

SPICY MYSTERY ★

25c

STORIES
for NOV



**SUMMONS
for SATAN**

by C. A. M. Donne

READ THESE 8 True Experiences of Men I Trained at Home For RADIO



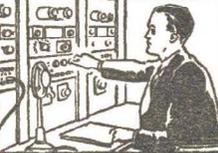
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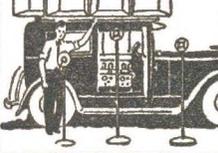

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Almost every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets showing how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send

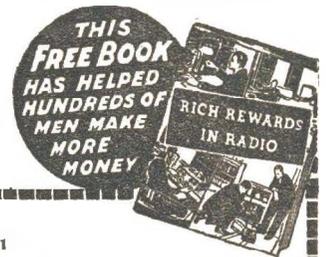
plans and ideas that made good spare time money for hundreds. I send Special Equipment to conduct experiments, build circuits, get practical experience. I GIVE YOU A COMPLETE, MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL WAVE, ALL PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT TO HELP SERVICE SETS QUICKER—SAVE TIME, MAKE MORE MONEY.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 7MX1, Washington, D. C.



J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7MX1
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

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SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

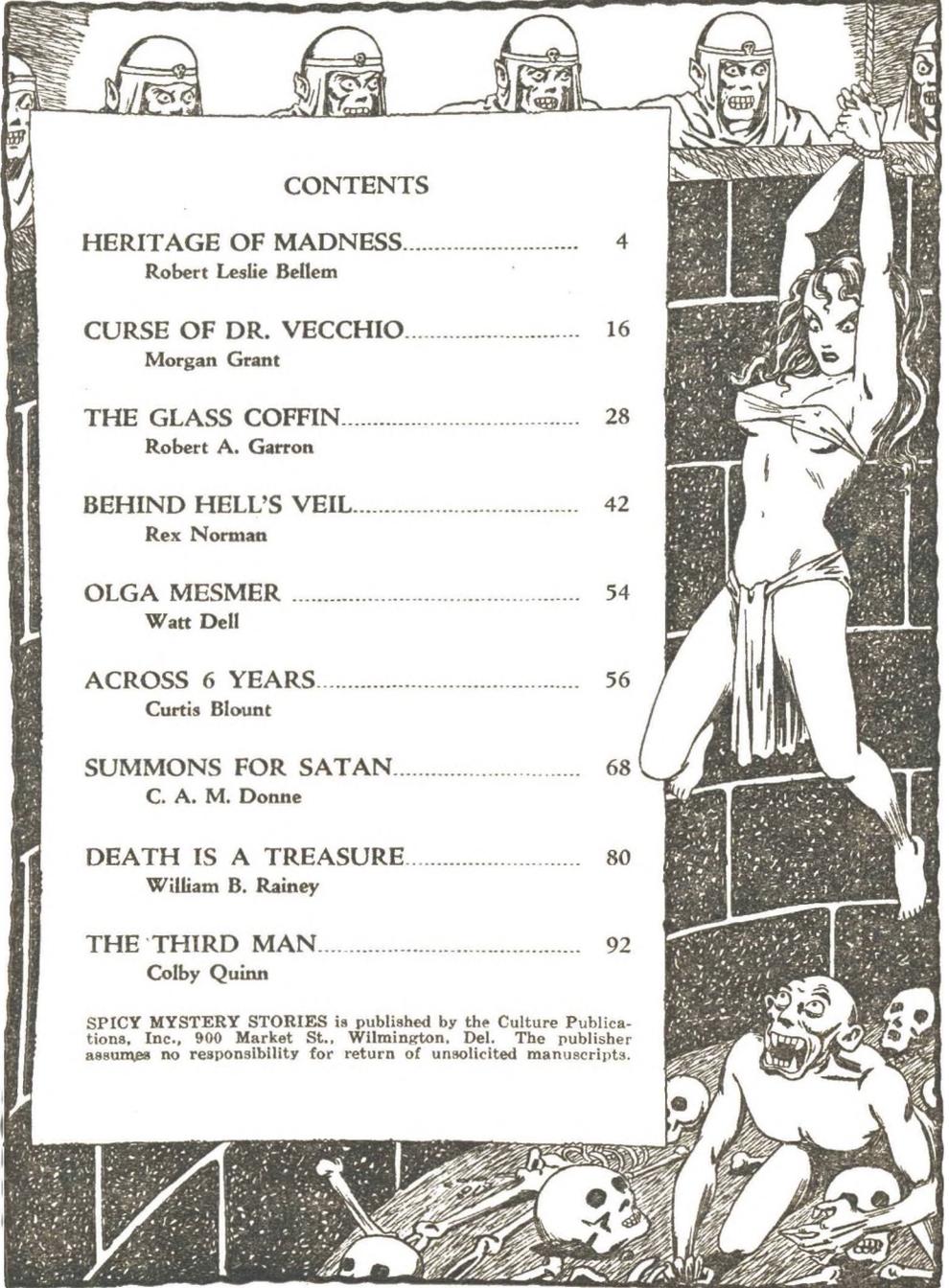
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NEARLY LOST GIRL

HE GOT SO
SKINNY AND
PEPLESS

then he gained
15 LBS. QUICK
and beat his rivals out—



Walter
Schoendaller

"A bad sickness robbed me of weight and left my skin in a horribly blotchy condition. I lost all my old-time pep, and when I did go out I noticed that my girl friend seemed to enjoy dancing with the other fellows more than with me. We used to quarrel about it and almost broke up several times. Then I started taking Ironized Yeast. In almost no time I began to fill out. I gained 15 lbs. in 10 weeks. My skin cleared up too, and all my old pep came back. I'm not worrying about rivals any more and I thank Ironized Yeast."

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New IRONIZED YEAST tablets give thousands 10 to 25 lbs.—Quick!

NOW thousands of skinny, rundown men and women can say goodbye to unsightly bones, certain skin eruptions and lack of pep, which rob them of natural attractiveness and friends. For with this new easy treatment hosts of people have put on normal good-looking pounds, cleared their skin naturally, and gained new strength—in just a few weeks!

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Why they build up so quick

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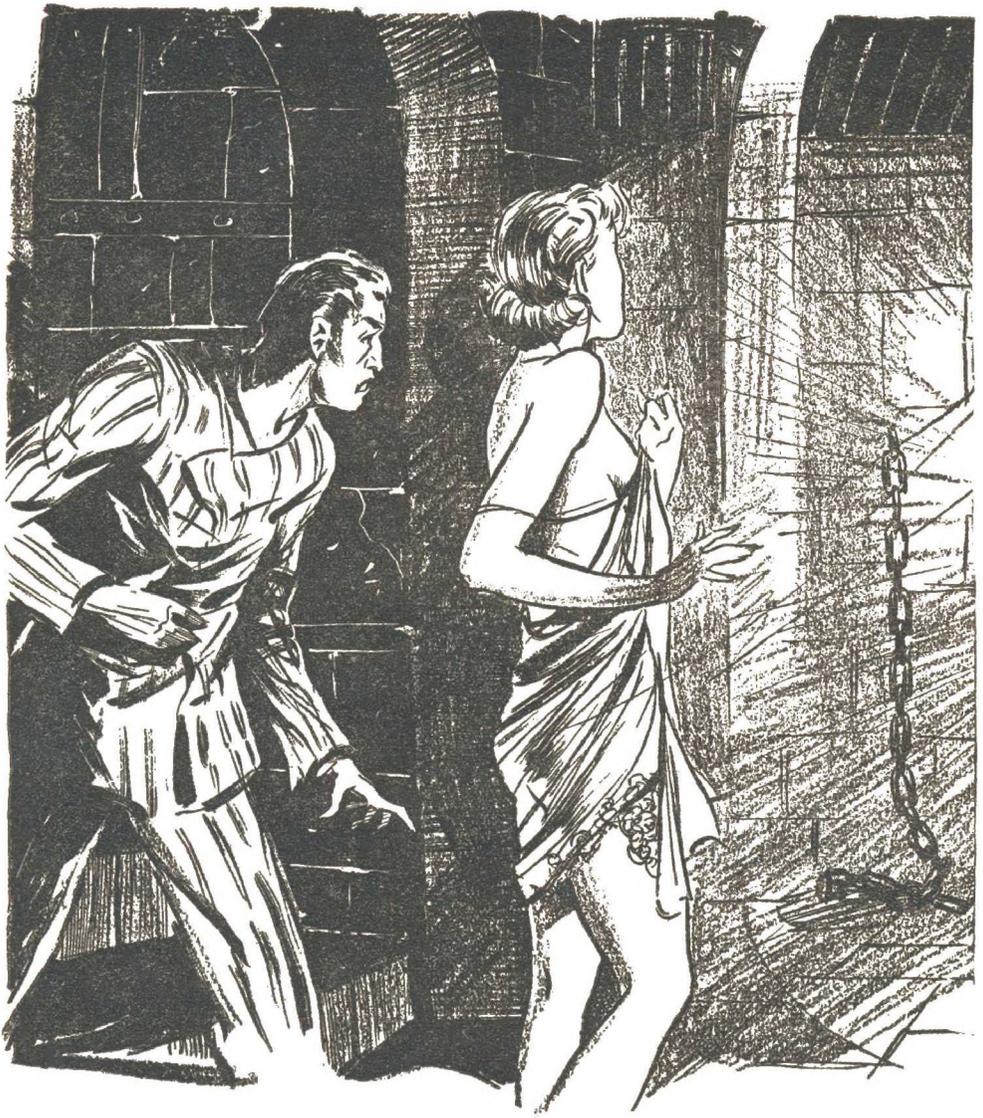
If, with the very first package of Ironized Yeast, you don't begin to eat better and to get more enjoyment and benefit from your food—if you don't feel better, with more strength, pep and energy—if you are not absolutely convinced that Ironized Yeast will give you the pounds of normally attractive flesh you need—your money will be promptly refunded. So get Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today.

Special FREE offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 10211, Atlanta, Ga.

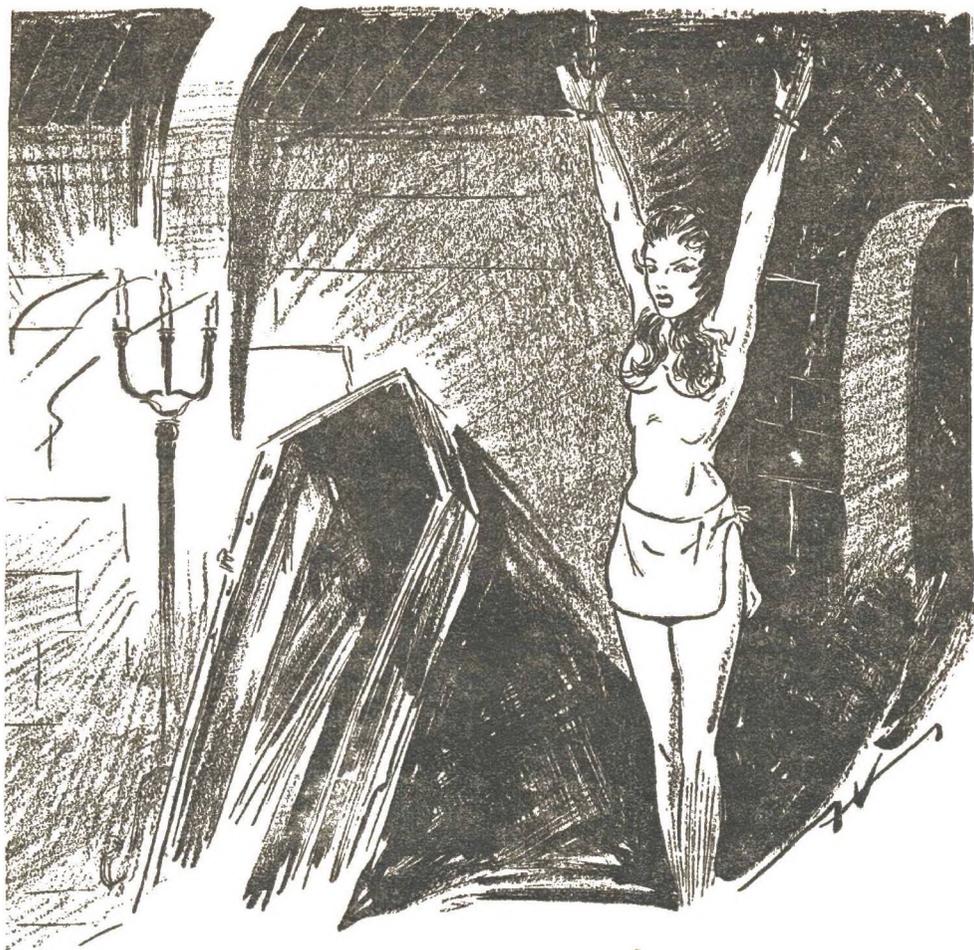
WARNING: Beware of the many cheap substitutes for this formula. Insist on the genuine Ironized Yeast.

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professional
models



HERITAGE of MADNESS

For three hundred years the curse had persisted, and still Elaine could not picture her husband as a spiller of human blood. Yet what can she believe when he leads her to the very maw of hell through a mirror that casts no reflection.



Like a suspended statue the girl hung in mute misery, while foam bubbled at her lips.

THE LEGEND

THROUGH some freak of atmospheric circumstance, the night seemed bathed in greenish light. It seeped through Rex Bardwell's open window; fell across the lovely face of Elaine, his golden-haired bride.

He stirred fitfully; opened his eyes. As wakefulness came to him, he beheld the moon greenly riding the somber sky. For some reason, he shuddered—although the August night was warm.

Queerly, it seemed that some presence

had been hovering close to him an instant before. Yet when he stared, he saw nothing.

He turned. Perhaps it had been Elaine, awake and moving about the room. But no. She was there beside him, peacefully asleep, with the ghost of a smile at the corners of her lips.

Watching her, he forgot all else; for a moment his uneasiness vanished. Her yellow hair was a tousled halo about the delicate oval of her face. One white arm was thrown upward; and where the covers had slipped away from her throat,

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Rex Bardwell could glimpse the rounded contours of her body.

Her night-gown of fragile crepe de chine clung as if it were a part of her to the mounds of her breasts, enticingly feminine as they rose and fell in rhythm with her soft breathing. With gentle fingers, Bardwell touched her cheek. She sighed a little, in her sleep.

And then—

HE tensed. Again there came to him an eerie sensation that he and Elaine were not alone. He thought he heard a sound, somewhere close at hand. It was not the creaking of woodwork in the ancient house; not the scampering of rats behind the wainscoting. It was more like the steady tread of ghostly feet. . . .

With unaccountable dread, Bardwell sprang to his feet. As he stood upright the sounds now seemed to arise from the hall just beyond the room's closed door. A vague puzzlement laid hold of him; he could not understand his own fears. Moving noiselessly, so that Elaine would not waken, he stepped out into the corridor.

"Jason!" he whispered in surprise.

A queer figure was slowly moving toward him; an old man in dressing-gown and nightcap. It was the Bardwell family servant, Jason Moone. He was carrying a flickering candle, and his movements seemed stealthy—almost furtive.

At sight of his master, Jason's pallid face grew expressionless. A characteristic trait, that mask of immobility. Once the servant had been a character-actor. Even after thirty years, he still possessed a weird control over his facial muscles. But nothing could hide the strange glitter that made his eyes seem almost reptilian.

"Jason!" Bardwell said again.

"Yes, sir?"

"What are you doing here? Is anything wrong?"

The servant's answer had a sonorous resonance. "Nothing is wrong, sir . . . yet."

"What do you mean, 'yet'?"

Jason's tongue licked snakily at his lips. "Do you happen to remember what month this is, Mr. Rex?"

"Why, of course. It's August."

"Ah, yes, sir. August."

"What of it?" Bardwell demanded impatiently.

"August, sir. . . . And tonight is the night of the full moon. You'll be remembering the Bardwell legend, Mr. Rex."

"Shut up, you fool!" Bardwell rasped.

BUT Jason went on, as if he had not heard the interruption. "In every generation for the past three hundred years, a Bardwell has gone insane on the night of the August full moon. The spirit of the first Bardwell who lost his mind on this night, returns and takes possession of the body of a living descendant. And then *human blood is spilled!*"

Rex Bardwell felt cold terror probing into his soul. Not because of the legend; but because of the weird timbre to Jason Moone's voice. He shook himself savagely to throw off this sensation of dread.

"Don't be a damned fool, Jason!" he snapped irritably. "There's nothing to that superstitious drivel. I'm not afraid of old Ben Bardwell's ghost entering my body, turning me into a killer."

Jason seemed apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir, if I've disturbed you. I wanted only to protect you from anything that might happen."

"Protect me? From a ghost?"

Then the servant revealed what he held in his left hand; a sprig of dried mistletoe. "I was going to fasten this to your door, sir. Evil spirits cannot enter a room where mistletoe hangs."

"Rot!" Bardwell grated, feeling him-

self filled with an anger oddly foreign to his usual disposition. "Go back downstairs to your quarters and go to sleep! If I hear any more of your nonsense, you'll be looking for another job!"

He was sorry, the moment the words sprang from his lips. He had not intended being so gruff with poor old Jason. After all, the man had been a faithful servitor for thirty years. He was entitled to his superstitions.

But it was too late for apology. The servant had already turned away, making no answer as he descended the staircase to the lower regions of the gloomy house.

As the candle-light died down the steps, Rex Bardwell clenched his fists until the nails dug into his hard palms. Why had he spoken so sharply to Jason? It was almost as if some other brain had given volition to the words.

God! he thought. Could it be true? Could another soul disposses his own, force him to do things beyond his own control?

Something interrupted his thoughts in the darkness: the sound of a door opening. He turned, saw his younger brother Stanley in the glow of a night-light.

"What's wrong, Rex?" came the whispered question.

Bardwell went into his brother's room for a moment. "Not a thing, Stan," he forced a grin. "Just some of Jason's delusions."

BIRTH OF TERROR

IN the main bedchamber, Elaine Bardwell sat up as her husband re-entered. The moon's green light fell upon his features as he came toward her; and suddenly, without knowing why, she was afraid. . . !

He seemed so strange, so evil! But that was only an illusion, she tried to tell herself. It was a trick of the moonlight.

She tried to smile, although it cost her an effort. "Rex, dearest," she held out her arms to him.

His embrace drew her close. "Elaine! You're awake?"

"Y-yes. I woke up when you first went out of the room a while ago. And . . . oh, darling, I—I heard what Jason said—"

He stiffened, scowled. "You heard? I'll discharge Jason for that, tomorrow! I never wanted you to learn."

She stared at him. It seemed odd for him to show bitterness toward anyone; toward Jason especially, who had served the family so long and faithfully. "Rex!" she stirred uneasily against him.

He stroked her hair. "Surely you're not taken in by such tommyrot? That Bardwell family superstition—it's just an old wives' tale. I told Stan the same thing a minute ago. Forget it, my dearest. Kiss me."

She gave him her parted red lips; but there was a queer reluctance within her heart as she felt his mouth pressed upon hers. Never before had his kisses chilled her this way. At the touch of his fondling hands upon her shoulders, she shivered.

He seemed to sense her disquiet. "Elaine!" he whispered sharply as he crushed her in his arms. "You're acting damned upset. Almost as if you didn't want me to be near you!"

"N—no," she lied. "Th—that isn't so, Rex."

To prove it, she cuddled closer against him; ignored it when one shoulder-strap of her night-gown fell low over her arm, so that the upper halves of her breasts were bared to the moonlight and to his hungry eyes.

SHE was very lovely. Her bosom was snowy, with a texture finer than the softest silk. The moonlight accentuated the shadowed valley of it, and the sheer-

ness of the clinging crepe de chine lent added enticement of her charms.

The lure of her femininity seemed to make Rex almost brutal. When he kissed her again, his mouth was fierce against her lips, bruising them. His fingers sank into her yielding flesh, hurting her.

He had never acted that way before. Always he had been tender. But now she suppressed a moan as his hard hands held her. When she saw the gleam in his eyes, boring into her own, it seemed almost that he was a changeling; that some other soul had taken possession of him, rendering him bestial and repulsive.

She remembered a faded portrait in the parlor downstairs: a picture of his ancestor, Ben Bardwell, who had lost his reason three centuries ago and slain two people before committing suicide. She recalled the eyes of that painting—eyes that held a yellowish inner flame, exactly as Rex's eyes now gleamed as they probed into her brain. . . .

Merciful God! she thought. Could the ancient legends be true? Had the evil spirit of Ben Bardwell, dead these three hundred years, returned to inhabit the body of her husband, the man she loved?

But that was absurd, she tried to make herself believe. Rex's changed appearance was only a malicious trick of the green moonlight. He was himself, surely, even though his eyes seemed different; even though there seemed to be a hawk-like savagery about his features. Her imagination was playing tricks on her!

But why was he so cruelly rough? Why were his caresses so savage, his hands so brutal? In spite of herself, she cried out as his mouth darted toward her throat.

"Rex! *Rex*—you hurting me! And your hands—you're bruising me—"

"That's because I love you so much, my dear!" he rasped. A canine grin

leaped to his lips. "You're not afraid of me?"

"N-no . . . y-yes . . . I d-don't know. . ."

"I'll teach you to have no fear of me!"

he growled. His hands clawed at the shoulder-straps of her night-dress, ripped the thin silk. He pinned his feral eyes upon her quivering beauty. He stroked her shoulders, his fingers lingered as if he had not previously known the full loveliness of her.

And even though she feared him, she knew that she could not repulse him. How strange it was that she should think of it in such terms! Always in the past she had responded ardently to his courtships. But now she had to force her arms around his neck, steel herself to his kisses, fight down her sudden terror at his roughness.

She closed her eyes. What was almost pain lanced through her. Not a physical pain, but a psychic agony that convulsed her soul and stabbed through her rebellious heart. . . .

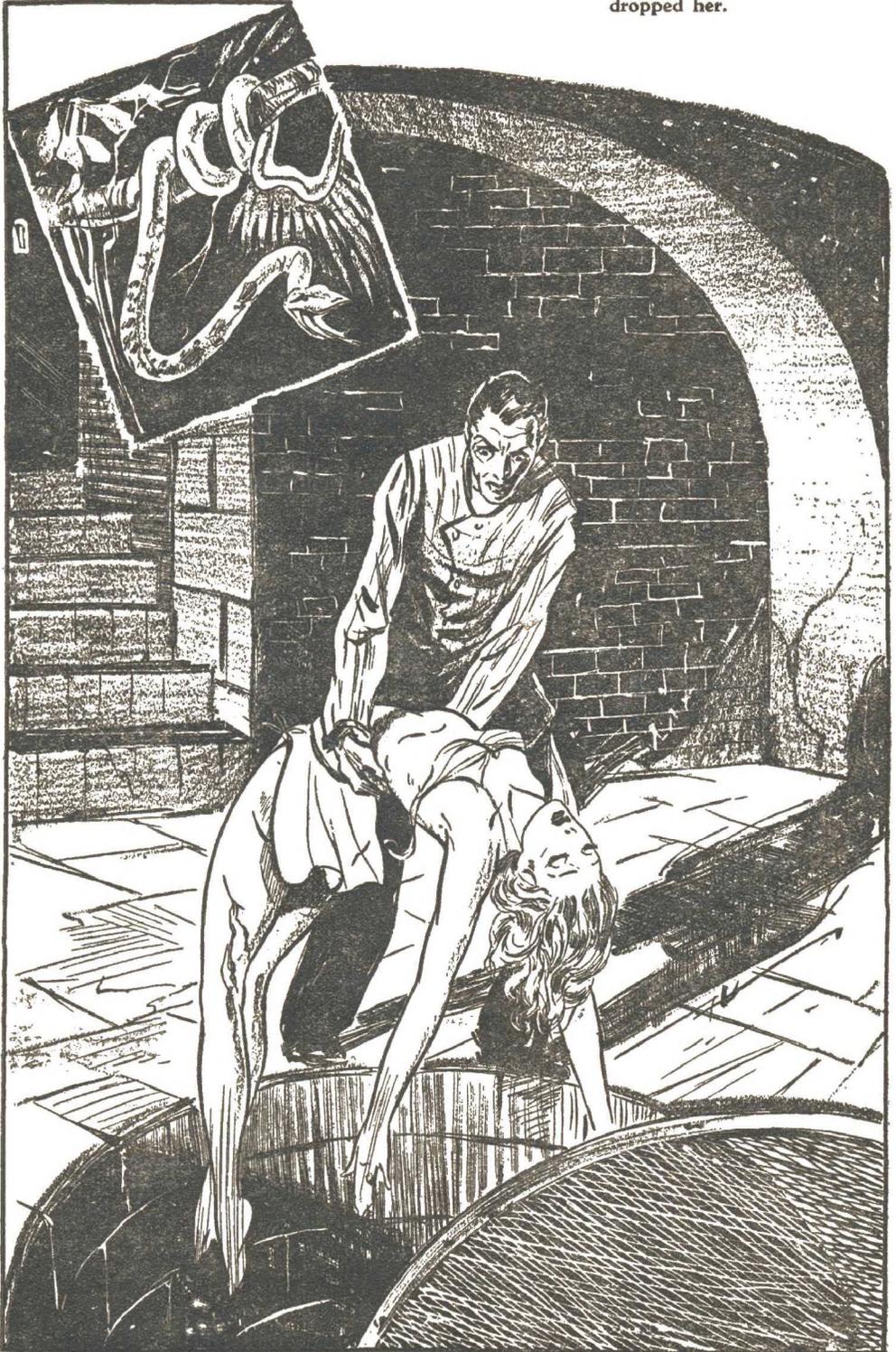
This was not her beloved Rex! This was a stranger who held her helpless! Yet in outward appearance he was Rex Bardwell. The transformation was an inner one. It was as if his soul had been ousted by some malignant fury. . . .

THEN, long moments afterward, he grew quiescent again. The evil aura that seemed to emanate from him was now less distinct. Weariness had blunted the devil that seemed to possess him.

His eyes were closed. He breathed stertorously. Green moonlight made a viscid puddle of light on his face, revealing harsh lines that Elaine had never before noticed.

She turned away from him; pretended to be asleep. Her heart thumped wildly from the experience she had just undergone; and she strove desperately to make her feigned slumber real. Perhaps sleep

He lowered her easily over the pit and callously dropped her.



would dull the memory of these past few moments. . . .

A sudden tenseness froze her.

Rex was getting up!

He was moving silently across the room, like a flitting shadow. He was stealing toward the long cheval mirror on the far wall.

Through fringing lashes, Elaine watched him. She saw him stand before the mirror. An awful horror ground her bones together. The glass was a black rectangle; and although the room was dimly lighted by the moon at the open window, *Rex cast no reflection in the mirror.*

Wide-eyed, Elaine stared. She saw her husband take another step forward—

He walked through the mirror and vanished!

CELLAR OF DEATH

AS if drawn by some hypnotic influence, Elaine arose. Stark terror grew in her mind as she saw the man she loved disappear in the looking-glass. She found herself gliding toward the black mirror in his wake.

She reached it; peered into its dark depths. Her hand fluttered to her breast to still the hammering of her heart.

She could not see herself!

Instead of her reflection, there was nothing but emptiness in front of her; a black solidity of shadows. Then, out of that emptiness, a voice whispered: "Come, Elaine. Come, my sweet bride. *Come with me into madness . . . !*"

Her husband's whisper—like the rustle of ancient parchment stirred by ghostly fingers!

She could not see him. She could see nothing but the yawning black rectangle of the mirror. Yet she sensed Rex's presence beyond it; sensed his desperate need of her.

Intuitively she knew that his very soul was crying out to her; that unless she went to him, he would be lost forever—

She stepped into the mirror. But it was not there! As if she herself were disembodied, she walked past the framework of the looking-glass; found herself in a stygian passageway. Clutching her torn night-gown together, she stumbled forward with her eyes staring sightlessly ahead.

A breeze brushed her cheek, as if she had passed by an open door. Again she moved forward, impelled by a loyalty greater than her dread.

Now her steps seemed to be inclining downward, into the bowels of the earth. Her feet encountered stone steps. She descended.

She heard a sound, far below; a faint wail of agony. A woman's cry!

But there were no other women in this somber house; none except Celeste, the French maid—the only other Bardwell servant besides Jason Moone.

Could that have been Celeste's scream? Was the maid somewhere below this secret passageway, facing some terrifying danger?

Elaine swayed; felt her senses reeling. Then to her straining ears there came again a whisper: "Come, my sweet bride. Come with me into madness. . . ."

Her husband's voice! Calling her, pleading with her, summoning her!

Strength and courage returned to Elaine. She bit her lower lip until she could taste blood. Blindly she stumbled forward and downward again.

At last she had the sensation that she was far below ground; somewhere under the mansion, in a subterranean corridor of hell. The passageway was smooth beneath her feet now, without downward incline. The dampness was a solid thing that choked her as she breathed. From overhead, water dripped like blood from

an open wound. *Drip—drip—drip. . .*

SUDDENLY there was a bend in the passage. As she turned the corner, Elaine saw a light ahead of her. She fought down her fears, moved resolutely onward. She came to a door; pushed it open.

"Oh, God—!" she gasped.

She stared into a cavernous cellar.

In a far corner, a bracket of candles flickered in an eddy of air. The walls were hewn out of sweating rock, grey and scabrous in the yellow light. Shadows danced and shuddered like living things. There was a heavy, reptilian odor everywhere.

With widened eyes, Elaine beheld a pit in the center of the cellar. It was well-like, circular, at least ten feet across. Over its top she saw a screen of heavy, meshed wire. Below that covering, she thought she heard a sound like the coiling and uncoiling of a scaly shape.

But it was not this sound that struck horror into her heart. It was something else beyond the far lip of the pit.

Celeste, the brunette French maid, was roped to a ring in the wall of rock, with her wrists drawn tightly over her head so that her bare feet scarcely touched the ground. She was nude except for a wisp of torn step-ins clinging to her ivory hips.

Like a suspended statue, the girl hung in mute misery. Her full breasts were distorted in shape by the upward pull of her straining arms. Quivers danced across her flesh as she vainly struggled to free herself.

Her shoulders and hips were lacerated and bloody from scraping against the rough wall in her efforts to secure release. Her eyes held fear-spawned madness; a frothy spew of white foam bubbled at her lips.

"Celeste!" Elaine cried out. She started toward the girl.

But before she had taken a step, she felt hard hands grasping at her. She squirmed, turned—

"*Rex!*"

His yellow eyes blazed insanely into her own. He grinned, and the mirthless twist of his cruel lips was a harrowing nightmare.

"So you have come at last, my sweet Elaine!" he chuckled. "You have decided to join me in madness!"

Elaine shrieked in a frenzy of dread. "Rex—you monster! You inhuman beast! *Let me go!*"

"Not yet, my love. Not until you have helped me placate the spirit of old Ben Bardwell. Not until you and I have joined in making a sacrifice to him, so that his curse will not fall on us. A sacrifice of *human blood!*"

She tried to struggle out of his arms. Her night-gown, already torn, was now almost completely ripped from her nubile body as she fought to free herself. But he would not let her go. He forced her into a chair; and with a length of rope he trussed her so that she could not move. The rope cut into her ankles, her wrists; and where it passed across her chest it sank cruelly into soft white flesh.

When she was completely helpless, he lifted her, chair and all, close to the yawning maw of the circular pit. She stared down through the mesh wire. A cry strangled in her throat.

In the pit's depths a huge snake undulated and writhed. A monstrous, scaly thing of terrifying aspect.

A python!

MADMAN'S WRAITH

FOR an instant, Elaine shut her eyes to the horror of that slimy thing. Then she stared at the man who was her husband, and yet who was so strangely altered. . . .

He had left her side. He was approaching the French maid. His hands were pawing at the helpless girl's lacerated sides.

"Ah-h-h-h!" he was purring. "It is too bad that you must die, my dear Celeste. But once in every generation, the spirit of Ben Bardwell returns. My madman ancestor! Tonight he inhabits the form of that snake in the pit; and he demands a human sacrifice. You shall be the sacrifice, little Celeste. Your blood and your flesh will appease my ancestor's hunger!"

"*Non! Non!*" the French girl screamed.

"Ah, but yes. It must be so. Yet I am reluctant to deliver you into the jaws of death until you have known the pleasures of life. . . . So I am going to be good to you, little Celeste—before I send you tumbling into Hell!"

Strapped to her chair, Elaine realized what he meant. Glassily, she watched.

She saw Celeste being untied, thrown heavily to the dank floor of the cavern. She saw her husband's mouth seeking the pinioned girl's frothy lips. . . .

That kiss was a torturing nightmare. And what followed was sheer, demoniac madness.

Celeste squirmed and screamed, but it did her no good. The hands that clawed at her were ruthlessly implacable. The fingers that gouged into her flesh were bestial instruments of pain-dealing. . . .

THE maid was still senseless when Bardwell picked her up and carried her to the brink of the pit. He kicked aside the mesh-wire covering.

Elaine felt nausea seeping into her soul. "Rex—no—don't! For God's sweet sake, don't throw her to that snake—!"

But he seemed not to hear. Laughing ferociously, he lowered the French girl over the lip of the pit. Callously he

dropped her. Then he replaced the wire top.

Staring down through the heavy mesh, Elaine beheld a sickening horror. The huge python coiled its length about Celeste's body. Its scaly form wrapped loop after loop around its unconscious victim. Then the coils began to constrict.

Crunch—snap—crunch of human bones. Dull, explosive *plop* of bursting flesh. Viscera being horribly squeezed. . .

And then—

Suddenly, there came a hoarse bellow from the underground vault's entrance. A thunder of footfalls. A roaring challenge of rage.

Elaine squirmed against her fetters, turned her head. She saw someone leaping toward her—

A man—

Her husband!

But how could that be, in God's name? What madness was this? Rex was here by her side, at the edge of the pit. Or rather, a man who bore Rex's features, although a strange, evil soul glittered from the windows of his feral eyes.

Then how could this newcomer be Rex? *How could there be two of the same man?*

In some manner, Elaine knew instinctively that the one who came leaping toward her was the real Rex. She could sense it, with her woman's intuition. New fear throttled her throat. If the newcomer was the real Rex, then this other man was something more than human.

And how could her husband triumph over a devil from beyond the grave?

Rex—the real Rex, who had just appeared—smashed himself at his counterpart; wrapped sinewy fingers about the other's throat.

"Damn you to everlasting hell!" he panted. "I know you in spite of your disguise, you fiend! You knocked me unconscious with a blow on the head.



And when I was senseless, you made up your face to look like me! You went into my room, lured Elaine down into this secret cellar of the house! I found the hidden passageway behind that damned mirror that swings aside—”

On her chair, trussed and helpless, Elaine went white. Now she understood everything. The man who had returned to her room had not been Rex! That was why she had sensed the change in him; why she had felt his evil aura. And—oh, God!—she remembered with horror all that had happened. . . !

REX and his double were still locked in savage combat at the pit's edge. “You monster!” Rex snarled as his fingers tightened about his adversary's gullet. “You've been Celeste's lover for a long time. You were tired of her. You saw a chance to kill her and pin the crime on me!”

They swayed dangerously close to the pit. Elaine screamed.

Rex went on: “You had that snake ready here. You lured Celeste down to her doom. Then you tricked my wife here to witness your crime! If I hadn't regained consciousness and found the way here, Elaine would have thought that I was a murderer! Her testimony would have sent me to an asylum—because of our family legend! Then you'd have had Elaine for yourself—you've been casting eyes at her for weeks. . . .”

