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MURDER BEACH

A Gripping Complete Novelet

By **WARD HAWKINS**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

**THE
DEAD
IN
ARMOR**

A Complete
Colonel Crum
Novelet

By **JOHN
H. KNOX**

**A SKULL
HAS NO EARS**

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**IF YOU WANT ONE OF
 RADIO'S \$30, \$40, \$50
 A WEEK JOBS!**



Skip This
**IF YOU'RE
 JUST A DREAMER
 -A WISHER**

*This opportunity is for men
 who believe in themselves*



We all know the type of fellow who will "SKIP" reading this. He is pretty much of a FLOP. SURE, he's read all about the opportunities in RADIO—knows that the Government has ordered millions of dollars worth of RADIO equipment. He knows that even without those Government orders, RADIO would be having another RECORD YEAR. He even puts two and two together—and thinks "BOY, RADIO WOULD BE A GREAT BUSINESS TO GET INTO."

He knows, too, if he masters Radio and is drafted, that he stands a GOOD CHANCE TO GET A HIGHER RATING, maybe up to 6 times a private's pay with extra rank and prestige. SURE, he KNOWS all this. HE'S EVEN HEARD how others have gotten into RADIO by training at home in spare time. But he still sits, and sits, and thinks about it. Ten years from now, he still will not have exerted himself to prepare for better pay.

**What's Wrong
 With Being a Dreamer?**

Nothing—if dreams of success are backed by the right action. But ask one who is a flop in life, and you'll get the sweetest lot of ALIBIS any man wants to hear. The real trouble with him is that HE DOESN'T BELIEVE IN HIMSELF. He won't tell you that—BUT THAT'S IT. He DREAMS BIG DREAMS and DOES LITTLE THINGS. He's not a physical coward but a MENTAL COWARD. He may dive into icy water to save a drowning kid—but HE IS SCARED STIFF to take the first step to get into RADIO as a means of making more money. Are YOU one of these fellows? If you are—stop reading now. You are wasting your time. BUT IF YOU AREN'T—if you BELIEVE IN YOURSELF—just want a little MORE ENCOURAGEMENT or INFORMATION before you ACT—read on.

**What Radio Can Do
 For You**

There's no formula for success in RADIO—except knowledge and ambition. If you've finished grade school, and are not afraid to do some spare time studying, I can supply the knowledge—if you'll supply the ambition. I'm not just "saying" this—I KNOW IT! I've supplied knowledge of RADIO to hun-

dreds of men during the past 25 years. BUT, you say, "Why should I select RADIO?" HERE'S WHY! The RADIO INDUSTRY IS GROWING AND GROWING! And when an industry GROWS—the people in it have EXTRA CHANCES TO GROW WITH IT! There are EXTRA OPPORTUNITIES FOR BEGINNERS TO GET IN AND TO GET AHEAD. TOO, RADIO is one of the few industries in which a beginner can

**Train at Home To Get
 A Real Good Start**

That's pretty important. VERY IMPORTANT, IN FACT. For you can go right ahead with your present work, until you are ready to step into something BIGGER in RADIO. I train you AT HOME, give you all the Radio training you need, give you PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE working with RADIO EQUIPMENT I supply—experimenting with it, testing it, learning from it. You learn a little at a time—and you can begin to use that knowledge to make extra money in spare time soon after you start training. Radio is already a fascinating hobby for thousands SO YOU CAN SEE THAT LEARNING RADIO IS pretty fascinating TOO!

Why Radio Pays Well

Radio Technicians work with their minds as well as their hands. IT TAKEN BOTH to repair and service a Radio Receiver; to operate a broadcast or commercial Radio station

to install, operate and repair Police, Aviation, Experimental Radio and Television equipment. That's why RADIO offers fellows who have faith in themselves and who are willing to work and learn, a chance to MAKE MORE MONEY, to HOLD STEADY JOBS, TO GET AHEAD FAST! Many men I've trained own their own full time or spare time Radio repair businesses, too!

**Don't Mail This Coupon
 . . . Unless . . .**

... unless you're ready to DO SOMETHING if I convince you that RADIO is a field of OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU! If you don't believe in yourself, haven't the STUFF IN YOU—forget it now! But if all you want is more evidence that RADIO DOES OFFER YOU OPPORTUNITIES—THAT I CAN TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR THEM—then Mail the Coupon. I'll send you my BIG FREE BOOK, "Rich Rewards in Radio," which tells you about Radio's opportunities those coming in Television, and HOW I TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR THEM. It shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained—telling what they are doing and earning. IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW—MAIL THAT COUPON NOW—pasted on a penny postcard, or in an envelope.

Mr. J. E. SMITH, President,
 Dept. 1G09,
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.



Mr. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1G09,
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: SHOW ME how you have trained hundreds for good jobs in RADIO. I mean business, if I feel you can help me. (No salesman will call—Write plainly.)

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July, 1941

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DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps



and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mental-physics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 160T, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.



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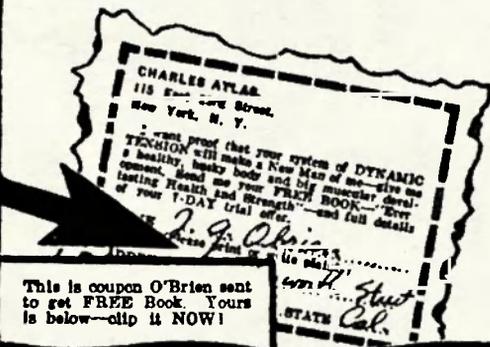
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"I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN"—Charles Atlas

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE; I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

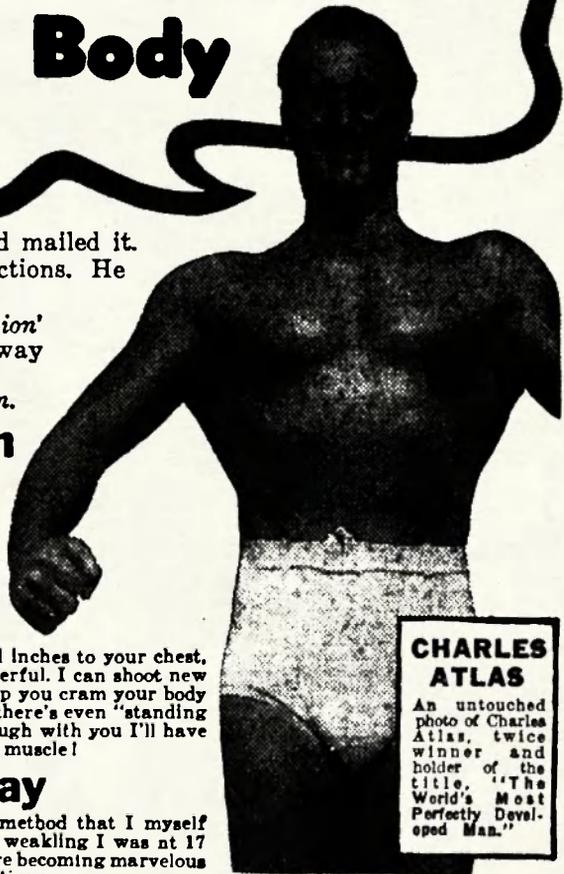
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"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. You learn to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension." You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

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Forty years ago the home and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 25% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

Not a "Gadget"—
Not a "Knick-Knack"—

But a valuable, proved device which
has been sold successfully by business
men as well as seasoned
veterans.

