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MYSTERY

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THE FIEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW

By **RAY CUMMINGS**

HELL'S HALF ACRE

By **JOE**

ARCHIBALD

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

GRAVEYARD RATS
By **ROBERT E. HOWARD**

BY SUBWAY TO HELL
By **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

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Eat Fleischmann's Yeast 3 times a day, before meals, until skin clears.



—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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I'll Prove in the first 7 days - that I can Make You a New Man!

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The 97-lb. Weakling Who Became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

LOOK at this new photo of me. This is exactly how I look today. Yet once I was a soft, skinny, 97-lb. weakling! I always felt weak, self-conscious—never had good times—couldn't eat a square meal and feel well afterward. Then I discovered the secret of *Dynamic Tension*—my entirely new and different method of body building. It changed my entire life—gave me the body you see here. It has twice won for me the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"! Tell what my amazing system did for me—what it has done for hundreds of other fellows like yourself—it can now do for **YOU**, too!

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Mail Coupon for My Big 64-Page Book — FREE!

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Vol. II, No. 1

February, 1936 /

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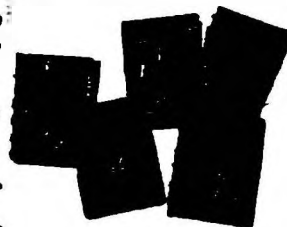
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- Electrician
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- Master Crew Chief
- Trunk Manager
- Parachuting Agent
- Aerial Mail Clerk
- Radio Expert
- Radio Operator
- Aviation Mechanic
- Field Work

- IN THE AIR
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- Air Mail Pilot
- Aerial Photography
- Airport Messenger
- Taxi Pilot
- Aerial Passenger Agent
- Private Piloting
- Weather Observer
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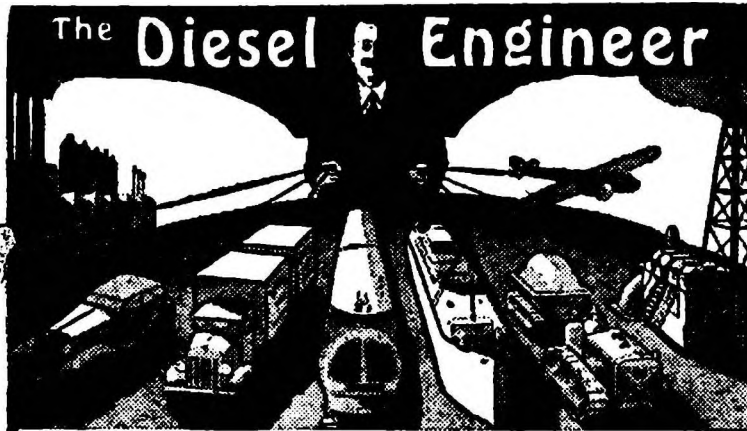
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CHAPTER I
Underground

MARIAN ROLPH shrugged closer into the corner of the subway car. The train hurtled through the long black cav-

ern visible beyond grimed glass, and noise battered at its steel as though by noise alone the violated earth could avenge man's desecration. The girl's small hands convulsively tightened on the pocketbook in her lap, while an unaccountable dread flowed,

A Horde of Fiery Fiends Pursue

Was in the Mysterious Message of Evil



The tentacles grasped her, jerked her quivering arms up over her head

like a dark, sullen flood, in her veins. The echoing damp reaches of the station, the train's roaring arrival, the magical sliding open and shut of its door, accustomed as they were, somehow tonight had seemed in-

vested with a strange, baleful omen. Even here, under the brighter lights, a vague threat pervaded the car's musty, close air that queerly was difficult to breathe. She should have stayed overnight at Ellen's instead of

Marion Rolph in the Stygian Darkness!

going home so late and all alone.
Alone—ridiculous!

Who was going to harm her? Not the bearded old fellow asleep back there where the tunnel roared away, closing in on itself in the swallowing darkness. Not that tousled youth nor the drowsy-eyed girl holding his hand in their midcar cubicle.

THE clean-limbed, strong-jawed young man opposite—Marian gasped as car-away pulled hat-brim shadow from his eyes and she looked deep into them.

Terror stared out at her, livid and awful. Such ghastly, searing terror as not even imminent death could inspire. Those dark eyes were veiled again as the girl's covert glance flickered away, but in that single, revealing instant they had mirrored a soul in torment.

Marian's skin was a tight, icy sheath for her body. She knew now that her apprehension, the brooding pall of impending catastrophe overhanging her spirit, were not causeless. Some psychic toxin had been ringing indecipherable alarm within her soul, but he *knew* what black peril it was to which the pounding conveyance carried them all. Dreadfully he knew what was coming and horribly he was helpless to warn of it or to avert it.

"Harry," the other girl's clear voice pierced the clamor. "Seems like we been runnin' an awful long time since the last station. I wunner—"

The frightened man was pushing against the straw edge of his seat. He was on his feet, he was coming across to Marian. Momentary panic flared in her, faded. Thought pulsed in her brain; He's read my eyes as I did his. He's going to tell me what . . .

He staggered to a sudden stagger of the car, snatched at a white enameled stanchion. The world was split by the shriek of clamped brakes, by a seismic pounding under the floor. Darkness smashed in through the windows. The stoppage threw Marian forward.

Strong hands closed on her shoul-

ders, shoved her back into her seat. A hurried, fumbling touch slid down her arm, found her wrist.

A whisper hissed, "Hide this. Quick!" Paper crackled in her palm and her fingers were closed down on it. "In the name of all that's good and holy, don't let them get it."

In instinctive obedience Marian thrust that which she had been given through the opening of her waist.

"If you get a chance memorize what it says and destroy it," the imperative, agonized whisper continued, and then the feel of another presence was gone.

The train was motionless in the sightless dark. Running footfalls pounded along the aisle. There was the sound of a scuffle, muted, somehow fierce. It was over almost as it began, ended in a burbling moan out of the impenetrable gloom.

Silence shut in, thick, funereal, pregnant with almost tangible horror.

A shrill, quavering scream knifed the muggy, breathless heat. It crescendoed, higher, higher, in a wailing ascent of mind-shattering terror.

"Annie," a man's voice shouted. Harry's. "Annie! What—what's the matter? Where are you?"

Then a crackling scrape spluttered into a yellow flicker and grotesque shadows fled from the minute flowering of a match flame. Harry's face was a blanched, big-eyed oval in the dancing light he had lit. He was staring down—at a limp, pitiful heap on the floor. It was the girl whose hand he had held. His legs buckled and he went down on his knees to her.

She was faceless, her features obscured by a scarlet, glistening mask. Shadows danced through the long, closed tunnel of the car's interior, revealed desolate emptiness. They three were alone! Where were the others?

The match went out and darkness blanketed horror. There was a dull thud against the side of the car, from outside, and a fear-thickened yell, "Let me go! Let me go, you devils! I haven't got it. I tell you I haven't

got it and you'll never find out what I did with it."

"Hell," Harry mouthed, seemingly oblivious. "That was my last."

A greenish glow outlined the window in front of Marian, a glow that was not quite light, that revealed nothing and yet mysteriously was radiant with a macabre, unholy threat.

"Annie," the kneeling boy implored. "Speak to me." His gusting, shocked gasp changed swiftly to a thin squeal. "Blood! Holy saints, she's all over blood! *Annie!*"

But that cry was drowned by another, a piercing high wail of unutterable agony. The smash of glass pulled Marian's aghast look back to the illumined oblong.

She saw that it was now framed by jagged shards. The iridescence was blotted by a black globe thrusting through—it was a human head—by naked shoulders ripped and shredded and clothed with gushing gore.

She could not see its face but she knew that the doom the frightened man had foreseen had overtaken him; that, reckless of the tearing glass points, he was struggling to escape it.

His forward movement stopped. He jerked back—was jerked back by some antagonist outside. But not far! Suddenly the head lolled as no living head could loll. It rolled gruesomely, slashed by knifelike glass. A cascade of carmine fluid pumped down, swamping the woven straw of a seat beneath.

An abortive, soundless scream ripped Marian's throat and she was lunging down the invisible aisle toward the forward cars. The guard, the motorman, up ahead—she must get them. She must get help. Light. They would turn on lights, dispel this awful darkness, this sudden terror that gibbered in the dark.

She slammed against glass, realized it was steel, the door partitioning this rear car from the next. Her flailing hand found the cold brass of a latch, tugged at it.

Marian plunged through.

Her foot found nothingness. She fell headlong into a dark and bottomless abyss. She pounded down on

gashing stones, on ballast whose sharp edges struck fiercely through her thin clothing. Her head crashed against a rail . . .

Marian retched, moaned. Her body was a bundle of compact, excruciating pain. But worse than the physical agony was the realization that the help she sought was beyond reach, that by some incredible fatality the rest of the train was gone, that the car out of which she had fallen was left behind, lightless and solitary in the Stygian tunnel with its freight of horror.

Lightless! A new, poignant apprehension pronged the reeling chaos within her skull. There was nothing to mark the obstruction, to warn a following train. In minutes, in seconds perhaps, it would catapult out of the gloom, would thunderbolt unheeding into destruction awaiting it. There would be a rending crash, screams of mangled, smashed men, women, little children. But the signals would stop it.

The signals! *There weren't any signals!* There weren't any red lights, or green, ahead. There weren't even the sparks of blue bulbs that should be spaced along the bore's roof!

CHAPTER II

Hell-bound

SOMEHOW she must stave off the disaster. Marian managed to get her knees under her, to scrabble somehow erect. She swayed, with weakness, with the agony tearing at her flesh. Back!

Marian twisted to the right. Halted. *The third rail!* The naked carrier of electric death was on one side or other of the tracks. If she struck it in the dark she was finished. A low, metallic hum hung about her. It was the train. It was the train, and though still distant it was coming fast! Hurling fast to inevitable destruction!

Marian stumbled in frenzied haste along a concave, slimy gutter that

twisted her ankles, that threw her once, twice, and again against the head-high bottom edge of the car-body. Then she was past it, had leaped to the rocky but firmer footing of the ballast-bed, was running through inky murk, toward the increasing thunder of the train she had to stop.

Its crashing roar was all about her, was battering her. The train was close upon her, but she could not see it, could see no light, no glimmer of any light. Marian flailed frantic arms above her head, screaming, "Stop! Stop!" and within her something else screamed: "You're blind! The stones cut your eyes when you fell, and you're blind. You'll never see any more. Even if the train does not kill you, you'll never see again!"

She was caught up in a deafening noise, in insupportable clangor. And then it was lessening. Unbelievably it was rushing away behind her. It diminished to a long peal of thunder, to a rolling roar, to a mutter of far-off sound. . . .

Marian stood still, trembling, aghast. The train had rushed over her and she had not felt it. It had hurtled along the tracks toward the stalled car, past the stalled car, and there had been no rending crash, no explosion of disaster. It was a ghostly train running on ghostly tracks. It was a spectral conveyance that had no real existence. . . .

Or was this all unreal, a nightmare? Oh, God! Why couldn't she wake and get rid of the pain that racked her, of the horror that crawled in her brain?

The flat surface of her pocketbook pressed against her chest! Her pocketbook! Marian's mouth twisted in a bitter smile and hysteric laughter rattled in her chest. Through all the terror that had encompassed her she had instinctively clung to that futile bag.

Futile! She remembered—what would she have been spared had this realization come to her when she knew not which way to turn to avoid the third rail's terrible blast!—she remembered the cigarettes in it and the matches.

Her trembling fingers broke open the clasp, searched through an exasperating conglomeration of small articles for the saving folder.

She found it, and bitter laughter spewed from between her icy lips. What was the good? She was blind, blind, blind!

Try, anyway. Try. Tear off a match, so . . .

THANKFULNESS surged through her as the tiny fire caught, was steady. She could see!

She looked about her and was prey again to staggering amazement. For the tracks between which she stood were rusted, unused, and incredibly they jutted out of a stark and solid wall. Out of a whitewashed wall through which the phantom train had come and gone. Out of a wall—and this was once more the stuff of nightmares—through which she herself had ridden in the fated car!

There was no mistake. To left and right were the damp-smearred sides of the tunnel, black-wet and glistening. To left and right were the sides, and in front of her the bore was shut off by another vertical barrier, a barrier through which it was inconceivable even an ant could pass.

Marian whimpered. She flicked her match into the darkness as it burned her finger-tips. This was a monstrous fairytale in which she was immersed, a nerve-crawling, scalp-bristling myth from out the pages of a dim, unholy past. This was a terror-dream—or she was stark, staring mad.

There was a sudden, threatening movement in the tunnel. From behind, from the direction of the stalled car, came padding footfalls, the click of a disturbed stone. Marian whirled to the sounds. A faint, greenish glow was drifting toward her. As she glimpsed it, it grew brighter, nearer.

"Don't let them get it," the dead man had whispered. Were these the enemies who had slain him, from whom he had bidden her hide the paper? "If you get a chance, memorize and destroy it!"

Marian snatched the note from its cover, struck another match. She

read with puzzled, staring eyes:

I will be dead if you read this. To save thousands of human souls from hell get this message to Warner Thor, Hotel Walward, Penn D 429. TO NO ONE ELSE.

"Thor," Marian repeated to herself, "Walward, Penn D 429." She was tearing the paper into small bits, was stuffing them into her mouth. "Thor, Walward, Penn D 429." Her teeth pulped the stuff, ground it into what she hoped was an indecipherable mass. And all the time the green light came on.

SHE could see now that the nearing glow came from the very substance of two flowing robes that cloaked, head and body, twin creatures hurrying toward her over the rock-covered ties.

She backed away from their approach, backed till the incredible wall stopped her and she could back no farther. She cringed against it.

They were upon her. The green light was brilliant now, dazzling, but no heat came from it. The weird robes grew tentacles that reached out for her. Nightmare paralysis held Marian rigid, quenched the shriek fighting to her throat for utterance. The creatures had hold of her arms, her legs, and their touch was gelid with the frigid clamminess of dead flesh.

She was off the ground. She was slung, face downward, by her stretched limbs. She was being carried back toward the stalled car and the crackling ballast stones beneath her were ghastly with the emerald reflection.

What were they? In the name of heaven, what were these beings whose captive she was? What were these creatures that had snatched a great subway car from a running train and prisoned it within a cave?

Their shapelessness, their green aura, were terror-inspiring; but more horrible was their silence and the peculiar unanimity with which they moved. The precision with which they had seized her, the dexterity with which they handled her, demanded

some communication between them. But there had been no words, no audible or visible signal of any sort.

Marian found strength to force her head up, to look ahead. The green radiance fell on a gaping coupling, on airline pipes and severed cables writhing from under the worn end of the subway car from which she had fallen. The emerald ogres rose to the steel platform, and she rose with them. She was again in that steel-walled enclosure where terror had begun.

Marian was up-ended, so that she swayed on her own feet, though she was still clamped helpless by the icy grip of her captors. Then one of them lifted her again and the other jerked her quivering arms up over her head, thrust them through the metal loops of straphangers' hand-holds and brought them down to her sides again.

A rope passed around her wrists, her quivering body, tightened, was knotted. The cruel nooses dug into her armpits, into her ribs. Excruciating agony belted her, wrung a moan from her pallid lips.

A moan answered her. Her bulging, burning eyes sought its source. She was not alone in her torture. The youth, Harry, hung next to her, trussed in the same way, and beyond him was his Annie. They must have been hanging like this for a long time. Pain had drained all color from their countenances and their eyelids were tight-pressed, waxen, their lips bluish black in the green radiance.

Past them—no—the murdered man was no longer there! And the bearded oldster? Not here either! He had been so fragile, so palsied with age even in sleep, it was queer that of them all he should have been the only one to escape.

Her own weight was a torture instrument racking her armbones to the breaking point. Through a haze of pain she saw the weird entities move along the wavering length of the car.

They are going away, Marian thought. They are going away and leaving us here like this.

Hope died within her. Metal clanked, up there at the end of the car the creatures were, and Marian's

burning gaze saw that they were pulling open something like a closet door, that behind it were levers, gages.

Green tentacles passed purposefully among the gadgets. Escaped air hissed suddenly, virulently, somewhere beneath. A jar pounded the great structure of steel, another, and they darted white-hot arrows of new torments through her.

The car lurched into motion.

The slanting of her body told Marian that the car was going downward. It rocked. It careened from side to side. Faster, faster became its wild descent, and more steeply it dropped, always more steeply.

The bottom went out from under the conveyance so that it catapulted down, straight down. The awful acceleration of the fall blasted her brain, blasted her into momentary, merciful unconsciousness.

CHAPTER III

Flame Spurting from Livid Flesh

MARIAN ROLPH floated on a lapping red sea of suffering. Molten heat surged about her, lifted her on its lurid swell, dropped her into a yawning pit. She flailed out. Barbs of excruciating flame struck through her.

Through a coruscating veil of tiny, sulphurous sparks she could see dimly a vast reach of vaulted, slime-filmed arches fading away into infinity. She could see vague figures lashed to rough-hewn pillars supporting the arches, realized through her anguish that she too was so lashed.

She was no longer in the subway car. It was gone, vanished. But the green creatures were still here.

They danced before her. They made no sound, but somehow she knew they were laughing with demoniac glee, jubilant with the suffering they caused her.

The sparks cut off, suddenly. Marian had an impression that one of the emerald fiends had moved, just as that happened, had pushed a lever she now saw jutted out of a quadrant before

it. But she could not be sure. She could be sure only that raw, flayed as her body was, the contrast with what had gone before was a blessed, cooling relief.

Those other figures she had seen were her companions in distress, the couple she knew only as Annie and Henry. The girl's face was scummed with dried blood. Both were stripped naked, their flesh peppered over with a sprinkling of black dots as though they were victims of some loathsome disease. Their faces were lined masks of anguish.

Youth, humanity itself, were stricken from them by the martyrdom through which they had passed. In deep-sunk sockets their eyes were dark, living pools of incredible torment.

She herself was naked, and she could see that the black dots sprinkled her own skin. Wires snaked away from her wrists, her ankles, joined wires coming from the others, wandered off into obscurity. Her skull was a charred, aching shell enclosing horror and despair.

A green demon was moving toward the lashed trio, his progress a horrible alther. He came close, stopped.

"That was only a foretaste of what is in store for you." His voice was a shrill, eerie filament of sound. "But one of you can purchase release for all. One of you possesses a secret we seek. This is the payment we demand."

A secret! It trembled on Marian's lips. "Penn D 429." It demanded utterance. "Penn D 429." Whatever its meaning it was the reason for the *outré* adventure, the murder, the torture.

"Is it you?" the monstrous inquisitor queried Harry. "You?"

"I don't—know—what you're talking about," the youth croaked.

"He lies!" It was the other one who spoke. "He lies!"

"Perhaps. We shall soon know." Marian's heart constricted with the grim presage of that laconic statement. The faceless monster twisted, slithered to Annie.

"If he has anything to say he will

talk when he sees—*this*—” The boneless tentacle that served the monster for an arm lifted, its knobbed end touched the girl’s skin.

Jets of purple flame spurted. In their light Marian could see Annie’s muscles writhe, squirm. From her mouth, from her nostrils, the orchid flame dripped, luminous blood of her agony. And then her screams began.

Through them a maddened bellow sounded, a bestial roar of crazed rage. It pulled Marian’s seared sight back to Harry. His face was a contorted, awful mask of insensate wrath. His body was arched against the obduracy of the stone pillar to which he was lashed.

His biceps, his thigh-muscles, were swollen with the gigantic effort he made to tear himself free. The thongs binding him were gory, cutting knife-like into his flesh.

There was movement in the dimness behind him, movement so stealthy Marian was not sure she saw it. There was a sudden splintering of green and purple light on slashing steel. Multiple twang of snapped cords shocked the clamor. Harry hurtled away from the prisoning pillar, miraculously freed. He was a berserk vengeance catapulting down upon the emerald fiend.

The monster whirled to meet the maddened charge. The youth’s clawing fingers tangled in the green luminescence of his garment. There was a hissing rasp of ripped fabric and an incredible countenance was suddenly limned to Marian’s staring eyes.

It was a visage of supernal horror. It was a doughy lump of granulated red flesh out of which a single scarlet orb glared; a formless mass of lurid putrescence gashed by a blank, writhing aperture that might have been a mouth.

It vanished in a maelstrom of ferocious combat. The second of the creatures surged to join the battle, abandoning his torture lever. Marian saw Harry’s nude arms rise out of the emerald whirlpool, heard the meaty thud of landing fists.

A shuddersome snarling, a shriek of sudden agony, quivered in her ears.

The youth went down, overwhelmed under a tumbling, heaving mass of emerald glow—and her own bonds fell away from her!

“**H**URRY.” a low, excited voice yammered in her ears. “Hurry. He has no chance, but you can get away!”

Fingers gripped her wrist, pulling her around the pillar, pulling her into darkness. The wires jerked away from her, and black against black in the shadows someone was running alongside her, was guiding her by quick, furtive stabs of an agitated hand.

She was running, was leaping in great, vaulting bounds away from the torture and the horror, and always with her was the dim, obscure, almost invisible shape of her savior.

Her bare feet made no sound on the rocky floor. The other was as silent. But from behind came a high, tenuous wail of alarm that told her her evasion was discovered, and a swift slither of pursuit. The sounds redoubled her efforts.

Despite weariness, despite the drain pain had made on her vitality, she fairly flew through the gloom. Black bulks loomed out of the sightlessness into which she fled. She dodged them, or he who had released her swung her around them, and eternally they ran on into the unrevealing murk.

Unseen fingers clamped about her elbow, suddenly, jerked her sidewise. She was off her feet, was falling, pounded down on harshness that cushioned her fall. It was alive, it rolled out from under her.

“Quiet,” a voice enjoined. “Quiet.” Marian lay bundled on rock, her mouth open so that her panting breath should be soundless, her pounding heart battering against its caging ribs.

She could see nothing, but somehow she sensed she was in some sort of pit, sensed the other’s presence close alongside her.

They were coming, the hunters. A green glow, barely perceptible, hung over her. Silence clamped down, falling like a pall out of the appalling blackness, but welcome as nothing

ever before had been welcome in her life. For it meant that the green monsters were foiled, that she had escaped!

Marian feared to move, even to breathe, lest they should return. She lay trembling, nausea throbbing within her, the impenetrable darkness a giddy swirl about her. Horror, despair, still clung to her. Annie's shrieks still rang in her ears. They were done for, the two lovers. For them she could only hope that they were dead.

They were done for, but she had escaped. Who was it that had rescued her? Who was it that had come out of darkness to snatch her from the green creatures of nightmare? Who could it be?

A low chuckle sounded, close by. "That fooled them," someone murmured. "Only way I could get you away. They forgot about you when the fellow jumped them. At that he put up a pretty fight before he went down."

"Who are you?" Marian husked. "Who are you?"

"Name's Gant. Lathrop Gant." A white beam cut the darkness, beam of a flashlight, and in its radiance a face sprang into being. A face—the face of the young man who had been opposite her in the doomed subway car! The young man—Then it wasn't he who had hung!

"Oh," Marian whimpered. "I thought you—"

"Not me." He was smiling, actually smiling. "Not Lathrop Gant. Those devils aren't smart enough to catch me. I pulled up one of the straw seats and snuggled in among the pipes and the dirt under it. Not the most comfortable place in the world, but a hell of a lot better than what you went through. But look here, you haven't anything on. Here—"

His flash went out. Marian heard the rustle of fabric, then something, a coat, fell across her.

"Put that on. Best I can do till we get out of here."

She fumbled into it. "The top of me's covered, at least," she said, trying to match the light banter of his

tone, "and that's something." It didn't make much difference. After what she had gone through, after what had happened to the other girl, her nakedness, modesty itself, were so trivial. "But getting out of here sounds good to me. Do you know how?"

"Sure do. But we'd better wait awhile. They'll still be looking for you. They won't come here."

It was comforting to have someone to talk to, to have the burden of fruitless struggle taken off her shoulders. Everything was all right now, Marian was sure everything would be all right.

"They're horrible," she shuddered. "And this place is horrible—"

"Not pleasant." He had a gift for understatement. "But a swell hide-away. It's going to be a car-yard, some day, when the whole city subway system is finished, but just now the only track leading into it is the one they managed to switch our car onto after uncoupling it while the train was running."

A light dawned on Marian. "Oh, then it wasn't—it wasn't—" She couldn't tell him that she had thought it the entrance to Hell itself. "But," she finished lamely, "it seemed to be blocked off."

"Oh, that was because the contractor put a sliding door across where the spur comes off from the main line. Those devils opened it to let the car through and shut it again after they had accomplished that."

"I suppose they used some electrical devices to torture us. Who are they? What do they plan?"

"Never mind that now." Gant spoke crisply, as if he had come to some decision. "It's safe enough now, I think, to make a try at getting out." The spray of his torch showed Marian that he was rising. "Come on!"

She pushed herself to her feet. Gant's jacket flapped ludicrously about her. "That can't be soon enough for me. Which way?" He was hesitating, curiously. "What are you waiting for?"

"Oh," he answered blandly. "I just thought—something might happen. We might get separated, one of us

might not get away. Hadn't you better tell me what was in that note so that if you don't—"

Marian didn't hear the rest. Dismay, renewed terror, boiled in her veins, pronged her reeling brain. Gant didn't know the message! It was not Gant who had pressed it into her hand. He had rescued her only to obtain it, only to surprise it out of her. He was in league with the green-luminous fiends and was trapping her!

What then? It must have been the old man who entrusted her with the secret. The old— But the head so gruesomely torn from its body had been the head of a young man. Its hair had been black, not white. It had worn no beard.

"What was the message?" Gant's voice was no longer suave. The good humor was stripped from it. It was urgent. Demanding. Threatening. "You little fool!" he snarled. "If you want to get away tell me what it is."

"I—I don't know what you mean," Marian faltered, her lips cold with a terrible fear. "What message?"

"Damn you!" Though he kept his voice low the exclamation was almost a shriek. "You lie and I know you lie. I saw him bend over you. I was right there. I would have had it then if that little tramp hadn't got in my way so that I had to slough her." His fingers dug into her arm.

"I won't tell you! You can kill me, but I won't tell you."

"Kill you, hell! I'll call them back. I'd rather share than lose it. Tell me what it is or I'll call them back."

"Never!"

His shout was a blast of doom in her ears.

"Here," he yelled. "Here she is. Come and get her!"

Marian jerked away from the clenching, torturing grip. Her curved hands flailed out. Her nails found flesh, ripped it sickeningly. She whirled away, blundered into a slanting wall. Somehow she mounted it, found level footing.

Ahead, not far ahead, a green radiance blossomed, deepened even as she glimpsed it. She whirled, dashed into damp and clinging darkness.

CHAPTER IV

Final Surrender

IN the blind maze of this underground labyrinth there was no chance of final escape, no chance at all. They would hunt her down. They would hunt her down relentlessly, implacably.

She was weakening. The crashing against obstructing stone, the searing pain of the rough footing on which she ran, were slowing her down. How die? How kill herself when she had no time to stop, no weapon to take her life even if she could stop.

A far-off rolling rumble came to Marian. Was that thunder? Was it—no! She remembered the roaring of the ghost train that had passed over her. That had not passed over her, but had rushed unknowingly just beyond the wall that was a sliding door. And she remembered the third rail that had threatened her with death.

Threatened her! She was searching for it now. She was searching for it, guided by that distant mutter that grew louder and died away.

The arched roof echoed, speeding the sound of the green Things, of the renegade Gant, after her. Multiplying those sounds so that they seemed on all sides of her, seemed to be closing in on her, an inescapable ring of gruesome menace. Surrounding her with fear . . .

Where were they? Were they still behind? Were they coming at her from right, from left? Was she throwing herself straight into their waiting arms?

She dared a single, terrified glance over her shoulder. There they were, the plunging, wraithlike figures of green flame, the dark frame of Lathrop Gant silhouetted against them. In that single frantic second the emerald monsters caught up with Gant. Passed him.

No! He was between them. They shouldered close against him on either side.

And suddenly a wild, unearthly shriek echoed after Marian, running

again in that hopeless flight of hers. A shriek, and then silence. She did not have to look back again to know what that meant. She did not have to look back to know that only two pursued her now, not three. Retribution had overtaken the renegade.

Even in her wrath against him she found space for compassion at the awful shape that retribution had assumed.

But the deed had delayed the hunters only an instant, and they were hot again on her trail. The hissing, grotesque sibilance of their pursuit continued and gradually it grew till she knew that they must be close behind, knew that in seconds they must have her, must drag her down.

Where were those tracks? Where were the two rusty tracks and the third that meant surcease?

Her toes stubbed against steel, crumpling with a last terrible spasm of agony. She fell forward, pounded down on the rocky ballast that once before had left its mark on her lacerated body. Her out-thrown hand found the other track. Beyond it must be the electric rail.

But had she time to reach it?

The demons were still yards away, but they were coming fast. She pushed torn palms deep into the cutting stones, straightened her arms, inched forward. Dropped. Pushed again.

But she couldn't make it. She couldn't. . . .

Shouts echoed over her head. The demon was no longer pulling at her ankle. Pounding blasts exploded into a rolling pandemonium. Shadows blotched the white radiance, the shadows of many men.

"There they go," a hoarse, excited voice shouted. "Get them! Don't let them get away!"

Gun barks swallowed the shout. Marian rolled over. The cavern was filled with a multitude of running figures, ahead of them the duo of hell-dogs, fleeing now. Orange sparks flashed, were pistols spurting death-hail. Their reports impacted on her. Bullets—she thought wearily—bullets will never bring them down.

But they did. First one, then the other of the fleeing monsters collapsed, were pools of green luminance on the rocky floor of the cave.

Flashlight beams concentrated on the fallen monsters. Someone bent, pulled at one of the green-glowing robes. It tore with the sound of ripping silk, fell apart, revealed lurid, blood-chilling corruption.

A man in white struck at the arm of him who tore the mask.

"Drop it!" the ambulance interne squealed. "Drop it. It's soaked in radium salts. It will rot the skin from your hands."

Flashlight glare invested Marian. "Hey, Cap," the policeman who held it yelled. "Here's one o' the passengers. A dame without no clothes on."

The knot around the dead ogre broke, streamed toward Marian. As they came the young doctor was saying, puzzled:

"It looks like cancer, but it isn't. I'll lay my hope of a successful practise that it isn't."

"Warner Thor," Marian said, thick-tongued. "Warner Thor. Hotel Walward . . ." And then there wasn't anything any more . . .

UNTIL she came awake between the white, crisp coolness of sheets— She stared up at the soft-shining greyness of a hospital ceiling, trying to remember. There was something she had to do. Something terribly important

What was it?

A nurse was opening a door.

"She's come to, Dr. Thor. Do you want to see her now?" She went out. Doctor Thor! Doctor Warner Thor!

Marian knew now what was troubling her. He was in the room, was bending over her. He was a dapper little man, clean-shaven. There was a strange olive tint to his complexion and the shape of his keen, ferretlike eyes was somehow exotic, unfamiliar.

There was sharp eagerness in his voice, but there was gentleness too, and compassion.

"I am Warner Thor," he said. "You asked for me. What was it you wanted?" His English was precise,

cultured. Too precise. It was the English of an educated foreigner.

"Penn," Marian mumbled. "Penn D 429."

Warner's brow crinkled. "Penn D 429," he repeated. "I do not know what you mean." He was not very old, Marian decided, but the fine wrinkles criss-crossing his face made him look very tired. "Are you sure that is what you want to say?"

He ought to know, Marian thought, wearily. "To save souls," she tried again. "Penn D 429."

"To save— Wait! I've got it! Penn Station!" He was excited now. "D 429." His long fingers on the counterpane were trembling. "The ten cent automatic lockers they have all over the station are numbered. Paul left the vial in the one marked D 429. Even in his disguise they trailed him, but he fooled them. He left it in the locker and he got you to bring me word of where he had hidden it even after they killed him."

"What?" Marian asked. "What vial? What are you talking about?"

Thor shrugged. "We've tried to keep it a secret, but you've earned the right to know. My country," his hand made a vague gesture to the south, "is a small one, but it is rich in natural resources. Two Americans obtained concessions, opened cinnabar mines. Quicksilver. The workers succumbed

to some strange disease—the Americans also. Something very like cancer.

"Radium salts, impregnated in silk worn as a robe, controlled the rotting of their flesh, but that did not cure the disease. The government canceled the concessions, drove out the Americans. I came up here to try to find a cure, found one by sheer accident. I hadn't had time to analyze the compound when it was stolen from me.

"Paul, my assistant, discovered that the American concessionaires were the thieves. They meant first to cure themselves and then sell the secret for a return of their privileges. Thus they would enslave our land. Another group got wind of the situation, sent a man named Lathrop Gant after the compound. Paul managed to get it back, was on his way to me with it when he realized that both outfits were hot after him. He phoned me that he would do his best to outwit them. He did—at the cost of his life . . ."

"They were human," Marian murmured. "The green monsters were human, then?" Somehow the thought was comforting. "They weren't— fiends from hell?"

Thor was very grave. "They were human — perhaps. But they were fiends. Hell—if there is a hell—can hold no worse."

Next Month: BLACK MOONLIGHT, a Horror Novelette by G. T. Fleming-Roberts—and Many Other Stories of Eerie, Spine-Chilling Thrills by Popular Authors

*You're bucking
the odds*



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PROBAK JUNIOR

BLACK

CHAPTER I

The Walking Dead Men

THE big Creole woman entered the shimmering green gloom of the newspaper office, waddled toward the city desk. She was perspiring freely, and the whites of her eyes were like hard-boiled eggs. Everyone in New Orleans had heard of Emmeline Sompayrac.

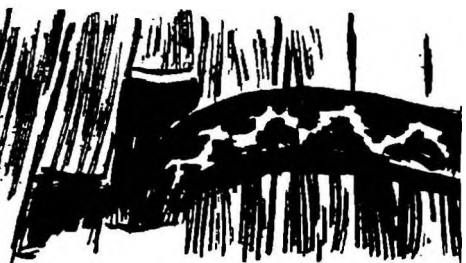
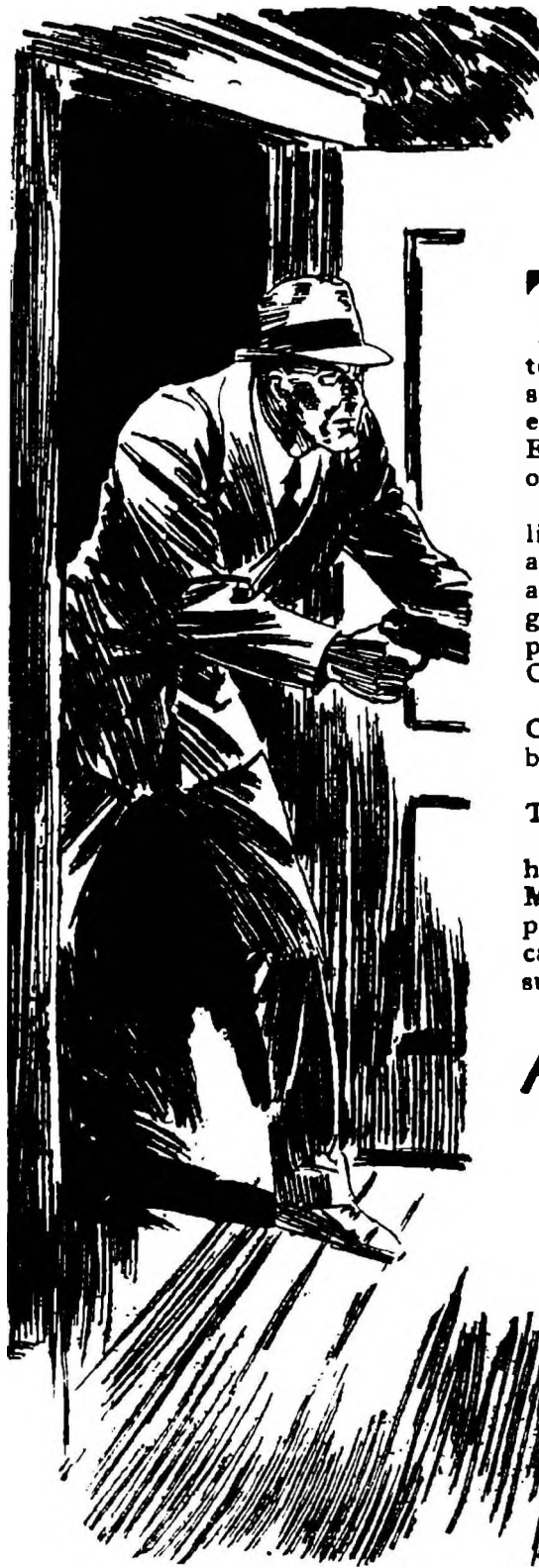
Dressed entirely in slinky black like a Creole queen, she looked exotic and interesting. The city editor rose and nodded graciously. Over by the green-shuttered windows two cub reporters stopped flirting with their Coronas, sat up stiffly and stared.

"Looks like hell's popped loose in Congo Square," said Reporter Number One.

"Looks like a story," said Number Two.

Emmeline wiped the moisture from her forehead with her pudgy palms. Mr. Pratz, the city editor, seemed pleased. He knew that if Emmeline came to the office in person there was sure to be trouble brewing somewhere

A Complete Novelette of Creole Witchcraft



Leprous, Evil Shapes Stage a Danse

DEMONS DANCE

By **FRANK
BELKNAP
LONG, Jr.**

*Author of "Murder at
Midday," "Medicine for
Three," etc.*



Macabre to the Castanets of Death!

in the French Quarter. Not just ordinary trouble, either, but something distinctly unsavory, like the oysters in the stalls along the riverfront when the thermometer stood at 115 in the shade and the hot pavements ate holes in your shoes. Only some devil's cauldron brewing black mischief could have moved big Emmeline from her cool patio to the torrid asphalt of the New Orleans streets at high noon.

It was a miracle, and the city editor was still marveling when the fifty-five-year-old policy queen set to work on his nerves. Big Emmeline knew a thing or two about psychology.

"Someone is trying to freeze me," she said. "But I never touched her. I just let her sit on the floor and came over myself to tell you about it."

"Who, Emma?" asked Pratz. "Who is sitting on your floor?"

"Judge Rocque's daughter. Someone pasted adhesive tape on her pretty little mouth, tied her up so she couldn't move, and left her in the *juju* room all night. No white girl could stand that, Mr. Pratz. The *papaloi's juju* would scare that little blond child out of her wits. But there's other things in that room—*zombies*, walking dead men. Sometimes I hear voices all night."

"What happened to Nizilda, Emma?" said Pratz in a tight, anxious tone.

"She didn't know me when I spoke to her," said Emmeline. "She just looked at me, like her pretty blue eyes had turned to ice."

PRATZ was alarmed. He knew all about Nizilda Rocque. She was a little madcap, a little fool. She gambled at Emma's night after night for higher stakes than even the judge could afford.

She was college-bred, but her brains were in her feet. She was a wonderful dancer, had tawny hair and a scornful little mouth which resented kisses. Perhaps she wasn't as wild as she was painted, but it was rumored that no man's private life

was entirely safe in her hands.

"This is bad, Emma," said Pratz. "They could shut your place up tight. You ought to be careful, Emma."

