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DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JANUARY

NRA

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

2 FEATURE NOVELS

DEATH UNDERGROUND
by WYATT BLASSINGAME

DARK SLAUGHTER
by HUGH B. CAVE

OTHER TERROR TALES!

JANUARY
DIME MYSTERY Magazine
10¢

Health Authorities WARN Against BULGING Waistline!

The New York Times

LARGE WAISTLINE HELD HEALTH PERIL

Middle-Aged Man Who Keeps His Small Lives Longer, Government Bureau Says.

FIGURES SHOW DIRECT LINK

Overweight People Have Worst of It in Mortality Tables Covering 15 Causes.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (AP).—The man who keeps his waistline small when he reaches middle age is the most likely to win the race for health, is the conclusion drawn from a new study of the relation of weight to physical defects just published by the Public Health Service.

"By the time that middle age is reached, these figures indicate, it is a definite advantage to be under the average weight for height," says the report.

It also shows "a great excess of mortality among overweight persons, whatever the age, and also an excess among young adult underweight persons."

The conclusions are drawn from records of more than 3,000 men from 1909 to 1928, showing the ratio of actual deaths to expected mortality, according to different weight groups. In the following table, figures below 100 indicate less than the expected death rate; those above 100 indicate more than the expected death rate:

Weight Class.	Age Group. 20-29.	30-39.	40-49.	50 and Over.
25 pounds or more underweight—	118	105	83	77
10 to 20 lbs.	101	94	76	85
5 lbs. under to 5 lbs. overweight—	92	84	87	92
10 to 20 pounds overweight	99	88	94	90
25 to 45 pounds overweight	113	123	128	119
50 lbs. or more overweight	167	143	144	130

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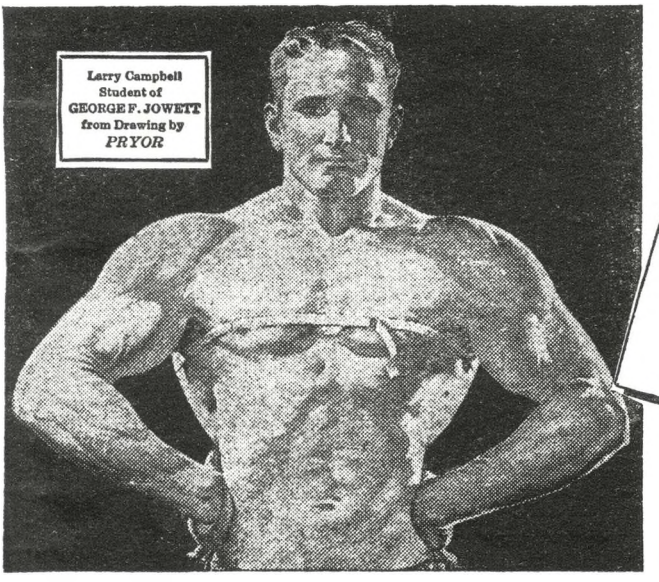

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10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Volume Four *January, 1934* Number Two

TWO FULL-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVELS

BREATH-TAKING HORROR NOVELETTE

SHORT TERROR TALES

—AND—

Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer

Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

Published every month by American Fiction Magazines, Inc., 2256 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, 1933 by American Fiction Magazines, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. $1.00. Send all manuscripts and subscriptions to 205 E. 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 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. Printed in U. S. A.

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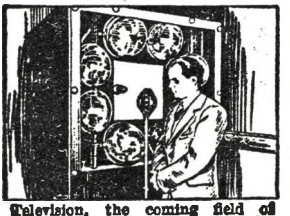

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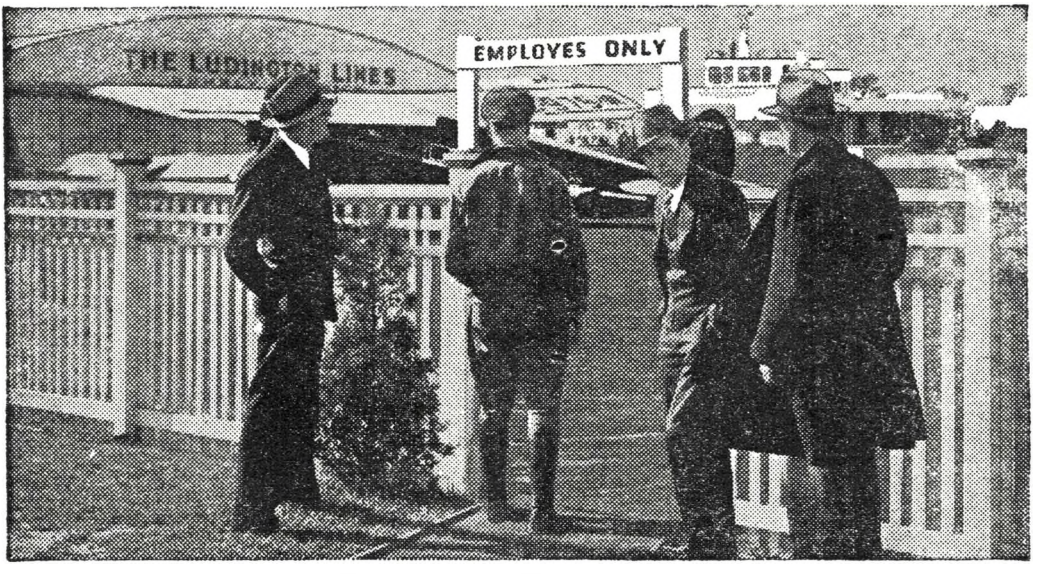

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Death Underground

Full-Length Mystery Novel

By

WYATT BLASSINGAME

Author of "Horror in the Hold," etc.

Deep within that stygian shaft lurked a monstrous living something which brought burning agony and slow, inevitable death to those foolhardy ones who went below. A blood-chilling tale of tingling terror and dark conflict underground!

KEN MARLOWE stared across his desk top, littered with blue prints and yellow sheets of paper, at Earle Brady, vice-president of U. S. Mines. Short, compact, with a square, determined chin and hard gray eyes, Brady glared back at him, hit his chair arm softly with his open palm.

"By God! That's every cent U. S. Mines will offer. You can take it or leave it!" Brady's short, big-knuckled fingers crushed a yellow sheet of paper.

At the end of the table Frank Crim, Marlowe's partner and half-owner of

Southern Coal, said quietly, "That settles the matter, then. We won't sell."

Both Marlowe and Brady swung in their chairs to face Crim. The shadow of a question flickered in Marlowe's brown eyes. "The offer sounds fair to me, Frank."

Brady flung around in his chair, his shoulders hunched across the desk toward Ken Marlowe. His short fingers opened suddenly, viciously, and the crumpled paper rolled across the desk. For a moment Brady watched the man across from him.

Ken Marlowe was a pleasant-looking man; lean, brown, with light brown hair and wide shoulders that opened like a trumpet from narrow hips. His level eyes held Brady's intense gaze.

"I hope you can make your partner see what's good for him," Brady snapped. "I'm leaving for Pittsburgh tomorrow afternoon. I'll be out of here in the morning. If Mr. Crim has come to his senses—" Brady looked toward Crim sitting quietly at one end of the desk, nodded curtly— "well and good. If he hasn't— I'm leaving for Pitt, anyway."

Brady pushed back his chair, stood up. Marlowe and Crim got slowly to their feet. Crim was a short man but heavy shouldered. His face was round and peaceful, but there was determination and will in the hard lines of his mouth and the glint of his blue eyes. "We'll be glad to have you out, but—" His voice broke abruptly.

THE door behind him burst open. A lean man in grimy overalls leaped into the office. His mouth was open and his chin worked vigorously, but for a moment he was too winded to speak. Coal-dust had blackened almost his entire face, accentuating the whites of his fear-widened eyes. "Mr. Marlowe!" he gasped, "Mr. Crim, there—there's somethin' in that—mine!"

Marlowe jerked to his feet and swung toward the man, moving like a boxer, on the balls of his feet. "What the hell are you talking about, Wilson?"

"There's somethin' in that mine!" the foreman said again.

He was catching his breath now and his words, in a torrent of fear, seemed to pour over one another. "They been hearing it before, down that adandoned shaft. It's had the Negroes scared for two or three days, 'cept nobody could be certain they'd really heard it before today. I figured they was scared, 'cause a fortune teller told a couple of 'em this was a haunted mine. But a little while ago we all heard it.

"One of the Negroes, Ed Reilly, went to see what 'twas. Nobody'd go with him and nobody heard nothin' from him for a long while. Some more was 'bout to go look for him when—when he yelled—" The man repressed a shudder. "He yelled like old Sam Mason did when that tram car smashed his leg and he lay there across the tracks, yelling, 'fore anybody could get to him. That's the way Ed yelled. We all knew it was Ed. Then his screamin' stopped. Not all at once; it slobbered off, kind of, gettin' deeper and lower like—like he was bein' dragged off—deeper into the shaft."

The foreman's voice slid to a stop and his frightened eyes, white and wide in his coal-blackened face, shifted rapidly on the three men, then back to Marlowe. The little office was very still.

Marlowe snapped, "Where is the man Ed Reilly? What's happened to him?"

Wilson's eyes shifted nervously. "He—he's still down there, I reckon. There ain't nobody else down there. All the men come flyin' out. I come out to tell you. I reckon that Ed—" His voice trailed off.

Marlowe spun on his heel, took one stride back to his desk, jerked open a drawer. Snatching up a flashlight and an automatic, he thrust the gun in his right coat pocket and spun toward Wilson. "How far'd he go down that shaft?"

"That shaft ain't very long," Wilson said slowly, "four-five hundred feet, maybe. We was right near the mouth. He musta gone pretty near the end, 'bout where it runs into the underground creek."

"All right," Marlowe said, his lips pulled thin. "I know where the shaft is." He swung past Wilson, went out the door.

Miners filled the little yard around the office, huddled in groups about the mine mouth, though Marlowe noticed that none of the groups were very close to the round, gaping hole in the hillside. Warm sunshine glinted on the coal dust that lay thick on the ground, gleamed on sweaty faces, brought into contrast the wide, rolling eyes of the Negroes.

As soon as Marlowe stepped out the office door a dead silence spread over the groups. They stood without moving, hardly breathing, as they watched Marlowe cross the narrow strip to the mine's mouth, plunge inside.

THE shaft ran into the hillside almost parallel, slanting downward gradually. A little tram line, over which the cars of coal were hauled, lay down the middle of the tunnel. As Marlowe swung inside, the tunnel seemed to smack its lips, then darkness swallowed him. He snapped on his flash.

The white spray of light that gleamed on the steel rails, showed the small cross ties blackened with coal dust. The walls of the tunnel pressed closely around him, seemed to push near and nearer as he went deeper. The darkness seemed tangible, intense, pressing closely about him. He could hear his soft crunching footfalls in the thick coal dust, a sound that seemed to weave and quiver in the dank, unmoving air.

Marlowe felt a strange, unreasoning fear clutch at his lungs; the fear of nameless things that comes to many persons underground or shut in by narrow walls. He shook his head. "Claustrophobia," he thought. "I always did hate to go underground."

But there was more than claustrophobia to fear here, under millions of tons of rock and coal and earth. Something had happened to a man here, something strange, unexplained had tortured, perhaps killed him. What had caused the man to scream horribly—and equally horribly, to cease screaming? An animal, perhaps? But what sort of beast would make its lair hundreds of feet underground?

He flung the light along the wall to his right. Twenty feet ahead a deeper blackness clung to the wall. The mouth of the abandoned shaft. His right hand went to his coat pocket, came out clutching the automatic.

At the entrance to the unused shaft Marlowe paused, flicked the light down the tunnel. In the intense darkness the white beam seemed to travel interminably through empty space. There was no track in this shaft, which slanted down at a sharper angle than the other. The floor was rough, uneven but so filled with coal dust that the rough spots threw no shadows, and the ground looked smooth and oily.

Beyond the light, darkness crouched like a black beast about to spring.

Marlowe turned into the shaft, went down it. Abruptly he halted. His heart stopped for a moment, then pounded against his ribs. From somewhere ahead had come a sound, a low rippling noise without form, whispering into silence. Marlowe's ears strained, the tiny muscles back of his ears grew taut.

He drew a deep lungful of dank air, released it slowly. "Damn it," he said aloud. "I'm getting jumpy as Wilson. Nerves, I suppose. And over nothing. I forgot there's a creek up here, with water rippling in it."

A flat echo beat back against his ears. He had not realized that he had been whispering until the echo had come to him. Through thin lips he laughed hoarsely, without humor. Flicking the light ahead of him from wall to wall, he went forward.

This was where the tunnel ended, on the side of an underground stream. To the right and left of the tunnel, Marlowe knew, ledges lay alongside the stream. The Negro must be on one of those ledges. And along that ledge, too, must be the thing that had made him shriek in agony.

Marlowe's fingers went hard around the butt of the automatic. Whatever it was, he'd find out in the next five seconds.

His light glinted on the slick, oily waters of the creek, along what he could see of the ledge, eyes straining at the darkness. Then he stepped out of the tunnel's mouth onto the edge of the creek.

Marlowe's light swept to the right, stopped. The muscles along his jaw jerking, his heart feeling swollen and still, Marlowe staggered backward as though sheer horror had struck its hairy paw against his chest.

THE white spray of light showed the body of Reilly lying naked, horribly

contorted and grotesque beside the edge of the stream. The body was wet, glistening, and water had darkened the ledge under it.

Then, as Marlowe staggered back, something slimy and snake-like struck at his face from the darkness. Marlowe felt it strike his temple, slither across his cheek. Cold, creeping chills tingled from his face to his spine, and down his back. Jerking up his gun, he spun on his heel, sent the shaft of light searching the darkness.

Abruptly the light stopped. Every muscle in Marlowe's body taut, he stared at the cloud of smoke that completely hid one end of the low, vault-like space beside the stream. It was a heavy, impenetrable murk. And through the dead, unmoving air it writhed slowly upward into darkness. Marlowe flicked his light to the low ceiling and watched the smoke bank against it crawl along the coal like a live thing.

The air tore from Marlowe's lungs in a gasp of agony. The right side of his face where the formless, snake-like thing had struck seemed to burst into flames! Hot pain ripped his cheek and forehead.

Instinctively he jerked up his right hand, holding the gun, and rubbed his knuckles across his face. The barrel of the automatic scraped his forehead as he struck frantically at his cheek. His breath wheezed through his nostrils in agonized gasps.

Fighting the pain that flamed in his face, the terror that clutched like a skeleton hand at his heart and lungs, Marlowe held the gun ready and stepped to the edge of the swirling smoke. The flash, held close to the smoke, jabbed faintly through it. Marlowe swept it across the ground, then up. He stepped into the smoke, moved forward three slow steps. The vapor stung his eyes and nostrils; he held his breath and went on. The light glinted on something black, unmoving. Breath hissed from Marlowe's lungs. He had reached the end of the vault—and had found the dead body of Reilly, the smoke, and the horror of the slithering monster. And—firey pain. But what had caused all this?

Overhead were hundreds of feet of solid rock and earth. Yet that slow, writhing smoke had suddenly burst from out the solid earth!

The words of Wilson, the foreman, drummed in Marlowe's brain. Reilly's screams had faded "like—like he was bein' dragged down . . . . " And then, for no logical reason, Marlowe felt the blood in his veins grow thin and cold. The pain, the burning sensation was almost unbearable now on his cheek. Tears began to form in his eyes, and he stepped back through the smoke to the clearer air.

Fighting to keep his hands steady, to keep from screaming with the torture of his pain, Marlowe stepped to the edge of the creek, knelt by it and placed the light on the rock beside him. Focusing its beam across the oily black water, he splashed some on his face. The ice-cold drops soothed the pain.

The gun still tight in his right hand, finger on the trigger, Marlowe straightened. Whatever the strange, invisible thing that had struck silently, leaving terrific pain in its wake, whatever the invisible monster that had twisted and contorted and killed Reilly, it might strike again at any moment. Horribly, painfully, it might strike from the darkness, to leave him too a tortured, twisted corpse!

"It's *got* to be here somewhere!" he spoke the words aloud, desperately. "It can't dive through solid rock—" And then Marlow started abruptly, and air hissed through his thin, hard lips. For Reilly's corpse was naked—yet there were no clothes in the vault!

He stood up, looked closely at the body.

It was horribly swollen; the face a bloated mask of agony; the cheeks had puffed until the eyes were almost invisible.

The light moved over the rest of the body. The legs, arms, abdomen, were also swollen grotesquely, horribly. And this was the death that had struck at him —Ken Marlowe! The hair along the nape of Marlowe's neck rose stiffly and he felt his flesh grow prickly. "Good God!" he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "*God!*"

Slowly Marlowe bent, placed the flash so that the stream of light fell on the dead man's face and shoulders. He stuck the gun in his right coat pocket. Then he caught the man by the wrists, twisted, and the body straightened on its back. Straddling the man's legs, Marlowe jerked, ducked his right shoulder. The body sprawled across his shoulder.

With his free hand, Marlowe picked up the flash and headed toward the mouth of the abandoned shaft. His cheek rested against the cold, clammy side of the corpse.

The light stabbed through the absolute darkness, lay white against the uneven floor of the shaft, wavered across the black walls, as Marlowe went toward the main tunnel.

A GRAY blur of light marked the mouth of the tunnel. As Marlowe walked toward it the light grew brighter, more clearly outlined. He saw the miners standing in the white glare of the sunlight beyond the mouth of the tunnel. Frightened faces with wide, white eyes peered intently toward the shaft-mouth.

Marlowe stepped into the glare, the corpse across his shoulder. The men jerked instinctively back and eyes bulged toward Marlowe. Stepping across the tracks Marlowe stopped, bent over and slid the body from his shoulder to the ground. Crim and Brady sprinted toward him from the little office. Behind them came Wilson.

"Well," Marlowe said quietly, "so there actually *was* something to Wilson's story!"

For a moment neither man answered, but stood staring, shocked faces turned toward the body at their feet. Behind them Wilson moved closer slowly, peering with wide, terrified eyes.

Crim stepped across the body, beside which Brady had knelt, and looked closely at Marlowe. "What the hell happened to your face? It's got the strangest red markings—"

Brady stood up abruptly. "This man," he said nudging the body with the toe of his shoe, "has been choked!"

"What?" Marlowe snapped, ignoring Crim's question about his face. He dropped to his knees beside Ed Reilly. Around the man's throat and under his chin ran a dark welt, visible even after the abnormal swelling.

"Look at the way the eyes roll back," Brady said. "That's the way they do when they're strangled."

Slowly Marlowe got to his feet, still looking at the body. The lines of his jaw were hard, and the red spots on his cheek burned brightly against his dark skin. He raised cold eyes toward Brady, and then suddenly turned.

Pushing his way through the miners, came a tall, slender man. His wavy blond hair was slightly tousled, and a troubled curiosity showed in his deep blue eyes. Everet Starlin had been looking over Southern Coal for several days, but he had made no definite offer to buy. He had been in the office twice to talk the matter over with the owners, but he had always been evasive as to whom he represented.

A smile curled his full, sensuous lips as he looked up from the corpse to Marlowe. "He looks like he got caught in a

hornet's nest," Starlin said. "And you do too, for that matter. What happened? Why is he naked?"

Marlowe looked again at the corpse without answering. A sudden light flickered in his eyes. Starlin's shoes and the cuffs of his trousers were wet and blackened with coal dust!

The light died in Marlowe's eyes and he raised his face toward the buyer. "I'll be damned if I know," he said matter-of-factly. "He was naked when I found him. And his clothes had disappeared."

Starlin chuckled softly and his blue eyes danced. "Sounds like a good ghost story," he said.

"Yeah," Marlowe said. "It does. Only—it isn't. Not by a damned sight!"

He stepped across the body, headed toward the office.

"One minute, Mr. Marlowe," Earle Brady snapped.

Marlowe wheeled, and Brady glared at him with granite eyes. He shifted his gaze quickly to Crim, to the huddled miners listening intently, and back to Marlowe. "When I come out tomorrow," his voice clicked with cold precision, "my offer will be fifty thousand less than what I offered today. We can't pay exhorbitant prices for mines where there'll be trouble getting labor. Good-bye, Mr. Marlowe."

He nodded his head curtly at Crim, stepped to the tram line, went briskly down it toward the lot where he had left his automobile.

Marlowe jammed his hands hard into his pockets, the muscles about his jaw knotting into tight lumps. From troubled eyes he stared a long, silent moment at Crim. And then he laughed harshly.

"Well—that's that!" he bit out. "But I'm damned if I either understand it—or like it!"

Without another word he turned and hard-heeled back toward the office.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Stalks the Dark!

BEFORE a small mirror inside the frame shack, Marlowe studied the red welts on his face. Most of the pain had left, although a slight stinging sensation remained. He bathed the spots carefully with antiseptic, and was patting a towel against his face when Crim stepped inside the office and closed the door softly behind him.

Crim's round, pleasant face had gone suddenly hard and his eyes were a steely blue. He strode to his desk, flung one leg over a corner of it.

"Now what the hell's all this about, Ken?" he snapped. "The damn thing's getting me. And God knows it isn't helping us sell this mine!"

Marlowe turned slowly, shrugged his broad shoulders. "Just what I said, Crim—and a little more." He explained in detail his experience in the abandoned shaft.

When he had finished, Crim did not answer. He sat, staring down at the floor, the tips of his fingers drumming a soft tattoo on the desk-top. Then he said abruptly: "I wish to heaven I knew something about this bird Starlin. He waited until you had gone and then started asking me a lot of fool questions. He said he'd been down by Warrior Creek in one of the little mines down there."

Marlowe did not answer. He crossed the office, jerked his coat from the chair back and slipped into it. He stopped with his hand around the door-knob, turned and faced Crim.

"Listen," he snapped. "You remember what Wilson said several days ago about this Ahao Larvki, the fortune teller, telling some of the Negroes they were going to get hurt in this mine? Well, if I remember, Ed Reilly was one of those

he warned. Now how did he figure that out?"

Crim ceased drumming on the table. His blue eyes twinkled as he looked at Marlowe. "What are you doing, growing superstitious on me? But if you want to ask him what's down the abandoned shaft, you can come with me tonight. He's holding a seance and I promised my fiancée I'd take her. He's supposed to be good—if you like that sort of thing."

Marlowe touched his fingers softly to his right cheek, took them away and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. "Thanks, but I'm going to call on Ed's widow for a few minutes tonight and tell her she'll get her insurance all right, and any food she wants before then." Marlowe stuck the cigarette between his lips, ran a match down the door sill, fanned it across the end of the cigarette. "I reckon after all it doesn't take any deep crystal gazing to tell that somebody is likely to get hurt in a coal mine."

He turned slowly, stepped into the little yard about the office. Every man had disappeared. The late afternoon sun fell obliquely on the swollen shape beneath a blanket at the tunnel's mouth. Ed Reilly's distorted body lay there, like a sinister portent of doom.

THE door of Ed Reilly's house was open when Marlowe braked his car to a halt on the narrow street that ran before it. Through the open door lamp light spilled into the dark yard. Two Negroes stood in the doorway. There were evidently more inside.

But the voice that poured through the open door was not that of an Alabama Negro. It was crisp, hard, and high-pitched. Ringing, fervent, the words made Marlowe's eyes grow hard and narrow.

"If you want to protect yourselves, if you want to keep your husbands and yourself from being murdered and tortured as this poor woman's husband was murdered, you've got to organize. . . ." The man's voice went high and shrill. Marlowe recognized it. Bill Daniels, a labor agitator.

Ken Marlowe leaped to the doorway, thrust the men aside. On the far side of the room stood a white man. He was a tall, gaunt man, and the rose of consumption flamed in his cheeks. Between Marlowe and the agitator sat several Negro women and others were ranged around the walls.

As Marlowe flung hard, level eyes around the room, Bill Daniels stopped talking abruptly. And then Marlowe's eyes came to focus on a slim figure near the fireplace. Standing near the lamp on the mantlepiece, yellow light making bronze fires in her Titian hair, stood a girl.

THE girl's face was flushed about the cheeks. Full, scarlet lips and dark eyes set far apart gave the face an incredible beauty. A dark dress clung to the full curves of her body. She straightened consciously under his gaze, walked across the room to the man against the far wall.

With an effort, Marlowe took his eyes from the girl, and quietly asked: "Which one of you is Ed's wife?"

A stout, elderly negress stood up. Her eyes were red and in her hand she held a damp square of cloth. "I am Ed Reilly's wife. Me an' Ed, we—" She began to sob.

"I'm sorry about what happened today," Marlowe said. "None of us know how it happened, but we'll find out. I came to tell you that you'll get your insurance money from the company all right. And if you need any food or rent money before then, just come up to the office and see me."

The woman dabbed her eyes with the damp cloth. "I 'spect I'll need me some rent money, cause Ed—" She began to sob again.

"All right. You'll get it." Marlowe's eyes swept the rest of the room, stopped on the white man and girl standing silent against the far wall.

"And you can put in your speech," Marlowe said, his voice hard, "there'll be no more murders in that mine. We won't put the workers back in the mine until we find out what—what the thing was. We never had trouble there before, and we won't have it now."

The gaunt man took a step forward and his voice blazed. "Why didn't you make sure before you sent a man in there to be murdered that the shaft was safe? When you deliberately let your men be killed, it's murder! And you're the murderer!"

Ken Marlowe's lips jerked thin. Moving on the balls of his feet, he crossed the center of the room. His hands were knotted fists, waist high.

A crimson flush in his gaunt cheeks, the man stepped to meet him.

Then like a dark wind the girl swept forward, past the man. She stopped in front of Marlowe and her eyes were dancing flames. "You heard what my father called you! Murderer! You let your men be killed in your mines, and now . . . " Her voice broke suddenly, went low. "You want to fight him because he told you the truth—and he's—he's sick."

The hard lines around Marlowe's mouth relaxed. He started to speak but the man had caught his daughter by the arm, pulled her behind him. "Be quiet, Ellen," he said softly. "This is my affair."

In the gaunt lines about the man's mouth and in the almost crazy light that burned in his eyes Marlowe recognized the sincere fanatic. The man was certain he was right, and would go to any extreme to uphold his cause.

Abruptly the man began to cough, and the hard light went out of Marlowe's eyes. "I want you to know, sir," he said, "that what I told you a moment ago is true. I won't put the men back to work until I am certain they are safe."

The man bowed slightly. "I hope you are sincere. But there's another question I'd like to ask you, here, in front of your employees. Why . . . . "

He halted, his mouth still open, his eyes growing suddenly large. A soft, thumping noise sounded in the chimney. Marlowe spun on his heel. His eyes flicked across the faces of the miners to where the yellow glow of the lamp glinted strangely.

Something was sliding down the chimney, thumping at the sides. Soot fell in black flakes on the open hearth.

Then into the open fireplace slid black feet and legs. The feet slid downward, touched the hearth. The knees, barely visible below the top of the fireplace, bent slightly, caught against the brick, stopped.

Air burst from Ken Marlowe's lungs. "God!" he breathed.

The naked feet and legs were puffed and grotesque; horribly swollen.

A Negro woman screamed wildly, flung up her hands, smashed over backward in her chair. With hoarse shouts the men leaped for the door, splintering chairs as they flung them against the wall. Barely conscious of the mad rush which shook the floor under them, they stared with popping eyeballs at the swollen legs and feet propped in the empty fireplace.

Before he moved, Marlowe knew there was no life in those grotesque legs and ankles. Knew that the thing which had killed Ed Reilly had also killed this man!

With one stride Marlowe reached the chimney, caught the ankles, pulled.

Soot burst into the fireplace, swirled along the hearth. The body of a naked man fell with a soggy noise into the room. The head clicked back against the bricks of the chimney with a loud cracking sound. It was an old Negro, his face swollen almost beyond recognition. Marlowe's tongue clicked against his teeth with a hissing sound. It was another of his miners!

Two of his men now had been tortured to death—and the shrieks of one and the body of the other had been used to frighten the rest of his laborers.

Now it would be impossible to put them back to work in the mines until this fiendishness had been completely cleared up or forgotten. What could anyone hope to gain by these barbarous murders?

Behind him Marlowe heard the girl gasp.

Spinning, Marlowe stared at Bill Daniels who stood watching him with fevered eyes. He had been attempting to stir up trouble among the laborers, asking them to strike. Well—this would get the men out of the mines!

LIKE a man flung from a catapult Ken Marlowe hurtled out the door. There, he twisted around to look at the roof of the little house. The chimney ran up the right wall and against it leaned an old ladder. Marlowe sprinted to the back of the house. Nothing there.

Some man had brought this body here, climbed that ladder, and flung the body down the chimney. There was no other way possible. "The dead don't walk," Marlowe whispered under his breath.

A number of footprints showed dully in the gray blanket of dust made visible by his flash. Even among the mingling of prints the marks of heavy-heeled shoes were plain at the foot of the ladder.

Marlowe whistled soundlessly. He flung the finger of light along the tracks, tracing them. A double set of footprints led from where the weeds of a vacant lot joined the small yard—and then the tracks returned.

He switched off the light and stood, body tense, staring into the darkness. For fifty yards the weed-grown lot lay flat, empty. Beyond the lot a serrated line of trees showed black against the graying sky. A full moon crouched just under the horizon, and would soon be swaying up into the sky.

Marlowe started on a run across the lot toward the trees, his fingers clenching the butt of his pocketed automatic.

"The man must be mad, stark mad!" The words beat into Marlowe's brain as he ran. That part of the country had seen crazy murderers before, but never one who followed this inhuman, fantastic method.

Yet, even as his lips formed the words Marlowe knew that he was chasing no insane killer. There was some monstrous plan back of the whole macabre affair. Why did it always strike when there were crowds of Negroes about? When Marlowe himself was nearby?

Marlowe slowed down and stepped slowly into the fringe of trees. The ground here was a pool of ebony shadows cast by foliage overhead. He stood for a long moment, the little muscles back of his ears taut as he strained for sound.

Then, spinning silently, the gun leaping from his pocket, he flattened himself against a tree trunk. A dark shadow was coming across the lot toward him.

Marlowe slid along the tree until the trunk was between him and the sound of the running steps. Eyes probing the darkness he saw a blacker shadow swaying in the flat darkness of the weed-

grown lot. It seemed to move with a floating, rocking motion, as though it were being drawn through the air, but he could hear the sound of shoes on the hard-baked earth, the swish of cloth against weeds.

The gun moved slowly, came chest high, centered on the dark figure halfway between the trees and the dull spots of light that marked the miners' cabins. The crook of Marlowe's forefinger rested hard against the trigger. A full moon rocked one edge above the horizon, and gray light seeped across the weed-grown lot.

MARLOWE'S lips broke their thin line and air pushed into his lungs. His finger went lax on the trigger. "God!" he breathed, "I almost shot her!"

In the moonlight he could see the pale blur of Ellen Daniels' face. He stuck the gun in his pocket, stepped from behind the tree. The girl saw him move, stopped in her tracks, gasping.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Oh!" her breath came in a long sigh of relief. "You frightened me."

Marlowe stepped close to her, stood looking down into her face. "Why did you come out here?" he repeated gruffly.

"I—I—" she dropped her eyes. "I thought you were someone else."

Sickening fear touched Marlowe's heart. Surely the girl could not be connected with this ghoulish business. Marlowe asked: "Who did you think I was?"

For a moment the girl did not answer. Then she raised her eyes squarely to Marlowe's. "My father."

An electrical thrill tingled through Marlowe, but he kept his voice steady. "Your father? I left him in the house with you."

Hesitantly the girl looked down at her laced fingers. "If you haven't seen him, I'll go back," she said.

Marlowe caught her by the shoulders. "Why did you think I was your father? Where did he go?"

"I don't know. He ran out of the house right after you. He said he was going to look for whoever dropped that —that body down the chimney. I didn't want to stay in there—alone. I went out in the yard. There was someone going this way and I thought it was father; so I followed."

Marlowe laughed, a short, harsh sound. He had stood still, waiting for the killer —and had let the murderer escape. Disappointment was bitter in his mouth. He had been so close on the heels of this fiend and of the solution of this grisly mystery, and now he had let it slip away from him!

The girl's voice was soft. "I thought you were very nice back there, and I'm sorry for what I said. But I'm—I'm worried about father. He's not well anyway. Lately he's been hanging around your mine. Going out there at night and coming home all muddy and wet. I wish I knew what the trouble was."

Marlowe felt the corners of his mouth twitch. He remembered the wild, fanatical look in the man's eyes. "You say he comes home all wet?" He tried to keep his voice cool, matter-of-fact.

"Yes. There's something—something terrible going to happen. I can feel it in the very air. That—that man falling down the chimney tonight—the other one that was killed in the mine today. I don't know what it all means, or what father has to do with it, but I'm afraid. He's been carrying a gun ever since he went to see that spiritualist. He never did that before. And yesterday—"

Her voice snapped and her hands clutched suddenly at Marlowe's coat.

Too late Marlowe heard the snakelike

hiss above his head. It brushed his face, settled about his neck, tightened. It jerked backward, cutting off his breath, flinging him headlong to the earth.

Marlowe hit the ground writhing and tried to struggle up again, but the dark shadow drove him back, forced him down. He caught a short glimpse of ferocious eyes glaring from behind a black mask, the glint of moonlight on metal.

A terrified scream burst in the night air, tore at Marlowe's ears. He heard Ellen Daniels stumbling backward. His gun caught in his coat pocket as he tore at it.

Something cracked loudly over his eyes. Dark shadows whirled dizzily about him, crashed into his brain. And he was out.

CHAPTER THREE

"So Soon a Corpse!"

HIS head ached fiercely and little lights danced before his eyes. Marlowe rolled over, groaned, strained his eyelids. He was lying inside the fringe of trees. He pushed his hands against the leafy earth, sat up. The ground wavered slightly, settled. Marlowe staggered to his feet, cursing bitterly.

"Walked into their trap like a damn half-wit," he said aloud. He stuck his hand in his pocket; the gun was gone. He stepped to the edge of the trees and looked across the vacant lot.

His brain cleared swiftly as remembrance stabbed him. Ellen had screamed just before he was hit over the head. He had heard her stumbling. "God!" he whispered. "They must have got her!"

He started across the vacant lot, his fists clenched into hard mauls. He was halfway to Ed Reilly's before his fury cooled enough for him to realize that he had no idea where to look for the girl and her captors.

A dozen frightened-eyed negroes were grouped on the sidewalk in front of Ed Reilly's house. They began to draw away when Marlowe swung around the side of the house and went toward them.

"Listen," the mine owner barked, "have you seen that girl or her father? Or anyone else around here since—since I left?"

Dead silence answered him while the men huddled together. Then one of them spoke. "Naw, sir. Us ain't seen nobody, ain't heard nobody. Ain't nobody been around here."

"All right." Marlowe stepped across the sidewalk to his car, slid in, threw the switch. On the first corner he swung to the right toward Underwood Avenue, driving slowly.

Abruptly Marlowe's hands closed hard over the wheel. There was one chance left! Ellen had said something about her father going to the spiritualist—and Ahao Larvki had predicted the death of some of the men in the mine. Perhaps . . .

Marlowe laughed deep in his throat. Hell! Probably wasn't even the same spiritualist. But he jammed his foot down on the gas. It was the only possible chance, and he wouldn't overlook it.

He turned off Underwood and went down Eighth Street toward Avenue F, then up the Avenue, running fast. Unconsciously Marlowe's teeth ground together as an appalling vision of the girl's soft body, twisted and swollen, flashed through his mind.

Why, if this fiend was so willing to murder and kidnap, had he not killed Marlowe when he lay unconscious? Perhaps he had believed him dead. Well, that was one mistake!

Marlowe tugged his car into a small

side street. At the first corner a dull arclight glowed and candle flies circling it threw dancing shadows on the dusty street. Just beyond the intersection Marlowe pulled his car to the curb, stopped, got out.

There were only two houses in the block, both on the right, one on each corner and separated by a vacant lot overgrown with weeds. It was the house on the far corner, set back from the street, in which Ahao Larvki communed with the spirits.

MARLOWE started diagonally across the vacant lot toward the soothsayer's house. There were no cars in front, but if Crim and his fiancée, Edith Waters, were here, their car was probably parked on the other side of the house.

Tall weeds swished against Marlowe's trousers legs as he walked. The moon was higher now and he could see the bare outline of the house, the blank, blind windows except for one far back where a tiny slit of green light showed.

Marlowe reached the side of the house, slipped along it toward the lighted window. Standing on tip-toe Marlowe put his eye to the slit of light. Heavy curtains hung inside the window several inches away from the sill. The light slipped through between them, but in such a way that Marlowe, standing outside, could see nothing of the interior.

Marlowe cursed silently and turned back toward the front of the house. There, he stopped at the first window.

For a long moment he stood motionless, his ears pricked to catch the slightest noise. The house might have been a grave for all the sound that came from it.

The window was about chin-high. Marlowe caught the screen between lean, hard fingers; pushed. It slid up silently. He pushed on the window and it moved upward on oiled pulleys.

Ken Marlowe rested strong hands on the window sill. His knees bent slightly, then he jumped, and crawled into the room.

The room where he stood was almost pitch dark. The window showed a gray-blue square against the moonlight. To the right was a door beneath which showed a slit of the sickly green light he had seen from outside. With outstretched hands, Marlowe inched his way toward it.

A woman's nervous laughter jarred through the dead silence and Marlowe's hand snaked for his coat pocket, stopped as he remembered his gun was gone. A man's deep voice murmured words unintelligible to the mine operator half crouched there in the darkness. Then a grim smile twisted the corners of his mouth. His nerves were getting jumpy. One of Larvki's clients had laughed, nothing else.

Through Marlowe's mind flashed that horrible moment when the invisible thing had struck him, the writhing smoke bursting from solid rock, the terrific pain that had flashed from nowhere to strike at his face and the noose that had come out of the darkness to snatch the breath from him.

The grim smile still twisting his lips, Marlowe edged toward the light. In the darkness he made out folding glass doors and a few inches beyond them a heavy black curtain through which the light fell.

Folding his hand around the door-knob he twisted softly, pulled the door slightly ajar. He knelt, caught one side of the curtain between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, pulled it slightly back.

The room beyond was lit with a ghastly, dim green light. At the far end an open fire burned, its yellow and red flames dancing strangely in the sickly green of the concealed lighting. And to the right of the fire, in deep shadows, sat a man dressed in long black robes. Near Mar-

lowe, with their backs half turned toward him, five persons sat in straight chairs. He recognized Crim and Edith Waters. The next couple he did not know. And in the fifth chair, leaning tensely forward, was Everet Starlin.

ABRUPTLY the man near the fire stood up, walked into the center of the room where the light was brighter. He was short, with wide shoulders from which his black robe fell in rippling folds to the floor. His face was dark, with thick lips; heavy, but with well shaped features. Hawaiian, or South Sea Islander, Marlowe thought.

His voice rolled muscially when he spoke, but there was a mystic, strained note in it. "I am ready now for the Mr. Crim's and the Mr. Starlin's questions," he said. "I will take them both at the same time. Write them as the others have."

Staring through the curtains Marlowe watched Crim and Starlin take paper and fountain pens from their pockets. Crim was writing on the back of one of the company envelopes. As the other couple turned to watch Crim with wide eyes, Marlowe could see their faces. A young couple, probably mill folk.

The questions written, both men, evidently following directions Larvki had given the others, folded the notes in small squares, put them in envelopes, sealed the envelopes. Larvki stepped back to the fire, picked up a pair of tongs, came back and held them open first before Crim and then Starlin, letting each man place his note between the tongs. Then without having ever touched the envolopes, he carried the tongs back to the open fire, thrust the envelopes into the blaze.

The flames licked at the paper, shot up higher. The paper curled blackly as it burned, fell in tiny fragments into the fire.

WHEN it had finished burning Larvki set the tongs beside the fire, took his seat again. As he sat down the tongs slipped on the hearth, fell with a ringing clatter. Larvki leaned forward, straightened the tongs, his features twisting strangely.

Kneeling there, peering into the ghostly, lighted room, Marlowe felt cold fear tingle along his back. Edith Waters' fingers twisted nervously in front of her. Crim and Starlin were also leaning forward, staring at the man in the shadows, tense, expectant.

Marlowe's eyes fastened hard on Laryki. He wondered how the man was going to fake answers to questions he could not possibly know. Suddenly Larvki gasped, stood up straight in the shadows. His voice leaped through the room, talking swiftly in that strained, far-away tone. "You are advised to sell your property at once, Mr. Crim, and at any thing you can get for it. There will always be trouble in that mine. One man has died —no! I see two dead bodies! And there are the ghostly outlines of others yet to come." The voice died abruptly, like the sudden end of a bell's ringing and taut silence held the room. Marlowe's fingers had gone hard, clutching the curtain.

How could this man know of what had happened in the mine? How could he know of the second death when the papers did not know, when Crim did not know—when Marlowe himself had not known an hour before? There were only two possible answers. Either the man *was* able to see spirits, or . . .

Ahao Larvki was speaking again, and the dead, far-away voice held an excited quiver. "Mr. Crim, you have a partner, a business associate. He is nearby—and in great danger. I see the outline of his form near those of the dead men. I see his automobile wrecked!"