Makes no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings
You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a liner from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays their man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has a gross of \$288.60, possible cost if done outside the store being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day as that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made \$10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$5.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get in yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success to that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer so let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the thousands by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

By trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are hesitant for a business that is not conventional—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upside, instead of the downside—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can get foot—regardless of time—then it is money but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sale in exclusive territory in your own business—that you have no sales representatives—that many men make it a good and smart way to invest their money—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get it first and as soon as for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it comes out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for conversation, see the sample bill—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. Address

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Surprise your friends! Learn to play the piano or other musical instruments this quick, easy way. First lesson starts you playing real tunes.

YOU'VE often been asked that question: "Do you play?" Everybody looks at you expectantly, waiting for you to sit down at the piano and entertain the crowd. Are you compelled to embarrass yourself and throw cold water on the party by saying "No"?

What a difference it would make if you could say "Yes". Think of the good times and popularity in store if you could only play the piano or some other musical instrument—the guitar, violin, accordion, saxophone or whichever one happens to be your favorite.

Well, you **CAN**. You can learn to play any musical instrument you please. You can do it by a method that's **EASIER AND QUICKER** than you perhaps ever thought possible. It takes only a few minutes a day at home, at your own convenience. You save the expense of a private teacher, so the cost is trifling.

Thousands Now Play Who Never Thought They Could

Does it sound too good to be done? Then remember this: thousands have learned to play by this amazingly easy method. Thousands of men, women and children in all walks of life—in all parts of the world. People who had never played before, who knew nothing about music and had no special talent.

Imagine their joy, when, in a remarkable short time, they found themselves actually **PLAYING!** Imagine the astonishment of their friends! No wonder the fame of this amazing method spread, until today, over 700,000 people all over the world have enrolled for it.

Music Made Easy as A - B - C

How is it possible to learn music so easily? What is this famous U. S. School method of home instruction? Here is the secret: this modern, short-cut method skips the tedious drudgery of old-fashioned methods. Instead, it starts you playing—a simple, popular tune in your very first lesson, another in your second lesson and so on. Fascinating print-and-picture lessons make everything clear. You see what to do—you can't go wrong.

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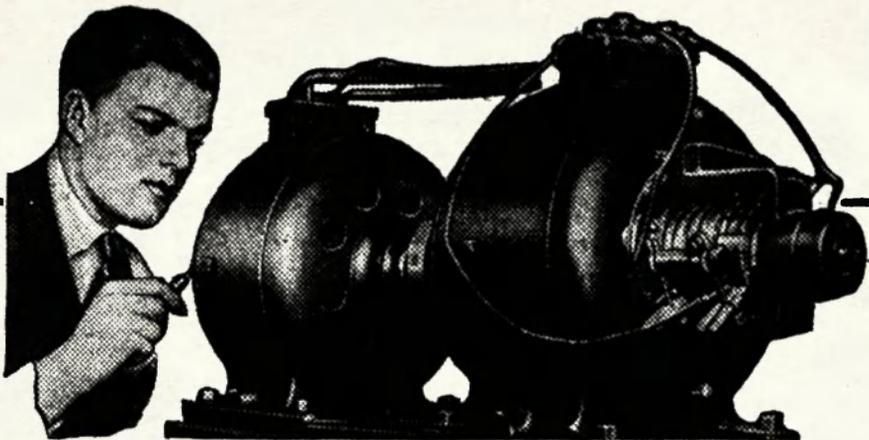
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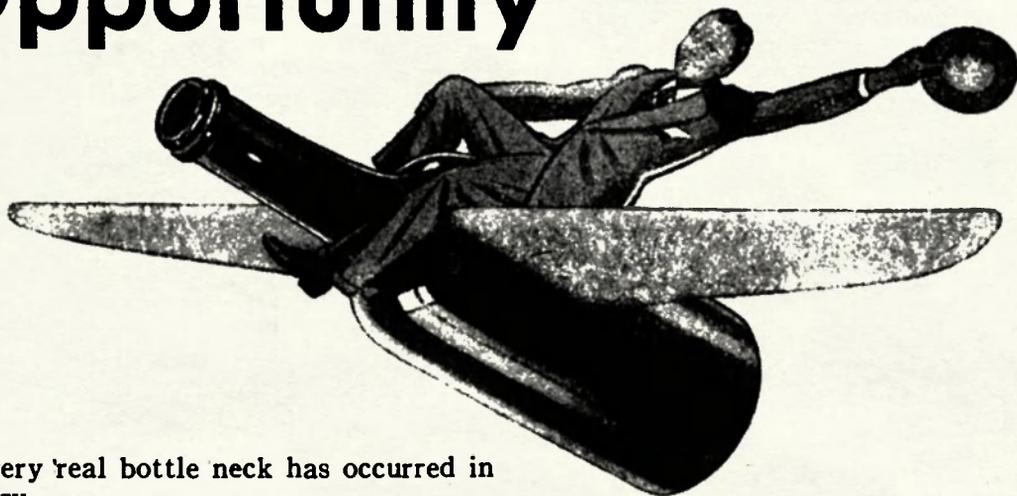
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MURDER BEACH

By **WARD HAWKINS**

Author of "King of Corpse Makers," "Conquest by Fire," etc.

Hurled Into a Maelstrom of Fear and Savage Death, Clyde Kelley Stalks a Killer Beast on Its Round of Ruthless Slaughter!

CHAPTER I *Beast of Death*

THE dog was a brute. Its thick-jawed, wedge-shaped head was coupled to a heavy, deep-chested body. Its coat was a shaggy gray. There was an oddly "wild" look about the animal, an ugly distrust in its slanted, yellow eyes, a furtiveness in the way it slunk about, sniffing and scratching at the door of Paul Cabell's cabin.

"It—it must be a timber wolf!" Myra Rhea whispered.

"Can't be," said Clyde Kelley. "Not around here."

They stood on the boardwalk near Cabell's cottage, one of a dozen built in a group on the outskirts of a small Pacific coast town. A hundred yards to their left, the sea thundered upon white sand, and far out, where sea and sky met, a bank of storm clouds had just swallowed the remaining rays of the sun.



"Then what is it?" Myra demanded.

"Personally," said Kelley, "I think it's a shetland pony in disguise. There's no point in a dog that big."

"Or that ugly," the girl added.

Myra was small, and she had tied her dark, shoulder-length hair in a yellow ribbon to hold it against the wind. It made her seem younger than she was. Her eyes, dark and long-lashed, helped the illusion. Not that she was old, for she was only twenty. She shuddered as the dog looked her way, caught Kelley's arm.