Emmeline's face was an anxious study. "I had nothing to do with it," she said. "Someone kidnaped her, wrapped her head in a towel and dragged her up a ladder to the *juju* room."

"Is she hurt, Emma?" asked Pratz. He had put the question off deliberately, out of sheer funk.

"Only in her mind, Mr. Pratz."

Pratz brightened. He was still concerned, but the news-hound in him was sniffing at a verminous scent. Scarlet horrors, terrible hauntings in the Vieux Carré! It was front-page stuff just as soon as you linked it up with Nizilda Rocque and her madcap personality. The ritzy set and Congo mumbo-jumbo! It was news!

There was no one in the office but the two cubs. He called to one of them in a voice that clapped like thunder.

"Come here, Freddy, quick. Got something for you."

Freddy Curtis was elated. He slapped a cover on his Corona, bounced across the office and stood at attention while old Pratz explained the assignment.

"This is Miss Sompayrac, Freddy," he said. "She runs a roulette parlor in the Vieux Carré. Nice place, all white clientele."

Emmeline nodded emphatically. "All white," she said. There was a ring of pride in her voice. Emmeline was an influence in New Orleans. Half the blacks in the French Quarter were enmeshed in her policy toils and some of the best and wealthiest pinks patronized her roulette parlor. Blacks and pinks together sent the stout old lady's income spinning up into the higher brackets.

She was proud of her social status, her immense importance in the city of sin and carnivals.

"I know the place," said Freddy, and could have bitten his tongue out. Old Pratz would think— But Pratz wasn't worrying about the moral derelictions of a cub reporter. He

teetered on his toes, his fingers in his vest, his eyes bright with excitement.

"Miss Sompayrac lives over the parlor," he said. "On the second floor. The third floor has been shut off for about six months."

"Five," corrected Emmeline. She started talking directly to Freddy. "It's got a spell on it. It was on account of the *papaloi*. He used too much *juju*. He died with the spirit on him. He was sitting on the floor with a bowl of blood on his knees when his heart burst and he fell over dead.

"When a *papaloi* falls dead with the spirit on him you should stay around and work over him, get the spirit out. But all the black dancers were so scared they fled and left the spirit in him. The *papaloi* was buried with the spirit in him, and that means he's not dead in his grave. He's a walking corpse, a zombie with white eyes. Every night he comes up out of his grave and goes back to the room. He can fill that room with dead men dancing. All the *juju* dancers in the graveyards he can call up. They'll serve him and dance for him.

"*Papalois* and *mamalois* that died when I was a little girl—that died with the spirits on them long before I was born. He can fly over all the graves in St. Roch's Campo Santo, and call up all the dead spirits.

"I woke up one morning a couple of months ago, and there was blood on the ceiling. It was just a little round spot at first, but it got bigger and bigger, and then it began to splash down into the room. It splattered the walls, splattered all over the night dress I was wearing. I had to have the walls done over, get a plasterer to fix up the ceiling. That was the only time the blood showed, but I could tell you about other things, the voices—"

P RATZ cut in emphatically. "All right, Emma, let's skip it. What you're trying to say is that the third floor has a bad reputation. There were dark goings-on there months ago, before you took the place over.

Voodoo dances; an old priest fell dead. So just to be on the safe side you shut the third floor off, boarded up the door and all. Freddy's got that."

Freddy Curtis nodded. "Third floor haunted, ghost of *papaloi* puts intruders on spot. What comes next, Miss Sompayrac?"

Emmeline cleared her throat. Something horrible had happened on that haunted third floor. It wasn't easy to talk about.

"Miss Rocque lost on every number," said Emmeline. "She was crying her pretty little eyes out. So I said: 'You go home to papa, honey. You've lost enough for one night.'"

"Wasn't there anyone with her?" asked Pratz.

"No. She shooed off her boy friend along about ten-thirty. There was only poor old Emma there to stand by her."

The city editor smiled. He couldn't picture Emmeline not standing by when one of her patrons was losing money.

"I put her in a cab," continued the policy queen. "Put her in and paid the fare. It must have been an outlaw cab. I thought the poor child was safe at home in bed until I heard someone moaning this morning up over my head. I looked at the clock. It was nine-thirty. I got up, put on a wrapper and went upstairs.

"She was moaning so loud I could hear her through the boards. I was so scared my teeth started clacking. I thought it might be the *papaloi* trying to drink out of his bowl of blood and moaning because he couldn't. Zombies can't drink. I went downstairs and got an axe, and then went back upstairs and set to work on the boards. It took me nearly ten minutes to get them down. There was a musky smell came out of the room while I was hacking at the boards. It made me feel sick all over."

"Never mind how you felt," said Pratz impatiently. "You got into that room, got the boards down."

Emmeline nodded. "I did, Mr. Pratz. And when I saw who was ly-

ing there on the floor I knew someone was trying to freeze me."

"She means, freeze her out," explained Pratz. "Give her joint a bad name; queer her with the police."

Emmeline bridled a little at the word "joint." Mr. Pratz, whom she had always really liked, was forgetting himself.

"The poor child's mind was just a blank," she said. "She just stared at me with eyes like frozen blue grapes."

Freddy docketed that phrase for future use. Emmeline Sompayrac was really a wonderful person. A little screwy, maybe, but a grand old girl all the same.

It was actually a privilege to follow her out into the stifling streets under a blazing sun. She waddled along in front of him, her black, silky flounces absorbing the glare as she moved. Freddy was more than elated. He knew that if he could get the little madcap daughter of Judge Rocque to talk freely his cub days would be over. A star reporter could have a pretty swell time in the carnival city by the yellow Mississippi.

A half block from the office they came to a broad cross street down which traffic streamed. Freddy moved to the edge of the curb and hailed a cab.

CHAPTER II

The Room of Horror

THE sun seemed even hotter when they passed out of the American Quarter, having rattled down St. Charles Avenue and crossed the intersection of North Peters, Canal and Tchoupitoulas Streets. The Liberty Monument seemed wilting in the torrid sunlight and in all the traffic of Liberty Square Freddy felt a dark, pervasive influence snaking up out of hell to envelop him in an aura of unclean superstition.

From Orleans Street the chimes of the old cathedral drifted across the city, but were nearly obliterated by the drone of the traffic. Blazing shafts

of sunlight streamed downward through the cab windows, turning Emmeline's face into a lake of perspiration and slithering off the chromium out in front.

Even the drive through the narrow, peaceful streets of the Old City Freddy did not enjoy. From somewhere near the center of the Vieux Carré a gruesome, malign influence radiated outward, meshing him in its unclean sweep. It was an illusion, perhaps, but a dozen times Freddy seemed to feel a tight band encircling his forehead and nasty chills running up his vertebrae.

But old Pratz wanted a story, something damned good that would knock his readers cold. It was up to Freddy. He had to make good, had to string along with old Emmeline. The cab drew to the curbing and came to a halt with a swishing of tires.

EMMMA'S place stood in the center of a block of miscellaneous houses. Some of them were low dives and some were just places where you could dine and wine without spending a small fortune, and some were wonderful inside like Emma's, glittering with the appurtenances of the gambling trade.

Emma's place was the largest establishment on the block. It was stuccoed in pale pink, with a jalousie to set it off. It was old and quaint and picturesque and an antiquarian would have raved over it. But what it offered a little spoiled madcap like Nizilda Rocque was not apparent on its outside. You had to go in through the very old door and look around, and then you knew.

Freddy dismissed the cab and followed the big policy queen inside. She didn't waste a second in the gambling parlor. She waddled forward between the roulette tables and under a glittering chandelier that had looked down on gracious ladies in plumes and satins when big Emmeline was a baby and up the stairs to the second floor. She didn't stop there, but went right on up to the *juju* room.

Freddy followed her, his heart thumping strangely. She moved along a dark hall at the head of the second flight of stairs and came to the boards she had attacked with an axe. Freddy glimpsed light between the pine-board ruin, and in his excitement and haste to get into the room, nearly toppled her over.

For a long second they both filled the doorway between the demolished boards, and then they were in the room, standing in a banner of light that streamed in through an open window and gazing in stunned wonder at the girl on the floor. Then wonder gave place to swift horror, and a little, choking sob flew out of Emmeline's throat.

Freddy made no sound. He just stood there, swaying a little, while his eyes goggled and the blood left his cheeks. The girl was sprawled in a corner. Her body was twisted and her face was black.

She was fully clothed, but she had kicked off—or perhaps someone had flipped off—her yellow suede sport shoes. There were dark bruises and red, ugly-looking welts on her firm-fleshed legs. She was wearing a white swagger coat over a yellow voile dress and rolled yellow socks. The little slippers were lying a few feet away on a patch of coffee-colored mildew.

Emmeline and Freddy both knew that the girl was dead. No form still warm and limber could have maintained such a posture. The ghastly distortion of her limbs and torso was even more horrible than her features, which were congested with black arterial blood.

She had apparently struggled fiercely, for the cords on her ankles had come loose, and those on her wrists were stained a rusty red. The little rouged, cupid's bow mouth was rimmed with pinkish froth.

There was a peculiar odor in that room. It was faint, but nauseatingly unpleasant. Emmeline would have said it was the contents of the *papa-loi's* bowl gone rancid, but Freddy was familiar with the odor of spilled blood, and he did not think it was

blood he smelled. There was a stranger, more repulsive odor in the room.

Suddenly Freddy recognized it. It wasn't the kind of odor that assails your nostrils vehemently, like the effluvium of a monkey house at the zoo. But it was a zoo odor. Freddy had smelled it several times as a kid and once or twice as a man. As a kid he had often visited the snake house at the National Zoological Park in Washington, D. C.

MENTALLY Freddy took his reporter's card and tore it into bits. He didn't want to go through with this. He wanted to dash out into the clean, bright sunlight again.

But when the Creole Queen flashed large eyes of scorn and reproach at him he got wise to himself. Freddy had a lot of courage in cold storage. His spine was an icicle, but he knew that he couldn't go on being a cub forever.

Here was the first big break he had got so far, and even if it was all dressed out in a grinning death-mask it wasn't going to bite him.

It was to his credit that when he really got over his momentary funk he figuratively took off his coat and waded right into that dark sea of horror, up to his knees, his waist, his chin. He knew he couldn't touch the corpse until the police came, but he made a visual examination at close range of practically everything in the room.

There were many curious things in that room. No furniture, but a lot of bric-a-brac on the mantelpiece, which was higher than Freddy's head. A little china bear and a French king sitting on a high china throne and a carnival mask of black papier-maché with long ribbons attached to it.

But the oddest thing was a yellow paper poster announcing a circus of some kind. Freddy held it up in the sunlight that streamed in through the window, perused it swiftly. It read:

AMAZING EXHIBITION
 First battle—an Attakapas Bull
 against Six Wild Dogs!
 Second Battle—a Black Panther
 against a—

The poster was torn at that point. The black panther's opponent would never be known. Freddy's steel-grey eyes narrowed in deep puzzlement. Why did a circus poster, and curious bric-a-brac, gather dust on the mantel of a voodoo priest's room?

Perhaps big Emmeline could enlighten him. He turned to her with a question on the tip of his tongue; then suddenly decided to keep his thoughts and queries to himself. The atmosphere of that grim room favored secrecy.

During the next five minutes Freddy was very busy. He bent close above the dead girl, studied the distorted body that some brute thing had crushed and— Not mutilated exactly, for there were no knife gashes in the bruised and abraded flesh, but the crimson welts indicated that the mutilating impulse had been present in the thing that had assailed her.

Freddy instinctively envisaged it as sub-human. Some leprous shape of black night, some scuffling, unclean thing bearing a snake-odor, trailing the fetor of graveyards. That was his instinctive feeling, and it was not a sane one. Old Pratz would laugh at it, sneer, perhaps. Old Pratz was as logical and level-headed as an adding machine.

Freddy had lived in New Orleans for a decade. Being young and imaginative, he knew a thing or two. The dark cult of the *juju* with its ophidian sacraments and blood-lusting ceremonies, still reared its ugly head in the city of levees. Seventy-five years ago the blacks had worshiped the snake-god openly in Congo Square. Something pretty awful had bruised and distorted the fragile, slim body of this little madcap scion of wealth.

Freddy took mental notes while his flesh crawled. His reporter's card was back in his pocket, and he was functioning at white-heat.

Emmeline was wringing her hands by the time Freddy was ready for her. He quizzed her, frightened her, threatened her. She answered him with shrugs and slight groans, her big fat body quivering against the

door jamb, her mouth working.

"Honest, young man," she said, "she was alive this morning. She was sitting up, looking at me. This must have happened while I was telling Mr. Pratz about it."

"How did they get her up here?" rasped Freddy. "Didn't you hear them busting the window open? Where's the ladder?"

"It's down in back," she said. "They carried it around the house. You can see the grooves on the ground right under the window. I sleep heavy; that's why I didn't hear."

"Well," said Freddy, "it doesn't look so good, Miss Sompayrac."

"But, my God, young man, you've got to make it look good! I'll be frozen if you don't. Please, young man, please try and fix it up for me like Mr. Pratz asked."

Freddy's brow was corrugated. "Best thing you can do is phone the police," he said. "Tell them to send someone right over. I can't make it look any better than it is, Miss Sompayrac. I can't pull off a miracle. This kid is socially prominent."

Emmeline let the tears flow then. They streamed down her fat cheeks, wearing furrows in her rice-powder makeup.

Freddy felt sorry for that aged lump of blubbery flesh.

"Just tell them what's necessary," he said. "Just keep to the story you told Pratz, if it's the truth."

"Where are you going, young man?"

"I've got to break this to old Judge Rocque," said Freddy. "I'll phone Pratz, and he'll send Davis or maybe Fearn over to keep the police from riding you. Remember, you don't have to tell them anything but the truth."

CHAPTER III

The Strange Family

FREDDY was relieved when he found himself out in the hot sunlight again. He looked up at the pink

stuccoed walls of Emma's place and thought of the thing he had seen. Warm clean sunlight on pink walls, and inside a festering horror that had made his flesh crawl. He went up close to the wall, and looked at the grooves in the soft earth directly under the window of the *juju* room. He shot a glance upward, saw Emeline's fat, frightened face peering down at him, and swore impatiently.

"Go down to your room and wait," he called up to her. "Stay in your room until the police come."

He stamped around the house through a grass-carpeted alley between the east wall and the adjoining joint, and took a squint at the ladder which was lying on trampled grass a few feet from the rear door of Emma's joint.

Then he returned to the front of the house, stood for a minute staring across the cobbled street at the row of pink and blue stuccoed houses opposite, and then stamped off down the street in quest of a cab.

He found one about half a mile from Emma's place. Cabs didn't cruise about much at midday in the French Quarter. The houses near Emma's joint were all shuttered and silent, and who would want to visit such places at midday? The few cabmen who cruised did it for exercise.

FREDDY tumbled into the cab which had drawn to the curb with squealing tires, and gave Judge Rocque's address to the driver. The latter stopped an instant to wipe the sweat from his dark Creole face and the tips of his waxed mustache.

"Hot day, ain't it, mister," he said as he took his toes from the rake pedal, spun the cab out from the curb and around a little parked-off square in the center of the street.

"Yeah," said Freddy, hugging the cushions and wishing that he didn't have to interview poor old Judge Rocque. The cab put on speed, swooped over the crest of a steep grade flanked by houses that looked like bits of old France, and turned right, then left, then right again.

It sped across two intersections,

beamed down a tree-planted street, and came to a halt with a grinding of brakes before a house that was almost a mansion. Flower beds and shaven shrubbery gave it an air of scenic distinction. It could have stood on upper St. Charles Avenue or Prytania Street without shaming its neighbors, but Judge Rocque preferred the less sumptuous residence districts of the Creole section. His house was on a back street not far from the black shadows of the Vieux Carré.

Freddy climbed out of the cab, paid the driver and strode between the flower beds to the door. His heart was pounding. Judge Rocque was one of the kindest men in New Orleans. He was kind and decent and just, and this thing was going to hurt him. Freddy rang the doorbell and waited.

A few seconds later the door opened and a dark-skinned manservant with white hair and nervous eyes peered out at him. Freddy said: "I've got to see Judge Rocque right away."

Something in the tone of his voice won him instant admittance. The manservant stepped back and Freddy passed down a long, oak-paneled hall, and into a brightly lighted room on the first floor. The judge was pacing the floor when Freddy entered.

He was a very tall, thin man with hawk features, and the sloping shoulders of a confirmed bookworm. His lean face was heavily lined and haggard. When he saw Freddy he paled. An agonized question leapt out of his eyes toward the young reporter before his lips murmured: "Is it about my daughter? Tell me, is it—"

Freddy nodded. He stood looking across the room at the grey shelves of books that towered up behind the kindly, scholarly jurist. A quick thrust is the kindest, thought Freddy, but his own face was paler than Judge Rocque's when he stammered out the truth.

The judge's reaction was curious. He remained for a moment very still and quiet. Not a muscle of his face stirred. Then he stepped backward, and his shoulders sagged. He slumped against the bookcase, all his dignity gone, in an agony of grief. Choking

sobs came from him while Freddy stood with dry mouth, gulping with pity.

He didn't know just what to say. He tried to say something, but his dry mouth stopped him. Why should a really good man like this have to suffer so? It was indecent, a mockery of justice. Freddy wished that he could shunt this ordeal as he had shunted the other, get out into the warm sunlight again. But he knew he had to stick it.

THE judge was still spread-eagled in agony against his books when his other daughter screamed. Somewhere upstairs Juana Rocque had looked into the face of death too. But it was not a daughter's face. Juana's small feet pattered on the stairs; she descended swiftly, screaming again and again, and raced along the hall toward the library. Her face was contorted with horror when she appeared in the doorway.

Freddy gasped. The grief of Judge Rocque and the wild girl cry had rasped his nerves, and he felt ill all over, right down to his soles. But the vision of loveliness that stood gasping and choking in the doorway wrenched a gasp of sheer wonder from him. No amount of tragic horror could dim such radiance.

Judge Rocque's youngest daughter was so lovely that she seemed dream-like and unreal. She was perhaps eighteen. Glowing dark eyes, a fair complexion, and slim, exquisitely graceful figure enhanced but did not really explain her breath-taking charm. It was the molding of her features, perhaps, which revealed a depth of intensity of feeling far beyond the average, that drew a gasp from Freddy.

She remained in the doorway only an instant, her eyes shifting wildly from Freddy's white face to her father's grief-racked figure, and then back again to Freddy. Then she ran toward her father, sobbing. He caught her, held her.

Freddy wished he could draw a curtain on the scene which ensued. The girl tried to describe the thing

which had frightened her and Judge Rocque tried to calm her, though he looked about ready to cave in himself.

"He had no face," she sobbed. "He came in through the window. He was carrying a little bag, all spattered with blood. There was fresh blood on his clothes. He shuffled—shuffled toward me."

Freddy didn't wait to hear more. He turned, bolted out of the room and up a staircase that was wider than any staircase he had ever climbed. Dark, menacing shadows leapt toward him over the massive bannisters. From the landing above, shadows leapt down. He plunged between the flickering tongues of darkness like some nervy diver who doesn't fear sharks.

On the first landing he heard footsteps up above, half way to the second a big form blocked him.

"Not so fast, young fellow. What are you doing up here?"

The form was six feet four or five in height and proportionately broad of shoulder. A menacing, resistant bulk, impossible to argue with. It started to move down the stairs, and Freddy moved with it. It propelled Freddy with slow, ruthless insistence down the stairs and back into the library.

Once Freddy tried to brush past, but a big hand descended on his shoulder.

"Just keep moving, young fellow."

Back in the library, Freddy saw the big man clearly. He was dressed entirely in black: black shoes, socks, suit and tie. He had nearly black hair, black eyes. He was, perhaps, fifty years old. He had a face like a basilisk. Gold snake-eyes stared at Freddy from cheeks shriveled and parchment dry. There was a flicker of malignant dislike in the eyes.

Juana Rocque was standing by her father, holding tightly to his arm. Freddy had never seen a whiter face, eyes so tortured.

"It's all right, Cousin Joseph," she said. "This man is a reporter. He's seen Nizilda. She's dead—Nizilda's dead."

The cold eyes contracted a little, the mouth twitched a little. That was all. No violent shock reaction to indicate that the death of Nizilda Rocque meant more to him than the loss of a good dinner.

Worse followed. Old Judge Rocque began to cringe, to grow subservient. It was horrible. Judge Rocque seemed to forget his grief for an instant under the cold scrutiny of the big man's eyes.

Suddenly Cousin Joseph said: "You are very like Nizilda, Juana. Sometimes fate confers blessings in tragic guise and frees us from obligations which—"

COUSIN JOSEPH was moving toward Juana with a slow, snake-like glide. Juana trembled and her eyes sought Freddy's. There was unmistakable appeal in her gaze, a beseeching, intimate glow that changed the world for him.

Freddy put himself between the big man and the two by the bookcase. "I've got to ask a few questions," he said. "The police—"

Cousin Joseph's hand shot out, fastened on Freddy's coat collar. "Ask them elsewhere," he said. Before Freddy could protest or cry out he was lifted up and literally dragged from the room. The manservant opened the front door and Freddy was shoved out into the hot sunlight of the *siesta* hour. Instantly the door slammed on his back. It had all happened so suddenly that Freddy was left breathless and gasping on the doorstep.

All the way back to the newspaper office in a cab that dawdled too long at the intersections, he cursed the huge man in black and worried about Juana Rocque. He'd get action from Pratz that would blast Cousin Joseph from crown to toe.

But when Freddy reached the city desk and told old Pratz about the incident, the latter poured icewater on all of his retributive schemes.

"Judge Rocque's cousin is probably a little cracked, Freddy," he said. "He's an eccentric character. He was an actor in his youth, and he likes to

spout rhetoric and dress like a superannuated *Hamlet*. He has a violent temper. You've got to make allowances for a bird like that."

His face became grim. "I've another hot assignment for you, Freddy. Emma phoned about an hour ago. I sent Fearn over to make the cops behave. They took Emma down to Headquarters. Fearn phoned from there. The commissioner is grilling her himself. I got him on the wire, talked to him, got a concession from him. He promised to treat Emma with kindness."

Pratz shook his head a little sadly. "Emma is a victim of circumstances, Freddy," he said. "She inherited the policy business from a brother years ago, carried on because she enjoyed being Emmeline Sompayrac, the Creole Queen, the Big Lady of Numbers. But she hasn't a black impulse in her nature."

His face became grim again. "What did you think when you found the Rocque kid, Freddy? Didn't your flesh creep; didn't the voodoo drums start beating in that room? *Tra-dum—tra-dum—dum*. Tell me, Freddy, didn't you hear them at all? There's something black and horrible about all this, Freddy. Maybe if you spent a night in that room—"

"What?" gasped Freddy. His mouth went suddenly dry.

Suddenly Pratz smiled. "There's nothing in it, Freddy, of course. I mean, the supernatural business. But I want you to spend a night in that room anyway. It will make a great story. I'll play it up, ballyhoo it. I've got the commissioner's permission. Everything's all fixed. All you'll have to do is sit tight and use your imagination. Nothing will happen, but it will be swell publicity. And if you sort of doze off and can half swear that a zombie climbed in the window and looked at you with its white, dead eyes—so much the better. Public falls for that sort of thing hard. I'm leaving it to you. All I want is a story, and if I get a good one you'll get twenty berries additional at the pay desk every week from now on."

Pratz went to his desk, flipped open the upper right-hand drawer, and drew out a slick number in firearms—a gleaming automatic that Freddy could have carried in the palm of his hand.

"Hard to get these for cubs," he said, and dropped the weapon into Freddy's coat pocket.

Freddy liked the little gat, felt suddenly pleased and proud. It was just like Freddy to forget all his morbid feelings when something pleasant made him happy. In a few minutes the old dread, the pervasive and oppressive sense of primitive evil entering his life and refusing to leave, would return. But now he was willing to play along with old Pratz.

"Take the afternoon off, Freddy," said Pratz. "Have a good time; forget all about this. There's a swell movie at the Franklin Playhouse—'The Blonde from Buenos Aires,' or something. Better take that in, and treat yourself to a one-buck *table d'hôte*. The paper'll pay for it. But remember, Freddy, no liquor."

Freddy left the office with nothing but kindly feelings for old Pratz. Why shouldn't he enjoy the movie? He had read somewhere that Charles the First had slept soundly while his gaolers were erecting the scaffold that was to finish him, and that one of America's foremost mobsters had asked about the weather on his way to the electric chair. A guy who let his nerves run wild would never get to be a star by the yellow Mississippi.

CHAPTER IV

Black God Dancing

THE Vieux Carré at dusk. There is very little traffic, and half the vehicles in the ancient streets are outlaw cabs *en route* to shady rendezvous. The rectangle of buildings and marts and monuments bounded by Canal and Esplanade Streets is sleepily dozing under the frosted silver sky. A yellow half moon swings low over Jackson Square, and up from Congo Square comes the *beat, beat,*

beat of jungle drums. Or maybe it is just imagination.

Once long ago the *papaloi* danced down there. With ugly Congo masks on their sweaty black faces, they grinned and capered under a moon just like this moon, under a sky just like this sky. But now maybe it is just imagination, that jungle odor on the wind that blows up from down there and whistles through the iron lattices and sweeps about the antique chimney-pots on the very old houses.

The wind says that somewhere down there a girl nude to the waist is tearing a white fowl with her white teeth, while the blood dribbles down over her comely brown limbs.

The wind whispers that the *papaloi* is tired now, and is resting, with the brimming sacrificial bowl tilted perilously on his scrawny knees. Fresh blood in the bowl, broken egg shells and chicken feathers scattered about. The chicken feathers are crimson-tipped, and the egg shells are red and brown.

Black and brown men and women, sweating in every pore and crazed with a kind of Satanic thirst, crawl toward the *papaloi* on their hands and knees, begging a drink from the bowl. But the *papaloi* is very tired now, very sleepy.

The wind blows up from Congo Square, carrying the taints of black Guinea, carrying the blood-chants of old slaves dead in chains who have lain for centuries underground. Carrying also the taint of the graveyards, of St. Louis Number One where the great gentry rest, and of the shallow tombs where the poor do not.

Dusk in the Vieux Carré. Along the narrow, cobbled streets ebony blacks shuffle; octoroons, the lightest of high yellows; white men, Americans, Creoles, shuffle in unison. Outlaw cabs move slowly through the dusk. Lights glimmer behind green-shuttered windows; the voices of Creole women evoke strange visions, and dreams of love.

It is a world of enchantment until up from Congo Square comes the boom of the drums again, the taint of

the jungles. But probably it is imagination. Only a few hear the drums now, smell the rank jungle odors.

Freddy got out of a cab a block from Emma's place, and walked with nervous steps past the joints where you could get anything at any hour of the day or night.

He was feeling it now, the reaction after old Pratz's buoyant assurances. In the office it had sounded all right. His scalp had tingled a little when Pratz had hurled the idea at him out of the blue, but that had been just momentary funk. Now it was different. He was jittery all over.

It had started in the movies. "The Blonde from Buenos Aires" had looked like Nizilda Rocque. And like Juana too, of course. She kept reminding him of what had happened to Nizilda and what might happen to Juana. He discovered to his dismay that he was horribly concerned about Juana. He couldn't keep his thoughts on the picture. He turned hot, then cold, then hot again. Then he began to shiver violently.

He hadn't even taken Pratz's advice about the *table d'hôte*. He had wolfed a scanty dinner at a one-arm lunch wagon in Jackson Square, and followed it up with a whisky and soda. Then he had commandeered a cab, and driven to the corner of Emmeline's block.

A detective was standing in the doorway of Emma's place when Freddy walked up with his police card in one hand, and a couple of magazines in the other. Freddy had bought some mystery magazines to read in case the black *juju* stayed buried.

He didn't look jittery. He looked composed, a serious young man of four and twenty, with mouse-colored hair, spectacles and a little mustache. He wore a tweed sport coat and white flannel trousers.

The detective looked him over, looked at the police card, squinted at the magazines.

"Publicity stunt," he muttered. "Fool thing to allow. Whatja going to do, read yourself to sleep?"

"I'll be too busy," said Freddy. "When do you leave?"

"I've got orders to stay out here all night," said the detective. "If you see anything, holler."

Freddy nodded and entered big Emmeline's dark house for the second time that day.

The roulette parlor was lit by a single green-shaded lamp set on one of the tables near the middle of the establishment. All the tables were covered with white sheets; and when Freddy entered, his shadow leapt all around the room on that white field.

It gave him a start. His own shadow was like a *juju* leaping out to devour him. His eyes searched the gloom for things unclean and leprous, shapes from the anteroom of death. He didn't see them.

An uneasy feeling chilled his spine as he ascended slowly up a wide, darkened stairway to Emmeline's suite on the second floor, paused an instant to stare at his shadow again as it danced on a white door illumined by a hall lamp of low wattage, and went on up to the *juju* room.

The *juju* room was in total darkness. The commissioner's minions had left it dark, at Pratz's request. Outside in the hall a lamp glowed dully, but its rays did not penetrate beyond the splintered boards which framed the doorway. Freddy's lips set firmly. He took a deep breath and stepped into the darkness.

The odor was as intolerable as ever. Freddy moved over the creaking floor to the center of the room, stood for an instant staring at the square of open window. Then he fumbled in his coat pocket, drew out a tiny electric lamp.

THE lamp looked like a little metal mushroom. It had a circular base and its rounded hood projected rays downward over a three-foot radius. It simply illumined a patch of floor without dissipating the surrounding darkness. An observer from the street would notice no glow when the light functioned.

Still, it was only for an emergency.

If nothing happened for a couple of hours, he might risk switching it on for the rest of the night. But first he'd give the *juju* every chance. He set the lamp on a projecting cornice of the massive mantel, and switched it on for a couple of seconds.

The dust was so thick on the illuminated boards that it looked like a greyish fungus growth sprouting evilly in the darkness. Two footprints crossed it, his own perhaps. He cast an anxious look around at the dim outlines of walls and ceiling; then switched off the lamp.

He felt bum all over. His mouth was dry and his temples throbbed. It was hellishly hot in that room. The *siesta* hour heat was still sluggishly circulating there, resisting the flank attacks of the cooler night breezes from beyond the window.

Freddy took off his coat, hung it on a projection of the mantel opposite the mushroom lamp. Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead and parked himself on the floor. He chose a corner near the window. He sat cross-legged, with his back against the wall.

All in all, it was a nasty assignment. He sat there in total darkness, with only his thoughts for company, and the memory of what had occurred in that room only a few hours before would have driven a less nervy kid mad. But Freddy could take it even though he was sick with loathing and his flesh crawled.

For minutes that dragged like dead eternities he sat there. He wasn't sleepy; his eyes didn't even blink. He just sat and stared into the darkness and he was still staring when the hideous faceless man appeared in the room.

The figure materialized so suddenly in the darkness that Freddy still stared quietly. His eyes saw it, but somehow it didn't click in his brain for four or five seconds. And when at last it did click Freddy didn't gasp or cry out. His face seemed to freeze. He could feel the blood draining out of his cheeks while his jaws seemed to grow rigid.

It was a ghastly sensation. Shakes-

peare says somewhere that a man can be frightened out of fear. Freddy was so frightened that he tingled and then went cold all over.

The faceless man was black. His nearly nude body glistened from toe to crown with a faint and spectral phosphorescence. The darkly gleaming torso was almost skeletal, and the ribs stood out. Horribly between them were scored lines in white chalk, and running vertically from navel to fleshless throat was a mark in scarlet blood.

The face seemed eaten away. Eyes on stalks, a twisted gash where the mouth should have been and a clotted, fibroid mass of mangled and striated flesh in the region of the nostrils suggested a countenance slashed and ruined by the holocausts of Armageddon.

The obscene creature was holding a bowl against its belly, and as it advanced toward Freddy its shoulders swayed. Swayed and jerked while its knees gyrated and its head went back. Suddenly Freddy perceived that it was dancing. It was dancing the hellish dance of the *juju*, to the wild beat of invisible drums.

It gyrated and spun, and the bowl spilled.

A RED stain spread over its white loincloth, ran down its gleaming dark thighs, its knees. It was dancing the supremely horrible ritual dance of the black jungles, the dance of its people known to red Congo moons by silvered waters in the deep forest glades, known to the hyena and its kin. The dance of the snake-god that called down from the skies murky blasphemies in semi-human shape, and capering blood-spirits that possessed black bodies and slew babies and old, old women in the shadow of the *kraal*.

It was dancing the sinisterly mischievous and hellish dance that summoned the *obeah*, the *mumbo-jumbo* dance of forgotten tribes. *Tra-dum—tra-dum—dum*. Were there drums beating in that room, or was it the blood in Freddy's ears that made his own body writhe and sway on the

floor, in unison with the dark, faceless form?

The bowl was empty now. The black dancer's torso and limbs gleamed with the spilled bright fluid of life, but still the dance went on. *Tra-dum. Tra-dum. Tra-dum—dum—dum. Tra-dum . . .*

Freddy's fingers lifted the little automatic out of his pocket. His body was swaying as he raised it, aimed it at the white chalk marking in the center of the dancing *papaloi's* black chest. His forefinger flexed while his body continued to move in unison with the inexorable Congo rhythms, to move and sway as the *juju* swayed.

The little gun blasted with a sharp recoil. A jet of yellow flame spurted from Freddy's raised arm, and the detonation which ensued shook the room. Freddy shot twice in quick succession.

The black figure continued to dance. Freddy fell back with a strangled sob and the little gun went clattering. Was it a man or a black god dancing? Even the instinctive revolt which had nerved Freddy's fingers was quelled now. Freddy would sway as the black shape swayed, would grovel in the dust of that room as the black worshippers had groveled.

Down on his knees he moved toward the black priest, toward the black god dancing. Across the room he moved, his features convulsed with terror and insane appeal. The faceless black priest had died with the spirit on him. Out from his unclean body the spirit flowed, enmeshing Freddy in its leprous aura. Jerkily Freddy moved toward the black man dancing.

He did not move alone. Out from the shadows of that slimed and fetid room a long, undulating shape slithered toward the capering priest. Its flat head wavered slowly from side to side as it drew near to the phosphorescent glow, its long body swayed in unison with the gyrations of the two human dancers.

Freddy was dancing on his knees, weaving crazily forward and backward when the great snake stopped

him. Its immense yellow body turned slightly in its course and flowed toward him, buckling into a swelling noose as he lurched sideways with a frantic cry. Like a tidal wave descending, the frightful bulk of the thing crashed down upon him, knocking the breath from his body, enmeshing him in a smother of slime and stench.

In a dark clearing by the silver River Congo, an old woman screams as she sees the snake-god descending. Ponderous, drooling black saliva from its scummed jaws and weighing many hundred-weights, it rests upon her, pressing the breath from her wizened chest, constricting her scrawny limbs. A scream is wrenched from her throat as the great shape tightens about her and takes her narrow black skull in its distended jaws. The voodoo drums are beating wildly, insistently under the red moon. The old woman's skull cracks like an egg-shell in the shadow of the *kraal*. Far off a hyena howls.

IN a New Orleans roulette parlor on the third floor a young cub reporter was retracing step by agonized step the *Via Dolorosa* of the African victims. High above the twisting coils a flat, scaly head reared. Two eyes, whiter and more opaque than the blind eyes of zombies, gazed down at Freddy Curtis.

Above the snake-encumbered body of the white lad the black *papaloi* with the spirit in him continued to dance the hellish ritual dance of the black Guinean jungles, all encrimsoned with the spilled sacrificial blood, all aglow with the white phosphorescent fires of some black hell.

Tra-dum—dum. Tra-dum—tra-dum. The devil-drums were louder now because the blood was splitting Freddy's eardrums with its wild, internal hammering. He thought he heard a fanfare of trumpets blown far off somewhere in another world.

Actually, it was the blast of a pistol that he heard. In that dark room bright yellow flame spurted again to a thunderous detonation. From the gleaming blue-steel barrel

of an automatic a bright tongue of flame whipped across the room, heralding a charge that shredded the flat snake head to a crimson pulp.

The oval-spotted python neck writhed with its weight of shattered head an instant before the thick body uncurled. Slowly it uncurled and retreated into the shadows, leaving a wet trail of snake gore on the dry, dusty boards.

Freddy was nearly unconscious. But though everything within the distorted angle of his vision flickered and danced like heat waves in fierce sunlight he sensed vaguely that the capering shape had vanished. Only a dim yellow glow that swiftly narrowed came from the wall before him.

The detective's eyes widened abruptly as he grasped the significance of the diminishing glow. With an oath he lurched forward and threw his right shoulder against the edge of the panel as it slid toward the wall. Instantly the light went out. He stumbled between a lot of things that made clattering and eerie noises when his shoes whacked into them, moved swiftly forward into inky blackness.

He could hear footsteps scraping on the dry boards ahead of him. Vaguely he was aware of heavy breathing and the odor of sweaty flesh. Then flame spurted out of the void, and a savage detonation whammed against his eardrums.

A slug buzzed past his left cheek, cut a deep swath in the woodwork behind him and ricocheted off into empty air.

Instantly he raised his automatic and fired three shots in rapid sequence, spacing them over an imaginary arc in the darkness. The darkness exploded in a crimson blaze. He caught an evanescent glimpse of something weaving or jerking about ahead of him between walls that seemed to waver and coalesce.

The triple blast had exhausted the dick's clip, but he had sprayed lead with telling effect. Twenty feet from where he was standing, a tall black man with a .32 caliber bullet in his vitals felt his body begin to rotate about his feet. He gave a hoarse

cry, slapped both his hands frantically to ears that roared, and sank to his knees on the creaking boards.

When the dick flashed a light on him he was a grim and pitiful sight. Smearred with yellow and reddish ochre and white chalk, he groveled on the boards, clutching his belly, twisting his head about in dazed agony.

The most hideous thing about him was his face. It was a sunken mass of twisted, discolored flesh. Only his eyes were animated. Madness and despair leaped in them while red blood oozed from the wound in his stomach, spreading over his black knuckles, dripping to the floor and spreading fanwise in a widening arc.

The dick flashed his electric torch in a wide semicircle about the passageway. He saw things that astonished him. But he was the opposite of unimaginative, and the strange-shaped objects that were massed just behind the panel caused him no perplexity. He knew that the huge drum head with the resin cord attached to it, the slatted wheel, the tin whistles above a weird, cone-shaped sounding box would create a cacophony sufficiently eerie and horrible to convince anyone he was listening to Africa speaking.

THE detective stood staring at the synthetic sound devices for fully ten seconds while the man on the floor beside him flattened himself against the boards with convulsive jerks. The panel had stayed half-shut after the dick's shouldering and the room was in partial view.

Across the floor and through the narrow opening Freddy came tottering in the darkness.

The grim-faced dick flashed the light on him, saw how bad he looked and swore softly.

"Take it easy, kid," he said. "Everything's okay now. It's damned lucky I heard your firecrackers."

Every fiber of Freddy's body shrieked. But he was spunky all the same. He knelt on the floor with the dick beside the faceless black man, and got a confession out of him implicating Cousin Joseph Rocque be-

fore he joined his ancestors beside the silver River Congo in the shadow of their *kraal*.

