

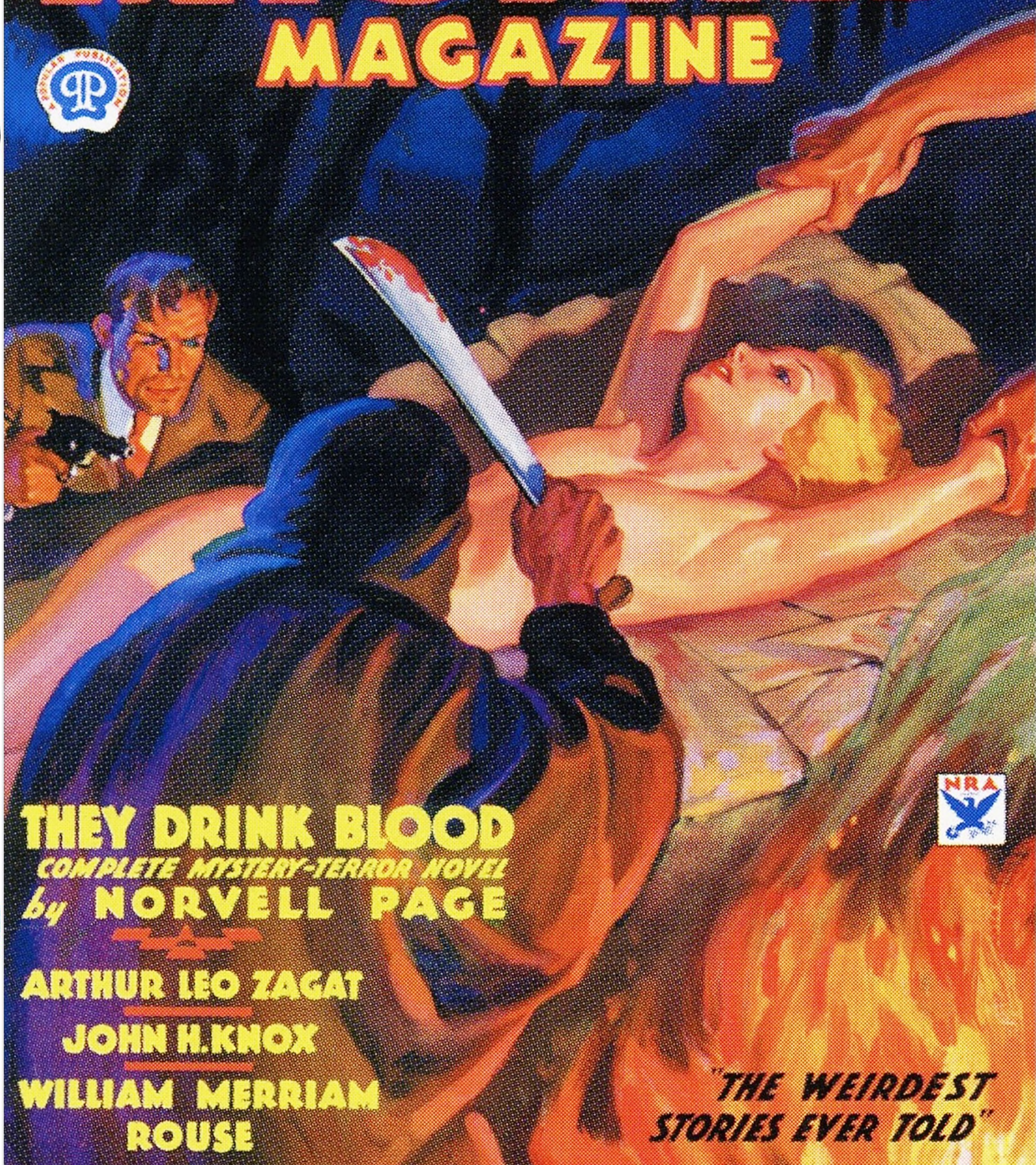
AUGUST

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



AUGUST

10¢ DIME MYSTERY Magazine



THEY DRINK BLOOD
COMPLETE MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL
by **NORVELL PAGE**

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

JOHN H. KNOX

**WILLIAM MERRIAM
ROUSE**

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10

Missing Page



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Volume Six

August, 1934

Number One

FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

- They Drink Blood**.....By Norvell Page 19
Slim Jenkins had never believed those tales of river witchery and bloodless death. . . . Yet the flood waters bore daily cargo of headless, human freight—and word went through the marshlands that the angry River Gods were drinking their fill of human blood!

THREE MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

- Those Who Dwell in Coffins**.....By John Knox 50
There are those who, having sold their souls to Satan, must dwell forevermore in the grim housing of the dead—accursed beings who ravish beneath the moon for human prey.
- Eat, Drink and Die!**.....By Nat Schachner 78
Stanard Bliss, men said, was slightly mad, but harmless. . . . Small warning, that, for those hapless guests who, unsuspecting, accepted invitations to his charnal party.
- Snake Drums, Booming**.....By Arthur Leo Zagat 106
From distant jungle lands came the crawling, ugly menace which was to reach out and trap Nell Carter in the heart of New York City.

SHORT TERROR TALES

- Death Watch**.....By William Merriam Rouse 38
That one night confirmed—in blood and pain—the tragic tale of the dying man.
- The Walking Dead**.....By Ben Judson 68
He came to the snow-bound house—seeking. For of what use is a soulless body?
- Corpses of Little Men**.....By G. T. Fleming-Roberts 97
One day a healthy man . . . the next a shrunken thing whose eyes were closed in death.

—AND—

- Dark Council**.....A Department 124

Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer

Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 225th Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 6, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1934, by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. \$1.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Peary, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.



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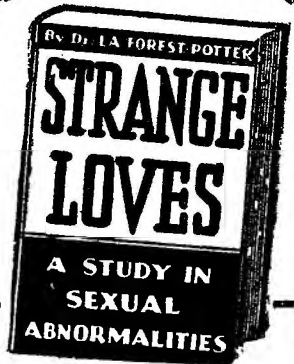
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28x5 25-19	1.55	1.15
30x5 25-20	1.55	1.15
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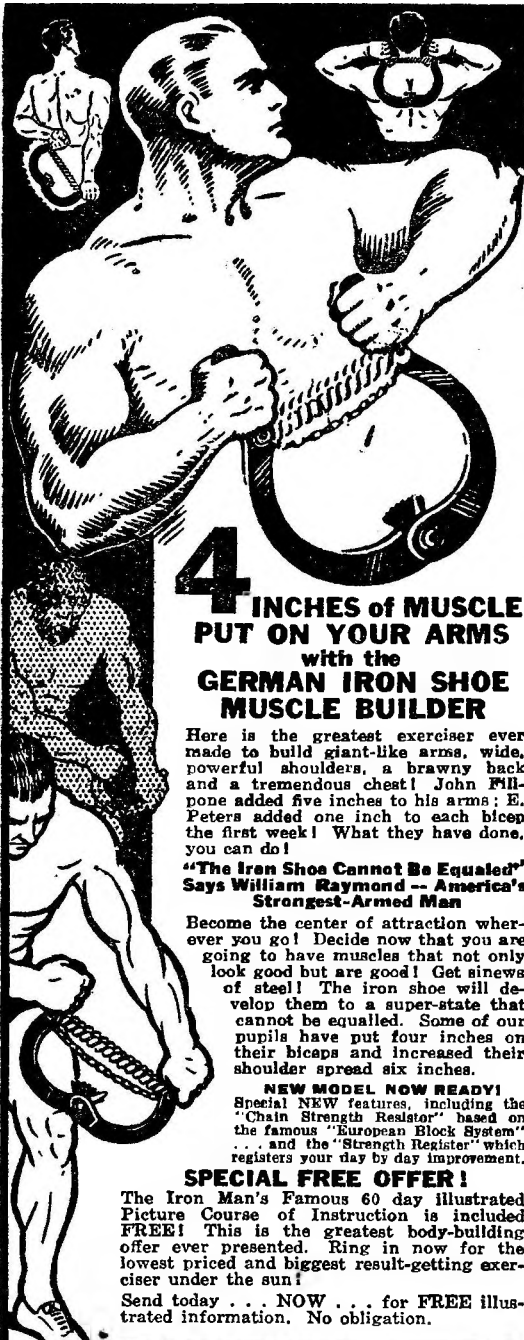
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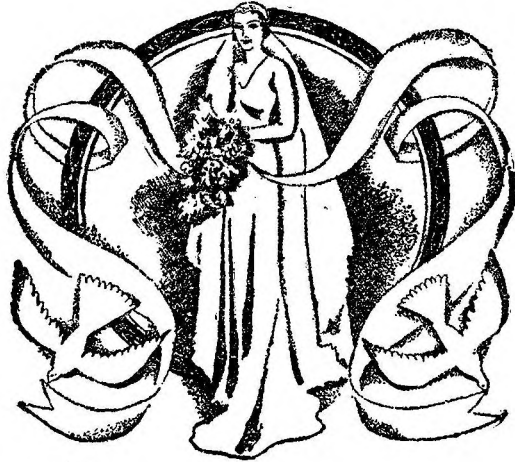
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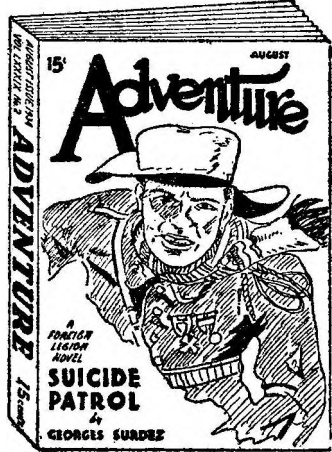
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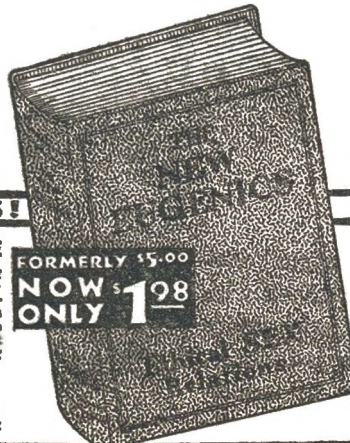
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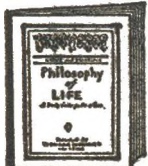
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They Drink Blood

by

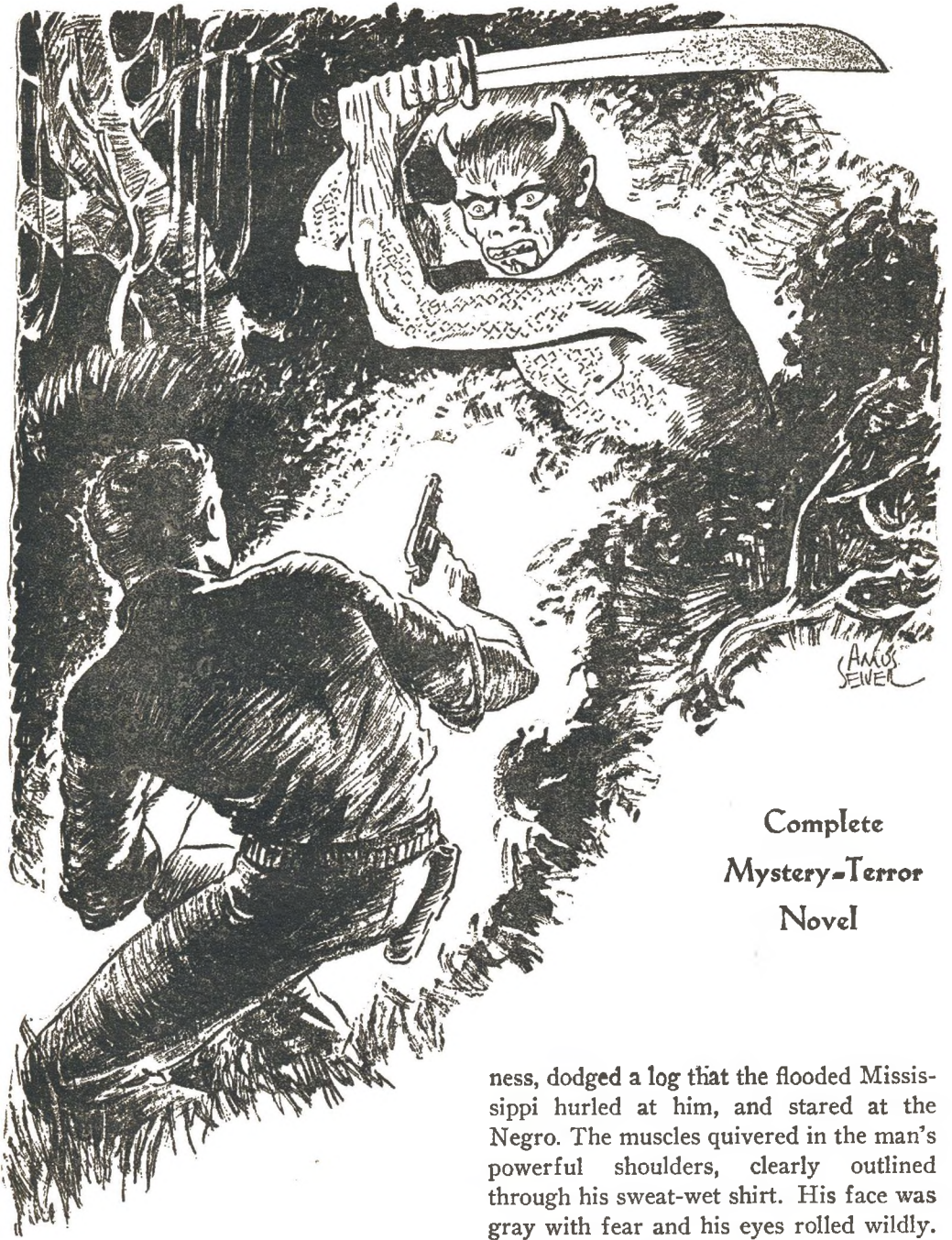
NORVELL PAGE

(Author of "The Death Beast," etc.)

Slim Jenkins had never believed those whispered tales of river witchery and bloodless death. . . . Yet the flood waters bore daily cargo of headless, human freight—and word went out through all the marshlands that the River Gods, made angry, were drinking their fill of warm red human blood!



THE NEGRO twisted around violently. The frail boat lurched with his weight, skittered sidewise under the drive of its powerful outboard motor. It sprayed a hard white rain of muddy water over Slim Jenkins, rigid in the sternsheets.



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"Keep quiet," he ordered sharply, his big-boned hand jockeying the tiller.

The Negro flung down on his knees and raised his clasped hands in supplication, his jaws working without sound. Jenkins, cursing, fought the boat to steady-

ness, dodged a log that the flooded Mississippi hurled at him, and stared at the Negro. The muscles quivered in the man's powerful shoulders, clearly outlined through his sweat-wet shirt. His face was gray with fear and his eyes rolled wildly.

His working jaws finally got out sound, drove words through the bellowing of the outboard motor: "Mistah Jenkins," the man begged, "Mistah Jenkins, please don't make me go near dat boat. Dat old debbil got Mistah Dare shore. He done bite off his head and drink his blood."

"Shut up," Jenkins said, grinning crookedly. He knew the superstition which sent the Negroes, howling in terror, to the backwoods, for weird, voodoo rituals whenever the Mississippi was in flood, its muddy brown dotted with patches of debris, logs, whole trees, carcasses of farm animals. Jenkins gazed forward to the eddy at the foot of Hog Island where Arthur Dare's empty row-boat circled slowly.

"You're a fool, George," Jenkins said sharply. "Mr. Dare's boat just got loose and drifted down the river. We're going to pick it up and take it ashore until he comes for it."

"Dat old debbil got him," George insisted, cowering in the boat bottom. "Dat old debbil bite off his head and drink his blood. . ."

"Shut up, George!"

". . . old debbil keep on biting off folkses' heads, keep on drinking blood until he got enough. . ."

"*Will—you—shut—up!*" Jenkins' lean freckled face was angry.

". . . old Mississippi, he just keep arisin' till debbil get his fill, then river go down. Better let 'im get 'em, or he break de levees an' drown us all."

Jenkins leaned forward vehemently, narrowed brown eyes boring into the Negro's. He spoke slowly, pitching his voice to cut through the roar of the motor: "If you don't shut up, George, I'll break every bone in your body."

The Negro shivered, great shoulders cringing: "Do that if you want to, Mistah Jenkins," he moaned, "but don't make me go out dere where the debbil done drink Mistah Dare's blood."

Jenkins jerked erect, stared again toward that slowly circling boat. Behind it the river was dyed blood-red by the last rays of the setting sun. Its silhouette was clear and Jenkins frowned suddenly, threw a quick glance at the whimpering Negro,

looked at the boat again. The boat seemed empty, all right, but—its prow rode high in the air, and its stern sat low as if some invisible man crouched there.

Jenkins felt a curse clog in his throat, lifted a big-boned hand to shield his eyes, thick sandy brows pulled down tight. And even as he peered, Jenkins felt his eyes jerk wide with apprehension. Over the stern of the boat jutted a man's arm with the fist tightly clenched!

He looked quickly to the Negro's face again, saw the man's eyes rolling. "You see, Mistah Jenkins," the Negro whimpered in terror. "You go back to the levee now; let old George go ashore."

JENKINS made no answer. In spite of his scorn for the Negro's superstitious talk of a blood-drinking, head-eating demon, he felt a tension creep into his body. His brown eyes grew worried. That stark arm with its clenched fist forbode evil. He knew suddenly that Arthur Dare was dead.

No living man's arm would jerk so stiffly to every twitch of the boat in the current, no living man would keep his fist so tightly knotted as if in defiance of the death that had conquered him, as Arthur Dare, even dead, stubbornly seemed to battle the world.

Jenkins had never liked the hard-headed old man who opposed his love for Billie Dare. . . . When Jenkins asked permission to pay court to Billie, the old man, apoplectic with rage, had threatened to take a buggy whip to him. For Jenkins, as Dare had explained with particularly sneering emphasis, was a mere deputy sheriff, as might be expected of the descendant of an overseer of slaves, while Billie was the daughter of an old and a haughty family—the Dares, suh, of Mississippi.

Jenkins' hand lifted subconsciously to the shiny new star upon the lapel of his worn brown coat. A mere deputy sheriff,

Dare had called him. Jenkins' widely good-humored mouth tightened. He was proud of his job, proud even in his shabby faded overalls, and tattered felt hat, as proud as any Dare. . .

Jenkins yanked wide the throttle and the little boat trembled beneath him, seemed to lift up on its propeller and skim the surface toward the drifting skiff. The Negro began to wail, swaying his hunched shoulders slowly from side to side. Even through the all-enveloping hammer of the motor, his words reached Jenkins.

"Oh, God, save me from dat debbil. Save dis black boy from dat old debbil. He done got Mistah Dare. He gonna get Mistah Jenkins, gonna bite off his head and drink his blood. . ."

Jenkins braced the tiller between his calves, stood erect, a gaunt tall man in faded overalls. He peered over the gunwale into that rapidly nearing boat, at the thing lying in the bottom. He jerked, then froze in sheer horror, eyes bulging from their sockets. The boat raced on past the skiff while Jenkins stood motionless, mouth half open, lips cold against his teeth. . .

A wild cry burst from the Negro. He sprang up and jumped thrashingly into the river. His cry cut short in a strangling gurgle and Jenkins dropped hurriedly to his seat and fought the tiller as the boat yawned under the thrust of the Negro's leap. He cut the throttle, jockeyed into a skidding turn.

The Negro's head was a black bobbing dot on the water as frantic arm-slapping strokes sped him toward Hog Island. Jenkins noted that only subconsciously, for his every thought was on the thing in the bottom of Dare's boat. With a hand as rigid as that dead fist, he forced himself to steer back to the drifting skiff. He felt horror gnaw with cold teeth at his heart, felt his stomach like a quivering stone within him.

In the bottom of the drifting boat lay Arthur Dare. Where Dare's head should have been was a bloody stump. The neck was a bloody tangle of flesh and severed veins, with the white stump of the spine showing dully. But the head was missing and underneath that mangled neck, the bottom of the boat showed clean.

Jenkins felt a physical sickness rack him. He lifted a shaking hand and drew it fumblingly across his forehead. His hand came away wet.

In God's name, what did this mean? The Negroes talked of a demon that ate men's heads and drank their blood and here. . .

"No!" Jenkins said violently aloud. "No! That can't be!" He cursed the shuddering pounding of his heart.

This was a murder. It was a horrible crime, but it was—could be—only that.

THIS was ridiculous, thinking of blood-drinking, head-eating demons. He knew absolutely that there was no such thing. Arthur Dare had been killed somewhere else, then tossed into the boat when his blood had ceased to flow. He knew that, but he had to clamp his jaw grimly and fight the nausea that quivered in his stomach, had to force himself to gaze down at that headless body.

From what he could see, there was only one wound, the clean severing stroke that had sliced off the head. It was human murder, but it would give support to this fool superstition that terrified the Negroes. But why should anyone want to do that, he asked himself. And he could find no answer.

The shock of the horror had faded now, leaving only that nauseous twitching in his abdomen. Abruptly he thought of Billie Dare. Some one would have to tell her, explain this ghastly horror which had struck down her father. It wouldn't be easy.

Fear made Jenkins' hands fly as he knotted a rope from Dare's boat to his own and sent the two crafts flying toward the levee. High-leaping fires danced flame in the water, spread splotches of lurid light over the dikes. Against them, like men in hell, the Negroes labored and Jenkins made out the tall, square-shouldered figure of Norris Sayers, the town banker, staring out toward him.

As Jenkins' roaring motor sped him across the blackened waters, the Negroes straightened from their tasks one by one and gazed out toward him, too. The wide-open bellow of his engine sent an ominous message. Slowly the figures on the levee congregated until they all but blotted out the fires.

Jenkins began to curse steadily under his breath. If those Negroes saw Dare's corpse, saw that the head was missing and that there was no blood in the boat, they would go mad with fear. There would be no more work on the levee unless forced at the point of guns. But he had to land Dare's body, had to race up river and see Billie, make sure she was safe.

Jenkins threw his boat into a skidding turn, sent it scooting along the levee, cut his motor.

"Keep the Negroes back, Sayers," Jenkins shouted. "Keep them back, for God's sake!" The bellowed words were lost in the beat of the engine and Sayers flashed an electric hand-torch at Jenkins, then upon the boat he towed.

"You fool!" Jenkins shouted.

He jerked the rowboat out of the beam, but the damage had been done. Against the firelight, Jenkins saw a wide-shouldered Negro drop to his knees with up-flung hands. Even above the engine, he heard the mounting wails of terror as man after man sank to his knees in the cold yellow mud.

Well, Sayers had caused the trouble, let

him settle it. But if he didn't get the Negroes back to work, the levee would cave under the flood and the best crop in years would be lost. Jenkins had other work to do now. He jammed the death barge nose-on against the levee, tossed the rope high, and saw a man catch it.

"Notify Sheriff O'Brien," he cried. "I'm going to Dare Island."

With the moaning wail of terror in his ears, he kicked the outboard with the palm of his hand and dug the propeller into the water, shoved the tiller far over. The shallow-draft boat spun into the current, raced up-river into the blackness toward where Dare Island was slowly drowning in the flood.

Once he sniffed the wind and jerked a glance back over his shoulder. Overhead, stars gleamed coldly, but the horizon was blotted out by piling masses of cloud. More rain to feed the raging torrent of the Mississippi. The thunder of the trembling motor beat upon his brain, blotting out all other sound.

He must catch the murderer—not only catch him, but prove him guilty beyond all doubt, or the serpent of terror would encircle Sayersville. The Negroes would drop their work upon the levees and the Mississippi would shove its ugly brown head over the dikes and sweep farms, dwellings, entire towns in its lethal, swirling tide.

Jenkins puckered his lips and whistled tunelessly. He could scarcely hear the sound above the thunder of the motor. At last his feeble light brushed over the wooded lower point of the island and Jenkins shot behind the spit that sheltered the entrance to the inlet. The flood was boiling over this natural mole, swirling among trees and underbrush. With slowing motor, Jenkins pushed up the inlet, over its drowned bank and grounded with

a small grating sound within ten feet of the farm house.

Yellow lamplight threw an oblong on the earth from an open door, and the wind was whipping curtains in the windows. Narrowed eyes searching the exposed parts of the rooms, Jenkins strode in half a run over the few feet that separated him from the porch. His feet slipped mad-deningly in the mud. He reached the porch and shouted loudly, "Anybody home?"

He paused and listened, scraping the mud from his shoes on the porch edge. Not a sound came from the house but the dull snapping of the curtains, flapping in the wind. Jenkins stood tense, head cocked to one side, listening. Billie *had to be here!*

He tried again, "Hello, in there! Anybody home?"

Once more he listened. There was no answer except the moaning of the wind. Fearfully, he stepped toward the door, dragging heavy foot ahead of heavy foot. He saw the dark floor gleaming beneath the yellow glow of the lamp. Far in the depths of the hall shadows sprang up and died as the wind made the lamp flame shudder.

Jenkins pushed on until his hands rested on each side of the door, until he could lean forward and peer into the hallway. He bent at the waist, looking fearfully around the left door jamb and suddenly, staring in, he froze. Scarcely conscious of the effort, he pushed himself bodily from that door, took two frantic strides backward before he forced himself to a trembling halt, his fists clenched at his sides. Slowly, rigidly as an automaton, he drove himself back toward that portal of horror, forced himself to step upon the sill and stand there gazing down upon the floor.

It was the body of an old Negro that lay there. The head was gone, and—there was no blood on the floor!

CHAPTER TWO

Thirst of the Demon

HORROR beat upon Slim Jenkins' mind with wings of panic. Twice within the space of an hour, this fearful death had struck. A human head had been sliced from its body, and the blood—Jenkins' teeth grated as he clinched them. He wouldn't—he *couldn't*—believe that superstition. What had happened to the blood he didn't know. But he did know this was the work of a human being. An insane, murdering maniac perhaps, but not. . .

Jenkins whirled about and stared out into the blackness behind him. He jerked out his flashlight and sprayed its white, thin beam over the lawn, made it glint upon the water. There was nothing there. He spun back to the corpse, staring at it with wide, haunted eyes.

He knew this corpse, too, knew it to be the body of the Dares' old servant, Uncle Mose. But Billie! Where was she? Snatching his gun from the holster beneath his arm, Jenkins rushed wildly into the parlor. A glance showed it was empty.

With pounding feet, his electric torch pushing its round spot of light ahead of him, he raced through the house. Darkness crowded tight around him, leaned toward him like a black animal ready to spring. The flesh was cold along his spine as he went from room to room, his fingers tight around the gun-butt as he waited for a shadow to leap from the darkness. But the house was empty.

Jenkins pulled open the back door, stepped out into the whipping wind. Once more he swept the light about him. Shadows danced among the close-creeping trees, and he could hear the dull mutter of the river off to his right. He forced the beam of his light down, found there in the almost liquid mud the print of a girl's high-heeled shoe. The tracks led

straight toward the woods behind the house and other tracks were beside them.

His light jerked over the ground as Jenkins floundered through the slippery mud. Ahead of him loomed the dark, serrated line of trees that made an almost impassable jungle of the interior of Dare Island. Billie had come this way—but why? And whose tracks were those beside hers? Jenkins lunged into a driving run. The headsman—the mad killer?

Jenkins' lips pulled thin across his teeth and he cursed savagely. Those were the tracks of Billie's foster-brother, Thad. They *had* to be! The killer couldn't have captured Billie. And yet. . . Jenkins saw again that headless body under which no blood had puddled lying just inside the Dare home.

Jenkins plunged through the fringe of trees into the pitch darkness of the woods and then halted suddenly, a curse hoarse in his throat. Leaf mold covered the earth here, and on the wet mold tracks would not show.

For a long moment Jenkins stood there, head pushed forward listening, body whipcord taut. Then he cursed again, softly. He ducked his head and shoulders, plunged deeper into the woods.

He used his light only now and then, and the darkness swallowed instantly the spatter of illumination. Above him trees moaned in the rising wind. The mutter of the river had died now, and only the deep, lugubrious whine of the wind remained. Abruptly, Jenkins stiffened, his slouched shoulders tensed and ready. To his left a bush had shaken—and then abruptly gone quiet. Straining his ears, he caught the unmistakable sibilance of breathing!

He stood rigid, ears straining. Ridiculous to keep thinking of that Negro superstition, of blood-drunk demons in the flooded forest; of a devil that must drink

his fill of blood before the water would go down.

He told himself that, but he knew that his hand, gripping the gun hard at his side, was trembling. He knew what that painful slow laboring of his heart meant. Since a baby he had heard the voodoo legends of the Negroes, weird stories of the sacrificing of a white goat, of human beings, even. He had never believed them, yet Negroes had been known to disappear and eerie stories whispered.

Standing there motionless, listening to the ragged noise of respirations, Jenkins felt the slow, cold tingle of dread creep over his whole body. Suppose the headsman lurked there! Suppose even now he stood—demon or human—mouth open in a bloody grin, waiting with a poised and fearful blade!

The image and his hesitation stirred anger deep within him, wiping out the fear. He reversed his revolver in his hand and, locating the tense breathing, he launched himself in a crashing charge.

He broke through the fringe of laurel in a single lunge. His hands touched something living that struck savagely at him. A gun blasted and the jar of the weapon struck against his side though the lead singed past harmlessly. They went down together, threshing.

Jenkins snapped his hand downward and grabbed for the gun, caught a small wrist that his long fingers wrapped completely around. He let out a startled cry, checked the down-sweep of his clubbed gun.

For he heard in the darkness beneath him a frightened, choking sob. And the sob was that of a woman!

HOLDING tight to the girl's gun wrist, Jenkins fumbled on his torch, threw its beam on the girl he held prisoner. Black eyes stared up into his, defiant despite the frightened quiver of a round, determined chin.

Jenkins jerked himself to his feet. "Billie! Billie Dare!" he cried.

He shook his head, dragged his sleeve across his eyes and looked again. The girl had the revolver leveled at his body. Her face was pale and determined.

Jenkins dropped on his knees. "Don't shoot, Billie," he said swiftly. "It's Slim Jenkins."

In the dazzle of the torch, Billie's face convulsed into a white mask of terror. A scream tore from her throat and she fired blindly. Jenkins cried in amazement, "Billie! What?" Then saw the gun was aimed into the shrubbery behind him.

He leaped to the girl's side, whirled and flung light at the spot. Billie's gun banged hysterically, her screams high pitched, shrieking. The circle of light brushed over the thick, glossy-leaved laurel, stabbed behind it—and Jenkins felt his heart quiver in his throat, felt a stricture like ropes of steel about his chest. For a weird, half-human shape stood behind the laurel—and projecting from its monstrous head were a pair of horns, glistening blood-red!

He stared with glassy eyes at the face of horror, the face of a fiend out of hell. The eyes were huge and glittered with red lights. A mouth without lips bared jagged teeth, and the mouth was rimmed with blood!

Green hair sprouted like wire just above the brows and bristled backward stiffly, but the hair broke above the temples from which the ghastly horns sprang. Jenkins felt muscles jerk and quiver over his body, but he could not control them, could not force them to act. Harsh sounds rasped from his mouth. The muscles of his shoulder shuddered as he tried to break that freezing paralysis of terror and raise his gun, but the arm remained at his side.

Slowly, while he stared with bulging eyes, the horned thing reared above the laurel, exposing a wide, muscle-corded chest, covered with green scales like a

snake. It jerked both hands above its head with the flash of a steel blade. The headsman's sword!

With a wrench, Jenkins jerked himself from the strangle hold of fear. He yanked up his revolver and blazed directly at that fearsome thing. Even as his first shot ripped out into the blackness, his flashlight shivered and jarred in his hand. Its white beam blinked out. Jenkins sprang forward firing all but the last bullet, then swung the weapon like a sword in the darkness. The gun swished empty through thin air. And where, a moment before, a demon killer had charged through the laurel, there was only absolute silence, absolute blackness.

WITH fumbling fingers, Jenkins stuffed cartridges into his gun, crouching warily. Was that giant monstrosity standing within arm's length, waiting to slash down with his blade? In the grip of terror, had he missed every shot?

Slowly, while he battled panic, he repeated in his mind, "There is no such thing as a demon. It is all superstition. If my light had been better. . ." But the words were without meaning, and his face was white and bloodless. He had seen a Thing out of Hell, and his bullets had harmed the Demon no more than air!

Then, as sudden as lightning, a scream tore the night. The sound seemed to rend the throat with its violence. Billie Dare!

Jenkins cried her name, sprang toward the spot where the sound had come. He heard the mad lashing of bushes, pounding feet. A second scream, farther away, rose piercingly, and died, and once more silence spread a cold smothering blanket over the forest. Jenkins' crashing feet were like thunder. "Billie!" he cried. "Billie!"

Not a whisper answered him. He reached the spot where the second scream

had seemed to originate, swept his left hand about in frantic search, his right on the gun. He went down on his knees, groping along the ground. His hand touched cold metal and flinched away, the gun poised. Nothing stirred. Slowly, fearfully as might a man reaching for the neck of a coiled snake he stretched out his hand into the darkness again, found the metal and explored it.

A lantern! Feverishly, without thought of anything but the blessedness of being able to see again, he lifted the glass globe, snatched out a match. Instantly he looked about him. Still nothing moved, there was nothing but black-shadowed shrubbery, the gaunt, tall ghosts of trees. He lighted the lantern, dropped it to the ground and sprang backward to crouch in the darkness.

His panic was gone now and in its place was a frantic fear for Billie. Why had her scream stopped and where was she now? Had the sword struck? Was that demon Thing even now drinking her blood?

Jenkins flung himself out into the laurel, fought a swift way around the light. "Billie!" he screamed into the darkness.

His voice was swallowed up in silence. There was no echo; there was no reply. Holding the lantern high above his head, he stared down at a depression in the earth like a giant lizard track. It was the shape of a triangle. The heel mark was round and deep, the ball with three long toes that ended in claws. And the print was eighteen inches long!

Once more the cold paralysis of fear ran up his spine. He twisted his head in a swift, hunted look into the shadowy forest, forced himself to follow the tracks. They were big, but they were not far apart, not much farther than his own. Four of the impressions he found, and

then, sharp beside one, the clear-cut print of a woman's shoe, of Billie's!

He could tell by the way she had spurned the earth that she had been running frenziedly. He dashed along the trail. The clawed print of the horned thing took a separate way. Jenkins glanced ahead, caught a gleam of white and flung himself into a pounding run. Yes, there in the thick laurel was something white. And Billie's prints led straight toward it.

For a terrible moment, while he raced at top speed toward the laurel, the hands of dread tore at his breast. If that was Billie, why didn't she cry out to him?

Jenkins reached the clump of laurel, set the lantern on the earth and, gun still ready, reached out to part the laurel. He touched the leaves and his hand stopped, his heart heavy and laboring in his throat.

His teeth showed between drawn-back lips. What would he find there in the laurel when he had pulled aside the leafy screen? The leaves were cold as dead fingers. The wind drifted through them and they stirred with dry, rustling laughter.

Angrily, he yanked aside the screen, peered down. Billie lay there, her feet toward him. The white he had seen was the milky flesh of her thigh, bared by a disheveled and torn skirt. Her right shoulder was hunched high, and her head. . . . God! He could not see her head!

CHAPTER THREE

Victims of the Night

WITH terror like cotton in his throat, Jenkins flung bodily into the laurel clump, dropped on his knees beside Billie. Then a sob of relief choked him. Billie's head was there all right, but the shadow of her shoulder had hidden it. He gulped air into his lungs with deep, grateful breaths.

He eased her up into his arms, gun forgotten on the earth beside him. He stroked her forehead, called her name, a whisper that held his whole heart: "Billie, darling. Darling, Billie."

She stirred, her eyes flew open and a scream began in her throat. She tore herself away, then saw his alarmed, friendly face. For a moment she stared, then her shoulders slumped. Her golden hair veiled her head as she dropped her face into her cupped hands and sobbed. Jenkins moved to her on his knees, patted her shoulder awkwardly.

"There, Billie," he said. "It's all right now. The—it's gone. What made you scream like that?"

The girl shuddered, jerked her white face up and peered, terrified, into the darkness. "Something touched me in the dark," she said in a low, hurried voice. "I ran and then, I guess, I must have fainted." She stared into Jenkins' face, a dim blob in the filtered light of the lantern. "What—what was that terrible thing?"

Jenkins shook his head dumbly. He was suddenly conscious of his missing revolver, jerked his head about to search for it. He remembered exactly where he had dropped the weapon. He groped. It was not there! Frantically he scrambled about on his knees, sifting the leaf mold. He found nothing.

"What is it?" Billie's voice was tense and alarmed.

Jenkins fought the words past the cold lump in his throat. "Nothing, Billie. I had something that might look like a clue to that thing and I lost it in the leaves. . . ."

A hissing whisper came to them and Jenkins jerked up his head and stared squarely into gleaming red eyes not a dozen feet away. The green hair seemed to crawl backward from the brows. And from the short horns blood drooled. . . .

It came forward, the face utterly expressionless except for the harsh cruel lines about the snaggle-toothed half-open mouth.

Jenkins did not know when he stumbled erect, hands clenched at his side. Half-mad with a welding of panic and anger Jenkins charged squarely at the fearful creature.

He saw a blade flash upward in the dim lantern light. He checked his rush and the Thing's arms, which already had started a downward sweep, checked, too. Instantly Jenkins flung forward again.

He plunged like a battering ram against that mighty chest, slamming his fist savagely against the cruel, set jaws. His knuckles cracked home with a hollow, ringing sound. He was within the circle of the Thing's arms and the hilt of the sword, swinging down, struck him on the back of the neck.

Lights blazed before his eyes and he plunged to his knees, hands clawing futilely across cold scales on the Thing's body. He snatched at the ankles, but the Thing jerked backward, and his fingers clutched only earth mold. He flung to his knees, saw the blade whistling toward him, a gleaming arc in the dim light. He ducked beneath the swishing steel.

He attempted to charge in again, but the blade swung in a backhand blow that came within an inch of disemboweling him. Jenkins sprang backward, seeking a weapon, the shimmering gleam of the Demon before him. It advanced slowly with poised blade.

"Behind you! Quick!" Billie shrieked.

Jenkins plunged sideways, jerking his head about as he dived. A second of the monsters sliced through the spot where he had stood. "Run, Billie," Jenkins cried. "They got my gun!"

HE SAW the girl start from the thicket like a hare and race off into the blackness. Jenkins caught up the lantern and

hurled it directly at the face of the nearest Thing.

Even while the lantern was in the air, Jenkins whirled, raced into darkness after Billie, overtook her, threw an arm around her waist and whirled toward her home. For a dozen paces he ran so, then he caught the girl up off her feet, an arm beneath her knees and another under the shoulders, cat-footed with her through the rain-soaked woods. The girl was relaxed in his arms, her arm soft against his hand. Even in the midst of this frenzied flight, he was conscious of the warmth of her, conscious of the up-drifting fragrance of her loose-flung hair. . . .

Unless those Things back there possessed a dog's sense of smell, they could not follow this trail. But they might guess he stalked toward the house and cut him off. The thought of that lent speed to his pace. He had gained a hundred feet now and he moved with less caution. But he made no sound that would be audible fifty feet away, even in the intense quiet of the woods.

That quiet was being invaded now by the lashing of the wind in the trees. The rising storm was swelling nearer and the fore-runner of its fury was tossing the tree-tops. Jenkins broke into a jog-trot.

They were within sight of the house when Billie's hand closed sharply on his arm and he slid to a halt, breath hissing out between his teeth, eyes peering sharply through the blackness. He saw the yellow glint of lamplight from the house, and then—a stealthy movement!

He set Billie down noiselessly, groped for a weapon. If the demons were here, they'd have a fight before they drank their ghastly potion. . . .

A dazzling light smacked him in the face. He threw up an arm to shield his face, leaped blindly, furiously forward. "Wait, Slim!" Billie cried out behind.

"Halt!" It was a man's voice! In his

relief, Jenkins could have shouted aloud. He checked his charge, and dropped his arms.

"Stay right there, Jenkins," the man ordered coldly. "One more step and I'll shoot."

Billie ran past Jenkins and caught hold of the man behind the light. "Oh, Thad, Thad!" she gasped. "Thank heavens, you've got a gun." And she babbled out the story of those Things in the wood, and Jenkins stared back over his shoulder anxiously. He could hear no sound back there. He peered at Thad Dare who heard the tale silently and Jenkins' sandy brows pulled down over his eyes. The tension slowly returned to his face.

This was Thad Dare, foster-son of old Arthur Dare, who had been murdered. But what was he doing in these woods? He threw another uneasy glance over his shoulder. Still nothing stirred there.

"Listen, let's get out of these woods," he said quickly. "My boat's down at the landing. Let's get away from here—then talk."

"We'll talk right here and now," Dare said ominously. "What are you doing on this island?"

JENKINS permitted a tight smile to lift the corners of his wide mouth. He peered at the faint loom of the figure behind the dazzle of the torch. His brown eyes were narrowed beneath sandy brows. Somewhere in the woods he had lost his hat and red, touseled hair sprawled over his forehead. Slowly he lifted his left hand and touched the star that glinted on his lapel, the star of a deputy sheriff.

Dare snorted. "I know you're a deputy sheriff. But father has disappeared and I find you in the woods where Uncle Mose saw him come."