The two men swayed closer to the pit. Somehow, the wire covering became dislodged. One of the combatants slipped at the edge of the yawning orifice. Shrieking, he went tumbling downward—

“God in heaven!” Elaine screamed. “Rex—*Rex*—!”

But it was not her husband who had toppled into the maw. It was the other man—the one who had impersonated him.

And now, in the depths of the hole, she saw the huge serpent writhe its coils about a new victim—

She saw the dying man's contorted face change its appearance. Wide-eyed, horrified, she looked into the twisted features of *Stanley Bardwell, her husband's younger brother!*

And even as her reeling brain realized the truth, someone else rushed into the subterranean chamber. It was Jason Moone, the old family servant.

Jason leaped to the pit's mouth. “Look, Mr. Rex!” he cried. “It's true! The Bardwell legend! The evil spirit of old Ben Bardwell came back to inhabit a Bardwell of this generation and transform him into a murderous madman—just as I told you!”

They stared down. Elaine went limp at this crowning horror. Young Stanley Bardwell was dead, crushed in the coils of the python. And issuing from his bloody lips, she saw an ectoplasmic substance *that gradually assumed shape!*

The stuff seemed viscid at first. Then it solidified—and became the wavering wraith of a man.

The wraith of Ben Bardwell, whose portrait hung in the parlor of the mansion! Ben Bardwell, dead three hundred years, and now returned from the grave!

No wonder young Stanley's face had altered, taken on an impenetrable disguise. It had been no trick of make-up. It had been the soul of his madman ancestor inhabiting his body—the ancestor who looked exactly like Rex!

And now the solid specter was crawling up from the pit. Curses bellowed from his throat. “Damn ye! Damn all of ye! Ye thought to keep me from the blood I wanted—but ye failed! Two of 'em I killed tonight—the girl and Stan. An' I'll do for the rest of ye before I leave—!”

Rex Bardwell hurled himself forward.

"You fiend—I'll put an end to you—"

"Ye can't harm me, ye fool! Ye can't harm a man already dead these three centuries an' more! Come on, if ye like. I'll taste your blood!" the wraith challenged fiercely. "An' when I'm done with ye, I'll sample your wife's kisses. . . !"

IT was Jason Moone who interrupted. He tottered against Rex, shoved him aside. Then, unexpectedly, he stretched out his hand. Clutched in his fingers was a sprig of dried mistletoe—the same sprig he had wanted to fasten over Rex's bedroom door, earlier tonight.

He threw the twig straight at Ben Bardwell's ghost.

There came a flash of blinding flame; an acrid, putrescent puff of smoke. And when the noxious billow had cleared, the demon-spector of Rex's ancestor had vanished.

Jason turned to his master. "He'll

never return again, sir. Mistletoe destroys any evil spirit it touches."

Rex gulped spasmodically. "Thank you, Jason, old friend." Then he turned to Elaine, untied her, lifted her unclad body into his arms. "My dear—my dearest dear!" he whispered tenderly. "The Bardwell legend is ended. There will be no more madness, no more unhappiness for us. . . ."

She tried to draw away. "But—but Rex, darling. Tonight, when you were unconscious, Stanley came into my room. Only it wasn't really Stanley; it was Stan's body inhabited by that evil thing. . . . In the moonlight, I thought it was you. He. . . ."

Rex enfolded her gently. With his lips he stopped the words that faltered on her tongue. His chest mashed her rounded breasts as he strained her against himself. Then when he had kissed her, he looked into her eyes. "We'll never mention it again, my sweet," he whispered.

They started up the secret staircase.

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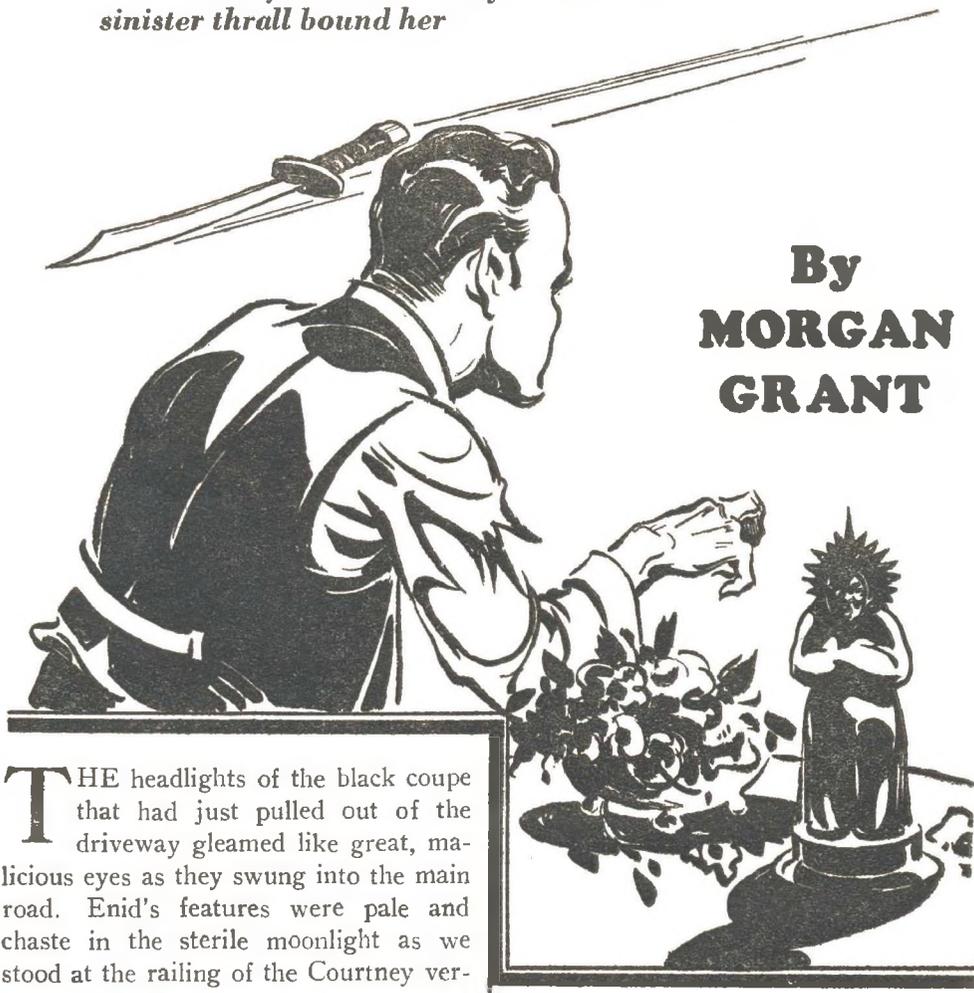
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COMING SOON!

• Curse of • Dr. Vecchio

The girl's own danger was not the worst thing her sweetheart feared. Even more ominous was the fact that she defended the very man whose sinister thrall bound her



By
**MORGAN
GRANT**

THE headlights of the black coupe that had just pulled out of the driveway gleamed like great, malicious eyes as they swung into the main road. Enid's features were pale and chaste in the sterile moonlight as we stood at the railing of the Courtney veranda.

For a moment I watched the gentle rise and fall of her breasts beneath the bodice of her printed silk frock. She wore almost nothing under the dress and the material fell caressingly about

her molded curves.

"I don't like that man," I said quietly.

She stiffened. "That's no reason for being rude and insulting. No matter



The steel bladed dagger whizzed over my shoulder, missed my neck by a hair's breadth.

what you think, Dr. Vecchio is a gentleman!"

I looked at her questioningly. There was something in the timbre of her voice, something in her manner, that frightened me. It wasn't the first time we had differed about Dr. Arturo Vecchio, but Enid had never before gone to the psychiatrist's defense with such fervor. I stepped closer to her, gripped her



arms.

"Have you lost all sense of proportion, Enid? Does this man Vecchio mean more to you than I do? *You* know why I don't like him. I don't like him because I don't trust him! I watched

him while he was talking tonight. I watched his hands and his eyes. His fingers are like little snakes. When he looked at you, he was mentally tearing the clothes off your body and leering at you."

THE brilliant ripple of her forced laugh penetrated me like a sliver of cold steel. She leaned back and her alabaster throat was a gentle curve from her chin to where her breasts began to swell deliciously. All I could think of at the moment was Dr. Vecchio's moist lips kissing that throat; his thin, white fingers touching ever so lightly the lush loveliness of her.

"I don't want you to see him again, Enid! What do you know about the man except that he's *supposed* to be a Viennese psychiatrist? Why did he come here? What sort of black magic is he practicing in the old Kendall house on the hill?"

Again she laughed, and again the sliver of steel knifed me. "Roger, you become more amazing every moment. The Ridges met Dr. Vecchio in New York. There's no mystery about it. He wanted a quiet place to carry on some psychiatric studies, and Walter Ridge suggested the Kendall home. I suppose you read something into that, too, because Walter is fighting you for the State Comptroller'ship. What's come over you, Roger? You were always so sane and logical."

She swayed closer to me and I could feel the warm, globular softness of her breasts. Her lips touched my mouth and their sweet moistness brought heady intoxication. I tightened my arm about her waist, drew her closer. The very barrier that had raised itself between us made me more eager to hold her inescapably. If Vecchio so much as laid a finger on her, he would be courting death. She was mine; all mine—every lovely, adorable inch of her.

She drew away gently. "You'd better go now, Roger. It's late, and you have a speech to prepare."

THE speech I had to write could be put off until tomorrow. There was something much more important that had to be settled in my own mind. I stepped on the starter, threw the car into gear, and headed for the Kendall place. I knew that Walter Ridge had probably arranged for Dr. Vecchio to occupy it at no cost, since it had reverted to the county for non-payment of taxes. If he had, it was the least of his malfeasances while in office. Neither he nor any one else in his political setup made any secret of the fact that he used the State Comptroller'ship to further his own financial and political ends.

But the worm had turned. I had in my safe at home enough evidence of Walter Ridge's dishonesty in office to kill him politically despite the powerful machine behind him. It was only a matter of presenting it to the voters—and that was coming.

I reached the fork in the turnpike, took the dirt road that wound up through the hills to the gloomy house on the cliff top. It stood, dark and dismal, its black-shuttered windows staring down at the bright red and green roofed houses in the valley. A hundred yards from the Kendall place, I killed the lights, pulled over to the side, parked. All the windows, save one on the lower floor, were dark, and only chinks of light escaped there.

I approached quietly, conscious of the accelerated beat of my heart. I had seen nothing and heard nothing, but the very atmosphere was macabre. Somewhere off in the distance an owl hooted, and a cold shiver ran up my spine. A twig snapped under my foot, and the sound magnified, resembled the crack of a pistol.

I reached the lighted window, flattened myself against the weatherbeaten

side of the house. A rotted shingle crumbled under my shoulder. The odor of decomposed wood sickened me. It must have been alive with ants and termites. I felt something crawling over my neck, brushed it away.

I heard voices. First a man's voice and then a woman's. Down on one knee, I peered through a crack in the shutter and saw a young woman stretched out on a plush divan, her bare right arm hanging limply to the floor. She was fully clothed but the front of her dress gaped open. I could glimpse the net of her brassiere cups.

In profile she seemed familiar. I knew those blood-red pouting lips and that sensuous, wide-nostriled nose. She turned her head. My heart leaped to my throat. It was Lynn Ridge, Walter Ridge's wife!

Her lips moved and I heard her deep, throaty voice, but it was impossible to make out what she was saying. She beckoned with her outstretched hand. The next moment, Dr. Vecchio crossed in front of the window and seated himself beside her on the couch. The light from the fire danced on his thin, swart cheeks and high forehead, made his black mustache and goatee glisten. He leaned over, kissed Lynn Ridge full on the mouth. His white fingers seemed boneless. They moved up her supple arms, caressing her gently. Arturo Vecchio was adept at the things that please women. Lynn Ridge tensed under the stroking of his hands.

As I looked on, I could imagine Enid in Lynn's position. The vision chilled me. Evidently, I had been right about Dr. Vecchio. I swore to myself that he would never set foot in the Courtney home again. Now, if Enid wanted a reason for my stand in the matter, I could give her one; a very definite one.

I BACKED away from the window, turned and started for the car. But the moon had dipped behind a cloud and the darkness was impenetrable to my eyes. Suddenly, I tripped, stumbled, fell forward. There was a crash and a metallic clatter. I had overturned a wheelbarrow full of garden instruments. I picked myself up, but not before a light flashed on under the driveway portico. The front door of the old mansion creaked open and a giant of a man stepped out. He saw me before I could move. I chose the lesser of two evils, approached the portico.

As I drew close, I saw that he was either an Arab or a Hindu almost seven feet tall, with huge, ox-like shoulders. He glared down at me, his massive arms hanging like an ape's.

"I'm looking for Dr. Vecchio," I said tremulously.

His dark face was devoid of expression. He turned, stepped into the house. Long moments passed before Vecchio himself, appeared in the doorway. The psychiatrist's beady eyes lit up.

"Ah, I did not expect the honor of a call," he said. His voice was smooth, oily, with just the faintest trace of an accent.

"I'd like a few minutes with you," I said. "Alone."

He saw me glance at the towering Hindu. "This is Ali, my attendant," he said. "He neither speaks nor understands your language. Come in, please."

I followed him into the house. There was an odor of dampness and decay. The dim light from an orange bulb in the cavernous foyer threw gaunt shadows on the high, vaulted ceiling. Vecchio mumbled something to the Hindu. He disappeared.

"An extremely faithful servant," Vecchio said. "Rather terrifying because of his size, but docile as a lamb." He

rubbed the palms of his hands together, led the way into what had once been the Kendall drawing-room but was now an empty, barn-like enclosure illumined only by a rickety, goose-neck lamp and the dancing firelight.

Lynn Ridge was seated on the couch, her slim legs crossed, the flickering flames heightening the sheen of her chiffon hose. The front of her dress was now pulled tight over her high, conical breasts. Every strand of her dark hair was in place.

"I believe you know one another," Vecchio said, smiling unctuously. "You are friendly enemies, I presume."

Lynn rose, smoothed her skirt. I could follow the outlines of her legs and thighs. "We're not enemies at all, are we, Roger?" Her smile was fixed. "Dr. Vecchio has been telling me something of his work in Vienna. Walter is speaking at the auditorium in Scottsville tonight." She turned to Vecchio. "I guess I'll be going now. I'll walk. It's a pleasant evening and I need the exercise. Good night, Roger."

Vecchio saw her to the front door, returned shortly. "Be seated," he said.

JUST looking at the man made my skin creep. He was small and mouse-like, with a head that was too large for his body. His hands were always moving, the fingers squirming like thin white worms. Looking at them I couldn't understand how even a woman like Lynn Ridge would permit him to touch her. But I had seen it with my own eyes.

"It won't be necessary," I snapped. "What I have to say won't take very long."

He shrugged, crossed over to a worm-eaten highboy, removed a decanter and two glasses. "I have some rare Arabic cordial. Would you care for some?"

"I'm not here on a social visit, Dr.

Vecchio," I said. "I came for the express purpose of telling you not to call on my fiancée, Miss Courtney, again!"

His eyebrows arched diabolically. "Rather a high-handed request, isn't it, my friend? What if I refuse?"

"You won't refuse, Vecchio." I tried to keep my voice on an even keel, fought to control myself. I was itching to smash a fist into his weaselish face.

He poured a thick, orange-colored cordial into one of the glasses. "I see no reason for depriving myself of Miss Courtney's charming company because of your insane jealousy." He raised the glass but the rim never reached his lips. I lunged at him, knocked it from his hand, sent it crashing to the floor.

My right fist swung at his terror-stricken face, hit him high on the cheek. Blood spurted from a gash where my signet ring cut his skin. He lurched back, smashed against the oak-paneled wall.

"I'll kill you if you step across the Courtney threshold!" I cried.

He leaned against the wall, momentarily dazed. His viperish tongue licked at a trickle of blood moving over the corner of his mouth. God only knew what was passing through his devil's mind. He wiped the back of his hand across his lips. It came away smeared with crimson.

"You'd better go," he muttered.

I heard a sound behind me, wheeled. Ali, the huge Hindu, was standing in the arched doorway, his great arms swinging menacingly, his spatulate fingers clawed. Vecchio addressed him in his native tongue. Ali nodded.

"You had better leave before I forget myself," Vecchio said. "One word is all that would be necessary to have the breath of life crushed from your body. Go!"

The Hindu stepped aside as I passed

through the archway. Vecchio followed me to the door. The feeble light in the foyer made a macabre mask of his

rutted dirt road ahead of me was blurred in the glare of the headlights. I could hear my heart beating and the pulses ticking in my temples. I blinked, shook my head, swung around a curve. Another five hundred yards and the car would be on macadam.

Suddenly something white shot out from the side of the road, loomed up in front of me. In the timeless moment



I heard her scream;
I wrenched the
wheel; but it was no
use!

face, ghastly pale save for a shimmering streak of coagulated blood running from the gash on his cheek to his receding, black-whiskered chin.

"We shall meet again, perhaps," he said, a faintly sardonic smile curling his bluish lips. "I trust the circumstances will be more favorable."

THE moon was still riding behind a bank of dark clouds when I reached the car. It was a relief to get out into the open air, away from the clammy dampness of the Kendall place. I swung around, headed down the hill toward the turnpike. For some strange reason, the

before the sole of my shoe jammed against the brake pedal I saw the ghastly, horror-twisted face of Lynn Ridge over the radiator ornament! I heard her scream, saw her throw up her arms as though to ward off the juggernaut of steel that was bearing down on her. I wrenched the wheel, but I knew it was no use. She was too close. The brakebands shrieked and the car swerved.

I closed my eyes, unable to witness the horrible impact of metal against human flesh and bone. The car skidded off the road, crashed into a high embankment. I pitched forward and my head struck the wheel.

LOW, mumbling voices penetrated the black curtain of unconsciousness. I forced my leaden eyelids open. Familiar features took shape and form above me. A black mustache and goatee, small dark eyes, the sheen of a high, hairless, forehead. Dr. Vecchio was leaning over me.

"You have suffered only a slight scalp wound," he said. "Mrs. Ridge has been seriously injured. A grave brain concussion. She will require an immediate blood transfusion. Fortunately, Ali's hearing is acute. He heard a scream from the road."

Cold sweat broke out all over my body. I sat up. "Have you called a doctor?" I gasped.

"Not yet. You realize, of course, what this means? If Mrs. Ridge should die—"

Something snapped in my head. "It was an accident!" I screamed. "Do you think I ran her down purposely?"

His voice was maddeningly calm in comparison to mine. "It doesn't matter what I think. You might have some difficulty explaining how it happened. A clear night, an open road. You see, I'm aware of the political differences between you and Mr. Ridge."

I stared at him amazed. "Do you think I'm going to let her die because of that?"

"No, hardly. However, I was about to suggest that you permit me to care for Mrs. Ridge. I have done a good deal of brain work and am better equipped to handle the case than any of your local physicians. However, the final decision rests with you. If you wish this unfortunate occurrence to become public knowledge, I should consider it my duty to inform the proper authorities of all the facts in the case."

My fingernails dug into my palms. "What are you talking about? What facts?" I was certain I detected a smug, weaselish smile curving about his lips.

"The facts as I know them," he replied. "That Mrs. Ridge left this house a few minutes before you did. That you seemed in a hurry to follow her." He stepped back from the couch. "That not only was she struck by your automobile but her physical condition shows every evidence of her having been assaulted."

I lunged at him, got my fingers around his skinny throat. With amazing strength, he tore himself loose. His face was greenish white. Ali, the giant Hindu, loomed in the doorway.

"Don't be a fool!" Vecchio snarled. "You happen to be the only one in the community who doubts my integrity. What chance will your word have against mine? If that woman dies, you will go to jail for life, maybe hang. Every moment counts."

I FELT as though I were caught in the steel jaws of a trap. God was my witness that I had done no wrong, but God could give no testimony in a court of law. This little rat of a man had me backed up against the wall of circumstance. He was right; it was his word

against mine. His voice droned in my ears.

"If she lives, nobody need ever know whose car it was. I will do this for you to show you that I bear no ill feeling, despite your opinion of me. I will do it for the sake of your fiancee."

I passed the back of my hand over my eyes. All the fight was gone out of me. I was beaten, licked. "All right. What's to be done?"

His eyes glistened. "You are being very wise. Ali will tow your car up the hill and hide it somewhere in the woods. You are much too weak to submit to a blood transfusion. I have been thinking the matter over and I suggest that you take my car and go for Miss Courtney at once. I should not think it necessary to explain any of the details to her, but I imagine she trusts you implicitly. Do you feel well enough to drive?"

My head was spinning and my body was clammy. "I—I think so."

"Good. The sooner you get Miss Courtney here, the better. There is no time to lose. Ali will bring my car to the driveway."

To this day, I marvel at how I was able to drive into the village, awaken Enid, and bring her back to the gloomy Kendall place. She begged me to tell her what had happened but I remembered Vecchio's dire admonition. Before we entered the gabled house, I took her into my arms, kissed the warm, sweet softness of her lips. I could feel the pressure of her deliciously yielding breasts. The round fullness of them against my chest gave me courage.

"Roger!" she gasped. "Tell me what it is! Maybe I can help you!"

I kissed her again, avidly, hungrily.

"Trust me, Enid," I murmured.

Vecchio was waiting for us in the living room. The fire had burned down until it was only glowing embers.

"Everything is in readiness," he said quietly. "Miss Courtney will please come with me."

He started toward a door but Enid held back. She turned suddenly, gripped my shoulders. "Roger! For God's sake, what is this madness? Why have you brought me here?"

I held her close. Again the sweet warmth of her lush figure brought comfort. "I've told you as much as I can, darling. There was an automobile accident. I want you to give some of your blood to save a life."

She trembled in my arms. She had dressed hurriedly and there was apparently little more than the ripe softness of her own body under her frock.

"Come please," Vecchio urged.

I LED Enid to the door. Her breasts were straining, pulsing, against the bodice of her frock. Swaying unsteadily, she followed Vecchio into an adjoining room. The door closed behind them.

I stepped over to the fireplace, stood with my back to it, trying to warm the chilled blood in my veins. It all seemed like a hideous nightmare. The moments dragged. A clock chimed from somewhere in the gloomy depths of the house. I thought I heard a low, quivering moan, but it may have been just a figment of my tortured mind. Dr. Vecchio stepped through the door, closed it behind him.

"There is every reason to believe that Mrs. Ridge will live," he said. "You are fortunate." He rubbed the palms of his hands together. "Miss Courtney is resting. I have given her an opiate."

He offered a cigarette from a lacquered humidor. I refused. He lit one, inhaled deeply. "You must realize," he said, "that my intentions are not entirely altruistic. I shall demand a price."

I could have throttled him with my bare hands. But I stifled my anger and thought of my position. "I'll pay your fee," I said.

Blue smoke curled up from his twisted lips. "It isn't money I want. You have become the medium through which I can repay a debt of gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Ridge. I am given to understand that you have in your possession certain documents detrimental to Mr. Ridge's political career. I want them, together with a statement in writing announcing your withdrawal from politics."

For a moment, I was stunned. His dark, beady eyes met mine unflinchingly. I could read contempt in their glittering depths.

"Do you think I'm mad?" I cried.

He shook his head slowly. "No, on the contrary, I think you are very sane. You will turn over these documents and a statement."

Every muscle in my body tightened like the strings of a violin. "Never!"

He raised his cigarette to his lips. The tip glowed as he inhaled. "I think you will," he said softly.

I tried to hang onto reason, but fire was burning in my brain. For an instant, darkness wiped him out, and then he was standing there again, a taunting, sneering smile on his lips. I lunged at him, struck with a tight clenched fist.

The blow never landed. Powerful hands gripped me from behind, pinned me as though in a vise. I struggled to free myself but the giant, Ali, swept me off the floor, held me as a terrier holds a rat.

Vecchio darted from the room, returned with a coil of rope. The Hindu swung me face down on the floor. In a moment, he had my hands tied behind me. In another moment, my body was

trussed. He rolled me over on my back. Vecchio stood over me.

"There are always, as you say, my friend, two ways to kill the cat. Now, we will try the other way." He snapped an order to Ali. The Hindu lifted me in his arms as though I were a feather pillow, followed Vecchio into the adjoining room. There, stretched out on a low couch, her supine body still except for the rhythmic rise and fall of her breasts, was Enid.

ALI propped me up in a chair. Vecchio approached the couch, touched the tips of his sensual fingers to Enid's waxen cheek. His tongue circled his thin, cruel lips. I watched his eyes run the length of Enid's figure, watched them lick at the gently tremulous curves so clearly outlined under her thin cotton dress. The blood backed up in my veins until my heart seemed about to burst. Vecchio looked over at me.

"You will see now that your suspicions regarding my intentions toward Miss Courtney were justified," he said. "I find her very lovely." He lifted Enid's arm, ran the tips of his fingers along the smooth inner surface of it. "She is so young, so soft."

I strained at my bonds, but the tight cords only cut deeper into my flesh. "I'll kill you if you touch her!" I shrieked.

Vecchio laughed mockingly. "Unfortunately, my friend, you are in no position to give orders or dictate terms." He sat down on the couch, leaned over deliberately and kissed Enid's half-parted lips. Those fine white fingers of his skimmed delicately over her throat, skirted the neckline of her frock. He sat up again. "Beautiful," he murmured liquidly. "Firm and feminine and lovely."

Again my body stiffened. The ropes

cut cruelly. From where I sat I could glimpse the milky-whiteness of Enid's thighs where her ruffled dress had crept above her knees. With each breath she took, the loose front of her dress fell open a little, bared the upper rondures of her breasts. The deep, shadowed valley between them was a tempting lure.

Vecchio's eyes swung to me again. The pupils were pin-point embers. His voice was almost dreamy! "And she shall love me, too. It will be very pleas-



As Vecchio bent over her, the Hindu held me helpless.

ant." The deadly menace returned to his voice. "And, my friend, do not forget Ali! He is quite a ladies' man himself!"

The Hindu was staring wildly at Enid's limp figure. The muscles of his brown cheeks twitched. The horrible picture of him so much as touching this helpless girl pierced my brain like a hot poker.

"No!" I screamed. "I'll give you anything you want!"

DR. VECCHIO stood before me. "The keys to your house, I presume, are in your pocket. You will tell me the combination of your safe. I have already prepared a statement which requires only your signature. You will sign it when Ali returns with the documents."

He copied down the safe combination as I gave it to him, removed the key-ring from my pocket. "You have my assurance," he said, "that once the papers are in my hands and your signature affixed to the resignation, nothing more will be said of this incident. Both you and Miss Courtney will be taken into town." He stepped out of the room. The Hindu followed.

I tried desperately to relax, to collect my scattered thoughts. Vecchio's knowledge of the evidence I had against Walter Ridge could have come only from Ridge, himself. Evidently this diabolical trap had been set for me. But what of the accident on the road? Had Lynn Ridge sacrificed herself in order to get something on me? Purposefully thrown herself in the path of my car? It seemed insanely incredible.

A soft moan brought my eyes to the bed. Enid was stirring. Her eyelids fluttered and a babble of whispered sounds escaped her lips.

"Enid!" I called huskily. "Enid!"

A shudder ran through her body as consciousness returned. She sat erect, her blue eyes staring, the pupils pin-pointed from the dope Vecchio had no doubt given her.

"Enid, this is Roger!" I gained her attention. "Don't talk," I whispered. "See if you can loosen these ropes."

She slid off the couch, swayed unsteadily as she stood erect. The bodice of her dress, torn by Vecchio, swung wide and revealed the snowy contours of her trembling breasts. She passed a hand over her forehead.

"Roger, what happened?" Her voice was strained, breathless.

"Don't talk, darling," I pleaded. "Try to free me."

She stumbled over to the chair. It seemed like hours before her trembling fingers made any headway with the intricately tied ropes. I kept my eyes glued to the door, expecting Vecchio or the Hindu to enter at any moment. But luck—for a change—was with me. Enid loosened the bonds sufficiently for me to squirm out of them. I swept her into my numb arms, kissed her full on the mouth. It was good to feel the soft warmth of her against me again.

"Wait here for me, darling," I whispered. "If I'm not back in five minutes, get to a phone and call the sheriff."

"Roger!" Her clawed fingers dug into my shoulders. "Roger, I'm afraid!"

"There's nothing to be afraid of, sweet. Just do as I say."

I OPENED the door gently, fearful lest the squeak of a hinge might ruin everything. The huge living-room was empty. The fire had died down and only a few wood embers still burned. I stepped out, treading on tiptoes. Fortunately, the flooring was heavy and solid. Even the dampness hadn't warped or loosened the boards.

I reached the dimly lit foyer, drew up as I heard the low, muted sound of voices; then the unmistakable tinkle of a woman's high-pitched laugh. A heavy oaken door leading off the foyer swung open. I ducked behind a dusty blue plush portiere just as a figure came out.

For a moment I thought I had gone mad: that my mind had cracked. There, standing in the doorway, silhouetted in the light from the room behind, was Lynn Ridge, her face bright with laughter, the front of her dress revealing the deep, narrow valley between her mature breasts! Lynn Ridge, the woman I had struck with my car! She was alive and well! Had it all been a ghastly nightmare? I stood there, rigid, uncertain of my own eyesight until I heard her speak.

"Where is the whiskey, Arturo?"

Vecchio joined her at the doorway, urged her up against the jamb. His fingers dug into her shoulders and his slim body pressed itself to hers. He was shorter than she and he had to stand on the tips of his toes to reach her lips with his hungry, quivering mouth. I could see her bosom rise with her quickened breathing as he kissed her. His hands slid down along her arms, laving their smooth nudity.

He drew his mouth away. "Must you have whiskey, beautiful one?" he murmured throatily.

She pressed her palms against his cheeks, joined her lips to his again. Vecchio stiffened, coiled his arms about her waist.

I HAD seen enough to know that it was no chimera; no mindless hallucination. Somehow, I had been tricked into believing that my car had struck and almost killed the woman who was now writhing under Vecchio's caresses. By what black magic this ebony-bearded demon had brought it about, I did not know. Of one

thing I was certain. That last horrible vision of Lynn Ridge's terror-twisted face had been no figment of my imagination. Her piercing screams, too, were stark realities. I could hear them even now, cutting against my eardrums.

But if all this were true, how was it possible for her to be quivering in Vecchio's arms, giving him her warm, damp mouth with all the abandon of the hot-blooded woman she was? There was only one way to answer the question. I stepped from behind the portiere.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Dr. Vecchio," I said.

He wheeled at the sound of my voice. In the semi-darkness his eyes gleamed like those of a lynx. I could hear his breath hissing through his nostrils. At any moment I expected forked flame to spit forth.

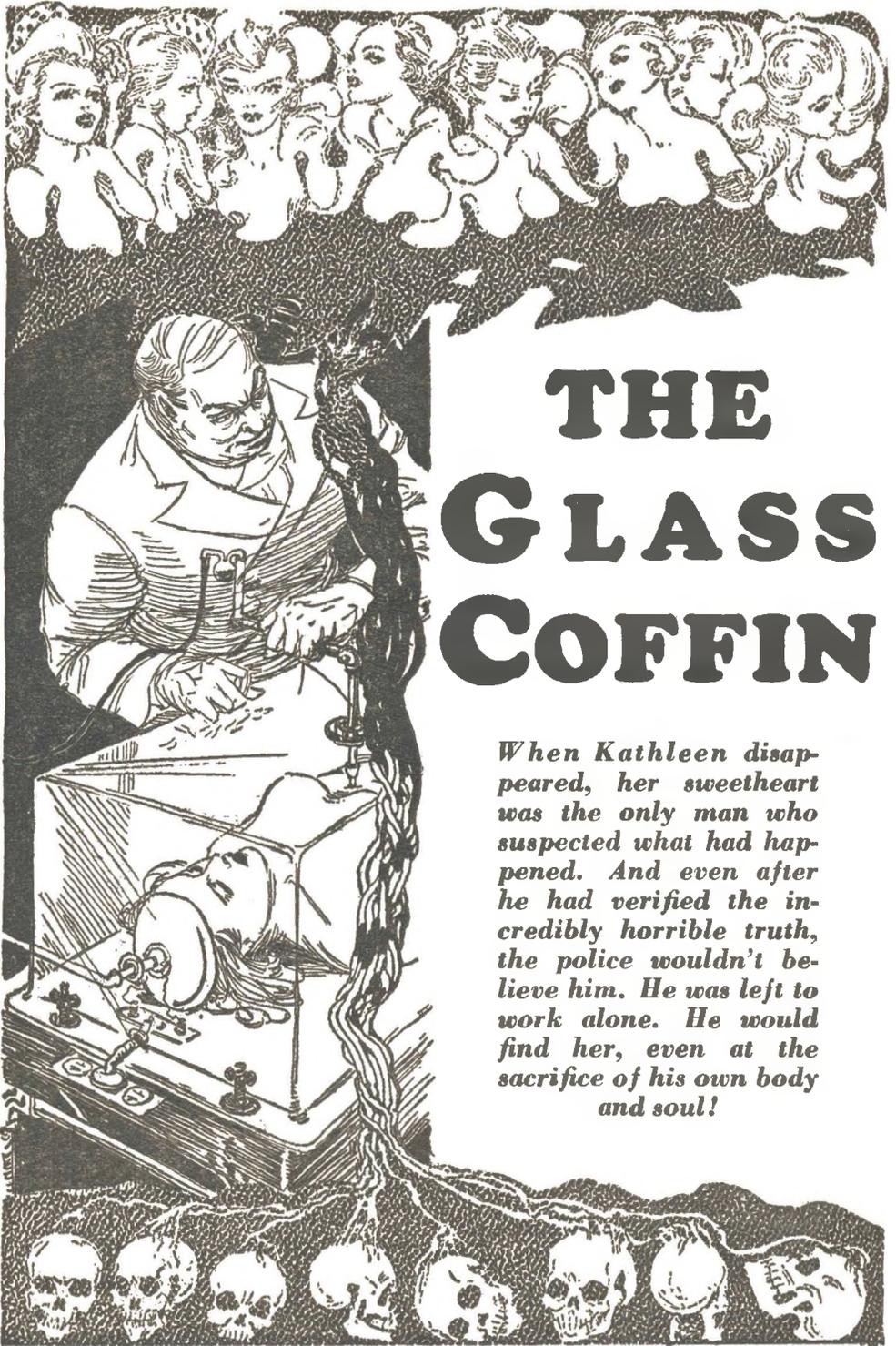
Suddenly he moved with the lightning speed of a rattler's head, darted along the foyer wall. He reached up, jerked a short, bone-handled dagger from its hanging scabbard.

"I'll run it through your heart if you lay a hand on me!" he snarled.

Out of the corner of one eye I saw Lynn Ridge move from the doorway. I side-stepped, lunged at her just as she curled her fingers about the neck of a pottery vase standing on a table. She had it half-raised to hurl at me when my fist smashed against her jaw. I pulled the punch but there was enough force behind it to send her crashing into a corner. She hit the wall, swayed momentarily, then crumpled.

The scrape of feet behind me was warning enough of Vecchio's approach. I ducked, spun around. The steel-bladed dagger whizzed over my shoulder, missed my neck by a hair's breadth. I closed with Vecchio, hurled him to the floor.

