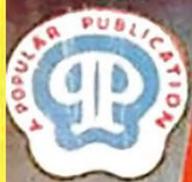


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TERROR TALES

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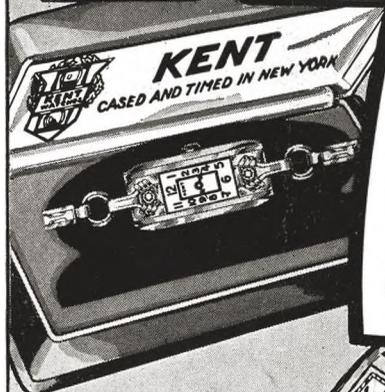
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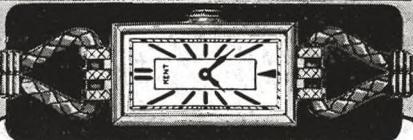
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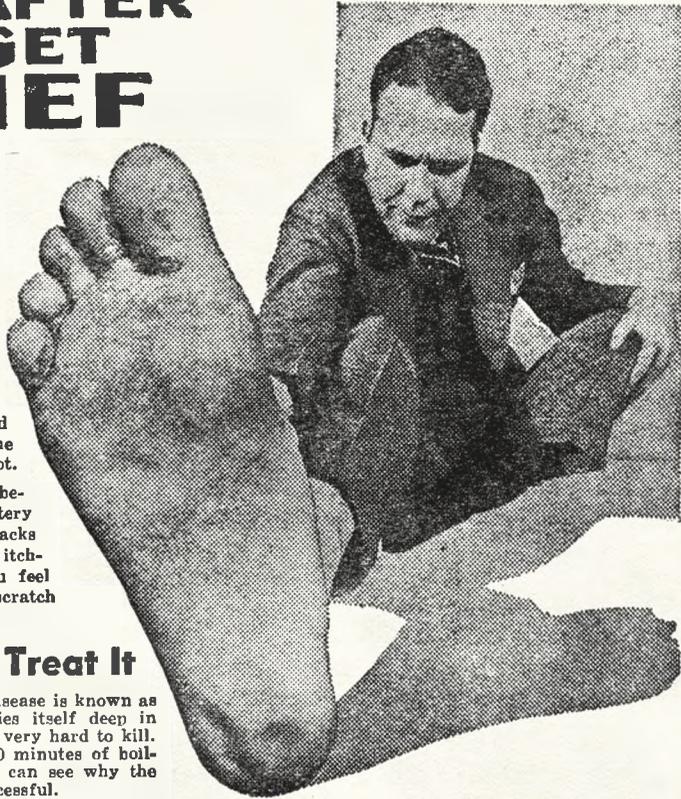
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As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

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Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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TERROR TALES



Volume Eight

July-August, 1937

Number One

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All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

FOUR LONG, FASCINATING MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

- Satan's Love Bazaar**.....By Wayne Rogers 6
 Could the baleful influence of that shaggy, unclean hex-man have turned our peaceful charity fair into a mad orgy where our loveliest young girls vied savagely with one another to flaunt their secret charms in lewd display? Could that strange power make me commit a hideous murder? . . .
- Lovely Lady of Death**.....By Donald Dale 38
 As a wedding present for my bride I bought a dainty figurine. . . I didn't know it was the goddess of a shapeless monster that would spill the life blood of my loved ones—and hurl me through the gamut of nameless horror and despair! . . .
- Revels for the Lusting Dead**.....By Arthur Leo Zagat 66
 Linda Loray had a date to be married—but not to a mad fiend who conducted midnight revels where naked girl-gliadiators entertained eerie spectators who were dead men lusting for the sight of fresh, warm blood!
- Dance of the Bloodless Ones**.....By Francis James 98
 If you are in love—beware! Guard the girl of your choice with your very life! For at this very instant, obscene, poisonous beings may be coveting your happiness—and gloating over the intimate beauties of your loved one!
- BLOOD-CHILLING SHORT TALES OF TERROR**
- I Am A Mad Artist!**.....By H. T. Sperry 28
 Why did that lovely creature insist upon posing nude for me—when she knew that the sight of her body would awake in me the killer-beast that was my heritage?
- The Thing Without A Name**.....By Ray Cummings 56
 It never occurred to Nada Parks that a gruesome thing long dead could command the love of some one young and flush with beauty—until she found herself locked up with The Thing Without A Name!
- Moulder of Monsters**.....By G. T. Fleming-Roberts 87
 Not words, but some unearthly, urgent whimpering, came over the phone and led young Dr. Hedson and his beautiful nurse to the laboratory where men were changed to monsters!
- AND—
- Religion of Terror**.....The Editor 4
 There are those who make a god of pain!
- Black Chapel**.....A Department 121

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Story Illustrations by Monroe Eisenberg and Hamilton Greene

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Religion of Terror

THERE is a unique group of cultists—flagellants—which is active today, and functions within the borders of these United States. They are called the *Penitentes*, and there are thirty-five thousand of them. Their cult was founded as a religious organization, devoted to offering penance in public. . . . Now the order retains no particle of actual Godly merit, having had its former rites varied so radically that it has become a monstrosity unconnected with any religion.

Rarely has an outsider spied on the activities of the *Penitentes*, and in several instances snoopers are said to have met with death. Each of the mountainous villages in a certain locality has its own fraternity, with its mayor or chief brother; his word is law. Sins against outsiders are disregarded, but offenses committed against a brother are punishable with a wire cat-o'-nine-tails lashing that tears huge chunks of flesh from the culprit. A member caught baring the secrets of the *Penitentes* would be buried alive.

The purpose of the cult is still professed to be one of worship, but the object of that worship seems not to be the Deity, but the spilling of blood in a manner so brutal, so ghastly as to strike stark terror into the hearts of all participants. The spectators revel in the awful terror of the thing; the actual participants revel in the excruciating pain of it.

Picture a bare-footed man, his body horribly slashed and bleeding, laboring up a steep grade with a cross chained to his back—a cross that weighs several hundred pounds and is fifteen to twenty feet long. Bound to his arms are two sharp short-swords, fashioned so that their points are anchored close to his ribs. If he falters, those steel blades will cruelly pierce his lungs—but he will be a martyr! Strange are the quirks of the human mind! . . . Following him is a dignitary of the order who, with a flint knife cuts gashes over the plodding man's ribs; then he slits a four inch wound in the side from which the blood pours in a sluice. . . .

At last the Calvary is attained and the man requests the attendants to nail him to the cross he has borne. It is done, and the cross is hoisted upright. After forty minutes of doleful chanting the cross is taken down to release the sufferer should he have survived. But he is dead. . . .

That is only one of the horrible ceremonies of the *Penitentes*, but the others are just as grisly—perhaps more so, because there are festivities in which scores of people whip each other—and themselves—into a bloody froth. . . .

Truth is stranger than fiction, and often more blood-chilling.

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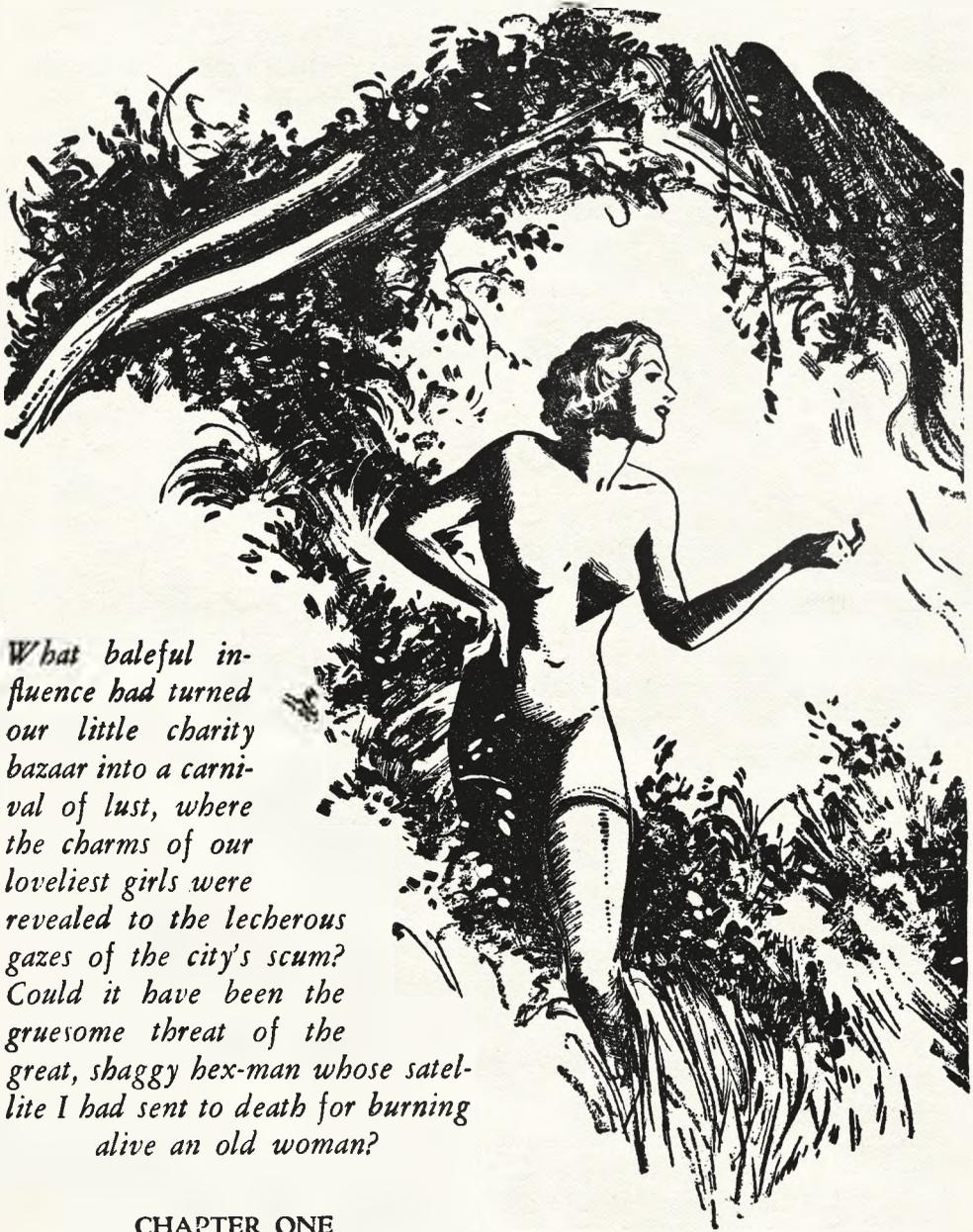
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CHAPTER ONE

The Devil Makes a Pledge

MURDER is nothing new or particularly startling in the life of a district attorney, and we had had plenty of homicides in Jordan City: drunk-

en killings, gang slayings, insurance murders, crimes of passion—the usual run that any city D.A.'s office handles year in and year out. My two terms had hardened me, and I thought I could take things of that sort in my stride. That was before Sheriff

*A Daringly Fascinating Novelette of Diabolical Intrigue
and Unleashed Passion*

By WAYNE ROGERS

(Author of "The Fire Bride," etc.)



Jackson brought in Lute Brunner from the hills. That was before . . .

Six hours after the dull-witted farmer clumped into my office the whole city was recoiling in horror from the details of his ghastly crime. The office itself still seemed to reek with the fetid odor he had brought

into it; a nauseous, acrid odor that had impregnated his ragged clothing and stamped him as the foulest monster I had ever encountered.

A "hex murder," the newspapers called it, but the deeper I delved into the maze of ignorance and superstition that was its

background the more I wondered how any human being—any creature molded in God's image, could descend to such a level. To kill in the heat of passion is one thing; even to murder cold-bloodedly, to remove someone who stands in the killer's way, is understandable—but the thing that Lute Brunner did. . . .

STOLID-FACED, dull-eyed, hardly appearing to be interested in what I was saying, he sat across the courtroom and stared at me as I gave the state's case to the jury.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I want you to visualize in your own minds, if you can, that scene in the woods on the side of Shiloh Mountain. Dusk is deepening into night as this man, Lute Brunner, creeps through the brush until he is within a few feet of old Hetty Mears' lonely cabin. For days he has been planning this deed, timing it carefully, picking just the right spot so that she will not see him when she steps out of her door.

"Crouching there in the brush he waits until this half-crippled, sixty-five year old woman hobbles out to draw water for her evening meal. Silently he leaps upon her and clubs her over the head. Then he ties up her unconscious body, lashes her wrists and ankles securely with baling wire he has brought with him.

"Callously he drags her to her own outdoor fireplace and slips ropes through her bound wrists and ankles, fastens the ropes to two trees and draws them tight until she is suspended helplessly above the dead coals of her noon fire. Deliberately he piles up fresh fuel beneath her and sets a match to it.

"Like a fiend out of hell he stands there as the flames catch her clothing and burn them from her writhing body. Like an inhuman devil he stands gloating there while her screams ring in his ears, while her flesh sears and blisters—while she roasts alive! Right in the smoke of her disin-

tegrating body he stands, glorying in her agony, until the stench of her cremation has saturated his clothing as thoroughly as this monstrous deed has stained his soul!

"A crime so foul it is incredible that a human being could have conceived and executed it! And what excuse does he offer for this barbaric outrage? Why did he put this helpless old woman to death in the most horrible way known to man? Why—"

Lute Brunner answered for himself. Before I could give the answers to my rhetorical questions—before I could tell them that Hetty Mears had died because the butter in his churn would not set, because one of his cows went dry out of season—he was on his feet, interrupting me.

"She was a witch," he repeated. It was the only defense he had made. "She put the sign on me. Fire is the only thing that kills a witch, so I burned her—burned her till there was nothing left to come back and do me more harm. You don't understand, Mr. Taylor, but maybe some day when the sign is on you—"

Frank Dixon, his attorney, was on his feet, vainly trying to quiet him, to drag him back to his place at the counsel table. The judge's gavel was pounding, bailiffs were starting toward him. Brunner gave up. With a shrug he sank back into his chair, into the semi-coma that had characterized him all through the trial.

No, I didn't understand how any human being no matter how uneducated or how superstitious, could be driven to commit such an unforgivable atrocity; and before I finished my summation I knew that the jury agreed with me. Lute Brunner's conviction was a foregone conclusion—but as my eyes traveled over the spectators they came to rest on a stalwart, leonine-headed individual sitting over among the hill people, and the edge was taken off my satisfaction.

Abel Fleming was a power in the hills; was *the* power in that wild, thinly populated territory that stretched beyond the state road. Like a feudal lord he ruled the ignorant inhabitants who cowered in fear of his supposed supernatural powers.

Weird tales drifted down from the scattered shanties of his domain; whispered tales of the influence of his evil eye, of the dread hex by which he kept his followers in subjection—tales of men who disappeared, men who mysteriously withered and died when they had aroused his displeasure. But always there was nothing but whispers; never actual testimony from the frightened hill-folk, never direct evidence that could be used to pin anything criminal on the reputed hex-doctor.

Calmly, his big, strong-featured face revealing neither satisfaction nor disapproval, Abel Fleming listened, and when I sat down I felt his eyes upon me. They were dark eyes that studied me without betraying the slightest hint of what was going on in the unfathomable mind behind them.

UNQUESTIONABLY Lute Brunner was guilty of the murder of Hetty Mears, but every hour that I had spent preparing the case against him I had become more and more convinced that it was Abel Fleming who should have gone to the chair for the crime. Nowhere was there the slightest lead to implicate him, nowhere anything direct that I could lay my finger on—yet I could fairly see his dominating figure looming in the background, pulling the strings that operated his puppets for undisclosed motives of his own.

There was something uncanny about that situation—and now, as my eyes encountered Fleming's basilisk stare, I had the weird feeling that he knew exactly what was going on in my mind; that he was chuckling inwardly, secure in the knowledge that any attempt to involve him in the crime would be futile. . . .

The jurymen filed out of the courtroom—and were back again in record time. There had been no worth-while defense, but the speed with which they reached their verdict of guilty, was something of a blow to Frank Dixon, the attorney the court had appointed for Brunner's defense. Dixon had worked hard on a hopeless case, trying vainly to forestall a decision that was a foregone conclusion, and my sympathy went out to him.

That was the story with most of Dixon's cases—hopeless from the start; yet he was ambitious and worked with a zeal that was worthy of better reward. The court knew that he was always available for appointment as counsel and that he would give every case the best possible handling, and as a result he had been defending a raft of cheap crook cases which netted him very little and were not much help in furthering his ambition—which, I believed, was to succeed me in the district attorney's office.

If that *was* Dixon's ambition, but I knew that it was doomed to failure. With the fall reopening of court I was to resign my office to accept an appointment to the district court bench, a reward for the drastic anti-vice campaign I had conducted until Jordan City was purged of most of its undesirables. But it had already been decided in the county committee of the dominant party that my friend and assistant, Neil Blanchard, was to succeed me—unless Cliff Mason, a formidable opponent, was able to defeat him in the primaries.

That didn't leave much hope for Dixon, but, nevertheless, as his client was led off to his cell I could not help feeling sorry for him and admiring the hopeless fight he had waged against a case that would have taken the heart out of most attorneys.

The picture of Brunner's ghastly crime, of the helpless old woman roasting to death like a chicken spitted over a fire, had spread a miasma of horror over the whole

courtroom. I detected it in the eyes of the jurors, in the white face of the judge, in the low murmurs of the spectators as they shuffled out. It would be a long time before any of us would forget that grisly picture.

All during the afternoon it haunted me, despite my efforts to shake it off, and it still weighed on me as I left my office for the day and set out for the Charity Bazaar being held by the Jordan City Civic Club, of which I was one of the directors. Each June we staged this bazaar in the city's largest auditorium and devoted a week to raising money to finance our charity program for the year. All the best people in town took part, and the event had come to be quite a social function.

This was the opening day, the first glimpse I had had of this year's layout, but almost as soon as I walked into the comfortably filled auditorium I was surprised and not very agreeably impressed. Pretty young Flora Campbell, who stepped up to sell me a program, was dressed in a costume that would have attracted plenty of attention on any beach. Her bare legs and stomach and her almost equally revealed breasts were startling there in that brightly lighted room.

But that, I soon discovered, was the keynote of the affair. Instead of the pleasant, easy formality to which we were accustomed, this year's edition of the bazaar had been "livened up" to the point of being decidedly risqué—the work of a Broadway director who had been imported to stage it for us.

As I wandered from booth to booth, from attraction to attraction, I became more and more disappointed—and vaguely apprehensive. But it was not until I reached Evelyn Owen's booth that my disapproval became personal. Evelyn was my fiancée, was to become Mrs. Garry Taylor in the fall when I became a judge, but she had been very secretive about her stunt in the bazaar.

When I reached her booth I saw the reason why. She was selling kisses at five dollars apiece!

"DON'T be a jealous silly!" she laughed at me when I protested. "You're frowning like an old bear—and everyone's looking at you. For five dollars you may kiss me—and from present indications I'll need a bit of kissing before the day is over; there don't seem to be many men who think my kisses are worth that much."

"But any Tom, Dick or Harry—" I started to object.

"Any Tom, Dick or Harry," she mimicked. "You know right well, Garry Taylor, this bazaar is patronized almost exclusively by members of our own circle—so what difference will a few kisses make?"

She was right in that; our bazaar seldom attracted any but the society element of the city—men who might have lightly kissed her at any time without paying five dollars to help provide milk for hungry youngsters. Perhaps I was unduly jealous. I tried to tell myself that—but, somehow, I didn't like it, and my curious uneasiness increased.

Not until some time afterward did that half-sensed apprehension take more definite form. I was at the ticket window, and suddenly found myself staring into the dark, compelling eyes of Abel Fleming as he handed over a dollar bill for his admission. The hill people had never come to the bazaar in previous years, and Fleming's presence sounded a tocsin of alarm in my brain. Vividly his presence recalled to my mind the courtroom scene—recalled the ghastly picture of that helpless old woman burning to a crisp over a roaring fire. . . .

The knowledge that he was there at the bazaar, that he was inside mingling with my friends, with Evelyn, would give me no peace. Shortly I found someone to re-

lieve me and went back into the auditorium—and immediately I knew that a sixth sense had been warning me, had been urging me back inside!

Shocked and outraged, I started across the hall to where Abel Fleming stood at Evelyn's booth. He had stepped up onto the raised platform and was taking her in his arms—but instead of the jocular peck which most men took for their five dollars he was crushing her to him passionately! One arm was around her, bending her head back into the crook of his elbow while his lips enveloped hers lingeringly; and the other hand was stealing up under her breast, cupping its rounded fullness in his fingers!

For a moment Evelyn struggled with him, tried to push him away, but then her efforts ceased and she seemed to relax in his arm as his fingers bored into hers. The next moment I was across the hall and my fingers fastened in his collar. In my rage I yanked him back so furiously that he toppled off the low platform and fell to the floor—to be met with a fist to the jaw the moment he was back on his feet. That blow floored him again, and I stood waiting for him to get up, waiting to unleash the fury that was raging like hot fire in my swollen

veins. I hoped he would come back.

Half a dozen of my friends intervened before the fight could go any farther and started rushing Fleming to the door. But before he was past me he set his feet solidly and flung their hands off his arms. Blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth and his dark eyes were like coals of fire in his white, set face as he stood there, glaring his savage hate.

"I'll go—you don't have to throw me out," he grated. "You can put my body out—but I'll still be here with you every moment. You'll know that I'm here—and before you close this bazaar you'll come up into the hills and beg me to come back and have free run of it!"

Even after he had gone we stood staring at each other, white-faced and shaken; wordless until a low, gasping moan snapped us out of our semi-trace. That moan came from Mary Corbin, standing right beside me. Her face was ashen under the rouge of her Oriental dancer make-up, and her eyes were widened to great pools of terror.

She began to sway backward just as my hand slipped around her waist—and then she was trembling and sobbing hysterically in my arms.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Unseen Director

EACH year it was the custom of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Civic Club to serve supper between the afternoon and evening sessions of the bazaar for those participating in it. Usually those meals were jolly gatherings, but tonight the festivity was subdued; hushed, as if a pall of tragedy hung over us all.

As I sat beside Evelyn I noticed that the business of eating was receiving concentrated attention all around me. Whether we would admit it or not, uneasy superstition had already clamped its cold grip on us. Abel Fleming's reputation was a potent thing, even in the city—and the picture of malignant picture he had made as he hurled his curious threat was still vivid in every mind.

As soon as we were finished I went back to my place at the door, and it was several hours before I had an opportunity to go inside again to see how the bazaar was progressing. It was Neil Blanchard who came out to get me.

"Better come inside and have a look around, Garry," he said uneasily. "I don't like it worth a damn."

The moment we got back onto the floor of the auditorium I knew what was bothering him. The whole atmosphere of the place had changed; just how I could not be sure, but I sensed it in the faster tempo, in the undercurrent of hysteria. The laughter was louder and more boisterous; the dancing was wilder and more spectacular; the expression on the faces of the performers was more excited, more feverish.

"You get it, don't you?" Blanchard turned to me as we passed booth after booth. "The whole thing is degenerating into a honkytonk performance. It's getting altogether out of hand, and the first thing you know we're going to have trouble. You can thank Berleigh Parker, our ex-

pert director, for that. He laid this thing out so that the emphasis is on sex wherever you turn—and now the party's running away with him."

Business was flourishing wherever we looked. Lines stood waiting at the central dance floor where the "dime-a-dance" hostesses were charging half a dollar for their services. Crowds were flocking in to see the Oriental dancers and the peep-shows. Evelyn and her co-workers were having all too much patronage to suit me at their kiss-selling booth. Even the fortune-tellers had customers waiting in line for their services—which were more than satisfactory, judging by the grinning faces of those who came out of the curtained booths.

Rushing business everywhere—but in every case the activity had become feverish, and the women were almost beyond themselves with excitement. I agreed with Blanchard; there was trouble in the air—and instinctively my eyes again strayed anxiously to where Evelyn was offering her lips to any man who had five dollars. She was laughing provokingly as another customer stepped up on her platform; was holding up her lips invitingly as he took her in his arms—and the chill of apprehension that trickled down my spine clashed with the hot anger that reddened my face!

The stage end of the auditorium had been partitioned off into a small tableau theater. Blanchard drew me into line with the jostling crowd of ticket-purchasers, and we got inside just as the curtain went up to reveal a very effective living reproduction of a famous painting of an artist and his model.

Betty Blanchard, Neil's wife, was the model, standing on the dais. Her arms and shoulders and feet were bare and she was holding a loose white robe around her body so that the rounded tops of her breasts were just visible above it. The artist, brush poised in hand before his canvas,

was looking at her before putting in the next stroke.

A ripple of applause ran through the audience, but it was the scattered applause of the uninitiated. The others were waiting, expectant—and then they were rewarded. Betty's robe seemed to slip from her fingers and almost dropped to the floor. Just in time she caught it—but for a long moment she stood there before them stark naked!

Neil gasped as the crowd whooped with delight. I could see the hot blood running up into his cheeks, but as I watched him out of the corner of my eye I was sure that he had not seen what was plain to me. That slip was not accidental; it was carefully planned—cleverly performed so that the seeming accident had a much more arousing effect on her audience than if Betty had stood there in the nude when the curtain rose.

The excited gleam I caught in her eyes betrayed her, and I knew that the thing was intentional—just as I could see that she fairly reveled in the wanton display of her charms.

But even as I understood what she had done I sought vainly for what had prompted it. For some time I had been aware that Betty was having a flirtation with Harry Graber, the man who posed as the artist, but even that would not account for her making such a public exhibition of herself. . . .

AS the curtain came down Neil Blanchard came to life and started grimly for the stage door, on the outside of the little theater. I was right at his heels as he stormed in behind the scenery and confronted Betty and Graber.

"How did that happen?" he demanded furiously; and before either of them could answer, "why haven't you anything on under that sheet?"

Betty stammered something about getting into the spirit of the pose, but Blan-

chard had already whirled on Graber.

"It strikes me as very odd that just you and Betty, out of all the others, should have been cast together for that scene," he said significantly. And I knew then that he had not been altogether blind to what was going on for the past few months. "And it strikes me as even more odd that Betty gets into the spirit of her work so completely that she strolls around here behind the scenes practically naked with you—"

Rage was blazing in his eyes and his lips were drained of color, but Graber backed away, frightened and shaken.

"I don't know anything about this, Neil," he protested. "I had nothing to do with what she wore. What happened was as much a surprise to me as to you. But Betty isn't the only one—the girls all seem to have lost their heads. I never saw them like this before; they're throwing themselves into these poses so completely that we don't know what to expect next."

"That's Parker's work," Blanchard swore bitterly. "He has the women so worked up with his damned sexy ideas that they don't know what they're doing."

"I thought of that," Graber nodded agreement, "but I have a hunch that the responsibility goes farther back than Parker. He's only doing what he was hired to do, but you remember it was Cliff Mason who proposed an outside director in the first place. He's the one who engaged Parker and brought him here."

Cliff Mason. . . .

I hadn't much use for the man. Aside from political differences, I felt that he wasn't trustworthy; and I blamed him for preventing me from scoring a complete victory in my vice crusade. Mason was attorney for Joe Steckel, owner of a notorious night-club and the man we believed to be the head of Jordan City's vice ring. Our campaign succeeded in convicting most of his lieutenants, and we managed

to clean up the Golden Horseshoe, his night-club, and put it on a respectable basis, but we weren't able to nail Steckel himself—thanks of Cliff Mason's questionable tactics.

But even though I disliked the man personally, I could see no reason why he should want to debauch the charity bazaar. . . .

A wild disturbance outside in the auditorium suddenly swept all thought of Cliff Mason out of my mind and keyed up my every nerve. Waves of applause, loud cheers and raucous shouts of encouragement rose in a riotous din. That demonstration sounded more like the drunken ovation a stag performer might receive than anything to be expected at the bazaar.

Grim-lipped I hurried to the stage door and stepped out into the hall, to find a boisterous crowd gathered around the barker's platform outside the Oriental dancers' booth. Mary Corbin was in the center of that platform—and as I looked at her I felt the hot blood rushing up into my cheeks and my hands balling into fists at my sides.

Mary was a very sweet girl—and at one time I had been close to marrying her. That was before Evelyn Owen came to Jordan City; but even though Mary was no longer my sweetheart I still held a very genuine affection for her—and the thing she was doing shocked me almost as much as if it were Evelyn up there on the platform.

WITH utter abandon she was throwing herself into one of the most sensual dances I had ever seen. One by one she had discarded her garments as her gyrations became wilder and wilder, until she wore nothing but a few veils—and even those dropped to the platform before I could make my way through the tight-packed crowd. Stark naked she postured before her audience, turning slowly so that every line, every intimate curve of her

body was revealed to their feasting eyes!

Slowly and deliberately she turned at first, then faster and faster until she was pirouetting like a top, whirling with dizzying speed, a flesh-white column that went round and round—until it crumpled and sank to the floor in a sprawled heap!

"She's fainted!" the scared barker shouted as he bent over her. "Get a doctor, somebody—quick!"

We carried her into the booth and stood aside while Dr. Wilkins worked over her. Strange, half-intelligible words were coming from her hardly moving lips. He bent close and tried to catch what she was saying, but in a few minutes he gave it up and shook his head puzzledly.

"'Able' is about the only word I can distinguish," he said doubtfully. "Evidently something she doesn't think she is able to do—"

But cold terror was stealing into my breast and clutching at my heart until it seemed that its beating must stop. Able—she wasn't saying "able!" In her half-conscious delirium she was muttering "Abel"—was talking to Abel Fleming, who had promised that he would be there with us every minute that the bazaar was open!

"There seems to be no indication that she was drugged," the doctor frowned, "yet there is no doubt that she is in some sort of trance, under some sort of spell. About the only thing I can do is administer a sedative."

From his bag he took a hypodermic needle and filled it, but just as he was about to press the point into Mary's side the seizure left her. For a moment she sat up and her frightened eyes turned from one to the other of us while she covered her breasts with the shawl that had been thrown over her. Then she burst into hysterical tears and sagged forward, limp and close to collapse.

She had been under some sort of spell, the doctor had said—and she was calling

Abel Fleming by name. . . .

As I stared down at her, sobbing brokenly in the arms of one of her friends, I remembered Fleming's malevolent face—remembered the startling effect his glaring eyes had had upon her. Perhaps Mary was more psychic, more sensitive, than the rest of us. Perhaps she had known then what his threat would mean—had known what we all faced. . . .

In that moment the vague, indefinable apprehension that had been growing within me began to crystalize; became transformed into an eerie fear of something that my mind would not admit was possible—but that my intuition shuddered away from in terror!

CHAPTER THREE

Death Steps In

THAT night it seemed the bazaar never would close, but when the auditorium finally was darkened and I started home with Evelyn the fear that was riding me found plenty more on which to feed. She was there beside me in the car physically, but that was all. Mentally she was so far away that she was hardly aware of my presence.

So far away—where? Cold perspiration seeped out on the back of my hands as I asked myself that question—and shied away from the answer that thrust itself into my mind. Was she, like Mary Corbin, already hearing Abel Fleming's call? Was that why she was so distracted, so absorbed with her own thoughts? Because his devilish power was beginning to exert itself over her?

Surreptitiously I watched her, and saw that when she did look at me it was with a peculiar, calculating expression such as I had never seen in her eyes. It was as if she was studying me, weighing me, speculating on what I might do. . . .

Her unusual behavior baffled me, and

added fuel to my growing terror. Whatever it was that was coming over her, it had its source back there in the bazaar, I knew; and the surest way to combat it was to keep her out of that place. But how?

"I don't like the way the bazaar is being run this year," I plunged into the thing desperately, "and I don't like that job of yours a little bit. It's cheapening, Evelyn. That's what's the matter with the whole bazaar—it's cheap and bawdy. Do something for me, darling; stay away from it tomorrow. Give it up; there will be plenty of others to take your place, and I'd feel a lot happier knowing that you are 'not taking part in it.'"

But even before I finished talking, I knew my cause was lost. Her eyes were becoming cold and hostile, and her little jaw was hardening into lines of determination that I could not mistake.

"I've promised, and I'm going through with it," she said doggedly. "You're simply being very silly, Garry, and I won't listen to you. If you insist, we're going to quarrel, and I'll go ahead with it anyway. Nothing you can say will stop me."

Her voice was rising excitedly, and as I looked deep into her eyes I knew that it was no use. She was *anxious* to go back there tomorrow, was looking forward to it eagerly, and she resented my interference as if I intended to deprive her of something on which she had set her heart.

There was nothing I could do but shrug and let the matter drop, but all the next day my thoughts kept reverting to the bazaar, dreading the afternoon hour at which I knew it would open. That was a hard day for me, aside from the worry that gnawed at me unceasingly. I was tied up all afternoon and booked for a dinner engagement that kept me until nearly nine o'clock.

By the time I reached the bazaar the evening session was going in full blast—and it took only one look to tell me that

last night's session had been tame compared to this one. The moment I stepped into the auditorium I was shocked by the spirit of wild abandon that ruled the place.

And tonight, I saw with added misgivings, it was not only our usual people who were in attendance. Word of what had gone on the night before must have been passed around the town, and as a result most of the worst elements of the city had flocked to the bazaar. They were crowding the aisles, leering at the women, snickering and making vulgar comments as they cheered them on to further excesses.

"Look at this place," I tried frantically to make Evelyn see what was going on around her. "It's a bedlam. We've got the scum of the town in here—and you women are encouraging them and leading them on. I don't know what's come over you—"

But she laughed at me.

"That's all in your imagination, Garry," she chided. "None of the other men seem to mind. Why should you? I can't understand why you've become such a Puritan all of a sudden. There seems to be something on your mind that's making you suspicious and disagreeable—and I don't like it."

She was right about the other men of our circle, I had to admit that. They seemed to have entered into the spirit of the wild revelry as completely as the women. *Was* the fault mine? Was I worrying too much? I tried to answer those questions honestly, but I didn't know. I realized that during the day my thoughts had been with Abel Fleming far more than they should have been—seeing him hold Evelyn in his arms and kissing her, seeing him glaring his hate and hearing him rasping his threat. Perhaps that was it; perhaps I was stupidly playing the fellow's game by letting his ominous-sounding words harass me. . . .

I tried to forget my suspicions, but the fear that was gnawing at my heart was

not a thing with which I could argue. If only I could get Evelyn out of there and keep her out. . . .

I WAS passing one of the fortune-tellers' booths at that moment, and Connie Haemer slipped up to my side and linked her arm through mine.

"I haven't had a chance to read your palm yet, Garry," she coaxed as she smiled up at me. "You'd better come in now. My last customer was so well satisfied he said he would bring back an army."

Connie was Evelyn's best friend. If anyone could influence her, Connie would be the one. Perhaps I could convince her of the danger I feared; perhaps I could persuade her to get out of the bazaar and take Evelyn with her. Anyway, it was worth a try.

With that intention I went into the dimly lighted booth with her, and the curtained doorway closed behind us. The booth was just a little cubbyhole with a small table in the center and a padded bench running around three sides of it. A draped overhead lamp and a number of cushions completed the furnishings.

Connie seated me opposite her across the tiny table and took my right hand in hers. Before I could say anything she began her palaver, so I grinned and thought I'd let her go through with it. But in a few moments I noticed that this fortune-telling was taking a peculiar turn. Connie was rubbing my hand, caressing it with warm fingers that made little excursions past my wrist and up my sleeve. She was not looking at my palm at all. Instead her eyes were fixed raptly on my face—eyes that sparkled with excitement; that were warm with desire and invitation.

Now she was leaning over the table toward me, and I noticed that the folds of her loose gypsy blouse had divided and fallen apart so that her unconfined breasts were almost fully exposed. They were rising and falling rapidly with the quicken-

ing breath that was panting out through her eager, parted lips. I tried to rise, but for a split second that brought my face closer to hers across the table—and her arms slid around my neck as her lips captured mine and held them in a kiss so intense that I could taste warm blood in my mouth!

Connie, too, was in the clutches of this thing that had settled over the bazaar! Forcibly I tore her arms from around my neck and plumped her back onto her bench while I dived through the curtained doorway. Now I *knew* that I was right; that bazaar was going stark mad—and somewhere in the background a fiendish devil was chuckling as he watched it degenerate into a Bacchanalian rout!

As I shot out of that booth I almost ran headlong into Neil Blanchard. He looked at me curiously and then nodded his head.

"You've had a taste of it, too, eh?" he grunted. "I've heard what's going on in those booths. It's almost as bad out here, for that matter. The whole bazaar's gone cuckoo, if you ask me—and that's just what Burleigh Parker wants."

Bitterly he surveyed the frenzied activity on all sides, and then turned back to me.

"You know that this place is full of reporters and newspaper photographers,

don't you? From the New York papers, every one of them. How'd they get here? Parker sent for them, of course. He's deliberately staging an orgy here so that he'll get his name and pictures in the papers and re-establish himself on Broadway. He's been slipping out of the lime-light lately and needs something like this to put him back in the headlines."

As he spoke I saw the flare of the cameramen's flashlight bulbs as they snapped pictures of the frenzied dancing going on in the center of the hall—dancing that would have been more in place in a voodoo debauch. . . . I went looking for Mr. Burleigh Parker.

In one of the wings behind the stage I located him, and cornered him before he had a chance to evade me. His eyes were frightened and he was trembling as I grabbed him and pinned him back against the wall. Perspiration beaded out on his forehead as I demanded to know what in hell he thought he was doing with our bazaar, but then he found his voice.

"I don't know what's happening here, Mr. Taylor," he protested. "I've directed other bazaars like this one—but never one that got out of hand like this. It's becoming a madhouse out there. I can't control it. And frankly I don't like it. I'll do anything I can—anything you say—to stop it; but the women won't listen to me. They



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pay absolutely no attention to my orders.”

“How about those newspaper men? Why did you send for them?” I flung at him.

“That’s another thing I don’t understand,” he shook his head helplessly. “I didn’t send for them—but somebody must have. They were tipped off to be on hand tonight for something big, and that has me worried. The way things are going out there, God knows what will happen. . . .

I THINK I can generally tell when a man is lying, and Parker impressed me as telling the truth. He seemed to be a very much worried young man; a director whose show had been taken out of his hands and was running away with him. I told him I’d see what could be done and would call him as soon as I could use him—and then something happened that drove Burleigh Parker from my thoughts entirely.

As I was retracing my steps down the dressing-room lined corridor toward the stage door a white figure darted from the stage and slipped into the narrow passageway. Instinctively I flattened myself into one of the doorways, just in time to catch a glimpse of Betty Blanchard poised alertly in front of one of the cubicles two doors farther down the corridor.

She was naked, except for stockings, slippers and what appeared to be an open negligée; and the furtive way she glanced up and down the dimly-lit passageway, before she opened the door and darted into the dressing room, told me that there was more trouble afoot. Whatever it was, I decided Neil Blanchard ought to know about it—in a hurry.

I hurried down the corridor to try to locate him, when suddenly the stage door flew open and a raging fury burst into the narrow passageway. Eyes wild and glaring, lips drawn back over clenched teeth, his face contorted into a mask of

ferocity, Neil Blanchard leaped straight at me, swept me out of his way and dashed past—to fling himself into the dressing room where Betty had just disappeared.

I heard the key click in the lock before I could recover my balance. Vainly I raced back up the corridor and hammered on the closed door. Frantically I called to him and demanded that he let me in.

There was no answer but Betty’s terrified screams.

Desperately I threw my weight against the door and tried to batter it in, but there wasn’t sufficient room in that narrow corridor to let me get a running start. Behind the stage, I remembered, there was an axe posted for fire protection; but it took minutes—hundreds of precious seconds—to run down there and get it. More long minutes wasted while I battered a hole through the door so that I could squeeze my way inside.

And then it was too late.

Harry Graber lay dead on the floor. His throat was literally torn out, the cords and spouting arteries severed as if a raging beast had been clawing at them. The moment he saw me Blanchard leaped up from his mangled victim and threw himself at his wife, cowering naked in a corner. His blood-dripping fingers fastened in her throat and closed like terrible vises, while streams of thick saliva drooled from his clenched jaws. The man had become a veritable fiend, a creature gone utterly mad with rage and avid blood-lust!

Betty’s eyes were bulging out of her head and her face was turning purple as I fought with him, but still I could not break that terrible death-grip—until three other men came to my rescue. Not until a club crashed down on Blanchard’s head and knocked him senseless did those bloody fingers loosen. Not till then did the mad light fade out of his eyes.

We had saved Betty’s life—but not before Neil Blanchard had stained his hands with murder. . . .

"I'll be here with you every moment!" Abel Fleming's bitter voice rang in my ears. "You'll know that I'm here—and before you close this bazaar you'll come up into the hills and beg me to come back and have free run of it!"

I could almost hear him mocking me now—could almost see him shaking his huge head with satisfaction. Two women driven to the verge of insanity, one man dead and another stamped with the brand of Cain—and the bazaar was only two days old!

"What will happen next?" I asked myself, while in the back of my tortured brain terror spawned the glimmering of a mad idea that took root in desperation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Call to Hell

THE crowd outside in the auditorium was unaware of the ghastly tragedy backstage, and the club directors, hastily summoned, were afraid that panic might result if it were announced. It would be better, they decided, to let the bazaar run and close it as early as possible that night.