Jenkins stared fixedly, expression unchanging, at the figure behind the light. Thad Dare did not know Uncle Mose was

dead, or else he pretended not to. But, hell, they couldn't stand here gabbling while those demons crept closer with their headsman's swords, with their blood-rimmed mouths. . . .

"Listen," he said, "your father is in Sayersville. Now let's get out of here before—"

"Sayersville!" It was a cry from Billie.

Jenkins nodded, face serious, and Billie came around in front of him and stared up into his eyes. "What do you mean, Slim?" she demanded.

Jenkins' face grew very gentle as he looked down at her. Abruptly the girl stepped back, wrist pressed against her mouth, eyes staring wide. She shook her head slowly from side to side, yellow hair swinging. "No," she gasped. "No, *no!*"

"What are you talking about?" Dare demanded irritably.

The girl came back to Slim swiftly and caught his coat lapels with both hands. "Slim," she pleaded, "nothing has happened to daddy. Tell me nothing has happened to him." The eye of the flashlight came closer.

"Spit it out, Jenkins," Dare rasped harshly. "Has anything happened to the old man?"

Jenkins ignored Dare, looking down into the girl's eyes. "You must be brave, Billie," he said kindly.

For a moment the girl's chin quivered; her eyes widened and grew dark. She drew herself up with a shuddering breath and slowly her head came up. "Tell me, Slim," she said quietly.

"Damn you, Jenkins!" Dare said vehemently. "Out with it!"

"Billie," Jenkins said gently, "your father . . . is dead."

A shuddering breath escaped the girl. She drew herself up rigidly. Her simple white blouse swelled with the pressure of

her breasts, of that long drawn breath. She exhaled gently. "How?" she asked quietly.

SHE was deathly pale. Her face had been white in the terror of the woods, but now her flesh was almost translucent, as if drained of all blood. Jenkins still stared at her directly. But he knew she would stand it. The Dares—their women especially—had courage.

"These Things in the wood," said Jenkins, his voice going tight. "They got him! Just as they'll get us if we don't get out of here." He jerked his head about toward the black forest again, but he could see nothing but a vast dark blur, eyes dazzled by long staring into the light.

"Those swords!" Billie whispered. "Father was killed with those swords!"

Jenkins nodded. His eyes swept the woods again, nervously. "I don't know that Thad's gun will keep those Things away. My bullets didn't hurt them. Let's get in the boat."

Dare said savagely, "Not until I know more about this thing." He half-raised the gun in his left hand and Jenkins saw a knife hilt at his belt.

Jenkins kept his eyes on him. "We'll settle that when we get out of the woods," Jenkins said grimly. "If you are willing to risk Billie's life any longer, I'm not." "You'll wait!"

Jenkins permitted his wide mouth to smile again. His eyes were hard as the glint of light on steel.

"Come, Billie," he said, urging her toward the house and the boat at the landing beyond. The wind had mounted in the trees until there was a low, constant moaning above them.

"Oh, let's go away from here, Thad," the girl said swiftly to her foster-brother. She was trembling. "I'm afraid. . . ."

Dare sneered. "You afraid, Jenkins?" Billie interposed. "Please, Thad. Let's

get away from here. I'm afraid." She put a hand on the arm of each man. The first spattering rain slapped the young leaves overhead. Jenkins' shoulders became more slouched, his arms lax at his sides.

"I reckon I'm as brave a man as you, Thad," he said, "only you didn't see what we saw. You didn't. . . ." He broke off and peered intently into the shadows, listened with straining ears.

Dare pushed past Billie and thrust his belligerent, broad face up at Jenkins. "It's all a fake," he said. "Everybody knows those demons are just superstition and it was all a show you put on. You killed the old man yourself. And I know why you did it. You want Billie, and—"

Jenkins' big fist crashed into Dare's mouth, hammered his head back on his neck and sent him reeling back two heavy steps. The torch fell to the ground, but didn't go out. The shorter men rasped a savage curse, ducked his head and charged.

CHAPTER FOUR

Scarlet Threads. . .

BILLIE tried to stop him, but her hand barely brushed his shoulder. Dare gouged a fist into Jenkins' hard belly and took two pile-driver clips on his head. Jenkins planted an open left hand in Dare's face and pushed, his slouched, heavy shoulders set rigidly.

"Listen, Dare," he said between quick breaths. "You quit or I'm goin' to beat hell out of you."

An angry oath spurted from the man. He snatched a hand to his belt and yanked out the long-bladed knife. With it clutched low at his side, point foremost, he rushed in again.

Jenkins said, "You low skunk!"

His left fist knocked aside Dare's knife. His right snapped upward in a slashing uppercut that lifted the shorter man a

full three inches from the damp earth and dropped him unconscious on his back. The knife flew off into the darkness. A windy gust swept the woods. Rain came down by bucketsfull.

Jenkins stood half-crouched over his fallen foe, his breath coming quickly. He glanced off into the forest, then caught up the torch and threw its beam off into the darkness. Nothing stirred but the wind and glass rods of rain slanted through the trees. The shadows seemed solid; one might hide. . . . He reeled back as Billie walked up and slapped him in the face.

"It's contemptible to use your position to impose on people," she said coldly. "But that's what you'd expect of a Jenkins."

Jenkins' mouth twisted into a forced smile as he executed an awkward bow to Billie Dare. "Yes'm, I expect so," he said, "but I don't pull a knife in a fist-fight."

The rain was spattering directly in Dare's face and he tossed his head and began to move his arms slightly. Jenkins yanked him to his feet, that queer smile still on his face.

"Would you mind coming to the boat, ma'am?" he said quietly.

BILLIE'S face was alabaster white, but Jenkins got his way. Through the pelting downpour that hissed into the black water all about them, he took Billie and Thad Dare back to Sayersville. Dare rode in grim silence. From far off, he saw the leaping, wind-whipped flames of the fires by whose light the Negroes still labored on the levee. The driving waves were weaker where he guided his boat into the lee of the Mississippi shore.

Jenkins saw Norris Sayers' square-built figure stride to the levee's edge and stand staring out over the water. There were other men beside him. Jenkins sent

a long halloo whooping from a megaphoned hand. The questing eye of a flashlight reached out toward him.

He ran the boat to the bowed tree where he had got aboard so many hours before. The water had risen now until it washed the tree itself. The sandbag bulwarks sloped up above it and a Negro ran out on the trunk and caught Jenkins' rope.

The whites of the man's eyes looked as big as hard-boiled eggs as he tied the rope hurriedly and sprang back to shore. Jenkins, looking up, saw that Norris Sayers held a revolver in his hand. He threw a quick glance over the levee. The Negroes were huddled fearfully about the fires and he saw white overseers with guns in hand trying to drive them back to their work. Wails of abject terror rose from them. The discovery of Arthur Dare's body had confirmed all their fears. Unless forced to work they'd be breaking away from the levee soon, plunging into the woods for blood-curdling voodoo rituals to appease a blood-hungry god. There would be chickens and a white goat sacrificed. If the voodoo god was not satisfied, then. . . . Jenkins shuddered, thinking of the horned Things in the woods.

HE SECURED his boat and balancing himself against a tree trunk, he held out an arm to help Billie ashore. She ignored the proffered aid, and scrambled to the levee alone. Jenkins came up after her. He threw another glance over the cowering, wailing Negroes. "All this because of Dare?" he said.

Sayers' lips tightened beneath the smooth black sweep of his mustache. "You stayed away so long, we sent Lem Constable up to Dare Island to find out about you." His dark eyes, glinting beneath the wide sweep of his black hat, flicked to Billie and he lowered his voice. "Lem found Uncle Mose lying in the hall and

blurted it out where the Negroes could hear," he explained. "He'd been killed like Arthur Dare and the Negroes all insist there's no use working on the levees until the voodoo demon has drunk his fill of blood. They'll be going to dance with the devil if we don't watch them."

Jenkins rasped out a sharp oath, strode along the levee with his feet sucking ankle-deep in the yellow mud. Dare called out after him sharply. "Wait a minute, you!"

Jenkins turned and faced him as Dare strode to him with a short-legged, jerky walk. Billie stood aloof.

"You're going with me to the sheriff," Dare said. "You've got a lot to explain."

"What's this?" Sayers demanded.

He joined the two men in the lurid light of the levee fires. Banker Sayers was forty, with a dark face now showing redly from the fire-glint that angled in beneath a wide-brimmed hat. He wore fine broadcloth trousers thrust into boots that made Jenkins' worn overalls more faded and bedraggled than ever.

Jenkins turned his head slowly toward him. "If any talking is done, we'll do it at the office, Mr. Sayers," he said shortly. "Come on, Dare."

Jenkins, accompanied by the angry Thad Dare, squashed through the levee mud and down to the sodden roadway that led to the town. Billie tramped along beside them, head high, eyes straight ahead. Through the dark, muddy streets lined with ramshackle Negro shanties they sloshed. Every shanty was alive with lights and from each came the mumbled wailing of fear. After twenty minutes of tramping, they dragged mud-padded shoes up on the porch of the sheriff's office. Rain drummed hollowly on the tin roof.

There was a light within and Jenkins opened the door and stood aside for Dare and Billie.

Pop O'Brien, the sheriff, dropped his feet from his desk and stood clumsily, a puzzled smile hovering on his old face.

"I declare, daughter," he said, moving haltingly toward Billie. "You sure did get wet."

"Sheriff O'Brien," Dare cut in. "I demand that you put Jenkins under arrest."

Sheriff O'Brien had not removed his sloppy gray felt when Billie came in. He shoved it back to expose a pinkly bald head, then yanked it forward again, looking embarrassed at the revelation. His bright blue eyes turned from one of the Dares to the other, and he smiled. "What about it, Slim?" he asked.

Behind the square, battered desk and near the rack of rifles was a door of steel bars. As Pop stood looking over the two men, a blond youth of twenty-four or -five came to the grating. He was Charlie Sayers, black sheep cousin of the darkly handsome Norris Sayers, whom the family had long ago disowned. Pop O'Brien kept his mild smile while Jenkins went into a detailed description then of his trip up the river. His jaw locked grimly as he told of the demons. It seemed ridiculous even to talk of them here in Sayersville.

Sheriff O'Brien shoved his hat back with a puzzled gesture, glanced at Billie and quickly jerked the hat down again over his bald head.

"Well now, son," he said to Dare. "I reckon if it was anybody but Slim Jenkins here you might have had reason to be a mite suspicious. But Slim, now. . . ."

Jenkins stiffened, glaring at his old friend. No one put any credence in the story of the demons. It was not that they disbelieved him, but that they were unable to believe in the existence of such creatures. Here in the cozy little office, Jenkins himself found the idea strange.

He looked fixedly at Pop O'Brien's

worried face, stared at Billie's cold unyielding countenance, at Dare's sneer. None of these seemed now to think of those demons. Yet two men had died terribly, their heads struck from their bodies, two corpses had been found drained of blood. And all about them, like the wind of the storm, was the wailing of the Negroes. They, at least, believed!

Outside, hoofs clopped in the mud and Norris Sayers came in, Lem Constable trailing. Lem stopped to squirt a stream of tobacco juice into the night.

"O'Brien," Norris Sayers said abruptly. "We just got word that Jim Thomas has been murdered—just like Arthur Dare was."

A STARTLED exclamation escaped Jenkins. So those horned things had struck again—and another corpse had been left headless. What—what could have happened to the blood? Those Negro legends were thousands of years old . . . but Sayers was talking again: "Negro who works for him sometimes found Thomas stiff and cold. From what he says I reckon he's been dead a right smart while. Negro could hardly talk for shaking. He said, 'They better sacrifice to the devil or he'll get everybody!'"

He looked at Jenkins and grinned. "You've got the Negroes on your side, anyhow."

Jenkins flushed, choking back the hot words that sprang to his lips.

Sheriff O'Brien's wrinkled face was worried. He looked down at the rain puddles on his floor, toying with the brim of his hat. "I reckon Jim can wait a few hours longer," he said. "Thad, suppose you tell us what happened on Dare Island this afternoon last time you saw your step-father."

"Yeah, I'm interested as hell," jeered a voice in the background. A pale face

was visible behind latticed iron work. It was Charlie Sayers, awaiting trial for killing a man in a brawl.

"Keep quiet, Charlie," said the sheriff without turning his head.

Norris Sayers frowned into the darkness where his cousin was imprisoned. Norris had not spoken to him for years. He did not now, though Charlie called out to him mockingly.

Thad Dare set his square, short body, straddling out his muddy boots. "Well," he began, "Billie and I were trying to argue father into leaving the place because of the flood. He wouldn't hear of it as usual, and we were sitting in the parlor talking—about an hour before dark it was—and somebody fired a shot through the window. It didn't hit anybody; just smacked into the wall.

"Father took his gun and went out. He took a rowboat to go around the island, looking for the boat of the man with the gun. After an hour, I set out to look for him. Billie must have followed me and got lost." Dare paused and looked at Jenkins angrily. "I want to know where were you an hour before sunset," he demanded.

Jenkins said quietly, "I was over on Hog Island after a cow that got marooned there. The cow started out to swim again and drowned. I was alone."

Sayers parted his mustache with his fingers, smiled curiously at Jenkins.

"Then what, Thad?" Sheriff O'Brien prompted.

Dare kept staring at Jenkins. "I looked a long time, but didn't find anything. Then I started back to the house, met Billie and Jenkins with their fool story about horned things with swords."

The girl was looking at Jenkins fixedly. "I saw them," she said. She shuddered, stared down at her hands twisting in her lap. "They were like devils out of hell," she said. "They had big

swords that could cut you in half at a stroke. And bullets couldn't hurt them.'

Norris Sayers was smiling a little. "Did they leave any tracks?"

"They did," Jenkins said shortly. "About eighteen inches long, and they had a three-toed claw."

O'BRIEN broke in on their talking. "I reckon we've all heard them stories all our lives," he said heavily. He paused and through the silence that fell, through the beat of rain on the roof, the wailing of the Negroes came again. Jenkins frowned down at the floor. "Just the same," O'Brien went on, "I don't see as how the law can take account of any demons. Here's what I see: Jim Thomas, Arthur Dare and Uncle Mose were all murdered in the same way by the same person. Now, who would want to get them out of the way?" He raised a stubby hand and ticked off gnarled old fingers. "There's Charlie Sayers. Thomas and Dare were both witnesses against him for the murder of Booth Jackson. But Charlie's in jail. So we can rule him out.

"There's you, Lem Constable." He looked at the gangly man with a shoulder propped against the door.

Lem spat at a cuspidor and hit it with a liquid ring. "You're right," he conceded. "Always did say Jim Thomas and Art Dare done me a dirty over that-ther land."

"And you haven't any alibi, either, have you, Lem?" O'Brien asked in kindly tones.

"Nary alibi," Lem conceded, taking a cake of tobacco from his pocket and twisting off a piece between his jaw teeth.

SHERIFF O'BRIEN folded down two fingers and looked at the remaining three. He said quickly, "Thad Dare could have done it with Uncle Mose's help and

then killed Uncle Mose. Slim, you could have done it. Dare was opposed to you courting Billie and you always thought Jim Thomas put him up to it."

Norris Sayers parted his mustache with thumb and finger. "I haven't any alibi, either, Sheriff," he said.

O'Brien smiled at him very kindly. "I was coming to you, Norris. Only I can't figure any reason why you'd want to do it." He looked awkwardly at his three folded down fingers, waggled the fourth. "Course, some folks that didn't know might point out these men were witnesses against your cousin, but everybody knows you ain't spoke to him in years so I can't see you doing murder for him."

Charlie Sayers' thin voice rasped out in his cell. "He wouldn't bring me a burial shroud."

Norris Sayers said quietly, "Oh yes, I would, Charlie. Gladly."

Jenkins was staring at Sheriff O'Brien and his eyes were smoldering darkly. "I been thinking it over, Sheriff," he drawled. "If you feel I'm open to suspicion, I reckon the best thing for me to do is resign." He unpinned the star from his soggy worn coat, tossed it tinnily on the desk. "You want to arrest me?"

Pop shook his head, kindly blue eyes twinkling. "Reckon not, son. I got an idea who the murderer is."

"You know!" It was a gasp of blended voices, but Billie Dare's was not one of them.

The old sheriff looked at her. "So you see it, too, Billie?" he asked.

Billie slowly nodded. "Yes, I think I do," she said.

Jenkins threw back his head and laughed. It was a bitter sound. In the silence that followed he stumped toward the door, jerked it open.

"Come back here, Slim," Sheriff O'Brien called.

"Go to hell!" Jenkins snapped. He

tramped out across the porch into the muddy street, sloped off through the rain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Demon Tracks!

IN HIS own small dwelling, Slim Jenkins sprang from his cot and landed crouched in the middle of the floor, gun trembling in his hand. He stared into the close darkness with startled eyes. His heart trip-hammered against his ribs. That and the monotonous beat of the rain were the only sounds. What had awakened him he did not know, but he felt again the dry, strangling hand of terror at his throat as he had felt in the dark hours when the demons had struck in the drowned forest.

Sound boomed through the room as a fist pounded on the door of his small, isolated cabin. A man shouted outside. Jenkins strode to the door. With his hand on the knob, he hesitated.

"Jenkins!" the man shouted. "Jenkins! Wake up! The demons!"

Jenkins wrenched open the door and strode out on the small stoop, gun tensely in his hand. A man stood there with a wide-brimmed rubber hat on his head. He held a lantern and it made yellow streaks like watered silk over a shiny black raincoat.

"What is it?" Jenkins demanded swiftly. "What about the demons?"

"They done killed again," the man said hoarsely, jerking a quick glance into the shadows behind him. "They done killed Sheriff O'Brien!"

Jenkins felt anger flare like touched-off gunpowder in his breast. His wide mouth thinned. "Good God," he whispered. "They didn't—didn't—"

The man jerked his head in a frightened nod. "His head was cut off," he dropped his voice to a piercing whisper,

"cut off and carried away, and his blood. . . ."

Jenkins cursed, whirled into his cabin. The man came in after him and shut the door. He was breathing heavily and now and then a shudder trembled over his body. He kept on talking while Jenkins yanked on wet overalls and tugged at soaking, muddy boots.

"Norris Sayers found him," he said in a thin, scared voice. "Found him back of a shanty over on DeFort Street. He was lying on his face. . . ." The man bit off the words, gulped. "I mean his belly. And one of his hands had been cut off, too. The Negroes have left the levee; couldn't even hold them with guns. They've gone for the woods and one of them voodoo sacrifice meetin's."

Jenkins caught his old gray felt from a peg and jammed it on his head, strode toward the man, gun still in his hand. The man looked at the revolver and Jenkins looked at it, too. He smiled tightly and thrust it into its holster. A lot of good it would do against those horned, half-human, half-animal Things he had seen!

The two ran with feet slipping and sliding in the mud. Far off down the deserted street, Jenkins made out a cluster of lanterns in the rain. There was no sound but the sucking squash of their boots and the plopping of the thick rain. There was not a light in the Negro shanties, not a sound in them. The wailing that had grown into a background for the horror of this night had ceased.

"Negroes all ran away," the man muttered at Jenkins' side.

They turned down between two shanties, sinking into deeper mud that made them lift each foot straight upward and swing it forward from the knee as if they waded through deep snow. They reached the corner of the shanties and stopped. A half dozen men stood in a semi-circle about something on the ground. They

jerked their heads around violently at the sound of the approach, faces white and tense. No one spoke, but Norris Sayers and Lem Constable moved silently aside for Jenkins to enter their tight, frightened group. Thad Dare looked up with never a word, but none of them looked down at the pitiful thing upon the ground.

JENKINS did. He looked down at the roly-poly body of the sheriff, saw a severed hand still clenched in death about the revolver he had drawn. A lump jumped up into Jenkins' throat, a lump that strangled him. He swallowed heavily, feeling once more the hackles of fear rise upon his nape, feeling the cold madness of panic. There was the sheriff's old gray hat, the hat he never took off his pink bald head when folks were about. His head. . . . Jenkins felt his heart beat twice, three times wildly. Lights and men blurred before his eyes. Pop O'Brien's poor bald head was not beside the body, and there was no blood under the stump of his neck.

Then the terror left him, left him cold. A hell of anger burned in his eyes. "What happened?" he demanded hoarsely.

Lem Constable spat into the darkness over his shoulder. He pointed beside the headless body. Jenkins bent close. There were two long tracks there and even the rain had failed entirely to erase the marks of three claws at the toe of each.

"There's your demon tracks," Lem said.

A shiver ran over the assembled men. Once more, Jenkins felt the cold dragging fingers of dread on his back. His throat was dry.

Thad Dare faced him with his stocky, belligerent body tense. "The sheriff knew who murdered Dare and Thomas," he declared. "There were only a few of us heard him say that. You were one," he went on shrilly. "And you were the one

that got sore about it and resigned as deputy." He walked toward Jenkins, feet sliding in the ankle-deep mud. "You killed Sheriff O'Brien!"

"Don't be a fool," Jenkins snapped.

"He ain't got no claws on his feet," Lem Constable sniggered.

The words struck a hush on the assembled men. White faces twisted to peer into the dark. Previously these men had mocked at Jenkins' story of the demons, but horror had struck in their midst in the town itself. Even Thad Dare ceased his accusations and stared, anxious-eyed, over his shoulder into the night that had vomited a claw-footed killer who cut off heads and drank. . . . There was no way of telling if the old sheriff's thinning blood had been spilled on the ground; the wash of the rain was ceaseless and the land sloped sharply. . . .

Jenkins' hand lifted to his lapel. He felt the spot where his star had been. The banker looked at him gravely.

"We'll forget that resignation," he said weightily. "You go ahead and find whatever it was killed O'Brien."

Jenkins stared at him without seeing. Sheriff O'Brien had said he knew the thing that killed so terribly and . . . *Good God!* Fright trembled over Jenkins' lank body.

"Thad!" Jenkins gasped out the word. "Billie! Billie knew, too!"

Dare stared at him, frowning. "What do you mean?" he demanded heavily.

"In Pop O'Brien's office," Jenkins tumbled out the words telling him. "And now Pop is dead," he finished.

A startled curse rasped in Thad Dare's throat. "You mean. . . ?"

Jenkins spun and ran with great striding leaps into the darkness, racing for Sam Perkins' place where Billie and Thad had taken rooms for the night. He heard Thad Dare yelp to the others to follow. Jenkins' feet slipped and sucked

in the slime. Fear made his breathing hard and his lungs pumped with the labor of the frantic race.

He heard the shouting, pounding rush of the others behind him. The half-flooded streets were deserted. Not a light except the pale glimmer of the far-spaced street lamps showed. Far ahead, at the bend of the rutted street, Perkins' small dingy hotel showed, a ghostly building with a rotting porch. A single dim lamp was visible through a window, a pin-hole of light in thick blackness.

Slim Jenkins was gasping for air now, sucking in breath with great dry sobs. The exertion of dragging heavy boots through the mud at his furious pace was terrific. His run was slowed to little more than a lurching, jogging walk.

The final burst to the long wooden porch of Perkins' place seemed to tear his lungs with hot steel. He stumbled up the rain-wet steps, feet sliding with the mud. He reeled to the door and wrenched it open, strode toward the desk where the single lamp burned.

"Perkins!" Jenkins shouted. The sound was a hoarse croak. "Perkins!"

H HE HEARD feet hit the floor heavily off to his left, strode to a door there and flung it open.

"What! What!" The old man's voice quavered with fright. "What do you want?"

"Billie Dare's room! Where is it?"

The old man shambled to the doorway, bare-legged and frail in an old-fashioned, split-tailed night shirt. He pointed a shaking hand up stairs that climbed the left side of the gaunt lobby. "The door at the right," he stuttered. "What's the matter?"

Jenkins hurled himself up the steps. Until now his laboring speed had dulled the thoughts that had flashed into his mind there beside the headless corpse of

Sheriff O'Brien. But now, as he took the stairway in three-step strides, hand tearing at the railing, his mind reeled before a ghastly picture.

What if the Thing that had struck O'Brien had come here? Had swung its great, two-handed sword high in the air over Billie's head. . . ? He croaked a curse in his throat. No, no, it could not happen to Billie! Not to Billie!

He reached the head of the stairs, jerked himself to the right by the railing. He flung at the door, struck it with both fists.

"Billie!" he shouted. "*Billie!*" The ancient door quivered and shook in its socket under his hammering blows. The sound of his hammering echoed through the halls. The light in the low-burning lamp swung to the ceiling, jumped and flickered.

Jenkins beat on the door again and got no answer. Fear clogged his throat, shook him with a blood-chilling palsy.

"Billie!" It was a hoarse whisper now.

He gripped the knob and his hand seemed frozen there, powerless to remove itself, powerless to turn.

Downstairs, Jenkins could hear the quavering old voice of Perkins, heard the stumping tread of other men trooping from the rain. Feet hit the steps coming up fast and Thad Dare spun around the railing, stopped as he saw Jenkins standing stiffly against the door.

"Where's Billie?" Thad demanded.

Jenkins twisted his head about and stared into the shorter man's face. "She doesn't answer," he said, slowly.

"Then go on in," Dare pounded out. "Here, let me."

He pushed up to the door and seized the knob as Jenkins' powerless fingers fell from it. Then, with his hand on the knob, he hesitated, too, staring up into Jenkins' face. The eyes of the two men were strained, unnaturally wide.

"*God!*" Jenkins rasped suddenly. He twisted Dare's hand on the knob, flung the door wide and plunged into the room. Dim light from the hall went in with him and laid a pallid oblong on the floor, angled across a side of the bed. Jenkins stared at the rumpled covers. They had been dragged half onto the floor as if—Billie was gone!

Jenkins flung a swift glance over the half darkness of the room. Billie's wet clothes were draped over a chair to dry. Her small shoes, cleaned of mud, sat precisely side by side under a chair. A window was open and a semi-circle of rain widened on the floor. But that was all, absolutely all.

Jenkins whirled toward Thad Dare.

"She's gone!" he cried. "Gone! The demons! The demons!"

Thad Dare came two trembling steps into the room. He stood staring, then buried his face in his hands.

Jenkins pivoted to the window, reached it in two long strides, and thrust his head out into the beating rain. Beneath the window, the porch roof slanted downward. Jenkins scrambled out, skated to the edge and swinging down by his hands, dropped to the muddy earth. Frenzy gripped him. The shouted cries from above were as meaningless as the moaning of the wind. For in his mind a grizzly, blood-curdling idea was forming.

He snatched out the torch he always carried and bathed the wet earth with its beam. There, deep in the mud, were the marks of those dread demon feet. The prints led off into the night behind the hotel, and the prints were deep, sunken, as if the demon carried something.

Jenkins straightened and stared where they pointed. His face was a white ghost in the darkness. His long-legged body was rigid. "Billie!" he gasped.

There was to be a sacrifice tonight, a

human being given up to sate the blood-lust of a devil. And the demon might choose. . . . Jenkins' breath rasped in his throat.

He had heard these voodoo stories since childhood. He had never believed them, but now. . . . Whipping his light ahead, he plunged into the night, on the trail of the demon who had borne away Billie to—God only knew what.

CHAPTER SIX

The Crimson Altar

THE demon trail led him through the darkness, past the deserted Negro shanties and across a field where mud clung like human hands. But Jenkins was past delaying now, past fatigue. He did not know how his whole body cried aloud against the labor to which he drove it. He had only one idea now: the sacrifice.

For a while the shouts of men rang behind as others sought to follow where the fearful vision of the captive Billie drove him, but gradually the shouting faded, leaving only the mournful howling of the wind, and the sucking of his shoes in the mud. He crossed the main road and the tracks struck straight into the woods beyond, where boughs rattled like the decaying bones of the dead. The rain had almost ceased.

Out of the tail of his eye Jenkins glimpsed movement in the shadows. Whirling, he swung up the light to where the blackness had moved. It glinted on a Negro, his face hideously distorted, lips drawn back terribly from the teeth, eyes glaring.

Jenkins lunged toward the man, gun flashing to his hand. He saw a knife and hit with his revolver barrel. The knife glittered off in a flying arc. The Negro reeled back, sank to his knees, moaning.

"Where do they take the white goat?"

Jenkins demanded savagely. "Where is the sacrifice?"

The Negro only swayed and moaned. Jenkins' teeth were bared, his eyes glinting knife blades. "Talk! Talk, or I'll tear you to pieces."

"I talk!" the man moaned. "I talk. H't's in de swamp, on de island in de swamp."

The words struck a flash of memory into Jenkins' mind. The island in the swamp was a bit of solid ground surrounded by miles of spongy quicksand, by miles of moccasin-infested waters. But the flood would have filled all that now with muddy backwater. The island, too, would be half drowned.

"Take me there," Jenkins ordered. He pulled the Negro up, thrust him ahead at a stumbling run along the track of the demons. "Hurry or I'll rip your hide to bits and strangle you with it!"

The Negro ran, butting half-blindly into trees, moaning and groaning. He reeled a hundred yards and sank whimpering to his knees, dropped flat on his face.

"Get up," Jenkins ordered.

The man thrust himself upward, leaning heavily upon his hand. He fell again, rolled white-rimmed eyes upward. "I can't," he panted. "I tell you. You goes pass Thomas' place—pass de point and on to de swamp. You goes to three big cypresses and you swims straight out to where they's one big cypress got a lot of roots sticking out all round. It ain't far. They's a boat there."

Jenkins spun, went driving toward the swamp.

Here in the woods the rooted earth, the leaf mold overcame the long soaking of the rain. It was half firm beneath his feet and he made better time. The Negroes, terrified by the killings, by their dread of the rising river, driven half mad by the thought of corpses drained of blood, might seek to propitiate their voo-

doo gods. Perhaps they had appointed the place and the time, and the demon had stolen the sacrifice. On the island in the swamp, they would make the sacrifice of a white goat—and of Billie's white body!

Driven by that thought, Jenkins pounded through the woods. Finally, three gnarled cypresses raised their funereal crowns beside the sluggish black water.

JENKINS paused to tie the revolver and extra cartridges to the top of his head, then let himself into the flood. Brush scraped his knees beneath the water. He bumped a log and felt a jagged end tear his side. A moccasin writhed in front of him and he splashed sideways, gasping.

At last he reached the gnarled cypress roots, found a derelict boat half full of water. He threw himself into it, got hold of a paddle and pushed on, strapping on his gun again. He knew the general direction of the island and he thrust violently toward it with all the waning strength of his body.

Abruptly he wondered what help he could offer if he found her. What good would one man be against these creatures that bullets could not harm? He cursed savagely. By God! He could try! Against devil or beast, he'd put up a fight.

All about him was the pitch blackness of cloud-lowering night. Trunks of trees were invisible ten feet away and rain still dripped from the wet leaves overhead. Finally, through the tangled jungle growth of the swamp, he made out a red haze coloring tree tops, a redness that leaped and died and leaped again. And then, like a pulse within himself, he heard sound—the mutter of drums.

The rhythm of the drums reached out and took hold of him there in the fetid depths, and he found his paddle thrusting to its maddening beat, found his body swaying with it as he fought on and on

through this waking nightmare. His very heart seemed to pick up the time and *thud, thud, thud* an accompaniment deep within him. It crept and swirled around him until his mind and soul cried out against it—and his boat grated on land.

He leaped to solid earth, snatching out his revolver. He needed no light now to guide him. The fire glare glistened red on the wet black trunks of trees. It danced ahead of him in rhythm to the drums. He stumbled on, more quietly now, forcing himself to move cautiously. His eyes bulged, aching with fear of what he might see, that he might be too late. . . .

The sacrifice, he knew, had not been completed yet, for the tenor of the drums was even, stirring and wild, but even. When the time of the sacrifice came they would go mad with excitement. They would throb and leap and drive men insane. And then, while the knife was poised, the drums would be still, and the Negroes would sit paralyzed with fear, staring at the demons from which they would have fled at any other time.

It was whispered of the Negroes that in their sacrifices they drank the blood of the victims. But this time, it might not be an animal they sacrificed. This one time. . . . A tortured gasp of horror squeezed from his throat. He must not think. He must not think!

The beat of the drums quickened and, with a smothered cry, Jenkins raced toward the opening in the trees. A vine tripped him and he reeled against a tree, bounced from it and staggered. The red glare showed between the black bars of tree trunks, a lurid fire of hell behind hell's prisoning gates. Jenkins fought his way through a final tangle of shrubbery and forced himself to halt just inside the last line of trees, staring with tortured eyes into that circle of bloody light.

In that circle, glistening black bodies were packed as close as corpses heaped in a burial ditch. They sat shoulder to shoulder, back to belly in rows seven, eight, twenty deep. They sat in a semi-circle facing two fires whose light flamed and danced and died with the waving of branches of cypress, flaming in time with the mad drums.

TO THE left of the twin fires sat men with drums, eight of them with drums as long as their bodies, with little drums that they held in their laps; and they beat the tight-stretched skin of their drumheads with their fingers, with the heels of their hands. The whole close-packed arena swayed and moaned to the cadence, swayed and moaned and tossed high-flung arms.

But Jenkins' gaze was focused on the tableau between those twin fires. A rock-altar was between them, a black rock that was striped with red. The carcasses of white roosters lay upon the earth and the stench of their burned entrails filled the air. A white goat had been slashed in the throat and his carcass lay beside the others.

Jenkins' staring eyes faced the two hooded Things that stood flanking that savage altar. Their horns were dribbling blood. Streaks had dripped down across the cruel lines that deformed their faces. Their mouths were ringed with it. They were swaying to the fury of the drums, and they held in their hands long, glistening, heavy blades. And the blades, too, were crimsoned.

Between them the altar stone lay bare, but even as Jenkins stared, a figure materialized out of the blackness behind the stones. A great striding demon with three-toed claws, with a giant corded chest covered with scaly green, with longer, sharper horns that were not yet red and a sword that was greater than the others.

He raised his sword and the drums fell silent for an instant, then thundered forth their madness again. A wail of hypnotic terror rose from the close-packed Negroes. Thin, individual shouts pierced the cacophony of moaning fear. The demon stood rigid with folded arms behind the altar and the other two lesser creatures with the red-tipped horns swung drunkenly away into the darkness.

Jenkins swung up his gun, stopped. Once before he had fired futilely at these demons. If he fired now the fear-maddened Negroes, driven by the green devils, would surge over him, kill him. And if he were killed, there would be no one left to. . . .

Jenkins shuddered, head pushed forward, staring past the fire into darkness. A white shadow glimmered, came closer. "Oh, God!" Jenkins husked.

For the demons were dragging Billie to the altar!

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Severed Heads

JENKINS' breath came hard between his teeth as he forced himself to stand there motionless while Billie was dragged closer and closer to that blood-fouled altar.

Here at last was confirmation of all the horror that had beat upon his brain in that long race through the drowned woods. But Billie was alive! His teeth ground savagely. If he could not save her now, it would be better if she had died!

One of the cloaked and hooded demons held the girl, white-faced and defiant, directly behind that blood-stained altar. A shivering moan rose from the Negroes. Fury made Jenkins' body tremble while Billie wrenched and fought against the grip of the monsters on her arms. Her long golden hair clung damply about her

shoulders. Her flimsy rain-wet night-gown, which was her only garment, molded every line of her taut and struggling body.

As Jenkins stood there, fighting the madness that urged him to fling himself to the rescue, the huge demon strode before Billie. He caught the gown at the throat—and before Jenkins could more than half guess his purpose, the demon ripped the last garment from her body. Once more the shivering wail of the Negroes rose into the night as the demon stepped aside. Billie stood there, stark naked, her lovely body tinted by the leaping flames. With a wrench and a twist, Billie was thrown upon the altar, spread-eagled flat on her back with one demon clinging to her arms and the horned monster grasping her legs.

A wild cry choked in Jenkins' throat. He hooked his left arm about a cypress, fought to keep himself from plunging headlong toward Billie, shooting and killing until he was beat down by the mob.

Clinging to the tree, he stared out across that packed arena to the girl's straining body, stretched white and helpless upon that bloody sacrificial altar. He had been mad to set out on this trail alone. He clenched the gun in his hand until his fist ached. What, what *could* he do?

The drums were insane now in the pounding madness of their rhythm. The Negroes were swaying like storm-rocked trees. The demon chief tilted back his head and howled.

Jenkins flung farther into the shelter of trees and ran frenziedly around the clearing until he was behind the altar. The demons were silhouettes of horror against the red glare of the fire. The leader still howled into the night. Jenkins stumbled and fell to his knees. His gun flew from his hands. Groping in the darkness, he grasped something round that eluded his hold.

He caught it again and a sudden chill swept over him. His breath choked in his throat. He thrust himself violently backward and felt cold horror writhe within him. In the grisly darkness he had touched a human head!

The howl of the demon grew louder, more wild, drowning the moan of the wind. He strode to the end of the altar and began to whirl the sword ceremoniously. He lifted it with a gleaming flash and held it poised above Billie's white body. Jenkins jerked to his feet without even that futile gun in his hand.

And then, deep in the lashing wave of terror, he remembered the head he had fumbled in the dark.

With a furious shriek he snatched up the head and hurled it with all his strength at the demon! The head struck the demon's horn and impaled itself, stuck there like a grotesque and hideous thing sprouting from the fearful creature's head. The demon reeled; the sword swished down. It struck the altar rock and glanced aside, wrenched itself from his hands.

Silence blasted through the weird arena. The drums stopped. The shouts of the Negroes died. For an aching moment there was no sound at all save the crackling of the fires and the slow drip of the rain. The demon lifted its hands slowly and touched the thing that dangled there, and strangely, the hands flinched. Jenkins was snarling, groping in the darkness for another of those grisly heads.

A sudden shriek of terror rose from the Negroes. Some started to their feet. The chief demon pulled the head from his horn, set it down upon the altar by the white, still struggling body of Billie Dare. He raised hands, palms outward, toward the crowd.

"My people!" the demon said in cavernous, hollow voice.

Jenkins found another head. With his

soul shrinking within him, he drew back his hand and hurled the second head violently into the lurid firelight. It struck the demon between the shoulders, sent him reeling forward a half step, and the head rolled on the ground at his feet where it bounced once, horribly, and then lay still. And Jenkins saw it was the head of Jim Thomas, iron-gray hair spired into stiff spikes with dried blood, drooping mustaches stained with it.

The hooded demon who held Billie's feet shuddered back, staring into the blackness where Jenkins crouched. The leader twisted his head and the lesser demon freed Billie's feet and darted toward the woods with a headsman's sword grasped before him.

The larger monster sat on Billie's feet, and the girl was struggling madly now. Jenkins' face was twisted, his muscles jerking as he waited. The Negroes' howls were no longer rhythmic; they were broken into shouts and mutterings. More and more men struggled to their feet, screaming.

The hooded Thing came straight at Jenkins. The deputy felt his mouth go dry with terror, felt the cold paralysis of fear creep over him and congeal his blood. What could he do against this monster that bullets could not harm? He felt his feet shaking, jerking with a wild, unreasoning desire to turn and run.

Yet Jenkins stood his ground. He ducked, scooped up another head, twisting his fingers into the hair. His skin crawled, feeling the dry blood, the dead, cold flesh under his fingers. And in the moment that Jenkins waited, tightening his grip on that blood-matted hair, he knew that this was the head of Billie's father—Arthur Dare.

The demon charged into the shadows, checked when he spotted Jenkins, and came on warily with the blade poised. Jenkins leaped at him, dodged the down-

sweeping sword and swung the head like a club against the demon's skull. The demon reeled and Jenkins struck again, battering that horned head with his fearful weapon. The grinning face of old Dare glinted red in the firelight. Screams tore from the demon, but the mouth did not move. The Thing dropped its sword. With a cry, Jenkins sprang, seized one of those blood-tipped horns and wrenched. And then—

The demon's head came off in Jenkins' hands!

LAUGHTER snarled wildly in Jenkins' mouth when he saw that what he held was a grotesque mask, made to cover the entire head, and he saw that the face of a Negro stared up at him from the green, scaly body. The Negro writhed, twisted free and spilled Jenkins to the earth.

Jenkins surged up, seized the headsman's sword and swung it once. The Negro's body reeled on rubber knees for an instant. The head toppled to the ground. Then the blood-spurting trunk fell to earth. Jenkins screamed a mad curse, utterly berserk. He whirled, groped on the earth and found a head that was baldly smooth. His hands closed upon it.

He drew up his coat as he had often done when a boy to shield himself from the rain, pulled it about his head and fastened the top button. He made a grotesque figure like a headless man.

He thrust the sword up into his belt. In one hand he caught up the demon mask, in the other he seized the old sheriff's head, holding it by the jaw. He strode forward into the light then, holding the sheriff's round face above his head, so that it seemed to be his own, the coat masking his face. He made his voice hollow and deep.

"You're doomed!" he shouted.

"Doomed, doomed! You have displeased a greater ju-ju. A greater god is angry!" He strode into the lurid light of the fire and to the Negroes he seemed a thin giant of a man with the head of the sheriff, whom they knew to be dead, upon his shoulders. The demon holding Billie's arms sprang to his feet with a wavering cry of horror and plunged headlong toward the milling crowd. They were all on their feet now, staring with rolling eyes at the apparition of a man taller than any they had ever seen with the head of a dead man on his shoulders.

Jenkins gravely removed the sheriff's head and lifted into place the mask of the demon he had slain. For an instant, complete silence fell upon the packed Negroes.

"You are doomed," Jenkins boomed. "You are doomed!"

Utter panic lashed them and they turned, piling over one another in a mad rush for the woods.

