

THRILLING MYSTERY

FEB.

10¢

SLAVES
OF THE
DANCING
DEATH

A Novelette of
Whirling Horror

By JOHN
H. KNOX

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

KISS OF
DEATH

A Weird Novelette
By DALE CLARK

HELL'S
DARKEST
HALLS

A Novelette of
Terror's Chateau
By HUGH B. CAVE

AND MANY OTHERS





She Got \$400⁰⁰ for a Half Dollar

Mrs. Sam Dorth, of Texas, sold B. Max Mehl one half dollar for \$400.00

**I WILL PAY UP TO \$6,500.00
For One Old Coin**

I PAID \$200.00 to J. D. MARTIN, OF VIRGINIA FOR JUST ONE COPPER CENT

"Please accept my thanks for your check for \$200.00 in payment for the copper cent I sold you. I appreciate the interest you have given this transaction. It's a pleasure to do business with a firm that can do as well as you do. I wish to assure you it will be my pleasure to sell all my trophies of your own and offer for old coins."

Julian D. Martin, Va.

This is but one of the many similar letters I am constantly receiving. Post yourself! It pays! I paid Mr. Manning, New York, \$2,500.00 for a single silver dollar. Mrs. G. E. Adams, Ohio, received \$7,000.00 for some old coins. I paid W. F. Williams, of Pennsylvania, \$13,500.00 for his six coins. I paid J. T. Neville, of North Dakota, \$200.00 for a \$10 bill he picked up in circulation. I paid \$1,000.00 to Mr. J. E. Brownlee, of Ga., for one old coin. Mr. Brownlee says: "You left record with the check for \$2,000.00. I like to deal with such merchants and hope you continue buying coins for a long time." In the last 36 years I have paid hundreds of others handsome premiums for old bills and coins.

All Kinds of Old Coins, Medals, Bills and Stamps Wanted

\$1.00 to \$1,000.00 for certain old coins, old silver quarters, etc. Buy new 10¢, 20¢, 25¢, 50¢, 1.00 Liberty Bells, etc. Buy old 1¢, 2¢, 3¢, 5¢, 10¢, 15¢, 20¢, 25¢, 30¢, 35¢, 40¢, 45¢, 50¢, 60¢, 70¢, 80¢, 90¢, 1.00, 1.50, 2.00, 2.50, 3.00, 3.50, 4.00, 4.50, 5.00, 5.50, 6.00, 6.50, 7.00, 7.50, 8.00, 8.50, 9.00, 9.50, 10.00, 10.50, 11.00, 11.50, 12.00, 12.50, 13.00, 13.50, 14.00, 14.50, 15.00, 15.50, 16.00, 16.50, 17.00, 17.50, 18.00, 18.50, 19.00, 19.50, 20.00, 20.50, 21.00, 21.50, 22.00, 22.50, 23.00, 23.50, 24.00, 24.50, 25.00, 25.50, 26.00, 26.50, 27.00, 27.50, 28.00, 28.50, 29.00, 29.50, 30.00, 30.50, 31.00, 31.50, 32.00, 32.50, 33.00, 33.50, 34.00, 34.50, 35.00, 35.50, 36.00, 36.50, 37.00, 37.50, 38.00, 38.50, 39.00, 39.50, 40.00, 40.50, 41.00, 41.50, 42.00, 42.50, 43.00, 43.50, 44.00, 44.50, 45.00, 45.50, 46.00, 46.50, 47.00, 47.50, 48.00, 48.50, 49.00, 49.50, 50.00, 50.50, 51.00, 51.50, 52.00, 52.50, 53.00, 53.50, 54.00, 54.50, 55.00, 55.50, 56.00, 56.50, 57.00, 57.50, 58.00, 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BOB MCKENZIE

TRANS-CONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION.
ROAD TO CALIF.

WESTERN UNION
TELETYPE

LOS ANGELES
TO CHICAGO

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Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State St.
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a 1934 Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 3322 miles in thirty nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Eastern Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 1 1/2 miles per gallon on gas-line.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 3 1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 60 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

After this experience with Vacu-matic, you can depend that on my future speed runs across country that I will be depending on Vacu-matic to give me the same added performance it has proven on this last record breaking drive.

Yours very truly,

Bob McKenzie

New Supercharge
Principle
SAVES GAS

MADE BY THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
WATWATOSA, WISCONSIN

ESTABLISHING new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic again scores in a new speed record established by Bob McKenzie transcontinental automobile champion. Los Angeles to Chicago—2,322 miles in 39 hours and 42 minutes—driving 75 and 80 to maintain a speed average of 59.7 miles per hour!

Here is speed—a grueling grind—where quick acceleration, greater top speed — and less stops for gasoline mean those precious moments saved that make new speed records possible. The same Vacu-matic that helped Bob McKenzie establish this speed record and gave him such fine gas savings is now available for all car owners. It is positively automatic—simple to install—inexpensive—and pays for itself many times over in gas savings.

Automatic . . . Nothing Like It!

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the super-charge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely AUTOMATIC and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required. No idling troubles—no carburetor adjustments necessary. It is so simple it will amaze you—so practical it will save you many dollars on gas costs.

Fits All Cars

VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and fitted into one unit, correctly adjusted and sealed at the factory. Nothing to adjust. Easily installed in ten minutes.

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The VACU-MATIC Co.

Wauwatosa, Wis.

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VACU-MATIC must prove itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worthwhile gas savings, quicker pick-up and more power, or it costs you nothing. "On my V-8 Ford it works miracles", says Ralph Fielda. James Sealey—"On an International Truck on a round trip to Cleveland, 385 miles, it saved 19 gallons of gas." A. V. Grove—"On the Buick it showed 5 miles more per gallon." F. S. Peck—"I average 22 miles per gal. on my Plymouth, an increase of 7 miles, for a saving of \$15.00 a month, or \$180.00 a year." Wm. Lyons—"Averaged 25 miles on a gal. with a Model A Ford at 40 miles per hour."

Free Details

You owe it to yourself to know all about this remarkable discovery. Mail the coupon below. Start saving gas with VACU-MATIC and enjoy a new driving thrill! There's no obligation—so get the facts now! Write today!

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Address

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Check here if interested in getting prospectus.

THRILLING MYSTERY


Vol. VI, No. 1

February, 1937

Price, 10c

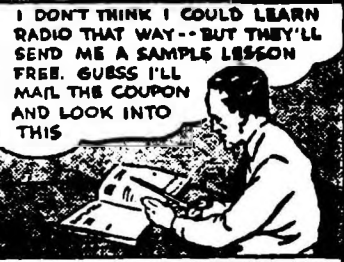
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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Some time Radio set servicing men can make up to \$500 a year. Paid time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$40, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts own and operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, installers, foremen, artisans, servicemen paying up to \$4,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I have trained are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

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No matter how skinny and run-down you may be, try these new Ironized Yeast tablets just a short time, and note the marvelous change. See if they don't build you up in just a few weeks, as they have thousands. If you are not delighted with the benefits of the very first package, your money back instantly.

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Food by professional models

Why Trained Accountants Command

[—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the LaSalle Problem Method] **High Salaries**

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures where-with he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to use these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of

LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at \$30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning \$200 a month—moved up quickly to \$3000, to \$5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than \$10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you can equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. You will be given whatever training, instruction or review on the subject of bookkeeping you may personally need—and without any extra expense to you.

If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training—you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

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Higher Accountancy

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Credit and Collection Correspondence | <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Accounting |

Name

Present Position

Address

*Names available on request.

Acid In Your Blood Kills Health and Pep Kidneys Often to Blame

There is nothing that can so quickly undermine your health, strength, and energy as an excess of Acid in your blood. Everytime you move your hand, take a step, or use even the slightest amount of energy, cells are broken down in the body and create Acids. This process goes on even when you are asleep.

Fortunately, nature has provided an automatic method of getting rid of these excess Acids. To get rid of these Acids nature provides that your blood circulate 200 times an hour through 9 million tiny, delicate tubes, or filters, in your Kidneys. It is the function of the Kidneys to filter out these health-destroying Acids, and to purify the blood so that it can take energy and vitality to every part of your body. But if your Kidneys slow down and do not function properly, and remove approximately 3 pints of Acids, Poisons, and Liquids from your blood every 24 hours, then there is a gradual accumulation of these Acids and Wastes, and slowly but surely your system becomes poisoned, making you feel old before your time, run-down, and worn-out.

CAUSES MANY ILLS

If poorly functioning Kidneys cause you to suffer from Acidity, Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Frequent Headaches, Rheumatic Pains, Swollen Joints, Circles Under Eyes, Backache, Loss of Vitality, or Burning, Itching and Smarting, don't waste time worrying and waiting. The natural thing to do is to help your Kidneys with the doctor's special, guaranteed Kidney diuretic prescription, called Cystex (pronounced Sias-tex). Cystex works directly on the Kidneys and Bladder, and helps the Kidneys in their function of washing impurities and Acids from the system and in maintaining the purity of the blood. Don't try to overcome Acidity in your blood by taking



Dr. T. J. Rastelli

medicines to offset the Acidity. The only way you can really get rid of the Acidity is by helping your Kidneys to function properly and thus remove the Acid from your system. The Acid is bound to stay there unless the Kidneys function properly.

Thousands of druggists and doctors in over 22 different countries throughout the world recommend Cystex for its purity and prompt action as a Kidney diuretic. For instance, Dr. T. J. Rastelli, famous Doctor, Surgeon, and Scientist, of London, says: "Cystex is one of the finest remedies I have ever known in my medical practice. Any doctor will recommend it for its definite benefit in the treatment of many functional Kidney and Bladder disorders. It is safe and harmless." Dr. C. Z. Heddelle, another widely known physician and Medical Examiner, of San Francisco, recently said: "Since the Kidneys purify the blood, the Poisons collect in these organs and must be promptly flushed from the system, otherwise they reenter the blood stream and create a toxic condition. I can truthfully recommend the use of Cystex."

GUARANTEED TO WORK

Because of its world-wide and unusual success, Cystex is offered under a written guarantee to do the work to your complete satisfaction in 8 days or money back on return of empty package. Under this written guarantee you can put Cystex to the test and see exactly what it can do in your particular case. You must feel younger, stronger and better than you have in a long time—you must feel that Cystex has done the work thoroughly and completely, or you merely return the empty package and it costs you nothing. You are the sole judge of your own satisfaction. With Cystex there is no long waiting for results because it is scientifically prepared to act directly on the Kidneys as a diuretic. For that reason most people report a remarkable improvement within the first 48 hours, and complete satisfaction within 8 days. Cystex costs only 5c a dose at druggists, and as the guarantee protects you completely, you should not take chances with cheap, inferior or irritating drugs or delay. Telephone your druggist for guaranteed Cystex (Pronounced Sias-tex), today.



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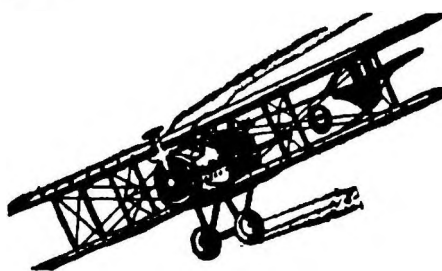
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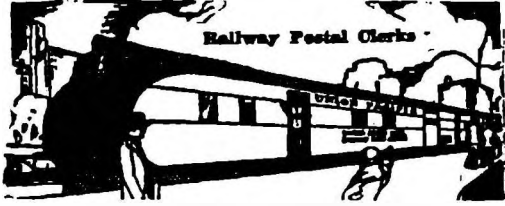


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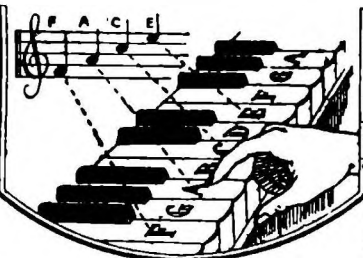
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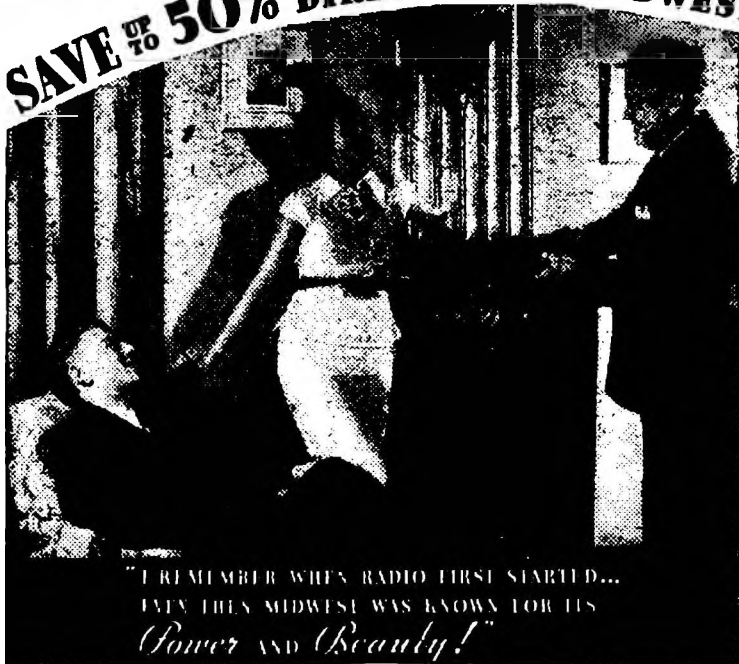
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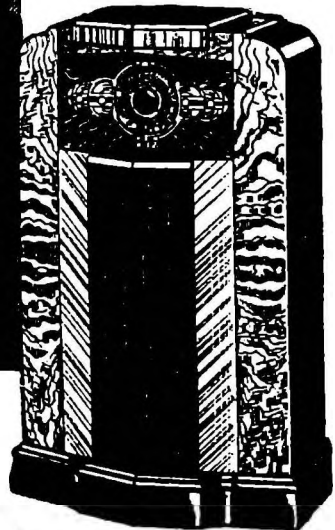
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Mail coupon today for new, FREE 40-page catalog...and learn how you can save up to 50% by buying direct from Midwest factory. See for yourself that Midwest offers today's greatest radio values, and scores of exciting features, like Dial-A-Matic Tuning, plus Elektrik-Saver. With the sensational Dial-A-Matic Tuning feature, for example, even a child can bring in ten perfectly tuned programs in ten seconds. Zipl... Zipl... Zipl... stations come in instantly, automatically, perfectly... as fast as you can push buttons. The exclusive Midwest Elektrik-Saver cuts radio wattage consumption 50%, enables Midwest radios to use no more current than ordinary 7-tube sets.

ONLY IN MIDWEST DO YOU GET
DIAL-A-MATIC TUNING *plus* ELEKTRIK-SAVER



DIAL-A-MATIC TUNING

Wow, even a child can bring in ten perfectly tuned programs in ten seconds! It's a big thrill to whirl the dial... and then hear the station you want... come in instantly, automatically... as fast as you can press buttons!



ELEKTRIK-SAVER

This exclusive Midwest feature cuts radio wattage consumption 50%... results in Midwest radios using no more current than ordinary 7-tube set... enables you to operate on voltages as low as 90 volts.

Only \$59.50 COMPLETE with GIANT THEATRE-BONIC SPEAKER (LOW TUBES)

TERMS AS LOW AS 10¢ A DAY



30 DAYS FREE TRIAL

You have a year to pay... terms as low as 10¢ a day... you receive privilege of 30 days' FREE trial in your own home. In addition, you are triply protected with Foreign Reception Guarantee, One-Year Warranty and Money-Back Guarantee.

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SLAVES OF THE

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A Complete Novelette

By JOHN

Author of "Twin of the Beast,"

CHAPTER I

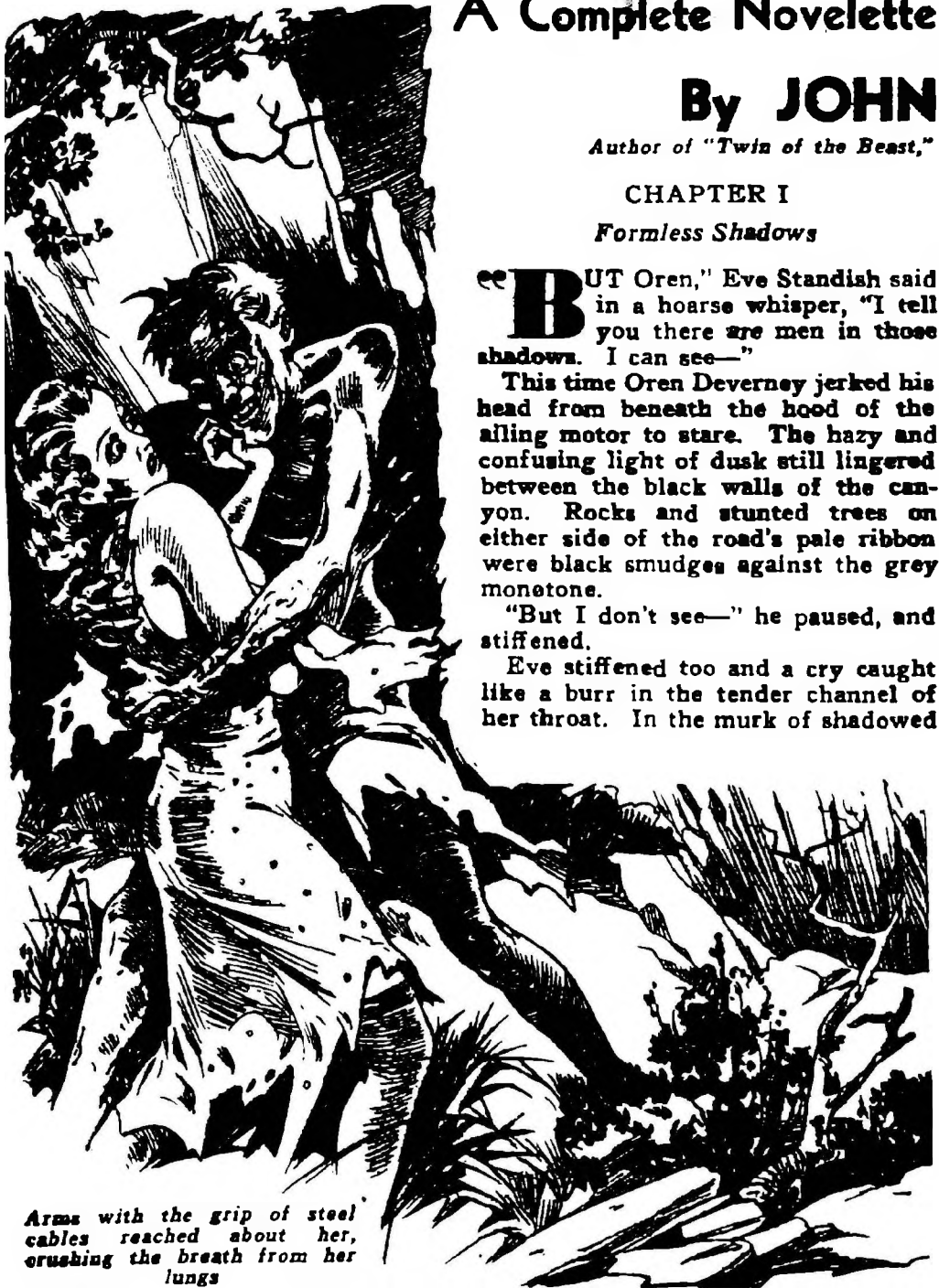
Formless Shadows

"**B**UT Oren," Eve Standish said in a hoarse whisper, "I tell you there are men in those shadows. I can see—"

This time Oren Deverney jerked his head from beneath the hood of the ailing motor to stare. The hazy and confusing light of dusk still lingered between the black walls of the canyon. Rocks and stunted trees on either side of the road's pale ribbon were black smudges against the grey monotone.

"But I don't see—" he paused, and stiffened.

Eve stiffened too and a cry caught like a burr in the tender channel of her throat. In the murk of shadowed



Arms with the grip of steel cables reached about her, crushing the breath from her lungs

An Unearthly Snare Catapults Men Into A

DANCING DEATH

of Whirling Horror

H. KNOX

"Dead Hands on the Moon," etc.

rock and shrub, gravel crunched to the scrape of dragging feet; formless shadows were flowing in a continuous blot into the grey-white road.

"Who's there?" Oren called throatily.

No answer. The flashlight in his hand flung a white lance of light toward the dark huddle and Eve's nerves crawled with fear. They stood in the center of the road, a full dozen of them—Mexicans—scarecrow figures. Some old, some young, but all ugly as dead monkeys, ragged, begrimed, they stood like upright corpses, their dumb pock-marked faces leering grotesquely into the light.

"Well?" Oren growled. "What do you want?"

The silence that met his words was



Maelstrom of Fury and Headlong Destruction

more terrible than any answer. Glittering black eyes blinked but did not falter in their gaze. They made no move forward. One grizzled apish brute in the front ranks licked his cracked lips with a pink tongue; a huge moon-faced moron with matted hair shifted his lumpy weight. It was terrifying; it was like facing some ghoulish army of the dead.

Eve could hear Oren's breath coming in harsh pants now. He stepped to the car, reached in and drew out the revolver which he carried in a door pocket. Its bright nicked finish glittered in the light as he faced the silent watchers again.

"You damned scum," he flung at them, "speak up or I'll give you a dose of this!"

BRAVELY begun, the threat seemed to peter out, fading like vapor-wave flung against beetling cliffs. The squalid scarecrows stood unmoved, like dead things—adamant, impassive.

"Then, by God, scatter!" Oren yelled wildly, and he swung the gun up to eye level.

Eve caught the note of hysteria in his voice then and she grabbed his arm.

"Don't, don't!" she begged. "If you do that—"

His arm fell limp. "You're right," he husked. "They'd be on us like a wolf pack. The lodge is only about a mile from here. We'll walk—take the short cut. I'll keep the gun on them while you lock the car."

Eve hurried to obey. The revenant pack made no move to come nearer. When she had finished, Oren snapped off the light, took her arm and they started up the road.

"Oren," Eve gasped, "what does it mean? In the last little town, the same vapory things gathered around us at the filling station, gathered like vultures about something dead. They looked at you as if they knew you and they looked at me as if—as if they could devour me alive. I believe some of the same ones are in that pack back there. They've followed us—"

"They hate me," Oren grated hoarsely, "they hate my whole family. It dates from long ago, when Father and Uncle Jackson first came to this country as prospectors. They did something—some sacrilege against the superstition of the Mexicans. But I never knew them to be so openly hostile. This is the first time they ever dared—"

He stopped, turned. There had been no sound of pursuit. Now Oren flung the light back again. There, at almost the same distance as before, stood the grim and silent watchers.

"Damn!" Oren swore. "Damn their souls!" He flicked off the light and his hand was like a steel vise on Eve's arm as he urged her to a brisker pace.

Panting up the slope, Eve felt cold tentacles of dread close round her throbbing heart. Why had she come, why had she let him lead her into this dreadful place? What did she really know of this strange, dark, silent man who had suddenly loomed so large, so tremendously important in her life?

It had been love at first sight when he had come to coach the football team in the small junior college where she taught. Blissful months had passed, and even after school was out he had lingered, reluctant to leave her. Then the telegram had come from his brother on the home ranch in New Mexico, summoning him to the bedside of an uncle who had been his guardian and foster-father.

Oren had begged her to marry him at once and come with him. She had not wanted to rush into marriage, but she had consented to come, to meet his brother and the dying uncle—his sole remaining relatives.

NOW she wondered if it had been wise. Something was wrong here, dreadfully wrong. She had sensed it in Oren's anxious preoccupied manner as soon as they had neared the place. Now it had become a certainty, with the soft footsteps of those furtive shadows of evil creeping behind them, following them, dumb and silent, charged with some inexpressible hate. Had Oren told her all he knew?

His voice broke in upon her thoughts—a steely whisper: "Here's the trail that branches off past the spring. Maybe we can give them the slip."

It was dark now, but the moon, a wan disc tangled in scudding clouds, had brightened the thickening murk, and as they walked silently up the shadowed trail, the vast and somber landscape of cliff and crag opened before them. They paused on a ridge to stare down into a shadowy ravine, slanting from above like a furrow some Titan ploughshare had gouged in solid rock. A low, throbbing rumble now filled the air, and the leprous moonlight danced weirdly on the sparkling torrent of a waterfall tumbling from the heights in a cloud of pale, hot mist.

"That's the mineral spring," Oren whispered. "They call the pool where it falls the 'Mirror of Toveyo,' and the throbbing sound you hear is the 'Drum of Toveyo.'"

It was weird, unearthly. They clambered to a jutting shelf of rock, moved single file toward the macaber scene.

Smearred by thin moon-glow a chalky cliff surged upward in ragged terraces, and in its sheer face was the black hole, belching clouds of steam out of which the shimmering ribbon of the cascade fell. From the boiling basin below came an angry hissing that mingled with the drumming rumble from the cavern above.

"Why the fancy names?" Eve asked, making a forced attempt at gayety. "Who was Toveyo?"

"An ancient sorcerer-god of the Aztecs," Oren answered huskily. "With a magic drum he once forced the people of King Huemac to dance madly until they tumbled over a precipice. The Mexicans, to this day, believe that to gaze into the Mirror of Toveyo and listen to the phantom drum-beats brings on an ancient madness."

"Listen!" Eve clutched at Oren's arm. Above the rush of the falls a cry had drifted; plaintive and birdlike, it rose from the vapors about the basin: "Geofredol! Geofredol!"

Oren laughed nervously. "Thought at first she was a ghost. It's only the housemaid at the lodge calling her sweetheart, the stable boy."

THERE was something in the desolate ululation which caused Eve to shudder, huddling against Oren's powerful body. The woman had stopped and was staring up at the thundering falls. Then her cry rose again, shrill now with a sharp edge of fear.

"Geofredo! Geo—"

It broke, swallowed by a sound that broke, cataclysmic, above the din of rushing water. It was closely followed by a medley of wild shrieks and shouts that seemed to knife through some crack that gave on hell. Then the horror appeared.

It came from the dense vapors behind the falls, a howling, shrieking shape that seemed to cry not with one voice, but with the voice of seven devils, and while it howled in a confused cacophony of pain and diabolic mirth, it tumbled, rolled and somersaulted down the slope. For an instant it came upright, and, leaping, lurched crazily toward the cowering woman on the basin's rim.

The woman stood paralyzed before the monster's rush. Then the beam of the flash in Oren's hand shot out and the thing was limned in a white mist. It was the naked figure of a man. Black hair tossed about his pain-twisted face, and the slaver's mouth, dilated nostrils and bulging eyes swam like a demon's visage in a nightmare. The hideous thing had reached the woman.

With a cry, Eve jerked forward. But Oren seized her, dragged her back from the brink of the chasm. And there, cut off by the gulf that yawned between them and the basin's rim, they stood helpless while the horror was consummated.

The woman had swayed, ducked, but too late. The reaching arms of the shrieking dervish had seized her, gripped her, and the two bodies now lurching, dancing weirdly in one single lump of screaming flesh, toppled to the ground. The two

bodies rolled to the basin's rim and jerked convulsively as they vanished in the swirling currents.

THE descent from the ledge was a blur in Eve's mind. She came to her senses on the rim of the pool. Ghostly vapors swirled about them, and Oren, on hands and knees, was reaching for something that tossed limp and gleaming in an eddy near the spillway.

He grasped a bobbing limb, dragged the thing out upon the gravel. It was the body of the man. Its twisted face, now frozen in death, sent waves of nausea twitching through Eve's frame. Then she noticed the peculiar color of the corpse. A mottled bluish tinge shone through the yellowish pallor. The bluish tinge seemed to deepen as she stared.

Eve turned her eyes away. "The woman?" she gasped.

Oren swung the light over the pool; it played through the mist that overhung the churned waters. But the woman was not there; she had vanished as if some abysmal monster had seized her and carried her down into lightless depths!

"Merciful God!" Eve breathed. "The woman was waiting for her lover and this monster seized her, murdered her! Who is he, Oren?"

The light went out. Blackness and the roar of the waters surged around her.

"The monster," Oren said in low, hollow tones, "was the man Geofredo himself—the woman's lover. That, say the legends, is the way the curse of Toveyo works. The victim seizes the thing he loves, destroys it, casts it into the devil-god's waiting arms!"

CHAPTER II

The Hanging Corpse

AFTER the first numbed interval of terror had passed, Eve felt her anger rising, boiling like a hot cloud under her ribs, forcing itself into her throat. She pushed away from Oren's arms.

"Why did you bring me here?" she demanded. "You knew—I've seen it in your face—the worry, the fear. You're still hiding something."

The fingers that had gripped her arms relaxed; his head dropped.

"I'm sorry, Eve," he said slowly, miserably. "You're right. I shouldn't have brought you, shouldn't have asked you to share the peril, the curse that hangs over my wretched family. I've lied to you, but now I'm going to make a clean breast of it.

"My mother was not a Spaniard, as I told you. She was an Indian, an Aztec—of the royal strain of Montezuma. For generations the daughters of that family had been pre-ordained Virgins of the Sun. My father took her against the will of her family—against the will of the old gods. He and my Uncle Jackson prospered here, became rich in this strange new land.

"But the native Mexicans never forgot. To them we are still accursed. My mother died when I was born; my father killed himself out of grief a few years later. My brothers, Guido and Malcom and I were reared by Uncle Jackson."

"Malcom?" Eve asked.

"I'm getting to that," Oren said. "Yes, there was another brother, the eldest. A few years ago he decided to marry; he brought his fiancée here—just as I have brought you. But in the night the doom of the Deverney's claimed them. They were found dead next morning in this very pool.

"That's why the Mexicans stared at us tonight—stared at you especially. They believe that tonight the old dark god will claim his due."

Eve shivered. Then an emotion stronger than fear gripped her; a warm wave of love and pity rose toward the man she was accusing bitterly. He had told her all now, and what she had been unwilling to face blindly, she could now face with open eyes. Impulsively, she put her arms around him.

"I'm sorry, Oren. I understand now. I'm not a coward, and I love you. We'll face it together!"

She felt a tremor run through his

body as his arms reached hungrily around her and hugged her close.

"Darling! How I love you for that. But I can't accept the sacrifice—not now. I'm going to take you back."

"But I won't go," she said firmly, smiling up at him now through tears that misted her eyes. "I have a will of my own, you see. I'm staying with you—now and for all time!"

He started to protest again, but a sound rose above the water's din—a scrape of footsteps on the trail that led down from the basin in the other direction. Oren fished the flash from his pocket, shot the beam down through rocks and brush, spraying white mist over a figure that had come to a stop and was staring up.

"Guido!"

"Oren!"

A TALL young man was clambering up with quick, powerful strides, and Oren was rushing to meet him. They clasped hands, and in the moment's silence Eve surveyed the newcomer.

He was lean and tall as Oren was, but his face was darker, handsomer even. He wore riding breeches and a polo shirt; the short sleeves revealed his brown and muscular arms. His dark eyes were piercing and his voice was musical and perfectly controlled.

"Oren, old man," he greeted his brother, "it's good to see you. But how did you get here?"

"Good to see you, too, Guido," Oren echoed. "Our car stalled; we took the short cut, and—"

"Yes, I'd better tell you now that I've been eavesdropping."

"You heard—"

Guido nodded. "And I gathered from your talk that something horrible has happened here." He looked at Eve, half invisible in the shadows. Then he came toward her, holding out a slender brown hand. "And this is Eve? I'm going to like you, Eve. From what I've heard, you not only have beauty but courage as well."

Eve smiled, taking his hand. Somehow she felt comforted by its strong and confiding grip.

"But let's hear what happened."

Guido had turned back to Oren. "Uncle Jackson just came back to the lodge and had gone out walking, against my advice. He was terrified; he blurted out something about hearing screams, then went straight to his room and locked himself in."

He turned quickly. Without a word Oren had flung the beam of his flash toward the edge of the pool, limning the horrible discolored body on its marge.

"Geofredo!" Guido exclaimed, frowning. "And Maria? They were together, I thought."

Oren shrugged. "Gone," he said, "vanished. We saw them fall into the pool together." He described what they had witnessed.

Guido strode toward the body, stared down at it. His dark eyes wandered absently to Eve's face. "Horrible," he muttered. "But we must make the best of it—not let it bluff us. I sent for you, Oren, so that we could fight this thing out together."

Oren took a deep breath, seemed to absorb something of his brother's defiant manner.

"Well then, tell me, Guido—"

"I don't know much," Guido replied. "But there's some human fiend at work here; in fact he has been here for some time. He's incited the Mexicans against us, he's scaring Uncle Jackson to death, and I believe he's the same one who was responsible for Malcom's murder two years ago."

"What about these people you mentioned in your letter?" Oren asked.

"They're the most recent puzzle," Guido told him. "They've been at the ranch for weeks—unwelcome, as far as I'm concerned. There's a certain Señor Picada who says he's a rich rancher from Mexico, interested in investing in American holdings. His daughter is with him—a sloe-eyed vampire type. Then there's Captain Vautrin and his wife. They came here months ago, settled in a deserted cabin, made some pretense of prospecting, but recently they've both moved to the lodge. The difficulty is that Uncle Jackson insists on keeping them there."

"But why?"

"That's just the point," Guido answered in a gruff undertone. "I think he's afraid of them. I think that's all that's the matter with him now. He's robust, strong beyond his years; yet I believe he's dying — dying of nothing on earth but sheer terror!"

OREN swallowed, frowned. "Are there any other guests?"

"No, no guests, but there's Dr. Blade," Guido said. "He's a specialist from the city, but he's posing as an archeologist. I brought him here under that guise because Uncle Jackson has positively refused to see a doctor. Blade hasn't been able to find anything wrong with him. But let's go on to the lodge now. You'll meet all of them there, and, Oren, I want your reactions."

They left the body where it lay. Guido said that he would send a Mexican servant out to cover it with a sheet and they would not disturb it until the officers from town arrived. They threaded their way in silence down a little slope, rounded a shoulder of the hill, and came upon the lights of the hacienda.

It was a long, rambling place, built of adobe in the old Mexican-pueblo tradition. Guido opened an axe-hewn door of oak and they entered an atmosphere of ancient days. Massive carved furniture filled the rooms, and the floors were covered with colorful Indian rugs. Save for an old Mexican servant, a wizened, evil-looking creature named Oceol, no one seemed to be about.

"Our guests," said Guido significantly, "are absent. Great walkers, these guests of ours—especially at night."

He led them to a huge and heavy door in the left wing of the hacienda, rapped on the carved panels.

"He's probably in a blue funk," he whispered. "He does that often—locks himself in and refuses to open the door." He rapped again. "Uncle Jackson!"

There was only silence and the echo of the knocking through the empty house. "We'll have it out with him

tonight," Guido went on. "He knows something, and we'll force him to speak." He raised his voice. "Uncle Jackson! Oren is here! Let us in!"

Still no answer. Oren had paled. "Something's wrong!" he blurted. "He may be—dead. Quick, get an axe!"

GUIDO went down the hall toward the kitchen and returned. Running, Oren snatched the axe from him and began battering down the weathered door. There was still no sound from the room, and they were certain that something had happened to the old man.

Presently a panel gave way and Oren's hand darted in and slid the bolt. He pushed the door open and they plunged in with a rush, but halted a few steps inside the threshold, halted with terror clutching at their throats.

A dim light burned in a shaded lamp beside the bed. But the bed, with rumpled covers, was empty. Its usual occupant was in a shadowy corner of the room—the tall wiry figure of old Jackson Deverney was grotesquely upright in a white nightshirt. His head lolled strangely to one side, his mouth was twisted and his tongue protruded from between yellowed teeth. His eyes were wide, glassy. The toes of his feet barely touched the floor, and he was hanging by a rope which encircled his neck and ran up to a rafter above him. An overturned chair lay on the floor nearby.

CHAPTER III

Dance With the Dying

NO one spoke at first, a cry stopped Eve's throat. Then Guido stepped forward. Half crouching, with a look of fearful bewilderment on his sharp features, he peered at the gruesome cadaver.

"Dead!" he said thickly. "And it's my fault for leaving him alone to brood. The fear got him, he couldn't stand it and he took the only way out!"

Oren nodded dazedly and stared about the room. He went to the room's deep windows. They were protected on the outside by steel bars—mute testimony to the old man's fears. He examined the bolt of the door, then turned back to Guido.

"Yes," he muttered, "he must have done it himself. But, somehow, I can't picture him doing it."

"You haven't known him these past few months," Guido said. "He hasn't been the same man at all." He had drawn away from the hanging corpse as if he were afraid of it. "But we'd better leave that for the coroner to decide. In the meantime we won't touch anything. I'll phone for the sheriff while you two see if you can find Dr. Blade."

They went back into the hall and closed the door of the death room behind them. Guido hurried to the telephone in the library. Oren grabbed Eve's arm and drew her toward the door at the end of the hall.

THEY stumbled out into the night, brilliant with the silver and ebon clarity of high altitudes. They circled the stables and outbuildings and came back to the narrow bridle path that skirted the rim of the cañon. Every dozen yards or so Oren paused to cup his hands and call:

"Dr. Blade, Dr. Blade!"

There was no response. They dipped over the ridge, trampled down through massed junipers on the other slope, then silently headed back toward the lodge. Leaf mold muffled their footfalls, and as they rounded a rock outcropping that jutted between them and the lighted house, Oren pulled Eve to a halt. A soft guttural voice was speaking beyond the shadow of the rock.

"—I'm going to cut into that corpse," the voice said. "Get it to the basement unseen if possible. I'll have to get back now."

Feet scraped—two pairs of them—then they moved off in opposite directions. A tall stooped shape soon became silhouetted against the light, as it stumbled toward the hacienda. Then a figure appeared in the em-

brasure of the front door—Guido's. He stepped out, hailed the approaching man.

"Doctor, Uncle Jackson is dead. We've been trying to find you."

"I thought I heard someone call," the other replied.

Huddled in the dark, Oren grasped Eve's arm. "God!" he gasped. "The fellow is Dr. Blade! What could he have meant? Anyway, we'll keep quiet about it for the present, and wait and see what he does."

Guido had taken the tall doctor's arm and was starting back into the house. Then both men paused. Two figures were running up from the direction of the trail to the springs. Slightly in the lead was a small man in riding boots. A woman in a tweed sports suit followed.

"Hello. What's up? We heard—"

Guido faced them belligerently. "Where have you been, Vautrin?" he growled.

"Just walking," the man stammered, out of breath. "You seem upset. What's—"

"Uncle Jackson is dead," Guido said. He turned back into the house and the others followed him.

OREN and Eve came out of the shadows and hurried toward the house. They found the others still in the hallway and Guido brusquely introduced them. Dr. Blade was gaunt and tall, with a sallow cadaverous face and black secretive eyes under thick brows. Vautrin and his wife were even less appealing. She was a slight woman with faded cornsilk hair and eyes pale blue and cold. Vautrin was youngish, but his flabby, neurotic face, thin sandy hair and jaded eyes gave him a look of premature age.

He wore well shined riding boots, and Eve's eyes lingered on them. She had suddenly remembered a detail glimpsed in the death room. Now she wished for a glimpse of the soles of those boots.

"Perhaps the others had better stay in the hall," Dr. Blade was saying to Guido, "while we make our examination. We must disturb things as little as possible."

Guido nodded, turned to Vautrin. "I advise you not to leave, Captain," he said pointedly. Then he followed Blade to the door of the room. The doctor had already pushed the door open, but he had stopped.

Guido shoved past him, halted too with a harsh gasp.

"What is it?" Oren stammered.

Guido turned, his dark features drained of blood. "My God!" he grated. "It wasn't suicide—he was murdered! The body's gone!"

Eve felt her nerves tighten as the sockets of her eyes burned strangely. With the others she stepped into the room. Nothing had been changed, except that the rope had been cut—sliced off as with a sharp knife—and the gruesome cadaver had vanished! It no longer dangled grotesquely.

But was nothing changed? While the others stared in blank amazement, Eve stooped quickly, stared under the bed. The shadowy space was empty. She straightened, looked at Guido.

"The murderer," she said slowly, "was in this room all the time, Guido. He was still hiding here when we came in; he was under the bed."

Guido frowned and the others looked startled. "But how—" he paused. "By gad, you're right. It's the only way it could have been, since the door was locked on the inside. He hid here, waiting until we left, then he carried the body away while I was in the library phoning." Suddenly his eyes were on Vautrin, burning into the man's pasty face.

"Don't stare at me," Vautrin rasped. "You were in the house alone. You had the best opportunity to do it."

Guido's long hands fisted and he took a step toward Vautrin.

But Eve interrupted again, playing her second card. "Wait," she said, catching Guido's sleeve. "Wouldn't it be best to search the house at once? If the murderer is among us he wouldn't have had time to take the body far. Wouldn't the basement be a likely place?"

Dr. Blade shot her a quick, searching glance, and Eve knew that she had scored. "I hardly think—" the doctor began.

But Guido cut him short. "It's worth trying," he said. "But we'll stay together while we search."

THEY followed Guido along the hall and down the dark basement stairs. A quick search of the furnace room proved it to be empty. They turned then to a door that gave on a storeroom in the left wall. Blade had stepped ahead of the others now. A key flashed in his hand and he thrust it into the lock, twisted it and swore.

"Damn! The key seems to have broken. But then the place was locked and—"

Oren shoved him aside. He lunged against the door with a rush. A single impact of his muscular shoulder cracked the lock; the door swung open, and Oren lurched in, swaying to recover his balance. The beam of Guido's flash shot past him, and suddenly there was a revolver in his other fist.

"Stand where you are," Guido grated, "and reach up!"