Personally, I was in favor of closing it for all time, but I was overruled. I noticed the others looking at me as if they thought I was out of my head. But they were older men—and they didn't have a lovely fiancée out there selling the intimacy of her lips to any degenerate who had five dollars to offer. . . .

Anxious and on the point of rebellion, I went out through the stage door and from its slight elevation scanned the milling crowd in the hall. Apprehensively my eyes sought out Evelyn's booth, some thirty or forty feet from where I stood. What I saw made the icy grip on my heart tighten. The kiss-selling booth was doing a capacity business—and as I watched I saw that the caresses Evelyn was giving were no mere formalities. Her lips were

clinging to those of the men who took her in their arms, and each left her more spent and panting than his predecessor!

At least I would put a stop to *that!*

Determinedly I started toward the booth, but before I was down from the short flight of steps leading to the stage door Cliff Mason pushed his way through the throng and grabbed my arm excitedly. His eyes were troubled and his handsome face was furrowed with lines of worry.

"I can't find my wife, Garry!" he hung onto me as I tried to get past him. "Gwen's disappeared. She left the dance floor, where she was hostessing, half an hour ago. Nobody has seen her since. The last I saw of her she was dancing with Joe Steckel—"

"Steckel!" I had no idea that the nightclub proprietor was at the bazaar, and his name exploded from my lips. "You mean to say that fellow had the damned gall to show his face here among decent—"

The indignant exclamation wilted on my tongue and my eyes almost popped out of my head as I saw Steckel himself. He was at Evelyn's booth—had her in his arms and was covering her lips with a lingering, wet kiss! She clung to him weakly as he relinquished her, and I saw him bend down and whisper something in her ear—something that brought an obscene grin to his fat face!

"Four or five of the women seem to have disappeared," Mason was saying. "Somehow they must have left the hall without being seen. . . ."

But I hardly heard him. A red haze had risen before my eyes and the roaring in my ears drowned out the sound of his voice. If I could have gotten my hands on Joe Steckel at that moment I would have torn the life out of him just as Blanchard had murdered Harry Graber. But by the time I reached Evelyn's booth the racketeer had disappeared in the dense crowd.

"You're getting out of here, Evelyn," I ordered firmly. "Tell the other girls to

quit, too. This bazaar is closing—*now*.”

For a moment she stared at me rebelliously, and then her expression changed. Perhaps it was the livid rage in my eyes, perhaps it was my strained face—but rather than fear I thought I detected a hint of cunning, of satisfaction, in her eyes. . . .

It took us more than half an hour to close the booths and get that hilarious, cat-calling crowd out into the street. When I climbed into my car beside Evelyn I was exhausted, physically and mentally. Again I sensed almost immediately that there was something strange about her. But it was different from last night when she hardly seemed to know that I existed. Tonight she clung to my arm and snuggled warmly against me. When I glanced down at her face as we stopped for a traffic light she was smiling up at me, and her eyes were aglow with something that puzzled me and at the same time sounded a note of alarm in my brain.

There was something expectant about that half-hidden gleam, something secretive; as if she was looking forward with delightful anticipation to something which I knew nothing about. Strangely, the touch of her hand on my arm brought out the goose-pimples on my skin, and I had all I could do to keep from shying away from her. Yet, as I gripped the wheel and kept my eyes resolutely on the road ahead of me I knew that I was afraid of her for reasons which I could not possibly have put into words.

“You’re coming in, aren’t you, Garry?” she invited when we reached her apartment and I stood in the doorway.

THERE was nothing unusual about that.

I had often gone in with her to have a cup of tea before going home and thought nothing of it—but tonight the idea frightened me—and suddenly I knew why. It was the insinuating, wheedling tone of her voice: it was the arch, inviting look in her

eyes, the way her hands caressed me and tried to draw me inside. She was trying to lure me into her rooms like a prostitute working on a reluctant customer!

When I demurred and tried to back away she slipped into my arms and her lips were pressed hotly to mine. Soft, coaxing sounds came from the depths of her throat and her hands slid inside my coat, went around me and caressed my body as she tried to draw me into the foyer. Right out into the corridor she pursued me with her eager lips and her soft, sensuous invitations—until I grasped her hands and forced them away from me, forced her back into the apartment and slammed the door on her.

My knees were weak and shaking when I got downstairs and stepped into the street, but as I was about to get into the car a sixth sense sounded a warning in my brain; it seemed to be dragging me back, holding me there. On a sudden hunch I drove the car to the other side of the street and a little farther down the block, and then came back to a point from which I could watch her doorway.

In less than twenty minutes she came through the lobby and I could hardly believe my eyes as I stared at her! Her face was brazenly daubed with paint. Her mouth was a scarlet gash, and she was wearing an extremely low-cut gown that clung to her figure and accentuated its every line. Sinuously she glided through the doorway, proceeded down the street, with a provoking hip-swinging gate!

My heart was in my throat as I cautiously followed her on the opposite side—and then I fairly dropped in my tracks as she sidled up to a husky passer-by, a total stranger. She smirked at him invitingly in the manner that has but one meaning the world over!

Horrified amazement seemed to glue my feet to the sidewalk for an eternity—and then I was free, racing across the street, grasping her by the arm and pushing her

away as I thrust myself between them. Evelyn's heavily mascaraed eyes flashed with rage, and the fellow's hand clamped down on my shoulder and whirled me around.

"What's it your business, buddy?" he demanded nastily as he shoved his ugly face close to mine.

It was some minutes before I could identify myself and straighten things out with him, and by that time Evelyn had run off and hailed a taxicab. Fortunately I just caught the address of the Golden Horseshoe, Joe Steckel's place, as she gave it to the driver.

Quickly I ran back to my car and followed her—but as the machine sped along I literally sweat blood. What in God's name had happened to Evelyn? Two days ago she was a sweet, normal girl. In less than forty-eight hours she had been transformed into a sex-crazed wanton! Before my very eyes I had seen her changing, had seen everything that was fine and sweet and clean about her crumbling and going to pieces—until she had actually become a street-walker—and not for the money!

All in the short space of time since Abel Fleming's lips had been crushed against hers. . . .

Abel Fleming! He had made good his fiendish boast; his damning specter had hovered over the bazaar every moment from the time he stepped foot into it. In some unholy way he had bewitched it, had turned its earnest workers into sex-mad animals—and now he had cast his hellish spell over Evelyn. That was the only way to account for her behavior.

But, I vowed grimly, I would not go begging him to come back to the bazaar that had ejected him. No—I would not go back to him for that. But if any harm befell Evelyn I would hunt out that black-dealing monster and settle the account with him, without help of the law but my two hands!

A BLOCK before I reached the Golden Horseshoe I drew up to the curb and parked the car, for I had no intention of parading in the front door of Steckel's gilded sin spot.

During the vice investigation I had proved that, while the upstairs rooms of the club were kept fairly respectable, it was downstairs that the devilry was staged. If Evelyn was in that place, it would be downstairs that I would find her.

Carefully I made my way through a nearby building and over fences until I was in Steckel's back yard. From a yard two doors away I had salvaged a broken automobile spring that might be useful to pry open a window if I could gain admittance in no other way—but when I reached the basement door of the Golden Horseshoe I found it unlocked.

Noiselessly I let myself into the dark hallway and flattened against the wall, listening to the boisterous gayety of a drunken party. The uproar was coming from farther down the corridor. Cautiously I inched my way along until I stood in the heavily draped doorway of a large basement room where a score of people were dancing to the sensuous music of an Oriental orchestra. Utterly crazed, they seemed, completely under the spell of that weird threnody—especially the women, who wore so little clothing that complete nudity would have been less licentious. Bitterly, I thought of the strange happenings at the bazaar.

Half a dozen of the Civic Club women I recognized in that cavorting throng. Gwen Mason was among them, and the others were the wives of our most influential citizens; the wives of men who had backed me to the limit in my vice crusade. Eminently respectable women gone mad with lust!

But Evelyn was not among them. Anxiously I strained my eyes to peer into every shadowy corner of that tremendous place—and then suddenly the hair at the nape

of my neck seemed to stand on end.

That was the sound of a creaking board! There was someone in the hall behind me! More than one person—many feet seemed to come running from all directions as hands grabbed for me and yanked me out into the corridor. From every side Steckel's roughnecks closed in on me and, too late, I realized that the whole set-up was a trap, the inviting basement door purposely left unlocked so that I would walk into it.

Desperately I threw myself to the floor and scrambled a few yards on all fours. Now the darkness was in my favor, and before they could switch on a light I was back on my feet, blessing the inspiration that had made me pick up that broken spring and take it with me. Like a flail I swung it around my head, and in a moment the hall was filled with howls of agony as the heavy bludgeon smashed into snarling faces and caromed off broken heads.

At one side of that corridor I knew there was a stairway that led up to Steckel's office on the floor above. In the darkness I tried to grope my way toward it—and when the light snapped on it was only a few yards ahead of me. Savagely I smashed the blood-reddened spring down on two more heads and then darted up the steps, just as a revolver thundered and a bullet whistled by my ear.

Steckel was in his office, frantically diving for a desk drawer as I burst in on him, but the spring caught him on the side of the head and knocked him spinning across the room before he could grasp the weapon he kept cached there. In an instant I was after him, the murderous spring raised over his head to bash out his brains.

"Where is she? What have you done with Evelyn Owen?" I snarled at him, while my arm fairly itched with the urge to bring that spring down across his terror-distorted face.

"She's gone!" he whined. "She ain't here any more, I tell you, Taylor. She's gone—up in the hills with Abel Fleming!"

Something snapped inside of me as the meaning of his babbled words penetrated the fog of rage that clouded my brain. Something snapped—and I became another person. Garry Taylor, the district attorney, ceased to be at that moment. In his place, in his body was a madman—a madman with a hellish idea that had been festering in his brain suddenly bursting forth in full virulency and blotting everything else from his consciousness!

CHAPTER FIVE

Hex Doom

WITH one hand firmly gripping Joe Steckel's collar, forcing him ahead of me as a shield, and the other wrapped around the blood-spattered spring, I battled my way out of that sordid joint. Not until I was out on the sidewalk did I fling the slobbering night-club man away from me and run for my car.

I did not know whether or not to believe Steckel—but now that seemed immaterial. There was only one thought in my mind: I wanted to get my hands on Abel Fleming. The hex-man had become an obsession with me. I could see nothing but his hateful face in front of me; could hear nothing but his voice in my ears.

Fleming was behind all this weird deviltry. It was his hell-spawned spell that had transformed Evelyn, and the only way to free her from its demoralizing clutch was to kill him. Again and again I went over that liturgy, until the blood was pounding in my veins and my brain was on fire as I jammed the throttle down to the floor-boards.

A quarter mile below Fleming's cabin I stopped the car and leaped out onto the rutted road. Cautiously I picked my way up through patches of brush and trees until

I was at the edge of his clearing. A light blinked feebly through the grimy window of his one-story cabin—and I felt as if I must howl with exultation!

Stealthily I crept up to his door, until I could peer through the window beside it and see him sitting at a table, counting bills by the light of a lantern—entirely oblivious of the retribution that hovered over him. Now he was mine!

That door had no lock. Noiselessly I grasped the latch and pressed it down—and then I catapulted into the cabin, smashed my fist into his jaw as he turned in his chair. Before he could get to his feet I knocked him reeling across the room. Then I was after him, smashing away at him with both fists. All ideas of fair play were thrown to the winds as I tore into him. This devil fought helpless women with the unholy powers of darkness; to overcome him I would use any weapon—like the chair I swung over my head and brought crashing down on his skill. . . .

Abel Fleming tottered for a moment as blood gushed from his torn scalp; then he wilted and thudded to the floor. My whole being tingled with mad delight as I looked down at him. It was as if Lute Brunner stood there in the cabin beside me. I could hear his voice plainly in my ears:

“Fire is the only thing that kills a witch, so I burned her—burned her until there was nothing left to come back and do me more harm. You don’t understand, Mr. Taylor, but maybe some day when the sign is on you—”

Yes—I *did* understand! Vaguely I had sensed this ever since I staggered away from the sight of Neil Blanchard’s hands

stained crimson with Harry Graber’s blood. Vaguely I had sensed what I must do—now I *knew*! I must kill this devil-creature—*must burn him to a crisp so that Evelyn would be freed forever from his damning spells!*

Fleming was a heavy man, but I seized him by the collar and dragged him out of the cabin. By the light of his lantern I found two trees with strong crotches, growing not more than ten feet apart. They would do splendidly! With the hex-man’s axe I cut down another and trimmed its trunk until I had a stout pole sufficiently strong to sustain his weight.

With ropes from the cabin I lashed his wrists together, around the pole so that he would hang vertically and burn *slowly*, from the feet up! God forgive me! . . . It took all of my strength to upend the pole and place one end in the crotch of one of the trees, then I hoisted the other up into place with the aid of a heavy forked stick.

With eager haste I piled leaves and brush on the ground beneath him, covered them with fresh-cut saplings and what dried wood I could find around the place. A noble pyre that would wrap him in flames as soon as I put a match to it!

Fleming opened his eyes just as I took a paper of matches from my pocket and struck one. He was trying to say something, mumbling incoherent words—but I laughed at him and held the match in front of his eyes. Deliberately I thrust it into the leaves and kindling—and a fierce satisfaction welled up within me as a column of smoke curled upward and was then shot through with flame!

There are now thirty-odd magazines on the news-stands made up of reprint stories. These magazines give no sign that their stories are second hand: that readers have read them in other magazines a few years ago.

Presenting old stories in the guise of new ones is a policy of certain publishers.

The reason is—used stories in the reprint market can be bought by publishers for one-tenth to one-fifteenth of the price that TERROR TALES, for example, pays for new material.

All stories in TERROR TALES and all other magazines issued by Popular Publications are new stories.

IN THE course of two short days I had slipped back hundreds of years. The district attorney who could not comprehend how a human being could stoop to do the thing that Lute Brunner had done was doing it himself! I realized that and I laughed—laughed wildly as the smoke puffed my way and wreathed around my face! All reason had left me; in its place was only a frenzied determination to exterminate this creature so that Evelyn would be free from the ungodly spell he had cast over her.

The flames were creeping up through the brush, licking up at Fleming. His trousers were beginning to scorch, to smoke from the heat—and if I had had a bellows I would have knelt and spurred the blaze on!

But suddenly I tensed, while surges of rage mounted within me. Someone was coming—someone who would try to interfere; would try to stop my grisly work! My fists clenched and I eyed the dark path grimly. A *girl* who came running through the bushes. A girl I knew—Mary Corbin!

"I can't let you do this, Garry!" she panted as she flung herself at me and grasped both of my arms with her hands. "I hate you—or I thought that I hated you—for tossing me aside for Evelyn Owen. But I can't go through with it! I can't let you make a murderer of yourself! I knew what you would do—that's why I followed you here to stop you. Please, Garry, put out that fire before it gets any bigger—there's still time to save yourself! . . . Oh, you *won't* listen to me!"

When she saw that I made no move to do as she begged, she tried to do it herself. Frantically she kicked away some of the burning branches and reached down to drag others off the pile, but her flimsy evening dress must have caught on an outstretched twig. I heard it rip—and when she backed away from the flames the whole front of it was torn so that her

lovely voluptuous breasts were naked. "Oh, I can't do it alone, Garry—please help me!" she pleaded, and then she had her arms around me and was kissing me feverishly.

It had all happened so quickly that I was half-dazed, but as she clung to me something was trying to penetrate my stupor—a familiar odor that tugged at my memory. . . .

Mary Corbin's face was right in front of me as she clutched me; her naked breasts were pressed against my chest—and that familiar odor was very close to them. I glanced down at their creamy whiteness—and the odor was stronger. In the top of her dress I located it; a handkerchief tucked into the top of her sleeve—a handkerchief with the perfume that Evelyn always used!

Before she saw what I intended I plucked it out and held it up to the light. Yes. It was one of Evelyn's expensive lace handkerchiefs! That meant that Mary Corbin knew where Evelyn was—that she had been with her—had taken that handkerchief from her!

She read the dawning understanding in my eyes and tried to dart out of reach, but I grabbed her and hauled her back, held her firmly in front of me while I looked straight into her eyes.

"You know where she is," I said grimly. "Tell me."

Her lips were tightly sealed and her eyes were inscrutable.

"All right," I clipped, as I started to drag her toward the path that led to the car, "then I'll take you back to town and you'll show me where—or you'll wish you had!"

With the heels of her shoes digging into the soft loam she braced herself and tried to hold back, fought furiously to stop me—so frantically that her torn dress ripped to shreds and hung in tatters below her waist. Down over one white hip it slipped—and then she wriggled her body and it

fell from her altogether. Naked except for her stockings she stood there in the fire-light and held her arms wide so that her every charm was revealed to me.

"Let's not fight any more, Garry," she pleaded softly, while the flickering flames painted thrilling highlights and intriguing shadows on her undulating figure. "Look at me, dear. *Take me!* I can give you more than *she* ever could. Garry. . . ."

BUT again my grim eyes betrayed me and told her that her efforts were useless. Suddenly her fists clenched and raised above her head and her pretty face was convulsed with ugly rage.

"Have it then—you asked for it!" she screamed at me. "Your lovely Evelyn is one of Steckel's women now. You'll find her in one of his rooms—if she isn't too busy to see you! If you still want her you can have her—*after Steckel's gang gets finished with her!*"

Gradually, as I stood watching her ranting and raving like a madwoman, I sensed that she was trying to keep me there; that she was deliberately striving to detain me. But why? Quickly I looked around me on all sides. Through an opening in the brush I was sure that I was a flash of white—sure that I heard the snapping of a twig! Instantly I started toward the sound, just as a ragged old crone darted from the path and scurried into the brush!

More by sound than by sight in the almost pitch-black night I flung into the bushes after that old hag, followed the sound of her flight until the undergrowth thinned and I found myself in another clearing. It was a clearing that ran up the side of the hill to where a denser patch of blackness loomed ahead of me. Daring an instant's flash of a match, I saw that the stygian patch was the mouth of a tunnel; a tunnel that wound as I groped my way along it and abruptly debouched into a lantern-lit cavern.

Suddenly framed in the cavern mouth,

I stared across the rock-walled chamber in shocked amazement—stared at the low, blanket-spread couch where Evelyn lay moaning, her ankles and wrists securely lashed to it. Only a few tattered shreds of clothing still clung to her nearly naked body, and her tear-stained face was a picture of hopeless despair—but the moment she saw me her eyes filled with wild concern!

Instinctively I ducked to one side as I caught her warning—just in time to avoid a fist that swung savagely at my jaw. The vicious blow smashed into my shoulder and almost knocked me down. It was the old crone. Then she was leaping in at me, pounding my head with a barrage of blows. She had amazing strength, and it was all that I could do to cover myself and back away from her onslaught.

Evelyn's moans and the sight of her wide eyes, fearfully watching the struggle that would decide her fate, stabbed at my heart and filled me with desperation—but as I sparred and backed around the cave I began to feel the terrifying conviction that I was no match for this old woman. It must be something more than human strength that was driving me back, that was dazing me, sapping the strength from my arms. Something unnatural, demoniacal, that brought the hag charging in relentlessly at me. . . .

Witches and hex-men, I had heard, were able to change their form at will—were able to assume the guise of beasts or other humans. That must be it—this creature must be Abel Fleming! This cave was where he had imprisoned Evelyn—was where he had lured me deliberately so that he could batter me into submission and murder me before her eyes!

I was reeling groggily, so battered that any good punch might have dropped me in a senseless heap, but that appalling thought sent me charging forward with berserk fury. One wildly swung fist missed, but the other caught the hag on

the jaw and knocked her across the cave—thudded her back against the farther wall.

The roof, at that point, was quite high. The rock wall ran up to a height of about nine feet and then gave way to several feet of yawning blackness that separated it from the stalactite-hung ceiling. Out of that black pocket rumbled a shower of pebbles and stones, loosened by the jar—to be followed by a slide of huge boulders.

All except one crashed down onto the cave floor—but that one struck the venomous old haridan squarely on the top of the head! I heard the sickening sound of splintering bone as the skull beneath her cowl-like shawl was battered in, and then she lay like a heap of dirty rags on the floor!

I thought I knew what to expect when I knelt beside the body and drew back the bloodied shawl. I steeled myself for the gruesome sight—but I was flung back on my heels with astonishment when I stared down into the dead face of Frank Dixon! Hardly believing the evidence of my eyes, I lifted the grey wig from the crushed skull and wiped the make-up from the dead face. But there was no mistake. The masquerader was none other than the attorney!

I TRIED to conceal the grisly sight from Evelyn as I sprang up and ran to the couch where she was tied, but she had already seen.

“He must have been crazy,” she half-sobbed as I worked over the tightly knotted ropes that held her. “He told me that he loved me—that he wanted to marry me. He promised me all the money and all the luxuries I wanted. He boasted how rich and powerful he was. You’ve been wrong about Joe Steckel, Garry. He was just one of Frank Dixon’s men, taking orders from him. It was Dixon who owned the Golden Horseshoe and controlled the terrible vice ring you broke up.

“He was so sure of himself—and so

sure that I was helpless to do anything but obey him—that he told me how he was going to have the whole city in the palm of his hand. He started all that trouble at the bazaar to get rid of you and Neil Blanchard. Niel will go to prison if he escapes the electric chair—and Dixon told me that you were dead already—”

“That’s what he thought,” I commented grimly, as I realized that Dixon and Steckel had purposely lured me to the Golden Horseshoe to meet my death. “But even with Neil and me out of the picture, I don’t see why he was so sure he’d have such clear sailing. With us out of the way, Cliff Mason would have been a safe bet for district attorney this fall—”

“That was just what Dixon planned,” Evelyn nodded. “He told me that he could handle Mason; that after tonight Mason and the rest of the big-shots in Jordan City would be very quiet and obedient.”

In a flash of understanding I grasped the fiendish thoroughness of Frank Dixon’s careful scheming. Gwen Mason and those other women in that orgiastic revel in the basement of the Golden Horseshoe. . . . They had been carefully selected and lured there so that they and their husbands would be completely in the power of Dixon and his gang. Doped with cantharides and other aphrodisiac drugs at the bazaar suppers, the women had been led into a sensuous debauch—and photographed—which would be held over the heads of their husbands as a club to keep them from any attempt to make trouble.

“And all the while I have been blaming Abel Fleming,” I thought aloud as I freed Evelyn from the couch and helped her into my coat.

“Fleming was just a helpless tool,” she volunteered as soon as I mentioned the hex-man’s name. “Dixon laughed at the way he used him to fool you. While he was working on Lute Brunner’s defense he found that Abel Fleming had really engineered Hetty Mears’ murder—and he

uncovered evidence that would have proved it. Dixon threatened to expose him unless he did as he was told, and forced him to come to the bazaar and pick a fight by kissing me so that you couldn't help seeing it. Fleming's rage and the threat he made were just staged to frighten us. . . ."

Before she was finished I had grabbed the lantern from the wall of the cave and was leading the way out through the entrance tunnel on the run. Suddenly I had remembered that I had left Abel Fleming tied up helplessly over a blazing fire! Perhaps by now he was roasting to a crisp! My hands were stained with his blood. . . .

But as soon as we reached the clearing I saw that the hex-man had not died in the flames. He was no longer suspended over what was left of the scattered fire. A few feet from it the charred remains of his woolen trousers still smoldered on the ground, but he was nowhere to be seen. Quickly I ran to his cabin and yanked open the door—but the inside was as deserted as the clearing.

Abel Fleming was gone.

Curiously I stepped through the doorway and looked around the room. There was something different about the place, something that was not as it had been when I was there half an hour earlier.

Then I saw what it was, and my brows knit in puzzlement. The door of a closet stood open. Painted on the inside of it was an unmistakable full-length, life-size picture of Frank Dixon.

That was an odd place for a painting—but odder still was the way the top of the door had been hacked to pieces. . . .

Evidently it had been opened and then the top had been curiously chopped in with an axe that lay on the floor beside it. The savage blows had cut the wood to splinters—had ripped down into Dixon's head and battered the whole top of it!

An icy stream trickled down my spine as I stared at that mutilated effigy—and remembered how Frank Dixon had died a few minutes before with a rock shattering the top of his skull. . . .

Suddenly the empty, shadow-haunted room seemed fairly alive with lurking evil; with uncanny, unearthly evil that chilled my blood. I wanted to get out of there—out into the clean, fresh night air. My arm went around Evelyn's waist, and as I helped her along the straggling path to where the car waited I wondered—had Frank Dixon, with all his fiendish craftiness, finally meddled with something that was too powerful, or too unthinkable evil, even for him to handle?

THE END

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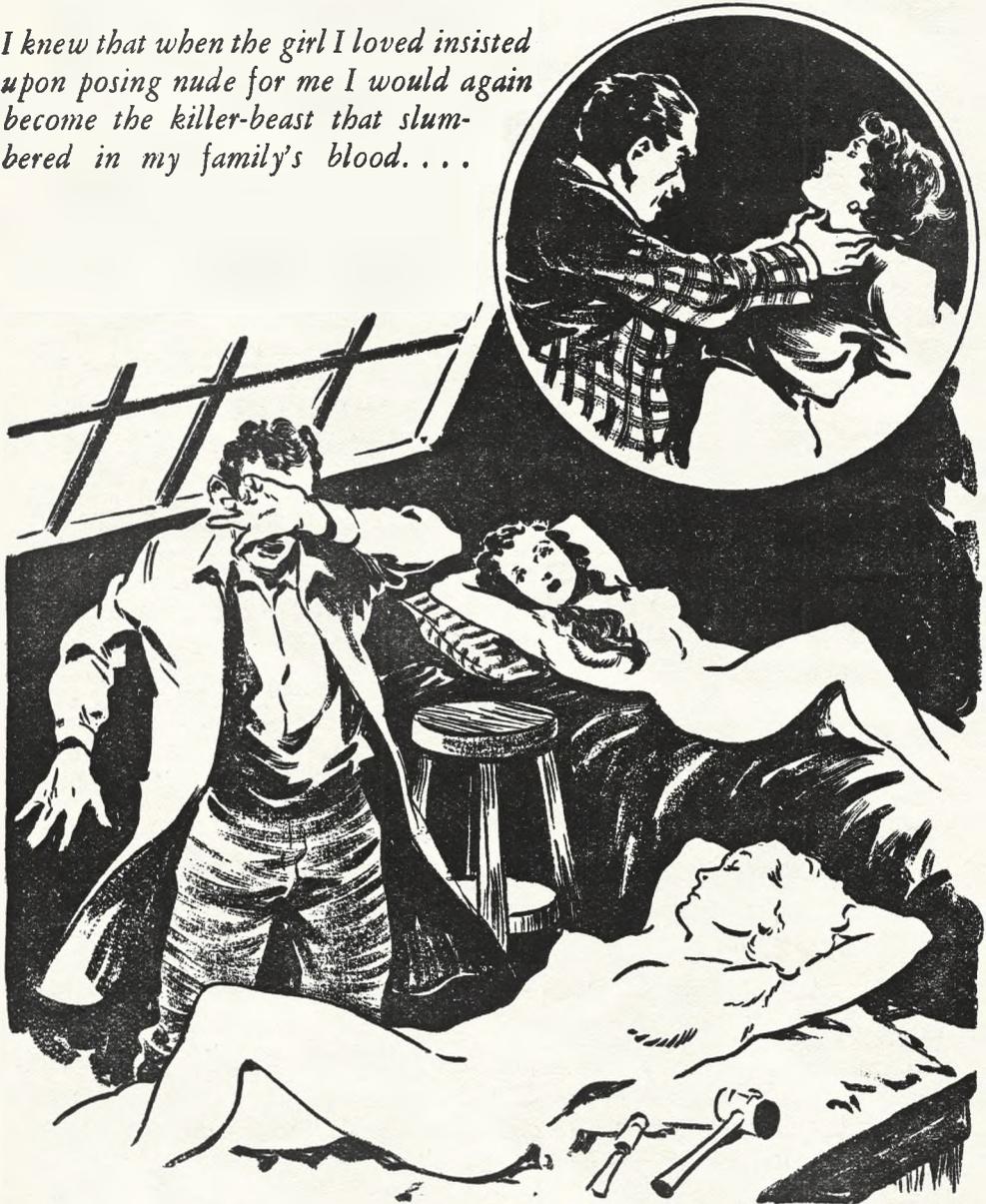
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I Am A Mad Artist!

By H. T. SPERRY

(Author of "The Garment Simister," etc.)

I knew that when the girl I loved insisted upon posing nude for me I would again become the killer-beast that slumbered in my family's blood. . . .



IT WAS not only that I was facing professional and financial ruin—I could have stood that almost with equanimity. The thing that was driving me slowly mad—that was making a surly,

anti-social hermit of me—was the knowledge that I was no longer fit for human society. Nor, indeed, was I fit to associate even with animals—whose bestiality was less bestial than mine because with them

it had, after all at least a natural cause.

It was an unbearably hot summer. The stifling bodily anguish, added to the torture of my mind and spirit, made existence seem desperate and worthless. Yet I could do nothing to gain ease. My commissions had fallen off steadily for over a year. I was reduced to barely enough money for my food, was able to purchase materials only through the generosity of such few friends as had stuck by me. Naturally I lacked the money to leave the city in search of the mountain or ocean breezes which might, in a measure at least, have restored me to normal.

I had nearly given up hope. I was thinking more and more of taking one of the only two avenues of escape which seemed open to me; should I surrender to a hospital for psychopaths, or commit suicide? Then suddenly one day the director of the Wyhe Museum called on me and gave me a commission for a life-size figure.

When he described what he wanted I very nearly refused the commission. It was to be of a woman, a figure typifying slumber A woman! That meant a model—a model posed in the nude! I dared not do it And on the other hand I dared not refuse. It was my last chance to save myself, my sanity, my life I accepted the commission

But I did not engage a model. Somehow, I got enough money together to purchase clay and material for the armature and went to work. I assembled such photographs as I had, borrowed more, bought a few. I would, I said, turn out this job without a model. It had been done before

Yes, it had been done before—but not by me.

Some painters, a lesser number of sculptors, are able to turn out successful work independent of models. I had never been able to do so. My hands would betray me unless my eyes were guided by

living lines. The clay would refuse to throw off its heavy materialism and become something very near to life itself, unless the pattern was there before me every instant. In my case, at least, the hair-line division between gross matter and vibrant illusion of nature was too fine to admit of any groping in the dark

And for over a year I had been trying to prove to myself that it wasn't so—with no success whatever!

It is true that, for a time, I produced some respectable male figures—in particular a group of old fishermen which gave me a fair monetary return, and which I was not ashamed to sign. But my talent had always been chiefly exemplified in the female form. Such reputation as I had sprang from my ability to imbue clay, stone and metal with the singing, rounded contours of girlish youth. If there is such a thing as inspiration, I was truly inspired only when engaged in such work.

So—commissions had fallen off; customers came to my studio no more; and the critics professed to mourn my death as an artist.

Of course, I had not given up without a struggle; had not dispensed with the models so necessary to my art without the frightful lesson, the appalling realization that, indeed, I dared not use them. And if I live for a thousand years I will never forget that lesson that I learned so bitterly and with such self-loathing. . . .

MY father's brother, old Uncle Conrad, had died fourteen months before this story opens. I came in answer to a wire from his daughter, my cousin Lucy, and found him all but beyond the portal of death. His old arteries had betrayed him at last, and he was feebly struggling in the last throes of arteriosclerosis. But in spite of his pain, his knowledge that he had only a few moments more on this earth, he insisted in talking to me alone. He ordered out Lucy

and the doctor, though the latter went protesting that the patient must not talk. Uncle Conrad beckoned me close to his side. In faltering syllables he whispered a tale of horror into my ear; told me what I must do to avert a terrible tragedy from entering my own life; gave me certain instructions and made me give him my solemn word that I would carry them out.

Then he died in horrible agony, and looking into the death mask that had been his face, I saw an exemplification of the horror he had described to me—saw, in short, what awaited me in the end, because I was of his blood and had sprung from his line

I left his house, and later carried out part of his instructions by searching his city residence until I found his diary. And then it was that I learned of the doom which lay in wait for me, in all its ghastly detail

Yet so resilient is the mind of youth, so over-weeningly self-confident are young men of good health and active lives, that, shocked as I had been, I soon shook off its effects. After a few days of brooding I roused myself, told myself that this thing could not happen to me. It might be true of everyone else of my blood—but it would not be true of me

Nevertheless, I took certain precautions. I procured a model who had no connection with any agency. Fortunately, one appeared at my door at the very moment I was about to go out searching. Many girls dispense with agents in this way, and make regular rounds, calling personally on artists and sculptors until they have built up a clientele. So I engaged Marietta.

She was not a particularly attractive girl, so far as her face was concerned; but she had a perfect "sculptor's figure"—full-blown, deep bosomed, with a wide pelvis and full-fleshed hips. I was well pleased to have obtained such an excellent model independently of an agency.

Work began auspiciously. I was inclined to smile inwardly at the forebodings and fears arising from the things my uncle had told me—but not for long. By imperceptible degrees those fears began creeping back into my brain. And finally the horror burst upon me in its full force. I know now that it was not until that moment that I actually realized the full ghastliness of what I had learned. The human mind is constructed in such a way that it will not permit a psychic shock of too great force to gain immediate entrance. To preserve itself, it must needs make the too dreadful, the excessively terrible, unreal for a time—until the mind has had time to readjust itself and absorb the shock of the awful knowledge.

Thus, it was only now that I truly *realized* that my uncle had slain his wife in the throes of a terrible sexual mania. It was only when I, myself, began to feel an ominous stirring within my veins that I truly absorbed the frightful knowledge that my father had killed my own mother in the same manner

But that realization, that absorption of horror, passed in the flashing of a moment. It was as though a crevice had opened in my mind, admitted the horrid facts, and immediately sealed it up again. There was left a slow burning in my brain, a fiery pulsing of the blood in my veins—and I dropped the spatula which had been in my hand and advanced toward the dais upon which the model reclined.

The girl looked up at me as I stood over her with something quickening in her eyes. It was not fear—not at first. Most models are exemplary enough young creatures. Their morals are as good or better than most girls'—and the ones who take their profession seriously will permit no undue familiarity on the part of the artists they work for. But naturally there are exceptions. Marietta was such an exception

What followed was a nightmare of bestial passion and, God help me, of brutal cruelty. When sanity returned I was confronted with the full realization of the sort of animal I had become—was confronted, also, with the nude, blood-spattered body of my first victim

HOW I obtained medical aid for the model, how I nearly impoverished myself at one stroke in paying her off and sealing her lips, has no bearing on this story. But I knew from that moment that I would never again dare to use a living model. I had escaped becoming the foulest sort of murderer known to the human race by the most perilously narrow of margins.

When I could permit myself to think of it afterward, I wondered dully why this mania had not stricken me before. I had seen literally hundreds of girls in the nude, had worked from models all my artistic life, including my school days. Naturally I had had a few amatory experiences, yet nothing remotely like this had ever happened before. Had the suggestive influence of what my uncle had told me done the work? Or had the curse just descended suddenly, independent of the knowledge I had gained? Uncle Conrad had warned me, indeed, that it would strike in this manner.

Not that it mattered. I had had sufficient proof of the fact that my blood was poisoned with the same taint which had been in the blood of my progenitors. There was one way and only one way for me to avoid the horror which had cursed the men of my line. I must avoid woman as I would the plague, even if it meant lifelong hermitry or entrance into a monastery. There was no middle course for me, and I knew it.

Yet, to my eternal shame, I must confess that I could not bring myself thus to renounce all that made my life worth living. I still had a few remnants of self-

respect, even of self-confidence, left. I resolved that I would go on as best I could, working without models, and at the first sign of a recurrence of my horrible mania I would either voluntarily enter a hospital for psychopaths, in the forlorn hope that modern psychiatry could cure me—or I would take my own life.

But, of course, when the horror recurred I did neither. Does a rabid dog confine himself to a kennel? I shall never live long enough to expiate the contemptible weakness which I displayed in not following the dictates of such manhood as was left to me. Nor can I ever truly hold up my head among my fellowmen—because, even now, I lack the determination and courage to take my own life

The summer, I have said, had been cruelly hot. The city had become an inferno whence all who had the means had fled. I lingered because of my poverty—and because I would not resign myself to my fate.

For awhile I took some encouragement from the progress I was making with the new figure. I constructed the armature, blocked the clay into it. With mallet and knife I shaped it roughly to the form I had designed.

It was hot work. I was sweating like a draught horse, even though every door and window in my studio was wide open. Only occasionally would a faint breeze percolate in from the hall and give me a moment's respite. I worked far into the night; dropped, at last, onto a cot against one wall of the room, without disrobing. After a shower and coffee the next morning I was back at work.

Throughout the day I toiled, pausing only once for food which I threw together hurriedly in the kitchenette—and late that afternoon I reached the point beyond which, I knew with sickening certainty, I could not go.

I have always been a tremendously fast worker in the preliminary stages of a clay

figure—and excessively slow in the final ones. After the form has taken its final shape, then begins the real work. Then it is that I throw aside my tools and begin working with my hands alone. And then it is that such genius as I may have begins to appear. But that touch—that vivid and life-like reality which I am capable of evoking—can not be drawn from my fingers unless the living flesh is there to awaken it.

For hours I struggled hopelessly, and finally black despair crept irresistibly into my soul. At last I threw myself upon the cot and buried my face with a groan in my clay-stained hands. I had been deliberately deceiving myself all along—I was beaten and I knew it.

Then, in that moment of retreat, temptation slipped insidiously into my brain. After all, it had been over a year since the grisly incident of the model, Marietta. How did I know that, having once come through an attack of the madness without having actually killed anyone—how did I know that I was not cured? Perhaps the curse struck but once. There was some basis for believing this might be the case, since my uncle's records recited no instance wherein a man of my line had killed more than once.

Ah, but I knew the reason for that. Some of them had had no opportunity—because they had been hanged for their crime. Others had secluded themselves in sparsely inhabited communities. Others, like my uncle and father, having successfully concealed the fact of their crime, had not remarried, and had sedulously avoided the company of all women save those of their immediate families.

Besides, it was not a curse in the sense that it was something of a supernatural nature, invoked by some ancient spell, or suchlike metaphysical nonsense; it was a definite taint in the blood of my line. A thing thoroughly understood and acknowledged by psychologists, sociolo-

gists, and ethnologists the world over. . . .

I groaned again and lowered my hands from my sweat-damp face.

I HAD lain there on the cot for perhaps ten minutes, agonizedly wrestling with my soul—struggling against the temptation to go out and hire a model even though it might mean her death, my own execution, and the eternal damnation of my immortal soul. I had heard no sound, sensed the presence of no other person in the room—and yet, as I opened my eyes and let my apathetic gaze wander over to the model's dais, I saw that I was no longer alone. A model was lying on the dais, nude, in the precise pose to which I had shaped the figure I had been working upon!

I leaped to my feet with a choked cry, and involuntarily brushed my hand across my eyes. It was not an illusion; there was actually a naked girl lying up on the dais. She had entered, disrobed, and assumed the pose indicated by my figure without my having heard a sound.

And then, as my vision cleared, an even more astounding fact smote my consciousness with an almost physical impact. The model was my cousin Lucy—Uncle Conrad's daughter!

MY figure, as I have said, protrayed slumber. It was the form of a young girl lying supine, her face turned to the right, eyes closed, arms raised so that the hands pillowed the head, the left leg drawn up slightly and resting against the right.

Lucy's form was perfect for the pose. Through the terror and stupefaction which seethed in my mind, I believe I realized in that very moment that subconsciously I had been visualizing her body as I worked. Indeed, throughout the whole of that terrible year I had mentally used Lucy's body as a model many times. In the past I had been tempted to ask

her to pose for me; but naturally thinking she would be unwilling to do so, had refrained. And now, astoundingly, she was here in my studio, as self-possessed and expertly posed as any professional model!

I staggered over to the dais. "Lucy," I muttered. "What in the world—"

The girl did not even open her eyes. "Never mind, Jack," she murmured. "Go to work—and don't ask questions. Don't you see I'm embarrassed to death?"

"But—but you don't understand," I groaned. "I—can't, Lucy. . . I—I dare not—"

"Don't be silly," she said firmly, and opened her eyes just a trifle. "Go to work and stop talking!"