Jenkins dropped the head and mask, yanked the sword from his belt and sprang toward the demon who remained. The Thing broke loose from Billie and snatched up the blade he had dropped. Whirling it high, he leaped upon Jenkins. Jenkins met that blade with a clashing blow of his own, striking with all the furious strength of his arms. The swords rang into the night and the demon's blade was knocked aside. Before the monster could strike again, Jenkins sprang close and jolted the hilt of his sword against the expressionless face. The demon reeled backward and Jenkins seized one of the horns and wrenched.

The demon, thrown off balance, reeled forward. Jenkins thrust his foot into the path of those awkward, clawed feet. The demon plunged to its knees and Jenkins whirled his blade high. A despairing cry ripped from the demon's throat as the sword whistled down. It bit where

mask and the green scaly suit met in the back. The head flew from the shoulders and the trunk quivered and collapsed slowly, grotesquely to the ground, shoulders and knees upon the earth, back humped high.

Jenkins whirled toward the altar stone. Billie was not there!

"Billie!" he cried. It was a cry that tore his soul.

From the woods behind him, a timid voice answered, "Wait, Slim. Wait until I can get this gown fastened together with some thorns."

Jenkins stood beside the altar rock, staring out over the arena where Negroes athirst for the blood of the girl had crouched. The fires were growing dimmer and the altar rock with its carcasses of chickens was becoming black with shadows. Against the fire the demon's suit glowed white hot and links of steel shimmered. Jenkins understood now the failure of his bullets. These grotesque suits had held bullet-proof chain mail.

He realized then that he still held the bloody headsman's sword and he dropped it to the ground with a shudder. The masked head lay near, and he walked toward it on heavy feet, stooped over and fumbled loose the fastenings of the mask. The head rolled free, rolled over and over until it stopped against the altar rock and glared up into the face of the avenger. It was a darkly handsome face, distorted now with fright, and a neatly-parted black mustache was on the upper lip—the head of Norris Sayers.

Jenkins stared at it and at the grotesque trunk, then he turned and stumbled toward the darkness where Billie walked slowly forward, a slim pale girl in a torn gown that she had poorly mended with thorns for pins. She crept into Jenkins' arms and sobbed there.

A HALF hour later a grim-faced group of armed men made their way to the

island. They found—but it was only after days of investigation—that Charlie Sayers had held evidence of a murder over the sanctimonious banker's head, evidence that the black sheep of the Sayers family had placed in a lawyer's hands, to be released in event of Charlie Sayers' conviction of the murder for which he was held in jail. He had forced his cousin to remove witnesses, to kill Arthur Dare, Jim Thomas, and Uncle Mose. Then Norris Sayers, believing O'Brien suspected him, had struck down the sheriff.

Slim Jenkins slouched even lower as he sat in the barely-furnished little sheriff's office a few weeks after the horror in the swamp. Near him sat Billie Dare.

"Sayers was a pretty smart feller," he drawled, "but not quite smart enough to stop his hands from itching. He used this scheme—it seems fantastic now, but it sure wasn't any joke at the time—not only to cover his murders, but to get more land. If he could have kept the Negroes too scared to work on the levee the flood would have destroyed hundreds of miles of bottomland crops on most of which Sayers held mortgages. An' he wouldn't have been a bit bashful about foreclosing either, getting title to thousands of acres at a price that would have ruined all the farmers. Luckily, Thad, Constable and I were able to get the men back to work in time to save the crops.

"He was supposed to be a student of voodoo—used to visit in Haiti a lot before he got in the bank here—and we found a bunch of books on the thing hidden in his library. So he intimidated a couple of his servants, forced them to wear those scaly clothes and horned masks—sorta hypnotized 'em with that religious mania. One of 'em kidnaped you, Billie, because Sayers believed you had the same

hunch as the sheriff about who was at the bottom of all this. The Negroes would eventually have been blamed for murdering you out there. . . ."

Billie shuddered. "It's like an awful nightmare. I—I can't tell you how grateful I am, Slim, for—awakening me—all of us!"

Slim Jenkins' face got very red. He started to say something, but a shadow appeared in the open doorway and Thad Dare stepped into the room. There was a grin on his face and his hand was outstretched toward the deputy.

"Slim, I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying to Billie. You—you're the better man, all right. I guess—uh—oh, what's the use. Good luck, anyhow, you two!" And he turned abruptly, embarrassed, and went out. The door closed behind him.

Jenkins flashed his wide, good humored smile at the door. He nodded, still grinning. "Nothin' wrong with the Dares. Thought they was some stuck-up at first, but, shucks, they're real people. Only, I knew all along *you* were the real stuff, Billie!"

Billie Dare's slender fingers pushed back a stray yellow lock from over her eye. And Slim Jenkins suddenly bent forward, his eyes focused on hers. "Why, Billie Dare! You — you're cryin'! Why. . . ?"

"W-what were you going to tell me when Thad came in?" she quavered.

Slim Jenkins scratched his head and his eyes crinkled. He got up and moved over to the chair where Billie Dare was sitting. His strong brown hands reached out to her white ones. He drew her up, close to him. His arms went around her.

"I don't have to tell you with words, Billie," he whispered.

He was right; he didn't.

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DEATH WATCH

by

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Rouse

He had only a dying man's word for that ghastly injustice of forty years before. . . . Yet that one night confirmed—in blood and pain and human sacrifice—the tragic deathbed tale.

THE smell of the house was that of old things, long neglected. The ancient stairs creaked as William Delano mounted them. Ahead of him waddled the old woman, whose felt slippers slapped softly against the mahogany treads. The banisters rattled under the pull of her knotted hand.

The hand went sliding up the rail. Delano watched it, fascinated. It stood out whitely in the gloom of the stair well.



As they climbed up and up the dark-clothed body of the woman became invisible, and only the sliding hand and the flap of the slippers proved that there was a presence ahead.

Young Delano felt as though he were being catapulted onward through the years to old age. Or was it a sinking backward, decade by decade, into the grim past of this house where his ancestors had passed from flourishing strength to decay and death?

It seemed a long, long time before the old woman paused in the twilight of the upper hall and looked back at him. He thought he saw a toothless grin. His feet lagged in a kind of hypnosis.

"In there!" she croaked.

The hand he had watched lifted and pointed toward a strip of yellow lamp-light, painted down the darkness at the front of the hall. Delano heard a clucking sound as he passed the woman, a sound which might have been a muttered curse or a grotesque chuckle. He stepped cautiously, feeling his way. The floor-boards groaned. Then he reached the vertical bar of light and pushed a door slowly open.

High on the pillows of a draped four-poster a bony, powerful face, with deepset eyes, looked up at him. That wide jaw and pointed chin were like his own, he knew, and the dark eyes would no doubt be as blue as his in a better light. Not snow-white hair, not age and illness, could change the likeness of a Delano to his kin. Jonathan Delano at the end of life was as plainly of the blood as he had been in his long distant youth.

He spoke no word as the young man crossed the wide chamber, over a threadbare Brussels carpet, and came to a halt beside the mounded feather bed. The imminence of death lay like a veil upon his gray face, and yet William Delano could not quite make himself believe that his uncle whom he had never before seen needs must inevitably die.

"Shut the door!" came in a strong whisper from the bed. "That hellcat will listen!"

Any formality of greeting which William Delano might have had in mind was instantly swept away. He closed the door upon the dark hall and pulled a shaky chair up to the bed. The old man drew a deep and rattling breath. He was gathering strength for an effort. It seemed utter folly to tell this strong-willed man, already on the edge of eternity, to be careful of himself.

"You sent for me, Uncle Jonathan," said Delano. "I'll do anything I can for you."

The old man nodded, as though he already knew it. His bloodless, clean-shaven lips parted.

"You're made of stronger stuff than your father," he said, slowly. "I can see that. Edward was a damned scholar. Will you fight for a fortune?"

THE question thrust at Bill Delano like a pistol shot. He had expected anything but this from the brief telegram that had brought him from New York to the snow-bound Adirondacks. He had come with no thought except that he might be of some use to his only remaining relative. From his father he had long since learned that there was nothing left of the Delano fortune but acres of rocky mountain and pasture land, and a decaying house with a fierce old man in it.

"I will fight for anything I want," he replied, carefully, "if it's mine by right."

"A preacher's conscience and a Viking eye!" sneered old Jonathan. "Well, take it or leave it, and be damned to you! You're the last of the blood, and fifty thousand dollars is yours if you've got the gumption to fight for it!"

Jonathan Delano breathed hard. His eyes traveled to a little marble-top table at

the head of the bed. Bill reached for a glass there, tentatively.

"Smell of it!" commanded his uncle. "I don't want that cursed medicine old Kate gives me! If it's water, all right!"

It was water. A touch of color came to the old man's face as he drank.

"Not much strength," he panted. "Or time! Got to make it short. Forty years ago your grandfather, Hiram, bought a half dozen farms from a youngster about my age, Joel Whalley. Passed his word, mind you, and gathered in all his cash. Joel Whalley came here the night they agreed on with the deeds and took the money. He says he didn't, but I know he did.

"That night your grandfather was murdered and the deeds were stolen. Whalley said the trade was postponed that night because of a disagreement about taxes for the current year. He had the deeds and said he'd never seen the money.

"Do you understand, young man? He had Hiram Delano's fifty thousand dollars and still owned the land that he holds now, curse him!

"But there was one thing that he didn't count on. At the bank in Valeboro they'd made a list of the big bills they'd given your grandfather that day. Whalley found it out. He's never dared to use that money.

"He knows I've got a list of plate numbers and he's waiting for me to die. He thinks that when old Jonathan's under the sod there'll be nobody to remember! Just one bill, young man, will be enough to convict him! I want you to go and get it!"

The sick man rested, gasping for breath, but his eyes pleaded with this nephew whom he had never seen before. Drops glistened on his forehead. Bill Delano wiped them away, mechanically, with whirling thoughts. His father had never told him anything of this. He understood why. His father had been a man of peace.

"The law—" he began.

"The law!" sneered Jonathan. "The law can't touch him! There's no proof! They didn't have fingerprints in those days! And Joel Whalley is a man harder than the stones of his house!"

"But you must have tried, yourself!" objected Bill.

The old man made a futile effort to lift his arm.

"Pull my nightshirt down from the left shoulder!" he commanded.

The will of Jonathan Delano held sway in that room. Bill drew the coarse garment away as gently as he could. The long cicatrix of a horrible wound was revealed. It looked as though it had healed without medical attention. In lumps and ridges the white scar reached from the collar-bone outward and upward to the peak of once powerful shoulder muscles.

"Whalley did that with a five-tined pitchfork. I could show you worse than that. But he didn't dare to kill me! He's guarded, William. You'll have to fight!"

"I'll go," promised Bill.

JONATHAN DELANO relaxed against the pillows. A great peace settled upon his face.

"I never could get inside," he whispered. "Just one bank-note will be enough to prove him guilty! The list of numbers is in my wallet, under my head. Take it. I'm tired!"

"We'll talk more later," said Bill. "Now I'm going to get a nurse in here for you."

The fire in Jonathan's eyes flared up again.

"You'll go now!" he panted. "Tonight! It's got to be done while I'm alive to be a witness! He'll know you're here! Take him when he thinks you'll be here waiting for me to go over the last jump! His house is just across the valley. And I'll have no nurses here, fussing with tem-

peratures and open windows! I'm master in my own house yet!"

William Delano realized that the kindest thing he could do was to go at once upon this strange errand. It was night, and bitterly cold. He would drive back to the hotel at Valeboro for his supper, and plan his undertaking there.

But in a last effort to do something for his uncle, he said: "That woman who let me in is no person to take care of you."

"Kate? She's good enough. The devil gave her a reprieve so I wouldn't be left alone. No one else would stay here. Damn it! Get on with the work!"

Bill Delano shrugged resignedly, nodded agreement. He found a yellowed, creased paper in the time-blackened wallet. It bore the bank-note numbers. The grip of Jonathan's hand was surprisingly strong.

"Good night, sir," said Bill. "I'll do what I can and come back as soon as I can."

Jonathan Delano did not reply in words; but his hawk eyes seemed to challenge the young man, and to mock him, as he turned away.

Bill Delano stepped out of the room into the dark and silent hallway. A faint glow of light came from below stairs. He felt his way downward over the complaining treads.

Old Kate was waiting for him in the lower hall, and under a hanging lamp of fluted glass he saw her with a degree of clarity. She was a bundle of fusty clothing, tied about the middle with an apron string. Black, button-like eyes were the only life in her parchment face.

"You want to eat something?" she asked. "I brung a cup of coffee."

One of the clawlike hands which had fascinated Bill darted out from the voluminous folds of her skirt. It reached for a cup that was on a table in the shadows. Mechanically Delano put his lips to the dark liquid there. It was un-

pleasantly bitter and he did no more than to wet his mouth.

"I'll be coming back later," he said. "Perhaps sometime in the night. Meanwhile see if you can't get some broth and wine for Mr. Delano."

"He'll get what he needs!" She nodded, and made that indefinable clucking sound which Bill had heard in the ghostly upper hall. He found himself disliking the old woman intensely.

THE high valley lay white in the grip of winter, and the night was brittle and cold. In the light of a full moon each tree and fence corner was fantastically revealed. Bill Delano stopped his car a few hundred yards from the rambling stone house of Joel Whalley and approached the front door on foot.

The car would be there for retreat in case of trouble. This was the only concession that he made to the warnings of Jonathan. In the cheerful, warm dining room of the hotel at Valeboro the potency of that half hour in Delano House had weakened.

Granting that everything which Jonathan Delano had said was true, Bill did not want to begin his quest by breaking and entering at night. He might get himself into jail. Whalley must be rich and powerful, and he was on his own ground.

There must be two sides to this story—and so Delano put his hand to the old-fashioned bell pull beside Whalley's door, with every intention of walking only on firm ground. He heard the jangle of the bell inside, but no other sound until the door swung slowly inward.

Bill Delano gasped, with slack jaw muscles. Unconsciously he had been prepared for another such servant as he had seen at Delano House. Instead, he found himself staring up at a slim girl who looked like an apparition from another and less troubled world.

The candle which she held framed her

head in an aura of misty light. Her hair gleamed softly golden. Her face had the kindly beauty which the young so seldom have. She smiled.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Joel Whalley, if I may," said Bill. "I am William Delano."

It was as though his name were a sound to inspire terror. The girl gave a little cry and the candlestick tipped in her grasp. She flung a glance over her shoulder.

"You are the nephew?" she asked, in a low tone. "You—"

A strong voice boomed down the hallway. "Who is it, Lucia?"

"Someone—to see—you. . . ."

A heavy tread sounded. Delano, alert for danger now, stepped up into the doorway beside the girl. He saw a vigorous old man, as old as his uncle, with high square shoulders and a long cold face. Eyes and mouth were expressionless, framed in iron gray hair which emphasized the grim line of the mouth and the pale quality of the steady gaze.

"Mr. Joel Whalley?" asked Bill.

"And you don't need to tell me that you're a Delano! William, son of Edward and nephew of Jonathan. We country people remember families, and names." Whalley turned to the girl. "Miss Lucia Brooke, my housekeeper."

She inclined her head, staring at Bill with wide gray eyes which had appeared black at the first glance, so enlarged were the pupils.

Delano bowed, and tried to draw his mind back from that charming, frightened face to the business in hand. Whalley made a wide gesture of welcome.

"Come into my office," he said. "Lucia, I'd like to have you with us."

Bill followed the massive, slightly stooped figure into a severe room of black walnut furniture and dark-toned wallpaper. A brisk fire burned in a low

box stove. The windows were thick with frost.

"Take Mr. Delano's coat," said Whalley. "Draw up a chair, young man. It's a good many years since a member of your family has called here."

"It was at the request of my Uncle Jonathan that I came," replied Bill, slowly. He thought he caught a flicker of surprise in the rocklike face of Whalley.

"He is not dead yet?"

"No, and with proper care I think it's possible that he may recover."

Now Bill was certain that a change of expression came into the pale eyes, like the shadow of a cloud upon cold waters.

"It has been very sad about Jonathan," murmured Whalley. "It would not have happened, perhaps, if he had chosen a more friendly mode of living."

"You mean?" asked Delano, puzzled.

"His mind," replied Whalley. "You must know he has been deranged for years?"

"No!" Bill stared. "I had heard nothing of that. Tonight he seemed eccentric, but not insane."

"It's less brutal to call him eccentric." Whalley spread large hands upon his knees, and nodded slowly. "He has had delusions for a very long time. One of them is that I murdered your grandfather, Hiram Delano."

IF JOEL WHALLEY had met Bill at the door with a shotgun he would have been surprised, but not overcome by astonishment. But these few words stunned him. He suddenly found himself fighting windmills. He was left flat and foolish.

"He has even caused us considerable trouble by coming here at times in a beligerent mood," continued the older man, in an even voice. "But because he was a neighbor no complaint has been made."

Delano rallied. He was now doubly

glad that he had felt his way in this affair.

"I think it's best to be frank," he said. "I came here on account of what he has told me, although I didn't fully credit it. His mind appeared to be clear, but he was not only of the belief that you killed my grandfather—he thought that you'd robbed him as well."

"He has accused me of something like that." Whalley cleared his throat. "I'm not quite certain what his idea is, but as a matter of fact the sale of my land to your grandfather wasn't completed. I returned home with the deeds. That night your grandfather was killed, and presumably robbed. I had hoped for the sale. I was forced to place some mortgages because it fell through."

It was all perfectly reasonable, Delano thought. He looked at the girl, sitting in silence with downcast eyes. Her nervousness was easily accounted for by fear of the family feud. Whalley had not wanted to risk talking to a stranger alone about this matter. Bill did not know why he himself persisted in his inquiry, but he did.

"But it would have been extremely clever," he said, smiling nevertheless, "to make the sale and then go back and get the deeds, which could not have been recorded that night."

The face of the girl looked waxen in the uncertain light of the oil lamp. Whalley's big fingers beat a tattoo upon his knees.

"I suppose so," he said at length. "But I haven't enjoyed the fruits of this alleged crime."

Was it a devil, Delano wondered, that was making him go on with this conversation? It was beginning to approach rudeness. "My uncle insists," he said, "that a list was made of the plate numbers of the missing bills."

Joel Whalley stood up, with the man-

ner of a man who has come to a decision.

"I see I'll have to convince you of your error," he announced, evenly. "Wait here a moment, please."

He was gone out of the room before Delano could utter the apology which had started to his lips. Bill had no chance to speak at all, for the instant that the door closed behind Whalley the girl was on her feet, with a hand lifted for silence. She had come miraculously to life. With a swift movement she bent her head to the crack of the door and listened. Then she turned fear-stricken eyes upon Delano.

"Go away from here!" she exclaimed. "Go at once, before he comes back!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Bill confusedly. He got to his feet.

She seized him by the arm with surprisingly strong fingers, tried to push him toward the door. "If I try to explain you'll argue, and it will be too late! Your life is in danger! Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Delano was nettled. She was too urgent. He was not a child.

He answered, a little haughtily, "My life has been in danger before now."

"How stupid you are!" she all but wailed. "Whalley will kill you!"

"Are you mad? Why, he's treated me with consideration!" Yet Bill was impressed in spite of himself.

"But you've persisted!" She flung out her hands in a helpless gesture. The door began to open behind her, and at the first faint sound she whirled and faced Joel Whalley.

"Lucia," he said, "I must speak with you."

The soft blue of her gown melted past Whalley and left him framed there in the doorway like a figure of doom. His expression had not changed, yet somehow he carried with him the promise of finality. Without a word more he vanished. The door clicked shut.

BILL DELANO looked about the gloomy little chamber. Instinct told him to smash that frosted window with a chair and leap out into the night. Instead he moved the stout poker so that he could reach it easily, and took a position with the stove between him and the door.

Whalley came back into the room, with his soft, deliberate tread. Behind him the doorway filled again, this time with a form which might have walked out of a brutal nightmare. A splay-footed giant, inches more than six feet tall, stood looking down upon the two men in the office.

A soiled flannel shirt and stained overalls encased his muscle-ridged limbs and body. A pointed head topped the long slope of his shoulders. And the features of the face upon that head seemed to melt into each other as though they had been molded of putty. Dull, inhuman eyes regarded Bill Delano.

"I understand from Miss Brooke," said Whalley, "that you intend to persist in your inquiry."

Rather than hear this Bill would have given up a fortune. He realized this abruptly, and his heart sank. So the girl had been acting, to find out what she could! She must be in this place willingly. Twice or thrice a fool, coming here in peace, believing Whalley, believing the girl!

"It looks now," said Bill slowly, "as though I had reason to persist. Why this person in the doorway? Are you afraid of me?"

Joel Whalley barked a laugh that was like the crackling of dry brush.

"This is my man Tim," he replied. "He is going to do some work for me, and he'll do it as well as he did the fall butchering."

"You want me to stick him, Mr. Whalley?" asked Tim in a thick voice.

"Don't put a mark on him yourself!"

commanded Whalley harshly. "I'll tell you what to do."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Tim. "You say what."

Delano shuddered. He saw the long, powerful hand of Whalley extended toward him.

"Have you the list of numbers?" he asked. "If you think not, Tim will search you to make sure your memory is correct."

Thought of instant battle came to Bill's mind, but he decided against it. He would yield long enough to make them careless. He took out the yellowed slip of paper which his uncle had given him, and handed it to Whalley.

The smooth mask of Joel Whalley's face did not change as he glanced at the paper. He tore it into fine pieces, lighted a match, and watched it burn on an ash-tray.

"The bank will have forgotten, after forty years," he murmured. "I could have taken that from Jonathan but the time wasn't ripe. He was too vigorous to die. A man is a fool who leaves a single straw to show which way the wind blows!"

"It seems to me," said Bill, "that you're leaving a good many straws!"

Whalley's upper lip drew back until the tips of the canine teeth were revealed.

"After tonight," he snarled, "there will be no Delano left alive! Tim! Listen to me!"

"Uh-huh!" answered the giant, and he balanced as though to take a forward step.

"Be careful not to hurt this man. Carry him out and throw him into the bull-pen. Then let Moloch loose in there. Do you understand?"

"Uh-huh! Now?"

"Yes!"

The poker was in Delano's hand with the first movement of the brute in the doorway. He turned and thrust at

Whalley's face, fainting, and drew Tim that way. Then he sprang backward, cleared the stove at a leap, and delivered a swinging blow at the domelike head as he rushed for the door.

Bill had felt the crack of the blow as it landed and glimpsed Tim reeling against Whalley. He was in the doorway. He thought he was free.

AND then he stopped as though the very air had frozen around him, holding him viselike.

A mighty hand had gripped the slack of his coat. He braced himself against that pull. Cloth ripped. His feet slid on the carpet. He twisted, working his shoulders free from the coat. His arms went behind him in the effort. The terrible grip shifted to a wrist and he knew that he was lost.

Bill was drawn back into the office. For the moment he gave up all resistance against the giant's grip. With but a little added pressure, the calloused, muscle-padded hands which held him could snap the very bones of his arms. . . .

A little ribbon of blood ran down the receding forehead of the unmoved executioner. Perhaps it would have been less horrible if he had been a normal man. But his face was like that of a weathered stone image, vague and without understanding.

"The coat must be found on the body, Tim," said Whalley. "Put it back on him. The rips won't matter; there'll be more before he's finished. Take him out now. He's given trouble enough."

Bill struggled free, sent a hard uppercut against the granite jaw above him. It did no good. Tim merely shook his head and went on with the business of clothing his prisoner in the torn coat. His corded arms encircled Delano, lifted him clear of the floor.

Bill went out of the room kicking like

a helpless child. He was borne toward the rear of the house. Tim opened a door, and abruptly they were plunged into the biting cold of the night.

The moon made a world of black and silver. Tim's heavy feet crunched on frozen snow. Delano saw a high fence, with buttressed posts. He was swung backward, and tossed into the air. His body rose over the fence, and landed with a breath-taking thump on snow-covered ground.

There was a moment when Bill, breathless, could not move. Then he gasped, rolled over, and came up to his feet like a cat. He looked right and left for something to fight. There was no moving object near him. The moonlight was still and cold, with an ominous stillness. Trampled snow surrounded him.

Before him the face of a low building was in impenetrable shadow. That shadow formed one side of a rectangle which was fenced by planks set on end, and edge to edge so that a solid wooden wall surrounded the enclosure. In the center of the fenced space the earth dipped sharply in a bowl-like depression. At the bottom of the depression there was the gleam of freshly formed ice.

Perhaps it was the sight of the ice that brought home to Delano consciousness of the intense cold. There was no breath of air stirring. It was one of those mountain nights when the limbs of great trees crack in the grip of the frost. In that air bare flesh would sear at the touch of metal.

Bill buttoned his torn coat and advanced to the fence. The planks offered no hold for his fingers. He could not reach the top. He turned toward the building; and then he heard the first sound that had come to him since he had been hurled into the air.

From the darkness came a rage-saturated roar in a voice which he knew

for that of Whalley's henchman. A blow thudded somewhere behind that curtain of shadow. Then a bellow of monstrous, primitive wrath shook the night.

Somewhere in there a board splintered. A great shape came plunging out into the pen. This, then, was the Moloch that was to do Joel Whalley's work for him. An intruder might easily fall into the bull-pen, to be trampled and gored to death without blame to the owner of the bull.

Bill was revealed on the edge of the depression. Moloch charged straight for him, as he would have charged in his stupid rage at any living thing that he saw. Bill took a backward step, and shot downward with lightning speed. He came to rest on the ice at the bottom of the bowl.

INSTINCT had halted the bull. Slowly he circled the depression. Finally it penetrated his dull brain that he could not get at the object of his wrath. With a snort like the sound of tearing cloth, he turned away.

Two black figures appeared on top of the fence, walking briskly as though on a runway. Whalley and his man halted and looked down upon Delano and Moloch.

"Want me jounce a rock on him?" asked the thick voice of Tim.

"No, you fool!" growled Whalley. "It would show that Moloch had help. You stay here and wait till he's finished. He'll freeze if he doesn't get out of that water-hole, and if he does Moloch will get him. I want to make sure, that's all. You watch, Tim!"

Bill Delano stood shivering, with his arms huddled around his ribs, and said nothing. He knew that he might as well talk to Moloch as to that cold, gray man on the fence. In silence he watched Whalley walk along the fence and disappear in the direction of the house.

Tim, mittened and capped and wrapped in a big jacket, was like an enormous toad against the skyline. He sat comfortably on the edge of the planks. He could wait an hour, two hours. It would be over long before his tough hide felt the touch of the icy night.

Delano took a step with a foot which had become like a block of wood. He had bought rubbers that day in Valeboro. The corrugated bottoms gripped the ice for a few steps up the side of the depression. Then his feet shot out from under him, and he found himself sitting on the spot from which he had started. The death watch on the fence gurgled and heaved with laughter.

With clumsy aching hands Bill Delano fished out his pocket knife. His fingers had become like talons. They were no longer capable of bending at the joints, but he managed to get the knife open with his nails.

He knelt and began to hack at the enameled surface of ice and frozen snow. The knife slipped from his grasp. Painfully he recovered it, and with one hand bent the fingers of the other over the handle so that it was held firmly against his palm.

Bill went to work again, to the accompaniment of diabolical mirth from the fence. He summoned all the force of his will and hacked desperately until there was a niche into which his stiff hand would hook. He reached up and cut another. The work warmed him somewhat. Pain came back to his hands and feet, and he welcomed it.

At last he was at the lip of the bowl. He raised his head, drew himself over the edge, and stood erect. Moloch was at the end of the enclosure, nosing and pawing the snow. Tim had risen to his feet, leaning forward to watch the comedy of life and death which had given him

such amusement. One great foot rested on top of the fence.

This was the moment. Bill dashed straight at the planking under Tim. He leaped into the air, with arms upstretched. His hands grasped the foot on the fence top. He held on with the grip of the drowning, swung all his weight upon the thick ankle.

A yell rose from the toppling giant. Bill braced himself against the planks and heaved backward with a wordless prayer for strength. Tim shot downward, to land on head and shoulders in the snow.

A GAIN Delano leaped, disregarding what might be happening behind him. He hooked his fingers over the fence and flung himself sidewise, like a pendulum. Back and forth, a little higher each time. . . .

At last a leg swung over the edge of the planks, and held there. He worked the rest of his body over—and gasping, exhausted, rolled on his stomach. Safe! He looked down into the bull-pen.

Tim and Moloch faced each other across a stretch of trampled snow. The bull lowered his head and a low rumble came from the deep chest. The man answered with a weird, inhuman challenge.

The two monsters launched themselves at the same time. They met at the edge of the depression, and melted into one dark shape. The bull stumbled, tossed his head. The man rose into the air and fell back upon him. Then they slipped sidewise together, and went gliding down to the bottom of the bowl. . . .

Bill Delano wanted to see no more. Breath had come back to him and he dropped to the ground from the runway along the fence. He knew that the sensible thing for him to do was to go back to his car, but he had no intention of doing the sensible thing.

He walked cautiously up to the house and tried the door through which he had been brought out. It yielded. He stepped into the dim hallway. A monotonous drone of voices came from the office, and the door of that room was open. From the shadows of the corridor Bill peered in.

Joel Whalley sat at his desk, in the act of pouring whisky from a bottle into two water tumblers. A gnarled hand reached eagerly from a humped figure beside the stove. It was a woman who straightened up and revealed her face in the lamplight. Old Kate, of Delano House, was here, drinking with the deadly enemy of her employer!

“You put too much into the coffee,” Whalley was saying. “That’s why he wouldn’t drink it. I’d rather have dealt with both of them there than here. But it’s all right. Young Delano has been taken care of.”

“You fixed him good?” The old woman’s mouth stretched in a gaping grin. She drank, and smacked her lips, and held out her glass for more. Whalley, who had not touched his whisky, measured a smaller second drink for Kate.

“Not too much of this tonight!” he said, warningly. “And don’t ask questions! Go back there and give Jonathan enough to finish him. Get up late in the morning. Make sure he’s dead. And then call a doctor. Be sure to leave the bottle beside the bed, in plain sight. He took it himself, remember!”

Kate’s head bobbed vigorously up and down. She sipped at her whisky.

“You got to give me some more of that stuff, Joel. What I had’s all gone.”

“What’s that?” exclaimed Whalley. “You haven’t used all that chloral since you were here?”

“I kept him under when he was raving about coming after you,” she whined. “You said if I finished him off the young

feller wouldn't come. An' I spilt quite a lot into the coffee. And I—I kind of tipped over the bottle, Joel."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place, you old fool!" He rose and went to a cupboard, turning his back upon the room. "I'll give you some more."

INSTANTLY Kate gulped her whisky and leaned forward toward the desk. Her shawl hooded her movements, but Bill Delano saw a shaking hand grip the neck of the bottle and slop out whisky. She began to talk, rapidly.

"My nerves ain't what they was forty year ago, Joel! You remember, Joel? Forty year ago! Nor my looks ain't what they was, neither! You used to think I was good looking, didn't ye?"

"Shut up!" said Whalley, closing the cupboard. He handed her a small bottle. "Take this and get out! And if you make a mistake you know what'll happen to you!"

"Kate ain't no fool!" she chuckled. "You give me some of that money you took off'n old Hiram. I got to help you afore I dast to spend it, anyhow. . . ."

"Get out!" growled Whalley. "And if the doctor asks you any questions remember that the Delanos hated me, and that you hate me!"

"I'll remember!" she grinned, as she got stiffly to her feet. "I'll remember everything!"

"You old rip," said Whalley, in a voice of terrible restraint. "If you make a mistake I'll send Tim after you!"

"I wasn't an old rip forty year' ago, when you come a-coaxin' and a-courtin' for me to onlatch that winder so's you could get at Hiram!"

She slipped toward the doorway as Whalley made a movement toward her. Delano stepped hastily far back into the shadows to let her pass. She went clucking down the hallway and out at the front

door. Bill glanced again into the office. Joel Whalley lifted his full glass and took the whisky at a gulp. He shuddered, and filled the glass again.

Bill jumped at a light touch on his hand, and almost betrayed himself to the man he was watching. Although he could not see clearly he knew that it was Lucia Brooke who was beside him there in the shadows, and that the mere touch of her fingers against his flesh was melting away all the bitterness of resentment which he had held against her.

"I heard them," she whispered. "Come quickly!"

He followed her out through the rear doorway. No sound came from the bullpen. Delano halted and faced the girl in the moonlight.

"You . . . what did you say to Whalley?" he asked confusedly.

"He listened in the room behind the office," she replied, in a gentle voice. "There's a stovepipe hole in the wall. He knew I warned you, and that decided him to make an end of you here. He locked me in my room until after Tim had taken you out. I saw the dreadful thing from my window."

"I'm sorry!" Bill was drawing her away from the house. "I've got a car near here. . . . We must get to my uncle before that old woman does!"

"It will be all right," Lucia assured him, from a calm as strong and serene as the night. "I know."

"But that woman tried to poison me!" exclaimed Bill, as they climbed into the car. "She has poison for my uncle!"

"My father and Joel Whalley and your uncle Jonathan all loved my mother," said the girl, and for an instant Bill thought that she had not understood what he said. "When my father and mother died, Whalley came posing as a friend and induced me to come here. I've been a prisoner.

He thought he was going to marry me. But I knew!"

"You knew what?" asked Bill. "Did you know that I was coming to Delano House?"

The strange girl turned in her seat and faced him, and smiled. "There is a law that cannot be broken," she said. "Evil must destroy itself."

THE lonely light in the chamber of the sick man was the only sign of life in Delano House. Bill and Lucia Brooke climbed up through the whispering stillness of the stair well, and fear that old Kate had somehow arrived before them lay heavy upon the young man.

But the piercing gaze of Jonathan Delano met them undimmed as they stepped over the threshold of his room. Miraculously his eyes filled with wonder and with happiness. An arm moved against the quilts. His head stirred upon the pillows.

"Lucia!" he exclaimed in a whisper that seemed to fill the room.

Then they were beside the bed, bending over him. Slowly the look of one who saw a vision faded from his face. The grimness of the stricken warrior settled about him again.

"It's Lucia's daughter," said the girl. "I've come to help you!"

"It's the boy there who can help me," replied Jonathan. "William, did you get the proof against Whalley?"

"He'll be ready to give up today," said Bill. "He's beaten at last."

"The money is under his bed in an iron box," murmured Lucia. "I have seen it."

The floor-boards in the hall creaked. Bill Delano sprang to his feet. A shape grew in the doorway, and old Kate stood

blinking at them with red-rimmed eyes. She steadied herself against the casing.

"You're too late," Bill said sternly. "I heard all you and Whalley said to each other. I want the bottle that he gave you."

The expression of the wrinkled, toothless face remained unchanged. A clawlike hand came out from the folds of the old woman's skirt. She held out a small bottle. Abruptly she gave a mirthless, clucking chuckle.

"You heard me," she said, "but you didn't see me when I put the pizen into his likker! Nor he didn't, neither! I hid outside. I see you folks go. And when I see through a winder that he'd fell out of his chair I went in and drug him out into the snow. It's cold enough to freeze the hair off a dog and he ought to be a goner by this time!"

For an instant a vast astonishment held Bill Delano silent. Then he found his wits and his voice.

"But you tried to poison me!" he cried. "You gave chloral to my uncle!"

"I give him enough to keep him from going up there in his nightshirt!" She nodded toward the bed. "And I was afeered Tim would kill you, if you went. What's more, I wanted to finish Joel myself. I knowed I'd get a chance sometime. If it hadn't been for him I wouldn't be the old rip he called me."

A sigh of great content came from Jonathan Delano, a quick intake of breath from Lucia. Old Kate was swaying gently in the doorway now. Bill took the bottle from her limp hand. It was empty.

"I drunk what he give me the last time," she said, faintly. "My work's done, and I calculate to take a rest."

In the Next Issue—

HONEYMOON IN HELL

A Chill-Packed, Complete Novel
By WYATT BLASSINGAME

—Out August 10th



Those Who Dwell In Coffins

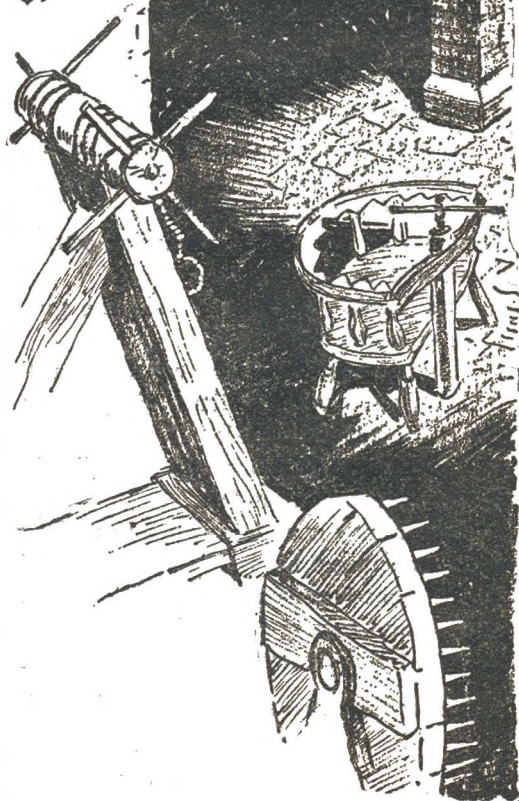
by John Knox

(Author of "The Soul Eaters," etc.)

There are those who, having sold their souls to Satan, must dwell forevermore in the grim housing of the dead—accursed beings only half alive, who must ravish beneath the moon for living, human prey.

THE boy spoke in a husky whisper that rattled against his teeth. "There it is. I wouldn't go no closer—not if I was dragged."

Garvin's eyes followed the boy's pointing finger. Beyond the dark ravine that fell away at his feet, he glimpsed, on the



Eerie Mystery Novelette

opposite slope, the black and ancient pile of adobe called *El Molino*, with its chimney and bell tower rising shadowy and ominous against the moon-bright sky.

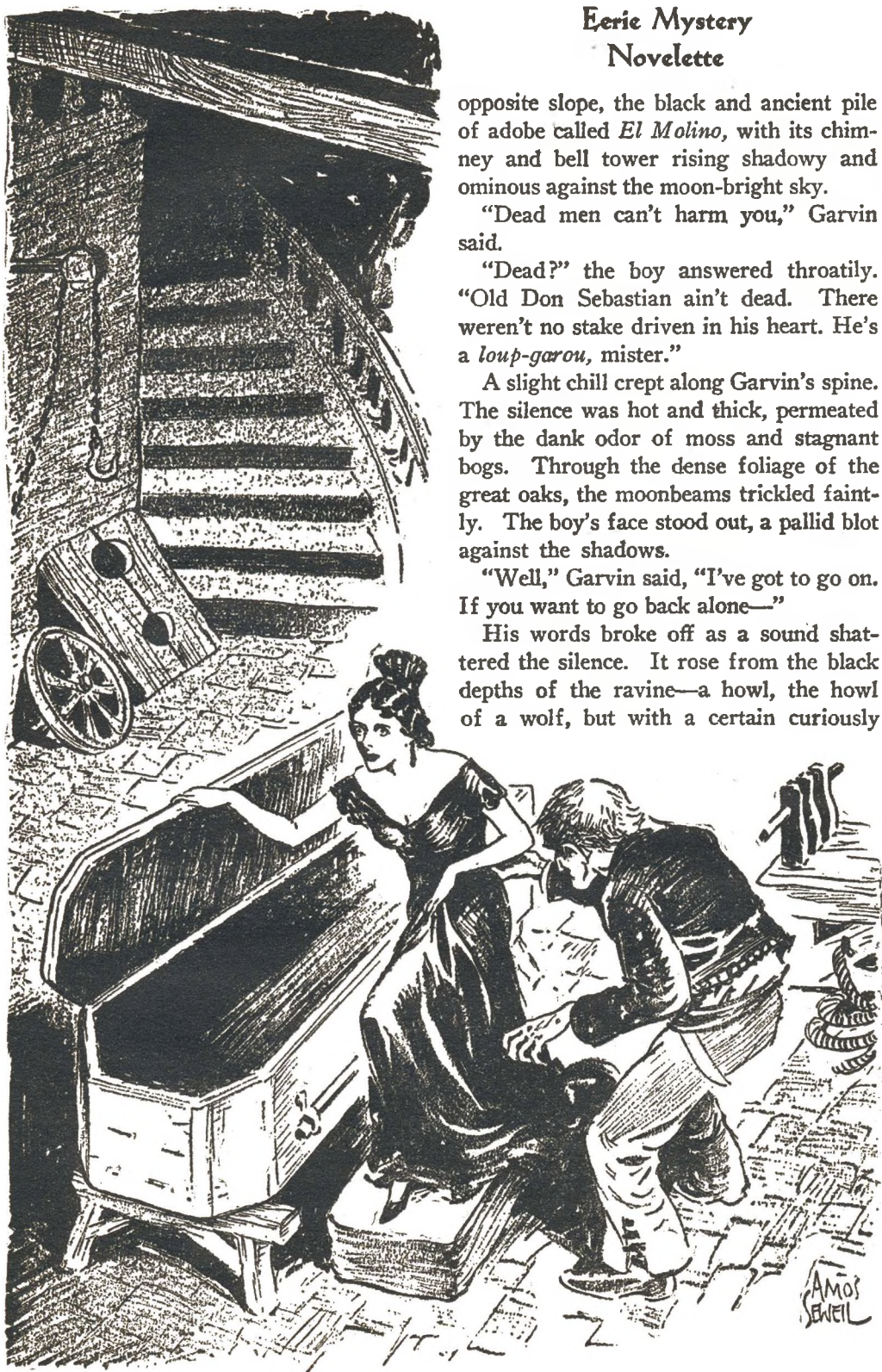
"Dead men can't harm you," Garvin said.

