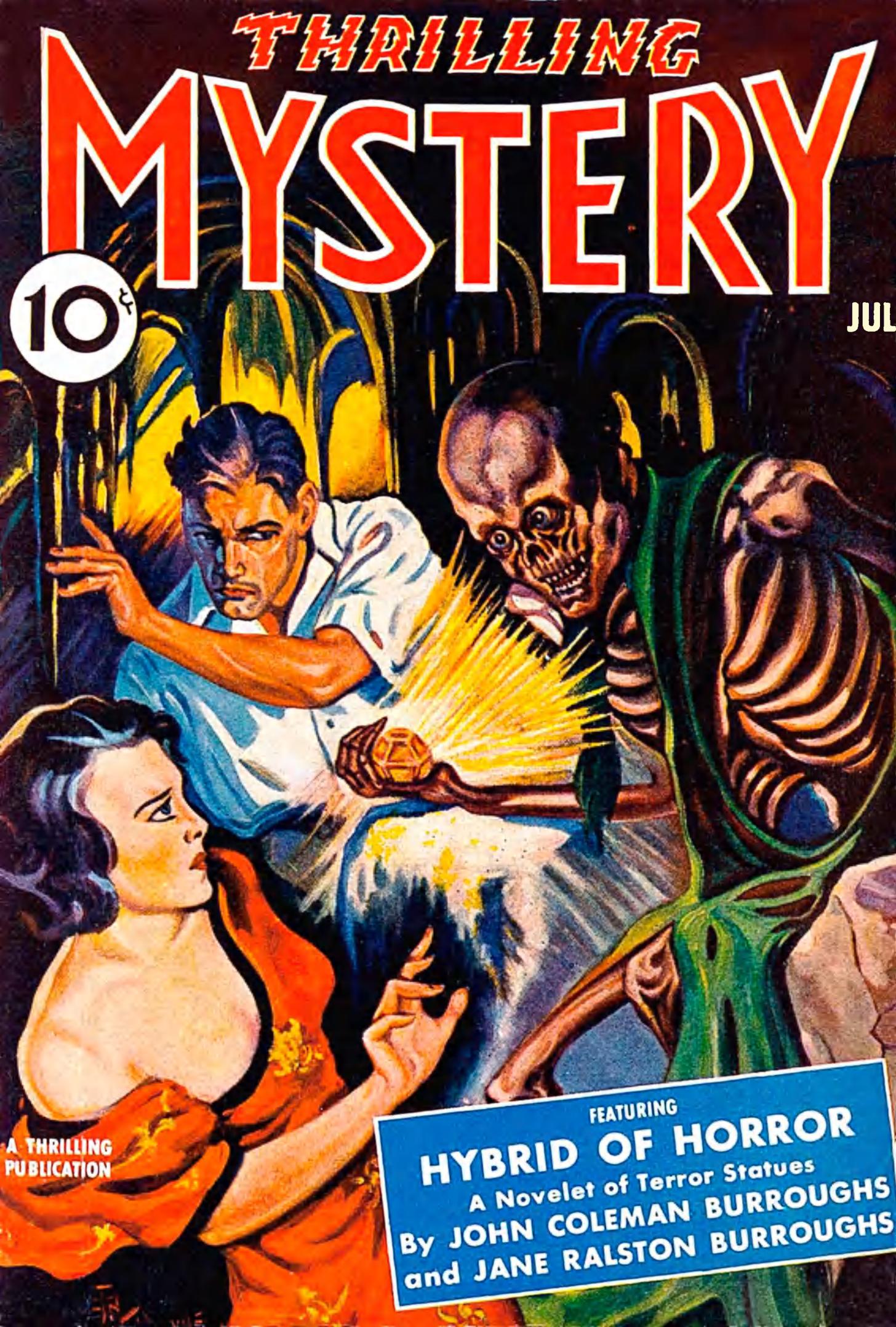


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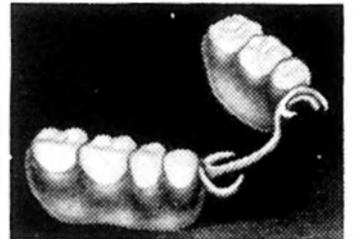
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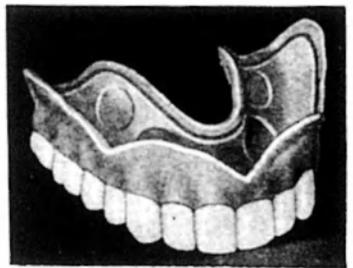
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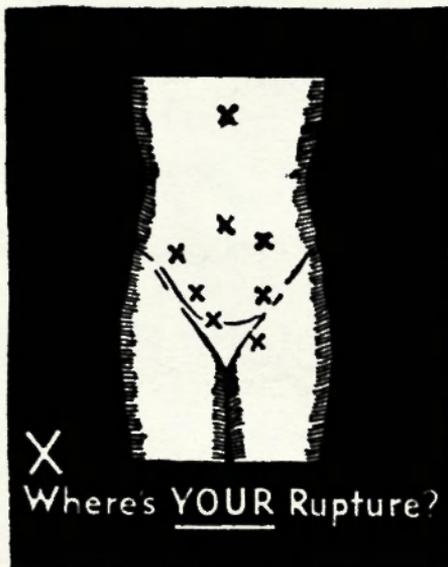
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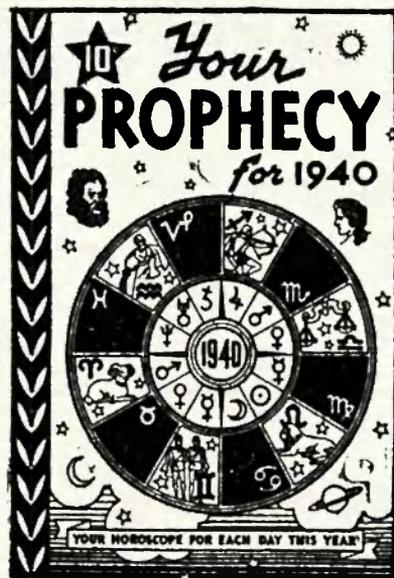
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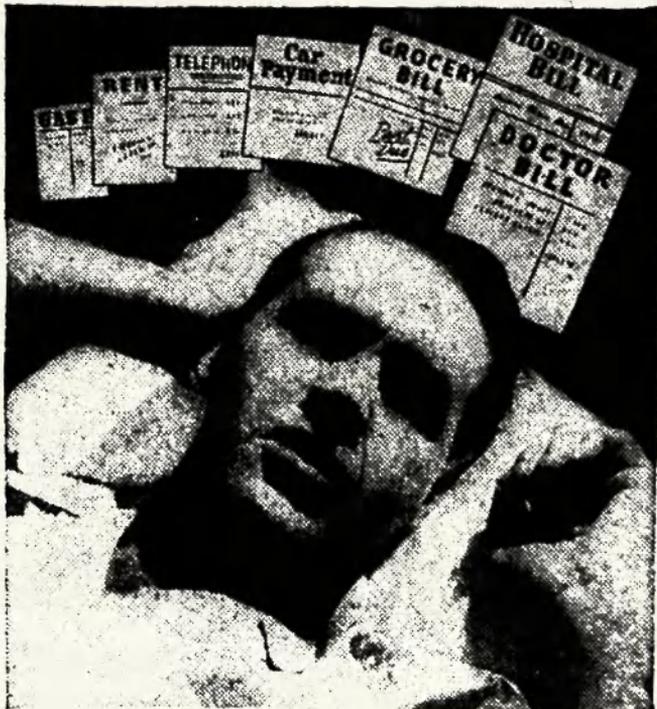
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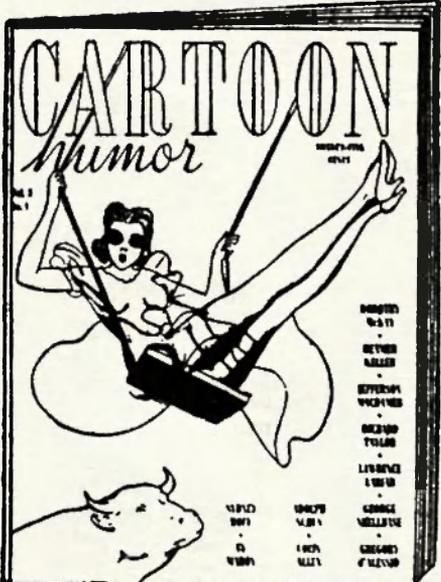
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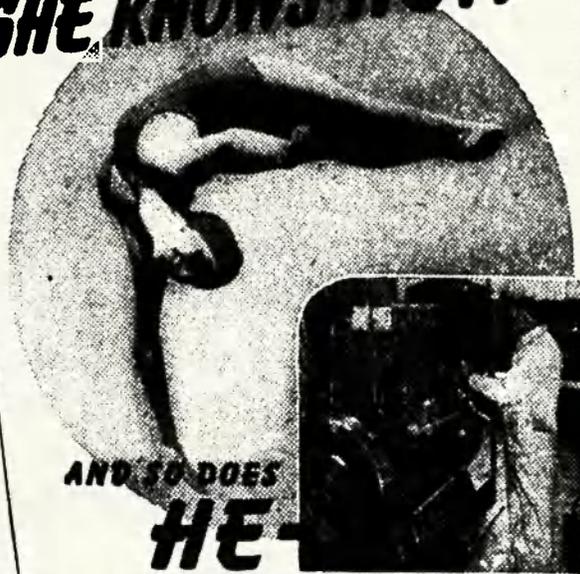
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HYBRID

CHAPTER I

A Note from Hell

MASON would be as damned as I, cursed by seeing things occur that could not happen. We would be cursed by those fiery eyes, the long shrieks and the longer silences—cursed by the thing in the dungeon!

The fate of Mason I have never explained satisfactorily.

I am certain that the secret is locked forever in that little New England valley, buried in the ashes of old Gribold Manor.

We were rattling on our way to the place that first night. I was still temporarily elated, for I had become one thousand dollars richer that morning on account of Mason.

"Mason," I said, "if I were you I'd try to forget those legends and get a little rest. There'll be some simple, logical explanation that you've overlooked."

I settled comfortably on the green plush and through half squinted eyes studied the chiaroscuro parade of tree goblins and phone pole ogres as they chased each other by the train window. Idly I was trying to figure how many phone poles one could buy with a thousand dollars.

I felt Mason's little fear-round eyes quiver on me for a second.

"No, Gov'nor," he came in slowly. "Hit hain't right, that's wot. Hit hain't right!"

"What isn't right?" I asked.

"Yer takin' that thousan' dollars I was sent to give yer. Yer shouldn't of took hit!" Mason's lip corner twitched nervously. "Yer ought've locked me up in jail, kept me from goin' back there. That's wot yer ought to've done—kept me away from that orful place!"

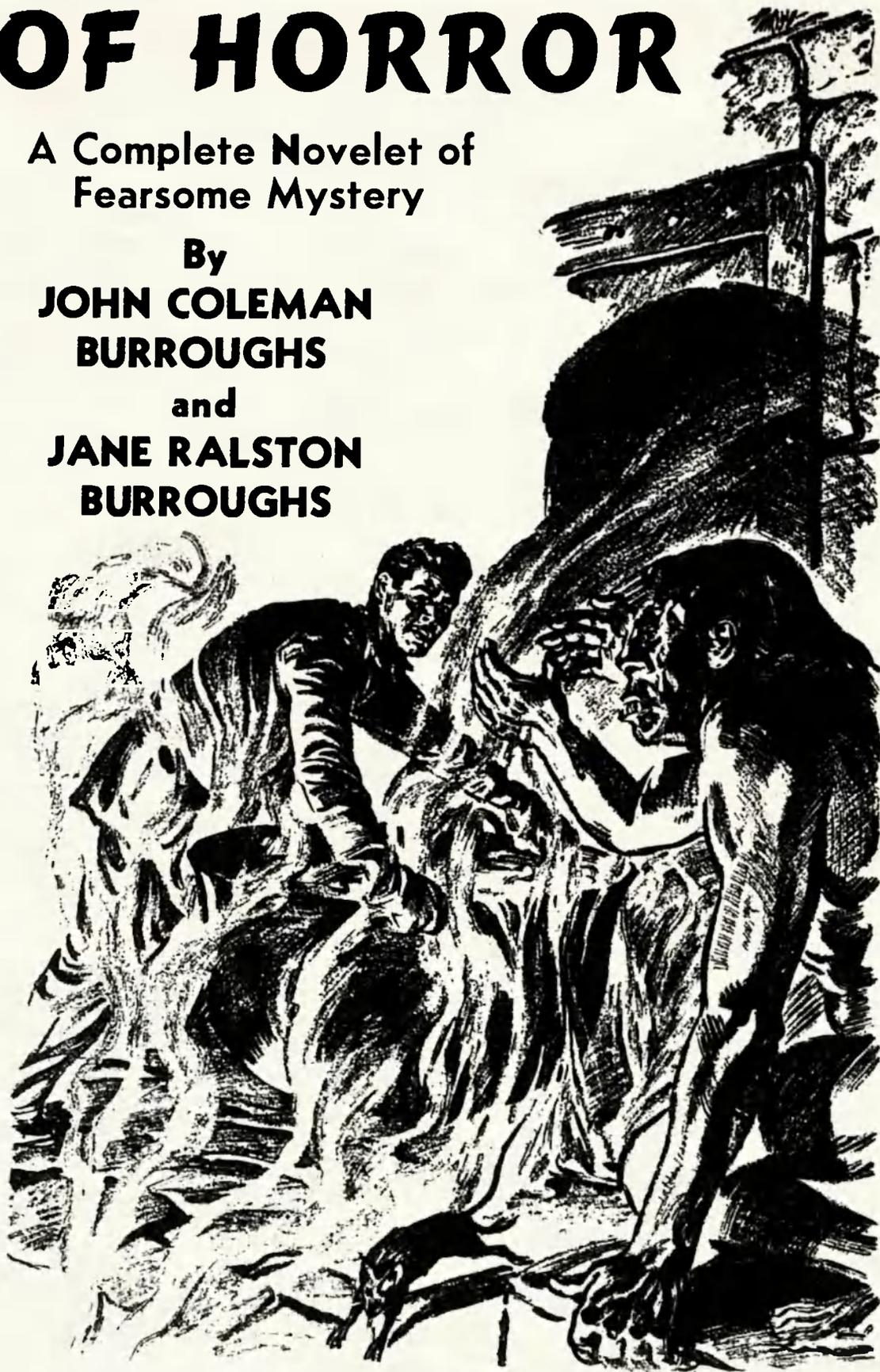
"It will be a sorry day, my friend," I replied, "when I refuse a thousand dollars in gold nuggets and then have my

Terror Screams in the Night When a Sculptor

OF HORROR

A Complete Novelet of
Fearsome Mystery

By
**JOHN COLEMAN
BURROUGHS**
and
**JANE RALSTON
BURROUGHS**



Madly I dragged the bubbling cauldron to the flaming pit and spilled in the brew

Is Called to Repair a Cannibalistic Statue!

generous benefactor locked behind bars."

I had known Mason only twelve hours. In the quiet of dawn he had knocked at my studio door. Even then, after I had stumbled out of bed and let him in, he had seemed frightened. He gripped a tanned leather sack as if it might strike at him.

There was an uncanny sensation when I took that sack from Mason. I know good leather, and my fingers are trained to remember the feel of things. Once I had felt stuff like it in the forbidden crypt of a cannibal witch doctor. It was tanned human hide.

BUT my gruesome idea fled when I saw the contents of the bag. What I judged to be about a thousand dollars worth of gold nuggets poured out.

I tore open a scroll of parchment Mason handed me. The writing was large and bold.

David Renton:

These nuggets are yours if you come at once to Gribold Manor. The Gribold Statue has been damaged. Only a competent sculptor can mend it. I make this offer to you because I have seen your work in the galleries of Edinburgh.

If you successfully heal the Statue of Gribold you may have the twin brother to this bag of gold. A life depends upon your succeeding. My servant will guide you to the Manor.

Rakor Gribold X
Master of Gribold Manor and Estates

I had heard of the Gribold Statue myth. With the exception of the Gribolds, no man had set eyes upon it for two centuries. Exactly what the statue was no man knew. To see it was to die, hopelessly, horribly insane. My conclusion at the time was that stupid people or neurotics like Gribold's new little cockney servant believed such rot.

Myths did not bother me. One thousand dollars was already mine. An equal amount would soon follow. I needed every cent of it. Any man in similar circumstances would have made his way to Gribold Manor that night.

The train whistled drearily. I dug out the parchment and read it again. I noticed casually the queer use of the

words "mend" and "heal" in regard to repairing the statue. The statement "a life depends upon your succeeding" puzzled me. My eyes kept returning to Rakor Gribold's tremendous signature. It was in reddish brown ink.

"Hit's writ in blood, that's wot hit his!" rasped Mason. "Hit's witch's blood!"

"If it's blood," I said, "it will be partly soluble in moisture."

I wet the tip of my finger, dragged it across the name. The stuff smeared.

"I told yer so, Gov'nor. Hit's witch's blood all right—the witch of Gribold!"

Mason fell off into an exhausted sleep soon after that. I noted his sunken cheeks, the nervous twitches that pulled at his eyes and mouth even in slumber. Our ancient car was air-conditioned on the warm side, so Mason's head was pillowed on his coat. His rolled-up sleeves revealed a pair of thin, tattooed forearms. In addition to a couple of nude mermaids, each arm bore the insignia of his Queen's navy.

Like a giant black caterpillar in the moonlight, the train wove its lonely way up the steep slope. We were approaching a high valley where, Mason had told me, the village of Gribold nestled.

WITH a start, the little cockney awoke. His eyes clouded with the old terror. He pointed a shaking finger toward a dark mass on a wooded hill rising above the valley. As if he had been wound up and was powerless to stop himself, Mason began babbling.

"That's it," he said. "That's the place—crouchin' on the 'ill lookin' over the village like a bloomin' beast of 'Oly Writ. Hit's the livin' place of the Gribold Statue!"

Mason leaned closer.

"I've heard hit up there," he rasped monotonously. "I've heard hit—that statue shriekin' at night. Hit's the voice o' the witch comin' outa the monster's throat. Blimey, I've trembled like a bloomin' wench lyin' there in bed, listenin' to eerie noises all over the place!"

Mason dragged a finger around under his collar.

"Hit's death to 'ear hit," he said.

"I'm a marked man. That's wot I am—a marked man!"

I listened quietly, reserving my own opinions to feed my disgustingly normal outlook on such tripe.

Save for a lone brakeman awaiting the next train, the old Gribold Village station was dismally deserted. I shuddered, pulled up my coat collar against the biting mountain winds. Mason gathered the bags together. Then we trudged off through the village and finally hit a narrow, forlorn path leading up to Gribold Manor.

The way led through a forest of gnarled oak. It was a steep climb and we had to stop often to rest. Our little lantern cast ugly black shadows. Mason stayed as close to me as possible and I noticed his eyes constantly striving to pierce the gloom about us.

We came at last to the forest's edge. One hundred yards ahead of us loomed the great manor, dark and lonesome. We sat down on our bags. Mason stared at the place for a long time before he started to whisper.

"Hit's old, Gov'nor, so old it scares yer. Two 'undred years old. The Archduke Gribold built the place for 'is bride, a village girl. They says she was lovely on the weddin' day, dressed in lavender and lace with snow-white skin an' pink cheeks. But Gord, Gov'nor, their first night in Gribold Manor—" Mason paused and drew a hand across his trembling mouth. "Turrible screams came from the manor. Hit was 'is bride. She'd gone stark, ravin' mad—that's wot she did." Mason gulped. "An' nobody hain't never knowed why!"

He clutched my arm and went on, his eyes staring at the place before us.

"Mean an' cruel 'e became, the archduke did, an' him an' 'is mad wife they ruled the manor and estate like divils down Hades way. They 'ad a wee one, finally. A little boy, an' 'e later inherited the estate an' carried on the Gribold name. But before that—" Mason whispered the next words very softly. "The archduke's wife became *bewitched!* She was a young 'un but blimey, they says she appeared like an old wizened woman.

"Then the archduke vanished! Some

says the witch of Gribold done it with 'er divil's brew in the basement of the place. Sore 'cause 'e drove 'er mad, she changed 'im—'ardened 'im into stone."

I could scarcely hear his next words.

"The Gribold Statue, Gov'nor—hit's the archduke hisself changed to stone, locked for a century an' a half in a dungeon of the old manor. Hit's the witch of Gribold I've listened to, shriekin' at night—an' the voice comes out o' the statue's mouth! It shrieks when it's hungry, wails like a banshee until Rakor Gribold lets it out to roam the countryside searchin' for meat—meat fer itself an' its master—*human meat!*"

MASON buried his head in his hands and rocked back and forth. I had never seen such terror and I felt sorry for the man. But I couldn't understand then.

Before we got up to go on, I asked him a question, one that I had no business to ask.

"Why," I asked, "if Gribold Manor is so distasteful to you, are you coming back to it? Why didn't you take the bag of gold and, well, scram?"

His answer startled me.

"Hit's 'is eyes, that's wot hit is. Hit's 'is eyes. Blimey, they wouldn't let me. Oh, Gord, how I've tried to beat it, anywhere. I'd even go back to the old country, enlist again in the navy. But I can't. Hit's 'is eyes. They ain't human. You'll see, Gov'nor!"

I know now that he was talking of Rakor Gribold, the man I was soon to meet.

Fifty feet from the huge doorway, Mason dropped the bags and shrank behind me, clutching my coat to save himself from collapsing to the ground. A shrill cry had cut the night like a knife stab. It was the voice of an incredibly agonized woman.

"That shriek, every night hit's like that! O Gord, wot is hit?"

Mason sank to the ground, grasping my knees.

I jerked myself free and started for the manor. I covered the huge stone steps in five leaps. The wail had subsided into a chant when I reached the oak-paneled portal. The door was moving open.

I rushed into the hall to be met by sudden silence. It was as uncanny as the cry had been.

A mildewed odor of stagnant age wafted up on chilling drafts from somewhere below. I opened my mouth to shout, closed it again quickly. Far down the hallway I heard the groaning hinges of another door. I listened. I could hear running footsteps.

Then I fell forward. Something had cracked violently against my back, and things began falling all around. I sprang to my feet. Mason lay on the floor behind me, bags scattered all over the place. He had rushed through the door and collided with me.

Someone was laughing.

I have never heard a laugh with less mirth. It was cruel, insane laughter. And it came from over my shoulder!

Turning, I saw the dim form of a huge man standing two feet from me. He flicked a match, lit a candle held in one hairy hand. It lighted his face from beneath.

And what a face!

Once, in a museum I had seen the reconstruction of a Piltdown Man, an abysmal brute who was an early link between an ape and a human. Now his living counterpart loomed before me.

Mason had pulled his punches when he described Rakor Gribold.

CHAPTER II

Master of the Manor

THE man bowed low, in apelike mimicry of an ancient human greeting.

"Good evening, David Renton. I welcome you to the cozy hospitality of Gribold Manor."

I drew back involuntarily. Speech shouldn't have flowed so easily from the mouth of an atavism like that. And his breath! God, it was as fetid as though he had been dead for centuries.

A cross between a snarl and a frozen smile lifted the corner of his flabby mouth, revealing a dirty, yellow fang. I was immediately struck by the prominence of the supraorbital ridges and

the short, receding forehead—the indication of an extremely thick skull. His round, owl-like eyes gleamed like twin holes into hell. The short cane he grasped in one hairy hand seemed to be fashioned of some greenish stone. It had been broken, leaving a wicked, jagged end.

"I trust you enjoyed my concert, Mr. Renton?" the rasping voice went on. "I often have them, much to the discomfort of my splendid servant here."

Rakor Gribold shuffled over to Mason, and poked him with his cane.

"Get up and take our guest's bags to his room, you stupid fool! What do I pay you for—to sleep on the floor?" Mason cowered as the giant, bearded figure of the Master of Gribold threatened him with his boot.

"Gribold," I interrupted, "if you don't mind, I'd like to see the statue you want me to repair."

I found myself struck with a strong desire to get the job over, collect that extra thousand, and get out. Gribold came close to me again. He blew in my face and grinned. Then he shuffled off down the hallway.

I took a thick tallow from a nearby stand, lit it, and followed Rakor Gribold down into the dungeons.

Tortuous winding corridors led ever downward. The air was damp with the chill of a lonely grave. Strange noises whirred through the hanging moss and roots. Bats, I thought. Carefully I shaded the candle with my hand.

I slipped suddenly. The candle fell, rolled away into a tunnel off the main corridor. I cursed, wiped the slime from my clothes and groped after the flickering light. It had rolled against the rusty bars of a tiny cell.

I clutched the tallow firmly and turned to go on. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of something white. I swung around, held the candle high. Mutely staring down at me was the bleached skull of some long dead human. There came a mirthless chuckle behind me. Gribold was fingering his necklace of teeth.

"An ancient enemy of the Gribolds," he purred. "It was an exquisite torture. They hung him on the wall—very carefully, so he wouldn't strangle. Then

they covered his body with molasses. Our little friends did the rest."

Gribold pointed to the walls and beams supporting the roof of the tunnel. They were covered with a pulsing blackness. I drew back as something fell on my hand. I brushed it off, crushed it under my heel. It was a shiny, black cockroach!

Gribold slashed at the beauty of a fragile moss-flower with his broken cane.

"Of course, Mr. Renton, you realize that this was done in centuries past. We don't think of doing those things in this day."

He moved to the main corridor. I followed, noting with relief that the tremendous beams and the supporting walls of the main tunnel were free of the repulsive insects. But each side tunnel seemed to move with a hideous life of its own. Now and then flickering lights would start and disappear in the murky darkness.

THE cobblestones under my feet had been worn into a troughlike path by Gribold's ancestors. The hollows between the stones were filled with puddles of black water that blinked up like evil eyes as the light of the candle glanced over them.

There was a sharp turn and the corridor ended. Rakor Gribold stood before a huge iron door. He fumbled under his thick robe, drew forth a key, fitted it into the lock. It was then that I noticed the curiously voluminous clothing that covered him from neck to foot.

The door moved slowly inward, sighing as though it were eternally weary of being opened and shut.

When Rakor Gribold entered the chamber, I felt an urge to turn and run. The evil that poured out of the room was as potent as the smell.

Then I saw the pit.

It was in the center of the floor. From its cavernous depths billowed red flames and a sickening odor that I can compare only to burning flesh. Boiling sluggishly in a massive iron pot hanging over the pit was a nauseous mass that gurgled and belched green fumes.

Suspended from chains that disap-

peared into a seemingly endless ceiling were a dozen bleached skeletons. They swung, still articulated, on giant hooks. I shrank from the wanton torture that must have taken place there.

The room was so dry that it almost crackled. Feeling a peculiar roundness under my feet, I looked down. I drew in my breath. The floor was paved with human skulls! Hell would have a floor like this.

Carved in the nearest wall were symbols of the Black Arts, and a map of the lower tunnels where lay buried the forgotten secrets of the Gribold blood cults. Old musty books stood on a shelf—black books of the Faith's Kingdom.

Again my eyes were drawn to the cauldron. Through the smoke and flames I thought I saw a figure bent over the boiling mess. A witchlike thing stirred the brew with a human leg bone! I had a confused glimpse of red glaring eyes, matted hair, incredibly wrinkled skin, a loose mouth moving over stained fanged teeth. But even as I peered closer, the figure seemed to dissolve. I reasoned that the smoke from the pit and the steam from the brew had caused an optical illusion.

Rakor Gribold was lighting giant candles at one end of the room. He stepped aside.

I quickly joined him at the base of a thronelike pedestal. I looked up, gasped! Before me crouched the famous Statue of Gribold!

NEVER had I seen such realism used to depict so fantastic a subject. It looked human, but the hideous grotesqueness of the thing made the human qualities uncanny. If it were standing, I judged it would be about the size of Rakor Gribold. The torso and legs were human. But the features were so insanely cruel that I found myself marveling at the hands that had modeled them. I saw some intangible expression, perhaps a similar facial angle, that reminded me of the bearded Rakor Gribold.

The creature on the pedestal had four arms. Two were short and two were long. One of the long arms had been broken off at the elbow. Gribold pointed to the broken joint.

"This is why I needed you, a sculptor, to mend my little pet."

He stroked the hideous head as though he were caressing his dog. I examined the broken stub.

"How was the arm broken?" I naturally asked. "Do you have the piece?"

My answer was a crooked smile from the Master of Gribold Manor.

"Tomorrow you will start to work," he said. "It will be quite cozy for you down here. But of course you will have to work by oil light."

I was about to protest. Working by oil light in a smelly dungeon would be a hardship for any artist, but for two thousand dollars I could endure it. I'd repair the Statue's arm twice as fast as any other sculptor could, and beat it away from that fantastically horrible place.

As we left the dungeon, I caught sight of Mason scurrying around a sharp turn of the corridor. A fierce light flared up in Gribold's eyes. I saw that yellow fang bared again.

My room was on the second floor at the head of the stairs. I was tired and scarcely noticed much about it when I climbed into the huge old bed. I did remember to lock the door, however.

The clock at the foot of the stairs bonged twice. I awoke with a start, listening intently.

There was a soft shuffling just outside my door. I sprang from my bed, flipped the lock and yanked the door open.

Mason was standing there, like a frightened dog.

"They're starin' at me again, Gov'nor. Borin' into me. Just like they do every night!" He clutched at my arm. "Can't yer do something? Make 'em stop?"

In an attempt to quiet the fellow, I drew him into the room and closed the door. I shook his arm.

"What's staring at you?" I asked.

"Hit's 'is eyes again— They're tryin' to make me go down to that dungeon," Mason whispered fiercely in my ear. "To that place in the basement where that statue is. Keep me in here, Gov'nor. Don't let me go!"

The fellow seemed sincere enough in his belief that Gribold's eyes were hypnotizing him. I didn't have the heart

to make him go down again to his lonely room off the kitchen.

The remainder of the night I listened to Mason's explosive snores and pondered over the man's strange terror. I found myself becoming aware of that same sensation of being watched by someone unseen. Only in this case it was my very thoughts that seemed to be under cold scrutiny by some hidden, evil force.

I ATTRIBUTED the feeling to Mason and the power of suggestion. Finally, just as the first rooster was awakening, I fell asleep.

That morning at breakfast, the iron knocker banged on the front door. Its thunder reverberated through the manor, rousing all the dormant echoes from the dungeons. I felt sure that I could never accustom myself to that frightful din.

Mason, still worried, came in a moment later.

"A man to see yer, Gov'nor. 'E said 'e'd wait outside."

Puzzled, I went to the front door. I saw a wizened man with ferret eyes, pulling impatiently at a large black mustache.

"Follow me," the man said crisply in a cracked voice.

I followed him obediently out the door. When we were some distance from the manor he stopped.

"I'm the sheriff from Gribold village," he barked. Then he dug a bony paw into his coat pocket and pulled out a small automatic, cold and blue. "Take it," he said suddenly.

Surprise must have been evident on my face as I took the gun. The sheriff conjured a water-logged toothpick from behind a golden façade of dentistry and blew it into space.

"That gun," he remarked. "Yuh can't kill nothin' much with it—but yuh can use it to call me up here with!"

The sheriff next produced a package of gum. He undressed each piece and stuffed them all into his mouth. Then he dabbed at his bald head with a pink handkerchief.

"I dunno what yer business is here," he said, after a pause. "An' I don't say as I give a damn. But I ain't hankerin'

to have any more people around here showin' up vanished!"

I still must have appeared unconscious of what he was driving at, but he kept right on chewing and talking.

"Shoot that gun off I give yuh three times if yuh need me, son, an' don't ferget it. I'll hear it down at the office an' hot-foot right up here."

"I don't understand," I finally managed. "Why should I need you?"

"They's legends," he said, "among the villagers an' farmer folk 'bout this place. They says the Gribolds has always been meat eaters. It's part o' their religion, an' well—some of the stories is pretty goll durned screwy. Others? I dunno. I'm sheriff. I'm supposed to deal in facts."

The sheriff paused to adjust his cud of gum.

"All I know is people come into this place and they don't never come out. Farmers are murdered hereabouts or they just disappear. I've come up here umpty-nine times with warrants, questioned Gribold an' tried to search the damn place. But all I can ever find is rats, cockroaches and a thousand smells. So this is just in case."

THE sheriff peered about the gardens to make sure we were still alone. Then he drew out a red bandanna tied into a sack. He dumped out on his hand what looked like some green pieces of stone.

"In the dead o' night, a week back," he whispered, "a farmer down yonder, 'Plow' Hendricks they call him, woke up to see somethin' peerin' at him through the window. He grabbed his shotgun and blasted away. The critter, whatever it was, beat it. But here's a queer thing about it." The sheriff bounced the greenish pieces of stone in his hand. "I found these goll durned things all over the ground by that farmer's window!"

I took some of the pieces and examined them closely. What at first I had taken to be a green igneous stone now looked like some soft plastic material that had hardened.

"Ever notice anything like that around in the manor?" the sheriff questioned.

I shook my head and handed him back the pieces. He wrapped them up again carefully in his bandanna and slipped the sack into his pocket.

"I just wondered," he said. "I'll be leavin' now. Watch yerself, son, an' remember them three shots if yuh need me."

"That farmer," I asked quickly, just as he turned to go. "Was he able to describe what he had seen looking in at him that night?"

"Well, yeah," admitted the sheriff. "But every prowler 'round these parts fits the same description—like it's allus been since I was a kid an' my ole man afore me."

"What description?"

"Just as Plow Hendricks said, the critter he seen lookin' in at him had four arms!"

I slipped the automatic into my coat pocket. The sheriff turned and ambled off down the trail toward the village.

CHAPTER III

The Fearful Workroom

RAKOR GRIBOLD was waiting for me at the door. We went immediately to the dungeons. I saw that Gribold had set up some oil lanterns around the statue. They illuminated the crouching figure, but only served to make the surrounding darkness more Stygian.

Rakor Gribold stood by with folded arms while I made a careful examination of the statue. As I had suspected the night before, it was not chiseled stone. It seemed to be a composition that I was completely unfamiliar with. The arm should be repaired with the same material. Gribold moved over to the cauldron.

"This is what you will need," he said, anticipating my question.

He brought an iron dish filled with some of the substance from the cauldron. It was a remarkably light plastic, and of the same greenish hue as the statue—and strangely like the greenish pieces of stone the sheriff had picked

up. It hardened slowly and modeled easily.

I found it impossible to become absorbed in my work. Like an unclean servant of Belial, Rakor Gribold hung over my shoulder. His rancid panting irritated me almost beyond endurance. He scarcely spoke a word, merely grunting with satisfaction as the work progressed. His eyes continually feasted on the hideous statue. He caressed it, drooled on its squat hand.

The murky chamber, the crouching horror on the pedestal and Rakor Gribold suddenly became synonymous with everything that was inhuman and evil. I dropped the tool I was working with. A timid knocking sounded at the door. Sweating with relief, I turned from the statue. Rakor Gribold yelled fiercely as he saw the latch slip.

"Put that tray down outside, you blundering idiot, and stay out! Stay out, I say!"

The tray clattered to the floor. Cursing softly to himself, Gribold crept across the room. He jabbed the sharp, broken end of his cane viciously through the large keyhole. If Mason had been there, he would have been blinded. I shuddered. This whole business was getting on my nerves.

Gribold put the tray on an improvised table and grabbed a chicken leg. The meat was gone in one gulp. Gribold tossed the bone to a far corner of the room. There was a sharp squeal, a scurrying of feet. I saw beady, unblinking eyes gather from every corner of the room to stand just outside the feeble circle of light. Gribold talked to them, flung them bones and bits of meat. It occurred to me that the rats had always been there, waiting for bones and meat!

I forced myself to eat something, lit a cigarette.

Gribold's eyes blazed. With one bound he reached me, struck the cigarette from my hand into the fire.

"You fool! Would you take the chance of destroying the statue with a careless cigarette tossed too near it?"

Then he calmed himself, but with difficulty. I stared at the hideous, mouthing face. The man was insane.

Gribold was muttering apologies,

placating me, but I determined to double my energy and finish the statue's arm. Why was he so afraid of a cigarette when that pit was always burning, filled with flames?

THAT night at dinner it was the same thing again—the horrible wolfing of meat in one form or another. I felt my appetite dwindling away before the carnivorous voracity of Rakor Gribold.

Mason came in with the wine on a tray. I noticed that the cockney was even more haggard than he had been the night before. He was trembling so violently that I wondered if he had seen a ghost.

He poured my wine and moved around the table to serve Gribold. His trembling upset the bottle and it rolled off the tray, striking the table. Its contents poured over the Master of Gribold.

Gribold jerked to his feet. He flung his chair spinning to the wall. His face was a contorted replica of the statue in the dungeon. He seized the unfortunate man by the scruff of his neck. One mighty arm held the petrified servant dangling in mid-air. Gribold swung him gently back and forth. Mason's face started to get purple. I arose, suddenly angry, and advanced toward my host. Then Gribold flung Mason ten feet across the room to slam into the door and roll out of sight into the pantry.

"Now stay out, you incompetent fool. That was your last blunder."

Gribold roared with laughter. The sound made me collapse suddenly into a nearby chair. The man was the devil's twin. His laughter came straight from the sulphurous depths of hell.

Sometime after midnight I awoke. The old manor was vibrating with sound. It took me a moment to come to my senses. Then I realized what I had heard. A man's scream of mortal agony had set the echoes reverberating through the corridors. Even now I could still faintly hear it rolling away through the vast halls and rooms.

I grabbed up my robe, paused to light a candle, and rushed down the stairs. The light from my candle flickered and

almost went out. I stopped, shielding it carefully with my hand. The shadows on the ceiling and walls were hideous, threatening ghouls reaching for the frail light that was my only guide.

The house was silent, chill, like a huge galleon at the bottom of the sea. The same chill, the same awful silence hung over the evil Manor.

Down through the long corridor to the kitchen I ran, through the back pantry to Mason's tiny room. It seemed as though time stood still. There was a breathlessness, a suspenseful waiting for some noise to break the spell. I called aloud.

"Mason! Mason, are you all right?"