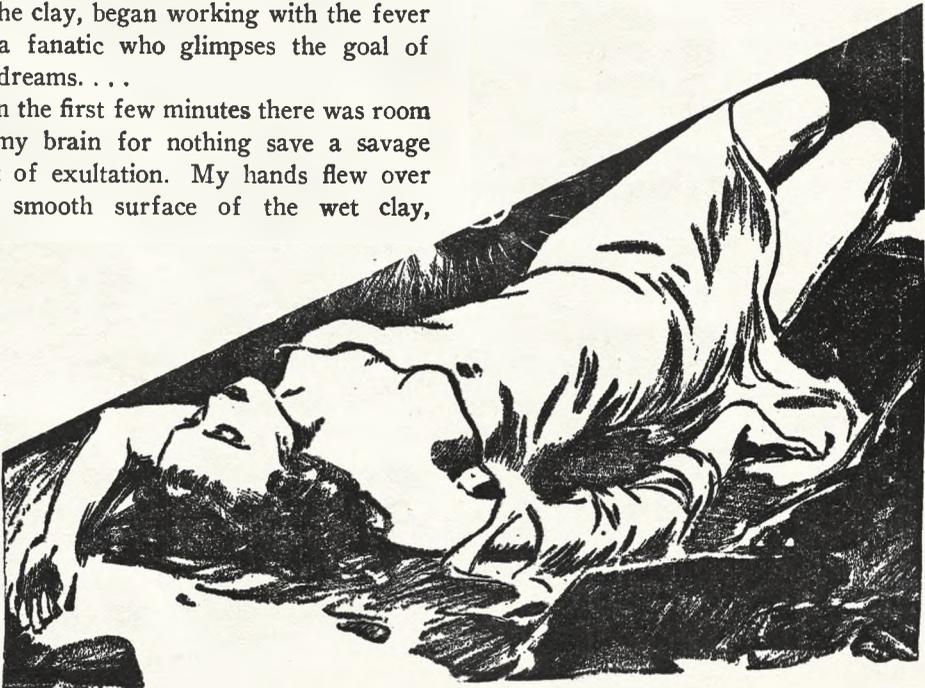
A moment longer I struggled with myself—then a sort of furious joy raced over my nerves. A year of arid struggle was behind me. The hunger which only an artist can know—the consuming craving to create in the image of his imaginings—clutched me with the accumulated power of all those sterile, frustrated months. With a choked gasp I whirled to the clay, began working with the fever of a fanatic who glimpses the goal of his dreams. . . .

In the first few minutes there was room in my brain for nothing save a savage sort of exultation. My hands flew over the smooth surface of the wet clay,

molding the insensate matter into the semblance of life, glorying in the sureness and confidence with which they worked, after the endless time of blind stumbling. . . . And then the moment came when I knew that I must touch the living form of the model. My fingers must learn a contour from warm flesh before they could transfer it to the cold clay. As I straightened and looked at Lucy's white body a shiver of apprehension ran through my frame. Dared I tempt fate to that degree? Was I strong enough to withstand. . . ?

Then it was that I noticed some thing which until that moment had escaped me. My attention had been directed principally about the torso of the figure, and consequently, the corresponding sections of the model's anatomy. I hadn't seen that Lucy was wearing a necklace.

To anyone unacquainted with the curious moves and psychological conventions of the world of artists it will seem strange—but it is nevertheless a fact—that an artist never thinks of his model as a woman unless she has on stockings,



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a necklace, or some bit of feminine apparel. Psychologists have long since proved that sexual stimulants are largely matters of convention and the conditioning of the individual. Thus Hindu women of the past veiled their faces, but exposed their breasts with perfect propriety—because, through some ancient twist of mass conditioning, Hindu men had come to regard the face as a sexual stimulant, and completely lost interest in female breasts as such. Only a few decades ago in all civilized countries the exposure of an ankle by a woman with any pretensions to the status of a “lady” was a matter of deep embarrassment to her—and of ribald delight to such males as witnessed the distressing accident. But what modern man can be seriously stirred by the sight of a mere ankle? So it is that artists, as they learn to accept the undraped female figure as nothing more than a tool of their trade, lose all interest in it as the body of a sexually attractive woman. But of course, the stimulus has been subdued rather than completely robbed of its power. As slight a thing as a casually worn wristlet may prove to be the catalyst which restores her seductive power to the model.

Lucy, in her innocence and ignorance, could not know that. She had probably forgotten that she even wore the necklace. But it was the thing which completely changed me in an instant from a reasoning human being into a ravening beast.

WITHOUT realizing that I had moved, I suddenly found myself standing over Lucy’s nude, white figure. I glared down at her with burning, devouring eyes. I feasted upon her nakedness, my body trembling with a desire that was like liquid fire in my blood. My fingers worked spasmodically, restrained from clutching her soft form in a grip of remorseless savagery only by the vestiges of control—of panicked and retreat-

ing manhood—which were left to me. Then Lucy opened her eyes.

I had expected to find terror there—and there was fear, lurking far back in their clear, blue depths. But there was something else in Lucy’s eyes; something which I could not analyze, and yet which aided me for the moment to keep a grip on my reeling senses. . . .

“Jack,” said Lucy softly, “I love you—I have always loved you. If I must die now, I want you to know that. I came to you because I would rather die at your hands than live without you. . . .”

For a long time, it seemed, the words meant nothing to me. It was as though they had come from Lucy’s mouth and been printed on my brain—but I couldn’t read them at first. Then, at last, their significance percolated through to my consciousness.

“Love?” I echoed hoarsely. “You—love me, Lucy?”

“Yes,” she murmured, “I love you, Jack. Perhaps—” and a pitiable light of hope was in her blue eyes—“perhaps we can conquer this madness together. . . . Maybe you can escape the curse of the Lawrences, with me to help—”

Then her voice trailed off and died in a whisper. Insanity was fastening its talons in my soul, and the beast was emerging in my face. The girl’s eyes widened with a momentary access of fear; then assumed a calmness as a courageous resignation took its place.

“Very well, darling,” she whispered, “if it is to be that way—”

But if she said anything else I did not hear her. A red tide had risen in back of my eyes, blinding me, robbing me of the last vestige of sanity. I heard a bestial snarl, and my retreating consciousness recorded the fact that it was from my own lips. Then I had swept Lucy’s white, unresisting body into a savage embrace—and conscious thought deserted me. . . .

IT WAS a waking nightmare which took the place of sanity and consciousness. It seemed to me that I held in my arms, not Lucy's little form, but a savage and fearful caricature of my own. It was a body larger than mine, clothed in a matted coat of rough fur, with the visage of an ape in which a semblance of my own features were distinguishable as in a cheap, distorting mirror. This beast bared frangs like those of a hyena, gripped me in a suffocating embrace, and lunged at my jugular.

I knew that to survive I must kill this other me—and my fingers fastened about the throat of the thing, tore at it with a viciousness equaling that of my antagonist. . . .

It was then that I had a momentary flash of consciousness—of veridical sensation. Enough, at any rate, so that I wondered at the softness, the hairlessness, of that shaggy-seeming throat. It was like, my bemused senses told me, the throat of a young girl.

Then the moment of comparative lucidity passed, and I was again grappling with the beast that was I—and a savage joy was permeating my being. This being which I could fight with, which I could *kill*—why, it was the bestial half of me which was wrecking my life, ruining my career, making of me a thing unfit to associate with human beings! I would kill it, at once—stamp out every vestige of its foul life. Then I would be free. I could work again. I could marry Lucy who loved me—and whom I loved, I realized now. Why, I had always loved her! But I had been so bound up in my career that I had never realized it until, in her unashamed innocence and courage, she had come to me and avowed her love for me. It was because of her, too, that I would be able to subdue the monster who had been dominating my life. She had precipitated the struggle which I had been avoiding. It would be decisive—and

I would be the winner. I never doubted that. . . .

The beast, for all its ferocious appearance, was not such a powerful antagonist, after all. Its struggles were weakening already—and as they lessened, my own ferocity increased. Ah, there would be no smouldering spark of life in that savage carcass when I was through with it! My fingers searched for the jugular, fastened upon it with all the strength at my command, ripped. . . .

It was as though the death of the beast had restored me to life—not the phantasmal, nightmarish life I had been living during my struggles with it, but real life, sanity, consciousness. Even before I opened my eyes I was suffused with such a sense of well-being and peace as I had not known since before I had listened to the horrible death-bed mutterings of my old uncle. Then I opened my eyes—and looked up into the tear-stained but smiling face of Lucy.

"Darling," she cried. "You've come back to me. You've won! Oh, thank God!"

My eyes fastened on her slender throat—on bluish, bruised welts which showed there against the velvety whiteness.

"Perhaps," I murmured. "Perhaps I have won—but at what cost to you, Lucy? . . . Are—are you all right, Lucy. . . ?"

"Yes—yes!" she exclaimed. "It was bad, at first. I thought surely I was going to die, Jack. And then—then a look came over your face, a strange, triumphant look, Jack—and—and you released me. You fell to the floor, clutching your hands together as though you were throttling something. And then, for a few minutes you lost consciousness, I guess."

I drew a deep breath and sat up. "What prompted you to come here?" I asked. "How did you find out about—me? Did your father tell you?"

"No," she said, "I moved into the town

house shortly after he died—and one day I found that diary of his. I knew that he had told you something the night he died, and there was something in the diary about his fears for you—being constantly thrown in the way of temptation through your work. He was afraid to warn you, because it would involve the confession of his own guilt. His—his murder of—”

She paused with a hysterical sob, then continued bravely. “I knew what you were going through, and I found out that you had given up using models. Of course, I realized why. At last I could stand it no longer. I decided to come to you and—if necessary. . . .”

But I stopped the rest with my lips. I pressed her sweet, slender body against mine and breathed a silent prayer of thankfulness for the supreme courage that God gives to some women—a courage far higher than that ever displayed by any man. . . .

* * *

And I, who am an arrant coward, can best appreciate such courage. If I had a modicum of it I would put this body of mine beyond the safe confining gates of death. For after a few weeks of living in a fool’s paradise, I came to realize that my illusion of conquering the beast which dwells in my soul was, indeed, an illusion and nothing more. . . .

In the meantime Lucy and I were mar-

ried, and I went back to work with a joyous energy which promised greater things than I had ever done before. But not for long. One day, as she stood nude upon the dais, the madness came back to me—and I awoke to find her crushed in my arms, her senses having fled before the pain my savagery had inflicted upon her.

When she had revived she calmed my raging despair, tried to talk the matter over with me in a sane, sensible manner. She pointed out that the last two attacks I had sustained had each shown a decrease in magnitude compared to the first one—that on Marietta. It was obvious, she insisted, that I was gradually returning to normal. It was only a question of time until I would be completely cured. . . .

But how can we be sure? I have consulted psychiatrists without number. They assure me that I probably have little to fear—that, indeed, I am on the road to recovery. But they seem puzzled about the beast. A dynamic illusion, they call it—and let it go at that. And at times, in the dead of night, I awaken in a cold sweat with the knowledge that the beast is not dead and will never die. That some day, he may return with renewed strength and conquer me utterly. And in that conquering will perish horribly the person whose life and happiness means more than anything else in the whole world to me. . . .

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LOVELY LADY OF DEATH

By Donald Dale

(Author of "The Beautiful Dead," etc.)

It was an object of rare beauty—the little figurine that weird peddler sold me as a wedding present for my bride. . . . I didn't know that it was the goddess of a Stygian void that would spew forth a monster to spill the blood of my loved ones!



CHAPTER ONE

Sign of the Dagger

THE dying girl was very, very beautiful. Her reddish-brown body, sharply outlined against the white satin coverlet, twisted and writhed con-

vulsively in the final grasp of Death. A golden chiffon negligée, scarcely veiling the tender curves of her full breasts and rounded hips, eddied softly around her as if stirred by the eager breath of the Grim One.

A Chill-Packed Novelette of Inexplicable Doom!



Manuel Ortiz and I stood helpless, held by the tragedy of this scene.

He was her husband. I was her doctor.

There was nothing either of us could do. . . . In a moment she was dead.

Ortiz shook off the hypnosis that relentless Death had cast over him. His

thin, brown face relaxed from its trance-like stiffness and began to quiver and twist into lines of hate.

When he turned toward me, I was driven back by the hot, unearthly flame of his small black, blazing eyes. He followed me with one threatening step. Then he shouted. "*You killed her!*"

IGNORING her husband's violent outburst, I looked sorrowfully at the dead girl, in her rigid, slender perfection like some skillfully chiseled statue of ideal, exotic womanhood.

And only two hours before she had been alive, had phoned me, begging me to come to her, insisting that she was dying. I had refused to go.

Judge for yourself if I was not justified. At ten o'clock in the morning I had returned to my apartment, eyes burning with lack of sleep and feet stumbling with fatigue. There was diphtheria in the city and for twenty hours I had worked without sleep or rest, and with all the driving force of a young doctor's enthusiasm.

I particularly regretted being tired on this day, for at four o'clock I was to be married, to Myra Sterling, the most wonderful girl in the world.

I planned to have a bath and then sleep two or three hours. I should still have plenty of time for the remaining preparations for the quiet wedding that was to take place in my apartment.

I started the shower running and took one more turn through my charming apartment, newly decorated for my bride.

As I went back through the bedroom, fatigue was almost forgotten. In passing I let my finger slide caressingly over the sleek surface of Myra's wardrobe trunk. It had been delivered that morning and now stood upended, ready to be unpacked. I felt my body expanding with the torrent of joy that coursed through my veins.

In a few hours the world would be

mine—all mine—I thought as I turned back toward the shower room.

Just then the telephone rang. Shrilly it reminded me that I was a doctor, that no time was my own, that no day belonged to me—not even my wedding day.

It was Dolores Ortiz, in one of her fits of depression. She declared she was dying; I must come at once.

Believing, as does every doctor, that I am a servant of the people, I would not have refused her summons on the grounds of fatigue, nor yet because it was my wedding day. I turned a deaf ear to her weeping because I knew her case too well. There was little wrong with her, and I believed she no longer needed medical attention. In fact, some time before, I had officially dismissed her case, suggesting that now she needed, if anything, a psychiatrist—not a physician.

So when she tearfully pleaded with me that I *must* come to her at once I reminded her that she was no longer officially my patient, and hung up to escape her neurotic recriminations.

I proceeded with my shower, and sighed with relief when finally I dragged my weary body into bed. . . . But I could not go to sleep. Somehow I was not able to banish the thought of Dolores Ortiz.

Her case had always annoyed me. Her husband was some sort of foreigner, a queer, sullen, secretive fellow who called himself a metaphysician. He spent his time holding strange, ritualistic séances in exotically furnished chambers. There were persistent stories of his power to furnish escape from reality in some strange spirit world.

If Manuel was not present when I called, Dolores alternated between hysterical fear about the small wound which I was supposed to treat, and amorous advances toward me. . . . But I was in love with Myra, had been since my college days. The beautiful, sleek, red-brown body of this woman only repulsed me.

From a professional point of view I disliked the calls, for they seemed useless. Again and again I had gone to her apartment to treat the small, dagger-shaped scratch that, just above the pulsing hollow in her throat, marred the red smoothness of her skin.

It was a harmless looking abrasion, much like a pin scratch. Or rather it seemed more like a tiny birth mark than a wound needing medical attention. It never got better or worse. I made sure there was no infection, and decided with relief that I could dismiss the case of this hysterical and unbalanced young woman.

For an hour I lay there, tossing from side to side, trying to forget Dolores Ortiz. It made me angry to think I could not dismiss the case from my mind. I knew my decision not to go to her, was right. Why could I not clear my mind and get my few hours of much-needed rest?

But something tugged at me, nagged at me, dragged me from my bed. So, despairing of otherwise getting the case out of my mind, I dressed and drove to the Ortiz apartment. . . .

“YOU killed her! You killed her!”

Once more I tried to tell this man that I sympathized with him, but that I was in no way to blame.

But he would not be mollified. “You killed her,” he repeated over and over. “*You* with your professional smugness! *You* with your cold scientific explanations!” he spat out, his queer eyes blazing again with uncanny light, “and some day I’ll—”

Abruptly all violence went out of him; his body stiffened and with the jerky motions of a mechanical man, he lurched over to stand again above the dead girl on the bed.

The lines of his face, so recently convulsed with grief, settled into a trance-like quietness. For an infinitesimal space, he stood and looked at the unbelievably

beautiful figure of his wife, rigid and cold.

Then from beneath his shirt he drew out a silver disc that hung from a chain around his neck. He held it in one hand, and in slow, precise, careful rotation, as if playing on a delicate instrument, he touched the numerals which rimmed it, while muttering in a medley of unknown tongues. . . .

Suddenly his voice rose. “*Rhamke!*” he now exclaimed tensely, and took the silver disc between thumb and second finger. To the level of his eyes he raised it, and spun around facing me in menacing attitude. “If I have to walk through hell, I shall have my revenge. By *Rhamke* I swear it!”

He made a sweeping gesture over the still body of his wife, tracing a symbol that I realized with repugnance was a rude representation of the dagger scratch on the dead girl’s throat.

With a peculiar, ritualistic quality, his voice droned these words: “By this mark you shall know of my coming.”

Abruptly the guise of fanatical fervor dropped from him, and with a return to his grief-stricken rage, he shouted, “Some day the man of science will come to the metaphysician. Some day you will ask help for the one you love best and will get—death!”

CHAPTER TWO

Death Makes a Sale

IT WAS one o’clock when I finally got home after my distressing experience. I was to be married at four, I reminded myself. I must put the whole matter out of my mind.

I had seen the coroner and his opinion exonerated me completely. At my insistence, however, two of the most reputable doctors in the city had come and examined the dead girl. They corroborated my opinion that the slight scratch on the girl’s

throat had not the remotest connection with her tragically sudden death. She had, sometime *after* she had called me, developed a condition for which I could have done nothing even had I been there. I had not the slightest responsibility, legal or moral. But, being young and idealizing my profession, I was miserable.

Soon Myra would be here, and my sister Janet, who was all the family I had in the world; and some of our closest friends. But I could not rest the short time remaining. Nervous and upset, I walked the floor of my rooms.

No, I was not to blame, I told myself for the hundredth time, yet I could not sweep from my thoughts the terrible grief of Manuel Ortiz. I felt again the tangible force of his threat against—"the one you love best."

I decided to have a drink, hoping somehow to banish from my mind the gruesome events of the morning. The glass jingled against the decanter with the tremor of my hands.

The sound of a tap at my apartment door made me jump like a hunted man. I banged the decanter down into the tray and upset the glass of whiskey. It was almost as if I had then some premonition of the tragedy and death which began at that moment to stalk me.

Tensely I looked around me as if seeking a way to escape. Suddenly it occurred to me what a fool I was. I had let the unhappy events of the morning throw my whole mind out of focus.

Though someone was rapping on my apartment door without having rung the bell from downstairs, there was no cause for alarm. It could be the janitor or the maid coming, as I had asked them to do, to see if everything was in perfect order for the wedding party. I strode to the door and threw it open. . . .

"Good afternoon, *Señor Doctor.*"

I drew back, startled. There was something strangely familiar—and terrifying—

about my visitor's voice, I thought.

But no, surely not, for never before had I seen the loathsome creature who cringed bowed in my doorway. His costume was a formless swathing of soiled white. A sort of turban was wound low about forehead and ears, almost obscuring his face. A length of uncut cloth bound his shapeless body. I had never seen so unusual a guise, and I could not even place the creature's nationality. His skin was dark, and his small eyes brilliant with an unearthly light.

"I have something for you," he said, advancing into the room and extending toward me some object wrapped in shabby green velvet.

"A peddler," I thought, relieved immediately of my nervous feeling about him. Still I did not want him invading my rooms, especially on this day.

"I don't want to buy anything," I declared firmly, gesturing him toward the door.

But still bowing and fawning, the creature continued his advance into my room, his small black eyes from his lowered head darting about.

With a quick deft motion he flipped the velvet from the object he held in his hands. I drew my breath sharply. Never in my life had I seen anything so beautiful!

It was impossible to resist it. A slender, female statuette about fifteen inches high, carved from cherry wood. The reddish-brown wood had been so skillfully handled that it looked soft to the touch—like the skin of a maiden of some brown, savage race. The carven girl stood on tip-toe, arms extended high above her head. In her upturned palms she balanced a crystal ball.

The sphere itself was arresting; milk-white, translucent, and of a startling texture. Its surface seemed more like a resilient membrane than glass.

The mendicant suddenly spoke. "Is it

not," he urged, "a perfect gift—for a bride?"

The fellow was right. It's delicate beauty and grace made it a perfect gift for a bride—for Myra.

Yet something made me hesitate to buy it. If at that moment my hard, scientific skepticism had yielded to the voice of my inner being, what a horrible tragedy would have been averted!

Annoyed at even a momentary recognition of instinct, I reached for my wallet, asking brusquely, "Well, how much?"

But the creature had not heard me. All his servility had left him for a moment. With sly, secretive looks he was examining the arrangement of my rooms, and even as I spoke, his gaze had found the aperture of the half-opened door to the bedroom and was fixed upon the beautiful twin beds I had so recently placed there.

"Well?" I snapped.

Immediately he was the groveling peddler again, eager to sell his wares. I struck a quick bargain with him and felt relieved when his presence no longer contaminated my apartment.

He was certainly one of the most loathsome creatures I had ever seen, I reflected, as I went to put the statuette among the many wedding presents that had for days been accumulating.

Suddenly my mind concentrated on the man's queer clothes, trying to capture an elusive impression. . . . Good Lord! the man's crazy costume looked more like grave clothes than anything else!

"Nonsense," I exclaimed aloud in an attempt to rescue myself from a return of the unhappy state of mind that had been pursuing me all day. I hurried to make the last-minute preparations for the arrival of the wedding party. . . .

THE wedding guests were gone. Myra and I had finished our first dinner together as husband and wife.

Now we were in our lovely room together.

With a heart overflowing with pride and love I was watching Myra brush out her long, shining hair. There was something about the grace of her movements, the slender fragility of her hands as she extended them above her head, the rippling of slender body under her sheer negligée, that reminded me of the lovely statuette I had bought for her.

"Darling," I said, "I got a present for you this afternoon."

In the mirror I could see her face crinkle with pleasure. "How dear of you! . . . When may I see it?"

"Just a moment," I responded proudly, already on my way to get it.

Myra was still at her dressing table when I re-entered the bedroom, bearing the statuette aloft in my hands. The first glimpse she had of it was in the mirror.

She stiffened and whirled around to face me. I saw with amazement that her eyes, dilated with fear, were fixed on the statuette—no, on the crystal that it supported. Slowly, as if in a hypnotic trance, she rose to her feet and cringed against the wall.

"Why, what's the matter, darling!" I exclaimed.

"Oh!" she exclaimed sharply. For a second she held her breath, then expelled it heavily. Making a visible effort to throw off her strange mood, she changed her tone completely. "Oh—oh, nothing . . . I *do* like it, dearest. Thank you. It's lovely. . . . But just for a moment I had the queerest feeling about it."

She came over and took it from me. "Now, where shall we put it?" she said with artificial brightness.

My eyes followed her adoringly as she went into the living room. The dusky-red nude figurine was a perfect foil for Myra's milk-white body with the rose-hued chiffon robe swirling around it.

With feigned interest she looked around

for exactly the right place for our new acquisition. At last her eyes settled on the heavy table in the center of the living room. "The very place!" she declared, carrying the statuette to it.

But I noticed that she handled it gingerly as a frightened woman touches a dangerous weapon.

CHAPTER THREE

Two Grim Visitations

I LAY and listened to the soft breathing of Myra, my bride, in her bed so close beside mine. She had been asleep for several minutes now, but memory of our supreme happiness stimulated me, kept me awake.

Plans for a perfect future for us ran through my mind. Playing . . . working . . . loving. . . .

Soon drowsiness stole away the proper sequence of thought, and my mind deserted the future and became a jumble of memories. Manuel Ortiz shouted vengeance against the one I most loved. . . . The brown figurine, at the touch of the mendicant who had sold it to me, stirred her amorous curves into motion and was suddenly replaced, by the lovely, sinuous body of Dolores Ortiz. . . . Back of all, like a fluid impressionist background, Myra stood, grown fantastically large. With her body stripped of all clothing, she cowered and cried out in fear. Then everything shimmered and melted away, and I slipped into a deep, restful sleep. . . .

A chilling, blood-curdling scream jerked me upright in bed. Myra!

Like a flash I threw myself toward her bed. I thought my hand brushed against something, but there was only the fleeting sensation of a slick, flaccid bulk, and then my hand was on the switch of the bedside lamp. The room flooded with light.

What a devastating scene for a bridegroom of one night to face! Myra's bed clothes were in wild disarray. Her flimsy nightgown had been stripped back from her shoulders. She was sitting up in bed, hands held tightly against her throat, a thin trickle of blood seeping through her fingers. And she was moaning, her terrified eyes fixed on the door that led into the living room.

The door was swinging to, as if it had just been pushed by a person going into the other room. I plunged toward it, but a sound brought me up short. I froze with a strange, tangible fear. . . .

The sound was indescribable, unearthly, like a soughing, sucking vortex of treacherous semi-fluid quicksand swirling and receding, dragging with it some struggling victim. I suddenly found myself gasping for breath as if the air of the bedroom had been drawn out to fill a vacuum elsewhere, and the door swung outward, toward the living room, drawn by the draft of air.

The movement of the door, that physical evidence that here *had* been an actual marauder in my bedroom, brought me to my senses. Myra was beside me now, still holding her white hands against the flow of blood from her throat.

"I'm all right," she said. "Come!"

I plunged ahead of her into the living room. With amazement I saw that the room was empty—and the windows were shut! Where was the marauder? There was no place for concealment in our tiny apartment.

I rushed to the windows, thinking that perhaps he had climbed through one and pulled it shut after him. But no, all the windows were locked from the inside.

Myra followed me, unwilling to leave my side, as I went to examine the lock on the apartment door. It had not been tampered with.

I turned slowly from it, completely baffled, trying to think of something reas-

suring to say to my wife. But she was not looking at me. Hands still pressed against her wounded throat, she seemed to be gazing fixedly at the table in the center of the room.

"Look!" he suddenly screamed, and pointed a shaking, bloody finger at the statuette on the table. "Look," she said again, terror choking her voice. Then I saw it was the crystal she meant.

I leaned with her over it. There was an eerie, shimmering light within it. And for a moment I thought I saw a weird sight within the narrow confines of this glass ball—a strange sun raining a black light upon a fantastic landscape where scurrying, nightmarish creatures blurred against a background of massive boulders. Then it was gone, so quickly that I thought I must have imagined it.

Myra, still bending, gazed as if transfixed. "What was it?" she whispered.

"Nothing, darling," I said, putting my arm around her. "It couldn't have been anything but a reflection. The lights of some passing automobile."

Yet I knew that that could explain only the light within the crystal. We had both seen that, but the strange other-world vista could not be accounted for in so natural a way. I wanted to know if Myra, too, had seen it. I could not bring myself to ask her—I preferred not to invite confirmation.

With determination, I grasped Myra by the shoulders, led her back to our bedroom, made her lie down. Then I went for towels and a basin of hot water. Soothing the frightened girl as well as I could, I pulled her hands away from her throat and drew the wet cloth across the blood-encrusted skin.

I drew back, crying out in horror. God! What could this mean? Terror came to gnaw at my vitals. Plainly I could see the wound that marked the whiteness of my loved one's throat. . . . It was not deep . . . was much like a pin scratch. Yet it

stood out vividly, more like a brand than a wound. And beyond all doubt, it was exactly like the wound that had been on the throat of—*Dolores Ortiz!*

"**B**Y this mark you shall know of my coming." As distinctly as though Manuel Ortiz stood before me in person, hate blazing from his eyes, while he fingered his strangely marked silver disc, those words rang in my ears.

Words that I had, twelve hours before, dismissed from my mind as too fantastic for regard. The product of the man's agony of grief, his fevered imagination, his queer personality obsessed with the metaphysical mumbo-jumbo by which he made his living.

And yet . . . now . . . I wondered.

Restlessly I paced back and forth in the cold living room. In the bedroom Myra was sleeping soundly. I had given her a sedative after dressing her throat.

I prided myself that I had been able to conceal from her the shock I had gotten from seeing that dagger-shaped wound. And I was nettled that I could not find an explanation that would satisfy my precise, rational mind: She might have done it herself. Yes—in a nightmare, clutching at her own throat to pull away hands that existed only in the dream, she could have scratched herself. That would account for everything.

Perhaps—not everything. But it would do. I decided to turn in. I had a busy day before me. Patients to see, affairs to wind up, so that at the end of the week I would be able to get away from town and take Myra on the honeymoon trip we had planned.

I entered the bedroom quietly. A shade was flapping lightly against a partly raised window, and beneath it moonlight poured in to fall in a silvery pool across the twin beds.

Wearily I started to climb into bed. Suddenly the act was arrested and I stood

ludicrously poised with one leg raised and outstretched. At the side of Myra's bed, gleaming where the moonlight struck it, was a blob of viscous fluid.

Slowly I brought down my foot and bent over. There was another drop a few feet beyond! And another beyond that one!

My heart beating rapidly in response to an intuition my mind would not recognize, I followed the trail of slimy drops. They led to the living room!

Into the living room and across it to the big table. There, inexplicably, they ended in a tiny pool of the same gelid fluid . . . Before me, on the mission table, was the figurine of the brown girl holding aloft her beautiful crystal. And at the base of the statuette was one more drop!

SOMETIMES it seems to me that we bright young moderns, so proud of our mastery of science, so cocksure in our skepticism, are as superstitious as savages. It becomes almost a fetish with us that there is nothing in the world that cannot be explained in precise, natural terms.

Long before the next night I had arrived at a "natural" explanation for the attack on Myra and the inexplicable behaviour of the crystal.

The next morning, before I waked her with a kiss, I lay looking at her, pride and happiness welling up within me. She was lovely. Soft black hair, gay truant from daytime coiffure, had slipped down to caress her smooth, pale cheeks. Her red lips curved in a tender smile, as if she dreamed of love.

It was inconceivable, I told myself, that anyone could wish harm to her. Clearly the lure of our wedding presents and my bride's jewelry had brought some clever burglar into our apartment. The attack on Myra was not premeditated. She probably had stirred in her sleep, and the marauder, interrupted, had tried to still her warning outcry.

On the way to the hospital for my morning calls, I stopped at the bank with my wife's jewelry, and as it disappeared into the vault, I felt immensely relieved.

As I went from room to room in the antiseptic atmosphere of the hospital, I found myself explaining away the puzzle of the crystal. It had been, I assured myself, no more than a trick of reflected light, heightened by my distressed state of mind.

But if I had satisfied myself, I found when I got home that Myra had not done so well. It was already dark when I arrived for dinner, and I found her in a state bordering on hysteria. If only I had credited her instinct . . . But I blundered on, smugly confident in my idolized science.

I succeeded in quieting her, and took her out to dinner. When we returned we went to bed early, and I fell asleep soon after Myra. It was a deep, dreamless sleep.

Suddenly I was wide awake. Wide awake and terrified. There was someone in the living room . . . No, something!

Perhaps in those first still hours after midnight, when life is at its lowest ebb, we are most like our primitive ancestors, cowering in their caves in dread of the nameless menace of night. Gone was the man of science. In his place was a quivering coward whose instinct said that in the next room was a being of unearthly loathsomeness.

I forced myself to get out of bed, moved stealthily toward the next room. Nothing but the thought of Myra, defenseless except for my protection, gave me strength to edge toward the unknown menace.

My cautious, unendurably slow advance finally brought me to the door. The living room was utterly dark. Its air seemed heavy—I could not breathe. . . .

I broke under the strain of the suspense. Caution abandoned, I bolted into the room.

A hard jolt shot through me as I crashed into something. As I was falling backwards, instinctively I put up my hands. Then—*God!* will I ever forget the sensation! I felt a huge shape towering over me, a *thing* that seemed to have no bones, but phalange-like arms and pulpy fingers that felt flabby against my face as they thrust at me.

As my head struck the floor, sharp pain burst like a bomb in my brain.

I could not have been out more than a few seconds. In fact, it did not seem to me that I lost consciousness at all. I thought I heard sounds—strange, incredible sounds that I attributed to the ringing in my head.

There was a low-pitched humming, suddenly cut off and followed by a sharp rush of air. Then a thin tinkle, as of metal and glass—and silence, audible and terrible.

Strength returned to my body and I struggled to my feet, stumbled to the wall. As I clicked on the light switch, I whirled to face my assailant.

The room was empty! There was no trace of the intruder.

No, there was a chair out of place. The big upholstered pull-up chair was not in its accustomed place by the table, but was near the door to the bedroom.

For a moment I convinced myself that there was the thing I had run into full tilt in the dark. I could not remember moving it to where it was now, but—frankly—I preferred that explanation to the other. For the windows were still bolted on the inside and the night latch was on the door. How could a human being have entered the room?

I had my answer immediately. No *human* being had entered. . . .

As I stood, back against the wall, breathing hard, something drew my eyes to the figurine with the crystal. I felt pulled toward it.

Slowly, stiff-legged, I approached the

table on which it stood. As I bent over it, the hair on my neck stirred with that primitive response to fear long lost to modern man.

Then I cried aloud.

On the wide base of the statuette, at the feet of the figurine, lay a bright piece of metal! A thin silver disc with strange characters stamped across its face—identical with the one Manuel Ortiz had flourished in my face as he threatened his revenge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Collects

WHAT catastrophic consequences can arise from the slightest of causes! If I had suppressed that shocked cry at the sight of the threatening omen, Myra would not have awakened and run into the living room. Then she would never have known what had happened—for I would never have told her—and the tragic consequences of the next evening might have been avoided.

But she knew that our home had again been invaded and that I was frightened. After that there was no quieting her terror.

“Oh,” she wailed, “what will I do when you’re away? I wouldn’t dare stay here by myself, even in the daytime.”

I finally succeeded in getting her to return to bed by promising that in the morning I would bring my sister Janet to the house. Janet would stay with her while I was out during the day.

When I phoned Janet the circumstances the next morning, she readily agreed to come. If there was another person in the world with a skepticism equal to my own, she was the one. Though I could see that she doubted the seriousness of the whole disturbance, she even insisted on sleeping at the apartment in order to keep Myra company if I should be called out at night.

The arrangement would not last long, she pointed out, for at the end of the week I would be able to leave my practice for my postponed honeymoon.

I went for Janet and took her to the apartment the first thing in the morning, before I made my calls at the hospital. Myra, poor girl, nearly fell into Janet's arms, she was so glad to see her. Even the short time she had been alone had frightened her badly.

Having made that concession to my bride's unreasoning terror, I determined to have some investigations made.

I could no longer deny, I acknowledged to myself as I drove toward the city, that someone was trying to harm Myra and me.

Manuel Ortiz had threatened us, and, although I could not see *how* he could have caused the strange, half-meaningless things that had happened, he seemed somehow involved in our difficulties.

The crystal had something to do with it, that was certain. But what was the connection between it and Ortiz? I recalled the queer, unnatural appearance of the mendicant peddler who had sold me the statuette, and decided the thing to do was to have the police put out a dragnet for him.

Meanwhile, during the day, if I could spare the time, I would look up Ortiz and see what he had to say for himself.

My plans went well. It seemed now that it would take only one more day to wind up my affairs, and Myra and I could begin our honeymoon trip sooner than we had first thought.

Late in the afternoon, I remembered to phone the police a description of the queer peddler, and also asked them to check up on Ortiz. I had not had time to call on him myself, but I decided it could wait.

Perhaps, if I were not too tired, I would drive across the city to see him tonight. Otherwise, the morning. . . .

I found Myra and Janet in high spirits

when I reached home. They had been shopping all day and, true to form, Janet had dispelled the dread which had been hanging over Myra. The three of us spent a pleasant evening, and then, because the girls were tired, decided to turn in quite early.

Because our tiny apartment had limited accommodations, Janet had to sleep on the living room couch, but being a good sport, she took it as a lark, and we all went to bed in a merry mood.

I was awake with the first sound of the telephone. A doctor gets that habit. The ringing had not lasted long enough to waken either of the girls before I picked up the instrument.

"Dr. Black's residence," I muttered sleepily.

An unintelligible jumble of words crackled from the receiver. "What's that?" I asked sharply.

". . . hurry . . . emergency. Accident . . . 2422 Pine Street . . ." A click in my ear and the line was dead.

WIDE awake now, I jumped into my clothes as a trained fire horse steps into harness. Knotting my tie, I thought with satisfaction that I was not leaving Myra alone. How fortunate that I had thought to have Janet here for just such an emergency.

I slipped into my coat, picked up my medical case, and was already at the door when Myra stepped into the room, a flimsy robe thrown over her nightgown, her heavy black hair tumbling over sleep-filled eyes.

"Earl! Where are you going?" she asked agitatedly.

"Emergency. Have to hurry, dear. Sorry the phone waked you."

Her eyes opened wide. "I didn't hear the phone. It was something—else that waked me . . . Earl! don't go—please, please don't go!"

Impatient to leave, I yet stood at the

door, looking at her. A vague fear stole over me. I answered her gently. "I must go, dear."

"Then I'm going with you!"

I would have protested but she was already gone back into the bedroom, and Janet took that moment to wake.

"Hello!" she said brightly, "out into the night to serve humanity?"

"Yes," I answered my sister, "as soon as Florence Nightingale gets her clothes on."

"Oh! . . . Myra's going with you?"

"Afraid?"

She grinned boyishly. "Of what?"

I smiled fondly at her. Her tousled hair, the same straw blond color as my own, made her look like an unruly elf. "I think that you," I said, "would make a nice tid-bit for any monster. . . ."

"Earl!" Myra said sharply as, pulling on her coat, she emerged from the bedroom just in time to hear my last words. "Don't joke like that," she pleaded.

Janet scrambled from the couch and ran to my wife's side. "There's nothing to be nervous about," my sister assured her lightly. "Why, I'm glad you're both going out. I'll climb into your bed and get a little relief from that hard couch . . . Go ahead now."

Myra smiled wanly, and I took her arm, patted my sister on the shoulder, and made for the door. . . .

The dashboard clock showed two-thirty as I turned the car at twenty-first and Pine. The street, dark and dingy even in the daytime, was doubly so at this darkest of all hours of the night.

I slowed the car down as I crossed twenty-fourth street, and began watching for number 2422.

The car rolled past a dirty-looking delicatessen on the corner, a shoemaker's shop next to it, then a tavern, closed for the night, and a drygoods store. The next three buildings were cheap flats. The number on the third was 2418,

I stopped the car in front of the next building. It was set far back from the street and though there was a dim light in its wide vestibule, I could not make out the house number. I started to get out of the car, then decided to turn the spotlight on the door, just to be sure this was the right place.

Myra leaned forward as I clicked on the spot and sent its beam back toward the wide squat building. It was she who first made the discovery.

Her scream of fright was ringing in my ears as I made out, in the white circle splashed by the spotlight, the sign she had already read:

COUNTY MORGUE

Again fear clutched my heart—fear for my sanity. I should have *known* that address the morgue.

"NO SIR, Dr. Black," said the old man who was night superintendent, "when we get 'em here, they don't need no doctor."

"But didn't anyone stop in to use your phone?" I insisted, trying to get to the bottom of this emergency call.

"I'm the only one on duty—been here since ten o'clock—and there ain't been nobody else here but you and the missus . . . No sir, somebody has played a joke on you."

But I knew it was no practical joke, and I could tell from Myra's trembling body that she too knew that the purpose of this call had been to get me away and leave her in the apartment alone.

As I drove the car rapidly through the empty streets of the city toward home, I came to a decision. We would leave the city tomorrow. I could arrange somehow to get away immediately. When we came back from our trip, with the help of the police I would get to the bottom of this matter.

I told Myra of my decision and it seemed to cheer her. We were both quite light-hearted by the time I parked the car in front of our home. I swung open the apartment door and stepped back to let her enter—and I caught her as her knees buckled under her. Then, with the limp body of my wife in my arms, I swayed against the wall with horror. . . .

Shreds of flimsy nightgown clinging to her broken, torn body, Janet lay in a pool of blood that lapped at my feet!

Once when I was an interne they brought us a child who had been caught in a threshing machine. We sewed her like a gunnysack, and for a few minutes life lingered in the mutilated shell.

My sister looked like that child.

I placed my wife on the couch, and bent over Janet's twisted, shattered body. It was still warm. She had been dead only a matter of minutes. . . . Then I saw that her bulging eyes, even in death, seemed to be staring at something—something that had lent them the final, unendurable horror I read in their depths.

I rose slowly and turned to follow the line of their vision. . . . God! It was the crystal on which her eyes had fixed in her death agony. Then the madness took me for its own. . . . The cherry-colored wood of the statuette was stained a darker color. It was bathed in blood—the life blood of my sister!

Dead! My sister dead!

I stood inert, shackled by terror. Now—too late—I knew the undeniable truth. This damnable crystal was the passageway of the fiend preying on my loved ones. By means of it, some *thing* had come into this apartment, and left the same way, still dripping with the blood of my murdered sister. And Myra. . . .

I threw off the paralyzing fear as my wife moaned faintly with returning consciousness. I picked up my medical case, and went quickly to her side. Soon her eyelids fluttered.

For a moment she stared vacantly into space, and then, with the flooding back of horrible memory, her throat constricted to scream. I was ready. Quickly I gave her the hypodermic I had prepared, and then took her trembling body in my arms.

I held her tight as she broke into uncontrollable sobbing. Gradually, however, the sedative took effect. Soon her eyes closed and her body relaxed. . . . I put her down upon the couch, and went into the bedroom to fix her bed.

Sadly I looked at the place where a few moments before, my sister, so vibrant with the zest for living, had lain. And now she was dead! Dead, because she had slept in Myra's bed.