"Oh, Clyde, let's go," she begged.

"But look at him scratch Paul's door," Kelly said. "What's he want?" He frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe I'd better find out."

"No, Clyde—"

But he had already opened the gate and stepped through. Clyde Kelley was not big, but he looked like a middle-weight boxer—compact, trim. Sandy hair fit close to his well-shaped head. His eyes were a sober, thoughtful blue, and he moved toward the dog, slowly, talking.

"Easy, now. Easy, boy. I just want to talk . . . Easy now . . ."

The soothing run of his voice meant nothing to the dog. He watched Kelley suspiciously, big head slung low. There was no tail-wag, but there was a growing curl to the dog's upper lip.

"Clyde!" Myra cried. "You come back here! Don't you see, he's—" She broke off with a startled shriek.

For the dog had exploded into sudden motion. He growled, lunged straight at Kelley. The dog's ears were flat to its skull. Kelley saw the gleaming white fangs, the eyes like balls of yellow flame. And then the dog leaped!

THE full weight of the animal, one hundred and fifty pounds of tough bone and muscle, struck Kelley in the chest, fore paws stiff, and he went down. He struck the ground on his back, threw his arms up to protect his face. He felt his wrist caught, felt the touch of fangs, the wet heat of the dog's mouth. And, in sudden panic then, he remembered the size of the dog's jaw, the terrible strength that must be there. He tensed, but the ex-

pected agony never came.

The dog leaped free of Kelley. Its head lifted, and its ears went erect. Then, without apparent reason, it spun and, leaping the picket fence, it raced away. Kelley sat up, a thoroughly surprised and shaken man. Myra flew to his side.

"Clyde!" she cried. "He hurt you!"

"He did not!" Kelley showed Myra his wrist. "See? Not a scratch, just dented the skin a little." He looked after the vanished dog. "But he could have pulled that hand off like a bunch of grapes. Wonder why he quit?"

Just then, a nearby cottage door burst open. Fred Rogers appeared there, lean and blond and a little excited. "What's all the screaming about?" he asked.

Kelley grinned. "That's Myra. She's a scairy-cat. 'Fraid of her own shadow."

Myra was indignant. "This idiot tried to make friends with a wolf! No wonder I screamed."

"Wolf?" asked Rogers. "*The* wolf? The one that's been at my door these many years?"

"No, a real wolf!" Myra said, scowling at the jest.

"A dog," Kelley corrected. "It wore a dog collar." He told Rogers about it then, and finished with: "The funny thing was, it quit like somebody'd called it, only I didn't hear anyone. Did you, Myra?"

She shook her head.

"What d'you suppose it wanted, anyway?" Rogers said.

"Dunno," said Kelley. "Let's tell Paul."

He knocked on the door, but got no answer. He tried the knob. It turned easily. Opening the door, he called: "Hello! Hello, Paul!" There was no answer.

"Gone to town, I guess," said Rogers.

"Must have," Kelley agreed.

He and Myra went on then, leaving Fred Rogers to tell his wife about the mysterious dog. At Myra's cabin, a quarter of a mile down the walk, and the last one of the group, Kelley opened the gate for her, remaining outside. He looked seaward, where the dark clouds were piled.

"Storm tonight," he said. Then he grinned wryly. "It'll be a real storm, when you tell your uncle you're going to marry a jailbird, eh?"

"You're *not* a jailbird!" Myra scolded. "Not really. You didn't kill that man. Helen Peters was driving the car, and you took the blame for the accident because she was hurt. She died before she could take the blame, and you went to jail. But you're not a jailbird!"

"I served a year for manslaughter," Kelley reminded. "I'm out on parole. As far as your uncle is concerned, that makes me a Grade A bounder."

Myra bit her lips. "Uncle Troy is—well, he's a little queer."

"Your uncle is okay!" Kelley said. "He fought eighteen months in the front lines in the last war. He's a little shell-shocked, gets spells and funny ideas, and he has to live on top of Indian Rock like a hermit because people upset him. But he's still a right guy! He worries about you, but who wouldn't? You've got me after you, an ex-convict, and Paul Cabell, a play-boy who's had two wives already. . . ." Kelley sobered. "What about Paul?"

"I'll tell him tonight," Myra answered quickly.

"Your uncle will be glad to hear that."

MYRA nodded. "Uncle Troy hates him, all right. Sometimes I'm afraid—" She left her thought unfinished.

"Well, I'll shove along," Kelley said. "Call me, if you need any help. . . ."

The storm broke as Kelley put away the supper dishes. He'd watched it coming from the window of his small cabin. He'd seen the long, gray veils that hung between cloud and sea, the wind like running feet that scuffed the wave-tops white.

The storm struck with a sudden, explosive violence, buffeting the cabin, hammering on the windows. Kelley moved his easel and paintings from under the leaky parts of the roof, and settled down before the fire. It was shortly after nine when the telephone rang.

"Clyde! Oh, Clyde. . . ."

It was Myra, her voice faint over the wire. Faint, but still Kelley's heart turned to ice, and fear caught at his throat like a great, cold hand. She'd sobbed his name, moaned it in a voice weak with terror.

"Myra!" he shouted. "Where are you, Myra? Answer me! Where are you?"

"Paul's cabin. Hurry, Clyde! Hurry!"

Her voice slurred off. There'd been no click of the receiver, for the wire still hummed. Kelley jiggled the hook frantically, calling:

"Myra! Myra! Hello, Myra!"

There was no answer.

Kelley turned and ran for the door. He plunged headlong into the storm, without coat or hat. The rain came down in sheets, soaking him, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but Myra. What had happened to her?

The lights were on in Paul Cabell's cottage; the door stood open. Blustering wind had spewed rain half across the living room—an empty living room. Kelley shut the door.

The dining room and kitchen were through the archway to the left. The telephone was on the kitchen wall. Kelley went that way. He found Myra, sprawled on the floor, limp, unmoving.

She wore a yellow slicker. A handkerchief was fastened peasant-fashion over her dark hair. There was no color in her face, except the dark shadow of closed lashes, the red smear of blood across one white cheek. Kelley went down on his knees beside her. It was some time before he realized that she was not dead.

She had fainted and, in falling, had struck her cheek against the corner of the sink. Kelley wiped the blood from her face with shaky hands.

Cold water brought her around soon. Slowly, her eyes opened, and recognition came into them. She threw her arms around Kelley's neck, whimpering in fright.

"What is it, Myra?" he urged. "Tell me! What scared you?"

"In—in the bathroom," Myra whispered.

CHAPTER II

Savage Murder

KELLEY got to his feet, moved into the hallway. There was light in the bathroom, none in the hall. But in the hall was something else—the feel of death, the smell of it.

The smell was the salt stench of fresh-spilled blood, and as Kelley moved toward the bathroom door, he felt nausea boiling in his stomach. Cold sweat formed suddenly on his face as the strength oozed out of his legs. It took real effort to force himself on, to stand at last in the bathroom door.