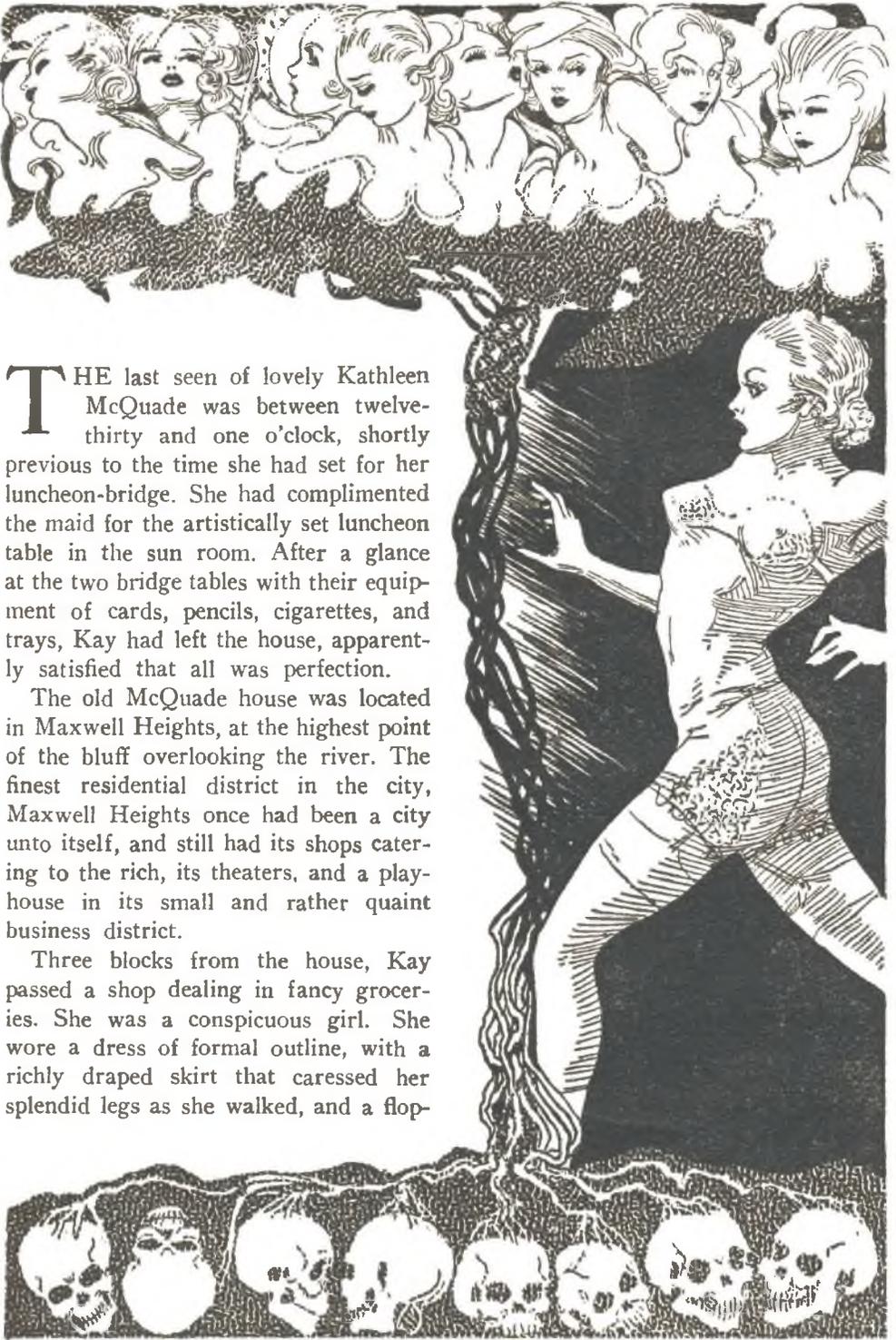
(Continued on page 125)



THE GLASS COFFIN

When Kathleen disappeared, her sweetheart was the only man who suspected what had happened. And even after he had verified the incredibly horrible truth, the police wouldn't believe him. He was left to work alone. He would find her, even at the sacrifice of his own body and soul!

Zuchet worked with a terrible, quick efficiency, like a surgeon with only flying seconds at his disposal. He forced the needle between her ribs, in, in. . . .



THE last seen of lovely Kathleen McQuade was between twelve-thirty and one o'clock, shortly previous to the time she had set for her luncheon-bridge. She had complimented the maid for the artistically set luncheon table in the sun room. After a glance at the two bridge tables with their equipment of cards, pencils, cigarettes, and trays, Kay had left the house, apparently satisfied that all was perfection.

The old McQuade house was located in Maxwell Heights, at the highest point of the bluff overlooking the river. The finest residential district in the city, Maxwell Heights once had been a city unto itself, and still had its shops catering to the rich, its theaters, and a play-house in its small and rather quaint business district.

Three blocks from the house, Kay passed a shop dealing in fancy groceries. She was a conspicuous girl. She wore a dress of formal outline, with a richly draped skirt that caressed her splendid legs as she walked, and a flop-

By ROBERT A. GARRON

py straw hat that made her look like an animated poppy. She had a gorgeous figure. Under clinging silk her exceptional bosom was a secret more than half revealed, and no man, possibly not many women, who saw her so could think of anything but girls, girls, girls.

The point was, she was as lovely as all that, the embodiment of all feminine allure, and she drew the eye as only beauty can. Yet, after the white-aproned grocer greeted her ingratiatingly, and she in response gave him free of charge a smile that made him forget his garden-variety wife and two children, to dream of the impossible for a time, Kay swung around the corner and vanished into the unknown.

Not immediately. For the grocer strolled casually past his luscious display of vegetables to the corner, looking after the doomed girl, and dwelling on the perturbing motion of her hips and the arousing shapeliness of her legs as she walked. It was in his mind that she was on the way to Zuchet's, the florist's, and he could have kept her in sight all the way to Zuchet's on the lower bluff. But a limousine pulled in to the curb in front of the grocery store—one of the snooty old hens of the district who shopped personally because she distrusted her cook or butler—and the grocer had to descend from the pearly clouds to the sordid reality of ringing up sales on the cash register. So he didn't see Kay McQuade reach the end of the block.

AT THE house, Kay's maid waited until a quarter of two, when luncheon wouldn't keep any longer. Some of the hors d'oeuvres, especially the pâté on little toast rafts, were beginning to look deadly.

At three-thirty Kay had still not re-

turned, so her brother Arnold fourthed at one of the bridge tables for her after shaking up a couple of batches of cocktails. For the moment, as far as Arnold McQuade was concerned, his sister's absence was a bit of good luck. Of the seven girls on hand, his, Jeanne de Winter, was far and away the most beautiful, and McQuade couldn't get enough of her. He thought she was more beautiful than his own sister, and wasn't far off in his belief that she was one of the most rapid methods ever devised by nature for raising a man's temperature.

Jeanne had a closely-molded glory of dark, silken hair; wide, alert black eyes; and incomparable red lips that seemed always at the point of smiling but seldom smiled save for Arnold McQuade. The real beauty of her soft lips was the most important thing about her; her slim body, her athletic torso with the suave hips, and the firm, twin thrills of her bosom, all of her splendid youth and gay personality was summarized in her velvet lips, inexpressibly delicate lips that always looked kissed. They had a sincere, thorough understanding, Jeanne and Arnold. When they got around to it, they might marry, but there was no hurry, both being young.

The other girls at the bridge party knew about the affair and envied Jeanne more or less openly because Arnold was regarded as a "catch." First of all, of course, was the McQuade money and position in society. A close second was his physique, combined with which were intelligence and talent. He kept tanned the year around, and if his slate-gray eyes had been set less deep, the gleam in them would have been mischievous. At twenty-three, he acted like thirty or better, and could be regarded as a more than promising young painter.

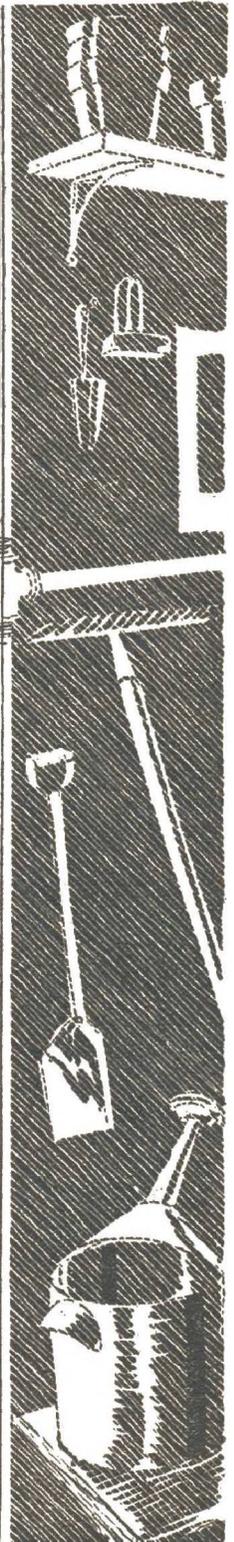
Most of his work went into portraits, because human beings fascinated him



He leaped at her with the velocity of a tiger, and she whirled to receive a solid, savage blow under the jaw.

in their infinite variety. When he did a landscape it was unusual, and his nudes were startling. He showed only the nudes posed for by professional models, because in spite of his close, brilliant technical method with its hint of sur-reality, his subjects were easily recognizable. Jeanne had fought with him to persuade him to offer a flamboyant nude of herself for the annual City Museum show, and he had refused point-blank.

"The idea of a gang of foul-minded yokels ogling your body, even if it's only a canvas," Arnold had said, "would gag me. Sure it's art! That canvas probably would take the first



award, but the honor doesn't mean a damned thing to me; the canvas is not for sale, and the amount of the prize wouldn't begin to pay for what the scandal clubs would do to your reputation. Nix!"

"Why, Arnold," Jeanne had mocked in her lazy, golden voice, "you don't thing people would whisper, do you? How old-fashioned!"

"You know damned well they would!" She had laughed. "If you want to keep me a secret, you oughtn't to leave the canvas so well displayed upstairs in the studio. You know, your dear sister has shown a number of her friends through the studio when you've been out, several times. Everyone in our set at least knows you've done that canvas, and knows what a really swell job it is. If you don't exhibit it, tongues will start wagging about us anyhow. Darling, don't you see?"

"Damn that sister of mine anyhow!"

But the exclamation had been scarcely more than rueful. He was genuinely fond of Kathleen, as was Jeanne.

BEFORE the first rubber of bridge had been completed this afternoon, the same dismaying thought occurred to him and Jeanne simultaneously, and their eyes met in a brief glance that was electric with apprehension. Within two years, more than a dozen girls had been reported missing, and none had been found. Perhaps the monster had struck again, and Kathleen was gone from the world. Something had happened to her; she would not stand up her guests like this for any reason whatsoever. As the afternoon waned, the very sunlight became tawny and thick with something sinister and forlorn. After the bridge game broke up, the usual conversation and laughter turned false with an un-

dertone of anger and hysteria as the girls overcompensated for fear.

Fear of the unknown strikes in high places also. Of the missing girls, all but one had resided in Maxwell Heights. A terror was at large, close by. It operated even in the blaze of noon, even though the Heights had become as closely and efficiently policed as any district in the world. Notorious for their abhorrence of secrets and the supernatural, the police expected to capture sooner or later a sex-mad murderer. If such a man existed, his cunning was such that no trace of crime could be detected in any of the disappearances. None of the girls had any reason for dropping out of sight. But if they wanted to vanish utterly, their right to do so was undeniable, while it certainly remained a matter of hotter and hotter police inquiry.

FROM the maid, Arnold had received the belief that Kay had gone to the florist's for a corsage of orchids. Before reporting to the police, Arnold made a thorough investigation of his own by telephone. He talked with Emil Zuchet, the florist, who informed him that Kay had not visited his shop. He could state this positively, because during the noon hour, when his two clerks were at lunch, he, Zuchet himself, took care of trade in the showroom. His two clerks said she had not been in before twelve, nor from one to five.

Arnold talked with the grocer, made numerous other phone calls, and at the end remained baffled by the fact that Kay had disappeared somewhere between the grocer's and the florist's. He reported Kay missing to an old friend of the family, Lieutenant Furness, who admitted reluctantly that the missing girls on the blotter numbered fourteen. Now fifteen.

Jeanne had remained for supper, after which he adjourned with her to the enormous studio upstairs. On the easel was another full length canvas of her, just begun, which he had intended to work on most of the evening if Jeanne didn't tire.

While he got his paints ready, Jeanne proceeded to the adjoining room and began to disrobe. She was wearing a buttoned-down-the-front dress of uncrushable linen, which came off to reveal her sheathed in a whispering taffeta slip. She pulled the slip off over her head and laid it across the foot of a lounge with the dress, neatly, thoughtfully. Her step-ins were the merest trifle of lace, and, still in her high-heeled shoes and sheer hose, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Call it a million dollars or so worth of curves.

Arnold hardly noticed her when she returned to the studio ready to pose. As she stood there a moment in the doorway, she could tell by the look in his eyes he was thinking of his sister, was still distraught. She looked at him pensively for a moment, and a thought flashed through her mind. Gaily, she called to him, "Darling, look at me! I have a surprise!"

He stared at her wonderingly, jolted out of his own trend of thought for the moment. His eyes widened as Jeanne suddenly flung out her arms, whirled into an exotic oriental dance. She had studied under good teachers and could dance well, but this dance was something she hadn't learned in any school.

Burlesquing, she danced with wild abandon; a dance that had in it all the provocative allure of the ages, the sinuousness of the Indian snake dance, the writhing insinuations of the Hawaiian hula. Her lovely body was like a living white flame, weaving, leaping, twisting, in a passionate effort to drive the ugly

worry from his mind by the only means she knew of. Still wondering, but beginning to perceive her purpose, he thought that if she were trying to distract him, she was doing a first-class job of it. But even this—the sheer beauty of her, the lovely rhythm of her movements—could not make him entirely forget about his sister.

"It's no use, Salome." He tried to make his voice laconic. "Better stop now and let the painting get under way."

Jeanne shrugged and quit, saying, "You can't blame a girl for trying, can you?"

"You know something's happened to Kay as well as I do. What's the use of trying to kid ourselves? We'd better do something!"

Jeanne indicated the dais on which she was to pose. "Let's you and me do a lot of work, shall we? Kay's all right. And even if she has been kidnaped or something, do you think you could compete with Lieutenant Furness and all the detectives down at headquarters? I'll pose, darling, and you go ahead with the canvas. There's no point in worrying until we're sure something's wrong."

Arnold flung down the brush with which he was making the figure drawing on the big canvas. "How are we going to be sure? Just wait? And guess? Not a trace of the other girls was ever found. Something horrible has happened to Kay, and I'll be damned if I can do any work tonight." He scraped the big smear of sienna, which he was going to use for brushing in outlines, off the palette again, put it back in his "junk jar" and clapped the lid on. With all the McQuade money, it was a funny, trick of his to be economical with his pigments.

"Well, what are you going to do?" she asked. When he didn't answer immediately, she idled over to the chenille

lounge and flung herself on it, her white body relaxed gratefully, her arms over her head.

"In the game of 'Murder'," Arnold mused startingly, wiping his hands on a soft cloth, "which is played in the dark, all the players must tell the ab-

The tendrils had stolen upon him from behind, and now. . . !



solute truth in the mock court which is held following the crime; all the players save the man secretly designated by lot as the 'murderer'. He may lie."

"What do you mean?" Jeanne asked slowly.

"What do you think of Emil Zuchet?"

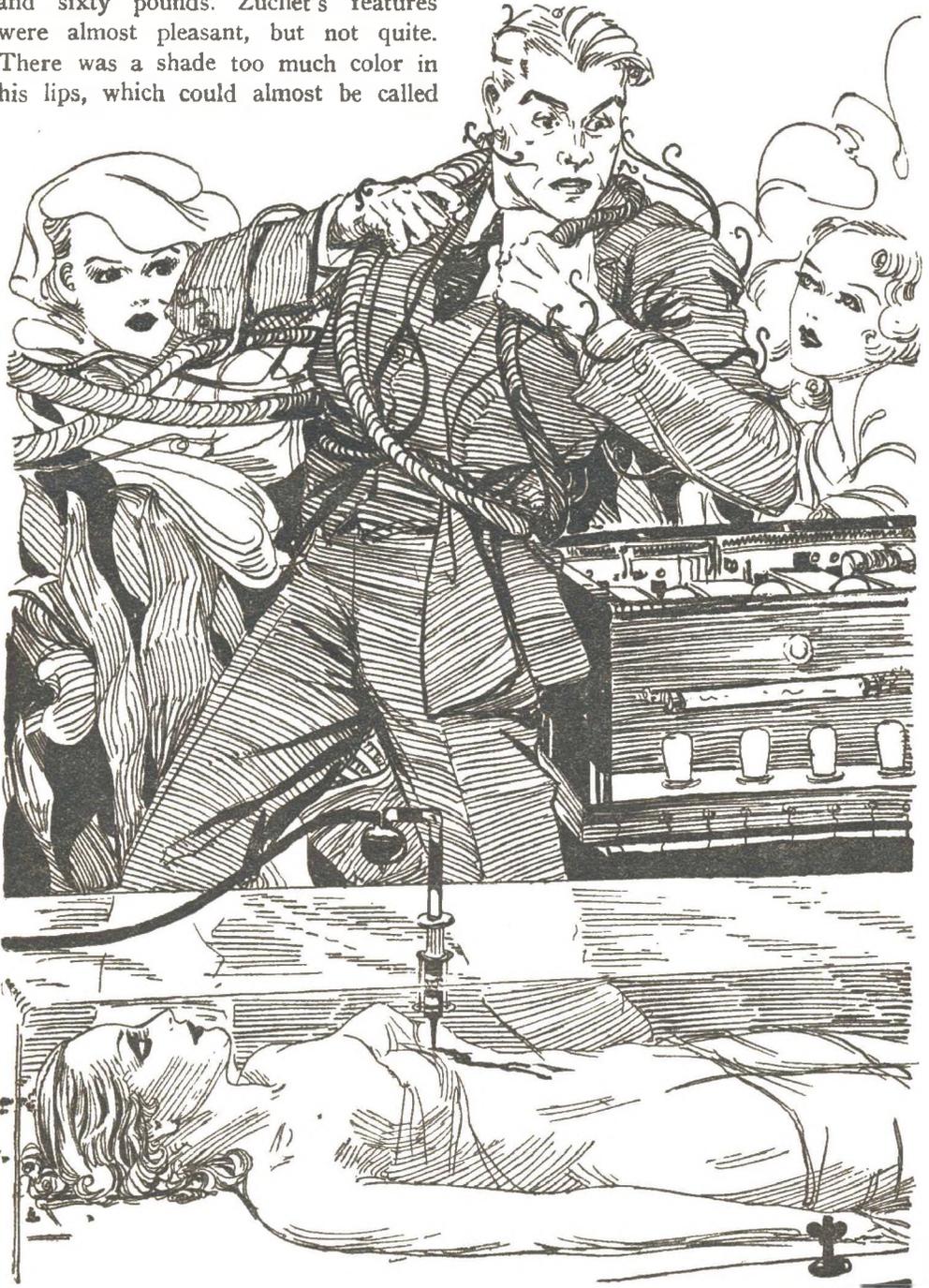
Jeanne went rigid, relaxed with a sigh. "Don't be silly, darling. That harmless little man? A florist?"

Arnold crossed to the lounge and sat on the edge beside her. Jeanne's use of the word "harmless" indicated that she too thought Zuchet was a peculiar man, the sort that a healthy young be-

ing like herself instinctively disliked but did not fear.

Zuchet was not taller than five and a half feet, but he was broad and perhaps weighed more than Arnold's hundred and sixty pounds. Zuchet's features were almost pleasant, but not quite. There was a shade too much color in his lips, which could almost be called

sensual. Any sensitive person would have called his eyes evil. They were round black eyes with a liquid jet glisten, and usually he kept them on the



floor as though tired, or as though he could hear better than he could see when waiting on customers.

He dressed very well and was clean, with his nails always neatly scraped. Mixed in with the fragrance of flowers in his shop, was the elusive, cloying scent of an expensive, exotic perfume he wore. The chief thing Arnold remembered about Zuchet was the incident when he accompanied Kathleen to the florist's to order flowers for their mother's funeral. Arnold had happened to be in a position for observing Zuchet unawares, and Zuchet's eyes had crawled over his sister like a pair of spiders.

More than the man's eyes, Arnold didn't like Zuchet's slow, caressing voice with its indefinable accent. It was an insidious voice, with a suggestive leer in it that conveyed to Arnold, now that he thought of it, insinuations of a diseased mind. A fat, lolling voice—disturbing, almost menacing.

“ONCE before,” Arnold remembered, addressing Jeanne earnestly, “Zuchet was questioned about one of the missing girls. He admitted she had bought flowers there, but said he was not in the habit of molesting or following girls, and didn't know which way she had turned after leaving his establishment.”

“Yes, I know.” Jeanne looked at him under the satin curve of an arm bent over her face, shielding her eyes from the light. “That was Elaine Betts. Her poor mother was sure that little Mr. Zuchet was an ogre who had attacked and murdered her daughter, and buried the body in a flower bed. The police trampled through his gardens and greenhouses, ransacked his house from attic to cellar and didn't find anything. Zuchet started suit against the city for

damages, but dropped the suit. I know that story.”

Arnold rested his hand on Jeanne's rounded knee. Leaning over her, he unconsciously dug his fingers almost painfully into her flesh, giving emphasis to his words. “Here's the point: in these two cases at least, don't you see that we have only Zuchet's word? He says he knows that Elaine Betts left the store with her flowers *because he was alone and waited on her himself*. When I called him before supper, he told me he was positive that Kay had not been in the store during the noon hour, *because he alone was taking care of customers in the store, and he would have waited on her if she had come in*. I think Zuchet is lying.”

“But darling,” Jeanne said softly, breathing faster, “a man can't murder fifteen girls and not get caught. You're letting your imagination run away with you.”

He had taken her hands in his and caressed her fingers absently, much as a man might his wife's, but he dropped them now and said abruptly, “I'm going down to Zuchet's.”

“I'm going with you. When you see how wrong you are, you're going to feel pretty silly.”

“You stay right here and wait for me.”

Jeanne sat up and wrapped her white arms around him. He felt the eager, quivering resilience of her bosom against him, and her cool, wet lips parted against his. He yielded for a moment, thinking that her breath was a soft, perfumed rapture, stood up suddenly and headed for the door.

“Arnold!” she exclaimed commandingly, and he halted, turned. “You're being foolish. Give me time to get ready and I'll go with you. You won't find out anything alone. Let me go in

to buy orchids all by myself; if you want to set a trap, that's the only way to do it. You know it. Only girls have disappeared."

"You're not going to disappear!" Arnold snapped.

"Don't be crazy!" she protested; she leaped up and ran to a closet door. She was so beautiful as she ran on her high heels, with her proud young breasts dancing, that Arnold waited, attentive and moody.

She offered a good argument. In the closet hung about a dozen of her dresses, two of them formal for evening wear. Kathleen had probably opened that door at some time or other and smiled, knowing that her brother had chosen the loveliest girl in the city. Jeanne chose a dress which had yards of rippling satin in the skirt, but which was extremely economical in the way it sculptured her hips, waist, breasts; in this creation most of her back was bare, and she had a perfect, delicately tanned back.

When she went into Zuchet's, the florist would think that she was on her way to a dance in one of the downtown hotels and had stopped to pick up a corsage. In these crazy days, girls might drop in alone to buy flowers and there was no breach in etiquette. Etiquette is personal. Very. Zuchet's wide mouth might smile, and secretly his gleaming, spidery eyes might crawl. Against his will, Arnold was convinced that Jeanne was right, that as a decoy she would have far more chance for success than himself.

THE Zuchet Gardens covered most of the ground on the lower bluff. Aside from the rich terraces, there were the greenhouses with their acres of glass spattered with whitewash, built out in three directions from the house. Connecting directly with the greenhouses,

the front room of the house was used as a place of business. There were tall glass cases filled with fresh, dewy, cut flowers, and tables freighted with potted plants.

On either side of the house, the greenhouses extended away and were lost in the humid night. Only the "store" was lighted. Jeanne saw no one in the place through the plate glass windows, but when she opened the door a spring-switch in the jam either rang a bell or turned on a light that brought Zuchet from somewhere in the house.

"Good evening," he purred. His words were a little too slow, as though he were dwelling on some secret pleasure.

"Good evening," Jeanne responded, smiling engagingly. Even though it was such a short walk down here from the McQuade house, Arnold had taken out the roadster and was waiting in it, with the lights out, in the alley a half block up. He was going to wait exactly twenty minutes, time enough for Zuchet to give himself away if he were going to.

Jeanne could not have worn a dress which displayed her figure to better advantage. What little there was of the bodice modeled her torso in detail. Her mother had called the dress indecent; under the gleaming satin was only a skin-tight, abbreviated chemise because fashion wouldn't allow step-ins or a brassière to show. Jeanne knew how delectably shaped she was and thought she was lucky to be able to wear a dress like this.

Slim ivory allurements, she stood unaffectedly with her shoulders presenting the firm, girlish perfection of her bosom under the satin. When she inquired about orchids, Zuchet mourned, "I have none cut. Would you care to make a selection from what I have? But

no, you might soil such a lovely dress walking through my greenhouses."

"You grow your own orchids, Mr. Zuchet?"

"But yes; I am a florist." Zuchet gurgled with slow laughter. "Would you accept any variety, miss, or would you like to see all the beauties. I would not like to cut one you do not like,"—ingratiatingly—"because it would not live long and Zuchet must run his business at a profit."

"Good heavens!" Jeanne thought, "my twenty minutes will be gone like nothing if he keeps talking as slowly as this." Through her head flashed another thought, "'Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.' No, he doesn't really care whether I see his orchids or not. But what ugly eyes he has!"

THIS was a matter of the briefest hesitation before she decided, aloud to Zuchet, "Perhaps you had better let me make my choice. I think I can be careful enough not to soil my skirt."

"Certainly. I will show you the way, please." He turned unhurriedly, and she followed him from the store into a corridor which branched into the greenhouses. Hesitating, he suggested, "We can take the long way around through the gardens, but it is shorter to go through the basement corridor to where they are. You will not get soiled that way."

"All right," she agreed, thinking, "Hurry up! Hurry up! Before Arnold comes boiling in and makes a fool of himself!"

Zuchet opened a door in the corridor, turned a switch that jumped the basement into view with bright yellow light. As she gathered up the extravagance of satin at one side of the dress and prepared to descend the wooden stairs after

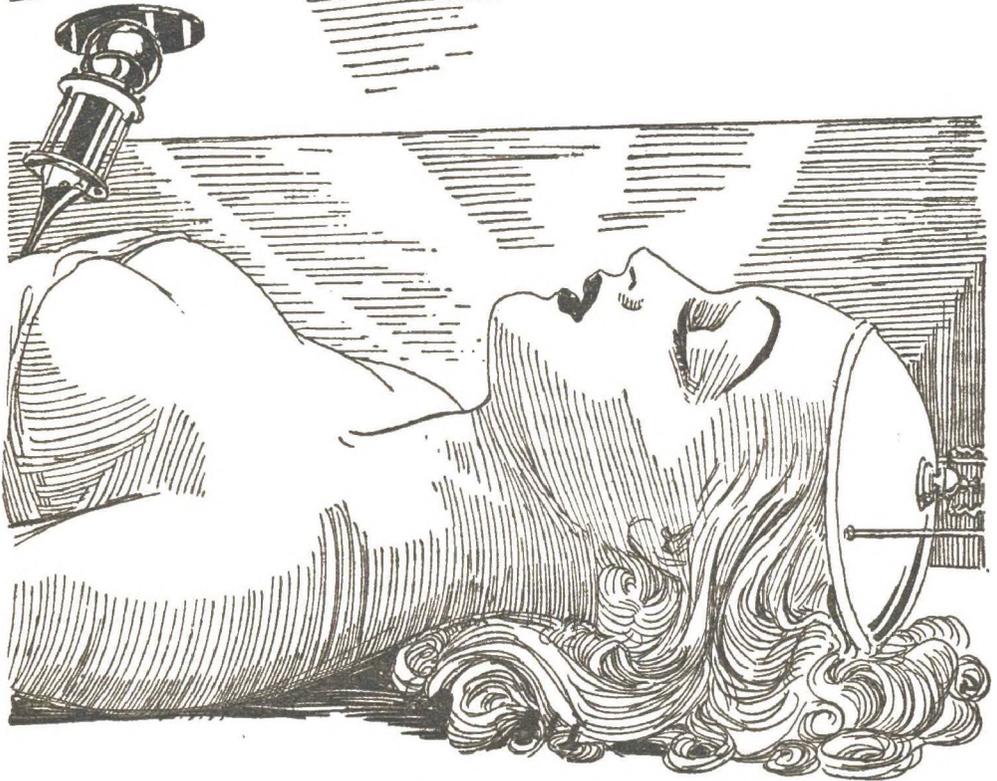
him, he was out of sight for a moment. She heard another click as though another switch had been worked, then a trembling vibration of short duration, as though the unit of an electric refrigerator had run briefly. Her high heels tapped the wooden steps briskly as she went down.

Halfway across the basement, Zuchet turned his head to smile at her, then proceeded into what seemed to be the entrance to a dark corridor. Jeanne glanced around swiftly at stacks of flower pots and garden equipment as Zuchet turned lights on beyond the entrance and waited for her.

On the threshold, she stopped with an exclamation of rapture at what she saw beyond him. Smiling, Zuchet stood aside to let her run forward to a bed where grew stupendous blooms of unimaginable beauty. Watching her with eyes slitted, Zuchet flipped up a tumbleswitch in the wall; he leaped on her with the velocity of a tiger, with a heavy trembling, a section of solid masonry rose from the floor at the entrance to seal them in the subterranean chamber. She whirled to receive a solid, savage blow under the jaw that felled her, senseless, before she could utter a cry. The cry would have gone unheard.

The door to Dr. Zuchet's underground laboratory was cleverly concealed. What looked like parallel pipes half-embedded in the cellar foundation, were two of the vertical tracks in which the false section of foundation was operated by concealed power machinery. Nature had furnished the laboratory with another exit, which was also well concealed.

ZUCHET'S slowness of manner was pretense. In the chamber scented overpoweringly by the orchids, he worked with terrible, quick efficiency,



Gloating over her loveliness, he murmured, "You'll be immortal, too!"

like a surgeon with only flying seconds at his disposal. He was a genius. A florist by trade, he had been trained in foreign universities in physics and chemistry, and had earned his several degrees as a scientific wizard. In America he had made a richly paying business out of his hobby, horticulture, to which his scientific genius was wed in a most peculiar and horrible manner.

The rectangular orchid bed stood in the center of the chamber, whose floor was original, somewhat uneven, bed-rock. Against the wall on the left stood an operating table, with a mass of scientific equipment near it. Anyone giving the equipment a casual glance would have thought, because of queerly-shaped vacuum tubes in a cluster, that Zuchet might be experimenting with radio or television. Over the table, equipped with wing-nuts so that it could be screwed fast to the table, was suspended a glass canopy about the size and shape of a coffin.

Doubly insuring the success of his job, Zuchet gave the girl a hypodermic injection in the arm, stripped her down to the sheer knee-length hose, undies, and slippers, and laid the few articles of clothing aside to be destroyed.

Gloating over the loveliness in his arms he murmured, "Sixteen. You'll be immortal, too, the loveliest of them all." His lips caressed the thrilling, creamy hollows of her throat; he kissed her fiercely, making a low growling sound in his throat. . . .

Laying her limp body on the table, he arranged her arms and legs, and turned on the power in his apparatus. The vacuum tubes glowed, and a low whine filled the room. The last thing he did before lowering the glass canopy was take down a length of tubing which was connected through the metal framing the rim of the glass box. The tub-

ing terminated in a hollow, fine chromium needle. Zuchet pricked her with the needle under the bosom, forced the needle into her flesh, slowly and carefully, between her ribs, in, in, . . .

JEANNE opened her eyes. The drug she had been given kept her body numb and powerless to move. With parted, trembling lips and eyes wide with horror, she watched the canopy descend, heard Zuchet swiftly turn the wing-nuts that sealed her in.

He glanced at a stoppered glass flask into which her rich red blood pumped in regular spurts from the other end of the tube, nodded and hurriedly left the laboratory. The whole business of conditioning Jeanne de Winter for immortality had been executed with so little waste motion, that scarcely twenty minutes had elapsed since she entered the store.

A bell rang as he closed the basement door, warning him that someone had entered the shop. He opened the door communicating with the shop, and recognized grim young Arnold McQuade, whose sister he had coveted for so long and disposed of so recently. The harvest of two girls in one day made him smile pleasantly, as he asked, "Yes, Mr. McQuade?"

"WHERE is she?" Arnold demanded.

"Who?" Zuchet inquired innocently. Simultaneously, Arnold acted with maniacal speed and fury. Both his fists were solidly reinforced with bone, and he hung one on Zuchet's teeth even before the very capable Zuchet realized how insanely angry he was, that he had a quick temper, and could move with explosive speed. Ten seconds later, consciousness returned to Emil Zuchet. He sat up with bleeding lips, his mouth full

of broken teeth. Arnold towered over him with a bloody handkerchief whipped around his right hand; his knuckles were slashed open to the bone.

"Where is she?" Arnold roared.

Zuchet spat out broken incisors and blood and sneered quietly, "Young man, you are going to regret having done this all your life."

Arnold whined with blind rage. Powerfully he snatched the squat Zuchet to his feet by the throat, and smashed the side of his head with the bandaged fist. He flung the body of the florist, unconscious again, back to the floor and called police headquarters from the desk-phone sitting on the counter behind Zuchet.

Besides squad cars, headquarters sent cars of detectives and one of the police emergency trucks out to Maxwell Heights. The truck was equipped with two floodlight units: powerful, portable lights whose generators were driven by compact gasoline motors, good for twenty-eight hours to the three-gallon tank; the floodlights were set up in the gardens. Police and detectives, among them the police chief and Lieutenant Furness, who was no mean criminologist, scoured the gardens, stampeded through the hothouses and prowled through Zuchet's residence from gables to the cellar bedrock. They found nothing, and most of them thought McQuade had gone off halfcocked.

Zuchet was a wealthy and respected citizen, a man who donated generously to the church to which he belonged. The fact that girls had disappeared near the Zuchet Gardens did not mean that those girls had disappeared in the angry florist's shop.

Zuchet was going to sue the city, and this time he meant business. Some time before the police had arrived, while Arnold was storming through the house in

search of Jeanne, Zuchet had set a little stage in the front room.

He had rung up a sale for two orchids on the cash register, taken from his wallet enough scented money to cover the sale, and placed it in the drawers. He removed cut flowers from a crystal vase and put them with flowers in another vase, leaned a price-card reading "\$3.00 ea." against the empty crystal vase in the showcase. Having worked himself up into a mood of righteous wrath, and convinced that police are stupid, he presented his little stage-setting to the police department with his compliments.

Jeanne de Winter, he lisped through his broken teeth, had visited his shop and he had persuaded her to buy his last two orchids because they wouldn't last until morning. The sale was registered, and the perfumed money was in the cash register with a little change. He indicated the empty vase and the price card in the glass case; he didn't mention that he prepared his orchids for wearing with the stems sealed in glass capsules filled with water, so that the fragile blooms would last longer, and the impatient detectives didn't know any more about orchids than they could talk in archaic Persian.

