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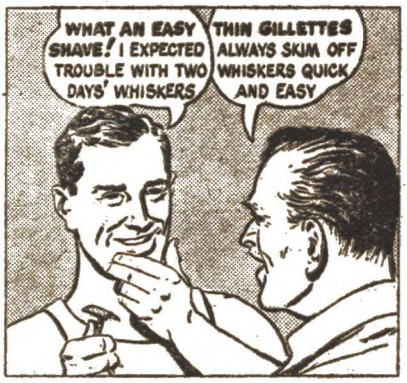

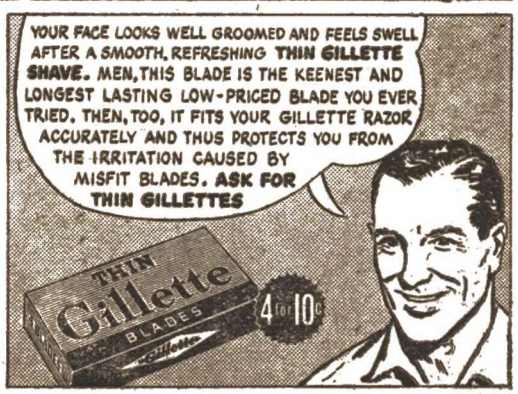

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Volume 35 *November, 1947* Number 4

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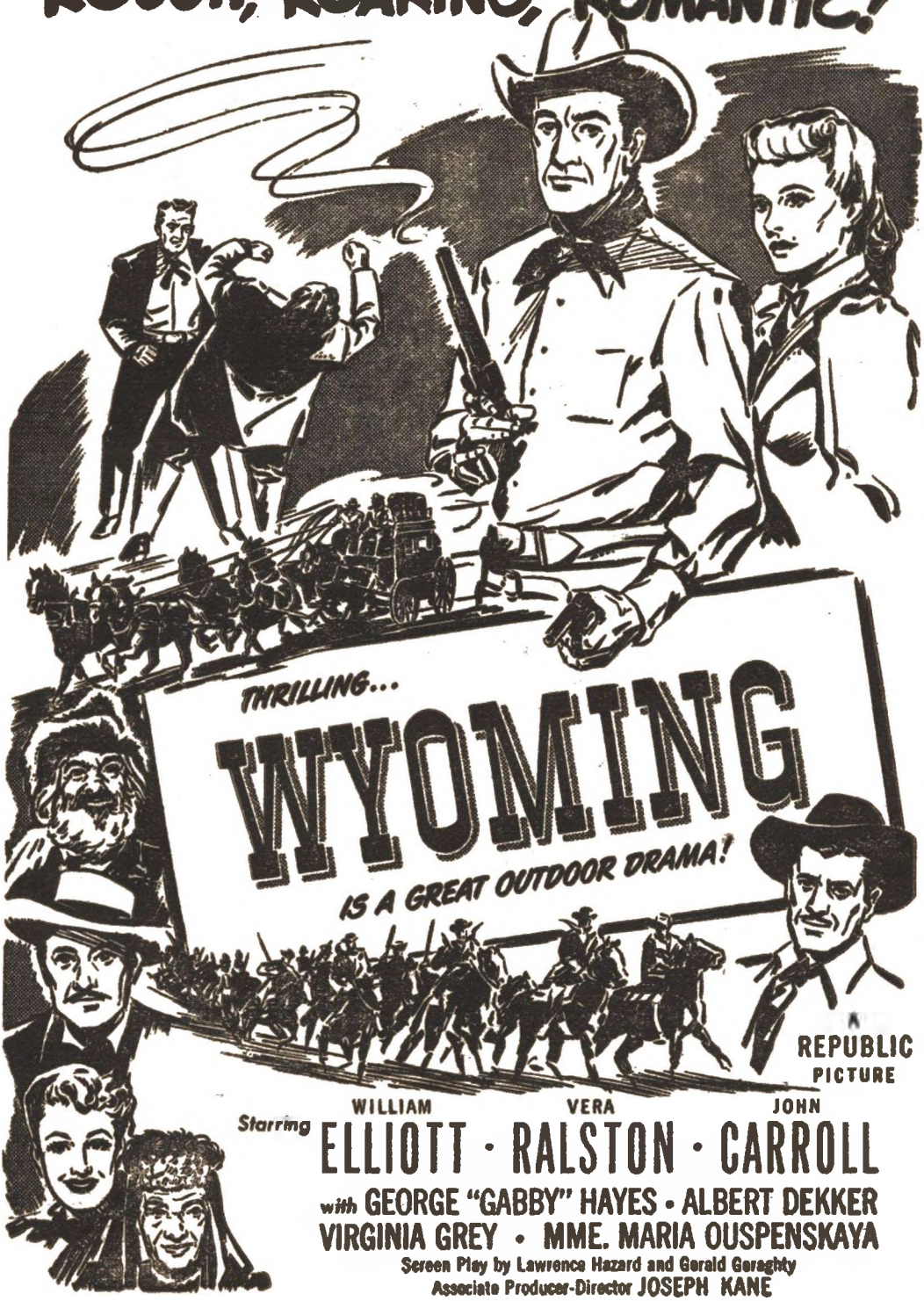

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"WE SUPPLY THE BODIES!"

By JIMMY NICHOLS

HAM MORROWS and Alf Chunk had been partners in business for as long as anyone in the little English coastal town of Dullingswirth could remember. Together, they owned and operated a carpentry shop. However, since no one had built anything in Dullingswirth since the time of Henry the Eighth, trade was apt to be slow. Very slow. In fact, by the summer of 1898, it had practically come to a dead stop.

"Ham," said Alf one morning, "we're at the end of our rope." And he shook their last three coppers out of the tea caddy onto the tablecloth. Ham nodded slowly, rose from his chair and hobbled his rheumatic way up the cobbled street.

Alf was surprised some minutes later when his partner came running back, breathless, and seized him exultantly about the waist. "We're going to make coffins! And be rich as kings!" Ham shouted in a manner quite unaccustomed to the British.

Then, more soberly, he explained. Unidentified, unclaimed, or poverty-stricken bodies were always buried handsomely in Dullingswirth, and Ham and Alf had been given an exclusive contract by the mayor to make the coffins.

"None of yer old pine boxes, either!" Ham burbled. "Solid mahogany, that's what they want! At five pounds apiece!"

"Wait a moment! 'Ow many bodies o' this sort do we have lyin' around of a year? Not too many, I'll warrant!" Alf said pessimistically.

"Enough, man, enough! The constable 'imself guaranteed us one a week!"

But it seemed that the official had overestimated the Dullingswirth death rate. Ham and Alf went into debt for a good supply of India mahogany—and sat and waited for the corpses that never came. Finally, one night, they worked out an ingeniously simple solution to the problem.

* * *

"Can't understand it!" the constable of Dullingswirth muttered to the mayor as he wrote out the tenth order in a month to the firm of Morrows and Chunk. "All the paupers in the village are dying like flies! It's costing us a year's taxes to keep up with 'em!"

It was true. Suddenly, like a plague, dead bodies littered Dullingswirth from one end to another. Not a week went by that two or three weren't picked up by the watch and carted in for free burial. Some were total strangers who had evidently dropped dead in the streets while passing through. Most were aging residents of the town who were well known to be without money or relations.

For a long time it never occurred to the simple-hearted authorities to question the strange trend. They merely observed that it must be an extraordinarily unhealthy season. Meanwhile, Alf and Ham worked long hours, their shop bright with lamplight and loud with the noise of saws and hammers until well into the night. Business was fine. Their plan was working.

Dullingswirth dwellers had stubbornly refused to die a natural death. Very well, then, Ham and Alf helped them along with a simple tap on the head. Their victims were all quite old and it didn't take much of a blow. The trick was to catch them on a dark street, so that the marks of the

(Continued on page 95)

The coffin-making business in Dullingswirth was mighty slow until carpenters Ham Morrows and Alf Chunk set out to increase the demand for same—by increasing the number of corpses!

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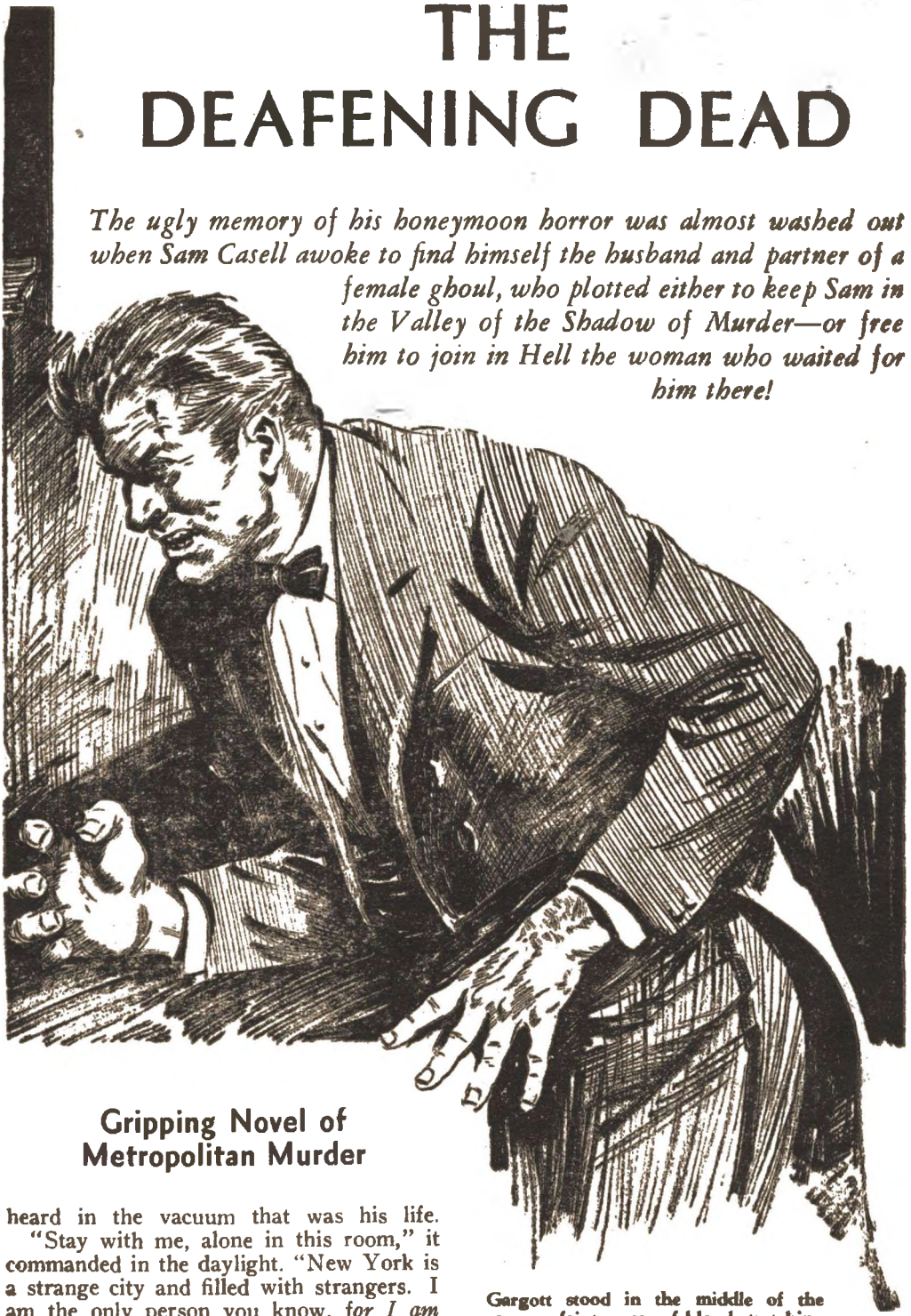
CHAPTER ONE

The Dead Don't Cry

THE LONELINESS began to take shape as an ever-present and invisible companion. It developed a silent voice and it grew hands. It became a brooding, jealous keeper, a parasite feeding on Sam's soul. It dwelled with him forever, until its voice was the only sound he

THE DEAFENING DEAD

The ugly memory of his honeymoon horror was almost washed out when Sam Casell awoke to find himself the husband and partner of a female ghoul, who plotted either to keep Sam in the Valley of the Shadow of Murder—or free him to join in Hell the woman who waited for him there!



Gripping Novel of Metropolitan Murder

heard in the vacuum that was his life.

"Stay with me, alone in this room," it commanded in the daylight. "New York is a strange city and filled with strangers. I am the only person you know, *for I am actually you.* We can sit here and remember our sins. We can remember the gentle

Gargott stood in the middle of the room, a faint crease of blood stretching over his temple, his face trance-like and smiling. "Lovely . . . " he said.

laughter in Carol's voice, and the love that was in her dark eyes. We can remember the torrent of darkness, the one scream, and the cool pale beauty of her face when she was dead. We will sit and remember forever."

And Sam listened, scarcely breathing, staring at nothing.

His loneliness murmured on. "We will hide here, you and I, and the world will never know. You will paint your pictures and I will stand at your side. In the darkness tonight, we will walk by the river. We will walk in the empty streets. We will speak to no one. We *must not* speak; no one must ever know. And when daylight comes again, we will sit in this room and remember her once more. Just you and I, your loneliness, forever."

Sam listened and his lean face grew grey around the whiteness of the scar that stretched down his forehead. His thin fingers plucked at emptiness. His black eyes looked at nothing. His features, gaunt as a frozen tree, were motionless with listening. Sometimes—but only for moments—a light would stray through the depths of his eyes. His fingers would move and he would stare at them in half surprise. His lips would part, as if a word were reaching its destination after an eternity of forgetting. Then the sick melancholy would flood his eyes again and his lips would close.

The darkness came and his loneliness took him by the arm. "It is time. We may walk now, for the streets are empty. We will be safe."

Sam went down the two flights of stairs, through the decaying quietness of the old brownstone house, into the funereal darkness of East Thirty-eighth Street.

A furtive cab glided by. A metal sign creaked as a breath of hot August wind went by. Sam walked slowly, his head forward, his steps soft as though he were trailing the echo of a voice. A subway rumbled beneath the concrete, and for a moment something stirred and tried to wake inside Sam.

It was the sensation of the city, massive and unknown, towering over him, rumbling under him, sleeping around him. It sent a quickening breath through him. Oh, if he could only wipe out the past! Walk in the daylight! Smile into someone's face and hear the rhythm of friendly words. If only. . . .

The twisted crimson scrawl of a neon sign glowed in a window. It was like a fire erected in space, and as Sam approached the scrawl, it became a name: The Red Angel.

He stopped, repeating the name aimlessly. He peered through the dusty window. Within was a dim-lit bar that stretched back into darkness. A fat bartender with the face of a brooding hog was drying his paste-white hands slowly, while a man—the only customer—stared at the mirror in front of him. The customer had a soft, flabby look, as if he were made of milk. His chin receded. His hair receded. His hands lay like lifeless things on the counter, but his eyes—great milk-blue eyes—looked hungry for something that was not food. They were eyes, Sam thought strangely, that slept wide open.

Sam stood there, touching the window, feeling queerly that this shadowy place, these two grotesque men did not actually exist at all.

His thoughts halted as the customer turned. Sam felt the impact as the hungry eyes met his through the window. He saw the moist lips utter a word. Then suddenly the lifeless looking hands jerked. The milky eyes seemed to come foaming brightly toward the window. The man started from his stool, an expression of incredulity on his features.

He's coming to me, Sam realized. Frenzy seized him. The interlude was tinged with some malignant horror, like a glimpse of evil. He turned and quickly strode away. He heard a door slamming behind him. He looked back. The man was watching him. Then he began to follow, his flabby body pulsating and shuddering as he moved.

Sam realized he was almost running now. It was fantastic, insane. Why should he run? Why should he feel this sudden horror, this repulsion?

He could not answer—no more than he could halt his swift strides and turn to confront this grotesque creature. Back! Back to the walls and silence of his room! Back, his mind cried.

He rushed up the stairs and slammed the door behind him. He leaned there, panting softly, listening. At last he moved his

hands across his eyes. He bent over the dresser and stared into the mirror. Perspiration beaded his forehead and gave a silken look to the smooth white scar. His cheeks sunken and pale, gave him the appearance of a death mask where a fragment of youth and life still struggled.

His lips moved. His words were faint, like a wondering child's: "Carol, do you suppose I am going mad?"

HE LISTENED. And then, as if in confirmation, the flabby knocking sounded at the door. Sam turned slowly. The knocking came again, soft and urgent as a woman's embrace. It commanded him to answer. He scarcely breathed. His fingers opened and closed.

"Let me in," a hot, moist voice called restlessly.

Sam hesitated, then fury that was half fear seized him and he jerked the door open. "What do you want?" he demanded. "Go away! Leave me alone."

"You don't need to be that way," the man of milk said. The pale eyes began to devour each section of Sam's face. The glow of amazement was rekindled. The flabby body shuffled across the doorway. Sam retreated.

"It's all right," the man said swiftly. "My name is Angelo. Joe Angelo. I was just sitting there and then I looked out . . ." he murmured incredulously. His hands wove a gesture in the air. Sam stared in curdling fascination. "What's your name?" Angelo asked.

"My name? Sam Casell. But I— What do you want?" he demanded again.

"And you're a painter?" Angelo blinked at the stand, at the unfinished canvas near the window. His eyes roamed hungrily on around the colorless room. "You just live here by yourself, huh?"

"Yes, I just live—What *are* you after? Why did you follow me?"

"Don't you like people?" Angelo asked in sudden curiosity.

"No. I want to be left alone. I don't want to know anyone."

"The way you talk . . . You came from the South, didn't you? You haven't lived in New York very long, have you?"

"Three weeks. I— Why should I tell you? Get out or tell me what you want. I don't like this." Sam moved forward.

Joe Angelo shifted with a curiously awkward grace. "Okay. I just saw your face at the window. I won't worry you any more," he said softly. A last time the milk-blue eyes floated around the room, paused a long moment on the door, then the lifeless-looking hand curled over the knob and drew the door shut behind him as he departed. Sam watched the knob revolve back into place. He listened for the sound of descending footsteps. There was only silence for minutes.

The man was waiting, listening outside! Of course!

Sam jerked the door open angrily. "Damn you, what—" He stopped, a sensation of blank dismay sweeping him. The hall was empty. The man had gone without a sound.

Or had he ever been here? Sam closed his eyes and opened them. He looked at the knob. He looked around his room. He closed the door. Suddenly, violently he trembled. "Dear God," he whispered, "I *am* losing my mind!"

At last he took off his clothes and lay down. In the darkness floated the image of the milky face. The lifeless hands seemed to be weaving webs around the ceiling. Sam turned on his stomach and squinted his eyes shut.

Perhaps he should count sheep, he thought. But he'd tried that. Something else. Try to remember vacant things that didn't matter. What day was this? Sunday. This was Sunday.

There was an aura of death about Sunday. A quiet aura. Death . . . Why didn't he simply kill himself? This day. Sunday afternoon. Somewhere quietly in a field in the sunlight. Why didn't he kill himself and forget it all forever . . . ?

CHAPTER TWO

So Little Time

THE SOUND was melodic and golden—a chime ringing gently. Sam opened his eyes, and the golden glow of sunlight filtered through lace curtains. Creamy walls rose about him. The chimes hushed and total silence wrapped the room.

He opened his eyes. The room was still vast, creamy, clean and golden in the glow from the immense window. Slowly he

raised himself on one elbow. A grey carpet, like a sea of glass, extended to the walls. Against the wall stood two suitcases. Over the back of a chair hung a pale blue suit, a white shirt and blue tie. Shoes and socks stood beside the bed.

He started to pick one up. But of course they weren't his. None of this was anything he'd ever laid eyes on—

Suddenly he threw back the sheet and started up. He gasped and clutched the bed as he swayed. The top of his skull seemed to continue upward, speeding beyond the limit of the ceiling, leaving him light and airy as spun cotton.

"God," he murmured faintly. The room rocked gently across his vision. Slowly the top of his skull sank back and a faint ringing grew in his ears. A wan emptiness grew in his stomach. His arms, his legs felt totally useless, as though they couldn't have crushed a twig. He swallowed. His throat felt dry and faintly sweet.

He listened. Suppose someone came and found him here? Suppose— He gathered himself and stumbled across the room to a closed door. Again he listened, then carefully edged the door open. His breath trailed away as he stared down the length of an unbelievably long room that ended with a bank of glass doors. Beyond the doors hung empty space and the distant tops of skyscrapers. White sheeting covered the massive shapes of furniture. Blond-wood panels shone richly on the walls. Silence was like the scent of old perfume in the warm air.

For a moment Sam felt a laugh rising crazily in his throat. This was it! That *was* the climax of madness! Him! This immense room! This—

The laugh split the stillness and came back to him from the blond walls. He stopped and trembled and listened again. That laugh . . . It was *his* voice. This was *he,* Sam Casell. All of this was happening!

He rushed to the bank of glass doors and stared out upon a narrow terrace, and beyond the terrace sprawled the roofs of New York—far below, many floors. Over there the sun shone brightly on a patch of river. Down yonder clustered the bulk of midtown skyscrapers. A faint veneer of dust covered the door mouldings.

He jerked open a door and looked into a rich red-and-black barroom where fine Chinese paintings covered the walls. He caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. Dark stubble coated his jaws. His eyes were glassy and sunken. He rushed to another door and stared into a pine-panelled dining room. Beyond glistened the white tiling of a kitchen. Everywhere was the faint veneer of dust, the old-perfume sensation of haunting silence. He returned to the bedroom, looked into a huge gold bathroom.

AT LAST he was certain: He was alone in this place. How? Why?

He could not answer. Uncertainty became a driving frenzy in him. He *had* to know! The clothes— They weren't his, but they were the only clothes there. So he *must* have worn them here. He plunged through the pockets of the pants: a handkerchief, a chain with three keys, sixty cents. Nothing of his.

He snatched the coat. A billfold. Ninety-two dollars and an identification card: William Carpenter, Parkview Tower, New York City.

"William Carpenter," Sam echoed. "But I've never heard of—" Then he saw the photograph on the back of the card. *His* photograph. The scar. *His* scar. Exactly the—

But it wasn't! The scar in the photograph extended into the left eyebrow. His stopped an inch above the eyebrow. Otherwise—

Sam sank into the chair and stared—just stared at the picture that was his—exactly his save for one inch of scar, perhaps one difference in the nose. Scarcely noticeable.

"William Carpenter," he whispered again. He grasped the coat again and emptied the other pockets. One sheet of paper fluttered to the rug.

He picked it up and looked at the typed message:

> Behind the largest picture in the bar is a wall safe. The combination is five left, five right, ten left, ten right, zero left. Your instructions are there. Each night additional instructions will be left for you. Obey them explicitly.

"Instructions . . . " Sam repeated. He stared toward the bar, then rose and crossed the huge main room. "The largest picture . . ." It was a painting of a Chinese

temple. He moved it aside and looked at the safe. "Five left, five right," he murmured. His fingers moved with the mechanical awkwardness of a sleepwalker. The round metal door swung open and Sam picked up a sheet of paper within the compartment. The message was typed, as the first had been:

> Within three hours after you awake, Sari will arrive. She is your wife, for you are William Carpenter for the present. She will explain what little you need to know, for she has *her* instructions, too. You and she will remain here, acting as if nothing unusual were happening. It may require a week, maybe less. Further instructions will tell you.
>
> Of course, it will occur to you to try to leave. Do not attempt it. You would have no chance and, in the *most* remote possibility that you succeeded, your escape will cost Sari her life.
>
> *You will be properly paid when your work is done.*

"But this— Insane!" Sam gasped. "My wife! It— Cost her her life! How could—" The golden note of chimes sifted through the penthouse. The door! Sam turned. But no. It was a clock—an electric clock chiming three in the afternoon.

It made no difference what time it was! It was time to go!

He rushed back to the bedroom, jerked off the strange pajamas, pulled on the shirt, the pants. He was putting on the shoes when a quiet metallic sound touched his ears and he froze. With a sound of finality, the front door closed. A footstep moved and halted.

"I'm here," a girl's voice said. It was the most forlorn and hopeless voice Sam had ever heard. He felt himself rising, tiptoeing to the door. He looked at her; she looked at him.

For those timeless moments Sam was bound in the spell of this girl's beauty. It was a flame; a composite of flesh and features. Her hair was purest black, just touching her shoulders. Her eyes were black, with the embers of scorn and resignation in them. Her slender face had drunk the sunlight and turned it to golden brown. And her body, too, was like a flame poised in an instant of restless flight. Sam had seen nothing like her in all his life.

And as he looked, he saw her lips parting in disbelief. He saw the eyes widening as she stared at him. "But you—*You are Bill!*" she breathed terribly. "Eyes . . . The scar . . . Everything . . ." As if dragged against her will by some sickening fascination, she moved toward him and lifted one hand as if to touch his face. "For God's sake, *tell me!*" she cried suddenly. "You can't be Bill!"

"Of course I'm not. Look at the scar—not long enough, don't you see? And you're Sari? The wife who— Look, you've got to tell me what insanity is taking place here! Sam—that's my name. Sam Casell. I never saw this place before. None of this! And instructions! What— Tell me what's happening!"

"Yes, I see it now, thank God," she breathed as she kept staring at the scar. Then she seemed to hear his questions, and a look of misery filled her eyes. "How did this happen to *you?*"

"I don't know. Nothing, I tell you. I know nothing except that . . . that I went to sleep and woke up here. I simply . . . That man. Angelo was his name," Sam whispered. "He followed me that last night. He must have returned. But why?" he demanded. "Can't you explain?"

"Too well, but not enough," she said hopelessly. She looked slowly around the room. "I'd hoped I'd never see this place again," she said bitterly. She kept moving restlessly around the room. Sam saw her eyes guardedly measuring him. Suddenly there was wisdom in her eyes—a terrible dark wisdom that accepted nothing, trusted no one. Then she moved her shoulders wearily. "But it wouldn't matter."

"What wouldn't matter?"

"Whether you are lying or not."

"What could I lie about?" Sam demanded hotly. "If you think I'm enjoying any of this, you're crazier than—"

Another chime—deeper than the clock-note—sounded. Sari turned stiffly toward the door, then her eyes fled back to Sam's With the stain of helpless dread on her face, she opened the door slowly.

"Mrs. Carpenter? Good afternoon, madam," a silken voice murmured. "I am Gargott. I received the letter of instructions yesterday morning. I am delighted to be at your survice. I hope everything will be satisfactory. I . . . Ah, pardon me, sir. Mr. Carpenter, I presume?"

There was almost mockery in the man's bow, then he straightened and his almond eyes were inscrutable. "I took the liberty

of planning this evening's dinner without consulting you, madam." He hesitated momentarily. "The cook you mentioned in your letter . . . Has she arrived?"

"Cook? But—" Sari stared at Sam. He swallowed and coughed.

"No, there—there isn't any cook here. Yet," he said faintly.

"It is quite all right. One never knows, does one?" The man named Gargott smiled again. "And the kitchen? Ah, yes. And the caterer will deliver this evening's food presently." He bowed and his footsteps flowed across the rug without a sound. His vast shoulders curved away through the door and Sam was left with the scent of something reminding him of musk or heavy incense; with an image reminding him of some incredibly handsome pagan idol.

He felt Sari staring at him. He turned, started to speak, then gestured mutely toward the bedroom. She followed him and he closed the door. "Did you write a letter to that man?" he whispered.

"I've never *heard* of him, much less sent him a letter."

"*Are* you Sari Carpenter? William Carpenter's wife?"

"I was at one time. No more, thank God, at least in my mind."

"Why do you say that? What happened? Tell me," Sam said.

Again her eyes of tortured wisdom searched his. "I suppose he is dead. I hope he is. *I hope he is,*" she sobbed harshly. "He made a devil of himself. A devil! You know nothing of devils," she said starkly. "They put them in fairy tales and amuse children with them, but I was married to one." She turned abruptly and looked out the window.

Sam's hands started up, then sagged emptily. He saw her shoulders trembling. The words in the message came back to him: "Your escape will cost Sari her life . . ."

He swallowed and moved nearer to her. "Sari, I know you don't trust me. Suppose I begin by telling you. Maybe . . ." He stopped, then continued doggedly. "I'm a painter. Not very good or particularly bad. I've lived in New Orleans most of my life. I've never been in New York until this month. I came because—" He stopped, then forced the words onward. "I had known a girl—a painter, too—only a few weeks. I loved her. It was a queer affair—breathless and swift, as though only a scrap of time remained for living.

"Perhaps," he said distantly, "there is something in our subconscious that can sometimes see the future. I don't know. I only . . . It was my birthday, we drank, somewhere we ate. It was a glorious night. Suddenly we decided to be married—that night, instantly! It was just as though we *knew* time was ending. We . . . Anyway, we took my car and drove toward a little parish upstate. It began to rain. A terrible rain, as though the night were enraged at our love. The car stalled. We'd lost our way. When lightning came, we saw what looked like a blur of a house. We got out of the car and ran toward it. The blur was a big white sign that said, Honeymoon Cavern. There was an abandoned cafe-shack and an entrance to a cavern. Honeymoon Cavern," he said. "*I* suggested it. *I* . . . That we explore the cave because it was *almost* our honeymoon . . . So we went in. I had only a cigarette lighter. Oh, God, it was insane. And the place was foul. No one had entered in years, it seemed. Carol was frightened. I sensed it, but it only excited me. Only a few feet further, I kept saying. Just around one more turn. And we went around that one more turn," he whispered. "A bat flew by us. Carol was startled. She turned suddenly and begged me: 'Please, Sammy, let's get out of here. Let's don't go any—' " Sam stopped, then his voice drove raggedly on. "Those were her last words. The ledge crumbled beneath her. There was a rushing damp-windy sound and she screamed and vanished. She screamed only once. It took me an eternity to reach her. I fell. I cut my head. At last . . . There she lay in the rocks and dirt at the edge of a little stream in the ground. So white and lovely and still. And so very dead. I had killed her." He stopped, opened and closed his hands, then stared up again into Sari's wide eyes. "I made her die. I killed her," he repeated. "That was scarcely a month ago. In that month I've run away—come to New York. But I can't run away from that night. The horrible guilt of it drives me mad, and I can't bear to face people, to think, even."

SARI kept gazing at him strangely. "I believe you. Isn't that odd? It seems so long since I've believed anything or

anyone," she said. She ran her fingers through her black hair and sighed. "Sometimes I yearn to die. To be through at last. I don't know . . ." She lay down across the foot of the bed and stared straight up at the ceiling. A pulse throbbed deeply in her throat, and Sam felt his lips turn dry, Dear God, she is almost inhumanly lovely, he thought.

"I met Bill Carpenter four years ago in Spain," she said as if still trying to understand. "My father was Spanish. He was killed during the Revolution. I was working as a reporter for an English newspaper when I met Bill Carpenter. He was—or is, if he's still alive—one of the richest men in the world. His father was a legendary diamond miner in Africa who died shortly before I married Bill. I don't know why, or perhaps I do know why—why I married Bill. He looked exactly like you, except that he didn't have the scar then. He was charming and quiet and thoughtful. God, I didn't know what he was thinking." Her fingers opened and closed and her eyes grew hard as they watched the ceiling.

"What was he thinking?" Sam heard himself ask.

"Of monsters. Part-human monsters. A scientific, surgical nightmare. Oh, you won't believe me. You'll only think I'm insane."

"No. No, please. Tell me."

CHAPTER THREE

The Man With the Milky Eyes

"I BEGAN to feel it—something wrong —creeping over me like a chill when I saw his eyes at times. Sometimes when he would put aside the book he was reading and stare into space with a look of ghastly rapture in his eyes. It frightened me, and when I spoke to him, he did not hear me. Then I began to realize that *every* book he read was a study in abnormality. Such things as experiments in transplanting an animal's brain into a human's body; or the effect of brain surgery to produce insanity; surgery and injections to create giants or dwarfs, to destroy the human resistance to evil. Some of the things were not in books, but were letters from some doctor in China. Later I learned that the doctor had gone mad. But anyway, I knew something was wrong. Then I realized one night—very late at night—that Bill had slipped from our bedroom. I don't know why, but some dreadful intuition filled me. I heard him return at dawn. He did not mention it the next day, nor did I. But I kept thinking. I scarcely slept. I couldn't sleep.

"And then I realized that he was slipping from the house almost every night, staying away for two or three hours, and returning without a sound. I had to follow him. *I had to know.* This was in Portugal, in Lisbon. So one night I followed him.

"He walked about half a mile to an old crumbling wine warehouse on a terrible street. He went in a side door; there were no lights anywhere, but I found a boarded window that I could crawl through. At last I found a glimmer of light at the bottom of dark steps. There were three basements—old wine storage vaults. You will not believe me," she whispered, looking at him, "but there were cells and cages down there. Cells where humans were caged. Deformed and insane and misshapen people, scarcely aware of existence or anything around them. And beyond there was a brilliant white surgery room. There, talking with a fat pillow-shouldered man in white, was *my* husband. And I heard him saying very clearly: 'Did the cat-brained woman live?' *And then I knew.* My husband . . . *Mine!* Bill was the guiding devil of an unthinkably grotesque experiment."

Sari lay still, her eye fixed on the ceiling again. "I ran. I can hardly remember the things I did. I was frightened and sickened. *I was afraid of Bill.* I didn't tell him. A friend got passage for me on the plane to New York. After a while, I couldn't believe such a nightmare was true. I must have imagined it. I thought perhaps I was insane. Then Bill appeared here in New York; he'd traced me, followed me. At last I told him why I'd run away. He was so sweet and gentle. I *knew* I had been crazy; it *hadn't* happened. I began to distrust myself. I imagined voices. I hated myself. Bill leased this penthouse. I became ill. It was nothing anyone could explain. I simply felt heavy and sleepy all the time; I could remember only snatches of what had happened the day before. It went on for months, perhaps a year. I don't know. But one night in this room, in this bed, I heard Bill tip-toe from the room.

It was happening again and I was not insane! I followed him. I hadn't time to dress. I threw on a robe, found my house shoes, followed him. It was raining that night. He went across Lexington Avenue and then up Third to an immense dark building—so very much like that building in Lisbon. He went in. The door was locked behind him. I couldn't find a way in. I came back here. In less than an hour, I heard the front door open. I started up, then heard Bill moan and fall. When I reached him, he was crawling toward the bathroom. His forehead was cut open. Blood was everywhere. He didn't know what he was saying. He kept moaning that, 'The giant broke down his cage. The giant got away.' " Sari turned and looked straight at Sam. "So you see," she said heavily.

"I—and what happened?" Sam whispered.

"I went to the telephone and started to call a doctor. Bill said, 'Don't, Sari.' I turned. He'd pulled himself up and he was bending over that table with an automatic in his hand. 'I can kill you, Sari,' he said, 'but it would be hard to explain. I don't want you to die. You are lovely. If I had been different, or you less curious, we could have been happy all our lives. But I have my work; nothing must halt it. You have your life. *Keep it by silence,* Sari. Forget what you have seen and thought. Remember the cells you saw, Sari. Remember the people in them. *It is cheap, isn't it?*' " Sari stopped, drew a heavy breath, and moved her fingers slightly. "That night, eight months ago, Bill said that, then stumbled out the door. I have never seen him again. I had hoped he was dead, but now that this . . ." She sighed.

"And you? What have you done since that—that last night?"

"Lived in hell," Sari whispered quietly. "At nights I lie in the dark, and suddenly I am sure I have gone mad. Such things *can't* happen. Then a note will come, or wherever I have gone, calls reach me. There's just the one word, always: *Silence* . . . I don't know whether the voice is Bill's or not. I've tried to forget. I've gone to Mexico, California. I've tried to work; I can't keep my mind on anything. I tell myself: If I haven't actual *proof* that Bill is dead in a month, I'll tell the police. When the month is passed, I'm afraid. Next month, I promise. I'm always afraid. Even if he is dead, he was working with others who are alive. And he is, or was, so incredibly wealthy. If I told everything, if they found him, if I weren't killed his money could defeat me. They'd prove me insane. There's nothing I can do. And now, *this* . . . Back to this place. Oh, God, you can't imagine."

"But why are we here?"

She looked at him darkly for almost a minute. "I have no idea. I am even afraid to imagine. I was told by a telephone voice to leave Mexico and arrive here this afternoon. I was ordered to conduct myself as any normal wife would, and a husband would be temporarily provided for me. Further instructions would be given when I arrived here. And the voice reminded me: *'Life is cheap, isn't it? . . .'* " She closed her eyes. "Here I am," she said hopelessly.

Sam opened his mouth. He could find no words. He stared around the room, his fists opening and closing. For a moment he felt a wild laugh rushing up his throat. He would laugh, scream his contempt at this mirage of madness, then he would wake and the nightmare would be done! For it must be a nightmare! It *had* to be. Nothing could—

Sari's eyes were terribly bright as she stared at the ceiling. "I just thought. I've *told* you. The silence is broken. I wish—wish I hadn't told," she whispered. "I'm afraid. I feel something, and I'm afraid."

"No!" Sam whispered. "You *had* to tell. Now we can do something. *We can!* We—"

The chimes sounded at the front door. Sam and Sari stiffened. The latch clicked. A woman's voice, hauntingly lonely, wandered through the penthouse:

"I'm Sylvia, the cook. A letter told me to come here."

"I am Gargott, the butler," the silken voice answered. "Come in. I remember your face from somewhere. I wonder . . ."

"Yes, I know you," said the haunting voice. "I saw you in Lisbon."