Cousin Joseph Rocque had engineered it all. Old Hamlet Rocque, whom Pratz had thought merely eccentric, had killed madcap Nizilda, and brought the faceless man to an untimely end. Presently he would stand in the shadow of the gallows with a rope around his throat.

Freddy explained it all to old Pratz the following morning. He had his story, the story that would save Emmeline Sompayrac and make him a star.

Old Pratz's eyes were shining as he listened to Freddy talk. Freddy talked very well when he got warmed up and old Pratz suspected that he could write, too. He was going to make a swell reporter.

"Emmeline didn't lie about the *papaloi*," said Freddy. "About five months ago, before she took the place over, an old priest named Simon Janin actually died there during a voodoo dance. I guess his heart gave out while he was working himself into a sweat. Simon Janin was a first-class charlatan and not just an ordinary witch doctor. He roped in some of the wealthiest high yellows in New Orleans, put on a show that was a knockout.

"I've told you about the secret panel and the hidden passageway in the walls. Simon Janin had gadgets stored behind that panel so he could imitate all the sounds of nature, and some sounds that weren't natural. He could even make a lion roar by pulling a resin cord through a drumhead. He had blue lights and green and yellow lights set in the wall and he could bring Africa right into that little room at any hour of the night.

"His credulous patrons would sit in the middle of the floor with eyes uprolled, moaning and wailing and looking at the *juju* man making faces at them beyond the panel. Then the panel would slide shut, and the *juju* man would beat it down into the cellar of the house and through another panel, and along a subterranean passageway that terminated in an old,

disused cistern nearly two blocks away. A clever rogue was Simon Janin."

"But how did the snake get there, Freddy?" demanded Pratz. He was fuming with impatience.

FREDDY smiled. "One thing at a time Mr. Pratz, *please*," he said. "It seems that Emmeline forgot to tell us about the snake charmer. A black lady as stout as Emmeline lived in the voodoo room too. She was Simon Janin's wife. She had eight pythons and one of them escaped, crawled into a hole under the boards and remained there for five months.

"When Janin died his wife got cold feet and fled. She knew that one of her pets was missing, but she thought it had climbed out of the window. I traced the old girl this morning, got her story. She rented her snakes out to the mercenary devils who stage animal fights for the edification of black and white sadists. It's against the law to hold such entertainments openly, but for over a century wild dogs have been pitted against bulls, pythons and boas against panthers and even tigers in this fair city, and the police have shut their eyes. Of course the snake was ravenously hungry. Pythons can go without food for several months, but it doesn't sweeten their dispositions any."

"But what about Joseph Rocque?" fumed Pratz.

"Cousin Joseph's fortune was made in rackets," said Freddy. "He had his fingers in the policy pie and operated a dozen roulette parlors under blinds. But Emma's place was the best plum in the pie, and he wanted it very badly.

"Cousin Joseph tried to kill two birds with one stone by having Nizilda kidnaped and carried through the cistern and wall passages to the *juju* room. The ladder prints under the window were red herrings. Nizilda's infernal cleverness and waywardness were twin swords hanging over Cousin Joseph's head. You see, old Judge Rocque wanted Nizilda to marry Joseph for his

money. The judge was in a bad hole financially, with a mortgage on the family estate and the grocery bills unpaid. But Nizilda was in love with a boy her own age. She wanted Joseph's money, but balked at the idea of marriage. She had an eight-cylinder brain behind her baby face and she figured out a way of getting Joseph's kale on a silver platter. She got wise to his rackets, got something dangerous on him—I don't know just what—through association with Emmeline and was blackmailing him, bleeding him white.

"Cousin Joseph was desperate. It occurred to him that if he could get the disfigured Negro, Nimrod Christopher, to put on a voodoo *mumbo-jumbo* for her benefit with all the paraphernalia in the *juju* room, she might go mad, and then her testimony against him would have no legal weight. And even if she didn't crack up, the crazy story she would tell would give Emma's place such a bad name that he could buy the old lady out for a song. He had very little to lose. If Nizilda could take it, if she remained sane they'd have a hell of a time hanging it on him. It was a long gamble, maybe, but worth a try.

"The set-up was magnificent. Nimrod Christopher had been the voodoo charlatan's sidekick and had helped hoax the deluded members of his cult. He knew about the secret passageway and how to put on a grand show with the paraphernalia behind the panel.

"Christopher was a kind of superior mongrel dog that licked Joseph's boots whenever Joseph called. He lost his face in a brawl in one of Joseph's joints. Some tough blasted his profile at close range with a Colt automatic. Joseph had forbidden him to enter Judge Rocque's home, but when he got wind of Nizilda's death he became so frightened he scrambled up the side of the house over a sun-porch and tried to contact his chief. He cut himself badly on a drain and when he climbed in Juana's room with blood on him Juana ran screaming to her father. That was what sent me upstairs to investigate

and slamming in Joseph's big bulk. Joseph didn't like me.

"I thought Judge Rocque would take my part, but only Juana did. The judge didn't dare antagonize Joseph. With Nizilda gone there was only Juana, and the judge wanted Joseph badly as a son-in-law.

"Of course Joseph didn't know about the python. The big snake came out of its hole while Emmeline was talking to us in this office, and killed Nizilda by constriction. I noticed that one of the boards was loose when I went into the room. There was a dark hole the size of my fist in one corner of the room, where the wall joined the flooring. I thought a brood of rats had taken up its quarters there."

"But why did Christopher give another exhibition last night?" asked Pratz.

“HE was the one who cracked up, Mr. Pratz. He went temporarily insane. That poor faceless wretch had a sensitive conscience. Hoodwinking the high yellows and doing Joseph's dirty work didn't faze him, but he wasn't a killer. He was tortured. He couldn't imagine what had killed Nizilda. Brooding over it, he had a temporary brain storm.

"Joseph, as you know, had a lot of influence in this town. He found out through one of his agents in the commissioner's office that you had secured permission to have me spend a night in the *juju* room. Naturally he passed the information on to Christopher, warning him to stay away from the French Quarter. But Christopher knew that the paraphernalia was still set to function behind the panel, and he couldn't resist the impulse to see what effect his hideous posturings would have on me. It was an utterly insane impulse. The poor devil was crazed by fear and remorse, and wanted to convince himself that he hadn't killed Nizilda.

"Ironically enough, I sat in on a performance that might have killed. Voodoo is snake worship, you know, and when I saw that immense dark

shape flowing slowly toward me—"

Freddy shivered, in retrospect.

"Apparently the light and noise drew the snake from its lair. It all fitted horribly together like a jig-saw puzzle made by the River Congo under the guidance of some wizard-devil wearing a hyena's pelt, beating a blood-smeared drum. Even when I shot at Christopher and missed he went right on dancing, because he was too crazed to realize his danger."

MR. PRATZ nodded. "Sometimes I think that the line between imagination and reality wears pretty thin at times. Take Emmeline. She swears she saw blood on her ceiling."

"I guess she saw some kind of a dark stain or smudge," said Freddy. "That snake couldn't live in the room a half year without leaving certain defilements which probably seeped through to the ceiling of the room below. Emma, being superstitious, made a tall story out of it. Trust an

old Creole woman to take liberties with facts."

Pratz was tugging at his chin. "Perhaps you'd better put all that in writing, Freddy."

"Maybe I'd better," said Freddy.

He worked hard on his story, drank black coffee and worked. Late that afternoon he received a phone call. He gathered up his typescript and deposited it quietly on Pratz's desk. His face wore a look that only a star by the yellow Mississippi could afford to flaunt in public. It was a pleasure-before-business look.

Mr. Pratz sighed as Freddy passed out of the office and descended in the elevator to the street. Maybe in a few weeks he would have to give Freddy a fortnight's leave and a wedding present. It was very annoying.

Juana Rocque was waiting for Freddy by the curb in a limousine that purred. Freddy's eyes were shining as he advanced across the pavement toward her.

*The Leering, Grinning Face of
Doom—Appalling, Sinister,
Mysterious—Stares at
Helpless Victims of a
Brutal Fiend in*



VENGEANCE OF THE SNAKE-GOD

A Complete Novelette of Weird Horror

By JAMES DUNCAN

Author of "Blood in the Night," "Scourge of India," etc.



In Next Month's Issue of **THRILLING MYSTERY**

GRAVEYARD RATS

An Aura of Abysmal Doom Pervades the Ravaged Village of Lost Knob, Where Detective Harrison Braves a Soul-Searing Nightmare of Horror!

By **ROBERT E. HOWARD**

Author of "The Treasures of Tartary," "Guns of the Mountain," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Head from the Grave

SAUL WILKINSON awoke suddenly, and lay in the darkness with beads of cold sweat on his hands and face. He shuddered at the memory of the dream from which he had awakened.

But horrible dreams were nothing uncommon. Grisly nightmares had haunted his sleep since early child-



The face was white, cold—dead

hood. It was another fear that clutched his heart with icy fingers—fear of the sound that had roused him. It had been a furtive step—hands fumbling in the dark.

And now a small scurrying sounded

in the room—a rat running back and forth across the floor.

He groped under his pillow with trembling fingers. The house was still, but imagination peopled its darkness with shapes of horror. But it was not all imagination. A faint stir of air told him the door that gave on the broad hallway was open. He knew he had closed that door before he went to bed. And he knew it was not one of his brothers who had come so subtly to his room.

In that fear-tense, hate-haunted household, no man came by night to his brother's room without first making himself known.

This was especially the case since an old feud had claimed the eldest brother four days since—John Wilkinson, shot down in the streets of the little hill-country town by Joel Middleton, who had escaped into the post-oak grown hills, swearing still greater vengeance against the Wilkinsons.

All this flashed through Saul's mind as he drew the revolver from under his pillow.

As he slid out of bed, the creak of the springs brought his heart into his throat, and he crouched there for a moment, holding his breath and straining his eyes into the darkness.

Richard was sleeping upstairs, and so was Harrison, the city detective Peter had brought out to hunt down Joel Middleton. Peter's room was on the ground floor, but in another wing. A yell for help might awaken all three, but it would also bring a hail of lead at him, if Joel Middleton were

A Complete
Novelette of
Fearsome Terror



A horrific, half-naked figure lunged at him with a tomahawk

crouching over there in the blackness.

Saul knew this was his fight, and must be fought out alone, in the darkness he had always feared and hated. And all the time sounded that light, scampering patter of tiny feet, racing up and down, up and down. . . .

CROUCHING against the wall, cursing the pounding of his heart, Saul fought to steady his quivering nerves. He was backed against the wall which formed the partition between his room and the hall.

The windows were faint grey squares in the blackness, and he could dimly make out objects of furniture in all except one side of the room. Joel Middleton must be over there, crouching by the old fireplace, which was invisible in the darkness.

But why was he waiting? And why was that accursed rat racing up and down before the fireplace, as if in a frenzy of fear and greed? Just so Saul had seen rats race up and down the floor of the meat-house, frantic to get at flesh suspended out of reach.

Noiselessly, Saul moved along the wall toward the door. If a man was in the room, he would presently be lined between himself and a window. But as he glided along the wall like a night-shirted ghost, no ominous bulk grew out of the darkness. He reached the door and closed it soundlessly, wincing at his nearness to the unrelieved blackness of the hall outside.

But nothing happened. The only sounds were the wild beating of his heart, the loud ticking of the old clock on the mantelpiece—the maddening patter of the unseen rat. Saul clenched his teeth against the shrieking of his tortured nerves. Even in his growing terror he found time to wonder frantically why that rat ran up and down before the fireplace.

The tension became unbearable. The open door proved that Middleton, or someone—or *something*—had come into that room. Why would Middleton come save to kill? But why in God's name had he not struck

already? What was he waiting for?

Saul's nerve snapped suddenly. The darkness was strangling him and those pattering rat-feet were red-hot hammers on his crumbling brain. He must have light, even though that light brought hot lead ripping through him.

In stumbling haste he groped to the mantelpiece, fumbling for the lamp. And he cried out—a choked, horrible croak that could not have carried beyond his room. For his hand, groping in the dark on the mantel, had touched the hair on a human scalp!

A furious squeal sounded in the darkness at his feet and a sharp pain pierced his ankle as the rat attacked him, as if he were an intruder seeking to rob it of some coveted object.

But Saul was hardly aware of the rodent as he kicked it away and reeled back, his brain a whirling turmoil. Matches and candles were on the table, and to it he lurched, his hands sweeping the dark and finding what he wanted.

He lighted a candle and turned, gun lifted in a shaking hand. There was no living man in the room except himself. But his distended eyes focused themselves on the mantelpiece—and the object on it.

He stood frozen, his brain at first refusing to register what his eyes revealed. Then he croaked inhumanly and the gun crashed on the hearth as it slipped through his numb fingers.

John Wilkinson was dead, with a bullet through his heart. It had been three days since Saul had seen his body nailed into the crude coffin and lowered into the grave in the old Wilkinson family graveyard. For three days the hard clay soil had baked in the hot sun above the confined form of John Wilkinson.

Yet from the mantel John Wilkinson's face leered at him—white and cold and dead.

It was no nightmare, no dream of madness. There on the mantelpiece rested John Wilkinson's severed head.

And before the fireplace, up and down, up and down, scampered a creature with red eyes, that squeaked

and squealed—a great grey rat, maddened by its failure to reach the flesh its ghoulish hunger craved.

Saul Wilkinson began to laugh—horrible, soul-shaking shrieks that mingled with the squealing of the grey ghoul. Saul's body rocked to and fro, and the laughter turned to insane weeping, that gave way in turn to hideous screams that echoed through the old house and brought the sleepers out of their sleep.

They were the screams of a madman. The horror of what he had seen had blasted Saul Wilkinson's reason like a blown-out candle flame.

CHAPTER II

Madman's Hate

IT was those screams which roused Steve Harrison, sleeping in an upstairs chamber. Before he was fully awake he was on his way down the unlighted stairs, pistol in one hand and flashlight in the other.

Down in the hallway he saw light streaming from under a closed door, and made for it. But another was before him. Just as Harrison reached the landing, he saw a figure rushing across the hall, and flashed his beam on it.

It was Peter Wilkinson, tall and gaunt, with a poker in his hand. He yelled something incoherent, threw open the door and rushed in.

Harrison heard him exclaim: "Saul! What's the matter? What are you looking at—" Then a terrible cry: "*My God!*"

The poker clanged on the floor, and then the screams of the maniac rose to a crescendo of fury.

It was at this instant that Harrison reached the door and took in the scene with one startled glance. He saw two men in nightshirts grappling in the candlelight, while from the mantel a cold, dead, white face looked blindly down on them, and a grey rat ran in mad circles about their feet.

Into that scene of horror and madness Harrison propelled his powerful, thick-set body. Peter Wilkinson

was in sore straits. He had dropped his poker and now, with blood streaming from a wound in his head, he was vainly striving to tear Saul's lean fingers from his throat.

The glare in Saul's eyes told Harrison the man was mad. Crooking one massive arm about the maniac's neck, he tore him loose from his victim with an exertion of sheer strength that not even the abnormal energy of insanity could resist.

The madman's stringy muscles were like steel wires under the detective's hands, and Saul twisted about in his grasp, his teeth snapping, beastlike, for Harrison's bull-throat. The detective shoved the clawing, frothing fury away from him and smashed a fist to the madman's jaw. Saul crashed to the floor and lay still, eyes glazed and limbs quivering.

PETER reeled back against a table, purple-faced and gagging.

"Get cords, quick!" snapped Harrison, heaving the limp figure off the floor and letting it slump into a great arm-chair. "Tear that sheet in strips. We've got to tie him up before he comes to. Hell's fire!"

The rat had made a ravaging attack on the senseless man's bare feet. Harrison kicked it away, but it squeaked furiously and came charging back with ghoulish persistence. Harrison crushed it under his foot, cutting short its maddened squeal.

Peter, gasping convulsively, thrust into the detective's hands the strips he had torn from the sheet, and Harrison bound the limp limbs with professional efficiency. In the midst of his task he looked up to see Richard, the youngest brother, standing in the doorway, his face like chalk.

"Richard!" choked Peter. "Look! My God! John's head!"

"I see!" Richard licked his lips. "But why are you tying up Saul?"

"He's crazy," snapped Harrison. "Get me some whisky, will you?"

As Richard reached for a bottle on a curtained shelf, booted feet hit the porch outside, and a voice yelled: "Hey, there! Dick! What's wrong?"

"That's our neighbor, Jim Allison," muttered Peter.

He stepped to the door opposite the one that opened into the hall and turned the key in the ancient lock. That door opened upon a side porch. A tousle-headed man with his pants pulled on over his nightshirt came blundering in.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "I heard somebody hollerin', and run over quick as I could. What you doin' to Saul—good God Almighty!"

He had seen the head on the mantel, and his face went ashen.

"Go get the marshal, Jim!" croaked Peter. "This is Joel Middleton's work!"

Allison hurried out, stumbling as he peered back over his shoulder in morbid fascination.

Harrison had managed to spill some liquor between Saul's livid lips. He handed the bottle to Peter and stepped to the mantel. He touched the grisly object, shivering slightly as he did so. His eyes narrowed suddenly.

"You think Middleton dug up your brother's grave and cut off his head?" he asked.

"Who else?" Peter stared blankly at him.

"Saul's mad. Madmen do strange things. Maybe Saul did this."

"No! No!" exclaimed Peter, shuddering. "Saul hasn't left the house all day. John's grave was undisturbed this morning, when I stopped by the old graveyard on my way to the farm. Saul was sane when he went to bed. It was seeing John's head that drove him mad. Joel Middleton has been here, to take this horrible revenge!" He sprang up suddenly, shrilling, "My God, he may still be hiding in the house somewhere!"

"We'll search it," snapped Harrison. "Richard, you stay here with Saul. You might come with me, Peter."

IN the hall outside the detective directed a beam of light on the heavy front door. The key was turned in the massive lock. He

turned and strode down the hall, asking: "Which door is farthest from any sleeping-chamber?"

"The back kitchen door!" Peter answered, and led the way. A few moments later they were standing before it. It stood partly open, framing a crack of starlit sky.

"He must have come and gone this way," muttered Harrison. "You're sure this door was locked?"

"I locked all outer doors myself," asserted Peter. "Look at those scratches on the outer side! And there's the key lying on the floor inside."

"Old-fashioned lock," grunted Harrison. "A man could work the key out with a wire from the outer side and force the lock easily. And this is the logical lock to force, because the noise of breaking it wouldn't likely be heard by anybody in the house."

He stepped out onto the deep back porch. The broad back yard was without trees or bushes, separated by a barbed-wire fence from a pasture lot, which ran to a wood-lot thickly grown with post-oaks, part of the woods which hemmed in the village of Lost Knob on all sides.

Peter stared toward that woodland, a low, black rampart in the faint starlight, and he shivered.

"He's out there, somewhere!" he whispered. "I never suspected he'd dare strike at us in our own house. I brought you here to hunt him down. I never thought we'd need you to protect us!"

Without replying, Harrison stepped down into the yard. Peter cringed back from the starlight, and remained crouching at the edge of the porch.

Harrison crossed the narrow pasture and paused at the ancient rail fence which separated it from the woods. They were black as only post-oak thickets can be.

No rustle of leaves, no scrape of branches betrayed a lurking presence. If Joel Middleton had been there, he must have already sought refuge in the rugged hills that surrounded Lost Knob.

Harrison turned back toward the

house. He had arrived at Lost Knob late the preceding evening. It was now somewhat past midnight. But the grisly news was spreading, even in the dead of night.

The Wilkinson house stood at the western edge of the town, and the Allison house was the only one within a hundred yards of it. But Harrison saw lights springing up in distant windows.

Peter stood on the porch, head out-thrust on his long, buzzardlike neck. "Find anything?" he called anxiously.

"Tracks wouldn't show on this hard-baked ground," grunted the detective. "Just what did you see when you ran into Saul's room?"

"Saul standing before the mantel-board, screaming with his mouth wide open," answered Peter. "When I saw—what he saw, I must have cried out and dropped the poker. Then Saul leaped on me like a wild beast."

"Was his door locked?"

"Closed, but not locked. The lock got broken accidentally a few days ago."

"One more question: has Middleton ever been in this house before?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied Peter grimly. "Our families have hated each other for twenty-five years. Joel's the last of his name."

Harrison re-entered the house. Allison had returned with the marshal, McVey, a tall, taciturn man who plainly resented the detective's presence. Men were gathering on the side porch and in the yard. They talked in low mutters, except for Jim Allison, who was vociferous in his indignation.

"This finishes Joel Middleton!" he proclaimed loudly. "Some folks sided with him when he killed John. I wonder what they think now? Diggin' up a dead man and cuttin' his head off! That's Injun work! I reckon folks won't wait for no jury to tell 'em what to do with Joel Middleton!"

"Better catch him before you start lynchin' him," grunted McVey. "Peter, I'm takin' Saul to the county seat."

PETER nodded mutely. Saul was recovering consciousness, but the mad glaze of his eyes was unaltered. Harrison spoke:

"Suppose we go to the Wilkinson graveyard and see what we can find? We might be able to track Middleton from there."

"They brought you in here to do the job they didn't think I was good enough to do," snarled McVey. "All right. Go ahead and do it—alone. I'm takin' Saul to the county seat."

With the aid of his deputies he lifted the bound maniac and strode out. Neither Peter nor Richard offered to accompany him. A tall, gangling man stepped from among his fellows and awkwardly addressed Harrison:

"What the marshal does is his own business, but all of us here are ready to help all we can, if you want to git a posse together and comb the country."

"Thanks, no." Harrison was unintentionally abrupt. "You can help me by all clearing out, right now. I'll work this thing out alone, in my own way, as the marshal suggested."

The men moved off at once, silent and resentful, and Jim Allison followed them, after a moment's hesitation. When all had gone Harrison closed the door and turned to Peter.

"Will you take me to the graveyard?"

Peter shuddered. "Isn't it a terrible risk? Middleton has shown he'll stop at nothing."

"Why should he?" Richard laughed savagely. His mouth was bitter, his eyes alive with harsh mockery, and lines of suffering were carved deep in his face.

"We never stopped hounding him," said he. "John cheated him out of his last bit of land—that's why Middleton killed him. For which you were devoutly thankful!"

"You're talking wild!" exclaimed Peter.

Richard laughed bitterly. "You old hypocrite! We're all beasts of prey, we Wilkinsons—like this thing!" He kicked the dead rat viciously. "We all hated each other. You're glad

Saul's crazy! You're glad John's dead. Only me left now, and I have a heart disease. Oh, stare if you like! I'm no fool. I've seen you poring over Aaron's lines in 'Titus Andronicus':

"'Oft have I digg'd up dead men
from their graves,
And set them upright at their
dear friends' doors!'"

"You're mad yourself!" Peter sprang up, livid.

"Oh, am I?" Richard had lashed himself almost into a frenzy. "What proof have we that you didn't cut off John's head? You knew Saul was a neurotic, that a shock like that might drive him mad! And you visited the graveyard yesterday!"

Peter's contorted face was a mask of fury. Then with an effort of iron control he relaxed and said quietly: "You are over-wrought, Richard."

"Saul and John hated you," snarled Richard. "I know why. It was because you wouldn't agree to leasing our farm on Wild River to that oil company. But for your stubbornness we might all be wealthy."

"You know why I wouldn't lease," snapped Peter. "Drilling there would ruin the agricultural value of the land—certain profit, not a risky gamble like oil."

"So you say," sneered Richard. "But suppose that's just a smoke screen? Suppose you dream of being the sole, surviving heir, and becoming an oil millionaire all by yourself, with no brothers to share—"

Harrison broke in: "Are we going to chew the rag all night?"

"No!" Peter turned his back on his brother. "I'll take you to the graveyard. I'd rather face Joel Middleton in the night than listen to the ravings of this lunatic any longer."

"I'm not going," snarled Richard. "Out there in the black night there's too many chances for you to remove the remaining heir. I'll go and stay the rest of the night with Jim Allison."

He opened the door and vanished in the darkness.

Peter picked up the head and

wrapped it in a cloth, shivering slightly as he did so.

"Did you notice how well preserved the face is?" he muttered. "One would think that after three days—Come on. I'll take it and put it back in the grave where it belongs."

"I'll kick this dead rat outdoors," Harrison began, turning—and then stopped short. "The damned thing's gone!"

Peter Wilkinson paled as his eyes swept the empty floor.

"It was there!" he whispered. "It was dead. You smashed it! It couldn't come to life and run away."

"Well, what about it?" Harrison did not mean to waste time on this minor mystery.

Peter's eyes gleamed wearily in the candlelight.

"It was a graveyard rat!" he whispered. "I never saw one in an inhabited house, in town, before! The Indians used to tell strange tales about them! They said they were not beasts at all, but evil, cannibal demons, into which entered the spirits of wicked, dead men at whose corpses they gnawed!"

"Hell's fire!" Harrison snorted, blowing out the candle. But his flesh crawled. After all, a dead rat could not crawl away of itself.

CHAPTER III

The Feathered Shadow

CLOUDS had rolled across the stars. The air was hot and stifling. The narrow, rutty road that wound westward into the hills was atrocious. But Peter Wilkinson piloted his ancient Model T Ford skilfully, and the village was quickly lost to sight behind them. They passed no more houses. On each side the dense post-oak thickets crowded close to the barbed-wire fences.

Peter broke the silence suddenly: "How did that rat come into our house? They overrun the woods along the creeks, and swarm in every country graveyard in the hills. But I never saw one in the village before.

It must have followed Joel Middleton when he brought the head—"

A lurch and a monotonous bumping brought a curse from Harrison. The car came to a stop with a grind of brakes.

"Flat," muttered Peter. "Won't take me long to change tires. You watch the woods. Joel Middleton might be hiding anywhere."

That seemed good advice. While Peter wrestled with rusty metal and stubborn rubber, Harrison stood between him and the nearest clump of trees, with his hand on his revolver. The night wind blew fitfully through the leaves, and once he thought he caught the gleam of tiny eyes among the stems.

"That's got it," announced Peter at last, turning to let down the jack. "We've wasted enough time."

"Listen!" Harrison started, tensed. Off to the west had sounded a sudden scream of pain or fear. Then there came the impact of racing feet on the hard ground, the crackling of brush, as if someone fled blindly through the bushes within a few hundred yards of the road. In an instant Harrison was over the fence and running toward the sounds.

"Help! Help!" It was the voice of dire terror. "Almighty God! Help!"

"This way!" yelled Harrison, bursting into an open flat. The unseen fugitive evidently altered his course in response, for the heavy footfalls grew louder, and then there rang out a terrible shriek, and a figure staggered from the bushes on the opposite side of the glade and fell headlong.

The dim starlight showed a vague writhing shape, with a darker figure on its back. Harrison caught the glint of steel, heard the sound of a blow. He threw up his gun and fired at a venture. At the crack of the shot the darker figure rolled free, leaped up and vanished in the bushes. Harrison ran on, a queer chill crawling along his spine because of what he had seen in the flash of the shot.

HE crouched at the edge of the bushes and peered into them. The shadowy figure had come and

gone, leaving no trace except the man who lay groaning in the glade.

Harrison bent over him, snapping on his flashlight. He was an old man, a wild, unkempt figure with matted white hair and beard. That beard was stained with red now, and blood oozed from a deep stab in his back.

"Who did this?" demanded Harrison, seeing that it was useless to try to stanch the flow of blood. The old man was dying. "Joel Middleton?"

"It couldn't have been!" Peter had followed the detective. "That's old Joash Sullivan, a friend of Joel's. He's half crazy, but I've suspected that he's been keeping in touch with Joel and giving him tips—"

"Joel Middleton," muttered the old man. "I'd been to find him, to tell the news about John's head—"

"Where's Joel hiding?" demanded the detective.

Sullivan choked on a flow of blood, spat and shook his head.

"You'll never learn from me!" He directed his eyes on Peter with the eerie glare of the dying. "Are you taking your brother's head back to his grave, Peter Wilkinson? Be careful you don't find your own grave before this night's done! Evil on all your name! The devil owns your souls and the graveyard rats'll eat your flesh! The ghost of the dead walks the night!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Harrison. "Who stabbed you?"

"A dead man!" Sullivan was going fast. "As I come back from meetin' Joel Middleton I met him. Wolf Hunter, the Tonkawa chief your grandpap murdered so long ago, Peter Wilkinson! He chased me and knifed me. I saw him plain, in the starlight—naked in his loin-clout and feathers and paint, just as I saw him when I was a child, before your grandpap killed him!"

"Wolf Hunter took your brother's head from the grave!" Sullivan's voice was a ghastly whisper. "He's come back from hell to fulfill the curse he laid onto your grandpap when your grandpap shot him in the back, to get the land his tribe claimed. Beware! His ghost walks the night!"

The graveyard rats are his servants. The graveyard rats—"

Blood burst from his white-bearded lips and he sank back, dead.

Harrison rose somberly.

"Let him lie. We'll pick up his body as we go back to town. We're going on to the graveyard."

"Dare we?" Peter's face was white. "A human I do not fear, not even Joel Middleton, but a ghost—"

"Don't be a fool!" snorted Harrison. "Didn't you say the old man was half crazy?"

"But what if Joel Middleton is hiding somewhere near—"

"I'll take care of him!" Harrison had an invincible confidence in his own fighting ability. What he did not tell Peter, as they returned to the car, was that he had had a glimpse of the slayer in the flash of his shot. The memory of that glimpse still had the short hair prickling at the base of his skull.

That figure had been naked but for a loin-cloth and moccasins and a headdress of feathers.

"Who was Wolf Hunter?" he demanded as they drove on.

"A Tonkawa chief," muttered Peter. "He befriended my grandfather and was later murdered by him, just as Joash said. They say his bones lie in the old graveyard to this day."

Peter lapsed into silence, seemingly a prey of morbid broodings.

SOME four miles from town the road wound past a dim clearing. That was the Wilkinson graveyard. A rusty barbed-wire fence surrounded a cluster of graves whose white headstones leaned at crazy angles. Weeds grew thick, straggling over the low mounds.

The post oaks crowded close on all sides, and the road wound through them, past the sagging gate. Across the tops of the trees, nearly half a mile to the west, there was visible a shapeless bulk which Harrison knew was the roof of a house.

"The old Wilkinson farmhouse," Peter answered in reply to his question. "I was born there, and so were my brothers. Nobody's lived in it

since we moved to town, ten years ago."

Peter's nerves were taut. He glanced fearfully at the black woods around him, and his hands trembled as he lighted a lantern he took from the car. He winced as he picked up the round cloth-wrapped object that lay on the back seat; perhaps he was visualizing the cold, white, stony face that cloth concealed.

As he climbed over the low gate and led the way between the weed-grown mounds he muttered: "We're fools. If Joel Middleton's laying out there in the woods he could pick us both off easy as shooting rabbits."

Harrison did not reply, and a moment later Peter halted and shone the light on a mound which was bare of weeds. The surface was tumbled and disturbed, and Peter exclaimed: "Look! I expected to find an open grave. Why do you suppose he took the trouble of filling it again?"

"We'll see," grunted Harrison. "Are you game to open that grave?"

"I've seen my brother's head," answered Peter grimly. "I think I'm man enough to look on his headless body without fainting. There are tools in the tool-shed in the corner of the fence. I'll get them."

Returning presently with pick and shovel, he set the lighted lantern on the ground, and the cloth-wrapped head near it. Peter was pale, and sweat stood on his brow in thick drops. The lantern cast their shadows, grotesquely distorted, across the weed-grown graves. The air was oppressive. There was an occasional dull flicker of lightning along the dusky horizons.

"What's that?" Harrison paused, pick lifted. All about them sounded rustlings and scurryings among the weeds. Beyond the circle of lantern light clusters of tiny red beads glittered at him.

"Rats!" Peter hurled a stone and the beads vanished, though the rustlings grew louder. "They swarm in this graveyard. I believe they'd devour a living man, if they caught him helpless. Begone, you servants of Satan!"

Harrison took the shovel and began scooping out mounds of loose dirt.

"Ought not to be hard work," he grunted. "If he dug it out today or early tonight, it'll be loose all the way down—"

He stopped short, with his shovel jammed hard against the dirt, and a prickling in the short hairs at the nape of his neck. In the tense silence he heard the graveyard rats running through the grass.

"What's the matter?" A new pallor greyed Peter's face.

"I've hit solid ground," said Harrison slowly. "In three days this clayey soil bakes hard as a rick. But if Middleton or anybody else had opened this grave and refilled it today, the soil would be loose all the way down. It's not. Below the first few inches it's packed and baked hard! The top has been scratched, but the grave has never been opened since it was first filled, three days ago!"

Peter staggered with an inhuman cry.

"**T**HEN it's true!" he screamed. "Wolf Hunter *has* come back! He reached up from hell and took John's head without opening the grave! He sent his familiar devil into our house in the form of a rat! A ghost-rat that could not be killed! Hands off, curse you!"

For Harrison caught at him, growling: "Pull yourself together, Peter!"

But Peter struck his arm aside and tore free. He turned and ran—not toward the car parked outside the graveyard, but toward the opposite fence. He scrambled across the rusty wires with a ripping of cloth and vanished in the woods, heedless of Harrison's shouts.

"Hell!" Harrison pulled up, and swore fervently. Where but in the black-hill country could such things happen? Angrily he picked up the tools and tore into the close-packed clay, baked by a blazing sun into almost iron hardness.

Sweat rolled from him in streams, and he grunted and swore, but persevered with all the power of his

massive muscles. He meant to prove or disprove a suspicion growing in his mind—a suspicion that the body of John Wilkinson had never been placed in that grave.

The lightning flashed oftener and closer, and a low mutter of thunder began in the west. An occasional gust of wind made the lantern flicker, and as the mound beside the grave grew higher, and the man digging there sank lower and lower in the earth, the rustling in the grass grew louder and the red beads began to glint in the weeds. Harrison heard the eerie gnashings of tiny teeth all about him, and swore at the memory of grisly legends, whispered by the Negroes of his boyhood region about the graveyard rats.

The grave was not deep. No Wilkinson would waste much labor on the dead. At last the rude coffin lay uncovered before him. With the point of the pick he pried up one corner of the lid, and held the lantern close. A startled oath escaped his lips. The coffin was not empty. It held a huddled, headless figure.

Harrison climbed out of the grave, his mind racing, fitting together pieces of the puzzle. The stray bits snapped into place, forming a pattern, dim and yet uncomplete, but taking shape. He looked for the cloth-wrapped head, and got a frightful shock.

The head was gone!

For an instant Harrison felt cold sweat clammy on his hands. Then he heard a clamorous squeaking, the gnashing of tiny fangs.

He caught up the lantern and shone the light about. In its reflection he saw a white blotch on the grass near a straggling clump of bushes that had invaded the clearing. It was the cloth in which the head had been wrapped. Beyond that a black, squirming mound heaved and tumbled with nauseous life.

With an oath of horror he leaped forward, striking and kicking. The graveyard rats abandoned the head with rasping squeaks, scattering before him like darting black shadows. And Harrison shuddered. It was no

face that stared up at him in the lantern light, but a white, grinning skull, to which clung only shreds of gnawed flesh.

While the detective burrowed into John Wilkinson's grave, the graveyard rats had torn the flesh from John Wilkinson's head.

Harrison stooped and picked up the hideous thing, now triply hideous. He wrapped it in the cloth, and as he straightened, something like fright took hold of him.

He was ringed in on all sides by a solid circle of gleaming red sparks that shone from the grass. Held back by their fear, the graveyard rats surrounded him, squealing their hate.

Demons, the Negroes called them, and in that moment Harrison was ready to agree.

They gave back before him as he turned toward the grave, and he did not see the dark figure that slunk from the bushes behind him. The thunder boomed out, drowning even the squeaking of the rats, but he heard the swift footfall behind him an instant before the blow was struck.

He whirled, drawing his gun, dropping the head, but just as he whirled, something like a louder clap of thunder exploded in his head, with a shower of sparks before his eyes.

As he reeled backward he fired blindly, and cried out as the flash showed him a horrific, half-naked, painted, feathered figure, crouching with a tomahawk uplifted—the open grave was behind Harrison as he fell.

Down into the grave he toppled, and his head struck the edge of the coffin with a sickening impact. His powerful body went limp; and like darting shadows, from every side raced the graveyard rats, hurling themselves into the grave in a frenzy of hunger and blood-lust.

ness lit by darts of flame from the eternal fires. The triumphant shrieking of demons was in his ears as they stabbed him with red-hot skewers.

He saw them, now—dancing monstrosities with pointed noses, twitching ears, red eyes and gleaming teeth—a sharp pain knifed through his flesh.

And suddenly the mists cleared. He lay, not on the floor of hell, but on a coffin in the bottom of a grave; the fires were lightning flashes from the black sky; and the demons were rats that swarmed over him, slashing with razor-sharp teeth.

Harrison yelled and heaved convulsively, and at his movement the rats gave back in alarm. But they did not leave the grave; they massed solidly along the walls, their eyes glittering redly.

Harrison knew he could have been senseless only a few seconds. Otherwise these grey ghouls would have already stripped the living flesh from his bones—as they had ripped the dead flesh from the head of the man on whose coffin he lay.

Already his body was stinging in a score of places, and his clothing was damp with his own blood.

Cursing, he started to rise—and a chill of panic shot through him! Falling, his left arm had been jammed into the partly-open coffin, and the weight of his body on the lid clamped his hand fast. Harrison fought down a mad wave of terror.

He would not withdraw his hand unless he could lift his body from the coffin lid—and the imprisonment of his hand held him prostrate there.

Trapped!

In a murdered man's grave, his hand locked in the coffin of a headless corpse, with a thousand grey ghouls ready to tear the flesh from his living frame!

CHAPTER IV

Rats in Hell

IT seemed to Harrison's stunned brain that he lay in blackness on the darkened floors of hell, a black-

AS if sensing his helplessness, the rats swarmed upon him. Harrison fought for his life, like a man in a nightmare. He kicked, he yelled, he cursed, he smote them with the heavy six-shooter he still clutched in his hand.

Their fangs tore at him, ripping cloth and flesh, their acrid scent nauseated him; they almost covered him with their squirming, writhing bodies. He beat them back, smashed and crushed them with blows of his six-shooter barrel.

The living cannibals fell on their dead brothers. In desperation he twisted half over and jammed the muzzle of his gun against the coffin lid.

At the flash of fire and the deafening report, the rats scurried in all directions.

Again and again he pulled the trigger until the gun was empty. The heavy slugs crashed through the lid, splitting off a great sliver from the edge. Harrison drew his bruised hand from the aperture.

Gagging and shaking, he clambered out of the grave and rose groggily to his feet. Blood was clotted in his hair from the gash the ghostly hatchet had made in his scalp, and blood trickled from a score of tooth-wounds in his flesh. Lightning played constantly, but the lantern was still shining. But it was not on the ground.

It seemed to be suspended in mid-air—and then he was aware that it was held in the hand of a man—a tall man in a black slicker, whose eyes burned dangerously under his broad hat-brim. In his other hand a black pistol muzzle menaced the detective's midriff.

"You must be that damn' low-country law Pete Wilkinson brung up here to run me down!" growled this man.

"Then you're Joel Middleton!" grunted Harrison.

"Sure I am!" snarled the outlaw. "Where's Pete, the old devil?"