They had to believe Zuchet. It had just happened that Jeanne had left the store without McQuade's seeing her from the alley where he was waiting. Zuchet swore she had told him that she was going to a dance in a certain downtown hotel with "a new man." It looked to headquarters as though McQuade had been stood up, and that was all there was to it, and they weren't very pleasant about it. Not only was the battered Zuchet going to sue the city; he was going to sue McQuade for first-degree assault, and he was going to sue

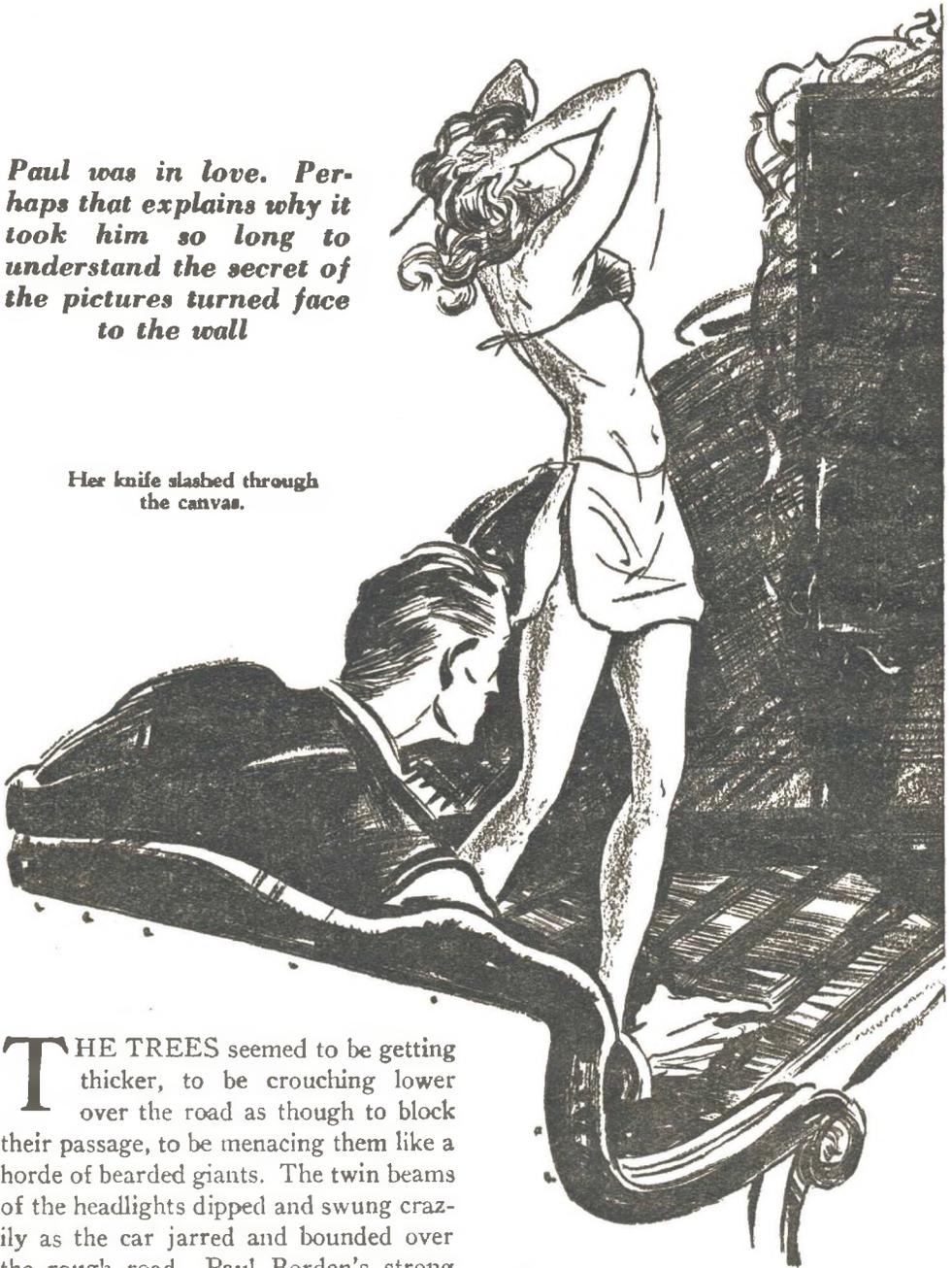
(Continued on page 105)

By **REX
NORMAN**

BEHIND

Paul was in love. Perhaps that explains why it took him so long to understand the secret of the pictures turned face to the wall

Her knife slashed through the canvas.



THE TREES seemed to be getting thicker, to be crouching lower over the road as though to block their passage, to be menacing them like a horde of bearded giants. The twin beams of the headlights dipped and swung crazily as the car jarred and bounded over the rough road. Paul Borden's strong artist's fingers spun the wheel as they started to skid; then when he had pulled the car back on to the highway, he stole a glance at the girl who sat beside him.

"Some road!" he said. "Was it always this bad?"

"Why do you keep on asking me questions like that?" she burst out. "I

HELL'S VEIL



told you I haven't been back here since I was five . . . and that was sixteen years ago!"

Paul frowned slightly. An outburst of that sort was so unlike Lisa. He had felt she was under a strain, that she was forcing herself to do something that frightened her when they had left the city that morning, but he had not realized that she was on the verge of hysteria. Of course, the wild, desolate country they were driving through was enough to set any one's nerves on edge. That, and the fact that

when they reached their destination. . . .

"Look," said Paul, "Do we have to go on, darling? I don't want to marry your family; I just want to marry you! I don't care what they're like if. . . ."

"Not 'they'," said Lisa. "Father's dead and there's only mother. And we've gone over all this before. I must go back once before I can marry you. I must find out why I'm frightened to death of my own home, of the place in which I was born. Find out why I've never been allowed back since I was about five years old, why I've never even gotten a letter from my mother in all these years."

PAUL stepped on the brake as they went over a rickety wooden bridge; the canvases, palettes, and packages of brushes in the back of the car rattling together.

"This Doctor Kelvin who's acted as your guardian, wouldn't he tell you anything?"

"No," she answered. "I haven't seen him either. He lives somewhere near here and I've only corresponded with him. He always ignored the questions I asked in my letters."

Paul shook his head. "I don't like it," he said. "I don't like anything about it. The way the people at the last village looked at us when we asked the way. The fact that you can't remember anything about the place, as if your mind had deliberately blanked out something horrible." He stole another glance at her pale, set face. "And if your name is Field, why is it called 'the old De Campo place'?"

"De Campo was the name of my mother's family. They've been in this part of the country for a long time. Dad came here only after he married mother."

Paul nodded. The note of strain seemed to be leaving her voice as she talked. That was what he had hoped would happen when he had asked her questions whose answers he already knew. Suddenly the probing fingers of the headlights gleamed white on a high stone wall at the side of the road.

"Isn't that it?" he asked, slowing the car. "They said it had a stone wall around it."

Lisa did not answer and when he looked questioningly at her, her face was whiter than before. It was as if her terror had left her for a moment and then come back with redoubled strength. Pursing his lips together, he swung the car toward the heavy wooden gate in the wall and stopped. He opened the door and got out.

"I'll go see if the gate's locked," he said. "If it's not, I'll open it and you drive the car through."

She nodded without speaking and he walked up to the gate. He pushed it tentatively and found that it was locked, but there was a lever near its middle and, when he pulled that down, there was a creaking sound and the gate swung back. He waved to Lisa and she drove the car through the opening. He followed and had just gotten inside when, of its own accord, the heavy gate slammed shut. The heavy click of the lock snapping closed startled Paul and he whirled around.

Then he saw something that gave him the first real touch of fear, apart from his concern over Lisa, that he had felt since they had started on their strange trip. The inside of the gate was perfectly smooth, having no sign of a lock or knob. It could not be opened from the inside! It had made so that it was possible to get into the De Campo grounds, but not out!

LISA had stopped the car a short distance up the driveway and as he walked toward it, he had to fight an impulse to break into a terrified run. Something had happened to him since he had come through that gate, something that he had not known since he was a child. He was gripped by a wild, unreasoning fear, a fear that peopled the darkness with unseen shapes. A fear that made him feel that his every move was being watched by malignant eyes. He forced a smile to his lips as he reached the car.

"Well, it won't be long now," he said with attempted cheerfulness as Lisa looked at him with dark, troubled eyes. She tried to force a smile also, but was not very successful. She moved over to let him get back into the driver's seat and as she did so, her eyes went past his shoulder. They dilated suddenly.

"Good heavens, Paul!" she gasped. "What's that?"

He whirled around but he could see nothing, only the solid darkness, yet the feeling of some Presence was even more intense than before.

"Where?" he asked sharply. "I don't see anything!"

"There! To the right! Something . . . black!"

How could black be seen in blackness? It was just her nerves which were. . . . then, as he strained his eyes in the direction to which she pointed, he saw it too! In the darkness a yet darker darkness was moving! An inchoate, formless shape seemed to be materializing!

A moment longer he stood there, staring. Then, because it was the thing he most feared to do, because he had to prove his mastery over his own frightened body, he ran toward it.

"Who's there?" he called. "Who are you?"

The black shape did not seem to move, yet when he reached the place where it had appeared to stand, it was not there.

"Where are you?" shouted Paul again. There was thick shrubbery lining the road and he thrashed his way through the clinging branches in hopeless pursuit of a thing he did not believe really existed. He heard Lisa's frightened voice calling him back, but he ignored it. Both fear and rage were struggling for mastery within him. He passed a moment to get his bearings, to see if he could locate that black shape again, when his nostrils dilated and he sniffed. He smelled something more than the dank, charnel odor of rotting leaves and mould; a faint, indescribable fragrance. An eerie scent that was both excitingly feminine and yet somehow repellent.

His eyes ached as they tried to pierce the darkness, then somehow he knew that the thing he had pursued was standing

before him, that it had materialized soundlessly out of the night again. His hands went out uncertainly, fumbling. They seemed to touch some tenuous stuff that was almost impalpable. It was almost as if his fingers were passing through something that was too vaporous to be felt, yet a shock of surprise shook him. This Thing before him, whatever its species might be, was nevertheless feminine!

An animal heat seemed to be bathing him. His fingers, still fumbling mechanically, seemed to trace the curving swell of a full, feminine breast. Every second the Thing seemed to be taking more solid form. His fear had been swallowed up in a strange unaccountable excitement. It was as if the essence of all that was dark and agelessly feminine was slowly becoming perceptible and palpable before him.

It seemed to be pressing closer to him. He still could not see it, but its warmth enveloped him. The butterfly light touch of soft lips seemed to be brushing his face and his hands dropped to his sides. A drowsy torpor seemed to be coming over him. His eyes closed. The not-quite-felt lips traveled fleetingly over his own, down to his throat in a delicate caress, then they fastened themselves there hotly, hungrily. A sharp pain stabbed him. With a startled cry he staggered back, but now the Thing had body and a pantherish strength.

It was as if the taste of the warm blood had made it real for the first time. It pushed away his clawing hands, crushed heaving breasts tighter against his chest, writhed a sensuous, subtle body against him so that he was almost borne over backward. Then, just as his knees weakened in both fear and strange ecstasy, a high, wailing call sounded from somewhere in the distance. He felt the Thing, whose eager mouth was fas-

tened to his pulsing throat, stiffen. Again the eerie call sounded and just as he roused himself somewhat from his strange daze and tried to tear this clinging Thing from his throat, it gave a low whimpering cry and then was gone without a sound, as suddenly as it had come.

A MOMENT longer Paul stood there, a curious mixture of shame and excitement filling him. Then he turned and stumbled back to the car. All that had happened must have taken place in only a few moments for Lisa, a frightened look on her face, was only now opening the door to get out and come look for him.

"What was it, Paul?" she asked. "I was afraid that. . ."

"Nothing," he answered. "Probably just imagination." He did not meet her eyes as he got into the car. Then with a startled cry she pointed to his throat.

"What happened to your neck? You're bleeding."

He glanced in the mirror and there on his throat, where that Thing had glued its hungry mouth, were two little punctures, a tiny drop of blood still oozing out of each one. A shudder racked him.

"Must have scratched myself on some thorns," he muttered and, throwing the car abruptly into gear, he sped down the muddy driveway as if he had only just realized that the place was accursed.

The house loomed up before them almost before they knew it, a monstrous, rambling pile without a light showing in any of its narrow windows. Paul pulled up before the heavy front door and silently helped Lisa out. She looked at him for a moment with troubled eyes as if imploring a reassuring word, but he was busy with his own dark and disturbing thoughts and hardly noticed her glance. Setting her lips bravely, she walked up the steps to the door, lifted the heavy

knocker, and let it fall with a sullen clatter.

The sound seemed to bring Paul back to himself. He put an arm around Lisa and pulled her to him, crushing her lithe young body against his, feeling the sweet softness of her young bosom, the fluttering of her heart, against his chest. He bent down and kissed her.

"Don't worry, my dearest," he said. "Whatever happens, remember I love you. I won't let anything come between us. . . ever!"

She sighed and cuddled even closer to him, seeming to draw strength from his embrace. Then they heard the rattle of chains and bolts and drew apart. The door opened a few inches and a black, glittering eye peered out at them.

"Who's there?" croaked a hoarse voice. "Who is it?"

"It's Lisa Field. I've come home to see my mother."

THERE was a gasp from behind the door. A moment longer that eye studied Lisa, then the door swung back and an old, dried-up woman stood there, a candle in her hand. Her face was yellow, lined. She must have been tall once, but now she was stooped, yet her black eyes were quick and beady. She did not see Paul standing to the side of the door. She looked only at Lisa.

"Ha-ha!" she cackled. "So you came home, eh?" She spoke with a trace of a foreign accent.

"Who are you?" asked Lisa.

"You don't remember me, eh?" asked the old woman. "Well, I remember you. I'm Maria."

"Maria," repeated Lisa as if the name awakened some faint memory in her.

"Wait here. I'll go get her." Shielding the candle with a clawlike hand, the old woman turned and disappeared into the gloom.



He stood there transfixed,
staring.

Paul felt Lisa shudder as she stood near him in the darkness. He could feel the eerie menace of the old dark house himself and he knew that old fears, memories of her childhood must be coming back to her. He started to step close to her again, to slip a comforting arm around her, then he heard a rustling and tapping sound that grew louder as it drew nearer to them.

The faint radiance of the candle appeared again in the blackness and he saw Maria's face and beside it, that of another woman who was even older. Her face was patrician but showed the ravages of time. Her nose was hooked, her mouth pinched, her white hair piled high on top of her head in an antique coiffeur. She wore an old fashioned black dress which rustled as she moved and she helped herself along with an ebony cane.

"Mother!" cried Lisa running toward her. "Oh, mother!"

She bent to kiss the old woman who turned up a yellowed cheek.

"Well, daughter," she said in a rasping voice. "So you finally decided to come home eh? All the De Campo do, at last." She cackled meaninglessly, then shook her aged head. "We've missed you, Serafina and I."

Serafina? Paul had never heard that name before. He moved forward to greet the old woman who had not seen him as yet.

"Yes, mother. I've come home. And I've brought . . ." Both Lisa's mother and Maria caught sight of Paul at the same time.

"A man!" shrieked Maria, her eyes widening in horror, the candle shaking in her hand.

"A man!" repeated Lisa's mother. "A man! Send him away! Quick! Blood! Blood on the floor! A trail of blood. Like your brother. Like your father. . . ."

Her voice trailed off incoherently in terror.

"But . . . but, mother," said Lisa, "It's Paul. The man I'm going to marry!"

"Marry!" Mrs. Field's voice rose to a scream. "Oh, God! Not. . . ." Then her eyes rolled up and her body went limp, the stick falling from her hand. Both Lisa and Maria seized hold of her, supporting her. Paul leaped forward to help but, with a snarl, Maria stopped him.

"Don't touch her!" she croaked savagely. "You've done enough damage already. We'll take her upstairs. You get out of this house as fast as you can!" And as he stood there open mouthed but with wondering fear in his heart, Maria and Lisa started to carry the old woman up the stairs.

HE CONTINUED to stand there in the darkness even after the flickering light of the candle had disappeared from sight. What was the meaning of all that had happened? The gate that would let one in but not out. That strange Thing he had seen or imagined in the shrubbery. The two old women's fear when they had seen him and their wild talk of blood. And Serafina, who was she?

He struck a match and looked around the entrance hall in which he stood. There was the stairway before him and to his right the yawning darkness of a large room. Holding the lit match high, he walked into it. There was an old brass candlestick on a wooden chest near the door and he lit the candle it held, then looked around him. He was in a musty smelling, dark-paneled room.

The furniture was mostly antique and in a bad state of repair. A huge, heavy wooden crucifix of Spanish design hung from a rusty nail on one of the walls, but the thing that most piqued the artist in

him was the fact that there were four large pictures in the room . . . and all four had been turned so that they faced the walls, so that only their backs were visible.

He heard a step behind him and turning, saw Maria. "Haven't you gone yet?" she snarled.

"No," retorted Paul. "And I don't intend to!"

Her eyes blazed at him, then a veil seemed to cover them. "All right then, stay!" She said softly. "It's on your own head!"

"Where's Lisa?" asked Paul. Jerking her head upstairs without answering, Maria started to leave.

"Wait a minute," said Paul. "There are a lot of things I want to know. This Serafina Mrs. Field mentioned, who is she?"

"Serafina?" repeated Maria, her eyes widening suddenly. "No one! She's . . . she's no one!" She continued to look at him for a moment and then, a look of terror on her face, she scuttled away and back up the stairs.

Paul gazed after her, muffling a curse of exasperation. His nerves were frayed to the snapping point. The old house was so full of dark mysteries that it choked him. No wonder Lisa had been afraid to come back to it. Fears, doubts, and questions were swarming in his brain. There was a frown on his face as almost mechanically he walked over to the nearest picture to turn it over and see its face, see who had painted it. Then he gasped.

There was a brass plate on the bottom of the frame's back and there, written in antique letters was the name, "Serafina de Campo"! De Campo was Mrs. Field's maiden name! She had said that she and Serafina had missed Lisa, yet Maria had said that Serafina was "No one"! This picture with its face to the

wall must be a portrait of Serafina . . . yet judging from the condition of its canvas backing, it was centuries old!

Almost timidly he reached up and turned the picture over, then he started and almost dropped the candle he held. The front of the canvas had been blacked out. It was a sombre expanse of painted darkness set in a gilt frame, yet somewhere in that darkness there lurked a formless shape that he had seen before, an inchoate, black mass, half perceived and half imagined. That picture of Serafina De Campo was a portrait of the Thing that had sucked the blood from his throat out in the shrubbery!

PAUL ripped out a savage curse. What was the matter with him? Was he going mad? Trying to build up fragments of unreal and fantastic fears into a terrifying whole? He looked at the painting more closely. Yes, the center part of it was darker than the rest. In a sense it did resemble that shape he had seen or imagined but that was because the Thing had had no particular shape. Then he snapped his fingers. Of course! There had been a portrait painted on the canvas, but someone had painted it out.

It was the covering black pigment which had suggested the dark shape he had seen in the shrubbery. Now an eager light came into his eyes. De Campo was a Spanish name. The canvas was very old. Might not the black paint cover a forgotten old Spanish master? A Sanchez Coello, a Velasquez, an El Greco?

The artist in him forgot everything else. He ran out of the room, the house, and opening the rear of his car, fumbled through the equipment he had brought along in the hopes that he might be able to do a little painting himself. He took out a bottle of turpentine, a wad of cheese cloth, a palette knife, and rushed back into the house. Working slowly with the

knife and the moistened cloth, he started to clean the top covering layer of paint from the picture.

It came off easily as if it had been only a thin coat, and in the small area in which he worked, a shape started to appear, a patch of white. He stepped back and looked at the canvas and he saw that he was uncovering a hand, a beautifully drawn hand with long tapering fingers. A strange excitement gripped him. It might very well be that he was discovering an old master.

He widened the arcs of the turpentine moistened cloth, exposing a wrist and the tips of the fingers, then suddenly he stopped, staring. Something was wrong. Those finger nails! He looked closer at them, a sudden shudder racking him. They were long, cruel, pointed like talons. Why should any artist paint hands like that? It was as if they were the hands of a corpse! The nails like those of someone who was dead, growing uncared for, after the body had been placed in its grave!

He sensed, rather than heard the footsteps coming down the stairs. Almost mechanically he put down the wad of cloth and the palette knife. As an afterthought, he turned the picture back as he had found it, with its face to the wall, then Lisa came into the room. Her face was still pale, her eyes veiled as if she were shielding her thoughts from him. A sudden pang of pity stabbed Paul, yet he sensed a certain constraint between them. It was as if she had learned secrets which she would never disclose to him.

"How is your mother?" he asked. Lisa shrugged her shoulders listlessly.

"She's still unconscious," she answered. "If she's not better in the morning, we'll call the doctor." Then, "Look, Paul. I've been speaking to Maria. You'd better not stay here tonight. Take

the car and drive back to town. If anything should happen to you. . . ."

"What could possibly happen to me?" he asked impatiently, forgetting everything but the fact that he did not want to leave her. "I'm going to stay here with you."

"Please, Paul. . ." she began, but in three long strides he had crossed the room and taken her in his arms, stopping her mouth with his. At first she struggled weakly, trying to push him away, but he only held her closer to him, crushing her young breasts against his chest, trying to fight the blood-chilling terrors of that eerie house with the warmth of his love for her. Then Lisa relaxed and swayed in toward him, pressing her body against his, answering his kisses with her own. He could feel her trembling and he did not know whether it was with love or fear. Then she drew away from him and sighed a long, quivering sigh.

"All right," she whispered. "If you won't go, I'll show you where you can sleep." And taking his hand she led him from the room and up the stairs.

THE corridor on the floor above was just as dank smelling as the rest of the house. By the candle light he could see the leprous patches of paint that peeled away from the walls. Lisa stopped in front of the first of the many doors that lined the corridor and opened it. Inside was a large bed chamber, sparsely furnished. There was a high bed in the center of one wall with an old fashioned canopy over it.

"You can sleep here," said Lisa. He took her hand and tried to draw her over the threshold into the room but she hung back, her eyes wide, her firm young bosom heaving.

"No!" she whispered. "Not now. Perhaps I'll come in and say goodnight to

"Oh God!"
she choked.
"Paul!"



you . . . later." With a sudden movement she pressed her lithe body against his once more. Her arms went around his neck and she clung to him so closely that he could feel her every subtle curve crying out for love; then she had torn herself away and was gone into the darkness of the corridor.

It seemed as if the dank sheets of the ancient bed would never get warm enough to permit Paul to fall asleep, yet even while his body shook spasmodically from their chill contact, his eyes grew heavy. The last act of his consciousness was to wonder whether he had locked the door of the room. To try and remember whether he had bolted it against the terrors that might stalk the midnight corridor outside or whether he had left it open so that Lisa could come to him, then he slipped down into darkness.

The blackness swirled slowly around him ebbing and flowing with a definite rhythm, and a strange excitement gripped him. Even with his eyes closed he could sense that something was moving in the blackness, a darker darkness that was somehow perceptible. It was something that repelled and frightened him, yet it held a fascination that was stronger than fear. His flesh crawling in a curious mixture of excitement and terror, he waited as it drew nearer and nearer to him, then suddenly he stiffened. He did not know when the dream had ended and his real awareness had begun, but he did know that now he was awake . . . and that still he felt that there was something in the room with him. Something that was drawing closer and closer to the bed in which he lay!

There was a strange, heady perfume in his nostrils. An unaccountable fever made his blood hammer in his temples.

"**I**S THAT you, darling?" he whispered. He could see nothing in the

darkness but his hand went out, fumbling, and seemed to brush something soft and warm. For a moment, he felt the rounded curves of a feminine form, thinly covered, then it was gone. He sat up and a cloud of fragrant hair brushed over his face. There was something maddening in those shy, fluttering touches.

He wanted to seize her, press her to him, feel those soft, trembling contours crushed against his straining chest, but he could not seem to grasp her. She seemed to be close beside him and then gone, leaving only a trail of perfume, a sensation of breath-taking warmth. He rose from the bed, his hands grasping.

"My darling! Come to me!" he whispered, then a soft throbbing body brushed against his and avid lips were pressed against his mouth. There was something savage, fiendish in the way they clung to him, drawing his soul up out of his breast. His hands tried to draw the trembling figure closer to him, but it seemed always to slip away. Then a searching finger of moonlight came in through the dusty pane of the window, lighting the darkness of the room with a watery radiance, and with a faint sound, the figure drew away from him.

He could see the rickety chair across the room, the cracked mirror on the wall . . . but he could not see the woman whose lips had just been pressed to his! She was still in the room, he could sense her presence but. . . then he saw it! A shapeless mass in the half darkness and silhouetted against it, the only portion of her that was clearly visible, a slender white hand with long, pointed nails!

He stood there transfixed, staring, as the beam of moonlight flickered and disappeared. He continued to stand there as he heard the door of the room open and close and the realization came over him that she was gone. She. . . or It?

For it had not been Lisa whose lips had burned against his, but that black, formless shape from the shrubbery! That Thing which he could feel but not see. It had come to him here in his room at midnight, but now one of Its long, slender hands was visible. And then he knew!

That picture down in the dank, wood-paneled room! The picture of Serafina De Campo. That painted over portrait of a woman dead for centuries. He had rubbed the covering paint free from one hand. If he cleaned the rest of the portrait, removed the rest of the dark, obscuring pigment. . . .

HE WAS moving toward the door of the room, his brain queerly detached from his body. His blood was searing his veins. A choking, burning sensation was shaking every fiber of his being. That full shapely body that had sought him out twice. A body separated from him by a tenuous black curtain which, only partially perceived, had whipped his whole being into a burning frenzy!

The corridor was a channel of night, the stairs a stepped and flowing darkness, then he stood at the entrance to the room where the picture hung which somehow linked the present and the past together. He stumbled across the room until his hands brushed against the low chest under the picture. He found a match box and lit the candle he had left there earlier that evening. Its yellow light was a small warm pool of radiance in the all enveloping darkness.

Then, his eyes wide, fixed on that white slender hand which was alone visible on the dark canvas, he moistened the wad of cloth with the turpentine and started to work.

Under the careful strokes of his hand, the scraping of his palette knife, a slender wrist appeared, then the elbow and

the bare upper arm of the woman who had sat for her portrait before his father or his father's father was born. He worked upward, bringing out the column of a neck on the old canvas, its flesh warm and living. A chin appeared, full red lips, a short straight nose, and then he was gazing into her dark fathomless eyes.

From then on, everything became dreamlike. Hair lying in a loose, dark cloud around bare, lovely shoulders. Down lower the arrogant, exquisite swell of flawless breasts, painted so beautifully that his hands trembled as he cleansed them of the covering pigment. A torso that twisted sinuously, the waist muscles seeming to ripple in their flexion. Then a thin wisp of silk that covered the full curving hips, the sleek roundness of milky thighs tapering into long slim legs. The damp cloth dropped from his nerveless fingers.

His work was finished. There lay Serafina de Campo as she had when she posed for the long dead artist centuries ago, her almost nude body lying languorously on a couch with a robe of curious Moorish workmanship as a background for the pearly whiteness of her flesh.

Paul's knees were starting to buckle under him; he himself did not know whether it was from weakness or from a desire to kneel before that vision of feminine perfection. Then a faint rustling sound came to his ears and even before he turned around, terror and a mad exultation struggling in his breast, he knew what stood at the dark entrance to the room.

Slowly he turned, his heart pounding madly, choking his throat. . . and there she was. The bright robe of Moorish pattern that the artist had painted as thrown casually over the back of the

(Continued on page 115)

THE ASTOUNDING ADVENTURES OF OLGA MESMER

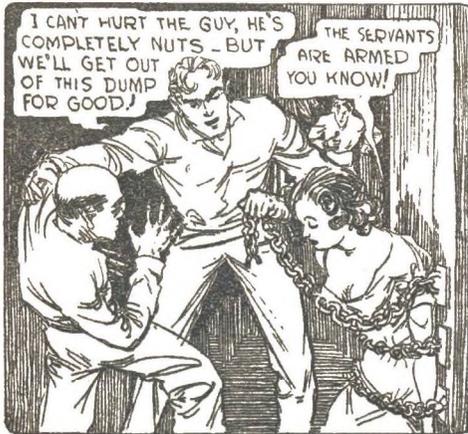
OLGA'S GUARDIAN, "DADDY" RANKLIN, LEARNS THAT SHE HAS LOST THE PHENOMENAL STRENGTH OF WHICH HE HAS BEEN IN MORTAL DREAD FOR YEARS. HE DOES NOT KNOW THAT SHE HAS LOST THESE "POWER-CHROMOSOMES" TO RODNEY PRESCOTT IN THE TRANSFUSION WHICH SAVED HIS LIFE. RANKLIN TIES UP YOUNG PRESCOTT, AND GOES COMPLETELY BERSERK - CARRYING OLGA DOWN TO A CELLAR PRISON. RODNEY FINDS HIMSELF LOCKED OUT.



THE GIRL WITH THE X-RAY EYES



POWERS WHICH WERE DORMANT THROUGH OUT HER CHILDHOOD BURST INTO LIGHT, ONCE SHE IS AROUSED, AND OLGA EMBARKS UPON A REMARKABLE CAREER.



I CAN'T HURT THE GUY, HE'S COMPLETELY NUTS - BUT WE'LL GET OUT OF THIS DUMP FOR GOOD!

THE SERVANTS ARE ARMED YOU KNOW!



SO I SEE! ALL THIS ADDED STRENGTH IS A VERY PLEASANT NOVELTY. AND I HAVEN'T LOST MY SPEED.



HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HIGH JUMP SWEET? - CAN YOU HANG ON?

LET'S GO MISTER!

WE'RE FREE!



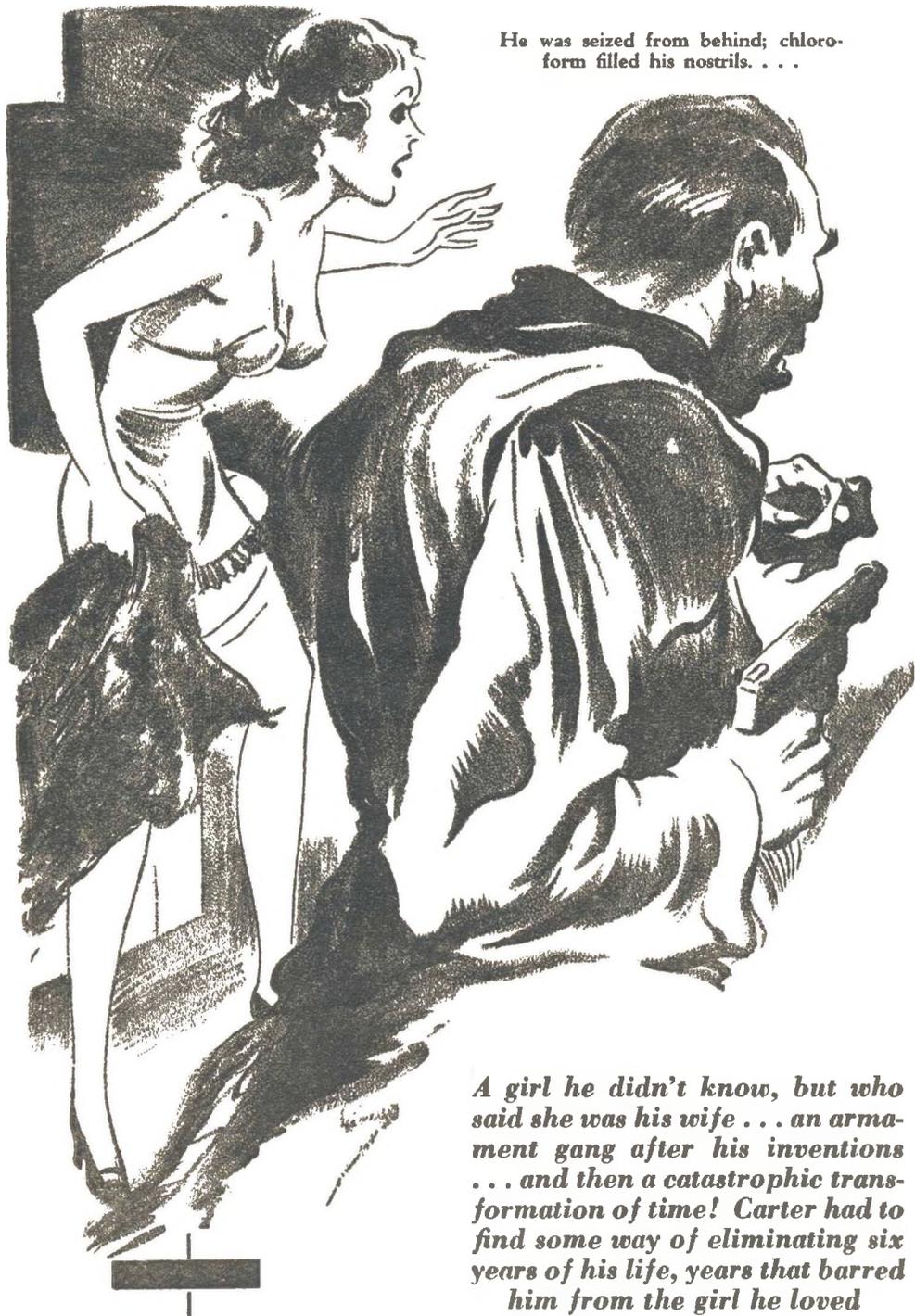
WITH THE FACILITY OF A KANGAROO, ROD LIFTS OLGA WITH HIM IN A LEAP WHICH KNOCKS OUT THE GUARDS...

TOGETHER THEY GO IN SEARCH OF THE BIRTHPLACE OF OLGA. WHERE THE LATE DR. HUGO MESMER HAD SECRETED THE FORMULAE WHICH GAVE STRANGE SIGHT AND STRENGTH TO HIS DAUGHTER...

RODNEY PRESCOTT, HIMSELF A GRADUATE PHYSICIST, PLANS TO AID IN THE SEARCH.

ACROSS

He was seized from behind; chloroform filled his nostrils. . . .



A girl he didn't know, but who said she was his wife . . . an armament gang after his inventions . . . and then a catastrophic transformation of time! Carter had to find some way of eliminating six years of his life, years that barred him from the girl he loved

6 YEARS

By CURTIS BLOUNT



CARTER SETON glanced briefly at the simmering retort over the electric heater, followed the neck of the retort to the angling end-tube of opaque black pyrex, then looked at the thermostat. Even as his left thumb and forefinger made a slight adjustment at the switch, his right hand lowered the pencil to the bottom line of the neatly arranged series of symbols and figures on his notebook page.

The early afternoon sun pushing through the smudged window of his third floor laboratory entered the retort and was refracted by the agitated, amber liquid in slivers of gold light that traced

barely visible fretwork over his formulae.

Carter's pulse was thudding importantly and his face was flushed and warm. He had it . . . he *almost* had it! The solution to the experiment he'd been working on for the past year under the Wilburson Fellowship.

A single, self-sufficient rap sounded at the door. Carter frowned, pencil poised. "Who is it?" he asked irritably.

"It's me, honey—Fran." Her voice tinkled with a merry thinness, a faint ring of hardness.