"Ah, yes, indeed, Lisbon . . . And here we are again. I wonder why?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything any more."

Sari's eyes met Sam's, and her lips moved

in the agony of an old terror. "Oh, God," she whispered.

Slowly Sam turned and looked out the window. At last his own life, with its torture of regret, seemed pale and meaningless. He looked down upon the city of New York and wondered: Can such things as this actually happen? . . . And he asked himself: What can *I* do? . . .

"COCKTAILS, MADAM?" Gargott asked. His eyes seemed to linger on Sari's beauty and to dream of loves of the past. Twilight filled the bank of doors at the end of the living room. The sheeting? Covers had been removed from the furniture. The odor of cooking food played delicately on the air.

"I'd like a drink," Sari said abruptly, and Sam nodded.

"Whiskey and water for me," he said stiffly. He was thinking: How queer people can appear, and never reveal the truth. For we *could* be married. We could be simply contented, without the slightest tint of fear. Yet here we sit, on the chasm of madness. Unknowing. . . .

Three whiskeys and Sam felt the lingering lightness departing from his brain. He felt his eyes, his ears straining. He watched the velvet gliding of Gargott's footsteps. He watched the flow of dark lights through Sari's eyes. He thought: I walked. I saw that window. I saw the man of milk. He followed. He studied my door. And now I am here. But that man of milk brought me here. *I will find him. . .*

Dinner at last was over. The hours of mock silence passed while Sam stared at the rug and Sari stared at the wall. Then a full silence grew in the penthouse and he looked questioningly at her. "Where did they go, Gargott and Sylvia?" he whispered.

"The service suite upstairs. There are stairs from the pantry."

Sam rose. "I'm going back to the point where all this started. I saw a man who followed me. A milky, wet-eyed man."

"But you mustn't. It's hopeless. I know. Whatever you do, someone will know. It's like an invisible man was following. Just as— You don't suppose that he—" she breathed.

"Impossible, Sari. No one can create invisible people. I'm going."

"Let me go. I *can't* stay here. Wait." She fled to the bedroom and returned with a dark red cape. She threw it about her shoulders. Silently they opened and closed the door behind them. They used the stairs to reach the solemn solitude of the lobby. And at last they were in the rushing freedom of the street. Cabs rattled. Wind blew. Subways roared beneath. Only two minutes away from madness, Sam was thinking.

He pushed open the door of a cigar store. He opened the Manhattan telephone directory. Angelo. Joe Angelo, his brain repeated. And there it was: Angelo, Jos. T. And the address.

* * *

It was a barren and colorless hotel, and yet its drab Medusa-headed doorway seemed vaguely familiar to Sam. But of course, he realized. He had passed this same doorway in the dark night walks with his loneliness; it was not far from his room. *His room,* he thought strangely again. Nor far from he Red Angel Bar.

The lobby was dim-lit and empty save for a drowsing clerk who scarcely noticed them. The elevator man was a sleepy Negro who murmured the number of Angelo's room and did not look at them.

They paused in the narrow yellowed corridor before door 805. A cardboard sign dangled from the knob: DO NOT DISTURB. Sam reached to knock. Sari made a soft sound and touched his arm.

"I don't—don't want to. I'm afraid. Please, let's—"

"No." Sam knocked. The echo faded. Midnight dwelled in heavy sleep through the building. Sam touched the knob. It turned and he felt the latch slide open. The door parted into blackness, then the dim-glow of the window grew distinct across the room.

"Sam, please," Sari whispered.

"Angelo?" he asked stubbornly, softly. No answer. His fingers rubbed the wall, found the switch, hesitated, then snapped it on. There was dust and empty beer bottles; a telephone at a dirty littered desk; a shirt on a chair, hair-tonic on the dresser. The soiled covers of the bed were tossed toward the foot. And in the bed, on his side facing them, lay the body of Joe Angelo.

His eyes were open and blind. His mouth was open and empty. A fly crawled through

the matted hair of his bare chest, then flew to the ceiling. And Sari choked a scream. Sam could only stare and swallow the crumbling ashes in his throat. The top of Joe Angelo's head was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tower of Madness

SAM managed to shatter the morbid trance. He grasped Sari's arm and shut the door to the hall. Again his eyes returned to the corpse, then he made himself stare around the room. There *must* be something; some detail, some clue to tell—

A cry of incredulity shot to his lips. There on the floor—*there beside the corpse*—lay his clothes. His—*Sam's!* Those very clothes he'd been wearing the night he'd first seen this man. And now they were matted and stained with blood. Now they—

A tap came from the door. Sam spun around. Sari's lips parted. With one silent step, Sam reached the door and snapped off the light. Endless moments passed and he did not breathe. Another tap came, softly, insistently. Sweat ebbed down his cheek. His lungs began to burn for oxygen. His muscles screamed in their tension.

Tap . . . Tap . . . Tap . . .

Like the sadistic play of an elf, chipping away his nerves. Then abruptly the knocking was done. Sari breathed: "We've got to get out of here!"

"Yes." He touched the knob, edged the door slightly. The drab yellowed hall was empty. He nodded to Sari, then he saw her eyes fixed sickeningly on the threshold. He looked down to see a sheet of paper just within the room. He picked it up and stared at the crudely penciled words: "Return to the penthouse immediately."

He stared mutely at Sari. She grasped his arm. "I told you. I told you. He . . . they know everything. You can't make a move. We *must* hurry."

One of the three keys fitted the penthouse door. Sam unlocked it and they entered the silent room. Suddenly he thought of it as a glass case—a tortured case where he and Sari moved as puppets, observed and manipulated, constantly watched. He thought of the wall safe. Had other instructions been left?

He snapped on the light in the bar and moved the picture. Five left, five right . . .

The door opened. The compartment was empty. A feeling of dread suspension filled him as he turned back toward Sari. "What can we do?"

"Wait. Just wait," she said miserably.

"But damn it, what good—" His fury dissolved in frustration. "At least I'll have a drink," he snapped. He poured two and handed one to Sari. She smiled momentarily, then her slender face grew lonely.

"I'm sorry I was blunt this afternoon, Sam. When you've lived in fear as long as I have . . ." She moved her head slowly. "I'm sorry this had to be you—this horrible masquerade."

"Yes," he started. "No," he corrected. "If it had to happen . . ." He stopped and his eyes dwelt on the dark flame of her beauty. "Sari," he said. And then he put down his drink and kissed her. There was a moment when her dark deep eyes searched his, then her lips answered. Perhaps it was their bondage of terror, Sam thought. Or the depths of their loneliness. Perhaps it was something, he thought chaotically, that happened but once. For the kiss that had started so simply became a wave of violent hunger, silent and desperate in its stolen existence. It was like no kiss and no emotion that Sam had ever known. It was the flame of Sari, for a moment blazing.

Then he felt her stiffen. He heard a soft gasp against his cheek. He saw her eyes, startled and bright as they looked beyond his shoulder. Slowly he turned. In the doorway of the kitchen stood the pagan idol of Gargott. His dark eyes feasted and his hands moved like crawling reptiles, climbing the air.

"What do you want?" Sam demanded furiously.

"I don't know," he said dreamily. "It's so hard for me to remember."

"Then get out of here! Go back to bed!"

He seemed not to hear. His eyes lay upon Sari. His fingers kept crawling emptily. His great chest swelled with his deepened breathing. "So lovely. So lovely and beautiful," he whispered.

"Oh, God," Sari breathed. "Get out! Get out of here!"

The man's hands sank to his side. "Goodnight, madam," he whispered softly. He

turned and departed through the kitchen. Sam's eyes moved back to Sari. Her face was white. A hand was against her throat, and her eyes were stunned.

"Don't ever—ever kiss me again," she stammered. "The way that man was looking . . ." She turned suddenly and fled into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Sam did not know how long he simply stood there. The warmth of her lips still burned his; the hot gnawing of Gargott's eyes stayed in his memory. At last he remembered his unfinished drink. He drained it, then abruptly filled the jigger again.

I remember your face . . . Yes, I saw you in Lisbon. . .

His clothes, stained and matted with blood, on the floor beside the corpse . . .

Sari's lips. Gargott's eyes—

Sam choked and poured a third drink. Drunk. How long since he'd gotten drunk? He wondered coldly. So drunk that the edges of reality faded into a thick mist and memory grew pale. So drunk that forgetting was easy. Everything was easy. Nothing was impossible. Yes . . .

He poured a fourth drink. He clenched his fists and stared at them, remembering Gargott. Remembering Angelo. He breathed deeply, slowly. Yes, it was easier to think this way. Another drink and he wouldn't give a damn what—

He reached for the bottle. His hand stilled in the mid-gesture. He blinked at the wall safe. He moved his hand across his eyes and looked again. He *had* left the safe open. Yes, he remembered that. But no one had approached within six feet of it. Sari had been over there. Gargott had been in the doorway. Only he had been this near. There *had not* been anything in it.

But the folded sheet of paper was in it now.

As one who moves on tip-toe, as if to prolong a deathly trance, Sam crept to the safe and lifted the paper. Silently he opened it and read the crudely penciled words:

> Andrea will arrive around noon tomorrow from Shanghai. Sari can tell you all that you need to know about her. For the past six months, your letters—William Carpenter's letters—to Andrea have described your illness and nervous breakdown—William Carpenter's breakdown. Copies of these letters will be left in the safe for you to read before Andrea arrives. When she arrives, you will conduct yourself as a man who is only now and slowly regaining his strength and mental power. Whatever strangeness she finds in you will be explained by your amnesia and your breakdown. You will be kind to her, *but you will tell her nothing of the truth.* A last letter of instruction will be left for you in the morning. Any effort on your part to depart from the plan will end in immediate tragedy.

"Andrea," Sam whispered. He kept staring at the note, then he looked at the wall safe again. The note had *not* been in there, he argued to himself again.

Slowly he crossed the living room to the bedroom door. He hesitated, then tapped softly. "Sari?"

"Yes?" she answered wearily. "Come in."

He opened the door. The room was dark, but at last he saw her dark profile. She was sitting in a chair she'd drawn to the window and the coal of a cigarette glowed at her fingers. "What is it?" she asked without turning.

"Another note of instruction. It says someone named Andrea is arriving tomorrow. It says you can tell me about her."

"Andrea? But I don't know— Oh. That girl. I met her only once, just after Bill and I were married. She is his sister." Sari's shadow moved. The coal brightened at her lips, then faded. "But I know nothing about her—only the little Bill told me. Things about their childhood, where they'd lived, little things." A silence passed. "I wonder why she's coming here."

"The note doesn't say. It tells me to act as if I'd had amnesia and a nervous breakdown. There'll be final instructions in the morning, it says."

"In the morning . . ." Sari echoed emptily

Then silence filled the room. Sam watched her motionless profile and searched for something to say. He could think of nothing. The hollow echo of her word kept straying through his brain: *Morning . . . Morning . . .*

What would tomorrow be?

And then, as if she perceived his wondering, Sari spoke. "There's no use thinking. Sleep if you can. Goodnight, Sam."

"Goodnight." He turned and closed the door behind him. A slow burning tide of fury and frustration moved through his chest and up his throat. Again his eyes roamed around the luxurious room.

"A glass case! A cell!" he whispered rawly. "A cell of madness, and what do I

do? Stand here, pant at myself, stare at the walls, wait! *Wait!* For what? There must be some way—"

That safe, he thought coldly. *Someone must place the instructions in it. Next time I will watch. I will know who . . . how . . .*

He turned out the light in the living room, entered the bar, and closed the door behind him. There was no lock. To be certain, he braced a chair under the knob, then opened the safe door half way. He moved one of the red leather chairs into position, turned the lamp to low, set the whiskey and cigarettes beside him, and settled himself to wait.

THE gentle chiming of the clock in the room was the only sound to mark his vigil. His throat, his shoulders, even his ears began to ache with the tension of waiting. Cigarette smoke turned stale in his mouth. The murky grey of dawn crawled up the window, and still Sam's eyes watched until they burned and felt as though huge boulders of sand were lodged beneath his lids.

Time and reality became a blur in which fragments of the past drifted over his brain. Once more he could smell the thick dampness of the cavern. Once more he heard Carol's scream and felt the rush of darkness from the abyss. And then, as though it were part of the misty past, a flickering of grey-white movement appeared within the wall safe. There was the slightest of sounds and nothing more. In the safe lay a thick envelope.

Sam leaped from the chair to the wall. He jerked out the envelope, thrust his hand into the safe and hammered the sides. They were unyielding. He pounded the bottom, the top of the chamber. He stopped momentarily, bent closer, then tapped the top more carefully.

Was the sound slightly hollow? Or was it only his imagination?

He tapped again. He tried the sides. He was sure—almost. He stared up at the ceiling. What was up there? Gargott's and Sylvia's quarters were somewhere above. The stairs led up from beyond the kitchen.

Slowly he turned toward the door, then remembered the envelope. He thrust it into his pocket and tip-toed from the bar. Through the glistening kitchen to a narrow flight of stairs that curved abruptly out of sight. Once more he hesitated, then opened the drawers until he found a heavy knife. Slowly he started upward.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alone

THE stairs ended at a short windowless hallway from which opened three doors. Two were closed. The third was open. It was a small bathroom. Sam stood still, trying to arrange in his mind the floor-pattern of the rooms below. The bath was above the kitchen. The two closed doors seemed to lead into rooms that were located above the large living room. But did they extend over the bar? If—

With a curiously liquid silence, one of the doors opened and Gargott flowed into the opening. His face, with its immobility of an idol's, showed not the slightest trace of surprise—of any feeling or emotion—as his dark eyes crawled over Sam, over the knife in his tense fingers, back to Sam's face.

"She is beautiful. Lovely, isn't she?" he whispered, as though his mind had dwelled on the words all night.

And then he glided forward soundlessly. Sam stepped back against the wall, bringing the knife up. Gargott seemed not to notice. He moved past Sam and turned down the stairs. "Lovely. Beautiful," he kept murmuring. He vanished.

Sam pulled in a gaunt breath and felt perspiration on his forehead. An atmosphere of deformity seemed to linger where Gargott had passed. Sam moved toward the door and entered Gargott's room. It was small; it could not extend over the bar. He tapped the wall. There was no hollowness, no echo that he could hear.

He turned as weary footsteps shuffled through the hall. It was Sylvia, her head bent, her arms hanging like broken stems at her sides, her eyes fixed vacantly on her shoes. She moaned wordlessly as she passed down the stairs.

The echo of her dirge-like moan strayed through Sam's brain as he entered her room. It was even smaller than Gargott's, and it was located over the opposite end of the living room. It would have been impossible for anyone to have dropped the envelope—

"Stop! Gargott! Stop instantly before—Gargott!" The scream of fear and fury raged up the stairs from below. Sari's scream. There was a crash, a shuffle of footsteps, Sari's scream again: *"Gargott!"*

"So lovely. Beautiful. He was kissing you. Beautiful—"

Sam was plunging down the stairs, through the kitchen where Sylvia stared vacantly at the door. "It's Gargott," she moaned.

Sam rushed into the living room. The wreckage of a vase was strewn over the floor. Sari was pressed against the wall, her face aflame, her dark hair dishevelled, her eyes sparkling with rage and fear. In her hand was the broken base of the vase.

Gargott stood in the middle of the room, his immense chest filling and emptying, a faint crease of blood stretching over his temple, his face trance-like and smiling. "Lovely . . ."

"Get out! Get out of here, damn you!" Sam thundered. He lunged forward, scarcely aware of the knife in his hand. Sari screamed. Gargott's eyes flowed around to meet Sam's. With a massive grace that rippled with animal power, Gargott wove his huge hand snaked in and slammed shut over Sam's wrist. There was nothing in his face but the dreamy trance.

"Knives," he murmured. "There were knives in Lisbon. Knives can hurt."

Sam cried out hoarsely as the trap of hand crushed his wrist. The knife clattered to the floor, and slowly Gargott's fingers loosened.

"Gargott, get out of this room instantly," Sari breathed starkly.

And at that moment, the chimes sang at the front door. Sam and Sari looked at each other. Gargott vanished.

"Andrea. It must be Andrea," Sari whispered. "What can— Quickly!" She began to gather up the pieces of shattered vase. Sam tested his wrist, his fingers. At last he picked up the knife.

"If it's Andrea," Sari whispered frantically, "leave her alone as quickly as you can. I'll meet you in the bedroom. I'll have to tell you something or she'll realize and . . . and I don't know what would happen then."

Sam nodded. The pain in his wrist was ebbing away. Fury, raw and cold, was filling him. Like a child! Like a spindle-legged child, dangling on a string! That was the way he'd been with Gargott! If—

Sari was opening the door. Sam tried to clear his brain, compose his face. "Andrea!" Sari was saying.

"Hello," answered a voice that was suddenly terribly quiet—quiet as the spirit of death. Sam stared as this girl named Andrea—his sister in this grotesque masquerade—came closely into the room, stopped, and looked at him for what seemed to be an eternity. And in that eternity, Sam did not breathe.

This girl is dying, he realized. That is the shadow of death in her blue eyes; it is the ivory in her cheeks; it is the echo in her voice. Death . . . A month, a year, three years ago she must have been lovely. Death is using her slowly, inch by inch, by hour, by year.

The eternity dissolved as the girl cried out and rushed toward him. "Bill, oh, Bill! Your face! So like you and so . . . so different. Even the scar and . . . Bill, we aren't strangers, are we? Tell me we aren't! Tell me you remember me. The letters when you told about forgetting, about your breakdown and the way you'd

changed, I— But you haven't changed too much. Tell me you know me!" she begged desperately.

"Yes. Yes, I remember. Of course I know you," Sam answered. It was the only answer he could have made. Anything else, he thought, would have been merciless.

"But you must be tired. When did you arrive?" Sari asked.

"Less than an hour ago by plane. I am tired, but I'm always tired." she said wearily. She kept looking at Sam, drinking in his image.

"Let me tell Sylvia about breakfast." Sari said anxiously. "And S— Bill, you *must* shave *at once.*"

"What? Oh, yes . . ." He nodded. He told Andrea he'd be only a minute or two. Sari joined him in the bedroom and closed the door behind her. Sam had already opened the envelope and was reading the pencilled message.

"Oh," he said slowly, softly. "It begins to make a little sense."

"What? What makes sense?" Sari asked tightly.

"All of this. It says that Andrea is dying of a slow fever. Her husband died of it a year ago in China. Andrea has made this last trip to see me—as her brother—to settle all financial affairs and to arrange the transfer of her fortune to me. I—you and I—are to give every appearance of a happily married couple. Andrea will stay no longer than a week, it says. We must do everything to encourage her to transfer the fortune immediately. And those other letters . . ." Sam looked at them swiftly. "They're carbon copies of typewritten letters from Bill to Andrea. They tell her he's been injured; that explains the amnesia, it says in a later letter. He's forgotten a lot; he's still not clear on many things and he's nervous. All those letters . . ." Sam stared up at Sari. "But I begin to understand now. Either Bill is dead and someone who worked on those experiments with him is trying to get Andrea's fortune, or . . . Yes, or Bill has changed so much and become so deformed in mind that he realizes Andrea would suspect some horrible situation and would refuse to transfer the money."

"Yes. And I think Bill *is* alive," Sari said slowly. "I dreamed last night that he— But it doesn't matter. I suppose I better tell you what few things Bill told me about his childhood." She ran her fingers through her hair and frowned. "You . . . Bill was two years older than Andrea. I believe he was born in London . . ." Her voice wandered softly on. Bill listened, yet scarcely heard.

He was slowly realizing how immense was the truth and how inevitable was the end for him. If Bill had been so tremendously wealthy, then certainly Andrea's fortune would be huge. And once it was transferred and the reason for the masquerade was ended, then he—Sam—would be killed. For the simple reason that Joe Angelo had been murdered: Because he had served his purpose, and had learned too much. It had been Angelo's task to find a likeness of Bill. That he had done. And he had died. Now it was his, Sam's, task to perform the masquerade. And then, he too—

"And that's all I know," Sari ended. "I suppose you can blame the blank spots on amnesia. Bill arranged that neatly."

"Sam, look at me," Sari said strangely. "Has something happened you haven't told me?"

"No," he said. "Not yet," he added wryly. "I was only thinking." He drew a leaden breath and went into the bathroom to shave. He heard Sari strike a match; he smelled the odor of tobacco. He finished shaving and looked at his image a long time in the mirror. He wondered how many times he would stand before what mirrors and live to shave again. And suddenly life, which had seemed so empty, but a short time ago, became a hard and violent yearning; a desperation for sanity, for sunlight and freedom, and the end of this mad nightmare.

"What are you thinking, Sam?" Sari asked. He smiled faintly.

"Nothing very surprising. Just simply that it's nicer to be alive than dead." He opened the door into the living room, and Andrea turned from the window and beckoned him.

"Here in the sunlight, I want to see you. It's been almost four years, do you realize? And you've changed, Bill." Then, after a moment she added, "But not so much as I." She took his hands in hers and turned him toward the window. Suddenly her face was close to his and her whisper scarcely reached his ears:

"At Duluth's Hotel. Room 5005 as soon as you can. No one must follow you. *No one, whatever happens.* I'll meet you. Do you understand?"

"Duluth's. 5005," he whispered.

A fragment of brilliance crossed the depths of her eyes. A momentary tightening went through her fingers. "Oh, Bill, how I've missed you. I've planned a hundred times to come to this country, but first there was the war, then Phillip's illness. There was always something."

"Breakfast, madam," Gargott said dreamily from the doorway. Sam stiffened. A current of grim silence seemed to pass through the room. He looked at Sari. She nodded slowly, her eyes fixed on Gargott's departing back. They went in to breakfast.

ANDREA and Sari were finishing their second cups of coffee. Sam said he wanted a cigarette and went into the living room. He heard Gargott and Sylvia murmuring to each other in the kitchen. Silently he opened the front door and closed it behind him. He listened a moment, then hurried toward the stairs.

The street was sunswept and filled with the torrent of mid-morning sounds. Trucks clashed their gears and poured exhaust fumes over the air. A vendor hawked his roses and a baby cried in its parked carriage in front of a grocery store. Sam felt, rather than saw these things as he glanced behind him and darted into a cigar store! He waited a full minute. No one he had ever seen went by. A cab drew to the curb and the passenger got out. Sam rushed out and slammed the door behind him.

"The Duluth Hotel. Hurry," he said. He watched the maze of traffic that fed into the pavement behind. Cabs, trucks, buses. But was one following? Hadn't he been a fool to give the direct address? A change of cabs would have been smarter.

Why did Andrea want him to meet her in the hotel room?

He kept watching the traffic behind, trying to think, and her image of slow death kept returning to his mind—a death image that still retained a spark of radiance, as a fire in a storming rain.

* * *

The Duluth Hotel was old and massive, with the overtones of past echoes wandering through the steep-ceilinged lobby. A clerk who might have been made of old silk and celluloid handed Sam the key to 5005. The elevator rose carefully with an aching sound high in the shaft. Sam unlocked the door and entered the large gloomy room. It had every appearance of an empty hotel room save that a woman's traveling case stood in one corner, closed.

He lit a cigarette and began to pace the faded rose carpet. From the door to the window, a pause to stare out across a rooftop, then back past the dark dresser, the smoothly empty bed, back to the dark door. His own footsteps followed him softly on the ancient rug.

What time was it? How long had he been waiting? Eight cigarettes. How long did it take to smoke eight cigarettes?

A hundred half-questions glanced across his brain, and then they faded and his mind became fixed on the basic question: Why hadn't Andrea arrived? Why had she sent him here and failed to appear? If—

He stared at the travelling case. Scarcely thinking, he started to reach down for it, drew back, then lit the ninth cigarette. If she hasn't arrived by the time I finish it, he told himself . . .

She had not arrived.

Slowly Sam lifted the case and tested the catch. It was locked, but the lock was little stronger than tin. He braced the case against the wall and kicked. The lock flew open. Shoes, toilet articles, stockings tumbled out. And in the heap fell a photograph. For an instant Sam felt a sensation of incredulity rushing over him.

It was a picture of *him*. Him, standing in an archway with a flower in his lapel, and Sari was there beside him, smiling and dressed in white. Then Sam realized what it actually was: the wedding picture of Bill's and Sari's wedding. Yes, there was even the rice scattered around, and a bouquet.

He lifted the photograph to look more closely at this man whose face was so nearly his that only a fragment of some expression marked the fleeting difference. He was still looking when the quiet knocking came at the door.

A feeling of sudden shame filled him. He dropped the picture and opened the door. "It took so long I—"

His words evaporated. This was no

Andrea. This was a curious elf of a man—an ancient white-headed little man with bright blue eyes and a wisp of white goatee.

"You? You're Carpenter, are you?" he snapped briskly. He limped into the room. "Damn fool of a taxi driver. Got the wrong place. Made me late. Was afraid—Well, where's your sister?" He peered around.

"But she— I don't know. She said she would be here as soon as she could. I've been waiting—"

"*Humph!* Can't wait long." He glared at his watch. "Due at the hospital in forty minutes, now. I . . . She told you anything about me? Dr. Calloran. Said anything about writing to me from China?"

"She . . . Not exactly," Sam fumbled. He tried frantically to think. Where did *this* man fit? "She told me you would be here," he said anxiously. "She said you'd explain everything. You—you see, she's been very busy and she isn't well."

"So she wrote me. Well, time's wasting. I'll tell you what little I know. And mind you, young man, I'm not interested in your domestic troubles at all. I'm just telling you what little I know, and even that is second-hand from Dr. Watterbury. Old friend of mine, he was."

"Dr. Watterbury?" Sam echoed blankly.

"Killed in China last year. That's where your sister first got wind of all this affair. Don't know why she didn't explain. Women never— But I've got no time to start talking about *them*. Getting on to what I started, it's like this and pay attention, now." He popped his pipe in his mouth and spoke rapidly, the pipe bobbing furiously up and down.

"Seems Watterbury was in China and somehow your sister met him. Had him out to her house and that was when he saw the wedding picture. The way she wrote it to me after Watterbury was killed, Watterbury looked hard at the wedding picture and asked who the bride was. Your sister said it was your wife—her sister-in-law. Watterbury backed off at that, but she pressed him about why he'd asked and it came out. Watterbury told her the bride was a girl he'd seen in Berlin when he was over there before the war. She'd been the daughter of Dr. Fritz Ehrland. Brilliant brain surgeon, Ehrland was. Poor devil lost his mind toward the end. But what Watterbury remembered about the daughter was something else. Beautiful girl she was, and smart. That was it. Too smart. Kind of a dark, ugly smartness. Morbid. She was around twenty-five then, and she'd been dismissed from the Academy of Surgery in London. Big scandal about it. She was a genius, no doubt, but she got to experimenting along the wrong road. Whole thing came out when a murder took place. Damned if that girl, pretty as she was, hadn't done a private operation and created cerebral pressure in a man's head, trying to destroy the inhibitions. Plain truth is, she was out to create a killing machine in human form. Scandal got hushed because of her father and she dropped out of sight. Guess Watterbury hadn't thought of her till he saw that picture in your sister's house in Shanghai and heard the girl was your wife. Anyway," the little man glanced at his watch, "something about the story excited your sister a great deal. But before she could see Watterbury again, the poor devil got himself killed in a fall from his room. Your sister wrote around and finally got in touch with me, being Watterbury's partner once. Wanted to know what I could tell her. Well, that's all. I never saw the girl. She's your wife and I'm not saying that one mistake can damn a person forever. All I'm saying is that I happen to know that the scandal story in London was a fact. Your wife did do that, I know for a certainty. So . . ." He glared at his watch again. "Going to be late at the hospital. Can't wait any longer." He nodded, thrust the pipe into his pocket, and popped out of the room.

Sam stood there, staring at the closed door, and time ceased to move. At first his brain refused to function. Only the name kept spinning around his skull: Sari . . .

Then the mocking rhythm snapped and fragments of the past hours flashed through his memory. The hotel room where Angelo's corpse had been; the tapping at the door. And Sari had been *behind* him. Then the light had been out; the tapping had sounded in the darkness, where he could not *see*. The note . . . dropped in the darkness where he could not *see* . . .

The messages in the wall safe . . . There was some opening from the bedroom to a corridor above.

Sari's curiously intent eyes, her careful question only two hours ago: *"Has something happened you haven't told me?"*

The fragment poured into a torrent of realization: Sari, the once-disgraced medical student, had married Bill Carpenter; had used his fortune to carry on her experiments in deformity. She had killed Bill Carpenter, perhaps because he had learned. But Andrea did not know of her brother's death. Sari had continued to write letters, signing Bill's name; telling of some accident, laying the basis, perhaps, of this very masquerade.

But wasn't the scheme even more vast? Was it not possible that Sari had planned for years to obtain Andrea's part of the fortune? It was even possible that she had sent someone to China to poison, by slow degrees, Andrea's husband. Then Andrea. Poison could be the slow death that lay in Andrea's eyes. And had not that same agent in China *murdered* Dr. Watterbury to seal—

And Andrea was there at the penthouse. Something had happened. She had not arrived here! It meant—

"Damn! Of course it means Sari's realized!" Sam cried. "Andrea's there with Sari and . . . *And with Garrott!* If—"

The telephone rang and every nerve in Sam's body jerked. "But it's Andrea, of course!" he told himself breathlessly.

And it was Andrea's voice—deathly quiet and slow.

"Bill, I'm sorry I can't meet you. We . . . Sari and I have been talking. We—we want you to come back. Come back *alone,"* she said hopelessly.

Sam held the receiver and felt one drop of perspiration move down his cheek. Yes, it was clear. Terribly clear. They were forcing Andrea to make this call. And he must return alone, or else . . .

"Yes, Andrea. I understand everything. Everything," he said softly, whisperingly.

He replaced the receiver. He could flee, he thought slowly. He could go, forgetting there had ever been such a person as Andrea. Or he could go to the police immediately. They could force the penthouse. But Andrea would not be alive to see them enter. Only if he returned alone. Alone, as the call had commanded . . .

Sam sat there and walked hand in hand with understanding. Andrea had stalled for over an hour, giving him time to talk to Dr. Calloran. Giving him time to know his danger. Giving him the choice that could cost her life.

Alone. Alone, Sam thought again. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

But he rose, He rose slowly. He was afraid, and he would be more afraid with each step, each minute, he knew.

CHAPTER SIX

The Face of Fear

HE LEFT the elevator and started across the lobby, then he stopped. A message, he thought desperately. He could leave a message to be delivered to the police in half an hour. That would give him time to reach the penthouse, be there to do what he could when—

"She said to tell you not to speak to anyone. She said to tell you to return in ten minutes," a mournful voice murmured at his elbow. Sam turned with a start and stared at the empty-eyed face of Sylvia. She tugged his arm wearily. "It's time to hurry," she said.

Slowly his breath sank out of his chest. "Yes. Yes, of course," he agreed. Together they walked out into the brilliant sunshine and entered a cab.

The echo of his knocking faded. He moved his tongue across his dry lips and

Sylvia sighed drearily. The door opened and Sari smiled at him. "I couldn't imagine where you'd gone. Until Andrea told me," she added lightly. "Sit down, Bill. Or Sam." She moved her wrist casually, then glanced coolly at Sylvia.

"Just like you said," the woman said.

Sam's eyes crept around the room. Andrea was standing beside the bank of glass door, the greyness of despair on her face.

"You shouldn't," she said simply.

And then Sam saw Gargott, standing like a waxen image against the wall behind him, and in his hand was a long-pearl-handled knife. His fingers were opening and closing upon it, like a musician testing the keys of a flute.

"Knives," he said softly. "There were knives in Lisbon, too."

Sam filled his chest heavily and faced Sari again. "Everybody seems to understand each other," he said bleakly.

"There are methods of persuasion." Sari moved her long fingers idly. Sam frowned, then slowly his eyes returned to Andrea. He saw and an involuntary cry broke from his lips. For the tips of Andrea's fingers were red with blood, and her nails were split open.

"You damned sadist!" he raged at Sari. "Haven't you done enough? Haven't you got enough money? Why—"

"There is never enough money," she interrupted bluntly. "And my new laboratory in Mexico will cost over half a million. So you see . . ." She frowned and ran her fingers through her dark hair. "But Andrea has made this whole affair so clumsy. A corpse is always clumsy. Two are simply outrageous. And in a penthouse . . ." She kept frowning, and her dark eyes brooded thoughtfully.

Sam ceased to breathe as he saw her features grow still as he stared at the bank of doors—and beyond them, to the terrace. As surely as if she had spoken, he perceived her thoughts. And then she did speak—softly, musing almost to herself.

"Yes . . . Perhaps. Andrea is ill. That is well know. The ill can become melancholy. Suicide . . . And you, as her brother . . . Of course. You saw. Rushed to save her. Fell as she fell. I will have seen it. Of course—"

Andrea screamed and Sari laughed. Sam opened and closed his fingers and the eyes crawled back to Gargott; to the immense machine of a man who dreamily fondled the knife. Sam looked at the man's eyes. They seemed to float everywhere, to be upon everyone. On him, Sam; upon Andrea. But in their dreaming, they always played upon Sari.

Sam's brain smashed to a halt. He remembered Sari's scream. He remembered the look in Gargott's eyes when he had seen the kiss. He remembered the gentle words of lust: "Lovely . . . Lovely . . ."

He began to breathe again and his eyes returned to Sari. He wet his lips and moved his hands. His muscles felt frozen. He took one step and moved his jaws. Yes, he could speak reasonably, he discovered.

"You're lovely, Sari. Lovely," he repeated. Another step toward her, and his arms rose gently.

"What in the devil?" she demanded blankly.

"Your lips. Your eyes. You *are* lovely, Sari."

"Are you insane, you utter fool! Take your hands—"

"I want to kiss you again. Remember? I kissed you before. Gargott saw us. *Gargott remembers.* It was lovely." He touched her shoulders. She twisted and jerked away.

"You complete maniac!" she breathed. "Stop—"

"*Gargott remembers,*" Sam repeated. He followed her. Then he heard a deep long breath of awakening from the place where Gargott stood.

"Lovely," Gargott said slowly, rumblingly. "Beautiful and lovely."

"*Gargott!*" Sari screamed furiously. "You damned beast, stay where—"

"Lovely," Gargott repeated dreamily. He came shuffling across the rug.

"Gargott!" Sari screamed. Her fury had passed into terror. "Leave me alone! Don't touch— Gargott, don't—" The words plunged into a wordless scream and she tried to evade the outstretched arms. There was the ripping of silk, then hard pounding of breath; the crashing of a chair, the wail of horror from Sari, and Gargott's whisper: "Lovely . . . Lovely . . . "

Sam leaped across the overturned chair

(Continued on page 96)

She had a child's eyes and a child's face and a woman's body. And I stayed at Kelly's because I loved her.

THE NIGHT THE RAT DANCED

By GEORGE WILLIAM RAE

THE newspapers called it "a sordid tragedy." You can put your tag on it; here are the elements: A man with a hole in his head, a rat that danced atop a bar, a lovely woman, and a drunkard who slept through murder. . . .

I took the job in Kelly's because I had to eat. It was a dump on the waterfront. A dim room with crowding tables and a postage stamp-sized dance floor. At one end a thin wall sliced the bar off by itself. That's where I worked, in the bar, four to closing, six nights a week, dishing out rotgut to people who were forever arguing and fighting.

I guess I couldn't have stayed if it weren't for Carmen DeVliss.

Carmen was the one-act floorshow. A ten-minute dance, three times a night. But what a dance. It wasn't the little she wore or what she took off. It was the way she did it. She flowed like music, she worked on you like wine, until the whole place swayed in the semi-darkness and it was as if everybody in the place was dancing to the sobbing of Jimmy Gaylord's sax. That's the way she hit you. The dancer with the child's eyes and the child's face and the woman's body. I loved her; that's why I stayed. I wouldn't have left Kelly's to save my life.

The night the rat danced was a Saturday. He leaped from the floor to the bar, down at the far end, a plump, sleek one,

The sleek grey rat atop the bar danced faster and faster . . . while the stranger called Death tapped the shoulder of the big man with the diamond stickpin. . . .

grey as death. He wasn't very big—I'd seen bigger in the waterfront district—but he was fat and sure of himself and entirely unafraid.

A big fellow with a diamond stickpin and a flashy suit noticed the rat first. The man was a newcomer. The night before had been the first time I'd seen him.

"Look!" he said. "A dancing rat!"

The crowd at the bar looked where he pointed. There was the rat on the bar, swaying to the music of Jimmy Gaylord's band. Following the rhythm with his body as he sat up on his hind legs, his long tail switching across the bar behind him.

They crowded around to watch and the rat went right on dancing, his eyes half-closed and glazed as if he were hypnotized. The music speeded up, loud and jarring, and the rat whirled and spun about, claws scratching on the bar.

"He's goin' crazy!" Someone yelled.

But the rat was right with the beat, dancing, spinning, lurching with the music.

I didn't hear the shot. The music was too loud. A woman screamed and pointed. The big man with the diamond stickpin was folding to the floor. The back of his head was a welter of blood.

For a moment we all stood frozen while the man settled to the floor and the rat went on dancing madly to the wild beat of Jimmy Gaylord's band.

I leaned over the bar and looked at the man. Then I looked at the crowd huddled close to the wall away from the body. A drunk named Donatti slept at a table against the wall, his shaggy head pillowed on his arms.

"My God!" someone whispered, and that broke the spell. Women screamed and the crowd headed for the door in a rush. I didn't try to stop them. I'm just a barky, not a cop. I walked around the bar and looked down at the man. He was dead.