Mocking, echoing voices mimicked me, flinging the words away into the darkness.

Mason's room was empty, the door ajar. Suddenly I thought of the dungeon. Mason had mentioned the irresistible attraction it had for him. Could he have gone down there tonight?

And then came that same inexplicable sensation of eyes watching my every thought—the cold scrutiny of my brain by some hidden evil force. Somehow, the thought of searching the corridors, peering into the dungeon for Mason, seemed fearfully alluring.

I found myself running through the kitchen, down the long hallway to the massive oak door that led to the dungeons.

DODGING the dank pools and low hanging moss, I hurried through the corridor. There were hundreds of bats beating wildly through the moss and roots near the beamed ceiling. They dived at me, emitting eager shrilling noises. The candle attracted them. It was all I could do to beat them off.

I passed the cell where the bones hung, rounded a sharp turn. The door to the forbidden room was closed. I tested it. It was locked. I felt relief sweeping over me. Mason hadn't gone in.

But I had to look through the keyhole. . . .

The room was hazy, filled with a luminous smoke. Faintly I saw a figure at the cauldron. It was stirring the brew with mighty sweeps of the leg

bone. First it was the witch. Then it had four arms. Finally it was Rakor Gribold bending over the steam. I rubbed my eyes. Why were all those impressions leaping at me? I looked again.

Steam, thick and fetid, poured out of the cauldron. No figure bent over it. I tried to see more of the room, the pedestal, the statue. My eye caught the glinting lights on the floor. The rats were out again. Then I heard them. They were squealing, fighting viciously over some dark mass on the floor near the fire-pit.

Suddenly, as though something had deliberately extinguished it, my candle flame went out. The whir of wings swept my head and face. The candle wick glowed briefly and died.

Fear swept through my veins. I stumbled to my feet, ran blindly forward. I crashed into the wall at the sharp turn. It jarred me back to my senses. I slowed down, concentrating on the corridors, the branching tunnels, any sort of landmark. I could make it. It would just take a little time.

Waving my arms in front of my face, I groped slowly along. The cobblestones were a help. The side tunnels were all planked with wood. I could feel the difference if my feet didn't freeze. I had lost a slipper in my blind flight. The slimy pools of the corridor were unpleasant, but at least I knew that I was on the right track.

Then I lost my balance and crashed to the floor. I had stepped on a huge toad. I felt it squash through my toes. I almost screamed as the gelatinous mess oozed over my foot.

I floundered forward, dragging my foot over the cobblestones, trying to free it from the mucosity of the entrails.

The swooping bats, the toad, the darkness, all contributed to my hypnagogic state. I forgot the cobblestones by which I had been guiding myself through the damned place. I ran, stumbling, cursing, dashing my face and body against unresisting walls.

The pain of my cuts and bruises finally slowed me down again. I groped against a wall, panting, hurt, cursing the day that Mason had brought me the money and letter. It would take more

than two thousand to pay me for this. Welcome anger poured over me, replacing my blind panic.

And then I felt it. The wall was moving under my bare hands! I could feel it move where I had slumped against it to rest. It crackled, rustled. The stench was nauseating.

My God, I had leaned against the cockroach wall!

I flung myself forward, fell into the arms of a thing that was huge, muscular beneath its baggy clothing. Several arms seemed to grasp me. Rakor Gribold's voice cut into the nightmare of my thoughts.

"Are you lost, Mr. Renton?"

HE struck a match, lit a candle. Then he guided me out of the cockroach tunnel, into the main corridor. I was numb. I couldn't think. I could hardly move. Gribold helped me through the long hallways, up the stairs to my room.

I flung myself on the bed, too exhausted to care whether or not I had picked up any cockroaches, that my foot was still slippery with toad slime. I fell into a deep sleep. My last conscious thoughts were:

"What had Rakor Gribold been doing in the dungeons? Could he see in the dark like any nocturnal creature?"

Next morning I awoke to find myself stiff and sore. In the light of the new day, my reactions of the night before seemed unexplainable. I had never had nerve trouble before, had never experienced a powerful phobia like the one that had driven me so near to madness the night before.

Mason's disappearance was not mysterious at all, I reasoned. He had probably taken the night train out of Gribold village. He was so anxious to go that he hadn't bothered about the few possessions I had seen in his room. I had rather liked Mason in spite of his perpetual terror. I would miss him.

I would finish the work by evening and leave the following morning.

I went immediately to the dungeon. Gribold unlocked the door for me and disappeared. I didn't see him again until that night at dinner.

Working steadily all morning, I was

grateful for once of the deep silence of the place. The work progressed rapidly. I felt my old joy of accomplishment returning. Around noon, I began to get a little hungry and wondered why Mason did not bring the tray. Then I remembered that he had gone. So I worked on.

I was finally ready for the finishing touches—those little cuts, the adding of a wrinkle or tracing a vein, perhaps the smoothing and defining of minor forms. Those are the intangible factors that make art approach reality.

Before I began, I stood back to look at the figure as a whole. How hideous it was, yet awe inspiring, too! It seemed to be the embodiment of all the evil grotesqueness of this world and the next.

It crouched as though about to spring. Two of the muscular arms and hands were curled about the base of the pedestal. The other two were curved forward, bent at the elbow, the fingers clenched as though to strangle the air between. The squat head was thrust forward with quivering intentness. The eyes seemed to glitter, the mouth to drool.

For some reason I thought of Mason, poor Mason. I shook myself free of the spell of the thing. Why had I said poor Mason? He was probably miles from here by now, looking forward to joining the Queen's Navy again.

I forced myself to laugh, swung my arms about, relaxing the tired and sore muscles. Then I started to work again.

The rats seemed to be quieter than usual. I didn't hear them scratching and squealing as they had done the previous day.

ONLY once during the day did my nerves go back on me again. I had been working on the closed hand, rounding the knuckles. I was using a sharp pointed instrument of fine steel that I had invented for the numerous bits of detail in the final stage of reconstruction. I had stuck the tool in the forearm of the statue to have it handy.

Suddenly I heard a faint clawing noise at the door. I turned to see what it was. A great rat was dragging a bone across the floor. I threw a piece

of the plastic stuff at it. The rat scurried away into the darkness of the room.

When I turned back and reached for my tool, it was clenched in the hand I had been working on! I was sure I had left it stuck in the forearm. But my nerves were still shaky from the night before. I must have experienced a brief period of amnesia. I had to get out of this place before I really did break. . . .

Two hours later, I was through. At least my work was as near complete as any artist will ever admit. I gathered up my tools, gave the statue a farewell glare and went up to my own room.

NOT having eaten all day, I was as ravenous as Gribold that night at dinner. I was aware that he was watching me constantly. When I told him the statue was done, he seemed in high spirits, grinning and chuckling to himself. The meat juices trickled through his beard, dripped off his chin in a greasy stream.

He began questioning me about the meat. Did I like it? Was it tender enough for me? He seemed unusually concerned and I felt myself getting unaccountably angry at him. I worried over the meat, pulling it here and there in the gravy. It seemed more fibrous than usual, but hunger is a great factor for overcoming the aversion to slightly unpalatable food.

I had almost cleared my plate. There remained only a chunk of fat with a small piece of meat stuck to it. I dug my fork into the fat. It fell apart.

Then I saw it, floating half submerged under the fat in the gravy. I poked my fork at it tentatively. Here again my imagination flooded my reason with a horrible thought. The peristaltic muscles of my stomach began to reverse their digestive action.

I flung my chair back from the table and ran out of the dining hall.

Staggering up to my quarters, I retched miserably, fell on my bed, completely unnerved.

The thing that my fancy had pictured floating, half submerged in my gravy, was a purple tattoo mark. The mark of the Queen's Navy had once been on Mason's forearm!

CHAPTER IV

Four Arms of Hell

FOR hideous minutes I was deathly sick. But then a lifetime habit of logical reasoning began to exert its therapeutic effects on my stomach. What I had mistaken for a tattoo mark floating in my gravy was merely the purple brand often seen on certain cuts of meat, especially pork.

I felt much better after that. Now sleep began to steal in on me. Faintly I heard the sound of Rakor Gribold shuffling past my door to his bedroom down the hall. Then I fell asleep.

Several hours later I awoke, listening to the front door as it groaned on its ancient hinges. I felt certain that Gribold had not left his room. I would have heard him pass my door, unless, of course, he had crept by, which he would have no reason to do.

I hurried across the room to the window. It was only a small, barred opening overlooking a short field. One hundred yards away was Gribold Forest.

Little icy chills started creeping after each other up my back. My knees weakened. My heart thundered. The light of a low moon sent a long, grotesque shadow stabbing across the field. I followed that shadow to its source.

There, clutching a short stick in one of its hands, and shuffling across the field to disappear into the woods, was the four armed statue of Gribold come to life!

Frantically I rubbed my eyes. Could it have been another illusion like the witch at the cauldron? But I had seen it come from the house. Should I awaken Gribold? As far as I knew, we were the only ones in the place.

Then the trembling started. My hands shook. The nerves in my body caused my muscles to twitch uncontrollably as though volts of electricity were shooting through me. Had I locked the door? I tested it. I ran back to the window, then back to the door. I listened through the keyhole. The silence was so complete that the throbbing of my own heart seemed like

the distant roaring of surf.

Then I felt those cold eyes, peering into my mind again, into the depths of my soul!

I crept back to the window. Had the thing returned? Did it have any meat?

If I could only get out of the place. If only I could have foreseen.

There was a faint scuffling noise in the hall. I crept away from the door on my hands and knees, knelt at the window, looked out.

Nothing. It must have been rats in the hall. It had to be. I thought of things the sheriff had told me—The little pieces of green stuff that Plow Hendricks had shot off the creature peering in his window were bits of the statue's arm I had been called to fix! With what I already knew, I fitted together the legends, the tales of the statue.

It hunted for meat, human meat for itself and its master.

All the poor victims probably ended up in the dungeon. I thought of the boiling cauldron—of Mason, poor thin little Mason and his tattooed arms floating beside each other in a nauseous, plastic green stew! My mind was groping around in vicious mazes like a tortured animal in a cage.

I TRIED to calm myself, get my once logical mind to working again. Would the statue find another victim? I found myself wishing with mad intensity that the thing would return and have a corpse in its arms!

Mason was gone. There was no more meat. If the statue failed to find any, I would be the next. I would be the meat that Rakor Gribold and his pet would devour with lustful greediness. Now that my work on the statue was completed, the thing could use its four arms once more.

Then I saw it again!

I strained forward in the gloom, pressing my face against the iron bars. Was there something slung over its shoulder?

No. It clutched only the short stick with which it had set out.

Dully I watched its shuffling glide across the field, into the garden. Again I heard the agonized hinges. Then silence again.

God, what silence!

Something was passing my room, going *down* stairs. I moved to the door, turned the key, opened it. For a moment I was an animal, wondering at things I heard but could not see. My fear made me strangely curious. I just wanted to see.

And I saw. The thing I saw penetrated even my terror-ridden brain. It was descending the stairs. It passed through a brilliant shaft of moonlight. I saw its semi-draped figure, four arms growing out of its hideous green body. It glowed in the darkness after it had passed through the moonlight like a phosphorescent monster from the awful depths of the sea.

I slammed and bolted the door. Drunkenly I reeled against the wall, sweat running from every pore on my body.

The thing I had seen descending the stairs, four-armed and green was—**Rakor Gribold!**

I staggered to my bed and lay there trembling, conscious only of fear that writhed and mouthed at me from every corner and shadow of the room. Fear stripped every shred of common sense and logic from my mind.

How long I lay there I have no way of knowing. Slowly I began to hear again. My senses began to return. I could see the room as a room, not a torture chamber of untold misery. I could hear sounds as they probably were, not the vagaries of a madman.

I heard music, beautiful, melodious music. Soft at first, then swelling, mounting, it grew hideous until I knew what it was. A female voice was piercing through the manor like a great stabbing knife—a sickening chant of death. Echoing and re-echoing until an unintelligible jargon whined monotonously up from the dungeons below, it was like a never beginning and never ending din that would drive me eventually to the depths of depravity. Then it gradually subsided. It became the monotonous incantation of some medieval witch conjuring all the rotting devils of her mystic creed.

For an eternity the chant continued. But instead of going mad, my thoughts became more coherent. Reason again

erected a bulwark against the thundering, destroying waves of terror. Reason told me that Rakor Gribold was some sort of four-armed hybrid or freak that coincidence and the greenish moonlight made resemble the Gribold Statue.

In the daytime it would be a simple matter for him to hide his extra arms beneath loose clothing. Perhaps the trait was inherited and all the Gribolds since the archduke had been four armed.

THAT would explain the legend of the archduke's bride going insane on their wedding night. She had probably killed him in a fury of horror, then modeled his likeness with some plastic hardening material. Accidentally she must have evolved the stuff in her cauldron as she dabbled in the black art of her insane witchcraft.

The Gribold Statue was as inanimate as the cauldron itself in that lower dungeon, and only a fool would believe otherwise. It was Rakor Gribold with his broken cane, and not the statue that I had seen crossing the field. I even found myself explaining away the death chant that was rising up from the dungeons below.

Gribold was probably fond of music. The tones came from some female songstress on a phonograph record somewhere in the house. Echoes and re-echoes would account for the unintelligible jargon.

Suddenly it was quiet again. The music had stopped. Everything had stopped. I hung suspended in limitless space. Then something must have

moved, because the stairs began to creak and groan, one by one. Something was mounting to the top, slowly, heavily ascending one step at a time.

All the framework of my cold, beatific reasoning during the past few minutes tottered and collapsed about me. I saw sections of myself floating in the cauldron, rats gnawing at the parts of my body that Gribold did not want.

The thing on the stairs came on. I heard it fumble at my door. It poked at the keyhole.

The key fell to the floor. There was a scratching noise like a wire being shoved under to drag out the key.

The door slowly opened. I lay motionless on my bed.

I didn't realize that I could hold my breath so long. My body felt as though the long dead witch of Gribold had turned it to stone. Now, out of the dark shadow of the doorway, something began creeping to my bed. In the faint light from the moon I could see it hovering nearer me.

It seemed to glow greenish. It was monstrous. Three arms rose up like hideous snakes. The fourth hand grasped the heavy, broken cane of Rakor Gribold! It raised for the death stroke. . . .

With a clenching effort, I jerked my benumbed arm and shoved my hand under the pillow. I touched cold steel. It helped break the paralyzing spell that had taken my body. I was positive now that the thing was Rakor Gribold, and that he was hungry. The gun the sheriff had given me would save my life. I would kill Rakor Gribold—

[Turn page]



I raised the weapon. Three blasts of yellow light ripped out from its muzzle.

Three round holes appeared in Gribold's forehead just above the left eye. I lowered the gun, waiting for the man to crash to the floor.

Rakor Gribold didn't stop! The slow glide to my bed continued. An odor of rotting meat rolled over me. I flung the gun at the leering face and scrambled beneath the outstretched arms. He lunged at me with the cane. I tore the stick from his grasp, shattered it over his head. Then I drove my fist into his face and gasped aloud with pain.

My knuckles crashed with terrific force against a face that felt like hard clay!

UT into the hall I raced, down the stairs. The thing shuffled after me as swiftly as a great cat. Again panic, clammy and grim, seized me. I reached the front door, struggled with the bolt, pounded at the panels. It would not move.

I turned and ran down the hall toward the entrance to the lower dungeons. I tried to swerve into the kitchen. The thing almost caught me again. I had to dive through the basement door.

Then I realized it was deliberately herding me into the dungeons down to the forbidden room!

I ran now for my life and sanity. One slip and all hope would be gone. Frantically I pitched through the darkness, protecting my face as best I could. I seemed to remember the various turns, the pools of water. I avoided them fairly well.

All the time the fetid, panting breath of the thing drew closer. I caught a gleam of light ahead. The door to the forbidden room must be open. I felt hope sweep over me like a breath of fresh air.

If I could reach the room ahead of Gribold, I could barricade the door with the cauldron. I sprinted around the last sharp turn, paused, scooped up a rough cobblestone and hurled it with all my strength. There was a noise like stone hitting stone, and the thing paused!

Fifty feet ahead of me was the partly

open door to the forbidden room. In a few leaps I could make it.

Then I tripped over something that squealed and bit me. Down I sprawled full length on the slimy cobblestones. The momentum of my body scraped me along on my belly. Stagnant water splashed into my face. I could taste its bitterness. Live forms squirmed under me, kicked, croaked and crawled.

I slipped again when I tried to get up, crashing down heavily on my elbow. A hand, hard and stony, plunged out of the semi-gloom. It cracked down on my head, jerked me up by my hair. I dangled in space.

Nauseous blasts of foulness blew into my face. Now from the depths of that creature's throat pealed forth the blatant shrieks I had heard twice before in Gribold Manor. Still holding me up by the hair, it began swinging me back and forth, timing the motion to a subdued rhythm of the first horrible cries.

When I kicked and clawed, two other arms came out to hold me in viselike rigidity. But never once for long, hideous minutes did my body cease its measured sway in space. My body was the swinging pendulum of a human metronome.

Gradually increased the crescendo of that chant. Recurring with greater frequency were the beats. And my body was moving closer to that diabolical face in the gloom. . . .

Death, certain and terrible peered at me two feet away. Fiery, cruel eyes seared into my brain—the same eyes that had haunted me for the past two days in the manor.

But it was the nearness of death that temporarily cleared my brain. It transformed me from a clawing, kicking bit of insanity to a reasoning man again.

The creature gripped me in three hands! The other hand I could see held to one side, as if it were wounded.

Wounded? Of course it was wounded. The hand, wrist and forearm were the same I had repaired during my stay at Gribold Manor! As yet the arm had not healed. It would hurt to use it, now that it was fired with life and feeling.

I wriggled my arm loose and grabbed out for that wrist!

 CHAPTER V

Battle for Life

MY fingers closed on what felt like hardened crust. I knew that beneath the superficial layer of hardness the plastic material had not yet completely solidified.

My strong sculptor's hands clamped with powerful tenacity. I twisted the wrist suddenly.

I leaned against the wall. No sound came from the corridor outside. I could hear only the hissing of the stuff on the floor and the crackling of the flames in the pit.

My eyes moved over, past the hanging skeletons, to look at the empty pedestal where the statue had been.

But the pedestal was not empty!

Crouching there as it had always been, I could see the dim outlines of the statue of Gribold!

I drew a hand across my eyes but the illusion still persisted. Relief swept

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 COMING NEXT ISSUE

There was a shriek of bellowing pain and I was dropped.

In that instant of freedom I lunged backward into the forbidden room and slammed the door.

The key was on the inside. I turned it, ripped off my coat. It protected my hands a little as I pulled and shoved the giant cauldron over to barricade the door. The boiling green mess spilled out all over the floor, hissing and steaming. But at last the vat was in place.

over me. It had been Rakor Gribold, after all, who had pursued me down from my room through the corridors and dungeons. It was Gribold who had crept toward me in my room.

But the three bullet holes?

I had seen them appear one by one, just as I had fired the gun—three round bullet holes just above the left eye.

My explanation? I had none, unless the man's unusually thick skull was not completely penetrated by the small .22 caliber bullet. Perhaps the lead had

not entered the cranial cavity nor pierced the brain.

But then I saw the stuff on the floor. I moved over closer. It was a green viscous fluid that was collecting in the crack between two of the skulls that composed the floor. My eyes followed the stream toward the base of the pedestal, up the dais to another little pool of the stuff at the statue's feet. I followed the green drops up, up to the base of the chin, where they dripped off the hideous face.

On the forehead my eyes stopped. A sudden, choking cloud of smoke poured out of the cauldron. I gasped, rubbing at my burning eyes!

Green ichor was oozing out of what appeared to be—three round bullet holes just above the left eye!

I have only a faint recollection of my escape from the dungeon. I must have upset the cauldron as I hurled it away from the door. The brew ignited as it came into contact with the flames in the pit. A strong draft nursed the flames when I flung wide the door. They pursued me, crackling and spitting, up through the long, winding corridors to the main floor.

The front door was partly open when I finally dragged myself up to it. Fresh air was pouring in.

I reeled down the huge, stone steps. A voice called out below me.

"Stop!"

THEN came a shot, sharp and clear. Something was shuffling swiftly toward me on the gravel walk. I threw myself to the side of the path. The thing lurched by me, breathing heavily and groaning. I lay there half dazed, watched it scramble like a huge spider up the steps toward the blazing manor.

I staggered to my feet as the little wizened sheriff puffed up beside me, clutching a smoking revolver. He had turned ghastly white. But his hand was steady enough. He raised the gun and fired at the apparition that leered down at us from the top landing. I was certain the bullet had found its mark.

But the sheriff fired until his gun was empty and still the thing at the top of the steps never moved. It stood there, silhouetted against the yellow flames

that were belching out of the open door at its back. The head was raised and the four arms were outstretched as if in supplication to the heavens.

"What is it?" I asked. "Is it Gribold?"

"Dunno," the sheriff replied tensely.

We were standing below, at some little distance from the bottom of the steps. The creature was well above us, with the flames in back. It was impossible to recognize the features.

"I heard yuh fire three shots," yelled the sheriff above the roaring flames. "I hoofed it up here as quick as I could an' bumped square into that thing streakin' down the path. It turned around an' ran back, but wouldn't stop when I ordered. So I had to shoot. Could o' sworn I hit it!"

"Look!" I cried.

The flames were now leaping out around it, engulfing the thing in great, yellow waves. Even where we were standing, some distance away, the heat was terrific.

I was getting so dizzy that I had to lean against the sheriff for support. I could feel him take in a deep breath.

"Come down here, Gribold!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

The thing on the landing looked down. Then out of its mouth rose that same ungodly wail I had heard before—the shrill cry of a woman tortured by agony!

For a long, hideous moment that cry stabbed out through the night, chilling my nerves even in the face of the almost unbearable heat.

I could still hear the cry even after the thing had turned. It leaped through the open doorway and was swallowed up in that blazing inferno. I thought I could still hear it faintly, while the sheriff was half carrying, half dragging me away from the manor. I had collapsed to the ground at his feet.

PERSISTENTLY that cry rang in my ears for over two months after they had taken me to the sanitarium. When I was finally able to speak coherently, I was invited to describe in detail my experiences to the psychiatrist in residence.

On the day scheduled for my dismis-

sal from the sanitarium, I entered the doctor's office. The morning paper was clutched in my hand. He waved me cordially into the big chair by his desk.

He listened attentively to my story and examined the letter I had originally received from Rakor Gribold. The doctor was especially interested in the skin sack containing the gold nuggets. He declared it to be human skin, as I had suspected.

"From my observation of you here in the sanitarium," he said, "I am convinced that you are telling me exactly what you saw or heard occur at Gribold Manor. There is only one unclear point in your story, which I'll speak of later. There I believe your vision was distorted by the nervous tension to which you were being subjected. Otherwise I think it is a true account of actual experiences."

"You believe, then, that Rakor Gribold was four armed?" I asked.

"Yes. The Gribold family, since the archduke, has probably exhibited a recessive quadrumanous tendency appearing only in the male offspring. The old archduke's bride was undoubtedly driven insane when she became aware of her husband's deformity on their wedding night. Her insanity was mistaken by the villagers as bewitchment and the Gribold Manor and its occupants were henceforth shunned.

"Believing the stories of her own bewitchery, this insane woman began dabbling in the Black Arts. When her little son was born four armed, she realized the full horror of the Gribold curse. She probably killed her husband and modeled his likeness with some plastic hardening substance that she had concocted in the cauldron after the formulas in her old witchcraft books.

"This would be the famous Statue of Gribold, perhaps seen at various times by carpenters or masons called up to repair the aging manor. They must have begun the superstition. Because the Gribolds were shunned, they were unable to get food honestly from the village market or from the farmers. So they were forced to go forth at night and steal livestock or whatever they could lay their hands on.

"Ostracized from the mores of so-

ciety, the step to cannibalism for the Gribolds was a natural one. They could recognize little difference between men and beasts. So cannibalism became inculcated in their religion. It was passed down by the old witch as part of necessity. Human meat is very nourishing and the hunting of it would greatly relieve the monotony of their stranded existence in the lonely manor."

I was following the doctor's opinions very closely.

"Then you believe that Rakor Gribold's plan, after he ate Mason, was to include me on his menu?"

"Undoubtedly," replied the doctor. "You were doomed to Mason's fate. But not until you had finished repairing the statue, which he had called you to 'mend' or 'heal,' as he put it in his letter to you. His reference in the letter to 'a life depends upon your succeeding' indicates that Gribold himself believed the statue to be alive. He paid you, incidentally, with some of the old archduke's vast treasure.

"How the statue's wrist was broken we'll never know. But when you were fighting Gribold and twisted his wrist, he bellowed with pain. It had been injured coincidentally, probably when Plow Hendricks, the farmer, fired his shotgun at Gribold, who was out hunting for meat and was peering in at the farmer."

WITH the exception of one point, that sounded reasonable.

"But the pieces of green stuff that the sheriff picked up next morning outside of Plow Hendricks' window—" I asked. "What were they?"

"Undoubtedly pieces from Gribold's cane, which he carried as a weapon. The spraying buckshot from Hendricks' shotgun lodged in Gribold's wrist and shattered the upper part of his cane at the same time. You said the cane was apparently fashioned not of wood or metal, but of a greenish stone that had been broken.

"The cane was probably made from the same stuff as the statue—material that was highly inflammable, as proved by the speed with which it ignited when you spilled the cauldron into the flaming pit. That's why cigarettes

were taboo around the statue. Also, Gribold must have had the ability to make his voice assume a feminine quality."

"But the bullet holes?" I said. "I saw them appear in the creature's forehead when I fired! And I saw them later in identically the same place on the statue's head."

"This latter point is the one place where your story strays from fact," said the doctor slowly. "The bullet holes appeared in Gribold's forehead because he had an extremely thick skull, and you were firing .22 caliber bullets. They lodged in the thick supraorbital structure. But when you thought you saw these same holes in the statue's forehead in the dungeon, your vision was obscured by the smoke and flames pouring out of the pit. And further-

more, Mr. Renton, your nerves were near the breaking point.

"Probably this one delusion, more than anything else, was responsible for your long confinement here in this sanitarium." The doctor rose and extended his hand. "Good-by, Mr. Renton—and good luck."

I shook hands with the doctor and thanked him. Before I turned to leave, I handed him the newspaper I had brought in with me. I pointed to an obscure news item on the back page.

Gribold Village was stunned by the double murder of its sheriff and a farmer known as "Plow" Hendricks here last night. Both men were clubbed to death while asleep in their homes near the outskirts of the village. Their assailant is unknown.

"Interesting coincidence," I remarked, and walked out.

Next Issue: THE DEMON IN THE SWAMP,
a Novelet of Forest Terror by O. M. CABRAL

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THE GUARDIAN SKELETON

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The light struck the face of a corpse

**There's Death at the End of the Trail in the Eerie Bayou Country
When Men Go Forth in Search of Treasure!**

AS the asthmatic motor chugged closer to the island in the bayou, a cloud passed across the early morning sun. Carlotta Bennett, seated in the stern of the boat, watched the horny, thumbless right hand of the pilot

dextrously swing the wheel, and shivered a little. It was one of those shivers that go with a change of mood—a mental rather than a physical chill.

All at once she wished that they had never started on this trail of treasure—

a treasure, moreover, they were not even sure existed. And suppose it did exist? Would it ever be found?

Miasmic vapors rose from the bay-ou's waters, darkened now by the cloud across the sun and by the clouds of doubt rising in her own heart. Why could they not have remained in the sleepy college town from which they had come—her father, Professor Charles Bennett, her sweetheart, Bill Stewart, and his colleague in the chemistry department, Dave Edwards?

But no, her father wanted money to expand his historical researches, those same researches that had put him on the trail of treasure in the first place. As for Bill and Dave, they had thought it an interesting way to spend part of their summer vacation. Besides, hadn't she been just as enthusiastic as they?

Why, then, did she have misgivings now—misgivings that grew stronger and stronger the nearer they came to the island? Was it because of the coldness that had sprung up between the two young men in the last two days? Or was it because of what "Cat Fish Joe" had said the day they had first visited the island.

Cat Fish Joe, who was known by no other name, was the only inhabitant of the island to which their search had finally narrowed. Sime Sothern, who piloted the launch that took them to and fro, thought him slightly cracked, and Cat Fish's appearance bore Sothern out.

With matted hair and untrimmed beard, he plied the trade of 'gator hunter, making enough for his simple needs. He had not taken kindly to the sudden invasion of his privacy a week before, and his bulging eyes had held less welcome with each daily visit the four city-folk had paid the place he had come to look upon as his own home.

A FISHY odor emanated from him constantly, which was not surprising, seeing that his diet consisted almost exclusively of the fish he himself caught, and that he was not too particular about cleansing himself of the piscine debris. The odors of strong applejack and stronger tobacco combined to make him altogether a rather odoriferous exhibit.

When they had first set foot on the island, Cat Fish had been waiting for them, eyeing them with a kind of baleful curiosity as he leaned upon his three-tined alligator spear. He had watched the dirty launch, with its equally dirty pilot at the wheel, swing about the head back to the mainland. Then extending his spear toward the four, he had said:

"Belike, I know what ye meat-eaters has come fer, and I'm tellin' ye to get the hell an' gone. 'Tis my home ye've come upon, without so much as sayin' a by-er-leave, ye that don't know a log from a 'gator, an' that swaller ox-steaks when fish is the only proper food fer man to eat. Go back an' leave me in peace."

He had held the spear extended as they moved toward him. Had he really known why they had come? Professor Bennett had pricked up his ears on hearing that. Then he advanced, ahead of the others, unmindful of the extended spear.

"You say you know why we have come?" he asked eagerly. "That's fine. That's an indication that we're not merely following will-o'-the-wisp. Tell us what you think we're here for."

"Father!" Carlotta had cried, seeing the professor advance clear up to the tines.

But Cat Fish, whether merely bluffing or impressed by the little professor's temerity, or because he was outnumbered, lowered the spear. He shifted his cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other.

"Ye've come fer the treasure," he said, and spat with unerring aim at a water-bug skimming the surface of a puddle. "The treasure Captain La Fitte hid away in one o' the caves hereabouts more'n a hundred years ago."

The four looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Jiminy!" Professor Bennett cried. "We're on the right track! The very fact that this fellow speaks of a treasure substantiates my analysis of the documentary material. How long have you been on this island, my man?"

"Call me by my name—Cat Fish," the 'gator hunter said sullenly.

"All right, then—Cat Fish."

"No more'n two months," the native

answered the question then. "This be a haunted island, haunted by the ghosts o' the pirate dead. Folks over to the mainland don't come here. I—I wouldn't a-come neither, hadn't been I wanted to be shet o' humans that was allus a-tormentin' me an' makin fun o' the way I live. So I figger—the ghosts won't bother me none, an' I come here."

"But the treasure, man—the treasure. Haven't you looked—"

CAT FISH shook his head somberly.

"There's more caves than a man can count. I've been through some o' them. Jest curious, that's all. I ain't aimin' to tangle with the ghost o' La Fitte. What ye folks want with treasure when there's allus fish to be caught?"

"Some men want more than fish," the professor said soothingly, in a humoring vein. "Money is important for my work. I don't want it for myself. I only want it so that I can do something that will add to man's knowledge."

"Folks knows too much, already," Cat Fish said. He gestured toward Carlotta. "What you want it for, Missy?"

"I just came along with my father," Carlotta answered, taking the cue of humoring the old eccentric.

"Be that feller yer beau?" Cat Fish asked, pointing at Dave Edwards.

Edwards laughed. "Wrong guess," he said, "though I'd be glad to take over the job if Bill Stewart, here, should ever pass out of the picture."

"Jealous, huh? I see the green in yer eyes. What ye want with treasure?"

"Unlucky in love, lucky in—treasure," Edwards said smoothly.

Bill Stewart, an arm about Carlotta, whispered in her ear:

"The old boy is making us all look foolish."

"All right," said Cat Fish, waving his spear. "Go ahead an' look. But mark my words, no good will come of it. Fishin' in the sunlight fer critters in the water is better'n grubbing in caverns fer gold. I'm tellin' ye them caves are haunted and cursed by pirate dead. They're a-watchin' over thet treasure, if it be hereabouts. Them caves are home to 'em, like their ships once were, an' they'd as leave spill

blood today as a hundred years ago. Thet gold is cursed! Mebbe ye think a ghostly cutlass couldn't cut that pretty throat o' yours, Missy, but I'm tellin' ye that they've kept their edges keen fer jest sech folks as the likes of ye!"

Involuntarily, Carlotta's hand went to her throat. Then Bill's reassuring arm was around her waist.

"Good morning to ye," Cat Fish had said then, and sidled off into the woods.

They knew he had a shack on the other side of the island. It appeared that he had crossed the island purposely to greet and warn them.

Now, as they once again approached the island for another day of exploration, they half-expected to see him again. But the rocky shore was deserted.

Sime Sothern swung the launch athwart the ledge of rock that provided the only means of alighting. He cast a weather-eye upward and then spat into the dark water.

"Looks like there might be a storm up before the day's out," he said. "Ye can look fer me early, 'less ye want to spend the night."

"About what time, would you say?" Bill asked.

"Make it two o'clock if ye want to be safe. Good day to ye."

The launch chugged off toward the mainland.

BEFORE setting off into the woods, the four once again consulted the aged and yellow map which Professor Bennett had dug out of the dusty archives of the State library.

"If the treasure is anywhere, it's on this island," the professor said. "We've narrowed it down to that. And if it's here, this map, with its seemingly crazy configurations, will ultimately lead us to it. What's the matter, Carlotta? You seem distraught."

"I think we're all silly," Carlotta said. "Why should we believe that if there ever was a treasure here, it hasn't been found long ago? Who cares about treasure anyway? You could do your researches just the same without it, Father. It would only take you longer. And Bill and I could have been married already, if you hadn't persuaded us to come along. Besides, it's not much

fun for me, waiting for you three to come out of those caves every day."

Her father looked at her helplessly, not knowing what to reply. Dave Edwards smiled at her.

"I can see that Bill agrees with you," he said. "Well, he has his treasure and her name is Carlotta Bennett. You know how it is with me, Carlotta. If I can't have that kind of treasure, you shouldn't blame me for settling for Spanish gold. As for your waiting, you objected to staying on the mainland. We don't want you to go into the caves because the going is tough. So be a good kid and observe woman's eternal role of waiting for the menfolk to bring home the bacon—I mean the treasure. Here we are."

They were in a bowl-like depression encircled by forest. The trees shut out the sun. It was as though twilight had suddenly fallen.

"I've marked out the subterranean routes we each should follow on these copies," Bennett said. "Searching in three different directions each day, as we've been doing, we've gradually eliminated the possible places so that either today or tomorrow, if there really is a treasure, one of us will in all likelihood come upon it. Here is your copy, Bill, with the route you're to follow,—and Dave, here's yours."

"Looks like you've been milling over these half the night," Bill said, examining his crinkled and finger-marked copy.

"Not at all," said Bennett. "I was asleep ten minutes after I left you young folks downstairs last night—and that, despite the hardness of Mrs. Southern's beds. Well, let's get on. Good-by, dear. We'll be back with the treasure before sundown."

He pecked his daughter on the cheek and turned toward the mouth of the cavern that led into one side of the concave, tree-shadowed declivity.

"Just bring yourselves back," Carlotta said, "and I'll be content to do without the treasure."

"By, Carlotta," Edwards said, waving his hand.

He followed the already hidden professor.

"Well, Bill?" Carlotta looked up at the man she was going to marry. "This

is getting to be a regular rite."

The rite consisted in Bill's giving her a revolver and followed it up with a long kiss.

"I think Cat Fish is harmless," Bill said, "but you never can tell."

"Bill," Carlotta said, "do you think that smelly old man was right?"

"About what?"

"About Dave's being jealous?"

"Dave's a good loser. Don't fret about it. So long."

BILL STEWART disappeared through the cavern's mouth and Carlotta was left alone. On previous occasions she had brought along a couple of books and had tried to read them, but had given up on account of the poor light. Neither had she found it comfortable to hold her flashlight on the printed page. So today she had been sensible and brought along her knitting bag. She was knitting a sweater for Bill.

Absorbed in her labor of love, the morning went quickly. She had all but forgotten her misgivings when a glance at her wrist-watch, showing that it was noon, caused her to look upward. By rights, it should have been lighter in the crypt, the sun being central in the heavens. Instead it was darker.

A sudden breeze fanned her cheek, rustled through her hair. She lowered her gaze. The crypt was darker still; much darker.

"What'll I do if it storms?" she thought worriedly. Her red dress with its flowered pattern was cool and thin.

The breeze freshened, grew stronger. Now it was moaning softly in the tree-tops. Carlotta, sensitive to the impressions of Nature, felt her original mood of the morning return. With an impulsive gesture, she hugged the half-completed sweater to her bosom. She felt lonely, and a little afraid. Cat Fish's words kept coming back to her.

Suddenly she lifted her head! She had heard something, a voice, far away. It was like someone shouting, and the sound seemed all mixed up, distorted by echoes. Where could it be coming from? She faced the cavern's mouth. Yes, it was coming from somewhere in there.

There was a familiarity in it, yet a

strangeness too. Then she knew that the strangeness was merely the effect of freakish acoustics. It was her father's voice! Yet it was impossible to judge either its direction or its distance. All she knew was that her father was somewhere in there, shouting.

Her father was in trouble! That was the conclusion that leaped into her mind instantly, fanned by Cat Fish's words, the darkness of the crypt, and her nameless fears.

She stood still, in an intense effort of concentration, trying to remember the details of the maps her father had drawn. She had conned over them with him on the previous evening. She remembered one of them best of all—the one her father had picked for his own route today.

"I'm going in," Carlotta said aloud. The echo of her words came back, frightening her.

"And I'm not going to get lost, either," she murmured, sinking her voice to an involuntary whisper.

With nervous fingers she extracted a ball of wool from her knitting bag and tied one end of it securely to one of the fingerlike formations of rock hanging down from the cave's ceiling. With the ball in her hand, unwinding as she went, and concentrating on her memory of her father's map, she moved into and down the subterranean passageway.