Cabell was on the bathroom floor. He was on his back, his face turned sightlessly upward and contorted by some terrible fear. There was blood on his hands that were like claws on the floor beside him. His own blood. He had bled copiously from a wound in his throat.

On the floor, tracked through the blood, were the footprints of a dog. A big dog. The hall window was broken, and glass had sprayed far into the hall. A dog might have done that, leaping in from the outside. And the wound in Cabell's throat—only fangs could have torn that flesh away.

Kelley went back to the girl.

She looked at him, hoping he'd tell her it wasn't true. But one look at his gray, shaken face was enough. She buried her face in her hands, choking. Kelley caught her by the shoulders.

"None of that, Myra! Stop it!" And when she'd gotten hold of herself: "How did you happen to find him?"

"I—I saw Uncle Troy come running out of here," she said brokenly. "I knew something must be wrong. The door was open and the lights were on. I called, but no one answered. I was afraid Uncle Troy might have—" She sobbed hard. "I—I found Paul there."

"Troy didn't—" Kelley began, then stopped.

A voice at the front door called:

"Hello! Oh, Paul, are you home?" It was Fred Rogers, rain-coat held

hood-like over his close-cropped head. "Well, hello, Clyde. I saw the light and popped in for a drink. Where's Paul?"

"Paul's dead," Kelley said flatly.

Rogers' face went blank. "What?"

Kelley nodded toward the bathroom.

"In there. But you'd better not look. It's pretty bad."

Still only half believing, Rogers went into the hall. Kelley followed. Rogers stopped in the doorway to the bathroom. He looked, and then staggered back. It was several moments before he could get his breath. He looked at Kelley with glassy eyes.

Kelley nodded. "Looks like it," he said tiredly. "It looks like the dog killed him. We'd better call the sheriff. . . ."

SHERIFF OTTO JAGGER was small, truculent. He had suspicious blue eyes and a thin mouth. He resented being roused out of bed in the middle of a storm, even for a murder. And especially for a murder as fantastic as this. He wasn't entirely sure someone hadn't concocted it as a trick to make Otto Jagger look like a fool.

"A dog!" he snorted. "Nonsense!"

"It's still the only answer!" Kelley snapped. He was white, grim. Because Kelley had served time, Jagger had centered his spite on him. And Kelley was out of patience. "The dog killed him. Get a posse and find the brute before he kills again!"

Jagger swung on him angrily. "Listen, you," he snarled. "I don't need your help. I put you away, didn't I? Right!" He went on sputtering, but he turned to the telephone and gave the necessary orders.

Kelley and Fred Rogers offered their help, but the sheriff refused curtly. Jean Rogers, Fred Rogers' wife, a pale, red-haired woman of thirty, caught Myra's arm.

"Stay with me," she pleaded. "I—I don't want to be alone. You shouldn't be, either."

Rogers chuckled. "Alone! That shows what she thinks of me as a protector. But stay with us, Myra, by all

means. And you, Clyde. Stop for a drink, anyway."

The rain was coming down with a steady roar. The four people paused.

"Run for it," Rogers shouted. They took deep breaths and ducked into the downpour. They'd almost reached the Rogers' cottage, when Jean Rogers came to an abrupt stop.

"There!" she gasped. "There by the door! Look!"

Fred Rogers' flashlight caught the dog on the porch. For a moment the brute faced them, head low, yellow eyes catching the light and throwing it back redly. Then, with an easy, fluid motion, the dog spun and vanished into the darkness beyond the porch rail.

Jagger came on the run in answer to Kelley's yell. There was a lawn around the Rogers' cabin, and, in back of it, an open field. Neither showed any tracks. Swearing angrily, Jagger came up on the porch where the others waited.

"Who left this door open?" he demanded.

"I—I might have," Jean Rogers said.

The dog had been in the house. Wet tracks showed that, and they led straight through to the rear, to the door of a back bedroom. After a short pause, the dog had turned and gone directly out.

"Why, that's my bedroom," Jean Rogers whispered.

She explained, under Jagger's questioning, that she suffered from insomnia and slept alone to spare her husband her restless tossing. Jagger was suspicious of that, as he was of everything. It was a relief when his men came and he went out to form his posse.

Jean Rogers fixed a hot drink. When the conversation lagged, Kelley asked about a bear rug, missing from its usual place before the fire. Fred answered that it was being cleaned. It was a futile attempt to make talk, for their minds were occupied with graver things.

Myra put her glass down abruptly.

"I can't stay, Jean," she said. "I'd like to, really, but I'd better get home. Clyde will take me."

Kelley thought she'd be better off with Jean than alone, but something in her eyes made him hold his tongue. They started toward her cottage, and then, when the Rogers' door was closed, she turned back.

"It's Uncle Troy, Clyde," she said. "I've got to see him now, tonight."

"He didn't kill Paul!" Kelley said.

"I know. But he saw the body," she said worriedly. "I'm afraid, because—well, not long ago he saw an accident. A woman was badly hurt. The blood and all upset him. He got shell-shocked again. Clyde, he thought he was still fighting the war. Everybody was a German. He was out of his head for three days."

"You think he's done it again?" Kelley asked.

"Well, something must be wrong!" she answered. "He should have called the police. Instead of that, he ran away."

KELLEY caught her arm, stopped her. His rain-wet face was sober.

"Maybe I'd better go up there alone," he said. "If he's out of his head—"

"I'm the one to care for him!" Myra said.

Kelley shrugged. Myra had a mind of her own, and he knew she'd go with him or go alone. Kelley stopped at his cabin for a slicker and a flashlight. They went on, arm in arm, through the rain-swept darkness.

Indian Rock was a giant fist of stone that thrust itself up sixty feet above the beach. There was only one way to the top, a path on the beach side. It was narrow and slippery, and in this downpour, it was all but impassable. A strange place to live. Kelley found himself remembering how Indian Rock had gotten its name.

Almost a century ago, a pioneer named Silas Huxley had been besieged atop it by a band of marauding Indians. The Indians had burned his homestead, but they hadn't hurt Silas Huxley or his family. In three days he'd killed ten of them, which convinced the others that one man could hold Indian Rock against almost any odds. . . .

They found Troy Johnson feverishly awake.

He was a tall man, dark and gaunt, and his black, deep-set eyes glistened hotly under thick, black brows. Paul Cabell's death had disturbed him, no doubt of that. Muscles crawled in his cheeks, his mouth jerked. His hands, big-knuckled and covered with coarse hair, were never still. The sight of Clyde Kelley brought swift, angry color to his face.

"You!" he breathed hoarsely. "You dirty convict, I warned you to stay away from Myra. Blast you, I'll—"

"Uncle Troy, stop!"

Myra threw herself forward, clasped determined arms around her uncle's neck. He tried to put her aside, but she clung to him.

"I asked Clyde to come!" she said. "Do you hear? I asked him to bring me here!"

"But, Myra—" Johnson protested.