Kelly came rushing out of the other room.

"What goes on, Frank?" he asked. Then he saw the body. His face drained of color. His big body trembled. Although he ran a waterfront dive, Kelly hated violence. It made him sick to see blood. "Call the police," he croaked, leaning against the bar. "And give me a double shot."

I called the police and poured two double shots. The bar was entirely deserted except for Kelly and me and the drunk sleeping at the table. With a sick little shock, I noticed the grey rat was still dancing on the end of the bar. . . .

LIEUTENANT BAKER of Homicide was very efficient. He ordered the blinds drawn, questioned the customers in the other room, got their addresses and let them go. Then, the place empty, he came out to the bar where the help stood around in a worried group.

Baker was a chain smoker, jerky in his movements, short and heavily built. He had thin lips that made me feel it'd be tough to have him for an enemy.

"Any of you people know the victim?" Baker asked. His hard brown eyes worked over the musicians, the two cooks, the three waiters, me. They lingered for a long time on the face of Carmen DeVliss and they glinted with strange lights as if he thought he knew her, but wasn't sure.

"Okay," Baker said. "Any of you seen him around here before?" He swung to me. "You seen him?"

"He came in last night for the first time since I've been here," I told him. "That's all I know about him." I don't know why I didn't tell Baker that I'd seen the big man go backstage to Carmen DeVliss' dressing room twice, the night before and that night. I figured if she wanted him to know she would've told him.

Baker went over to the drunk who still slept at the table. He shook him. "Hey, you, wake up!" he yelled. The drunk's head lolled about but he remained asleep. Baker came back to the bar. "Who's he?"

"That's Phil Donatti," Kelly said. "He's a regular. He hasn't been sober since I've known him."

Baker turned to me again. "He drank enough to float the Queen Mary tonight," I said.

"A hell of a lot of good you people are to a murder investigation," Baker said. He took a notebook from his pocket, opened it with clean, blunt fingers.

"Now I'll tell you a few things that might jog your memories." Baker said. "The dead man is Pete King, a cheap hood from New York. He wouldn't be coming in here for nothing. Probably looking for somebody. That mean anything?"

Nobody answered. Baker smirked and

went on. Behind him the coroner and several other men worked in quiet boredom, taking pictures, measuring, sorting out the contents of the dead man's pockets.

"King's racket is mainly blackmail. According to the record he wasn't much on pleasure so he must've been here on business." Baker's voice was flat and a little weary. "If any of you are holding anything back you're putting yourself in a tough spot."

Still no answer.

Baker slammed the book shut, shoved it into his pocket and turned his back on us.

"Take that drunk down to Headquarters and sober him up," Baker said to a harness bull at the door. "I want to talk to him when he can make sense."

I happened to be looking at Carmen DeVliss' face when Baker said that. She turned pale and her lips formed the word, "No. . . ." but she didn't say anything aloud.

I knew there was something between Carmen and the drunk, Donatti. I'd seen them together enough. I'd never said anything to her about it because I'd said very little to her anyway. I told you I was in love with her. Well, I guess it was what you call a silent love. To her I was just a barky who worked in the same joint with her. We'd never held any long conversations.

The musicians, cooks and waiters went out when Baker left. Carmen was going to leave, too, but I stopped her.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I'd like to talk to you."

She swung her eyes full at me, and I could see in them what I'd thought might be there. Fear.

"What about?" she asked.

"Look," I said, "I'm with you, kid, but I'd like to know what I'm supposed to say. I know that murdered man went back to see you last night and tonight."

"I figured it was *my* business," she said. "I didn't tell them because I didn't want to get involved."

"That's okay by me. But how about Donatti? You didn't say a word about knowing him, either."

She didn't say anything to that, just caught her bottom lip between two rows of small white teeth and looked at me.

"They'll probably find out about it," I told her. "Why don't you let me help you?"

Her eyes came up to mine. We were standing very close together at the end of the bar. We were alone in the bar.

"Why?" she asked.

WHAT I did then could've been called cheap or beautiful, depending on the way you knew me. I'm just a little guy who got out of the Army with a few battle stars and a kind of humility at being alive. I got kicked around. No decent work. But I never got bitter. I'm not the kind of a man who gets bitter. I can't hate. In war it's an impersonal thing, can you understand that? I couldn't do a cheap thing to somebody I love. I leaned over and kissed her. She knew then why I wanted to help her.

She didn't pull away from the kiss but when it was over she said, "Nobody's ever kissed me like that Be careful, he'll kill you, too."

I said, "Who?" But she was gone and I was alone in the bar and strangely very lonely. Loneliness is common in bars. They bring it in every day and throw it at you

but it doesn't touch you until suddenly you are lonely yourself, and then it pounces on you and you hear it whispering from every corner of the room and along the bar where it had daily chewed the hearts of men.

I took off my apron and walked down the bar. There was a scraping scamper and I saw the rat, the plump, death-grey rat that had been dancing while a man died. He was poised on the end of the bar, his glazed eyes aimed at me, his pointed teeth bared, his sharp nose twitching. We looked at each other for a long time and then he whisked off the bar and glided under a table.

Kelly came out of his office then.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Frank," he said, looking around and shivering. I hardly heard him because I suddenly knew something that made the death of the big man with the diamond stickpin easy to understand.

"Go ahead," I said to Kelly. "I'll close up. Guess I'd better clean that mess up in front of the bar."

He shivered again as his eyes struck the bloodstain on the floor.

"Okay, go ahead. I'm getting home to bed." He just about backed out.

I stuck around for about an hour and then I went to my room.

The next morning in a heavy rain I went down to Headquarters.

Lieutenant Baker was in his office, looking like he'd been through a wringer. "We've been sweating Donatti all night," he said wearily, "but we couldn't get anything out of him. He says he was asleep, that he was drunk. That's all he'll say. We'll have to turn him loose."

"I came down to tell you about the rat," I said.

He squinted at me. "What rat?"

"The rat that was dancing on the bar when the big man was killed."

"I heard someone mention that. What about it?"

"Doesn't it seem funny that a rat should be dancing?" I asked. "And just at the time when a man was murdered?"

He lifted his shoulders. "One of those things," he said. I had wanted to tell him what I'd found out but suddenly I decided to let it ride for a while.

"I wonder what was eating Donatti," I mused. "I never saw such a rummy."

Baker was interested now.

"Ever see him with a woman?"

"I saw him with a lot of women," I countered.

"This one would be short and dark," he said. "About a year ago, back in New York, this woman was tried for knocking off her husband. The state said Donatti was the motive but they couldn't make it stick. There was a witness they couldn't locate. After her acquittal she disappeared, and so did Donatti. Maybe she's around. By the looks of things, she knocked her husband off, and she and Donatti ran off together."

It was a nice story but it didn't make a pretty picture in my mind. I went out into the rain feeling lousy.

CARMEN lived at a small hotel downtown. I'd heard her mention it once or twice in Kelly's.

She opened the door to my knock almost immediately, as if she'd been waiting for me.

I eased in and closed the door.

"They're going to turn him loose," I said. Over her shoulder I saw the suitcase on the bed, half packed.

She backed against the bed, looking at me as if she'd never seen me before.

"I'm no detective," I said, "but it wasn't hard to figure why the rat danced. *He danced because he was drunk.* Donatti was pouring the booze he was supposed to be drinking into the rathole under the table. I pulled the nest out of there last night; it was soaked with whiskey. I found a gun in there, too, Carmen. That gave me the picture."

Her face was as white as the blouse she wore. She gave a kind of a sob and then took a couple of steps toward me. "It's the wrong picture, Frank," she said. "I don't know how you found out about New York and that trial but you've got the wrong picture."

I took the .38 I'd found in the rathole out of my pocket. "There's only one picture you can make out of this," I said.

With an effort Carmen pulled herself together.

"Yes, that's Phil's gun," she said. "Yes, he did pour some of his drinks down the rathole. But what that adds up to is not what you think. Last night you kissed me, Frank, and you said you meant it. I kissed

you back and I meant it, too. If you want to hear what I've got to say, then listen to me before it's too late. . . ."

I put the gun back in my pocket.

"In New York I married a man I'd known one day. I thought I loved him. I was new to that. I found out soon how wrong I was, but by then it was too late. I was married to one of the biggest crooked gambling operators in the city. Phil Donatti worked for him. I could talk to Phil and he understood. There was never any more than that between us. My husband had a partner who hated him and it was this partner who must have killed him. He was the man the state thought they could complete their case with but he was gone. They said I'd killed my husband for Phil Donatti but that wasn't true. The newspapers made a big thing of it and after the trial I thought it best to leave the city. I got the job here and Phil followed me but there still is nothing between us except friendship. . . ."

Someone walloped the door. I stepped aside and Carmen opened the door. It was Jimmy Gaylord, the orchestra leader. He threw the door open and for a minute I was behind it.

"Phil's out," Gaylord said to Carmen. "I was up at Kelly's rehearsing my boys. He came in and talked crazy, said he was going to kill somebody. I rushed over here."

Gaylord's back was to me. I slid out the door, my feet making no noise on the carpet. I had things to do and I had to do them fast.

The cab skidded up to Kelly's a half-hour later and I rammed through the door. The silence of the place wrapped itself around me so suddenly that I stopped just inside and ran my eyes over the dimness and listened for a minute to my heart walloping against my ribs.

I walked through the room with its ghostly white tablecloths. The echoes of my footsteps tramped along with me like those of unseen companions.

He was in there, all right. Up ahead in the darkness his voice whipped. "Stay there. I've got a gun on you."

I stopped, straining my eyes at the dim bulk of his figure.

"You're a sap, Frank," he said. "The telephone call was a dead give-away. I could see that you just wanted to keep me her until you came. Am I right, Frank?"

He came out of the shadows, his face emerging from a white blur until it hung before me, clear and cold and deadly.

"I hate violence," Kelly said, "but it seems to force itself on me. I'll have to kill you, Frank."

"Putty outside and steel inside," I said. "Violence seems to be your forte, Kelly. There was a man in New York, your partner. Then there was a blackmailing hood last night. You took care of them, all right. Then there was a drunken kid named Donatti. . . ."

"What about Donatti? He was around here a short while ago, yelling he was going to kill somebody."

"He was," I said. "He went off the top of the Mercantile Building a half-hour ago."

Kelly laughed a hard little laugh. "Donatti had it coming," he said. "He was trying to help Carmen pin the New York killing on me—and after I'd taken her in and given her a job, the tramp."

"I guess that wraps it up," I said. "You killed the big guy last night because he knew about the murder in New York. Donatti was pouring drinks down the rathole to keep sober so that he could warn the guy, but the temptation was too strong, he got drunk and you went through with it. Is that right, Kelly?"

He wasn't laughing now. "I took a hundred grand away from New York," he said. "I'd kill a lot of guys for a hundred grand —including you. . . ."

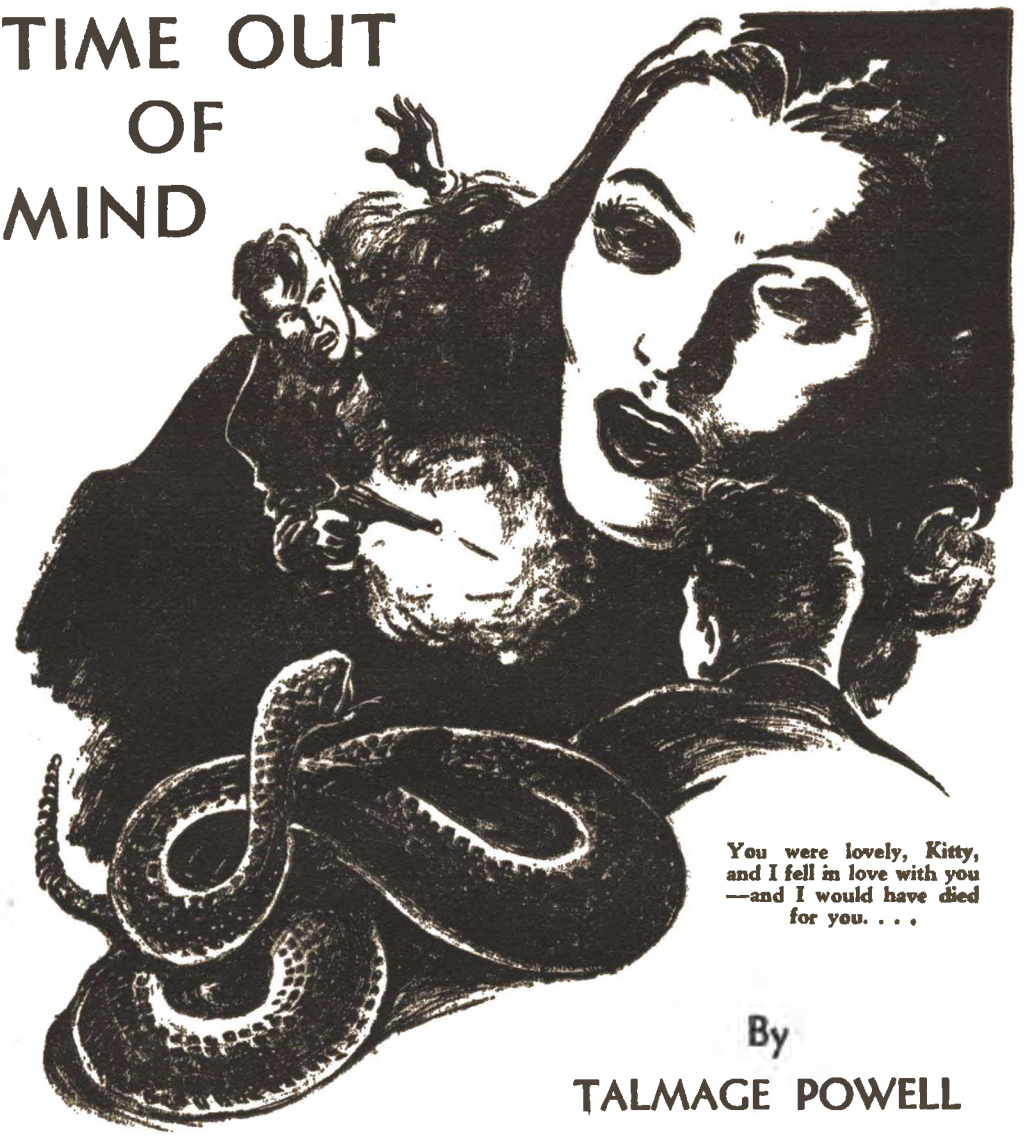
He was backing away, his face working. He hated it, what he'd have to see, a lot of blood and more violence. I had nothing to lose. I dived at him. Something sledged my ribs and I slid across the slippery dance floor. I dug in my pocket for the .38. He was throwing shots at me now. Another tugged at my arm. I sat up and shot him in the stomach.

He doubled over the gun, still triggering on an empty cylinder, then he smashed face down on the floor beside me.

I stayed awake long enough to see Carmen come in and then a tall, young beat cop who'd heard the shooting.

In the middle of a kiss I passed out, but there was a lifetime more where that'd come from.

TIME OUT OF MIND



You were lovely, Kitty, and I fell in love with you —and I would have died for you. . . .

By

TALMAGE POWELL

Murder hung like a pall over the mind of Kitty Hargrove. . . . Heavier than the dark mist that shrouded the lush Florida swamps, deadlier than the rattlesnakes she trapped in its dank depths. . . .

IT IS the aftermath of murder now, Kitty. Blood has touched us, but now it is over and done. I am lying here in my hospital bed, and the walls and ceiling are very white and clean. The soft breeze is touching my cheek, and in the warm silence there is plenty of time to think. . . .

I am thinking of that moment I met you, Kitty. Do you recall how hot that Florida day was? I had been walking in the pine woods. It was shady there, the tall pines cutting off most of the hot, Florida sun. I felt the flexing and pull of my muscles as I walked along. I was surging with a sort of

bubbling power, as if life itself was bubbling up in me to the point that I couldn't hold it any longer.

I had just about gotten over that night in Madison Square Garden when the welter champ had beat hell out of me. I'd been a pretty fair prizefighter up to then—but I woke up after that fight with a broken hand and bees in my brain. They told me I'd better rest. Macklin, the best manager a guy ever had, tore up my contract and told me to get out of the fight game while I had all my marbles.

He had tears in his eyes when he did it, Kitty. "You never belonged in the fight game, Sam Breece," he said to me. "You're college-trained. You're smart. I know you got a thrill out of it, and life has been just one big happy merry-go-round. But the carousel has run down now, Sammy. I always wanted to manage a champ, Sam, but —well, there's your contract."

On the floor in little pieces.

I had come home, Kitty. To the little Florida town where I'd grown up. And so I was walking in the pine woods on the edge of town that day—walking into murder. . . .

I reached the edge of the woods, and there was the old Collins place before me, like a great, dark shadow-house out of a nightmare. I could see only the upper stories of the house itself: the shrubs grew rank and wild about it, giving it a hulking, waiting air of evil. Houses like that should never have been built in Florida. Florida is the place to build neat, white cottages with plenty of exposure to the sun.

In the village they were already whispering dark, old wives' tales about the strangers who'd bought the old Collins place. About Janice, your brother's wife. About her wide, blank eyes and slavering mouth, and how sometimes when the moon was full sounds came from the old house like a mad she-wolf baying at the dark sky.

I stopped there in the road, the heat like a thick blanket about me, looking at the house. It was silent, as if Death were its only occupant. I hadn't wandered this way by design—I'd just been walking. But now as I looked over the face of the house, I caught a glimpse of movement in an upstairs window. I knew I was being watched, and because I was a stranger, I could conclude only that all strangers who approached that house would be watched.

I turned down the road away from the house. The road angled, cutting through a neck of pine woods, and when I reached the fringe of the trees, I heard a man's voice calling from the house, "Kitty! Come to the house, Kitty. *Kitty!*"

I came out of the short neck of woods. Before me lay wasteland, dotted here and there by low, prickly palmetto growing in the sun-scorched sand. The man's voice faded in the distance.

THEN I saw you, Kitty. You were tall, dark, and looked cool in the heat. When I later learned that your name was Kitty, I felt that it was wrong for you. I felt that you should have a stranger, far more exotic name. A mysterious Slavic name, perhaps. You were wearing a white sport shirt, almost like a man's, and tan slacks. The slacks were tucked in knee-high boots. There was a purpose for the boots. You were hunting snakes, and you had found one.

I stood rigid with amazement for a few moments. You had the snake, a rattler as thick as my forearm, pinned to the sandy soil with one of those gadgets they use, a long stick with a strap passed down its length, forming a loop at the end of the stick that can be tightened around the snake's neck.

You must have heard me run forward, but you didn't look up. You were too busy for that. You didn't know whether I was male or female, but you said quietly, "Would you mind opening the basket?"

A large wicker basket was on the ground a few feet from you.

"You'd better open the basket," I said, "and let me handle that guy."

You glanced over your shoulder then. For an instant our eyes met, and for me it was like getting an electric shock. I looked at your almost Slavic face, with the high, lovely cheekbones, the haunted something in your eyes, your black, perfect brows, and gleaming sheen of jet hair that was parted in the middle and combed down loosely about your shoulders.

Then I took the stick from your hands. The snake's rattles were going like crazy, but you were cool, detached. I sensed that you were laboring under some sort of strain, but none of it showed.

Considering the power that rattler was

transmitting through the gadget that held him, I wondered how you had hung on to him. You opened the basket, and I, teeth set and sweat beading my brow, picked the big fellow up and thrust him in the wicker prison. You popped the lid on, and I wriggled the stick free, pulled it from under the pressure you were putting on the lid, and you secured the lid.

"Well . . . ." You blew your breath up so that it toyed with a fine lock of stray hair on your forehead. "That was something. Thank you, Mr. Breece."

"So you know me?"

"You're Sam Breece, the fighter—or a very close double. I read in the papers that you were coming down this way for a rest. I used to see your fights."

"The ex-fighter," I said. "Is your name Kitty Hargrove?"

You nodded.

"I think your brother was calling," I said. "I passed close by the house."

"My step-brother," you said, as you lighted a cigarette. "His father married my mother many years ago. My mother gave me the Hargrove name." You looked at me then, from the tip of your cigarette. "You've met Randolph?"

"No," I said.

"But you called him my brother. You knew the last name."

"Well, I—" I stammered.

"Have the people in the village been talking about us?" you asked quietly.

I didn't say anything.

"It's because of Janice," you said. "Rand's wife. She—had an accident. It hurt her spine. She is suffering from a brain disorder."

It was a neat, polite way of putting it, and I accepted it. At that moment, I knew I had found something. I wanted only to stand there for a very long time and just look at you, Kitty. I wondered what you'd do if I kissed you on the lips. It gave me a fluttery, soft feeling inside. And yet—for some reason I was afraid. Despite the bright Florida day, there were shadows in my eyes. I remembered the almost frantic way Rand had called you, when he'd seen me heading this way. As if he didn't want anybody to catch you hunting rattlesnakes. . . .

Yes, I had found something, Kitty. Lives are funny that way. They touch and intermingle, and at every touch they cut new channels for each other. You stand and chat forty-five seconds today with a newsboy as he sells you a paper, and the rest of your whole life is forty-five seconds different from what it would have been.

When I got home that afternoon, I went out in the kitchen, where my mother was mixing dough to make soft rools. My father is the lawyer down in the village, Kitty, and my parents are as old as the town. They're good and generous people.

I sat down and watched Mom for a few minutes, chatting idly. Finally I said, "Met a girl this afternoon."

"That's nice." The too-casual way my mother said that made me realize she'd been worrying about me. "What's her name, Sam?"

"Kitty Hargrove."

I saw Mom's hands suddenly freeze in the big wooden dough-mixing bowl. I saw her face whiten just a shade, the way a face will do when the blood rushes inward, toward an inner source of suddenly needed heat. "She's—a very exotic girl, isn't she, Sam?"

That was her first reaction to you, Kitty. I must be honest about this whole thing, else there will always be dishonesty between us; if I am dishonest in the slightest detail, there is no need of writing this at all. My mother's first reaction to you, then, was one of instinctive fright.

"She is very exotic, Mom," I agreed. "You know her very well?"

"No one knows the Hargroves well, Sam."

"What's her brother like?"

"A very handsome young man." She kneaded the dough until the silence was stretched like a taut wire, then added, "Almost too handsome, I'd say. I understand he's been unlucky with his wives."

I felt a stiffness grow over my lips. "Unlucky? What do you mean, unlucky with his wives?"

"It's just rumor, I suppose. The real estate man who sold them the old Collins place knew them slightly up North. Perhaps he started it all."

She kneaded the dough some more.

"Damn it, Mom, what are you driving at?"

"His first wife was fairly wealthy, Sam, and older than he was. Much older. She

committed suicide by jumping from a fifteenth floor window in their apartment. A year or so later he married his present wife. She was hurt in a fall down the stairs, which could easily have killed her. Sam—he almost went into court about his wives."

I looked at the patch of sky framed by the window. "You mean—he might have done something to them? People are always gossiping like that, Mom."

"I suppose so, Sam. Incidentally, his present wife is a Tampan. She was Janice Vanderling until she married him."

I remembered the Vanderling name. Old, respected, worth close to a quarter of a million dollars, I supposed.

"You remember," Mom asked, "that Andy Vanderling was killed in action during the war? You ought to recall him, Sam. He used to come here sometimes for the hunting before he went in service."

"I remember Andy Vanderling," I said.

"He was the last of the line. Only Janice is left now. Old families have a way of going like that. In its declining decades, seems that fate poured a lot of violence on the Vanderlings. I remember young Andy used to tell us how high-strung Janice was. It's no wonder, I say. Her mother was drowned when a boat capsized, and her father was bitten to death by a cottonmouth. No wonder she hated boats and snakes. Then to have young Andy go in the war. . . ."

I don't know what else my mother said. I remember that I got out of the house. I walked for hours. I tried to shut you out of my mind, Kitty. But two lives had touched, and the channels had changed. . . .

I DIDN'T sleep much that night, and when I did drop off along toward dawn, I dreamed strange dreams. I dreamed about reeling fighters soaked with sweat and blood. I dreamed of a wife named Janice suffering—politely—from a brain disorder, howling like a wolf at the full moon. I heard the echo of a male voice calling frantically, "Kitty—don't let him see the snake, Kitty!" And I saw that blank-eyed Janice in my dream, backing away in wild terror, whimpering vocal nothings, as a five-foot rattlesnake lashed, coiled, and struck. . . .

The striking of the snake woke me. I was limp with sweat. I'd been screaming! I hadn't wanted it to happen—because it had been you, Kitty, who'd caught the snake.

It was broad day when I woke. Mom was bending over my bed, shaking me, her eyes worried. "Sam, are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure." I sat up in bed, passed my hand over my face.

She stood near the bed, as if not knowing what to do. "Sam, are you sure you're feeling well. That last fight—"

"I'm okay. Be a good girl and fix me some breakfast?"

Later, after I'd showered, I stood before my bureau mirror combing my hair and trying to think myself out of it. I'd been under too much strain. I was seeing phantoms. The awful worming decay of rumor about the Hargroves had done its work on me. That last fight—I was still too shaken from it to think clearly, I told myself, and I was jumping to dark and morbid conclusions which had no basis in fact.

But the thought kept sticking. *What earthly use would a woman have for a five-foot rattlesnake?*

You remember those next few days, Kitty. After my dream that morning, I made up my mind that I would forget you. But, Kitty, I had phoned you before noon, and that afternoon we played tennis down in the village, remember? That was the beginning. We saw each other often in the days that followed. There were long, warm evenings with the darkness like velvet, inviting times to take long drives. There were dinners at a Spanish restaurant in Tampa, and the boat races in St. Petersburg. I had fallen in love with you, Kitty. I knew many things about you. I knew that you played tennis well. I knew that you knew how to laugh, that you were intelligent without being an intellectual snob. And you were lovely, Kitty. But that haunted look never left your eyes, even when you were laughing, and you talked none about yourself. So, while I knew many things about you, I knew nothing. And the unknown things were what frightened me. . . .

Yes, I was in love with you, Kitty. But I had never dreamed it would happen this way, with me fighting against it, powerless against it. In love, with terror knotted inside of me.

You see, there was a growing question in my mind, one that I couldn't voice: *What had happened to the rattlesnake?*

Then, Kitty, came the events of last night. You phoned me late in the afternoon. Would I come to dinner tonight? I was surprised, and I think you sensed it. But you passed it off with warm laughter and told me it was nothing special, that Rand wanted to meet me. "Just wear any old thing, Sam—a sport shirt and slacks if you like. And bring along your swimming trunks; we'll drive out to the beach afterward, you and I."

I knew then that something was going to happen that night, for as you were hanging up—you must have been replacing the phone slowly, reluctantly—I barely caught a man's sibilant, evilly anxious whisper over the wire: "Is it set?"

I went up to my room. Hard knots had come into being in my chest, and my hands were shaking. I was coldly, deathly afraid, Kitty. Of what I didn't know. I stayed in my room a long time. Then I rolled my trunks in a beach towel and put them in a plastic beach bag. I thought of you, Rand and Janice. I knew I had to see this thing through. Who else could I turn to? What was there, concretely, that I could say to anyone else? Janice, after all, was a human being. Crazy, perhaps, but a living person whom I couldn't let die.

I rode the municipal bus out of the village to the end of the line. It was a good stiff walk from there to the Collins place. Where the driveway turned into the old house, the shrubbery was thick and high, making the turn-off of the drive a blind curve.

You met me at the door, took my hand and guided me into the house. Inside, the place was what I'd expected from the outside appearance: furniture repaired enough to get by, place clean. But dark shadows in the corners. Shadows hovering everywhere, it seemed, even in places there were actually no shadows at all.

We sat down in the living room. I noticed the deepness of your tan, the darkness of your eyes, the natural redness of your lips.

"Rand is up with Janice," you said. "He'll be down presently."

As if he'd heard his name, Rand at that moment came into the room. He was tall, slender, with a face that was perhaps too fine-boned, a pencil-thin mustache, quick, morbid eyes under a high, narrow forehead.

We shook hands, and you excused yourself. Rand said, "A drink, Breece?"

"A little wine, if it's handy."

It was in the cabinet at the far end of the room. Rand mixed himself a stiff whiskey and soda.

We talked of this and that for a few moments, and I veered the conversation around to you, Kitty. Finally, I mentioned the snake in an offhand way.

"Oh, that," Rand laughed. "She sold the snake to the man down at the snake farm. You know the place, a couple miles south of town where they milk the snakes for the venom." He looked at me, looked away, licked his lips and laughed again. "Kitty is quite a girl, if you haven't already discovered that fact. Always poking her nose here and there. Inquisitive, you know. Well, it's really very simple. The snake, I mean. She went to the snake farm one day, sightseeing. You know how tourists flock there. The snakes fascinated her. She listened to the guide lecture on their capture and use—and decided she'd try her hand at it. Until you came along, Breece, she was bored stiff here."

"It is an out-of-the-way place."

"Yes. Well, Janice's people used to come here sometimes, years ago. A psychiatrist suggested the place might be good for her. Mental association, you know."

Istill wasn't satisfied. His explanation about the snake had come too readily, and for a moment I wasn't sure whether it had been I who'd actually veered the talk in that direction. I was afraid of him, Kitty. He was a weakling, but the sort of weakling who would bring out all that was maternal in a woman. I was beginning to sense and feel vague, terrifying things in his presence, the sort of things that might have put that almost-hidden, haunted look in your eyes. For the first time in my life I had met a man I was afraid of. . . .

WE HAD dinner, and you had cooked the fried chicken, Kitty. But you couldn't eat. Your hands were trembling, and your face was too white. Once, during dinner, we heard a thin wail filter down from upstairs, and Rand, dutifully and with much grace, excused himself to see about her—about Janice, who was the last of the Vanderling line and worth a quarter of a million dollars.

Rand came back and seated himself at the table. "Janice had lost her doll," he said with the quiet tone of a martyr. I looked at him, and he explained: In her state, Janice had vague, vacant dreams of motherhood and had fastened her pathetic affection on a small, silken doll. There was a kitten on the place—also Janice's—that was given at times to tussling with the doll, carrying it off into corners, even outside. Rand's words left a still, cold feeling in the room, and I was glad when you and I changed and met again downstairs and drove your convertible to the beach.

It was a beautiful night, the beach and surf white under a new-risen moon. We swam far down the beach and back again. We were winded and tired when we got out of the water. We stood, breathing deeply, looking out over the limitless expanse of the gulf. We were both very quiet, and it was the most natural thing in the world for me to tip your chin up and kiss you.

It was a sweet kiss, Kitty, a kiss that held and became long, and that tried to let you know how much I loved you.

Then I knew you were crying. You seemed to drift away from me. You sank down on the sand, like a pilgrim doing aching penance. . . .

Your sobs were thick, shaking the whole night. But I didn't touch you. I knew this was something you had to fight out alone. Whatever you had to tell me was coming now.

"I can't go through with it, Sam! I can't help him kill her—not this one!"

That turned my throat to parchment. *Not this one* . . . .

"Don't look at me, Sam! If you look at me, I'll never be able to tell you. And I've got to tell you, Sam! I've got to—because I love you. . . ."

I got it in snatches, Kitty. You couldn't get it out clearly or in one piece. For Rand you'd always felt that strongest of feminine emotions: a maternal sense, a feeling that he was weak and must be protected. It was a feeling that had governed your life for years, but it was dying now—if it hadn't months ago.

His first wife had been lecherous, cruel. Older than Rand, she'd bought him, and she had known it. She had hated you for your youth and loveliness and the laughter that danced on your lips and in your eyes.

The day of her death you'd come from a cocktail party. She'd begun to quarrel with you over some unimportant incident. You had reached the breaking point. You stormed back at her. You went out in the kitchen and had two long drinks. They hit you, with what you'd already had from the cocktail party. And you are not the kind to drink, Kitty. You'd passed out on your feet, with the events of the next few hours coming to you only in flashes. Between those flashes of realization, you hadn't known what was happening.

Later, you remembered aruging again with that first wife of Rand's. You remembered her striking you; then your mind had dissolved in a red mist of indignation that she should lay those fat, lecherous hands on you.

Then—how much later you didn't know—Rand's white face swam into your vision. He was shaking you, telling you not to worry, that it would be all right, that he would take care of you. You realized then that his wife was lying in the courtyard far below and that you were trembling with rage, standing with the breeze blowing through the open window . . . .

You couldn't kill anyone, you'd tried to tell yourself—but always there was the memory of that breeze blowing through the open window, and no matter how many times you walked to the police station, your feet always turned themselves away at the last moment. Perhaps Rand had done it, you thought. You watched him for some give-away signs. There was none. But always those steps into the precinct house were unmountable.

Rand had married Janice a year or so later. Janice's fall down the stairs actually had been an accident, but if Rand had had her committed, Janice's investments would have been administered by her attorneys. So he had decided that she must die. He had begun working on you slowly, telling you that Janice would be better off dead, using every trick, wearing you down, until, like a strained dam, you had broken to his silken, effeminate will. A weakling, he'd had strength in that way—a strange and terrifying strength.

He'd planned to use the snake, but I had seen you catching it, Kitty, and he'd discarded that idea.

You raised your tear-streaked face from your hands there on the beach and said, "Now we've got to hurry, Sam! He's going to put that doll of Janice's in the driveway and let her wander out to it at exactly nine-thirty. I'm supposed to whip into the drive. We—we'll hit her. He's sure that in her condition an accident will kill her. He'll say the kitten must have carried the doll out and that she must have wandered out to it without his knowing it. He drew you in, Sam, to make it stronger, to make you a witness that is was an accident."

You were rising, moving toward the car. Going to save Janice's ife. My throat was a pair of knots working against each other. I held your fingers in my hand and made you pause long enough for me to try to tell you with my eyes. You had been honest with me. I loved you more than I could ever love any mortal. I didn't know what was ahead, but now the terror had gone oue of me—and out of you. I think I made you understand.

You remember, Kitty, that you drove very fast on the way back.

You killed the car lights a mile from the old Collins place. You parked over half a mile from there. Sound carries far on a still, Florida night.

We set out, moving like shadows over the landscape. Rough palmettoes flayed our calves, but we didn't feel the pain.

It was just after nine when we approached the aged, dismal house in our beach sandals.

We worked our way around toward the back of the house, intending to approach it from that direction.

I could feel your hand wet with moisture in mine. Or perhaps the perspiration was all mine.

We moved silently along the side of the house. And when we reached the front corner, we saw Rand. He was a dark shadow on the porch, staring into the dark for the glow of headlights . . .

He moved to the drive, then suddenly stopped. The rustle of foliage, the snapping of a twig had warned him. "Who's there?" he demanded hoarsely. He spun and ran for the house.

THERE was no need for silence then. He clattered across the front porch a jump ahead of me, slammed the door, tripped the key. I had to hit the door three times with my shoulder before it gave with a crash.

We paused a second, you and I, Kitty. And during that second, I didn't see him. We edged into the room, the long, shadow-filled living room. He was standing near the dining room doorway, etched in moonlight that came through the tall windows. I could hear his breathing. It was loud, rasping, the breathing of a wild thing. I could sense the fear eating at him, swelling out into the room. There was a reason for fear like that, Kitty.

It happened then. He had a gun in his hand and he was firing it, the flashes lighting up the room like summer lightning.

I hadn't expected that. I don't know how many times he fired. The shots all seemed to roll into one. But I heard you gag on your breath and try to scream, and then one of his bullets tore into the fleshy side of my chest, knocking me down. The whole scene was one of confused movement, but one thought was lucid: he'd hit both of us, limned in the doorway as we'd been.

I could hardly see or hear. I sensed that I was lying on my back, and I could feel blood spreading out over me, but there was a roaring in my head.

He turned on the light then, and moved toward us. I could see him almost clearly. He was whimpering softly as he looked at us. His face was slick with sweat, and I could see his stomach jerking under his sport shirt.

"I didn't know whether he'd killed you, Kitty. I hated him blindly, but there was nothing I could do about it except lash him with my thick whisper: "You'll never get away with it! Look, damn you, what you've done to us! *But you'll never get away!*"

He took a step back with each word I said. Then he cried out, turned and ran. I could hear his footsetps going through the house. I was passing out, trying to get up and look for you, Kitty, and trying to listen to him at the same time. But I couldn't make it. I was sinking in a deep, soft blackness. I heard the dim patter of his feet racing up the stairs.

He must have climbed until he reached the top. Then there was one last crash of pistol fire from the very pinnacle of the house . . . .

(Continued on page 97)

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson

The underworld of Argentina has introduced its candidate for all-time honors in horror. He is one Sebastian Pecard, the cripple-king of Tucuman, who is said to have surgically created a host of cripples at a "hospital" he ran for the express purpose. His idea was to render his monstrosities helpless and dependent upon himself—then send them out to beg, with their creator sharing in the proceeds. He was uncovered when he jacked up rates on account of the world-wide inflation, he said. A few of his subjects rebelled and called in the authorities!

In Kansas City, not long ago, an anonymous addict of true crime stories decided a neighbor of his, George Allen Sauder, resembled a dangerous criminal whose picture he'd just seen in a detective magazine. Full of zeal, the would-be sleuth notified police, who broke in on Mr. Sauder and, considering him a desperate villain, shot him dead.

The gent they mistook Mr. Sauder for proved to be serving a sentence in Sing Sing. An F.B.I. investigation cleared Mr. Sauder of all wrong-doing!