Carter's frown deepened, yet his heart thudded even more excitedly. Damn the woman! Why must he be so affected by

her? Why must he shame himself by this helpless infatuation for a girl who even had admitted mischievously to him that he wasn't her only sweetheart? She was that sure of him.

SLOWLY he turned the thermostat down to zero, and sighed as the agitation of the liquid subsided. He covered the figures with a blank sheet before going to the door.

An appealing and faintly freckled little nose wrinkled at him. "Having fun?" Black eyes shone and danced with malicious glints. "But of course"—she tiptoed to deliver him an unsolicited kiss—"of course you couldn't when I'm not here."

His head retreated. "I've told you not to come here." His lips lined tightly in anger. "You know I've work to do, and somebody might drop in. That Wilburson Committee. . . ." He shrugged. "They might get tough, end the fellowship checks. Then I couldn't see you at all." He drew her into the room and closed the door.

She said coolly: "They'd think I'm a no-good woman, wouldn't they? They'd say your respectability didn't measure up, and so on. Well, damn them, and you too! I don't have to see you at all!"

But even as she spoke, she had moved past him and flung off her coat, draped it carelessly across a chair. The scene was a re-take; and she'd won each time before. She won now. By the simple maneuver of turning and pressing her provocatively yielding form against him. Her lips brushed his as she murmured:

"Kick me out, honey; give me the air. But I like you, I really do . . . you do something to me . . . *here!*" She touched the pliant curve over her heart, then grinned impudently and added: ". . . and *here!*" Her hand moved across her bosom. Her laughter bubbled softly into

his mouth, was stifled by his savage and despairing kiss. Another tiny wrinkle deepened imperceptibly in Carter Seton's cortex and strengthened the compulsion of his infatuation.

HE HAD met her on a wild party while he was still in college, last year; a party girl. He'd had to see her often after that, and she came to know it. Why she took such a fancy to him, he didn't know, for he had no money. "You're sweet . . . different from the others," was the only answer she'd ever give him. Oh yes, of course there was someone for him to be different from! Some nights when he wanted a date she couldn't give it to him.

As he kissed her now, she snuggled a little closer, in a sliding, standing-on-tiptoe way she had, and ran her cool fingers over his head and face and throat, deliberately feeling the betrayal of his hammering heart in the carotid arteries. With her thumbs against the pulses and her fingers curving to the back of his neck, she squeezed harder than was necessary, and the clever pressure dammed the hot blood beating turgidly in his already dizzy head.

Carter lowered his hands along her back to the curved slenderness of her waist; with the humid softness of her mouth parting to his kiss, he trembled a little and almost circled her waist with his hands as he took part of her weight in his arms. What a maddeningly sensuous body she had . . . and how she knew it!

She was too clever for Carter's peace of mind: if only she had wilted sweetly in his arms and closed her eyes . . . but no, those black eyes shone as she gauged the effect she had on him, and she bent back at the waist, until her mouth, retreating before his, only touched his in small, swift kisses, brushing him with

the heated surfaces of her lips. Her breasts might have been two little ghosts, so lightly did their boldly lifted rondures flick his chest. Finally, laughing, she blew a teasing little kiss between his parted, feverish lips and ducked away with averted face. She twisted firmly out of his arms and walked from him, toward his laboratory table.

Carter closed his eyes for an instant and exhaled with a shuddering breath. He was half maddened by the sudden firmation of their embrace. Then, for an entranced moment, he followed the contour of her hip as it shaped itself gracefully and with rhythmic shivers at every step. The capabilities of that knitted dress had been considered.

"Stay away from there," he ordered sharply.

She stretched a hand toward his notebook, heard the hissing of his breath, and shrugged. "After all, it's not your experiments I love, darling." She sat down in his chair and turned to face him, crossing her knees with a flourish that let her skirt fall above her stockings and wrinkle caressingly across the sleek perfection of her thighs. Her face was rosy now, and even the cream-textured skin above her stocking top was flushed alluringly. Bitterly, Carter stepped toward her. He wouldn't have put it past her to be able to blush from head to toe, at will. . . !

WHEN again he sat alone before the bubbling retort, his mind wandered. Shame at his weakness for Fran depressed him. He should leave women alone altogether, he thought; especially this one. If he kept at his work, if he integrated all his power to the focus of these experiments,—well, he knew he had it in him. Carter knew he was versatile.

The Wilburson committee didn't know

all his ideas. Military inventions, for instance. Selenium detonators, improved; radio controlled projectiles; the atom turbine. . . . Some day he'd perfect them, would work out his ideas practically.

And, like many another modern physicist, Carter was not the scoffing materialist of the nineteenth century. He had not confined himself to the test-tube, the spectrohelioscope, or atom-s m a s h i n g dreams. Carter knew things about the mind. He knew that telepathy existed, and it didn't seem strange to him. And in a little article, he had projected even stranger speculations about the time-space continuum and the basic oneness of all life. The future, the past: branches of the same tree. . . . But the Wilburson committee didn't know about that article, because Carter was practical; he had used a pseudonym.

With a start, he remembered to check the progress of his experiment. But as he lifted his eyes to the retort, a weird sensation froze him motionless. The sun had lowered, but those refracted and reflected slivers of gold and greenish light still danced with the bubbling of the liquid. But the amber clarity was clouding, or it seemed so to Carter; contrarily, the light rays seemed to glow with suddenly magnified brilliance; the retort was growing immeasurably large.

A rhythmic, painful roaring beat in his whole being, and the swirl of liquid began to shape into a girl . . . a life-size girl of heavenly loveliness who smiled, who leaned toward him, whose voice became more audible as the rhythmic beating in his head made itself sensed as pain.

Watching her with intent and wondering eyes, Carter knew abruptly that she *was* bending toward him, that her voice was real. He reached for her hand, and she helped him sit up.

"You poor dear!" she said tenderly. Her hand stroking his forehead was like a touch of refreshing dew. "Your head must ache fearfully."

Carter didn't dare ask, "Why?" The agony in his head was quite palpable to him, though her touch seemed to be lessening it. But he didn't dare speak. Something remarkable had happened. Something wonderful, if it allowed him to remain close to this exquisite creature.

"Would you like a drink of water?"

THE possibilities of how a stiff measure of brandy might pick him up occurred to Carter, but he only said gently, "Yes, please."

As she left the room for the water, he had a chance to observe that he was wearing expensive silk pajamas, that the luxurious bed was in a sumptuously fitted room. The sleeve of the pajama jacket was monogrammed. Someone else's clothes? Not likely: "C. S." Carter Seton. . . .

He tried to ponder calmly. The pain in his head was subsiding rapidly. He said to himself slowly and thoughtfully, "This isn't a dream, and it's not a hallucination . . . it's something rather eerie, because I've never seen her before, and she called me by my name."

Slowly, cautiously, he found his feet. In a daze, he circled the room. There on a mantelpiece was his picture . . . his picture and with it, that of the girl who had just left him. They were together in the picture, their cheeks almost touching. No, certainly all this wasn't a dream, but if it wasn't a dream, what was it?

"Here." She was at his side again, with the glass of water. "Poor Carter." When he had drained the glass, she reached up and kissed him. "You'll be better now, sweet."

"Of course," Carter agreed, not know-

ing what he would be better *from*. But the soothing touch of this girl was enough to make him better from anything.

Suddenly she was sobbing and in his arms. "Oh, why did they have to *hit* you? Why couldn't they just steal what they wanted and leave you alone. You might have been killed . . . and your old invention isn't worth it. It's only made to kill people with, anyway."

Carter frowned a little, even as he kissed her tear-wet eyes. He wanted a better lead even than that. He only said, "I feel lots better."

The thrill of feeling her arms so familiarly about his neck, of feeling the intimate contact of her slim but exquisitely shaped young body, was a gift from heaven that he didn't intend to deny himself, however crazy all this might be.

Invention? Well, of course he was an inventor, but he was still working on that Wilburson Fellowship experiment; he hadn't got around, yet, to his best inventions, especially his military ideas. She must be crazy. Or maybe he was. Maybe he'd invented something and hadn't even known it himself.

PRESENTLY she pulled out of his arms. "You want to see this morning's paper? It has an account of what happened—on the front page."

"Yes, of course." A god-given opportunity to see what was what, in black and white.

He took the paper from her. "The *Ledger-Dispatch!*" he exclaimed.

"Of course, you read it every morning."

"But—" Carter, on second thought, decided not to go on. The *Ledger* and the *Dispatch*, he knew, were two separate papers. But everything else was cockeyed; why not this? The dateline

both explained and confused it all: May 17, 1943.

Nineteen forty-three! But of course it was nineteen thirty-seven. This was ridiculous. Still, it occurred to him, no more ridiculous than the existence of this rich man's house for his convenience, or that picture of himself and the girl . . . or the girl herself. But the paper might tell.

A two column spread in the center said that Carter Seton, prominent young inventor, had been slugged by burglars whom he had discovered in his study. Apparently they had wanted the designs to one of his military inventions, for plans had been scattered about, though none were missing.

A rhythmic, painful roaring beat in his whole being, and the swirl of liquid began to shape into a girl of heavenly loveliness. . . !



"How do they know none are missing?" Carter asked her.

"But darling, you said so yourself, just before you fainted! You said they were after your television-torpedo—and that you hadn't put it all on paper." She was staring at him wide-eyed. "You seem so . . . queer, honey. But," she touched his cheek gently, "of course it was that blow on the head. The doctor said you'd be all right."

"I feel better . . . better," Carter assured her, dazed. "How about—breakfast?" he asked doubtfully.

"It's ready. Want to dress? I'll meet you in the breakfast room."

She kissed him lightly and went out. Carter fingered the tender spot on the side of his head. Glanced at the paper again and closed his eyes. He was in the year nineteen forty-three; he was a famous and rich inventor, the master of a large and sumptuously furnished house, the possessor of a lovely young wife. Why, all this was something like what he might have described as his hope of the future back in—*now* in, he swore—in nineteen thirty-seven. His own future life. Well, it obviously was, and he was in some measure what he had hoped to be.

He must find out what it all meant, but it would be better to go cautiously, to feel his way, and do what was expected of him.

A CLOSET full of clothes led him automatically to get dressed. The suit fitted him as if tailored to him. Had been, no doubt, he reflected . . . or *would be*, in nineteen forty-three!

Chimes sounded at his elbow, chimes that he didn't connect with the telephone until they had sounded several times. A maid appeared in the doorway but turned away when she saw him lift the instrument (a strangely light and comfortable

thing to hold, he noted).

When finally he hung up, he hoped he had carried it off. He wasn't sure what all that had been said really meant. The caller evidently had been a person of authority in some school; a boys' school. He had been calling Mr. Seton to assure him that his son's gripe was nothing at all to worry about; that the boy would return to classes in a day or two.

So, Carter was staggered by the idea, he had a son! How old, he didn't know. And the boy's mother? Carter blushed hotly as he thought of the lovely creature who had kissed him. Apparently she was his wife. That meant . . . it meant that if this was a dream, it was okay by him!

CARTER was bothered by his not knowing what to call her. All during breakfast they were silent except for short remarks. She seemed worried.

"That Mrs. Perth—though I'm sure that's not her real name," the girl suddenly said, "is coming at eleven, you know. She just phoned before you came down. She'd heard about that awful thing that happened to you, she said, and she wanted to know if you were well enough to keep the appointment. I told her yes. You might as well get it over with, as long," she added bitterly, "as you think you must know more about her and why she's so interested in your work."

Carter mumbled, "Sorry . . . it won't take long." Now, who in hell was Mrs. Perth? He wondered. If people wanted his secrets enough to burglarize his home and knock him in the head, maybe other interests also cared enough to set a siren after him.

The siren description fitted down to the last subtle curve, he saw instantly when he greeted her. Mrs. Perth was probably about thirty, but it had taken a couple of hundred years of just the right

ancestors to give her a figure like that!

"How about that drive we agreed on," she almost whispered, as if they had a secret from the rest of the house, from the butler who was retiring, from Carter's wife, who had coldly refused to come down at all. "I've got my run-about."

Carter didn't look back as they scattered gravel on his driveway and hummed out to the road. He let his eyes take account of her, though, and she appreciated that with a little smile, though she kept her eyes on the road.

In fact, thought Carter, she might have dressed with the intention of having him take account of her. That sporty costume she was wearing . . . umm! Snug sweater moulding perfectly formed breasts and letting them shiver delightfully at each bounce or vibration of the car. An oyster gray flannel skirt, pleated and lying in fluted folds along the tapering lengths of her thighs. He could barely see the round of one silken knee, until she shifted a little closer to him and somehow made the skirt slide back into her lap.

She dropped her right hand beside him and steered with the other. Her fingers pressed his, and she let the springy curve of her right breast brush his arm. Glancing at her feet, he saw that short white socks gave an especially delicious intimacy to her trim ankles.

"Do you want to just drive?" she asked softly, "or shall we stop and take up our discussion where we left off?"

IF THIS snuggling act was a sample, Carter found his pulse heightening to think just where they had left off. When he didn't answer, she drove off the highway under a spreading tree. Instantly she was in his arms, had twisted and leaned back so that he had to support her yielding weight, and had turned her mouth to his.

Remembering the girl who was, or ought to be, his wife, Carter wasn't too eager; but he had to find out what all this was about! He kissed Mrs. Perth, felt her legs scrape against his knees as she slid closer, and began to pick up interest. When she pulled her mouth away from his, after a minute, she was breathless and her eyes shone brightly beneath artfully drooping, sooty lashes. If it was an act, it was a very pleasant one, well played.

"I tell you what, Mr.—Uh . . . Carter—" she whispered, to keep her secret from the spreading tree, "Why don't we go to the Chinese Falcon? We can discuss things more . . . privately."

Carter had yet to find out what they were discussing.

In the Chinese Falcon, he apparently knew the waiters. At least they knew him. The manager, though, appeared to be not Chinese, but Japanese. Carter vaguely remembered having been here once in his college days. Why, the thought staggered him, it was here he had met Fran! They'd thrown that party here. But where was Fran? Where was anybody he'd known?

Mrs. Perth nodded to the Japanese and Carter followed her up a little stairway without protest. They had drinks in a private room and they were good drinks. If there was danger in this association, Carter considered, it was going to be sprung on him in a more subtle way than by feeding him a Mickey.

They sat side by side on a leather lounge with the little table before them. Mrs. Perth drew his face to hers, yielded her scarlet lips with a smile that helped the kiss oddly.

She said evenly, after a minute of that spiced kiss, "Carter, darling, what happened last night only proves the danger of your holding onto that design. I know you haven't given or sold it to any com-

pany or government, and Villomar will give you a cool million dollars for the sole rights to the television-torpedo."

"Wait!" he ordered. He smothered her mouth again, and she smiled and accepted the idea. She was a woman with a mission; Carter was young and exciting.

BUT Carter wanted time for the flurry of ideas to settle. Villomar—that told him plenty! World's most notorious armament makers, that company was continually involved in intrigue and counter intrigue, playing one country against another, and had been known to betray both sides. But when a nation wants war machines, it pays and doesn't argue or look too closely at the honor of its merchant.

And the television-torpedo . . . why he must have perfected it! Yet he could not remember ever having worked on it beyond sketching the possibilities of a radio controlled torpedo with television screen, an instrument of battle that could be steered from the attacking ship . . . or from shore . . . as easily as though the operator were in the torpedo itself.

But his wife—what could her name be?—had told him he'd mentioned not having set down the full design on paper. Then the joke was on them, for Carter hadn't the slightest idea what he had worked out for the thing.

He wondered what she'd say if he told her the truth. He said, "I'm sorry, but I've lost the plans for that thing, and I don't remember just how to do them over."

"But that's ridiculous!" she exclaimed angrily. Then she laughed. "You're trying to string me along, aren't you? I know how to make you remember!" She was confident now that he would sell the design, but perhaps a million dollars didn't mean so much to a millionaire as

some other things! She could forgive that!

She caught the hem of her sweater with a sudden movement and pulled it over her head. Before he could stop her she had stepped out of her skirt and was plumped down into his lap dressed in nothing but filmy underthings and stockings and shoes.

Carter felt himself tremble despite his determination to get this woman out of the way and return to the big house and find out about things. He stared fascinated at her bare and trembling shoulders, at ample but firmly rounded cones of lightly clad flesh, faintly glossed by the dim light of the room.

Watching his gaze, she laughed huskily and surged up against him with an undulant movement that ended with her ripe and demanding lips parted for his kiss. Carter's arms tightened spasmodically about her supple form. Not taking her mouth away, she crossed one knee over the other with a movement that turned her a little more toward him.

CARTER didn't hear the key turn, the door open. The girl did. With a choked, breathless cry she leaped from his arms and snatched her clothes, backing away.

"Anna!" came the tense, low voice of the man at the door. He didn't have a gun in sight. He merely closed the door behind him and advanced toward them.

Carter laughed. "The old badger game, huh? You catch me and squeeze and I shell out. I suppose he's your husband, Mrs. Perth!"

"But he *is*!" The girl squealed. "You don't understand. Harry—where did you come from?"

"Never mind that. Thought I was a thousand miles away, didn't you? I've had my eye on you for weeks, and I

She had read part of his diary. "So you've found another girl, have you?" she asked bitterly.



don't give a damn who's paying you, I'll kill you for stuff like this. You dirty little tramp—!"

He grabbed her arm, twisted it behind her, and slapped her face, hard. The girl moaned, but she didn't cry out. "Harry!" she gasped. "I—I love you, believe me.

Get out, before they catch you! They'll kill you!"

"If anybody gets killed, it's you."

Carter took two steps and jerked the man's head back from behind. A right to the jaw. It was almost automatic, yet he wondered how it happened the man

hadn't shot him, hadn't expected some fight.

"Nicely done, Mr. Seton," came the suave voice of Loo Ming, the proprietor of the Chinese Falcon. Behind him as he entered, two small, lemon-skinned men stopped.

"Take this out." Loo touched the fallen man's unconscious form with his foot. The girl seemed scared now. "He's your husband?" She nodded.

"Please don't—kill him," she pleaded. Her voice trembled. She licked dry lips.

Loo Ming ignored her and addressed Carter: "I heard everything through our dictaphone arrangement, Mr. Carter. Let me assure you that we shall not hurt your wife if you are agreeable to the proposition put to you by your lovely companion."

"My wife!" Carter gasped. "Why you yellow rat—!" His hand shot toward Loo's throat, but Loo had already thrust forward the muzzle of a heavy Mauser automatic. Before Carter could make another move, he felt himself seized heavily from behind. Chloroform was filling his nostrils. . . .

"**F**LOWER, mister? Roses, two bits a dozen!" The boy's voice was half a giggle, and Carter, fighting the haze in his brain, knew—when he finally knew anything at all—that the boy thought he was drunk. Carter was slouched, half sitting, half lying, in a doorway. The place, he recognized in some surprise, was several blocks away from his laboratory. It was dark.

"Roses, mister?" The kid tugged at his sleeve.

Carter struggled to his feet. God, what an awful bat he must have been on! His head throbbed. "All right," he mumbled to the boy. He dug into his pocket and found some silver. "Keep it."

Carter tore off one rose from the

bunch and half consciously stuck it in his lapel. He shoved off for home; his rooms were behind the laboratory.

So groggy was his condition, that it was not until he tried the door and found it unlocked that it occurred to him that he couldn't remember any wild drinking parties; he couldn't even remember leaving the lab. He shook his head as he entered and switched on the light.

Carter stared at his notebook, lying on the desk; at the retort on the stand, with amber liquid still and cold within. The sight of that brought back in one white wave everything that had happened to him. He sank weakly into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

Carter Seton's Diary

May 12th, 1937: I've thought it all over . . . everything that's happened since I looked into that retort—how long ago? (It may have been yesterday, for this is yesterday's *Ledger*, here)—and I've decided not to leave this room until I duplicate that experiment. I *have* to get back to her somehow! They have her . . . the wife that will be mine six years from now . . . and I had to leave her just when she needed me!

Yes, I know what has happened. By some queer freak of my mind, while I was staring—into that retort yesterday, I was projected into the future! Into the future of my own life, six years hence. . . . And why not? In my article on the space time continuum and its possibilities I developed the thesis that a man may be projected into the past. Since all life is one, from the beginning of the lowest one-celled bit of slime till now, there's no reason why a man's mind, a bit of the cosmic life, could not find itself a thousand years in the past, or a million. There's also no reason why he should not find himself in the future: it has

happened before, I believe; certainly it has taken place in my case.

Why do I find myself back in the present? Is it because my life is destined to end when that chloroform is clamped to my nose? Shall I never have a chance to save that lovely creature who is to become my wife (how many years hence, I wonder?)

But I can't tell anyone about this. They'd think I was crazy—Fran and all the rest—if I told them I'd been living in my own future life! That I'd found in the year nineteen forty-three a girl lovely beyond imagination; that I actually was married to her and was a rich and famous inventor. They wouldn't believe such a thing could happen to me. They'd think I'd been dreaming, whereas actually, by some accident that I *must* duplicate, I've been given a glimpse into the secret of the co-existence of space and time . . . I've simply been projected into a different cross section of my own life!

CARTER didn't know how long he'd been writing there at his desk, using up his notebook beyond the notes on his experiment, when he swung around, startled.

"Fran! Can't you knock? You walk like a mouse!"

Her impudent, freckled nose wrinkled in a laugh of defiance. "I forgot something when I saw you this afternoon. So I came back, and when I found the door unlocked, I thought I'd just sort of sneak in and kiss you on the back of the neck . . . like *this!*" (So it had been this very afternoon! he thought.)

He couldn't stop her; in fact, he didn't seem able to make any resistance at all!

The warm nibbling of her lips back of his ear sent a chill of pleasure down his back; and that despite the fact that he was saying to himself: "Fran means

nothing to me now . . . not after the kiss of that other girl, my wife."

But then, he wouldn't meet the other girl until some time in the future! Nevertheless—oh! he must get rid of Fran; he must duplicate the conditions of that transformation that had wafted him into the future of six years hence.

Even now—though of course it couldn't be *now!*—but at this moment in the future, she might be suffering tortures at the hands of the armament gang.

Carter straightened and took the girl's arms from his neck.

"You don't love me any more?" She grinned confidently.

He must get rid of her. "Of course I love you," he assured her. "Here's a rose I got for you."

She took the rose and held it between their mouths during a kiss. He drew away and said, gasping: "I'll make some coffee. Then you must go. I've work to do."

"Work, work—always work and no love!" Her taunting voice followed him as he went toward his pantry. He made a thorough search. He'd known he was low on food. But there was not a single can. Nothing. Not even coffee.

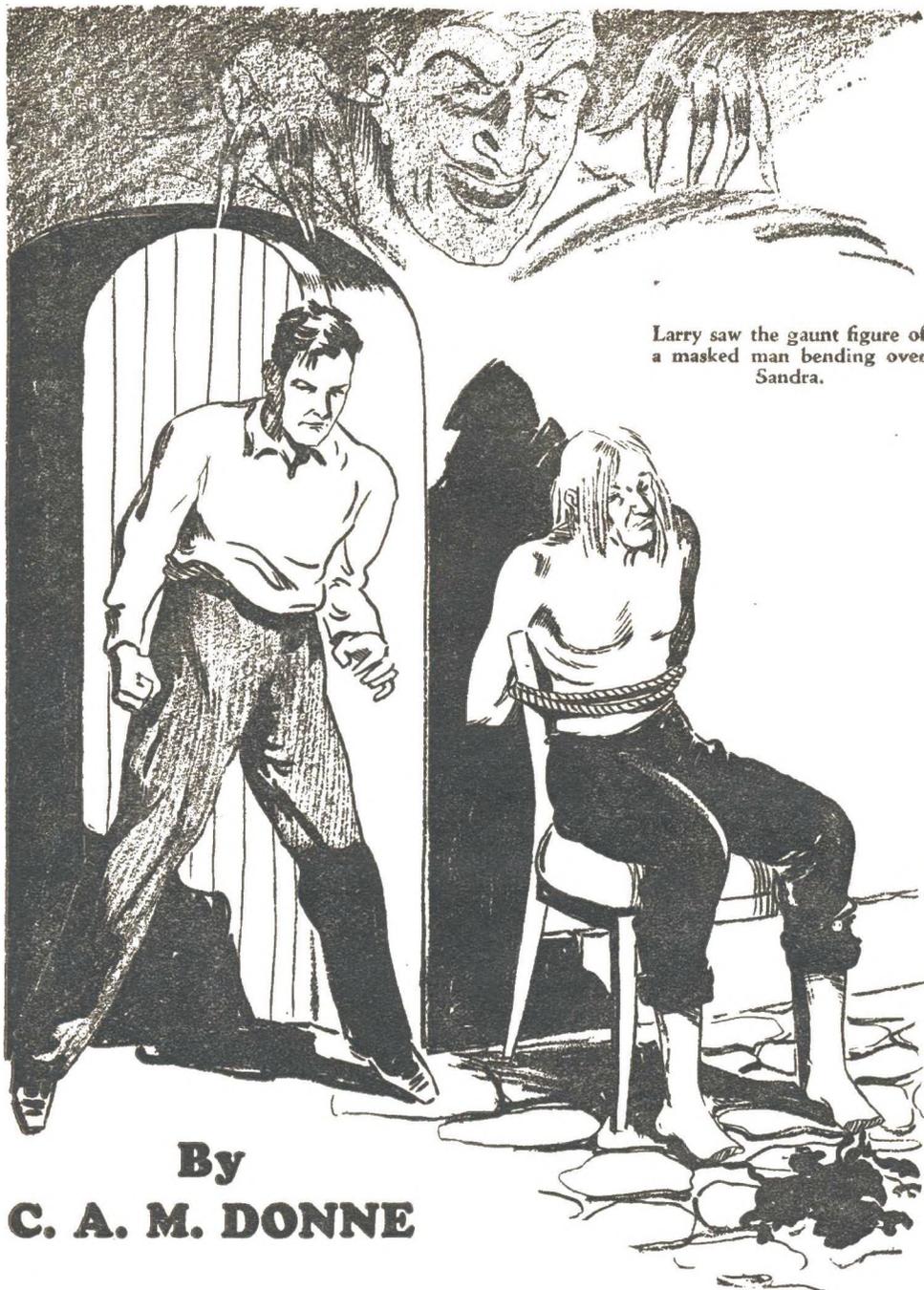
When he returned, Fran's eyes were blazing, her mouth shaking in tremors of bitterness, of jealous hate. She had his notebook in her hands.

"Put that down!" he leaped forward and snatched the book. He had described in it everything that had happened.

"So you found another girl, did you? Fran means nothing to you beside her, is that it? Why you lousy—!"

DROPPING the notebook she flung the rose in his face and started for the door. Carter opened his mouth, took a step after her, then stopped.

(Continued on page 100)



Larry saw the gaunt figure of a masked man bending over Sandra.

By
C. A. M. DONNE

He met her on a ferry boat. It was love at first sight . . . a love that drove him on to find out what mysterious terror lurked behind her lovely eyes

SMOKY fog filled the harbor that warm night, hiding Manhattan's spectral skyline behind an impene-

trable veil, muffling the mournful sirens of tugs and freighters, walling the Staten Island ferry boat away from all

SUMMONS FOR SATAN

the rest of the world. Its fleecy tendrils curled caressingly like ghostly arms around the slim figure of the lone girl at the rail.

Len Larrimore, slanting his seventy inches of lean youth against the side of the cabin not a dozen feet away, watched her out of intent gray eyes that hungered, seeing how the breeze whipped her sheer frock snug against the sculptured firmness of hips and the enticing fullness of softly rounded breasts.

Her small figure was lithe and erect and her oval face, framed in dusky hair that seemed as insubstantial as the mist itself, peered eagerly toward the murmuring water, nostrils distended to sniff



the wet sea-smells. Her skin was old ivory under the yellow lamps, her eyes fathomless pools of blackness beneath sweeping lashes, her lips lush and red. She was lovely and alluring and exotic.

In his loneliness—for he had met few people in New York except those connected with the business of publishing his prize-winning novel, written out West—Larrimore had looked with something akin to longing at many girls who had pretty faces and tempting figures. But never had any woman electrified him with the kind of thrill that came ten minutes ago, when this girl had brushed casually against him on the gangplank.

He hadn't seen her before that. His elbow had felt the gentle inadvertent pressure of a cushioned bosom and then his hand, swinging at his side, had made accidental contact with the yielding softness of a shapely thigh. Probably a dozen women had brushed against him in the same manner that day, on the street and in subway trains, but not with the same result. This time a warm shiver ran through all his nerves, and as he turned to look at the girl he was almost surprised to see that she was clothed. He'd had the amazing feeling that she was not when he had touched her!

THEN he experienced his second heady shock. Her dark eyes laughed up at him and it was as if powerful magnets held him rigid and motionless. There was a mysterious quality in her glance that was new to him. He felt that the spell lasted for hours, although it could not have been more than a second until she said throatily, "I'm sorry!" and passed on, leaving him gaping at the rippling contours of her body beneath the flowered frock.

Even so, the spell lingered—for with-

out consciously willing it he followed her through the cabin to the damp upper deck. They were alone there, but he would not have noticed if they had been the center of a gaping crowd. He saw nothing, thought of nothing, excepting her.

Suddenly the whistle above them gave forth a jarring, ragged blast that would have startled any person less rapt than Larrimore. It startled the girl. She stiffened with a jerk and said, "Oh!" Then she looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and caught Larrimore's eye and smiled a second time.

This time her magnetism was irresistible. He moved toward her, forgetting his natural shyness, and with every step it seemed his heart quickened its tempo. until his pulse was a roaring tumult in his ears as he stood at her side. He put his hands on the rail and grasped it tightly.

"It's a spooky kind of night," he said, striving to sound natural.

She accepted his presence as though she had known him for years. "It's a spooky world," her vibrant voice replied, "filled with forces stronger than people." And he sensed in her words something prophetic, vaguely disturbing.

IT TAKES approximately half an hour for the night ferry to cross the harbor from Manhattan to Staten Island, largest and most sparsely inhabited of the five boroughs of the metropolis, and sometimes longer when fog lies heavily over the water. But this passage was timeless for Larrimore. It was like a dream, whose action may embrace years in a space of seconds, and whose details are forever afterward fuzzy and elusive. An enchanted dream in which things that could never happen in real life become matter-of-fact.

They said things he could never after-

ward remember, except that he learned her name was Sandra and was conscious that she deliberately avoided telling much about her life. They stood close together and he felt her shiver against him, and it seemed natural that he should put his arm around her shoulders. And their lips met and his veins throbbed with liquid fire, and there was no remonstrance on her part, no pushing him away.

Larrimore thought of things he had read about Destiny—about a force greater than human life that brings soul-mates together across the width of the world—about lovers pledged in the beginning of time, who recognize one another suddenly in chance meetings, even though neither had suspected the other's existence. Such things had seemed ridiculous at one time. Now he believed in them.

He had boarded the ferry simply for the ride, intending to return to Manhattan immediately, but that was all forgotten. When the clumsy craft bumped into its slip they went down the gang-plank together, threaded their way through the docks and took a street that climbed steeply up a hill, out of the low-hanging mist. They passed through other side streets, deserted at this late hour, and through a wooded park. At the edge of the park she stopped.

"I'll have to leave you here," she whispered. And even in the shadows he could see that the laughter had vanished from her eyes as they lifted toward the dark mass of a huge house, turreted like an ancient castle, topping the hill above them. It was a gloomy, forbidding spectacle, stirring an unbidden chill that slithered like a snake along his spine.

Larrimore put both his arms around her. "You can't leave me, here or anywhere," he panted. "I've got to keep you always."

"I want you too," she said. "I knew it the moment I saw you. But not for a little while. We'll meet again sometime—"

"Tonight!" he insisted. He bent his head, seeking her lips. His arms tightened, crushing her against him, molding her soft shapeliness to his angular frame. And all at once she responded with an ardor that took his breath away.

Her arms went around his neck in an embrace that stopped just short of being strangling. Her lips were pressed to his mouth; her perfumed breath was a madness against his face. Her body trembled ecstatically and delicious shivers rippled through it. From her throat came little, moaning whimpers of love.

The thumping of his own heart staggered him with its violence. His arms tightened spasmodically around her yielding length and the depths of his emotion held him in a grip that he couldn't break.

He lifted her in his arms as though she had been a child, and the hand that was beneath her knees touched burning skin above the tops of silken hose as her skirt billowed. Again his mouth sought out the soft hollows of her throat. . . .

MANY minutes later, when the tornado of their embrace had passed over, she remembered suddenly that she had been in a hurry. She straightened up, patting her tangled hair into some semblance of order and smoothing her frock. With an effort she disengaged herself from his clinging arms. There was a note of fear in her voice as she said: "I should have returned long before this. He may need me. Saturday night, at the same time, I'll be on the ferry, if you care to meet me."

He had no chance to protest. She kissed him swiftly and was gone. By

the time he had turned to follow she was a fast-moving blur in the dusk, speeding up the hill toward the grim pile of masonry that perched on its summit like a sorcerer's castle against the sky.

Heavy feet crunched in gravel and a cop appeared in the park. Larrimore lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and waited till the cop came close and began eyeing him.

"It's a swell night for a stroll," he said to the cop, "and that's a swell-looking place." He pointed toward the castle. "Who lives in it?"

The cop laughed shortly. "A swell guy to stay away from," he growled. "Maybe ye've heard of the nut that calls himself the Great Zastro?"

Larrimore frowned, trying to think where he had heard that name before. Of course! The Great Zastro—most famed stage magician of all time until two or three years before! Then there had been tragic stories in the newspapers. The master charlatan had suffered a nervous breakdown, had been forced to retire. It was said he had come to believe in his own tricks, had come to think he was really a magician, drawing supernatural powers from the devil.

With his great fortune he had bought an old mansion on Staten Island, had remodeled it to resemble a medieval castle and had equipped it with all the paraphernalia of the mystery stage—sliding panels, trap doors, false walls. His neighbors had petitioned to have him placed in an institution, but nothing had come of it. . . .

No wonder the place had looked to Larrimore like a sorcerer's castle! No wonder the girl Sandra had not wanted to talk about her private life! What could she have to do with a fantastic maniac who believed himself in league with Satan? And what was the strange

power she had exerted over Larrimore—and still seemed to exert?

For he found himself walking swiftly up the hill toward the dark turrets, with no definite idea of what he intended to do when he reached them. He caught himself, hesitated, knew that he should return to the ferry dock and go back to Manhattan and his hotel.

He had already taken a step backward when the scream knifed through the blackness above him. It was horrid and piercing, freighted with agony and nameless fear, rising to a crescendo of madness and gurgling into shuddery silence. It froze Larrimore into a motionless statue and drenched him suddenly with cold, clammy sweat.

LARRIMORE began to run toward the house after that first ghastly moment of surprise. He could not have gone back if his life had depended upon it. Whatever doubts about Sandra had begun to rear their heads vanished instantly at the thought that she might be in danger.

She had disappeared, but he had watched her long enough to know that she had not entered the front door. She had veered from the flagstone walk and crossed the lawn toward the squat tower that flanked the main building on the right. Larrimore went that way, too, and found a narrow door at the base of the tower, open an inch to show a feeble light that filtered from somewhere above.