Two cowering figures blinked into the light and raised their hands slowly. One was a short, squat man with a round swarthy face and a dark mustache over a small mouth that now had a puckered gape of a hooked fish. Beside him was a slender girl with sleek black hair and shadowy eyes. She was dark as a gypsy and huge golden earrings dangled against each olive cheek. Behind them a bulky mass lay on the floor covered by a grey blanket.

"Picada," Guido growled, "you've tried one murder too many. Stand aside there. Pull the blanket away, Oren!"

"But you are mistaken—" the Mexican began to protest.

But Oren had seized a corner of the blanket, yanked it away.

"Good Lord!" he drew back with a start. An amazed gasp from the whole group echoed his exclamation. There was a corpse beneath the blanket, but it was not the corpse they expected to see. Instead of the body of Jackson Deverney, this blackened, naked thing, sprawled in the revealing glare of the light, was the body of the servant, Geofredo, who, spinning in his

weird death dance, had dragged his lover into the watery pool!

"Well, Picada?" Guido was the first to recover.

Dr. Blade stepped up before the Mexican could reply.

"This has gone far enough," he said. "I take the responsibility for this. While walking tonight I discovered this body beside the pool. I guessed something of the horror which had taken place, and I wished to investigate—alone.

"Quite by accident I stumbled on Señor Picada and asked him to help me bring the body here. The first step in an investigation seemed to perform an autopsy and discover what manner of poison or drug had been used on this victim. That was what I intended to do, secretly. Incidentally, Picada is cleared of suspicion by the very fact that he was willing to help me."

He smiled calmly as he finished, and Picada and his daughter smiled too. Eve stared at Picada's feet. He was wearing hiking moccasins. She turned to Vautrin.

"Captain," she said evenly, "I wonder if you would let me look at the soles of your boots?"

"MY boots!" Vautrin gasped after a long moment and took a step back. But his face was no more startled than the faces of the others.

"Yes," Eve repeated, "your boots." She turned to the others. "When we first came into the room in which the murder was committed," she explained, "I noticed something which I don't think Guido and Oren saw. There was a pair of boots under the bed. I thought nothing of it at the moment, but later I wondered if those boots might not have contained the murderer's feet and legs.

"Just now when we were in there I noticed that the boots were gone. But I remember the look of the soles—a certain worn spot. Look out there, Guido! Your gun—"

But her warning came too late. Vautrin had suddenly acted. One leg, outflung, had kicked Guido's wrist, knocking the gun from his hand. Be-

fore he could make a move to recover it Vautrin's right fist had emerged from beneath his coat gripping a large and very businesslike Luger.

"Stop!" he grated, shoving his wife quickly behind him with one hand, while he moved the weapon from side to side with the other, covering the group. "The first one to make a move dies!" His face was the twisted mask of a maniac now, and he was backing slowly toward the door.

"Then you admit—" Oren flung at him.

"I admit being under the bed," Vautrin snarled. "I had been hiding there for hours, waiting to witness something I anticipated—a murder. I did not murder Jackson Deverney, but I know," he checked himself, "well, I know everything—entirely too much to feel safe in this house. I'm going now. Don't try to follow me, and don't make a move until five minutes have passed; that is, if you value your lives!"

He had backed outside the door. Gripping his wife's arm and dragging her with him, he darted off into the darkness.

A growl broke from Oren's throat, and he started after them. But Guido pulled him back.

"Don't be foolish," he said tensely. "They can't escape. The only road that leads out of these mountains goes through town. They can't get anywhere afoot. I'll phone the officers; then we'll divide up and look for them. There are plenty of guns here. One of us can stay at the lodge and wait for the officers while the others comb the woods. Agreeable?"

ALL agreed, and tense, feverish excitement now mingled with the fear that gripped them. At least they were no longer completely in the dark. Even Picada's daughter took a rifle, accompanying her father, who chose a repeating shotgun. Guido, it was decided, should stay at the house. The others separated at the door of the lodge, struck out in different directions.

Eve and Oren took the trail to the mineral springs. Both carried light

.30—.30 carbines. They went slowly, pausing often to listen. The lights of the hacienda dropped away; the dark shadows of the junipers swallowed them. A cold uneasiness began to tug at Eve's heart again. Oren was strangely silent.

"Why did Vautrin do it?" Eve suddenly whispered. "You believe he's guilty, don't you?"

"Yes," Oren answered, "and yet that matter of motive bothers me too. What does he hope to gain? This place isn't valuable. The gold pockets Father and Uncle Jackson worked were exhausted years ago. I can't get it."

In his voice Eve detected that hollow note of fear again—fear not for the menace of flesh and blood, but for the dark shadow of that ancient curse hanging over his doomed house.

Softly they crept on, leaving the trail occasionally to crouch in ambush and wait when they heard the slightest sound. It was thirty minutes before they rounded the hill where the cataract was visible. A smoking ribbon of silver tinsel, it glittered in the moonlight, and punctuating the steady rumble of the water was another sound—a vibrant throb, rhythmic like a drum-beat. Eve shuddered, gripping her rifle, staring from side to side into the gloom, then up at the falls spilling over the churned cauldron—the haunted Mirror of Toveyo.

"Eve!" Oren had suddenly clutched at her, drawn her back into the shadows of a rock outcropping.

She followed the direction of his gaze, and saw a figure emerging into the moonlight that spilled into a clearing at the foot of the trail. It was a woman's figure. She moved slowly, eyes fixed on the falls above. It was Vautrin's wife and the nicked barrel of a revolver in her hand gleamed momentarily.

"Shall we call to her," Eve whispered, "or follow—?"

SHE didn't finish. The words died on her suddenly frozen lips. Above the water's dull monotone a scream like the whine of an angry

siren suddenly burst, knifed into her ears with a shrill vibration. Savage, maniacal, it came from the shelf above the pool and seemed to increase in volume like the wild crescendo of a falling shell. And then she saw—

Down the sloping trail the black shrieking object was rolling, bouncing and howling with agonized bleats. It struck the lower level, floundered up, began to weave from side to side like a top that has spent its force and is running down.

The woman had started toward it at first, but now she retreated. The thing flung itself at her. She screamed; the gun exploded and fell from her hand. Oren had shoved Eve back, was plunging out to meet the monster's rush.

Afraid to risk a shot because of the woman, Oren had gripped his rifle club-wise. Flinging himself toward the spinning maniac, he swung the rifle in a wide arc. Eve screamed then. For a lurch to one side had slung the madman's body beneath the swing of the clubbed gun and the next instant the creature had seized Oren about the waist, hurled him to the ground. Then, dancing weirdly over his body, the beastly killer had seized the fleeing woman.

Quivering with terror, Eve forced herself out of the shadows, staggered toward Oren's body. The gyrating monster had hugged the woman to him now, and his screams blended horridly with her own crazed cries. Reaching Oren's body, Eve dropped to her knees, grabbed frantically at Oren's coat, tried to drag him up.

"Oren, Oren!" she sobbed wildly. Then she stiffened and whirled. A shriek tore at the raw tissues of her throat. The monster had flung the woman to the ground and still spinning, was hurtling toward her in a crazy zigzag motion. The naked phantom thing advanced toward her.

Too late Eve tried to dodge. A swinging arm slapped across her face, flung her back; a rushing body collided with hers. Arms with the grip of steel cables reached about her, crushing the breath from her lungs, and she too was whirling, whirling . . .

Red flames of agony and terror seared Eve's brain. Once, as consciousness flickered, she jerked back her head, stared into the twisted maniac-face with wide slaving mouth still pealing its awful cries. Vautrin's face! And it was Vautrin's vile naked body against which she was pressed, hugged tight in a deathly grip.

"Let it be swift," Eve prayed, "let death be swift!"

Her lungs were bursting; her brain was throbbing against the walls of her skull. She felt her body becoming a limp, inert bundle, swung by a naked madman in this macaber dance of death. Then black nausea claimed her and she was sinking into dark depths, beyond fear, beyond pain.

CHAPTER IV

The Demon of the Falls

EVE came to her senses in a bedroom in the hacienda. Her whole body ached with bruises. Oren was standing by the bed and behind him, near the door, were other figures—Guido and Dr. Blade talking with two men whose badges identified them as officers.

Eve took a deep breath and sat up. The nightmare fog was clearing from her brain. "They got here in time to save us?" she stammered.

Oren shook his head. She noticed now that his left arm was in a sling. He seemed otherwise uninjured.

"The only thing that saved us," he said, "was the fact that Vautrin died before he succeeded in strangling you as he did his wife. He broke my arm when I fell, and at the same time he knocked me out. When I came to my senses he was dead. He had the strength of two men his size. I can't imagine what—"

"It must have been some maddening drug," Eve suggested.

"Possibly," Oren agreed, "but there seems to be some other devilish power too. First the victim is turned into a human juggernaut. Then after a certain time it kills him."

He turned, stared somberly out the open window. A curtain fluttered in the light breeze. Faint and far away came the drumlike throbbing of the falls. Eve noticed the greyish pallor under the tanned skin of Oren's lean strong face.

"Oren," she said, taking his hand, "don't let it get you—that nonsense about the curse. There's a human being at the bottom of it all. If it wasn't Vautrin, it was someone else. Where's Picada and his daughter?"

"I don't know," Oren replied abstractedly. "They haven't showed up."

"Then it must be Picada," Eve said, "he and that slinky gypsy creature he calls his daughter. Let's go and find them, Oren—now. I'm not afraid!"

He stared at her, scowling. "Don't even suggest such a thing," he replied, almost harshly. "Don't you see what happens—what happened to Vautrin and his wife?"

"But what's to be done? We can't surrender in blind panic to this devil-god myth!"

"No," he said, and his jaw set grimly, "no, we can't surrender to it. I'm going out again, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it. Dr. Blade is going to perform an autopsy on Vautrin's body. We've already brought it in and put it in the morgue in the basement. The rest of us will take up the search again. We were just waiting to see that you came around all right."

"I feel all right now," Eve said quickly. "I want to go with you, Oren."

"That's out!" he answered firmly. "You've got to understand, Eve, that I won't take any more chances with you. I was a fool to bring you here, but now that you're here, I'm going to see that you're safe."

"You're going to stay right in this room. The windows and the door will be locked and I'll leave a loaded revolver with you. Blade will be downstairs in the basement and a deputy will be with him. They'll hear you if you call. But if anyone tries to enter the room by force—no matter who it is—shoot, and shoot to kill!"

EVE nodded, she saw that argument with him would be futile. Blade and the two officers had left the room. Guido stood waiting.

"Ready?" he asked.

Oren went to the windows, lowered and locked them. He brought a loaded revolver and laid it on a chair beside the bed. Eve followed him to the door to bolt it. Guido stepped into the hall. For a long moment Oren held her in his arms and she clung to him fiercely.

Finally he pushed her gently away. "I'll be back, darling, and I hope I'll have the answer. For my sake, don't take any chances. You won't, dear?" He turned quickly then and was gone.

Eve closed the door and bolted it, and stood listening to their footfalls become fainter and fainter. Alone now, the courage she had felt seemed to drain from her body.

Excepting Oren there was not one of them that she felt she could trust. Now Oren was gone—back into the night that had spawned those frightful horrors. She felt an impulse to run after him, beg him to come back, to stay with her and let the others go. But she mastered that impulse and went back to the bed and sat down.

The house was utterly silent. Even the distant throb of the waterfall was shut out now. Eve shivered. The emptiness of the room tormented her like a tomb's closed silence. She stared at the shaded windows, felt the illusion of eyes staring, spying at her from the cracks beneath the blinds.

She tried to banish the obsession, but couldn't. She got up and put out the light, raised a shade. A blue shaft of moonlight slanted through the pane, lay in an irregular square on the bed. This was better than the glaring light, exposing her to the imagined stare of demon eyes. She lay down on the bed, her head propped high, one hand touching the cold steel of the revolver.

How silent it was, how utterly, tormentingly silent! Shadow shapes beyond the moonlight's reach began to assume queer shapes, to move and shift, advance and retreat. She fixed

her eyes on the window to keep from looking at them, stared at the pale sky above the treetops, at the shadows along the patio wall.

Where were Oren and Guido now? Had they stayed together or had they separated? The latter was more likely. She shuddered, thinking of Oren alone in that haunted darkness. Would he go toward the falls again, braving that peril for the very reason that he feared it?

Her thoughts scattered. She sat up, breathless. Had she imagined it or had a dark shape moved, there in the shadows of the patio? Yes, something was moving there. Quivering in every nerve and muscle, she slid from the bed and crept to the window.

Through the moon glazed pane she saw the figure clearly now. A man, stooped, so that she could not see his face, was sidling furtively from shadow to shadow, moving toward the house. He passed out of her range of vision.

Softly Eve unlocked the window, slowly raised it. Then cautiously she thrust out her head. Moonlight washed the hacienda wall. The figure had vanished. The barred window of the death room was next to the window from which she stared. Beyond that was a door. Had he gone in there?

A thin shaft of light splashed suddenly against the bars of the next window. It vanished quickly. The man had gone into the death room and was in there with a flashlight!

EVE crept back to the bed and got the revolver. Her immediate impulse was to fire it, sound the alarm. But that would warn the intruder and he would escape. Quietly she tiptoed back to the window, and climbed through. With pounding heart she crept along the hacienda wall, stole to the window, and peered in through iron grill-work.

Chill fingers of dismay clutched at her throat then. The man crouching in the shadows of the death room was Guido!

Near the wall to the left of the bed, he stooped intent on something. He

moved slightly and Eve saw his fingers twirling the dial of a wall safe which a painting on the wall had concealed. Now the safe swung open and he thrust in his hand, began to draw out documents—ancient looking papers with faded seals. Some he pushed back into the safe. Others he thrust into his pocket. Presently he closed the safe, replaced the painting, and snapped off the light.

Scuttling to the shelter of a shrub, Eve crouched in the shadows, quaking with indecision. If she ran to the basement for Blade and the deputy, it might be too late. Guido would have made his escape. Should she follow him?

The door into the patio opened silently, and he was coming out. Quickly he cat-footed across the moonlight patio and went through the gate. Eve tiptoed silently after him. She saw him taking the trail that led up to the springs.

Creeping out silently, Eve followed, leaf mold muffling her footfalls. She caught sight of Guido again as he mounted the steep climb that led to the basin. Crouching behind a boulder, she stared up. He had passed out of her range of vision now. Huddled low, digging her feet into the loose rocks, Eve began to climb. As her head rose above the level of the shelf, she halted. The rumble of the falls dinned in her ears. The swirling vapors from the cave's mouth billowed out in dense clouds. Then her eyes became accustomed to the floating spray and she made out Guido's shape again—his dark shadow was dissolving in the mist, vanishing into the mouth of the cave.

Eve pulled herself up to the basin's rim. The cave! Why hadn't they thought of it before? Beyond its black fog-belching mouth must lie the answer to the whole ghastly enigma.

Eve straightened. At her feet, silvered by the moon, the Mirror of Toveyo churned and boiled. Staring into it, listening to the weird throbbing, Eve's brain spun too. Should she go back for help?

Doggedly, taking a grip on her waning courage, Eve forced her reluctant

feet toward the jagged rocks that formed rude steps up to the cave's lower lip. She reached the narrow ledge, slimed with moss. Poised precariously there with the warm currents rushing past her feet, she stared into the tenuous veils of mist that hid the hollow vault of darkness. Clutching a moist splinter of rock with a shaking hand, she hesitated. Could she possibly go in?

A shrieking gust of hysteria froze her body. Out of the boiling mist a shape was materializing—a nightmare shape that seemed spawned in the twisted dreams of lunacy. A horrible, corpse-like face, leered from tossing black hair, and beneath it loomed a hunched body—shadowy, batlike. It was splashing toward her through the warm currents of the shallow stream.

All reason deserted Eve then, swallowed by a wave of intolerable terror. With a shriek that beat pitifully against the thunder of the cataract she staggered back, lost her balance and slipped. Lurching out, she went hurtling down into the darkness.

Her body struck the surface of the deep pool and sank like a plummet as darkness enveloped her. Then she was up, choking, spitting, tossed like a chip in the spinning current. Fighting against the pull of the whirlpool, she flung herself toward the graveled edge. Her fingers clawed desperately at the slimed rim. Choking, she lifted dazed eyes, and too late tried to push herself back.

The ghastly shape from the cave was crouched now on the pool's rim. Bony fingers clutched at her, pulled her with a jerk through the fringe of foam to the shore. Then something soft and heavy like a sandbag slugged dully against her skull. Her body went limp, her spinning brain whizzed off into darkness.

CHAPTER V

The Whirl of Death

IT was the screaming that aroused her—the screams and the horrible throbbing sound which beat against

her ears. Eve opened her eyes. Clouds of sulphurous fog enveloped her; the humid heat was stifling. She was sagging limply against the slimy walls of a cave. One of her ankles was fastened by a heavy chain to a rock. The warm current flowed past her, and a bluish haze lit the cloudy darkness.

Eve moved, sat up. Beyond the current a pallid face shone through the bright blue fog—the face of Picada's daughter! The girl lay half in the current, half out, still, as if dead. But as Eve splashed toward her to the end of her chain, the girl raised her head. Her wild eyes focused with an effort, and she screamed:

"Madre Maria! I thought I was dead. Cannot I die?"

The pitiful wail curdled Eve's blood, but she fought against the hopeless despair that threatened to swamp her.

"Who brought you here?" she called above the throbbing din and the wild cries that gusted through the haze.

"But I do not know," the girl's choked voice replied. "Some monster thing captured us, beat us, and brought us here." She paused, listening to the fearful cries. "He is torturing Father now." Her words dwindled to a shriek.

"Stop it!" Eve yelled. "We must get out of here. Tell me all you know about this awful business. Why did you and your father come here anyhow?"

"Father came here from Mexico," the girl sobbed, "to buy the Deverney place. It is the spring he wants—this accursed water. Somehow he heard of it. It is valuable—a priceless mineral water."

Eve's brain was clearing. This much was plain: the mineral water, its value unguessed for years, had suddenly become the prize in a bloody game. But who? She could not answer that. But she was now certain that the fiend behind the horror was human, and since he was human he could be beaten.

The Picada girl was screaming again, and struggling with the chain that held her.

"Stop it," Eve cried, "save your

strength. If we can only hold out until Oren finds us."

"Oren!" the girl was scornful. "But he is here too. While you were unconscious the monster dragged him in. You see, there is no hope!"

Eve jerked back. The weird throbbing which had come from a branching tunnel where the blue light burned, suddenly ceased, but the horrible screams rose higher. Then, into the blue aura of the light, a maniacal figure was leaping—Picada!

Naked now, his short squat body was a twitching, spinning thing that seemed alive with some diabolical power. Pitching forward, he somersaulted into the water, flung himself upright, and with wild yelps went lurching and spinning toward the cowering figure of his daughter.

Eve flung herself against the cavern wall. Hiding her eyes and stopping her ears with her palms, she tried to shut out the fearful sounds; the wild scream of the girl, the thud and splash of grappling bodies, the madman's abysmal yammering.

AFTER an eternity of terror she looked up. One glance was enough. The girl lay limp beside the convulsed, jerking body of the man, her head lolling weirdly in the water, her dark hair flowing with the current. Picada lay pitching and heaving in death spasms, but a new horror had taken his place.

The hideous monster Eve had seen stood in the lighted opening to the torture cavern. Smearred by the eerie bluish glare, his hunched form looked a figure out of some concealed myth—a feathered demon-thing from the grisly lore of the all-powerful Aztecs. A dark breech clout girdled his lean loins and over his shoulders was thrown a cloak of woven feathers which spread out in a wing effect when he moved his arms. The horrible twisted face with the lank black hair straggling over it was leering at her now out of beady reptilian eyes.

"You will be next," a harsh voice spoke. "Come nearer and you shall see me prepare your lover for Toveyo's dance of death."

Oren! Oren was in there. In a few moments he would be like Picada, would lurch out, a howling madman!

Fearfully Eve stumbled out into the current, stared past the monster into the lighted off-set. Hanging from the ceiling of the small chamber, a carbide miner's lamp shot a jet of blue flame into the air. Its weird glow splashed over two bodies on the floor. One of them was the bruised, half-naked body of the servant-girl, Maria. The other was Oren, unconscious, his arms and ankles bound. Then Eve saw something else.

On an axle protruding from the solid wall of stone hung a giant wheel. From its iron hub huge spokes of wood spread out to a heavy rim. Behind it a belt ran out to a small gasoline engine a few yards away. The purpose of the deadly contrivance became clear at once.

The grotesquely garbed fiend had stepped back into the cavern. Stooping, he lifted Oren's unconscious body, propped it upright against the wheel. Then, as Eve stared in a helpless terror, he began to bind it fast to the mammoth spokes.

Finished, he stepped back. Oren hung there like a figure on a crucifix, his head lolling, still unconscious. The fiend had reached back to a projecting shelf of rock and picked up a large hypodermic syringe filled with some blackish substance.

"This," he said, leering at Eve as he fingered the gleaming instrument, "is filled with a preparation of magical properties—it changes human beings into beasts. Long ago the *ahkins*, or devil-priests of the Aztecs mixed a powerful medicine, *teopatli*, from the tuberous roots of the *vinagrilla* and other secret herbs.

"Arrows or knives tipped with this potent drug induced in their victims a murder-madness that make the ravages of hashish tame by comparison. I have improved on this ancient formula. I have added to it the venom of the rattlesnake and doses of the poison of the Black Widow spider. As a result, I am able to destroy my monsters after a fixed time by varying the doses of poison."

Leering hideously, he stepped to the giant wheel. "This," he said, "is my final touch of artistry. After injecting the drug, I spin the victim on my wheel. That creates the beauty of the death dance. The delicate organs in the ears which control equilibrium are upset.

"When my victim is released, howling alternately from the pain of the poison and the madness of the drug, he cannot stand on his feet, can only spin, lurch and roll. He thus becomes a human Juggernaut of incredible strength, seizing, crushing, destroying everything in his path, until finally the tissue-destroying snake venom brings the death convulsions which leave him a hideous, discolored corpse."

"You beast!" Eve heard herself shrieking. "You monster!" The words choked in her throat. Words would not help now.

MADLY she stared at the stream flowing past her feet, and her brain grappled desperately with an idea. The stream could be used to carry a message to the others outside, if only—

While the fiend hesitated, watching her, she suddenly stripped off her suede jacket, tossed it in the current; her blouse followed. Then, stifling her shame, she tore her skirt from her limbs, stood with the pink and white of her lovely body clad only in thin underthings gleaming seductively in the eerie light.

The fiend had paused, was devouring her with eyes in which lewd yellow lights were crawling shamelessly. Eve lifted her head, stretched out her arms toward the hunched lecherous figure. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that the clothing she had discarded was being carried by the current toward the cave's mouth. Someone would be searching, someone would find them, and would follow the clue into the cavern . . .

Huskily, from deep in her throat, Eve's voice forced itself out, pleading: "Spare him, only spare him, and you can have me. I'll do anything you order."

The fiend had moved nearer; now she cowered before the glitter of his avid eyes. With a quick step he reached her; she could hear his hot breath rasp behind the carved mask. One of his arms slid about her waist and pulled her in a savage hug against his body.

"No, no," Eve screamed, "you must release him. You can't—"

He held her, struggling. "Can't I?" he mocked, his left hand brandishing the hypodermic. "But, I'll not bargain with you. What I want I take!"

Half smothered by his horrible embrace, Eve flung herself away from him. He let her go, stared at her cackling with hellish laughter. Then he turned and darted back to the wheel. Eve saw his purpose then and screamed, tugging wildly at the chain that held her ankle.

The gasoline motor sputtered into life, the great wheel groaned and creaked as it began to turn. A hoarse cry volleyed from Oren's throat. The motion had awakened him. But now the wheel was moving and he was spinning with it, round and round in the mad whirl of death.

The fiend was splashing toward her again. This time he seized her at once, held her with the gleaming point of the hypodermic needle pressed against the flesh of her arm. "Struggle against me now," he growled, "and I'll plunge it in."

Paralyzed, Eve stared at his hideous face, dropped her eyes to the glistening needle. Better the needle than the horror of the fiend's embrace, then death at the hands of her own mad-dened lover.

Abruptly she jerked back. The crash of a gunshot reverberated above the throb of the engine, and a yellow blob of fire exploded in the swirling vapors. Then a figure was lunging out of the misty shadows—Dr. Blade, a leveled pistol in his hand.

The fiend had whirled, but instead of running, he lurched nearer to Eve, dragged her against him. Blade staggered to a halt.

"Shoot now if you will," the fiend snarled. The point of the needle pricked the flesh of Eve's arm. "Have

you discovered the secret of my poison by your autopsy?"

"I've discovered enough," Blade growled hoarsely. "I suspected the rattlesnake venom from the first."

"Then," the fiend cackled, "if you wish to see this woman die as the others have died, try shooting at me!"

Blade simply stared, stunned by this horrible alternative.

"Shoot anyhow!" Eve screamed. "At least save Oren!"

But she knew that he wouldn't. Then an idea flooded her mind. She could still sacrifice herself. Once Blade saw that the fiend had done his worst, he would kill him and Oren would be saved!

With all her strength, Eve flung herself against her captor. She felt the bite of the needle strike like a scorpion's sting. Then a blow struck her face. She lurched back, screaming, and her last conscious impression was the sight of Blade charging forward, the pistol spitting orange jets of fire.

IT seemed to Eve that she was lying in some pit of hell and demons were tearing at her arm. Someone was screaming at her from a distance. With a jerk she came awake.

She was lying on the ledge at the basin's rim and the night was bright with stars. The flames came from a lantern on the ground and the demons tormenting her were Oren and Dr. Blade. Oren was holding her tight with his uninjured arm, and Dr. Blade was twisting a tourniquet between her shoulder and her elbow.

"Steady, darling," Oren's voice flowed over her like a caress. "Steady now, you didn't get a full charge of the poison—only a little of it. Blade shot the fiend before he could press the plunger. You'll be all right."

Blade had twisted the tourniquet tight, and was now pressing a whiskey bottle to her lips.

"You're not hurt, Oren?" she gasped.

"I was sick and shaky," he answered, "but they got me off the wheel in a hurry. I shouldn't have let him capture me, wouldn't have, if

It hadn't been for this broken arm. He slipped up on me with a sandbag while I was looking for Picada."

"And the fiend," she asked, "was it Guido?"

"Guido?"

"Yes, he—" Her glance had wandered to the shadows beneath the cliff and she jerked up with a sudden scream. "There—look!"

Lolling against the cliff wall were the ragged, haggard-faced Mexicans who had accosted them on the road, and standing in front of them was Guido.

Now he came toward her, smiling. "My dear sister-in-law to-be," he said, chuckling. "Is that the sort of greeting—?"

"But," Eve said bewildered, "I saw you in the death room, rifling the safe!"

He had stopped beside her. "So you saw that? Yes, I rifled the safe. I found out what I wanted to know there. Then I came directly to the cave. I was rather hasty and foolish, I'm afraid. The monster took me by surprise, as he did the others, slugged me and dragged me into his lair, where I'd probably be now if it hadn't been for your courage."

Eve's head was spinning with bewilderment. "But who?"

"The fiend," Oren said gravely, "was Uncle Jackson."

"But he was dead! He was hanging there, we all saw him."

"What we saw," Oren said, "was a clever set-up. He fooled us. He placed the noose about his own neck and tied it to a rafter. But the tips of his toes, if you remember, were touching the floor, and he was leaning against the wall. He was a good actor, and he knew that we would run for the doctor at once and that would give him the opportunity to escape. When he had finished with his diabolical work of murder, he would have claimed that some fiend—probably one of us—carried him away half dead, and that he later recovered."

“AND it was the mineral spring he wanted?” Eve asked. “But I thought that was already his.”

"So did we," Guido put in, "until I found those papers in his safe tonight. The place had been the property of our dead father and we were legally entitled to it, as well as to other property which he had embezzled.

"I learned too that the myth about our Indian ancestry was a lie. Our mother was Spanish, of a fine old family. Uncle Jackson had invented the other story for a sinister purpose. Malcom must have discovered the truth two years ago, and Uncle Jackson must have killed him to silence him. It fitted in with the myth of the curse, and later, when he discovered the value of the spring, he used the same legend to cover what he planned as a thorough eradication of the rest of us."

"And the others—Picada, Vautrin?"

"Vautrin," Guido said, "was the man who discovered the medicinal value of the waters. He and Uncle Jackson had a written agreement about that, but Uncle Jackson broke it when Picada came from Mexico with a fabulous offer for the springs. Vautrin swallowed his anger and waited for a chance to get the old man where he wanted him. He must have known that Uncle Jackson had swindled us.

"After hiding under the bed and seeing Uncle Jackson pull his little stunt tonight, Vautrin, I suppose, went to the cave and threatened him with exposure. We know what happened to him. Picada and his daughter must have stumbled into the cave while searching for Vautrin."

"And the Mexican servants," Eve said. "Why did he kill —them?"

"Because they knew too much," Guido answered. "Geofredo had helped him install the motor. But he let the secret leak out, and that's what excited those Mexicans who were on the road tonight. Aroused by the rumors, they were suspicious of all of us. But it's fortunate they were around, for it was one of them who found your clothes when they floated out and summoned Blade to the rescue."

Eve lapsed comfortably back in

Oren's arms, stared silently at the silver ribbon of the falls. "And it's really as valuable as all that?" she asked.

"We don't know just how valuable," Oren said, "but Guido found among the papers in the safe an opinion from a noted chemist who says there's nothing else like it on the continent. At any rate, my dear, it's worth enough that you and I will never have to teach

school again. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Darling!" she said softly and looked up into his face in time to see him wink at Guido.

Guido discreetly picked up the lantern and moved it a few yards away. Dr. Blade turned and stared at the swirling pool. As Oren bent to kiss her, Eve thought she heard one of the Mexicans chuckle softly, but he was quickly nudged into silence.



IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

THE TERRIBLE DARK

A Novelette of a Monster Amok

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

—and other novelettes and stories by ALGERNON BLACKWOOD, FRANK BELKNAP LONG, Jr., WYATT BLASSINGAME and others!



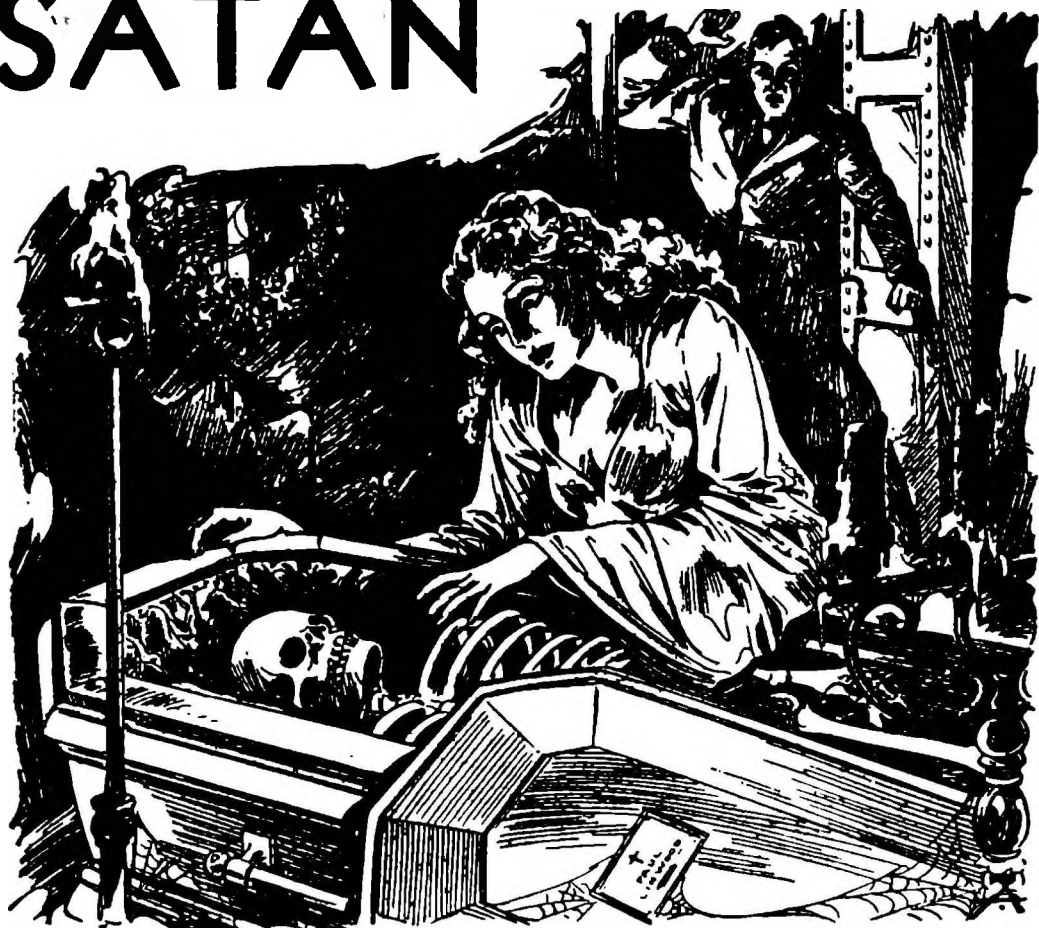
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STEPCHILD OF SATAN



"Paul," she whispered, "I've come again to see you."

Jealousy Prompts a Heinous Deed, and the Word of Guilt Comes from the Lips of a Strange Accuser!

By DAVID X. MANNERS

Author of "Murder Addition," "Corpse Crack-Up," etc.

IT was a pretty gay affair, this wedding of Grace Foster and Paul Linwood. That is, gay for everyone but me. You see, I was the one left out in the cold. Naturally I felt pretty blue. Blue? Why not be frank? Now that it's all over there's nothing to hide. I may as well say I

felt as miserable and as let down as any man ever has on this earth.

When I saw Grace Foster climb into Paul Linwood's swanky cabin plane beside her groom, I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I broke down and began to cry like a child. Maybe after you see what follows you'll

think I'm some kind of a monster devoid of human feelings. Maybe you've a right to that opinion. But losing a sweet girl like Grace was no fun for me, and I felt it.

I choked back my tears and crowded through to the door of the plane. Paul Linwood was already at the controls and the propeller was whirring. There was a smile a mile wide on his face.

"Good luck, Paul, you lucky stiff," I said, extending my hand that was trembling with emotion, to him. I was the loser congratulating him—the winner. And what a prize he had won!

"Goodby, Grace," I said, the tears blurring my eyes as I took her soft, white hand. Through the blur I was seeing a vision of loveliness. If Grace Foster had been beautiful before, she was a hundred times more beautiful now. I couldn't say any more.

She trilled a musical laugh, and I felt that I could hear a note of pained sympathy for me in it. "Aren't you going to kiss the bride?" she bantered.

I held her steady in my gaze for a moment, and then I bent over and kissed her lightly upon her lips. I could feel the warm flush of her face close to mine, and I was conscious of a heavenly, delicate fragrance of orange blossoms. Then and only then did I feel the true depth of my loss, and I cursed myself for the fool I was. Now it was too late for regrets.

The door of the cabin plane closed slowly, and the crowd that was round about fell away to make room for the take-off. I buried my face in my hands and turned away. I didn't want to see what was happening. My grief and remorse was already more than I could bear.

The celebrating throng about me was having its fun, cheering and shouting goodbys and throwing rice. I didn't care to make a public display of myself, any more than I had to, so I took my troubles and myself off to a far corner and tried to be calm.

Jack Pixley saw me and came over. "What's the matter, Steve?" he

asked. "You're white as a ghost and trembling."

I didn't answer, but I guess he judged what was wrong by the helpless way I shrugged my shoulders.

"I see," he sympathized. "Some guys get all the breaks. Though what she sees in that homely mug, Paul Linwood—"

A sudden roar sounded from down the field.

"Look! They're taking off!"

I turned mechanically, and then quickly I turned my face away. I didn't want to see the take-off. I couldn't. . . .

THE drone died softly away as the plane taxied down the field, and craned necks bent upwards as it took the air.

Jack Pixley was pulling on my sleeve. "Look. That guy Linwood's hardly in the air and he's going to loop the loop. That's what I call—"

A sickened, anguished cry broke from the crowd. I jerked my eyes upward. The plane was halfway up on the first part of the loop, and it was faltering. A wing was crumpling and falling away!

A second later it was plunging earthward, and I was watching it with a sort of hypnotic fascination.

A greyish wisp of smoke went up from it as it crashed into the ground. There was a dull boom and it burst into flames. The crowd surged forward, and I raced madly through it.

"It's no use!" somebody cried out. "Stand back or you'll all get burned!" The plane fuselage was a raging furnace of flame.

I ran forward till the heat beat me back. I was shouting with wild grief. "Grace! Grace! Oh, my God!"

And then suddenly I saw her. She wasn't in the plane. She was on the ground, and she was trying to crawl away from the intense heat that was licking behind her.

By some miracle she had been thrown clear of the wreck!

IT'S strange how things happen. The same accident that snuffed out Paul Linwood's life left Grace

Foster completely unharmed. She hadn't even a scratch on her, but she was never the same again. I often thought that it might have been better, even for her, if she, too, had lost her life in that crash. But the sinister fate had ruled otherwise, and so it was.

I must confess I felt no grief that Paul Linwood was gone. I had never cared for him, and when I realized that he was taking Grace from me, my affection for him was in no way increased.

For a long time I left Grace Foster to herself. It was an awkward situation. I did not like to put myself in the position of profiting from the dead. But still there was that passion within me that wanted Grace more than any man ever wanted a woman.

I bided my time, and when I felt that it was completely proper I began to once again call on her.

She was beautiful. Jet-black hair that fell in soft, silky waves, and blue eyes. What man's heart could be still when she smiled on him? Was there any wonder that I was crazy about her? I recall now the first time I went to her home. It was a warm evening in early fall, and the leaves were just beginning to turn into their red and gold colors. We sat together on the veranda, looking quietly down over the broad valley that stretched below us.

"You've come," she had said simply, in greeting me, and she threw her arms about my neck and kissed me. Naturally I was surprised, but I didn't see that I could object.

She seemed very solicitous about my health, and asked me in detail what I had been doing. Then I realized what she was up to. She was trying to forget. I considered myself no bad bargain. I had money, and it's no great compliment to myself if I say that I was better-looking than Paul Linwood.

Grace made it easy for me. We went around quite a bit, and when I asked her to marry me, she readily assented. We started on our honeymoon on December 15th, exactly six

months to the day that Paul Linwood had been killed.

And then it started. When the red-cap was getting our luggage together at the station *she called me Paul!*

It sent chills up my back, and my feet went icy. I almost told her, but then I saw that she hadn't noticed the slip of her tongue, and I let it go. I was rather glad that she hadn't noticed her own error in calling me Paul. It was no time for sad memories. And then it happened again, and again!

And on our wedding night as she lay in my arms, she ran her slender, white fingers through my hair, and whispered tenderly in my ear, "*Paul, I do love you so much!*"

THAT was just the beginning. Consistently now she called me Paul until she set me nearly half crazy.

"Grace dear, my name is Steve." I reminded her quietly at first, and finally as I grew more irritable I shouted at her, "Paul Linwood's dead! Dead and buried! Did you marry him, or did you marry me?"

And then half insanelly I began to wonder if Grace Foster, too, hadn't been killed in that airplane crash, and that I had married a ghost. A ghost that had come to haunt and plague me.

Grace didn't seem to understand. "Yes, I know," she would say, and then a moment later she would be calling me by that damned name again.

I had done no wrong in marrying her. Paul Linwood was dead, and she was free to do as she pleased. And then I began to curse myself for ever thinking that she loved me. It was a dead corpse she was in love with, not me! Those passionate kisses of hers were meant for him, not me. Those ardent protestations of love were for his ears, not mine!

And then every time I reproved her she grew sad and her blue eyes would grow wide with tears. She was more beautiful than ever then in a wistful, ethereal sort of way, and I felt like a beast for making her unhappy.

Finally it did begin to sink into her that I was Stephen Andrews and not Paul. And then, strangely enough, I was sorry that it had. Now she became melancholy and cold. I didn't exist for her at all. She looked at me without seeing me. And her embrace was lifeless and without meaning.

So I began to humor her. It was better to have her love and affection in an in-between sort of way than not at all, but something had now been lost between us. The spell and illusion were broken.

She took to sitting in the dark with me, with only a red light for illumination. And I sat with her hours at an end at a ouija board, and she would read off imaginary messages to herself. Messages that were always from Paul, of course.

One night I awakened from sleep to find that she was gone. Her place in bed was cold, and I knew she had been gone some time. Quickly I got out of bed and switched on the lights, and there she came walking in through the door, her face flushed, and her eyes wide with a happy excitement that she could not hide.

"Grace, where have you been?" I asked.

"Just down to get some air," she said calmly. "It was so warm up here."

I looked at her, and then at the bedroom windows. They were both open wide, and through them was coming a cold crisp blast of January air. And I looked down at pink-trimmed mules she was wearing. They were thick with the muddy clay of country fields.

Like a flash my mind went back to my seeing her slippers muddy like that on more than one occasion in the past. I had thought little of it then. Now I realized that she must have been going out on these midnight excursions frequently. I, being a very sound sleeper, had never before noticed that she had gone.

The following night instead of dozing off the moment my head touched the pillow, I stayed awake. When the old Tower Church clock

struck twelve I felt her stirring beside me. She was listening raptly for a moment to hear my breathing. Apparently satisfied that I was asleep, she slipped quietly out of bed. Clad only in her sheer, linen gown, she was leaving the room.

I waited, then followed her.

Stepping quickly, she cut across the fields, the wind flouncing past her.

Long before she reached that long stone wall that dipped and rose along the hills, had I guessed her destination.

When she came to the wall she stopped. Then quickly she climbed over it. In a moment she was lost among the gravestones, that reared gaunt and white in the moonlight.

Sickening horror and dismay clutched my heart. My head was reeling and my feet were numb as I vaulted the wall after her. And then I, too, was with her there in Sycamore Hills Cemetery!

BRIGHT moonlight shone. With ease she was picking her way past the headstones. Dressed in her long, white gown she seemed a ghost hovering there among the dead. Suddenly she stopped as if she had lost her way, and a cry broke from her lips.

"Paul! Paul, where are you?"

Good Lord, she was calling him! And now, once again, she was heading for the grey granite mausoleum that held his bones.

From somewhere a key had appeared in her hand. She was thrusting it in the lock that closed the way into the tomb. Then with a harsh, grating sound the iron-barred door had been pushed open.

"Paul. Paul, I'm here, my darling!"

I stumbled toward the tomb's door after her. My clenching fists grabbed the iron bars, and like a madman I looked inside. High up on one wall was a grated opening through which the moonlight streamed brightly, casting its fiendish glare upon a sight that I pray I may be struck blind, rather than see again.

Grace was standing beside the vault that was carved with the name

of Paul Linwood. She had shoved away its top-piece, and now she had opened the black lid of the coffin before her.

"Paul," she whispered, "I've come again to see you." And with that she raised her leg as if to climb in beside him!

I didn't know what I was doing. Everything had gone black before me. I swung open the iron-barred door, and a cry of horror and warning anguish tore from my throat.

"Grace!"

She wheeled about, her eyes flashing fire. With a whimpering moan she fled past me, out of the tomb, out into the open stone-flecked field.

And one after another screams were bursting from her lungs. With one final despairing shriek she was gone. Gone from before my eyes. It were as if the earth had opened up and swallowed her!

I staggered limply forward after her. If the earth had swallowed her, let it swallow me too! And then my head cleared, and I saw what had happened.

There was a newly dug, open grave there. I climbed up the little mound of earth and looked down into it. There she lay in the frost-bitten pit, whimpering painfully to herself. She had broken both her legs in the fall!

How I ever got her to the hospital I don't remember. My mind is a blank, perhaps blessedly so. At day-break Grace died, but not before she had given birth to a child. The accident had precipitated her condition. The child, they said, was premature.

I was completely broken up, I knew no comfort. The doctor tried to console me.

"Yes," he said, "your wife is gone, but you have a son."

Slowly I saw the futility of my grief. I did have a son that was hers and mine. A son that would always be a living reminder of her.

And then I thought, "I shall call it Paul. Paul was dead a year and a half now. For Grace's sake I would give it that name. I knew she herself would have it so. Perhaps it was ironical for me to give it that name,

but I felt that I owed something to both Grace and Paul, and I wanted to make amends.

I knew the baby must be dark-haired. Both Grace and I were dark, I only hoped that it might have her sparkling, dancing, blue eyes.

"Let me see the child," I asked. "May I?"

I was shown the way to it. It was a large baby. I could tell that immediately by its form beneath its blanket. It was perfectly still, and slowly I pulled back the covers so that I might see its face.

My heart stood still, and then it began a wild, palpitating beat.

The baby had mouse-colored hair, a stubby nose, and a sharply forward thrust to its jaw that was unmistakable.

"Paul Linwood!" The cry jerked involuntarily from my lips. This was not my child. Those night excursions away from home to that tomb. This child was something that. . . .

I spun about. I was leaving. I was getting out. I was—

"Steve!"

The sound of a voice calling my name stopped me. There was no one in the room to be calling me.

"Steve!" The voice was firmer this time, and it came from the. . . .

Yes, I killed the baby. You've probably seen my picture in all the papers. They call me a fiend, a monster. They've compared me to some kind of a poisonous spider that kills its young for no reason.

I've never told them the real reason for my doing it. I'd rather spend the rest of my life in the penitentiary than in some insane asylum. Undoubtedly that's where they'd put me if I told the truth.

That kid would probably have died anyway. Something was wrong with it. Babies don't normally talk when they're born. And it wasn't just my imagination. When I heard that voice, it was the voice of Paul Linwood that I heard. And it said:

"Steve, why did you do it? Why did you weaken those wing-struts on my plane, so that it fell to pieces once I got in the air?"

A Complete
Novelette
of Bestial
Crime



"Curse your women!" he swore.



His eyes found Paula there, a water pitcher and basin in her hands

CHARNEL HOUSE

Wolves Howl a Chorus of Ghoulish Dirges as a
Monstrous, Horrifying Thing Points the Clammy Hand
of Death at Cauldwell Hall

By **ANDREW HOLLIDAY**

CHAPTER I

Man or Beast?

NEIL CLARK ground his cigarette into the ash tray. The place was getting him. From the first, three years ago, when Thaddeus Cauldwell became his guardian, he'd hated Cauldwell Hall. Now his feeling was more than hate for the ugly old pile.

Day by day it had grown in spite of him. There was nothing he could

put his finger on—and that worried him more than anything else. If Paula would only come away—

He whipped around suddenly. Tad, Paula's younger brother, stood in the doorway, a loose smile about his slack lips. He drew close.

"Got a pair of rifles since you were here last," he said. His voice was low, his eyes warily on the door. "I know you like hunting. Want to come along?"

Neil stared at him. Thaddeus Cauld-

well's Father had been too radical even for the Sodomites. He'd gone off, built the Hall here, where it was still nine miles by a narrow footpath from other human habitation.

Thaddeus was even more fanatical. The strictest rule of his belief was against killing. And here was Thaddeus' son asking him to go hunting!

"You're kidding me," he said. "Your Father wouldn't let you."

"He doesn't *know*," Tad said. "I've got the guns cached in the woods."

"What about the reports, even so?"

Tad winked slyly. "Silencers." He shrugged, half in apology. "Somebody's got to get rid of the wolves. Coming?"

Neil nodded. The wolves did need attention before they invaded the night. Odd, though, for Tad to have such a simple unselfish motive.

Not for the first time Neil thought what a queer lot the Cauldwells were. Grannie climbing the stairs as they went along the hall—a creaking bag of bones in black crêpe, deaf as a door-nail, almost voiceless, like a shadow in need of oiling.

Paula's elder sister, Isabel, on the veranda—dark, statuesque, more man than woman. And there with her, Agnes Cauldwell and Guy Ferris. Agnes, a sweet, nunlike woman, unlucky enough to have become Thaddeus' second wife.

Guy Ferris, her son, a meek little duck—more like an office clerk than the mining engineer he was. He had a mother complex if any man ever had it. Paula just didn't belong—

The dark wall of trees loomed ahead of them like a thing alive. Underfoot, coarse weed grass scraped their shoes with tough razor-edged blades. It was the only plant that really thrived on the greasy black soil.

Tad laughed suddenly. "Got to be careful we don't pot Hugo," he said. "Think of what Father'd say if a Cauldwell was nipped while gamboling about on all fours!"

Neil knew better than to reply. Hugo Cauldwell was Tad and Paula's cousin. The big, hulking half-wit was supposed to be harmless. But who knew what he did during his long

absences into the woods? For that matter, if he was harmless, why was there a special room for him in the basement—a room with an iron-barred window and a massive oak door that locked from the outside?

The rifles were cached in a hollow tree. Tad busied himself removing them from their aluminum case. The silencers had to be fitted and the guns loaded. He preferred doing it himself.

Neil stared into the brackish stream alongside. There was a thick film on the water, especially along the slow-moving edges. He kicked a pebble into it. The film broke, let the pebble sink. Sunlight knifed through the dark leafy pall overhead, gave the stagnant surface a moment of rainbow-tinted splendor.

THERE was only the faintest rustling of the undergrowth. Neil heard Tad gasp. He wheeled around to find him crouched, the gun in his hands leveled. Neil's gaze left Tad's petrified figure, sped out along the rifle's line-of-fire.

Was it human or beast? Hare-lipped Hugo in his worst gibbering moments never looked like this thing crawling toward them. Neil's stomach revolted, but his eyes remained fixed with morbid fascination.

Long grey hair, ragged beard, both of them matted and filth-ridden. Mad, beady eyes, barely visible through the overhanging hair. Drooling mouth, flecked with froth. And the body, its shriveled, wrinkled nakedness torn and bleeding from the brambles.

It *must* be human! Any place other than in this nerve-destroying hole, Neil wouldn't have hesitated. It was an old man, a pitiful old man in sore distress. His aged frame writhed convulsively. Neil flung forward.

Tad's voice pulled him up short: "Don't touch him, you damned fool!"

Neil hesitated. His gaze went from the trembling old man to Tad with unspoken question. Tad said:

"He's got some filthy disease. I had enough medical school to know that much. You don't want to get it, give it to the rest of us, do you?"

The old man crawled toward Tad. His lips moved but no sound passed them. His breath came in rasping sobs.

Tad pulled away, said: "What's wrong with you? What d'you want? Keep back from me! D'you hear?"

Tad's voice was pitched high. His finger tightened nervously on the trigger. Neil kept his voice quiet, said:

"Easy, Tad. He needs a hand. We've got to get him to the house."

The old man reared himself up on his knees like a dog begging. A bleat came from his voiceless lips. His gnarled fist pointed to the gun muzzle, then rapped his chest. His eyes pleaded.

"God!" Tad said. "He wants me to shoot him!"

Neil's lips tightened. "We've got to get him to the house," he repeated. "Quick."

Tad shook his head. "Not as he is! I'm not putting my hands on him. Here. This'll do it."

Before Neil could move, Tad grasped his rifle by the barrel, swung it. The walnut stock caught the old man back of the ear. His limbs collapsed under him like matchsticks.

"Give me your jacket and shirt," Tad said. He stripped off his own. "Wrapping him up may save us from infection. God, what an awful-looking mess!"

The rifles were cached again, the old man swathed in the makeshift wrappings. Tad led the way, taking his share of the burden by the legs. Neil gripped the old man by the shoulders.

He was surprisingly light—not heavier than a small child. Even though unconscious, his muscles still stiffened spasmodically in their strong hands. He would've been impossible to handle if Tad hadn't knocked him out.

As they rested once before they reached the clearing, Neil looked into the old man's face. The hair had tumbled back. Neil started as he saw the man's lips. Saliva had them flecked and wet. They were drawn back on his yellowed fangs—cruel as a wolf's.

CHAPTER II

From the Grave

PRINCE, Hugo's ungainly mastiff, was dozing near the back porch. They were nearly to the door when the dog's nose twitched. He leaped toward them before Neil could shout a warning to Tad. A guttural whine gurgled deep in the animal's throat. His tongue licked avidly over the old man's face. The chain was long enough to let him bar the way to the door.

"Cal!" Tad called. "Cal!"

Caleb was one of the Hall's two servants. His pasty face showed at the pantry window. "Yes, Mister Tad. Coming."

"Tie this damned hound back!" Tad said, and when the man had it done, added:

"Get to town fast. Get a doctor—any doctor. Tell him it's emergency."

Sybil, the cook, was in the hallway. Her dark eyes grew round as she saw what they carried. There was terror rather than any other emotion in her face. She nodded dumbly when Tad told her:

"Bring hot water—a lot of it—upstairs."

The sound of their steps brought nearly everyone in the house to meet them. Only Grannie didn't come. Thaddeus directed them to the spare room on the second floor. Neil couldn't make out whether he was displeased or not. Even when he ordered Paula and Isabel to keep away, Thaddeus' face was still a sour mask.

With the return of consciousness, the old man began to rock violently from side to side. His hands clawed the bedclothes. His lips twisted back from his teeth in a horrible grin. A sudden spasm arched his aged frame on head and heels. He moaned. His eyes were black beads of anguish.

Neil realized now they'd made a mistake in bringing the old man to the house. He'd forgotten that in Thaddeus' harsh belief, suffering was a punishment for sin and had to be endured as such. Thaddeus hadn't

allowed them to do more than get the poor creature between sheets.

The old man was forcing out a whisper. It was halting, almost as unintelligible as Grannie's.

"Do something—any thing," he said. "End this— The wolf again—"

His eyes were glazed, far-away. Pain was racking his body; memory adding to it to give him the torments of hell.

Thaddeus Cauldwell's jaw, if anything, hardened. "Pain and death," he said, as if quoting, "come from the hand of God alone. We kill neither beast nor any other living thing. Pain is the penalty for sin."

He stopped. Neil knew only too well that it wasn't a pose. Thaddeus Cauldwell ran his own life by it. He'd make the same pronouncement if Paula were lying there!

The old man ceased his pleading. He'd realized it was of no use. Mad anger burned in his beady eyes. It threw him, twisting, into the most violent spasms he'd yet had. He recovered, gasping.

"Curse you! Curse you!" he said.

He paused as the door opened. His eyes found Paula there, a water pitcher and basin in her hands. He devoured her slim blond body malevolently, broke out again:

"And curse your women— Your women!"

His voice cracked on the last word—cracked with the *crack* a phonograph needle makes, crashing through a record. It echoed gratingly through the room, rasping the eardrums, leaving his throat a voiceless horror.

Thaddeus took the pitcher and basin from Paula's hands. He didn't utter a word, but Neil saw Paula pull back hurriedly. His eye must've stung like a lash, for she said:

"I know you told me to stay away, but Sybil and Cal are gone. They aren't coming back."

THADDEUS turned, left her to speak to his back. Neil's fists clenched angrily. He saw her lip tremble. She was very near crying as she hurried from the room.

"Wonder when that damned doc-

tor'll get here," Tad said abruptly.

"Doctor?" Thaddeus repeated. His tone was no different than usual. The displeasure in it had to be sensed rather than heard. "Did you call a doctor?"

Tad stood his ground. "I did," he said. "You can't let him die as if he were one of your own family." Thaddeus made no reply. Not even his expression altered.

Neil was glad of an excuse to get away. He knew there was no sense finding Paula, trying to comfort her. She would only pull away. But at least he could get out of here. He wasn't any help, anyway—even less than the others.

"I'll go down and wait for the doctor," he said. "I'll bring him up as soon as he comes."

* * * * *

The doctor's name was Miller. He was also the coroner, he explained. He arrived a few minutes before the old man breathed his last. Neil detailed the circumstances to him on the way upstairs.

Thaddeus eyed the doctor coldly, said nothing. Neil'd had enough of it. He let Tad work with the doctor while he himself went to the window, stared out over the bleak expanse of weed grass at the dark shadows of the woods beyond.

"Dead," he heard the doctor say finally. "Luckily, I was here before he died. I can certify to the cause. So there needn't be an inquest."

Agnes broke in gently: "What was the poor man's trouble, Doctor?"

The coroner shrugged. "Age, for one thing. Malnutrition, for another. He probably hadn't eaten for days. But the cause I'm certifying is hydrophobia. Bitten by a rabid animal, probably. There've been three other cases recently—two of them from wolves."

Hydrophobia!

The doctor hesitated as he addressed Thaddeus. "It's advisable—more than advisable—that the body be buried as soon as possible. And the room disinfected."

He paused. "It's a long way from here to town. While I can get men

over tomorrow, we are still busy with typhoid. I was wondering if—"

Thaddeus checked him. "I understand," he said. "We'll bury him here. We won't refuse a stranger a last resting place."

Agnes couldn't keep from interrupting. "Don't you think we could have him placed in consecrated ground, Thaddeus?" she asked. "He'd wish it, I know."

"Consecrated ground?" Thaddeus repeated. "All ground is consecrated by the hand of its Maker, save that desecrated by man's sin. We'll bury him here, Doctor."

With the sheets in which he lay for shroud and a length of canvas for coffin, Tad and Neil bore the old man's body out. Thaddeus and Guy Ferris carried the spades. The mastiff leaped up as they descended the back stairs, bayed dismally at the end of his shortened chain.

Hugo burst from the woods as they reached the corner of the grounds Thaddeus selected. He looked worn-out, disheveled—as though he'd been searching for something he couldn't find. His ear cocked to his dog's howling. He watched him lay their canvas-covered bundle on the ground.

The next instant he was upon it. His big paws tore aside the loose canvas. He stared down into the old man's face. Neil felt a lump rise in his throat. The half-wit's grief was the mad unreasoning grief of a dumb beast.

He hugged the old man's frail form to his chest, swayed back and forth. Neil realized now why the dog fussed over the old man: Hugo knew the old fellow. He'd just come in from searching for him.

Thaddeus and Tad pulled Hugo away, tried to quiet him. The half-wit was in deadly fear of Thaddeus; but so violent was his mad emotion, Neil expected him to break from their grasp at any moment.

TWILIGHT was setting in after a gloomy day when they took heavy flagstones from the walk and placed them over the grave. It took both Guy Ferris and Neil himself to roll

each stone into place, but they'd be all the more protection on that account. The wolves might make short work of the grave, otherwise.

Hugo flung himself on the stones when they finished. They left him lying there, babbling—and made their way back to the house.

* * * * *

The wolves came earlier that night than usual, Neil thought. He didn't have to look out into the moonlit grounds to see their slinking shadows, cruel eyes. He could picture them easily enough as he lay there sleepless in his bed, heard them wail, heard them tear at each other.

How long he lay awake, when he finally dozed off, he didn't know. The voices of the wolves were still ringing in his ears when he opened his eyes. It was yet early morning. He was utterly weary. But he felt impelled to get out of bed, dress, go to the grave.

It was open—empty!

CHAPTER III

The Virus Spreads

EVEN when the mastiff went mad, Neil didn't feel such a foreboding of evil. The dog snapped his chain, ranged the grounds, mouth froth-flecked and drooling. When he barked, the notes broke in harsh discord.

More than once Neil started toward his room to get the revolver he had in his bag, only to check his steps. Killing the rabid animal could only mean leaving the Hall, perhaps never seeing Paula again.

Agnes laid her hand on his arm. Her soft brown eyes were troubled. "You don't think—" she began.

Neil knew what she meant. He laughed. "Scarcely," he said. "Don't take it too seriously. The old man didn't curse Prince, did he? Prince just licked his face. That's all. What bothers me is that I can't put the poor animal out of his misery."

She looked doubtful but reassured. Neil's own thoughts, though, were

far from confident. Easy enough to tell Agnes not to take it too seriously—far easier than it was to keep himself from wondering about it in off moments.

She didn't know he'd found the old man's grave empty. None of the women did. He'd agreed with Thaddeus, Tad and Guy Ferris that it was better not to worry them with it.

Five days ago, but the scene still flashed vividly before him. The empty grave. The other men and himself scouring the grounds and the surrounding woods without finding a trace.

There'd been marks of clawed feet—wolves' feet—in the soft earth. But the heavy flagstones: it'd taken the combined strength of two able-bodied men to roll each of them into place.

Dusk came; then darkness. The mastiff still ranged the grounds, his saberlike fangs dripping madness and death. The dog was weaker now, stumbling; his cries, harsher, more discordant.

Then, from the woods, rang the challenge of a wolf. And another. And the pack took it up.

The voice of the pack grew louder. The beasts were sweeping toward the house. Neil could imagine them; grey four-footed shadows sifting through the trees. He knew what was coming. He left the second-floor porch, slammed down the windows of his room; but he couldn't shut out the shrieking horror of Prince's end.

* * * * *

The house was strangely quiet when the moon rose over the edge of the trees and bathed the grounds in silver and sable. Even the wolves had taken themselves off, so that their cries sounded only from afar. Neil thought he couldn't sleep, but he did doze off.

Moonlight was streaming in his window when he awoke. He felt dazed. He looked at his watch. Five after one— Why had he awakened at that time?

The wall behind his head shook under the impact of a heavy object.

He leaped up, heart pounding. Grannie's room. It must've been a crash like that which'd startled him out of his sleep.

Tad was coming up the staircase, two steps at a time, as he got into the hall. They didn't need to tell each other something was wrong. They burst into Grannie's room together.

No need for a lamp. Neil could see the old woman's body twisting convulsively in the moonlight that drenched her bed. He tripped over the night table that lay, overturned, on the floor. Nothing could compare in horror to the almost silent writhings of the old creature under the icy spotlight of the moon.

"Get Father," Tad said. "I'll stay here."

Tad was lighting the lamp. Neil didn't have to go far. Thaddeus was coming out of his room. Other doors along the hall were opening, too. The house was as awake as if a gong had pealed through it.

THERE was no more to be done for Grannie than for the old man. Nobody dared suggest a doctor to Thaddeus—even if someone could win through the wolf-ridden woods to town. The old woman had to live or die as best she could.

Not a word passed her lips. Her old eyes were clear, knowing. But she was too far gone. She wasn't able to move her jaw. It had locked. Her lips were blue and grinning. Every sound, every movement in the room threw her, gasping, into more violent convulsions.

Neil returned to his room. Death had been merciful in claiming her quickly. The wolves were howling outside the house again as he sat at the window. He heard them absently. He was still seeing before him Grannie's wasted neck, the angry red welts across the wrinkled flesh.

Suddenly the significance of her death struck him. No need of a doctor's diagnosis to know the cause. He'd seen the old man die. But Grannie hadn't been in the hallway or anywhere near the old man. How had she become infected with the

fatal virus of that dreadful disease?

Neil found Paula in the living room. It was the first chance he had to see her alone during the morning. There was a shaft of sunlight coming in the window beside her chair. It should, he thought, have made the menace of the night before seem unreal. Somehow, though, it didn't. It seemed only to deepen the contrast, give the shadows substance.

He frowned as he looked at her. The night had taken its toll. The color was gone from her cheeks. The curve of her lips drooped. Her blonde hair was set in smooth waves, but he knew it for what it was—a gesture to defy weariness.

"Paula," he said. "You've got to listen to me. You've got to come away."

Her eyes met his softly for a moment. "Don't keep asking, Neil," she said. "You know I'd like to, as much as you'd like to have me. But it can't be yet. Don't make it any harder. Please!"

He shook his head. "You've got to come, Paula. I'm not asking what I asked before. If you don't want me to, I won't see you till you're twenty-one—hard as it may be. But you must come away. There's something here I don't understand—something I can't see to fight, menacing you and the whole place."

The line of her lips hardened. "You're not used to the Hall as I am, Neil." She looked away. "Even if there were any such thing, it'd be my job to stay here and see it out. I couldn't leave my family in a lurch just because I felt afraid."

He smiled grimly. "I knew that before I asked," he said, "but I warn you that if things get any worse, you're coming with me, whether you like it or not."

* * * * *

The whole day long Neil felt the tension increasing. Tempers were on edge. Isabel snapped at Tad for nothing at all. Thaddeus frowned at the least noise. And Neil knew that he himself wasn't the best of company—even for himself.

It wasn't just that Grannie'd died,

for her passing could scarcely be felt. It was more like the removal of a shadow from the wall than the death of a fellow human. Nominally she'd been mistress of the house, and now Thaddeus was its master—just as Thaddeus' will would pass the ownership of the house to Agnes when he died.

But no one commented on that or gave it a second thought because Thaddeus had been the real master of the Hall, anyway. It was the manner of Grannie's passing that'd left its mark.

Toward midnight, though, the let-down set in. Nerve tension and weariness had reached the saturation point. Neil watched the others drag themselves off to their rooms, then went himself. His eyes felt heavy. Even the wolves crying outside in full pack couldn't break through his lethargy. He drifted into a leaden doze.

THE scream came as a shock. It cut through his troubled dreams like a knife, sat him bolt upright in his bed. There was no repetition. The echoes more than sufficed. He tumbled from the sheets.

Paula and Isabel burst from their own rooms as he came out. They looked at one another.

"What is it?" Paula asked. Neil shrugged. No time for ceremony. He plunged down the hallway toward the open door there, letting them follow him.

Tad arrived ahead of him. When Neil entered, he was standing over his stepmother's bed, a lighted lamp in his hand. He was scowling, worried. Thaddeus was standing in the open doorway that joined his wife's room with his own.

Agnes lay, half sprawled, across the disarranged bedclothes. Her eyes were closed. It gave Neil a jolt to see her face—the ghastly pallor of it. Her skin was pinched and drawn. A few wisps of greying hair clung to her damp forehead. Her breath was a series of rapid, irregular sobs.

Tad placed his lamp on the nightstand. Neil saw his lips tighten as

he grasped her wrist, felt for her pulse.

"Get some coffee, fast," Tad said. "She's almost gone!"

Paula nodded, hurried down toward the kitchen. Neil felt uncomfortable, waiting idly by. He wanted to help the woman on the bed as he knew she'd want to help him. But there was nothing he could do. Isabel was with Tad, helping him get Agnes back on the pillow, making her comfortable.

Neil's eyes strayed from the bed to the connecting doorway. Thaddeus hadn't moved from the place. Neil was amazed to see the man. His eyes were unnaturally bright, feverish.

He seemed to have lost control of his muscles. He shrugged continuously, for no apparent reason. His face twitched. His strong fingers seemed uncertain of their hold on the door jamb. What was the matter with him?

Agnes' eyes opened. Their gaze was soft, far-away. Her lips moved. "Guy—" she whispered. "Guy— The wolf!"

Neil spun around. Where was Guy Ferris? To be missing at a time like this, when his mother lay stricken! Neil flung through the door. He didn't get much further.

Guy Ferris met him just outside. The engineer rubbed his eyes, yawned.

"Something woke me," he said. "What's up?"

Neil didn't reply. He led the way into the room. Words couldn't soften the shock for a man who bore his mother the strong devotion Guy Ferris did.

The engineer took one look at the bed, broke. He threw himself across the room. Agnes' eyes were closed again. The movement of her breast had ceased. The slow shake of Tad's lowered head was only too significant. Guy Ferris buried his face in his mother's arm, wept without restraint.

Tad put a mirror to the woman's mouth in one last vain effort. It came away clear. He nodded to Isabel, and they both came away to leave Guy Ferris to his grief. Paula came

in a moment later. Neil took the tray from her, put it on a chair. They joined Tad and Isabel in a dumb cluster about Thaddeus.

Tad kept his tone decently lowered as he answered Isabel's sudden question.

"I'm hardly doctor enough to say," he said. "All I know is that her heart gave out. My guess is functional weakness, with sudden shock doing the rest."

"There was a wolf," Thaddeus said slowly, more to himself than the others. "I saw its head shadowed on the wall. It moved across the wall to this door. It was huge."

His shoulders jerked spasmodically. "A halo of evil light surrounded it. Then your mother screamed."

NEIL could see the scene: Thaddeus suddenly awakened. The shadow limned in light on the wall. Thaddeus unable to take his eyes from it. Fright freezing him where he was, afraid at first the thing was coming for him.

Seeing it glide, phantomlike, toward his wife's room. Agnes' scream of terror. It had taken more than a little to rob Thaddeus of his courage and cool self-possession. No wonder Agnes' heart had given out!

Isabel was staring out the window. Neil saw her eyes grow wide. He looked out along the line of her vision. There was nothing to be seen but the moonlight silvering the weed grass, limning the fleet shadows that fled to and from the dark mass of the trees.

"There's a full moon tonight," she said slowly. "A full moon— Where's Hugo?"

Tad forgot the presence of death in the room. His voice rose very sharply.

"How many times do I have to tell you," he said, "that the moon, full or empty, has nothing to do with insanity? Do I have to bring a whole medical faculty to prove it to you?"

Isabel seemed not to have heard him. "Hugo hasn't been in the house in nearly a week. I'm going out to look for him."

CHAPTER IV

Hugo's Cell

ISABEL was out of the room before they could stop her. Her feet tapped a quick rhythm down the stairs. Neil saw her snatch a coat from the hall rack. She was already outside when they reached the rear door.

She'd taken one of the electric torches from the back supply cabinet. The light bobbed up and down as she threaded her way across the weed grass into the woods.

Neil raced back upstairs after his revolver. His fingers went automatically about checking its load. The wolves were gone from the grounds, their cries off in the distance. Any minute, though, might find them coursing back.

Thaddeus was holding Tad back when Neil came down again. "When Isabel is to be brought back," Thaddeus was saying, "I'll do it myself. She'll find Hugo if anyone can."

"If the wolves don't get her first," Tad returned bitterly. "Don't you realize they're all probably rabid now after finishing off Prince, even if they weren't before?"

Thaddeus was imperturbable despite his twitching face and shoulders. "I realize fully," he said, "and I myself'll go after her—if she isn't back in fifteen minutes."

Neil turned away, grim-lipped. It was all he could do to keep himself from knocking Thaddeus down. Fifteen minutes! A lot of good even a revolver would be to the girl by then!

The seconds ticked off with interminable slowness. There was no sign of Isabel. The woods formed a black drop through which penetrated only the howling of the wolves and the voices of the night.

At last Thaddeus moved. On the threshold he turned as if to speak. His eyes were still feverishly bright. The twitch that jerked his shoulders hadn't abated. For a moment he hesitated, but whatever he really intended to say remained unspoken. His only

words to the frightened group were: "I'm going. Keep the door shut till I return."

Neil pulled the gun from his pocket. "Take this with you," he said. "You'll need it more than we will here."

Thaddeus stared coldly from the pistol to Neil himself. He didn't speak, but his contempt was all the more cutting on that account. He took the second of the three torches from the cabinet, went his way.

Tad and Neil watched him cross the weed grass, shadowy back of his bobbing light. He disappeared, as Isabel had, into the trees. And with the full moon hiding behind clouds, all was black again.

The howling of the wolves swelled in volume. They were sweeping toward the house. Tad'd been right—too much so! There was in the wolves' cry, Neil noted with a shiver, the same broken note there'd been in Prince's. It wasn't a pack of wild but of *mad* beasts ranging the woods.

"We can't stand here," Neil said. "We've got to do something!"

"You're damned right we do," Tad said. "Father can risk his own stiff neck if he wants. I'm going after Isabel."

"There's only one torch here," Neil said. "I'll get my searchlight. Guy can stay with Paula. I'll tell him."

Bedlam broke out ahead as Tad and Neil approached the trees. They'd cut through the weed grass at double-quick time. Now they fell into a run. Neil grasped his searchlight in one hand, held his pistol ready in the other.

The wolves ceased their howling, began barking savagely, discordantly. Once Neil thought he heard a scream—the scream of a woman, high-pitched with terror. The wolves' barks became yelps. The sounds that followed—of a desperate scuffle, of human voices—were unmistakable.

The light of Thaddeus' torch finally came glimmering through the trees to guide them. Scuffling broke out anew. Neil heard Thaddeus' voice raised in anger. There was a sharp cry of pain. And the torch was blotted out.

NEIL played his searchlight toward the place. It was a moment before its sharp eye picked out a moving target. When it did, both men stopped dead in their tracks.

"God!" Tad said. "Give me that gun!"

Not forty yards away, in a brief clearing, just visible through the trees, was Hugo. He'd turned half around as the light spotted him, but his feet kept moving. There was no mistaking that heavy face of his or the grim burden he carried in his arms.

Neil couldn't see her face; but the dark flow of hair to one side, dangling legs to the other, compelled recognition. Isabel!

Hugo was carrying her deeper into the woods. Neil gave his pistol to Tad without realizing it. He awoke to find Tad firing. Neil held his light steady. Two shots, Tad fired. Then, running forward, he triggered out two more.

Hugo didn't pause. If hit, he didn't show it. There was no faltering in his pace. The trees swallowed him.

Neil caught up with Tad. The two panted along, side by side, picking their way through the trees and underbrush that covered the uneven ground. No word passed between them. The evidence they'd seen was too clear, too damning.

"Stop! Stop!"

They jerked to a halt. The voice was hoarse, insistent. Neil swung his light about.

"Father!" Tad whispered.

Thaddeus lay on his back, his head supported by the bole of a tree. The glass lens of his torch glinted a half dozen feet away. The feverish look in his eyes was become a glassy stare. His hand drew them weakly to him.

Tad was impatient. "Hugo's got Isabel," he said. "We've got to—"

Thaddeus spoke with difficulty. "She's dead," he said. "He had her—torn—bloody." He paused for breath. "Stabbed me. Don't leave me here—for the wolves!"

Thaddeus Cauldwell's chin fell forward on his chest. Tad ripped aside his clothing. There was a bloody gash

near his left armpit. Tad used a handkerchief to staunch the flow.

"Got a first aid kit with my guns," he said. "Not that it'll be much good for this. Keep this swab as it is."

It was some minutes before Tad followed the sound of his steps into the light. Under his arm was the four-foot aluminum gun case.

"How is he?" he asked. "I tried to hurry."

Neil realized that the throb beneath his fingers was stilled. He pulled aside quickly to let Tad get close. But after a minute, Tad swung back on his heels. His eyes dropped; his lips moved silently. Neil didn't have to be told.

They hunched Thaddeus' body atop the aluminum case, staggered through the trees under the double burden. It seemed to Neil that it took them hours to make the trip.

Guy Ferris was waiting at the back door. The moon had come clear of the clouds; it revealed him to them when they were still a distance off. The man seemed to have recovered from his grief. Had his mother's sudden death shocked him out of his mild ways? He looked straighter, more purposeful.

"Paula," Neil called to him. "All right, isn't she?"

Ferris' face darkened. He waited till they were at the steps, then said: "Didn't you meet her?"

"Meet her? Man, what d'you mean?"

Ferris shrank back, blinking at them. "Don't tell me you didn't!" His voice shook.

"She left right after you did. I tried to stop her, but she broke away. I couldn't catch her in the dark. Didn't you see her?"

PAULA gone! The stark finality of it crowded out every other thought.

"I'm going back," Neil said quietly. "Take my end here, will you, Guy?"

"A couple of minutes can't matter now," Tad said. "Let's get set, and we'll all go. Guy and I'll get Father in the house. You can go down to Hugo's room and get his 'cuffs. We'll need them. Give me your pistol. I'll

load it with the rifles. Then, we'll each have a gun."

Guy Ferris had already taken his place behind the case. Neil hesitated. Anything might happen in a couple of minutes. Still, Tad was right. They'd have a far better chance if all three went—went armed. He slipped the revolver into Tad's pocket, held the door open for them.

The basement stairs led down under the back porch to a pair of doors. The one on the right opened into a single room—Hugo's cell. It was a massive panel of solid oak, fitted with a spring lock that worked only from the outside.

Neil's searchlight found the lock. A turn of the little ridged knob pulled back the bolt. It rasped into place again as he released the knob, threw the door wide. He played his light over the walls.

Only the iron-barred window over to the right broke the whitewashed expanse. There was an iron bed and a chair. The handcuffs were hanging over the chair's back. They glinted dully in the harsh white light.

The door refused to stay open of its own accord. Neil put his searchlight against the panel to hold it back; there was enough glow from the moon to show the outline of the chair.

The bare floor echoed his steps hollowly. His fingers contacted the clammy steel of the handcuffs. They clinked mutely. They were more like heavy shackles than ordinary 'cuffs.

Something scraped the stone near the door. There came a harsh whir of metal rolling over the floor. His flashlight was loose. He could see the dark mass of the door swinging in upon him, blotting out the blur of moonlight back of it.

He dropped the 'cuffs back on the chair, flung himself at the door. His feet brushed his searchlight, sent it rattling away, as he tore forward. The door slammed heavily into its frame. He heard the click of the spring lock as the bolt snapped into place. He crashed against the unyielding oak with a shock that knocked the wind out of him.

He picked himself up, fumbled about the floor for his searchlight. It was still in good order. He shot its beam up and down the door.

The oak panel fitted its frame snugly. The lock was on the outside, out of reach. There were only the minutest of cracks in the masonry of the walls and ceiling. His lip curled grimly when he found that the center of the three window bars moved in its socket; hands far more powerful than his had strained it.

He would've liked to think that his searchlight had merely slipped under the weight of the door. But there was no use clutching at a straw. He knew how securely he'd propped the door back.

CHAPTER V

Strychnine!

EYES were boring into his back. He became conscious of it suddenly, spun himself about, faced the window. The beam of his searchlight darted out through the bars to help the moon.

He fell back a pace, then edged forward again. Hugo was outside the window, blinking in at him. A slow, stupid grin overspread the half-wit's face. He was sitting on his heels, baboon-fashion. As Neil watched, he took a paper envelope from the tin container in his hand, emptied its contents into his loose-lipped mouth. His face turned sour as he swallowed it.

Hugo was waiting for him to come within reach of his powerful arms. Neil was thankful that at least the simpler way—through the door—hadn't occurred to the half-wit.

Tad, though—what about him when he came down to open the door? There was no way to see him coming, warn him off. The window was far out of sight of the back door. Hugo would be upon him before he knew it. If there were only some way to hold Hugo at the window—

The handcuffs might do it! Neil snapped off his light, moved, as if

aimlessly, toward the chair. He was careful to keep the heavy links from clinking as he went over them, made sure they were open and ready.

He stayed just out of reach of the window, pointed to the container in Hugo's hand.

"What's that?" he asked.

Hugo eyed him a moment, said thickly: "For wolves."

"Wolves?" Neil said. "Give you this searchlight for some."

Hugo started to shake his head, hesitated. Neil held his breath while the half-wit eyed the searchlight and considered the three envelopes left in the container. He was having it difficult, making up his mind.

"Maybe we'd better forget the whole thing," Neil said.

Hugo grunted, thrust a pawlike hand through the bars for the searchlight.

Neil shook his head. "Not so fast," he said. "Put out your right hand with the wolf food in it, and your other hand empty. Close your eyes tight. When you open them, you'll see the searchlight." Hugo was eying him warily. Neil added:

"Maybe you're not strong enough?"

Hugo couldn't stand anyone questioning his strength. He shut his eyes, thrust his hands through the bars. The 'cuffs went on without a hitch. It was easier than Neil'd thought—easier and more cowardly.

A growl came from deep in Hugo's throat. His eyes seemed to grow enormous. The muscles of his neck and shoulders bunched. The iron bars looked puny as he loomed in the window, filling the opening with his bulk.

A shot rang out.

* * * * *

Hugo's hand went slack on the bars. His rage was gone. He strained out as far as the shackles let him. His head was cocked to one side. He was listening intently.

Neil had to stay away from the window, out of reach. He kept his eyes on Hugo. The half-wit was bound to see or hear anyone coming along the side of the house.

The shot had been fired within the

house. That much, Neil was sure. But what did it mean? He gave up speculating shortly. It led to no conclusion. Only facts could supply a definite answer.

Anxious minutes dragged by before Hugo moved. Neil saw him snap to attention, saw his big head cock further to the side. Neil drew as close to the window as he dared. The moon was shining, but the side of the house was shadowed. He darted out the beam of his searchlight.

GUY FERRIS was caught in it. He stopped short. In his one hand, he carried a rifle; the other, he threw up to shield his eyes from the glare.

Neil lowered the light. "Let me out," he said. "I'm locked in. Don't worry about Hugo here. I've got him handcuffed to the bars."

Ferris advanced till he was only a few paces from them. He didn't speak. Neil swung the light about to reassure him, playing it upon Hugo and himself. Still, Ferris said nothing. But his eyes went over them carefully.

"What're you waiting for, anyhow?" Neil said. "Let me out!"

Ferris' only reply was a smile—a queer smile that began at his lips, spread gradually over his whole face. He was smiling more broadly than ever as he backed away.

Neil pursued him as far as he could with the beam of his light. His ears caught the light tread of Ferris' feet on the gravel of the path and, seconds later, the tap of his shoes on the back steps. Silence followed the slamming of the door—

Hugo jerked Neil back to the cell. The half-wit's face and shoulders were beginning to twitch. Beginning to twitch—A picture of Thaddeus just before he died flashed before Neil. Hugo was going, too—going as the others had before him!

Hugo had known, loved the old man. Why should the old man reach out to slay him? Was it something other than a curse—something other than even hydrophobia, that was striking the Cauldwells down?

Of a sudden Neil thought of the container that dropped from Hugo's fingers when he shackled him. He stooped over, picked it up from the floor where it lay. His flashlight showed the printed wrapper. It read:

HUDSON'S
SCIENTIFICALLY PREPARED
VERMIN KILLER
STRENGTH: 5 GR. STRYCHNINE

Strychnine! And he'd watched Hugo swallow the contents of two packets! Even his hulking body couldn't withstand its cobra-like effect. It was already twisting him. And Neil was powerless to help him—even if he knew how.

The old man had died of hydrophobia. The coroner had been sure enough on that point. Prince, too, might easily have been rabid; he'd licked the old man's face, invited infection.

But the others—Grannie hadn't come near the old man. Had she died of strychnine? If so, what caused the red welts across her throat? Strychnine could scarcely have claimed Agnes. Her symptoms were different: those of fright, of shock.

Tad's diagnosis was heart failure. Besides, what of the wolf Agnes had mentioned? Thaddeus, too, saw the wolf's shadow. It hadn't touched him, though. Had strychnine made *his* shoulders twitch?

Hugo was jerking convulsively. Neil waited for a spasm to pass, asked him:

"Where did you get this stuff, anyway?"

The half-wit stared at him sullenly a moment. But he was too used to obedience. "Tad's room," he blurted out.

Tad's room!

Hugo was a hard witness. Neil didn't know how much time might be left him. He gritted his teeth, dragged the answers out of him. Piece by piece, he fitted it together, filling in the gaps with his imagination.

Tad had forbidden Hugo to touch the vermin killer, saying it was only

for wolves. But he had a habit of leaving the door of his room open. Hugo sneaked in. Had Tad intended his warning as a come-on?

Hugo'd met the old man in the woods. He was kind to him, took him to the cave where he lived, talked to him. On the day Tad and Neil found the old man, Hugo'd been looking for him. That night Hugo'd dug the body up, took it to the cave; but the old man wouldn't wake up.

HUGO'D heard the wolves snarling tonight, gone out to look. Wolves were afraid of him. The old man'd given him a knife. He'd beaten them off, only to find Isabel already torn apart by them. He was carrying her to the cave when Thaddeus came upon him.

He'd hated Thaddeus, been afraid of him. He loved Isabel and Paula; they were good to him. So, when Thaddeus tried to prevent him from taking Isabel to the cave, he stabbed him and ran off.

He'd left Isabel's body in the cave, come back to see what Tad and Neil were doing. He followed them to the house. When he saw Neil go into the cellar, he pushed the door shut.

* * * * *

Neil caught the sound of approaching footsteps. They weren't masked as Ferris' had been before. There was more than one person coming down the path.

Hugo had been lying on the ground, his body stiffening to increasingly more frequent convulsions. He trembled as he struggled to his feet, crouched against the bars.

Paula came into the beam of the searchlight—

Neil's cry of relief died in his throat. Her arms were bound behind her, her clothes all but ripped off. They hung in shreds from her shoulders, revealing her smooth flesh to the blaze of white light. She squinted her eyes open again as Neil dipped the beam. Her lip was trembling. She was keeping herself going on sheer nerve.

Guy Ferris was right ahead of her. He'd exchanged the rifle he'd carried

before for a revolver—Neil's own. He steered Paula's course by a cord attached to her bound wrists. She winced as he pulled it.

Neil's fingernails bit into his palms. Was there no way of getting out of this prison? It would've been worth dying for, at that moment, just to batter in Ferris' smiling face!

Neil kept his tongue behind his teeth. Words might increase Ferris' brutality. Nothing he could say would relieve Paula's misery. He watched her breast rise and fall, watched the fear grow in her eyes as she became used to the light, saw Hugo and himself.

Her lips parted, but remained as wordless as his own. He knew her thoughts were racing frantically back of her troubled eyes.

Ferris was still smiling. Neil could see his face over Paula's bare shoulder. Ferris gave his lead cord a jerk to draw her nearer the window. Neil saw satisfaction light his eyes as the cord tore the girl's soft flesh and she winced. Ferris caught his breath with delight when a stiffer jerk wrung an agonized moan from her trembling lips.

Neil felt the muscles of his shoulders and neck tighten. The veins of his temples throbbed. His voice rose of its own accord.

But all sound of his words was lost. Hugo gathered himself, the many-linked handcuffs glinting in the searchlight's beam. Neil wondered how far the 'cuffs would stretch—

Hugo threw himself bodily at Ferris. He snarled like a wild beast as his leap died in mid-career and the grip of the shackles flung him to the ground.

Ferris' revolver barked. The livid flame leaped almost the entire distance to Hugo's exposed chest. His hulking body twitched to the shock of the lead, lay limp. The smile hadn't left Ferris' face. His eyes danced wildly.

His finger was tight on the trigger, ready for another shot. Paula threw herself against him. The slug went wide. "Don't, Guy," she said. "Not now."

NEIL chewed his lip as he watched her. Even knowing what the effort must've cost her, even knowing that she was trying to draw Ferris away from further shooting with her blond allure, didn't lessen Neil's agony. Still, he kept his lips tight. He'd no right to kill her plan if he'd none to offer himself.

Her one chance was to use every wile she had—to get Ferris off guard for a single instant.

Ferris' eyes swept over her, lingering lecherously. One arm he threw about her slim waist; in the hand of his other arm he held the cord. Blood rushed to Neil's head as he saw them move away. He followed them, face pressed against the bars, till they were out of sight.

The sound of their slow steps rang in his ears like a knell. He could hear Paula's voice, softly persuading. And her low, forced laugh, dying in a scream of pain, fled back to him as Ferris tore at the cord again.

Where was Tad?

CHAPTER VI

"Iron Bars Do Not—"

NEIL CLARK dragged the chair over to the window. He was able to reach through the bars to Hugo's prostrate form. There was still pulse in his wrists. Neil shook him by the shoulders, tried to slap blood into his flaccid face.

Hugo moaned. Neil said: "Get up, Hugo! Get up! Paula needs you—Paula!" Over and over he repeated the words, working without ceasing.

At last Hugo stirred. He opened his eyes blearily. Neil helped him sit up. "For Paula, Hugo," Neil pleaded. "Help me. Pull this bar—this bar—for Paula, Hugo!"

"For Paula— Paula—" Hugo muttered dully. "For Paula—" And, holding the bar, he lurched awkwardly to his feet. He scarcely seemed to know what he was doing as he grasped the bar tightly in his big paws, braced himself against the wall.

It was an almost hopeless task. That

it was held loosely in its cement socket meant nothing. What right had he to drive a dying man, rob him of his last moments, attempting the nearly impossible?

Neil knew only that Paula needed him. He got himself into the window, set his own feet below Hugo's hands at the bottom of the bar. The other two bars, he gripped with his hands.

Hugo hunched himself, strained. Neil kept the rhythm so their forces would bear on the bar together. How many thousands of times had Hugo shaken this same bar before? The iron rasped in its socket, but held.

They tore at it again. Was the cement giving? Hugo had to pause, coughing, trembling.

Once more their muscles tensed. Neil was exerting his utmost. Still, it was nothing to the tremendous pressure Hugo exerted from without. The metal ground into the cement, biting its way through the grey mass.

The end came without warning. The bar tore from its moorings. Hugo's body, still straining, hurtled outward. The iron bar came away in his hands—dropped from them only as his broad back crashed into the harsh grass.

Neil's own legs shot through the opening. His hips wedged tight in the hold of the two other bars. He had to slide himself free, slip out sideways.

Hugo didn't move when he shook him. Neil played his light upon him, felt in vain for heart beat. His hand came away bloody from the wound; Hugo had died in that last mighty effort. There wasn't time to move him.

Neil's eye caught the gleam of steel. Hugo's knife had slipped out of his pocket when he hit the ground. Neil picked it up, saw the name burnt into its bone handle.

Rex Long. The name came to life as Neil raced toward the back of the house. The old man's name had been Rex Long. The papers had carried headlines of his disappearance two years ago. No wonder he'd cursed the women: his own wife had run off

with his bank's money while he was ill, leaving him to serve a jail sentence when he recovered!

* * * * *

All the way front was the living room. A swath of yellow light came through the doorway, seeped down the hall. Neil knew the way well enough, but the dim glow helped him keep his wobbly feet right.

Paula's voice came to him. It was high-pitched, at times trembling. The words grew clearer as he stole forward. She was talking desperately, sparring for an opening which might never come.

"Love him?" she was saying. "All I wanted was to save him so we'd have someone to blame things on if the coroner comes. Even you'll have to admit it's better than your idea of letting the wolves get rid of the bodies. He's not clever or anything, don't you see?"

FERRIS laughed harshly. His voice was so changed Neil scarcely recognized it. The mildness was gone. His tone was savage, domineering.

"Clever?" he said. "He's stupid—stupid like all the rest of you. It took a man like me to see the film on the streams and the kind of soil here. You lived here all your lives without knowing there was a fortune in oil under you."

His voice rose. "Hydrophobia, curse, wolves! That was all you could think of! Nothing so simple as the strychnine your brother had!"

There was a pause before Paula recovered herself, spoke again. "You mean you poisoned them—poisoned them just to get the property?" she asked, her voice so faint Neil barely heard her.

Neil gritted his teeth as Ferris' laughter grated on his nerves again. The man was taking a fiendish delight, describing to the girl how he'd poisoned her grandmother, choking the old creature when she fought against the hypodermic. How he'd begun to give the strychnine to Thaddeus in his food because it was slower-working that way and he

wanted Thaddeus to suffer for what he did to Agnes.

Neil stumbled over something as he slid into the room next to where Ferris had Paula. A shiver ran along his spine. His toe had stubbed against flesh. He turned on his light, shielding it with his hands.

Tad's eyes stared vacantly up at him. There was a dark hole in the boy's right temple. No wonder he hadn't come down! Neil let his light die—but not before he spotted another searchlight, not unlike his own, beside the body.

He felt impelled to pick it up, try it. A wolf's head, jaws agape, showed in the circle of light cast on the floor. Neil's fingers found the paper image pasted across the lens. Tad had made the same discovery before him, confronted Ferris with it, got a bullet from one of his own rifles for his pains.

As if from a distance he heard Paula ask:

"Then, why did you kill your mother?"

"Are you crazy?" Ferris' voice rose hysterically. "I *loved* my mother! It was a blunder. I only hope she can forgive. God only knows why she had to look through the door and see the shadow I put on your father's wall! Her poor heart couldn't stand it."

His voice cracked. "All I could do then was change my plans, finish what I'd set out, and avenge her memory."

Neil reached the door that led to the next room. The lamp blinded him for a moment. Then he saw Paula.

She was sitting on a couch at the far end. Her clothes had dropped from her shoulders, the straps held in place only by her arms, which were still bound behind her back. She was struggling to keep the revulsion from showing on her face.

Neil was tense, waited. Everything would depend on whether he chose the right instant. Ferris had kept the revolver in his hand. He could drop Neil before he was halfway across the room. Throwing the knife would endanger Paula as much as it would Ferris.

Ferris moved closer to the couch. Neil saw Paula shrink away in spite of herself. He saw Ferris run his fingers over the smooth curve of her shoulder.

PAULA had held back her bait long, patiently. She played it now.

"Aren't you going to untie my hands, Guy?" she asked softly.

Ferris threw back his head, laughed maliciously. "Untie your hands! Well, what a fool you must think I am!"

And then Neil struck. He was across the room in a quick dash. He threw the knife aside as he started. He wanted to use his hands.

A shot belched from Ferris' revolver, spat into the wall before Neil's fist sent the gun, spinning, from his hand. Ferris went to the floor under a flurry of blows. Neil felt his own face and body being battered by an antagonist whose strength amazed him. But Neil was unmindful of pain. It drove his fury higher.

Neil's fingers sought Ferris' throat. He wanted to choke the bestial evil out of him. He hung there in spite of the terrific beating Ferris gave him in return. He felt he must choke the life out of the thing he held in his fingers if he wanted Paula to live, be free from shame.

Gradually Ferris' fists lost their force. Neil felt the man go limp. Still, he throttled—was still madly throttling when Paula threw herself, bound as she was, between them.

"Don't, Neil," she said. "There's been too much death here already."

Neil rose, lifted her to her feet. He took a cloth from a table, threw it about her. The cords that bound her wrists, he twined tightly about Ferris' own. Then he swung her around so her eyes wouldn't be upon Ferris' unconscious form as he drew her to him, kissed her tenderly.

Not until later did Neil learn the rest of Ferris' story. The plan had been born in the engineer's mind almost as soon as he found oil on the place. Only Grannie and Thaddeus were between Agnes and possession

of the property—untold wealth for both his mother and himself.

The arrival of the old man, the hydrophobia and strychnine poisoning. Hall furnished the opportunity, Prince's death capped it. Only an experienced medical man could distinguish between the symptoms of hydrophobia and strychnine poisoning.

The trick with his searchlight provided more than enough suggestion, with the wolves howling as they did continuously, outside.

The only hitch was Agnes' sudden

death from heart failure. Aside from the unbalancing grief it caused him, her death meant that he'd have to gain control of the property in another way—by marrying one of the girls and killing off those between her and inheritance.

But almost everybody and everything in the house had conspired to help him, even down to Tad's furnishing the rifle for his own execution.

If it hadn't been for that loose bar. . .



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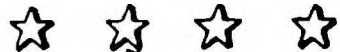
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As he drew the blade across the python's head, it writhed crazily

**Polin, Carnival Strong Man, is Pursued by the Writhing
Tentacles of Terror as He Cringes from a Force
Beyond His Power!**

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Murder Witness," "The Road to the Morgue," etc.

FOG as thick as puree enveloped the tents of Gasper's Mammoth Carnival. Like long ghost fingers, great tentacles of it wrapped themselves around the moldy canvas tent where dwelt the renowned Madame Luray, charmer of snakes. A gibbous moon looked down, futilely trying to pierce the blanket of mist.

The carnival people were sleeping—all save one. In his tent the Great Polin, "strongest man in the world," sat on his tumbled cot. His eyes were widely open and looking out through the opening in the tent.

Paint glows of light dotted the show grounds here and there, and the saffron hue of one rested on the large

wagon and stood near Madame Luray's sleeping quarters. Polin's eyes were flecked with little spots of red as he looked in that direction. His breathing was labored and beads of sweat oozed from the pores of his massive face.

The Great Polin looked at his watch. Three o'clock. He got up. His powerful arms were so abnormally long that, when they swung easily at his sides, the finger tips of his huge hands touched well below his knees.

He walked out of his tent and froze in front of it for awhile. He analyzed every small sound that broke the stillness enveloping the carnival grounds. His eyes, stabbing through the fog, discerned a watchman moving about fifty yards down the midway. A thin smile came to his lips. When the watchman became swallowed up in the darkness near the ticket booth, Polin began to move forward.

This was the night. He would never have a better chance. His wife had insisted on sleeping near her snakes. Polin did not like snakes so he had taken a tent of his own.

The Strong Man had decided to kill Madame Luray. As light on his feet as a cat, he made no sound as he crossed the grass and went into the tent where his wife was sleeping.

MADAME LURAY awoke with a start. A scream died at its source when an arm encircled her small white throat and tightened like a constricting band of steel. It pressed and pressed until her heart stopped beating.

But the Great Polin had not even started. He lifted the woman's inert body out of the bed and wrapped those great arms around her chest. He could hear her bones crack. Polin let her slip to the floor beside the bed where she lay in a grotesque position like a rag doll. Quickly he crossed the boards and ripped the canvas aside.

Backed up to the tent was the big wagon that contained Madame Luray's three pythons. Polin lifted a heavy bar and swung the door open. His blood boiled when he saw the

head of one of the snakes dart forward. The Strong Man had always hated the serpents. Everybody had told him how strong they were—that they could crush a man to pulp. Polin had always wanted to find that out for himself.

He stood back and watched a twenty-foot snake glide out of its cage, its steely eyes flickering. Another head moved and the Strong Man smashed it with a stick. The python drew back and Polin let the door of the cage swing lazily. The big snake crawling into the tent swung its wavering head toward the Strong Man. Polin drew a murderous-looking knife and leaped toward the snake. He thrust a powerful forearm between its jaws and let it bite.

He forgot the pain as he drew the blade of the knife across the flesh just back of the python's head. The huge serpent writhed and lashed out crazily. A table crashed to the floor. The tent shook as if caught in the teeth of a roaring storm.

Then Polin yelled wildly, calling for help.

The Strong Man knew it would take at least a minute for people to get out of their beds and reach the snake charmer's tent. He severed the great snake's head from its body and opened the jaws. Leaping to the side of the dead woman, he brought those jaws down against the thin white forearm that stretched out over the floor. The python's teeth drew blood. Polin tossed the grisly snake head away from him and flung himself toward the writhing thing on the floor.

Shouts went skyward down the length of the Midway. Boots thudded against the lush earth. A face was shoved through the mist that swirled around the entrance of the snake charmer's tent. Polin, shoving and heaving serpentine coils from him, struggled to get to his feet.

He recognized the barker. Then other faces were looking in through the door. White faces, with wide, staring, horror-clouded eyes.

"The snakes!" the Great Polin yelled. "The others—look out!"

He scrambled to his feet and let

the bloody knife drop from his fingers. The barker snapped on a light and looked at the shambles on the floor. The hardened carnival man took a backward step and gasped chokingly. Just inside the door, the Human Skeleton looked even thinner. His bony face was the color of parchment. A Bearded Woman fell forward, head swimming.

"D-DIDN'T y-you hear her?" Polin choked. "She screamed—I got here just as . . . it was too late. I got its head off and the thing began to unwind. I dragged it off her. It bit me—but I slashed at it. Look out—there's another one!"

He staggered over to where his dead wife lay and dropped down at her side. Lifting her head, he pillowed it on his arm.

The barker and a crowd of carnival performers beat at the python that was half out of the cage. The snake began to draw back, its glittering eyes seemingly glued to the broad back of the Great Polin. When the door of the snake wagon clanged shut, Polin eased the dead woman to the ground, set his jaws and got up.

"It's tough, Polin," the barker said tremblingly. "What a way to go out. Looks like it—got her—when she was asleep. If she could have seen it before! She had a strange power over—"

The Great Polin staggered out of the tent. Outside his Satanic smile was screened by the swirling vapor. He wiped long, steely fingers stained with python gore against the front of his shirt as he crossed the Midway to his tent.

The sheriff and the coroner would be on hand before long. He had to watch himself. He had to be sure that he would put over a good act—the best of his career. Yes, this was the place to have pulled the job—in the sticks. The sheriff would not be as smart as a city dick. And the coroner . . . what could he prove?

At four o'clock in the morning the sheriff arrived. Polin did not come out of his tent. When the barker finally came to get him the Strong

Man, who could bend an iron crowbar as if it were nothing but a willow twig, was sitting on a chair with his head bowed in grief. His eyes were wet when he looked up at the barker.

"No," he said, "I don't want to see it again. I can't stand it, Flick. Ain't I seen enough? She—Flo layin' there—her body smashed all up—like that. What they want me for, Flick?"

The Great Polin, however, went over to the snake charmer's tent. The faces of the stunned troupe near the door seemed to swing, bodyless, in the skirling fog. Their eyes were filmed with horror. Their lips were frozen. Most of the shocked eyes strayed to the ugly bite on the Strong Man's arm.

The high-pitched, strained voice of a midget sounded to break the silence. "He killed it—with his hands."

Polin felt fear knife through him. He whirled toward the midget.

"What you say? You say I—" His sluggish brain cleared. "Sure, sure," he muttered. "I got it—too late—too late!"

THE sheriff was a raw-boned country man who looked as if he had just come out of a hay field. The coroner was a small man who seemed more anxious to get out of the place than anything else.

"Yeah," the coroner said, "no use to make any fuss about this. She's dead—crushed to death. I'll make out a death certificate. That all right with you, Sheriff?"

The man nodded. "Nasty mess, huh?" He saw Polin then and started as if frightened. "Y-you're the man. You're Polin who—"

Wordlessly the Strong Man nodded. He looked at the dead woman then and sank to his knees, crying out. It was a gruesome sight. The dead woman, the mutilated python, tremors still running the length of its body. The bloody snake head on the floor, and Polin, "the world's strongest man," sobbing like a woman.

"Let's take her out of here," proposed the coroner anxiously.

The sheriff was glad to get out of the snake charmer's tent. When he

drove away from the fog-choked carnival grounds, Polin drew a deep, long breath. "I'll take her to the undertaking parlor in town," the coroner had called back. "You can make arrangements."

The Great Polin had stared at the man blankly, then nodded. He stumbled toward his tent now like a man walking in his sleep. A carnival freak called out to him.

"Leave me alone!" Polin choked. "Leave me alone!"

It was done. The Strong Man indulged in a cold smile when he was alone. He could go to *her* now. That other woman—in town. That dark-eyed sorceress with the crimson lips and soft skin. The woman who felt so soft in his huge strong arms.

Last year, when the carnival had been here, he had met her. He had wanted her to go away with him then. But she was a woman who wanted a man without any strings on him. Two days ago she had whispered something while lying in his arms.

"You're very strong, Polin. You can do anything you want to. You are stronger than those snakes of hers. Suppose—"

The Great Polin had read the thing that had just happened in the woman's smouldering eyes. He was strong, but that woman with her soft voice and haunting smile was stronger.

He looked at the dried blood on his hands and shivered. He went to a stand in the corner and poured water into a bowl out of a large pitcher. Industriously he scrubbed his hands clean and began to flex them. A warm flow of blood surged through his powerful frame.

Strength! She had been right. Polin could do anything.

Three days later everything was over. The carnival Strong Man watched two husky men down at the railroad station push a coffin into the express car. Madame Luray was going back to the town of her birth to be buried.

Polin was unable to accompany her. He had to think of the carnival. The show had to go on. That was what he wired her people. Flo would have

understood—she had been a good trouper.

But that night the carnival pulled out without the Strong Man. Polin had gone to the owner of the show in the guise of a broken man.

"I can't stay, Mr. Knowles," he had said. "I thought I could. But without her—I couldn't stand it. I'm quittin' the business. I don't know where I'll go—what I'll do. But if I stayed, all I would be seein' would be her—on the floor—and a snake—"

THE Strong Man lost no time in collecting the reward for his crime. The woman was waiting for him. She lived in a house at the edge of town, a big, gingerbread structure whose crumbling sides were smothered by wistaria vines.

It was said of Nan Hawley that she had once been on the stage. She was not as young as her face made her out to be. Townspeople whispered when she passed them by. They whispered about her red lips and her dark, provocative eyes. There had been a time when an effort had been made to drive her out of town.

Nan Hawley let the Great Polin in late one night, two days after the man had shipped a casket to the West. She slid into his great, powerful arms and her tumultuous eyes looked into his with a question in them. Her red lips were curled.

The Strong Man, a little shaken by the ghastly memory, his brain numbed by the proximity of the woman for whom he had committed murder, nodded his massive head. Nan Hawley laughed aloud and crushed her red lips to Polin's mouth.

"Now you belong to me," she said. "A long time I've been waiting. Take me out of here, Polin—away from here. We'll be married."

Polin held her close and delicious tremors ran through his powerful frame. She was so soft, so small. She was worth that terrible thing he had done—worth anything. Nan freed herself.

"Such strong arms, Polin. They're like—pythons curling around me—tight—coiling—"

Polin cried out. His face was ghastly. Beads of sweat welled through his pores. His wide, haunted eyes almost frightened the woman.

"Don't say that!" he croaked in a hoarse voice. "Don't ever say that!"

The woman soothed the Strong Man. Her lips drove fear out of him. He had killed for her—she belonged to him.

"We'll go away," she whispered. "A long way from here. Get a place somewhere—just the two of us."

Polin crushed Nan Hawley against his ponderous chest and laughed with forced gaiety. "Yeah, yeah. I'd like that—get away from here—a long, long way. Tonight we'll go. We'll be married."

The Strong Man and his woman went away—far away. They found a small place in a desolate countryside, hundreds of miles from the scene of the horrible crime that had made her his. A weather-beaten old farmhouse that stood at the edge of a thick woods.

The sagging barn stood at the very edge of a slimy pond choked with great, gnarled tree snags. Dead apple trees stretched along one side of it, blackened, leafless branches reaching toward the sky like the fingers of the suicide trees in Dante's Inferno.

Polin ploughed up a weed-choked patch of ground and planted seeds. When that task was done, he went out and found work by the day in a big granite quarry five miles from the farm.

THE woman seemed content in the dreary surroundings. She could look the world in the face; she heard no more whisperings. But the Great Polin heard whisperings all around him. He could see freaks—tall, skinny men, midgets, bearded women—looking at him out of the shadows. Their eyes shone like moonstones.

When he was alone at night, he was afraid. Sometimes he would wake up in the darkness, a hoarse, strangled cry ringing in his ears. He imagined a great writhing thing was in the room with him.

At the quarry men marveled at Po-

lin's strength. They looked at his huge, dangling arms and powerful body and shuddered. His silence was a cause for wonder as was also the strange light that burned in his eyes.

One night a year after Polin had come to the little farm, he walked out into a clammy mist to feed his hens. When the door had closed behind him, the woman got up from beside the stove and walked into the bedroom that adjoined the kitchen. She lit a lamp and began to put more red on her lips. She put color on her pale white cheeks and smiled at the effect.

Polin liked her that way. Polin loved her. He did not have to know about those others. He was protection for her. He was big and strong, but in her arms he was like a child.

While she stood looking at her face in the mirror, Nan Hawley heard a crazy scream out in the yard. She dashed to the window. Fifty yards away Polin had set his lantern down. He had an axe in his hand and he was felling away at a tree with it. Labored curses came from his lips.

When the woman ran out to him, the Strong Man was tearing at a climbing vine that he had cut away from the tree. He did not know that the companion of his solitude was watching him until she spoke. Then he wheeled toward her, his face chalky and dripping with sweat in the sickly lantern light. His fingers were bleeding. There was a glare as of insanity in his eyes.

"Polin," Nan Hawley asked sharply, "what is the matter with you?"

The axe slid from powerful fingers. Polin drew a sleeve across his face.

"Everything looks like a snake," he almost screeched. "The vine—it was crawlin' up the tree like . . . Every time I look up there, where you can see the gravel road, it wriggles like a snake, too. I—I'm going mad—Everywhere—snakes! I see them, dream about them, snakes with their heads cut off!"

He uttered a hoarse, strangled cry and slumped down on his knees beside his painted woman. She let her fingers run through his wet, matted black hair.

The next day, at the quarry, a worker said: "I'm afraid of that feller, Polin. He looks like he's goin' a little mad."

Someone laughed nervously. "Yeah, yesterday he seen a little snake—just a little green snake. He turns white—like a scairt girl. A man that can lift a hundred-pound chunk of granite like it was a pebble, afraid of snakes! I don' like his looks, neither. He ain't all there."

THE sheriff was called to the countryside near Polin's place three nights later. A farmer took him out into the woods and showed him a small calf. It lay on the ground, dead, its body crushed.

"Only one man could do that, Sam—that man, Polin," said the farmer. "He don't like me. He drove me out of the yard last night. Said to keep away—to stop comin' there to look at his wife. He's gone in the head, Sam. He done this. He could do that—to a human bein'."

The sheriff went to get the Strong Man. When he led Polin to where the crushed body of the calf lay, the Strong Man staggered back a step and smothered a frightened cry.

"I—didn't do—that," he choked. "Last night I was out on the pond—fishin'. I wasn't here in the woods at all." The sheriff looked at him, wondering at the terror that gripped Polin. "If he says I done that, if anybody says it, he lies."

The Strong Man turned abruptly and went crashing through the woods as if some terrible thing were hard on his heels. When he staggered into his house near the pond, Nan turned white under her rouge. The back of her hand fled to her mouth in a gesture of stark fright.

"I saw something—out there, Nan," Polin breathed in a strangled voice. "It was crushed to death—broken—like that woman. I didn't do it! But they blame me. I don't know a thing about it. I'm afraid—I'm afraid—"

The painted woman put her soft arms around him and gradually routed his spell of panic. After awhile Polin got up and walked across the floor

a little unsteadily. He stumbled over a small dog and the mongrel yelped with pain. It sank its teeth into the Strong Man's leg and he cursed and kicked the animal across the room. The woman's eyes flared.

"Y-you beast! Don't ever do that again!"

"It bit me," Polin lashed back at her. "That little rat of a dog—bitin' me—Polin! I'll kill the thing, yet."

The woman's red lips curled wickedly. "You do and maybe they'll find out—about other things you killed. I'll—"

"Shut up!" Polin cried out. "Damn you!"

"You're losing your stomach, Polin," the woman purred. "You'll get into real trouble yet. You watch your step around here. People don't like you much." She slipped back into the shadows near the stove.

Polin looked at her, his long fingers curled. "I'll make sure. I'll kill you." Then his anger died. He swept Nan into his big, powerful arms. "No—I'll never do that. But I am jealous of you—I love you!"

The woman smiled and let her soft arms move up around his neck. But the smile was only on her lips.

Polin went out a few minutes later to finish his chores. The moon was full. It bathed the slimy pond with an unhealthy glow. The countryside was laid bare in the silver light and the Strong Man could see that distant gravel road winding toward a mountain side—like a huge python.

Fear crept in on him again. In the charivari of sound that came from the nocturnal crawlers he thought he could hear whisperings. He stepped on something that gave under his boot and a black round coil of something bumped against his leg. Horror filled him but it was nothing more sinister than a big rubber hose.

YET when a terrible scream of terror rose in the air he froze in his tracks. That cry was like that of a tortured soul coming from the maw of hell. Polin's spine was like jelly. Nan came running across the muck of the yard, her red mouth a dark splotch

against the chalky oval of her face. Her frightened eyes glowed horribly in the moonlight.

"Polin," she gasped, "did you hear?" He nodded wordlessly.

It came again, faintly this time. That horrible, choking cry, followed by a silence interrupted by the familiar mournful cry of a loon. A ghostly southing of the breeze through the dew-soaked branches of the trees alternated with the woman's spasmodic breathing. Time passed, time rife with a haunting, gnawing dread.

"You'd better go and see, Polin," she said at last.

The Strong Man's frame quivered. His lower lip sagged loosely. "Somebody drowning, maybe," he forced out. "Somebody turned over in a boat. You stay here, Nan. I'll go."

It took all of Polin's waning courage for him to move his legs. He plodded along the edge of the pond like a man stumbling through a bad dream. His eyes probed at the swirling mists that rose from the stagnant water near the shore like vapor rises from hot tea in a cup.

Terror was in the Strong Man's eyes. He thought of that calf, crushed, bleeding. There was only one man who had the strength to . . . He stopped suddenly. Figures were moving up there under the pine trees.

Polin heard a horse snort. Voices, husked and vibrant with horror, beat against his ears. The Strong Man forced his numbed legs into motion. Soon white faces of two men appeared out of the gloom. From off to one side Polin thought he caught a strange, spine-tingling, rustling sound. A faint splash lifted the short hairs on his massive neck. Then a voice boomed at him.

"You did this, Polin! Here's the man who owned the calf—the man you told to stop lookin' at your woman."

The Strong Man stared, paralyzed, at the thing on the ground when the farmer touched a match to the wick of a smoky lantern. The body lay there in horrible distortion, mouth open wide and staring eyes still

glazed with stark terror. Blood trickled from the dead man's mouth in a black stream. Polin's blood became slush in his veins. He tried to cry out but his throat was dry and constricted.

Crushed—like that calf!

"You come with us, Polin," one of the men said. "I've got a gun."

"I—I did not do it," the Strong Man gibbered. "I was not here. You look—you see my tracks there? I have boots with big hobnails. My wife, she knows I wasn't here. Mother of—"

THE painted woman stumbled into the sickly light of the lantern. She, too, saw the thing and screamed hoarsely.

"Nan, they say I do this thing. You know I been in the yard back there. You tell them—"

"Yes, yes," the woman choked, and seemed on the verge of falling. "Polin, he did not do this thing. We—both of us—heard the scream from the house. Polin, take me away from here!"

"The man's right," one of the two men who had discovered the body grudgingly admitted. "There's no sign of tracks near the body. But only such a man could—"

The farmer shook his head and licked dry lips. "Let's get him home. This place crawls." He looked at Polin fearfully. "If we find out about this, Polin—"

Back at the house Nan shrank from the Strong Man's touch.

"Keep away from me! I see you there in the yard when the man is being killed. You could not have done it, but only you are that strong! To crush a man—to death!" A sudden wave of terror swept into her eyes. "Maybe you wasn't there. Maybe you are a devil. Something out of hell that can be two places!" Screaming, she ran into the bedroom and locked the door behind her.

Polin took but two steps after her, then stood as if carved out of a rock as he looked at the door. No, he could never kill Nan. He loved her; he had committed murder for her, had made

a place in hell for himself because of her.

The Strong Man did not move for a long time. That look in his woman's eyes haunted him. He became conscious of a gnawing fear. It ate into his vitals as he swung around like an automaton to look at the great black maw of the open door.

Something had killed that farmer. And only Polin could crush like that. But Polin knew that he had not done it. That was the horror of it. And he knew there was not a man within a thousand miles who possessed his inhuman strength.

Maybe Nan was right. Maybe he was in the grip of a devil. The devil could do strange things. An agonized cry broke from his throat. Everything around him seemed unclean, crawling. The fetid, slimy pond seemed to be alive and moving toward the house. The quiet of the grave gripped that isolated group of crumbling farm buildings.

There came a scraping sound outside the house. Polin moved like an automaton toward the open door. The sound came again as if something that writhed were threshing against the clapboards. With a gasping cry, the Strong Man picked up an axe that leaned against the woodbox and went out into the yard. He saw a tree limb being whipped against the house by the fitful breeze that was coming up.

A little mad, he dropped his axe and reached for the limb with long, steel-like fingers. He snapped it off with brute strength and hurled it from him. Thunder began to growl and lightning to split the night sky asunder. Polin went back into the house, brain in a torment.

THE Strong Man went upstairs to an unfinished room and lay down on a heap of old rags. Ten minutes later a terrific squealing came from the direction of the barn, the frightened commotion of pigs. Sweat was streaming from Polin as he tottered down the stairs. His wife was standing in the middle of the kitchen floor holding a lamp. Without her make-up she looked like something that had

just come out of the grave to hunt for life blood. When she saw Polin, a look of relief came over her face.

"I thought you were out there—killin' somethin'," she breathed. Turning without a word, she went into the bedroom again, her bare feet making a slapping sound. The key turned in the lock. There was nothing but silence.

"I—I'll go mad!" Polin thought. "The way she looks at me. The things she says to me. Yes, she knows—the only one who knows—and it was for her. I was mad then, but I can't kill no more. The pigs—they heard something out there in the barn."

Polin put on his shoes hurriedly and went out of the house. When he crossed the yard, the rain was falling heavily. Thunder rumbled and the chain lightning, drilling down out of the heavens, was like a yellow snake with tiny tendrils licking out from it. Snakes—everything like snakes.

The Strong Man looked toward the barn warily. He increased his pace. He wanted to get away from the place for awhile. Into the woods where the air smelled cleaner and where he could not see anything but blackness. But the lightning flashes cut deep into them.

Once Polin fell over a large creeping vine and went sprawling. He tore at the vine which was slippery in his grasp. He almost screamed as he tore it loose. Like a clinging snake it was.

He scrambled to his feet, stumbled through the woods. At last he came to a clump of small pines that grew close together. It was dry under their branches and he crawled in and threw himself on the aromatic bed of pine needles.

All during the night the Strong Man lay there, brain tortured, fear holding him fast. Exhaustion numbed him after awhile. But he woke up, a strangled cry ringing in his ears. His own voice.

He had dreamed that he was in a tent holding a snake's head in his hands. Carnival freaks began to swarm toward him, fingers pointing. Then a woman walked up to him with eyes that were open but did not see.

Awake, he could hear the painted woman's raspy whisper.

"Maybe you're a devil—maybe—"

The night seemed interminably long to Polin. When dawn finally broke with promise of a clear day, he got up and started back through the woods. Halfway to the clearing, the Strong Man stopped dead in his tracks.

A piercing cry of stark terror penetrated the woods and beat against his eardrums. Again it came, a soul-chilling cry that seemed to fill all the world. It came from the farmhouse near the stagnant pond.

Polin started to crash his way through the woods like a berserk wild beast, a meaningless, terrified babble rambling from his lips. Fear bit into his heart when that cry came once more—fainter this time. It trailed off into a strangled gurgle and died.

POLIN tore out of the woods and across the yard. He slid in the yellow mud churned up by the rain of the night before and as he clambered to his feet he saw that the farmhouse door was swinging open. Nan always got up early. Sometimes she went to the barn and—

Polin shook with terror as he stumbled toward the rotting structure. Pigs were squealing. The big draft horse was snorting and stamping in its stall. Polin went into the barn and saw the painted woman lying on the floor. Blood was trickling out of one corner of her mouth. Her body was in an unnatural twisted position—like a broken doll.

The Strong Man ran to her and picked her up in his arms. He yelled her name crazily. He kissed her dead, white face. Then Polin's horror-choked eyes saw the marks on her bare arm. Marks that he had seen on a white arm before. The marks of snake teeth. His blood thickened and became stagnant in his veins. Icy shafts of horror pierced his heart.

He heard something scraping against the rotting floorboards and he turned his head. He tried to scream but his throat was constricted. He could not breathe; he could not move.

There it was—a great writhing thing, half hidden by the darkness that still held sway near an old feed bin!

He saw the markings on its slimy body, heard the horrible liquid sound as the other end of it squirmed through the stagnant water that lapped against the side of the barn. Then it was gone.

But Polin still saw it—he would see it forever.

The Strong Man shook violently and the unintelligible babble came from his lips again. His entire body oozed sweat as a sickening horror engulfed him. Suddenly he found voice and screamed; screamed with a volume of terror that had been brewing in his massive frame for months. He held the dead woman to him and rocked from side to side. The sound of heavily beating hoofs and the rattling of loose wheel spokes and milk cans cut into the hellish quiet half an hour later.

Polin was still kneeling on the barn floor with the dead woman in his arms when two men came running into the outbuilding. The man's eyes were a little glassy now. He hardly saw those hard, shocked faces staring at him. He did not hear the horrified curses that fell from their lips. The dead woman's face had become that of another person to whom Polin was babbling.

"I done it for her, Flo. I killed you—had it all planned. I crushed you with these arms—they'd think I . . . Oh God, I was mad! I didn't know what I was doin'! That woman out of hell!"

A husky man who drove a milk truck every morning through the countryside gasped:

"He did it. They said he would sometime. Look at them arms, Hank. Better git him while—"

The speaker picked up an old axe handle when Polin's deranged eyes swept his way. Then Polin's eyes seemed to clear. He looked at the thing in his arms, then dropped it to the floor.

"It was the big snake!" he screamed. It killed her! Tear down the barn! It—it—"

"**HE'S** crazy!" the milkman ripped out. "Talkin' about snakes. Look at the slime on his shirt an' arms. It's all over the woman's dress. And he wants to tell us it was a snake. Why, there ain't a snake that big. . . . Look out, Hank!"

Polin leaped toward the man, great fingers hooked. "Y—you don't believe me?" he croaked. "You think—I'm. I didn't! I didn't! It was the snake! Don't look at me like that! I'll—"

The axe handle crashed down on Polin's massive head. The Strong Man went to his knees, uttering animal-like cries. He tried to get up. The club descended again and he went groveling to the floor, his giant frame quivering. Stunned, he lay there.

Voices came from far away.

He struggled to summon his strength. His stunned brain lent no aid to his powerful muscles, however. His sanity was slipping fast. He thought he heard that huge snake crawling toward him, but it was the milkman shuffling across the floor.

"Kill it, kill it!" he screeched. "Don't let it get me!" Fright tremored through the Strong Man and super-human strength lifted him off the floor. The men thought of his crushing arms. Again that axe handle descended on his head and the world broke up in front of Polin's eyes. His skull was crushed and he fell back,

his sightless eyes staring at the ceiling.

The Great Polin's black soul went swirling toward hell. Whisperings, mocking whisperings were all around him. Whisperings that told him a grim Fate had balanced things. He had killed the snake charmer—everybody had laid the blame on a big snake. Now, a big snake . . . Polin was lost in ebon darkness. Ten minutes later acrid smoke billowed across the clearing and crackling of flames muffled the voices of men.

"Shoulda been burned down long ago, this hell hole," the milkman ripped out. "Ten years ago a man cut his own throat there."

"Yeah, let's git out of here," said one of the others.

The sun was just visible above the horizon when Polin's body was dragged across the mucky yard and dumped into the milk wagon. A gust of wind drove the yellowed fragments of a newspaper across the gravel road and flattened it against a wheel of the wagon. There was a strange item of news on the torn paper. It said:

The big python that escaped from Gaspar's Mammoth Carnival on its way through this county is still at large. Farmers are asked to be on the lookout for the big snake that measures twenty feet in length.

Below the news item was a prophetic scarehead partly torn away—
WIFE SLAYER DIES AT DAWN.

THE BLANK FACE OF HORROR

A Novelette of

Terror-Freighted Mystery

By

WYATT BLASSINGAME



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

A Terror Novelette



Laniel's gun belched thunder—but the monstrous shape was hidden by the staircase from the men rushing through the doorway



HELL'S DARKEST HALLS

The Resurrection of a Fiend in the Eerie Chambers of the Chateau Dominique Brings an Invasion of Sadism to the Villages Surrounding Quebec!

By **HUGH B. CAVE**

Author of "The Twisted Men," "Blood in the House," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Hunchback

THE bell of the Chateau Dominique tolled midnight. Plaintive as the cry of a mourning woman, the solemn symphony invaded tiny Canadian villages where waking *habitants* whispered and crossed themselves at sound of it.

In the dark courtyard a door creaked on heavy hinges; a candle flame flickered, illuminating the face of a woman who glided forward. As the bell tolled its last wailing note, the woman knelt, gazing up at the tower.

"Two more will arrive tomorrow, O Sainted One! One is a young man from a great and wicked city to the south of us, the other a young woman

from the west. The little innocents who sleep now in their beds must be guarded from such evils, Gregoire, and the scheming ones who come here will themselves be destroyed. I swear it to you. By the poor hands and feet of me, I swear it, Gregoire!"

She raised her arms, and her hands were small, malformed mockeries. Far above her, a light glowed behind thick iron bars in a window of the tower, and a face ugly and hideous swelled against the bars and a humped body loomed darkly as bulbous eyes peered down.

"They must be sent way, my Madeleine!"

"They will be, Gregoire," the woman moaned. "I swear it!"

THE boat owner stared with greedy eyes as Peter Wakely pawed through a roll of Canadian and American greenbacks. "Ten dollar, that is right, m'sieu!" Avidly he clutched the bill. "And now this Chateau Dominique, to where you go. Straight down this road you walk to Ephrem, where lives the owner."

Peasant children in dog-carts stared as Peter Wakely trudged along, and when he reached Ephrem an old woman directed him to the home of Michel Laniel. It was near the church and nearly as imposing, but when he climbed the steps and knocked, there was no answer until a man came from the rear, trundling a wheelbarrow, and called to him.

"You are Mr. Laniel?" Peter asked.

The man shook his head and came closer, staring. He was tall and handsome; he wore overalls. "Mr. Laniel is not at home. You are Mr. Wakely, from New York?"

"Yes."

"Ah! And you seek Mr. Laniel about the so strange affair of your uncle. You see, I know. I am Felix L'Aigle, the gardener here. You will find Mr. Laniel at the chateau, which is but a short walk up the mountain. I would go the long way around. That way," pointing. "The other road is steep and difficult."

Peter Wakely went the long way and was grateful for the advice. Red

dust rose under his shoes and colored his clothes and stung his eyes. Four times he stopped to rest.

When he stopped the fifth time it was of necessity, because the path was not wide enough for two persons to pass in safety, and loose stones rolled under the feet of someone who was approaching.

"You are Peter Wakely?" the woman asked.

"Yes." And he stared at her.

"I am Madeleine, and I have come from there"—she nodded toward the chateau—"to warn you. You were mad to come here. Gregoire, who died in the flames but lives again, will destroy you—or I will. Go back to your wicked city."

"Why shouldn't I come here?" Peter Wakely demanded, scowling. "My uncle has—"

"I know. Nevertheless you must go away!"

"I intend to see Laniel."

Her eyes blazed with fury as she flung herself forward. Her hands streaked up to claw at his face. The hands, however, did not touch him. When the sleeves of her gown fell back, exposing them, both he and she stared at the ugly, twisted claws which grew out of her thin, slender wrists.

Horror and pity swelled in Peter's throat, choking him; and she, it seemed, was stunned by the hideousness of what she saw. Sobbing convulsively, she somehow managed to squirm past him and run down the path.

"The poor girl!" Peter gasped.

Ignoring her warning, he trudged on, and there were eyes watching him from the jagged rocks above, to his right. There was a broad, unsmiling slit of mouth beneath the eyes and a humped body looming behind them.

"You fool! Go back before it is too late!"

Peter stood his ground, though the uncouth creature at whom he stared was less than human, more than horrible.

"Go back!"

"No." He shook his head and moved forward.

BARELY in time he saw the monster's corded arms encircle a huge boulder; saw the boulder sway, then tip, then hurtle down toward him.

The path was not wide enough for a sideward leap. He lurched forward, arms outflung to break his fall as he stumbled and went down.

So close was annihilation that the careening boulder, growling past, tore a heel from one of Peter's shoes before thundering out into space to continue its descent. Ripped loose by the force of its charge, lesser rocks cascaded over Peter's sprawled body, bruising him and gouging flesh, and the shock stunned him.

From far below came a final shattering crash. And the uncouth face above was gone. Stubbornly, Peter Wakely reeled erect and went on.

The castle courtyard was empty, but sounds of young voices singing came faintly from windows in a frowning wall, and Peter strode toward them. A door hung open.

So old, this place. So gloomy and musty and enormous. Surely his uncle had been mad even to think of buying it. But his uncle had dreamed of the day when people would say: "That is the Chateau Dominique, the summer estate of a New York millionaire . . ."

The voices lured him on, lightly chanting a children's song in French, and suddenly a bend in the corridor steered him into the midst of it. He stood staring. An old man stared back, and the children stopped singing.

"And who are you, sir?"

"I'm Peter Wakely. I'm looking for Mr. Laniel."

"You are Peter Wakely?" The man was old, but his eyes were young enough to glitter like polished bits of glass. "Ah, yes, we have been anticipating your arrival. We have heard of you!" His voice grew shrill. "You are not welcome here! This, sir, is my school! Get out!"

Peter Wakely shook his head. "I know nothing of any school. I came here to see Laniel."

"Mr. Laniel has turned this build-

ing over to me. I order you to go!"

"What is the trouble here, Andre?" a voice asked softly.

Peter turned, relieved. The voice was pleasant; its owner came through an open doorway and paced forward on slippered feet—a calm, middle-aged man who smiled with understanding.

"This," declared the schoolmaster acidly, "is Peter Wakely."

"But he is no ogre, Andre. Surely!"—turning to Peter—"you are no ogre, sir?" And the smile lingered.

"I'm looking for Mr. Laniel."

"I am Mr. Laniel."

The schoolmaster glared. The children, none over eight years old, whispered among themselves. Laniel said gently: "Come, and I will answer all your questions." And Peter followed him along a corridor, up stone steps, to a sunlit room resembling an office.

"You see, Mr. Wakely, we do not understand the methods of you Americans. This unfortunate matter begins without our knowledge and suddenly through the ire of your uncle we are drawn into the midst of it. Andre Pacome—he is afraid he will lose his school."

"And yet you invited an investigation," Peter said grimly.

"To clear ourselves of suspicion. Do sit down."

Peter sat, scowling. "Very well, Mr. Laniel, I'll lay my cards on the table. My uncle is wealthy. He was approached some time ago by a group of men who sold him, for more than forty thousand good American dollars, this Chateau Dominique of yours. My uncle is not easily duped. Yet when the deal was concluded and he sent a man here to look over the property, he discovered that you owned it, that you knew nothing of any deal involving the sale of it, and—well, the whole affair was a colossal fraud."

"Your uncle wrote threatening letters to me."

"And now I'm here, at your own invitation, to look into the matter. And already one of your hirelings—a hunchbacked monstrosity with a

strange ability to disappear at will—has attempted to murder me!”

Michel Laniel stiffened. His eyes widened. “A—hunchback?”

“Yes!”

“But that is impossible,” Laniel said softly. “You are quite mistaken, Mr. Wakely, or quite mad. Gregoire, the hunchback, no longer exists. Gregoire is dead—very dead—and buried.”

CHAPTER II

A Dead Shape

THE road through St. Simeon gleamed white and hard in the late afternoon sun, and the car droning along it was coated with fine white dust. A girl drove the car—a girl dressed smartly in grey, with a vermilion scarf to contrast the pale, soft beauty of her face. She was alone.

The sun had set when she reached Ephrem, and darkness crept after her as on foot she climbed the perilous path to the Chateau Dominique.

“I’m late,” she thought. “Mr. Laniel expected me this morning.”

In gathering gloom she crossed the courtyard. She did not look up to see the face that was framed in a narrow fissure above the frowning doorway. The face was malshaped and ugly, and two fat hands clutched the sill.

The girl entered, staring ahead of her. To her right a flight of stairs curved down into the corridor, and a dark shape crept down them, toward her.

Stifling a cry of fear, she stepped back. The dark shape studied her and said softly: “What do you want here?”

“I—I have come for Madeleine. I wish to see Mr. Laniel.”

“Ah, then you are Madeleine’s sister?”

“Yes, I am Marie Sabrevois.”

“And I am Gregoire. Come!”

The girl’s wide eyes drank in the horror of him, and she hesitated.

“I am your sister’s trusted servant,” the hunchback murmured. “Surely you do not distrust me.”

“No. No, of course not.”

Nodding, he turned to lead the way. Marie Sabrevois followed fearfully, keeping far enough behind so that she might flee for her life if the monster wheeled upon her.

It seemed a long and circuitous route that he led her, but at last, after climbing a steep flight of stairs, he said, smiling: “It is not far now. Your sister will be so happy to see you.”

Then, whirling, he stared into the corridor’s depths, where sounds of approaching footsteps whispered in the eerie gloom.

A SNARL burst from his pendulous lips as he lurched backward, thrusting the girl aside as he sped down the stairs. Terrified, she stood where she was, and then the gentle voice of Michel Laniel asked softly: “Who are you?”

“I am Marie Sabrevois. My sister—”

“I know. It is good that you came, for your sister must be taken away from here and cared for.” Quizzically he studied her. “You look frightened. Perhaps this old chateau is frightening to a stranger . . .”

“No, no, it is not that. It was the hunchback!”

“A—hunchback?” Laniel whispered.

“He met me at the door and led me here. He told me his name was Gregoire.”

An electric shock seemed to leap from Laniel’s fingertips as he clutched her arm. “That is what Peter Wakely said—that he was alive—alive again! But it cannot be true!” He caught himself, drew his hand away. “I am sorry. So many things have happened lately to upset me. Come, my dear, let me take you to Madeleine.”

Obviously the hunchback had lied about the location of Madeleine’s room, for the chamber to which Laniel led Marie Sabrevois was not near the spot where the monster had bolted.

Laniel knocked before opening the door, then stood aside while Marie walked timidly toward a bed where

the girl with the twisted hands lay staring.

"Madeleine! Oh, my poor, poor Madeleine!"

Laniel closed the door and went away; and for a long while the only sound in the room was the sobbing of beautiful Marie, who knelt beside the bed and clung to her sister's withered hands.

The sister frowned and said: "Why did you come here? I did not send for you."

"No, no . . . Mr. Laniel wrote to tell me what had happened. I have come to take you home."

"Home?" The sick girl snatched her hands away and squirmed erect. "I cannot leave! The children need me!"

"But they are not *your* children, Madeleine. You are only their teacher. Besides, in a short while Andre Pacome will be going away, and there will be no more school. Laniel told me so in his letter."

"You're lying! You're mad!"

"No. It is you who are—" Marie checked herself. Yet it was true; Laniel in his letter had said so. The terrible accident which had destroyed Madeleine's once beautiful hands had also injured her mind, and she was not wholly sane.

"You must come home with me to Quebec," Marie whispered. "I am earning enough now to send you to a good doctor—"

"No!"

"But why must you stay here?"

"Because *he* is here, and he has promised to make me well again. He is a saint now. The fire destroyed him and he was reborn. These poor hands and feet of mine—he will make them whole again."

"Who?"

"Gregoire."

"Dear Lord—that monster?"

"He is no monster! He is a saint! And he will not let you take me away!"

Kneeling there by the bed, her eyes brimming with tears, Marie Sabrevois did not know that the door behind her had silently swung open. Gregoire stood there. Gregoire's bulbous eyes

drank in the slim loveliness of her kneeling body, and he tiptoed forward, his huge hands curling, his shapeless head outthrust.

Madeleine saw him, and murmured cunningly: "Perhaps I will go with you, Marie. Perhaps, after all, you are right!"

And then Marie felt the foul miasma of Gregoire's breath, and turned her head. Fear forced a shriek from her throat. Fear pushed at her eyes and swelled them, and glued her feet to the floor as she swayed erect. Gregoire seized her.

The girl on the bed giggled and licked her lips and waved her withered hands in grotesque gestures signifying delight.

WHEN Michel Laniel entered the little office where, that morning, he had talked with Peter Wakely, he saw that Peter and Andre Pacome were awaiting him.

Laniel drew a rubber-banded packet of papers from his pocket. "These, Mr. Wakely, are proof of my ownership of the Chateau Dominique. You will find here the history of the castle's proprietorship since the year it was erected."

Peter Wakely studied the papers and wondered if they were the ones he had inspected in New York, before his uncle's purchase of the chateau. They seemed to be the same, but how could he be sure?

"Perhaps you will let me keep these overnight," he suggested softly. "I have taken a room in the village. I can return these in the morning."

"You ask too much. These papers are valuable. You may study them here."

For half an hour the office was so still that the ticking of Laniel's large watch was like a heartbeat. Then Peter handed the papers back and said: "Thank you. I'm finished."

Laniel placed the papers in a small safe and locked the safe's door. "You see," he murmured, "I do not trust even myself to guard them. It is a lonely road to my home in the village, and I have heard too much talk about Gregoire."

"Who is Gregoire?" Peter demanded softly.

"He was a hunchback, and was believed to be a descendant of the Gregoire Dominique who built this chateau. You see, this old castle was erected when the grand city of Quebec was but a village. Gregoire Dominique built it for his beautiful young wife, who later bore him many children. But he was a brutal, sadistic man, and his wife and children left him. He lived here alone, luring young women here and shaming them—until one day a group of enraged villagers trapped and destroyed him.

"After many years, the chateau was reclaimed by one of Gregoire's sons; and until I purchased it from the last of the Dominiques—one Albert Eugene Damien Damase—it had never fallen into alien hands."

"But this hunchback," Peter insisted, scowling, "this man who tried to kill me—?"

"He was here when I purchased the chateau. They say he came here to escape the stares of men and women who looked with horror upon his deformity. When I bought the place, he stayed—until death removed him."

"Death?"

"Some months ago there was a fire here. A terrible fire. It threatened the lives of the children of Andre's school and would have destroyed all of us while we slept, if Gregoire and Madeleine had not saved us. Gregoire died from his frightful burns. We buried him. Madeleine—you have seen her, have you not?—her hands, her feet, her mind—ah, it is pitiful!"

Peter Wakely stood up. His glance strayed to the safe in the corner, but came away quickly, and he moved to the door. "Good night, gentlemen," he murmured, "and thank you."

Closing the door behind him, he turned to the stairs. At that instant a shadow detached itself from the wall behind him. A small hand clutched at Peter's leg.

HE whirled—and a seven-year-old face grinned up at him.

"I heard what you were saying in there," the lad whispered.

"Did you? And who are you?"

"I'm Charles and I'm one of Andre's pupils, and I should be in bed with the others. But lots of times I sneak out and go for walks around here at night. Do you know what I'd have asked them? I'd have said, 'Who rings the bell every night at midnight, now that Gregoire is dead?' And do you know what they'd have answered to that? They'd have said, 'We don't know.' And they don't!"

The lad's voice was a confidential whisper, intriguingly tense with eagerness. "It's a mystery how that bell rings every night," he whispered, "because after Gregoire died they walled up the stairs leading to the tower where the bell is, and nobody can go up there now. But I know how it's done!"

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do! You see, one night I was wandering around and—" He stopped, and was suddenly not looking at Peter but beyond him. Terror struck at him with cataclysmic quickness, and his eyes bulged with fright.

The boy ran wildly into darkness. Peter Wakely stared at a face—a face with pendulous lips and bulbous eyes that had gathered form in gas-lit gloom near the head of the stairs.

"Gregoire!" Peter whispered.

He took a stride forward. The face receded, snarling, and the hump-backed body slid like a giant slug over the edge of the stairs. A heavy thud echoed up from below.

Very slowly, Peter descended. Remembering the ghastly terror of young Charles, he made fists of his hands and peered fearfully into the darkness. There was no human sound in the corridor below.

A chill mist eddied around him as he stepped through the great stone doorway. The flagstones of the courtyard rang hollowly under his feet.

Had young Charles fled safely back to bed, or had the monster pursued him?

Peter glanced up at the tower. At midnight, the ancient bell would begin tolling, and young Charles knew the secret of that weird symphony. The living Gregoire had tolled that

bell for years. Now some other person—or thing—had taken over the task. Why?

Suddenly Peter's feet stopped moving. Something up there was screaming!

Above him, a hurtling shape shot from the window of the tower room; shot straight out and seemed for an instant to hang suspended, a floating blur against the back sky. Like a plummet, it dropped.

If Peter had not lurched backward, the descending shape would have crushed him. As it was, a naked foot struck him and sent him sprawling, and the contorted body crashed with a sickening thud within arm's reach of him. The surrounding walls made thunder of the sound.

But the shape itself was dead when Peter crawled toward it. Horribly crushed by its fall, it lay in a twisted heap, raw bones gleaming through torn flesh, its head lolling on a broken, bloody neck.

On hands and knees Peter swayed beside it. "Oh, my God," he whispered, "it—it's the boy who called himself Charles!"

CHAPTER III

The Ghost Bell

PETER WAKELY staggered erect over the body of the murdered boy and glared up at the shadowed shaft of the tower. He slobbered breath into his heaving chest and voiced animal sounds of rage. Savagely he re-entered the Chateau Dominique.

What had the boy said? After the death of the hunchback, the tower stairway had been walled up. But he had known of an entrance to that damned shaft, and he had paid horribly for knowing too much.

Peter strode through the labyrinth until the walls curved away from him and formed a circular chamber in which a stone stairway curled up into gloom. He climbed the stairs slowly. A wall of masonry confronted him.

"This isn't the way." He spoke the

words aloud, snarling them. Dark fury fed on his heart as he stared around him. There *must* be a way to the tower! And the secret must be somewhere here in this chamber at the tower's base!

His back toward the doorway, he did not see the white shape that glided silently over the threshold toward him.

The woman's deformed feet made hardly a sound. In one withered hand she clutched a knife—and Peter Wakely did not turn until she was upon him.

There was no immediate pain as the knife sliced into his shoulder. In the hands of a strong man, the blade might have pierced his heart; but she was a woman, she was ill, and her withered fingers were too weak to retain their grip when Peter whirled.

He flung her aside. Then the pain engulfed him.

It rushed to his brain and exploded there, and suddenly his strength was gone and he slumped to his knees. Blood painted a red line down the white of his shirt.

Madeleine Sabrevois crept toward him, hate glittering in her eyes. Her lips writhed over words that whispered in the room's stillness. "You were warned to go away from here, and now you seek to harm Gregoire. I will kill you!"

Peter was too weak to resist when for the second time she flung herself upon him. She swarmed over him, seeking his throat. Wearily he struggled to push her away as the knife descended.

"Madeleine!"

Imperative as the crack of a whip, the voice rasped from the doorway. The woman turned. Slowly she swayed erect.

"Madeleine, are you mad? Put down that knife!"

He was a young man, darkly handsome, and strode forward with bewilderment distorting his face. Peter remembered having met him at Laniel's home in the village. L'Aigle was his name; Felix L'Aigle.

And Felix L'Aigle was quick with his hands. When the girl leaped to-

ward him, he seized her wrist and twisted, and the knife clattered to the floor. The girl clawed at him, kicked him. Her shoulders gleamed with sweat, and her hair was a wild wet mop over her face. But Felix L'Aigle bent her backward until she moaned for mercy.

His methods were so cold-bloodedly brutal that Peter gasped out: "Stop it! You're killing her!"

L'Aigle dragged her to the door and pushed her into the corridor. Curtly he said: "I shall tell Mr. Laniel about this. Go to your room!" Returning to Peter, he tried vainly to quell the flow of blood from Peter's torn, knifed shoulder.

"You need attention," he muttered. "A doctor—"

Peter was only dimly aware that the man was lifting him to his feet. L'Aigle was strong—gentle. . . .

Peter lost consciousness.

THE bell of the Chateau Dominique tolled midnight. In the tower room, Gregoire the hunchback grinned evilly as he performed his nightly task.

His fat hands gripped the knotted bell-rope and his thick, squat legs were twined around it. His malshaped body hung, a human pendulum, in mid-air, and the enormous bell loomed above him.

Chuckling to himself, he swung from wall to wall, and at the end of each giant swing his outthrust foot propelled him back again—and the gurgle of his chuckling was smothered by the deafening crash of the bell's iron tongue.

When the last note had whispered to silence, Gregoire's mouth spread from ear to ear in a grin. "The ghost bell," he said softly. "The bell that rings itself, and frightens people." Turning, he peered into the room's ochre shadows.

Candlelight revealed a table littered with the remains of a meal—bread and cheese and dark bottles of wine—and revealed also an antique cot against the wall.

Marie Sabrevois lay there.

A tangle of ropes bound her, and

her lovely body gleamed like a thing of soft mist against the wall. Her wide eyes were saturated with terror as the hunchback crept toward her.

"Leave me alone!"

"But you are very beautiful, my Marie. You are even more desirable than your sister. Perhaps I shall destroy Madeleine and keep you in her place!"

Gregoire's hands gathered up the trailing strands of the girl's hair and caressed them. "The American," he said softly, "has been taken care of, and I have hidden the body of little Charles where none will find it. We are alone and will not be disturbed. And you are so lovely . . ."

A scream gathered behind Marie's clenched teeth and shrilled forth into the night, through the barred window, to be lost in midnight darkness.

PETER WAKELY awoke from sleep in a room in the home of Michel Laniel. He was alone, and the pain of his injured shoulder was a vicious throbbing that ate into his brain.

Felix L'Aigle, in overalls and soiled blue shirt, entered the room and found Peter getting dressed.

"Ah, so you are feeling better now!"

"Who doctored me?" Peter demanded. "You?"

"No, m'sieu. I carried you here from the chateau, but it was Andre Pacome who doctored you."

"Pacome?"

"Yes, m'sieu. I told him what had happened, and—"

A door slammed, and a voice boomed: "Felix, Felix, are you here?" Footsteps sounded in the hall, and Andre Pacome strode into the sick-room.

He gasped at Peter. "Here, here! What are you up to?"

"I can't stay here," Peter retorted.

"You can and you will. I've studied medicine, sir, and I say you're ill. Back to bed with you!"

"But—"

"Back to bed!"

Peter frowned, shrugged his one good shoulder and began removing

his clothes. Pacome poured medicine that looked dark and evil.

"Drink this."

"What is it?"

"An excellent tonic. Tomorrow you'll be well enough to return to New York."

Peter took the glass. "How much of this stuff have you fed me?"

"Half a bottle."

"I'll drink this later."

Pacome snorted, turned to Felix L'Aigle. "Mr. Laniel needs you," he declared. "Come!"

Peter Wakely was alone.

Sniffing the dark liquid in the glass, he thrust the glass aside, got off the bed and dressed himself. The sun was down behind Mont Dominique when he left the house and began the exhausting journey to the chateau.

He went the long way around and doubted his ability to get there. The pain of his torn shoulder was a drug, and the desire to sleep was almost too strong to resist.

Long before he reached the castle courtyard, a queer, ringing sensation crowded his brain, and his head was a dead weight that forced him to plod along like a zombie.

He looked up at the tower and shuddered. Then, hearing voices and footsteps, he lumbered into a shadowed niche and stood rigid, staring.

Three men emerged from the castle's main doorway and trudged across the gloomy court. Peter caught snatches of their talk.

"We buried him beyond the walls, near the knoll. There is a stone slab marking the spot."

"It should be an easy task. The ground will be soft after so much rain."

"But there'll be no corpse in the grave. Mark my words!"

THEY were three ghouls on some evil mission. They carried a tell-tale assortment of tools — spades, pickaxes, crowbars—and soon vanished into deeper darkness. But Peter did not stir from his hiding-place until the last faint echoes of their footsteps had died to silence.

Five minutes later he drew open the

door of Michel Laniel's office, and pulled the door shut behind him.

A candle burned on the desk. He pulled it from its base of drippings and set it on the floor. Stubbornly fighting the drowsiness that threatened to overpower him, he went to work on the old-fashioned safe.

There was no moonlight slanting through the narrow window as Peter bent to his task. Nor was there moonlight to aid the three ghouls who stood around a grave on a dark knoll outside the castle walls.

"This is it, Felix. This is where we buried him. Now then, dig!" And Andre Pacome leaned forward, hands clasped behind him, stumpy body teetering on wide-spread legs.

"It's a job I don't like," Felix L'Aigle muttered, shaking his head. "An ugly job, digging up the dead . . ."

"Dig!" Pacome commanded, and Michel Laniel nodded.

The spade in L'Aigle's strong hands bit into soft brown earth and made sucking sounds. The night grew blacker. A whippoorwill on the frowning castle wall uttered its nocturnal chant, and L'Aigle shuddered. The hole deepened.

"Think you, Laniel," Pacome muttered, "that the dead are really able to rise again? Think you that this grave will be—empty?"

"I know not."

"No. None of us knows. But what *think* you?"

"That we are mad to do this, Andre, and that you are the maddest for insisting upon it."

"Ah, but we must learn the truth!"

"And suppose we find the body of Gregoire lying here in its box. What then? Will you say that the dead need not take their bodies with them when they return to torment the living?"

No answer. No sound except the suck and scrape of the spade as Felix L'Aigle bent to his task. Pacome looked up and stared around him.

"It is dark tonight. Fearsome dark, Michel . . ."

"And the better for us because it is dark. If we were seen by prying eyes,

the tale would spread like a plague over the countryside, and we'd be called insane—or worse."

The hole was deep, and Felix L'Aigle clambered down into it. "It is cold out here," Laniel said, and shivered. The spade struck with a hollow thud against wood.

"Give me a crowbar," L'Aigle muttered, discarding the spade. "The box is here. I'm standing on it."

Andre Pacome crossed himself and again peered around him into the crowding darkness, his eyes white and small as frightened beetles. Laniel passed an iron bar to the man in the pit. With it, Felix L'Aigle tore loose the lid of the coffin.

"Give me a light."

"Here." And L'Aigle's upthrust hand trembled as he took it.

The flashlight's silver glare threw into ugly detail the wet black walls of the grave, the mud-caked feet of the gardener, the tilted, warped cover of the oblong box. It revealed the rotted face of the corpse—a face with pendulous lips, great bulbous eyes and flat, lumpy nose. Flesh clung in tatters to protruding bones. The earth's dampness had taken its hideous toll.

Felix D'Aigle leaned backward, thrusting a hand over his mouth and nostrils, coughing to clear his tortured lungs of the evil stench that arose to strangle him. The flashlight wavered in his other hand, and grotesque shadows danced over the corpse, lending it a semblance of life. Laniel stepped back from the pit's edge. Pacome remained stooped, staring down.

"It is Gregoire, Felix?"

Unable to answer, L'Aigle jerked his head up and down.

"Are you sure? Prod the hump with your crowbar. Make sure it is real!"

"It is—real enough. My God, can you not see?"

"Make sure! Make certain!"

LEANING no closer than necessary, L'Aigle extended the crowbar and poked gingerly at the rotted body. Flesh crumbled when the iron

weight touched it. Shreds of dark clothing came loose . . . and the hump was real.

"It is Gregoire," Pacome muttered. "I thought—I thought another corpse might have been substituted—one with artificial deformities. But it is he. Come up, Felix. Close the lid."

L'Aigle grasped the hand that was lowered to him and pulled himself out of the pit and stamped the grave-earth from his shoes. Michel Laniel spoke for the first time in many minutes, saying: "Now are you satisfied, Andre?" And Pacome nodded, but put his hands behind him and paced back and forth, back and forth in the darkness, while Felix L'Aigle spaded earth back into the hole.

The gardener finished his task. The three ghouls gathered up their tools and plodded back to the chateau, back across the silent courtyard. This time their mud-caked shoes created no thumping of footsteps. And Peter Wakely, listening for sounds of their return, heard nothing and was not warned.

"Look there, Michel!" Pacome whispered, halting. "A light in your office!"

The ghouls stood staring. A scowl twisted across the face of Michel Laniel and he said softly: "Make no noise. Come!"

They made no noise, and when the door of the office was jerked open, Peter Wakely was discovered there at the desk. The safe-door was open behind him, and the desk was cluttered with papers gleaming white in the flickering light of the candle.

"So—you are a thief, my young friend!" Laniel declared acidly. "I refuse to lend you the papers, so you come here to steal them!"

Peter Wakely had battled with drowsiness so long that he was only half awake in the chair. The papers were strewn before him and a box of black dusting powder lay open under his right hand. He stared at Laniel, at the men behind Laniel, and was too mentally and physically sluggish to move in self defense even when the chateau owner drew a gun.

Aiming the gun squarely at Peter's head, Laniel paced forward.

"So—you seek to find fingerprints on my papers! *Whose* fingerprints, may I ask?"

As if waking from deep sleep, Peter shook his head stupidly and tongued his dry lips without answering. His brain seemed somehow to be stuffed with cotton; it worked, but worked at snail-speed and was still concerned with the problem of how the three men had so adroitly trapped him. He had heard no footsteps in the courtyard. The last time he had stepped to the window to look out, the yard had been empty. Yet—

"*Whose* fingerprints?" Laniel repeated harshly.

"Why, my own."

"Your own?"

Ignoring the gun, Peter reached out, scuffed the papers together and placed a heavy bronze ashtray upon them. The cotton in his brain was beginning to dissolve and he realized dully the peril of his position. But there was another sensation, too—a feeling of deep, dark anger which had rumbled within him during his search for fingerprints.

"Yes, mine," he said sullenly. "And your little game is—" He checked himself. That smoldering rage must be stopped, or the gun in Laniel's fist might belch a bullet! "—is apparently on the level, Laniel," he finished humbly, "and I'm ready to apologize for my suspicions."

THAT was better. It was necessary now to convince Laniel that he had discovered nothing. Pretending to regret his intrusion, he'd be allowed to depart—then a hired car would take him to Quebec and a swift plane would land him in New York before morning. The rest was up to Uncle Jonathan.

He *must* reach New York as quickly as possible. He must inform Uncle Jonathan that these papers in Laniel's possession were the same papers that had been presented by the crooked New York syndicate from whom Jonathan had purchased the Chateau Dominique. These papers, taken from

the envelope in the safe, bore Uncle Jonathan's fingerprints, samples of which he had brought with him, with just such a test in mind! Proof positive that Michel Laniel was crookedly affiliated with the vanished syndicate!

"I repeat, Laniel, I apologize. My suspicions were unfounded."

The gun in Laniel's hand did not waver. The candle-light made a menacing mask of his hovering face. Without answering, without shifting his gaze, he said to the men behind him:

"One of you had better go to the village. Bring the police."

Felix L'Aigle vanished silently over the threshold.

CHAPTER IV

Half Hour to Live

PERSPIRATION gleamed on Peter Wakely's face and he sat motionless in his chair, staring at the gun. His ruse had failed. Either Michel Laniel realized the nature of his discovery, and its grim significance, or was a hard-headed individual who refused to tolerate any flagrant form of meddling.

If the police came, the consequences might be serious. Laniel ruled the village; his word would be enough. The local authorities would throw Peter Wakely in jail—and a thief was a thief, and Canadian justice was both swift and stern. Too late, the truth would reach Uncle Jonathan. By the time he arrived, all evidence of Laniel's guilt would have been hidden or destroyed. . . .

Peter acted the moment his mind was made up. He shrugged his shoulders, relaxed and crossed one leg over the other. Laniel stood behind him. Peter's right foot idly scraped the desk, then suddenly flattened against it. His leg straightened abruptly. The chair shot back on its castors, and Laniel was hurled off balance.

Peter Wakely was across the room in three strides, and planted a fist in

the face of Andre Pacome when that amazed individual tried vainly to block the doorway. Gasping, Pacome staggered backward into the corridor, tripped and fell and began shouting. But Laniel was in a heap on the office floor and the gun had leaped from his hand, slithered out of reach.

Peter's feet beat a hollow, clacking tattoo along the unlighted corridor, and darkness swelled protectingly around him. His legs pistoned. He realized too late that he had turned the wrong way, that the sprawled body of Pacome had blocked the route to the main entrance and he had blundered in an unfamiliar direction.

He turned, but Pacome was erect, screaming, and Laniel was lurching from the office. The gun in Laniel's fist spewed a clap of thunder as Peter whirled and leaped toward a flight of stairs.

He took the stairs three at a time, his outthrust left hand pawing a rough stone wall. His heart was pounding crazily; sweat stung his eyes, and violent exertion had stirred to life all the savage, twisting agony in his injured shoulder. But he was clear of the stairs before his pursuers began climbing. Blindly he lunged along a black hall.

It was a mad flight. It took him along endless corridors and through rooms which, judging by their musty odor, had not lately been disturbed. The din created by his pounding feet lived behind him, and when he stopped to listen, chest heaving and breath whistling from his pain-twisted mouth, the sounds of pursuit were always behind.

A door clattered open under his onslaught and he stumbled into a room where candles glowed to dispel the fearsome dark. Rows of beds confronted him; children aroused from sleep sat up and stared at him, and their faces were like pale plaster-masks on shelves in a display room. A woman in white rushed from an adjoining chamber when some of the children cried out in terror.

She blocked Peter's staggering path to the far door, and she was a weird white statue standing there in

the passage, candle-light gleaming on a body nearly nude. Recognizing him, she raised withered hands to stop him, and her lips writhed back to reveal gleaming teeth. She was the woman who had attempted to kill him in the tower room—Madeleine Sabrevois of the deformed hands and feet. But this time she had no knife with which to menace him, and he automatically flung her aside.

The wails of frightened children died behind him. He clawed his way down a circular flight of stone steps, raced along still another midnight corridor, but the sweat on his aching body was cold now, his eyes burned from staring, his legs were leaden, and the sounds of pursuit were louder.

WHEN for the first time he recognized his surroundings, he was in the circular chamber at the base of the great tower, and footsteps were terrifying loud in the corridor by which he had entered. Wild-eyed, he stared around for an exit.

There was none. There was only a dark staircase leading upward, blocked by a mocking wall of masonry. Trapped, he swung to face the doorway, then slowly, stiffly stepped backward until the wall beyond the stairs stopped him.

It was the end. Laniel, enraged by his violent escape from the office, would surely shoot to kill.

He heard his pursuers coming, saw the black blurs of their bodies racing toward the doorway. A cry of surrender leaped into his throat, but his lips were dry and tight and refused to utter any intelligible sound—only a harsh, gasping wheeze as his aching lungs labored for air.

He saw the gun glinting in Laniel's outthrust hand and heard the yell of triumph that tocsined from the man's lips. The gun roared. The bullet struck the stairway and ricocheted with the shrill whine of a broken bandsaw.

And suddenly there was something else for Peter to stare at. A huge block of stone in the circular shaft of the staircase was swinging outward

on a pivot, swinging swiftly, silently, to expose an aperture through which a shape darker than the darkness was pouring out along the floor!

The thing had a face, had large human hands that moved like crawling slugs along the stone. It rose in a black, swelling mass and took form—took the hideous, humpbacked form of the fiend known as Gregoire.

Laniel's gun again belched thunder—and the monstrous shape lurching toward Peter was hidden by the staircase from the men who rushed through the doorway. They could see only the shadowy form of the man they sought. The bullet from Laniel's weapon chipped the wall less than a foot from the target, and Peter, whirling sideward, collided with the hunchback and fell sobbing to his knees.

A heavy, naked arm twined around his throat, jerking him backward.

He tried to scream, but thick fingers gripped his lips, hairy flesh scraped his face and encircled his neck. Powerful hands seized him and dragged him, and the huge block of stone, swinging on its pivot, came within inches of tearing his feet from his body as it blotted out every vestige of sound from the room beyond.

He fought, using hands and feet and teeth, but other hands were at his throat, strangling him, and his own clenched fists beat against the confining walls of the shaft, and his threshing feet thudded against secret, hidden stairs that rose sharply into Stygian darkness.

DULLY he realized that this was the long-sought entrance to the mystery room at the top of the tower—that this was the secret young Charles had tried to tell him. But the fingers imbedded in the tortured flesh of his throat murdered the importance of the discovery; they were killing him, and the agony in his brain was a gigantic black balloon with steel spikes, ready to burst and shatter his skull.

He went limp. The cruel fingers relaxed their pressure and shifted to his armpits. For a moment there was

no sound, no movement in the vast darkness; he wondered dully if his assailant had left him. Perhaps this was *not* an entrance to the bell room. Perhaps—heaven forbid!—it was a cell where he would be left to die, where he might beat for hours at the thick black walls in a futile attempt to make his plight known to those who might help him.

You *could* die here. Even now, beyond these walls, Laniel and Pacome were surely searching for him, mystified by his disappearance. They would be talking, moving about, yet no vaguest whisper of sound reached into the dungeon.

But he was not alone. Those murderous hands were still gripping his armpits, though his body was almost too numb to feel their pressure. They were lifting him now, dragging him. His head lolled like a wooden thing on his chest; his dangling hands and trailing legs thumped on invisible stone stairs.

And Gregoire was chuckling.

The evil sound curdled Peter's blood, rekindling within him the violent urge to fight for freedom. But he remained limp, feigned unconsciousness while the hunchback dragged him up an endless winding flight of narrow stairs. And presently an ochre glow of candle-light relieved the gloom; the stairs ended, and the hands released their hold, allowing Peter to slump to the floor of the bell-chamber.

The huge bell loomed above him. On a cot against the wall lay a nearly nude woman who was very lovely. . . .

In that dim light, the hunchback's bent body cast a vast, distorted shadow as he strode to the table. With his big hands he set a chair in place, then jerked Peter from the floor and flung him onto it. Sick with pain, Peter swayed there and stared at the woman.

She was so young, so beautiful, and her pale, bound body was criss-crossed with angry red welts, and she was unconscious.

The point of a sharp knife touched Peter's neck, and the huge bulk of Gregoire hung over him. "You have

a task to perform," the hunchback said softly, "and then perhaps I shall release you."

Pen and ink and paper lay on the table. "You are to write a letter to your uncle," Gregoire declared. "Say to him that you have investigated the state of affairs here at the Chateau Dominique and you have found nothing to warrant suspicion as to Michel Laniel's honesty. Say to him that you are departing from here tomorrow and will spend three or four months hunting and fishing in the Laurentians before returning to New York. Now write!"

Peter's pain-laden brain struggled to grasp at the motive behind the fiend's command, and he was slow in obeying. The knife-point entered his neck and traveled an inch, slowly, toward his skull, and the pain was excruciating.

"Write!" Gregoire snarled.

He wrote, realizing dully that he was writing his own death warrant.

Uncle Jonathan would read the words and decide that nothing was wrong. When no further message arrived, Jonathan would say: "Well, he is in the mountains, enjoying a deserved rest, and we must not expect to hear from him . . ."

Ah, but the girl on the cot was so lovely! How could anyone, even Gregoire, wish to mutilate that glorious body?

He finished the letter, and Gregoire's thick fingers took the paper away from him, and Gregoire chuckled, saying over and over again: "Good! Good! Good!" Then the knife pressed home again and Peter Wakely addressed an envelope, and Gregoire chuckled over that also.

"And now you die!"

HIS cold, stiff body shook as with the ague, but he was not strong enough to resist when the hunchback dragged him from the chair. Would death be so awful? Had not the girl on the cot already suffered worse than death?

Gregoire tripped him to the floor and swarmed over him, twisting a rope around his ankles and knotting

it. Drugged with pain, he lay limp, staring up into the vast, black hollow of the bell, and waited for the fiend to bind his wrists also—but Gregoire straightened and leered down at him, and evidently had other intentions.

The rope attached to Peter's ankles was a long one, and most of it lay coiled in the hunchback's hand. Another rope hung from the bell—and up that one Gregoire climbed like a monkey, to vanish in the sepulchral darkness above.

Peter scowled, wondering what fate awaited him. But after all, what did it matter? Death would silence the raging pain within him, would it not? Death would be sweet. Yet if he died, the girl on the cot would be alone, and this ugly room would become a chamber of iniquity and horror, for Gregoire was reputed to be a direct descendant of the first Gregoire, who had sadistically preyed upon young women.

The fiend was descending. He swung from the knotted bell-rope and dropped to the floor. He would approach now, and the knife would strike home. But now—he was backing away.

The rope from Peter's bound ankles slanted upward into darkness and sloped down again into Gregoire's hands. It formed two sides of a triangle, and when the hunchback pulled on it, bending his malshaped shoulders to the strokes, Peter's legs were drawn upward, his aching body was raised clear of the floor and hung dangling, head down.

Blood rushed to his brain as he swung there. The floor was a rolling ocean beneath him. And Gregoire was chuckling.

Slowly the hunchback pulled. The rope squealed over a fat iron bar high up in darkness, and, feet first, Peter was drawn up, up, until the sloping walls of the huge bell surrounded him and the soles of his shoes slapped with a whispering thud against the melon-shaped iron ball of the bell's enormous tongue.

And now Gregoire was climbing the bell-rope again. His hideous face hung level with Peter's eyes, which

saw an inverted, monstrous image of it. He climbed higher, and wrapped an arm around Peter's legs and bound them to the bell-tongue. Then he descended . . . and Peter hung there in the bell's ancient gloom, his arms dangling, his head heavy and sick with the blood that poured into it.

Gregoire looked up, grinning, his face a yellow mask in the candle-glow. "Soon, my meddling American," he declared softly, "it will be midnight, and I shall toll the bell as usual. Do you know what will happen to you when I do that? You see this rope?" He stroked the knotted bell-rope as fondly as if he were caressing a cat. "I shall swing upon it, back and forth, back and forth, from wall to wall . . . and the great bell erected by my famous ancestor will toll tonight with a different tone, for with each giant swing you will be flung against its curved walls . . . and you will be dead when I am finished."

The words purred into Peter's pain-warped mind and swelled there, and he twisted his hanging head to stare in horror at the circle of iron surrounding him. It was true what Gregoire said. When the heavy tongue swung to strike, the arc described by his own bound body would be swifter and greater, for the tongue ended where his legs began, and his body was but an extension of the clapper's length.

His head would travel more swiftly than all else, and would be crushed to bloody and horrible pulp against the bell.

"God!" Peter muttered. "You are descended from a monster!"

Gregoire, staring up, grinned from ear to ear. "I am descended from the first Dominique, and this castle and all in it belong to me, and I shall take what is mine. Even her," he added, peering at the girl on the cot. Then: "You have less than half an hour to live. Enjoy yourself."

There were bottles of wine on the table and he seized one, pulled the cork and drank deeply.

Half an hour? Peter Wakely's dangling body shook convulsively

and his hands pawed the air beneath his sweat-drenched face. It was a ghastly way to die. Merciful God, he did not want to die!

Why was that? Was it because the rush of blood to his head had cleared his brain, allowing a measure of strength to flow back into his muscles? Was it because he no longer *felt* dead, but alive? Or did life suddenly seem so precious because he had looked into the pale, sleeping face of the girl on the cot?

CHAPTER V

The Pendulum

IT was quiet here now. Quiet as a tomb. Gregoire sat at the table, swilling wine, and the girl still slept. Half an hour. . . . Ah, but the hunchback was turning! There were sounds outside, in the courtyard far below that barred widow. Gregoire was pacing toward the bars, was standing there now, peering down.

A chuckle whispered from the hunchback's lips. He swung around and looked up. "They are looking for you," he said, "but they will not find you. Perhaps they are also looking for Felix L'Aigle, who went for the police. But they will not find him either. I destroyed him."

Peter did not answer, but knew that his last hope was dead. L'Aigle might have known where to look for the secret entrance, and with the aid of the police might have found it. But with L'Aigle dead there was no hope, no feeblest shred of chance. . . .

"This is excellent wine," Gregoire declared, smacking his lips. "I regret that you cannot drink with me." He flung the bottle aside and reached for another.

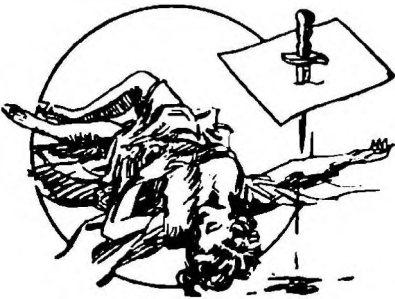
"He will soon be drunk," Peter thought dully.

"Do you enjoy swinging?" the hunchback asked pleasantly. "Here!" Gripping the bottle in one hand, he grasped the knotted bell rope and tugged on it. The great bell trembled as if infused with life. Slowly one of its menacing black walls

swung toward Peter's bulging eyes, then swayed back again. Gregoire grinned and walked crookedly backward to the table.

The bottle empty, he discarded it and lurched toward the cot, munching a thick slab of cheese. Peter's blood ran cold as the fiend leaned forward to paw at the half-clad girl lying there. The candle on the table threw Gregoire's shadow in gigantic grotesquery across the wall.

"You are very beautiful," the hunchback murmured, his munching mouth close to the girl's unopening eyes. "Very, very desirable. I shall keep you here forever unless I tire of you." Drunkenly he extended a hand to stroke satin-smooth flesh, and sprawled to his knees to press his lips against hers.



"You beast!" Peter muttered. "You degraded beast!" But the monster did not turn.

The great bell was still slowly swinging. Abruptly, with one clutching hand, Peter reached out and caught the knotted rope. Flames of new-born hope, akin to madness, danced in his bloodshot eyes.

Gregoire, whispering words of lust and desire, paid him no attention but knelt there with his back turned and drunkenly caressed the face and shoulders of Marie Sabrevois.

The long, knotted rope rose from the floor—and Peter's dangling body swung sluggishly with the diminishing sway of the bell.

He had it all now, had the entire length of it in his two hands and was fashioning a noose, but still Gregoire had not turned. A twist of Peter's hips and shoulders increased the length of his swing, and the iron clap-

per creaked above him. But Gregoire's head was low over the girl's throat, his thoughts were not for the doomed man above.

Once, twice, thrice, Peter swung, gripping the noosed rope in cold, stiff fingers. Each swing carried him farther backward, farther forward, almost to the bell's menacing walls, which would vibrate with a dull whine if he came in contact with them. The rope would reach now, but he must be sure of his aim, must not miss! There would be no second cast!

And suddenly the raucous creaking of the iron clapper reached into Gregoire's liquor-deadened senses. He jerked his head up, turned.

The noose fell with a heavy thud over his shoulders and slid tight under the bulging hump of his back.

The monster spewed out a roar of rage, but amazement held him rigid and for a split second his dulled brain failed to react. When he did move—when his clawing hands reached for the rope—Peter's corded arms had already taken up the slack. The swing of Peter's body jerked the fiend below him off balance, and as Gregoire had so often swung gleefully at the rope's end while tolling the bell, so he swung now, screaming and writhing and cursing.

THE wall stopped him with a bone-jarring crash, and he swung back again, his squirming body a human pendulum. At the end of each giant swing the walls battered him, while above, Peter Wakely exerted every muscle in a superhuman effort to keep the pendulum swinging.

The weight of that writhing body was tearing Peter's arms from their sockets, straining every bone and muscle in his tortured frame. But he clung to the rope, heaved forward and back, forward and back—and for every ten feet his inverted body traveled through space, the screaming thing below him traveled twenty.

Blood ran on the walls where the human pendulum kept striking. Blood dripped to the floor under Gregoire's twisting hulk and formed a

crimson trail across the room. No longer did lurid screams jangle from the man's mouth; the sounds he uttered now were gurgling groans of agony, and they too were presently silent.

Only then did Peter allow the pendulum to swing more slowly—but it was still swinging, a lifeless, sodden heap at the rope's end, when he saw the woman with withered hands.

She seemed to rise out of the floor—but that, of course, was because he was looking at the room upside-down and everything in it was distorted. In reality she came up the stairs.

She stared at Gregoire. Her withered hands flew to her throat and she screamed. The sound was like the whining ricochet of a bullet. She looked up at Peter, cursed him with a shrill, unending flow of words as she rushed forward. Passing the table, she snatched up Gregoire's knife.

Gregoire's body was still swinging, and Madeleine Sabrevois did not see the red smear of blood on the floor. She saw only Gregoire, and flung herself at him to cut him loose.

Her bare feet slipped in the blood. She fell, shrieking. Gregoire's arching body catapulted into her.

And if Gregoire was not already dead, he died then, at the hands of the half-mad creature who had so pitifully believed in him. The knife in her clenched hand raked his face and stuck in his throat. Braked by Madeleine's weight, he stopped swinging, and his life-blood was a scarlet river cascading over her slumped body.

The woman did not move again, even when Peter Wakely slowly hauled on the rope, lifting the hunchback into the air. She stared up and her eyes were open, but she neither moved nor spoke, and seemed to be dead. Dripping blood, Gregoire's contorted body rose until Peter could grip the knife.

He pulled the knife out and let the corpse sink back to the floor. With the bloody blade he slashed his own bonds, then hung, gripping the bell-tongue, and dropped.

Madeleine Sabrevois was dead, killed by the crushing impact of the

hunchback's swinging body. Gregoire was dead, and the knife in the mad woman's withered hand had torn terribly into his face, torn through layers of puttylike flesh, revealing other features beneath—features neither malformed nor ugly, but darkly handsome, though twisted now by pain and terror.

It was the face of Felix L'Aigle.

Staring, Peter backed away from it, turned and stumbled toward the girl on the cot.

MICHEL LANIEL never really owned the Chateau Dominique." The hired car was purring along the road from Ephrem to Quebec, and Peter Wakely drove it, talking to the pale, beautiful girl beside him. "L'Aigle owned it, and planned to transform it into a mammoth resort hotel, but had no money. Months ago he came to Ephrem to look over his property—property he had inherited but had never laid eyes on. Only Gregoire the hunchback was living there then—a poor deformed old man who claimed, probably because of his name, to be descended from that ancient monster, Gregoire Dominique.

"L'Aigle approached Michel Laniel, the most prominent man in the village. He begged a job as gardener, saying he would work for nothing because he was homeless and without money. That, of course, was so he could remain in Ephrem and be close to Laniel without arousing suspicion. A week later a man visited Laniel with a peculiar proposition. He was an agent, he said, of Albert Eugene Damien Damase, which is the real name of your Felix L'Aigle. He knew, he said, that Laniel had once attempted to buy the chateau. Was Laniel still interested? Laniel was.

"Well, the chateau was not for sale, and never would be, but if Laniel cared to assume proprietorship for six months, that could be arranged. It was arranged. Already prominent as Ephrem's leading citizen, and a retired man with time on his hands, Laniel grasped eagerly at the opportunity to be known as the owner of the famous Chateau Dominique.

"As a business man he was childishly simple. The agent said it would be necessary to draw up certain papers showing that Laniel had bought the property for an enormous sum. Laniel signed. In return for this, he was to take care of the chateau, make certain repairs, and keep strangers away, and six months later must hand the place back, ostensibly *selling* it back, to its real owner."

Peter scowled at the dusty road ahead. "Laniel himself told me most of this while you've been under the doctor's care these past two days, Marie. And you see the motive behind it all, don't you? L'Aigle, or rather Albert Eugene Damien Damase, wished to have his name erased temporarily as the owner of the chateau. Six months, he figured, would be sufficient time for his associates, a group of clever crooks, to sell the property to some wealthy American, collect cash for the transaction, and clear up a fortune which would enable him later to turn the place into a hotel.

"Laniel, as the apparent owner, would bear the brunt of any investigation and would remain unshaken because he would actually know nothing. Sworn to secrecy, he would keep his mouth shut and answer no questions. Fear of ridicule or entanglement would keep him silent.

"As Felix L'Aigle, Damase stayed on the scene to handle any unforeseen emergency. The papers were in Laniel's possession—he'd need them in the event of an investigation—but L'Aigle must have smuggled them to his associates long enough for the sale to go through.

"To Laniel, he was merely a gardener. Laniel took over the castle, allowed Andre Pacome to establish a school there. Then came the fire. Gregoire the hunchback died, your sister was injured. With some of Gregoire's clothes, with an artificial

hump and clever disguise, L'Aigle became the hunchback, in which rôle he could prowl at will around the castle.

"You already know what your sister thought of him, and how he used her in his attempts to drive both you and me away when we arrived. True, he saved me from death at her hands, but feared at that time to let her kill me, I think, and took me instead to Laniel's house, where he drugged me to keep me out of things.

"Later he *had* to kill me—could not risk even the probability that Laniel and Pacome would do it for him—because he knew I had discovered my uncle's fingerprints on the papers. He was a monster, Marie . . ."

SHE nodded, shuddering. "I know. I know what a terrible monster he was."

"The blood of the original Dominique flowed in his veins. He must have reveled in his rôle of ghost. Drunk most of the time, he made a fine art of murder and lust. Perhaps a form of insanity was partly responsible."

Marie closed her eyes, remembering perhaps the ordeals of her captivity in the tower. Her soft fingers touched Peter's hand on the wheel, and presently she asked: "Who is the rightful owner of the chateau now?"

"My uncle, I suppose, when the legal red tape is unraveled. I don't really care. I've found something else, more important. I've found you."

"And that makes you—happy?"

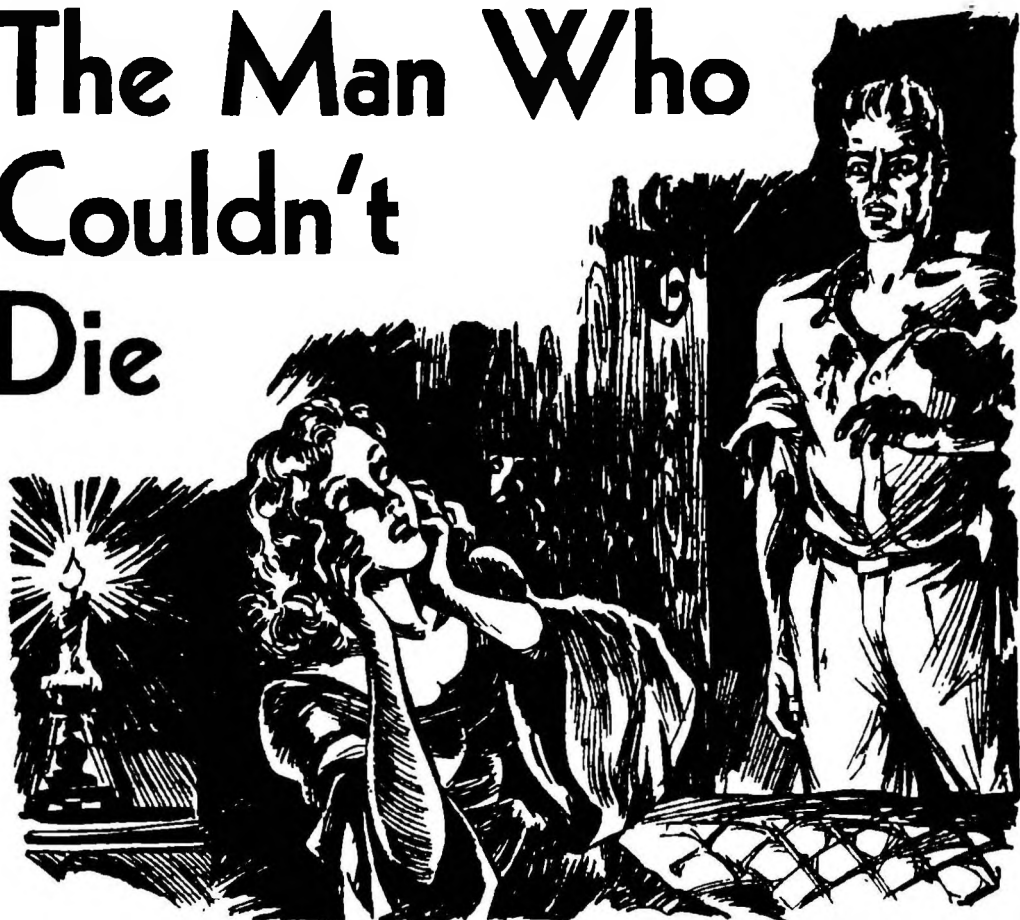
"When I've wired my uncle the full details," he said softly, "we'll find some little church in Quebec, and then"—lifting one hand from the wheel, he pointed to the purple haze of mountains to the north—"and then the peace and quiet of the Laurentians, just as Felix L'Aigle suggested."

Next Month:

INFANTS FROM HELL

A Novelette of Blood-Crazed Gargoyles by
FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

The Man Who Couldn't Die



Dead or alive, she saw him then—but never as she had seen him before.

No Human, but a Monster Whose Flesh Could Feel No
Pain, He Returned from a Living Death
to Claim His Bride!

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "The House of Dreadful Night," "When Death Comes Crawling," etc.

MARIE GRAMONTE could never forget that she dwelt with the dead. The moldering bones that were her neighbors seemed less dead than alive to her. Perhaps that is why she uttered the prayer that some said disturbed the eternal sleepers and caused the tragic end of the House of Gramonte.

There is still the original fence around the property that three generations of Gramonte's claimed—a thing of rusty iron with a gateway

through which a drive wearily winds its way between little hills. The gate is surmounted by an arch upon which are embossed iron letters reading in solemn Latin: *Requiescat in pace.*

The gate was a memorial to someone, no doubt; but for all its rust, the iron has outlived the memory. A cairn of cobblestones is all that remains of the Gramonte house, and the ground has once again returned to its original owners, the dead who are buried there. It is said that the dead

are jealous of their ground and have never relinquished from their bony clutches what the living had deeded to the sons of Louis Gramonte.

Passing the place in the daylight—for none would pass it at night—you might point and say, "Why, that looks like an old graveyard, only—" And then you pause and, unless you're a stronger man than most, you shudder. For there are no headstones beyond that fence, and sunken graves are hidden by tall, waving grass. Yet somehow, you know that the dead are there.

"Isn't it used any more?" perhaps you'll ask. And your guide will look straight ahead down the road and whisper, "No, none would commit their dead to ground where Paul, last of the Gramontes, is. You see that pile of brown cobblestones atop the second knoll? Well, Paul Gramonte is beneath it and Paul is the man who, wanting to, couldn't die."

Of course, that's superstition. There must be twenty tons of stone on top this Gramonte fellow, and wanting it or not, he must be dead. Then you begin to pump the story from your guide and when he has laid the whole truth before you, you probably don't believe it.

Here is why it all happened, and why Marie Gramonte prayed that night the November wind wailed at the narrow windows of Gramonte House and the dead turned restlessly in their graves.

THE Gramonte men were all ruthless beasts with a strain of mad genius boiling in their blood. Money was their god and they had no creed but their own desires. So it was that Louis Gramonte saw the cemetery with its old, weathered headstones and iron fence, and coveted the ground which belonged to the dead.

He purchased the entire cemetery from impoverished farmers who were its owners. The farmers were not to blame for selling it. Gramonte came as a magnificent stranger, masked with benevolence, and offered to take all care of the cemetery off their hands and pay them for the privilege.

None doubted but what Louis Gramonte would do exactly as he promised; surely none thought that he intended to build his home there.

But no sooner had the deeds been signed than Louis Gramonte went to work. Old and lovely trees were lopped down from the knolls. Headstones were sacrilegiously uprooted, and there were none in those parts but knew where Gramonte got granite flags for his garden walks.

Had Gramonte House been a thing of beauty, the farmers might have forgiven its builder. But it was like a stunted castle and something like a monastery, and like a prison, too. That is, it had such an appearance from the outside.

But anyone who entered the place felt that it was none of these. Walls, windows and roofs had been made by the living; but the atmosphere within—ah, that was the work of the jealous dead!

There was a clammy chill and a stifling staleness about the air. Spectral wisps of grey vapor clung to the walls at night and rose from the floor. Something in the composition of the mortar, artisans explained to Louis Gramonte; it would all go away. But it never did.

Louis Gramonte died. His two sons were weaker stuff, and when the old man was laid away in a crypt beneath the house, they took themselves to France.

Then came Paul Gramonte, the last of the line, who returned to the house his grandfather had built. He was an enormous man, but for all that, his two hundred pounds didn't fill out the hollows and angles of his body. He was six feet, five inches tall. His jaw was square and his mouth a thin slit. His forehead was remarkably broad, high, and flat, topped by the upstanding bristles of his dark hair.

He lived alone in Gramonte House, did no work that anyone knew of, and at night drank expensive liquors until he became stupid.

Then one day Paul Gramonte got married to Marie Tinsley. It was no match of love's making, that was a certainty; there were whispers that

Mark Tinsley had sold his daughter to the Gramonte brute for the Gramonte money.

Poor Marie! That night when she passed beneath the old cemetery gate with that monster of a man who had never spoken a dozen words to her, she must have felt that she was walking to her own interment.

Marie tried courageously to make Gramonte House into a home. In some measure she succeeded. She hired an old man servant who, though glum as Gramonte himself, looked human and was devoted to his mistress. Her warm kindness and her blond beauty affected even Gramonte somewhat. The servant told neighbors that Paul Gramonte loved his bride in a clumsy, timid sort of way. He would at times stroke her golden hair with his huge hand—gently, very gently as if he were a great child and she a tiny, fragile doll.

Marie could not bring herself to love this last of the Gramontes. Night after night she would sit at the piano that Paul had newly purchased, and sing songs of love—gay songs, at first—songs that saddened as long days dragged slowly by. Paul Gramonte would sit and watch her, his thin lips parted in a smile that gradually changed as the music changed, growing sad.

Before two months had passed, the piano was out of tune. Nothing of wood could have withstood the damp of Gramonte House, and damp was undoubtedly the cause of the defect. But Marie Gramonte's mind found another explanation: it was the work of the jealous dead. Their cold, invisible fingers plucked at the strings to produce a discordant jangle.

Paul Gramonte smiled no longer. He understood now that Marie had fought to love him, and had lost. Then he did what he thought was the wise and kindly thing to do.

He simply disappeared. No one knew where he had gone or whether he was alive or dead.

IN the next five years, many things happened to Marie Gramonte. Her father died. Then it was discovered

that the fabulous Gramonte fortune was no more. By frugal pinching, Marie could live on in Gramonte House, but nowhere else. Every candle must be counted, and every night shadows crowded closer and closer to the girl huddled near the feeble flame.

Yet, for all the torment of solitude and anxiety, Marie was still beautiful. She was like a sad and lovely woman who, on losing love, had retired to a convent. Morley, her old servant, was loyal to her, staying on though she could not pay him. But he, too, seemed of the grave—always silent, sustaining life with crusts of bread, until his face was lean and bloodless as a corpse's.

Of all Marie's former friends only one seemed to remember her. He was John Fostich, a young farmer with glad eyes and sun-bleached hair. Night after night he would go up to the strange, cold house and sit with Marie.

It was in the fall, six years after Paul Gramonte's disappearance. John Fostich was making his nightly visit to Gramonte House.

"Listen, Marie," he said—and this was what he had been leading up to all summer—"you can't stay another winter in this place."

Marie stared into the smouldering fire. "I know I can't—not and stay sane."

John Fostich beamed. "Glad we agree on that point! Now, er—well, I'm a practical man, Marie. You know that. I guess I've always loved you. What I'm trying to get at, do you think you could learn to love me?"

"John, dear," she said softly, "you can't learn to love anyone. Love is something that's got to grow."

John nodded his head vigorously. "I know. It's like corn and wheat. Got to grow. But you can cultivate it. I was wondering if you wouldn't try that."

Marie smiled. "I don't have to do even that, John dear. I've loved you always. But, John—" Marie stopped suddenly and bit her lip.

"What, dear?"

"There—there's a weed, John, in

my lovely garden. A tall, grotesque, clumsy weed. I know no way to uproot it."

"Paul Gramonte? What right has he in anybody's garden, as a weed or anything else? The man wasn't human."

"I—I think he loved me."

"Loved you! Well, he certainly picked a funny way of showing it. Running away like that!"

"That's how I know he loved me," she whispered.

John Fostich took her somewhat roughly by the shoulders. His blue eyes were deadly earnest.

"Marie, you've got to forget Paul Gramonte. He's dead. He's got to be. And you've got to marry me. Oh, lordy, darling, you've got to!"

Like a woman in a dream, Marie slowly shook her head. "If I only knew."

John Fostich stood up, picked up his sheepskin coat, and put it on.

"I'm not coming back for two weeks, Marie. That'll give you plenty of time to think this through. I'll see a lawyer and learn how these divorce things work. And I'll try once more to trace Paul Gramonte. I'm sure he's dead. Then, I'm coming back for your answer."

AND again the days dragged on. Marie knew the loneliness of Gramonte House as she had never known it before. On the tenth day after John had left, Marie received a short note through the mail. It was from John.

"Everything is all right. He is dead."

She read the note again and again. Her heart thudded in her throat. Why was John so brief? She glanced at the postmark on the envelope. The letter had been mailed from Baton Rouge. Why, if Paul Gramonte was dead, hadn't his body been returned to Gramonte House for burial beside the bodies of his people?

Marie Gramonte could eat nothing that night. And while she sat close to the fire, the shadows that seemed spirits of the long departed, crowded closer and closer. Hastily, she

snatched the note from the bosom of her dress and read it again, bending close to the light of the fire. Nearer now than ever before, the shadows. Still, ghostly voices were shrieking: "It's a lie! Paul Gramonte is not among us."

"John wouldn't lie to me," she argued timidly. "He wouldn't lie!"

"Lie," echoed mournfully from the cold walls.

The door of the room opened. Marie turned, stared fearfully at the dead white face gleaming in the shadows. A long sigh sobbed in her throat. It was Morley, the servant.

"Mrs. Gramonte," came Morley's thin, quivering voice, "I thought I heard you cry out. You're all right?"

Marie nodded. "Yes, Morley. You may go to bed now."

"Then good night, Mrs. Gramonte." And Morley quietly closed the door.

She took a candle from the mantel and lighted it in the dying fire. Holding it in front of her, she walked through the door and into the gloomy hall. Shadows retreated before her, but she knew that behind her they were closing in. Shadows of the dead. The echo of her footsteps whispered along the hall and up the stairway. Ghostly footsteps.

She entered her bedroom and thrust the candle into a copper sconce beside the door. The wind had a thousand wailing tongues that night as it swirled about the corners of Gramonte House and rattled the windows in its phantom clutch. Marie walked slowly to her bed. There her knees sagged. Flinging her arms across the icy sheets, she spoke aloud her prayer.

"Dear God, I must see him. I can never believe John until I see Paul Gramonte alive or dead. Please, God, help me to see the truth. Help me see Paul Gramonte."

Then, face buried in the bedclothes, she wept softly.

Somewhere a door creaked. A sob in Marie's throat caught and choked her. What was that? The wind? No—no.

It was *her door*—the door of that very room had opened. She turned

her head so slowly that it seemed scarcely to move at all. Her lips parted. She wanted to scream, but the sob was still in her throat, choking her.

A GREAT hulking figure stood in the doorway. Candle light shone on a square, pale face, and upon a high, broad forehead. Paul Gramonte! Dead or alive, she saw him then, but never as she had seen him before. His black hair was long and tangled. There were patches of white in it that she didn't remember. In places his skin seemed almost to glow with light.

He was dressed only in a tattered shirt and trousers, though the night was a bitter chill. A deep, red wound had laid his right cheek open. Blood dripped slowly to his stiff, frozen shirt. But he was smiling.

His thin, ugly lips parted so that his mouth was like another wound on his pale face.

Timidly he held out powerful arms and hands that trembled. She saw his eyes now, clearer than she had ever seen them before—deep, sad eyes, watering from the chilly wind.

"Marie." His voice was a hollow whisper that might have come from the grave itself. "Marie, I—I thought I heard you calling me. You—you want me—me, Paul Gramonte?" Timidly, fearfully he seemed to wait her answer.

Ice seemed to harden around Marie's heart. There was a dull ache in her breast. She hadn't wanted him. Not like that, she hadn't wanted him. Numbly she watched his empty arms drop to his sides. The ghastly smile had faded a little. His head shook bewilderedly back and forth.

"She—she prayed for me?" he muttered softly.

With a superhuman effort, Marie swallowed the scream that was in her throat. "Paul," she whispered softly. "You've really come back? You're not dead?"

Paul Gramonte's voice was a woe-ful thing. "Dead? Me dead? I've tried hard to die. I couldn't. I—I'm not sorry now—not if you're not."

Marie swayed slightly forward; caught herself just in time. "You are hurt, Paul," she whispered. "I'll call Morley."

"No. You must not do that. I'm not hurt at all. You mustn't call Morley."

"But—but you're bleeding dreadfully," she said bravely.

Paul Gramonte's bewildered eyes looked down at his shirt. He saw the blood. His right hand crawled up, not to his wounded face, but to his breast where the blood was. "I—I hadn't noticed," he muttered. "It isn't anything. I had to break the glass in the window to get in. The door was locked. Maybe a sliver of glass scratched my chest. But you mustn't call Morley."

Weakly Marie moved toward the door.

"Then I'll get something—some hot water and bandages—"

Paul Gramonte stood aside. As Marie moved through the door, his right hand went out timidly and brushed a lock of her hair. She was conscious of that touch, shrank from it; and hurried into the hall. All the way down the dark stairs she could feel his dark eyes upon her. Why, in the name of heaven, had he clenched his breast when the wound was in his face?

But perhaps there was another hurt, deep in his heart. Paul Gramonte had loved her. Perhaps he still loved her. She must try so hard not to hurt him.

With numb, cold fingers, she set about boiling water in the kitchen, and ripping bandages from a piece of clean linen. She thought of John Fostich. How he had lied to her. Oh, God, if his letter had only been the truth!

With the kettle of hot water in one hand and the bandages in the other, she returned to the bedroom. Gramonte was sitting stiffly in a chair. A cigarette was burning in his fingers. At the sight of her, his thin-lipped, ghastly smile came again. She wanted to shriek when she saw it. She forced her eyes away from his face; saw the cigarette.

"**YOU** smoke now, Paul?" she asked in a voice that all but broke. She had to talk, feverishly, about anything.

Paul Gramonte puffed on his cigarette. "Yes, I have learned to smoke. Where I've been you smoke cigarettes or go mad."

Marie moistened cloths with the hot water and laid them on his cheek. Again she saw his dark eyes beneath the shaggy brows. Surprise in them now. He looked down at his blood-covered shirt, then back into her face.

"Sometimes," he said slowly, "I wonder if I started to smoke soon enough."

She jerked her eyes from his and again stared as if fascinated by the glowing cigarette stub between his fingers. She tried a ghost of a smile. "I—I hope the water isn't too hot."

"I guess it isn't," he whispered.

She busied herself with wringing the cloths. The wound was still bleeding freely. Then she saw the cigarette again. Every nerve in her body seemed suddenly cramped. She stood there with dripping cloths in her hands, staring at the cigarette. Its pale blue wisp of smoke waved gracefully in the air. But mingled with the fragrance of the tobacco was another and sickening smell.

The cigarette had burned completely to his fingers, was glowing against his skin, burning his flesh. Yet all the time he stared vacantly at her, blood dripping from his wounded cheek.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Have I done something—something to offend you? I—I'm sorry—"

A hell-born shriek ripped the air. Marie's every nerve seemed to have reached the breaking point.

Again and again she screamed, retreating step by step toward the shadows at the end of the room. Screaming laughter from her pale lips now.

"Dead! You're dead! Thank God, you're dead!"

Then her knees gave way, she dropped to the cold stone floor, sobbing, laughing, fighting unconsciousness. And the last thing that she saw

was the grey snow of ash from the completely burned cigarette sifting through Paul Gramonte's fingers.

The window of Marie Gramonte's bedroom was a narrow finger of sickly morning light before she awoke. She was in her own bed. For a moment she lay still, wondering how she had come there. She raised the bedclothes and saw the lacy front of her own nightgown. Someone had undressed her and put her to bed.

Then the whole, hideous nightmare returned. Paul Gramonte. Where was he? She threw back the bedclothes and got to her feet. On the front of her gown was a blot of dried blood. Blood, too, was on the floor and upon her discarded clothing that was neatly piled on a chair—the very chair where Paul had been sitting, burning his fingers with a cigarette.

Marie Gramonte thrust her feet into slippers and pulled a flannel bathrobe over her nightdress. She ran into the hall, pattered down the steps. Breathlessly she searched the lower floor and even went down into the basement. She passed the iron door that led into the Gramonte burial crypt, shuddered, and hurried up the steps. Once again on the second floor, she pounded on Morley's door.

"Yes, Mrs. Gramonte?" Morley thrust his white head out the door and stared at her with red, puffy eyes.

"Morley, I—" Marie stopped. The words of Paul Gramonte echoed in her mind. He hadn't wanted to call Morley. Why?

"Yes, Mrs. Gramonte?" Morley persisted.

"Morley, I—I had an awful dream. Did you hear any sounds in the night?"

"Me, Mrs. Gramonte? No, ma'am. I'm a very good sleeper. What sort of sounds?"

"Why, I scarcely know. But there's a broken window downstairs. There's blood in my room."

"Love of Heaven, Mrs. Gramonte! A burglar, you think?" And Morley's head disappeared.

The servant came out of his room fully dressed four minutes later. Armed with his old shotgun, he

searched the house from top to bottom. He had no better luck than his mistress.

THAT night Marie Gramonte talked with the dead, for only they were near to listen. She always thought of the shadows as the spirits of the dead. In the flickering fire-light they came and went. Silent shadows, giving no council to the distracted girl. She watched them, spoke to them.

"You don't return really, do you? Not as people. Sometimes as shadows, you come here and watch me, don't you? So if Paul was dead and he came to me, he would be a shadow. But he came as a man. So—" She checked herself. Was she mad? Talking to herself.

Three days passed, and Marie busied herself about the house, keeping her mind clear for practical things. She could expect John Fostich any time now. Perhaps tonight. She'd sit up and wait for him. She was angry with John for lying to her. Paul Gramonte was alive. He had wanted to die but couldn't, he had said.

So at last, supper over, Marie prepared herself to meet John. She didn't know why she hunted out her very best dress in which to wait up for John Fostich. But still, as she sat in front of the mirror, arranging her golden hair, she thought she would look her very best. Somehow, some way, tonight must finish it all.

She would say what she had to say to John Fostich. Then she would leave the house. She didn't know where she would go. To the city, perhaps.

For nearly two hours she sat in front of the fireplace before John's cheery ~~tattoo~~ sounded on the knocker. Head held high, she went to the door and opened it.

John was there, his sheepskin coat buttoned to his ears, his round cheeks red with the cold. He strode into the hall, and before she could stop him, flung his arms about her. For a long time he held her so. Her head swam. Then slowly she pushed him off.

"What's the matter, Marie?" he asked in surprise.

"John," she said, her voice wavering. "Why did you lie about it?"

John Fostich frowned. "Lie about what? What are you talking about?"

"John, you wrote that Paul was dead. He isn't. He was here just the other night."

John Fostich's jaw dropped. "Here?" he asked finally. "Paul Gramonte here?"

Marie nodded. "And you said he was dead."

John Fostich took off his coat, and silently and unbidden went into the living room. Marie followed, saw him standing with his hands on the mantel, staring into the fire.

"You didn't see Paul at all, did you, John?" she asked searchingly.

"Why, yes," he said slowly.

"Don't lie to me."

He turned around. His face indicated clearly his helplessness. "Marie, you *couldn't* have seen Paul Gramonte. It just couldn't happen!"

A sudden gust of wind rattled the casement window and boisterously flung it open. In an instant the flickering candle died and there was only the uncertain light from the fire.

"John, that wasn't the wind. I saw a hand—John, there's someone in the room. Someone over there in the shadows!"

JOHAN FOSTICH'S arm went around Marie's shoulders. His eyes darted about the room, fastened on something in the corner.

"Who's there!" he cried huskily.

Like the wailing of the wind it came, a single name sobbing out of the night. "*Paul Gramonte.*"

"John! Someone said 'Paul Gramonte,'" Marie whispered.

"Just the ~~wind~~," John Fostich laughed. His eyes were fixed on the tall shadow at the end of the room. "I tell you, Paul Gramonte couldn't come here."

"*Paul Gramonte,*" the voice rolled deeply and distinctly now. "Paul Gramonte couldn't die. He tried and couldn't die." Low, sobbing came the words.

And the tall shadow moved. With slow, stolid steps it moved into the circle of firelight. And the mighty shadow was Paul Gramonte. The lurid wound gaped on his pale cheek. He walked with powerful arms outstretched.

"Paul Gramonte," he muttered. "She prayed for Paul Gramonte when she meant John Fostich!" Deep, dark eyes beneath beetling brows caught the light from the grate and burned a fiercer fire. His thin, ugly lips moved mechanically.

"As long as she hated me and loved no other, I was willing that my arms that ached for her should not touch her. But now, it is something quite different. Oh, quite different!" A hollow laugh rumbled in his powerful chest. He advanced quickly now, glaring at the two cowering figures against the firelight.

"Woman," he roared. "Do not forget that I am your husband!"

John Fostich groped for the poker, his eyes never leaving Gramonte's towering form. Gramonte laughed boisterously and kicked the poker out of the way.

"And you seek to harm me—who cannot die, who know no pain? Fool!" With an angry gesture, Paul Gramonte ripped open his shirt, baring his broad chest. "You would hurt me," he whispered scornfully. "Watch!"

And with fingers of both hands crooked so that they resembled huge talons, Gramonte dug his finger nails deep into the flesh of his own breast and slowly raked ten bleeding tracks across the flesh. And all the time he chuckled hoarsely. Then, grinning like a ghoul, his left hand came up and finger nails ripped through the flesh of his left cheek.

"See?" he shouted. "Paul Gramonte knows no pain!" Then both hands, dripping with his own blood, shot out to seize Marie. "You wanted me dead, did you? Come with me. I'll show you where I've kept myself these four long days. You'll dwell with me there and be a bride again."

John Fostich, his hands clenched, sprang suddenly upon the giant. He

led a long left that met Gramonte's jaw. The monster laughed. Like a hammer, his right fist came down on John's head.

Fostich was no pigmy, but that blow would have felled an ox. His knees crumpled and he collapsed on the hearth.

GRAMONTE seized Marie's arms, and heedless of her screams, dragged her from the room.

"I'll show you!" he ground out between clenched teeth. "You wanted me dead. I belong to the dead, but you'll go with me!"

Along the hall, down the basement steps, he dragged her. Then she saw and understood where Paul Gramonte had hidden. The metal plate that covered the Gramonte family burial crypt had been thrust aside.

The light of a candle stuck to the basement wall sought feebly into the dank depths below and showed the reeking, fungus-covered walls of rough, jointed stone. Still holding her by one wrist, Gramonte sprang into the vault to land halfway down a narrow flight of steps.

Marie was fighting now, down on her knees before the maw of the grave itself, clawing at the stones for support. The broad, bleeding face of Paul Gramonte grinned insanely at her.

"I belong to the dead, eh? And you are my bride!" Slowly, inevitably, he drew her toward the opening.

"John! John!" she screamed.

Suddenly something sprang across the path of candle light. Paul Gramonte's mad eyes blazed. Marie half turned her head to see John spring toward the opening. He had his right arm raised. In his hand was a small hatchet.

He hesitated not a moment, but hacked down at the head of Paul Gramonte. Gramonte tried to duck. The hatchet missed his skull by the fraction of an inch and sliced across his jaw. The blue-whiteness of bone gleamed for a moment, then was drowned in a torrent of blood.

And Paul Gramonte laughed!

Again the hatched arose and descended with all the force the desperate Fostich could muster. A sickening crunch of bone. Paul fell back, back into the depths of the tomb. For one fleeting moment Marie caught a glimpse of Gramonte's wrist, a mere bleeding stump. The hand that had clutched her wrist was gone.

John Fostich seized the girl in his arms, dragged her to her feet and back from the yawning grave. Rollicking laughter echoed hollowly in the crypt below. Something moved. A bleeding, living thing that knew no pain was crawling up the steps. Though he knew the truth, John Fostich uttered a frenzied scream.

With all his strength he hurled the hatchet straight at the face of the last of the Gramontes. The handle struck Paul Gramonte's broad forehead. He pitched suddenly forward, his two hundred pounds of brawn thumping to the floor of the crypt.

A dull, rumbling sound deep down in the earth. A thundering crash. John was galvanized into action. Clutching the half-fainting girl in his arms, he sprang up toward the basement steps. One frantic look backwards. The mouth of the crypt was widening. The loosely mortared stones had given away. A veritable avalanche was tumbling into the burial vault. A bleeding, handless wrist was struggling among the rocks. Another thunderous roll as the walls of the burial vault gave way, burying Paul Gramonte beneath tons of stone. Then silence.

Hours later, Marie found herself in John Fostich's snug bungalow. A doctor had been called. He had said that Marie had endured nothing but what time would heal. Alone with the woman he was going to marry, sat John.

"Paul Gramonte," she whispered. "What has happened to him? You'll not let him come for me?"

John Fostich smiled gently. "No,

dear. He'll never come back again. And if you're well enough, I'd like to tell you why I lied to you."

THE golden head against the pillows shook back and forth. "I don't care, John. I only know that if you lied it was for me."

"No," John contradicted gently. "It was because of Paul. He asked me to tell you he was dead. I found him in the Marine Hospital at Baton Rouge. That night, years back, when he left you, he went away because he loved you and knew that you could not endure him. He went to the Orient—joined the Marines, I believe—in an effort to try to forget you.

"It was there that he contracted leprosy. As the disease developed, he was taken to the hospital I have named, where many lepers are confined. It was there that the madness that has lurked in Gramonte blood overtook him. The day I found him there he seemed quite sane. He wanted you to forget him; asked me to tell you that he was dead.

"Right after I left, he must have managed to escape. Why? Simply because you are the lovely thing you are. He wanted to see you again. That was why he came into your room that night. When he knew that you did not want him, he hid in that crypt, evidently, just to be near you. He must have been stark mad by that time. Then tonight he must have been prowling about the house when he discovered that I was with you. He knew the truth then, and it drove him into a rage that—that's all over now. He told me he wanted to die."

Marie's brow furrowed deeply. "But you said he had leprosy. I don't understand—"

"There are two kinds of leprosy—one that attacks the flesh itself and the other that attacks the nerves. Paul had the neural type. The sensory nerves of his flesh were gone. He could feel no pain. That is why—why he thought he could never die."

Next Month: THE TERRIBLE DARK, a Novelette of a Monster Amok
By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS



KISS OF DEATH

An Invisible Veil of Horror Shrouded The Mysterious Evil
That Raged Through A Dark House Leaving
A Trail of Bloody Terror

By DALE CLARK

Author of "Badge of Honor," "Sap Cop," etc.

CHAPTER I

Bride of Horror

KURT WHEELER stared at the girl he had married less than an hour before.

Few men could be privileged to gaze on a bride as lovely as Valerie. The contours of an exquisitely modelled body silhouetted through the billowy fluff of her bridal gown as

she stood before the blazing fireplace. Dancing flames shed rosy light on her bare, slim shoulders and slender throat, glistened in her warm, auburn hair. Just to look at her should have made Kurt the happiest man alive.

And Valerie—for her, surely, this moment should have been utterly and dazzlingly radiant.

But it wasn't. On the contrary, Kurt's stare found in his bride's eyes a flame of terror.

She was peering at the inky, gigan-

A Complete
Novelette
of Weird
Thrills



A black hole painted itself high on the man's left cheek and blood drained horribly

tic headline of a tabloid newspaper on the table near the hearth. There, spread for all the world to see, was the old horror that Kurt had begged Valerie never to think of again: **KISS OF DEATH GIRL WEDS! LADY OF ILL-FATED LOVES MATES WITH PLAYWRIGHT!**

"Rotten yellow journalism! They must be hard up for news, having to print ghost stories." Kurt tried to make his voice casual, to make the headline seem unimportant.

He grabbed the rain-dampened tabloid, made as if to fling it on the fire, then hesitated, letting his eyes skim the first lines of print:

Valerie Acton, musical comedy star, famed as the Death Kiss Girl, was married late tonight to Kurt Wheeler, a playwright. Thus Miss Acton and Wheeler defy the death curse which has haunted all of Valerie's lovers—

The print straggled zigzag around pictures—horrible pictures. Nausea skewered Kurt as he glowered at the page. The tabloid editors had gone the limit to hand jaded New York a morbid thrill.

THERE was a picture of Valerie in a wedding gown. Faked, he knew, by photographing a model in such a dress and adding Valerie's face from another picture. Then they had snipped across on eof her stage portraits to take her mouth—only the mouth—and had captioned it, luridly, "Death Kiss Lips."

There was more. There was a margin around the page—a margin of male faces—dead men's faces circled with funeral wreaths. Captions shouted that these were the men who had been killed by the kiss of death. Seven men, shrieked the tabloid, had already died because they dared love the Forbidden Woman.

Dully Kurt realized that Valerie was speaking to him. Her voice came, sobbing, "Kurt! You—you've got to go away—before you— Oh, Kurt! I'm afraid! I should never have let you marry me."

Her tearful cry melted into the storm fury which pelted rain in luna-

tic fury on the old, high windows. Windows that were black until their glass flashed livid with lightning. It flashed now, and the chimney became a stone throat down which thunder growled into the room.

"Valerie!" Kurt cried. "Don't! It's all right."

He wanted to drag her close, wanted to kiss away the nightmare fantasy of her fear. But that would only make it worse. For he sensed that tonight the girl's softly curving body was a chilled, marble thing. Chilled with the old horror this newspaper headline had awakened in her.

"Poor darling!" he said soothingly. "You can't help worrying about—about this silly publicity stunt of Crilly Hubb's, I know. But don't take it so seriously."

"I've tried to believe that it is only a publicity stunt," she sobbed. "But, Kurt—I've tried to tell you before—about those queer feelings I have. Usually at night. As if I change—become another person in my sleep—"

A chill tingled down Kurt's spine. Valerie's voice trembled like some poor frightened bird beating its wings against the high windows of this big, gloomy library.

"But you have told me, and I've pointed out that those queer feelings are merely dreams," he muttered.

Valerie's shudder lifted the snowy mounds of her bosom from the bridal gossamer. "That's the worst of it. I wake up feeling as if I'd been another person for a while, but I can't remember *what that other person did.*"

Valerie's eyes appealed out of a face that was a mask of pain. Her fingers were tight little fists. Her voice dwindled to a dry husk of whisper. "What happens during my dreams, Kurt? Sometimes I think I yield to some power that can curse men—*kill them!*"

KURT WHEELER steeled his voice to calm her.

"You're over-excited, tired out. Why, Val, you hardly knew some of these men." He tapped the newspaper with his finger. "They probably sent flowers and silly letters to you, sure,

And to every other pretty girl on a New York stage."

His stare shifted down to the page. He gasped. His fingers, clenching tense, crushed the sheet. There was something he hadn't noticed before. He knew now that Valerie had, and it accounted for her fear now.

There were eight male faces ranged around the border, he saw now. Seven dead men, and a single living one.

This last wasn't a good photo. Ink-blurred, it only dimly reproduced the clean-cut lines of the original. Yet Kurt had no difficulty in recognizing it. It was his own face! -

They hadn't wrapped a funeral wreath around it. Instead, Kurt's face peered out of a circle of fat black question marks. And the caption was, "The Next to Die?"

Anger blurred Kurt's eyes. Then, as he stared at that paper he seemed to see his face freeze in rigid coldness on the page. He saw the ring of question marks fuse into a wreath of cold-petaled flowers, like those other wreaths around the seven dead faces! He saw the type leap into staring distinction: *The Next to Die*.

Four words, and a wreath, and his own face looking from the page with sightless, corpse-cold eyes!

"Kurt!" Valerie moaned.

Kurt jerked his eyes away from the horror of that mirage. With fingers that trembled slightly he was about to toss the paper into the flames when something about the photo caught his attention. Easily identified by the necktie he wore, it was a picture that had been taken very recently. So far as Kurt knew, only three prints had been made from the negative. One he had kept, one went to Valerie, and a third hung on the wall in Crilly Hubb's office.

How came the newspaper to have this picture, then?

And how came the newspaper to know about their marriage, a ceremony performed at night in a village a hundred miles out of New York, secretly, just to escape this kind of publicity?

"Valerie," he said. "I've got to see Crilly about something important."

CRILLY HUBB'S room was at the end of the downstairs hall, for only the first floor of the mansion was kept habitable.

Clenching the newspaper in angry fingers, Kurt strode down the hall. He pushed open the door without knocking, and his stare swept over the group of four men in the room. Three of them held whiskey-and-soda glasses in their hands, while the fourth held a liquor tray.

Kurt's eyes stopped on Jared Acton, Valerie's uncle and guardian. "Jared, I wish you'd go in and see Val," he said. "I want to see Crilly Hubb—alone."

Jared, a short and squat man past middle age, shot Kurt a questioning look out of black, expressive eyes. There was surprise in his solid, side-whiskered face.

"Well, Kurt," he said. "It must be pretty important business to cause you to take it up tonight." His tone disapproved thoroughly. "But if you say so—"

He went out. His son, Thane, Valerie's cousin, hastily drained his glass. Blond, handsome, unlike his father, his face showed the same surprise and disapproval.

"I'll be getting to bed myself," he said, and moved toward the door.

Crilly Hubb spoke from beside the fireplace in the room. "I suggested Jared and Thane stay tonight, on account of the storm."

Kurt looked at the man with the tray. Hostile, rheumy eyes under tufted white brows returned his look. The man was Eben Church, a former vaudeville actor whom Crilly Hubb allowed to live in the cottage several hundred yards from the house. In return, Church acted as manservant when Crilly paid his rare visits to the place.

"You can go, Eben," Crilly Hubb ordered.

Kurt waited for the door to close. Then he strode over and thrust the paper under Crilly's fat face.

Hubb glanced at the headline.

"Another of your publicity stunts?" Kurt snapped. "I know how your publicity department built up this 'Kiss

of Death' legend around Val. But it's got to stop! I won't have my wife's name dragged through this kind of slime."

The producer's pulpy lips formed a slow smile. He sank into a chair, spread the paper across his knees. His voice buttered his words.

"New York is a funny town, my boy. And the show business is screwy. I admit I've played up the Kiss of Death—laid it on with a trowel. That sort of publicity brings people into my theater. They're morbid curiosity fiends, I grant you, but they pay for their tickets. That's why I can pay Val a whopping salary. The Actons never kicked, so why should you?"

Kurt's lips tensed. There was something ghoulish about Crilly Hubb. There had to be a streak of ghoul in any man who could publicize a sweet, decent, appealing girl like Valerie into a hateful she-fiend legend.

"That's all over," he snapped. "Val's not going to be put on exhibition to be stared at by a pack of thrill-seekers any more. My wife is going to have a normal, happy life from now on. Get that through your head, Crilly!"

THE producer lighted a cigarette, breathed smoke through his nostrils.

"Val, have a normal life?" he murmured.

The fat man leaned back in his chair, heavy lids curtaining his eyes. "Maybe it won't be that simple. You can blame me for this publicity all you like, Kurt, but didn't it ever occur to you that there might be something more than a publicity gag to that death kiss business?"

Kurt shook his head. "Crilly, you don't really believe that."

"Val's a peculiar girl. Those dreams of hers," Hubb muttered. His fat fingers drummed a devil's tattoo on the newspaper.

Kurt's eyes hardened against the tiny doubt that gnawed in him. "Rot!" he said angrily.

Crilly bent forward, looked at Kurt. "Dreams in which she becomes the tool of preternatural influences.

She's told me something about those dreams. Obviously her mind is subjected to some horrible stimulus—"

Kurt scowled. "The stimulus of your publicity," he broke in. "The preternatural influence that gave this paper my latest picture."

He reached for the sheet, to thrust the damning evidence of the photo at Crilly, but he never picked it up. His hand froze in mid-air. His breath clotted, choked his words. His stare switched back to Crilly's face. And he knew that Crilly was listening too—had heard what he had heard.

CHAPTER II

Poltergeist!

"**W**HAT'S that?" Kurt jerked. "The wind," Crilly wheezed. "Wind—shaking the house—"

Thud, thump! And then a high dry squeal carried to their ears on the storm's wail.

But it wasn't the wind that made the squeal. They both knew that.

"Valerie!" Kurt said and whirled toward the door.

The wainscoted corridor stretched before him, the library door at its end. The corridor seemed a mile long as Kurt ran along it.

Thud! Bump!

The sound came deadly, subdued. It might have been Jared Acton helping Valerie with the luggage. It might have been Jared Acton dragging one of the heavy suitcases across the floor. But Kurt instantly rejected that simple solution.

His hand raked the library door-knob, twisted it. He leaped through the opening as the door yawned.

"Val!" he yelled.

She wasn't there! The dancing flames gibbered red light on the hearth where he'd left his bride. But she wasn't there, she didn't answer.

Kurt stood for a stunned second.

Minor hell was cutting loose in this end of the house. *Crash! Slam! Bang!* He heard a clatter, as of a table turning over, and a shrill jangle of breaking glass.

The uproar came through the panels of the bridal bedchamber door!

Kurt would have gripped the truth quicker if only he'd had the layout of the house thoroughly in mind. The bridal chamber was one of two smaller rooms adjoining the library. Doors from it opened both into the library, where he stood, and onto the hall. He had rushed past the other door when he charged down the corridor.

He plunged across the library now. "God, let me be in time!" he prayed.

His feet slipped on the slick, hardwood floor. Sprawling, he slammed against the door, burst it open.

Bumped down to his knees, the impetus of his rush pitched Kurt across the threshold. On his hands and knees he stared around.

"Val!" Kurt's choked sob mouthed the girl's name in dry agony of fear and dread.

THEN he saw Valerie, and the first thought he had was that she was dead.

She must have been disrobing when the blow fell. The white fluff of peignoir told him that. It spread in a silky pool covering her body.

No. Not covering it, because the wrap really hung in shreds from her shoulders. Val's creamy skin and soft curves showed through a dozen gaping tears in the silk.

Her eyes, wide open, stared out of the terrified pallor of her face. Glazed with horror, her eyes were, and they seemed to be pinned on something in the room. As if some magnet there gripped the pupils, drew them almost out of their sockets. But they weren't seeing now because she was unconscious. Kurt could see that.

His gaze jerked across the room, halted.

He saw an overturned chair. He saw drawers yanked out of the wardrobe chest, spilled on the floor, with Val's clothes strewn about. Dainty, intimate garments were ripped into gauzy ribbons.

A vase of flowers, brought in by Eben Church's wife, spread a trickle of smashed china, trampled blossoms, and water on the floor.

His eyes picked their way over the debris. A strangled cry burst from his lips.

What was happening here? Slack-jawed, face contorted into a mask of dull amazement, Kurt watched. Incredible! Incredible and impossible! But the thing was happening. Another drawer jumped out of the wardrobe to shed its finery onto the floor!

Kurt's mind blurred a little then. Blurred, as it tangled with the fact that the drawer had come out by itself, as if pulled by invisible hands!

The nerve-scorching moment came when the drawer perceptibly hesitated in the empty air, trembling a bit, as if the unseen hands shook with anger. Then, furiously, it was dashed to the floor.

Next a picture on the wall over the chest lifted and went crashing in a staccato soprano of flinching glass.

KURT groped to his feet. Icy, liquid fear chilled him; crawled in a shudder over his face. *It was exactly like watching an invisible man demolishing the room.*

Valerie moaned, covered her pale face with rigid fingers. And she did it in the way of a sleeper struggling in the grip of an evil dream.

The crash as the dressing table mirror, snatched from its frame, hurtled to bits on the floor snapped Kurt's drugged muscles into life again.

He had to get Valerie out of the room!

Kurt stumbled to the girl. Something—the flash of metal moving, glimpsed out of the tail of his eye—whipped him around.

A writing desk stood at the end of the room. Open, it revealed pigeon-holes that contained the usual blot-ters, pens, bottles, and a paper-knife. Kurt saw the paper-knife as a thin blur of blue light across the room.

He reeled back as the hiss of the knife, splitting the air, grazed his chest. The blade stuck, buried an inch deep in the oak panel of the bridal bed!

Kurt gasped. The *thing* had thrown that! Had thrown it at him!

Fear for Valerie flared, stronger than the surge of his personal, eerie terror. Crouching, he swept the girl up in his arms.

She lay limp, a dead weight in his arms.

He plunged toward the hall door. Then the door opened to reveal Jared Acton.

The room had grown queerly, weirdly quiet.

"Just put her on the bed," said Valerie's uncle. "She'll sleep now for hours. She always does, after the Poltergeist . . . I want to tell you about Poltergeist, Kurt." His voice was calm, undisturbed.

CHAPTER III

Death's Cold Kiss

"POLTERGEIST?" muttered Kurt. "But what . . . ?"

The three, Jared Acton, Crilly Hubb, and Kurt, had returned to the library. Valerie's uncle watched lightning limn the tall windows, waited for the thunder to growl down the chimney. Then he glanced at Crilly.

"Have you an encyclopedia here?" he asked.

Crilly blinked owlily. "Sure."

"We want the volume that includes psychical research." Jared's heavy gaze shifted to Kurt. "You can dig the facts out of it quicker and clearer than I could explain them."

Kurt snatched the book from Crilly, leafed through it with shaky fingers. He found the page. Black lines of print wavered before his eyes:

Frequently recurring cases of strange noises, movements of furniture, and breakage of crockery . . . Cases of this kind have been recorded for many hundreds of years—

Kurt grasped that some sort of unruly astral spirit was responsible. Poltergeist was German for "racketing spirit," the encyclopedia said. And some one agent whose presence *is essential!* That must mean Valerie!

One thing was all too clear. There were Poltergeists. The idea wasn't a

superstition, an old wives' tale. It was in the Britannica. That authority stated that there were cases that defied science!

"Trickery does not seem to be an adequate explanation of the facts," he read.

Trickery? Kurt knew nothing, outside of sensational newspaper reports, about the eerie phenomena that the Society for Psychic Research investigates. But he knew what his own eyes had seen. He and Valerie had been alone in the bridal chamber when the knife was thrown.

The knife! That brought a train of nerve-jangling, eerie fears. Not ordinary terror; Kurt was no physical coward. But, terror of the power of the Invisible Thing that could break and smash and destroy. That had tried to kill him! Unsuccessfully, yes. But was the Poltergeist always unsuccessful?

Kurt remembered how seven men had already died. One in an auto accident. One had shot himself. Another had drowned. Another, *stabbed* by a mysterious intruder never apprehended by the police. They had all been violent deaths.

He didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to remember what Crilly had said.

"Suppose Val's dreams are some sort of psychic state? A state in which she becomes the tool of preternatural influences . . ."

HE couldn't deny that Valerie was subject to spells—mysterious spells—that left her crushed and senseless; left her lying in a rigid trance.

She lay like that, now, in the bridal chamber where old Church and Thane Acton were cleaning up the debris.

"Because," Jared had explained, "it is essential for her to wake up in the same room, restored as nearly as possible to its original condition. Dr. Dranot, the psychiatrist, ordered that. The idea, as he put it, is to preserve her 'continuity of consciousness.'

"In other words, if Valerie is to have a normal life, she mustn't get any inkling of what has happened." Then

Jared had said a queer thing. "By the way, Kurt, you'd best stay out of the room. The emotional excitement due to your presence may have helped bring this on."

Crilly Hubb muttered, "You mean, this Poltergeist thing is jealous of Kurt?"

Kurt closed the Britannica. "I want to know all about this, Jared. Everything you can tell me."

Crilly Hubb poured drinks. Jared Acton gulped a Scotch neat before replying.

"There is really very little to tell," he said. "It began when Val was just a kid. I had her on the stage in a—well, kind of a mind-reading act. As with Robert Houdin and his son Emile, everything depended on a system of signals, which were given by Thane. He sat in a box seat, watching me as I passed through the audience. Then he communicated with Val, blindfolded on the stage, by means of an electric apparatus.

"However, I caught on that Val was doing things that couldn't be explained by the signals. *She actually read my mind.* Or, *she* got help from some third source—not Thane. I discovered that one night when the electric wire connection in Thane's apparatus broke and I got the answers just the same.

His lips curled in a rueful smile.

"Most men would have played that up for all it was worth. Luckily, I took Valerie to Dr. Darnot. He warned me that use of the power might prove very dangerous to the child. So I took her off the stage. She never came back to it, until she was sixteen. I had hoped that her psychic condition would be outgrown by then."

He poured himself a stiff second Scotch.

"But I was wrong. She began to have these Poltergeist attacks. The first one happened one night after she'd stayed out late. Shortly after she returned I heard the noise and found Valerie lying senseless on the floor of her room. Her party dress had been torn to shreds. Lotions and perfumes from her dressing table littered the floor." He drained the glass. "All

the subsequent attacks have been like that."

KURT stared. "Her clothing always torn?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes, always."

"The furniture upset?"

"Well, tonight's episode was the worst so far. Usually the Poltergeist confines himself to smashing her toiletries."

Crilly Hubb laughed, queerly.

"And it always happens," he pressed, "after she's had a date with a man?"

Jared Acton nodded.

Crilly's bulging eyes glinted. "That's damn queer—and significant," he said slowly.

Kurt felt a chill slither along his spine. His mouth suddenly tasted dry.

"What's in your mind now, Crilly?"

The showman listened to a long roll of thunder. A leering smile moved across his fat face.

"This Poltergeist of hers," he said, "acts exactly like a jealous lover—or husband. I wonder. It's a kind of a soul-mate from hell, eh?"

"You're crazy!" Kurt scowled. "Seems to me a thing like this should be talked over in the morning anyway."

"Right," approved Jared Acton. "Besides, Kurt, you ought to see some authority in the field of psychic investigation. After all, we are merely laymen. Trying to diagnose something that's far too deep for us—and human lives are at stake!"

"Kurt's life," grunted Crilly Hubb.

Jared nodded. "And Valerie's life, too. If she ever finds out I don't know what she'd do."

KURT unstrapped his valise, got his revolver from its inside pocket. He laid the gun on a chair at the head of the library divan, where he would spend the rest of the night.

The door to Valerie's room, ajar, gave him a glimpse of the girl's figure bathed by the subdued light of her bedside lamp.

He lay down, fully clothed except for his shoes, and watched the log smoulder into cold ash on the hearth.

A deep frown knit his forehead. The weird events of the past hours, beginning with Val's confession about her "dreams" and following through to that remark of Crilly's about a soul-mate in hell, made jigsaw pieces of a puzzle whose pattern Kurt couldn't grasp.

The one comforting fact was that Val didn't know. But maybe if she did know she could fight off this Poltergeist thing.

KURT'S lips thinned in a straight line. Tell Valerie? No, he couldn't take that chance. He'd have to face this terror alone, crush it out of both their lives. Only, how was he to crush something he couldn't even see?

Outside, the rain shrank to gusty patters against the panes. Kurt sat up, shook a cigarette from the pack he'd laid on the chair.

He didn't light it because, sitting up on the divan, he could see more clearly into Val's room. The cigarette dropped from lips that tensed into twin hard ridges. Kurt's hand slid to the chair, and his fingers curled around the revolver. Blood drummed in his temples as he rose quietly to his feet.

Maybe he couldn't see the Poltergeist. But a shadow fell on Val's slim, bare shoulder where she lay, a shadow that was man-shaped!

Something—someone—had come between the girl and the bedside light. The door, though, wasn't open quite wide enough for Kurt to see just what—or who.

Kurt padded softly on shoeless feet toward the bridal chamber. He gripped the gun in his right hand, pushed the door with his left.

His eyes searched the room. There was nobody there! Even the shadow had disappeared! Kurt drew a long breath, looked down at his bride. Valerie's small, pear-shaped breasts lifted; fell. It might have been normal sleep, only the pallor of her face proved otherwise.

Kurt wheeled toward the clothes closet at the end of the room. He poked into its empty darkness.

Nothing there. It was a connecting closet, designed to serve also the unused adjoining room. He tried the other door. It was locked.

Kurt walked back into the bridal chamber. He knelt, peered under the bed.

Finally he returned to the library. A thought occurred to him. A man, by stooping below the level of Val's bed, could have escaped into the hall. Kurt whipped open the library hall door.

He had only a fleeting glimpse of the figure as it vanished into Crilly Hubb's room at the other end of the corridor. But the one glimpse identified the lean, hulking form. Kurt started.

What errand called Eben Church into Crilly's room at this hour? Kurt's lower lip crowded higher as his jaw advanced. His shoulders hunched slightly. If Church had been in Valerie's room that demanded explanation!

THEN he forgot Eben Church. The faint click of a latch whirled Kurt around. Again he gasped, and his eyes widened to circles of surprise.

"Val!" His whisper broke the silence.

She didn't answer. She had come into the library, had closed the door after her. Now, against the dimly shining windows, he watched the snowy silhouette of her figure, walking, arms stretched before her, toward the divan.

Kurt sensed that her eyes were open, unseeing. Her step was the groping falter of the sleepwalker. Kurt's heart chilled in apprehension. He dropped his fingers from the light switch by the door jamb. It would be dangerous to startle her.

The silhouette of her blurred when she passed a casement, floated into being again as she moved in front of the other window.

Eerie, fantastic feeling gripped Kurt. Watching her was almost like watching a disembodied wraith!

He shook off the feeling, tiptoed toward her. "I mustn't waken her," he

thought. Carefully he dropped the revolver on the divan. Both his hands went out to meet the girl's.

"Valerie, dear. You're asleep, aren't you?" he said softly.

He couldn't be sure. His eyes, probing the darkness, couldn't read the dim, pale oval of her face.

Her hands were icy cold. They lingered a moment in his grasp. Then the slim, chilled fingers slipped between his large, warm ones. Dreamily, they touched his wrist and moved up his sleeved arms.

Why did he shiver? This was Valerie, his bride. Yet, Kurt *did* shiver.

Her bare, cold arms went around his neck. She drew his face down. So close that he could see, now, that her lips were serious, unsmiling.

Kurt knew what to expect, and thrilled, nerve-raw, to the chill pressure of her rigid lips as Valerie kissed him. But the taste of her kiss was venom that leaped like cold fire into his flesh, spilling numb poison into his veins!

"So that is it!" he thought, crazily. "The Death Kiss. *Death!*"

HE wrenched his head away from the cold, clinging arms of his bride.

The fire log, broken open, spilled a last livid gleam into the room. Kurt jumped, whirled, and stared into the muzzle of his own revolver. The dim fire-gleam painted the outline of the revolver aimed into Kurt's face. Cold terror froze him.

For the gun *floated* in empty air! Floated, without any means of support. It aimed itself, as if in the clutch of a fleshless, invisible hand!

Kurt's eyes strained at their sockets, abysmal fear held him in its clutching grip.

The revolver was cocked! He noticed that a second later. In the winking glow of the fire, Kurt could see the trigger begin moving as if squeezed by an invisible finger!

He yelled again. His cry was drowned in the roar of the gun exploding. Kurt pitched forward with Valerie across the divan.

CHAPTER IV

Dead Man Number Eight

VALERIE moaned. Kurt looked anxiously into her white face.

Her body felt cold and limp to Kurt's hands there on the divan. But she hadn't been shot. The one bullet that had been fired had grazed its burning track across his own shoulder.

He had acted in the nick of time. Another instant of delay and the lead would have crashed inches lower than his shoulder. Then there'd have been only Kurt's fingerprints on the gun. A coroner's jury could return a verdict of suicide.

For some reason, this Poltergeist thing wanted to make his death look like suicide. Why?

Kurt slipped to the edge of the divan; stood up when he knew that his frame would no longer be patterned against the faint glow from the hearth.

Once before tonight, under the same circumstances, his first thought had been to carry Valerie out of danger. Now he knew that the danger wasn't Val's.

Kurt's pulse thudded as his eyes bored into the darkness. He wanted to get to the light switch. But somewhere in the black and cavernous murk, between him and his goal, was a shapeless thing evilly concentrated on his murder. If it could smash up furniture the way he had seen it smash the dressing-table mirror in the bridal chamber, there seemed no reason why it couldn't crush a man the same way.

Kurt's eyes, boring into the dark, sensed a blackness ahead more intense than the gloom elsewhere—like the shadow he'd seen patterned on Val's shoulder. He held his breath until his ribs ached. The thing *did* have a man-shape. He could feel it waiting.

Kurt inched one foot across the floor. His stockinged feet were soundless. But maybe this thing had keener ears than a human being. He heard the intake of a breath!

Then he realized that it was Valerie

he heard breathing. He cursed his own imagination. Hell, he hadn't seen anything out there in the darkness. Just ragged nerves.

He clenched his fists. He walked out into the middle of the room, heading for the place where the light switch ought to be.

Crash!

He wasn't headed the right way! He slammed up against the denim-draped piano!

Ghostly notes tinkled as his hands clutched the keyboard. Notes that were wiped out by the *spat* of a revolver shot.

"Damn!" breathed Kurt, and dived to the floor.

THE scare weakened his knees, and needles prickled his scalp. Like a blamed fool, he had showed himself against the windows.

Moreover, he'd been right the first time. There was a shape in the room. He could see it clearly now.

"Maybe," wondered Kurt, "it's something that can't be seen in the light, but becomes partially visible in absolute darkness . . . Hell, that's against all natural laws."

But was it? Possibly the Poltergeist consisted of rays which, although completely wiped out by sun or electric light, had a peculiar, dark radiation of their own? Spirit mediums never produced their ectoplasmic figures except in rooms from which all light was shut out.

Just as that thought occurred to Kurt, the library chandelier blazed up. Thane Acton stood in the doorway, his hand on the switch.

"My God! What's happened?" Thane gasped.

Kurt scrambled to his feet. The chandelier light made his eyes blink. It was half a second before he saw clearly.

An incredible picture sketched itself onto Kurt's brain. There was Thane Acton in the doorway which led from the library out into the hall. There was Valerie on the divan. Kurt was leaning against the piano.

Crilly Hubb said, "Well, I'll be—" His fat figure blocked out most of a

doorway that had not hitherto been used. This door connected the library with the second of the smaller adjoining the rooms—the one that shared the closet with the bridal chamber.

The facts about Crilly and that room didn't occur to Kurt at once because there was another and more pressing matter. Kurt's skin crawled with a slow horror, and fear boomed hollowly in his skull. He knew that they were all staring at him, pitilessly.

Jared Acton lay stretched between Kurt and the light switch. A black hole from which blood drained, printed itself high over the man's left cheek.

Valerie's uncle was dead! And the gun—Kurt's gun—still trickled a thin wisp of almost colorless gas from its snub snout.

Kurt knew, without looking, that two cartridges had been discharged from it. And he knew, too, that the only fingerprints on the weapon would be his own.

A coroner's jury could bring in just one verdict on these facts. Murder.

The silence was something that Kurt could feel. Then Valerie screamed. She rose from the divan. Her eyes had come alive, brimming panic in their lapis lazuli blue.

"I've had a dream," she said. "Such a horrible dream!"

She looked at Kurt when she said that. A fraction of a second later, her wide-open gaze found the man on the floor. . . .

Valerie gasped. "It—it wasn't a dream!" she cried, horrified.

THEY sat in the bridal chamber, Valerie, Thane and Kurt. They listened to Crilly Hubb giving orders to Eben Church in the hall outside.

"Take my car and fetch Dr. Kehoe," Crilly was saying. "Kehoe, do you understand?"

There was the sound of Crilly Hubb's feet tramping up the hall toward his own room; shortly after the sound of old Eben pushing the car past the house into the slowed-up rain.

"You've got to tell me what happened," Valerie said, "or I'll go insane, wondering if I—"

"You had nothing to do with it," Kurt soothed. He told her the story—part of it. Naturally, he couldn't tell Val that the Poltergeist connected with her in some way had used her in some horrible, mysterious fashion.

"Then, that shot was meant for you?" Valerie whispered.

Kurt nodded. "How else can you figure it?"

"But how did Uncle Jared—?" She stopped, frowned.

Thane Acton fumbled to light a cigarette.

"Dad was in my room," he muttered. "We were talking this thing over when we heard you yell, Kurt. My father rushed out into the hall. I was in bed. I stopped to grab my robe. That gave him time to get ahead of me. The hall was dark. He must have come very quietly into the library, just in time to be shot."

Kurt's lips thinned. "The Poltergeist mistook him for me, you mean?"

Thane's eyes narrowed. His mouth went tight around the cigarette.

"I can't figure it that way," he said sharply. "How could a Poltergeist—whatever that is—make such a mistake? My guess is that a human hand fired that shot, intending to kill you, Kurt. Dad just happened to get in the way of the bullet."

The youth stood up, shaking his handsome head stubbornly.

"I never was sold on that kiss of death gag. It always struck me as four-fifths Crilly's publicity, plus one-fifth plain fake."

"What about my dreams?" Valerie challenged. "Oh, Thane! If you could explain that part of it!"

"I could make a pretty fair guess." Thane stepped to the door, peered out into the hall.

"I'm going to knock around this house a little," he said abruptly. "Before Eben Church gets back."

Valerie sat tensely on the edge of the bridal bed. She had drawn a fresh, fur-fluffed negligee around her lovely self, and her face was as white

as the fluffed collar. "Kurt! Do you think it's safe for Thane to wander around, alone?"

"I guess so."

"You mean—the danger is only for you?"

"No, not that."

KURT shut Thane out of his mind. There was something else he had to learn. Dreaded, and yet must know.

"Val, dear," he began gently. "That dream of yours. You can remember this one. Exactly what was it?"

The girl shivered. "I can remember only the last bit of it. You see, after you left, Uncle Jared came into the room and said good-night. I felt awfully tired and begged him to excuse me. Then I came in here."

Valerie's blue eyes clouded. "I hardly know what happened next. I dreamed, but before that I must have undressed. It comes to me vaguely that I put on a negligee that was torn—"

"Torn?" Kurt jerked. His stare searched her face. "Val, are you sure of that? Sure that the negligee was torn when you put it on?"

Valerie gnawed her lip, looked doubtful. "No, I'm not sure. I couldn't swear to it. Anyway, I don't remember getting into bed. That was when the dream began. What I dreamed about I'm not sure of—up to the very last."

"Go on," Kurt urged her.

"Well, I dreamed about Uncle Jared." Her face showed strain. Tiny lines etched around her eyes and mouth. She was very pale.

Kurt took his bride's hands, pressed them between his fingers. "All right, dear. What did you dream?"

"I saw Uncle Jared." She shivered. "He was running—in the dark. But I could see his face in spite of the darkness. And it was horrible with fear!"

Kurt's fingers ached to the tightening pressure of her grip. Valerie went on, her voice climbing up the scale of panicky terror.

"Uncle Jared was running, and he kept looking back over his shoulder,

as if the danger were back there, behind him. But it wasn't!" She whimpered to the memory. "It was in front of him, Kurt! That man in front of him, pointing a gun at Uncle Jared's head.

"Uncle Jared kept on coming, starting back in that terrified way. Oh, it was too horrible!"

Kurt leaned toward the girl.

"That other man, Val—the one with the gun—could you see *his* face?"

"No," she gulped. "It was so dark. I'm not sure that it was a man. It was just a shadow—a shape. . ."

Kurt's hands jerked, he wet his lips. That was what he had seen in the library, a : ape!

"Then what happened?" he urged.

"The gun exploded. It made a terrible noise. For a moment I thought I had been shot. It hurt so. Here!" She pressed slim hands to her temples. "And then I knew that I was waking up, and that was what hurt."

KURT controlled the shaking of his own hands. "Of course, it was only a dream," he said gently. "But it may just possibly shed a little light on the tragedy."

His eyes narrowed in reflection. "Tell me, Val, did Jared seem to be running in any particular direction? And how far did he run?"

Valerie didn't hear either question. Her face glazed in a look of panic. A slim, bare arm lifted from the folds of her negligee, pointed.

"Kurt!" she sobbed.

Kurt saw it out of the tail of his eye. The little lamp was being wiped off the bedside table! Kurt's hand jerked, and his fingers closed on the pink-silk shade.

The lamp shot out of his grip, leaving the shade in his fingers. Kurt sensed the tug of power that snatched the thing. But his eyes, jerking around, found nothing there! It was as if the lamp had been snatched by an invisible hand!

The bulb detonated into bits as it hit the floor. Darkness leaped, menace-full.

"Val!" Kurt yelled.

Then out of the ink-pot black, hor-

ror came. Kurt felt his windpipe blocked off, his cartilage being crushed. . .

His fingers raked out, tried to drag at the thing that clutched his throat. And his fingers found only empty air! His nails only tore at his own flesh!

He was strangling in the clutch of an invisible hand that had no flesh nor bone to it!

CHAPTER V

It Hurts to Die

HORROR drenched Kurt. Twice before that night his blood had run cold in the presence of a spectral, fleshless force that could break up furniture and aim a gun at a man. But that had been mild terror compared to his present emotion.

Life was being crushed out of him by a foe that Kurt couldn't see or feel. He was being strangled by non-existent hands which could not possibly be pried loose from their grip on his tortured flesh.

Kurt fought instinctively. His muscles made automatic, spasm-like movements. He plunged to his feet, his fists lashed out into the dark. They flailed, pounded empty air.

The grip on his throat jerked, tightened.

Kurt tried to break away, clawed at his throat. His fingers came away, stickily wet.

He wanted to yell at Valerie; tell her to get a light. There were matches on the bedside stand. He couldn't squeeze the words through the husk of his throat. His lips formed only croaking sounds.

Maybe Valerie had fainted again, he thought dully. That seemed to be the way this Poltergeist thing worked. It somehow had the power to crush her into insensibility.

Shock dragged Kurt's mouth wide open, now. His lungs sucked for air that couldn't slip through the ring of steel throttling him. Time became a necklace strung with big gory beads of agony. His fists slammed out weakly into the nothingness.

The world narrowed down to blackness. When, finally, he heard Valerie sob his name, her cry seemed to come from another, far-off planet.

Blood rocketed in Kurt's skull, burst in red showers that dripped fireworks behind his eyes. He knew that his eyes were crowding from their sockets. His arms went slack, pumping the increasing dead weight of his fists.

He realized that his desperate, flailing rushes were being guided. The horror at his throat pulled in a definite direction. He was being reeled in like a hooked, drowning fish!

BLINDLY, he staggered toward the invisible, fleshless thing that pulled him. It would be easy to die now. Pain eased, became dull and blunted. The blood hammering at his temples made a sound like a train chugging away into the night.

Terror, man's oldest friend. The thing that sticks by and keeps him fighting when will and courage and even physical agony desert him. Now Kurt learned what it was.

He stumbled the last step. Light flickered, far off. He learned afterward that Valerie had scratched three matches to get that one tiny flame, because the frail little sticks snapped in her shaky fingers.

The flicker of light showed him something. To his blood-choked eyes, the figure looked only like a black man-shaped shadow. He buried his fist into it.

Terror galvanized his arm, supplied the strength that went into the punch. Kurt felt his knuckles digging into soft, pasty flesh. There was the crash of a falling body.

A tiny thread of air found its way to Kurt's lungs. He hung onto the thread. It meant life, and he kept pulling it in.

Valerie struck another match. The light got stronger as she came toward Kurt. He was surprised to find himself kneeling on the floor.

He got another surprise. The flare of the match spilled its glow past Kurt's shoulder, and painted the huddled figure into which he had

driven his fist. Kurt bent lower, peered incredulously into the face—a round, fat, pudding of flesh with eyes like unripe plums staring deadly out of it.

"Crilly Hubb!" gasped Valerie. "Then it was he. . . But how?"

Kurt's lips worked into a crooked grin. His eyes gripped the almost invisible length of wire that curled through Crilly's fat fingers. He felt gingerly of his throat.

A noose. A noose made of wire as fine as piano-wire, and as strong, had been looped around Kurt's neck from behind, so that his flailing hands had failed to find it. It had sunk deep into the flesh, and pain had made it seem much wider than it was.

"Oh, God!" shuddered Valerie, looking at the thing.

Kurt's eyes went back to Crilly's face, to inspect the bruised spot that trickled blood into the furrow of Crilly's double chin.

CRILLY had fallen out of the closet doorway. Kurt stepped over the purple-pajama clad body, pulled the chain which dangled from a light bulb in the closet. A 40-watt bulb flared, and showed that the door at the other end of the closet was open now. Kurt walked into the adjoining room.

It took a moment to find the switch in there. Then more light pooled from a chandelier. Kurt's eyes widened. He went to Thane Acton, lying face-down in the middle of the room.

"Thane!" he said.

Val's cousin sat up, rubbed his chin.

"Crilly Hubb," he muttered. "Slugged me—"

Kurt seized Thane's shoulders and helped him to his feet. "Just what happened?" he urged.

Thane shakily aimed a forefinger into a corner of the room. "I caught Crilly carrying out that stuff."

Kurt stared. At first he didn't see anything in the corner, the "stuff" blended so perfectly with the wainscoted walls of the old house. He moved closer. His eyes gripped a

tracery of wires—fine, almost invisible wires.

"There's your Poltergeist," Thane explained. "Didn't you ever see a levitation act on the stage? Bodies made to float before your eyes? Well, they do it with wires. Eben Church must have concealed himself in the closet and put on the Poltergeist act while you talked to Crilly."

"But Val—?"

"Drugged, I suppose. There might be something in that water pitcher in her room."

"And the knife?"

Thane grunted. "A spring concealed in the desk, probably. Aimed to drive the knife at whoever stood over Valerie."

Kurt shook his head. "It sounds far-fetched."

"It's nothing compared to a first-rate performance by a good magician. And you—well, you'd be found dead with a knife in your body. Probably you'd grab at the knife and leave your fingerprints on it. Crilly knew there'd be no investigation. It would look like suicide. The Kiss of Death curse."

"It's lucky I ducked," Kurt said.

"Yes. Because of that Crilly had to try again." Thane reflected. "The gun you saw floating in empty air is a trick that hundreds of spirit mediums have used—only they generally float a trumpet. They use a wire extension. And again, you would have been killed by your own gun, and it would have been chalked up another 'suicide' on the Death Kiss string."

KURT fumbled in his pocket, found a cigarette. His fingers shook slightly as he struck the match.

"I see. That newspaper was planted in the library. A build-up. Eben, hidden in the closet, could have released that knife anyway as I crossed the room. Then the Poltergeist stunt could have followed my death. As it was, a man in the closet would have had plenty of time to pull the wires in there while I carried Val to the bed." Kurt's brows met in a scowl. "But why should Crilly want to kill me?"

Thane's eyes gleamed. "Don't you know? He wants Val for himself."

Kurt laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh.

"You lie, Thane. And you're doing as bad a job of it as you made when you tried to kill me and shot your father instead!"

Thane Acton's face turned fish-belly white. His eyes bulged. A wrinkle twisted his mouth evilly. He snarled, drove his fist at Kurt.

Kurt stepped inside the punch. His knuckles crashed against Thane's jaw.

"Good work!" boomed a voice behind Kurt. "I heard him confess how he did it."

Kurt swung around, peered at the big bald man in the doorway. "You're Doctor Kehoe?"

"Doctor? Hell, no!" The bald headed man flashed a badge. "I'm Sheriff Kehoe!"

Crilly Hubb applied tender fingers to his jaw, grinned at Kurt and Valerie. The fat fingers on his other hand encircled a whiskey glass.

"Thane lost his head after he killed his father," Crilly said. "He knew there'd be an investigation, so he tried to hang the job on me. Jared was the brains of it, of course. And besides, Jared was the one who could hypnotize Valerie."

"Hypnotize!" Valerie gasped, wide eyed.

"Uh-huh. Eben was the first to recognize the hypnotic nature of your sleep. He remembered seeing Jared Acton in a levitation and mesmeric vaudeville act years ago. Jared was mesmerizing a little girl on the stage. You, Val. He hypnotized you so often as a child that you hadn't the normal resistance to his power," Crilly went on. "That explains the preternatural element I recognized in your dreams."

"It explains a lot of things. Eben's visit to your room, and you coming to the library," Kurt added. "Also, it clears up Valerie's dream about Jared running. Her mind was under a fresh influence from him then. He'd gone into the bedroom and urged her to come to me, kiss me. That was to dis-

tract my attention while Thane got my gun. But I went into the bedroom, and Jared must have dropped under her bed, then crawled into the library where Thane shot him by mistake."

CRILLY sipped the Scotch. "When did you get hep to Thane?"

Kurt grinned. "After he had that noose around my neck. I hit you in the body, Crilly. Sank my fist in to the wrist. When I saw the bruise on your jaw, I knew you'd been knocked out before I hit you. You were just a target for me to run into."

Valerie shivered. "But why—why?" she stammered.

"That's not hard," Crilly said. "Jared was your guardian. He collected your salary. Your marriage

cost the Actons a pretty penny. But it wasn't enough just to kill Kurt. They had to make you think you were in some way responsible so you'd never dare look at another man. Make you think you really had some fatal connection with a Poltergeist. That's why Jared hypnotized you when he went in to say good-night. Why Thane went by the other room into the closet and manipulated the wires. Why—"

He broke off. Kurt and Valerie had turned to the window. Outside, the sun was coming up on a fresh, rain-washed world. The light found glints in Valerie's hair. Kurt's arm slipped around the girl's shoulders, drew her close.

Crilly Hubb suddenly found something very interesting to stare at in the bottom of his empty glass.



IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE
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College Humor

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THE BEST COMEDY IN AMERICA

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THE DWELLER IN THE TOMB

The Dust of Centuries Gives Horrid Birth to a Thing of Fleshly Corruption!

By
HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Coffins for Six," "Power of the Snake," etc.

MENACE. The night was thick with it. As I stood before the age-blackened door of the ancient Sussex castle, listening to the hurried pounding of hoofs dying away in the darkness, I felt the first warning of that frightful horror that was to engulf my wife, Lucille, and me, and send us to the brink of madness.

For, faint, muffled as though it came from far underground, I seemed to hear a distant thudding from below, echoing the sounds of our guide's hasty retreat. As though something deep in the earth had awakened and was moving ponderously to investigate our arrival! I did not know, then, of the tomb beneath the castle, but I sensed something strangely amiss—something evil—that seemed to brood over the lichened stones like a fetid exhalation rising from foul corruption.

Lucille moved closer to me. There was fear in her blue eyes as she looked up at me.

"Jim," she said, and I saw her shiver, "do you feel it—that thing the driver told us about?"

"Nonsense," I said, trying to make myself believe my words. "He said the devil lived below the castle, and we'd be able to smell the foulness of his breath. Apparently he didn't



It was a procession of the damned, marching down the abyss

think the moat could have a bad odor, too."

That was true. The green-scummed, black water of the moat, over which a rude bridge had been constructed, possessed a singularly horrible stench. I wondered if it had ever been drained.

Lucille, about to reply, turned sharply. The door had opened slightly, and a man with a gaunt, white face was peering at us from the gloom. A shrunken old man, with vivid dark eyes in a bloodless, wrinkled face. In a high-pitched, rasping voice he demanded:

"Well, what do you want? You're on the wrong—"

I interrupted him. "I'm Jim Mason—your nephew. Don't you remember me? This is my wife."

He scrutinized my face suspiciously. "Why—yes. You're Jim, all right. What are you doing in Sussex?"

"We're on our honeymoon, Lucille and I. As a matter of fact"—I hesitated—"we'd planned just a brief visit, merely to say hello. But the driver went off in such a hurry that I had no time to ask him to wait. We'd planned to stay in the village to-night."

A FLICKER of amusement appeared on the gaunt face.

"They don't like this castle, Jim. Well, come in. You too, Mrs. Mason. What's your first name? Good; I'll call you Lucille. I'm Martin Argyll. Jim's told you, of course."

He took Lucille's arm to escort her through the doorway, while I remained behind to pick up the traveling bags. Frowning, I followed them in. Somehow, I didn't like the way my uncle's clawlike hand gripped Lucille's bare arm—like the talon of a bird of prey, loathsomely caressing.

"Leave the bags in the hall," he said over his shoulder, as he swung open a paneled door. "Come in here."

The room into which he led us was comfortable enough, and a fire was blazing in a great stone fireplace. But shadows lurked disquietingly in the corners of the high ceiling. Always there were shadows in the castle, even

in broad daylight. It is odd that shadows can be so—unpleasant.

"Kent!" Argyll said sharply, and a man got up leisurely from an arm-chair before the fire and came forward to meet us. He was a slender chap, apparently in his early twenties, with a ruff of stiff red hair and horn-rimmed spectacles that gave him an inquisitive, owl-like appearance. Argyll introduced us.

"This is Fred Kent," he said. "My assistant."

A flash of memory came to me. "Not the son of Moss Kent?" I said.

"My old partner," Argyll finished. "Yes. When Moss died, I rather took Fred under my wing. Eh?" He stared at the youth.

"That's right," Kent said. His voice was deep, pleasant. "I owe a great deal to Mr. Argyll."

"It's mutual," Argyll said, and I thought I detected a note of sarcasm in his voice. "You've been of great help in my research."

Lucille, spreading her palms to the blaze, turned.

"Jim's told me of that, Mr. Argyll. It must be fascinating work."

The old man's eyebrows shot up. "Fascinating? My dear girl, that's scarcely the word. Occultism is the one great science—" He broke off, and I saw him cast an odd glance at the floor. "Yet I'm afraid sometimes," he finished somberly. "Even though I bought this castle—"

"Bought it!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, of course. I can afford it. But come, sit down and get yourselves warm. Take this chair, Lucille." Those blue-veined fingers, resting on Lucille's shoulder, were trembling slightly. "Jim, I'll tell you something. I'm quite sure that there is something buried in a vault that exists beneath this castle, something worth—" He made a sweeping gesture. "Well, its value cannot be measured in dollars."

"What is it?" Lucille asked curiously.

Instead of answering Argyll said slowly: "This castle is built on the site of an old Druid temple. Down in the vaults—" He broke off to say almost anxiously: "Now that you're

here, you'll stay for a time, won't you? I need help—and I won't be ungrateful."

"We hadn't planned—" I began, but Lucille interrupted me.

"I hardly think we can do that. Our steamer sails Monday."

"But until then," Argyll urged. "Stay with me until then. You must, Jim. I need help. If it's a question of money—"

"It isn't," I said shortly. But the old man's pathetic eagerness had rather touched me. "Lucille," I said, "can't we stay for a few days?"

SHE bit her lip, and then nodded slowly. Argyll smiled.

"Good—good! You've come just when I needed you most. I need your help, Jim. You're strong. You're young and strong!" And he laughed with a curious air of triumph.

I saw Kent cast a warning glance at him, and felt a vague, uneasy premonition of something wrong.

Throughout the rest of the evening this feeling persisted, and it was with a sense of relief that at last I heard my uncle offer to guide us to our rooms. He had already sent Kent upstairs to prepare our beds, but the high-ceilinged tower room to which Argyll conducted us bore the stamp of uncounted generations of tenancy, nor did the clean bed-linen tend to dispel this impression. The four-poster bed was an antique, grotesquely carved. Argyll blew the dust from a table before setting down his lamp.

"It's the best room," he said. "Kent and I sleep below. Come along, Jim. You have the next room."

I followed him into a chamber similar in every respect to Lucille's, save that a little balcony jutted out from the tower, visible through incongruous French doors which some tenant had installed. I unpacked my suitcase while Argyll watched. After a time he went to the door.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the vaults," he informed me, and I heard his quiet laughter as he descended the stairs.

I examined the bed, an old four-poster affair, with dark green curtains all around it. These I dragged

from their place, creating a stifling smother of dust. While waiting for it to settle I went out on the balcony and lit a cigarette.

The night was very dark. The moon shed a faint, dim glow through piling black clouds, and I saw water gleaming from the moat below. But for the most part it was as though I stood staring out into the blackness of infinite space. To my mind a thought came unbidden.

Never on them does the shining sun look down with his beams—but deadly night is spread abroad over these hapless men.

Where had I read that? Suddenly I remembered. They were Homer's lines describing Odysseus' visit to the Land of the Dead. And truly this was a place of deathly gloom and shadows to which I had come.

The dark burden of the centuries had fallen heavily on this Sussex castle, and from the very stones beneath my feet I imagined there exhaled a subtle odor of decay and frightening antiquity. I cast my cigarette away, watched the red spark drop down to be quenched in the waters of the moat. I turned to re-enter my room.

An iron band gripped my throat! Agony, blinding, frightful, raced through me. I felt an inexorable grip tighten, shutting off my breath, lifting me from my feet. Desperately I clawed at my throat, felt a slender, metallic strand slip beneath my fingers.

Hoarse, choking groans forced themselves between my lips. If I could only grip the wire—support my weight—

It slipped through my clutching fingers. I could get no purchase. Sparks of multi-colored light flashed before my eyes.

My head was swelling, turning into a huge ball of fire.

From the blackness above me a guttural voice rasped: "Fool! Don't tamper with forbidden things! Go while you can—let the Dweller sleep!"

There was a thudding, rhythmic,

hurried pounding at my brain. The racing blood? No, the door of my room. Someone was knocking.

They would not come in time. I would be dead very soon now, I knew. I tried to shriek for help, but the murderous loop kept me silent.

The knocking grew louder. I heard someone calling my name, and recognized the voice of Fred Kent, my uncle's assistant.

The door wasn't locked. *Open it, fool, open it!*

Again the deep voice snarled out from above: "Doom will fall if the Dweller is let out from his prison. For he is hungry and athirst!"

The door opened. Kent stood in the doorway. I saw him dimly through staring eyes. He glanced about the room, abruptly paused, frozen, as his eyes met mine. Then he was racing toward the window.

The iron grip about my throat relaxed. I collapsed, choking for air. To my ears came a faint whisper, fading, vanishing into the distance.

"He is hungry and athirst!"

Then only blackness . . .

SOMETHING was biting my throat, something hot, burning. I coughed, spluttered—and opened my eyes. I was on the bed, and bending over me was Kent, intent upon forcing brandy between my lips. I pushed the glass away, struggled to sit up. Kent's arm about my shoulders supported me.

"What was it, old man?" he asked quietly. There was a strange look in his eyes, behind the shell-rimmed glasses. Was it fear? I could not be sure.

I told him. He frowned, shaking his head.

"I can't imagine," he said. "But, look here, Mason. I'd rather you wouldn't tell Argyll of this. He's—" He hesitated, went on slowly. "Sometimes I'm rather afraid of him, in spite of all he's done for me."

"I see," I said. "Well, that's all right. Perhaps it will be better. I don't want to worry Lucille, either. But I'm going to get her away from this death-trap."

Kent pushed out his lower lip. He

took off his glasses and polished them reflectively.

"That's really why I came up here," he said. "Here—take another nip of brandy. There's no use going after the fellow, whoever he was. You were out for fully fifteen minutes. And besides I want to tell you—"

He went on quietly, his calm, restrained voice lending an added touch of terror to the fantastic tale he related. As I listened a weird spell of horror seemed to close in upon me, a nightmare menace from the foul and hidden depths of antiquity. He told of his coming to the castle, for a purpose Argyll would not explain to him until a few days before our coming.

"He took me down into the vaults," he said, and I saw little beads of perspiration sprinkling his forehead. "Black as midnight, filthy with cobwebs, and infested with insects—spiders as big as walnuts, and ugly little yellow centipedes that flashed away almost before you could see them. There are seven vaults down below the castle, and in the lowest vault is the door.

"An iron door, rusted and barred. But we opened it with chisels and hammers. We had to wait half an hour before the air in that locked vault became breathable. And it was empty. Argyll told me to dig. They buried it deep, he said. I had no idea what he meant, then. I sweated and dug there until I had a shallow crater about eight feet deep, and finally, about noon the day before yesterday, I struck something that sent out a hollow clang. I kept on digging."

Kent brushed the perspiration from his forehead, went on. "I uncovered an iron disk, embedded in the solid rock. Several iron bars lay across it, their ends hidden in slots in the stone. After a great deal of hammering we slid the bars into their slots and pried up the iron disk.

"Directly beneath it was another disk, warped and bent, as though terrific pressure had been applied to it from below. Argyll was tremendously excited. As he babbled I finally managed to make out that this was the ancestral tomb of somebody or

other. And finally I said impatiently, 'Well, let's open it, then.' And I sent the crowbar swinging down.

"I don't know how to tell this, Mason. I've seen some odd things during my association with Argyll. Occult research isn't all fun, you know. But this—well, Argyll shrieked out a warning and caught me about the waist, deflecting the blow. As it was the bar hit the iron near its edge and crashed through the metal.

"What happened after that—it's rather blurred and indistinct. I felt the crowbar jerked from my hand and drawn out of sight below the metal disk. Good Lord, Mason, something pulled that crowbar out of my grip as though I had been a child! And I had been clutching it with all my strength!

"As I watched I saw the iron disk bulge upward, cracking and snapping. Argyll sucked in his breath. But the disk did not rip open, as I feared—"

Then I heard it—a little gasp from the doorway. I turned. It was Lucille, in a flimsy negligee that revealed rather than concealed the rounded contours of her body. She hurried forward, her face chalk-white.

I drew her within my arms. Her heart was beating furiously.

"Jim," she said. "I heard. We've got to get out of here—now."

"Perhaps it's just as well," Kent said. "I'll give you the keys to my car. Or I'll drive you to the village myself."

"That's considerate of you, Fred," my uncle's high-pitched voice said mockingly.

HE stood in the doorway, his wrinkled face twisted into a saturnine grin. In his hand was a gleaming, vicious automatic. He gestured with it peremptorily.

"Stand up, Jim. You too, Lucille. That's right, line up, like good children." His cackling laugh sent an icy chill down my spine. The man must be mad!

He read my thought with uncanny accuracy. "No, I'm sane enough, Jim, as you'll find out. Fred has been tell-

ing you things, hasn't he? Has he . . . What's the matter with your neck?" He pointed at the livid weal on my throat

In the back of my mind had been the thought that Argyll had been responsible for the attack on the balcony. But apparently he knew nothing of it. Or was he shamming ignorance?

"Nothing's the matter with it," I said.

He hesitated, then shrugged. "Since Fred has so kindly told you of my—experiment, you may as well know the rest of it. You fools who laugh at occultism—well, you'll know the embrace of the Dweller very soon now. The Dweller . . ."

His shrunken, red lids dropped over the glittering eyes, but as I moved they lifted again. The black muzzle of the automatic was aimed unwaveringly at my heart.

"My researches enabled me to discover the Dweller. I found a manuscript—or rather Fred found it, in an old London garret in a bundle of waste paper—and there I learned of what lies beneath this castle. Ages ago, when the old Druid gods were worshipped at Stonehenge, when oak and mistletoe were sacred in Britain, there was a temple of the sun in this spot. This I have learned. The chief priest was an adept, who spent his life delving into occult mysteries and secrets and acquiring a vast knowledge of the Black Arts. So great were his powers that when his time came to die he was able to defeat death, to live on—

"But *changed*. When he defeated death, he was no longer completely human. And so the Druids buried him below the *adytum*, in the cavern that still exists below this castle. Below the iron disk Fred uncovered."

Argyll's eyes were blazing now, and he was trembling visibly. But the automatic was rock-steady.

"In the manuscript I mentioned I found a tremendous secret. I learned that the Druid priest—the Dweller beneath this castle—can be freed from his age-old prison—and *enslaved!* The man who enslaves the Dweller

becomes master of all the powers of the Druids—powers and knowledge long since forgotten! The stars—he was almost shrieking now—"The stars will be within my reach!"

"Do you mean to open the tomb—now?" Kent asked.

Argyll nodded quickly. He began to speak, but Kent, his nerves apparently snapping under the strain, burst out: "But the Dweller! If you do that, the Dweller will be freed!"

My uncle suddenly became quiet. He smiled very grimly.

"Have you forgotten the sacrifice?" he asked. "The Dweller will not be dangerous—to me."

Kent paled. He nodded slowly, and at Argyll's peremptory gesture moved toward the door. For a moment I hesitated, then, at Argyll's frown, followed him, my arm about Lucille.

Procession of the damned, marching down to the abyss! First came Kent; then Lucille and myself; and finally Argyll at our heels, urging us on with that deadly automatic. Down

from the tower, down steep stone steps into a dungeonlike underground room—Argyll had picked up a lamp from a table in the hall—and through an arched opening in the wall. Seven vaults, festooned with grey cobwebs. Thin strands brushed my face and clung tenaciously.

"I was down here yesterday," Argyll said from behind us. "But the spiders spin fast."

There was an iron door ajar in the wall of the seventh vault, and through this we passed. We were in a narrow little chamber, empty, dank, and odorous. There was a deep, craterlike hole in the dirt floor, and at its bottom I saw a rusted iron disk, warped and bent. Suddenly I felt sick and giddy. I knew Lucille must be feeling even worse. "Buck up," I said in a whisper. "We'll get out of this, dear."

Argyll barked a command, and Kent turned away, picked up a crowbar that leaned against the wall. Under the menace of the gun he de-

(Continued on page 116)

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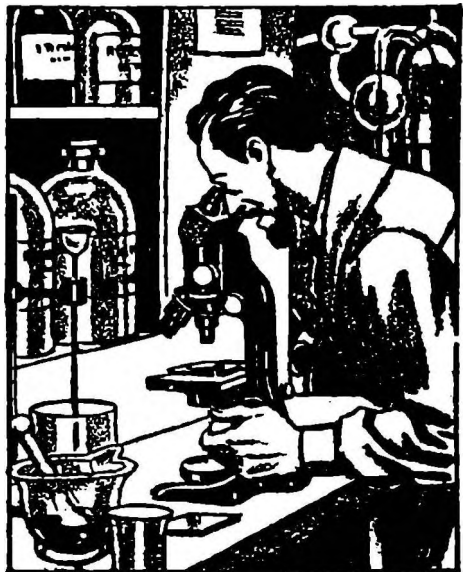
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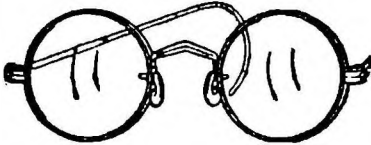
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(Continued from page 115)

scended into the pit and began to break through the thin barrier of iron.

Did I hear footsteps—thudding, distant footsteps—from below? Argyll heard them, for he gave a triumphant cackle of laughter.

"Quicker, Fred, quicker!" he snarled. "We must be ready!"

I could not see Kent's face in the shadow, but he attacked the disk with redoubled vigor. As it gave way he scrambled up the side of the pit.

Argyll moved closer to the brink, peering down, with quick side glances at us. I caught a glimpse of a dark, rough floor of stone beneath the disk, and on it was a low, oval platform, apparently intended to hold a coffin, but now empty. And, too, the light mercilessly revealed curious tracks upon the floor—dark oval patches far too huge for any human footprint!

Thud . . . thud . . . rhythmic padding of giant feet. I felt a Presence in the tomb beneath us. There was an uneasy rustling and shifting, and Argyll shrieked in triumph and leaped back.

"The Dweller!" he screamed. "He comes!" He paused to set down the lamp carefully on the floor. I felt Kent nudge me, urge me back from the pit. I put my arm protectingly about Lucille.

Something was rising from the ancient tomb, something huge and black, rising inexorably into view—very slowly. Something vaguely anthropoid in outline, but covered with a foul and glistening slime.

"The Druid priest," I heard Kent whisper hoarsely. "*The Dweller in the Tomb!*"

BLOATED and huge and vile beyond imagination it arose, the essence of all foulness and evil. Face it had none. From a featureless black globe a single glowing eye peered frightfully. The long apelike arms ended in great horny claws.

Argyll sprang toward us, the automatic menacing. He seized Lucille, jerked her away before I could prevent it. His clawing hand clutched at her negligee, ripped it from her.

With a vicious push he sent her prone on the edge of the pit. She lay there, unmoving.

Cursing, I sprang forward, felt Kent seize me.

"Wait, man, wait!" he whispered urgently. I tried to pull free, but he held me in an iron grip.

The Dweller began to march up the side of the pit, slowly, ponderously. It did not pause at the nude form of Lucille. Instead, it strode on—toward Argyll!

And my uncle, his face a death-mask, drained of blood, retreated. Slowly, slowly — and slowly — the Dweller followed him. Once Argyll tried to dodge past to the door, but the monstrous being was too quick, despite its bulk. And eventually the old man was pinned in a corner, while we watched, scarcely daring to breathe.

Argyll's nerve broke. He screamed maledictions, frantic appeals.

"Take them!" he shrieked at the being. "Three of them—for the sacrifice! Take—"

Abruptly he flung up the automatic, fired. Rolling thunder reverberated through the chamber. And then Argyll was staring stupidly at the empty gun, while the Dweller moved inexorably forward.

Argyll flattened himself against the wall. His face was frightful. His mouth hung lax and his staring eyes were frozen, glaring at the inhuman horror so close to him. A crablike claw swung up for Argyll's throat.

With a scream of utter, agonized horror my uncle collapsed. Tottered and dropped and lay in a limp heap on the ground, his white face staring up blindly in the dim light of the lamp. I saw that he was dead.

I heard the bark of a shot. Kent had pushed past me, a gun in his hand. Again the weapon roared.

The Dweller turned, very slowly. The single eye seemed to glare at us malefically.

Kent sent shot after shot into the gross, hideous body.

And the Dweller fell. Toppled and crashed to the ground beside my uncle, and lay writhing with curi-

(Continued on page 118)

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(Continued from page 117)
ously wormlike motions. Kent kept pumping bullets into it.

Then I heard it—the thing that made me catch my breath in sheer amazement as I stared at the thing on the floor. For from the faceless, slimy head of the creature a voice croaked:

"Curse you, Kent, you blasted double-crosser—"

The words ended in the harsh death-rattle.

FOR an eternity, it seemed, I stood there, my mind working at lightning speed. I heard Kent's voice, all the assumed fear gone from it.

"The swine!" he said coldly. "Why did he have to—"

I broke in. "Then you're responsible for this— You've been behind the whole thing!"

His eyes were amused behind the horn-rimmed glasses. "Yes, that's right. Now, unfortunately, I'll have to kill you. I hadn't planned . . . Keep back!" The gun menaced me.

I retreated a step. If I could play for time, perhaps—

"Who's your friend, then?" I asked as calmly as I could.

Kent smiled. "The same chap who lassoed you on the balcony. The man who drove you here. He's been working for me for quite a while. But my plan went wrong. I hadn't intended to kill old Argyll, the swine! If I could only have driven him mad, as I had planned. But I hadn't realized how weak his heart was."

"But why?" I asked desperately. "What did you have against my uncle? He befriended you—"

"After he killed my father," Kent snapped. "You didn't know that, did you? They were partners, yes. But Argyll managed to defraud my father and leave him penniless. And because of that my father killed himself. I didn't know that myself until a few months ago, when I found an old notebook of his. Then I determined to have my revenge, to strike at Argyll through his belief in occultism, his weakest spot."

"What about the manuscript?"

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"Forged. I located this castle, did a little construction work on these vaults. But little was necessary. There's another entrance to the tomb, of course. Then I cooked up a legend that would appear authentic to Argyll, and told him I'd found the parchment. As I expected, he bought the castle and set out to enslave the Dweller. I really didn't want to kill you unless I had to," he went on naively. "In fact, I tried to frighten you away by having you attacked, and by telling you a wild tale about the Dweller. I didn't expect Argyll would force the issue."

Suddenly I remembered something. "And when you told Argyll that if he opened the tomb the Dweller would escape—you were really talking to him," I ventured, nodding toward the motionless black figure that was at my feet.

He nodded. "Yes. He was outside on the balcony, and that gave him his
(Continued on page 120)

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AT ALL
STANDS

AT ALL
STANDS

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cue. I decided to let Argyll have his way. I'd already seen to it that his gun was loaded with blanks. And I'd planned to kill the Dweller, then unmask him—and be as surprised as you." He smiled grimly as he finished. "Naturally, nobody would suspect me. They'd think our friend had been trying to hoax Argyll and me—but the fool talked. I didn't expect that. So—"

He lifted the gun. Its muzzle seemed to grow, to become a well of blackness that would swallow me. I tensed, although I read murder in Kent's eyes, and knew I'd have no chance. His finger was tightening on the trigger.

Lancing through the vault came a scream! From the corner of my eye I saw a white figure leaping up—Lucille!—racing toward the door.

In a flash I saw her plan. Kent would not dare to let her escape. The muzzle of the gun wavered, turned away momentarily. I leaped.

Flame seared my side as the gun blasted. I clinched with Kent, gripped his wrist and forced the gun up. Again it roared, and I heard the bullet whine as it ricocheted from the walls. I wrenched Kent's wrist viciously, and he dropped the gun.

His knee drove up at my groin, but I twisted aside, evading the blow. His fingers were at my throat now, digging in viciously. Suddenly I felt my strength draining away. The previous attack had weakened me more than I had realized. Desperately I threw myself back.

We fell on the edge of the pit, and the breath was driven from my lungs. We tottered there for a moment, and then we went rolling over and over down the incline, blinded with dirt, snarling curses. Those iron fingers were closing remorselessly on my throat.

I felt emptiness beneath me, felt air rush past me as we plunged down. We struck with an impact that jarred me into momentary unconsciousness. Then I was staggering to my feet, feeling the murderous hands fall away from my neck.

Kent lay flat on his back, staring up through the horn-rimmed glasses. Oddly, they were unbroken. On the stone around Kent's head was an irregular splotch of grey and crimson.

"Jim!" It was Lucille's voice. She was on the edge of the pit, looking down at me. "Are you hurt? Is he—"

"I'm all right," I said. "Kent—is dead."

There was a ladder on the floor nearby, kicked away when the spurious Dweller had ascended. It was the work of a moment to raise it and clamber from the tomb.

I picked up Lucille's negligee, and she wrapped it around her as we hurried through the vaults, and up into the great hall of the castle. And there, as I looked down into my wife's blue eyes, so close and so tender, I felt that the shadow of evil that had brooded over us had passed away forever.

BLOOD-CRAZED GARGOYLES



IN INFANTS FROM HELL

A Novelette

By **FRANK BELKNAP LONG, Jr.**

In Next Month's Issue

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HORRORSCOPES

By **CHAKRA**

Famous Mystic and Authority on Esoteric Lore

Strange stories will always be popular, especially when these strange stories are true. The person who has a number of weird, supernatural or horror stories at his fingertips will always be the center of attraction in any conversation.

The purpose of this department is to furnish such entertainment. It presents true stories of horror, mystery and the supernatural gathered from all corners of the earth and authenticated by reliable persons.

HOPELESSLY INSANE

FOR years there has been a controversy about the advisability of doing away with hopelessly insane people. You have heard people say about a certain insane person: "He'd be better off dead." Such had been the talk concerning a certain young man confined in an Eastern asylum, when the grandmother of the inmate, the only surviving relative, called at the office of the institution to inquire about the boy.

The senior physician was reluctant to reveal the truth; but a short, stout doctor with a black beard stepped forward. "Madam," he said, "your grandson is not only hopelessly insane, but he is dangerous. He would be better off dead."

The old lady's eyes flashed fire. "Better off dead, eh?" she snapped. "That's all you know about it!"

"Please, please, madam," interrupted the head doctor considerably, "it is true about the condition of the boy, but he will receive the best of care in this institution, I assure you."

But the old lady was not listening. She wagged her cane at the bearded man.

"Kill the boy, would you? Well, listen to me! You might think you are right, but I know something. That boy has got a soul—a soul that has nothing to do with his sick brain—and some day that soul will prove itself valuable to humanity." The cane thudded on the floor. "That's all I have to say now, gentlemen. Good day!"

Two years later the insane asylum caught fire. There was a lack of water, and the institution appeared doomed. To prevent the inmates from being burned alive the authorities had to release all of them within the yard of the great estate and take chances on some of them escaping. Most of them huddled like frightened animals on the broad lawn and watched the roaring inferno that was the main building.

But suddenly one individual, clad only in pajamas, ran to the fire chief. He was apparently one of the keepers. "You need water, don't you, chief?" His handsome, intelligent face was gleaming with excitement. "Well, there's a swimming pool

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around the back. Drive a pumper around. You have good pressure."

The firemen instantly responded and in a few minutes two hoses were pouring water into the flames. "But this won't last long," said the chief.

"Don't worry—this will check it a while. At the bottom of that hill is a lake. You've got enough hose. Put another truck down at the edge."

While this was being done, the young man ran up and ordered one of the hoses from the swimming pool shut off. Taking the line, he slowly climbed the fire-escape till he reached the roof. Then he signaled for water, and, clinging to the writhing nozzle, directed the stream into the flames. His daring efforts were rewarded. The local fire department realized that this young man had saved the greater portion of the institution.

The chief led the young hero to the group of doctors on the lawn. "You can thank this man for saving your place." But as the chief turned to him, the young man was not beside him. Instead, the lad had pounced upon a fire axe that lay on the ground. Two watchful attendants leaped on his back and bore him down. He kicked and screamed insanely.

An old lady, supporting herself on a cane, appeared before the doctors.

"I told you my boy's soul would prove itself some day," she said. "He saved your institution when not one of you had brains enough to move. His father was one of the greatest firefighters this country ever saw. He died fighting a fire. That was *his* voice you heard tonight!"

THE HEAD

RECENTLY, in New Hampshire, a woman sat in her bedroom reading a book before retiring. She finally dropped off to sleep and the book slid from her lap and fell to the floor. The sound awakened her and she sat up, blinking.

Something caught her eye on the table across the room. She tried to pierce the dimness—then she screamed: "My son—my son!" She beheld the gory head of her boy. And at the sound of her voice the head began to roll in a wide circle around the table top. Around and around it went while the terrified woman, too shocked to tear her eyes from the ghastly spectacle, stared at the scene of horror. The head then came to a stop. The eyes glared steadily at the woman. Finally they closed.

With a shriek, the mother toppled to the floor and lay there in a dead faint until her daughter found her.

The next day word was received that the son, who was a sailor on a battleship, had been decapitated in an accident on ship-board. And because of the pitching of the ship the head had rolled about the deck for some time before it could be recovered.

(Continued on page 124)

Arrest Him, Officer!

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LEWIS HOTEL TRAINING SCHOOLS
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(Continued from page 123)
PICTURE OF DEATH

A NINE-YEAR-OLD girl, Agnes, whose parents had died, came to live with her uncle in a huge mansion. The child's room was separated from the main part of the house by a single drawing-room, through which it was necessary to pass to go into the living room or into the yard.

But every time the little girl went through this drawing-room she was terrified by a huge painting that hung over the door. She screamed at the figure in the painting: "He wants to kill me!"

The older people tried to reason with the child, but she was obstinate and insisted on leaving her room by way of the servants' quarters every day. She kept her door locked and never went into that room for the ensuing ten years. Then she became engaged and a reception was held at the house. Guests had asked to see the painting in the drawing-room, so Agnes reluctantly followed them in so she wouldn't be ridiculed. But it was a put-up job. No sooner was Agnes in the room when the others rushed out and left her locked in. She screamed: "Let me out! Let me out! Please—please!"

But her uncle and the guests only laughed. "She must overcome that foolish superstition," said her uncle.

Agnes rushed to the door, begging her friends to open it. She rattled the knob. Then she screamed again in horror and pounded on the panels with her fists. The vibration shook the picture, which ripped from its cords and fell. A corner of the huge gilt frame struck Agnes in the head, killing her instantly.

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RADIO OF DEATH

A YOUNG man on a Southwestern ranch greatly admired a young lady who sang over a small radio station in the county. Every Thursday evening at nine the rancher would listen in to the girl of his dreams. He had written her the previous week how madly in love with her he really was, and she had promised to sing his favorite song the following Thursday.

But he was two minutes late in tuning in that Thursday, due to a phone call from a neighbor. However, he rushed to the radio, realizing that he could not have missed more than the announcer's introduction. As he turned the dial he heard the girl's voice coming over more sweetly than ever. Never before had she put so much feeling into her song. He wept with joy as he listened.

As she finished her song, he waited to hear what the announcer might say. Only silence followed. The young man, believing that something had gone wrong with the station, dismissed the thought and set down to write a letter telling the girl how much he appreciated what she had done for him.

(Continued on page 126)

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| 28x504 | \$12.90 | | |

To help you answer these 3 questions:



1- What are today's opportunities in Drafting?

2- Will I like the work?

3- Can I learn Drafting readily?

2 Beginning Lessons in Drafting Free

Before anything can be made or built, the draftsman *first* must draw it. Building trades, transportation, manufacturing—ALL depend on him. That is why *any* pickup means *first* call for the Draftsman!

Drafting Opportunities Grow Daily
Drafting welcomes ambitious men—offers good pay to start, with splendid opportunities for promotion. One of the *steady* jobs of all times. Right from the start, the beginner works side by side with experienced men—inking in their drawings, mak-

ing tracings, constantly profiting by his contact with seasoned engineers. The "high ups" see his work. If it is good, advancement is sure and steady.

Drafting Experience NOT Necessary
You can master Drafting readily by home study because you learn and advance *exactly* as professional Draftsmen work—with T-squares, dividers and drawing board. Actual working conditions are duplicated. Thousands of successful graduates enthusiastically endorse our methods.

Prove that You can Qualify

The 2 lessons will be sent absolutely without obligation. In the privacy of your own room, look them over. See how simply you start—how gradually you are led step by step—how thoroughly you master each point—how, as time goes on, you can pass from a raw beginner to complete mastery of Drafting—able to get and hold a pleasant, profitable, steady job. Such a future is well worth looking into RIGHT NOW, so... write TODAY!

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Test Yourself for a Good Pay Job—Steady Work

down his own daughter with his automobile killed a second child a year later at the same spot. Certain neighborhoods, crossroads or buildings seem repeatedly to be scenes of tragedy.

Only recently in a new apartment house in Athens, Greece, a servant girl attempted suicide by gas. Her act was discovered before it was too late. However, a short time later another girl leaped from the fifth floor of the same building and killed herself. Two days later a man visiting this spot did likewise. The tenant began to move. Investigation disclosed that at the time the building was being constructed one of the workmen had jumped from the same floor to his death.

To HORROR-SCOPES:

I have heard that the peasants and fisherfolk of Brittany are the most superstitious in the world. Do you happen to know some of these superstitions?

H. WENDER.

To H. WENDER:

Here are a few: If a ship is battered to pieces and those on board drown their bodies are washed to a certain cove where their souls must remain for seven days before going on. If any person dares to enter that cove during the week he will instantly die a horrible death.

When a sailor is drowned the gulls fly to his house and swoop against the window panes.

The people leave a fire in the hearth when they go to bed in case the dead wish to warm themselves in their former home.

If a person is accidentally killed, his soul remains in the air until the time of his natural death.

When there is a storm at night the drowned can be heard shrieking and screaming.

If a baby dies before baptism, it rises in the air where it must remain until Judgment Day.

The wind is the voice of the dead.

To HORROR-SCOPES:

What is the "Dancing Madness"?

DANIEL CARTWRIGHT.

To DANIEL CARTWRIGHT:

The dancing mania swept Europe in 1374. Its causes are unknown. People danced frantically, waved their arms, tossed their bodies, leaped in the air, even tearing their clothes and lacerating their bodies. The madness spread rapidly. It had spells for three hundred years and reached as far south as Ethiopia. Then it faded out of history.

The greatest epidemic was in Metz, Germany, where at one time a thousand people were leaping and howling, some nude and bloody, in the market place. The mania did not always kill, but left victims feeble mentally and physically.

(Concluded on page 128)

Better

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15c Everywhere

DO YOU SUFFER

from
PSORIASIS?

IF SO, WRITE FOR BOOKLET ON SIROIL

Men and women in every walk of life—from the highest social, financial and professional ranks to the most humble—have written to the Siroil Laboratories about the benefits they have derived from Siroil. Siroil removes the scales and crusts caused by psoriasis and relieves other of its discomforts. It is applied externally and will not stain clothing or bed linen. It is offered on a strictly money back guarantee, with you the sole judge as to results.

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TREATMENT mailed on Free Trial. If satisfied, send \$1; if not, it's Free. Write me for your treatment today.

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Send for FREE TRIAL of Noxalon, a guaranteed harmless home treatment. Can be given secretly in food or drink to anyone who drinks or craves Whiskey, Beer, Gin, Home Brew, Wine, Moonshine, etc. Your request for Free Trial brings trial supply by return mail and full \$2.00 treatment which you may try under a 30 day refund guarantee. Try Noxalon at our risk. **ARLEE CO. Dept. 209, BALTIMORE, MD.**

(Concluded from page 127)

To HORROR-SCOPES:
May I advise you that I have learned from a friend of mine employed in a magazine shop in London that King Edward reads Chakra?
HARRY ELWELL.

To HARRY ELWELL:
Thank you. King Edward has always been a great lover of good mystery yarns. His favorite English author is Gerald Verner.

To HORROR-SCOPES:
Recently I heard a man say that he had put his hands in boiling water without ill effect. Is this possible?
G. P. ALYNN.

To G. P. ALYNN:
Yes, in high altitudes, water boils even under 100 degrees of temperature. In Peru, for instance, they actually wash babies in boiling water, but it is not hot enough to scald. It is a fact that the boiling point of water is diminished by one degree with every 500 feet of altitude.
—CHAKRA.

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WHILE it is interesting to read about mystery of things that apply to other people, it is more interesting to know the mystery of your own life and fate.

Send this coupon to Horror-Scopes, THRILLING MYSTERY Magazine, 22 West 48th St., New York City. Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope.

You will receive a Chakra-Crystal-Scope giving you information concerning yourself. It will reveal your lucky number, the combination of three numbers favorable to you; your good and bad traits, lucky days of the week, lucky color, best occupation, lucky dates, years, months and years of age. Each Crystal-Scope is made out by Chakra personally, in accordance with your birth-date.

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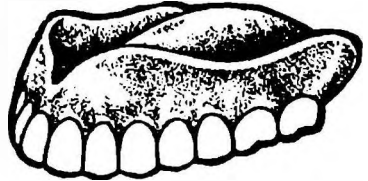


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In one Pennsylvania town alone 91 people are wearing plates made by me. They are completely satisfied and have saved big money.

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HERE'S PROOF: SEND NO MONEY

I am a minister of the Gospel. I have been preaching for 26 years. I can say you did good work for me. My teeth fit good and give good service.—O. M. W. Va.

My teeth have already been worn ten times the price I paid for them. My friends can't understand how I obtained such beautiful teeth at such a small price.

Mrs. W. T. S., Texas.

I am 64 years old. Most of my teeth have been out over 25 years. My health was not good until I got my teeth. I weighed only 118, now I weigh 135 lbs. and feel better than in 20 years. I can't say enough for your fitting my teeth, and the beauty they have. My wife gained 23 lbs. since she started wearing your teeth. She now looks like she did 42 years ago when we were married.

L. D. K., So. Cal.

My plates are very beautiful to look at and are constructed to give life-long service and satisfaction. You can look younger at once. They are made with pearly white genuine porcelain teeth. Well-fitting and guaranteed unbreakable. Remember, you do not send one cent with coupon—just your name and address, and we send free impression material and full detailed directions. Be sure to write today for my low prices and complete information.

FREE Don't put this off. Do it today. Just mail coupon.

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Please send me your FREE impression material, price list and full information on your dental plates without any obligation.

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Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

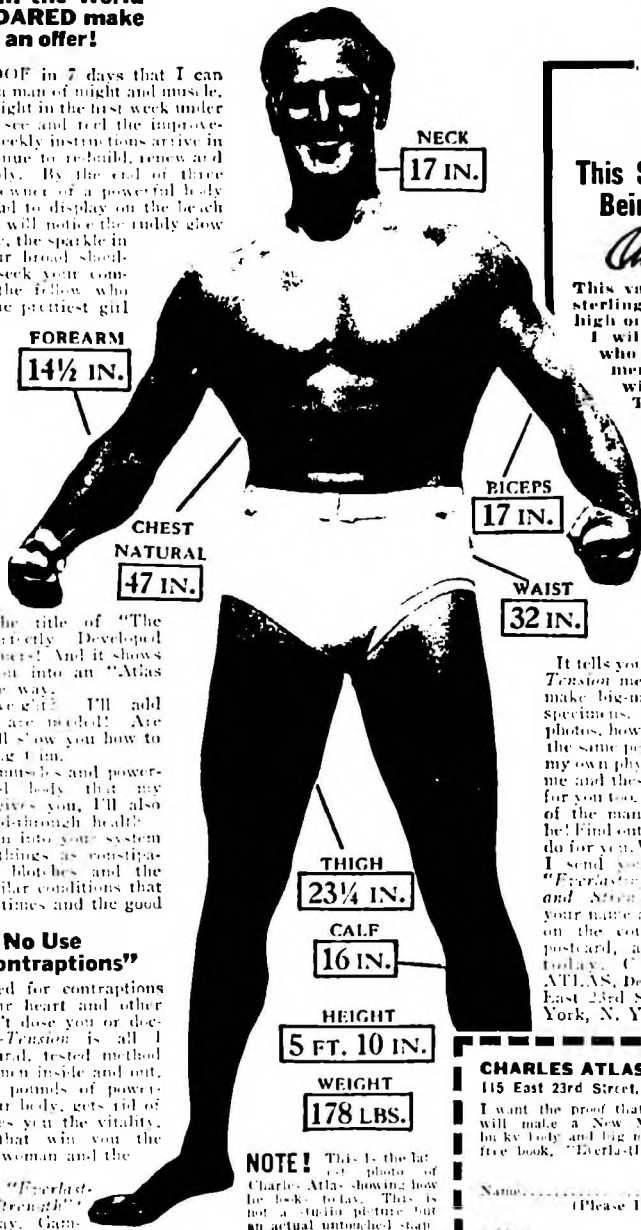
Are you underweight? I'll add pounds where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

And with the leg muscles and powerful evenly-developed body that my method so quickly gives you, I'll also give you thorough-and-through health! Health that digs down into your system and banishes such things as constipation, pimples, skin blotches and the hundred-and-one similar conditions that rob you of the good times and the good things of life.

I've Got No Use At All for "Contraptions"

I haven't any need for contraptions that may strain your heart and other vital organs. I don't dose you or doctor you. *Dynamic-Tension* is all I need. It's the natural, tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

Get my free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Mail my coupon today. Gamble a stamp to prove I can make YOU a new man!



NOTE! This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.



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This valuable cup, made of solid sterling silver, stands about 11" high on a black mahogany base. I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement within the next 3 months. Therefore, no matter what your measurements may be now, you have an equal chance to win this cup for permanent possession—and with YOUR name engraved on it! Get my free book by mailing coupon below.

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No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an offer!

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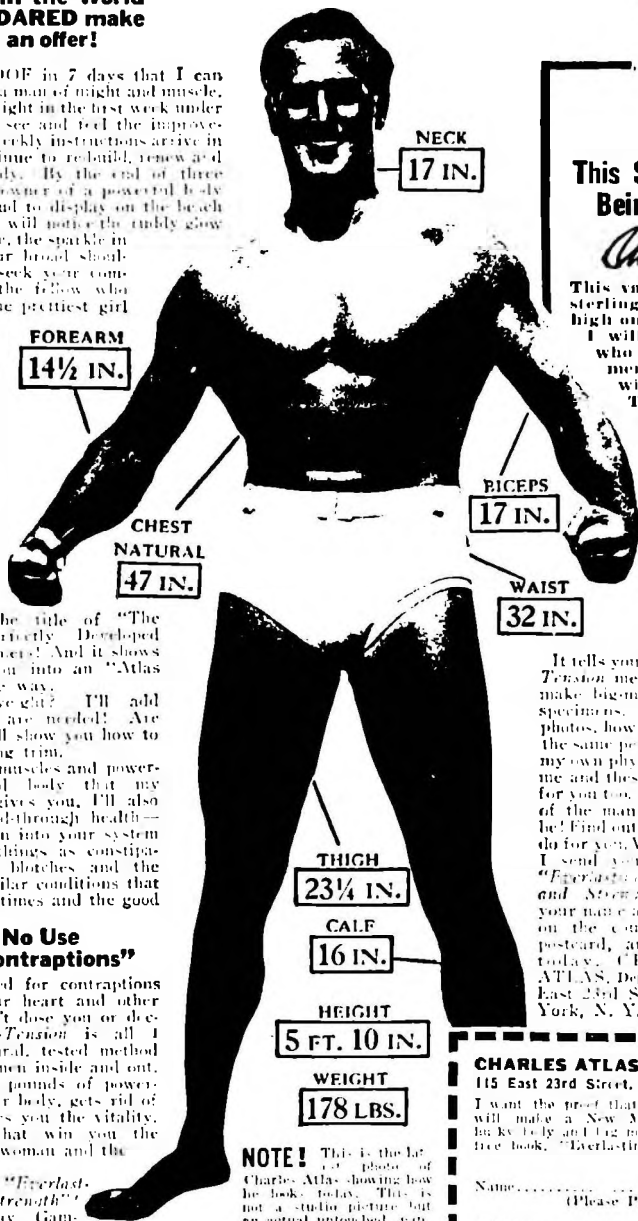
Are you underweight? I'll add pounds where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

And with the big muscles and powerful evenly-developed body that my method so quickly gives you, I'll also give you through-and-through health—health that digs down into your system and banishes such things as constipation, pimples, skin blotches and the hundred-and-one similar conditions that rob you of the good times and the good things of life.

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