She did not keep her flashlight on continuously, fearing to wear out the battery. Instead, she used it to show her the way for several yards, then snapped it off and guided her course by her recollection of what she had seen an instant before.

HALF an hour after she had started out, she started calling:

"Bill! Father! Dave! Where are you? It's Carlotta! Sing out if you hear me!"

Over and over again she repeated it, and the cavern walls and ceilings gave back a queer amalgam of what she was saying. Echo and double-echo replied to her, but of another human voice there was no sound. Her father might still be shouting, but now the subterranean jumble must be blocking off his

voice. Or perhaps that voice was stilled by causes less natural and more terrible.

She went farther and farther in, exhausting one ball of wool and tying the end of another onto it so that she could continue without fear of losing herself. Her flashlight went on and went off, like a great firefly seeking its freedom from some unwonted imprisonment.

It was in one of those stretches of darkness that, miscalculating the distance she had illuminated a second before, she lost her footing and fell. Her hand touched something soft. But it was not her sense of touch, it was her sense of smell that terrified her. She smelled fish—a strong fishy odor. And mingled with it was the reek of liquor. She was smelling Cat Fish Joe!

She got to her knees, relinquished the ball of wool, drew her revolver and flashed on the light.

Then she shrieked!

Cat Fish Joe lay on his back, staring with sightless eyes at the cave's ceiling, his face blue and swollen. He was in *rigor mortis*, had been dead a good many hours.

"Bill, where are you! Father!"

She did not notice that she did not call upon Dave Edwards. Was it because suspicions were already deep in her mind?

And then, horror upon horror, her scream came again, torn up out of her depths. For, lifting her head, she gazed upon the face of Death! It was literally death, or the outward representation of death. Death, the Noseless One, the Skeleton! The skeleton sat on a rock, one arm outstretched, and in its bony palm a crystalline gem glittered, flashing its rays back into the skeleton's face!

And then she saw it—the treasure! She recoiled from it, shudders shaking her. In her fevered mind, at that moment, she conceived the treasure hunt as having been cursed beyond doubt. Yes, there was a treasure—she no longer doubted it. But it had been gained by the shedding of blood, and a curse was on it! A curse that would be laid upon any who came to take it away! That was why the skeleton was there—to guard the treasure and to kill all those who coveted it!

Dropping her flashlight, which nevertheless sent its rays slanting upward to illumine the jewel in the bony hand, she whispered:

"Keep the treasure, whoever you are, and for whoever's sake you guard it. Only let us go. . . ."

She swayed, but something kept her from falling—a strong arm around her waist. She looked up. It was Bill.

FOR an instant she did not recognize him, but when she did, she sobbed out wildly:

"Oh, Bill! Where's Father? We must find Father! The Thing—it killed Cat Fish! And Father's calling for help! Bill, I've found the treasure—look. But don't let's touch it! Let's leave it, go away, and forget we ever came here!"

Supporting her with one hand while she sobbed hysterically, Bill played his flash over this cave which housed the treasure and its guardian—over the walls, the floor, the ceiling, into every nook and cranny.

"Hush, honey," he whispered. "It's all right. I heard your father calling too. From the sounds, it seemed to me that he was heading toward the exit. So I went all the way out to the crypt. You were gone. But the wool trail you left brought me back to you in a hurry."

Her sobbing moderated. "Cat Fish," she murmured. "He must have been after the treasure too. Now he's dead. Let's not touch it. It's not worth it!"

"It isn't," he agreed, and there was a certain dryness in his tone as he let his light play on the nuggets partly revealed beneath the rock upon which the skeleton was seated. "There doesn't seem to be much of it, does there?"

He straightened, and his eyes narrowed as he looked thoughtfully at the dead body of Cat Fish. He let his light play around the cave once again, bending and examining the floor carefully.

"Mm-m, no signs of a struggle," he muttered.

Then, as Carlotta watched and wondered, he took out his copy of the map and held it under the flashlight. She saw his eyes light up in satisfaction, and a foreboding shiver ran over her. She was recalling a seemingly ir-

relevant fact—Bill's remark about the crinkled and dirty appearance of the copies the professor had given him and Dave Edwards.

She remembered that those two copies, and her father's own, had been fresh when he had taken them up to bed with him. And her father had said that he had gone right to sleep. Her father did not lie even about trivial things. If he had fingered the maps in a long examination the night before, he would have said so.

Someone else had been at those maps!

Who? The words of Cat Fish again came back to her—that stuff about seeing green in Dave Edwards' eyes. Did Dave believe firmly in the existence of the treasure? And believing, was he now of a mind to find it at all costs, and keep it for himself, to make up for the loss of the "treasure" he called Carlotta Bennett? Was there more than jest behind his words?

"Bill," she whispered. "The maps. Did somebody steal them last night from Father?"

He nodded. "Yes. I'm afraid somebody has been overwhelmed by his greed for gold, and played a murderous joke on us. Come, let's find your father first. He must have gone back to find us, and is probably wandering around now looking for us."

Carlotta followed him, the tight hand of terror still clutching her heart. Was her father wandering around, or had something horrible happened to him?

BUT her forebodings were fortunately unfounded. They found the professor, slightly dazed, guiding himself by his daughter's knitting material.

"I got lost going out," he confessed sheepishly, "until I thought of looking at my map." Then he went on excitedly: "I was coming to tell you about—"

"The skeleton," Bill finished for him. "We know about it. We've seen it, and Cat Fish too."

"Well, our search is ended," the professor said.

"I think not," Bill answered grimly. "Come with me."

Carlotta was puzzled. Following si-

lently, she watched Bill flash his light here and there as their way wound tortuously through the caves.

"But Bill," the professor said, "this is the route that was marked out for tomorrow's search, if we didn't find the treasure today."

"I know it," said Bill. "The last possibility."

He stooped, picked something up which his light had revealed. He stopped, showed it to them. It was a fish-hook, with a piece of dirty shirting attached to it.

"Cat Fish's," he said grimly. "This is where he was killed, and he was dragged to the other place. This cave—Well, take a look. There it is."

And there it was—a huge chest, opened, and revealing its golden contents.

"Don't excite yourselves about it," Bill said dryly, examining the find.

He seemed more interested in the chest than in its contents. He slammed down the lid, and an exclamation came from him as he read an inscription etched into the brass plate. It was in Spanish, a language with which he was familiar, and a grim smile curled his lips after he had studied the inscription for a few minutes.

"The drama ends in irony," he said. "The treasure we all were looking for, the treasure over which Cat Fish was killed, and a part of which was removed to that other place along with the skeleton to make us think that our search was at an end, turns out to be a joke played upon all of us by that romantic pirate who lived and roistered over a hundred years ago—Jean La Fitte. Everything's fake about it except that skeleton. Even that jewel isn't a precious stone, but a cut and polished piece of quartz. Listen to this translation of the inscription."

And he read to them:

This stuff that looks so much like gold,
This stuff for which men's souls are sold,
Is here concealed to mock the ghouls
Who know not gold from gold of fools.
Jean La Fitte.

"In other words, the 'treasure' is worthless iron pyrites, otherwise known as 'fool's gold'," Bill said. "That map your father unearthed, Carlotta,

was genuine enough, made by Jean La Fitte himself, but it was one of La Fitte's jokes on his fellow pirates. And now, let's get out of here. There's still a detail to be taken care of."

Their exit was swift, expedited by the wool trail. They found Dave Edwards and Sime Sothern waiting for them.

Sothern had been a good prophet. The air was full of the promise of stormy weather, and Sothern had called for them early.

DAVE EDWARDS about to speak, was stopped by Bill's grim expression.

"Let's have a look at your map, Dave," Bill demanded.

Edwards handed him the paper. Bill examined it, then nodded, as he had done back in the cave over his own.

"The treasure hunt is over," he said.

Then, suddenly, his gun was out and covering—Sime Sothern!

"Game's up. Sothern," he snapped.

"I'm charging you with murder. You stole these maps last night, while Professor Bennett was asleep. You examined them carefully, then replaced them. You went to the island, explored the caves along the designated routes, found nothing, went further—and finally found what you thought was the treasure.

"Cat Fish came upon you at that moment. You must have quarreled with him and then murdered him. So you placed some of that gold—which is fake, by the way—in another cave, and moved the skeleton and Cat Fish's body to it, knowing that one of us would find them today, believe the whole treasure was there, and give up our search.

"Sothern, you murdered a man for worthless iron pyrites. Your fingerprints are all over these maps. How do I know they're your fingerprints? Because there are no right thumbprints on the side opposite to that which bears a clear set of fingerprints—and you're minus a right thumb. Tie him up, Dave. I'll take the wheel."

"Well," said the professor, looking a little dazed, "we didn't find any treasure, but we got a murderer. And anyhow, as a historian, I should be thankful for some fascinating new light on the character of Jean La Fitte!"

A Complete
Novelet **PHYSICIAN,**



Dr. Adams Stares at the Maddest Illusions That His Most Insane Patient Ever Had—But the Monstrous Horrors Are Real and Solid!

CHAPTER I

Legend of Horror

DR. ADAMS' uneasy smile turned grim. He knew his lined, handsome face showed the strain of perpetual fatigue.

Distantly, from a floor above in his private hospital, had come a long, quavering scream that might have been shrilled by a man or woman. It subsided at last in a series of choking cries.

"Was that Ames?" District Attorney Lansing asked.

Adams shook his head slowly, almost painfully. Lansing and Dr. Gaul Smith,

Ames' personal physician, knew how tired he looked. But they didn't know how much the task of restoring Ricardo Ames to sanity had cost him.

For some reason, these Tuesday and Saturday luncheons in the dining room of his private hospital on upper Park Avenue seemed to unnerve Dr. Herbert Adams the most. Right now he kept trying not to look at the fireplace. A gray, agonized face was staring at him through flames he knew weren't there.

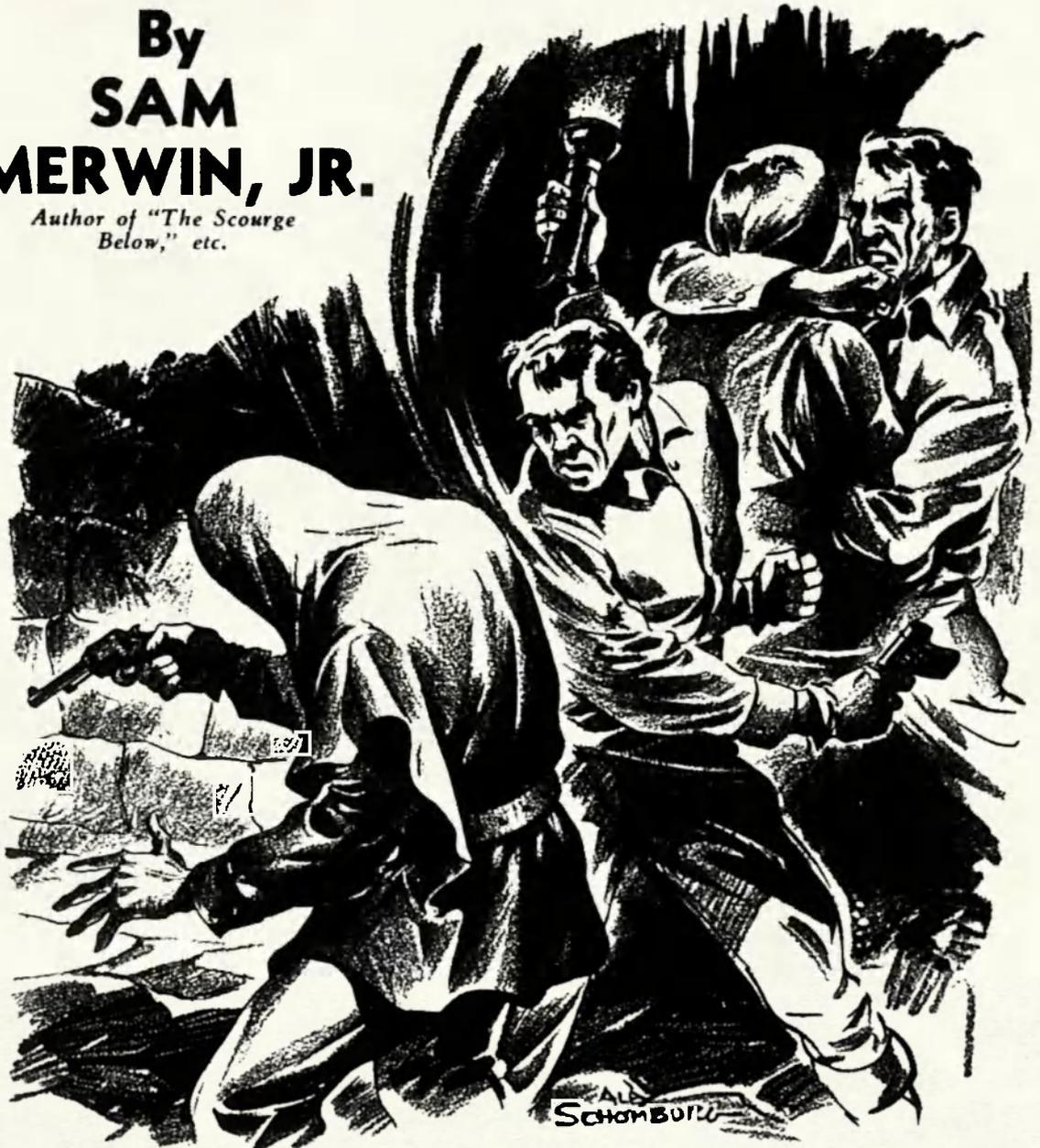
But he could not resist a quick glance. A hand of fire instantly began reaching out to him. He had to fight back a scream. . . .

"You mean I can put Ames on the

HEAL THYSELF

By
**SAM
MERWIN, JR.**

*Author of "The Scourge
Below," etc.*



Before he could fire, he was slugged from behind

stand in a week?" District Attorney Lansing demanded anxiously. "Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely sure," Herbert Adams replied. He could hardly nod his heavy head. It was unbearably heavy, aching with a vast pulse. "I shot the works with the new treatment of sulphanilimide I developed. Strictly off the record, Bob, you're in for a big surprise. Riccardo Ames is innocent! He's bewildered, persecuted, uncertain. But I'm speaking from twenty years of ex-

perience, and I tell you Ames never swindled anybody in his life!"

Bob Lansing's face went hard, defiant.

"That part's my job. A grand jury indicted him. He's the only one who can give us the facts of the swindle. Your job was to get him on his feet, and you've done it magnificently. But once he's out of your padded cell, I take over."

The pressure of the task had been terrific. It wasn't helped any by the

fact that both Ames and District Attorney Lansing were Adams' personal friends. Ames had collapsed financially and mentally six months before, when his gilt-edge suburban utilities corporations collapsed. The Ames empire had been under staggering pressure on the stock market, and when they fell, they took along two hundred million dollars with them.

Ames had given Richard Benson power of attorney—and Benson had mysteriously vanished, leaving the partners and investors howling for the financier's blood. Even his own daughter, Mary Ames, had agreed to testify against her father. But perhaps that wasn't so remarkable. She was horrified by the suicides of ruined investors—and she was Bob Lansing's fiancée.

"You did a swell job, Herb," Dr. Gaul Smith said. "I'd have thought it was impossible. But it's taken plenty out of you. I'd say you need prescribing now."

"You certainly look it," Lansing agreed. "Your part of the job was hard enough without having to worry yourself over my part of it."

"Have it your way," sighed Adams.

He had no strength to argue. The hand of flame was coming closer now—closer, closer. . . .

It was ironical that after all these years of careful living, he was going as batty as his battiest patient.

Adams jerked his eyes away. But when he glanced back, fiery fingers clawed at his face. He leaped sideward to escape. He overturned his chair and fell to the floor.

HE knew he must have been out for several minutes. When he opened his blurred eyes and looked around, he stared at the faces of Gaul Smith and Robert Lansing, who were bent over him solicitously. Adams found he was lying on a couch in his inner office.

"Boy, I've really got 'em!" he whispered, grinning weakly.

Dr. Gaul Smith rubbed his strong chin thoughtfully. He shrugged and looked briefly at Lansing before turning back to Adams.

"What you need is a rest, Herb—im-

mediately. You'll be a complete mental case in a week if you don't get away from all this pressure. It's too much."

Adams struggled to a sitting position.

"But you know I can't! I've got to nurse Ames through. He's almost well."

"Another twenty-four hours of this de luxe booby-hatch of yours and somebody'll have to nurse you!" Smith retorted. "I'll clean up the routine of Ames' case. You clear out for awhile. Now be sensible about this, Herb. You have to be in shape to testify at the trial. You're convinced he's innocent, aren't you? Then you'll want to do everything you can for Ames."

"I must," gasped Herbert Adams. He sank back, sick, exhausted. "I must."

"How about that place of yours upstate, Bob?" Gaul Smith asked.

The young district attorney frowned, then managed an unconvincing laugh.

"So I'm supposed to help character witnesses for the defense, eh?" But immediately he grew grave. "It's exactly the spot for you, Herb. You'll have perfect quiet, and it's comfortable. Of course I have Mary Ames and her companion and Harry Stoops up there until the trial. I don't think that'll bother you, though. I'll tell them to leave you alone while you're there."

"I'd like to talk to Mary," Adams said quietly.

"Don't tamper with my witnesses," laughed the district attorney. "I have an old Indian guide taking care of the place. Moose Windrip'll keep you two apart if I tell him to—and you can bet I will tell him to! But you'll like it there, Herb, and it's quiet enough for anybody. About the only excitement you'll be able to find is the wreck of an old castle on the place. Colonel Barton Harward built it after grafting a fortune in one of the Indian wars. He and a raft of others were burned up in it during the Revolution, so, of course, they haunt it. You'll have a lot of fun investigating the legend."

"Don't forget that I'm supposed to be haunted, too," whispered Adams, managing a wan, troubled smile.

The psychiatrist really had little

choice in the matter. He let himself be persuaded into assent, and turned his practise over to the huge, suave, white-haired Dr. Gaul Smith.

He soon found himself alone in the back of one of the young district attorney's long limousines, driving between snow-capped, weirdly shaped hills and a dreary looking, ice-sheeted Hudson River.

With the early winter sun dropping swiftly in the sky, they turned west across the river. They skirted the southern Catskills and swung around them into the choppy, subglacial forest and dairy country of west-central New York State.

Dusk had fallen when the expertly driven car rolled into a remarkable driveway. It twisted its way between silent rows of snow-laden pines for all of four miles over a string of hills, then opened to reveal a long, low cabin, its windows glowing with orange light.

The front door was opened by a weather-beaten man whose age Adams could not determine. The psychiatrist felt himself instantly assailed by the demons of tension he had fled the city to escape. Perhaps it was the silence of the Indian that gave him a preview of restless fear and excitement. Perhaps it was the immediate departure of the chauffeur, leaving him stranded here in the midst of nowhere. . .

Whatever the cause, he felt that his warning sense was justified. He stared at three persons who dawdled over whiskey and water in the dropped living room. A burly, rugged man stood before the immense stone fireplace that was packed with crackling logs. In spite of the fierce heat the flames cast into the room, he shivered as if with a chill. Adams estimated him at about thirty-five years, disliked his heavy black brows that met over his surly eyes, and thought his dinner jacket looked strangely out of place.

THE big man swayed a little as he glared at the two women on the long, blanket draped sofa. The girls were a striking contrast to each other, sharing only the attribute of beauty. One was tall, blond, heavily made up, her expression loose and gay. The

other was dark, slender, intelligent looking, and sullen. Both were roughing it in tweeds and sandals.

Adams smiled at the fine featured brunette, walked over to her, hand outstretched.

"I'm glad to see you, Mary. I just left your father. He'll be well soon."

Mary Ames took his hand, but she looked at him doubtfully, as if debating how she should speak to her father's friend.

"It might almost be better if you hadn't done so well, Dr. Adams," she said at last. "His recovery won't help those who trusted him. And prison won't help Father."

She turned to the man at the fireplace, who had bent over to fill his glass from a tray of whiskey, soda, ice, and tumblers on a small table near him.

"Don't be an idiot, Harry," she declared angrily. "You'll freeze to death if you go to the castle tonight."

Adams was shocked by Mary Ames' attitude toward her father. She clearly believed him guilty and had no intention of helping him at all. Her rudeness in not introducing him left the psychiatrist in an uncomfortable situation. He thought of taking a drink, remembered the vision that had caused his collapse at lunch, and didn't.

"What about the castle?" he asked quietly. "And if anybody's interested, I'm Dr. Herbert Adams."

The blond girl cooed a greeting.

"I'm Harry Stoops, one of Ames' former partners," the burly man replied. "And this is Lorna Vane. I've heard of you, of course. I don't know whether ghosts're much in your line, Doctor, but hanging around up here in the snow has made our tongues sort of hang out for entertainment."

He sounded more sober than he looked.

"I heard there was a haunted castle here," Adams said. "Where is it?"

He followed as Stoops led the way to a northern window. The big man wiped a hole in the frost patterns on the glass.

"There it is," said Stoops.

Adams peered through. The light was dim at that end of the room. Through the glass, he could see the cas-

tle clearly, for the northern sky was ablaze with lights that hung from the heavens in gigantic convolutions like waves of closely set porcupine quills.

The castle was a craggy ruin of gutted stone, with a crumbling round citadel raising a jagged plateau on its southeastern corner. It topped a small hill a mile away. The snow atop its ruined battlements softened the harsh outlines against the cold blaze of the aurora borealis.

"An illustration from *Dracula*," the psychiatrist said, and shuddered, for a draft of icy air seeped through the edges of the window.

Stoops smiled without mirth.

"There are no vampire legends in these parts," he said. "The castle was built by a racketeering British Colonial colonel back in seventeen-sixty-five. He and Sir William Johnson made a cleanup taking the Indians for everything but their scalps. The old fellow built this castle so he could live the life of a retired robber baron. But he took the wrong squaw by mistake. After Burgoyne surrendered in seventeen-seventy-seven, the Iroquois came down on him and built fires around the walls for a week. When they went inside, Colonel Harward and all his squaws, including a couple of white ones, were roasted as nicely as if they'd been cooked in an oven."

"I think that's a horrible story, Mr. Stoops," said the blond Lorna Vane.

Adams smiled at her. He was, to his surprise and relief, feeling immensely better. Then he returned his attention to Stoops.

"What's the rest of the legend?" he inquired.

"It is no legend. It is the truth," said a deep voice, almost in his ear.

Adams, started, turned to find the Indian caretaker, Moose Windrip, at his shoulder. The curious light eyes in that leathery skin were ablaze with sincerity.

"For ten years," the Indian went on, "after the colonel was killed, no one would go near the castle. Then a wandering trader spent the night there. He was found days later, roasted. It happened again, seven years after that. Then no one would spend the night

there, until six months ago a stranger here was found there—I found him—roasted. Mr. Stoops wants to go tonight and see for himself. He will die like the others." He paused, then added: "Dinner is served."

CHAPTER II

The Legend Takes Toll

AFTER they were seated, Stoops continued on the same subject.

"The funny thing is, Doctor, that I've been checking up on the legend, and it seems to be true. A man certainly was found here last summer, done to a crisp. Not even modern police methods could identify him. Seems to me it's worth investigating. I'm taking some whiskey to keep warm and a blanket roll. Care to come along?"

"Not tonight, thank you," said Adams. To his surprise, he shuddered. "I'll be extremely interested to hear your report tomorrow, though. "Truth and legend usually make an irresistible combination."

"Hell!" he thought. "If I went up there, I'd probably see a human bonfire." Then too, Stoops's absence afforded him a better chance to get at Mary, to learn what lay behind her unfriendly attitude toward her stricken father.

The meal served by the soft-moving Indian was simple, ample, and excellent. When it was over, the party adjourned to the long living room. But after a short while Stoops wandered off to prepare for his expedition.

Half an hour later, he emerged, clad in ski boots and a Canadian blanket suit of scarlet. He carried a bedding roll around his shoulder.

"I'll be off," he said genially, "as soon as Old-Rain-in-the-Face comes up with my whiskey. This is a night for fire-water if I ever saw one."

"You're a brave man, Mr. Stoops," said Lorna Vane, clasping her hands in front of her. "I'd be terrified."

"He's a foolish one," said Mary Ames quietly. "I was never much of a be-

liever in ghost stories. Indian reprisals a century and a half ago plus one modern accident don't represent a basis of fact to me. Men are babies."

Stoops winced and laughed, accepted the three pint bottles Moose Windrip handed him, and stowed them about his person.

"See you tomorrow, Doctor," he said cheerily. "Good night, ladies. I'll probably get frost-bitten instead of roasted," he laughed.

With a casual wave, he was gone.

Dr. Adams, at the window, watched the heavy-set witness strike out across the snow in black silhouette, making steady progress on his skis. It was an eerie setting, with the old castle in the middle background, and again he shivered as Stoops's bulky figure disappeared in a dip of the ground. When he turned back, he found, to his disappointment, that Mary Ames had gone silently to bed, leaving him alone with Lorna Vane.

He endured her idiocies for the better part of an hour, then let his natural sleepiness in the change of air overcome him and had the girl show him his room.

In bed, he was seized with a frightful attack of lonesome jitters. He wondered, as he stared up at the darkness of the ceiling, what new omen of insanity would appear there. But nothing came. He gradually drifted off to sleep, leaving the forces around him unhampered to do their horrible work without interrupting the rhythm of his relaxed breathing.

IT was still dark when Herbert Adams awoke. Despite the first gray hint of dawn in the east, it was dark because the northern lights no longer shone in the sky. And it was cold! His nostrils felt lined with ice, and the air he breathed was sharp and raw in his lungs.

Shivering, he got up to shut the crack of open window. He took a look toward the north to see if there were evidences of Harry Stoops' occupation of the ruined castle. It was hard to find the ancient citadel in the gradually lightening grayness. But as the psychiatrist's eyes grew accustomed to the

gloom, he made out its faint outlines. From somewhere inside came a faint glow.

"Well," he told himself, "at least Stoops is warm."

He switched on a light by the bed, picked up a detective story he had brought with him, and settled down to read it. Sometime later, he dozed off again.

When again he awoke, the sun was streaming in through the window. The world of white outside gleamed with blinding gaiety as it reflected the sun's bright rays.

He breakfasted alone, save for Moose Windrip's silent attendance. The women were evidently sleeping late. And again, in the lodge dining room, he felt an uncanny threat that made the hair along the nape of his neck seem stiff and rigid. Glancing at the bright outdoors, he tried to shake off his fears, but the sensation persisted. He wished Stoops would return, wondered what sort of story the ghost-hunting witness would have to tell.

After smoking a couple of cigarettes and longing for the morning paper, Adams decided to look for his dinner companion of the night before. It was time the man returned.

He went back to his room, stripped, donned a pair of bathing trunks, heavy shoes and socks, over them a skiing suit and gloves. He put a pair of dark glasses over his eyes. From a closet in the hall, he selected a pair of skis, examining them carefully and testing their under-surface. He'd need wax, for the snow had grown sticky under the sun. All the time he was thus engaged, he felt that someone was watching him.

"Persecution mania," he told himself. "I am in a bad way."

Smiling grimly, he walked outdoors, slipped his feet into the straps and glided away over the snow. Before he had gone a quarter of a mile, he began to sweat. The sun, reflected from the white surface, was doubly hot. The psychiatrist smiled, and this time his smile was not grim.

Dr. Adams, though few would have guessed it from his unathletic build and bearing, was close to being an expert

skier. During the years he had spent in Vienna under the tutelage of world-famous psychoanalysts, he'd taken up the sport to keep his body in tune. Living in Austria had given him the opportunity to study under the world's greatest masters.

He glided down a small slope in expert slalom fashion, executed a difficult gelaendesprung or jump-turn at the bottom for the sheer joy of it. He was really perspiring then.

Pausing near a small pine, he stepped out of his skis and removed his ski suit. Then, clad only in trunks, shoes, socks, and gloves, he continued toward the castle. Sweat streamed down his body under the still-rising sun. For the first time in months he felt well, inside and out.

BUT as he came up under the ruined gray walls of the castle, disquietude returned. He called Harry Stoops, but received no answer save the echo of his own voice. The witness's ski tracks from the night before had been obliterated by drifting during the night. There were no traces of his having left in the morning. Adams circled the rectangular wall, slowly.

On the far side of the ruined edifice, a vein of rock was swept bare of snow. It carried the jagged, uneven summit to the underbrush two hundred yards away. Beyond lay forest. Uncoupling his gear, the psychiatrist stepped from his skis and walked into the ruin. In the shade, it was freezing cold. He hastily scaled to the top of the battlements where the sun once more beat down on him, and he could see the interior.

There was plenty of footprints and signs of recent habitation. In one wind-sheltered corner of the courtyard, Adams saw the remains of a small fire till smoldering. He eyed the citadel, which rose one story above him. This had been the crematory for so many souls, if history were truth.

Its walls were rent and torn. The sky showed through them and the roof. Yet once again the psychiatrist felt unseen eyes upon him. Wondering if Stoops were playing a joke, he mustered his courage to peer through a gap

in the massive wall of the castle.

Again he found nothing. He could see clear through to the ground, where ancient timbers lay. Nowhere in that empty place could Stoops have found refuge. Again he shivered, and not from cold, for the sun was full on his back. He had the illusion of smelling the burning flesh of the victims of that Indian massacre of long ago.

He was puzzled, for with the exception of the fire, there was no trace of Stoops. He clamored down, got back on his skis. There was only one way by which the witness could have escaped without trace—over the rocky trail into the underbrush.

Digging in with his poles, he followed it. He reached the thicket, hesitated, for the branches would tear at his unclad body. Hoplessly he peered into the crosswork of boughs and brambles. Then, with a gasp, he went rigid.

Something was in the thicket, something brown and misshapen. But he could easily see that it had legs, arms, a trunk, and a head. Forgetting the twigs that scratched his skin, Herbert Adams dived into the thicket, came staggering out with what had been a man. Laying the body on the snow, he examined it incredulously.

From its bulk and general proportions, it was the body of Harry Stoops. The face, the hands, the entire surface of the corpse was nothing more than raw flesh. Though what had been the witness was frozen stiff as a plank, the psychiatrist was horrified by the realization that death had not come from freezing.

Harry Stoops had been roasted to death—barbecued like a steer!

ADAMS recalled the smell of burning flesh that had assailed him in the tower. He realized with horror that it had probably not been his imagination. He set his teeth, dug his ski-poles into the snow, and started out at a sprint for Lansing's lodge and help. The legend had come to life with a vengeance!

He never stopped to put on his ski suit, but came sliding up to the front door clad only in trunks and boots. A

car was drawn up on the driveway, and Adams stumbled into the cabin to find Lansing there, talking with the two girls.

He looked up as Adams entered, his eyebrows lifting incredulously at the psychiatrist's strange costume.

"Stoops!" cried Adams. "He's dead—burnt to a crisp!"

Lorna Vane fainted where she stood in front of the sofa. Lansing's surprise increased. And Mary Ames' mouth set in a hard line.

"Poor Harry," she said and set about reviving her companion.

Quickly Moose Windrip was summoned. Lansing, who had driven up without a chauffeur, got into skiing clothes, and the three of them set out to retrieve the witness's body.

But when they came gliding around the castle, Adams in the lead, they stopped short with one accord.

The body of Harry Stoops was no longer there. And the snow, while it showed his own footprints and ski trails, no longer bore the imprint of the corpse.

Adams looked around uneasily, recalling with a rush the symptoms he had revealed after yesterday's lunch with Lansing and Gaul Smith. He could see the question in the district attorney's eyes.

"Come on" Lansing said. "We'd better go back and get more help before we search farther."

The psychiatrist wanted to stay and dig into the ruins, seek the explanation of the weird occurrences. A roasted body in a snow-covered thicket—a body that vanishes within half an hour of its finding! But more than incredulity underlay the district attorney's tone. It was tinged as well with deep suspicion. For there was no doubt that Harry Stoops, vital to his prosecution of Riccardo Ames, had disappeared from the visible earth.

Wearily, Adams picked his clothes from the tree branch where he'd hung them. He got into them and returned to the lodge. He was still sweating, but he no longer felt well. He was surrounded by horror, and the worst of it was that he could not be certain whether it were real or only in his

own brain. He had witnessed too many delusions in his career to fool himself. He knew he could have imagined it.

But every instinct in his fiber told him it had been real—that he'd actually held the roasted corpse of Harry Stoops in his arms. Despite the shock of his experience, his head had been clear, his senses alert. And yet, in the back of his mind, the lurking possibility of insanity refused to be dislodged. Was he mad?

CHAPTER III

Where Is Mary Ames?

IT was then that Adams also became aware of intense bodily discomfort. In his excitement, he'd stayed uncovered in the sun too long and was suffering from severe sunburn. Such a burn, as he knew all too well from experience, was more severe than the worst summer beach blistering.

"Seems to be quite a day for barbecuing," he told himself sardonically.

A husky sheriff and two deputies drove twelve miles from the nearest town to aid in the search. Once more Adams led the way to where he had found the body. Once more the hunt revealed nothing.

Resolutely ignoring his acute discomfort, he climbed to the top of the battlements. From there he systematically dug to the bottom of the citadel, through weathered and charred beams to the dungeon floor. Its spongy bottom, composed of rotted leaves and wood, revealed no trace of having been disturbed for centuries. The faint odor of burnt flesh was gone, washed away by the winter winds.

Furious at the disappearance of his witness, Lansing returned to the city in the late afternoon, promising to come back on the morrow. The sheriff and one deputy went with him, leaving the other aid to stand by on the scene. Adams was glad of his company, glad that evening had come at last, for the day had been one continuous horror.

After dinner, he managed to get alone with Mary Ames. While not appearing

to avoid him, she had shown no desire for his company.

"Mary," he said, "your attitude puzzles me. I know how difficult your position is. I know that you and Bob Lansing intend to marry. But after all, he is your father, and you must have some feeling for him."

She looked at him strangely for a moment, her cold beauty blazing into warmth.

"Who says I have no feeling?" she asked and burst into tears.

Adams smiled and put his arm around her. He was relieved at this normal outburst.

"It's all right," he said. "I know Bob thinks your father is a criminal, that he's convinced you it's your duty to testify against him. But I'm willing to stake my professional reputation on his innocence."

She lifted her head, eyes alight with hope.

"You mean that?" she asked.

He nodded. "What's more," he told her, "in a week at the outside, Riccardo Ames will be able to speak for himself. He's made a magnificent recovery. And your duty lies with him. Bob will be all right when he understands that Benson, not your father, was the guilty man."

"Benson!" she cried, shaking her head hopelessly. "Oh, it's so useless. Benson will never appear. And all those thousands of people who lost their money!" She paused, straightened up to wipe the tears from her eyes. "But you're right. I turned to Bob not only because I love him, but because, with my father— It wasn't right, but there was no one else. My duty is at his side in trouble."

"Remember," said Adams quietly, "your father is innocent."

He sighed, his brow wrinkled, as his thoughts returned to that vanishing body. Rational explanations refused to come. Moving slowly to spare his burning limbs, he said good night and went into his bedroom.

BED was out of the question. Just looking at the coarse linen sheets made his nerve-ends tingle with anguish. He read for awhile, until his eyes

began to tire. Then he turned off the light and moved a chair to one side of the window where he could look at the ruined castle.

This night the moon was up. The castle's fallen ramparts were bathed in blue phosphorous. He chilled with his sunburn. Then, abruptly and uncomfortably, he dropped into dreamland.

He was awakened by a sudden gust of ice-cold air that slapped with frigid fingers at his unclad ankles. Coming to with a start, he tried to shake himself awake from the horror before him. But the horror remained. Someone without a face was climbing through his window almost into his lap.

Was this another step on the road to madness? Holding his breath, Herbert Adams wondered. He shivered again, from fear and the cold. The figure, large and massive, eased itself silently over the sill, put one foot gently on the bedroom floor.

"Well," the psychiatrist cautioned himself, "if this is another apparition, I won't get hurt at any rate."

He leaned forward, waited until the other foot just touched the floor. Then he bent swiftly and grabbed at both ankles, pulling them toward him.

Taken completely by surprise, the figure thumped to the floor, cursing softly and effectively. Adams quickly found out that he was dealing with no mental combatant.

When he leaped for the housebreaker's throat, a very material knee crashed into his diaphragm. He let out a strangled "oomph," grasped at slippery icy, elusive surfaces. He sought to give return blows and get air back into his lungs at the same time.

He couldn't call out without wind. A second wallop to his solar plexus gave him a taste of nausea, tinged with blood. With fading eyesight, he saw a talon rise over him, descend with inescapable speed. A spray of rockets shot before his eyes, faded into blackness as he fell forward, unconscious.

Adams returned to sudden consciousness when the guarding deputy's revolver blasted away almost in his ear. He was lying by the window, and the sheriff's assistant was shooting through the open window out into the night.

Groggily the psychiatrist scrambled to to his feet.

The deputy's gun clicked uselessly. Growling, the young husky stuck it back into the belt holster at his side.

"Shut that window," said Adams. "I'm frozen."

Angrily the deputy slammed the sash down, swung to face the psychiatrist.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Adams told him briefly, as much as he knew.

"How did you get in?" he asked.

The deputy, who had switched on the light, led the way into the hall.

"I heard sounds of a scrap in here," he said. "I was told to stay close to this room. I came in and fought with something till I tripped over the table. The guy or whatever it was got away through the window before I could nail him."

WHATEVER it was. The phrase stuck in Adam's mind. The cold, yielding clamminess that covered his attacker still seemed to cling to his fingers. He shuddered, followed as the deputy moved along the hall to bang on the door of the room shared by the girls.

"Everything all right?" the deputy shouted.

The answer, barely audible, was a low moan. Quickly the deputy broke down the door. Adams, peering around his bulky shoulders, looked onto a shambles. Bedding, clothes, underclothes, and furniture were scattered and smashed all over the room. The window, in this case, had been crashed.

On the floor, her silk nightgown half torn from her shapely body, the yellow-tressed Lorna Vane lay on her back, moaning. Her forehead was purple with an ugly bruise, and there were marks on her throat.

Of Mary Ames there was not a sign. The girl had vanished. The noise of the attack on Adams had drawn the deputy's attention and masked the sound of this second struggle.