When William Kappen of St. Louis, failed to show up for his wedding, it was because fate had chosen him as its unhappy instrument to unravel a madman's memories—and bring to light one of the more monstrous females in criminal annals. Police found William, dead of a bullet wound, in some weeds on the outskirts of the city and, during their investigation discovered that his father was in a mental institution for killing his son-in-law. Told of his son's murder, the supposed madman accused his daughter—not only of the murder of which he'd been convicted, but of fratricide. With nothing more to go on, police managed to pin the crime on the lady and her boy friend, and both were executed.

One of the top criminologists of the U. S. Government back in 1924 was William Fahy, so when there was a $2,000,000 train robbery at Rondout, Ill., he was almost automatically put in charge. Under him, T-men and postal detectives scoured the country for the robbers. While the hunt was at its climax, Fahy's sweetheart notified U. S. authorities that she had beaten her boy friend to the solution and was ready to turn over the leader of the robbers, complete with proof as to his guilt.

She was invited to do so—and named William Fahy! It turned out she'd been the wife of a man Fahy had once convicted—Innocently, she claimed. She'd gone after Fahy, and *gotten* him!

First there had been the black widow spider, then the car crashing into the carriage, and now—what?

ARMS of the BLACK WIDOW

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

CHAPTER ONE

Just an Accident. . . .

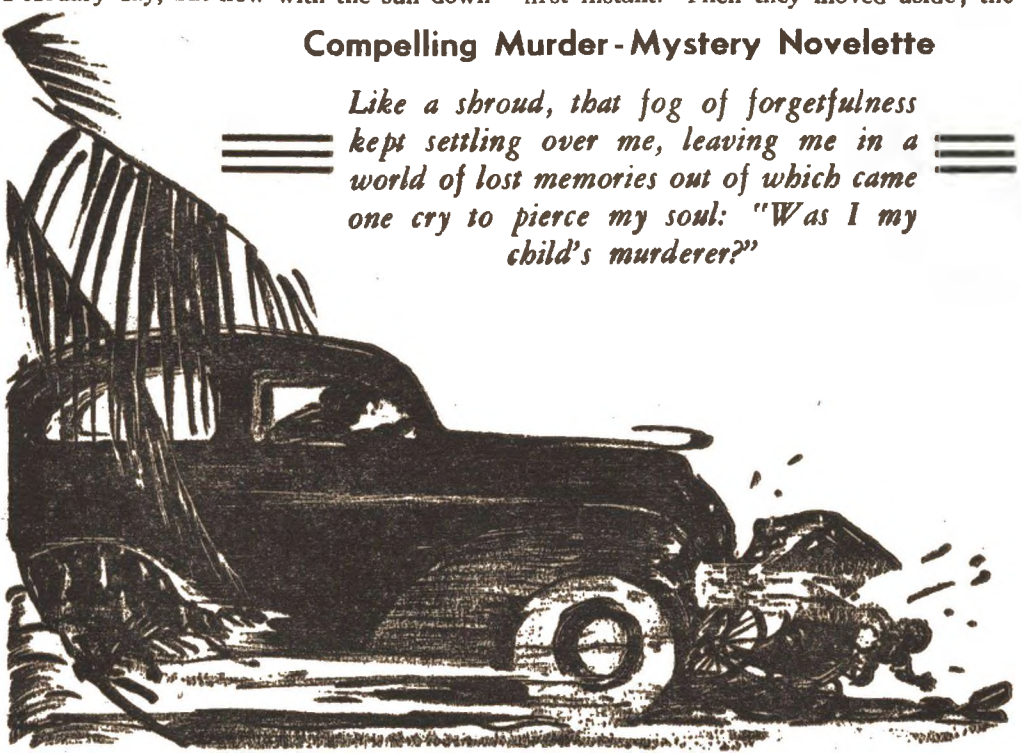
THE SHERIFF has said that it would help if I would make a full written statement of everything that I can remember. I will start with that Friday afternoon, or rather evening.

I came down the beach with my sketch book under my arm and I found the car just where I remembered leaving it, under the coconut palm at the road's end. The day had been warm, even for a Florida February day, but now with the sun down the breeze was chill. My hat and sweater were on the back seat of the car and I put them on and drove home.

There was a group of people in the yard. We have only one fairly near neighbor and I remember wondering what the convention was about. As I pulled over to the side of the road to stop, the car lights shone on Ann Margo and Norman Donnel; they were the only ones I recognized in the first instant. Then they moved aside; the

Compelling Murder-Mystery Novelette

Like a shroud, that fog of forgetfulness kept settling over me, leaving me in a world of lost memories out of which came one cry to pierce my soul: "Was I my child's murderer?"



group parted slightly before the lights of the car and I saw the baby carriage.

It was our baby carriage, there in the full glow of the headlights: the handle bent at a crazy angle, one wheel crushed, the side caved in.

That's when the terror got me. I missed the handle on the door and had to try again to get it open, and I stumbled when I got out of the car. I went toward that wrecked baby buggy, but I didn't want to. The people had moved back out of the car lights and now they were only figures in the gloom, unrecognizable.

"The baby . . ." I said. "What . . . ? Where . . . ?"

Ruth came running toward me down the tunnel of light and she had Mary in her arms. "Joe! Joe!" she cried. "Somebody tried to kill the baby!"

The next minutes are blurred. I was holding Ruth and the baby in my arms at the same time. Mary, the baby, was all right; in fact, she was enjoying the excitement. Her eyes were big in the car light and she kept making happy noises. She said, "Da!" and "Goo!" and the other things that babies say. But Ruth, who was on the jagged edge of hysteria, kept crying that somebody had tried to murder the child. Somebody had run into the baby carriage, but the baby hadn't been in the carriage. Ruth had taken her out of it just a few minutes before.

The terror began to thaw out of my throat and stomach. I tried to take the baby from Ruth, but she wouldn't let it go. "Nobody tried to kill her," I said. "Nobody would try to kill a baby. It was just an accident."

"It was some drunk," Norman Donnel said. He lived in a shack a couple of hundred yards from us: a thin, seedy, rather pallid man who said he had come to Florida because of his arthritis, although he could really afford to live here. "With these juke joints up and down the road, it's a wonder somebody isn't killed every day," he said.

Mr. Walter Sturdy said that somebody had passed him about a half mile down the road, driving like a fiend.

"Probably some damnyankee, some snowbird," old Mr. Burgess Atwater said. He owned a good part of the land on Midnight Key, had made a minor fortune out of sales and rentals to the winter tourists—"the snowbirds" as he called them—and yet he seemed to hate every nickel of it.

"It is the jukes, these dives, that cause the trouble," Norman Donnel said. "Selling liquor to children, or to anyone else who can pay the price. No wonder—"

"Bah!" Mr. Atwater shouted. "If the man had been in a juke, drinking, where he should have been, he wouldn't have been on the road!"

I HAD heard this argument before and now it made things seem more normal. I started to laugh, my arm still around Ruth and the baby. Knowing the baby was safe, the fear had gone out of me, and I felt surprisingly good. "Just don't leave the carriage so close to the road, darling," I said. "But everything's all right now. Quit crying."

"I didn't leave it close to the road!" Ruth said. She almost shouted it at me. "Ann saw the car that hit it! The driver did it deliberately! He tried to kill our baby!"

Ann Margo was our nearest neighbor, living about a hundred yards away. The lots between us were overgrown with cabbage palm and seagrape and you couldn't see from one house to the other.

"I was coming over to talk with Ruth," she said now. The light from my car was touching on her face: olive-skinned, beautiful, sensual. "You know that path across the vacant lots—I was just beyond the last cabbage palm when I saw this car. I—I thought it was you, coming home. The car wasn't running fast. It pulled off the highway and I thought it was going to stop. Then it shifted gears, hit the baby carriage, and went roaring away."

We were all staring at her, grouped about her. You mean . . . ?"

"Some crazy drunk," Norman Donnel said again.

"There is no explaining the actions of a drunk," Mr. Walter Sturdy said. "Perhaps he thought this was his home, or that it was a side road. You can't tell."

"Anyone who drives under the influence of liquor should be put in jail for six months," Donnel said.

Old Mr. Atwater said Donnel was crazy, that he himself could drive a car better drunk than he could sober. And then he looked at me. "But I told you that you

wouldn't want to live here," he said. "I told you this ground was bad luck."

He had told us that when we bought the land from him to build on; I had thought the statement silly then, and I still did. Anyway, I was remembering what Ann Margo had said, and that cold lump was beginning to form in my throat again. "You saw the car?" I asked. "It was going slow?"

"Yes." Her hair was very black and it made black shadows on her face. For an instant she loked away, then back at me and she smiled. "The silly part of it, I—I thought it was you."

"Me?"

"The car was the same color as yours. It must have been the same make—though I don't know much about cars. That's why, when I first saw the car, I thought it was you coming home. Then as it raced off I got a glimpse of the driver. Just a glimpse."

"Could you—?"

"It was too dark to see clearly. I just saw the outline of a hat, like the one you're wearing. And something dark, like that sweater you have on. For a crazy moment I still thought it was you. And then I knew it couldn't be."

"You can't insure a baby that young," Mr. Sturdy said. "I know, because I tried to insure mine."

He said it so matter-of-factly that we all laughed, a nervous ragged laughter.

I said, "Have you called the sheriff yet? Whoever did this shouldn't be left on the highway."

"I phoned him," Donnel said, "as soon as your wife told me what had happened. He should already be here."

THE SHERIFF came soon after that. Ann Margo told him what she had seen; Ruth showed him where the baby buggy had been, a good fifteen feet off the road, and the road was straight here, with no reason for a car to swerve. The sheriff said that wrecking the baby buggy must have left some mark on the car and that he would search, starting with all the juke joints in the county. Then he and the deputy left; the other people left also, and Ruth and I were alone with the baby.

Ruth put the baby to bed and got her to sleep. We both leaned over the crib and kissed her; I never kissed her without thinking how smooth and sleek and warm her skin was. Then we tripped out of the room, closing the door behind us.

I went in the kitchen and made a couple of drinks. "This will take some of the tension out of our muscles," I said. "Then we can eat."

"I don't feel as though I could ever touch food again."

"The danger is over. It was just an accident." I put my hand on Ruth's arm and she pulled away from me, jerked away almost. She was trembling.

I said, "You've got to get control of yourself, Darling. It's all over now. If you want to, you can give Mary her sunbaths in the backyard from now on."

She turned to look at me. She was a small girl. Her hair was light brown and wavy. She wasn't really pretty—not in the way that Ann Margo was pretty—but she had a pert face that fitted easily into laughter. Now her face was distorted. She looked as though she would never laugh again.

"Somebody is trying to kill the baby, Joe! Somebody wants to murder my baby!"

"That's absurd, Ruth. You—"

"What about that black widow spider?"

"That was an accident." I could feel the cold lump in my throat and I took a sip at my drink. Because the spider had been an accident. I felt sure.

Here's what had happened about the spider:

Five days before the baby-buggy was wrecked, Mr. Walter Sturdy had phoned me and said that in an old house he was tearing down he'd found some black widow spiders. Mr. Sturdy was the contractor who had built our house and he'd heard me say I would like to see a black widow spider. I paint—rather non-conventional stuff as a rule—and I had an idea for using a black-widow. Using a bottle, I trapped one of the spiders he showed me and brought it home.

The day after that Ruth was putting the baby to bed and she found the black widow in its crib. It was at the foot of the crib, under the covers, and it was pure luck that she found it. It wasn't the spider I'd had in the bottle. I had sketched that one, and destroyed it. At least, I thought I had

destroyed it. And you don't often find black widows in new houses, not even on the Florida keys. But there this one was in the baby's crib.

"It was an accident," I said again. "It was one of those freak things that sometimes happen."

"And what about the night that her crib turned over and I ran in the room to find the window open?"

"We've talked about that. One of us must have left the window open and forgotten it. Mary is getting big enough to pull herself up and shake the side of the crib. She turned it over herself. She must have."

"She's never done it again."

"No." Fear was a kind of black hole in the back of my mind. Do you remember when you were a child and afraid to be left in a dark room, terrified without being sure what it was that caused the terror? It was like that now, only worse: formless shadows moving in the dark room of horror.

"If anyone had wanted to kill Mary, why try to do it by turning over her crib?" I asked. "As it happened, she wasn't even hurt."

"She could have been. She could have broken an arm or leg."

"Yes. But it's very unlikely that she would have been killed. And if anyone had wanted to kill her, they could have done it then, with a blow. Or—or by choking her. And you would have been right in the next room and never known anything."

"But we would have known it was murder," Ruth said. "We would have known it wasn't an accident. And this person—"

"Quit!" I said angrily. I took her by the shoulders and shook her. "You've got to quit talking that way! It's insane! Nobody could want to kill a baby."

"People *do* kill them. You read about it in the papers."

"Mothers who don't want them. And drunken fathers. Who else? Who else could possibly want to murder a child that isn't even old enough to talk? What reason? What reason could there be?"

"I don't know. But—" Her face seemed to crumple then and she began to cry and I put my arms around her. "I don't know, Joe. But I'm afraid. I'm afraid."

"Nothing is going to happen to Mary," I said. "She'll grow up to be Miss America of 1967. Don't you worry."

Ruth cried awhile and felt better. She started to get dinner then and I said I would move the car from in front of the house and put it in the garage.

The moon had come up, big and yellow. I walked past the spot where the baby-carriage had been wrecked. I looked at the distance between it and the road. *A person would have to be mighty drunk to get that far off the highway, unless. . . .* I told myself to stop it; thoughts of that kind were absurd. I went on to where I had left my car.

And it was then, in the soft bright moonlight, that I noticed the fender. The front left one was bent and the paint gone from it in a long scratch. And all at once, as clearly as if she were standing there beside me speaking, I could hear Ann Margo's voice saying: "Just a glimpse, an outline of a hat like the one you're wearing. And something black, like your sweater. For a moment I thought it was you."

The trembling stared deep inside me then. It got worse, until my whole body was shaking. I couldn't stand up and I had to sit on the car seat and put my face in my hands. I shut my eyes, and opened them again quickly, because when my eyes were closed the blackness started welling up through me, rushing from my eyes toward my brain. I put my hands on the car wheel and held to it like a man to a liferaft in a storm.

CHAPTER TWO

Strangler in Town

HERE I have to write about the thing that is wrong with me. It is the first time I have ever tried to put it into writing. It isn't easy to do.

I was nine years old when I first realized there were gaps in my memory. They must have been there all the time, but I was nine when I first began to understand it.

My father was a fanatical churchman, very strict with his children, and with a violent temper. He asked me one night—this was when I was nine, when I learned about the blank spaces in my mind—if I had walked into town that afternoon. I

don't remember having gone, and I knew I wasn't supposed to have gone. I said I hadn't.

My father began to whip me. He said he would stop whipping me when I told him the truth. The truth was that I didn't remember having walked into town—I had absolutely no memory of it at all. So I kept maintaining that I hadn't left home, and he kept whipping me. He was using a razor strap, across my legs and back, and finally across my chest and wherever he could hit.

At last, not much more than half-conscious by then, I told him I had gone into town. It was a lie, so far as I knew. I screamed it, trying desperately to make him stop whipping me. And he said then that he had seen me in town and knew I had been there.

I had to stay in bed for four days after that whipping. I lay there and thought. If my father said he had seen me in town, that meant I had been in town. My father would not have lied, and there was little chance of his having been mistaken. So I must have gone into town without knowing it, without remembering it. And when I realized this I understood other things from the past. My memory didn't function like that of a normal man. There were gaps in it as complete as if I had been to sleep.

I was afraid of my father, afraid even to try to explain to him. I tried to tell my mother, but I doubt if she half heard what I was saying. She told me to pray to be a good boy, and that was the only bit of advice she gave me. If she understood at all the thing I was trying to say, she didn't believe it. She was a good woman, kind and sweet, but not very intelligent.

And so I grew up, knowing about these blank spaces in my brain, aware of them, afraid of them, always afraid because at any time I might be confronted with something about which I knew nothing. I lived with that dark, blank-faced terror at the back of my brain. It was, I thought, a kind of madness, and I must keep it hidden.

Persons said I was eccentric. All artists, they said in the little town where I lived, are eccentric. And I was talented. I'd won several state art contests while still in high school. I'd won a fellowship to art school; the local minister told my father it was not right to deny a talent which God had given, and so I was allowed to go to art school. I never went back to my home again.

Ruth was the first person I ever told about the holes in my memory, and it wasn't easy to tell her. I had lived with that secret too long, kept it too deeply buried in shame and fear. The war was on and I was in the Navy. The Navy doctors hadn't learned. I was an artist who could paint propoganda pictures; my feet weren't flat and my heart was good. That was enough for them.

But I was in love with Ruth. I was in love in the way a man is just one time in his life, with my heart and my head and every nerve in my body. And I couldn't ash her to marry me, because I was afraid; I was afraid of that secret, like a cancer eating at the back of my brain. If a man has fears for his own sanity he doesn't look on himself as a matrimonial bargain.

When I knew I was to be sent overseas I didn't mention that either, not until the night before I was to leave. Then I told Ruth that I was leaving the next morning.

She looked at me. Her little pert face that could break so easily into laughter was pale. Her mouth trembled, and got stiff. After a while she said, "You love me, Joe?"

"Yes," I said. "I love you."

"And you won't ask me to marry you. I don't know why not. You—you aren't married, are you, Joe?"

"You know I'm not."

"Some men lie about those things in war time. I—well, you won't ask me. I'm going to ask you. Will you marry me, Joe?"

That's when I told her, digging the old shame and fear out of me with words, like cutting the core from a festered wound. And when I finished she said, "You never told anyone? You've never talked to a doctor about this?"

"No one, until now."

"We are going to see a doctor, tonight. Now."

We saw the doctor, and like most doctors he had a name for it. It was a kind of recurrent brain fever, he said, rare but not unknown. Incurable, but nothing particular to worry about. I would do nothing in one of these blank periods that I wouldn't do

normally. The rest of the mind functioned as usual, he said, and the disease could not be passed to my children. I didn't know how good a doctor he was, but he told me what I wanted to believe and so I believed him.

We tried to get married that night. There was a three-day marriage law in the state and we tried every possible way to get around it. And we couldn't. It was after two o'clock when we gave up and went back to Ruth's apartment.

I stood there just inside the apartment, with my back to the closed door. I said, "Good night, Sweet." The words hurt physically. I turned quickly and walked out.

Because the war was almost ended before I went overseas, I didn't get back until October 1946. Ruth met me as she had promised and we were married that first day I came ashore.

It was just one week later that I ran into some friends I hadn't seen since getting out of the Navy. We went in a bar to have a couple of drinks and talk over old times. There were the usual qestions and answers. I was feeling fine, they felt fine, how was Ruth, how did I like marriage, that sort of thing. Then one of the girls said, "And how's John Reeves?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Oh! Ruth must not have told you about him."

"No. Who is he?"

The girl laughed. Her date looked at her with that hopeless, futile, disgusted look that a man has when he is trying to stop a gossiping woman and knows he doesn't stand a chance. "Oh," the girl said, "John Reeves is just a friend of Ruth's. A casual friend. She used to see quite a lot of him while you were gone."

That was all. We talked of other things and I finished my drink and said good-bye. I wasn't really upset—at least, I wasn't conscious of being at the time. I mentioned it to Ruth as a joke. "I understand you were doing some heavy courting while I was gone," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Some guy named John Reeves. I heard about him today."

She looked at me quite gravely. "I meant to tell you about him, Joe, and—there just hasn't been a chance. He's a really splendid fellow. You'd like him."

"Did you like him? Not too much, I hope."

"I like him a great deal. If I had never met you—" She smiled and said, "But I had met you, darling. I liked John a lot, and I think he liked me. But there was never any doubt about him taking your place."

That was all there was to it. Once I met John Reeves and did like him. Then Ruth and I moved to Florida and bought land from old Mr. Burgess Atwater—land that he said was haunted and cursed. Indians had massacred some early Spanish sailors here, Mr. Atwater said. Once a hurricane had blown over a shack built here and had killed two persons. The body of a kidnapped and murdered child had been hidden here some ten or twelve years ago, during that time when kidnapping was a favorite pasttime of the underworld. Oh the place was haunted all right, Mr. Atwater said, and we wouldn't like it. But we did like it; it had oaks and a view of the bay; and we paid him twice what it was worth. And here Mr. Walter Sturdy built us a house among the oaks.

From here we drove to the hospital on the mainland where Mary was born, just exactly eight months after Ruth and I were married.

Premature births are common enough. I knew that. The doctor told me that. But I wouldn't have been quite human if the thougnt of John Reeves hadn't occurred to me. And yet, I don't think that—consciously—I was any more worried about my child's paternity than the average man. The idea had not crossed my mind in months.

But now I sat there, holding to the car wheel and feeling the dark, horrible shadows in my mind, remembering what Ann Margo had said: *Your car. . . . An outline of a hat like the one you're wearing. . . . I thought it was you. . . .*

I FORCED myself to think back over that afternoon. I had left the car where sand dunes blocked off the end of the road and had walked to the point. I was making sketches of the dunes and also of seashells; recently I had been painting shells, the weird shapes and patterns in which they can be arranged. I tried to remember each drawing.

Sometimes I know when there is a blank space in my memory; the beginning and end of it are as sharply marked as the edges of sleep. And sometimes I have no realization of having lost my memory at all. I would be thinking about a subject and the memory would fade and come back with my conscious mind still on that subject, and in the meanwhile I might have talked to half a dozen persons and remember nothing of it.

So I thought back over the afternoon. My first sketches were off balance and the fault was in my mind, in conception. I started walking, kicking at the sand.

Then the next thing I could remember I was over by the lake, a half mile away, and it was almost dark. There was a gap of about an hour in my afternoon.

The dark, shapeless terror in the back of my brain began to stir, to creep, toward my eyes.

And what about the other two times when the baby was in danger—when the crib was turned over, and when the spider was found in her bed?

I had been walking on the beach when the accident happened to the crib. The spider might have been in the bed for hours, because Mary had been outdoors in her playcrib. So. . . .

I shook at the wheel as though I wanted to break it. The shadows in my mind were insane. It was impossible that I should have tried to kill my daughter.

It was somebody else who had found my car and driven it and wrecked the baby carriage. My hat and sweater had been on the back seat of the car and the person who stole the car could have put them on.

But why? Why, in the name of God, should anyone want to destroy a child, a baby not old enough to talk? What horrible secret could a baby hold that someone should want to murder it?

And that idea was insane too. Nobody could want to kill Mary. It was all an accident, a series of accidents. It had to be an accident!

And now terrors were like rats gnawing in darkness at the back of my brain, and I could not run them away.

"Joe!" Ruth was standing in the door, calling.

"What is it, darling?"

"Where have you been so long? I thought you were just going to put up the car."

My watch showed it was more than a half hour since I'd came outside. I hadn't realized it had been so long. "Come here a moment," I called.

I saw her glance back into the house, toward the door to the baby's room—the instinctive gesture of a mother. Then she came across the lawn, through the dark shadow-pools of the oaks and into moonlight beside the car.

"What is it, Joe?"

"Look here." I put my hand on the dented fender.

"How did that happen, Joe?"

"The dent wasn't in that fender this morning. It wasn't there when I left the car by the sand dunes." Ruth did not move. She was looking up at me and her face seemed to grow pale, the skin tight across her cheekbones. I said, "It must have been this car that—that hit the baby carriage."

"You mean, someboby stole it, and—"

I just looked at her. "Somebody stole it from you," she said. "That means they—they tried, deliberately—"

"It could have been a drunk."

I kept looking at her face. And she said, "It must have been. Some drunk who stole the car from you." I wondered if she knew what I had been thinking. I wondered if the same horrible fears were in her mind. She said, "Come inside, darling. The sheriff will learn who did it."

"I should call him," I said. "I should tell him it was my car that was used."

She was a long time in answering. "Yes," she said at last. "You should call him."

We didn't have a phone but there was one at Ann Margo's house. I walked there. The moon was well in the sky now, silver instead of gold. The vacant lots between our houses, overgrown with palmetto and cabbage palm, were like some stunted jungle, with the path winding through it. The wind made a rattling in the palmetto and once some animal, field rat or a coon, went scurrying away, startling me for an instant. My nerves were strung and I was aware of fear of the thing I was about to do. I tried, with a conscious effort, to relax my muscles and make my breathing slower.

I came out of the vacant lots to the small yard of Ann Margo's cottage. She lived here alone, having come to Florida for a divorce, though why she had picked Midnight Key rather than Miami I didn't know. Perhaps it was a matter of economics, I thought; I really knew very little about her.

The cottage door was open, which struck me as a little odd because the night was chilly. I knocked. "Ann!" I called, and pushing open the screen door I went inside.

The room was L-shaped, softly lighted, and there was the faint odor of the perfume she used. The phone was in the corner of the L, hidden from where I stood. I called once more, loudly, so that if she was in bath or bedroom she'd be sure to hear. But there was no answer. I started for the phone, went past the corner of the L—and stopped.

Ann Margo sat in a chair beside the telephone table. She was facing me, her back to a curtained window. One of the curtains was held neatly in place by a cord tie-back. The other curtain blew free, and the cord which had once held it was knotted about Ann Margo's throat. Her eyes bulged. Her mouth was open and the swollen tongue stuck out between her teeth.

There was no time for thought—just that frozen, instinctive action of which a man is capable while very much afraid. I was jerking at the cord, trying to untie it. And I couldn't get the knot untied. My fingernail broke digging at it. I saw the nail break, but felt no pain. I couldn't get the cord untied and I must have worked at it for many seconds before I saw the small, pearl-handled pocketknife beside the phone.

The blade nicked her skin; a drop of blood stood clear against the flesh but didn't run. Then the blade cut through the cord. The cord came free in my hands. Ann Margo's body slipped out of the chair, half turned, and fell with a soft thump on the floor. I rolled her over, face down. Kneeling astride her body I began artificial respiration.

There was a scream, animal-like in its thinness and terror. For a half instant I thought it was Ann Margo screaming. Then I saw Norman Donnel standing at the end of the room, his pallid face contorted with fear. He was backing away from me, still screaming.

I yelled at him to shut up. "Call a doctor! Quick!"

His mouth worked. "Doctor . . . ?"

I realized then that he must not have understood what I was doing. In that first instant he must have thought I was fighting with the girl, beating her against the floor. "I'm trying to revive her! Get on the phone and get a doctor. And the sheriff."

I kept on with artificial respiration until the doctor came. But I knew by then it was hopeless. I knew by then she had been dead when I came into the house.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghosts of the Present

THE PSYCHIATRIST sat with his hands folded on his desk and let me talk. Sometimes he made notes; occasionally he asked a question; but mostly he just sat and let me talk.

I told him about the time when I was nine years old and first realized there were gaps in my memory. I told him how persons would mention seeing me at such-and-such a place, my behavior apparently normal, and yet I could remember nothing of having been there. I told him of the fear of insanity which had lived in my mind as I grew up and how I had hidden that fear from everyone until at last I told Ruth and then the doctor to whom she took me.

The psychiatrist looked down at his hands. "Go ahead," he said.

I took a long breath. There was a tightness, like a band around my chest, that hurt when I breathed. My lips were dry.

"Things have been happening to my eight-months-old daughter."

"What kind of things?"

I told him about the black widow spider, and the overturned crib, and the baby carriage that was wrecked. "A woman saw the car which hit the baby carriage. She said—it was late, she couldn't see clearly. She said the driver looked like me."

I didn't tell about what had happened to Ann Margo; perhaps she had been killed for some reason out of her own past which could never concern me, or Ruth, or our daughter. And if her murder was connected

with the accident to the baby carriage, then it all went back to Mary and the threat to her life.

I swallowed to get the lump out of my throat. "Could I be trying to murder my own daughter?" I asked. "Am I insane? Could I do that?" My voice had got away from me and I was shouting at him. "Could I? Could I?"

"Quiet," he said.

I slumped back in my chair. "I want to know," I said.

"It's more than I can answer right off." He sat there looking at the notes he had made, looking out the window. "Was your wife playing around before you married her?"

"What?" I felt a kind of blind anger growing in me. "What's that got to—"

"Tell me about your father," he said, the soft voice cutting through my shout.

So I told him about my father and the strict religious background against which I was raised. I told him about the whippings I'd got for lying, sometimes when I didn't even know I was lying. I told him how my father had said so many times that a woman's place was in the home, and how my mother stayed in her home except for church and prayer meetings and the essential shopping. I was telling him these things, half lost in memory, when his voice cut in again.

"Do you have any reason to believe the child is not yours?"

Again I felt the anger swelling in my head. Yet I knew it was his business to ask these things. I fought the anger and got control of it. But I was slow in answering, and when I did I was not sure if I told the truth. "No," I said. "I am very sure the child is mine."

He sighed and looked at the clock. "I think that is enough for today," he said. "I'd like for you to come back tomorrow, if you can."

"I want to know *now*," I said. "I want to know if I could possibly threaten my own daughter."

"If you had some subconscious belief she was not your daughter, some buried reason for hating her—" He made a gesture with his hands. "Psychiatry is a slow business," he said. "We have to keep digging."

I told him I was coming back the next day. This was in Tampa, about fifty miles from Midnight Key, and I had slipped away without telling Ruth or anyone else where I was going. Perhaps I could slip away again tomorrow. Or it might be best if I told her.

I was thinking these things when I noticed the man in the corridor outside the doctor's office. I was sure I had seen him before, but I couldn't remember where.

It was late afternoon now, the sky hazy, the warmth leaving the air. I had to walk four blocks to where my car was parked. As I unlocked the car door I saw the man who had been outside the doctor's office. He was getting in a car across the street. And it was then I remembered where I had seen him.

Last night, after Ann Margo's death, he had come to the island with the sheriff. He hadn't come in the house, hadn't talked to me, but I'd seen him outside. He was a deputy sheriff. All the way back to Midnight Key his car followed close behind me.

I tried to think how the things which had happened would appear to the sheriff. There was the fact that my car had been used in the attempt on my baby's life; Ann Margo had said the driver looked like me; now Ann Margo was dead, murdered, and I had found her body. My fingernail had been broken on the cord about her throat; it might have been broken in the struggle to tie that cord as easily as to untie it.

But the only motive I could have for killing Ann Margo would be that I had tried to kill my child. And it isn't easy to accuse a respectable man of attempting to murder his own daughter. But now the sheriff would soon know I had been to a psychiatrist. And if the doctor talked, told him why I had come—

I could feel fear like a steel wire tightening about my throat.

NORMAN DONNEL and Mr. Walter Sturdy were at my house when I arrived. In the corner of the room the baby sat in her playpen. Ruth who was getting the baby's dinner, was in and out of the room. "We just stopped by to gossip," Mr. Sturdy said. "Haven't had a chance to talk to you since last night's tragedy. Where have you been?"

"Working."

I saw Ruth glance toward the other room where my easel and sketch books were

stacked. She knew I had not taken them with me. But she said nothing and went on into the kitchen.

"I don't see how you can think to work after last night," Norman Donnel said. "I was never so—so terrified in my life. When I first saw you I thought you were strangling the poor girl."

"I didn't hear you come in the house," I said.

"I knocked. I guess you were just too excited."

"I guess he was," Mr. Sturdy said, but he was looking at Donnel, at the man's threadbare clothing, his pale, thin face. "How'd you happen to be calling on Mrs. Margo?"

"It was not a social call," Donnel said, and managed to imply that any visit from Mr. Sturdy would have been. "I wanted to use her telephone."

"Calling the juke for a bottle of liquor?" Mr. Sturdy asked. He was a heavy-set, florid man and his sense of humor was a bit on the crude side. Donnel's prohibition tendencies were well known, even though he hadn't lived on Midnight Key but a month or so.

"I was calling—" Mr. Donnel began to say, but a heavy knocking on the door interrupted him.

Mr. Burgess Atwater, the man from whom we had bought the property on which we built, came in along with a large, white-haired man I had never seen before. Mr. Atwater introduced him as Professor Leonard Montgomery. "Professor Montgomery," he said, "is from the International Institute of Psychic Research."

"What?" Mr. Donnel said sharply. "What's he from?"

Professor Montgomery smiled at him. "The International Institute of Psychic Research," he said. He turned to me. "Our Institute has long had a file pertaining to this property. Today Mr. Atwater has been telling me about the most recent occurences here. I would like very much to investigate the location."

"There has been nothing psychic here," I said.

"Yeah?" Mr. Atwater shouted. He was a gaunt old man and shouting was his natural way of speaking. "Murder and attempted murder's been here, ain't it? Somebody trying to kill your own baby. What's natural about somebody trying to kill a baby?"

"We don't know there was an attempt," I said. "An accident, but—"

"Bah!" Mr. Atwater shouted. "Your wife told me about the blackwidow spider. About the crib turning over. How many accidents you need to know something's wrong? You want to stay on and get your baby murdered?"

"Don't talk like a fool," Mr. Donnel said. "Nobody would want to kill a baby."

"*Nobody,*" Mr. Atwater said. "Nobody *normal.* That ain't what Professor Montgomery is looking for."

The Professor made a calming gesture with both hands. "There's no need for excitement," He looked directly at me. "Mr. Howard, I'd like to live here, alone, for one week. In that time I should at least know whether or not there are psychic tremors peculiar to this location. I can pay you two hundred dollars for your home for one week. There will be no one here but me, and the house will be kept in perfect condition. There would be no need for you to move anything except the clothing you and your family need for a week."

"And where are we going to live?" I asked. "How could we find a house in the middle of the season?

"I have arranged that with Mr. Atwater. It took some doing, I'll admit. But he has a house at the south end of the island where the tenants moved out today. A lovely place and you'll be comfortable there. The research institute pays the rent for it, so what you get for this house is all profit."

"No," I said.

"It is in the interest of science, Mr. Howard."

Mr. Walter Sturdy said, "I built this house and I can tell you there are no ghosts in it. Silliest damn thing I ever heard of."

"Quite possibly you are right," the professor said. "We only seek to know the truth."

Ruth was looking at me from the kitchen doorway—looking straight at me with her eyes dark and her face drawn and pale. *She's afraid,* I thought. *Afraid of me. Afraid of something outside which she doesn't understand. Afraid of what is going to happen.*

"Give me a moment to think," I said. I

went past Ruth into the kitchen and stood before the window, looking out at the night.

Perhaps by tomorrow the sheriff would have talked to the doctor in Tampa. Perhaps by tomorrow I would be arrested and charged with murder. If I were guilty, then I wanted to be locked up, but if not—

That's when the idea occured to me. It seemed quite clear and simple and I wondered why I hadn't thought of it before. A rush of hope and excitement filled me.

I went back into the livingroom. "Professor Montgomery, you say the house at the south end was vacated today. Could we move in it tonight?"

"Why, er—"

Mr. Atwater shouted, "All you got to do is go up the steps and open the door."

"Very well," I said. "We will move out of here in two hours and you can take possession. Tonight."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kill in Your Sleep

THAT IS how it happend that at nine-fifteen on a February night we moved into the house at the south end of Midnight Key, a house owned by Mr. Burgess Atwater. The baby was already asleep; Ruth put her to bed and then the two of us looked over the house. Finally we came back to the living room.

It wasn't until then Ruth asked, "What is it, Joe? Why are you so excited? Why move down here tonight?"

"I've been going half crazy trying to think of what could be the reason for the things that have happened. And I think I know. Suppose there *was* something about that house of ours?"

"You don't believe in ghosts, curses . . . ?"

"No. But suppose that somebody, for some reason, had to get us out of that house. How could they do it? Buy it, but only by offering an exhorbitant price, because otherwise we would not sell, we couldn't find any other place to live. Besides, we like the place. Nobody could rent it from us without paying much more than it is worth, and also finding us a place to live, because otherwise we wouldn't move out."

Ruth's face looked old, her eyes shadowed with fear and her nostrils dilated. "You mean—the baby?"

"If something happened to one of us, if you or I were injured or killed, the other would go right on living in that house with Mary. Midnight Key is our home now. You have no family, and I have long since cut away from mine. But if Mary was injured, if she had to go to the hospital, then you know and I know, and everybody that knows us knows, we'd both go right in there with her. The Brandon hospital isn't like a big city hospital. It's always short on nurses and they like to have parents help out. We'd both stay right there with her until she was well."

"But if she were killed . . . ?"

"What would you do?"

"I don't think I could ever go back in that house if she were killed there. I'd have to get away."

"Somebody else has figured that same way," I said. "Somebody who wanted to get possession of our house."

"But why should anyone want it so desperately they would kill to get it?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"How?"

"I'm going back there, tonight."

Her lips trembled. "Joe—"

"I've got to do it," I said. I couldn't tell her that tomorrow might be too late. I couldn't say there was only one other possible reason for what had happened and that reason was my own insanity, my own guilt.

So I went out of the house and took my car and drove north along Midnight Key. The moon was past full. Warped and bent and yellow, it climbed out of the bay. Clouds blew like banners across it, their shadows dragging the earth. Near the house where Ann Margo had lived I parked my car and went ahead on foot. I went across the dark lawn of her house, between the palmettos and cabbage palms of the vacant lots. A night flying gull passed overhead, crying weirdly. It was like the cry of a lost soul, I thought, and the thought was no comfort to me there in the darkness.

I reached the point where Ann Margo must have stood the night before when she saw the baby-buggy wrecked. This was near the road, but sheltered by palmettos, and standing here a person could get a good view of the road without being seen.