Marlowe felt a chill wave sweep along his spine and his heart clogged in his throat. Could this man know he was nearby? This man who had predicted the death of the miners—now predicted the death of Ken Marlowe! What supernatural power did he have that enabled him to read messages that had been burned?

Marlowe's lips twisted grimly. He'd know something about it before this forecasted death came true!

He tensed himself to fling the curtain aside, but stopped as the voice of Ahao Larvki came again with a wild rush.

"And you, Mr. Starlin, your question has to do with the same thing. But you will never know. It is good that Mr. Crim did not seek so much information; even now perhaps he will not escape. But—" the voice dropped to a sound like the soft beating of wings in the air—"I see your body among the dead, Mr. Starlin. So soon, so very soon, nothing but a lifeless corpse!"

EVERET STARLIN surged to his feet and Marlowe could see his big frame trembling. Then he laughed hoarsely. "You may be right, Prophet," he sneered. "But before I bump off I think I'll take a look at those tongs you burn the notes with." He strode past Larvki to the fireplace, picked up the tongs.

Through the narrow part in the curtains Marlowe stared at Everet Starlin, watched him go over the tongs minutely. Finally, holding them by the head, he raised baffled eyes toward Ahao Larvki. "They look all right," he admitted grudgingly.

His inscrutable expression never changing, Larvki said, "If you doubt they are sound, jar them on the hearth. If there is nothing wrong, perhaps you will believe me."

Twice Everet Starlin rapped the iron tongs on the hearth. The dull sounds rang with muffled echoes against the curtained walls. Then, his face suddenly growing livid, he dropped them. He staggered slightly as he went back to his chair, slumped into it. "Is there any one else who doubts?" the mystic said quietly.

Marlowe heard the words break from his lips before he knew he was going to speak. "Yes."

He flung the curtain aside, leaped into the room, straight toward Larvki. The mill girl screamed shrilly as she saw Marlowe's face, a ghastly color under the green light. He went toward Larvki, moving on the balls of his feet, fingers claw-like at his side.

The medium sprang back, startled. "Who—who are you?" he cried.

Marlowe caught him by the shoulders with lean, hard fingers. They were broad, muscular shoulders, but Marlowe saw the grimmace of pain on the swarthy face as his fingers tightened. "You ought to ask a spirit," Marlowe snarled. "But I'll tell you. I'm the man you said was nearby and going to get killed. And I want to find out how you know so much." The man flinched as Marlowe's fingers dug like steel hooks into his shoulders.

Frank Crim had jumped to his feet as Marlowe stepped into the room. Now he put a hand on his associate's arm. "What the hell, Ken? Where did you come from?"

Before Marlowe answered the spiritulist spoke, his voice cool. "If the gentleman doubts that I speak true, let him look behind him—at Mr. Starlin."

Flinging the medium from him, Marlowe spun on his heel. Everet Starlin was doubled over in his chair, his arms clasped about his belly. His face was dead white and against the pallor of his cheeks the flush of his lips showed strangely. His mouth was partially open

and his breath came in wheezing gasps as he twisted in agony on his chair.

The mill girl had turned to look at him. Her mouth flew open, lips trembling before the scream burst from them. She staggered from her seat, clutching frantically at the young man with her.

With one leap Marlowe reached Starlin, caught his shoulders. "What's the trouble?" he rasped.

Starlin struggled for breath. "Get me out of here," he gasped. "A hospital! I—I'm sick!"

Everet Starlin was a big man, but Marlowe caught him up in his arms like a baby, brushed through the curtains and out the door. Moonlight made the steps a gray blur. Marlowe raced down them, along the sidewalk toward his car.

His arms were aching with the weight of the man before he reached the car and slid him on the back seat. Leaping under the wheel Marlowe flipped the switch, jabbed the starter and raced toward the Hillman Hospital. Tires whined as Marlowe pulled his car into Twentieth street, screamed again as he jammed on the brakes outside the emergency door of the Hillman.

Two porters were running down the walk before Marlowe swung out of the car. Without questions they dragged Starlin from the back seat, carried him up the walk. And Ken Marlowe, his jaw set, followed.

In the emergency room a white-coated interne jerked open Starlin's coat and shirt, put a stethoscope to the man's chest. For a moment he leaned over him, then turned slowly to Marlowe.

"The man's dead," he said quietly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Larvki & Co.

KEN MARLOWE stood looking into the doctor's eyes unbelievingly; afraid to believe what he knew to be true. Everet Starlin was dead! The soothsayer had said he would die—and, apparently healthy a few minutes before, he had died. And the fortune-teller had said that he, Marlowe, would die soon. He felt his heart freeze in his chest. Three men before him had been marked for death by this seer; and three men had died, all of them horribly. Now he was the fourth. . . .

Marlowe fought to keep his voice steady. "How did he die, Doctor? What was wrong with him?"

The interne moved slow eyes to the body on the operating table, then back to Marlowe. "You'll have to tell me something about the case. When did he grow sick? How did he say he felt?"

"He was just sitting still," Marlowe said softly. He was afraid to tell the doctor too much; anger was flaming in him and he didn't want the police holding him for questioning. Not if what he suspected was true. "Suddenly he grabbed his belly," Marlowe went on. "He said he was sick. That's all. I rushed him here."

The interne rubbed the fingers of his right hand hard across his chin. "Of course I can't say certainly without an autopsy, but the indications are that he had ptomaine poisoning. It seldom strikes so suddenly, but it has been known to do so. Do you know what he had been eating?"

Marlowe shook his head. He said, his voice heavy: "Is it possible to give a person ptomaine poisoning any way except through their food?"

The doctor's hand froze on his chin. "What do you mean?" His eyes snapped.

Marlowe's mind was racing back over the things he had seen that night. He didn't want the cops now. He'd got himself into this thing and he'd get out alone, or not at all! "I don't mean anything

in particular," he said softly. "I was just wondering."

The doctor, still watching him curiously, took his name and address and Starlin's name. As he drove away from in front of the hospital, he saw the interne standing on the sidewalk, taking down his license tag number. Marlowe smiled grimly. By the time the interne had made that autopsy and learned whatever he was going to learn, Marlowe would be ready for the cops—if they came.

He turned into Avenue F again and started down it, Marlowe uttered a sudden exclamation. It had flashed into his mind as he watched the doctor pressing his fingers against his chin.

"Damned crook," he muttered. "So that's the way Larvki read those burned notes! He simply clamped the tongs on the envelopes where they held the notes, so they wouldn't burn. Then when the tongs slipped down on the hearth and he straightened them, he picked up the notes, palmed them and read. Clever. Too damned clever."

Marlowe's knuckles whitened around the wheel. "And if he faked that . . . . " he whispered aloud.

His brain was racing so that his eyes, staring straight ahead, did not see the big green automobile lurch from the shadows at the intersection of Eighth Street and the Avenue until it was almost on him. Furiously he jerked at the wheel. Tires screamed shrilly as the machine rocked to one side. The other car swerved, but not enough.

He felt the smash jar through his machine, fling it against the curb. The car rocked dangerously, came down on all four wheels, the front tire exploding like a shotgun.

Cursing, Marlowe cut off the motor. Well, the forecast wreck had happened all right, but Larvki had been wrong about the rest. He wasn't dead—yet! He pushed open a door, stepped out.

A red tail light was vanishing a block away on the Avenue.

Quickly, Marlowe looked over his car. The right rear fender was crumpled against the tire, but could be pulled out. The left front tire was blown. He went to work on it, moving rapidly, and cursing through clenched teeth.

UNDER the arc light, a block from the house of Ahao Larvki, the circling candle flies threw weaving shadows that danced on the dusty street. Ken Marlowe braked his automobile to a halt just outside the dim circle of light, got out. Rapidly, he went down the unpaved sidewalk toward the house of the spiritualist.

As he went, feet thudding on the unpaved walk, his hands crushed into rock-like balls. Larvki had faked the note reading. Then he must have faked his predictions. And there was only one way! He was connected with this fiendish business! Marlowe straightened his fingers, knotted them again. At last he had something to work on, some chance to find what lay back of this.

When he saw the pale green glow sliding narrowly through the back window, Marlowe cut across the weed-grown lot. Outside the window he had entered some two hours earlied he stopped. The window was still raised. Once more he flipped himself in as he had done before, slid across the darkened room to the black curtains. Muffled words came through the closed doors. Marlowe slowly pulled the door open, pushed the curtains stealthily apart.

In the next room three masked men were grouped in front of the open fire. And standing facing them, her back to the fire, head high, eyes defiant, was Ellen Daniels! Marlowe's breath came in a slow hiss.

Black, hood-like masks, with narrow

slits for eyes, hid the faces of the men, muffled their words as they spoke. One of them had the girl by the wrist. Marlowe saw her flinch slightly as the man tightened his grip.

"All right," the man said, "we're getting damned tired of playing with you. You know what your old man is doing—or trying to do. And that's what we want to know. So come clean, sister, and talk fast!" He wrenched her wrist.

Ken Marlowe swung his shoulders toward the curtain. Then he stopped. Hidden, he might learn the secret behind this murderous affair. What part did this girl and her fanatical father play?

"I've told you," she gasped. "I don't know what he's after. He never told me."

"Well, maybe you can guess," the man to the side of her sneered. His hand flicked out of the shadows toward her face, then dropped without touching her. Marlowe saw something glint in his fingers.

For a moment the girl stood perfectly still, Marlowe saw her eyes darken with fear and saw her lips quiver as she fought for control. Then she screamed.

She jerked both hands free, began to beat frantically at her face. The man at her side clamped his hands over her mouth and muffled her cries. Agony twisted her body. Yet the man's hand had never touched her!

Ken Marlowe hurled aside the curtains, dove toward the group like a mad man. The tall man spun to face him, his hand flashing toward his left shoulder. Marlowe's shoulder struck him, flinging him backward. They crashed into the man in the shadows, bowling him over like a tenpin, and all three smashed to the floor.

Twisting, Marlowe lashed out with his fist toward a mask, felt his knuckles jar on flesh and bone. He heard Ellen scream. He heaved his body to the right, rolling across the floor.

The roar of a gun jarred the room, echoed crashingly between the curtained walls. Leaping to his feet, Marlowe saw the man who was standing before the fire swing the gun to cover him, saw Ellen grasp the barrel. The gun roared.

With one sweep of his left hand Marlowe caught up a chair, drove forward holding it shield-like before him. The chair cracked into the gun, knocking it from the man's hand.

ELLEN screamed again, and Marlowe spun sideways, flinging the chair as he spun. The man he had tackled was on his knees, tugging at his gun. The chair struck him in the chest, hurling him backward.

The man before the fire dived for the gun on the floor. Marlowe kicked it viciously, and it skidded across the room toward the curtains. He grasped Ellen by the wrist, jerked her with him as he dived after the gun, shoved her through the curtains into the next room.

There was no time to look around. Marlowe flung himself sideways and down, hit the floor rolling, the gun in his hand. A gun thundered and he heard the thud of the bullet as it hit the wall over his head. Then he was on his knees, bringing up the pistol he had knocked from one of the masked men.

The room was empty.

Marlowe leaped to his feet. A dark stain of blood showed on the floor near the fireplace. The smear looked black in the shadows. Marlowe smiled grimly. One of the men's shots hadn't missed altogether. It had struck one of his confederates.

He heard a door at the back of the house slam. Flinging the curtain aside, Marlowe leaped into the next room, dived for the door. Something struck his legs

and he crashed to the floor. Cursing the chair he had stumbled over, he staggered to his feet, felt for the door. His hands ran across the smooth walls frantically, found the knob, twisted. The door was locked.

Drawing back, Marlowe flung himself against the door, splintered the flimsy wood. Then he stopped, cursing. A half block away he heard a motor burst into action, the grinding of gears.

Standing where the curtains framed her in soft black folds, Ellen watched Marlowe come into the room. Three small red welts dotted her left cheek, and from them inflamed lines spider-webbed. Marlowe stopped before her, his eyes dark with anxiety. The girl put one hand gently to her cheek. "I don't know what happened," she said. "One of those men just waved his hand in front of me, and —and my face seemed to burst into flame. It doesn't hurt much now, but it's so weird, so strange, it frightens me."

Marlowe wheeled, went rapidly but carefully over the floor in front of the fire where the girl had stood. And he found nothing.

He straightened, frowning, his eyes black fires. What devilish torture was this that could strike invisibly, vanish without leaving a trace, yet, given time, could work horrible, agonizing death? He thought of the two swollen, contorted bodies.

This wasn't the same thing that had struck Everet Starlin so suddenly and fiercely. Marlowe pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, stepped to the fireplace, picked up the tongs, holding them with the handkerchief. Starlin had held them by the top when Larvki had told him to strike them on the floor.

Marlowe rapped them on the hearth. A white needle flickered into the light on the top, vanished.

So! Pricked in the tough palm of his hand and with his mind fixed on the sound they would make, Starlin had not noticed the tiny prick. But why—why had they killed Starlin? What had been his connection with this wild nightmare of death and torture?

Marlowe turned to the girl, caught her hands in his. "We'd best get away from here before the police come; some neighbor has probably phoned them and there is too much to explain."

He led her through the curtains, through the darkened room, and out the front door where the full moon, high in the sky, spilled a white and mystic light along the dusty street.

The machine was where Marlowe had left it. He helped the girl in, walked around to the other side, crawled under the wheel.

"I—I'm very glad you weren't hurt in the wreck," the girl said.

Marlowe turned in his seat to face her, his eyes wide with amazement. "The wreck." he repeated. "How did you know there had been a wreck?"

"The man that knocked you over the head chloroformed me, took me to that house. When I came to I found two men with me. Later the third came in and he told the others he had run into you but hadn't turned your car over."

Marlowe laughed harshly as he started his car. "So it was all a fake, the whole business. Well, at last I know one man that's in it. Now all I've got to do," his smile was without humor, "is find Larvki and find his confederates and find the reason back of all these murders!"

As they backed under the street light and turned around, Marlowe saw the girl's wide, dark eyes fixed on him, saw their troubled look and the quiver on her lips. "I—I wish you wouldn't try to find out too much about this. It's dangerous, horrible," she said softly.

Marlowe's knuckles whitened on the

wheel. "I'll be careful," he said grimly, "after I have a little talk with Ahao Larvki and company!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Writhing Death

SLANTING sunlight fell in a golden bar through the window of the field office of Southern Coal, shone on the desk top and on Frank Crim's folded hands, but left his face in shadow as he stared up at his partner.

Both men were tired; they had been up since before dawn, had made their way to the little house recently occupied by Ahao Larvki. The house was empty, the front door standing ajar, just as Marlowe and Ellen had left it. The two men had gone at once to the deserted mine.

Marlowe's face was gray with fatigue and nervous strain as he met Crim's glance with troubled eyes.

"I wish to God," Marlowe was saying, "that Brady would come on out here! I want to see him."

"What's the rush?" Crim asked. "You interested in selling today?"

"No," Marlowe said slowly. "But I'm interested in the man who wants to buy. He wants to get the mine cheap, doesn't he?"

Crim laughed softly. "Of course, but so do a lot of other people. What are you driving at?"

Marlowe stuck his hand in his coat pocket, pulled out a cigarette, thrust it between his lips. He flicked a match with the end of his finger nail, touched the flame to the cigarette.

"I don't know exactly—yet. Give me time." He began to walk slowly back and forth across the office. A long gray ash grew on the cigarette and blue smoke trailed behind him.

For hours after he had taken Ellen home last night his brain had struggled vainly for some clue to this hellish business, for the reason back of it all. Why could anyone want to kill the men in his mine, torture them to a ghastly, horrible death? What connection had Ellen's father, the labor agitator, with this strange affair?

He lit another cigarette from the first, ground the butt under his toe. A third and fourth followed.

"Damn it!" Crim barked abruptly, "I wish to hell you'd get out of here to do your sherlocking. Not a man came to work today, and I sit here trying to figure out how to make a profit out of a mine we can't get anybody to work, and you keep pounding up and down the floor!"

Marlowe stopped, took the cigarette from his mouth, let the smoke crawl from between parted lips. "Okay," he said slowly. "You take care of the books. I'll get the mine to running again."

He went through the front door into the full sunlight. Outside he stood blinking against the bright daylight; he took a deep pull on his cigarette, blew the smoke against the big glass globe that circled the single light on an iron post in front of the office door. That was the only light left burning around the office at night.

In the bright morning the place had a strange quiet. There were no cars moving along the tram line, no checking man at the scales, not a human being in sight. On his way to the office that morning he had seen one of his miners, stopped to tell him there would be no work that day. The man had looked at him with fear-struck eyes.

"Naw, sir, dere ain't gonna be no work at dat mine fur me. Naw, sir, Ah ain't even livin' over heah no more. I'se movin' to Fairfiel'!" And the Negro had shuffled away with quick, nervous steps.

MARLOWE'S eyes moved along the tram line to the mouth of the mine and stopped. Standing in front of the mine, the sunshine a golden fire burning in her hair, was Ellen Daniels. Marlowe went across the little yard toward her.

She heard his steps on the dust-covered ground and turned. "I'm glad you're here," she said quickly.

Looking down at her Marlowe felt again the sheer power of her beauty. "What's the trouble?" he demanded. "You look worried." He wondered what she was doing at the mouth of the tunnel which lead to this macabre, underground mystery.

"Father came out here last night, and then again early this morning. He went down—down there. I couldn't stop him. He should have come out a long while ago, but he hasn't. I—I'm afraid . . . ."

Marlowe put his hands on her shoulders, felt the soft warmth of her flesh under his fingers. He tried to make his voice steady. "I don't think anything could have happened to your father." The words were heavy in his throat and he could see that Ellen knew he was lying. "I'll go down and look for him," he added.

Her lips opened slightly, stiffened, while wild fear leaped to her eyes. "Listen!" she gasped. "What's that?"

A faint, wailing, unearthly sound had stirred the black air of the tunnel. So faint it was Marlowe could not be certain he had heard it, yet he knew what had caused it, and the blood in his veins went thin and cold. It was the torn, agonized shriek of a man in unbearable pain.

Marlowe caught the girl by the arm, jerked her away from the tunnel mouth. He sprinted for the office and as he ran he heard the girl behind him.

Dashing through the open door Marlowe skidded to a halt beside his desk, jerked open the drawer. A gun lay where he had put it that morning, but the flashlight was gone.

He swore, sticking the gun in his pocket. He remembered now that Crim had said last night he wanted to take the flash home to work on his car. Marlowe whirled toward Crim's desk but his partner had stepped out. Beside the door was a lantern. Marlowe leaped to it, snatched it up, lit it.

Just outside the door Marlowe paused, wrenched the big globe from around the light on the iron pillar. He put it up to his head; it was big enough to slip over.

Ellen Daniels caught him by the hand. "I'm going with you," she said, her voice husky.

Marlowe took the globe from his head, said savagely: "No! Get in there and wait, I'll be back—with your father." He started at a run toward the mouth of the mine.

The girl came running after him. Marlowe whirled. "Damn it," he barked. "Go back. There's no telling what's in that hole. And you . . . . I . . . ."

She caught at his coat with both hands. "Don't you see?" she begged. "It's my —*my* father. I've *got* to go! If you won't take me, I'll follow!"

HOLDING the globe in one hand, the lantern in the other, Marlowe gazed at the girl for a split second, pride and fear for her clashing in his eyes. Dark terror showed in her face but her chin was held firmly high.

"All right," Marlowe said, "if you've got to come . . . ." Dropping the lantern he leaped past her, tore the screen from the window of the office, ripped the frame from it. Quickly he bent it box shaped, came back and dropped it over her head. He picked up the lantern.

"I don't know what it is down there," he said, "but it hits at the bare parts of the body."

At the mouth of the tunnel he slipped the large globe over his own head. Lantern in one hand, gun in the other, he plunged into the darkness, Ellen Daniels close beside him.

The lantern threw a large circle of yellow light around their feet, but ahead the darkness pressed like a gigantic wall about to crash down on them. The tram tracks glinted in the light which splashed about their feet. Two yards ahead tracks and light vanished as if the earth had swallowed them.

Marlowe could feel his heart hammering against his ribs as they went down the tunnel. Yesterday he had come down this same way, wondering what lay at the end. Now he knew that death and writhing torture awaited them at the mouth of the abandoned shaft.

Their steps made tiny whispering sounds in the thick coal dust. In the dead stillness of the tunnel the noises seemed to grow and to echo like dead voices from the narrow walls.

Marlowe caught the rim of the globe with the hand that held the lantern, lifted it from over his head. The girl stood holding the screen in her hands.

"What is it, Ken?" Her voice trembled, went quiet, and there was no sound except for the quick hissing of her breath.

"I want you to go back," Marlowe husked. "You've got no business down here. "It's . . . ."

Marlowe could feel the girl's hand clutching at his arm. "I *am* afraid," she whispered. "Horribly afraid. I—I feel that something terrible, something ghastly is going to happen. But"—and her hand tightened on Marlowe's arm—"I've *got* to go. If father's hurt, if he's—" Her voice broke sharply.

Marlowe raised the lantern so that the light fell full in the girl's face. Terror showed in the wide, dark eyes. "I've got to go, Ken," she repeated.

For a moment Marlowe held the lantern high, gazed into the girl's face. A calm fierceness seemed to band Marlowe with steel, and his fingers crushed hard around the butt of the automatic. By God! He'll see that nothing happened to this girl! If anything happened to her, he, Ken Marlowe, would wreck the thing even if it vanished where the smoke had come from —into the solid earth, and he had to tear the rocks apart!

Marlowe's voice was a low whisper when he spoke. "When we get out of here, Ellen, I—" He felt her hand tremble on his arm, knew that she understood.

He slipped the globe back over his head, lowered the lantern, and they moved deeper into the bowels of the hill.

THE light of the lantern fell softly around them, but did not stretch a finger into the darkness ahead. Madman or demon, whatever it was that lay waiting, the killer would stay shrouded in utter darkness until they had come within a few feet. Yet they stood plainly in the light. A sudden leap from the impenetrable blackness, and the thing would strike them down.

But, Marlowe remembered, this flaming pain struck invisibly even in the light. A man, the spiritualist perhaps, had waved his hand in front of Ellen's face and agony had seered her cheek like a white-hot iron. Yet the man had never touched her! And this torture that caused men to twist in agony and die lurked ahead in the darkness, waiting . . . .

The black mouth of the abandoned shaft yawned suddenly to their right, sloping downward. For a moment the two stood hushed in the entrance of the shaft, listening. Silence crowded against them so that their ear drums ached from the very soundlessness. The dank air lay dead and still, as still as the rotting body of a beast buried in an eternity of hideous

darkness. Yet Marlowe could feel in the darkness something lurking, waiting. . . .

Marlowe went slowly down the abandoned shaft, with the girl behind him. He could hear, above the muffled sound of his shoes, the heavy hammering of his heart. The vein above his left temple was pounding, and every nerve in him was as taut as a steel spring.

The yellow light rocked slightly as he walked, crawled faintly along the wall to his right. The left wall was hidden in the limitless night.

A black edge showed in the yellow circle. He had reached the end of the shaft. Breath suspended, Marlowe stepped past the shaft's mouth to the edge of the stream, the gun ready in his hand.

Hideous laughter jarred the dead air like the splitting of thousands of tons of rock overhead. The sound bounded along the low ceiling, across the black, still water, to return and crash at Marlowe's ears from every direction.

Wild terror struck at his brain. Madness leaped from the black pit in his belly to clutch bony fingers about his lungs, crushing them.

Marlowe swung up the lantern. The light spun along the rock edge of the stream, struck at the black water, faded.

On the edge of the stream lay the twisted, naked body of Bill Daniels!

In the split second that Marlowe stared, horrified, the man was convulsed in agony, twitched, went still. The swollen, contorted face stared up at Marlowe with a sickening leer.

Ellen Daniels screamed shrilly, rushed past Marlowe as he lay the lantern down near the body of the dead man. "Father!" she cried. "Father!" She snatched the screen from her head, knelt beside him.

Something struck gently at the glass globe about Marlowe's head. He saw a black shadow slip across the globe, sliding around his neck. Marlowe jerked up his hand, struck a wet round thing.

A terrific snatch tore at the glass around his head. It caught under his chin, snapping his head back, jerking him upward, off his feet. He hung swaying in the air.

MADNESS writhed in Marlowe's head, held his brain in an icy clamp. Stark terror surged through him, making him unconscious of the pain that wrenched his neck. Four bloody slits burst into the palm of his left hand where his fingernails bit into the cushioned flesh.

Then, through the glass globe about his head, he saw the disturbed black water of the stream just beyond where Ellen Daniels knelt. A ghastly face and head came out of the water, sent black ripples flowing off into darkness. The face was flat with gigantic, lidless eyes. From its center sprung a strange appendage which might have been a snout, might have been a mouth.

Hanging in the air, Marlowe wrenched himself around, terrific anger thawing the fear that had crushed his lungs. He drew his gun.

Ellen Daniels saw the face and terror choked the scream in her throat. She leaped to her feet, and her body shielded the thing from Marlowe's gun, leaving it barely visible.

The face vanished under the black water. One bare arm lunged upward, clutched the girl's dress, pulled. She staggered forward, hands clutching frantically at the air. A wild shriek rent the darkness.

Then she plunged into the water, pulled by that bare, bodiless arm, her cry cut suddenly short. Black water leaped into the air, swirled back into the trough her body had made. Dark ripples rolled in widening circles, vanished.

Ken Marlowe struggled furiously, feet

kicking the air, body swinging helplessly.

A choked cry broke from Marlowe's lips, beat in dulled echoes against the jar about his head. His finger tightened on his gun trigger. The light had glinted on a figure, naked except for a loin-cloth. And the face was a horrid, flat face with great round lidless eyes. In its hands the thing held a taut rope which stretched upward into darkness.

As Marlowe flung up his gun the figure leaped to one side, let go the rope. Marlowe crashed down, the roar of his gun thundering under the low ceiling.

His feet hit the rock, slipped. He went flat, his head cracking against the rock, shattering the globe. Fighting the numbing horror that clutched his heart and lungs Marlowe leaped to his feet, swung up the lantern. A dense wall of smoke swirled before him, twisting slowly upward.

With a mad cry, Marlowe plunged into the smoke. He whirled the lantern about him in a vicious circle and struck nothing. Breath ripped from his nostrils as Marlowe leaped to the wall, began to make his swift way around it, the lantern held stiffly away from him into the smoke.

Abruptly he stopped. Black water lay at his feet.

He whirled, plunged back through the smoke, swinging the lantern. He burst into the free air.

The swinging light showed the naked, swollen body of Bill Daniels, then black water, black walls, and writhing smoke. Nothing else.

MARLOWE set the lantern at his feet, put his left hand to his neck. He caught the rope noose, jerked it larger, pulled it over his head, cursing hoarsely. Picking up the lantern he held it above him. In the top of the cave a pulley had been fastened, and over it the rope ran.

His foot crunched on a piece of the shattered globe and Marlowe laughed hoarsely, wildly. "So that's why poor Ed Reilly was choked!" he said through lips that seemed stiff and thick. "Thank God, the noose caught around the rim of the globe instead of my neck!"

For a long moment he stood without moving, his left hand holding the lantern stiffly in front of him, the fingers of his right hand like iron strips around the butt of the automatic. His brain battled with horror, his heart pounded cold blood through his body.

Hurriedly, with cold trembling fingers, he sat the lantern on the floor, stuck his gun in his coat pocket, peeled off his coat. Whatever this nameless beast was that had seized Ellen Daniels, it had dragged her under the water. There was no place the other one could have gone except into that dark, oily stream whose waters seemed to stand dead still under the black ceiling of this subterranean sepulcher.

And wherever that hideous, flat-faced creature had taken Ellen Daniels—Ken Marlowe was going after her!

He pulled off his shoes. For a moment he stood, toes hooked over the rock edge of the stream while fear surged through his body. What lay under that black, impenetrable-looking water where the monster had pulled Ellen? What chance did he stand in a fight under water with such a creature? His heart rock-like in his throat, he plunged directly toward the point where the creek seemed to disappear under low shelving rock.

Marlowe gasped as he hit the ice-cold water. Flat on the surface, three feet from where the stream ended, he sucked the dank air deep into his lungs. Then he dove.

He touched slick rock, went deeper, sliding his hands along the wall. He blinked his eyes, but except for the feel of the water he could not tell when they were open.

Marlowe's fingers found an opening in the wall, and swimming slowly, he moved into it. It was narrow, tunnel-like, and, pulling his arms back in a breast stroke, he felt the slick rock on each side. He let his body rise, struck the wall above. The water filled the tunnel completely.

He dove, touched rock under him. And a new menace showed itself. The water-filled passage was too small to let him turn around.

Marlowe let the air slide from his nostrils, heard the bubbles roll past his ear. His lungs were beginning to ache. Terror gripped him, squeezing breath from him. In a half minute more he'd be gasping water into his lungs. What if this passage had no end?

Then his outstretched fingers touched human flesh. Wild fear surged through him. His fingers gripping frantically on the bare arm he had caught, Marlowe heaved forward. But the body did not move! Groping forward, Marlowe felt wet cloth and under it cold flesh. Then beyond the body he touched solid rock. The waterfilled passage ended abruptly right here!

CATCHING the wrist of the drowned man with his left hand, Marlowe shoved viciously, slid back through the water pulling the body with him.

Swiftly he beat his way backward, towing the body. By putting his free hand against the wall, he got purchase for a crab-like retreat. He clutched the wall again with his right hand, tried to shove off it. The wall was slick and his fingers slid futilely. He held his legs stiff, cupped his right hand back of his wrist, pulled it furiously down and forward.

His lungs ached and he felt sick inside. He had to fight to keep from gulping in mouthfuls of water as he slid backward. Fear squeezed at his lungs as, almost unconsciously, he towed the body with him.

His back scraped along the ceiling of the tunnel. His legs touched a sharp edge. He threw his hand backward, caught the edge, heaved. Then he was struggling upward. His head burst into dank air.

For twenty seconds Marlowe treaded water. Air rushed into his lungs, strained them until they pressed against his ribs. The air tore through his gaping mouth and he sucked more into his lungs.

He swam slowly to the ledge by the lantern, towing the body. Near the edge of the stream Marlowe released the dead man, let himself down feet first under the water. He touched rock, fought his way along it a step or two, shoved up into the air again.

Catching the ledge with his hands, he whipped the water with his feet, pulled downward with his arms, flipped himself up to the bank. Kneeling, he moved the lantern nearer to the edge where the glow fell on the black water. The body of a man, wearing athletic underwear, floated face down. Marlowe caught an arm and leg, pulled the drowned man to the bank, rolled him over on his back.

The lamp light fell soft and yellow on the pale face of Wilson, the mine foreman. A stain, darker than the water, showed on his chest.

Standing gazing down at the corpse, Marlowe suddenly remembered the stain of blood on the floor at Larvki's.

So this was the man who had dumped the body down the chimney; the man whom his confederates accidently had killed while firing at Marlowe in that mad fight at the spiritualist's!

CHAPTER SIX

One Mask Gone!

HE BENT, picked up his coat, slid into it, then reached for the lantern

and stood staring at the water. Diving back now wouldn't help. If Ellen had been held under water all this time she had drowned. There was a chance that somewhere along this ledge the ceiling would be higher with air pockets above the water. Certainly there had to be an outlet somewhere, and Ellen Daniels might be alive in some cavern along the bank of the stream.

He remembered the small flashlight he kept in the pocket of his automobile and the dagger-like letter opener that lay on his desk. The rays of the light wouldn't reach far under water, but they would help—and if he had under-water fighting to do, the knife would be a deadly weapon.

Abruptly he wheeled, began to run up the abandoned shaft. The yellow light of the lantern danced fantastically along the black walls. His foot struck a shallow hole, pitched him forward. Marlowe twisted, swinging the lantern away from the wall. His shoulder struck heavily and he slid to his knees, pain throbbing through his left shoulder, but the lantern was still burning. If that went out and he had to feel his way through the tunnel, it would take him nearly an hour to find the opening. Marlowe staggered to his feet, began to run again.

Halfway up the main tunnel he slowed to a walk. It wouldn't do to be too tired when he got back down to the mouth of the abandoned shaft. Under that black water he'd find somewhere the—the monsters—that had taken Ellen Daniels. And when he did—Marlowe's teeth ground together.

The mouth of the tunnel loomed a gray blur, turning sharp white and black as he moved toward it. The sunlight hurt his eyes even before he had stepped into it, and as he passed from the tunnel he clapped his right hand to his mouth, muffling a sneeze. The sun felt warm and soft through his wet clothes and he felt it beat through his wet hair onto his skull. He went across the small yard to the door of the office, moving with soft, almost noiseless strides.

He pushed open the door, stepped into the office.

On the far side of the room where the little safe squatted in a corner, a man leaped to his feet, spun around to face Marlowe. He clutched papers in both hands, and as he spun his big-knuckled fingers crushed them with a nervous, vicious movement. His hard gray eyes glinted savagely.

"WELL," Marlowe said, his voice flat, "so *you're* doing a little private investigating, eh, Brady!"

Brady stood without moving. But into his eyes had crept a look of scorn, of relief.

Swiftly, Marlowe looked around the room. The top of both his and Crim's desks were littered with papers and the drawers stood open. He moved his eyes back to Brady's square, heavy-featured face. "I should warn you," he said quietly, "that investigating around here is a bit dangerous. I was looking at an investigator a few minutes ago. He was—dead!"

A strange flame flashed for a brief instant into Brady's granite eyes, and was gone. When he spoke his words were as crisp, as decisive as ever. "There's no need for me to say what I've been doing. But there is one thing I can say, Mr. Marlowe: You're a damned fool! Mentally, you're a child, and"—Brady surged his heavy shoulders forward—"you're about to get hurt. I'll offer you as much for your half of the mine as yesterday I offered for both halves.

Since then things have developed that make it necessary for me to buy you out —and I'm going to get it."

Brady's eyes glinted savagely. "I advise you to take it, Mr. Marlowe." His words went slow, hard, like the sound of heavy rocks falling. "Take it and get out, Mr. Marlowe. Otherwise. . . ." The flame leaped behind his granite eyes again, faded.

"Thanks," Ken Marlowe said softly, "but I sort of like this mine. Sort of a hobby with me; one that I like." He stepped across the office toward Brady and stopped a yard away.

"I'm mighty busy right now," Marlowe said matter-of-factly. "When I've finished the work I've got to do, I'll talk the matter over with you. And"—his shoulders hunched slightly forward and his fingers went stiff and talon-like—"I want to be so certain that you stay and talk with me about it, Mr. Brady, that I'm going to tie you up here so you won't leave while I'm gone. And I'll leave a little note for Frank so that if he comes in he'll know why you are tied and won't untie you."

Again the red flame danced behind Brady's eyes, a flame that glowed and went out, and Marlowe thought he saw a shadow of fear flicker across the man's face. The thick lips twitched, then curled disdainfully.

Brady's hand moved slowly toward his coat pocket. "Don't move for the gun," Marlowe said quietly. "There's been enough killing around here without my doing any of it."

The two men stood unmoving, glaring into each other's eyes. Marlowe was the taller by several inches, Brady wider in the shoulders and hips. Through the window to the right the sunlight streamed in a golden shaft, and through the bar tiny motes swayed endlessly. The curtains that Edith Waters, Crim's fiancé had hung over the office windows, lay as though pressed against the sill, unmoving. The sunlight glinted on the edges, leaving the rest in shadow.

"WELL," Marlowe said calmly, "you can sit in that chair and get tied without being hurt, or. . . ."

Brady stepped backward and his hand flashed toward his pocket.

Marlowe moved like a flash. His right hand smashed upward to Brady's jaw as he lunged forward; his left snaked Brady's wrist. Brady hunched his shoulder and Marlowe's hand drove into cheek, too high for a knockout. Then Marlowe, holding to Brady's wrist, twisted sharply, heaved. The heavy man was jerked into the air across Marlowe's back and crashed to the floor with the mine operator on top.

For so heavy a man Earle Brady was remarkably fast. He hit the floor rolling, wrenched his hand free, bounded to his feet, gun leaping from his pocket. The blue muzzle flecked up toward Ken Marlowe.

Two feet away was Marlowe's desk. From hands and knees he dived, hit behind it, crouching.

There was a sudden breaking of glass, pieces clattering to the floor. Something hard smashed into the wall above Marlowe to fall with a thud.

In the split second after he hit behind the desk Marlowe heard the glass break, heard the crash against the wall above him. He clapped his open hands against the desk, face almost touching it and drove forward like a football tackle.

The desk smashed into Earle Brady, hurled him backward. The gun roared in the little room, thundered against the walls. Like a cat Marlowe arched his body over the desk, struck Brady who was reeling backward and smashed him to the floor. Marlowe's fingers snapped

around the barrel of the gun, pushed it upward.

Brady's fist struck Marlowe's ribs, jarring the air from his lungs. Still twisting on the gun, Marlowe wriggled upward, and drew back his fist to strike again. Toes digging into the floor, Marlowe struck.

The jar ran through his arm to his shoulder, and Brady's head snapped back like the cracker of a whip, bounced against the floor. His eyelids fluttered and the automatic skidded from his hand. Marlowe's right arm went back again. The wrist slightly arched he drove the fist to Brady's chin once more.

Brady's head popped deep to the right and lolled back, listlessly. Marlowe got to his knees, pushing against Brady's chest with his right hand. Then he stood up.

A gaping hole had been smashed in the window panes. The day was hot and the lower sash had been raised. Now both panes were shattered. Sunlight sparkled on the broken glass on the floor.

Marlowe walked around his desk to the far wall. On the floor lay crumpled paper. He picked it up. It was wrapped around a rock the size of an egg. Sticking Brady's gun in his other pocket, he unwrapped the paper. Then he stood staring, puzzled, at it. The paper was perfectly blank!

Holding the paper in his left hand Marlowe stared perplexed at the blank sheet, then quickly stepped to the window and looked out. The ragged hillside, cluttered with rock and low scrub bushes, lay empty under the warm sunshine. To his right he could see the tram line leading down hill; to his left the rugged hill sloped upward.

Marlowe grunted, placed the paper on the warm, sun-brightened window sill, and bent down. Brady was still out, lying flat on his back, hands sprawled over his head. Marlowe caught him under the arms, dragged him into a chair.

He tore the curtains from the window, bound Brady's hands behind the chair, his feet to the chair legs. Then he picked the rock from the floor, slipped it into Brady's mouth, slipped a bit of the curtain over his face and tied it back of his head.

THE man was coming to, his eyes blinking dazedly. "I don't know exactly who you'd call," Marlowe said, "but I don't think you'll call anyone with that gag."

From his desk he picked the paper cutter. When the mine had employed convict labor before the state governor put those men on the roads, a prisoner had made this knife by months of filing on a pick head. A guard had taken it from him and had given it to Marlowe. It had a heavy wooden handle and a blade an inch and a half wide at the base sloping to a needle-like point, sharp on both edges.

Marlowe flipped back his coat, stuck the knife under his belt, started for the door. Abruptly he halted, turned back to the paper lying in the sunshine on the window sill.

Marlowe's mouth and eyes jerked open as he stared, unbelieving at the paper. Crude writing sprawled across the paper that had been blank three minutes before! He read:

> This is the last warning! Take what you can get for this mine and get out. For you and your partner there waits only death and torture under this hillside.

There was no signature.

Behind him Marlowe heard a thumping, turned to see Brady wriggling in his chair, his eyes blazing. The corners of Ken Marlowe's mouth went up but there was no humor in the smile. "The note came at the wrong time, huh Brady?" he said softly. "If you had fired a few

seconds earlier, perhaps there would have been no need of throwing it. You didn't want to risk anyone but me reading it, so your pal used invisible ink!"

Brady's cheeks puffed but no sound came from behind his gag. He leaned forward, and the legs of the chair scraped along the floor as he twisted. Then his muscles relaxed and he sat staring downward. Marlowe gazed at him for a moment, wheeled and went out the door.

He swung toward the little lot where he had left his car. No road except the tram line ran to the mine itself. He went rapidly, cursing as he walked.

Marlowe rounded a turn in the tram tracks, came on the little parking lot. His car sat where he had left it. Beyond was a taxi, the driver waiting. Crim's car was not there. He'd evidently gone to the city.

Marlowe stepped to his own car, pulled the door open, fished the light from the pocket. Beyond, he saw the taxi driver crawl from his own machine, stand with one foot on the running board looking toward Marlowe. He was a small, squat, brown-skinned man with bushy, overhanging brows.

Marlowe stuck the flashlight in the pocket with Brady's gun and said to the driver, "You might as well go on back to town. I'm afraid Mr. Brady will be busy for some time."

The driver's black brows jerked into a straight line. "Dat so!" he snapped, a foreign twang to his voice. "Well, I think I'll stick around. He ain't paid me yit."

"Okay," Marlowe said quietly, "stick around."

He turned and headed up the hill toward the mine. Elder bushes grew along side the path and blackberry vines wound around them. He stopped, pulled the knife from under his belt, cut a three foot length from one of the elder bushes. As he went up the hill he began cleaning the pith from the hollow stem.