Cautiously he pushed the door inward and entered a low-ceilinged, circular room floored and walled with rough stone and bare of furniture. A stone stairway, railed with wrought iron, scaled the wall, and the dim light straggled downward along it. The air in the room was dank and stale, as if it had been bottled up for centuries, or had



"Put up your hands," a crisp voice behind him snapped.

been contaminated by something too ancient to belong in the modern world.

Not a sound reached him as he stood holding his breath and straining his ears—not a sound save the faint *drip-drip* of water not far away, as though a faucet were leaking. He tiptoed to the foot of the stairs and stood listening again for a moment. The sound of the dripping ceased and something wet and lukewarm fell upon the back of his hand.

He looked at his hand as a second drop struck it, and jerked it back instantly. Horror surged through him, for the drops were red and sticky and shining. They came from between the wide planks that formed the ceiling, where a dark stain had spread over the wood.

Weaponless, without even a pocket knife, Larrimore started up the winding steps. Before he reached their top, he could see into the room above, which

was loftier and better finished and lit by a wavering radiance that could only have come from candles. His head rose above the floor and he discovered with relief that no living person awaited him there. He saw three lighted tapers in a tall holder, bookshelves, and a table and chairs—and a corpse.

It was a man's corpse. It lay near the wall upon a worn carpet, it wore no clothes, and it had been treated abominably. The man had been very old. The

hair was silver, the contorted face was the color of parchment and false teeth had fallen back from the thin lips, so that they sagged loosely inward.

Larrimore knew the scream he had heard must have come from that scrawny throat, for the man had been dead only a few minutes and he had died under unspeakable torture. Blood still streamed sluggishly from dozens of knife wounds in his chest, stomach and thighs. A keen blade had sliced his body everywhere, had gouged deep in tender parts, had cut away big chunks of flesh. No sacrificial victim had ever departed life more painfully for the glory of the gods of the nether world.

SHUDDERING, Larrimore remembered many things. The Great Zastro had come to believe he held supernatural powers through the generosity of Satan! Since earliest times, people had supposed Satan must be propitiated by human sacrifices of bodies and souls! Sandra had said cryptically: "It's a spooky world, filled with forces stronger than people." Toward the last she had shown an unaccountable eagerness to return to the ugly castle because "he may need me."

Was *he* the man who lay here dead—perhaps the great and pitiful Zastro himself, gone to explore the final mysteries—or was she speaking of someone else, too dreadful to call by name? And—it was not yet a half-hour past midnight—was it because of the supposed significance of the "witching hour" that she was in such a hurry?

God, there was no time to debate her guilt or innocence, now that it was certain something unholy stalked the gloomy corridors of this madman's retreat! Perhaps there was not even time to save her life, if Larrimore should race out into the night again to summon

the police. He thought of that as he turned again toward the stairway, and paused. When he remembered her loveliness, her body straining against him, the glow of her dark eyes when he had kissed her, he could not bear the thought of harm befalling her.

There was a curtained doorway in the room where the corpse lay. Larrimore peered past the curtains into a dark corridor and saw light streaming from a door at its end and from another door, halfway along it. Not even the *drip-drip* of blood came now to break the utter stillness of the castle. He entered the corridor and moved soundlessly to the first door.

The gruesome spectacle of the mutilated corpse had not immunized him to horror. His brain reeled and the hackles of his spine lifted at the sight that met his incredulous eyes in this other room. At first he thought he was looking at a woman hanging there, but a second look showed him it was a man—or had been—an old man whose wavy white hair hung to his naked shoulders and concealed his lowered face.

The man was suspended by thin cords tied to his thumbs and to spikes driven into a heavy ceiling beam. The only garment upon his emaciated body was a pair of trousers of some flimsy material, such as that used for pajamas. His feet dangled six inches above the floor and—merciful heavens!—not a single toe was left upon them! Where the toes had been were crimson wounds from which blood ran in glistening lines, forming a great puddle upon the bare floor of the room, which was furnished only with a bed, a chair and a dresser.

The ease with which the blood flowed suggested to Larrimore that the man might still be alive, and he was about to enter the room to cut the cords that

suspended the pitiful figure. A voice arrested him—a woman's voice!

"Who are you?" it asked softly behind him.

LARRIMORE whirled, his surprise so sharp it almost amounted to terror. He faced a tall, slim girl standing in the lighted doorway at the end of the corridor opposite the turret room. He had a hasty impression of pale yellow hair making golden billows at either side of a milk-white face in which the only features that seemed alive were glittering green eyes and vivid scarlet lips. That first impression told him the girl was exquisitely beautiful, but with a strange, unearthly beauty that boded more evil than good.

He hardly recognized his own voice, so hoarse had it become with the burden of his emotion. He rasped: "It doesn't matter who I am. What's been going on here?"

The scarlet lips did not smile. There was no expression in the face at all. The girl's voice was even caressing as she answered: "You mustn't let yourself be upset. Remember, you are in the house of a magician, where things are not necessarily what they seem."

He grasped at the fantastic notion, anxious to purge his mind of the revolting pictures that filled it. After all, he had seen some pretty startling things on the stage. Lesser magicians than Zastro had appeared to saw pretty girls in two pieces and had pretended to lop the heads from their assistants with swords. They hadn't been so damnably realistic about it as Zastro—if, indeed, the bloody sights in those rooms were illusions—but that didn't prove anything.

"I hope you're right," he told the girl hesitantly, and added, to explain his presence: "I'm looking for a girl named Sandra, who lives here. I found

the door open, saw what looked like blood dripping from the ceiling and came in."

"Sandra?" The blonde girl's penciled eyebrows lifted. "In this house?"

"Don't tell me she's an illusion, too. I know better."

"She might have been here at one time or another, or she might still come occasionally," the girl said. "Zastro has many girls calling on him."

He did not miss the slurring implications of her tone. They hurt him. Sandra hadn't been *that* kind of girl. If that were the case, she couldn't have been the way she was. She couldn't have made him love her so completely in a few magic moments.

And yet, there had been the mist and his own loneliness. . . . Other men, hungry for love, had let themselves be fooled by women who could never have appealed to them normally. Perhaps, after all, he had only been a fool. . . .

Instantly he became angry with himself for his thoughts. He said: "I'd better be going. Only I wish you'd prove to me first that the two men I apparently saw dead or dying are really all right. I don't want to say anything to the police if it isn't necessary, but it all seemed so real."

The red lips bent in a seductive smile. The green eyes glinted like the eyes of a cat in the dark. "Certainly," the girl said. "If you will just come here."

SSOME inner instinct warned him to beware of her. She was all at once too ingratiating, too eager to please. He stood his ground, watching her.

Her eyes hardened and brightened. She said again, her voice just above a whisper: "Come here."

He was tempted to turn away from her entirely. As if she sensed his indecision, she lifted her hand to the

throat of the long, white robe she wore. With a single wrench she flung it open to her waist, and he saw that beneath it she only wore a sheer, clinging chemise.

He had hardly been aware of her figure before. Now he looked upon creamy shoulders and a generous, perfectly modeled bosom, that sagged just a trifle of its own weight. Farther down her waist was satin-smooth and slender, and still farther down her hips began to flare in luscious, flowing lines. Not even Sandra's beauty affected him this way, for he caught his breath sharply as he looked upon her and realized that probably never again in a single night would he look upon two girls so exquisite.

"Come here," she whispered for the third time.

He clenched his hands and unclenched them again. The palms were moist with sweat. He felt his heart begin the familiar trip-hammer rhythm. Why not? he asked himself. She was beautiful and she had called to him. Such opportunities for adventure did not come every evening, and why should he forego this one?

Her gown parted where one rounded knee pushed forward. It was half open now from top to bottom and her slender body was almost completely unveiled. So sheer was her brief chemise that it seemed like a fleecy cloud.

He felt as he had felt in the park, when he had refused to let Sandra leave him. He took a step toward this other girl.

She stretched out her arms to him. Her lips parted and the green eyes seemed to swoon in anticipation of his kisses. This crazy fellow Zastro certainly picked his feminine companions with an eye to beauty, Larrimore thought. He took another step.

"Put your hands up!" snapped a crisp voice behind him.

LARRIMORE managed a bitter sneer as he saw the green-eyed girl's inviting smile change to a mocking grin. He turned his head and looked over his shoulder. Approaching him along the corridor with stealthy tread was a tall, gaunt man in black trousers and shirt, a black skull cap on his head and his face wholly hidden by a mask of black cloth. The man held an automatic pistol in a gnarled fist. Larrimore lifted his hands.

His heart sank. A chunk of ice seemed to settle in the pit of his stomach as he recalled what had happened to the two men he had seen. He was convinced now that there had been nothing illusory about their fate. Convinced, too, that his own fate would be no better.

He said to the girl furiously: "Damn you! I should have known you were rotten—"

The floor opened beneath his feet. He dropped through it, dazed and gasping for breath. He heard the blasting roar of the pistol and felt the stinging tug of a bullet at the base of his neck. His feet thudded against something thick and soft, like a mattress, and he pitched to one side and struck his head against boards. Strong hands grasped him beneath the arms and dragged him. A door opened, letting in the moist smell of the night. He struggled to his feet, clinging to the side of the door.

A whisper, so faint as to be barely audible, reached him: "Run as fast as you can. Bring help!" Then he was left alone.

HE took half a dozen steps into the night. With every movement searing pain crossed the line of Larrimore's neck where it met his shoulder. The bul-

let had passed just beneath the skin, causing no serious damage, but his whole side was soggy with blood. His head still throbbed from his fall, but the air cleared it.

One person, at least, in that hideous house was friendly to him—the one who had helped him to the door. He wondered if it had been Sandra; the whisper



The pistol thundered, the girl slumped down, as scarlet stained her breast.

had been too faint to be identified. And he wondered why that person had not fled with him.

Surely, unless she was in league with the murderers, she was in unthinkable danger. For the second time he realized there was no time to seek policemen or telephones, no time for anything but fast, sure action. He squared his shoulders, flexed his muscles and felt strong enough for anything.

He groped his way to the turret and found the door still ajar. The circular

room was exactly as he had first seen it, save that no more blood dripped from the planks of the ceiling. The corpse was still lying in the room above, however, its ghastly wounds darkening with thickening gore in the wavering light of the tapers.

He thrust aside the curtains and stepped into the corridor. A low, gloating laugh came from the room where he had seen the old man hanging from the ceiling by his thumbs, his lifeblood pouring out at the ends of his feet.

Larrimore reached the door of that room, peered cautiously within.

The old man had been cut down. He sat helplessly in a chair, his feet still bleeding sluggishly, his long hair pushed back and his face the color of death. But he was not yet dead. Dark, glowing eyes, brimming with agony and apprehension, were fixed upon the bed.

And there Larrimore saw something that effected him more deeply than anything else—the white body of Sandra, almost entirely nude, sprawled upon the blankets, and the gaunt figure of the masked man bending over her.

The scrawny fingers of the man prodding the soft flesh of her arms and shoulders, pinching brutally, marring her skin's velvety softness.

And although Sandra's eyes were wide open and she was certainly conscious, she offered no resistance at all to the cruel caresses. It even seemed to Larrimore, watching jealously from the doorway, that she welcomed them.

The gloating laugh came again from behind the black mask and the man looked at the pitiful figure in the chair. "You have only to tell, Zastro," he said, "and I will leave her unharmed for you." "There is—nothing to tell." The dying charlatan's voice was like a distant sigh. "I have said before—there is nothing. But if you let me live—"

Sandra spoke suddenly. "Yes, let him live!" she begged. "In the morning I can make arrangements—"

"No," said the gaunt masked man. "In the morning you would only call the police. I shall let the old fool die, and I shall kill you as I killed your susceptible boy friend a few minutes ago. Then Margot and I will have the whole night to search. But you are too pretty just to be left alone to die. Before I kill you, I shall show you how much I appreciate your loveliness. . . ."

He bent over her again. His caresses became more brutal. Through slits in the mask his eyes gleamed exultantly. . . .

LARRIMORE was about to spring at the fiend when he saw the green-eyed girl come silently through the doorway at the side of the room. She paused, watching the two figures, and her fingers curved into rigid talons.

"Jared, you cheater!" she cried. "You were only to try to frighten the old lunatic—not to make love to Sandra! I warned you what would happen if you tried to trick me!"

Suddenly she was upon him. Her long fingernails raked across his face, tearing away the mask, revealing thin, vicious features. Blood spurted from four parallel furrows in his cheek. Again her claws raked him, gashing his forehead, so that blood poured into his eyes.

He snarled in agony and struck out at the girl Margot blindly. His fist missed and she thrust up her knee, striking him in the groin. The snarl changed to a howl of rage and he fumbled at his hip and brought out the automatic. It was Margot's turn to shriek, but not for long. Three times the pistol thundered, and she slumped to the floor, hands clutched to her breast. Scarlet stained the white robe. Her legs thrashed spasmodically, their white perfection bared to the thigh as the robe fell apart, and then she was still.

"Now," said the killer, "it's your turn, baby." He went back to Sandra's side. Blood from his face splashed upon the ivory of her skin as he bent over her.

Larrimore leaped. The man who had been called Jared was at the opposite side of the bed, away from the door, and Larrimore launched himself in a flying tackle that cleared the bed and the twisting figure of Sandra. Jared

saw him coming and had time to fire once. The bullet plowed downward along Larrimore's shoulder blade, and then their bodies met and they both struck the wall and fell to the floor, stunned.

Jared was the first to recover. His right hand clutched at Larrimore's throat and his left groped for the pistol he had dropped. Larrimore fought to draw air into lungs collapsed by the force of his fall. His hands tore at the wrist pressing against his windpipe, but the other's muscles seemed made of steel.

The pistol came up, gripped in eager fingers. Larrimore's bulging eyes looked into its deadly muzzle. He felt darkness closing in upon him and thought dully that it would be as well to die by a bullet as by strangulation. His hand moved automatically toward the gun, but so slowly he knew he could never reach it before the trigger was pressed.

AND then Jared vanished from in front of him. The hand that had been squeezing Larrimore's windpipe was gone suddenly, letting sweet air rush into the tortured lungs. The hand that had held the pistol was flung up wildly, releasing the weapon. Jared dropped downward, through the floor, and Larrimore had a brief glimpse of a yawning hole. Then the trapdoor closed again.

Zastrow was chuckling feebly. "Some sense, after all, in my madness!" he wheezed. "Secret passages—trap doors in every room and hallway! Mystify guests—and murderers! There's a door—just under the window—"

Larrimore scrambled to his feet, snatched up the fallen pistol and rushed to the window. He threw the sash open just as a gaunt, black figure staggered

into view beneath him. Without pity he aimed the gun and triggered. Five shots crashed out before the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. The killer was a huddled, dark shape sprawled on the lawn below. . . .

Sandra had not moved from the bed, and now Larrimore discovered what he had not seen before. She could not very well have resisted Jared's advances, for her wrists were bound behind her with strips torn from the bedsheets and a twisted loop was around her throat, the free end fastened to the head of the bed. Jared could have strangled her had she fought, simply by tightening the noose. As it was, her face was purple from her efforts to get free and she had difficulty in breathing.

Larrimore ripped the sheets to shreds, untying her. He put his arms around her, thrillingly conscious of her near nudity, and held her close until she had recovered.

"Get a doctor!" she gasped as soon as she could speak. "Zastro is dying."

Feebly the old man shook his head. The hand he had stretched forth to the wall to press the button that had released the trap door had fallen limply to his side and his eyes were closed. The floor was almost completely covered with his blood and his body was so white it seemed transparent.

"No," he whispered. "No doctor can help now. I'm dying—and I'm well again. They tortured me to make me tell a secret that never existed—and made me sane. You have been good to me, Sandra. You will find my will leaves you everything—"

She was at his side, cradling his withered cheek against her own, when the death-shudder shook him. She lifted dark, tearfilled eyes to Larrimore.

(Continued on page 113)

Death is a



The Goat God had whispered, "Go back! Death waits ahead!" But Beauchamp and the girl went on to their destination, and to an adventure that chilled their blood

THE sun went down leaving only a gray ghost of light that thickened toward darkness. To right and left of the shell road was swamp: black water choked with lily pads, occasional muddy hillocks, oak and cyprus

that clawed the gray sky with leafless arms; and everywhere the dank gray curtain of Spanish moss.

"You can feel it," Charlie Beauchamp said to the girl who rode beside him on the front seat of the automobile. "It's the

By **WILLIAM B. RAINEY**

Treasure



him. He leaned his head close to her ink-black hair, whispered, "Darling!" and looking downward saw that she had pulled her skirt above her knees because of the heat and the white flesh of her legs glowed softly in the gloom. He let his hand slide from the steering wheel around her waist, and felt the responding quiver run through her. She was wearing a man's shirt, open at the throat, and he could glimpse the soft swelling of her breasts and the shadowed valley between them.

She asked, "How much farther is it, Charlie?" There was a throbbing promise in her voice.

"A few miles."

THE change came over her suddenly and without warning. She was abruptly tense at Beauchamp's side and in her face there was something unnameable, something almost psychic as though she were looking beyond the

The faceless girl carried two chickens in her hand, a hen and a rooster.

bayou at twilight. It's a world of its own. It's the Congo transplanted. It's the ancient, the eternal. And sometimes I think it's the home of evil."

"You get quite poetic over it," Marda said.

He glanced to see if she were making fun of him. She wasn't. Her eyes were dark and serious as she stared out into the swamp. Her lips, full and softly curved and damp, were parted. She had never seemed so furiously beautiful to Beauchamp as she did now. A hot-and-cold wave of excitement shot through



gloom and the swamp and into some ineluctable horror that lay ahead of them. "I'm afraid," she whispered.

Beauchamp looked at her, incredulous. "Afraid? Of what?" The three persons on the back seat of the car had heard her and stopped their conversation to listen.

"I—I don't know," Marda said. "But there's something—out here, something gruesome and deadly."

"That's just the way the swamp makes you feel," Julian Rivers said from the rear. "A lot of this country remains exactly as it was when only the Indians had seen it."

"Julian probably knows how many Indians there were," June Borden said. "For breakfast he eats a History of Louisiana."

"That's why I'm crashing your party," Rivers said good-naturedly. "I need some more information for an article I'm doing and Charlie's got a collection of manuscripts, letters, and old books out here that a collector would pay a fortune for."

Beauchamp was not listening. His mind had turned back to the time two weeks before when Tom Delaney and Marda had opened at the Crescent Theater in New Orleans. They were billed as brother and sister, though Marda had told Beauchamp they were not related. The act was part frank trickery, and part a revelation of the girl's amazing psychic abilities. Beauchamp had seen the first performance and afterwards met Marda backstage. He would never forget that meeting, or the hours, and days and nights which followed.

She had been sitting at her dressing table, her back to the door when Delaney brought Charlie in. A silk scarlet robe draped free over her shoulders. His gaze meet the reflection of hers in the mirror and it was like an electric shock, jerking him stiff and taut.

He didn't remember Delaney introducing them, then leaving the room. He was staring at the dark, hypnotic face in the mirror. Then she turned, still sitting, and looked full at him. The scarlet wrap hung loose and he could see that she was wearing little beneath it. The full, breath-taking bosom was half visible, firm and

quivering with her breath. The long, beautifully shaped legs were stretched in front of her and there was a glimpse of sleek white thighs.

He tried to tell her that he'd enjoyed the act. The words stuck in his throat. Then he was asking her if he could see her after the show.

HOW it happened he never knew. She had stood up and all at once his arms were around her, her lithe body was flat against him from knees to shoulders, her mouth damp and hungry burned into his. He could feel her breasts flattening upon his chest, feel them throb with the emotion that ran through her.

Then she was away from him, the scarlet gown held tight around her, hair, so black it was almost blue, framing her face. Her eyes were wide with that look of seeing through him into the future. "I knew when you came in the door," she whispered. "I knew we could never keep away from one another." And then the look on her face changed and she said, "I'm afraid! I'm afraid!" and she was clinging to him again, madly, despairingly . . .

After that night Beauchamp was scarcely conscious of anything except Marda. He met her after each show. He was with her most of his waking hours, and a good part of those when he slept. More than once she had suddenly said that she was afraid, that she felt some horrible doom waiting for them. But she couldn't explain the feeling, and Beauchamp had enjoyed it—because she was one of these women on whom fear and danger acted as a stimulant, sending wild, almost inhuman fires storming through her.

He had noticed that her psychic fears came more often when he talked of the ancient, bayou-surrounded home of his ancestors and had offered to bring her

out for a weekend's fishing and cure her. Delaney had insisted on coming, bringing June Borden with him. Beauchamp had consented, though without much pleasure. Several times in the past two weeks he had noticed Delaney watching him and Marda. He believed the man was jealous, but Marda said there had never been any relation between them except professional partnership. And after Delaney and June Borden, Rivers also had asked to come along.

NOW Beauchamp let his gaze shift once more from the road to the girl beside him. She was staring at the swamp again, and in her face was that look which had troubled him since their first meeting.

Abruptly she said, "It's the swamp. Death is here. I feel it."

"This is a hell of a cheerful talk," June Borden said. She was a girl with the face of a cherub and the body of Diana. She could knock over three quail with four shots and drink a pint of corn whiskey without showing it, but to look at her you'd think she slept with a teddybear cradled in each arm.

Rivers said, "With you along . . ." The last word was hurled from his mouth as the car went into a lurching skid. Shells machine-gunned against the fenders. Marda's cry was sudden and sharp, drowned in the deafening roar that merged with a dark streak crashing down before the automobile.

The car jerked to a halt. Beauchamp held the steering wheel with hands bloodless from pressure. Sweat had abrupted thick around his mouth. He stared at the dead tree which lay across the road.

He had seen that tree falling in the last second that gave him time enough to stop. And the tree had not leaned slowly, gathering speed for its fall. There was no wind blowing to crash it down.

Yet without warning it had slashed at them.

And in that moment of shocked, immobile silence the voice sounded. "Go back!" it said. It was scarcely a whisper and yet it shook the murky gloom like a cannonade. "Go back! Death waits ahead of you!"

IT SEEMED to Beauchamp that he had been staring at the figure for seconds before he saw it, that it was formed of gray and ghastly twilight and nothing else, that he could see through it as through a mist. It was the satyr of mythology, a creature neither human nor animal but with the goat-haired body of a man and above that the head of a goat, and all made of a substance no thicker than smoke.

"Go back," its voice whispered in rolling thunder. "*Beyond this tree there is death*—for some of you."

A hideous, Pan-like expression twisted the goat head and Beauchamp was thinking suddenly, "The Goat-God, the God of all animal evil!"

"Death for some!" the thing whispered again. "And love for others!" It was looking straight at Marda then, and there was unspeakable wickedness in its voice.

Beauchamp didn't know that he had moved, but he was outside the car, rounding the front fenders. And then he stopped. His mouth was wide open now and the sweat stood slimy upon his face.

For the figure had left the road, wavering like blown fog out upon the dark water of the bayou—water that Beauchamp knew was twelve feet deep in places! It scudded over the water and beyond brush that did not quiver as it passed. Then twilight swallowed the figure into itself.

June Borden stepped out beside Beauchamp, a shot gun in her hands. "Damn

these gun cases," she said. "I couldn't get the thing off to save my life." But beneath her makeup she was pale.

"It was the goat-headed voodoo God," Rivers said. "I've read about him." His voice shook slightly as she spoke. Against the gloom his face was a shocked white.

"It was Death," Marda said. "And we can't escape it! We can't!" She ran to Beauchamp and clung tight to his hand. She was panting, her eyes dilated. Through the open V of her shirt he could see the high swelling of her exquisite breasts and see them move with each gasping breath.

For a moment Beauchamp stood motionless, tall and lean, wide-shouldered, the angles of his face increased by the tight set of his mouth. He said, "It was some trick. It must have been. But I didn't know there was any voodoo left out here."

"If the Negroes are having a ceremony and want us to go back, we'd better do it," Rivers said. "I don't know much about those rites, but they get pretty wild at times."

"Phooey! If there's a ceremony I want to see it," June said. "And I'm damn sure not going to let anything keep me from fishing tomorrow."

The final decision was to go ahead. June and Delaney insisted on it and the others were rather ashamed to argue. But even as they dragged the tree aside, Beauchamp kept remembering how the figure had formed out of nothing, how it had blown like smoke across the water.

DARKNESS came as they drove. It crowded in upon them, a suffocating blackness through which the car lights cut sharply. And with the darkness chill, almost supernatural quiet came upon the swamp. There was no chorus of frogs and crickets, no night birds chirping: only the faint purr of the motor, the grind

of tires on shells. And then from far off there was another sound.

Marda huddled so close to Beauchamp he could feel her breast warm against his arm. "What's that?"

"Dogs," Beauchamp said. "In the Negro quarters I imagine, I never heard them howling so loudly before."

The trees ended, leaving them at the edge of a large clearing that tilted gradually upward. At the top was the house, a huge and shapeless mass against the night. Then the car had topped the knoll, turned into a U shaped drive before the house, and stopped. "Here we are," Beauchamp said. When he cut off the motor, the howling of the dogs came clearly from somewhere beyond the house.

What had once been magnificent lawns were rank with weeds and bushes. Shrubs pressed thick and dank against the walls. One of the tall columns across the front tilted crazily. The place stood dark and ominous.

"I wonder where the overseer is," Beauchamp said. "I wrote him we were coming." He tooted the horn and yelled, "Hello! Crass! Where are you?"

A light showed at the far end of the hall which bisected the house. Yellow and shoulder high it wavered toward them, growing larger until it came through the front door and Beauchamp could see the thin, dark, highboned face of Sam Crass, his overseer.

"Hello," Beauchamp said. "You got my note I was coming out?"

Crass nodded, his head throwing distorted shadows across the floor.

"Well, let's go in," Beauchamp said. "Some of the help will get our bags." He took Marda's elbow. The planking of the steps was soft and rotting. Beyond the house the dogs continued to howl.

Marda held to Beauchamp. "You go

Three huge bucks carried Marda to the place of sacrifice.



to my room with me," she whispered. "This house—it's so strange—and those dogs . . ."

HE WENT gladly enough. There were no electric lights. Candlelight showed a high-walled room opening on a small balcony, heavy mahogany furniture, a huge fourposter bed over which

a mosquito net hung ghostly in the gloom. Marda turned swiftly to him as the door closed behind them, flung her arms around his neck, her body hard against his. Fear had made her eyes wide and luminous, and as always it set conflicting emotions running like wildfire through her veins. "Charlie," she whispered. "Hold me. Hold me hard. I'm afraid—

terribly afraid!" And she clung to him as if she'd never let go.

He held her. They stood in the center of the room, swaying, bodies close together, mouths avid on one another. She was wearing little beside the shirt and a thin skirt. Through the cloth he could feel the warmth of her pulsing flesh, feel the sweet flowering of her hips.

His heart was hammering painfully and he could scarcely breathe. His muscles felt watery. His knees trembled. With a sudden surge of new-found strength, he gathered the girl in his arms and cradled her against his chest. The movement loosened her shirt at the neckline, slid it off one white shoulder, and a snowy breast gleamed momentarily in the candle light. His mouth sought and found the soft, intimate hollow of her throat. Through eager, parted lips her hot breath fluttered in his ear.

"Charlie," she gasped. "Charlie . . ."

IT WAS long moments later that the girl suddenly stiffened in his arms. A scream jarred in her throat. Her arm was skeleton-white as she stabbed a finger toward the open balcony. "Look! Look!"

For an instant Beauchamp thought he was dreaming. The thing he saw was impossible! Horror squeezed his heart and sent pain lashing through his body. He tried to breathe and couldn't.

There was a woman on the balcony, barely visible in the moon-tinted light. To all appearances she was totally, gorgeously naked. Slim, curving legs rose rhythmically to swell into rounded hips. Above a flat, sleek waist, her upper body was majestic. In the moonlight her flesh was the color of saffron, swaying, undulating, gyrating with an unholy motion. There was something horrible, something furiously and irresistibly evil about her movements. Beauchamp

wanted to scream, to run howling away from her—and he found that he was in the center of the floor, going forward like a man hypnotized, unable to resist.

She half turned in her dancing and the moonlight fell pale across her face. Then Beauchamp heard his own voice torn terribly from his throat. He reeled backward, his hands over his eyes.

For the girl on the balcony had no face! There was only a skull over which drooled slimy tatters of flesh. The eyes were blank, glaring sockets, the mouth lipless with white froth dripping between broken teeth.

Somewhere in the night a voice whispered tremendously, "Leave! Leave this house of the damned or your women shall be as the one you see before you!" It was the voice of the Goat-God!

Marda's scream helped jerk Beauchamp back to his senses. He fought his nerves, conquered them. His muscles were stiff and aching as he flung himself toward the balcony. And then he stopped, wild-eyed.

The place was empty except for pale moonlight!

He stood motionless for a long moment, feeling unbelief and terror crawl through him. His body was sleek with sweat; but his mouth felt as though it had been stuffed with dry cotton and, trying to dampen his lips with his tongue, did no good.

He turned back into the candle-lighted room. Marda was crouched at the side of the bed, forgetting to pull her shirt back over her semi-nakedness. "It's Death," she whispered. "We can't escape. I knew . . ."

"I'm going to find out," Beauchamp said. He heeled and went out of the room.

CRASS the overseer was on the back porch, gaunt head held to one side,

a nasty grin twisting his mouth. "Listen at them dogs," he said. "They howl that way down in the quarters most every night now."

Beauchamp gripped his shoulder, spun him around. "What the hell's going on around here? What's happened?"

Crass laughed. "How'd I know? Been some talk 'bout hoodoo. Four or five blacks that used to be round here ain't here no more." He shrugged.

"Who's behind it?" Beauchamp said. "Who's the headman down there now?"

"Nigger calls hisself Seymore. A high yellow. He come here 'bout a month ago. Right after that all this stuff started."

"I think I'll see him," Beauchamp said.

The grin faded from Crass's senile face. "I wouldn't bother down there if I was you. They go crazy over that hoodoo stuff. Besides . . ." There was sudden terror in his eyes. "You can't mess around with that stuff. It ain't all human . . ."

"I'm going to see him," Beauchamp said. But first he went back into the house. He found Delaney and Rivers, told them to take the girls back to New Orleans, to leave right away. They objected, and when they found Beauchamp refused to let them stay, they tried to persuade him to go with them.

"Listen," Rivers said. "You'll only get yourself killed out here alone. Let's take the girls in and then all come back together, bring the sheriff. Or else just leave the Negroes alone until they get over this spell."

"I'm going to stay," Beauchamp said. And he did. June Borden swore she wanted to stay with him; Marda tried to make him come back to New Orleans with them. He looked down at the full curves of her body and she pressed close against him, begging him to come with her. Ecstatic memories throbbed hauntingly within his brain. But he shook his

head, and presently he stood alone on the porch, watching the red tail-light of the car sweep out of the drive, then fade downward into darkness. Far off in the Negro quarters the dogs kept howling.

SEYMORE, the hoodoo man, was not in his cabin when Beauchamp got there. Nearly all the Negroes were gone from the quarters and those that remained shook their heads in terror when he questioned them. There was a meeting somewhere tonight. They swore they didn't know where. But Beauchamp didn't give up the search. As a child he'd heard vague whispering about the place where the two-headed doctors did their work. It had always been somewhere in the swamp beyond Crescent Bayou.

Ten minutes later he was in a small pirogue. Across the guwhales lay a repeating shotgun. In the right pocket of his hunting jacket he carried a .38 automatic. In the left pocket was a flashlight.

There was no way to know where to begin his search. The bayou coiled for miles, losing itself in innumerable others, twisting down through swampland and islands all the way to the gulf. But Beauchamp went straight across the narrow tongue of water toward the heart of the swamp. It was somewhere in this section that most of the child-heard stories had located the place.

He pushed the pirogue onto a mud-flat, left it, and plunged into the utter darkness beneath the cypress and moss-hung oak. The white cone of his flash lashed the darkness. A bird stirred in bushes to his left, making a little rustling sound among the leaves.

As he went ahead, the swamp tightened around him. Muck and water sucked at his shoes. At times he was forced to balance carefully on a water-surrounded hillock, search with his light until he found the next one, jump for it over

quicksand that would have sucked him under in brief seconds. Now and then he saw the dark sleek coil of a moccasin or from the darkness heard one slither through marsh grass and water. To right and left vines writhed downward like the dangling ropes of some huge and forgotten stage scenery.

IT HAPPENED without warning. There was a sound that might have been wind in the brush. He glanced toward it casually.

A hoarse cry belched in his throat. He tried to swing the shotgun, get the butt under his elbow. But his muscles were stiff with fear. He could feel his eyes bulging, seeming to explode from their sockets.

Before him stood the goat-headed figure—less than two feet away!

The instant seemed to last for hours. He kept trying to swing the gun, seeming to move with the drifting slowness of a man underwater.

And then the light went out of his hand, spinning through the darkness. Thunder crashed against his skull, the very force of the impact bending his knees. He began to fall, slowly, turning over and over in darkness that wrapped itself around his brain.

SOUND boomed with slow rolling monotony. It was the throb of pain within his head, he thought. His brain seemed to contract, then flow outward to strike hard against his skull, but gradually the pain cleared until he was able to see and think.

He was lying in thick sawgrass that separated a big clearing from the dark waters of a bayou. Firelight washed over the sawgrass, and between the blades he could see the clearing.

Huge trees formed a kind of amphi-

theatre some fifty feet in diameter. In the center was a fire, and on the other side of the fire were three tom-toms over which naked Negro bucks crouched, beating out steady time with the heels of their hands. Circling them and the fire were other Negroes, men and women, perhaps fifty in all. Some of them had on scraps of clothing, others were entirely nude.

Firelight gleamed on sweat-sleek bodies, on breasts, huge and ponderous, small and conical, erect or flabby. They crouched or knelt, swaying with ceaseless rhythm of the tom-toms. And from them, low and agonized, came a moaning chant. Their faces were rapt, insensible to all except the gruesome ceremony about to begin, eager to have it over with so they would be released on a wild unlimited orgy.

The beating of the tom-toms increased. It rolled into one long crescendoing fury. And stopped. On the sharp silence a woman screamed, "Heah he come!"

Every person in the clearing turned to stare past where Beauchamp lay hidden toward the bayou.

Beauchamp tried to move and realized for the first time that his hands and feet were tied. He doubled his legs under him and rolled. As he did, his trousers were pulled up over his ankles. He stared at them, unbelieving.

His legs had been painted black!

For a moment he did not understand the significance of what he saw. And then, slowly, it came to him. There was no way to know what the reaction of these Negroes would be if they found a white man watching their ceremony. They might kill him. They might break and run. But if they found Beauchamp now they would never realize he had been painted. Shouting at them would

make no difference. They were beyond the point of understanding words.

He remembered suddenly the words of Crass, his overseer. "Four of five blacks that used to be round here ain't here no more." What had happened to them? He had only the dreadful memories of stories heard as a child—*stories of human sacrifice!*

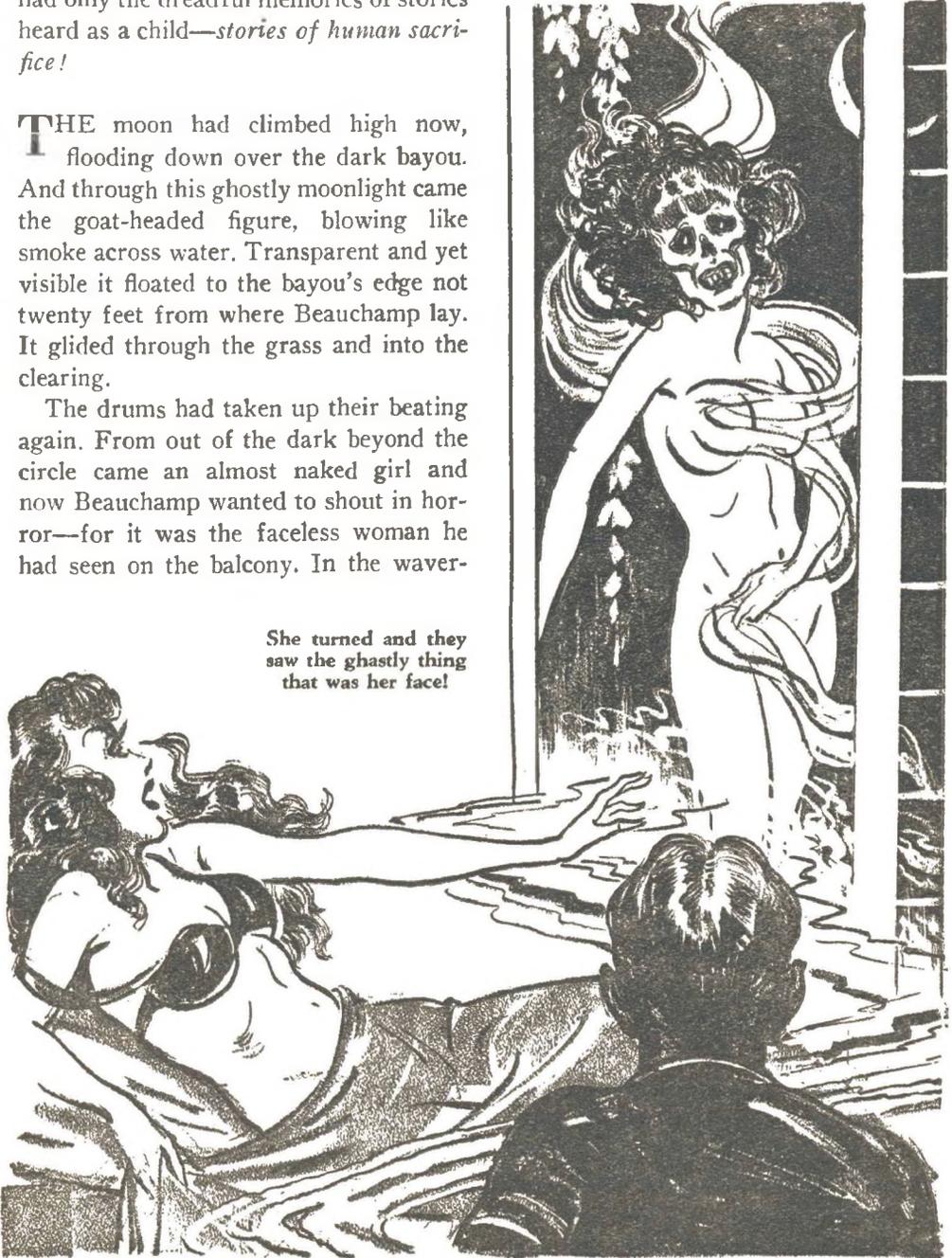
THE moon had climbed high now, flooding down over the dark bayou. And through this ghostly moonlight came the goat-headed figure, blowing like smoke across water. Transparent and yet visible it floated to the bayou's edge not twenty feet from where Beauchamp lay. It glided through the grass and into the clearing.

The drums had taken up their beating again. From out of the dark beyond the circle came an almost naked girl and now Beauchamp wanted to shout in horror—for it was the faceless woman he had seen on the balcony. In the waver-

ing light of the fire she was more dreadful than ever, the shards of flesh drooling blood across the skull-like face.

She danced forward with that vile, animal motion that was more than a human being could watch without feeling re-

She turned and they
saw the ghastly thing
that was her face!



vulsion storm through him. The fire glinted on her thighs and flat stomach, on the proud, heavy splendor of her breasts. Her whole writhing body glistered as though it had been oiled. The negroes swayed and screamed, held back from one another only by some unheard and superhuman command.

The faceless girl carried two chickens in her hands, a hen and rooster. She went down on her knees as she approached the Goat-God, writhing her body, holding the chickens toward him. But he shook his head and the Negroes groaned in terror as she turned from him toward an old man who lifted a razor and cut the throats of the chickens. Holding the bloody carcasses high, she let the crimson stream over her body, then glided out of the circle again.

Almost immediately she came back leading two white goats, male and female, dancing between them with that horrible writhing motion. But again the God's head shook from side to side.

A fearful wail went up. The Negroes were crouching, contorting, held by terror and even grimmer emotions. But as the old man cut the throat of the goats, the God turned and pointed toward the sawgrass some twenty yards from where Beauchamp lay. Three huge bucks went to the spot, stooped, and lifted into the light the form of a woman—the woman who would be used as a human sacrifice.

Beauchamp went half mad. He screamed and stormed at his ropes. For although the girl's body was bronze-colored, he knew her. It was Marda!

HE SCARCELY knew when the men came and lifted him, dragging him through the sawgrass into the clearing. His bulging eyes were fixed on Marda's body bound upright to a post near the fire. The light wavered over the slim,

swelling legs, the high firm bosom. Her mouth hung slack. Her eyes were glazed with terror.

The grass had cut Beauchamp's face and hands and legs in a dozen places, but he felt no pain. The blood ran sleek over his painted skin. The crowd's screams were cataclysmic now as they begged the God to end the sacrifice which would satisfy him, and release them to their own crazed devices.

Then men half carried, half dragged Charlie Beauchamp across the clearing. He felt the heat of the fire increase against his face, felt it burn at his eyeballs as the Negroes thrust him ahead of them toward the tall pole at the edge of the fire. He fought with them as an animal does, insanely, using feet and shoulders and teeth. But even while he struggled, they untied his hands and ankles, pushed him against the pole, pulled his arms and legs around it.

The old man who had killed the chickens and goat was erect now. The light played in red and running flashes upon the razor in his hand.

And then Beauchamp's voice joined with the screaming. "Oh Lawd!" His knees buckled, every muscle in his body went limp.

The Negroes who had been holding him changed their grips to support him. There was a split instant in which the hands held him laxly. And in that instant Beauchamp acted.

His knees straightened, catapulting him away from the pole and out of the Negroes' grasp. Headlong he dived at the old man who had killed the goat and chickens. There was no chance for the fellow to move. Beauchamp's swinging left fist landed on his jaw, smashed him down. The razor fell, glittering in the firelight. Then Beauchamp had caught it up. He plunged at the Goat God. He felt

the swinging razor strike, the blunt side jar back against his knuckles.

His shoulder plunged into the Goat God and pain jolted through him. Then they were on the ground, rolling. And all at once the creature under Beauchamp ceased to struggle.

It stiffened and began to scream!

Beauchamp wriggled to his knees. He caught the goat-head and jerked. In the red firelight he stared down into the convulsed face of Julian Rivers.

The cry gurgled off. The mouth bent in a contorted and furious grin. "That damn mulatto double-crossed me," he said. "But all I needed was tonight. I . . ." He died, the hideous grin still twisting his face that was red and purple in the firelight.

Beauchamp stood up and turned. He and the corpse and Marda were alone in the clearing.

SEVERAL days later Beauchamp was able to explain the whole thing to Marda. "Julian was a history student," he said. "He had come on some old papers that he believed indicated where La Fitte, the famous pirate, had buried treasure on my property. But a vast amount of digging was necessary, more than he could do alone. Besides, he might have been seen by the Negroes. So he started up that voodoo religion, using it to make them do the work and to frighten them into keeping quiet.

"He needed help, and he got this mulatto Seymore to go out and live on the place and be the head hoodoo man. Seymore figured he'd finally found the treasure and needed only one more day to get it up. He planned to double-cross Julian and tried to kill him and all of us with that log."

"Seymore tried to kill Julian again when Julian was driving us back to New Orleans," Marda said. "He blew up the

car, and June and Tom were killed. But Julian wasn't hurt and he got out and fought with Seymore, killed him. Before then I'd heard so much he thought it best to do away with me."

"He had to get me out of the way too," Beauchamp said, "and planned to have the Negroes do it, so that no matter what happened, he couldn't be blamed. I was lucky that I happened to kill him with that razor despite his costume. He had big, air-filled tin shoes like boats. When he stood on them, they sank under the surface of the water, but supported him. He had tiny mirrors hung all over his costume so that looking at him you saw a reflection of the ground and bushes in front of him which were just about the same as the ground and bushes behind him, so it looked as though you were seeing through him.

"But that razor got between two of the mirrors and almost did go through him. And that girl we saw on the balcony—her skull-face was made up too. She was a sort of half-witted mulatto who lived out there—probably Crass's daughter."

"And the treasure?" Marda said. "You said they had located it. Did you find it?"

"Yes. And the papers were genuinely La Fitte's too. But the treasure wasn't what Julian had expected it to be."

"What was it?"

"The body of a man La Fitte had buried without wanting his followers to know he was dead. Death had been the only treasure there from the very first."

"Out there," Marda said, "not here." She was sitting on the long sofa in her living room and he saw that her eyes were starry. She caught his hand and leaned back pulling Beauchamp down beside her. "Oh Charlie!" she murmured. "I'm afraid." And again he felt her warm breath flutter past his ear . . .

Louie stood frozen for seconds, dazedly looking at the girl. Then the cop who had heard her scream broke into the apartment.



JIMMY BRANDT let himself out of room 722 at the Burrige and, when his attempts to ring for an elevator were unsuccessful, descended the stairs and left the hotel. As he crossed the intersection, a cab almost ran him down. It was almost as if the driver hadn't seen him at all.

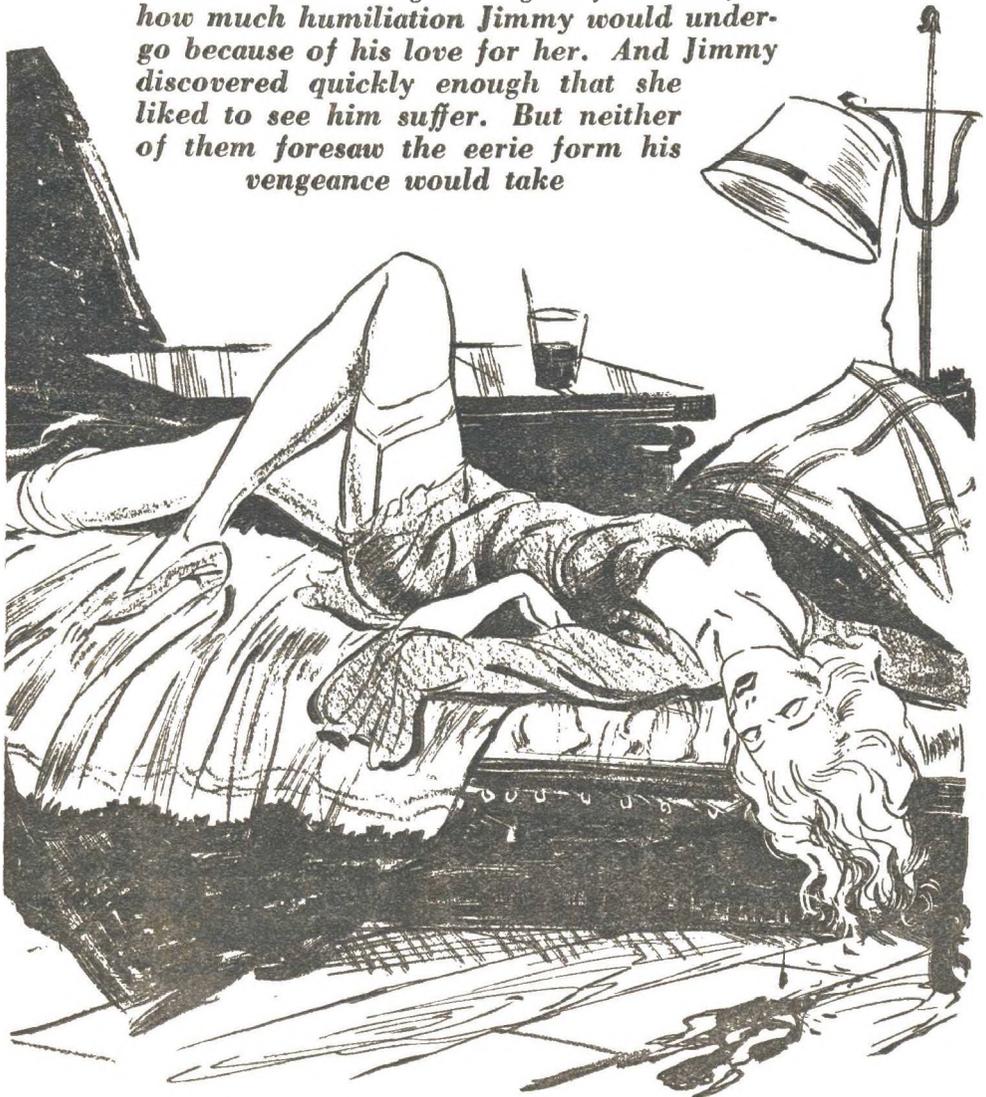
Jimmy's destination was definite. He was going to see Dolly. But meanwhile he was asking himself, why hadn't he killed Louie Kortz a week ago, when he'd first intended to? When he'd first found

out about him and Dolly? Jimmy had a vague sensation that he'd waited too long, now.

He paused for a moment, grateful for the faint night breeze stirring through the stifling city streets. Then he headed downtown toward his apartment. Dolly would undoubtedly be there. Dolly, his wife. His lip curled . . . and yet somehow he felt closer to her just now than he had in weeks. She'd be reading, alone—he hoped—her seductive little body curled up in an easy chair, waiting for

• THE THIRD • MAN

It didn't take the girl long to find out just how much humiliation Jimmy would undergo because of his love for her. And Jimmy discovered quickly enough that she liked to see him suffer. But neither of them foresaw the eerie form his vengeance would take



By COLBY QUINN

him. He wondered just how long it would take him to choke her if he found her with another man. . . .

Another man! There'd been *three* other men since he'd picked her up from a taxi-dance hall on Fourteenth Street two months ago and married her. God! the way she'd treated him. Thinking about it made his mouth feel hot and dry; his tongue already was strangely thick and numb.

Two before Louis, he remembered in disgust; one after another, two ratty dance-hall hangers-on who didn't work for their living; helping his wife in her cheap chiseling. They thought it was smart; *she* thought it was smart . . . until he'd discovered her with the first guy, accidentally, and fixed his mug so the girls wouldn't like him for a while.

A TELEPHONE lineman like Jimmy Brandt couldn't stick around all the time just to keep watch over a blonde baby in a Tenth Street apartment. Of course he should have booted her out in the gutter the first time; it was where she belonged; he knew that. But Jimmy was born to be a sucker: he'd never been really in love with a girl before—never *this* crazy about one—and he must have had an idea that he would shrivel up and languish away if he didn't have Dollie. At least, Jimmy had to have something to explain his shame, the degradation of that arrangement he'd finally lowered himself to make—that she could have her boy-friends on the side!

The first one, the guy whose pretty features he'd mussed up, had been just an ordinary cheap gigolo, and Dolly had only laughed (after she discerned that he wasn't going to hurt *her*). But the second one, she wanted him to understand, was a man she really cared for; her lover before Jimmy; was, in fact, the

man she'd been dancing with that night when Jimmy first met her. . . .

On that night, Jimmy remembered, she'd been quarreling with this bird. Jimmy had been standing at the edge of the dance floor with a fistful of tickets, ignoring other girls' invitations just to watch Dolly. He hadn't met her, but he'd been watching her; two dances now with the same guy, and Jimmy was beginning to feel greenish, seeing the possessive way this fellow held her . . . the snaky way one arm pulled her toward him at the waist while his hand rested carelessly, favored by the *ensellure*—that seductive inward curving just above her swaying hips.

A redhead ran her fingers over Jimmy's arm, keeping time to the swing of hot music with a lilting movement of her body, a rhythmic, slight bend of her knees that pushed them almost against his. "Lonesome, honey?" she crooned.

But Jimmy didn't see her. For only a dozen feet away, right at the edge of the crowd, Dolly had suddenly stopped; he saw her face flush darkly as she stiffened; then she spat out some angry word and tried to break away, pushing her elbows into the guy's chest.

He was still holding her, talking steadily in a low tone, when Jimmy pushed the redhead aside and strode lithely over.

"Break!" he urged in a soft-steel gentle tone.

THE fellow gave him one look and then ignored him. Only for a second. Then fingers that had earned their grip handling wire-cutters closed over a soft, pinkish ear, twisted as though opening a stubborn door.

"Ooww!" The head bent back; knees buckled. "You damn—!" Jimmy blotted the strangled mouthings with his other hand, pushed the guy down so quickly that his head slapped the floor.

Another moment and he had the girl in his arms, had whisked her dancing beyond the crowd that started to collect. She shrank up to him, trembling a little, her face white and her eyes wide.

Her lips worked uncertainly; then she smiled and squeezed his arm above the elbow with quick fingers.

"Thanks, darling," she said warmly. "Take me out of here, will you. . . . It may mean my job, but there'll be plenty trouble if I stay."

They didn't even wait for her to get her coat or purse. Five minutes later Jimmy had her in a taxi.

"You want me to take you home?" he asked. He didn't touch her, but his heart was thudding strangely against his ribs.

"I—don't know." She glanced up at him, then, "Yes, will you, please?" She moved a little closer.

Jimmy offered her a cigarette. Puffing it, she seemed calmer. She told him her address and Jimmy ordered the driver.

She reached up and pulled the cigarette from his mouth, turned her face to him and melted her lips liquidly to his. They were moist with the warmth of pulsing blood, parted enough to let him feel her breath on his lower lip. Jimmy closed his eyes dizzily and put his arms around her, and her kiss was soft and sweet for a few brief seconds.

She whispered with a bright smile in the semi darkness; "That's for helping me . . . if you like it." She watched his face for a moment and laughed gently. "You do like it, don't you?"

Jimmy mumbled something and his arms tightened. One of his hands slid down over the smooth skin of her bare back. She kept both arms around his neck, and the cigarettes she had been holding dropped to the leather seat. Her breasts, firm and unconfined beneath her cheap gown, met his chest and yielded against him as he kissed her, and Jimmy

felt the aching pressure of her knee and thigh against his own.

THAT was the beginning: she wouldn't let him go. Inside her cheap furnished room, she started humming as though she'd forgotten all about the man he'd taken her away from. With half-shy smiles when she met Jimmy's glance, which was often, she set about brewing coffee over the gas plate.

He hovered near, already lost, drinking in the flowing loveliness of her movements, watching the bright yellow of her hair, the grace of her long, slim legs. It was the kind of gown you paid for at a dime a dance; the kind that told everything and asked nothing. He couldn't keep his eyes off the bold bosom that slid its firm, pointed roundnesses beneath the silk of her bodice, and she knew it.

When they sat down to drink coffee, she was careful to cross her knees and leave the hem of her dress a little above them; it looked careless, though, and Jimmy watched the taper of her slender shapely calf and felt his blood hum. She wore no stockings, and her thighs were smooth as satin where they swept into the shadows beneath her gown. Jimmy sat watching her and trying to hold himself steady until he had finished his coffee.

He didn't know anything about her except that she was a taxi-dancer he had never seen before tonight. He didn't want to know anything about her; all he knew was that she attracted him, drew him, as no other woman had ever done before, and that he was crazy about her.

She seemed to know that, too, for when presently he walked over and put his hands on her shoulders, she stood up slowly, inside his arms. She let him kiss her, first, as if she didn't care; then she started breathing in deeply, and shud-

ders convulsed her as her arms locked about him. . . .

FOR three weeks Jimmy lived in heaven and came home to the angel every day after work. Then one day he happened to come home at the wrong time and the next thing he remembered was kicking a guy down the stairs after bashing in his face.

Dolly was sobbing hysterically when he came back into the apartment.

"All right," she whispered without looking at him. "I'll get out."

Fangs of jealousy bit deep inside him. But he clenched his hands and asked calmly:

"Why—*why?*" Bitterness blackened his voice. "Are you that *cheap?*"

Gasping, sobbing, she suddenly flung herself on him. "Oh God, Jimmy! Jimmy I love you so! Honest t' God I do, darling! This wasn't anything—really it wasn't. He—he's a guy I used to know, and he just came in. I don't know how he knew where I was. He said hello and then grabbed me and kissed me, and just for old times' sake I let him k-kiss me—and that was all. . . ."

"Aw, shut up!" He flung her away, heavy disgust in his voice. He started for the door, opened it. Then he lost. He shut the door again, walked back over to her slowly, where she huddled in a chair with her face buried in her arm.

"It didn't mean anything to you, did it?" he asked desperately. "You still—love me?"

He was sickened of himself then. In that moment, he knew he was asking for more, begging her to push the knife in deeper and twist it *hard* next time.

But he couldn't help it; if she'd been in the arms of six other men that day, he still loved her too agonizedly to leave her; he'd made himself a slave to her, to her red lips and that delirious drink-

ing kiss that drained him so pleasantly.

She raised her head, eyes bright, cheeks feverishly spotted. "You know I can't love any other man," she said. "Would it—hurt me like this if I could?"

Vaguely he knew that some emotion he had felt for her at first, now curled dead inside him; but that didn't matter now. He swept her into his arms, picked her up and held her high, thrilling at the rich, sensuous feeling of her limbs against his chest. His eyes ate up the white flesh of her through the gossamer negligee, and in his delighted nostrils her perfume stung him like an anesthetic to his betrayed love. . . .

THAT was the first time. The second time, she couldn't put up quite the same defense of innocence; because—well, for one thing she discovered he had come in too silently; had been waiting and watching for long minutes behind the half open door of the front room.

He'd hesitated there, Jimmy had, when he'd heard soft voices; even when, through the crack of the door, he recognized the good looking blonde man he'd taken her from that first night.

She was in his arms now, and she wore only two piece pajamas—black lace jacket and snug-fitting trousers that he'd given her, just so she could wear them for *him*.

Jimmy stopped breathing; his impulse was to break in and kill the man, but somehow he restrained himself. He had to know for sure this time, even—even if it meant. . . .

What it meant he learned in the ten years of the next twenty minutes, watching his faithless wife lavishing on another man every one of her little arts and gestures of love that he had made himself believe no one could know but himself. The maddening way she hugged herself against him, tight as hell one



The next thing Jimmy remembered was kicking a guy down stairs, while Dolly started to sob hysterically.

minute, and the next just close enough for her swaying breasts to brush lightly against his chest. The way she could shiver and moan and let those quick shudders take her when a man's arms wound around her!

Jimmy almost groaned aloud. This other guy was acting as if Dolly belongs to him; was taking for granted every one of her embraces; caresses and favors that he would have bought with his blood, that he would have wrung out his heart to hold sacred. . . .

Sacred, hell! As sacred as the way she had danced with a hundred men in the dance hall, as reserved as the way she was pulsing and palpitating now in this man's pirating embrace.

Bottled in bond, his inward brain ground icily. Cut behind your back. So he just stood there watching, reeling, as murder-lust claimed him like vertigo, all but hurling his consciousness from the precipice of that single passion.

He staggered back, sank limply into a chair, hearing only the man's low laugh and Dolly's little squeals of delight.

Let them find him here, he thought dimly. Then the explosion would come.

BUT after long minutes he perceived that the man must have slipped out by the other door. For Dolly, humming a snatch of a popular tune, came tripping lightly through the doorway. The tune rose to a quick, sharp yelp, and Jimmy, his eyes on the floor, watched her feet stop moving, saw her toes curl down sharply inside the satin mules.

"God!" she whispered. Then, "Damn!" These two words expressed a great many of her emotions.

Jimmy looked up at her and sighed. When he didn't say anything, she suddenly burst into a torrent of defiant profanity.

"Why, you lousy rat!" Her voice rose

in pitch. "You were out here all the time—*watching* us! You cheap heel, nobody but a scum would—"

She broke off and her voice trailed down, as though she saw it wasn't working.

"All right," she said sullenly; "what are you going to do about it?"

"For God's sake, why did you do it?" he groaned. "Haven't you got a single decent—?"

"I like him!" she cut in, defiant and snarling. "I like him—that's why."

She watched him a moment, hands on her hips, and then said cruelly:

"Get wise, big boy. What d'you think I am—a girl scout? Well, if you wanta know something, I lived with this fellow—Julius he is—before I ever saw you. I was mad at him, that's the reason I married you. God! I musta been nuts!" she finished in tones of deep disgust. . . . yet there was a thread of fear tightening in her words. It was as though she were trying to turn away his anger by reviling him first.

But even then she hadn't found out how mad Jimmy was about her; what he would take. She knew the thrills you get from love—love of the kind she understood—and she knew what it was to be "gone" on a man; it meant you'd rather have him kissing you than anybody else.

Dolly wouldn't have been able to understand, even if Jimmy could have told her—and he had tried to tell her—how he felt about her. She might have been flattered if he had told her that during the whole day he was away from her, he could hardly go five minutes without shaping her name with his lips and seeing her in his mind and running over, in indulgent visions, some of the scenes of their love. She would have liked hearing it, but she wouldn't have believed it.

Jimmy didn't understand it himself; perhaps, since she was the first girl he'd

surrendered himself to wholly, she meant everything in a girl he had dreamed of finding. Dolly didn't know, until Jimmy spoke again, that he was so mad about her that she could not break him. And then she thought he was crazy.

FOR Jimmy said matter-of-factly: "Do you really want to leave me, Dolly?"

"Want to?" she gasped. Then, intuitively, she had the right answer. Her voice was sullen: "I dunno—honest I don't. I like Julius—lots. And I like you. But I gotta see him again."

"Suppose you stayed with me," Jimmy said deliberately, "and you could see him, too . . . Then what?" What agony it was to say that! Remembrance of Julius holding Dolly close . . . visions of the way she'd hugged herself to Julius . . . it was all a torture that released subtle poisons in his blood and made his stomach a hateful hollow. Yet—like the delight of a hair-keen razor, a peculiar sensation of pleasure flowed through him . . .

He began to wonder if he had not held himself back a few minutes ago because he liked the feeling of sharp and almost unbearable jealousy which hissed about his quivering nerves like a cat-o'-nine-tails . . .

"You're—you're kiddin' me," Dolly said uncertainly. But then she suddenly knew he wasn't. She came and sat on his lap, soft-fleshed and warm and *loving*. . . "You really mean it, honey?" she asked, maliciously sweet. She kissed his forehead, put her hand to the back of his neck to press his head closer, and her fingernails bit into his skin. "You mean you'll let me see Julius again, you'll even let him come here while you're not home . . . if I stay with you?"

"My God—don't! Don't!" cried Jimmy wildly, standing suddenly and

thrusting her away. But she crept in and hugged him.

"You're a darling, Jimmy," she laughed softly. "You're a swell guy to love me the way you do. I really love you too—you know that, don't you?—except that—well, I guess I love Julius too!"

He gritted his teeth. She laughed and kissed him.

THAT was the second time. And after that, Jimmy knew that he wasn't in his right mind. The girl was like a drug; a dope that he had to have with him all the time or die. Only—he hadn't foreseen the particular pleasure it would give Dolly to be cruel to him. Now that she knew how things were—that she could keep on pushing his face into the mud and making him eat it—she seemed to make her arrangements especially so that he could catch her with Julius as often as possible.

He would come in loudly, slam the door; but still Dolly would wait a moment before she looked up lazily; and then jump swiftly as though in sudden shame. "Oh, is that you, honey?"

Julius was apprehensive at first, but this changed to a growing boldness; finally, after a couple of weeks, he came to grin and laugh a little, and look away when Jimmy came in. His laugh had an unclean sound, and Jimmy wanted to choke it out.

Then Julius would leave, taking his time and whistling coolly, yet never saying a word to Jimmy. Jimmy just looked out the window until the other man was gone and then, wanting to kill himself, he'd pounce on Dolly as a starving hound on a helpless animal. The more she tortured him the more he needed her.

In dope, you have to keep increasing the doses, and Dolly would throw up her arms in ecstasy. Then later, she would

(Continued on page 102)

ACROSS SIX YEARS

[Continued from page 67]

She turned. "You'll never see me again, never . . . never . . . !"

Let her go, thought Carter. She'd read part of his diary. But not enough to understand; though of course she wouldn't have understood anyway. Nobody would.

Suddenly Carter felt unutterably weary; his head began to ache. He dropped into the chair and stared at the notebook. Had it all been a dream?

The door again.

"Oh, Carter, darling! You're here! You're safe! Dr. Byrnes—he's here!"

The room whirled for Carter, but he recognized his wife—the girl of the future. She was real; her slim length of warm youth was beside him, her eager arms about him, her kisses on his face.

The gray haired little man who followed her into the room only said, "Good. Lucky we didn't find him dead in a sewer! Carter—are you all right?" Carter didn't know him.

IT TOOK more than a little while to make Carter understand even partly what had happened. Stroking his head, she explained: "I was suspicious of that Perth woman, especially after last night's burglary, so I had you followed. Had the police raid the Chinese Falcon. He was bluffing you when he threatened me, darling, because I was safe. It was you we were worried about. They smuggled you out before we got there. Somehow they suspected, and they must have just dumped you on the street."

"But this"—Carter waved his hand about dazedly. "My laboratory. Isn't this 1937? I haven't met you yet . . . I

love you, but I don't even know your name."

The girl and the doctor looked at each other. He whispered to her. She said gently, "My name is Mary, and I'm your wife."

She read his diary . . . the diary he had written in the brief time since Loo Ming's men had dumped him on the street and he had found his way here.

"Poor Carter!" she whispered. "It is 1943, darling, and you're not a poor struggling inventor: you're one of the most famous in the world! Don't you remember your short wave machines? Your radio planes? Even the television-torpedo they tried to steal from you? You think it's still 1937 because. . . . Well, you see, just before you met me, an explosion in the laboratory here destroyed your memory, and Doctor Byrnes and I kept it just as it had been that last day, bringing you here often, hoping the place would bring back what you'd forgotten.

"But it didn't, though you went ahead with your work after we were married. When that burglar hit you, it must have brought back all your past life, before the explosion—but at the same time blotted out the last six years, all that's happened *since* the explosion!"

Carter passed a hand across his forehead. He noticed now that the 1937 *Ledger* was age-yellowed; the equipment on his table was newer, slightly different from the old. They must have found out from the Wilburson people how it had been arranged.

"We came here earlier tonight, on the chance you might have come here, if you



Before he could stop her, she had stepped out of her skirt.

weren't d—dead . . . and we must have left it unlocked. We didn't really expect to find you, Carter, but oh! I'm so glad we did! You'll remember, after a while, what's happened during the last few years, but you're all right now, aren't you?"

"Of course . . . yes!" Carter kissed her. It seemed strange. He didn't remember having done it before the time when he'd wakened up and had breakfast with her.

MARY stared again at his diary. "Carter," she murmured in awe.

"You—you wrote this with your right hand—the way you used to write, before I persuaded you that you should write left-handed because you were born that way!"

Carter laughed shakily. "That's odd!" Oh, yes; part of it was explained: amnesia had simply wiped six years out of his consciousness and made him think it was back in 1937 . . . that his yesterday was a glimpse into the future. But there was something he couldn't tell Mary or

the Doctor. Something that puzzled him profoundly.

He couldn't tell them about Fran's visit a little while ago. They'd explain it away as the hallucinosis of an injured brain, but would they be right? Or *had* he been projected into the past for that few minutes? Into a past peopled by shades, by the past lives of the people he had known.

He paled when he remembered how Fran had read his diary, had left him in anger. He remembered the rose she had crushed and thrown in his face before

she had left, crying, "You'll never, never see me again. . . !"

Fearfully he looked down upon the floor. He stooped, picked up a rose whose petals were bruised, but not dried by time. Its fragrance lingered in his nostrils, and—was that a trace of Fran's perfume?

"Does this smell like, just a rose?" he asked, strainedly.

His wife, here in 1943, humored him. "It smells like a rose, a sweet one, to me. Where'd you get it?"

"It's just a flower," Carter said softly, "that I bought from a boy on the street."

THE THIRD MAN

[Continued from page 99]

try to make him listen to what she had to tell him about dear Julius . . .

"Stop! Stop it—for Heaven's sake!" he almost screamed once. And then he leaped back from the silently laughing girl and put his hand to his mouth. He swallowed blood. She had bitten deep into his lip.

WHEN he found her with Louie Kortz, then, Jimmy knew he was definitely crazy. Louie didn't act scared like the others; but he was leaving; he jerked out a thirty-eight automatic and backed out of the apartment.

Dolly didn't even make a defense this time. She just said contemptuously, confidently: "Do you still love me."

And the reason Jimmy knew he was crazy was that he said yes. His hands worked, his fingers curling in like claws, as he pulled her close to him; but he kissed her with a hungry groan.

He was too wretched to ask much about Louie Kortz, but he knew him by

sight as a pin ball front. A good guy, any cigar-store or small restaurant owner would tell you shakily after having taken Louie's pin-ball machines to keep from having a bomb tossed in his window.

But when he met Louie Kortz coming out of his apartment, Jimmy stopped dead; some flicker of reason seemed to prompt his words.

"Listen, Kortz," he said slowly, "I want to talk with you."

Louie backed away. He wasn't afraid, but he didn't like shootings—when *he* did the rod-work. And if Jimmy laid bare hands on him, Louie knew he would suffer.

"Sure," he said greasily. "I don't mind talking to you, guy." He glanced at his watch. "Say in an hour, over at my hotel room, huh?"

"Anywhere," Jimmy said. "What hotel? What room?"

"Seven-twenty-two at the Burrige." Louie turned away. "All right?" he asked carelessly.



He jerked out his gun and backed out of the room.

"I'll be there." Then Jimmy went inside; while Dolly wasn't looking, he slipped out of his desk drawer the old forty-five automatic he'd worn in the army.

IN AN hour he'd gone to the Burrige, found room 722. But instead of Kortz, he had discovered two heels who leaped upon him without warning, pummeling him with blackjacks. There'd been a fight about which he now remembered nothing and didn't seem to care. The parched agony of his tongue and fevered lips tried to remind him of something, and he entered a gin mill thinking of a cold glass of beer.

The bartender looked like a nice guy; yet he stared past Jimmy and ignored his order, seemingly. Presently, however, he slid a stein along the bar. It stopped at Jimmy's elbow, but now he found that something must have happened to him in that fight; his fingers apparently were paralyzed or incredibly weak. He couldn't seem to get a grip on that stein. And just looking at the head of cooling foam heightened the dry torture which racked his mouth.

After a moment the man next to him took the stein right out from under his nose, and Jimmy concluded it hadn't been meant for him anyway. He strode out in disgust. Only after he was outside did it occur to him that he didn't remember having opened the door going either in or out of the gin mill.

But he gave no wonder to that now, for he was thinking of Dolly. Suddenly like a gust of clean air came the knowledge, the conviction, that he was free; that he no longer needed the drug of her tawdry affections. Yet somehow it seemed to him that he still loved her, and because he loved her, he wanted to kill her. That seemed odd, yet he was

sure it was the only way to purify their love and bring Dolly and him together as he had dreamed of their being, from the first.

He turned a corner and eased up the stairs to his apartment, effortless as wind. He found Dolly leaning back in a chaise longue, and he stood over her for a moment before he bent and wrapped his fingers about her throat.