I moved on, to the edge of the overgrowth, and stopped. I could see my home now, white and ghostly among the oaks. The shades were all drawn and I couldn't tell whether or not there was a light inside. Would Professor Montgomery be sitting there in the dark, or with all the lights burning, or how?

I sat on the ground, my back to a cabbage palm. I sat very still, my right hand inside my right coat pocket, holding the .32 caliber pistol I had brought. I sat there, and waited—and while I waited thoughts began to creep and stir in my brain.

Suppose while I sat here, waiting without knowing what I waited for, that one of those blank periods came on me? What would I do? It always seemed to me that in those times without memory I must move like a sleepwalker, like a man with his eyes open but blind, a robot controlled by some impulse outside himself. How could the actions of a man without his conscious mind, without memory, how could they be normal?

I shook my head to clear it of those thoughts. I had been through them thousands of times, and there was no solution. I could only sit here, waiting, hoping.

And then the other idea came to me: suppose the motive back of everything which had happened was not to get Ruth and me out of our home so that someone else could get in it. What if someone had been trying to kill the baby because that person *wanted* to kill the child, *needed* to kill it for some reason that I could not yet understand? If that was the true reason, what had I done?

I had moved Ruth and the baby into a house the key to which could be held by God knows how many persons. Certainly Mr. Burgess Atwater might have a key. Professor Montgomery might have a key, since he had rented the house for us. The persons who had moved out of the house might have kept a key. And who those persons were I didn't know.

So I had left Ruth and the child alone in that house without even a gun. I had the gun with me. And they were alone, without protection.

The idea took possession of me. I told myself it wasn't reasonable. The solution to what had happened was here, in the house in front of me. It had to be!

But what if Ruth and the child were in danger while I sat here?

And then the old terrible dread again: What if the danger were from me? What if I were the person who had driven my car into the baby-carriage? What if I were the person who had murdered Ann Margo?

And if I were innocent? If I sat here in the quiet moon-shadow while someone at last found Ruth and the child without protection?

I got to my feet and started to run, back across the vacant lots, across the moon-washed lawn of Ann Margo's house. Then I was on the road. A cloud had covered the moon for a moment and I was stumbling along, searching the darkness for where I had left my car. It should be here, I thought. Or here.

The moon came out again. I could see up and down the road for fifty yards in each direction. The car was gone!

I STOOD there, trembling, wanting to run and forcing myself to be still. It was five miles to the south end of the island, too far to run. And it might already be too late. Because if I was the person who had taken my car without remembering it—

How long since I had left the house at the south end? We had reached there about nine-fifteen and I had left about thirty minutes later. I looked up at the moon. It stood clear and white in the sky, but not high, not very high. It had just been lifting out of the bay when I left home.

I could feel the watch on my left wrist. I didn't want to look at it. My hand shook as I raised it. I had trouble seeing the dial in the moonlight. It was ten forty-five, an hour since I had left the house.

I was sure that I could remember everything that had happened in the last hour. There was no gap in that hour. I was sure—and I wasn't sure. Because I had lived with this thing too long; I had known too many holes in my memory.

Surely in the last hour there was not time for all I could remember, and anything else. And yet—

While I stood there the seconds ticked past. While I stood there Ruth and the baby might be in danger.

I turned and began to run along the

road. If anyone passed I would stop them. If not, Professor Montgomery might be in my home and he might have a car. I would get that.

No cars passed. Still running I turned off the road; I raced past the place where the baby buggy had been wrecked and under the oaks to the house. The door was locked and I began to pound on it with my fist.

There was no answer. Wind made a faint breathing sound in the trees. That was all.

I ran around to the back, to the garage, and there was a car there. But there were no keys in it, and I didn't know how to start a car without keys. I blew the horn and beat on the door that led from the garage to the house. But there was no answer.

Ruth had given Professor Montgomery her set of keys to the house. Now I fitted one to the door. I turned the key and pushed the door open.

The house was dark, pitch dark. The darkness was like a wet, black cloth against my eyes. "Professor Montgomery!" I called. My voice made dim echoes, and was gone.

I stepped through the door and closed it behind me. The light switch was just to my left, about shoulder-high on the wall. I put my left hand out and turned it on.

For an instant the light, following on such thick darkness, was blinding. I stood there, blinking. And then I saw the professor. He sat in a kitchen chair, facing me. His head lay over on his right shoulder, his white hair like a halo around it. His coat was open and I could see the bullet hole over the heart and the black stain of blood around it.

I didn't want to see any more. I put out my hand for the light switch again.

"Wait!" the man's voice said. He must have been standing where the opening door sheltered him. Now he was behind and to my right, not more than five feet from me. "Don't put out the light, Mr. Howard," he said.

My hand was already raised, but it stopped. It hung, heavy in the air. It went down to my side again though a weight had pulled it. My right hand was in my coat pocket, on the gun, but the man was behind me. He said, "Take your hand out of your pocket, Mr. Howard." His voice had a thin sound, like that of an electric saw. A kind of wail.

I took my hand out of my pocket. I began to turn, not because I had any plan, not because I wanted to see him, but simply because I could not stand there with my back to this man any longer. And as I turned I saw the hole cut in the kitchen floor and extending into the hallway between kitchen and dining room. Then I could see Norman Donnel.

He was crouched over his gun, his face white as Professor Montgomery's hair. His mouth twitched and saliva flecked the corners. "You'll have to dig it up," he said. "With the pain in my back I can't dig any more. You've got to do it."

I stared at him, thin and bent, with the gun centered on my chest. My own mouth was dry. "Dig what up?"

"Fifty thousand dollars!" It was almost a cry. His eyes were wild. His mouth shook and the saliva went down across his chin. "Hurry! Hurry!"

I took a step backward, away from him. My hands were half raised, clear of my sides. "I won't do it."

"Damn you!" I thought I had gone too far. His gun wavered and I thought he was going to shoot. Then the gun was steady again. "You'll dig," he said. "You'll dig, or I'll kill you."

I took another step backward. "You'll kill me anyway."

"No! I'll split the money with you. I—"

My back was against the wall now. I could feel the light switch just under my shoulder. "All right," I said. I made a gesture, a shrug of the shoulders. The light clicked and darkness struck like a blow. I was flinging myself sideways, falling, rolling. The blackness crashed with the sound of gunfire. The room shook and roared with the sound.

I fired twice at the flash of the gun. I heard him running then, the scream as he struck the chair in which Professor Montgomery's body sat. Then something fell on me and there was a writhing tangle in the dark. My left hand found Norman Donnel's face and I struck at it with the gun in my right hand. I struck three times, hard.

"IT IS all quite simple," I told Ruth.

"At least it's simple when you know the reasons."

"That is what I am waiting to hear," Ruth said.

It was after daylight now and I was back at the cottage at the south end of the island. We sat in the living room with the long sunlight pouring in the windows.

"Mr. Atwater told us," I said, "that ten or twelve years ago the body of a kidnaped child was found on that property. The money paid the kidnaper was never found, but the kidnaper was sent to prison. He died in prison about a year ago, but before he died he told his two cell-mates where he had hidden the ransom money. Those two cell-mates were the men who passed himself off as Professor Montgomery, and the one we knew as Norman Donnel."

"How do you know this?"

"Donnel talked to the sheriff, although once they knew who he was and what he was looking for there wasn't much more to be told. A deputy and I dug up the money. It had been buried at the center of a triangle formed by three oaks—which put it just between our kitchen and dining room."

"That's what Mr. Donnel was after all the time?"

"He got out of prison a month or so before the other man, this Professor Montgomery. Naturally he wanted the money for himself. But he was almost broke; he couldn't buy or rent our house. And because we had the baby we never left it for long. One of us was always there.

"He had to get rid of us so he could get in the house, cut a hole in the floor—these cement block houses are built on a solid foundation and there was no other way to get under it and start digging. And just as we said last night in talking about it, he figured that striking at Mary was the best way to get both of us out of the house.

"He swears he didn't want to kill her, just send her to the hospital. He heard Mr. Sturdy and me mention the black-widow spiders and got one himself. Since he often stopped here, it was easy to drop it in the bed. He reached in through an open window and overturned the crib, hoping it would break Mary's arm or leg."

Ruth shuddered, holding tight to the child.

"Then he found my car after seeing me wandering off through the brush around the lake. He had seen Mary in her buggy in the yard a short time before, so he took the car and drove back there. He didn't know Ann Margo saw him. The use of my hat and sweater was just for disguise.

"But he was worried about how much she might have seen and called on her that night. And somehow, perhaps seeing him in silhouette, made her recognize him. So he killed her, cutting the curtain tie-back with his pocket knife and using it to strangle her. Then he went off and forgot the knife. That's why he came back and found me there. He had to get the knife. And in the excitement, I never noticed it was gone.

"You say he took your car again last night?"

"On his way to our house last night he found it. He knew he would need a car for his getaway, so he drove it off the road, hid it, then went on to the house. In the past month he'd managed to get an impression of one of our keys and let himself in with that. He planned to wait until the professor did the physical work, but there was a fight and he killed Montgomery."

"He wasn't a psychic research man at all?"

"No more than I am. He got here after Donnel. He heard what had been happening and figured it out. Mr. Atwater with his talk about the place being haunted gave him his chance. He pulled that professor stuff, and he had money to rent our place, and there he was. Once he was in there Donnel had to move fast."

Ruth rocked the child in her arms. "I'm glad it's all over. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, but I—" She paused. "It didn't make sense. I knew it was impossible, but after Ann Margo said what she did about thinking it was you who drove the car—"

"I know," I said. "I was afraid of the same thing. Of course it was impossible, but it's just because I've been afraid so long. When I left home yesterday it was to visit a doctor in Tampa. I have an idea that man can help me."

And as it turned out he could, and did.

THE END

BLIND DATE

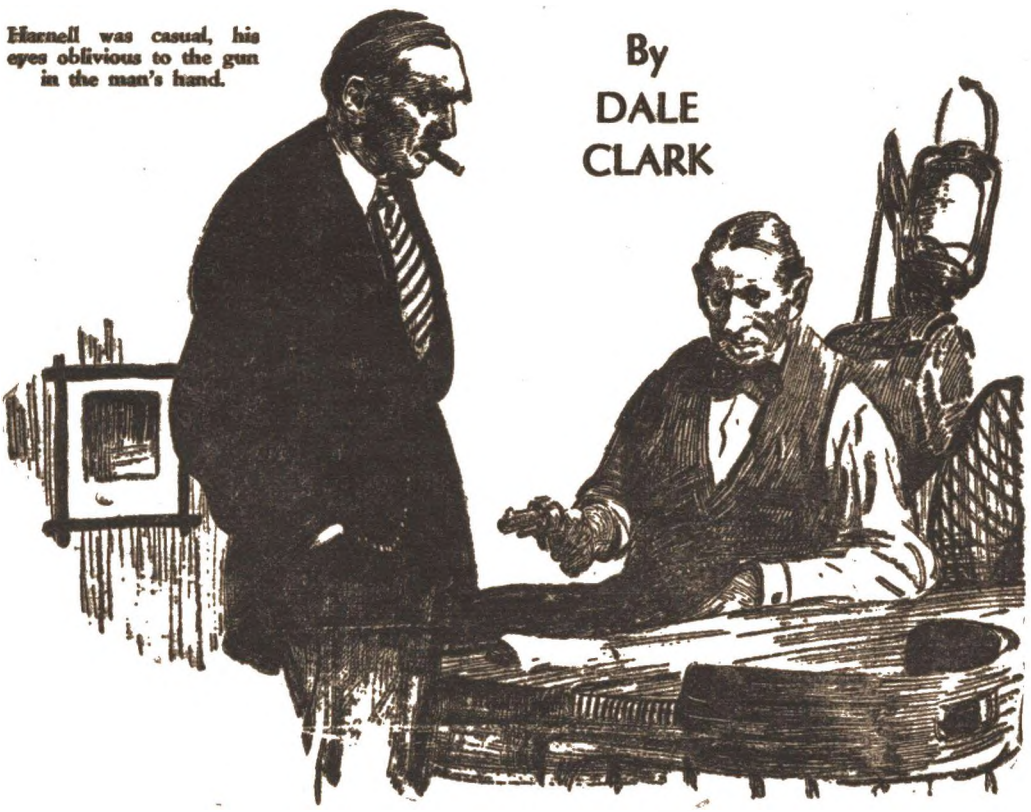
HERE'S HARNELL a tall man with a long, sad face, standing in a darkened office and staring from the window. A hundred feet of darkness lay below, down to the glowing, electric automobile eyes. It was a busy street, choked with twin streams of traffic. Cars streamed from east to west. And the west emptied itself of other cars into the east. Every two minutes the semaphores flashed, the traffic broke itself up into resting, block-long links —and the cross-town avenues rushed automobiles and busses and trolleys from north to south, and from south to north.

What a *big* city it was!

As far as Harnell could see, the night spread itself on an enormous chessboard pricked out in headlights, street lamps, and shop windows. The tall, many-windowed pieces on the board were the lofty downtown office buildings, hotels, movie palaces: the small, squat pawns were the little cafes, the bars, the shoeshine parlors.

It was *big*—and Harnell wasn't seeing the half of it, wasn't even seeing the tenth. There were the miles of apartment hotels and flat buildings, and then more miles of lawn-surrounded private homes. After all

If all the headlines in the Daily Blade *were strung end to end, Harnell knew, they would form either a hangman's noose for the killer of Lily Lavelle—or a tripwire over which Harnell would stumble into his own grave. . . .*



Harnell was casual, his eyes oblivious to the gun in the man's hand.

By DALE CLARK

that the suburbs stretched on, until the thing petered out into truck farms, highway tourist cabins, and gaudy roadhouses.

Why, a man could go crazy, literally a man could burst his brains, trying to visualize the hugeness of this city: Its parks, lagoons, colleges, zoos, storm drains, vacant lots, backrooms and cellars—all its dark, hidden, secret places where a killer could lurk.

When a man stopped to think the answer might be any of those automobiles down there—it might be apartment or house or tourist cabin—any sewer or backyard ashpile that held the clue . . .

Harnell whispered, "I'm going nuts! Raving nuts!"

But now he heard footfalls, limping ones. He stepped to the office desk, flooded it with light from a gooseneck lamp, sank his tall, thin person into the swivel chair.

Knuckles rapped on the door.

"Come in," said Harnell, and the limping footfalls brought a man into the room—an old fellow, bald and stooped, with false teeth that clicked when he spoke.

"I brung up the paper, Mr. Smith."

"Swell. Here," said Harnell, "keep the change, Pop."

Pop's fist swallowed Harnell's quarter with alacrity. He wasn't in any hurry to hand over the newspaper, which he held pressed under his other arm. Why should he be in a hurry? It's a lonesome job running the night elevator in a building as nearly deserted nights as this one. Pop's elevator didn't even have a window to look from; there was just the stool to sit on, the newspapers to pore over, and maybe once an hour somebody wanted to ride up or down. Maybe the somebody said, "Hello, Pop," or "G'night, Pop," and maybe not.

It was a big city outside; but it was full of little lonely niches like night elevators and jail cells and hall bedrooms. The city was ful of lonely people sitting in their niches, and nothing to do but read the papers.

Pop clicked his teeth and he said: "They're still looking for the guy. The one that killed that racetrack girl."

"Lily Lavelle?" murmured Harnell.

"Yeah. Paper's got a new angle. Putting on a special investigation. They brung in some hot-shot private detective. Guy from back East." Pop had to use short sentences, he'd get out five or six words, and then he'd have to catch those false choppers from falling out of his mouth. "Guy's got a piece in the paper. How he's going to catch the killer. Five hundred cops couldn't, but he claims he can."

"All right," Harnell interrupted. "I can read. Just put the paper on the desk."

"There's nothing new on the case. This wonderful detective, this Harnell. It's a newspaper stunt, I bet. It's to sell papers. That's all it is."

But Harnell's face was blank. He didn't even bother to reply. So the old man said, "Well, thanks, Mr. Smith," and went away to the tune of limping footfalls and clicking store teeth.

What a character he was! What a wise guy! But all the same, he'd read the paper. And he'd read it tomorrow, he'd be back for the next installment, no matter if he did think it was just a circulation stunt.

Harnell spread the ing-damp front page under the gooseneck lamp's cone of light. A picture of Lily Lavelle stared up at him, a pin-up pix he'd seen before and didn't bother to look at now. There was a black, two columns wide box of type, telling how the *Daily Blade* wasn't satisfied with the local police investigation, and had brought in the famous East Coast private detective, E. W. ("Rocky") Harnell to find Lily Lavelle's murderer.

HARNELL didn't waste any time on this blurb, either. What interested him was the article below, the one written by E. W. ("Rocky") Harnell. The last time he'd seen this stuff was when he'd pulled it out of his typewriter, and he'd worried plenty as he pecked away at the machine. In print, it looked different, it had punch and authority the typewritten page lacked. Harnell read the words—his own words—with rapt, frowning attention:

I'LL SOLVE THE LILLY LAVELLE MURDER

Yes, that's my challenge. I'm going to bring this girl's slayer to justice. On that promise, I stake my professional reputation.

What's more, I'm not going to do it next month or next year. I'll have a solution very soon—*in less than a week.* Tomorrow, the day after, or the day after—*very soon now*—I'm going to print the murderer's photograph on this front page.

I haven't any "inside information," either—any hot tip—any secret leads on the crime. There's no rabbit up my sleeve that you don't know about. All I've got is the theory—my

one and only theory—that *you* can help.

I'm CERTAIN that various witnesses in this city know a few small FACTS sufficient to solve this horror. I'm convinced these persons can be reached through this newspaper—reached in such a way they will understand the IMPORTANCE of what they know and CAN TELL.

I'm in deadly earnest when I say I'm sure six or eight or a dozen people—maybe more—possess evidence that will positively identify this killer in our midst.

These witnesses haven't gone to the police because they unfortunately don't understand the importance of the clues they hold.

YOU, reading this, may be the WITNESS with the innocent-seeming but absolutely vital key fact to the killing.

Let's just briefly review the Lily Lavelle case. In other words, let's get behind the headlines and look at the record in an orderly way.

It was a week ago—Monday morning, the 15th, at 8:15 o'clock—when Mr. Edgar Sanders, 9950 Monticello Avenue, cut across a vacant lot in his hurry to catch the 101st Street bus. This vacant lot is right back of Sanders' home, facing on Lawndale Avenue. Sanders had almost reached the Lawndale sidewalk when he saw the nude, mutilated body of a young woman lying in the weeds.

A horrible spectacle confronted the police and detectives who swarmed at the scene. The face of the brunette young victim was battered and mangled beyond recognition. The unclad body had been frightfully and sadistically maltreated. The victim had been tortured—seared with fire—while her wrists and ankles were bound.

Wait a minute! That's our first clue!

Suppose you wished to tie somebody hand and foot. You MIGHT have a length of rope for the purpose—and again, you MIGHT NOT. The rope used in binding Lily Lavelle left deep, perfectly clear traces upon the poor girl's skin. It was a braided rope, approximately three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter. It was very likely a clothesline, and possibly a new one, judging from the victim's abraded skin.

There's a chance—a 50-50 chance—that Lily's torture-slayer went out and bought a brand-new clothesline for this crime.

Do YOU work in a store where rope or clothesline is sold? If so, stop and think back. Do you remember a customer—a man or woman—making such a purchase from you?

You may not know his or her name. You may not even be able to describe the customer. Even so, your evidence is valuable. It is a real CLUE, because the very location of the store where you work tells something about the habits of purchaser of—it narrows down the search to a certain neighborhood or district of the city.

OR, do you know of a missing clothesline that disappeared from a backyard in your block—or along your milk or ice or mail route? You won't necessarily be getting your neighbor or customer into trouble by reporting such a clothesline. It's entirely possible the criminal stole a clothesline instead of buying one—a CLUE to the killer's habits and movements.

If you know *anything* about a clothesline, telephone AMES 44702—and TELL me—right now!

You don't want to be tortured and killed, as Lily Lavelle was. You don't want your wife or daughter to meet Lily's fate. Therefore, you want this fiend put away!

So, remember this. Fiends don't suddenly materialize out of the midnight sky, or melt away into thin air between their horrible crimes. They live day-to-day lives, constantly rubbing elbows with persons like yourself. They can't buy or steal or cut down in their own backyards so simple an article as a clothesline without SOMEBODY knowing it.

The clothesline is just one clue.

I'll be back tomorrow with other angles.

Remember the phone number—AMES 44702.

The desk telephone rang. Harnell reached for the instrument with one hand, unpocketed a pencil with the other. The voice was breathless. "Mr. Harnell," it said, "my name's Jennie Wick, and I ride that 101st Street bus, and I didn't think of it until I saw the paper tonight—but there was a man on the bus Saturday afternoon with a hank of clothesline in his coat pocket. I thought to myself, well, he certainly needed it, his clothes were just filthy. He was dirty old fat man, and he had been drinking, and well, you know, he *looked* at me."

Harnell had barely hung up when the phone rang again. It went on ringing, call after call; it was well past midnight when the thing stopped, and Harnell could go stiffly to the window for a breath of fresh air.

Down there in the street, the cars still ran, east to west, and west to east, through the downtown's huge electric chessboard. It was a big city, all right.

And apparently it was full of clothesline buyers. Literally it seemed the buyers of clotheslines must have stood three deep at the store counters, must have packed the pavements with clotheslines clutched in their fists, clotheslines peeping from their shopping bags.

"Nuts!" said Harnell. "It's enough to drive a guy completely, raving nuts!"

HERE was Harnell again the next night at the same window peering down at the same gleaming grill of the city. What a

queer manhunt it was! A silent man in a lonely little office, trying to reach into the glare and turmoil of the metropolis and pick out a hidden killer from its restless millions.

A needle in a haystack would be child's play compared to this. A needle in a haystack would be easy! Suppose you turned five hundred cops loose on a ten ton haystack—each man would be responsible for a mere fiftieth of a ton—forty pounds to the man. A few forkfuls of fry grass!

Why, five hundred officers could count that much hay wisp by wisp, could label and number the straws, and, yes, photograph them individually—in a tiny fraction of the time the police of this city had spent ringing doorbells and checking auto court registers and running down tips.

That's the kind of a case this one was—a case in which every living adult in the city was a conceivable suspect. If you lined them up, you'd have a column of people six hundred miles long, with one of these suspects posted every yard of the way. And if Harnell started at one end of this line, spending just enough time to ask each person his name, address and murder night alibi, it's take him six million minutes to reach the other end of the line. A hundred thousand hours, or more than ten years, without one second allowed to eat or sleep.

Tonight he didn't bother to turn around when the knock sounded.

"Come in."

Pop came in—the same shabby Pop, having the same trouble with his teeth, getting out the same words:

"I brung up the paper, Mr. Smith."

"Okay, there's two-bits on the desk for you."

Pop wasn't so easily rebuffed. "Paper here says Harnell's got a clue. Says the killer was seen, all right. Claims he's close to breaking the case. Mister Smith, you know what I think?"

"No, what?"

"Looks to me, it's all bluff," said Pop. "This Harnell, now. He talks too big. I figure he's whistling in the dark. Take a man hunting rabbits, he don't whistle at all. He sneaks up quiet, see what I mean"

"You sure as hell wouldn't get any rabbits, would you?" said Harnell, grinning as he waved the oldster from the office.

Alone, he snatched up the paper. They'd given him only one column on the front page tonight. Quite a come-down.

I said yesterday I was sure—without any advance inside information or secret tips—that I'd have Lily Lavelle's killer soon.

Today I'm twice as sure. I can now report that an arrest may be only a matter of hours.

Remember, I asked for certain information about a clothesline or a piece of rope. Well, that angle's been taken care of! Of course that's just one angle—the first link in the chain. We're going to dig the NEXT link out of Lily Lavelle's life story.

Yesterday I described the manner in which Lily's mutilated body was found on the vacant lot on Lawndale Avenue. The girl's identity was determined from fingerprints, despite the torture burns which seared her hands and arms nearly to the elbows.

Lily's prints were of record because she was once arrested—three years ago, at San Ysidro, California, on suspicion of dope smuggling. At that time, the girl stated she had crossed the Border to attend the races at Tijuana. Subsequent investigation disclosed that Lily's only regular employment was following the races, placing pari-mutuel bets after a system of her own. When this system failed, she would accept employment just long enough to get a fresh "stake."

She is known to have worked as a photographer's model, beauty cream demonstrator, and house-to-house canvasser. She was a beautiful girl with an appealing personality, and she chose employment which enabled her to cash in upon these assets.

She arrived in this city on Thursday, the 11th, the day before the opening of the Laconda Track race meet. She hitchhiked here in a car driven by a W. F. Edwards—Edwards has been questioned by the police and *cleared.*

Here, then, are two big CLUES!

Firstly, Lily may have been broke—since she chose to hitchhike. She may have sought temporary employment in this city.

Are YOU an employer? If so, look again at Lily's picture. Did such a girl enter your place of business seeking work—Thursday afternoon, Friday or Saturday last week?

Secondly—there's no record to indicate Lily spent the night of the 11th, or the days of the 12th, 13th and 14th, in any hotel, auto court or rooming house. But she certainly stayed somewhere—and we can make some deductions about that, too. Because it's even money or better that Miss Lavelle phoned a friend or acquaintance as soon as she arrived in this city, and went to spent the night with her "friend" or acquaintance.

Now, everybody think hard.

Was there someone in YOUR building or YOUR block who had a guest Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday?

If you actually saw the guest— a girl resembling Lily Lavelle—that's it.

But even if you didn't see her, there are possibilities we mustn't overlook. Just stop to think what the circumstances are when an unexpected guest drops in on YOU. Why,

YOU couldn't have anybody in YOUR home without somebody knowing about it—the janitor, the maid, the milkman who left the extra bottle, the postman, the people upstairs or across the hall or next door, the grocer you shop with, the butcher, the delivery boy, the Fuller Brush man who talked to the guest while you were out, the laundry driver who picked up the extra-large bundle.

Somebody knows, too, where Lily Lavelle spent the last four days of her life—and YOU may be the one who CAN TELL.

So run—don't walk—to the nearest phone, ring up AMES 44702, and the voice you hear will be mine.

THE FIRST voice Harnell heard tonight was a twangy nasal tenor, pitched over the noises of a jukebox and clicking poolballs. "Look," it said, "I'm a hackie, see. Name of Joe Majer, I drive a cab for the Blue Line, and it must 've been last Friday I hauled a dame out onto 68th Street—"

That was the first call. The phone kept ringing after that—Harnell had hit the jackpot again. You'd have thought the city was simply overflowing with inexplicable house guests, in every nook and cranny of it there'd been mysterious and stealthy, after-dark arrivals of young women knocking on doors. There must have been a regiment of young women with suitcases traveling in taxis and streetcars or trudging the pavements. A map marked with colored pins showing the addresses where the house guests had been entertained would have looked like a case of measles—house guests had been as common as fire hydrants.

It was raining when the incessant ringing let up, and Harnell walked to the window. All the lights in the street below had their doubles, headlights and streetlamps and neons flashing reflected from the rain pools. The lights had another reflection in the rain clouds above the downtown office buildings, actually the lights were so numerous they painted these clouds a strange, salmon pink.

What a *big* place it was! What a tremendous antheap of concrete and metal and glass, how full of hurrying, shuttling antshapes at their incredibly complicated business of life—or the other business of death.

And as for trying to pick a killer out of it—

"Nuts," said Harnell, his voice hoarse from the telephoning. "It could drive a guy nuts."

All the same, he was there in the little office the next night—the third night—when Pop ambled in, mumbling:

"I brung you the paper, Mr. Smith."

"Okay, here, keep the change."

It was the same old routine—but then it wasn't either the same, because Pop turned and limped toward the door.

Harnell stared after the old man, pinching eyes that had begun to show faint, dark circles of sleepless strain: "What's wrong? Where's the big news digest, the walkie-talkie current comment column?"

"Huh?" said Pop, vaguely.

"You're falling down on the job, ain't you? You haven't told me the latest on the murder."

"Yuh," said Pop, and clicked his teeth. "Yuh, I'm kind of losing interest."

Losing interest? Harnell's eyes were perfectly thunderstruck. Why was Pop losing interest? Harnell's hands shook a little as he gripped the front page—they'd only given him a paragraph or so of front page tonight, the rest continued on page two:

LILY LAVELLE's killer is still at large—but only while the final link in the evidence is being forged.

The first link in this chain was hammered out of a study of the CRIME. That is, the clothesline clue!

The second link was hammered out of investigation into the life of the VICTIM.

For the third—and last—link, we're going straight to the KILLER.

What do we know about this phantom? This shapeless, faceless, furtive figure of murder?

I know plenty!

I've dealt with these egomaniac, "lone wolf" criminals before, and it's really laughable to watch their flabbergasted expressions when they find out their soul secrets have been pretty much public property all along. Lone wolves are always blind to the possibility that SOMEBODY ELSE may be "seeing through" them. Lone wolves always imagine, up to the last minute, that they're getting away with murder—absolutely!

Well, I know so much about the killer that one more seemingly insignificant FACT will enable me to secure an arrest and a conviction.

Actually, this FACT is well-known to dozens of you who read this newspaper.

I'm not alluding to the car which the slayer of Lily Lavelle is known to have used in transporting her body to that vacant lot.

Or the killer's known physical strength and agility, needed to overcome an active, healthy young woman who was fighting for her life.

Or the killer's reclusive, secretive type, possessing the "private place" needed to

commit a diabolical crime such as this.

More important than these details is the psychological truth that the fiend's associates —you couldn't call them friends—are "hep" to the phantom's INNER SECRET. THEY KNOW WHAT MAKES THE SLAYER TICK! They're not only "hep," but they've discussed it among themselves, frequently. I'm sure they have, because such things *always* get talked about.

Now I call upon the acquaintances of the killer—whoever you are, by this time you KNOW what I mean. I call upon you to reach for the nearest phone, dial AMES 44702, and start spilling that gossip, that juicy little tidbit you've so often talked about—and, yes, laughed at! It isn't a giggling matter any more. It isn't a private scandal. It became EVIDENCE the moment Lily Lavelle gasped her last breath—even though you "can't believe" the party most concerned could possibly be guilty!

That's what you're thinking, isn't it?

Of course it is! Because, as you see it, the lone-wolf is a poor doggie—a housebroken pet. So perfectly harmless and transparent!

Well, just step out of your own mind and put yourself into that lone-wolf brain, and imagine what it's thinking of you. Remembering that this brain doesn't dream about your gossip and your laughter. Remembering that the brain is coldly, completely sure it's got you fooled, bamboozled, and hoodwinked. The brain's laughing at you!

So hop to the phone and tell me what you know. With what I know, we'll go places FAST. Let's hammer out that last link before midnight tonight!

Harnell thrust the paper aside, sat there until he tired of staring at the utterly silent phone. He shoved up from his chair, stalked to the window, and broodingly gazed on the bustling, electrically gleaming city.

You'd have thought a town as big as this one ought to be bursting with secrets, that a ten-line switchboard would be swamped with the flood of incoming scandal.

No, thought Harnell, this thing was getting too close to home —to every home in the city. For what those avid newspaper readers wanted to believe in was a newspaper sensation, not a horror that touched upon their own lives. They wanted to believe in a "fiend" without a face, a mysterious stranger skulking through the streets with a hank of clotheslines clutched in his fist! Not one of their own personal friends!

"This lone-wolf may be one of the fifty or sixty people in your circle," Harnell tried to tell them.

But what they thought was, "No, in a city as big as this, it couldn't be. No, it's some stranger."

That's why they'd report the dirty fat man seen on the bus, or the pretty girl glimpsed turning a corner with a suitcase or something in her hand. But blab on the queer duck in their own office? No.

Harnell shook his head. "It's enough to drive a man—"

The sound of the desk phone sliced short the sentence, whipped Harnell into a headlong dive across the little office.

"THAT YOU, Rocky?" a muffled voice asked.

Harnell couldn't help it, his voice went down the scale, too. "Yeah. Sure, it's Rocky. Who's calling?"

"I dunno if you remember me. This is Joe."

"Joe who? Which Joe?"

"It was back East, Rocky. You prob'ly wouldn't remember."

Harnell asked, "You mean you knew me back on the East Coast, Joe?"

"Yeah, and Rocky, I been reading this you're dishing up in the paper. I think maybe I got something for you, but the price has gotta be right."

"You want to sell me information on the Lily Lavelle case?" Harnell questioned.

"Yeah. You catch on quick. How much dough could you raise?"

"That depends on what you tell me," Harnell said. "How about meeting me somewhere tomorrow?"

The voice said, "No, right now. You know the Baker Avenue carline?"

"I can find it."

"You get on the Baker Avenue car going north, Rocky. Don't take a seat. Stand up in front with the motorman. There'll be an auto blink its lights. When you see it, you hop off at the next corner and walk back. And you better not bring any local cops, Rocky. I'm hot, see? I got to have some dough to get out of this town, see?"

"I'll come alone," Harnell promised.

* * *

It was far out into the sticks, very near the end of the Baker Avenue run. For blocks now the motorman had been sliding suspicious glances toward the tall, dour-faced passenger who seemed to have grown roots into the shaking floor. Why didn't he go in and sit down, now that three out of

every four seats in the trolley were empty.

The trolley shook its way up a hill, something like a spaniel coming out of water. The grade was a long one, a quarter-mile climb. Headlights of a car parked at the crest of the hill switched on and off, off and on.

"Here!" Harnell called, swinging to the exit as the trolley lost momentum. The door folded open, and Harnell kissed the step with one foot and landed on the curb with the other. Hands open and conspicuously empty at his side, he strode toward the headlights that bathed him.

"Rocky?"

"Yeah, right."

"Hop in. Quick!"

Harnell wasn't settled into the seat beside the driver when the coupe gunned in a way that nearly snapped the head from his shoulders. The car made a U-turn and headed downhill away from the city, traveling fifty an hour as it passed the trolley.

Harnell glanced at the driver—a sharp-faced man wearing a hat tugged brim-down on this side of his face, wearing an ulster collared up to the height of his thin lips.

If you're hot, Joe, I'd go a little easy on the cowboy driving," Harnell advised quietly. "You might get us picked up by some speed cop."

Joe took his foot from the gas pedal and dropped it on the brake, but only to round the corner ahead.

The coupe roared along this sidestreet to the next boulevard.

It followed the bouelvard until that became a highway outside the city limits. The thin-faced driver whipped his machine onto an oiled sideroad, soon swung from the oiled road onto a lane.

At the end of the lane stood a shack—a crude summer cabin with a flyscreen front porch overlooking the dark night-shine of a small lake.

"What's this layout?" Harnell asked.

"My hide-out. Come on in."

Joe went ahead, up trembling steps, across the rickety porch floor, into a wall-papered room lighted by a gasoline lantern on an oilcloth covered table.

"Sit down," Joe said. "How much dough will you put up for the dope on the LaVelle dame?"

"I told you on the phone. It depends on what you've got for me."

Joe rubbed his chin on his ulster collar. "Well," said he, "the way I heard is this. The Lavelle girl was mixed up in the dope racket. She was with Busca's mob."

Harnell said, "Oh, hell," and stood, pushing back his chair. "If that's the best you can do, let's start back for town."

"You know better than that, huh?"

"I know a lot better than that."

Joe frowned under his hat's slanted brim. "Maybe anything I tell you—you can say you know better than that! You can say it's no help, you knew it anyway. Maybe you better tell me how much you know, and then there won't be any argument whether I'm giving you something more."

Harnell laughed. "If that's your line, Joe, it's good-bye. I'm here to buy information. Not give it away. You want money from me, you'll have to do the talking."

"Well-l," Joe said. "Lily had something better than dope. She had a man she was shaking down, blackmailing."

"What man?"

"She didn't tell me his name."

"Oh, so you knew Lily?"

"Sure," said Joe. "I play the bangtails myself. I've seen her around the tracks. I understand she had her hooks into a man out here on the Coast. She'd let him alone while she was winning, but then when her system blew up, she'd blackmail him for a fresh stake. Does it fit with what you've got, Rocky?"

"It could. What'd she have on the man?"

"The usual. Some damned fool letters. I understand the guy is married to a society wife. Lily told me she was with him one weekend on his yacht. It shouldn't be so hard for you to trace him. Not so many guys own yachts."

"Is that all you know about him, Joe?"

"It's a start, ain't it? It ought to be worth a couple hundred dollars, shouldn't it?"

Harnell said, "Maybe, but of course I'll have to check up on all this first. We'll go back to town and I'll—"

He was crossing the floor, impatiently, as he spoke.

Joe rapped, "Not that door! The other one!"

Harnell threw open the door. He saw an iron bedstead, a black streak on the wall-paper too dark to be a shadow. Flame had seared the wallpaper, red fluid had left

darkening spots on the floor. Harnell heard the sharp, rasping scrape of chair legs behind him.

There was a gun in Joe's hand, a bellygun coming out through the parted front of the ulster.

Harnell said matter of factly, "Hell, and I thought that was the way out of here," he turned around, routed himself casually toward the porch door. His eyes looked straight ahead, apparently oblivious to the weapon in the thin-faced man's hand.

Joe hesitated, he din't know whether to use that bellygun or try and hide it again, after all.

Harnell's tall body plunged abruptly, catching at the gun hand with wiry fingers, making his other arm into a piston that worked methodically against Joe's jaw.

In about ten seconds time, Harnell had the gun and the thin-faced man lay helpless on the floor. Harnell caught up the gasoline lantern and stepped to the inner door, and started searching about the interior of the fire-seared, bloodstained chamber.