For a moment he stopped at the door of the office, looked in at Brady sitting stiffly in his chair, his cheeks puffed by the rock in his mouth. Marlowe crumpled the white pith of the elder in his hand, tossed it on the floor. "We'll see," he said softly to Brady, who sat cursing him with his eyes, "if the note was correct."

He went on, toward the gaping hole in the hillside.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Crawling Torture!

TWICE before, Marlowe had come down this passage of death, and twice he had been attacked. This time he came wanting a fight. And this time, by God he would not go out until he had found Ellen Daniels and the monsters that had captured her!

The finger of light danced along the tracks ahead of him, and once more he became conscious of the stillness of the place, a stillness so deep that the soft hissing noise of his shoes in the blanket of coal dust seemed to echo against the close-pressing walls.

Pulling his automatic from his pocket, he stepped on, swinging ahead toward the abandoned shaft, toward the spot where death and torture lurked. His breath hissed in his nostrils as he stopped a yard inside the shaft mouth. His gun held close to the flash, showed a dull blur. He could see his knuckles, white from pressure against the gun butt. Then he flung his body past the end of the tunnel in a giant leap. Twisting in the air he whipped his light sharply to the left, gun ready. The light ran like a luminous snake along the black walls, across the black water, whipped along the narrow ledge. Nothing there.

The light snapped around, shot along the rocky ledge, across the bodies of the two dead men, to where the smoke hung like a dark pall. The smoke was deathly still; the light slid into it and faded. One end sprawled along the floor, the other reaching up into darkness, the rope lay as Marlowe had left it.

Shoulders forward, gun ready, Marlowe moved toward the smoke. It had thinned slightly, but in the dead air of the place it still hung thick, unmoving, blotting up the pencil of light from the flash.

Then Marlowe stepped into the smoke.

It was acrid, burning his eyes, and he felt tears forming in them as he moved, snapping the light from side to side. He reached the far wall, moved along it to the water's edge, then back through the smoke again, into the open air.

From his eyes he wiped the tears the smoke had formed, shot the light around the low-ceilinged vault. Except for himself and the two corpses at the creek's edge, the tomb-like cave was deserted.

His teeth clamped together back of thin-pulled lips. Well, wherever those things were, wherever they had taken Ellen Daniels, he'd find them!

He slid his gun into his hip pocket, adjusted the knife at his belt, took Brady's automatic from his coat, slipped it under his shirt and inside his belt. Then he peeled off his coat, shifting the flash from hand to hand as he pulled his arms through the sleeves. He pulled off his shoes, dropped them beside his coat. They made a loud jarring noise in the utter silence of the cavern.

Ken Marlowe sat down on the edge of the stream, holding the flash in his left hand. With his right hand he pulled the length of elder bush from his coat pocket, then quietly let himself into the water, gasping at its coldness.

When the water reached his chin Marlowe shoved silently away from the bank, treading water. He put one end of the hollow stem in his mouth, let himself down. The water closed blackly over his head.

The rays of the flashlight jabbed into the water, but the heavy blackness seemed to beat them back, crumpling the finger of light into a dull, short blur. It was difficult walking on the bottom. The water held his legs, and with his head tilted to hold one end of the tube in his mouth and the other above the water so that he could breath through it, he could scarcely see the short light flung by the flash.

Slowly, quietly, Marlowe made his way to the bank, began to feel along it. Where the water had washed pockets in the rock Marlowe jabbed in the light, eyes aching into the darkness around it. With his leg he felt the low, tunnel-like pocket where he had nearly drowned a half hour before.

The water touched him like liquid darkness, and somewhere under here moved the ghastly things that has seized Ellen Daniels, the things that had tortured and murdered her father and two men. He wondered suddenly if the flaming torture that had struck his face, that had caused the two dead miners to writhe and twist before life passed from them could strike under water.

THEN he saw, dully, an opening in the solid rock wall of the stream. It seemed to extend from the bottom to within a foot of the water's surface, and was some four feet wide. Marlowe thrust the light into it—and discovered only darkness. He felt a slow tug of the water, a current.

He slid his hand along the top of the ledge. About two feet inside the opening shot upward, how high he could not tell. Marlowe pressed his toes on the bottom, shot his head out of the water. He pressed the tube against the palm of his left hand,

held his right thumb over the other end. Then he dropped until his feet touched the bottom and shoved.

The water had cut an almost perfectly round passage through the earth and rock. In the center the ceiling was not more than a foot and a half above the water which lapped blackly along the sides. The stream ran straight for some fifty feet, beyond that the light of the flash faded.

Flipping off the light, Marlowe began to swim. Inside him a fierce anger that was almost joy warmed his blood. This stream, he felt sure, led to the place Ellen Daniels had been taken—and led to the fiends that had taken her. He was approaching the end of his search. And, he thought grimly, perhaps the end of his life!

He rounded a corner and stopped, treading water. Ahead of him the creek ended abruptly in a solid stone wall with the ceiling of the tunnel slanting down to join it.

Lying flat on the surface, he jerked his hips into the air, pulled in a vicious breast stroke with his arms, plunged. The dull blur of the flash touched on slick rock. Then he felt the tug of the water again. The rock ledge opened into a narrow hole. He swam into it, pulling his way forward.

As he swung back his arms for the third stroke Marlowe realized that his hands were not touching the sides. He blinked his eyes to make sure they were open. The blackness of the water seemed to fade, growing slowly gray. He let himself start floating toward the top, tugged the automatic from under his belt as he gulped air into his lungs.

A wild cry jarred in his ears, made him spin in the water, bringing his gun up. Then he stopped, and the curse froze on his lips. He remained staring for a long moment, his eyes blinking in the gray light that filtered from an overhead opening.

Ahead the stream lapped along a rocky ledge beyond which stretched a strip of sandy beach, and beyond that a dark, shallow cave. In the distance he heard the muffled rippling of Cataba Creek. This evidently, was where the underground stream met the large creek which half circled the base of the hill.

Marlowe saw these things in the split second that his eyes were leaping toward the point from which the scream had come. Then he stiffened.

On the sandy bar beside the stream were two men—and Ellen Daniels. The girl's wet dress clung closely to the soft curves of her body. One of the men stood behind her, his left arm circling her waist, his right hand holding an automatic, the dark muzzle centered between Ken Marlowe's startled eyes. Both men were naked except for short trunks. And over their faces they wore gas masks.

These were the hideous figures he had seen at the mouth of the abandoned shaft, and this explained how they remained so long under water.

The short, powerful man behind Ellen had pulled the gas masks slightly loose at his chin so that he could talk, but the words were thick and muffled.

"Drop that gun, Ken Marlowe, and come on out. This is the last act."

MARLOWE stared at the man without answering. There was no chance to shoot. He might get the tall, dark-skinned man to the left, but the other was shielded by Ellen, and it was signing his own death warrant to fire. Marlowe dropped the gun. Treading water he wiped the back of his hand across his eyes.

Ellen Daniels' face was drawn and frightened, and her full mouth trembled

when she spoke. "Why did you come here, Ken? They'll—they'll kill you!"

The man squeezed her waist roughly. "Shut up!" he snapped. Then to Marlowe, "All right. Are you coming out now, or are you going to wash out—with a bullet through your head?"

Through thin lips Marlowe said softly, "I'm coming out." He swam to the bank, slid himself on it, stood up. "All right," he asked, "now what?"

The man back of Ellen Daniels spoke out of the corner of his mouth, his voice barely intelligible back of the mask, "Get that knife out of his belt and see if he's got anything else."

Swiftly the other stepped to Marlowe, pulled the knife from his belt. He grunted softly as he looked at it. For a moment Marlowe stood unmoving, his heart beating high. He glanced upward, at the patch of daylight, twenty feet above. A rough ladder led up to the opening.

Perhaps this fellow would overlook the automatic in his hip pocket—then if the other would step from behind Ellen. . . .

Over the fellow's shoulder, just under the edge of the cave, Marlowe saw a small paper box. With its red commercial lettering on the side it looked oddly out of place. Marlowe smiled grimly. Smoke bombs, of course! That had caused the sudden smoke bursting from the earth, the smoke behind which these men had slipped into the water and vanished!

Carefully, the dark-skinned man patted Marlowe's sides, his flank. With another grunt he pulled the blunt-nosed gun from the mine operator's hip. Turning, he carried the gun into the shallow cave, dropped it on the sand. The other man flung Ellen to one side, said into his mask, "Bring out the deeds we've got ready for this fellow. He'll want to see them."

As the girl was pushed to one side she staggered in the sand, caught herself, stopped. Eyes following her, Ken Marlowe saw for the first time a strange container near the mouth of the cave. It was a dome-shaped jar of fine screening And the inside was black with swarming. crawling insects. Ants, millions of tiny black ants! At the bottom of the jar was a spigot-like place through which a few could be allowed to come at a time.

In Marlowe's mind flashed a hideous picture of the body of Bill Daniels, black with gnawing, stinging ants, shooting their fiery poison through every agonized nerve. Then, the body washed in the creek, the swollen corpse had been left on the bank.

This, then, was the torture of which the note had warned! The muffled voice of the man jarred on Marlowe's ears, set his nerves quivering like taut bands.

"Now you know why the bodies you found were so twisted with agony, and why they were so puffed and swollen. In South America those are called fire ants, and if a man is stung by one he will put the live end of his cigarette to the place —the pain of the fire is less. Those that stung you and the girl were gentle. Most of their venom had been extracted by stinging—something else—shortly before. If a few thousand of those get on a man they kill him—but not too quickly. In South America men had rather be burned at the stake than—tied on an ant hill!"

He paused, and Marlowe could feel sheer horror creep like a cold snake along his spine as he stared with bulging eyes toward the deathly, venomous insects.

Then the man said, his voice low: "But there is no need for you to know about them—if you are sensible."

Slowly, Marlowe turned his head to face the other. Behind the glass plates he could see hard, gray eyes. "All right," he said softly, "I may have the brain of a child but I already know all I want to

about ants." He paused, added, "What is it you want?"

From the tall, dark-skinned man who still held Marlowe's knife between long brown fingers, the gray-eyed killer took a sheaf of papers, held them out to Marlowe. "Write your name on those," he said, "and you'll be free—to live."

Rapidly, Marlowe looked at them. It was a bill of sale for his half of the mine. The purchaser was unnamed. As he read, Marlowe's body seemed to drain itself of emotion and a cold, dead feeling crept through his belly toward his heart. It was not fear—it was too late for fear. But it was the sick, empty feeling that comes to a brave man faced by certain death.

For Ken Marlowe knew he would not be released after he had signed over the mine. Released, he had only to locate the owner to find the fiendish murderer of the miners and of Bill Daniels. Marlowe raised his eyes to the hard ones behind the flat glass. There was only certain death in their gray-blue flame.

"Yes," Ken Marlowe said, "sign—but I'll be free—to die!"

A snarl came from under the mask. "You had your chance to sell. I warned you!"

Through thin, unmoving lips Marlowe pushed the words. "If you had thought there was any chance I'd do it, you'd never had that rock thrown. You knew I wouldn't back out—after you had the girl."

The man laughed shortly, harshly. "Hell, we've done enough talking. Are you going to make out this bill now, or"—his voice dropped, each word falling on Marlowe's consciousness like the slow dripping of water—"are you going to let those ants eat on you until you *are* willing—or until you look like those bodies you found?"

Marlowe's eyes jerked instinctively toward the screen container where millions of horrid fire ants crawled in layers. Shrinking away from the glass, Ellen Daniels watched him with large, dark eyes. Her Titian hair, dark with water, hung about her shoulders, and one bar of sunlight, reaching down through the opening twenty feet overhead, shot tiny spangles of flame through the wet curls.

Then Ken Marlowe looked back into the eyes behind the glass plates of the mask. "A half hour," he said slowly, "after she goes up that ladder and out of sight, I'll sign."

"No! No! They'll kill you!"

The girl swept to him, catching his shirt in her hands, her slender fingers working nervously in the wet linen. "They'll kill you!" she repeated.

Ken Marlowe looked into her eyes and shook his head slowly. He slid his hands along her forearms, took her fingers from his shirt. "They are going to kill me anyway," he said gently. "They can't afford to let me go. But I'll see that you get out of here—safely."

The girl swayed close to him and her hands slipped toward his shoulders. "I don't want to go," she whispered, "without you."

The man holding the automatic laughed and Marlowe spun to face him, his body stiffening. "Don't worry," the man sneered. "You won't get out of here—without him. Or with him." The flat glass eye-pieces jerked toward Marlowe. "I can't let her go anymore than I can let you go. For the same reason."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Out of the Pit

MARLOWE did not answer, and the words of the killer parred hollowly back into the shallow cave; faded like gray smoke. The girl's body swayed

closer to Marlowe and he could hear her forced breathing.

Marlowe felt his heart beating under his ribs with a faint, far-away hammering while the hair along his nape rose stiffly. He had faced death for himself with only a cold hatred for the murderer, but now—death for Ellen . . . .

His lips snarling, Marlowe said, "Until you let her go I don't sign—not for all the ants in hell!"

The man moved the black muzzle of the gun in a slow circle centering about Marlowe's belly. "Perhaps. If they were all on you. You're a brave fool, Ken Marlowe. But if half the ants," he moved lust-glinted eyes toward the girl, then back, "were crawling about her naked body, then perhaps you would sign."

Air lurched through clinched teeth into Marlowe's lungs. "God!" he gasped. "You—you can't torture her!" Only a fiend, an inhuman monster would release these deadly monsters on this girl to mutilate and deform her; to make that slim, lovely body a grotesque and evil mass of lumpy, bloated flesh. For himself he was not afraid. He could stand any torture they might inflict—any except hearing the agonized screams of this girl. "You can't torture *her,*" he repeated frantically.

"And I can't let her go either," the man sneered. Out of the corner of his mouth he spat the words toward his companion, "Strip her!"

Ken Marlowe caught the girl by the waist, pulled her behind him. He half crouched, elbows at his waist, forearms straight in front, fingers claw-like. His face was a flaming mask of hate as he crouched, waiting. The tall man snaked forward. He had caught the knife by the hilt and his wrist arched slightly as he held it.

"Stop!" the man with the gun ordered. The tall man halted in his tracks, knife ready. Marlowe half turned to face the man who had spoken. He had lowered the gun, and the black muzzle centered on Marlowe's leg between thigh and knee. "Come around in front of him, sister," he snapped. "And be quick before you have to step over him."

Anger flamed in Marlowe's blood but he fought to keep from plunging toward the gunman. If he dived and was shot, he left Ellen Daniels at the mercy of these two fiends. Dead, or lying helpless on the ground with a bullet through his leg, there was no possible chance of saving her. Alive and uninjured there was always hope.

THE muscles in his arms and shoulders quivered as the girl stepped from behind him, moved slowly toward the man who stood holding the knife. Her face was pale and drawn; her eyes were dark fires and her full lips were compressed and steady. She stopped, and stood, head bowed, looking at the ground.

With his left hand the man caught her dress at the throat, jerked. The girl staggered, nearly losing her balance as the wet cloth ripped loudly. The man bent, caught the dress, ripped again. It fell from her shoulders, but the seam at the bottom held. For a moment the man stood looking at her, his eyes almost invisible back of the glass plates. Then he cut the seam with the knife.

With a jerk he removed the rest of her clothing.

Ken Marlowe could see the little muscles in the girl's shoulders and knees quivering as she stood naked, unmoving, eyes on the ground. Slowly Marlowe twisted his head toward the gunman, body still crouched. The man's lust-brightened eyes flashed back to Marlowe, and the gun was rock-steady at his belly. "Strip yourself. We won't be niggardly with

these ants. Give them plenty of room to bite."

Marlowe's fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, but his eyes never left the muzzle of the gun. If for one second it would waver, steel-springed muscles would fling him forward. But the gun did not waver.

Peeling the wet shirt from broad, hard shoulders Marlowe wondered if, after the bullet struck him, he could reach the man with strength enough left in him to twist the gun away. Even if he did, the other would be on him before he could turn, and if he killed one and was killed, Ellen Daniels would be left unprotected, with the tall, dark-skinned man whose eyes were dancing flames behind the glass plates of his mask.

Marlowe slid out of his trousers and trunks, dropped them on the ground near where the girl's torn dress lay. "Tie them," the gunman snapped. His confederate went back into the cave, returned with two lengths of small rope. He stuck the knife under the belt of his trunks, stepped back of Marlowe.

"Cross your hands behind you," the man said. Marlowe did, and felt the bite of the rope as the knot was jerked tight. Without warning Marlowe's legs buckled as his captor kicked the back of his knees. He hit the sand hard.

The fellow tied the rope that bound Marlowe's wrists to a jagged outcropping of rock. Pushing Marlowe flat on his back, he ran the rope up his side, around his neck, back to the rock, and pulled it taut.

Marlowe writhed slowly on the ground, testing the ropes while Ellen Daniels was tied to a rock just beyond. He could reach the rope running up his side by twisting his wrist, but it was too taut to allow him to sit up. His legs, untied, stretched straight on the sand.

"Now," the heavy-built murderer said, "we'll see how you stand up under this."

The killer stepped to the ant-filled cage behind Marlowe's head, turned the spigot at the bottom gently. Then he passed Marlowe, and stopped near his confederate, a couple of yards beyond Marlowe's heels. "I want to watch your face," he smiled pleasantly, "when the ants reach you."

TWISTING his head so that his chin dug the sand, rolling his eyes into the top of his head until they ached, Marlowe looked back at the screened cage. From it, across the sand, single file, crawled a black line of ants. His eyeballs popped with the strain of looking back, but he could not take them from that terrible black trickle creeping toward him. Marlowe could see the hideous legs of the first fire ant moving stiffly as it approached, reaching straight out from the shiney black body, then bending downward to touch the sand.

He could feel his blood chill in his veins and he writhed fiercely against the rope that held him. The rope scraped flesh from his wrist and warm, sticky blood began to seep along his skin.

Then he saw, as if magnified, the great, ghastly head of the deadly insect less than an inch from his own eyeball.

With a gasp of terror he snapped his head around to save his eye. Wild red flame seemed to burst from his shoulder. The flame seared along his flesh toward his neck as though a white-hot iron had been pushed across the skin. Fighting at the rope that bound him, he tore the flesh around his wrists until the blood ran freely, but he did not feel the pain.

Above him the cold, fiendish voice said. "After they have crossed you they will reach the girl. There will be plenty, more than plenty."

Writhing under the agony, Marlowe fought to keep his voice steady. He

couldn't let this inhuman torture happen to her, he *couldn't!* "If you'll kill her quickly, I'll sign. Then you can—can do what you want."

Marlowe felt the sneer in the man's wards. "I might make the bargain that way." He spun the gun on his finger.

As the torture seared through his shoulder into his neck Ken Marlowe twisted sharply. His flame-racked brain leaped—there was one chance!

Flattening on his back, Marlowe flung his feet over his head, far back. From the corner of his eye he saw the screen cage with its thousands of ants, the black procession from hell crawling, crawling across the sand toward him. He clamped his feet on both sides the cage, hurled it toward the men!

As Marlowe had flung his feet behind him the man made a mad clutch at the gun spinning on his finger, fumbled it. Then he lunged desperately as Marlowe hurled the cage. The dark-skinned man tried to leap past him, slipped, shoved. The gunman dropped the automatic, fell sprawling in the sand.

The cage crashed into the chest of the other, and ripped apart! A dark cloud of stinging ants enveloped him, and others fell in great piles to the sand.

With a shriek of agony the man flung his knife away, plunged headlong into the stream to disappear under the rocks that separated the cave from Cataba Creek and the sun outside.

Ken Marlowe's legs moved like a snake striking. He hit the knife with his foot, kicked it against his bound hands, hacked wildly at the rope around his wrists, ripping flesh.

The gunman had staggered to his feet again. He flicked his eyes toward the weapon he had dropped. It was buried in a swarm of ants. Flinging sand with his feet he whirled, leaped for the other gun inside the cave. Ken Marlowe hurled the knife.

The heavy wooden shaft struck the man at the base of the skull, driving him forward. He fell on his face, skidded. Marlowe heard Ellen Daniels gasp as the first ant touched her.

Even as he leaped after the knife Marlowe beat frantically at the half dozen ants on his neck and shoulder, smashing them against his skin. Hot pain flamed through him as he scooped up the knife, leaped back to the girl, slashed her free.

One sharp glance showed hundreds of ants floating on top the water where the man had dived. Marlowe caught up some clothes, grabbed the girl by the hand and leaped for the rough ladder that led to the sunshine above. Hand over hand he raced up after her.

A scream below stopped him and he turned. The murderer had staggered to his feet, caught up the gun from inside the cave and sprung back, brought the muzzle up toward Marlowe. But with his eyes upward he had stepped barefooted into a black cloud of ants!

With a cry of anguish he dropped the gun, dived for the ladder, caught it. Half way up he stopped, beat at the swarming horde of ants with one hand, began to climb again.

Marlowe flipped himself to the top, threw the garments out on the rocks and then stretched out with his hands swinging down along the ladder. As the masked face reached his hands, he caught the mask, tore it off.

And the pain-maddened eyes of Frank Crim stared up at him!

Savagely, Crim snatched for the mask. Marlowe jerked away and Crim clawed again for the mask, clutching with both hands. His fingers caught, slipped. He staggered sharply.

With a frightened shriek Crim lost his balance, plunged backward, his arms beat-

ing wildly at the air. He struck, half standing, on the rock ledge of the stream, reeled, for a dizzy second, and then plunged backward into the sand.

The bone in Crim's leg snapped as he struck the rock with a sharp cracking noise. Marlowe saw the jagged white bone below the knee rip through the flesh.

Even as Marlowe looked, ants blackened Crim's body, thousands of them swarming hungrily over it. The pain-widened eyes suddenly went black as stinging ants swarmed across the pupils.

Crim's shriek, blood-curdling, terrific, filled the deep hole, echoed wildly in the shallow cave. He clawed at the air, beat the sand. His fingers, striking the sand, dug through the ants that blackened it, showing the white grains. Then, at once, it was black with ants again.

Behind him Marlowe heard Ellen Daniels' horrified gasp. He stood up, pushed her gently from the mouth of the hole. "Don't look," he said. "It's not pretty. Ahao Larvki can thank his Hawaiian Gods that he got out of there, even though he's only getting into the electric chair. A naked Hawaiian doesn't stand much chance of getting away. The police will have him in a few hours."

When they had hastily struggled into the scanty garments which Marlowe had secured back in the cave, the girl looked up at him from wide, violet-blue eyes. She said, "I don't understand what's happened, what's going to happen. I—"

"It's all over," Marlowe said softly. Crim had been cheating me for some time about the mines. They were better than I knew, but I trusted him with the books. Lately I had suspected him, but wasn't certain until Brady, after going through the books, offered me twice as much for my half the mine as he had before.

"After Crim had found the mine to be richer than he had thought at first, he wanted to buy me out, but he didn't want to pay much. He tried to frighten the labor so that no one would work here, then he figured I would sell cheaply. After a year or two people would have forgotten about the terror, and then he could put the mines back in operation.

"He hired the fortune teller to frighten the men, and when that wasn't a complete success he tried this method."

Ellen's eyes widened. "But if he had bought your half and then put the mines back to work, wouldn't you have known. Why didn't he kill you at first?"

Marlowe nodded and smiled cryptically. "You see, he didn't plan to buy the mine under his own name. He would have sold his half too, buying the whole thing again under an assumed name, through the probate office and the whole transaction carried out by mail. No one here would have ever known who really owned the mine.

"At first he didn't want to kill me because he wanted to buy the mine without going to a public sale to do it.

"Of course, he was willing to kill me today or last night at Larvki's to protect himself. But he tried to keep from killing me at first because he was afraid of the consequence. The police here don't spend much time investigating the death of a worker in a mine. But my family is pretty well known and if I was killed it would stir up an investigation—and Crim didn't want that."

"That's why I thought it was Crim; Brady, being from the North, might not take that angle into consideration. But I was with Frank when the first murder occurred—he had his own men do that—and it threw me off the track. I wasn't certain until a note was flung through the window. But before that I had Brady tied."

"And father," the girl asked, her lips trembling, "what was he doing?"

"Your father," Marlowe said gently, "was a brave man and very sincere in his efforts to help labor. From the Negro miners he heard rumors of what was happening and began to investigate. He" —Marlowe's shoulders shrugged— "found out too much."

"It's the same thing that happened to Everet Stralin. He liked ghost stories and this interested him so he began to investigate. He had found out too much, even before he went to Larvki's after he had heard that the medium had predicted the deaths. It was his last ghost story. An autopsy'll show just how he was poisoned."

They went down the hillside toward Cataba Creek showing dully through the leaves of the elder and willow bushes on its bank. "If you'll wait here," Marlowe said, "I'll go up to the mine and get us some more clothes—if you are willing to wear dirty overalls. And when I get back —"he paused.

The girl turned dark, wide eyes toward his face and her lips smiled softly. "You started to say something in the mine," she whispered.

Marlowe grinned. "And there, a few minutes ago, you said you did not want to leave without me?"

"Yes."

"Would you be willing," he said slowly, "not to ever leave, any place at all, without me?"

She half closed her eyes while her soft lips waited for him to take his own answer.

THE END

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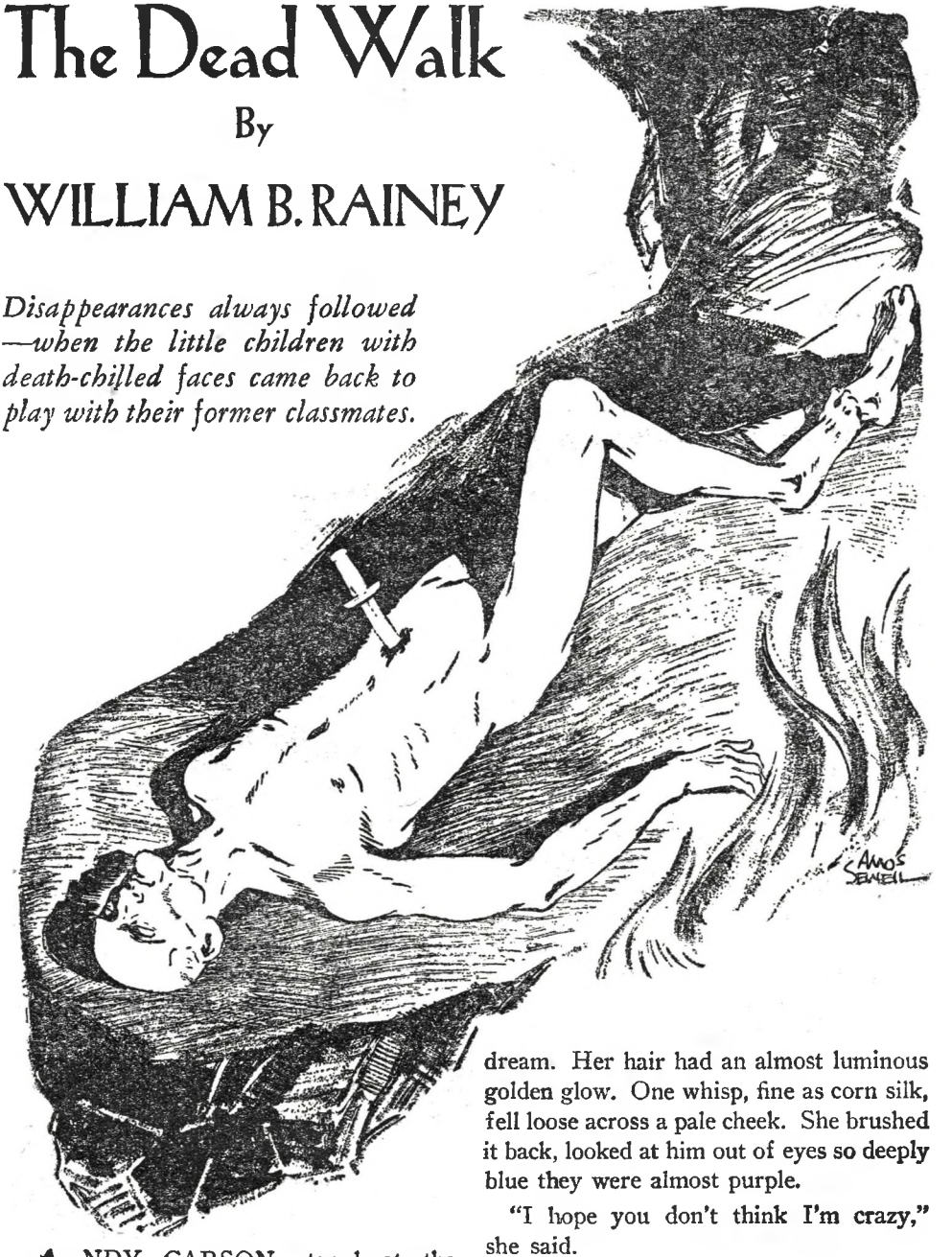
The Dead Walk

By

WILLIAM B. RAINEY

Disappearances always followed —when the little children with death-chilled faces came back to play with their former classmates.



ANDY CARSON stared at the girl, his black eyes narrowed in thought at the incredible story she had just told him. For a second he had the idiotic notion that the whole thing was some fantastic nightmare, and that Madelaine Blaine herself was only part of a dream. Her hair had an almost luminous golden glow. One whisp, fine as corn silk, fell loose across a pale cheek. She brushed it back, looked at him out of eyes so deeply blue they were almost purple.

"I hope you don't think I'm crazy," she said.

"Of course not. But I want to get this thing a little more in detail. You mean you saw this child—dead. And later she came back into your class room and another child followed her out?"

"I saw her in the casket," Madelaine

Blaine said. "She was dead. She lay there for two days while they had those strange rituals over her. There have been three children, all little girls, to die that strange, slow, sleeping sort of death. All of them members of that wild man's, or New Messiah's Cult—" she spoke the words as though black fear pressed at her lips—"that started when the creature came into the mountains six months ago.

"When the second dead one came into the room last week I couldn't stand it any longer. That's why I wrote the Attorney General to send someone to investigate. I sent the note the dead girl left in the school room as proof—all I had. And I asked for you, Andy, because I knew you wouldn't believe me crazy."

The girl shuddered, and her purple eyes held a strained, frightened look.

Andy Carson felt a chill, eerie, sensation creep along his spine. He had lived in Kentucky all his life, though not in the mountain section. For the past three years he had been attached to the Attorney General's office, and had come into these mountains once before when some difficulty had arisen over newly discovered oil land.

He knew about the strangeness of the mountain folk, their ways of living and talking almost unchanged since their forefathers had followed Daniel Boone into the country. He had heard of the strange cults that sometimes sprang up among them. Less than two years before the papers had been full of stories of human sacrifices in a community not more than a score of miles from where he now stood. He had not wanted Madelaine to come here from Louisville to teach, but she had insisted. Carson had jumped at the chance to investigate this trouble; it was the first opportunity he had had to see her in nearly a year.

"How did the dead children act when they came into the room?" he asked.

Neither he nor Madelaine had heard the door of the one room country school open. Yet Carson knew, with a wave of horror, what was behind him before he turned; knew even before he heard the creeping sound like the soft rustling of dead leaves. And as he turned he saw the rich color drain from Madelaine's lips.

The child was less than a yard away. Her hair, white and matted, hung about a drawn, death-chilled face. Her eyes, wide open and fixed on Madelaine Blaine, were blank and unreflecting. She passed Carson, almost touching him; moved with stiff, somnambulistic steps to the teacher. Some power outside the child's body seemed to raise her arm—slowly, stiffly. Mechanically, her clenched hand opened and a slip of white paper fluttered to the floor at Madelaine Blaine's feet. Then the child turned rigidly, began to move toward the door.

Staring at the blank-faced child Carson felt his heart pound at his throat. A nameless fear of some unseen and horribly cruel power clutched at him. Then a wave of anger at the inhuman creature who had made such foul use of children, swept over him. He clutched the child by the shoulders, shook her. Quivering in every muscle he released her, staggered back. The little body, perfectly rigid and cold, had swayed unresistingly under his hands!

Free, the child moved toward the door. Her steps made a low creeping sound like a snake moving in dry grass.

Again Carson leaped to catch the girl, whirled just in time to reach Madelaine Blaine as she crumpled toward the floor. For a moment, he held her in his arms, her body soft against his. She stirred slightly, opened her eyes and slowly raised her head. Her face had a grayish tinge and her lips showed livid where she had bitten them to suppress the trembling.

"I've never fainted before," she said

unsteadily, and tried to force a smile.

"All right now?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid, horribly afraid."

The paper made a crinkling noise as Madelaine Blaine handed him the note. Carson's fingers closed on it hard. Here, at least, was a tangible part of this unbelieveable business. But the script—it was a wild flowing handwriting like he had seen in the Attorney General's office. The words used strange letters he had never seen. "Anglo Saxon," he said. A language as old as Beowulf and the monsters he had fought. "Can you read it?"

"Yes." She put pale, trembling fingers to colorless lips. "I learned a little of it in college." For a moment she stood quiet, and Carson could see in her eyes the struggle to regain shattered nerves. "It says, *'The Children of the Druids sacrifice to the Gods those who interfere'.*"

Andy Carson bounded toward the door. "Wait here," he snapped over his shoulder. "Druids in Kentucky! Bunk. I'll get that kid."

A heavy twilight thickened the shadows outside and the tall oaks seemed to lean against the leaden gray sky. A hundred yards away Carson saw a flutter of white where the child walked. He leaped down the steps. Abruptly he halted, felt a cold lump form in his chest. The child had vanished.

CARSON stood staring at the spot where she had been. Just to the right a tall tree reared gaunt limbs against the side of a sheer cliff reaching a hundred feet upward. On the left was a short clearing beyond which the trees pressed blackly. The girl had not crossed the clearing—yet she was gone! Ahead, the path lay gray and empty until it faded like smoke into the darkness.

Carson shook off the feeling of fear that clutched him. "Even if she's dead she's got to be there—somewhere" His teeth gritted and he plunged forward.

He made the cliff quickly, began searching the base. The sound of horse's hooves on stone made him look up. Coming down the path toward him was a gaunt gray horse and rider. They were within a few feet before Carson could make out the man's face in the gathering darkness.

"Howdy Mister," the rider said, reining in his horse.

Carson knew the mountain people, hesitated to ask the question bursting at his lips. But something about this kindly faced, thin-haired little man told the investigator that here was no regular mountaineer.

"Listen," Carson said, the words pouring from his lips, "did you see a little girl walking down this path a moment ago?"

The little man shook his knobby head. Keen brown eyes squinted narrowly at Carson. "Nope. How come you so excited about it?"

"Well, I saw her pass, and—well, I wanted to speak to her and—and . . ." Somehow Carson didn't seem to be able to find the words.

The little man squinted with kindly interest at Carson's excited face. "Did the little girl look sort of—like she might be dead?"

"Yes," Carson said. "That's the way she looked—like she was dead."

The little man shook his head again, his eyes now wide and round.

"It ain't none of the Lawd's work," the little man said. "I'm the Circuit Rider hereabouts, but I can't move these folks fast. Some of 'em got strange ideahs. But they'll come round, pending nobody from outside don't come in an' rile 'em. I been here years an' I know. Come to see me if I can help you any."

The little man rode on down the path and Carson turned back toward the school house. The Circuit Rider was right, Car-

son thought. Outsiders only angered the mountaineers, made them more determined to follow their own methods. It was best not to interfer.

Madelaine Blaine waited on the front steps of the school. She listened quietly as he told her what the Circuit Rider had said.

"The thing for you to do is to leave here and marry me," Carson said warmly.

She smiled. "We'll talk about that later. Now it's time for supper." She led the way down the winding half mile path to the house where she stayed. The school was situated in a clearing a half mile from the nearest house and served the twenty or thirty mountain families in a radius of five miles. The children walked or rode mules.

Great oak trees, interspersed with an occasional sweet gum, towered darkly around the path, and, underneath, the ground was thick with leaves. Along the path where the leaves had been kicked aside, the ground, except for an occasional shelf of rock, was soft and black. On it their steps made only the ghost of a noise.

It was dark when they rounded a giant oak and saw the light of the Tompkins' home.

"The Tompkins are the best people in this section," Madelaine said. "They own more property and they are not as superstitious as most of the folks around here."

A woman's wailing scream, choked with terror, split the air. "Anna! Anna! Where are you?"

A tight cord about Carson's brain, a cord that had seemed to hold his mind asleep, broke sharply. Madelaine clutched his arm. "That's Mrs. Tompkins calling. Anna is her daughter." Together they raced forward.

"Wait here," Madelaine panted at the gate. "I'll see what's wrong, then come back."

Two minutes later she stared up at Carson with wild, frightened eyes. "Anna's disappeared. A neighbor just came in and told Mrs. Tompkins he saw Anna in the woods before dark.

"She was walking hand in hand with—the little Clark girl who died!"

Carson jerked the gate open, stepped inside. "Where's Mrs. Tompkins?" he snapped.

"In the back," Madelaine said and led the way.

In the yellow glimmering light of a kerosene lamp Carson saw a woman standing on the back porch of the little house. She was middle-aged, but hard work had coarsened her features and stooped her shoulders. Scraggly hair fell about her face and the lamp light glinted on tears running down her cheeks. She was sobbing, a broken moan.

Carson stepped to the porch beside her. "I'm Andy Carson, sent out here by the Attorney General," he said quietly. "Which way was your daughter going when she was seen?"

The woman stepped back, startled, then glowered at him sullenly. She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, smearing the tears in her hair.

"I don't know nothin' 'bout her," she said.

"Are you members of this—this new religion here?"

The woman backed toward the door. She had stopped sobbing. "I don't know nothin' 'bout it," she said. "I gotta go cook supper." She backed into the door, pulled it shut after her.

"The mountain people won't talk to strangers," Madelaine said.

Carson turned toward her. "I'm going into town." His voice was low and hard. "I may have a letter there. I'll be out again tomorrow." He swung off the porch and into the darkness.

THE NARROW, bumpy road wound torturously through the hills toward Clarence. The road had never been intended for a car; a horse could have made just as good time.

The headlights, more often than they revealed the road, blazed against crowding trees or rocky precipices leering overhead. Carson cursed the slowness with which he was forced to drive.

He turned into a stretch running a hundred yards straight ahead between towering oak trees, and pushed down on the gas. The car jumped forward, then jerked to a halt, as if some gigantic hand had reached out invisible fingers and seized it. The motor sputtered, stopped.

Through cold lips Carson whispered, "Well, I'll be damned! Now what. . . ."

He stepped on the starter and the engine purred. Slipping the gear into low, he let out the clutch. The power of forty horses surged the car forward—less than a foot! The motor churned furiously. Bits of rock, flung by the skidding wheels rang like machine guns against the fenders. Carson muttered a curse under his breath, threw the car out of gear and reached out to open the door.

Then, suddenly, as if it had matured from thin air, a gigantic figure stood at Carson's side. A voice like a fog horn thundered, "Stop thy striving! The power of Woulfgard holds thee!"

Andy Carson's blood ran chill and cold sweat broke out along his spine. The monster, Madelaine had called him—the Messiah, others said—stood glaring into the roadster. And beside his terrific statue the automobile was dwarfed.

Dressed in flowing white robes, the man was fully eight feet tall and built in proportion with enormous shoulders and a great ape-like chest. But it was the face that held Carson's attention. Under a wide sweep of forehead there were eyes that actually burned with a red, inhuman glow. The lips, chalky white, curved in a fixed, beatific smile. Long strands of white hair hung wildly down to the shoulders.

The last pant of the motor throbbed on the air, died. A vast tense silence crushed down on the lonely road. A black bat flitted through the glare of the headlights, vanished. Carson felt a wild terror growing inside him; fear clutched at his throat. He beat down the horror that gnawed at his brain, gazed steadily into the face above him.

The great voice roared, "Do you wish to die the sleeping death? The death in life!"

"Hell no," said Carson. "What're you talking about?"

The light in the eyes went out, leaving the Gargantuan face blank. Then it came again, a pale red glow. It grew brighter and brighter, flamed fiercely scarlet.

"You have seen a child who died the sleeping death. Such a one has life only at the wish of Woulfgard, movement only at the word of Woulfgard. It is unending slavery."

Madness beat at Carson's brain. He saw himself moving as the child moved, stiffly, mechanically. And then there flashed through his mind a vision of Madelaine, her great purple eyes blank and empty, bowing before this creature. Carson's hand reached for his gun. There was a flick of white before his eyes and his arm froze hard against his side.

Carson almost screamed in sudden terror. The giant in front had never moved; yet something bound Carson's arms to his sides. He looked down. In the pale glow of the dashlight he could see a golden rope running about his waist and arms. Something held it fast in the back. He looked closer. The rope was a long braid of woman's hair, silk, fine!

Again the voice thundered at his ear drums. "There is no power that can harm

Woulfgard. But your life is as a candle flame in my hands. I release you now. But if you ever return to these mountains—" the voice sank to the low deep tones of cries heard in a cave from a long distance—"you die the sleeping death."

Andy Carson felt something tug at his side, looked down to see his gun vanish in the air behind him. He tried to twist around, but as far as his head would turn there was nothing. He looked back at the monster.

"All right," he said. "You win. Take your hoodoo off this car and I'll get out."