"Take care of this girl while I look around, Doc," the deputy sheriff snapped. "Bring her to so she can talk."

He turned on his heels and strode away, his footsteps echoing decisively. Adams' first action was to pick up the girl. Shutting the door behind him, he carried her into the living room. It was still warm from the smoldering embers in the great fireplace.

He was still trying to revive her when the deputy returned, pushing a sleepy-eyed Moose Windrip in front of him.

"I suppose you didn't hear a thing," he barked sarcastically at the redskin.

The Indian shook his head. "I was asleep," he murmured.

With an incredulous grunt, the deputy picked up the telephone and jiggled the hook repeatedly. After a couple of minutes he slammed the receiver down hard.

"Wire's dead," he said laconically. Looking at Adams, he asked: "How's she coming?"

The girl answered him by sitting up slowly, her hands to her injured forehead. When she opened her eyes, there was terror in them.

"Where am I?" she gasped. "What happened?"

"Suppose you tell us, Lorna," said the psychiatrist gently. "How much do you remember?"

Lorna shook her yellow-crested head. She was fighting hysteria, and there was a sob in her voice.

"I don't know," she said.

The deputy stepped forward truculently.

"Whaddaya mean you don't know?" he snapped.

Adams motioned him to silence with the authority of long years of successful medical practise.

"Easy," he said. "Nobody's going to hurt you, Lorna. Just tell us what you can."

Lorna Vane looked at him gratefully.

"I can't tell you much," she blurted. "I woke up, and there was a fight going on, and someone was choking me. Then I heard shooting, and whoever was choking me hit me on the head. The next thing I knew, I was here." She looked around her in sudden alarm.

"Where's Mary?" she asked.

"That's it," said the deputy grimly. "Where is Mary? She's been kid-

naped. At least she's missing."

He kicked savagely at the leg of a chair. When he looked again at the girl, she had fainted once more.

IF the day had been a nightmare, the night multiplied the horror tenfold. For what seemed hours, the deputy gave Moose Windrip the third degree. He tied the Indian to a chair, under Adams' cynical gaze, and tried to backhand him into a confession.

The psychiatrist would have liked a half hour alone with the Indian himself—but not to apply such methods. As a keen psychoanalyst he felt certain that the redskin, even if he intended to talk, even if he knew something about the crimes, would never open his mouth under such treatment. It gave him no chance to save his face.

Nervously, Adams went to the window at intervals. He felt the deputy was wasting time on whose every second the life of Mary Ames hinged. He himself was suffering from violent chills, caused by his sunburn and intensified by the exposure he had suffered. What he expected to see, he did not know—for the night was cold and silent.

He looked at the clock on the mantel—it was only two o'clock. Outside, the northern lights flamed once more. Visibility was excellent.

Something had to be done. The deputy had just slapped Moose Windrip into unconsciousness and was staring down at him in disgust. Lorna Vane was sitting on the sofa, moaning faintly, her head in her hands.

CHAPTER IV

Capture

SUDDENLY suspicion seized Adams. He knew Riccardo Ames to be innocent. He had expressed his belief to the young district attorney.

His brilliant mind flashed back over the recent past. Surely it was more than coincidental that two witnesses had vanished. One of them had been murdered foully on the very estate of

the district attorney! Adams himself had been dragooned into coming here, to be attacked immediately after telling Lansing that Ames would soon be able to defend his case, that he believed in the financier's innocence.

Only one man, on the face of it, could have engineered it—Lansing! A dozen motives for the outrages could lurk in any cranny of the Ames smash.

And those hallucinations! Adams shook his head, trying to drive their memory from his mind. For the horror of the luncheon was not the first such vision he'd seen. There must be some other explanation of them. With the attack in the night, he knew for the first time in weeks that he was wholly sane himself. His lips tightened, and he crossed to the deputy.

"Come on," he said. "We've got to get going before it's too late."

The deputy looked at him, astonished.

"Go where?" he countered. "We can't leave this monkey alone with the girl."

"Allow me," said Adams. "I'm an old hand with a straightjacket. Have you a pair of handcuffs?"

The deputy nodded, but reloaded his gun. He held it at the ready, and stood well away from the psychiatrist before handing them to him. Adams grinned, amused at his caution.

He pushed the still unconscious Indian off his chair. The redskin fell sideward to the floor, lay there moaning faintly. Adams put the cuffs on him, drew his knees up between his manacled arms. Then, picking up the poker from the hearth, he thrust it under the knees and over the elbows, neatly hobbling him.

"He won't make trouble," Adams said, stepping back. "Better give Miss Vane the tongs, though, just in case." He went over to the girl with the improvised weapon. "Think you can do it?" he asked. "We're going after Mary."

She nodded silently, suppressing the horror that showed in her eyes. Adams turned to the deputy. There was no question about who was in command now.

"It'll be cold," he said, "but there

must be prints. I have an idea my sunburn upset a well laid plot. If I hadn't been sleeping by the window—"

They donned skiing clothes hastily. Then, at Adams' suggestion, they took heavy blankets from the beds and cut eyeholes in them. They draped them over their heads, tucking them in at the belt.

Looking like a couple of incipient ghouls, they hurried outside and onto skis. They had not gone fifty feet before they found the sets of tracks that vanished into the nearest patch of brush.

BECAUSE of the blanket coverings, they were warm, almost invisible against the snow. They followed a staggering, torturous trail that circled slowly, but ever definitely toward the old ruin. Adams, who had searched the place extra carefully a half dozen times wondered how he could have missed anything.

Then, still in the forest cover, some two hundred yards from the ruin, the trail vanished abruptly in a clump of shrubs. Adams and the deputy circled it carefully, but no tracks appeared on the other side. For a moment they stood there, leaning on their ski poles, questioning one another silently through the eyeslits in their blanket covers.

Discarding his skis, Adams pushed on into the shrubbery, the deputy at his heels. In the center of the brush was a small circle of open space, crowded with footprints. At one side, where the ground was particularly trampled down, was a large flat rock. Psychiatrist and deputy saw it simultaneously, and tugged on it.

Nothing happened.

They tried again—and again nothing happened. Tired, Adams leaned against a small tree, grunted as something blunt stabbed the small of his back. To the amazement of both men, the rock slid slowly aside, revealing the mouth of a passage.

Looking quickly behind him, Adams found that the knob he had leaned on accidentally was a small steel button, disguised cleverly to look like a knotty piece of bark. He pressed it again.

The stone slid silently back over the hole.

Once more he pressed it—and the psychiatrist led the sheriff into the unknown.

It was colder than the cold of outer space at first. For perhaps a hundred yards of dank, murky, ice progress through tomblike stone walls, the passage ran straight. Then it took a right-angle to the right and, a few yards farther on, an acute angle backward to the left. This, Adams decided, should take them toward the castle.

It began to get warmer from here on, and the ceiling was lit by occasional electric bulbs. Adams put away the flashlight he was carrying, then gripped it again and wished it were a gun.

Slowly, silently, the two men moved along through the passage. Fleeting Adams wondered why, with such an escape handy, Colonel Harward and his harem had not used it to flee the roasting history had handed them—history and the Iroquois.

So suddenly that they almost stumbled into it, without warning they turned to find themselves standing in the doorway of what must once have been the castle cellar or dungeon. A figure loomed before them, a figure somewhat like themselves with head covered, save for eyeholes. But his cover—was of dark leather. He was menacing them with a huge Luger automatic pistol.

"Welcome, gentlemen," said a muffled, unrecognizable voice. "We've been expecting you."

"Oh yeah!" cried the deputy, bringing up his own gun.

THE fellow was brave enough, but it was useless. Before he could fire, he toppled forward, slugged over the head from behind. Adams felt himself gripped, his flashlight snatched away. Then his blanket was torn off. He stared about him, head free, hands bound behind his back.

"Okay, Lansing," said the psychiatrist. "Let's get it over with."

The other figure chuckled. "Soon enough," he replied. "Soon enough. I'd like to show you around first. Un-

fortunately, thanks to our limited facilities, you'll have to wait your turn."

"And you thought *I* was mad!" said the psychiatrist sardonically. "What's in back of it all, Bob?"

The other laughed again and beckoned. Pushed sharply from the rear, Adams stumbled after him. They left the chamber, crossed another, which was rigged up for living quarters to accommodate perhaps a half dozen men. Across it they marched to a door on the far side. This door the masked killer threw open with a flourish.

For a moment, the psychiatrist could not believe what he saw. In the center of a large chamber was an operating table. Over the table, surrounded by reflectors, two dozen huge sunlamps beat down with an almost blinding intensity. In the contrastingly dark corners of the room were odd shapes from which came whirring noises. Dynamos and batteries!

But on the table, unconscious of what was happening, lay the slim dark beauty of Mary Ames. She was literally being roasted alive!

Once more, for a moment, Adams questioned his own sanity. His expression must have revealed his thoughts, for the masked figure chuckled again.

"No," he said, "you're not mad, Herbert. You never were. Did you happen to notice that your hallucinations only followed our bi-weekly luncheons?"

Dumbly, the psychiatrist nodded, and the other chuckled once more.

"I fed you a few drops of hashish concentrate in your cocktails," he said, his voice still amused. "You weren't expecting an attack, so it was easy to divert your attention. Feel better about it while you can. You haven't got long."

Adams saw the whole pattern then—the doses of the drug to give him visions and convince him that he was suffering from the granddaddy of all nervous breakdowns. All this had been solely to make him give up his work on Ames, to get him up here, away from the hospital, where he would be at Lansing's mercy.

Then, once more, he realized what he was looking at—one of the most fiendish murders modern science could devise for the murder of an innocent girl—a girl who might, wittingly or otherwise, reveal too much on the witness stand about her father's affairs.

HIS every instinct screamed revolt against the horrible process. With a sudden bound, he started toward the table. He never got there. A gun butt laid neatly against the side of his head brought him stumbling to the flagstoned floor, stunned. He was seized by two husky men. One of them, he noticed, had a badly broken nose.

Adams was borne, unresisting, to still another chamber and placed on a chair. Handcuffs clamped over his wrists.

When he finally got his head clear, he saw three other figures in the room. One was the broken-nosed roughneck who had helped to bring him here, the second was the unconscious body of the young deputy sheriff. The third—He gasped involuntarily.

It was Riccardo Ames! The financier lay stretched out on a rude army cot, his mouth open, unconscious.

So that was it. Complete elimination of every person who might bring guilt home to the right persons in the Ames prosecution—whoever those persons might be. Adams knew, of course, that Lansing was one of them. But he had little time to think of the background in which he had become unsuspectingly involved. Mary Ames was roasting to death under the sun lamps in the next room, and it was up to him and him alone to save her.

He did some rapid mental calculating. His mind trained for over two decades, clicked like a well oiled machine now that it was assured of sanity. Hashish! He should have guessed it himself. But, as Lansing had said, he was off guard at those luncheons.

From the condition of the girl's bare flesh, Adams decided that the death-lamps had been turned on about ten minutes ago, as nearly as he could reckon. And his reckoning, he knew,

was pretty accurate. Such a concentration of ultra-violet rays as he had witnessed would severely burn anyone in half an hour. An hour under that tissue-destroying blaze would kill an ox.

He studied the guard with the broken nose, who was calmly smoking a cigarette. The guard made a deprecatory gesture as his eyes met Adam's.

"Just business," he said in a voice that suggested an overdose of the prize ring. "Nothing personal, understand."

"Sure," said Adams coolly. "A fellow's got to make a living."

"That's right," said the guard.

Adams went to work, cataloguing his watcher with all the rapid-fire ability of a tulip specialist in a Holland garden listing his favorite flowers.

A simple action type, Adams decided, mentally measuring the flat apelike head with the meticulousness of a Bertillon. A man little above the animal, the guard would be capable of great cruelty only because his own insensibility to feeling made him insensible to the feelings of others. Judging by his rasping voice, his cauliflower ear, his broken nose, he'd been a fighter at some time or other, but not a winning fighter. Which suggested that his brains might have been more than slightly scrambled in the ring—and that would make him absolutely perfect!

CHAPTER V

The Velocity of Escape

ADAMS lifted his handcuffs, found that they sharply reflected the light from the ceiling in the guard's squinted eyes. Naturally, as a watcher, the broken-nosed man followed the move of his arms. Adams kept them in the light, moving them just enough to keep the thug's eyes fastened on them. He could see a faint reflection wavering up and down that broken face.

"Yes," said the psychiatrist, "it's funny how many queer things life shoves us into. I take it you've been a prize fighter."

"Fifteen years in the ring," said the

thug, his eyes riveted to those ever-slightly moving handcuffs. "Say," he went on in sudden suspicion, "what is this?"

"I might as well talk to you," said Adams gently. "It will help me pass the time. And I certainly can't do you much damage now and even less later."

The thug said nothing, and Adams took his silence for assent. Fifteen years in the ring! Adams gloated inwardly.

"You know," he said, his voice still gentle, "I'm not sorry to die. I find I'm very tired. Very tired. I wonder if you've ever thought about sleep?"

Then, before the thug could answer, Adams went on.

"I get so very sleepy sometimes that I'd just like to lie down and rest—just close my eyes and rest." He continued, keeping that light in the thug's face, until he saw the scarred eyelids begin to droop. Then, still softly, he said: "I know you've felt that way. You feel that way right now. So sleep."

On the third repetition of this speech, the man with the broken nose slipped quietly from his chair, dead to the world in hypnotic slumber.

Adams came to his feet like a cat, searched the man's pockets. He removed the key to his cuffs and a heavy automatic with an extra clip. The thug slept peacefully on.

The psychiatrist armed and with his hands free, moved swiftly and cautiously toward the door. He bumped directly into the other guard, who was carrying a large packing case.

One sharp chop with the heavy pistol brought the second thug stumbling to earth. The case fell to the floor, split open, and Adams had a glimpse of the small tins it had contained.

Before Adams could retrieve a second gun from his new victim, the masked man appeared, snapping angrily.

"Damn it, Orlov, don't be so clumsy. That dope doesn't grow in ponds."

He saw Adams standing there and reached for his gun. The psychiatrist fired at him point-blank, seven shots into his chest. Gasping, the masked man spun into the wall and sat down hard.

Quickly the psychiatrist jammed the extra clip into the gun. Mary had been under the rays so long that there was no time to look for switches.

He aimed carefully at the central connection above the lamp reflector, fired one shot. With a loud hiss, the deadly lamps went out. And at the same moment, Adams was knocked to the hard stone floor by a slug through his right shoulder.

THE darkness, complete save for the faint light from the next chamber, was blinding. Wondering who had shot him, the psychiatrist lay flat, his eyes wide open. Something moved across the room, and flame spurted. A bullet screamed within two inches of his nose, splashed stinging mortar into his face. He winced, fired at the flash, heard the bullet thud home.

It was the eighth shot he'd put into Lansing, and yet the district attorney fired again. Was the man indestructible?

Crawling behind a dynamo for shelter, Adams suddenly realized what was carrying him through bullets. Surrounded as he was with plug-uglies of the worst description, Lansing must be wearing a bulletproof vest.

Adams' shoulder hurt like hell as he crouched behind the engine, his eyes adjusting themselves to the dim light. He peered around, ducked hastily back to avoid another bullet. Then, firing quickly, he sent a shot home into the center of that leather mask. His enemy half rose to his full height, clawing at his face as his gun clattered on the floor. Then he pitched forward to lie still.

His strength ebbing, Adams got up, stuffed a handkerchief into his wound. He moved toward the masked man. The bullet, apparently, had gone clean through the muscles without breaking the bone, for Adams could move his arm though it hurt like the very devil.

He bent, wincing a trifle, over the dead leader of this unholy mob. He pulled the leather mask from the blood-bathed head. And he gasped, but not with pain. Though the face was unrecognizable, it was topped by a shock of snow-white hair.

Gaul Smith, not Bob Lansing, was

the man behind these ghastly murders!

But Adams could not waste time. There was too much to do, and his strength was ebbing too fast. Broken nose would keep for hours. The psychiatrist knew enough about hypnosis to be sure of that. He took the gun away from the other gangster, handcuffed him to a ring in the wall.

Then, in vain, he tried to bring the deputy back to consciousness. After twice slapping the deputy's head between his skullful hands, he stopped. Already Adams himself was becoming dizzy, and Mary Ames, unclothed, her skin abnormally heated by the lamps, was in greater danger.

Moving more and more slowly, he ripped blankets off the cots. He took them into the death lamp chamber and wrapped their warmth around the drugged girl's slim young body. Then, hoisting the girl on his left shoulder, he started back through the passage.

Before he had gone two-thirds of the way, Adams knew he had made an overestimate of his strength and wished he had waited to arouse the deputy. But the girl's condition was too serious to brook delay.

HALF fainting, held up only by his iron will, the psychiatrist somehow staggered on. He reached the end of the passage, pushed against the rock that barred the way, and saw blue sky appear.

The rest of that trip through the snow was one of which he could remember only bits and snatches—A sudden flaming of northern lights, the vapory breath of the girl on his shoulder that showed her to be still alive. During the cold night, the crust of the snow was frozen enough to support him without skis, and he made his bloody passage back to the lodge.

Then suddenly he was falling. Just as suddenly, lights and voices and men were all about him. The northern lights seemed to flame all around him, and he sank to the ground, unconscious.

When Adams came to, he was lying in his bed at the lodge and Bob Lansing towered over him.

"Can you talk now?" the district at-

torney asked. "There seems to be a lot of holes."

The psychiatrist nodded, cleared his throat. His shoulder burned him with sharp pain but it was bandaged. Otherwise he felt all right, save for fatigue and the sunburn. He told the district attorney what had happened, learned that the deputy had been rescued along with the two thugs.

"Another thing I want to know," said Lansing. "What you did to the guy with the broken nose? He's in some kind of coma, and we can't bring him out of it."

Adams managed a smile. "I hypnotized him," he said. "With a pair of handcuffs. He isn't what you'd term a strong-minded type, so it wasn't too difficult."

"There's something else you should know, too," the psychiatrist continued. "I don't understand how Smith got possession of the castle dungeons, but I have an idea what he used them for—when he wasn't roasting his victims. Dope!" Lansing nodded.

"We haven't finished our search yet," he said. "When we'd followed your tracks, we were too busy taking care of survivors and Smith's corpse. But I can tell you how Smith had possession. He sold this place to me in the first place. He walled off an extension of the old dungeon and put his machinery in. I didn't get suspicious of him until last night, when I found that Ames had been kidnaped from your hospital. Since then I've dug up plenty."

"The other gangster did some talking. He didn't know who Smith was—the rat kept his face covered when he was with criminals—but he knew something of what was happening. Enough to burn for it. Smith was not only in touch with the underworld through his dope smuggling and selling, but he forced his way into the upper brackets as well."

For extra protection, he sold me the lodge. But he went right on with his dope activities here, right under my nose. He wangled a job as Riccardo Ames' private physician, and systematically began to ruin the man to his own advantage."

"I know some of that," said Adams.

"He got Benson in with him, convinced Ames to sign over to Benson his power of attorney on a false claim that Ames' health demanded such a step. Ames told me that, but I never connected Smith with any criminal undertakings. The man had a first-rate reputation."

FOR several moments the district attorney was silent.

"I thought that was it," said Lansing quietly. "They short-sold Ames utilities until they wrecked the whole corporation. But they cleaned up by their illegal rigging."

"You remember," Adams said, "that Ames was very anxious to see Benson after the smash? And you remember that he said Benson had agreed to confess before he vanished six months ago? Maybe you also remember that the first roasted body was found here at almost exactly that time."

The district attorney slapped a fist into the palm of his other hand.

"That's it!" he said. "That's the missing link. He invited Benson up for a week-end and disposed of him. After that, Smith figured himself in the clear until you began to bring Ames out of his breakdown."

"So he doped me at those luncheons until I thought I was mad," said Adams. "Does it occur to you, Bob, that he may have done the same thing to induce Ames' crackup?" He paused to let this surmise take effect. "And then," he continued, "when Benson softened, he took advantage of the old legend and of that sunlamp treatment to make his accomplice an unidentifiable corpse. He relied on local superstition to protect himself."

"It was horribly neat," Adams continued. "He'd dope his victims, put them under those hidden lamps, and let them roast. As long as the dungeons weren't uncovered, and in this wild district, by moving at night and with the Indian in his pay, discovery was next to impossible. No one could have pinned a thing on him."

"Stoops' death must have been bungled. I found the body too soon. But since I found it, it was easy to convince you I was crazy."

"However, it also meant that I'd have to be removed. Particularly, since Ames might have told me something about his innocence. And I'd softened Mary up to a point where he had to get rid of her, too. Remember, Moose Windrip was here in the lodge and could hear everything we said. And if I hadn't got sunburned so badly, I could have slept in bed. We'd all have been dead now but you and Lorna."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Lansing. "From the way you handled things all around—from curing Mary's father, to hypnotizing the guard, and saving the State the expense of prose-

cuting Gaul Smith—I think you'd have managed some other way."

"How is Mary?" Adams asked anxiously. "Her shave with death was the most horrible part of the whole thing to me."

"She'll be all right, Herbert," said Lansing. "Just mild secondary burns, no worse than your sunburn. In a few days she'll be better than ever. She doesn't remember any of it, thank God! Herbert, I want to thank you not only for giving me a wife, but a wife whose father I don't have to prosecute."

"I'm glad of that," said Adams.

The two men shook hands.

NEXT ISSUE

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

A Novelet of Weird Illusion

By DON JOSEPH

WAS MY FACE RED

when she dodged my kiss?

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VENGEANCE OF THE MOLDERING DEAD

By PAUL SELONKE

Author of "The Devil Likes Company," "Destiny Brings Corpses," etc.



The gun almost exploded in Ware's face

TOM WARE drove swiftly through the misty darkness toward Worthley's apartment. His brain crawled with horror, though his unbelievable experience was almost twenty-four hours old.

He had proof now that it had not been some spine-chilling dream. It brought back the vision of the moldering face of John Robles, leering down at him from among the wind-swept tombstones. It brought back the curses he had heard streaming from

When the Dead Return
for Justice, the Living
Scream in Helpless Terror
Before the Inhuman Strength
of Their Putrefying Fingers!

the corpse's rotting lips

That was last night—when the wind moaned around his lonely bungalow, sweeping dead leaves eerily up the concrete driveway. He was in his study room then, sleepily thumbing through the papers Robles had left behind him in that drab rooming house in Omaha. It was his one final effort to learn what really had happened. A year ago, that mild, well-to-do man had vanished as if the earth itself had swallowed him up.

Where John Robles had gone, and why, became one of the city's unsolved mysteries. Before leaving, he had signed over his entire fortune to the finance company he headed. His mystified business partners—Casden, Gillis, and Worthley—were at a loss to explain. So was Peter Morro, company secretary and close friend of Robles.

It was Morro who ordered Tom Ware to find the missing man if that were humanly possible.

Tom Ware was the young lawyer who handled the legal quirks of the firm's business. Though he dug deeply into the mystery, he found no clue to the man's whereabouts—not until two months ago. That was when the Omaha police wired him that a body, identified as that of John Robles, had been found hopelessly mangled in the freight yards there.

Ware immediately took a plane to Omaha, but the mangled condition of the corpse prevented positive identification. So he showed his photographs to Robles' landlady.

"These are pictures of him, all right," she said emphatically. "Funny thing, mister. When he first came here to live, he was a mild sort, easy to get along with. Lately, though, he changed and became hard, as if he was up to somethin'. What was he doin' over there in the freight yards? I dunno. It looks queer to me."

That was about the extent of the information he got in Omaha.

He arranged that the body be taken home and given a decent funeral. The town came out in droves to witness this bewildering climax to the unsolved mystery.

Ware, however, would not accept this as the ending. He pored over

everything Robles had left behind. The diary was odd, startling—always referring to the time when Robles would rise from the dead and bring about some secret vindication. Then there was the unfinished letter, addressed to Ware, which the Omaha police had found crumpled in Robles' waste basket.

DEAR TOM: Viciousness can be bred in the most upstanding people. Greed spawns it, until a man's very soul shrivels and he becomes as ruthless as the Evil One. I should have come to you that night a year ago. Now it leaves nothing but that John Robles should die. After death, you will see him again. He will tell you of certain things—

REREADING the unfinished letter, this windy night, Tom Ware wondered if Robles had purposely flung himself beneath the mashing wheels of a freight train.

Ware yawned. Sleepiness was creeping up on him like some potent drug. He kept staring at the strange message Robles had flung away instead of posting. He stared at it until the written words blurred in front of his eyes.

Had Robles gone mad? Were these the words of a maniac who believed that, upon dying . . . upon dying . . .

The moaning of the wind awakened him, chilled him to the marrow. Clouds scudded in the sky overhead. A feeble moon hung forlornly beyond the black, swaying claws of the surrounding trees.

Ware pulled himself groggily to a sitting position. Then a chill coursed through him. That coldness that did not come from the wind. He was in a graveyard, huddling on the frozen earth between moon-white tombstones.

"Tom!"

The hair prickled on his neck at the sound that whispered down at him from the wind. The icy fingers of terror gripped him as the words in the diary, the words of the unfinished letter swirled through his maddening thoughts.

"Tom!"

It came again, more insistently this time. Ware lifted his eyes then and saw the loathsome thing.

A greenish, recognizable face leered

at him from beyond the gravestones. He recoiled, cold sweat beading his forehead. But common sense shrieked that this was a dream, some horrible nightmare.

He shut his eyes, shook his head to rid himself of this abomination. But when he opened his eyes again, the face was still there—

An oddly shrunken, glowering thing, it plainly showed the green mold of a buried corpse that had risen up to befoul the air with its putrefaction. He saw the lips, decaying and rotten, trembling to movement. His unwilling ears heard sepulchral words that crept out.

"This is no dream, Tom. This meeting is as I have planned. I am—what is left of me—John Robles!"

Tom Ware wanted to shriek out in the utter insanity of the moment. He had been present at the interment, two months before. He had seen the casket lowered into the clay of this graveyard. He had come back, weeks later, to examine the plain tombstone that hulked white before him.

It seemed too real. He could not discount the real feeling of the wind tousling his hair, not the hard-frozen earth that lay beneath his tense, sweaty fingers. The ghastly voice went on.

"I brought you here, Tom, to bear a message — a message to Casden, Gillis, and Worthley. By their right hands, they reduced me from wealth to squalor. I want those right hands. I want those very hands that doomed me. So tell them this, Tom. Tell them that each must dig his right hand into the clay that presses down on my coffin. This, by sundown tomorrow night. . . ."

Ware fumbled a handkerchief from his breast pocket, mopped his horror-sweat away. His eyes were riveted all the while to the festering thing beyond the tombstones.

"And if they laugh at you, Tom, and call you mad, warn them that failure will bring unholy wrath on their souls. It will be too much for them to swallow. *Too much!*"

Common sense, at last, swept through Ware's horror. If this were no dream, it was insanity. No corpse

can rise up from eternal sleep to make diabolic exactions. He cried out as sudden anger swirled his dulled brain. He tried to spring at this ungodly thing. But his limbs were flaccid, leaden, and he fell back again.

In one engulfing wave, blackness blotted everything out.

AWAKENING, he found himself slumped over his study desk. The wind still moaned around his bungalow. Dead leaves still swished endlessly up the concrete driveway outside. It was three in the morning, and he stared drunkenly about the quiet of the room.

So, after all, it had been a ghastly nightmare. But it had been as graphic as an actual experience.

An appointment the following morning brought him to the finance company. Ware related his gruesome dream to the business partners.

"What a dream!" muttered Casden. He was a fat man, with a round greasy face.

Gillis was hard looking. His thin emotionless lips cracked into a grin.

"Lord, Tom," he said, "you certainly must have been drunk last night!"

Worthley, however, was queerly shaken. He was big, bluff, every inch the popular conception of what a bank president should look like. He stood up, edged away from the conference.

"I've got to get a drink," he said thickly as he stumbled through the door. "Got to."

Peter Morro, an enigmatic grin on his swarthy face, chuckled at Worthley's nervousness.

That nervousness was enough to puzzle Ware. How could his dream reveal something that could upset Worthley? But what really caused Ware's uncertainty was a conversation he chanced to overhear later. He paused for a drink at the water cooler outside of Worthley's private office. A draft had blown the office door slightly open, and he heard Gillis speaking.

"You're a greedy, designing rat, Worthley."

"Not half as greedy and crooked as you and Casden," retorted Worthley. "That's exactly why I'm trying to buy you two out."

"And you know we won't sell. So you worked out this dirty plan with Ware, your future son-in-law, trying to scare us into thinking that the dead rise again. Maybe you think we'll be glad to sell at your ridiculous offer and get out of town. Maybe you even mean to kill us and blame Robles' ghost. That'd be mighty sweet, considering our arrangement that, on death, each partnership reverts to the survivors. But I'm telling you, you're not going to get away with it."

"That's crazy!" Worthley protested nervously. "Ware isn't the kind who'd go in for dirty work. I swear he knows nothing about how you cleverly arranged things on Robles. That's why I'm scared about that dream of Tom's. I've been reading up on spiritualism. There are authentic cases, proven cases where dead men have come back for horrible revenge—"

The draft clicked the door shut then, cutting off the conversation.

Tom Ware had heard enough to be shocked. It was plain that the partners had done something to make the mild-mannered Robles leave town and turn over his fortune to them. Yet it bothered Ware that facts concerning this had been revealed to him in a dream. He professed no leaning toward clairvoyance.

All day he puzzled over it. Late in the afternoon, an inexplicable curiosity lured him to Robles' grave in the cemetery. As he stood there, he beheld in his mind's eye the resurrected corpse leering from beyond the headstone.

Abruptly he spied a white object lying some ten feet in front of the grave. It was a handkerchief. He snatched it up, stared at a familiar monogram.

He stared at his own initials!

WARE remembered using his handkerchief to wipe his brow as the corpse had chanted its grisly threats.

A cry on his lips, he fled the cemetery. He drove out into the country—driving madly in an effort to wash horror from his brain. Hours later, when a degree of sanity returned to him, he was miles out of the city.

A new feeling gripped him. He was sure now that the three surviving partners were in definite danger. He alone could prevent some vicious fate from striking them down. They would laugh at him, of course, all except Worthley, who had demonstrated his fear of the supernatural. Worthley could call Gillis, who lived on the floor below him, into the conference. The three of them might work out some plan.

It was evening when Tom Ware reached town. He drove swiftly through the light fog until he reached the towering apartment-hotel where Worthley lived. He hurried up to the ninth floor, thumbed the bell of Worthley's apartment.

The apparition had given sundown as the final hour. The memory of those words brought terror in Ware's heart again. He seemed to hear dragging footsteps coming down the corridor. That was the sound a festering corpse would make on its mission of unholy wrath. Nervously Ware swept his eyes about, holding his finger impatiently on the bell button.

The door opened at last, and Jane Worthley admitted him into the apartment vestibule. She was slim and dark-haired, with wide brown eyes. She was quick to detect his nervousness.

"Tom," she said, "what's wrong? You look as if—"

"Your father," he cut in desperately. "Is he home?"

Her face paled now with intuitive fear. Her cold fingers clenched Ware's arm.

"Father's in the library. What is it, Tom? What is it?"

It was her right to know, of course. But should he tell her? How could he begin?

In that moment of indecision, slow ponderous knuckles banged on the corridor door.

"That's queer," Jane said. "Why doesn't he ring the bell?"

Noisily Ware sucked in a quivering breath, for he dreaded what might be standing out there. Staring tautly, he watched Jane turn toward the door. For some reason he could not help thinking how clean, how wholesomely alive she was. It made all the more

horrible the obscene, moldering thing that had rasped to him through its stench of decaying flesh in the graveyard.

He lurched forward, swept Jane aside. Her shocked outcry made him feel brutal, but he knew he dared pay no heed. Muscles bunched, every nerve in his body drawn tight, he jerked the door open.

Tall and somber, Peter Morro was standing in the corridor. His unpressed clothing hung loosely on his skinny frame.

His penetrating eyes jabbed into Ware's tense face, then slithered to Jane. She stood against the vestibule wall, fingers pressed against her mouth in fright.

"You look upset, Jane," he snapped. "He hasn't been telling you about his silly dream, I hope."

"Silly dream?" Ware burst out. "I've proof that it was not a dream!"

MORRO snorted. "Then you have gone completely mad, Tom."

"It can't be madness, Morro. It—"

Ware paused, then related all the horror he had endured. Finally he brought out his handkerchief, smirched and ugly with graveyard clay. Jane stared at him.

"Then— Oh, Tom, then it wasn't a nightmare!"

Muffled shouts of terror ripped from the rear of the apartment. So sudden and stunning it came that they stood rigid and shocked into helplessness.

"The library!" babbled Morro. "That came from the library!"

Jane's anguish raised her voice shrilly.

"Tom, Father's in there!"

They raced wildly through the apartment, flung open the door that led into the library. The room was in utter darkness. The only thing they could see was a wide-flung window, its curtains flapping.

"Worthley!" Ware called as they burst into the room.

There was no reply. But the odor that clung to the blackness—the foul smell of the unburied dead—chilled Ware. He groped for the light switch, snapped it. . . .

The horror the light revealed tore

an agonizing scream from Jane's throat.

Neither of the men could move to catch her as she slumped. Their eyes were fixed hypnotically on the dreadfulness that lay twisted on the floor. That bloody corpse had once been Worthley.

But the right hand had been severed at the wrist. And the severed hand—

Running through Ware's mad thoughts were those last words the graveyard apparition had uttered.

"It will be too much for them to swallow," the undead thing had said. "Too much!"

The stump of the severed hand had been forced deep into Worthley's lifeless mouth!

A gagging sensation convulsed Ware's throat. He sweated at the same moment that he shivered. He reached down and picked up Jane in his arms. As he moved to the door, he heard the ominous buzz of the doorbell.

"See who it is," he muttered to Morro. "I'm taking Jane into the living room."

Ware was trying to think, but he couldn't. If some depraved human agency had been striking at them, he would have known how to fight back. But how can you struggle against an abominable, undead thing that brings with it the stench of the grave?

He laid Jane down on the living room divan. But he couldn't force himself to bring her out of her faint—to make her remember the fearful sight that had been her own father.

His trembling fingers fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket. He lighted it and sought to marshal his whirling thoughts.

Seeing Jane huddled there, her defenseless beauty swept a wave of hot, utterly human anger through his horror—anger that wrenched his sanity back. Something in his mind told him that there must be a rational explanation.

Then, all at once, he realized what might be behind this. The truth had been apparent the first time he read over Robles' private papers. Now he was sure, for only a madman would devise this kind of devilish revenge.

PPETER MORRO walked into the big living room. Cold, passionless, he had no hint of terror on his swarthy face. Gillis was with him, still dressed for the street, too stricken with fear to have thought of removing his hat.

"We searched the whole apartment, Tom," Morro said quietly. "There's no sign of whatever killed and mutilated Worthley."

Gillis' voice came out in a whimper. "I thought this was all a trick of Worthley's and came up here to—" He paused to raise nervous fingers to his throat. "That hand stuffed in Worthley's throat. . . . D-do you think Robles really came back from—the d-dead?"

"I don't," Ware said grimly. "All this ghastly horror made me lose my head at first. Now common sense is telling me that Robles did not die."

Morro's eyebrows shot up. "You're hinting at what?"

Ware didn't answer, but snapped a question at Gillis.

"Better tell the truth, Gillis. You, Casden and Worthley framed Robles and sent him out of town. Right?"

"You damned, dirty—" Gillis lurched forward at Ware.

Morro grabbed him by the arm, shoved him down into a chair next to the door. Fists clenched, he leered at his business partner.

"If that's true, Gillis," he snarled, "I'll tear you apart with my hands!"

"It's not!" cried Gillis. "The truth is that Robles had been defrauding us cleverly over a period of years. He grabbed off five hundred thousand. We knew that if it got public, it'd hurt our organization. So I wrote out a document, giving all the details of his crime. He signed it. We all signed it as witnesses because it stated that he was to turn over his own fortune to us. Then he was to get out of town for good. We've got the paper in a bank's safety box."

"Which fits damnably well with what's happening around here," Ware said. "Robles wrote that he was meant to rise up from the dead. Isn't it possible that somebody else's body was mangled in the freight yards? He could have come back here now, mad with the idea of vengeance. During these two

months since his supposed burial, maybe he was right here in town, making his fantastic plans for murder!"

"You think he went mad?" Morro asked, puzzled.

"His papers read that way, don't they? The first thing we've got to do is get in touch with the police."

"What the devil can they do?" protested Gillis. "If he's made such elaborate plans, he's also got an elaborate hiding-place."

Ware shook his head. "I'm not thinking of that. Robles, you know, limped when he walked. He's still carrying some shrapnel slugs from the war. Now I happen to know his legs weren't mangled like the rest of his body. Let's get permission to have his supposed body exhumed. If we find those slugs aren't present—"

"We'll know that the body isn't that of Robles," nodded Morro. "But what if we learn that it is his body?"

Ware shrugged at the implication. He walked past the quiet figure of Jane, to the telephone that stood on the end table. First he meant to get police protection for the partners so there would be no repetition of what had happened to Worthley. Before his fingers could close on the phone, the living room lights blanked out. . . .

THE awful odor of decaying human flesh suddenly assailed him. Swearing, he wheeled a round, saw the greenish, leering abomination that was Robles' face. It had materialized in the doorway. Ware heard the sound of scuffling, and Gillis' voice shouted out in anger.

"Get away from me! Get your filthy paws off my wrist!"

Ware charged at the gruesome figure, his fists knotted. The moment he sprang, the face vanished—and the agonizing shrieks of Gillis came from the opposite side of the room.

"Morro! Tom! He's dragging me out!"

Ware heard the thump as Gillis collapsed to the floor. He heard a swishing, as though their ungodly visitor were dragging his victim from the living room through the side door.

"Morro!" Ware bellowed. "Stop him, for God's sake!"

There was no response from the secretary. Had the loathsome thing got Morro first?

Then he saw Morro framed in the doorway to the hall. The distance-dimmed vestibule light was less than a vague gloom. But it was enough to tell Ware the horrible truth. Morro had Jane's inert body in his arms. He was carrying her off!