Whoever had killed her had intended to take her away—because he thought she was Myra! But he had seen his mistake when barely out of the bedroom, and so he had killed her, brutally torn her apart with insensate rage. With heavy heart, I turned from the bed and walked, head bowed, back into the living room.

Something made me look up, drew my eyes to the cherry-colored figurine which supported the damnable crystal. There was a glimmer of light from within its milky depths!

I dashed to the table, bent over the crystal. The light was gone! . . . Could I have been mistaken? No. I *knew* I had seen some manifestation of its unearthly power.

A terrible dread settled on me, and I slowly turned to see if my wife was safe—and a sob was wrenched from the very depths of my being.

Myra was gone!

CHAPTER FIVE

Payment in Full

MY MIND snapped. For the next few moments I was a gibbering idiot, tossed in a tornado of meaningless action, wild, grief-stricken cries spilling from my

slavering lips. I rushed to the locked door, and shook it frenziedly, and on then to the windows, calling, "Myra! Myra!" I remember standing over the crystal, threatening, pleading, finally breaking into sobs of impotent fury. . . . Where was my adored wife? How was it possible for a person to disappear practically into thin air?

Gradually I grew calmer . . . What could I do?

In despair I threw myself on my knees beside the body of my sister, weltering in its pool of blood. Her crimson-stained lips seemed trying to tell me something, and her staring eyes were fixed on the crystal.

I jumped to my feet, bent over the crystal and with all the force of my mind tried to penetrate its fiendish secret. But to no avail. Futile tears blurred my sight as I stood looking helplessly at the unfathomable sphere and the figurine supporting it. Suddenly my eyes seemed to play a trick on me.

The cherry-colored wood of the statuette paled to the shade of reddish-brown skin, and the sharply-cut lines of the miniature face softened until they were the sensual features—of Dolores Ortiz.

The illusion lasted only a second, but it was enough to make me relive the awful moments when the beautiful body of Dolores Ortiz had lain cold and still, and Manuel Ortiz had stood over his dead wife and prophesied:

"Some day you will ask help of me—for the one you love best. . . ."

And now, God knows, the time had come. . . .

I picked up the phone and gave the operator Ortiz' number. As I waited for her to complete the connection, I looked again at the figurine. While the illusion of a moment before was gone, there was still a remarkable resemblance between the statuette and the dead girl. I wondered that I had not noticed it before.

Had the fiendish mind of Ortiz planned it thus, so as to make the more subtly horrible his revenge?

As the operator cut in, I realized that while I had been brooding, she had been trying unsuccessfully to get Ortiz' number.

"Shall I keep on ringing?" she asked.

"No," I answered dully, still staring at the mocking statuette.

As I cradled the phone, there was a faint sound. A ring-off with the disconnection, I thought. Then something made me believe I had been mistaken, that my phone had really rung.

I picked it up again, and immediately a voice spoke in my ear.

"You were calling me?" it asked softly. A shock ran through me. Unless I were mad, this was the voice of Manuel Ortiz!

"Where is my wife?" I shouted into the phone.

"You were calling me—for help?"

"Where is my wife, you fiend?"

A soft, malicious chuckle was my only answer. It grated into low-pitched laughter, swelled to a maddened roar, rose with hysterical shrieks, and broke into demoniacal peals.

Through it I heard a scream of pain . . . Myra!

Then there was nothing more.

Frantically I jiggled the phone. In a second I heard the operator's voice.

"Quick!" I said, "trace that call! Dr. Earl Black speaking. I must know where that call came from."

The operator replied promptly and without a second's hesitation: "You must be mistaken, sir. Since your outgoing call a moment ago there has been no traffic on this exchange."

MANY doctors, having to make calls at all hours of the night, frequently in doubtful neighborhoods, carry guns. I had one downstairs in the car, under the cushion in the front seat. If I had had

it in my hand when I put down the phone, I would have killed myself.

I had nothing left to live for. "Nothing, nothing, nothing," I repeated over and over until I thought my head would burst.

Myra was gone and I could do nothing to bring her back. And my whole world—the world of scientific, demonstrable facts by which I worked, yes, and lived—was completely smashed.

Janet had been killed in a room that had not been entered by another *human* being in my absence, and the only clue was her life blood smeared on a glass crystal. Myra had disappeared from that same room, after which I had heard her cry of pain over a phone *that had no connection at the other end*.

It was impossible, utterly, completely fantastic—yet the horrible, deadly truth. From the moment when Manuel Ortiz had uttered his threat, the whole natural order of things had collapsed. The world had become for me and the ones I loved a place of chaos, stalked by a horrible menace somehow connected with the fatal crystal.

I would have smashed the malignant thing—if I hadn't known somehow that it was the only connection I still had with Myra, wherever she was. I stared long at it, as if I might wrest from it its terrible secret. Still watching it, I thrust hands in pockets and began a slow, hypnotic, funereal march around the room.

Past the body of my sister, past the couch on which Myra had lain when last I saw her, past the phone from which, inexplicably, had come that fiendish laughter, past the crystal soundlessly shrieking at me Manuel Ortiz' fantastic threats. . . .

I stopped short.

Spinning around, I retraced my steps and seized the telephone. By God! *It was* fantastic, and if I could do nothing, then let the police try. Let them.

I slowly lowered the phone until it rested again on the table. I had heard no

sound, yet I *knew* that someone was now in the room.

I turned.

Myra stood before me!

In front of the statuette she stood, deathly pale, eyes staring vacantly, body rigid. Suddenly, before I could move, she toppled to the floor.

On one arm were two ugly bruises, like prints of giant fingers, and her dress was ripped away from one shoulder, as if torn in a struggle to escape.

She had no other apparent injury, but seemed to have suffered a great shock to her nervous system. Her pulse was very weak, and her heart irregular.

I lifted her to the couch and, kneeling beside her, began a systematic examination to make sure there was no other damage. I worked rapidly but I still had time to think. While my hands were skillfully performing this routine of twentieth-century medical science, my mind was struggling through a dark labyrinth of medieval magic.

Myra, after her disappearance, had reappeared in the same inexplicable way, materialized out of thin air. This was the final proof needed to convince me that there were things that could not be met rationally.

Although my vaunted science could not explain what had happened, of one thing I was sure—only the destruction of the crystal could free us from the weird vengeance that stalked us, and in a moment, I was going to smash it to atoms.

So I thought, as I finished my examination of Myra. There were no internal injuries. I prepared a stimulant, gave it to her, and took her pulse once more; it was already gaining strength.

Suddenly I dropped her limp arm. I had heard—no, *felt* something. It was as though a cold draft of air had played upon my bent back. With an actual dread, I slowly started to rise, first carefully putting down the hypodermic syringe.

On my outstretched hand, I felt the same cold touch. I looked down. God! My hand had disappeared into a peculiar shadow that lay on the rug.

That shadow was the most tangible, terrifying thing I had ever seen. It seemed to be an absence of light, a colorless void, a tangible blackness. My hand seemed cut off, the part that lay in the weird shadow invisible. There was a clammy, cold sensation where the black light touched me.

Suddenly my hand was whole again. The shadow had disappeared. With it went my paralysis of terror. I leaped to my feet and spun around. Then I reeled back with a cry of animal fear.

Before me was a creature of nightmarish horror. Where a moment before had been nothing, there now loomed a huge slate-grey bulk of bloated skin, advancing on ponderous legs, one massive fist raised above me.

Before I could raise a hand, I was driven straight down to my knees with the terrific force of the blow on my head. With my last spark of consciousness, I knew that I was toppling, face down, into the pool of blood around my sister's body.

EVEN before I was fully conscious, I must have instinctively started to struggle against the ropes that bound me. By the time I opened my eyes, my arms were stiff from straining and my hands raw with the chafing.

But the pain was driven instantly from my mind by the sight before me. Myra's clothes had been stripped from her, and she was tied to the couch near the wall. Beside her, the loathsome monster fumbled with my medical case! I must have uttered a faint groan of despair, for the monster rose, and came toward me; I shrank from the horror of its appearance.

The monster was a ghastly caricature of Manuel Ortiz! The same small, close-set black eyes, now lost in a bulbous,

puffy face. The same arrogant carriage, recognizable even through the distended, bloated skin.

It was a travesty on man, I told myself. It was like a patient in the last stages of dropsy, the same beady moisture forming on the slick, puffed skin and dripping to the floor in heavy blots.

I shuddered at the maniacal hatred that blazed from the monster's beady eyes. No sound came from its thick, pendulous lips—I seemed to know that none could—but, as though they were spoken aloud, these words rang in my ears:

"If I have to *go through hell*—I will make you pay."

Now the monster was returning to Myra's side. He stooped, and from the open medical case took a scalpel. God! this was the end.

Frenziedly I strained at my bonds, but though I rocked the chair to which I was tied, the ropes would not budge.

Chest heaving, I watched the monster raise the gleaming scalpel. He held it to Myra's bare throat, twisted it suddenly.

As he stepped I saw on Myra's throat the sign of Manuel Ortiz's revenge—the same, shallow wound that Dolores Ortiz had borne. Dolores Ortiz, for whose death I was blamed, unjustly.

The pain of the tiny cut had shocked Myra from her faint. Her eyes fluttered open, and for a second she stared about her uncomprehendingly. Then she cried out piteously, "No! No! Not the black light again!"

In a moment I was to know the meaning of that terrified appeal. The monster now stood before the crystal, his shapeless hands tracing a cabalistic pattern through the air. As he gestured, the crystal sparked with light, then darkened. Suddenly, from it shot out a pencil of *black light*.

The beam grew, opening fanwise and broadening, until it was the size and shape of a huge funnel, the narrow point focus-

sing at the center of the crystal, the wide mouth big enough to hold even the great figure of the monster.

He now dropped his arms, lumbered to where Myra lay, and looked once more at me.

Then he began to drag my wife toward the black funnel of light!

I DID not need her terrified screams to tell me that once she entered that dark tunnel, I would never see her again on earth. I began to strain frantically at my bounds once more. . . .

Suddenly I ceased the fruitless effort. I had an idea—one hope to save Myra.

I began to rock the chair to which I was tied. As I threw my weight heavily from side to side, I darted a glance toward the monster. He had dragged Myra to the very edge of the black funnel of light. Now he was slipping into it.

It engulfed him until I could see just the faint outline of his huge grey bulk through the blackness. . . .

One arm, like the tentacle of an octopus, seemed to float in aimless motion. Suddenly it shot out of the shadow into the light—and seized the rope tied around Myra!

God! Was it impossible to upset this clumsy chair! . . . The monster was tugging laboriously. In a second Myra would be inside the funnel and gone—

The chair swung far over to one side and I threw my weight that way. The crash sent a sickening pain through my chest as I felt my collarbone snap. But I was free of the chair!

Hampered by the ropes I had not time to shake off, I sent my body rolling madly toward the table on which the crystal stood.

Pain shot through me as I jarred the heavy table. The statuette teetered on its base, and like a beacon the black funnel of light swung up and down with its motion.

As I rolled back for another painful onslaught, the monster suddenly changed his tactics. He released the rope by which he was dragging Myra into the black area, and drew back his hand.

Then he began to gesticulate wildly, and though I could not see distinctly, there seemed to be some pattern to the motion of his hands. Suddenly, as if in response to his ritual, the beam of dark light began to shrink. Like the closing of a camera lens, it narrowed its aperture, and at the other end seemed to funnel swiftly into the crystal.

Then the monster stooped swiftly and once more reached out to snatch at Myra. I saw that she had fainted . . . Desperately I gathered my knees half under me, and again hurled my body at the table. The statuette clattered wildly on its base, swung far out over me. . . .

In the split second of its fall, I could see the monster spinning about like a cork in the narrowing, tossing beam, the fingers of one outflung hand breaking through into the normal light of the room . . . Myra had been abandoned.

Then the crystal struck!

I averted my face, and a thousand tiny fragments and splinters of glass bit at my neck and shoulders. I twisted over to hurl myself at the monster. But the vortex of light had disappeared! *And the monster was gone!*

My eyes flashed to Myra. Thank God! she was safe—still unconscious, but unharmed.

I began tugging at the loose ropes that still clung to me, but abruptly I ceased. . . .

Among the shattered pieces of the crystal that could no longer bring death and tragedy to my home, I had seen something—something that gave one last slash at nerves I had thought incapable of further sensation.

The monster was gone—completely vanished like the figment of a tortured

imagination—but here beside me among the larger pieces of broken crystal, at the point where it had struck the floor, lay three slate-gray, pulpy fingers, their bloody ends ragged as if they had been torn off by terrific force!

MYRA was now sleeping peacefully under the influence of the sedative I had found it necessary to give her. I sat for a moment on the edge of the bed and thanked God that she showed no signs of her harrowing experience.

The cold light of early morning was fast filling the room. This night of horror was past, and now I must try to put it from my mind. But still I sat there. With the habit of a lifetime of scientific training, I was trying, even then and in the face of all that had happened, to find a "rational" explanation.

My raw nerves screamed with the sharp ring of the phone.

I rushed to answer it—to stop the sound that for three days had presaged only tragedy, heart-ache, and horror.

Before I put the phone down again, I had final proof that the only explanation there was to this tragic, unearthly adventure was one that in itself defied reason.

The call was from police headquarters. Half an hour before, they had broken into Ortiz's "temple" and in the ritual chamber they had found Manuel Ortiz—dead!

"Must have been some strange disease," the sergeant reported. "His body was—well, queer . . . Coroner's got it now, down at the morgue."

"And, funny thing," he added, "three of his fingers were missing—just bloody stumps left on his hand. . . ."

At that moment I felt I had nothing left of my once vaunted scepticism. Manuel Ortiz had made good his fanatical threat to make me pay for his fancied wrong. And as he had boasted, I, the scientist, had been forced to call the metaphysician for help "for the one I loved best." He had kept his every word.

Except one. . . .

"I will have my revenge," he had said, "if I have to *walk through hell.*"

The human mind is a strange instrument. Immediately I began rebuilding my scepticism around the one flimsy fact that at least Ortiz had not gone outside the world of physical life. However many incredible things he had actually accomplished, by whatever unbelievable powers he had done them, he had been a living man—until he had died by the instrument of his own revenge, one short hour ago.

It was a strange sort of consolation, but to me it meant that there was a limit to the things I had to bury in my mind because I could never explain them.

But I was a fool—a fool to cling blindly to my scepticism, a fool to think that Manuel Ortiz had not kept his *every* word.

The phone rang. It was the police calling to relay the report they had just got from the coroner, after his examination of Ortiz's body.

Manuel Ortiz had been dead three days!

THE END



THE THING WITHOUT A NAME

By RAY CUMMINGS

(Author of "Tomorrow's Terror," etc.)

Can a gruesome thing long dead command the love of some one young and fresh with vibrant beauty? Nada Parks found the answer—in a welter of stark horror!



EVEN in the warm, tropic sunset Nada's beautiful shoulders twitched with an involuntary shudder. "Yes," she said. "This is a voyage of horror. I know it . . . Down below they talk of nothing else. The whole fo'c's'l' feels it."

"Rats," I said.

She smiled somberly. "Rats, Alex? Most likely they all went ashore yesterday at San Marino. Rats always leave a

doomed ship—they have some way of—"

"Stop it," I protested. "You give me the creeps."

But I couldn't wave it away as easily as that. All day, as the little *Polaris* steamed northward over the Caribbean, I had felt it. The stewards somberly whispered about it. The deckhands mumbled curses at it. For all the crew held a smouldering resentment against Captain Parks, because he had taken

aboard his wife and his daughter Nada. It meant that this voyage, by the age-old tradition of the sea, would be doomed to grim disaster. In the forecabin little groups of men gathered with terror in their eyes, whispering of other voyages—voyages to which the presence of the captain's wife had brought stark horror . . . There is nothing so contagious as a presage of fear; no man so susceptible to eerie superstition as a sailor. . . .

I was radio operator of the *Polaris* at this time. My name is Alex Crane; and I was twenty-four. Certainly I was far from being steeped in the traditions of the sea. I was a normal fellow, afraid of no normal adversary. Yet the thing had me jittery. . . .

"Voyage of horror," Nada was murmuring. "For every ship there must be a voyage which is the last."

I mustered a grin. "You're as bad as all the rest of them. Quit it, I tell you."

We were seated forward on the hurricane deck. Over the purple blue of the white-capped sea the sun had just vanished below the western horizon. The sky off there was a mass of red-tinged clouds . . . red as blood. Here on the rolling deck, the shadows of evening were beginning to creep around us. I stared at Nada as she sat stretched in her deck chair. She was a tall, pale-blonde girl of seventeen; slim, yet already rounded into the full glory of womanhood, full bosomed, slim-hipped. The moulding of her limbs was obvious beneath the clinging filminess of her pale-blue tropic dress.

There was a glorious vitality about Nada that no one could miss. Delicate featured was her face, and extremely beautiful. The sea was in her wide blue eyes—all the mystery of it.

A step sounded behind us. One of the passengers was promenading after his evening meal. Nada and I were seated just forward of the *Polaris'* single stack. The man—one of a dozen or so passen-

gers which the small 3500-ton vessel was carrying this voyage—came from behind the stack. He passed us and rounded the wheel house.

Nada's hand had gone to my arm. I could feel that she was tense so I sat silent, waiting until the man had disappeared. And then she was staring at me.

"What is it?" I murmured.

"That man—he—revolts me. I'm afraid of him."

"You've met him then?"

"Yes. Just for a minute, this afternoon." She was breathless; and then suddenly her voice was stark with fear. "He's—what made me feel that this was a voyage of horror. Something about him—different from other people. You watch him, Alex—you'll see."

BLANKLY I stared at her. I had noticed this passenger from a distance and thought him odd, sufficiently so that I had inquired a bit about him of the purser. His name was John Hays Hartlow, a wealthy traveler. Despite that he was alone, he had engaged the *Polaris'* "bridal suite"—A-12—aft on the hurricane deck. It was the only real luxury of which the ship could boast. His luggage had come aboard shortly before we had sailed from San Marino.

It was a pretentious variety of luggage; bags and iron-bound boxes—one of which was six feet long, narrow as a coffin. All of his duffel had been specifically marked "cabin." The two-room suite must now be littered with it.

A retiring fellow, this Hartlow. He had not yet appeared in the dining saloon—his meals were served in A-12. And he had come aboard, as though desiring to avoid accustomed publicity, so unobtrusively that not until after the ship had sailed did he make himself known to the purser. . . .

"He's coming back," Nada murmured. Again her hand gripped me, as though to

cling to me would ward off the flood of revulsion and horror which engulfed her at his approach. In the shadowed twilight he showed as a blob coming from behind the forward superstructure. A tall, gaunt figure, with legs somehow stilt-like, and wide, high shoulders. He was dressed in a dark suit of tropical fabric—a dark shirt—and a black cap pulled low on a bullet head of close-clipped dark hair. All sombre, so that we really saw only the strange white pallor of his thin, hairless face, the grey of his big hands and thick wrists as they hung from the dark sleeves of the jacket which seemed too short for him.

For a moment now Nada and I breathlessly stared as he came slowly toward us, slanting across the open deck quite obviously with the intention of speaking to us. Woman's intuition? I had no need of it now to feel revulsion stirring within me. Revulsion—and fear? As though something were telling me now that here, in the person of this Hartlow, was a thing not to be understood. A thing . . . gruesome . . . unaccountably menacing. . . .

I was aware suddenly of a weirdness in his stalking tread. He lifted his stilt-like legs not with a flow of movement, but in a succession of jerks, planting his big feet squarely upon the gently undulating deck. And his dangling arms—I could see a tenseness to them, as though he held them stiff from the shoulder. . . .

Gruesome, that was it. And there was a gruesome aspect about him of latent power. His whole thin figure appeared taut with muscular power that seemed to make it jerk as he walked. . . .

"Good evening," he said.

He stood before us, his huge body stiffly, strangely erect.

I climbed to my feet. There was a third deck chair near us and I could do no less than offer it to him. But he refused my offer.

"Thank you—I can—only stay a mo-

ment. I have work that I must do—in my cabin."

It was the first time that I had heard him speak. Amazing quality of speech it was—not so much his heavy guttural voice with the indefinable accent of a cultured foreigner; but his slow, measured, ponderous handling of the words. A drab, colorless monotone, devoid of inflection. He backed against the rail, gesturing to me to be seated again beside Nada, and stood with elbows on the rail partly supporting his weight. The position raised his gaunt wide shoulders so that his bullet head was sunk down between them.

"You are—one of the ship's officers?"

I pulled myself back from my roaming thoughts. In the twilight I saw that he was staring at me out of that square, heavily jowled, pallid face with its high cheek bones and dark, deep-set eyes—staring at my white linen uniform with gold-braid insignia.

"Oh—I beg your pardon," Nada stammered. "I forgot you had not met. This is Mr. Crane, our radio operator."

Hartlow barely moved; there was just a gesture of one of his big hands. "It is nice to meet the ship's officers. We will have a pleasant voyage." He was looking now, not at me but at Nada. And suddenly he added, "You are very beautiful. Very young—very—alive. That is good . . . young people who are alive. . . ."

THE slow drab word trailed off as though his thoughts had engulfed him. Nada's frightened gaze flitted to me. For that moment we were both silent; and Hartlow was staring as though now he did not see us, but only the conjured visions of his thoughts.

I said at last, "You have work to do—in your cabin?"

His whole body seemed to twitch as my words pulled him from his thoughts. His head came jerking around to face me.

"Work? Yes . . . I was thinking. . . ."

She is so alive—it must be glorious to be young and—”

And alive? His trailing voice did not utter the word. But the unspoken phrase screamed itself at me; and I heard Nada suck in her breath as though to suppress a cry. And now again his weird eyes were staring at her. The fading roselight of the western sky faintly tinged the glory of her figure draped in the filmy pale-blue dress. His pallid face remained with a frozen blankness so that in those seconds only his eyes seemed alive—his eyes that roved over her half reclining figure, from her trim little blue suede slippers to the mass of pale-gold hair braided and coiled on her head. And there was in his gaze something so predatory—something of such gruesome menace that I muttered a curse and shoved back my chair.

Instantly he took his elbows from the rail. He spoke, and his voice had a sudden rasp in it.

“Do not disturb yourself, young man. I am going now.”

He turned with a jerk. Weird, those jerky movements were; gruesome, because they seemed to make him something less than human; unnatural as though no muscle, no joint, worked normally.

“Goodnight,” he said. He seemed not to hear our murmurs. He moved away, his stiffly erect figure stalking with measured tread down the shadowed hurricane deck until the after superstructure hid him. . . .

For half an hour more Nada and I sat there, with the light fading from the sky and the shadows of night deepening around us. Hartlow did not return. I avoided talk of him. Certainly there was nothing that I could say which would not add to her terror. For a time we sat silent. And I found my thoughts roaming far afield into realms of gruesome fancy. . . . This man—was not like other men. He was weirdly sinisterly menacing . . . as though he were not a person,

but a thing . . . not alive? . . . Was he dead then?

Absurd! I tried to cast away the oppressing thoughts.

“Let’s go below,” I said abruptly. “Your mother will be wondering where you are.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

Never during this voyage must Nada be alone. I determined it that moment. Should I speak to her mother about it? Or to her father, Captain Parks? What could I say? That this wealthy passenger—this Hartlow—was so odd that he frightened me? That would sound childish, wouldn’t it?

The deck up here was empty. We went down its swaying length to the after companionway. And suddenly Nada gripped me.

“Alex—dear God—”

A blob of figure was here on the deck almost beside us. Hartlow! He stood drawn back against the dark deckhouse wall, like a huge gaunt effigy of evil—a black figure with arms out sidewise stiffly as thought to brace himself. There was a dark corridor doorway near him. Had he been hiding there, waiting for us?

“Good evening,” he said. I mumbled a salutation.

The companionway light struck upon his pallid face. I saw in his eyes, a mute look of anguish; numbed anguish of spirit as he stared at Nada’s youthful beauty—her live, vibrant beauty.

The look had such horrible, gruesome desire in it that I turned cold. I could only thank God that Nada had not seen it, as I hurried her past him and down the companionway.

“You stay with your mother,” I murmured when we reached the lounge. We found her mother at a bridge game; and presently I left Nada there and went back to my own quarters in the radio shack on the hurricane deck almost amidships. . . .

I RECALL that I was normally busy that evening. We were only some 300 knots north of San Marino—the *Polaris* was a slow old tub. It would be a five-day voyage to New York. There were a few incoming radiograms for the passengers; one or two to send out; a few ships here in our vicinity of the Caribbean to contact for exchange of weather reports.

The work was a relief. But with every lull I found myself staring out through my port hole, across the shadowy deck at the purple sea and the sombre sky.

And then I saw Hartlow standing against the rail, just beyond the radiance from my window. He was staring at me.

With a startled oath I jumped up, went to my door. He was gone; the deck was empty. He had had time to stalk away, of course. Or had he? It was only a matter of seconds. . . .

The wind had swung to the north and was freshening. The sea was making up a bit so that occasionally now the little *Polaris* would pitch, staggering, and creak throughout her length. The wind now sucking and whining around my shack. Though this was the hurricane season, I knew that no major storm was abroad in the Caribbean. But a local disturbance was ahead of us, and we were beginning to plow into it.

Four bells came. I recall that at perhaps quarter past ten, I had occasion to take a message to one of the passengers down in the lounge. Nada was still there with her mother. She flashed me a smile as I went past her. God! If only I could have known that within five minutes, despite my warning, she would come up and visit me in the radio room. If I had known that she would pass close to the door of A-12 on her way—the most terrible experience of our lives would have been spared us.

But I could not have guessed it. I went back up to my instruments. There was momentarily nothing to do so that I

sat listening to the whine of the wind, the slap of the wash against the *Polaris'* plates as we ploughed forward into the storm. The night was black now. There was no moon; the stars were all obscured with scudding black clouds.

The hurricane deck near my shack was only dimly lighted with an occasional single bulb at the head of the little companionways. My radio room door and window shafted yellow light out; but beyond the beams there was only the dark outline of the nearby funnel; a few little ventilators standing like disconnected listening ears; a life-boat at the rail, ghostly in the gloom, with its white tarpaulin shroud. . . .

Five bells came and passed. I remember that there was on me a sort of weird expectancy, as though now I sensed myself upon the brink of horror. God knows I did not guess what horror was upon Nada—even this very instant! I was thinking only of Hartlow—of what gruesome plan was in his mind as he had gazed at Nada's beauty. . . .

The crackling call of my radio chased away those roaming thoughts. I answered. Tense, with a chill of excitement stabbing at me, I took the message.

It was for Captain Parks, signed by the chief of police at San Marino, whence we had departed only thirty hours ago.

Request immediate information regarding your occupant Suite A-12.

Hartlow! The San Marino authorities were investigating him! I started with the typed original for Captain Parks and in that moment it seemed that the nameless, gruesome menace of Hartlow was gone. This was rational. Our weird passenger was a fugitive from justice. Now we could clap him in irons, and shove him into the brig. Or could we?

When the darkness of the wind-swept deck enveloped me, the horror came leaping back. . . . What manner of man was this? Somehow I could not accept him as

a human being who could be shackled by any man-made chains. There was Hartlow—stalking in our midst, and yet somehow not confinable. And suddenly another question leaped at me: How had he gotten on board anyway? No one had seen him come. He just suddenly appeared.

WEIRD were my thoughts as I strode along. Then I found that I had not turned forward, but aft. The dark bulkheads of the stern staterooms were close before me. None of them, save cabin A-12 was occupied. The deck here was wholly deserted. It was quarter of eleven, and the storm was increasing in intensity.

A-12 was the aft port corner of the deck house. It seemed that from one of its shuttered windows a little light was streaming. Was Hartlow in there?

Upon impulse, I kept going aft. His words came leaping into my memory: "I have work that I must do—in my cabin."

Work? What evil work could be engaging him. And was he in there now?

The dark deck narrowed to eight foot between his window and the rail. A little horizontal slit of light shone across the deck. I saw now that it came from an inch-wide slit between his lowered shutter and the sill. The inner glass sash was up. Crouching on the deck, I found that I could see through the opening—a segment of the little sitting room of A-12 was spread before me.

The scene was so weird that I held my breath, my heart racing as I peered. The room was indeed littered with luggage. Half a dozen big square leather boxes stood on the floor. There was a suitcase or two. Against one wall, a big triangular box stood on end. On the floor beside it was another—oblong—six feet or more in length, narrow as a coffin. . . .

The room was dimly lighted, with just one small table lamp which cast gloomy shadows beyond its small circle of illumi-

nation. The angle of my vision showed the table, a chair or two, a wall shelf, and a big leather couch near which the door into the bedroom and bath of the suite showed. The door was half open.

Hartlow was in the foreground. His cap and jacket were off. The sleeves of his dark linen shirt were rolled to the elbow, exposing forearms matted with thick black hair. He was kneeling on the floor by the table, opening a box. The yellow light painted the top and side of his bullet head of close-clipped black hair.

His hands came up. He placed something on the table; the light gleamed on it with a silver sheen. Another object followed. And another. . . . Forceps; scalpels; saws. . . .

Surgeon's instruments! An ether cone; needles strung with gut; bandages of gauze and adhesive. He laid them neatly in a row. His lean powerful fingers were trembling. In the silence I could hear the sucking of his eager breath. And the light struck on his hairless, pallid face as he bent to the table. Gleaming sunken eyes; bluish lips parted with a snarl of eagerness. . . .

Then with his jerky steps he was padding across the room, opening the big triangular box. It was racked with big glass decanters. Carefully he took them out, ranged them on the shelf. I could not see them clearly; the room shadows over there blurred them. But they were wide-mouthed, pot-bellied bottles of thin glass—and something floating in each—floating in a liquid of pale green tint. . . .

I crouched for those breathless moments, transfixed at the window sill. For what unholy necromancy was the weird Hartlow preparing? What gruesome, diabolic surgery? Who was to be the *victim*?

I WAS aware abruptly that Hartlow had momentarily gone into the bedroom beyond my sight. For another

minute, motionless I peered, waiting for him to reappear, staring with breathless puzzlement at the weird room. I knew that the bedroom of A-12 had a door to a small companionway beyond. But I didn't think of it then. Nor that Hartlow might have seen my face pressed against the slit of his window.

And suddenly here on the dark windy deck there was a padding step. I had no more than time to leap to my feet when from around the corner, his big figure came pouncing.

"You—spy upon me?"

He towered half a head above me. His hand came up with a jerk and seized my shoulders. Amazing strength was in those big fingers. They gripped me like pinchers, so that suddenly I felt that here was a strength superhuman. The strength of a madman? I did not try to move. I was unarmed and helpless. One may have a premonition of impending death so strong that it must be heeded. I had the feeling in that tense second that if I shouted and started a struggle those fingers of colossal strength would grip my throat and wrench my head from my body.

"The captain wants to see you," I said softly.

"Does he?" The grip on my shoulders seemed to tighten a little. And in the dimness of the deck I could see Hartlow's face break into a grin. "That can wait. You—come with me—you are so interested to see what I am doing . . . I will show you."

Madman? His grip loosened, but instantly his left arm went around me, its vise-like pressure bending me down and pressing me against him as though I were a child.

He murmured ironically. "You would not call out, would you? You know I have the strength to toss you over this rail—"

He was dragging me now. I said,

"Don't be absurd. I'd like to see what you're doing."

Was there within me some vague thought of Nada? Some fear for her that vaguely urged me to get into Hartlow's room? As though her life hung by a silken thread? Premonitions are vague things indeed. I only know that as Hartlow violently shoved me into the corridor, it seemed as though I were urged not even to want to resist him. A new wariness was on me—a tense alertness which gave me courage.

"Your work? . . ." I murmured. "It's interesting—"

"Yes I think—you may be able to help me. Something of you I can use."

The bedroom was undisturbed. He had been shoving me ahead of him, and now in the livingroom he pushed me into a chair.

"You sit there. I will tell you—about my work."

He planted himself before me; then, as though this were to be a friendly chat between us which would give him pleasure, he drew up a chair and sat stiffly in it, with long legs drawn up so that his knees were high. He was panting. From the exertion of shoving me? Rather, it seemed the stress of inner emotion.

"You saw what I have here in my unpacked luggage?" His big hand gestured to the strange litter of the room.

"You seem to be a surgeon," I said. Warily my gaze roved the cabin from this new vantage point. The bottles on the shelf—I could see them better now. In their wan liquids grey-white dead things floated.

And now I saw that they were human organs. A stomach. A heart; God! It was beating—rhythmically pulsing pumping the pale liquid in and out. A brain; it seemed to be quivering, alive. Was it thinking thoughts, there as it floated disembodied in the pallid brine?

A flood of horror surged over me, so

that every instinct warned me to get out of here. Hartlow's gaze momentarily had drifted off. There was a little door here to the quarter deck. It was closed. Was it locked? If I made a leap past him. . . .

I HALF rose from my chair, and instantly he tensed, snapping his head around so that his gaze transfixed me.

"Sit down," he rasped. "Don't you want to hear how you can help me? I am a surgeon—yes. But more than that I have perfected a way to keep human tissue—human organs in their entirety—alive outside the body. You see them there—do you realize what that means I can do? What I—have already done?"

It struck me as a dreadful, grisly thing. Yet in the proper hands, it was a boon to mankind—the salvaging of the human race.

"A man may die," he was saying, "but is all of him beyond salvaging? His heart fails—just a little engine worn out. Then I—give him another heart—another brain if he needs it—or new arms and legs. . . ."

Then he said he had built a new human being from the discarded parts of others which had "died." Already he had accomplished it. A complete new man, created by the scientific skill of this Hartlow.

"I have him here," he went on. "I am transporting him to New York—to exhibit. The thing is—very queer. I thought I would make a man—I made, only a monster. The soul is lacking. So I achieved nothing human . . . just a brute."

Because he was not God—just a scientist. . . . I sat breathlessly staring at him. Did he plan now to show me this monster? . . . Abruptly other questions leaped at me. Why had he gotten out all his apparatus tonight, here in the creaking little cabin of the swaying *Polaris*? Those organs in the bottles—was their movement caused only by the lurching

of the ship, and my own strained fancy so that they looked alive? And was this Hartlow only a crazed scientist—dreaming of these wonders he planned to perform?

Then another thought sprang into my dazed brain. Probably he had done nothing. He was just wildly *planning* the Creation of a human monster. And I recalled his words: "Something of you I can use." The grisly implication of it surged upon me now. . . .

"The brain over there in that bottle," he was saying slowly, "it once belonged to a girl. I was—very fond of her. Now she is gone. There is nothing left of her—except her brain. She loved me. . . ."

I recall that I was sitting tense, gripping the arms of my chair—alert to spring—to fight for my life. Alert to seize an instant when I could leap past him and escape. But now his slow words with a queer quivering eagerness in them brought upon me so weird a flood of new thoughts that I forgot myself. I was not to be his victim of this ghastly necromancy. He had seized me—would kill me doubtless to silence me. But his interest was in Nada! A brain here in a bottle—the living brain of a girl he had once loved. And I remembered that look he had cast upon Nada—upon her beautiful body. . . . That body was to house the brain of his dead lover!

My eyes in that second were roaming the shadowed cabin. Was it fate that led my peering gaze down to the dark room corner? Suddenly my breath stopped. I stiffened, staring with so great a chilling torrent flooding over me that my senses reeled and the room swam before my gaze. A little pile of filmy blue-white fabric lay there on the floor—the dress Nada had been wearing; her stockings; a pink silk undergarment.

For those seconds I was numbed. In the silence there was only the low eager drone of Hartlow's voice, with a blended

background of the ship's sounds—the creaking of the cabin, the distant thrum of the engines racing now as the propeller of the little *Polaris* lifted above the water with her plunges; the slap and swish of the waves; the whine of the wind around the deck housing.

THEN suddenly Hartlow's voice was checked. Here in the room with us a low moan sounded. I swung my eyes—it seemed in those stricken seconds as though my eyes were all of me that would move. A muffled moan issued from that coffin-like box on the floor by the cabin wall. And now the lid of the box was rising. A hand came out; a pink-white arm. Then as the lid went up, there was a head of tousled pale-gold hair—a face, beautiful, contorted with terror, a mouth of parted red lips gulping for air; white shoulders and a hunched white body strained upward.

Nada!

I must have leaped erect, turning toward her, so numbed and blurred by the shock of my horror that in that second I was hardly aware that the huge form of Hartlow was driving toward me. I tried to whirl and strike him with my fist; but he crashed through the blow. I felt his hands seize me. With a strength unhuman he lifted me up. His throat was rattling with a chuckle as he swung and hurled me. Then all the world seemed to crash with blinding, roaring light as my skull struck the bulkhead—then my senses slid off into blackness. . . .

“DO NOT struggle Nada—this will not hurt you. That beautiful white body I want to—keep—unmarred. It is only your brain I do not need. . . .”

I came out of the swirling fog of unconsciousness into the realization that I was stretched on the floor. For a moment I could see nothing; there was only Hartlow's panting voice, with a triumphant

eagerness in it; the sound of his stalking tread as he moved about the cabin; the clink of bottles; the clank of his surgical instruments. . . .

“She loved me Nada. Don't you understand. . . .”

Dimly, as my senses returned, the ghastly scene of the cabin was taking form. The nude, glorious body of Nada lying on the couch. There were ropes around her thighs and shoulders holding her down. . . . Her head was half raised, her eyes wide with terror. Her mouth was open for the scream that was stuck in her throat.

He was bending over her now. “Lie quiet I say.” The caress was suddenly gone from his voice, so that it was a cruel rasp. “If you twist like that the ropes will mar your lovely flesh. I don't want that to happen—I want you unblemished.”

His hands were caressing now. His breath was a sucking gasp of eagerness. “You'll be unconscious, Nada, and then—you will wake up. This—same beautiful body—will be yours—but in it will be her brain. The person you will be will remember our love. Just the two of us—in all the world. Just us two—made for each other.”

Over his hunched wide shoulders I could see her white contorted face, her staring eyes, numbed and blurred with terror. . . . I tried to move my leaden limbs. . . . Then I was up on one elbow, summoning every desperate effort of will. . . . He had put the big bottle—the one with the brain floating in it—on the table. . . .

“Now, Nada—you breathe this. Your brain will go to sleep forever—” He was holding an ether cone toward her. Wavering, I gained my feet; steadied myself. His lustful eagerness absorbed him; in the creaking cabin he did not hear me. I seized the bottle. Then Nada saw me. An involuntary movement she made

must have warned him, for he rose up, half turned—as with all the desperate strength I could summon I sprang—and crashed the vile bottle into his face.

A splintering crash of the thin decanter; the noisome splattering of the brain; the stench of the splashing liquid—that frightful scene will never leave my mind. . . . I dropped to his feet to avoid his clutching arms. From his throat came a bellowing cry of anger and pain. He staggered sidewise past me, lurching across the cabin; his snarling voice was half a bellow of rage, half the scream of a hurt animal. Then I was aware that the liquid had cascaded over his face, into his eyes. He was blind!

The ship pitched sharply and his huge body caromed against the wall. His hands went up, clawing at his eyes. . . . Then he was coming back at me, with outstretched arms fumbling. I leaped aside, seized a huge bar-clasp which was part of the lock of one of his iron-bound caskets. I turned to face him.

HE HEARD me, shrank back and stumbled against the couch, falling across Nada. Her scream rang out; and then with a leap I was upon his back, pounding at his bullet-like skull. His body heaved up under me. He staggered with me across the cabin, blindly crashing the table. The light went out. Upon his shoulders I clung; and with despairing effort brought the bar down on his head. The crunching of his skull mingled with his roar that turned into a grisly rattle in his throat as he wilted under me. . . .

“Nada—Nada dear—” I leaped from the huge hulk beneath me. It was twitching. It rolled over and lay still.

“Nada—” I rushed to her, cast off her ropes, held her cold, shuddering body

against me. “You’re all right now, Nada dear—he’s dead.”

There was a little light in the wrecked room. It came from the corridor, through a narrow grill-work over the cabin door. It illumined the dead thing that had been Hartlow.