"All right," he said. "You killed Lily, and you did it here. Now why?"

JOE'S THIN face had the look of breaking into tears of rage. He said nothing. Harnell returned and put the lantern on the table. Stooping, he caught the ulster collar and hoisted Joe into a chair.

"It's going to be your confession or mine in the morning paper," Harnell said. "One or the other, and I don't think you'll like mine."

"Yours?" Surprise wrung the word from Joe's thin lips.

"Uh-huh. I'll have to break down and admit a murder can't be investigated the way I went to work on Lily's death. Not with two hundred different witnesses describing two hundred different clothesline suspects, not to mention a thousand or so mysterious house guests.

"The town's simply too big," continued Harnell grimly, "only a guilty egomaniac wouldn't realize it! He'd be so self-centered he'd imagine he was the only human being who had anything to do with clotheslines and mystery girls. He'd be blind to everything and everybody but himself, so all this stuff would look threateningly close to him. And it'd really get under his skin when he read that all his friends were hep to his hidden-away secrets! He could go nuts thinking about it, huh, Joe?"

Joe's lips hung open, loosely.

"Yes," said Harnell, "he could fall for it so hard he'd contact the detective. He'd lead the dick to the murder scene, just to see if the dick knew the place. You figured I didn't now it, after all, and you were egotistical enough to think you could give the case a fresh, phony twist to throw me off your trail. When I really wasn't on the trail at all."

The other man blinked in surprise, his jaw muscles working.

"You see what I mean?" said Harnell. "It's either a case of a master-mind running down a super-duper crook—the way the public thinks now. Or else it's a case of a damn' dumb little screwball outsmarting himself into jail—the way it'll look if the papers print who I really am."

And Harnell chuckled: "Joe, you poor dumb sap, there isn't any famous 'Rocky' Harnell from back East. I'm plain Harnell Smith, detective second-class, local. The town will bust its buttons laughing when it comes out how you 'remembered' me."

He caught the thin-faced man's arm. "What do you want? *That?* Or a nice, quiet, clean confession?"

"I killed her," said Joe, and swallowed lamely. "I'm the man she was blackmailing. I got in a little too deep, losing money on the races. I'm an industrial insurance collector, and I started betting the money I collected. So many of those people drop their policies, anyway, I figured I could cover up."

"How long's this been going on," Harnell asked.

"It started last year. Lily Lavelle found out—one night we had a few too many drinks, and I talked too much. She started hitting me for money. Ten and twenty dollars at first—loans, but she never paid them back. And then this year she blew into town, and she wanted a hundred or she'd tell the insurance company. I told her we'd have to drive out in the country so I could get the money from my brother—my brother uses this cabin during the fishing season.

"All I thought was," Joe said, licking his thin lips, "I'd tie her up for a few days. I'd scare her good. I'd come out nights and

(Continued on page 98)

THE WITCH'S WAY

When one is working on a witch case, Chief of Police Antonio Lopez reasoned, one should go in the witch's way—by dark of night, using the strange call of the accursed night bird, waiting for fear to unleash men's tongues. . . .

By
JOSEPH SHALLIT

"CROSS YOURSELF," Valentino Loreto said to Antonio Lopez, the chief of police. "Cross yourself, for here comes the witch."

"Better that you should not speak such foolishness," Antonio said. "Only children and fools believe such stories."

"Then I am a fool, for it is too late to call me a child by forty years," Valentino said. "Nevertheless, better that you should

". . . In the darkness of the early morning I placed the trail of rice to Julio's hut. . . ."

cross yourself. It is good protection."

"Be still and do not frighten the old man," Antonio said.

Into the doorway, passing beneath the sign reading, Chief of Police, Municipality of Tompon, Leyte, walked Vicente Honorio, leaning on his cane. He wore a brown hempen shirt, blue, cotton American trousers and a brown crust of dirt on his bare feet. He had a large, hooked nose unsuited for his flat face, and a smile that was lost in a jungle of wrinkles.

"I am ashamed that I must trouble you," he said to Antonio.

"It is no trouble, old man," Antonio said. "Sit in this chair."

"I would not come if my rice were not taken," Vicente said, sitting down softly so as not to disturb the chair unduly. "I do not care so much for the fish."

"Tell me what is your trouble," Antonio said.

"My rice," Vicente said. "Three sacks stood on a shelf close to my cooking pots. Late in the night I am sleeping. I hear a noise as of someone walking on the bamboo ladder. 'Who is it?' I say. 'Go to sleep, old man; it is a dream,' a man's voice tells me. Therefore I go to sleep again. When I wake in the morning, I have only two sacks of rice. And of the twelve fish which I myself brought from my fish trap yesterday, I have only two small ones. I do not care so much for the fish, for the sea runs plentiful these days. But two sacks of rice will not last until the next harvest."

"WHY DO you weep, old man?" Valentino Loreto burst out. "Can you not send out your accursed pig to get more rice for you?"

The smile went away from Vicente's face. "It is not an accursed pig," he said meekly. "It is a pig like any other pig."

"Does not your pig run through the roads at night, frightening good people with his golden teeth and causing them to lose their wits?" Valentino demanded.

"It is not true," Vicente said tremblingly. "I know that many people say this of my pig, but it is not true. My pig does not have golden teeth. It is a pig like any other pig, and I keep it in its pen at night."

"And is it not true," said Valentino, half rising from his chair, "that you transform yourself into a large black bird and fly through the night, crying *woc-woc,* bringing trouble to men's homes?"

"It is not true, not true!" Vicente said, almost weeping. He turned a sorrowful face to Antonio. "Ay, all the people say these things of me, but they are not true. My pig is like other pigs. I am a man like other men. But since the time, many years ago, that Tomas Escuadra's little son died of the dysentery as I was walking past his house, people have spoken these evil things of me."

"Do not mind them," Antonio said kindly. "And you, Sergeant Loreto, do not trouble this old man who seeks only to find the rice which has left him."

"Yes," said Vicente. "I do not care so much for the fish, for I believe it stinks already."

"I wish to help you, old man," Antonio said, "but it is very difficult. In every home in Leyte one can find sacks of rice like yours. Is there any one you have a sentiment upon as having taken your rice?"

"Yes," Vicente said promptly. "It is one of my three neighbors: Juanito Repulda, Julio Ontimaro or Salvador Campos."

"You speak quickly, old man," Antonio said. "Why do you name these three only?"

Vicente leaned forward, and his wrinkles twisted as he pondered. "I think about this in the morning," he said. "You know where my hut is, at the end of Juan Luna Street, at the edge of the rice fields. The thief could not go through the fields because they are too wet now. He must go through Juan Luna Street. If one walks from my hut, one passes the huts of my three neighbors, and then one comes to a muddy place. There is rain in the evening yesterday, and it makes the mud smooth. Early this morning I go there to look. There are no foot marks in it."

"You are wise, old man," Antonio said softly. "If you were younger I would make of you a policeman and give you the place of Sergeant Valentino Loreto."

"Very good," said Valentino. "And I shall take the old man's wings and fly at night and cry *woc-woc.*"

"Go, old man," Antonio said. "We shall try to find your rice."

Vicente rose. "You are very kind," he

said. "You will receive many blessings for my rice." He followed his cane out through the doorway.

Valentino stood up and gave a snort like a carabao. "That accursed witch! It is some new evil he is trying to make this way. If he wishes to find his rice, he can do it himself. Why does he not make himself into a bird tonight and cry *woc-woc* in the windows of his neighbors? They would give up their rice soon enough for fear of having their wits destroyed."

Antonio took a report form from his desk drawer and began to write.

"Oy!" said Valentino. "You are not going to make serious business of this witch's story?"

"A crime is a crime," Antonio said, "and will be so entered in the monthly report."

"You are too kind to a witch," Valentino said.

"I am not kind," Antonio said. "I think of myself only. Look at this report I must send to the provincial provost marshal this month: Crimes reported—seven. Crimes solved—none. The provost marshal will not like that."

"Oy, but you are making it only worse, for now you will have eight crimes reported."

"Yes, Valentino, but this crime will be solved."

Valentino stared at him. "How will you do that?" he asked respectfully.

"Do you not know that you have already suggested the way?"

THAT NIGHT, at half an hour before midnight, Antonio and Valentino left the police office and walked through the dark streets of Tompon. They went past the hemp warehouse, past the Chinese bakery, past the market shed where the clean-up boys were making music with pans and bottles, past the seamstress' place, past the Liberation Café where a few old men still sat, drinking tuba, past the chapel and into Juan Luna Street.

"Good that there is no moon," Antonio said.

"Yes, for even the moon would laugh to see us doing a witch's business," said Valentino.

The street, of packed dirt and gravel, became softer as they went on, softer and grassier, for few persons came this way. On both sides of the street the low rice fields lay beneath a blanket of water, resting from the harvest.

"Oy!" Valentino exclaimed. "The mud!"

They had come upon the muddy spot Vicente had told them about.

"This is for carabao to walk in, not men," Valentino said.

"Hold your breath and you will not drown," Antonio said, walking after him.

They cleared the muddy spot and continued to walk. And now on their left appeared the nipa-palm hut of Juanito Repulda, standing on bamboo stilts at the side of the road.

"Here we must be very quiet," Antonio whispered. "We must go as a bird goes."

"Then better that a bird were doing this and not I," Valentino said.

They walked to the window. It was covered by a thick bamboo and nipa screen, to keep out the injurious night air.

"Now bend," Antonio whispered, "so that I can put my knees on your shoulders and be lifted to the window."

Valentino looked at Antonio's thick shoulders and thick, round belly. "My wife will have a husband with a broken back tonight," he whispered.

Valentino stooped. Antonio put his hands against the side of the hut and put his knees on Valentino's shoulders. Valentino rose with a quiver and a grunt, and Antonio slid upward against the rustling nipa leaves. He put his mouth to the edge of the screen.

"*Woc-woc,*" Antonio said softly.

"Oy, speak louder and be done with it," Valentino said. "I cannot suffer this burden all night."

"*Woc-woc!*" Antonio cried. He flapped his arms like a bird against the screen.

There was a sudden cry within, and then a voice began to mutter.

"*Woc-woc!*" Antonio cried. "*Woc-woc!*"

The voice became louder. It was saying, "Jesús-Maria-Josip! Jesús-Maria-Josip!"

"*Woc-woc!*" Antonio cried, louder still.

"Jesús-Maria-Josip!" persisted the voice inside. "Jesús-Maria-Josip!"

"Oiga, come down!" Valentino exclaimed. He stooped, and Antonio slid down along the hut to the ground. "It is a terrible sin," Valentino said, "to be speaking a witch's cry against these holy words. A great harm will come."

"Jesús-Maria-Josip!" said the voice inside the hut.

"Oy, let us go quickly," Valentino said. He leaped to the road and ran a few paces.

Antonio came slowly after him. "Do not run, imbecile," he said. "There are no devils here."

Valentino waited for his chief to come beside him, and said, "Oy, it is foolishness for a chief of police to play the witch."

"It is no harm," Antonio said. "Perhaps in this way I can frighten a man into confessing his crime."

"Surely there are other ways to catch a thief."

"If I am dealing with men who believe in witches, I use the witch's way."

"Better that the crime never be solved than to catch a thief in this unholy way."

"I sign the monthly report," Antonio said, "and I shall sign for the sin."

Now they came to the hut of Julio Ontimaro. "Once more give me your back," Antonio said.

"My wife will say to me, 'Go, you are a bent old man,'" Valentino said.

He stooped and raised Antonio to the tightly screened window.

"Woc-woc!" cried Antonio. *"Woc-woc!"* He pressed his ear against the screen. "Listen, Valentino," he whispered. "Do you hear the noise?"

There was a whirring, grinding sound inside.

"Woc-woc!" Antonio cried. Then he stopped. "I think we have found a thief," he whispered. "He is grinding his stolen rice in the dark. Lower me, Valentino."

Valentino let him down, and they moved quietly to the bamboo ladder leading to the doorway. Antonio went up the ladder. Valentino stooped beneath the hut where he could hear the sound coming through the bamboo lattice floor.

Antonio rattled the door. It was unfastened. He pushed it slightly open. The sound of grinding continued. He took a match box from his pocket and struck a match. He held it inside the door. "Oy!" he said.

"Yes, I know," said Valentino. "It is no rice grinder."

Antonio came slowly down the ladder. "I have never heard such snoring," he said.

"I can smell the tuba from here," Valentino said. "He has drunk so much, a regiment of devils could not wake him."

"If you knew it was not a rice grinder, why did you not tell me?" Antonio demanded.

"I do not interfere in a witch's work," Valentino said with haughtiness.

When they came to the hut of Salvador Campos, Antonio said, "Well, then, this is the last time you must raise me. Perhaps you will cease weeping."

"It is no matter now," Valentino said. "I have become a carabao with a hump. I shall hire myself to farmers and drag the plow."

He stooped and hoisted Antonio to the window. *"Woc-woc!"* Antonio cried. *"Woc-woc!"* He grasped the corner of the overhanging roof, and pressed his mouth to the edge of the screen. *"Woc-woc!"*

"Who is it?" a sleepy voice groaned within.

"Woc-woc!" Antonio cried, striking his shoulder against the screen.

There was a sudden sound of ripping leaves. The corner of the roof moved in Antonio's hand. "Oy!" he cried, his body shifting away from the building. He grabbed for another hold on the edge of the roof. There was a rending and a thrashing, and Antonio came tumbling down, and the corner of the roof crumbled down upon him.

"Thieves! Thieves!" the voice cried inside the hut.

Valentino dragged his chief to his feet. "Run!" he shouted.

"Let us tell him—" Antonio began.

"Thieves! Go or I shall kill you!" the voice cried.

"Oy, let us run!" Valentino shouted. With one leap he was on the road, and his feet went pounding away into the darkness. Antonio tried to think of what to say to the occupants of the house. Then he heard a click as of a rifle bolt.

He heaved his fat body to the road and ran after Valentino.

"Thieves!" the voice cried after him. Then his ears were shattered by a great explosion. He kept running, not knowing whether he still had all his limbs, not knowing whether the wetness that clothed him was sweat or blood. He kept running miraculously until he came to the mud hole. There, in the darkness, he almost stumbled over the body of Valentino.

"Oy, Valentino, you are wounded!" he cried.

"No," said Valentino with a sour voice. "I am resting. And you, old fighting-cock, I see that you also are not hurt."

Of that I do not know," Antonio said, gasping. "It is too dark to see."

THE NEXT day Antonio sat at his desk with all the records for his monthly report spread out before him. The number of policemen on duty. The number of arrests made. The number of crimes reported. The number of crimes solved. The number of illegal firearms confiscated. . . .

"Oy," said Antonio. "Here we shall have something to say. Valentino, we have discovered a case of illegal possession of firearms, have we not? Go to the home of Salvador Campos and confiscate the shotgun."

"Yes, sir," said Valentino. "But I think—" He took a sheaf of papers out of his desk and looked through them one by one. "Yes. Salvador Campos was given a permit to have a shotgun eight months ago."

"Oy!" said Antonio.

A little while later, Valentino exclaimed, "Oy, here comes the witch! But do not cross yourself, for you are his brother."

Vicente Honoria pushed his stooped body into the doorway and tapped the floor with his cane.

"Come, sit in this chair," Antonio said to the old man.

"I am ashamed that I must trouble you again," Vicente said.

"It is nothing," said Antonio.

Vicente sat down by Antonio's desk, and his smile ran away among his wrinkles. "What I must tell you is that I do not wish you to search for my rice because it has been returned to me."

"Oy!" said Antonio. "Valentino, hear what this old man has to tell us. You say that your rice—"

"Has been returned. I am ashamed that I troubled you yesterday."

"It is no trouble, old man. Some thief's heart troubled him and he returned your rice? Is that not so?"

"Oy," said Vicente, "it is a foolish thing. You will laugh at me if I tell it."

"No, no, old man," Antonio said. "Only tell it. Who was the thief?"

"Julio Ontimaro."

"Julio Ontimaro!" Antonio exclaimed.

"The one who slept," said Valentino.

"He heard my call even in his drunken sleep," Antonio said. "But speak, old man. How was it that he returned your rice?"

"It is in this way," Vicente said. "I go to his hut this morning and I say, 'Julio, return to me my sack of rice, or I shall tell the police you are a thief.' Julio becomes angry and he says, 'You are crazy, old man. Why do you say I have stolen your rice?' I take him outside and show him a trail of rice grains going to his door. I say to him,' There is a hole in the sack of rice you take from my hut. This is the sign of your guilt.' Then Julio begins to weep, and he says, 'Do not tell the police. I shall return your sack of rice and another also.' 'No,' I say. 'Give me only what is mine.' And so he does, carrying the rice to my hut. Now I wish that you do not put him in prison, because he has returned my rice. I do not care about the fish."

Antonio put his hand on his thigh and sat up straight and stared at Vicente. "Old man," he said angrily, "why did you not tell me yesterday about the trail of rice grains?"

Vicente shook his head. "Oy, but it is not there yesterday. I place the rice along the road to Julio's hut in the darkness of this morning."

Valentino began to laugh.

Antonio struck his desk. "Be quiet, you foolish Filipino!" He turned again to Vicente. "You say you placed a trail of rice to Julio's hut? How, then, did you know that he was the thief? Tell me that, old man."

"At that time I do not know," Vicente said. "I place a trail of rice to the hut of Juanito Repulda and Salvador Campos also, and this morning I accuse each one, but Julio is the only one who returns my rice. That is how I know he is the thief."

When Vicente departed, Antonio picked up his pen and dipped it in the ink bottle.

"What are you going to write now?" Valentino said.

"A crime solved is a crime solved," said Antonio, "and will be so entered in the monthly report."

THE DEVIL DOLL

With a kiss, Crita planted a miniature of her soul in Earl Gleason's body . . . a miniature that took physical form, running its tiny fingers, fine and delicate and wet, over his face like mice in the dark . . . whispering, sometimes, "Come back to Crita," *and, sometimes*—"Kill!"

JACK LONDON said it better than Earl could have said it. She was "fire in his blood and a thunder of trumpets." But no one could tell you of her laughter. It held undertones, suggestions of shadows and evil darkness.

Crita doesn't laugh any more, of course. Nor does Jean, though her laughter was never more than a thin cold smile. But Earl will always hear Crita's mocking laughter as long as he lives. And he will always remember the unspeakable little projection, with its soft, warm breath against his ear. The small, piping voice. The thing's laughter and its tiny fingers, fine and delicate and wet, that ran over his face like mice in the dark.

He had been drinking heavily. He had never been able to drink well. But he had needed courage to tell Crita that it was quits. The courage gained was not in proportion to the bourbon consumed. His suit was wet and cold against his thin, quick-moving body as he edged up the stairs.

It was in the Village, on Grove Street. And he climbed the narrow stair slowly. Sweat was cold on his thin face. His heart was pounding pain against his ribs.

Why should he fear to tell Crita? They'd made the arrangement long in advance—when one tired of the other, the affair would be gracefully dissolved, no regrets, no fuss.

But he had learned since then that Crita never surrendered anything. And she had claimed him. He had been a promising artist until a few months ago, when he had met Jean Morris. Something had happened to his artistic ambitions. He had quit painting because of Jean. He had begun to play. Jean had money, more money than she had ever bothered to count. She was pretty but nothing like Crita.

Crita had been a singer in a Village night spot, with promise of getting into the big time. But Earl had been selfish. Too selfish, but he couldn't help it. She had quit singing. He'd wanted her all to himself, you understand.

The body in a green dress, long and sleek and shiny. She loved him with a strange, almost terrifying possessiveness. To him, she was a violent, roaring flame. He lived in the flood of her fire. But Jean had taken him away—from his painting, from the Village, from Crita. Jean was a traveler, a trotter of grotesque dogs along Park Avenue. She was small, delicate, white.

He had to tell Crita now. Jean was impatient with his dual role.

He shivered. He blinked hot burning eyes. Crita had given up everything, everything, for him. She had cooked, washed, done a thousand and one small things to make his meaningless life easier.

And he had to tell her that it was finished. He didn't want to. Money, the damned filthy compulsion. He hesitated outside the door. The narrow hall was confining, stuffy. He felt his breath suck in between tight lips. Then he opened the door.

The room was dark, the blinds drawn. A single candle burned in an onyx holder wound with red-eyed serpents, upon a small table. All the familiar things in the large, sky-lighted room were shadow-limned, distorted.

He saw her dark face framed by candlelight.

He backed away. Her eyes shone with a gleam of hateful understanding. Mingled with sudden horror in him was also relief, because now he wouldn't have to tell her. Crita knew about Jean. She already knew everything about it. And she had already done something about it. He didn't know

that. There was much he didn't know.

Her skin was a deep bronze. He didn't know her origin, but her accent seemed subtly French. There was something primitive about her face, a beautiful savagery. Like an evil but beautiful jungle flower, hungry and unfolding.

Her lips were slightly parted, revealing strong teeth like white pearls. The deep brown pools of her eyes shone with that ineffable light of love that has frozen to hate and loathing.

Then he seemed to get the full implication of the props littering the shadowed room. They had always been there. But until now he had always considered them an affectation—'arty' stuff. He realized now that Crita's hobby of voodoo and black magic was more than a hobby. Maybe he had always known this, subconsciously. The voodoo drums on the walls. The 'black magic' cult she belonged to.

Now the memory of these things came back. How strange she had seemed as she sometimes sat in the shadows, softly murmuring some alien chant, eyes closed, mouth lax, while her hands gently brought blood-throbbing rhythms from the drums.

She was familiar with Haiti. Maybe she came from Haiti. Haiti, dark island of voodoo, devil-devil. She made dolls, devil dolls, and also little packets which she called ouangas. Packets of carved bone, beads, potions.

That had been the thing about her songs at the clubs that made them different. Sultry, suggestive songs, half chanted, self-accompanied by the gentle, throbbing rhythm of a jungle drum.

HER VOICE was low. The candle shuddered. Shadows swayed.

"You're not going to leave me, Earl."

He moved toward her. He'd forgotten Jean for a moment. He had forgotten her delicate submissive slimness, the softness of her brown hair. Her wealth and her penthouse.

He stopped walking. The candle-light hurt his eyes. He was ill, very ill. He had

"Kill her," the tiny voice at his ear whispered. "You've got to kill her!"

been drinking too much, much too much.

"How did you know about Jean and me?"

She laughed. Her eyes turned downward into the flame. He touched his wet lips. How had she known? A modern witch. Strange contrast. A beautiful woman, compact and full and rounded with a penchant for black magic—in the heart of New York.

She got up, the candle-light flickering over her green evening gown. It clung to the roundness of her bronzed fullness. She came to him slowly. His arms reached out. He felt the warmth of her body reaching out to him. His hands cupped her shoulder blades and she didn't move, just watched mutely. She was firm and warm in his arms.

Her head went back and she shut her eyes. He kissed her. The candle flame flickered, and he felt her arms about his neck as the kiss became deep. Lilac perfume closed around him.

"You can't leave me, Earl. No matter how you try."

He shook his head. His hands dropped. The way she had said that. As though she *knew* he couldn't leave. He looked up at the ceiling to escape her eyes. It was a Gothic ceiling, with heavy rafters in squared angles. Like a row of gibbets strung across the room. A creeping knot of terror grew tighter and tighter around his waist.

He pushed her away. She stumbled. He fell back as she crashed into the wall. The voodoo drum fell from its hook. A dull dead *boommmmm* floated across the shadows.

Her eyes blazed as she climbed slowly to her feet and came toward him again. Desperate panic turned his heart to lead, his knees to water. His hands were rubber fish against his sides. He had to get out of there, get a drink. He couldn't see or talk to Crita any more. He tried to move, but he seemed rooted there by old passions, memories, fears.

He watched her hand move to his right shoulder, a kind of lethargic terror dulling him, freezing him there.

Her hand moved quickly. His coat slid down over his right shoulder. The sound ripped in his ear as her fingers clawed his shirt open, baring his shoulder.

Then she kissed his shoulder. Her lips burned. A river of white-hot flame exploded in his head. She dropped back, laughing. Laughing. Always the laughter.

He looked at his shoulder. Nausea caused by pain thickened in his throat. Red on his shoulder where her lips had been. He was swearing as he rubbed at the red marks. But it wasn't lipstick; it wouldn't come off. He scrubbed frantically. She kept on laughing.

He stumbled back to the door and opened it. A draft of cool air was a shock to his sweating skin.

"You'll try, but you can't leave me, Earl. I won't let you go."

He ran. Down the dark stairs fast. And into the night.

He remembered drinking heavily that night. Straight shots in a dark booth where no one noticed him. But nothing could drown the fear. . . .

The fear, nor the pain that was growing in his right shoulder. He tried to ignore the pain later when he drove over to 61st Street to see Jean and tell her that he had gotten rid of Crita. Jean knew about Crita.

IT WASN'T that night that Jean died with his fingers around her thin white throat, throttling off her cries, her million dollars. It was later, maybe a week, maybe longer. That isn't important to Earl. But he couldn't forget Crita that night when he was with Jean. The pain in his shoulder kept growing. They talked. They went walking in the park, threw popcorn to the ducks, watched the lights from the towers reflected on the water, watched other couples walking along the dark paths.

He got rid of Jean, left her at home and ran away to his own apartment. He ran frantically, sobbing. His shoulder was burning agony. And—*something was alive there. Something moved.*

He tore off his coat and shirt. He looked in the mirror. His face was a terrible image sculpted in wet, grey putty. His eyes bulged. . . .

A figure danced on his shoulder. A little, living, chortling marionette. He groaned something unintelligible.

She's here . . . with me . . . on my shoulder. Crita. In a green dress. She is only an inch high. But she's alive.

She is growing out of my shoulder.

There were familiars. You believed in them, you feared them in dark forbidden

jungles and groveled in superstitious terror.

You'll believe in anything, anywhere, even among the steel and concrete jungles of Manhattan—*when it happens to you!*

"Go away!" he shrieked. He slapped at it. It slithered from the flat of his palm. "Get off me! Go away, damn you!"

The tiny swaying figure laughed.

Crita in miniature, growing out of his shoulder. A tiny, wispy body swaying to an invisible melody. And it leaned toward his ear. The laughter became high and shrill, then tiny, elfin.

He kept staring into the mirror. It was easier to see the thing there than to turn and see it directly, see it looking back at him from tiny pin-point eyes. Its little hands reaching for him, the elfin head tilted, and the shrill bleating laughter.

He reached up slowly with his left hand. But he couldn't grasp the devilish thing. He was afraid perhaps that he actually *could* touch it! And before his eyes, in the mirror, the ghastly miniature kept growing.

He stumbled about the apartment. It was hot, stuffy, damp. His clothes stuck to him. His right shoulder pained and twitched, and he felt its roots in his flesh.

He stumbled to the telephone and called Crita's apartment. He heard the phone ringing, over and over. But no answer. He dropped the receiver and groped his way to the bed, fell on it, shuddering.

From then on it became screaming nightmare.

From then on the thing on his shoulder talked to him. Talked and laughed.

"I'll not go way. I'll not go way. Not until you come back to Crita."

It was Crita's voice, only it was far away and tiny and silvery now. It mocked and laughed and swayed. He screamed.

And through the hours and the days, the laughter rose higher and more shrill in his ear.

* * *

It was dark in the room. It was hot and sticky. Under his matted hair and through the stubble of beard, his eyes were depthless and mad.

Suddenly, with a choking cry, he clutched at the thing on his shoulder. It squirmed in his grasp. It screamed. He tore, wildly, gasping and gibbering. White-hot pain seared his arm, sizzled in his brain. He felt the warm lines of blood crawling down his chest as he slowly withdrew his hand.

The thing had screamed; then it slowly began to laugh again. He couldn't rid himself of it. Not that way. He staggered to the mirror. The thing was taller, more full-bodied now. It was four inches high. He knew he couldn't hurt it without hurting himself, and he couldn't stand pain.

He knew no one else would believe him, but he knew that the thing that was laugh-

(Continued on page 93)

Far down, deep in the dank stone vaults of Gothic Strohdene, three desperate people waited for the creeping death that would soon come flooding in. . . . Bringing with it the oblivion that was their only escape from the strange horrors which stalked invisibly through that Satan's castle.

CHAPTER ONE

The Horned Shadow

THE CAB rocked to a halt in a tree-shadowed dank hollow, but the driver made no move to get down and open the high double doors, grey wood strapped with rusted iron, that closed the gap in the moss-splotched brick wall.

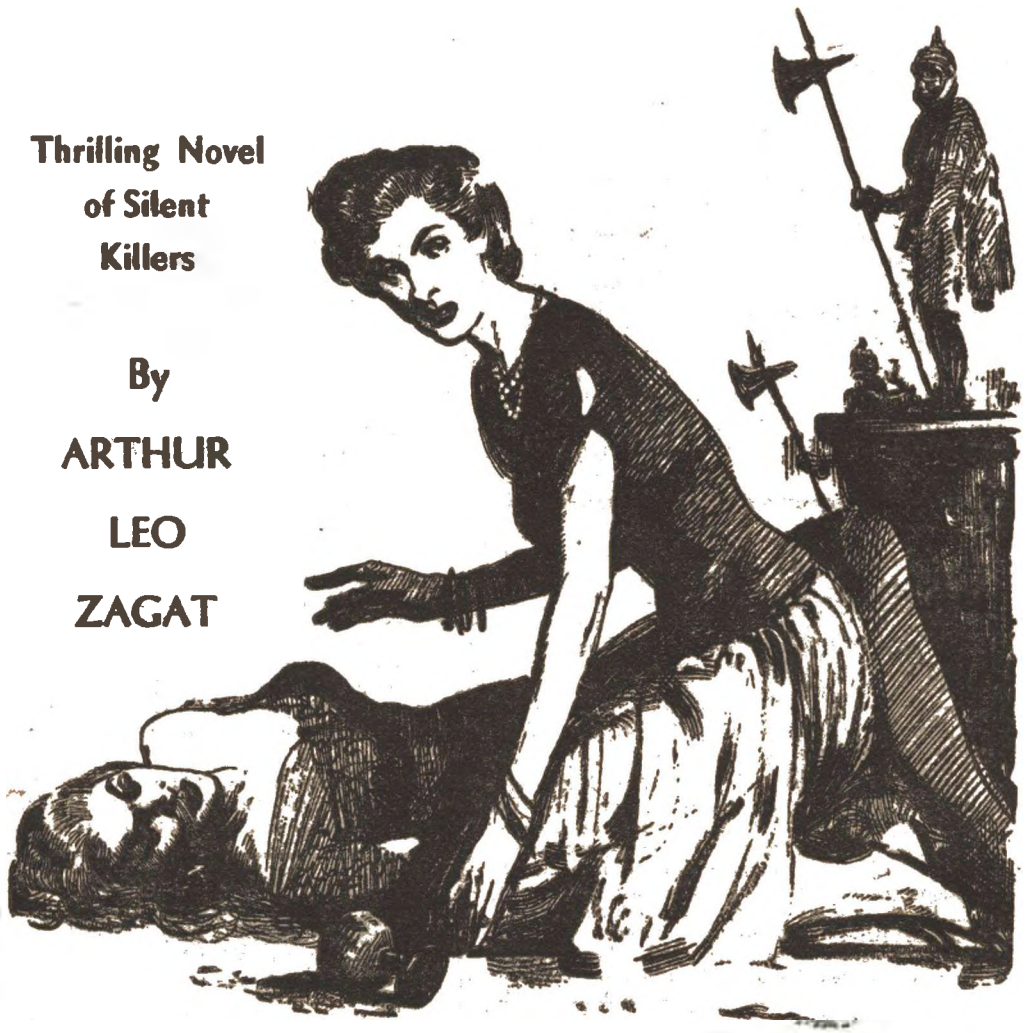
He half-turned to Jennifer and grunted, "Okay, miss. Fare's a dollar and a half."

"So you told me when we started out from Norville," she said. "I'll pay you when I get out."

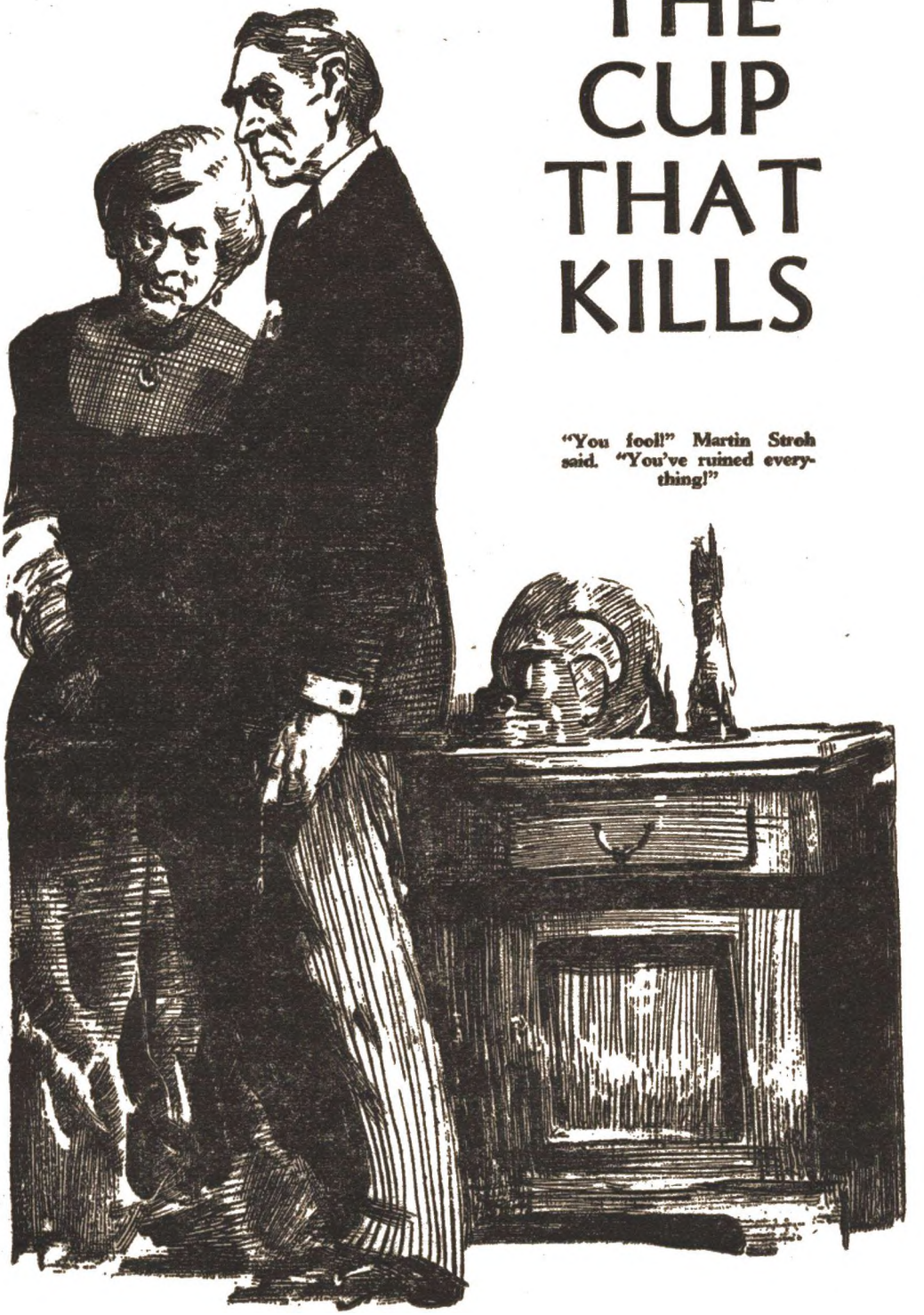
"Yuh get out here." A long arm reached back to the latch of the door beside her, opened it. "This here's Strohdene."

Thrilling Novel of Silent Killers

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT



THE CUP THAT KILLS



"You fool!" Martin Stroh said. "You've ruined everything!"

"The entrance to its grounds, you mean." As they had breasted the hilltop she had glimpsed dark turrets thrusting up out of the dark sea of foliage that seethed behind this wall. "It's at least a quarter-mile more to the house."

"Correct, but this is as far's I go."

Easy, Jenny, she told herself. *Take it easy. No sense getting sore because this yokel's too dumb to explain that the private road's washed out or something and he can't get his cab past.* "All right then. Please carry my bag up there for me." It crowded her feet, a bulging pack of green canvas that still bore the faded stencil: Lt. J. Lane, W.A.C., U.S. Army. "You don't expect me to lug it myself, do you?"

"That's none of my business, miss. Me, I don't go through that gate."

It seemed to her, almost, that he was about to add, "And you're a fool if you do," but the temper that matched her red hair flared as he growled instead, "Step on it. I got th' four twenty-three to meet." Snatching a bill from her purse she slapped it into a calloused paw, heaved the pack out, grabbed up her typewriter case and was down in the road beside it.

Almost before her feet were firm on the highway, the cab had reared into a U-turn and was racketing up the steep, woods-bordered slope down which it had brought her. "I hope you get three flats," she flung after it, small fist clenched against the blue-grey suit it was so wonderful to be wearing after three years of khaki. "I hope your rattletrap falls to pieces!"

"You shouldn't say that, miss." Jennifer whirled to the drawled reproof, stared at the young man who'd appeared out of the thicket across from Strohdene's wall; tall, gaunt in a shaggy maroon sweater and corduroy slacks, his brown shock of hair rumpled. "Sam Rollins has a wife and six children and he needs that jalopy to make a living for them."