She interrupted breathlessly. "I saw you run out of Paul's cabin and knew you must have seen Paul. I was worried. I came as soon as I could."

Troy Johnson brushed his forehead, remembering.

"Yes—yes, I saw him. It was terrible. There was blood everywhere. And his throat was—"

Suddenly, Johnson was shaking. His eyes grew wide, more brilliant. There was a white ring where his nostrils flared. Myra looked to Kelley for help.

"Put him to bed," Kelley snapped. "Make him quiet down, stop thinking about it. Give him a sedative of some kind. Got any?"

Myra flew to a cupboard and came back with a box of pills. Johnson protested, but to no avail. Myra made him take two. He became drowsy almost at once.

"I went to tell—Cabell to leave you alone," he muttered. "No-good play-boy. . . . Not good enough for you, Myra. . . ." He sighed throatily, relaxing in sleep.

After sending Myra into the next room, Kelley removed Johnson's shirt and trousers, rolling the big man beneath the blankets. He was turning to put the clothes away, when a dark stain on the shirt front caught his

eyes. He stared at it, dazed. After a moment he hung it in a closet. Then called to Myra that he was ready to leave.

They left the cabin a few moments later. The rain continued, a sodden, monotonous downpour that filled the night with steady sound. Kelley stopped at his cabin for a hammer and some nails.

"Insurance," he explained with a tired grin. At Myra's cabin, he nailed strips of lumber across all her windows. "That'll keep a dog out," he said, "or a man."

"A man?" she asked. "What makes you say that?"

"Just an idea," Kelley added hurriedly. "Look, do me a favor. Lock your door and keep it locked. Don't open it for anyone. And I mean *anyone!* Not even for your Uncle Troy."

"But Uncle Troy is sleeping!" she protested.

"I know," Kelley said. "But suppose someone came around and said he was your uncle. You might let him in before you knew, see?" He nudged her chin with his fist. "Gonna mind me?"

Her eyes were sharp. "Clyde, if you're keeping something from me—"

"Nonsense!" Kelly said.

He turned to leave, and Myra called him back. She looked at him again, to satisfy herself he was hiding nothing.

"You forgot to kiss me, mister," she said, grinning. "Or doesn't your wife-to-be rate a kiss?"

"Maybe our marrying is a mistake, Myra," he said, suddenly grave. "Me, an ex-convict—your uncle isn't going to forget that, ever! I don't know, maybe—"

"Cold feet?" she asked.

"No!" Kelley said. He caught her then, kissed her thoroughly.

CHAPTER III

Accusing Blood Stain

THERE was a light in Fred Rogers' cabin, and Kelley thought of stopping there for a drink, but de-

cided against it.

"Better get out of these wet clothes," he muttered, and slogged on through the downpour. He'd gone no more than a hundred yards when he stopped again.

A woman's scream caused that—a wide-throated cry, muffled by the rain, yet clear enough to reach out and grip Clyde Kelley like an icy hand. He was held frozen, breathless. The scream broke off then. With a choked curse, Kelley wheeled and ran back the way he'd come.

His first thought was Myra. A bright vision of the dog rocketed through his mind. He saw the big brute plainly, leaping on Myra, knocking her down, saw the powerful fangs buried in her throat. His mind was filled with this, already believing it. The truth caught him unprepared.

The back door of the Rogers' cabin slammed open. Jean Rogers appeared there, a brief silhouette against the yellow light, and ran swiftly into the rain-drenched darkness. The shock of seeing her thus frightened, made Kelley break his stride. He tripped and fell.

He fell on the rough boardwalk and the breath exploded out of his lungs. A curtain of blazing lights flashed across his eyes, and for long moments he couldn't move, couldn't think.

Jean Rogers screamed again, thinly in the night, holding a high note. Fred Rogers yelled at her, kept yelling. The two sounds jerked Kelley to his feet and pushed him on in a staggering run.

The woman's voice stopped sharply. Fred Rogers' voice paused, then took on a sudden frantic insistence. He repeated her name again and again, his voice coming through the darkness as he hunted for her. Kelley ran after him, searching with his flashlight. Rogers' voice broke off with a sudden anguished cry.

Kelley found him a few moments later, in the field back of the cabin. Rogers, pajama-clad, was on his knees, crouching over something still and white in the knee-high grass. As Kelley neared him, the light brought out details mercifully hidden till then by darkness.

Fred Rogers staggered up. He covered his face, took a dozen blind steps and fell. He lay there, thin and lank against the ground, sobbing. The rain beat soddenly upon his shoulders.

Jean Rogers was a pitiful figure, red hair streaming into the mud, arms and legs twisted like a broken doll. A last spasm of terror had wrought her face into a grotesque mask, eyes stretched wide, mouth distorted and screaming, had there been breath left in her to scream. There was a raw, gaping wound where her throat had been. . . .

"DOOR Fred!" Myra said.

"It's tough," Kelly agreed soberly. "He's on the verge of collapse. He was sound asleep when she screamed. Must have seemed like a terrible nightmare to him."

It was ten in the morning, and Clyde Kelley was sitting at Myra Rhea's breakfast table. The rain had stopped, but there were leaden clouds that promised rain again. Behind Clyde and Myra was a night without sleep, a night of relentless questioning, of nervous exhaustion. And it had left its mark. Their eyes were red, their voices slow and tired.

"Why did she run out of the house?" Myra asked.

"No one seems to know. Panic-stricken, probably."

"Oh, Clyde, they've got to find that dog!" Myra cried suddenly. "They've got to! It—it seems to kill just for the joy of killing!"

"Jagger's doing all he can." Kelley smiled a little. "An old woman came around last night with a sure-fire solution. She claimed it was a werewolf. You know, one of those gadgets that changes back and forth from man to wolf and wolf to man."

"Clyde!" Myra gasped.

"You mean to say you don't believe in ghosts?"

"This is no time for joking!"

Kelley sobered then. "You're right. Jean Rogers' family is due in today. They won't think it's funny."

"Has Paul Cabell's family been notified?" she asked.

"He hasn't any, to speak of. Only a cousin, Henry Hugon, and they haven't been able to locate him. But

he'll turn up, all right. All Gabell's money goes to him."

"It's odd that—"

Abruptly, Kelley stood up.

"You must be dead for sleep," he interrupted. "I know I am. I'll be around before dark. Keep your door locked." He kissed her hurriedly and went out.

He went out to intercept Sheriff Jagger, whom he'd seen coming along the walk toward Myra's house. Jagger showed strain, too. His face was dirty, bearded. Fatigue had turned it gray.

With each hour, he seemed to grow more truculent, more suspicious. He carried something balled up under his arm.

"I thought," Jagger said heavily, "you gave Troy Johnson some sleeping tablets."

"That's right," answered Kelley. "Two. Seconal, I believe. Should keep him out 'til afternoon."

"Hah!" Jagger's mouth twisted in an ugly grin. "Now what do you know about that? I guess he walks in his sleep."