"He got scared and ran off."

"Crazy, like Saul, maybe," sneered Middleton. "Well, you tell him I been savin' a slug for his ugly mug a long time. And one for Dick, too."

"Why did you come here?" demanded Harrison.

"I heard shootin'. I got here just as you was climbin' out of the grave. What's the matter with you? Who

was it that broke your head?"

"I don't know his name," answered Harrison, caressing his aching head.

"Well, it don't make no difference to me. But I want to tell you that I didn't cut John's head off. I killed him because he needed it." The outlaw swore and spat. "But I didn't do that other!"

"I know you didn't," Harrison answered.

"H?" The outlaw was obviously startled.

"Do you know which rooms the Wilkinsons sleep in, in their house in town?"

"Naw," snorted Middleton. "Never was in their house in my life."

"I thought not. Whoever put John's head on Saul's mantel knew. The back kitchen door was the only one where the lock could have been forced without waking somebody up. The lock on Saul's door was broken. You couldn't have known those things. It looked like an inside job from the start. The lock was forced to make it look like an outside job.

"Richard spilled some stuff that cinched my belief that it was Peter. I decided to bring him out to the graveyard and see if his nerve would stand up under an accusation across his brother's open coffin. But I hit hard-packed soil and knew the grave hadn't been opened. It gave me a turn and I blurted out what I'd found. But it's simple, after all.

"Peter wanted to get rid of his brothers. When you killed John, that suggested a way to dispose of Saul. John's body stood in its coffin in the Wilkinsons' parlor until it was placed in the grave the next day. No death watch was kept. It was easy for Peter to go into the parlor while his brothers slept, pry up the coffin lid and cut off John's head. He put it on ice somewhere to preserve it. When I touched it I found it was nearly frozen.

"No one knew what had happened, because the coffin was not opened again. John was an atheist, and there was the briefest sort of ceremony. The coffin was not opened for his

friends to take a last look, as is the usual custom. Then tonight the head was placed in Saul's room. It drove him raving mad.

"I don't know why Peter waited until tonight, or why he called me into the case. He must be partly insane himself. I don't think he meant to kill me when we drove out here tonight. But when he discovered I knew the grave hadn't been opened tonight, he saw the game was up. I ought to have been smart enough to keep my mouth shut, but I was so sure that Peter had opened the grave to get the head, that when I found it *hadn't* been opened, I spoke involuntarily, without stopping to think of the other alternative. Peter pretended a panic and ran off. Later he sent back his partner to kill me."

"**W**HOS he?" demanded Middleton.

"How should I know? Some fellow who looks like an Indian!"

"That old yarn about a Tonkawa ghost has went to your brain!" scoffed Middleton.

"I didn't say it was a ghost," said Harrison, nettled. "It was real enough to kill your friend Joash Sullivan!"

"What?" yelled Middleton. "Joash killed? Who done it?"

"The Tonkawa ghost, whoever he is. The body is lying about a mile back, beside the road, amongst the thickets, if you don't believe me."

Middleton ripped out a terrible oath.

"By God, I'll kill somebody for that! Stay where you are! I ain't goin' to shoot no unarmed man, but if you try to run me down I'll kill you sure as hell. So keep off my trail. I'm goin', and don't you try to follow me!"

The next instant Middleton had dashed the lantern to the ground where it went out with a clatter of breaking glass.

Harrison blinked in the sudden darkness that followed, and the next lightning flash showed him standing alone in the ancient graveyard.

The outlaw was gone.

CHAPTER V

The Rats Eat

CURSING, Harrison groped on the ground, lit by the lightning flashes. He found the broken lantern, and he found something else.

Rain drops splashed against his face as he started toward the gate. One instant he stumbled in velvet blackness, the next the tombstones shone white in the dazzling glare. Harrison's head ached frightfully. Only chance and a tough skull had saved his life. The would-be killer must have thought the blow was fatal and fled, taking John Wilkinson's head for what grisly purpose there was no knowing. But the head was gone.

Harrison winced at the thought of the rain filling the open grave, but he had neither the strength nor the inclination to shovel the dirt back in it. To remain in that dark graveyard might well be death. The slayer might return.

Harrison looked back as he climbed the fence. The rain had disturbed the rats; the weeds were alive with scampering, flame-eyed shadows. With a shudder Harrison made his way to the fivver. He climbed in, found his flashlight and reloaded his revolver.

The rain grew in volume. Soon the ruddy road to Lost Knob would be a welter of mud. In his condition he did not feel able to the task of driving back through the storm over that abominable road. But it could not be long until dawn. The old farmhouse would afford him a refuge until daylight.

The rain came down in sheets, soaking him, dimming the already uncertain lights as he drove along the road, splashing noisily through the mud-puddles. Wind ripped through the post-oaks. Once he grunted and batted his eyes. He could have sworn that a flash of lightning had fleetingly revealed a painted, naked, feathered figure gliding among the trees!

THE road wound up a thickly wooded eminence, rising close to the bank of a muddy creek. On the summit the old house squatted. Weeds and low bushes straggled from the surrounding woods up to the sagging porch. He parked the car as close to the house as he could get it, and climbed out, struggling with the wind and rain.

He expected to have to blow the lock off the door with his gun, but it opened under his fingers. He stumbled into a musty-smelling room, weirdly lit by the flickering of the lightning through the cracks of the shutters.

His flashlight revealed a rude bunk built against a side wall, a heavy hand-hewn table, a heap of rags in a corner. From this pile of rags black furtive shadows darted in all directions.

Rats! Rats again!

Could he never escape them?

He closed the door and lit the lantern, placing it on the table. The broken chimney caused the flame to dance and flicker, but not enough wind found its way into the room to blow it out. Three doors, leading into the interior of the house, were closed. The floor and walls were pitted with holes gnawed by the rats.

Tiny red eyes glared at him from the apertures.

Harrison sat down on the bunk, flashlight and pistol on his lap. He expected to fight for his life before day broke. Peter Wilkinson was out there in the storm somewhere, with a heart full of murder, and either allied to him or working separately—in either case an enemy to the detective—was that mysterious painted figure.

And that figure was Death, whether living masquerader or Indian ghost. In any event, the shutters would protect him from a shot from the dark, and to get at him his enemies would have to come into the lighted room where he would have an even chance—which was all the big detective had ever asked.

To get his mind off the ghoulish red eyes glaring at him from the floor, Harrison brought out the ob-

ject he had found lying near the broken lantern, where the slayer must have dropped it.

It was a smooth oval of flint, made fast to a handle with rawhide thongs—the Indian tomahawk of an elder generation. And Harrison's eyes narrowed suddenly; there was blood on the flint, and some of it was his own. But on the other point of the oval there was more blood, dark and crust-ed, with strands of hair lighter than his, clinging to the clotted point.

Joash Sullivan's blood? No. The old man had been knifed. But some one else had died that night. The darkness had hidden another grim deed. . . .

Black shadows were stealing across the floor. The rats were coming back—ghoulish shapes, creeping from their holes, converging on the heap of rags in the far corner—a tattered carpet, Harrison now saw, rolled in a long compact heap. Why should the rats leap upon that rag? Why should they race up and down along it, squealing and biting at the fabric?

There was something hideously suggestive about its contour—a shape that grew more definite and ghastly as he looked.

THE rats scattered, squeaking, as Harrison sprang across the room. He tore away the carpet—and looked down on the corpse of Peter Wilkinson.

The back of the head had been crushed. The white face was twisted in a leer of awful terror.

For an instant Harrison's brain reeled with the ghastly possibilities his discovery summoned up. Then he took a firm grasp on himself, fought off the whispering potency of the dark, howling night, the thrashing wet black woods and the abysmal aura of the ancient hills, and recognized the only sane solution of the riddle.

Somberly he looked down on the dead man. Peter Wilkinson's fright had been genuine, after all. In his blind panic he had reverted to the habits of his boyhood and fled toward his old home—and met death instead of security.

Harrison started convulsively as a weird sound smote his ears above the roar of the storm—the wailing horror of an Indian war-whoop. The killer was upon him!

Harrison sprang to a shuttered window, peered through a crack, waiting for a flash of lightning. When it came he fired through the window at a feathered head he saw peering around a tree close to the car.

In the darkness that followed the flash he crouched, waiting—there came another white glare—he grunted explosively but did not fire. The head was still there, and he got a better look at it. The lightning shone weirdly white upon it.

It was John Wilkinson's fleshless skull, clad in a feathered headdress and bound in place—and it was the bait of a trap.

Harrison wheeled and sprang toward the lantern on the table. That grisly ruse had been to draw his attention to the front of the house while the killer slunk upon him through the rear of the building! The rats squealed and scattered. Even as Harrison whirled an inner door began to open. He smashed a heavy slug through the panels, heard a groan and the sound of a falling body, and then, just as he reached a hand to extinguish the lantern, the world crashed over his head.

A blinding burst of lightning, a deafening clap of thunder, and the ancient house staggered from gables to foundations! Blue fire crackled from the ceiling and ran down the walls and over the floor. One livid tongue just flicked the detective's shin in passing.

It was like the impact of a sledgehammer. There was an instant of blindness and numb agony, and Harrison found himself sprawling, half-stunned on the floor. The lantern lay extinguished beside the overturned table, but the room was filled with a lurid light.

He realized that a bolt of lightning had struck the house, and that the upper story was ablaze. He hauled himself to his feet, looking for his gun. It lay halfway across the room,

and as he started toward it, the bullet-split door swung open. Harrison stopped dead in his tracks.

Through the door limped a man naked but for a loin-clout and moccasins on his feet. A revolver in his hand menaced the detective. Blood oozing from a wound in his thigh mingled with the paint with which he had smeared himself.

"So it was you who wanted to be the oil millionaire, Richard!" said Harrison.

THE other laughed savagely. "Aye, and I will be! And no cursed brothers to share with—brothers I always hated, damn them! Don't move! You nearly got me when you shot through the door. I'm taking no chances with you! Before I send you to hell I'll tell you everything.

"As soon as you and Peter started for the graveyard, I realized my mistake in merely scratching the top of the grave—knew you'd hit hard clay and know the grave hadn't been opened. I knew then I'd have to kill you, as well as Peter. I took the rat you mashed when neither of you were looking, so its disappearance would play on Peter's superstitions.

"I rode to the graveyard through the woods, on a fast horse. The Indian disguise was one I thought up long ago. What with that rotten road, and the flat that delayed you, I got to the graveyard before you and Peter did. On the way, though, I dismounted and stopped to kill that old fool Joash Sullivan. I was afraid he might see and recognize me.

"I was watching when you dug into the grave. When Peter got panicky and ran through the woods I chased him, killed him, and brought his body here to the old house. Then I went back after you. I intended bringing your body here, or rather your bones, after the rats finished you, as I thought they would. Then I heard Joel Middleton coming and had to run for it—I don't care to meet that gun-fighting devil anywhere!

"I was going to burn this house with both your bodies in it. People would think, when they found the

bones in the ashes, that Middleton killed you both and burnt the house! And now you play right into my hands by coming here! Lightning has struck the house and it's burning! Oh, the gods fight for me tonight!"

A light of unholy madness played in Richard's eyes, but the pistol muzzle was steady, as Harrison stood clenching his great fists helplessly.

"You'll lie here with that fool Peter!" raved Richard. "With a bullet through your head, until your bones are burnt to such a crisp that nobody can tell how you died! Joel Middleton will be shot down by some posse without a chance to talk. Saul will rave out his days in a madhouse! And I, who will be safely sleeping in my house in town before sun-up, will live out my allotted years in wealth and honor, never suspected—never—"

He was sighting along the black barrel, eyes blazing, teeth bared like the fangs of a wolf between painted lips—his finger was curling on the trigger.

Harrison crouched tensely, desperately, poising to hurl himself with bare hands at the killer and try to pit his naked strength against hot lead spitting from that black muzzle—then—

The door crashed inward behind him and the lurid glare framed a tall figure in a dripping slicker.

An incoherent yell rang to the roof and the gun in the outlaw's hand roared. Again, and again, and yet again it crashed, filling the room with smoke and thunder, and the painted figure jerked to the impact of the tearing lead.

Through the smoke Harrison saw Richard Wilkinson toppling—but he too was firing as he fell. Flames burst through the ceiling, and by their brighter glare Harrison saw a painted figure writhing on the floor, a taller figure wavering in the doorway. Richard was screaming in agony.

MIDDLETON threw his empty gun at Harrison's feet.

"Heard the shootin' and come," he croaked. "Reckon that settles the feud for good!" He toppled, and Harrison caught him in his arms, a lifeless weight.

Richard's screams rose to an unbearable pitch. The rats were swarming from their holes. Blood streaming across the floor had dripped into their holes, maddening them. Now they burst forth in a ravening horde that heeded not cries, or movement, or the devouring flames, but only their own fiendish hunger.

In a grey-black wave they swept over the dead man and the dying man. Peter's white face vanished under that wave. Richard's screaming grew thick and muffled. He writhed, half covered by grey, tearing figures who sucked at his gushing blood, tore at his flesh.

Harrison retreated through the door, carrying the dead outlaw. Joel Middleton, outlaw and killer, yet deserved a better fate than was befalling his slayer.

To save that ghoulish, Harrison would not have lifted a finger, had it been in his power.

It was not. The graveyard rats had claimed their own. Out in the yard, Harrison let his burden fall limply. Above the roar of the flames still rose those awful, smothered cries.

Through the blazing doorway he had a glimpse of a horror, a gory figure rearing upright, swaying, enveloped by a hundred clinging, tearing shapes. He glimpsed a face that was not a face at all, but a blind, bloody skull-mask. Then the awful scene was blotted out as the flaming roof fell with a thundering, ear-rending crash.

Sparks showered against the sky, the flames rose as the walls fell in, and Harrison staggered away, dragging the dead man, as a storm-wrapped dawn came haggardly over the oak-clad ridges.

**TORTURE—Ancient and Modern—Discussed by
CHAKRA, Famous Mystic, in *Horror-Scopes*, Page 120**

DEATH COMES for

The Fires of Hell Poured
Through the Body of
Hartman — but He Vowed
That He Could Not —
Would Not Die!

By
**WAYNE
ROGERS**

*Author of "Disappearing Death,"
"Her Lover from the Grave," etc.*



No human flesh

JOHN EMERSON was dying. Death was in his feverish eyes; in his gaunt and cadaverous face, ashen and contorted with pain. The sable wings were flapping low over the lonely mountain cottage to which he had fled to make his last stand. So low that the chill of their passing seeped into our bones as we paced the death chamber.

And Death had brought with it a terror that was unnerving. Emerson felt it. It mirrored itself in his panicky stare. Sally, his granddaughter, recognized it. Her strained face, her clasped, white-knuckled hands, her restless pacing told how completely it possessed her.

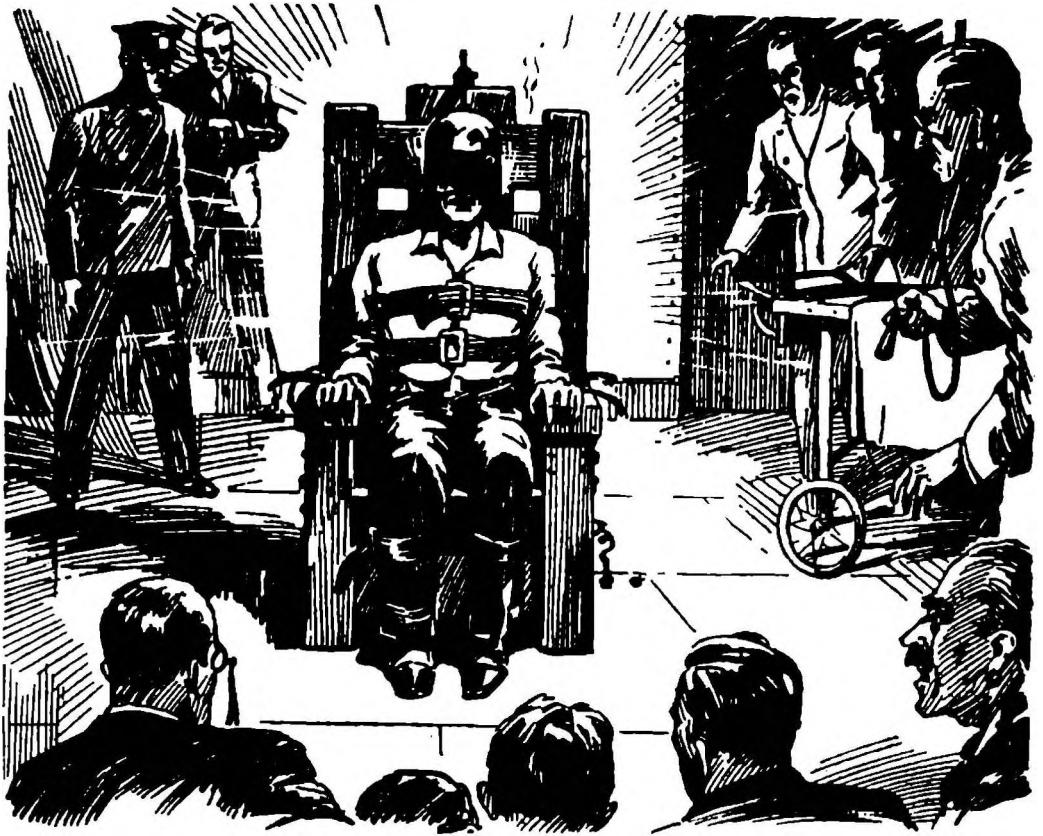
For my part, I tried to deny it. I tried to tell myself that such things could not be. But the terror gripped

me, too; had been with me constantly for two long weeks. It was useless folly to try to deceive myself. I knew that John Emerson was dying; knew that he was being murdered right there before my eyes—by a dead man!

And for two weeks I had known this would happen, and been powerless to prevent it.

I had thought myself a brave man that day, two weeks ago, when I walked into the State Penitentiary execution chamber with the other witnesses. True, I had known fear in my time. That first morning when I went over the top in the grey of dawn, racing toward that sheet of flame that was the German line—I had known fear then. Fear that unnerved me, sent me stalking forward like an

the EXECUTIONER



could stand against such a current of electricity

automaton, hardly seeing or hearing.

Fear, and panic, too. There was that night I stared into the huge muzzle of a forty-five revolver held in the hand of a madman and aimed at my heart. Complete panic had seized me that night—so overwhelming that I crazily made a pass at the gun and knocked it, flaming, out of his hand. That was panic, all right—and the memory of it still brought a shudder.

But terror—that was for weaklings. So I believed that night when I stepped into the execution chamber to watch Harry Hartman die. Curiosity brought me there—and perhaps a vague uneasiness, prompted by my love for Sally Emerson.

THAT curiosity was apparent among the other witnesses, too.

This was no ordinary execution they were about to see. Henry Hartman's defiance had set it apart, given it an atmosphere of the bizarre, almost of the supernatural. Nobody there really expected him to make good those threats, but still . . .

Henry Hartman was a scientist. "The electrical wizard," the newspapers described him. He had been convicted of a diabolically clever murder, a murder in which the unsuspecting victim had electrocuted himself, apparently by accident. But Hartman had made one little slip, and that slip had pinned the crime on him, convicted him and sentenced him to die in the electric chair.

When sentence was passed Hartman had laughed derisively.

"You can't kill me!" he jeered at

the judge. "Your childish electric chair can't harm me! I'll be a free man yet!"

"The wizard who defies death!" the papers shouted—and the witnesses were there to see what would come of that boast when the deadly current hummed through the wires.

They all knew of those threats, and they all knew that years ago Henry Hartman and John Emerson, the State executioner, had been associated, sharing the same experimental laboratory. But they didn't know the things that I knew.

They didn't know the closeness of that association—so intimate that the two men had looked forward to the day when Hartman's son and Emerson's granddaughter would marry and perpetuate their alliance.

Those plans were forgotten when the men disagreed and dissolved their partnership. Later John Emerson accepted his grim position with the State, and heard no more from Henry Hartman until his old-time partner was arrested for murder.

The witnesses knew of those boasts Hartman made in the courtroom, but they did not know of the note the convicted man managed in some devious way to slip out of the Death House the day after he stepped over its grim threshold. Emerson showed me that note.

It read:

Dear John:—

My boast in the courtroom wasn't as crazy as it sounded—though I shouldn't have lost my temper and thrown it in the face of the old fossil on the bench. You're not going to execute me. Everything has been arranged with the examining physician. He will pronounce me dead after you throw on the current the third time. And Albert will claim my body.

All we need is your cooperation, which will be very simple. You will turn on only one-half the ordinary voltage. I can take that without even feeling it. After the third jolt your part will be done. We'll reward you for it fittingly. Please get in touch with Albert and let him know that you will cooperate.

—Henry.

After I read the note, Emerson tore

it into bits and threw them into the fire.

"Perhaps I ought to turn it over to the authorities," he muttered, half to himself, "but it's simpler this way."

"Then you aren't going to—to do anything about it?" I asked.

"Of course not." His answer was matter-of-fact.

"Perhaps—don't you think—maybe it would be better if you withdrew from this execution?" I suggested. "In view of your past association with Hartman?"

"There is nothing personal about this," he said in his emotionless voice. "The State pays me for throwing a switch. It is my duty to do that no matter who may be sitting in the chair at the other end of the wires. That is the business of the State, no concern of mine." And with that his steel trap of a mouth closed inexorably, and I knew there was no use arguing further.

Nor did his attitude change in the slightest degree when the second note came. He showed me that, too, and shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. Its tone was more sinister:

Dear John:—

So you won't listen to reason. Well, let me tell you this: you can't kill me. Your chair may scorch my body, but it can't kill me. Before I am ready to leave this earth I'll take you with me. So, if you want to live, do as you were told.

—Henry.

SALLY tried to argue with him, too, tried to plead with him. He hadn't shown her the notes, but with womanly intuition she sensed that this would be no ordinary execution; she could feel the human drama behind it. But he was deaf to all she could say.

"My chief value to the State is my impersonality," he said with finality. "Once I let personality enter into my work, my usefulness to the State will be gone."

It was the third note that really worried me. Brief and unsigned, it read:

If your own death means nothing to you, remember this: there are others. When you go, you won't go alone.

Sally was the only living relative John Emerson had. She must be the "others"—unless I, her fiancé, were also included in that threat.

So probably it was that vague apprehension on Sally's account that prompted me to secure a ticket to the execution.

There was something more than the usual tomblike quiet in the death chamber when they led Henry Hartman in; there was something intangible but felt unmistakably by all of us. It sent little chilling tingles up and down my spine as I looked at the murderer's sardonic, sneering face.

Calmly, he sat in the death chair while the electrodes were being strapped in place, while the black mask was being placed on his head and over his cruel eyes. Behind a screen in the doorway twelve feet to the left of the chair I could see John Emerson standing before his panel—and, despite his grim stolidity, I could see that his face was whiter and more set than usual.

The guards stepped away from the chair, the warden gave the signal, and the current switched on. The slight, crackling whine of the heavy voltage sounded thunderously in the little room, and a dull red suffused Hartman's skin. Before the sound of the first shock had died away, the second jolt came—forty seconds of it. And Hartman's hands clenched so that the white knuckles threatened to break the skin.

Momentary silence, and again the whine of the twenty-two hundred volts broke out. Silence, and a fourth deadly charge of electricity flashed through the electrodes.

And then I knew what terror is—stark, unnerving, shivering terror, that seems to disembowel you and leave you quaking and helpless. For as I sat straining on the edge of my seat, staring with awe-widened eyes at that figure in the chair, a sneering grin spread over Henry Hartman's white lips and, in the momentary quiet that followed the fourth jolt, a ghastly cackle of triumph broke from his lips!

The terror of the unknown and the

uncanny was livid in our eyes. We looked at one another; and in every mind was that boast Hartman had shouted at the judge:

"You can't kill me!"

Four deadly charges—and he sat there cackling and grinning his hate. Something awful, something unthinkable, was going on in that death chamber. I wanted to get out, to get far away from it—but my eyes returned, fascinated, to that grinning mouth beneath the black vizor.

Again the current snapped on, and now I could tell by the rising whine that the voltage was heavier. For a full minute, by my wrist-watch, it stayed on. Hartman's body strained at the straps—but he still lived! And terror gnawed at the pit of my stomach, sapped my strength, and made me sick.

ONCE more the rising whine, the straining body, the heavy voltage mounting until the din of it seemed to fill the room like the bedlam of a boiler factory. Now the odor of scorched flesh was added to the hell—the man-made hell—of that room. No human flesh could stand against such a current of electricity. . . .

And yet it switched on again and mounted, mounted—God knows how much voltage the executioner threw into those wires before the body of Henry Hartman finally slumped in the straps and was pronounced officially dead.

Beads of perspiration pimpled my face and ran in rivulets down my neck, and my wet clothing clung to me as I followed the other haunted-eyed witnesses out of that chamber. They would never forget what they had seen, but for me the incredible spectacle meant days of worry and nights of torture. It gave new meaning and force to those two threatening notes, and I was horribly afraid for Sally.

This demon, this wizard of electricity, could defy death, could grin in the face of what would have killed any ordinary man—and who could tell what else he might be able to ac-

comply? He was dead, yes—or was he?

The chair had scorched his body, as he had admitted it might, but had it really killed him? Had it killed his spirit—or had he, by some Machiavelian power over electricity, managed to escape from the death chair?

"Before I am ready to leave this earth I'll take you with me!" he had threatened—and, now, with that death chamber scene burned indelibly into my memory, I was ready to believe him!

That's why, when Emerson suggested that we spend a few weeks in his mountain cottage, I approved the idea enthusiastically. He had not been feeling well, anyway, and the change would do him good. Besides, that cottage was miles off the beaten track, in the wilderness above a little country village.

Sally would be safe there. Safe from just what, I did not know, but my uneasiness gave me no rest while she was in the city where danger might so easily approach her from any side.

But Emerson's health did not improve. He became worse. Finally, this morning, we had phoned down to the village for the local doctor. He came, the typical country doctor, with hair that needed trimming, a beard that was twenty-five years out of style, and old-fashioned, silver-rimmed glasses. He listened to Emerson's complaint, nodded his head sagely, and mixed up a bottle of medicine which was to be taken every hour.

Even as I watched him studying his patient and mixing up his nostrum it came to me with strange certainty that this was all a waste of effort. Nobody could prescribe against Henry Hartman, and that was what ailed Emerson—in my heart and soul I knew it.

Somehow, in some devilish way that was known only to fiends like him, he was murdering his executioner there before our eyes . . .

Emerson knew that, too. Earlier in the afternoon, when Sally was out of the room, he had motioned me to

his bedside. His tone was shaky.

"It's Henry Hartman," he whispered, so that his voice might not be heard by her in the other room. "He's coming for me! Last night, after you were in bed, I heard him. He spoke to me here in the dark—told me that my time had come. And that Sally would be next. Take care of her, Gordon. Take her away from here while there is still time. I don't matter—and you can't help me anyway."

BUT of course I would not leave him. Sally never would have consented to go even had I tried to persuade her. Besides, I told myself, the old man's imagination was playing tricks on him. He had been worrying; was feverish, besides. That was it. Dead men didn't come around haunting houses and talking to people.

Fine—if I could have believed it! But even as I argued with myself I saw that sneering grin on Henry Hartman's lips as he sat in the electric chair, a man who should have been dead, and heard the ghastly cackle that broke from his throat. Nervously I looked about me, as if I expected to find him standing at my shoulder.

As night came on the old man's condition became worse. He writhed and moaned and called constantly for water.

"Inside of me—I'm burning up!" he gasped, as I held a glass to his hot lips.

Sally watched with tear-filled eyes, paced the room to the window and looked out into the black night. There was no moon and the sky was starless. Then she came back to the bed and felt his feverish forehead—and gasped softly as a moan of pain was wrung from him and he twisted in torment.

"I can't stand this!" she burst out. "I'm going to call that doctor again. Surely he can do something to stop this. At least he can give him an opiate to deaden the pain."

I knew it was useless, but I let her go into the living room and phone. In a few minutes she was back, her

face discouraged—and the first suspicion of terror in her eyes.

"I can't get him, Gordon," she told me nervously. "The line doesn't answer. There doesn't seem to be any sound on it at all!"

To satisfy her I went out and had a try at it myself. Cranked the handle on the side of the box, shouted into the receiver, held the ear-piece against it—but I could not stir a sound out of it. The line was out of order—or cut!

"Line seems to have gone dead," I told her as easily as possible. "They're probably fixing it and we'll be able to get a call through in a little while."

Sally didn't quite believe that. Her eyes studied mine suspiciously before she turned away and went back into the sick-room. I didn't believe myself. With that same strange conviction I knew that the telephone would not be repaired—that John Emerson was cut off from help from the outside world.

Now it was beginning to storm outside. No rain was falling, but there were peals of thunder and flashes of lightning—especially the lightning. Blinding flashes of it and jagged spears that shot across the sky in front of our windows. That lightning was realistic enough, but the thunder, as I listened to it, did not seem quite natural. Somehow, it did not have the volume, the great depth of tone, which usually characterized the rolling thunderclaps in these hills.

Ruffie, Sally's big white Eskimo dog, sensed something unusual about that storm, too. He paced the cottage nervously, whining and whimpering, and then found a sanctuary under a big settee. Sally tried to pull down the shades, but Emerson insisted that they be left up.

"We can't shut him out that way," he said wearily, and then realized that he had said too much, so he closed his eyes and pretended sleep—until another spasm of pain convulsed him. Sally stared down at his agonized face, and then she ran for the useless telephone.

I knelt beside his bed and forced

another spoonful of the medicine down his throat. He had had the last dose not half an hour ago, but something had to be done to ease this frightful suffering.

As I held him there in my arms he suddenly stiffened and stared, aghast, out of the window. His lips moved but no sound came from them.

AND then I saw—and the chilly hand of terror gripped my heart so that I thought my breath must stop!

Out there, on the edge of the clearing, half hidden by the trees, a ghastly, luminous form was weaving its way in and out through the shrubbery. For a moment the face was turned toward us—and it was the face of Henry Hartman!

But now that face was a sickly blue-grey, and fire played over it, licked around it—not flames, but the leaping, live fire of an electric current!

Henry Hartman had come back from the grave—from the electric chair—to carry out his threat!

Then at last Emerson found his voice.

"I'll go with you, Henry!" he cried, his voice rising shrilly as he fought to get out of bed. "I'll go with you—but leave Sally. She didn't harm you. She never harmed—"

I fought to push him back in the bed, struggled to gag him, to muffle his hysterical outburst. But I was too late. Sally had heard. She stood there in the doorway, her mouth agape, her hand clutching her trembling throat.

Then, before I could stop her, she ran across the room to the window. The luminous figure was just at the edge of the clearing. For one awful moment the sneering, flame-limned face turned fully upon us—and Sally screamed as I have never heard a woman scream before. She swayed on her feet, and I sprang across the room to grab her before she could faint.

But Sally wasn't the fainting kind. She lay in my arms and looked up into my face accusingly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she gasped. "But I should have known. I've sensed it all along. I've seen it in your eyes, Gordon, for the past two weeks—and Granddad hasn't been the same since the Hartman execution. Oh, he never should have done it—he should have listened to me!" Then she caught herself up short. "What is it, Gordon—what does that Thing want? I heard what Granddad said. Has it come for me?"

"Never mind what it has come for," I comforted her, as I held her close and patted her shoulders. There was no sense trying to deceive her; she had heard too much and was too keen to have the wool pulled over her eyes. "It won't get you—won't hurt a hair of your head. Just stay here in the room with me, and keep away from the windows."

Though just how that was going to protect her from the fiend who had been able to laugh at the electric chair, was more than I could have told her. All I knew was that I did not dare to let her get out of my sight.

For a few minutes John Emerson lay quiet, spent from his efforts to fight his way out of bed. Then, once more, his body twisted and squirmed in torment, while groans of mortal agony wrenched from his throat.

"I'm burning up!" he panted. "Burning up—inside!"

But, before I could fill a glass with water and hold it to his lips, he held up his hand for silence. That command was unnecessary, for now we could all hear the sound that had pierced through his hell of pain and reached his consciousness.

It was a whine like that of a dynamo, punctuated by a slight crackling sputter. Gradually the whine rose in volume—and all three who listened to it, spellbound, knew what it was.

"The chair!" gasped the man whose hand customarily threw the switch to set that grim instrument of death in motion.

And the chair was right there in that mountain cottage room of death!

The whine snapped off, then began

again. Forty seconds, by my wrist-watch. A third charge. Then a fourth. A fifth—a full minute this time. A sixth—and the whine had risen in volume so that it filled the room and dinned thunderously in our ears.

FASCINATED, unable to move a muscle, I sat there and listened—and saw the sneering face of Henry Hartman as I had watched it the first time I listened to this hellish whine of death. After this sixth charge there would be a seventh, before—

I looked over at Emerson and saw that he had caught the full significance of that weird death message. He was sitting up in bed now, his arms at his sides to his elbows, then stretched straight out before him on the covers, his hands clenched so that the knuckles stood out stark and white.

"The chair," he whispered through white lips. "It's burning me up—shriveling me! My insides are on fire with the current! One more charge—and then—"

Sally did not wait to hear any more.

"Oh, God!" she cried hysterically. "I can't stand it! We've got to do something for him! I'm going after that doctor!"

"You can't!" I shouted at her as I sprang after her. "Not out there, Sally! Come back here—please, darling!"

But she was deaf to my pleas; she could hear only the agony of her grandfather. Nimbly she sprang across the room, through the doorway, and down the short hallway to the front door. Like a white streak, Ruffie, the Eskimo, raced after her. She threw the front door open and they plunged out together, before I could grab her.

Out into the darkness and across the clearing. And then, with appalling suddenness, the darkness was split by a burst of blinding light. Ruffie leaped into the air, howled terribly, and from head to tail he seemed bathed in a baleful bluish grey light that fairly consumed him.

One moment of horrid brightness; then the smell of burned hair—and blackness. But in that moment I had thrown myself forward in a football tackle. I grabbed Sally around the knees and crashed to the ground with her with such force that the breath was knocked out of her body.

In the next instant I was on my feet, bending over her, lifting her in my arms, and racing with her back into the cottage.

There I propped her up in a chair in the sick-room and held a glass of water to her lips. Emerson was lying back in his bed exhausted, but even as I knelt there beside Sally, that hellish whining began all over again, and the dying man sat bolt upright, taking his place in the dread electric chair.

"You stay here with him, please, Sally," I begged, as she opened her eyes and looked around her. "Don't go out of this house again—no matter what happens. Promise me that."

"But what are you going to do? Where are you going?" she wanted to know.

"I'll only be gone a few moments," I promised. "When I come back I will have put an end to this devilment—or I'll come back with the doctor. You stay here with him."

Then I hurried upstairs, climbed the ladder from the second floor to the attic, and worked my way out of a tiny attic window. From my precarious perch on the roof I was able to grasp a sturdy branch of the big oak that towered above the cottage. Like a monkey, I worked my way, hand over hand, along that branch until I reached the trunk of the tree. Then I felt around in the pitch darkness until I found another substantial branch on the other side of the tree.

Slowly, silently, I began to work my way out along this, until the branch began to dip slightly beneath my weight. I could not go much farther. And so far—

Then I got the break for which I had been praying fervently. Down there, beneath me, and some distance to the left, the flame-limned figure of

Henry Hartman was wending its way through the trees. It was coming in my direction. By moving a bit farther back up the tree, I was immediately over the spot where it should pass.

BREATHLESSLY I waited. It came nearer, nearer. When it was almost beneath me I could dimly see another figure crouched behind it. When that second figure was directly under my feet, I let go—and went plunging downward in the darkness.

With a thud I landed on that dim figure, and we both sprawled on the ground, then scrambled wildly to our feet. But I had the advantage of surprise; I knew what was coming, and the moment I sprang to my feet I launched myself upon him, punching and smashing away with a fury that I had never known before.

I took blows in return, plenty of them, but, oddly, I hardly felt them. Certainly they did nothing to dull my rage or stem the flood of punches which I showered on him. At last I didn't notice the blows coming my way any more—and then I realized that my adversary was limp beneath me. And there was a noise in the tree above me—a noise and a light.

"How did you get down there?" Sally called, and I looked up to see the light almost directly overhead.

"Don't try to come down here; you'll break your neck!" I shouted back at her. "Get back into the house!"

"I—I can't," came plaintively from up in the tree. "I—I'm going to fall!"

And in the next moment I had Sally in my arms while she struggled to pull down her skirt from about my shoulders. With far more sense than I, before following me out onto the roof she had equipped herself with a flashlight.

Now she turned it on my unconscious antagonist—and I stared at the messed-up face of the village doctor. His venomous, hate-filled eyes glared up at me as full consciousness returned to him.

"So—it's you who are behind all this, is it, doctor?" I said as I yanked him to his feet. "Stand still, if you know what's good for you." And while he stood there I took off his belt and bound his wrists securely with it.

"Now we're going back into the house," I told him, "and you're going first—walking right in front of me," as I saw the flicker of triumph momentarily light up his eyes. "If you know what's good for you, you'll lead the way to your apparatus and turn off the power in those wires."

Meekly he turned and led the way farther into the brush, to where he bent over an electrical contact box and some wires. He pressed a switch and there was a little *phht* of disconnecting power.

"That's better," I nodded, as I grabbed him by the elbow and led him toward the cottage. We had to climb through the heavy wire which was stretched three strands deep around the clearing. "What did you do, connect it up with some near-by high-tension wires?" I asked him, but he preferred to ignore the question.

We were barely through the wires when an indignant spluttering began at another point on the edge of the clearing.

"What kind of a crazy mess is this?" a querulous voice demanded, a voice that sounded oddly familiar to me. "First I'm knocked out and tied up all day. Then, when I manage to get loose and come up here, I get messed up in this thing!"

Sally turned her light toward the voice, and there, trying to get through the wires, was the village doctor!

At the same moment my prisoner decided it would be a good time to depart, but I had him by the collar before he had taken two steps. Then we helped the second doctor through the wire. He, too, gaped when he saw his double staring at him.

But only for a moment. Then he flew at the prisoner, and his hands fastened in the beard and pulled vigorously. It ripped away in his hands,

to reveal a clean-shaven face beneath the spirit gum. Then he grabbed the prisoner's hair and yanked again. That came away much more easily, and disclosed a sleek brown thatch beneath the mop.

Now it was Sally's turn to stand there mute with amazement. Then the spell was broken.

"That's—that's Albert!" she sputtered. "Albert—Albert Hartman, Gordon!"

"**S**O-O-O-O!" I whistled, and looked down understandingly into the raging, hate-filled eyes of Henry Hartman's son. "That explains lots of things that have puzzled me. Now let's get inside and see how your patient is, doctor."

The house was in darkness and we had to pick our way in by the aid of Sally's flash. But by the time we reached John Emerson's bedside it was too late to do anything for him. He was dead, lying on the floor beside the bed; and clutched in his hand was the reading lamp that had stood on the table beside him.

Evidently he had grabbed it to steady himself as he got up and had fallen with it. The fixture was badly smashed and the wires had short-circuited.