"Morro, so you're in this *with* Robles! Damn you, you rat!"

Ware forgot about Gillis now. Instead he tried to plunge after Morro. A spine-chilling laugh bubbled behind him, something cracked him sharply on the head. Then he felt himself collapse, face down, on the rug.

He struggled to lift himself up, saw the leering figure of Robles gliding through the door in Morro's wake.

Then a blackness, which was not that of the room, overwhelmed him. . . .

It seemed hours later, many hours later. The stench of the dead was still in his nostrils, and a queer sepulchral voice was prodding through the throbbing fog of his brain.

"Easy, Tom," the voice was saying. "Easy, now—"

Tom Ware realized, all at once, that he was sitting unbound in some kind of heavy chair. But when he wrenched his eyes open, he could see nothing but a red glow.

A figure seemed to rise up in front of him, then recede, over and over, with almost the same maddening rhythm of that hollow sepulchral voice. It goaded his nerves. He wanted to scream and shout. Yet his mouth felt dry, paralyzed.

His vision steadied, with a more complete return of consciousness. He saw a heavy table in front of him. A red flare, like a Fourth of July firework, crackled and smoked on the table.

And beyond the table stood the eerie figure of John Robles—stiff, dead looking, as motionless as some fantastic statue.

"Careful, Tom, not a move," the hollow voice said. "You will notice what I hold in my hand."

Ware saw it then. Robles was gripping a very material light-reflecting automatic. The sight of it swept away all of Ware's terror of the supernatural.

"So John Robles brought me here because he didn't want his grave dug up," he sneered. "You were listening at that living room door. You decided you didn't want to have the police learn that you are—a living man!"

"Morro and Gillis searched the big apartment, did they not? No, Tom, a living man could not accomplish what I have done in so short a time. Worthley choked to death on the hand that damned me to privation. Gillis is in the next room, waiting to die. And I've got Morro, hypnotized to my will, out looking for Casden—to bring him here."

"Damn you!" Ware cried. "What did you do to Jane?"

"Nothing yet," Robles replied quietly. Glance to your right."

WARE swore angrily when he saw the figure of Jane lying on a cot against the wall.

"What's come over you, Robles?" he cried. "You used to be a kind, mild-mannered man. Have you lost every bit of decency?"

"If I haven't any decency, it is because these vile partners of mine stripped me of it," the hollow voice said emotionlessly. "Remember my letter? I said that greed spawns viciousness. It left nothing for me to do but throw myself under a freight train—so that I might come back."

"Death doesn't give you leave to resort to utter vileness!"

"It was a conspiracy that sent me away. Gillis was the worst, Worthley was next, and finally Casden."

"I know, Robles. They were robbing the firm. When you learned of it, they framed infallible proof that it was you who was guilty. This cleverly arranged evidence was to send you to jail, unless you signed your fortune to them and left town. You took the alternative, meaning some day to come back."

Robles recoiled in shock, startled by hearing the truth from Ware.

"That's exactly what happened," he blurted. "But I had no money. I could not investigate without detectives. Yet something within me said I could return after death. I believed it and was willing to take the gamble—and I did return!"

"Why didn't you come to me?" Ware asked softly. "I always felt you were an honest, upright man. Together we could have fought them."

"I was foolish and lost my head. Afterwards it was too late."

And you took advantage of the fact that someone else was run over by a freight train. You came back with this hocus-pokus. . . ."

"Death isn't hokus-pokus, Tom. I did die! If you examined my earthly remains, you'd learn that that is the truth."

"You're alive, Robles," retorted Ware. "You drugged me in some way last night. You dragged me out into the cemetery for your ghastly play-acting. That face you've got on is papier-maché, shrewdly designed to look like your own dead face. You use some foul smelling chemical to simulate the stench of decay. And now you've got me here to prevent an exhumation of what's supposed to be your body. Being reduced to poverty turned you into a murderous madman. Don't think I'm going to let you get away with it."

"I'll get away with it, all right, Tom. See that block and tackle fastened to the ceiling? If you decide to be difficult, I will pull Jane to the ceiling—suspend her by her feet. Death by inverted hanging is almost identical with heart failure. No one has discovered Worthley's body yet."

"I'll place Jane in that library so the police will attribute her death to shock. But I know you will agree to my request. Also, I know you are a man of your word, that it practically amounts to a phobia with you. Do I have your agreement?"

"You mean that I do not ask for permission to exhume?"

"Exactly," nodded Robles. "Exhumation, of course, will disclose that the earthly remains are my own. The reason for my demand is that it is a sacrilege among us who are dead to have our remains violated. You wouldn't understand that, however."

TOM WARE licked his lips, because he saw how Robles awaited his answer. He had to restrain himself from springing. The automatic in the

madman's hand was too ready for that. He had to stall, to think. A sane person should be able to outwit a maniac. He had no intention of being an accessory to wholesale murder.

"Robles," he asked, "you mean you are really dead?"

"I died under that freight train," the hollow voice answered. "I died only so I could live again."

And then Ware heard something that almost turned his blood to ice. It was a voice, much hollower than that of Robles, coming out of the darkness beyond the red flare on the table. It was Death itself, mocking Robles' masquerade.

"Who is this mad human who dares make a travesty of the dead?"

A sobbing gasp bubbled from Robles. Involuntarily he turned toward the terrible voice. . . .

With all the power of his bunched muscles, Ware lifted up the table. He crashed it against the madman in front of him.

The gun almost exploded in Ware's face as he leaped across the overturned table. His fist smashed through the dreadful mask to the flesh of a human face.

Robles staggered back, attempting to bring his gun up. But Ware smashed it out of his hand. Tom Ware's anger burst out in all its fury now. His fingers found Robles' throat, and the ungodly figure thrashed in his grip until it sagged limply.

Ware dropped Robles as though the mere touch of him contaminated his fingers. He strode over to where Jane lay. He bent over tenderly, discovered that she was under the influence of one of Robles' sleeping drugs.

"I am the voice of Death," a familiar voice said from a dark corner. "Tom, for God's sake, come over and untie me!"

Ware hurried there and found Peter Morro, his head bloody. He stared in shock.

"I thought you—you and Robles—"

"You just jumped at conclusions when you saw me carrying Jane out to safety," Morro said. "He took advantage of your misconception."

After he had untied Morro, Ware had to voice his profound relief.

"Thank the Lord you had the inspiration to throw Robles off his guard. But now to find Gillis. He's still around here—alive, I hope."

Morro stumbled over to the inert, sprawling "corpse." He examined it, then ripped off the grisly mask.

"He's alive, all right — the greedy butcher!" he growled.

Ware stared down at the face Morro had revealed, rigid with disbelief. He could not believe that any man in his right mind, as Gillis certainly was, would stoop to such depraved murder.

"I recognized this as the basement of Gillis' old house, when I came to," Morro explained. "And it doesn't surprise me that he'd try to pull a trick like this. He is a greedy snake."

"And I'm positive now that Robles was framed for the swindling of his partners," Ware added. "Gillis was using it for his own beastly gain. The revenge-after-death theme of Robles' private papers must have given him the idea. He figured out how he could get the entire finance company for himself — by the vicious murder of Worthley. Casden's murder he hadn't had time to manage yet. And probably he had elaborate plans for his escape."

MMORRO nodded. "But you scared him with that exhumation talk. He realized he had to prevent it, because the cops wouldn't believe in ghosts. They'd look around for likely suspects, such as himself. He was sitting by the door in Worthley's living room, close to the light switch. I give him credit for his living room act. I'll bet he didn't take off his hat because he had his mask hidden in it—just in case. When I tried to sneak Jane out

of the dangers in the living room, he followed and slugged me."

"But how do you suppose he managed the Worthley killing, Morro?"

"That was pretty simple," Morro replied. "Remember the open window? There's a fire escape outside of the window, and don't forget that Gillis lives in the apartment directly below Worthley's. The shouting, of course, he did himself, to heighten the effect of horror."

Ware stared down grimly at the sprawled figure of the vicious masquerader.

"I think I see now what Robles meant by saying he would die and come back again. It took a year for him to realize he had acted the part of a fool. He decided that the old, mild-mannered Robles would be dead when he returned here. The new Robles would be a fighting man who would put up a do-or-die struggle against the men who had defrauded him. He had no money, so he meant to come here by freight train. He missed his footing, perhaps, and fell beneath the wheels to a horrible death."

Lips compressed with horror, he lifted his eyes and saw that Jane was stirring. He went over, gathered her tenderly in his arms and turned to face Peter Morro.

"I'm going upstairs and call the police," he said in a dull voice. "I don't want Jane to wake—down here."

"I hope the cops don't come too quickly," Morro growled, his fists clenched belligerently. "I want to have a little conference with Casden—over what he did to poor old Robles. I've always had a violent urge to punch his fat, greasy face!"



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CHAPTER I

Murder Jewel

THE two men in the dimly lighted room of the remote gabled house stared at the object on the table in front of them. It looked like a great drop of blood, as large as the end of a man's thumb. An oppressive silence, run through with fear, gripped the place. It was broken only by the steady drip-drip-drip of water against the roof of the porch outside.

One of the men was powerfully built, with a large, squarish head. His widely spaced eyes were dilated with greed as he stared at the ruby.

The other man was emaciated as a corpse. Fear gave his sunken eyes an unnatural brightness. Every time he breathed, his eerie, dry rattling sawed through the stillness. John Whiteside was a sick man, old before his time. The thing in the center of the table had sapped him of all vitality as if it had been a leech.

The husky man, Walter Helf, broke the silence. He broke it with a jerky laugh as he raised his eyes to meet Whiteside's. He wondered if Whiteside had any idea that he was going to die in a few minutes.

"The Maga Ruby," he said. "Jackson Means was right. I've come with the money, Whiteside."

"That devil!" John Whiteside, once the foremost authority on precious stones in the world, fairly spat out the words. "How did he—"

"How does he know everything, Whiteside?" Helf asked. "He uses his knowledge of law to make a mock-

ery of justice. He probes for skeletons in closets, and then shackles the souls of men who forever after serve him under pain of death or loss of blessed freedom. He harasses them to the brinks of suicides' graves. He barter with souls, for things like this—the Maga Ruby. You see, Means knows you murdered your wife two years ago.

"You had not become infatuated with another woman, so what was the motive? She had no insurance. Jackson Means told me he scoured your past after he wormed you out of the chair. He still has the evidence that can prove you did commit murder. You were on that steamer out of Bombay that a young Englishman was murdered on seven years ago, Whiteside. The young fool had let things slip in the bar—about a fortune he carried—"

"Shut up!" Whiteside screamed. "Somebody may be outside listening. That flat-faced devil I've seen—"

"Still seeing things?" Helf laughed coldly. "Still seeing that slant-eyed, pocked face pressed against your window?"

"Yes. Last night, Helf. They're getting close now. That cursed thing there, you're welcome to it. Look what it's done to me. Y-yes, I killed her—She was the only other person who knew I had it. Anyone who owns that murder stone is marked for death. I wanted to get rid of it long ago. It fascinated me though, Helf. I tell you I've seen that face—for the last ten days.

"That Maga Ruby! I had to get possession of it. Rare jewels—perfect stones like that thing there—have been a passion with me. All right, give me

Should a Mortal Call Himself Death, Beware—for the Grim



"He came in to kill me. He bent over me—and shot—"

the money. Take the damned thing away from here. I'm going to run away—I'm afraid now, Helf!"

WALTER HELF set his powerful jaws. He watched Whiteside's face closely. The man's breathing was getting difficult. Helf looked toward the shelf over the table. His eyes played on the bottle of adrenalin and the hypodermic resting in the glass beside it. Without the adrenalin, Whiteside would be in a bad way. He had asthma in its worst form. Helf kept watching Whiteside. Means had him in his clutch too, but he had given Walter Helf a way out.

"You're in a mess, Helf," Means had said. "If this Farwell heiress should demand an accounting of her estate, would you tell her about her sixty thousand you dropped in Valadium Steel? Yes, I know all about it. That is why you and I shall put over a busi-

ness deal. Sit down, Helf, and listen—"

John Whiteside struggled to get out of his chair. A fit of choking seized him. He reached for the adrenalin on the shelf, but Helf raced around the table. He pulled Whiteside away just as the man's clawing fingers brushed against the bottle.

"Lean forward and put your arms against the back of the chair," Helf said, his eyes glittering. "I'll get the hypo. Here, let me get my arms around your chest. I know just how to fix you, Whiteside."

Whiteside felt Helf's powerful arms close about his chest. His feet came off the floor and he hung limp in Helf's arms. The arms kept increasing their pressure until Whiteside had to fight for air. Helf braced his feet. His face oozed sweat, and he ground his teeth hard together.

Abruptly Whiteside stopped squirm-

Reaper's Savage Jealousy Destroys Minds of Men!

ing. He hung in Helf's arms, a dead weight. Helf held him for several more seconds and then eased him to the floor. He knelt beside the prone body and lifted Whiteside's eyelids. He put an ear against the chest and could hear no beat. Whiteside was dead. His heart had given way.

Walter Helf drew a sleeve across his clammy face. He stood there and listened to the sounds out in the night. Then he picked Whiteside up and threw him over his shoulder like a sack of grain. He took the dead man upstairs and put him in his bed.

Thoughtfully Helf disarranged the sheets and blankets, crumpled the pillow and threw it on the floor. Whiteside had started to freeze into a posture of agonizing death. Helf lost his sudden pang of remorse when he thought of the stone lying on the table downstairs. That would take care of the money he had embezzled from the Farwell estate.

He hurried down, snatched up the Maga Ruby in his hands. The stone had the warmth of blood.

It might take two or three days for anyone to discover the dead man. He had no friends. This house squatting in the shade of rotting locust trees was seven miles from the nearest habitation.

Walter Helf had both the Maga Ruby and Odette Farwell's hundred thousand dollars. He had carried out the orders of Jackson Means.

He slipped out of the house and made his way toward the roadster. He had parked it in the shadows that crawled along the edges of the rutted road leading to the gabled house.

As he hurried along, the seeds of a hellish scheme began to sprout in his brain. The roots spread and burrowed into his sanity. He knew that the man who had his soul in his slimy hands would not release him, even though Helf had committed murder for him. Means would lead him deeper into the labyrinth of crime—that is, if Jackson Means lived, now that Whiteside was dead!

MEANS had given Helf the Maga Ruby's brief but grim story. It had been stolen from the temple of

Ramo-Che by a Tibetan renegade. Two wealthy Englishmen had purchased it in the customary Asiatic way of polite bribery and had slipped out of Lhasa during the feast of Monlam. They had not traveled far before the curse overtook them.

One died of a strange malady in a native hut before he reached the border. The other was found dead in his stateroom aboard a steamer out of Bombay. He had been stabbed through the heart. Both Helf and Means had laughed over the superstition attached to the enormous blood-red stone.

"If Whiteside is found dead," Means had boasted, "we will tell the papers that it was through him that the Farwell heiress purchased the stone. Don't you see, Helf? The curse—"

Walter Helf saw, all right. As he backed his car out of the isolated roadway, he was seeing things even more plainly. More than one person had died, the story would have it, because of the curse upon the Maga Ruby. A lot more could die. . . .

Helf thought of Odette Farwell as he drove through the night. He pictured her as she had been the night he had told her about the Maga Ruby. She was not yet eighteen but there was a sophistication in her feline, slightly slanted eyes that belonged to a woman twice her age. Rouge accentuated the pallor of her cold cheeks, and her mouth was thin-lipped and highly tinted with a bluish-red cosmetic. Possession of the purely material was the obsession of Odette Farwell. The girl had laughed in Helf's face when he mentioned the curse.

"You're in charge of my affairs, Helf. I want that stone at any price!" Her eyes had shone with an unholy avaricious light. "Wait until they feast their envious eyes on that stone at the Marlincourt affair! Arrange for a body-guard. Get the story to the papers. They'll want pictures."

Walter Helf's mouth twisted into a travesty of a smile. Jackson Means would be one to handle the Maga Ruby too. Means' man, Willie Kwong, had played his part well. It had been an easy role. The slant-eyed, flat-faced Oriental had stripped Whiteside of whatever courage he had had left.

Haunting the darkness outside of the gabled retreat, he had pressed his face against the window whenever Whiteside happened to look that way. Somehow he had always slipped away like a wraith when Whiteside tore out of the house, a gun held in his shaking fingers.

Kwong would have to fit into Walter Helf's hellish plans, too. Odette Farwell, Mark Farwell, the curse of the Maga Ruby—Helf laughed as he reached the outskirts of the city. Walter Helf himself would be the curse!

Jackson Means was waiting for him. When he walked in, Means was holding up a glass of port to the light and studying its color. It was the color of the stone Helf took out of his pocket—the color of blood. Means was a big flabby man with a long equine face. He had a wide, heavy-lipped mouth and a pair of eyes that seemed to gore the person he looked at.

"Well, Helf?" Means said, his lips twisting.

"It was easy. Not a mark on him at all. Asthma attack took him out of the world. Here's what you want."

JACKSON MEANS held the Maga Ruby in the hollow of a fat, sweaty hand and laughed silkily. His porcine eyes reflected the lurid redness of the ruby.

"A pretty thing, Helf. The hundred thousand now—"

"Here."

"Very good, Helf. Very good. I can always use a man like you."

"Don't try to talk me out of my cut," Helf warned.

The crooked lawyer lifted his brows. "Oh, but not yet. Not until we're in the clear. When the authorities are satisfied that Whiteside—"

"I see, I see," Helf said.

His big hands balled into knotty fists. There was a hangdog expression on his face and he turned it full upon Means. Jackson Means nodded approvingly.

"In the morning, you will deliver the stone, Helf. You are her legal guardian. You handle or—er—mishandle her affairs. I have a little chore to do for the Farwell girl myself. Her worthless brother has been fooling around with another man's wife. Have a check for

twenty-five thousand ready for me in the morning. The girl is anxious to keep the family name spotless, if possible, Helf. Twenty-five thousand will look like a lot of money to a bookkeeper like this John Morton."

"She mentioned the mess to me," Helf said. "Thought you were the one to smooth it over, Means. That's all right, I have enough to do."

"I'm a little tired tonight. I'll send for you when I need you."

"Yes, you will," Helf said. "That's one thing I can be sure of."

He fought to hide the hate in his eyes, to mask the triumph behind it. Jackson Means laughed at Helf.

"You certainly can. Don't forget that twenty years is plenty of time to rot away in."

"I'm thinking of that," Helf snapped out.

He turned and walked out of the apartment. Leaving the building, he paused and looked up at Means' lighted window.

"Clever devil, aren't you? But you don't know that inside of two days you're going to be a corpse. Laugh about the curse on that stone, Means. There is one—I am that curse!"

CHAPTER II

The Curse Strikes

WALTER HELF stood in the crowd, watching the Farwell heiress go into the Marlincourt residence on the Avenue. She was wearing the Maga Ruby for the first time. She posed for the cameras willingly, for she loved notoriety. For the benefit of the common herd staring at her, she quipped to the reporters.

"My—my! So this ruby is cursed, is it? I haven't seen a single little yellow man with a knife anywhere." Her laugh was scornful. "Let us go inside, bodyguard."

"Fool, you will find out!" Helf said.

A pasty-faced man, with the reek of drink upon him, reeled toward Helf. It was Mark Farwell, and he was in evening clothes.

"You're starting early tonight,

Mark," Helf said sourly. To himself: "You'll make a good corpse."

Mark Farwell had been cut off from the Farwell millions without a penny. A wastrel, he had been manna for the gossip columnists for years.

"Look at her, Helf!" he ground out. "Wearing a bauble that cost a fortune while I have to gather crumbs off her table. I have to beg pittances from her, but look at her strut! If she weren't my sister—Look here, I need money, Helf."

"I'm your sister's guardian, not yours, Mark. Don't forget you just cost her twenty-five thousand. You're lucky this guy Morton didn't blow out your brains. Get away from me."

Farwell moved off, cursing. Helf grabbed his arm.

"Spill it, Farwell. You won't be long in this world. I know how rotten you are, what you would stoop to."

Helf wondered if Jackson Means had an idea for using Farwell. He knew Means wouldn't be able to resist the temptation to play him against Helf, to tell him about the sixty thousand. But Helf was being driven by the diabolical cleverness a man falls heir to when he sells out at Satan.

"Mark Farwell is up to his neck in debt," he thought as he walked along the street. "If he knows where Odette keeps that ruby, all hell won't stop him." Walter Helf chuckled. "I must see that the girl has a gun. I must warn her about burglars and—little yellow men—as soon as Whiteside's body is found."

TWO days after the Marlincourt affair, a baker knocked on the door of the gabled house. He waited. His nerves began twitching as the awesome silence struck flat against him. When he saw that the door was partly open, he went inside, calling Whiteside's name. A will stronger than his own drew him through the house and upstairs. He looked into a bedroom, sucked in his breath and held it. Almost without breathing, he scrambled downstairs and back to his truck. The minute he got to the city, he notified the police.

Walter Helf went out with the police to look at the body. Standing in the

bedroom, Helf spoke in a mournful tone.

"I knew him slightly. He always acted as if he expected something or somebody to creep up and touch him on the shoulder. There was a story in his eyes. I bet if anyone knew what it was, it would not have been pretty. His eyes always had pain in them. He was a sick man."

The medical examiner sniffed noisily.

"Yeah, dead about two days, maybe more. Died from an attack of asthma. Funny he came up to bed without that bottle of adrenalin and hypo I saw downstairs. But people do funny things. A man can forget."

The police looked through Whiteside's bedroom, found evidence that he had been a well known jewel expert.

"That's what makes me think—funny things," Walter Helf said. "Look, that Odette Farwell purchased the Maga Ruby. Whiteside, while he lived, didn't want anybody to know where she bought it. He was afraid of the curse. He told me so himself. Yes, I arranged for the sale of that Maga Ruby. Now that he's dead, I can speak."

A MAN swore softly. "Must have died just after he sold that thing. Well, that Farwell dame is sure welcome to that rock."

"You believe that rot?" Walter Helf laughed. "I handled it, didn't I? And how about Jackson Means and Odette Farwell? They're alive."

"Yeah, but—"

"Rubbish!" the medical examiner snapped. "Whiteside died of natural causes. Asthma attack; heart gave out. That's all, gentlemen."

Walter Helf almost cackled in glee. But after all, how could they know he was the curse? They would never find out. He must get in touch with Means, now that he had a use for Willie Kwong. He would possibly need Willie for psychological reasons, if Odette Farwell refused to break. . . .

The papers played up the curse of the Maga Ruby to the limit after Whiteside's burial. The Farwell heirless reveled in the publicity, scoffed at the superstitions connected with the

precious stone.

"Wait," she laughed at Walter Helf one night, a week after the Marlincourt affair. "Wait until you and Means die. Then maybe I'll start believing. You touched the stone didn't you, Helf?"

"Yes, I— Look there! At the window—"

Mark Farwell swung his head around.

"I don't see anything."

"I thought I saw a face at the window," Helf said. "It had little slant-eyes. I guess I'm letting this thing get me." He managed an unconvincing smile.

"You fool!" Odette Farwell flung at him. "Get hold of yourself."

"But I keep thinking about something Whiteside said. He saw faces at his window. Maybe one scared him to death."

The girl crumpled a cigarette into an ashtray beside her. She had just lighted the cigarette. Helf saw her fingers shake a little.

"I want you to get a detective, Helf. Have him watch outside tonight."

"Why, you—don't keep that Maga—that thing in this house do you?"

"I don't have to ask you where to keep it! You just do as I say."

Helf snatched a quick glance at Mark Farwell. The wastrel's red-rimmed eyes were wide with the effect of his sister's words. Helf saw Farwell's jaws become tightly set. The flesh around them went white.

Odette called a servant and told him to get her a drink, a stiff one. Her nerves were singing, Helf knew. It wouldn't require much work on them to make them snap. He was willing to bet that she would hit the nerve sedative in an hour or so. She had set such a terrific pace for herself that she had been using nerve sedatives for a whole year.

"I'll be going," Helf said. "I'll send a detective over, Miss Farwell. I'd suggest you take that stone—"

"I'll do as I damned well please!"

Helf shrugged, turned and went out. His lips pulled crookedly into a icy smile. He heard Mark Farwell ask his sister for a drink. She refused and young Farwell's cursings followed Helf out of the mansion.

So far so good. The place would look like a morgue before long. It was time for someone to follow Whiteside. Helf didn't know that his sanity had been torn to little pieces. He was a madman now, in the grip of forces that seeped out of hell itself.

He had not underestimated the black soul of Jackson Means. A call came from Means early the next evening. It was time Helf came right over and discussed things with him. It was not a request, it was an order. There was a threat running through Means' raspy voice. Helf replied with a silky, soothing voice.

"I am glad to come. You will spend a pleasant evening."

JACKSON MEANS sipped his port and gloated over Walter Helf.

"We have a hundred thousand of her money. You have read about the police digging around Whiteside's place? A mystery, isn't it? A secret between just the two of us. Let's drink to our inevitable success."

"I have to take your orders, Means. I do not have to drink with you."

"I see. Still have scruples, eh?" Means' face clouded with anger. He smashed his glass to the floor and leaned forward in his chair. "I can hang murder on you now, you rat! My hands are perfectly clean. You'll do as I say. This Farwell heiress has millions. I want more of her money, and you will help me get it."

"I'm sorry, Means." Helf acted the cringing slave that Means expected him to be. "I know I'm in too deep—"

But his brain was working swiftly. Means' servant, Willie Kwong, had left the apartment for the evening. It was Thursday, the man's night out. The apartment was on the twenty-fifth floor and it was soundproof. Helf took a big silk handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his brow. He asked for a glass of port.

"Now that's being sensible, Helf." Means poured port into two glasses that were side by side on the table.

"I think I could use something stronger, if you don't mind," Helf said apologetically.

Means grinned and got up. He went to an ornate servidor that stood in a

corner. Working hastily, Helf took a little bottle out of the silk handkerchief. Its contents spilled into one of the glasses of port. He was balling up the handkerchief when Jackson Means turned away from the servitor with a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

He poured Helf a stiff drink. He drank both glasses of port during the short conversation that followed. Helf waited.

Jackson Means' eyes began to get heavy. He smacked his thick lips, slid his tongue along lips that had become dry. His piggish eyes dragged closed and then opened.

Glaring balefully at Helf, he roared a curse and hauled his huge bulk from the chair. His legs caved under him.

"Helf—you put something in that—"

His eyes were glazing fast, but they were filled with sudden terror. He tried to throw himself at Helf. He fell short and collapsed on the floor.

"A knockout drop, you swine!" Helf ripped out. "Now for the next one—and this'll be one that you'll never snap out of, Means!"

Face shining with a devilish light, Helf reached down and shoved his arms underneath. He dragged Means toward the open window, summoned all his strength and lifted him up. Means lay draped over the wide sill for a moment, his hoarse breath groaning through the deathly stillness.

Walter Helf pushed him off the sill, stepped back. He heard a scream down in the street far below. A terrible splatting sound cut above the subdued roar of suddenly thinning traffic.

Helf put the port glasses into his pocket and went out the back way. No one saw him leave the apartment house. No one had seen him come in. He knew he had left no betrayal of his presence there. He had not even taken off his gloves.

The police could not avoid the smell of alcohol. Everyone in the city knew Means had been a heavy drinker. There would be no autopsy, Helf felt sure. There probably wouldn't even be enough left of him for an autopsy! He was glad he would not have to look at the enormous red blot Means must have made on the pavement. . . .

Walter Helf got into a taxi three

blocks away. He couldn't get rid of the thought of Willie Kwong. Willie would be the one man in the world to suspect that Means had been murdered. But Kwong would not weep over the tragedy. There was little doubt in Helf's mind that Kwong had been in the hollow of Means' slimy hand. Walter Helf was sure that he could expect a visit from Willie.

He went to his small apartment and waited. He turned on the radio at eleven o'clock, listened intently to the news. Jackson Means had either leaped or fallen from the window of his apartment.

Helf got himself a drink of whiskey. Sitting back luxuriously in his chair, he planned his next move. Now he felt he could really smile. He was the weird, unknown force to be feared. He was the devil's instrument of vengeance. He was the curse of the Magna Ruby!

CHAPTER III

The Corpse Maker

DESPERATION had driven Helf to the first murder. He was no longer desperate. An insane delight was driving him furiously. Taking human life was the most dangerous, the most thrilling sport in the world. He had fashioned two corpses with his strong hands. There would be more—a whole corpse cavalcade.

"It's an art, murder is," Helf said. "The most difficult medium to master. Only a genius—"

He got up and poured himself another drink. At the buffet he saw himself in the mirror. He lifted his glass, grinned and drank to the homicidal maniac.

The phone rang. Helf thought he knew who was calling. He was right. Odette Farwell's voice was raspy, run through with growing terror.

"Y-you've heard about Means, Helf? Do you think—"

"Rot," Helf replied, his mouth twisted into a grin.

"Come over here. I have to have protection, Helf. Mark is here. He's

been drinking and he's raving. Do something with him!"

Helf went over to the Farwell mansion. The girl's face was haggard when she came to meet him.

"You're letting this nonsense upset you," Helf said. "You've got to be rational, get control of yourself."

Odette Farwell laughed. "You mean the curse?" She laughed again, but the laugh sent little shivers down Helf's spine. "I'm not that much of a fool. It's this heel of a brother of mine."

Helf looked at Mark Farwell. The man's hair was disheveled and his eyes were feverish. Mark Farwell got out of his chair and yelled at Helf.

"Talk to her! Get her to get rid of that thing or — I've touched it, you hear? It's driving me crazy — I don't know what I'll do. I'm fighting something. Look, Whiteside is dead. Jackson Means is dead. . . ."

"Shut up!" Helf yelled and pushed young Farwell back into the chair. "Means fell out of a window. Every day people fall out of windows somewhere."

"Yeah? Y-you're crazy. I'll die, Helf. B-but I'll make every minute count. I'll make things buzz, once I get some dough. They say if you've touched that—"

"Stop that crazy talk, Mark!" Odette Farwell screamed.

She pressed her clenched fists to the sides of her head and paced the floor. Helf laughed inwardly. He certainly had them going. Their minds were rocking in mad fear.

Out in the hall he had spoken briefly with the housekeeper. She had told Helf that the girl had taken a strong sedative an hour before he arrived. There had been a violent scene between the girl and her brother when the news of Means' death reached the house. Mark Farwell had demanded money to get away from there.

"I-I'm going to bed," the girl said. "You'll excuse me. Do you have that detective outside? He hasn't gone?"

"No, he hasn't gone," Helf replied soothingly. "Good night, Miss Farwell." He went out into the hall with her, handed her an automatic pistol. "Just as a precaution," he said quietly. "Keep it in your right hand all night.

Shoot anyone who comes into your room. Understand?"

"Y-yes, I will. Thanks—Helf."

ODETTE FARWELL'S hand shook as she took the pistol. Her face was ghastly under her rouge.

Helf walked back into the room and sat down. He said nothing for a while.

"She shouldn't keep everything in the house," he mumbled finally, as if thinking aloud. "A hundred and fifty thousand dollars and that bloody rock. Most men would commit murder for less. A lot of money, one hundred and fifty thousand. A man could do a lot—"

"Shut your mouth, Helf!" Farwell screeched.

"She takes sedatives. That's what worries me. It'd be pretty easy to murder her while she slept. Might not have to, to get that ruby—"

Helf spoke so softly that he seemed to be talking to himself. But he was laughing inside. Feed it to the rat, he's breaking. Mark Farwell hasn't more than a shred of manhood left. Break that shred, keep sawing at it—A hundred thousand dollars and more—

"I think I'll go, Mark," Helf said, getting up. "Go get some sleep. Sleep off that jag of yours. You'll need all your wits to protect your sister. That is, if you're half a man."

"To hell with her!" Farwell flung at Helf. "Why should I worry about her? She don't care a blasted bit about me. Go on—get out of here!"

"Good night, Mark." Helf smiled.

The newspapers, all the next day, refreshed the minds of the public about the curse of the Maga Ruby. Whiteside had died after he had sold it to Odette Farwell. Jackson Means had been a part of the transaction, and now he was dead. The papers did not hint of murder. Coincidence, the higher type sheets would have it. The tabloids began building up a sensational series of articles on the blood-red stone.

It was a misty afternoon. The air was cold and clammy. Helf sat in his apartment. His evil thoughts were intent on Willie Kwong when Kwong called him.

"Yes?" Helf said. "Oh, Kwong? How are you?"

"Very well, Mr. Helf," Kwong re-

plied. "I shall talk to you, perhaps? Very important, I assure you." Helf wondered if that was a small furtive laugh on the other end of the wire. Kwong went on. "Very bad about Master. Perhaps Mr. Helf, he knows—"

"All right, Kwong. But we must not talk here. We'll meet where it is quiet."

Helf's teeth were almost clamped together. His hands shook. He was talking to the third corpse.

"I have automobile," Kwong said. "Will pick you up. Shall we say where?"

Helf designated a place where Kwong could pick him up. It was on a lonesome corner on the outskirts of the city.

"Very good," Kwong said, and hung up.

"The yellow devil!" Helf rasped. "How much did Means tell him? Wants money from me—blackmail—the rat!"

He took a gabardine topcoat out of a closet and put it on. Outside his place of residence he hailed a cab. He alighted a block from where he was to meet Kwong.

Kwong drove up to the corner after Helf had waited in the rain for fully five minutes. The Oriental's flat face was expressionless as he nodded.

"What's on your mind, Kwong?" Helf said, when he got in the seat beside Means' servant.

Kwong set a fast pace and did not answer Helf for several torturous moments.

"You kill Jackson Means. I know. You were in his hands. He tell me about you steal money from this rich girl. I see you go in his house—but I tell nobody. Not yet. I want fifty thousand dollars."

"Stiff price," Helf said, his eyes glued to the slippery road that snaked on ahead. "But there is nothing I can do, is there?"

"No. I learn lot from Means. How to get money fast."

"I was sure you wanted money, Kwong. Pull up there at the curve. I have twenty thousand with me. I'll have the rest tomorrow."

"Good. Then I go away. I never tell."

KWONG braked the car and it skidded on the wet surface. It slued to a stop at the side of the road.

"Right—you'll never tell—" Helf ground out.

He smashed his heavy left elbow into Kwong's face, stunned him. He caught the Oriental's neck in the crook of his arm, jammed his big first under the chin for leverage. Helf had been a wrestling champion at college. He knew how to break a man's neck.

He shoved hard—harder. Abruptly he heard a grinding, snapping sound.

Helf did not waste a second. He pulled the corpse from behind the wheel and threw the car in gear. The moment he let the clutch in he jumped. The sedan rolled over the edge of the country road and plunged down a thirty-foot embankment.

Walter Helf slunk into the woods at the other side of the road. It was five miles back to the city. He still wore gloves. There would be no sign of his prints on what was left of Kwong's car.

An hour and a half later, he stopped two blocks from his apartment house and cleaned his muddy shoes with his handkerchief. There was a man at the switchboard when he walked to the self-service elevator.

"A rotten night," Helf said amiably.

The sleepy man grinned. "Yeah—a good night for a murder, Mr. Helf."

Helf laughed and went into the elevator. In his rooms he downed a stiff drink of whiskey. Then he sat down and meticulously reviewed his crime. It looked perfect.

"Whiteside — Means — now Kwong. *I am the curse!* Fools, to think a piece of mineral can kill. It hasn't two hands like these, has it?" Helf lifted his strong hands and surveyed them. His face twisted into a great show of unholy mirth. "Superstition, my best friend. The curse of the Maga Ruby—That's funny. Wait, now. All you've got to do is wait, Walter Helf. The police have no idea that Kwong had anything to do with the ruby. I'll have to tell the Farwells about that."

The authorities did not get a look at Helf's third victim until late the next day. A farmer on his way to town happened to see the wreck down the gully. The papers simply stated that Willie

Kwong, a resident of the city's Chinatown, had skidded on the wet pavement and fallen to his death. Willie Kwong had been of little importance.

Helf went to see the Farwells. The girl's eyes were heavy and he could see that her nerves were raw. Mark Farwell was drunk again, his face covered by a two-day growth of beard. His mood was ugly.

"I suggest you get rid of the stone, Miss Farwell," Helf said.

"What? You think I'm going to let a silly superstition take that ruby away from me? If that's all you came for—Means' death was accidental. White-side had asthma. Perfectly simple, isn't it? You're being a fool."

"I read something in the paper tonight, Miss Farwell. On the surface it looks like a harmless news item. It's about the death of a Willie Kwong. He was killed in a motor accident."

"Well?"

"Kwong was Means' servant for the past three weeks," Helf said, letting words come out slowly.

A cigarette slipped out of Mark Farwell's palsied fingers. It began to burn the rich rug, but it stayed on the rug unnoticed. Odette Farwell's eyes went round and shocked with fear.

"Kwong was—"

HELF laughed deep within him, but he nodded solemnly.

"Perhaps he got a look at the ruby. Means had it for awhile. He let Kwong pick it up—perhaps. The papers will get the connection before long. They'll build up that crazy story."

"Crazy?" young Farwell almost shrieked. "What more proof do you want? Listen, Odette, get rid of it—tonight—please—Something terrible is going to happen. . . ."

"You're drunk!"

"Yes, worse than drunk. Not whiskey alone—something else. You get rid of that—"

He slumped down in his chair when Helf's heavy hand hit him in the chest.

"Pull yourself together, you fool!"

Farwell's body shook. He kept mumbling:

"Three dead. Got to get away somehow. If she doesn't take that ruby—"

Fear stalked the Farwell mansion.

Walter Helf sat in the room, fanning the fear to a hellish flame. The manservant, the girl told him, had left the house. The housekeeper had given notice. The fools!

Odette Farwell paced the floor, smoking an unbroken chain of cigarettes. Her usually well coiffured hair was in disarray. Her eyes were wild. She was a bundle of screaming nerves.

Time passed and Helf kept feeding the fear to the Farwells. He thought he had Mark Farwell's mind read as clearly as if it had been an open book. Helf knew what had been going on in the wastrel's mind for the last forty-eight hours. He would gamble on it. He had to.

"You're alone here. That stone is worth a fortune. There are men in this city who would kill a dozen people for less."

Odette Farwell turned and screamed at Helf.

"I know that, you idiot! Do you have to keep harping on that? I still don't believe such fantastic nonsense!"

She turned and fled from the room. Helf did not see her again for twenty minutes. Her nerves had steadied and her eyes looked strange as she dipped red-nailed fingers into the almost empty leather cigarette box.

"A sedative again," Helf thought. "When it wears off, one of you here will be a corpse."

CHAPTER IV

Death Himself!

MARK FARWELL got up and reeled out of the room. A numbing silence fell over the mansion. Then Helf and the girl heard Farwell pacing furiously somewhere above. Odette Farwell pressed her clenched hands against her head and gritted her teeth.

"He said that whatever happens, it will be my fault. If he is killed, his blood will be on my hands. Why does he say those things? He's drunk, I know. But he keeps staring at me."

"He's talking through his hat," Helf said, rolling the words on his tongue.

"Look out for him. For a stone like that, even a brother would—"

"Why doesn't he stop that walking around up there?"

The girl reached for the whiskey decanter, and Helf took it away from her. She was breaking fast!

"No more of that. You need a cool head, Miss Farwell. Go get some rest and *don't* take a sedative."

"I—I'll go. You stay here, Helf. I'd like to know there was a man in the house somewhere. You can sleep here on the couch. Just for tonight. My nerves—" She touched a match to a cigarette and then laughed. "I still don't believe those silly stories, Helf. I won't give up that stone. It's beautiful, shines like a big drop of blood. It— Good night, Helf. You'll stay?"

"Sure, sure."

It was late when Mark Farwell stopped pacing overhead. The thump-thump-thump of his feet echoed in Helf's ears a long time after he had stopped.

Helf turned out the lights and lay down on the divan, his face alight with a satanic smile. Fear was all around him but it did not brush against him. For he was the curse. He was the threat. In the minds of those upstairs, a cavalcade of corpses kept marching on. They thought of yellow men up there, too. Mark Farwell would be thinking of the Maga Ruby.

You've broken them, Helf. Something should blow wide open tonight. Even you, Helf, get ideas when you think of that stone. A weak man like Farwell, hating his sister, wanting to run away from a terrible fear, without money—

Helf lay on the divan, eyes open and staring at the dark ceiling. An hour passed, another.

Then it came—the sound of a shot! After moments of dread silence that sent a terrific hammering at Helf's temples, the housekeeper began yelling up above.

Helf ran up to Odette Farwell's room. He found Mark stretched out on the floor. He was dead.

Powder smoke bit into Helf's nostrils and a little curl of it played near the ceiling. Odette Farwell stood braced against the table. She was in negligee,

her hair streaming down over her shoulders. The automatic pistol was still in her hand. There was a widening red blotch on Mark Farwell's white shirt front.

"H-he came in to kill me," Odette Farwell stammered. "I was afraid to sleep. He bent over me and I—shot—him—"

She slumped to the floor.

"Get the police!" Helf barked at the housekeeper quaking in the doorway.

Walter Helf's devilish soul was filled with gloating. Another corpse. Odette Farwell did not know who that was on the floor. When she found out, she would need a strong sedative—a very strong one. The police would come and immediately they would blurt it out.

The curse!

Helf wanted to laugh. Mark Farwell had donned a cheap suit of clothes and he had a handkerchief over the lower part of his face. Helf knew he had been thinking along with Farwell.

HELF went downstairs when the cops came.

"It was Farwell himself," he said to them. "Tried to steal that stone from his sister. She shot him. My God, what is it? Is there really such a thing as a curse?"

Trembling, Walter Helf poured himself a drink. He knew he was putting on a beautiful show of fright. A husky man from headquarters cursed.

"Yeah, this sure is getting spooky. It's got me wondering. Whiteside—Means—that Kwong, and now Mark Farwell. The girl— You better get her away, Helf."

From upstairs came a terrible screaming. It trailed into a wailing sound.

"They've told her," Helf gloated. "That drunken fool, he had it coming. Tried to steal that ruby. What did he expect but a bullet? I told her to sleep light. Hell, I need another drink."

A policeman came into the room.

"She's nuts. She keeps repeatin' what her brother told her last night. He said she would be responsible for his death. How did she know?"

"He told her he would die unless she got rid of the stone," Helf said. "He

was drunk. Maybe he wanted to get rid of it. Maybe he thought getting rid of it would save her life."

"Well, they can't do anything to her. It was plain self-defense."

Helf turned his face away, lest his eyes be mirroring the hellish gloating that was inside his black heart. They couldn't do a thing to Odette Farwell. She had not killed Mark. He had—Walter Helf, the curse of the Maga Ruby! These fools wouldn't know that. They wouldn't know that Odette Farwell was going to commit suicide before morning.

Helf hated to keep that secret to himself. Four corpses, another to join the parade. There was enough veronal in that glass upstairs to make that fifth corpse. Everything seemed terribly quiet above, but soon the medical examiner came down. The frightened housekeeper trailed him.

"She's quiet now," she said to Helf. "Gave her the sedative that was on the table. I made it a little stronger."

"You made it even stronger?" Walter Helf wanted to yell out. "Good, good! That's fine."

He simply nodded. His eyes swung away from the woman, evaded all other eyes in the room.

A half hour later, the police had gone. Mark Farwell's corpse was on the way to a funeral parlor. Helf was alone with the housekeeper.

"Did she say anything about the stone?" he said to her.

"She took it out of the wall safe, put it on the table. She told me to tell you to take it—take it anywhere, so she will never see it again. She looked like a crazy woman."

"Why not?" Helf said thickly. "She just killed her brother."

"I'm leaving this house. I'm going in the morning."

Walter Helf had come to the end of the horrible road. The men were dead, all of them. Odette Farwell would never awaken from her sleep. Even as he sat there, her heart might have stopped beating. He could already count her as dead.

Only one was left who had handled the blood red stone—Helf, and the curse would not harm the curse. It was so funny that he had to laugh. The

fools, they thought a chunk of mineral could kill! Killing takes a brain and two strong hands. Helf looked at his hands. He laughed silently and his brain whispered that he must go away. The police would say that Walter Helf had fled in terror to escape the curse of the Maga Ruby. Then Helf would really be free—with the hundred thousand dollars waiting for him up in that room!

He went out into the hall, walked slowly up to the room where Odette Farwell slept.

WALTER HELF looked down at the girl. Her face was ghastly. Her lips were parted, but no gentle breath stirred them. He touched her cheek. It was icy cold. She was dead.

Helf turned and looked at the dressing table. It was dark in the room, but a shard of light came in through the partly opened door and struck against the blood-red stone. Helf ran over and snatched it up. His ruby—his fortune! Five had died because of that jewel.

Laughing softly, madly, he stole out of the room and down the stairs. Death could not strike him. He was Death!

He got his hat and coat, put them on and hurried out of the house. His car stood out in front and rain was pelting down. It had been raining for hours. The wind howled and whined.

Grinning icily, Helf turned the ignition key and stepped on the starter. The engine refused to turn over. He swore and clambered out into the driving rain, hauled up the soaking hood. The rain had beaten in and wet the wires.

He ran around the corner of the big house, heading for the Farwell garage. He might as well take Mark Farwell's car. The young drunkard wouldn't be using it that night. The thought jerked a harsh laugh from Helf. Since he was Odette Farwell's guardian, nobody could question his right to use a Farwell machine.

He opened the garage door and went inside. He climbed into the long, sleek, yellow convertible coupe. The key was still in the ignition lock. He started to turn it. Instead, his eyes leaped frightenedly to the side.

A white face, twisted in a fury of in-

sane anger, sprang out of the darkness. Helf recoiled from a fist that leaped up at him. He gaped blankly into the ugly muzzle of a gun.

"Farwell, you rat, I've been waiting here for you!"

"I'm not—" Helf yelled in frantic horror.

But the garage rocked with the sudden blasting shots. Helf slumped down in the seat of the coupe. Blood gushed out of him through five huge, ragged holes.

Walter Helf was dead. The curse of the Maga Ruby had joined the cavalcade of corpses!

THE next day's papers were filled with the triple tragedy at the Farwell's. Odette Farwell had mistaken her brother for a burglar and had killed him. A few moments after she was told about Mark Farwell's death, she had committed suicide.

Walter Helf, the well known attorney, was the third victim to meet death there within the space of a very few hours. John Morton, a bookkeeper employed by the Bayliss Iron Works, walked into the Fourth Precinct Police Station and gave himself up as Helf's

murderer.

He told the police that the late Mark Farwell had paid him twenty-five thousand dollars to placate him for the interest Farwell had displayed in his wife.

But Morton asserted that the mere payment of money had angered him all the more. After brooding for some time on the wrong that had been done him, he determined to kill Mark Farwell. He did not know that his intended victim was already on his way to the undertaker.

Police found the Maga Ruby on the riddled body of Walter Helf, but were reluctant to touch the stone that has so far plunged six people into violent deaths. A reporter from the *Blade* carried the ruby to Police Headquarters. The police will turn it over to the curator of the Dettmer Museum.

The entire city is shocked by the series of deaths that even the most hardened skeptics are hard pressed to explain. Why did these people die? We cannot vouch for the truth of the Maga Ruby's earlier history, but we do know that Whiteside, Jackson Means, his servant, the Farwells, and Walter Helf, are dead because of it.

Who shall say that forces beyond our ken are not stronger than those visible to us here on earth? Six touched that stone, and six are dead! What is the answer?

Walter Helf could have given that answer. But Walter Helf was dead.

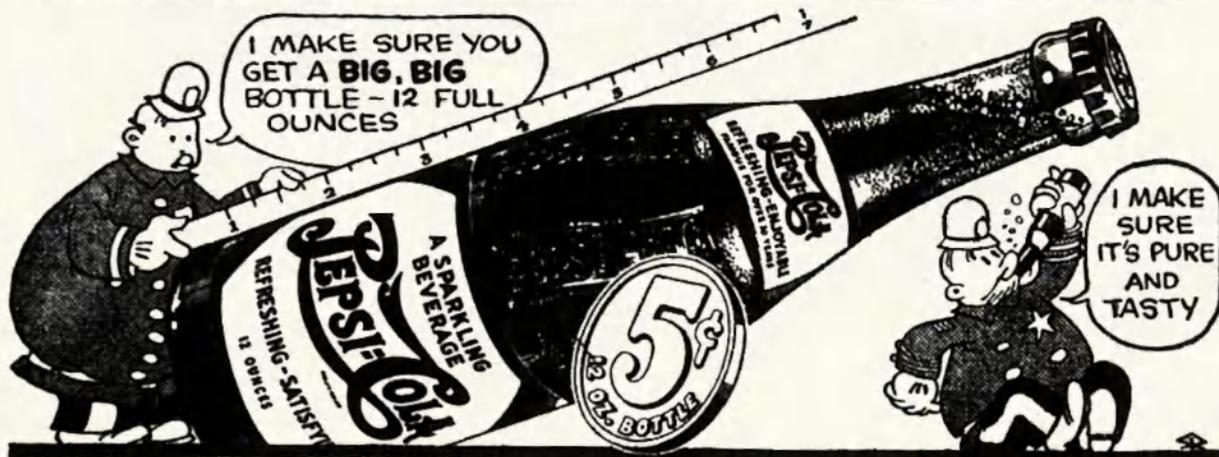
Still, could he really have answered it? He had not saved himself. . . .

NEXT ISSUE

THE RIPPER CREEPS

A Complete Novelet Introducing Colonel Crum,
the Master of Mystery

By JOHN H. KNOX



DREAD ECSTASY

By **MICHAEL O'BRIEN**

Author of "The Secret Panel," "Man of Haunted Valley," etc.

MAYA TARPANI was dead. She was lying downstairs in the receiving hall of the ornate mansion on the outskirts of Paris—dead. Her fragile unearthly beauty that profited so much by the delicate movements of life, was heightened by the stillness of death.

But she was dead—dead. The thought drove deep lines of agony into the handsome face of her husband. Calverton Wakefield sat upstairs and fingered idly the pearls that had once graced her slender throat, caught the fading fragrance of her perfume that would never again be scented anywhere—and sobbed.

His younger brother, Maurice, was attending the friends downstairs, receiving their condolences. Calverton Wakefield didn't want to see them—ever again.

When he had fallen so desperately in love with his dream wife, for she did seem a dream now, he had changed his way of living. Now he would change it more. There was a time when he had let the morbidness of the war years drive him into partaking of the frantic debaucheries of Paris. With the huge fortune he had alone inherited, he had stayed behind while his buddies returned to America.

He had sought out the gruesome, learned the mysteries of the ancient city of Paris—the dark narrow streets, the gloomy interiors of strange houses where incredible rites were practiced. He had bought the very house he lived in because the police had found the skeleton of a murdered man lying next to the furnace. And at the Opera, when he went to see Salome, his tall person with blond hair and deep-set black eyes was peered at from every box.



A skeleton was found next to the furnace

But suddenly, all that changed. His meeting with Maya Tarpani had decided their destinies.

They had married soon, very soon after they first set eyes on each other. And, after that, they were rarely seen anywhere. They were too happy together.

A Mourner's Dream Turns to Weirid Reality!

Even Maurice, who had come over from America to visit them after the honeymoon, hardly ever saw him and his graceful wife—Maurice, with his small eyes and stubby hands.

During those few months of happiness, Maya seemed to grow more beautiful and paler day by day. And then, two nights ago, she had turned to her husband in the morning's dark hours, she had wakened him whispering:

"Darling, promise me that even death will not separate us. I know that if you love me so terribly, I cannot die—to you. But, for the rest of the world, I am dying now."

Calverton thought now of his answer.

"I do love you, Maya, terribly—terribly enough. Oh, dear God, she cannot, she will not leave me now."

And he did not go to the funeral. He did not watch the small coffin deposited in the vault behind the mansion.

He gave himself over to a desperate struggle with his love.

IT was no more than a month later that she came to him in a dream. It was not in the guise of death, she came, but of life. Her lips were red, her skin was vibrant. When he awakened, he thought he heard a foot-step disappearing in the distance. The fragrance of perfume filled the still air of the room.

In the bed next to him, there seemed to be a depression, as though someone had slept there. It was still warm.

"She is coming back to me," he whispered exultantly, and pressed his lips against the warm pillow.

The next night, she visited him again, and in the morning he noticed with trembling excitement that her pearls were gleaming with a lost lustre. They had faded, had become lifeless after she died.

He knew that even the servants had seen the change that was taking place in him. He began dining with his brother, and no longer demanded that a third place be set at the table. He granted his brother's request for a larger allowance, although he thought Maurice's glee at receiving it was in bad taste.

Then, he knew, the great night was

at hand. He rang for the frightened maid. He knew she was frightened by the way she held her hand to her pulsing throat.

"You will lay my wife's night clothes out, Marie," he said curtly.

And as he watched the trembling girl going about her task, he kept thinking: "Tonight she will visit me. Tonight she will come, not in a dream, but in the flesh. Our love will make it so."

He lay down to wait for her, closed his eyes wearily.

The first sign of her coming was when the lights went on, full blaze. Then he saw her walking across the room toward her dressing table. In the darkness, she had slipped from her black dress into the gown Marie had laid out for her. He watched her lovely body moving so easily, almost floating.

Trembling, he slid his feet to the floor and started toward her, but she motioned him back, and sat down at the dressing table.

He thought: "That's so. She never wanted me to touch her until she left the dressing table." He went back to the bed.

At last, she came to him, sat on the bed beside him, cradled his head in her arms. Her delicate perfume filled his nostrils, the sweet odor of her skin. And a deep peace filled him, a peace he had not felt since she had left him.

"Yes," he remembered, "this is the way I always felt in her arms. As though nothing could touch me."

And even in his sleep, she didn't leave him.

She was kissing him softly, whispering to him. But she said:

"I must leave you now, my darling," she was saying, and even in a dream that depressing thought hurt him unutterably.

"But you were going to stay with me forever, after tonight," he said, and there were tears in his dream-voice.

"Only if your love brought me back. You see, my love was strong enough. That's why you could feel my body even when you were awake. But your love wasn't, my dear. You could only think of me as I *had* been. You couldn't really believe that I lived again, only that I once had lived."

AS he reached for her, crying "No . . . No . . . No" in his sleep, he felt her fading. Restlessly, he moaned, twisted in his bed. He came awake to find the moon shining on his face, the room empty.

In the deep agony of his spirit he got up. Started to walk across the room to the window opening on the balcony.

"Oh, Maya darling, beloved," he moaned hopelessly. "I have lost you again. But I cannot—cannot live without you, sweet. It is too much to ask. Show me, Maya, how I can find you again. Only show me. . . ." He raised his head, thinking he had heard her answering step on the balcony. As he turned to look, something silvery and bright seemed to flash through the window along the moonbeams, and fall on the floor near his outstretched hand.

Incredulously, he looked at the slim dagger in his hand. Exultantly, he recognized it. She had worn the delicately jeweled thing as a huge morbid pin at her shoulder. It had been pinned to her burial dress. This was her answer. So be it. She had followed him back to life and he had failed her. Now he must follow her into death.

The sound of his footsteps in the vault were hollow and weird as he stood there quietly, thinking of her. He would not fail her this time. Once more he looked out the half open door at the moonlit trees. Then he raised the dagger to his heart.

When he came to, the pavement was wet under him. He realized it was his own blood that slithered beneath him. The stone felt cold against his body—and then he knew he was not dead, that

the thrust had not gone home.

He *had* failed her again, but strangely, now, it brought him no agony. It was as though, ironically, the blow of the dagger had brought him back to life. Casually he noticed how the stone face of her grave drawer no longer fitted snugly.

Now, he remembered how the dagger had come flying into the room, from outside the window, and the smell of that perfume.

Weakly, he got to his feet, started toward the house. He could feel his shirt sticking wetly to his chest.

When he walked into Maurice's brightly lighted room, Calverton saw his brother start, his eyes wild with fear.

"You're dead," his brother screamed. "Go back to the tomb. I saw you die out there. Go back."

Now he knew. He had made sure. His brother's maddened eyes were fixed on his chest. Strange, he thought dispassionately, he hadn't thought to remove the small dagger that hadn't reached his heart. It was still sticking there, in the flesh.

Quietly, he withdrew it, put it in his brother's hand, walked out of the room. Behind him he heard a grim shriek, a gruesome gurgle.

IT was in the hospital that the police inspector told him what they had found—his brother's throat cut from ear to ear. They were investigating with the thoroughness of the French police.

Dully, he told the story. Listlessly. "I see," the inspector said. "He
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College Humor

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THE BEST COMEDY IN AMERICA

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MY FATHER IS A VAMPIRE!

A Complete Novelet of Bizarre Witchcraft

By **THORP McCLUSKY**

Author of "When the Red God Laughed," "The Phantom Sweatship," etc.

CHAPTER I

Home Without Mirrors

THE blood-red sun was already dwindling behind a pine-serried notch deep in the Adirondack hills. Larry Cavanaugh topped the last rise before home and looked down. For the first time in eight long and turbulent years he saw again the twilight-purpled valley in which he had spent his youth, and the great stone house in which he had been born.

Bitter-sweet memories flooded his thoughts as he slowly set his two heavy suitcases down in the stony, rutted road. He flexed his aching arms and mopped rivulets of perspiration from

his lean, tanned face with a sodden handkerchief. Uppermost in his mind was a grim, disturbing query.

"What if Father hasn't changed, after all? What if he's still the same—still clinging to those childish fancies and half-mad theories that caused our quarrel? What if my letter, this gesture of friendship I am making now, fail to restore him to sanity—or at least to tolerance? Poor old man, he must be terribly lonely—"

After a long moment he worriedly shook his head, picked up the heavy suitcases and plodded ahead. As he descended the hill, he could see the house more plainly. It stood square and austere in the bottom of the valley, at the end of the road.





When Larry Cavanaugh
Returns to the Old Farm,
the Foul Undead Welcome
Him—and His Blood!

He gazed down at the flawless face of the
red-lipped girl

This was dismal country, grudging country, hard to farm. Only two other farms in all the three miles back to the railroad flag-and-whistle stop, and both of those, Larry had noticed as he passed, were deserted now. It looked as though the Keenans and the Oschlegers had given up the unequal fight and moved to the city. . . .

Yes, the mountain back-country farms were becoming more bleak, more lonely now than ever. And yet Larry, as he plodded along, felt a swift resurgence of tenderness for these grim and aging hills among which he had lived his youth.

These worn mountains had been old before the Rockies were formed. They were perhaps the oldest mountains on earth. And they were rich in legends, in the sagas of the Six Nations, and later, bloodier tales. More than two centuries of savage and unrelenting warfare began with the French and Indian wars and only really terminated when Nat Foster—James Fenimore Cooper called him Leatherstocking—shot his last redskin at Old Forge on the Fulton Chain of lakes.

One old legend in particular had fascinated Larry as a boy—the persistent rumor of a fabulously rich silver mine which had been worked by the Indians for centuries. But the secret of its location had never been discovered by white men. There was the historically authenticated tale of an old Indian brave who for forty years and more had bought all his powder and ball and fire-water at Burlingame's Post, paying for all his purchases with nuggets of pure silver the size of a man's two fists.

Nat Foster, in his memoirs, admitted that he had trailed the old redskin across Herkimer and Oneida and Lewis counties, not once but many times, hoping thus to discover the rich lode—but without success. The old redskin had never relaxed his vigilance. The secret of the Indian Silver Mine died when he died.

Oh, yes, there were plenty of tales about these hoary hills that Larry loved. . . .

Twilight lay deep in the quiet valley as Larry followed the long curving sweep at the road's end. Past the end of the faint footpath, he came down to

Little Mirror Pond, an exquisite, tiny lake back in the woods a half mile from the house. There Larry had learned to swim, and on its pine-shrouded shore, his father had often expressed the desire to build a summer cabin.

Larry turned in toward the house. The thin red rim of the sun had vanished. The swift mountain night was falling.

"Odd," Larry thought, with a sudden flickering of apprehension as he approached the porch. "I don't see any light in Father's den. Why, the whole house is dark!"

ABRUPTLY, realization swept him. He had not heard one word from his father since the day, eight years in the past, that he had called his father an egocentric daydreamer and, worse, a blasphemous fool. And his father had ordered him from the house. Thanksgiving and Christmas had come and gone, that year, without communication between father and son.

Then Larry's company had sent him to China. When the Japanese finally succeeded in crowding him out, he had been recalled to the States. Even now, after the lapse of years and with a two weeks' vacation ahead, it had cost Larry a real effort to swallow his pride by writing to his father, and then following that letter home. Pride, in the Cavanaughs, was a characteristic as hard as flint. . . .

Had his father died during those eight years? Was the Cavanaugh house, like the Keenan and the Oschleger, now tenanted only by dust and memories? It might well be. So far as Larry knew, he and his father were the last of the Cavanaughs.

Of course there had been Murray Cavanaugh, his father's twin brother, whom, incidentally, Larry had never seen. Murray Cavanaugh, as Larry had gathered from various remarks his father had let slip during Larry's boyhood, had been a thorough renegade, a vicious changeling, rotten clear through.

Forty years ago, Larry's grandfather had kicked Murray Cavanaugh out, disinherited him, told him that he never wished to look upon his face again. And Murray Cavanaugh had never been

seen or heard from since. Well, probably he was dead by now—God rest his soul—

When Larry was within a few feet of the house, all his melancholy misgivings were abruptly dispelled. He heard the crunch of footsteps on hard-packed earth. Immediately afterward, three persons, a man and two women, appeared around the east corner of the house.

They were walking slowly and leisurely along the narrow path that led halfway up a low and heavily wooded hillside to the gray mausoleum. Larry's great-great-grandfather, Gregory Cavanaugh, had built the tomb in 1782, from hand-hewn limestone blocks, to shelter the coffins of the Cavanaugh dead.

"Father!"

Larry dropped the suitcases and hurried toward the tall, iron-gray-haired man who walked at the head of the little procession. Twenty paces, and they stood face to face. Impulsively Larry extended his right hand. More deliberately, the other grasped his hand in a grip of astonishing power. Their hands separated. But in that brief instant of contact, Larry had received a distinct impression that his father's flesh was oddly, unpleasantly cold.

"Poor circulation, no doubt," Larry thought briefly. "No wonder, at his age. Why, he's—seventy-two! But he's certainly strong for his age. That grip of his is like iron."

IN other ways, too, it seemed to Larry that his father had changed. He appeared somewhat thinner than Larry remembered him. There were peculiar, deep hollows beneath his cheek-bones, and his lips were thinner and redder than Larry recollected—almost like a knifegash in his strangely pallid face. . . .

"Well, Laurence," the older man purred, his voice soft, almost gloating. "Welcome home, son!" He turned, then, toward the two women—one middle-aged, the other young and almost incredibly beautiful in a dark, alien, uncomfortable way. "Laurence, I want you to meet my—wife, Beatrice, and Eileen, her daughter—"

The two women inclined their heads

in a brief, somehow *watchful* gesture of acknowledgment. But neither spoke, nor did the masklike immobility of their pallid faces change. Larry, dazed by his father's unexpected announcement, stammered a few appropriate banalities.

After a moment his father grasped his arm and led him back toward the house, the woman and girl silently following. And again as they walked along, Larry was aware of the strange, weird coldness of his father's fingers—a coldness that struck through the rough tweed of his coat and raised little crinkles of gooseflesh on his biceps. He felt almost painfully relieved when they approached the suitcases. Standing beside the steps, his father released that viselike grip.

"I'll carry the bags," he said hurriedly, as he saw his father reach for the larger bag. "They're pretty heavy. There's some jade and a bronze Buddha in the big one—"

But the gray-haired man gave a deep, throaty chuckle, as though at some sinister joke which his son did not yet comprehend. He picked up the two bags as easily as though they were filled with feathers. He walked lightly, resiliently up the worn steps and opened the storm door, then the permanent entrance door, and entered the house.

Following his father into the thick gloom inside, Larry wondered why the storm door had been left on until late May. But that wonder was lost in a far greater bewilderment. His father had touched a switch on the wall, just inside the door, and the hall lights flashed up.

Good God, what manner of slattern had his father taken to wife! The place looked and smelled as though it had not been entered for months—let alone cleaned. Dust lay everywhere, thick dust that lay in a gray blanket on the gay nineties furniture which once had glistened from frequent waxings and polishings. Yard-long cobwebs hung from the ceiling and festooned the stair-rail.

Bewilderment and anger welled in him like a sullen flame. Larry stood aside while the two women entered the house. Without speaking, without even looking at him, they walked down the hall and passed through the broad

door that led into the huge, old-fashioned dining room.

What kind of in-laws were these, anyway? Was the whole household crazy?

But again his father was speaking, hurriedly, with forced joviality, as though attempting to gloss over the churlish behavior of his wife and her disturbingly beautiful daughter.

"It's quite all right, Laurence, quite all right. You know they like you, and all that—but they're—shy. We don't get about among people much. No normal human contacts at all, as a matter of fact."

"So the old man's more eccentric than ever," Larry thought somberly, as his father continued with painful haste.

"I'll explain everything after you've had your supper, Laurence. The story's much too long to tell now. Let's go upstairs. You'll want to unpack your things and wash up a bit. I've kept your old room just as it was when you went away, son—"

A GAIN before Larry could intervene, he picked up the two heavy suitcases and leaped springily up the stairs. Larry almost had to run as he followed.

They entered the well-remembered room. His father set the two suitcases down in the center of the worn Brussels carpet. He stood rubbing his hands together, affably baring his teeth in a peculiarly wolfish grin. To Larry, it seemed distinctly sinister, distinctly alien to the familiar Celtic Cavanaugh smile.

The odd thought struck Larry that his father's teeth were almost indecently white, and more pronounced than he remembered them. The canine teeth were particularly long and abnormally pointed—as though they had been filed to needlelike sharpness. They more nearly resembled carnivorous fangs than human teeth.

"Maybe they're a set of new plates," Larry thought.

A warm surge of affection swept him as he gazed about the old familiar room. There were all his Tom Swift, Horatio Alger and Tarzan books, standing in their accustomed place on top of the

wardrobe. His college pennant still hung on the wall at the head of his bed. He opened the wardrobe door, saw his blue denim overalls hanging there on the same old hook. Even the red-and-blue patchwork quilt he had so admired as a very small boy remained on his bed.

So his father, despite their quarrel, had gone on loving him through the years!

But otherwise the room had changed. Like the downstairs hall, it was dusty, stagnant with long dead air. Actuated by some obscure impulse, Larry turned back the bedcovers, touched the sheets. They were cold, clammy. The bed had not been aired for months. Leaving the bed turned down, Larry turned to his father. He was determined not to reveal to the older man his inward astonishment and perplexity.

"It was swell of you, Dad," he said quietly, "to keep my room just as it was." He paused. "But what's happened to the mirror over the bureau? It's gone."

The gray-haired man nodded, smiled cryptically.

"A little accident," he explained suavely. "The mirror was broken, and I've just kept putting off having it replaced."

"Too bad," Larry replied. "They don't make mirrors like that one any more. Well, Dad—guess I'll wash up. Bathroom still in the same old place—down at the end of the hall?"

The older man's thin smile deepened on his unnaturally carmine lips.

"Still in the same old place, son. You run along. I'll meet you downstairs. Your supper'll be ready by then."

Grinning, Larry shucked off his coat, collar and tie, and ambled down the hall to the bathroom. He opened the door, stepped inside.

He stood motionless in amazement that slowly turned to terror—

Dust lay thick on the bathroom's linoleum floor and in the tub. Cobwebs trailed from the ceiling and the archaic, open pipes. But it was not at these evidences of neglect that Larry gazed while the blood chilled in his veins and his brain whirled with an ancient, fantastic horror—

He was staring at the door of a small,

prosaic-looking, white-painted medicine cabinet that hung over the wash-bowl. There had once been a mirror set in that cabinet door. But the mirror was no longer there. It had either been removed or wilfully broken from its frame—so carefully that not the tiniest shard of silvered glass remained. Only the bare pine boards that had supported the glass were left . . .

"Dear God!" Larry whispered to himself. He stared and stared at the naked panel where once the mirror had rested. "What kind of people live here? Why can't they endure the presence of a mirror in their house?"

CHAPTER II

People Who Do Not Eat

HOW long he stood there, just inside the door of that prosaic old bathroom on the second floor of the dust-buried house, Larry Cavanaugh never really knew. Only gradually did his swift, unreasoning terror wear off. His brain reluctantly grasped at the melancholy probability that his father's eccentricities had at last deepened into madness.

Obviously, then, the two women were unscrupulous human leeches who were cleverly humoring the old man—and probably bleeding him, bit by bit, of whatever small savings he still possessed.

"I'll keep my eye on those two ladies," Larry thought grimly. "If they're rooking Dad, I'll spike their guns in damned short order!"

Confident that he had arrived at a plausible solution of the whole bizarre affair, he returned to his room. He rummaged in a suitcase for a clean towel, soap, and the mirror from his shaving kit. With these he went back to the bathroom and made himself presentable.

A few minutes later he descended the stairs to the front hall, where his father was waiting.

"Your supper's ready, son," Brian Cavanaugh boomed jovially, nodding toward the dining room door. "Simple fare. We three are rather — faddists

about our diet. I'm afraid you'll have to eat alone."

"Oh, I'm not fussy, Dad," Larry protested quickly, as they entered the dining room. "Whatever you people have will be all right with me."

"I wonder," the older man murmured, as he seated himself at the head of the long table and gestured toward the chair on his right. "I wonder if you would relish—our food. But we'll keep you company, anyway."

Larry sat down. In the multicolored glow from the stained-glass chandelier directly above, he saw that the table, at least, was clean and shining. It had been recently dusted and polished. But the rest of the room, like the rest of the house, was blanketed in dust.

With a brief, sharp resurgence of eerie terror, Larry noticed that the bevel-edged plate glass mirror was missing from the huge sideboard!

Half angrily he was about to speak, to ask his father what all this childish mummary meant. But at that instant the door opened and the middle-aged woman came in. She was carrying an oval wooden tray.

Still preserving her aloof silence, she placed before Larry a bowl of chicken stewed with vegetables, three or four slices of stale bread and a bit of old butter, a saucedish of canned blackberries, an aluminum kitchen spoon and an iron carving knife.

Didn't they use silver utensils in this crazy house?

"This is getting too much like a horror movie. All this buildup—for what?" Larry thought. "It doesn't seem possible that Dad's cracked enough to swallow all this rigmarole. Still, I suppose there's no limit to the imaginings of a madman's mind—"

Politely he smiled his thanks to the woman. Ignoring him, she quietly seated herself at the foot of the table and relapsed into stonelike immobility. He waited a moment, but obviously neither the woman nor his father was going to eat. So, casually, he picked up the aluminum spoon and attacked the stew.

Again the kitchen door opened, and this time the young girl entered. She was carrying a wine bottle and a glass, which she set before him. Like

her mother, without seeming to notice him as a human being at all, she glided to the chair opposite him and silently sat down.

"Well!" Larry thought, and he realized that he was becoming faintly irritated by all this pseudo-weird play acting. "She's pretty, all right. But if she wants to ignore me I can ignore her, too. I can play at being crazy just as well as the rest of this household."

Shrugging, he poured a glass of wine and took a long sip. It was sherry, of a really excellent vintage. He remembered that his father had always liked good wine.

"Aren't you having any wine, Father?" he asked casually.

The gray-haired man's lips flickered a thin smile.

"I've stopped drinking—wine, son."

Why had he hesitated before uttering the word *wine*?

As he ate, Larry was uncomfortably aware that the girl was staring at him. He glanced up, stared at her squarely. The smouldering intensity of her gaze struck him like a physical blow! He noticed for the first time that her eyes were unnaturally large, and black as bottomless space, with pinpoints of crimson light dancing in their depths. For an instant he returned her intense, burning, somehow *hungry* appraisal. Then, with an almost violent effort, he looked away.

"What in hell is she trying to do, anyway?" he thought angrily. "Hypnotize me? Are *all* these people cuckoo?"

Larry finished eating. The two women rose. Neither had uttered a word throughout the meal. Beatrice, the mother, cleared the dishes away. Without a backward glance, she vanished into the kitchen. Eileen, the daughter, with a brief look at the still half-filled wine bottle, followed. Father and son were left alone.

"Come in to my den, Laurence. We can talk there undisturbed."

Larry nodded. Rising, he followed his father across the hall to the small, austere furnished room his father had always used as a sort of den-library. He remembered that room well—its plain mission furniture, the roll-top desk, the coalstove with its angled pipe boring into the chimney above

the bricked-up fireplace, the bookcases laden with musty old tomes.

Like the rest of the house, the room was unchanged, except that it was no longer immaculately clean. Without surprise, Larry saw that dust and cobwebs were everywhere. The windows were almost opaque with dirt.

Old Brian Cavanaugh seated himself before the rolltop desk, and Larry sat down gingerly in the old Morris chair. Despite himself, his glance traveled furtively toward the bookcases in which his father kept the damnable volumes which for many years, as Larry remembered, had engrossed his waking hours.

With a start of foreboding, Larry saw that they were all there—the infamous *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, Ludvig Prinn's *Mysteries of the Worm*, Mycroft's *Commentaries on Witchcraft*, the black *Book of Eibon*, and many others. More, that obscene and blasphemous library had grown. There were new volumes which Larry did not remember, volumes his father must have acquired during the eight years Larry had been away.

SLOWLY, sardonically, Brian Cavanaugh nodded, almost leering at Larry.

"Yes, son. After you—left home, I plunged with even greater vigor into my studies—those studies which you, in your youthful egoism, once told me were 'senile silliness.' Son, I am glad that you have returned. I can now prove to you that my studies, which you so long derided, were not in vain. I can now offer you the immortality for which I sought so long, and which I have at last achieved!"

"So that's it," Larry thought bleakly. "I was right. Father's crazy as a loon—"

"That's fine, Dad!" he exclaimed, trying to make his voice sound hearty, approving. "How did you do it? Did you summon Satan by intoning some ancient ritual, and barter your soul to him in exchange for immortality?"

The older man's eyes narrowed, burned with feral intensity as he replied.

"Don't talk like a fool! Neither

Satan nor any other of the gods and demons of mythology exist. There is only one Supreme Being—and He does not barter for souls. No, I achieved bodily immortality in a less spectacular, more earthly manner. I became—a vampire!”

So that was his father's delusion, that he was a vampire! Larry should have realized it sooner. It explained everything, the empty mirror frames, the dramatic procession down the hill from the old mausoleum, the absence of food on the table, the totally neglected house. Lord, the old man must be living in a perpetual state of make-believe! Larry wondered if he slept all day, from sunrise to sunset, as vampires are reputed to do. It seemed probable, for there is logic in madness. . . .

Then did he sleep in the mausoleum—in a coffin? That, too, seemed probable.

And on what did he feed? Did he actually subsist, like the vampires of legend, on human blood? And if so, *where did he get that blood?*

Good God! His father's insanity was beginning to reveal possible aspects which were far more dangerous than Larry had at first supposed. He might be homicidal. He might already have murdered—sucked the blood from the living!

Larry thought grimly of the Keenan and the Oschleger homes—empty, deserted—

The older man's lips twisted in a cunning smile. Abruptly he spoke.

“I see that you don't believe me, Laurence. As before, you consider me mad. Well, that is understandable. And so I counsel you, and warn you. If you wish to join us, to become as we are, to enjoy the immortality which, barring destruction at the hands of vengeful men, is the heritage of every vampire—then remove from your throat the crucifix your mother gave you as a child and which you have worn ever since. But, if you do not wish to become as we are, and I tell you this because, though a vampire, I am still your father, then go away from this house at once!”

“Father, please!” Larry cried. His voice, despite himself, was fraught

with sorrow and incredulity. “Please don't tell me you believe that rot!”

Implacable, his face stony, Brian Cavanaugh replied.

“Laurence, I will not argue with you further. I will merely conclude by telling you this. Three years ago I learned of an outbreak of supposed vampirism in northern Ireland. I went there, bribed the authorities to permit me to open the suspected graves. I found that, as I had half-hoped, the rumors were true. But I did not destroy the undead bodies, those of a mother and daughter. I brought them here. Later I permitted them to suck my blood—to make me as they are. It was my only hope of immortality. My natural life was about run. It is my hope that you, too, will willingly become one of us.”