The monster moved back, back until he was a dim outline of darkness against the black trees. He mumbled as he went, his tone receding like the rumble of fading thunder. A sharp, twanging noise mingled with the thunder of his voice; then sudden silence. "The power of Woulfgard releases you. Depart."

The cord of hair flicked away. Carson snapped around in his seat, saw a slither of darkness in the ditch at the roadside. Then nothing. . . .

A grim smile twisted the corners of his hard lips as he started his engine, slipped the car into gear. The little roadster lunged down the road.

IT WAS dawn before Carson reached Clarence. He went to the small boarding house where he had engaged a room on his arrival. The town of Clarence did not boast a hotel. He bathed, dressed, shaved. From his bag he pulled a .45 automatic, thrust it in his pocket. Then he went downstairs for breakfast. After breakfast he walked down to the general store which served the mountain town as postoffice as well. "Any mail for Andrew Carson?" he asked.

"Sho' is," the clerk said. He had to stand far back from the counter on account of his belly. "Yep. Just now come on the mornin' train. From Washington. Gov'ment letter. Here 'tis." And he took a long important-looking envelope from a wooden pigeonhole.

Outside Carson tore open the envelope, looked quickly over the contents.

As he read his lips froze into hard, thin lines and his eyes narrowed. He stuck the letter into his coat pocket, strode with long steps toward the car in front of the boarding house.

In three minutes he was bounding wildly over the road leading back toward the mountain school house. His eyes were black fires and along his jaws the muscles corded. The wagon trail he followed ended two miles from the Tompkins'. Carson leaped from the machine, plunged into the woods.

It was mid-afternoon when Carson passed the Tompkins' home, walking fast. The doors and windows were shut and there was no sign of life about the place.

Two hundred yards from the little school he stopped abruptly, his heart pounding. A woman's wild scream whipped the air. From the door of the school house stalked a tall, russet-skinned man. About his head was a crown of mistletoe, for clothing a goat-skin loin cloth. And hanging limply over his shoulder was Madelaine Blaine!

Jerking out his gun, Andy Carson raced forward. He could see Madelaine's golden hair swaying across the giant's back. He dared not risk a shot. The giant saw him, dashed with great easy strides along the path down which the child had vanished the previous afternoon. Andy Carson sprinted to intercept him.

Carson heard the snicking sound of a bullet tearing through his hat, knocking it from his head. But there had been no rifle crack. Another bullet whined within an inch of his ear and Carson dived headlong, rolled behind a tree. As he did a third slug ricocheted off a rock behind him, went shrieking through the forest.

Keeping his head flat against the ground, Carson peered around the tree. The giant had disappeared.

"Hell, he can't be far. He can't fly." He said the words aloud, almost desperately, as if to convince himself of their truth.

For a full three minutes he lay, black eyes searching. A small group of children stood huddled in fear on the steps of the school, crowded close together, their faces white masks of horror. A sepulchral hush crept through the forest. Hugging the tree, Andy Carson got to his feet. Swiftly he flung himself across ten yards to the next tree. His stomach felt cold and hollow, waiting to feel the sickening impact of a bullet. There was no sign that anyone except the children, staring at him with strained white faces, had seen him.

Carson's lean face set in fighting lines. His teeth made a low scraping noise as his jaws clamped tight. "If that guy has hurt Madelaine I'll kill him if I have to drive a stake through him."

With short rushes from tree to tree, he made his way to the foot of the cliff where the giant had disappeared. His eye caught a hollow, low in the tree beside the cliff. Stooping he looked inside. Far up light showed. Carson crawled inside, groping hands found rungs nailed to the side.

He stuck his automatic in his hip pocket, began to climb. They might know he was coming but there was no other way to find Madelaine. Looking up, he could see the tiny motes swimming in the golden funnel of sunlight streaming through an opening overhead.

The hollow let out upon a narrow shelf of rock, running south. The late afternoon sun was hot on the cliff, turning it to a ruddy bronze. In the small crevices the shadows lay like damp splotches. Carson catfooted forward. His shoe struck something round, and looking down he saw an empty cartridge. His thin lips pulled back from white teeth.

The shelf widened slowly, then ended abruptly in a perpendicular wall. The foot of the wall was ragged, one huge rock protruding three feet beyond the others. Carson stepped around it.

Andy Carson saw the shadow move, jerked up his gun. Something cracked sharply over his temple. A wild whirling blackness crashed on him.

FROM somewhere weird, eerie music, a wailing sort of chant, drifted about Carson's ears. He tried to open his eyes, struggled. He twisted to raise a hand; then memory rushed back to him. He was tied, hand and foot, and his eyes, wide open now, were staring into blackness. When he had stepped around that jagged rock the late afternoon sun had been pouring about him. How long ago was that? He rolled for a more comfortable position and the shooting pain over his right ear reminded him of the blow that had smashed him down.

Without warning terrific screams jabbed the air—the horrible wailing of a tortured human. Then the cries dropped to a low moaning, while from a distance a ghostly chanting beat pulsating through the darkness.

In Andy Carson's mind flashed the note Madelaine Blaine had read him. *"The Children of the Druids sacrifice to the Gods those who interfere."* Perhaps Madelaine Blaine was in there being tortured, her fragile beauty mutilated while the life was wrung from her soft body!

Carson writhed to a sitting position, leaned back to twist at his bonds. A cold horror leaped through his body. His heart ceased, then raced like a horse on the home stretch while a fearful madness leaped shrieking at his brain. His bound hands had touched cold human flesh. He snatched away, fell on his face; then he

clawed to a sitting position again, fighting the fear that clutched him.

Between him and the weird chanting a flickering light appeared, then another and another. Yellow wavering lights, moving toward him. Carson felt his flesh grow prickly.

In the smoky light of the first pine torch Carson saw the face of a man; a gaunt, haggard face with eyes burning with a frenzied, unearthly light. Unkempt blond hair fell around the man's weather-beaten face and over his hair there was a garland of mistletoe. Behind him came three men all carrying torches. They were the mountaineers. Carson could see the lean, hard outlines of their faces, and below the flowing white robes which hung from the shoulders he saw the dirty cuffs of worn overalls.

The light of the torches fell wavering on Andy Carson. Beyond the yellow circle of light about him and the four silent men, the darkness crowded like a giant cat about to leap. Without a word two of the men handed their torches to the others, bent to untie the ropes which bound the investigator.

Carson twisted around. A child lay motionless beside the wall behind him. She appeared asleep, except that her eyes, wide open and unseeing, stared up into the darkness. It was the girl who had delivered the note to Madelaine.

A man on each arm, the other two close behind, Carson was led toward the chanting and the beating, ghostly music. They turned a corner, came into a great vaultlike room. Staring around, Carson knew the place was one of the caves with which the mountains in this section were pockmocked. The great vault chamber was lit by scores of tall torches casting a yellow glow. Black smoke streamed up from them and the air was heavy with the odor of burning pine wood. At the rear of the cavern were grouped about twenty-five men and women dressed in flowing white robes. Their haggard, ascetic faces, pale in the dim light, were frenzied with a spiritual drunkenness. Some stood stiffly erect, others squatted on their heels, rocking rhythmically; some writhed like snakes on the rocky floor. All the while they chanted a low moaning wail, keeping time with the ghostly music that came from behind a great throne-shaped stone, directly in front of Carson. And on the throne sat Woulfgard. But Woulfgard was strangely different from when he had stood before Carson on the lonely road. His eyes did not burn now, but were dark holes, hung low beneath a horribly wide forehead.

A SICKENING odor of burnt flesh nauseated Carson. Just beyond the throne three flat, bedlike stones had been shaped by the wearing away of rocks during the centuries. And on one of them was stretched an old man, stark naked. From his stomach protruded the bone handle of a knife. Underneath the altar was a burning fire. The man's flesh, where it touched the stone, was cracked and blackened from the heat. A horrid, nasty drooling had run from his lips across his cheek. At the foot of the three stones was a great pile of mistletoe.

Furiously Carson whirled, threw off the man on his right, smashed his fist to the other's jaw. Then a terrific impact carried him down as the two men drove at him from behind. Stretched on the floor, his clothes were torn from him. He was carried, writhing, to the nearest altar. Four men held him, one on each arm and leg, their faced turned toward Woulfgard.

Carson glared at the fiendish face with the beatific smile. The monster was staring toward the far wall, and in the small, sunken eyes was a gloating, lustful gleam. Carson snapped his head around.

Coming into the chamber from a black

passageway was Madelaine Blaine. She half walked, was half carried by the two women with her. Carson gasped, then struggled fiercely to free himself. For Madelaine Blaine was naked except for the golden, luminous hair that hung shimmering about her shoulders and breasts. As she came into the center of the cavern, two men sprang forward silently, forced her to the altar beside Carson, held her there.

Suddenly the music hushed, the chanting died. A ghastly silence hung trembling in the smoky light of the torches. A gigantic voice boomed through the cavern; flung out wild meaningless words that crashed against the walls, bounded in confusing echoes. Then it became a roaring chant. Slowly it faded to a low whispering, died softly. Now Woulfgard's voice boomed again, this time in English.

"The Druid Gods demand sacrifice. The wolf runs wild and unfed on the hill and the mistletoe blights in the tree. The Gods have sent us sacrifices. Prepare the fires!"

Two men carrying sticks moved forward, placed them beneath the altars. Carson looked toward Madelaine. Low sobs shook her breasts and throat, but seeing him, she fought bravely for control. A low moan escaped her tightly compressed lips as a man bent to light the fire beneath her.

Thick pine smoke surged up around Carson making the men that held him lean away from the altar. The music had started behind the throne, and the worshipers, their eyes fastened to the altars, chanted wailingly. Carson felt the flat rock beneath him growing warm.

Above the chanting he heard the voice of Woulfgard.

"Brand the man that his flesh may be more acceptable."

From the wall a man approached the altar, a cow's horn in his hand. Moving the horn about Carson's chest he left a black trail of powder, coiled snakelike. Carson felt the muscles in his back and shoulders creak as he fought to raise his head, watched the tip of the horn move about his chest. Beneath him the stone grew hotter. He writhed to shift his weight.

THE mountaineer with the powder horn stalked back to the wall and another took his place. Slowly, he bent to the fire beneath the altar, straightened holding a twig one end of which blazed smokily. He reached forward, touched the burning end to the black powder. Fire leaped high and a ripping flame tore about Carson's chest. Agony twisted his body convulsively; then he went limp in the hands of the men who held him.

It was his one chance. His mind fought to keep his muscles still and relaxed despite the racking pain in his chest and the searing rock beneath him. He must not faint. He heard the fire sputter sullenly beneath him, through slit eyelids saw black smoke swarm up. The men on his right edged away from the altar. One coughed hollowly and the other raised a hand to wipe smoke from his eyes.

Carson jerked fiercely. His right hand and leg came free. He pivoted on hip and shoulder, smashed hand and foot upward. He heard the grind of teeth breaking from their sockets as his fist smashed through flesh.

Carson was on his feet in one whirling leap. He dashed around the altar, tore the knife from the stomach of the dead sacrifice. And flinging himself at Woulfgard, he drove snarling into the monster, crashing him backward, slashing at him with the knife. There was a ripping sound and the hissing rush of air. Carson leaped to his feet, jerked Woulfgard up with him.

Carson thrust the knife into the face

of the monster, ripped it downward a foot and a half. The face fell sloppily to each side. The little Circuit Rider, blood spilling from his cheek where the knife had grazed him, glared at Carson.

Standing in the large, stilted boots with the rubber suit—which he had worn inflated to give him size—hanging limp and split about him he seemed strangely deformed. Yet Carson could feel the power of the man's hypnotic eyes binding his muscles. He shook himself free, crashed his fist to the small man's jaw. Then leaped after the Circuit Rider, snatched up the limp body, and shook it before the crowd.

The movement had been so rapid that the mountaineers had stood there as if paralyzed. Now they surged forward. Carson shook the Circuit Rider before them, tore his rubber suit from him by bits. "Look at your Woulfgard! A fake! A rotten fake!"

The crowd milled uncertainly.

Madelaine screamed. Carson saw her staring past him, flung himself to one side. The shoulder of the bronze giant, who had sprung from behind the throne, flung Andy Carson like a match against the altar. Carson was on his feet as the giant turned, rushed. He smashed both fists to the giant's face, ducked and leaped for the open. He felt fingers like iron go down his back, slip off.

Wild panic had struck the mountaineers at the russet-man's rush. Their screams shook the cavern as they fled.

Carson stood naked in the glow of the torches, the brand on his chest flamed rawly. A hundred and eighty pounds of muscle and bone, he knew he would be a child in the hands of the man moving upon him with the slow inevitableness of death. Yet there was one chance. . . .

The giant came forward, talon hands outstretched, fingers clawlike. Carson waited, crouched. Then the giant leaped. A split second more Carson waited. His fingers closed about the giant's wrists; he flung himself backward, feet coming up. His feet caught the plunging giant in the belly, heaved fiercely.

The russet-man flung, twisting twelve feet through the air, struck on head and shoulder. There was a dull thud, a muffled crack, and the man lay sprawling, his head twisted queerly.

Carson turned to the Circuit Rider, picked him up and slapped him twice, sharply. The man's head nodded, straightened.

"Listen," Carson snapped, "you've got enough on your hands without any more murders. You better do something about those kids, quick."

"You got nothing on me," the little man whined. "You can't prove nothing."

"Like hell I can't," Carson husked. "But I won't have a chance. The British Government wants you for two murders in India. You've been hidden away in these woods so long you forgot about fingerprints. I sent the note the kid left in the class room to Washington. I was going after the answer when you stopped me with the piano wire across the road, and those flashlight eyes that you can't get away with in here where it's light."

"THIS fellow Armand," Carson explained to Madelaine, "has been a college professor, student of ancient languages and psychology, an expert hypnotist, and something of a geologist. He must have picked up that giant when he was in India ten years ago. He got out of the country just in time, came to the United States. He must have known they'd trace him as far as this country, and so he came out here as a Circuit Rider, figured he was safe.

"When he suspected there was oil in the section he started this cult. Playing that phonograph he had hidden back of

the throne, he hypnotised the mountaineers into a religious frenzy, had them deed over their property to the cult, which was him. When they wouldn't deed it over he had 'em sacrificed. The kids he had doped and hypnotised, and used them to bring the others around with their property. He was afraid of us, wanted to put us out of the way.

"That loud speaker he had rigged up inside his mask not only made him thunder, but kept them from recognizing his voice."

Madelaine Blaine's deep purple eyes glowed softly. "I owe you a great deal," she said.

Andy Carson grinned. "Well, you're going to have a life time to pay. We've got one preacher here and as soon as we get him locked up we'll find another preacher to lock us together. Then I'll have something to say about what you do, and if you ever mention teaching in the mountains, I'll. . . ."

He never finished his threat. A man doesn't threaten very well when he's being kissed.

DARK

IN THE beginning, there was nothing strange about Michael Brodin. Nothing strange at all. He was, to be sure, a more advanced student than most of us, and boasted an intellect far superior to the sluggishly conventional minds of his associates. But he was not at all mysterious and certainly not mad. When he called me that night, he used neither a crimson letter-head nor a blue light waving in some obscure window. He simply picked up the phone, and when I answered the ring, said: "That you, Paul? Come over and I'll show you something for a laugh."

And when I had strolled across the square and buzzed his bell—for he had plenty of money and could afford an apartment rather than endure the too-strict rules of the dorm—he grinned at me good-naturedly and said in a bantering voice:

"Remember that book I dug up? Well, I'm going to try it."

"Really," I smiled. "A little slow music is in order, I presume. The *Danse Macabre,* perhaps. Who translated the thing for you?"

"Doped it out myself."

"Smart lad," I grinned. "Since when could you read Creole?"

"All you need is a good imagination,"

SLAUGHTER

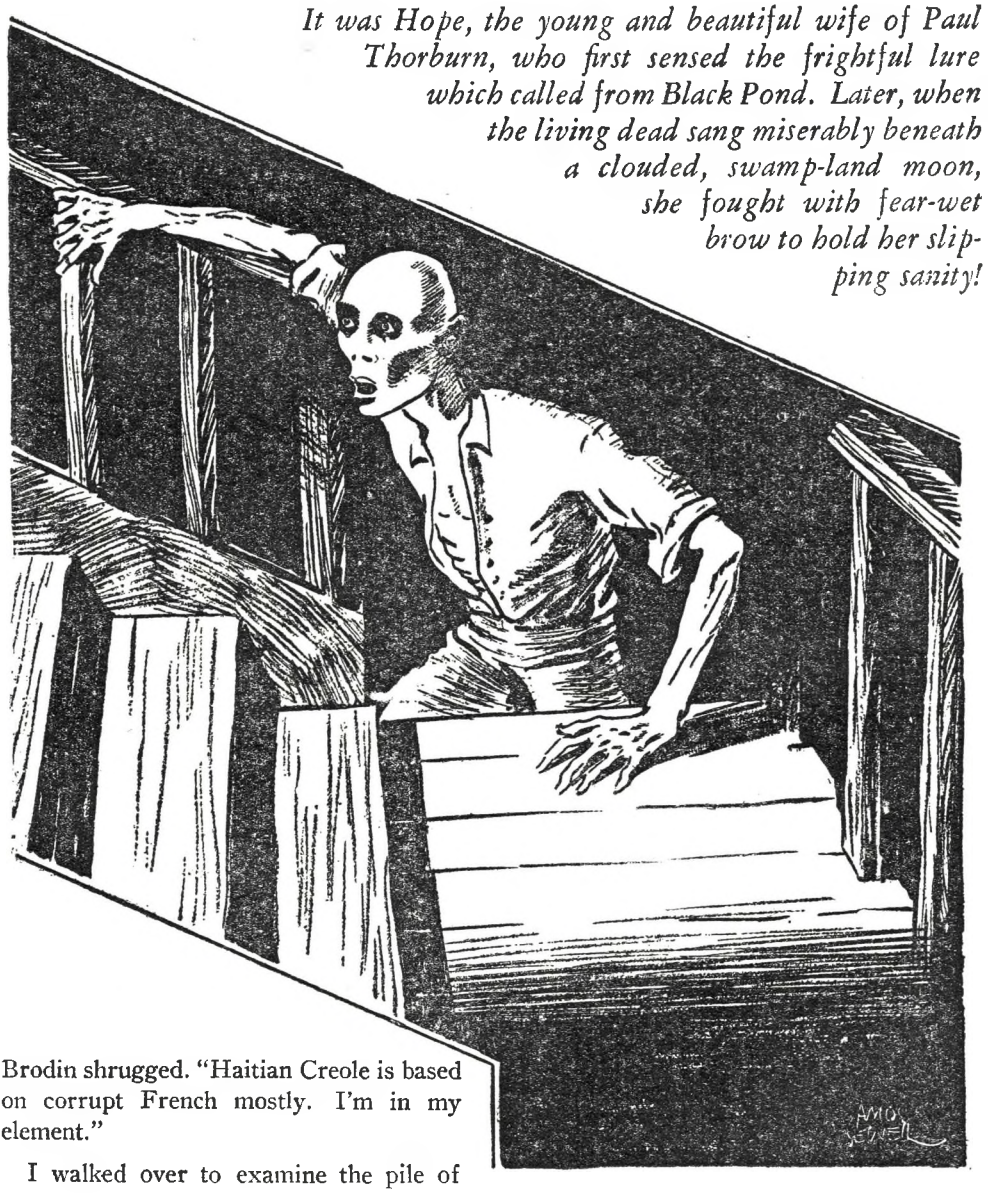
Mystery-Terror Novel

By

HUGH B. CAVE

Author of "They Feed at Midnight," etc.

It was Hope, the young and beautiful wife of Paul Thorburn, who first sensed the frightful lure which called from Black Pond. Later, when the living dead sang miserably beneath a clouded, swamp-land moon, she fought with fear-wet brow to hold her slipping sanity!



Brodin shrugged. "Haitian Creole is based on corrupt French mostly. I'm in my element."

I walked over to examine the pile of

papers on his desk. Smiling again, I said to him: "I suppose we'll have revived corpses floating all around the room before morning, eh?"

"We'll have one at any rate," Brodin said quietly. "Jack Terry is bringing one."

I stared at him. "You mean to say Jack Terry is actually bringing a dead body here for you to experiment with? Good God, man, you'll have every policeman in town—"

There was a noise downstairs. A door slammed, and someone was singing in a loud, discordant voice. Brodin got quickly to his feet. I heard scuffing footsteps on the stairs, and a series of disgruntled mutterings. Then the door of the room quivered to an impatient thumping.

Brodin opened the door wide, and Jack Terry stood there.

He was a devil-may-care chap, this one. I had met him on one or two occasions and found him to be exceedingly likable but shamefully irresponsible. Presumably he was attending college for the hell of it. He cared nothing for convention, drank considerably, and went about in baggy trousers, sport shoes, and a greenish crew-necked sweater. His life, as well as I could judge, had been one eternal round of song and drink.

His friendship for Brodin was just "one of those things." They had nothing at all in common; they seldom went anywhere together; they met in only one or two classes. Perhaps it was an attraction of opposites, perhaps a mild form of hero-worship. At any rate, Terry had apparently discovered something magnetic in Michael Brodin's personality, and now—

Well, he was quite drunk.

"Didn't expect t' be so late, Brodin. Hones'ly I didn'. But here I am, jus' as promised. And look 't what I got."

BRODIN hauled him inside and pushed the door shut again. Terry stood there, as grotesque a figure as ever I had looked upon. His face was twisted in a senseless grin. His shirt collar was wrenched half off, as if he had attempted with drunken fingers to remove it. His hair tumbled down his forehead and into his eyes. His shoes were coated with clay. Over one shoulder he carried a bulging burlap bag stained with red earth. Pitifully drunk he was, yet conscious of his condition, for he turned to me with half an apology.

"Sorry, Thorburn. Didn't know you were t' be here, too. Thought it was just Brodin here, an' I might 's well be drunk 's sober. Experiment, y' know." He spoke the word *experiment* with an obvious effort to make it sound dignified. "I brought a lady along."

He grinned again and dropped the burlap bag on the floor. Then he was on his knees beside it, dragging out its contents. I looked down into a face that had long ago turned black with decay, a face more than half decomposed and now only a mask of shrunken flesh clinging to shapeless bone-formations. The rest of the hideous thing was mercifully wrapped in a ragged winding-sheet which revealed only enough to prove that our guest was feminine.

I recoiled instinctively and looked into Michael Brodin's countenance. It was not the same countenance I had looked into five minutes before. It was vibrant with anticipation and eagerness, and yet tinged with bitter disappointment.

"Is this the best you could do?" Brodin snapped.

"Huh?"

"This isn't the girl they interred yesterday! I gave you implicit directions—"

"Sorry," Terry shrugged. "I forgot what y' told me. I was drunk, I guess. So I jus' dug up the firsht—"

"All right, all right," Brodin said curtly. "Give me a hand. Get it on the couch."

I stood and watched them. It was unbelievable, of course. It was all too fan-

tastic. I felt as if I were watching the rehearsal of a stage drama. Here was Michael Brodin, the wicked scientist; here was Jack Terry, the drunken comic character; here was the resurrected corpse, being toted callously to a resting place on the couch. Presently the wicked scientist and the drunken comedian would leave the room, and the lights would fade to mere pin-points of yellowish glow, and then, very slowly, the corpse would move and reach out a bony white hand, and stand erect—and some woman in the audience would scream with delicious terror.

But it was nothing of the sort. Michael Brodin was no wicked scientist; he was my friend. Jack Terry was no comedian; he was a very drunk and slightly sick young man who was saying even now, in a thick voice:

"I want a drink, Brodin. Hones', you don't know what a job I had, diggin' this damn thing up and luggin' it here."

"Wait," Brodin said. Then, turning to me with a quiet smile: "Still think I'm cracked, Paul? Just watch!"

He strode to the table, and I saw him reach for a bottle that stood there. A long-necked bottle it was, deep green in hue, without a label. He pulled the cork carefully and poured some of the liquid into an ordinary tumbler, and studied the stuff as a connoisseur of liquors might study some rich and rare wine of uncertain vintage. From the other end of the room Jack Terry muttered again:

"Aw say, Brodin, I *need* a drink. Maybe you think it was a cinch, gettin' this female. I'm tellin' you—"

Brodin glanced at him impatiently, and frowned. He jerked open the table drawer, irritably, I thought, and lifted out a bottle of gin. Hurriedly he poured a short drink and held it out. Terry came and gulped it.

"Better?" Brodin demanded.

"Uh? Sure! I tell you, it was no cinch—"

"I heard you the first time. Now listen. I want you to hold the lady's head up and keep pressing her throat while I pour this liquid into her mouth. Understand? Put both hands on her throat and—"

I watched them with increasing horror. At that moment I learned to dislike Brodin. He was inhuman. He had none of the natural squeamishness which should have possessed any man engaged in such a task. He enjoyed it! And when Terry lifted that leering death's-head, so that it stared straight across the room at me, I wanted suddenly to scream.

LIKE a man casually administering medicine to a normal patient, Brodin poured his greenish concoction down that awful throat. I heard it gurgle through decayed channels, into worm-eaten intestines. Every last drop of it went into that gaping mouth. Then Brodin nodded quietly to his assistant and stepped back.

There was something unholy in Brodin's eyes then. He stood like a robot, staring straight down into the woman's face, waiting. He was unaware of my presence, even unaware of Jack Terry. He was alive for only one thing—the impossible horror that he actually expected to take place.

Terry blinked at him and lurched away, mumbling incoherently. I could do nothing but stare. I do not remember my thoughts at that moment. I know that Terry went to the table and grabbed one of the bottles there. I know that he poured himself a drink. I know that I realized, even as he upended the glass in his mouth, what he had done.

"Not that!" I shrieked, lunging erect. "That's the wrong—"

Then I stood quite still, cold as ice. Terry turned to me, grinning foolishly.

He said, in a cracked voice which almost whimpered as it came from his drooling lips:

"Want t' go home 'n' sleep. Got classes tomorrow. This business is gettin' on my nerves. I been drinkin' too much 'n'—"

The glass fell out of his hands and broke on the floor. His grin faded. His eyes opened slowly, hideously, until they were rimmed with stark, staring white. I was vaguely aware that a clock was ticking somewhere in the room, and that Brodin, bending over the dead thing on the couch, was breathing heavily, rapidly. Then, so suddenly that it echoed again and again through the chamber, a lurid shriek rose from Terry's lips. He staggered backward, clawing at his face with his hands.

"Brodin!" he screamed. "Brodin, I'm on fire! I'm burnin'!"

Then he fell. His knees let him down, and he pitched back against the wall. A bubbling white foam filled his mouth. His face was suddenly a writhing horror, contorted with agony. He struggled up, supporting himself on one arm. Then, with a sob that seared my very soul, he collapsed.

"Brodin" I shouted. "For God's sake, help him! Brodin!"

Michael Brodin turned slowly and looked into the boy's upturned face. He paced forward with deliberate steps and stood staring.

"He drank the wrong stuff!" I cried. "He thought it was gin! *Do* something!"

"There is nothing to do."

"But, good God—"

"He's dead."

I gripped the table with both hands. I had to grip something, or I should have stood there and screamed until my throat broke. Brodin turned again to the ugly thing on the couch and said heavily, methodically:

"I've failed, Paul. She was dead too long before I got her. I'll have to find another corpse, a fresh one."

I stood rigid, gaping at him.

"It's a rotten shame," he shrugged. "All our work for nothing."

Then the hideousness of that unholy room put its hands on me. I stumbled to the door and flung it open. I went down the stairs as if a living horror were pursuing me. I slammed the lower door with such violence that the glass broke and tinkled on the stone steps as I fled down them.

I was alone then, alone in the abandoned by-street which led to the square. Blindly, I ran along the sidewalk, keeping to the shadows of the buildings. Five minutes later I let myself furtively into my own room, and there, in the solitude of familiar surroundings, threw myself on the bed and prayed.

CHAPTER TWO

Land of Terror

THAT was the first of Michael Brodin's vicious experiments. As for Jack Terry's death, the matter was somehow hushed up. The boy's body was never discovered. The case was recorded simply as a "disappearance"—the desertion of a student who probably found college study too difficult and flight more honorable than failure. Brodin, after a few days of secret preparations, left the university suddenly and without apparent reason. Perhaps he feared suspicion and ultimate discovery. Perhaps, after the result of his first hideous experiment, he had cast aside his insane desire for such forbidden research. I did not know.

It was not love for Michael Brodin that sealed my tongue. Fear was the shroud that kept me mute, and the more I dwelt on it—the more I argued with that relent-

less demon named Conscience—the greater became the fear. Nights on end I combated the dread which took possession of me and rotted my knowledge of right and wrong. Morbidity claimed me. Awake or asleep, I heard that jangling death-scream from Jack Terry's lips. Grim horrors paraded over my floor—accusing, condemning, mocking me. I looked a thousand times into the decayed face of that woman from the grave.

Then a girl came to me. A girl with hair the color of burnt sienna and eyes choked with loneliness and bewilderment. Hope was her name, but it was a mockery, for the hope in her breast was dead. She sat in the straight-backed chair in my room and said to me:

"You knew him, Mr. Thorburn. You knew him well enough to know that he would never just run away like that, without telling any of us."

"No," I said dully, "he would never just run away."

"I loved him. He knew I loved him."

"He is not dead," I said, because she wanted me to say it. "He can't be dead. He'll come back."

When she had gone, I stood alone in my room. Stood and stared at the faded rose-pattern on the wall, and said aloud:

"I can't. I can't ever tell."

That was in November, 1924.

IN 1925 I left the University. Four years later I walked out of medical school and into the General Hospital, as an interne. There again I found Hope Lewell. She was a nurse.

"He has never come back," she said. "I love him, yet he has never come back to me."

We were together there. Together constantly, because the memory of Jack Terry united us. And when I had served my allotted time, when I was done with accident-rooms and grim gleaming tables on wheels and the midnight screams of women in child birth—when at last I was privileged to hang out my shingle and declare myself fit to serve mankind without the supervision of superiors—she came with me. She, Jack Terry's sweetheart and the girl to whom, in the name of mercy, I could never confess the truth, stood beside me while a minister of the church linked our hands and said quietly: *"Until death do you part."*

And in the spring of the following year I received the letter which, while innocent on the surface and utterly devoid of macabre significance, bore grinning death between its neatly typed lines and lured me into a pit of shadow from which I have never risen.

From Morrendale it came, from the home of my brother. "My dear Paul," it began, and then after words of no importance: " . . . hoping that you will find it possible to accept this invitation, and that I may have you and your wife with me during the pleasant summer season, or at least a part of it . . . ."

And I said to Hope: "We will go, you will love it there."

IT is a fascinating stretch of country, that region between the ancient town of Rennison and the black, spider-legged bridge which spans the moiled waters of the slow-flowing Morguen River. To the ordinary traveller, the tourist, it is merely "country." But to the inhabitants it is a terrain of legend, of old and mysterious memories, of near-forgotten Indian ceremonies and Indian onomatopoeical names. It is darkness and shadow. The gleaming black and gray roads which glide through the land are merely impotent breaths of civilization, indents of an unwanted outside which bring only a leer from the dim dark beyond the fringe. One must either love or hate such surroundings; he may not be indifferent. And, as I have said, I loved this country.

At Rennison that afternoon, my wife and I turned from the main highway into the seldom-used back road which leads deeper into the woods toward Morrendale. Morrendale itself is no village at all, not even an assembly of scattered houses; it is merely a name given to an emptiness on the map between two man-made boundary lines. The road which leads to it is merely a pair of sandy ruts with stubble growing between them.

Here and there, just after leaving Rennison, appear gaunt and spectral houses, gaping and abandoned. Occasionally, on some half-hidden side road, a wooden sign indicates the presence of a summer camp. There is nothing more. Nothing but great grim masses of apparently primeval forest, and deep, dark swamps full of oily blackness and whispering gloom.

Ten miles of loose sand and gravel crunched beneath the wheels of our car before we neared our destination, and now I began to see and remember things which were like joyous cries out of the past.

On either side, snakish paths of mystifying origin and unknown appointment came and went like wraiths, concealing their secret rendezvous. Once, pointing down through a great wall of tangled underbrush and malshaped trees, to where a half-hidden pond of black water gleamed dully in the sunlight, I said, smiling:

"Somewhere in that vale, Wampanoag and his black clan had their altars of blood. The Indians called it the Pond of the Midnight Raven. The natives hereabouts call it Black Pond."

"It is a strange place, Paul," my wife whispered. "So strange."

I glanced at her curiously. I did not know, then, that I was taking her blindly into a terrain of terror where no woman should ever have intruded. I did not know that these gloomy hollows and patchwork pits of darkness sheltered a horror which would eventually claim us both.

WE rode in silence after that, and presently, after another mile or so of hard going, we came at length to the side road which led to my brother's isolated home. Here was a battered wooden arrow, nailed to a huge pine, bearing the solitary word "Thorburn." And when we had proceeded a short distance down the road, my brother's house appeared through the trees.

A typical farm dwelling it was, square and somewhat stern, with shuttered upper windows and three separate chimneys poking their noses above the sloping roof. My heart leaped at sight of it, and I was grinning childishly as we drove the final hundred yards. But my grin died to frowning bewilderment when I noted the weedy, unkempt appearance of the grounds and saw no sign of life about the place.

Always my brother had prided himself on the neatness of his "estate." Always he had considered it his private and very personal kingdom, glorying in its remoteness and seclusion, and affectionately dubbing it "Castle Thorburn."

Now there was something grimly and uncomfortably significant in that term castle. When I stood with Hope on the small veranda and pressed the rusty bell in the door-frame, I found myself saying glumly:

"It isn't what I expected, dear. Something's wrong."

We waited, and no one came in answer to my summons. Again I pushed the bell and again we waited. Finally I seized the knob impatiently and twisted it, and the door swung inward.

"Frank must have gone to the village," I shrugged. "We'll make ourselves comfortable."

Silently we entered the room which I remembered as the parlor, wherein were assembled all the usual hulks of massive, somber-hued furniture so common in country homes. I removed my coat and and hat and placed them over the back of one of the stuffed chairs. And then, assisting my wife with hers, seated myself and stared about me.

"I can't understand it," I said, more troubled than I wished her to know. "The place is positively repelling. I can't ask you to remain here."

I expected my wife to laugh softly, as was her usual reaction to petty discomforts of any sort. Instead, she looked directly at me and reached out to touch my hand.

"There is someone here," she said almost inaudibly.

The inflection of her voice silenced me. I stared. Then I stood erect and strode angrily to the table.

"Nonsense," I said tartly. "If anyone were here they would have heard the car and come out to greet us. We'll wait an hour, no longer. If this is Frank's idea of a joke—"

An ancient gramophone with lily-shaped horn stood on the table. I rummaged through the pile of dusty wax cylinders in the rack beneath. Finding one with a label which sounded somewhat cheerful, I slipped it over the felt slide and wound the machine until the crank snapped back in my fingers. In a moment the room was filled with cracked and scratchy music, distorted and tuneless but nevertheless dammably welcome.

I noticed then that shadows had taken possession of the chamber, and it was dark outside. I turned the little protuberance beneath the gas-mantle over my head. No hissing sound came in response. Scowling, I bent over the lamp—a black, ludicrous thing fashioned of curved and twisted metal, which stood beside the gramophone.

A moment later, as I leaned impatiently against the table, my wife said heavily:

"I'm tired, Paul. So tired. My head—"

I peered at her. She was tired; and I knew from the drawn whiteness of her face that she was suffering. With a word of encouragement to her, I walked out of the room and down the shadowed corridor to the kitchen. There, in a cabinet, I found a small bottle of aspirin tablets. Returning, I offered the bottle to her, and she smiled at me gratefully.

The gramophone had run itself out. Once again I wound it up, and this time the music was of war-time origin, squawking despondently of a rose in some devil's-garden. In the midst of it I stared suddenly at my wife, and saw that she was sitting very still with one hand half lifted, as if she had heard, or was hearing, some sound of evil portent.

"Someone is coming," she said.

I listened and heard nothing.

"Hardly," I shrugged. "We should hear the car."

"No. Someone is coming who has been here all the time. Someone inside the house!"

She turned in her chair and looked straight at the door. Bewildered, I too turned to stare.

And I was not surprised when the door opened.

CHAPTER THREE

He Speaks Not

IT is a peculiar psychology, that. Once, when I was a child, there was a picture hanging on the wall of my bed-chamber. It was a most ordinary picture, portraying a pig's head with comical red eyes; and I was told by my mother that the pig was a

magic pig, and that by looking at it I could make it wink. I spent many an hour staring at it from my bed, and could always, without fail, make it do as she had promised—or make myself think it did.

So I was not surprised when the door opened.

But I stood quite still, utterly without motion or speech, when I saw the man who stood there.

He was a tall fellow, grotesquely so, with stooped shoulders and abnormally long arms. The shadows of the doorway revealed in detail only three significant parts of him: only the parts which were naked and therefore white against a black background. Those parts were—two gaunt dangling hands with limp and motionless fingers, and a face that seemed at first glance to contain all the hollows of a death's-head.

Mutely, the man stared at us, with the fixed and vacant expression of a creature who has eyes but cannot see with them. He neither moved nor spoke, but stood like a mechanical automaton who had, in the grip of some remote control, shuffled into our presence.

And he was my brother!

Mutely, I lifted the lamp from the table and strode forward, but a slender hand seized my arm and held me back, and I looked down into my wife's face. And at that moment I hated my wife unreasonably and blindly, for she clung to me with an amazing display of strength and cried out desperately:

"No, Paul! No!"

But he was my brother, and he was ill, horribly ill. I wrenched myself loose and confronted him, and even the glare of the lamp, raised before his wasted face, did not cause him to blink those fixed, glassy eyes. He did not recognize me. He did not hear the shrill rasp of my voice when I said anxiously:

"Frank! Good God, what's wrong? What's happened?"

He did not reply. I seized his hand and drew him into the room, and he scuffed forward without any show of realization or resistance.

Hope was beside me then, and together we got him into a chair. He slumped down mechanically, moving only the lower portion of his body. He sat stiff and mute, staring into emptiness, hideously like a propped-up corpse from the grave.

And while I talked to him—while I talked *at* him, mumbling incoherent words and questions which had no effect whatever upon him—the door-bell rang.

The ringing of that door-bell was a mockery, but at that moment it was a blessed relief.

"I'll answer it," I said curtly to my wife. "Stay here."

"Be careful, Paul!"

I hurried into the hall. The front door was already open; a man was pacing toward me. When he saw me, he stopped abruptly and stared. Then he advanced again and said in a voice strangely womanish and shrill:

"Who are you, sir? What are you doing here? I demand an explanation!"

"I might demand the same thing from you," I said bluntly.

He stood motionless a moment, then introduced himself. So I met, for the first time, Dr. Ira M. Bickell, who was later to become the object of my most intense hate. Accepting his introduction, I drew him into the parlor where my brother sat like a dead man and my wife stood staring. And there, after the physician had explained his presence, I learned the truth about my brother's affliction.

"It is a strange illness, sir," Bickell said, leaning forward in his chair and twining nervous fingers together as he spoke. "Mr. Thorburn is the fifth in two months, and I've tended all of them. A

kind of cataleptic trance I'd call it, but not like anything I've met up with before. It comes amazingly quick. Take your brother here. One day he was fine and happy; the next day he was like this."

"He sent for you?" I demanded.

"There was no one else he could send for," the little man shrugged. "Not hereabouts."

"And when did this attack come on?" I glanced sideways at the strange shape that was my brother—that was, to all appearances, a man of flesh and blood, yet was sitting stiff and silent in his chair, utterly oblivious of our presence.

"Six days ago today, sir," Dr. Bickell replied. "Six days ago, in the early hours of the morning."

I looked sharply into our visitor's face. I was thinking thoughts that were not good thoughts.

"Three days ago," I said, "my brother wrote to me. At that time he was normal and happy."

"Quite likely, sir. Quite likely. It might have been in his mind to write to you long before this happened. It was a mechanical gesture, surely."

I looked at my wife, and she was staring fixedly at the doctor. There was something in that stare, some deep and inexplicable *knowledge,* not mere intuition, that startled me. I had never seen that almost uncanny penetration in her gaze before.

"You say other inhabitants of the district have suffered this same malady?" I prompted. "They got over it, Dr. Bickell?"

"No."

"No?"

"That is, we don't know, sir. They didn't stay. They—they disappeared."

"What?"

"There was young Jeremiah Rankin first. He was under the influence, as you might say, for eight days. Then he vanished out of his house, down on the Bloody Pond road. His folks searched high and low for him, but he's never been found. Then—" Bickell's fingers began to twist nervously again—"there was Marshall Durgel's wife. She got it, and she slipped out of the house the second night. She's never come back, either."

"And you left my brother alone, in the face of such facts?" I snapped.

"Well, I couldn't stay here, sir. I have a practice to attend to. I didn't know he had any folks."

I stood erect and faced the little man bitterly. Certainly my anger was justified and at that moment uncontrollable.

"It's a damned good thing I came!" I rasped.

Then I said impatiently: "Well, talking won't get us anywhere. Help me get Frank to his room. I'll examine him. Come with us, Hope. You can't stay here. God knows what's happened or what might happen!"