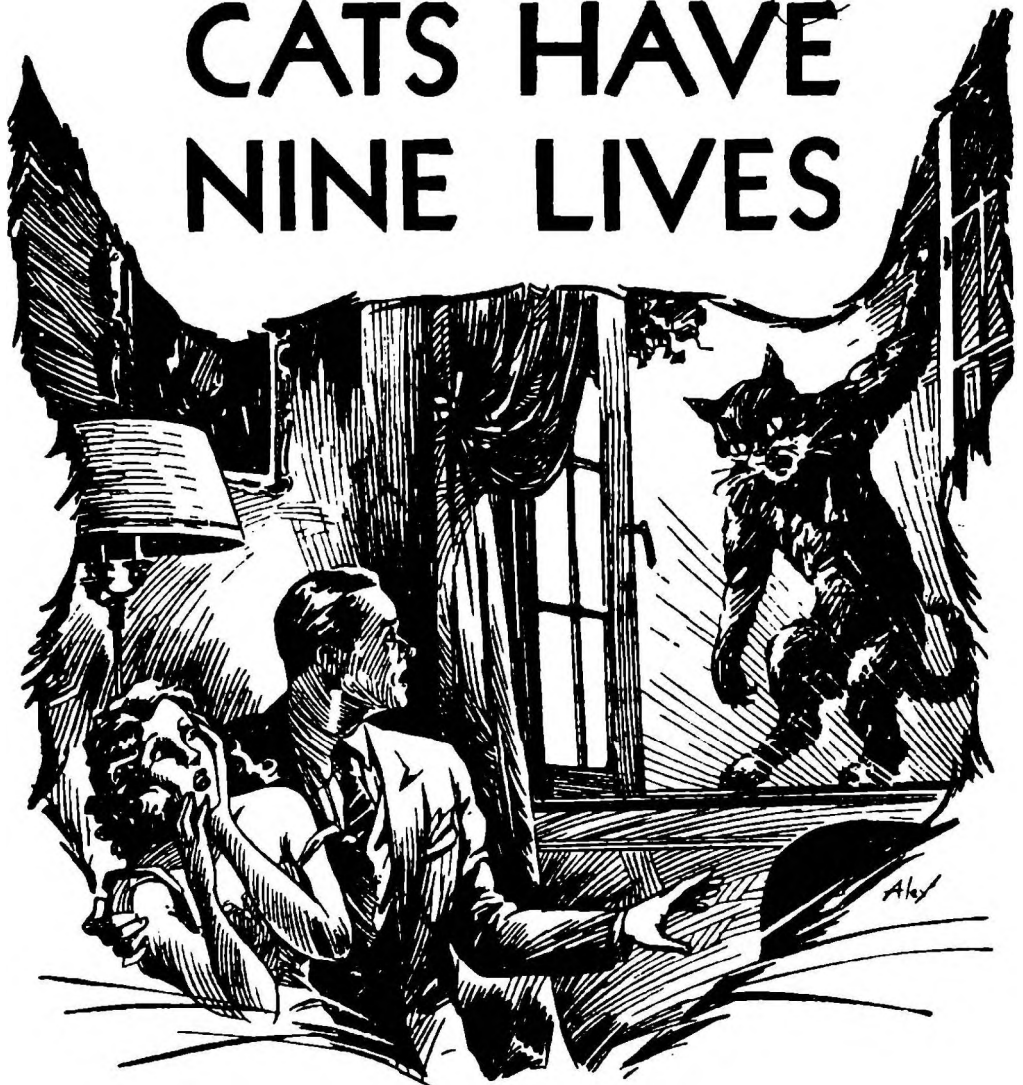
"Could the shock he got from that lamp have killed him, doctor?" I asked, as we bent over the still figure on the carpet.

"No—not the electricity; that wouldn't be strong enough," the physician said, as he concluded his examination. "But the shock stopped his heart. This man seems to have been under a terrific strain. Besides, this inhuman devil you've caught was feeding him hydrochloric acid—a dose strong enough to burn his stomach out. That would not have produced death for several days. It was the shock from the short-circuited current that killed him."

John Emerson, the executioner, had died with the whine of the chair in his ears, the fire of the current in his stomach, and the bite of it in his muscles. And somewhere, I knew,

(Concluded on Page 77)

CATS HAVE NINE LIVES



*Silhouetted against the grey of the window it loomed up—
the shape of a huge cat*

**A Strange and Horrid Being Lurks in that House—and
then Four-Footed Murder Strides, and Strikes
With Saber Talons!**

By HEYDORN SCHLEH

Author of "Keep Off the Grass," "Death at the Crossroads," etc.

I TOOK over Dr. Shaham's practice during his short holiday abroad. Rudolph Birch was one of his patients—an important one because of his wealth. Certainly had it not been for Shaham's particular solicitude for this case I should not

have responded to his call that night.

For it was a ghastly trip—five miles of it along the Shore Road to his lonely place on Gravestone Cove. Cold drizzling rain trickled through the pea-soup fog, splattering in my face and running down my neck.

The monotonous grumble of the restless sea, the blinding glare of my own headlights in the fog, the maddening creeping pace, hanging half out of the window of my automobile, feeling for the edge of the concrete road. And for what? There is really nothing a doctor can do for these chronic cardiacs, except to insist upon rest and quiet. When failure comes, we are as helpless as the rankest layman.

But they were waiting for me, even though the hour was past midnight. A big, sullen-looking fellow whom I took to be the butler met me with an open umbrella as I stepped from the car—as though I could get any wetter!—and led me, I think without uttering a word, through the large living room to the smaller study beyond.

There, behind a huge walnut desk, sat Rudolph Birch.

He was a smallish man, but puffed out, from overliving. He had tiny black beads of eyes—I couldn't tell in that light whether they were cruel, or mad, or frightened. And I could understand at a glance Dr. Shaham's concern for him. Just the type that will go quickly—his very life hanging on a slender thread at which his own nervous energy is constantly tugging perilously.

BUT the thing that fascinated me more than the man, lay on the desk, stretched across the clean, brown desk blotter. It was—the body of a dead, black cat!

"Took you long enough to get here!" he growled, drawing my attention from the dead animal.

Dripping pools of water to the floor, I was in no mood to argue that point. "It's a bad night—"

"Never mind that!" He cut me off, sharply. "Get to work!" Reaching over, he lifted the dead cat by one of its ears and handed it toward me. "I want to know if it's—dead."

I felt my blood boiling. Good God! I came five miles through this—risking my life—to tell him whether a cat was dead!

"I'm a physician—" I began hotly.

"I'm paying you!" he retorted. "I want to know—"

Maybe Shaham takes that sort of thing from his rich patients. I don't ordinarily. But choking back even my anger there was fear—fear for the man. The flushed face, the throbbing temples, the pounding of his heart—I could almost hear the wheezing of the valves. Each beat I thought would be the last, ending in a sickening gurgle of congestion and the rattle of death. I had to calm him, at all costs. I took the cat in my hands.

"It is dead," I said, simply. "Neck broken."

"I know that!" He was off like a madman. "I killed it myself! Wrung its filthy neck with my bare hands! I killed it twice before—and I'll kill it again, by God! Nine times—"

"Stop it!" I shouted. "Shut up! . . . You've got to be quiet! Your heart—"

My sharp command did sober him a little. I went around the desk, opening my bag for my stethoscope; but the instrument brought the flush to his face again.

"I don't want that! I'm all right! Get out! I want to be alone! I want to wait, until it moves again! I—"

Stark mad, of course. Nothing to do but humor him. I succeeded in giving him three grains of phenobarbital, a mild sedative, then left him alone to avoid further agitation. The butler followed me out—I had forgotten he was with me all the while—and closed the door.

The living room had been deserted and dimly lighted when we passed through. Now the household, aroused from slumber by our raised voices, was converging upon it in varied array of pajamas and negligées. I catalogued them from Dr. Shaham's description:

Mrs. Birch, whose imaginary ills had contributed so handsomely toward Shaham's holiday, was much as I had expected.

"I know! You're the new doctor!" she gushed at me. "You do—look young—but Dr. Shaham seems to think you are capable. You *must* give me some medicine before you leave!"

I brushed her aside, rather rudely, I'm afraid, only to face the gaunt, bespectacled, slightly neurotic son, Gerald. He had been reading in bed; he still carried the book in his hand, a finger marking his place.

"I know what it is," he said in a tinny, sing-song voice. "It's the cats. The pater never did like them. I don't know why. I like them; don't you?"

BEYOND, peering through the portières, a clean-cut youth who must have been Peter, the chauffeur; and clinging to him, a frightened maid with her hair in curlers. Opposite, apart from the rest, stood a girl.

She, I knew instantly, was Leone, the adopted daughter. Shabam had described her as pretty, the way an elderly man says "pretty," without much emphasis. I found his description inadequate. She was beautiful, in striking contrast to the rest of the clan, even in negligée and with her hair combed back and with the frightened look in her eyes.

"Is he—will he be all right, Doctor?" she asked tremulously.

I was drawn to her instinctively. She was the only sane person in the whole crazy room, not excluding myself. After that agonizing drive through the fog and the events of the past few minutes I was far from sure of my own sanity.

"I think he will be all right. I have given him a sedative. He must be kept from exciting himself like that."

I had not yet removed my wet, dripping slicker. With that as a pretext, I drew her to the hall, apart from the others, where I could talk to her.

"Tell me," I asked, "what is it all about? Has he been—like that—before?"

She was frightened; I could tell that. Her voice was almost pleading.

"Oh, I don't know what it is! It is all so—uncanny! He always has hated cats. Perhaps abnormally. We never had any in the house. But this one—"

She stopped, looking about, as though expecting something to pounce upon her.

"What about this one?" I urged, gently.

"It was Monday evening," she went on, hesitantly. "He found it in his study, nestled in a pile of papers. In a rage, he killed it, and made Gerald take the body and bury it. But last night it was there in the study again—or another black cat was. . . . Do you think I'm mad? Are we all mad?"

"Go on," I urged.

"Well, it—a cat—was there. And he killed it again. Or so he insisted. And then tonight it was back again! Do cats have nine lives?"

I started to answer, but my words were drowned out by a cry—the most horrible cry, I think, I have ever heard. Chilling, galvanizing, drawn-out, like the wail of a soul in torment, ending at last in a dull thud that all of us knew instinctively was that of a body falling.

It seemed minutes before the spell was broken; before I could make my paralyzed legs carry me across the floor to the study door. But I was the first to reach it. The others crowded behind me.

Rudolph Birch lay slumped on the floor behind the desk—dead. But there was blood—blood gushing from livid gashes across his face and about his neck. I bent over him, as much to shield the horrible sight from the women as to make a futile examination. Regaining control of myself, I faced them.

"He is dead," I told them. "Congestive failure—just the thing we have been afraid excitement would bring on. These wounds, while deep, are only flesh wounds. They are not the cause of death. But something has happened in this room—something for which I cannot account. Under the circumstances, I shall have to notify the police. I hope you will not object?"

I TURNED, lifted the French-type phone from its base, and waited for a response. There was none. Leone moved to my side, took my arm. Her big brown eyes searched mine, steadily, as though she were putting her trust in me. And I couldn't keep

my eyes off her. I jiggled the hook again. The phone was dead.

"Is there another phone in the house?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No."

I tried to conceal my alarm—my sense of helplessness. There was not another house within a mile. I had not even a gun. Rudolph Birch had called me on that phone little more than an hour ago. Since then, someone had cut the wires. Someone had slashed his face and neck, and frightened him to death. With what intent? We had to get help at once.

I didn't want to leave them. I had no way of telling what might happen next. I was more than a little suspicious of the butler; he seemed to be glowering at me menacingly, following my every movement with those shifty little eyes. Peter seemed on the level. I asked him to go.

"You can take my car," I told him. "It is already in the driveway. Go to the nearest phone. Tell the police there has been a death, and they will notify the coroner. Return here as soon as you can."

"Yes, sir." Without knowing it, he offered a salute and went up to put on some clothes.

Leone was still holding to my arm, but it was only after Peter had gone that I noticed she was tugging at my coatsleeve, trying to attract my attention. I followed her eyes.

The body of the cat that had been on the desk was gone. But in the shadow, beyond the direct light of the desk lamp, only its eyes glistening, crouched—a live black cat!

I think the rest of them saw it at the same moment. Mrs. Birch uttered a little cry and collapsed. She would have fallen had not Leone caught her and helped her to the other room. The butler's face was a study in emotion—some emotion I could not analyze in the excitement of the moment. But Gerald came quickly forward.

"I'm not afraid of cats. I like them. . . . Here, Kitty—"

He crossed to where the cat crouched, stooped and caught it in his arms. But the cat squirmed, snarled viciously and lashed out with

its claws. Blood spurted from livid streaks across the boy's face.

For just a moment he was startled. Then there was a light in those dull eyes—the same light I had seen in Rudolph Birch's eyes—and there was a snarl on his lips. With one quick motion he had twisted the cat's neck—killed it instantly.

Just as quickly, the mad urge passed. He dropped the body to the floor and stood watching it, almost tearful, oblivious to his bleeding wounds. I started toward him, intending to dress them, but he motioned me away.

"I'LL be all right. I'll take care of it myself."

He started out. After all, his wounds were not serious.

"Use a little iodine," I called after him. Mrs. Birch, now hysterical, needed my care more than the boy.

The butler found a cover to throw over the body in the study, then closed the door. I heard Peter come down the stairs and go out the back way. It wouldn't be long now until we would have help.

It was fully ten minutes before I could leave the woman. As soon as possible I returned to the study alone, and lifted the cover from the body. There was something I wanted to see.

I moved the desk lamp over, so it shone directly on the lifeless form. Then I dropped to my knees, bending closer, wiping away the sticky, clotting blood with a piece of cotton, so I could see the wounds.

There were four of them, parallel lines across the face, fully an inch apart, and as much as three-quarters of an inch deep in the fleshy part of the cheek. I opened the man's shirt. There were other marks there that I hadn't seen in my cursory examination before—pierce marks, in sets of five. Claw marks! But the marks of some huge paw. The cat that lay on the floor—still dead, thank God!—couldn't have done that. Nor could any cat, short of a tiger!

I started to replace the covering over the body. Suddenly I was conscious of something bending over me.

I turned quickly. It was the sullen butler. I hadn't heard him follow me into the study. I had moved the desk lamp, so he had made no shadow. He had been standing there, his hand resting on the desk—on one of the metal book-ends. He was still clutching it when he started back as I turned. Recovering himself, he replaced it on the desk and turned away without a word. I had the uncomfortable feeling of having had a very close call.

I returned to the living room. Mrs. Birch seemed to be quiet. The maid was sitting with her. Leone, I noticed, wasn't there. Nor was the butler. The latter fact concerned me more at the moment, for I had resolved to keep a sharp eye on him, at least until the police came.

I began to wonder what I would do if I were a detective—or what the police would do. What did it all mean? What crime, if any, had been committed? Who could have done it? And for what reason? There seemed to be no answer to those questions. I almost had myself believing that the cat had come back to life. But those deep scratches—

I parted the portières and peered out into the hall. The butler wasn't there. Gerald was coming down the broad stairs. He had dressed, in dark trousers and a polo shirt, and had strapped adhesive rather clumsily over the scratches on his face. I went to meet him.

"Are you all right, boy?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. It wasn't bad. I'm rather sorry I—er—killed it. I'm not cruel, really. It's just my temper. I can't always control it."

I smiled a little. He seemed mild; harmless, at least. That was something to be thankful for in that madhouse. But he shouldn't have used adhesive over iodine on the cuts. I started to tell him that, but I was interrupted by a scream.

It was Leone who screamed. The cry came from upstairs.

I took the steps three at a time. Leone was in the hall when I reached the top landing. Out of the open

I darted to her side. She swayed a little. I put my arms about her to steady her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was frightened!"

SHE let herself relax in my arms. The hand that had been covering her neck slipped away—and there was blood on it! There was a scratch on her neck!

The sight of that maddened me inexplicably. I could regard the others impersonally, but the sight of so much as a harmless little scratch on her neck tore at something inside me I couldn't understand. The butler started past, down the hall, but I stopped him.

"You stay here!" I commanded, sharply. "We'll have this out—now! By God, if you've hurt her—"

"Oh, no! No, please! . . . It's all a mistake! . . . Let me get my breath!" the girl pleaded.

I patted her gently. "You're all right now," I soothed. "Take your time."

She looked up into my eyes. "It was really my fault. I went into mother's room without turning on the light. I was feeling in the closet . . . I wanted to get a heavier wrap. Gustav heard me. He thought it was—someone else. I guess we frightened each other terribly. . . . Don't you see? It was an—accident!"

I didn't see it at all. "It would have been an accident, too, if a metal book-end had dropped on my head, wouldn't it?" I remarked, caustically.

Gustav gave me a malignant look, a look that would have meant fight to the death of one of us, had it not been lost in sudden total darkness. For at that moment, the lights went out.

I stood still, clutching the girl close to me, expecting momentarily to feel the weight of that big brute lunging toward me. On that soft carpet one couldn't hear footsteps. I had no idea where he was.

It seemed an eternity that we stood there. Nothing happened. The maid downstairs screamed once. Mrs. Birch was sobbing. Leone was breathing

rising and falling against my chest. Little by little, the tension wore off. "Fuse blew out."

It was Gustav, the butler, whose voice came from the darkness. I breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of it. He hadn't tried to kill me. His voice gave no sign that he intended to.

"We've got to get a light! Mother is frightened!" The girl drew away from me a little.

"I have a flashlight in my car," I remembered. "I'll get it." I had not as yet heard Peter leave with the car.

"I'll lead you down the stairs," Leone suggested. "I can find my way in the dark."

She slipped out from my arms, a little reluctantly I thought—or perhaps the reluctance was mine—and took my hand. Slowly we made our way down in the pitch dark. At the bottom landing she stopped short.

"You go straight ahead to the door," she said, abruptly; and before I could move she had slipped away. I wondered why.

I found the door, opened it, and went out. It was still raining, but the fog had lifted a bit. I could see the parking lights of my car. I started toward them.

TWO long steps from the entry I stumbled over something—something soft. Sprawled face forward to the soft ground.

Even as I was flying through the air it came to me. Peter hadn't gone for help! If he had, my car wouldn't be here! I knew in the instant—the thing I stumbled over was a body—Peter's body!

I scrambled to my feet and raced toward the car. No need to go back. I knew as surely as though I had stopped to examine him that Peter lay there in the drizzling rain, and that he was dead. I found the flashlight and confirmed that a moment later. He had been struck over the head, his skull crushed. His uniform cap, sticky with blood, lay beside him.

Someone opened the door of the house. I turned the light in that direction. It was Gustav, the butler.

"What is it? . . . Oh, Lord!"

He shrank back from the body. I wondered if he were really as surprised as he pretended to be.

And yet, much as I distrusted the man, I had no other choice than to trust him now. The police wouldn't be here, now; they hadn't been notified. I had to have help. Hesitantly, I handed him the flashlight.

"Take this. See if you can fix the lights. I'll get him inside."

He took the light from my hand and was gone. I wondered if he would fix the lights.

I dropped to my knees in the soft mud, and swung the body across my shoulder. I struggled to the door. I had just got inside the hall, when the lights came on.

They came on suddenly, without warning. It was like a picture suddenly flashed on a screen, indelibly printed on my mind. Leone, her face livid, stood at the foot of the stairs, some papers in her hands. Someone had just gone upstairs. I saw only a man's foot and a single dark trouser-leg.

I dropped the body to the floor—the man was dead, anyway—and leaped to the stairway. But the girl blocked the way, stretching her arms from the wall to the newel-post.

"No, No, No! Please don't!" she cried. I started back, incredulous.

"Who was that?" I demanded, more sharply than I had intended. She was sobbing, almost hysterically.

"I can't tell you! I don't know! I won't tell you!" She was screaming it, madly. "Oh, you've got to go! You've got to leave us alone—get away from here! Please! Won't you go away?"

It was a plea, a frantic plea, why, God only knew. She swayed a little; I was afraid she would faint. I couldn't stand it, that look in her eyes. I caught her in my arms, held her tight. She tried to break away.

"Listen to me!" I commanded. "You've got to listen to me! I can't leave you! This is murder! Do you understand that? Peter is dead! Murdered!"

She uttered a sharp little cry—a hurt cry—and was limp in my arms.

"Can't you do—anything? Can't you—save him? Isn't there any way?"

I FELT her agony tearing at my heart.

"Listen to me!" I whispered. "You've got to believe in me! You've got to believe that I'll help you, that I'll do anything! But you must tell me the truth. You must tell me everything. Will you?"

She recovered herself a little. Pushed away from me. "I—I can't tell you. You can help—by going away—now—please!"

I hesitated. I would have done almost anything for her. Almost even that. But I couldn't leave her.

"I—I have to take care of—him—first!"

It was a clumsy thing to say. I wanted time; time to collect my thoughts. I returned to the body I had dropped on the floor, lifted it.

I didn't want to take it into the living-room. Mrs. Birch was in there. I didn't want her to know—yet. There was another door, further down the hall. I started to open it with my free hand.

Leone stopped me. "Don't!"—she cried. "Please don't go in there!"

I hesitated only a moment. Some mad impulse seized me. I thrust her aside.

The door led, I found, to the study. I put the body down on the floor and looked around the room. I saw why she wanted to keep me out.

The door of the safe was open!

I remembered then that she had left me at the bottom of the stairs, near that very door. What impulse had siezed her to open the safe? What had she found there? Who was the man who had run up the stairs?

She had followed me into the room. I gave her an accusing look. She faltered, then came close to me.

"You said you would help me," she said. "Now I'm—afraid! Terribly afraid! I—I don't know what to say! What would you think—what would you do, if I were to tell you I did—all this? I frightened father to death! I opened the safe! I—killed Peter!"

"I'd say it's a damn lie!" I retorted hotly. "I know you didn't! You're lying to cover someone else! You're—"

I stopped. Why would a woman lie to cover anyone? For only one reason. Love! Someone in her life, in the life of this creature who had been adopted into the family! The man on the stairs! What a fool I had made of myself!

And what an abysmal fool I was going to make of myself! For I knew instinctively that I would help her, that I couldn't help helping her, even if it meant a rope around my own neck!

But how? What was the answer to all of it? It was like a crazy nightmare. There must be some awakening from it; something, something we could do.

I was near desperation when the door opened suddenly. Gerald stood there, but it wasn't the mild, meek Gerald I had seen before. There was that light of madness in his eyes, the light that had flashed for just a moment when he killed the cat. Leone shrank away from him.

"Gerald! Don't!"

"Don't what?" he hissed, venomously. "I know now! You did it! I thought he'd cut you off—I always thought that! You're only an orphan—but you get everything! But you won't get it! I'll kill you—"

HE LUNGED toward her. I sprang between them. He was light, frail. I sent him sprawling on his back.

"Gerald! Don't! Be quiet!" Leone screamed hysterically. He started to get up, crouched, as though to leap at her again. I moved toward him.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed again. But instead he scrambled to his feet and ran away.

I hesitated; hesitated between springing after him, and staying with Leone. It was only a moment, but that moment was nearly fatal to both of us. I ran upstairs, but he was out of sight by that time. I looked in room after room, but there was no sign of him. I went back again to the

rooms, searching the closets and peering under beds in frenzied haste. He must be there. He had come up the stairs. Then, suddenly, the lights went off again.

I was on my knees when it happened. I had no idea what room I was in; no idea which way to go to the stairs; no idea where Leone might be. Inky blackness, and a madman loose in a madhouse, determined to kill Leone!

I staggered toward where I thought I had left the door. Struck it head-on, and bounded back. I tried it again. Made the hall. My eyes were becoming adjusted to the darkness, and there was a little light, the deep gray of early dawn. I could at least see windows. I called to Leone. She answered from downstairs somewhere. I made my way down.

It was maddening, that search for her in the darkness. I found her at last, in the study. Folded her in my arms.

Then an eternity of waiting, waiting in the dark for death to strike, not knowing what form it might take. Straining for a sound, for a bit of light, but there was no sound save the sobbing of the woman in the next room; no light but the blanket of deep blue-gray across the window. Yet it would come.

It did come. Silhouetted against the gray of the window, it loomed up—the shape of a cat, a huge cat, as big as a tiger—standing on its hind paws. Leone trembled convulsively and buried her head. The thing snarled—an ungodly snarl, neither of beast nor man. It was coming closer . . . closer. . . .

We shrank back from that—back to the wall—until we could go no further, until we were face to face with death. I pressed her head close to me. Kissed her, just once; then thrust her behind me.

I lunged, struck out at the head of the thing with my bare fist. I might as well have hit a pillow. The thing snarled. It caught me, buried its sharp claws in my flesh, tore—

I fought, with blood gushing from raw wounds, struck feeble blows that

slid off the thing's soft, furry sides. I still tried to fight when there wasn't the strength left to move, with those claws still tearing at me. Then—

Perhaps death is like that; something like an explosion. It seemed I heard breaking glass, a sickening thud, shots—a lot of them—all at once. Then oblivion.

THE sun was shining when I awoke. My first thought was that I had made the grade, because they don't have sunshine in Hades. Someone was picking on my back, without hurting me much because it was sort of numb back there. I was lying face down, but I could see the sunshine on the blue-carpeted floor. Maybe they were tacking on my wings. I must have laughed at that thought. And then, before I knew it, Leone was down there on her knees, on the very spot where the sun had been. And she was holding my head.

"It's all right now," she was whispering. "It's all over, and you'll be all right. Gustav went for help. If he hadn't—" She shuddered a little, then smiled, and kissed me on the forehead.

Gustav?

Slowly it all came back to me. Then, a little later, when they had finished the sutures and bandaging, they let me sit up and showed me the thing.

And a horrible thing it was! A suit made out of skins of cats, even to the paws and grotesquely shaped head. But for paws there were hooked knives, ground down to the sharpness of razor blades, set in leather gloves! An instrument of death which only the mind of a fiend could conceive!

And it was that, the mind of a perverted fiend, that the frail body of Gerald Birch harbored. Dr. Knowlton, a psychiatrist, determined that.

Even as a child, it was discovered, Gerald had wanted cats. Always they had been forbidden him because of his father's unreasoning aversion to them. Preying on a feeble mind, they became a maniac obsession to him. He read about them, brooded over feline cunning and ferocity, so foreign to his own frail, timid self.

Later he found a way to keep cats, unobserved, in the unused attic. There he had fashioned his weird cat-suit. While he had it on he could imagine himself to be a cat. He could be fierce, ferocious, cunning. Without it, he was only his frail self.

Probably he hadn't intended to kill anyone in the beginning. It was just a weird, perverted trick, perhaps provoked by the escape of one of his pets, which was killed by his father, and which he was made to bury.

The rest came step by step—the death of Rudolph Birch, frightened to death by the sight of the horrible avenging feline monster; Peter killed to keep the alarm from being spread; the opening of the safe to get his father's will; and at last, the chagrin, on reading it, at learning that instead of being sole heir, he was substantially at the mercy of an adopted sister!

Gerald was dead—mercifully. Mrs. Birch was sent to the hospital. She will be there a long time, recovering from that shock. I was bandaged, it seemed, from head to foot. Leone volunteered to drive me home.

IT was wonderful, even being a mass of gauze, driving in the morning sunlight again. Leone drove slowly, and I was glad she did. At

that, we drew up before my apartment and stopped all too soon. She cut the ignition, then turned to me and smiled.

"End of the line!" she said, cheerily. Then, turning away from me, she looked down the long shaded street ahead, wistfully, as though lost in thought. And she repeated it, softly, more to herself than to me: "End of the line!"

I studied her face. "You came out of it all pretty well," I suggested. "It's a large estate. You're pretty well fixed."

She nodded. "Yes. Pretty well fixed. I should be thankful for that, shouldn't I? But—"

"But what?" I asked her.

"I never had anyone when I was little," she went on, absently. "Never anyone of my own. I was always alone.

"Then the Birches took me in, and that was wonderful—just having someone, and loving them, and pretending they were really mine. Even poor, weak Gerald! But now they're gone, and I'm just back where I started. No one—"

I slipped my arm about her, drew her close to me, ever so gently, as though she were a fragile thing. For I wanted to keep her, always, looking just as she did then.

Death Comes for the Executioner

(Concluded from Page 68)

the evil spirit of Henry Hartman was chuckling ghoulishly over his demise.

We found the dummy, rigged with electric wires and coated with phosphorus, that Albert Hartman had used to simulate his father, and we found the blasting powder and the fireworks he used for his storm effects. Found also the loud speaker unit which he had installed in the wall of Emerson's bedroom so that he could imitate his father's voice over it and could transmit the sound of a dynamo.

Yes, the younger Hartman had gone to considerable trouble and expense to avenge his father—and to pave his own way to the grim chair.

How did his father manage to defy the voltage that would have killed any other man? That is a question which only he could have answered—but by continual application one can inure one's self to the effects of electricity the same as many other things. Hartman had almost made himself immune to the deadly current—but not quite.

In the clear light of day it all figures out simply enough—but never, until my dying hour, will I forget the sneering grin on the lips of the man who could not die. Nor the feel of enervating, paralyzing terror as it steals down sickeningly into one's vitals!

Hell's Half Acre

Where Owls Gather, there Carrion May be Found—
and an Odor of Corruption that Breathes of Murder!
Justin Holt Follows a Weird Trail that Leads
Him into Strange Paths

A Complete Novelette

By **JOE ARCHIBALD**

Author of "Cocardes of Courage," "One Drop of Blood," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Grinning Skull

"**G**OOD land!" The aged station attendant's rheumy eyes widened perceptibly. "Yew're not going up to the Rowley place tonight, are yew?"

Justin Holt grinned at the little, stooped old man.

"Sure I am. I was told it was only six miles from here. Any rig around I might hire?"

"Nope. Anyway the road's too bad. Yew got to walk if yew go. Old Rowley, huh?"

The little old native seemed to shiver although the humidity of the night was thick and the heat oppressive.

"Seems like he won't never die. And that brother of his'n. Ab's crazy—folks hereabouts says he lives most of the time with owls. One of Rowley's nephews come back t'other day, I hear, and he lit right out. Wouldn't blame the feller. Say, yew ain't the other nephew, be yew?"

"Which way is the road from here?" asked Holt, ignoring the question.

The station agent squinted at him curiously for a moment and then

shrugged his shoulders in deprecation.

"Yew walk up the tracks 'bout a mile and yew'll come to an old bridge. It begins there—the trail does. But I wouldn't go tonight, young feller. It's bad 'nough in daytime—"

"Thanks," Holt interrupted, and left the rotting platform of the box-like, isolated depot.

Frogs croaked out a monotonous medley as he walked along the tracks. But when he passed by the alder-choked swamp where they swarmed, the frogs suddenly became quiet.

The silence seemed unreal to the stranger. The darkness had thickened with almost incredible rapidity by the time he reached the bridge. There he turned from the tracks into an old woods road which the station man had described as the way to old Rowley's home.

As he entered the woods, Holt drew a flashlight from his pocket and brought it into play. The yellow beam from it exposed the road bed. Two deep ruts wriggled along before him like a pair of great dark serpents moving off into the blackness beyond the light. Between the ruts the lush earth was choked with vegetation and as the traveler began his six-mile walk his boots sank in deep and made



The skull grinned at him hideously

weird sucking sounds at each step.

A mile through the woods Justin Holt felt as if he had shut the door of the world behind him. The never-ceasing charivari of insects only accentuated the desolation, the deathly quiet.

The air was heavy, permeated with an odor of rotting mold. Perspiration poured down Holt's face. He paused to rest, sucking in his breath laboriously.

Without warning there came an unearthly scream that wrung the stranger's heart dry. It was followed by a hissing sound.

Something black swept by in front of his staring eyes. There was a great flutter of wings, then silence. Justin Holt was not a timid man. Yet five minutes passed while he stood motionless in the middle of the woods road, mouth wide open, eyes dilated. Then he saw two fiery eyes up ahead,

high in the branches of a tree. An owl.

"Hell!" swore Holt and resumed his way. Nevertheless he wished he had taken the old depot master's advice. He could have waited until morning. But there was no use in turning back now. Again he heard that scream and, despite the fact that he knew its origin, he felt cold and clammy and spineless. There is something fearsome about the sound of flailing great wings in the dark.

After awhile he came to a sort of clearing. Off to the left he saw a light. A dog barked fitfully, became mute. Again the road cut into dense woods. Holt looked up to see stars blinking through rifts in the foliage. He was halfway there, he judged. Walking along, with the flashlight playing on the road intermittently, Justin Holt's mind wandered back to the problem that was responsible for

his presence in this God-forsaken spot.

"Old guy dying," he mumbled to himself. "Sends for his nephews to gather them to his bosom again and split up his money. One doesn't want it, evidently. Disappears right after he gets here. Yeah, Granby's right. Sounds darned queer."

Jonas Rowley had been a city man once. He had made considerable money in shipping in Boston. Something had soured him against the world, however, and for fifteen years now he had lived like a hermit in a tumble-down house on Rowley's Pond where he had been born. For years Granby, his lawyer, had lost track of his client. Then word had come to him that Jonas Rowley was gravely ill. He had instructed the lawyer to find his two nephews, Enoch and Zachary, whom the eccentric old man had driven out years before. That was the background as Granby had given it to Justin Holt when he had hired him.

"But he didn't tell me about those blasted owls," Holt grimaced, as he plodded on his way.

JUST then one of the great birds swooped over his head. It screamed like a human thing and scinged out through a gap in the over-spreading branches. The road slanted upward and Holt's breathing was labored. Once he stopped and could hear the rapid beating of his own heart. It sounded like the distant throbbing of a tom-tom in that unearthly quiet.

On again, feet sodden, wet trousers flapping against his legs, Holt struggled, sweat pouring down his face and his body reeking with it. Imaginary horrors seemed to crawl toward him from every side in that eerie darkness.

The road dipped into a hollow, now. On the downgrade Justin Holt stopped dead still. Wings flailed above him, screams shook the humid air. But it was not these weird sounds that chilled the stranger's blood. It was a horrible, nauseating odor.

There was only one odor in the world like it. Justin Holt had been in France. Once he had gone into a German dugout. There had been bodies from which life had long since fled. The odor of decayed flesh—human flesh. It dispelled the reek of rotting vegetation and mold, the pungent tang of conifers. Hisses, shrill cries, filled the woods as the winged creatures flew from the spot.

Holt turned off the road, flashlight stabbing at the lush earth. He came to an old stone wall and climbed it. A hidden strand of barb wire tripped him, gashing his leg. Across the fence ferns grew in thick profusion. The ray of light fell upon a spot where they had been flattened and up-rooted.

And Justin Holt could feel his blood congeal in his veins as his eyes fell upon something else. A human skull. It grinned hideously at him. Creeping closer, holding his breath against the loathsome stench, the man saw the rest of the mangled corpse. He felt sick and leaned against a small oak tree. The skull still retained a patch of dark hair. Bits of flesh clung to the skeleton.

A screech over Holt's head made his heart leap. A dark shadow flitted across the open space in the leaves above where he stood. He cursed and felt his flesh creep. For days, he knew the owls must have been feasting on the carrion.

Two of the nocturnal scavengers swept by overhead and hissed, as he steeled himself for a closer examination of the corpse.

A peculiar thing about it struck him as he viewed the ghastly thing. What had become of the man's clothes? Not the smallest remnant of cloth was anywhere in sight. Then for the first time Justin Holt heard the sound of gurgling water.

"Went for a swim, maybe," he speculated. "Left his clothes somewhere around. Perhaps he was killed and robbed." He whirled suddenly and let the light beam play on an old rotting tree. Holt could have sworn that someone had been staring at him, that he had heard a twig snap.

For five minutes Holt remained stationary. At last he reached into his pocket and drew out an automatic. The feel of it stiffened his morale. Slowly he walked toward the rotting tree, light beam sweeping from side to side. No one was there.

He was about to turn away when his eyes were drawn to something on the ground. It was a huge slimy toadstool. Someone had stepped on it and mashed it flat. Holt's eyes hardened, and he walked back to the gruesome thing in the crushed ferns. A wave of nausea surged over him, but he fought it down. He lifted the skull gingerly and twisted it to one side.

A hole gaped in the base of it. So it had been murder! This man had been struck from behind with a murderous weapon.

Holt went back to the rutted road and trudged on, his gun held in readiness. The horrible odor finally left his nostrils when he had walked a mile nearer to Rowley's Pond. He gulped sweet air into his lungs, for the memory remained and assailed him from time to time.

Across a rickety wooden bridge the road pitched down through a clump of willows. Beyond them Justin Holt got his first view of Rowley's Pond and the crumbling old house that hugged its mucky bank. Hell's half-acre. There was a grimness about the abode that the traveler had finally reached.

From the shadows of a gnarled apple tree he gazed down on that desolate stretch of water and a shiver passed over him. Blackened tree trunks jutted out from the slimy, moss-strewn surface. They looked like charred dead things with bony arms reaching up toward the gibbous moon. From across the bleak, watery waste a loon cried forlornly. The cry was pregnant with stark despair, utter loneliness.

Justin Holt moistened his dry lips and approached the house. The yard was muddy, littered with corn cobs and the filth of fowls. From the darkness off to the right came a sound like talons ripping into wood. A scream

split the quiet asunder. The door of the decrepit house jerked open.

A SWATH of light cut across the squalid yard. Holt walked into it as a man's voice called out:

"Who's there?"

"Hello, there," replied Holt. His voice broke a little. The face of the man in the doorway was repellent. Cavernous eyes set in a bony face peered at Justin Holt as he came into the circle of light. The man's hair was disheveled, a matted thatch of mixed white and yellow.

"Who are ye?"

"Name's Holt. I was sent down here by Mr. Granby."

A tortured silence followed the words. Finally the man in the doorway said:

"Oh, Granby? Come in. You a detective?"

Justin Holt grinned and nodded.

"Sometimes I'm called that. And you're Ab Rowley, I take it?"

The bony individual nodded as he closed the door. Holt looked around the room. It seemed to serve as both kitchen and living room. A dirty stove stood in one corner. A woman bent over it. She wore a faded blue garment that hung shapelessly from her gaunt frame. A sour look rested on the pinched face that she turned toward the visitor. Strands of unkempt hair fell down over piercing, gimlet eyes. She accorded him a quick nod.

"Et yet? We ain't fancy here, but ef you want salt pork an' 'taters, ye can have 'em."

"I wouldn't mind," Holt said.

He sat down in a chair that creaked protestingly under his weight. The leather had cracked open and stuffing and metal springs protruded. Ab Rowley took his stand by the stove, eyeing Justin Holt while the woman was putting the food on the rickety table.

"It's ready," she said at last.

Holt's appetite failed him as he sat down to the greasy repast. The oil-cloth on the table was faded and worn. Scraps of food from a previous meal befouled it. He was making

a pretense of eating when noises from across the yard made his head snap up. Ab Rowley's eyes glowed.

"Them's my pets," he shot at the detective. "Ye like owls?"

"Why," Holt said hesitatingly, "I don't know. They sort of give me the creeps. On the way up here—"

"Owls are better'n most humans," Ab interrupted. "Ye can see somethin' in their eyes. They're playful things." He chuckled inanely. Holt saw that his gums were toothless. Ab's gleaming eyes mirrored the madness in his brain.