"Six or sixty sniveling brats," she snapped, "he's got no right to dump out a passenger in the middle of nowhere."

"And *such* a passenger. Ginger-haired—"

"Auburn!"

"Ginger," he insisted.

"Look here, you. I don't intend to stand here—"

"Uh-huh." He shook a chiding finger. "You really must control your temper, J. Lane. Remember that you're an officer and—"

"I am not! I've been a civilian for a week and four—but that's none of your business, you—you—"

"Insolent lout," he supplied. "Or maybe you'd rather call me what the rest of my beloved relatives do: thankless ingrate. Myself, I prefer plain Hal." His look dropped to her bag. "What does the 'J' stand for? Jezebel?"

"Of course not. It's Jennifer." She snatched at the shreds of her shattered dignity. "But that's no concern of yours. If you'll just tell me how I'm going to—"

She didn't finish. Startlingly, the youth had whirled and dived into the thicket out of which he'd appeared, and behind Jennifer unoiled metal screeched. She turned, saw that one of the great doors was swinging inward.

The little old man who'd made the arrangements for her to come to Strohdene appeared in the opening and came toward her. Instead of the ancient suit he had worn in the office he had on rough tweeds, a shade greyer than his sparse hair, and a grey scarf was wrapped around the loose chicken-skin that had showed in the V of his starched wing collar. But his voice was the same, like a rustle of dry leaves. "You took an earlier train than we agreed, Miss Lane." It was faintly disapproving. "You should have wired me so that I could have met you in Norville."

"I intended to call you from the station," Jennifer explained, "but I discovered you have no phone." In these shadows heavy with the odor of wet loam, the gaunt face—ashen skin stretched tight and unwrinkled over bone—discomfortingly resembled a death mask. "I didn't feel like waiting two hours so I took a taxi. *The* taxi." She grimaced wryly. "That seems to have been a mistake."

"Yes." The nostrils of Stroh's patrician-ly thin nose pinched. "I am surprised that Rollins brought you even this far. He had a dispute with one of the family some years ago and since then has refused to have anything to do with Strohdene." That's an explanation which doesn't explain, Jennifer thought. "Luckily," he went on, "I guessed that you must be aboard this cab when I happened to catch sight of it coming over

the top of the hill. So I came down. . . ."

The sere voice trailed away as its owner's pale eyes found the green pack in the road. "It's even heavier than it looks," Jennifer said. "Can't we leave it inside the gate till you can send someone down for it?"

"There is no one to send." The old man lifted the bag with surprising ease. Jennifer preceded him through the gate, saw that the rutted driveway ran across a narrow clearing and was swallowed almost at once by a gloomy tangle of woods as uncared for as the wildland across the road. The thud of the door behind her, then a click of metal on metal, turned her to her host. He had set down her bag and was snapping a padlock on the gate.

Breath caught in Jennifer's throat.

The rusted spikes with which the top of the wall and the doors bristled were to be expected but not the closely set row of sharp, cruel points, brightly new, that curved down from the upper edge of the wall. They were not meant to keep anyone out. They were meant to keep someone in.

It occurred to Jennifer that she might too hastily have accepted Martin Stroh's proposition in the office at the Veterans' Center.

SHE had noticed him the first time she had gone there. He had seemed so out of place among the bronzed young men, so alone and lost among them, that Jennifer had forgotten her own impatience wondering what possible business he could have there.

Was he looking for a son—more likely a grandson—long since reported as 'missing in action'? Hardly. He neither looked with eager eyes at each new entering face nor questioned anyone. He merely sat in the corner near the door, holding a square-sided grey derby on black knees, silent, surrounded in the buzz and bustle of this big room by an infrangible silence.

"Lane!" Her name, gruffly called, broke in on Jennifer's speculations. She jumped up and hurried to the blue-uniformed guard at the opening in the low barricade beyond which stretched the rows of desks. "You Lieutenant Lane?" he demanded.

"Not lieutenant," she corrected, as if the title would fasten on her again the discipline of which she'd been free for two glorious days. "*Miss* Lane, please," but the burly guard was unimpressed. "Third desk on the right," he directed.

The sign on it said R. Mason, Housing Counsellor, and the middle-aged man who sat behind it seemed weighed down by frustration. He gestured Jennifer to the chair at the end of the desk. "This," he said, indicating the form she'd filled out at the reception counter downstairs, "is refreshingly different. You're not sharing three rooms with fourteen other people. Your wife isn't battling with your mother. In fact, you couldn't possibly have a wife."

"No," Jennifer said, "that's hardly possible."

"But there's one thing that *is* possible—why don't you go home to your folks in Indiana?"

"Because I haven't any folks in Indiana any more. My father died while I was in service and that's all there was." She swallowed the lump the reminder of her year-old bereavement still brought to her throat. "I'm not going back there, Mr. Mason. Not to that stuffy, smug little town. I do need a rest, though, some quiet room of my own with a bed, a chair and a table for my typewriter."

"Your typewriter? Thought you wanted to rest."

"Yes, but the little money I have will run out sometime and I'll have to look for a job. I must get back my speed on the machine." Jennifer leaned forward, her eyes pleading. "Surely there must be something like that, somewhere in this big city."

"This big city," Mason said unhappily, "is packed tight and bursting at the seams." His fingertips drummed on the desk edge. "Is there any reason why a place in the suburbs wouldn't do?"

"Why, no. Not as long as it's near enough that I can get in to the theaters and concerts and things like that."

The drumming stopped. "In that case, I may be able to help you. But I'll have to—you see, we have no listings like that in this office. I'll have to make some inquiries. Suppose you go home now and have fun for a week and come back here a week from today, at eleven sharp."

The good old G. I. runaround, Jennifer had thought, but she'd thanked him and gone back to her hotel heavy-hearted. She'd bought clothes in that week, all the frilly furbelows of which she'd been deprived so

long, and a portable typewriter, and had done some room-hunting on her own without result. When she returned to keep the appointment she was convinced would be as fruitless, a second chair stood beside R. Mason's desk and in it had sat the old man who had so intrigued her on her first visit.

"Mr. Martin Stroh," Mason introduced him, and then, "This—well, this is somewhat out of line with our usual procedure, Miss Lane, but you won't mind when I tell you that Mr. Stroh can offer exactly the sort of thing you're looking for."

"He can! I'm so glad."

"I thought you would be." The housing counsellor smiled, obviously pleased with himself. "His home is out in the country but there are frequent trains from Norville, six miles away, and it's less than an hour from the city. And wait till you hear what it'll cost you." Mason leaned forward. "Seven a week for room *and* board. What do you think of that?"

She thought it was absurdly low. Wasn't there some mistake?

"No, Miss Lane." She heard Stroh's dry, toneless voice for the first time. "We've no desire to make a profit on someone who's worn our country's uniform. But," bony fingers fumbled with the derby, "but we do feel we've a right to make certain conditions."

There would be a catch. "Conditions, Mr. Stroh?"

"Yes. You see, we—mother, my wife and I—live a somewhat solitary life. It would disturb us if you had visitors."

"Is that all?" Jennifer exclaimed, relaxing. "There's no one in the East here who'd possibly want to visit me and I've completely lost track of my old friends back home." She recalled the odd flicker that had showed in his sunken eyes and quickly been hidden. "And besides," she went on breathlessly, "I don't want to see people. I've had too many living in my hair too long not to want to be alone for a while."

"That's settled, then." Too quickly, Jennifer realized now as she watched the old man pick up her bag and come toward her. "Let's hurry," he said, putting his free hand on her arm. "They're waiting."

"Let them wait." She must get this straight now. "I want to know why you keep that gate locked and why you've got those spikes on the wall."

"Yes," he sighed. "Of course you do. I had meant to tell you as we drove up from the village but I still have time." Because he seemed quite unperturbed, Jennifer yielded to the gentle urging of his bony fingers. "It's mother, Miss Lane." The woods shadows closed about them and the driveway's gravel crunched under their heels. "She is well along in years and there are times when she is—shall I say difficult?"

"Oh . . .?"

"She is quite old and she sometimes confuses people with others out of her past. Also, it upsets her terribly when she is corrected. If—it may not happen, but if she should get some notion about you, I hope that you will be—er—kind enough not to correct her."

Jennifer stopped short, twisted to him. "You're not explaining those spikes. You're over sixty and that makes your mother eighty or more. It's scarcely probable that she'd be able to climb a ten-foot wall."

Stroh's face was startled. "Why—" His pupils widened, staring at something beyond Jennifer.

She whirled, saw only darkening shadows, the barrel-thick gnarled bole of a tree. Suddenly, then, a shaggy and incredible shape leaped at her!

Jennifer's last recollection was of a goat's head, horned and bearded but with human features, and fiery eyes that were neither a goat's nor a man's.

WHAT LIGHT there was seeped in through the leaded glass of two tall, deeply embrasured windows, and was swallowed by walls of some dark, glowing wood. The walls seemed immensely far away. The raftered ceiling which was the first thing Jennifer had seen on awakening was all of fifteen feet above her.

She had awakened in a bed so deep and soft it seemed almost to smother her with its feathery comfort. There was pain at the base of her skull, a dull, drawing ache like that which a bee's sting leaves after the first red-hot jab—but otherwise she appeared unharmed. A light blanket, the grey of a thundercloud, was thrown over her and beneath it, silk was cool against her skin.

It was the silk of her own pajamas, the extremely feminine pajamas for which she'd spent more than she should during her

week's orgy of shopping in the big city.

Still somewhat dazedly, her eyes probed the dimness. They found an armchair, high-backed, upholstered in rich tapestry, in the far corner near the windows. They found the gloomy loom of a wooden wardrobe that faced the bed. In the wall, right-angled to that against which the wardrobe stood, was a closed door. Against that same wall, the mirror of a ponderous dresser reflected the windows. Nearer, another chair stood between her and a table of black teakwood, ornately carved.

Jennifer thrust up to a sitting position, curled fingers denting her breast.

On that table was her precious typewriter, open for work, and beside it lay erasers, pencils, the half-ream of yellow paper she'd found space for in its case.

The simple, matter-of-fact circumstance somehow was shattering. She'd been tensed for some fearful discovery, some dreadful menace. Here was only the quiet room for which she'd asked, so quiet that its only sound was the whisper of silk against the rise and fall of her own breathing. Here were the bed and chair and the table for her typewriter. Here was nothing to justify fear save the nightmare recollection of the monster that had leaped at her out of the dark of Strohdene's woods.

Had Martin Stroh fought it off and then carried her on up the hill to safety? He couldn't have. He couldn't possibly have the strength. And he'd said, she remembered, that there was no one else with strength enough even to carry her bag. How then . . . ?

She was out of the bed then, running across deep-piled carpeting to the door. It would not have surprised her to find it locked, but it gave easily to her tug on its knob. She opened it cautiously, held it with only a narrow opening between its edge and jamb.

Peering through, she saw only another door across a wide, dim hall. Her straining ears made out only a distant murmur of voices; in the corridor itself there was sound of life. She widened the aperture, slid her head out far enough so that she could see all of the passage.

To her left it ran off, door-lined, into shadow. In the other direction, however, the opposite wall ended abruptly about twenty feet away and gave place to a stone railing that, sharply silhouetted by artificial light from below, curved to descend along a staircase of which Jennifer could make out only the two top marble steps.

Beyond the staircase there was another, matching rail and then the corridor began again.

She'd have to get into some clothes before she could investigate farther. She pulled back into the darkening room, shut the door carefully, held the knob so that it would not rattle as its spring turned it. A sturdy bolt was screwed to the wood, six inches above it! Wonderful. Jennifer thrust this into its socket, sighed with relief as she started for the dresser.

It did not occur to her to look for a light switch. There was still sufficient light to see by and she didn't want to waste time. Her hands closed on the brass handles of the dresser's middle drawer, pulled it open, and groping fingers identified possessions. Quickly, she stripped off the pajamas, slipped into underthings, a dress, turned to find a place to sit as she drew her stockings on. Then she froze, throat locked on breath.

Beyond the bed the windows were high oblongs set in the wall. On one pane lay the shadow of a man's torso grotesquely misshapen, of his hunched shoulders. And of a head knobbed by a goat's horns.

She was held in a numb paralysis of the kind she'd thought came to one only in dreams. She stood there, unable to move, unable to scream, her hands holding to the bed for support. Then there penetrated to her numbed brain the thud of knuckles on wood, on the wood of the door she herself had bolted.

She was there, somehow, making small, inarticulate noises as she jabbed the bolt out of its socket and twisted the knob. The door pushed in against her. "I—I—" Her tongue refused to form the words, but she could turn and point—

The window was blank. The terrible shadow had vanished from it.

"Why're you dressing in the dark, child? Couldn't you find the switch?" Sudden light clicked on, made of the window at which Jennifer stared a glitter of glass against which the empty night pressed. "Well? Cat got your tongue?"

The woman who had entered was hugely built, her great hips and bosom swathed in scarlet velvet, her bare arms almost as

startlingly white as her hair. "I declare. You look frightened to death of me."

"Not of you, Mrs. Stroh. I—"

"Mrs. Stroh, indeed! I'm your Aunt Laura, my dear. Your grand-aunt, really. You were only a babe in arms when I saw you last, but that's no excuse for being shy with me."

"I'm not shy. And I'm not your—" Jennifer caught that back. Grand-aunt, she'd said. She must be Martin Stroh's mother. "I'm sorry, Aunt Laura. I—I'm still a little drowsy and mixed up." She got upset, he'd said, if you corrected her mistakes and Jennifer couldn't face that now. She couldn't face being left alone either. "Look, wouldn't you like to keep me company while I finish dressing?"

"I certainly would." A flabby hand patted the girl's shoulder. "You're sweet, Alma dear." So that's who she was supposed to be, Alma something. "And very pretty. That's what I told your Aunt Helen the minute I set eyes on you walking up the drive."

A TINY muscle knotted in Jennifer's cheek as she watched Laura Stroh lumber away to the tapestry-backed armchair and let herself down into it, sighing. Did that last remark mean that she'd walked to the house on her own power after she'd blacked out? That she'd been greeted by the two women, had come up here and unpacked, undressed, gotten into bed, all without recalling any of it? She shook her head. It was the old lady who was crazy, not she.

"Come, come, Alma," the latter exclaimed, a bit irritably. "Stop standing there gaping at nothing. Martin doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Sorry." Jennifer picked up the hose from where she'd dropped them, laid one on the bed, perched herself on the edge of a chair beside it and started drawing the other over curled-down toes. A shrill titter came from across the room. "You young people are all alike. Hal's wits used to go woolgathering just like that."

"Hal?" Jennifer contrived a passable imitation of offhandedness. "What Hal is that?"

"Your cousin Hal, naturally." The old woman sighed. "This used to be his room, Alma, till he died." Clenched nails started three ugly runs in the gossamer nylon. "You never met him, did you, Alma?"

"No." Of course she hadn't, Jennifer told herself fiercely. He was dead, wasn't he? "What did he look like, Aunt Laura?"

"Tall, my dear, but too thin because he'd grown so fast. Handsome though. Chestnut hair that would never stay combed and beautiful grey eyes." *Chestnut hair and grey eyes....* "I was terribly fond of him, Alma, till he turned out to be such a thankless ingrate. *'Or maybe,' he'd drawled, 'you'd rather call me what the rest of my beloved relatives do,' and the bushes hadn't rustled when he'd come out of them or when he'd vanished into them like a startled deer.* Martin said you promised him that you wouldn't disappoint me the way he did, Alma. Did you dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Laura." Jennifer didn't know what she was saying yes to. She scarcely heard the old woman say, "I do hope you'll keep your promise, Alma dear, because I'd be desolate if you didn't and I had to do to you what I did to Hal."

In a white-faced calm that was next door to hysteria, Jennifer finished drawing on the other stocking. She tied the laces of the low-heeled, stub-toed shoes that had been WAC issue, and stood up. "I'm ready, Aunt Laura."

"Ready!" The heavy-lidded blue eyes glared. "Indeed you're not. You're not going down with your hair all a mare's nest like that."

"Hair, Oh, of course not. What I meant was that I'm ready to go and wash."

"With your dress on? Well, if that's the way you young girls do nowadays.... Your bathroom's right next door, on this side of the hall."

The corridor still was deserted. Jennifer locked herself into the lavatory. The brown-veined marble walling the room, the luxurious if quaintly old-fashioned fixtures, were brightly illumined by the moonlight that streamed in through an oval window above the claw-footed bathtub.

She had to know what was outside there. She ran to the tub, stepped into it, mounted its wallward rim.

Trembling hands clinging to the sill at the level of her ribs, Jennifer looked out and down—down along thirty sheer feet of granite, phantasmal in the moonglow and naked of any ledge, any irregularity that might offer a climber even fingerhold.

A *human* climber.

Strohdene's brooding and sinister woods crowded close to the house. Not everywhere. To the right they receded, leaving a large open space whose rectangular boundaries were sharply defined by the three-quarter moon's blue-silver brilliance. The floor of this clearing was a tangled mass of low shrubbery run wild, but Jennifer could make out a tilted stone bench, the flagstones of a meandering path, traces of a sunken garden's formal plantings.

And down at the far end, limned against the night, was a lifesize statue of some pale stone. So bright was the moonlight that its every detail was clear—the clumsy haunches, the hairy torso, the satyr's head boat-horned and goat-bearded, but with the face of a man.

Sudden, ironic laughter fluttered in Jennifer's breast.

Was this the source of all her terrors? Had some trick of afternoon sun and wind-moved foliage made it seem alive and leaping at her? Had a low moon rising behind it thrown its strange shadow on her window?

Could be, she told herself. She'd been over-wrought, imagining things.

Even the fact that the window was open a foot, when she returned to the room, no longer had significance. She must be mistaken in thinking it had been shut tight when she awoke here. "I'm ready, Aunt Laura."

The old woman switched out the light and closed the door. They went past the end of the wall and Jennifer looked down over the rail. What a setting, she thought, this would make for a Gothic mystery.

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Darkness

THE MARBLE staircase descended to a hall baronial in proportions, a vast space gloomily lit by a chandelier that dripped crystal pendants from its roof. Walls on either side were dark reaches of tapestry. Straight ahead, shadows filled the deep granite embrasure of a monumental doorway. The floor glowed dully with a magnificent Oriental rug. Midway in the hall stood a table, light gleaming brightly on its white napery.

Trailing the rail, Jennifer's fingers felt dust-thick on it. The rasping beneath her feet was dust too, gritty on the marble treads. Martin Stroh came soundlessly out of the dimness to her left, the black suit in which she'd first seen him making him seem one of the shadows come alive. He looked up to the two women, his grey countenance anxious. "I'm sorry to have been so long with my primping, Uncle Martin," Jennifer called down, "but I did want to look especially nice my first evening with you and Aunt Laura and Aunt Helen."

His phantom smile thanked her for accepting the relationship thrust on her by his mother, but he said nothing, merely waited at the head of the table. Jennifer came off the stairs. "You sit there, Alma," Laura directed, gesturing to the chair that faced the door. "In Hal's old place."

In the place of the dead Hal.

The old woman seated herself at the table's narrow end, to Jennifer's right. Stroh sank into his own chair, unfolded his napkin. Imitating him, the girl felt the heavy, soft texture of fine old linen, noted that the china with which the table was set was fragile Limoges, and that the bread basket, the domes covering the two vegetable bowls and the cutlery were solid silver rubbed to a satin sheen.

Across from her was a fourth setting and a vacant chair, apparently for Alma's Aunt Helen. Weren't they going to wait for her?

Feet whispered behind Jennifer. A drably clad woman came past her carrying a heavy platter on which steamed a crisp roast of beef. "You've spoiled it," Laura Stroh snorted. "You've cooked it too long, Helen."

Helen? But not Helen Stroh, certainly. This dreary drudge couldn't possibly be—"I'm sorry, mother," she was murmuring, meekly. "I timed it for seven and we're so late that—"

"All right. All right. It can't be helped now. Sit down and let Martin get on with the grace."

Showing no resentment of the peremptory tone, no emotion of any kind, the woman took the vacant chair. Jennifer decided that she was much younger than her husband. No silver showed in her dark brown hair and the skin at her throat was firm and unwrinkled. The small, delicately formed head, the finely chiselled features hinted of

beauty in youth. Even now she would still have been attractive had there been some color in her face.

And if her grey eyes were not so dreadfully tired.

"Hear us, Master," Stroh's dry voice rustled across Jennifer's thoughts. "For the food of which we are about to partake we are grateful to you." He didn't bow his head, but looked straight ahead of him, his gaze unfocused. "We are grateful for all you have done and will do for us, but most profoundly for your forbearance through the long months we have been unable to serve you in the ancient manner. For your patient understanding we thank you, and we thank you for chastising the ingrate who would have betrayed you and us to your enemies."

He means Hal. He's giving thanks for his son's death.

"But tonight," the sere voice went on, "our circle once more is complete. The place too long vacant is filled at long last and again we may fittingly worship you—"

"No!"

Jennifer's head jerked to her neighbor across the table. That gasped interjection could have come from no one else, but it couldn't have come from Helen either, motionless, her countenance blank and impassive. . . .

"Keep us faithful unto you, Master, and reward us in the hour, which is close at hand, of your final triumph. Amen."

"Amen!" came lustily from the foot of the table but the colorless lips across from Jennifer moved soundlessly and for some reason the word seemed to stick in her own throat.

No one seemed to notice. Metal clattered as Martin Stroh picked up a staghorn-handled carving knife and fork and went to work on the roast. "Pass your plate down to me, Alma," his mother directed, "so I can ladle out your vegetables."

The plates were filled, returned. It all was very homey and family-like, except that Stroh's wife should be sitting in the place of honor opposite him, not the white-haired beldame. It's a wonder they let her sit at the table at all, Jennifer thought. They've made her a servant in her own house. Indignant pity moved her to exclaim, "The roast's wonderful, Aunt Helen." She did her best to make it sound warmly enthusiastic. "Will you show me how you prepare it, some day soon?"

"I'd love to." The wistful smile that rewarded the girl's remark faded. "But—but won't it be an imposition?"

"Of course not! I have so little to do. And I'd love," the girl added impulsively, "to help you with your housework. And in return you could go to the city with me once in a while and show me which are the best shops and hairdressers and so on."

She'd been right. All the woman had needed to make her attractive was the light that was shining in her eyes. "That would be wonder—"

"Too bad that it's impossible," Stroh broke in on his wife. "Your Aunt Helen hates to admit it even to herself, but an expedition like that would lay her up in bed for weeks. Her heart, you know."

"Her heart," Jennifer flared hotly, "doesn't seem to hinder her from doing all the work around here."

The old man's fork stopped short above his plate, his eyes suddenly pale marbles. "Look here, young lady—"

"Stop it!" Knives rattled as the old lady's hand pounded on the table. "Stop it this instant, you two! I won't have that sort of thing start all over again!"

Spots of color flamed in his cheeks but he said nothing. Not until his fork had slowly lowered itself to his plate. Then, "I'm sorry." He's mad as blue blazes, Jennifer thought, but he's afraid of her. "I was merely going to explain—"

"Alma isn't any more interested in your explanations than Hal was." So that was the meaning of her, 'that sort of thing.' Father and son must have quarreled continually over the way mother was treated. "I've been thinking about the boy, Martin." An ominous note came into Laura Stroh's voice. "I've been wondering if the fault mightn't have been less his than yours."

Stroh gasped, the pulse of his Adam's apple, the V of his wing collar making visible his struggle for words. "You're right, mother." That was Helen, hands flat on the table to push her erect. "But the blame's mine, too, because I—"

She broke off in a thin squeal of pure terror. She was staring at something behind Jennifer, her face ghastly, her eyes wide with terror.

Stiff with the contagion of that mindless

fear, the girl forced herself to turn.

Nothing was there. She saw only the marble staircase, the marks of her own feet and Laura Stroh's in the thick dust filming its treads—then she saw it. Footprints were appearing on the stairs, one by one, as though someone invisible were walking slowly down into the hall!

VAGUELY she was aware that the old woman at the foot of the table was mumbling what might be a prayer, that at its head the old man whispered, "His wrath, Helen. The face of the Master's wrath." The sere sound merged with the dry rustle of tapestries stirring in a sourceless, chill wind that brought to Jennifer's nostrils the same fetid, animal odor that had once assailed her nostrils when, the road from Nuernberg to Neuschatz, in Germany, her jeep had been blocked by a herd of goats.

It was the print of a goat's hoof that was appearing in the dust of the steps—of *something* that descended slowly towards Jennifer, walking erect on small, cloven hooves.

Dust swirled on the eighth step, halfway down, and a hoofprint appeared there. "No-o-o," Helen moaned. "I was wrong. I didn't mean it. I take it back."

The dust on the ninth tread remained undisturbed. The chill wind died. Jennifer heard a chair scrape, turned back to Helen in time to see her sink into her seat, limply as a rag doll out of which the sawdust runs. The woman shuddered, buried her drained face in her hands. At the foot of the table, Laura Stoh watched, expressionless save for the blue glitter in the slits between her narrowed lids. Martin drummed with bony fingers on the cloth before him, then leaned forward to his wife.

"That was wise, Helen," he murmured. "You've set yourself right."

"Yes." The word came bitterly. "I don't feel well. May I go upstairs, Martin, and lie down?"

"You would disturb our plans for the evening." The devil! The heartless devil! "You've already upset our visitor with your attack."

"Attack!" Jennifer exploded. "Is that what you call it?" Her mouth twisted. "A heart attack, I suppose."

Stroh's blank countenance turned to her. "Precisely, As I was about to explain when I was interrupted, your Aunt Helen's heart condition is not so much physical as mental." The words "heart" and "mental" were lightly but meaningfully stressed. "That is why I felt it would be unwise to expose her to the excitement of a trip to the city." His smile was a thing of lips only. "You understand, I'm sure."

"Yes." Faint but undeniable, the goat-smell still tainted the air Jennifer inhaled with a long breath and let slowly seep out again. "I understand that something's going on in this house that I want no part of. I'm leaving."

She heard a hoarse, inarticulate ejaculation from Laura Stroh and out of the corner of her eye saw Helen stiffen, but it was the old man she watched. There was the barest possible pinching of his thin nostrils but his voice betrayed no emotion at all. "That would be regrettable but we cannot keep you here against your will." *He wants me to go. Why did he bring me here in the first place?* "If you still feel the same way in the morning—"

"Not in the morning, Mr. Stroh. I'm going tonight." Jennifer pushed up to her feet. "Right now."

"No!" the old woman sobbed. "No, Alma, I won't have it." Her quivering cheeks suddenly were wet with the ready tears of the very old. "Now that Hal's gone you're my last living kin and if you too—Martin!" She twisted to him. "Don't let her. Please don't let her go."

Cruel to have fooled the old woman. Tell her, Jenny. Tell her that you're not her niece. But as Jennifer's lips parted, Stroh already was talking. "She's as headstrong as the boy, mother. I couldn't save him and I can't save her." His glance returned to Jennifer. "All I can do is warn you not to attempt to leave Strohdene tonight."

"Warn?" Jennifer's hot temper was one thing, the cold rage that now frosted her voice another. "Would you care to try and stop me?"

"Nothing could be further from my thoughts. Here." Something small skittered along the tablecloth, clinked against her plate. "That's the key to the gate."

"Meaning that if I leave tonight, I walk the six miles to town? I'll do just that but I don't think you'll like what I'll have to say to the authorities when I get to the city." *R. Mason, veterans' counsellor, will like it even less.* "Suppose you think that

over while I go upstairs and pack my bag."

Jennifer snatched up the key and stalked stiff-kneed away toward the staircase.

"Don't go up there," Helen's anguished cry followed her. "Alma! Don't—" But wrath made Jennifer impervious to the new note of terror in the poor woman's voice, to the weird hoof prints still plain in the dust.

She mounted, straight-backed, defiant, but when she had passed the railing and was screened from below, pent-up breath left her lungs in a great, sobbing gust and she fairly ran down the wall to her room, slammed the door shut and clawed the bolt into its socket.

And stayed there, her shoulder and the side of her head pressed against the hard wood, her heart pounding its cage of ribs, panic dancing in her veins.

This was not reaction. It had come to Jennifer why Stroh had so blithely tossed to her the key she clutched in her hand. To use it she would have to walk through Strohdene's black woods, and it had come to her that the stone-framed front door was on the opposite side of the house from the garden she'd glimpsed out of the bathroom window. She could not possibly have seen its statue down there near the entrance.

The Thing, the horned and hoofed horror with the face of a man that had leaped at her, actually existed and Stroh had almost tricked her into going out to meet it alone.

"Jennifer."

The whisper hung sourceless in the empty room. The window that had been open only a foot when she'd left it was wide open now to the menacing night, to the moonlight in which something was moving. The girl's frightened eyes were drawn to the wardrobe's black loom to a shadow unfolding out of the armchair beyond it. The shadow came into the lunar glow and was tall, gaunt, in a dark sweater and slacks.

"Hal." The name came unwilled from Jennifer's cold lips. She heard herself ask inanely, "What are you doing in my room?"

"Your room? It used to be mine."

"This used to be his room, Alma, till he died."

AS SOUNDLESSLY as it had fled into the thicket, the apparition came toward Jennifer. She shrank before it, hands up and open in front of her, to fend it off. "What's the matter, J. Lane?" the low voice asked. "You look like you see a ghost."

"Aren't—you *are* one, aren't you?"

"A ghost?" Eye corners crinkled. "Now that's an interesting notion. Where on earth did you get it from?"

"You're dead, aren't you? She told me you were dead."

"She!" Startled, he stopped short. "Who?"

"Oh, her." Relief was obvious in his tone. "She would." Bitterness now, and contempt. "She meant that I'm dead to her; she disowned me months ago." The hand whose edge he pulled across his forehead seemed to tremble a little. "For a second I thought you meant— How is my mother, Jennifer? Is she all right?"

"I—I think she is."

"But you're not sure?"

"I'm not sure of anything. What's going on in this house, Hal? Is everyone in it crazy, or am I?"

"You're crazy to be in it, I'll tell you that." Small muscles crawled along the bony ridge of his jaw. "And so am I. Just what are they up to now?"

"I'm not even sure of that." Jennifer could smile now, even if tremulously. "None of it seems to make sense."

"That I can believe. You—hello! You're scared to death aren't you? You're so scared you can hardly stand." In another lithe step he reached her, slid his arm around her shoulders. "Take it easy, kid." It felt good there. "Come over here and sit down." He urged her, very gently, toward the chair by the table and she was glad to go. "Okay. Now, what's it all about?"

"I—I don't know." She wanted to talk to him, tell him everything. Maybe if she talked about it, it would take on some semblance of reason. "It's all so—so screwy."

"Yes? For instance?"

"For instance, almost the screwiest thing of all happened right after I started up the driveway with your father—"

"Whoa!" he interrupted. "Let's get that straight right off. That mummy's no relation of mine! But go on. You started up the driveway, and—"

"And he told me about his mother's sometimes mixing people up in her mind, was asking me to promise that I'd be whoever she thought I was, when all of a sud-

den he stopped, frightened by something behind me. I turned—"

Jennifer couldn't tell from Hal's expression whether or not he believed her tale of the monster that had leaped from behind a tree. But he listened carefully as she went on, telling of her blackout and of her strange awakening in this room. When she came to the shadow on the window-pane he grinned. "Scared you half out of your wits, did I?"

"You!"

"None other. What you two said there in the road tipped me off you weren't who I'd thought you were, and I took a long chance to try and get word to you of what you were walking into." The girl's heart thudded again, but not with fright. "I learned in the Army how to scale walls lots tougher than that one, and there's a drainpipe at the corner of the house from which I could climb along window sills to here."

"But the horns. I saw them distinctly."

"The shadow of my cowlick, I guess." He shoved fingers through disordered hair. "Aunt Laura used to pester the life out of me about it. Called it a mare's nest."

"Yes," Jennifer nodded. "She pulled that on me too." She thought of something. "I suppose you were also responsible for the hoofprints on the stairs."

His bent leg shot down to the floor and he straightened, suddenly taut. "The *what* on the stairs?"

Her spine prickling again with the recollection, she explained. "I was terrified, of course, but you should have seen how your mother looked."

"I can guess," Hal growled. "I've seen her before when he was working on her." He stood up and started prowling the carpet, taut with some dark and terrible emotion. "If only I dared smash him," he muttered to himself, "but I'm stymied. He's dug himself in too deep. I tried," he groaned. "By all the powers of darkness, I tried and all it got me was that I almost lost her altogether." There was nothing boyish about him now. His face was haggard. Tortured. "I almost pushed her all the way over the line. And it would be unthinkable to call in help from outside. I can't. . . ."

He twisted to Jennifer, cheekbones etched sharply against tight skin. "I've got to talk to my mother without Martin's knowing it. You'll have to get her up here. Pretend you need something or just want to chat—"

"No good, Hal. The old man won't allow it. He hit the ceiling when I proposed that she visit the city with me, and I lost my temper, told him I intend leaving Strohdene tonight. He'll be certain I want to get her to come with me."

"So what? She can't go anywhere from up here and he'll figure he can stop her when she comes down again. Please, Jennifer. Try it."

"All right," she yielded. "I'll try." But out in the corridor again, the door shut on his pleading eyes, she paused, her hands pressed against her aching head.

It had come to her that he hadn't explained anything. He'd gotten her to talk, plenty, but he'd told her nothing except that what she'd seen on the window had been his shadow. . . .

His shadow with horns, Jenny. Remember his boast about how easily he can scale the wall. Remember how closely the woods hug the wall both sides of the clearing around the gate and how silently he can slip through underbrush.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Mass

HELEN would know who—or what—he was, and whether he was to be trusted. If he'd set a trap for the two of them, Helen might even know what they could do about it.

All this ran through Jennifer's mind as she moved across the passage. She reached the corner where the railing began, stopped there to reconnoiter.

More time than she thought must have elapsed since she'd left the hall below, or perhaps her departure had brought the meal to a sudden end. At any rate, the table had been cleared, the white cloth removed and a scarlet one of heavy velvet spread in its place. The chairs no longer stood around it. Three of them were aligned midway in the space between the doorway and the table, facing the latter. In the middle one Laura Stroh sat dozing, but neither the old man nor the younger woman were in sight.

One of the pair was in the hall, though, on the other side of the staircase and hidden from Jennifer by its slant. She could hear metallic clinkings, then then the gurgle of

poured liquid. Was it Helen? Alone? To find out, Jennifer would have to cross the top of the stairs in full view from below.

She glanced down there again. Laura Stroh's head was bowed forward and her hands clasped, in her lap, a small black book. Thick, gold-edged, it looked like a prayer book.

It was, for all the world, as if the old woman had slipped into the easy sleep of the aged while waiting in church for the service to begin.

But the aged wake easily too.

Jennifer hesitated, decided to risk it—too late! For Helen came out in the open now, walking wearily toward the red-clothed table.

Jennifer might even then have tried somehow to signal her if it had not been for what she saw on the round gold tray the woman carried. Not the three gold cups nor the gold decanter against which they tinkled. It was the fifth object that sheathed the girl's body with ice.

Erect in a golden base, this was a foot-tall cross of ebony so artfully polished that it seemed to burn with an inward fire of its own. A black and unholy fire, for the shorter, horizontal arm was low on the vertical shaft, two-third the distance down from the top.

Jennifer knew now to what deity Martin Stroh had addressed his strange grace, knew for what awful rite the scarlet altar was being prepared. Browsing once in a bomb-shattered German library, she'd read in an ancient volume the meaning of the symbol before which, having set it in the center of the table, Helen was arranging the decanter and the cups.

The last cup skidded across the tray and clanked against its rim. Laura, jerked, came awake. Her small eyes peered at what her daughter-in-law was doing and she snorted as she had when the roast had appeared. "Can't you do anything right, you fool? There should be four cups."

Helen turned to her. "No, mother. Only three." Light shimmered on the empty tray.

"Four," the old woman insisted. "You've forgotten Alma."

Jennifer didn't notice where Stroh had come from but he was down there at the farther end of the table, listening silently as the tray shook more violently in his wife's hands. "Alma's gone, mother."

"Is she?" A triumphant smile was growing on the round, flabby face. "That's what you would like. You would like for her to have disappointed me the way your apostate son did, but she promised she wouldn't and she hasn't. Look, Helen. Look up there." And Laura Stroh pointed straight up at Jennifer who, absorbed in the scene below, had taken a single catastrophic step out beyond the wall-corner behind which she'd thought herself safely hidden.

"You can come down now, dear," the old woman called up to her. "We're almost ready to begin."

You can't run back to your room, Jenny. If he is Helen's son, you'll betray him. If he's not . . . . The front door! Go down to them and watch for your chance to slip out through it.

"Coming, Aunt Laura."

Going along the rail toward the staircase, Jennifer seemed to wade through invisible waters that resisted every step she forced her strengthless legs to take. She was tired, tired as if she'd walked miles by the time she reached the top of the stairs but she made herself turn and start down.

Below her the upturned faces waited: Laura's with that moist-lipped, triumphant smile on it; Helen's haggard, defeated; Martin Stroh's expressionless as death itself. But as Jennifer descended they retreated out of her field of vision. All she saw was the scarlet cloth and a gleam of gold, and rising from it, the blasphemous symbol of the Antichrist.