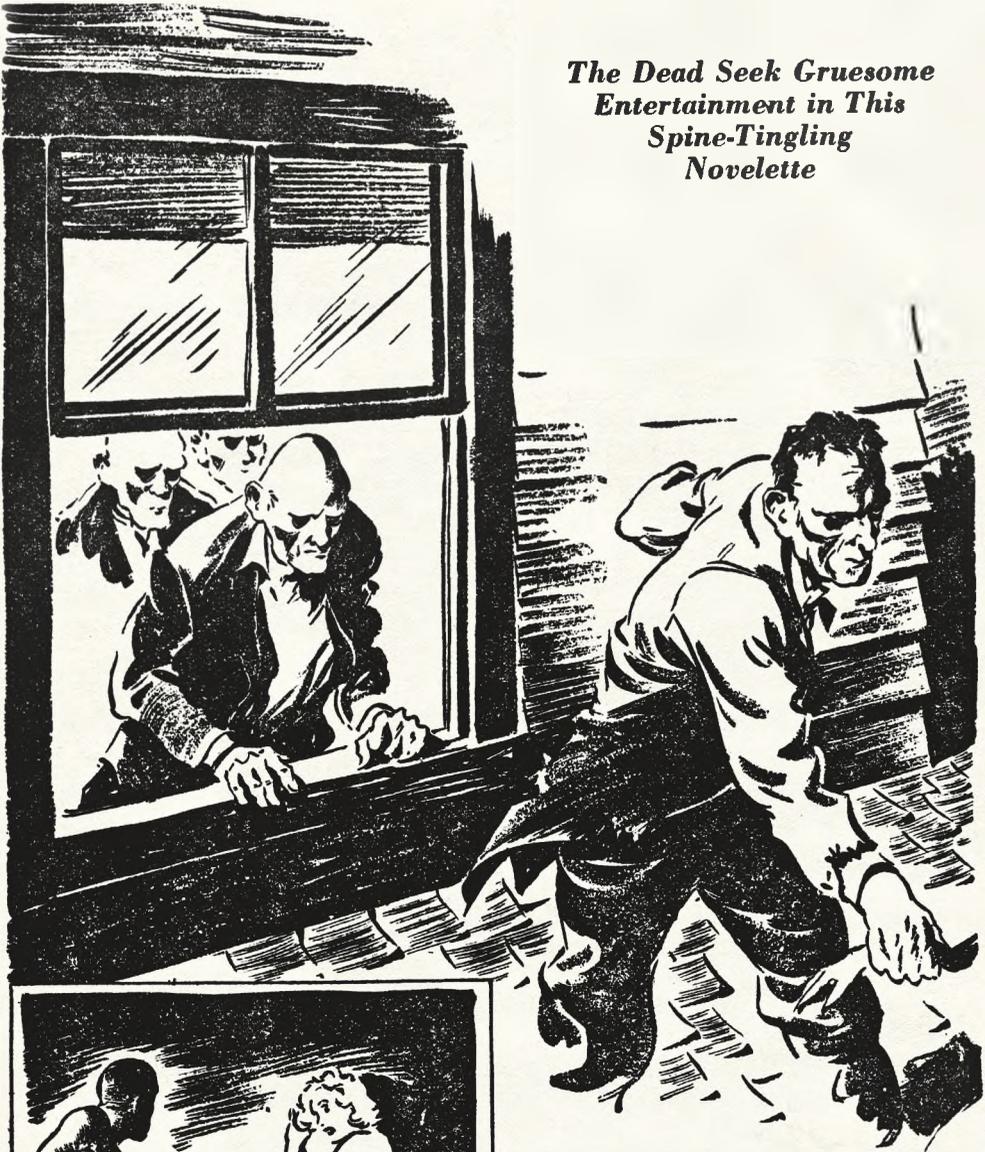
Hartlow? I stared. My clawing struggle had ripped away his shirt; his neck, chest, and shoulders were exposed. . . . Great scars, only newly healed, were on his shoulder. A band of scar with surgeon’s stitches encircled the base of his throat. One of his arms had a wide metal plate re-enforcing it!

This was not Hartlow, but the monster which Hartlow had created back in San Marino! The monster which, as we later learned, had killed its master and fled. That very night the police had found Hartlow’s murdered body. . . . Now I realized why no passenger had come aboard with Hartlow’s luggage. This thing, fashioned like a man, had been in the coffin-like box; had come out, here in the cabin, after the ship had sailed. It had come out with one grim purpose in its distorted, transplanted brain—to search for a lovely female body in which to install the brain of its long-dead lover. . . .

The thing was a pitiful travesty of a human being. It had realized its deficiency. . . . That look of numb anguish as it had stared at Nada’s fresh loveliness—I could understand that now. And the brain in the bottle—once part of a living girl, beloved by the man from whom this monster’s brain had come—would soon have commanded Nada’s body. This thing had said: “Just two of us in all the world, Nada—made for each other. . . .”

As Nada and I stared at the dead man-made thing we clasped each other tightly, thanked God we had each other as *He* had made us—in warm, pulsing life. . . .

*The Dead Seek Gruesome
Entertainment in This
Spine-Tingling
Novelette*



CHAPTER ONE

Delegation from the Tomb

LINDA LORAY tried not to show her disappointment and growing uneasiness as she asked the hotel clerk whether he knew Holt Carst—the man she had come to Torburg to wed.

“Yes,” he replied, eyes narrowing in his young but strangely grey-hued, brooding countenance. “Everybody in Torburg knows Holt Carst.” His glance flickered

Revels For The Lusting Dead

By Arthur Leo Zagat (Author of "Lair of the Snake Girl," etc.)

Linda Loray went to the quiet country town of Torburg to become a bride—but not the Bride of Lazarus, a mad fiend who conducted midnight orgies where naked, maniac girls clawed one another asunder in bestial fury—and the spectators were dead men lusting for the sight of blood!



over Linda's face with a curious intentness, dropped to the brass-framed card, flat on the counter, that bore the words:

ON DUTY: Dan Thilton

"Mr. Carst wired me to come by the

late train," Linda explained, "but he wasn't at the station and there was no message for me." She was poignantly conscious of the dusty hush of the lobby, of its somehow desolate emptiness. "How can I reach him?"

"Hard to say." The girl had a queer impression that Thilton was holding something back deliberately, perhaps maliciously. "There are no more trains till morning. Best thing for you is take a room here and wait for Carst to get in touch with *you*." He shoved the register at her, thrust a pen into her hesitant fingers.

The ancient, musty inn was vaguely repulsive to her, but there was nothing else for her to do but sign: Linda Loray, Boston.

Thilton turned and took a key from a rack whose hooks were completely filled. He came out from behind the counter, moving slowly, not from weariness but as though trammelled by some odd reluctance. His tall frame was a little stooped, a little awkward with the earthbound clumsiness peculiar to men born in the hills.

"This way," he murmured, picking up Linda's bag and motioning across rutted floor tiles toward a staircase at the other end of the dim foyer. Linda reached the worn steps, started to mount them. "Lije," Thilton called, behind her. "Oh, Lije!"

A big door slid open in the lobby wall at right angles to the staircase, and the cloying, sick-sweet odor of funeral flowers was all about the girl. She turned, startled, and looked through the doorway.

The flowers were piled around a makeshift bier in what must be the dining room of the old hotel. They formed a bank of blood-red roses, of lilies wax-white as death itself, and on that bank a dull ebony coffin rested. Two huge candles were burning on either side of it.

There was no lid to the coffin, so that from her slight eminence Linda looked right down into it. She saw a black frock

coat clothing a man's body—a coat unnaturally stiff as are only the garments of the dead.

The dead man's hands were decorously folded on the rigid chest, but even lifeless they were pallid, rapacious claws; their bony fingers half-curved as if still eager to tear some helpless, quivering flesh.

The head was completely bald. The face was lashless, wax-white as the lilies. It resembled the visage of an albino vulture. Beneath the closed, blue eyelids the skin sagged in the pendulous dark pouches of dissipation, and the way the livid lips were thinly puckered branded those moribund features with lascivious cruelty.

"I'm going upstairs, Lije," Thilton said, "to show this lady to her room. Watch things, will you?"

"Sure," a toneless, heavy voice responded. "Sure, Dan."

Linda looked at the man who had opened the door from within. The watcher of the dead was as tall as Thilton, as spare-framed and gangling, but much older. His hair was iron-grey, his cheeks deeply seamed, weather-beaten. And in his hands there was—a shotgun! Its black barrel slanted across his torso and one calloused forefinger rested on the trigger. Watcher of the dead indeed! The man called Lije was a *guard* of the dead. An *armed* guard!

Against what impossible menace was he armed? Against what ghouls who would violate a coffined corpse?

Thilton, in motion again, forced Linda to recommence her climb, lest he collide with her. He unlocked the door of a room at the head of the stairs, shifted the key to the inside, put her bag down and departed without a word.

Despite the questions hammering within Linda's skull, questions she oddly dared not voice. Despite her perturbation over Holt Carst's failure to meet her, the exhaustion of her long journey welled up

drug-like in her, numbed her. She was already half-asleep as she undressed, and when she crept into the creaking bed, it was as though she crept into immediate, tangible oblivion. . . .

THOUGH she had slept long enough to warm the harsh cotton sheets, Linda Loray's slim body seemed molded within ice when she awoke—as frigid and as utterly incapable of motion! Fear, naked and terrible, was a presence in the room, a livid crawl in her veins.

The sound that had startled her to the quick came again—a thin cry shrilling out of the night. This time the incredible words were clear and terrifying.

“They’re coming! *The dead are coming!*”

Running footfalls thudded toward the hotel. “The dead—they’re alive again!” The shout was right under Linda’s window, and the pound of frightened feet was first dull on the hard-dirt path from Torburg’s single street, then hollow on the inn’s porch planks. “They’re com—” A door slammed, cutting off the cry.

“Lije!” a muffled voice shouted from below. Now the sounds of trampling feet were within the house, the sounds of voices husky with apprehension but too low for Linda to distinguish the words. . .

She was dreaming, she tried to tell herself, and then her fear-frozen brain was demanding, can one dream noises alone, seeing nothing, feeling nothing except the pressure of one’s lids against aching eyeballs, the pressure of lids one fights unavailingly to open?

It *must* be a dream. In no waking moment did one hear a voice crying that the dead were alive. Only in a nightmare did one’s muscles refuse the bidding of a brain squeezed between the jaws of terror’s dreadful vise. Only in a nightmare were one’s nostrils so stuffed with the odor of funeral flowers that one could hardly breathe.

Of course! The smell of the flowers from that improvised morgue below, seeping up through the mouldering walls and warped floors of the crumbling structure, had inspired a dream of horror. If she could only get her eyes open, if she could only come fully awake. . . .

It was no dream! Linda was staring at the cold, hueless glow of moonlight that crept into the musty chamber. She was awake now, without possibility of question, and she still heard those ominous sounds.

Hushed voices quivered with some dreadful urgency. Something scraped ponderously, as though a heavy piece of furniture was being moved across the lobby floor to barricade the entrance.

On the faded quilt that weighed Linda down, the lunar luminance lay, shaped in a sharp-edged rectangle by the frame of the window through which it seeped. The oblong was deeply notched by a triangular black shadow. The girl focused her attention on that strange silhouette, trying by pondering the puzzle its odd shape presented to take her mind from the more fearful puzzle of the weird warning she had overheard, of the threat against which the preparations below were being made.

The sky had been dark when she had toiled up the deserted street from the railroad station. The moon must be now just rising. It was the shadow of a building, then, that lay on the coverlet. Linda recalled seeing a church, across the wide Main Street from the inn. Inevitable landmark of a New England village, its steeple had pointed a slender finger to the heavens. The moon was behind it now and this sombre triangle was the shadow of the steeple’s tip.

There had been an iron-fenced graveyard beside the church. . . .

THUD! That dull sound was outside the inn. It was the thump of stone on soft earth. *Thud!* Ridiculous to think

—that they were made by tombstones falling, one by one, on the soft loam of the graves they marked, that the sounds came from the graveyard. . . .

Rusty hinges screamed protest against being disturbed! There had been an iron gate in that iron fence. It was opening! Who, *what*, was opening it?

Casting the quilt and sheets off her body, Linda sat there for a moment in a daze. Then suddenly her bare feet struck the floor, and she came erect.

The sheer silk of her nightgown was no armor against the sharp chill of the upland night. Gooseflesh prickled her nubile breasts. Muscles tautened across her flat abdomen, shrinking from the frigid sting. The cold struck through to the very marrow of her bones, but the girl did not hesitate. The imperative need to know what was going on was impelling her to the open window through which the moonlight—and the scrape of dragging feet on flagstones—came.

She reached it, peered through it. The tiny burial place was plain in a pale weird light that lay on it like a transparent shroud.

Linda saw the black oblong of an open grave. It was for the dead man, of course, who was laid out in the dining room below. But there was another, and another; and on the grass behind them their headstones lay, askew as if just now they'd toppled to the ground.

The earth from those empty graves was not neatly piled but had erupted from the black holes, as though it had been thrust up from beneath.

The shadow of the church was black along the front of the graveyard, along the tall fence that a century ago had been wrought by patient sledges to wall the graveyard in, so that Linda's staring gaze could not make out what it was that moved there. But *something* moved there, many things, in fact, and from within the shadow came the faint scrapings that had

seemed to her the sound of bony feet on the flagstones that paved the churchyard paths. . . .

Whatever was there moved toward the curb, moved across the curb and out into the street. The darkness not so intense there, Linda made out the form of a man; other forms followed him. The leader came nearer still, came into a patch of pale moonlight.

A scream formed in Linda Loray's throat, was held there by the swelling of her larynx that cut off all her breath but a wheezing gasp.

Mouldering garments fluttered about that scrawny shape, and through the rents in them grey-whiteness flashed that could be only skeleton ribs. Its head was grotesquely askew on twisted shoulders, and its face. . . .

It had no face!

It had only a serrated, grinning gap where its mouth ought to be, two great stygian pits for eyes. That macaber countenance was earth-smearred, and something flapped against a grey-white cheek-hollow, like an ear that had rotted loose.

An ear that flapped with the grisly, limping gait of the thing as it crept along.

The *thing* passed into shadow again. But the shape that followed it was no less gruesome, nor was the one that followed next. . . .

They went across that patch of revealing luminance, and darkness hid them from Linda once more. But the shadow could not shut from her ears the scrape, scrape which told her that the spectral procession paraded straight up the path to the inn, that it mounted the steps to the hotel porch.

It could not keep her from hearing the rat-a-tat of bony knuckles on the door below her window, and the sepulchral voice that boomed a summons.

"Open!" it called. "Open for the *League of Lazarus*."

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Attack

LINDA LORAY'S trembling fingers bit into the window sill. It wasn't—it *couldn't* be true. She had not seen living corpses marching from their violated graves. They were not clustered beneath her, hidden from her by the porch roof, demanding admittance to the very house that sheltered her.

Such things could not happen. Yet—

"Open!" the dead leader of the dead boomed once more. "We have come for our brother and his bride."

His bride! The bride of the dead? There had been only one coffin down there. There had been no keys missing from the rack in the lobby—no other room was occupied. . . .

It could not be *she* whom they meant. How could it? In the morning she would be a bride, but not of a dead man. Of Holt Carst, who was vibrantly, heart-stirringly alive.

"Not this time," a voice shouted. "We ain't going to let you in." It wasn't Dan Thilton's voice. "This Lazarus business is going to stop right now." It was the voice of Lije, the man who had watched a corpse with a shotgun in his hands. "Henry Fulton's going to be buried proper, and he's going to stay buried."

Where was Holt? Why had he not met her at the station? What business could he have so important as to keep him from her? Saying goodbye he had murmured, "It's only for a few weeks, sweetheart, but it's going to seem like years. I dread the thought of our being separated."

Linda had smiled through her tears. "You don't really mean that, Holt. You've only known me for a month, surely you couldn't have gotten as used to having me around as all that."

"I've known you forever, Linda—in my dreams." She felt that way about him,

too. She seemed always to have known his lithe, straight figure, his dark eyes that could be so gay, that could glow with such tenderness. "Known, and loved you forever." From the first time she had met him, his every little gesture had been utterly familiar, as when he tossed his head to fling back his shock of ebon hair from his high, white brow. "I'll send for you as soon as I can."

Then the trainman had called, "All aboard! All ab-o-oard!" And Holt's arms had crushed her to him, his lips hot on hers.

"Take me with you," Linda had gasped against his lips. "Now." But he had thrust her from him and sprinted through the train gate. . . .

The great city had been lonelier than ever, after that, for the orphaned girl. She had had no friends, few acquaintances, before Holt Carst had come into her life. She had been content with her job and her books. But there had been no contentment in the time of waiting after he had returned to Torburg. It had been almost agony, relieved only by the thought that it would soon be over. . . .

Now, there was a tentative rattle of the door latch below, and then an ominous moment of silence.

It was ended by a piercing whistle. Then another whistle answered it.

Central in the graveyard, a moss-stained family tomb glimmered palely in the moonlight. Peering to make out whence that second whistle had come, Linda saw the great bronze door of that tomb swing open; saw one, two, a half-dozen more of the spectral figures issue from it. They clustered about a shaft standing just within the graveyard gate, a "broken pillar" of archaic funebral design.

The grisly shadows gathered about that symbol of grief. They swayed, and the pillar swayed with it. It toppled, fell!

The shadows lifted the monument from where it had fallen, shuffled off with it.

They shuffled out through the gate. They were carrying the cylindrical gravestone horizontally between them and the way they carried it made their purpose plain.

THE stone that had been intended to stand forever as a memorial to someone's loved one—was to be a battering ram!

She must warn those below! Linda shoved herself away from the window, got moving across the room. The dimness was like some invisible, viscous flood, clinging to her limbs, clogging her progress. It required infinite effort to get her to the door, but she reached it at last, fumbled at the key till it clicked over. She reached the outer hall, leaned over the rail at the stairhead.

"Watch out," she called, managing only a husky whisper. "They're bringing something to break the door in."

"Let them," Lije grunted. His head didn't turn. He was standing in the center of the lobby, facing the place where Linda knew the entrance door was, though she could not see it. Another man was beside him, shorter, stockier. Both had guns to their shoulders, the barrels pointing at the door. They were straddle-legged, indomitable, but Linda saw that their hair and the backs of their heads were wet with perspiration.

It was deathly cold in that hotel lobby. The sweat that dampened the skin of those two men was the sweat of fear. . . .

The clerk, Thilton, was nowhere in sight. A stir came into the lobby from beyond the unseen entrance, the thump of burdened feet on the porch planks.

"Don't try any tricks," Lije shouted, "or we'll shoot."

A laugh answered him, hollow and horrible. The crash of stone against wood obliterated it.

"Jehosophat!" the other man whimpered. "They're doin' it. They're breakin' in."

"Can't stop them," Lije grunted. "But we can give them a taste of lead when they get the door knocked down. Hold your fire till you can see them, Jed."

The battering ram thundered again. Wood splintered. Bolts, riven from their ancient fastenings, shrieked shrilly.

"Lead!" Jed exclaimed. "What good's lead against 'em? You can't kill the dead!" His voice pitched upward to a squeal. "You can't kill. . . ."

Crash!

"That's what I'm going to find out. No use running now, there ain't no place to run to."

Linda wanted to get back into her room, to lock her door and cower behind it. But she couldn't. She couldn't move—she could only lean over the rail and stair. . . .

Crash!

The whole structure shook with that thunderous impact, but apparently the door still held. The old inn was built like a fortress. It had been built as a fortress, decades ago. It must date back to the War of 1812, perhaps to the Revolution.

Light wavered on the steps. Linda had a sensation of eyes upon her, of malign eyes watching her. She looked around. . . . The dining room door was open. She could see through it. She could see the flower-banked coffin, the body—

The dead man's lids were *open!* Some shortening of their muscles, drying, must have pulled them open. A dark fire glittered in those eyes that should have been glazed and sightless!

CRASH!

A SCREAM tore out through Linda's throat, but whatever its volume it was drowned by the final appalling detonation as the battered door gave way; by the deafening explosion of the two shotguns in the confined space.

Orange-red flares streaked from the gun muzzles. Frantic fingers pumped re-loading bolts. A skull-countenanced figure

leaped toward the defenders, leaping downward as though from piled shards of the shattered portal. Lije's gun poured its charge pointblank into the attacker.

As though that lethal burst had been the harmless spurting of a child's cap pistol the apparition came on, laughed mockingly.

Others leaped behind it, a ghastly pack. Jed's shotgun blasted again. . . . Then Jed's shriek was a scarlet thread of agonized sound. The two defenders went down under that macaber rush. A pile of green-scummed shrouds, of tossing skeleton limbs, hid the men from Linda. But a carmine stream dribbled out from under the seething mass, across the rutted tiles.

A single figure, that of the grim leader, extricated itself from that heaving, awful mound. Linda's eyes followed him, her limbs once more rigid in the grip of a nightmare paralysis. The animate skeleton came inexorably toward the stairs. He was coming for her, coming to take her. . .

No! At the last moment he veered, went into the room where the dead man lay. He was sitting up! Henry Fulton, dead, mourned for dead, was sitting up in his coffin!

"Welcome, brother," the spectral captain of the spectral troop intoned, "welcome to our company of the dead."

Fulton, the body of Fulton, lifted his dead arms. But it was not to the living corpse that his hands extended. It was not to the apparition in the doorway that his face was turned. It was the almost nude form of the staring girl to whom the orbs of black fire were lifted. It was Linda towards whom those pallid hands thrust, their grisly fingers curved like rapacious claws.

"All in good time," the other answered that look and that gesture. "You shall have your bride to warm your earthen bed for you—as have all your brothers of the League of Lazarus. But first. . ."

Icy fingers clutched Linda's arm! She

wheeled, flailing out a small fist in reflex of terror. Lent strength, virulence, by her terror, that fist spattered against flesh, broke her captor's grip. She glimpsed a man staggering back against the corridor wall behind her—Thilton! She leaped for the open door of her room, slammed it closed—locked it in the same motion. Leaned against it gasping, alternating waves of frigid cold and torrid heat chasing each other through her body, a long shudder shaking it.

CHAPTER THREE

Saved—For What?

DEEP in Linda Loray's throat there was a whimper of animal fear. She knew now why Thilton had induced her to stay here the night, why he had not been down there in the lobby with its defenders, who were now shredded flesh, dismembered bones. . . .

He was one of them, an accomplice of the incredible creatures who called themselves the League of Lazarus. He had snared their bride for them, their bride for the dead.

"Miss Loray." His whisper came through the thin panel. "Let me in. I can get you away. I can save you."

The corners of Linda's lips twitched, distorting her mouth to a humorless smile.

"For God's sake, Miss Loray! Let me in quick, before they see me."

"No." Linda was surprised to find her voice steady, was surprised that she had a voice at all. "You can't fool me."

"I'm not trying to fool you. I'm trying to help you. I'm your friend."

"Then prove it. Find Holt Carst. Get him for me—"

"Good Lord! Carst's—"

The whisper cut off, was replaced by the padding of stealthy feet on the worn hall carpeting. Then there was other feet, coming up the stairs. They stumbled,

those feet, uncertainly, as if they were numbed by sleep—or by death.

They thumped on the landing outside. The doorknob turned against Linda's back and the door pressed against the bolt she had shot.

"It's locked," the voice of the corpse's leader said. Something answered him.

It wasn't a voice. It was a thick, tongueless mumble that had the inflection of words, though it was utterly unintelligible. It was fuzzed by the throaty vibration that is called the death rattle, but it was not made by a man dying. It was made by a man coming alive after being dead.

"Open!" the first voice demanded. "Open for your groom."

Linda cowered away from the door, went wheeling across the room, blind panic driving her as far away from those voices of the dead as she could get. Fleshless knuckles gattered against the flimsy portal, and the panel shook.

The wall stopped Linda, and she cowered against it, her dilated pupils on the thin barrier that was all that was between her and—nameless doom. There was the sound of splitting wood. The door must give. . . .

The girl felt every blow on that door as though it was delivered on her own cringing flesh. There was no hope for her—no escape.

Escape? Hysterical laughter twisted her larynx. She was at the window, the open window. . . . She heaved herself up to the sill, squirmed through to the slanting porch roof outside. Abruptly she could think again. . . .

She reached in, pulled the window shade down, then the window itself. That would gain her precious moments, moments that would mean the difference between safety and disaster. They would look for her within the room first, beneath the bed, in the closet. Meantime she could run along the porch roof, let herself down at the end of the house, where she

wouldn't be seen by those who were still below.

She heard the door crash in, the sound distinct through the glass pane. She twisted to start the flight she had planned—and froze!

A footfall on the path below had pulled her eyes downward. She saw Holt. Her lover. He was running up the path, his stride, the jaunty pose of his head, unmistakable. He was running straight toward that smashed entrance, straight into the clutches of the terrible *things* who were making saturnalia below!

Behind Linda the shade rattled as someone brushed against it. She still had a chance, but if she called to Holt, to warn him, she would betray herself.

"Holt!" she cried. "Don't go in there, Holt. Stop. *Stop!*"

He halted. Shade fabric ripped and the sash thumped up, behind Linda. She heard the rattling mumble of the dead-alive. Beneath her Holt was looking about him, startled, uncertain whence her cry had come.

"Run, Holt!" the girl screamed, leaning far over the edge. "Run!"

Something touched her back, snatching at it, something clammy-cold. She flinched from it, lost her balance, went hurtling over the porch roof, went hurtling down to the darkness below. . . .

Sight flashed to Linda in the whirling eye-blink of time that she fell—a vision of Holt's gaping, startled countenance; of the animate corpses pouring down from the porch and swarming over him. Agony burned into her that her sacrifice had been futile. Then she crashed into the branches of a bush that whipped her face, lashed her almost nude body. Breath, all but the faintest trace of consciousness itself, was jarred from her as her body pounded those branches to the ground. She was catapulted sidewise, hurled into dank, earthy darkness that enveloped her brain.

HER wounds netting her with a garment of pain, Linda Loray weltered slowly back to realization of the miracle that she was still alive.

Stygian darkness weighed heavily upon her, darkness so complete that she could be sure her eyes were open only by the feeling of lids stretched wide to stare. Clotted silence brooded about her. Then she began to make out small sounds.

There was a *pit, pit, pit*, regular as a clock tick, not far away. *Pit, pit, pit*. It might be water dripping, drop by drop, from a tiny pipe leak.

There was, every now and then, a rustling crackle. Linda had some time, somewhere, heard a sound like that before. It vaguely disturbed her that she could not identify it. . . . Then it came again, a little louder, and she remembered. It was the sound the timbers of an old house make, drying out, settling, never quiet still, never silent.

There was another sound, faint but continuous, a sougling overtone to the others. It seemed to come from over her head where, she realized, the blackness was not quite so absolute. A soft, chill breeze seemed to brush down on her from above, bringing that vague whisper with it.

A breeze. The sound of a breeze. The sound of a breeze flowing through damp grass, yet above her. . . . Then she knew.

She was in the cellar of the old inn! She had not fallen directly upon that bush, but upon the lateral branches of it, on the side towards the house. The strong branches had acted like springs, had thrown her light form under the porch, into the hotel's basement. So swiftly had it happened, with no one's eyes upon her, that it must have seemed as though she had vanished magically, leaving no trace.

Her heart pounded against her aching ribs. She was saved. A miracle had saved her!

And then, inwardly, she groaned. She was saved, but in her stead the ghastly

things that had risen from the grave, the spectral beings who called themselves the League of Lazarus, had seized Holt Carst, her lover. What had they done to him? Had they served him as they had served Lije and Jed? Was he lying out there on the lawn, torn? . . .

The thought she dared not word even in her own mind lifted Linda to her feet. She twisted to the wall beside her, groped for the place whence came the wind. She found it—a narrow opening between short stone pillars that supported the foundation beams of the hotel. By pulling herself up to the very tips of her toes she could bring her eyes level with it.

She peered out, fearful of what she might see, yet knowing that she must look for it. At first, the dim glow that met her gaze blinded her, so complete had been the darkness here. But after a moment, she saw that she was looking out between the under-planking of the porch and the debris-strewn ground beneath it. Beyond, where spread the luminance of a moon now high in the heavens, she discerned the base of the bush that had saved her, the shaggy lawn, even the path where Holt Carst had been when she had spied him.

The grass was trampled, the path rough with footmarks. But no blood stained them, no fragments of a body strewed them.

There was no sign of Holt Carst there, no sign that he had been killed. What then? They could not have let him go. They must have taken him off with them, to the inferno whence they came. They must have carried him off to Satan alone knew what hellish fate!

Linda's figure tightened on the jagged edge to which she clung. Holt! a voice within her groaned. What have they done to you?

And then terror struck at her once more. There was a rasp behind her, a stealthy scrape of wood on wood. . . .

SHE swung about, trembling hand to quivering breast, dry lips twisting. There was light in the cellar now; a vertical sheet of yellow light slicing down from a yellow slit in the black roof to be cut off in a narrow, zig-zag line by ladder-like stairs at the other end of the basement.

The slit in the roof widened, slowly. Its rim was scalloped by a set of knuckles. A shadow blotched the opening, a man's shadow that grew upon the stairs, grotesquely deformed, grimly ominous. The trapdoor came fully open, and Linda saw Dan Thilton crouched over it, peering down.

She had not been thrown into this basement quite unobserved. He had seen her, and now he was coming for her!

Furtively, as though he believed her unconscious of his advent and feared to alarm her before he could get her in his clutches, he lowered first one, then another cautious foot to the top of the ladder. He came down, slow and silent, the inexorable messenger of the dead.

Linda crouched, darted along the wall, her unshod feet noiseless on the earthen floor; fiercely glad that her almost naked body was unhampered by garments that might rustle.

Thilton reached the base of the ladder, started straight across for the spot where Linda had lain. No doubt, now, that it was she for whom he searched—that he knew exactly where she should be.

The girl's outstretched fingers touched stone, warned her that she had reached the basement's corner. She twisted, crouched motionless, her eyes on the prowler, a daring plan budding behind her aching brow.

When Thilton got to the outer wall she would dart straight across the cellar to the ladder. She could be up and out, the trapdoor closed, before he was aware of her. There must be some way to fasten it down, some way to imprison him, long

enough at least for her to escape from the inn, for her to rouse the village to Holt's rescue.

She waited. Out of the path of light from above, Thilton was only a moving bulk, hardly discernible, blacker against blackness. He reached the foundation wall, grunted beneath his breath. Now was her chance. *Now!*

She launched into a run, swift and silent as a bat's flight. She was yards from the corner, she was halfway to the ladder. She was. . . .

Her toe stubbed against something, and she went down. Rocks bruised her. Rocks rattled down about her. Not rocks but coal. She had run into a pile of coal in the blackness and it avalanched down upon her in thunderous betrayal.

CHAPTER FOUR

Prisoner of Doom

LINDA LORAY heard the sharp intake of Thilton's breath. She heard his feet scrape as he whirled, heard him cry out, sharply, as he plunged toward her.

"Miss Loray!" Even then there was something stealthy in the sound of his footfalls, something furtive. "Thank God you're alive! I thought. . . ."

He reached her, bent to her, the round shape of his head silhouetted against the trapdoor's light. Linda's hand flailed for it, holding a chunk of coal she had grasped as she fell. The impromptu missile landed square on the man's temple, the thud it made sending a sick shudder through the girl despite her desperation.

He collapsed heavily upon her, quivered, and was still. Hysteria wrenched at Linda's larynx. She throttled the scream, fought from under the man's dead weight. Bits of the coal showered from her as she gained her feet, and she lunged for the ladder.

She slipped as she reached it, barked her

shin against the sharp edge of the lowermost rung. Excruciating pain shot up her leg. She clutched with frantic hands at the splintery wood, pulled herself erect. She was up the ladder and out on the lobby floor; she was tugging at the heavy trap door.

Its weight came up, swung over, tore itself from her bleeding fingers with a ponderous crash. The hole in the floor was closed, but there was no bolt, no lock, nothing to hold it shut. Linda looked frantically about her, for the moment oblivious of the shambles that made of the tiled floor a slaughter-house horror. A deep-seated club chair was only a few feet away, its stalwart frame promising weight enough for her purpose. She leaped to it, grasped its arms and tugged at it.

It moved easily, sliding too easily on the carmine fluid which lay in pools along the floor, but something caught a leg of the chair before it was wholly on the trap-door and Linda darted around behind it to push it the rest of the way.

She halted—and dropped to her knees beside a bound, recumbent form the chair had hidden from her.

"Holt," she gasped. "Oh, Holt!"

It was her lover, his ankles, his wrists lashed, a gag forced between his jaws! It was Holt, his clothes half torn from him, a livid bruise on his cheek, but alive. Alive and not a prisoner of the *revenants*.

Linda's flying fingers untied the knot that held the gag in his mouth, pulled the rag from it. Then they flew to the lashings on his wrists.

"What happened?" she demanded. "What happened to you, my dear?"

"Got away—from—those *things*," he mumbled. "Came back here . . . look for you. Thilton jumped me from the stairs . . . conked me. . . . But you, Linda, why did you stay here? Why. . . ?"

"He told me to." Holt's hands were free and he was helping Linda loosen the lashings that bound his legs. "Thilton.

He said you were busy, couldn't be reached till morning."

"The dog!" Their fingers touched and the old electric tingle ran through the girl. "I *was* busy—trying to get the villagers together to fight that damned League of Lazarus. Trying to convince the townsmen that there's nothing supernatural about the League. Your train had already left when Fulton died, and there was no way of stopping you. But I left word with Thilton to send Lije up to my house with you when you came. You would have been safe there. Dan's in cahoots with them. I always suspected him."

HE was free now. They were both on their feet, and Linda was in her lover's arms. "You poor dear," he murmured. "You must have gone through hell. But everything's all right now. I'll take you home and then I'm going after them." He was shrugging out of his coat, was putting it around her. "I'll lick them alone if there's no other way."

"What are they?" Linda cried, snuggling into the warmth of her sweetheart's fur-lined coat, doubly comforting because it was his, because it was redolent with the spicy tang of his tobacco, of his masculinity. "*What are they?*"

Carst's eyes went bleak, his lips tight. "I don't know. Nobody knows. They first showed up when old Winthrop died, while I was in Boston. His body vanished and a girl vanished, too. That's happened three times since, and they've got all Torburg terrorized, so nobody sticks his nose out of doors when any man lies unburied, anywhere in town. This time I made up my mind to stop the damn business. I sent Lije Carberry here to guard Hen Fulton's body, and Jed Storm to watch the graveyard while I tried to get the town aroused. But it wasn't any use."

"No. It was no use." Linda's eyes widened, as Holt's words reminded her of what had happened here and the sight of

that which was strewn through the lobby struck sickness through her as it had not when she was so frantic. "Take me out of here, Holt. Take me away from here."

"Yes dear," said Holt; he looked down at her tattered nightgown, added, "As soon as you get some clothes on. Where are they?"

"Upstairs. But I'm not going up there again." She shuddered. "I'm going just as I am. Come on."

"You can't run naked through the streets. Your feet will be all cut up. You'll freeze to death. . . . Wait—I'll run up and get something for you to put on."

"No! Holt—" But he was already across the lobby, was already halfway up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Horrible as was the thought of going up to that room again, the thought of remaining alone here was still worse. Linda ran after him, across the slippery tiles. She reached the staircase, started up.

Carst yelled something, up there. His voice cut off. A black shadow whirled into being at the head of the stairs. It swooped down on Linda, enveloped her with its darkness. It swirled about her, was drawn tight, pinning her arms to her sides, pinning her legs together. Sightless, helpless in those swathing folds, Linda suddenly felt something jammed against her face, smelled a pungent, heady sweetness.

Hands gripped her, lifted her. She tried not to breathe, but her laboring chest broke the seal she put on her windpipe. The fumes gusted into her lungs, swirled up into her skull. She was slipping, slipping down into vertiginous dark.

Just as her senses left her she heard the tongueless mumble of the revived corpse to whom she had been promised as a bride. But her last thought was of her lover.

Had they killed Holt, up there? Or. . .

A *THING* mewled, close by. And although Linda Loray could not see what it was, because she had not yet sum-

moned up courage to open her eyes, she knew by the sound it made that it was blind and mindless and without hope that death would ever come to release it from its agony. . . .

Linda was sick with nausea. The stone upon which she lay on her side was damp and cold against her lacerated skin, and the odor of death was in her nostrils, the stench of corruption.

There were other living things about her. Vague noises told her so; a sighing breath, sluggish movement, the rub of two surfaces one upon the other. There was a hollow, reverberant quality to the sounds that told her she was in a more than ordinarily large space, and that the exit to it was closed. But it was the mewling that bothered, the half-human, half-animal cry that seemed a prophecy of what she was to become.

Something touched her thigh, something cold and slimy. It started to crawl across her quivering skin. Linda snatched at it, flung the squirming, noisome thing away from her, trembling with revulsion. And suddenly she summoned up enough courage to open her eyes.

A green and spectral light pulsed against those throbbing, pupil-dilated eyes. It came from flames that danced out of a trephined skull supported on a tripod of human thigh bones at one end of the space about which she stared. The skull's eye-sockets were filled with the green flame. It glared through the jagged triangle of its nose-pit, gleamed viridescent from its lipless, grinning mouth.

The ghastly luminance played across a wide floor of damp-blackened stone. It stroked the pillars of massive arches that curved overhead to form an interlaced roof, from which dripped serrated stalactites like tears frozen to stony icicles. It probed the shadows between the ranged pillars, thrust flickering fingers through a wide-meshed lattice-work of rusted strap iron and showed Linda what it was that

moved—what it was that mewled. . . .

They were humans who were caged there! Naked women! Young girls, or rather girls who once had been young, and now were ageless from suffering.

Linda could see three of them. The one who mewled lay on her side, her knees drawn up and pressed into her belly, her head and shoulders curled over so that her blue-veined breasts lay against those knees. Even in that emerald light the wealth of hair that cascaded over the huddled form gleamed with warm red tints. Once the girl must have been very beautiful. Once—before whatever frightful experience she had passed through had ravaged her, had left her a face a mouthing mask of horror and her body a bundle of agonized flesh. . . .

The others, on either side of the girl on the floor, were erect and clinging to their cage-bars with fingers that writhed worm-like against the rust-red straps. Their heads were pressed against the bars, the curls of one golden as the sun, the luxuriant crown of the other raven black.

The faces of these two, turned as if they were trying to see one another, were contorted with a strange animal ferocity, with a mindless hate. Their red lips pulled away from their white teeth in silent snarls, their long-lashed eyes were orbs of lurid wrath. But, and this was most horrible of all, they made no sound and somehow Linda knew that they could make no sound, that somehow speech was lost to them forever.

Abruptly the ghastly illumination flared into brightness! Linda twisted to the source of the new light, saw that another skull, on its thigh-bone tripod, had blazed into being at the other end of the crypt.

This macaber flambeau was at the focal point of a tiered amphitheatre rising behind it. The seats on that stepped and curving rise were gravestones, so ancient that the stone flaked from them, that their inscriptions were indecipherable beneath a

coating of green mould. Between them and the flaming skull three coffins stood erect, the central one taller and more ornate, and lidless, though the others were closed.

In the moment Linda saw all this an unseen bell filled the chamber with a melancholy tolling. Like a death-knell. . . .

A SCREAM rang out. The terror-filled sound pulled Linda's eyes back to the cages across from her. The red-haired girl had sprung to her feet! She clawed at the barrier that penned her in, and the rattling of the decrepit iron mingled with her screams, with the fading notes of the bell that had tolled.

The cacaphony aroused Linda to action at last. She thrust frantic hands against the floor beneath her, to shove herself to her feet. She lifted herself. Something tightened across her her hips, her ankles.

Linda clawed at the wide canvas straps. They had been loose enough not to impress her until this moment, but they held her inescapably. She writhed around, discovered she was free to sit up, to bend and tear at the strange lashings.

"Don't be in such a hurry, dearie," a laugh cackled in her ear. "You must first be properly dressed for your wedding."

The girl could not see whence the hag had come, but she was bending over her, thrusting a sharp chin into Linda's face; her eyes gleaming like black beads out of rheumy sockets, her great nose hooked and vulpine, her skin yellow, wrinkled parchment, her teeth yellow fangs in a drooling mouth.

Linda's own scream added itself to the turmoil. She struck at the witch. . . .

Fleshless fingers caught her wrist. They tightened, and with amazing strength they held Linda stiff, motionless. The tiny, evil eyes fastened on hers. The red rims expanded, the black orbs within them were great dark pools into which Linda slid.

The girl went limp. "What must I do?"

she asked, her voice lacking expression.

"Obey Nitina," the hag cackled triumphantly. "Obey Nitina, and Nitina will give you a groom such as many a girl might envy. But first, here is your wedding dress."

She released Linda, bent and lifted from the ground a bundle of white fabric. "See, is it not pretty?" she asked, shaking it out.

It hung from her taloned hands, long and white and shapeless. It was such a gown as no bride had ever before been proffered. It was such a garment as long ago was used to clothe the dead. It was a shroud!

CHAPTER FIVE

Hell's Bridal Sport

LINDA LORAY plucked at the hooks that fastened the canvas straps to rings in the floor. Her fingers were clumsy, her eyes slitted and dreamy, her face utterly expressionless.

She got herself free, came slowly to her feet, stood there docilely. Nitina tore from her the few remaining shreds of her night gown, and slipped the shroud over her head.

Even when the harsh skin of Nitina's fingers rasped her bruised breast and sent fierce pain darting through her, Linda did not move. Even when the hag's long nails tore a new wound among the many on her lacerated abdomen she did not wince.

But when Nitina stepped back to admire her handiwork, and indicated with a gesture that she might turn, the muscles in Linda's thighs tensed for the quick leap she planned, the flight from the hag toward a door she remembered having glimpsed to one side of the banked grave-stones. Her quick yielding to the witch's hypnosis had been altogether simulated, had enabled her to avoid a real surrender.

Linda wheeled—but she did not make

that intended leap toward escape possible.

She had delayed too long, and the way of possible escape she had spotted was now impossible. The curved rows of seats were now thronged by the dead-alive who had earlier raided the inn. They sat on the monuments that should have weighed them down in the long sleep, the sleep from which by some inconceivable necromancy they had been evoked, and every eyeless socket of that grinning, serried host was turned upon her.

There was no hope now, utterly no hope, of getting past them. They would surely intercept her.

Even if by some miracle she should avoid their clutching, skeleton fingers, whose awful power she had witnessed when Jed and Lije had gone down beneath their ravening rush, the door was blocked to her.

If *they* had shaken her with revulsion, the being that strode in through that darksome entrance was horrible beyond conception.

Words brushed Linda's tortured mind, words from a Book even the mere memory of which, was sacrilege in this cloistered theatre of hell:

"And when He thus had spoken, He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin."

He who came through that doorway—which Linda saw now was shaped like the door of a tomb—and glided rather than walked, was "bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound bound about with a napkin." The napkin covered his face, so that Linda could not see it, and if in that moment she could be glad of anything, she was glad that this was so.

For as he reached the center coffin of the three that stood behind the green-flaming skull and took his place within it,

the deep-toned bell tolled once more and the rustling, expressionless voices of the dead ranked above it dully chanted his name.

"Lazarus! Hail Lazarus!"

Lazarus bowed that white-bound, faceless head, and they were silent. His white-swathed arm gestured to his right.

The lid that covered the coffin to which he motioned slid down, seemingly into the very rock beneath it. In that place of fluttering, earth-rotted rags, of white grave clothes, no contrast could have been more ghastly than the meticulously frock-coated figure revealed within that up-ended casket; no long-dead skull more horrible than the staring, waxy, sex-ridden face of Henry Fulton.

Lazarus gestured to the left.

The lid of the coffin on that side slid down. Linda's eyes widened, watching it wondering what weird figure it would reveal.

There was none, none at all. The coffin was empty.

"The bride!" Lazarus' voice boomed out and echoed into the hollow resonance of the crypt. "Let the bride come forth!"

THE unseen bell tolled again. But now it was not a single peal that filled the great vault. The muted strokes of the bell came again and again, and its tone changed, so that it formed a welling threnody. Higher in pitch, the sound of another, smaller bell joined it, merged with it.

The measured melody of the mellow bell was the melody of the Wedding March from Lohengrin. Beneath it, deep and hollow, shaking Linda to the very core of her being, the greater gong beat out the slow, measured notes of Chopin's Funeral March.

"Go, dearie," Nitina whispered behind her. "Go to your place."

Linda was marching toward that empty coffin, her quivering limbs keeping time to

those strangely intermingled processions that beat about her and carried her onward on the bosom of their palpitant flood. She went steadily toward the casket that awaited her.

What else was there for her to do? What else save carry out her pretence of conquest by the hag's hypnosis, hoping against hope that something might occur to save her from that to which she seemed doomed?

There was still within her, deep within her, the utterly mad, utterly unwarranted thought that perhaps Holt was still alive, that somehow he had once more escaped the minions of Lazarus and would somehow rescue her before it was too late.

She reached that waiting corpse-box, entered it. The bells moaned to silence.

"Dearly beloved," Lazarus intoned, in sepulchral mockery of the words with which so many a devoted minister had commenced his discourse on the inscrutable ways of his God, ways that were here denied. "Dearly beloved, tonight we welcome among us a new brother to our unholy company. Tried and tested in the ways of evil is he, so that he has been accounted fit to be one of us. We have with us too the bride he has selected to warm him in the cold companionship of the grave to which he is destined. Living, she shall feed her dead spouse with the life that is in her, so that the chains of death shall not bind him, the earth not hold him. So that, in the long years, he shall join with us in our nightly revels.

"Such is our custom. But, as is also our custom, before the grisly rites of their nuptials are consummated, we shall indulge him who was known among the living as Henry Fulton, and her who, still living for a space, bears the name of Linda Loray, with a foretaste of those orgies we of the League of Lazarus have preserved for the centuries since first they were presented in the arenas of Imperial Rome. Is this your will?"

"Aye," the spectral congregation cried from their high banked gravestones. "Aye. It is our will."

"So be it. And now our faithful Ninita, what have you conceived for our pleasure?"

THE hag hobbled to the center of the open space and ducked in an almost ludicrous curtesy. "Something you'll like," she cackled, "I'm sure. Something to which I've trained my pretty ones with much trouble."

"Proceed."

The old witch curtsied again, limped toward the cages. There was a key suddenly in her hand. She unlocked the cage against whose bars the golden-haired girl pressed.

"Come, Naomi. Come my sweet."

The girl darted past her, the green luminance stroking her unclothed limbs, flashing on her curves, on the secret charms of her sleek body. She crouched, knuckles to the ground, lips drawn back snarling from her gaping mouth, her eyes not human eyes but the lurid orbs of a maddened beast.

"And Jane. You've been impatient for this time, I know."

The key creaked in the rusty lock; the dark-haired maiden was whining as once Linda had heard a dog whine, eager to be at another's throat. The iron door clanged open.

Jane leaped from the enclosure. She stopped for a moment, gazed about her, evidently dazed. Linda was conscious of the impulse to veil her eyes from that gleaming nakedness, a nakedness not only of body but of murdered soul. Some horrible fascination prevented her, kept her staring at those nude girls out there, those girls who were circling now, heads thrown back, faces virulent with hatred and contorted with a fierce animal ferocity, arms crooked before them, palled fingers curved to hooked claws.

"Go get her!" Ninita screamed. "Jane! Get her, Naomi."

They sprang at each other. They were clawing at each other. They were tumbling on the stone, snarling, biting, gouging. And the grisly spectators were not silent, but howling with delight.

Their screams blasted down on Linda, beating against the coffin within which she stood—cries of encouragement, cries of lewd pleasure evoked by the naked limbs flashing in that throbbing green light. With each shrewd blow, with each handful of hair torn from a bleeding scalp, with each gory rake of tearing nails across palpitant flesh, a shriek of sadistic ecstasy shrilled from the yelling watchers.

Blood smeared the stony floor now, blood bathed the unclad flesh of the maniac girls who fought for the delectation of the dead-alive in a gladiatorial fray more awful than ever had been staged in ancient Rome.

Linda managed to drag her staring eyes from the dreadful sight—only to see the frock-coated man who should be dead leaning out of his casket; his eyes, that should be glazed, aflame with the dark light of frenzied ecstasy, and spittle drooling from the corners of his writhing lips—that should be frozen and still forever. . . .

"That's the way, my little one!" Ninita's cry dragged Linda's eyes back to the arena. "Finish her, Naomi."

The dark girl lay flat on the stone, quivering feebly. The other kneeled on her, a scarlet-smeared, monstrous shape. Naomi's torn hands were clenched on the other's throat, were tightening, and in a sudden, brittle silence Linda heard the grate of collapsing gristle.

Jane, the terrible shape that had been Jane, writhed once, and was still. The victor lifted her head to receive the plaudits of the mob.

There were no longer eyes in that contorted, carmine mask!

CHAPTER SIX

Dreadful Dilemma

THEY had been taken away, the dead body of Jane, and Naomi who less mercifully was still alive.

The green light wavered under the labyrinth of weeping arches, between the thick dark pillars of that demoniac cloister. Sick with horror, Linda Loray shrank within the casket from which she dared not move; listened to the voice of the cerement-clothed being who had been acclaimed as Lazarus.

"Well done, my Ninita," he was saying. "You have pleased us. And what other little entertainment have you devised for us?"

"One that I think you'll like even better," the hag responded, the seams of her saffron visage twisting in what she must have meant to be a smile. "An improvement on a device of Nero's of which you have told me."

"On with it then. Our bridegroom grows impatient."

"For this I must call help," the woman replied. She hobbled to the opposite end of the crypt, passing the further flambeau. Linda saw her reach the end-wall beyond it, saw for the first time that it was broken by a door.

Ninita opened that door, and came limping back. A shadowy form moved through the opening, came into the light.

Even in the full illumination the newcomer was still a shadow. He was all black; his lithe body, his legs, his arms, his hands and even his head covered by a skin-tight, dull black garment. He faced Lazarus and lifted a long, coiling black whip in salute.

Ninita's key rattled in the lock of the middle cage, the one where the auburn-haired girl was.

What had happened to those other two had been horrible, but at least they had

been wholly mad and in all likelihood had no conception of what they were doing, perhaps had not even felt pain. She had seen this other suffer in anticipation, had heard her scream at the sound of the bell that had announced the gathering of the league. She would know exactly what was occurring. would suffer trebly because she was not—insane.

The cage door opened. "Come, Lillian," Ninita said. "It's your turn now."

There was no sound in response, no voice, no movement.

"Lillian!" the hag exclaimed sharply. "Quickly!"

A murmur ran through the assemblage. Then Ninita was coming out into the open again, and she was trembling with fright.

"Master!" she quavered. "It—she—Lillian is dead. Dead from fright. And I have no other to substitute for her. We shall have to dispense with what I had prepared for her."

"Thank God!" Linda breathed. "Oh thank God."

"You should have taken better care of her," Lazarus rebuked the scrawny old panderess of sensation. "You may take her place."

"No!" the woman screamed. "No!" Terror convulsed her countenance. She went down to her knees, her arms flung out in entreaty. "I have served you well. I do not deserve payment such as that."

"It is by your negligence that the brotherhood is cheated of its pleasure."

"Pleasure?" the witch squalled. "What pleasure will you have watching this old flesh lashed, these old bones broken! Look!" In an agony of desperation she tore at her clothing, ripping it from her in rags. In seconds she was naked as her victims, her sere and scrawny flesh exposed, her thighs yellow pipe-stems, her torso a bag of bones against which her wrinkled breasts lay flat and hideous. "But you need not be deprived of your game. There," she leaped erect, "there is

one well-formed and beautiful. There is the one who should be here in the arena for your delight."

She pointed—straight at Linda!

"Yes!" the fleshless voices of the dead-alive roared. "Yes! Give her to us. Lazarus, *give her to us!*"

"Silence," their lord thundered. "Silence. It is for me to decide."

They were still, ghastly still. . . . Linda stood motionless as the napkined head turned toward her. She could not see the eyes behind it, but she could feel them upon her.

A sound broke that stillness, a sound more horrible than the chorused voices of those living corpses. It was a mumble, the tongueless mumble of the one who was too newly dead to have relearned speech, protesting the loss of the bride that had been destined to him.

"No," Lazarus intoned. "It is not for me to choose. I have promised her to our novice brother. I cannot break that promise."

They were angry now, the brotherhood of the dead. They let him know it in no uncertain terms.

"Silence," he cut them off again. "Let me finish. I have given my promise and cannot withdraw it. But there is one who may choose. I leave the choice to that one."

His bandaged arm rose, his white-swathed hand pointed at Linda. "Choose, you. Is it bride you will be, or—" That pointing arm swept outward to the black figure, waiting just before the distant skull with his lash. "Choose! Which shall it be?"

WHICH should it be? Linda Loray peered across the green glow to that snaking whip, coiling and avid for her flesh. Her head turned.

She saw Henry Fulton, read his wax-white face, read the meaning of his drooling, lascivious mouth. Even if he were

living. . . . She shuddered, and her eyes went back to the other, terrible shape.

"What is your choice, Linda Loray? Bridal bed or the lash?"

The man down there at the other end of the crypt moved. His head tossed back, as if to fling back a shock of hair as black but more lustrous than the hairless cloth that covered it. . . .

That gesture was unmistakable. It was Holt who stood there! Holt Carst! Somehow he had managed to get in here, somehow managed to overcome Ninita's helper where he had been waiting for her summons. Disguised, he had thus contrived to get in here, and now he had let her know who he was!

"I choose the lash," Linda announced, hard put to it to keep her elation out of her tone.

The red-headed girl's death had made her rescue easy. Holt would wait for her there, only a few paces from the door. When she reached him they would both dash out. Before any of the League of Lazarus could get to them they would be away. . . .

"Come then, my duckling!" Ninita cackled. "Come, my gosling."

"Go!" Lazarus commanded.

Linda stepped out of her coffin. She went past the chuckling, relieved hag. She went past the flaming skull. She went steadily across the stony floor that was slimy with the blood of the two mad girls who had fought there to the death. There was joy in her heart.

Holt drew the lash lingeringly between his black-gloved fingers. He seemed to gather himself together. His acting was superb.

The place was so still the silence beat at Linda, pressed against her the shroud that was to have been her bridal gown. She was near to Holt now, near enough to whisper.

"Sweetheart! You are so brave. So very brave!"

"You don't know how brave, Linda," his whisper came back to her. "You don't know . . ." His arm lifted the short handle of his whip. His wrist circled a bit, so that its long lash coiled in wide, lazy circles about his head. He was gaining every instant of time that he could, every instant that would be so precious when they dashed at last for safety. . . .

The lash struck out at Linda! It slashed across her side, cut through the shroud-stuff and wealed her shrieking skin!

"Holt!" she screamed. "Holt!" And then she was screaming no longer. Her arms were flung up to protect her eyes. Her head was bowed, and the whirring, biting whip was playing around her, was slashing at her. With infinite cruelty it flicked, just flicked her garment, tearing the shroud wisp by wisp, stripping her naked with its cruel bite.

"You fool!" Holt's voice was harsh. "This is what I brought you here for!"

She was nude, entirely nude. She darted away. The lash curled about her waist, brought her back to her tormentor, to her lover turned torturer. It made a thorny web about her, a web through which she could not pass. It bit at her skin, stung her flesh. It had stripped her, and now it was flaying her. . . .!

Her mind was caught in that tortuous mesh, wishing only—and vainly—for the release of death. . . .

A deafening detonation exploded about Linda. There were screams somewhere, shouts. There were shots. . . .

The whip was no longer whirring about her, no longer licking at her. She went to her knees. Twisting as she fell, Linda saw a tossing, uproarious chaos involve the slanting amphitheatre from which the League of Lazarus had watched its saturnalia. She saw uniformed men swarming among the corpses, saw a club lift and fall on one grisly skull. . . .

And a face, a grizzled, staring-eyed, but human face, appear from within it!

Fingers clutched her throat from behind, fingers cloth-covered. "I'll make sure you won't talk," Holt's voice grated in her ears. The fingers closed, hard upon her larynx, cutting off her breath. A knee dug into her spine, garroting her. "I'll get away and they won't know I've ever been here."

The fight was so fierce, up at the other end of the crypt, that no one saw what was happening at this end. Linda knew she was about to die. . . .

Footfalls pounded out of the darkness. The strangling fingers were suddenly gone from Linda's throat, the torturing knee from her backbone. She collapsed to the floor, but the veil lifted from her eyes. She saw a fist rise and fall on a black-swathed head, saw the face of the man whose fist it was.

Youthful, but no longer grey-hued, no longer brooding—Dan Thilton!

"I MUST have lam there in the cellar a long time," Dan Thilton said, "after you knocked me out. When I came to I crawled out through the hole under the porch. I telephoned for the state cops; then I followed the tracks of the so-called dead men. They were plain in the graveyard, leading right to the tomb that was the entrance to that place where they carried on their mumbo jumbo. By the time I found the entrance the state cops came driving into town, and we went right to work breaking that door down. I guess we got down into the underground chamber just in time to save you."

They were in the room where Linda had first awakened to terror. She was clothed now. A grey dawn was pressing against the window through which she had climbed, and from the lobby beneath came the noises that told of the police-detail lining up those of their prisoners who were still alive, getting them ready for the bus that was to take them to jail.

"How did you know to look for me in the cellar?" she asked.

"I was on the porch roof, trying to get to you and talk some sense into you, so I saw what happened to you when you fell. I had to wait until the bunch that were dressed up as corpses went back to the graveyard, and then I went downstairs to find you. Carst was in the lobby, looking for you, I guess, and he jumped me. I knocked him out, tied him up, and went on down to the cellar."

"He said he had been arousing the people of Torburg to fight the League of Lazarus. He said it was he who got Lije and Jed here to fight them."

"That's right. He got them here and he gave them the shotguns too, loaded with blanks so they weren't any good. Lije and Jed and I weren't scared enough of his outfit to suit him, and he was afraid we were going to make trouble, so he took that way to get rid of us. But I was up here watching your room. You see, when you came in and said he'd wired you to come here tonight, it made me sure of what I'd already suspected—that there was some connection between him and what was going on. Because those other girls came here to marry Holt Carst, too! They vanished right away. Queer thing was, they were all insured in his name."

"Insured. . . ! I remember. . . . He did get me to sign a paper, just before he left. Said it was an application for a marriage license, but it may have been an application for insurance. I trusted him."

Linda opened her suitcase. She had already taken out of the wardrobe the frilly, glamorous garments that, tired as she had been last night, she had carefully hung up because they were to have been her trousseau. As she started to fold them into the bag, she glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. Thilton's gaunt frame, silhouetted against the window out of

which he was staring with grim bleakness.

"Sure it was an insurance application," he said. "Carst played both ends against the middle. Getting the insurance on these girls was the final business. In the first place, he got the girls for that bunch of rich old libertines that paid him plenty for a new kind of thrill. 'Lazarus' was the richest; his name doesn't matter now that he's dead. And Carst is through, too. Yankee juries work fast. He's through and Torburg's clean again."

"I'm glad," Linda breathed. "It seemed such a nice village from the little I saw of it last night."

"Nice isn't just the right word for it. It's grand. Carst and his gang came from outside, and they soiled our town for a little while, and now they are gone. But the hills were here before they came, and will be here long after they are forgotten. The wooded hills, the green and pleasant valleys, the white houses where friendly people live. . . ."

"Friendly people," Linda breathed, thinking of the cold grey city to which she was returning. "Neighbors. . . . Yes, it's a lovely town. I'd like to stay here. . . ."

Thilton looked at her, hope dawning in his eyes. "Do you mean that? I wish you would. I was thinking I'd have to move to Boston if I wanted to see you any more—and I do. . . . I love you, Linda."

As he came toward her slowly, shyly, Linda knew that she had learned more about this man in a few hours of terror than she could have learned in years of just living.

"I love you, too," she answered. Her voice was low, but joy was in her heart. She thought. "It's funny, I did come here to get married—and that's what I'm staying for!" She smiled. But she didn't say it aloud—just then. She couldn't, for she could not talk and be kissed at the same time. And by now she was being thoroughly kissed. . . .

THE END

MOULDER of MONSTERS

By
G. T. Fleming - Roberts

(Author of "The House in Hell," etc.)



Unsuspecting, young Dr. Frank Hedson answered a weird, pleading call that led him and his beautiful assistant into a hellish laboratory where human beings were twisted into gibbering, raving idiots—for a hideous display. . . .

THE telephone receiver slipped from her fingers. It dropped eight inches to the plate glass that covered Dr. Frank Hedson's desk, tipped over, and rolled until it struck a heavy paper-knife. Her hand went up toward her head, flut-

tered a moment at the back of her neck where an icy chill played with the wisps of fine, gold hair. She could not drag her blue-eyed gaze from the phone receiver.

The *voice* was still there—the voice that spoke not words, but gave forth

muted croakings that were loathsome and hideous—yet filled with pleading.

Frank Hedson came out of his tiny pharmacy which was attached to his consultation room. A bottle of pills that he intended to drop at the home of one of his patients, on the way to the theater, rattled in his pocket. His whistling lips groped vaguely for a tune.

"That the phone, Flo?" Dr. Hedson asked. Then, as Flo Martin turned around, her fingers gripping the edge of the desk, the doctor's smooth, hard jaw muscles tightened perceptibly. His big body moved quickly across the office. He pounced upon the phone. "That damned masher trying to date you again? I'll date him for a sock in the nose!"

"No," Flo whispered. "It isn't that. It's—" She shook her head bewilderedly.

As Dr. Hedson listened intently, his unruly eyebrows converged in a puzzled frown. His dark eyes became the shiny darkness of the telephone receiver in his hand.

Flo pressed close to him. Her white fingers hooked into the substantial muscles beneath the sleeve of his coat. The muted croakings had stopped and in its place was a meaningless, metallic clattering.

Frank Hedson jerked at Flo: "Morse code, I think, and it doesn't mean a thing to me. Someone is in so much pain he can't speak. Maybe dying. Get out the car. Best bet is to have this call traced." Then he said into the transmitter: "Can't understand that tapping Hello. Try speaking again."

Flo picked the doctor's trench coat from the rack and pulled it over her severe white uniform. She smiled a little in spite of the agitation within her. It was an old coat that smelled of tobacco and rubber. It fitted her like a tent. But it was thoroughly reliable and proof against stormy weather. A lot like Frank Hedson that way. So she loved wearing the old thing.

She ran down into the garage in the basement of the building. It was dark down there, and she hurried about getting the light on. Then she pushed back the wide doors that opened on the concrete incline that slanted to the street level. Mist rolled into the garage in sluggish, grey billows. Grotesque, flacid creatures of mist moved unalterably forward to take a clammy grip of everything in the garage. Her pulse quickened. As a little girl she had been told that there were monsters in the mist. She had never quite got over that childish fancy.

She got into the shiny sedan, turned the key, and plugged at the starter. The starter cranked and cranked but the motor wouldn't kick over. She tried again, and still no results. Nothing to do but trot across the street and get Henry Crowe. She got out of the car, ran up the incline. It was like climbing to the pinnacle of a mountain, somewhere among the clouds. Distant street lamps were dingy and incompetent. Directly across the street, Henry Crowe's neon garage sign created a little aura of demoniacal red in the fog. Flo held the collar of the doctor's coat up close about her throat and ran across the street.

SHE went into Henry Crowe's office. There was no one there. Crowe owned the garage and slept there on a cot with a telephone a little way from him. Like a doctor, he gave twenty-four hour service. He had always wanted to be a doctor for that matter. Would have been one, too, had it not been for that accident that had burned one of his hands so badly he always kept it hidden with a white glove.

"Henry!" Flo cried. "Henry Crowe! Where are you?" She listened for footsteps. Somewhere in the vast garage building a door slid open. She saw a white figure running across the repair shop. Crowe came into the office on the run.

He wore immaculate white overalls. His dark red hair was slicked back neatly. He was grinning boyishly. A year older than Frank Hedson, he somehow kept himself looking five years younger. He nipped the sleeve of the coat Flo wore, with his right hand—the hand that wasn't gloved. His grin slashed across his freckled face. "I'm a soothsayer, Flo, and I say that Frank didn't take my advice and replace that automatic choke."

"I don't know what he didn't replace, Henry, but the car won't start and this is an emergency." She was talking to Crowe while Crowe darted into the shop and came back with a tool bag that was as neat as a doctor's satchel. Then he grabbed Flo's arm and steered her into the mist.

"Nasty night for a death-bed session," he said. "Too bad Frank won't get it through his head that a car can go wrong just like a human body."

They went down into the doctor's garage that the mist had made as mysterious as a subterranean cavern. Henry yanked up the hood, balanced a flashlight on the motor, and pulled the cap from the automatic choke mounted on the manifold. A thin piece of metal dropped out. He grunted, tossed the choke cap aside. "Thermostat burned clear off. Frank will have to let me take him in old Betsy. Wait until I lock the garage, and I'll be right over." Then his white figure vanished in the blur of light.

Frank Hedson came into the garage. He was carrying Flo's coat and a satchel. His frown had turned into one of anxiety. "That call came from a warehouse down on the river front," he said. "Shouldn't be anyone there at all at this time of the night. Queer." Then he looked at the car. "Wait, didn't you leave the motor running?"

"It won't run," Flo told him. "A gadget is burned off."

"Damn," he said quietly. "Have to go get Henry."

A car roared at the top of the doctor's inclined driveway. Flo said: "That's Henry now. He'll take you with him, wherever you want to go. If you're going down toward the river, I'll ride with you. It's only a few blocks from my place, you know."

"A heck of a neighborhood," Dr. Hedson said as he strode up the incline.

"Telling me?"

Henry looked surprised as Flo started to get in beside him. He grinned. "This is a charming pick-up. Squeeze in, Doc. What'd I tell you about that choke?"

"Yeah," Hedson growled. "You're a better diagnostician about engines than I am about human beings. Step on it, Henry."

"What kind of a case?" Henry asked.

Hedson looked at Flo, queerly. Then he filled in an uncomfortable pause with a laugh. "Some of the old medical spirit rising to the surface, Henry? Better stick to cars. They don't balk at diets and nasty medicine."

"Guess you're right," Henry said quietly. And whatever else he was saying was lost in the roar of the old car's motor as they accelerated up the street.

MIST was born at the river. On Front Street, the atmosphere was all but impenetrable. Henry's yellow fog light picked out the holes in the brick pavement and he staggered the car along to avoid them. He had cranked the window down in the hope of gaining better visibility. The fog rolled in through the opening and its grey, gelid fingers found Flo's throat and choked, choked.

The tires of the car scuffed the low, worn curb in front of a low, black building. The engine died and there was no sound in the grey, ubiquitous night except the lap of the river against the old wooden bulkhead. Flo coughed. Dr. Hedson gripped his bag and got out.

"Wait." Henry said. And Dr. Hedson

waited. There wasn't a sign of light in the warehouse or the little office attached. Henry dug out a flashlight from the door pocket. "There have been too many doctors walking off into the night lately," Henry said.

Flo and Frank knew what Crowe meant. Six medical men had walked off into the night within the past six months. They hadn't come back.

Frank Hedson grunted. "I can take care of myself, even if I haven't sense enough to take care of my car." But he didn't object when Henry got out, flashlight in hand.

"Well, you're not going to leave me alone, that's certain," Flo said. She laughed uneasily. No, she didn't ever want to be alone on a night like this. They were stealthy monsters, these creatures of the mist. And their touch was cold. She crowded in between the two men and Frank's arm was welcome as it curled about her waist.

"Don't know what we'll find inside here," he whispered. "It couldn't talk. May be some sort of ghastly mess."

She didn't care. It would be human. The monsters of the mist weren't human. She was glad when the door of the warehouse office closed behind them. That would keep the fog out.

But it didn't. The fog came in just the same; crawled through cracks in the floor and beneath the door. Persistently, it mounted guard, became a legion of grey phantoms of ever changing shape that quenched Henry's light until it was as feeble as a jaundice patient and just as yellow.

Henry's light splashed across a worn desk. There a telephone had been upset. Flo pressed close to Frank Hedson. "Blood," she whispered. "On the floor." Across the dirty boards, blood smeared a trail that led to a door at the end of the room. Hedson took the light from Henry's hand and started toward the door.

From the next room came queer, straggling sounds and another sound that was like the body of a huge fish thrashing around in the bottom of a boat.

At the door of the next room, the trio paused. The light in Hedson's hand fingered through the gloom, splashed across something that was white and naked, and spotted with blood; splashed upon a shaky, misplaced head, a horribly-blank face and a bloody slash of a mouth that seemed to be way down where the breast ought to be.

Hedson swung around. Light fell on Henry Crowe and Flo Martin. Hedson's face was chalk-like. "Get Flo out of here!" he shouted hoarsely.

And Crowe, sick and stumbling like a green frosh in a college dissecting room, put arms around Flo and tried to draw her back. The thrashing, flopping sound was furiously redoubled. Dr. Hedson gave Flo a shove that backed both Crowe and the girl into the office. Then he turned into the room where horror dwelt.

Through the fog-filled room, the yellow light hunted, caught the naked thing as it flopped and rolled toward the end of the room where the grey of the mist deepened. It might have been called a man, once. It was loose-jointed and shaky as a new born calf. It crawled on bloody elbows and knees, or fell flat on its belly when its very bones seemed to bend beneath it.

"Stop!" ordered Hedson.

But the thing didn't stop. It rolled and flopped along and the doctor's curiously leaden legs dragged him after it. At the end of the room was a ragged blot of blackness in the floor, like a pit of some sort. Hedson saw the thing roll sideways over the edge, cling for a moment to the rim. He leaped, dropped to his knees, tried to clutch at a hand that had a limp, dead-fish feeling. Then the thing dropped through the opening. Cold water drenched the doctor's face. He turned his light into

a depth of churning, black, river water, beheld again that white, expressionless face, so hideously soft and boneless looking.

THE floor boards cracked and bent beneath Hedson's weight. The high water that had been so prevalent that spring had rotted the floor at this end of the building. The monstrous thing was down there, somewhere in the black water. Bubbles gurgled to the little patch of surface and burst there. The thing had been alive. But for God's sake what kind of creature was it? Had it been the thing that had phoned Hedson's office? Why, then, had it run away?

He stumbled back to where Henry and Flo awaited him. He took the girl's arm with one hand and Henry's with the other. "Let's get out of here," he said. And the huskiness of his voice made it seem as if those fingers of mist had him by the throat, too.

"Dead," Frank Hedson told them as Henry started the car.

"But—but what was it?" Flo whispered.

Hedson ran a big hand across a moist, chill brow. He shook his head. "No idea."

"It was like a man," Henry said. "Yet it wasn't either. More like a human squid."

"But aren't you going to the police?" Flo asked.

"Get you home first. . . . Two squares north, Henry."

Flo Martin had a small apartment over a hardware store. As Hedson said, it wasn't a particularly nice neighborhood. Hedson didn't like the girl living there, but there wasn't anything he could do about it until his practice picked up. He took her up the dark stairway. The mist-creatures were there, too, but beyond her door the living warmth of soft-shaded lamps shut out all that was cold and grey and dead.

He kissed her that shy, embarrassed

way he always did and hurried down the steps where Henry awaited him in his old wreck of a coupe. Flo didn't have a very nice outlook from her front windows, he thought. There was a pool room, the Cozy Coney Island Lunch, a double-feature movie house, a few shops that were dark at night, and something else. A new industry had moved in where a large grocery had failed. The front of the place was garishly lighted, and there was a big canvas sign reading: "Museum of Freaks and Mammoth Menagerie."

Henry noticed Frank Hedson looking at this dime museum. "Must be a new place," he said as he started his car.

"Yes," Hedson said slowly. "They ought to have that nightmare we found in the warehouse. I—" He forgot what he was going to say. Standing at the door of the museum, bowing to the curious patrons as they went inside, was a sleek-haired man who looked as if poured into a dark, pin-striped suit. Hedson pushed open the door of the coupe.

"Matter?" asked Henry Crowe.

Hedson's jaw muscles were tight. "Know that fellow over there? The one who seems to be running that freak show, and possibly the universe, judging from the conceited look on his face?"

Crowe shook his head.

"Well, I don't either!" Hedson snapped. "Don't want to know him, but he's the same Johnny who has been pestering Flo every time she comes home. Look at the sun-tan powder on his face! Trying to catch the sophistication of an explorer with makeup and a smooth line. Told Flo his name was Whit Jennings." Hedson got out and slammed the door of the car. And with black brows drawn together in a thunder-cap scowl, Frank Hedson went across the street, walking fast.

HE TOOK another look at Whit Jennings. The man bowed and smiled at him. Hedson grunted, went over to

the ticket booth and tossed down his dime. He went around the booth so he could walk in front of Jennings. Just inside the entry-way, was a sign. It read: "India Rubber Man."

Hedson turned on his heel. "You!" he thrust the word at Jennings. Jennings bowed his mechanical bow, and Hedson said brusquely: "Where's your India Rubber Man?"

"Unfortunately, I am unable to exhibit him tonight," said the proprietor of the museum, in a velvety voice. "But of all the freaks, he is probably the least important."

Hedson grumbled something and entered the museum. It was a shabby place, even as dime museums go. There was an ancient elephant and a pair of mangy, half-starved wolves. A cage labeled "Man-Eating Panther" was empty. There was the usual collection of animal freaks—five-legged dog, two-headed calf, and similar grotesqueries, probably all faked.

But the human freaks— Never had Hedson seen anything more nauseous, and a medical man sometimes sees some horrible things. And the human freaks weren't fakes.

There was the human spider, a twisted, crippled specimen of humanity, whose long, emaciated limbs looked as though they had been stretched on the rack, so disproportionate were they in comparison with his scrawny body. It was physically impossible for him to walk any other way than on all fours, if he could have walked at all.

And there was about his face that same blank expression that Hedson had met on the face of that monster in the warehouse office.

The mouth of the unfortunate looked as though it had been puckered by means of a thin wire sewed through the lips. It was dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts, and as it moved about its canvas-fenced pen, to the morbid delight of the

onlookers, its crooked, shriveled limbs trembled like wire springs.

In another booth was what was supposed to be a wild man from Borneo. The wild man's skin, where it was visible between patches of long, dark hair that covered its torso, was as white as Hedson's. But the entire body seemed to have been dwarfed by tremendous pressure. Legs were thick, short and bowed. The head was flat. The chest bulged like a wine barrel and distorted ribs seemed on the point of bursting through the skin. The face was lined with scars. Here again, something had been done to the lips. They were turned inside out, giving the whole countenance an expression of hellish glee—and, incidently, preventing the freak from talking intelligibly.

Frank Hedson turned away, shuddering. He shouldered his way back through the crowd. Whit Jennings, the proprietor, was just entering the room preparatory to giving his thrill-talk before each booth. Hedson caught him by the shoulder and all but yanked him off his feet. "Where do you get your freaks?" he cried.

WHIT JENNINGS' smile seemed pasted on his effeminate lips. "I've searched the world over for the most unusual specimens of mankind. I—"

"Well, I've got another idea!" Hedson's left fist pounded up to the point of Jennings' chin. Jennings went over backwards into the arms of surprised patrons of the museum. An hysterical woman shrieked out: "Murder!" Somewhere out in the street, a cop shrilled his whistle. Hedson jabbed his elbow into the face of a man who would have detained him and rushed from the museum. In spite of repeated calls from the cop to halt, Hedson sprinted on until he saw a cruising taxi. He hopped in and directed the driver to go to his office. . . .

An hour later, Frank Hedson walked into the office of Henry Crowe's garage.

Crowe wasn't in sight, but there was an electric button on the desk, which would summon the garage man at any hour of the night. Then, impatiently, Hedson stepped out into the repair shop. He saw Crowe coming up the basement steps, as he moved alongside of a partially raised hydraulic lift. He waited for Crowe.

The garage man wasn't grinning. His face still wore the sickly hue that had come upon it in the river-front warehouse. He stopped at one end of the lift and asked the doctor what he wanted.

Hedson said: "I've been looking in a closet, and I came across a telegraph key. A boyhood pal of mine and I used to have a telegraph outfit between our houses. That boy was about five years older than I and a lot smarter. When he grew up, he studied medicine and assumed an important post at a certain medical college. His name is Dr. Eric Goelf. Ever hear of him?"

Henry nodded. "Studied anatomy under him. Why?"

"Because," said Hedson slowly, "I saw him tonight. I called up his school and found out that he has been missing for some time. I found out a number of other things I didn't know, and I recalled how he and I worked to learn Morse code when we were kids, telegraphing back and forth. Eric is the only man who would know that once I knew Morse code. He tried to communicate with me tonight by means of the code. He couldn't talk over the phone because someone had done something to his mouth—and to other parts of his anatomy. Henry, that *thing*, that boneless, flopping freak in the warehouse tonight was not only Whit Jennings' escaped India Rubber Man, he was also Dr. Eric Goelf!"

"Well?" Henry waited.

"Henry, *there is nothing wrong with your left hand, is there?*"

Crowe looked down at his gloved left hand. His grin came back, but only to

one side of his mouth. His eyes had a glazed, dead look in them. "No," he said evenly, "there is nothing wrong with my hand."

"No. It wasn't your hand, Henry. It was your brain. Your rotten, filthy brain." Hedson took a step toward Crowe. Crowe rested his hand on the rack of the hydraulic lift. He said: "So you found that out, did you? What are you going to do about it?"

"I think," Hedson said slowly, "I think I'm going to kill you."

Crowe's smile widened. That ought to have warned Hedson, for as the doctor advanced toward Crowe, the garage man simply shoved against the rack of the hydraulic lift. The rack swung around and its heavy steel side member wiped Hedson off his feet with a stunning blow that made a whirling turn-table of the earth. He fought bitterly against unconsciousness and won. But he was all but helpless in a tangle of oil-soaked rope that held his arms and legs. And struggle as he would, Crowe tightened and stretched the ropes with the patience of a spider very sure of its fly.

When he had reinforced his hasty web of rope and made certain that Hedson was unable to escape, Crowe took hold of a free end of rope and dragged the doctor across the garage floor and down a flight of steps. Inhuman shrieks of agony ripped out of the darkness below.

The room below was not unlike any garage basement. But there were heavy steel doors that made privacy a certainty. There were drums of grease and oil and alcohols standing about on shelves to camouflage the jars of chemicals, reagents, and cabinets of instruments which Crowe had accumulated. The shrieks of agony came from a flimsy looking cage where an animated black shadow now and again hurled itself against wire mesh and fell back on the cage floor to rip at its confines with saber-like claws. The creature

was a black panther, probably the cat that Whit Jennings had exhibited in his dime museum. And the brute was utterly blind. Fresh blood streamed from empty eye sockets.

In this basement room were two hydraulic lifts. One of them was occupied by a wooden frame across which was stretched a mummy-like thing, swathed in bloody bandages. The lift had been raised until it engaged a similar frame fixed to the ceiling. The terrific pressure thus exerted was warping the bandage-swathed body into some grotesque shape.

CROWE lugged the helpless doctor to the second hydraulic lift and threw him across the grease rack. Then he loosened that portion of the rope that bound Hedson's arms, but only long enough to secure Hedson's shoulders to the rack. As he bound the doctor, Crowe nodded toward the mummy-thing in the rack at the opposite end of the room.

"Dr. Manfred," he explained. "I studied surgery under Manfred. He was on the committee that examined me, and like the others who were instrumental in my discharge from college, he is paying the price for my disgrace. Remember how he used to always say 'Humph!' Well, he will have a hump that any dromedary might envy, by the time I get through with him.

"My processes are interesting. Vivisection and the grafting of one part of the body to another account for some of the changes. Then again, I inject certain acids into the bony structures. Even as the shell of an egg is rendered soft and plastic by a soaking in vinegar, so my acid reduces bones to something which, when sufficient pressure is exerted, may be warped into any shape. Sometimes, I resort to plastic surgery to gain the proper facial expression, such as you noted in Jennings' wild man, who, by the way, was once Dr. Raymond Gribbon, another

member of that committee which discharged me for 'unethical practice' even before I had a license."

"You're a damned fiend!" Dr. Hedson shouted.

Crowe's face became sullen. "And I might have been a genius had not the narrow mindedness of the medical profession prevented my progress." He slowly withdrew the white glove from his left hand and clenched and unclenched perfectly formed fingers. "While I used the acid burns I received in the laboratory as an excuse for giving up medicine, you see what my advanced knowledge of plastic surgery has done for my hand. I might have helped cripples and paralytics in the same manner, had I been given the chance. But reminiscence is not good for anyone.

"Not so many years ago, a surgeon succeeded in transplanting the eye of a pig into the socket of a human being who had lost an eye. Though the transplanted eye became a part of living tissue, the man was unable to see with it. I am not anxious to replace sight where I shall have taken sight away. But Whit Jennings will pay fifteen hundred dollars for a panther-eyed freak. Ordinarily, I receive only a thousand dollars for my creations."

"And I suppose I'm to be the subject of your experiment," Hedson said.

Crowe smiled queerly. "Whatever led you to believe that?" He moved calmly across the room to the door of a closet. As he passed the panther cage, the blind brute became a black tornado of insane fury. It clawed and bit at the wire mesh in an effort to reach the man who had tormented it. But Crowe passed unscathed. He opened the door of the closet and hauled out a vertical rack on rollers. In the center of the rack was a woman, wrists and ankles securely bound, bright gold hair securely knotted to a horizontal member of the frame, her white, lovely back stripped bare; her eyes were open.

"Flo!" Hedson gasped, yet he could scarcely hear his own voice.

Standing beside the frame, Crowe assumed the attitude of a lecturer. "Before removing the young lady's eyes in order to replace them with those of the panther, I want to make a few changes in the general appearance of her body." He marked points along the girl's spine with a piece of red chalk. "Spinal injections will be made at these points in order to destroy some of the bony tissue of the vertebrae. In that way we shall be able to warp the body into something more nearly resembling that of a panther. Don't look so furious, Hedson. A panther is not an unlovely animal."

Crowe went to a littered work bench, picked up a flask of water. To this he added a teaspoonful of purple powder that was heaped up on the bench. "Potassium permanganate," he explained. "Added to distilled water, it makes an ideal antiseptic with which to bathe that area upon which we are about to operate."

PPOTASSIUM PERMANGANATE, thought Hedson dully. He looked at the heap of purple powder, lying in the middle of a litter of mechanic's tools, surgeon's instruments, and cotton waste. On the shelf directly above the bench was an open can marked: "Radiator Glycerine." Potassium permanganate and glycerin—there was some connection between the two chemicals in the back of Hedson's brain. Their combination now—was that the trick that had once delighted him in school chemical laboratories?

He watched Crowe prepare the antiseptic solution. If Crowe had stood a little nearer the hydraulic lift, Hedson might have swung the lift around and knocked Crowe down. That was possible, because a piece of old shaft hanging, attached to the low ceiling, was within the reach of Hedson's left hand. But what good would that do? He couldn't hope to knock Crowe out, for the rope that bound his shoulders to the rack prevented him from exerting enough energy to swing the



lift around at sufficient speed so that it might strike a telling blow.

He looked over at Flo. The girl was conscious, but she had abandoned all effort to escape from the ropes that lashed her to the frame. She was sobbing quietly to herself. Then as Crowe came up to her and applied the sponge soaked with the antiseptic solution to her back, her body stiffened convulsively. "Please," she choked out. "*Please, God, let me die!*"

Hedson clenched his teeth. To think of that loveliness destroyed, that body deformed, the blue eyes replaced with the dead, green eyes of a cat—

"No!" he shouted. "Crowe, stop it. Give you anything. Anything you want."

Crowe turned his head slightly toward the doctor. "I am not aware that you have anything that I want, Doctor," and calmly proceeded with the sterilization of the girl's flesh.

Hedson's frantic gaze darted to the shelf above the work bench. If he swung the hydraulic lift around, counter-clockwise, he might be able to touch that shelf. He *had* to touch that shelf; had to reach the glycerin. It was the only chance of escape, and it was slimmer than a thread from a spider's web.

He reached out his left hand and touched the shaft hanging. With all the strength that was in his arm, he shoved against the hanging. The hydraulic lift swung around silently and ponderously. Hedson's heart gave a bound. He could now touch the shelf, but his fingers were inches from the can of glycerin. He shot a glance at Crowe. The vengeance-mad genius was removing a number of large hypodermic needles from a sterilizer. It was only a matter of minutes before his hellish process would be under way.

Hedson strained against the ropes that held his shoulders to the rack. They gave an inch, two inches. He touched the glycerin can, pulled it toward him, tipped it over on its side. The clear, sluggish liquid

gurgled from the opening, dropped in a steady stream upon the mound of powdered potassium permanganate crystals. Hedson pushed the can back on the shelf. Then he pushed the hydraulic lift back a little way until the knotted rope that crossed over his shoulders was directly above the chemicals on the bench. And he waited—agonizing seconds, he waited. What if the can had not contained glycerin? What if the glycerin was not of sufficient purity to foster the violent chemical reaction he expected?

But even as these maddening thoughts churned in his brain, there was a blinding flash of purple-hued light. Flame like that from a blow torch leaped into the air. Heat from it singed Hedson's hair, but a steel cross member of the rack kept his clothes from catching fire. But the rope? Did he smell rope burning? Or was it merely that wad of waste on the bench?

Crowe stepped back from the rack to which the girl was bound. He turned around, was stunned for a moment by the purple flash of flame. Then he leaped to the wall, seized a valve and spun it around. Hedson felt motion beneath him, saw a triumphant leer in Crowe's eyes. The hydraulic lift was moving upwards, beyond the reach of the flame. It was moving toward the black beams of the ceiling, moving to crush the life out of the helpless man tied to it.

THEN Crowe ran the length of the room to a hose reel. He seized one end of the hose and ran with it toward the bottom of the stairs. The fire was spreading across the bench, reaching for the cans of oil that were standing on the shelves above. Hedson writhed and twisted. Something was searing his neck. The rope! It *had* caught fire.

With a mighty heave that strained every muscle of belly and shoulders, Hedson tore away from the grease rack. But at the same time, his head struck the beams

of the ceiling above. The lift was still moving upwards. He forced himself to lie flat against the frame. Still, the black beams came nearer. He *had* to move or be crushed to death, yet the rope still crossed and recrossed his ankles.

Desperately, he rolled sideways, rolled from the rack to hang head down. But as his body swung down like a pendulum, the ropes about his ankles slipped from the other end of the grease rack. He fell head first to the floor, landed on his shoulders, and somersaulted to his feet.

He raced across to the rack where Flo was bound. "Darling!" he breathed, and nothing more, for time was too precious to waste on words.

Crowe came back with the hose spurt- ing. He saw Hedson tearing at the knots that held the girl. With an oath, he sprang at the doctor. But Hedson was ready for him. The doctor leaped to the bench, seized one of the largest grease cans, flung it straight at Crowe's head. Crowe toppled over backwards to the floor, tried to get up, couldn't make it.

Hedson was already back at the rack, tearing away the ropes that bound the girl. The fire was well rooted in a tank of oil near the panther's cage. The black brute, terrified by the smell of smoke, redoubled its efforts to escape. The flimsy door of the cage was buckling under its blind, frantic efforts.

The last rope tore away. Hedson had the girl in his arms. Hastily, he gathered her rag of a dress about her and started for the steps. Crowe was on his feet again, weaving across the floor in an effort to cut off their escape. There was a gun in his hand. He stopped, legs wide-spread, to steady himself. He raised his gun, stared down along the barrel.

Out of the smoke and flame, a snarling, vengeful shadow came hurtling through the air. Just as the gun in Crowe's hand

spat its lethal charge, the blind, black panther landed on Crowe's shoulders.

Cries of the furious beast and the frightened man mingled with the ever increasing roar of the flames as Hedson and Flo gained the upper floor of the garage

"There was a spark of madness burning always in Henry Crowe's brain," Hedson afterwards explained to Flo. "He was thrown out of college because of his revolting experiments. His insane vengeance must have extended to the entire medical profession, but he was particularly anxious to get even with the committee of professors that threw him out of medical college.

"So he kidnaped those fine old doctors, as he kidnaped you, made freaks out of them by his accursed surgery, sold them to Whit Jennings, that they might be exhibited to the public. The poor doctors couldn't tell what had happened to them because Crowe always performed some sort of operation on mouth or throat that prevented them from talking."

"When did you first suspect him?" Flo asked.

"Tonight. When we encountered that unfortunate monster that had escaped from Jennings' show, I noted that the creature tried to escape as soon as it saw Crowe. And that awakened suspicions I had had that Crowe was mad.

"The poor devil had telephoned to me for aid, yet when Crowe appeared, the monster ran away. Evidently, it feared further torment. So it slipped off into the black water, slipped off into death. Later when I got back to my office, I telephoned Crowe's old school and learned the details of his dismissal. But let's try and forget such things, Flo. We've got to forget."

She nodded her lovely head. "Because we're going to be happy, dear, utterly happy."

DANCE OF THE

By
Francis
James

(Author of "The City
Ruled By Death," etc.)



*A Long, Gripping Novelette of
Nameless, Eerie Menace*

CHAPTER ONE

Things that Crawled

I REALIZE now that my terror down there at Pelican Island began a long time before the night when Louise Ranier died screaming that something was crawling on her.

Some little thing would seem queer,

perhaps the gleam in Lauderdeck's eyes, perhaps the sullen stares of the Portugese sponge fishermen down at the lower end of the place, and uneasiness would jab at me, a cold finger along my spine. I would shrug and dismiss it, tell myself it was nerves—and go on with my holiday loafing. Once or twice I stopped long enough to tell myself that I ought to get Mary, my wife, out of here. But I didn't . . .

BLOODLESS ONES

If you are young and in love—beware! If you think the girl of your choice is the loveliest being God ever created—guard her every moment of your life! For the time may come when you will know the horror of realizing that, unseen and unsuspected—in the very air about you—foul, obscene beings are watching your happiness with virulent envy. . . . That other eyes than yours are gloating over the intimate beauties of your loved one!



We had been out fishing that day, a dozen or more of us, in two power boats. Louise hadn't felt quite up to going; said she would take a day off in bed and rest up. But she insisted that Frank, her

husband, go with the rest of the party.

One of the boats was held up by a broken engine, and the other one had to tow it, which delayed us three or four hours. It was long past dark when we

finally pulled up to the wharf and stretched our cramped limbs ashore. A thunder storm was rolling up masses of inky clouds. Frank's house was nearest. We all headed toward it on the run, laughing and chattering, our mouths dry for the Tom Collinses that he had been talking about for the last hour.

"What's the matter, why haven't they got the lights on?" Frank exclaimed. For early in the evening though it was, his big house was dark from bottom to top.

THE sight of that unexplained blackness made us all travel faster. Not that we dreamed yet that anything was wrong, but the silent gloom of that house gave us a strange feel of uneasiness. A hush had settled down over everything, held breath of the coming storm. Noises rang hollowly in it—the men's boots crunching over the rocks, the women's voices, half breathless from the steep climb.

And then it came. Against the background of that silence, Louise screamed. We heard her voice plainly through the open window of her bedroom. Terrified and gasping words: "It's crawling! It's crawling on me!"

It was a pulse-quickening sound, that cry in the dark. Yet all the same we couldn't believe that it was anything serious. "A nightmare," somebody said. "Have you got mice in your house, Frank?" one of the women panted. "Poor Louise!" What made her go to bed so early?" some one else questioned. "Why doesn't she put on a light—"

Only Frank didn't say anything. His face looked worried and white as he ran at my side. "Crawling—what can be crawling?" he muttered. "Louise hasn't got nerves, she wouldn't scream at a mouse—"

We gained the top of the path and the rolling expanse of the bluff top opened ahead of us. "There she is! There's

Louise now!" somebody cried shrilly.

A form appeared at one of the open windows. Louise, a blob of white in her bedgown. She seemed to be fighting, struggling with something that held her.

And then we saw her only garment ripped from her from behind. Stark nude she stood there, straining to get across to lean out of the window. We could see her figure bent forward, hands reaching out, clutching for something to catch hold of and pull herself by.

And still she shrieked: "It's crawling! It's crawling!"

We started running then, Frank and I—everyone. We still couldn't imagine what it could be that Louise was struggling to escape from. Whatever was there was too far back in the darkness to see. But the sight of that nude, straining figure, the sound of those cries, made us cold with a rush of tingling fear.

FRANK RANIER was three strides ahead of me as we hit the piazza steps and went up them three at a jump. We burst through the door and up the stairs. The others were all coming, they were close behind. At the top of the flight, another lightning flash showed his wife's open door.

Frank in the lead, we catapulted over the threshold. "Louise! Louise, darling!" he yelled. He snapped the wall switch without result, the current was off. I could hear his thick breathing, the match box clattering in his hand as he struck a light.

Louise was there on the bed. I took one look at her. I stumbled forward, my hand pawing my eyes, for the horror I saw there I couldn't believe.

Louise—we knew it was she because it couldn't have been anyone else. But no one could have identified her. Frank's wife had been lovely, queenly in beauty, but now her face was gone! Where cheeks and mouth had been was just raw and

grisly pulp, through which the bones and white teeth gleamed in horrible outline. Some one—something—had ribboned that face with stripping of giant claws, literally cleaned off the flesh as though raked by a monstrous currycomb.

I turned my back to that sight and I felt my stomach turn over, while bewilderment thrust at me. What could it have been? Who or what could have been in here and then gone while we were climbing those stairs? It couldn't have gone far, the chances were that it was still close around.

And then I found myself backed up against the rim of the door with the others who had come scrambling behind us up stairs. The storm was raging now, the steady ripple of lightning bathed the shape on the bed in eerie blue flares.

The place was full of confusion, women sobbing, everyone talking at once. We were dazed by this sudden horror, for a moment we couldn't collect ourselves.

Mary shuddered up to my side, her face a pallid blur in the shimmering glare. She had torn her waist on a beam, her white shoulder showed through the rent. Her blue eyes were moon-huge, bottomless wells.

"John, who did it? What could have done that horrible thing?" she husked.

Fred Wilson's square-cut, powerful face shoved up to me. He gripped my arm. "That smell—you get that smell in here, John?"

Vaguely I'd been aware of that odor before, but in the rush of my horror because of Louise I hadn't given it thought. It was a nameless, a ghastly stench—a reek of putrescence like aroma of rotting carrion. It filled the air thickly, it seemed like something material and solid. It held a menace of curious evil that brought beads of sweat out on my forehead.

"What that smell is, what did this thing, I don't know—but let's get these people out of here," I muttered to Fred. For

in that darkened house, menace lurked in every shadow blot. My nerves were shaken, I was jittery with terror. That thing couldn't have gone far, it might be close by.

Together, Fred and I herded the shuddering knot of figures around and down what was left of the stairs to the front hall. We got them into the living room and tried to turn on the lights. But still they wouldn't work, the house current was off.

The storm was at its height, rain and wind lashed the windows. But none the less, the women wouldn't stay in the house. Panic of the thing that had killed Louise and left that smell in her room had them all by the throats.

Walter Van Dine's house was next in line and toward it we all raced through the downpour. We pounded up on to the piazza and into the living room. Van hustled out drinks and touched off the logs laid in the fireplace.

We stood there without speaking, staring at one another, gulping down the liquor that lighted synthetic warmth in our shivering bodies. We couldn't believe this thing that had thrust into our care-free and happy lives, it all seemed a nightmare.

THERE were fifteen of us there in Van's house. Here on Pelican Island, inside the curving arm of the Gulf of Mexico and off the Florida coast, our group of well-to-do business men and our wives had bought up most of the area of the pile of rock that thrust up from the blue waters and developed it as an exclusive winter colony. We were all acquainted in business or social ways and for several seasons we had revelled in the almost tropical climate, the superb fishing and bathing.

"Let's try to keep our heads clear and figure this out," Fred Wilson said after a moment. "When we saw Louise at the

window, she was alive. So whatever it was that—”

“What could it have been that crawled?” Joe Stevens broke in. “She must have imagined it, had a bad dream—”

“But don’t you remember, we saw her?” Van Dine said. Van was a young fellow, slim and quiet, hardly more than a lad, a six-months’ bridegroom. When I think of what happened to Ban that night—God! “We saw her at the window, and something was pulling her,” he said.

“It was the thing pulling her that killed her, must have been,” Wilson said. “A thing that crawled! And before that, he—or it—had cut the wires outside of the house, shut off the lights.” All our houses, by the way, got current from the gasolene engine-dynamo combination in the same little power house where the water pump and pressure tank was.

I moved around to Joe Steven’s side. Tall, spare, a college professor, Joe was another man who didn’t get rattled. He was standing there listening and thinking, his deep grey eyes thoughtful.

“You know that settlement of Portuguese sponge fishermen down on the other end of the island,” he said to me. “They wouldn’t sell out to us and they have always resented our being here. I wouldn’t put it past them to do something like this.”

We considered that angle. There was quite a village of the spongers in the cove a mile away, with their own stores and churches. Among them were several individuals whom I didn’t like. We had had a rather unpleasant siege, trying to buy them out and I knew that anger and resentment rankled there. I’d felt their sullen and hostile gaze on me many times when I had passed through there.

“We can’t handle this ourselves, we’ll have to send to the mainland for the police,” Stevens remarked. “But it’s too rough now, no boat could live in this storm.”

After some discussion, we decided to send ashore as soon as the storm lightened and meanwhile for some of us to go down and give the Portegee village the once-over. We didn’t do anything right then about going back to get Louise. There was nothing that anyone could do for her—or to her—now. Or so we thought. For still we didn’t dream the depths of the horror that had swooped down on us. None of us could fancy that the monster who had killed Frank’s wife could still want to torture her—*after she was dead*. . . .

Four of us were picked to stay with the women. Frank Ranier was one who went with us. Face working, he stood alone, staring into space. I went over and put my arm around his shoulders. He turned to me. His fists were clenched, he clicked out words like tapping of hammers against iron. “I’ll get him, John! Before God, I’ll get the man who killed Louise and I’ll tear him to pieces—”

But Frank didn’t get him. . . . Twelve hours after that, he was taken away to a hospital for the insane. But that was the next day, when all of us thought that we were going mad. . . .

As I was struggling into the too-small raincoat which Van had brought out for me, Mary shuddered up to my side.

“Don’t go, John, don’t leave me!” she whispered. “I’m horribly afraid—That thing in Louise’s house—I think it’s here, too!”

I kissed her. “Some one has got to go,” I said. “You will be safe, with everyone around—”

I left her and went out with the others, and a specter of terror walked at my side. It wasn’t so much that Louise had been killed, though just that would have been dreadful enough. It was the *way* she had died, and her cries of the crawling thing, and the smell in the house. And Mary’s shuddering moan that the thing was in there at Van’s, too.

The white, rigid faces of the men around me, hard, practical business and professional men, showed that the thing had them stopped. We were up against something that there wasn't any reason for, which the common sense of sane minds couldn't fathom.

God, I'd have given a million if I hadn't left Mary. . . .

WE SPENT the best part of an hour going over that Portegee village. Sullen silence, hostility and dark looks greeted us from house to house. And of course we didn't turn up a single thing that could be construed into suspicion.

From one unexpected quarter, however, we did get some help. Young Steve Rodriguez, son of old Jimmy, dean of the spongers, put on his coat over his sea-going duds and came out with us. Steve was a noteworthy exception to the run and file of the ignorant fisher-folk. Imbued with a love of self-improvement, he had saved his earnings from sponge-diving and gone to college for a couple of years. He was a keen, friendly and level-headed lad, broad-shouldered, a magnificent physical specimen, who listened thoughtfully to our story and then turned a strangely white and frightened face toward me.

"Lauderdeck—have you thought of the professor?" His voice was significant, tense.

Professor Lauderdeck—no, I hadn't thought of him. But at Steve's suggestion, things clicked in my mind.

The professor was another charter resident of the island whom we hadn't been able to dislodge when we had tried to acquire the entire tract. He lived hermit-like in a big house backed up against the rocky flank of the big hill, almost a mountain, that shot up abruptly near the north end of the island. He posed as a scientist, living there to study the strange flora and fauna that swarmed in the warm tides of the Gulf. Almost every day we

would see him putting around in his little power boat, dredging up specimens in the net that he handled with a tackle and tiny power winch.

We had made friendly overtures and the prof had seemed cordial. Too cordial—for there was a servile suavity about him that didn't ring true. He seemed like a man with much to conceal. More than once I'd caught his beady black eyes fixed on Mary or some of the other girls as they lay on the beach in the fashionable scantiness of present-day bathing attire. The mephistophelian black beard and up-curving eyebrows of the man had seemed to take on a more satyr-like twist. In the village they told stories of some of the native girls who had been taken on as maids in his menage—and who later had fled from his house, tight-lipped and white with terrors about which they would tell no one.

Gradually I had come to believe the solitary scientist a little mad—harmlessly mad. But now. . . . The diabolical fantasies of a mind inflamed as I deemed his to be might have driven him to perpetrate such a grotesque horror as we had seen at Ranier's.

"All right—let's go up to Lauderdeck's," somebody said.

IN VELVET dinner jacket and slippers, Lauderdeck himself answered our summons at his door. Gravely he listened to us and shook his head. As one could see, he reminded us, he had not been out—he had been sitting reading the whole evening. And he was inexpressibly shocked, but he had no idea who could have done it. Possibly some one from the sponge fishermen's village. . . .

The man was smooth and glib-tongued. I felt that he was hiding things, telling half-truths or lies. He hadn't shown indignation at our blunt inquiries as to his whereabouts, as a man with a clean slate and self-respect would have done.

He had the oily evasiveness of one who can't be offended.

"There is a peculiar odor here in your house, professor," I said abruptly. "As though something were rotting—"

His black eyes glinted above his red lips. "Yes—unfortunately I am unable to keep the rather brackish aroma of the tanks in which I keep my specimens from permeating the premises." He crossed and threw open a door. Beyond, we saw a room filled with square, metal receptacles. And out from it came a nauseating wave of vile odor, reek of primaeval ooze. "I live with it so constantly that I fear I have grown accustomed to its unpleasantness," he smiled, apologetically.

We took our leave in a moment. We went hurrying back down the slope of the hill. I glanced at the others, and I knew from their faces that they were thinking of the same thing that I was. Explain it how he would, that smell in Lauderdeck's house was the same stench that we had smelled in Louise Ranier's room!

"That man knows something that he isn't talking about," Joe Stevens said grimly. "I'm going up there tomorrow and—"

Joe's voice broke on a note of stark horror. He halted, transfixed. He stretched out his hand. "Look!" he half shouted.

The rain had stopped. The moon was struggling to break through the clouds. It had shown Van's house standing there, a black silhouette with lights ablaze in the windows.

And then suddenly those lights had gone out! Like candles extinguished by a down-blotting hand, the twinkling fires were quenched.

And through the sudden silence came a scream—shriek upon shriek in a woman's voice. It was the cry of a human being in the ultimate throes of unbearable torment—the living voice of agony.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dancing Girl

CAN I ever forget those century-long seconds while we went racing up the hill toward that darkened house!

Somehow Van got ahead of me, I was hammering at his heels as we dashed inside. There was confusion in the pitch darkness in the hall, everyone rushing around. The screaming up stairs had stopped, but they weren't going up there. They came crowding toward us as the door opened.

I pushed them aside. "Mary! Mary!" I shouted.

And then all at once she was beside me. Her warm arms flew around my neck and I smelled the fragrance of her cheek crushed to mine. "Thank God you've come!" she cried.

I crushed her close and kissed her and then my arms dropped limp. Some one was yelling up stairs and I knew the voice, Wally Van Dine's. I went pawing my way toward the stairs and Mary raced at my side, her hand frozen in mine.

Walter and Peggy's door was the first to the right at the top. The house lights went on again just as I hit the last step and a figure came stumbling out of the room.

It was Van. In that thirty or forty seconds while he had been here alone, something hellish had got hold of him. One side of his face seemed torn off by the roots, skin and flesh ripped down as one would shuck an ear of corn. Behind the jets of spurting blood, the bones showed in grisly outline.

"Look out for him—put on a tourniquet and stop that bleeding!" I yelled back to the others. I went on into the bedroom.

I took one look at what was there on the bed—one was enough. Peggy Van Dine, stark naked and dead as Louise had

died. And nothing else save only that loathsome and putrid odor that seemed like the breath of vileness beyond thought to describe.

I drew the door shut behind me and went down stairs. My back was cold and I was wet with sweat.

Some of the men had got Van into a chair and were doing things to what was left of his face. Bending over, I pointed to his bare neck where the collar of his shirt had been ripped away. "What's that?" I said. Mary was there at my side, sobbing. She pushed her hand into mine, it was a hand of ice.

The men who were working on him shook their heads without answering. The marks on his skin were little circular spots, red around the rims and white in the middles, rows of them all over his neck. They reminded me of the marks left by a rubber heel on a wet pavement—a pavement moistened with blood. Somehow the sight of them lifted the hair on my neck.

I swung around to the others. We had given up our thin pretense of bravery now, stark terror gripped us all. I looked into a ring of white faces, eyes that held haggard lights of sheer horror. At times like this, human nature shows itself in the raw.

"What's going on in this place, for God's sake what is it?" Bill Onslow burst out. His fat, chubby face was the color of wet newspaper.

Fat and silly little Alice Wilson went into hysterics. Yellow hair flying, she ran up to her husband and slapped his face.

"Why don't you do something, why don't you find that thing?" she screamed. "I know why, because you want me to be killed, too. You're hoping that I'll be the next—"

Fred's face went a shade greyer. "Hush, Alice," he muttered.

Some of the others were talking to

Van, trying to get him to tell what had jumped him. It was no good, his horrible experience had unseated his reason. He kept calling his wife, moaning over and over, "Peggy! Peggy, where are you!"

Joe Stevens shivered. "This is beyond me. That thing has hit twice, it may be right around here now. We'd better get out before something else happens. Get down to the boats—"

"Too rough," Wilson said. "Hear that surf? A boat couldn't live in it—"

Mary pressed to my side, she looked up at me, face working as she tried not to cry.

"Is it really too rough, John? I—we—all the women. . . . We can't stand any more. That thing may come again—"

I put my arm around her. "Yes, it's far too rough. Besides, there isn't any danger with us all here together—"

Perhaps I was right about the storm, maybe we would have been drowned if we had tried to escape. But better that, if I had only known, that the horrors to which I was exposing Mary by lingering there. Better our chances with the rage of the sea than with the beastly menace that even then was closing around us. For the sea kills but once. . . .

Finally Collins and Markham, the only two of us who weren't married, volunteered to try to get across to the mainland for help, if they could take my big sea-going cruiser. And we agreed to that. We had got to do something, we had got to have some one there, if only for Van's sake. It was taking two men now to hold him down in a chair. . . .

Not one of us left the room while we waited. We sat huddled together, we paced the floor, dragging jerkily on our cigarettes, talking in whispers, jumping at noises. Peggy's death had left us all stunned. Peggy was lovely, a witch of a child, we had all loved her. She and Van, those two blissful newly-weds, had been the pets of the island.

I flung myself into a chair, Mary came and crept into my arms. She was lovely, too, a heart-stirring Circe of radiant allure with her milk-white skin and her copper-hued hair, her yellow-grey eyes. Close to me I pressed her, she nestled closer still, the fragrance of her rose like wine in my brain. I thought of how I'd seen Lauderdale's pagan eyes blaze up at sight of her, of those other two girls, and my hands fisted in agony. Mary, my darling, caught in this horror-web, with that black menace striking, no one knew when nor whence!

AT TWO o'clock, Collins and Markham came back with Sheriff Higgins, two deputies and a Dr. Wells.

Wells, a big, phlegmatic man with a paunch belly and pagoda chins, stayed up with Peggy after they had all briefly examined her, while the three officers went down where we were all gathered in the living room. They listened to our story with incredulity biting deeper into their faces with every word.

"You were the first one into this Rancier woman's room," the law officer said to me. "Less than a minute after she had been alive, screaming. All right. You didn't see anything that crawled, or any signs of one, did you? So she must have dreamed it. She woke up in the night, there was a man in her room. She felt his hands on her and she dreamed that something was crawling. That damage to her face was done with some kind of a hook. You've got a maniac killer down here, that's what. One of those spongers down in the village, or that crazy old professor."

The door opened and Dr. Wells came down from examining Peggy. The sloppy-looking medico had an odd, tight look on his face.

"There is something extremely queer about this," he began, clearing his throat. "I find that Mrs. Van Dine did not die

as a result of those wounds on her face. She was dead some little time before they were inflicted!"

Higgins started to his feet, amazement sagging his jaw.

"What's that! But these people heard her screaming just a few seconds before—"

The doctor mopped his face with a silk handkerchief.

"I am aware of that. But there can be no doubt of the facts that I found. Those wounds had not bled, as they would have done had they been made in living flesh."

The sheriff jabbed a cigar into his face. "Well I'll be eternally damned!" he muttered under his breath.

"And that isn't all," the doctor was going on. "The instrument that tore at her flesh so shockingly wasn't any iron hook as you supposed. To the best of my belief, it was done by a *beak*—by some huge and horny bill such as a parrot or macaw might have had. The flesh isn't cut, it is gouged and torn away in a succession of pitted wounds—bitten or pecked away."

We listened to that and tried to digest it. Bitten or pecked away—God! It was just one more puzzle piece in a pattern of horrors.

"And those marks, those red circles on Van?" I said.

"Yes, those marks. . . ." Dr. Wells mopped his brow. "I, er—can't even guess at what made them. It looks as though that man's flesh had been branded in red by an iron with rows of raised circles along it. Those marks on him—yes, they are *burned* there."

Nobody spoke for a minute. Higgins was pacing the floor, muttering under his breath. Just a rural law officer, this thing had him beyond his depth. Finally he beckoned to his men and went out without speaking.

The rest of us spent the remainder of the night where we were, in Van's living

room. No one could face the thought of going to bed. We talked and talked, we debated and pondered, and the pall of that horror that we couldn't untangle only grew thicker and darker.

Nor did we trust the electric lights any more. We filled the room with lighted candles and oil lamps and we sat there and waited.

THE night passed without anything more happening. Higgins and his men had been marking time during the dark hours, but with daylight they went to work.

They fine-combed the Portegee village and found the same as we had done—nothing. They went up and spent an hour at Lauderdeck's and came back with more of the same.

No one had been to Ranier's house since the night before. Higgins and the doctor went up there to get Louise. In a couple of minutes we saw them coming back on the run.

"That dame ain't there, she's gone!" White-faced and goggle-eyed, Higgins shouted as he pounded up to the house. "Was there ever any woman killed there at all—"

We didn't believe him, we couldn't believe—till half a dozen of us had climbed in again over the shattered debris of the front hall and satisfied our own eyes. The blood on Louise's bed was there, soddening the sheets and pillow with its crimson flags. But Louise was gone. During the night, someone—or something—had taken her body away.

And that also was the case when they went up by daylight to look at Peggy again. Since three o'clock, when Dr. Wells had examined her, she had been stolen out of the house. . . .

We held a meeting that morning—all the winter vacationists who formed the corporation of Pelican Island. We got together in the little dancing casino on

the bluff over the water, a white and silent group of women and men. Outside, the sun shone as it can shine only in Florida, the soft lapping of the blue water against the rocks sounded lulling and peaceful. But the air in the place was cold with the foreboding of something that congealed us with terror.

It wasn't so much that Louise and Peggy were dead; death was a dark picture, but it could be understood. It was that death hadn't ended their fates, that their bodies had been stolen away. And that thing that had *crawled*. . . .

"They're somewhere here, somewhere right around, close to us!" Bill Onslow's wife whispered. "Who—what—took them away? What did he do it for? *What did he want to do with them?*"

That was what we were all thinking about, the question that made all of those women cold in the sunshine. If they should be killed, what would that thing do with them *after they were dead?*

We talked it all over, what we should do, whether we should give up the place and depart to the mainland. And in spite of everything, we decided not to go.

Maybe the bright sunshine and the tingling air gave us fool's courage. "The police are investigating. Whoever did it is on the island. It's a small place and they can't help but find him," Fred Wilson reasoned. "We are safe enough if we all stay together. And in a day or two it will be over."

That was the way we decided in our unimaginative common sense. But I knew there wasn't a man in the group who didn't secretly feel as I did, that he was worse than a fool to stay on, that he should have rushed his wife into a boat in the clothes that she stood up in and put a thousand miles between her and the thing that crawled before it tore her flesh away like the snapping beak of a bird.

One thing, however, we did decide—that until the mystery was cleared up, we

wouldn't sleep in our own houses at night. We would all gather at Tom Malone's—he had the biggest place. We would burn candles and oil lamps and some of us would stand watch, patrolling the house, from dusk till dawn.

An hour later, one of the police boats started back to the mainland with Van Dine—to carry him to an asylum. He kept tearing something invisible off his face and screaming that it crawled. . . .

HIGGINS pulled me to one side. He produced a square of paper out of his pocket. "Who in this place could draw a thing like that?" he asked.

I felt my scalp tighten as I looked at it. It was a sketch done in colored crayon, but the uncanny genius of the artist had endowed the figures of the composition with a kind of hellish vitality.

Against a background of bright sand and water, a nude woman was wildly dancing. She danced with her arms raised high over her head.

Her long, unbound hair spread fanwise about her head and shoulders as her slim figure gyrated in obedience to a curling, many-thonged whip which seemed to follow her every direction, etching red trails of torment on her naked flesh.

The wielder of the whip was a hybrid monstrosity, half sea-creature, half man. The upper portion of the shape's body was that of a deformed dwarf. From the waist down the loathsome thing had in lieu of legs eight pinkish tentacles which writhed through the air like members of a multifold, living whip. Where they lashed and twined around the girl's curving nakedness, jagged slashes of crimson blotched her skin.

I shuddered. "Anyone I know draw that—God, no!" I exclaimed. "Where did you get it?"

"Found it on the floor beside the Ranier woman's bed," Higgins muttered. "Done by a madman. Makes me think

of some of the frights that I saw up there at the prof's."

Lauderdeck—yes. The insane frenzy of that hideous shape brought back the crazy lights that I'd seen in the scientist's eyes. The "frights" that Higgins referred to must be the marine specimens that he kept in the tanks with which his house was half filled.

In the bright winter sunshine, something cold seemed to crawl on me. That drawing had come from a mind diseased, it was a warning of other horrors. It told me that something more hideously evil than I'd yet dreamed was close to us here, close to Mary.

I sensed that on-creeping menace, and still I didn't go, I let Mary stay on there. God, if any penance in this life or agony of hell fires in that to come can help me atone for that! If I could forfeit my life to make up for my madness when I let the woman whom I loved more than life, whom I had sworn to protect, stay on in this island of doom!

I suppose it must have been because the fullness of terror of which I saw visions till it didn't seem humanly possible, because I trusted the sheriff and his men to take care of us. Higgins had sent for more officers, there were six of them now. Their presence and the beauty and seeming peace, the sunshine and the soothing expanse of blue water stretching off to the horizon must have lulled me into a fool's heedlessness.

YET all the same I couldn't relax. I felt treachery in the very air. In the afternoon I put on my bathing trunks and joined the others at the beach, and all I could think of was the exulting look on the face of that monster as he flogged the girl with his rubbery whirling legs. I would look at Mary, more than half naked in her ultra-modern swim suit and in fancy I'd see those other eyes lusting after her. . . .

Hell, the things that I thought of that day! And the others, too. The thoughts of those dead women who had been taken away—for what purpose—haunted the living.

And still I didn't do anything—till the thing that happened that evening, that jerked the mask from the face of my terror and stood it in front of me, stark and gibbering.

IT WAS an hour after dark, Mary and I had gone over to Bill Malone's according to plan, and we were up in the room to which he had showed us, freshening up before dinner. In her underthings, Mary suddenly halted before the dressing table. She stood looking at something which she held out of my sight. I saw her bare shoulders twitch, I heard her hysterical gasp.

"What is it? What have you there," I exclaimed. I went and looked over her shoulder.

One look I took and a cold iron seemed driven into me. For the thing that—as she told me later—she had seen sticking out from under one of the trays on the table and pulled out in curiosity—was another one of those crayon seascapes!

The nude girl was there, being flogged by that thing. And the face of that orgiastically pirouetting female—a face contorted with pain and hideously alight too with a damnable ecstasy—was Mary's own! It was as though she had sat for her portrait to the fiend who had executed the drawing!

I snatched the thing out of her hand and tore it in pieces. She turned to me and flung her arms around my neck.

"John! Where did that come from, what does it mean?" she moaned. "I'm afraid! I'm horribly afraid! That woman was me!"

Afraid! God, a stifling hand clutched at my heart. Louise had got one of those things. And Louise had been killed and

her body taken away. We had thought that we had protected ourselves with police and guards, but some one had been able to get into Bill's house and leave that warning for Mary.

All my brave resolutions to stay and see the thing through, all my faith in the measures of safety that we had adopted went dead as a snuffed candle. The others could do what they wanted to, stay or go, but this was enough for me. Peggy's ribboned face swam in my vision and the iron of terror vised more breathlessly around my heart.

"Get your clothes on quick! Never mind stopping to pack anything we're going this minute!" I muttered.

Maybe it was five minutes later that we opened our door and hurried down stairs. For the first time then I realized that something was happening down there. A knot of figures was clustered around the open front door and they were all talking excitedly together.

I heard snatches of words as Mary and I ran up behind them. Old Jimmy Rodriguez, Steve's father, was out on the porch. His lined, deep-bitten face was pasty-grey under its wind-tan, his eyes bulged whitely.

The gold rings in his ears shook with his trembling. "I tell you, de boats all sunk!" he cried. "Since dark, wan hour ago, somebody sink every boat on de island! All you folks' boats, all fisherman's boats. No wan can get away from dees place—"

There was a lot more talk, but I didn't linger to listen. I drew Mary back into the house and I stood there, sickened with terror. We had waited too long. And now that monster who was behind this, knowing that one more fright would send us all stampeding, had fixed things so that none of us could depart. Here we were trapped, and up there in our room lay the picture in which Mary's doom was blue-printed—in which she danced, a dead woman, to

the song of those spitting whips!

CHAPTER THREE

When the Dead Laughed

JIMMY RODRIGUEZ went back to the village. In Bill's dining room where dinner had been waiting, we sat making a bluff at eating and only succeeding in drinking more than was good for us. That wholesale boat scuttling, we knew what it meant. We were trapped on that island, trapped there to wait for death.

Fred Wilson tried to buck us up. "This doesn't change anything really," he said in his careful logical way. "In the morning we will put up a distress signal on top of the island. Some passing boat will be sure to see it in a day or two. We have just got to be more careful, that's all."

Careful—I kept Mary close at my side, I wouldn't let her out of my sight, and I could feel her trembling when our bodies touched.

The evening wore away. Along toward ten o'clock, she announced that she was tired and was going to bed. I went up with her, of course.

She didn't start to undress, restlessly she roamed around. She went across to a window, opened it and stood looking out. In an instant she turned, beckoning to me. "John, come here—"

I went over and stood at her side. "What is it?" I whispered.

She clutched my arm. "Listen—"

And then I heard the sound that had startled her. Faint and eldritch it came, born from far away on the breeze. The sound of laughing. Women's voices were laughing! But it wasn't normal, that laughter, it held something wild and macabre that chilled the blood.

"John! What is the matter with them? Who are those women laughing?" Mary cried.

I slammed shut the window. "Probably some girls from the village, out on a lark." She shivered. "No, not village girls—not those voices," she whispered. "Not those voices in agony—those voices laughing in pain—"

I muttered: "I'm going down stairs. Come on—"

Down there, I left her talking to some of the others and beckoned Fred Wilson to one side. I didn't tell him what I had heard. I merely said:

"I'm not satisfied with those policemen of Higgins'. I don't believe they'll ever find out anything. I'm going out around and take a look for myself."

He looked at me oddly. "Want any help?"

I shook my head. "One can hide easier than two. But I'll need help back here. I want you to look out for Mary."

He nodded grimly. He patted a bulge in his pocket. "I'll see to her—"

I slipped away without Mary's noticing me, for I knew that she would never con-



sent to my going. Leaving her after what had happened to those other two, after the picture that had come to her, seemed an act of madness. But I had to go, for that hellish laughter suggested something on which I didn't dare to focus my thoughts. It sounded as though it might have come *from the dancing girl whom I'd seen in that picture.*

Mad—of course, the whole set-up was mad. But something was happening, and it was a thing too dark and deep for the matter-of-fact minds of the country policemen. They couldn't cope with these grisly horrors. Days might pass before we were rescued. If I still hoped to save Mary, there was only one way, to go out myself and find out what it was, to try to catch this man, beast or whatever in God's name it might be, before it struck at her.

A LOW moon cast a yellow slick like a writhing dragon over the water. It pricked out the spires of rock, gaunt splintered pinnacles stabbing the stars.

Hugging the shadows, I followed a narrow path that ran along the crest of the bluff. Down below were the caves that everywhere lined the shore, into which the surf beat with a hollow growl.

I hadn't been out more than a minute when I heard footsteps behind me, feet racing wildly over the stones and a voice sobbing my name. Mary's voice! The next instant she came running out of the shadows, white-faced, hair streaming.

"Mary! For God's sake!" I ran to her, I grasped both of her cold and shaking hands. "Go back—you shouldn't be here! You must go back to the house!"

"No! No, John! I can't stand it without you! Take me with you wherever you're going!"

Take her with me, out into that darkness where God only knew what was waiting! But on second thought, what did it matter? Maybe she would be just

as safe with me as back in the house. For guards and crowds hadn't prevented the killer from getting into Van's. And here at least I'd have her with me, I could watch over her.

"Come along then," I muttered. I grasped her hand.

For a while, I wouldn't know how long, we stole through the shadows. No one was here, that laughter had ceased. Just loneliness, the stars and the crooning wind.

Suddenly we turned a corner around the flank of a boulder and a figure was standing there—Lauderdeck. The moonlight shone on his red lips already smiling, on his black beard and the fathomless jet eyes with their inscrutable mockery.

He advanced with outstretched hand. "An unexpected pleasure, indeed!" he exclaimed. "It seems that I am not the only one whom the beauty of night brings into the open."

Revulsion tingled me as, diplomatically, I touched the cold, strangely reptilian fingers.

"Yes, taking a walk—but not exactly for pleasure," I responded briefly.

He didn't answer at once. His eyes had lighted on Mary, on her voluptuous, full-blown allurements, on the full curves of her figure where the unbuttoned neck of her blouse left her bosom deeply revealed. It seemed as though the man's oddly-shaped eyebrows moved, alive, curled in an up-twisting of satyr's lust. He found my angry gaze on him and shifted his glance. His look became grave.

"Yes—danger is here," he said. "Peril lurks in the shadows, peril that no one can fathom. Really, my dear Carstairs, I most strongly urge you to take your wife home. Or if you must go on, allow me to accompany you. I have a revolver—"

I shook my head. With scant courtesy I said:

"Thanks, but we prefer to be alone. We have things to discuss—"

Lauderdeck said nothing more. He bowed and stood aside for us to pass.

We went along, and the night had grown colder.

We headed at random toward the north end of the island. We were out of sight of all houses now, the scenery grew wilder, more barren and savage.

We were walking close to the base of the big hill, or little mountain, that shot up abruptly here. The moonlight glinted on the strangely colored, shining rocks that stood out on its cliffs and lay scattered around its base. We had wondered a lot what those rocks were, but nobody knew.

Right ahead was a deep gash running into the bluff, opening of a cove which cut into the land, with hundred foot cliffs running down to the shore. We came to its edge and stood peering over.

Below, the curved, sandy beach glimmered gold in the moonlight. For a moment the place seemed deserted. Then Mary pressed my hand. "Look there!" she whispered.

For now we could see that two figures were moving down there. At first they were dim, wraith-like, wavering ghosts. And then I perceived that they were female forms. Two women, stark naked. They came further on to the beach and they started to dance.

Dance, God! In sinuous riplings of their nude bodies they moved, they writhed and gyrated, they swayed with shudderings of bosoms and hips that were pagan.

And now I heard the cracking of whips. From the deep blackness that swathed the mouths of the caves issued a figure. It ran scuttling over the sand in a side-wise, crab-fashioned gait.

A figure from hell! For its lower part was that of a deformed dwarf. And its upper portion seemed composed of writh-

ing tentacles, long sinuous arms that wove a gyrating pattern around it as it raced toward the two women.

Human arms and hands the thing appeared to have. And one of those uplifted hands clutched a whip. It started flogging the women. The darting black thong swished and hissed, cracked on their nudeness, and crooked rivulets of crimson trickled over their shoulders.

TRANSFIXED I stood while starkness of horror crawled on me. It was Mary who moved first. Sobbing, she groped in my pocket for the field glasses that I had put there when I started out.

I twitched them out of her clasp and clapped them to my own eyes. I husked a curse, for in the field of those glasses I saw the faces of those naked forms.

Louise Ranier and Peggy Van Dine! Louise and Peggy, dancing to the whip of that monster! And more incredible still, those ghastly wounds that had ribboned their faces were gone, their countenances were smooth and unblemished.

I felt Mary's arms clutching about my neck. Her teeth chattered, she moaned in choked sobbings.

"But they are dead! Louise and Peggy are dead!"

I mopped the sweat from my forehead. Yes, dead. . . . I had seen them lying in their beds, I had put my ear to their silent hearts. . . . But alive again now, and that mad resurrection had cleansed the scars of their wounds from them. . . .

Again it was Mary who got hold of herself first, who was gripping my sleeve, tugging me onward. "We've got to go down there and get them!" she shivered. "We've got to get them and bring them back!"

I halted, pulling her back. "No, not there!" I cried. "Not down there where that creature is!" For I knew that it was he that had sent her her warning, it was his form there on that picture!

But she wouldn't stop, she kept pulling me onward. "We've got to get them, we've got to get them away!" she kept crying.

At last I gave in and went with her. Cold sweat poured down my back. God, to take Mary down there within reach of that thing!

A short distance away, the bluff shelved in an easier gradient which sloped to the water. Over the slippery clay and bunch grass we went sliding. A tower of black rocks loomed in front of us. We groped through their mazes and suddenly came out on the edge of the beach.

We could see them more clearly now, they were only a short distance away. Their faces held a blank stare, their eyes were fixed and unseeing, eyes of the dead!

Yet still they danced. The black figure skipped and capered around them. Close to him now, I could see the eyes flaming red as sulphur flames in his face that suggested the pinched and venomous savagery of a huge spider. The hand gripping the whip rose and fell. They held up their bosoms. Into the biting flame of that lash they lifted their breasts while eldritch laughter shrilled through their lips!

"Stay here! Don't you take a step out on to that sand!" I muttered to Mary. I was clenching my teeth over my horror, with all the power of my trained and sophisticated mind I was fighting the conviction of that sight which I saw there before me. I saw it, but I knew that it couldn't be, such things didn't happen in this human world. . . .

I took a step from behind the rock. In another instant I would have been out there—had not another hand gripped me and held me back.

I spun around. Steve Rodriguez stood there. Moisture stood on his lips, his eyes bulged white in his swarthy face.

"Steve! What are they? What is that thing?" I cried.

He shook his head. "I don't know. Be-

fore God, Mr. Carstairs, I can't guess! But don't you go out there, sir—in God's name don't take a chance with that thing!"

"I've got to," I muttered. "I've got to get those women, and—"

I looked around and sucked down a breath. For those figures were gone! As though my magic, all three of them had disappeared—vanished back into the caves.

We didn't go in there searching for them. Not for all the money in the world's gold mines would I have taken Mary inside one of those jagged holes. . . .

WE WENT back to the house and Steve stayed with us as far as the door. Inside, we didn't mention what we had seen to the others. We couldn't bring ourselves to put that tale into words.

We went up to our room and we sat there for hours, with all the lights on, my arms wrapped around Mary, trying to figure it out.

"They didn't ever really die," she pondered aloud at last. "They seemed dead to us in our excitement—even to the doctor when he examined Peggy. Something had been done to them, they had been sent into some kind of a trance, like suspended animation, to make them like that—the wounds on their faces weren't as serious as we supposed, not enough to kill them. And then at night, this—this madman or whatever he is, came when no one was looking, and took them away—"

It was a wild explanation, for a dozen reasons it wouldn't hold water. Yet I couldn't think of anything better. For Mary's sake, I made her think I believed it—she needed something rational to hold on to. I didn't tell her that I had put my ear to those two girls' hearts and I knew that they were forever stilled. That I knew that the pair we had seen were the living dead. . . .

I knew that, I knew that those girls

had been dead, and then I'd seen them living again! That was a thing that my reason couldn't accept, against which I fought with all the logic of my college-trained and cynical intellect. And it was a puzzle that I couldn't answer. God, I had seen what I had seen!

Around and around that thought beat in my brain till it seemed I'd go mad. Mary had got her warning that she would be the next victim. The next, not to find the peace of oblivion beyond the dark frontier, but to live again, hideously and impossibly, to dance under the song of those spitting whips!

The night passed and the next day arrived. I felt it my duty to impart my knowledge to Higgins. I got him aside and told him the story while he stared at me, thinking me mad. But he promised to take his men and go down to search through those caves.

They put in all day at the hunt and they came back empty-handed.

"There's a million of them little holes, it would take an army to cover them all," he muttered as he sat on the piazza mopping his brow. "But sooner or later that nut will come into the open again. All you folks have to do is hang together and keep away from the rocks after dark."

Time dragged—three, four, five days. And still nothing happened. Our flag of distress, with ensign reversed, fluttered from the pole at the end of the island. We waited for rescue, but no craft showed on the horizon.

But with the passing of time, our fever of terror began to die down. Higgins' men were around us and we told ourselves that their presence would keep that madman cowed in his lair.

And so little by little we started to encyst those horrors in our minds, weave little cocoons of forgetfulness around them. A gesture of cowardice or of self-preservation, it is hard to say. For that is ever the way of human nature, ostrich-

like to blind one's self to things that are too painful or too terrible to think of. Too much supping on horrors will drive a man mad. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Cave of the Dancing Dead

IT WAS late in the afternoon, just a week after the day when the boats had been sunk, that Bill Onslow caught my eye while I was loafing around with half a dozen others in the casino and beckoned me outside.

"Seen Mary lately?" he asked.

"Half an hour ago," I said. "She took a book and went over there in those rocks to read." I pointed at a cluster of boulders that stood not more than a couple of hundred yards away, in plain sight. "Why? Has anything—"

"Hang on to yourself, John." Bill clipped his words through tight lips. "I happened to stroll around there just now, and I found this on the ground. Mary wasn't there—"

He shoved a paper into my hand. Before I looked at it, I knew. Mary's face—on another one of those naked girls who danced while the thing flogged them! Her second warning!

The paper crackled under my clenching hand. We had agreed never to be alone, never to lose sight of our wives for an instant. And then, with these days of safety, we had grown careless. I'd taken chances with that which was more precious to me than life itself, while that fiend bided his time!

I heard the noise of footsteps and voices, I knew that the others had come crowding out of the summer house. I elbowed my way through them. I couldn't endure the sound of their voices, their words of sympathy beat torture strokes on my brain. I had to be alone with my remorse and my agony.

How long I roamed that island, up and

down, I wouldn't know. A million wild schemes to find Mary seethed in my brain. I had a mad impulse to throw myself into the sea and swim the fifteen miles to the mainland and get an army to come and tear those rocks to pieces.

If I had seen her dead, that would mean at least that her agony was over, she was at peace. But she wasn't dead. There in the daytime, the fiend who had kidnapped her hadn't had time to kill her as he had killed the others. He had taken her away alive. Perhaps she was still alive, waiting in torture for me to come! Or if she was dead, she would come alive again, alive like those others that I had seen on the beach. . . .

Darkness shut down and still in near-frenzy I wandered. All over the island, places where Mary and I had been; cozy nooks where we had sat, locked in each other's arms; sandy beaches where her happy laughter had rung.

After a while, my senses in a measure returned to me. I swung around. Grimly I set my feet toward Lauderdeck's house. Of all the people who lived here in this place, I still believed him the one most likely to be behind this sabbath of horrors. I'd go to him and ask him about Mary. He'd tell me the truth, or I'd kill him. . . .

NO ONE answered my ring at the big house on the hill. I tried again, and then turned the knob. To my surprise, the door was unlocked. I shoved it open and went inside.

No one was in sight. Through an open door I could see lights, going in Lauderdeck's study, books and papers strewn over the floor around his favorite chair.

I called his name and got no answer. Hesitantly at first, then with growing wonder, I started exploring the place. I travelled all over the house from bottom to top and no one was there.

At last I turned toward the group of

rooms in which he kept his collections. Here was a bewildering array of tanks, with all sorts of salt water creatures alive in them; fishes and crustacea, great marine worms as long as my arm, devilish looking sting rays with murderous projecting spines, big sea anemonies, fragile and beautiful as vividly colored flowers afloat in the water but poisonous as searing acid, and I don't know what all.

And then, in the last corner of the cellar there was a door through which I pushed and then halted suddenly.

In here was pitch darkness. And out of it a gelid hand seemed to reach and press on my spine.

I BLINKED, rubbed my hand over my eyes. In this dank dungeon was nothing that I could see. Yet I was aware of a presence, a foul and nauseous, unhuman something, *that lived*.

And then I was conscious of something else, of that vile and putrid stench that I had smelled in Louise Ranier's room. And of yet one other thing, a noise there in front of me. A slow, thick rippling, swishing of something heavy and sluggish through turgid water.

My thumb hit the knob of my flash and light streamed through the murk. The white ray shone on a pair of eyes that seemed to swim against the dark surface of water in the raised tank in the middle of the floor. Great moon-round eyes aglow with weird hunger. Two of them—and then two more, four eyes in all.

Long, sinuous outlines like slender elephant's trunks waved to and fro over the tank. Blue-black in hue, pink underneath, with rows of little rounded protuberances set along their nether sides. Out from the centers of those circles of swaying tentacles, faces stared at me, incarnations of hell. Wondering, lascivious moon-eyes and over the puckered mouths beaks like down-curving hooks.

And now, behind the arms and the

faces, I could make out two huge, bulbous bodies, jet black inflated bags. Lauderdale's two octopi! Imported here and kept where he could study their life habits.

Showerbath of stark horror drenched over me. Such horn-like beaks on these creatures as could have bitten and torn Louise and Peggy Van Dine! Those suckers on their tentacles could have made the marks we had seen on Van! Louise had screamed that something was crawling—the touch of one of those tentacles would have felt like a slithering snake!

Sagged back against the wall I stood staring and my soul was sick with bewilderment. An octopus, too, had undoubtedly been the inspiration of those lewd pictures; the whips with which the monster had flogged the girl were their tentacles! But an octopus, travelling around and getting into houses—was I going mad!

But one thing I did know, Mary was gone. She had been taken away by that thing, whatever in God's name it was, that played with these hideous symbols. Taken where, save into this house, where all things matched too perfectly for it to be coincidence?

I looked at those shapes in the tank, and quintessence of horror crawled on me. Mary brought here, where those two figures of hell leered out of their hungry eyes! Brought here to what ghastly and unthinkable doom?

The ray of my light shifted and then

I saw what I hadn't noticed before, the dark rectangle of a trap door open in the opposite corner of the floor.

I ran over and peered through the cavity. The eye of the light showed a hole in the rocks with a flight of iron rungs set into the granite face and leading down.

The metal rungs were slime-dripping and gelid under my hands. Half-slipping, I scrambled down them and stood on the wet sandy floor of another cave where gaunt and riven walls of water-shimmering jet dissolved in thick shadows. At one side a passage led steeply down and in this direction I could hear the boom and hiss of the breakers dashing into one of the tidal caves.

The other way, a crooked tunnel rose steeply into the rocky maze. And in this direction the most sand was pitted with footsteps.

Following the spoor of those steps, I started running. Perhaps a couple of minutes I'd climbed when suddenly I halted.

For up ahead, voices were laughing. Women's voices like those that Mary and I had heard on the beach, shrilling mirth that held a note of unthinkable horror.

I stumbled around one more rocky angle and halted, transfixed.

At the end of the passage down which I had come, a cave of sorts hollowed the rock. And there in its middle, Louise and Peggy were dancing. Stark nude and laughing as they swung their bosoms



and hips in a shuddering that was purely vile.

For an instant, I stood there and then, despite the tingling rush of my horror, I was running toward those two girls. Thickly I shouted their names. For I had got to know. I had got to find out if I was really seeing this or if I was going mad.

Just a couple of steps I took, they paid no attention to me, and then I checked my advance and slid back behind a jutting crag.

For Mary was there! Out from one of the niches that fissured the wall of the cavern she came walking and beside her a figure.

The dim glow from a lantern hanging to the wall showed it up clearly—the squat lower body of a deformed hunchback, and above a body that was the puffy black bag and dangling tentacles of an octopus.

And by a human hand he gripped Mary while he led her on toward those other two. She walked with him and she didn't resist. Her gait was mechanical. The look in her eyes was the same fixed and vacant stare that I'd seen in Louise and Peggy's.

I SWEPT my hand over my eyes, I cracked my gaze into the yellow murk. Was she indeed like those others? Dear God, had I come only in time to find her one of the walking dead?

Out of the mouth of the passage I dashed toward her. "Mary! Mary!" I shouted. "What are you doing there with that thing? Speak to me—"

And then I knew that she wasn't dead, for she gasped and turned. Her arms flew out. "John! John, darling!" she shrieked.

I was half way across the floor to her when from behind I heard a jangling snarl and the rush of other feet.

I spun around—in time to see a second one of those shapes, a black and formless

blot that came sweeping down on me with its eight circumferential legs whirling and lashing. I spilled backward, trying to sidestep. I slipped on the damp sand and the next instant huge, steel-powerful arms whipped around me.

I lashed out at it, I hammered my fists into the place where its face ought to have been. It growled and clutched me the tighter.

We thrashed and battled all over the place. The strength of that thing was incredible. Its whirling legs tangled around me, wound me in a tramelling net. I couldn't get clear of it, its two arms vised me tighter and a white hot iron seemed clamping around my lungs. Over my head its eyes blazed weirdly blue as sulphur flames and between them was a black, down-curving hook like the beaks of those octopi. Like the beaks which had slashed and torn the faces of those girls—those girls who, nevertheless, had whole, unscarred faces, now.

Over its shoulder, as we hammered and clawed at each other, I could see Mary. The one that held her had started tearing her clothes off. Garment by garment he ribboned them, till at last she stood naked.

For an instant he stood gloating over her rosy beauty. Sucking his breath, he slid his hands over her shoulders, her bosom. Suddenly he swept her into his arms. He wrapped them around her, he pressed her nude softness against him.

I saw my wife's naked body disappearing into the black clutch of that creature and I cursed in near-madness. I beat my fists into the creature's visage, I jabbed my thumbs into the pits where his eyes were ablaze.

And then I saw something, more horrible yet. For as he held her, that other one was bending low over Mary's face. Stooping to crush against it that long, curving black beak! Hooking its sharp point into her flesh to ribbon it as the cheeks of Peggy and Louise had been torn!

Sheer paroxysm of terror gave me strength that wasn't my own. With an ape-like yell, I wrenched myself loose from that grip. A kick to his vitals drove him staggering backward.

Across to Mary I rushed. On the way I stooped to snatch up a rock from the floor of the cave.

The other one heard me, he dropped Mary and whirled. The first one had got his feet under him again, he came lunging down.

And then there were two of them. With the edge of my rock I beat the foremost of those hellish twins back on his haunches.

Turning to meet the other one, I tripped and went over backward. I felt searing pain as my arm doubled under me and the bone splintered. With a snarl, the monster flung himself on me, his knees in my stomach drove the wind out of me.

But my good arm was free. Straight upward into his face I drove my rock, with the last savage ounce of my strength. I heard a scream of pain, I saw the black rubber mask that covered his features split lengthwise to disclose the pale and sweating face of a man with blood trickling between the eyes.

I got my feet under me and scrambled up. For a moment then I was clear—for only a moment, while those two forms wobbled, half-stunned.

The fear and the fighting had been too much for Mary. She had slumped down in a faint, she lay a rounded white heap against the rocks.

With my good arm I managed to get hold of her and swing her up over my shoulder. I spun around and started to run.

Which direction to go to get back to Lauderdeck's ladder, I didn't know, for in this maze of twisting passages I had lost my way. Stumbling and tripping, lurching under my burden, I fled desperately. blindlv. And now I heard those

others—those *things*—coming behind me.

WITH my arm knitted around Mary's soft, naked body, I ran for life, for both of our lives. The connecting caves under the cliff were tunnelled with passages, a bewildering maze. How long I fled up and down their twistings and turnings, I wouldn't know. The bones of my broken arm jabbed through the flesh. I could hear the ends grinding as the useless member swung at my side. Sweat of agony poured over me. Black specs danced in my eyes. I was tiring fast, breathless and almost spent.

I stumbled over a rock and pitched down on my face. I was too weak now, too winded and sickened with torture to get up again. On my one good hand and my knees I started to crawl, halting at every step to drag Mary's limp figure beside me.

On and on till at last I halted, groaning in my despair. I couldn't do any more, I couldn't go on, and they were close behind. Mary stirred, she whispered my name. With my sound arm I strained her against me, wildly I kissed her nerveless lips.

And then, despite the agony that seared living flame through my body, I was going on again, creeping, crawling, one tortured, desperate step after another. Hours, centuries, seemed to pass. I tasted the salty sweetness of oozing blood where my teeth pierced my lips. And then, through the mists of my agony I became aware of something.

A dark shape lay motionless in my path. Dazedly, I passed wondering fingers over it, bent to peer into its face. Lauderdeck's face, the skull crushed by a savage blow. But the man wasn't yet dead, he was still breathing.

I crawled past him and struggled on. The footsteps were right behind, around the last corner, coming up fast.

A booming roar droned in my ears, the champing of breakers. I knew why, be-

cause the path down which I crawled led into one of the caves which honeycombed the bases of the cliffs along the shore. At low water these caves were empty, they could be entered from the beach, but the tide was in now, it came booming and roaring into the narrow gut.

That was what lay at one end of my trap—and behind, the two dark forms which I saw just turning the corner as I darted a look backward. They caught sight of me, they yelled and came dashing on.

What desperate strength of despair was born in me then, I don't know. A man never knows what he can do till he looks into death's eyes.

But suddenly I was up on my feet again, with Mary crushed tight in my one useful arm. Down that rocky slope I went lurching. I heard the panting snarls behind, and ahead a green, phosphorescent wall came roaring and hissing into the mouth of the cave, drenching me with spray.

Headforemost, I drove into that hissing whirlpool. I felt the waters close over me, savage hands clutched and tore at me. Only with my legs could I swim. Madly I used them, with strength of despair I fought those raging waters. My lungs already were burning from lack of oxygen. I had to fight desperately the impulse to open my mouth and gulp in the water which would have spelled my instant death.

Centuries seemed to pass. The breakers engulfed me, they hurled me to and fro like a chip, they slammed me against rending crags, they beat the breath from my body. Now the inward pressure was bursting my lungs, I felt the drums of my ears splitting as I started to bleed through them.

And then suddenly, that torment relaxed. My head came up out of the water, I sucked down a blistering breath. Dimly I could see the dark mouth of the cave behind me, and ahead a narrow strip of

water which lay between me and the land.

I had just strength enough left to paddle my way up to that sand. Vaguely I was aware of faces and voices, of hands which seized me and drew me ashore. The folks from the house, it turned out later, had been hunting for me for hours.

AN hour later, after I had told them my story and they had gone down into the cave through Lauderdeck's house, we got the truth out of the professor—for he lived an hour before he finally breathed his last.

Steve Rodriguez, whose face I had recognized when my blow broke through his rubber mask, had been at the back of it all. When Steve had gone away to college, he had taken with him a sample of rock from the detritus slopes that ringed the base of the great hill at the north end of the island. To him it was just a bit of queerly shining stone. But his professor had told him that it was a piece of tungsten ore and that the lode from which it had come was worth millions.

Steve's outward appearance of wholesome honesty had been a hoax. He had tasted the elixir of life during his college days and he wanted money, lots of quick money, to drink it deep. The tungsten ore was on land owned by the winter vacationists. So the first thing to do was to get rid of them. He thought out the terror campaign to drive us away, so that he and his father—who was not too unwilling to join—could buy it back for a song. Old Jimmy had been the other thing in the rubber octopus suit.

Peggy and Louise they hadn't even killed. They had stolen them away alive. The dead bodies which we had found in their beds had been those of village girls who had died shortly before. Steve and his father had done a skillful job of grave-robbing. They had brought the bodies to Frank and Van's houses, sneaked them up by way of low roofs and into the bedrooms and left them there when they had

taken the girls away. The disfigurement of their faces had been done for two reasons—to drive the iron of terror deeper into the strangers, and to make identification of the substitutes impossible. They had taken the bodies away again both to terrify us the more with fearsome surmises and to prevent a more careful medical examination from revealing the fact that those corpses had been embalmed. Colliding with Van up in Peggy's room, Steve had slashed his face with the curved tines of a sponge rake.

The details of the terror-hokum and the crayon pictures, which Steve himself had drawn and left around, had been suggested by Lauderdeck's two octopi. The red circles, which looked like marks left by the tentacles of the beasts, he had applied with a rubber stamp dipped in an indellible dye. The smell he had planted with a foul-smelling substance which he had dropped in the rooms.

Steve was a degenerate, too, a sadist. When he had got those two girls in his power, he had administered a drug which evoked unnatural sex impulses and made them take part, at his suggestion, in the lewd dances.

As for Lauderdeck's part, the half-crazy scientist had been from the first an unwilling partner. Steve had got hold of some facts about his relations with the village girls with which he could have sent him behind the bars. With that knowledge he had blackmailed him to permit the use of the cave under his house. But Lauderdeck's better part had asserted itself after a while. Revolted, he had balked at more slaughter. He had tried to get Mary away from them when they had taken her there. Savagely, without compunction, Steve had smashed him down.

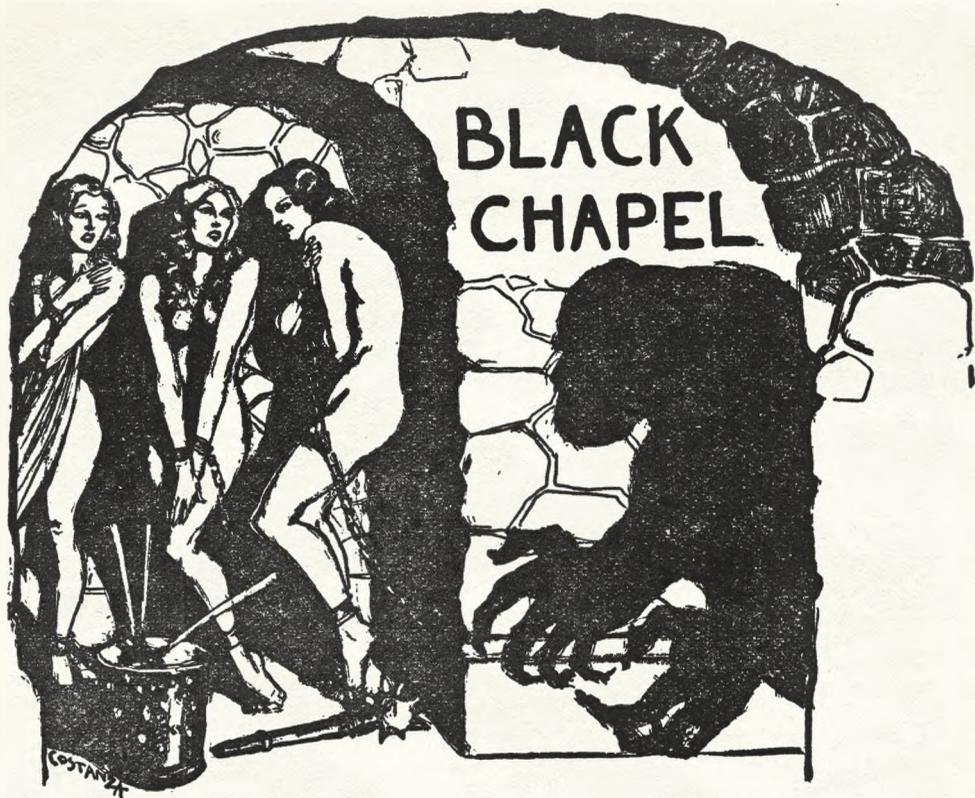
LUISE and Peggy hadn't been much hurt. A coast guard cutter saw our distress signal and put in the next day.

They rounded up Steve and Jimmy after a day's searching and clapped them in irons. We all went back with them to the mainland. In a hospital, the two girls slowly recovered from the effects of the drug. Of course their faces had never been slashed—those dreadful wounds had been on the cheeks of the dead village girls. And the drugs had had at least one beneficent result: they had dulled the memory of the terrors they had witnessed—had shielded their minds against the soul-destroying horrors they had been subjected to. Because of that, in time they could forget. . . .

Van's case was the worst. The surgeons worked a miracle on his face, but his mind wasn't so easily cured. Six months afterward he was still in a mental hospital, tearing those invisible things from his face and screaming that something was crawling. The doctors said that in another six months or a year—perhaps . . .

As for Mary and me, we sold our interest in the tungsten mine and in Pelican island, too, to a syndicate. We never wanted to see the place again. Gradually the memory of her horrors grew dim in her mind. But she had not been so long subjected to the effects of the drug as the other girls. The terrors she had lived through had left a sharper-etched impression on her brain. It was only the strength of her will, the indomitable determination that the nightmare she had experienced should not ruin her life, that brought her through, at last. She fought the hideous phantoms that threatened her sanity and her happiness—as well as mine—and, I firmly believe, won finally more on my account than her own.

But some nights, I feel her cuddle closer to me and then as she winds her arms tighter around my neck, I know that she is dreaming of the crawling touch of those black tentacles over her flesh.



THE GIRL was not a witch. If she had been, perhaps she could have devised some bit of magic to counteract the ever-mounting terror that was flooding over her young body, pounding in her brain, as the awful hopelessness of her predicament became manifest.

She was bound to a crude bench in a reeking, loathesome field-stone jail. She knew now that in a few minutes she would be dragged out into the square before howling, jeering throngs. She knew that soon she would feel scorching flames envelope her, smell the stench of her own broiling flesh. For she knew that she was to be burned at the stake, just as surely as she knew that there was no appeal. The word of the very man who tormented her was the unalterable word of the law. She had failed to pass the test that Matthew Hopkins had prescribed—and Matthew Hopkins was the Witch Finder of England in the year of Our Lord, 1644.

The test? After the girl had been shackled in her dismal cell, Hopkins had stood nearby waiting for a fly, a mosquito—any insect—to flit near her. He had not long to wait, for the squalor all about her was a paradise for all creatures bred of

filth. . . . There was a faint whine of whirring wings; a large green bottle-fly buzzed near the girl's head. Matthew Hopkins struck out at it, missed. There was a sadistic leer in his bulging eyes. . . . A darning-needle zoomed by. Hopkins took a swipe at it, missed again and smiled evilly.

The fact that Hopkins failed to catch the insects convicted the girl of witchcraft. Not snaring them proved that they were not mortal and harmless, but devils or imps, attempting to communicate with their associate—a witch. . . .

Long after the acrid odor of the cinder-burned corpse had drifted away on the evening breeze, long after the snapping embers had cooled, the villagers sang the praise of Matthew Hopkins, who had rid their town of another witch—and been paid twenty shillings for the job. Those ignorant, unsuspecting countrymen looked upon Matthew Hopkins as man's greatest benefactor. They didn't know that he was a merciless, brutal murderer who had devised a series of "tests" which could not help but send to death any victim whom he chose to make appear guilty.

(Continued on page 122)

In the case of this young girl, those grounds for suspicion were so utterly ridiculous as to render unbelievable the whole gruesome story. Yet it is true. With a homely medicine prepared with herbs, she had cured a person ill with fever. She had learned the recipe from her mother who, while her husband was off at war, had had a chance to study nature and live close to the woods and soil and acquire simple methods of healing simple sicknesses. Many a woman died horribly for knowing less. . . .

If this legend seems absurd to you, bear in mind that Matthew Hopkins operated less than a hundred years after a body of men no less astute than the British Parliament considered the practice of magic serious enough to pass a law making it a felony! By the time the rather foolish James the First ascended to the throne, all England was living in a dread terror of witchcraft. It was then that Matthew Hopkins, a dissatisfied lawyer, came by his idea of surpassing wickedness. The country was ripe for it!

It is difficult to understand why the man's appearance alone didn't mark him as a murderer. He had bulging, venomous eyes, loose flabby lips and a feeble receding chin. His ears protruded sharply, were pointed at the tips and had no lobes. He had a low, slanting forehead; a simeon head. He should have given an impression of stupidity impregnated with a vast and cunning cruelty. However grotesque he was in looks, he did have an intelligence of a sort, and this enabled him to exercise the foresight to take advantage of a sorely distressed and terror-ridden people.

Although Hopkins took no stock in such foolishness, he did know that devil-worship was more or less prevalent in rural England. Groups called "covens", comprised of exactly *thirteen* persons, met all over the country on *Friday* nights. The leader was invariably dressed in the raiment of the devil—horns and all the rest. A weird ritual of mumbo-jumbo was followed. History cannot give us any satisfactory motive for these covens. In the main, they seem to have been more or less harmless, the participants being either unbalanced neurotics, or victims of such early known drugs as bella-donna, mandragora, poppy and nightshade. . . . Though covens were a recognized institution, it is

a horrible fact that the countless numbers of people who suffered nameless torment and death at the hands of Matthew Hopkins, Discoverer of Witches, were never associated with covens—or any other form of alleged magic. The fact that there actually *was* devil-worship merely helped confirm the demand for such a "benevolent" man as Hopkins. Most any kind-hearted old dame whose knowledge of barnyard healing allowed her to effect what seemed to be a spectacular cure for a sick neighbor, or who mumbled incoherently in her dotage with a dog asleep at her feet, was a twenty-shilling commission for the unfeeling Witch Finder.

James the First fancied himself a talented writer, and among other things, he wrote a very comprehensive (though asinine) volume on demonology. An ancient woman who posed as an authority on such subjects flattered the king by saying that his thorough expose of the devil made him Satan's greatest enemy. Whether the woman's admiration was affected or not will never be known. The king thought she knew *too* much about demonology—she died writhing and screaming, in flames.

So, it may be easily seen that the time was ripe for some man with vision to take upon himself a title, a claim to glory—and a fortune. That man was Matthew Hopkins.

Only three years did Hopkins operate in full swing, but during that comparatively short span of time he developed into one of the most infamous large-scale killers the world has ever known.

He first stirred interest in his own direction by saying that he had reason to believe that one of the local covens was offering human sacrifices to the devil. For some strange reason he held that the members of the coven were guiltless themselves, but were under the evil influence of a witch. He said he had been attacked by imps in his garden, that he had followed the imps to their mistress, the witch. With the benefit of his legal training, he convinced his neighbors that a certain old lady was guilty, burned her at the stake and forthwith collected his fee from the village council. That was the beginning.

He went at his gruesome business systematically, mapping out all the eastern

BLACK CHAPEL

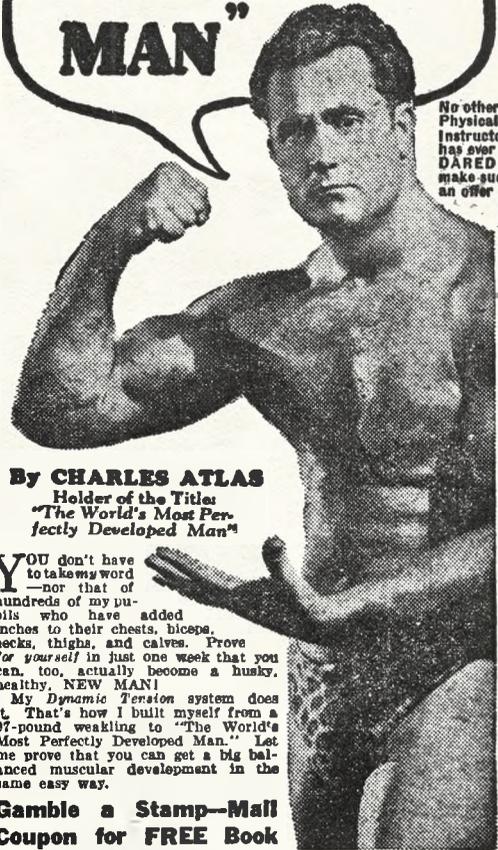
counties as his itinerary. He obtained a horse and buggy, and the services of two assistants; a man, one John Stern, who was as heartless a scoundrel as Hopkins himself; and a woman, whose name is not known. She was necessary to perform examinations upon the bodies of women suspects, to search for the condemning marks or blemishes which Hopkins called devil-marks. You know his fee for a conviction. For an acquittal there was no charge; but Hopkins and his monstrous partners allowed precious few acquittals.

This cold-blooded trafficker in warm blood and flesh assumed a rare dignity and solemnity in conducting his cunning investigations—and almost to the end, in handling his tests. He would mingle with the Sabbath gatherings, or the crowds at the fairs, and pick up bits of gossip which he could later twist into damning evidence of witchcraft. When once the victim was confronted by this arch-killer, there was little or no hope. The tests would do the rest. He would stick the suspect with a pin. If she professed to feel no pain, she was guilty. It is believed that Hopkins employed sleight-of-hand, deliberately preventing pain—then. Another test, wherein his female assistant was used, was also a pin-sticking act. The victim was stripped; if some mole or other blemish were discovered, Hopkins would appear to pierce it with his pin. If no blood appeared, the victim was condemned, and Hopkins knew that many a wen or wart on the human anatomy could be pricked in such a way as not to bleed. Another method of proving guilt was to command the hapless suspect to weep—genuine salt tears. The wracking sobs of utter devastation would not suffice; a tried actor would be hard pressed to shed real tears under such harrowing circumstances!

Most of us have heard of the water test; it was a product of Hopkins' murderous mind. The suspect was securely tied, right hand to right foot, left hand to left foot, and tossed into deep water. If

(Continued on page 124)

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28x4.75-21	2.45	30x4.00	2.65	32x4.75	3.75
28x4.75-20	2.50	30x4.25	2.75	32x5.00	3.85
28x5.00-19	2.55	30x4.50	2.85	32x5.25	3.95
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28x7.25-20	3.45	30x9.25	4.75	32x10.00	5.85
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28x8.50-20	3.95	30x11.75	5.75	32x12.50	6.85
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28x13.25-19	5.80	30x21.00	9.45	32x21.75	10.55
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28x15.50-20	6.75	30x25.75	11.35	32x26.50	12.45
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28x20.00-19	8.50	30x34.50	14.85	32x35.25	15.95
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28x20.50-20	8.75	30x35.75	15.35	32x36.50	16.45
28x20.75-19	8.80	30x36.00	15.45	32x36.75	16.55
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28x21.25-19	9.00	30x37.00	15.85	32x37.75	16.95
28x21.25-20	9.05	30x37.25	15.95	32x38.00	17.05
28x21.50-19	9.10	30x37.50	16.05	32x38.25	17.15
28x21.50-20	9.15	30x37.75	16.15	32x38.50	17.25
28x21.75-19	9.20	30x38.00	16.25	32x38.75	17.35
28x21.75-20	9.25	30x38.25	16.35	32x39.00	17.45
28x22.00-19	9.30	30x38.50	16.45	32x39.25	17.55
28x22.00-20	9.35</				

BLACK CHAPEL

more. She burned alive in mortal terror before the sun had set, and Hopkins added twenty shillings to his fattening coffers.

The man devised what, compared to our method of harrassing criminals, was a super-third degree. Unbearable tortures were inflicted upon his victims to force confessions that were false, and later were to be repudiated in the flaming person's dying words. By now Matthew's lust for killing had become more than a desire for mere power and wealth. The job of inflicting pain and death became an obsession with him. He received a mad, Sadistic thrill each time he touched the torch to the tinder at the feet of a screaming victim. He slaughtered as many as eighteen victims in one day, and though it is a matter of record that he murdered two hundred persons during the three years he was unmolested, it is estimated that the number was far in excess of that figure. . . .

What eventually happened was bound to follow—as Hopkins might well have perceived. But by then he was an unreasoning monster who thought himself super-human, beyond criticism. People began to oppose him. He at length provided by his entrance into a town more stark terror—terror of his own person—than the fear of witchcraft had ever evoked. . . . At last one John Gaule, honest and intelligent Vicar of Huntingdonshire Parish, swung suspicion in the direction of Matthew Hopkins, alleged Discoverer of Witches!

Gaule's argument was fairly sound, and he presented it forcefully in the form of a pamphlet which he distributed throughout the counties. The principal basis of his contention was couched in just one question: How could Matthew Hopkins be so familiar with the secrets of the devil—unless the man himself consorted with the Prince of Evil?

Hopkins protested wildly, storming up and down the countryside—to no avail. Even his carefully and craftily prepared rebuttal to the startling accusation helped him not one whit. Piously quoting the Scriptures in futile protest, he was dragged by a howling mob to a river's bank. Ironical that he should be convicted of the very crime he so brutally prosecuted—by a test of his very own devising.

Trussed hand and foot, he was hurled into the swirling water, and this strange fact stands out in this chronicle: Matthew Hopkins floated to the surface, alive. All the better to feed the avenging madness that swept through the throngs. They hauled him out and hanged him, while husbands, fathers, brothers and sweet-hearts of countless tortured and murdered girls and women shouted and jeered until Hopkins'

(Continued on page 126)

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 125)

sparse frame had long since stopped twitching.

It wasn't, it is certain, the logic of John Gaule's accusation that swayed suspicion toward Matthew Hopkins, nor incited the people to rise against him. It was the horror that welled up in human hearts when he set about his dreadful work. Can you imagine how you would feel if you lived in a small country hamlet and you knew that a man was coming to town who had the authority to slaughter as he so willed? A man who might just as well as not pick you for his victim, or your mother, or sister, even though you knew that neither you nor any one you loved was witch or wizard?

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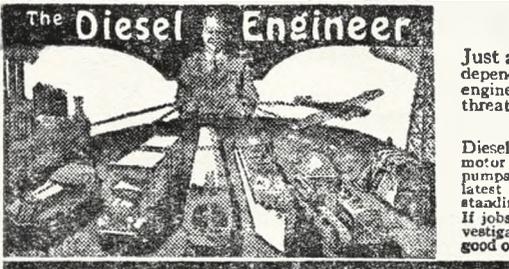
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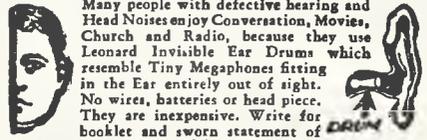
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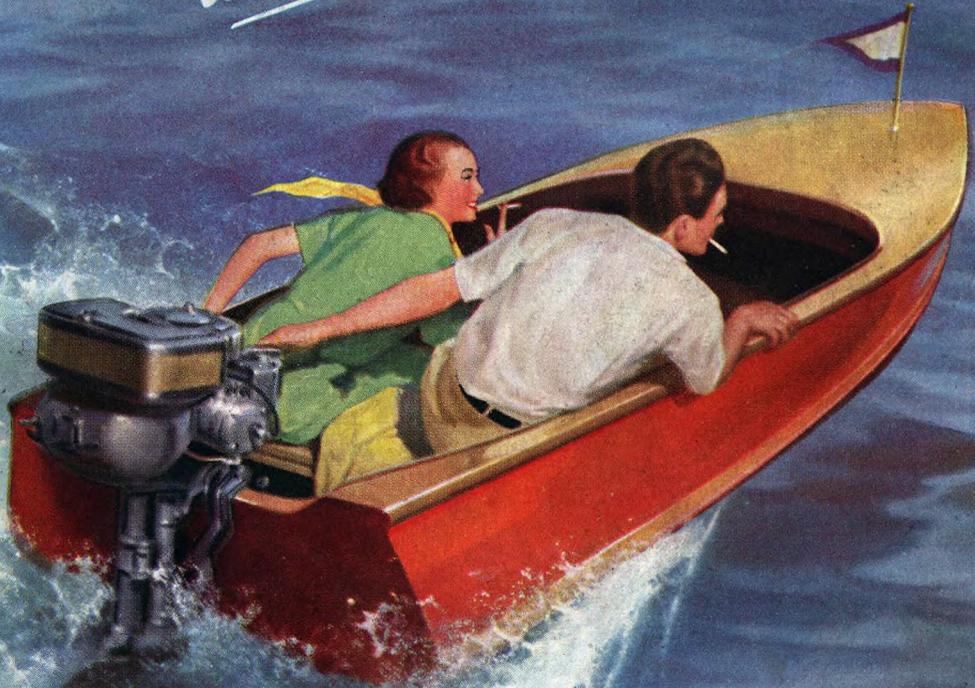
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