"Now what's the story about your nephew?" Holt asked suddenly. A stove lid clattered to the floor. He looked toward the woman. His eyes met her probing ones for a brief instant before she stooped to retrieve the iron lid.

"Ain't much to tell 'bout him," said Ab, sucking at the stem of a filthy pipe. "Enoch Garvey come here 'bout a week ago, stayed overnight, and then went out fer a walk. Leastways that is what he said. He never come back. An' good riddance to 'im, I say. He wa'n't never no good."

"No more was Zach," the woman cut in with a strident voice. "That ol' fool—Jonas must be crazy. Goin' to give 'em his money. Ab had ought to git it. Ab's ben closer to him—" She bit back her words, but there was a glare in her eyes.

"Ye talk too much," Ab cracked. "Shet up, ye ol' devil!"

"Enoch, now," Justin Holt went on, "did he have black hair? Maybe he was about as tall as you, Ab?"

"He was that. How d'ye know?"

"Because I found Enoch," Holt said deliberately, rising from the table. He heard the woman suck breath in through her snaglike teeth. Ab Rowley's foot came down from the stove hearth with a dull thud.

"Ye did?" he shot out. "Where?"

"I found what was left of him about a mile and a half from here. In the ferns off from the road. Something—animals or something—had almost picked him clean. It was the black hair that—"

From the corner of his eye Holt

saw the woman flash a frightened look toward Ab Rowley. No one spoke for several minutes. Through the open window Justin Holt could look out over the slimy pond.

A loon called mournfully. From the yard came a restless clawing, a series of petulant cries. The man from Boston shuddered. Here, he thought, was the limbo of everything evil and unclean.

"They got to be fed," Ab said almost inaudibly. "Them owls!"

"Jonas better be told 'bout Enoch," the housekeeper said.

"How is he?" Holt asked.

"No change," said Ab. "Doctor'll be up agin tomorrer night. I'll git a lamp. We'll go up."

Justin Holt got out of his chair as Ab Rowley reached for a lamp with a blackened chimney. He scratched a match and touched the flame to the wick. A few moments later the detective was following his dubious host up a stairway covered with mouldy, frayed carpeting.

Dust was thick on everything. Cobwebs brushed against his face as he reached the landing just after old Ab. The man led him down a musty, dank hall and stopped before a door. He turned the knob and peered in.

"Ye asleep, Jonas?"

"No, I ain't!" The voice from within was rasping, albeit faint. "Git out of here, Ab Rowley. Go out with your owls. I don't want ye here."

"A feller's here to see ye," Ab said testily. "From the lawyer to Boston."

Justin Holt walked into the room. Ab grumbled something unintelligible and shut the door.

"Ye come from Granby?" old Rowley queried as the visitor crossed the room.

The detective experienced a shock. It seemed incredible that the wasted, gaunt thing on the bed could talk. The face against the greyish pillow was the color of parchment. The flesh was gone from it; only skin was drawn tight over the bones. The arms lying on the coverlet resembled sticks with gnarled twigs at the ends for fingers.

"I did. I came about Enoch Garvey," Holt said, finding voice with difficulty.

"He was here," old Rowley said. "But he lit out. I wanted to talk to him about—"

"Pull yourself together, Mr. Rowley," Holt said kindly. "I have something unpleasant to tell you. Enoch is dead!"

The faded old eyes widened and bony fingers dug deep into the soiled bed covering. He tried to raise his head from the pillow. Justin Holt eased him back with a gentle hand.

"Easy, easy," he said. "There's nothing we can do but—"

Jonas Rowley struggled up again, defied Holt's attempt to calm him. "Ab done it!" he croaked. "He wants my money. He killed Enoch an' he'll kill Zach. Zach—is he here yet?"

The detective shook his head. A sound outside the door manifested itself. When he got up, Holt thought he heard muffled footsteps out in the hall.

"Ab done it! Ab—"

Holt said, "Maybe, but it's my business to make sure. Have you a phone?"

Old Rowley shook his head. Suddenly an owl screamed. The old man's eyes grew feverish and bony fingers clutched at the detective's sleeve.

"It's them owls! They done it. Ab's owls," he husked. "He catches the critters an' keeps 'em penned up. Torments 'em sometimes, too. Starves 'em so they screech all night to keep me awake. He knows I hate 'em! One time he put one in my room—damn 'im! The varmint can't wait until I die."

"No 'phone," Holt said, meanwhile attempting to calm Jonas Rowley. "Then Enoch'll have to stay where he is until we can get a rig up here. He'll keep—what's left of him, I guess. Anything I can get for you, Mr. Rowley?"

The old man pointed to a glass half filled with amber liquid. Justin Holt handed it to him. Sipping from it, Rowley turned his dimming eyes on the detective.

"You can't do nothin' now," he said. "You git out. It's an evil place. They come in here nights. Open the door an' look in. Ab an' Missus Quale. To see if I'm dead yit. But they ain't goin' to git none of my money. Listen—them owls—ye hear them? Like screams from hell!"

Holt nodded.

"I think I'll go downstairs now. I'll look in on you again, Mr. Rowley, before I turn in."

CHAPTER II

Murder

WHEN he got back to the kitchen Ab and the woman eyed him closely.

"What did he say?" the former shot at him.

Holt did not make direct reply.

"Those birds of yours are making a racket, Rowley," he said. "The old man has got to have some sleep. Can't you quiet them?"

"They're hungry," Ab said, and his eyes gleamed cruelly. "Maybe I better feed the devils. Want to watch?" He reached behind the stove for a lantern.

The housekeeper's face twisted into a bleak grin. Justin Holt felt chilled. Several minutes later he wished that he had not followed Ab Rowley out of the house. From a burlap bag in a rickety outhouse the old man took a pair of woodchucks. Holt watched him cut them into chunks with an axe. The old man's hands were drenched with blood when he was through.

All during the operation a grim sound of flailing wings came from a big pen nearby. The detective could see the gleam of green eyes. A hellish clatter arose as the big birds of prey caught the scent of blood.

"Watch 'em," said Ab ghoulishly. "They'll rip each other's eyes out git-tin' to this meat. One of them owls'll eat up a whole woodchuck in a day."

The watcher's heart thumped and his brain raced. He wondered what a dozen of them would do to a human

body. His lips tightened as he stared at Ab Rowley. The bony man's face was warped by an insane grin. His eyes, sunken deep in their sockets, seemed to assume a greenish glow. Owl's eyes themselves.

Holt's blood jelled as he saw the old man toss a chunk of carrion into the cage. The owls screamed, ripped and beat with their claws. One tore a chunk out of the meat and gulped it. Its beak dripped red.

Justin Holt turned away. But Ab Rowley laughed with insane glee. Holt did not wait to see the rest. He returned to the house, his stomach revolted. An amused smirk rested on the Quale woman's gaunt face as she watched the detective draw a glass of water from the pump. She laughed a mirthless cackle.

"Ye didn't like it much," she rasped. "Nobody understands Ab. He lives with them owls. Talks to 'em like they was human. He had over two dozen of the critters up 'til a week ago. Somehow they got out. Ab—he went crazy when he seen that empty pen."

Holt's fingers shook and water spilled down his shirt front. Owls. Two dozen of them. Got out a week ago. The woman's words echoed in his brain.

"When was it Enoch got here?" he shot at her suddenly. "Ab said about a week—"

Her snag-like teeth snapped shut and the little eyes bored through Holt, straining at their sockets.

"So ye think Ab killed Enoch eh?" she thrust out abruptly. "Ol' Jonas said so, didn't he, Mr. Holt? Jonas is crazy. He—"

The detective eased himself into an antique chair and bit the end off a cigar.

"I didn't say Ab did it. It just seems strange—"

Suddenly he got up and went out. He crossed the mucky yard to where Ab Rowley was tossing the last chunk of woodchuck carrion into the pen with the owls. For the first time Holt saw the creatures close up.

They were huge birds, with evil, green eyes—shimmering discs in a

feathery ground. Screams and hisses came from them in the fight over the last morsel.

"Ye should have stayed," Ab said, eyes clouded with madness. "They fought like hell." He picked up a tool that leaned against the side of the pen and hooked it into a strand of wire that seemed loose. Drawing the wire taut, he hammered a nail deeper.

JUSTIN HOLT eyed that implement as Ab worked. It was a sort of adz. One end of the forged steel head tapered to a sharp point. The detective visualized that grinning skull out in the woods, the hole in the back of it. He was sure that he had found the weapon that had killed Enoch Garvey.

"That's a wicked-looking thing," he observed. "You could kill a man easy with the sharp end."

Ab Rowley stopped working, dropped the adz to the ground. He remained mute, his ghoulish eyes searching the detective's expressionless face.

"Reckon maybe ye could," he said at length, and ambled away, wiping his bloody fingers on the sides of his grimy overalls.

Back in the kitchen, Justin Holt eased himself into a chair beside the stove and watched Rowley wash his gory hands at the iron sink. Once Ab turned to Mrs. Quale, who sat on a broken-down couch, her arms folded across her flat chest.

"He thinks I kilt Enoch," the old man grinned, as though immensely pleased with himself.

Mrs. Quale sniffed.

"He's crazy. Everybody's crazy," she intoned expressionlessly.

Holt cut in then. "Mrs. Quale told me your owls got loose a week ago, Ab," he said. "Seems funny that Enoch was murdered about that time. Owls could eat a body up in a couple of days, couldn't they?"

Rowley whirled, face saturnine. "Ye think I turned 'em loose to feed on him, huh? Well, it's a damn lie! Somebody let 'em out on me. The staple was took out of the pen door. Ol' Jonas done it, I bet. We found

him wanderin' in the yard that night. He hates them owls. Hates 'em because I like 'em. It was him that—"

A stunned silence followed. A knock came at the door. The woman leaped to her feet.

"I'll see who 'tis," Ab said, and crossed the room.

Holt leaned forward in his chair. Ab Rowley opened the door and held up a lighted lantern. It revealed a man on the door sill looking in. He was tall, loose-jointed, clad in an ill-fitting brown suit. He carried a battered old suitcase.

"This you, Ab?" a husky voice spoke. "My name's Zach Garvey."

"Y-you Zach?" Ab Rowley gasped. "Why, I thought—ye look—"

Mrs. Quale also sounded startled.

"Ain't ye been here before?"

Zach stepped in, dropped his suitcase and looked around him.

"Nope, not for many years," he finally answered the woman. "Reckon you're the housekeeper, eh? Is Enoch still here?"

Nobody answered his query for a moment. Justin Holt saw that the man's hair was black when he doffed his hat.

"Yes, Enoch was here," Ab Rowley finally said. "Ye look a lot like 'im. Allus did." He paused, looking from Holt to Mrs. Quale. "Enoch's dead!"

"Wha-a-a-t?" Zach Garvey gasped. "Enoch? Why, down in the village they said he come here. How did he—?"

"Murdered," Holt said shortly.

Zach Garvey's bovine eyes flickered. "Who are you?"

Detective from Boston," Holt said easily.

"Murdered — Enoch!" Garvey breathed.

Justin Holt studied the man. His face was horsey, low-browed, loose-lipped. When he walked into the hall to hang his hat on a peg, the detective saw that he lumbered along with a simian gait. Mrs. Quale's eyes never left the man. They held a baffled expression. Only when Garvey asked for food did she reluctantly avert her gaze.

"You look a lot alike, you two,"

she said as she dumped greasy potatoes into a pan, "but Enoch—he was a might taller, I-guess. I'd swear you was Enoch when you stood there. He had on a dark blue suit an' black shoes, though. Place ain't changed much. Jonas has; him, he's dyin'." Her lips seemed to curl. "Seems like he's too stubborn to die. Ye better go an' see him."

Garvey nodded and involuntarily dug the fingers of his right hand into his left arm. "Funny, him sendin' for us. Drove us out once. Maybe his mind ain't right. But if it's his money he wants to talk about—"

HOLT'S eyes hardened at the callousness of the man.

"'Tain't right," Mrs. Quale rasped as Zach Garvey started for the stairs. "Belongs to Ab. Who's cared for him all these years? Ab! Not them wuthless nephews of his'n. Zack ain't changed none. Got worse if anythin'." Angrily she snatched up the butt of a disreputable black cigar that Zach had left on the edge of the table.

"I'd ought to git some of what he's got," protested Zach. "He can't just cut me off. I'm his brother. Reckon I ain't goin' to sit by an'—" His eyes were wolfish and his bony fingers clawed his lean shanks. An owl screeched and Ab's face underwent a metamorphosis.

"You should've seen 'em," he said to Mrs. Quale. "They was mad. Clawed each other when they smelled that bloody woodchuck meat. They never seem to git enough. Seen three of 'em flyin' over the barn t'day. Bet it was them as got out. Funny critters, them owls. I like to look in their eyes at night. Ye can see things there—"

Justin Holt was glad when Zach Garvey came back. The man's eyes were avid.

"Reckon he won't last long," he grinned, sitting down to his food. "Says he forgives me. Wants me to take the place an—"

Ab cursed and the detective thought his eyes turned green.

"When you're finished," Holt said, "we'll go and look at Enoch. We'd

better try to get him out of there."

"I got an ol' drag out in the barn," said Ab. "We'll put him on that."

"You ain't goin' to put him here?" Zach shot out. "I don't want to be around no dead man."

Later Ab went out and hitched an old nag to the drag. Holt and Garvey followed it down the rutted road. A thin mist wreathed the desolate place. Mosquitos were thick. As the men entered the woods an owl screamed. Over in the slime-choked pond a fish broke water. The sounds raked Justin Holt's nerves. A depressing silence ensued, broken only by the *clump, clump* of the horse's hoofs in the woods road. After awhile Ab Rowley stopped the animal.

"You seem to know just where to stop," Holt shot at him. "The body's across the fence."

"Yeah," Zach sneered. "Funny, ain't it Ab? You didn't want me and Enoch to have—"

"Reckon I know where the ferns grow thick," Rowley blazed. "That's where ye said, wa'n't it, Holt?"

The detective nodded. "That's so. Well, let's get it over."

It was a grisly task, wrapping what was left of Enoch Garvey in an old horse blanket. Holt and Rowley carried it to the drag.

"It's the clothes that stump me. I think I'll go and see if I can find them," said Holt.

Ab Howley's jaw dropped.

"I didn' think of that," he said. "Funny there wa'n't none on 'im. He was wearin' a blue—"

"I know," interposed the detective. He swept the trees about him with his flashlight.

Zach Garvey looked at old Rowley, eyes hard.

"Reckon it couldn't be only one man who done for Enoch," he said. "Wa'n't Jonas nor was it the woman."

"Don't ye look at me like that, ye rat," Ab screeched.

searched the woods for almost half an hour but no sign of the dead man's apparel was uncovered.

Finally Holt gave it up and waded through the profuse fern growth to the road. There was a possibility, he thought, that Garvey could have been killed far from the spot. His clothes stripped—at Rowley's? His thoughts were snarled as he followed the drag carrying the cadaver back to the old mill pond house. They put the remains in the old barn and went into the house.

"Enoch, all right," Zach said in answer to the question in Mrs. Quale's eyes as she looked up. "Tell by the hair."

"Jonas wants ye," she said to Holt.

The detective went upstairs. Jonas Rowley gripped his arm with gnarled, fleshless fingers. His voice was ghostly.

"You git out. It's an evil place, I tell ye. Them owls I been ahearin' 'em. It was the devils who killed Enoch. Ab starved 'em. They got out—"

Justin Holt knew that Jonas Rowley's mind was giving way fast. When he went downstairs again, he saw Zach Garvey and Ab Rowley sitting on opposite sides of the kitchen staring strangely at each other. Mrs. Quale quickly averted her eyes when the detective glanced at her.

"You'll sleep in the room with me," Holt addressed Ab Rowley. "I sleep lightly. I wouldn't try to get away. The thing that killed Enoch was that adz you've got out by the owl pen. I'm holding you for murder, Ab Rowley!"

Mrs. Quale's face drained of blood. A cry fell from her contorted, colorless lips.

"He didn't do it!"

Zach laughed mirthlessly.

"Look here, damn ye," Ab Rowley flamed, "ye ain't got no proof. Ye—"

"You took him out there and let the owls loose," the man from Boston went on relentlessly. "You knew they'd scent carrion after you'd starved them. You were going to get rid of that skeleton, too, when they'd cleaned it. Maybe that was what you

JUSTIN HOLT'S short hairs on his neck lifted. Rowley's piercing utterance reminded him of an owl's angry cry. The three men

Missing Page

An oil lamp was burning in the depths, so he snapped out the electric flash as he descended the steps.

The cellar was damp—dirt-floored. The decay of years emitted a fetid odor that stifled him. Holt walked through a heap of rotting vegetables, turned a corner and saw four cider barrels supported by a wooden rack. In front of them was a dark heap. The sickly light from a lamp played on Ab Rowley's cadaverous features.

The Boston detective knelt down, now completely disarmed, and placed a hand over the man's heart.

Ab was quite dead. His face was contorted. He had suffered horribly. A soiled empty glass had rolled about ten feet away from the corpse. Holt got up and recovered it. His nostrils caught a significant odor. Poison. In the bottom of the glass was a trace of sediment.

"Somethin' wrong?" Mrs. Quale called down the stairs. "Where are ye?"

Justin Holt went to the rickety stairs.

"Ab's dead," he said. "Looks as if he did himself in."

A croaking, "God help us!" came from the woman as she trod the stairs. She looked at the body of the owl man from a stony face. Holt's nerves quivered as he heard eerie screams from outside the house. Mrs. Quale looked at him.

"Reckon they know Ab's dead," she whispered huskily. "Listen to the racket they're makin'. He tol' me you'd never git him to a court-house. But I still don't think Ab done it. Ab hated them Garveys but he wouldn't—"

Someone moved overhead.

"What's goin' on?"

Zach Garvey came down into the cellar. The man wore no shoes and appeared to have dressed hurriedly. He stared at Ab Rowley's dead body, seemed bewildered as his eyes sought out Justin Holt.

"Who done it?" he snapped, turning toward Mrs. Quale. "By God, somebody tried to kill me awhile ago. Come into my room. It was either Ab or you—you old hellion! I'm

goin' to git out of here right away."

"Ab Howley drank poison with his cider," Holt said. "Looks as if he saw the game was up. Wonder where he got the stuff—cyanide—that's what it smelled like. Did you know he had it in the house, Mrs. Quale?"

The woman shook her head. "I never knowed he had it."

THE detective looked at Zach Garvey.

"Somebody tried to get you, too, did they? Where is your room? I want to look at it." He shot a stern glance at the housekeeper. "I guess somebody wanted to make a complete job of killing."

Holt followed Zach Garvey to his room. It was on the same side of the hall as Ab Rowley's. The room contained a rusty iron bedstead and an old dresser. Garvey's coat was thrown over a chair. His shoes were on the floor by the bed. All this the detective saw as he shifted his light from place to place about the room. Once he held the beam in one spot. There he saw something that caused his lips to tighten.

"It was either Ab or that she devil," Zach declared. "It was dark. Both of 'em would've killed me as soon as look at me."

"Well, it looks as though Ab won't kill anybody else," the detective said deliberately. He turned as Mrs. Quale came into the room.

"I just told Jonas," she said. "You better go see him, Mr. Holt. I don't think he's got long now."

Justin Holt felt revolted as he bent over Jonas Rowley in the sick man's room. The old man did not open his eyes for quite some time. Then his head rolled to one side and his feverish eyes opened. Recognition of the man sitting on the edge of the bed came into them.

"So Ab—he poisoned himself?" he whispered hoarsely.

Holt nodded, shot a glance at the door.

"Wait," he cautioned Rowley. He crossed the room, jerked the door open. But no one was there. When he returned to the bed, old Jonas said

to the detective, almost inaudibly: "What was it he used, Mr. Holt? Did—you find out?"

"I'm almost certain it was cyanide," the detective said in a whisper.

"F-funny," the doomed man husked. "Ab didn't know I had it in the house."

"What did you say?" Holt clipped. "Mr. Rowley, can you hear me?"

"I—got it to—poison rats." Jonas replied weakly. "Must be ten years ago. I hid what I didn't—use. Afraid Ab would—he hated me. It was in—a—coffee can—in an old vinegar barrel in the barn cellar. Me an' Enoch—or Zach—I forgit which—used it. We—"

"Then Ab was murdered!"

Jonas Rowley nodded his head feebly.

"You git out, Mr. Holt," he wheezed. "This is an evil place."

Holt left him and hurried down into the kitchen. The housekeeper appeared to be wracked with terror.

"Them owls!" she croaked. "They'll be the death of me, else drive me mad. Zach, you go let 'em out. Listen to 'em, Mr. Holt. They know—some-how—"

"Is there a way to get into the cellar besides that door?" the detective shot at Mrs. Quale.

"Of course—from outside," she replied.

HOLT looked at Zach Garvey. The man was in his shirt sleeves. His shoeless feet were braced against the stove hearth as he leaned back on two legs of his chair.

"When did Ab go down for a drink last?"

"About three hours ago," Mrs. Quale said. "While you was up with Jonas the first time."

"I see," Holt said thoughtfully, taking a chair near Zach. "That cider isn't poisoned. It was put in the glass."

"You seem to know a lot," the woman sniffed disdainfully.

"The glass was kept on the barrel," Holt went on. "Even in lamp light you couldn't see it very well. The glass looked like it never was washed.

A body could put crystals of cyanide in it—they would stick if you put a little cider in the bottom of the glass. Ab would pick it up and just fill it. He wasn't a very clean man. Yes, Ab Rowley was murdered."

"She done it, I bet," Zach gritted, eyes flashing toward Mrs. Quale. "She tried to kill me, too. With all of us gone, she could git Jonas' money. Ab kilt Enoch. She planned it with him, I bet. Then she tried to do the rest of us in."

Justin Holt smiled icily. He leaned forward in his chair. Before Zach Garvey could make a move, the detective had the man by the arm. He ripped Garvey's shirt to the elbow with his free hand. A long healing scar rising in an ugly welt was revealed on the man's arm. Zach cursed and wrenched himself loose.

"I saw a spot of blood on your shirt, Garvey," Holt accused him. "The same blood I got on my fingers tonight!"

Mrs. Quale uttered a cry and backed against the wall.

"Damn ye!" Zach cursed. "What you talkin' about? You tryin' to make out I—"

"Zach Garvey," Holt said relentlessly, "an owl did that to you. When you let 'em out a week ago!"

"I wa'n't here. I just got here tonight. I cut that arm on barb wire." The man's tanned face was blanching as he jerked the words out tremulously.

"You came here a week ago as Enoch Garvey," Holt said deliberately as though he were reading the tale from a printed page. His gun was in his hand now. "Enoch never set foot in this house. I wondered when you went out in the hall and put that hat on the rack. How did you know that rack was there? The wood is new, unpainted. Evidently it hasn't been there long. You've been away more than ten years, yet you could walk right to that—"

"It was always there! I just—" Zach's eyes seemed terror-ridden.

"It's a lie," the woman said. "Ab put it up only a month ago. There never was none there before. I

thought he looked like the same man who was here. You can't tell about brothers, though."

"That's right," Holt said. "Don't move, Zach. Mrs. Quale is right. I've seen brothers whom no one could tell apart unless they were seen at the same time. Together, there's a difference. You figured that out, Zach. You have black hair, too. You made another mistake, Zach. When I found that body early tonight you were watching me from behind a tree. You stepped on a toadstool—a big mushy one. Some of it is still on your shoe upstairs."

Zach Garvey's body twitched at every word the detective uttered. His quivering lips had lost their sneer.

"Y-you can't prove all that," he said desperately.

"You got here first," Holt went on. "You knew Old Jonas was going to leave you and Enoch money. But you were greedy. You saw a chance to get it all. You knew when Enoch was coming, and you told Granby you'd be delayed in getting here. But you hurried up here the day before Enoch was expected, and pretended to be Enoch!"

"You knew Ab hated his brother. You also knew about Ab's owls. So when you went out, you got that adz and went down into the woods. You stayed there until Enoch came up the road—the only way in here. When you killed him you stripped his body of his clothes. Hid them somewhere. Then you came back, replaced the weapon. When you let those owls out, one clawed your arm. You lived here once. So you knew these owls around here. They'll eat a lot of meat in a day."

MRS. QUALE covered her face with her hands.

"God!" she whispered, terror-ridden. "I remember that night. Ab got up and went out when he heard the owls screaming."

"You knew Ab would be suspected," Holt said accusingly. "He wouldn't have a chance. You waited a week before you came back here in different clothes. Enoch's clothes. And by that time you naturally had

figured Enoch's body would be mutilated beyond identification!"

"It's a lie," Zach Garvey croaked. "A lie!" He wiped sweat from his face, striving to hide the guilt in his eyes.

"But it was Jonas Rowley who pinned it on you for keeps, Zach," Holt said grimly.

"The old man?" Zach gasped. "How could he—?"

"That cyanide. He got it ten years ago. Ab didn't know where it was," the detective went on. "Jonas said you or Enoch helped him poison rats with it. He couldn't remember which one of you it was. Then he hid it in the vinegar barrel in the barn cellar. It had to be you, Zach Garvey, because only the one who knew where it was got it out tonight!"

The man's whole body was seized with a horrible trembling. Craven terror covered his face like a mask. He seemed to sense the futility of further denial.

"Y-yeah, I k-killed Enoch," he blurted out. "I had to get Ab. When you was upstairs with the old man, he kept lookin' at me. Staring at me with that ugly grimace on his face. I was afraid he knew it was me who come that first time. I had to kill the old devil. He kept askin' me things—why I kept feeling of my arm. Yeah, it was me that tried to strangle you when you was asleep, damn you!" He seemed to take an insane pride in his work now. I made out somebody tried to git me too, to cover up. Thought you'd blame it on Ab, and think he committed suicide after."

Holt looked grim.

"And when I proved Ab was murdered, you tried to pin it on Mrs. Quale. Pretty thin, Zach. I suspected you, but had to get more proof. You're short on brains, Zach. Instead of being content with half of old Jonas' money, you'll get a rope instead!"

From outside came the scream of an owl. As the harsh notes died, there sounded the far-off howl of a dog.

Justin Holt looked out of the window over the slimy pond. Nothing moved out there. The night had be-

come deathly still. Again the far-off canine ululation jangled the detective's nerves. The owls made a frightful clatter again—screeched like souls in torment. Zach Garvey, eyes clouded with stark terror, jerked out of his chair.

"Take me out of here!" he cried hoarsely. "Out of here! Them damn owls. If they git loose— I killed Ab. They know—" The man's eyes were wild.

MRS. QUALE went upstairs. A few moments later she entered the kitchen, face grave.

"Jonas—he's dead," she said solemnly. "There's a strange smile on his face, Mr. Holt. Like he was pleased about somethin'."

Justin Holt felt his scalp tingle.

"Yeah, I think I know why. He knew, maybe, that if he brought these two nephews together—where Ab was—that—" The detective pawed his eyes and got up. He looked out of the window. The first streaks of dawn were visible in the eastern sky. Even those, he thought, had a leprous tinge. "Have you got an old rig, Mrs. Quale?"

"Yes."

"Hitch it up. Go down into Goffton and get word to the authorities. Tell them to bring out three pine boxes. I'll wait here—with Zach. But hurry back. I want to get the taste of this place out of my mouth. What a night!"

As the woman hurried out, drawing a shawl around her shoulders, Justin Holt added in an undertone: "Old Jones was right. It's an evil place."

He went over to his prisoner and tied his hands behind his back with strong clothes-line. The man gave no resistance now. He seemed to have sunk into a stupor and mumbled and muttered like the demented creature he was.

When Mrs. Quale clattered out of the yard in an antiquated wagon, Holt went out to the owl pen and ripped the door of it loose. He shuddered as the voracious birds flew out, making hellish sounds as they headed for the deep woods.

"I guess that wipes everything clean," the detective murmured, as he trudged back to the house through the filth of the yard. "At least as clean as this place could ever be."

NEXT MONTH'S HEADLINERS



BLACK MOONLIGHT, by G. T. Fleming-Roberts

VENGEANCE OF THE SNAKE-GOD, By James Duncan

BLOOD OF GOLD, by Wayne Rogers

THE TWISTED MEN, by Hugh B. Cave



EVERY ONE A THRILLER!

A Blood-mad Fiend Makes an Unholy Alliance With
the Flesh-eating Denizens of the Deep!



He stared at the thing in the chair

The CRIMSON POOL

By JACK D'ARCY

Author of "The Voice from Hell," "The Madhouse Murders," etc.

AVARICE does strange things to the soul of man. A consuming desire to amass gold, gold refined in the suffering of humanity, poisons the heart, sends strange toxins to the mind which turn it from the lucid path of sanity. True, money brings happiness, power; but sometimes it carries in its wake madness and devastation.

Jasper Gaylord was possessed of two overwhelming passions. One of these was gold; the other ichthyology. For years he had reigned as a tycoon in Wall Street, using every means, legal and otherwise, to accumulate a mighty fortune. He had made and lost millions in his day. But now that day was fast drawing to a close.

His interest in fish was an odd, in-

explicable one. His associates who had often contributed to his fortune through no volition of their own, hinted that this interest was perhaps predicated on consanguinity. Undoubtedly this was malice, though it was apparent to even the most casual eye that Jasper Gaylord most certainly possessed piscatorial characteristics.

His eyes bulged from their sockets, blue, blank and watery marbles devoid of all human expression. His jowls, flabby and scaly-like, hung down at the side of his face like gills. His hands were invariably clammy, cold. It had been said of Jasper Gaylord that if his sire were Mammon, a mermaid was his dam.

He lived in a habitation which was well suited to him. It was a bleak and desolate old house, standing weather beaten and unpainted beyond the farthest suburb of the Metropolis. As ugly within as it was without, the only freshness and beauty about the place was the presence of his ward, Helen Summers.

In the basement of the old mansion the walls were lined with glass tanks. In their depths swam myriad fish. Fish of all colors; of all species. This aquarium was the pride of Jasper Gaylord. Only the swelling numbers of his bank account brought a greater glow of achievement to his heart.

There was an atmosphere about that house, an atmosphere at once gloomy and unholy. Impossible to explain in any reasonable way, it somehow seemed to seep through the weather-beaten shingles, to rise like a cloud of evil from that basement where the fishy prototypes of Jasper Gaylord himself swam endlessly in their transparent prisons.

PERHAPS it emanated from a point even lower than the basement. Perhaps it came from that dark subterranean vault below the aquarium, of which Jasper Gaylord alone had knowledge.

On this, a depressing March day, Jasper Gaylord sat alone in his library. Without, the eerie howl of the wind wailed miserably. The ham-

mering gusts beat like invisible wings against the boards of the ancient house. And the tempest outside was emulated in the heart of Jasper Gaylord.

His eyes resembled those of a fish more than ever at this moment—those of a fish about to be taken on the fisherman's hook. Nervously, his teeth clamped down on a cigar. A worried frown corrugated his brow. Unconsciously the evil thing that was in his brain contorted his face into a mask of unholiness.

He started as the telephone jangled at his side. His old yellowish hand snatched up the receiver. His voice, cracked and dry, echoed oddly in the huge, book-lined room.

"Hello? Yes. No, she's not here. I don't know. In an hour. All right."

He grunted as he replaced the receiver on the hook. He jammed out the glowing tip of his cigar in a hammered silver ash tray. Then a grim and resolute expression crossed his ugly face. Purposefully he rose and left the room. Down, down he went to the basement and beyond, like a shadowy doomed soul descending into Hades.

Larry Miller drove thoughtfully through the grey day toward the old Gaylord house. His face was set and stern, and a cloud of worry masked the sparkling youthfulness of his eyes.

It was he who had spoken a scant hour ago to Jasper Gaylord on the telephone.

Now he was proceeding on his way to the house to see the girl whom he loved more than life itself. But much as he loved her he hated the atmosphere in which she lived.

He was suspicious of Jasper Gaylord, mistrusted him. Even now he knew through his newspaper connection that Gaylord was on the eve of being investigated by the Government for stock dealing activities which it was believed had transgressed the law.

For months now he had pleaded with Helen to leave the house, to elope with him and forget the lonely

years she had spent as the ward of Jasper Gaylord.

But she had demurred. In two months now she would attain her majority. Then she would come into wealth of her own. Despite his faults she insisted that in his own peculiar way Jasper had been kind to her. She would repay that kindness by remaining with him for two months longer.

Larry Miller's face grew graver as he thought of these things. The stern lines about his eyes did not relax until some two hundred yards from the house, he caught sight of Helen strolling slowly along toward the Gaylord mansion.

He hailed her gayly, and she climbed into the car with him. She shivered as she pulled her coat around her shoulders.

"It's cold," she said. "I'm cold, Larry. Inside and out."

He glanced at her inquiringly.

"That's a strange speech," he said. "What do you mean?"

A little shudder ran through her. "I don't know. Perhaps someone just walked across my grave." She laughed nervously. "I don't know, Larry. I've felt this way all day. Felt as if something terrible was happening. Or about to happen."

He put one arm around her and pressed her shoulder.

"It's that damned house," he said. "That and old fish-face. The combination's enough to give anyone the horrors."

She shook her head as if to clear her brain of unpleasant thoughts.

"Well," she said. "I'm glad you're here. Don't let's talk about it any more."

In silence they drove toward the house.

TOGETHER they stood on the threshold of the library. In a far corner, amidst expensive volumes, Jasper Gaylord sat in his favorite arm chair. The room was illuminated by a single bridge lamp near the door. Gaylord sat still and quiet, his head slumped forward in the chair, his hands lying inert on the padded arms.

"Hello, Uncle Jasper," greeted the girl. "Dressed for dinner already?"

As she spoke Larry Miller was aware of an odd flicker of apprehension in his heart. The breath was suddenly cold in his nostrils as he sensed the clammy presence of death. Gaylord's white shirt front gleamed snowy in the dim light. A little inexplicable shudder trickled like icy water down Miller's spine.

"Good evening, Mr. Gaylord," he said courteously. "How are—"

He never finished the sentence. Helen had preceded him into the room. She walked across the polished floor toward the recumbent figure. Then of a sudden she stopped short. The color drained itself from her face. Her mouth opened. A scream of inhuman horror ripped from her ashen lips.

In an instant Miller was at her side. His right arm encircled her protectively. His gaze followed the direction indicated by her trembling fingers. He stared at the thing in the chair, and his stomach was suddenly empty.

For there sat a horrible thing which once had been a man. A fleshless face stared up at him. Hollow, unseeing eye sockets met his gaze. Two bony members which had once been hands lay unmoving on the arms of the chair.

Miller licked dry lips and moved toward the thing. He bent over it. Not an iota of flesh remained on the grinning skull. The bones were white and meatless, picked clean as if by a flock of hungry buzzards.

But on the neck, beneath the incongruous collar of the stiff-bosomed shirt, white skin showed itself. Miller scrutinized the body more slowly. Save for the face and hands the corpse was normal. But these had been picked clean.

Skin and tissue had been stripped from the bones, leaving the ghastly framework of the man himself. On the middle finger of the left hand there was a signet ring.

Carved into the metal were the initials J. G. Beneath the gold was a red hamburger-like piece of flesh

which had not been torn from the bone. A faint red stain was apparent on the bone of that finger.

The girl's voice beat into his ears.

"Larry! It's Uncle Jasper! What has happened to him? It's horrible! It's ghastly! Oh, what shall we do? What—"

Miller, his face set and grim, put his arm about her once more. Firmly he turned her away from the terrible thing in the chair. Gently he propelled her toward the door. He slammed the library door shut as they passed the threshold. He helped her to a chair in the hallway.

"There," he said. "Take it easy, dear. He's dead, and we can't do anything about that. I'll phone the police right away. Everything'll be all right."

Helen Summers buried her face in her hands. Her slim shoulders shook slightly as Larry Miller picked up the telephone at the other side of the foyer. For a long moment there was no answer. Then, as he manipulated the hook to summon the operator an acrid, repulsive odor assailed his nostrils.

Startled, he glanced at the girl. He breathed deeply. Then, his sense of smell offended by the scent, he exhaled again. His heart picked up a beat. The room was redolent of the biting odor of burning flesh.

A CLOUD of invisible miasma seemed to seep through the wood of the floor at his feet. Now the smell grew stronger, more sickening. The girl looked up at him. She wrinkled her nose.

"What's that, Larry?" she asked through her tears. "What's that unpleasant smell?"

He did not tell her what it was. The blood was beating through his pulses. He handed her the telephone.

"Take that, darling," he said. "I can't get the operator. Get a call through to the police. I'm going downstairs a moment."

Her blue eyes dilated. "What for?"

"That smell. It's peculiar. It seems to come from the basement."

She took the phone reluctantly.

"Don't go, Larry. Don't leave me."

But a grim resolution was in his heart. He was aware of an impelling desire to get to the bottom of this ghastly mystery.

"I'll only be a moment. You'll be all right. The police will be here almost immediately after you get them. Courage, darling."

She took the telephone from his hand. Her slim white finger banged the hook up and down as Larry Miller strode purposefully toward the stairs which led to the aquarium below.

As he descended the stone steps which led into the basement, the searing odor of the burning flesh became more pronounced. Once it seemed to Miller that he heard a distant cry, as if of a human being suffering dire agonies. As he stepped into the tank-lined cellar the oppressive air of the old house grew stronger.

Carefully he glanced about the room. The lithe bodies of the fish swished gracefully up against the sides of the tanks. But there was no sign of human habitation. Slowly Larry Miller walked around the room.

His foot struck against something unyielding and metallic. He stumbled, then glanced down at the floor. He was standing directly before the tank which contained the *amphioxus*. Usually a small rug covered the floor before this tank. But now he noted it had been jerked aside.

Beneath its usual place there was a trap door—a trap door which was now slightly ajar. It protruded a half inch above the level of the floor. It was against this that he had stubbed his shoe.

For an instant he hesitated. Should he pull open the trap and descend into Heaven only knew what fiendish hell, leaving the girl upstairs unattended? Or— He reached down and seized the metal ring of the trap. The police would be here in a moment, he decided. There was little actual danger for Helen.

The trap door dropped into place over his head. At the foot of the stone steps down which he was walk-

ing he saw a dim ray of light. His heart beat like a trip hammer against his breast. Yet he walked boldly into the subterranean depths.

As he reached the foot of the stairway he heard a sinuous swishing sound. The splashing of stirring water reached his ears. Dimly through the pale green light he made out a small square room, in the center of which stood a zinc tank. He blinked quickly, accustoming his eyes to the sickly light.

Then a shuffling footfall rammed itself into his consciousness. He glanced up, stared across the small chamber, then uttered an involuntary cry of stark and utter horror.

For there, staring at him with his fishy eyes, malevolent agate marbles of hate, stood the ghost of Jasper Gaylord!

Miller stared at him, the pupils of his eyes dilating. The features into which he gazed were horribly contorted. Pain had etched its mark agonizingly upon that face. Then as Miller's gaze traveled over the body they came to rest on the figure's left hand.

It was fleshless!

BONY and bare as had been the hand of the corpse he had discovered in the library a short while before, the member hung eerily at the side of the body. The green light gleamed horribly on the inert bone.

Miller found his voice. As it emerged from his almost paralyzed vocal cords, it was dry and possessed of an alien sound.

"Who are you?" he shouted hoarsely. "Is that you, Gaylord? Or is it some damned thing from the grave?"

A terrible chuckle came from the thing's throat. It crashed into Miller's ears with the off key rattle of death.

"It is you who go to the grave," said the figure. "It is you who must die."

The voice floated through the air, and came to Miller's consciousness, thick with pain. It had some resemblance to the mortal tones of Jasper Gaylord. But it was heavier, thicker,

the voice of a man who is undergoing untold suffering.

The figure shuffled nearer.

"It was death to come down here," it said. "You have walked into your tomb."

The right hand, the good hand of the thing moved, seemed to touch the pocket of his coat, then came to view again. There was nothing supernatural about the article it held in its hand. It was an exceedingly mundane revolver.

Miller felt a sensation of relief come over him. No matter what the danger might be at this moment, at least he was dealing with a material thing. A ghost would not resort to an automatic.

The shadow that once had been Jasper Gaylord jerked his head in the direction of the eastern wall.

"Get in there," he said in the same eerie, terrible voice.

Miller turned his head. On the side of the wall he saw two iron cages resembling tiny prison cells. In one of them he saw a crumpled heap lying on the floor behind the iron bars. The second one was empty. It was toward this that the ghastly one-handed thing before him had pointed.

With a swift beating heart, Miller obeyed the order. He stepped into the cell. A moment later the door clanged shut behind him. He heard the rasping of metal upon metal as the bolt was shot.

The fiend then swung open the door of the second cell. He lifted the heap that was a man to its feet and dragged it across the floor to the edge of the zinc tank. A horrible chuckle emanated from his lips as he did so.

MILLER pressed his face against the cold metal bars. In his heart was a surging horror. What he was about to witness he did not know, but he knew deep down within him that it would be a ghastly ritual, a black act of horror.

The victim stirred uneasily as he was pulled to the tank's side. Again the fiend in the shape of Jasper Gaylord laughed a mirthless laugh. His

blue, burning eyes stared for a moment at Miller's white face.

"Watch," he said. "For this also is the death you die. The death of the unidentified. You have blundered here into a room of doom. You shall suffer the fate of the others."

With a strength surprising in one of his apparent age, the one-handed thing lifted up the body of his human sacrifice. For a single moment the man opened his eyes. He stared dully at his torturer.

It seemed to Miller the victim was under the influence of some drug. His eyes were glazed and blank. The strength seemed to have been sapped from his muscles.

He stared at the fleshless hand which lay resting on the side of the tank. He glanced into the tank, then turned wide eyes to the fiend who held him.

"No, no!" he screamed. "Not that! Not that! Why must you kill me? I did as you ordered. I shall never betray your secret. I did all you asked me. I—"

A dry mocking sound ripped from the grey lips of the one-handed wraith of him who had once been Jasper Gaylord.

"No one shall betray me," it said. "I shall take care that there is no one left alive who can betray me."

His bony fingers hovered in the air for a moment, then dove, and seized the other's wrist. They held it firm for a moment, then, with an amazing strength, plunged it deep into the tank.

Again Miller heard the soft splashing of water against the sides of the tank. Again he was aware of that soft swishing sound as if of a thousand stirring, writhing bodies in the water.

Then there came to his ears the most terrible sound that he had ever heard. The tortured victim of the fiend uttered a scream. It was no ordinary scream. It seemed to have issued from no human throat.

Awful agony was in that scream, a myriad inexpressible, ineffable sufferings were carried in that voice. The mocking laughter of the torturer

came a soft evil obligato to the other's shrieking.

Miller's face strained against the bars of his prison. Standing on tip-toe, his eyes straining, he essayed to peer into the interior of the tank. What terrible thing was there? What awful beastly thing which tore the living flesh of men from their bones?

Savagely the one-handed thing withdrew the other's hand from the tank. Miller saw the whiteness of the man's bones. His member had been completely stripped of flesh. His other hand was plunged into the tank. Now his screams grew fainter, but the awful horror in his voice remained.

Miller could hear a steady gnashing as if some gnawing rodent was eating away the human flesh. Of a sudden he saw the torturer loosen his grip on the dying man. He seized him by the throat, and with a mighty jerk forced his head into the tank.

The swishing, the splashing of the water sounded like a thousand maddened mill pools. The gnashing, the gnawing, became increased in volume. The screams no longer ripped through the room.

Then of a sudden the body was jerked back from the hell that lived in that zinc tank. That which had once been a man was flung violently to the floor. Miller looked at the body with rising fear and horror in his heart.

It was a replica of the thing he had found in the library a few moments before. Save for the hands and face, it was a man. But where the fingers and the features should have been, there was nothing save bleached bone, stripped of everything, white and barren like a desert of the moon.

THE hateful figure of Gaylord turned and advanced toward the cell in which Miller was locked. A sadistic, murderous light shone in his eyes.

"And you," he said as he approached. "You alone stand between me and the thing I desire. You, too, shall make the acquaintance of my friends."

Larry Miller's brain was working

at top speed. He had no doubt now that this terrible creature was surely Jasper Gaylord. Jasper Gaylord not dead, but imbued with a bloody madness that would feast on his, Miller's own flesh.

In spite of himself the flesh crawled at the base of his spine. He could still hear that ominous swishing sound which emanated from the tank. It seemed to presage some terrible disaster, to give an evil hint of the terrible, the iniquitous thing that dwelt in the tank.

Gaylord, his face still wreathed with agony, but with a horrible blue light in his eyes, the light of flat, dead steel, took a key and inserted it in the lock of Miller's cell. Once again he took the revolver from his pocket.

He held it by the muzzle and raised it shoulder high. Miller drew back, but the narrow confines of the cell would not permit him to retreat out of range of the madman's club. He saw the murderous intent too clearly now.

He would be stunned by a blow on the head, then dragged toward the awful death of the tank. The maniac moved closer.

Then Miller heard the sound of a soft footfall on the stairway. His heart stood still.

A voice, Helen's voice, spoke nervously:

"Larry! Larry, are you here? I was so afraid up there."

Larry Miller's throat was dry. Fear ate at his heart. He lifted his voice in a terrible cry.

"Helen! Go back! Go back at once! For God's sake hurry!"

But the warning was too late. With a feral snarl the bestial thing before him raced toward the stairway, its white fleshless hand dangling frightfully at its side.

The girl saw the gaunt apparition approaching. She reeled, cried out in horror.

The madman reached out and seized her slim body in his arms. He swung her clear of the stairway. Shrieking madly, he raced to the tank's edge. "You, too," he said. "This is a room

of death. Who comes here must die. I shall keep my secret."

His savage hand, possessed with the strength of demons, held her fast, despite her struggles. He ripped the fabric of her dress, exposing the white skin of her shoulders. Her screams rang like protesting insane bells against the ears of Larry Miller.

Madly he crashed the weight of his body up against the bars of his cell. Then, of a sudden, he remembered the key which remained in the lock. As usual on such doors, there was a square piece of metal guarding the keyhole.

Miller jammed his hand through the bars. His finger tips touched the edge of the piece of metal that alone could release him.

At the edge of the zinc tank Helen struggled violently, her piercing screams ripping the air. Gaylord grunted savagely. He swung her free of the floor, lifted her high above the tank. His horrible cracked laugh sounded through the chamber of evil.

"Here, my little friends. Here is another one."

Miller's fingers, bleeding from abrasions, touched the end of the key. Desperately he screwed his hand around. The bolt shot back. As he charged from his cell he could hear the sinister swishing sound again as of thousands of hungry writhing bodies churning the water.

SHOUTING madly, he bore down upon the fiend.

Gaylord, alarmed by the sound, turned abruptly. He saw the white-faced Miller charging down like a Nemesis upon him. The girl's shriek died away. She went limp in his arms.

Miller reached out. His hands tugged at the girl's arm. With another ghastly utterance the madman let her go. His hand dropped to his pocket, seeking the automatic he had used before.

Swiftly Miller lay the girl upon the floor. His right fist shot out, and sank deep in the gill-like jowls of the fiend. Gaylord staggered backward. As he did so his fingers constricted on the

trigger of his weapon. A roaring burst of flame stabbed into the dim room.

A bullet whined its way over Miller's head. Again Gaylord raised the gun. Again Miller's two fists hammered into the fiend's face, a pistol-like tattoo that sent the evil killer reeling up against the side of the tank.

For a moment he tottered there at the edge, then of a sudden he lost his balance. His hands reached out into the empty air. He uttered a piercing shriek, then he tumbled with a flat splash into the water. Even as he was submerged his terrible death cry rang in Miller's ears.

Miller leaned breathless up against the side of the tank. The swishing sound rammed itself into his ears once again. There was a mighty stirring in the water which was swiftly turning to crimson.

Gaylord's head appeared above the water. His face was a terrible thing to behold. Fear glazed his eyes. An awful terror was upon him. Agony was stamped indelibly upon his face.

The water was now a churning red wine. Something leaped from the tank and affixed itself to Gaylord's face. Miller heard a steady crunching sound, and to his horror, saw a strip of flesh ripped from Gaylord's face. The madman's scream was drowned in the bubbling cauldron of blood and water. Gaylord's face disappeared beneath the surface never to rise again save as a fleshless skeleton.

Heavy footfalls sounded on the stairs. Half a dozen men rushed into the room. Revolvers were in their hands. Miller turned to meet them.

"Hands up!" snapped one of them. "We're the law."

"It's all right," said Miller, and the sound of his own voice was odd in his ears. "It was I who sent for you."

He bent down and assisted the girl to her feet. Her face was white as the bones which would soon be taken from the tank. But her eyes were open. She was conscious.

"What's wrong?" asked the policeman. "Who the hell put that damned thing in the library upstairs?"

Miller indicated the red waters of the tank.

"The man that did that," he said, "has suffered the same fate himself."

A TALL grey-haired man walked slowly up to the tank's edge.

"I'm Inspector Raynor," he said. He glanced into the tank. "Good God!" he ejaculated. "Is that a man in there?"

"It was," said Miller gravely.

"Who?"

"Jasper Gaylord."

"Gaylord. Then that's not he upstairs?"

Miller shook his head.

"Those fish," he said, pointing to the terrible things in the tank. "They're *piranhas*. I recognized them at once—knew them because of an interview I had recently with a celebrated ichthyologist who claimed to have the only one in captivity. I saw it—it was explained to me. The deadliest thing in the water. They eat flesh with a speed and voracity unequalled among carnivores. I saw Gaylord kill a man in that tank ten minutes ago. He held his victim's face and hands in there till all the flesh was eaten away. It seemed a matter of seconds."

"God!" said the Inspector in horror. "Then that's what he must have done to that thing upstairs."

"Exactly," said Miller with a shudder. "And it's what he intended to do to me and to his ward here."

Helen dabbed a handkerchief at her tear stained face.

"But why?" she asked in a tremulous tone. "Why?"

"I can answer some of that question," said the Inspector. "There was a Federal warrant out for Gaylord. He stood to get twenty years for his stock exchange crooked practises. He knew it was coming. I sent a man out here this afternoon to serve the warrant. He hasn't reported back to me yet.

"Furthermore, the Federal men were keeping an eye on Lane, Gaylord's business associate. I understood that he was due here this afternoon. He was supposed to be con-

verting everything they had into cash so that Gaylord could make a getaway. But still that doesn't explain all this horror at all."

Larry Miller's mind had been working at top speed. His eyes narrowed.

"Wait a minute," he said slowly. "Things begin to tie up in my mind. Gaylord kept this subcellar full of those damned *piranhas*. No one knew of these vicious pets of his. He was boasting of that secret and that no one should live who ever learned it. If he intended to run out on the indictment, it would have been a good idea for him to pretend to be dead. Then the hunt would cease. Do you see it?"

Raynor gasped. A frown wrinkled his brow.

"You mean," he said, "that Gaylord fed my man who came here to serve the warrant, fed him to the damned fish, removing all facial identification?"

Miller nodded. "Exactly," he said. "We, of course, took the dead thing for Gaylord. It was dressed in his clothes, wore his ring, and sat in his library. It was a natural conclusion. Gaylord apparently was dead; the hunt would stop—at least long enough for Gaylord to make his getaway."

Raynor shuddered. "God!" he said. "What a way to die. And the second man," he went on slowly, "must have been Lane. Gaylord did not intend to trust even him with his secret."

"Right," said Miller. "He kept repeating that no one should know his secret. That's why he tried to kill us."

Raynor stared with horrified eyes at the tank. Now the sinister swishing had ceased. The *piranha* had stripped the flesh from another skeleton. Then rested, somnolent at the bottom of the pool. The water cleared somewhat. It was still red.

Raynor pointed suddenly to the pool.

"Look!" he cried. "Look!"

THEIR eyes followed the direction indicated by his outstretched arm. There glittering at the bottom of the pool was an oblong metal badge. It was obviously a police shield.

"It was White's," said Raynor, a tremor in his voice. "Gaylord must have dropped the badge in his pocket when he changed clothes with him. It's left down there with the skeleton. Something his damned fish couldn't eat."

Miller nodded gravely. "He was a madman," he said in a low voice. "That burned flesh I smelled, the odor that brought me down here. Look at that."

He pointed to an iron poker lying on the floor near the tank. Its end glowed dully.

"One of his fish got Gaylord, too," went on Miller. "Gnawed the flesh from his hand while he was engaged in killing one of his victims. To prevent himself from bleeding to death, he cauterized the wound himself. He must have suffered agonizing pain. Yet he bore up under it."

Miller felt the girl shudder beneath his encircling arm.

"Come," he said, "let's get out of here."

Slowly they mounted the stairs, leaving behind them forever the fleshless skeleton of the man who had suffered the death which he had intended for them. Behind them the police, calloused to blood and evil, to the iniquity of humanity, could not restrain a shudder as they took their last look at the crimson pool wherein lay the bones of the fiend who had nurtured the fiends of the deep for his private death trap.

Spine-Chilling Stories by James Duncan, Arthur J. Burks, H. M. Appel, Jack Williamson, Robert E. Howard, Jack D'Arcy and Many Others in Coming Issues of THRILLING MYSTERY

Grim Terror Faced Her in that Horrible

TORTURE TOWER

By MORT WEISINGER

Author of "Money's Worth," "Rope Enough," etc.



SCARLET rage wavered before Elva Stuart's eyes as she stared glassily at the megalomaniac before her. Her face was a mask of colored wax. She swayed uncertainly against the wall of the small torture chamber and clutched frenziedly at her silk scarf as Dr. Cronin, the madman, came toward her, his eyes black beads that glittered with evil hardness.

He seized hold of the fettered guide who had come with her to the castle in the country. His laughter rose in a gust of fiendish glee. "Now you will see what happens to those who defy me," he said. "He will die the same way as the others!"

Moving swiftly, the madman pressed a hidden button somewhere on the massive door before him. Instantly the door was studded with rows of needle-sharp spikes which gleamed horribly. Suddenly Elva grasped the whole diabolic scheme. This was how the others had been killed—most of them acquaintances of Dr. Cronin. Their bodies had been found outside the castle, frightfully gouged with some sharp instrument. No wonder the police could not find the murder weapon in the castle—the spikes were ingeniously concealed in the door—to be ready at the pressure of a finger.

Even as she was thinking, the doomed guide was being slowly, inexorably thrust into the space behind the door. The fiend pushed the door

against the man's body with brutal strength, stopping halfway. The guide lunged in one last desperate attempt, and jerked still with a ghastly shriek of pain. The sharp spikes had penetrated his side. The blood gushed hotly over the ripping iron. The thirsty spikes hemmed in again, impinging on flesh at every point.

Again the door crushed inward, every razor-edge of the spikes drinking blood. The spikes dug deeper.

A thousand sears of sharpest agony lanced over the man's body. The sweat poured from his agonized brow, ran down to mingle its saltiness with the blood. Deeper, deeper, remorselessly, by imperceptible gradations, ripping in with furious avidity. A great scream tore through bluing lips, went crashing with thunderous echoes through the dungeon. . . .

DR. CRONIN turned away from the dead guide and faced the stunned girl. There was a swirl of horror in her brain, fighting a nausea that retched her stomach.

"I killed him for—pleasure—you might say," he said in a mirthless laugh. "The others who were killed: some were my enemies—some I killed for sport." The madman's lips narrowed in a grim line. "I lured you here, telling you I wanted to buy that jade amulet your father left you. You have it on your person—and I want it! Now get this," he went on fiercely, "if you give me the amulet, I'll let you choose a painless death. Otherwise—the spikes. I'm going to close the door of this room. I'll be back in ten minutes. If you're ready
(Continued on Page 126)

THE FIEND OF

A Complete Novelette

By RAY

Author of "World of Doom,"

CHAPTER I

A Cry in the Night

I CAST aside the newspapers which I had been pondering all the way up from New York City on this 7.30 train which would land me at the little town of Sleepy Hollow at 10 P.M. I must say this assignment had no appeal for me—body-guard, you might say, for Sleepy Hollow's only millionaire family.

A fiend in human form prowling these lonely wooded hills . . . The police balked . . . The first murder a week ago—the body of old R. P. Morton, retired millionaire, found on the grounds of his Sleepy Hollow estate—the head wrenched from the body, evidently by a fiend of superhuman strength. And now, last night, the body of one Peter Green, found on a path at the edge of the village—the head wrenched from the body, evidently by a fiend of superhuman strength.

Even allowing for the usual newspaper exaggeration, the blood-chilling thing had set me shuddering. No wonder this Morton family was terrified tonight and wanted a body-guard.

"Sleepy Hollow! Last stop—Sleepy Hollow!"

I shoved the newspapers to the floor and stared out of the car window. It was a gloomy, overcast night. The train was winding slowly through wooded hills. Then it whistled, slackened and stopped. A small group of lights disclosed a wooden platform, a



*I swung, my finger on the trigger
of the gun*

A Creature Accursed Discovers a Magic

SLEEPY HOLLOW

of Gruesome Thrills

CUMMINGS

"Girl in the Golden Atom," etc.

little station, a few somnolent streets of dispirited straggling buildings.

The two or three people who got off the train stared at me as though a stranger was an enormous event. Lugging my suitcase, I inquired and found the only brick building in the village—the Town Hall, which was also the police station and the jail.

The constable had not yet gone to bed. "Sit down," he said. "You're a reporter? I haven't got anything much. The police of Cartersville, that's our county seat, fifteen miles west—they got this in charge—"

"I'm a private detective," I said. "George Halton—I'm the son of the Halton & Son Agency, New York City. We had a call this afternoon from John Morton. His secretary, Phillip Ober, telephoned. Then my father and I talked with Morton. I'm hired to come up here and live with them for a while. Sort of bodyguard. I guess they're pretty well scared."

THIS constable wasn't the usual type of hick policemen. He was a youngish fellow, and evidently not a bit dumb.

"Scared?" he said. "Well, I would not blame 'em—"

"Me either. What's this Morton family like? I don't know a thing, except I'm supposed to go up and guard them."

"John Morton's the head of it now."

"How old is he?"

"Oh, maybe thirty-five. Old man Morton was sixty-five. He got killed a week ago—"



From the portières came a giant shape

Elixir which Endows Him with Giant Strength

"Yes," I said. "I know about that."

"This John Morton's going to be our next mayor, I think," the constable added.

That electrified me. Peter Green, he who had been murdered last night, was a politician. The constable wasn't dumb; he understood my look.

"Green was runnin' for mayor, too," he said. "But, jus' the same, they were good friends."

"Queer," I murmured.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. That's what the police are thinkin'. But they was good friends—friendly political rivals—jus' the same. Besides, John Morton wouldn't murder his own father, would he? The same fiend did 'em both; you can't miss it."

Would John Morton murder his own father? How could anybody guess that?

The constable went on earnestly: "Young Morton an' Peter Green had another reason for being friendly. Gladys Morton—that's John's younger sister—she was engaged to Green—"

That might make Morton and Green friendly—and it might not.

The constable was saying, "An' besides, there's one big thing you can't get away from—what's got all of us stumped. This murderer's got superhuman strength—no ordinary person could do these things."

A hush came to his voice and he let it trail away into silence. I could feel my heart beating faster.

"How do you mean?" I said.

He pulled his jacket around him as though he was cold. "Well, I guess you read about it—head wrenched from the body. Hell, you can read about things like that an' they don't mean much. But I—I saw the bodies. The head—pulled right off—"

His gaze clung blankly to my face with a far-away look as though he were seeing through me—seeing those gruesome murdered bodies.

I said, to fill up the silence, "Or chopped off, maybe. It isn't very unusual for a murderer to dismember—"

"But it wasn't anything like that," he interrupted with sudden violence. "You can tell the difference. I'm

tellin' you—pulled out—nothing cut—jus' wrenched!"

Shuddering picture his vague words were conjuring. And to my mind came a vision of this fiend—giant of a man—superhuman strength such as only a brutal giant could have—more animal than human.

Animal! Could some great, cunning animal—a gorilla, perhaps—be roaming these dark lonely hills? Wild thoughts! These were not isolated murders. There was a connection between Peter Green and the Mortons—a link which suggested a human motive.

"Strength," the constable was saying. "You can't get away from that. No ordinary person, even if he had the strength of a lunatic, could do it. You—you might try wrenchin' a head from a body—"

I MADE an effort at a wry smile. "Thanks," I said. "I'll pass that up."

"Nor anyone else that I ever met," the constable said. "An' there you are! John Morton's a little fellow—a head shorter than you or me."

"Who else is in the family up there?" I suggested.

"Nobody else, 'cept the women an' servants. There's Gladys—she's eighteen. An' her mother—the widow—she's about prostrated, I guess. She's in bed most of the time now since her husband was killed. There's Phillip Ober, young Morton's secretary. He's a thin, sissy-looking fellow—I could wring his neck with one hand. An' they got a Chinese butler—I think he calls himself Charlie Lee."

"A Chinaman?"

"Yeah, but that's not as fiendish as it sounds. He's about as big as up to your shoulder. Young fellow—educated at Columbia. Nice sort of fellow, too. I know him pretty well—I like him. An' that," the constable said, "is the whole layout. The police are sure satisfied we got to locate somebody—something—entirely different from any regular man."

I stood up. "That's true enough—"

"An' unless he's absolutely nuts," the constable added, "hell keep him—"

self out in the hills. He must know anybody could spot him if ever they seen him—"

Roaming these hills? Huddling by day, like an animal in some secluded lair. Roaming by night—

"You goin' up to Morton's now?" the constable asked. He was standing with me and we were facing the open door. The street outside was dark, save for the yellow glow from the small street light cluster in front of the Town Hall. Across the black sky, a flare of distant jagged lightning darted, and a moment later there was a grumble of thunder.

"Looks like a storm," I said. "How do I get up to Morton's?"

The constable rubbed his chin. "They got a car. They didn't come down for you?"

"I didn't know what train I'd take. And I wanted to consult you privately."

"It's about a mile," he said. "There was a taxi when the train come in—you should have tol' him then. I guess he's gone to bed now."

"I'll walk," I said with sudden decision. "A mile isn't far. That would be quicker than waiting, anyway. I want to beat that storm. You keep my suitcase. I can get along without it tonight."

He stood regarding me blankly. "You're armed?" he inquired.

I showed him my little automatic. "Even a man of superhuman strength goes down with a bullet in his brain," I said. But though I tried to smile, it somehow seemed a failure.

The constable nodded. "I guess you can take care of yourself. You don't look very helpless." He followed me to the door. "You jus' follow this street right out. Straight road all the way to Morton's. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," I said as we shook hands. "And thanks for what you've told me."

"That street gets pretty lonely pretty quick," he said as I went down the steps.

HE stood on the steps gazing after me. The street did indeed get suddenly lonely. There were two or three blocks of straggling dark build-

inga. A fringe for a block or two of shabby residences—and then abruptly I was on a lightless dirt road, in the woods.

Under other circumstances, by day, for instance, it might have been a brief, pleasant stroll. But it wasn't now. The trees crowded thick on both sides of me, sometimes with interlocking branches overhead so that I was in a leafy tunnel. Not a house; not a light; not a sound except the murmuring undercurrent of insect life which now was engulfed by a wind which was springing up, sighing with puffy bursts through the tree tops.

The darkness was so solid I could barely see to keep on the road. I had a small pocket flash. I sent its tiny white beam ahead of me for a minute or two. Then the vision came to me of myself as I was here, plodding along with a light marking me. I snapped off the light. The storm was coming, no doubt of that. The wind was increasing. The occasional lightning flashes were closer, more intense.

The brief glares lighted the scene with a dazzling eerie luridness; and after them the darkness seemed more solid than ever.

I began wondering how far I had gone. Almost a mile? By day one could judge. I thought now, perhaps only half a mile . . . I was walking fairly fast; peering, straining all my senses into an abnormal sharpness. And my thoughts were surging. A fiend of ghastly giant strength, prowling these woods. With sharpened fancy, I could picture him here near me now. Following me along. Watching a chance to leap upon me.

And then ahead of me I saw a little light. A glowing yellow spot. It shifted; vanished; came again. With breath stopped, I checked my advance and stood peering.

It was a lighted house window. Not Morton's. I knew I had only gone about halfway to Morton's. A little bungalow shack was here beside the road; a shabby, one-man farm, with a rambling wooden fence enclosing a few cleared acres here in the woods.

I went past the house, with the road

bending off to the left, plunging again into the woods. The glow was a light on a yellow window shade, drawn down over an opened window. The fence was still beside me when, from the silent house, came a woman's scream. A low, throbbing, tortured wail! It rose, eerie, gruesome, then died away into silence.

For an instant I stood frozen. Then a flash of lightning came. The scene all around me burst into a lurid glare. Ahead of me, on up the road, the huge gaunt figure of a man was standing! A monstrous shape. He saw me. He swung—came bounding!

CHAPTER II

The Body in the Tree

THE lightning glare vanished, but the glow from the house still showed me the oncoming figure. I made a leap off the road, into a heavy patch of tree shadow, and melted down, crunching. The rushing man seemed not to have seen where I had gone. The blob of him passed me as he dashed to the gate of the fence and stood there, peering. And from the darkness I said softly:

"Don't move! I've got you covered. I'll put a bullet in you if you move."

He stiffened; stood as though frozen, with only his head turning toward the sound of my voice. The radiance from the window fell full on him now—a tall, thin man with scraggly iron-grey hair; bareheaded; with an old raincoat flopping loosely around his shoulders, giving him a hunched, misshapen look.

A shotgun was in his hand, but he made no attempt to raise it. He stood and gasped:

"W—who are you? Come out here where I can see you!"

With leveled automatic I confronted him. But my menace was unnecessary, and already I knew it. The woman in the house again had cried with that eerie wail; then suddenly the blob of her showed at the window with the light behind it as she pulled aside the shade.

"Ezra—that you, Ezra?" she called. Broken, half-hysterical voice.

And the man before me said, "Yes, Annie. It's all right—go back in—be quiet—"

I will say that must have taken courage—his quiet admonition to her, and me confronting him with leveled weapon. Then he swung, tense, to find out what I was going to do to him and combat it if he could.

But already I had lowered my automatic. "You live here?" I said.

"Yes, I live here. Who are you?"

I laughed shortly. "We've evidently mistaken each other. I'm a special officer, from New York. I'm on my way to Morton's. I heard a woman's cry—"

"My wife," he said. "She's frightened. All this talk of a fiend around here—" He had lowered his voice. He came closer to me, and suddenly he dropped his gun and gripped my wrist. "If you're a policeman like you say—you better show me somethin' to prove it."

THAT old farmer had a grip like steel. "Easy," I said. "I can do that." I showed him the insignia under my coat.

"All right," he said. And his suspicion changed to agitation. "You—you didn't see anything as you come up along the road?"

I shook my head.

"I run out the other way," he added. "We thought—we thought we heard somethin'." And then he said, with a sudden stark note of horror in his voice: "Our little granddaughter—she's with us this week. An' we jus' found she's—she's gone!"

A child missing! Stolen from its bed by this roaming monster!

The old man was clutching at me now. "She—she's a sleepwalker. We thought she was cured of it—she ain't done it for a year. But that's what must've happened. She's wanderin' out here somewhere—"

"How long ago?" I demanded.

"Couldn't have been over five or ten minutes. My wife had jus' been in to see her. If you'll help—"

"You go one way—I'll go the other.

I guess she would stick to the road."

I started back toward Sleepy Hollow. But I had just come along this part of the road! "It has to be the other way," I said. "How far did you—"

I had run back to join the old man, and the words died in my throat. A flash of lightning split the sky, with an almost simultaneous crack of thunder. The scene momentarily brightened with a lurid green glare.

"Oh, my God!" the old farmer gasped.

The darkness closed in around us, like a shroud enveloping us. And we stood clutching each other, nerve-shaken, weak, trembling.

We had both seen it in that second of flashing light. The crotch of a tree-
limb, a hundred feet away perhaps, and fifty feet above us.

The gruesome, mangled body of the child, up there where the fiend had thrown it. . . .

I think I can never recall a more blood-chilling rush of horror than that which now surged over me. It blurred all my senses for a moment, so that everything was dim, far-away—as though I were no actor here, but a spectator, watching myself and the speechless, shocked, broken old man.

He broke away from me. He dashed through the gate, with his peering wife coming to meet him. And then, as in his numbed confusion he must have blurted out the horror, I heard her scream.

The thing for these seconds had struck me witless. I had dealt with murder before. But this—

A fiend, evidently of superhuman strength. Those reiterated words in the newspapers rang through my head.

I stood stiffly, automatic in hand. Then I ran a little distance up the road. That pathetic, broken little body may have been nearly over me, but, mercifully, I could not see it. And again I stood listening, peering. Nothing to see but almost solid blackness of heavy woods and tangled thickets of underbrush with the tunnel-like road winding on toward Morton's. Nothing to hear, but the wailing of

the hysterical old woman down at the house—the muttering rumble of distant thunder—the surge of wind high up in the trees.

THEN another flash came—Nature's torch to show me what was hidden here in the blackness. I chanced to be staring directly at it—diagonally forward across the road.

And that second of glare disclosed it clearly. A hundred feet from me. A thicket in a hollow by the roadside. A hunched but giant figure. A peering face, livid, ghastly green-white in the lightning. No mistaken identity this time—a face contorted, with a wild horror look on it, twisted by frenzied murderous lust into a monstrous travesty of human aspect.

The darkness after the flash sprung between us. But in that second I fired, with my shot a yellow stab and a cracking roar of sound like an echo of the thunder-clap.

But I had missed. The damnable shape must have leaped at sight of me. I heard the threshing, cracking of the underbrush.

I think I may have run a hundred feet or so into the thicket. The threshing was still ahead of me, growing fainter as I was outdistanced. Then it died into silence.

I turned back. Forced myself through the tangled underbrush to the road. Here was the hollow where I had seen the damnable thing.

My thoughts were running away with me. It had been a man—all that the newspapers and the constable of Sleepy Hollow had said he must be. And here on the ground where he had been crouching was tangible evidence. My hand-torch beam showed that this hollow was soft, muddy ground. It must have been raining earlier in the day. The road was dry, but there was still soft mud here in the hollow. And footprints showed where the fiend had been crouching—the huge, blurred imprint of his shoes.

And there was something else. A small, pale-blue rectangle. I stooped and picked it up; held my light closely upon it. A little oblong of bluish paper. It had been folded but not

crumpled. On neither side had anything seemingly been written.

I stared, puzzled. Then I folded it carefully in the original creases and put it in my wallet.

There was nothing else that I could find around here. And with that body dangling up there in the tree, the hysterical old couple in the farmhouse, certainly there were things I had to do better than standing there.

I dashed back to the house. The old couple were in the sitting room. Numbd. Witless.

"You got a phone?" I demanded.

THE telephone was here. Neither of them had thought to use it. I telephoned the constable at Sleepy Hollow. The operator gave me his home. He was evidently going to bed.

"Oh," he said, when I told him who I was. "You're at Morton's."

"No. A farmhouse—half or two-thirds the way."

"That's Jones."

"Jones—"

"I'm Jones," the old farmer said numbly.

I told the constable what had happened.

"Good God!" he gasped. "I'll get busy—they'll have to come over from Cartersville—"

"They'll be up to you presently," I interpolated to Jones. "You and your wife lock yourselves in here. Stay inside. It won't be long."

I said to the constable, "That's all. You won't need me here. I'm going on up to Morton's. And listen—I don't think I'll say anything about this up at Morton's—just yet."

I left farmer Jones and his wife locked in their cottage. I was closer to Morton's than I realized; it wasn't over quarter of a mile. I went swiftly past that tree where the mute evidence of the fiend dangled in the darkness.

The storm was still threatening, but save for those two or three flashes, it seemed to hang off. There was the feel of rain in the air. I don't suppose I was much over five minutes getting to Morton's. But it was a nasty five minutes.

I passed through an ornate brick entrance into the cultivated grounds of the estate. Window lights, and a light at the *porte cochere* entrance showed me a big, rambling brick and stone two-story structure, with ivy growing upon it.

I rang at the *porte cochere* door. It presently opened, disclosing a hyronial hallway, dimly lighted, and here at the door a thin, pale-faced, youngish man with slick blond hair and horn-rimmed glasses.

"I'm George Halton," I said, "from New York. I guess you're expecting me."

He smiled. "Oh yes, of course. I'm Phillip Ober, Mr. Morton's secretary. Did you walk up? We'd have come down."

A young Chinese fellow was here with him. Small, slender but with the wiry, catlike movements of the Oriental. He looked queerly grotesque in his dapper butler's uniform.

Ober said, "Lee, tell Mr. Morton—"

But John Morton was already coming forward along the hall. I stepped inside, and Charlie Lee closed the door upon me.

If only I had known what was going to happen to me before I got out that door again!

CHAPTER III

A Smell—of Burning Flesh?

"**Y**OU walked?" John Morton said. "You shouldn't have done that. If I'd known—"

"It was nothing," I smiled. "I left my suitcase in town—I'll get it tomorrow."

I submitted while that little Chinese butler took my hat and outer coat, with the secretary lingering deferentially near us. The eyes of the Chinese lad seemed appraising me. An intelligent-looking fellow, but for all his American education the inscrutable look of the Orient still clung to him. As I handed him my coat, I said:

"Wait, I forgot—" I took my automatic from the overcoat and

transferred it to my jacket pocket. "Don't want that to get away from me," I smiled.

I hadn't forgotten the weapon, of course; and as I produced it, I swept these three men with a glance. The incident startled Ober and Morton—or at least, it seemed so. But there was no change in the bland aspect of the little Oriental.

And as I took off my outer coat, I glanced furtively down at the feet of these men. All small. And there were no muddy shoes here save my own.

"Let's go into my den a few minutes, Mr. Halton," Morton said. "I want to talk this over with you before you meet my mother and sister. Then we'll go upstairs. Your room is up there, near theirs."

We passed along the big baronial hall, luxurious with heavy-beamed high ceiling, hardwood floors upon which rich Oriental rugs were lying; a tremendous Yule-log fireplace half-way along, with the bottom of a broad staircase opposite it, curving upward.

A number of rooms opened from the hall. I saw a library; a writing room; a darkened billiard room, with its walls solid with oil paintings in heavy gilt frames. A music salon. We passed the staircase; passed the dining room entrance.

The hall narrowed. A door stood open, showing a little den, with a single small light between a couch and easy chair.

"Let's go in here," Morton added. He had named the rooms as we passed. "Tomorrow," he said, "I'll show you all over the house."

He gestured back along the dim hall. "I've had my secretary sleep down here—there are servants' rooms here, and this hall leads back and into the kitchen. My room is upstairs—the women don't want to be alone up there, of course. But we want the lower parts of the house protected also."

"And the butler?" I said. I lowered my voice, though we were here alone now, lingering at the door of the den.

"His room is down here," Morton

said. "And here is my father's chemical laboratory—"

HIS voice halted a little at the mention of his murdered father. Was it an assumed emotion? I swear I could not tell.

"We never go in here now," he added. "I'm not much interested in chemistry. But it was a passion with father in his latter years."

The open laboratory door was here in the narrow hall, directly opposite the door of the den. I saw a big, ghostly, dim interior, with board tables, shelves and a litter of chemical apparatus.

"Your father was a chemist?" I asked.

"Well, no. I wouldn't call him that. He made his fortune as a wholesale merchant. Dry goods. But when he retired, he went in for chemistry as a hobby. Research work. I think if he had lived, he might have attained fame at it. But he—didn't."

I learned nothing new, except that the women servants of the house had become frightened and beginning tonight, they went to their own homes at dusk. So we were six, here in this twenty-odd room, two-story building: the secretary; the butler; Morton; his mother, and his sister. And myself.

No one else here. But my thoughts ran wild. Was this, indeed, the lair of the fiend? Was he one of these three slender, frail men? Impossible! One of the two women upstairs whom I was to meet soon? Fantastic! None of these people, men or women, had a tenth the physical strength which the murderous fiend had demonstrated.

But I could not shake myself of the feeling that the murderer was here, now, somewhere.

Was he lurking here in some of these big, dark rooms? Did he, by some chance, know the layout of this rambling many-roomed building? Crouching, hiding in some dark hole by day—roaming out at night with the mad lust to kill? A modern Jack the Ripper! Was this his home, into which tonight I had come alone with my little automatic to offer protection

to this family? I wondered anxiously.

Pleasant thoughts! Certainly I gave no hint of them now to Morton. I found him a pleasant-voiced, smooth talker—a suggestion of the oratorical politician in his flow of words. His physical strength. The background of my mind kept always surging with that damnable thought.

Morton, I saw clearly, was no more equipped with physical strength than were Phillip Ober and Charlie Lee. I am a six-footer myself, and pretty husky. I felt that in a rough-and-tumble fight I could take on all three of these little fellows and knock their heads together. And when I thought of the fiend: the heads of murdered men twisted and wrenched from the body. A fifty-pound child hurled upward high into a tree.

"I suppose we might as well go upstairs," Morton said at last. He had spoken frankly, regretfully, of the death of his friend Peter Green. His political rival. But it was only a game to him and to Green, this little mayoralty of Sleepy Hollow. Green was to have been his brother-in-law. His sister had loved Green very dearly.

We went forward into the big hall and up the huge central staircase. Ober and the Chinese butler stood silently watching us.

"Can Mr. Halton come in, Mother?"

A girl's contralto voice said, "Yes—come in, John."

WE entered from the upper cross hall, into a small boudoir, with the communicating door open into a small bedroom behind it.

Gladys Morton said, "Mother has just gone to bed. But she does want to meet young Mr. Halton. She is glad he has come here to live with us."

She was a small, slim, very pretty dark-haired girl of eighteen. She looked like a high-school graduate. But her face was pale, and she was red-eyed now, though her manner was thoroughly composed, not willing to show her grief to a stranger, so that she smiled briefly at me as we shook hands.

"Come in," she said. "Mother will

see you." I followed into the room.

I stayed no more than a minute. Mrs. Morton lay in bed—an elderly, grey-haired woman who in her youth must have been very handsome. She was propped up on the pillows with a negligée around her shoulders. She, too, had been crying. She seemed weak. Her heavy-set face was puffy.

She gave me a cold, flabby hand. She smiled weakly, with parted blue lips and slightly panting breath which suggested a bad heart.

"It will be a comfort to have you here with John, Mr. Halton," she said.