It seemed to her that the great hall darkened, that the inverted cross drew all the light into itself to feed its black, inner flame. And now it seemed to Jennifer that she felt that flame's radiance, though—strangely—not on her face and bare arms. It was within her, deep within her body. it was an almost pleasurable warmth at first but as she halted on the midway tread it grew swiftly hotter. Unendurable heat spread through her organs, her flesh. It ran, liquid fire, through her veins.

There was no light or smoke, no smell of burning, no flame. Jennifer herself was the flame and it was contained within her for even the flimsy rayon of her dress did not char, was cool to the frantic hands that tore at it. "Help!" she heard her parched throat moan. "Save me."

And she heard, as from a far distance, the rustle of Martin Stroh's answer: No one can help you who planned to deceive the Master. No one can save you from the flameless fire of his wrath."

The voice faded. Jennifer stared sightlessly into a blood-red haze within which a shapeless something moved and suddenly had hold of her and fell with her, bumping down the remaining treads. It hauled at her, made tiny, mewling noises as it tugged, batted, shoved her away from the stairs.

The fire that in another instant would have destroyed her was out of her.

SHE LAY moaning, a single mass of pain, every nerve, every cell blistered with recollection of searing heat. Sight filtered back into her eyes and she was aware of a blurred dark shape swaying low above her, of a pale blob topping it that took on the outline, the features of Helen Stroh's face.

It dawned on Jennifer that Helen had dared the staircase's terrible fire and dragged her down from it to safety. In her throat a grateful phrase struggled with a sob but new terror flared as Helen cringed now like a cur under its owner's whip.

The lash that cut at her was only a choked whisper. "You fool!" From Martin Stroh, staring down, his grey face livid. "You've ruined—"

He cut short. His mother's scarlet bulk swam into view, and he was saying to her, suave again. "The Master is more forbearing than even I knew. It must be because Alma has not yet been confirmed to him that he permitted Helen to save her from punishment for her sin."

"What sin, Martin?" The resonance was gone from Laura Stroh's voice. It was thin, childishly plaintive. "What did she do?"

"Nothing, mother. Nothing yet. It was what she had in her mind to do." Stroh said it smoothly enough but cords ridged his scrawny neck and his pupils were pinpointed. "Didn't you see her glance to the entrance as she started down to us? Didn't you see the look of hate that came into her eyes when they found the sacred symbol of our faith? She meant to spy on our rites and then betray us to our enemies."

"Like Hal?"

"Yes. Like Hal. She planned to do what he—"

"Only for a moment," Helen put in quickly. "Just a moment of weakness. As Martin said, she hasn't been confirmed yet so we can't really condemn her."

"Who are we to condemn her," the old woman asked, sighing, "when the Master has forgiven her?" Her tiny eyes peered down at Jennifer. "You've learned your lesson now, child, haven't you? You won't let wicked thoughts like that ever come into your pretty little head again, will you, dear?"

"No," Jennifer answered meekly. "I've learned my lesson." The lesson Helen had learned long ago, that there was no use trying to fight the forces of ancient evil Martin Stroh could call up at will. "I won't think wicked thoughts ever again."

"That's my own sweet girl. That's my pretty. Help her up, Martin." Laura Stroh was her imperious self again. "And you, Helen, go fetch the fourth cup so we can begin. We're late now. We're dreadfully late,"

With the same dull and dreary resignation she'd so pitied in Stroh's other victim, Jennifer took the hand he held down to her, let it pull her to her feet, let it lead her to the right-hand chair of the three that were aligned across the center of the hall. She sank into it, was aware that Laura Stroh seated herself in the center one beside her, watched the old man return to the table and take up a position facing them, his grey hands on the scarlet cloth either side of the inverted cross.

Of Satan's cross.

She tried not to think but could not keep from thinking: *It's Satan's mass he waiting to celebrate.* Ademonic, evil ceremony. She couldn't stop the dreadful thought from running through her head; *Satan exists. Maybe not anywhere else in the world, any more, but in this house he still exists and is worshipped.* She knew now that Strohdene's people were not mad, nor was she. She'd had proof. It was Satan's fires, the fires of Hell, that had burned her there on the staircase. They would burn her again, too, if she refused to join in worshipping him.

She could save herself by praying but she could not pray. Not here. The seal of the Antichrist was on Strohdene. She could not reach God from here. Not from between these walls.

Laura Stroh moved restively. "What's keeping Helen, Martin?"

"I don't know, mother. Shall I go see?"

"Yes. And hurry."

He was going away from the table. He was behind the staircase and Jennifer was alone in the hall with the old woman. *This is your chance, Jenny!*

She was up and running toward the stone-framed portal. "Come back," she heard the cry from behind. "Where are you going, Alma?"

"Outside," Jennifer flung back. "Out under the sky where I can pray." That was all that mattered. If she could pray just once more, commend her soul to God, it didn't matter what happened to her body.

She reached the towering door, clawed its huge bronze latch-handle. It refused to move. Locked? Or merely too ponderous for her strength? She got both hands on the handle, put all her strength into desperate effort. It was beginning to yield when fingers gripped her shoulders, twisted her around to Laura Stroh's furious eyes, to a moist mouth that spewed senseless words as Jennifer's frantic small fists flailed ineffectually.

"Let me go," she sobbed. "Please let me—"

Darkness swallowed the scarlet bulk and with it all of Strohdene's great hall, sudden darkness so black it seemed tangibly to thumb Jennifer's eyeballs. The clamping grip relaxed for a startled instant, long enough for her to wrench free of it. She stumbled, caught at rough stone and got feet under her again, was running once more, anywhere as long as it was away from the raddled beldame.

Somewhere in the darkness metal clinked, mellow as only gold can sound. The sightless cavern through which Jennifer ran seemed peopled by pursuing presences, silent and no more visible in the light than in this impenetrable dark. She flung out hands to ward them off, felt fabric that swirled around her abruptly, swathed her, tangled her in its musty folds.

She fought it and could not get free of it. A scream bubbled to her lips, was held there, soundless. She'd butted against vertical hardness. A wall. The tangling cloth was not something used to trap her. It was merely one of the tapestries that dressed Strohdene's hall.

A LONG finger of light reached through the darkness, probing for her. Jennifer was behind the tapestry before the light could find her. Flattened against the wall, she pulled dust into her lungs. The fabric muffled Laura Stroh's babbling, Martin's answering rustle and she could not make out what they said but she could tell that they were moving from her right to her left and she remembered that her flight had diagonalled here from the right. Then they were going back across the hall away from the door.

The door wasn't locked. It had started to open to her desperate pull. If she could get back to it unheard, if the darkness lasted long enough for her to reach it unseen, she might still get out.

She could, Jennifer decided, lessen the risk of being betrayed by a sudden return of light if, instead of cutting across the way she'd come, she stayed behind the tapestries with which this wall was hung. She then would have only the comparatively short dash from the corner to make in the open.

But what if they've left someone else there to intercept you, Jenny? Something else?

It was a chance she'd have to take. Jennifer started, moving sidewise so that the hangings should billow as little as possible as she edged along behind them. The battered lining traced her face with ghostly fingers. She felt the shivery touch of cobwebs on her cheek. The arras ended but she groped for, found the edge of the next one and was behind that.

It seemed in better condition and there was more space behind it. She could turn— She collided with something yielding solid that moved, that covered her mouth with a muffling palm, clamped her arms to her sides and lifted her *through the wall!*

Jennifer could not see but she could feel through her frock's thin silk the harsh, shaggy hair of her captor. Panic screamed through her, gave place to fatalistic surrender. She was bone-weary of fighting, strengthless from fear as she was set on her feet again and heard a low murmur, "Okay, Jenny. Let's go." A recognized voice.

She could even extract grim, ironic satisfaction from this proof that she'd been right in mistrusting this being whose fingers on her elbow urged her into motion, checked her momentarily with the warning, "Watch

it. Steps down here," and then urged again.

The steps were stone, descending endlessly. Her shoulder rubbed a rough stone wall and she had a sense of being enclosed in a narrow space, of abysmal space below. Reason stirred again and with it recollection that when she'd first looked down into Strohdene's hall she'd seen Martin Stroh enter from this direction. From a door, perhaps, behind the tapestries.

The musty air was threaded by the animal odor, the goat smell that had affronted her as she'd watched the hoof marks form in the dust of the marble staircase. On these steps there was no click of hoofs, no sound of footfalls other than the tap of her own heels. The steps ended. The voice murmured, "Hold it." The fingers left her elbow. Jennifer stood alone in darkness so dense it seemed to thumb her eyeballs. She was alone and free to flee, but where could she flee? And why try? She'd learned by now that there was no possibility of escape for her.

Close ahead she heard a soft rhythmic pat as of fingertips on wood. *Pat. Pat-pat.* And now the rattle of a bolt in its socket.

Hinges squealed thinly. Light sliced the blackness, widened, blinded Jennifer. The goat smell suddenly was strong, and forms moved in the dazzle out of which the whisper came, imperative. "Get in here, Jennifer. Quick."

She went into the blinding light, heard the door thud behind her. A face formed out of the light.

Helen Stroh's face.

It was pallid but no longer haggard with anxiety. The drab shoulders no longer were stooped as though under an intolerable burden. The dreariness was gone from the voice that said, "You're safe now, dear. We're both safe, now that my son's here to look after us."

"Your—" Jennifer's dazed look found him, the corners of his grey eyes crinkled as he came from behind her. His sweater. Its wool, not a satyr's bristly hair, was what had rasped her. "He's really your son."

"You wouldn't think so, the way I've treated him." Helen's growing eyes followed him as he prowled past them, catfooted on rubber soles. "I've been terribly wrong." The light came from a single lantern hanging from a low rafter just within the door and beyond the constricted area of its illumination the cellar's dark reaches swallowed Hal. "I only realized how terribly tonight, when Martin made the hoofprints appear on the staircase and you threatened—"

"How could he make those prints?" Jennifer cut in. "He wasn't anywhere near them."

"He—he didn't have to be. The dust on the stairs is mostly powdered iron and under each step there's a specially shaped electro-magnet connected by wires under the floor to one of a row of buttons under the edge of the table at the end where he always sits."

"I get it." Jennifer remembered from her high school science laboratory the intriguing behavior of iron filings on a paper held over a magnet. "When he presses a button the magnet to which its wire leads is activated and the iron dust on the marble above it swirls into the form of a hoofprint. By pressing one button after another he made it seem that something invisible was walking down. How simple." And how terrifying. "I suppose the wind's from a silent electric fan."

"Yes. In a duct from that hot-air furnace." Helen pointed to the looming bulk near them, a metal hydra from whose head huge sheet-iron ducts squirmed away under the rafters. "Behind a register in the floor at the foot of the stairs."

"But that awful smell?"

"Is from a sponge soaked with oil of asafetida and hidden in the duct. That's why the odor's so strong down here." But Helen spoke absently as she peered into the darkness where her son had vanished. "I wonder what's keeping Hal," she fretted. "Now I've got him back I'm nervous when he's out of my sight."

JENNIFER prickled with returning fears. "What's he up to back there?"

"I don't know. He hasn't told me anything." There where the two women peered the blackness held vague and frightening shapes, vagrant glints of light on metal, but no sound, no hint of movement. "When I went into the pantry to get the fourth cup, he was there. He rushed me down the back stairs, snatched up that lantern and told me to light it and hang it up while he rushed

off again and shut off the electricity at the big main switch."

"That's what saved me," Jennifer exclaimed. Then, "But he couldn't know what was happening to me. Why, Helen? Why did he switch off the current?"

"So I could get to you without being burned," Hal himself answered from the door behind them. "I couldn't be sure Martin didn't have more than just the staircase wired for heat."

"Wired? You mean that the invisible flame—"

"Is no more supernatural than the hoofprints. Check." He grinned bleakly, skin tight over the sharp angles of his skull. "You've read about the new artificial-fever treatment for mental cases, using high-frequency radio waves to send the blood temperature way up and burn the bugs out of the brain. And that other stunt of the electronics, roasting a steak from the inside without even charring a paper plate on which it lies. Well, brother Martin combined those two gadgets into a sort of jumbo-sized radio oven that came within a couple of seconds of cooking you to death."

Jennifer shuddered, recalling her agony on the staircase.

"What makes it a particularly neat murder instrument," Hal continued, "is that it doesn't leave a mark. The life's fried out of the brain before flesh or skin's been cooked enough to be noticed by anyone making an autopsy. The coroner's verdict on you would have been, 'natural death from deterioration of the cerebral tissues.' "

"On me!"

"On you, J. Lane. You don't imagine, do you that he'd have turned it off till you were done for, if my mother hadn't dragged you down out of it? I'd looked out to see what was keeping you but by the time I could have reached you, you'd have been gone."

She'd been that close to extinction. Jennifer started to say something but Helen intervened. "You're holding something back, Hal. What is it?"

"You may as well know," he said. "Aside from taking a look at Martin's wireless oven and a couple of other quaint gadgets he installed down here since I left, I've just checked a notion that came to me a couple of weeks ago when I saw a truck from the city drive into the grounds with a couple of strangers in overalls and a load of Portland cement and shaped iron rods."

"The hooks for the wall!" Jennifer exclaimed.

"That was only part of it. He had them seal every opening to the outside from this cellar, every window and the two doors and even the coal chute, with reinforced concrete."

Helen's hand went to her throat but her voice was steady. "He told us the Master had warned him that you meant to lead a raid of unbelievers against us some night when we were celebrating the Devil's Mass."

"He wasn't far wrong." Hal's face was grim, older-seeming than its years. "I would have done it but I couldn't chance it while he had mother in his clutches. With her out of the way I'd have been free to go to town against that madman and his dirty scheme."

Jennifer wanted to ask what that was, but this wasn't the time. "Why don't we just go up the same way you brought me down, and out the front door? Surely the three of us can easily handle that decrepit old man."

"I suppose we could if we could get at him."

"Why can't we?"

Hal pulled the edge of his hand across his forehead. "Because this door and the one to the stairs from the pantry are locked from the outside. Not only locked, but backed up by what feels like iron bars he put across them while I took the time to jam up his machinery so he couldn't use it again. This house was built when lumber was cheap and people built to last for centuries. The doors are solid oak two inches thick. It will take us hours to dig out."

"And you won't have hours," a voice said, a dry, rustling voice that seemed to come out of nothingness. "The decrepit old man still has a trick or two up his sleeve." Whirling, Jennifer could see only Helen but the voice went on, "You may have jammed up the instruments the Master taught me to build, but he has supplied me with another to destroy his enemies."

Jennifer stared into the starkly empty cellar where a disembodied laugh rustled, sere and sinister. Beneath that laugh, she felt, rather than heard, an ominous throbbing.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Vaults of Strohdene

THE SUDDEN movement that pulled Jennifer's head around to Hal was his arm jerking up to point at the furnace. "That's where it comes from. He's talking into a register and his voice is coming down to us through one of the ducts. And he can hear us the same way."

"Very clever," Martin Stroh applauded. "You've always been too clever for your own good, my dear Hal. Are you smart enough to divine what else is coming down to you beside my voice?"

Jennifer saw little muscles clump at the angles of Hal's cheekbones. She saw his head cock sidewise as he listened to the throbbing, his nostrils widen as they tested the air and found the acrid taint of which she was herself becoming aware.

"Yes," he said, tonelessly. "You've driven your car up in front of the doors, attached a hose to its exhaust pipe and run the other end of the hose down into that duct. What you're sending down to us is carbon monoxide."

"Very good." Knowing that they came from a human throat did not seem to make the apparently disembodied tones any less eerie. "And, since I've prepared it for an attack by your friends from the village, that cellar is hermetically sealed."

"But it's big, Martin." Jennifer realized that Hal was saying this more to hearten his mother and her than for Stroh's benefit. "It will take a long time for you to pump enough gas down here to kill us."

"I have all the time I need, my boy. None of us in Strohdene is apt to have visitors, not even our little boarder. I made sure of that by a week of careful investigation before I invited Miss Lane to join our happy—"

"Miss Lane!" Helen's exclamation was edged with alarm as Hal darted away towards the cellar's rear. "You would call her Alma if— What have you done to my mother, Martin?"

"Nothing, my dear Helen" to perturb you. I've merely put her quietly to sleep with a somewhat different injection than I used on the girl."

"What do you mean?" Jennifer was surprised she could speak at all but Hal had whispered to her, "Keep him talking," and she must. "When did you use an injection on me?" She knew. She recalled the sting that had puckered the nape of her neck when she had awakened in this house of terror. "I don't remember anything like that."

"You don't remember anything of your first two or three hours in Strohdene." The reply seemed to come from two directions at once and the *chug-chug* of the motor that poured lethal fumes down here abruptly

was more distinct. "Have you ever heard of scopalamine, Miss Lane?"

"Scopalamine?" Jennifer saw the reason for the change in quality and apparent source of the sounds. "Why, yes." Hal had opened a large clean-out door in the side of one of the huge overhead ducts, was silently closing it again. "I remember some medical officers mentioning it at mess, when they were talking about painless childbirth." He vanished now in the lightless regions far back. "And someone remarked we ought to use it in screening out active Nazis who applied to us for jobs. He called it the 'truth drug.'"

"Very good, Miss Lane." Helen pressed a palm to her brow. Jennifer realized that her own head was beginning to throb with the ache that is monoxide's first warning as she heard, "Both those uses for scopalamine depend on its peculiar property of creating an artificial amnesia so that pain—or anything else experienced while under its influence—is instantly forgotten. Because of this, it also obliterates the will."

Hal appeared again, hurrying back to them. "When you began to ask embarrassing questions," the voice from the furnace continued, "I distracted your attention long enough to permit me to inject the drug into the nerve center at the base of your brain, where it would take instantaneous effect. Until it wore off, you obeyed me as implicitly as though you were under hypnosis, yet retained no recollection of what occured."

"Okay, Martin," Hal growled. "So you're a holy roaring wonder." What in the world, Jennifer wondered, did he intend doing with that rusted elbow joint of iron pipe and the coil of insulated wire hanging from the crook of his arm? "Suppose you start figuring where you're headed." He threaded an end of the wire through the joint, started measuring off a four-foot loop of the doubled strand. "They hang murderers in this state, you know."

"Not if they are unaware a murder has been committed." Stroh chuckled. "It is getting rather chilly in this rambling old house tonight and so I shall start the furnace for the first time this season. Most unfortunately, I shall fail to inspect the system and so will not discover that during the summer one of the ducts, the one that opens into the rooms occupied by Helen and Miss Lane, has sprung a leak which will permit coal gas, almost pure carbon monoxide, to enter it. I shall be inconsolable when I find, tomorrow morning, that they've been asphyxiated while they slept."

Hal reached up and slipped the end of the loop over the nail from which the lantern swung, let the pipe-joint swing free as he knotted to the doubled wire, about halfway down, the single one trailing from the coil. "As for you, young man," the rustling voice continued, "No one knows you are anywhere inside Strohdene's walls, hence I shall not be called upon to account for your disappearance."

"Right," the youth agreed, almost pleasantly. "If I disappear. Which I've no intention of doing. You forget about this axe you left down here." He pulled on the line he'd attached to the loop, gave it slack. "Hear that." The elbow joint pendulumed, chunked into the door. "How long do you think it will take me to chop through with it?"

Forever, Jennifer thought. "How long?" the voice from the furnace chuckled. "Too long to save you, my friend." The joint completed another arc and chunked into wood again. "Much too long."

"Says you," Hal snarled. He turned to the women. "Mother. Jennifer. You two get to the back of the cellar. Climb up on something high, as high as you can get." *Chunk*. "Monoxide's heavier than air, it will be thickest near the floor." He gestured them towards the rear. "Go on now. I can handle this axe myself." *Chunk*. But as they obeyed he went with them, paying out the line pulling on it so that the iron kept swinging against the door and to the listener above it would sound as if he had never left it.

A paint-spattered crate blocked their path. Jennifer started to detour this, was halted by Hal's hand on her arm and thrust the wire's end into her fingers.

"Keep it swinging," he whispered. "And take care of my mother for me." He jumped on the crate, reached up and opened the clean-out door in the side of the duct beneath which it stood. Jennifer pulled the wire, heard the answering *chunk*. This was a different conduit from that down which poured the lethal fumes that were bringing stinging tears to her eyes. *Chunk*. There

was a sudden, inarticulate sound in Helen's throat. She reached for her son, but his head and shoulders already were inside the big, square-sided conduit and his legs were swinging as he pulled them up into it.

The elbow joint pounded into the door, and above Jennifer blackened sheet-iron buckled. The straps holding the duct to the ceiling crackled. Would they hold his weight?

SHE PULLED on the wire, praying that the answering *chunk* would cover the scraping noises inside the duct that meant Hal was belly-crawling toward where it curved up out of the cellar. She heard Helen moan, whispered to her. "He's climbing up through it. He's going to jump your husband from behind."

"Husband? Martin isn't my husband."

Jennifer blinked eyes now fiercely smarting from the burned gases but she did not forget to keep the elbow-joint making the sounds that she hoped would keep the killer thinking Hal still chopped at the door. "Get up on this box." With her free hand she helped Helen mount the crate, got up beside her. The air was a little fresher here close under the ceiling and she could think more clearly. It was no surprise that the evil old man had lied to her.

"But you cried out to him, 'What have you done to my mother?' *Your* mother. Martin Stroh is your brother."

"Not Martin *Stroh,* Jennifer." The woman's mouth twisted. "His name, the only name we know, is just plain Martin. He's no relation to any of us."

"But he kept calling your— He kept addressing Laura Stroh 'mother' and neither of you seemed to think it less queer."

"No." The momentary relief was ebbing. Light and dark were beginning to swing about Jennifer in dizzying circles. "It's the title he gave her. Mother in Satan. It's part of his terrible scheme."

"What scheme?" She had time now to ask it but she wasn't at all sure she'd have time to hear the answer. "What's he after?"

"Strohdene, of course, and the fortune my father left when he died." Helen swayed, would have fallen if Jennifer hadn't caught her with her free arm. If Hal didn't hurry. . . .

Maybe he's stuck in the duct. Maybe Martin had outguessed him and was waiting at the outlet. . . .

"Tell me," Jennifer urged. Hal had told her to take care of his mother but the only thing she could do was keep Helen's mind off the death welling invisibly up about them. "Tell me about Martin's scheme."

It was a strange tale listened to in the darkening cellar while an iron joint chunked on wood and a car engine chugged, while death crept up about teller and listener and somewhere above a grey-eyed, brown-haired youth struggles for his life and theirs.

A dozen years ago Helen's father and her husband had been drowned in the same fishing accident. Left alone with their grief, the rich widow and her daughter had been ripe prey for the first charlatan who could worm himself into their confidence.

"We heard about this wonderful medium who could bring back the dead. He did bring Dad and John back to us, Jennifer. I saw them, talked with them. They said things only they could know."

Martin had prepared himself well.

"They told us he had knowledge and powers no other man had. They said if we could get him to stay here with us he'd show us how to attain the only true happiness. We begged him to stay and he finally agreed."

The build-up was gradual. It was years before he had revealed that his powers came from Satan and by then he was master of Strohdene. Meantime Hal was away in boarding school and summer camp, college and, later, the Army. But Laura Stroh could not live forever. Martin determined that before she died she must leave her estate to his cult. To him, in other words.

Here he hit a snag. Laura was old and stubborn and she had a strong sense of family.

"Besides Hal," Jennifer heard Helen's faint voice through the pain that pounded at her own skull, "there was only her sister's granddaughter, Alma Chandler. We hadn't seen Alma for years but mother refused to make a will that would disinherit the two children. And then Hal came home."

Horrified by what he learned, he had

tried to talk some sense into his mother's head but Martin, sensing this, countered with new proofs of his "supernatural powers." The only result of the conflict had been to drive Helen to the brink of madness. One night Hal had exploded, denounced the charlatan to his grandmother and threatened to have her declared legally incompetent if she did not turn him out. Laura flew into a rage and ordered him out of her house and her life.

Helen was deeply shaken torn as she was between love for a son of whom she'd seen little for years and love for the mother with whom she'd shared bereavement and the dark consolation of their blasphemous faith. She realized, moreover, that if Hal were right she dared not leave the old woman alone in the house with Satan's priest.

But Martin saw the solution to his problem. The grandson had eliminated himself, the grandniece could be eliminated in a similar manner. Alma, fortunately for him, was somewhat abroad with her engineer husband. Nevertheless he induced Laura to write and invite her to Strohdene, intercepted the letter and set out to find a substitute.

"Me," Jennifer gasped. "That's why he warned me she might mistake me for someone else." Light and dark wheeled dizzily. "He planned to —"

"Terrorize you into behaving so as to turn mother against Alma, too," Helen whispered as, almost blind, almost strengthless now, Jennifer clung to her. "But mother flared up at him and then I did. He got us under control with the hoofs on the stairs, and then you exploded and I knew he'd never dare let you out of here alive. I—"

"Shhh," Jennifer interrupted. "Listen."

They stared into lantern light blurred by the acrid death-fog.

"I don't hear anything."

"That's just it. The chugging's stopped. Hal's won out. He's shut off the motor. Listen!"

There was sound again, a metallic rattling. The door rattling against its bolt! Jennifer let go of Helen, climbed down. She fell off the crate and pushed up to hands and knees and started crawling but down here the fumes were thicker and she had no strength. She forced herself on.

A pounding of iron on wood hammered the pain in her swirling head but it wasn't the elbow-iron; her numbed fingers had lost the wire long ago.

The door pulled open.

To Jennifer's bleared eyes it was only a shadow that blotted out the lantern's blurred glow and rushed toward her. Abruptly Hal's face was clear-etched, then was blotted out the darkness that swirled into Jennifer's brain and possessed her. . . .

* * *

She breathed cold air, crisp, clean of fumes. She drew it into her lungs and washed them with it, washed the sickness out of her. She had a dim recollection of being carried, up and up, interminably, of a far-away voice saying her name. Hal's voice. She opened her eyes and looked into Hal's face, drawn, anxious. She smiled wanly and whispered, "Okay, Hal."

Jennifer saw him against the pale loom of a tall, deeply embrasured window. It was the window in her room, the one against which she'd seen his frightening shadow and it was still open but that wasn't frightening now. Her eyes questioned him. "Your mother?"

"Inside with hers. She'll be all right. They'll both be all right now that Martin's out of the picture."

"What—what are you going to do about him?"

"Nothing except report that he met with an accident."

"He—he's dead?"

"As Hitler. He heard me sneaking up on him and tried to jump me. I used some of my Army judo on him. He landed on the back of his head and I heard his spine snap. But how about you, Jennifer?"

She knew that he didn't mean how was she physically; she'd already told him she was all right. "What about me?"

"Will you stay, Jennifer?" He thrust fingers through the brown disorder of his hair. "Will you stay here at Strohdene?"

Her heart pounded. "I'd like to, Hal. I'd like very much to. Do you want me to?"

"Do I!" His eyes appealed to her. "I want you to stay here forever."

"That's queer, Hal. It's very queer, on account of that's exactly what I want too."

THE END

(Continued from page 71)

ing and growing from his shoulder was real. That it was from some dark hell. That Crita had sent it to him and was making it grow.

Voodoo. Witches in Manhattan. Black Mass on altars of chome and white walnut. He knew now. He believed now.

There was no sleep for Earl. There would never be sleep for him until he went back to Crita, back to her apartment in the Village, with the dusty paintings in the corner. . . .

Long nights, twisting and turning in a clammy shroud. The tiny laughter and the shrill voice mocking and beckoning as the Lorelei beckon.

He had called up Jean. He had tried to explain in a way she would believe. He formulated stories and none of them sounded credible. She kept calling him. He sat waiting for her calls while the thing in the green gown swayed from his shoulder. It was fat and sleek. Its voice was stronger now.

"Come back to Crita. Come back to Crita."

You can't leave me, Earl. The only way you can be free of me is to come back to me.

He phoned Crita's apartment again. He phoned many times. He couldn't remember now how many times. There was never any answer.

But Jean came to see him. She came unexpectedly, without phoning. He didn't even know she cared about him any more. He didn't have any idea now how many days it had been since that last evening in the park. The bell rang. He cried out, felt his muscles jerk with fear as he stumbled to the door, stood leaning against the wall.

The thing on his shoulders rubbed tiny fingers down his neck. He shivered.

"Let her in. It's Jean. Let her in."

He was muttering. Terror clawed and scrabbled in his heart. He wanted to run, run and hide in a dark corner. But the thing on his shoulder would follow, anywhere. His lips felt wet and loose. The little voice whispered hoarsely. *"Let her in, Earl. Hurry. You'll never be able to come back to Crita until Jean's out of the way."*

His hand trembled as he managed to hook it around the knob of the door, and pull it open.

"Jean . . . don't. . . ."

She screamed in terror when she saw him.

"No, Jean. Don't. . . ."

"You've got to kill her, Earl—quick! You've got to stop that screaming!" the little voice whispered.

He slammed the door shut. His back was against it. He jumped. A sense of intense relief flowed through him, warmly, as her cries died between his hands. He kept his hands there, made them tighter and tighter.

"You . . . Jean, I was happy enough . . . things were nice . . , until you and your damned money . . . you . . . talking all the time about what we could do . . . where we could go . . . you laughed at my work. . . ."

He staggered back. He flattened against the wall. His breath was choked and heavy in his throat as he looked down at her. A sick horror sighed through him. The little

Crita

familiar on his shoulder twisted its head and looked at him. It laughed its shrill little laugh.

"Hurry, Earl. Come back to Crita. You haven't much time."

HE TAPED the thing down. It shrieked and he tried to smother its cries, bind its lashing body. He put on a coat, then a topcoat. But he could still feel it squirming against him. He could hear its muffled cries as he drove blindly toward Crita's apartment in the Village.

It was dark and lonely as he drove into the night. Into the darkness, the last mantle of the damned. . . .

The hallway was still. A faint wind blew

some white hall curtains gently. They floated faintly in the soggy darkness. A musty odor hung imprisoned by the flood of dim yellow light outside her door.

He listened. He couldn't hear anything from beyond the door. Only the muffled whispering of the thing on his shoulder, the familiar, the unnamed vicious little monster that had grown out of him. . . .

He opened the door and edged into the room. It was very still and smothered in thick dusty shadows, and hot breathless air. No songs now to ancient gods. No incantations to the monody of evil drums. There was an unfamiliar smell. Yet he should be able to recognize it—the unmistakable smell of death.

He lurched toward a window. Dead flies lay on the sill, dead flies and dust. He needed air. He cried out as he bumped into something, something that thudded hollowly against his face. Something that swayed back and forth now. There was a creaking sound overhead. The swaying form bumped him, slid around him, then twirled slowly around and around. . . .

Rafters strung across the darkened ceiling like gibbets. Crita! *Crita!* And a length of hemp squeaking on dry wood. Her body in its green gown hanging, stiff and cold and twisted.

He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing happened.

The miniature thing on his shoulder laughed.

* * *

We found him crouched in the dark corner of Crita Montez's apartment over a shattered pile of his dusty, abandoned paintings. He later admitted murdering Jean Dupre. Crita had evidently committed suicide.

We found a doll in his hand. It was a very life-like doll with a green dress. It was an amazing duplication of Crita Montez.

An odd case. There's a birthmark on his shoulder which seems to fill him with a peculiar terror. It is a peculiar birthmark. It looks startlingly like the imprint of a woman's lips.

Police psychiatrist Dr. Joseph Wright says that as far as he can determine, Earl Gleason is sane.

"WE SUPPLY THE BODIES!"

(Continued from page 6)

weapon would be taken for contusions caused in falling.

Mass production was their downfall. Impatient for their fees, the two figured out a way to bridge the time gap between the order for the coffin and the period required for construction. "Measure 'em as they fall!" said Alf brilliantly. Thereafter, they were able to ship—and collect—much more promptly.

It was on July 28, according to the testimony, that the truth burst upon the constable of Dullingswirth. That morning, the usual quota of three coffins were delivered by the carpenters despite the fact that no bodies had been reported.

"Don't think we'll need 'em, please God!" the officer sighed to the two craftsmen. "We 'aven't anyone to bury today!"

"You haven't? But you must have!" The two looked dumbfounded as they departed and the constable rubbed his mustache thoughtfully.

Sure enough, a few hours later three corpses came in, and the police officer was startled to notice that although one was over-sized, at least six-foot-three, and one was unusually fat, weighing close to 300 pounds, the coffins were similarly shaped and fitted them perfectly.

Summoned by the suspicious constable, it did not take a physician long to find the cause of death. "Murder!" he announced.

HAM AND ALF confessed willingly. Apparently, after years of inaction their self-imposed speed-up had exhausted them both and they were ready to quit. They were indignant, though, at the charge of first-degree murder. They called it justifiable homicide. "It's all yer fault, anyway!" they said hostilely to the mayor. "Ye guaranteed us one body a week and it was a clear breach of contract!"

The judge and jury at the next court assizes appreciated but were unable to agree with this argument. Sentence was carried out on September 14, 1898. No one appeared to claim the bodies and they were buried, after the prescribed waiting period, at the expense of Dullingswirth. A carpenter in the neighboring hamlet of Wessex received the contract for the coffins.

(Continued from page 26)

and grasped Andrea's arm. Sari choked and sobbed as they rushed toward the door.

"Down! Downstairs! Get the police!" Sam said swiftly. He gave her a push, then turned back into the room. Gargott had dropped the knife. Sam snatched it up. Sari broke away from Gargott's grasp for a moment and stumbled across the room. Gargott lumbered after her.

Sam leaped, driving the knife downward into Gargott's shoulder. Gargott staggered to a halt. His body shook heavily and a rumbling sound of pain grew from his throat. An expression of glazed recollection came across his face.

"Knife . . . Lisbon . . . So long ago . . ." His glazed stare focused on Sari again. His lips struggled. "Lisbon . . ."

She screamed and fought to open the glass doors. Gargott began to stumble after her. Sam leaped at his back, tried to seize his throat. The immense arms hurled him off and Gargott plodded on, tractor-like. Sari's screams were an unceasing torrent of hysteria. She threw the door open and fled out onto the terrace. Gargott swelled through the doorway and staggered after her. Sam made a last desperate effort. Gargott did not feel his blows. He reached a last time. Sari screamed in the wildness of horror, then in mid-scream her voice broke. She swayed backward. For an instant Sam looked into her eyes and saw the black starkness of death; then she toppled across the terrace wall.

Gargott sagged over the wall and stared down. "Lovely . . . Love . . ." Then his massive muscles seemed to melt. His head sagged and his knees went down and his fingernails slid off the bricks with a rasping sound and he lay still, looking up into the sunlight.

Sam closed his eyes and leaned back against the door.

A sad and lonely voice murmured beside him. "Knives," Sylvia said. "There were knives in Lisbon so long ago. Maybe they're gone now."

"Yes. Gone now," Sam said. He heard footsteps and slowly turned to face Andrea. "Gone now," he repeated. "It's over."

He wondered, and then he was sure: The glow of life grew slowly in her eyes.

THE END

TIME OUT OF MIND

(Continued from page 38)

And that brings us up to today, Kitty. To this moment, almost. To this hospital where I'm in a room and you're in another room right down the corridor from me. They've told me you're going to be okay, but neither of us can be up and around for a while, so I'll have to write to you.

A couple of boys found us, Kitty. They'd been out crabbing in the bayou near the Collins place and heard the gunfire. Janice was all right and there's a chance she might even recover her mind some day.

Rand was dying when they found him. And that it the point I've been working toward, Kitty. He knew he was going and was afraid. He told them everything. There was a reason for his kind of fear when we burst in the old Collins house, Kitty. It was the fear of a murderer and a coward. You see, you never killed anyone. You only saved a life, Janice's. If you hadn't stopped him, he would have killed her sooner or later, just as he had his first wife.

That was the reason for his fear. He'd killed his first wife and made you think you did it, Kitty, to keep you in line, to keep you from questioning *his* actions too closely on the day of his first wife's death.

So now I am almost through writing, Kitty. But there is one thing I want you to do. When you have read this, burn it. And as it burns, let the nightmare of these years burn out of your mind along with it. Let it burn out forever, darling, and close the chapter tight.

For there is a new chapter just beginning, and I give you my pledge that it will be a bright one.

(Continued from page 62)

talk like I'd probably kill her. So by the time I let her go, she'd have learned her lesson and be afraid to blackmail me any more.

"Only, Saturday she got off the bed in there, and she found a match and started a fire of some papers on the floor. She tried to burn the clothesline off her wrists. Her sleeves caught fire, and she was in bad shape when I got here. She was half-crazy, out of her head, so I couldn't turn her loose. I had to kill her. That was the only way, it looked to me."

Harnell Smith almost gagged, listening to it. But then, he wasn't surprised, either. A cop has to take crime the way it comes—and take a murder like this one. He was certainly not going to wind up holding any sweet-smelling flower in his fist. Murder cases always leave a bad taste in a man's mouth, and he hadn't expected this one to be an exception.

Look what kind of a case it'd been! The one man in the little, lonely office trying to reach down into the gleaming, glittering, swirling city and pick out a killer . . . . What was he going to get on the baited hook he dropped into the city, night after night? He was bound to get the one, particular, warped newspaper reader among all the newspaper readers—the particular one and only egomanic who was bound to gulp the bait, hook, line, and sinker—the whole works.

He yanked the shrinking killer from the chair. "Okay, come on! Remember, I said I'd print your picture on the front page? You've got a date to keep with a Headquarters' police photographer."

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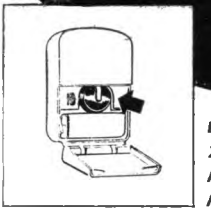

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