WE led that pathetic figure into the corridor and up the staircase to the landing above. Hope and I walked beside him, guiding him gently between us. The little man with the shrill voice preceded us, showing the way and carrying the twisted iron lamp in his outstretched hands.

There in my brother's bed-chamber, while Hope stood at the door and regarded us intently, Bickell and I examined the unfortunate man who had been my dearest companion.

He offered no resistance, despite the peculiar nature of his illness. Had he wished to, he could have swept both of us aside with a single heave of his great arms. I knew that from childhood experiences. But he said nothing and seemed not even aware of what we were doing as we stripped away his upper garments and subjected him to a most thorough exami-

nation. He made no exclamation when I tested the various reflexes and listened to the irregular beating of his heart. And the only things I found of any significance were a tiny puncture in the lower left arm, just above the wrist, and a slight discoloration of the lips. Nothing else.

I drew him to the bed, then, and made him sit upon it. Motioning Bickell away, I leaned close and took my brother's hand in my own.

"Frank," I whispered. "Listen to me. It's Paul, your brother. Can't you remember?"

He turned slowly and stared at me. God, that stare! His eyes were utterly empty of any expression, any *desire* for expression. They were the eyes of a dead animal, set in a masklike face which seemed moulded in clay. There was no recognition in them. There was not even life!

I stared at him mutely, until a hand touched my shoulder and my wife said, very close to me:

"Please, Paul. I must talk to you."

There was nothing more we could do at the moment. Leaving the stricken man in his room, we shut the door and locked it, and descended again to the parlor. There, for some time, Bickell answered my detailed questions and provided me with such information as he possessed. He displayed no hostility. He was only too eager to be of assistance.

And because of that, I was lured into making my first hideous blunder. Glancing at my wife, and taking note of her apparent fatigue, I drew Bickell aside and asked him quietly if he could supply me with a mild medicine to sooth my wife's nerves. He hesitated before complying; then, staring first at my wife and then at me, he took his bag from the table and handed me a bottle of patent-medicine which contained sufficient morphine for my purpose. Then, bidding us good-night, and promising to wire a message to the city for me, he left us.

I said to Hope: "This will help you, dear. You need a good night's sleep."

She looked at me, and there was a strange expression in her eyes which troubled me. She took the medicine hesitantly—would have refused it, I am sure, if I had not displayed my impatience. Then, handing the bottle back to me, she said very quietly:

"Paul, this house is unholy."

"Unholy?" I frowned. "Yes, I suppose that's the word for it. Such a malady is beyond me. But von Heller will know. I've sent for him."

"I did not mean that, Paul."

"What, then?"

"This house—there is something here that is not here. Something evil."

"Nonsense," I said. "You're upset."

"No, Paul. Something—something is watching over us, gloating. I have felt it from the very beginning."

"You don't wish to stay here?" I demanded.

"We must. We can't leave him here alone. Nor can we take him away until —until we know. . . ."

"There's no real danger," I shrugged. "It's just the rotten atmosphere of the place. I'll scrape up something to eat, and then we'll find a room upstairs, where we can be near him. Come, brace up! Bickell's talk has frightened you!"

My wife stood up and faced me, with the lamplight glowing in her face. The words she spoke then made me shudder and peer about me with a start. Had she uttered them in a whisper, while she cringed against me and entreated my protection, I might have considered them merely the fears of a frightened girl; but she spoke them evenly, deliberately, with the calm viciousness of a judge pronouncing sentence.

"That man is evil," she said. "Everything here is evil."

Then she came closer to me.

"You don't understand," she smiled. "I know you don't."

And I didn't. I understood no single part of it. I knew only that there was the mark of an hypodermic needle in my brother's arm, just above the wrist, and that an acid discoloration marred his lips and mouth. And I knew that I dreaded the coming hours of darkness and wished that my wife and I had never set foot in this house of silence and sinister mystery.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wailers of the Night

IT must have been three or four o'clock in the morning when I awoke. I awoke abruptly, with a sensation or premonition —call it what you will—that something, some sound or presence, had whipped me out of unconsciousness. Yet there was no sound whatever in the room with me. There was not the faintest whisper. And the very silence, where there should at least have been the customary sigh of my wife's breathing, made me turn over swiftly and reach out an exploring hand.

My fingers encountered only the crumpled sheets of the bed, not the warmth of a human body. My wife was gone!

I did not stop to think. If I had any thoughts, they were incoherent and bordering on terror, and they came to me mechanically, subservient to action. I got out of bed as if the bed itself were a thing unholy. In bare feet I rushed to the door, hardly aware that the room was only mildly dark and that objects about me were vaguely discernable in the pale half-light from the window.

The door was open. I rushed into the hall and stood there, uncertain which way to turn. Through no volition on my part, my wife's name jangled from my lips and went screaming through the entire upper portion of the house, shrill and high-flung, like a disembodied entity with its own means of propulsion.

"Hope! *Hope!*"

An eternity passed then. I heard sounds from my brother's room, and then footsteps. Into the corridor, not ten paces from me, stepped a figure in white.

It was my wife. For a long moment she stood staring at me, as if she had been waked from a trance. Then she spoke, and her words were so low that they scarcely reached me.

"Paul—oh, thank God!"

I stumbled forward. My hands gripped her arms, and she was trembling. She was attired only in pajamas. Very slender and small she seemed, standing there in the well of gloom and shadows, clinging to me as if she feared I might desert her.

"What is it?" I demanded. "What are you doing here?"

She drew me into the room—my brother's room. The window was wide, the curtains flung back. Silver moonlight made gaunt black specters of chairs, bed and table. The room was cold with the chill clamminess that invades wooded regions at night. I shivered as I paced forward.

Then I saw that my brother was not there. I stood quite still and stared at the bed. My mechanical gaze went to the window, then back to my wife's face, which was strangely white.

"He—he's gone," I said. It was a silly thing to say, but I could not help it.

"Yes, he's gone."

"But how? Why?"

"He went that way," my wife said slowly, pointing to the window.

"But you! What were you doing in here?"

"I came to—oh, I don't know why I came, Paul! It's all too horrible!"

"We've got to find him," I said. "He'll be hurt. He'll wander off into the woods. What are we standing here for? We've got to—"

"No, Paul."

"But, good God—"

"You don't understand. Please. He won't wander. He—he'll go to *it.*"

I stiffened and looked at my wife as if she had spoken in a strange tongue. I thought at that instant that she was mad: that the terror of the past few hours and the loneliness of our surroundings had finally seized her. But she touched my hand and said quietly, deliberately:

"Come back to our room. I must talk to you."

WHY I followed her I do not know. Every instinct commanded me to rush out of the house at once and find my brother, who might even now be prowling deeper into the woods. Yet I went back to our room and sat there, and listened. And my wife, pale and small in her chair, spoke words which under ordinary circumstances would have made me laugh derisively.

"He has gone to *it,*" she said. "You must try to understand that, Paul. You must. The summons came, and he answered it. I was awake, lying beside you, and I felt it, too. I—I might have answered it with him, if your scream had not stopped me in time."

"You mean you actually heard a voice?" I demanded.

"Not a voice, Paul. Not that. The same presence I felt when we drove along that evil road, past that horrible pond. The same that was here when we arrived. It came again while I lay beside you. It came for him. Oh, please try to understand! It was a *command!*"

"What sort of a command?" I muttered.

"You—wouldn't understand, Paul. If it had possessed a voice, it would have been: 'Come to me.' Only that. 'Come to me.' Then I heard movements in your brother's room, as if he had been sitting there in a chair, waiting for it. I heard the chair scrape as he stood up. Then footsteps, going across the floor. He raised the window, and I heard him crawl out. I heard him strike the ground underneath, when he dropped. Then I heard him tramping away through the brush, like an automaton, like a man hypnotized. And then the command reached *me,* ordering me to *follow him.*"

My wife was speaking truth. I knew it. I knew then that she was attuned to things I might never comprehend; and God help me, I felt a horrible loathing come over me. I shrank back from her. She seemed suddenly to have become a part of the evil machinations around me, an inhabitant of a world of evil things and black abhorrents which had contaminated her. But she did not notice my revolt. She continued to talk in that dull, monotonous voice, and to stare at me.

"I went to his room, Paul. The window was open. I stood there and saw him, and he was striding across the yard, tall and grotesque in the moonlight. I watched him go into the woods, and I would have followed him if you had not screamed. Some sound—perhaps the cold air from the corridor, when I left the door open—must have waked you. You screamed my name."

I hated her. I hated my wife. God forgive me, but at that moment she was a loathsome, horrible consort of the devil. She was a creature of blackness. I hated her and feared her, even as on that awful night long ago I had feared Michael Brodin, when I had discovered that he, too, was a fiend unspeakable.

I said not a word. Bitterly, almost savagely I put on my clothes and strode to the door. My wife stood and watched

me, with one hand half outstretched. I think she knew my thoughts. She made no move to stop me, other than to take a single faltering step forward and whisper:

"Paul! Oh God, Paul, don't!"

I moved blindly into the corridor without once looking at her. I did not stop to think. I was obeying my emotions, and they were savage, primitive.

I strode down the staircase and along the lower hall, with no thought whatever of the woman who stood helpless at the head of the stairs with both arms outstretched and my name on her lips. I knew only that I must find the man who had wandered into the dread woods outside.

The door slammed behind me. I stood on the steps with the glow of the moon in my face, and great black trees looming all around me. Then I heard something.

It came from far off, from the direction of that place called the Pond of the Midnight Raven. It was not a scream, in the sense of being shrill and vibrant. It was neither high-pitched nor powerful. It was a low wailing—a pitiful moaning sound of human origin—beginning on a deep and forlorn note and rising thinner and softer until it became a mere whisper.

What I might have done, had it not been for that macabre sound, I do not know, nor do I like to think. I stood utterly still, listening, and the sound was repeated, I think, seven separate times, each time becoming more distant and less audible. Then I looked into the patchwork of shadows around me, and into the massive woods which hovered so close and so sinister, and I knew the meaning of absolute horror.

Not—oh, it is difficult to explain this as it should be explained—not horror for these things in themselves, but the awful realization that only a moment ago I had been blindly bent on plunging into them and leaving my wife alone to face whatever terrors the darkness and solitude possessed for her.

A great wave of sickness came over me. I stood staring, trembling. Then for a long moment I remained with my eyes closed and my fists clenched at my sides, while I struggled to regain control of myself.

I remembered then the bottle of medicine, nerve-medicine, which Bickell had handed me. Mechanically I took it from my pocket and upended it in my lips. Then I went back into the house.

My wife was still standing at the head of the stairs, standing there like a dead woman, her empty arms outstretched. I took her in my arms. I crushed her against me and held her savagely, fearfully, with every ounce of my strength. I believe I stammered out a plea for forgiveness. But if I did or didn't, it doesn't matter, for she knew my thoughts and could read the very secrets of my heart.

"Thank God!" she whispered. "Thank God you understand, Paul!"

And in my blind ignorance, I did not realize the enormity of the blunder I had committed. I did not realize what a mad fool I had been to trust Ira M. Bickell, the apparently innocent country practitioner.

I did not know that, through sheer carelessness, I had consumed a drug—and forced my wife to consume a drug—whose hellish power would soon thrust us both into an inferno of horror.

I did not realize that my wife had already become a partial victim to the drug's vile influence, and that within a very few hours I too would be its slave.

THE following morning I found footprints. My brother's footprints they were, deeply embedded in the ground beneath his window, where he had thudded down from above. Apparently he had hung at arm's length and dropped. The trail led straight across the yard, growing

fainter as the ground became more inflexible. At the yard's edge, the prints vanished in heavy ground-growth.

It was madness to consider probing that labyrinth of tangled underbrush and the swampy terrain of jungle gloom beyond. Consequently, after a hurried breakfast which Hope prepared from food found in the kitchen, we locked the house behind us and drove away in our car, determined to follow the general direction of my brother's flight and discover what lay at the trail's end.

As we neared the junction of the roads, where that arrow hung on the tree, my wife said suddenly:

"He would have had to cross the main highway, Paul. If we can find his tracks again—"

I agreed, and instead of driving blindly we turned left, for left seemed to be the proper direction. And presently, after proceeding at a snail's pace down the sandy ruts, we discovered what we sought. We found the imprint of a boot, deep-pressed in the clayish red soil on the shoulder of the road, and other marks equally significant leading across the highway at an angle.

And those marks proved a strange thing: that my brother, even after ploughing his way through the difficult stretch of woods between house and road, had been striding onward with the same long, mechanical, tireless strides which had first carried him away from the house.

Out of a maze of underbrush the footprints came, crossed the road, entered a jungle even more impenetrable. As I examined them, I was possessed by a sudden vision of Frankenstein's monster pacing savagely through a midnight wilderness, with murder in his heart. Standing in line with the prints, I pondered their destination.

"The Midnight Raven," I said aloud, frowning. "But there's nothing in that valley. There *can't* be anything there."

"It was there," my wife reminded me, "that I first felt the—the thing."

"Can it be something between here and there?" I scowled, and knew in my heart that it could not be. Without doubt my brother's destination lay in that terrain of shadow and gloom which cupped the Midnight Raven in its unholy bowels.

Mutely I returned to the car and turned it around. We could investigate, at least. We were duty-bound to do that much, whatever the consequences.

I DROVE slowly, not at all eager to reach the end of the route. When we heard the sound of an approaching machine, I was only too glad to stop and wait, and ponder the problem confronting us. Then a battered coupé rounded the curve before us, bearing a green cross above its registration plate; and my wife said suddenly:

"It's that man, Paul. He's come back."

It was Bickell. Jolting his car to a stop, he bustled out of the ancient conveyance and hurried toward us. Nervously he put a hand on the door beside me.

"I was comin' to find you, sir," he said.

"Yes?" I countered.

"It's about your brother, sir. I heard all about it. Got a 'phone call this morning, almost before I was up and about. Mr. Frank is all right, sir. Don't you be worrying about him."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"It was Mr. Burrin who called," Bickell explained nervously. "He's the writer chap that lives over on the Black Pond road, in the old hunting-camp. He said to me, and he was all excited: 'There's a strange man here, doctor. Seems to be in a trance or something, he does. I can't get a word out of him, and you'd best come right away.' So I told him I'd be over at once, sir, but first I came out to tell you. I knew right well who the strange

man must be, and I knew you'd be worried."

"Where is the place?" I scowled.

"The hunting-camp? On the other side of Black Pond, sir. There's a road leads into it. I'll show you."

I nodded and glanced at my wife. My vague doubts were magnified many times in her rigid face, and I sensed that she too only half believed our informant. What there was about this undersized country practitioner with the shrill, womanish voice and shifty eyes that should have created such suspicion in both of us, I don't know. But my wife believed him to be evil, and I knew better, now, than to doubt her intuition.

"I'll pull my car off the road and come in yours," Bickell announced. "It'll be quicker that way, and I guess you want to get there soon as you can."

So he climbed into his coupé and maneuvered it to one side, leaving the road clear. And thus, with the little man in the back seat, leaning intimately forward with his smallish head between my wife and me, we proceeded.

CHAPTER FIVE

Unholy House

I SHOULD never have found that road except for Bickell's directions. It was no more than a slit in a wall of otherwise unbroken forest—a careless opening between drawn curtains of verdant green. Whether or not such concealment was intentional I could not guess, but after passing through the "mouthpiece" I found the going much easier and the road more clearly defined.

Occasionally, through the woods on our right, I caught the almost metallic glint of the Midnight Raven, sullen and repelling in its isolation. We seemed to be passing around it, or around the vale which nurtured it. And as I drove, with Bickell's face close to mine, I found myself remembering half-forgotten events of other years.

Strange memories, those. Once, for the sheer desire of disturbing those smug, leering waters, I had found a heavy rotten log and hurled it far out. The black waters had gurgled over it, and the log had never returned to the surface. . . .

"This hunting-camp," I said stiffly, "must be a recent thing. I don't recall any such place."

"It was built some years ago," Bickell explained. "Some men from outside built it, but they didn't come back the second year. One of them was drownded in the pond, and it scared them off. That is, they *said* he was drownded, but I'm not so sure. We never found any body. You see—"

But I was seeing something else. We had come to the end of the road, and a high wooden gate barred further progress. Beyond, I saw the shape of a massive structure looming through the trees, and another structure beyond that. And standing directly between the car's headlamps, facing us, was a man who apparently served as gate-keeper.

I stared at this man, because the very idea of employing a gate-guard at an ordinary hunting-camp struck me as being ridiculous. At first glance he seemed merely an uncouth country chap, attired in khaki trousers and open-necked flannel shirt, with a battered felt hat on his head and nothing at all on his feet. At second glance I saw more, and was bewildered.

The man was a moron. There could be no other explanation. His eyes were wide open and almost pupilless, as if the color had faded out of them. His mouth gaped open idiotically, and he kept his hands stuffed in his pockets. When I leaned over the car door and called to him to

swing open the gate, he merely gaped at me.

"Open it, will you?" I said again, impatiently. "We've come to see Mr. Burrin."

The fellow stood quite still, as if he had not heard. I would have climbed out to open the gate myself, but Hope's hand touched my arm, restraining me. Behind us Bickell said:

"Let me talk to him. He's a queer one."

The little doctor climbed out and strode forward. He stood squarely in front of the gate-keeper and said sharply:

"Open the gate, Andrew."

And the fellow opened it.

Bickell stood on the running-board then, while I steered the car into the campgrounds. A hundred yards farther on we stopped before the lodge veranda and, shutting off the motor, I was instantly impressed by the unnatural silence which possessed the entire clearing. There should have been innumerable friendly little rounds at this hour of the morning, with the sun burning brightly in a clear sky above. Yet there was nothing but deep silence.

The house itself was most uninviting. It was square and squat, with a shingled roof which slanted awkwardly down toward us and extended, canopy-like over the long veranda. A queer place, it seemed to me, for my brother to have wandered to in his strange trance.

I strode up the veranda steps and knocked. There was no response. I said to Hope, who had left the car and now stood beside us:

"Ugly place. Frank could surely have no reason for coming here."

She looked at me queerly. "Haven't you felt the reason?" she said.

"Felt it?"

"It's here, Paul. Do be careful!"

"Damn them," I grumbled. "Why can't they answer?"

I knocked again. Then a hand touched my arm and Bickell said beside me: "Let me, sir."

"You seem to know a lot about this place," I challenged.

"I've been here before, professionally," he nodded. Then, stepping close to the door, he raised his voice and called out sharply:

"Antone! Open the door!"

IT SEEMED ludicrous. Here was this little shrill-voiced country doctor standing very businesslike beside me, screaming at a closed barrier. Yet it brought results almost immediately. I heard plodding footsteps within, and the thud of a bolt receding in its grooves. A key grated in the lock. The door opened in our faces.

"All right, sir," Bickell said. "Come right in."

He stood aside and motioned us to pass him, and as I strode by the man who had opened the door I found myself staring once again into the face of a halfwit—a face in which every trace of individuality had been eradicated.

"We'd best go to the living room and sit down," Bickell said. "Burrin is generally pottering about out back."

We crossed the room—it was a most ordinary and uninspiring room with a drab assortment of wicker furniture and a great dirty fireplace—and, with Bickell mumbling apologies for which I could see no reason, we entered the chamber beyond. Here the little practitioner motioned us to be seated, and leaving us alone he crossed to an inner door and vanished.

My wife leaned close to me and said in a whisper:

"Paul, do you think I'm a fool?"

"Fool?" I frowned. "Why?"

"This place is evil. Every single thing

about it is evil," she said quietly. "We should never have come here."

I did not contradict her. After the events of last night, I respected the fact that she was more attuned than I to certain influences which presaged danger.

"Those men," I scowled. "The one at the gate and the other who let us in here. There's something about them—"

But my wife was sitting very still and seemed to be listening to something. She did not answer me. The door through which Bickell had vanished was half open, and I thought I heard voices.

Then I did hear something. It was a sound that jerked my memory back, with uncanny and fearful abruptness, to the scene of the night before when I had rushed from my brother's house, hating my wife violently. This sound was the same wail of utter despair which I had then heard. The walls muffled it. From no definite direction it came, and at the same time from every direction. It was in the room with us, and in the room beyond, outside and inside, very close and very far away.

I listened. The cry was presently repeated, with more volume and infinitely more anguish. Foolishly, I strode to the door. My fists were clenched. I was determined to know, once and for all, the meaning of that awful voice. I crossed the room in a dozen strides and confronted the sheepish fellow who stood by the door leading to the veranda.

"Open it," I ordered. "I'm going out."

The man made no move.

"Open it!" I rasped. "Don't stand there gaping at me!"

He either could not or would not understand. Angrily I stepped up to him and seized his arm, to thrust him aside. Then I realized my mistake.

The fellow had the strength of a giant. Half-wit or not, he flung me off almost without trying. It was as if I had grasped, idiotically, the arm of a mechanical robot, and thereby put into force some reactionary mechanism within its seemingly inert body. The force of that effortless thrust sent me reeling into the room, left me gasping for breath and gaping in amazement.

Yet there was no anger in the man's stolid countenance. He had simply made a mechanical gesture to keep me from the door. He had simply shown me, unemotionally and without apparent interest, that I was a prisoner.

For a moment I glared at him; then my temper bested me. I strode back to the inner room. My wife was standing fixedly in the doorway, staring at the guardian of the door. She had witnessed the entire pantomime, and she scarcely moved when I walked toward her.

"I'm going to find Bickell," I said curtly. "You'd better come with me."

We went into the adjoining chamber. It was empty, but it led apparently to yet another room beyond. And there was something else. There was an opening in the wall on the right. We paused before it. The aperture revealed a flight of stairs, and the stairs descended into blackness. Presumably it was the entrance to the cellar. The steps were steep and dark, dropping into a gloom so impregnable that their terminus was invisible.

"He didn't go down there," I declared. "We'd have heard him. He's out back somewhere."

My wife did not answer. She had been holding my arm when we entered the room. Now she let go and stood strangely rigid before that gaping aperture, peering down into the gloom below.

"Come!" I said irritably.

I strode toward the farther door. It lay perhaps ten paces distant. Impatience carried me forward quickly, and I was crossing the threshold before I realized

that Hope had not followed me. Abruptly I swung about.

And then, God help me, I stood like a frozen corpse, like a propped-up dummy, staring in amazement instead of rushing forward.

MY WIFE'S arms were outstretched before her like wooden sticks. I could not see her face; it was shadowed by the darkness from the cellar doorway. She had already placed one foot on the stairs, and was moving over that accursed threshold like one in a dream.

"Hope!" I shouted. "Stop it! What—"

But she was already descending. My outcry had no effect on her at all. She was in the grip of some hellish power which was forcing her to go down—step by step—into the blackness of the pit.

I ran forward then. What gibberish poured out of my lips as I stumbled those endless ten paces, I do not know. All I know is that another sound smothered the frenzied cries from my own throat. It was a metallic, grating, rushing sound from the aperture before me.

Even as I reached the opening and would have plunged down those steep steps to drag my wife back into the room, I was flung backward. A wall of iron bars descended in my face, so abruptly that my groping hand was nearly wrenched from its wrist by the impact. Then I was clawing at prison bars. I was screaming like a madman and fighting furiously at the grim, mocking barrier which blocked the stairs. My jaded nerves, long suffering and already on the verge of collapse, gave way completely.

Hours passed while I raved there, cursing horribly and battling those bars as if they were living things which had conspired against me. Hours at least it seemed to me, but it could have been no more than a few seconds. For when I ceased that futile clawing and realized the madness of it, my wife was still before me, still descending the stairs.

"Come back!" I cried. "Don't go down there! Don't!"

She did not hear me. Sobbing, I slid to my knees, gripping the bars in front of my face. I pleaded with her. My screams became whispers. I moaned to her, begged her, entreated her to listen to me.

"It's Paul. Don't go down there, Hope! *Come back!*"

She did not stop. She was almost in darkness, almost concealed from me. Only a vague light, from the room behind me, penetrated beyond her. A well of darkness reached out to claim her. I tried to scream again, but the words choked me. On my knees I prayed. Gripping the bars with both hands, I hung there and prayed.

"God in Heaven!" I sobbed. "Help me!"

Then I slumped down. One hand let go; the other held my sagging body from falling to the floor.

What it was that made my wife stop and turn, I am not sure even to this day. Perhaps it was my prayer, which came from the very depths of a soul in torment. Perhaps—and this is the more likely—it was the shadow of my arm as I hung there.

The light from the room behind me, penetrated into that hole of hell, took shadows with it; and my upflung arm, gripping the middlemost of those grim bars, formed an almost perfect cross. The shadow of that cross, enduring but a moment, nevertheless remained long enough to hang suspended before my wife's eyes as she groped downward.

I am not a religious man; I refuse to admit any supernatural significance in what happened. But my wife is religious; and when she saw that strange shadow, she stopped, and stood staring. Then she

turned slowly and saw me; and I cried out in desperation:

"Come back! For God's sake, come back!"

She peered into the darkness below her, and a great shudder shook her. She screamed, even as a sleep-walker might scream upon waking and finding himself on the verge of some tremendous horror. Sobbing wildly, she rushed up the stairs and flung herself against the barrier, reaching through it with both hands.

"Help me, Paul!" she moaned. "Oh, help me!"

I felt triumphant then. "I'll get you out if I have to tear down this whole damned house! This gate must open somehow!"

I sought the lock. Finding none, I hammered on the iron frame with both fists, knowing that somewhere there must be a panel or concealed spring. But I found nothing.

"I'll get you out!" I raved. Then, lurching erect: "Bickell! Damn you, Bickell, where are you? *Bickell!*"

The only answer was my wife's pitiful whisper: "Paul, I'm so afraid. I'm so afraid."

I paced back and forth in front of the bars. I was more angry than fearful. I wanted to smash that infernal barrier down.

Then suddenly my wife whispered fearfully: "Paul! Someone is coming!"

I stood rigid. Hope had turned and was staring like a trapped thing into the well of gloom below her. Down there in darkness someone was approaching. The *shf-shf* of plodding, mechanical feet was distinctly audible.

AT THAT instant I knew the full meaning of terror. I flung myself viciously against the bars, tearing at them, hammering them. My wife recoiled from the thing that was coming. It had reached the bottom of the staircase—was climbing. Its steps were slow and regular, increasing in volume as they came nearer . . . . nearer.

"Paul! Oh God, Paul, help me!"

I fought the bars with both hands and cursed the same god she prayed to.

"Hold me, Paul! Don't let it touch me!"

Her voice did something to me then. I stopped my mad struggles and put my arms through the bars to encircle her. Her face was close to mine, hot and trembling. We stood there together, waiting, with that damned barrier between us.

And then it came. . . .

Slowly and deliberately it moved up the stairs. First its face was visible in the half-light, then the shoulders beneath, then the long dangling arms. The face was expressionless. It was a lifeless human mask with wide, empty eyes and limp lips. It was my brother's face.

I screamed at it, again and again.

"Frank!" I sobbed. "For God's sake, Frank, don't come any closer! Go back! Leave us alone!"

I continued to scream at him until he had climbed high enough to reach out with his long arms. I beat at those arms with my fists, clawing them, tearing wildly at his hands as they closed about my wife's legs. Horrible animal sounds came from my lips; and then I fought at the bars until my own hands and arms and legs were dead with pain.

My wife was gone. My brother had torn her from me. He had dragged her away out of my reach, tearing her cruelly from the bars to which she clung.

Not once had he spoken. Not once had he shown any signs of emotion, any vindictiveness, any hate. He had moved like an automaton. He had come, and taken her, and gone back again into that well of shadows—like a mindless robot oper-

ated by remote control. And all that was left to me, as I raved against the barrier, was the shrill sound of my wife's voice, receding from me. Then I was staring down into empty blackness. . . .

How long I clung there—how long I had strength enough to continue my futile assault against that hellish door, I do not know. In the end it was a sound that stopped me and made me turn. A laugh, soft and human and triumphant.

I turned slowly, and stood motionless. I stared into a man's face—not another of those empty, gaping faces, but a human countenance which was the essence of all evil.

It was the face of the man who had once been my friend. The face of the man who, on that night of terror many years ago, had called me from my room in the college dormitory and made me witness the nightmare death of a fellow student.

It was the face of Michael Brodin.

CHAPTER SIX

At Satan's Command

IN ALL that unholy chamber at that moment, I was conscious of only two separate and terrifying objects. They ate into me, burned. They were more than the eyes of Michael Brodin; they were endless, bottomless tubes of black space. Looking into them, I looked into a vale of abysmal darkness as vile as the pits of a nether world.

And I knew him for what he was. He alone could answer for the mysterious malady which had overtaken my brother. He alone, the man who was now smiling at me with such malignant triumph, had caused that infernal iron grating to drop in my face, and then caused my own brother to drag my wife down those black steps to unknown horror.

Knowing those things, I could not control myself. I leaped toward him. There was a desperate fury in the leap, and a hate beyond all calculation. And a madness, too, that would have been the finish of me, had we come in contact. For Brodin's massive frame harbored the strength of an ox. Had he wished, he could have flung me aside with a single blow.

But he did nothing of the sort. He made no move, other than to dismiss that ironic smile. It was something else that stopped me and made me stand rigid. It was his eyes, or a tenuous force, indescribable and Gargantuan, which flowed from those burning orbits.

I can not explain it. At least, I could not at the time. Now I know that it was hypnotism advanced to an unbelievable stage, so that the word hypnotism becomes a childishly inadequate definition. I know now that Brodin's uncanny power of will, aided by the hellish drug I had innocently consumed, was the irresistible force which held me at bay.

I recoiled against the wall and clung there, limp, staring and afraid, as Brodin advanced toward me with slow steps. By all logic and reason I should have been at his throat, killing him. Yet I cringed from him, and obeyed him when he said quietly:

"Go upstairs, Thorburn. It's been a long time since we last met. A very long time. I want to talk to you."

I turned and walked to the door. It is unbelievable when I look back on it now. Slowly I walked away from those cruel iron bars and the black stairway which held, in its depths, the one I loved most in all the world. Not once did I look back or hesitate. And though I had never been beyond that threshold before, I paced straight across the adjoining room and along a narrow passage to a flight of stairs half hidden in gloom.

Michael Brodin followed me, and I am sure that a vicious smile curved his lips as I groped up those stairs. He was not unaware of his powers; he knew the full extent of my helplessness. And I, too, knew it in a vague way, but could do nothing about it.

I paced along the upper corridor and into a dismal, cell-like room beyond. I stood inert and puppetlike in the center of the floor, while Brodin entered behind me and closed the door. Then, after lighting a lamp on a square-topped table in the corner, he turned to face me.

"A long time," he murmured again, "since we met last, Thorburn. You should feel honored. With the exception of Bickell, you are the only person who has ever seen even a suggestion of what is going on here. Your wife, of course—but I purposely omit her."

He was talking for his own benefit, not for mine. I merely stared at him.

"I thought at first," he shrugged, "that I might make you my assistant. But I think not, Thorburn. After witnessing your display of emotion just now, I've changed my mind."

He studied me casually, with the leisurely indifference of a scientist making an appraisal of some biological specimen of not much interest. Idly he put a hand in his pocket and took out a small pen-knife, and picked at his fingernails with the blade of it.

"I had to bring you here," he said calmly. "My preliminary work is about finished, and presently the police—even the Federal Government—will be trying to find out who is the directing brain behind all this. It would have been dangerous to leave you in circulation, Thorburn. You might have recalled certain things that happened some time ago, and linked your memories with current reports."

He placed the pen-knife on the table and lowered his gaunt body into a chair. There was a fiendish lack of concern in the way he sat down and peered at me. At first I did not realize his intent. Then the full power of the man's terrible strength was turned on me, and I recoiled from him, realizing with horror what he wanted me to do.

But presently the thing no longer terrified me. I wanted to do it. I was eager for it.

I walked to the table. Recalling that moment now, I realize that I had no knowledge that it was a will other than my own which was forcing me to do the deed. I was hardly aware of Brodin's presence. I simply wanted to pick that pen-knife up and *kill myself with it!*

I did pick it up. Standing there, I looked down at it triumphantly and fingered its blade. Then I swung about, and as I raised it, Michael Brodin said softly, with a chuckle:

"Put it down, Thorburn. Put it down. It would be too messy, really. I'd rather not have you mutilated that way. Think what your wife would say."

Mechanically I let the knife fall. Brodin got out of his chair, smiling, and strode to the door. He turned again.

"There are other ways more effective," he said.

Then I was alone.

I LOOKED down at the knife. Bewildered, I looked all about me, and I was like a man coming out of an opium dream. It seemed to me that some all-powerful influence was gradually releasing me back to myself.

I stumbled to the door and hammered on it frantically, desperately. Then I ran to where dim curtains indicated a window, and I tore the curtains aside and found iron bars blocking the aperture. I stood staring. Outside was blackness impregnable.

For an eternity then, I raved up and

down the room, cursing and praying. Not until I heard sounds beyond the door did I stand rigid at last, listening . . . .

The sounds were footsteps; plodding footsteps. They stopped outside the barrier, and a key grated in the lock. The door swung open while I stared at it, and then all at once I was gaping into the face of the man who stood on the threshold.

He was my brother.

I could have screamed with relief at that moment. In my ignorance I thought he had come to release me. I rushed upon him, sobbing my gratitude.

Then I realized my mistake, and the realization was doubly horrible because of the great hope which had preceded it. My brother stepped into the room and thrust me back with a vicious straightening of his arm. He closed the door behind him. Deliberately, he advanced toward me.

I recoiled from him, mumbling words without meaning. My terror was a thousand times more intense because of the very lifelessness of his advance. Had he lunged for me, hating me and snarling his hate, I might have fought him. But his face was utterly devoid of expression, and he did not hate me. He was simply obeying orders.

"Don't touch me!" I screamed at him. "Good God, leave me alone!"

Then the wall stopped my retreat, and he was upon me. I clawed at him, beating a frantic tattoo on his face and chest. I sank my teeth into the arm that encircled my throat. But I might as well have fought the bole of a tree.

He was insensate to pain. He simply dragged me from the wall and pushed me against the table. With one hand he bent my writhing body back until the ceiling above me grew black and red with the pain that stabbed through me, and his face was a blurred gargoyle hovering close to mine.

With his free hand, he took something from the pocket of his shirt. I saw it as he lifted it to his lips. It was a bottle, brown and labelless. He pulled the cork with his teeth. Then he sought my throat, and the elbow of his arm crushed me over the table until I could no longer scream. He stared down at me, waiting for my mouth to twist open. His thumb ground into my neck. The bottle was above my face, ready to be emptied down my tongue. I caught the bitter odor of aconitine . . . deadly poison . . .

And then the door clattered open.

It was not the voice of the intruder that caused my brother to release me. He did so even before that rasping command came from Brodin's lips. The command itself was a single curt word—"Wait!" And Brodin paced forward unemotionally to take the bottle of deadly poison from my brother's hand.

"Go away," Brodin said. "Go downstairs."

The door opened and closed. Alone, I faced the man I hated and feared most in all the world. Studying me intently, he said:

"I've changed my mind, Thorburn. Sit down."

I stiffened and stepped toward him.

"You damned murderer!" I blurted. "Where's my wife? Where—"

"Sit down."

And that simple command, quietly spoken, was the beginning of an interlude of horror from which I have never recovered.

MY MEMORIES of that mad interlude are necessarily vague. The first of it I can set down easily enough, to be sure, but I find an indecision and hesitation creeping into my recollections concerning the rest. It was no dream, certainly. Yet I find myself precisely in the

position of a man who attempts to set down, rationally and coldly, the events of a dream.

First then, is that scene in the prison room, with Michael Brodin facing me calmly, indifferently, and saying without emotion:

"They are slaves, of course. You must have realized that."

"Slaves?" I repeated wearily.

"All of them, except Bickell. You remember that night in the University? It began then."

I remembered, and yet that too was a vague recollection without real substance. And I sensed something else—sensed feebly what he was doing to me. Yet I could not fight it.

"All slaves, Thorburn," he smiled. "I alone am master here. Bickell does not count. I intend to remove him and put you in his place. He is only a country practitioner; you have ambitions. And no ties either, have you?"

"No," I said.

"Not married, are you?"

"Married?" I struggled to remember, but there was no memory. I had loved a woman, some woman, a very long time ago. But not any more.

"No," I said. "I'm not married."

"Good."

He thrust his hand toward me, and I stared into his face. Then I knew what he wanted me to do, and I was eager to do it. I smiled and gripped his hand.

Brodin smiled, too. There was triumph in his eyes, and something deeper that I did not understand. He said quietly:

"Slaves, Thorburn. It's been done before; we're not the first. If you've ever been in Haiti—but you haven't, so we won't go into that. It's enough for you to know that I *have* been there, studying. I learned a lot there. More than most men learn in a lifetime.

"The human mind, Thorburn, is a strange thing. I've studied it, medically and scientifically. Studied how to build it up, as in my own case, and tear it down, as in the case of the mindless creatures who dwell in this house.

"In Haiti, Thorburn, they have what is known as the Zombie, supposedly a resurrected corpse endowed with supernatural life. Maybe there is such a thing, but those that I saw and studied were not resurrected corpses. Not at all. They were human beings with the mind—soul, if you like—destroyed. The Haitian inlanders know more than one method of destroying the mind. It was from them that I obtained the formula for the—er—medicine with which Bickell supplied you. There's nothing mysterious about that, Thorburn. Even opium will deaden a man's mind and make him more susceptible to the will of another. And the stuff you gave your wife, and, incidentally, drank yourself, is rather more effective than opium.

"We haven't reached the end yet, Thorburn. I've taken primitive methods from Haiti and applied advanced medical-science to them. After a little more experimenting—"

"What kind of experimenting?" I demanded.

"You'll see. You'll see shortly. Meanwhile we'll go downstairs and take Bickell in hand. I left him in charge of an old friend of yours. You remember Jack Terry?"

I stared at him. "Remember—whom?"

"You sound alarmed, Thorburn. No need to be, really. Terry has been with me ever since that night at the University. He didn't die. He came as close to death as any man will ever come, but—well, he's here."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Penalty Is—Death!

I SAID nothing as Brodin ushered me downstairs to the lower portion of the house. My thoughts were incoherent, and I had lost the power to concentrate. Vaguely, I wondered about that night of horror at the University. Then we entered the downstairs room and I ceased wondering about past events.

Bickell was waiting for us. We saw him as we crossed the threshold, and the sight was sufficiently abrupt to bring an exclamation from Brodin's lips.

Bickell sat on the floor with his back to the wall. His head hung on his chest, and his thin legs were extended limply before him. He was not aware of us. He did not look up as we strode toward him, nor even when we bent over him.

His reasons for being indifferent were most excellent. He was dead.

Yes, dead. Brodin and I examined him carefully. He had been strangled by two strong hands. The pits dug by those powerful thumbs were still visible in his neck. He had been flung with terrific force against the wall, and had slumped down into the position he now occupied. The back of his head was caved in. His back was broken. Both his legs were broken.

"An act of extreme violence," I said to Brodin. "He has been dead about half an hour."

Brodin stood staring. The expression on his face was not a pleasant one. His eyes were more than half closed and his lips thin and drawn, with a gap between them. He was not pitying Bickell. He was extremely annoyed.

Without answering me he strode to the door. I noticed then that the door was not guarded by the strong-armed idiot who had prevented my wife and me from escaping. It was not guarded at all. And when Brodin opened it and stood there on the sill, staring into the outer darkness, I was aware of something else.

Someone outside was singing.

It was more than that, really. The sound came from quite far away, and it was a low moaning sound, too deep in volume to have emanated from any one throat alone. It was a combination of voices, chanting mournfully in unison; and I judged from the tension on Brodin's face that the sound was unpleasantly significant. Brodin stood stiff as wood in the doorway, staring in the direction from which the disturbance came. And when he swung about to face me he said viciously:

"I was a fool to trust any of them. Come!"

I followed him from the house and across the yard. Apparently there was no need for haste. This thing that had happened, and was still happening, was a thing that called for thought and deliberation. Slowly, Brodin led the way toward the deeper darkness of the woods, and I trailed after him, peering about me.

A moon had come up, and to the right of us lay the Midnight Raven, strangely still and sinister.

The clearing through which we advanced was a terrain of silver shadow, in which Brodin's house loomed like an ancient and frowning castle of some past century. The more I stared at these things, the more I admired the man for his cunning in selecting such a spot. Here in this vale we were as safe from intrusion as if buried underground!

But were we safe from the creatures whom Brodin himself had enslaved?

I wondered, and as we drew nearer the edge of the woods my doubts increased. The sound which had first drawn us from the house was now louder and less mysterious. It was a deep-throated chant, harsh and vibrant, intermingled

with guttural words and phrases of an unintelligible nature.

The woods closed about us as we advanced. I found myself moving along a path so close to the water's edge that the ground beneath my feet gave off an almost human sucking sound as my shoes came in contact with it. We had entered a tract of darkness wherein the moonglow from above did not penetrate. On all sides of us hung gaunt, straight trees and matted undergrowth. And with every forward step we took, that eerie ululation ahead grew louder.

And a moment later, when we came upon the creatures we sought, I stood stock still and uttered a cry of amazement.

BEFORE us lay a moonlit amphitheater, sloping gently down to the pond's edge. There, in full view, crouched Brodin's slaves.

I stood gaping, fascinated by the strangeness of the scene. A dozen or more of those mindless human beings were kneeling in the deep grass, their arms uplifted and their bodies swaying in rhythm with the guttural sounds emanating from their lips. They were like plantation negroes performing some religious ceremony, and their moaning chant was not unlike a negro spiritual.

In the midst of them stood a rigid, unmoving shape whose face was turned toward me. Staring into that face, I knew that Brodin had not lied about the result of that night of horror at the University. For the leader of the slaves was Jack Terry. And it was Terry who was responsible for the strange ritual they were now performing.

I peered at Brodin. He was angry, and glared sullenly at the creatures before us. He strode deliberately into the clearing and advanced toward them. And mechanically I followed him.

Straight into the clearing he strode, and confronted Jack Terry. The chant ceased abruptly; the swaying figures became all at once motionless. Empty eyes gaped at Brodin as he seized Terry's arms.

"Well," Brodin snapped, "what are you doing?"

Terry made no reply. He looked idiotically into the big man's twisted face, and made no attempt to free himself from the pressure of Brodin's grip.

"What's going on here?" Brodin demanded curtly.

"Sing," Terry said foolishly.

"Sing? Sing what?"

"Just sing."

Brodin hesitated. He peered intently into Terry's eyes, as if wondering whether the idiocy behind them was assumed or genuine. Then he stood with his hands hipped and his legs wide apart, scowling at Terry's companions.

"Which one of you murdered Bickell?" he rasped.

The creatures exchanged slow glances without answering.

"Which one of you killed him?"

Still there was no answer. They were afraid of him. Idiots or not, they had learned to fear him, and perhaps to understand him.

And he did not shout at them again. Standing silently before them, he folded his arms on his chest and peered steadily at each one, in turn. They cringed from the force of his gaze. Like dogs they backed away from him, mumbling and muttering. And I was sorry for them, because I too knew the hideous power that lay in those eyes.

And finally Brodin achieved his purpose. Whimpering like a child, one of the pitiful creatures shuffled slowly forward, head bowed and arms hanging limp at his sides. Almost inaudibly he said:

"I killed him."

"Why?"

"I do not know."

"You know the penalty?" Brodin snapped.

"Yes, I know."

Deliberately, the guilty man turned and walked away from his accuser. Like one in sleep he prodded mechanically through the deep grass toward the edge of the clearing. Brodin stood staring, a cruel smile curving his lips. I, too, stood staring. And as the murderer continued his pilgrimage to the clearing's edge, where the land sloped gently down toward the waters of the pond, his companions set up a terrible wailing and moaning, as if they too had been condemned to his same fate.

Step by step the man paced on, and to my astonishment he did not stop when he reached the water. Thin and gaunt in the moonlight he waded straight out into the black liquid; and the gurgle of the water was like guttural laughter as it rippled about his ankles. Horrified, I stood at Brodin's side, watching with wide, unbelieving eyes. Horrified too were the creatures surrounding us. And, like a machine, the doomed man continued his death journey.

The black water rose higher and higher about him. It reached his knees. It climbed relentlessly to his armpits, and continued to ascend, slowly and awfully, until only his head was visible. Then he was gone, and the surface of the pond was once again a sleek, unruffled layer of gleaming blackness.

Still I stared, waiting for the condemned man to come to the surface. He *had* to come! No man could continue to walk on and on beneath those black waters, until death claimed him. Even if he succeeded in drowning himself, the buoyancy of the water would tear his feet from the pond's bottom and hurl him to the top. The laws of physics demanded it!

But the laws were wrong. He did not come to the surface. And when sufficient time had elapsed for the horror of it to penetrate my bewilderment, Brodin turned to me and said quietly:

"Come. You have seen enough. You know now why they fear to disobey me."

I turned slowly and gaped at him as he ordered the rest of the creatures back to the house. Then, beckoning me to follow him, he strode away through the grass. And a moment later, with the slaves trailing behind us, we began the return journey to Brodin's house of evil.

WHAT time it was when I retired that night I am not sure. It was late, certainly, because after returning to the house, with Brodin and Jack Terry and the mindless creatures under Brodin's control, I was made to sit for a long while in the living room, under guard, while Brodin escorted his slaves to the cellars.

Returning, he stood before me, and said quietly:

"I've placed Terry on watch at the door of your wife's cell, Thorburn. It may not be necessary, but we'll take no chances, eh? She has unusual powers, that wife of yours. Psychic, if you care to call it that. And I have no desire to lose her. I'm looking forward more than a little to—er—using her as a basis for further experimentation."

The words meant nothing to me, nor did the vague smile which accompanied them.

"Come," Brodin shrugged. "I'll show you your room."

Again I followed him, this time to the upper level of the house where he ushered me into a chamber containing bed, table and chairs, and advised me to get some sleep.

"We have work to do tomorrow," he smiled.

He locked the door and left me. Then,

utterly exhausted in mind and body, I sprawled out on the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

But even in my slumbers I was aware of a certain strange influence which was being brought to bear upon me.

What this influence was, I could not be sure; nor could I be sure whether it was dream or reality. I know that it was no dream; it was a powerful will other than my own, attempting to reach me and converse with me. That is a most inadequate explanation to be sure, but I can think of none better. The thing *was* striving to converse with me, to gain control over my warped mind and drive out Brodin's evil influence.

It was trying to help me, seeking to establish contact with me. And had it been stronger, or had I been less exhausted and more receptive to it, it might have accomplished its purpose.

And *had* it succeeded in releasing me from Brodin's uncanny bonds, I might have been spared the torments that awaited me. I might have met Brodin with clenched fists when he came for me the following morning, instead of greeting him with staring eyes and a mind full of shadows.

"Well, Thorburn," he said, smiling at me from the doorway, "we have much to do during the next few hours."

He was right. We had much to do.

But I can see no point in describing, in detail, the events of that hideous day. Most of our time was spent in Brodin's "research room" in the upper part of the house. The room itself was neither large nor scientifically equipped, but it contained an operating-table and other apparatus which became inventions of hell when Brodin put them to use.

There, for hours, I assisted him in work of such a vile nature that I hesitate to mention it. Sufficient to say that Brodin's experimentation was evidently far from complete; and that, watching him, I was convinced that the man was an utter monster. He enjoyed his awful work too much. I believe to this day, though I may be wrong, that his reasons for establishing his house of horror in the Morrendale woods were not scientific reasons, despite his declarations to that effect. He was not a master of science, *but a student of horror.*

"Tell me," I said, as we went about our gruesome tasks, "what all this is for. What are your plans?"

He leaned both elbows on the operating-table and peered at me thoughtfully.

"Consider the possibilities, Thorburn. I am a man with a brain, an ingenious brain. I have the power to create slaves to obey me. At present I am engaged in studying them mentally, biologically, and —if my hopes are realized—*bionomically.* When this study is complete, I'll know better what I'm working with. Then I shall make use of my knowledge."

"How?" I demanded.

"I have not yet decided. One thing I assure you: I shall not always be a recluse, working alone in this God-forsaken place. I shall have power!"

We continued our work, and later I said casually:

"These slaves of yours, are they all local residents?"

"With the exception of Terry, yes," he shrugged. "Most of them I acquired with Bickell's excellent assistance. One or two," and he smiled at me, "I obtained myself."

"Bickell was responsible for my brother's condition?" I demanded.

"Indirectly, Thorburn. Your brother visited me of his own accord. I suppose he was curious to know what kind of person would be living in a location such as this. He came, and we spent a pleasant evening together, and when I discovered who he was I determined to use him

as a means of bringing you here. He—er—began to lose health after that. He sent for Bickell to cure him. The rest was quite simple."

"Bickell drugged him, just as I was drugged?"

"In the interests of science, yes."

"And the note I received, inviting me to visit him. You wrote it?"

"He wrote it," Brodin smiled, "under my direction."

I looked at the man and admired his cunning. No, I did not hate him. He made sure that no such thoughts entered my mind! I no longer had any personal interest in my brother, or in anything except the work which lay before us.

And so we continued our work, he the master and I the student. That day, to me, is a day of evil and abhorrent memories, better forgotten. When it was finished, and I again retired to my room, I was utterly exhausted and eager to rest. Without troubling to remove my clothes, I stretched myself once again on the bed and slept.

And when I awoke, after perhaps two hours of restless slumber, I was aware of the same unnamable presence which had visited me the night before.

CHAPTER EIGHT

My Soul Is the Devil's

THE floor of my room was streaked with moonlight, and I sat up, staring at the small barred window in the wall opposite me. And this time the thing succeeded in establishing contact. The longer I sat there, staring straight ahead of me, the more I remembered. Those memories were not pleasant. They were not tempered with the grim indifference forced upon me by Michael Brodin. They were human and horrible.

It was my wife who was reaching me. I knew that, and was not surprised. Call it "vibration" if you will. Call it the result of the hellish drug administered to me by Bickell. But she was in the room with me, close to me. She was giving my soul back to me and freeing my numbed mind from Brodin's vile influence.

I saw myself as I was, as I had been for the past thirty-six hours.

I shuddered and groped erect, and stood trembling. I realized the enormity of the sins I had committed as Brodin's assistant. Then, remembering what I had done to my wife, I suppressed a sudden harsh scream that welled into my throat. Turning, I flung myself against the door.

But I stopped then, and the madness left me as I realized the nature of the ordeal which lay before me. I became cool and calculating. I studied the lock on the door. Cautiously I put my weight to the barrier, testing it. By hurling myself against the panels, I could have broken them down and opened a way to freedom; but I knew that Brodin's room was nearby, and the sound would be my undoing.

Quietly, I groped in my pockets for a sharp-pointed tool, and found none. I gazed about me, desperate. A moment later I had piled the bed-clothes on the floor and dragged the thin mattress aside, and was feverishly bending one of the wire springs in my fingers.

The spring yielded. Triumphantly, I returned to the door and crouched there, with a six-inch strip of wire gripped in my hand. Bending one end of it into a hook, I worked the hook into the lock, turned it, twisted it patiently. Five minutes later the door swung open and I stepped into the corridor.

My forehead was drenched with sweat. I had been through hell. Noiselessly I shut the door behind me and tiptoed along the passage. No longer was I Brodin's

slave, but a human being in the grip of fear, bent only on the safety of myself and my wife.

At the end of the corridor I came upon a rear stairway which led, I knew, to the cellar. I descended slowly, timidly. My outstretched hand still clutched the bent wire. I should have to use that wire again on the door of my wife's prison-cell. As yet, I did not know the location of that cell. For that matter I knew nothing at all about the subterranean portion of Brodin's evil domain. Brodin had refused to show me.

But I knew the desire in my heart, and it carried me forward despite my fear of the consequences of failure. Somehow I would find my wife's cell and . . .

I stopped abruptly. Below me in the dark, at the edge of a halo of light thrown by a feeble gas-jet, something had moved. I flattened against the wall, holding my breath. The thing moved again. It was a woman, ascending slowly toward me.

I am not sure what I did then. I believe I spoke her name aloud, in a hoarse whisper, and took her in my arms. I held her fiercely, pressing my face in her hair and sobbing like a child. For a full minute no words came from my lips, and when they did come they were not concerned with escape, or with the future, but with the past. Staring down into her upturned face, I begged her forgiveness for my desertion of her. I begged her to understand.

"There is nothing to forgive," Hope said softly. "God is being good to us, Paul. When Michael Brodin sent Jack Terry to guard me, I knew there was a way of escape. I knew I could make Terry remember me and understand."

"He didn't harm you?" I mumbled.

"No, Paul." She clung to me, trembling. "I could make him obey me. When I sent him upstairs to release you—"

"To release me?" I scowled. "I released myself. He hasn't been near me."

She stared beyond me into the darkness of the stair-well. She was bewildered and afraid. Something was wrong.

"I sent him up to free you," she said slowly. "He—I made him break open the door of my cell. He is strong. They are all strong. They could free themselves easily, if only they knew enough to try. Then I sent him to release you, and I waited. I didn't dare come myself. If any of Brodin's creatures had seen me, they might have killed me. So I sent Terry."

She clung to my arms, trembling in the grip of sudden terror.

"He—he must have wandered off," she whispered fearfully. "My hold over him was not strong. He might go to Brodin, Paul! If he does—"

"If he does," I said viciously, "it will be too late. We're getting out of here. Come!"

Together we groped to the bottom of the stairs and crept along the lower corridor. Gas-flames showed us the way, and on both sides of us, as we proceeded along the narrow passage, lay barred chambers strangely similar to prison-cells. Cellar was not the word for this unholy place; it was a dungeon.

I saw then that some of the cells were occupied. Faces stared out at us as we hurried past. Like death-masks they peered through the bars, watching us with empty eyes. I cringed from those gaunt features with a shudder of revulsion, and my wife gripped my hand to urge me to greater haste.

Hurriedly we moved on, and, reaching the end of the passage, Hope led me into a second, shorter corridor which seemed to slope upward as we continued along it. There, at the end of this second and less sinister tunnel, we reached our destination. A flight of stairs angled up before us, and at the top hung the iron grating

which not long ago had quivered to the impact of my frenzied fists.

"Do you know where you are now?" Hope whispered to me.

I nodded, and together we ascended the stairs. Before us, as we reached the halfway point, a small lever protruded from the left wall, and my wife leaned forward to seize it. Evidently that lever controlled the counter-balance of the iron door, for the door slid upward with scarcely a sound, even as I stared at it. A moment later we were tiptoeing through the downstairs rooms of the house. Then the front door closed behind us, and together we descended the veranda steps outside.

Only one more obstacle lay between us and escape as we left Brodin's house of evil behind us and hurried across the weed-grown yard. Nearing the gate, I saw leaning there the same corpselike figure which had so stolidly barred our way on the morning of our arrival. He would not permit us to leave unmolested; I knew that. So, cautioning my wife to silence, I looked about me for some weapon with which to overpower him.

I found what I sought: a heavy bludgeon of pine-wood, partly rotted but formidable none the less. Alone I approached the guard and spoke to him, ordering him aside. He stood motionless, returning my stare. When I reached out to open the barrier, he stepped toward me and would have pushed me back.

I struck him. The wooden bludgeon crashed full across his face, hurling him backward with such force that he stumbled to his knees and rocked there. When he rose again, my fist levelled him. And then, while he lay there staring at me, more bewildered than hurt, I opened the gate quickly and my wife and I fled down the road. Nor did he follow us, though I am sure he could have, had he wished to do so. My attack had been so sudden that he simply did not react to the situation.

And we—Hope and I—were free. Michael Brodin's house of evil lay behind us, and before us was only a short stretch of desolate road leading to the main highway. Eagerly, we hurried along it, indifferent to our surroundings, oblivious to everything but the thought of being united again in a place of safety where Brodin's evil influence could not reach us. My wife's eyes were glowing. She looked at me and said fervently:

"Thank God, Paul! O, thank God!"

WE HEARD something then, as we hurried along the road. It came from behind us, and it was a sound so full of meaning that my wife cringed against me and trembled as I put an arm about her. Turning, we both stared in the direction of the sound, and the sound itself came from that isolated clearing in which I had seen a man condemned to so strange and awful a death. Almost inaudible it was, yet somehow triumphant and sinister. It was a low, vibrant chant, strangely inhuman despite the fact that it came from human throats.

My wife said suddenly:

"We must hurry, Paul! They must have broken loose—or Jack Terry set them loose! If they find us—"

I needed no urging. To me those sounds were sinister enough in themselves. They spelled danger. Seizing Hope's arm, I strode swiftly down the road, away from the nearby clearing from which those weird sounds emanated.

And then I was aware of something else. I stopped, and stared at my wife, and turned again in my tracks to look back at Brodin's house of sin. At first—God help me!—I did not divine the truth; I did not believe such a thing possible. I stood rooted to the ground, combating my emotions. I wasted the very moments

which might have saved me, had I fled from that vile place.

And then it was too late. Something hideous and horrible was attempting to take possession of my thoughts, to drive out my desire for escape and turn my mind in another direction. I felt that obscene influence take hold of me, precisely as it had possessed me on that first occasion when Michael Brodin had made me his slave. I stood with my fists clenched and my eyes wide, while my wife gazed at me in terror and said falteringly:

"Paul! Paul, what is it?"

I did not answer her. I peered at her and wondered about her. She was not my wife. She was merely a woman—the woman who was so vital to the success of our experiments. What was she doing here, so far from the house? How had she unlocked the door of her prison-cell? Was she trying to escape?

Escape—that was it! The woman had somehow contrived to break out of confinement and flee from the house. She was attempting to get away, to tell her story to the world outside!

Savagely, I took hold of her and dragged her toward me. Her cries meant nothing to me. Over and over she screamed my name, pleading with me, begging me to disobey the demon who had once again taken possession of my soul. But her screams meant nothing. Her sobs brought only a cruel snarl to my lips.

Seizing her in my arms, I flung her over my shoulder and strode back the way we had come. The guard at the gate, seeing the expression on my face and knowing me for what I was, stood aside to let us pass.

The sinister chant of the slaves was no longer audible as I strode through the deep grass of the clearing. Moonlight swathed the gaunt structure before me, and to my right the black waters of the Midnight Raven extended away into darkness. On all sides the woods loomed strangely quiet, as if guarding some evil secret of their own.

And Michael Brodin was waiting for me. When I had paced through the downstairs rooms of the house and climbed to the upper level, he was there to greet me. Triumph glowed in the man's eyes. I saw in him the same lust for horror which I had seen before in the operating room.

He faced me quietly, and for a moment was content merely to stare at me. Then he advanced and looked into the face of the limp thing which hung over my shoulder, and he said casually, as if it did not matter:

"She has fainted."

I nodded. I had no personal interest in the woman's condition. If she had fainted, it would be all the easier to carry her back to the cell from which she had escaped. But Brodin hesitated, as if debating the wisdom of taking her there. A slight smile played about his lips, and he said finally:

"Take her to the operating room, Thorburn."

"The operating room?" I frowned.

"I think so."

I shrugged, and moved along the corridor to the chamber in which, only recently, I had witnessed the very essence of things horrible. A light was burning there, and after lowering my burden on the smooth-topped table, I turned again to face my companion. He stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt and his elbows angling outward to touch the sides of the door-frame. The same suggestion of a smile lingered on his lips.

"I have changed my mind about her," he shrugged. "She is too dangerous to be kept here in her present condition, Thorburn, even for the purpose of experimentation. Already she has found one

method of escape. She would find others. It will be better to operate."

"Operate?" I said, squinting down into the woman's face.

"If you will be good enough to assist me."

CHAPTER NINE

I Would Give Away My Wife!

I HESITATED. The real hideousness of the situation did not occur to me, but I was physically and mentally exhausted, and did not relish the thought of laboring over the operating table. Frowning, I stared into Brodin's face and said:

"Is it safe to operate at night, in a light as dim as this?"

Brodin's answer was a cruel smile. Moving past me, he advanced to the wall and worked there a moment. The room was suddenly alive with a glare as bright as day—a brilliant white glare emanating from twin carbon-lamps set upon metal stands. The operating table lay directly in the center of that penetrating whiteness; and, peering intently into the face of the woman lying there, I saw that she would soon regain consciousness.

Brodin, glancing at me curiously, paced back to the door of the chamber and closed it. Then, with as little emotion as if he had been about to perform a routine duty in some hospital, he began to arrange the necessary implements. Without looking at me he said curtly:

"Undress her, please."

I nodded, and bent over my wife's unconscious form. Mechanically, I loosened her outer garments and removed them. As yet, I had no understanding of the nature of the proposed operation, but it did not occur to me to ask questions. I was simply assisting in a routine duty. When I had finished the task assigned to me, I rearranged the patient's unconscious body and looked again, expectantly, at my companion.

"Shall it be ether?" I said.

He turned slowly to face me. "I administer no anaesthetics in my work," he replied.

Even then I did not sense the horror behind the words. No anaesthetic? Very well, if he so desired. Evidently the operation was to be a minor one, and for that I was grateful. It would soon be over, and then I could retire to my room and be alone. There were things I wanted to think out.

I stood aside, then, while Brodin advanced toward the table. There was no sound in the room, no sound at all except the slow breathing of Brodin, the woman, and myself. He did not speak to me, and I knew better than to speak unless spoken to. As for the woman, she was twitching slightly, as if about to regain consciousness, but her eyes were still closed, her lips slightly parted and colorless.

"Usually," Brodin said, "I extend this treatment over a period of days. It is safer that way, and perhaps less painful. But in this case, Thorburn, I shall perform the entire operation at once, and if the patient suffers let her suffer. A sadistic impulse, that, but nevertheless—"

His lean fingers closed over a keen-edged scalpel, and deliberately he leaned over his victim's naked body. His free hand, encased like the other one in a rubber glove, pushed back the woman's dishevelled hair and exposed the alabaster whiteness of her forehead.

"We work with the brain," he said, without looking at me. "There are certain nerves to be severed, and nerve-centers to be destroyed. Now then—"

But he did not bring that gleaming blade into contact with the smooth flesh

beneath it. Instead, he stiffened slightly, and I saw that the patient's eyes had flickered open and were staring at him.

The woman lay motionless, her hands gripping the sides of the table. Her wide eyes filled with terror; her lips opened to release a sudden scream as she saw the upraised scalpel in Brodin's hovering hand. Violently, she twisted sideways and flung up her arms to defend herself.

His answer was a grim laugh, loaded with triumph and anticipation. Savagely he thrust her down again and leaned over her. Her nakedness seemed to have a strange effect on him, bringing out all the vile lust in his soul. He took delight in overpowering her.

She fought at him wildly, at the same time sobbing my name and pleading with me to help her. Her nails, raking Brodin's wrists, drew blood. But her resistance was futile. Brodin's fingers found her throat and clamped there, and under the increasing pressure of the fiend's cruel hands, her struggles became weaker and her sobs died to a mere gasping for breath.

Her body went limp again, then, and seemed lifeless except for the rapid rise and fall of her breast as she fought for air. And Brodin, still smiling that vile smile of triumph, thrust her head back, placed one hand firmly over the lower portion of her colorless face, and raised the scalpel to make an incision.

And again he stopped at the very moment when the knife would have made contact.

He turned slowly and stared at the door. I, too, turned to stare, and was aware of the sound which had attracted his attention. It was almost inaudible, yet grimly significant and portentious. From below us it came, from the downstairs chambers of the house, and it was a low and rhythmic sing-song.

Brodin moved to the door and stood rigid. Evidently he realized all too well the meaning of that strange chant. His hands, one of them still gripping the scalpel, clenched viciously, and his lips curled, showing white teeth. He had no thought for me, or for the woman who lay bruised and naked on the operating table. He had no concern for anything except that uncanny moaning noise which drifted up from downstairs.

AND it was that sound, that same moaning chant, which led to the final mêlée of horror. The woman on the table, staring at us and realizing that Brodin was no longer watching her, leaned forward and spoke my name in a whisper.

What she said to me I do not know. I do know that she stared straight at me, and the words sobbed from her lips almost without being audible. And whatever she said, however she said it, her low words did something to me. They made me realize vaguely that she was something more than a mere woman.

She was *my* woman. That thought came to me and festered in my brain. She was my wife! And Brodin had been on the verge of—

I paced toward her, and at the same time, staring past me, she screamed a warning. I swung about. Brodin was standing near the door, glaring at me. Disturbed by the sound of her voice, he had dragged his attention back to what was happening in the room. Now his face was convulsed. The very thought that any person had dared defy him, dared plot against him, was enough to make him furious.

"Stand away from her!" he ordered curtly. "Come here!"

But I did not obey. My wife's hand was on my arm, and I stood where I was, openly defiant.

He could have subdued me even then, had he realized it. The hellish drug with-

in me was not dead. He could have stared me into submission, willed me to do as he commanded. But instead, he allowed his anger to best him.

Snarling, he flung himself upon me, the gleaming scalpel upraised in his fist. In that short interlude, death stared me in the face and breathed upon me with a breath cold as ice. Then I stepped abruptly away from the table, flung up both arms to protect myself.

The table groaned audibly as Brodin crashed into it. He crashed heavily, and the force of the impact sent him reeling backward. A guttural curse exploded from his mouth. For an instant he seemed stunned, bewildered. In that instant I leaped upon him.

There was nothing heroic about the leap. I was facing death and knew it, and when that unexpected opening confronted me I seized it in desperation. Hurling myself forward, I lunged headlong into the man's legs, driving him off balance.

He fell with a floor-shaking thud, and my outstretched hands clawing at him. Together we writhed over the uncarpeted boards. Then we were fighting, like men gone mad. Locked in each other's embrace, we rolled beneath the iron legs of the table and twisted clear again. The wall stopped us with a sickening crunch, sending an agonizing streak of fire through my back. It was combat to the finish, between an inhuman fiend mad with murder, and a desperate, death-fearing adversary who fought for the life of a woman as well as for his own.

For an eternity, or so it seemed to me, that fearful battle continued. Time and again the gleaming scalpel leaped toward me; time and again I was fortunate enough to grip the descending knife-wrist and wrench it aside before the blade could reach me. Stark, blind fear can give a man superhuman strength; otherwise Brodin, with his tremendous physical power and endurance, would have battered me senseless in the first few moments.

Yet I continued to resist him. My fists beat a mighty tattoo against his face and chest, sending blood to his mouth and tearing his throat. Despite his furious efforts he could not throw me off, could not twist me about and bring that wicked scalpel into play. Had he discarded the weapon and used both hands to subdue me, he might have succeeded. But he clung to the knife tenaciously.

And then it happened—

Fighting for my life, I failed to realize the man's hellish cunning until it was too late. Using his knees to batter my heaving body backward, he had driven me into the iron legs of the operating table. Too late I thrust up an arm to ward off the clenched fist which came from nowhere and struck me with pile-driver force.

My head snapped back as if on a pivot. The iron table-leg ground viciously into the back of my neck. For a single brief moment I was blinded by an overwhelming wave of blackness and sickness. Then, too weak to defend myself, I stared in horror as the keen point of the scalpel descended toward me.

TWO things happened at that instant. My wife screamed, and I twisted sideways with a final hopeless effort as the blade burned into me. That last desperate twist saved my life. The knife had been aimed at my throat; missing its mark, it buried itself in the flesh of my shoulder, close to the collar-bone. And Brodin leaned forward with the apparent intention of withdrawing the blade and plunging it home again.

But my wife's voice stopped him. Shrill words filled the room, and Brodin turned to stare at her.

"They are coming for you, Michael Brodin! Do you hear? They are coming for you! Listen!"

Brodin stiffened. Once again that

strange moaning chant was audible, but now it was nearer. And another sound was audible with it: a sound of shuffling footsteps ascending the stairs which led to the upper level of the house.

"It is the end, Brodin," my wife said harshly. "Even if you kill us both, it is the end. They have come for you!"

Brodin's face whitened. For an instant he hesitated; then ignoring me, he rose slowly to his feet and paced to the door. Jerking the barrier open, he stood rigid on the threshold, staring.

Beyond him, and advancing toward him along the corridor, were the creatures whom he had transformed into slaves.

Slowly, deliberately they came toward him, filling the corridor with their macabre chant of death. Peering into their faces, which were plainly visible in the glaring light from the operating room, Brodin fell back a step and bellowed a harsh order, commanding them to stop.

But they were no longer his slaves. They did not obey him. They had a new leader, and their leader was Jack Terry.

I did not see all that happened in the next few moments. Stumbling erect, I leaned against the operating table and strove desperately to regain a measure of strength for whatever ordeal awaited me. Steeling myself, I pulled the knife slowly from my shoulder and then stood swaying, fighting the agony which surged through me. When I looked again at Brodin, his face had lost all color. He had taken yet another step backward and was frantically thundering an order at the oncoming procession.

"Go back where you belong! You are not permitted to come here! Go back!"

They stood gaping at him—not foolishly, as I had so often seen them gape before, but with a grim deliberation which should have warned him of the transformation which had taken place within them. The corridor was choked with their gaunt bodies. That vibrant moaning sound, emanating from their lips, was hideously suggestive of things beyond the comprehension of men. Yet Brodin found enough courage, even then, to advance toward them.

"Go back downstairs!" he bellowed hoarsely. "By God, I'll see that every last one of you is punished. Punished! Do you know what that means?"

The answer was slow in coming. Before it came, another sound shrilled through the room in which I stood, and I turned quickly to confront my wife. The sound was laughter, tumbling hysterically from her lips. She sat upright on the table, one hand pointing rigidly at the creatures in the corridor. The ordeal had shattered her nerves at last.

"Threaten them!" she shrieked. "Go on, threaten them, you fool! They are not your slaves now! They've come to repay you for what you have done!"

I stared at her. Wearily, I moved to her side and put my arms about her, holding her against me until her hysterical laughter subsided. But she gazed past me with wide, unblinking eyes. And I, too, turned to peer at the doorway.

Brodin had ceased screaming his commands. He stood rooted to the floor, his fists clenched and his eyes terribly wide as he peered into the faces of the menacing creatures who shuffled relentlessly toward him.

Then he turned. Desperately, he hurled himself free of them and stumbled toward the end of the passage. Had he reached it, he might have escaped the fate that awaited him. He might have raced down the rear stairway to the pits, and fled through the lower corridors to the iron grating, just as Hope and I had fled less than an hour ago.

But the way was blocked. Before he reached the end of the passage, he stiffened convulsively and stood gaping into

more of those masklike faces. The slaves had left no exit unguarded. They had closed in upon him through the pits, as well as through the house. He was trapped. He stood there, trembling violently, undecided which way to turn.

And they fell upon him.

I did not see their method of subduing him. I did not want to. Retreating to the table, I stood close to my wife, with her arms clasped about me. I wondered if we, too, would be included in whatever unholy ritual they had planned. For they were not committing murder. Brodin's shrill screams had not abated, and that strange moaning chant was still audible. Murder would have been quicker . . . .

CHAPTER TEN

Vengeance of the Slaves

QUIETLY we waited, my wife and I I, not because we had no fear of death, but because we realized the futility of attempting to escape. But they did not come for us. The sounds receded to the far end of the corridor; and as we stood there, close to each other in what might have been our last embrace, we heard once again the tramp of footsteps on the stairs, this time receding to the lower level.

I looked at my wife, and then she at me, and our unspoken thoughts were the same. We had faced death and yet been pardoned. Escape lay before us, and Michael Brodin no longer had the power to prevent us.

Hurriedly, I scooped up my wife's discarded clothes and assisted her into them. Silently, then we tiptoed to the door and peered both ways along the corridor. Brodin's slaves had left none of their number to guard us. Perhaps we had never been included in their plans.

Together we hurried from that evil room. Together we descended the stairs to the main floor of the house, and crept through those lower chambers until we reached the door which led to freedom. That door was open; the slaves had come this way with their victim. And as we crossed the threshold and groped our way over the veranda, we saw them.

The clearing before us was white with moonlight. From the far end of it, near the shore of the Midnight Raven, came that same moaning chant which had accompanied the slaves' exodus from the upper corridor of the house. And as we stood there on the veranda steps, staring, the creatures themselves were plainly visible to us.

How many of them were in that strange procession, I do not know. A score or more were there, at least, and they were gaunt, shadowed shapes marching slowly toward the water's edge. Beyond them the surface of the Midnight Raven gleamed like ebony in the moonglow, and the great woods on either side were still as death.

Slowly and awfully, that moaning procession moved forward. And fascinated, we stared at them, risking our own safety as we stood there. Had they turned and discovered us, they might have come back for us—and yet I did not believe so. They were mindless robots following a leader, and their leader was the man who had caused Michael Brodin's downfall—Jack Terry. And behind Terry, within arm's reach, paced a creature whose massive frame identified him as my brother.

No, they would not have harmed us; I am sure of it. They had no thought for anything beyond the performance of their strange ritual. That ritual was vengeance; vengeance upon the man who had made them what they were. For in my brother's arms, held high above his head, writhed the body of Michael Brodin. And Brodin's screams were the screams of a man gone mad with fear.

So long as I live, I shall never forget that macabre sight. Like mourners at

some weird funeral ceremony, the slaves continued their death-march. Straight to the pond's edge they moved, in single file, without faltering or hesitating. Methodically, they followed their leader into the shallow water. With every forward step they took, the screams of their victim increased in volume, until the night was alive with his lurid shrieking.

The black water rose about Jack Terry's thighs. It crept to his shoulders, and still he did not stop. Step by step he continued his relentless striding, with the others trailing in his wake. The water swirled about his face, about his eyes. Then he was gone. And behind the sinister spot which marked his grave, a pair of gaunt uplifted arms protruded in the moon-glow. My brother's arms, holding Michael Brodin's twisting body.

Then they, too, were gone, and their burden with them. Brodin's screams ended abruptly, leaving only grim silence. In another moment the last of those marching men had vanished beneath the surface.

FOR a long interval I stood staring, unable to drag myself away. I could not believe what I had witnessed. As on that other occassion, I waited in bewilderment for the laws of nature to right themselves. But Brodin and his creatures did not reappear. The pond did not cast them up from its depths. The moonlit bowl of blackness lay calm and quiet, guarding its secret.

Then my wife spoke to me and put her hand on my arm.

"We're free, Paul," she whispered. "Free. Don't you understand?"

I did understand. I drew her close to me, and together we walked across the clearing to the gate. There, hidden deep in the underbrush, out of sight of prying eyes, we found the car in which we had come. And as we drove along the road a little while later, leaving Michael Brodin's horror house behind us, my wife rested her head on my shoulder and said softly:

"We can begin over again, Paul. We can forget."

I think that is all. There is no need for my dwelling on the rest of it—no need for me to describe how we made our report to the authorities, or how I closed my brother's deserted house and took my wife back to the city. We were together again, and free from Michael Brodin's terrible bonds. That is all that mattered.

But there *is* one thing more. One thing of significance, which may serve to explain the inexplicable. It is a report, or part of a report, made my Federal investigators who were called upon to study Michael Brodin's career and make certain that his villainy was forever ended. I repeat it here, word for word, as it appeared in the press.

"Black Pond (locally known as the Midnight Raven)—Advise no further search for the bodies of Michael Brodin and others reported to be drowned here in a mysterious manner. Careful investigation reveals Black Pond to have a sloping bottom which continues toward the center and drops abruptly to incredible depths. Underwater springs exist at several points near the shore, producing a powerful subaqueous flow toward the center, and resulting in a central drain probably connected with a subterranean stream flowing to the nearby Atlantic.

"Black Pond is doubly deceptive because no surface whirlpools exist, the inflow and outflow being apparently evenly balanced. Powerful currents were discovered in some places at depths of five feet or more. The force of suction in the central drain was great enough to cause the breakage of all sounding lines lowered there.

"Advise this site be marked with warning signs, and the surrounding territory, known as the Vale of the Midnight Raven, be purchased by the State and condemned.

"Any bodies lost here are forever irretrievable."

THE END

Midnight FANGS

by

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

His work was the study of those queer unfortunates who, legend says, change form by night and run with the gray, meat-eating packs which raven under the moon...

"THE white wolf leaped, straight for his throat. With a tremendous effort Count Orloff overcame the paralysis of terror that bound him and pressed the trigger of his gun. Just in time! For even as the beast collapsed in mid-air his fangs clamped about the Count's neck and scratched, barely scratched, the skin.

"The great shaggy body crashed to the ground. Momentarily a vertigo blinded Orloff. Then his sight cleared. He bent to the body stretched at his feet, and staggered back. This was no wolf that lay there, stiff in death. It was a man—the swarthy woodchopper who had misdirected him into the lonely forest path!"

A murmur of applause ran around the candle-lighted table as I ended. I sipped my cordial and congratulated myself. I had put the tale over well. Then Elnore Lansdowne gurgled, she of the diamond tiara and the triple chins.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, I think that was just the most adorable ghost story I've ever heard. You must tell us another. You really must."

My fingers tightened on the napkin in my lap, and I felt my face flush. But Irma Stanton, practiced hostess as she is, averted the impending explosion.

"A little later, dear," she said sweetly. "If you don't mind. We shall be more comfortable in the drawing room." She gathered eyes with her own and rose. Chairs scraped and a confused gabble covered her whisper to me. "Now be good, Earl. Remember it's all in the sweet service of publicity.

But I'd had enough. I slipped through a door and got up to Rand's library unobserved, or so I thought. The door firmly shut, I sunk into one of the big chairs and lit a Hoya. I swore I should never write another book. I had tried to get across some of the eerie fascination of the stories I had tracked down for these ten years, the legends of men and women who change into wolves by night and run with the gray packs that raven under the moon. I had tried to put the spine-tingling strangeness of it on paper —and my reward has been the powder-scented adulation of women like that flesh-pillowed, simpering Mrs. Lansdowne. Pah!

Behind me the door opened. I didn't turn at the sound. The only illumination came from the flickering hearth-fire, and the chair's high back was between me and the entrance. Perhaps the interloper would think the room deserted. But I forgot the wavering line of smoke rising from my cigar, betraying my covert. Silk swished in a long arc around to my left and Lisa Mountenoy came drifting out of shadow into the unsteady glow.

She stood there, quite unmoving, her tall slimness sheathed in black that merged with the darkness behind her, so that her white arms and shoulders and the small pale oval of her face seemed disembodied. Her eyes, black as her close-coifed hair, brooded, and even in the faint smile that touched the corners of her little mouth there was a hint of sadness. So fitting, somehow, was she to that fire-shadowed room and my mood that I did not resent her. Nor did I rise or stir at all, but waited.

A knot popped in the burning log and kindling resin flared, outlining her figure, making her real. I started to rise. "This seat is very comfortable."

"Thank you, but I'll sit here." I hadn't noticed the other chair beside mine. She sank into it. "I hope you don't mind my intrusion."

"Intrusion! Your presence is far from that. It makes the trinity complete. A good cigar, a glowing fire, a beautiful woman. What more can a man desire?"

"You are more than kind. But I am going to disappoint you."

"Disappoint me? How could you possibly do that?"

"Easily. You are thinking 'I hope she'll have sense enough to keep quiet. It won't be so bad if she does.' But I'm going to talk, and about your book too."

I sighed. "Must you?"

"Yes. But perhaps when I am through you will not be sorry as you are just now. Tell me, Mr. Ashton, do you believe there is any truth in the idea of the werewolf?"

I took a long puff. At least she wasn't going to gush about how thrilling my tales were.

"Reasoningly, I do not. There is no scientific justification for it. Yet sometimes I wonder. The legend is so universal, so deeply rooted in all folklore. Sometimes it changes to correspond with the fauna of the locality. In Burma, for instance, they whisper of tiger-women, in Abyssinia of lion-men. In the Cape Country tales are told of silver-pelted beasts who lead the wild-dog packs by night but return to their human beds with the first touch of sun on the veldt. Can it

be possible that there is no basis at all for so widespread a myth? But I have never been able to authenticate one of the innumerable instances of which I have been told."

She was queerly insistent. "You are not certain then, that the thing is impossible?"

"Certain?" I shrugged. "Death, they say, is certain. Yet in Haiti silent figures laboring in the fields were pointed out to me as men who had been buried months before. I have seen and heard unbelievable things in all the ancient countries of the world. Only here in new America is everything certain, everything explained."

Sap dripped from the end of an uncaught log and hissed on the red embers. Mrs. Mountenoy's hands twisted, one within the other, in her lap. Her face was hidden in the embrasure of her chair but there was in her voice a palpable effort at control.

"It may be so," she whispered to herself. "It may be so." Suddenly I was aware that hers had been no aimless query, that to her some vast import had rested in my reply.

"What may be so?"

She made no direct answer but seemed to be nerving herself to some decision. After a while she spoke, her tones low yet vibrant with urgency. "Will you help me, Mr. Ashton?"

"How?" I exclaimed. "What is the trouble?"

"Trouble? That is a weak word." She leaned forward into the light. Her pupils dilated and a little muscle twitched in her cheek. "Only you, I think, in all the world can help me. Will you?"

"Of course. In any way I can." Even now I cannot see how I could have made any other response.

"Thank you!" The tension in her face eased. "I knew you would not refuse."

I tried to be matter-of-fact. "Now tell me about it. Just what is it you want me to do for you?"

Again there was silence while she seemed to search for words. Finally her slender hands went out in a little gesture of helplessness. "I can't say it. It would sound silly, hysterical. You must come and see for yourself."

"Where?"

"At my home. Come now, tonight. It's only a short distance, we can drive there in twenty minutes. I have a room prepared for you."

I drew back slightly. After all I knew nothing of this woman, had been introduced to her only this very evening. And Irma had not been over friendly to her. My thought must have been reflected in my face, for she answered it. "My husband will be waiting up for us, I told him I hoped to bring you back with me."

"But can't it wait till Monday? I'm supposed to be here for the week-end and Mrs. Stanton will—"

"—Forgive you. I'll go and make it right with her." Before I could voice any further protest she was up and out of the room. What she said to Irma I never found out, but in minutes she was at the door with my hat and stick. "Your bag is in my car," she said breathlessly. "Come. We'll go out the side entrance."

WE DID not talk as, taut behind the wheel, Mrs. Mountenoy shot the roadster through the home-bound traffic on the North Country road. We passed through a town and I glimpsed an illuminated clock face, saw that is was just ten. We turned sharp right and were bumping along an unpaved lane. The foliage of the North Shore dropped behind, and gaunt pine barrens stretched away on both sides, bleakly desolate under the stars' cold light. Just ahead a dark bulk loomed against the sky. Its outline sharpened and I saw it as a long, low-sprawling house.

The road curved to its further side, and there were two windows, yellow with light. The car skidded to a halt.

I got my bag out of the rumble, followed the crunch of Lisa Mountenoy's shoes on the gravel path. I caught up with her at the door. She was crouched against it, her ear against a panel. As I reached her she gasped almost inaudibly, I thought with relief. The key in her hand slid soundlessly into its lock and she turned it slowly, carefully, as if striving to avoid giving warning to someone within. I caught the contagion and tiptoed after her into the dark hall, groped with my bag for a clear space before setting it down. To the right a thin yellow line near the floor indicated the lighted room. Again she listened for a moment, breathlessly. Then, apparently satisfied, she threw the door open.

"I'm back, dears," she called. "And I've brought a guest with me."

"Yes, I heard your car. You are early." The speaker rose from a low chess table. I had an impression that his white hair brushed the rafters of the ceiling, he was so tall. His voice was high-pitched, querulous. And from his gaunt, almost emaciated frame his clothes hung loosely. Deep seams cut into his cheeks, and fine wrinkles radiated from his washed-out, bleared eyes. I was conscious of a shock of dismay. Could this be her husband? Why, he was at least twenty years older.

"This is Earl Ashton, dear, the author of 'Trail of the Werewolf.' My husband, Mr. Ashton."

His bony hand was icy in mine. "I have read your work with a great deal of interest. I am honored by this unexpected pleasure."

Queer. Hadn't she said that he knew she would bring me? I mumbled something.

"And this is Carl." A lad of about sixteen, with strikingly blond hair brushed back from a high white forehead. There was a look of pain in his blue eyes and his sensitive lips were rather too tightly compressed for his youth, his pinched, sharp-chinned face too pale. "Ought you to be still up?"

The boy flushed. "It is late, Lisa, I know. But I just wanted to finish this game. I had him almost beaten."

Her tone was anything but gentle as she snapped peremptorily, "Well, say good-night and turn in." Resentment flared in Carl's eyes as he slammed the door through which we had entered. The old man winced too. But in the next moment she was graciousness itself.

"Do make yourself comfortable, Mr. Ashton, while I get you a drink. I don't want you to regret being kidnaped. I did just that, Roy, plucked him right out of Irma Stanton's house at the point of a gun."

Something grim in Mountenoy's frosty smile. "I don't doubt it. And if he had resisted you would have dragged his mangled corpse here."

Her laugh was forced. "You see what you escaped. Now aren't you glad you came peaceably?"

"I certainly am glad," I lied. Already I was uncomfortable, feeling myself caught in the swirl of some scarce-hidden family tempest. "Glad to have come here on any terms."

It was a pleasant enough room, oak-panelled, book-lined. The chairs, the table, a secretary in the corner, were museum pieces. Evidences of wealth here, despite the apparent absence of servants. Yet I could sense unease and a furtive—fear. That was it, I realized. These people were afraid of something. Nor was it the usual banal distrust of one another when age weds youth. It was something more fundamental, more—ghastly. They were listening—both of them—listening for something they dreaded to hear.

THE Scotch was real, and as I doused it with Club Perrier and drank with the two my discomfort passed away. The conversation turned, of course, to my work, and I told them one or two stories that had been crowded out of the volume. Roy Mountenoy countered with a tale or so of his own, and we drifted into a discussion of folk legends in general. My hosts displayed a surprising familiarity with the subject. I began to enjoy myself, riding my hobby to a fare-you-well. The "Trail" was on the table, a first edition, and I riffled the pages as we talked.

Then suddenly I noticed that their attention had strayed, that her smile was fixed, unnatural, and that his eyes kept wandering to the windows across the room from me. I finished my remarks with a question. Neither replied, and there was a momentary silence.

Distinctly, from just outside the windows, I heard faint sounds, a scratching of claws on stone, some animal sniffing at the sash. A glance passed between husband and wife, a swift unspoken entreaty and assent. Mrs. Mountenoy rose with a tight-lipped; "Will you excuse me a moment?" and went out the way Carl had gone. Mountenoy started talking but what he said was germane to something that had passed minutes before.

Somehow I was immensely relieved when Lisa Mountenoy returned. Once more there was a silent interchange between them. An almost imperceptible negative shake of her head. What little color the other had drained from his face, left his seamed countenance yellow, jaundiced. I noticed that the hand on his knee trembled slightly. Our talk lost its spontaneity, there were long interludes. Whatever it was that had been sniffing at the windows had gone. But I heard a dog howling, somewhere far off.

We were waiting, all three of us, waiting for something to happen. I did not know what it was, except that it must be the reason for my presence. Yes, something more I was certain of. Roy Mountenoy hoped desperately that it would not eventuate, hoped against hope . . .

Heavy footsteps crunched from the path. Mountenoy's head twisted sharply to the sound, and his lips went white. It seemed to me that red flame glowed in the black depths of Lisa's eyes. There was a knock at the outer door.

Mountenoy pushed himself up out of the chair, went to answer the summons. Once I saw a captured Chinese bandit walk proudly alone to where the axeman waited. It was like that. He left the room-door open, and I could see him fumble at the knob outside. There was a chill in the breeze that came into the room, although the night had been warm.

"Good evening, Mr. Keller, Come in." His utterance was muffled.

"Damn right I'll come in." A stocky, roughly dressed individual thrust into the foyer, his round face florid in the light from our room. He shoved what seemed a bundle of feathers almost into Mountenoy's face. "There's some more of your dog's work. Best layer I've got. He hauled her right off the roost."

The other took a backward step, raised a protesting hand. "But I have no dog. I have no dog, I tell you." Incomprehensible agony twanged his vocal cords.

"Say listen, that won't go down. Not no more. I believed you the last time, but tonight I saw the murderin' cur slink straight here an' jump over your hedge. Big fellow he is too, with a kind of whitish coat. He's here in this house right this minute."

"My dear fellow, I give you my word we own no dog." Curious how unconvincing he sounded. "Both Mrs. Mountenoy and I dislike the brutes."

Keller fairly spluttered. "Don't you 'dear fellow' me, and don't you lie to me

neither. It won't go down. Either you shoot that dog tonight or I go down to Mineola in the morning and get the sheriff to come up and do it.

"I ain't going to have my hens killed by no dog to satisfy you. There's been a ewe murdered too, Eli Hunt tells me, down on his north pasture. The beast is dangerous. Next thing you know he'll be tearing the throat of some kid."

I heard the woman gasp at that. Mountenoy shrank back as if to avoid a blow. A single drop of blood dripped from the fowl and made a glistening spot on the floor. "Well, which is it goin' to be?" the farmer growled. "You, or the sheriff?"

Mountenoy put a hand on Keller's sleeve. "Look here. Don't do that," he pleaded. "Don't go to the authorities. We have no dog, but they will make a lot of trouble and I—I am a sick man. I couldn't stand it. I'll pay for your hens, I'll pay twice, three times their value. For Hunt's sheep too. Tell him. Come, be a good fellow." He got a wallet out of his breast pocket, pulled bills from it. "Here's fifty dollars, will that be enough?" He pushed the money into the other's fist. Keller muttered something I did not catch. But he turned to the door and went out.

MOUNTENOY came in to us. More than ever he looked an old, broken man. His gaze caught and held that of his wife, and there was a piteous appeal in it. He slumped into his chair, buried his face in his hands. "Roy," she jerked out. "Go look." He heaved to his feet, went across the foyer to the first door. He opened it cautiously, peered within and came back.

"There," he said. "Asleep." He stood in the doorway, swaying.

Lisa Mountenoy's voice was tight in her throat. "Roy, you heard what he said —about children. Do you think—" Her hand came up to her heart in a curious gesture whose meaning I could not read.

He bowed his head, and his hands dropped to his sides, palms out. "Tomorrow I put bars on the window," thickly, "and a padlock on the door."

She turned to me. "What do you think, Earl?" Sometime during the evening's talk we had gotten to first names. "Will it do any good?"

"I don't know what you mean." I was tired of her obliqueness, was determined to make her speak plainly.

Again that vague smile, just touching the tips of her lip-wings. "Of course you do. You are neither blind nor deaf. You know we fear that Carl is a—werewolf."

Mountenoy reached for the door-jamb, and his knuckles whitened as his bony fingers gripped it.

"No," he groaned, "no!" Every line of his taut body demanded reassurance from me, denial. But his eyes were hopeless, agonized.

"Roy dear, aren't you convinced yet? Surely there is no escaping after tonight."

"Tell me about it," I put in.

"You tell him, Roy."

"But, Lisa," Mountenoy protested, "why should we involve Mr. Ashton? After all our worries are of no interest to him."

"On the contrary! If I can be of any assistance I shall be only too happy."

"It was on that understanding Earl came here, Roy."

Mountenoy gave in. "Very well." He moved a chair and sat down. I noticed that he had a full view of the door across the entrance vestibule. "If you can help us, I shall be very grateful."

"No reason for that. I am vastly interested. This whole thing is right up my alley."

"Two weeks ago—"

"Perhaps you had better start further back," Lisa interjected. "Earl should know the background."

Pain crossed the old man's face, but he commenced again.

"CARL is my son but not Lisa's. I met his mother abroad, in a small fishing village in Norway, while I was there on business."

"When Roy retired he had become the largest importer of cod liver oil in America," Lisa explained. "But he was just beginning then."

Mountenoy ignored the interruption. "We were married and a year later Helda died in giving birth to Carl. It was imperative that I return to America at once and I left the boy with Helda's parents. I visited him only infrequently, but I managed to see that he was taught English and something of American customs. I hoped always to bring him here but one thing after another prevented. It was only two years ago, when Lisa and I were wedded, that I did so.

"Some months ago I retired, and we bought this place, thinking to find peace and rest. At first it was all that I had hoped for, although I am afraid Lisa rather chafed at being so out of the social whirl."

"I was a little lonely, but as long as Roy had what he wanted I was content."

I wondered just how true that was. I could not quite fit Lisa Mountenoy into any picture of bucolic calm, but certainly she seemed a devoted wife.

"Two weeks ago Lisa had occasion to go to Carl's room for something after he had retired and found that he was not there. He was nowhere about the house or grounds, although none of his clothes were missing. I was in the city, returned at midnight to find her terribly agitated but waiting for me before communicating with the police. I looked in his chamber before doing so, and there he was, asleep. We wakened him and he denied absolutely having left his room. We were at a loss to account for the occurrence but finally set it down to sleep-walking."

"There were no tracks outside," Lisa murmured, "and the door was locked."

"Could he have gone out through the window?" I asked.

"Certainly," Mountenoy snatched at the suggestion. "That was my own conclusion."

"There is a flower bed there, and no tracks." Her hands twisted, one within the other. "Except the dog's."

"You had a dog at the time?"

"No! I have never owned one. It must have been some stray."

"That afternoon Ethel, our cook, came back from her shopping in the village with gossip of some hens on a neighboring farm having been killed by a marauding dog. The farmer, Elmer Keller, had shot at the animal but with apparently no effect. We paid very little attention to the story—till later."

"The next night we watched Carl's room, but nothing happened. The following night the same and our vigilance relaxed. But on the morning after the third night we again heard of a canine raid on Kellar's hen-house—and Ethel found a bloody feather under the boy's bed. Keller was here in the afternoon. All the known dogs in the vicinity had been accounted for, he said. Had we any? He did not appear to believe my denial but he went away.

"There weren't any more incidents that week. But Lisa heard of your book, purchased a copy, and insisted that we read it together. There was one chapter particularly that hit us with terrific force. You remember the tale that was told you at Storvaagen? The wolf that mangled a man and was chased off a cliff by the villagers."

I stirred. "Yes. In the morning they found the crushed body of the boy Svedin on the rocks below but there was no trace of the wolf."

Mountenoy raised bleak eyes to mine. "My first wife's maiden name was Svedin. The town where Carl was born and raised is Storvaagen." He said it quietly, but somehow the words rippled the following silence like little circular waves sent out by a stone dropped into a black pool.

"That happened a hundred and fifty years ago. Those Norse families certainly cling to their homes." The remark was ridiculous, but I had to say something. Lisa answered it.

"Yes, Carl objected strenuously to leaving his grandparents, and he has not been happy here. He seems to have a natural affection for Roy, but I haven't been able to win him. As a matter of fact I am very much afraid he—resents me."

"You misunderstand him, Lisa. It is just his reticence, his cold Northern blood. But all this doesn't interest Earl." Roy stopped the discussion and resumed his narrative.

"Last Saturday I was called away. My successors had gotten into a labor tangle in St. Louis, appealed to me, the men would trust only me. I could not refuse to go. Lisa's letters told me of her mounting perturbation. Time and again during the week the dog had been on the prowl and each time Carl had been absent from his bed. I returned this afternoon to find Ethel sitting on her luggage, waiting for me. Last night she had seen a big white dog skulking in the hall, she wouldn't sleep here again. And tonight—well, you heard and saw."

Again he buried his face in his hands. "I learned that you were to be at the Stanton's," Lisa said. "And I literally forced an invitation from Irma. She doesn't like me. I was determined to meet you, to get you here tonight. You are the only one in the country who would understand, who would not think us insane. And I am afraid, deathly afraid. The Storvaagen Werewolf started out by killing sheep, didn't he, before he killed a man? And Carl—hates me."

Mountenoy started up, his face working. "He won't hurt you, Lisa, he won't!" His voice was harsh, his eyes staring. "God help me, I'll kill him with my own hands if he attempts it."

So far had this retired businessman, this seller of fish oil, come!

I tried to calm him. "Even if your suspicions are correct I don't believe there is any danger tonight. He has already been out, doubtless he will sleep quietly now till morning."

She caught me up. "Then you think he really is a werewolf."

"I scarcely know what to think. It is incredible. Yet, as I told you before, I have long passed the stage of stigmatising any tale, however wild, as impossible. The boy comes from the very fountainhead of the legend, has undoubtedly heard the story of the Storvaagen Werewolf time and again. Possibly there is an ancestral taint in his blood, reawakened by the disturbance of his forced migration." I shrugged. "I should like to mull it over through the night. I may have some solution by the morning."

They couldn't very well do anything but acquiesce. After all, I was their guest.

THE house was only one story and the bedrooms opened on a long corridor that began at the left of the entrance lobby. The first, as I had already gathered, was Carl's. Next came Lisa's chamber, connecting through a dressing-room with Mountenoy's. The guest room was at the extreme end. "Rather an unusual arrangement for a house as large as this," Roy said. "But it is attractive to one for whom stair-climbing has become a task." He smiled wryly.

As I undressed my thoughts were occupied not with the outré story I had heard, but perversely enough with an inconse-

quential trifle. The first edition of "Trail of the Werewolf" in the living room had Mentano's stamp on the flyleaf. Like all first authors I had visited that famous bookshop three days after the publication date in the guise of a purchaser. A clerk had told me that the first edition had been sold out, and had offered me a competing work. That had been four weeks ago. Yet Lisa Mountenoy had bought a copy there within two weeks. I had heard of bookclerks being subsidised; had that happened here? I must speak to Rand about it.

As is my habit I fell soundly asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. I awoke with a start. Only the faintly lighter oblong of the window broke the darkness; only the shrilling of crickets the silence. But I had a strange sense of something inimical lurking close by. I lay quite still and searched the dark with my eyes.

Then I heard it—a soft pad, pad of animal feet, a click of claws against wood! Not in the room. Inside the house. At my door! A soft body thumped against the panels. I recalled there had been no key in the lock—was it coming in? Was there any possible weapon in the room? None that I could remember, none that I could find instantly in the dark.

I slid a hand over the side of the bed, to the floor, gripped a shoe. That wouldn't help much against a—against what was at the door.

There was the faintest possible creaks, and a snuffing close along the threshold. I had the covers off me now, was taut for a spring. But the latch held! The footsteps padded away. Held breath popped from between my lips, and courage came back. I was out of the bed, at the door, was jerking it open. I *must* see what had made those sounds!

THE corridor was unlit, save for one small light at the other end. I saw a flickering shadow there, momentarily, then it disappeared—into a room. Lisa's or Carl's? I could not tell, drowsiness—the dimness—confused me.

I went down the hall, my bare feet thudding against the parquet. Both doors were closed. I listened at Carl's, heard the long breathing of sleep. From behind Lisa's came the rustling of a sheet, creak of a bed spring as the dreamer turned.

Then suddenly I was conscious of the figure I made, in pajamas, one shoe tight-gripped in a shaking hand, listening at a woman's door in a strange house. The realization jarred me to normalcy.

Was I sure I had heard those sounds at all, seen that moving shadow? Wakened in unfamiliar surroundings, had I not imagined them? After all, the evening had not been one to give me quiet nerves.

I got back to my own chamber as soundlessly as I could. I was sure now that I was making a fool of myself, had allowed the neurotic imaginings of an overwrought woman to sway me off-balance. My foot touched the threshold, felt wetness. I bent to it. All along the flat board was a dribble of foam. The dripped slavering of a dog!

I stared at it, my hair prickling. And scream after scream ripped the silence behind me! Then words—"Roy! Roy! The dog! Roy! He's in here! The dog!" I whirled to the sounds—from Lisa's room—dashed to her door, flung it open.

Light swept in, obliquely. Mountenoy burst through the dressing-room door, in nightshirt, hair tousled, eyes staring, a gun in his hand. The bed was empty! But he looked to the window. Lisa was there—leaning out!

She turned to us, slowly. Her form was silhouetted against the pale star-glimmer. She stood there, gazing at us. A long shudder ran through her.

"Lisa. What is it? Lisa my dear?"

Her voice was thin, strained, hysterical.

"The dog! I woke and saw it—crouched to spring." Her arm rose, her long hand pointed to the floor at my feet. "Right there. Its eyes were like flames. I screamed and it twisted—leaped through the window."

"You watched it. Where did it go?"

She was silent, holding him with her eyes.

"Damn it, Lisa, tell me. Where did it go?"

"It went—oh Roy—it went into Carl's window—into his room."

"Into my room—what—what's happened?" A drowsy voice in the doorway behind. I whirled to it, whirled back to Roy's unintelligible shout, insensate, furious.

In a flash I saw his gun sweep up, pointing at Carl; saw *her* face over Roy's shoulder, and sprang, grasping the gun, thrusting it down. The bullet roared into the floor.

"He's your son, man, your son!" I yelled and jerked the weapon from him.

His skinny hand snatched at it, his thin lips were drawn back from his teeth in a snarl. "Give it to me, give it to me. Son or not, I'll kill him. Kill him before he kills her, kills my wife and my child."

Now I understood. Fending the old man off I looked at her. God! May I never again look into a face with such malice, such hate, blazing in it.

"Where is it?" I asked her as calmly as I could.

Her lips moved, soundlessly. But the swift dart of her eyes was enough. I pulled away from Mountenoy, stepped to a mirror-covered closet door, jerked it open.

There, chained to the floor, its snout bound tight by a gray silk stocking, was a huge white dog.

PERHAPS I should have guessed it before, when Mountenoy told his story. I realize now that the essential part of the werewolf idea, Carl's absence from his bed when the dog was loose, depended on her unsupported word. How dexterously she had managed that!

She would not herself kill the interloper, the alien who must share with her and her unborn child that for which she had sold herself in marriage to a dotard. She was afraid—afraid not of the deed but of the punishment. I wonder how many nights she lay awake, thinking, thinking, rejecting one plan after another while the old man snored. No, she could not do it.

And then by some ill chance she bought and read my book. The place, the name, in that old Norse tale leaped out at her from its page. . . .

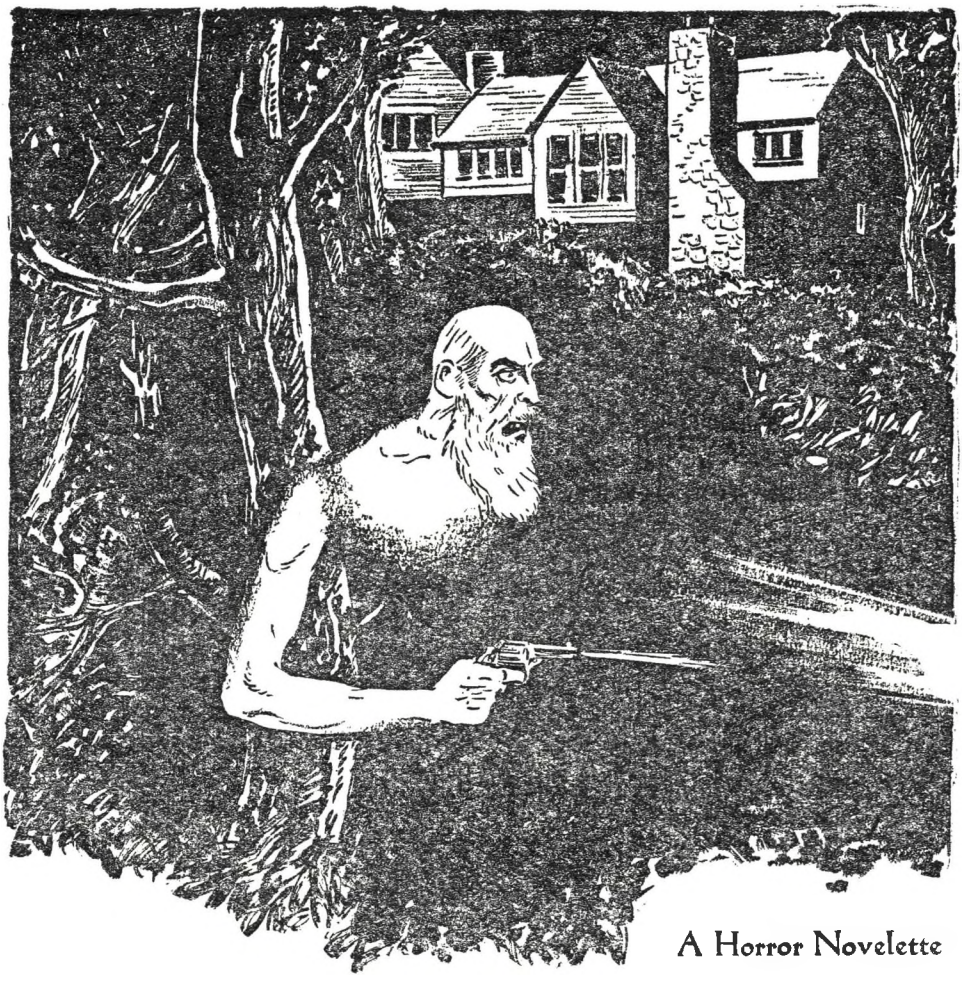
The slow, insidious development of her scheme to slay the boy by his father's hand is obvious. Except for one thing. Why did she bring me there? I asked her.

"Don't you see? Would we have believed when we said that Roy killed Carl because he was a werewolf? But you—the authority in that field. . . ."

That was her mistake. Because, at the last, I realized that she had read "Trail of the Werewolf" long before she told Roy she had bought it. Because I knew then she had lied, that the whole thing was a lie. And her face, flaring in mad triumph, had set off the instantaneous explosion of thought that had thrown me at Roy's hand just in time to send the bullet harmlessly into the floor.

THE END

Ten Dollar Prize Winner of "Army Post Murders," Contest is Robert Keys, of Glade Springs, Va.



A Horror Novelette

THE VAT OF DOOM

by

FREDERICK C. DAVIS

Have you ever visited within the bleak gray walls which house the criminally insane? That was the fate which awaited Ranny Clinton after those dark hours in which he learned to know the vat wherein men vanished!

THE shadow of the gallows haunts me, and men think me mad. I am wanted for murder. I am held guilty of slaying two men in the heat of insane fury. Worse—far worse—a cursed doubt fills me, doubt of my own sanity, doubt

that those horrible dark hours ever passed.

I am writing this calmly, thinking clearly and logically. I can remember vividly, and I am able to recount in detail, every incident of that night of terror. Before God, I swear I will here set down the truth as I know it. But—are the events I remember, the incidents of those frightful black hours, only images created within my darkened mind? Am I actually mad, or am I guilty of the two murders they say I committed? I do not know. Never shall I know!

Yet there is one who believes me . . . . who knows I tell the real truth.

My name is Randall Clinton. I am thirty-two years old, college educated, and I always enjoyed mental vigor—until that night. I trained in chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I was thirty when I was employed as laboratory assistant by the wealthy and eccentric Dr. Junius Seneca.

Early that night Dr. Seneca was working in the lab. It was a large, dormered room covering the entire third floor of the huge house, which sat in an outlying section of Long Island. The mansion was like a fortress, surrounded by spacious, gardened grounds and a high spiked fence. Night after night, at all weird hours, lights glimmered through the laboratory windows while Dr. Seneca worked at his experiments.

The room was a clutter of apparatus, with every inch of wall space shelved, every shelf crowded with bottles of reagents. Beakers, retorts, flasks, titrators, scales, burners, furnaces—every conceivable piece of apparatus glittered on every table. The air was pungent. Continually, pausing only for the trays of food brought him from the kitchen, and for a few hours of sleep, Dr. Seneca labored there.

A queer man. Huge, short-necked, with broad shoulders, short arms, and a stubbled beard, he seemed like an ape. His deep-set eyes glowed with the strange secrets of the laboratory. He had inherited great wealth; he was married and childless. Nothing meant more to him than his researches in protoplasmis phenomena. A vindictive man, I often thought. A monomaniac, certainly.

They think me insane; yet all the time it was Dr. Seneca who was mad.

Early that night, while Dr. Seneca was working at the bench, I entered the laboratory. I was a bit unsteady, and not too strong, for only a day previous I had been released from a hospital. I had been the victim of an automobile accident and had suffered severe contusions and lacerations about the head. Though Dr. Seneca had not seen me for weeks, he did not even look up when I came into the laboratory and greeted him.

On the table before him was a small screened cage. Inside the cage was a white rat. Dr. Seneca often used rats in his experiments on protoplasm. He never disclosed to me the real object of his researches, but I knew he was attempting to create life in test-tubes, to make cultures of protoplasm artificially—to learn the secret of creation, to usurp the power of God!

He did not look up, and I saw, in some surprise, that he was holding the rat down, and inserting into its nostrils two tiny rubber tubes. A large beaker sat beside him. It contained a limpid, oily fluid, absolutely colorless. He heard my step and looked up.

"Clinton!" he exclaimed angrily. "What are you doing here?"

"Do you need me tonight, Doctor?" I asked.

"No! Leave at once!" he snapped.

At that moment the telephone rang. Dr. Seneca had turned back, and was again intent upon his rat, so I took up the receiver. A woman's voice spoke over the line—the voice of Mrs. Seneca—Mateel.

"Ranny," she said, "I am phoning from Mrs. Sturvon's. I won't be home until late. Please tell my husband. Are you feeling quite well?"

Her voice was like balm. It was musical, soft, sweet. I adored every inflection of tone, every syllable she uttered. Her husband neglected her shamefully, as he neglected everything but his experiments. To him she was merely the seldom-seen mistress of his home; to me she was a warm and lovely woman.

I SPOKE to her softly, for Dr. Seneca was not listening. He was bending now above the beaker of limpid liquid.

When I left the telephone, happy, glowing, the doctor was peering down at the empty table-top, and holding in his hand the two detached rubber tubes.

"Mrs. Seneca will be home late, Doctor," I said.

He did not hear. He might have been hypnotized, so intense was his concentration upon that bare table-top. He passed his hand over it, then closed his fingers as though to grasp something—but when he raised his hand it held nothing—nothing that I could see.

"Where's the rat?" I asked. "Did it get away?"

The doctor opened a little trap door in the side of the screen-covered cage, and thrust his hand inside—a hand with fingers curled, still as though he were holding some object. He opened his hand, closed the door quickly. He left nothing inside—nothing I could see.

Dr. Seneca's gaze on the cage was so intent that I, too, stepped close and peered into it. The cage was divided by a partition, in which was a small swing door. Rats, when contained in the cage, could pass from one section to the other by running through the balanced door. But there was nothing in the cage now—nothing I could see.

Suddenly the little door moved. There was no draft of air in the laboratory that might have swung it. But it moved. It opened and closed. And from the empty box came sounds.

Cheep-cheep! Cheep-cheep!

It was the familiar chattering of a rat. It issued, certainly, from the inner partition. Yet the inner partition, I would have sworn, was empty. And with the squeaking came another sound—the rustling of the hay, with which the box was lined. I heard the hay move, I saw it move, as though a rat were running over it. But there was nothing in the box!

A hoarse exclamation of gratification came from Dr. Seneca. He picked up the beaker of limpid oil, turned, and poured it into a huge vat in the center of the floor. He was reaching for a five-gallon bottle of light animal oil when he saw me. His face turned purple. His eyes glared.

"Get out of here, Clinton!" he snapped. "Get out at once!"

I was a little shaky. The automobile accident had left me weakened. I peered at the doctor confusedly, and began a reply; but the doctor's manner changed immediately.

"Sorry I spoke so roughly, Clinton," he said. "I didn't know you were still here. I want to be alone. You need rest, too. Better go to your room and get some sleep. That's a good fellow."

I was being ordered out; I could not stay. And I *was* tired and dizzy; I was glad to go. I went to the stairway door, said good-night, and closed it behind me.

I was halfway down the stairs when I heard the latch click into place. The door was locked behind me. I did not dream then that a horrible secret lay within the walls of the laboratory.

LYING on my bed, in my room on the second floor, I began to wonder. I thought again about the little screen cage on the laboratory table. I heard again the noises that had come from its emptiness, the squeaking, and the rustling of the hay.

"I saw nothing inside that cage," I said to myself. "But there *was* something in it."

I lay restless, wondering. At last I rose, put on some clothes, and stepped upon the balcony.

The grounds spread black and shadowed all around the house. In the dormer windows above, lights were gleaming

from the laboratory. I heard splashings and gurglings, as though large bottles were being emptied into the vat. A queer, sweet smell was in the air. At last the sound of pouring stopped.

My curiosity was strong, and the sloping roof offered an opportunity. The eave was within reach. I braced my feet on a windowsill and pulled myself up. Creeping across the shingles, I soundlessly made my way to a dormer window that looked in upon the laboratory.

This man—the phrase often rang through my mind—is mad. What is he doing? What is this madman doing, I wondered.

When I looked in through the laboratory window I was startled. The huge room was empty. Dr. Seneca was not in sight. I knew he had not come downstairs, for to do so he must pass my bedroom door. He must still be in the laboratory. But I could not see him.

A splashing sound was coming from the room now, its source the large porcelain vat in the center of the floor. The surface of the oily fluid in it was moving vigorously. Over its rim trailed two small rubber tubes, like the tubes Dr. Seneca had inserted into the nostrils of the rat, but larger. The tubes, too, were moving. Something beneath the surface of the colorless fluid in the vat was tugging at them.

Another thing bewildered me. Beside the vat, on the floor, lay a pile of clothing. I saw the doctor's smock, his trousers and socks and shoes, his shirt and tie and underwear. Dr. Seneca, it seemed certain, had stripped to the skin immediately after locking the door upon me. But he was not in the room, that I could see.

The surface of the oily liquid in the vat was stirring as if with some force contained within itself. And the twin tubes trailing over the lip of the vat kept moving, tugging.

What did this mean? Was Dr. Seneca inside the vat, beneath the surface, breathing through the two tubes? If he was, what was he doing—and why? I crouched outside the window, motionless, peering in.

The tubes ceased to move. The surface of the liquid in the vat grew quiet. Minutes passed, and the stuff grew still.

I was alarmed.

"Doctor!" I burst out.

There was no answer from the laboratory—no sound or movement. Quickly I turned away. I slid down the roof, jumped to the balcony, and hurried through my bedroom. I ran up the stairs to the door of the laboratory. It was still locked.

"Doctor!" I cried.

For a moment there was silence. Then a renewed, vigorous splashing, came from the laboratory. The contents of the vat were churning anew. The swishing lasted a few seconds, then stopped. Again there was silence.

I knocked loudly. "Doctor!"

Unsteady as my nerves were, I threw myself against the door. I had no key. Only Dr. Seneca possessed a key to the laboratory. I was afraid that something had happened to him—that he had perhaps drowned himself in the vat. As I flung myself against the door a second time, a panel gave way, and I reached through the splintered wood toward the latch.

FLINGING the door wide, I ran into the laboratory. Every light was blazing. The doctor's clothing still lay in a heap on the floor. But the rubber tubes no longer trailed over the lip of the vat; they were lying coiled on a table. Beside the pile of clothing I saw something which had not been there a moment before—a bath-towel that was wet.

On the floor, leading from the vat to

a chair placed a few yards away, were the wet prints of bare feet.

"Doctor Seneca!" I cried.

My voice rang back from the shelved walls. There was no other response. Frantically, I ran toward the vat. The oily liquid it contained was limpid as crystal. It was so clear, so colorless, the vat would have seemed empty if the lights had not reflected brightly on the still rippling surface. And except for the fluid, the vat was empty.

I thought I heard breathing. I looked around, but I could see no one. Slowly I made a complete circuit of the laboratory, looking in the closet, even under the tables. Dr. Seneca *must* be in that room. He had not come out of it. He *had* been in the vat; the wet footprints on the floor made that a certainty. Yet I could not see him.

The doctor must be in that room, yet I could not see him!

"Where are you?" I cried. "Doctor! Are you here? Are you all right, Doctor? Where are you?"

My voice rang off the walls. Weakened and confused as I was, I could scarcely think. I was totally unprepared for the next thing that happened.

A voice spoke—the voice of Dr. Seneca.

"Don't be alarmed, Clinton," the voice said. "I am quite all right. The experiment was a complete success."

The words were perfectly clear, though the voice was hushed and sibilant—and it carried a note of fierce triumph. I could not doubt that I had heard Dr. Seneca speak—that the voice had come from a point only a few feet away. Yet when I jerked about I could see nothing.

Nothing!

"Where—where are you?" I blurted.

"Right here, Clinton," came the doctor's voice again. "Right in front of you. I am sitting in the chair."

I looked at the wet prints of bare feet on the floor which went from the vat to the chair and there disappeared. I looked at the chair. It was empty. Before God, Dr. Seneca was not there—that I could see!

The doctor's voice came again, fiercer, more sibilant than before.

"Look hard, Clinton. Can you see me? Can you see me, sitting here, naked, in this chair?"

CHAPTER TWO

Invisible Nemesis

I STOOD rigid as a statue, staring into the emptiness of the chair. But though I strained my eyes, there was no sign, no slightest indication, that Dr. Seneca was there—except his voice.

I stepped back.

"Look here," I said to myself. "This is some trick. The doctor is playing a joke on me. He is not in this room at all. Perhaps he has a loud-speaker hidden under the table, and is talking through a microphone from another room. He is playing a trick on me."

I was too confused to remember the rat, the strange noises in the empty screened cage, the inexplicible swinging of the little door inside it. I was too startled, at that moment, to recall that Dr. Seneca could not possibly have left the room without my knowing it. I thought it was a trick.

Quickly I stooped and peered under the table. I saw a shelf crowded with beakers; but there was no loud-speaker. I went to the next table, and the next. I peered all around. I was crawling on my hands and knees, on the floor, searching for the source of the doctor's voice, when I heard him speak again.

"What's the matter, Clinton? Don't you believe me? I tell you I am sitting here in this chair."

I jerked about. The chair was empty, as before.

"Stay where you are, Clinton," the doctor's voice sounded again. "I will come to you."

Immediately the chair moved slightly. I saw nothing near it, but it moved. Dull thumps sounded on the floor, as though someone, barefooted, was walking across it. As I stood there, rigid, a strange sensation enveloped my right hand. It was *grasped*—grasped firmly by warm, clammy fingers which I could not see!

I stared down at my hand. The pressure of the invisible fingers was compressing it. The touch was strong and steady. I *felt* another hand grasping mine, but I could not see it!

With a slight gasp I leaped back. The grip of unseen fingers tore away from my hand. Crowded against the vat, breathless, I stared into the emptiness of the air. And out of it came a chuckle —the throaty laugh that was characteristic of Dr. Seneca.

"Don't be alarmed, Clinton. The experiment is completely successful. Haven't I proved to you that it is a success? You are a scientist—surely you can understand."

I could not understand.

"Look!" the doctor's voice said.

The thumps sounded again, as of bare heels thudding across the floor. At Dr. Seneca's desk there was a rustle of papers. I saw a letter lifted into the air, placed aside. Then an ink-pad slid forward on the blotter, and its cover was raised.

"Come closer, Clinton. You are familiar with my fingerprint, I think. You've seen it countless times on the beakers and flasks. We classified our fingerprints once, as a moment's amusement. Watch!"

A depression appeared in the center of the ink-pad. The pigment oozed up, as if something were pressing on the pad. Then some of the ink—a smudge—rose in the air. Before God, I swear, it was only a spot of ink that rose in the air! It moved in an arc, and descended upon the sheet of paper.

Instantly, clearly, the impression of a thumb was left upon the white sheet. Too bewildered to think, I leaned forward and peered at it. It was the thumb-print of Dr. Junius Seneca!

Perhaps it was my weakened condition. Perhaps it was merely the natural reaction of overstrained nerves. At sight of that disembodied thumb-print something seemed to snap within my head. I whirled and dashed from the room, in sudden, unreasoning panic. I stumbled down the stairs headlong. I did not stop until, breathless and weak, I fell into a chair in the library on the lower floor. And there I slumped, panting for air, dizzy and sick.

Then I heard—I swear I heard—footfalls on the third-floor stairs. *Thud, thud, thud!* Bare feet striking the boards. I jerked up again and rushed to the bottom of the lower stairway. The footfalls were coming closer. They were softer now, as they passed over the carpet in the second-floor hallway.

Then they began to come down. I watched the steps. I saw the carpet on the stairs depressed, pushed down, by an invisible weight. As the thuds came closer, I saw the form of human feet pressed into the carpet on the stairs. One after another, down the stairs, the footprints came!

There was the sound of breathing, and it came closer.

Gasping, I whirled away again, dashed into the library. Crowded into a corner I watched. The footfalls now were in the hall. Suddenly I sprang to the door and flung it shut. The slam reverberated through the whole, empty house.

Immediately the door-knob turned. A

hand seized it on the outer side and turned it. The latch clicked, and the door began to open. I could see both sides of it—see that nothing was coming through. Nothing! Yet the door swung open, and closed again, as invisible hands pushed it.

THE doctor's voice came again. "Can you see me, Clinton? Can you see me at all?"

"Let me alone!" I shrieked. "What have you done? Let me alone!"

The invisible man did not answer. Backed against the wall, I watched the impressed footprints in the soft nap of the rug. In a moment one of them disappeared, then reappeared eighteen inches farther along. The second vanished, then became visible again ahead of the first. The unseeable man was walking—walking across the room.

The footprints moved to the easy chair in the corner. Suddenly the cushions of the chair were indented. They flattened back; the seat curved down, exactly as if the weight of a man was upon it. But I could not see the man. I stared until my eyes ached with the strain—and I could see nothing in the chair but emptiness!

The telephone moved. It raised from the taboret on which it sat, swung upward, and paused in midair. Suddenly the dial began to spin. It whirred, clicked, whirred, clicked, as if by some diabolical witchery—for I could see nothing touching it. Presently the dial spun to a stop—and the handpiece of the telephone remained suspended in empty air.

"Hello," came the voice of Dr. Seneca from the chair. "Is that you, Philo?"

I could hear the diaphragm of the receiver rattle as the man at the other end of the wire answered.

"I'd like you to come over this evening, Philo," the doctor's voice said. "As soon as you can possibly make it. I know, but we needn't discuss that over the phone. I've come to believe that our differences are not really serious. I'm sure we can settle them amicably.

"You'll come at once? Good!"

The handpiece of the telephone swung back to the standard, and there it rested. The cushions of the easy-chair remained depressed, and for a moment there was silence.

Complete confusion gripped me. The man to whom the voice of Dr. Seneca had talked on the telephone was Dr. Philo Lucey. He was Governor of the American Society for the Advancement of Abstract Sciences. I knew that he was Dr. Seneca's bitterest enemy. Their differences had begun when Dr. Lucey had refused to allow Dr. Seneca to read a paper before the Society years before, a paper embodying important researches of my employer. The bitterness had grown between them since then. Dr. Seneca hated the man—hated him fiercely. Yet now, this voice—the voice of a man I could not see—had called Dr. Lucey to the house.

Dr. Seneca spoke again from the region of the easy chair.

"You have often doubted my sanity, haven't you, Clinton? I know you have. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I am mad. But now you are doubting your own sanity, aren't you? You can't believe your eyes and ears. You think perhaps *you* have gone mad."

I fought for breath. "Are—are you really there, Doctor? Are you sitting in that chair? Are you looking at me? Can you hear what I am saying to you? In God's name what have you done?"

The doctor's chuckle answered.

"Of course I am here, Clinton. I am sitting comfortably in this chair. I am stark naked, of course. I am looking directly at you, and I hear you perfectly. I am the same man you have always

known, Clinton, absolutely the same—except in one particular."

I could only listen.