We exchanged only a few sentences. Then Morton and I withdrew. But my heart was pounding. There was a little table with a night light on it beside Mrs. Morton's bed. A glass of water. A bottle of medicine. A handkerchief.

And lying there I had seen a small oblong of pale blue paper!

"I thought this would be a comfortable room for you," Morton was saying. He led me into an ornate, luxurious bedroom, diagonally across the hall from the women's suite. "Mine is just a bit farther along," he added. "Lord, that's a queer storm—it's been hanging around all evening."

But it seemed bursting on us now. There was no more lightning or thunder, but the wind came surging, shaking even this solid structure; and I could hear the driving rain.

"You'll be comfortable," he repeated. "The bath is here adjoining."

"Oh yes—thanks."

"I'll leave my bedroom door ajar—"

"All right," I agreed. We stood in the doorway, and I eyed him, though I was smiling. "If you hear me roaming around, don't get excited over it."

"You expect to—roam around?"

"Well," I said, "I don't know that I expect to sleep much. I can do that in the daytime."

He answered my smile. "Use your own judgment. It's a comfort to have you here. We're all nervous. I suppose that's about all it amounts to, anyway. Good night, Halton."

I left the bedroom door ajar, and

flung myself into an easy chair beside the bed.

AN oblong of pale blue paper! My mind flung back to that taboret at Mrs. Morton's elbow. I had almost a duplicate of that pale blue paper in my wallet now. The fiend had dropped it in that hollow by the roadside. I took it out of my wallet and examined it again.

No writing on it. There wouldn't be, of course, because now I realized its use. A paper of the sort that holds medicine in powder form. Familiar type and color of paper—I had often seen it.

The creases of the one I had in my hand now indicated such a use—they made a folded little packet, about an inch by two inches.

Strange loose ends to this diabolical mystery! But they seemed vaguely to be linked together: pale blue paper dropped by the fiend—a chemical laboratory downstairs here. . . .

With a new chill running through my veins I was forced afresh to the conviction that here at Morton's was the lair of the fiend.

My mind roamed on. I heard, for a time, the family moving about the house. The butler and secretary downstairs—I heard them locking up for the night.

Could there be, by any possible chance, any connection between this paper the fiend had dropped, and the one I had seen lying by Mrs. Morton's bed? Unwholesome looking woman. Queer, puffed, heavy face.

A roaming mind can dash far afield against all reason. The grim wild thoughts I was thinking had no sense to them, and I flung them away impatiently.

It was near midnight now. The house was silent, save for the outside noise of the storm. The thunderstorm aspect of it had evidently swept away. There was a steady gale of wind now, and a torrential driving rain.

I think perhaps I may have dozed in the chair. I had no plans. As a matter of fact, I think the calmest reasonable logic of my diverse

thoughts was telling me to go to bed. The police from Cartersville, investigating the murder of the little girl, would be roaming these hills all night. And by morning I might find that the fiend had been caught.

Then suddenly I realized that a slow horror was creeping over all my senses. A realization slowly coming to me now, so gruesome, noisome, so fraught with terrible meaning that it chilled my blood, tightened my heart, tingled the skin all over from feet to the roots of my hair.

I was smelling something! Through the partly opened bedroom door a little drift of vague, acrid smell was coming. A smell with an implication so horrible that I sat upright, snatched from drowsing into a tense shuddering alertness. Was it the smell of burning flesh?

CHAPTER IV

The Body on the Stairs

AT the bedroom door I stood tense, automatic in hand, sniffing, peering along the dim hallway, straining all my senses trying to determine what it was I was smelling, and from whence it possibly could be coming.

There was no way I could tell. Yet it was stronger out here in the hall. From Morton's bedroom? A little way down the hall I saw his door ajar—the room dark behind it. Upon impulse I went there; my rubber-soled tread was absolutely noiseless on the heavy carpet of the hall.

I was aware now that the storm outside seemed wilder than ever. A gale of gusty wind that pounded the rain against the sides of the building, so that I could have made plenty of noise here, and still been unheard.

At Morton's door, I paused. The smell did not seem coming from here. Was he asleep? Should I go in?

I hesitated.

Still undecided, I shoved very gently at Morton's door. An inside light in his bathroom cast a dim radiance on his bed. It was rumpled; it had been occupied, but it was empty

now. I paused a moment at the door.

With pounding heart I went into the bedroom. It was empty. The bathroom was empty. Morton's clothes were here. He had evidently gone to bed; then gotten up and left the room. Had he gone downstairs? What was he burning downstairs?

I padded swiftly back into the hall. There was no confusion in my mind now as to my attitude in this thing. I was playing a lone hand. Myself, here alone, pitted against—what?

I saw near me the top of a steep flight of back stairs. I could still smell that damnable stench, but no stronger here than back at my own room. I tried to orient myself with the lower floor of the house. This was the back. These stairs probably led downward into that narrow back hall near the kitchen. Under me would be Morton's den; across from it, his murdered father's chemical laboratory.

Was someone down in the laboratory now? Something diabolical going on down there?

I had no more than paused at the head of the narrow back stairs. There was solid blackness here; I got the impression that there was a closed door at the bottom, but I did not want to disclose my presence by using a flashlight.

SHOULD I go down here? Something told me not to do it.

I padded back; past my own bedroom; past the suite occupied by Mrs. Morton and Gladys. The boudoir door was closed; and, I assumed, locked.

I came to the head of the main staircase. The smell was stronger here. Quite evidently it was wafted up from below. There was a dim night light downstairs. It disclosed a section of the big hall. No one—nothing—in sight. Very slowly, carefully, I descended the staircase. Tense business, trying to see whatever may be lurking, watching you. The house was so noisy from the storm I could not determine whether there were any interior sounds down here or not.

Following a line of wall, I passed back along the big baronial hall. Soon I was beyond the light, almost in darkness. Like a hound following a trail, for the smell was much stronger now. The hall narrowed. Blackness ahead. The door of the den and the laboratory were not far from me. Beyond them would be the bottom of those back stairs.

I passed a portiered arched doorway which I knew was the dining room. And with the portières beside me, I stiffened.

Was that a cautious footstep?

There may have been a chance lull in the wind. Whatever it was, I could have sworn I heard a step in the dining room. I drew the portières slowly aside, thrusting the automatic muzzle ahead of me.

The dining room. Empty? It was so nearly black, I could not tell. I took a cautious step forward. I murmured:

"Come out of there! I've got you covered. I'll fire!"

The rattle of a gust of wind flung away my murmured words. Then indeed, unmistakable, I heard a step. A patter of running feet—a slap, as though something flat-footed, shoeless, was running.

The butler's pantry! The swinging door from the dining room was moving, as though someone had just passed through. I leaped; shoved the swinging door with my foot.

From farther on in the kitchen there came the grind of a window being flung open. I went through the dimly lighted pantry with a rush; but I was too late. In the dark kitchen the pantry light showed an open window, with the wind and the rain beating in.

I think that a certain sense of relief swept me. Someone had escaped out of here. The fiend, fleeing from the menace of my prowling? I stood a moment back from the window; then cautiously I reached, jerked down its raised sash, and locked it.

The fiend gone? There was still that noisome smell. I followed it to the door of the laboratory. No one here. But the fumes were far strong-

er; unmistakably the source of them was in this room. In the dimness, the big laboratory was eerie.

There was a copper-lined sink, with water faucets. A central board table, littered with chemical apparatus; and board shelves on the walls, with bottles standing in rows. All in a disarray, as though with the murder of old Morton, this room of his hobby which he loved had been left untouched by the family.

I saw that the laboratory had another doorway draped with a curtain. Something crouching over in a shadowed corner?

Then I saw that it was nothing alive—a little pot-bellied stove, queerly shaped as though it might be an incinerator, or a small furnace for the heating of chemical retorts.

THE fumes were coming from there! The little incinerator door was partly open—the fiend, startled by something, had left here and overlooked closing the door so that the stench had escaped into the house. I flung the small iron door wide. My flashlight showed the interior. Things charred, smoldering with a red glow in the furnace draft, and exuding a volume of acrid smoke.

Not the gruesome thing I had expected—but even more significant: a bloodstained flannel shirt was smoldering here. There was only a small fragment of it left amid a heap of ashes.

And a pair of smoldering old leather shoes—huge in size to fit a giant. The shirt and the shoes which the fiend had worn tonight when he was out murdering the little girl. The shoes which had made those muddy prints in the soft ground by the roadside.

I stared—incautious, witless fool to be standing there with a lighted flashlight in my hand! I suddenly heard the gasp of a panting breath as though some monster here beside me in the darkness had gulped in air upon the verge of a spring.

I whirled. The curtains across the room had parted. A vague stream of light-radiance from behind the cur-

tains made a head and a line of shoulder vaguely visible. A wide, hunched shoulder. Gaunt, contorted face stamped with a frenzied lust.

I leaped and fired. The stab of flame and the bullet went through the curtains; the crack was deafening here in the narrow confines of the room. Then darkness. Comparative silence. But I had fired too high. Or was this hideous thing impervious to a bullet?

I own that now there was a frenzy also upon me. With that shot ringing through the silent house to arouse all its inmates, I flung away the last vestige of caution.

The face was gone. There was nothing behind the curtains save a dim corridor with a single light. I thought I heard distant padding footsteps. I dashed after them; found myself again in the dim kitchen.

Nothing here.

A door led downward into the cellar. Had the fiend gone that way? No! There was what sounded like the swish of the pantry swinging door.

I must have charged like an infuriated bull. But how could I catch this fleeing thing, which seemed to know every inch of the intricate interior of the mansion? I plunged on through the dining room, out into the big front hall. No sound. Where was the family of this gruesome house? Hadn't my shot aroused them? Where had the fiend gone?

He was here, of course—lurking somewhere here, afraid of my weapon, waiting with his giant animal strength an opportunity to get his hands upon me.

Where was the Chinese butler? And the pallid little secretary? Their bedrooms were down here. It certainly was not over a minute since I had fired that roaring shot in the laboratory. I thought vaguely that there was a woman screaming now upstairs.

Was this blood, here on the hall floor, disclosed by my flashlight? It seemed like a smear of blood; but I did not stop to examine it. I found the door of the butler's bedroom just

beyond Morton's den. The door was open. Disheveled interior. The Chinese butler's uniform lay here on the floor. Bloodstained.

I dashed out. An adjoining little servant's bedroom had been occupied by Ober. Nothing here but his blood-stained garments. A rumpled bed, bloodsmeared. A trail of blood on the floor where the giant fiend had carried away this victim also.

FROM upstairs now, I could hear that woman's scream. I ran front; mounted the main staircase three steps at a time. The dim upper hall was unchanged; there was only the noise and rattle of the outside lashing storm; and the agonized voice of Gladys Morton from behind her locked door:

"John! John—where are you? Oh, what's happening?"

I shouted through the door: "I'm Halton. Are you all right?"

"Yes—all right. Where's John? What's happened?"

"I'm looking for him. Keep your door locked. I'll be right back."

I found him, indeed, within a few seconds. I stood again at the top of that steep narrow flight of back stairs. I had been too cautious before to light my flash; but I stabbed its beam downward now.

Shuddering, horrible scene there at the foot of the stairs with a closed door at the bottom. Hunched against the door, the weltering, pajama-clad body of John Morton—the head torn, wrenched out with so horrible an aspect that I snapped off my light and stood weak and trembling.

Then I ran back to the boudoir door. From behind it, Gladys again gasped:

"John—John—where are you? Mr. Halton—"

"I'm here!" I called.

She opened the door an inch or two. I saw the line of her white negligée, an edge of her pale terrified face.

"What's happened? Oh—where's John?"

I had no heart to tell her.

"I'm going to phone for the police,"

I panted. "You stay in there. Keep your door locked. Don't unlock it no matter what you hear!"

I drew the door abruptly closed; the click sounded as she locked it. There was a telephone here in the upper hall. I seized it. I would call Cartersville; have a police squad here as quickly as possible.

But there was no operator's inquiring voice; no sound of the buzzing current. The line was dead! The storm had pulled down the wires.

My cold, shaking hand touched the telephone table, where was a new horror. My hand was wet and sticky. Blood. My light showed the wet red smear. The fiend, himself now covered with blood, had been here! And now I saw the wrenched, torn wires.

I think I must have sat for a moment with stark horror freezing me. I saw myself, isolated now—here in this house with only the women behind their locked door.

Myself—and this blood-soaked murderous fiend. He had killed everyone in the house but me and the women. No help could come. Of course he had cut the wires downstairs as well as here.

And he was lurking—monstrous Jack the Ripper—frenzied now beyond all vestige of human reason—bent upon killing everyone in the house.

And there was only myself, now, to oppose him.

I stood up from the bloodsmeared little telephone table. I padded along the upper hall to the head of the main staircase.

Then, with automatic alert, very slowly I descended.

CHAPTER V

In the Clutch of the Fiend

THE lower hall was light enough so that I had no need of a flash. I left the staircase. I stood well away from the shadowed walls and draperies which so easily could have shrouded my antagonist. With what horrible, straining tenseness I stood

peering. Turning slowly, pointing the leveled automatic to left and right, behind me—that big baronial chair—was something crouching there?

No. It was only my shuddering fancy conjuring now a certainty that the fiend was somewhere here. A thing in monstrous human form—yet with no quality of a human antagonist about it. Somehow, I feared no bullet from these shadows. This murderer had used no weapon upon any of his victims.

I moved with slow steps the forward length of the hall, and back. The dark doorways of the front rooms yawned like cave mouths. Any one of them could be a lair for the monster. It was as though I were stalking some hideous giant animal—trying to hear it—trying to lure it out that I might take a shot at it. Trying, above everything, not to let it seize me—so that most assuredly I kept from entering those yawning black doorways.

Still no sound. The accursed gale and pelting rain still lashed the house outside. It seemed to mask whatever I might be hearing now of the lurking thing.

Then there came a lull. And I did indeed seem to hear something.

I moved past the dining room. Back across the hall I heard a little click. I swung, with every faculty alert, my finger on the trigger of the upraised gun. The dining room portières momentarily were behind me! Too close! Damnable error that I should have been outwitted. The fiend had tossed a coin to clatter across the hall.

As I peered that way, from the parted portières behind me a giant shape came with a leap. The impact flung me forward and down. My automatic futilely spat against the opposite wall; and as I fell sprawling, the weapon was knocked from my hand and went clattering across the floor.

I was in the grip of the fiend. His weight was on me; a knee in the small of my back; fingers fumbling, gripping my throat.

FOR that instant my senses went off into a whirling chaos of horror. But I fought; heaved upward; then fell again, twisting so that now I was face upward with my fists flailing.

That demoniac face was close above me now. Fiendish, leering face contorted with lust so that every vestige of humanity was gone from it, leaving only a stark, murderous frenzy. Wild, red-rimmed glaring eyes, with nothing in them of sanity, but only that same murderous lust. Dank hair straggling on a forehead wet with the sweat of a killer.

"A fiend, evidently of superhuman strength . . ."

For all my flailing efforts, I felt myself lifted high in the air; and then flung down again with the breath knocked from me. Was this blood, this wet sticking ooze that was smeared on my face? My own blood—or the blood of this panting monster? He was panting, not from his effort, but sucking in his breath like a ghastly, mouthing animal, triumphant at the kill.

My senses were whirling away. The fingers at my throat, stifling my breath, were like a tightening band of steel. My futile hands plucked and tore. A million whirling spots of light were in my eyes.

So this was the end! The gibbering, sucking breath of the fiend was engulfed by the torrent of sound in my ears . . .

Then dimly, far away as though I were envisaging myself floating in a black empty void, I seemed to feel knees against my shoulders. The grip on my throat was gone. Hands clutched my head, twisting it—pulling, wrenching as the knees pressed downward.

I may have gotten a little last despairing strength when the grip on my throat relaxed so that again I could gulp for air. I felt myself lunging again.

And suddenly the fiend had released my head and was on his feet—carrying me under one arm.

Was this the narrow back hall? The laboratory—he had brought me

here—to mangle and kill—to toss my body on the weltering pile of his other victims?

Again I was slammed to the floor; the ghastly gibbering, sucking breath was faster with the last triumph of a lust about to be consummated. Knees pressing my shoulders with a new violence, those maniacal hands spread on my face and head . . .

Then abruptly I was conscious of a change. One of the knees slipped sidewise off my shoulder. The lust of the sucking breath seemed mingled with a little gasp; a whine—a cry. The hands wrenching at my head were gone; came again, with a fumbling grip so that suddenly my own fumbling fingers seemed almost able to pluck them away.

Was that whining gasp a cry of fear? Was this ghastly fiend losing his strength? It seemed that a tremor shook the gaunt body as it sprawled upon me. Then suddenly he was off, lunging away, scrambling to his feet!

In my blurred confusion I was conscious only of a mingled hope and the desperation of terror. With every gasping gulp of air my strength was coming back, so that as the monster drew himself erect I was staggering up with him, my own fingers now seeking his sweating throat.

A cry of fear! His gasping cry was more than that now—a whimper of terror! His hands clawed at me. Futile, now! His gaunt body heaved and twisted in my grip as I wound a leg around his, struggling to throw him.

AND then I relaxed a little, holding him tightly but not heaving, for now he seemed to have ceased struggling. As though stricken, we both stood panting, with my arms and a leg wound around him.

His gaunt body of superhuman strength was shrinking. His bulging, taut muscles turned flabby as their strength oozed away. Wide, gaunt, hunched shoulders lowering, seeming to narrow as they sloped down to the aspect of a man of slender puny build.

Gruesome changing identity! My mind flung to encompass the truth of

it. This, the murdered old man Morton's chemical laboratory. He had been a research chemist. A drug—that pale blue oblong of paper, holding a drug. This fiend, murdering old Morton to keep for himself the secret of the drug . . .

And the effects of the drug suddenly had worn off now! The fiend, in the grip of my arms, lapsing into his true puny aspect. The hideous maniacal face was losing all its contorted frenzy. A pallid, frightened face now, with the sweat of horror bathing it. . . .

I stared. I murmured, "You—"

It was the pallid, meek, obsequious Phillip Ober, the secretary, who now stood trembling in my grip!

I can explain the strange details now. Old Morton had discovered this drug—for no diabolic purpose, but that it might bring strength and health to suffering humanity. A drug of amazing, though temporary potency, affecting the ductless adrenal gland. Mysterious workings of nature! Mysterious catalysts of that mysterious gland which under the influence of this drug, liberated its vast, unused store-house of strength.

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Physicians who are studying it now are realizing that the brain impulses within us—that motivating force of the mind—allows us only a small portion of the latent contractive strength even our most puny muscular tissue possesses. The strength of a madman! Medically that is far more than a mere trite phrase, for with the frenzy of insanity, there comes a brain-release—the lightening of some mysterious check-rein, so that the muscles use a greater power than ever is normal to them.

THIS drug of old Morton's, the scientists are saying now, is like that—a thousand-fold enhanced.

Dangerous drug indeed!

(Continued on Page 118)

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Dr. Walter E. George, for many years Health Director of Indianapolis, says: "Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with Aching Back, Frequent Night Rising, Itching, Smarting, Burning, Painful Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Headaches, and a generally run-down body. I am of the opinion that the prescription Cystex corrects such functional conditions. It aids in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, and in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Cystex deserves the indorsement of all doctors." If you suffer from Kidney and Bladder dysfunction,

delay endangers your vitality, and you should not lose a single minute in starting to take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Blue-tex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It is swift, safe and sure in action. Gently tones, soothes and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today.

(Continued from Page 116)

Upon some strongly seated mentalities, it might have no deranging effect. But upon the pallid little secretary, it was wholly diabolical. His twisted and doubtless latently murderous brain became inflamed with it. Superhuman strength—and a personality distorted into a lustful fiend, so that with demoniac pleasure he gloated in the metamorphosis from his own puny normality.

At his motives we can only guess—but they are fairly clear. He started his killings with the old man—so that he might possess the secret of the drug. For what money and fame he thought he might derive from it—and then, for his own lustful pleasure, as the bloody killing of old Morton made him lust for more.

Then he killed George Green. We have learned now that Ober aspired at one time for the love of Gladys Morton.

He and Green had angry words. The killing was revenge—and to confuse the police into thinking this was a Jack the Ripper.

He planned, of course, to kill all the Morton family one by one. In the end, he would have the secret of the drug beyond possibility of challenge. And as Phillip Ober, the Morton secretary, he would inherit a fair-sized legacy.

The murder of the little girl? Again this may have been to confuse the police with diverse, motiveless murder. But I think also that he had slipped from the house—to meet me. Afraid of this New York detective who was coming up to investigate. And with the murderous lust upon him, he must have encountered the wandering child—

Old Morton had perfected an antidote to the drug. With it, Ober could change his identity at will. He had taken the antidote just before I met him at the roadside. He had dropped the little pale blue paper; and the similar one at Mrs. Morton's bedside was a coincidence, of course.

Ober's mysterious movements within the house tonight, when he found me an armed adversary stalking him,

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must always remain a matter of conjecture. Yet they too are fairly clear. Young Morton must have started downstairs—and Ober leaped upon him.

In some fashion then, Ober severely cut his wrist. And he scattered his blood everywhere he went.

It was Charlie Lee, the little Chinese butler, whom I had chased, and who in wild terror had escaped from the kitchen window, thinking the fiend was upon him.

And Ober doubtless still had had some rational plan for his own escape. He would kill everyone in the house. He would spread his own blood in the butler's room, and in his own room. With his killings finished—the house a shambles—he would have gone into the woods; and a day later, appeared at the village to tell how the fiend had carried him off, wounded him, leaving him for dead in the woods.

I THINK I have covered all the strange details. The drug, as the inflamed Ober was crouching over me now in the laboratory, had swiftly worn off.

I stood now, gripping him, staring at his pallid, blood-streaked sweating face.

Terror on it.

"Oh—you've got me," he gasped.

Amazing slender, puny little figure here in my grip, with torn and blood-soaked garments, mute evidence of all that remained of the fiend.

"Why—it's you—"

And suddenly with a jerk, he snatched himself from me. A last despairing urge of a mind which had broken.

He made a leap headlong, like a diver plunging into water. A leap which crashed his skull full against the iron front of the squat little re-tort-furnace.

His body fell to the floor, lay writhing, with the blood welling from his head. The ghastly death rattle was in his throat. Then the gasping breath was gone. The shrunken, blood-soaked figure lay motionless. It was the end of the fiend of Sleepy Hollow.

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THROUGH the blood of man has always run an elemental strain of cruelty. History's pages are vivid with almost incredible accounts of man's fiendishness. The annals of time record inhuman and satanic brutalities that stagger the imagination—this despite man's vaneer of civilization.

Torture is the direct result of this barbaric streak. Strange as it may seem, torture came into being through the quest for truth. It was based on the fundamental theory that a person subjected to intense agony would tell the truth. But practise has not proved this to be the case; for the tendency is to lie to evade torment.

Tortures of Antiquity

It is difficult to conceive of new tortures which cannot be traced back to antiquity. Ingenious inflictions were those perfected by the Chinese—but torture really reached its zenith during the period of the Inquisition.

Torture has been used for several reasons. To ferret out the truth; to punish; to entertain; and for religious purposes. While modern civilization has outlawed torture, still there are many people who would prescribe it for criminals who have committed fiendish crimes against society. In the past centuries, these terrors were

so common that anyone who had enemies or was in danger of being tortured for religious or political differences would invariably carry on their persons some quick-killing poison or other suicide instrument rather than be exposed to excruciating pain. Prisoners were usually searched meticulously to make certain self-destruction was impossible before being taken into the torture chambers. Even the places of confinement were padded, so that the victim could not dash his brains out against the wall.

The Rat in the Hole

A short time ago several adventurers were discussing various tortures in a New York City clubroom. One of the men shocked his acquaintances with a detailed account of the most heinous torture that had ever come to his attention, that of the "Rat in the Hole." Briefly, it was this:

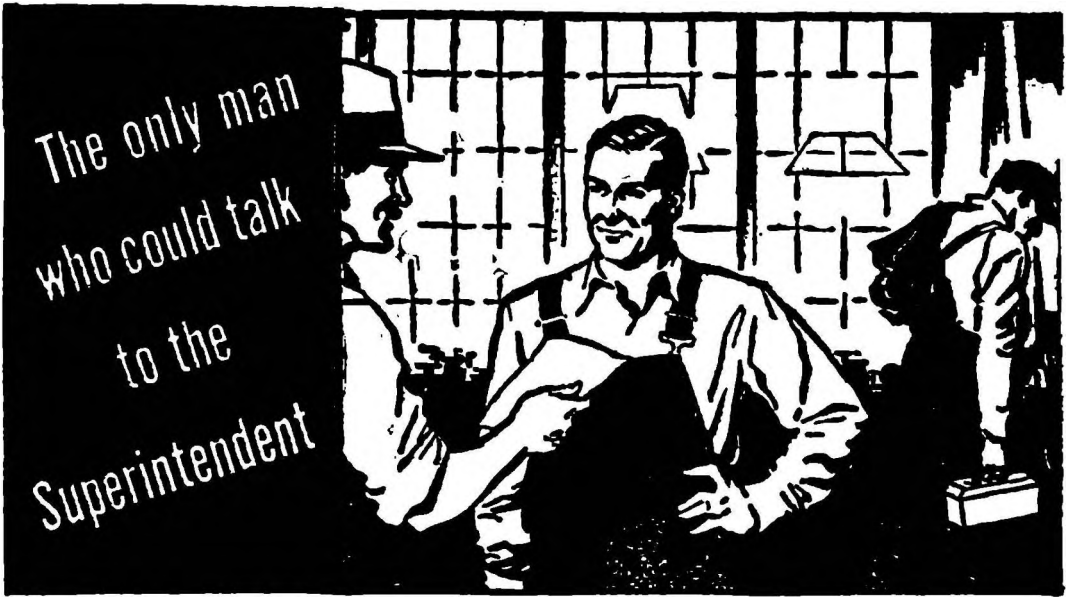
The victim, nude and bound, is secured to the floor of a small stone room. Several gashes are ripped in various parts of his body. Then a number of starving rats are placed in the dungeon with him. At the proper moment a quantity of smoke from smoldering rags, but not enough to suffocate, is forced into the room.

The ferocious rats, panic-stricken by the
(Continued on Page 122)

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For several years, he was just like a score of other men in the plant—a good, honest, fairly capable worker, but only that. There was nothing distinctive about him or his ability—nothing to make him stand out from the crowd—no reason, as a matter of fact, why he should ever receive a raise.

Then one fortunate day he decided that the reason he wasn't getting anywhere was because he lacked special training. He searched around a bit—asked a great many questions—and then enrolled for a home-study course with the International Correspondence Schools.

"Soon after I began studying," he wrote to us the other day, "we had a change in management at our plant. The new superintendent said that only

men who had really studied their work were in line for positions as foremen.

"I certainly was glad then that I had decided to study in my spare time. For, thanks to my I. C. S. course, I was the only man in the organization who could talk to the superintendent in his own language. As a result, I was promoted over men who had been here from ten to twenty years."

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(Continued from Page 120)

smoke, hunt for a hole of some sort to escape into. In their panic they rush to the helpless victim and gnaw their way through his flesh, attracted by the smell of blood from his lacerations.

From the 15th Century

The greatest collection of torture instruments are those from the Royal Castle of Neuremburg, owned by the Earl of Shrewsbury and Talbot. This collection consists of 652 pieces. Some of the most diabolic ones are: The Iron Maiden, which was a vertical, coffinlike container with the head of a smiling woman. It was made of strong wood, bound with iron bands, and opened with two doors to allow the prisoner to be placed inside. The whole interior was studded with long, sharp, iron spikes, so that when the doors were closed the sharp prongs tore their way into various parts of the body. Two of the prongs entered the eyes, several forced their way into the back and other parts of the body, impaling the victim in such a manner that he lingered in harrowing pain for several hours. This instrument was most popular in the 15th Century.

Then there are the Martyr Pincers, or flesh tearer; the mouth spreader, the tongue tearer, and the Spanish gaiter with shin-bone pressers. Also branding irons for all letters of the alphabet; collars, chains, thumb-screws, spoons for pouring boiling oil and tar, handcuffs, body rings for holding the victim, rollers to break bones, spikes, wheels for turning the victim through fire or boiling oil, whips, masks, and stocks.

In the collection are also various iron boots, in which the feet of the victims were placed, and molten lead poured into the boots. Also the Spider, an instrument shaped like a spider, with long, sharp claws for use in gripping the flesh on various parts of the body, and then tearing it away. This was frequently used on women, particularly beautiful ones, whom it mutilated horribly.

The Barrel of Fire

Another devilish device of the same period was the Barrel of Fire. The stripped victim was sealed in a huge barrel, which had numerous bungholes on the top; then red-hot coals were dropped through the holes and the victim suffered the agonies of one in Inferno.

One of the more nauseating tortures was the Ball in the Mouth. A solid iron sphere about the size of a golf ball was placed in the victim's mouth. A strong chain was attached to this ball, which hung out of the mouth. The jaws were then held tight by an iron bar under the chin and over the head, so that the mouth couldn't open. The executioner then took the chain and

pulled viciously on the ball, bringing with it teeth, jaw-bone and parts of the face. Many victims of this treatment have survived for days afterward.

Damien's Torture

Damien's torture, instances of which have been recorded during the past century, was the grim ordeal of chaining a victim on an iron bed, tearing parts of his flesh open, and then pouring molten lead, wax, or burning oil into the open wounds until the victim died—anguishing and effective!

All of the foregoing tortures were practised during the Inquisition. Perhaps the rack, the wheel, the Iron Maiden, the thumb screw, and hanging by the thumb, were used more frequently. Sometimes one hundred victims were suspended by their thumbs or tongues, with their feet weighted down, while hot coals beneath them gradually roasted them to death.

Chinese Tortures

Some of the most prominent Chinese tortures were as follows: The death of a hundred cuts. This called for an expert executioner. He was supposed to slash the victim a hundred times, and on the hundredth cut the victim had to die. If the victim died before the hundredth cut, then the executioner himself became a victim.

Another hellish punishment was that of forcing the victim to eat young bamboo shoots of a certain variety, which grew inside the victim, and finally punctured the stomach and intestines. There was also the gruesome two-pronged stick, which was slowly forced into the victim's eyes or up his nostrils into the brain. Also, the smashing of ankles and knees with hammers.

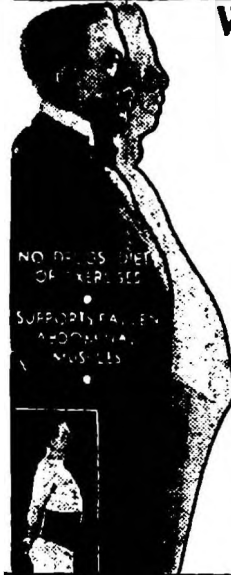
The beating with split bamboo poles of the victim was another satanic sport. The chained man was beaten in one spot until the flesh tore. Then the bruised spot was allowed to heal, and later the scabs were pried off, and the whole process repeated for days and days, until the victim inevitably died through loss of blood. Pulling out the tongue by the roots was also an old Chinese practise. Piercing the eardrums, pouring molten lead into the mouth, and burying up to the neck in sand, with syrup poured on the victim to attract the ants, who soon started eating the flesh, were all products of Chinese inventiveness. The ripping out of finger nails, the forcing of splinters under the nails, and then setting fire to the splinters, were more contributions. The Chinese also practised the water cure for centuries—the forcing of water into a man's body until he burst.

Many of these tortures are still prac-

(Continued on Page 124)

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WRITTEN BY J. C. BAILEY



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(Continued from Page 123)

tised in China today, according to Arthur J. Burke, well-known horror story writer and former aide to General Butler. He himself has seen some of these cruel tortures. He told me of witnessing a native having his hand cut off for stealing a goldfish.

According to the old Chinese, torture was a matter of art. A doctor of torture held high rank, and his services were at a premium. The more original and ghastly his tortures the greater his reputation. There were cases where these doctors of torture were hired as entertainers, when some high ranking official wanted to give a torture party for his friends.

"Taking the Gloves Off"

One of the more eclectic tortures practised in China, Tibet and Eastern Russia was the one named "Taking the Gloves Off." The victim's hands were plunged into a solution of boiling grease for a specified time. Then the torture doctor peeled off the skin and flesh in the form of a pair of gloves, which later hardened. Naturally the victim died, for there was nothing left below his elbows but sheer bone.

The Chinese still practise the insidious slow torture of breaking the bones of the body joint by joint. If the victim faints from pain "the entertainment" is delayed until the victim becomes conscious again. The Chinese never believe in wasting torture on an unconscious victim.

Torture Today

While present civilization frowns on a torture of any kind, quite frequently instances of modern torture are reported. Most of these cases are due to various kinds of cults, where the torture takes on a form of pleasure for the torturers. Many modern torture doctors have built up chambers suggested by Edgar Allen Poe.

Even the current motion picture called "The Raven" presents a modern torture chamber, using, of course, electricity and other devices unknown to the torture experts of past centuries.

In India today there is a band of thugs who, for a price, will kill by torture. A member of this organization is called a *dacoit*. The most popular method used by these people is slow strangulation. Then in America we frequently hear of torture practised by various gangs and racketeers.

As long as men live outside of the law there will be torture; for the alternative of fear of the law is fear of pain.

But the farther man gets away from the primitive instincts of life the more he will get away from physical pain inflicting into the realm of mental torture.

After all, torture of the mind can be

more brutal than torture of the body. Still, as long as there is such a thing as physical pain, mankind will take advantage of it for selfish gain and pleasure. The history of torture has been a black mark on the scroll of civilization. The only satisfaction today is that torture is considered outside the law, and that those who practise it, do not have sanction of the majority. In other words, torture is a criminal offense. The Goddess of Truth no longer carries the Sword of Tor-ture at her side.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(Readers are invited to send their Thrill and Chill questions to this department of discussion. Confidences will be respected. Unusual thrill and chill experiences are welcomed.)

To HORROR-SCOPES: How do you account for that death-house recently reported in Mexico, where everyone who lived in it has committed murder or suicide? According to the papers, it was built by a monk, who later killed himself in the house. Then a young married couple were found dead, and just recently a mother killed her two children and her-self. H. L. D.

To H. L. D.:

There is always room for a lot of exaggeration of a coincidence. There are scores of houses in the world where many people have died. If, however, the conditions are true as reported, then there must be some evil force that makes itself felt. It has long been believed that walls hold vibrations of those who have lived within them. This is the basis of the haunted house theory. But nothing has been proved along this line. It is more likely that there is some physical cause, like recurrent deadly fumes.

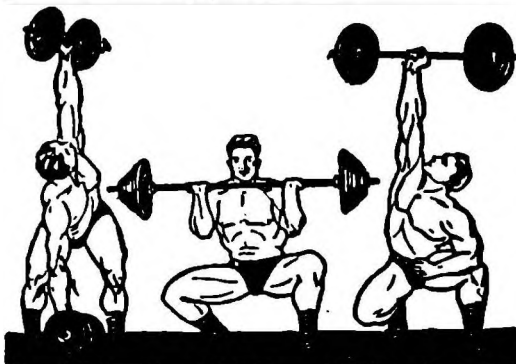
To HORROR-SCOPES: My young son seems to take delight in torturing dumb animals. It is impossible for us to keep a dog or cat. He is now starting to hurt his young playmates, even burning one on the face with a match. Will he outgrow this strange habit? A. L. E.

To A. L. E.:

This is a dangerous trait. Better consult your doctor at once. He will advise you what to do. Cases of this kind are not rare. The trait can be cured. One of the greatest animal lovers of today used to torture animals when a child. This man, now head of a zoo, is beloved by the animals in his charge. It is just a matter of proper adjustment. But don't let your son go on unattended indefinitely.

(Continued on Page 126)

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(Concluded from Page 125)

To **HORROR-SCOPES**: Some years ago I started having a peculiar experience. When I lie down at times, a numbness comes over me and my spirit seems to leave my body and travel to distant places. I can see my body still lying in bed. I never remember returning to my body, but when I wake up I can remember my experience. I know I have been to these places, for I have seen my friends and have recorded their movements at that time, which later were verified. What causes it?
M. K.

To M. K.:

This is similar to the question of "stir-simple," which was discussed last month. It is caused by a subconscious desire for escape from some restraint. It might be due to confinement in one place too long, dissatisfaction with social or family environment. Sex sometimes enters into the picture.

Consult a good psychiatrist. Mystics for years have tried to cultivate this strange power, so that they can control it at will. During the war there were several instances reported where the power was used in spy work. But experiences were not satisfactory, due to inability to hear conversations while in the trance.
—CHAKRA.

TORTURE TOWER

(Continued from Page 101)

to give me the amulet—about through the door. Otherwise, I'll smash in!"

He stopped momentarily.

"It won't be any use standing in the rear part of this room, out of radius from the door. Others have tried it. The whole floor, except for the space in reach of the door, is made of steel. Good, strong steel. When I leave, it will be charged with high tension power, by the turn of a switch outside. So if you want to escape the spikes—sidestep—if you prefer instantaneous electrocution!"

The madman bowed mockingly, then went about the business of prying away the guide's body from the door, and wiping away the blood until the spikes shone in grim suggestive-ness.

He slammed the door behind him, leaving Elva Stuart leaning weakly against the wall for support. Quickly, she unclasped her belt from her dress. It was made of copper, a series

(Concluded on Page 128)

False Teeth



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"I ate with my plate 15 minutes after I put them in my mouth. I slept with them in my mouth, never bothered me a bit."—E. F., Lake City, Colorado.

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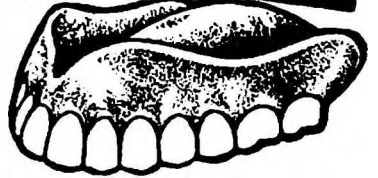
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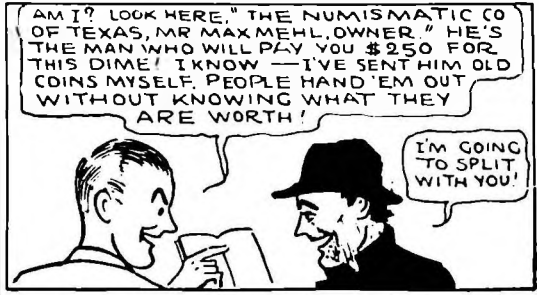
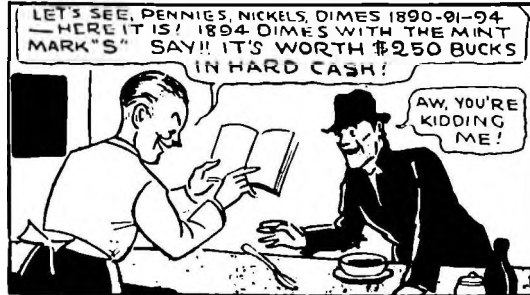

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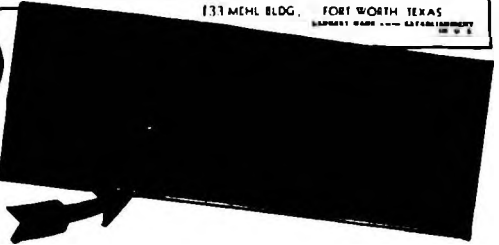
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