Bitterly, cruelly, Larry laughed.

“Father, I've told you before what I think of all this—”

His father rose.

“Then there is no point in continuing this conversation further. Do you wish to leave this place now, or to remain?”

“I'll remain. It's the only course I can take that may bring you to your senses.”

Red flames glowed deep in Brian Cavanaugh's eyes as he nodded, spoke with ghastly significance.

“Very well. I am sorry, but I can give you no more of my time now. The nights are all I have. But you know your room. Your books and things are all there. You may retire whenever you wish.

Larry stood up.

“Good night, Father,” he said softly.

The older man did not reply. He remained standing, immobile as an image. Only the red flames deepened triumphantly in his sunken eyes as his son quietly walked from the room. . . .

CHAPTER III

Death of a Vampire

LARRY CAVANAUGH went to bed at ten o'clock, without glimpsing again either his father or the two mysterious women. Ap-

parently the house, except for himself, was utterly deserted. Surprisingly, he fell asleep almost instantly. After all, he had ridden almost three hundred miles by rail, and walked three miles, carrying two heavy bags over a rough mountain road.

He slept uneasily, and awoke slowly, while it was still dark, struggling upward through a kaleidoscope of weird nightmare fraught with dreams of vampires. With extreme slowness he remembered where he was. After a few moments he rolled over on his side and stared foggily at the radium dial of his wrist-watch, lying in a chair beside his bed.

It was seven minutes past four. He had slept, then, for over six hours. Yet he did not feel rested. On the contrary, he was more enervated than when he had gone to bed. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. His mouth and lips felt dry as dust.

A curious conviction agitated him. Someone or something had visited that room while he slept. . . .

That was silly, of course. With the vague idea of going to the bathroom for a drink of water, he started to rise. But abruptly nausea struck him like an exploding bomb. The dim room swirled crazily, his stomach knotted, and cold sweat leaped out on his hot flesh.

He sank weakly back against the pillow, wondering what could have caused such extreme lassitude.

And then his brain reeled with new horror, while grisly chills swept his body. In the strip of vague light that extended from the open window to the bed, something was forming—something that looked like a thick fog, yet was undeniably, eerily human in shape!

It was slowly moving inward from the window toward him, and second by second it was growing more tangible, less nebulous. With utter soundlessness it came closer and closer to the bed. Now its weird transformation was complete. It was no longer nebulous and misty, but seemingly solid and real. A human figure.

It was the girl with the midnight eyes, the one he had first seen following his father down the path from the

Cavanaugh tomb—the girl Eileen!

He could not be mistaken. As though she shed an unholy luminosity of her own, he saw her clearly—her raven-black hair, her high proud breasts tight-bound beneath a demurely unfashionable bodice, the deep pallor of her preternaturally beautiful skin, the fathomless pools of gleaming night that were her eyes. . . .

And now she was standing beside the bed, gazing wordlessly down into his eyes with that strange intensity he had experienced earlier in the evening. Dimly he realized that he should tear his gaze away from the delicious, numbing stare. Yet he did not even try. Lord, but she was beautiful, beautiful as an odalisque!

Slowly she sank to her knees, slowly her eagerly parted lips descended over his face, hesitated, then moved downward slightly until they lightly brushed the hollow of his throat. As a man who dreams a nightmare and knows he is dreaming yet is powerless to awaken, he felt those lips. Grave-cold, they grasped and clung to his throbbing throat.

He knew he should feel revulsion, that he should tear himself away from her. But he seemed to be dreamily floating in a limitless sea of lassitude. Nothing mattered any more, only that she was close to him. Ecstatically he felt a sharp little pain in his throat. Then for a long time he felt nothing, only the cold clinging caress of her lips and a faint sensation of suction. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the room was swirling again.

So gradually that he did not even realize when consciousness was leaving him, he sank into black and bottomless oblivion. . . .

YELLOW sunlight, lancing prosaically through the dusty upper windowpane, drew him back to consciousness. The angle at which the bright rays slanted across the room told him that it was already early afternoon. Yet for a long time he lay there unmoving, hardly aware of who or what he was. Full of a tremendous tiredness, he felt like an old, old man whose life is almost spent.

At last he lifted his hands and looked

at them. They were ghost pale and of a curiously waxen appearance. With a shuddery premonition of what the result would be, he reached up and touched his throat. Two tiny, painful wounds were there. His fingertip, when he drew it away, was flecked with flakes of dried blood.

His head throbbing as though encircled by iron bands, he stumbled out of bed. He managed somehow to get into his clothes, and staggered weakly over to the bureau. He looked dully at the crucifix lying there. He had deliberately placed it there last night to give his demented father the fullest possible liberty of action.

Smiling uneasily, he picked up the little cross and slipped it into his breast pocket. For some reason he was afraid to place it back around his neck, to let it touch those raw and aching wounds in his throat.

He stood at the window, gulping in the clean warm air. He glanced downward at the oaken windowsill—

Once more his flesh crawled. For that window sill, across which he had last night seen drifting the hellish mist that had metamorphosed into a fantastically beautiful maiden, was covered with an unmarked film of dust!

It had not been a dream, then, or a trick of vision! Anything human coming across that window-sill would have left traces in the dust—and a dream has never yet left the wounds of needle-sharp teeth in a man's throat!

Larry Cavanaugh turned away from that window, went out the door and down the hall to the bathroom. There he drank glass after glass of water. Feeling a trifle strengthened, he walked downstairs and through the various rooms. All were empty, all void of any sign of human occupancy.

Afraid that he would go mad if he remained within that accursed house another moment, he walked through the dusty, echoing hall and out into the sharp clean sunlight. He sat down dully on the top step of the porch, rested his forehead in his nerveless, shaking hands. He tried desperately to think . . .

He knew now that it was all true. The whole ghastly sequence of events had begun years before, when his

father, fanatically determined to escape the natural death which is the normal heritage of every living creature, first started his studies in demonology. He knew now that his father, far from being harmlessly mad, had been damnably, hellishly sane! Had he not always been so material-minded, Larry would long ago have admitted the possibility that the vampire legends—universal for thousands of years in every country and among every race on earth—might be based on fact, however distorted, however supposedly supernatural.

For vampires *did* exist! *His father was a vampire!*

MERCIFUL God! Perhaps all three had banqueted last night, in turn, from his throbbing veins! He remembered that even when he first awoke in the night his mouth seemed unnaturally dry, his throat already ached. Perhaps the girl had not been the only one. Perhaps she had only been the last!

And in that hideous moment he knew what he must do—

Slowly, lips hard as frozen stone, tortured eyes unseeing, Larry rose to his feet. Blindly he stumbled down the worn steps, paused for an instant. Then he turned and walked swiftly, purposefully, around the house and back to the barn.

Lifting the rusting latch, he swung open the creaking doors, went inside, and picked up the axe from the dusty floor beside the sawbuck. He walked out of the barn quickly, crossed the yard to a row of young box alders his father had set out ten years before.

A few blows with the axe, and the smallest tree swayed and toppled.

Quickly Larry struck away the limbs, stripped the slender pole of bark, cut and pointed three two-foot stakes.

He picked up the stakes, swung the axe over his right shoulder. He returned around the house. He continued along the narrow trail that led up the wooded hillside to the mausoleum his ancestor Gregory Cavanaugh, had built to house the bodies of the Cavanaugh dead.

The mausoleum loomed before him,

low, ponderous and vague in the deep green twilight beneath the close-packed trees. It stood against the hill, jutting out from the underbrush-choked slope like some strange excrescence of the natural rock. It was, indeed, partly hollowed from the gray limestone of the hill. Lichens speckled its rough-hewn facade. Bright green mosses clung tenaciously in the narrow crevices between the huge rectangular blocks.

There was but one opening into that grimly utilitarian tomb. A ponderous and time-blackened iron door hung on hand-forged hinges embedded in the solid masonry.

For an instant Larry hesitated before that ancient yet still formidable door. His face utterly expressionless, cryptically impassive, he stared at the archaic lock. He did not remember ever having seen a key for the immense keyhole, yet a key must exist . . .

Was that key in the lock—*on the inside?*

His face paled, great beads of perspiration leaped out on his forehead as he let the axe and staves slip to the ground. He grasped the massive iron door handle, and tugged.

The door swung open easily, so easily that Larry knew instantly that it had been recently opened.

No later than just before dawn, perhaps?

And why was it unlocked, from the inside? Was he perhaps—expected?

No gush of foul or musty air rolled from the mausoleum as Larry stooped, picked up axe and staves, and stepped inside. The air within was as sweet as without, proof that the chamber had been opened frequently. Yet there was also a faint, cloying odor of recent death there, too. It was like a small warning voice whispering in Larry's brain. The old dead had long since crumbled into dust and dry bones.

But there were new dead here now—

LARRY walked slowly forward into the darkness within the tomb. Seven paces and he halted. He put the axe and stakes down, stealthily, as though he feared he would rouse the dead.

For a moment or two he peered

about uncertainly. The darkness at the rear of the tomb was almost impenetrable.

Then, as his eyes became a little more accustomed to the gloom, he started down the right-hand row of granite sarcophagi. He remembered from his youth that the sarcophagi near the door were all filled. Less than a half-dozen tombs remained unoccupied, far back in the slope of the hill . . .

Abruptly, then he halted. Chiseled in gothic lettering on the smooth granite facing of a sarcophagus he read, with extreme difficulty, a name he instantly recollected.

IRMA THAYER CAVANAUGH

Born 1841—Died 1919

His great-aunt Irma! He remembered her well, a hardy, merry old lady who had outlived all her generation—the last of the Cavanaugh's to be interred here. The next sarcophagus should be empty.

Empty? He knew it would not be empty—

With palsied, shaking hands he felt along the satiny contours of the next tomb. It was too dark here at the rear of the mausoleum to be guided by sight. He must read by the sense of touch alone. And then his blood stood still in his veins.

On that tomb there was no inscription. The smooth rectangle left by the stone masons for the engraver's chisel was utterly blank.

Yet he knew that that tomb was occupied!

Feverishly he fumbled through his pockets until he found a half-used packet of paper matches. His hands trembled so violently that he could scarcely open the packet. He tore off a match, struck a light.

As the deep gloom shrank back from the flickering yellow glow, his heart pounded convulsively. Horror beyond human endurance shriveled his throat.

For the granite lid had been removed from that sarcophagus! It had been removed, and neatly, precisely laid on its side beside the tomb. A polished, gleaming casket snugly nestled within the coffin's cold embrace — a *new* casket!

Normal sanity, normal volition left Larry, as pain leaves a nerve tortured beyond feeling. From that moment he moved mechanically, numbly, like an automaton, like a machine pre-set to perform a certain task. His conscious mind was temporarily mercifully short-circuited.

The flickering match burned down to his fingertips, wavered and went out. In the swift swoop of darkness he automatically dropped it to the stone floor and struck another. He leaned closer over the casket

He saw without emotion, without surprise, that the casket bore a bronze nameplate.

BRIAN CAVANAUGH

Born 1867—Died 1940

Rest in Peace

THE irony of that inscription meant nothing to his numbed brain.

His glazed eyes focused dully on the bronze clamps along the casket lid. They were unlocked. That small part of his nerve-shocked consciousness which still functioned had known they would be. He raised the casket lid—

And saw his father's face! Brian Cavanaugh's familiar high cheek-bones, aquiline nostrils, the tight-compressed, firm lips he remembered so well! The grizzled hair was brushed neatly back from the deep, broad forehead. There was a faint, enigmatic smile on the too red lips, an evilly carmine bloom on the smooth-shaven cheeks. His father looked not dead, but merely sleeping, as though he might awaken at any moment and smile at his son!

The match went out, but Larry had seen enough. Walking jerkily in the darkness, like a marionette controlled by a fumbling amateur, he crossed the floor. He picked up a single stake and the axe, and returned to the coffin.

Feeling in the black darkness with his left hand, he placed the sharpened wood over his father's heart. He struck heavily with the flat side of the axe—once—twice—thrice.

With the second blow, a gasping moan burst in the sooty dark from his father's lips. A single wrenching cry!

With the third blow, the grisly task was done. The stake grated harshly against the bottom of the casket

CHAPTER IV

Vampire's Confession

THOUGH his conscious mind did not know, his clothing was soaked with sweat. Yet his whole body was shivering violently, spasmodically.

He moved in the darkness to the next tomb, lit another match. That granite slab had also been removed. The inner casket lay exposed, with unfastened clamps. Again he performed his grisly task, this time upon the no-longer young, yet still beautiful body of the woman Beatrice, Eileen's mother.

But now—and silently he thanked God—no moan burst in the darkness from the cold dead lips as the pointed stake drove home!

Relentlessly he moved to the next coffin, opened the casket lid. He gazed down in the flickering light upon the flawless, paper-pale face of the girl Eileen. Her blue-black hair hung over her forehead like a crown of ebon night, as though she had not troubled to rearrange it after returning, sated, to her tomb just before the dawn. She was smiling, and a crimson smear glistened on her slightly parted lips. . . .

Larry's blood!

Crazily he crushed out the still-burning match and flung it away. In abysmal darkness he planted the last stake and drove it home. Staggering like a besotted madman, he closed each casket, fastened down the clamps. With a strength he had never before possessed, he lifted each granite slab and slid it across its coffin. Then he stumbled toward the dim rectangle of greenish light that slanted through the mausoleum's entrance. Blindly he reeled across the threshold into the sweet tree-shaded day, crashed the heavy iron door shut behind him. His body quivering, his fists clenching and unclenching agonizedly, he sank to his knees in the soft gentle grass.

He prayed. . . .

Minutes or hours later—how long the time was he never knew, except that the sun was close to the western hills before at last he attained a measure of sanity—he rose slowly to his feet and walked back down the hillside to the house. Deliberately, without pause or hesitation, he ascended the steps, crossed the broad porch.

Entering the house, he walked up the dusty stairs and down the silent hall to his old familiar room. He went directly to his suitcases, opened one, and lifted out his portable writing kit, his flashlight, and his Smith and Wesson .38 caliber automatic. He slipped the gun and flashlight into his hip pocket. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, placed the writing kit on his knees, and began to write.

Darkness was already creeping into the room when he folded the neat pages and slipped them into an envelope. He did not seal the flap.

With a last, wistful glance about the room, he walked quietly into the hall. He closed the door softly behind him and descended the stairs. Pausing at the foot of the stairs, he wedged the white envelope into a crevice in the newel post, where it would be instantly seen by any person entering the house.

Then he opened the front door, let himself out into the purple twilight, and closed the door behind him. He walked down off the porch, and up the path toward the mausoleum.

The sun had already set. Night was deepening. The brighter stars gleamed steadily.

AS he climbed the hill toward the mausoleum he walked more and more rapidly, like a man hastening to keep a tryst. It was pitch-dark beneath the trees, and once or twice he stumbled. As if only that moment remembering, he drew the flashlight from his pocket and flicked it on.

He was before the tomb now. The bright cone of light touched the pressed-down place in the grass where he had knelt. He swung the door open, and stepped briskly inside.

He walked quickly, without uncertainty, past the tombs of his ancestors. He halted at the rear of the crypt, be-

fore the unmarked coffin within which lay Eileen's body. Through long moments he stood silently, with bowed head, before that plain granite tomb.

Slowly he shifted the flashlight from his right hand to his left. He reached in his hip pocket for the gun, lifted its cold muzzle toward his right temple. The chilled steel touched his flesh. His forefinger tightened on the trigger. . . .

Seconds passed while he stood utterly motionless. Then, slowly, with a strange expression of tortured doubt twisting his haggard face, he lowered the gun.

He did not know that through all those hours of superhuman terror and strain, some small fraction of his mind had been obsessed with an incredible doubt. Mercifully, in that timeless hair-trigger moment when life or death depended on the twitch of a muscle, that bit of remaining sanity had asserted itself.

Moving slowly, with inexorable, dogged deliberation, his brain reeling with images that screamed for unmistakable refutation before he took his own life, Larry walked toward his father's tomb!

His hands were steady as rock when he slid the granite slab away, unfastened the clamps and lifted the coffin lid. Calmly, almost impersonally he directed the yellow flashlight beam on the dead face—

That face, he knew, was his father's. But a small thought, beating like an imprisoned bird within his tortured skull was—Why had there been no swift gush of fresh crimson blood when he drove the stake through his father's breast? For vampires, he remembered, reek with blood—

There had also been no issue of fresh red blood from the breasts of the middle-aged woman and her exotically beautiful daughter when he drove the stakes home to grate against their casket beds. Why? Why had the bodies of three supposed vampires—vampires who had recently fed—failed so utterly to exude blood when their lips had looked so full and red, so brilliantly, theatrically red?

Why had the blood that smeared their lips failed to cake, during the many long hours, since dawn, that they

had supposedly slept? Blood exposed to the air, even for a few minutes, should clot.

His father's lips were brilliantly, glisteningly red. And he remembered that the lips of those women, lying in their coffins, had gleamed bright crimson.

Carefully, then, with an oddly wooden expression of utter concentration on his face, Larry slipped the gun back into his hip pocket. He reached out and gently touched his father's breast and the embedded stake.

Horror began to return to him again. He fought to control it as he grimly lifted his fingers to his nostrils, smelled them.

CLINGING to his fingertips was a faint odor of corruption. But mingled with it was the clean sharp antiseptic smell of formaldehyde!

His father's body, even before it had been placed in the coffin, had been embalmed! But men are never allowed to embalm vampires—

His face gray and drawn but still utterly expressionless, rigid with the intensity of his effort to retain self control, Larry touched his father's carmine lips. He nodded with slow, grim detachment.

Those lips were tinted, not with fresh blood, but with lipstick!

The long lean muscles along Larry's jaw were knotting like tensing snakes as he closed the coffin and replaced the granite slab. He moved toward the next tomb. He reached out his left hand, carefully put the flashlight down—

Again, slowly, detachedly, almost mindlessly, like a zombie actuated by impulses originating far outside its own dim intelligence, he performed that ghastly ritual. He opened the tomb and casket and gazed down upon the worn, lined face of the middle-aged woman. He stared at her halo of graying hair and her compressed, red lips, at the stake he had driven through her body, stretched out before him in the flashlight's yellow gleam.

Steeling himself with almost superhuman effort, he reached out and touched the still lips, the face, the breast. For long moments he stood

there, his face an utterly expressionless, graven mask.

Then, abruptly, his fingers moved like detached entities with a life of their own totally independent of his mind's commands. They hooked into the broken dress fabric where the stake had penetrated into that strangely bloodless body, ripped it ruthlessly away from throat to breast in one swift, savage motion. His eyes, haggard pools of utter comprehension gazed at the smooth gray contours his act had revealed.

That body beneath his eyes was not the body of a vampire. It was not even the body of a dead, embalmed woman. It was not the body of anything!

It was merely a molding of soft clay, crudely fashioned in the likeness of a woman!

Larry ran to the third tomb, and again, yet this time with a strange dread whispering deep in the back of his brain, performed his weird examination. And in this last casket he found a beautiful, cryptically smiling mask of cunningly tinted and lipsticked plaster-of-paris. It was joined to a recumbent body of gray, soft clay that was dressed in a young woman's garments.

He knew now that, somewhere, the woman and the girl he had seen last night lived. These were merely effigies, made to resemble their flesh-and-blood originals. Yet the other body was without doubt that of his father— And without doubt it was dead.

What living man on earth so closely resembled his father that he, Laurence, his father's son, had failed to detect the impersonation?

There could be but one answer. Murray Cavanaugh, his father's renegade twin brother, whom he had never seen until last night.

Murray Cavanaugh had returned home!

Very slowly, while the pupils of his eyes dwindled to inexorable pinpoints and the grim mask of his face, though utterly immobile, seemed to grow grimmer, more granitic, like congealing stone, Larry nodded—

For some good reason Murray Cavanaugh wanted to drive him away, wanted to frighten him away from his own home.

What was that reason? To gain permanent control of the property? It seemed improbable. As Larry well knew, the farm as a farm was of little value. In any case, his grandfather's will had disinherited Murray Cavanaugh and his descendants forever.

Even Murray Cavanaugh could not hope to impersonate his dead brother indefinitely. No, the impersonation was undoubtedly planned to last for only a brief period of time. But throughout that time it was vital to Murray Cavanaugh that his nephew remain away from the Cavanaugh farm.

What was Murray Cavanaugh's scheme? Did he plan to sell the farm while using his dead brother's identity?

It seemed possible, yet he must know that the ultimate detection and exposure of such a fraud would be inevitable. Only by a quick transfer of the property to some comparative stranger could he hope to escape with his profits. And those profits would certainly not be large—only a few thousand dollars at most—hardly enough to justify the risk.

Since Larry went away the property must, in some way, have gained in value. That was the only logical explanation.

Again Larry nodded, reached to pick up the flashlight—

And in that instant he whirled to face the darkness behind him. From behind him, from the mausoleum entrance, had come the swift light rush of frantic footsteps!

Gliding toward him was the girl he had, until a few moments ago, believed a vampire, the girl whose supposedly unholy life he had believed that he had terminated only a few hours before. The girl Eileen!

"So it's you, is it?" he said, and his voice was soft as spun glass.

Only a few feet from him she halted, and he knew that she had seen the two open tombs. For a long moment she remained so, utterly immobile. In the darkness he could not distinguish her expression. Then, hesitatingly, she took a single step toward him, reached out an appealing hand.

"Larry! Larry Cavanaugh!" she whispered. "Listen to me. You've got to listen to me. You've got to under-

stand! Dear God, don't look at me like that!"

Larry's right hand moved, struck her uplifted hand away with the swift cutting motion of a lashing whip.

"Get out of my way," he snapped, in that terribly quiet voice. "Get out of my way. I'm going to find out right now why my uncle—my father's brother—pulled this obscene show. I'm going to the house for a little pertinent conversation with Uncle Murray Cavanaugh!"

THE girl had begun to tremble pitifully, like a viciously struck tuning fork. But she held her ground, only seemed to shrink like a lashed dog beneath the icy-hot fury in Larry's words.

"You can't go hating me like this. You can't go without understanding. Don't go like this! He'll kill you. He's armed—"

"So am I—Bride of Frankenstein!" Larry snarled, and his eyes were sheer pools of hatred. "And I can't go without understanding? I understand, all right. Don't let that worry you. Or are you trying to tell me that you don't play on Uncle's team any more?"

Words poured incoherently from her lips like long pent-up waters sweeping over a bursting dam.

"Listen to me, Laurence Cavanaugh, and try to believe me. I hate your uncle. I've always hated him! He's not human—he's a beast! But my mother didn't know that. She had a three-year-old daughter when he came into her life from nowhere and dazzled her into stealing all my father's savings and running away with him. She found out soon enough, though.

"He's made her stay with him ever since. Whenever she tried to escape from him, he told her that if she ever went back home they'd send her to State Prison and take me away from her forever. And she believes him—"

"For eighteen years it's gone on like that. My mother roamed the country with him, afraid to live with him, afraid to leave him. After I grew up, I still stayed with them, afraid to run away because of what he might do to her. He beats her horribly when he's drunk. He'd have killed her many times if I hadn't stopped him—"

CHAPTER V

Vampire or Human?

EILEEN'S voice had risen hysterically until it had become almost unrecognizable as speech, almost an unintelligible, anguished scream of bitterest hatred. For an instant she paused. Then, controlling herself by an almost superhuman effort, she went on, in a slightly calmer tone.

"Three months ago your uncle brought us here. The police in half a dozen cities were looking for him. He'd passed a lot of bad checks and he'd almost killed a man in a back-alley hold-up. He wanted to hide out for awhile.

"Your father wasn't living in the big stone house any more. He was living in a little cottage he'd built down on Little Mirror Pond. The big house was closed up—"

"That fits in all right," Larry stated coldly. "I know that for years Father wanted to build a cottage down on that pond."

The girl nodded, went on with desperate eagerness.

"After we'd been in the cottage about six weeks, your father became sick. He wouldn't have a doctor. He said the Cavanaughs were all strong as bulls and that he'd be up again in a few days. Doctors were no good anyway—"

Larry said nothing, only waited implacably.

"A few days later two men came to the cottage. Murray Cavanaugh met them, and they assumed that he was your father. He didn't say anything to correct their assumption. They were mining engineers, and they told your uncle that they had stumbled upon an old silver mine on the Cavanaugh property. They wanted a thirty day option on the mine, long enough to give them time to take samples of the ore—"

Understanding leaped in Larry's brain.

"The old Indian Silver Mine!" he said in a low whisper, almost to himself. "I've always suspected that the mine was located somewhere near here!"

Cold steel crept into his voice as he went on.

"It's all clear to me now. My uncle took that option money and forged my father's name to the receipt. More money might be coming, too—big money—quick, easy money. But to get that money he'd have to keep my father out of the way until after the option time expired. Maybe he was planning to kill my father, if necessary. Maybe he did kill him!"

The girl shook her head.

"No. That's one crime he didn't commit. Your father died just ten days ago, peacefully, in his sleep. But the option still had fifteen days to run. Your uncle knew that if he notified the authorities, his impersonation would be discovered. So he embalmed the body. He'd done almost everything at some time or other during his life—even worked for an undertaker—removed the bones from an occupied tomb, and interred your father in their place.

"Why he did that, I don't know, except that it probably was from some queer, twisted sense of shame. He even engraved a name-plate, polished the casket until it looked like new. Then, just two days ago, your letter came."

"I see it all now." Larry's words came wearily, then demanding, like the probing tip of a fine Damascus blade. "Except this. Why did you and your mother let him drag you into this plot?"

Her answer came in a small, choked voice.

"I'd made him promise that after he got the rest of the money from the mining company, he'd give us enough so we could go away from him forever."

SLOWLY, thoughtfully, Larry nodded. Very quietly he spoke.

"One thing more. Why did you come here now?"

Blindly, gropingly, she reached out her arms toward him.

"It was that letter, that pitiful note you wrote explaining why you were going to—kill yourself. The note you wedged into the newel post where somebody would be sure to find it, afterward. He found it right after you went out of the house. We two had been hiding in the attic all day. He

read it to me and—laughed!”

She was trembling violently, pitiably.

Through what seemed a timeless eternity Larry did not speak. Then, almost as though to himself, he whispered, very slowly:

“So you followed me to the tomb, to stop me!”

Still he made no move to approach her, to touch her. But his voice was curiously gentle as, after a moment, he continued with deadly significance.

“I’m going now—to find Uncle Murray. You’d better not come down to the house.”

For an instant a strange smile touched his set lips. Then he hunched his right hip slightly, feeling the cold reassuring weight of his gun. He reached out his left hand and took the flashlight from the coffin lid. Like a black, avenging shadow, he strode toward the mausoleum’s open, night-darkened maw.

With the suddenness of a lightning flash, a dazzling glare struck him full in the face. A deep-throated voice snarled.

“Don’t reach for your gun, Laurence! I’ve got you covered.”

Larry’s flashlight tinkled to the floor and shattered. Bathed in that blinding, pitiless beam, he slowly raised his hands above his head.

From behind the blinding beam of light came a sly, murderous laugh.

“You didn’t think I’d be fool enough to wait down at the house for you, did you, Laurence? Get back against that wall—both of you—and keep your hands up high.”

Larry stepped warily, tensely backward. The light moved forward across the mausoleum’s rough stone floor. From the shadowy figure in the blackness behind the beam, Murray Cavanaugh’s laugh came again.

“Brian Cavanaugh’s son, standing up against a stone wall, awaiting execution. What a priceless picture! For you know what I’m going to do, don’t you, Laurence? I’m going to kill you both, here and now, you and the girl. Why don’t you squirm, Laurence Cavanaugh? Aren’t you afraid to die at the black hands of Murray Cavanaugh, your renegade uncle? God, how my father loved that word!”

In the pitiless flashlight beam, Larry’s face was ghost-pale. But his voice was steady as stone.

“Wait, if only for a moment. Why do you have to kill us? Suppose I gave you my word that I’d let you get away with this steal you’re trying to pull. Suppose I promised to leave you alone afterward. Suppose this girl—”

A sardonic snarl interrupted him.

“Do you think I’m nuts? I’ve never trusted anybody in my life, and I’m not starting now. Least of all you and that girl. The first chance you got, you’d turn me in for forgery and for what I did to Brian’s body. I’d get five years anyway, maybe more. And five years to a man my age is just as bad as the hot squat—”

Beside the light something black and formless lifted very slowly. The man’s gun-arm. . . .

“Wait!”

LARRY was desperately playing for time, playing for a chance to grasp at the one infinitesimally tiny possibility of escaping death. He moved ever so slightly toward the left, one inch, two inches, keeping his hands high above his head, careful not to startle his uncle. He tried to speak calmly, but there was a small quaver in his voice.

“You asked me if I was afraid to die. I don’t want to die, of course—any more than you really want to kill me. You don’t really want to kill us, do you? You’re too clever to kill us except on the spur of the moment. You *must* be clever to have planned all this. It began when my letter came—when you realized that you couldn’t hope to impersonate my father well enough to fool me for long. You planned your hoax then, and it was clever, wasn’t it?”

From beyond the steady, pitiless light came a throaty, cunning, murderous laugh.

“You’re wasting your breath.”

Desperately Larry plunged on.

“It was all so simple, so beautifully simple, wasn’t it? You already knew of Father’s obsession for the weird and the unknown, and of the old quarrel between us. So you determined to make me believe that Father’s weird studies had really succeeded—that he

was really a vampire! You determined to frighten me so thoroughly that I would never wish to return.

"The dusty, cobweb-festooned house provided you with plenty of ready-made atmosphere. This girl and her mother were completely in your power. It was easy for you to brow-beat them into playing the part of vampires—have the girl go into my room in the middle of the night, right after she'd rubbed her lips and hands with ice. You made her pretend to suck the blood from two little cuts you'd made in my throat, probably with a razor blade, while I was asleep. Half of what I saw was hallucination, anyway. The wine I drank was doped.

"You were clever, too, the way you considered every possibility, even the remote one that I would stick after the night was over and inspect the mausoleum in the morning. My father's body was already entombed, even before you got my letter. But you made clay molds of the women's faces and cast plaster-of-paris masks from them. Tinted with water-colors and lipstick, with coiffures made from the stuffing out of an old horsehair sofa, those faces looked realistic enough. They certainly fooled me!"

Snarlingly, Murray Cavanaugh interrupted.

"And it all would have worked, too. You were on the verge of suicide. That note you left in the newel post proves it! Only that brat spoiled everything—ran out of the house and up the path so quickly that she took me by surprise. I couldn't stop her in time. Well," his voice suddenly hardened with murderous resolve, "you know it all now, Laurence. So—"

In the gloom beyond the light, the deeper blackness that was Murray Cavanaugh's gun-arm lifted!

Simultaneously the girl, Eileen, screamed. For an instant the torch-light beam wavered in her direction. It was the instant for which Larry had been waiting and praying.

HIS lean powerful hands, already raised high above his head, reached upward and backward with lightning swiftness. They clamped about the base of a small stone urn that

he remembered from his boyhood. It had always stood in a niche in the mausoleum's rear wall. His arms swung forward. Like a stone slung from a catapult, the urn hurtled straight toward Murray Cavanaugh's head!

The man ducked, just in time. Another fraction of a second and the heavy vase would have crushed his face into bloody pulp. The urn shattered against a granite coffin. Murray Cavanaugh's gun vomited orange flame.

Larry plunged forward, felt the fiery breath of a slug hiss past his cheek. There was no time to reach for his gun. His single chance of life was to come to close quarters with his uncle before the man could fire again.

He leaped forward savagely, bracing his body against the bullet that might tear through him at any step. Then his right fist smashed into Murray Cavanaugh's jaw. The next shot blazed harmlessly over his head. His left hand gripped Murray Cavanaugh's right wrist, twisted. His right hand sledged two terrific uppercuts into the older man's jaw.

Murray Cavanaugh sagged face-forward to the floor. His gun skittered across the cold stone. His flashlight dropped from his nerveless left hand sent its bright yellow beam slanting crazily across the floor.

Swiftly Larry stooped, snatched up the gun with his right hand and the flashlight with his left. He realized abruptly, like a man dreaming a nightmare, that Eileen was standing close beside him. She was swaying slightly. He put his left arm protectingly about her shoulders.

"Eileen, darling," he whispered, and his arm tightened around her. "Are you all right?"

A quickly-stifled sob reassured him.

"Don't worry, Larry. I'm all right."

Murray Cavanaugh, on rubbery hands and knees in the bright glare of his own flashlight, was dazedly shaking his head. His eyes were glazed, but they were clearing fast. He was a powerful man. Larry stood rigid, wary, looking down at him.

"Get up, Uncle—and may God forgive me for cursing our relationship,"

(Continued on page 112)

THE MAN WHO CAST TWO SHADOWS

By **RAY CUMMINGS**

Author of "The Midnight Fiend," "The Secret Grave," etc.



THE CLOUDS of earth sounded horrible as they struck the body that lay crumpled in the shallow grave. Frantically the tall, thin George Stark shoveled the loose earth and stones. The brilliant moon-

light, here in a little open path of the denseness of the woods, struck down into the grave and showed the dead face of Grant, with glazed eyes staring upward. Then a shovelful of earth struck the face.

Relief swept Stark. It was easier now. He shoveled a little more; then rested a moment, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his coat. The moonlight, from behind, cast a long grotesque shadow of him. Part of it was on the ground. The rest struck a tree near at hand and reared upward—his head and wide, thin shoulders, upright against the big, silvered white birch tree-trunk.

Again Stark shoveled, filling up this lonely, secret grave which he had dug in the woods. The end of James Grant. No one but Stark would ever know what had happened to him. One of the thousands of missing persons, never to be found.

The grave presently was leveled off. Stark was bathed in sweat, trembling, panting with the effort. He had always been a nervous, imaginative, apprehensive fellow, in delicate health this last year. God knows he had had enough to break his nerves, to terrify him. Tonight's work particularly.

It had been more nerve-shattering than he had expected, killing Grant, carrying the body here, a mile from

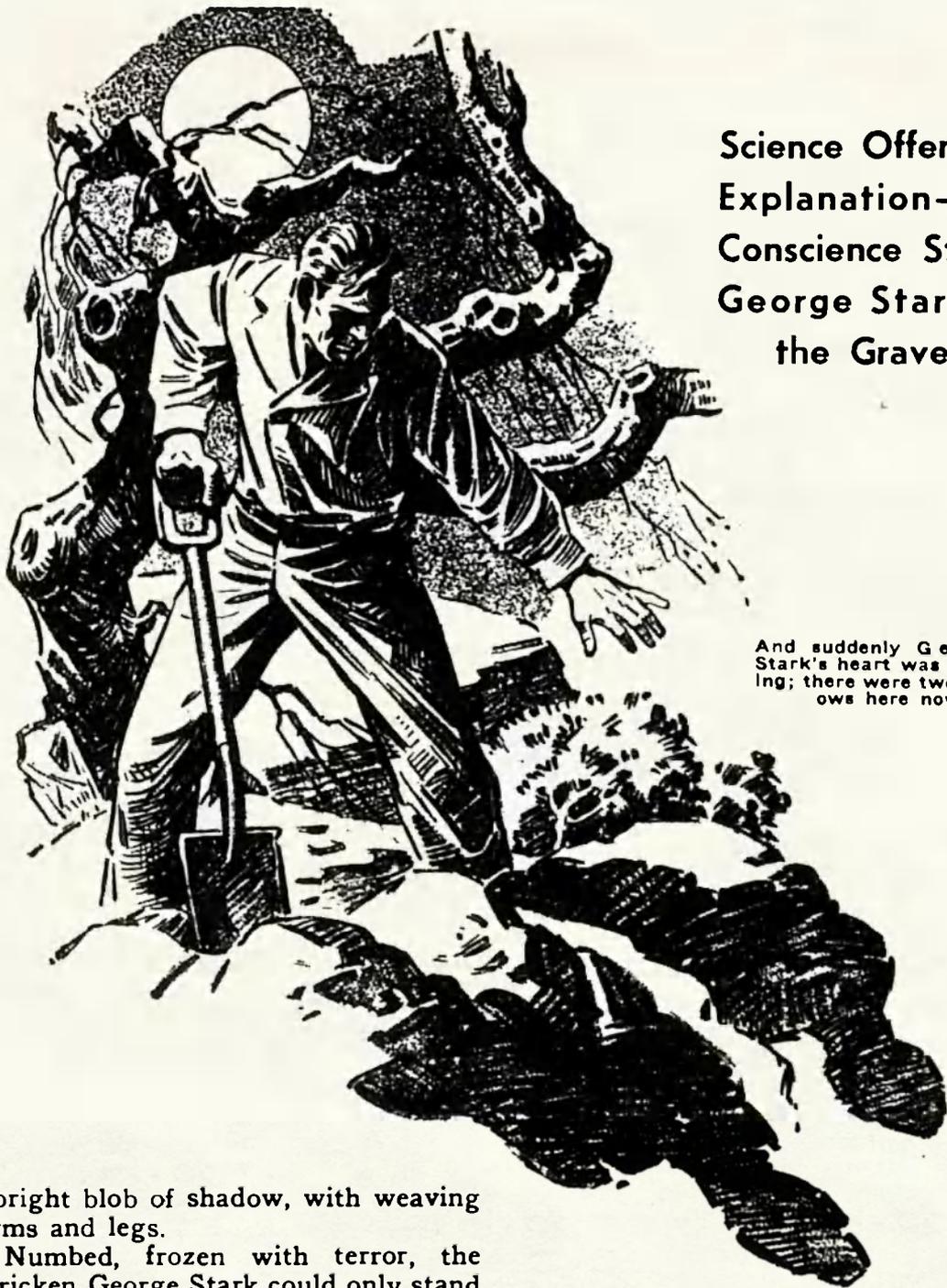
Grant's home, and burying it. But the thing was done now. All his threatened disaster was in the past; there was nothing ahead but Anne, her beauty and her money, with a life of ease for Stark—never again anything to terrify him.

He was careful to scatter mold and leaves upon the loose earth so that it wouldn't be apparent. Throughout it all, here in the moonlight, silently his shadow mocked his every movement. He stooped, smoothing the leaves with his hands; and his shadow drew toward him, congealing into a little blob—like a little monster crouching here on the ground beside him. He chuckled. It was a silent witness. George Stark, in replica. His faithful collaborator, with him wherever he went.

With the grave-earth covered to his full satisfaction, Stark stood up. Nothing to do now but go home, go to bed and forget all this. His shadow beside him stood up also, silently rearing itself again against the broad tree trunk. It stood there, like a grotesque, misshapen manservant, waiting for the master to depart, so he could follow in his steps.

And suddenly George Stark's heart was pounding—hammering seemingly in his throat. Blankly he stared with so great a horror flooding him that the dim moonlight woodland scene blurred before his terrified gaze. There were two shadows here now! His own, and another! Had that second dim, floating shadow come up out of the grave?

It seemed so—a small round blob floating slowly up from the ground at his feet! Then in a second he saw that it was oblong, as though it had oozed out of the grave and, released, had lengthened, drawing away until now it was off there by the tree. An oblong,



Science Offers an Explanation—But Conscience Stalks George Stark to the Grave!

And suddenly George Stark's heart was pounding; there were two shadows here now!

upright blob of shadow, with weaving arms and legs.

Numbed, frozen with terror, the stricken George Stark could only stand and stare at the blurred second shadow. It was as silent as his own, an upright, second replica of himself. No! It couldn't be that. A man couldn't cast two shadows; and his own shadow was motionless, like himself. But this other one floated. From the grave it had come seeping upward. And silently now it seemed to be attaching itself to him!

But that was crazy! James Grant was dead and buried. He couldn't cast a shadow! His shadow couldn't come up here and attach itself to his murderer!

Stark took a step. Both shadows

moved. His own—and this other, damnable one. Both mocking him. He moved sidewise, and stooped—and both the shadows shrank to congeal into little crouching monsters here beside him!

With a mumbled cry of terror Stark ran for the thickets, ran with his two shadows grotesquely darting ahead of him. They were there, sometimes side by side, sometimes intermingled, mocking his plunging steps, lengthening on the ground, or silently darting up the tree-trunks until he reached the darkness of the woods where there was no moonlight, and then they were gone.

"YOU'RE not ill tonight, are you, George, dear? Hadn't you better come into the house? It's getting chilly."

He felt his wife bending over him. In the gloom of the small, ivy-clad terrace at the side of their luxurious home, he knew she could not see his face.

"You're alone too much, George." Her head came down; her blond, bobbed, perfumed hair brushed his face, and then she pressed her cheek against his.

"What's the matter, dear?" she persisted. "Don't you love me any more? Has our marriage—disappointed you?"

He snatched himself out of his brooding thoughts, and kissed her. "Of course I love you, Anne."

"You seem to want to be alone so much. Out here in the dark."

He stood up beside her—tall, wide-shouldered and thin. At his shoulder she was doll-like; beautiful, with the sleek luxuriousness of wealth. His hand with a nervous gesture ruffled his longish, wavy black hair. There was just enough light here so that he knew she could see he was smiling.

"Don't be silly," he said. His fingers tweaked her cheek. She wouldn't notice that his fingers were trembling. "I was thinking where we might go next winter. Switzerland? Or the Riviera?"

He followed her into the house, where she and her brother James had lived. But it was Stark's house now. It hadn't been hard for him to have her transfer it. The husband should be the property owner, not the wife.

The living room was softly lighted by dim, pastel shades. In the daytime it was somber, cloistered. Stark had never been afraid of the living room. He never saw either of his shadows in there, if he was careful.

More than a month had passed now since that nerve-racking moonlit night when in the deep woods a mile from here, Stark had buried Anne's brother. His disappearance had not stopped the wedding. Grant had been a hot-tempered fellow, a forceful, dominant character—but sometimes, when angered, he had been petty.

It hadn't been hard for Stark to

persuade the worried Anne that her brother had indulged in a childish fit of temper because she was going to marry Stark of whom he so strongly disapproved, convincing her that James had gone off somewhere—a sea voyage perhaps. In a few months he'd be back, sheepish, sorry that he had worried them. That's what Anne thought.

But Grant wouldn't come back. The months would slip into years, until finally it wouldn't be hard for Stark to persuade Anne that she should apply to the courts to have her brother declared legally dead. James' share of the Grant family fortune would be Anne's then—a total of nearly half a million for Stark to control.

God knows, he deserved it. This last year or two had been hell. His unpaid gambling debts could very easily have caused his death—fellows like gambling operators thought nothing of murder. Or if not that, then his shortage at the trust company would have been found out and he would have been jailed. All that was fixed now. Anne was no business woman. With James out of the way, there was no one to inquire into Stark's handling of the funds.

"I—I guess I'll go to bed," Stark heard himself saying abruptly.

He was always so nervous, apprehensive. It had seemed a miracle that no one had noticed his two shadows up to now. But he had been very careful, shunning brightly lighted places when he could. Anne had thought it reasonable for him to give up the trust company job. She knew he had always been nervous, perhaps threatened with a breakdown, working so hard at the trust company and quarreling with James over getting engaged to her.

A MIRROR in the dim, pastel-lighted living room suddenly showed him his face—his staring, sunken dark eyes, his gaunt, pale cheeks bluish, with a two-days' beard growth. "Heavens," he said lightly. "I need a shave."

He went presently into the bathroom. He mustn't let Anne see him looking like this. That was what the damnable shadow of Grant wanted, un-

doubtedly to frighten him, so that people would wonder what was the matter. Then they'd look more closely. They'd take him out into the sunlight. No one could miss that second shadow if you looked closely, when it was clear and bold, cast by the sunlight.

The bathroom had white-tiled walls. A pale little shadow of Stark was mimicking him as he shaved—a formless, thin-gray blob of his head and shoulders and moving arms, beside him on the wall. The shadow of Grant was more furtive. Stark knew it was here. But he didn't look directly at it. He had trained himself never to do that, if he could help it.

You couldn't shake loose from a shadow, once it had attached itself to you. No one could do that. But you could ignore it. People didn't go around examining their shadows. Seldom was anyone conscious of them at all. That was why they had never noticed that Stark had two.

"The hell with you," Stark muttered as he shaved. "I know you're there, but I'm not afraid of you."

God, that was an error! He mustn't yield to this habit of talking to the damned thing out loud! Anne would hear him. Why did he bother with it, anyway? It was a week or more now since he had actually been sure that he saw it. Perhaps he'd never see it again—if he was careful to avoid the sunlight.

Then suddenly Stark, with his face covered with lather and his razor in his hand, stood stiffened. The damnable thing had been hiding over in a corner of the room! It came gliding forward now along the white wall, the shadow of the burly Grant, with his bulletlike head and thick shoulders. Silently it stalked. Ironic, silently jibing thing, monstrously bent, doubling itself as it turned an angle of the wall.

"Why, you—damn you, get out of here!" Vaguely he was aware of his muttering voice. Then he had unscrewed the safety razor, snatched out its thin, double-edged blade. "Damn you, I'll cut you loose! You can't fasten yourself to me like this. You get out of here."

"George—George, what is it?"

A terror more poignant than he had ever felt before engulfed Stark as he heard his wife's anxious, frightened voice behind him in the bedroom. Then she was in the bathroom doorway staring at his outstretched hand where blood was dripping from his fingers into which the razor blade had sliced.

"George, you've cut yourself!"

"Why—why, so I did. It's nothing." He dropped the blade and held his fingers under the cold water tap. "Just changing the blade," he mumbled. "That one's too dull."

THE white vision of the bathroom swayed before him as he fought to control himself. He must smile, act natural. Had she heard him talking to the damned thing? He saw her worried gaze upon him. Did she think he was going crazy? Nervous, hysterical, always on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

But God knows his mind was clear enough. He must laugh now. And get her out of here. If he didn't, she'd see that he had two shadows! They were spread there on the bathroom wall. She'd see it if she happened to look at them. Then he saw her gaze go toward them!

"Queer, eh, Anne?" He mustn't talk like this! Good God, what was he saying? "That shadow sort of startled me. You can understand? A shadow isn't supposed to—"

"George!"

She was looking at him now, not at the two intermingled shadows, staring at him with terror in her wide blue eyes. Did she think that he had broken, that he was hysterical, momentarily irrational? Somehow it steadied Stark. She hadn't noticed that he was a man who cast two shadows. Or had she?

"My—my shadow," he said. "Funny, eh, Anne? A man being afraid of his shadow!"

She hadn't noticed anything wrong. She was just staring blankly at him.

"George, you—you come to bed now; you're all right."

"Of course, I'm all right."

"Don't—don't shave any further tonight."

(Continued on page 107)



By CHAKRA

Famous Mystic and Authority on Esoteric Love

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BROTHERS IN BATTLE

MANY strange stories came out of Finland during its struggle against Russia. But this one, reported by an English correspondent recently, seems to be one of the most outstanding.

The Kackzell twin brothers, Alex and Serge, had been inseparable since birth. In school they used to fool their teachers and friends by pretending to be each other. But as they grew older Serge grew stronger and was always the defender of his brother Alex.

When the Russians invaded Finland, the two brothers were called to the colors. Serge became a flyer—Alex an infantryman.

It was a sad day for Alex when Serge was shot down and Alex viewed his brother's dead body. He couldn't believe Serge was dead, for Serge had always been the more aggressive of the two; fearless, active, defiant and ever ready to protect Alex.

But this was war, so Alex carried on as he knew his courageous brother would want him to. Then, one morning after a vicious attack by the Russians, Alex came face to face with a Russian soldier. It was hand-to-hand combat, with bayonets. The Russian was much stronger. Alex was weakening and finally fell exhausted in trying to parry the thrusts of the foe. As Alex saw the Russian about to plunge a bayonet into his body, something hit the Russian and he fell dead.

While the young Finn was gasping for breath, a comrade ran over and cried: "Good work—I saw you knock that Russian with the butt of your rifle."

"I didn't hit him," said Alex.

"Sure you did—I saw you—and when I looked again you were down. I thought you were shot."

Still mystified, Alex looked at the dead Russian. There wasn't a mark on his body. How he had died, neither he nor his buddy could tell. There was no evidence of a bullet wound or blow. But the friend insisted that he had seen Alex hit the Russian and could recognize his face. "I never saw you look so savage before."

Had the spirit of his twin brother entered the fray in order to protect Alex?

THE LOST SOUL

FOR centuries, certain mystics have believed that lost souls hover in the outer world between mortals and immortality—and that they constantly seek evil pleasure in witnessing scenes of terror and tragedy on Earth.

To some extent, this belief was borne out by something that was reported in New York City during the great sleet storm which swept over the Eastern seaboard last March.

One afternoon on an end street in uptown New York, beneath a large viaduct, a young lady noticed a horrible looking old man standing in the middle of the street, gazing upward. She was so terrified by the ugly monster that she hurried past. And when she saw a policeman on the next block, she told him about the awful creature, believing that he might be an escaped lunatic from a nearby sanitarium.

She said: "He was wearing an old cape,

but had no hat—and his face looked like that of a fiend out of hell.”

The policeman walked down to investigate but could not locate the man. Where he had disappeared, the policeman could not imagine. There were no homes there—just a warehouse, empty lots and the walls of the viaduct.

The policeman believed the girl might have imagined things, so he started back to his beat. Then a loud crash made him turn. An automobile had skidded and plunged through the guard rail on the viaduct above, landing upside down in the middle of the street forty feet below. Six people were killed—mangled almost beyond recognition—one of the worst tragedies of the year.

Had the girl been right? Had she seen an evil creature of the outer world who had learned in some psychic way of the coming tragedy—and who had come to gloat? Who knows?

THE LOVE OF A DOG

THE horror of numerous merchant ships being torpedoed in the present European war recalls a strange story experienced by Willard Harkwell, who during the World War was a sailor on an English ship sailing between London and India.

It was in 1916 that Harkwell was on his large merchant vessel which had left India on a return trip and was due to arrive in England August 18th.

The boat was nearing the English Channel. Harkwell was on duty in the cook's galley when he noticed that his pet dog, Brownie, a Collie, was very ill and could not get up when called. Harkwell, loving the animal, carried the dog to the ship's hospital begging the doctor to do what he could.

The doctor examined the dog and said it would need several days of care. So Harkwell left Brownie in a basket and went back to work. The doctor said he would tell him when the dog was well.

That night and the next morning Harkwell called on the ship's phone and asked how the dog was coming along. The doctor reported progress and suggested letting the dog remain quiet until the boat landed.

But late the following afternoon the ship was torpedoed. The force of the explosion filled the galley stairs with debris, entombing Harkwell. Those on deck believed Harkwell dead and they abandoned ship without him.

But just before the ship went down Harkwell chopped his way out of the galley and had to plunge quickly into the water to keep from being sucked under when the ship sank.

For several minutes he was swirled round and round in the foaming water. But finally when the water was quiet, Harkwell could see nothing. It was foggy. He called for help in vain. He knew the ship hadn't been far from the English coast, but which way should he swim?

Then he saw his dog Brownie a few yards
(Continued on page 104)

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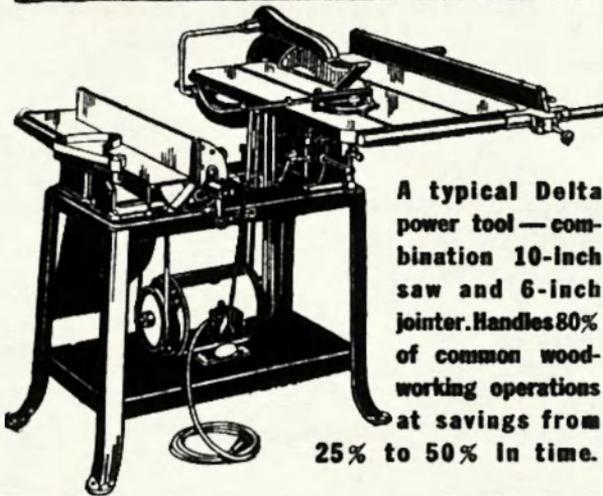
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A MAGAZINE OF WESTERN LOVE

15c AT ALL STANDS

(Continued from page 103)

ahead of him swimming frantically to the left. Harkwell, believing in a dog's instinct to head for the nearest shore, followed the animal.

For several hours he swam, the dog finally disappearing ahead of him in the fog—but Harkwell kept swimming in the right direction.

He was almost exhausted when fishermen found him and took him to shore. Several days later he located his shipmates and the first thing Harkwell did was to inquire about his dog. Had they seen it?

Then the doctor sorrowfully said: "Why, Brownie died on the boat that morning and I put him in a box. I didn't want to tell you till we got to shore."

Had the dog's ghost saved his master from a watery grave?

A MYSTERIOUS RING

AN undertaker tells this story. Some years ago, in a western city, a young girl, Beatrice, was engaged to a splendid young man. They loved each other dearly. He had given her a diamond ring which she cherished. She said it would stay on her finger for eternity.

Then fate struck. The young man was killed in an accident and Beatrice was prostrated. Her grief so weakened her that she contracted pneumonia, and six months after her fiancee had died, Beatrice passed away.

Just before the funeral, her mother removed the diamond ring from her finger, and put it away in a jewel box together with other sentimental belongings of the daughter. She remembered how Beatrice had worshipped that ring—it seemed to carry Beatrice's spirit with it. Never would the mother part with it.

That is why, a few days later, when the mother discovered that the ring had been stolen, she was so greatly grieved. She offered a large reward, no questions asked; and the entire police force hunted for the stolen ring in every pawnshop of the state.

But it was never recovered.

Three years passed. And due to the opening of a new highway, the cemetery where Beatrice was buried was condemned. All bodies would be moved to a new graveyard.

An undertaker was commissioned to disinter Beatrice's body and place it in a new coffin.

In examining Beatrice's body, the undertaker made a startling discovery. He found the diamond ring on Beatrice's withered finger.

He notified the mother at once and at first the mother was embarrassed in having to admit that evidently some member of the family must have placed the ring back on Beatrice's finger before the funeral.

But the more she thought of it, the more sure she became that this had not been done by any living person. Everyone who had been at the funeral was questioned. The mother was absolutely certain that the ring had been removed and not replaced by living hands. How had the ring gotten back on

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

Beatrice's finger. This still remains a mystery today.

RED INK

HERE is a story that happened only several days ago in a New York City business office.

William Brandt, an accountant, had been thinking of his brother Tom all morning. Tom had been working on a construction job in Pennsylvania and had written to his brother William some three weeks before. But William kept saying to himself: "I wonder why I can't get Tom out of my mind?"

So at twelve o'clock, before he went to lunch, he thought he would write his brother. He dipped his pen in the black ink and started to write, "Dear Tom."

Then he looked at what he had written. It was in red ink. But he had used a bottle of black ink. He examined the pen and was mystified. Then he turned to a stenographer and asked: "Am I going color blind—isn't this red?"

He handed the paper to her and she looked at it. "No—this is black ink," she said.

He grabbed the paper from her and looked at it again. This time it was black.

For several moments he tried to figure what made the writing appear red. He looked around for some red object, believing the sun might have cast some reflection. But the phenomenon could not be explained.

"Must be something wrong with my eyes," he said. "I guess I'd better see an oculist."

But at three o'clock that afternoon he thought otherwise. A telephone call from Pennsylvania informed him that Tom had been crushed to death by a tractor at 12 o'clock that day—the very moment he wrote the words: "Dear Tom."

Questions and Answers

Dear Chakra:

Are there any instances of buried treasures being recovered by mediums under trance who gave information of location?

Sydney Wells.

Dear Mr. Wells: Yes. Only recently the Associated Press carried the following item: "San Diego, California: A public exhibition of old metal crosses has directed attention to a mystery of spiritism and buried treasure of the California Mountains. The objects were dug up between 1914 and 1924 at various locations between San Luis Rey and Bakersfield at locations specified by Mrs. Parent, now dead, who claimed clairvoyant powers and directed neighbors to more than one hundred locations where she said buried treasure existed."

Dear Chakra:

Are there any instances of witchcraft at the present time? Mona Higgins.

Dear Miss Higgins: Yes. The Associated Press recently released the following news item: "Las Vegas, New Mexico. A tale of witchcraft and hexing, came out of a northern New Mexico mountain village today where a man was charged with mayhem and accused by townfolk of turning himself into a frog and hexing people."

(Concluded on page 106)

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AT ALL STANDS

(Concluded from page 105)

Dear Chakra:

Are there any authentic instances of ghosts photographed by infra-red film?

Victor Gibson.

Dear Mr. Gibson: Experiments are now being conducted by several photographers who are investigating reported haunted houses in the East. As yet nothing authentic has been reported. This department will be the first to publish any such report. Follow it carefully. A house in Katonah, New York, has just been reported, and at this writing, a photographer is making arrangements.

Dear Chakra:

Have phonograph records of strange voices of mediums under trance ever been played on the radio? Nancy Manseau.

Dear Miss Manseau: Several psychic investigators have offered such records to broadcasting stations, but as yet, they are taboo. It is quite likely that after the publication of the forthcoming book called SCARE ME, by Ed Bodin, the psychic authority, that some radio stations will be interested; for Mr. Bodin covers this matter very fully and convincingly.

Dear Chakra:

Who would you say is or was the greatest mystic of all times? One who really did more to prove the occult than any other? Sam Klein.

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THE MAN WHO CAST TWO SHADOWS

(Continued from page 101)

He was smiling now, his hands on her shoulders gently shoved her back as he stooped and kissed her. "Don't be silly, Anne. I'll be finished in a jiffy."

He closed the bathroom door on her. Hastily he finished shaving. He cut himself a little because his hand was trembling. Resolutely, he didn't look at the wall where his two shadows were silently mimicking him.

The bedroom was very dim. His shadows were gone. Downstairs he heard Anne at the telephone; heard her say:

"Well, would you ask him to make it the first thing in the morning?"

Then she hung up.

"Who were you calling?" Stark asked as she came upstairs.

"I'm tired," she said. "Tell you in the morning, George."

Then the light was out. There was only the brilliant moonlight outside the windows, and it couldn't get in.

For a long time Stark lay tense, with Anne beside him. He was no fool. With the darkness here, he could think calmly. Anne had been calling their doctor. He would come in the morning, with damnable probing questions. He'd think, as Anne must think, that Stark's mind was breaking. It wasn't, of course.

Or was it? Was that what the dead Grant was trying to do? A shadow couldn't harm you. But fear of it could drive you mad. That was Grant's game—damn him, moldering there in his grave but clever enough to send up his shadow to attach itself forever to his murderer. Tonight, in the bathroom, Stark had almost given himself away. That was another danger! How could he keep this up for weeks, months, years—for all the rest of his life? This dodging the sunlight; afraid of bright moonlight; this skulking around in the dark.

Was Anne asleep now? It seemed so. Occasionally she restlessly turned, but she was breathing slowly. Rigid on his back, with fists clenched at his sides, Stark gazed up at the dark ceiling. Were his two shadows up

(Continued on page 108)

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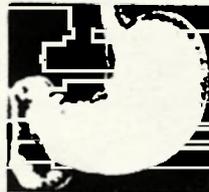
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(Continued from page 107)

there now? Or here on the walls? They were here somewhere, of course. Your shadows were always with you, only in the dark you couldn't see them.

But the morning would come, bringing another day of terror. And that damnable probing physician. This was what the dead Jim Grant was planning, of course. How he must be chuckling, out there at the bottom of his grave!

"Damn you!" God, he must keep his voice soft, not to awaken Anne!

"Damn you, I'll cut you loose from me! Tonight—I'll have to do it tonight."

Cut that shadow loose? He had tried to do that in the bathroom. But there must be some way of getting rid of it. You couldn't drive off your own normal shadow, of course. But this second one had no right there.

Drive it away with a Cross! Evil spirits could be driven away with a Cross. Stark was aware that he had furtively slipped from the bed. Anne had stirred, but she was undoubtedly asleep now. That big silver Cross which she sometimes wore would be in her jewel case.

He found it. He clutched it in his right hand. Damn you. Damn you, I'll drive you away now—the end of you forever. But where was it? He couldn't see it here in the darkness. Pajama-clad, in his bare feet he padded down through the dark house and to the front door.

The summer moon was a great, flattened white disk, half-way down in the glittering heavens. It drenched the world with silver. The ground was white, glistening so that in places it looked like snow. The somber, motionless trees were inky-black with shadows. All the shadows were dark and solid.

That was good. He gripped the big silver Cross firmly in his right hand and stepped out, with his back to the moon. There they were! His two shadows. Replica of George Stark, which belonged there, and the monstrous replica of James Grant, which didn't—together, interlapping in places, monstrously they were spread on the ground before him, attached to his feet.

"Damn you, break loose!" He tried

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

to keep his trembling voice low, when all the time he wanted to scream. "Damn you, break loose, James Grant!" Belligerently, he raised the Cross before him. "Away! Back! Break loose!"

God! It didn't move. His own shadow mocked him with its grotesque arm and shadow of the Cross, huge on the ground. But the other only seemed to quiver its silent defiance.

"Damn you, break loose from me! You can't hang onto me like this!"

BUT the accursed thing clung with tenuous, wispy dark lines to his ankles and his feet. It wouldn't break loose. Angrily, he took a step. Silently, with his own shadow the ghastly thing shifted backward. Damn it! Mocking him! He ran a few steps forward, and paused again. Still it was there, fastened to his feet. A man with two shadows fastened to his feet! It wasn't afraid of the Cross!

Wildly, Stark was aware that he had flung the big silver Cross from him. He was staggering forward in the garden now, his bare feet scuffling the ground. But he couldn't kick the accursed thing loose. He was trying, first with one foot, then with the other.

"Damn you, break away!" If he could ever get it loose, it would drift off. Often it had seemed starting to do that, drifting upward or sideward, as though in doubt. And then, always it had come snapping back. If he could break it wholly off, it would have to roam away. And a shadow had to have something to attach itself to. It would go back to Grant's grave and attach itself to him, down here underground, where it belonged.

In the moonlit garden a row of white stakes with sweet peas growing on them caught Stark's eye. Suppose he drove a stake through its heart! You could put a vampire at rest like that. With a stake driven into its heart, a vampire had to stay in its coffin. Would that work with Grant's shadow?

Wildly Stark pulled out one of the sharp-pointed stakes and plunged for the dark, silently jibing shadow of Grant as it fled before him.

"Hold still, you damned thing!" Wildly he ran. Once he flung himself
(Continued on page 110)

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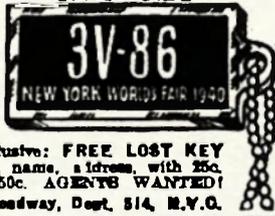
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(Continued from page 109)

on the ground, stabbing with the stake.
But when he rose up, still the shadow
was there ahead of him, unharmed,
still attached to him—always ahead of
him. Damn you, I'll get you now.

The river boiling in the little canyon
blurred his words. Or was he only
thinking them? He must drive the rot-
ten thing away. Detach it from his
feet where even now as he plunged
wildly forward in the drenching molten
moonlight it was still attached, its
thready, divided shapes of legs pump-
ing back and forth as it mocked his
plunging steps.

Even in the silence of the breathless
summer night, with the roar of the river
falls like a distant growl, the accursed
fleeing shadow was soundless. Was it
over the silvered surface of the boiling
little river now? There was hardly an
added splash as Stark's body hurtling
over the little brink, went in after it.

Perhaps for a little time he was
aware of the chaos of boiling water, his
body crashing, bumping over the rocks
against which it surged. Perhaps, too,
he even saw the horrible jibing shape
hovering in the air ahead of him, as still
mockingly it fled. And then his tum-
bled, battered half-drowned body went
over the lip of the boiling falls—long,
seething watery drop until at the bot-
tom he crashed on the rocks and was
flung into the great Unknown.

NO, ASSUREDLY he wasn't in-
sane," the surgeon said grave-
ly. "Your husband undoubtedly was
neurotic—perhaps always on the verge
of a nervous breakdown. But it seems
that there was a very real basis for his
obsession."

The autopsy was finished. The sur-
geon, here in the somber hospital room,
glanced around at the assembled group
—the internes and a couple of the local
physicians—and brought his gaze back
to the white-faced, black-robed widow.
And there was a plump, bald-headed
little man who stood aside, silently lis-
tening.

"You mean," Anne murmured, "that
there was a reason for him to be afraid
of his shadow?"

"His shadow, or something that he
thought was a shadow," the surgeon
said.

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

The plump little man, whose name was Dr. Beck, explained gently. "The autopsy shows that scotoma had developed in one of your husband's eyes. I'm an oculist, Mrs. Stark. The process by which we see the external world about us—"

He was addressing the earnest, intent group of young internes now. "The fundamental principle of sight is really very simple. Quite like photography, in fact. Did you know that we see nothing of the world outside us? Everything we see is inside our eyes—it's just a picture, focused on the back of the eyeball. A person blind from birth and suddenly given sight, is instantly conscious that everything he sees is inside his head!

"Waves of light from external objects pass through the crystalline lens and are drawn to a focus on the retina. Like the image which the lens focuses upon the sensitized film in the camera. The retina is a continuation of the optic nerve, which comes from the brain, enters the eyeball at the back and spreads out as a nerve-carpet, or screen. This nerve-carpet receives the focused image. Now it happens that the image-rays, between the lens and the retina, pass through the vitreous humor—a thin, semi-liquid substance within the eyeball."

The little oculist smiled faintly. "Ideally, the vitreous humor should not cast any image of its own upon the retina. But very often it does. Most of us, in a bright light, particularly when looking at a white background, sometimes are aware of little shadows that seem to hover in the air in front of us. They are motes in the vitreous humor—tissue-cell fragments which break off from the inner surface of the eyeball.

"Most of us ignore them. But sometimes they coalesce, form a larger fragment, irregular in shape, perhaps with protuberances—a shadow which in bright light hovers huge in the field of vision. Then it would be very apparent—an alien, silhouetted image on the retina, mingling with the image of the outside world so that the brain cannot distinguish one from the other."

"I can understand," the surgeon said, "that with a neurotic, highly imagina-

(Concluded on page 112)



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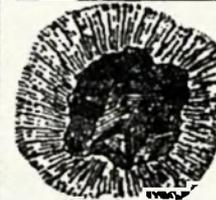


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(Concluded from page 111)

tive patient like Mr. Stark, such a shadow hovering in his field of vision would be harassing. More so, doubtless, than with a normal person. But why he wouldn't have mentioned it to you, Mrs. Stark—why he would keep it secret, with such an obvious terror—

THE surgeon shrugged hopelessly and let his voice trail off.

The young internes were extremely interested. Several of them decided that they could write a very learned thesis on how neuroticism may cause an abnormal secrecy, so that the sufferer from a perfectly commonplace ailment will magnify it into something of extreme terror.

It was entirely a medical problem, of course—an abnormality of sight, unsuspected by the neurotic sufferer, causing a temporary functional derangement of the mind—a condition of

hysteria, resulting in George Stark's case in a fatal accident.

An interesting medical case. No one could realize how unfortunate it was that George Stark and James Grant both were dead. They might have explained to these scientists that science is sometimes too sure of itself; and that there are many things which none of us who are living will ever understand.

MY FATHER IS A VAMPIRE

(Continued from page 97)

Larry said after a moment, his voice as remote and chill as a distant glacier. "Walk out of this tomb. I don't care about that option money you took. But what you did to my father's body can't be concealed. It's got to be explained. So I'm going to take you to the village and turn you over to the sheriff. Take the flashlight, Eileen darling, and keep it on him."

MMURRAY CAVANAUGH sensed the flinty determination in Larry's calm command. He stumbled to his feet, stood swaying while his brain cleared. Then, without a word, he turned and walked, with hands upraised, through the gaping mausoleum door into the night.

Murray Cavanaugh walked ahead in the flashlight's beam, that strange procession descended the path from the tomb. As they came out onto level ground, Eileen snuggled close against Larry's lithe, strong shoulder.

"Thank God, Larry, that Mother doesn't know anything about all this!" the girl whispered. "She went all to pieces late last night. She's down at the cottage now, sleeping under a big dose of sedative."

They were close to the house now. Then they were passing it, turning into the roadway, beginning the long grim walk to the village.

Suddenly though Larry's face was invisible in the darkness, he smiled with a strange, infinite conviction. He drew Eileen to him swiftly.

And swiftly he kissed her parted, eager, thrilling *human* lips!

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

DREAD ECSTASY

(Concluded from page 79)

could have arranged all this, knowing you were already half mad with sorrow. He could have poured out the perfume, made use of the maid, created the other suggestions that drove you to these strange hallucinations before you were driven to the suicide he had counted on."

"Not the perfume," Calverton disagreed. "It was her secret formula. The last was poured into the grave with her." He shuddered now, thinking of it. "And the pearls—the pearls glowed with life again."

The inspector shrugged. "I don't know about the perfume. But our investigators learned that after your wife's death the maid used to wear her jewelry and her gowns. Your bother gave her permission, said you wouldn't notice it. Pearls become bright next to any skin."

The inspector coughed importantly.

"Of course, to prove this thing finally, we will have to do an autopsy of your wife's body. With both of you dead, your brother would have inherited your fortune. He might have poisoned her. If he did, that would disabuse your mind completely of all these phantasies. All we need is your permission, now."

Calverton's face grew tense, the tenseness of a man trying to hold to a log in a whirling current—or to a dream.

"No," he whispered harshly. "No. Let well enough alone. I can never give you that—it would—would take too much for me. I want her to be with me as she was, unmarred. My love—hers—will make it so. . . ."

●

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29x4.00-19	2.95	20x2 1/2-18	3.05
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29x4.00-21	3.35	20x2 1/2-20	3.45
29x4.00-22	3.55	20x2 1/2-21	3.65
29x4.00-23	3.75	20x2 1/2-22	3.85
29x4.00-24	3.95	20x2 1/2-23	4.05
29x4.00-25	4.15	20x2 1/2-24	4.25
29x4.00-26	4.35	20x2 1/2-25	4.45
29x4.00-27	4.55	20x2 1/2-26	4.65
29x4.00-28	4.75	20x2 1/2-27	4.85
29x4.00-29	4.95	20x2 1/2-28	5.05
29x4.00-30	5.15	20x2 1/2-29	5.25
29x4.00-31	5.35	20x2 1/2-30	5.45
29x4.00-32	5.55	20x2 1/2-31	5.65
29x4.00-33	5.75	20x2 1/2-32	5.85
29x4.00-34	5.95	20x2 1/2-33	6.05
29x4.00-35	6.15	20x2 1/2-34	6.25
29x4.00-36	6.35	20x2 1/2-35	6.45
29x4.00-37	6.55	20x2 1/2-36	6.65
29x4.00-38	6.75	20x2 1/2-37	6.85
29x4.00-39	6.95	20x2 1/2-38	7.05
29x4.00-40	7.15	20x2 1/2-39	7.25
29x4.00-41	7.35	20x2 1/2-40	7.45
29x4.00-42	7.55	20x2 1/2-41	7.65
29x4.00-43	7.75	20x2 1/2-42	7.85
29x4.00-44	7.95	20x2 1/2-43	8.05
29x4.00-45	8.15	20x2 1/2-44	8.25
29x4.00-46	8.35	20x2 1/2-45	8.45
29x4.00-47	8.55	20x2 1/2-46	8.65
29x4.00-48	8.75	20x2 1/2-47	8.85
29x4.00-49	8.95	20x2 1/2-48	9.05
29x4.00-50	9.15	20x2 1/2-49	9.25
29x4.00-51	9.35	20x2 1/2-50	9.45
29x4.00-52	9.55	20x2 1/2-51	9.65
29x4.00-53	9.75	20x2 1/2-52	9.85
29x4.00-54	9.95	20x2 1/2-53	10.05
29x4.00-55	10.15	20x2 1/2-54	10.25
29x4.00-56	10.35	20x2 1/2-55	10.45
29x4.00-57	10.55	20x2 1/2-56	10.65
29x4.00-58	10.75	20x2 1/2-57	10.85
29x4.00-59	10.95	20x2 1/2-58	11.05
29x4.00-60	11.15	20x2 1/2-59	11.25
29x4.00-61	11.35	20x2 1/2-60	11.45
29x4.00-62	11.55	20x2 1/2-61	11.65
29x4.00-63	11.75	20x2 1/2-62	11.85
29x4.00-64	11.95	20x2 1/2-63	12.05
29x4.00-65	12.15	20x2 1/2-64	12.25
29x4.00-66	12.35	20x2 1/2-65	12.45
29x4.00-67	12.55	20x2 1/2-66	12.65
29x4.00-68	12.75	20x2 1/2-67	12.85
29x4.00-69	12.95	20x2 1/2-68	13.05
29x4.00-70	13.15	20x2 1/2-69	13.25
29x4.00-71	13.35	20x2 1/2-70	13.45
29x4.00-72	13.55	20x2 1/2-71	13.65
29x4.00-73	13.75	20x2 1/2-72	13.85
29x4.00-74	13.95	20x2 1/2-73	14.05
29x4.00-75	14.15	20x2 1/2-74	14.25
29x4.00-76	14.35	20x2 1/2-75	14.45
29x4.00-77	14.55	20x2 1/2-76	14.65
29x4.00-78	14.75	20x2 1/2-77	14.85
29x4.00-79	14.95	20x2 1/2-78	15.05
29x4.00-80	15.15	20x2 1/2-79	15.25
29x4.00-81	15.35	20x2 1/2-80	15.45
29x4.00-82	15.55	20x2 1/2-81	15.65
29x4.00-83	15.75	20x2 1/2-82	15.85
29x4.00-84	15.95	20x2 1/2-83	16.05
29x4.00-85	16.15	20x2 1/2-84	16.25
29x4.00-86	16.35	20x2 1/2-85	16.45
29x4.00-87	16.55	20x2 1/2-86	16.65
29x4.00-88	16.75	20x2 1/2-87	16.85
29x4.00-89	16.95	20x2 1/2-88	17.05
29x4.00-90	17.15	20x2 1/2-89	17.25
29x4.00-91	17.35	20x2 1/2-90	17.45
29x4.00-92	17.55	20x2 1/2-91	17.65
29x4.00-93	17.75	20x2 1/2-92	17.85
29x4.00-94	17.95	20x2 1/2-93	18.05
29x4.00-95	18.15	20x2 1/2-94	18.25
29x4.00-96	18.35	20x2 1/2-95	18.45
29x4.00-97	18.55	20x2 1/2-96	18.65
29x4.00-98	18.75	20x2 1/2-97	18.85
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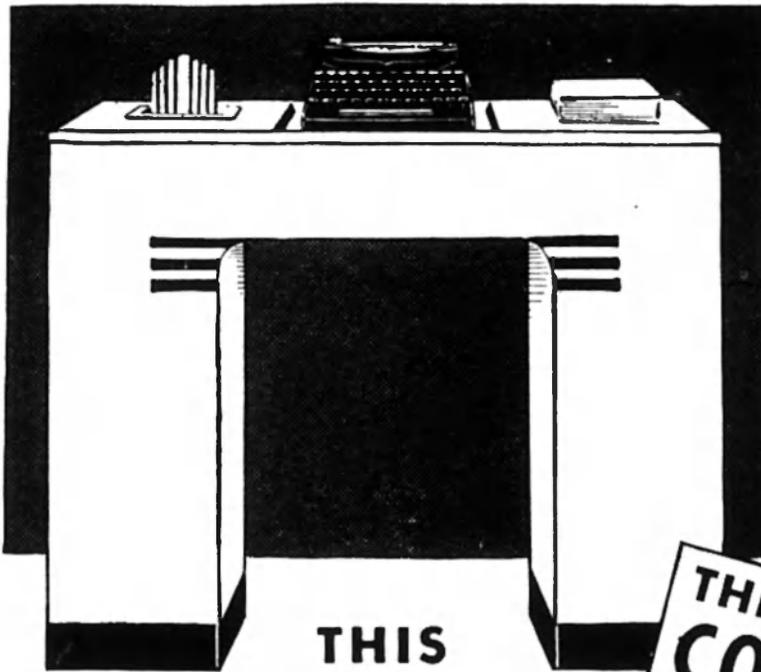
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