"You thought the little cage upstairs was empty, didn't you, Clinton?" the doctor's voice went on. "Not at all. The rat was inside it when you looked in. The rat is still inside it. You were simply unable to see it, as you are unable to see me now. The experiment, as I told you upstairs, was completely successful. I have subjected myself to the same treatment as that I gave the little white rat."

There was a pause.

"There is nothing really new about that treatment, Clinton, except the extent to which I have been able to carry it. You have seen biological specimens treated with oils so that the tissues become almost completely transparent, and the skeleton and organs become visible. You know that this condition is brought about by immersing the specimen in light oils, one after another, until the specimen is completely permeated. At last, as you know, the tissues become impregnated with fluids which make them transparent. You've seen them many times, Clinton, of course. They are common enough to be displayed in drug-store windows as a sales help to certain popular books on the human body."

Confusedly, I began to understand.

"I have perfected that treatment, Clinton, so that it produces complete transparency, *in living animals*. I have been working secretly upon the process for months. The rat I treated tonight was not the first. I handled others while you were in the hospital. I merely inserted tubes into the nostrils so that the little animal could breathe and completely immersed it in the oil, as I immersed myself tonight.

"The oil permeates every cell of the body, making them perfectly transparent. The leucocytes, the macrophages, the epithelials, the tibroblasts, even the brain cells, the hair cells, the corpuscles of the blood, are rendered completely, perfectly transparent by immersion in the oil. You do not see me because light passes through me undiminished. My whole body is now more translucent than the aqueous humour and the cornea corpuscles of the normal eye."

"But why?" I cried. "Why have you done this?"

THE cushions of the chair moved. The pressure left them, and they puffed back into roundness. The imprints of bare feet again appeared on the rug, came halfway toward me.

"My work, my researches, the years of my life I have devoted to investigation of the protoplasm, are fruitless. They can never be completed. The answer to my experiments lies beyond the limits of the human mind. My life is a bitter failure, a waste, so far as my researches are concerned. Now I would not create life if I could do so. To bring life into this scurvy world—Clinton, I could not bring myself to that.

"On every hand I see injustices. I see treachery, thievery, corruption, sin, deception, dishonesty. I hate people—hate them for what they are, hate them because they are not what they might be. Does it not occur to you, Clinton, that I have given myself almost invulnerable power? That I have placed myself beyond men, given myself the omniscence of a God?

"I can see without being seen! I can move among men and observe their treacheries. I can right wrongs, bring justice into the world—and I cannot be seen, cannot be touched! I dedicate myself to righteousness—I dedicate myself to the work of God and the Black Demon! I am the power—the invisible power—that—"

The door bell rang.

I had not moved. I remained backed

against the wall, trembling, staring at the nothingness which was Dr. Seneca. As the shrill clatter of the door-bell echoed through the vast house, the disembodied voice faded from the air.

Still I did not move. I could not tear my eyes from the footprints in the rug, the impressions of two huge, bare feet, side by side. There, I told myself, stood Dr. Junius Seneca. There, my outraged senses protested, no man could be standing. And yet there were the footprints on the floor, the footprints that moved and walked.

I tried to reason with myself. "This is a dream," I argued within my mind. "A waking dream. These things do not exist. The voice I have heard is not real. It is a trick of my imagination. I am feverish. My senses have been affected by the injuries to my head in the automobile accident. In a moment this delusion will be completely gone."

But there were the footprints on the floor—the footprints that moved and walked—and they remained all the while I stared at them.

Again, shrilly, the door bell rang.

"Clinton," came the ghostly voice of Dr. Seneca. "Answer the bell."

A fascination gripped me. Suddenly the room, the footprints on the rug, the voice I heard, were acutely real. My mind reasoned that, of course, all this was true. I understood perfectly how it had happened. It was stupid of me to be bewildered and confused. There was nothing to be afraid of. In that mood I began to walk toward Dr. Seneca—toward the footprints in the rug.

I shall touch this man again, I thought. I shall pass my hands over this invisible body. I shall feel the arms and the legs and the head, for it is real, it is here in the room with me, a breathing living body. I shall make sure beyond all doubt, I thought, that this is no trick of my senses, that Dr. Seneca is really standing there, an invisible man.

I raised my hands—but I paused. My muscles froze. I was almost upon the footprints in the rug; I could hear the invisible man's steady, deep breathing. Yet I could not bring myself to place my fingertips in contact with that unholy body! This was not a man at all! This was a demon—a devil from hell—a madman, whose witchery—

Again, a third time, the doorbell shrilled its echoes through the vast house.

"Clinton!" came the doctor's voice again, impatient now. "Answer the bell."

I turned away. I walked from the room, into the broad hallway. Suddenly I felt the oppressive emptiness of the house. This was the servants' night off. There was no one within these walls save myself, and that—that *thing*—in the library. I was glad to hear the door bell clatter again, glad that another human being would soon be with me in that silent emptiness.

I OPENED the door. Standing outside was a man, tall, with a lean, wedge-shaped face, and eyes that glittered like blue crystal.

"Good evening, Dr. Lucey," I said.

"Good evening, Clinton," he answered a bit stiffly. "Dr. Seneca asked me to drop over. He's in?"

Reason paralyzed my tongue when I tried to answer. I could not say that Dr. Seneca was in the house. I could not say that he was not. I stammered an invitation to Dr. Lucey to step into the library, and we walked together along the hall.

I entered the library behind Dr. Lucey. Taking his hat, I glanced quickly about the rug. The footprints were still there—the impressions of the bare feet in the nap. As I watched them they began to move. First one, then the other, disappeared and reappeared, and they came toward Dr. Lucey.

"Where," he asked, "is Dr. Seneca?"

I answered: "Dr. Seneca is right here."

"What? Where?"

"Standing before you, Dr. Lucey."

He looked around the room. He did not notice the footprints on the floor. He peered at me strangely and asked:

"Clinton—are you ill?"

Then came a chuckle—the low, throaty laugh of Dr. Seneca.

Lucey stiffened. He looked about again. This time his eyes dropped, and he saw the footprints, the outlines of the two bare feet in the softness of the rug. He was staring at them, bewildered, when Dr. Seneca spoke.

"Clinton is quite right, Philo. I am standing directly before you."

Lucey grew pale at the sound of that voice, and his breath came fast. I was watching him. He hears the voice, I told myself. He sees the footprints. Then these things are not tricks of my imagination. They are real. He sees and hears the presence of Dr. Seneca exactly as I do. After all, my senses have not betrayed me. In this way I reassured myself.

Dr. Seneca spoke again. "In the past," he said, "you have doubted my integrity as a scientist, Philo. I am pleased to see that my latest experiment is convincing you. However, I did not call you here tonight for that. Nor to patch up our differences. I hate you too deeply to try that. I loathe you from the bottom of my soul, Dr. Philo Lucey."

Lucey gasped, and stepped back, and peered into the emptiness.

"I hate you enough to kill you, Dr. Philo Lucey!"

The doctor's voice was hissing like a snake's.

"I hate you so much *I am going to kill you, Doctor Philo Lucey!*"

SUDDENLY then there was a resounding crack. Dr. Lucey's head snapped backward. On the line of his jaw appeared a small cut, which began to drip blood. An invisible fist had driven hard against his face, and he was stunned by the blow.

A gutteral cry followed—from the unseeable lips of Dr. Seneca. Dr. Lucey was still recoiling from the blow when a new force struck him. He lurched backward, as though thrown by a heavy weight. He staggered. His knees bent. But he struck out blindly. His fists traveled swiftly through empty air, and stopped against empty air with sharp, sudden sounds.

He choked, and I saw that his neck was compressed, squeezed in an invisible grasp. He tore at the unseen hands which were fastened about his throat. Frantically he gripped the invisible wrists. His fingers curled around emptiness, tightened until they were bloodless white. His hands were clutching invisible flesh, as he tried to tear invisible claws from his neck.

I gave a cry, and sprang forward. I was reaching downward, groping through air for the solidity of the invisible body of Dr. Seneca, when the attack came. A heavy, powerful fist crashed into my face. Another thumped against my chest. I swung my fists wildly, and struck nothing. And on the instant another tremendous blow cracked against my head, and I sprawled backward while it seemed the walls collapsed upon me.

Panting, paralyzed, I tried to drag myself up. Dr. Lucey was half off the floor, lifted by the power of the invisible arms which were destroying him. His face was purple; he was choking; he was clawing at his neck. Strength was going from him. As I lay on the carpet unable to move, staring, staring, I saw Dr. Lucey's head loll, saw him drop back to the floor.

Minutes must have passed. I do not know. When, at last, I struggled to my unsteady legs, Dr. Lucey was lying white

and still on the rug. His neck was horribly bruised. I felt for his pulse as best I could—but there was none. He was dead. Dr. Seneca had killed him.

I heard heavy breathing. I looked about, and saw the footprints on the rug, the shape of two human feet impressed upon the nap. Suddenly the footprints moved. They appeared and disappeared rapidly toward the door. Heel-thumps came from the hallway. Then the outer door was jerked open. It slammed shut, pulled by hands that could not be seen.

The invisible demon was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Behind Locked Doors

I SPRANG up. I raced along the hall, to the door, and jerked it open. A sound came from outside—swift footfalls swishing through the grass. In a moment they disappeared.

My mind was reeling. My one frantic thought was to shut the invisible demon from the house. I slammed the door, shot the bolt into place. I ran from room to room, inspecting each window catch, making sure each one of them was fastened. My anxiety was so great that I dared leave no opening unfastened, even on the second floor, even in the laboratory.

In the laboratory I paused, peering at the vat, at the clothes on the floor, at the oily footprints leading to the chair. Each detail fascinated me. I knew there was a man lying dead in the library. I knew that the police should be called. Yet these were only vague realizations in the back of my mind. I was still too fascinated, too horribly bewitched, by the dark magic of Dr. Seneca, to think of anything else.

I peered into the little cage that was still sitting on the laboratory bench. The squeaking sounds were again coming from it. The hay was rustling. But there was nothing inside—nothing I could see.

Carefully I opened the trap door, and reached inside the box. I groped my fingers about. Something brushed against them—something hairy and invisible—and my blood grew cold. The second time this happened I snatched at the empty air. I felt a warm, struggling body within my fingers. I brought out my hand and looked at it. My sense of touch told me I was holding a little rat in my hand. My sense of sight told me I was holding nothing.

With a shudder, I dropped the rat to the floor and heard it scamper away. Turning, I peered at the vat. Suddenly I picked up a pair of rubber gloves and drew them on. I crossed quickly to a larger cage in the corner, where more white rats were usually kept. The little things scurried about as I reached into the larger cage and caught one of them in my gloved hand.

Carefully I brought it back to the bench. Still holding it, I took a large beaker, of 1000 c. c. size, and dipped it into the vat. It became filled with liquid crystal, with fluid diamonds. Carefully I picked up the tiny rubber tubes, and inserted them into the nostrils of the rat. Then—taking a deep breath—I dropped the little animal into the sweet-smelling oil.

Amazement held me paralyzed—for a quick transformation occurred within the beaker. The white hair seemed to disappear from the rat. Then its skin vanished, disclosing the internal organs—the lungs, the stomach and intestines. The eyes vanished from the head. The nose melted away, although the rubber tubes were still tugged and pulled by the squirming of the little creature. Within a few moments only the skeleton of the rat was visible. And then, magically, even the skeleton disappeared. There was only crystal clearness inside the beaker!

I scooped the rat from the liquid, and

detached the tubes. I could not see it, not a hair. I felt of it, of its invisible tail, of its invisible, pointed nose. I could hear it squeaking. Then, overwhelmed, I quickly thrust the little animal from me. For long minutes I stood beside the great vat, staring.

I did not know the composition of the oil I had used. No doubt Dr. Seneca had a record of it—in code. I knew only that its use was extremely simple, that its effects were rapid and complete—and horrible. It was then that I realized in full that Dr. Seneca's voice had told the truth—that his own body was permeated with this pervading oil.

Good God! I thought. Can he ever make himself visible again? Will he live and die beyond the sight of other men?

Spurred by the gnawing horror in my soul, I threw my weight against the vat containing that accursed liquid, sprang back as it toppled slowly over and spilled its ghastly liquid upon the laboratory floor.

I stood there, motionless, dazed by the happenings of the last hour, till I was suddenly aroused by the shrill ringing of the door bell.

I WENT down the stairs slowly. And I wondered: Has Dr. Seneca come back? Is it his invisible finger which is pressing the button at the door? Will open the door and look out upon nothingness?

Perhaps, I though, he has come back to kill me!

Slowly I went down the stairs. I walked along the hallway to the front door. With my hand on the knob, I paused.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's I, Ranny—Mateel."

The sweet sound of Mateel's voice brought ease to my tortured soul. It was rest to my strained nerves, a blessing to my being. The cold agony that was in me vanished as I felt her presence, so close to me now.

"Wait one moment, Mateel," I said. "Just one moment."

I turned quickly and hurried to the library. I closed the door, trying to avoid sight of the dead body on the floor—the man Dr. Seneca had killed. I turned the lock, scarcely thinking that this man was dead, that a murder had been committed, that the police must be called. I was thinking only of Mateel, of the lovely, fragrant warmth of the woman my whole soul loved.

I hurried back to the front door. Carefully I unlatched it. She was standing just beyond the threshold, radiant in the soft light, beautiful. She smiled at me and stepped through. And just as she entered the hall, I saw her look around quickly, and step back. Swiftly I shut the door and bolted it again.

"What was that?" she asked quickly.

"What?" I demanded of her, and my breath stopped.

"I thought I felt someone brush past me."

"Oh, God!" I moaned. "Oh, God!"

She gazed at me strangely as I stood there, looking around. She was not afraid; there was warmth in her eyes, living warmth. But I was frantic. Was it possible, I thought, that Dr. Seneca had been standing directly behind her at the door—unseen, his presence unsuspected by her? Was it possible that he had slipped into the house again, past the locks I had so carefully fastened against him? I could not know.

I took a few steps, passing my arms through the air, through empty air.

"Doctor!" I said. "Are you here? Are you inside now, doctor?"

There was no answer.

Was he there—watching us with invisible eyes, sardonically keeping mute?

Were his eyes upon us then—at that precious moment, when I was alone with Mateel?

She was regarding me strangely. I turned back to her, and she laughed softly.

"Ranny," she said, "what *is* the matter? The doctor isn't here. And even if he were—?"

"Nothing is the matter," I lied. I was somewhat breathless, looking at her. I could think of nothing else then but her beauty. "There is nothing the matter."

She was close to me. I took her in my arms. I could no more help taking her in my arms than I could help breathing. Her face was so close to mine. Her perfume filled my being as I kissed her warm, soft lips. She let me take them. She clung to me, adorable, precious. It seemed to me in that moment that I had always loved her, that from the first instant of seeing her, I had loved her. This moment that I had dreamed of, this exquisite, precious moment, was real now—real.

"Ranny," she said. "You're so strange, dear."

Never until that moment had I touched her. I had gazed at her, with longing, pleading eyes. I had seen in her own eyes the warmth that revealed she loved me. Yet not until this moment had I ever dared touch her.

She was so close to me, her eyes raised to mine.

"Strange?" I repeated confusedly. "It's nothing. Perhaps I'm still not quite myself—from the accident. But don't worry, darling."

"Ranny, dear," she whispered. Then again: "Ranny, dear."

She left my arms quickly. Without looking back, she climbed the stairs to the second floor. I watched her, filled with the exquisite pleasure of her nearness, drunk with the wine of her lips, until she moved from sight. Then, again chilled, I peered through the air, all around, trying to find a presence in it—a presence that haunted the ineffable happiness of the moment.

"Doctor!" I whispered. "Are you here? If you are here, for God's sake, speak!"

There was no answer.

I climbed the stairs slowly, passing back and forth, groping through the air with my arms, searching for an invisible body. I went the entire length of the upper hallway, still groping, before I ventured to the door of Mateel's room. The door was partly open. I was drawn to it. I stepped inside, and immediately shut it behind me, and bolted it.

Never before had I passed through that door. Never before had I been alone with Mateel, like this. An overpowering force was drawing us together.

She had slipped off her evening gown. Now she was wearing an exquisite silken negligee. She came to me smiling, her eyes looking deep into mine.

"Mateel—Mateel—darling, with all my heart I love you."

"Ranny, sweet, I have seen it in your eyes. Really I have," she said. "You have loved me a long time, dear."

I whispered: "Mateel—we must leave here."

"I know," she answered softly. "We must go. We can't stay here now. We must go—together. Oh, Ranny, I have waited—waited—"

"Tonight," I urged. "Now. At the soonest possible moment. Don't pack. Don't take anything with you. Just come—come now!"

I kissed her again. I was full of a burning fever. I crushed her in my arms. My mind was spinning with her spell.

"We must go now," I kept saying. "We must go now—tonight—now."

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

And suddenly—there was laughter.

There, in the room, near us, sounded the deep, throaty chuckle of Dr. Junius Seneca!

DURING those few moments my happiness had been a delirium. It was a blissful forgetting of all else—a forgetting of everything, of everybody save Mateel. To know that she loved me as I loved her—that she would go with me—I could think of nothing else. Of nothing else until that chuckle came out of the empty air—that chuckle from the invisible throat of Dr. Junius Seneca!

Mateel moved from my arms. She looked about, frightened. Her fear increased when she saw the paleness of my face, the terror in my eyes.

"Ranny!" she cried. "What is it?"

"He's here! He's here! The doctor!"

Mateel, once more, looked around. She could see nothing but that we were seemingly alone together there, as we had been many times. Of course she could see nothing more than that. She turned to me, and her cool fingertips caressed my fevered face.

"Ranny, darling, you're imagining—"

"No! It's true! He's here, in this room!"

And then the voice came. The voice of Dr. Seneca came from the empty air. It came from the seeming emptiness of that room, sibilant and throaty.

"I have known," he said.

Mateel stood spellbound. She was at my side, close and warm. She was looking up at my horror-stricken face. I could not move.

And then I heard the footfalls on the floor. The thumps came regularly, moving away. The footprints appeared on a small rug, crossed it, and went on. In the corner of the room stood the dresser of Dr. Seneca. In front of it the footfalls of the invisible man came to a stop.

A stifled cry came from Mateel as the top drawer of the dresser began to slide open. The hand which pulled it could not be seen. But it opened, slowly, to the limit. Then sounds came from inside the drawer, a rattling sound. And presently—lifted by an invisible hand—an automatic moved into view!

The gun swung through the air. It moved strangely as invisible fingers touched it. A small click sounded as the safety catch was drawn free. And then the gun—hovering in midair—came level. It pointed toward us. It swung to point full at Mateel.

The voice of Dr. Seneca: "First you, my dear. Then your lover."

"For God's sake, don't!" I cried. "Don't, doctor!"

Before I could move, before I could throw my aching body into motion, fire blazed out of the gun!

A hushed cry came from Mateel. I stopped in my tracks, peering back. She was staggering against the wall. The blood of her lovely body was flowing, running red from a ghastly wound in her shoulder. The bullet had struck her high in the chest. She did not faint. She did not even fall to the floor. Braced back against the wall, her one arm dangling useless, she peered, pale as death, at the gun hovering in the air.

"Get out of this room!" I shrieked. "Get out!"

I whirled back toward the gun that was swinging through the air. It was pointing at me now. It was levelled at my head. I sprang toward it recklessly, and with one swift blow, knocked it aside. Fire splashed in my face as the gun exploded, and a bullet crashed into a mirror on the wall.

"Get away, Mateel!" I shouted fearfully.

INSTANTLY I found myself grappling. Powerful arms encircled my body. I fought to free myself, but a ter-

rific strength filled them, crushing me, pressing the breath from me. I did not even think of that. I grasped the wrist of the hand which held the gun—the wrist I could not see, except that my fingers curled whitely about it. I struck out madly, hitting the solidity of naked, unseeable flesh, and again I screeched to Mateel, imploring her to go.

In brief, frantic glimpses, I saw her pull herself from the wall. She drew the bolt of the door, snatched it open, and ran into the hallway. Drops of blood were left on the floor. I saw her stagger and almost fall, but she brought herself up, pushed herself on.

"Hide!" I shouted. "Don't let him find you! Hide!"

The powerful, invisible arms were crushing me. Hot breath from invisible lungs was beating into my face. Gutteral growls sounded in my ears, the fury of an enraged demon. Still I clutched the wrist I could not see, and strove to tear the gun away. But I was battling greater strength than mine—greater strength than I could master.

Suddenly I was flung away. The demon's strength hurled me across the room. I struck the bed, spilled over it and sprawled on the floor. My weakened body was throbbing with pain. My mind was a flashing crazy-quilt of doubts and fears. I strove to pull myself up, scarcely aware of what I was doing. I was able to see, dimly, the automatic still hovering in the air.

Again it was leveled. Again it was pointing directly at me. I could see the trigger moving—moving back.

"Hide, Mateel!" I screeched. "Hide!"

Fire blazed out of the gun, a flame that seemed to cover the world. Terrific pain sprang into my head, horrible agony that threw me down and stiffened every muscle of my body. It seemed that searing fire was playing across my scalp. I could feel the blood dripping down.

I lay motionless, not breathing, though I did not completely lose consciousness. I heard the footfalls come toward me, and stop. I could imagine the invisible demon bending over me, judging me dead. Then I heard the footfalls leave me. They moved into the hall and toward the steps.

From below came a scream of horror. Mateel! I heard her stumble and run. I heard the rear door of the house slam. In the silence of the hallway the footfalls still sounded, the footfalls of the invisible man. Then the back door opened and closed again.

They were gone—the hunter and the hunted—into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Moon Saw Horror

THERE was no sound now. The house rang with silence. Mateel had fled in terror before the advance of the demon who could not be seen. He was following her—following her into the dark grounds.

I forced myself to rise, forced myself to my feet. I tottered across the room to the window, peered down into the moonlight, the black shadows of the gardens. I could not see Mateel. But a flash of light came in the moonglow, an instant's reflection of light on metal.

It was the gun—the invisible man with the gun, lusting for blood, seeking his prey.

I sprang toward the door, stumbled across the hall, into my own room, and jerked open a drawer of my dresser. I fumbled my revolver out of its case and, gripping it tightly, hurried into the hallway again. At the top of the stairs I stopped, panting.

I must think, I told myself, I must plan. Out there in the moonlight, in the

shadows, Mateel cannot see the demon stalking her. I must find him first. I must kill him before he kills her. These thoughts raced through my reeling mind.

And a question tortured me. How could I find him? In the moonlight and the shadows, how could I find him?

As I hurried down the stairs, a plan began to form in my mind. I seized upon it with frantic hope.

When I reached the rear door of the house, I swerved aside and shouldered through another door, which connected with the garage.

It was dark inside the garage. Only a film of moonlight lay in a patch on the floor, a silver pool. By its dim glow I groped to a bench that ran along the cement wall. It was such a workbench as must be kept somewhere about a large estate. On the shelves behind it there were tools, cans of paint, odds and ends. I had seen a spray-gun and tank there, and my hands sought it.

I found it, brought it down. From a shelf I snatched a can of white paint. Quickly I poured turpentine into it, thinning it. As quickly I poured the mixture into the spray-gun. It spilled and slopped, for my hands were quaking. But when it was filled I screwed the cap tight. Gripping it in one hand, my revolver in the other, I sidled out through the garage door, into the open.

How oppressive the darkness was! The glow of the moon seemed to make the inky shadows all the darker. The grounds spread away on all sides, undulating stretches, broken by patterned gardens. Somewhere out here, I thought, is Mateel. Somewhere in this gloom an invisible madman is lurking.

He could see me; I could not see him. Therefore, I must move carefully. I crept onto the grass and darted into a shadow. Under the bushes, I worked my way farther out. At that moment of anxiety the grounds seemed to stretch for miles. There seemed to be countless shadows in which the demon might be lurking.

Crouching low, I waited, peering into the gloom, listening. My body was throbbing; my head seemed to be a mass of flame. Blood was still dripping from the cut across my head which Dr. Seneca's bullet had made. I strained my eyes, my ears. All around there was silence, a sighing silence.

I rose again, and crept farther out. Here the grounds were pathed around a formal garden bordered with small spruces. They were like a hedge, enclosing a black rectangle of space. I crept to the gate, and stared in, and remained there long moments, motionless. But there was no sound. There was nothing but that sighing silence.

I ventured through the gate, and along the path. I placed each foot with the utmost care, striving to make no sound. My muscles ached with the torture of movement, my head was beating like a tom tom. It took all my strength and will to keep myself from crying Mateel's name. But I must make no sound—no sound at all.

Suddenly a cold shock coursed through my agonized body. I sensed, then heard, a rustle among the spruces which lined the garden. I whirled, and pointed my gun, and stood stock-still, and waited. There was nothing there—nothing moving. Yet I had heard the branches move. In that shadow there was something—

I saw a soft ruffle of silk that glistened in the moonlight as it moved slightly.

"Mateel!" I gasped her name in a whisper, but there was no answer.

I jumped toward the trees, and then I saw her. She was standing, leaning against the trees, supporting herself with a hand grasped about a branch. She was drooping—drooping with the pain of her

wound, with the loss of blood that had flowed from it.

"Mateel!" I whispered again.

She stirred a little. I dropped flat, so I could crawl under the trees without disturbing them, without making a noise that might bring the invisible monster toward her. I jumped up, and reached my arms for the poor, tortured body leaning against the tree. Mateel's head was lifted; her eyes were open; she was gazing at me. Then her eyes shifted. She stared in horror past me—and a moan came through her lips!

I WHIRLED about. At first I saw nothing, for the shadows were long and dark. At first I heard nothing, for my head was singing with pain. Then, with shocking suddenness I sensed the coming of the invisible man. I sensed his presence even before I heard the soft rustling of the grass, the swishing steps, as invisible feet paced toward us.

Then, in a moment of clarity, I saw the grass moving, I saw the indentations of the feet, as I had seen the pressure on the nap of the library rug. Step by step the impressions came toward us. Moonlight shafted down, onto the imprints, through the body of the man who was coming. And again, I saw, like a flash, the glint of light against metal.

The automatic was raised to shoulder level—it was pointing toward me, and toward Mateel. An invisible finger was upon the trigger. An invisible eye was aiming behind the sights. It was coming closer, closer, steadily levelled—bringing death with it—death at the hands of that unseeable killer.

My revolver was in my hand, but I quickly pocketed it. I held the pressure valve of the spray-gun ready, stared in fascination as the automatic came nearer to us. The thing in my hand must have looked harmless. For Dr. Seneca did not fire. He must have thought we could not escape him now. But I brought the spray-gun up, and sharply released the valve.

A sharp hiss sounded, and a cloud of white spray shot into the air. Instantly an outline appeared in the moonlight. The wet spray of paint struck and clung to the body which could not be seen. It brought solidarity out of invisibility. It brought into sight a part of the upper arm of Dr. Seneca, a section of his bare chest, and the lower part of his face.

They hovered in space, unsupported by anything visible, these parts of his body that were covered with the pigment. The section of chest was heaving heavily. The white beard was bristling, and above it there was a mouth—a mouth that was an outline in white. The lips parted in a snarl of sudden rage, and between them light shone! Between the lips was emptiness, the shining moonlight beyond!

Swiftly, desperately, I shot the spray again, and a third time. The cloud of clinging white brought into being more of the invisible man facing us. The whole face appeared, a ghastly white, the eyes dark ovals of empty moonlight. The right arm became visible, extended, and I could even see the hand gripping the automatic. The whole chest appeared. But nothing more. All the rest was blankness, empty air.

But it was enough—enough to see and fight!

Another snarl of rage came from the apparition's white, leering lips. The white arm holding the gun swung sharply. There was a blast, a rocking report that shocked into my ear. The bullet crashed past me, and there was a rustling in the trees at my back a soft moan from Mateel.

I sprang forward in a frenzy. I swung the spray-gun and struck at the white hand holding the automatic. It thumped against the flesh; but instantly the left

hand, the invisible hand, snatched through the air. It gripped the sprayer and tore it from my grasp. It went hurtling away, through the air, and fell in the grass. And in that swift second the automatic turned full in my face.

I ducked with a cry, and rushed at the apparition. The gun roared again, and the bullet screamed off one of the statues in the garden. My arms were groping around the invisible trunk of the body. I bore it away, thrusting it back. Then the automatic splashed at me, and the arms tore at me, and I was flung aside.

I sprang up from the grass. The apparition was moving toward me—the thing that consisted of one white arm, a white head through which the moonlight shone, and a chest that glowed like alabaster. The gun was pointing again. I leaped aside, groping my revolver out of my pocket. I wrenched it up. In a sudden frenzy I fired.

THE report of the gun blasted like thunder across the grounds. It was followed swiftly by another explosion as the automatic spat flame. The bullet missed me, but I leaped again, and fired again. I was aiming point-blank at the white horror in the air. I saw a black hole appear on the white-surfaced chest. A piercing cry of pain, an unearthly shriek, mixed with the echoes of the shots.

My aching eyes were fixed on the automatic. It dropped and dangled, as if in a strengthless hand. I saw the white head loll forward, the chest expel a gust of breath. My only thought was for Mateel. If I did not kill this demon, it would kill her. If it did not die, it would kill again and again. The mad monster was before me, bleeding invisible blood. Yet he lived—he lived.

I fired again—and again—and again. I pulled the trigger until the hammer of my revolver clicked upon an empty shell. I blasted lead into the apparition in the moonlight. Terror and hatred followed every bullet that drilled into the invisible flesh.

Suddenly the head, the arm, the chest, all white, like a part of a dismembered body, dropped to the grass. I did not move as I watched. The air was torn with strangling gasps. Invisible lungs were gulping in air. Ghastly moans came from the thing on the ground. It threshed in agony, and the grassed stirred under the weight of its body. And at last it grew still.

Only then I tore my eyes from the depression in the grass, the outline of a man's body impressed into the softness. I turned away; I found Mateel wilted to the ground. She was a small, piteous figure. She was still. I cried her name. I took her into my arms.

"Mateel!" I whispered. "Mateel!"

She could not answer.

I gazed into her pale, beautiful face, and I lowered her gently to the ground. In unreasoning rage I turned, and kicked at the form on the ground, the invisible demon who had killed her. My shoe met the solid, unseen flesh again and again. I kicked with hatred—with a fury I could not control.

"Fiend!" I shrieked. "Fiend!"

Suddenly—I scarcely knew I moved,—I ran toward the house. I burst into the garage, and from the corner snatched up a broad-bladed shovel. I hurried back with it, and stopped, and peered again at the thing on the ground. Then, into the soft earth beside the garden, I drove the blade of the shovel.

I worked swiftly. Tortured as I was, the labor was nothing. I was a machine, powered by forces undreamed of. Again and again I sank the shovel into the earth, digging it away, heaping it at one side. Deeper and deeper I dug, a trench six

feet long and three feet wide. I sank the bottom lower and lower, and all the while a hatred filled me—hatred of the demon who lay in the grass.

At length I paused, and dropped the shovel. I strode to the thing that had once been Dr. Seneca. I stooped and lifted it into my arms—that body I could not see. The weight of it staggered me, a burden that strained my every muscle—yet a burden beyond the sight of living eyes. And I dropped it into the grave.

I shovelled again, pitched dirt upon the invisible body. I covered it. I tramped upon the ground, packing the thing into the black, wet earth. At last I sank, my strength ebbing, to the grass, beside the still, small form that was Mateel.

I took her into my arms.

"Mateel!" I whispered. "Mateel!"

It was thus the police found me when they came.

THE shots had aroused the anxiety of the families in the surrounding houses, and from Police Headquarters a car had come, carrying two detectives. They put their hands upon me; they brought me away. It was two days later that I was formally indicted for the murder of Dr. Philo Lucey and Dr. Junius Seneca.

They are like a dream, the hours that followed that night of horror. What happened to me scarcely mattered. I remember being obliged to submit to the examinations of physicians and psychiatrists and alienists. I remember a few fragments of what was said at the trial—testimony given by the Doctors Mitchell Gorham of New York and Augustus Zimmerman of Vienna.

"There is no doubt," they said, "that the young man's mind was affected by the automobile accident in which he suffered serious injuries to the head. Though he had lived an exemplary life prior to the accident, and left the hospital apparently in normal health, his mental faculties were affected. There is no doubt that he became capable of sudden, terrific rages, loss of memory, and savage violence. The young men," they declared, "is mad."

This they said of me, when all the time it was Dr. Seneca who was mad.

I remember faintly, too, the remarks of my attorney in his summary to the jury.

"We do not maintain that the defendant is guiltless. It has been established by various proofs that he committed the murders with which he is charged. But we plead with you, gentlemen, to consider the defendant's mental condition, to realize that the horrible deeds he committed were beyond his control to avoid.

"The defendant, on the day preceding the murders, had just returned from the hospital and, unknown to anyone, was suffering from an unbalanced mentality. The peculiarity of his affliction, resembling somewhat schizophrenia, was that he was rendered unable to control his emotions normally. The slightest irritation or resentment, real or imagined, was enough to throw him into a murderous rage."

I listened to this and smiled. My own attorney was admitting that I had committed the murders. My own attorney would not believe my story, would not believe that it was Dr. Seneca who was mad, and not I, and it was he who had killed, and not I!

"We shall never know exactly what happened, but it is possible that Dr. Seneca addressed a rough remark to the young man during the evening. An ordinary man would be easily able to curb his resentment. The defendant was unable to do so. The deed he committed was done in the heat of savage, primitive emotion too powerful for him to control.

He did not even realize what he was doing when he killed Dr. Seneca.

"No doubt Dr. Philo Lucey was also a victim of the defendant's derangement. Perhaps he was curt to the young man upon entering the house. It is known that the defendant was once in the employ of Dr. Lucey, and that Dr. Lucey discharged him. It may be that his long pent-up resentment flooded out in a burst of savage temper that night, but it is impossible to say. We know only that an unreasoning impulse made the defendant strike Dr. Lucey down.

"It is evident that the young man's testimony is throughout the imagery of an unbalanced mind. His story of Dr. Seneca's becoming invisible is, of course, incredible. The police, once they learned from the defendant of what had happened, disinterred the body of Dr. Seneca and found it somewhat decomposed but otherwise quite normal. The defense, gentlemen, rests upon this conclusion."

In vain I tried to insist that I had told the truth. I tried to tell them that the natural decomposition of Dr. Seneca's body, lying in contact with the damp earth, had nullified the effects of the oil and rendered him visible again. But I myself had freed the invisible rats—had emptied the vat of its accursed liquid. I had no proof! They would not let me explain. They dragged me from the courtroom. Two men held my arms pinioned to my sides when I was returned to hear the verdict.

"The jury finds the defendant guilty as charged, and that he was and is insane."

This they said of me, when all the time it was Dr. Seneca who was insane!

I heard, as if in a dream, the judge pronounce sentence upon me:

"Life imprisonment—in the State Asylum for the Insane."

THERE is a yellow newspaper clipping on my desk, a fragment of fragile paper which I found in Marseilles. It reads:

CLINTON ESCAPES GUARDS WHILE ON WAY TO ASYLUM!

Found Guilty of Double Murder, Prisoner Makes Daring Get-Away. No Trace Found. Police Begin Search.

They may search and keep on searching; they will never find me here, in this tiny villa which rests high upon a cliff overlooking the sparkling blue Mediterranean.

I pause and wonder.

The shadow of the gallows haunts me, and men think me mad. Far worse, that cursed doubt fills me—doubt of my sanity, doubt that the frightful dark hours I remember are only figments of my confused mind. Am I actually mad, or am I really guilty? I do not know. Never shall I know.

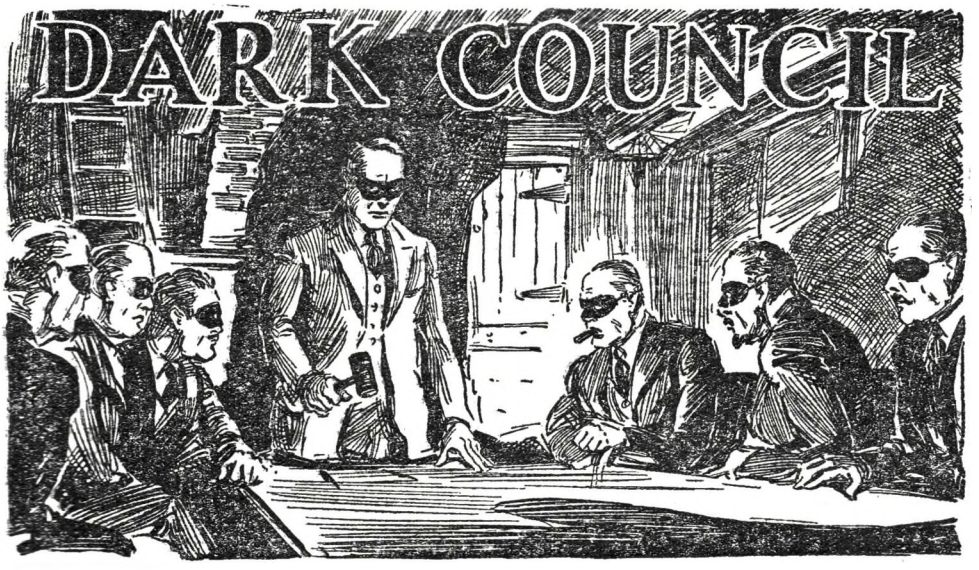
Yet there is one who believes me, one whose soul knows I tell the truth. She has no memory of that night of horror. She remembers nothing of those dreadful, dark hours. Yet she believes.

Lifting my pen, I peer through the window, at the little path which winds up the hillside. I see her now, coming towards me, and smiling, and gazing at me with warm, soft eyes.

Mateel—my wife.

THE END

NEWS OF THE SPIDER! SEE PAGE 44!



HAVE you ever, as a child, returning home after dark, gone out of your way to pass by the local "Haunted House?" Do you remember the feeling, something between awe at your own daring and consternation at its possible result, which stole over you as, footsteps lagging, you approached the place? Being a product of present-day materialism, you knew of course that there was no such thing as ghostly haunts or evil, nocturnal spirits. Such things, your parents had told you, were merely the products of ignorance and superstition and had no place in the honest light of cold, hard logic.

But as you drew nearer through the dark night, you began to doubt. The nearest street lamp was far away, and the faint breath of the night wind in the trees overhead stirred up queer, whispery almost human sounds—as if the spirits you'd just been telling yourself did not exist were laughing.

The chances are that your heart beats speeded up a little and your breath shortened. You didn't believe in ghosts, you told yourself again. But you found suddenly that in the dark and eerie gloom of a moonless night it wasn't so easy to be cocksure and confident.

You caught your breath at the sudden rusty creaking of an unseen shutter; chilled at the patter, like small feet coming stealthily near, of dead leaves blowing across the weed-grown, unused path to the gaping front door. And then, if you were an average boy or girl, you were running, fists clenched at your sides, eyes and mouth wide in sudden terror, fleeing blindly from those hidden, evil shapes which you had just been telling yourself did not exist.

Do any of us, man or woman, savant or saint, ever fully outgrow those early, half-formed, seldom-admitted doubts as to what strange forces *may possibly* exist beyond the ken of man? Do any of us, reading some convincing, well turned tale of witch or werewolf, zombie or vampire, fail to thrill to the soul-shivering drama of such beliefs?

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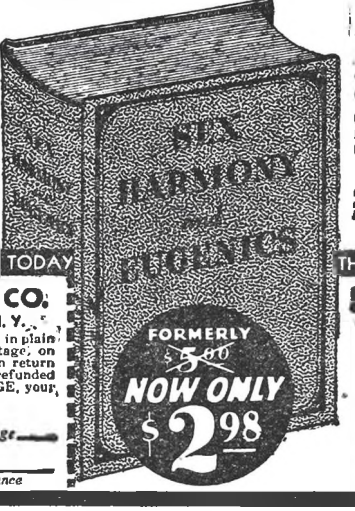

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Both these ideas are all bunk—and I have PROVED it. All I need is 7 days to prove what I can do for you! And I don't need any apparatus either. In fact, I have no sympathy with apparatus at all—don't believe in it. It is artificial—and it may strain your heart or other vital organs for life!

NATURAL Methods Are All I Need

On this page you will see an actual photo of how I look today. This picture has not been changed in any way. No muscles have been "painted on." This photograph is the camera's honest proof of what I have done for MY body. I myself am ready to prove what my secret of Dynamic Tension can do for YOURS!

To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I was a few years ago. **Then** I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat chested, spindly legs, arms and legs like pipestems.

I was worried—and I had a right to be. I decided to study myself, to do something about my body. Then I made a discovery. I found a new way to build myself up. A way that was simple, natural, quick and sure! "Dynamic Tension" is what I called it. I put this secret to work. And in a short time I had the kind of body you see here—the body which has twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This Secret Has Helped Thousands

Thousands of other fellows now know this secret, too—and know from their own personal experience what Dynamic Tension has done for them. When they turned to me for advice, they were just as frail and puny as I once was. Now they are life-sized examples of what a man **can** and **ought** to be—with mighty energy, tireless endurance, and muscles that stand out like bridge-cables all over their bodies.

I have written an interesting booklet, filled with pictures, which tells my story—and theirs. I would like to send you a copy of it entirely free.

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