"Dead?" the boy answered throatily. "Old Don Sebastian ain't dead. There weren't no stake driven in his heart. He's a *loup-garou*, mister."

A slight chill crept along Garvin's spine. The silence was hot and thick, permeated by the dank odor of moss and stagnant bogs. Through the dense foliage of the great oaks, the moonbeams trickled faintly. The boy's face stood out, a pallid blot against the shadows.

"Well," Garvin said, "I've got to go on. If you want to go back alone—"

His words broke off as a sound shattered the silence. It rose from the black depths of the ravine—a howl, the howl of a wolf, but with a certain curiously



human quality. Prolonged, mournful, it trailed off in an eerie ululation that seemed to hover quivering in the shadowy air.

With a short, hissing cry, the boy sprang against Garvin, his fingers clutching the man's arm convulsively.

"Lordy!" he gasped. "It's him—the *loup-garou*. I think I seen his eyes—there!"

A screech owl swooped down across their path with its weird cry. The boy ducked, sobbing with terror.

"Steady, kid," Garvin said. He placed a firm hand on the boy's shoulder. "It won't hurt you. . . . It's nothing."

He took a step forward, stopped. The words froze in his throat. As if in solemn mockery of his speech, the deep and resonant clang of an iron bell broke suddenly from the dark tower of *El Molino*. *Bong! Bong! Bong!* Slow, measured, funereal, the echoes rolled like a rumbling tide above the treetops, filling the air with a vibrant cold that chilled his bones to the marrow.

With a shrill scream the boy pulled away from Garvin's grasp, staggered back, his face chalk-white in the moonlight, his limbs trembling. Garvin started toward him, but the lad fought him back with flailing arms. "Leave me be!" he shrieked. "I'm going back. . . !"

He turned and plunged into the dense shadows of the woods.

"Little fool!" Garvin mumbled. But a sense of guilt troubled him. He shouldn't have hired the kid to guide him. No use trying to follow him, though. The boy knew the woods much better than he did. Garvin swept a hand across his perspiring forehead, turned toward the dark pile of masonry looming beyond the ravine.

The groaning of the iron bell had ceased; the hot and heavy silence closed in about him. Garvin started on. But his nerves were taut and his eyes probed

the shadows warily. Once he stopped, blinking uncertainly. It had seemed that for an instant he had glimpsed in one of the dark windows of the old building a strange blue light that flickered and went out. Perhaps he had only imagined it. He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth and began to stumble down into the ravine.

Then he stopped, rooted in his tracks. From the dark woods behind him a cry had rung—a harrowing wail of terror that was doubly horrible since it seemed to issue from the throat of a child. Whirling about, Garvin snatched at the revolver in his shoulder holster. Holding this in one hand and his flashlight in the other, he ran back in the direction from which the cry had come.

His heart hammered in time with his pounding feet. And as he ran the cry was repeated. This time it was a moan, pitiful in its utter agony, its depth of abject, childish pain and fear. Ducking about a clump of briar, Garvin plunged into a patch of moonlight, and stopped short, staring in frozen horror.

The boy's body lay sprawled upon the grass, face down, arms outflung. Yet it was moving! With a crackle of leaves, it was moving toward a clump of shrubbery. Something was dragging it, dragging it into the dense foliage of a thicket.

WITH a hoarse yell, Garvin sprang forward, sweeping the beam of his electric torch across the shadows. Briefly he glimpsed a pair of greenish eyes, blazing with a horrid glare. He fired, emptying his revolver.

But at the first bark of the gun, the eyes had vanished. There was a noise of crackling twigs as some great creature beat a retreat into the woods; then a sound that caused Garvin to stiffen into frozen immobility—a cackle of maniacal laughter, bestial, diabolical, that seemed

to blast his eardrums with its horrid blasphemy. Then silence.

With the echoes of that awful laughter ringing in his ears, Garvin dropped down beside the now motionless figure of the boy. With a hand that shook violently, he grasped a shoulder and rolled the body over. One glance was enough. The child's throat was a horrid, gaping wound from which the blood bubbled up with a boiling movement! Its ragged edges spoke significantly of tearing teeth. . . .

"My God!" Garvin swore dazedly. "My God!"

The sweetish smell of fresh blood on the hot air sickened him. The boy was unmistakably dead, yet he could not leave the body here, not with the memory of that ghoulish laughter still clamoring in his brain. Gently he lifted the limp figure in his arms and staggered back toward the ravine.

A shallow stream whose black current shimmered in the moonlight gurgled seaward through the dark gulley. Garvin crossed a narrow footbridge and followed a path up the opposite hillside. Now he stood under the very shadow of *El Molino*. He lowered his pitiful burden gently to the ground, and stood staring speculatively at the forbidding place. Massive and silent under the ancient oaks it stood, with moss-covered walls and roof of Spanish tile, and corners embedded in heavy buttresses. It seemed indeed a fit place for all the evil legend attributed to its inhabitants. Might there not be something in those legends, after all? Might it not be best to return to the little town, wait for daylight?

It was the memory of the girl that decided Garvin, the vivid picture of a sad and lovely face, with dark hair and the deep liquid eyes of a madonna. He had seen her in the town that day, and had been told that she was Raquel Castillejo,

the last of the proud line, whose ancestor, Don Sebastian, had converted this ancient mill and garrison into an hacienda, and who had won for himself the name of a fiend and monster, still feared eight decades after his death. Whatever her ancestors might have been, one look at that girl's face had told Garvin all he needed to know of her. The place could not be entirely evil, so long as she was here. He would not turn back now.

Leaving the body of the boy upon the grass, Garvin crossed a flagged terrace with quick, deliberate strides. He passed the arched openings of the old mill chambers and paused before a door of axe-hewn oak.

With the iron knocker lifted, Garvin abruptly checked himself, let it fall silently. A stealthy sound had reached his ears, a rustle in the shrubbery near the spot where he had left the boy's body.

Turning, he tiptoed silently toward the spot, crouched and peered through the thick foliage of a flowering shrub. Then he drew in his breath sharply. Something gaunt and dark was bending above the lad's prone body, with head thrust forward like a feeding beast.

Swiftly, Garvin's hand dived for his revolver. A twig snapped when he moved and Garvin felt the hair on his scalp rise and bristle. For the thing that had looked like a feeding wolf, rose abruptly upon its hind legs, stared an instant with head thrust forward and long arms dangling. And then, as Garvin staggered up with a choked cry, the gruesome thing sprang back, doubling its body up until the gaunt arms reached the ground, and facing Garvin with enraged animal-like snarls.

Holding the revolver before him, Garvin approached, saw with sick horror that the face of the thing was the face of a man, with long hair falling over the wild eyes and great jagged teeth gleaming through the foam that oozed from the

gaping mouth. Involuntarily, Garvin slowed his pace.

"Stop," he choked out, "or I'll shoot!"

BUT before his fingers could tighten on the trigger of his revolver, the thing had sprung forward. One arm struck Garvin's hand, knocking the pistol to the ground. He staggered back, saw the thing spring past him, felt its foul and fetid breath poison the air. He watched with sick horror as the human monster dropped on all fours and began to run across the terrace, with the grotesque, loping gait of a wolf.

Recovering his balance, Garvin snatched up the pistol. But the wolfish revenant had vanished. He gathered the limp body of the boy in his arms again and hurried across the terrace. At a buttressed corner of the dark building he stopped, listening. Strains of low music drifted to his ears, weird and peculiarly sweet. A pomegranate hedge grew close against the patio wall, and from beyond this came the singing. A woman's voice, rich, golden, throaty, rose and fell in muffled cadences. It was an old Spanish song, and the eerie, melancholy tune sent a queer nervous chill through Garvin's frame. He caught the words:

Alone in the darkness
I thought a moment—
My God, how lonely
The dead are!

Goose-flesh prickled Garvin's body as he stole to the patio gate and peered through the iron grill. The heavy odor of flowers was like an opiate in the air. And in the center of the patio, on an old moss-covered well head, sat the girl. Her white hands were folded in her lap and her pale face, framed in an oval of black hair, was lifted toward the sky with an expression of sad rapture.

Garvin rattled the gate. The singing

ceased. The girl stood up, slim and statuesque in the moonlight, staring toward him.

"Miss Castillejo!"

She came forward slowly, with the measured pace of a sleepwalker.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"I'm Mark Garvin," he said. "This child here is dead. . . . Some sort of monster's at large. Open the gate."

She stared at him with a strange dazed look, then opened the gate.

"A child—dead?"

Garvin laid the boy's body down upon the grass. "I must see your uncle," he said, "at once."

"My uncle!" she repeated in a throaty whisper. "My uncle is dying. You can't come in. You must go away at once. Why have you come here?"

"I came here," Garvin said, "to warn you of a plot against your life. I have a map in my pocket, drawn on ancient parchment—the floor plan of an old mill built by the Jesuit fathers. It shows where a huge treasure in gold plate is buried under the foundations. That old mill is the house in which you live, and the cutthroats from whom I took the map in Juarez, Mexico, were planning to murder you both. But I'm not thinking of that now. We've got to get the fiend who killed this child. We must send in for the police, and in the meantime I'll search the house and grounds."

"But you can't," she said. "You must go away. I can't tell you why, but you must!"

The opening of a door interrupted her. Garvin stared, saw framed in the deep-set doorway, the gnarled figure of an old Mexican with a mummy-like face and watery eyes. He carried a tall candle in one hand.

"Your pardon, Señorita," he said in a creaking voice, "but the young man may come in. Don Miguel desires it."

Garvin shot a quick glance at the girl's face. Splashed by the lurid candle-light, it was pale and drawn with anxiety and fear. Her eyes met his, and seemed to plead with him not to go in. Then she said, in a tone of resignation, "Very well, Gongora, if he wishes. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghost at the Deathbed

LED by the gnarled creature who was called Gongora, they followed the flickering light through dark corridors where gaunt shadows leaped and gestured on the plastered walls, on rich hangings and old paintings and rusty arms. They mounted a staircase with an iron rail, passed through another hall, and paused before a heavy door. At the servant's knock, a voice, faint as with exhaustion, but somehow shrill and piercing, bade them come in.

They entered a curious shadowy room. Its high beamed ceiling was stained with ox-blood, its floors covered with a dark wine-colored carpet, its windows hung with black velvet. It was lighted by a candle burning in a candelabrum on a heavy center table, and two candles burning on the mantle.

On a raised dais at one end of the room stood a four-poster bed, canopied like the windows with black velvet. The curtains were drawn aside, revealing, against the white pillows, a face on which the seal of death seemed already stamped. The cheeks were sunken, the flesh like a thin layer of wax poured over the bones of a skull. Only the eyes were alive, burning out of their pits of shadow with an almost preternatural fire.

"I overheard you there in the garden," said the dying man in a whisper like the crackling of dry leaves. "I thank you for your kindness, but unfortunately, I am

dying. As for my niece, she shall be adequately protected. You may leave the map you spoke of, if you care to, and be paid for it. But I must ask you to leave at once. The Castillejos have always attended to their own affairs."

"But this fiend. . . ." Garvin began, making a movement toward the bed.

He stopped. The gaunt face had turned away from him, as if in a gesture of final dismissal. But the sunken eyes, burning with their hot and liquid flame, were fastened on the opposite wall with a fixed, hypnotic stare.

Garvin turned. A portrait in a massive gilt frame hung between the two windows. Garvin started violently. How life-like, how horribly *alive* the thing seemed! Dressed in the costume of the early dons, he stood with a jaunty air, in a jacket of red leather trimmed with gold buttons, one hand resting upon the sword hilt above his scarlet sash.

But it was the face that drew Garvin's fascinated eyes with a magnetic compulsion. Long, swarthy, vulpine; it wore a look of Satanic arrogance; the heavy lips curled back in an insolent leer, exposing massive teeth, white and fanglike, while deep eyes blazed with an inhuman malignancy. And it was the face of the thing he had seen in the garden, the face of the thing that ran like a beast on all fours!

Garvin tore his eyes with an effort from the strange face, swung his glance back to the figure upon the bed. The old man was slowly raising himself on lean elbows, his head thrust forward, his eyes protruding from their sockets, riveted upon the painting. From his gaping mouth an eerie murmur drolled.

"He has come. . . . I see him. . . . Don Sebastian. . . . father and master. . . . he has come for me. Accursed, undying, he has wandered the earth for ages, but he comes for each of us. . . . the bell tolls,

the lid of the iron coffin creaks. At Sacramento! *Madre de Dios!*"

The last came, a shrill scream between chattering teeth, as the old man turned wild eyed toward the girl. "Raquel! Raquel!"

She ran to his side, dropped to her knees by the bed, allowed his palsied arms to embrace her shoulders.

"Raquel! Raquel! Swear to me again that our accursed blood shall die with you! Thus and only thus shall *he* too die! Swear that you will keep the pact!"

The girl raised a tear-wet face to meet his shuddering gaze. She lifted a white hand. "I swear," she sobbed. "I swear it!"

THE old man's head suddenly dropped upon his breast. A harsh, gurgling rattle issued from his throat. His body stiffened.

"Gongora!" he gasped. "Gongora! Draw the curtain." Abruptly he fell back upon the pillow. The wizened servant came slithering across the floor, snatched the sobbing girl away, and jerked the velvet curtains closed upon the scene of death.

With eerie chills creeping along his spine, Garvin had watched the weird scene. Now he sprang forward and bent above the girl who lay where she had fallen upon the carpet. The gnarled Gongora had turned from the bed, and Garvin, glancing swiftly at the mummy-like face, surprised there a look that gave him new cause for alarm—a malicious sneer that vanished instantly, leaving the wrinkled features sphinxlike and impassive.

Gently, Garvin lifted the girl, bore her to a chair.

Snatching the candle that he had brought into the room, Gongora shuffled out. Garvin laid a hand on the girl's shoulder, felt it quiver to his touch. His

own breath came strained and heavy. It seemed that a sudden chill had crept over the silent room.

"Tell me," Garvin whispered with soft urgency, "what was the pact you spoke of?"

The girl had raised her face. She was staring at the candelabrum upon the walnut table. It had four prongs. Three prongs held the stumps of dead candles. The fourth still burned with a sickly light.

"See," she gasped. "The candles. Four brothers—three dead—the fourth dying."

The words had scarcely passed her lips when suddenly, as if touched by an icy breath of air, the fourth candle guttered and went out. Garvin stiffened, felt the blood run cold in his veins.

"What," he stammered, "what was the pact?"

"The pact?" she said softly. "Ah, the pact! I must die."

"You . . . die!" he exclaimed in horror.

Then he felt her body go rigid under his touch. Her head was turning slowly toward the portrait on the wall. Suddenly, with a short cry, she slumped forward in the chair. Garvin, his eyes turned to follow the direction of her gaze, felt his whole body suddenly freeze with an awful paralysis, felt the wind of his sucked-in breath whistle between his teeth.

Velvet curtains hung on either side of the portrait, and standing before one of these curtains was a duplicate of the figure in the frame! Every detail of the costume was identical, the attitude of the body the same. For a moment Garvin thought of a figure of wax, and then with a sudden tightening of the muscles about his throat, he saw the figure move. The shoulders slumped, the torso hung forward, long arms swinging. Then as if to complete the dreadful metamorphosis, the whole figure suddenly crouched, eyes blazing wildly in the out-thrust head, foam flecking the peeled-back

lips where fangs now more wolflike than human gleamed evilly.

And, on the electric silence in which Garvin stood in a numbed daze, the dismal thunder of the ancient bell broke out. In a flash, the figure had vanished, seeming to melt and dissolve in a swirl of black draperies.

Shaken from his stupor, Garvin sprang forward, dived toward the velvet curtains with a choked cry. His groping hands clutched wildly at the sable fabric. Then abruptly a sharp pain shot through his skull; lights danced crazily before his eyes, and his knees crumpled under him.

UP, UP, through swirling tides of darkness, Garvin fought back to consciousness. Now the bare ceiling of a vault-like room was before his eyes, splashed with yellow tongues of light from a guttering candle. The dank and fetid air of a crypt enveloped him. He seemed to be in a burial vault. One side, he could see, was honeycombed with horizontal shafts, from the dark openings of which the ends of rotting coffins were visible. A muffled tapping sound was audible.

Garvin turned his head to one side. The girl was bending over him. "You?" he asked incredulously. "You hit me?"

"No," she said. "I had fainted. It was Gongora. We carried you here because we were afraid to leave you."

Garvin saw that he was now lying flat upon a heavy coffin of carved wood, ancient and mouldy. He raised his head, rubbing his eyes. Over the girl's shoulder he could see, in the center of the vault, old Gongora, crouching like some malevolent beast of the night beside another coffin. The coffin appeared to be of heavy wood, plated with copper, and the single candle resting upon its top struck glints from the green corrosion on its seams. The old man laid down the heavy mallet and chisel with which he had been hammering at

the coffin's seam, and glared at Garvin with a hostile leer.

"Why did you hit me?" Garvin asked.

The old man ignored his question. With a low growl, he said to the girl: "The man is a fool. He still does not know that we have saved him from the teeth of Don Sebastian."

"Then—" Garvin stammered, turning to the girl. "That fiend was . . .?"

"Don Sebastian," she said with a nod. "Don Sebastian, called the *Undying*. Surely you have heard . . .?"

"I've heard these tales," Garvin said, "and that is the fiend that killed the child. But you believe . . .?"

"It is true," she said. "The blood of vampires . . . the *loup-garou*, is in the veins of the Castillejos. It is our heritage from my grandfather who trafficked with the Evil One. Tonight you saw him. Long ago, they buried him, but he is not dead. He cannot die so long as the blood of the Castillejos flows in living veins. Now that my uncle is dead, I am the last of the line."

Garvin stared at her out of squinted eyes. A wild, mad light seemed to shine from her face as she spoke, a light of martyrdom and self-immolation. A hint of the meaning of her words, of the intention in her mind, crept into his brain and coiled there like a hissing serpent.

"Listen," he said. "You can escape all this. Let me take you away—tonight."

She shivered and a ghostly pallor swept the last vestige of color from her cheeks. Sadly she shook her head. "I could never escape it," she said. "My destiny is already decided. But you must go, my friend, go before it is too late."

"I go?" Garvin asked. "Not unless you go with me, Raquel, not if all the devils in hell are in this damned place!"

For a moment a flush suffused the girl's pale cheeks and she lowered her eyes. Then she turned to the old man. "Gon-

gora," she asked, "isn't it possible, couldn't we find the coffin—his—couldn't we drive a stake through his heart? End it that way?"

Grimly the old man shook his head. "It cannot be found, *Senorita*. I have searched for it. But it is hidden well. He is cunning, and he must have that place to sleep when he is not prowling. But come near me now, *Señorita*; hold the crucifix over me as I work."

The girl stepped fearfully to his side. From her bosom she took a small crucifix of gold and held it above his head.

"Good," he said. "I am nearly done." He resumed his work with the chisel.

Garvin rose to his feet, drew near and stared over the girl's shoulder with a grimace of nausea.

"This, *Señorita*," said old Gongora, looking up with a leer, "shall be the final proof to convince you. It was the dying wish of Don Miguel that you should see with your own eyes the proof of the curse that rests upon your family. This is the coffin of your uncle, Don Porfirio. It was sealed on the day of his death."

With a final stroke of the mallet, the lid of the ancient coffin was jarred loose. The girl, her whole body shaking with violent tremors, looked on with horror-stricken eyes.

Old Gongora seized the coffin lid with a gnarled hand and wrenched it up. With a groan of rusty hinges it yielded, opened and fell back. Holding his breath against the stifling reek that poisoned the air, Garvin peered in, then drew back with a gasp.

Instead of the human bones he had expected, he saw, shining white with age in the shadows of the coffin, the skeleton of a huge wolf!

WITH a cry of terror the girl fell back. Garvin caught her, held her in his arms, where she lay sobbing like a child.

He stroked her pale forehead with his hand.

"Let me take you away," he begged.

But suddenly she straightened, drew away from him stiffly.

"Gongora," she said, her voice now firm and even, "where is the iron coffin?"

The old man stepped to one side, pushed open a door that let on a dark, tunnel-like passage, motioned silently. Without even a glance in Garvin's direction, the girl stepped through the doorway.

Garvin sprang after her—but too late. The heavy door swung shut in his face, and he heard the sound of an iron bar falling into place. Frantically, he threw his shoulder against the door, calling her name, beating upon the heavy door with his fists. It did not yield. Then, as a hoarse and guttural growl fell on his ears, he half turned, uttered a choked cry as he felt a rope tighten with a sudden jerk about his throat.

Flinging his body about, Garvin threshed from side to side. The rope tightened, strangling him. He flung his arms back, groping wildly for the body of the garroter. But old Gongora had sprung upon his back, where he clung like the Old Man of the Sea, drawing the strangling rope tighter with each struggling movement of Garvin's pain-wracked body.

Whirling to crush his tormentor against the wall, Garvin stumbled, lurched forward to the floor. The impact stunned him, but he continued to writhe, dazedly conscious of the horrible pain at his throat, the throbbing of his temples, the ache of his eyes which seemed ready to burst from their sockets, and the burn of his suffocating lungs. Then darkness seemed to swirl about him, and his body slumped.

Half conscious, but too numb and dazed to struggle, Garvin felt his body being dragged along the stone floor. Dank, subterranean air flowed into his

lungs. Friction with the stone floor burned his knees and elbows, but he was scarcely conscious of it. Then powerful arms were shoving him into some small enclosure which cramped his body horribly. The rope fell away from his throat, and he sagged limply, gulping the foul air avidly, his eyes closed.

He opened his eyes. The taste of blood was in his mouth but he could not spit it out. He was gagged. Light came to him through a lattice-work of wooden bars. He was in a small cage suspended in the air above what seemed to be the torture chamber of a dungeon. Medieval racks and engines of torture were visible in its shadowy recesses.

Then Garvin saw the girl. She was seated before a table on a high balcony that ran the length of the room. Across the table from her stood old Gongora, holding in one hand a candle which threw out a bluish, eerie light. In the old man's other hand a white sheet of paper fluttered. He spread it upon the table before the girl, tapped it with a lean finger.

"There, Señorita," he said. "You will write your statement now, your confession? Say simply that what you are about to do is done of your own free will. It was the dying desire of your uncle that I, an old servant, should not be blamed."

Garvin twisted violently in his narrow prison, tried to cry out, to warn the girl of the hideous treachery that was being practiced upon her. But the gag choked his words to a futile murmur. With mounting consternation he saw the girl mechanically lift a pen and begin to write hurriedly.

Gongora waited until she had finished. Then, with an evil leer, he began to back slowly away from her across the balcony, his eyes fastened with a curious intensity upon her face. Raquel rose slowly to her feet, stood stiffly a moment, her dark eyes staring vacantly. Then, with the

strange mechanical step of a puppet pulled by strings, she began to follow the old man.

Along the balcony she walked as the old man shuffled backward before her, his body weaving sinuously like a serpent charming a bird. Down the stairs to the chamber's floor they went, the girl holding her head proud and high, like a queen walking to the scaffold.

Garvin heaved and treshed until his suspended cage rocked. Now he could see the floor of the room plainly. On a sort of low trestle stood a huge coffin of iron. With lid lifted, it gaped darkly like some hideous monster waiting to devour its prey. And the girl was moving with slow, deliberate strides toward the coffin!

Garvin chewed savagely at the gag that bound his mouth, succeeded in pulling his hands up to it, tore it away. "Stop!" he shrieked. "Stop, Raquel! He's tricking you. It's murder! For God's sake, stop!"

If she heard him, she gave no sign. No flicker of emotion disturbed the trancelike expression of her face. Now he knew that she was hypnotized, that he could never make her hear his warning cries.

For a moment the girl paused beside the coffin, her lips moving as if in prayer. Then she stepped inside, stretched out full length. She folded her hands upon her breast and closed her eyes.

Quickly, old Gongora snatched from his belt a thin-bladed dagger and laid it carefully upon the girl's folded hands. Then the lid of the iron coffin fell with a clang—as the ghostly booming of the great bell rang out in the shadowy room.

CHAPTER THREE

Pit of Terror

A DARK mist swam before Garvin's eyes, sickness gnawed at the pit of his stomach. The beat of his blood ham-

mered in his ears, a swift accompaniment to the horrid clamor of the bell. Horror at the girl's fate and the fiendish treachery that had lured her to a dreadful suicide drove from his mind all thought of his own peril.

He was convinced that she was now under the influence of hypnosis. But when that wore off—what then? It was a thought too frightful to contemplate. He seemed to see her white face torn by an agony of terror, her delicate hands beating at the coffin lid, tearing at her dark hair, finding finally in the keen blade of the dagger a grateful release from that horror beyond nightmare—burial alive.

A sudden hush followed the cessation of the bell's iron-throated dirge. Garvin stared down into the chamber, probing its shadows apprehensively. Then, from somewhere in the semi-darkness below him, a peal of shrill and maniacal laughter rang out. Higher and shriller it rose until it seemed to fill the whole dark vault with a horrid vibration that tore at his nerves and turned his blood to ice.

He saw old Gongora, who had been crouching beside the coffin, suddenly spring to his feet. Seizing a candle in a hand that trembled, the old man stared about wildly for the source of the sound.

In the doorway that opened upon the burial vault, a gruesome shape seemed to materialize out of the shadows. A black and rotting shroud hung loosely from the ghastly form which seemed half man, half beast. It crouched there glaring at the old servant, while peal after peal of the obscene laughter shrilled from the awful mouth.

Gongora stumbled back, holding a crucifix before him. As he reached the foot of the stairs that led up to the balcony, he began to run up the steps. He paused for a moment beside a huge capstan, from which a rope ran out through pulleys to the cage in which Garvin was suspended.

He pulled a wooden lever. The small cage gave a downward jerk and began slowly to descend.

Then the apparition crouching in the doorway sprang into the room with a hideous snarl. The old servant on the balcony dived abruptly into a doorway and vanished, while Garvin watched with mounting horror the weird antics of the thing that was called Don Sebastian. With rumbling growls it ran back and forth across the floor, sniffing the air like a dog cheated of its quarry. Then suddenly it stopped by the iron coffin. Rearing back on its haunches, it lifted its inhuman head and uttered a bestial howl.

Garvin's flesh crawled at the horrid sight. With a heave that set his cage rocking drunkenly, he stared down through the lattice-work bottom. His muscles stiffened with a jerk. A circular pit, some six feet in diameter, yawned in the flagged floor beneath him, and his cage was descending slowly toward it. It was the ancient cistern indicated on the parchment map, and somewhere in its rock walls must be the sealed entrance to the treasure chamber!

Garvin shifted his head, trying to escape the sickening odor that arose from the cistern's yawning mouth. Then he was abruptly aware that the howling had ceased. Glancing toward the iron coffin, he saw that the frightful figure of the man-wolf had vanished as suddenly and unaccountably as it had come.

Now the floor level was climbing up past his range of vision. Shadow-smearing walls of rock surrounded him; from below came a swish as of stagnant water stirred by moving bodies.

Light flashed above him—the bluish glare of a candle. Tongues of eerie light licked down the rocky sides of the pit, throwing a cobalt mist into the long black cylinder below; and for an instant Garvin saw the pool of greenish water at its

bottom, saw the creatures that stirred its dark surface. An alligator, his baleful eyes glittering in the reflected light, churned the foul water to a froth with his great tail. Fat moccasins curled their sluggish bodies over outcropping stones; huge water spiders, monstrous and obscene, clung to the damp and slimy walls. Then the light vanished, the foul darkness closed in about him.

EVERY bone and muscle in Garvin's body ached; the reek from the pit was hot and suffocating. He strained frantically, pushing out with his feet against the imprisoning bars. He felt for his flashlight. Both it and his gun were gone. He ran trembling hands over the bars of his cage. It appeared to be of primitive construction—thin slats of some tough wood bound together with thongs of rawhide. If he only had a knife, a piece of glass, anything with a sharp edge!

Slowly the wall was slipping past. Garvin's brain throbbed with horror. He felt the black water reaching up to swallow him, thought of the girl locked in the iron coffin. Panic seized him. He thrust out his hands, tried to cling to the wall, clawing at protruding rocks until his nails were torn and bleeding. Still they slipped past. He fell back exhausted, shaking with tremors while the sweat drooled from his forehead, stinging his eyes.

Abruptly Garvin went rigid; a cry died on his lips. The cage had touched water; slowly, it was seeping up into his clothes. He stared into the fetid blackness that seemed to teem with writhing reptilian bodies, saw the horrid eyes of the great saurian, now on a level with his own, glaring at him with a baleful fire. For a moment blind terror overwhelmed him; a mist of madness fogged his brain.

Then, out of the hot thick silence, came

a faint, rhythmic sound. *Tick, tick, tick!*
His watch!

A wave of desperate hope surged over him. Swiftly one cramped arm snaked to his pocket, whipped out the watch. Gritting his teeth, Garvin thrust an arm out and smashed the watch crystal against the rock wall of the pit. Quickly he drew back his hand, clutching the sharp fragments in a tense fist.

The water had risen in the cage to a depth of six or seven inches. Could he make it? He raised his body on one arm, reached up with the other and began to slash with the broken glass at the leather thongs in one corner of the cage. They tore apart. He reached higher, ripped at the thongs that bound the top to the side.

The water had reached his chin. He could lift his head no higher. He dropped the glass, pushed out, felt the side of the cage yield. With a mighty effort he straightened his doubled body, throwing his bowed head and shoulders against the wooden bars. Creaking, they gave. He wriggled out into the water, floundered against a huge, horny body that jerked swiftly into life at his touch.

With a wild cry, Garvin plunged down into the water, swung his body beneath the now almost submerged cage and came up sputtering and gasping on the far side. Across the top of the cage, the alligator's ugly eyes glared at him. Then the clammy body of a snake slithered across his arm. He sprang aside, scrambled to the top of the cage, clutched at the rope. With a lunge the alligator followed, churning the cage about in the water.

With a gasp, Garvin seized the rope, swung his legs up into the air as the click of murderous jaws sounded in the darkness a few inches below him. With the supernatural strength of terror, he began to lift his body hand over hand up the rope.

Halfway up to the floor level, Garvin checked himself abruptly. Light flashed above him. He stared up, eyes wide with dismay, straight into the leering face of old Gongora. The light from the candle in the old man's gnarled hand spotted him plainly as he clung there quaking with fear. Then the blade of a knife flashed in the light, moved with deliberate slowness toward the rope. A harsh cackle of triumph broke from Gongora's throat.

Garvin spun around, his eyes wildly scamming the slimy walls of rock. With an incredulous gasp, he saw a circular blot of shadow—a narrow opening in the sheer wall. He swung his body toward it. Not a second too soon, he released the rope which dropped limply, and reached with outthrust hands toward the dark hole.

His fingers touched the ragged rock that framed the opening, clawed frantically for a hold, clung like steel hooks, then crawled farther in—until with an upward heave he brought his elbow into the opening. He lifted his body into the tunnel. This hole, he surmised, was the tunnel which led to the treasure chamber, and the fact that it had been opened proved that the treasure had been discovered. For a moment he lay there, catching his breath. Then, crawling on all fours, he began to inch his way through the stygian blackness.

The tunnel turned and twisted, and presently a faint illumination showed in the blackness ahead. At the next turn, the light was visible. Garvin dropped down, flattening himself against the ground while he stared warily ahead. What seemed to be the light from a candle flickered on the bare mud walls of a chamber into which the tunnel debouched, and directly before him he could see an ancient chest bound with rusty iron. With lid raised, it rested against one wall. A golden glow radiated from its piled con-

tents—massive chalices, plates, candlesticks. The treasure of the padres!

WITH bated breath Garvin crawled forward. Then he stopped short, digging his suddenly rigid fingers into the dirt, as he stared into the chamber. Preceded by a shaggy tail, a gaunt, lean-flanked wolf was backing slowly across his line of vision, and Garvin saw with a convulsive shudder that the burden which the beast was dragging was the blood-bathed body of the boy who had been his guide! Limp and mutilated by tearing teeth, it hung from the beast's mouth, the head rolling grotesquely from side to side as the creature pulled it along with short jerks—and finally passed out of sight.

For minutes which were like hours, Garvin lay perfectly still, while the blood drummed in his temples and his brain throbbed madly. But he could not turn back. Unarmed as he was, he must go on; that was his only chance for escape. Slowly, silently, he crawled on.

His head was now near the tunnel's opening. Staring into the dimly lighted chamber, he suppressed a gasp. The wolf had vanished, but the body of the child lay upon the floor, and crouching beside it was the hideous apparition of Don Sebastian. Even as Garvin stared in dumb horror, the ghoul lifted his frightful head, stared about with the look of a beast who had sated his blood-lust, and began creeping toward a shadowy corner of the chamber.

Then Garvin saw the great coffin of ancient, axe-hewn wood and knew that he had not only found the hiding place of the treasure, but the secret lair of the man-monster as well. That was the coffin which old Gongora had mentioned, the coffin which he had said he had searched for, intending to drive a stake through the heart of the sleeping vampire. And the

grisly thing was now dragging its gaunt body into the coffin!

Now he was stretched out full length in the worm-eaten casket, and one lean, talon-like hand was lowering the lid. Slowly it came down until nothing was visible of the monster but the two bestial eyes still blazing through the crack. Then the lid fell with a soft thud.

With an effort Garvin shook off the daze of horror that gripped him, mastered his jangling nerves, and snaked his way silently into the room. By slow degrees he lifted himself to his feet. Holding his breath, he cat-footed toward the coffin. His muscles tensed, and with one bound he sprang upon its lid.

A din of horrid sounds broke out within the coffin—hideous shrieks of rage, like the snarling cries of a trapped beast, and the beating of bony knuckles against the lid. But Garvin's whole weight was on it, and he held it down against the desperate struggles of the maddened vampire. Yet even with the heavy wood between them, Garvin felt the beads of icy sweat dropping down from his brow upon his face, felt chills play along his spine as he listened to the creature's inhuman cries.

Presently the sounds of struggling grew fainter, the shrill cries receded to whimpering moans and the harsh breathing of exhaustion. Softly Garvin slipped from the coffin's top, and still holding the lid down with his hands, shoved it toward the tunnel. With a sudden push, he jammed one end of it into the narrow hole and stepped back, daubing the sweat from his face.

The monster began to thresh and cry again, but the low ceiling of the hole held the lid down. It did not seem that the creature would be able to escape, surely not before Garvin could return with a weapon. With a last look at the coffin, he snatched up the candle and hurried

into the passage that led out of the chamber.

This passage ended in a flight of narrow stairs. Garvin climbed up to a landing. Narrow passages branched off in three directions, and Garvin took the middle one. He surmised that he was now moving through secret passages in the four-foot adobe walls of the old structure.

A closed door appeared. Garvin stole up to it, stood listening. No sound came from within. He gave the door a gentle push and stared in. The place was empty.

The small cubicle in which he found himself had the appearance of an actor's dressing room. There were mirrors, jars of grease paint and make-up on a small stand, and an assortment of wigs and costumes hanging upon the walls. A saber in an ornate scabbard lay across a table. Light dawned suddenly in Garvin's mind as he stared about the room. He snatched up the saber, drew its keen and glittering blade into the light, ran his finger along its razor-like edge and grunted with satisfaction.

A sound behind him caused him to turn quickly, sword in hand. A short iron ladder ran up the wall in one corner and above this a trap-door had opened. There Garvin saw the startled face of old Gongo peering down at him.

The door slammed down as Garvin sprang for the ladder. He swung himself quickly up and pushed against the trapdoor. It opened and he thrust his head through. The edges of black velvet draperies met his eyes, the legs of a bed, and above him, the springs and mattress. He crawled through the opening, still clutching the sword, and thrust his head out from under the bed.

He was in Don Miguel's bedroom. In a swift glance he saw the figure of Gongo vanishing behind the curtains that

hung beside the portrait of Don Sebastian. Leaping quickly to his feet, Garvin followed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fangs of the Wolf

JUST as he had guessed, the velvet curtains concealed a panel which opened at his push. Stepping back into the room, Garvin snatched a candle from the mantelpiece and plunged back into the passage. Gongora had vanished. But the appearance and disappearance of the ghostly figure of Don Sebastian was now explained.

A few yards farther the passage turned and came out upon the landing where the three passages had diverged. One passage now remained unexplored and Garvin took it, hoping that it might lead to the torture chamber where the iron coffin lay.

He moved rapidly now, preceded by the candle's flickering tongues of light. The end of the passage came in view—a door. Garvin pushed through and came out upon the balcony that overlooked the torture chamber. He ran to the railing, stared down with a muttered oath. Crouching beside the iron coffin, the lid of which was now raised, was old Gongora. The pale face of the girl was faintly visible in the shadows of the coffin, and the old servant was bending over her. He looked up quickly at the sound of Garvin's entry and his seamed and aged face shone pallid in the wan light, twisted as with an agony of fear.

With a savage cry, Garvin sprang to the stairway. In a flash he had seen something which set the blood boiling in his veins. One of the old man's hands held a goblet of some dark liquid, and he was forcing it to the girl's lips.

In three leaps Garvin gained the flagged floor, in a dozen swift strides he was upon

the old man. The latter fell back, clutching at his breast as he cowered before the brandished blade. The goblet clattered to the floor as he stumbled and fell. He lay there panting, mouth agape, animal-like moans of fear drooling over his cracked lips.

Seizing him by the collar, Garvin flung him aside and stepped past him to the coffin. He bent above the girl, stared anxiously into her upturned face. Her eyes were closed, her features relaxed in an attitude of quiet repose which to Garvin's desperate eyes was horrible in its similitude of death. With shaking hands he lifted her head, felt with an awful pang the coldness of her flesh. Then he saw on the faded carmine of her lips a brownish stain. The liquid from the goblet!

Supporting her head with one arm, Garvin shook the girl gently.

"Raquel! Raquel!" he whispered. His voice choked up in his throat. "Raquel, for God's sake, open your eyes, answer me!"

But even as the frantic words died on his lips he seemed to realize their hollow futility. He allowed the girl's head to fall gently back. A blind lust for the blood of her murderer was rising like a hot mist to his head. Gripping the saber, he swung about, stared wildly around the shadowy room. Gongora was nowhere in sight.

A dark stain on the floor near the stair marked the place where the old man had fallen. Garvin stiffened, blinking with bewilderment. His sword had not touched the old man. Why the blood? He looked up to the balcony. The door that opened on the passage gaped wide. Garvin sprang up the steps. At the top he checked himself abruptly. A stealthy sound was issuing from the passage.

Ducking behind the table, Garvin crouched, waiting. Footsteps, firm and measured sounded along the passage, a

wavering light drew near. Then suddenly the light spread fan-wise across the balcony. Framed in the doorway, Garvin saw the creature whom he had left imprisoned in the coffin. Now for the first time Garvin noted the stiff and rigid contours of the face, mask-like and immobile. The thing was walking upright now, and an automatic pistol was gripped in one bony fist.

The figure came out upon the balcony, crept warily toward the rail. It was now or never, Garvin knew. Taking a deep breath and a firm grip on his sword, he sprang out of the shadows and leaped toward the creature who was now staring down over the rail.

THE monster started, whirled about, jerking the automatic to eye level. Garvin ducked as flame flared from the gun's muzzle, felt the wind from a bullet whistle past his ear. He straightened, lifted the saber and made a wild lunge.

Again the automatic barked. A sharp, stinging pain stabbed Garvin's wrist; the saber fell from his hand. He dropped to evade the next bullet, dived for his assailant's legs.

Nimble the creature sidestepped. But Garvin's left arm swung out in a wide arc, his fingers gripped the other's ankle, tripped him. The man lurched back, jerking at the trigger of the automatic. But the shots went wild as he staggered against the balcony rail to regain his balance. Garvin was on his feet in a flash, hurling his body like a tiger upon the snarling ghoul.

Under the impact of Garvin's charge, the fiend was thrown violently against the rail. With a crack of ancient timber, it broke, and the figure in the black shroud toppled backward with a cry of rage and fear. Arms wildly flailing the air, he plunged downward toward the flagged floor of the lower chamber.

Garvin staggered back, clutching at his injured wrist. As he did so, a savage growl fell on his ears. He backed toward the door. From somewhere near the spot where the black clothed figure had fallen, a huge wolf had leaped out into the light! Fangs bared, foam drooling from his murderous jaws, the great beast was plunging up the stairs with infuriated snarls.

Too late, Garvin made a move toward the automatic which had fallen to the balcony floor. The beast, maddened by the smell of fresh blood, was almost upon him. Diving to one side, Garvin snatched up the saber.

The wolf sprang past him, the great fangs missing their target by a hair's breadth. Then, in the split second required for the savage creature to whirl for a fresh attack, Garvin had wedged his body into the narrow passage, where he stood brandishing the saber in his left hand.

Checked by the flashing blade, the wolf came to a halt, stiff-legged, quivering. His eyes, blazing with a mad parody of human intelligence, followed the sword's menacing movements. Step by step, Garvin retreated. In the narrow passage he felt that he might be able to hold the brute at bay. But he was growing weak. Blood was gushing from his wounded wrist, sapping the strength from his body. His head throbbed with a dull, sick pain, his limbs were trembling with exhaustion.

The wolf moved forward with a growl—a hoarse, bestial rumble that suggested the voice of the man who ran on all fours. Garvin continued to back away. The wolf followed. And Garvin knew now that he had reached the end of his rope. Sooner or later, they must come to grips, he and this beast with the strangely human eyes. And his strength was ebbing. Better now than later!

With a yell that rivaled the beast's snarl, he sprang forward, whipping the sword from left to right across the passage. He felt its keen edge bite into the wolf's flesh. With a howl of pain and fury, the great beast sprang into the air.

Garvin took a step back. Then, marshaling all the strength that remained in his exhausted body, he aimed the bright point of the saber at the wolf's shoulder and threw his weight against it. The beast struck the blade in mid air, fell against it with such force that Garvin was thrown backward. He reeled and went down, the cry of the wolf blending in his ears with the dull roaring in his head.

Then blackness claimed him. . . .

GARVIN opened his eyes, lifted his head. How long had he lain here? He could not tell. Staggering to his feet, he saw that his wrist was a mass of dark, congealed blood. He had fallen on that arm, luckily. It had saved him from bleeding to death. A few feet farther down the passage lay the body of the wolf, the saber buried deep in its motionless body.

Dazedly, Garvin stumbled along the passage. He was so weak that he had to lean against the wall for support. Body and mind felt sick. The wolf was dead, and his master must be dead, too, lying on the flagged floor of the chamber. But what did it all matter? He had been too late to save the girl. Even the pain of his aching wrist failed to trouble him, so numbed, so dead to every feeling had he become.

Staggering out upon the balcony, he leaned over the remaining strip of railing, stared down. The figure in the black shroud lay sprawled upon the floor. By its side lay a mask which had fallen away from its face, a mask cunningly fashioned like the face of the portrait of Don Sebastian, with fanglike teeth protruding

from its feral mouth. But it was the face of the man himself that caught Garvin's rapt attention. He bent nearer, peered incredulously. It could not be . . . but it was!

It was the face of Don Miguel de Castillejo!

With a gasp Garvin straightened, stared about the room. At the same instant a voice called his name. He turned toward the sound. His mouth gaped, one hand moved in a slow, bewildered gesture across his eyes. This must be an hallucination! For it seemed that the girl was moving toward him up the balcony steps.

He took a step toward her, swaying drunkenly. Swiftly she darted forward. Now her arm was about him; he was certain of that because he could feel it supporting him as he slumped weakly to the floor.

Now she was kneeling beside him, her white hands holding his injured wrist. Still he was too dumbfounded to speak.

"I think," she said, "that it will be all right. The bone doesn't seem to be broken."

"Raquel," he said, "am I dreaming? I thought . . . I thought you were dead. What has happened? Where is Gongora?"

"Gongora?" she repeated, lingering sadly on the word. "Poor faithful old creature, he's dead."

"You must be mad!" Garvin said. "Don't you understand . . . his treachery . . . the trap they set for you?"

"It was Gongora who released me," she replied, "saved me from my uncle's treachery. He was a madman, Don Miguel, but I did not realize it until I heard it a few minutes ago from Gongora's dying lips. He told me everything. It seems that Uncle Miguel's madness came on him in spells. Gongora began to realize that he was mad when he insisted on keeping the alligator and the wolf. He be-

lieved that the body of the wolf held the spirit of our ancestor, Don Sebastian."

"Whom he impersonated to frighten you into suicide," Garvin said.

"Yes," she agreed. "He was cunning and unscrupulous, and he plotted that in his sane interludes. That was after he discovered the treasure and decided to get me out of the way. He frightened me with the tales of the vampirism in our blood, made me believe that it was my duty to stamp it out by my own death. You know how he played the ghost of Don Sebastian, how he pretended to be dying, then slipped through the secret passages which Gongora told me of."

"But I don't understand about Gongora," Garvin persisted.

"He lived in mortal fear of Don Miguel," she explained, "and he tried to keep the secret of his madness from me. When the fits would seize him, Gongora would try to keep him locked in certain parts of the house. But when he learned that my uncle intended to murder me, that was too much. He was willing to have you murdered, since he suspected you from the first, but even his fear could not keep him from trying to save me.

"He pretended to be carrying out Uncle Miguel's orders, but he really gave me a drug to make me sleep. He intended to come back and awaken me with an antidote after he had killed my Uncle Miguel. My uncle's sudden fit of madness offered him this chance. But despite that, Uncle Miguel grew suspicious and stabbed the old man. Afraid that he would die leaving me locked in the coffin, Gongora dragged himself up, mixed a drug and was holding it to my lips when you came into the room."

"And that explains the spot of blood," Garvin said. "I didn't think I had touched him with the sword."

"NO," SHE said. "He told me how he crawled out of the room as soon as your back was turned. He was dying then, but he managed to live until he could get back to me with another dose of the drug to awaken me. But if it had not been for you, fighting off Uncle Miguel and the wolf, Gongora could never have managed it."

"And now?" Garvin asked.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to get you to a bed where I can dress that wrist for you."

"Thanks," Garvin said. "But what I mean is, what do you plan to do now that Gongora is dead? It wouldn't be safe for you to stay in this place alone and unprotected. There are others who may still be after this treasure. You see, I'm a private detective, and I was working on another case when I happened to stumble on this. It seemed more important than the other. And," he added with a smile, "it seems even more important now. You'll have to have someone to protect you, Raquel. . . ."

"You think so?" she asked softly. "I can think of only one whom I would trust to protect me."

"You're in love with someone?" he asked quickly. But he smiled, too, as he saw the mischievous smile twinkle in her once-sad eyes.

"I am beginning to think so," she said.

Garvin was weak, but when she lowered her lips, he was able to raise his head high enough to reach them. . . .

THE END

In the September Issue—Out August 10th—

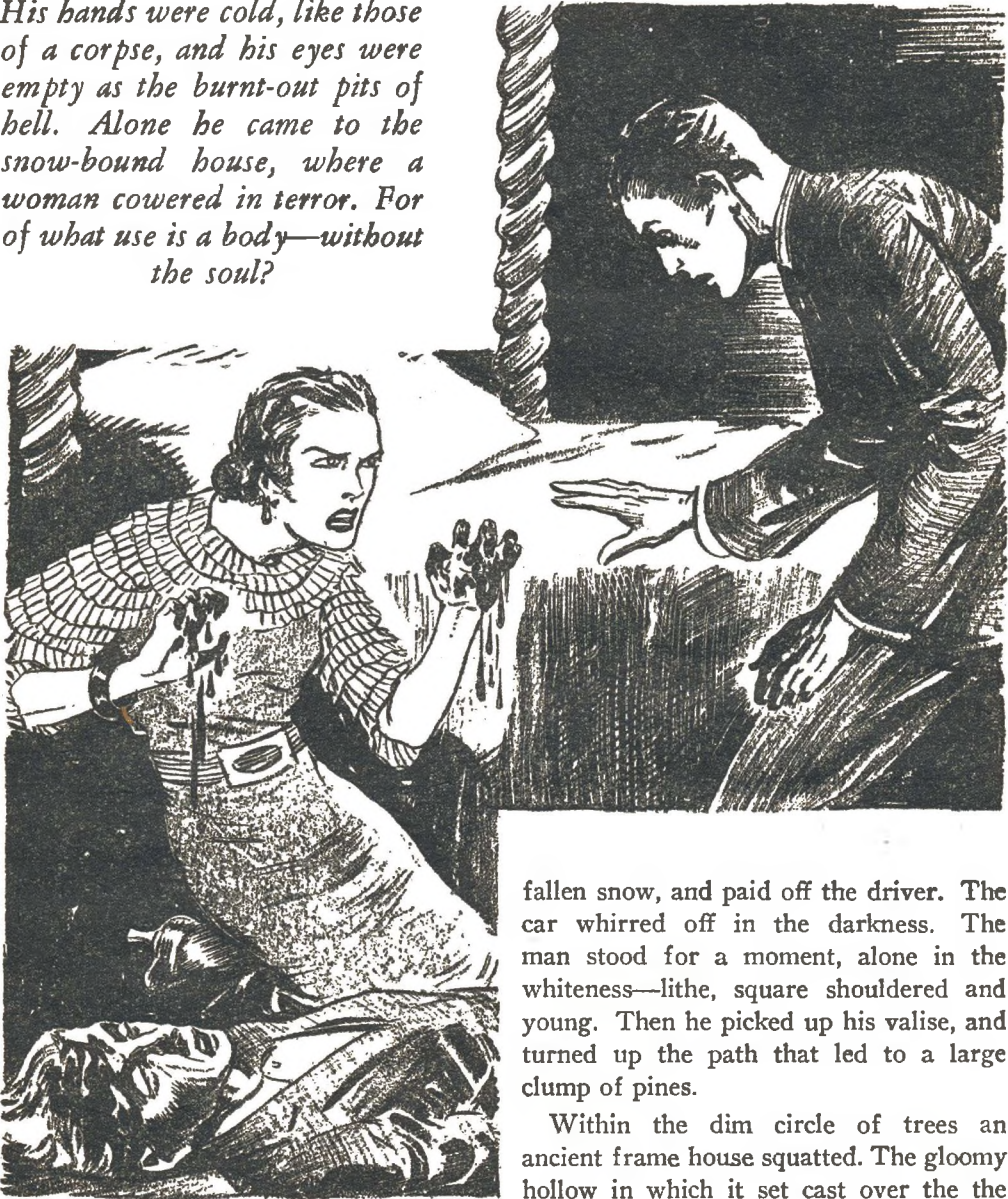
A Spine-Tingling Novelette by That Master of Eerie Fiction—

HUGH B. CAVE

The WALKING DEAD

by Ben Judson

His hands were cold, like those of a corpse, and his eyes were empty as the burnt-out pits of hell. Alone he came to the snow-bound house, where a woman cowered in terror. For of what use is a body—without the soul?



fallen snow, and paid off the driver. The car whirred off in the darkness. The man stood for a moment, alone in the whiteness—lithe, square shouldered and young. Then he picked up his valise, and turned up the path that led to a large clump of pines.

Within the dim circle of trees an ancient frame house squatted. The gloomy hollow in which it set cast over the the habitation an almost sinister air of seclusion and remoteness from the rest of the world. The man hurried through the eerie shadows and knocked on the door. A moment, and it was opened by an upright and gray-haired old man, whose eyes

THE taxi slid to a halt beside the dark road. The snow wriggled like expiring fireflies in the light cast by the headlamps of the car. A man emerged from the cab, set his bag down in the new-

squinted through the uncertain light in the entrance, in an effort to make out the caller.

"Good evening, Doctor!" the caller poke warmly.

Doctor Albert Jardin extended his hand slowly. "*Bon soir, Paul,*" he said. "We've been hoping you'd arrive this evening. Another old friend is paying us an unexpected visit."

They went into the parlor. Seated there was the other guest—a man obviously of foreign extraction. He arose as they entered.

"Paul, may I present Monsieur Dutoit?" the doctor said. "Paul Travis, my daughter's fiancé. Vida and I met Monsieur Dutoit six years ago on the boat when we came over from France. Soon after I invited him to spend a week-end with us. Now, six years later, he accepts!"

Paul Travis and Dutoit shook hands. Dutoit's was cold, like the hand of a corpse from which the warmth of life had sped. Their glances clung for a moment, until the younger man shifted his gaze. Dutoit's eyes were cold and empty, yet in them Paul sensed a strange hypnotic power. Dutoit—where had he heard that name before?

"Again I most humbly beg your pardon, Monsieur Jardin," Dutoit said, "for being so tardy in accepting your kind invitation. But I have been away from the United States for a long time. Only a short while ago did I return to the States."

A voice, low and musical, gravely announced behind them, "Dinner is served, gentlemen!"

Paul turned, his heart leaping at sound of the voice. It was Vida, her dark eyes happily alight.

"*Bon soir, chérie!*" he cried, and held out both his hands in greeting.

"Good evening, Paul," she answered soberly. She let him take her hands in his own; but only for a moment. The

Jardins, father and daughter, had been but six years in America, and their old-world formality was still a part of them.

The four of them entered the dining-room. The doctor carved and served while Vida busied herself between table and kitchen. Jardin disliked servants, which necessitated Vida's doing all the housework. Conversation was slow in starting; each time Vida left for the kitchen, Dutoit stared moodily after her, not hearing Paul's attempts at discourse. Even the doctor seemed not quite his usual cordial self.

"Somewhere I have heard your name before," Paul at last addressed Dutoit.

Vida had entered the dining-room as he spoke.

"I told you last spring of our having met Monsieur Dutoit," she reminded Paul. "We thought he had died, till we got his letter yesterday!"

"Eh?" Dutoit appeared startled, but he said calmly, "I did not receive Monsieur Jardin's invitation until a year after I left for Haiti. Then—the eternal press of business, and I never got around to answering it." He was gazing at Vida again, with his expressionless, vacant eyes.

"Oh, that was it!" Paul exclaimed. "Vida said you had been killed in Haiti. I thought your name sounded familiar."

Dutoit flashed his gaze to Paul. "No—no!" he ejaculated in a strained voice. Then he added, more quietly, "I was in a little trouble. I thought it best to disappear. But it was nothing—nothing."

Conversation lagged even more markedly. Dutoit appeared to draw into himself; his fingers tapped nervously on the table, though his eyes retained their odd staring quality. Paul was relieved when the meal at last ended.

As they rose from the table Paul murmured to Vida, "Where did you get the idea that Dutoit had died?"

"Last spring," Vida confided, "when

papa was in New York he saw a notice in the paper that Monsieur Dutoit had died in Haiti. Papa cut it out and brought it home. We still have it somewhere about."

"He has such a haunted look," Paul mused. "As if he were afraid of something out of his past. . . ."

As they entered the parlor Dutoit broke his silence. "Do you think it possible," he asked the doctor abruptly, "for a person to die, and to come to life again?"

VIDA, who preceded Paul, froze in her tracks. She gazed fixedly at Dutoit, who stood near the hearth. The dying flame brought out the ghastly pallor of his face; there were deep sunken spots of gray in his cheeks.

There was a prolonged silence, broken only by the intermittent purring of the flame on the hearth. It seemed as if everyone present were breathlessly awaiting the doctor's answer. Doctor Jardin sat back in his chair, concealed in the shadow that bordered the faint circle of light. Outdoors the wind sighed with a sound like the gasps of the dying.

The glowing cinder of Jardin's cigar swung in an arc as he flicked the ash into the hearth. Then, at last, he spoke.

"It is according to the degree of death," he said. "A dead person may still be living in that the individual cells of his body function as living protoplasm for a while after the organs have ceased to operate. Before *rigor mortis* and putrefaction have set in, it would sometimes be possible to revive a corpse."

"But what if the spirit has already flown from the body?" Paul demanded.

Dutoit turned, looking directly at Paul. The pallor of his face had deepened, and there was a sigh in his throat like that of the wind outside. A slight tremble shook his frame; and he looked away again, at Vida.

"May I help you to a chair?" he asked.

Vida took the seat proffered her, saying nothing. Paul sat beside her.

"The spirit," the doctor said, "is something about which we scientists do not bother ourselves. We neither deny nor affirm its existence; its presence or absence in no way affects our calculations."

He stared into the dying embers. The gloom advanced steadily from the remote corners of the dark-paneled room, and a sense of chill stole into the air. Paul and the doctor moved closer to the hearth. Dutoit seemed excited by a nervous agitation. When they first had entered the room, he had talked to Jardin in a low, sustained voice; now he was silent for the most part; he glanced continually at Vida, and his fingers twitched.

The doctor, sensing the strain, got up, and threw a log on the fire. He procured wine and glasses. The reviving flame and the wine drove back the chill; the pallor in Dutoit's face lessened, and conversation lightened.

* * *

The storm which had begun in the evening grew in intensity and continued through the following morning. The snow banked against the pines, leaving the partially buried house in a valley of eerie shadows. Breakfast was served at ten-thirty—it was Sunday morning—and immediately afterward the doctor retired to the library, to browse and speculate.

The talk of the previous night still fresh in Paul's mind, he followed Jardin there soon after. The two men were soon deep in a discussion as to the nature of the soul. The doctor maintained that the amorphous element described as the "spirit" was not necessary for the maintenance of human life.

"If that is so," Paul countered, "wherein does human life differ from bestial life?"

"In the degree of the development of

the mentality," the doctor responded.

"Still you admit that there is a possibility of the existence of spirit?"

"Yes," said Jardin. "But it is not necessary for human life. Does the spirit remain in the body after death?"

"No," Paul admitted.

"It leaves it immediately?"

"Yes."

"Can it ever be called back to the body?" Jardin demanded.

"Sometimes, I suppose, by a person possessing great spiritual powers, as Christ raised Lazarus."

"But not by persons of decidedly low spiritual powers"—the doctor smiled—"such as scientists?"

"Hardly!"

"Then, if the spirit is necessary for life, how do you account for revivifications accomplished by men of science?" The doctor selected a worn tome from a shelf and hurriedly thumbed its pages. "Take the celebrated case of Doctor Anthony, of London, in 1831, for instance. Mr. Stapleton, a young attorney, died of typhus fever, and was buried. Three days after the funeral his body was disinterred for a *post mortem* examination because of some abnormal symptoms which accompanied his death.

"'A galvanic battery,'" the doctor read, "'was applied to one of the pectoral muscles; the patient, with a hurried but quite unconvulsive movement, arose from the table, stepped into the middle of the floor, and then spoke. Having spoken he fell heavily to the floor. Upon exhibition of ether he revived and was rapidly restored to health.'

"Doctor Anthony was a practical scientist—there was no clairvoyance in his methods."

"Then," Paul exclaimed, his eyes dark with excitement, "there are human beings, alive, who walk and talk as we do, in whom there is no soul! For if the soul

has gone forth at death, and is not recalled at revivification, the body would exist in a living state without the spirit!"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "A musician once said to me, when I attempted to play on my violin, 'You have no spirit!'"

"He meant feeling, not soul!" Paul barked, angered at his host's levity.

But the doctor's mood for study evidently had passed.

"I'm going to get myself a whisky and soda," he said. "Will you join me?"

"No, thank you," Paul answered, still a little nettled. "I'd like to see more of your library."

He selected a volume, sat down and began to read.

Half an hour after the doctor had left Vida entered. She stood quietly beside the chair in which Paul sat, absorbed in the tome from which the doctor had quoted.

"Paul—"

He started. "Oh!—I didn't know you were here!"

"Paul—" her eyes were wide and serious—"Monsieur Dutoit asked me to—"

Paul sprang up, suddenly apprehensive. "To what, darling?"

"—to marry him!"

PAUL drew back. He parted his lips to laugh, but noting the seriousness of Vida's expression, he gazed at her in astonishment.

"You told him no, of course!"

"I told him nothing. He said he asked papa's permission, and papa said yes."

The crease deepened between Paul's brows. "I don't understand, Vida! Your father knows we're engaged!"

"Evidently he's changed his mind."

"But why should he do a thing like that? He doesn't *know* Dutoit!"

"Dutoit must have influenced him in some way. Maybe, if I hold off, Dutoit

will leave, and then we can smooth things over."

"You don't want to break our engagement?"

"No, Paul!"

The certainty of her tone left no doubt in Paul's mind as to her love for him. Yet her father's astounding change of attitude left him worried and heartsick. What subtle change had come over the members of this household? For a long time he and Vida sat silently together, each seeking comfort in the other's presence.

The rest of the day was agony for Paul. Dutoit followed Vida about the gloomy house with his vacant, soulless eyes. Sometimes the eyes seemed to gleam with a light, but it was no light of heaven. And they gleamed thus only when they stared directly into those of Vida; at other times they remained vague and out of focus. A troubled, subtle fear began to show itself in Vida's countenance.

After dinner that night the doctor retired to the library. Paul later joined him, closing the door after himself. The old doctor sat slumped down in his chair in the pale glow of the lamp. The yellow book that had rested in his lap had slipped to the floor, and he stared vacantly ahead of him. The lines of his face seemed to have deepened and multiplied since the preceding evening; there was no more the suggestion of youthfulness about his bearing. His energy seemed to have crumpled away, leaving him a weary old man.

"Doctor—" Paul began softly.

Jardin turned his head slowly. His eyes were feverish and bright; they looked on Paul as if focused on some object far behind him.

"You are not well," Paul said, advancing.

"No," the doctor admitted in a halting voice, "I—am not—well."

"Hadn't you better send your guests away?"

What seemed a crafty smile distorted the old man's face. "I can take care of my affairs!"

There was a silence for a few moments. Paul shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. Finally he blurted out: "Vida says you gave Dutoit your permission to marry her!"

Jardin avoided his guest's accusing stare.

"Yes," he admitted.

"Does that mean you no longer consider me as Vida's fiancé?"

"If you want it that way."

"Why?"

"I—don't know. Dutoit is a—is a good man," the doctor finished lamely.

Paul disregarded the old man's unintentioned implication. "You must have a better reason," he said.

Jardin shrugged. "You don't like Dutoit. Naturally not. He's a rival!"

"He's more than that! He's undermined your mentality—and he's undermining Vida's!" Paul trembled with exasperation.

"I know what I'm doing." But the doctor's assertion was none too positive.

"He has you hypnotized with those evil staring eyes of his. *You haven't any more will!*"

Paul glared into the doctor's face, pronouncing the last words in low, menacing tones. Jardin stared back; a look of momentary fright contorted his visage.

"Do you think so?" he whimpered hoarsely. But then he shook himself, glancing angrily at Paul. "It would please me," he said testily, "if you would refrain from bothering me any more!"

Paul sighed and left the old man to himself. He went into the parlor. The fire on the hearth had all but died. There was no light in the room save for a faint glow reflected from the hallway. When

he had almost reached the fireplace he discovered Vida recumbent in an arm-chair, apparently asleep. He whispered her name.

SHE came to with a start, uttering a terrified little cry. Paul put his arm about her shoulder.

"It's only I, Vida," he reassured her.

"Paul—I had the most horrible nightmare!"

"What was it, darling?"

He threw a few sticks of wood onto the fire, and drew Vida's chair closer to the hearth.

"I was sitting here, talking with Dutoit. I didn't dream this—it was after you went into the library with papa. There was no light, except from the fire. He was talking about marriage—how he needed me, because he would die without me!

"The fire was dying out. I got sleepier and sleepier as he talked in his low monotone—finally I couldn't stand it any more, and I slept. Then I had the dream. Oh, Paul, it was horrible!"

She looked up at him with terrified eyes.

"Tell me, Vida."

"I dreamed that he—Dutoit—was staring at me with those eyes of his. They kept getting wider, bigger and closer, till they were all I could see. I could feel all the strength oozing out of me. Finally they seemed to possess me—I seemed to lose my identity in them. Then they left—and they were cruel and bright till they disappeared. But I didn't seem to exist any more! I had no more identity—it was as if I were a body, which I knew had belonged to me—but there was no feeling of *self* about it. Those horrible eyes had taken my *identity*!"

Paul shuddered, involuntarily. He took her small hand in his, tried to pat it reassuringly.

"Don't leave me, Paul!" Vida whimpered. "I'm afraid—afraid!"

"We must make your father have Dutoit leave immediately," Paul said. "He's driving us all to insanity!"

"Papa won't listen to reason. I told him I had no intention of marrying anybody but you. But all he said was, 'I have decided. You are to marry Dutoit!' Dutoit has hypnotized him!"

"Why don't we go away before something terrible happens?"

"And leave papa alone with him? Besides, we couldn't get beyond the pines, the snow is so deep."

"Then I shall watch all night at your door."

"Do you think Dutoit would attempt anything—like that?"

"I would kill him if he did!"

They looked up at the sound of footsteps. The doctor was standing in the doorway, eyeing Paul savagely.

"I must ask you to leave this house at once," he growled without preliminary.

"Papa!" Vida exclaimed.

"I shall give you five minutes!" the old man snarled. Turning on his heel then, he reentered the hallway and climbed the stairs. Too astounded to speak, Paul and Vida watched him until he disappeared around the head of the stairway. Paul raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Come!" Vida whispered. "Into the library. When he comes down I'll tell him you've left. Then we shall see what he does."

Paul nodded. They entered the library, waited for a few minutes.

"I'd better be in the hall, so he'll suspect nothing," Vida decided. "I'll leave the door partly open so you can hear. Stay here till I call you."

After she had left, Paul stood for moments in the center of the room, his brows contracted. After an interval he heard Vida slam the outside door—ob-

viously to lead the doctor to believe he had left. Then followed a long silence. Paul sat down in the doctor's reading-chair, and buried his face in his hands.

Who was Dutoit? Why should he court Vida in so strange a manner? Paul could understand anyone being attracted by Vida—his own case was fatal enough. But what was the mystery about the man—what had happened in Haiti? Ah, that was it: what was the incident in Haiti that Dutoit was concealing?

Paul grew restless. This speculation was getting him nowhere. His eye caught a bright yellow book that lay at the foot of the chair. He picked it up. It was a slim volume, unlike the dingy tomes that lined the walls.

He opened it to the title page: *The Magic Island*, he read. He thumbed the pages; under the *Foreword*, about a dozen lines down, his eyes lit upon the word Haiti. The book opened of its own accord to page ninety-two. There was a newspaper clipping between the leaves; he glanced at the initial sentence of the article and immediately his attention became riveted to the little scrap of paper. With widening eyes he read:

HASCO, HAITI, April 29, 1933—The grave of Ramon Dutoit, who was formerly in the employ of the Haitian-American Sugar Company here, was found open yesterday. It is thought by the authorities to be the work of a *culte des mortes*, a society of creole necromancers, who rob new graves of their corpses for use in their rites. M. Dutoit died recently in a lethargic coma induced by poisoning in his food. He had many enemies, it is said, among the native employees of the firm for which he worked. As the *cultes* are bound in secrecy, it is doubtful that the body will be recovered. The deceased left no relatives behind."

A PUZZLED frown creased Paul's visage. According to this, Dutoit had died last spring—under very unusual cir-

cumstances, it must be admitted—yet here he was, in the same house, moving, eating and breathing like the rest of them!

He glanced at the chapter heading. ". . . Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields." The thought startled him. An idea began to permeate into his brain—a hazy, shadowy image which slowly shaped itself, sinister and challenging belief.

Facing page ninety-two was a ghoulish representation of the subject of the chapter—unearthly, sightless men walking under the sun. Paul shuddered and turned the leaf. His eyes roved down the page to the third paragraph. He began to read.

It seemed . . . that while the *zombie* came from the grave, it was neither a ghost, nor yet a person who had been raised like Lazarus from the dead. The *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has had time to rot, galvanize it into movement. . . .

Obediently, like an animal, the *zombie* stood erect—and what I saw then, coupled with what I had heard previously, or despite it, came as a rather sickening shock. The eyes were the worst. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. . . .

Slowly the facts which seemed unrelated began to fit themselves together, like the parts of a ghoulish jigsaw puzzle. Paul's conversation with the doctor earlier in the day came flooding back to him. "Take the celebrated case of Dr. Anthony," the old man had said. Three days in death . . . and the corpse had been revived, and "he was rapidly restored to health."

Suppose the newspaper accounts were correct? Could that seeming repudiation of reality be made to fit into that huge ghastly puzzle? And if it did fit in, what

terrible picture would he have then?

He attempted to review mentally the facts of Dutoit's life of which he had knowledge. Emigrated from France at the same time as the Jardins—New York for a few weeks—Haiti—employment in Hasco—his reported poisoning, death and burial—his sudden return to the United States in the winter of 1933—his arrival at the Jardin home—his strange wooing of Vida. Characteristics: a pallid, almost gray skin; vacant, soulless eyes; and a hypnotic power over human beings. What was his motive in his sudden wooing of Vida Jardin? Up to twenty-four hours ago he had been no more than a casual friend!

What was Dutoit seeking?

"... There are human beings, alive," Paul had said to the doctor, "who walk and talk as we do, in whom there is no soul! For if the soul has gone forth at death, and is not recalled at revivification, the body would exist in a living state without the spirit!"

And the answer came to Paul, like the bursting of a sun. The thought was so astoundingly horrible that for moments he refused to believe himself. But eventually the truth forced itself upon him. Dutoit was a dead man, simulating life as the *zombies* in the cane fields of Haiti! And if the soul could be called back to the body by a person possessing occult powers, why couldn't it be commanded forth from a living body by a person of similar ability?

The sweat poured from the pores of his forehead. He gasped at the enormity of the ugly fantasy that suggested itself to him. A man without a soul, wooing a beautiful, spirited girl—for what? Could Dutoit command forth the soul of Vida, and assume its ownership within his own body?

Paul realized how Vida's temperament had changed within the past day. All her

spontaneity had been deadened as if some half-realized fear were taking possession of her senses. Her dream of Dutoit—those horrible eyes advancing upon her, dissolving into her, and retreating, leaving her without any sense of identity. What was the soul but the expression of individuality?

"Oh my God!" Paul groaned. The words were both prayer and cry of terror.

Dutoit was taking her soul!

THE book slipped from Paul's fingers onto the floor. He stared at it blankly. Then came the final, terrible proof. Jardin had been sitting in that chair, reading that same book. The doctor knew what Dutoit was! He realized the fate that was creeping upon his daughter, and yet he accepted it. The old man, then, had been the first to succumb to Dutoit's influence. Had he not given Dutoit permission to marry Vida?

Flinging himself from the chair, Paul rushed to the library door.

Somehow, during the interim, it had closed, noiselessly and without his knowing it. He attempted to wrench it open, but it stuck fast. It had been locked! Restraining an impulse to cry out, he placed his ear to the panel. There was no sound.

He waited breathlessly for a few seconds. They seemed like eternity.

Then from somewhere upstairs there came a shrill, prolonged shriek—a cry filled with such terror as brought Paul's racing heart to a standstill. He threw his body against the door. It bulged. He backed the length of the room, picking up an andiron from the cold fireplace, and hurled himself furiously against the panel. It sprained and sprung open; Paul fell headlong in the middle of the hallway.

Jumping up and grasping the iron in his fist, he raced up the stairs.

In the doorway of Vida's room the old

doctor stood facing Paul. In his limp hand dangled a revolver. Behind him, prostrate in a chair, his daughter lay, pale fear on her quiet face, her eyes closed as in death. By her side Dutoit crouched. An expression of startled frustration warped his features.

As Paul advanced Dutoit sprung up, concentrating his vacant, lifeless eyes on the back of the doctor's cranium.

"Kill!" Dutoit muttered.

The doctor's revolver-hand came slowly upward. His eyes were dull and senseless, like those of Dutoit. Paul stood still. He glared at Dutoit, feeling the hair bristle on the nape of his neck.

"Zombie!" Paul uttered in a low, vibrant voice.

Dutoit's face contorted first with hideous fear, then with rage. An animal snarl rumbled from his throat.

"Kill!" he shrieked.

The doctor jerked his arm up. Paul threw the andiron with vicious force, not at Jardin but at Dutoit. It struck him in the head. The man fell heavily, the iron thumping on the floor beside him.

The revolver dropped from Jardin's almost extended hand! A startled, frightened look snapped into his eyes, as if he had been awakened suddenly from some horrible dream. He stared at Paul, at the pistol on the floor, then at the unconscious form of Dutoit. Finally he went over to his daughter, gazing at her with a questioning, poignant look. His eyes showed him to be himself again. Paul snatched up the fallen gun and pocketed it.

"Come." Paul shook the old man. "We'll put Vida in your bedroom." His voice was strained from the horror he had lived and seen.

Paul picked her up bodily. Jardin went before him, opening the doors. When Paul had laid Vida on the bed the doctor felt her wrist.

"Well?" Paul demanded, gazing at him intently.

"Low and irregular pulse." Jardin frowned. "I'll get her a stimulant."

The old man hastened out of the room. Paul drew a chair close to the bedside and seated himself, watching closely Vida's immobile, pale face. Shortly the doctor returned with a tumbler of a dark fluid. Paul supported Vida while her father administered to her the stimulant. She coughed once, but it seemed to have no other effect.

"It will take a little time," Jardin said, seating himself wearily.

They maintained vigil for a long time, for the most part silent. The past day had fallen from the old man like a dropped cloak. He seemed to remember but little that had happened, and Paul thought it best not to remind him.

After a while Paul saw the tired old doctor nodding in his chair. He felt himself drowsing and fought to keep awake. But the mental and physical strain of the past hours had weakened him. He swept downward into sleep. Halfway there, a warning voice in his brain seemed to be telling him to come back—telling him, why he did not know, that he *must* remain awake. But his need was too strong. He slept. . . .

HOW long he slept he did not know. But he awoke at last with a frightened start. The doctor was snoring gently. But Vida was gone! Paul started up, apprehension throbbing like a sharp pain in his breast. He ran into the hallway, calling for her. There was no answer. Something seemed to draw him to the room where Dutoit lay. Panic seized him. Had Dutoit been only stunned? In his worry over Vida's condition that possibility had seemingly escaped him. Was that what the warning voice in his brain had been trying to tell him?

A low moan came from Vida's room. He stepped inside the door and switched on the light.

Paul's blood ran cold. Seated on the floor beside the body of Dutoit, Vida glanced up at him vacantly. There was an ugly red gash across Dutoit's forehead, and there was blood on Vida's fingers, where she had been dabbling them in the wound.

"Vida!" Paul gasped. "Come away from that thing!"

She smiled up at him childishly. Leaning across the body, Paul grasped her arm. She drew back suddenly, hissing at him like an infuriated she-beast.

He stood still, gazing at her in horror. Dutoit must have accomplished his mission! Paul had been too late!

"Zombie!" he breathed, drawing back.

Then something snapped within his brain. He felt an insane desire to mangle the unmoving body that stretched at his feet. He grasped its throat, and his fingers sank into the flesh as into putty.

There was a wild coughing of rage, and Vida flung herself upon him. She dug her nails into his face, gripped his throat and tried to strangle him. Paul fought her off, holding her arms pinioned.

The attack brought him back to his senses. He dragged her from the room, and forced her down the hall and into the doctor's room.

Pushing her into a chair, he waited for her to spring up. But she remained quiet, leering at him rapidly. He shuddered.

Sitting opposite, he watched her for any sign of movement, but she stared ahead, her eyes unfocused, uncomprehending. He had acted too late! Dutoit was dead, but he had won.

Watching her helplessly, the need of his weakened, pain-racked body conquered him once more. Sleep overcame him.

He dreamed. Dull vacant eyes stared at

him, filled him with terror. The eyes advanced, all but melted into himself. He awoke in a cold sweat. The clock on the dresser said almost eleven, and a dull gray light shone through the windows.

Vida was gone again! With a giddy, whirling sensation in his brain, he went slowly into the hall, and entered Vida's room. As he flung open the door, he stopped short, drawing in a sharp gasp.

Dutoit was standing there, unsteady but alive! Vida clung to him, her eyes set like those of a corpse, fixed upon him. Dutoit advanced with a threatening, wavering motion on Paul.

"Vida!" Paul screamed.

She glanced quickly at Paul. Momentarily a look of comprehension flashed into her eyes, but they set again, dull and void. A growl rasped from Dutoit's throat, a growl that held a note of frustration.

That quick glance from Vida sent a wave of hope through Paul. Maybe, even now, he was not too late! Dutoit had not been dead—only unconscious. Perhaps, if he were really dead. . . .

Paul jammed his hand in his pocket, seized the revolver he had taken from the doctor, and brought it forth. He pulled the trigger.

The gun barked sharply. A small round hole appeared between Dutoit's eyes, and the *zombie* stopped short. He tumbled inertly to the floor.

Vida gasped. The same startled expression that her father had shown snapped into her eyes. She gazed piteously at Paul, glanced with horror at the corpse on the floor.

Horror was in her eyes, but life too was there again. With Dutoit's death she had come back!

Paul rushed to her. Then, with a little sigh, she swooned, slumping into his arms. . . .

EAT,

by

Nat Schachner

(Author of "Marble Murderer")

Stannard Bliss, men said, was slightly mad, but harmless. . . . Small warning, that, for those hapless guests who, unsuspecting, accepted invitations to his charnel party.

KNOWING the reputation of his host, Owen Meredith had expected the party to be rather out of the ordinary, but he was not prepared for the ghastly jest it actually turned out to be. Before the night was over, in fact, the japery had long been forgotten and tragedy leered down with hideous eyes on the tattered remnants of a half-mad orgy.

Stannard Bliss, the host, surveyed the



DRINK and DIE!

Mystery-Terror Novelette

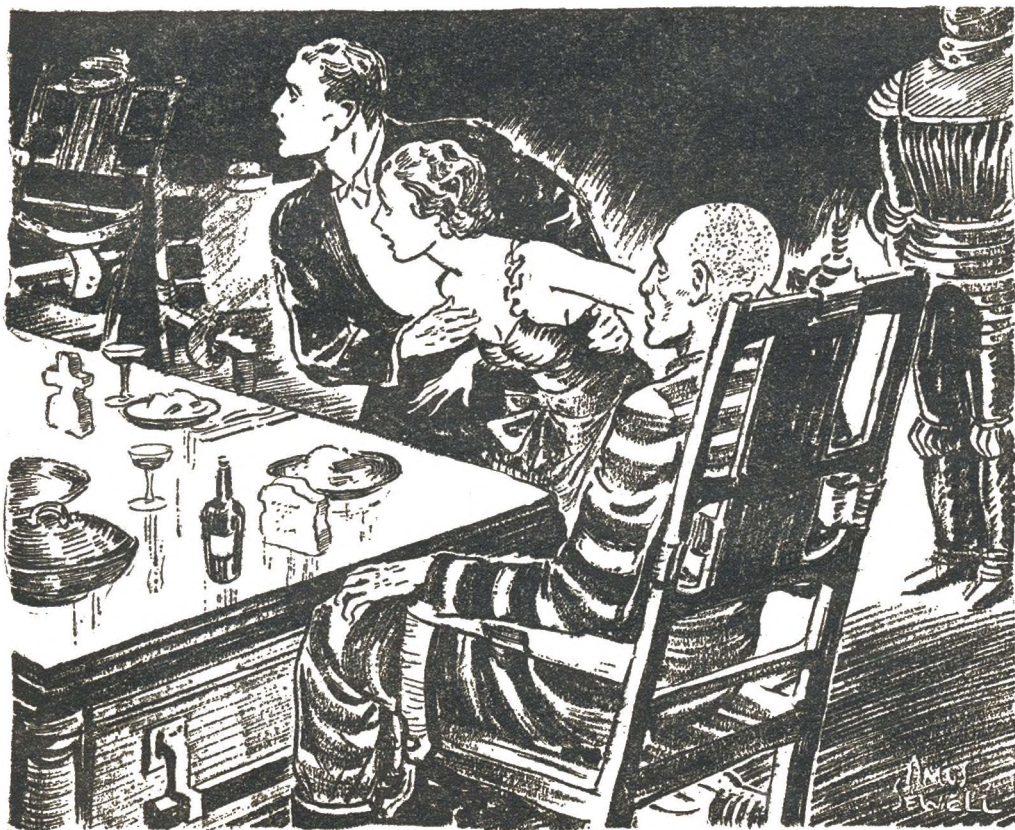
six of them blandly. He was a round, moon-faced man of ageless appearance. He might have been twenty-five or he might have been fifty. His eyes were coldly merry and his effusiveness struck a false note. His millions accentuated rather than hid the sinister underground rumors about him and about his castellated retreat in the Ramapos. Meredith had only a nodding acquaintance with the man and it was curiosity more than anything else which finally overcame the strange reluctance he had felt on receipt of the invitation.

The great clock high on the wall of the

paneled library bonged twelve times. Silence descended on the guests, cocktails paused half way to lips. They had only just arrived, and already they felt uneasy, constrained. Conversation had been forced, and died down quickly. They looked at each other askance.

A large, powerfully built man with ruddy bulldog face and thick fleshy nose crossed over to where Meredith stood, slightly aloof. He was Horace Lenz, owner of a chain of newspapers and the only one present whom Meredith knew at all well.

"There's something funny about this



party," he growled. "Noticed it, Owen?"

The young man crushed the sparks out of his cigarette stub before replying. His slim, smoothly muscled form contrasted sharply with the burliness of the other.

"The atmosphere is a bit unhealthy, if that's what you mean," he agreed. "And I can't say I like all the guests Bliss invited, either."

Lenz lowered his voice. "That's just it. You may not know it, but there's a hell's brew simmering underneath the surface. Almost everyone here has good cause to hate everyone else." He grinned suddenly. "Take yourself for instance. I hear you're writing a book."

"I've written quite a few," Meredith pointed out.

"But this one," Lenz insisted, "according to gossip, is going to expose the secret lives of our prominent people; rake up a lot of scandal; that sort of thing. . ."

"Maybe," said Owen, non-committally.

"Don't do it," the publisher advised. "They say Bliss is in it—and others. You'll ruin their lives. There might be danger to you. Bliss, for instance, is a desperate, wild-headed sort."

Meredith smiled. "I'm not worrying. If anyone should write such a book, I think it would be a public service. These whited sepulchers, I've always claimed, are a menace to society.

Lenz shrugged in resignation. "Well, there you are. Now take the others. . ."

The last stroke of twelve thudded ominously away. Stannard Bliss lifted his hand. Lenz's voice trailed off. All eyes fastened uneasily on their host. Some of his reported pranks bordered on—well—the thin edge.

Bliss's smooth face seemed puckish. He rubbed his hands with a dry crackling sound. "The party's going to begin now, people. It's the most unusual party I have ever given—and I have a reputation for doing the unusual. In this I have

surpassed myself." He chuckled, but his humor was not contagious. "You will dream of this party; you will awake suddenly in the middle of the night to scream out—"

Gloria Albright breathed through parted crimson lips that were a vivid gash against a dead white face: "I love to scream in the middle of the night. Get on with the party, Stan."

"Impatient as always for the next thrill, my dear," the host reproved. "This time even your bottomless desire will be fulfilled."

"I don't like this," Lenz said in a low voice. Meredith noted that his ruddiness was gone, that his features were twitching. "Bliss is mad; I've always suspected a streak in him. We'd better go before—"

"I didn't know you had nerves," Owen told him. "Wouldn't we look silly to make off now?"

BLISS was saying: "I picked you six with care." His coldly merry eyes swept to Meredith. "Owen Meredith for instance: He writes the most blood-curdling, spine-freezing horror tales of our generation."

Owen bowed, smiling wryly over Bliss's effusive words, but already Bliss had fastened on a tall, thin, cadaverous man with a high, egg-shaped head that was absolutely hairless. "And August Blemmons. Most of you don't know him, but he is a fanatic on rare poisons which kill without a trace. The Borgias were amateurs compared to him." He giggled without moving a muscle of his face. "Careful how you shake hands with him; he wears a ring."

Blemmons lifted his right hand and stared with lusterless expression at the blood-red ruby on a claw-like finger.

A girl sucked her breath in sharply. Her beautiful face was drained white, her wide-spaced eyes were filled with fear.

Bliss swerved on her. "May I present my secretary, Christine Larrimore. Isn't she lovely?"

The girl shrank back. A curious look had crept into her employer's face. Gloria Albright leaned forward, her dusky languorous eyes glinting dangerously. Her purring voice dripped poison. "So lovely, and so good! A pity, isn't it, Stan, that the good—die young!"

The woman, Meredith recognized instinctively, was dangerous, seething with repressed rage. Lenz whispered in a shaky voice. "Bliss had better be careful. I know Gloria. She used to be my mistress and I was damned glad when she took up with Stan. If he's giving her the go-by for that little blonde secretary of his—"

Meredith whispered back: "Good Lord! That poor girl's scared to death. She doesn't belong in this crowd."

Bliss said coldly: "Keep quiet, Gloria, you're out, and you know you're out! Don't try your tragedy queen stuff with me."

Owen, watching closely, saw the fathomless fury in those dusky eyes, and felt a chill. Murder was here, in the making. But Bliss, seemingly unaware, mocked on. "You all know the voluptuous Gloria Albright, of course. The actress who has played a hundred vampire roles in make-believe and tried them, but with less success, in real life." Blood dripped slowly from the woman's crimson lip where sharp white teeth had clenched in spasmodic repression. A faint uneasy stir swept over the room.

"Now we come to Corey Wells," Bliss rattled on. The short dark man with the gashed irregular scar which ran from cleft chin to ear and twisted his face into a perpetual grimace, grinned sourly. "The famous traveler, the explorer who was the only white man to penetrate into the heart of the Devil-Worshippers' country in Arabia. Rumor has it he joined

the sect himself and underwent the full initiation. You know, of course, of one of the ceremonies: eating the raw, bleeding heart of a man you killed with your own hands."

Meredith watched the shuddering pallor of the blonde girl, Christine. She looked faint. Owen was not exactly squeamish, but even *he* felt a little sick at the cold brutality of the man.

"He's going too far," the newspaper publisher growled. "Banks on his millions and reputation for eccentricity to protect him."

Bliss swerved on him with a wave of his pudgy, corpse-white hand. "And over there, the bull-headed man who is muttering indistinguishable things under his breath, is Horace Lenz, molder of public opinion. I dare not say what skeletons in *his* life admitted him to this select little party of ours."

Their gaze met and stabbed in silent challenge. Then Lenz laughed good-naturedly. Bliss said: "I have invited one more guest. He came because he couldn't help himself. You've never met him, I believe, but you will recognize him at once. He's my *chef d'oeuvre*, my masterpiece—the high spot of my career."

Corey Wells rasped out: "The trouble with you, Bliss, is that you talk too much. Get on with the party." His voice was like the grating of a rusty hinge. It matched the unpleasantness of his features.

The round moon face of their host was blankly merry. "Of course," he agreed readily. "It is but natural impatience." He turned around, facing the wall at the other end and clapped his hands.

Meredith had made his way over to Christine Larrimore. He was anxious about her. "A very pleasant party, isn't it?" he murmured.

She looked up and shuddered. "I—I'd like to go home. Mr. Bliss was never like this before. I've worked for him a month

and—and—he always seemed normal. I'd rather—"

"If you feel that way," he said gently, "I'll get your wraps and drive you home myself."

She looked up gratefully. "Thank you!"

At that moment the panels of the farther wall slid open. It was fathomlessly dark beyond. Bliss stood at the entrance, rubbing his hands. "Come in, everyone. I guarantee you'll be surfeited with thrills." He saw Owen leaning over his secretary. "You, too, Christine," he called. There was imperative command in his tone.

The girl smiled wanly and rose. "I have to go in," she said hurriedly. "It means my job if I don't." Bliss waited until they all had moved into the pitchy darkness. They stood in an uncertain group, trying in vain to penetrate the mystery beyond. Then the panels slid noiselessly into place behind them, and the blackness was complete.

SILENCE—ominous, deadly! Thick stirrings and rustlings, and then a sound as of soft, dry whispering. Someone moved on padded feet.

"A swell moment for a murder," the voice of Gloria floated through the dark. Blemons dripped cold words. "A silly stunt! We don't scare easily." Lenz's growl seemed far away.

Meredith shifted his position, seeking the girl, Christine. He collided with an invisible body. Someone cursed, shoved at him violently. Staggering a moment, he lunged with angry heat for the discourteous assailant. At the same time a startled exclamation ripped through the Stygian pall. It was Blemons!

"Something's got me by the hand," he gasped. "I can't let go! What the devil. . ."

"Hah! ha-ha!" Obscene laughter rakketed and echoed. "I was waiting for

that. Blemons of all people to be caught! That's rich—ha-ha!"

Meredith stumbling over nothingness, cried out sharply. "The joke's gone far enough, Bliss. Turn on the lights!"

"Of course," returned the bodiless chuckling voice. Slowly, very slowly, a dim funereal illumination spread ghostly waves through an enormous chamber. It picked out strange, incredible, half-perceived blobs; then, as the light grew stronger, the blobs took definite shape and form.

CHAPTER TWO

Charnel-House Party

CHRISTINE screamed and thrust a warding elbow before her eyes, and muttered exclamations burst from the others.

Bliss rubbed his hands. "Nice idea, isn't it?"

Gloria said throatily: "Marvelous! Superb! I could love you all over again for this, Stan." Eyes gleaming, she put a thin dead-white arm on the millionaire's shoulder.

Bliss shrugged it off. "Don't be a fool, Gloria," he snapped. His eyes sought the trembling figure of his secretary, narrowed. Meredith was at her side, supporting her. Lenz watched the people rather than the disclosed horrors. His eyes were bitter.

Christine moaned: "It's like the ravings of a madman, this—chamber. Now I know why he looked at me—like that—for days."

"Easy!" Owen soothed. "He *would* attempt something like this." But his eyes held in unwilling fascination. It was macaber, horrible, obscene, yet in its very gruesomeness the room was a marvel of depraved genius.

The enormous chamber, glowing with the ghastly green of the hidden illumina-

tion, seemed the interior of a charnel house. The walls were of rough slimed stone, green with the putrescence of decay; the rafters of the vaulted ceiling gibbered with live squeaking bats and red-eyed owls who glared motionlessly down at the astounded guests.

In one corner a scaffold loomed, a huge perpendicular beam with a crosspiece at right angles from which a slip noose dangled suggestively. In the opposite corner a guillotine reared its ugly head. The sloping steel blade glittered evilly in the slotted guide posts.

In the very center of the house of death and decay a huge coffin stood, waist high. Beneath its glassed surface waxen images rested, hands folded in similitude of death. On the glass top stood broken grave-stones, each with a carved name. They were the names of the guests. Before each gruesome place-card was a chair; an exact facsimile of the electric chair, with electrodes and switch. The coffin was heaped high with food, served on black plates. Blood-red bottles of strange shapes filled every vacant niche.

At the head of the coffin-table was a larger chair, and a figure was strapped in it, a motionless wax-like figure in prison stripes and clothes. The death cap was on its head and the death mask on its face.

"The last invited guest," Bliss chortled. "A pretty thought, eh? Death at the feast! Sit down, everyone. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Lenz said sharply: "Look at Blemons! What's the matter with him?"

The poison expert was standing near an upright grinning skeleton. The bony hands was extended and open. Blemons swayed slightly, and looked stupidly at his own hand.

"Just a little joke of mine," Bliss grinned. "He stumbled in the dark with hand outstretched against the skeleton's paw. There are springs holding the bones.

They contract and give a good, hard squeeze. He's all right."

Lenz was at the man's side, gripping his shoulder, peering into his eyes. He seemed worried. "Sure you're okay?"

The cadaverous man lifted his hairless head with an effort. His eyes were dull, unanswering. He spoke hesitatingly, thickly: "I'm all right. Le' me 'lone." He pushed the newspaper publisher's hand away and stumbled to the table. He peered vacantly at the macaber place-cards and sank into his chair.

The other guests, their first reaction over, seemed to enter into the spirit of the jest. Gloria was especially vivacious. Her excitement was mounting; her eyes glittered. Death—by poison, by strangulation, by hideous and subtle means alike was her constant theme. Her feverish pre-occupation was contagious. Corey Wells, the traveler, unbent after the third drink, and in dry, monotonous voice, narrated the most frightful tales of torture he had personally witnessed and participated in among Yezidees, head hunters, Chinese bandits and Hindu fakirs.

Lenz chimed in with choice bits of scandal about hitherto spotless and respected citizens of the town. He seemed quite drunk. Bliss prodded them on, spurring them to more and more fantastic efforts, plying them with curious liqueurs and stranger foods, interposing deftly his own subtle obscenities and depraved touches. This was what he loved; lived for. The proceedings gradually assumed the wildest aspects of a feast of Heliogabolus.

AS THE fever mounted, and the blood-red drinks took their strange effect, Christine shrank more and more into her seat. Her face was pale and her breathing rapid. Bliss, opposite her and next the unstimulating ghastly figure of the condemned criminal in the electric chair, watched her speculatively. There was a

strange light in his eyes. Gloria's stealthy glances were murderous barbs. She seemed more than ever the bloodless vampire. Wells devoured Gloria's sinuous form with hot avid expression, and Lenz, lolling with drink, nevertheless held everyone under surveillance.

Meredith had tasted the first drink offered him and refused any more. Its curious potency astounded him. He had an uncanny feeling that the night and this strange orgy would not end normally. He was next to Christine—a deft switching of gravestones made certain of that.

Blemons too, was not a participant in the proceedings. He slumped in his chair, eyes half closed, chin sunk on bosom, and he answered vaguely and with muttered thickness any remarks thrust his way.

Meredith waited for the break. He knew it was coming.

And then it came!

Gloria tossed off another drink and started violently from her chair. Her hand darted snakily into the bosom of her breast-high evening gown. It came out with a long curving razor-edged knife. Face distorted, she swooped around the coffin and plunged for Christine.

"You filthy little blonde witch!" she screamed, "you *will* try to take Stan from me, will you?"

The glittering blade poised for the downward stroke. The table seemed afflicted with a strange unmoving paralysis. Christine cried out. That released Owen. He threw himself forward and clawed for the knife. Its keenness seared down the flesh of his hand. Then he twisted and the weapon went whirling through the air. It smashed into the figure of a knight in dark armor, next the skeleton.

Gloria fought like a fury, her crimson lips spitting feline obscenities, but Owen held her tight. Bliss came rapidly around the table, balled his fist, and crashed it hard against her cursing mouth.

"You slut!" he said, low and hard. "You try that again and you'll wish you were never born."

Blood dripped from her lips. Owen released his grip. She stared at Bliss wide-eyed; without another word she walked back to her chair. Christine sat rigid, almost bemused.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Meredith.

"It was the only way to treat her," said Bliss. He raised his hand, and once more his voice was merry, as if nothing had happened. "Now another surprise. We've had Death with us at the feast to remind us, like the ancient Egyptians, that time is on the wing and we should seize our pleasures as and where we may. A pretty conceit, was he not?" He turned and bowed ironically to the seated representation of the condemned criminal at the head of the table.

"A stroke of genius," Wells declared.

"Not yet," Bliss corrected. "Now, however, it will be. For behold, Death itself will turn to life, to dangerous, forbidden life."

He leaned suddenly forward, and with a quick movement ripped off death cap and mask to disclose a jerking, twitching head. The hair was shaved close and the prison pallor was heavy on the sunken features. Animal-like eyes darted fearfully around the room.

"My masterpiece," Bliss cackled.

Lenz jumped to his feet with a hoarse cry. "Jim Marra!"

Meredith felt Christine's body shrink against him; her heart beat with rapid thudding strokes against his shoulder. Gloria thrust back her head and laughed wildly, the blood still dripping from her crushed lower lip.

"Splendid! A condemned murderer as a fellow guest! What a conception!"

Marra screamed: "You promised, Mr. Bliss, you wouldn't give me away."

Bliss said. "Don't you worry; I keep my bargains." His moon face wore a self-satisfied air as he faced his stupefied guests. "It was a happy accident. Jim Marra escaped from the death house three days ago. On one of my little excursions I discovered his hiding place while the police were searching the country for him. I saw at once his possibilities for this party, and broached it to him. He saw the light too; it was this or—the death house."

MARRA swung out of his hideous chair. "I was innocent," he cried desperately, shifting hunted eyes from one to the other. "It was a frameup; I was railroaded. Don't give me up!"

Horace Lenz kicked back his chair. It fell with a crash. His powerful hands clutched at the table, his bulldog face was ridged in hard lines.

"You lie!" he shouted. "You killed John Wiley; the proof was unanswerable. He was a good friend of mine, Bliss," his voice cackled, "I'm going to call the police."

His host said smoothly: "Jim is my guest. I promised safety in return for this little tableau."

"To hell with your promises!" the publisher growled. "The man must get his just deserts. He's a killer. I'm going."

Meredith rose; his hand around Christine's trembling waist. "So am I," he announced calmly. "And so is Miss Larrimore. Your party is not to our taste."

Bliss surveyed them from bland eyes. "The doors are locked, Lenz, by an electrical contrivance of which only I know the secret. You might as well stay."

Jim Marra searched the publisher's countenance. "Lenz!" he screamed. "I thought I recognized you. It was your newspapers that hounded me to the chair!" He darted forward, murder writ large on his writhing features. Owen

thrust quickly into his way, stiff-armed his puny body smashing to the floor.

"Thanks!" Lenz said, glaring down at the quivering wretch.

"We've *got* to get out," Christine moaned.

Meredith took a step toward Bliss. "Now listen here; you're opening those doors, or—"

He was interrupted by a strange sound. August Blemons, who had sunk further and further into the seeming stupor of the drunk, swayed slowly to his feet. His hairless, egg-shaped head pulsed with a greenish, glowing light. His lips drooled green-flecked foam. His mouth was set in a stiff hard line. A curious moaning whistle tore from his rigid lips. His long flaccid hands writhed with a strange life of their own, uncontrollably, as though they were dissociated from his body.

Then, as they stared in mounting horror, the writhing, snaking hands lifted, grasped the bulbous head, and tore wildly frantically. Nails ripped deep into skull and cheeks, gripped and pulled as if he wished to burst open his tortured head like a rotten apple. Without ceasing, the frightful whistle seared through the lock-jawed lips.

Owen sprang for him, too late. The weaving hands had reached the mouth, caught at either side, and yanked. The flesh yielded with a gurgling tearing sound and a bloody gash grinned rawly at the assemblage. The full throated shriek of the damned gushed forth, burbling with blood and green foam, higher and higher, sending the roosting owls in the rafters into flight, until a horrible retching came, and August Blemons fell headlong to the floor. He twitched once and then lay very still. He was dead.

"God!" Christine whispered. Gloria wiped her bleeding lip and drank in the sight with voluptuous intake of breath. Bliss gripped the edge of the coffin-table,

A puzzled frown disfigured his ageless skin. Jim Marra was on his feet again and cowering away from the motionless body.

Horace Lenz shouted in stentorian tones. "Damn you, Blemons was poisoned!"

Bliss wiped his face clean of expression. "His ring, that's it! He must have pricked himself."

"A pretty alibi, Bliss," Lenz sneered, "but it doesn't work." His jaw was jutting. "You pulled the trick yourself."

The millionaire eyed him curiously. "How?" His voice was gently.

"That damned skeleton!" The publisher strode angrily to the grinning white form, pressed open the phalanges of the outstretched hand. "Look!"

They crowded closer to view the damning sliver of needle imbedded firmly in the bone. Lenz swung around. "Bliss planted that for Blemons. There was an East Indian poison on the needle. I know the symptoms."

Bliss fell back a little from his accuser. "It's not so. I admit the needle. But it was clean; a joke—just to prick the skin and make the victim jump. The skeleton was there for anyone to touch. I had no reason—"

"No?" Lenz said sardonically. "You thought yourself a modern Borgia, and flattered yourself you got away with it. My papers have been investigating you. There have been several unexplained deaths among your friends. Blemons concocted the poisons and sold them to you. He was getting scared, and was going to talk. You thought up this method to shut his mouth!"

Bliss, for the first time, lost his poise. His moon face wrinkled hideously; he fell back staring. "You lie," he declared hoarsely. "I never did—" He stopped short, eyes wide. "Of course, I should have known." He turned swiftly to Jim Marra, corpse-white in his prison stripes.

"You, Jim, get—" His hand reached back on the coffin, groping.

Owen went for him in a quick dive. Lenz moved sideways, against the sable-armored knight. .

The lights went out!

CHAPTER THREE

Man or Monster?

MEREDITH crashed against a chair. Blackness dropped like a shroud. Men grabbed indistinguishable words; Christine cried out sharply. Gloria's wild laughter enveloped them all. Owen staggered dizzily to his feet as something whizzed past him, ruffling his hair.

"Christine!" he shouted, straining against the dark. No answer. That one cry had not been repeated.

He plunged blindly. There were scuffling sounds around him, gruntings, heavings. He collided with fighting, threshing bodies, and they slid away from him. Someone gasped and choked off with a horrid gurgling noise.

"The lights!" he shouted. "Turn on the lights!" A mocking laugh answered him, a laugh whose source he could not trace. Something was being dragged heavily along the floor.

He groped blindly on, trying to orient himself. There had been a light switch near the entrance panel; he remembered that. And then, with sudden dazzling glare the lights went on. Lenz, panting heavily, his face flushed and angry, removed his finger from the trip.

"I had the devil's own job finding it," he breathed. "Whose fool idea was it to turn them off?"

Wells spun around hastily, his eyes blinking like an owl's. His reaching hand pulled back from the guillotine. Marra crouched against the coffin-like table, opening and shutting his mouth in spasmodic constrictions. Gloria was back in

her chair, her blood-red lips parted to disclose small sharp white teeth. Her neck undulated with swan-like movements.

August Blemons still sprawled unmoving, face downward.

It was Christine who made the horrible discovery. "My God!" she shrieked.

Meredith was swiftly at her side. Everyone swerved at her trembling finger. A shudder of horror rippled through them.

To the far corner of the room, swinging with slow ghastly motion, dancing with desperate feet in emptiness, strange dead fruit of scaffold and noose, hung the distorted, strangled body of the host, Stannard Bliss! Ensnared in his own trap, caught in the weave of his own peculiar jest, no longer would his fertile, sadistic mind conjure up novel sensations and macaber entertainments to startle and tickle jaded appetites. He was dead—murdered!

Lenz was the first to reach the swinging figure. The round moon face was blue with cyanosis, the lips snarled back from teeth like fangs, the cold merry eyes squeezed half way out of their sockets.

"Don't touch him," Owen cried sharply. "He must be left for the police. There may be fingerprints."

Lenz withdrew his hand, passed it shakily across his face. He was chalk-white now. "God! What a party!" he groaned. "First Blemons, then Bliss. Who is next?"

A strange access of fear carried him headlong to where the panel was. He beat with clenched fists against the solid wall. "Help! Let us out! Police!" But the walls were soundproof and the control for the sliding panels cleverly concealed. There was no answer.

Meredith's calm voice stilled the mounting panic. "We've got to think this out. We're locked in, ironically enough, by the man who is swinging there. We can't get out, possibly not until morning, when the

servants will become suspicious. In the meantime, there is a murderer among us, a ruthless, fiendish murderer. Two are dead—there may be more before the night is over. We must find him out first, before—"

"I thought it was Bliss," Lenz muttered thickly, "but—" His morale seemed to have broken suddenly under the impact of the gruesome hanging of their host.

"Bliss couldn't have hung himself," Owen pointed out. "Now who else?" He turned slightly toward Jim Marra.

The escaped murderer flung up his hand to ward off expected attack. His voice rose to a scream. "I didn't do it! I swear I didn't!"

Corey Wells said coldly: "He had plenty of opportunity to coat the needle in the skeleton's bones with poison. He was all alone in the room before we came in. And Bliss was going to accuse him when the lights went out."

Lenz said harshly: "You're no saint yourself, Wells. The cult of the Devil-Worshippers exacts a curious price from its devotees."

GLORIA flung her arms over her head, exposing high pointed breasts above the line of her gown. "Don't forget me," she laughed wildly. "I hated that windbag strutting the air up there. I made a good thing of him for a while, but he was throwing me over. And how that silly waxen doll he was falling for—she was ninny enough to be afraid of him? Or our budding novelist himself, whose brain is addled by the tales he strings? We're all suspects!" Her laughter shrilled through the charnel house with tense, ripping sound. The men stood and snarled at each other like animals about to spring as fetid, blood-reeking hate enveloped them.

Meredith said, struggling for calm: "We're only making things worse. Everyone get away from the light switch.

There must be no more darkness. As for Marra, he is a condemned murderer. He must be safely tied, and held for the police. Perhaps—"

Marra sprang back. His hand darted out to the coffin-table, to the broken grave-stone in front of the host's chair, where Bliss had reached before his death. Christine cried out and clung to Owen's arm. A flat automatic gleamed like a thing evil in the greenish light.

"I'll never go back alive!" There was the glare of desperation in his sunken eyes. "I'll kill the first one who makes a move."

Meredith gently shook off Christine's clutching hand, balanced himself easily on the balls of his feet. Lenz moved sideways with imperceptible movements; he was close to the knight in black armor. Gloria's hand slid stealthily along the table.

"I mean it," Marra cried, swinging the pistol threateningly. Corey Wells dived suddenly, and the gun crashed. Then, without warning, the light blinked and was gone.

Meredith had barely time to wonder at the enveloping dark when his forward spring brought him crashing into a second spurt of flame and the echoing report of the gun. He swung at the spot where the flame had lanced. There was the thud of flesh on bone, a scream of pain, and a metallic object slammed against the floor.

Christine was crying: "Owen, where are you? Are you hurt?"

Gloria screeched in insane hatred: "Let me get my hands on you; let me get my claws into your face, you—!" Then suddenly, she was still.

Meredith, feeling his way blindly in the thick blackness, felt a sudden sinking sensation. If only he could find that light switch in time.

"Everyone of you! Speak up!" he shouted. There was no answer; only a silence more deadly than any noise. Good

God! Was every one dead? His outstretched hand pounded against solid wall. It moved feverishly along until it contacted the switch, and he tripped it. Illumination, green glowing, lit up the shambles, the morbid jaspery of the charnel house that had long since passed beyond all jesting.

Blemons still sprawled face down on the floor, the green foam drying on his lips; Bliss still swung hideously from the gibbet. But the others? Christine? His frantic eyes searched the room. There she was—a huddled mass near the sable knight. He ran toward her, knelt at her motionless side with frantic haste. Fear drove him with scorpion whips. Her face was calm and drained of color. He felt her pulse. Thank God, it beat slowly, but steadily.

He lifted her gently to her chair, dashed water from a carafe over her pallid countenance. Everything else was forgotten. She shuddered under the impact of the cold fluid, breathed deeply, and opened her eyes. They were filled with brooding terror.

"Owen!" she whispered. "Someone caught me by the throat in the dark. I tried to cry out and couldn't. Then—then, I felt myself dropping, and everything went black." There were purple bruises against the white of her skin.

"You're all right now," Meredith assured her. His eyes were stormy.

The voice of the newspaper publisher rose in a weird hoarse cry. "Good God! Gloria!"

Meredith spun around, dreading what he would see.

IN THE farther corner of the room, a bright keen blade hung suspended as before between the slots. But the brightness was dimmed with dripping gore. It ran down the steel, beaded into dark red globules, went *drip, drip, splash*, on the frightful thing that lay across the wooden

block—the kneeling, half prone, headless body of a woman! Gloria Albright! Her slender, swanlike neck ended horribly in a straight sharp slice of flesh. Gouts of blood oozed slowly from the gaping wound, and made a pool on the platform of the guillotine. The once beautiful head, with tresses sheared into a sinister bob, lay face upturned, at the opposite end. Blood smeared the delicate veinings of her cheeks and the sensuous red lips gaped wide.

Lenz hid his face in his hands. His shoulders heaved convulsively. After all, thought Owen, he had once loved the woman.

"We've got to get out! We've got to get out!" Christine repeated tonelessly. Accumulated horrors had mercifully dulled her perceptions.

Meredith dared not answer. First Blemons—poisoned by a skeleton; dead on the floor. Then Bliss, the host, hung on his own scaffold. Now Gloria, decapitated under the guillotine. Human hands had dragged them there, strangled them to keep them from crying out, worked the gory instruments. Even as human hands had impregnated the needle with poison. It *must* be so, he insisted to himself. Yet how was it possible—who among them could be the slayer in the dark? Who among the survivors—Marra, Lenz, and Wells? Or was there some unseen, inimical influence in the room. Something disembodied and unearthly in the evil atmosphere that played with human lives. Had Bliss in his mad striving for shocking, terrifying effects, evoked a monster hidden in some unknown crypt, and died, another Frankenstein in the grip of the thing he had called into being?

He shook off these shuddering speculations with grim ferocity. If he didn't get a good grip on himself, he too would go mad.

Jim Marra rose slowly from under the

gibbet on which Bliss dangled and danced. He held his right arm stiffly and moaned. He did not seem to notice the headless body of the actress.

Corey Wells lifted himself from his prone position on the floor. He stared vacantly around. "I was shot," he muttered thickly.

Meredith reached him in two strides. At his feet was a glint of metal. He stooped, picked up the automatic, thrust it into his pocket. Then he raked the explorer with swift, sharp glances. "Where were you shot?" he demanded.

Wells made a vague gesture. "I don't know," he said. "It seemed to me—maybe not. I must have bumped my head."

Owen averted his eyes from the ghastly dead. "Now listen to me, all of you," he commanded. "Three of our number have been done to death—horribly. One of us is the killer!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder in Black

WELLS was staring with a kind of fascination at the blood-dabbled trunk of what had once been Gloria Albright. "There are devil-demons," he said without expression, "who kill like that."

"Supernatural nonsense," Owen said sharply, to hide his own uneasy qualms. "The murderer is human, and in this room. And I know who he is!"

Lenz took his hands away from his face. "Tell us then," he implored. His fists worked powerfully. "I'd kill him barehanded."

"It isn't time yet," Meredith answered shortly. "First we've got to find a way out."

Lenz hurled himself against the wall again. It would not give. He seized a chair, swung it with all the force of his massive shoulders. The sturdy rungs

splintered and crashed to the floor, but the panel remained unmarred.

"Don't stand there like mummies," he snarled. "Give me a hand!"

Corey Wells made no move, but stood watching with smoldering eyes. Jim Marra lifted his right hand stiffly, let it drop again. Christine walked slowly along the wall, seeking the hidden spring. The blood pounded so in her temples she could hardly see.

Meredith said: "A battering ram is the only idea. How about the cross beam of the gibbet?"

Lenz said earnestly: "I wouldn't go near Bliss with a ten foot pole. Damn him and his house and his parties! You couldn't hear the explosion of a ton of dynamite outside. And his servants know from bitter experience not to intrude on any of his parties until he summoned them."

Owen said: "There must be a way. The murderer isn't through yet. There's another one of us on his slate."

"How do you know?" Lenz glanced fearfully at the two men in the rear.

"Just a hunch," Owen answered evasively.

Lenz cried out suddenly: "The knight in black armor! I saw him move!"

He thrust past Meredith, face grim and set, and leaped for the sable figure. Everyone in the chamber of death swerved at his outcry. The publisher grabbed for the steel-mailed neck, and staggered back with an even sharper cry.

There was a swift whir. Something seemed to yawn in the Stygian breastplate, and a hiss of metal lashed through the air. Meredith jumped barely in time. The thunderbolt of death ripped through his scalp, thudded with a smacking noise into the deep wood of the wall. Then the green illumination went out with a rush.

Owen shifted his position silently. He knew he was marked for death. He

prayed only that Christine would keep silence, and not disclose her whereabouts. He strained every faculty to penetrate the barrier between himself and the others in the charnel chamber. What had moved inside the armor of the grim black warrior? But strain as he might, no answering message came back from the outer darkness. Everyone, everything in it, seemed stricken with a strange paralysis. Yet he knew that even now, somewhere in that room, the weapons of horrible torturing death were being forged for him, that even now the murderous being was advancing stealthily upon him. The pounding of his heart came to him with explosive sound; every nerve shrieked against the unknown danger. Half crouched, he moved stealthily forward.

He lunged into a chair and overturned it. He leaped back in quick fright at the abrupt noise, whirled, and faced the black void with panting gasps. Someone, far off it seemed, gasped in sympathy.

A voice pierced the insupportable silence; a hollowed, muffled voice. To Owen's fevered imagination it seemed to issue from the helmeted head of the suit of armor. It rang in his ears with the thudding strokes of remorseless doom: "Owen Meredith! Owen Meredith! Your turn has come. Blemons, Bliss, Gloria—and now you! Your allotted fate is awaiting you! Prepare!"

The young man, perspiration clammy on his forehead, said nothing. He held the automatic with a desperate grip, and backed slowly and warily toward where he thought the light switch was.

Christine shrieked: "Owen, be careful!"

His fuddled senses strove desperately to disentangle a certain important point: Who among them had eyes that could penetrate the dark?

Lenz cried out desparingly: "The switch doesn't work!" And in Owen's

ears the empty, fruitless click was terrifying in its finality.

Meredith stumbled slightly; his foot made a scuffling noise. Something launched itself through the air at him. Too late he recovered and swerved. Steel-hard fingers contracted round his throat, hot fetid breath flamed on his cheek. Bright stars crashed in ruining desolation all around, and then he was swimming in a sea of blackness.

From far off he heard a faint scream, the dim patter of heels. The strangling sensation around his throat loosened, and he thudded heavily to the floor. Christine's sobbing cries mingled with muffled imprecations; there was the scuffling sound of a struggle. The girl had sprung to his rescue and was even now beating with small fists at the unseen form of his assailant. There could be only one outcome!

His throat felt torn and clawed; his temples burned with searing fire, his limbs were still half immersed in the befuddling blackness into which he had fallen, yet he swayed unsteadily to an upright position. The girl screamed once and the sound trailed off to a thin gurgle. There was a noise like a dragging sack across the floor. Men's scared shouts pierced the darkness.

"Christine!" he cried in anguish, and tottered on liquid feet. A horrible, unhuman laugh answered him, and bit off sharply in midflight. Owen fell forward, face downward. This time the dark sea overwhelmed him completely.

"MEREDITH! Meredith!"

Urgent voices, calling him, plucking him back from the depths of the overwhelming ocean. Little by little they pulled him, slipping and heaving, until awareness came to him. His tongue was a furry animal many sizes too big, his head was a lake of fire, his throat a painful noose. He opened his eyes.

There was nothing, just blankness. He closed them again and groaned.

Invisible voices were a confused murmur around him. Then: "Thank God you're all right!" The familiar tones of Horace Lenz growled. "The beast almost got you, didn't he?"

"Lights!" Owen muttered drowsily.

"The switch is dead. And we haven't a match between us."

Meredith sat up shakily in the dark. He could see no one. "Us?" he echoed. "Who's us?"

"The three who are left." The publisher's voice was edged with suspicion. "Marra and Wells got to you first when you fell. Luckily I was right behind them. It was a job finding you in this hell-hole."

"What do you mean—lucky?" the unseen explorer asked venomously. "Are you trying to insinuate—?"

Marra cried: "He means me; I'm the goat! If I ever get out of this alive—"

The angry voices pierced Owen's consciousness like swords. He came scrambling to his feet, collided with and almost knocked someone over. "Christine!" he rasped. "What happened to her?"

"Eh? Christine?" Lenz's tone was blank. "Why, by God, of course! Where is she? Where has that devil taken her?"

Hot and cold spasms alternated over Owen's body. Christine had saved his life, and in doing so had lost her own. He remembered that strange dragging noise; the unhuman laugh that had bitten off sharply. He cursed and swung on the others. "We've got to find her."

"Easier said than done," Wells said coldly. "We can't see a thing."

Owen swore furiously. If only he had a flash, a match, anything—yet he shrank from the gruesome sight it might disclose. The thought of that lovely body tortured, swinging, decapitated somewhere in that chamber of horrors . . . The darkness was more merciful.

Lenz said suddenly: "The knight in black armor! It's got something to do with all this. I heard it whir and jumped back just in time when I grabbed at it before the lights went out."

Any activity, no matter how aimless, was better than this gruesome waiting in the darkness, waiting for the next blow to fall. And Christine—Maybe . . .

Meredith reached out with his hand. Marra cried out in terror. "It's only I," said Owen. "I'm trying to get placed."

"Here's the table," advised Wells. "The knight stood about ten feet from the end chair."

"The skeleton's right next to it," Marra said fearfully. "With that poisoned needle."

"We're all of us going," Meredith told him with grim intonation. "Step by step, touching arms, together."

"Who, me?" cried Marra. "Not in a thousand years! I'm scared."

"Yes, you!" Lenz growled. "What are *you* scared about. The death house waits for you outside; you'll lose nothing."

Meredith heard the quick intake of breath on the part of the condemned man; then silence. They went forward, shoulder to shoulder, hands outstretched, groping in the strange, clammy darkness where not even dim outlines showed. Somewhere in that unearthly gloom lurked the killer; somewhere was Christine, dead, or perhaps worse—alive! Owen shuddered and hastened his pace. He broke contact with the others. Wells, on his left, muttered angrily, and was gone. Marra, on his right, made scuffing sounds. Then he too was gone.

"Steady!" Lenz said. "Marra's just slipped my grasp. I tried to hold him, but he twisted out. Where are you, Owen?"

"Here!" His hand collided with corpsebone. He snatched it away. Had he touched the lethal needle?

Lenz called out: "I've got the knight.

Careful—there's something wrong about him—*Look out!*"

His hoarse cry of anguish beat and reverberated around Meredith's ears. Pounding feet, stertorous breathing of panic flight, and an invisible bulk slammed into him, sent him skidding along the floor. He threw out his arm to save himself from falling, and caught hold of something solid. The last thing he remembered was the thought that this was the similitude of the electric chair at the head of the coffin-table. Then the ground seemed to open beneath and he was catapulted downward into the black void. A dead weight descended on his head, and for the second time he lost consciousness.

* * *

He had no means of telling how long he had been out. The side of his head felt as if it were caved in, and his mouth was sticky with dried blood. He tried to move his arms and could not. Was he paralyzed? In instinctive horror he opened his eyes. Flooding light made him blink; it was warm, yellow light, not the former ghastly green. He moved his head. He was not in the great vaulted charnel chamber but in a smaller room of bare concrete walls.

He looked down with still-bleared eyes. He was strapped to a chair, tall-backed, metallic. Something pressed heavily on his head. It too was cold and metallic. His eyes bulged; his mouth gaped in terror, for his chair was the death chair in which Marra had sat, and the death cap was on his head!

CHAPTER FIVE

Fry!

GHASTLY realization flooded over him. He cried out and tugged with all his might at his bonds. They bit

crucially into his flesh but would not yield.

"I see you've got the idea finally."

He twisted his head around as far as it would go, straining against the clamped electrodes. Where had he heard that muffled disguised voice before? Out of the corner of his eye he saw him, over to the left—a great, armored figure. "The Black Knight!" he burst out involuntarily. "Who are you?"

"You will never know," the man in armor rasped. "In two minutes you will follow in the footsteps of Blemons, Bliss and Gloria."

"But why? What have I ever done to you? I don't even know who you are."

The encased figure laughed sardonically. "You know me well enough. I am one of the three who survived." The muffled tones took on a deadly note of venom. "You were in my way, even as the others. You must die."

"Why did you kill the others?" Owen asked. Now that he knew the thing that had struck in the dark to be a man, he was coldly calm. His mind raced along at top speed, trying to pierce the disguise, to seek a way out.

The murderer seemed to read his thoughts. "It won't help you, trying for delay," he boomed. "This chamber is as soundproof as the one above. Bliss had an elevated platform arranged to drop the chair; he wanted to work a stunt, to thrill his guests. His thrill days are over."

There was fierce, blasting hatred in that statement. "It all worked into my hands," the armored figure pursued. "It was I who placed the poison on the needle; it was I who dragged Bliss to his well-deserved death by strangling; it was I who decapitated that slinking trollop. Blemons, I admit, was an accident. The trap was set for you or one of the others; he blundered into it. You avoided

that one, you managed to jump out of the way in time when the cross bow inside the hollow suit of armor twice shot its steel missiles. This one I'm wearing is a duplicate Bliss had in reserve."

Meredith laughed mirthlessly, tugging stealthily all the time at his straps. "You're trying to scare me. This chair is a harmless imitation."

The black-clad figure chuckled obscenely. "It's real enough. Bliss had it made to order. He intended sending small shocks through his guests. He was very humorous that way. It's a pity I had to use the gibbet for him; that was pure window dressing, but I was a bit rushed at the moment. I would have liked to see him sizzle slowly, just as you will. But first—"

THE Black Knight clamped out of his straining range of vision. Meredith immediately tugged furiously at his straps. Was it imagination, or had the leg bonds actually yielded a bit? Then the creature in armor was back, dragging a limp figure by the shoulders. He dumped the soft body directly in front of Owen's horrified vision.

"Christine!" The name tore from his throat.

The girl lay unconscious, only the regular movement of her white breasts showed that she was alive. The light blue evening gown was torn from its shoulder straps, and the upper half of her gleaming slender body was exposed. Her silky hair stretched in a tousled halo around her pale white face; her firmly modeled form was faultlessly beautiful.

The sinister knight, great metallic legs straddled, bent his closed helmet downward. Owen sensed hot avid eyes inside boring lustfully at the exposed nudity of the girl.

Owen tugged at his bonds.

The Black Knight started forward,

away from the prone body of the girl. One greaved arm was raised as if to strike. "Damn you!" His voice was hoarse with passion, natural.

Meredith did not flinch. "So it was you all the time," he said very low. He was not surprised.

"You'll never live to tell what you know." The metal-clad hand reached for the switch in back of the chair.

Owen heaved. The leg-strap burst. He put all his strength into a last agonized effort. There was a ripping, tearing sound, and one arm was free. But the other held and in split seconds the juice would be turned on.

With a last despairing glance at the unconscious girl, he hooked his free arm around, clawed at the sable gorget. The man jerked from the impact, cursed, and lashed out. The blow caught Meredith across the mouth. His lips crushed in against his teeth; warm salty blood made a channel down his chin. But he did not mind; a fierce overmastering exultation filled him. The last body-strap had snapped.

He threw himself forward and out of the chair just as the switch knifed into position. Blue flame arced between the electrodes, sputtered and whined at the loss of its victim.

The killer in armor swung around with an oath. His great, steel-clad arms closed around the plunging man, jerked him upright, and compressed with crushing force. Owen fought vainly to wriggle out; he lashed his fist again and again into the helmeted head, tearing his knuckles to ribbons on unfeeling metal. The steely arms went tighter. He felt his ribs caving under the terrific pressure, the strength was slipping out of his tortured body. Hot breath whistled on his cheek; flaming half-mad eyes bored out of the visor's eyelets.

With a muffled roar of triumph the

sable knight lifted his limp form, raised him high to throw him directly into the chair. It met his fascinated eyes like a hideous mythological dragon with open devouring maw. Blue lightning sparked and roared between the electrodes; the metal frame pulsed with thousands of volts. Life in its close embrace would be but a matter of moments.

Owen, in midair, twisted convulsively. The fierce grip tightened, and there was no disguise in the exultant growl from within the armor.

"Fry, damn you, Meredith!"

The young man caught a glimpse of Christine crawling painfully along the floor. Her body was startlingly white against the gray of the concrete. He closed his eyes, nerving himself against the first jolt of the current.

He was falling! The steel arms swung him down. Then, unaccountably, he was jerked violently to one side. The exultant voice changed to a cry of alarm. The man in the suit of armor stumbled, tried to regain his balance, tottered, and went crashing.

"Jump clear!" It seemed to Owen as if the voice came from a great distance. He had not expected to hear it any more in this world. Christine screamed frantic warning.

The grip on his body relaxed. He flung himself desperately to the left. The sleeve of his dress coat brushed the fatal metal and he slammed into the concrete, rolled over and over.

A scream of awful agony jarred him to a stop. The Black Knight had fallen athwart the two steel arms of the chair. Flame spurted with greedy, licking fingers along the sable armor. The body jerked and spun and writhed, but could not tear free. The lightning surged through the metallic form. Scream after scream rasped from the throat of the doomed man, the while his body danced

in a frightful macaber dance. The odor scorching flesh and hair filled the chamber with its nauseating smell.

Meredith, half stunned, his breath still coming in gasps from the punishment to his ribs, tottered to his feet. He felt sick. So did Christine, outstretched along the cold concrete, her half naked form shuddering convulsively. Her last ounce of strength had gone into that dreadful slow crawl along the stone to reach out and trip the armored monster as he struggled with Owen.

Meredith swayed to the switch, jerked it open. He saw the black snaky cable that connected the death chair with the plug in the wall. The weird blue flames flickered and went out. The killer, with a clang of metal, sagged and fell to the ground. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Party's End

TEN minutes later, fumbling, half paralyzed fingers managed to unclasp gorget, visor and helmet. Christine, with Owen's coat to cover her nudity, screamed and averted her eyes.

The face that looked up at them from the interior of the helmet was literally roasted. The skin had shriveled into crisp shreds, the uncovered flesh was smoking and charred. A black tongue, thick with sizzled blood, hung from a gaping snarling mouth. The eyes, pebbly white, protruded from engorged sockets. The putrid smell beat up in waves. . . . It was Horace Lenz!

It was dawn before the frightened servants broke into the simulated charnel house and the secret chamber beneath the trap door. The survivors held hasty conference before the arrival of the police.

"I suspected Lenz almost from the first," Meredith explained. "For one thing he knew too much about everyone;

for another he was the only one present who could possibly have had reasons to wish for my removal. There had been a leak about my proposed book, exposing certain types of perversion among our most prominent citizens. He mentioned the fact early last night; warned me not to go through with it, and at the same time pretended not to know that he was among those being exposed. As a matter of fact, the only way that information could have come to him was through a man on one of his papers who supplied me with certain details about his boss.

"He and Bliss knew each other well; had been companions in debauches until Bliss stole Gloria Albright from him. He played with the idea of wreaking a fantastic vengeance on them both, while pretending not to care. It was Lenz who instilled the idea of this party and its macaber trimmings into Bliss's own perverted mind. It was he who caused me to be invited; he felt it was a good opportunity to get rid of me at the same time.

"When Bliss let us into the darkened room, as a sort of a scary joke, Lenz, who had seen the arrangements privately with his host before we came, slipped over to the skeleton, and daubed the needle with poison.

"Marra, as the last ghastly touch to the party, was Bliss's own personal idea. He was inordinately proud of it. It shocked Lenz at first, but he was a resourceful man. He was quick to see that he could turn the appearance of an escaped murderer to good account. Everything that happened would naturally be blamed on him."

THE puny man with the prison pallor nodded mournfully. His eyes traveled ceaselessly to the door, where the police might be expected to arrive any minute.

"Blemons' death was an accident," Meredith went on, "but Lenz's accusations of the relations between the victim and host were correct enough. It was then that Bliss realized the murderous game his friend was playing. He called on Marra to help him and went for his pistol. That hurried Lenz.

"There was a master-light switch at the base of the neck in the suit of armor—Bliss had intended playing around with a lot of practical jokes in the course of the evening. Lenz got to it, seized Bliss in the confusion, strangled him and dragged him to the scaffold. Lenz was a powerful man; I had always known that. It was another reason for suspecting him.

"Gloria came next; Gloria, who knew Bliss was through with her because of Christine, and who, in her own tortuous mind, possibly thought she could lure Lenz back to her."

The girl shuddered and wrapped the coat closer around her. "Inside the suit of armor," Owen continued, "was still another practical joke; a crossbow that was to shoot soft darts. Lenz thoughtfully changed them for steel ones and tried to eliminate me with them."

"If you knew all this at the time," Wells interrupted, "why didn't you denounce him and put a stop to it?"

"I didn't know; I had suspicions, but I had no proof. I made my statement about having discovered the murderer deliberately. I wanted him to concentrate on me and leave you others alone. I thought I could handle him," he smiled faintly, "and almost lost out because I was not as clever as I had imagined. That trick of the trap platform underneath the electric chair fooled me. If it hadn't been for Christine—"

The girl blushed. "I was so frightened I didn't know what I was doing."

Jim Marra cast a last desperate look around the library. The panels to the house of horrors had mercifully been closed, waiting for the police. Beads of sweat started from his pallid forehead; his torn prison stripes were a ghastly mockery against the conventional evening clothes of the others.

"Let me go, for God's sake!" he begged feverishly. "Don't you realize, the moment the police step into this room, I'll—I'll burn in the chair just like Lenz did?"

Wells shrugged. The scar stood out boldly on his twisted face. "It makes no difference to me, one way or another."

Meredith looked at the feverish little man with the wasted body. "I think I can straighten everything out, Jim," he said kindly.

"What do you mean?" stammered the little convict.

"I went through Lenz's pockets after his—er—demise, and found certain papers in his billfold. They seem pretty positive proof that Lenz killed John Wiley himself. They were friends who had been two-timing each other. He framed you, the petty thief who had been seen in the neighborhood of Wiley's house, and used his newspapers to get a conviction. It gave him his out."

"Watch him!" Christine cried.

Jim Marra had slumped to the floor—in a faint.

The outer door to the library opened. The butler, ashen gray and trembling, appeared.

"The police are here, gentlemen," he said.

THE END

Thrills and Chills!—In

H. M. APPEL'S Next Yarn

In the September Issue—Out August 10th

Corpses of Little Men

by G. T. Fleming-Roberts

(Author of "Swamp Wolf," etc.)

One day a normal, healthy man . . . the next a shrunken, doll-sized thing whose sunken, tiny eyes were closed in death!



"THE newspapers," declared Martin Dorn, as he basked his coat-tails in the luxuriant warmth from the French Griotte marble fireplace, "the newspapers always play up the sensational."

Mrs. Morris Clayton, Dorn's aunt, authority on all things social, and possessing in her own right money to the extent of five million dollars, could not have heard her nephew's last remark. Her small, sharp eyes skated down one column of the paper that she clutched in her fingers. "Listen, Martin," she pinioned her nephew enthusiastically. "It says right here that this extortionist who calls himself 'The Mangle', has taken a half million dollars in cash from his victims in the past month! With two exceptions, every one whom he has approached has paid

up promptly. One man, Garten Clove, publically refused to pay, and he has not been seen since.

"The other, a wealthy woman, is confined in an asylum for the mentally unbalanced. She does not respond to any known treatment, but spends her days in pacing her room repeating over and over: 'The little man. My God! The little, little man!'" Mrs. Clayton indulged in a pleasurable shudder.

Martin knew Garten Clove to be a man of unstable character; his disappearance might be nothing more than a drunken spree. "Rot!" he said, but gained little consolation from his exclamation. It was no night for morbid thoughts. The chilling damp, the dismal howl of the wind, imparted an atmosphere of gloom that penetrated even this house of wealth with its brilliant lights and crackling fire.

WHEN the bell in the gate-house rang, awakening Tearles, the night keeper, the storm had renewed its vigor, sweeping the countryside with torrents of icy rain. Tearles left the round-bellied iron stove and faced the wind to answer the summons.

The caller proved to be a thin man swathed to the eyes in a soaked, animal-smelling, blue overcoat. He had, he declared, a package for Mrs. Clayton. Tearles unlocked the gate, took a light wooden box from the thin man's hand, and trudged up the drive towards the house. He gave the box to the cook, who passed it to the butler. Finally, it reached Mrs. Clayton's own living room—that of the Griotte marble chimney-piece.

"Why, what could it be?" asked Mrs. Clayton. "No-no, Dalton. Just put the box on that coffee table and bring it over to my chair. Some trinket that Morris has picked up somewhere," she speculated. "I hope it's nothing for the house.

Morris has such miserable taste in such things."

She looked the box over from end to end with her little gimlet eyes. Her jeweled fingers tapped on its wooden sides. It was a box perhaps twenty-eight inches long and having six-inch-square ends. It was closely nailed and might have contained a large loaf of cheese.

"Martin," said Mrs. Clayton, "come help me open it."

"I am afraid," said her nephew, as he examined the closely set nails that fastened the box, "we will have to have a hatchet or something of the sort. Dalton"—to the servant—"find something that will do the trick for us."

"I wonder who brought it, Martin?" asked Mrs. Clayton. "It didn't come by post, and there's no express label on it. It only says: 'To Mrs. Clayton.'"

"Perhaps Uncle Morris sent it by special messenger. Where is he tonight, anyway?"

"In Philadelphia," she answered absently. She lifted the box, shook it to hear no rattle, sniffed it to smell no odor. It was obviously something that had to remain a mystery until Dalton should attack it with a hatchet.

When the edge of the hatchet had been inserted, thin boards flew up and nails squealed from their holes. The top of the box presented an unbroken layer of fine, sheet cotton which Dalton offered to lift from the box.

"No-no," said Mrs. Clayton. The surprise was intended for her and she meant to have the whole of it for herself. Her eager hands lifted one corner of the cotton. Her brow puckered, and she removed the covering completely. Her eyes suddenly became balls of frozen terror.

The cotton dropped from her hands to the floor. With a stifled scream that tore from her throat, she tipped backward in a dead faint.

Dalton, who had not seen within the box, ran to the phone to call Dr. Lorrenza, her physician. But Martin Dorn stood there behind his aunt's chair, unable to move or speak. His jaw dropped until he became the picture of horror. Within the wooden box was something wrapped and re-wrapped in linen bandages.

Swathed as it was, the bundle took the general form of a human body, at one end of which was a tiny head no larger than Dorn's fist. Head and hands were the only parts of the body exposed. And the hands—the size of those of a little monkey—were undeniably human. The head, though brown as a Malay's had perfectly formed Caucasian features. Its little eye-lids, no larger than a baby's thumb nail, were tightly closed; yet the lashes were silky and long, entirely out of proportion to the shrunken features. The hair on the head was long and yellow-white as if weathered by a tropical climate.

It might have been a doll had it not been that the cheeks were covered with natural down. Shrunken though they were, Martin Dorn recognized those features. He was looking at the head of Garten Clove—in hideous, blood-chilling miniature!

Upon the swathed breast of the little body was a white placard. Drawn in firm black lines, were the words:

"Introducing Mr. Garten Clove as he is today.

"Mrs. Clayton, you will get together \$500,000 immediately. Next Tuesday, your nephew will walk the highway between Fowler and Montmorenci and hand the above sum to a thin man in a blue overcoat who will address him as 'Victim Number Ten.' Should you desire your husband to become a brown and sleeping little man like Garten Clove, you need only to refuse me this slight favor—or call in the police!

THE MANGLE."

Martin Dorn pulled himself to his

senses. He snapped orders to hysterical servants. He carried his aunt to her bedroom. Then hurried down stairs in time to admit suave, sleek-haired Dr. Lorrenza.

"I believe Mrs. Clayton will be quite herself in no time, Doctor," said Martin, as Lorrenza drew gray suede gloves from his long fingers. "Her maid brought her around with the scent bottle, but you'd best take a look at her."

"She fainted?" asked the doctor, in mild surprise. "A woman of your aunt's splendid constitution must have undergone a great shock, then."

"Shock enough," declared Martin. "But you'd better go to her at once."

MARTIN was about to follow the doctor up the stairs when an automobile horn sounded one shrill note directly in front of the door. It was followed immediately by hurried footsteps and an excited knocking at the door.

Martin hurried into the hall just as Dalton answered the knock. A round little man whose forehead was a pink peninsula extending between two rows of white hair, burst into the room.

"Where is he? Tell me, has Theodore been here? Tell me at once, I say!" His fiery little eyes swung to Martin. "You, Martin Dorn! Have you seen my man, Theodore? He left my house thirty minutes ago. He took my sedan and had a wooden box with him. The cook said that Theodore was coming over here!"

Martin Dorn had never seen Mr. Ferdinand Febel so completely put out. He replied politely that he had not seen Theodore and wouldn't have known him if he had.

"Oh, he's tall and thin, wears a blue coat, and talks in some outlandish accent," sputtered Mr. Febel. "Theodore isn't his name, but I call him that because his real name is a perfect tongue-twister."

He's a Peruvian Indian I brought from South America."

"You said something about a wooden box," said Dorn. "You wouldn't by any chance know the contents of that box?"

"Of course not! That's why I must find the man. I've been missing silver ware from my house and I don't know but what he's peddling it from door to door—not that Mrs. Clayton would buy any if he did bring it here," he added.

Martin Dorn went quickly to the house phone and called Tearles, the watchman at the gate. "Tearles," he said over the phone, "do you remember a man bringing an oblong wooden box here tonight?"

Tearles remembered well enough, and after further inquiry, Martin learned that without doubt the thin man who delivered the gruesome package was none other than Mr. Febel's Theodore.

Dorn turned from the phone. "Mr. Febel," he said, "either knowingly or unknowingly, your servant is in league with the notorious extortionist, the Mangle."

For a moment, Febel's tongue could only click against his teeth. When he could speak coherently, words came in whispers: "You mean that—blackmailer?"

"It is not blackmail," Dorn corrected. "It's an almost unfailing method of extorting money in any desired amount. Did you know Garten Clove?"

"Did I? Of course. What's the matter? Is he dead?"

"Come in here," said Martin, leading towards his aunt's living room. "Garten Clove is in here. Your Theodore brought him over tonight."

Mr. Febel entered the room, stood a few feet inside the door and looked timidly around. "Why, I don't see a soul. . . ." he murmured.

"No," said Martin dryly, "but if you will look in this box over here, you'll see something that once had a soul."

Febel tiptoed over to the box and looked

in. His blue eyes winked rapidly. Then he raised his head. "I'm not surprised," he said. "I'm not going to let myself be surprised. The fact is, I'm going to march right over to this chair"—he proceeded with pussy-footing steps toward a huge easy chair—"and I'm going to sit down. Then, I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Martin Dorn."

Febel produced a blackened pipe, the bit of which had been whittled until it brought the bowl directly under the smoker's nose.

"And the hard part of it is," he began in the middle of his story, "that there is nothing we can do about it. Pay, by all means, Martin. Pay if you ever expect to see your uncle in any other form than that of a hideous little mummy"—poking his pipe towards the box. "As for me, I'm an oldish man and not worth a jot of rum as it is. It wasn't any great shock to me when I saw J. J. Hayne last night in much the same manner as you have just seen Garten Clove."

"You mean Hayne, the lumber king?" Martin interrupted.

"Exactly. I thought J. J. Hayne was in Europe. It seems he is in quite another place. Hayne was delivered quite dead at my door last night. Martin, he was a hideous *little man*. Quite the most perfect specimen of Inca head embalming that I have ever seen."

"You mean that you know something of this horrible process that reduces an adult body to the form of a shriveled brown pigmy?" Dorn asked, horror shrilling his voice.

"**S**OMETHING," nodded Febel, spitting out a furiously rolling cloud of smoke. "I traveled in Peru for many years and studied quite a bit about ancient Inca civilization. In the original, the process occupied a period of several months. The flesh was carefully separat-

ed from the bone of the head by some method as yet unknown to us. Then clay balls were squeezed into the skin of the head once occupied by the skull. The heads were then allowed to dry in the sun. This caused the skin to shrink until it tightened around the clay. The first ball was then removed and a smaller one put in its place, and so on until the head became about the size of your fist. The head was shrunken in size, but the features remained the same shape.

"What I do not understand is how this criminal, the Mangle, has reproduced the same process in so short a time. I think it was not a week ago that I saw Garten Clove alive and well."

Martin Dorn shuddered. "Then you think the whole body was treated in the same way that the ancient Incas treated heads?"

"No, I don't believe that possible. I think that if we could muster up enough courage to unwrap one of those little mummies we would find that the body is only wooden or molded papier maché. The hands were mummified in the same manner as the heads. You probably noticed that the finger nails had been removed. They, of course, would not respond to the same method of shrinking."

"And you say that the Mangle has approached you with the same proposition?" asked Dorn.

"Well," said Febel, "he wants half a million from me which I do not intend to pay! I will not contribute to this criminal's fortune, come what may. But unless my plan for out-witting him succeeds, I most heartily advise you to pay promptly. Suppose we plot together, you and I. We really should have a third man. How about our neighbor, the eminent Dr. Lorrenza? There's a man without a nerve in his body. He has the advantage of not being rich enough to merit the attention of the Mangle. I would like him to ex-

amine carefully the bodies of these little men."

A few minutes later, Dr. Lorrenza joined them. When he saw the shrunken pigmy that had once been Garten Clove he could do nothing but repeat softly over and over, "*Dio mio, Dio mio. . .*"

"The first part of my plan is to have you examine both this body and that of J. J. Hayne, which is now in my possession," said Febel. "I hope in that way to get a clue as to whom the Mangle really is. There can not be many men who understand, perfectly enough to reproduce it, the old Inca process of mummification. Do you see my point?"

Both Lorrenza and Dorn gravely nodded their heads.

"But remember," Febel cautioned, "not a word of this to anyone, or I may find myself another little man before my time has come. I have until tomorrow night to get the money, and should the Mangle learn that I have no intention of turning a finger to raise his cursed loot, he would probably dispose of me as he has the others."

Febel and Lorrenza started towards the door. "I have given your aunt a sleeping powder," said the doctor. "You must do nothing to excite her. Her heart is not as strong as I supposed it to be."

With that, the two left the house.

THE phone in Martin Dorn's room jangled madly and Dorn jumped as if he had been kicked from his chair. After one hour of horror, his nerves were badly frayed. His unreasonably sharp voice softened when he learned that it was Martha Collete calling.

"But Martha," he exclaimed, "I thought you were away at school."

"I was," replied the girl. "But haven't you heard? Grandfather is extremely ill. I've been driving since five o'clock trying to get here in time. I'm all fagged out,

Martin. Can you possibly meet me at Charley's in ten minutes? I can't go another mile without someone. I've got to have you, Martin. . . ."

"Of course, dear," Dorn replied eagerly. "I'll be with you."

He scribbled a hasty note on the telephone pad in case anyone wanted to know where he was. Then he traded his dressing gown for his coat. He was out in his car in another minute and speeding along the rain-glistened highway.

Charley's Place was a pavilion along the National Road where anything from gasoline to frog dinners could be bought. Martin Dorn found Martha Collette sitting behind the wheel of her green roadster waiting for him, and at sight of him the tired lines fled from her pretty face. She was glad enough to get into Martin's big sedan for the remainder of the trip to her grandfather's house.

"You know, Martin," she said, "I don't know whom I would have called if it hadn't been for you—you know how it is when you're in trouble? You've just got to have another human being to share it with."

Martin nodded. "I know. And so I'm just another human being"—dis-
mally.

"You're nothing of the sort!"

"Putting insult on top of injury? Well, maybe not even that, then!"

"Don't tease," she said. "You're *the* human being. Now, if your vanity is salvaged, let me tell you about grandfather. You knew he'd been sick?"

Martin had known nothing about it.

"Well," she continued, "I'm afraid I didn't realize how ill he is. This morning, I got a letter from Mr. Barns, the family lawyer. He told me straight from the shoulder that grandfather was acting very peculiarly."

"He's eighty-five," said Martin, as if that explained everything.

"Of course, but Mr. Barns said he wants to dispose of a lot of his securities. If he can't sell them right away, he thinks he'll return to his second childhood or something. That doesn't seem rational, does it?"

This statement, on top of what Martin had already learned that evening, made him prick up his ears. "Can you tell me what were his exact words?"

"Why," Martha explained, "he keeps saying that if he doesn't turn his securities into half a million cash, he will become a—what was it—a 'little man,' I think he said."

Martin's foot jumped on the accelerator. The sedan that had been lagging along suddenly leaped out. Martin bit his lips. "We've no time to lose!" he snapped.

The rest of the way back, he explained as tersely and as cheerfully as possible what he knew of the Mangle, and the little corpses. By the time gravel in the Collette drive scudded beneath his wheels, his story was finished.

"Then you think grandfather is being threatened by that terrible person?"

"I am afraid so," he replied softly. But what he really feared was that old Mr. Collette would not live to pay out the extortion money. In that case might not the Mangle turn his terror tactics on Martha?

The door of the dismal house was opened by the fatherly Asa Barns, lawyer to the Collette family. He took the young girl in his arms, held her for a moment, then said: "Your grandfather, Martha, died late this afternoon."

The girl suddenly twisted from the lawyer's arms. She stared at him wide-eyed with grief and terror. "He—he wasn't murdered. . . ." she breathed.

A puzzled frown crossed Barns' face. "Why, of course not, child. Whatever put that notion in your head?"

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" she said fervently. Then came tears that mingled relief and sorrow.

AS THE white-haired lawyer tried to comfort her, a servant entered to announce that Martin was wanted on the phone. Martin hurried to the instrument, frowning when he heard the usually smooth voice of Dr. Lorrenza now somewhat ruffled by excitement: "Mr. Dorn," said the doctor, "I'm speaking from Mr. Febel's house. Come immediately. Everything's upset!"

Lorrenza hung up in spite of the half dozen questions that Martin fired at him. Martin left the phone to rejoin Martha and Mr. Barns. "I've got to go," he said. "That was Lorrenza, and something's happened."

"By all means go," said the lawyer, "if you think it your duty. I'll stay here until we hear from you. Martha's told me about this terrible business—and Martin, don't trust Lorrenza any farther than you can see him. Are you armed?"

Dorn laughed. "Of course not. I've known Lorrenza for years. He's a fine man, in spite of the fact that he hasn't a single nerve in his body."

Barns shook his head doubtfully. He reached in his pocket and drew out a small automatic pistol. "Take this, my boy, just for luck. I've carried it for years and it comes in handy sometimes."

Dorn laughingly accepted the pistol, said a reluctant good-bye to Martha, and hurried out to his car. He pushed the needle of the speedometer to its limit on that run to Ferdinand Febel's house.

There Lorrenza was awaiting him. The usually plastered black hair of the doctor was standing up in all directions. His clothes looked as though they had gone through a thrashing-machine.

"It's horrible!" he gasped. "Febel and I were heading for his place when we

were stopped on the road by another car. I got out to see what the trouble was. A tall man, probably Febel's Theodore, struck me on the head and I measured my length on the roadway. When I regained consciousness, the car, Febel, and the little mummy of Garten Clove were gone. Do you see what that means?"

Dorn frowned.

"It means this," Lorrenza hurried on, "someone overheard Febel telling you and me that he had a plan to trap the Mangle."

"But who?" Martin persisted. "You and I were the only ones there."

"Your servants," Lorrenza suggested. "Remember Theodore was Febel's most trusted man."

Dorn shook his head. He was becoming more deeply puzzled every minute. There was much to think about. His uncle must be traced some way. There was the business of raising money to pay his uncle's ransom. His mind was becoming muddled with the whole affair.

He remembered Barns' warning. How easily Lorrenza might have made away with Febel. There wasn't a witness to prove a word of the doctor's story. It seemed almost unbelievable. . . .

* * *

The following afternoon, Martin Dorn received a phone call from Lorrenza. "Dropping by for you in half an hour," he said mysteriously. "It is something of the greatest importance."

So, for thirty minutes, Dorn was allowed to whet his curiosity. When Lorrenza arrived, there was another man with him. "Captain Hartz of the city police," explained Lorrenza. "I think this whole matter has gone far enough without the intervention of the law. Come on, Dorn. We're driving to the south side of town."

"Well," said Martin, after they had rolled from the drive, "I'm impatient to know what this is all about."

"It's this way, Mr. Dorn," the police captain volunteered. "Dr. Lorrenza received a message this afternoon. I can remember the exact wording though the note itself is at headquarters. It said: 'Come to 1463 South Michigan if you would learn something about the little men.' There was no signature. I'm thinking that some member of the Mangle's crowd has cold feet, and I'm hoping for a straight tip."

"I feared a trap," declared the doctor, "so I thought it well to have Captain Hartz along."

South Michigan, never a street to foster civic pride, was particularly drab on this late autumn afternoon. And number 1463 proved to be an apparently deserted red brick building.

The investigators got from the car, found a door leading up a flight of stairs unlocked, and descended creaking steps with as much caution as possible. At the top, they opened a sagging door and pushed into a barren room.

"Nothing here," declared the captain. "There's a door beyond. Suppose we try it. Dr. Lorrenza, if you will stay here and warn us of any one approaching from the rear, Dorn and I will go ahead."

THE closet was lined with sheet metal. Light angled through a barred window and illuminated a shelf upon which stood a row of three narrow pine boxes. In each box was a hideous little shrunken body not over two feet tall. Each body was placarded. There was the body of Hayne, the lumber king; Garten Clove, and, lastly, the shrunken miniature of Ferdinand Febel.

"God!" exclaimed Dorn. He took a step forward and tripped over something. There was a sharp explosion. Blue flame roared across the row of boxes. The steel closet was almost instantly transformed into a blazing oven.

"The wire!" shouted Hartz. "You tripped over a wire, Dorn. It was a trap fixed to fire the place! Lorrenza, call the fire department!"

The captain lunged forward and closed the door of the closet. From inside came the roar of the blazing inferno.

Thoughts tangled in Dorn's brain. What could have been the purpose of this mad display of the Mangle's victims? To put Lorrenza and himself in a fire-trap? Impossible! A man who could have arranged this instantaneous fire could have as easily arranged an explosion that would have been much more effective.

It was only when the firemen were clattering up the steps that the truth broke on Dorn. The answer to a dozen questions struck him so suddenly that he was nearly floored. He knew now who the Mangle was!

When he regained control over his muscles, he raced from the room without waiting to give word to either Hartz or Lorrenza. He dived into the doctor's car, turned over the motor and headed in the direction of his own home.

Fifteen minutes later it was almost dark, and he was forced to turn on the headlights by the time he sighted Martha Collette's house. Some premonition prompted him to stop in front of the Collette drive. There could be no harm in first seeing if Martha was perfectly safe. Gravel kicked from beneath the tires as he dragged on the brakes at the side of the house.

He ran to the door and opened it without knocking. Burton, old Mr. Collette's servant, was seated in one of the hall chairs, his back towards the door, his head bending forward.

"Burton!" Dorn shouted. "Is Miss Martha here? Is she all right?"

The servant seemed not to hear. He

did not move. Dorn advanced to the chair, a half uttered cry on his lips. Burton's throat was slit from ear to ear!

Suddenly, a woman's cry rang through the house. Martha! Had the cry come from upstairs? He bounded up the flight and flung through a door. In the center of the room, Martha was seated in a chair, her wrists and ankles bound. Before her was a masked man with a knife in his hand.

AT THAT moment, Dorn remembered the automatic pistol that Barns had given him. He yanked it from his pocket, leveled it as the masked man leaped at him. The automatic spurted flame. There was a terrific impact as the man's body met his. The upraised knife raked Dorn's cheek—but his assailant wilted to the floor, blood spouting from his chest.

Dorn dropped the gun and hurried to Martha's side. Quickly, he cut the ropes that bound her. Frightened, she was, but unharmed.

"He was going to torture me," she panted. "Wanted me to deed all grandfather's wealth to him. But I knew if I did that, he would probably kill me!"

A low groan came from the floor behind them. Dorn turned. The masked man was still breathing in short, choking gasps. It was as if he was trying to say something. Dorn hastened to his side, knelt, and placed his ear close to the mask.

"Dying. . . ." came the rattling whisper. "You—you got me. You'll find your uncle . . . he's at my house, safe—alive. . . ."

The Mangle was dead! Dorn lifted the mask. It was as he had thought. The Mangle had been Ferdinand Febel, a man who had seemingly died twice!

One hour later, Dorn, Captain Hartz, and Dr. Lorrenza went to the Febel house. There, they encountered the thin Peru-

vian known as Theodore. It was from Theodore, who had been left guarding Mr. Clayton, that they forced the truth about the Inca embalming process. Febel, who had traveled in Peru, had discovered the long-secret formula. He had used a copper-clad furnace lined with electrical wires to develop the proper temperature for shrinking the heads and hands. In this way, he had managed to speed up the process. The bodies of his victims, with the exception of the head and hands, had been cremated in a huge furnace in the basement.

"But will someone explain where Febel obtained a shrunken head that so resembled his own?" said Lorrenza. "We certainly saw something of the sort back on South Michigan Street."

"It was probably made of wax or something else readily combustible. The other two heads were genuine enough. We were sent there for the sole purpose of proving to ourselves that Ferdinand Febel was dead. There we were to see his 'body.' I realized that immediately after the fire. It was clear that the fire trap was arranged to destroy the wax image of Febel. In that case, you, Doctor, would be a most reliable witness to the fact that Febel was dead. He would have then, in disguise, pursued his diabolical extortion racket and there would be no chance of his identity being discovered. You'll probably find that he rented that building in South Michigan Street for that one purpose."

"He didn't do that, exactly," put in Hartz. "It would have been too easy to trace. It was our skinny friend, Theodore, who rented that building. Don't see why Febel didn't take the money he'd made and clear out. He must have scraped together quite a fortune. But they always want more money. . . ."

"And where he's going, they never use it," concluded Dorn.

SNAKE DRUMS,

by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

(Author of "Garden of the Dying," etc.)

From distant jungle lands came the crawling, ugly menace which was to reach out and trap Nell Carter in the heart of New York City.



DUSK, slowly creeping between drab facades, made a grimy canyon of the Harlem sidestreet, and lingering fingers of gray light quenched the radiance of street lamps to mere spots of brightness. Puzzled lines furrowed Nell Carter's piquant face as, long-legged,

boyish in the tailored lines of a tweed suit, she mounted a chalk-scrawled stoop.

"Queer," she muttered. "Wonder where everyone is."

Up and down the block other front steps were crowded with black, brown, and yellow tots, half-clothed and noisy;

BOOMING

Weirdly Gripping Mystery Novelette



with slatternly Negro women, gossiping; with flashing-toothed bucks and pluck-browed high-yellow wenches. But there was no one in front of the shadowed vestibule Nell entered. No one. And in this neighborhood of crowded warrens that of custom spilled their teeming life into

the open, that was altogether strange. . .

Uneasily, the girl felt that in the inscrutable eyes watching her from those other stoops, the slitted, speculative eyes of an alien race, there lurked some furtive expectancy. Her own gray-irised glance sought the nimbus of Neon luminance

that marked Lenox Avenue, and she half-turned as if to retreat. Tiny white teeth caught up the thin red line of her lower lip. "The supervisor said I was not to make any calls after dark," she muttered to herself, "that it wasn't safe for a white woman to be alone here at night. . . Maybe I ought to take the subway and go home."

Nell's gloved hand tightened decisively around the leather-lined document case under her arm. "It's silly to be afraid," she told herself. "Half the people around here are on Relief; if I didn't come around with their food tickets every week they'd die like flies. They're human after all. Grateful. They wouldn't let anyone hurt me. And besides, it's my own fault that I'm so late. I can't let those six little Thompson children go hungry overnight, just because I've been trying to find out why my other clients suddenly can't get along on what the city gives them when it was plenty till a month or so ago."

The relief-worker's brow puckered as she was reminded of the worrying problem, and she opened the paint-peeled door almost mechanically. She couldn't understand. That starved look had reappeared on the faces of the children; again in the eyes of the adults was the same dumb misery that she had seen when she first began giving them relief. Something had gone wrong—dead wrong. She sighed. "If they'd only help me to help them. If they'd only talk. But they won't, they just get stony-faced and evasive when I question them. Scared-looking, too."

She strode down a long hall toward the narrow stairs she knew to be at the rear. What little light seeped in through the dirt-streaked glass panel in the entrance door served only to emphasize the dismal murk within, to bring into being eerie shadows that lurked in crannies and cloaked formless, intangible menace. As Nell passed each black pool she found

herself fighting a scalp-tingling impression that it came alive behind her, that it slithered soundlessly after her.

Odors closed about her; stench of filth and eternally sunless dankness that was underlaid by the musky, other-racial fetor to which all her months of service in Harlem had not accustomed her. Disquiet stirred more and more queasily within her as she became aware of the uncanny hush that pervaded the tenement, the pall of soundlessness where accustomed pandemonium should reign. No shrill voices screamed from one open door to another, there was no scampering of childish feet, no boisterous singing and no brawling such as was the constant accompaniment of her daily round. The place seemed to quiver with silent fear.

Uncarpeted, splintered steps creaked under the social-worker's tread, her heels clicked loudly against wood. The Thompsons were on the top floor, Nell recalled, six children and two grown-ups in a two-room flat. There hadn't been a morsel of food in the place when she had made her first call, last week, and she had rushed back to the office and pleaded with Miss Bailey because of the emergency.

Still in that uncanny hush she passed the first landing, reached the second. It was almost pitch-dark here. Tiny feet scattered past her and Nell gave vent to a little scream. She could never get quite used to the rats that infested these dwellings. Two dots of red glow were the rodent's eyes, watching her. Hinges creaked somewhere. A line of gray light widened as a door opened, slowly. A whisper reached her. "Oh, Miss Carter!"

NELL gasped, startled. She could see a black hand silhouetted in the aperture. It beckoned to her, and the whisper came again, urgently. "Miss Carter." She remembered whose door this was, and the pounding of her heart quieted. She moved

nearer, and saw a familiar face peering timorously out.

"I haven't your ticket today, Mr. Brown," she said. "It isn't due yet."

Eyes rolled whitely in a chocolate face overlaid with ashen tint. "Ah doan' want no ticket, missie. Ah wants to tell you sompin'. I wants to tell you to go 'way from here."

"What do you mean?" Nell flared. "I don't understand you. . ."

The black's voice cringed, was entreating. "Please doan' get mad, Miss Carter. Ah doan' mean nothin' bad. Ut ain't good for you to be here jest now. You done been so good to us Ah doan' want nothin' to happen you."

The girl found courage in the other's fear. "Why, Mr. Brown. What could happen to me in this house? I'm taking care of every family here except the Thompsons, on the top floor, and I'm going up to see them now."

"The Thompsons!" A groan seemed wrenched from the man, and his lips were purple. "Oh Lawd-a-mussy! That's where. . . ! Doan' go there, missie. Not there!"

Nell's scalp tightened under her jaunty little hat. "What's the matter with them? What's going on? Why shouldn't I go there?"

"Doan' ask me. Doan' ask." A mask dropped suddenly over Brown's face, the stony, unreadable expression grown too familiar in the past weeks. "But that ain't no place for white folks."

"Rastus," a feminine voice shrilled from within. "You close that do' quick!" Terror quivered in the thin tones. "Close it or—"

The man's head twisted. "Hush up," he called, warningly. "Hol' yuhr tongue, Mamie." He turned back to Nell, his thick-lipped mouth twisting. "Please doan' go up there—*Oh Lawd!*"

He had slammed the door shut before

Nell realized that the squealed exclamation was wrenched from his livid lips by a scraping, ominous sound from above—a sound like a bare foot rubbing furtively against wood. She was cold all over, but she forced herself around till she could stare with widened eyes up the dark ascent. Something bulked up there, black against black. It was coming down, slowly, step by step, coming toward her!

She was rigid. Her throat worked, but she could make no sound. The Thing neared, was on the landing. A stench folded around her, fetid, a scent that spoke somehow of mouldering human bodies cast unburied on the green-scummed bosom of a swamp. It was almost on her; she felt rather than saw its nearness, and fear was an icy stream in her veins.

The Thing slithered past, gliding uncannily. Against dim luminance from below Nell saw its shape, saw that it was a bent, wizened old man. From his gaunt, black face eyes fastened on her, momentarily, eyes that burned redly from deep-sunk pits. They seemed to sear her with hot evil, then they were gone and the twisted shape vanished into shadow. But it left the very atmosphere charged with a vibration of hate, of utter malevolence. Nell shuddered, swayed and caught at the door-jamb behind her for support.

FOR a moment she clung there, the floor heaving under her feet. Panic had her in its grip, fear of things unseen, of forces beyond the Known. Some weird thing from out the past of these people, some uncanny mystery from the steamy jungles of their ancestral Africa, was reaching out for the children of the Dark Continent who huddled, afraid, in this city tenement. This *was* no place for white folks. She must run, she must get away from it before it had her, too, in its slimy, reptilian grip! She pushed herself away from the wall, took one step

toward the stairs that dropped down to light and safety. . .

And then she stopped. Her mouth twisted, wryly. She was being puerile, childish. She was in a jitter over nothing: a dark hallway, a scared Negro, a white-haired old Negro who wore no shoes. Were these things going to frighten her away from her job? If so, she might as well give it up. She turned and mounted higher.

She was still afraid; the pumping of her heart thumped in her ears. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* No—it wasn't her blood, it was a dull thudding from without, sourceless. *Thud. Thud. Thud!* The slow pound of a drum. *Of a jungle drum!* Vibrant as a snake's tongue. . . .

Step by step Nell mounted, and step by step the thump of the tom-tom marked her climb. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* It was coming from above, from the lightless region to which she climbed. It was warning her, warning the white woman to keep away, to flee from mysteries forbidden to her race. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* It was all about her as she reached the topmost landing, was receiving her into the pound of its slow terror, was beating in every cell of her being.

Thud. Thud. It had halted in mid-beat! The silence was like a thunderclap.

Almost inaudible, a mumbling chant trailed out of darkness. It was coming from straight ahead of her, and for all its faintness something in its intonation sent tremors of fear rippling along her spine. She stared into the blackness, and gradually became aware that the veriest filament of light made an angle near the floor. And it was from just that point that that eerie sound was coming. Nell crept closer, some strange fascination conquering fear. Her hand slid along dirt-slimed wood, found a doorknob. It responded to the pressure of her cold fingers, turned. The door moved noiselessly, and the light-

thread widened. A gap appeared, just enough for her to peer through.

Hazy twilight made the utterly bare room just visible. The walls were damp-smearred, faded wallpaper peeled away in long strips. The floor was age-gray, splintered. And on it squatted one whose toothless mouth mumbled the incantation she had heard.

Fingers of fear tightened at the girl's throat. *This was the man, the very man, who had descended a moment before; and no one had passed her on the way up!* His dull black face sloped back from thick, protruding lips to a wig of frizzed white wool that pressed low over goggle-like, sunken eyes. The enormously wide nose was so flat that it scarcely broke the simian, slanting line of his aboriginal profile. From under a scarlet robe, veiling his body, splayed black toes peeped out. And the sleeves of that robe flapped away from pink-palmed hands whose ebon fingers played with—a tiny wooden doll!

CHAPTER TWO

Witch-woman

NELL'S eyes narrowed. A scarlet, woolen string had been wound around the curious figurine, and the strange being was unwinding it. Slowly, slowly, with infinite patience, the red thread came away, and there was something in the leisurely motion of his hands, in the weird syllables that blubbed from his monstrous mouth, that reeked evil.

A moan wrenched the girl's eyes away from this uncanny sight, a low moan pregnant with anguish. The sound had come from behind her—from where she knew the Thompsons' flat to be. It came again. Soundlessly she closed the door on the weird sight she was watching, and forced herself to that other door across the hall.

Her rap on its panels was loud, terribly loud. But there was no response

from within. She knocked again. Even the moaning had stopped. For all the evidence of her senses the flat was deserted. But someone was there, someone ill, in distress. Someone who needed help! The door opened as she tried the knob.

A candle flickered on a dilapidated mantle. Its yellow beam lit a room hardly more furnished than the one she had just seen. A broken-legged chair, a kitchen table. A bed on which dirt-gray rags were tumbled, half-concealing a human form. The face that turned toward her from the pillow was skull-like; fever burned in its pain-ridden eyes. On the floor a semi-circle of ragged children, squatted like so many brown monkeys, their cheeks hunger-hollow.

From the other side of the cot a woman, brown arms crossed over an ample bosom, exclaimed, "Who dat?"

Nell kept her voice steady. "Miss Carter. From the Home Relief. I've brought your tickets."

Mrs. Thompson came around the bed, reaching a hand whose boniness contrasted startlingly with the rotund curves of her kimonoed figure. "Gimme," she grunted. "Gimme."

"Wait a minute. I want to have a talk with you first." Nell had dispensed only emergency relief last week; on this visit she was supposed to probe more deeply into the family's affairs, discover what other aid they needed. Clothing? Medical care? Her expert eyes roved the children's faces. Good Lord, they couldn't have had much to eat since she was here! What had been done with the vouchers she had gone to so much trouble to obtain? Here was the old problem again!

"No need talkin'. Gimme the tickuts an' go 'way."

Nell didn't resent that. The attitude was all too familiar and she knew how to meet it. But something else was troubling her. She sniffed. What was that pungent

aroma—like aromatic leaves burning? Where were those wisps of smoke coming from, coiling greasily in the air? They seemed almost alive, almost like gray serpents twisting. Her eyes followed them.

That was not shadow in the farther corner, where the candle-light did not reach. It was an old woman, haunched over a caldron suspended from a tripod of three sticks bound by a red cloth. The smoke was coming from that iron pot, and underneath it a little fire of splintered wood burned on a metal plate. Bits of scarlet cloth were twisted in the multitudinous tiny braids that bristled from the black crone's head, and her beady eyes glittered as they watched the intruder.

From outside came the faraway honk of an automobile horn, the rumble of a passing truck, the murmurous voice of New York. Otherwise Nell might have been in some mountain hut in Haiti, some thatched *kraal* in faraway Dahomey. She stared incredulously, her skin prickling.

And then her training came to her aid. Never show surprise, wonder, in dealing with your clients. Accept all that you see without comment. Be nonchalant, poised. She brought her eyes back to the Thompson woman. "Yes, Mrs. Thompson. There *is* need to talk. You see," she managed a smile, "we want to help you all we can, not just hand out tickets."

The other's eyes were hostile. "You kain't help us. No 'un kin help us 'cept—"

WAS it the old woman's sudden movement that had halted the sentence, the sharp hiss that came from her? Nell ignored it. "Oh yes, we can help you," she urged gently. "For instance, your husband seems to need a doctor. I'll order one sent in tomorrow morning, and it won't cost you a cent. What *is* the trouble with him anyway?"

"Nothin'. Ain't nothin' de matter a doctor kin help."

The investigator abandoned the point, tried another angle of attack. "And then you don't seem to have been getting the right things for the children to eat. They look just as poorly as before. What *did* you get with your orders?"

The mother's mouth worked. "Got de right things. Ain't no 'un kin tell me whut my kids need to eat."

"I have no doubt. But perhaps you didn't get enough. Maybe I can tell you where to go to get more for the amount on your tickets. Your grocer may be cheating you—we sometimes catch one doing that. We don't want your babies to be hungry when the city gives you enough for them. We want them to grow up healthy and happy even if your husband hasn't any work. We want them to be strong men and women with straight bones and sturdy limbs. Don't you?"

"Sho 'do." The woman's voice broke, and a tear rolled down her brown cheek. "But—" her lips quivered—"but there don't seem to be no way. Not ef'n Ah is gwine save Pompey from—" Her hand went suddenly to her mouth, and fright widened her eyes.

Nell realized something unintended had slipped out, pounced on it. "Mrs. Thompson," she said sternly. "I know what you've been 'doing. You haven't used the vouchers for food, you've given them to somebody because your husband is sick. Haven't you?"

"I—J—"

"You have! Who was it? This woman? This—" the word *witch* almost slipped out—"old lady?"

"Y-yes." The monosyllable ripped from the Negress' tortured lips. Then she tossed her head defiantly. "Mam' Julie be a *mamalo* from Haiti. She be the on'y one kin save Pompey from de *bocor* who make de death *ouanga* against him, de witch-doctor who unwin' de thread of his life. Ah's got to pay her an' Ah ain't got

no money." Her choked voice rose at the end to a shriek.

Nell gasped. She had plunged into unexpected depths here, was touching incredible things. For an instant, inborn, unacknowledged terror ran riot within her, fear of Black Magic, of unreal, horrible things from the earth's beginnings.

"So that's what it is!" Her small fists clenched, her eyes flashed. "You've been giving your children's food to a witch. *A witch!* Great Heavens! And she's been selling the tickets to some grocer at half-price. Well, it's going to stop—stop right now. Do you hear me?"

Mrs. Thompson's eyes were like a trapped animal's; they darted from Nell's irate face to the crone's darkly brooding countenance. "Ah kain't," she groaned. "Ah kain't stop now. We'll all die ef'n Ah does."

"It is going to stop," Nell repeated, her voice quivering. "I'm going out right now to call up the Children's Society and the Health Department. They'll clear out this mess, quick enough."

"No," the mother screamed. "No! Doan' do thet. They'll take my chillun away from me. They'll take 'em away an' not let me see 'em no moah. Oh please doan'. Please." She thumped to her knees, clawed at the hem of Nell's skirt. "Please doan'." The youngsters were crying openly, sobbing and wailing in a harsh chorus of fear and grief.

THE white woman bent, put her hand on the mother's shoulder. "I don't want to do it," she said, the anger gone from her tones. "I don't want to take your children away. But I shall have to, for their own good, unless you promise me you'll stop this witch business. If you'll swear to use the vouchers properly, if you'll let me send in a doctor tomorrow to treat your husband and promise to do what he says, I'll let you keep them."

Mrs. Thompson looked up at her, her

dark face working in anguish. Words trembled on the pendulous lips. But from the corner where the crone still haunched an angry hiss came, sibilant, venomous. It pulled Nell's eyes to it. She saw quick movement among the rags cloaking the hag, saw something dart from them, a green flash that stopped, suddenly, and was an emerald snake, coiling! From its uplifted, diamond head a scarlet tongue flickered, and its face was shudderingly human, quiveringly demoniac.

The scene froze; a nightmare paralysis held Nell rigid. Only her eyes were alive. They mirrored the shadowed room, the sick man on his filthy cot, the tortured woman kneeling at her feet; the black sorceress haunched over her caldron and the coiled reptile, its scales green-glowing, its darting tongue like a tiny flame. They saw, as through a mist, the half-circle of gray-faced, starved pickaninnies. . . .

It was the silence, the close-lipped, brooding silence of the *mamaloï*, that was so terrible. If only the hag had spoken, if only those thrust-forward, wide lips had opened to pour forth entreaty, argument, invective, the white girl could have found words to combat her. But she squatted there on her haunches, a crouched, scarce-human threat, and mumbled strange cadences that never lifted to the level of hearing. And all the while her little fire flickered bluely, the gray smoke-coils drifted from her black-bellied pot and undulated heavily in mid-air, the green snake poised its affrighting head above its spiraled tail. . . .

A child whimpered. Nell's eyes flicked to its face—and the spell was broken! The tot, no more than three, was big-bellied with famine, sunken-cheeked. She could almost see Death's finger trace his mark on the tiny brow. No! Not if Nell Carter could prevent it. "Well," she pushed out between clenched teeth. "Well, how about it? Do you promise?"

The woman's body quivered, jelly-like. Her lips moved soundlessly, and Nell knew that she prayed. From somewhere came a breath of cleaner air and the snake uncoiled, skittered back to its hiding place in the *mamaloï's* rags. The torture went out of the mother's eyes and a light came into them, a light that had not been there before. "Ah, promises," she said. "An' may de good Lawd he'p me keep mah promise." She sobbed. "Ah'll gib de vittles to mah chillun."

"Good woman!" Warmth swept through Nell's veins, exhilaration at her triumph. "Here are your tickets, then." She zipped open her document-case, fumbled within. "You sign here, remember. . . ." Her voice was crisp, businesslike once more.

The black crone lifted to her feet. She upended the black caldron, spilling its contents on the stick-fire, quenching it. She glided across the room. From the corner of her eyes Nell watched her, saw her stop at the door. And now, suddenly, her sere face was contorted with hate—with something more fearful than hate. Her shaking, clawlike hand was upraised—and from between her twisting lips strange accents squealed. The meaning Nell could not fathom, but the syllables burned deep into her brain:

Aia bombaia bombe!
Lama Samana quana!
Evan vanta, á Vana docki!

No, the girl did not know the meaning of the sounds, but she knew that it was an invocation to obscene gods whose abode was in the foul morasses of some distant jungle, knew beyond doubt that the priestess of evil was crying malediction down upon her, was cursing her with an ancient curse.

The crone threw a pinch of green powder into the air—and vanished. But Nell shuddered as she realized that there were yet before her those long flights to the

street, those long dark flights where shadows crawled—anything might happen!

CHAPTER THREE

The Goat Without Horns

THERE was light on the landing below Nell Carter when she left the Thompson apartment, a pin-point flame that danced and flickered at the tip of a fly-blackened bracket, serving only to make the shadows that lay in the door embrasures blacker still. Those shadows were like huge black beasts, lying in silent wait for her. She could almost see them breathe.

The girl hesitated, her hand on the grease-smudged banister. Should she turn back, send one of the children out for a policeman to escort her from the building? Her small mouth twisted in a mocking smile at the thought. She was getting as jittery, as superstitious, as the Negroes themselves. Afraid of the dark, like a five-year-old! And besides, if she did that, if she betrayed her trepidation now, all that she had gained in the recent conflict of wills would be lost. The witch-woman would regain ascendancy over the Thompsons, and the children would go hungry once more. She had to go ahead, alone. *She had to.*

The start was the hardest. Once in motion, running down step after step, the tattoo of her heels somehow comforting, courage seeped back to her. One flight was behind her. She whisked past the landing, started another. In moments now she would be out in clear, clean air, away from the gloom of this fear-filled house, away from its grisly, weird silence. And she would never again enter a Harlem tenement after sundown!

This next landing, just ahead! Why was it unlighted? Why was it so dark, so unearthly dark? What were those green spots of light that appeared so

startlingly, that leaped up at her bringing blackness with them?

A bubbling shriek formed on Nell's lips—was never uttered! For the black was tangible, all about her, was a cold, clammy ebon jelly that swamped her, that bore her down, struggling, that flowed over her, weighty, choking, reaching its chill tentacles into her mouth, her nostrils.

She struck at it with her fists; they sank into the soft mass without effect. She kicked, frantically, frenziedly. The Thing gave way before her struggles with little, sucking noises, infinitely fearful. She could get no air, but grave-smell was in her nostrils and gigantic emerald orbs whirled before her eyes. Whirled dizzily, growing till they were world-size, cosmic-size—whirled till her brain was whirling too—till green evil took possession of her senses—of her very soul. . . . Somewhere a serpent hissed, sibilantly. . . .

* * *

A drum thumped, muffled. *Boom. Boom. Brrroom! Boom. Boom. Brrroom!* The savage sound beat into Nell's brain; beat life, consciousness back into it. *Boom. Brrroom!* She opened her eyes.

She could see neither drum nor drummer, though the muffled beats went on, slow, unending. She could see nothing but walls of stone, a floor of stone whereon lay the half-shell of a coconut, a little light floating on some liquid within it. Above was vaulted darkness; ahead of her the dim illumination was swallowed by darkness. From somewhere out there came the ominous drum-beat. *Boom. Boom. Brrroom!* She was lying on something soft, and it was soothing to the weariness that ached dully in every fiber of her body. But there was a steel band around her wrist, a chain from it that arched to a ring sunk deep in the stone wall beside her, that clanked as she moved! Nell sat up, her heart pounding, and screamed! The shrill sound echoed

and re-echoed—and the unseen drum mocked her with its muffled unresonance. *Boom. Boom. Brroom.*

She screamed again, "Help! Help!" and again her voice was swallowed into echoing silence. She lifted to her feet, surged against the chain. The ring bit into her arm cruelly, jerked her back.

Wings fluttered, in the shadow to her left. Nell twisted to the sound. Something white was moving there, something white and small. The wind of her sudden motion flared the shell-light a bit, and she saw that it was a rooster, a white rooster, saw that a chain from a band around its ankle was fastened to a ring in the wall.

Boom. Boom. Brroom.

God Almighty!

Eyes were on her, eyes bored into her back. The girl, wild-eyed, swung around at the end of her tether. A bearded face stared at her from the other edge of the candle-light; a bearded face, long flat nose, glittering eyes. *Horns! A goat! A white-skinned goat was chained to the wall as the rooster was, as she herself was chained! A goat!!*

Boom. Boom. Brrroom.

Goat! Rooster! Girl! Icy fingers stroked Nell Carter's spine. White girl! White rooster! White goat! Where had she read of that combination, that somehow unholy, meaningful combination?

Brroom. Bom. Bom. Brroom. The drum cadence changed suddenly. **BOOM!** And stopped. Another sound slithered into the girl's consciousness, the padding sound of bare feet. It came from the long reach of shadows there ahead, came nearer, nearer. Horror was approaching.

Nell quivered as she stared past the faint light. Horror was approaching—was in the nimbus of pale luminance. It was staring at her with baleful eyes. Horror in the shape of a weazened black man, a scarlet turban hiding his white hair, scarlet robe draped about his age-bent

form. The Thing on the stairs, the squat sorcerer who unwound life from a tiny wooden doll, stood there in the flickering light of the shelled candle. And triumph edged the thick oval of his protruding lips!

A GREEN coil slid over his shoulder, around his neck. The green snake lifted its diamond head and seemed to whisper into the *papaloi's* ear!

The chain clanked as Nell shrank back. And the sound roused fury in her. "You—let me go! Let me go at once! How dare you do this to me? How dare you?"

The evil smile on the black face deepened, became more sinister. "I dare all. These are my precincts, not yours. It is you who have intruded—you who must make recompense."

Nell felt surprise at the preciseness of his utterance, the purity of his speech. Strange, utterly strange, coming from that barbarically bedecked ancient. It was more eerie, more uncanny, somehow, than everything else that had happened. But she straightened, tossed her head. "I have intruded! By trying to help your people, by trying to save them from their own folly?"

"By crossing the ancient gods!" The slow words dripped from him, coldly menacing. "By bringing your white philosophy, your white religion, into the domain of Legba and Dambella. By daring to deprive Ayida Oueddo, the serpent goddess, of her due!" At this last queer name the snake's head jerked, minutely, as if it had heard its own name spoken.

"I have no concern with your gods!" Nell retorted, eyes smarting with anger. "My clients can worship the devil himself for all I care. But when that worship takes the bread from the mouths of their children it is my concern, and all your tricks and mummery aren't going to keep me from fighting it."

The baleful glow crept back into the old man's eyes. "Tricks! Mummery! You know better than that, white woman, you have felt the night itself grow real about you and overwhelm you, who have looked deep into the eyes of Papa Agoué himself. How came you here? By tricks and mummery?"

"I—" The girl's mouth opened, and closed again. What was it that had overwhelmed her there on the stairs, that vast outpouring of black nothingness that was yet solid? What were those green eyes that had stared into hers and grown large, whirled large as the cosmos? She had sunk deep, deep, into their depths. . . .

"Ah, you cannot answer me. But I know it. I, *Vòdu* of *Vòdumnu*. I, Ti Nebo, priest of the ancient rites, I know! And she knows—" his hand went up to stroke the snake's head that bowed to meet it—"the living incarnation of Ayida Ouedda. She knows. But enough of this. You have tasted of the power of voodoo." He broke off, and suddenly his face was a stony, horrific mask from which tiny eyes glittered like black, hard marbles. "Have you heard, by chance, of the goat without horns?"

Something in the way he asked the question, in the slow, malevolent way the words dripped into the dim vault, struck new terror into Nell's heart. "The goat without horns!" What was there about the phrase that made it so infinitely, obscenely menacing? Nell, wordless, shook her head.

"You have not? But you can guess its meaning. Well—if you would not be the *goat without horns* this very night, listen to me, white woman, and obey!"

SHADOWS crawled behind Ti Nebo, black shadows that were alive. Fear was a living presence in the dim reaches of this stone chamber that was out of the world she knew. "What do you want of

me?" Nell whispered. "What do you want?"

The ancient nodded slowly. "You are to go among us with ears that hear not, with eyes that see not. You are not to question what is done with the vouchers you bring. You are to open no door that is not opened to you. And you are to forget, utterly, what you see this night."

Ears that hear not! The meaning crawled snakelike into Nell's shrinking brain. Eyes that see not! And the alternative—the *goat without horns*! What, in the name of God, was the goat without horns? Frightened speculation beat at her bewildered brain. The horned goat stalked to the end of its chain, she saw that its blue eyes were fixed on the black priest. And she saw in those eyes, in those *animal* eyes, a brooding horror of things unseen, unguessable! Fear in the eyes of a goat!

What was it a goat could fear? Death? What does a beast know of death? Did that horned beast see something she could not see, some monstrous shape, some formless elemental hovering about the scarlet-robed *papaloi* around whose neck coiled a green snake with a half-human face? She shivered. It was cold, deathly cold. But the cold was within her.

Starving children grow cold before they die! Other eyes swam before her vision, piteous, entreating eyes watching a mother's hands for food that would never be given to them. Eyes of hungry children. A voice spoke; she was startled to hear that it was her own. "No! Never! You can kill me, do anything you want with me, but never while I live will I let those little children starve! Never!"

The snake arched above Ti Nebo's scarlet turban, a curve of emerald threat. And somehow the *papaloi's* visigae took on the uncanny, half-human, wholly demoniac cast of the reptile's countenance. "You will live," his tones, suddenly deep,

intoned. "You will live—and you will obey!"

And, on the word, he vanished! Nell tried to tell herself he had merely stepped back into shadow—but no pad, pad of the naked, splayed black feet came out of the darkness.

As if fascinated, the girl strained toward the tiny flickering flame in the coconut shell, stared at it, and shuddered. This was New York, she told herself, New York and not some mountain hut amid the tumbled crags of Haiti. Outside somewhere were automobiles, and traffic lights, and blue-uniformed policemen patrolling. This was New York—but she knew that in this vaulted cellar—it must be the basement of the tenement she had entered, was it only an hour ago?—in this stone-walled enclave she was as far from the great metropolis as if some genie had transported her to the jungle depths of the Voodoo Isle.

The Voodoo Isle! From its dark mountains something had come across the seas, a foul something had come to this black Harlem, this gathering of dark-skinned races in the heart of white New York.

Voodoo! In Africa, in Haiti, in Jamaica, deep in the miasmatic depths of the Dismal Swamp, in the night-shrouded mystery of the cotton-fields, in the mysterious, mangrove-screened bayous of the Mississippi's delta, wherever the children of its primeval votaries had been gathered to fulfill their toilsome destiny, the mysterious snake-worship had followed to take its toll. And now it had followed them once again, to the northern city where civilization had reached its flower. It was here, here in New York. And she, because she had threatened its reign, because she had snatched one victim from its coils, she was in its dread clutch. Black, slimy, mysterious . . . she was its prisoner—she and the rooster and the goat. Great God! What were they going

to do with her? What would happen next?

"You will live—and you will obey!"

The voice of the weird priest of the weird religion rang in her ears. Nell sank to her knees and prayed to her white God, prayed for strength to withstand the horrors that were to come.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Papa Legba Open de Gate!"

IN THE darkness a drum was beating, thumping its savage rhythm, pounding its primeval cadence. From beyond the darkness it came, from beyond the flickering halo of light cast by the little flame floating within the shell that looked like half a blackened skull. *Boom. Boomboom. Boom.* Another joined it, and another. Pounding, booming sound reverberated within the vault, reverberated within Nell's aching brain. *Boom. Boomboom. Boom.*

Now that booming, that dreadful booming was loud; now it died down, drifting away, it seemed, so that it was a faint mutter of rolling thunder in the distance, of cadenced, rhythmic thunder. Now it was nearing again, louder, louder; *boom, boomboom, boom;* and with it other sounds were coming, the shuffling of many feet, the low chanting of many voices. Louder the boom of the drums, louder the chant of the singers; nearer, nearer, till Nell could distinguish words:

Papa Legba open de gate!
Papa Legba open de gate!
Papa Legba youah chillun come!
Papa Legba open de gate!

Over and over, over and over, boom of drum and chant of singers, till her own heart pounded in time with the pounding chant, thudded in time with the thudding words:

Papa Legba open de gate!
Papa Legba youah chillun come!
Papa Legba open de gate!

The gate to what, a fearsome voice whispered in the ear of the shuddering girl. *The gate to what?*

Shuffling feet, many shuffling feet, made whispering sound in the darkness, many feet shuffling in time to the pound of the drums, to the thump of the chant. *Boom. Boom. Boomboom. Boom.*

Papa Legba open de gate!

The fetid smell of close-packed bodies came to Nell; sweat-smell, toil-smell, jungle-smell underlying all. Somewhere out there in the blackness was a throng of unseen, swaying to the thud of the drums, intoning the mysterious unmusical chorus. *Thud. Thud. Thudthud. Thud.*

Then silence crashed. Quivering silence more dreadful than sound. Long silence in darkness that veiled what horrors? The girl strained at her chain, strove to pierce the gloom with aching, frightened eyes.

A single voice, a cracked female voice, squealing:

Ayida Ouedda, goddess of snakes,
Come to us, come, as the lightning breaks!

And lightning glare ripped the darkness, flared blindingly! It vanished—but a picture persisted in the white woman's dazed eyes—a picture of a huge coiling serpent in mid-air, a serpent with a woman's face, black and eerily beautiful; and beneath it a sea of upturned black faces, of black hands raised imploring, beseeching to the snake-woman.

Now light was growing in the darkness beyond; dim light, sourceless. The faint muttering of drumheads rubbed by black hands grew as the light grew. Space extended itself as brightening light revealed arch after stone arch progressing on and on—till far down at the other end Nell could see squatted forms, row upon row; shiny faces, black, and brown, and lighter

tan; could see white eyes rolling, white teeth gleaming.

The drummers were nearer, here close to the shell-light, gigantic naked Negroes sweating as their black hands rubbed gray skins stretched taut over upright cylinders that were the drums. And such drums! Hollowed tree-trunks cut off, the wood age-blackened. The center one three feet tall, the others shorter, uneven. And around each cylinder a snake was carved, carved so lifelike that for an instant Nell thought they moved.

There was a long table here too, stretched across the space, a table covered by a white cloth. And on it a cone-like mound of cornmeal surmounted by an egg, a small wooden snake stretched horizontally atop an upright stick, a wooden bowl. And a long-bladed, cruel-edged knife. . . .

The drums were talking, growling in forgotten accents a tale from out of vanished years, a tale of angry jungle gods demanding propitiation; a tale of long-buried threat, of reawakened fear.

To the left of the altar Ti Nebo stood, a figure of dread in his scarlet robe, his lurid turban. To the right, where the drummers were, stood the old crone Nell had last seen bent over a black caldron. But age was somehow gone from her figure now. She stood erect, lithe, springy as Nell herself. From her shoulders, too, hung a scarlet robe.

THROUGH the muttering talk of the drums a hissing sounded. Nell saw that the cheeks of the woman, of the *mamaloï*, were puffing in and out, in and out, like a pulsating bladder. It was she hissing, snakelike. A sinuous wave rippled through her body, another. She was turning, hissing and writhing, in serpentine fashion. A scream aborted in the girl's throat as she saw beady eyes glittering in the black face, saw a red tongue-tip darting in and out, in and out, flick-

ering as the snake's tongue had flickered.

The voodoo priestess was advancing now, advancing in a curious glide, while still she hissed, while still her little body undulated, while still her red tongue flickered between her lips. She moved erect, yet somehow it seemed she crawled—crawled on her belly along the floor!

The chained white bird was rigid, its red comb erect, its little eyes fastened on the snake-face of the coming *mamaloï*. Her black hands writhed out from her scarlet robes, as the green snake had writhed from her rags. Her fingers touched the bright steel chain—and it fell apart.

Faster the drums thumped, faster, faster. Staccato thumping, grandfather of jazz!

Black hands clutched the rigid bird, lifted it high in the air. The drums rumbled in triumph, and Ti Nebo's arms thrust above his turbaned head as the cock lifted. The sorcerer's voice was like ripping silk: "Ybo, the hour is come. The hour is come, Ybo. The hour of blood."

Was it from the drums that the soundless vibration came, the vibration that filled all space, the reverberant vibration that was a presence in the room? Was it from the snake drums, booming?

It was the drums that pounded, pounded, frenziedly in a tangled, quick, yet ordered rhythm as the *mamaloï* whirled, spun like a top, faster, faster, till she was a mazy whirl of scarlet at the apex of which was her black snake-face and the white, wing-beating shape of the sacrificial cock. And suddenly a black hand darted, reptilian, to the rooster's neck. A sudden twist, and the comb, the head was gone as still the priestess whirled. Blood spurted from the headless neck, spurted fountain-like. . . .

Ti Nebo had seized the wooden bowl, had snatched the headless bird from the whirling woman's hands. The blood

poured into the bowl . . . wings beat feebly against the *papaloï's* arms. . . . The priestess collapsed, lay writhing on the stony floor . . . the drums muttered into silence. . . .

And Nell felt pent-up breath whistle from between her white lips. The warm smell of new-spilled blood was sweet in her nostrils, the jungle-rhythm of the drums was in her brain. A cry burst from her throat, a cry that had the very timber, the very sound of the shrill, exultant cries that burst from these other throats, the black throats of the staring, swaying crowd far back in the buried voodoo temple.

An exultant cry! Oh God!

THE blood-spattered priest whirled to her. There was triumph in his face!

No! Please God, no! She was not as these. Not as these. Not yet! Nell's hand flew to her mouth, from which that cry had come, and her heart pounded.

"Our Father which are. . . ." She murmured the childhood prayer. And suddenly she knew that these things she was witnessing were foul and horrible.

Triumph faded from the *papaloï's* face. He signed to the drummers. A new rhythm pounded on the quivering air.

"You will live—and you will obey," was what he had said. Obey that black-faced devotee of a religion of blood and fear?

Never!

But the drums were beating, and the scarlet-clad priest was sprinkling meal on the floor, sprinkling strange designs of intertwined circles, stars, tangled lines. The drums thudded, and the ranged congregation beyond were silent in a hush of expectancy. Nell saw them clearly.

Why! These were no savage votaries of a savage faith. These were her clients, the men and women she had fed and clothed, whom she had aided in their distress. There was Abe Johnson, there

Mima Lewis, there Erasmus Jones. Hat-tie Carbo's eyes were white orbs glowing out of black and twitching face. And in the very front row, conflict evident in every line of his contorted, chocolate-brown countenance, was Rastus Brown. Rastus, the man who had warned her, defying his own fears, warned her to flee this house accursed.

The drums had called them here, the old drums and the old gods. The drums had called them here for their own undoing. And Nell knew, now, that the struggle in which she was engaged, the battle with the forces of ancient evil, was not for herself alone. She was fighting for them, for the bodies, the souls of the childlike, pitiable people who had been her wards these many weary months. If she failed, if the prophecy of the *papaloi* came true, and living, she obeyed his command to go among them unseeing, unhearing—then they were lost. Souls and bodies they were lost. For that to which she was to blind herself, to deafen herself, would be their exploitation by the unholy pair!

Iron entered Nell Carter's soul, iron of the old Crusaders, of the Puritans, of the missionaries who carry the Cross into distant, hostile lands. She would not fail, she could not fail.

And the drums boomed, softly, and the red-robed *papaloi* traced weird patterns with trailing corn-meal. The gory sorceress groveled before the uncanny altar, and something breathed in the room that was neither man nor beast.

And the horned goat watched her with its blue eyes in which fear lurked—and something else.

He knew!

CHAPTER FIVE

Goat Cry in Human Throat

THE NEBO was finished with his tracing of powdered designs. He moved

slowly back to his post at the altar's left. The black crone lifted, stood swaying at the right. The tempo of the booming drums quickened, grew more ominous.

What horror was to confront her now Nell could not know, but she knew that the time of her supreme test was at hand.

The drums thumped and chanting voices took up the rhythm once again, chanting voices pounding:

Papa Legba open de gate!
Papa Legba open de gate!
Let her pass to de promised lan'!
Papa Legba open de gate!

Let *her* pass. . . . Nell's throat choked as she heard the change in the invoking: "Let her pass to de promised lan'." It was she they meant. Nell Carter, and the "promised land"—oh mockery—was the dim half-world ruled by the jungle gods!

Papa Legba open de gate!

As the drums thumped the eerie light dimmed, that hitherto had illumined the cavern. No, it did not dim, it drew in, its margins narrowed, till all she could see was the white clothed altar, and the statuesque, red-cloaked figures at its either end! These, and the crumpled heap of blood-spattered feathers that once had been a proud white cock.

Papa Legba open de gate!

A blue flame sprang into being, where was the central triangle of the design Ti Nebo had made. It ran swiftly along the powdery lines till the whole pattern was a tracing of eerie flame. Nell saw that the powder itself was not burning, that the fires above it almost touched it.

Let her pass to de promised lan'!

The *mamaloi* was moving. Her black hands reached for the wooden bowl, closed around it. She moved along the table, lifted the bowl to the priest's thick lips.

He drank the still warm blood of the sacrificed cock!

Papa Legba open de gate,

the moaning chorus intoned, and the drums beat their savage rhythm.

Nell was crouched now, her eyes, widened and aching, glued to the two servitors of pagan rites. They were coming toward her, two black-faced grotesques blood-robed, pacing toward her in measured cadence with the measured beat of the drums.

And before them a shadow moved, a shadow that was not theirs!

The edge of that shadow touched the hem of Nell's dress, blackness ran up her clothing like quicksilver, swallowed her form, her arms. She was in the center of a sphere of blackness, blackness absolute, and her being shrank to a tiny pinpoint of white light within that blackness.

Fear was in that blackness, and horror. Crawling things were in it; things that slithered the steamy earth before the human race began. Terrors were in it, terrors of the jungle night when man hid in his caves and his hollowed tree-trunks and shuddered till daylight came again. All the primitive fears of mankind were in it, the fears of little Man in a cosmos he did not understand. And the beat of the drums thumped through it, promising relief, promising safety from all the fears, all the terrors that stalked the night. "Bow to Damballa," they boomed their message. "Bow to Ayida, the serpent goddess, and she will guard you from harm."

At last the little white light began to grow, and the blackness retreated before it. And Nell Carter was herself again.

But she was no longer chained to the stone wall of the *haumfort*, the underground temple of voodoo. She was in the open space before the altar, and the weird blue fire was burning all about her, trac-

ing the design the *papaloi* had made. It was burning all about her but there was no heat in its flame. She was crouched in that open space, and crouched on its haunches before her was the white goat.

Its blue eyes gazed into hers, and her gray ones gazed back, and it seemed to Nell that a current flowed between them. It seemed that something from within her was flowing out along that current and something from within him was returning to take its place.

All the while the booming of the drums was like thunder in that narrow place, like thunder in the mountains, like the voice of an angry god growling his wrath.

And cry formed in Nell Carter's throat, *the blating cry of a goat!*

SHE fought against it, fought against the animal cry tearing at her voice-cords, fought to keep it from bleating forth submission to the dark power of voodoo.

Steely light flashed between the goat and her, darting light, and Nell knew a knife hovered above her, a knife in the hands of the ebony *papaloi*, a knife that in another instant would flash across the goat's throat and hers, spilling their blood to the glory of the jungle gods. Goat-bleat quivered on her lips. Her chin lifted as the goat's head lifted, she and the goat offered their throats to the stroke. Exultation clamored in the girl's veins, exultation that she had been chosen for the sacrifice, that her blood would mingle with goat's blood for Dambella to drink, for Ouedda. . . .

A hysterical voice screeched, somewhere: "Papa Legba! Papa Legba open de gate for me and not de white. Not de white, Papa Legba! *Not de white!*"

Nell's eyes flicked to the shock of the sound. A woman was hurtling across the space beyond which black rows watched, a girl whose hands clawed sleazy fabric

from ivory breasts; breasts round and palpitant and hard-nippled. Nell saw her corded, stretched neck; her head, thrown back, strained back as Nell's own was strained; saw froth flying from her red-lipped, screaming mouth; saw eyes that were black flame.

"I am de goat widout horns," the girl shrilled. Wiry hair writhed like tiny snakes around her frenzied face. Silk ripped—and the bounding Negress was a lithe, naked thing of the jungle, a wild, unhuman thing hurled toward the knife of sacrifice by a power outside itself. "I—I am de goat!"

Wrath, red wrath exploded in Nell at this blasphemy. She—she was the appointed one, the one the gods had honored! This—

"Not de white, Papa Legba. *Not de white! I'm de goat!*"

Wrath vanished as the crazed Virago's words penetrated. She—she was Nell Carter! *She was the white!* White! Oh God! She remembered now.

The spell was broken. The white girl lifted from her crouch, lifted and screamed with white lips, "No! God help me! What am I doing? No!"

A growl behind her, a ferocious growl of baffled rage, twisted her around. Ti Nebo, his aboriginal visage contorted with fury, leaped for her, his thirsty blade sweeping in a long arc. Nell sprang to meet him. Her little hand clutched his knife-wrist, her other joined it, and she clung, swaying, to keep the cruel steel from her flesh.

He clawed her, ripped long weals in the skin of her cheek. The furrows seared like living flame. She shrieked in anguish—shrieked, but held her grip.

There were shouts behind her, the pound of running feet. The *papaloi* jerked, almost tore from her grasp, lifted her from the floor, but she held on. Frantically, desperately, she held to the grip

on the skinny black wrist that the knife might not reach her.

The onrushing throng was almost upon her. She felt their hot breath, heard the thunder of their coming. In seconds now they would be upon her, would tear the profaner of their mysteries to bits.

They would kill her, but at least they would not have swayed her to their will.

A black form loomed at her side. A hoarse voice shouted. Fists lifted. This was the end!

But the fists crashed into the grimacing, terrible face of the sorcerer! His arm tore from her grasp, his wizened form sprawled across the altar, crashed with it to the floor. An arm swung around her waist, lifted her. The hoarse voice shouted in her ear, "Miss Carter, it's all right. It's all right, Miss Carter."

She twisted, saw the face of her rescuer. It was Rastus Brown!

SOMEONE plunged at them, and Brown's clenched hand crashed into a swart face. Maelstrom of fighting. Voices shrieked, "Kill her! Kill de white!" Other voices screamed, "Let her through!"

Animal growls all about her. Snarls, and the howls of wounded men. Smack of fists on flesh. Black faces, brown faces, yellow faces, teeth bared, eyes rolling. Blood-lust in rolling white eyes. Maelstrom of fighting.

But in Nell's heart joy leaped. A carol of joy in her throat.

Some, at least, of her wards had remembered. Some, at least, were safe from the spell of voodoo. Her long lone fight had not been in vain!

"It's all right, Miss Carter. All right." Good voice, brave voice of Rastus Brown in her ears as they forged through the mêlée. Brave Rastus Brown, chocolate-faced, level-eyed, with gratitude in his soul for the white girl who had brought food to him and his when he was starv-

ing, clothed them when they were naked.

And others too, remembered. A phalanx was forming around her, a fighting triangle of fighting men, and they were moving faster now toward the door she could see far back in that cellar, a cellar that was no longer a *haumfort* but a basement beneath a Harlem flat.

Faster and faster they moved. They crashed the door, poured up the steps. They were in the vestibule. And suddenly there was silence.

A policeman was framed in the doorway, his nightstick gripped in his hand, his white face peering into the gloom. "What's goin' on here?" he roared. "What's all the yellin'?"

"Oh Lawdy," someone groaned in the crowd. "De cops! Now we—git it."

Nell jerked away from Rastus Brown's arm, pushed to the front. "Nothing, officer," she said lightly. "I'm late with my food tickets and the boys were all waiting down here in the hall for me. Were they making too much noise?"

"An' who're you?"

"Nell Carter, from the Home Relief." She was in the shadow; she hoped he could not see that she was hatless, her suit in rags. She hoped he could not see the livid weals on her cheek.

"From the Home Relief! Hell, Lady, you shouldn't be going around here at night."

"I have to bring their tickets to them, Officer. And besides, nobody would harm me here. The boys will look out for me. Won't you?"

"Yas'm," they chorused from the darkness around her. "Nobody ain't gwine hurt you w'ile we's aroun'."

The cop grinned in the light of the street-lamp. "I guess they wouldn't at

that. They know which side their bread is buttered. Good-night."

"Good-night, Officer."

Nell watched the policeman stroll down the stoop, then she turned to the crowd. "Thank you, men. But why did you let me go through all that? Why didn't you get me out of there long ago?"

"We was scared o' the voodoo man," Brown's voice answered. "But when we saw as how he didn't have no power over you we wasn't ascaired no more."

The smile vanished from Nell's tones. She was very grim. "He had no power over me because I didn't let him have, because I knew his tricks were all mummery and fraud. And if you believe that, if you hold on to that thought, he'll never have any more power over you. Remember that, will you?"

"Yes'm, we sho' will. He was a fakir, sho' 'nuff. We ain't gwine give him no moah uv ouah food tickuts. You-all needn't be scared o' that."

"All right. Now good-night."

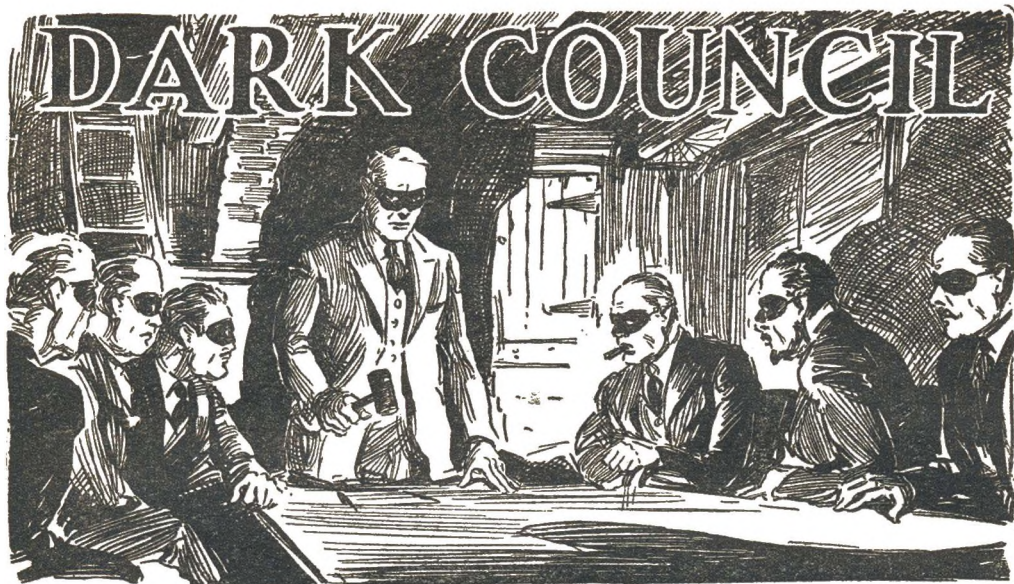
"Good-night, Missie Carter. De good Lord bless you."

Wearily Nell Carter descended the stoop into the street. She had won. But a queer thought slid through her tired brain. "Was he a fakir?" it asked. "What of the man dying upstairs, because he was unwinding a string from a little wooden doll made in the man's image? What was it that overwhelmed you on the stairs? What was the shadow that crawled over you and engulfed you so that all there was left of you was a tiny, shining light no bigger than the point of a pin?"

Music on Seventh Avenue was like the beat of jungle drums, serpent drums, booming. . . .

THE END

Another Weirdly Gripping Mystery Novelette
By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT
In September Dime Mystery—Out August 10th



IT IS not often, unfortunately, that a magazine receives such quick and lasting popularity as has been accorded *Dime Mystery*. And when such overnight success does come to any fiction publication we believe that there is an underlying cause which goes far deeper than the mere essentials of good stories and attractive presentation. We believe that in almost every instance of this sort success comes because the publishers—luckily or otherwise—have chanced upon some new and virile fiction field for which there is waiting a large and previously unsatisfied public.

We believe this to be true in the case of *Dime Mystery*. There were good mystery stories and good terror stories appearing in half a hundred different publications long before this magazine ever reached the newsstands. Such stories were eagerly read and thoroughly enjoyed by millions. But no magazine, to our knowledge, had ever combined these two elements of mystery and terror and devoted its pages exclusively to stories of this one heart-quickening type. *Dime Mystery* chanced upon this tremendously popular formula—and from the first issue on its success was a foregone conclusion!

And, dating immediately from that same first issue, our readers began writing in to demand that we give them more of the same sort. We aim to please. But that order, we found, was no easy one to fill. Already we were experiencing some very real difficulty in

filling *Dime Mystery* each month with those high-grade mystery thrillers which we had pledged ourselves alone would find their way into the pages of this magazine.

But we tackled the new job our readers had set us. Slowly at first, then with growing frequency, we enlarged our list of regular authors. We encouraged and developed new ones. We proceeded with patience, refusing to be hurried into a premature launching of the new magazine. Now, at last, it's ready! The new companion magazine to *Dime Mystery* for which so many of you have asked! It is scheduled to make its initial appearance on the stands on the 25th of this month (July). It's a pretty swell job and we're proud of it. We hope and believe you'll like it.

The title of it, naturally enough, is **TERROR TALES.**

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I have a wonderful opportunity for women on best Tea and Coffee Routes. Earnings run up to \$5.00 a day just in spare time. The work is light, sane, pleasant and the profits exceptionally big. Housewives, school teachers, office workers, factory workmen—all find my new and novel plans for spare-time work highly profitable. If you have other work to do just start in spare time. Mrs. C. B. Laoma, W. Va., averaged \$48.00 a week for a year on one of these routes. Mrs. Preston Farwood, Ga., quit a \$10.00 a week department store job and cleared \$7.50 the first afternoon. These unusual earnings show what big money women can make. I now have an even better plan to offer you. Send me your name today.

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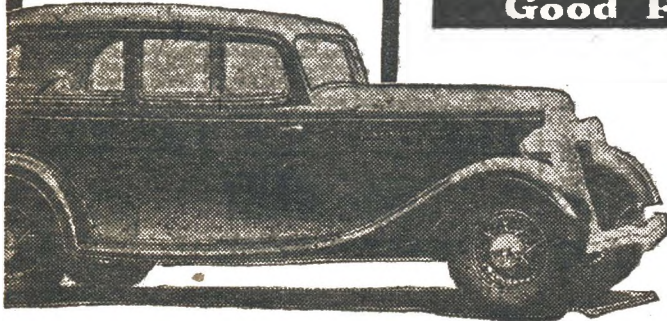


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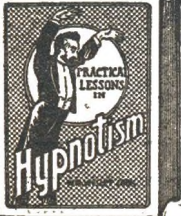
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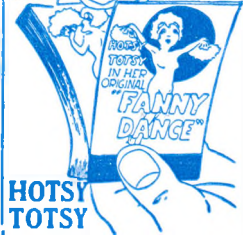
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