KELLEY'S stomach tightened. "You mean—"

"He ain't there!" Jagger was suddenly savage. "And what's more, he ain't been there for hours!"

"You must be wrong! We—"

"Wrong, am I?" Jagger thrust his face close, snarling. "I've had about enough of your lip, you dirty stir-bum! You're a liar."

"I'm not lying!" Kelley was white, stubborn. "Myra gave him those pills. It looked like he swallowed them, but he might have held them under his tongue. Anyway, we thought he went to sleep!"

"Well, you thought wrong! He's gone!"

"What of it?" Kelley asked. "He's got a right to go, hasn't he? He didn't kill anyone."

"The guy's a nut," Jagger said. "I've known it for a long time. Been watchin' him. Now these killings start. It's the dog, sure, but ain't it funny the dog picked Cabell to knock off. Cabell, the guy Johnson hates like poison? Then the Rogers'

woman. And now we can't find Troy. Where is he?"

"Probably out hunting the dog. Everyone else is."

"That dog's handy, ain't it? A handy hook to hang things on. Like murder, for instance."

Kelley's mouth thinned. "If you've got a charge to make," he said, "get it made."

Jagger laughed. "I ain't chargin'—yet. I'm askin'. Now take this shirt, here." He took it from under his arm. "It belongs to Troy Johnson. I'm askin' how that big stain got on the front of it?"

"What is the stain?" Kelley asked.

"I think it's blood."

"Well, is it?"

"It sure ain't gravy!" Jagger fumed.

Kelley was shaken, and he knew it showed. He felt all color drain out of his face, felt uncertainty come into his eyes. Jagger slanted a sharp glance at him. He must have decided Kelley was acting suspiciously, decided, too, the best way to trip him was to do the unexpected. With a shrug the sheriff turned and strode abruptly away.

Kelley went on to his cabin.

Whatever the sheriff's motive, he'd left Myra alone, and for that Kelley was infinitely glad. If he'd gone to Myra with that shirt. . . .

Kelley lay down. Sleep seemed hopelessly out of the question, his mind was too full. Too full of questions like: Where was Troy Johnson? Why had he faked taking the pills? How had the blood come to be on the front of his shirt? Unanswerable questions.

But no, there was an answer. It was a gruesome answer, hideous and fantastic, like something out of the dark ages. Men who turned to wolves and back again. Men who killed as wolves kill.

What utter nonsense!

IT was dark when he awakened. He sat up with a guilty start. The cabin was cold, still. The radiant dial of his watch pointed after nine o'clock. Kelley swore.

He'd promised Myra he'd show up before dark. A fine prospective hus-

band he was!

Hurriedly, he got his coat and flashlight, and then, at the door, he paused. He had no weapon. A gun was impossible—an ex-convict doesn't carry one and remain an "ex" for long. The next best thing was a club. He got one and set out for Myra's cabin.

Fat, dark clouds were very low. They made a black night even blacker, and they were poised, ready to let go a deluge at any moment. A side window of Myra's cottage dropped a square of light onto the ground. Kelley was still a hundred feet away, when he saw a gray shape glide across that square.

It was the dog! Kelley broke into a run.

The dog whirled, crouching. It eyed Kelley, undecided whether to fight or not, then slid away toward the beach and the high sand dunes there. Kelley leaped up on the porch. He tried the knob, found it locked. He pounded on the door.

"Myra!" he shouted. "Myra, are you there?"

The door opened, and Myra was there—a startled, frightened Myra.

"Clyde, what is it?" She backed away as he came in and heeled the door shut.

She looked from his white face to his club, and back again.

"The—dog!" he panted. "Saw it outside, just now. Scared me. Thought he might have gotten in somehow."

"Silly! The windows are nailed up, the door locked. How on earth could he?"

Kelley let his breath out with a rushing sigh, pushed his hat back.

"I'm jittery, I guess," he said, grinning. "One more night of this, and I'll be—"

The dog howled then. Starting high, the sound trickled slowly down the scale, each note agony. Myra was breathless, wide-eyed. Kelley felt cold fingers playing along his spine. They could not move until the last quavering note had died away. Then Kelley came explosively to life.

"I'll settle that mutt!" he rasped.

Myra caught him. "No, Clyde! Call the sheriff."

"The dog might tackle one man,"

Kelley said. "But he'd run from a half a dozen. I'll fix him, don't worry. I'll beat his brains out. Lock the door. . . ."

Kelley found where the dog had gone into the sand dunes. The wet sand held the tracks well. Kelley followed them to the high dune where the dog had howled, then down to the hard-packed sand at the edge of the surf, where, wide-spaced and running, the tracks led northward. He followed them at a steady jog.

A mile beyond Indian Rock, the tracks left the hard-packed sand and turned into a thick wood. Kelley paused, apprehensive. A fight in the open was one thing; in the woods it was another. Still, he'd come this far, and it was only a dog, after all.

HE moved into the woods, taking his time, letting himself be swallowed into the trees. The darkness was thick and it played strange tricks. Shapes, each one sinister and dangerous, rose up and vanished. Imaginary shapes, but they had him sweating all the same.

Sounds were like that, too. In the odd, breathless quiet, even small noises took on big meanings. The wet whisper of the wind might be a man moving, the rustle of field mice, a dog crouching for the spring.

He'd followed a narrow trail a hundred yards, when a dull red glow caught his eyes. He went toward it slowly, found a small, hidden clearing. The red glow was a banked up campfire that had flamed up a little. There was a tent beside a fallen tree, a pup-tent which held a pack sack and a sleeping bag. Kelley stood for several moments, listening. Then he crawled into the tent.

The pack was marked with the initials, "H. H." A sudden exultation surged through Kelley. He put his flashlight and club beside him, fumbled with the pack buckles. The contents of the pack were few: clothes, shaving tools, and at the bottom, a letter. The letter was dated the week before and addressed to Henry Hugon.

Kelley's fingers trembled as he started to open it. Then he whirled at a soft, stealthy sound.

CHAPTER IV

Struggle for Existence

MENACINGLY the gray shape of the dog was beyond the fire, slipping forward, ears flat to its great skull, teeth bared. Kelley was suddenly bathed in sweat. He was being stalked. The dog's big shoulders moved lithely, muscles writhing under the thick hide. Kelley groped for his club.

The movement set the dog in motion. Suddenly, it changed from a creeping threat into a juggernaut of savagery. Kelley's desperate fingers closed, not on the club, but on the flashlight barrel. There was not time to change. He lurched up to meet the attacking dog.

He managed to sidestep the first rush. As the dog flashed by, he struck out with the flashlight, caught the dog a glancing blow. The lense shattered on the thick skull. The dog whirled and came back, leaping for Kelley's throat.

Kelley grabbed frantically, his fingers sinking into the loose flesh of the dog's neck. The full weight of the animal struck him, then, and Kelley went down.

Before, the dog had given Kelley the feel of his teeth and had gone on. But not this time. This time it fought with a cold, silent ferocity, its big head whipping back and forth, lunging down. The canine was big, as big as Kelley, pound for pound, and much stronger.

Kelley held the dog away with his left hand, and with his right chopped at the skull with his flashlight. Again and again. The metal ground on bone, cutting. Abruptly, the flashlight disintegrated in Kelley's hand.

The dog was on top of Kelley every moment. Every moment fighting harder, stiff-legged, clawing, covering Kelley like a clever wrestler, using his weight to hold him down.

This was death, and Kelley knew it. This was the same death that had come to Cabell and Jean Rogers. He couldn't doubt that now. Not with

those white fangs so close, so eager for the soft flesh of his throat. He fought furiously, terror flooding him with strength.

But the dog was stronger. More, the dog had a better skill at the art of killing. The flashlight was useless. Now, Kelley needed both hands to hold the ever-increasing fury of the brute. He used both hands, and even they weren't enough. The dog's strength seemed to grow as Kelley's strength began to fade.

As fatigue ate into Kelley's arms, and they began to tremble, to bend, sweat burst through his skin. There seemed no air for his tortured lungs. The dog sensed Kelley's weakening, felt his arms give. He lunged harder, whining in his eagerness.

Another moment would see the finish. Another moment and those slashing fangs would have their way. Kelley would die then, and death would be this savage beast tearing at his throat.

But the dog stopped fighting!

One moment, it had been horribly intent upon the slaughter; the next it was stiffly tense, alert. There was no apparent reason for it. No one had called it. Abruptly, the dog shook free. He leaped across Kelley's helpless body and flashed away into the darkness.

For a long moment Kelley lay still. His sudden deliverance left him dazed. He was limp with exhaustion. When strength did come back to him, he wasted no time getting away from there.

His flashlight was broken, the fire scattered, and finding the letter would be a hopeless task. Besides, he had no taste for meeting the dog again. He stumbled away toward the sound of the surf.

The storm broke as he stepped out on the beach. The great, dark clouds seemed suddenly to split apart and let go a cascade of water. A cascade that had no end. And a night, already black, became as dark as hell's own pit. Kelley was drenched in a dozen steps. . . .

THERE was a light in Myra's cabin. Kelley hurried toward it,

reassured. But his reassurance did not last long. He was a hundred yards away when the door burst suddenly open.

The silhouette that appeared there might have been Jean Rogers', the circumstances were so exactly the same. But it was Myra, with terror in every strained line of her body. Suddenly she screamed in blind panic and ran into the night.

Abruptly the cabin light went out, and the darkness came again. Kelley's memory took him as far as the cabin, but beyond that blackness swallowed him. Myra might have gone in any direction. Rain and surf filled the air with muffling sound. Then, off to the left, toward the sea, Myra screamed again!

It was a full-throated cry of blind, senseless terror. She was running, for the sound moved through the darkness. Kelley yelled, and the sharp memory of the night before came back. His voice was like Fred Rogers', no more able to help.

He remembered Jean Rogers' fate, and the mental image put strength into his legs. He could not see as much as a foot before him, but it didn't matter. He ran as he'd never run before.

He smashed full into a clump of scotch broom. The tough branches tore at him like steel claws, tripped him and pulled him down. He lunged up, only to step into an unseen hollow and go full length again. Each time he fell, it was harder to get up. His legs began to weaken; his feet became lead. But there was always the pitiful sound of Myra's voice to pull him on.

The chase led into the high dunes back of her cabin. Kelley was sure it was the dog pursuing her, and the dog must catch her soon. A low bush grabbed Kelley's ankle, sent him sprawling. He got to his knees, and froze there.

Myra's voice jerked suddenly up to a shrill, wild yell! And then, just as suddenly, it snapped off short. There was no sound after that. Nothing but the sea and rain.

And so Myra had died. The dog had caught her, had pulled her down. Her last cry had been ended by teeth

that slit her throat as deftly as any knife. Kelley thought of this, and lost what little control he had.

He staggered up, no better than an animal himself. He was a savage now. He was going to kill that dog, if it meant death for himself.

His blind rush carried him to the spot where Myra had screamed. To the spot, and beyond. But he found nothing, heard no sound. He turned, cutting back and forth in the darkness. His rage climbed to a mad, white heat. He raved, he swore, he pleaded with the dog to come to grips with him again. But still there was no answer.

He stood, at last, stock-still, hands clenched, face uplifted. The awfulness of his failure swelled up and engulfed him like a rushing tide. He shook his fists at the sky, cursing. He fell to his knees in a torment of impotence. The rain came down to beat upon his shoulders as he lay there, torn and wracked by great, convulsive sobs. . . .

"**W**HY can't we find her?" Sheriff Otto Jagger demanded harshly. "Did the dog carry her away?"

"He could have," Kelley said. "He's big enough."

They were in Myra Rhea's cabin. Kelley, Jagger, two deputies and Fred Rogers. Kelley and Rogers were oddly alike. Both were pale, hot-eyed, both a little mad in the fierceness of their desire to avenge the two girls. Rogers had been attracted by Kelley's efforts to find Myra, and he'd helped, to no avail. Myra had vanished, and the pouring rain had wiped out all trace.

"Some dog!" Jagger sneered.

"It's the truth," said Kelley.

"Ahhh!" Jagger snorted disgustedly. "Well, I'm blamed if I believe it!" He pointed to a hat that lay on the table. "That's Troy Johnson's hat. It's got his name in it. I found it out where you said the dog got the girl. I suppose the wind just happened to blow it there at this particular time? Just happened to, eh?"

"Surely, you don't think Troy—" Rogers began.

Jagger hit the table with an angry

fist. "I'm not sayin' what I think! Figure it out for yourself. There may be a dog, only I ain't seen it. But I *have* seen this hat, and Troy's shirt with blood all down the front. Troy's a nut. He hated Cabell. He's hidin' out now. Did the dog turn the cabin light off when the girl ran out?"

"If Troy's acting queer," Kelley said, "it's because that shell-shock has come back to him. As for that light, you forget Henry Hugon."

"Ahhh!" Jagger said again.

"Hugon's got a motive," Kelley persisted. "The money he stands to inherit. I think he's trained that dog to kill, and the dog won't stop killing." Kelley's mouth jerked. "But I'm wasting my breath. I told you about that camp."

"And I don't believe it!" Jagger's face was turning purple. "Why? Because my men have been through that woods a dozen times. They'd have seen it."

"If they fell over it," Kelley said bitterly. "It's well hidden. If it hadn't been for the fire, I wouldn't have found it. Jagger, you're a blundering fool. If you were anything but, you'd at least find out if I'm lying!"

"Fool, am I?" Jagger choked. He whirled to one of his deputies, his voice clotted with fury. "Williams, go with Kelley. Find out if he's lying, and be sure about it. Get out!"

Williams was a young giant with black hair and black eyes, and he distrusted Kelley. He strode through the downpour, growling:

"That camp better be there, if you know what's good for you."

They had no trouble finding the trail, or following it into the woods. But there was no red glow to guide them to the clearing. Kelley turned off the trail and, after some trouble, located a clearing. It looked familiar, but there was no tent, or sign there'd ever been one. He went on then, deeper and deeper into the woods, aware of a growing sense of disaster. He stopped at last, and went back to the first clearing.

"Are you havin' trouble, pal?" Williams sneered.

"He's gone," Kelley said.

"Now ain't that nice!"

"The camp was here!" Kelley protested. "There's the fallen tree. Hugon knew I found the camp, and moved it."

"Sure, sure," Williams rumbled. "I'll bet that's just what happened." His big hands closed into fists, shoulders bunched.

"You lyin' bum!"

KELLEY knew what was coming, knew that he was powerless to prevent it. Unless he could prove—His searching light settled on a bit of white in the sand. The corner of an envelope! The letter!—It had been buried by Kelley's struggle with the dog, and went unnoticed by Hugon. Kelley dived on it.

The letter was soaked and limp, but the ink had not run. Together Kelley and the surprised deputy read it. And when they had finished, Williams gasped:

"Holy Mackerel! This—this is it! We gotta show Jagger! Come on!"

Williams swung around and plunged toward the trail. Kelley followed, glad Williams was convinced, that he would do the talking.

But Fate stepped in again for one last blow below the belt. She put a root in the path of the big deputy. William's foot caught on it, twisted, and he went down with a yell of pain. He tried to stand, and sat down again at once.

Kelley looked at his ankle.

"Fraid it's broken," he said glumly.

They heard the sound of rifle fire then, faint above the rumbling surf, the pounding rain. Two quick shots, three in answer. Then a slow, spasmodic exchange between two guns. Williams stopped his groaning.

"What's that?"

"Troy Johnson!" Kelley breathed. "That's coming from Indian Rock! Troy's barricaded himself there. Jagger is trying to shoot him down!"

He caught up his flashlight and lunged down the trail.

"Hey!" Williams yelled in sudden panic. "Don't leave me here! That dog—*Hey!*"

Kelley kept on running.

CHAPTER V

A Killer Is Unmasked

A SMALL-SCALE but deadly battle was going on at Indian Rock. Sheriff Jagger, two deputies and a State Trooper were sheltered behind a sand dune a short way from the foot of the Indian Rock trail. Flashlights, driven butt-first into the sand, served as searchlights. Their long, white beams lanced through the pouring rain to turn the Rock aglow. Kelley caught Jagger's arm.

"Where's Fred Rogers?" he yelled.

Savagely, Jagger swung around. "How do I know? I've got my hands full." He pointed to one of the deputies, fury contorting his thin face. "Look at that!"

Kelley's heart skipped a beat when he saw that the State Trooper was bandaging the deputy's arm.

"Johnson done that!" Jagger roared. "Billy was watchin' his place on the Rock and Johnson sneaked up and shot 'im. Billy was lucky to get away. And you say Johnson ain't the guilty one."

"Troy's out of his head," Kelley said, desperately. "He's not responsible—"

"You're tellin' me!" Jagger screeched. "He's crazy, all right. Bitin' people's throats out. . . . And now we can't get him outa there!"

Troy Johnson's voice bellowed out above the storm.

"C'mon, you dirty Huns! You started this bloody war, now let's see

you finish it! Give 'em plenty, boys!" Jagger levered a shell into his gun, went to the edge of the dune and commenced firing. Kelley yelled. And when Jagger ignored him, he caught Jagger by the shoulders and dragged him up.

"Look at this letter!" Kelley snarled. "Look at it, blast you!"

Jagger raged savagely. He seemed to have forgotten Williams in his fury. He wanted nothing but to destroy Troy Johnson. Johnson had wounded a deputy, and was doing his best right now to kill any and all who came his way. What further proof did anyone need? Jagger had had enough of Kelley.

Jagger lunged, cursing, and his rifle butt caught Kelley on the side of the head. Kelley went down with a blaze of light in his eyes, stunned.

When Kelley could think again, he realized how steep the odds were against him. He needed a miracle to stop Jagger. Blunt proof, that Jagger could not deny. Shocking proof, to hold his attention.

The State Trooper threw down a tear-gas rifle in sudden disgust.

"Can't hit that plateau!" he yelled at Jagger. "Wind blows it away when I do."

"It'll take dynamite to get 'im offa there," a deputy said.

"If he wants war, I say give it to 'im," the other deputy said. "We'll use grenades."

"Hand grenades!" Jagger yelled, grabbing the idea. "That's the ticket. We got 'em in the armory. You,

[Turn page]



Haines, go get some. We'll fix Troy Johnson!"

Kelley watched the State Trooper run for his car. Hand grenades would work. In fact, they'd work too well. If Kelley was right, they'd kill not only Johnson, but someone else besides.

Kelley staggered up. He had ten minutes until the trooper came back. Ten minutes to work a miracle. He lunged away into the darkness, and Jagger's shout only lent wings to his feet. . . .

CLYDE KELLEY did his best. He got a piece of evidence. It wasn't the evidence he'd hoped for, but it was almost as good. Going back toward Indian Rock, he thought each step would be his last. Each breath was acid to sear his lungs, each step torture. And it didn't help to know the trooper had returned with the hand grenades before him.

The crowd at Indian Rock had doubled. There were more lights, more guns. As Kelley neared, he saw a man in a mackinaw, and at his side, a big dog on a short lease. The dog!

Kelley put on a burst of speed, yelling, and the man and the dog both disappeared into the shadows. Kelley ran toward Jagger, just as a darting figure broke free and raced toward Indian Rock.

It was Fred Rogers. He carried a grenade in each hand. Troy Johnson's rifle cracked. Rogers staggered, dropped the grenade from his right hand. Scooping it up with his left, he lurched on, his right arm oddly limp.

"He's hit!" Jagger roared. "That dirty killer shot Fred!"

Fred Rogers vanished into the brush at the foot of Indian Rock. Kelley reached Jagger, then. He shoved the evidence into the surprised sheriff's arms, gasped, "Teeth!" He gave the sheriff the letter, gasped, "Motive!" and then he was running again.

He pounded across the lighted area toward Indian Rock. Johnson's rifle spoke again, and bullets snapped and whined about Kelley's head. Then a shout from Jagger put the lights out. Darkness, blessed darkness. And Kelley reached the foot of the Rock.

Fred Rogers' right arm was injured, and that meant he would have to throw the grenades with his left. To do that, he would have to climb nearly to the top, and there hadn't been time for that yet. Kelley drew a deep breath.

"Fred, stop!" he yelled. "Killing Troy won't help!"

Feet, scrambling in the darkness above, stopped, and Kelley knew Rogers was listening. Kelley found a huge boulder beside the trail. Crouching behind it, he began to talk again. His voice was loud enough to reach only Fred Rogers, fifty feet above.

"You did these killings," Kelley said. "You hear that, Fred? I can prove that you're the killer."

Kelley went on to unfold the whole grim story. Fred Rogers had known Paul Cabell several years, Kelley said. