

THRILLING

MYSTERY

JULY

10^c

RAZOR OF GASTON DUBROIS

A Novelette of Haunting Secrets

By **CHARLES GREEN**

DEATH ASKS THE QUESTION

A Novelette of

Ticking Doom

By **JOHN**

RUSSELL

FEARN

**HOLOCAUST
OF HELL**

A Novelette of
Flaming
Vengeance

By
**GEORGE
CLARK**

**BRIDES
OF THE
DARK GOD**

A Novelette of
Horror over Hollywood

By **JOHN**

H. KNOX

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION





Hi Everybody! Come and Join Us—

Get Marvelous Book of 20 Dance Lessons
by **ARTHUR MURRAY**—World's Greatest Dance Instructor—**FREE!**

START NOW to Clear up Your Skin
Learn the New Dance Steps!

WIN POPULARITY!



Save Your Labels

GET THIS GRAND BOOK!
20 lessons... 62 photographs...
19 diagrams! **FREE** Dance Card
gives full details about this
offer. Ask your grocer!

● Good dancers are always popular. But, even the best dancers become self-conscious if they have to appear at a party with a face broken out with pimples.

Fleischmann's Yeast has helped thousands of young people to clear up pimples, by helping to clear the blood of waste poisons which irritate this condition.

If you have any tendency to pimples, start eating Fleischmann's Yeast. And—be sure to *save the labels* for your copy of Arthur Murray's dance book!

Remember, the **ONLY WAY** to get it is with Fleischmann Yeast labels. Paste these on **FREE** Dance Card your grocer will give you. Send it for book.

If your grocer has no Dance Cards, save 81 yeast labels. Paste on piece of paper—or simply enclose in envelope—and send them with your name and address to Fleischmann's Yeast, 701 Washington St., N. Y. C. (This offer holds good until Aug. 31, 1937.)

(Details of securing Dance Book differ slightly in states west of Denver and in Canada, see newspapers, or ask your grocer.)

DON'T LET ADOLESCENT PIMPLES SPOIL YOUR GOOD TIMES

Read this
**TRUE
EXPERIENCE**
of how
**FLEISCHMANN'S
YEAST**
helped clear
Dick's skin



BEFORE



AFTER

Dick Rooney, of Brooklyn, N. Y., had pimples like these. "I was ashamed to have people see me," he says.

Pimples no longer spoil Dick's good times. "Everybody that's got pimples ought to try yeast," he says.

"**STICK TO IT,**" says Dr. R. E. LEE, well-known physician, "and Fleischmann's Yeast will help to correct **ADOLESCENT PIMPLES.**"



● After the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25—important glands develop and final growth takes place. This causes disturbances in the system. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin, pimples break out.

Fleischmann's Yeast helps to free your skin from pimples by clearing these skin irritants out of the blood. Eat 3 cakes daily—a cake about ½ hour before each meal—plain, or in a little water. Start now!

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ANNOUNCEMENT of New Coffee Agency Openings



EARNINGS UP TO \$60⁰⁰ IN A WEEK

Within the next two weeks, over 850 men and women will be given the opportunity to open up fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. If you are looking for a bona fide chance to make as high as \$60.00 in a week, starting at once, this company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. You risk no money. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living. If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

Clip Out and Mail Today!!

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

① **WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE!**

Name.....
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address.....

City and State.....

② **HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE TO COFFEE AGENCY?**

Mark with an "X"
 FULL TIME PART TIME

[Full time pays up to \$35 to \$60 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to \$22.50 in a week.]

③ **STATE WHICH BONUS YOU PREFER—CASH OR FORD AUTOMOBILE?**

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of \$500.00 or a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

\$500. CASH BONUS LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN.

④ **CAN YOU START AT ONCE?**

Mark with an "X" YES NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

SEND NO MONEY

ALL APPLICATIONS WILL BE HELD STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

There is no money fee of any kind required with this Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. You will be notified by return mail whether your home locality is available. Then you can decide if the money-making possibilities look good to you. No obligation on your part. Those who apply first will be given preference, so be sure to mail your Application without delay—NOW! No letter is required, just the Application. Mail at once to

ALBERT MILLS, President
4000 Menmouth Avenue Cincinnati, Ohio

THRILLING MYSTERY

Vol. VIII, No. 1

July, 1937

Price, 10c

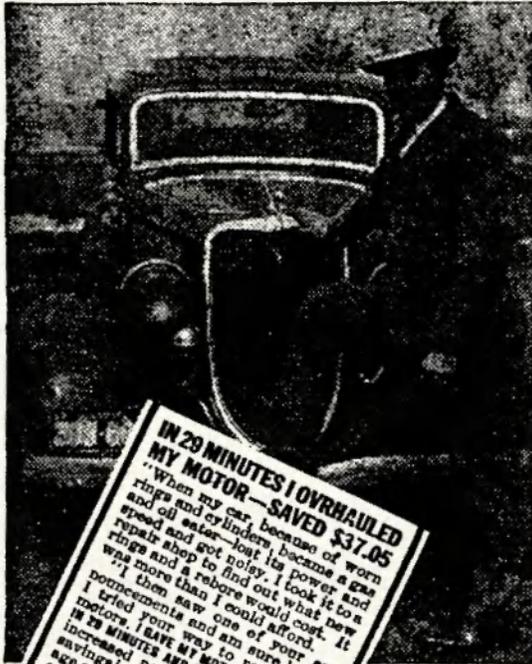
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CUTS GREATEST EXPENSE of MOTOR CAR OPERATION



**IN 29 MINUTES I OVRHAUL
MY MOTOR—SAVED \$37.05**

"When my car, because of worn rings and cylinders, became a gas and oil eater—lost its power and speed and got noisy, I took it to a repair shop to find out what new rings and a rebore would cost. It was more than I could afford. I then saw one of your announcements and am so happy I tried your way to recondition my motor. I **SAVED MY MOTOR AN OVRHAUL IN 29 MINUTES AND SAVED \$37.05.** The increased power and speed, the savings in oil and greater gas mileage sure sold me on Ovrhaul—convinced me I should be connected with such a revolutionary product."

CHAS. J. WATTS

**250,000
CAR OWNERS**

in the U.S. and Foreign Countries have used this remarkable mineral product instead of new rings and rebore. Placed through spark plug openings, it works on the mineral plating principle. Saves up to 96% of Ring and Rebore costs. Not a gasoline dope or gadget. Does not contain graphite or harmful abrasives. Reconditions while you drive and a single application is good up to 10,000 miles.

**INDUSTRIAL
TESTING LABO-
RATORY REPORT—**

"We hereby certify that we have tested Ovrhaul Motor Working Conditions—1928 Pontiac driven 72,000 miles. **TOTAL GAIN** in compression 94 pounds (nearly normal according to manufacturer's specifications.) **OVRHAUL** does NOT scratch, abrade or otherwise injure the motor. The "pick-up" speed and hill climbing performance were increased **ENORMOUSLY.** Car runs practically as well as when new."

**BIG PROFITS for SALESMEN
But You Must Act Quick—Valuable
Territory Still Open! WRITE NOW!**

Distributors and salesmen say Ovrhaul is the biggest seller in years. 18,000,000 cars need it. Sells for less than spark plugs. This is an opportunity for wide-awake men to make money and make it fast. Let us tell you why Richman of Florida reports net profits as high as \$78.80 in a single day, Hesselbine of Washington turns \$672.60 in **TWO MONTHS** and Phelps of New York reports 792 sales in one month. Ovrhaul opens an opportunity for you to get in this **Big Money Making Class.**

START TODAY! You need not send any money—Just your name and address on the coupon opposite or a penny postcard will bring you complete details of our plan and a **FREE SAMPLE** of the amazing mineral that makes such profits possible. No obligation.

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., Ovrhaul Co., 1912, Kansas City, Mo.

Amazing mineral discovery actually gives similar benefits of ring and rebore job at a saving of 95%—increases power, speed and quiet—saves oil and gas—send coupon below for Free Sample!

If your car is keeping you broke buying gas and oil—If worn rings and cylinders have caused it to lose that "new" car speed, power and quiet—then before spending up to \$150 for a ring and rebore job, do as a quarter million car owners have done—Ovrhaul your motor—without tying up your car. This amazing mineral threatens to revolutionize motor upkeep.

ASTOUNDS MOTORISTS and AUTOMOTIVE ENGINEERS

Nothing like it ever before known. Almost unbelievable—yet it has stood rigid tests in great Universities and Testing Laboratories, with almost phenomenal results. Proved harmless to the finest motors and increased compression to normal in nearly every test. If your car is sluggish and gradually wrecking itself—Use Ovrhaul under our no risk plan. You cannot afford to pass this opportunity.

SMASHES OIL and GAS UPKEEP

Satisfied motorists report sensational reductions in operating costs—Oil savings up to 45%—Gas savings up to 50%—and smooth motor running that makes your car a joy to drive.

FREE SAMPLE

Just mail the coupon below and we will send you a free sample of this amazing mineral and full information about this money making opportunity. Salesmen and Distributors wanted to share in profits. It costs you nothing to investigate and may mean thousands of dollars to you—Send this coupon at once.



Free SAMPLE COUPON

B. L. MELLINGER, Pres. Ovrhaul Co.
1912, Kansas City, Mo.
Without cost or obligation, send me at once a **FREE SAMPLE.** Also show me your big money-making plan.

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____



THROW AWAY YOUR GUITAR, AND GIVE HER A REAL SERENADE !



WHEN THE SMITHS ARE COMING AND YOU DON'T WANT THEM - TRY THIS!



WHEN THE BOSS SAYS, 'NO VACATION' TAKE ONE ANYWAY !



CALLING ALL LIFE-GUARDS!.. HERE'S A QUICK REVIVER!

SPECIAL!!
NINE ISSUES FOR
\$1.00

SUBSCRIPTION DEPT., COLLEGE HUMOR TF7
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 My dollar is pinned to this coupon. Please send the next nine issues to:

Name.....
 Address.....
 City..... STATE.....
 (Foreign, \$1.60)



YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW.

NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW



THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY



YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.

I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME

THANKS



OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO

YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE. THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING

TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"



BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME



SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO



GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE

YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Spare Time* FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB



J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute

Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year — full time servicing jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week.

Many Radio Experts own their own full time Radio businesses. Radio inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$8,000 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 trained at home are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

Many Make \$8, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Their Spare Time While Learning
Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time service-

man. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send you special equipment which gives you practical Radio experience—shows you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important principles used in modern Radio sets. My Free Book tells all about this.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 18 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells

about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7G09
Washington, D. C.



IT'S NOT TOO LATE. TAKE MY TIP AND MAIL THAT COUPON TO N.R.I. TONIGHT

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7G09
Washington, D. C.

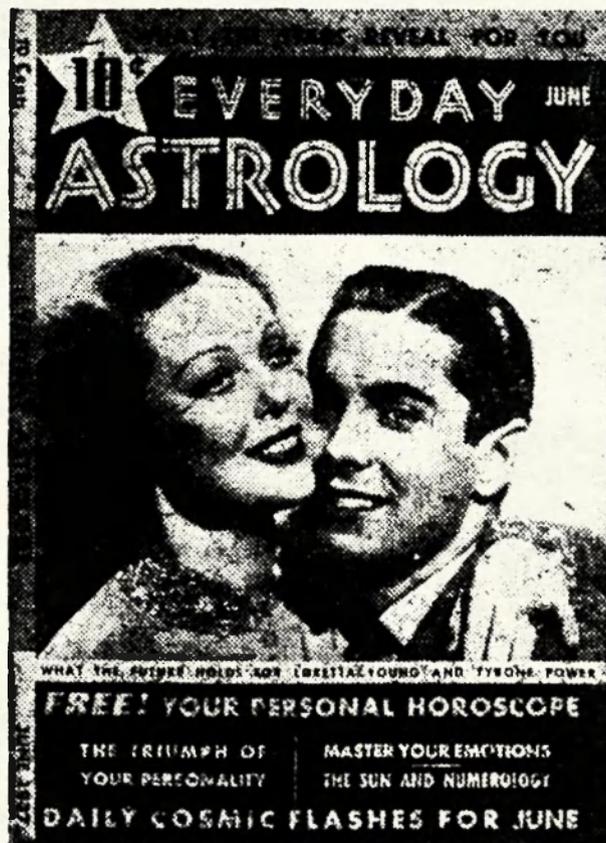
Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... STATE.....

A NEW MAGAZINE FOR EVERYBODY!

EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY

YOUR Guide to Happiness!



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PACKED WITH VITAL, PERSONAL FACTS



“SELDOM SEE AN I. C. S. GRADUATE OUT OF A JOB”

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A business executive made this statement in a recent letter commenting on the I. C. S. men in his employ and expressing regrets that it was necessary to reduce his personnel.

“However,” he added, “all I. C. S. graduates and students will be retained, for I

fully realize their value in my business.”

The reason so many I. C. S. men have jobs is because they are *trained men!* A recent investigation into the working conditions of 1000 I. C. S. students revealed only 10 unemployed. You, too, can be an I. C. S. man.

Mark the coupon and mail it today! It has been the most important act in the lives of thousands of men.

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★ Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, “Who Wins and Why,” and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X: ★

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Name..... Age..... Address.....
 City..... State..... Present Position.....
 If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

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OF LIFE AND LOVE



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THRILLING

Confessions

A NEW MAGAZINE OF REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES

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Over 700,000 People *have studied music this easy way*

SIMPLE AS A-B-C
Interesting as a game

PICTURE yourself the center of attraction at a party like this. Imagine yourself surrounded by happy, rollicking friends singing to *your* accompaniment. Or a room full of dancing couples—stepping lively to *your* peppy music.

"Impossible," you say? You couldn't learn to play in a hundred years? Teachers are too expensive? You haven't the time or patience to practice scales or finger exercises by the hour? Well, listen to this.

Suppose someone told you that there actually is a way to learn music quickly in the privacy of your own home, without a teacher. That learning to play by this method is easy as A-B-C—so simple a child could understand it. That it's real, interesting fun. And that it costs only a small frac-

tion of what you'd pay a private teacher. If you knew of such a simple, inexpensive method—would not you take advantage of it without hesitating a second? Of course you would.

NO TALENT NEEDED

The famous U. S. School of Music has developed just such an easy home-study method. A simple print and picture system of instruction that makes it possible for anyone who can hum a tune to learn to play the piano—or any other musical instrument—in an unbelievably short time. No special musical talent is necessary—no previous training. The lessons are sent to you by mail. They include printed instructions and all the necessary music at no extra cost. Everything is in words and pictures.

First you read how to do a thing. Then a picture shows you how it is done. Then you do it yourself and hear it. Could anything be more simple?

What's more, with this fascinating U. S. School method you don't spend hours and hours practicing humdrum finger exercises or monotonous scales. You actually learn real tunes right from the very first—from real notes—the same as any finished musician uses. It's a great pastime—interesting as a game. And sooner than you ever dreamed possible you are entertaining your friends.

PICK YOUR INSTRUMENT

Piano	Guitar
Violin	Saxophone
Organ	Mandolin
Cornet	Ukulele
Trombone	Harp
Piccolo	Clarinet
Flute	Cello
Hawaiian Steel Guitar	Trumpet
Piano Accordion	Italian and German Accordion
Voice & Speech Culture	Harmony & Composition
Drums and Traps	Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor)

You become more and more popular—sought after everywhere. Invitations galore—no party is complete without you. Why? Because you are contributing something to the fun—you're adding to the life of the party—providing real enjoyment for others—and for yourself.

Free Book and Demonstration Lesson

To let you see for yourself how easy to understand—how thorough—how practical—how quick to bring results—this method really is, the U. S. School has prepared a Free Book and Free Demonstration Lesson, which gives you a complete clear picture of this modern course of musical instruction. These are yours for the mere asking.

If you honestly want to learn music—if new friends, good times, social popularity appeal to you—here's an opportunity to realize your fondest dreams. Send for the Free Book and Free Demonstration Lesson. Simply fill out and mail the coupon below. Don't wait—act today. Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit. U. S. School of Music, 2947 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC 2947 Brunswick Bldg., New York City.

Please send me your free book, "How You Can Learn Music in Your Own Home," with inspiring message by Dr. Frank Crane, Free Demonstration Lesson and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

Name.....
Address.....
City..... State.....

BULLDOG DRUMMOND



Bulldog Drummond

*The World's
Most Famous
Gentleman-Sleuth
Takes the Trail
in*

THE MYSTERY TOUR

A Brand-New Story

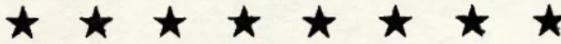
By SAPPER

Creator of the BULLDOG DRUMMOND Novels

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IN THE JULY

POPULAR
DETECTIVE

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I Want to Be Loved!
I Want to Be Popular!

What a thrill it is to get what you want! Imagine having a magic wand that makes every wish come true. Futile? But think of what astrology is asked to reveal:

Was I born to be rich or poor?
Will I get my heart's desire?
Who and where is my soul mate?

Don't be afraid to use your *inherent* magic—the gifts with which you were endowed at birth, according to solar astrology. Here is your chance to ascertain your trends and potentialities, also your zodiacal identity with the Air, Fire, Water and Earth Signs.

Send for your solar horoscope—the modern way to analyze yourself. Amazing and delightful. Fascinate your friends with what you can tell them after you have received your solar horoscope. Use coupon below and send with 10c for mailing and service.

EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY,
 22 West 48th Street,
 New York, N. Y.



Please send me Solar Horoscope for my birth period. I will retain it for personal use. Herewith find 10c (coin or stamps) for mailing and service.

I was Born.....

MONTH (1st to 31st) YEAR

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

STAY

a wage-slave
 IF you wish
BUT-

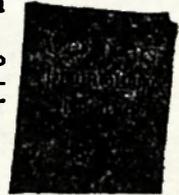
DON'T you wish you were like some of your friends who are forging ahead while you stay put? Like it or not, people size you up by what you earn. Is their sizing flattering to you? —Why not *plan* to get ahead, to make more money, to get a raise if you don't know how, perhaps we can aid you as we have so many others. Chances are good that we can help you *boost yourself up* in ways you never thought of. —Thousands will gladly tell you how our planned training helped them—directed their work along *charted* paths to business success, bigger earnings, 10%, 20%, 50%, some even 100% and 200% greater income . . . At any rate, let us send you the inspiring book "Ten Years' Promotion in One." It's FREE! It will surely help you *plan* your next raise whether you ask us to *help* you plan or not. Write us today for the book—the coupon is for your convenience.

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- Modern Salesmanship: Training for position as Sales Executive, Salesman, Sales Coach or Trainer, Sales Promotion Manager, Manufacturers' Agent, Solicitor, and all positions in retail, wholesale or specialty selling.
- Higher Accountancy: Training for position as Auditor, Comptroller, Certified Public Accountant, Cost Accountant, etc.
- Traffic Management: Training for position as Railroad, Truck or Industrial Traffic Manager, Rate Expert, Freight Solicitor, etc.
- Law: LL. B. Degree.
- Stenotypy: The up-to-date method for secretaries and court and convention reporters.
- Modern Foremanship: Training for positions in Shop Management, such as that of Superintendent, General Foreman, Foreman, Sub-Foreman, etc.
- Industrial Management: Training for positions in Works Management, Production Control, Industrial Engineering, etc.
- Modern Business Correspondence: Training for Sales or Collection Correspondent, Sales Promotion Manager, Mail Sales Manager, Secretary, etc.
- Stenography: Training in the new superior machine shorthand, Stenotypy.
- Ry. Station Mgm't
- Railway Accounting
- Expert Bookkeeping
- Effective Speaking
- Business English
- C. P. A. Coaching
- Credit and Collection Correspondence
- Commercial Law

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

BRIDES of

CHAPTER I

The Goats' Victim

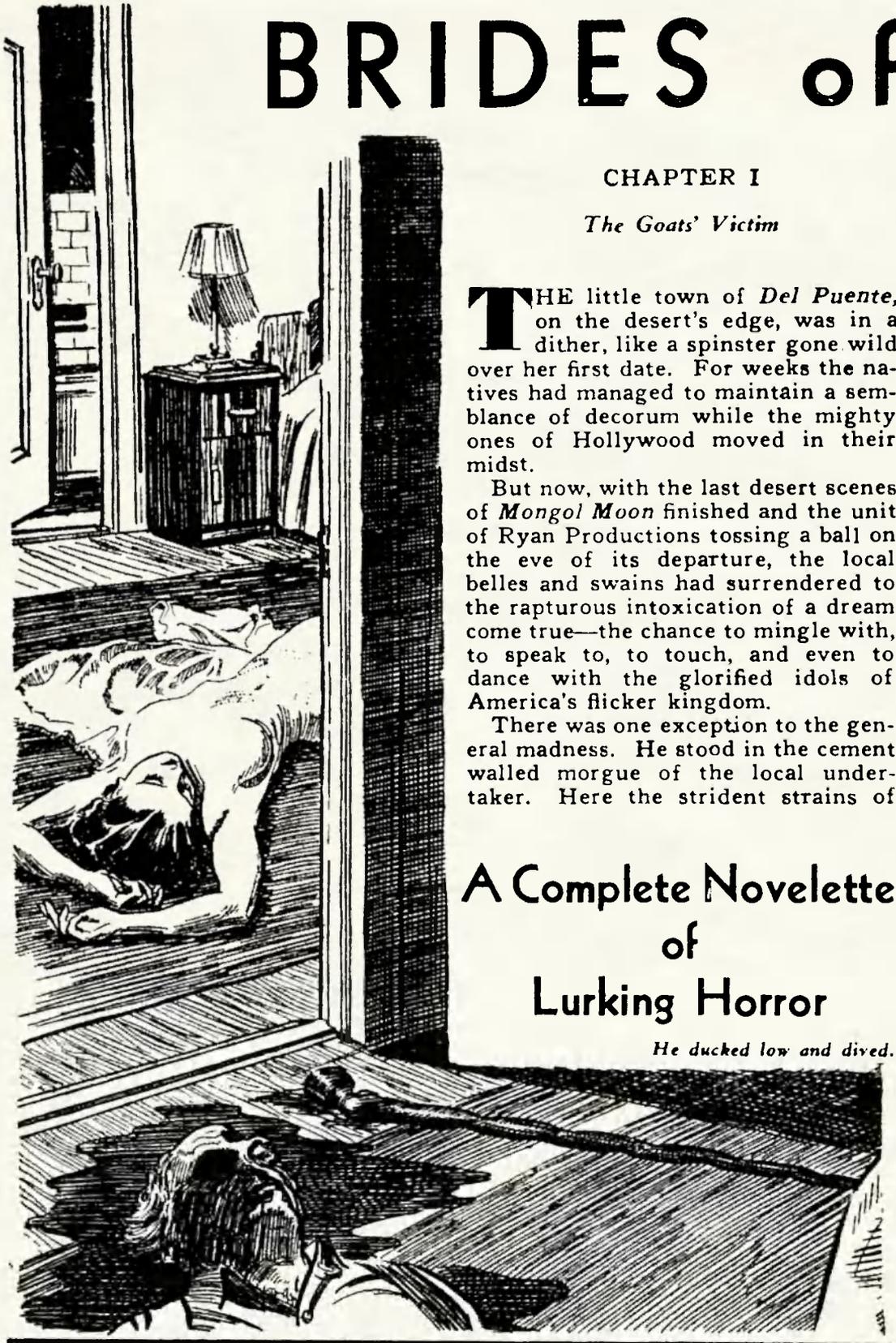
THE little town of *Del Puente*, on the desert's edge, was in a dither, like a spinster gone wild over her first date. For weeks the natives had managed to maintain a semblance of decorum while the mighty ones of Hollywood moved in their midst.

But now, with the last desert scenes of *Mongol Moon* finished and the unit of Ryan Productions tossing a ball on the eve of its departure, the local belles and swains had surrendered to the rapturous intoxication of a dream come true—the chance to mingle with, to speak to, to touch, and even to dance with the glorified idols of America's flicker kingdom.

There was one exception to the general madness. He stood in the cement walled morgue of the local undertaker. Here the strident strains of

A Complete Novelette of Lurking Horror

He ducked low and dived.

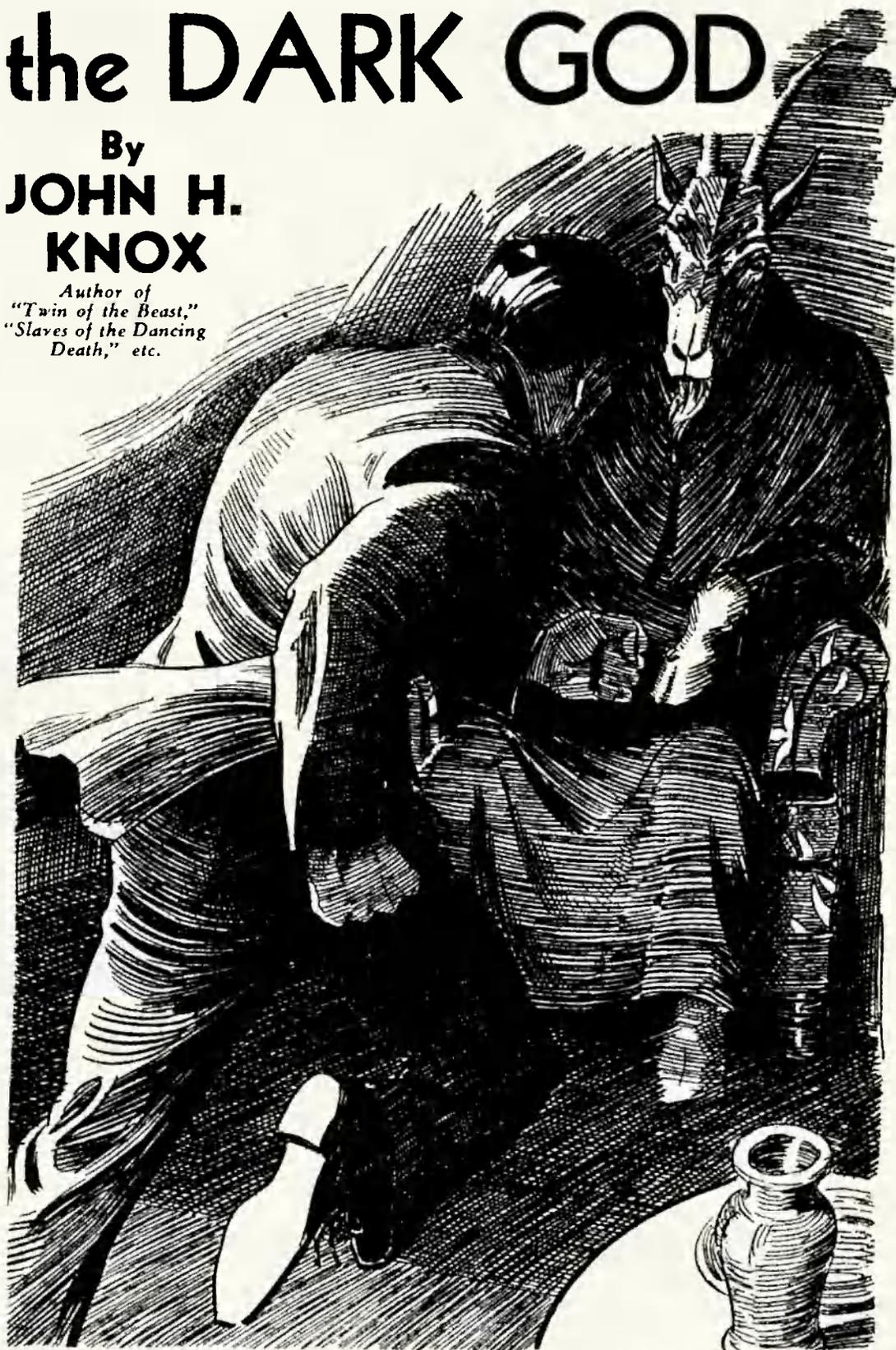


Weird Goat Demons Strike Terror in the

the DARK GOD

By
**JOHN H.
KNOX**

*Author of
"Twin of the Beast,"
"Slaves of the Dancing
Death," etc.*



Heart of the Hollywood Movie Colony!

swing music from the crowded ball-room of the Coronado Hotel reached him like a distant echo, muted, remote, incongruous. In this dank and poorly lighted room was a force more gripping, more compelling than laughter and music—the grim and tingling silence of Death's sovereign presence.

Tommy Albright, editor of the *Del Puente Clarion*, moved nearer to the slab where the sheeted body lay.

"When and where did they find her, Joe?" Albright asked the undertaker's pimply faced assistant.

"One of Ludlow's Mexicans found her," the youth replied. "She was layin' right out on the sand under a clump of greasewood about a half mile from Ludlow's headquarters. We brought her in here and Kanine, the director, said to keep it quiet until the dance was over. He didn't want to start a panic."

ALBRIGHT nodded, stared down. The girl had been lovely. The luxuriant hair that lay in matted tangles about the mangled horror of her face still glowed with the metallic sheen of beaten gold. Albright lifted the edge of the sheet, then quickly dropped it.

One glance had been enough. It had showed him the marble contours of the once perfect body bruised and mutilated like the face—scarred with angry bluish welts of a peculiar and uniform pattern—the forked, diverging hoofprints of a goat!

Albright lighted a cigarette and sucked at it thirstily. He tried to get the thing straight in his mind, but somehow it wouldn't come clear. Bette Wayland, a minor featured player in the cast of *Mongol Moon*, had vanished in the early morning hours from a wild party at Ludlow's ranch house. Today they had found her—had found this!

"Joe," he muttered suddenly, "doesn't it strike you there's something screwy about this business?"

The pimply youth swallowed; then his bony face took on a look of shrewdness.

"Tell you what, Mr. Albright," he

confided, "I figgered the thing out from the start. I figger that bunch out there at Ludlow's was havin' a 'reefer party'—smokin' *marihuana*, you know. They say it's the rage in Hollywood now. Well, this girl got too much of the stuff and wandered off. She got lost and fell down and a herd of goats trampled her."

"Don't just fit somehow," Albright shook his head slowly. "In the first place *marihuana* doesn't stimulate one to a lot of running around like liquor—not as much anyhow. In the second place, goats as a rule, like cattle, will run around or jump over a body rather than step on it—natural caution.

"Besides these bruises don't look like the hoofbeats of a running herd. They look like some maddened beast had pawed and trampled her deliberately; they look like . . ."

He didn't finish because the thoughts that suddenly flooded his mind were too wild and horrible for utterance—childish terrors that lurk in every civilized brain—folk memories of dark woods creatures, satyrs, fauns, demons with cloven hoofs. Pan, he recalled vaguely, had been to the ancients no friendly woods god but a thing the sight of which froze one to madness. The very word *panic* had come from his fearsome name.

Rubbish and nonsense! Albright walked back into the street, cynically mocking his own dark presentiments, Ahead, the five story Hotel Coronado, Del Puente's pride, was ablaze with lights. *Never Gonna Dance* . . . the orchestra wailed through open windows. Shiny cars lined the curb for blocks; and in and out the front door unsteady couples shuttled.

Never Gonna Dance . . . Bette Wayland was never gonna dance . . . Something that was like a noose tightened around Tommy's throat. He wanted to find Faye Daly at once, drag her away from the revel, keep her close to him at all costs.

There was a crowd about the cocktail bar on the mezzanine. Albright found a place at one end and sipped a Tom Collins while his anxious eyes lingered on the wide doors that had opened on the ball room. Somewhere

in that din of music, laughter, shuffling feet, Faye Daly, wildly excited as the others, was dancing, too.

Albright hadn't paid much attention to the men standing nearest him at the bar, but now, as his ears caught a chance remark, he turned. The three men grouped together in a confidential huddle were Nicholas Kanine, the director, Dudley Ryan, Oklahoma oil man taking his first fling at producing, and Dr. Alexis Narodny, technical adviser on Mongolian lore and manager of the star, Parks Cavanaugh.

KANINE, a huge blond giant, slouched in his usual baggy tweeds, a cynosure of awed glances, nonchalantly sipping his drink while he fed peanuts to a pet monkey perched on his shoulder. The eccentric director who had worked his way up from an animal trainer to one of Hollywood's most famed and most dreaded directors was enjoying his pose of cynical aloofness from the mob.

"Your big virility-man, Cavanaugh," he remarked sarcastically to Dr. Narodny, "has picked him a local belle, I see."

Albright turned quickly, following the others' glances, and his heart took a dizzy plunge. Just vanishing with a slow glide into the throng of dancers, he saw the tall, powerful figure of Parks Cavanaugh, Hollywood's latest thrill-man, and in his arms the slight little figure of Faye Dale!

Albright's face was burning; he gulped the rest of his drink and primed his ears for the next comment.

"The big virility-man," Kanine went on, "doesn't seem to be bothered at all by Wayland's death. She was his latest crush too—before he started playing Verda Mayne. But that's the way with animals like him. I know animals; I can direct them, but—" he broke off laughing.

The lean dark face of Dr. Narodny had tightened. "I wouldn't advise you to say that to Parks," he rumbled ominously.

"Eh? Wouldn't you?" Kanine jeered. "I've said worse to his face.

He may be a sensation with the ladies but he's just an animal to me—like my monkey here, though not as intelligent.

"Why do they go for him? Did you learn some potent love spells while you and he were traveling in Mongolia, Doctor?" He paused, sipping his drink while he leered at Narodny's infuriated face. "Poor Wayland," he finished. "She shouldn't have played with goats."

Narodny slammed his glass to the bar and took a step toward the director. The large head set on his slight shoulders wore a look of Satanic fury.

"Kanine," he said, "I advise you to drop it. You're getting on dangerous ground now and you may say too much."

Kanine laughed again, a rumbling belly-laugh.

"Okay," he said, "since you seem to take your pet seriously." He turned to Dudley Ryan. "You ought to be improving the shining hour, Ryan," he told him. "With Cavanaugh all wrapped up in the little local belle, you might get a chance to dance with Verda."

Ryan flushed, but made an effort to take it good naturedly. He was a large man, but a trifle puffy, with sallow jowls, a bald pate and watery eyes.

"A good suggestion, Nick," he laughed forcedly as he made off for the dance floor.

"New-rich hillbilly," Kanine followed him with a sardonic glance. "Verda'll get his watch and chain and then drop him for Cavanaugh. She's working him now for a share in the picture. But the damned thing's a flop despite my directing." He turned back to the bar.

Tommy Albright walked away. He crossed the thickly carpeted floor and paused near the ballroom doors. In a huge carved chair against the wall near the elevator sat the queer but familiar figure of Russ Ludlow, the old sheep and goat rancher who owned the hotel, most of the town and the surrounding country.

Stubby and fat, with the leering

face of a dissipated Silenus, he was dressed in his usual costume. His blue shirt, open at the collar, exposed the fuzzy white hair at his throat which matched the fuzz that sprouted from his ears and nostrils. He also wore a frayed vest, and duck pants stuffed into his boot tops. The left boot, built especially to fit his deformed foot, was crossed over the other, and a twisted cane with a carved goat's hoof on the handle was held in one hand.

"HELLO, Mr. Ludlow," Albright said as he fished out his pack of cigarettes. "Have one?"

The old man, whose watery gloating eyes had been following the bare backs of the women on the dance floor, shook his head with a chuckle.

"No thanks," he bleated. "Don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew ner cuss. Heh, heh."

"No vices at all, eh?" Albright absently went through the formula which always evoked the same answer from old Ludlow.

"Eh?" the old man gurgled, rolling his eyes significantly toward the women. "Well, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say *that!*" and he rocked back in a spasm of senile laughter.

Albright moved away. He had suddenly recalled that it was from a party at the rich eccentric's ranch house that Bette Wayland had vanished. He recalled, too, the old man's reputation where women were concerned—the daughters of his peon sheep herders, for instance.

Albright's thoughts scattered. The dance number had ended and moving from the dance floor toward the doorway, he saw Faye Daly. In her simple little gown of black taffeta with its corsage of velvet poppies, she was a dainty and charming figure—like a real flower, Albright thought, among synthetic blossoms. But Cavanaugh was still with her! Hanging on the arm of the tall sleek star, Faye was looking up at him, her brown eyes sparkling, her rosy lips parted in gay laughter.

Albright ground his teeth, drew back a step glowering. But just then an interruption occurred which gave

him the chance he wanted. Verda Mayne, a willowy figure in a scarlet gown, with flashing dark eyes and a mouth like the crimson gash in a pomegranate, pushed suddenly out of the crowd, seized Cavanaugh's arm and drew him angrily aside.

Albright stepped forward. "Faye!"

She turned. "Tommy!" she eyed him with dismay. "What on earth are you doing here like that? You look awful. Your hair's all tousled, your tie's crooked, and that old suit looks a sight. . . ."

"I know," he laughed uneasily, "but it doesn't matter. I didn't come here to dance. I came to take you away—"

"Take me away!" she echoed. "Why the idea! I'm having the time of my life. Parks has just been telling me that I'm a dead ringer for Janet Gaynor, only more so, and—"

"Please," he interrupted her, "this is serious. I've just been down to look at Bette Wayland, and there's something horrible afoot. I've got to talk to you."

"What about Bette?" A shadow darkened her face.

"Come away and I'll tell you," he said. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself anyhow. She was a friend of yours, got you on with the outfit as an extra. She was crazy about Cavanaugh, too, and yet with her lying there dead you're following him around, making eyes at him and—"

"Hush!" she cut him short. "You can't talk to me like that." Deliberately she turned her back on him. "You're just being jealous and ugly. Go away. I have a date with Parks now, and after the dance old Ludlow is giving a party."

"You're not going there!" He grasped her arm convulsively. "I won't let you! It was from there that Bette—"

She whirled on him, white with anger. He was conscious for the first time that others had stopped to stare at them. He released her arm but before he could stammer an apology, Faye slapped him.

Somebody laughed. Albright turned away. His face was hot and a red mist of anger and humiliation

hazed his eyes. He barged across the mezzanine and went stumbling down the steps. Behind him, above the din of voices, a shrill cackling laugh arose, bubbled into the air like the foul emanation from some slimy pit.

"Heh, heh! No vices, eh? I wouldn't say that; I wouldn't say *that!*"

CHAPTER II

Beast-God's Nuptials

OUTSIDE, in the darker reaches of street, to which his mood of rage and humiliation and fear had driven him, Albright felt the cool wind from the desert. Spicy with sage and greasewood, it fanned his brow, and sobered him. His angry steps slowed; resolutely he pushed wounded pride from his mind. He grappled with the weird and torturing apprehension—the conviction that Bette Wayland had been foully murdered, and that her death was only the beginning.

But why, he asked himself, should anyone have murdered her? He remembered one of Kanine's outbursts in which the latter had complained of a jinx on the picture, of a conspiracy to ruin him. But absurd outbursts of temper were commonplace with the director, and besides, Bette Wayland was not an important player. It was only her position as Cavanaugh's discarded lover that gave her any importance at all.

But if there had been no sane motive for the murder, it left only one alternative—a horrible thought from which Albright's mind shied away. She must have been murdered by some beast in human form, must have been ravished and mutilated by some monster driven by no saner impulse than the warped and twisted compulsion of unnatural lust!

Did such a monster lurk among them? If it were so, he knew the difficulty of discovering him. Such fiends are rarely caught save through a rash and careless repetition of their

revolting crime! The horror of that thought, the paralyzing dread of who might be the next victim, pulled Albright to a halt.

He had to do something. Maybe he was wrong, maybe it was all a wild nightmare his disturbed mood had spawned. But he had to know! And there was a way in which he might find out.

If he could get into the dead girl's room, search among her papers and belongings, he might find some clue which would connect her with the fiend whose savagery had caused her frightful death. With teeth gritted and fists clenched, Albright turned about and started back.

No one paid any attention to him as he came back into the lobby. The excitement in the hotel was approaching the freedom of a revel. Behind the desk, fat Charlie Tate, the manager, flushed and distracted, was watching a couple of drunks arguing by the elevator. Pausing at the desk, Albright said,

"Some sort of disturbance on the second floor, Charlie—room on the west side, next to the corner. I heard a girl yelling. Maybe you'd better—"

"Oh, hell!" the manager moaned. "If I live through this night!"

"I'll watch the desk for you," Albright volunteered.

"Thanks," Tate said. "Staff's not half big enough for this sort of shindig. I'll be right back."

Albright slid behind the desk as Tate made for the elevator. He knew that the girl's room was number 320. His eye roved over the numbered pigeon holes that held the keys and spotted the one he wanted. He slipped it out and into his pocket and was leaning nonchalantly on the desk when Tate returned.

"Noisy in there all right," the manager reported, "but nothing serious, I guess. Lord, but I'll be glad when this bunch is gone. Thanks."

"You bet," Albright told him and sauntered off. He started up the steps to the mezzanine. Near the top he suddenly paused on the carpeted stairs. Close at hand a whiskey-hoarse voice rose above the clamor from the

ball room—Dudley Ryan's voice, speaking in an angry guttural.

"—make a laughin' stock outa me, eh? Dig me for all you can get and then drop me for that damned Cavanaugh."

"Oh, Dudley!" a woman's voice—Verda Mayne's familiar contralto—broke in. "Don't be a fool and cause a scene. Let me go now. I have a headache; I'm going to my room."

"Go ahead!" it was a snarl now. "You may think I'm a fool but I didn't fight my way to the top of the oil game with kid gloves on. Think that over!"

"Let me go!"

ALBRIGHT resumed his climb. He reached the top in time to see Verda Mayne, floating like a red flame toward the elevator while Ryan glowered after her. Albright took a glance about. Russ Ludlow was gone from his chair by the doorway. Kanine and Narodny were nowhere in evidence. Neither were Cavanaugh and Faye. Had Ludlow's party already started?

Albright turned away. Avoiding the elevator he climbed the stairs to the third floor. The corridor was deserted. Swiftly he made his way to room 320 and let himself in. Everything was neat and orderly, but even here, the wraith of the dead girl's presence seemed to float among her possessions like an uprooted ghost.

He snapped on a small pocket flash and began the search. Numerous drawers yielded nothing; then the light fingered over the dressing table, came to rest on the desk. A leather writing portfolio lay there. Albright snapped it open. Letters, stationery, a little leather-bound book marked "Diary"!

Albright's heart took a quick beat. With trembling fingers he began rifling the diary's pages, working toward a recent date. Then abruptly he froze stiff. Footsteps, muffled and stealthy, in the corridor, footsteps pausing outside the door; a key grated softly in the lock.

Off went the flash. Swiftly but silently Albright dropped to hands and knees, flattened himself and rolled

under the bed. The door opened, closed softly, but for an instant the feet and legs of a man had showed against the lighted hall.

Albright held his breath. The man stood a moment by the door; then the flame of a cigarette lighter flicked on. The man moved with silent strides to the desk. Albright could hear him going through the portfolio.

He moved to the bureau next; drawers opened and closed. There was a muttered curse and the prowler turned to the closet, dragged out a leather bag. As he knelt to open it, Albright glimpsed his face and repressed a gasp.

The man was Parks Cavanaugh!

He had snapped open the catches of the bag and with one hand was feverishly fumbling among its contents. The flickering flame of the lighter threw his face into bold relief—a face, now splotched with unflattering shadows. A face which Parks Cavanaugh's admirers would have been startled to see.

For the face of the actor was not only older and more haggard, but somehow bestial. The distended nostrils seemed to flare more widely and the heavy sensual lips under the small black mustache were twitching with a queer animal-like motion. The black eyes crawled with yellow points of light.

Then Cavanaugh found what he was hunting. His hand came forth clutching a pack of letters, papers. He glanced through them and in quivering haste began stuffing them into his pockets. Suddenly he closed the bag, shoved it back into the closet and straightened. A moment later the door had opened and closed again and Cavanaugh was gone.

Albright scrambled out of his hiding place. His heart was thumping with excitement. What had Cavanaugh been looking for? Something certainly which proved a relationship between himself and the dead actress, some dark secret which he did not want to be dragged into the light.

Abruptly Albright realized that he was still gripping the little diary in his hand. He snapped on his pocket

flash again, opened the book at the place his fingers still marked. The date at the top of the page was March 23rd—that was yesterday. Albright's eyes fixed on the irregular, nervous scrawl which covered the page:

I can't endure it any longer, and I have told Parks so. It's not so much that he's ditched me for the Mayne woman. But I won't see him seduce that innocent child, Faye. He laughed at me, but tonight I'll crack the whip over his head. When he learns that I know his secret—that ugly secret that he hides from the world, he'll sing a different tune. And if I threaten to go to Verda with it—God, it's all so ghastly, too! That I can still love him, knowing it's not a man I love but a something . . . I can't say it! I loathe him, cringe from him, yet when his arms come around me again, I'll be as weak as ever. . . .

THE writing ended, as if the ill-fated woman had been overcome by her own emotion. Albright closed the book and snapped off the light. He was dizzy with anger and fear. The wildest and worst was true! Cavanaugh was something, something which even the woman who loved him dared not name. And Faye had fallen under his spell!

Albright wished now that he had seized Cavanaugh while he was in the room, had choked the truth from him then. Fists clenched, teeth gritted, he started for the door, paused with his hand on the knob. Across the hall a door opened and closed softly. He waited, thinking he heard muffled footfalls, but not sure. After a moment he opened the door, stared out. The corridor was empty.

He stepped out, closed the door and started down the hall. But abruptly he stopped, whirling sharply, feeling the hair bristle queerly at the back of his neck. From the door opposite the room he had just left a sound had drifted, a sound so incredible that Tommy's first impulse was to doubt the testimony of his senses.

The sound was the low and plaintive bleat of a goat!

In two swift noiseless strides, Albright was before the door. Again the weird sense of hallucination swamped him. For to the first bleat a second bleat replied, and suddenly there was

a rush of sound that held him paralyzed—a hiss and whistle like the funereal whine of winds across Mongolian steppes.

Then, soft at first, but rising as if the wind had ushered it in, a thin and reedy piping that curdled his blood—Pan pipes in a wild, lascivious ululation that seemed to leave his senses intoxicated and defiled.

Again the bleat of the goat, nearer now, frenzied, horribly urgent, like the incarnate voice of lust itself, and to the pipes' thin, diabolical wailing, the beat of hoofs began.

A weird paralysis gripped Albright then and for what seemed an incredible age of horror he stood there, his pulse pounding to the devilish measure. Through the polished panel of the door he seemed to stare in at a Thing, erect and rampant in its hideous dance—the ageless and eternal shape of that shaggy horror veiled under a thousand names and symbols, feared and worshipped since the world began.

It was the sudden variation in the sound of the hoof beats that shook him alive, hurled him against the door with scalding terror flooding his veins. For the hoofs had ceased to pound against the floor, were beating instead with hideous crunching thuds against some yielding substance which he knew was human flesh and bone. The thing was trampling a body, a woman's body.

Faye's?

At the thought of her lying there, horribly silent, lacking either the power or the will to resist, something snapped in Albright's brain.

He flung himself against the door like a madman, his shoulder crashing against it with bone shattering force. But it held firm, while his shouts and curses echoed down the corridor.

Doors opened and he was dimly conscious of cries, running feet, shouted questions. A burly man in a dressing gown joined him, threw his weight against the door too. At the double impact there was a shattering crack.

The lock gave and the two of them catapulted into the room, jerked up before the sprawled white shape loom-

ing vaguely out of the darkness. Someone snapped on the light. In the doorway a woman screamed.

VERDA MAYNE lay in the center of the carpeted floor. She was nude and the shreds of her ripped gown and filmy underthings lay about her in a bloody litter. They had not been stripped from her body but literally torn from it, as if the teeth of some thing without hands had wrenched them away.

Dead eyes stared up from her contorted face in unutterable horror. Her body, from head to gleaming thighs, was a mass of bluish, blood-seeping welts—welts in the hideously significant pattern of a goat's cloven hoof!

Albright jerked up his eyes. Aside from the woman's outraged body the room seemed empty. He strode to the bathroom door and flung it open. It was empty too. He tried the clothes closet, poked incredulously among the racks of dresses, turned about, his flesh crawling queerly. The fat man in the dressing gown was on his hands and knees peering under the bed. A curtain fluttered in the breeze from the open window. Tommy ran to it and looked out.

Ludlow, in building the hotel, had wasted no money on ornament. The bare brick wall could not have been scaled by a human fly. The drop to the street was much too far for a jump.

Albright turned about, his wild eyes roving over the crush of frightened figures in the doorway. Suddenly



they parted and Charlie Tate, the manager, was shoving in, stammering excited questions, sputtering incoherently as he glimpsed the horror.

Albright didn't answer him at first. His eyes were crawling over the bare unbroken walls of the room; his brain was battling with a conviction of madness. He knew he had heard it—those sounds, those hellish hoofbeats. Yet—the troubling voice of reason could not be gainsaid—*no human creature could have escaped from this room!*

CHAPTER III

Demon—Lover

BY now the horrified crowd in the doorway had swelled to a mob in the corridor and now a short stocky man came elbowing through them.

"One side; stand back, please."

He was Sheriff Mart Strobel. Close behind him, in the path he cleared, followed Nicholas Kanine in a silk dressing gown, Dudley Ryan, fully dressed but weaving unsteadily, and the hatchet-faced, flint-eyed Dr. Narodny. Strobel let them in and then slammed the door in the faces of the others. He looked at the woman on the floor, muttered an oath. "Who found her?" he demanded.

Albright swallowed and spoke up. A little uncertainly, he told them the whole incredible story of what he had heard through the locked door. The sheriff's china-blue eyes squinted at him queerly; Charlie Tate frowned. Kanine and Narodny turned sharply toward him and the former smiled openly. Ryan, already half drunk, and now apparently stunned, had dropped down on hands and knees beside the corpse, was staring at it with apparent stupefaction.

"Good Gawd!" Sheriff Strobel, still goggling at Albright, expelled air from his lungs. "Never knew you to smoke *marihuana* before, Tommy."

Albright flushed. "What I've told you is the truth," he growled, "and you can take it or leave it." He shot a sharp appraising glance at the others.

"There's something rotten going on in this movie bunch," he finished. "You'd better ask these gentlemen what they've been doing and where their various rooms are."

Kanine and Narodny volunteered the information without waiting to be questioned. Narodny had gone to his room to look over some mail; the room was three doors down the hall. He denied having heard anything, though there was a queer twitching of his thin lips as he said it and a flicker of cold fear in his eyes.

Kanine's room was on the fourth floor, just above the murder room. For the past half hour, he said, he had been there, checking up on the last details of the day's work. He had heard nothing at all.

"What about you, Ryan?" the sheriff asked.

"Me?" Ryan turned slowly, looked up. "Well, I was pretty drunk. Verda left me at the cocktail bar and a few minutes later I came up to my room, passed out, I guess. Then this yelling—"

"And where's your room?"

"Right next to this one," Ryan gulped, "but God! I wouldn't have— You don't think—? Why, I was crazy about that woman!"

"Where's Parks Cavanaugh?" Albright suddenly exploded.

"Cavanaugh?" It was Dr. Narodny who spoke up first. "What about Cavanaugh?"

"This is the second woman in love with him to die this way," Albright ground out. "And the last time I saw him he was with Faye Daly—"

"You mean the little girl in the black dress with the red poppies?" Kanine suddenly asked. "I saw her leave the dance floor and step into the elevator about forty minutes ago. Parks was with her all right, but they weren't alone. Old Russ Ludlow was limping along beside them."

Without a word Albright turned and started for the door.

"Where you going?" Sheriff Strobel snapped.

"I'm going to find them," Albright grated, and he slammed the door before the sheriff could reply.

A curious, whispering crowd still blocked the corridor, but Albright pushed through them, paying no attention to their looks and questions. He heard the door open and close behind him but paid no attention to it until, almost to the elevator, he felt a hand pluck at his sleeve. Whirling, he stared in the dark, twisted face of Dr. Narodny.

"Wait, wait, I have something to say," the man begged.

"What do you want?" Albright growled.

"Come into my room," Narodny replied, nodding toward a nearby door. "I can tell you plenty—where your girl is maybe—"

Albright grabbed his arm. "Where is she then?" he rasped.

"No, no, not here—" Narodny shot a glance at the crowd behind him. "Inside here, one moment—"

He turned, stepped to the door and opened it. Albright stepped ahead of him into the dark room. Narodny closed the door.

"Well, make it snappy—" Albright snapped. Then his voice cracked on the unfinished sentence.

NARODNY had turned, reaching back to snap on the lights. They blazed, and Tommy was staring into the business end of a squat black automatic grasped in Narodny's skinny brown hand.

"What the hell!" Albright gasped. "What do you want?"

"A square deal for Parks Cavanaugh," Narodny grated in clipped syllables. "Sit down on that bed; you're going to listen to me."

Albright sat. Narodny moved nearer. The gun in his hand was shaking but he kept it levelled approximately at Albright's middle. Then the words came with a low, sibilant rush:

"I'm Cavanaugh's manager and his only friend. I know you must have heard things about him—malicious lies. You believe he's at the bottom of this deviltry and you're mad enough to kill him. What have you heard about him?"

Narodny's face was twitching now

with excitement and it sobered Albright a little.

"Plenty," he said. "And you're not helping his cause any by pulling a gun on me."

"I had to force you to listen," Narodny answered. "First I'll tell you that I believe absolutely in that story of yours the others scoffed at—about what you heard in the locked room. I've traveled in the strange places of the world and seen strange things that these provincial fools would not believe. I am convinced that the man behind these outrages is only half man—the other half of him is devil!"

"What do you mean? Who—?"

Narodny's eyes narrowed and a fatical gleam showed under the lowered lids.

"I mean," he said, "this lecherous old beast who calls himself Russ Ludlow. You start? You think you've known him longer, that I can't tell you anything about him?"

"But I can. The mark of the beast is on him. Have you heard of the devils of the Mongolian desert? Of the 'King of the World' and his subterranean people? Of ghouls and demons who can assume human shape and speak all languages?"

"But, Good Lord!—" Albright began contemptuously.

"Wait! You are cynical. But I know. These bestial devil-things exist. Every race and age has known them, from the Greeks and Romans with their Pan, their satyrs and fauns, to the German peasants with their Corn-Goat and the Russians with their *Ljeschi*, or goat-people of the forests."

Was the man mad? "But what's it got to do with this case?" Albright asked.

"Ah," Narodny grinned mirthlessly, "but it was such a creature who murdered these women. The old man, Russ Ludlow, is a *Ljeschi*. He lives among the goats and he is one of them. That's not all.

"Last night at that party the lecherous old beast had his eyes on Bette Wayland. But she was wild about Parks. I saw the bestial rage and frustrated lust which the old man hid from the others."

"And you believe—?"

"That he murdered her!" Narodny answered emphatically. "In a second spasm of lust he must have murdered Verda Mayne. And he's trying to lay the guilt on Parks.

"Remember he owns this town, this hotel, and I have heard that on the unfinished top floor of this very building he keeps a suite of rooms for his revels. It is to that place that he has lured Parks and that girl of yours!"

Albright sprang up. Regardless of the man's insane theories, this was something tangible and terrible. He too had heard the rumors of Russ Ludlow's secret room on the top floor.

"We'll go there," he grated, "and see—" He started for the door.

"Wait!" Narodny stopped him. "We must go cautiously. We can't trust any of the hotel employees, who would warn him. We'd better sneak up by the stairs."

He pocketed the gun, but kept his hand on it, and let Albright lead the way. The people down the corridor paid no attention to them and they climbed the infrequently-used stairway without meeting anyone. But at the top of the flight to the fifth floor they found their way blocked. A barrier of carpenter's saw-horses, boxes, barrels and debris bore a sign which read: "Unfinished Floor—Keep Out."

Albright stooped; cold chills quivered along his spine as he stared at the unbroken blackness beyond the barrier. All the stories of old Ludlow's unbridled lechery came back into his mind.

"Strike a match," he whispered to Narodny. He began as quietly as he could to move aside one of the big boxes stacked behind the saw-horse.

HE made an opening and crawled through, Narodny coming behind him. Here the floor was uncarpeted, the darkness thick and impenetrable.

"I'll go to the left, you to the right," Narodny whispered.

Albright muttered assent and started off on tiptoe. Behind him Narodny's footsteps faded away. In the silent darkness the man's words re-

turned to his mind with a new force. "Such things exist—" the man had said. How else could what he had heard in the murder room be explained? Was the same thing happening to Faye now?

He reached the corridor that ran through the right wing of the building. Here a little light filtered from the window at its end, making a dim and dismal greyness.

Suddenly he stopped. A faint creak of leather from somewhere in the darkness behind him, caused him to whirl, flattening himself against a door. Had Narodny tricked him; was he creeping back to murder him from behind?

Reaching back, Albright clutched a knob and silently opened the door. He backed inside, closed it to a crack, waited. He listened, but the sound in the corridor was not repeated. He turned about and sucked-in breath whistled sharply between his teeth.

The room in which he stood was bare, its single window unshaded. But beyond there was a glow of light. It came from a suite of rooms on the same floor but in the opposite wing. Three open windows gave a view into two lighted rooms, and in one of them stood Faye and Cavanaugh and Russ Ludlow!

Scuttling across the room, Albright leaned on the sill and stared. In the rich and elaborately-furnished bedroom, old Ludlow was standing beside a carved end table shaking drinks. From a silver cocktail shaker he poured the mixture into fragile glasses, handed them to Faye and Cavanaugh.

Into his own glass he poured milk! Tommy ground his teeth. Faye was laughing, seemed already a little tipsy; her eyes glittered with a hectic light as she lifted her glass.

Softly Albright slid the window up a few inches, thrust his ear to the opening. Across the narrow court and above the subdued sounds from below, the cracked voice of old Ludlow drifted:

". . . to youth! To the hot spring-time of life! To youth and its sweetest fruit—Love! Heh, heh—"

Glasses clinked. Albright slid the window higher, stared in disgust as they drank the toast. Old Ludlow's face was splotched with feverish patches of red; his watery eyes gleamed lewdly as he leered at the other two. Cavanaugh had drawn Faye close to him with one arm, was looking down into her smiling upturned face with an ugly and possessive smirk.

Damn their souls! The filthy devils were probably drugging her! Savage rage flared in Albright's brain, fogged his eyes with a red mist. Then Ludlow was speaking, staring at his thick watch.

"I must go now, heh, heh. Attend to a little matter. I'll leave you two little love birds alone for a while—"

He turned away, limped toward the door that led into the next room. Albright cursed under his breath. It seemed impossible that it was really Faye who was there. She had made no protest, was snuggling close to Cavanaugh as the two stood listening to old Ludlow's footfalls limping through the next room.

He turned his eyes and saw that old Ludlow had paused near the door that gave on the hall. He opened it, then slammed it loudly, but remained in the room. A hideous grin twisted his lecherous features as he turned and began to creep softly back toward the door behind which Faye and Cavanaugh were standing.

Albright's skin crawled with revulsion. Old Ludlow had passed out of his range of vision now, but Albright guessed what the vile old lecher was about. He was staring through the keyhole!

Cavanaugh, at the sound of the outer door's closing, had suddenly drawn Faye into his arms, was muttering huskily as he smothered her face with kisses. Weakly she drew away from him, but he gathered her close again.

"Not afraid of me, darling?" Albright caught his thick guttural.

"No, no," Faye was sobbing breathlessly, "no, Parks. But there's something about you so, so mysterious. I don't understand. It does frighten me a little, even though it's fascinat-

ing. Tell me, Parks, Bette spoke of some strange secret in your life."

"Bette!" the word burst like an explosion from between his lips, and Albright saw him stiffen. "Did she tell you something—?"

Albright didn't wait to hear more. The note of cold restrained savagery in Cavanaugh's voice had electrified him to action. He swung about, his eyes probing the shadows of the room for some weapon. There was a pile of loose lumber and debris in one corner and he fished out a sizable club. Gripping it in a knotted fist, he started for the door.

But with his hand on the knob he turned. The lights across the court space had flashed off, and suddenly from the darkened window, a shrill scream of terror pealed into the night—Faye's voice, jetting into his ears like a blue flame, sharp and hot with inexpressible agony and despair.

CHAPTER IV

Goat Hoofs Dance Again

IT seemed as though the cry rang on and on in Albright's ears as he flung the door wide and plunged into the darkness of the corridor. But he knew better. After that single blast of terror an awful silence had swallowed it.

Into his brain leaped the vision of the beast-man's attack—the hideous metamorphosis worked by raging madness and lust, the stunning blows of the goat hoofs, the bestial teeth tearing at Faye's clothing, the hideous dance of death . . .

The hall seemed endless. He dived into the middle corridor, struck a wall, rebounded and lurched on. The darkness spun round him in surging grey-black waves as he careened into the left wing and hurled himself toward the door of Ludlow's suite.

To his amazement it was unlocked. He staggered into the living room, blinded, breathless, plunged toward the inner door. His foot struck something and he lurched forward,

sprawled. Clambering up, his feverish groping hands touched flesh, came away sticky with blood.

Rising, he suddenly went rigid in the crouching posture of a runner on the mark. The lock of the inner door was grating. The door itself was opening, and suddenly the flesh along Albright's spine was crawling with little worms of horror. Even before he saw the thing the rank and heavy stench of goats gusted out in a sickening wave to meet him. And then the thing itself was dimly visible.

For what seemed a full minute he crouched there unmoving, his unbelieving eyes probing the outlines of the incredible shape looming in the grey light that filtered through the window. A tall form, taller than his own, hovered in the doorway, a hunched black shape melting into darkness. And thrust up from the black-robed shoulders was the hideous, leering, horned head of a he-goat!

Then the thing bleated and Albright sprang.

The plank club swished through the air as he charged headlong at the monstrous apparition. The club struck with a thud but missed the head, and then the thing lurched forward.

Robed arms swept out, and as Albright swung the club a second time the monster's rush threw him off balance. A blow from something hard and horny smashed against his fist, knocked the plank club from his grip.

He lurched forward to regain his balance, doubled low and charged forward, fists pistoning at the hazy shape of the creature's body. His knuckles dug savagely into hard flesh beneath the robe and a snarl grated from the beast-thing's mouth.

But the next instant Albright was falling back under a rain of blows that could have come from no human fists—powerful and swift as the blows of a trip-hammer, the jabbing horny fore hoofs beat against his body, his face, his arms. He flung up his arms to shield his face. A hoof struck him in the belly, another crushed the knuckles of his hand.

In desperation he beat out wildly like a man battering bleeding fists

against a brick wall; but the hideous goat-smelling form had closed in. Hoofs cracked against his skull. Lights danced and spun before his eyes. He was crumpling, sinking to the floor with blood streaming from his nose and mouth . . .

Darkness, swirling and eddying about him. He had slumped in an inert heap. Something like the bite of a snake's fangs stung his arm. Then he was drifting off into darkness, absolute and utter as the grave's embrace.

Albright awoke, blinked dazedly into the bright light that enveloped him. He found himself sprawled on the white tile floor of the bathroom. Blood was on the floor and slow drops still trickled from his battered face.

The bones of his arms and shoulders ached. He scrambled up, flung himself against the door. It was locked. A small window opened on the five-story drop to the court, but there was no other exit.

WHAT had happened? Where had the monster gone? Where was Faye? How long had he been unconscious? And why had the monster left him without killing him?

Remembering the sting of the hypodermic which had jabbed his arm, he stripped off his coat, rolled up his sleeve. There was the angry red welt and the scars of two needle punctures. Two!

But there was something else—a drying crust of some milky substance. Then he understood. The fiend in his hurry had jabbed the needle of the hypodermic clear through his flesh; most of the charge had been lost. That accident had saved him!

He turned to the door again, stopped. In stripping off his coat he had let the little diary found in Bette Wayland's room drop to the floor. A couple of folded newspaper clippings, unnoticed before, had fallen out, and from one of them a face with a strangely familiar look stared up at him.

He snatched the clippings up. Both were faded and yellowed with age, but the hard, though not unhandsome fea-

tures of the boy in the photograph were unmistakably those of Parks Cavanaugh, and the headline of the clipping read:

KILLER OFFERED AS GUINEA PIG FOR SCIENTIST

Boy Who Killed Playmate Offered by Parents and Lawyer for Laboratory Experiment
Detroit, Sept. 10: Larry Parks, fifteen-year-old killer of playmate may escape penalty. . . .

Albright didn't have to read the rest; he remembered that the case had been one of the sensations of his boyhood. Quickly he glanced at the second clipping. Heading it was another photo; Albright gasped. Fifteen years younger, but unmistakably the same, it was the face of Dr. Narodny, and he read:

GLAND EXPERT WOULD CREATE SUPERMAN FROM BOY KILLER

Narovitch, Goat-gland Expert, Accepts Offer of Boy Criminal. Promises to Make New Man of Him . . .

Albright blinked; his head was spinning as his mind went back to that famous scandal—the furor of public indignation which had greeted the announcement of the experiment. The threats against the life of Narodny (or Narodny), and finally the disappearance of both doctor and patient.

God in Heaven! The puzzle was complete now. Cavanaugh was the boy patient and Narodny was the doctor. That experiment! Goat-glands!

Albright shuddered, crumpling the paper in his hand. It was all too clear now. Narodny, with his goat-glands and God knew what else had not made a superman, but a monster! That was Bette Wayland's secret—and possibly Verda Mayne's! And Narodny, guessing he knew, had led him into a trap!

And Faye? Faye was probably dead!

Albright flung himself against the door again, hammering savagely with his bruised shoulders, pounding with his fists in desperation. Blood was streaming afresh from the wounds on his forehead, mingling with the sweat that ran stinging into his eyes.

Then he stopped, terror and despair freezing his blood to an icy ichor.

From beyond the door came the bleat of a goat, and following it that rush of wind and the eerie shrilling of the pipes. Then the hoofbeats began!

"You devil! You fiend!" the cry gushed like flame from Albright's raw throat. But the door held fast before his wildest battering. Whirling about he searched for some loose heavy object with which to attack the unyielding panels. But there was nothing—nothing at all! He was helpless, and in the other room some thing from hell was trampling Faye's body to a pulp!

Flinging himself flat on the floor, he braced his neck and shoulders against the base of the tile tub and jammed his feet against the door. Corded muscles strained like weighted cables as he pushed. Pain racked him, sweat burst out on him like juice from a squeezed grape. There was a creak, a crash and the door flew open.

STAGGERING up, Albright lunged like a maniac for the opening, stopped in its embrasure with a crazed feeling of insanity jerking at his taut nerves. Was he mad? Had the brain of a lunatic spawned this monstrous hallucination?

On the floor of the room, with the clothing torn from her body, lay Faye Daly. And crouched upon her like some hideous vulture on its prey was a tiny shape, no more than two feet high—a dwarfish replica of the goat-monster he had fought.

Complete with goat's horns and black robe the diminutive monster crouched in apparent paralysis, staring at him. Protruding from one sleeve of the robe Albright glimpsed the fiendish instrument of mutilation. It was a mechanic's hammer to which had been cunningly fitted the horny hoof of a goat. And the weapon was now poised above Faye's motionless, unconscious body!

But what was even more inexplicable was the fact that though the little demon had made no move, the weird music of the pipes still echoed in the room—seemed to come from the hunched body of the creature itself.

Albright's paralysis snapped then and he sprang. But even quicker was

the little monster. Like a leaping cat it rose into the air, landed on soundless feet and scuttled toward the window. Skidding to a halt, Albright snatched up the hammer and flung it. A shrill scream of animal pain burst from the goat's-head; the music ceased, and in one leap the dwarfish monstrosity had reached the sill of the window and plunged out.

Albright dropped to his knees beside Faye's body, pressed his ear to her breast. Faint but unmistakable, he caught the beat of her heart, breathed a prayer of thanks. She wasn't dead—yet. Doped insensible by a hypodermic injection, she had been left for the little monster to kill.

He staggered up, made for the door in the next room. It was locked on the inside. He shot the bolt, kicked the door open, and crouched rigid in its embrasure. Sprawled on the carpet in the shaft of light from the room behind him lay Russ Ludlow limp and inert as a sawdust dummy, his upturned face a beaten bloody mess.

Two strides carried Albright into the center of the room where he halted, his nerves tingling electrically to the spoor of danger, his nostrils quivering against the heavy goatish odor. Slowly he turned and his blood congealed. He cursed the rashness that had sent him blundering into a trap. Not ten feet away, in a dim corner of the room, sat the goat headed monster, staring at him.

Albright's throat was dry; the bloodbeat throbbed and pulsed in his temples. The man-sized monstrosity sat upright in an easy and indolent posture, the goatish head an immobile, leering gargoyle. One black sleeved arm lay along the arm of the overstuffed chair; the other lay in his lap. But human hands protruded from both sleeves now; the hand in his lap held a hoof-studded hammer, the one on the chair arm held a snub-nosed automatic.

In another instant, Albright knew, death would come blasting from that murderous muzzle; the beast-thing would have his triumph after all. Faye, in the drug's clutches, would be left to his unsatiable and sadistic lust!

 CHAPTER V

Show-Down

AN age passed, an age measured by two slow intakes of tortured breath. Then somehow Albright found his speech.

"Well, Cavanaugh," he grated between set teeth, "do you intend to shoot, or is there some price I can pay for the girl's life?"

No answer. Only the stolid, fiendish stare of the motionless goat eyes. There was another eon of agony in which the cold sweat popped from Albright's bloodied brow. Then he took a step nearer.

"My life doesn't matter," he stammered, "but if there's anything—"

He had taken a second step, and now, according to his plan, he ducked low and dived. To his incredible amazement the gun blast he had anticipated failed to materialize. He jerked up in a crouch, his clawed hands frozen in the act of reaching for the monstrous throat. Still the creature did not move. God in heaven! Feeling hands groped out, felt the human form beneath the robe, drew back.

A man was under the robe and the cunningly constructed goat's mask fitted to the shoulders; but the man was either dead or he too was drugged insensible!

But with the mystery of the creature's identity within his grasp, Albright drew back, startled by a sound from the hall. There was the crash of overturned boxes at the blocked entrance and the pound of feet beating along the corridor, and a voice shouted:

"Here, this way!"

Scuttling across the room, Albright flung himself behind a heavy divan and crouched there, peering out. The pounding steps came to a halt at the door, a husky buzz of voices followed. Then the door was opened, a face appeared and a gun was blazing streaks of flame across the semi-dark.

"Got him!" a voice grated. The

lights went on, and Nicholas Kanine, a dressing gown trailing behind his massive bulk, a revolver clutched in his hand, was striding across the room. He was followed by Tate, the hotel manager, Sheriff Strobel, and Dudley Ryan.

"Gawd A'mighty!" Ryan suddenly gasped, stopping stock still to stare as the others filed past him. "Gawd A'mighty! Cavanaugh!"

Albright stared at the thing in the chair. The head had fallen sideways, the hideous goat-mask had toppled to the floor. There, hanging limply from the neck, with bright blood dripping from a dark spot on the forehead, was the head and face of Parks Cavanaugh!

"Yes, Cavanaugh," Kanine grated. "And we're too late to save Ludlow, and God knows who else the fiend may have murdered. I've suspected him from the first, but as I told you, I didn't know the truth until I investigated his past—and Narodny's."

"But I still don't get it," the sheriff gasped.

"Sadist!" Kanine pronounced. "That killing when he was a kid gives the clue. Then Narodny got hold of him and with that operation—goat-glands was only a part of it—he made him into something. Well, something not quite human. When these spells came on him he couldn't resist, had to murder and mutilate. Ugh!"

"You lie!" The words cracked in the air like a whip lash and all eyes jerked toward the door. Leaning there, a haggard and bedraggled figure with a bloodstained face, stood Dr. Narodny.

"The fiend's accomplice!" Kanine snorted. "Well, the jig's up, Doctor. Where have you been?"

"I've been lying in the hall," Narodny replied, limping into the room, "where I was left by the devil who slugged me—a devil I've decided is human after all. As for that nonsense about Cavanaugh, it's a malicious lie.

"The boy never had a chance, I took him, tried to correct his defects. My operation may not have been a success, but my training was—to the extent

at least that I made a great actor of him. But at his worst, Parks was only a woman-chaser, not a murderer!"

An ugly jeering laugh from Kanine answered him.

"Too late for excuses," he rasped. He strode to the door into the next room, jerked up with a muttered curse. "God! He murdered the girl too! And—"

The sentence went unfinished. From his point of vantage Albright could see Kanine's profile, could see that he was staring, not at Faye on the floor, but at the open bathroom door, which in the first excitement had passed unnoticed.

Albright got it all then—the whole thing. Scattered pieces of the puzzle fitted themselves together in a flash. Kanine had turned about. "Sheriff," he said, "you'd better put the cuffs on Narodny before—"

Albright seized the moment to appear. He came upright, and as the startled group turned to stare, he said, slowly and with the confidence of one who is sure:

"Never mind Narodny, Sheriff. The man you want is Nicholas Kanine!"

"Kanine!" Ryan gasped, and the sheriff goggled.

THE rage twisted face of the burly director had gone suddenly white. He took a step toward his accuser, the gun wavering menacingly.

"What do you mean?" he rasped. "Are you a lunatic?"

"No," said Albright, "and I'm not dead either—which has upset your plans. You killed Bette Wayland and Verda Mayne and Russ Ludlow and Parks Cavanaugh. You tried to murder Faye and me. Cavanaugh was dead or doped when you came into this room.

"You knew it. You had set the scene, dressed him in the robe and placed him in the chair so that you could shoot him as soon as you came in. You thought that I'd be dead, and that your little monster would also have killed Faye by now."

Kanine glared at him savagely, then his eyes swept the room.

"Little monster?" he rasped and laughed harshly. "Sheriff, the man is mad; he's suffering from delusions. . . ."

The sheriff looked much like he thought so too.

"What do you mean, Tommy?" he asked.

"I can tell you," Albright replied, "and I may be able to show you, if you'll come in here."

He led the way into the next room. The others followed, watched in silence while he walked to the open window, reached out, and turned about with a length of black sash rope in his hands. The rope came from above the window and reached down to some weight below. Tommy hauled on it, pulled the object at the end of the rope over the sill.

As it dropped to the floor, the others jerked forward. A tiny body lay enveloped in flowing black robes from which the papier mache mask of a miniature goat's-head protruded. Albright kicked it away.

"Kanine's trained monkey!" he announced as the twisted bestial head of the dead creature came to light. "This sheriff, is the explanation of his crimes and of the weird sounds you scoffed at." He pulled the robe away from the hairy body and revealed the small black japanned case strapped to the monkey's back.

"The box there," he explained, "is a miniature phonograph which may be set to play a particular record. I knew it had to be something like that, for after I figured that the creature was a monkey, it was the only way to explain the sounds.

"Kanine, you see, would commit his murders by drugging his victim, then going out—locking the door. From some place—his room or the roof of the hotel — he would let his trained monkey down into the room. The little monster, with the fiendish goat's-foot hammer, would then beat the life from the victim and climb back up the rope.

"In this case Kanine, in the robe and mask and with the goat-odor on him, first killed Ludlow. Then he stunned or doped Cavanaugh, Faye and me.

He let his monkey down from the roof, leaving the end of the rope tied there and trusting the monkey to get out while he had gone to call you for his grand finale—"

"It's a lie!" Kanine suddenly snarled. He had taken a step back from the others, stood glaring at Albright like a cornered beast, the gun in his hand leveled.

"Drop that gun!" the sheriff ordered, jerking up his own weapon. "And if you've got any answer to these charges—"

The fiendish laugh of a cornered maniac broke from Kanine's lips.

"The hell with your charges!" he snarled, swinging the gun toward Faye's unconscious form. "I'll do the dictating now. You can shoot me, but the girl's still alive, and you can't shoot quick enough to save her. Now back into the bathroom, all of you, and shut the door. One false move and I'll blast the life from her!"

Albright saw the sheriff's face grow grey, saw the knuckles of his gun hand whiten. The others moved toward the bathroom door. Albright's brain was a chaos of wild terror; a cold and numbing paralysis gripped him, and out of the daze he heard his own voice rasping:

"Let him go, let him go . . . In God's name—"

BUT the sheriff held his ground, undecided, reluctant to let the killer escape. Kanine, with the gleam of murder in his eye, drew a slow bead with his weapon on Faye's heart.

"I'll give you three," he snarled. "One, two—"

The sheriff didn't budge. Then Albright saw his only chance and acted. Doubling forward, he flung himself in a quick dive toward Faye's sprawled body, fell across it as Kanine's gun roared and a sharp flame of pain burned his left side.

Almost simultaneously the sheriff's big revolver gave the brief and final answer. As Albright rolled over, clutching at his bleeding side, he saw Kanine crumple in a limp heap that never moved again of its own volition.

Later, while the house physician

was bandaging his side and Narodny was working over Faye to bring her back to consciousness, Albright turned his eyes toward Dudley Ryan and remarked:

"It's funny, I had the whole thing figured out except an important item that's still completely foggy. What in God's name could his motive have been?"

Ryan frowned. Pale and haggard, he was nevertheless thoroughly sobered now.

"I've thought it over," he said, "and I guess I'm the only man qualified to answer that. You may not know it, but Kanine's fame was on the wane in Hollywood. That's why his company lent him to me. Kanine was bitter about it. He grew more bitter still when he realized that in this picture his old power had returned to him. I think he believed it would be his masterpiece.

"Yet he wouldn't profit a cent from it. I owned the company, and the only other sharers in this picture were Cavanaugh, to whom I had given an interest as a bonus, and Verda, to whom," he paused, "to whom I had given a share for another reason—"

"But look here," Albright interrupted. "Kanine openly pronounced the picture a flop."

"Of course," Ryan agreed with a wry smile. "Isn't that what he'd naturally do if he wanted to get possession of it himself? He dinned the same song into my ears, but once or twice he slyly offered to buy it—just to take it off my hands, you understand.

"I smelled a rat then and wouldn't sell. So he decided he'd make me sell by wrecking—or apparently wrecking—the whole project—killing the only shareholders and most important stars. After Verda's death I got a clue to his intentions when he told me that certain important scenes would have to be made over and that the thing was ruined now, because Verda was dead.

"Get the idea? To that he would have added the argument that the scandal attached to the picture would spoil its chances with the public. Sly. But he didn't believe it. He really be-

lieved that it would be good advertising, drawing morbid crowds from all over the land.

"He was probably right. When things had come to this pass, I'd probably have sold out to him for a song. Add to that the fact that he hated Cavanaugh anyhow and was enraged with Verda because she had repulsed his advances."

Albright nodded. "And he must have found out the truth about Cavanaugh's past from Bette Wayland, then murdered her to silence her and also to throw the first stone of suspicion at Cavanaugh. God! I shiver when I think how nearly he succeeded."

"I'll make you shiver," the hotel physician cut in, "if you don't lie still until I'm through and stop gawking at that girl on the bed there. . . . Hey, wait—!"

But Albright was already on his feet. Faye had stirred, had opened bewildered brown eyes, had called, "Tommy . . ." in a faint whisper.

A moment later Albright held her in his arms. Speechless with happiness and relief, he devoured her with his eyes, then abruptly noticed that the room had emptied.

"Tommy," she breathed, "oh, it's so good to have your arms around me again."

"Honest?" he asked. "You still love me? I thought—"

A wry grimace twisted her soft lips for an instant, and she exclaimed,

"That beast, Cavanaugh! I loathed him. Oh, but you don't know how hard it was for me to do what I had to do. But I knew I'd have to do something like slapping you in public to get you to leave me alone for a while, and I had to be alone with him to find out—"

"What on earth are you talking about, Faye?"

"About Bette," she said sadly. "You see, Tommy, Bette and Parks Cavanaugh were secretly married—"

"Good Lord!" Tommy gasped. "Kanine expected that to come to light too then. And I suppose that's one reason Parks was searching her papers—to find the license, among other things. But go on."

"Well," she resumed, "after Bette's murder, and after I saw how he was running after other women, I remembered something Bette had told me—had hinted at, rather—some dreadful secret in Parks' life. I began to put two and two together and the answer I got was that Cavanaugh was the one who had murdered her. . . ."

"Darling!" Albright gasped, squeezing her close. "And you were only trying to wheedle his secret from him and avenge Bette's death?"

"Of course," she answered. "I hated him from the first. I never want to see him again!"

"You never will," Albright told her. "And that's not all. From now on you're not going to see anybody but me!"

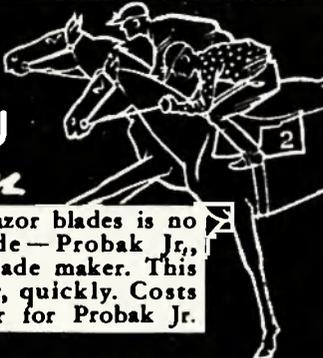
Next Month: THE SEA OF FEAR—Another Spine-Chilling
Complete Novelette by JOHN H. KNOX



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4

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PROBAK JUNIOR

The DEVIL in STEEL

A Robot Leaves a Trail of
Corpses Beneath Its
Electric Sway!

By JACK
WILLIAMSON

*Author of "Spider Island," "Death's Cold
Daughter," etc.*

MIGHTIER than any man, the iron giant came clanking through the darkness. The building shook beneath its quarter-ton of metal. Menacing blue rays shot from its photo-electric eyes. Its steel face was a staring mask, inhuman, sinister! Puny men covered before its crushing advance.

For they saw the monster of a new Frankenstein. They saw the soulless might of the robot turned against its makers. They saw all humanity crushed by the vengeful power of revolting machines—saw a dead world turned to a thundering hell of metal monstrosities . . .

A swell lead for his newspaper story, thought Jimmie Beckland, scribbling rapid shorthand. Nor was it all imagination! His tall lean body was already half shuddering. The mechanical giant certainly looked uncanny enough, marching stiffly beside its maker into the long laboratory.

A queer contrast, Beckland thought,



Behind Dr. Daker was a horror in steel.

between robot and man. For Dr. Runyon Daker was thin, stooped, colorless. He stood a bare five feet, against the robot's towering seven. He must have created it as a sort of compensation for his own bodily weakness. He was quivering with pride as the great metal giant moved obediently to his high-voiced commands.

Shuddering horror abruptly stopped Beckland's flying pencil. Melanie Doyle swayed to her feet beside him, a shriek of pure terror torn from her lovely throat. The little group of watchers sat paralyzed with consternation. For something was frightfully wrong!

An ominous clashing grated from the steel-armored robot. It swung with ponderous menace upon its proud demonstrator. A great blue arm flailed upward, struck savagely! Dr. Runyon Daker sprawled limply at the iron feet of the monster he had made, blood oozing from his head!

It was half accident that brought Jimmie Beckland to witness that strange tragedy in the lonely island laboratory. He had come to Scimitar Lake, high in the heart of the Rockies, on vacation from his metropolitan daily. Or so the resort village thought. It had seemed but chance that Delcrain met him the day before, on the pier above the lake.

ANDREW DELCRAIN was the tall soft-spoken president of Effo Electric. Beckland had once called at his ornate Manhattan office to get the details of a million-dollar merger, and Delcrain knew him now.

"Why, Beckland! How are they biting?" he shouted jovially. "I'm here to kill two birds with one stone," he explained, offering an expensive cigar. "Business and pleasure. —Say, Beckland, you don't want a good story?"

"I came here for trout," Beckland said. "But a scoop's a scoop. What's up?"

Delcrain spoke confidentially.

"You've heard of Runyon Daker, the robot inventor?"

"Sure!" Beckland spoke eagerly. "I did a feature, couple of years back, on his new electronic ear. Specialize in

scientific stuff, you know —What's he got now?"

"Daker has been working the past two years at his private laboratory out on McTee Island," said the tall executive. "He has perfected a complete electrical man.

"If it's all he says, I'm going to pick up the patent rights. He's going to put on a demonstration, tomorrow night. I could arrange for you to see it—we can always stand a little good publicity."

"You're on!" Beckland cried—and his eager voice didn't carry half his delight.

McTee Island was five acres of rugged granite jutting from the farther end of deep, cold Scimitar Lake. Gigantic, ancient trees grew wherever there was soil enough. The big, dilapidated log dwelling stood beneath great pines, beyond the half-rotted boat landing.

Jimmie Beckland felt his first chill of sinister foreboding when the hired motorboat left him beside the tall financier on the sagging landing. They were to be guests until the boat returned next day. Already the sun had gone beyond far, snow-swept peaks, and the icy waters of the forest-walled lake turned blackly forbidding. The newshawk shuddered with a sense of dread imprisonment.

That was forgotten, however, when Melanie Doyle came running down to welcome them. Daker's niece, she was a tall girl of twenty, athletic and lovely in a tweed sports suit.

"Jim Beckland!" Surprised pleasure rang in her voice. Her grey-eyed face lit with gladness. Beckland moved very eagerly to take her offered hand.

"Two years since I saw you," he told her. "I hoped you'd be here!"

"I have to look after Uncle Runyon." Trouble stained her lovely face. "I'm afraid—afraid he has gone too far!" Her tortured eyes moved to Andrew Delcrain. "I hope you buy the robot and take it away, Mr. Delcrain. The thing is horrible—monstrous!"

"A poor sales talk." The financier smiled gravely. "But I'll make him a fair offer—if it is a practical inven-

tion. Where's Dr. Daker?"

"At the laboratory," she said, "getting ready for the demonstration."

They went up a narrow, tree-walled path, beyond the old dwelling. Dusk had already fallen beneath the pines. The laboratory stood alone, across the little island. It was a square, white-walled modern structure. Some powerful machine was throbbing within it—yet Beckland shuddered to a feeling that it was somehow tomb-like.

The door in the bright-lit entry was a green-painted studded panel of steel, its knob a modernistic cube of ruby glass. Delcraïn paused in the pool of light, fumbled for it with an odd hesitation.

Beckland reached past him to open the door, followed him into the long room. The walls were lined with metal-working power tools. A great motor-generator was thrumming at the farther end.

"Franz," the girl called to a shambling, gorilla-like figure in grimy mechanic's coveralls, "tell Dr. Daker that we're all here."

SHE introduced two other waiting spectators, seated in folding chairs.

Tony Marvis was a dark, sullen-looking youth. His flashy checked suit was expensive but unpressed. His sallow, haggard face was purple, unshaven.

Jeff Kelly was a thin, bald man, with a twisted leering face. Gold teeth chewed at an unlit cigar. Yellow claws of hands toyed with a pair of glittering, gem-set gold dice that he wore for a watch fob.

"Tony's another member of the family," she said. "Dr. Daker's step-son. But you had better watch Mr. Kelly, Mr. Delcraïn!" She laughed. "He is a rival bidder for the invention."

Franz Roth, the mechanic, appeared again, opening an inner door. His staring face was dull with an ox-like expression of stupidity—was that a mask, Beckland wondered, to hide a secret cunning?

"We are ready," pronounced his flat, nasal voice. "Dr. Daker brings you—Roxar!"

Clanking into the room, followed by its little stooped builder, the seven-foot robot looked as mighty and stern as a stone-chiseled Assyrian god.

"Roxar!" Daker's high, feeble voice was almost a squeak. "Halt!"

The robot stopped in the middle of the floor, like a futuristic colossus of bright blue steel. The sparrow-like scientist cleared his throat, said shrilly:

"Gentlemen, let me present the first complete robot automaton—my Electromaton Model 99! The robots of which you read in the newspapers are mere ingenious machines. This is more! My new electro-neuronic cells give it an electrical brain. It can remember—think—reason!"

The little scientist paused, looked proudly up at his weird creation. Writing swiftly in the silence, Jimmie Beckland looked around at the others. They all had gasped with shock at the robot's alarming aspect.

But now Delcraïn's face was poker-smooth. Kelly's hard little eyes were glittering with greed. Tony Marvis's haggard face was a sullen, bitter mask of hate. Franz Roth's features were the same stupid blank.

"Electromaton Model 99," the high voice resumed, "is a complete operating unit. My new storage batteries, charged from the generator here, give it self-contained power." He cleared his throat importantly. "Now for the demonstration! I begin by addressing the robot by the name to which its electronic ears are tuned—Roxar!"

Jimmie Beckland started, at that loud thin shout. And the robot also came to life! It clanked and jerked suddenly about to face the little scientist, stopped motionless again.

"Roxar!" Daker commanded. "Brush your hair!"

A massive metal arm lifted, flailed noisily at the armored head. The robot had no hair. Beckland felt vaguely that the towering steel-visaged body was too grimly menacing!

"Roxar!" its master demanded, "what is seven minus four?"

The great metal hand reached stiffly out. One long cruel gleaming metal claw lifted. Another. And a third!

It wasn't very wonderful, Jimmie Beckland tried to tell himself. But he shuddered. Again he looked at the others. Melanie Doyle's oval face was a white pool of dread. Tony Marvis stared with dull, brooding hatred at the robot and its master alike.

A white scar of fear showed above Delcraïn's thin lip. The greed in Kelly's beady eyes had turned to dread. Only Franz Roth was still ox-like, unmoved.

PUTTING himself across the room, Daker now held up a green silk handkerchief, called:

"Roxar! What does this mean?"

The robot clanged and swung and lumbered toward him. It stopped abruptly when he pocketed the green handkerchief, held up a red one in its stead.

"Now, Roxar!" Daker commanded. "Remember! What was my first order?"

The metal body jerked and shook again. Steel talons rattled against the armored skull, grotesquely brushing hair that did not exist. It should have been funny, Beckland thought. But he shuddered to the same outraged dread that he saw in Melanie Doyle's clear eyes.

"Roxar," Daker shrilled again, "that is all!"

The robot stood frozen to a gigantic hideous statue of steel, eyes gleaming weirdly blue. The thin little scientist stepped forward.

"That is enough, gentlemen," he said, "to prove that the Electromaton can think, reason, remember!" His pale spectacled eyes glittered, oddly like those of the robot.

"My robots can do the work of all the world! Think of it—a world of metal slaves! Metal men toiling in mine and field and factory, doing all the work. Every man can be an emperor, with his own robot-slaves!"

"Caution, Doctor!" It was a low, harsh whisper from dull-faced Franz. "Roxar hears!"

"The Electromaton is worth any sum I could name." Daker jerked his head impatiently. "But I'm not greedy. I ask only a nominal reward."

His pale eyes flashed avidly from face to face. "All my inventions are for sale—at the modest price of one million dollars."

In the startled silence, Jeff Kelly caught his breath. Tony Marvis gulped. Delcraïn deliberately blew the ash off his cigar. The little scientist stepped anxiously forward, shrilling:

"Well, what do you say?"

Delcraïn shook his head.

"Your figure is fantastic! Effe Electric manufactures appliances of proven value. Frankly, I fail to see any scientific or commercial value in your demonstration. Honestly, I'm disappointed. Of course, if you have any discoveries of practical value—"

Jeff Kelly came abruptly to his feet, explosively spitting his half-chewed cigar toward the wall.

"Practical be hanged!" he sputtered. "It's a great stunt, Professor! Me, I'm in the side show supply business. I don't give a damn about the scientific end. But your electric giant's a cinch to pack a tent! Tell you what—I'll give you ten thousand for the exhibition rights."

Daker stepped back toward the robot, hesitant, considering.

"I need the money," he muttered. "And you don't want my patents?"

"Sell 'em to the man in the moon!" grunted Kelly. "It just want your iron man, whatja call him, Roxar!"

"I'll do it," agreed Daker. "Sold!"

At that word, the great robot came abruptly to lumbering, grinding life. Humming and clanging, it swung ponderously toward Daker, its thick-lensed eyes flashing ominously blue.

"Roxar!" he shouted fearfully. "Halt!"

But it swayed swiftly toward him, its mighty tread shaking the laboratory floor. Melanie Doyle screamed again. Deep and solemn came the warning voice of Franz Roth:

"Roxar is angered! Tell him he will not be sold!"

The agitated scientist sprang toward the steel breast of the charging robot.

"Something wrong!" he shrilled. "Got to open the plate, disconnect—"

Jimmie Beckland caught his breath

with dread as the great metal arm lifted stiffly, fell. It struck Daker's head. He collapsed at the robot's feet. Abruptly motionless again, it stood above his lax body, stark and grim as the carven god of some forgotten evil cult.

With a soft cry of pain, Melanie Doyle ran to the fallen man.

"Uncle Runyon!" she sobbed. "Can you hear me? I was so afraid—"

JIMMIE BECKLAND helped her carry Daker to a cot by the wall. In a moment he sat up, peering about with pale bewildered eyes.

"That offer," Jeff Kelly muttered uneasily. "Forget it. I don't want to buy the devil in a machine!"

"Just a short somewhere," protested Daker. "I can fix it."

He stood up, tried to walk toward the grimly looming robot.

"Not now!" Melanie objected nervously. "Let's get away from this horrid—monster! Come on up to the house. Jake and Liza will have dinner ready."

Beckland took Daker's other arm, and they returned along the uneven woodland path to the dwelling. The sky had turned very black. Far thunder rolled warningly against the peaks that walled Scimitar Lake.

"A storm!" Melanie's voice was shuddering. "They are quick and terrible, here on the lake."

When they reached the house, Daker let her bandage his head, but refused to lie down. When the negro couple served the meal, he ate a little. But he kept talking, in a high, incoherent voice, of the wonders of a robot-manned world. When dinner was over, ignoring the girl's protests, he started back to the laboratory with Franz Roth.

"Just a simple adjustment," he said.

"The electro-neuronic equilibrium is very delicate. If I wait, the robot's whole mind may become deranged!"

"Can you feature that?" demanded Jeff Kelly. "A machine gone mad?"

He seemed to mean it for a joke, but nobody laughed.

Old Jake had kindled a log fire on

the big hearth, for it was cold. For a while the party sat before it—all still silent from the horror of the striking robot. Melanie shuddered abruptly.

"I'm so afraid—for Uncle Runyon!" she whispered. "If the thing should turn on him again—"

"I'll stroll down and see if he's all right," offered Andrew Delcrain, sympathetically. "Let me go with you," Jeff Kelly volunteered hastily. "That robot would be one smash attraction—if he could keep the devil out of it!"

Sullenly announcing that he was going to bed, Tony Marvis climbed the broad stair. Jimmie Beckland was left alone before the fire, with Melanie. He knew, now, that he had really loved her, these last two long years. He had a vivid sense of menace dogging her, a poignant urge to defend her.

Fear still haunted her oval, grey-eyed face.

"Jim" she whispered, "why don't some of them come back? Something must have happened!"

"Shall I go down?" he offered.

"Let's both go," she said. "Before it storms!"

But the storm struck before they came out on the old veranda. Purple lightning seared across the black, cloud-massed sky. Rain drummed down in great icy drops.

"Better let me go alone," Beckland said, and pushed back the shuddering girl.

The mad wind tore at him. He was drenched in an instant, chilled to the bone. Guided by the flicker of lightning, he stumbled along the trail toward the laboratory. Relief sobbed from him when he saw its white cube. He was calling out, anxiously, when he stumbled over something sickeningly soft—and fell plunging into black horror!

On his knees in the roaring darkness, he felt the thing. It was sticky, sodden—warm! Sharp ends of broken bones jutted out of it. Through the rain, a sickening smell came to his nostrils. Half the acrid smoke of smouldering cloth—and half a peculiar penetrating pungence that was dreadfully familiar!

Hardened newshawk that he was, Beckland turned faintly sick. His tortured mind painted again all the well-rehearsed horror of an electrocution—the death-chamber filled with that same suffocating stench of seared human flesh!

Who?

CHOKED with the horror of that question, he waited for the next flash of lightning. But the body was beyond any recognition. Limbs and torso were crushed to bloody pulp. The head was sheer nightmare, a broken jelly of bone and brains, the surface burned black. The face was—obliterated!

Only the clothing answered his question. The blood-drenched suit had a loud stripe. A pair of jeweled golden dice still dangled from the watch pocket. It was the hard-bitten side show man, Jeff Kelly!

But what devil's mill had pulped him? What searing horror burned him?

Himself sweating in the icy rain, trembling and ill, Beckland staggered back to his feet. Melanie Doyle was first in his mind. He had left her alone, undefended against this horror that stalked the island! Wiping crimson fingers on his handkerchief, he started running back toward the dwelling.

The girl met him, stumbling against the roaring downpour.

"Jim!" she gasped. "I came—I was afraid—for you—" She clung to his arm. "Find anybody?"

"Kelly," he said. "Dead!"

Lightning showed him her face. "Jim, what—"

Horror strangled her. Her hand went rigid on his arm. For a thin, shrill scream of mortal dread had cut through the storm! It was lost beneath a loud brazen clangor!

Shuddering, they peered back along the trail. Lightning flared blue to reveal the tragedy. A man came running from the laboratory—little Dr. Daker, his thin legs working like pistons of fear! Behind him came—horror in steel!

The seven-foot robot came plung-

ing, glistening blue in the lightning. Evil gleams shot from its wide-lensed eyes. Clanging, clashing, it moved with a stiff, awkward, mechanical deliberation. Its speed, nevertheless, was appalling!

Darkness again. Melanie clung against Beckland's arm, gasping with dry-throated dread. Daker's quavering shriek ripped once more through the veiling rain. The clangor of the robot was nearer, a hellish alarm.

"It has gone wrong—mad!" sobbed the girl. "It will kill him! I was so afraid—"

Beckland's tense arm slipped protectingly about the shuddering girl. Hoarsely, he demanded:

"Is there a gun in the house?"

"I don't think—yes, Tony's rifle! Do—"

Her voice stopped. Lightning flashed again. The first flicker stopped the two figures motionless, yet in violent action—like a single frame from a movie film. The fleeing scientist had stumbled; caught motionless in the very act of falling. And the robot was upon him!

Darkness fell, with splintering thunder. Daker screamed. It was a thin, bleating sound, like the cry of a wounded rabbit. The drum of cold rain drowned it.

Another flash of horror! Daker was helpless on the ground—and steel feet tramping him! His cries abruptly ceased. The robot bent stiffly, lifted him in crushing arms.

Beckland swung the mute girl away, himself sickened by the dull snapping of broken bones. He saw abrupt electric sparks, crackling purple about the robot's claws. Then its dead maker, crushed and burned, was cast to the side of the trail.

Shuddering, Beckland dragged the girl swiftly behind a tree. The monster stood motionless for a moment above its victim, then went crashing blindly through the storm-torn undergrowth toward the lake.

Careless of the pelting rain, Beckland ran ahead of the girl to pick up the body. He staggered back with it to the house, laid it on a couch in the living room—and felt ill again when

he saw it in the light!

"Don't look!" he gasped hoarsely at the girl. "Call Tony, and get his rifle! The thing is still loose—God knows what it will do!"

RUNYON DAKER had been mangled beyond recognition. The stamping metal feet had destroyed his face. The steel levers of the arms had crushed flesh and bone to crimson pulp. Electric fire had seared it, cooked skin was falling away. Beckland coughed to the strangling reek of smouldering cloth and burned flesh.

He spread a rug over the dripping horror, called the startled negroes from the kitchen, told them to secure doors and windows.

Melanie Doyle came back down the stairs.

"Tony's gone," she whispered. "And his rifle!" Her voice sank. "Jim, Tony hated Uncle Runyon—because Uncle had called him a shiftless no-good, threatened to disinherit him."

"Eh!" Beckland rubbed his lean chin. "And there's no weapon in the house?"

"Not sep' dis, boss!"

The trembling old negro, Jake, brought from the kitchen a rusty old long tom shotgun, with one lonely buck-shot cartridge. Beckland tried the action skeptically, loaded it, handed it to Melanie.

"If the thing comes here," he told her, "wait till it's within six feet. Then shoot into the middle of it. That ought to stop it! I'm going out to see what happened to the others."

"Don't—" protested the girl, fearfully. "Or, anyhow, take the gun!"

"Oh, Lawdy!" wailed old Jake. "De debble-thing's a-comin' back!"

Above the drumming of rain and the thunder magnified to an endless reverberation against the walling peaks, Beckland heard the robot's brazen clangor. The girl thrust the shotgun back into his hands, ran apprehensively to a window. Beckland followed.

Lightning ripped the sky again. They saw the steel giant plunging

back through the swaying trees—horrificing as some monstrous invader from Mars!

"De good Lawd save us!"

Jake fell on his knees to pray; fat, white-aproned Liza collapsed whimpering in a chair.

Her white face brave and quiet, the girl stood staring from the window. The monster itself became invisible in the darkness, but its huge, blue-shining eyes, weirdly sinister as those of some jungle-monster, moved swiftly toward the house. The ponderous tread crashed across the old veranda. The robot was at the door!

Beckland leveled the rusty shotgun, set himself in the middle of the room. Cold chills rattled his teeth. This wasn't funny—trapped by a mad metal giant!

A steel fist crashed against the door. The lock creaked ominously. Liza shrieked and slid out of her chair. Jake's prayer died in his throat. Melanie turned silently to Beckland, her bloodless face agonized with a terrible question.

"Wait!" he called softly. "The door's locked—"

His words were lost in a tremendous crash. The time-rotted panels burst into flying splinters. Oil lamps flickered to a wind cold as death—swirling ahead of the lumbering robot!

Its blue steel mass filled the opening. Smouldering hideously blue, its eyes moved back and forth with its stiffly jerking head. Suddenly it whirred and plunged ahead again—its fearful red-stained metal talons clutching for Melanie Doyle!

Heavy with the sickness of terror, Jimmie Beckland stepped sidewise. He stopped in front of the horror-frozen girl. Trying to steady jerking muscles and pounding heart, he lifted the ancient gun.

The metal giant lumbered swiftly toward him. Its flailing arm caught a table, tipped it, sent a glass lamp crashing to the floor. Beckland waited until it was four feet from the gun's wavering muzzle, aimed at its blue breast, pulled the trigger.

The response was an empty click.

A steel arm swung wildly at him, purple sparks crackling from cruel-taloned fingers. Beckland sidestepped, lifted the gun like a club, struck fiercely at the great armored skull. The rusty barrel crashed to its mark—and Beckland's whole body jerked to the rending agony of a powerful electric shock!

DIMLY he knew that the ancient gun had exploded in his hands, with a terrific blast. That Melanie had collapsed on the floor behind him. That wild swift flame was spreading from the shattered lamp. But blackness overcame him.

Icy rain brought back his consciousness. He was lying on the ground under a tree, his head in Melanie's lap. Jake and Liza were crouched near them, drenched and whimpering. The storm still howled and drummed against the pines—and beneath it roared a conflagration!

"Jim!" the girl was sobbing. "Oh, Jim—speak to me!"

He groaned, sat up dizzily. Yellow light flickered against great boles. The old log house was a roaring furnace. Beckland rubbed his wet head with blistered hands, looked anxiously at Melanie.

"Afraid I'll live," he muttered. "You're all right. Tell me—what happened? Where's the—robot?"

"The gun blew up in your hands," whispered the girl. "You fell as if you were dead—"

"Half electrocuted!" Beckland muttered. "Daker's storage battery is a wonder, sure enough, for portable power—that thing must pack a thousand volts! But where did it go?"

He looked hopefully toward the roaring flames, but the fearful girl shook her head.

"I don't know." She shuddered. "At first I thought you had put it out of commission. It stood swaying a minute, over you—almost fell. The fire swept toward it, on the spilled oil. Suddenly it moved, and went out in the storm again. We just had time to carry you outside."

"So it's still free!" He shook his throbbing head. "You haven't seen

Tony or Delcraim or Franz?"

"No." It was a shuddering, voiceless whisper. "I'm afraid—afraid it killed them all!"

Beckland reeled unsteadily to his feet.

"We can't stay here," he gasped. "The thing may have thought we'd be finished off in the fire, if it can think that far. But it may come back—and we're defenseless! Let's go to the lab. It will be a shelter, anyhow; and there is a chance we'll find the others."

The girl nodded voicelessly, called to the whimpering servants. She walked very close to Jimmie Beckland, along the rugged trail. The black sky sluiced blinding, chilling rain. Lightning seared their vision. Thunder rolled incessantly down from the peaks.

The white cube of the laboratory came into view at last, coldly tomb-like in the rain. Beckland was reaching for the door-knob, in the bright-lit entry, when Melanie pointed trembling into a dark mass of shrubbery behind them, gasping:

"Look, Jim! *There—*"

Beckland reeled shuddering to peer at the shapeless dripping thing flung like a bundle of red rags into the brush. It was pulped and seared like the others, not easy to identify. Faint and nauseated, he picked a sodden leather cigar-case out of smeared blood and entrails.

"Delcraim," he whispered hoarsely to the girl. "Kelly—Dr. Daker—now Delcraim! That leaves Tony and Franz—"

"*Hush!*" came the girl's warning breath. "There's somebody in the laboratory. I heard—something!"

Beckland moved silently to the door. A moment he paused, weakened by horror. Then he turned the red glass knob, stepped quickly inside.

The powerful motor-generator still throbbed against the farther wall; bright electrics still glowed among the dusty roof-girders. Warily, Beckland scanned machines and benches. The room seemed empty.

"Someone has been here," whispered the girl, beside him. "Rummaging Uncle Runyon's papers. See!"

She pointed to a tall green filing cabinet. Its battered drawers were sagging open, empty. Papers and blue-prints were scattered about the wrecking-bar beside it on the floor.

"But he must be gone—"

BECKLAND heard a little sound behind the door, spun swiftly. A man was crouching there—a massive, powerful, black-bearded stranger. The newshawk was in time to see a heavy black automatic descending toward his skull—but too late to defend himself!

He tried vainly to thrust up a shielding arm. The flat black gun struck his temple with shocking agony. Not quite unconscious, he sagged to hands and knees. Fighting red waves of pain, he swayed back to his feet.

The bearded stranger was backing swiftly through the open door, menacing them with level gun. Pausing against the stormy dark, he shouted harshly:

"I warned Daker not to steal my idea! You see what happened to him!"

Then he was lost in the rain. Beckland staggered groggily to shut the door. He tried to lock it, shook his throbbing head.

"Lock is broken," he muttered. "Forced." His blurred eyes looked at the trembling girl. "Know him?"

"Name's Birkhead—Leland Birkhead," whispered Melanie. "Used to be Uncle's assistant. They quarreled. He accused Uncle of stealing his ideas. He wrote threatening letters, and said he was building a robot of his own. He may have come to steal plans—"

Beckland caught his breath.

"I wonder—" he whispered. "Could he have done something to the robot, while we were all at dinner—to make it go wrong and cover up his theft?" He rubbed his chin. "Anyhow, let's look for Franz and Tony. And some weapon! For Birkhead may come back—or the robot!"

Dripping icy water, he walked swiftly through the three connecting rooms. In one doorway he rocked

back to a blow of instinctive horror. Before him stood a whole monstrous line of staring robots!

"Preliminary models," explained the girl, following. "They didn't work."

He found a dry coat in a locker, put it around her shivering body.

"Nobody here," he said. "And I don't see any weapon."

"Oh, Lawdy!" Old Jake's quavering, terrified cry called them back to the main room, where the generator throbbed. "De debble-thing!"

Cold dread ran through Beckland's veins, as he, too, heard the brazen clanging of the great robot approaching through the storm. The girl's grey eyes looked at him, sick with consuming fear. Her dry lips asked soundlessly:

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know." The newshawk rubbed his throbbing head. "The door won't lock, and we can't find a weapon—maybe it will go away."

The girl shook her head.

"It won't!" Her whisper was a dry horror-husk. "Not till I am dead! It is after me because I'm Uncle's kin—"

Her voice faded to the heavy clangor outside the door. The green steel panel rattled violently on its hinges. Beckland shuddered to a nerve-severing scratching, as if metal fingers fumbled for the knob!

"Can't we hold the door?" sobbed the girl.

"No," said Beckland. "The steel would transmit current to electrocute us—"

His voice died, oddly. His eyes narrowed at the panel, his lean head inclined. Still that queer fumbling went on.

"But—" he whispered, "*listen—*"

Suddenly he snatched a coil of heavy copper wire from a bench, flung it like a thin serpent across the concrete floor, ran back toward the thrumming generator—

HE was frozen by Melanie's shriek. The glass knob had turned. The steel door flung open. The robot came lumbering into the room. Seven feet

of towering bright steel, dark with running stains of human blood. Its bulging armored head swung stiffly back and forth. Sinister blue-glowing eyes fixed upon the girl.

Her strength went out, then, in a little sigh of agony. Ashen-faced, too terrified to run, she sank down on her knees. The metal giant lumbered swiftly toward her, merciless red-stained talons of steel clutching for her helpless white flesh.

"Stay back, Jim!" she sobbed. "It's I that it wants!"

The trembling newshawk stood back against the wall. His eyes tried to follow the glistening ruddy wire laid like a lasso across the green-painted floor. Dimly he saw the monster about to pass the end of it—then everything dissolved in a picture of Melanie's fair body crushed and seared like the other hideous human remnants he had found.

"Stop!" He had tried to shout, but his voice was a dry, hoarse whisper only. And the robot clanged on. He rasped: "I know that E. E. is two million in the red!"

At that, the steel giant abruptly halted. The metal head jerked back and forth until the glaring blue eyes found him. The robot lunged toward him, flailing out with crimson, purple-sparking talons.

Beckland waited, breathless and shuddering, beside the generator. He saw one metal foot tramp down upon the copper wire—and threw his strength against a massive switch. The hum of the dynamo changed. Blue sparks showered. Suddenly inert, the colossal metal body toppled slowly forward. Out of it came a thin shriek of mortal human agony!

"Red on green," whispered Beckland, staring out of a dazed weakness. "He didn't see the wire."

The deputy sheriff from Scimitar, a little later, hammered on the laboratory door. Beckland and Melanie, clad in dry coveralls they had discovered in a locker, let him in. He was followed by Franz Roth and a little posse of the villagers. Amidst them, in handcuffs, glowered heavy black-bearded Leland Birkhead.

"Roth, here, rowed to the village after us," announced the deputy. "He says he found a tin suit in a boat, and figured something was wrong. I reckon he was right! We found Kelly and Delcraim dead outside—or what's left of them! And this guy trying to sneak away in another boat!"

"I'm no murderer!" Birkhead protested sullenly. "I came here merely to find what Daker was doing with my stolen invention."

"He isn't the killer," agreed Beckland. "There's the suit of armor." He pointed toward the fallen robot-shape. "You'll find the murderer inside—electrocuted!"

"Marvis, eh?" said the deputy, as his men labored to pry open the steel contrivance. "He's the only one not accounted for."

"An ingenious thing!" Beckland muttered. "Designed like submarine armor, though of lighter metal. Storage cells in the shoulders, high-tension coils in the head, and insulated cables running to the claws. Light-bulbs for eyes. See how the arms are built—such a terrific leverage!"

The breast-plate came open at last, and the deputy peered inside.

"Andrew Delcraim!" he gasped. "But we found his body outside—"

"That's Tony Marvis, outside," Beckland told him. "He must have been suspicious, and come down to investigate. But Delcraim got him, first. His clothing and rifle are in a locker, here. Delcraim put his own garments on the burned and mangled corpse, so that it would be identified as himself."

"Delcraim probably meant to sink Tony's garments in the lake, together with his robot-suit. When Franz appropriated his boat, to go for help, it broke up his plan."

"Delcraim!" whispered the wondering girl. "So that's what you meant! E. E. stands for Effo Electric!"

"It does," said Beckland. "My paper had a tip that he had looted his company from inside. I was covering the story—tailing Delcraim in case he tried to scam. That supplies half the motive for his plot—he hoped to be reported dead, so no search would be made."

"He must have planned it long in advance. He had seen the robot, probably photographed it, and had the suit made to imitate it. Daker probably gave him the storage battery to test. He must have invited me here because he wanted a competent witness to his faked death.—Poor Kelly, by the way, must have seen or guessed too much."

"You knew," the girl whispered again, "when you called out, and made him turn from me toward the charged wire! But how?"

Jimmie Beckland paused to smile at her.

"Delcrain was color-blind," he said. "Couldn't distinguish red and green. I noticed that when he couldn't see the red glass knob against the green door of the lab. The real robot could distinguish colors—you remember Daker's demonstration. But

the mad monster, breaking in here, had the same difficulty that Delcrain did."

"One thing," demanded the bewildered deputy. "Where's the real robot?"

"It's standing in the lab, together with that row of unsuccessful models. It's quite a tricky contraption, but the valuable thing about it is the light, powerful storage battery that runs it. Delcrain meant to steal that invention—which is why he was trying to kill every one who might know the secret of it!"

He turned back to the girl, smiling again.

"That discovery is worth a fortune, Melanie. And now it's yours."

She looked a long time into his eager face. Her grey eyes misted.

"No, Jim," she whispered. "Not mine—ours!"



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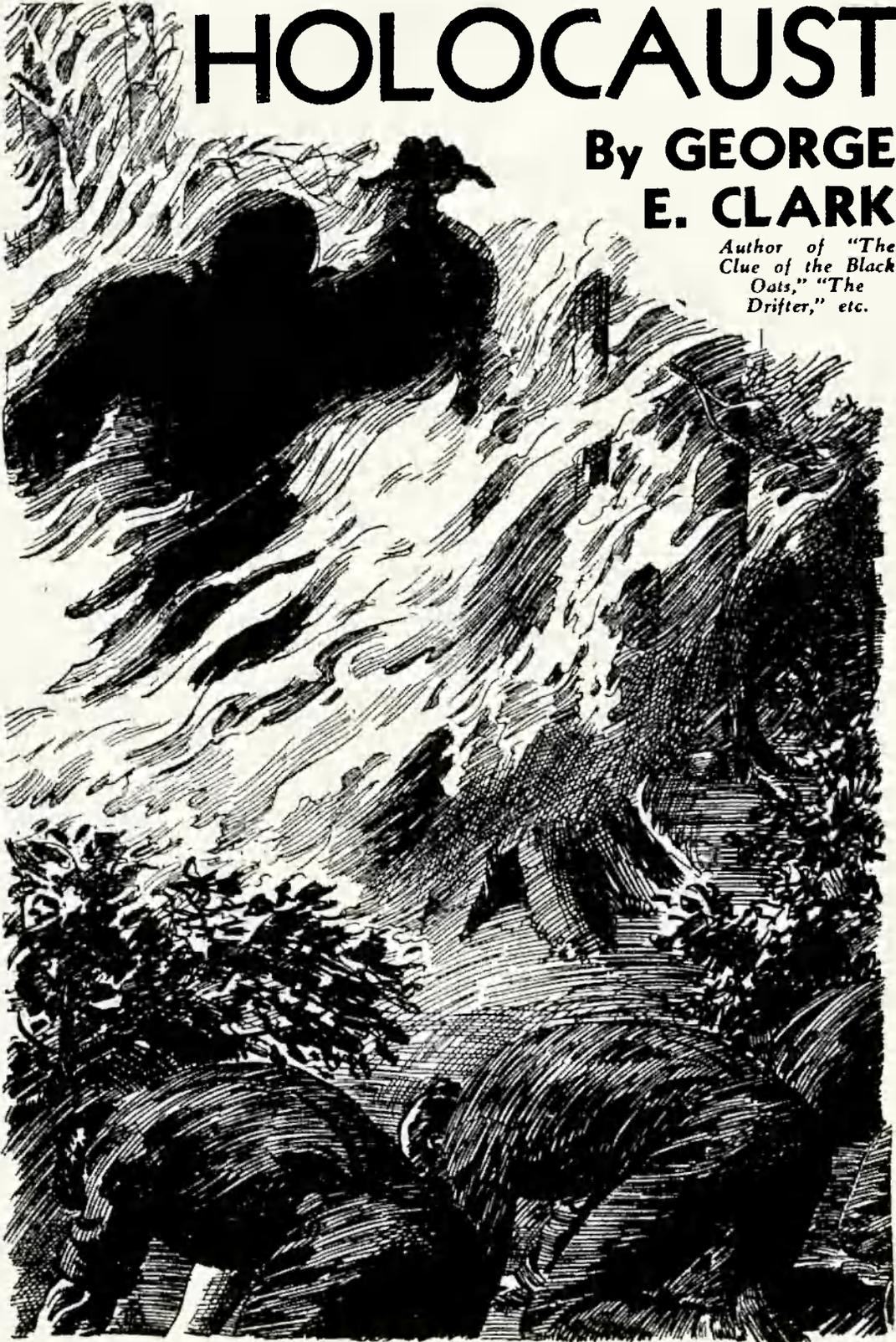


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"Arise, children of the wrath to come!"

Bruce Langford Goes Through a Real Ordeal

of HELL

CHAPTER I

The Black Brotherhood

WHILE I live, the agony of memory gnaws like a loathsome worm at the vitals of my soul, bringing back a hellish scene of a mad, wind-driven inferno which pierced the smoke-defiled heavens.

I can hear again the monster's greedy roar as it leaped insanely from tree to tortured, withering tree. I can hear the crackling thunder of toppling giants—feel the earth's shudder as they crashed in awful ruin.

Again the hot, searing breath of fire is burning my flushed and grimy cheeks; in my nostrils clings the sickening, tar-like odor of fire-blackened corpses—once living creatures of God-inspired beauty. Terror seizes me, as it seized me then, with my thought of Ellen.

Ellen, my wife, my lovely bride of four months—whose rare beauty of face and figure marked her apart from the women of Crag Cove, like a shapely young cedar compelled to

A Complete Novelette of Flaming Vengeance



Fear-stricken voices rose in a blood-chilling chorus

by Fire to Save His Beautiful Bride!

grace a neighborhood of gnarled, twisted oaks!

In that moment of instinctive dread, I gripped the shovel with trembling hands and tried to decide what to do. On either side of me, desperate men were chopping, digging, hoeing — working frantically to thwart the licking tongues of flame that crept along the carpet of the forest.

Back-fires had been set, but now the wind was shifting. I was needed here, desperately needed, to help save the village. Yet the terror-stricken face of my young wife seemed to flash before my vision; her anguished voice seemed to rise above the crackling, snarling fire—calling, begging me to come!

HASTILY I scooped up a final shovelful of debris from the new fire trail, turned and struck out blindly through the underbrush.

As I fought my way down the rough mountain slope above Crag Cove—crawling over rotten logs, evading the clutching, restraining tentacles of twigs and branches—I recalled the weird premonition of evil that had swept over me when I left Ellen, three hours earlier.

It must have been inspired by the fright I saw mirrored in her large violet-blue eyes. A sinister, undefined menace—I could feel it, as I had felt it many times since coming to this God-forsaken, isolated village, home of the Black Brotherhood.

The Black Brotherhood! How we had all laughed at that name, back in San Francisco—Frank Bledsoe, Carl Abbott, Luis Villanova and I—for we mentally envisioned childish simpletons strutting around in black nightgowns.

Ellen hadn't laughed. She had lived in Los Angeles, and had seen enough superstitious quackery to make her indignant whenever she heard of gullible folk being duped.

It was pitiful, she said, to see unscrupulous fakers drumming up a following simply by wrapping towels about their crafty heads, mumbling gibberish and peering wild-eyed into a crystal ball!

But this Brotherhood of Crag Cove proved to be something different. It had nothing in common with other fantastic, ritualistic sects which had sprung up in various parts of the country.

This was a little band of queer but apparently harmless men and women, who had "fled" from a modern and progressive world. They formed their own settlement at Crag Cove, a barren spot far up on the coast of northern California.

Spawned of ignorance and superstition, their strange creed had apparently been fostered by the world-wide economic crisis, the political and social strife.

The black garb these people wore was meant to signify that they were in mourning for the wicked world. For they firmly believed that horrible punishment and unlimited terror were at hand for all peoples.

Therefore, science and advancement were futile; normal pleasures were wicked; even laughter was forbidden! Yet they had tolerated us among them—even though they knew our purpose was to help to bring a railroad into Crag Cove.

Nevertheless, we could sense their resentment; and because I knew that people living abnormally repressed lives often become dangerously neurotic—that human emotions, dammed up, are liable to explode without warning in some horrible expression of perverted desires—I took no risks.

Keeping watch over my attractive young bride, I had never, until the forest fire threatened the town, let her out of my sight.

It was with an effort that I forced myself to leave her. I seemed to sense some indescribable menace in the very air. The frightened look in her lovely eyes seemed to hint at the same feeling. But it was only of my safety that she was thinking.

"You'll be careful, dear?" she pleaded, with a woman's anxiety.

"Of course!" I said lightly. "Only a fool would take chances with a forest fire. I hate to leave you, but every able-bodied man is needed, and it probably won't be for long."

"Then you *will* be careful? You'll look out for those terrible falling trees—and you won't let the fire get behind you and trap you—like—like those poor people in Oregon?"

SHE was thinking of the forty-three men, women and children who had been burned alive when the fire destroyed Woodvale, about seventy miles north of Crag Cove. It had been horrible. Some had been trapped in their homes, others overtaken and roasted attempting to flee in automobiles.

"Don't worry, dear," I admonished gently. "I'll be careful—it's you I'm worried about. Better stay indoors. You know what this town is—how these superstitious fanatics feel toward us!"

"Yes, Bruce, but that's only because of their religion."

"Religion!" I snorted. "You can't dignify the crazy doctrines of this devil-worshipping cult by calling them a religion! I don't trust these people, Ellen—"

"But they mean no harm," she protested quickly. "It's only that they think we're wicked city folk, you know. They've been taught to hate all beauty, and young girls like Lola can't even—"

"Exactly!" I cut in. "And you're the most beautiful creature their perverted, lustful eyes have ever beheld! Besides, they envy us.

"We're happy, healthy-minded, devoted to each other, while they're starved for normal living. Ellen, I'm going to send you back to San Francisco the very next time Abbott or Bledsoe makes the trip!"

"Is that so?" she teased, smiling. "Then you're coming with me. I'll go nowhere without my husband!"

"But, darling!" I cried. "You know I can't do that! I've got the chance of a lifetime here. Crag Cove is the logical shipping outlet for all the back country of southern Oregon.

"A little dredging and a short jetty will provide a good harbor. Our company is formed and we have plenty of financial backing for the railroad, which the Interstate Commerce Com-

mission has approved. All that remains to be done—"

"Silly!" she reproved, kissing me. "I know all that. And I'm with you one hundred per cent—which means I'm *not* going back to San Francisco alone! Besides, in San Francisco, we have any number of rough-necks like Mort and Ivan. They haven't the fervor of religious fanaticism to excuse them. They'll work for any man that pays them enough."

Whenever Ellen talked that way, tilting her shapely head and looking impishly up at me out of those big, innocent eyes, I knew I was whipped.

Grinning in spite of my anxiety, I hugged her slender, supple body close to mine.

"You loveable little scamp!" I growled. "If anyone ever so much as touches one of those golden hairs of your head, hell itself won't stop me from—"

But then I noticed my three friends, standing in the open doorway and watching us.

"You'll do what, in spite of hell, Bruce?" demanded Carl Abbott, in mock astonishment.

"So that's the line he hands her!" Bledsoe chimed in.

VILLANOVA fingered his tiny black mustache and drawled: "The ladies, they like the he-man *talk*. But maybe they like the *he-man* better than the talk, eh?"

My sheepish smile faded.

"What do you mean, Luis?" I shot back. "That sounds like a threat. Perhaps you'd better explain!"

"With pleasure," he retorted, his swarthy face expanding to show gleaming white teeth. "Ellen puts her trust in you, her husband, eh? *Bueno*. But if this hell you speak of breaks loose, what then? It is the man, an' not the talk what counts, *verdad?*"

"Damn you, say what you mean!" I almost shouted. "Are you insinuating that you—"

"No, no, no!" he interposed gently. "Not I, your friend! It is the hell I refer to. It is here, *right in this town!*"

"Oh, can the chatter!" Abbott pro-

tested. "Luis is just kidding you, Bruce—because you're newly married and terribly in love—with a girl any of us would feel lucky to get!"

His glance of frank admiration brought a blush to Ellen's cheeks.

"I never," said Villanova quietly, "joke about hell."

"Just the same, we're wasting time," Bledsoe declared. "That fire is nobody's joke—it's enough like hell-fire for my taste. Let's get going before it sweeps down on the town!"

That conversation, pointless as it seemed at the time, had stuck in my mind. I wondered whether Villanova had been having his fun with me or whether he was hinting at the same sinister menace I had seemed to detect in the atmosphere surrounding Crag Cove.

The Latin-American adventurer was not a bad sort, in spite of his greasy, unwashed appearance that even well-cut, expensive clothes never completely modified. But his meanings were often hard to fathom.

Grimly, as I worked on the fire trail, I repeated my promise to Ellen. And when her cries seemed to sound in my ears, I threw a hasty glance at the bestial, vacuous faces of the Crag Cove townsmen working near me, and slipped away.

Ellen's voice might have been a mere hallucination, caused by worry; but it might also be real. And neither those black-clad cultists nor the devil himself was going to stop me from finding out the truth!

When finally I emerged from the woods, panting, my apprehensions increased. Cold, dank air struck my hot face. Ghostly fog from the sea, mingling with the heavy black smoke, screened the angry red eye of the sun as it poised over the ocean's horizon. I shivered, as if the hand of death had reached out and touched me; and involuntarily I broke into a run.

Abruptly the crude dwellings of the village loomed up before me, like tombstones on a dark night. I saw no one. The town was apparently deserted. Fear clutched me then.

"Good Lord," I muttered, "something's wrong! Every able-bodied

man is fighting fire—but where are the old men and the women?"

Scarcely had I asked myself the question, when I rounded the corner at Gath Street—and beheld the answer.

Black-garbed figures were huddled together, talking in low tones. They lapsed into ominous silence as I approached, but not until I had heard enough to send an icy tingle racing through me.

"This is the day," I heard a slovenly, coarse-featured woman assert. "*He* will be here soon."

"Yes, the Master—*he* will tell us all!" an old man squeaked.

"Aye, an' he won't just tell us—he'll show us!"

"This is the time of vengeance."

"Aye, of vengeance—at our very doors!"

"The Master—"

THAT was all I made out of the babble of sound. They saw me and held their tongues instantly. I could feel their hateful stares boring into my back as I passed.

This was not the first time I had heard mention of the "Master," but who or what he was, none of us outsiders knew. If he was the founder of the cult, he didn't live among them, but out in the craggy hills somewhere. Was he man or demon? Real or imaginary? We didn't know, and the close-mouthed fanatics wouldn't tell us a thing.

But it was plain enough that some sort of weird devilry was brewing. I was certain now that an inner psychic voice had warned me to return to Ellen.

A psychic warning? God in heaven! That had happened to me only once before in my entire experience. My father had been gored to death by an enraged bull, when I was a boy of twelve. I had been at a neighbor's farm at the time, two miles away. Suddenly I distinctly heard my father's voice:

"Bruce—Bruce—help!"

Terror-stricken, I had rushed home. Too late, the hired man had dragged my father from the corral. Still be-

lieving I was playing near by, he had died calling out my name.

"Ellen!" I shouted, as I bounded up the stairs of our cottage. "Ellen—are you all right!"

My voice rang in my ears as I searched every room. Then I stopped as if a bullet had pierced my heart. Horror crawled over me like the caress of a slimy serpent. I stared at the spot of gore on the living room floor.

Blood! A huge drop of crimson—with a faint trail leading through the doorway!

While the ghastly significance of that blood-written message thawed into my frozen brain, my gaze fastened on something else. A torn fragment of cloth—blue—the color of the dress Ellen had been wearing!

A voice from hell seemed to whisper the taunting, soul-withering truth. That psychic warning—Ellen's terrified voice piercing dimly above the crackling forest fire, as she begged me to return! It could only mean—

"Ellen, Ellen!" I choked, unable to accept the awful fact.

But mercilessly the truth stabbed home: It could only mean what my father's voice had once meant—as *his soul wavered in horror before entering the portals of death!*

Then madness burst upon me. I flung myself out of that house of horror and death, charged blindly down the street. With every step of my racing, pounding feet came the memory of my own voice, in ghastly mockery—as I promised Ellen I would defy hell itself for her sake!

I had promised my wife *that!*

Heaven forgive me, I would never again be able to see her beloved face in life!

CHAPTER II

Night of Vengeance

GRIEF and rage have power to transform the best of us into madmen. I loved Ellen so dearly that, had I seen her dead body at that moment, I wouldn't have believed she was

really gone from me forever. Ellen was more to me than my own life; because of her, I had been ambitious, hopeful, eager to wrest victory from the world.

Now, in one frightful stroke of fate, all that was changed. I couldn't fully grasp that stupefying fact as yet. I only knew that I had to find my Ellen—and *avenge her death!* I didn't ask myself what fiendish member of the Black Brotherhood was guilty. To me, they were all my enemies. I would destroy them all, and neither man nor devil would stand before me!

Those furtive, lustful glances I had seen cast at the lovely figure of my wife—the glances that had warned me of the sinister, perverted desires smoldering beneath the surface of the repressed minds of the cult—they would pay for them now! I would seek out the particular brute who had done this thing, and for him there would be no sudden death!

God, how I would make him pay!

But when I reached Gath Street, the red mist before my eyes seemed to clear somewhat, for the street was deserted. There was no one upon whom to vent my insane fury. The crowd of old men and women had vanished, and I was alone in a ghostly village—alone with only grief and rage and tormenting memories for company.

Blindly I turned up one street and down the next. Smoke hung like a pall of doom over the town; fog drenched the air, phantom figures swirling in the murk everywhere, dogging me, mocking me!

Down on the beach the surf thundered incessantly, while up on the ridge the fire still raged, a vast semicircle of threatening flames.

Falling trees, starting down with limbs breaking with the sound of rifle shots, and crashing to earth with the ear-shattering, nerve-jolting roar of cannons, told me that the conflagration had reached the back-fires—that over Crag Cove hung the peril of blazing destruction.

The sun had gone down, and night was swooping like a shadowy black vulture upon the frightful scene.

Everywhere the grim forces of na-

ture proclaimed that this was a time of vengeance, of terror and destruction. It echoed in my grief-maddened heart, as I staggered from house to house—breaking down doors and searching vainly for the wretches I imagined were hiding from me. Vengeance—how I thirsted for vengeance!

At last, gasping for breath, I stood in the middle of the gloomy street and fought for control over my emotions. I must find Ellen—dead or alive, I must get her back. But where were the members of the Black Brotherhood? Where should I go to find them—and Ellen, their victim?

Instinctively, I started toward the forest fire. The crew must still be up there, guarding the trail. Somehow I would make them tell me the truth. I would drag one of those stupid, bestial creatures off into the thicket and pound and choke from him the secrets of his cult!

The roar of the fire increased as I ascended the slope. I stumbled in the darkness, fell many times into brush-covered hollows. My rage was lashed to a fiercer pitch, so that normal reasoning was impossible.

And then, with startling abruptness, it happened!

I HALTED, stood there on the side of the hill like a frozen statue. I listened, straining my ears, while my heart suddenly began to pound like a trip-hammer with hope and dread.

"Ellen!" I cried, tears streaming. But there was no answer except the muffled roar of the fire and the moaning of wind in the trees. "Ellen!" I screamed, knowing well that I must be insane.

"Bruce! Bruce!"

It was true! Ellen was out here somewhere, calling my name—or else I was stark, raving mad!

God, had they dragged her out here, tortured her, and left her to die? What would I find—her lovely self still, or a mutilated wreck to whom death would be more merciful than life?

I shouted again: "Ellen! I'm coming! Where are you?"

And as I plunged through the un-

derbrush, I made out a dark, slim figure at the edge of the road. I breathed a prayer of thanks, for she was standing—she must be unharmed!

But something was wrong; I sensed the difference even before she spoke, haltingly, fearfully.

"Oh, Bruce—Bruce Langford! It's me—Lola! I followed you—tried to make you hear me—"

My body went numb. The shock was almost unbearable. Ellen—I had found her, held her in my arms—and now this wasn't she!

"Lola!" I groaned. "You! God in heaven, I thought—"

But she was still talking, her voice a horrified whisper.

"—and I hid here and watched you comin' up the hill, but I was afraid it wasn't you! Then I saw your white shirt—called out your name! Even then I was afraid—"

I caught her by the shoulders, shook her so violently that the poor girl was suddenly speechless with fright.

"Where is Ellen?" I cried. "What are you talking about—don't you know I've got to find her? You stupid little devil, why did you trick me—"

She whimpered and cringed; and shame halted me.

"I'm sorry, Lola!" I muttered, releasing her. "I'm half crazy. But *don't* stand there gaping—talk—*talk!* What have they done to my wife?"

"The Master—" she choked, in an awe-stricken whisper.

I waited for her to go on, slow horror freezing me. The "Master"—that dread creature that reigned mysteriously over these people, apparently from somewhere beyond the material world!

"Talk—*talk!*" I urged frantically. "What happened?"

"*He is here—for vengeance—*"

I began to understand. The leader of the cult had allowed us to remain in Crag Cove unmolested, while he made his plans. Now he was seizing his chance to destroy all trace of us. This forest fire—if investigation was made from the outside world, it would be the excuse.

The Crag Cove fanatics would say we had been burned to ashes, perhaps

while trying to leave town by the fire-covered road—like those poor wretches at Woodvale!

BUT Lola, in spite of my insistent questions, either didn't know this to be the truth or was bound by superstition from telling me.

"I'm the one, Bruce!" she gasped. "I have sinned—I have departed from the ways of my people! The Master—he knows—things we do can't be hid from *him*, Bruce! But I'm afraid—to take my punishment—it will be death—horrible death—"

Pity welled up within me, yet the fate of Ellen was uppermost in my mind.

"Don't worry—I'll protect you, Lola. But where is my wife? Can't you tell me?"

She stared at me through the darkness, a motionless figure of awful fright.

"If I tell our secrets, Bruce—if I tell—"

"Lola!" I choked helplessly. "Can't you see? If you don't help me to find Ellen—"

She glanced around, then caught my arm impulsively. "I'll tell!" she gasped. "I love Ellen. She has helped me—taught me how to be happy! But it's a sin to be happy, Bruce—it's sin to fall in love with a man.

"I love Evan, and he loves me—and I told your Ellen. She said she would help me—send me away with Evan, where they couldn't find us—San Francisco.

"So I went to your house when everybody was watching the fire and I wasn't seen. I told Ellen the Master has said there can be no more weddings—marriage is forbidden—because the time is at hand—"

"Good Lord, Lola, what happened?" I cut in savagely. "Is Ellen alive? I saw blood!"

"The Master—he has her now!" Lola whispered. "She was alive when they took her away—"

I felt a surge of relief sweep over me, leaving me weak and helpless. But Lola's next words brought fresh horror.

"She will be the Master's bride!"

"Are you crazy?" I snarled. "Your Master's bride? But she's my wife, doesn't he know that?"

"First she will die," Lola whispered. "The Master is not of this world—he died—but came back to lead us. He is not mortal, Bruce—and he sees everywhere at once!

"He sees us *now*—he will punish me for what I have said! Even you cannot escape, Bruce—because a mocker cannot know our secrets and live! Oh, oh—I should never have told you!"

I gripped her slender wrist and made her listen to me.

"Lola, was that *your* voice I heard—when I was working on the fire trail?"

"Y-yes, Bruce. I went up there to tell you—when they got Ellen! I was afraid to let them see me, so I called to you—but you ran off too fast for me to follow!"

Then it hadn't been Ellen's dying voice that had pierced to my consciousness! Perhaps there was still time—

"But that blood on the floor?" I jerked out.

"One of the men had a knife—tried to kill me—scratched my arm! But I ran—got away, while Ellen blocked the door! They looked for me—but I ran into the woods—went to tell you—"

"Yes, yes! I understand now. But who were the men? How many were there? And what's this about the Master—about Ellen becoming his 'bride'? Quick, tell me everything, before—"

But Lola uttered a piercing scream, flung herself into my arms and clung like a terrified child.

"Bruce—behind you!—"

I whirled, with Lola still clinging to me—I saw blurred forms creeping toward us! With a muffled oath I tore loose from the girl's desperate embrace, lashed out with my fist at a lunging shadow. My knuckles cracked against something solid; there was a slight groan, and the shadow dropped!

Instantly other figures leaped from all sides, swarmed upon me, crushing me to the ground. I struggled like a wild animal, but one of them clubbed me, knocking me nearly insensible.

Dimly I heard their voices growling.

"You've killed him, and the Master said—"

"No, he's alive."

"Lucky for you, then!"

"Lucky for all of us. Vengeance is the Master's."

"Shall we tie the mocker?"

"No, he's unconscious. Have you got the girl? Then come! The Master is waiting!"

"Yes, hurry! If he chooses, he can read our very thoughts! Let's not suffer the fate of this wicked girl and this mocker! Hurry, hurry!"

I felt myself hoisted upon strong shoulders. I was in that semi-conscious state when it is possible to hear but impossible to move a muscle. While I struggled to hold on to ebbing consciousness, their grunting voices seemed to grow fainter and fainter. The last words I heard were barely distinguishable, yet they are seared in my memory for the rest of my life:

"Don't forget, my brothers—we have a Master from beyond the grave! Hurry—hurry!"

CHAPTER III

Children of Wrath

A TERRIBLE, head-splitting jolt seemed to bring me to my senses. I was lying on the ground, and the crackle of fire was in my ears. It was a long moment before I realized that I had been carried to the edge of the forest fire and roughly deposited on the ground.

I rolled over, stifling a groan. Black-clothed figures stood around me, their vacuous faces turned expectantly toward the blazing trees and underbrush beyond the narrow fire trail. Smoke poured over me, at times almost obliterating the fire-lit scene. I coughed, choking; but no one turned to look at me. All eyes were riveted on those dancing, leaping flames.

My head cleared gradually, and a sudden memory brought me tensing

to my hands and knees. Ellen! Where was Ellen?

My gaze swept upward. Before I could rise, it encountered something that froze me where I crouched. A black shadow—in the midst of the flames!

I stared, unable to move. Was it a human form? No, it—it couldn't be! Not in that inferno of hell!

Yet it was moving, materializing out of the smoke! I tried to shut my eyes — tried to tell myself it was a black tree stump, that the blue-grey haze and tricky light gave it the appearance of movement. But the hellish vision held my fascinated gaze with an evil, hypnotic power.

God, it was a living creature — a shapeless black monster that had sprung into being amid the licking, devouring fire!

Larger and larger it loomed—moving toward us. Suddenly it vanished, as fire spurted up from a pile of brush. Slowly, in the grip of almost paralyzing horror, I staggered to my feet.

It had been a vision—a ghastly trick of the imagination. There was no creature capable of living in that fire—no human being could—

A scream of terror caught in my tight throat. The Thing had appeared again—was floating in that soaring, dancing fire—a Thing that raised black, shapeless arms in hellish benediction!

With moans of awe and terror, the men and women of the Black Brotherhood sank to their knees, bowing their heads to the ground.

I stood there as if alone, and reason whispered that here was my chance to escape; yet I had no power to seize the opportunity. My eyes were held by the incredible Thing I was seeing—the embodiment of Evil. A Thing of black smoke, whose life was hell-fire—a Thing that advanced with menacing tread through that oven of withering heat, with fire swirling about its demon body!

Suddenly it halted, still in the midst of flesh-consuming, life-destroying flames, with one dreadful hand upraised. A voice like the voice of doom thundered above the growl-

ing, crackling tones of the fire:

"Arise, children of the wrath to come! Arise—for I, your Master, am here to guide you!"

"Yea, Master!" Their fear-stricken voices rose in a blood-chilling chorus, as they got to their feet.

A terrifying thought pierced my stupefied mind—this unearthly Being was their Master—a Master from beyond the grave! Merciful God, could such a thing be?

Had the leader of this devil-worshipping cult gone to his death, surviving the fury of burning hell? Had he power to show himself thus—in fire—a living, speaking, but deathless creature out of hell?

NO wonder we had never seen him among the villagers! No wonder they had feared to speak of the dreadful personality that haunted their lives, dominating the Black Brotherhood!

I remembered suddenly how they had held their weird meetings—down on the beach, in the dead of night—with a huge bonfire in their midst!

And something else grazed my understanding—that thing Lola had said—that Ellen, my wife, was to become the bride of this creature from hell! Ellen—good God—she was doomed to die—to share with this unreal monster an existence in hell!

The Master's bride—Lola had said that! And she had said no one could escape this living dead man's wrath—that I was doomed, as well as herself. That Ellen must die to become the mate of this Thing I was staring at—this Thing the flames had spawned before my eyes!

"God, no! Not while I live!" I choked, and whirled around, vainly searching for a weapon. My half-blind eyes saw the outline of a stick at my feet, and I seized it and flung myself at the flame-wrapped black monster.

Hoarse cries of alarm and indignation burst from the Black Brotherhood. I disregarded them, leaped at the motionless figure.

Fire stopped me, sent me reeling backward, choking and gasping—my

hair singed and my skin scorched. I knew in that instant that I was no match for this Thing of hell—that I was helpless in his presence—that resistance was futile. My fate was in his devilish hands.

And yet, the instinct to live, to fight for my life and for my loved one, was stronger than reason. I couldn't touch that master of the flames, but I could bravely defy these members of the Black Brotherhood, who were of living flesh and blood, like myself!

I saw an opening in their ranks, flung myself toward it. But I was too late—they had divined my intention! With axes and shovels and mattocks poised, they blocked the opening—then advanced in a menacing semi-circle!

Trapped between the fire and that murderous crew of fire fighters, I looked frantically around. It was hopeless. I saw the fanatical hatred gleaming in their eyes, saw them gripping those deadly implements in fiendish anticipation, as they closed in on me, to hack me down!

There was no help for it now—I would die fighting. In the rage of despair, I lunged forward, thrusting my slender, sharp-pointed stick like a rapier into the face of the foremost, a lumbering, hulking brute. The entire weight of my body was behind that vicious jab, as it struck home.

The fellow staggered back, dropping his heavy mattock, and I felt the point of my stick break into popping flesh. It came out dripping gore, the victim's scream of agony ringing in my ears.

"My eye!" he shrieked, both hands clapped in pain-maddened frenzy over the bloody socket. He swayed, then toppled!

Amazement and horror held the wretch's companions an instant; then, bellowing insanely, they charged me.

I leaped into action to hold them off. Whirling, stabbing, leaping, dodging—fighting in all directions at once—I succeeded for the moment in holding them at a distance. I made myself keep relaxed yet poised like a steel spring, using all the knowledge I had ever learned in fencing.

THEN a huge devil, with bestial features twisted in fury, darted forward, his double-bitted axe hissing. Just in time, I evaded that cleaver-like blade and countered with a tremendous jab that plunged deep into his solar-plexus. With a gasping moan, he crumpled. Others tripped over him, caught their balance, came on!

I knew I was doomed—my luck couldn't hold out. Yet I gave ground with stubborn reluctance, slowly backing toward the searing fire. Behind me was that shapeless black embodiment of hell. But I couldn't pause to look, knew only that he was still there, silently dooming me to destruction while I struggled for life.

The thing that happened next was too confusing for my desperate, anger-crazed mind to grasp. Above the tumult of shouts and the blinded wretch's screams—above the snarls and crackles of the fire—rose a woman's voice. Even in that tense moment I recognized it as Ellen's voice—but where was she?

That involuntary pause was all my attackers needed. An axe came hurtling through the air from my left as I stood there, a perfect target. I dropped face downward, but the flailing handle crashed into my skull.

I heard a cry of horror, raised my throbbing head. The black-clad mob had stopped, were staring not at me but at a prone figure to my right. I saw then, and understood.

The blade of the axe, missing me, had got one of the attackers who had been standing in a direct line with the deadly missile. Without a sound, he had pitched forward, his head split open like a ripe watermelon!

I tried to stand, was struggling upward, when that dreadful voice of doom thundered from behind me.

"Children of the wrath!"

In terrible lust for my blood, they were dashing forward to finish me, but they halted in mid-stride.

"Yea, Master!" they chorused.

"Ye shall shed no blood! Vengeance is mine!"

They hesitated; then: "Yea, Master!" And before I could make my

limbs obey, they pounced upon me, jerked me to my feet.

I was still only partly conscious. It was purely by accident that I raised my eyes toward the towering trees. And then I stiffened. All the blood seemed to drain from my body.

For I was looking directly at Ellen—at her nude body—tied high on the trunk of a tree! In horror I stared, unable to comprehend the meaning of that fearful sight. But a voice was thundering in my ears—a hellish voice that commanded:

"Bind this wicked mocker to a tree, like the others! He has dared to resist the will of your master. Furthermore, he is the husband of the beautiful but unrepentant woman I was to have made my bride.

"Very well, my children, they shall both enter hell together—they and their wicked cohorts. You shall see how Satan's fire hungers for the flesh of his enemies!"

"Yea, Master!"

Strong, eager hands caught me up as if I were a rag doll. I felt myself being carried swiftly across the intervening space to a large tree. Then I



was pulled and hauled up a ladder, and I dared not struggle, for the earth was receding below me and I knew I would be killed in the fall!

Before I knew how it had happened, I found myself hanging up there, chains bruising the flesh of my arms, waist and ankles and holding me securely to the broad trunk of the tree.

Descending hurriedly, my captors pulled away two ladders, then darted away, toward the mighty fire—and the black robed demon in it!

My eyes sought the figure of Ellen. Even before I could discover the tree upon which she hung, her frantic voice reached me.

"Bruce—oh, Bruce! They're going to burn us alive—burn the trees—and us with them!"

CHAPTER IV

Food for the Flames

WRITHING and twisting, I tried to slip out of those encircling loops of chain; yet I knew that I would only plunge to certain death if I succeeded.

"Ellen—darling!" I cried. "Did they—harm you?"

But she couldn't reply, for her golden head hung forward in a faint. God, how she must have suffered! How these chains cut into the flesh, painfully, torturingly!

I could see the dim outlines of two of my friends, bound to neighboring trees, but I couldn't distinguish their features in that drifting murk. They, too, seemed to be unconscious, and I knew they must have hung there a long while.

Whether the third of my associates adorned another tree in the same ghastly manner, or whether he had somehow escaped the vengeance of this crazed mob, I had no way of knowing.

That terrible, demoniacal voice was roaring from the flames again, drowning out the noises of the conflagration.

"My children, you have done well this night. Satan's fiery wrath has been kindled against you, because you allowed mockers and scorners to live among you—and because some of you have departed from the ways of our sacred Brotherhood!

"But tonight we shall appease Satan's wrath, for the fire of hell shall wipe out these wicked ones. Only then can you live in safety in your homes—while the prince of hell pours out his fury on the wicked world!"

"Yea, Master!" they thundered.

"You believe? It is well that you do! Do you know what is happening throughout this vile world? Everywhere there is panic, bloodshed, violence. Because they love their sinful luxuries—their automobiles and telephones and radios and electric lights, their bridges and airplanes—and railroads—"

"Yea, Master! Yea! Yea!"

"—because of these things, their doom has come! Even now there are wars and rumors of war—floods and drought and starvation! For the time of vengeance has been speeded by such worldly wickedness. As you have known it would be, God's time has ended— He has turned this world over to his dreadful servant, Satan, for fierce punishment!

"Only you who are guiltless in the eyes of Satan, therefore, can escape destruction. I, your Master, know these things, because I have passed through the fire of everlasting death—have returned to guide you, my children! *Will you be faithful to Satan's will?*"

"Yea, Master!"

"Then bring to me that vile creature who has dared to let her heart grieve in love in these days when there can be no love, but only terror and mourning! Bring her who dared to betray our sacred Brotherhood, by consorting with unbelievers and mockers!"

There was a scurrying of black figures, then little Lola was dragged into sight, bound hand and foot. Two men held the swaying girl on her feet. How like my own dear Ellen she looked, with her yellow hair and slender figure!

"Strip her—that her shame may appear to all!"

Lola's black garments were ripped from her, exposing a shapely form that was silhouetted against the glare of the fire. Gaping, shifting with the greedy lust of restless wolves, the mob growled approval.

"Anoint her for the cleansing fires of hell!"

One of the brutes seized a spray-gun, pumped it furiously.

Gasoline!

MY eyes bulged at the sight of that spray-gun, which had been used to set the back-fires. I tore at the chains in horror; when I looked upon that fearful scene again, it was to see an old hag pull a long burning stick from the brush fire.

"Thus does Satan punish those who betray him!" yelled the hellish priest

—and the hag hobbled eagerly forward and applied the torch.

Instantly the gasoline exploded in a sheet of flame! Lola shrieked piteously, her body a mass of fire from head to foot. Then she pitched forward into the bed of flames across the trail, her heart-rending cries dying away, as merciful oblivion seized her. Before my eyes, her once lovely body withered and blackened like the charred skeleton of a tree.

I saw the black-shrouded monster step over the corpse—saw the mob's gloating give way to superstitious dread and reverence, as they cringed back to let him pass. He walked toward me, stopped beneath Ellen's tree.

"You have seen!" his voice thundered up. "What is your answer now?"

When Ellen, who was unconscious, answered nothing, he seemed to go mad with fury.

"The trees! Burn the trees!" he screamed. "This one first—that her husband may see her consumed!"

But to my astonishment, a young man caught up the spray-gun, turned it on the priest of hell, covered him with gasoline! Before anyone could stop him, he touched the black robes with fire!

Cries of horror and rage! But standing motionless, the awful creature who had sprung from hell's own fire was impervious to the flames that greedily licked up the gasoline, then commenced to die out!

Yells of triumph and admiration surged up. At a sign from their master, the black-clothed men of the cult seized the daring youth who had tried to kill a Thing from beyond the grave!

"Evan!" they cried. "Evan did it, Master—it was him that dared to love Lola! And now he tried to kill you, Master!"

The boy struggled and fought; he yelled and kicked.

"I know you—you foul fiend! You ain't our Master—you—you are—"

In shuddering horror I saw what was going to happen. The master—he who had forbidden the shedding of blood—caught up an axe and swung it

over his cowed head!

"Look out! Look out!" I screamed, and shut my eyes.

When I opened them, sick with dread, Evan was a lifeless corpse at the feet of the murderer.

But something had happened to the mob below. There was horror in some of their faces, lust and gloating in others. I sensed the reason—Evan had been a likeable youth, brighter and more courageous than his fellows.

He had died horribly—just when he was about to tell them something. The younger men seemed uneasy, suspicious, as they stared at the figure of their Master.

I saw Ivan and Mort—the hulking giants who had so swiftly destroyed Lola, as if knowing in advance the wishes of the dread priest—separate themselves from the mob and stand behind their Master. Plainly, they sensed trouble, were afraid!

And then I began to yell down at them, seizing the moment to act. If I couldn't free myself, I could talk, plead, persuade!

"You people!" I cried. "Don't be fools! That thing is not your Master—it is a living man—an unbeliever who has used you as his tools! It's one of my own companions—and he has played upon your superstitions for his own ends! Grab him, you young men—grab him and tear off that mask!"

THEY gaped up at me, but made no move to obey.

"Grab him!" I screamed. "Don't fear him! Those clothes of his—"

But the fiend's voice, like shattering thunder, drowned out mine.

"Burn the tree!" he commanded furiously. "Quick—the gasoline! Spray the tree—set it on fire! It's old and dry—watch it go up in flaming fire!"

They still hesitated, torn between dread and unbelief.

"You fools!" he thundered, while his two henchmen cowered behind him for protection. "Will you obey me—your Master—or that blasphemer!"

"Let him show you his face!" I yelled down. "If he's really what he pretends to be—"

But they weren't listening now. Superstition had triumphed. Some of the old men, the worst fanatics, were already spraying the trunk with gasoline. Suddenly flames sprang up—reaching, crawling like devilish serpents toward me!

I had seen the fire leap from tree to tree in the forest fire; I knew it would be only a matter of moments before the deadly flames were upon me!

Upturned faces encircled me. Gloating eyes watched in sadistic satisfaction the thing that was happening to me. Through the holes of his black mask, the devilish master stared up at me—and I knew there was triumph in those hidden eyes.

Rage overcame my panic and desperation. It flamed like the fire below my feet, when my tormentor issued his next command:

"The next tree, my sons! Quickly—he must see the fate of his loved one—while the flames gnaw at his flesh!"

They hastened to obey; and when I saw fire leap up at the foot of the tree holding my unconscious Ellen, I must have drawn strength from temporary insanity.

My chains were not tight, having been fastened in haste. It was the sagging weight of my body that held me against the rough bark. I wriggled a foot loose, then got the other free. Taking up the slack, I managed to slip through the remaining loops.

With my feet digging into the bark, I clung with my hands to the chain, preparing to leap!

My heart was in my throat now. A slip, and I would plunge to death. But I thought of Ellen—of the fire she did not know was soaring toward her naked body—and I steeled myself for the desperate jump.

Apparently no one had observed. All eyes were fastened on Ellen's lovely figure. I measured the distance to that grisly demon on the ground. It would be easy to leap too far from this height.

A cry went up: "Master—above you!"

He jerked around, looking up—and I knew it was now or never! Just as I leaped, he started to run—

The swift plunge through the smoke-filled air seemed an eternity of time—for I knew I was going to miss him—had jumped too far!

But, sensing his peril, the monster darted off in panic—away from me—ran directly under my outstretched feet!

The shock was terrific. I felt his ribs crush under me like matchsticks; my knees buckled up beside my chin; my head snapped forward, almost breaking my neck. I rolled on the ground, knowing only that I was still alive—that the black-robed creature's body had broken my fall sufficiently to save me!

CHAPTER V

Holocaust

HELPING hands pulled me upright. I saw the tense, white faces of several young men—Evan's friends. Faintly I rasped: "My wife—save my wife!"

They shook their heads tragically.

"It's too late, Bruce—the fire would burn the ladders now! We're sorry—we know how you loved her. We, too, have wanted to be free to love—"

But I shook them off, threw myself upon the mangled figure in the black robe. My frenzied fingers ripped away the black mask—and I saw the twisted, bloody face—of Carl Abbott!

He opened his eyes, seemed to recognize me.

"Damn you!" he groaned weakly. "Should have—let them kill you. Wanted you to suffer—burn—hated you—still hate you—"

"You murderous devil!" I cried, as I tore off his thick clothing. "I began to see through your scheme—when I recognized those two brutes you had helping you—the same two you were trying to bribe to give away the cult's secrets! But why do you hate me?"

He groaned as I flung him around, not caring how much I hurt him in my haste to get those garments—a complete covering of asbestos cloth, dyed

black, which covered even the feet, and included a heat-resisting cape for good measure!

"Ellen!" he growled faintly. "I—wanted her—even before she married you. Had Ivan and Mort grab her—while I—slipped away from the crew—put on black asbestos—appeared in fire. I commanded them—come here—Ivan and Mort—told others in town—their Master—"

I was working swiftly, pulling on the asbestos clothing—aware that the cracking fire was climbing, climbing, towards Ellen's bare feet! I was huskier than Abbott and the suit did not fit readily.

The stupefied mob of the Black Brotherhood were grouped about us, totally ignoring my wife's terrible plight in their utter amazement at the unmasking of their dying "Master."

"Fools—ignorant fools." Abbott was gasping, as he saw them staring down at him. "Could have—handled them all—like babes. Unlimited power—make me rich—mine gold for me—deed me their property. I had to do something to impress them— So I set the fire—Knew it would get beyond control—destroy everything."

"Yes, and later you would give them a new 'prophecy,' I suppose!" I snarled. "You would own Crag Cove—get the railroad in here—be a dictator, hiding behind that mask—a dictator from the dead! But you're dying now, Abbott—and I'm glad!"

His eyes glared at me.

"Not sorry—wanted Ellen. Told her everything—would have made her rich—happy—if she'd pretend to die, come to life—"

"Happy?— With a fiend who burned an innocent girl alive!" I exclaimed, marveling at his enormous conceit.

I saw Abbott feebly beckoning me to come closer. I knew he was dying, supposed he had something of tremendous importance to tell me. I bent over him. My fingers were still working with the fastenings of the fire-proof outfit.

"Had to do it!" he gasped. "Fools—starved emotions—gave them what they wanted. Later would have told

them—all right to marry."

I saw his eyes glazing, but he had managed to grasp my sleeve, was clinging with the desperation of approaching extinction.

"Real master died—before we came. Spiritualist, promised to come back from grave—lead followers. I got asbestos outfit—San Francisco—appeared one night—bonfire—at meeting. They found empty grave—believed.

"Do anything I said—but I had to humor superstitions—end of world—Satan's reign. Had got tired trying to win them over—your way. Wanted to get you three out of way—"

SUDDENLY a devilish laugh gurgled in his throat, triumph blazed in his glazing eyes—which were upturned—*toward Ellen!*

"Fool!" he choked. "I'm dying—but you can't have her, either!"

Donning the black hood, I turned to save Ellen. Now, in horror, I saw what Abbott had been doing—diverting my attention long enough to let the flames reach Ellen's naked form! He was dead now, gloating triumph still warping his lifeless features!

Cursing him, and myself for delaying, I looked for help with the nearest ladder. Strong young hands helped me to hoist it to the side of the dry, rapidly burning tree. I could scarcely make out Ellen's figure through the intervening flames, and hope died in me as I hastily mounted the rungs.

The ladder was already afire; the flames licked at me as I climbed through them. My heart leaped—Ellen was still untouched!

"Thank God!" I cried, and saw that her eyes were open.

At last I freed her, wrapped her in the asbestos cape, began to descend with her limp body draped over my shoulders. The ladder creaked warningly—began to crack! Suddenly it broke—we fell, but the earth was only a foot or two beneath us, and the fall was slight.

Ellen was completely exhausted from the terrible strain of hanging there so long; I had to pick her up, steady her.

Then I remembered my unfortunate friends, Frank Bledsoe and Luis Villanova. But already they were being rescued. The other ladder was against Bledsoe's tree; Villanova was on the ground.

I saw him come staggering toward me, his stout body barely able to stand erect.

"Bruce, ol' man—*amigo mio*," he said, his swarthy face expanding in a haggard smile, "you are the he-man, my friend! The thing I feared—it happened, no? I saw you jump—"

A blood-curdling scream cut him off. Two figures came bounding out of the darkness toward us—the same two hulking giants who had served Carl Abbott with such fiendish efficiency!

"The fire!" they were yelling. "It's jumped the trail—at both ends—we're surrounded!"

Cries of fear and horror swelled from the mob.

"Trapped—doomed—we can't escape!"

In a moment there was pandemonium. Frightened men and women fled in all directions. I saw with dismay that they were deaf to reasoning. I raised my voice to a shout, and to my surprise it thundered out as Abbott's voice had thundered.

I put Ellen on the ground, adjusted to my lips the metal gadget I had noticed fastened inside the robe—a voice amplifier!

"Stop—wait!" my voice boomed. "I'll get you out—some way! Keep your heads—I'll be back!"

At the sound of that dreadful voice, they halted in superstitious fear. I carefully readjusted the cape around Ellen, caught her up and started off toward the village.

Instantly I saw my mistake. My thundering voice, calling attention to my fire-proof clothing, had already produced a sinister effect on the fear-crazed mob. With wild eyes distended, faces revealing their devilish intentions, the two rascals who had tried to slip away when they saw Abbott dying, charged toward me!

I saw Villanova halt one, grappling with him, but the other came on, intent on getting from me the asbestos

clothing that meant life!

A CRESCENDO of yells and shrieks—then the whole terrified mob burst in pursuit.

I tried to run faster, but I was tired and weak, and Ellen's slender young body seemed an insuperable burden. Just as I reached the edge of the encircling fire, clutching fingers closed on my shoulder, spun me around!

In wild desperation, weeping with rage at this turn of events—just when I was about to get Ellen to safety—I let her slip to the ground, swung with all my might at the brute's jaw.

He grunted, his grasp loosening. I recognized him—the treacherous, hulking giant—Ivan!

With memory of what he had done to little Lola lashing me to greater fury, I tore into him, flailing both hands at his face. He backed toward the fire, swung a club-like fist which caught me on the side of the head. I was staggered; I heard the cries of the mob, as they arrived at the scene.

Ivan lunged at me, bellowing like a mad bull. This time I swung my fist in a perfectly timed blow that crashed into his exposed chin. He sailed over backward, landing squarely into the red-hot mass of burning brush; he didn't move.

Expecting the whole mob to swarm upon me and tear the black garments from my body, I whirled. But something had happened: they were running back again, led by gesturing young men!

Uncomprehending, I returned to my loved one. She was standing, her eyes wild with terror.

"Bruce—are we going in there—through that fire?"

I nodded grimly, and caught her firmly in my arms. "It's going to be hard—breathing that smoke!" I warned. And to myself: "If only I can make it—for her sake!"

Behind me there was a frightful crash, the earth shuddering. A tree had fallen—one of the burning giant snags near the fire trail. I heard shrieking cries—knew that the burning monster must have landed among those trapped wretches—knew that

sparks and flaming brands would be scattered everywhere in the dry brush—that the unholy spot was doomed—and the people with it!

Yet for me there was no choice. I could only go on, weeping with the stinging, blinding smoke in my eyes—picking my way through the flames, past fire-eaten snags that threatened to topple momentarily.

That nightmare of horror—as we passed through a literal flaming hell on earth—came to an end at last. We reached the open—stood on barren ground.

Ellen was able to stand, but I sank down, exhausted.

"God, I can't go back there!" I moaned. "I haven't the strength left—I'll collapse on the way. But I've got to go! I can't leave them to die like that, while I escape without lifting a finger to help—"

"Wait!" Ellen cried. "I hear voices! Yes—here they come!"

I couldn't believe it, but it was true. Plucky Villanova had led the most daring of the group, including Frank Bledsoe and the younger men and women, to safety. He had wisely chosen as their only remaining avenue of escape a burned over area where

only warm ashes and smoldering ruins of trees remained.

CRAG COVE and the Black Brotherhood are no more.

Out of the ashes of the village rises a new town—Port Villanova—with a modern harbor, a railroad, and sane, industrious inhabitants. In a modern world, neither superstition nor tragedy can for long delay the march of progress.

But I dare not return there. I leave to Frank Bledsoe and Luis Villanova the task of looking to my interests. For the mere sight of a fire-ravaged skeleton of a tree, once young and shapely and glorious to behold, would invoke memories that might threaten my sanity.

Even so, I cannot completely forget, and life seems a futile mockery. Yet I have my lovely Ellen; and because our love has already triumphed over hell and destruction—because we are young and have the future before us—I dare to grapple with the hideous monster of memory.

And who knows? Perhaps the long sea voyage we have planned will restore the peace and joy we are both seeking.

●
NEXT MONTH

FOUR FRIGHTFUL MEN

A Novelette of the Devil's Pawns

By HENRY KUTTNER

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WHEN the BLACK FIEND FED

By HAL K. WELLS

Author of "Glass Chin," "Bride of the Rising Dead."

“STOP here!”
There was a vibrant note of nervous tension in Karl Reisner's command. I brought the car to a skidding stop in the loose sand of the narrow roadway.

Reisner and Allan Grove were sitting in the back seat. I got a glimpse of Reisner's face in the rear-view mirror. His features had always been gaunt and pallid. Now in the faintly reflected moonlight his face was the bleached white of a naked skull.

“There's the Herron place,” Reisner

said, his voice so low that it was a husking whisper. “Now do you see what I meant?”

I stared out across the narrow moonlit valley that separated us from the hill-top estate of the late Gordon Herron. Tiny ripples of dread ran along my spine. Alice shivered and her slim fingers were cold in mine as she huddled closer against my shoulder.

Since I had last seen the isolated hill country home of Gordon Herron it had changed insidiously. The four of us sat staring across the valley in taut

silence. I believe the same thought was in all our minds—the memory of Gordon Herron's recent death, the weird horror of the manner in which he had died.

Alice and I had been away on our honeymoon when it had happened, but we had been apprised of all the details. The dread manner in which the famous Black God had figured in the tragedy made the story a natural headliner for the sensational press.

Gordon Herron had found the thing in a Mayan tomb somewhere in Yucatan, during his last archaeological expedition. It was the Los Angeles reporters who gave the statue the name of the Black God. Some of them went a step farther and called it the Black Beast-God.

Neither Alice nor I had ever seen the stone figure, and the newspapers' reports of it were far from informative. They agreed upon the rough fundamentals—that it was of some unknown variety of black stone, that it weighed close to a ton, and that it represented a standing figure that was a repellent blend of man and beast.

But when it came to further details, no two reporters seemed to have seen the thing alike. No satisfactory photographs were ever published. For some curious reason, the statue registered only as an amorphous blur upon camera plates.

GORDON HERRON had taken the thing to his lonely estate high in the San Fernando hills. Three weeks later he died there — horribly. Karl Reisner, Herron's secretary and assistant, returned late one night to find Herron's body lying broken and dead beneath the massive weight of the overturned statue.

Herron's head had been crushed to unrecognizable pulp. By a gruesome freak of chance the Black God's figure lay with its bestial snout buried deep in the dead man's shattered skull, its fanged jaws dripping carmine as though in grisly feast.

Karl Reisner's husky voice cut through the somber thread of my thoughts.

"Do you see now what I meant," he

said, "when I told you that the place had—changed?"

I nodded grimly. When I had last seen the estate it had been a lushly green oasis in the drab vegetation of the Southern California hills. The big stone house had been surrounded by the rich foliage of pepper trees and the graceful fronds of tall palms. But now it was a blighted area of death.

The palm fronds were wilted and black. The thick foliage of the pepper trees was brown and sere. There was an odd symmetry to the blighted area. Close to the house it was practically complete. Then as the circle widened outward the blighting influence became steadily less virulent.

It was as though in some weird manner the house was a central point from which issued an invisible miasma so poisonous that it brought death to everything within its aura.

I felt Alice's slender body shiver against my shoulder. The night was sharp with the chill of late Spring, but there was another and indefinable coldness in the air. It was a chill as stark as that which fills the eternally lightless void beyond the stars.

For a long, shuddering moment I felt that somewhere in the dark bulk of that stone house Something crouched in hideous waiting, a Something of such nameless and abysmal evil that its very presence numbed the brain with crepitant dread. Then I shook off the eerie feeling angrily, and turned to face Karl Reisner.

"You brought us down here by phoning Alice of some vague evil that was threatening the place," I said impatiently. "When we met you in the village you refused to give any details, telling us to wait until we arrived and saw for ourselves.

"We're not waiting any longer. If there is real danger lurking in that stone pile, we're going to know what we're facing before we go any farther. You're telling us all about it—here and now!"

Reisner nervously ran the tip of his tongue over dry lips.

"All right, Bartlett," he husked, "I'll tell you. It's that accursed thing that Gordon Herron dug out of that Mayan

tomb! For three solid weeks Herron and I lived out here with that ghastly black abomination. From the first day we knew that we were facing Something utterly beyond all normal ken, but we refused to admit the incredible truth, even to ourselves.

"We went on about our work, with every passing day hammering the dread knowledge deeper into our brains. The Black God was in some nameless and blasphemous manner *alive* with an unspeakably hideous life of its own!

"It wasn't a tangible thing that you could put your finger on," Reisner continued, his low voice trembling. "It was a feeling deep in your soul that all the time the God was standing there *watching* you — alive, sentient, waiting!

"Its very presence seemed to focus vast forces of unknown evil upon the estate, as a burning-glass focuses the rays of the sun. The trees around the house withered and died. The servants, with the exception of Mack Delmar, the gardener, left en masse.

"Herron, Delmar, and I sickened with a slow illness that seemed to be sapping the basic essence of Life itself, but we stubbornly stayed on. Then finally there came the time when the hideous hunger of the Black God had to be appeased. It fed—and its victim was Gordon Herron!"

"**W**AIT a minute!" Allan Grove exclaimed. There was disdainful contempt upon his sardonically good looking face. "Gordon's death was gruesome, yes, but it was nothing but an accident. The stone figure toppled over, and its weight crushed him. You're not telling us that the Black God voluntarily moved, are you?"

"Yes," Reisner answered tersely. "You don't know the real truth of what happened that night. When I entered the house I found the Black God standing upright in its usual place. The body of Gordon Herron was huddled at its feet. There was nothing but a ghastly cavity where Herron's face had been. And the Black God's fanged mouth was deeply stained with fresh-dried blood!

"I couldn't tell the authorities that story, of course," Reisner said drearily. "They'd have called me a madman. They might even have accused me of killing Gordon Herron myself.

"I did the only thing I could do. I toppled the statue over so that its fall crushed what was left of Herron's head beyond recognition."

"That happened over a week ago," I said bluntly. "Why wait till now to tell us?"

"I waited for the same reason that I hid the real manner of Herron's death," Reisner said desperately. "I simply didn't dare come to you with such a weird story. But I couldn't keep it to myself any longer.

"There's stark incarnate Evil in that demoniac stone thing, Evil that will strike hideously again if it is not destroyed. Your wife and Allan Grove are Gordon Herron's sole heirs. The responsibility is theirs."

For a moment we sat in stunned silence. My brain was a dazed maelstrom of conflicting thoughts. With the blighted estate staring me in the face and the cold aura of eldritch evil about the place closing in over my consciousness like a chill shroud, I couldn't shrug Reisner's story away.

I looked down at the clear blond beauty of Alice's head nestling against my shoulder, and I wished with all my heart that I had never brought her on this eerie midnight errand.

"Personally, Reisner," Allan Grove's hard, flat voice broke the silence, "I think you're either drunk or crazy. But you've hauled us out here to this God-forsaken place, and we might as well go on and have a look at this black bogey-beast of yours. Unless my little cousin and her husband object?"

I felt the hot rush of blood to my face. It was only the restraining pressure of Alice's slim fingers upon my arm that kept me from turning and taking the swing at Grove's supercilious face that I had been longing to take for years.

Instead, I allowed Grove's taunt to goad me into doing something a thousand times more foolish. I crashed the car into gear and grimly headed it down into the valley and up the other

slope into the estate.

We swung through the stone pillars of the gate, and passed Mack Delmar's cottage. The darkened windows showed no sign of life. We followed the winding driveway on into the area of blighted vegetation. Evil seemed to close around us in surging waves of chill menace as we neared the house. The palms of my hands were clammy with sweat as they gripped the wheel.

Ten yards from the house we rounded a sharp curve between tall hedges of withered evergreens. Alice cried out in startled terror. My foot trod savagely upon the brake, bringing the car to a jolting stop. There in the narrow, graveled roadway just ahead was the grotesquely sprawled body of a man.

We got out of the car and approached the body. The brilliant glare of the car's headlights revealed it with pitiless clarity. Alice got one brief look at the shuddering horror before I had time to sweep her into my arms and turn her head from the sight. Reisner, Grove, and I stood looking down in white-lipped silence at the ghastly fragment of what had once been a man.

The entire face had been literally *bitten out*, as one would bite a chunk from an apple. Where the eyes, nose, mouth, and cheeks should have been there was nothing but a gaping bloody cavity of unspeakable horror. Blood stained the thick shock of grizzled grey hair and splattered the dead man's faded khaki coveralls. The clothing and the hair identified the corpse as that of Mack Delmar, gardener of the estate.

REISNER'S gaunt face was livid with fear as he lifted his eyes from the mutilated body.

"The Black God!" he chattered between trembling lips. "The Black God has fed again!"

I stared at the stone bulk of the house looming just ahead. The yawning gates of Hell would have been preferable to that bleakly silent house, yet I knew that we had to go in.

My voice was a hoarse croak in my throat as I said, "We'll go inside and

look at the God."

Reisner started to protest, but I cut him savagely short.

"We have to go in there!" I rasped. "It's the only way we can ever be finally and definitely sure!"

Allan Grove's face was sickly grey, but he followed us as we slowly walked up the driveway. The porch floor rang hollowly beneath our feet. We opened the front door and stepped through a small entrance hallway directly into the large high-ceilinged room that had been Gordon Herron's study.

For a moment we stared into gloom that seemed to throb with eldritch menace. Then the lights blazed as Reisner's finger found the wall-switch.

Alice's breath hissed in a sharply in-drawn gasp. Allan Grove swore in a sibilant whisper. I felt the hair at the base of my skull bristle erect.

The Black God stood in front of the wall opposite us. It was a silent, immovable, apparently lifeless piece of stone—yet upon it was horrible and damning evidence of its grisly guilt! Fresh-dried blood smeared the bestial obscenity of the Thing's snout, and torn shreds of flesh still lingered on the fangs of the hideous mouth!

We advanced slowly toward it, our steps the stiffly mechanical progress of hypnotized birds approaching a deadly snake. We came to a halt in the center of the room. I forgot even the ghastly significance of the blood-smeared mouth in the starkly overwhelming horror of the Black God itself.

It was carved from a single block of some jet-black stone whose oddly lustrous sheen was unlike any rock that I had ever seen. It was a little over seven feet in height and must have weighed at least a ton.

The body was roughly human. Savage power was carved in every line of the thickly muscled shoulders and torso. Set in the center of the massive chest was an egg-shaped gem whose malignant scarlet fire seemed to originate deep within its own core.

The ape-like arms ended in hands that consisted of three curving talons. There was no base to the statue. It rested upon wide-splayed feet.

The face was the crowning horror of the Thing. It seemed incredible that any human sculptor could ever have conceived the unearthly evil of that visage. It was a nightmare of obscenity that could only have been born in the reeling chaos of some other and elder world of abysmal malevolence.

The head was low skulled, utterly bestial. The open jaws of the long, hideous snout were lined with curving fangs. Above the thick upper lip were the flaring holes of wide nostrils. The face was devoid of all trace of eyes or sockets, yet oddly it gave no impression of blindness. You felt that it had never had eyes because it had never needed them, that it saw with other and weirdly alien powers of its own.

MINUTES must have passed while we stood there staring in hypnotized silence at the grimly monstrous stone Thing, our brains reeling and numb from the surging miasma of nameless evil that poured from it. Then from somewhere there came a sound that snapped our dazed senses back to a realization of our surroundings. It was the hoarse cry of a man in the last extremity of terror!

Wrenching my gaze away from the black statue's baleful fascination, I stared around me and started in shocked surprise. There were only three of us in the room.

"Where's Reisner?" I asked blankly.

Grove shook his head in bewilderment.

"I don't know," he said dazedly. "He was right behind me a few minutes ago."

My gaze roved on past Grove, then stopped abruptly as it fell upon a door in the far wall. I was certain that the door had been closed when we entered the room, but now it was half open.

"Where does that door lead?" I asked Alice.

"Down to the basement," she answered in surprise. "But there's nothing down there except some—"

Her voice broke off squarely in the middle of a sentence as from somewhere below us there came again the sound of a man's outcry. I saw the faces of Allan Grove and Alice go

ashen white, and I felt horror's icy fingers sweep coldly down my spine. There was no mistaking the hideous nature of that cry. It was bubbling, gurgling, as of a man choking upon his own blood!

We hurried over to the door. Just short of the threshold I reached a hand to Grove's arm and halted him.

"We're unarmed, Grove," I reminded him tersely. "Better equip ourselves from that junk there." I gestured toward a cluster of weapons on the wall, souvenirs of one of Gordon Herron's many jungle treks.

Grove took down a sword with a long curving blade like that of a scimitar. I selected a wooden mace, with a heavy knobbed head. The feel of the weapon brought new confidence to me as we stepped over to the doorway.

We stood there a moment, listening in tense silence. There was no sound from the black gloom of the depths below.

"There's a switch on the left wall," Alice whispered.

I snapped it on. Yellow light from dusty bulbs revealed a flight of stone steps leading down into a basement that was little more than a long, half-finished corridor. There was nothing to be seen in the limited area visible from the door.

"Reisner! Karl Reisner!" I called. "Are you down there?"

There was no answer. We started cautiously down the steps, Grove and I abreast, Alice close behind us.

The stairs ended at a wooden floor. The air was dankly chill, with a musty scent of decaying wood. Tiers of piled packing-cases lined the walls, some of them empty, others containing relics from Herron's trips of exploration. We advanced slowly along the narrow aisle between the cases toward a door in the far wall.

We passed through it into another room, a small chamber approximately twenty feet square. Several tall piles of packing-cases towered precariously against the walls in here, their contents stone figures and panels from Mayan tombs. We searched the small room for a few minutes, then came to a halt, baffled.

At that moment, with heart-stopping abruptness, the lights went out!

PITCH darkness surged in upon our dazed senses like the stifling folds of a giant blanket. With the darkness there came a sound that brought stark gibbering horror!

Somewhere in the room above us there were footsteps, not the ordinary light tread of normal human feet but ponderous clumping steps made by a Thing of colossal weight as it strode stiffly upon feet of solid stone. Primal terror numbed my quivering senses in a dazed stupor as I realized the incredible truth.

The Black God was again stalking through the night!

For a dread shuddering minute that seemed eternities long, the three of us stood frozen and motionless in the dense darkness, listening with hypnotized fascination as the clumping automaton-like steps crossed the floor toward the basement door.

Then as the unseen Thing reached the door, our tension suddenly broke. I heard Allan Grove mumble hysterical curses through quivering lips. He turned and fumbled for the door. He passed through it and raced in blundering flight into the case-lined aisle of the room beyond.

I swept Alice's slender figure close to mine, holding her tightly lest terror should drive her into blindly following Grove's example. Flight in that direction was stark madness. It meant rushing straight into the grimly-taloned hands of the stalking stone horror.

I felt Alice's body shudder in my arms. The touch of her slim fingers upon mine had the coldness of naked fear.

"Steady, darling!" I whispered huskily, trying to put a reassurance into my words that I was far from feeling. "As long as we stay back here we still have a chance."

I groped for the door and swung it shut. My fumbling fingers found the latch and slipped it into place, though I knew the utter futility of the act. That grimly stalking stone colossus could shatter the flimsy barrier with a

single sweep of one of its black arms.

We retreated to the far wall of the little room. I placed Alice in the shelter of a niche between one of the piles of cases and the wall. Then, mace in hand, I stood in front of her, tensely waiting.

The stifling darkness blotted out all trace of vision, but we did not need sight to be aware of what was happening. The sounds that throbbed through the blackness told the story all too clearly.

There was the slow ponderous tread of the Black God's feet as it descended the stairs, stone feet clumping solidly upon stone steps. There was the lighter sound of Grove's shoes scuffling over the floor in his mad flight.

Heaven alone knows what fatal quirk in Grove's terror-crazed brain sent him racing headlong into the arms of the advancing Thing. They met, apparently at a spot near the bottom of the stairs.

There was a sharp ringing clang, as of Grove's scimitar striking forcibly against stone, followed by blurred, vague sounds of a hand-to-hand struggle. Allan Grove screamed once, a shuddering cry of gibbering terror.

His voice was abruptly blotted out by a grinding, *crunching* sound of indescribably horrible timbre. A gurgling moan bubbled through a liquid-choked throat, then died away into silence. There was a dull thud, as of a lifeless body falling limply to the floor.

Next came the sound that I had been dreading with every shrinking fiber of my soul — the ponderous thud of the Black God's stone feet as it again resumed its ghastly march!

The last flickering spark of hope died in my heart as I realized that Grove's death had not appeased the Thing's grisly hunger. The monstrous march of the thudding footsteps was progressing straight toward the door of the room in which Alice and I crouched, helplessly trapped!

FERIE menace pulsed through the smothering darkness in waves of shuddering terror. Every nerve in my body flinched beneath the remorseless rhythm of the stiffly clumping feet as

they advanced toward us. The insensate stone body came onward in a monstrous and horrible manner that was alien to every law of a sane and normal world.

It reached the door. The stone feet came to a halt. For a long breathless second there was a tautly vibrant silence. Then sound exploded with cataclysmic force in the close confines of the small room. A hurtling stone arm crashed into the barrier. The flimsy latch snapped as though struck by a battering-ram. The door swung violently open.

A small oval spot of red light glowed luridly in the opening. The rays struck full in my face. My eyes blinked blindly in the ruddy glare. The source of the crimson light was the gem on the Black God's chest.

Behind the fiery jewel I could dimly see the towering outline of the mighty stone figure, topped by the flattened skull of its hideously bestial head.

For an interminable second of crepitant horror the Thing stood motionless, its eyeless face fixed upon us as though *watching* us with some eerie sense utterly alien to all Earthly life. Then one of the great splayed feet stiffly rose and the Thing stepped across the threshold.

Grimly and inexorably it advanced upon us. Evil, abysmal and incarnate, flowed from the Thing in a surging flood of soul-chilling malignance. My brain reeled, numb and shaken beneath the impact of that dread aura of stark malevolence. I stepped forward to meet the stalking figure.

The glowing jewel approached my eyes until it was so near that my dazzled vision could no longer discern even a hazy glimpse of the stone body behind it. I lifted my heavy mace and swung with all my strength at the spot where I felt that the loathesome-faced head should be.

The blow never landed. An unyielding solid stone arm met my wrist with a paralyzing force that sent the club spinning harmlessly from my limp fingers.

A taloned hand of lustrous black stone lashed out through the crimson murk. I jerked my head to one side

but the hand caromed off my cheek with a force that sent me reeling.

The Thing was upon me before I could recover. I struck blindly with both fists, then winced in pain as they glanced futilely off the skin-tearing surface of living stone. Again a lustrous black arm swung ponderously toward my face, and this time I had no chance to dodge.

The blow struck my forehead with stunning force. My body hurtled backward into a precariously piled heap of cases in the corner. The pile collapsed with a splintering crash, but I was too dazed to scramble clear.

The last thing that I heard was Alice's high-pitched scream of mortal terror. Then the falling cases crashed upon my head and shoulders. White flame exploded in my brain in a blinding sheet followed instantly by a black oblivion that blotted out everything.

MY first waking sensation was of pain. My head throbbed. Agony grated through my left side with every breath that I drew. An intolerable weight was pressing upon my chest. I opened my eyes. They met only smothering darkness.

My arms were partially pinned at my sides. I managed to twist them free sufficiently to explore the darkness around me. I was lying face upward on the floor, half buried beneath the broken packing-cases and their stone contents.

It took long minutes of muscle-wrenching work before I managed to work myself free of the splintered debris, and wriggle clear. My body was an aching mass of bruises from head to foot, but the only serious injury seemed to be in my side. The persistent grating pain there told of broken ribs.

I searched my pocket for matches. I found just one, and it was broken. Its flame lasted for scant seconds before it scorched itself out against my blistered fingers. The brief flare lasted long enough for me to see that I was alone in the small room.

The Black God had gone. And with the monstrously stalking figure of malignant stone, Alice had vanished!

Stark dread closed over my heart with icy fingers as I thought of the unspeakable fate that might have befallen her. My steps shuffled over the floor with frenzied haste as I groped for the door.

Imagination limned vivid and terrible pictures in my tortured brain—images of the clear, flawless blond beauty of Alice's lovely face, and dread memory of the horrible faceless fragment that had once been Mack Delmar.

I groped my way along the case-lined aisle of the next room. My foot thudded solidly into something lying limp and motionless on the floor. My lips spoke a whispered prayer as I knelt and explored the thing with groping fingers.

A mighty wave of relief surged through my heart as my fumbling fingers met a stiff collar and tie that were unmistakably masculine. My fingers passed on up over the chin. Then abruptly I snatched them away with a strangled exclamation of abysmal horror.

The sight of the faceless mutilations that marked the Black God's dread path was horrible enough, but to run one's fingers into one of those unspeakable facial cavities in the darkness was a shock that brought my reeling brain perilously close to the brink of shrieking madness.

My body retching in uncontrollable nausea, I staggered to my feet and blundered on through the blackness toward the stairs. My foot struck the bottom step.

At the top of the flight a faint line of light marked the crack of the door. From somewhere beyond the door there were faint sounds, as of someone or some Thing moving around in the room above.

There was a low rumble of conversation but the words were indistinguishable. I groped my way cautiously up the stairs. The door opened outward into the study. It was slightly ajar, but the crack was too narrow to give any view of the room beyond. I gently pushed it open several inches more. The sight that was revealed numbed my heart with cold horror.

The monstrous form of the Black God dominated the scene. The towering figure was in its former place in front of the wall, but it no longer stood erect upon its splayed feet. It now leaned far forward at an angle so great that the only thing which restrained its headlong plunge to the floor was a thick rope looped around its massive neck.

STRETCHED on the floor beneath the grisly menace of the stone colossus was Alice's helplessly-bound figure. Her position had been calculated with fiendish nicety. When the leaning figure of the Black God was released to finish its forward fall, its long bestial snout would strike with horrible accuracy squarely into Alice's unprotected face!

The rope around the Black God's neck passed on up over an iron hook fastened to the ceiling rafters, then down to a strong steel spike driven deep into the wall. The rope was looped around the spike in a noosed knot that needed only a single jerk at its free end to come loose and send the stone figure hurtling forward on its deadly plunge.

And, standing with his hand almost within reach of the knotted rope, was the human monster who had been responsible for the grisly horror of the night's events. There was no mistaking the tall gaunt figure. It was Karl Reisner!

Alice's face was deathly white as she stared up into Reisner's eyes, but her voice was pluckily steady.

"Why are you doing this to me, Karl?" she pleaded.

"I have no choice in the matter, my dear," Reisner rasped. "It is either your life or mine. You and Allan Grove were Gordon Herron's sole heirs. An accounting of the estate to you would reveal that the accounts had been looted of considerable sums.

"The shortage would inevitably be traced to me and the authorities would then guess the real truth about Herron's death, that I killed him when he threatened to send me to prison for the theft. But with you and Grove eliminated, the accounting would be post-

poned long enough for me to cover all traces of the shortage."

I stepped up into the room. Every muscle was tensed in an agonizing effort to keep from making the slightest sound. The spot where Reisner was standing was nearly thirty feet from the basement door. I crept toward him with the slow and infinite caution of a stalking jungle cat.

"Mack Delmar suspected the truth about Herron's death," Reisner's husky voice rasped on, "but he was too canny to act until he had proof. The fool waited too long. I killed him just before I went to the village to meet you tonight, then mutilated his face to make it appear that he had been slain by the Black God."

As I stealthily advanced upon Reisner, I saw on the floor beyond him the discarded costume that had been worn during the attack upon us in the basement. The body and cleverly built-up headpiece were sheathed in a black stone-like material. The soles of the shoes were lead-weighted like those of a diver.

The facsimile gem upon the chest still shone red from a concealed battery. Beside the suit was a bolo, its heavy blade stained dark with blood, in all probability the weapon which had so horribly mutilated the faces of Mack Delmar and Allan Grove.

I could see now how easily Reisner had duped us into playing directly into his hands. When we entered the basement in answer to his cry, he had probably been hidden among the packing-cases in the room at the foot of the steps.

After we passed on into the smaller room he slipped back upstairs, donned the Black God costume, snapped off the lights, and descended for his murderous attack. He had made just one mistake in his carefully-planned program thus far, and that was when he had left me for dead beneath the pile of fallen cases.

I HAD covered half the distance to where Reisner was standing when Alice saw me. Her swift-drooping eyelids instantly hid any telltale gleam of hope from her captor. With lightning

alertness and superb courage, she helped me in the only way she possibly could, by trying to keep the fiend's attention diverted until I could get within striking distance.

"You can't get away with your plan, Karl!" she said desperately. "People believed you when you attributed Gordon Herron's death to the Black God, but they'll never believe that three other persons could have died the same way."

"Why not?" Reisner rasped, his voice tense with the sadistic madness that surged through his veins. "The fools of the press built the Black God up into a supernatural figure about which anything will be believed.

"I have cleverly added to its aura of evil mystery, even to the extent of injecting poisonous chemicals in to the sap of the surrounding trees. When I tell my story of the God stalking murderously through the house tonight, leaving me the only survivor, I will be believed. No one will—"

Reisner's words broke abruptly off. Some faint sound of my steps must have warned him for he whirled swiftly around while I was still a full six feet away.

There was no time to rush him. His hand swung too perilously close to the knotted rope that would release the stone statue. I left my feet in a hurtling headlong tackle.

We crashed to the floor together. Reisner clawed for his pocket with his right hand as we scrambled back to our feet, but I was upon him before he had time to complete the motion.

My fists ripped into his face in a lashing attack that staggered him. He caught himself, and fought back with a savage ferocity that momentarily held me at bay. There was surprising power in that tall gaunt frame.

But he no longer had the protection of the stone-sheathed armor that had given him such an overwhelming advantage in our basement battle. This time my fists struck solidly home, and their ripping punishment swiftly began to tell.

He gave ground before the blows I rained in his face. Beyond him I saw Alice jerking and rolling her bound

body with desperate efforts, had managed to writhe safely clear of the leaning Black God's menace.

I shot a thudding left home to Reisner's mid-section. As he sagged from the blow I caught him with a smashing right on the side of his jaw. He pitched backward to the floor at the base of the leaning statue.

In the heat of the battle I had forgotten his previous effort to get something out of his pocket. I remembered it too late. His hand again flashed for his pocket, and came out with an automatic pistol.

I flung myself forward, but his shot caught me in mid-stride. Smashing pain raked my side as the slug furrowed across my ribs. I staggered backward into the wall.

Reisner rose to one knee. His skull-like face was a contorted masque of demoniac triumph as he carefully steadied the pistol for the next shot. With pain-glazed eyes I watched the lethal black hole of the muzzle swing

inexorably into line with my heart. Then the fingers of my right hand touched a dangling rope end.

Memory of what that rope meant flashed with lightning swiftness through my racing brain. I jerked it savagely, then flung my body to one side just as Reisner fired. The bullet ripped harmlessly into the wall within scant inches of my body.

Reisner looked up in time to see the Black God start forward in its deadly plunge. He tried frantically to scramble out of the way, but his foot slipped. He sprawled on his back, squarely in the Black God's path.

Reisner screamed, a cry of stark horror that ended abruptly. The falling statue struck with a weird and terrible accuracy. What had been Karl Reisner's face vanished in a hideously pulped cavity in which the statue's blood-smeared snout nuzzled deep, as though the Black God was actually glutting its hunger in one of the grisly feasts that Reisner had simulated.



Next Month: DEATH PLAYS DOLLS, a Fantastic Novelette of Eerie Thrills, by C. K. M. Scanlon

College Humor



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I AM THE WOLF



A man, masked, swung a hatchet in a short vicious arc

**Murder Comes with Dripping Jaws and Escapes into
Darkness—and the Fate of the Coyles
Hangs upon a Curse!**

By HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Nightmare Woman," "My Brother, The Ghoul," etc.

EDGAR COYLE braked his roadster to a halt in the well-kept driveway and curiously glanced up at the old house towering above him. It seemed scarcely to have changed in six years. A great, old-fashioned mansion, lonely in its height on the slope of Grey Mountain, far above the little village in the valley below. The driveway was carefully

raked, and the little garden was well tended, but bushes still grew thickly on the slopes nearby.

Coyle, as a boy, had feared those bushes. They had been so dark, so menacing, as though they harbored in their shadowed depths all the ghastly figures that haunt a child's dreams. Often, peering down fearfully from his bedroom window, he had imagined

that alien eyes were glaring at him from below; in the night, when dogs howled from the village, Edgar Coyle would awake shuddering with terror. For instilled in him by Lynch, the hunchbacked, superstitious butler, had been the tale of the Coyle curse—the werewolf legend.

But now, Coyle thought, he had outgrown such foolishness. He was coming home, for the first time since a night six years ago, when a bitter argument with old Everett Coyle, his grandfather, had ended with the younger man's stalking out of the house, declaring that from then on he would support himself.

That he had done. But with the years his old hatred of the taciturn, morose old man had changed, faded and dimmed. He himself, he knew now, had been at fault also; intolerant youth and opinionated age had clashed. In response to his grandfather's pleading letters, Edgar Coyle had come home. "To shake hands once more before I die," the old man had written.

Smiling somewhat sadly, Coyle swung out of the car and hurried up the path. As he rapped the old-fashioned bronze knocker he was wondering who would answer the door, whether old Lynch was still presiding over the household.

Yes. It was Lynch, framed in the doorway, his gigantic, humped torso monstrous above dwarfed legs. The swarthy, wrinkled face, stubbled with grey beard, was thrust forward. Sparkling, jet-black eyes peered into Coyle's own.

"Don't you know me?" Coyle asked, grinning. "Hello, Lynch!"

THE man drew back, his face twisting into a mask of fear and hatred. His voice came raspingly.

"Aye, I know you, Edgar. Your grandfather said you were coming. *You Fool!*"

Startled, Coyle stepped back. Was Lynch mad? What had happened to change him so?

"Lynch," Coyle protested, frowning. "What's the matter, man? Is anything wrong?"

The hunchback shut the door carefully behind him and stepped out on the porch. His hands swept out, caught Coyle's shoulders. Black eyes stared searchingly. And fear crept into them.

"Yes, man, something's wrong." Slowly Lynch nodded. "Have you forgot all the old tales I told you? Edgar, you're a Coyle. Does that mean nothing to you?"

Coyle stared in astonishment, repressing an impulse to laugh.

"You mean the curse? Lynch! Afraid of me? Why you've known me since I was a baby!"

"You're no child now." The hunchback's face was sombre. "You're twenty-three. The curse falls when a Coyle's of age. And you have the yellow Coyle eyes, wolf's eyes, that can see in the dark."

"Come on," Coyle said brusquely. A little surge of irritation mounted within him. "Tell my grandfather I'm here. At least he won't be afraid of me."

"The fool," Lynch whispered, his voice hoarse with passion. "The mad fool. No, he'll not fear you; he doesn't believe, either. But *I* fear, for I know! And I'll save you both. Go back to the city, Edgar. You must, you *must*."

For a moment Coyle considered arguing further with the old servant. But impatience won. Shrugging, he moved aside, intending to brush past Lynch. Again iron hands gripped his shoulders.

"You'll not, then? By God—" The great fingers dug remorselessly into Coyle's flesh. "You'll not come in this house. Not with the curse on you!"

Wincing with pain, Coyle tore free. Lynch blocked his path. He flung out a great arm, pointing to the roadster. But Coyle came forward, head bent, fists ready.

The hunchback crouched. His arms swung apelike. His hairy face was a twisted devil-mask.

"Lynch!" The cry came from nearby. A girl's voice, low and commanding. The hunchback looked around quickly, and Coyle followed his gaze.

A girl was standing at the corner of

the house. She wore riding clothes, swung a crop carelessly against her leg. Level grey eyes, fringed by lashes golden as the girl's hair, watched the two men.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Oh—your eyes—" She broke off suddenly. Flushing, she covered her embarrassment. "I'm sorry. You're Edgar Coyle, of course."

"I'm not ashamed of 'em," Coyle grinned. "Yellow eyes are a family trait. Thanks for coming just now. Lynch and I—" He hesitated, not wishing to involve the old servant in trouble; but Lynch shrugged impatiently.

"He must go back to the city, Miss Denison. He *must*."

"What?" The girl stared. "But why? Your grandfather has been talking for days about you. You'd planned to stay for a week, he said. Can't you—"

"I've no intention of leaving," Coyle broke in. "Lynch insists on it."

"Lynch! You've no right—"

"My right and my duty," growled the hunchback harshly. "You see his eyes? Wolf's eyes! He can see in the dark, as all the Coyles can. And d'you know why? Sure you know—it's no secret around here. The villagers know why every Coyle must live alone after's he's of age!"

THE girl's brows contracted. Her lips parted, but Lynch gave her no chance to speak.

"There's an old saying—

'One shall be spared, for he is the lock;
One shall be spared, for he is the key;
Two shall be doomed, be they Coyle clan,
By the blood of wolf in the veins of man.'
Alone the Coyles are safe. But when two Coyles meet, the gate is unlocked—the gate of hell! And the werewolf runs with the pack again!"

"Stop it, Lynch!" How well Coyle knew that deep, powerful voice! Swiftly he turned. Everett Coyle, his grandfather. The old man had changed not at all. His snowy mane swept back from the wide forehead, and his bushy eyebrows were tangled above the yellow Coyle eyes, blazing now with anger.

"Stop it! You superstitious fool,

get in the house! I should have expected something like this." Muttering, the old man watched Lynch shamble out of sight. Then his face was no longer forbidding.

"Edgar, I'm glad—" The two wrung each other's hand, and the younger man felt a deep thankfulness that he had heeded his grandfather's call.

After a moment old Coyle turned away. His voice was unsteady as he spoke.

"I'll get the others. I want you to meet them. Come in the house. You, too, Alma," he said.

Comfortably esconced on an old-fashioned sofa, the girl smiled at Coyle.

"I guess we're introduced. Alma Denison. Boarding with your uncle."

Coyle looked surprised. "I didn't know—surely he doesn't—"

"Well, not a regular boarder. Didn't you know about Nova Colony? Your grandfather started it, and his money's backing it. Lucky he's got plenty of dinero, for certainly it's shown no profit!" She caught herself. "I mean, it's an artistic colony, with only a few members. They all live here with your grandfather, who's backing them—formed a corporation, in fact."

Coyle grunted. He was not entirely pleased by this news, although he could not have said why.

"Are you in on this—Nova Colony?" he asked the girl.

"Oh, no. I'm really spending my vacation here. Mr. Coyle was an old friend of my father's, and, well, father died, and a stenographer doesn't make a fortune. Your grandfather asked me to spend my vacation here. It helps a lot." She smiled confidently. Somehow Coyle was glad that this girl was not a member of Nova Colony.

He glanced up quickly. His grandfather was ushering three men into the room. Introductions were made. It was plain that Everett Coyle thought highly of these three.

COYLE catalogued them in his mind. Norman Arndt—author. A bronzed, pleasant-faced man who seemed curiously young despite the streaks of gray at his temples.

Clyde Di Mario—a slender, nervous man of indeterminate age, with a thin dark face and a needle-tipped black moustache. And Ralf Kain, who was a sculptor—very big, very blond.

Di Mario, a painter, had a number of packages under his arm.

"I'm going to the village," he announced. "There is mail to go. And some canvases. Have any of you mail?"

"Not me," the blond Kain said. "I've been expecting a letter though. Ask for it, eh?"

"See if my dictaphone records have come in yet, too, Di Mario. I ordered some two weeks ago, and they haven't arrived," Arndt said, shrugging semi-tragically. "I'll be reduced to using my typewriter soon, and I'm much too lazy. I do all my writing vocally," he grinned at Coyle. "Miss Denison is good enough to transcribe it for me."

Di Mario, with a glance at the darkening windows, hurried away. Everett Coyle looked after him, his shaggy eyebrows raised.

"He does not find our company stimulating, I fear," he observed in his deep bass.

"No," Arndt grunted. "He won't be home till eleven or twelve. Cards and drink—they'll keep him busy."

Later Coyle was to remember those words. The rest of the evening was a pleasant, confused haze—cocktails, a dinner served by the sullen Lynch, cigars and idle talk—and finally bed. As always at night, a strong wind blew noisily around the house; peering down at the bushes, Coyle chuckled to himself.

No wonder he had been frightened by them as a child. Certainly the black shadows took strange shapes, but they were merely wind-tossed shrubs. Still, he did not envy Di Mario his journey back from the village.

He was sleepy, very sleepy. Almost before his head touched the pillow the black abyss of oblivion swallowed him. Dreams came.

Strange dreams. Dreams of moonlit forests, and shadows, lean, furtive shadows that slipped noiselessly from tree to tree. Strangely in the dream

he seemed to be running with the shadows, running on four legs!

The dream changed. There were vague, inchoate flashes, a vision of the moonlit slopes below the house, with bushes tossing wildly in the silver glow, and a small figure plodding along the road. A figure he recognized. Di Mario.

In the dream Coyle ran to meet the artist. Ran—on all fours! Ran, and leaped, and saw Di Mario's face, a grotesque horrible mask, drop beneath his onslaught, saw blood ribbon across swarthy skin! The rest of that ghastly dream—

Coyle did not care to remember! Shuddering, sweating with horror, he awoke to find sunlight slanting across his pillow. Someone was knocking loudly at his door.

Slowly Coyle got out of bed. There was a dull ache in his head, and he saw with a shock that his pajamas were stained with earth and torn in several places.

"Who's there?" he called weakly.

"It's Kain. Come out, man—Di Mario's been killed!"

Ice gripped Coyle. He sat down weakly on the edge of the bed.

"What? Di Mario—killed?" he gasped.

"Yes. Will you come down?"

"Right away," Coyle called. "I'll be right there." After a brief hesitation the sound of footsteps receded down the hall.

Coyle's eyes were shut against the throbbing ache in his skull. Slowly they opened. He peered at the hands resting on his knees.

HANDS that were stained red! A sickening charnel odor of the abattoir crept into his nostrils, and he was suddenly sick and giddy.

"Good God," Coyle groaned. "What's happened to me? What—what have I done?"

A glance into the large mirror did not reassure him. The haggard, hollow-eyed image that faced him sent him hurrying to the bathroom to remove all trace of the ghastly red stains that befouled his hands and face. He made a hasty toilet, and presently de-

scended the stairs.

There seemed to be no one in the house. A buzz of excited comment came faintly from outside. Coyle went to the door. His shaking hand found a cigarette, lit it.

A group of men was gathered about something in the road, something that lay sprawled in the shadow of a thicket. As though drawn by a lodestone, Coyle moved forward. The thing was covered over by a blanket, but blood had seeped through in a great, shapeless stain.

"Di Mario," Coyle said tonelessly. "What—what killed him?"

Faces were turned to him. One he did not recognize, lean, lantern-jawed, with sharp colorless eyes. An old man, but one with the whipcord body of youth.

"This is my grandson," Everett Coyle said. His voice was emotionless, but his yellow eyes were unnaturally distended.

"Edgar, this is Sheriff Dakin."

Dakin acknowledged the introduction with a grunt.

"Dunno what killed him," he observed. "Animal, maybe. There's plenty of tracks here. Looks like dog or coyote or wolf tracks."

And now Coyle saw them in the dust. Impressions of pads, the claws extremely prominent. His stomach gave a little jump.

This was impossible—impossible, unless one granted the reality of ghastly legends of another age! Yet was it merely superstition? Was not a familiar medical term today lycanthropy, a form of mania in which the patient thinks himself a wild beast?

Shuddering, soul sick, Coyle moved aside, noticing the furtive glances the others gave him. Someone laid a hand on his arm. He looked up quickly.

"Alma," he said. "I—you shouldn't have seen this."

"I found the—I found him," she said. Her face was white, but composed. Her grey eyes searched his own. After a moment Coyle's gaze fell.

Everett Coyle, his strange eyes dwelling on his grandson's face, approached.

"Edgar," he said slowly, gripping the younger man's arm. "What kept you so long? Were you asleep?"

"I—yes. I was asleep." Coyle found it difficult to meet the old man's steady stare. Everett Coyle turned to the girl.

"Will you excuse us, Alma? I want to—"

Nodding understandingly, the girl went toward the house, and Everett Coyle led his companion in another direction. Screened by thick bushes, he turned to face his grandson.

"I was late getting up this morning. We all were. But I was the first one up, and I saw something under your window, Edgar."

Coyle's face was white. With an effort he said, "Under my window? Was someone trying to get in?"

"There were tracks under the window," the old man said very softly. "Wolf tracks."

"WHAT do you mean?" Coyle whispered through dry lips.

"In God's name—*what do you mean?*"

"I'm no fool, Edgar. Nor am I superstitious. But I think a wolf, or something like a wolf, came to the house last night. That, alone, would not matter greatly; wolves can be killed. I—" The old man hesitated. His bearded lips were retracted in a grimace of pain.

"I found other tracks under your window," he went on finally. "The tracks of bare feet. I noticed a little scar—triangular—on one heel. I remember when you got that scar, Edgar, as a boy. You stepped on a broken bottle."

Coyle stood unmoving, mad thoughts racing through his brain. His lips formed a word which the other recognized.

"Lycanthropy. Yes, that's what I feared. I destroyed your footprints, Edgar, but—" The patriarchal face was a tragic mask of agony and pain. "Edgar, don't make me believe this. I thought all the tales were superstitions, because of the Coyle eyes. They seemed like the sort of legends that are the outgrowth of any peculiar inherited characteristic. But this ter-

rible insanity—"

Coyle looked away. With dreadful distinctness he was recalling his dream, if a dream it had been. Somehow it seemed, now, less a dream than a memory. *Lycanthropy!* Frightful, mania in which the victim, believing himself a wolf, goes forth by night to slay, to slake his red thirst!

Now Coyle remembered medical histories he had read, cases of men who had crept through midnight shadows to wreak ghastly butchery, men who had ended their lives in insane asylums, dumb save for the bestial yells and snarls that came from their throats.

And in Coyle's brain, like a cracked phonograph record, there whispered a mad little phrase. Over and over—

"I am the wolf. I am the wolf."

Night came down slowly. A pall of silence seemed to hang over the house. All day it had existed, ever since Di Mario's mangled corpse had been taken down to the village. Tomorrow men would set out with guns and dogs in pursuit of the man-killer.

"A timber wolf," the sheriff had said wisely. "Once in a while we still get 'em around here. Prob'ly half starved, and Di Mario must have been drunk, or it'd never have happened."

All day Coyle had been conscious of eyes watching him. Lynch's eyes, wide with terror and something like hatred. His grandfather's yellow eyes. Inscrutable eyes of blond Ralf Kain, the sculptor; speculative eyes of Arndt the writer.

And Alma Denison's grey eyes, a little puzzled, a little worried. But not afraid. Somehow it would have hurt Coyle a great deal to have read fear in the girl's cool gaze.

They ate in silence. Finally Coyle could no longer endure the furtive glances cast his way. He pushed back his chair silently and took his demitasse into the garden. The cool breeze was pleasant on his flushed face. He sipped the coffee slowly.

Presently a sound made him turn. Alma Denison was beside him.

"We'll drink ours together, eh?" she smiled, making a grandiose gesture with her tiny cup. "If you—oh!"

A stone turned under her foot, and the girl nearly fell. Coyle caught her just in time. For a moment she lay in his arms unresisting, her cool eyes smiling into his. And because the man could not help it, he bent his head, pressed his lips on those scarlet, alluring ones.

Swiftly he drew back.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

But the girl was still smiling. "I—rather liked it, Ed," she whispered. "However, it seems we get no coffee."

Coyle scarcely glanced at the shattered cups. "I mean it, Alma. I shouldn't have kissed you. Will you—forget it?"

The girl's eyes fell. "Of course. If you wish," she murmured.

Silently she turned back to the house, and as silently Coyle followed her.

AN uncanny drowsiness seemed to have settled over all of them. Coyle had thought that he would not be able to sleep, but when the others, blinking sleepily, had retired to their rooms, he, too, felt a dull heaviness oppress his mind, a lethargic languor that made his movements an effort.

Buttoning his pajama coat, he moved to the window and stopped, staring. Then he lifted the shade, and saw the heavy shutters that barred the window. Shutters that were immovable! He slid open the window and tested them, but they scarcely creaked under the pressure of his hand. Somehow a little breath of relief touched Coyle. He turned away, and hesitated as a knock came on the door.

"Edgar?" It was his grandfather's voice.

"Want me?" Coyle asked sleepily. "Come in."

But there was no response. Only the click of a key turning, and the sounds of footsteps padding softly away. Grinning wryly, Coyle went to the door and tested it. Locked. Everett Coyle had taken steps to protect his grandson—and himself.

Sleep came to Coyle presently. It was not the lethargic slumber of the preceding night, but a broken, uneasy

sleep. There came again to him the eerie visions he had already experienced, the moonlit forests where black shapes ran furtively.

A tiny thread of sound, elfin-thin, ran through his dreams, a vague whispering, faint and far away. It grew louder, and receded, and swelled again. And now Coyle seemed to see the sleeping form of his grandfather, bearded face pale in the moonlight. Coyle was moving closer, a dreadful hunger stirring within him.

Shrill, piercingly, a scream ripped through the mists shrouding Coyle's mind, bringing him back to full consciousness. The room was dark, but unerringly Coyle's hand went to the lamp at his bedside, switched it on. There was an odd sensation in his ears and a voice was murmuring something.

He sat bolt upright, staring at the thing his hands had brought down from his head. Earphones! From them a rubber tube ran to a black metal box beside the bed, on which a dark cylinder revolved slowly. It was a dictaphone.

The ghost-voice was quite audible now. Coyle's eyes widened as he listened.

"—moonlit forest—black shadows are moving there, running swiftly—you are running with them—and now you are in Everett Coyle's room, moving closer to him. You are watching his throat. A little gesture, and red blood will spurt out—"

With a horrified exclamation Coyle dropped the earphones. He understood, now. Something he had read, long ago, came back to him. A scientific experiment on education during sleep.

After the patients slept, Coyle remembered, an adapted dictaphone had given informative lectures, carried by earphones to the sleeping minds of the subjects. And on awakening they had remembered the lectures almost word for word!

A trick, Coyle realized that now, had been used to create in his mind a dream-memory of something that had never occurred. The whispering voice of the dictaphone had suggested to Coyle the weird visions, while

someone had gone forth to slay, ruthlessly, bloodily.

Coyle's mind worked swiftly, analyzing and fitting together the fragments of the puzzle. Someone who was familiar with the werewolf legend had killed Di Mario, and had attempted to frame Coyle, even to the extent of making him believe in his own guilt. Someone whose voice, distorted and unrecognizable, had whispered deadly suggestion from the dictaphone.

A GAIN the cry came, faint, despairing. Coyle had almost forgotten what had awakened him, but now, hearing the terrified scream from below, he leaped from the bed, cursing. His bare feet made no sound as he crossed the room, tried the door. It was unlocked. Everett Coyle had left the key in the lock, and the murderer had easily opened the door when he had brought the dictaphone to Coyle's room.

Downstairs a door slammed. Swiftly Coyle raced down to the first floor. The hall was empty, dim in the moonlight. Stealthily he tried a door.

The room beyond was empty. The next two proved equally disappointing. But beyond them—

Quietly Coyle drew the door open, peering through the crack at a dimly-lighted cellar and old rickety stairs. The place was a maze of dust and cobwebs, and the accumulated rubbish of years littered the floor. A single electric bulb hung from the ceiling, its faint radiance gleaming on the nearly nude body of Alma Denison as she lay crumpled on the ground.

Hurriedly Coyle went down the stairs. The girl's filmy nightdress hung in shreds, and a dark bruise discolored her temple. But she seemed unhurt. Beside her, however, lay a rake, the tines discolored with clotted blood, to which shreds of flesh and hair clung. The weapon that had mutilated Di Mario!

As Coyle stared, Alma's eyes opened, and she cried out sharply, her horror-riveted gaze on him. Dropping the blood-stained rake he knelt beside her.

"It's all right, Alma," he told her. "What happened? Are you—"

She swayed toward him, faint with relief.

"I—I don't know, Ed. I woke up when I heard someone moving around in the hall, and when I opened the door he—he saw me."

"Who?"

"I don't know. His face—he had a woman's stocking over it, with just eyeholes cut in it. He caught me, Ed. I tried to get back in my room, but he was too quick. He dragged me down here, although I fought him all the way, and then he must have knocked me unconscious. My head—" Her fingers went up to the livid bruise.

Coyle's lips tightened grimly. He straightened as a sound came to his ears. His head turned swiftly.

The door at the top of the stairs was opening.

A black, hunched figure stood there. It was the hunchback, Lynch. His grotesque face was twisted with some unfathomable emotion.

He came down the steps slowly, his gaze never leaving Coyle. The wrinkled, red lids were drooping, but the hunchback's eyes were glittering and fixed.

"Lynch!" Coyle said sharply.

The man stopped at the foot of the stairs. Amazingly a tear rolled down his creased, black-stubbed cheek.

"Ah, God—Edgar!" he whispered hoarsely. "I couldn't believe—even though I knew the curse. But now—" His glance went to the half-nude girl. "You—you're a wild beast, Edgar!"

Sheer agony was in the hunchback's voice as he almost shouted. "I'm going to kill you! I must, like I'd kill a mad dog! You—"

He moved forward on his stumpy legs, great arms dangling. Before Coyle could move, the girl leaped to her feet, interposed her body between the two men.

"Stop it, Lynch! He's not—he didn't do this."

"Eh?" Lynch stopped, staring. "He didn't—"

Without warning it happened. Stark fear sprang into Alma's eyes; Coyle shouted a futile warning.

SOMETHING had emerged from the darkness beneath the stairway—a man, masked, swinging a hatchet in a short vicious arc. The murderous weapon crashed down on the hunchback's head.

Horribly the man's head was split almost in half under that terrible blow. With a brittle crunching of bone the hatchet's blade bit deep, and the body of Lynch stood for an intolerable, age-long moment, still and unmoving.

The hunchback toppled. Blood splattered on Alma and Coyle.

Coyle wrenched his gaze from the shambles at his feet. A sharp command from the killer made his tense muscles relax. An automatic was aimed unwaveringly at his heart.

"Back up," a cold voice requested with ironic politeness. "Against the wall. That's it. Now we're quite comfortable."

"You devil!" Coyle whispered. "You're responsible for this?"

"Of course," the other said. Coyle tried to pierce the stocking-mask, but the features beneath it were unrecognizable. "Of course I'm responsible. But don't blame me. You started it."

"I?—what d'you mean?" An amazing thought was growing in Coyle's mind. "I started it—by coming here?"

"That's it. It doesn't really matter now how much you know, for you'll both be dead in a few minutes. Or even sooner." He thrust the gun forward.

"You killed Di Mario?" Alma asked.

Coyle blessed her. From the corner of his eye he had seen an empty beer bottle lying on the head of a barrel scarcely a foot away. He shifted his weight imperceptibly.

"Yes," the masked man admitted. "I killed Di Mario. And tonight I'm going to kill a few others, just as I'd planned. In fact, more than I'd planned, for if you hadn't interfered, I'd not have found it necessary to dispose of Lynch, or either of you. Lynch and the girl would have been witnesses against Edgar Coyle. And you, Mr. Coyle, would have died in the chair or gone to an insane asylum."

"But why?" Coyle asked desper-

ately. "I've never harmed you, as far as I know. What—"

"Harmed me?" There was bitter rage in the man's voice. "Not yet. But you would have. As long as your grandfather hated you, he wouldn't leave you a penny of his fortune. But you had to come back; the old man softened up and was planning to change his will. Change it in your favor!"

"But who—" Coyle stopped suddenly understanding. And Alma's voice confirmed his suspicions.

"So that's it. Ed, do you know what your grandfather's will says now?"

"Tell him," the killer mocked. "Tell him!"

"His fortune goes to the Nova Colony! Di Mario, Arndt, and Kain, for them to administer between themselves for the furthering of the colony."

"Exactly. But why should I share the money? I'll handle it myself—as the sole survivor. Nova Colony!" the masked man chuckled. "Fools! Once I get my hands on old Coyle's money—" Again the gun swung up.

"You can't expect to get away with this," Coyle interrupted hastily. "The others will hear the shot—"

The man laughed with genuine amusement. "Drugged, Edgar, drugged! Just as they were last night. The coffee—"

Realization came to Coyle. That explained why Alma and he were awake now. Their coffee had been spilled in the garden. And Lynch? Possibly the man's iron constitution had enabled him to fight off the drug's effect. The hunchback's eyes had been heavy, Coyle remembered.

SWIFTLY he acted. The empty bottle was close now, for he had been edging stealthily in that direction ever since he had seen it. With one swift movement he flung himself aside, clutching the bottle by its neck. He flung it with desperate accuracy.

The killer's gun blazed, and a bullet thudded into the wall. But Coyle's aim had been good. The electric bulb popped and went out as glass shattered. Instantly the cellar was

plunged into darkness.

Very silently, very swiftly, Coyle moved. The killer was quiet, obviously waiting for the others to betray their positions by sound.

A metallic clatter sounded, and a snarling oath. Then the rickety wooden stairway jarred ominously as two bodies fell against it.

There was a scuffle, a sudden expulsion of breath, and the thud of a body collapsing. Presently a match flared.

"Ed!" Alma ran forward, her face alight with relief. "You're—you're safe! I was afraid—"

"I'm okay," Coyle grinned wryly. "A few bumps and bruises. But our friend here is out for the count."

"Oh! Who is it, Ed? The mask—"

Coyle saw a candle on a shelf near by, and lit it.

"Don't you know? I managed to make a pretty good guess. You see—either Arndt, the writer, or Kain, the sculptor, could have used a dictaphone. But—remember the wolf tracks found outside the house? There were the tracks of my own feet there too, although I hadn't walked where they were."

"But how, Ed?"

"Plaster casts, of course. The killer made casts of my feet while I was asleep, and used them. The wolf tracks—well, he either employed the same trick, or else moulded pads from clay, and then made the casts. And I remembered that Kain was a sculptor, and that would be right up his alley. See?" Swiftly he bent and stripped the mask from the murderer's face.

The girl drew back, shuddering, into Coyle's arms. "You're—you're right, Ed. It is Kain. And—he nearly won, too. If we hadn't been lucky—"

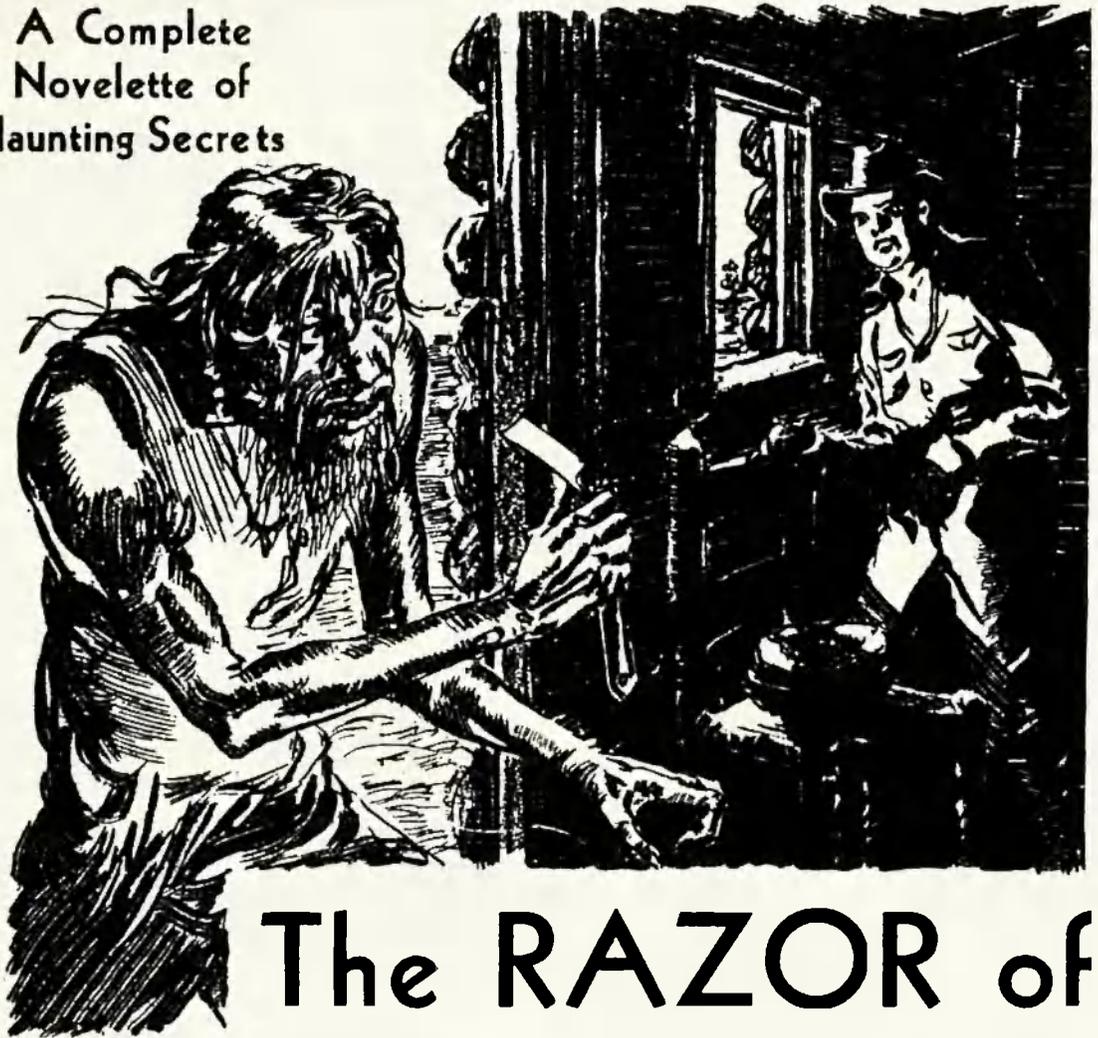
"Lucky?" Coyle chuckled. "No luck about it! After the light went out, I simply picked up the rake, knocked the gun out of his hand, and piled into him."

"But how—"

"The ancestral curse," Coyle laughed, tightening his arm about Alma's waist. "Kain forgot about that, or he wouldn't have waited as he did. He forgot that the Coyles—the werewolf Coyles—can see in the dark!"

Bob Barret Ferrets Out a Ghastly

A Complete
Novelette of
Haunting Secrets



The RAZOR of

CHAPTER I

Return of the Dead

THERE were seven of us making that tough, back-breaking portage through Canadian wilderness from a tributary of the Mackenzie to Peace River.

Jacques Laval, the gnarled old French guide, trudged with his party of four, thirty feet ahead of Larry Conroy and myself. A leather sling from the bow of their canoe was suspended over his left shoulder. The men with him alternated taking turns at the stern

sling of the canoe. Conroy and I, Bob Barret, sweated at the slings of our own.

The faint trail we'd followed at first had petered out altogether. Now it was just the grim, ugly business of weaving with the heavily laden canoes through fairly thick brush.

We should have paused and struck camp at least an hour ago. But there was a storm looming up. Laval was trying to make the shelter of an abandoned cabin that, he claimed, was less than a mile from where we were now.

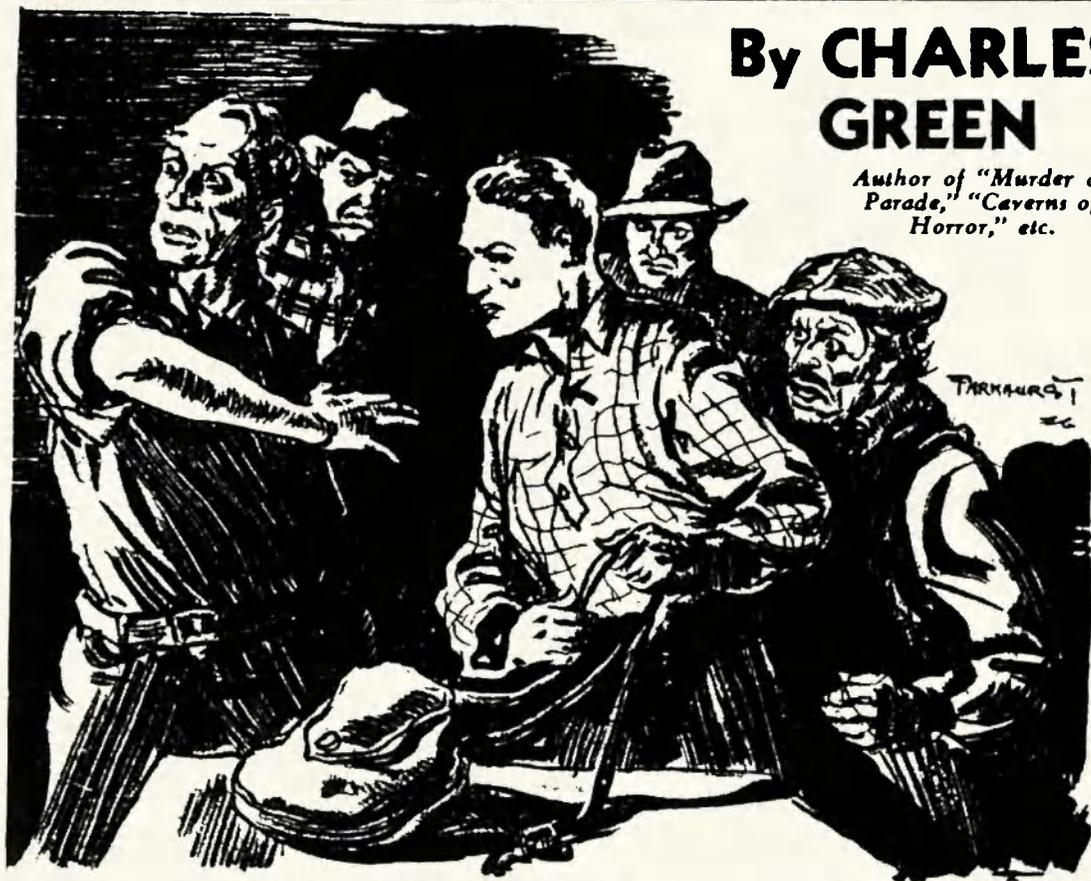
We trudged in silence. Lightning occasionally crackled across the heav-

A Haunted Cabin in the Canadian Wilderness

Secret in a Desolate Scene of Madness!

By **CHARLES GREEN**

Author of "Murder on Parade," "Caverns of Horror," etc.



A wild, inhuman shriek came from the doorway.

GASTON DUBROIS

ens, with its ominous accompaniment of distant thunder. There wasn't a breath of air. Sweat trickled into my eyes, moistened my palms, soaked my clothes. The strap of the canoe felt like a mustard plaster across my shoulder and back.

"There's the damn cabin—to the right!" one of the men ahead yelled suddenly. "See it?"

I glanced right. Sure enough, just barely visible through the brush and the thin screen of young spruce, I saw a small log cabin. A patch of blackish water showed beyond it.

Laval, I thought, evidently had mis-

calculated the distance to the cabin. Then I heard the guide's voice, high-pitched shrill.

"*Mon Dieu*, no! That is not the place. I did not t'ink we come by so close. Stop there? But no, no, *no!*"

Burly Dominick, at the stern of their canoe, lowered his end. His sweat-drenched, beefy face was ugly with resentment.

"Why not?" he rasped. "What's wrong with that cabin?"

Laval was rapidly jerking his head from Dominick's face to the cabin. And I saw that his eyes, beneath the shaggy grey eyebrows, were rolling with some

Gives Habitation to Unspeakable Horrors!

inexplicable terror. His face was white.

"The breath of hell, *m'sieu*," he panted, "eet hangs over that place. We must go way—quick!"

"What d'you mean?"

Sweat glistened on Laval's broad, hickory-hued face.

"The spirit of ver', ver' wicked man live there, *m'sieu*. Because Gaston Dubrois—he get the curse of God for the terrible t'ing he did."

"What crazy gibberish is this?" Dominick snarled.

The lanky, hook-nosed, lantern-jawed man who had been introduced to me as McFarlane said in his startling effeminate voice:

"This wicked Gaston Dubrois—what's he done, Laval?"

The old Frenchman again glanced fearfully toward the cabin.

"Gaston—he drink too much, *m'sieu*. A bad man. One night, he get ver' drunk. He takes razor. He go first where his wife sleep. He slash wit' the razor—so!" Laval scraped his thumb across his throat. "Then he go where his daughter sleep. Again he slash wit' the razor."

"Nice old guy," drawled Clark, a chubby little man with the bland face of a cherub and the cruel eyes of a cheta cat.

IN a whisper, Laval began elaborating on the gruesome details.

"Gaston—he don't stop wit' cuttin' t'roats of his wife and daughter. He go more and more crazy when he see the blood. He slash, slash, slash wit' the razor. The mounties who find the bodies say they t'ink Gaston mebbe try to skin the women like animals he catch in his traps."

I found myself staring at the fourth man, the man they called Sturm. He was a thick-necked Dutchman with a body like a hogshead mounted on absurd stubby legs. His thick lips were parted, and he was wetting them with the tip of his tongue. Relishing that horrible story!

"What became of the old devil?" Clark asked casually. "Did the mounties catch him?"

"Oh, Gaston don't run away. He cut

his own t'roat too. His son Jean escape when Gaston go crazy wit' the razor. He bring back the mounties."

There was a brief pause, then Dominick's harsh voice cut in.

"A good yarn, Laval, but I'm tired. Had enough hiking for one day. So we're stopping over in that cabin. Gaston's spirit won't bother you near as much as the toe of my boot can. Go on, lift up your end of the canoe!"

Laval hesitated, terrible indecision on his broad, brown face. He glanced down at the burly man's big clenched fists. Without further comment, he heaved upward at the canoe sling. Dominick lifted the stern.

As Conroy and I trailed behind the others toward the cabin, a curious sense of foreboding came over me. A warning instinct of lurking peril and menace tingled my spine.

Maybe it was the electricity in the air. Or the terrific feeling of expectancy that charges the atmosphere before an electrical storm. Or perhaps the effect of the spine-crawling story of the murderous maniac slashing with the razor. But as we neared the cabin, I felt my nerves tightening, tightening.

Who, I found myself wondering again, were those four men trudging with Laval ahead of me? The burly, brutish Dominick; Sturm, that waddling mass of ugly blubber; hook-nosed, soft-spoken McFarlane; Clark, with the face of a cherub and the eyes of a devil. They were city men, obviously. What were they doing here in the heart of the Canadian wilderness?

Conroy and I at least had an understandable motive. We were shooting wild life and nature scenes for a Canadian travelogue. But I couldn't accept the explanation that those four men were simply on a shooting and fishing party. Why go so far North?

We were with them only because of an unfortunate accident. Our own guide had sprained his back. He held out just long enough to bring us to Laval's cabin. We had hoped to hire Laval to replace him. But Laval had already been engaged by that quartet. The best he could do was to suggest, we trail along with his party until we

hit Peace River, a distance ahead.

Then I became annoyed at my own thoughts, suddenly feeling like a prying, gossipy old woman. Who those men were was, after all, none of my business.

WE were quite near the cabin now. It was built close to the edge of what looked like a small lake, and final dying rays of the sun cast a crimson tint on the blackish surface of the water.

We lowered our canoes on a kind of crude little pier built at the water edge. Jacques Laval lighted his stubby black pipe, then suddenly turned to Dominick. There was a strange glitter in his eyes.

"You t'ink," he said, "mebbe I make up that story about Gaston Dubrois, eh? You come wit' me, and I prove it to you, *m'sieu*."

"How?" Dominick asked curiously.

"You come wit' me. Inside Gaston's cabin. I show you."

And he did, thirty seconds later, when we crowded in the main room of the tiny cabin. Gruesome, horrible proof. As added protection against the bitter Northern winter, Gaston Dubrois had lined the inner walls with a kind of greyish clay. There were great red-brown stains on that clay now, especially above two of the bunks. Other stains—these dark red—were on the white pine planking of the floor. Dried blood!

"The mounties," Laval explained "they burn blood-soaked mattresses and blankets after they bury the bodies. But they can do not'ing wit' the walls and floor. Here is where he kill his old woman."

He pointed to the left bunk, then traced with his finger the trail of blood-stains to a solid patch of brownish red a few feet away.

"He drag her—there! Then he pick up razor again—"

A wild, inhuman shriek from the doorway spun us about as if we were puppets operated by the same control string.

Then a tremendous clammy paw suddenly seemed to clutch my heart, squeezing, squeezing.

A nightmarish figure stood just inside the doorway. The figure of a tall horribly emaciated man. Rags, indescribably filthy, partly covered his skeletonlike frame. Stringy black hair, matted with earth, came down over his forehead, and the crafty cruel eyes of a madman peered through it.

The lower part of his face was concealed by a matted, filthy beard. A black beard, just below where his chin must be it was caked with what looked like dried blood. And the same reddish substance stained his clawlike hands, his forearms.

Even as we stared at him, all of us paralyzed, utterly incapable of sound or motion, one of those clawlike hands darted beneath the rags covering his chest. It emerged an instant later, brandishing aloft a glittering straight razor.

"It is Gaston Dubrois!" Laval screamed. "Gaston Dubrois—back from the grave!"

The creature's lips parted, exposing broken black teeth.

"*Oui*—Gaston Dubrois!" he said in a curious half chant. "My razor—eet is still ver' sharp. You bettaire go 'way—soon. Or I *keel*!"

A peal of maniacal laughter followed the warning. With the swiftness of an animal, he turned to the door, darted through it.

"I'll get him!" Clark yelled.

HE was standing nearest to the door. Tugging at his hip pocket, he plunged in pursuit. A moment later, I heard shots—one, two, three! Then Clark burst into the cabin. Smoke still curled lazily from the snout of his automatic.

"Johnny," he said to Dominick, a plaintive, incredulous note in his voice, "you know I never miss with the gat. Not at twenty feet, anyway. And he wasn't much further than that when I began pumpin' lead at him."

"He got away, eh?"

"Right. I can't figger it out. Don't see how I could've failed to plug him."

"He is dead," Laval said hoarsely, his face twitching with terror. "You cannot kill the dead, *m'sieu*. Gaston Dubrois, put in a murderer's grave two

years ago—he laugh at bullets. We must dig up his grave. We must drive a stake through his black heart. That will keep heem there.”

“Do you know where the mounties buried him?” asked Clark.

“But certainly. I help dig the graves. Come, I show you.”

CHAPTER II

Death Strikes Again

SO we trooped out on this mad, macabre mission of driving a stake through a corpse buried two years ago. Laval led us to the rear of the cabin. Then he stopped short, pointing with a violently trembling hand. His mouth was open, but he seemed incapable of uttering a sound. He was literally frozen, paralyzed with terror.

There were two mounds of earth behind the cabin. Two graves. Between them yawned a shallow pit, fringed with loose earth. An open grave.

“You see?” Laval screamed suddenly. “He—come out of his grave. He—”

“Now wait a minute, you old fool,” Dominick growled. “You saw Dubrois buried in that grave by the mounties?”

“*Oui, m’sieu.* He was dead, his t’roat cut from ear to ear.”

“Dead men,” said Dominick, “don’t crawl out of their graves. The mounties must have only thought he was dead. Buried him alive. Then he clawed his way out again.”

“But I tell you, *m’sieu,*” Laval insisted shrilly, “Gaston Dubrois *was* dead.”

“The mounties,” Clark contributed hesitantly, “are pretty bright boys. Seems to me they wouldn’t make a dumb mistake like that. And I told you, Johnny, that I pumped three slugs at him.”

Dominick laughed, derisive laughter in which McFarlane and Sturm joined.

“All right, Chris,” he sneered, “start holding hands with Laval. You’re in his class now. Myself, I got a bright idea, folks. This is supposed to be a hunting party, isn’t it?”

“I,” McFarlane said softly, “am getting an inkling of what you’re driving at, Johnny.”

“You would!” said Dominick. “A mad Frenchman chasing around with a razor ought to supply a lot of fun, gents. It’s a cinch that he’s still around somewhere. How about a little man-hunt, just to break the monotony, you know?”

McFarlane smiled slowly. Sturm made throaty noises that reminded me of an eager and excited pig. Clark, evidently forgetting his qualms a minute ago, said enthusiastically:

“Hell, Johnny, you always were the brain guy of this outfit. Sure, that oughta be a lot of fun.”

“How about you and your friend, Mr. Barret?” Dominick asked, turning to me. “Would you care to join us?”

I glanced at the open grave.

“The madman’s razor,” I said slowly, making no effort to conceal the antagonism in my voice, “as I recall, did look awfully sharp. No, I think I prefer a swim right now.”

“A most prudent young man,” Dominick drawled. “But your suggestion of a swim first is rather excellent. Would you consider the lake polluted if we joined you?”

Open invitation to a brawl was in his voice, his eyes. I chose to ignore it, turned on my heel. I gestured Conroy to follow me and walked down to the pier at the water edge.

“I wouldn’t antagonize that gang too much, Bob,” Conroy whispered nervously. “They’re vicious devils.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about them,” I said. “There’s something else that—well, that’s making me feel jittery as hell.”

“I know,” said Conroy. “Something in the atmosphere—something evil, sinister. I keep catching myself listening, listening. If that madman with the razor isn’t Gaston Dubrois—then who in hell is he? And that open grave—”

I LOOKED sharply at Conroy. Only then I realized that he was scared stiff. His lips were white, and there was a brightness in his eyes that I didn’t quite like. He was a mild, meek, plump little man. A swell photog-

rapher, but I really hadn't known him long. Picked him up in Hollywood when I got the travelogue assignment from the Mammoth Films.

"Steady," I said, and checked what I wanted to add because the others now joined us on the pier.

Silently, we began removing our sweat-soaked clothes. Clark undressed first. He had the smooth, evenly padded body of a Polynesian. I heard the splash as he dived in, then a shout: "Boy, it's great!"

Then the rest of us plunged in. The water was cold, and delightfully refreshing. Splashing in it, the fatigue and discomfort of that tough portage leaving my body, I could have laughed at the sinister tension of the past few minutes.

The grotesque figure with the razor, Laval's gruesome story, the empty grave, my clash with Dominick and the proposed man-hunt—it all seemed strangely unreal. It wasn't long before we were whooping in that cold water like school kids playing hookey in some swimming hole. Dominick was good-naturedly trying to duck Clark, and the smaller man retaliated by splashing water in his face.

Glancing at the pier, I saw that Sturm hadn't plunged in yet. That hogshead body of his was hideous in the nude. Masses of shapeless blubber, greyish-white, hairless. A small leather pouch showed darkly against the white of his chest. It was suspended by a leather thong encircling his thick neck.

He raised the little bag now in his cupped hands, and for a moment I had the impression that he kissed it. Then I saw him stoop to move one of his boots a bit further from the edge of the pier. Water geysered in a huge splash as he dived in clumsily. I wondered where Laval was. The old guide hadn't walked down to the pier with the others.

It was getting quite dark now. Thirty feet from the pier was a kind of rude float, built for Lord knows what mysterious purpose. Conroy was hanging onto it. I thought I'd swim over there and back, then get out.

As I struck out for the float, I passed Sturm, treading water. He appeared to

be fumbling at the thong on which the leather pouch was suspended. Then he suddenly threw himself on his back and lashed out with both feet.

A vicious, unexpected kick, it caught me full in the pit of my stomach. Drove the air out of my lungs. Forced me to double up in a paralyzing cramp. I yelled something, floundered, thrashing my arms helplessly, went down.

Still in that paralyzing cramp, my knees practically touching my chest, I must have gone down like a rock. Down, down, down, in water that became progressively colder as I continued sinking. Then there was a soft jar. I felt my right hand touch and sink into the slime that formed the bottom of the lake.

EVEN in those terrible few seconds while I lay helpless on that slimy bottom, blackness about me, a score of feet of water above me, my lungs already bursting and tortured for air, my brain was lucid, still free from the paralysis of panic. I knew I had to break that cramp—or die!

I tried. Tried to bring my hands to my stomach muscles and massage them. I succeeded only in clawing at my flesh. Then I suddenly felt my legs jerk out. Instinct prompted me to make the proper muscular move when my brain hadn't realized yet that the cramp had left me.

Twice again I kicked out convulsively. Then I shot up to the surface, gasping, gulping great lungfuls of air. Between myself and the float, ghastly in the darkness that intensified every second, I saw Sturm's gross, white body. He was swimming toward the float. The others, realizing that something was wrong, were also converging on the float.

Blind, mad fury coursing through my blood, I struck out swiftly after Sturm. I meant to grab the gross animal and give *him* a taste of what drowning felt like. But Sturm reached the float before I could overtake him. He grabbed at the side of it just as a vicious streak of lightning snarled across the heavens.

It revealed Sturm hanging by one arm at the side of the float. Conroy, several feet to the left of him. Clark

and McFarlane on the opposite side, neither having reached the raft yet but quite close to Sturm. Dominick was near Conroy.

I continued swimming in the second of total blindness following the lightning glare, when my spine was suddenly chilled by a horrible gurgling scream. Near me, and to the left. The crash of thunder drowned it out an instant later.

My outstretched right hand touched the warped wood of the float. Then I felt something hot bathe my left shoulder and arm. I glanced up—at horror. At horror that sickened me to the point of nausea. At horror that I knew would haunt me for my nights to come.

Sturm's blubbery bulk was above me. His left arm was still hooked on the float, and he hung from it. But the upper part of his torso was no longer greyish-white. Blood crimsoned it. Blood trickling in tiny joined rivulets, forming a hideous web on his chest. Blood which had its source in a tiny jetting fountain at his throat.

His jugular had been cut, and I could gauge the dying beats of his heart by the rhythmic spurts of blood.

Even as I stared at him, his head fell back, back. It widened the frightful wound in his throat. Like some hideous red mouth, opening in a macabre grin, drooling crimson saliva, that wound leered at me. Mocking, fantastic, grotesquely horrible.

The leather pouch was no longer dangling at his chest. The razor which had slashed his throat, I found myself thinking in that moment of frozen stupefaction, must have severed the thong which had supported it.

The razor! Gaston Dubrois, the murderous madman whom the grave could not hold, living up to his grisly warning?

I SAW Sturm's body begin to sink as his hooked arm slid off the edge of the float. Instinctively, I grabbed him, one arm around his shoulder and under his armpit, my other hand clinging to the float.

Revulsion gorged me as I felt again the heat of his blood on my flesh; as I heard the throaty gurgle still emanat-

ing from his opened mouth. He stiffened suddenly, with such violence that he almost tore my grip at the side of the float. Then his head went back, and again I saw the lips of that frightful wound widening, widening. Leering at me.

Someone was saying in an awed, incredulous whisper: "My God!" Repeating it over and over again. It was Clark, I saw an instant later, his teeth drawn back over his lips, his nostrils dilating.

Then a bulky body loomed up over me on top of the float. Dominick. Standing there motionless, water dripping from him, staring, staring.

"Grab hold of him, will you?" I shouted, my own voice strange in my ears.

Dominick grabbed Sturm's arms. He tugged at them while I pushed from below. Between us, we managed to get him up on the float. I ducked, and washed off the gore which had splattered on me. Conroy extended his hand to me when I was about to climb up. The others were already on the float.

"Wait!" I said.

My right hand had come in contact under water with some object on one of the submerged beams of the float. Treading water, I lifted the object, looked at it—and almost dropped it with disgust. It was a straight-back razor.

Bright and shiny, free from rust, that razor couldn't have lain long on that submerged timber. Obviously it was the razor which had slashed Sturm's throat. Wielded by whom?

CHAPTER III

The Man with the Black Beard

AND that was the question that I asked myself again when I climbed up on the float and stood over Sturm's gory body. The fat man was dead now. A long minute dragged, none of us saying anything. Just standing there, staring at Sturm.

His right hand, I noticed, clutched the thong from which that little leather

pouch of his had dangled. The razor, as I had guessed before, had cut the thong when it slashed his throat. His fingers, closing convulsively from the terrific pain, must have caught one of the severed ends as the pouch began sinking. The pouch was clutched tightly in his hand, the cut thong dangling.

I was still holding that damned razor, and I took a better look at it now. Scrolled in black letters on the bony handle was a French trademark. "Lille, France," was printed beneath it. And on the opposite side, scratched deeply into the bone, was the name—"Gaston Dubrois!"

Without a word, I handed the razor to Dominick. He looked at it, saw the name, nodded grimly.

"Yeah, that mad dog has lived up to his promise. Must've been hiding near the float here. Cut Sturm's throat, placed the razor on that timber and swam ashore. Swam under water probably. But you and Sturm had a fight out there. Why?"

I shrugged.

"It was no fight. I swam past him. He was fumbling with the thong of that pouch of his, saw me and kicked me in the stomach. Damn near drowned me."

Dominick passed the razor on to the others. Conroy, the last man who got it, shuddered and dropped it on the float near Sturm's body. The tense, awkward silence continued. There seemed nothing to say; no comment to make on this appalling murder that had been committed under our very eyes.

Then Clark said jerkily:

"I pumped three slugs at him at twenty feet — and missed! And the mounties don't bury for dead anybody who could still be hung."

Dominick glared at him.

"No, damn it!" he snarled. "The dead—stay dead! Warm blood was in the arm that slashed Sturm with that razor."

Clark shrugged, stooped over Sturm's body and picked the leather pouch from the dead hand. I saw Clark's hand close tightly over it, open, close again.

"Johnny," he whispered to Dominick.

"Johnny, it's—gone!" he exclaimed. "What!"

The float rocked as Dominick actually leaped toward Clark.

"Let's see it!" he shouted.

Clark handed him the pouch. Dominick felt it with his fingers, straightened slowly. His voice was low, even, deadly as he said to McFarlane:

"Yeah, Mac, it's empty. The guy who slashed Sturm's throat helped himself to it."

"To what?" I asked. "What was in that pouch? Sturm kissed it before he dived in. Or I thought he did."

A GAIN SILENCE. But silence **A** pregnant with some sinister significance. Clark, Dominick, McFarlane—they were all staring at me, saying nothing. Then Dominick drawled casually:

"Oh, it was a good luck charm that all of us believed in. Still do, for that matter. We've got to get it back, eh, boys?"

"You're damn right we do," Clark said, his voice thick with passion. "We seen the guy at the cabin. The guy with the razor. The guy who killed Sturm. The guy who swiped that good luck charm. Let's start lookin' for him. I'll get the rat if I have to spend the rest of my life in this damn country."

"That goes for me, too," said McFarlane.

"And me," Dominick gritted.

He was the first to dive off the float. The others followed him. I saw them reach the pier, climb up, feverishly begin to dress their wet bodies.

"Bob!" I heard Larry Conroy say in a choking whisper. "There's a quart of liquor in my duffel bag. I need a drink as I have never needed one in all my life. For God's sake, let's get ashore. Away from—from this thing."

He gestured at Sturm's gory body, his hand trembling, his face grey with terror.

"You swim behind me, please," he added. "So that you can warn me if he comes after me—with a razor."

"You needn't worry about the razor, anyway," I said lightly trying to reassure him. "Because it's right here on the—"

And then the words died in my throat.

The razor which I had seen Conroy drop on the float near the body was no longer there.

Gone!

In vain I tried to convince myself that it must have fallen between one of the spaces in the plankings, or slid off when Dominick's leap had rocked the float. Somehow I kept seeing in my mind the murderer's bony claw reaching for it from the blackness of the lake.

No matter which way I faced, I seemed to feel on my back the cruel, glittering eyes of the madman.

"**YEAH,**" I said, my own voice none too steady, "let's get ashore."

The swim back to the pier wasn't a pleasant experience. I could have made it in nothing flat, but I dutifully stuck behind Conroy. When he climbed up finally, every nerve of my body raw and quivering, we made another ugly discovery.

Jacques Laval had run away!

Cursing, furious, Dominick informed me of that pleasant fact. It meant that we were completely lost somewhere in the Canadian wilderness. For none of us had the faintest idea of where we were, except that we were at least two hundred miles from the nearest settlement.

"But we'll worry about that later," Dominick said. "You still don't want to join this man-hunt of ours?"

"Hasn't it occurred to you," I countered, "that someone ought to stay here? To guard our canoes and supplies? And to forestall the excellent possibility that this homicidal madman might return to the cabin? Besides, how do you expect to catch a man who must know every square yard of this part of the country?"

"I'm gambling," Dominick said grimly, "that he's crazy enough to attack one of us. That's point one. Point two: he came ashore somewhere. Soft mud fringes the shore of this lake. It's bound to show his footprints. Maybe we could track him down, if we get at it quickly."

CLARK, followed by McFarlane, walked back from their canoe. There were three flashlights under his armpit. He distributed them. McFarlane was swinging a big blue .38 by the trigger guard. The bony hilt of a knife protruded from his belt. There was also a knife in Clark's belt, and an automatic in his right hand.

"Now look, guys!" said Dominick. "We're starting out in three directions. 'I'll take the shoreline going left from here. You, Mac, explore that finger of land that juts out into the lake. And you, Chris, cut across that point, and work your way to the right. If you pick up his tracks in the mud—and you must, sooner or later—fire a couple of shots. We'll join there and try to track him down. Remember that you're bait for him, so be on your toes. Let's go!"

They moved away, preceded by the spots of their searchlights, in the directions Dominick has designated. Three efficient, deadly bloodhounds! I wasn't as skeptical now of their ability to track down the madman.

That is, if the rain, which threatened to come down any moment now, held off awhile.

Larry Conroy had already put on his clothes.

Only mine and Sturm's now remained at the edge of the pier. Conroy was rummaging for the bottle of liquor in the canoe. It didn't take me long to dress, but when I joined him at our canoe, the quart bottle was almost a third gone. He was already swaying on his feet.

"Better go easy with it," I warned him. "A long night ahead. Did you get your gun out?"

He slapped the pocket of his mackinaw. I found my own heavy army .45, thrust it in my pocket. And it was then that I felt the first drop of rain. It forced my next immediate move. Those cameras and film boxes had to be protected.

The rain came on with almost unbelievable rapidity. A savage, hissing deluge maybe thirty seconds after I felt the first drop. We succeeded in getting most of the equipment into the cabin. I left Conroy there, now so

drunk that he was useless, and ran back for the last box of film.

All hell had broken loose. The mad, wild fury of the elements was terrifying. Lightning zigzagged continuously, ever to the deafening crash of thunder. Then, as I stooped over the film box, a particularly vicious lightning bolt split the heavens. An instant of white brilliance, objects concealed by the darkness leaping into stark prominence.

And then my fists clenched, I dropped into a half crouch and my heart tattooed madly against my ribs. It is hardly credible that the eye could record so many visual impressions in that one instant. But every detail of the frightful scene before me on the float remained indelibly impressed on my mind, though I had had just an instant's glimpse of it.

In darkness again, the rain pounding at me, I could still see in my mind that stooping figure on the float. The man's back was to me. I could just see the lower part of his nude body, and his hands. Because of the frightful thing they were doing, those hands had caught my eyes, held them.

THE right hand was holding a bloody razor, which had just completed a downward stroke along Sturm's paunchy stomach. A deep slash. I had considered horrible the wound in Sturm's throat; the wound in his stomach reached a peak of nauseating horror for me that I couldn't have dreamed possible.

I jerked out my automatic. Crouched there awaiting the next flash of lightning. It came only a few seconds later. But I didn't squeeze the trigger of the gun. Not then, anyway. I recall that I yelled something; that I had the impulse to close my eyes—and couldn't.

Only the diseased mind of a drug fiend could have conceived the scene that I saw now. It tugged at my sanity.

Both hands of the man stooping over Sturm's body were thrust into that frightful gash in the corpse's abdomen. And before merciful darkness blotted out the horror of that scene, I saw those gory hands jerk out again.

Only then I fired, blindly, wildly,

jerking six times the trigger of the automatic. And kept jerking the trigger, half mad now, at least a dozen times more, although the magazine was empty.

Then a third flash of lightning. Only Sturm's slashed body was now on the float!

CHAPTER IV

Quicksand—Quick Death

I DON'T know how long I stood there in the blinding rain. It abated after awhile, its very fury wearing it out. Softened to almost a drizzle. Lightning was no longer as frequent, and the thunder sounded like distant firing on a far-off front.

I found the flashlight which I had put away at the point of the prow of the canoe where it had escaped soaking, walked to the edge of the pier and directed a beam of light on the float. Only the grisly horror of Sturm's body!

A peculiar sound swung me about. At first I thought it was only the product of my imagination. Then I heard it again, louder this time, lifting itself above the swish and patter of the rain. It sounded like a high note on a flute, or the first protesting wail made by a new-born infant.

It seemed to be coming from the right somewhere, past the cabin. Some wild animal or bird? No, there was something human about that sound. I moved in that direction. It had stopped for awhile, then picked up again, this time much closer.

I identified it suddenly and plunged forward with the flashlight. It was a moan of pain. A tortured sound racked from a human being in terrible agony. Then my light picked up a figure sprawling at the foot of a huge spruce.

Black beard, filthy matted black hair, rags clothing an emaciated body—it was the madman who had brandished the razor at us from the doorway of the cabin!

He breathed with a short gasping sound, and every once in a while his

body would jerk convulsively. It was then that the piteous moan of pain would escape his lips. He was obviously wounded—and badly.

I approached him, dropped on my knees near his head. His eyes, bright with pain, looked up at mine. Then his lips began to move.

"You are bad men," he said in French, a language which, luckily, I spoke almost as fluently as English. "You shoot me. You steal my razor. It was my father's razor. I am his only son. Have I not the right to keep it, *m'sieu?*"

"But certainly," I said, while a thousand questions ran through my mind.

"I only frighten people with the razor," he went on. "I do not harm anyone. I only want people to keep away. Or they may tell the police. The police will take me back to the crazy house. Maybe I am crazy sometimes, *m'sieu*. But lived in the woods all my life. I choke when there are walls around me."

I now remembered Laval telling us that Dubrois' son, Jean had called the mounties after the murder. This, then, must be Jean. Jean, whose mind had been unhinged by the tragedy. He'd probably escaped from an insane asylum, returned to this place of his birth. And he had devised with the cunning of a madman a damned effective way of forcing people to give the cabin a wide berth. By acting as the ghost of his murderous father.

"But you are a bad man too, Jean," I said. "You killed that fat man in the water."

THE black eyes widened.

"I do not kill anyone, *m'sieu*," he said plaintively. "I tell you I only scare people with the razor. Now maybe the little man is right in chasing me from the cabin and shooting me. But the tall man with the big nose—is he right in stealing my razor, *m'sieu?* It was my father's second best razor. The police took the other one."

My head reeled. By the tall man with the big nose he must mean McFarlane, and Clark would be the "little man"—who had shot the madman, after all.

"How do you know that tall man stole your razor, Jean?" I asked.

"I saw him, *m'sieu*. When the little man shoot me in the back, I do not fall. But I drop my razor. I run a little while, then I hide in back of a tree. I watch the place where I drop my razor, because I do not want to lose it. But Big Nose—he picks it up. He hides it in his sleeve."

His voice was weakening now, so low that I could just about make it out.

"Little man and the big strong man find me here when it rains hard. They get angry when I tell them about Big Nose stealing my razor. They say they will kill him, and they go off to look for him. Then Big Nose runs by here. He is scared because he knows that the other two are looking for him.

"I ask him if he will give me back my razor if I tell him where he can hide and kill the other two men. He says yes. So I tell him that if he will go up this trail here he will come to a cave. Good place where to hide. But he don't give me my razor. So, *m'sieu*, I do not tell him that you must walk close to the wall when you enter the cave, because there is quicksand in front, and you die quickly if you do not know about it."

"And Big Nose—he went to the cave?" I asked tersely.

"Oh, yes, *m'sieu*. He is surely dead now. Like the other two."

"The other two?" I shouted. "Have you sent them to the cave, too?"

"Yes. They go by again, chasing Big Nose. They stop and ask me where he went. I plead with them to give me some water, because I have great pain. Strong man—he kicks me in the face. Little man—he pulls out a knife and says he will cut my heart out and let me see it if I don't tell him where Big Nose went. So, *m'sieu*, I tell them. They are most surely dead, too."

I leaped to my feet. He'd said that a trail led to that cave from here. My flashlight found it a few seconds later; a barely discernible path. I raced along it, the underbrush on either side tearing at my wet clothes.

The trail wound for quite some distance. Once I lost it, and spent a fever-

ish minute or two trying to pick it up again. Then a huge rock loomed dead ahead of me. There was a six-foot opening in it—a tunnel leading into its interior.

I DIRECTED a beam of light into the black opening—and almost dropped the flashlight. In the dead center of the spot of light was something which, perhaps, supplied the crowning touch of horror. It was a hand, protruding from what looked to me like solid surface.

A broad, powerful hand, fingers hooked talonlike, veins standing out like cords along the back. A heavy gold ring was on the third finger. Dominick's ring. Dominick's hand. And even as I stared at it, slowly, slowly, it sank beneath the surface.

I fled from that evil place. Crashed and tore like the madman I was then back down the trail. Jean Dubrois' cry when I passed him brought me to my senses a bit. He was propped up on his elbows, his eyes rolling with pain.

"Tell me, *m'sieu*," he said when I approached him, "is it just, *m'sieu*, that I should—lose my—razor?"

His body arched still higher. Then blood suddenly gushed from his nose and mouth. He was dead when the arch broke and he dropped back to the ground.



Slowly, I walked back to the cabin. Larry Conroy was sprawled out on the floor dead drunk. There was still a bit left in the bottle. I killed it and felt much better. Driven by a force stronger than myself, I walked out on the pier and stared at Sturm's body.

There were certain facts I now knew, but I still hadn't the key to the devilry

of the past hour. I knew that McFarlane had cut Sturm's throat, since he was the one who'd picked up the razor where Jean Dubrois had dropped it. He had sneaked it into the water with him, murdered Sturm, and returned later to slash open the corpse. But why had he done that?

Obviously, there was something in that pouch carried by Sturm that was damned valuable. The men knew about it, for I still recalled their consternation and fury when they found the little pouch empty. They were certainly much more concerned with recovering that object than in avenging Sturm's murder.

I remembered now several queer moves that Sturm had made. His fooling with the pouch before he dived in. And fumbling with the thong later, when I had caught him at it and he kicked me in the stomach. Was Sturm attempting to remove the pouch then? Fake losing it in the water? But if the pouch was empty—

Then I suddenly recalled something else: Sturm moving his boot from the edge of the pier before he dived in. Possibly . . . damn it, was it possible that he'd taken that opportunity to drop the object into his boot? The boot that was on the pier a foot away from me?

I stooped swiftly, picked it up, thrust my hand inside. My fingers closed on something hard. I withdrew it from the boot and directed the flashlight on it. A diamond the size of a thumb nail—a glowing, gorgeously beautiful thing—lay on my palm! An apparently flawless stone, it must be worth close to fifty thousand dollars!

I UNDERSTOOD now. Understood the devilish cross and doublecross that had been played here tonight. Sturm apparently had been entrusted with that diamond; a diamond owned by the four of them. He was going to fake losing the pouch in the water. He'd evidently been ready to remove it when he saw me looking at him. Panicky, he'd lashed out with his feet.

McFarlane, in the meanwhile, having picked up that razor, had the bright thought of slashing Sturm's throat and

appropriating the diamond for himself, with the mad Frenchman eventually serving as the goat. When he saw that the diamond was not in the pouch, and heard me say that Sturm had been fumbling with the thong before he kicked me, he guessed what Sturm had been trying to do. But he hadn't guessed correctly what Sturm had done with the diamond. He thought the fat man had swallowed it—as McFarlane himself had probably intended to do. An idea that I, myself, had given him when I had said I had thought Sturm was kissing the pouch. That had shown plainly enough that Sturm had had the thing near his mouth.

Slashing open the corpse had been a desperate attempt by McFarlane to recover the diamond from where he thought it was lodged — in Sturm's stomach.

How Clark and Dominick got together when they found Jean Dubrois —perhaps they'd met when they encircled the lake — would never be known, of course. But the moment they'd found the madman shot, they realized he couldn't have been the killer. And when the Frenchman had told them that McFarlane had picked

up the razor—well, they logically assumed that he had not only murdered Sturm, but had the diamond as well. Of course, they promptly went gunning for him.

Treachery upon treachery, with everyone of them meeting a horrible death. Through Jean Dubrois, who resented the theft of his father's second-best razor. The poor madman who was perhaps the sanest man of the lot.

And Jean Dubrois (as the mounties brought by Jacques Laval the following morning from a frontier outpost, explained to me) was responsible for that quartet meeting just what they deserved. For they were wanted for a particularly brutal murder of a wealthy woman in whose ring that huge diamond had once glittered. They'd gone North supposedly on a hunting party because it was the only way they could temporarily evade a police dragnet set out for them.

Those two mounties still probably think I'm crazy, too. For I was remembering a poor crazy man's last words, and I must have musingly said them aloud:

"Tell me, *m'sieu*,—is it just, *m'sieu*, that I should—lose my—razor?"

HEADLINERS IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE of THRILLING MYSTERY



THE COFFIN DWELLERS

A Mystery Novelette by G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

FOUR FRIGHTFUL MEN

A Weird Novelette by HENRY KUTTNER

THE SEA OF FEAR

A Terror Novelette by JOHN H. KNOX

DEATH PLAYS DOLLS

A Fantastic Thriller by C. K. M. SCANLON

DEATH POURS A TOAST

—And Takes the Last Trick
in a Gruesome Game
of Murder!

By
**ROBERT
C. BLACKMON**

*Author of "Doom Sits in Judgment," "Death
Made to Order."*

"TONIGHT, my dear friends,
ends our Last Man Club—
with me the last man!"

A bubbling chuckle welled in the red fatness of Holbert Gresham's neck. It shook the pink folds of skin along his jaws. His eyes, tiny blue glass chips in a red-veined, bloated face, circled the black table at which he sat.

Flickering black candles in silver holders gave the only light in the somber room. Black china, glassware and silver was arranged at the table for five diners. The black plates contained food, the black glasses drink—yet but one of the five chairs was occupied. Four of the chairs were draped with folds of funeral black crepe.

The fifth chair was Holbert Gresham's. He sat at the head of the black-spread table, alone in this special room of the Gresham country mansion.



"I drink a toast to all of you."

Directly before him on the table was a long-necked bottle filled with a dark red, sparkling liquid. The bottle bore the label of an expensive foreign wine.

"Tonight, my dear friends, Holbert Gresham drinks a toast to all of you—and my wedding next month to Sybil Manvel!"

Gresham's heavy lips warped into a loose, mocking smile as he looked about the table.

"But tonight, I want to talk to my dear, dead friends. I want to tell all of you that I planned this night five years ago. I planned it the day we five formed our Last Man Club—the day each of us willed our estates to and obtained insurance policies in the favor of the survivors. That day I planned to be what I am tonight—the last man!"

Again Gresham's bubbling chuckle sounded in the room. It had a horrible, gloating quality about it. His fat hulk shifted to a more comfortable position. Elbows on the table edge, he pointed a fat finger at the nearest chair to his left.

"You were the first to go, Monte Wetstone."

Gresham's smile broadened, but there was no hint of mirth in the grimace.

"One night about four years ago, you were alone in your home, Wetstone. Your family and servants were out. A man whom you knew came to see you and you let him in. You talked with him for a few minutes, then his attitude made you realize the purpose of his visit.

"You knew death had marked you for her own. You tried to scream and to reach the telephone. Then he shot you. Just one shot, aimed for your heart. That skinny body of yours went stiff, not hunched over any longer.

"Your yellow eyes almost popped from your skinny face. Your fingers clawed at the hole in your chest. Crimson spilled out and smeared your hands. Your mouth opened to scream, and blood gushed out. It streamed down over your chin. It was bright red and frothy. Then you fell—dead.

"The man who shot you got away and was never found. The gun he used was never located. Your estate was di-

vided between the survivors—Kenley, Yorke, Manvel and myself. We went to your funeral. The papers printed columns about our Last Man Club, about our undying friendship and all that rot.

"They took pictures of this special room I arranged for the meetings of our Club."

Gresham's thick arm swung, indicating the somber walls of the room, its black draperies and furnishings. His head moved slowly as he looked about at the other three crepe-draped chairs.

"I know all of the details about Wetstone," he said hoarsely, "because I shot him!"

HIS voice died out, and a silence came into the room. It was a strange quiet. Moment by moment, it seemed to become more profound—the silence of forgotten tombs. Then Gresham spoke again.

"I was terrified for weeks, afraid to go out of the house and afraid to stay home. Not—" The pink folds of flesh along his jaws shook as he moved his head from side to side. "Not because I regretted killing you, Wetstone. Not that. Your death meant a matter of a hundred thousand dollars to me.

"The murder was too simple and easy. It wasn't complicated enough. There were too many chances of my being caught. A chance of someone seeing me leave the house—a hundred things. I planned the next more carefully. It was yours—Orvel Kenley. It was a masterpiece."

Gresham's thick fingers made a pyramid. His tiny eyes centered upon the second chair to his left.

"You were killed accidentally, Kenley. Your own carelessness brought about your death. You, David Yorke and I went upstate on a duck-hunt. Our duffle was in the back of Yorke's car. We reached our destination and were unloading. You became careless with your shotgun. It was in the back of the car.

"All of our guns were supposed to be empty, but yours was not. You made a wisecrack at Yorke, standing beside you, and pulled your gun toward you. It went off.

"The trigger was caught in the duffle in the back of the car. That mild, academic face of yours was a red horror when Yorke caught your falling body and eased it to the ground. I was at the front of the car, out of danger and entirely beyond suspicion."

Gresham chuckled throatily. It was a hideous sound in the room. The pink tip of his tongue swept thick lips.

"It was a sad affair. No one could account for your gun being loaded, while mine and Yorke's were not. Just carelessness, a sad accident. Your family was prostrated by the tragedy. So was Yorke.

"He almost went mad, thinking of your blood on his hands, of your shattered face almost touching his. He didn't want to take his share of your estate, Kenley, but he did, finally. I remember the amount each of us received—one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. A sad affair."

Gresham's thick fingers lifted the black glass beside his plate. He gulped for a moment. His greedy swallowing was the only sound in the room.

"But no one," he continued, putting the glass down and wiping his mouth with a black napkin, "no one suspected me of loading that gun and arranging it to fire when you pulled it from the car, Kenley. It was a sad accident. With you gone, David Yorke, Jaffrey Manvel and myself were left. The Three Musketeers, the newspapers called us. One for all and all for one. It was all quite touching."

Gresham's big hulk shifted again. He leaned heavily on the table. His eyes sought the last chair on his right.

"I used an entirely different method on you, Yorke. I wasn't there to see you die, but the men I hired to kill you said you begged for life like the potbellied coward I always knew you to be. Weak and yellow. I contacted those two hoodlums and offered them ten thousand dollars to kidnap you, take you out in the country and shoot you down in approved gangster fashion.

"I paid them five thousand cash the day before the job and had them come to collect the other after I knew you were dead. They came, and I gave

them the package I had prepared. Anxious to leave, they opened the package in the car several blocks away, and—"

Gresham's thick hands spread, pink palms upward. His fat shoulders lifted.

"The Police could never figure out anyone killing you in a gang war. It just didn't fit with that pious, milk-sop whining of yours. You even objected to a bottle of wine in the Club, a bottle to be drunk by the last man.

"There was another thing the Police couldn't figure—why the city had an expensive pavement repair job on their hands. The surprise of the hoodlums, too, must have been very amusing. The package I gave them contained a Mills hand grenade, arranged to explode when the package was opened!"

GRESHAM'S fat body shook with laughter for a moment. He dabbed at his mouth with the black napkin, took another swallow of water from the black glass beside his plate.

"But the most pleasant thing about it was the fine condition of your estate, Yorke. Manvel and I divided a little over a half million dollars. It came in very nicely, didn't it, Manvel?"

Gresham's tiny eyes swung to the nearest chair on his right. Subdued laughter made a quaking mass of his huge body. He drank water greedily from the black glass and wiped his mouth.

"Your securities were dropping daily, Manvel. You faced ruin. Everything you had was as good as lost. Nothing but a miracle could have saved you. Then I caused a miracle to happen, and you had your share of Yorke's estate.

"It gave you a chance to recover. You tried frantically to cover your losses, but the cards were stacked against you. I stacked them. Most of your share of Yorke's estate came to me, then you were facing ruin again. Yorke's share gave you a chance to keep Sybil from me.

"You knew I'd had my eye on your daughter for months. You knew if you urged her to marry me I would help you. You knew she would have done anything for you."

Anger burned in Gresham's tiny eyes as he stared at the crepe-draped chair. His big shoulders hunched over the table. He lifted the long-necked bottle of wine from the table and held it in his hand.

"Instead, you tried to play on our friendship. This wine is a sample." Gresham shook the bottle until the sparkling liquid frothed. "You brought it here. Wine to be drunk by the last survivor of the club, you said. Bank! It was a peace offering.

"You wanted my help and were too scared to ask for it. You knew I'd ask for Sybil. I couldn't have gained anything by killing you. You were broke.



Yet you stood between me and your daughter. That's why I killed you, Manvel."

Gresham drank the remaining water in the black glass beside his plate.

"It was simple, yet clever. Everyone knew you were on your last legs. The insurance policy in my favor had been canceled. You couldn't pay for it. You didn't have money enough to pay for anything, so you jumped from your office on the eighteenth floor and committed suicide. It was a most tragic happening. Sybil was frantic with grief."

CHUCKLING throatily, Gresham uncorked the bottle of wine and poured some of it into his black glass.

"She was fortunate enough to have Holbert Gresham, an old friend of her father's there to console her. It was quite pleasant, having my soothing arm about her shoulders, having her cry

on my shoulder. Quite pleasant!"

Gresham passed the wine-filled glass beneath his bulbous nose and sniffed appreciatively. Again a laugh shook the fat hulk of his body.

"No doubt she would have found another comforter, had she known that I threw you from your office window, Manvel," he said softly. "Your secretary was in the outer office. She knew your condition as well as I did, as well as anyone. I talked to her a few moments and planted the thought of suicide in her mind.

"Then I went in to see my old friend Manvel, threw him from the office window and yelled to the secretary that you had jumped. Simple, and effective. You turned over twice on the way to the pavement below, Manvel. Turned slowly, almost majestically. Then you struck.

"It made me a little sick for a while, but that was mistaken for my grief over the death of a dear friend. The newspaper articles about our undying friendship made a perfect background. I explained that I'd seen you were badly worried, that I'd offered to help you, but you seemed entirely unbalanced.

"You leaped for the window. I tried to stop you, and missed. The secretary was too excited to notice anything she said. She admitted that you had been depressed and vaguely remembered something about suicide, but she thought you'd said it. It was all very simple. With you dead, Manvel, I was the last man.

"I waited six months and broached the subject of marriage to Sybil. She wouldn't think of it at first, but she finally said yes—as I thought she would. I have wealth. She needed that to straighten the mess you left behind, Manvel. True, she is somewhat younger than I am, but that doesn't matter. I want her, and what I want, I get!"

The fat fingers of Gresham's left hand clenched on the table top, bloated pink flesh against black cloth.

"We are to be married a month from tonight. I have already willed everything I have to her. I shall announce our wedding to the newspapers to-

night. The reporters and photographers are waiting outside. I told them I would hold the last meeting of our Last Man Club tonight, that I wanted one last hour with my dear, departed friends, then all of this would be destroyed."

His sweeping arm encompassed the black furnishings of the room.

"There will be nothing remaining to remind me of you. This room is sound-proofed, as all of you know. What I have said here tonight cannot be known by anyone. Now, my hour is up."

Gresham's fat hulk lurched erect. He was holding the glass of wine in his hand. He raised it.

"I give you as a toast, my dear, dead friends, my marriage to Sybil Manvel. I drink that toast in the wine so generously provided by her father!"

Gresham brought the black glass to his lips. His swallowing made a greedy, bubbling sound. He finished, replaced the glass on the table.

"And now, my friends, I bid you a last and, I hope, a long farewell!"

He started to move away from the table, then stopped. A queer, twisted expression of surprise flashed across his bloated features. His tiny blue eyes snapped wide. Sudden, terrifying knowledge flamed in their depths.

"Manvel! You! You—"

Loosely, his jerking lips formed the words. Then his eyes spread wider. Fat fingers dragged across his sweat-beaded face, dug at the collar half hidden in the red folds of his neck. A choked scream of sheer horror swelled in his throat. His blue eyes spread

wider, staring wildly.

The four crepe-draped chairs about the black table were now occupied!

MONTE WETSTONE'S thin figure was to the left, a horrible, blood-rimmed hole showing in the white of his shirt-front. Beside him was a figure whose face was a red, raw horror—Orvel Kenley. David Yorke's broad figure was to the right of the table, a ragged pattern of crimsoned bullet wounds across his chest and shoulders.

To Yorke's left was a thing that had been a man, but was now a crushed and shapeless mass of torn flesh and shattered bone. Before Holbert Gresham's glazing eyes swam a grisly vision of two shrieking humans blasted to atoms. Then his own voice blended with their screams.

"Manvel! You've killed me! That wine—poison—"

Gresham's fat fingers clawed at his throat. A spasm wrenched at his obese figure. Terror, stark and maddening, blazed in his eyes and drained the crimson from his veined face. He caught at the table for support, then fell, dragging the black cloth with him.

The long-necked wine bottle tottered, dropped to its side. Dark, red, sparkling liquid spewed out, soaking into the black spread of the table. It dripped from the table edge. Crimson drops spattered upon the stiffening body of Holbert Gresham.

And the merry, gurgling laugh of the wine flowing from the bottle was the only sound in the room.

LOOK FORWARD TO STORIES BY THESE POPULAR AUTHORS OF SPINE-CHILLING MYSTERIES

Ray Cummings
Arthur J. Burks
Wayne Rogers
Paul Ernst

C. K. M. Scanlon
Wyatt Blassingame
George Wilson
James Duncan

Jack Williamson
John H. Knox
G. T. Fleming-Roberts
Edmond Hamilton

IN COMING ISSUES OF THRILLING MYSTERY



The

She plunged to a horrible death off the sheer precipice.

EYES OF DOOM

Hypnotic Death Stalks Abroad in an Ancient Island
Castle Where Legend Lives Anew!

By **ANDREW HOLLIDAY**

Author of "Death in the Offing," "Charnel House," etc.

L HENRY JOHN KEITH, feel impelled to set down here the details of what occurred at Crannock Castle, Crannock Island, on that night of fear, July Seventh, Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-six. Even as I write, my pen seems to run blood and my hand is clammy with cold sweat. But that the dead may rest and the living go on with names

cleared of guilt, I must not falter. . . .

* * *

The dinner was to have been a festive affair, one of celebration. It started off wrong, though, and the wine did little to restore things—even for a little while.

The storm broke soon after we got to the island; indeed the caretaker, to whom I'd given the night off, was

caught in the tail of it before he got the motorboat to the mainland.

It was as severe a gale as ever lashed that part of the New England coast. Rain flooded down in heavy cellophanelike sheets. Thunderbolts split the heavens. Surging mountains of brine pounded the sheer rocky cliffs along the northeast face of the isle. And every now and then, snake lightning would come gliding toward us over the peaked tops of the waves.

Incessant thunder made conversation difficult. But with that we could have borne, had it not been for what happened in Grace Severn's room.

Grace had looked lovelier than ever when we met that day. If I hadn't had good reason, having spent years in the same vaudeville troupe with her, to know that she was thirty-four, I'd have looked at her slim figure and finely modeled blond head and said she wasn't a day over twenty-three. As it was, I felt the need of seeing her and hearing her voice, and so lingered at her room, playing with her pet Scotty, while she unpacked.

The dog refused to have anything to do with me. He retreated when I grabbed at him, only to charge me, yapping, the instant I relaxed. I cornered him finally, though, when he jumped to the low window sill, and I shot my hands out to catch him.

TOO late I saw the unfastened casements swing out on their hinges as he thumped back into them. My muscles tensed as with a galvanic shock, when his paws slipped on the smooth wet stone, when my fingers missed him by inches, when I saw the gaping void where his pert black body had been.

His broken cry, the sickening thud of him on the cement courtyard, thirty feet below, floated up to us through the teeth of the storm. Grace stood stricken.

I couldn't meet her eyes. "Sorry," I said inanely.

She pulled herself together. Her hand gripped my shoulder.

"You didn't mean it, Harry," she said. "You go get ready for dinner?" She paused. "You might ask David—"

I nodded, went dumbly on my way. I knew how she felt; she was too sturdy a trouper to give vent to her emotions.

David, it must be explained, was the son of Jerry Speers, another member of the old troupe. I'd adopted David four years earlier when his father died. He'd been a trifle on the frail side then, a bit undernourished. But now, returned after a year on a ranch in southwest Texas, he was as muscular and bronzed as a frontiersman—a dark, handsome lad of twenty-two.

I found him in his room, told him of the accident.

He understood at once, put his magazine aside. "I'll go right down," he said, and started off as he spoke.

My face startled me when I reached my own room, looked into the mirror over my dresser. It was the face of an old man—tired and old at thirty-eight. My skin was blanched, bloodless. My eyes didn't look right.

The shock I'd just had was partial cause, I knew. And recently I had overworked, making sure that the hospital I'd built and endowed with a slice of the fortune a cousin had unexpectedly left me was up to specifications. I wondered if I was on the verge of a nervous break-down.

The caffeine tablets I had would help. Each of them had the pick-up effect of a cup of strong coffee without the bilious aftermath of the coffee. I took two of them to tide me over the evening.

Much of my good spirits returned by the time dinner was over. In fact I was feeling rather elated and was having some difficulty in keeping my tongue from running away from me.

I looked across the table at Gaston France. He didn't appear too happy, somehow. Years were beginning to take their toll from him, silver his hair. It hadn't been easy on him, either, since vaudeville was definitely out and, like the rest of my company that night, he was too proud to take assistance from me.

"Gaston," I said when I caught his eye, "you certainly outdid yourself tonight, making this dinner. I'm glad now that the servants didn't get a

chance to arrive and spoil things. Your hand hasn't lost any of its old skill."

He beamed. "In the old days, it was different," he said. "Most times we hadn't much to cook."

TAJ OUIDA, the Swami, was sitting next to him. Taj Ouida used to add the Oriental color to our show. He was a Hindu with certain caste rights that I should remember more about but don't.

Taj shook his head, showed a line of fine white teeth.

"You were always too modest, Gaston France," he said, his words pronounced with his usual almost mincing precision.

Gaston's niece, Marilyn, was in the place of honor at the head of the table. Her young form, in her white satin gown, looked as fragile as a flower. Her hair was a pale blond—not the vibrant golden shade of Grace Severn's, who sat at my left. I was lingering hopefully on the thought that Marilyn and David, who was at the opposite end of the table from her, might find each other mutually attractive, perhaps discover a more tender attachment.

I rose with a glass in my hand. "A toast to Gaston," I said, "whose resistance I finally wore down enough to make him allow me to adopt his niece today as my daughter!"

Gaston came to his feet. "To our host, who can give Marilyn advantages that I couldn't," he said. He raised his glass again. "To the happy death of Marilyn France. May—"

The girl's face went white. The fork she'd been toying with fell to her plate with a clatter.

"Uncle!" she cried, drawing a sharp breath.

Grace intervened. "Your uncle didn't mean you were going to die, Marilyn," she said. "You must be on edge, dear."

Marilyn looked troubled. "Maybe I am on edge, and I'm sorry. But I had the strangest feeling when Uncle spoke."

"You should not have, my lady," the Swami told her, his dark eyes caress-

ingly upon her. "What men call death is not bitter, nor is it really death. It is but the sweet passage from time into the fullness of eternity. It is not death we must fear, but other things—evil things. Your adopted father could tell you such a tale about this very house."

All faces turned toward me.

The conversation had taken too macabre a turn for my liking and I'd been struggling for a way to steer it into another channel. The story Taj Ouida suggested was the last one in the world I wanted to tell at the time. I could see no graceful out for me, though, and that more especially when Grace, to whom I'd secretly vowed atonement, urged me with:

"Please tell it, Harry."

It was only a neighborhood legend, I warned them, and far from being authenticated. I purposely made my tale as brief as possible, barely sketching in the main heads.

A century and a half before, it was said, Sir Elijah Crannock, a hard-shelled old aristocrat with more money and eccentricities than brains, had bought this island and built the house—a solid pile of masonry rising four stories and half a hundred feet, something like a cross between a light-house and a medieval castle.

For some imagined offense, he'd driven his young daughter out on just such a night as this. Wandering in the storm, driven from the house but unable to leave the island, she'd plunged to a horrible death off the sheer precipice along the northeast.

SIR ELIJAH, it was related, was thereafter stricken with a strange malady and suffered the torments of hell until he died by his own hand. And finally, Crannock Castle, accursed, had passed from one ill-fortuned hand to another until I—like old Sir Elijah in that I had far more money and eccentricities than brains—bought it and was going about rebuilding it.

There was a hush when I was done; a hush that seemed to be both without and within the house.

The setting, the strange old house

with its high, black-beamed ceilings and the bursting thunder-riven elements outside, had defeated all my efforts to make the legend dull and prosaic. And, as the pregnant stillness expanded to its full, there came such a breath-taking crash of thunder that it seemed that the old house must surely be shattered by the very vibration. And the casements were lighted up as if by a living sheet of flame.

Who originally brought hypnotism into the talk, I can't remember. We were lolling about the same room where we'd had dinner—the two lower floors of the castle were still in the process of being remodelled. Somehow, as I look back on it now, we seemed to be consciously trying to infuse gayety into our chatter, but happy recollections and pleasant topics all seemed to have a hollow ring to them.

When it came to hypnotism, though, things definitely perked up. There was no stopping the trend of thought. Soon an almost violent discussion was under way as to methods, power of operators, susceptibility of subjects, mediums, effects, and what-not. And I found myself drawn irresistibly by the current.

Before I knew it, I'd accepted a challenge.

Gaston France said I might've had a mind-reading act in the old days, but as far as he was concerned *he* knew it was a farce. And as far as being a genuine hypnotist, I never was and I never could be. To prove his point, he sat Marilyn in a chair, stood me in front of her, and *dared* me to go to work.

Marilyn was a perfect subject; that much, I knew before I began. She was young, docile, obedient. Ever since she'd been a child she'd always looked upon me as a sort of tin god, one who could do anything. Moreover, I was sure—dogmatically sure—that I could make her do anything I chose. I felt possessed that evening of strange power. Otherwise, I would never have accepted the challenge.

I not only succeeded; I succeeded easily.

It was no time at all before she be-

came drowsy. Her light sleep was just as quickly followed by profound slumber. She was soon ready to obey my every command—a mere automaton at the mercy of my whims.

It was then, after I'd had Marilyn walk along the edge of the carpet as though on a tight-wire, that Grace Severn laughed, somewhat hysterically, and said:

"Careful, Harry, please. Don't give Marilyn any post-hypnotic suggestions like that to do after she wakes up. She'd probably try them on the edge of the cliff, and the yokels hereabouts would swear it was fulfilment of the legend you told us."

A vivid, awful picture of Marilyn on the brink of the precipice flashed through my mind. I shuddered. And I released the girl from her trance as quickly as I could.

SLEEP wouldn't come to me that night. We'd taken leave of each other and gone to our rooms shortly after eleven. For half an hour, a half hour that seemed eons long, I lay there on my bed, listening to the driving rain and the pounding sea. Nor would closing my eyes keep out the searing flashes of lightning.

Of a sudden I sat bolt upright in my bed. Sweat broke on my forehead. Something was happening!

The scream was the scream of the damned. Its utter despair cut through the booming crescendo of the elements. Its high-pitched, tremulous note swept my nerves up to a shattering peak, only to drop me again, a palsied, shapeless thing.

How I managed to pull myself from bed, grope my way to the door, stumble down the hallway, I scarcely know. Sheer necessity must have forced me.

Everyone else was there, in various stages of undress. No one could have slept through that terrifying shriek. Shivering despite the humid air, faces blanched with fear, they had come to seek the company of their fellows.

All, except Marilyn.

We gathered at the door of her room. Grace didn't bother to knock. Her hand sought the knob at once. The metal rasped in its holder.

Grace's slim shoulder thudded dully against the panel.

The door wouldn't budge.

At the time no one raised a voice in an attempt to get a response from within the room. It seems odd, recalling it now. But somehow it didn't seem so to us then. We all knew without being told that grim tragedy had stalked behind the door, and for some minutes all we did was stare dumbly at the massive oaken portal, realizing the futility of pitting our puny strength against it.

David was the first to recover sufficiently to think of a remedy. He was down to the second floor and back again before most of us had moved. In his hand was a heavy axe which he'd snatched from among the workmen's tools. He'd fetched a cold chisel, too, realizing that even the sharpest-bladed axe would bounce off that age-seasoned wood.

Bursting into the room the instant the bolt was dislodged, we came to an abrupt halt.

The room was empty.

"The window!" Gaston cried.

His voice and the casement, swinging back and forth in the driving rain, started us to life again. We crowded after him. Half afraid, half expectant, we craned our heads out through the opening.

A blaze of lightning showed us only too clearly what we sought. A split second picture, but one of haunting clarity: the pink satin nightgown, splashed with mud, wet and gleaming; pathetic sprawled limbs; the dreadful white of a girl's flesh; the pale gold of her hair; and that horrible splash of red.

I came away, sickened. Grace touched my arm.

"Is it—" she began.

I realized she hadn't been to the window. She'd always had altiphobia badly—so badly that it was an effort for her to close a window, much less look down from a height. I nodded wordlessly.

MARILYN'S poor broken body was beyond human aid. Her death had been instantaneous. Even

before we raced down the stairs, carried her drenched form in out of the gale, that much was clear. She'd been spared the suffering that would have been hers if she'd lingered; for medical aid was impossibly out of reach, now that the motorboat, our one link with the mainland through the murderous sea, was gone.

She looked like a doll when we laid her on her bed—a fragile doll with features delicately molded in wax. We men came away slowly, leaving Grace watching by the bed. David seemed especially hard hit. He acted as if he were drugged, blinking stupidly at me when I spoke to him.

My own nerves were shot. I kept my hands in my pockets to keep the others from seeing how I was shaking. Before I went down the hallway, I visited my room and swallowed a couple more of my caffeine tablets.

Gaston France and the Swami were arguing heatedly when I joined them in the dining room. The sound of their raised voices—Gaston's, rather, for Taj Ouida never seemed to feel the need of raising his—quickened my steps as I came down the corridor.

The two men were facing each other across a narrow table. I realized for the first time that, though civil enough toward one another, they had never really been friends. David was sitting off by himself, his face a dull vacant mask. Which explained why his voice hadn't reached me.

Gaston had his jaw out belligerently, "I saw enough of your doings in the old days," he was saying. "All of it wasn't for show. You're nothing but a damned heathen!"

Taj Ouida folded his arms across his chest. "My people cradled the Aryan race," he reminded. "India will exist when your kind are forgotten." He spoke coldly. "You babble and profane things you could not hope to understand."

I caught Gaston by the shoulder, pulled him about. "Gaston," I said, "this is no time for argument and shouts. Your niece is lying out there, dead."

Gaston's face twisted convulsively. "Dead!" he spat through his teeth.

"Dead, and *he* killed her. He and his damned mysteries! I could see the Devil in his face when he asked you to tell that story tonight. I don't know how, but he killed her!"

The Swami made quick reply. "You seem to be on good terms with the Evil One that you recognize him so easily. Maybe the bolted door was no bar to your steps. Could it be that you, who toasted the poor child's death, also wished it?"

The floor rocked under me, hearing them hurl charges of murder at each other. Their natural antipathy had made them forget me. Had they forgotten I had hypnotized Marilyn that very evening—hypnotized her to a point where she was susceptible to post-hypnotic suggestion?

I myself had been haunted ever since I'd first seen her empty bed, with the fear—more, the growing certainty—that the thought image of her walking along the edge of the precipice had been transferred from my will to her own. What else could have made its way through that bolted door, sent her through the casements to her death?

MY NERVES were steadier now. I couldn't bring myself to reveal my own guilt. Still, I couldn't let my best friends accuse each other, either. I was determined that the blame should at least not be misplaced. I pushed Gaston France roughly aside, brought my fist down upon the table, faced them with blazing eyes.

"You will both listen to *me*," I said stonily. "This is my house. I will have no fighting in it. I will not have my guests insulted. If either of you wishes to stay, you will go to your rooms at once."

I met Taj Ouida's eyes, then stared full into Gaston's. I pointed to the doorway. "I mean it. Go!"

And the men, without word of reply, went.

I watched them, then with a nod to David, followed.

My steps were firm enough, but my soul within me was confused; possessed as if by two persons. One, the self I was used to, seemed to be sitting

back as it were, astonished and amazed at the boldness of the other. Never before, for instance, would I have faced friends and spoken like that.

The split in my personality was still vague and indistinct. But would it remain so? Or would the gap widen?

Grace Severn was keeping watch over Marilyn's poor dead body when I passed. There was a strong urge in me to go lay my troubles, little-boy-fashion, in her comforting lap. I repressed myself, though, and went my way after telling her that I'd relieve her in a couple of hours if she could hold up that long.

I set my alarm for a quarter past three, intending to nap that long. Sleep again eluded me, though. The thunder and lightning had abated, but the rain still flooded down in torrents. It wasn't the storm, however, that kept me awake. If any man ever had a guilty conscience, I had one and it was preying, vulturelike, on my mind.

Half past two. I wasn't even drowsy.

In desperation, I reached for my clock, pushed down the key so that the alarm wouldn't ring. The storm had grown in fury again, the lightning blazing more brilliantly than ever. My thoughts were whirling dizzily. Habit more than anything directed my fingers in dressing me.

My hand sought the door knob.

The next instant I was gripping it as fiercely as if an electric current had flowed from it into my body. A numbing spasm seemed to contract my brain.

The scream died in mid-career.

I can only describe it that way. Perhaps, I should call it a throaty roar rather than a scream. But roar or scream, it broke just as it was born so that it seemed to hang like an awful living substance in the damp air.

The others were already coming into the hallway. I saw their eyes travel from one to another, including myself. They were doing what I was—counting heads!

Another missing!

The uncertainty was nerve-racking. Not a second was wasted getting into that room, but it seemed an eternity

to me before the cold chisel bit its way in through the crack and dislodged the bolt.

Again, the empty bed.

Again, the empty room.

And down, down thirty feet below the swinging casements, below on the cement pavement, stark in the glare of the flashing lightning, lay death!

MARILYN, fragile thing that she was, had been a broken doll, pathetically beautiful, if anything, in death. But poor Gaston, grown heavier with the years, was—God, I *will* not go into ghastly detail.

We carried Gaston's body up and laid it in the room next to where Marilyn lay. A silent little group we were, shuffling up the flights, bearing within our hearts a weight that seemed measureless compared even to that we bore, panting in our slipping hands. We came away woodenly after depositing our burden on its temporary bier.

My nerves were on the breaking point. I stole off to my room to snatch another caffeine pick-up. As I came in front of my dresser, reached for the box, though, I caught sight of my face in the mirror.

I fell back, startled, the box dropping from my nerveless fingers. It was with an effort that I forced myself forward again, forced myself to look in the glass.

I felt myself flush hotly, feverishly. I became conscious of my pulse. It was racing. My heart, too, was pounding against my ribs. I tried to lick my lips, but my tongue was parched and dry; the contact was almost painful.

Was that—could that be—my own face?

Hair all awry, standing practically on end. Skin heavy, puffed, its bloated surface unhealthily flushed and blotched with rash. Cruel, sensuous lips.

The eyes, though, held me. I was all but hypnotized by them. They seemed twice the size I thought mine ought to be. Their pupils were widely dilated. They seemed to swim before me as I met their glassy stare.

My hand went to the mirror. My fingers went over it carefully, hoping

to find some flaw. But there was none. There was no trick. What I saw was my face; my eyes.

No wonder the little Scotty had barked at me, had backed through the casements rather than let me touch him! No wonder Marilyn had fallen so quickly under my dooming spell! No wonder Gaston France and Taj Ouida had retreated to their rooms without a word when I'd commanded it!

Good God, I'd ordered poor Gaston to go to his room or leave the house! Could he have misconstrued my command somehow and in troubled sleep have plunged on that account to his death? Was I a double murderer?

I snapped out of my trend of thought with a jerk as my eyes fell on my mirrored reflection again. I had to pull myself together, I realized. The road I'd been traveling was headed for the horrors of madness.

My fingers were already selecting a couple of my pick-up tablets when I came to understand what I was doing. Of a sudden I determined that I would have no more of them.

Maybe my nerves did need soothing; maybe each of the tablets was only as strong as a cup of coffee. Still, I was definitely through with them, definitely through with paying tribute to whatever devil was inside me.

I flung the box into the corner of the room, scattering the contents over the floor.

GRACE had given up her watch over the dead. She was sitting in the dining room with David and Taj Ouida when I came along. All three of them were sitting close together as though they felt the need of each other's support.

The low tones in which they'd been speaking died away as I entered. There was, I thought, a note of compassion in the dark eyes with which Taj Ouida regarded me. Both Grace and David took their gaze from me at once. They seemed afraid I might reach in and read what they were thinking.

Had they in turn managed to read my guilty thoughts? Or had they by

simple elimination fastened the blame where it belonged? Had they read the dread implication in these staring eyes of mine? I wondered and was afraid.

The draft flowing in through the casements, damp and warm as it was, made me shiver. I'd already seated myself. I felt fagged out. I turned to David.

"Shut the window there, will you please, David?" I said.

The lad said nothing. But as he met my gaze, I thought he flinched. Barely perceptible, it was, and surely involuntary; but he *had* drawn back before my eyes. Was the lad afraid of me?

For nothing better to do and because words seemed too heavy to bandy, we watched David rise somewhat dazedly from his chair, walk across the floor, a little unsteadily. He paused halfway there, but continued on.

When he reached the window, though, he broke. If we hadn't been watching closely, it surely would have escaped us. We might have supposed that he'd merely stopped at the window for a moment to survey the raging electric elements outside.

But, watching as we were, we knew that the hand with which he grasped the window frame was not put there in an idle gesture. He was *holding* himself. Within him a silent battle—a battle to the death—was being fought. We could see the muscles under his shirt stand out like whipcords.

Realization crashed down upon my head.

I flung myself from my chair, gripped him by the shoulders. He fell to the floor as I flung him roughly back—away from the open maw of the casements.

My body was trembling when I faced the others. The words I spoke seemed scarcely mine.

"The dog, Marilyn, Gaston, and now David," I said. "It can't go on! We can't let it. We can't let one go on, fattening on the deaths of others, no matter **who** the person, what the reason."

"But what," Grace asked softly, "can

we do, Harry?"

"Do?" I echoed. "Go to your rooms. Bolt your doors. Lock your windows. Tie yourselves to your beds, if you will. I hold myself responsible for all this. There will be no more of it! Go to your rooms. You shall see what I'm going to do!"

Perhaps I was foolhardy to think of the idea under the circumstances—under any circumstances. That I did think of it, though, shows how far gone I was at the time, how desperate. My whirling brain was only too willing to catch at anything, straw though it be.

FOR no help could possibly reach us for hours. It would have been sheer suicide for any boat to have attempted tying up at the island. The sea was still boiling, still threatening to engulf the little rocky pinnacle on which the castle stood. Thunderbolts crackled and crashed without ceasing. And the bursting reservoirs of the heavens appeared to be emptying their contents in a solid mass.

There was strong probability that my flares mightn't even be seen on the mainland. But as I opened my kit and pulled out my Very signal pistol, one maniac trend obsessed my mind to the exclusion of all others:

I must summon aid. I must give myself up, have myself put safely away. There must be an end to the tragedies of this horrible night.

The pistol appeared in good order, as it should have been, being a new one, bought especially for use on the island. The shells I took from the box were somewhat clumsy-looking affairs with their one-inch caliber.

I paused, listening. Something I had heard—

After a moment the knock was repeated.

I stood there like a statue. My pulse leaped. My heart beat like a triphammer. Blood roared in my ears. The walls of the rooms expanded and contracted like rubber sheets as I stared.

It was impossible!

Yet it came again, that knock, brooking no denial to its summons.

Came from the window!

Someone was knocking on my window; my window that was thirty feet from the courtyard below, that was set in a wall of solid masonry without crack or foothold in its entire surface; my window that was more than the length of a tall man's body from the nearest neighboring window above, below, or to the side!

I walked across the floor on tiptoe. The window latch opened silently under my fingers. I put my foot to the twin casements, flung them out sharply.

Lightning flared dazzlingly in my face. Of anything else, though, there was no sign.

The strain of waiting was too much for me. I went softly to the window, thrust my head gingerly out. There was nothing below; nothing to either side of me. I stretched myself out further, intending to twist my head around, to look upward.

The noose dropped around my neck without warning.

It was already tightening when I awoke to my plight. I flung my hands up to fight it off. Too late. The best I could do was grip the dooming rope with straining fingers.

My feet left the floor of the room. The window sill caught vainly at my dragging toes. And then, incredibly, there was only the rope between me and eternity.

My legs tread the thin air. I swung, pendulumlike, over the void. Rain beat my tortured face. Twisting the rope about one of my hands before I was fully out the window had saved my neck from breaking strain and me, perhaps, from instant death. But my hands felt the numbing cut of the rope and my arms ached as if they'd been ripped from their sockets.

The rope had ceased being pulled upward soon after I was clear of the sill. I knew it was not being lowered. Still, I myself was moving slowly downward, and the noose was tightening about my throat.

MY HANDS were slipping on the rope!

They were slipping faster as the

rain soaked the fibers. Soon, for I hadn't the strength to pull myself up, I would be hanging by the neck!

Of a sudden I felt the line of thin twine that had rubbed my chin but which I hadn't bothered in my anxiety to account for, grow taut. It was given a sharp jerk.

And the noose about my neck fell slackly away.

I cried out hoarsely at that. Somehow, even that choking noose had seemed some support as I hung there. And now that the twine had released the slip knot that held it, I was hanging by my hands alone—my hands that were slowly slipping down toward the end of the wet rope.

The rope jerked, sliding me down an additional precious inch. An annoyed grunt, followed by a low, harsh chuckle, reached me from above. It evidently hadn't been expected that I'd be still hanging on.

I stared upward, trying to pierce the darkness.

"You wouldn't take the quick way like the others, would you?" a voice said. "Well, hang on as long as you want. The rope's tied, and it's no extra strain on me. You deserve a few extra minutes of torture, anyway."

Lightning flashed. Framed in the window overhead, his face stark and nearly unrecognizable in the harsh glow, I saw him. I had refused to identify the voice, but now there was no doubt. I all but released my grip.

"David," I said brokenly. "David, what have we—I—ever done to you that you would do this?"

His voice beat down out of the darkness. "You would've ruined me if I'd let you, you damned hypocrite. Leading me to expect that I'd be a millionaire some day, and then sending me away to a ranch so I'd be out of the way and you could squander a fortune, endowing hospitals, buying this hell-hole, adopting that stupid little ninny who thought I wasn't good enough for her, willing the rest of the money away to people like that damn' uncle of hers! I wouldn't have had enough to pay my debts if I'd let you get away with it.

"The only decent thing you ever did

was to take the responsibility for the deaths and practically promise to commit suicide. I knew you were still acting the hypocrite, though; that's why I decided to use the lariat on you as I did on the other two. You damned hypocrite!"

Lightning flashed again as he finished. But it wasn't David's twisted lips I saw, nor his hard eyes. The rope where it was stretched tightly over the sill beside him was holding my unwavering attention, adding new alarm to my bottomless despair.

The sharp-edged stone was cutting through the rope.

With every move I made, with every bit I slid, with the slightest motion the gale gave my twisting body, the strands were being parted—one by one—inexorably . . .

The scuffle in the room above and Grace's cry from within my own room came together, as though set off by the same charge.

IF THE struggle overhead, I could only surmise that Taj Ouida had set upon David and that the two were battling it out. Grace, I feared though, had fallen in a faint; for after her short cry, I could neither see nor hear anything within the room.

I was past caring now, anyway. The strain had been too intense. The reaction was setting in. It could only be a matter of minutes, perhaps seconds, until the rope parted or my numbed hands slipped down those last inches. My holding onto the rope was automatic rather than intentional.

Only vaguely do I recall those final seconds.

I had wronged Grace. It was she who with the speed of desperation had flung down to where the workmen's equipment was kept, found the rope with which to rescue me. It was she who, hanging boldly onto the swing-

ing casement, threw a loop out about my doomed body.

There had been no room for hesitation or for second thought. Her saving coil caught me in the nick of time. Her knots about the bedstead within the room held, groaning—but held—when my weight made the cable saw the top of the supporting casement.

Her quick decision had saved me from the fate of the body that hurtled down past me from the fourth floor, dark and screaming, as I hung there, footless but safe at last, waiting only for Taj Ouida to come and help her drag me inside.

"He fell," Taj Ouida told me, meeting my gaze with inscrutable eyes. "It is perhaps better."

Only on one point were my instincts right, and then partially. Later chemical analysis showed that tablets dosed with minute quantities of atropin had been substituted for my own mild ones of caffeine. No wonder I hadn't been able to recognize myself with my system charged with that powerful stimulant and my brain semi-delirious from its befuddling effect! I can only guess that David switched the tablets because he was afraid to have me clear-headed while he was working out his devilish plot.

I taxed Grace afterwards, asking how it came that an altiphobic like herself had dared do what she did in getting the rope about my swaying body.

"There are times," she said, "when a person has to forget to be afraid." She smiled.

The Swami, too, had a ready answer when I wanted to know how I could reward him.

There was a light in his somber eyes. "If I may quote a saying that is old in Lahore," he said, "'Let him who wishes an heir take unto himself a wife.'"

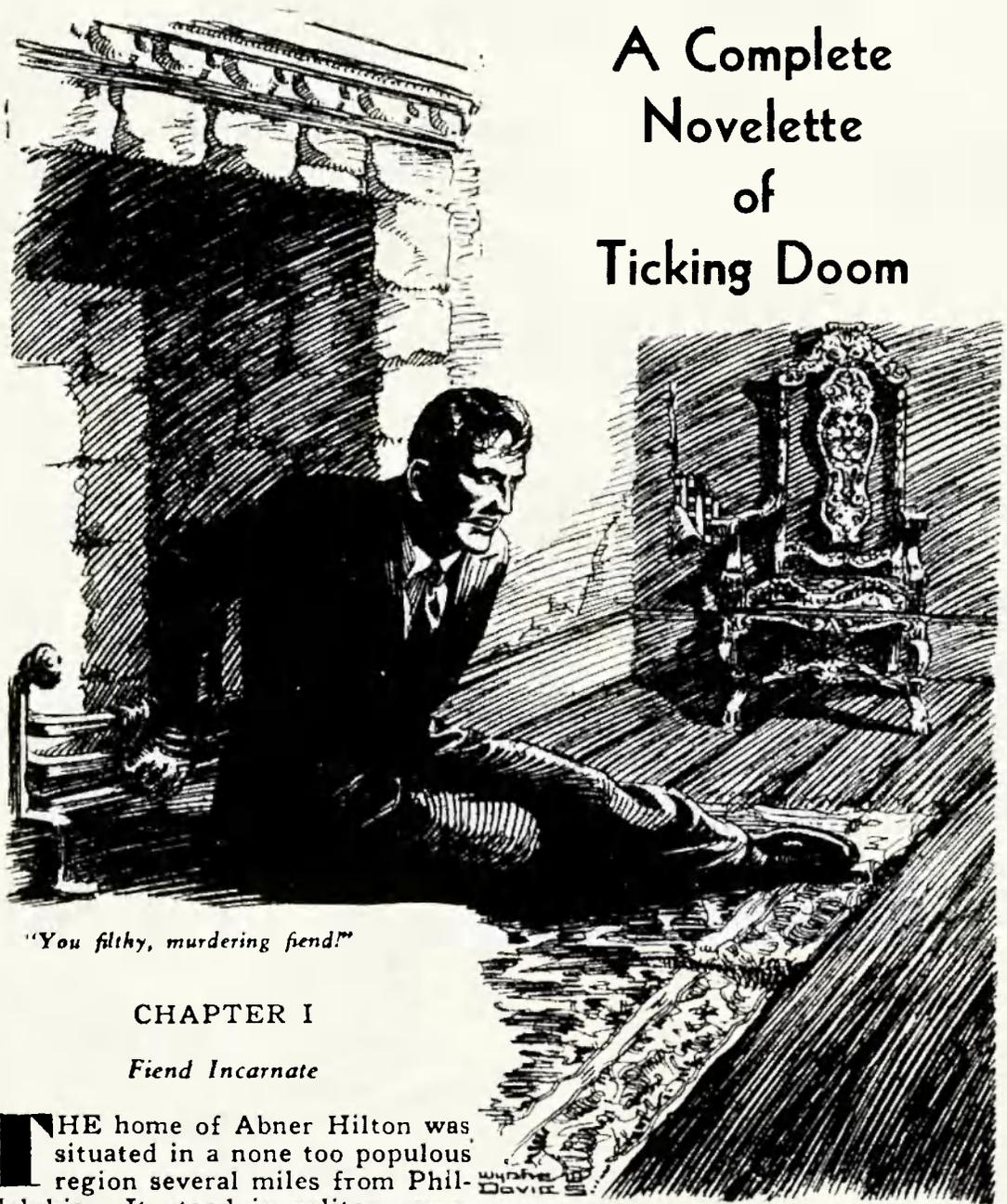
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DEATH ASKS

A Complete
Novelette
of
Ticking Doom



"You filthy, murdering fiend!"

CHAPTER I

Fiend Incarnate

THE home of Abner Hilton was situated in a none too populous region several miles from Philadelphia. It stood in solitary magnificence in its own grounds—a passably prosperous looking place, its nearest neighbors being a dozen similar homes at regular distances. To

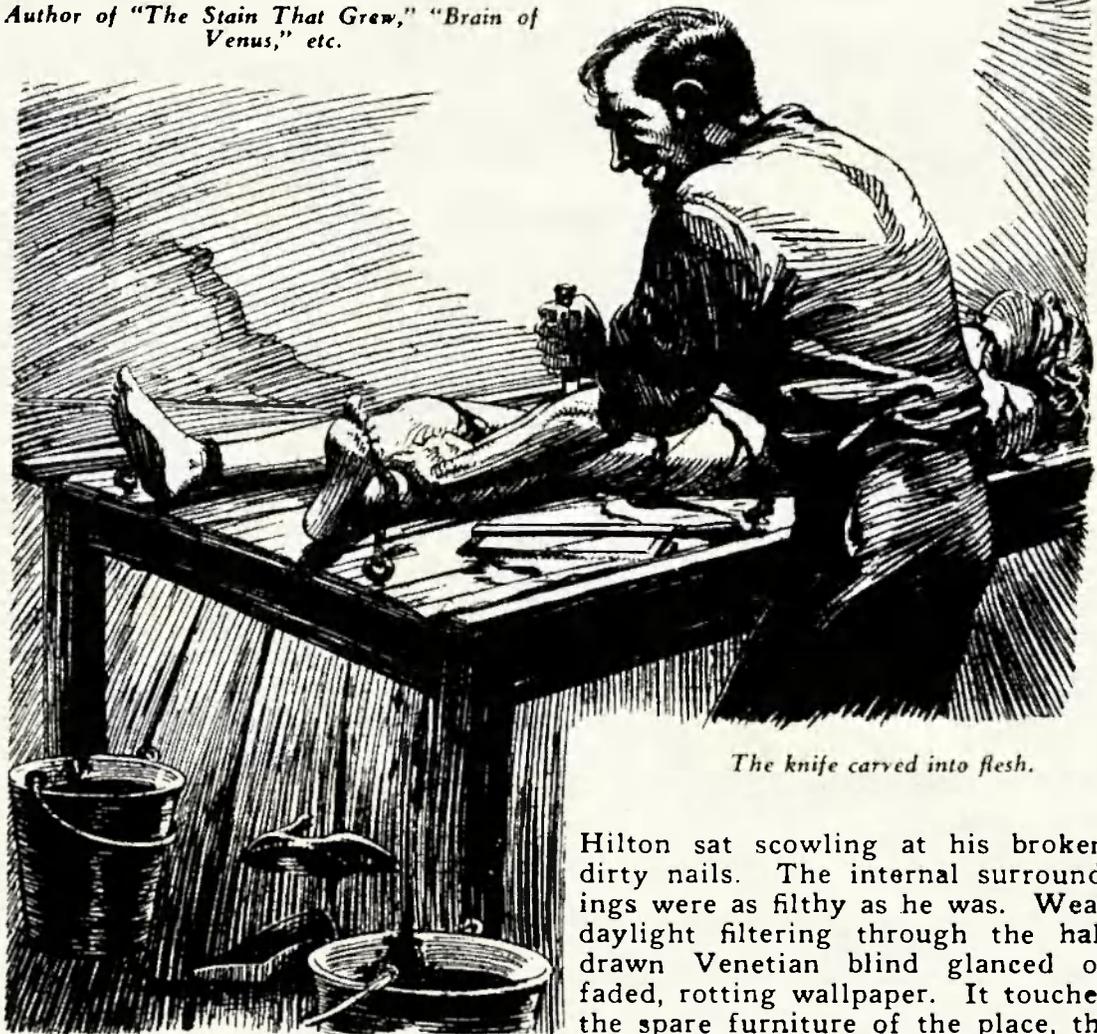
back and front there was nothing but wild, open country—the former looking over rugged moorland to a distant hill; the latter towards the smoky line

The Tortured Beat of a Palpitating

the QUESTION

By
**JOHN RUSSELL
FEARN**

Author of "The Stain That Grew," "Brain of Venus," etc.



The knife carved into flesh.

on the horizon that denoted Philadelphia itself.

Within the dilapidated, depressing interior of the Hilton home, Abner

Hilton sat scowling at his broken, dirty nails. The internal surroundings were as filthy as he was. Weak daylight filtering through the half drawn Venetian blind glanced on faded, rotting wallpaper. It touched the spare furniture of the place, the most substantial article being an unusually long deal table provided with sloping wooden runnels on either side.

In the room beyond, turned by the poor, half insane Hilton into a bed-

Heart Tolls the Tocsin of Disaster!

room, the same drab daylight fell on muddy grey tangled sheets and dust caked floorboards.

Gloom, depression—subhuman morbidity. All these things stalked the jetty shadows of the horrible place and filled both the rooms and Abner with a certain hellish meaning.

He was waiting—waiting for his young niece to visit him. He had not seen her since her childhood. She was worth a fortune in money and he wasn't worth a dime.

The thing to do then was to kill her, very skilfully, and throw the blame onto her fiance Courtney Wayne, a young Philadelphian engineer. Once it was done he could have the money for himself under the will of his dead brother, the girl's father.

For months he had brooded over the idea in his rotting little retreat. She would come, surely. The outside of the house looked quite prepossessing. The neighborhood was fairly select and quiet. Finally he had written a letter. His one time culture had enabled him to write it very convincingly, expressing the urgent wish to see her and convey a confidential message which had been left in his keeping by her dead father.

Yes, it had been a very clever letter. . . . And now he sat, a tattered, unshaven figure, eyes glowing with the unholy light of murder-lust—waiting, waiting. She would be here any time, now. For an instant his gaze shuttled to the battered alarm clock on the mantel; it was just three o'clock, the time appointed. That meant . . .

HE jumped to his feet abruptly with a sharp and triumphant intake of breath. There was a knock on the front door. The tap of a woman's hand, beyond doubt. Just the sort of tap Mary would give, he reflected. Dear, sweet child. . . . He chuckled viciously to himself as he moved along the dusty hall, then flinging back the massive bolts he wrenched the door open.

His hungry little eyes flashed over a young woman modestly attired in a warm winter overcoat, golden hair peeping from beneath her hat. She

was just as pretty as she'd been as a child, he decided. Not quite so luxurious in clothes as he had expected; there wasn't even a car visible in the drive. Evidently she had come by train to the local station. . . . All these thoughts took perhaps two seconds as he surveyed her, then she started to speak—but he interrupted her with a raised, skinny hand, motioned inside the drab hall.

"Come in, my dear," he invited gently, but to his irritation she drew away nervously.

"No—no, thank you. I only just wanted to know if—"

"Yes, yes, of course—I'm your Uncle Abner. Come along in."

"But I—"

Hilton's lean jaws snapped together. There was no time for argument. Reaching forward suddenly he clutched the girl round the waist and flung his free hand over her mouth to stifle her cries of fright.

"You darned little fool!" he panted, dragging her within and slamming the door. "Do you want the whole damned place to hear you? Why can't you do as your Uncle asks and—?"

He stopped, momentarily surprised. The girl had fainted in his arms. For a moment he stood glaring down into her ashen face, then staggering beneath her weight he carried her into the living room and laid her on the long deal table.

Rubbing his skinny hands together he looked at her closely, puzzled for a while over the apparent cheapness of her clothing as he wrenched the overcoat from her unconscious form. For a girl worth a fortune she wasn't dressing half as well as he would have expected.

Still, that didn't matter—evidently the countryside was no place for finery. Besides, what did clothes matter anyhow? His main object was to be rid of her and put his predetermined plan into action.

Working with the swiftness of movements long rehearsed he tightly bound her wrists and ankles to the underside of the table legs. A piece of filthy rag thrust between her teeth and tied securely into position ef-

fectually gagged her. Another length of rope secured across her neck held her head tightly.

"A fortune, eh?" Hilton muttered, surveying her helplessly trussed form. "We shall see, Mary, my dear . . . We shall see!"

Turning, he strode through the dimming daylight to the rickety sideboard and pulled a long carving knife and a saw from the left drawer. Gently he laid them down beside the girl, rubbed his palms softly together in ghoulsh anticipation. Grunting impatiently he lighted an oil lamp and placed it on the hook over the table.

His actions were deliberate—the brutal, inhuman actions of a fiend.

FIRST he sliced the knife down the girl's clothes, tore them away from her body then bedded them down in the empty fire gate. His cruel eyes rested for a while on her lissom nakedness under the dull lamp glow. Broken teeth glinted in a ghoulsh smile as he found she had recovered consciousness and was trying desperately to raise her pinioned head.

"Oh, no, my dear," he said gently, glaring into her terror stricken face. "It is of little use trying to scream now—the gag will take care of that. It's my turn! Not a trace will remain by the time I'm finished with you. Mary Lillian Digby will vanish off the face of the earth!"

The girl struggled again, threshed and twisted as far as the ropes would permit, pulled her head upwards until the constriction of the cord set the veins bulging in her forehead. Then again she relaxed, dumb, staring blue eyes fixed on Hilton's grinning face. Suddenly he turned away and went into the adjoining kitchen, brought forth two large buckets and placed them at the ends of the table runnels.

Complacently he nodded, picked up the wickedly pointed knife—then drove it with all his strength between the girl's heaving breasts, gave it a left hand twist that struck clean through her heart.

There was a faint moan from behind the gag, then her struggles ceased. Blood began to well from the knife

wound in her breast. Unmoved, Hilton smiled. With a steady hand he withdrew the blade and began to cut swiftly, hacked and carved until at last he had removed the heart itself. Eyes bright with madness he laid the bluish organ gently to one side, sucked breath over his broken teeth in sadistic glee.

Again he returned to the mangled thing that had been a young woman. He worked ceaselessly until perspiration drenched him from head to foot, worked to the sound of blood dripping from the runnels into the buckets. Time and time again he traveled with them into the filthy kitchen and emptied them into a tub.

So, little by little, he dismembered the body, cut away the legs, arms and head, left only a bleeding torso with a gaping ragged hole where the heart had been torn out. Panting hard from his exertions he stared at the dismembered organ.

"At least you can never beat again!" he muttered. "Not even in a dead body! It is safer with the heart removed—detached. . . ."

He brooded over that, then suddenly looked up with a start as there came a heavy pounding on the front door. For an instant he hesitated, staring at the pulped mess on the table. Then quickly wiping his hands on a filthy rag he sped through the crawling shadows of the hall and opened the door gently. The dying light fell on a young, well-dressed man with a clean shaven face and determined blue eyes.

"Well, what do you want?" Hilton demanded irritably.

"You Abner Hilton, sir?"

"Certainly I am. What of it?"

"I believe Mary came along to see you this afternoon? I saw her come in as a matter of fact, a little while ago. I thought I might as well join her. I'm Courtney Wayne, her fiance."

"Oh, I see!" Hilton's face lighted with sudden understanding. In the gloom the young man failed to notice the subtle craftiness that crept into it. "Pray come in, young man—I've rather been expecting you. You must

excuse the dim light but unhappily the current is off—a fuse, you know. I'm an old man and don't know much about these things."

"Maybe I can fix it for you, sir," Wayne remarked, and stepped into the shadows.

The instant he did so fear crawled through him. The damp, odorous air was heavy with the reek of human blood; the whole place stank like an offal dump. Abner Hilton felt his powerful young hand close on his arm.

"Where is Mary, sir?" his voice demanded from the dark.

"Right ahead," the old man chuckled. "We were talking in the lamplight, owing to the fuse. Go on—right ahead down the passage to that door there. You can see the light."

Wayne hesitated for a moment, then obeyed. In a few moments he gained the open doorway and started into the dreary surroundings. Instantly his eyes alighted on that ghastly horror on the table. The room was like a charnel house; the glow of the softly swinging oil lamp in the hall draft cast its dimness on things that sent his appalled mind tumbling madly in the depths of hell.

"Mary!" he screamed insanely. "Oh, God! I'm mad! That can't be Mary there—"

"That is Mary," Hilton reassured him, closing the door softly and moving towards the fireplace. "Mary—or what remains of her! You didn't expect it, did you? Thanks for coming like this—it's saved me the trouble of sending for you."

Wayne's voice cracked in hysterical horror and fury over the words ripped from his lips.

"You fiend! You filthy, murdering devil! You've killed her—even dismembered her body—mutilated her face! Oh, God, why didn't I get here sooner—"

"That is Mary, but you killed her!" Hilton said tonelessly. "I will arrange that later—"

He broke off as Wayne made a sudden violent leap towards him. It was the very action he had been expect-

ing. Instantly his hand came up from behind his back and was revealed as clutching the heavy iron poker from the grate.

Wayne never realized clearly what happened, as he pitched senseless to the filthy, blood spattered floorboards. . . .

CHAPTER II

Heartbeats of the Slain

WAYNE returned to his senses with the realization that he was firmly bound to the heavy old-fashioned fire grate. His eyes, blurred with the pain from his damaged head, stared drunkenly at the dancing, leering face of Abner Hilton in the lamp glow.

With a low snarling laugh the old man came forward, shook his skinny fist malevolently.

"I waited until you recovered, young man," he said throatily. "I wanted you to see everything right through to the end! You might as well—the police will want to accuse you." He went closer, hot fetid breath blowing in Wayne's face.

"Do you realize what I'm going to do to you, Courtney? I intend to break your will—turn you by slow degrees into an imbecile! By torture—by mental anguish, by whatever means I can and as soon as I can! Clever, isn't it? And well worth it!

"You see, with you and Mary both out of the way—you as her murderer, in a fit of insanity, it leaves only me to collect. So good of you to follow Mary here. Now watch!"

Wayne didn't answer. He felt already that his mind was on the verge of cracking under physical pain and the added horror of gazing. Yet gaze he did, with fascinated nausea, as the inhuman Hilton continued his work.

The knife carved flabbily into the resistless flesh of the thing that had been a woman; the saw grated viciously over bone. Every sound of it went through Wayne's body and brain as though he were the victim.

By slow degrees through what

seemed endless hours he saw the corpse carefully cut into pieces and thrust into a heavy sack. Then Hilton became fiercely active. Lifting the buckets of blood he vanished into the kitchen and there came the sound of running tap water. When he returned he was rubbing his hands complacently.

"So easy to dilute the blood to the consistency of weak dye and pour it down the sink," he breathed venomously. "That is what the police will find you did! I will tell them that. You cut the body into sections and made it unrecognizable, hoping for the perfect crime. The remains will be buried in the garden. Remember that!"

So saying he seized the sack and pulled it along the floorboards to the back door, leaving behind him a smear of blood that deeply stained the boards. Wayne watched glassily, stunned with horror. He would not, could not believe that he was seeing all that remained of Mary being carried away in that sack.

He screamed at the thought—raved and cursed with impotent, helpless fury, wrenched and tore at his ropes with the ferocity of a madman but all to no purpose.

Thirty minutes later Hilton returned, the sweat of exertion dewing his lean, brutal face.

"Hard work, digging," he said ominously. "She's well bedded down—a good four feet. And when she went down my chances of inheritance went up. Understand? Say something, you idiot—say something!" He struck him savagely in the face with the flat of his hand, but Wayne remained silent. His mind was utterly numbed.

In a daze he watched the old man complete the details—watched him clean the table and floorboards with caustic, swab out the pails, and then set fire to the clothes in the grate. Turning at last from the glowing ashes he indicated the bloodstained knife and saw laid carefully on one side.

"Evidence!" he breathed maliciously. "Evidence when the police come

—evidence that you did it! You killed Mary Lillian Digby!"

Wayne remained mute; his head drooped between his shoulders with the heaviness of unconsciousness. Hilton went forward and examined him closely, convinced himself it was not a trick. Only then did he loosen the ropes, seize the young man by the shoulders and drag him into the filthy, dark apartment that had once been a second drawing room.

Working swiftly he rebound his ankles and wrists—spread-eagled him on the barren floor. Skipping back into the kitchen he brought hammer and massive curved staples, fastened the ropes around them then drove them deep into the boards.

"**G**UESS that'll hold you," he muttered, reflecting—then again he went to the kitchen and presently returned with a large can of water, slightly punctured in the base to permit of the water dripping through drop by drop.

With fiendish ingenuity he fastened it to the old electric light fixture above, carefully arranged it so that the drops fell steadily on the forehead of the pinioned, unconscious man.

Torture—absolute and vicious—torture calculated to break a man's mind, not from pain but from the agonizing anticipation of each icy drop through endless hours.

The intense gratification at the thing he had done did not abate in Abner Hilton the next day. After a few hours of sleep—remarkably peaceful considering the inhuman brutality of his crime—he entered the second drawing room to survey his prisoner, dimly visible in the light drifting through the chinks in the drawn Venetian blind.

He found Wayne conscious again, still tightly bound on the floor, face drawn into tight, weary lines of suffering, water dripping down it from the almost empty can over his head.

"You—you inhuman fiend!" He muttered the words thickly. "You devil! Do you think you can get away with this?"

"I know I can," Hilton replied affably, rubbing his hands. "I'm sorry I can't make the room warmer—unfortunately there is no fireplace in here. Nor can I offer to release you."

Wayne glared at him dully. His body was already numbed and stiff from his immovable position and the icy draft blowing under the door. Only his head seemed to have feeling, felt near the bursting point with the leaden dropping of the icy cold water, more searing than molten metal. His jagged nerves were keyed into intense agony of expectancy for every drop.

"Sorry, too, that I can't offer you anything to eat just yet," Hilton went on sardonically. "I have little to spare, but I'll see you get enough to keep you alive until the police come. Water, though, you can have in plenty," he added grimly. With that he went out and refilled the can, put it back in place, and left the tortured man to himself again.

So, throughout the day, Wayne suffered exquisite tortures, he felt his mind slipping little by little under the terrible strain. Abner Hilton waited in fiendish expectancy for something to happen—but nothing did.

He had expected inquiries for both Wayne and Mary, but neither came. Instead a host of invisible presences seemed to watch him silently in dire and horrible reproach for the sin on his soul. Most of the fears he dismissed with a sneering grin on his feral lips.

Once he glanced through the rear kitchen window towards the spot where he had buried Mary's remains, and beheld it untouched. Then he returned to commune with himself in the shadows.

LATE in the afternoon he moved into the second drawing room, cut Wayne's limbs free from the staples but none the less kept him securely bound.

"I'm going to be merciful to you," he said thickly, delivering a kick in his aching ribs. "I'm giving you a respite; tomorrow I'll resume the treatment. In the end I'll break you!

"When the police come I'll say it was you who attacked both Mary and me. Understand!" His bitter little eyes glared in the flickering light of the lamp in his gnarled hand, hurled mental suggestions into the torture-weary mind of the man sprawling on the floor. . . . All ideas of escape were still-born in Wayne's brain. He could hardly even think, so overcome was he by exhaustion.

Hilton left him at last and so, for two more days, the ghastly business went on. Wayne was alternately tortured and released, given only enough meager food and water to keep him alive in order that he would be able to speak when the law finally caught up.

And, just as Hilton had hoped, he was hardly master of his own will any longer—almost did believe by the endless hours of implacable hypnotism the old man indulged in that he *had* killed Mary. The horror of her death and the continued torture had become a crushing obsession slowly warping his mind.

Only at times was he aware of himself, realizing with leaden helplessness that nobody would be concerned about his disappearance. He had been on a vacation from his normal work in any case and only Mary knew. Mary! Merciful God!

It was on these occasions of self-assertion however that he tried with pained weariness to work free of the ropes holding his wrists. The staples holding them were fairly rough; in time he might break through his bonds. But it would take days.

On the third night, puzzled by the continued absence of action, Hilton went to bed early, lay awake gazing at the darkened, chilly room. Then at last he turned on his side amidst the dirty sheets and closed his eyes.

The silence was still disturbing him—even Wayne in the adjoining room was curiously quiet, working silently and laboriously in the dark on the ropes that held him, fraying away the tough thickness little by little with muscles that were cracked and aching.

Then, as he lay silent, Hilton heard something. There crept into his

senses a dull, ticking sound, heavy with apparent distance.

Tick—tick—tick. With the measured beat of a metronome, gradually becoming louder. Very slowly creeping up by imperceptible degrees, until at last the faded walls of the entire room groaned with the pulsating mystery.

Thud—thud. Thud—thud. Rhythmic, insistent, inhuman.

At last Hilton sat bolt upright in the bed. One skinny hand clutched the dirty tattered shirt that served as night attire. Staring wildly into the gloom he listened with twitching face muscles to the still resolute beating, for all the world like a gigantic human heart.

Heart? That thought knifed into his rotten brain. Instantly his memory was transferred to the heart he had cut out of the girl. He had cut it out to be sure life could never return, and now—

Clammy sweat drenched him as he listened. His breath rasped over his stumpy teeth. There was no way of telling exactly where that awful sound was coming from. It might be to one side, above or below—he could not determine. It seemed to fill all space.

Throb, throb, throb. . . .

"No!" he shouted hoarsely, leaping out of the bed. "No! Stop!"

And instantly the sound ceased!

The whole house seemed to become mute, horribly silent after the torturing rhythm of the beating.

With dragging footsteps and sweat-drenched face Hilton moved to the adjoining room and twisted the door key with trembling fingers. All was quiet within. Wayne lay like a log in the dim gloom, stirred only slightly as a match flared in Hilton's quaking hand. The old man's hoarse voice came to him.

"Courtney, you heard it?" he demanded thickly. "You heard that beating?"

"I heard nothing," Wayne muttered dully, and relaxed again.

For a moment the old man stood gazing at him, then he went out. Wayne lay silent for a while after

he had gone, wondering what he had been talking about. He certainly had heard nothing. Then once more he set to work on the laborious task of fraying through his ropes.

In the meantime Hilton returned to his room and waited a long time in the shadowed gloom, but the mysterious sound was not repeated. At last recovering some of his courage he climbed into bed, nerves tensed for a recurrence of the sound.

Presently he heard it, very soft and low, that measured beat sweeping up from nowhere.

Louder and louder became the ticking, mad, nerve cracking tempo. Hilton shot out of bed once more, again screamed for it to stop—and as before it obeyed. Weakly he staggered to the front hall door and opened it, stared out toward the dimness of the drive.

Slowly he crept outside and looked about him, down past the many rear out-houses with their sloping roofs. There was nothing unusual visible—only a quiet, dark immensity.

He knew not how long he stood shivering in the night breeze. His next clear remembrance was of being back in his bedroom. He crawled back onto the bed at last and lay in frigid horror for the return of the beating—but the night passed quietly and he awoke again to the grey glimmerings of an ashy dawn.

CHAPTER III

"Why Did You Kill Me?"

SHAKEN by the experience of the night Abner Hilton felt like a trapped animal. Though he did not believe in the supernatural, though he inwardly boasted that he had no conscience, he could not altogether rid himself of the remembrance of his crime. Time and time again the vision of the slain girl rose up before him.

In his mind he could again hear the sloughing of the knife as it carved her flesh, the grate of the saw against her bones.

He scraped together a scanty meal

and then went in to his prisoner with a few crusts and some water. Wayne looked at him dully, but behind his back his hands were slowly pulling away the remainders of his frayed rope. A night of rubbing on the floor staple nearest to him had cut them through. They gave way just as Hilton was bending towards him.

Instantly his fingers closed round the old man's skinny throat, sent the meager meal hurtling through the air. Hilton was pulled down to the floor with Wayne's fingers crushing hard into his leathery neck.

Wayne wished desperately he could get to his feet, but his bound ankles prevented it. His only hope lay in strangling the old man where he was—but in that he was doomed to failure. With a sudden vicious twist Hilton wriggled sideways, brought round his foot with all his strength and kicked Wayne violently in the ribs.

He gasped with the sudden pain, desisted in his effort to get to his feet—and in that moment Hilton acted. He had the advantage in every way. Wayne was bound and weak from his ordeal; Hilton was free and furiously energetic.

"So you thought you'd escape, eh?" he breathed venomously. "You thought you'd fool me, huh? Well you won't!"

With that he dived away and snatched up the heavy, dirty plate on which he had brought the food. Even as Wayne tried to get up the plate came down on his head with stunning force, edgewise. He sank down mutely, blood streaming from a scalp cut.

"It was you who plotted that heart beating stunt!" Hilton screamed. "You! I don't know how, but you did it! You'll not do it again, Courtney. Damn you, no! I'll kill you first!"

Savagely he rebound his victim's ropes, spread-eagled him back in his old position. Then he refilled the can and stood looking at the unconscious figure in vicious glee.

"You can stay that way until I want you! Without food and without water—at least to drink! No more

leniency—no more leniency!"

And with that he stamped fiercely from the room, slammed and locked the door.



Only once did he return, and that was towards evening. Wayne was half conscious, muttering supplications for release. The old man's feral lips twisted in an unholy smile; his only response was to make sure the water can was refilled then he went into his bedroom to pass the night.

But the instant he entered the gloomy shoddiness—for the oil in his lamp was exhausted—he felt a strange fear clawing at his heart. The memory of the night before returned to him. He sat on the bed edge, listening with one ear half cocked for some sound of the heart, but instead there came something else, something that sent the blood crawling in streams of ice through his withered body.

"Abner Hilton, why did you kill me?"

The merest whisper, an ice cold question that seemed to creep from the Unknown. It started Hilton's heart racing madly, set crawling fingers of ghastly fear clutching at his vitals.

"Abner Hilton, why did you kill me?"

IT WAS stronger this time—a woman's voice calling softly, mournfully, from an incredible dis-

tance. As in the beating of that enigmatic heart it was impossible to guess the exact source of the sound.

"Why did you kill me?" Words dreary with anguished reproach.

He leaped savagely to his feet and stared madly round him in the dimness. Viciously he struck a match, but the flickering light revealed no change. It went out and scorched his fingers.

"Imagination!" he panted hoarsely. "Imagination—or nerves!"

"No, Abner Hilton—neither imagination or nerves, but the voice of the woman you killed," the voice answered somberly.

"You slew me, carved my body into pieces and buried the remains! You tore out the heart—but in the heart there is not life—only in the mind. The mind lives on. In the end I will destroy you, as you destroyed me!"

With a pallid face he listened to the words, heart racing agonizedly against his skinny ribs. Her voice—the voice of Mary Lillian Digby—speaking from hell knew where!

Suddenly he found relief in action. As before he made straight for the second drawing room and stared in palsied fear at the bound figure of Wayne. He certainly was not responsible.

Mad with fright he left him and blundered outside into the half clouded moonlight, glared about the sodden grounds of his home with the eyes of a maniac. Just as on the previous night there was nothing to disturb the aching quiet.

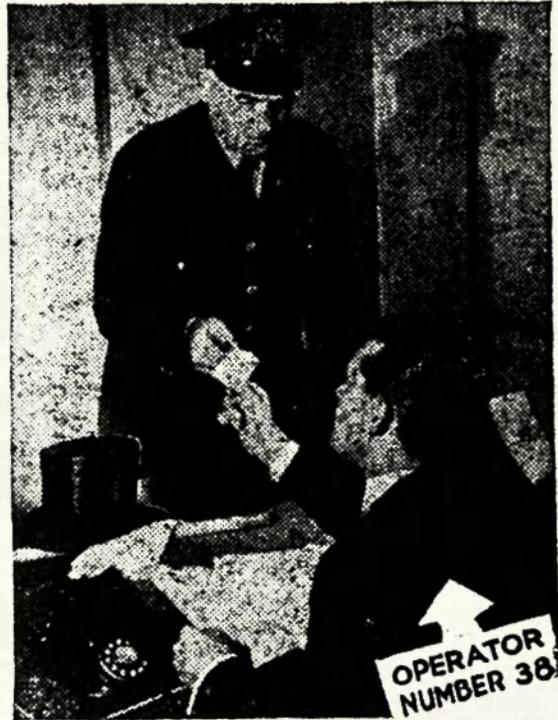
Breathless, shaking with fear, he returned inside at last, bolted the heavy front door with fingers that were oddly brittle. Cold creeping waves of superstitious fear were clawing at his evil heart.

As he tottered uncertainly down the hall, striking match after match to allay the crushing dark, he tried to convince himself that it was all imagination. That he hadn't heard anything. It was some trick of Courtney Wayne's; it *had* to be!

He twisted round and fumbled along to the second drawing room again,
(Continued on page 118)

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passed inside and examined the spread-eagled man closely, was forced to admit as before that he was *not* responsible. He was a silent, stupefied man, water trickling down his ashen face from the slowly dripping can.

Very quietly Hilton withdrew again into the abysmal dark of the hall, nearly wept with rage and fear as he found his matches were exhausted. Weakly, knees like jelly, he clawed his way back into the main living room and stood for a while in the jetty gloom, eyes staring at the hazy grey oblong where the window lay.

Turning he searched for the rickety chair and dropped his leaden limbs into it. Spittle was drooling unheeded from his quivering lips; sweat drenched his skinny body. The complete ghastly fear of a supernatural unknown had him in its grip.

For nearly an hour he sat there and heard nothing. A blank nothing that hemmed him in like a living, avenging presence. The only sound he once detected was a long drawn out groan which he knew came from Courtney Wayne as he returned to consciousness.

A third look at the bound man convinced him; he was still there in the very dim moonlight filtering through the blind. In some odd way he was glad of the man's presence; it did something to alleviate the terrible fear numbing his being.

An hour later quivering, brain numbing reaction set in. With heavy feet he scraped along to his bed and lay face down upon it, trying to muffle his ears to the dreaded sound he was afraid to hear. Softly, gently, came the resumed beating of that heart—and above it the awful, sepulchral voice.

"Abner Hilton, it is dark and cold in the grave you dug for me! I cannot rest. I am returning to life, to the land of mortals, to ask you face to face why you killed me! I am not dead, Abner Hilton. *I am alive!* Listen to the beat of the heart you cut away! Listen to it, gathering power!"

Shaking like an aspen Hilton listened—could not help himself. The voice ceased and the subdued rhythm of the heart became swifter, louder.

Pat, pat, pat, pat. . . .

"You hear, Abner Hilton?" the voice breathed. "I live! I have come back from the grave to ask why you killed me! Look in my grave! Dig down deep and you will find I have gone! Dig! Dig!"

CHAPTER IV

The Remains Walk!

HILTON could stand it no longer. With a desperate scream he leaped out of the bed, blundered through the dark to the kitchen, felt round frantically until he encountered the handle of his shovel. Panting hard he wrenched back the outer door and charged madly into the garden outside, plowing heavily through rank soaking weeds and grass to the clear soil space where he had put Mary's butchered remains.

With savage desperate movements born of ghastly fear he drove the blade into the earth, shoveled the soil to one side. He worked with mechanical frenzy until the blood pounded insanely through his veins and drove his heart to erratic spurts of beating.

On and on he shoveled, flinging the loose earth away with the ease of a maniac, until at last his spade plowed through the sack in which he had placed the remains. Shaking with fright and exertion he pulled it free, gazed with stupid eyes as it moved drearily in the night breeze.

It was indeed empty! The remains had gone!

"No!" he muttered desperately. "No—no, it can't be! I'm going mad! I know I'm going mad! You couldn't rise from the grave! You were utterly destroyed—dismembered! You—"

He stopped, the sack falling from his nerveless fingers. The moon, which had been shining diffusedly through ragged clouds suddenly emerged from their midst with a pale and leprous glow, cast its pale silver over the unkempt grounds and the hole of the grave.

But it was to none of these things that Hilton's mind was directed—his

fixed, incredulous eyes were chained to a figure walking slowly towards him along the uneven ground.

It appeared to be the naked figure of a woman, arms extended towards him! And as she came nearer he could behold quite clearly against the whiteness of her skin the black marks at the joints of her legs and arms where he had cut them from the body! One other, round the base of the neck, held him mute.

Making hardly any sound she quietly advanced, coming nearer and nearer, and still he stood paralyzed with numbing shock.

"Abner Hilton, you killed me!" she said at last, in the same dreary grave-ridden voice he had heard in the house. "I have come back—to ask you why you did it!"

Within six feet of him she stopped, a lovely but forlorn figure, hair moving slightly in the mild wet wind. Clearly he could distinguish the graceful curves of her body, the rounded formations of her breasts—but upon one of them was a dark patch—a hole where he had torn out the heart to make sure she would never come back.

Never come back! That realization burst in his diseased mind like a bolt of living fire. He found action at last in a desperate, piercing scream, turned swiftly and went blundering and gasping over the uneven ground—anything to escape the woman who had risen to question her fate.

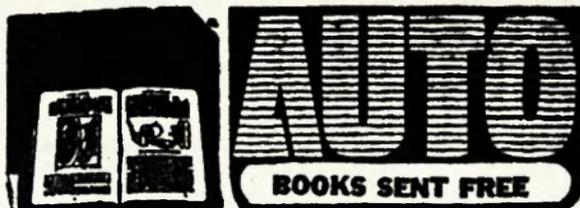
Even as he flew over the ground, driven by insane terror, he could hear feet racing after him—not the sound of woman's feet but the heavy clomping of a nightmare creature.

Thud, thud, thud, like the beating heart he had heard.

He threw himself screaming through the front doorway, into the hall. His fingers twisted the key of the second drawing room door and he went flying inwards to hurl himself beside the silent figure of Wayne.

"Courtney, in God's name save me!" he screamed frantically. "Save me! She's come back! Mary's come back from the grave!" His trembling fin-

(Continued on page 120)




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(Continued from page 119)

gers wrenched a penknife from his pocket, slashed through the ropes holding the tortured man. "Save me, Courtney! Say you will! It's *Mary!*"

That jerked something of consciousness into Wayne's laden brain. He stared into the dark, down, at the dim, pawing, gulping figure on the floor beside him. Stiffly he tried to move to his feet—then his eyes jerked round at the sound of feet in the hall. A light was bobbing along it.

COLD terror surged through him too as in the doorway he beheld the same naked woman's figure that Hilton had seen—a woman who stared tensely, wounds on her rejoined limbs clearly visible. Almost at the same moment the owner of the storm lantern became visible, pushed the woman to one side and charged forward, clutched the screaming Hilton round the neck.

In the light of the storm lantern on the floor Wayne dazedly watched what took place, saw a powerful shouldered man with a face of frozen hate clutch Hilton's skinny throat in sinewy fingers, crush into it with all the strength at his command.

"Kill my daughter, eh?" His bitter voice knifed in the quiet. "Cut her up, would you? My Annie! By God, you filthy butcher, this is where you go to the hell you deserve!"

Hilton tried to speak but the compressing fingers would not let him. His miserable body threshed madly on the floor. Slowly but surely his struggles became weaker and at last ceased altogether.

Only then did the man rise up and kick the corpse violently with his heavy shod foot, turned, then stared at Wayne amazedly.

"You're alive!" he shouted hoarsely—and with his words the girl in the doorway seemed to arise from her horrific trance and advanced at a run.

Wayne felt convinced in that moment that he was going insane at last—for the girl was *Mary!* There could be no mistaking her face. *Mary, yes—naked, with scars of her hideous death still upon her. Mary!*

His lips moved to utter her name then even as her white arms reached towards him he relapsed into darkness and brief rest.

Wayne realized as he came back to consciousness that he could only have been senseless a few minutes. He was lying on his back, all his ropes removed, the face of *Mary* and her rugged visaged companion bending over him. The only change was that she was now wrapped in an overcoat.

"Courtney, dear—Courtney!" she breathed, gathering him into her arms. "Thank God you're alive! I thought you were dead—that was why I helped Mr. Craven here."

Dazedly, weakly, Wayne raised himself on one elbow and stared toward the light of the lantern.

"What—what's it all about?" he asked helplessly. "I saw you cut in pieces by that fiend, *Mary*—I saw it! A moment ago you were naked; I saw the marks."

The girl smiled faintly. "Only tights, Courtney, marked on the joints with black paint. Cold, yes—but the only way to drag this fiendish uncle of mine into the open."

"Come to think of it, I didn't see your face when—when Hilton butchered you," Wayne shuddered. "It was utterly unrecognizable, and—"

"It isn't really so complicated as it seems, sir," Craven muttered. "This filthy devil intended to kill Miss Digby here, but instead he killed my girl Annie. She was canvassing this district for radio set orders. We had got a little business together and were doing quite well."

"Actually, Courtney," *Mary* intervened; "although I said in my letter to you that I was coming to see Uncle, I changed my mind at the last moment. It seems that Mr. Craven's daughter arrived at almost the time for my appointment. Evidently Uncle didn't give her the chance to speak, and not having seen me for years he mistook poor Annie for me, both of us being fair and young."

"That must have been it," Wayne nodded drearily. "As for myself I was afraid for you and came to see if I could help you when you visited

your uncle. There wasn't time to come to your home first, so I came straight here. I saw somebody like you enter the house whilst I was still a distance away; after that I came in and saw." He stopped, brokenly.

MARY slowly nodded. "I got worried when I couldn't get any news of you. All I could find out was that you'd started on a holiday. Closer inquiry, though, revealed that you'd followed me here.

"I decided to come here after all and it was evening when I arrived; that was the evening after I should have come, of course. The first person I ran into was Mr. Craven in the grounds. He had just dug up some remains out of a sack—"

"I'd found that Annie had last been seen at this place," Craven muttered bitterly. "I found bloodstains on the grass and traced them to that newly dug hole. I identified the remains as those of Annie—there were certain birthmarks on her body which only I knew about. It was her all right.

"Well, I couldn't see any real motive for the brutality until Miss Digby happened upon me; then I began to see what had happened—how my poor girl had got what was intended for somebody else. It seemed pretty evident that you had probably gone the same way since you had disappeared.

"Both of us wanted vengeance on the old fiend and were prepared to go to any lengths to exact it."

"And yet you didn't go to the police?" Wayne asked wonderingly.

"Police!" derided Craven contemptuously. "What could they do? Just give this devil here the hot seat for murder. That wasn't enough for me—I wanted to torture him as he had tortured my poor girl—I wanted to drive him mad with my own efforts.

"Miss Digby felt pretty much the same way about your disappearance. Of course, we had no guarantee that you really were dead, but we suspected it as the only explanation. The best way to find out was to get Hilton out of the house and look for ourselves—and that demanded something

(Continued on page 128)

Flush Kidneys of Acid and Poisons

Stop Getting Up Nights

When kidneys are clogged they become weak—the bladder is irritated—often passage is scanty and smarts and burns—sleep is restless and nightly visits to the bathroom are frequent. The right harmless and inexpensive way to stop this trouble and restore healthy action to kidneys and bladder is to get from any druggist a 35-cent box of Gold Medal Haarlem Oil Capsules and take as directed—you won't be disappointed—but be sure and get **GOLD MEDAL Haarlem Oil Capsules**—the original and genuine—right from Haarlem in Holland—a grand kidney stimulant and diuretic. Remember also that other symptoms of kidney and bladder trouble are backache, leg cramps, puffy eyes, moist palms and nervousness.

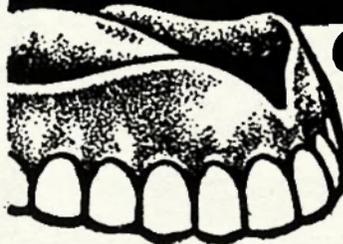


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By CHAKRA

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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.

THE DOG THAT KNEW

MIKE FLYNN was an elderly office man for a road contractor. Because Mike was rather an insignificant-looking individual, his employer usually sent him every Friday for the payroll money. No one would have suspected that he carried a large amount of money.

But on a fatal Friday he went to the bank alone. Usually he was accompanied by his inseparable companion, "Spirit," his dog; but on this particular day he left Spirit in the office although the dog whined to go. But the animal had been sick and Mike wanted him to rest. Mike had named his dog Spirit because, as Mike said, "He sees ghosts." Everybody laughed at this, of course.

The bank teller gave the money to Mike and the old man stuffed the thick package into his inside pocket and was returning to the office by way of an alley short-cut. Someone had let slip the information that Mike was carrying money that day. As Mike plodded along, a stranger slunk from a doorway, his arm swung up, and a heavy club crushed the old man's skull.

The police found Mike's body shortly afterward. From a card in the dead man's pocket, they located his employer. The contractor hurried to the alley accompanied by Spirit. Immediately the dog crouched beside the body of his master and began to howl, and would not allow anyone to come near the corpse.

Suddenly the howling ceased. The dog looked strangely into the air, sniffed, and then with a yelp darted down the alley and

around into a side street. With a long leap he pounced upon a man who was talking to a young woman on the corner. Both dog and man went down in a noisy, writhing tangle.

When the police reached the spot, the man was dead—his throat torn open. The stolen money was not found on the body; but a search of the man's premises revealed it behind a hidden panel. The dog had been right.

What had he seen?

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PRISON WALLS

QUITE some years ago, two young men were in jail awaiting execution. They had been tried and convicted of murder and were now to pay the penalty for their crime.

But they both insisted that they were innocent despite the fact that witnesses had testified they had seen the two men leaving the scene of the crime. The fact that it was night and the vicinity frequented by tramps, had not interested the judge or the jury. Identification had been established and justice had taken its course.

The elder man, John Watkins, was extremely bitter about his fate. He planned ways and means of escape for both men—but in vain.

On the eve of the execution, the governor had seen fit because of the youth of the second prisoner, to commute his sentence to life imprisonment. On the following day the other man, Watkins, was hanged in the little yard behind the jail, still proclaiming his innocence.

For several days the surviving prisoner remained in the jail awaiting transfer to another prison. One morning he was gone; his cell door was open. The guard who had slept through the night could give no explanation. None of his keys was missing. But for some reason, records show that no effort was made to recapture the escaped convict. Merely a "Transfer" was shown on the prison books—but no record of admission in the newer prison can be found. Perhaps those in authority didn't want to reveal the escape.

Years passed. Recently the escaped man told his story to friends. An old man now, he wants to be declared innocent before he dies and for his children's sake.

His explanation of the jailbreak causes friends to raise their brows incredulously, for he says:

"I used to sleep most of the time in prison. That night someone woke me up by calling my name. I looked around and the cell door was open. I stepped into the corridor and saw the guard's keys in the lock. I took the keys and opened all the necessary doors. Then I returned the keys to the guard and left. I know that John Watkins returned from the grave to rescue me, because I was as innocent as he was. I always dream of John on the anniversary of his execution."

SPIRITUAL EYES

A REPUTABLE business man tells the following story: Occultists say that everybody has spiritual senses in addition to the five physical ones. At birth, a child is in possession of these spiritual senses, but because of its inability to make use of them, they become dormant. A child can see things that an adult cannot. When I was a kid I used to see imaginary children. We romped together and had grand times.

(Continued on page 124)

"I have **REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT**"

... writes George Bailey

"I suddenly realized that I had become a fat man! The boys kidded me about my big "punch".

At parties I learned that I had become a "wall flower". Nobody wanted to dance with me.

In a balling-out... I was humiliated. The day I heard some children laugh at me I decided to get a "Weil Belt".

What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken **EIGHT INCHES** off my waist... and 50 pounds off my weight!

It seemed to support the abdominal walls and keep the digestive organs in place... and best of all, I became acceptable for insurance!

I have a new enjoyment of life... I work better, am better, play better... I didn't realize how much I was missing!

IF YOU DO NOT REDUCE YOUR WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS

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 You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit... its message-like action persistently eliminating fat with every move you make!

Many enthusiastic wearers write that the Weil Belt not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place... and with loss of fat comes increased endurance, pep and vigor!

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The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days if your waistline is not actually 3 inches smaller... 3 inches of fat gone, it won't cost you one cent!
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42x32	\$2.45	42x32	\$2.45
44x32	\$2.45	44x32	\$2.45
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84x32	\$2.45	84x32	\$2.45
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90x32	\$2.45	90x32	\$2.45
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CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS IN

(Continued from page 123)

But my parents never believed the tales I told them.

Once I became seriously ill. I couldn't sleep and tossed in my bed, burning with fever. In order to isolate me from my brothers, I was placed in the front parlor. There was a gas light in front of the house and its beams shone through the window.

One night—I shall never forget—I reached the crisis. I was fully conscious but suffering. It was well after midnight when my spiritual playmates suddenly appeared. They clutched my body, and laughing, lifted me into the air. As I rose, my sufferings seemed to drop away like a discarded garment. I was suspended in the center of the room. Looking down, I saw my body still lying on the couch in the corner.

I became excited and glanced about wildly. At that moment a policeman came ambling down the street, paused and peered intently in the window. I screamed in terror and the children suddenly disappeared. The next thing I knew, my parents were in the room. I was lying on the couch, blurt- ing out the whole story. My mother tried to calm me by rubbing my forehead.

"Father," she gasped, "the fever—it's gone. He's going to live!"

I still persisted in my story and to make it more convincing I told my father the number on the policeman's helmet. I could not have seen it from the couch which was obscured from the window.

My father just laughed at me and said that I had seen it on the policeman's helmet before and remembered it. However, on my insistence he agreed to go out and talk to the officer.

He returned in a few minutes. His face was ashen. He looked at my mother.

"The number agreed," he said in a low voice. "And the patrolman was just transferred to this precinct. It was his first tour of duty."

SOUTH AMERICAN MAGIC

A YOUNG man returned recently from South America and has a remarkable story to tell of his escape from the head-hunters of the Amazon. Shortly after he got out of college he joined an expedition into the head-hunting country. His employer was subsidized by a museum, commissioned to seek data and souvenirs of any kind that might be of value.

But two months in the jungle were enough for the young man. He left the expedition and started down the river toward the headquarters port where he would get a boat back to the United States. But the following morning he was taken captive by a band of natives. He was led to the chief and ordered to disrobe. He believed they were going to beat him because he saw whips in the hands of two native guards.

Suddenly one of the natives cried out and pointed to a red birthmark on the white man's shoulder. The leaders of the tribe

gathered and looked at it. And as they did so they backed away and looked at the American with loathing as though he were an evil power of some kind. One by one they disappeared into the jungle leaving him alone. The last one to leave was an old man who slapped some mud on the birthmark and then darted away.

The American found his way back to the river and his boat, and the next day arrived at his destination. In time he reached the United States. When he told his friends about his experience, they seemed to doubt him, so he kept his story to himself.

As the birthmark was just behind his shoulder, he seldom noticed it. He would have to hold a mirror in a certain position.

One morning, that part of his shoulder began to itch. He held the mirror to look at the spot, and to his surprise, the red birthmark was no longer visible. The skin was a bit different on the spot, but it was no longer the ugly red color. He thought it so strange that he went to a doctor. The doctor could not explain, but the doctor did tell the young man to speak to a certain professor who knew much about South and Central America.

The lad told his story to the professor, who examined the spot on his shoulder. A magnifying glass had to be used to see the form of the birthmark. As the professor studied it, he remarked: "I have seen a design which closely resembles this mark, on the walls of an old Mayan temple near Yucatan. I have noticed that natives back away from it whenever they see it. It must be some mark of evil. However, my boy, it saved your life and therefore is a mark of good luck for you."

But no one has been able to explain why the red birthmark gradually disappeared. Medical science has no record of any cure of such marks. And since the mark has gone, the young man has had several very fortunate breaks including the winning of a large sum of money in a contest. Where his luck had been bad in the past, it now is remarkably good. He believes the old native did him a great favor.

THE DIAMOND CURSE

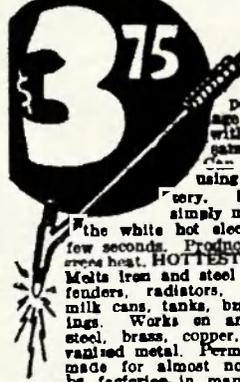
IN France during the World War, drinking water had to be chlorinated. The chlorine mixture came in small glass tubes, and one man was commissioned to put a tube in every bag of water that hung in the company street or billets.

A regiment of artillery was stationed in a small town called Vayres. A certain widow of that town had a large diamond which her husband had given her. She treasured that diamond more than her life. One unscrupulous soldier managed to steal that diamond from her purse when she was giving the man a drink of water at her home one afternoon.

She didn't miss the diamond until that night in a small café, where Frenchmen gathered with the soldiers. She did not

(Continued on page 126)

Trindl ELECTRIC ARC WELDER



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(Continued from page 125)

know whom to suspect, although she felt that it had been stolen. She was sure she hadn't lost it.

She reported the loss to the captain of the company in the village. He ordered a search.

The guilty soldier, who was carrying the diamond, suspected what was about to happen so he hid the diamond in a chlorine tube and dropped it in the water bag in front of the mess hall.

A thorough search and questioning of all soldiers failed to produce the diamond.

That evening, shortly after dark, the soldier went out to the water bag and reached for his tube. Suddenly he yelled in pain. The sergeant of the guard rushed over and found that the diamond had imbedded itself in the palm of the soldier's hand, just as though it had been a hot coal.

The strange incident was reported to the captain at once. The man's hand was bandaged. He was put under arrest and the captain took the diamond to the widow.

Happy, she gazed at it. The captain did not tell her the details of the discovery. He merely said that it had been found among the belongings of one of the soldiers who had been arrested and would be tried.

The widow thanked the captain. Then she said: "I prayed that the diamond would curse the thief who took it and burn a hole through his hand."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

To Horror-Scopes: Why is it necessary at a seance to extinguish the lights, hold hands, keep silent while the medium goes into a trance?—H. K.

H. K.: No one knows. The mediums say it is because light prevents the vibratory power necessary for the experiment, just as static electricity prevents pure reception on the radio. And of course, noise disturbs concentration. The holding of the hands helps the vibration, by producing combined power obtained from those present, just like the laying of hands on a table will start it moving. The more hands, the more power.

To Horror-Scopes: Why does a person who loses a limb still experience the feel of the limb? Is it because there is a spiritual body as well as a physical one and the person still feels the spiritual body?—D. P. S.

D. P. S.: Your doctor can explain that this sensation has nothing to do with any spiritual limb. It is a matter of nerve and muscular action at the stump of the limb.

To Horror-Scopes: Is it true that a rattle-snake knows that a sleeping man is harmless and therefore will not bite him?—F. H. W.

F. H. W.: The matter of sleeping has nothing to do with it. Remain quiet around a

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rattlesnake and he won't strike, but if you move, it will strike whether you are awake or moving in your sleep. Anything that moves is a natural enemy of a rattler. It fears attack. Rattlesnakes have crawled for hours over a man lying still on the ground. Had he moved a muscle he would have been bitten.

To Horror-Scopes: A friend of mine told me he saw a Hindu swallow a small snake and after several minutes that snake crawled out of his mouth. Could a snake live in a man's stomach?—A. L. R.

A. L. R.: Hardly likely. The gastric juices in the stomach would kill the snake after a little while. It is quite common, however, to see fakirs in India or China train small snakes to crawl up a man's nostrils and come out of his mouth.

To Horror-Scopes: Has anyone ever photographed the soul departing from a body at the moment of death?—D. W. F.

D. W. F.: Charles Miller, the celebrated cameraman of Hollywood, made a test of death photos. He arranged with the local hospital for the experiment. He took several pictures at the moment the patient died.

The doctor sat at the bedside, and as the pulse stopped the doctor nodded for the photo to be snapped. In every case the negative was black except for a small streak of light that resembled a miniature flash of lightning. Mr. Miller is writing a book on his experiments which will be published next year.

—CHAKRA.

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DEATH ASKS THE QUESTION

(Continued from page 121)

pretty ingenious. We managed it, between us."

He paused and smiled reminiscently. "Being a radio engineer came in handy," he went on grimly. "I got a microphone and small loudspeaker and lowered them by wire half way down the main chimney breast.

"I knew that in common with all houses of this type the main fireplace flues would end in one chimney, so the sound would travel to all rooms possessing a fireplace. It was fairly certain Hilton would occupy such a room. It was easy to get to the roof by the out-houses, without much noise either.

"Once that was done Miss Digby and I went to our apparatus, just beyond the range of the back grounds. The microphone in the chimney picked up every sound that Hilton made; with headphones we could vis-



ualize his movements. Every time he went to bed the mattress springs squeaked. As to the voice of the woman it was Miss Digby herself speaking into our own microphone, which of course emanated from the loudspeaker in the chimney. The heart effect was simply a ticking alarm clock, made louder or quieter by a volume control on the microphone."

Wayne nodded slowly. "I begin to see now why Hilton was so frantic. For myself I heard nothing; this room has no fireplace. Besides, I was unconscious most of the time."

"When he shouted for the beats to stop we naturally obeyed the order, hearing him distinctly," Craven breathed. "That got him! He really thought the devil was after him. Just

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the same we didn't tempt him out the first night; he needed time to think and work himself up into a real frenzy of fright.

"We did that tonight, of course. Miss Digby joined me again after sundown, complete with an outfit that looked like my girl risen from the grave. The rest you know. Of course it was I who took away my poor Annie's remains."

"And you?" Wayne asked slowly. "You've murdered Hilton. That is against the law, fiend or not."

Craven shrugged his heavy shoulders and looked down at the corpse.

"I'm going to give myself up and trust to the mercy of the law. With your evidence too and my dead girl's remains where is the jury which would convict?"

"We'll back you to the end," Wayne said quietly, getting to his feet with difficulty.

The girl's arm went round him supportingly as she helped him from the drab house. As they passed into the cool night air they looked away to the east.

Ragged dawn was already creeping over the misty, saturated countryside. Somewhere amidst it, perhaps, abandoned and alone, was the fiendish soul of Abner Hilton. . . .

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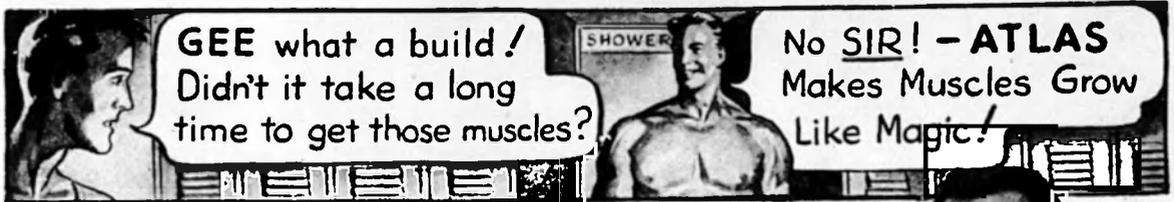
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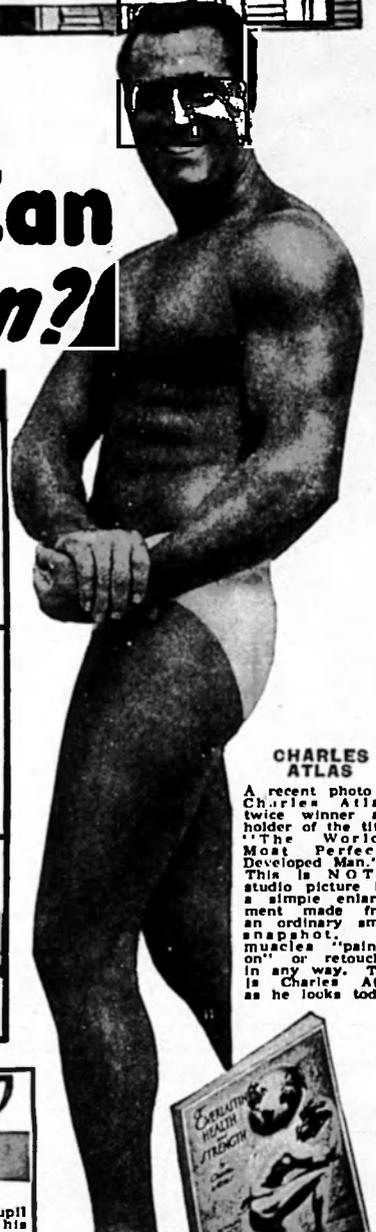


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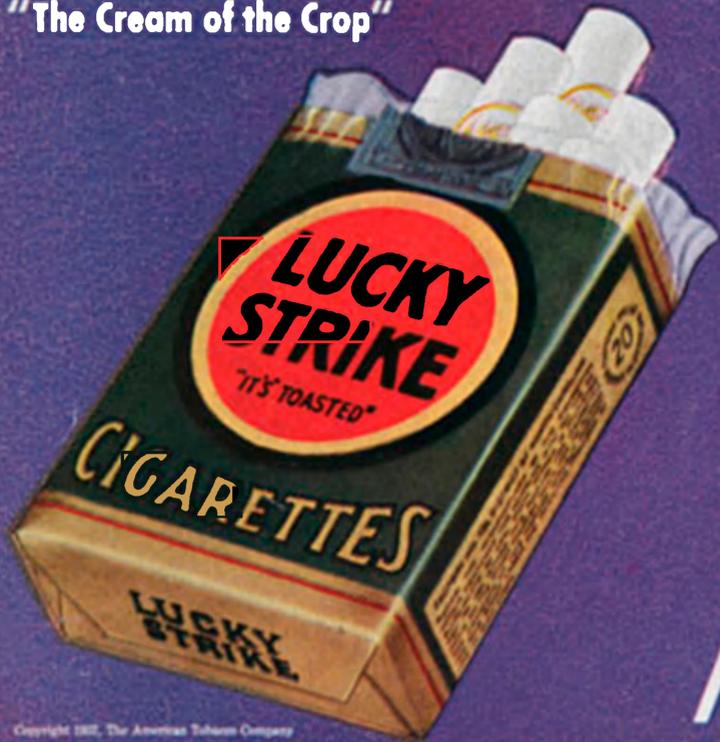
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