Then he remembered that peculiar paralysis that had prevented him from lifting the beer stein. Yet it wasn't paralysis, he saw now; his fingers were flexing vigorously, yet they seemed to make no impression; they sank right into the white flesh and left her throat as smooth and unmarred as before. Doggedly, despairingly, he bent all his will to making his fingers grip solidly.

There was a puzzled frown about Dolly's eyes. "Louie," she said, her heart thudding unaccountably, "do you think—do you think something could have happened to Jimmy?"

LOUIE KORTZ looked up sharply, suspiciously from the drink he was pouring just inside the kitchen doorway. "What makes you ask that?"

Then suddenly before his bulging eyes, Dolly began to scream and clutch at her throat. "Here he is now!" she gasped. "Save me! He's—trying to choke me!"

But though she saw him, and saw those arms reaching and knew the hands were at her throat, she felt nothing. For Jimmy wasn't succeeding despite all his efforts. And now he knew why: he remembered, as the agony in his throat stabbed again with unendurable pain. Why, he couldn't be here! Those two thugs had blackjacked him until he was only half conscious and then hanged him to a bar in the clothes closet. Now

he realized why people hadn't seen him, why he had walked through doors and couldn't grip anything with his fingers; he wasn't here! He wasn't anywhere except back in that hotel room closet!

Yet there was Dolly screaming: "Louie, help me! He's choking me! Don't you see him?"

Across the room, Louie Kortz wondered how the girl's husband had got into the apartment so quietly—and how he had in the first place got out of that hotel. Kortz dropped the drink and whipped out that thirty-eight and laced two slugs into the figure leaning over Dolly. One of the bullets zipped into the plaster of the wall beyond; the other took the girl square in the mouth of her back-tilted head.

Louie stood frozen for seconds. For now there was nobody there but Dolly,

and she was very still. And there was a pounding on the apartment door: the cop who had heard her scream broke in.

After one look at the girl and another at Louie, standing there with the gun dangling limply in his hand, the cop prodded him in the belly with his own revolver. He had seen her bloody mouth and the hole in the back of her head.

AT THE moment Louie shot Dolly in the mouth, Jimmy seemed to be holding her in his arms, and that cheap and furtive expression had faded from her face, leaving her lovely as he had first seen her; and nobody else could have her, now or forever.

Back in that clothes closet in the hotel room, Jimmy's body twitched feebly, clawing fingers stiffened where they were tied behind his back, and he died.

THE GLASS COFFIN

[Continued from page 41]

him plenty. Zuchet was outraged.

Lieutenant Furness hunted for McQuade through the Zuchet Gardens, but couldn't find him. At about the time Furness gave up and returned to his car to go back to headquarters, McQuade was making his way along the river at the water's edge, stepping deep into black muck. He remembered something.

AS HE floundered along, jerking his feet free from the ooze with sounds like a line of wolves smacking their jaws, he remembered exploring both banks of this river as a boy. Somewhere along here was a tunnel at the water's edge, a tunnel in which ran an underground stream about five-eighths of a mile long, spring-fed. Near Zuchet's

house, almost squarely under the south hothouse, there was a shaft opening into the ceiling of the tunnel.

A rusty iron ladder six inches from the shaft into the tunnel. The short shaftway connected with a spacious natural cave, scoured out by the spring in the dawn of time before it escaped into the river directly. The previous owner of Zuchet's house had filled the cave with beds of rich soil for growing mushrooms.

As the boy-explorer, Arnold had wandered through the mushroom cave, awed, found a door, found himself in what was obviously the basement of the house up the river and departed forthwith. His father, being told of the adventure, had told him that the house

around the wick and snapped the wheel. He snapped it a half dozen times before it came to life with a tiny bud of blue flame. Enough to see by.

That other time, he had paddled a canoe in here and been able to reach the

He screamed and
struggled to free
himself



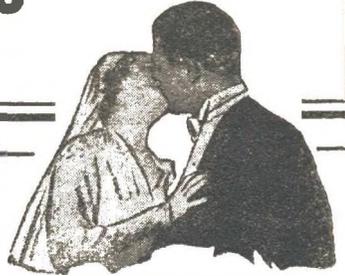
was very, very old indeed, that the pioneer who built it had extended his cellar and tapped the tunnel in order to be provided with a possible avenue of escape in case of attack by Indians.

What had suddenly occurred to Arnold, after having searched Zuchet's house for Jeanne just now, was that the basement was considerably smaller than his boyhood memory of it. Part of the basement had been walled off.

He heard his name called in a shout made thin and eerie by the height of the bluff and distance. As he ignored it, he plunged up to his chest in icy, crystal water. Whooping with the shock, he headed into the tunnel under the bluff, thrashing against the slow, frigid current.

Before advancing very far, he pulled out his cigarette lighter, blew off water

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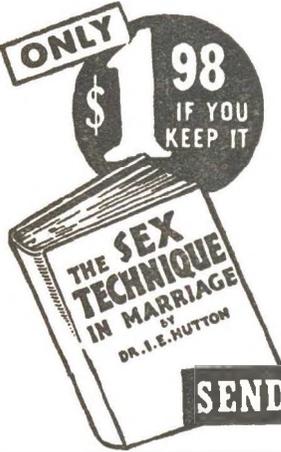
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ladder easily. This time he had to spring from the clay bed of the stream with every ounce of strength in him, and snare the bottom wrought-iron bar one-handed. He made it, the lighter going out. The ladder shuddered with his sudden weight, and sand sifted down on him with fleckes of rust. With the dead lighter in his teeth he went up, trembling, and with his breath whistling from exertion. His knuckles were split open again, but his hand was too cold to bleed readily.

THE stagnant air of the cave hit him with its full weight of mustiness and corruption. The cave was still being used for cultivating mushrooms. In the pale, thin radiance of the lighter they bulged from their beds of fertile mold like spheres of leprous flesh, like blind eyeballs. The cave was being used for something else, too.

On one side were fifteen long mounds in a row, some of them swarming monstrously with mushrooms, which was why there was no use dragging the river for missing girls. Here their lovely bodies slept in a subterranean burial-ground. The fifteenth grave was fresh, Kathleen McQuade's, and against the wall near it leaned a damp spade.

Arnold raced down the rotten board walk that extended the length of the cave from the door. It was an ordinary wooden door with three panels, and it was locked from the inside. Arnold had never been one to waste his strength in trial efforts. He backed off, held a good breath, and smashed into the door shoulderwise with everything he had, ramming into the portal just above the level of the latchbolt. Wood split and the door burst wide open, still on its hinges, with a crash that filled the cave like low thunder.

If the air in the cave was hard to breathe, the air in the orchid chamber was stupefying with the drugging strength of perfume distilled by the flowers. The perfume was sickeningly sweet, lodging in the throat like the taste of fine, poisoned candy. Already half-stunned, Arnold got up from his knees with the relighted flame and spent a preliminary glance on the bed of flowers. Fourteen of the specimens, one of them a vine, were in flower. The fifteenth was a naked bulb, freshly planted, with its upper part exposed and releasing a fat tongue of violet-flecked green.

Across the room, the vacuum tubes in the apparatus emitted a glow of soft red and there was a whine in the air. Reflected light on the glass case momentarily prevented him from seeing what lay inside. He could discover, despairing, no exit from this weird chamber into Zuchet's basement.

On a stool near the orchids a flask full of red liquid caught his eye. Glass tubing connected the flask with the box of soil in which the orchids grew, a box supported on heavy legs. The tubing, full of the ruby fluid, ran completely around the box. There were twenty-four stopcocks and connections, with auxiliary tubes running from fifteen of the connections through the sides of the box, one feeding tube for each orchid.

The orchid nearest him, a fantastic beauty of extraordinary size with crumpled chiffon petals weeping with golden tendrils, suddenly leaned toward him on its tall, curiously fluted stem. For a moment he stood rooted, while gooseflesh washed his whole body with icy hands, fascinatedly watching the great, fragile flower move on its flexible stem as though searching for him.

He stretched out his hand and touched the gorgeous thing. Instantaneously, the

tendrils twined around his hand and fingers, tightly, as the petals caressed his palm. His fingers were touching the stem, which was intricately veined like flesh, and the stem was pulsing. Arnold drew his hand free nervelessly and the golden tendrils reluctantly let go.

Sickened, he held his hand to his throat, and his fingers encountered leaves. All the tendrils of the vine had stolen upon him from behind, unfelt because the leaves and tendrils were of the same temperature as his own body. The leaves had the peculiar, porous softness of human skin. Involuntarily he struck at the thing with a cry of disgust.

The vine flinched free of him as he sprang back; it shrank into a compact mass of coils and foliage, visibly quivering with hurt from the blow he had dealt. These beautiful, foul things were alive with a horrible, sentient life.

IN HIS present position, as he looked about wildly, he saw the outrage of Jeanne de Winter's white body in the glass box. His face convulsed and he reached her with a scream of horror. He didn't see how the box was fastened down, and the glass was too heavy for him to smash.

"Jeanne!" he shrieked.

He was too late. She recognized him with the ghost of a smile on her lips, but her eyes were closing in death. The needle stuck into her heart just below the perfect breast, had drained most of the blood from her body. The flush of life was almost gone from her and her nymphean form had become a dreadful white ivory. On her jaw was the stain of a bruise, where Zuchet had struck her. Her beautiful breasts trembled together, then ceased their slow rise and fall with her breathing. She relaxed into a reclining sculpture lovelier than anything man ever cut from marble.

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Her head rested on a plate of peculiar grayish metal which was wired somehow to the electrical apparatus near by. Suspended above the case over the plate was a glass bulb shaped like a cathode tube, also wired. Like a glass gun it was directed upon an egg-shaped flower bulb, which was immersed in some perfectly transparent liquid in a crystal jar. On a shelf were several such jars containing bulbs of slightly different shapes and sizes.

At the instant of Jeanne's death, a beam of visible light shot from the plate under her head to the cathode tube suspended above it, where the beam was condensed, and brightened and fired at the orchid bulb in the jar in a needle of light. Emil Zuchet had discovered how to capture and make use of that form of energy which is called "intelligence" or "the soul" in a living human being. The average weight of energy constituting the human "soul", as other scientists before Zuchet had discovered, was one quarter of an ounce, which is lost at "death" and according to archaic Indian mysticism returns to its source, the envelope of the universe which is fumblingly worshiped or scorned as "God."

A SECTION of the chamber wall slid down in its shaft with a dull rumble. Overhead lights flashed on; Arnold whirled as Zuchet flipped the switch that sent the ponderous slab of masonry rumbling back up into place. There was a revolver in Zuchet's fist.

"You found your way in here, did you? When the door to the mushroom cave is opened, it rings an alarm in the house."

"Does it?" Arnold asked in a queer, flat voice.

"The police are gone now. And you and I," Zuchet sniggered insanely, mention SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

"have business together, haven't we?" There was something about his lisp, caused by his broken teeth, that made him seem all the more deadly.

"Yes, we have business together," Arnold whispered, easing toward Zuchet imperceptibly. He was poised with the cold, merciless calm of a man who has gone insane with a fixed idea, the driving necessity of murdering the unspeakable Zuchet with his bare hands.

"How do you like my place, eh?" Zuchet crowed. "Before I kill you I am going to tell you a secret. The orchids I am growing here, they are not like other orchids. Oh, no! They are human beings, like you and me! They think; they feel; you can make them twist with agony. You know what I do with all those girls who disappeared?" His wide mouth slobbered. "All those lovely girls with their white bodies? I imprison their souls in those orchids, those splendid flowers. Their souls, man! Would you ever think of that?"

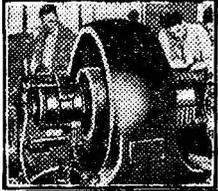
"Yes, I thought of that." With a guttural laugh of complete insanity Arnold charged.

Zuchet shot him through the stomach.

Arnold was beyond feeling shock and advanced steadily, though he was a dead man. Zuchet shot him twice more, once through the shoulder, once through the chest; Arnold coughed blood and staggered, but kept coming. Zuchet backed away frantically, gobbling with fear, and emptied the remaining bullets into his body. Only transcendent hate kept Arnold on his feet. He reached Zuchet's jaw with a clumsy blow of his fist as the last bullet tore through his heart.

The blow was enough to sprawl Zuchet on the stone floor, where he sat gasping, swallowing with relief as he looked at the dead man. A pleasant

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stupor overcame him so swiftly that he was unable to get to his feet.

Perspiration beaded his face; he wiped it off drowsily, wondering what was the matter with him. His ears began to ring, and a sweet weakness weighed him down. "Zuchet, Zuchet," he muttered. "What is happening to you?"

The overpowering fragrance of the orchids drugged his brain. His eyes closed with a dream of fair white bodies, of slender torsoes with firm young bosoms, of shapely legs with the creamy thighs so soft. At last the agony in his throat and wrists reached his brain, and he jerked his eyes open.

The flowering vine had stealthily snared his wrists and throat, his cheeks, all the exposed area of his skin. The tendrils of the vine were equipped with suckers, and the vine was getting fat with his blood; he was dying.

He screamed for help and struggled to free himself. But the chamber was soundproof, and the tendrils of that gorgeously flowering leech, fattening insatiably, or revengefully, enmeshed him even more securely with the tensile strength of flexible steel thongs. He gibbered feebly, and with all the power left in his barrel chest produced a scream that had no more volume than the drawn-out chirp of a cricket. A squat, helpless and dying cricket.

His round head struck the stone floor meatily as he fell back. With tremendous effort he blinked his glazing eyes, the prey of the verdant horror of his own invention.

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SUMMONS FOR SATAN

[Continued from page 79]

"FOR seven years he was like a father to me," she murmured. "I was a homeless orphan when he found me and took me with him on his tours, and I became his assistant on the stage. When his studies of ancient magic unhinged his mind, I brought him here

and took care of him, humoring his whims. The trapdoors were one of them—he loved to surprise visitors by disappearing suddenly whenever he wished.

"I shouldn't have left him tonight. I had already suspected Margot, the maid we hired a few weeks ago. Her eyes were always greedy when he said things about an imaginary treasure he had hidden in the house. It was just one of his delusions; such money as he has is in banks and bonds.

"Jared was her sweetheart. He came here often to visit her. They must have plotted together to torture him and Wilkes, the old man who had been his servant for twenty years. He's dead, too."

"I know." Larrimore thought grimly

They felt the menace of the old castle as they sat together in the park.



of the lacerated body in the tower room. "God, what beasts they were!"

"I found him right after I left you," she said. "I wanted to run away then,



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but I had to see whether I could help Zastro before it was too late. I found him, but Jared showed up and I had to hide. Then you came in, and that horrid woman was so pretty—”

“She was ugly,” he lied. “I was only pretending. I wanted to get my hands on her, to make her tell where you were.”

“Anyway, when I saw Jared was going to shoot you, I waited till you stepped on the trap door, then pressed the button that released it. That saved your life. And I dragged you outside so you could call the police. I thought you were too badly wounded to fight.”

“Just scratched.” But his whole body ached from the wounds and he fought off spells of dizziness. “And it’s a good thing I came back. I was just in time to stop that fiend from—”

She put a hand over his lips. “Don’t say it,” she warned. “Don’t even think it. All that is past. There are only you and I.”

BEHIND HELL'S VEIL

[Continued from page 53]

couch, was wrapped around her lovely body, but there was the same half smile on her red lips, the same veiled and secret invitation in her long lashed, dark eyes. Paul staggered back and fell against the wall where the heavy wooden crucifix hung. She stood there a moment longer, her eyes fixed on his, then she came slowly toward him.

She did not seem to walk but to glide with a smooth, sinuous motion. He had brought her into the light, stripped away the covering layers of dark pigment that had shrouded her from men’s eyes, and she was coming to thank him for it.

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There was more than gratitude in her eyes, though, for they burned with a light that was not of this earth.

She was close to him now, so close that he could smell the fragrance of her body, that subtle maddening odor that had come to his nostrils twice before that night. Then, raising her arms slowly, she let the brightly colored robe slip from her body and stood before him as she did in the painting, nude except for the thin wisp of silk that circled her middle.

PAUL'S bearth was a sobbing pant in his throat as his eyes took in the softly curved beauty of that body. He did not know whether she was real or a figment of a fevered imagination; whether she had come from some secret place in the ancient house or from the nethermost pits of hell. He did not care. He only knew, only cared about one thing. He took one hesitating step forward and then she was in his arms.

Moist lips pressed to his like the avid mouth of a succubus. A warm, soft body tight against his in an embrace whose closeness was maddening. The unbearable softness of a firm bosom crushed against his chest. The trembling of rounded limbs which awoke a response in him such as he had never known. He tore his lips from hers only to murmur her name, "Serafina! Serafina!"

They were standing beside an old sofa that was covered in faded brocade and he slowly sank down beside her upon it. Her eyes were glittering wildly. Choked, half inarticulate sounds came from her parted red lips. She took his head in her hands and closed both his eyes with burning kisses, drawing her eager lips across his cheeks, his mouth, to his pulsing throat.

"Yes, my loved one, yes!" she murmured. "Only first . . . you would not

begrudge it to me, would you? Just a few drops!"

The pricking stab in his throat was no sharper than the pangs of love that he felt. The warmth of her lips where the blood oozed from the tiny punctures was as much a caress as the pressure of her body trembling against his. Her hair was a fragrant cloud about his face. He was sinking back slowly into a warm, sensual dream while he waited for her to lift her head, raise her blood-wet lips to his, press her. . . .

THE scream stabbed through the night like a knife blade. With a snarl, the woman who crouched above him lifted her head. Slowly Paul opened his eyes and there, standing in the doorway of the room, a candle in her hands and her thinly covered body rigid with horror, stood Lisa!

Her dilated eyes were glancing from the almost nude figure that crouched beside Paul to the one painted on the canvas, looking again and again from one to the other as if she could not believe what she saw.

"Oh God!" she choked. "Paul!"

He tried to struggle to his feet but in a flash a warm figure pressed itself to him again, bare arms went around his neck.

"Be still, my dear one," whispered the husky voice of the woman from Hell. "You are mine. Your blood is on my lips. Do you prefer her love to mine?" He looked deep into her burning eyes, felt the tenseness in her graceful length.

"No," he answered faintly. "I am yours."

Her dark eyes blazed with triumph. The red lips parted in a slow smile.

"Yes, mine! And you shall have your reward!" Slowly she started to bend down again to press her lips to his. He was tense, waiting, then even as his eyes started to close with ecstasy, he saw Lisa



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leap forward. Her face was set, her lips bloodless. She ran to the foot of the picture where Paul's palette knife lay beside the turpentine and the cloth that he had used to clean the canvas. Even as she picked up the paint smeared knife and raised it high, the woman who crouched over Paul leaped to her feet with a scream.

"No!" she shrieked. "No!"

"Yes!" gritted Lisa. "Back to hell with you!" And she slashed down and across the ancient canvas in two savage cuts!

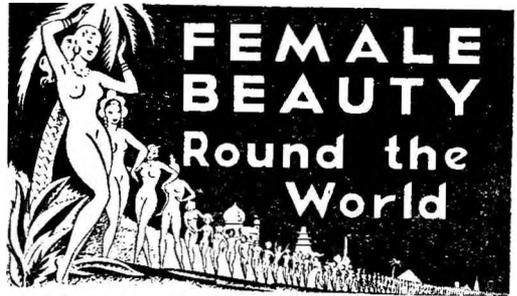
Again Serafina screamed, this time as if she were in mortal agony. She staggered back and brought up against the wall under the heavy wooden crucifix with stunning force . . . and with a rasping sound as the nail pulled out of the rotting plaster, the ponderous cross fell forward and on top of her, crushing her to the floor!

The knife dropped from Lisa's hand. With a moan, Paul leaped from the couch and tried to run toward the prostrate woman, but his heel caught and he started to fall forward. But even as he fell, even as he tried to throw out his hands to save himself, he knew it was useless. He knew that Serafina was finally dead. Knew that if he lifted the ancient heavy crucifix from her prostrate body, he would find the whiteness of her skin marked with two intersecting lines like the lines of the knife slashes on her painting! Then he felt a jarring blow on his head and he knew no more.

PAUL stared around the bedroom, at the discolored walls and the cracked mirror and then up at the two faces that bent over him. Lisa smiled at him and nodded to the elderly, grey haired man.

"This is Dr. Kelvin, darling," she said. "He came in this morning to see

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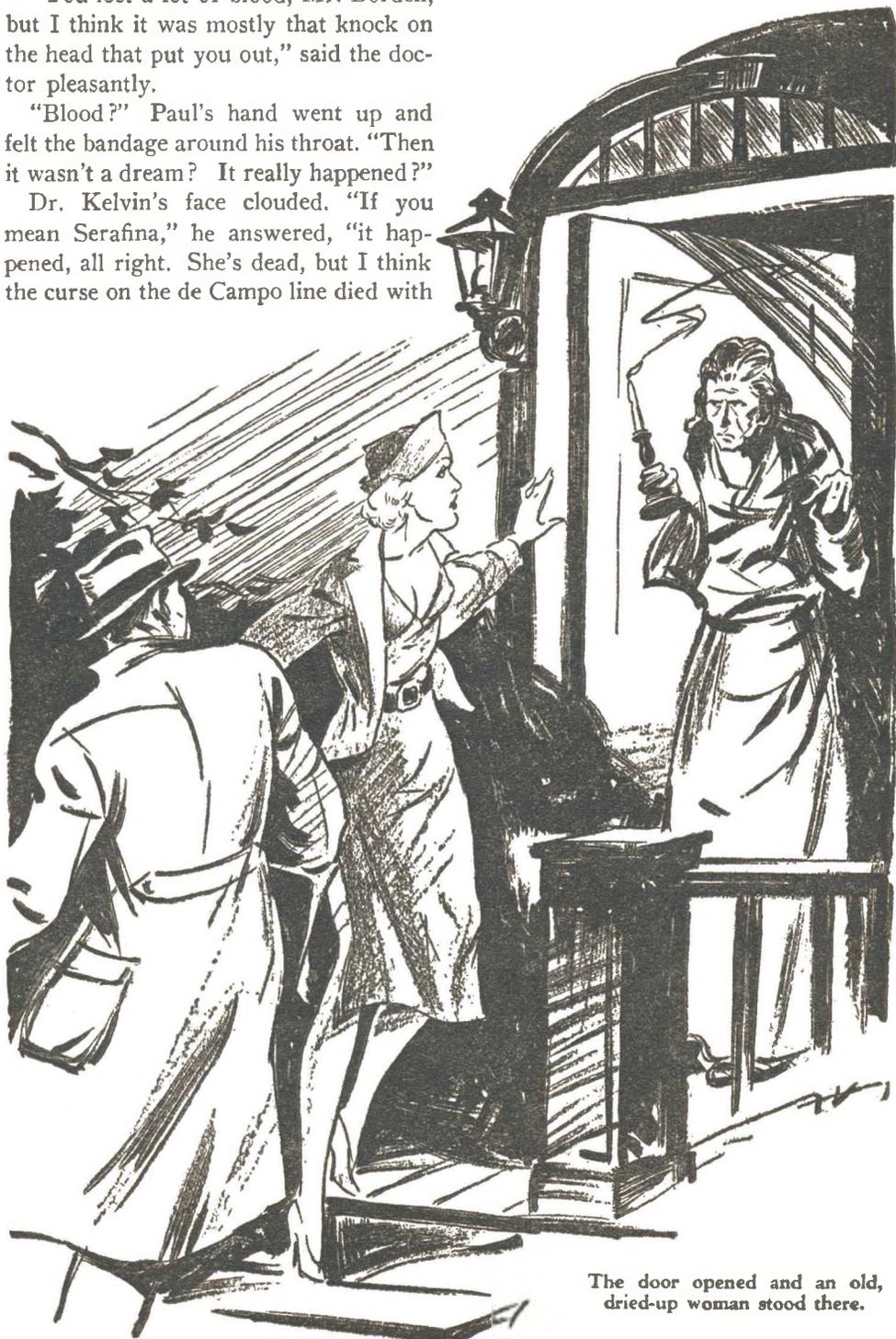
how mother was and found he had another patient."

"You lost a lot of blood, Mr. Borden, but I think it was mostly that knock on the head that put you out," said the doctor pleasantly.

"Blood?" Paul's hand went up and felt the bandage around his throat. "Then it wasn't a dream? It really happened?"

Dr. Kelvin's face clouded. "If you mean Serafina," he answered, "it happened, all right. She's dead, but I think the curse on the de Campo line died with

her." He saw the question in Paul's eyes. "Oh, the curse was real enough too. It



The door opened and an old, dried-up woman stood there.

was hemophilia."

"Hemophilia?" There was a note of fear in Lisa's eyes. "But that's a disease, a blood disease which is passed on through the female side of a line. Then I..."

"No," said Dr. Kelvin. "You won't pass it on to your children because you're not a carrier, you're not a de Campo."

"Not a de Campo?"

"No. Mrs. Field is not your mother." He sighed and sat down on one of the room's rickety chairs. "I'll start from the beginning.

"I knew your father for a long time, Lisa. Knew him when he got married for the first time. Your mother died when you were born and he was terribly broken up by it. I was moving my practise up to the country here and I made him come out and stay with me for a while. While he was out here he met Miss de Campo, the woman whom you thought of as your mother, but who is really your step-mother. Well, he fell in love with her and married her.

"You were only about two years old then and wouldn't remember. He came to live in this house here and I didn't see very much of him for a while. He had two children after that with his new wife, a boy and a girl, your half brother and sister. The girl was Serafina, named after an early ancestor."

"The one whose picture is downstairs?" asked Paul.

Dr. Kelvin nodded. "Yes. She was the one who came from Spain to America and it was with her that the curse on the de Campo family really started. I found out about it when I got a frantic call from your father, Lisa. The boy, he was about two years old then, had cut himself and we couldn't stop his bleeding. It was then that I discovered that he had hemophilia. He was a 'bleeder'. His mother had passed on to him that rare

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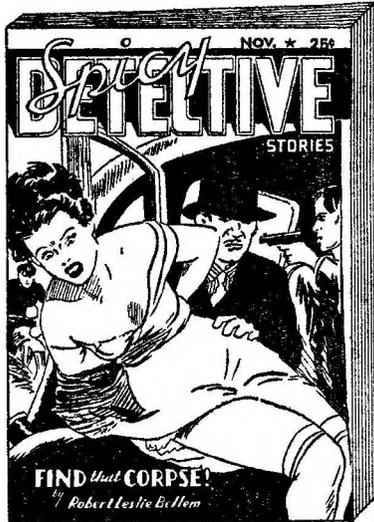
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and fatal disease which will not permit the blood to coagulate. He bled to death from the small cut he had gotten." He shook his head.

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"It must have been enough to drive her mad," said Lisa.

"In a sense, it did," said Dr. Kelvin. "I was made executor of your father's will and I took you away from the unwholesome atmosphere of this house and sent you to boarding schools. I did not see your stepmother for years; not until just recently, as a matter of fact, but I think I can reconstruct what form her mania took."

"SHE still had her daughter Serafina, named after the ancestor who had come to this country from Spain, but she could never let that daughter marry, for she too was a carrier of the dread disease which the women of the de Campo line were cursed with. Evidently the poor crazed woman could not bring herself to destroy that picture of her ancestor which is downstairs, but she painted it out, as if to blot out the awful curse it seemed to symbolize. Serafina, your half sister, must have come to identify herself with that painting. She led a strange life.

"She wasn't allowed to meet or even see a man because of her mother's fear that she would marry and pass on the disease in her blood to her children. She was never allowed off the grounds here. Even the gate was fixed so that tradesmen could drive in to make deliveries,

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but had to be let out by either Maria or your stepmother, who would see that Serafina did not slip out. She was always dressed in a long black, hooded gown so that even if one of the tradesmen did see her by chance, he wouldn't realize how attractive she was."

"A black cape and hood!" exclaimed Paul. "That was why I couldn't seem to see her out there in the shrubbery and again when she came here to my room. And that strange cry must have been Maria calling her back to the house. But there must have been something more . . ." His hand went up to the bandages that covered the two small wounds on his throat. "Both times that I saw her . . ."

Dr. Kelvin nodded. "There was something more. Serafina might have been a normal child to start with, but living here under unnatural conditions did something to her. She knew she was cut off from men, from the rest of the world for some reason. From things her mother and Maria said she must have guessed that it had something to do with blood. Her warped mind must have decided that if she could drink fresh blood, a healthy man's blood, she might become normal, be free to mingle with the rest of mankind."

"Poor creature!" whispered Lisa. "Poor Serafina!"

"Yes," said Paul. "That would explain everything. The black paint that covered the portrait of her ancestress, with whom she subconsciously allied herself, was symbolized by the black robe she always wore. When I removed the paint from the hand of the painting, she felt that she could leave her hand exposed. She must have come downstairs and seen me working at the complete restoration of the painting."

"That Moorish robe in the painting was probably the last touch," said the

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doctor. "It was a family heirloom. It had been hanging in her room. She must have gone upstairs to put it on when she saw it appear on the canvas. When she came down wearing it, she was convinced that there was some definite bond between her and the picture. So convinced that even if that heavy cross had not fallen on her, I am certain that she would have died anyway of a stroke or heart attack when Lisa slashed the canvas."

"And now," said Lisa musingly "There is only one member of the de Campo line left, the woman I thought was my mother."

"The woman who still thinks of you as her daughter," said Dr. Kelvin. "That is why she fainted when you said you

were going to marry Paul. She had visions of the de Campo line with its curse of hemophilia going on and on. I can assure her that you are free of that, but I can't alleviate the loneliness she is going to suffer now that her real daughter is dead. Only you two can do that."

"We two?" repeated Paul wonderingly.

Dr. Kelvin nodded. "She is too old now to realize that Lisa is not her child. If you two had children, she would think of them as her grandchildren . . . and I think she would like that." He smiled as he saw Paul's arm go around Lisa's slim body, then he rose to his feet and went out, leaving them together.

The Curse of Dr. Vecchio

[Continued from page 27]

We rolled over and over, fighting desperately for the lethal weapon now tightly-clutched in his right hand.

THE little man's strength was amazing. More than once he wrenched loose and freed his knife hand long enough to slash at me. The blade cut through the sleeve of my jacket, drew blood. I could feel the life fluid seeping down my arm, warm and sticky. The

dagger might just as well have slashed my throat or buried itself in my heart.

I jammed my knee up into his groin, took advantage of his momentary weakness to get on top of him. But even pain failed to stop him. His right arm circled my neck. Something warned me in the nick of time. I threw myself off his body just as the dagger swung down, its point aimed at my back.

I heard him groan horribly, saw his

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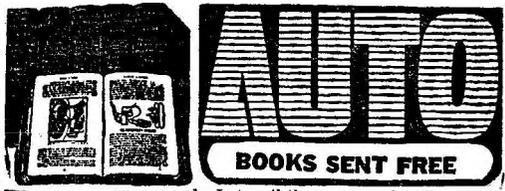
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body stiffen. The handle of the dagger was sticking out of his belly. Unable to check the momentum of his arm he had *knifed himself!*

For a moment that seemed like a century, I crouched on the floor, watching the blood spurt from the wound with each beat of his heart. He was dying and he knew it. His eyes were glazed, and his lips had lost every vestige of color. He motioned to me, indicated that I was to lift him up. I did so, as gently as possible, braced him against the wall.

"Paper," he whispered. "Paper and pencil. In . . . in . . . the desk . . . drawing-room."

I found a pad and a pencil, brought them to him. His hand shook as he wrote a note in Arabic. "You . . . you will give this to . . . to Ali," he said. "Unless you do . . . he will kill you." The pencil slid from his inert fingers. I could hear his teeth click as he gritted them. A faint, painful smile touched his lips.

"You . . . you must wonder about . . . about the accident," he murmured, his voice scarcely a shadow of sound.

"You . . . you did not strike Lynn. It was an illusion created by placing a concave lens over your . . . your windshield. It . . . it brought her figure nearer . . . like . . . like binoculars."

I placed my lips close to his ear. "Did Walter Ridge put you up to this?"

He shook his head. "No. I did it for . . . for Lynn in exchange . . . in exchange for certain favors. Tell her . . . tell her . . ." His chin dropped to his chest. A shudder ran through his body. He was dead.

I HEARD a gasp and a muted cry behind me. Enid was standing in the drawing-room archway, gaping at the corpse of Dr. Vecchio. I hurried to her, held her in my arms. She was trembling.

"It's all over, darling," I whispered. "Death has lifted his curse."

She buried her face against my chest, sobbed like a child. I knew, then, that all the horror and all the mental torture was not in vain if it had brought Enid back to me once again. For Dr. Vecchio it was the end. For us, the beginning.

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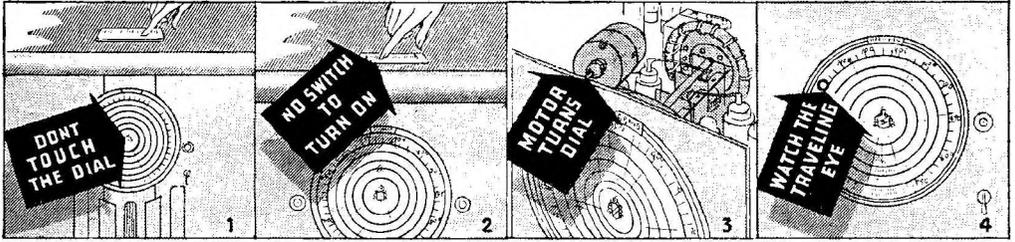
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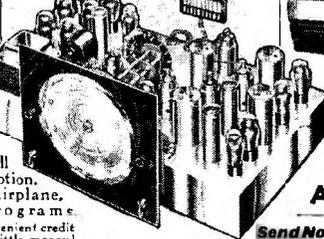
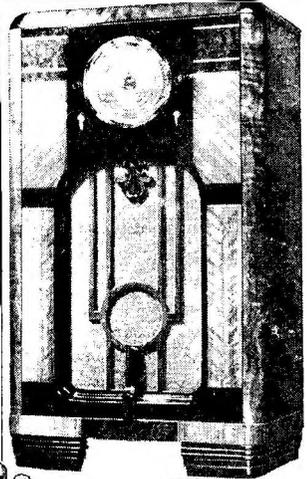
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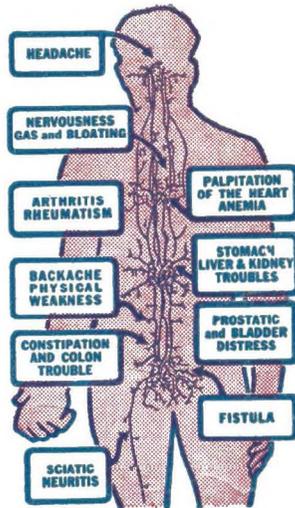
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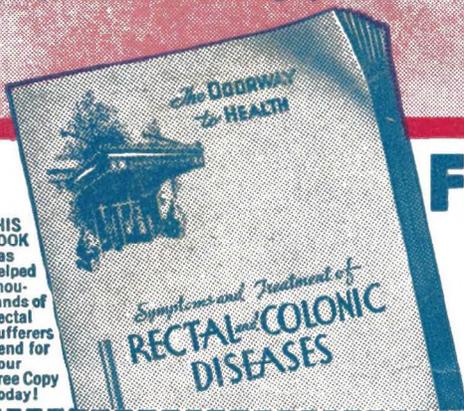
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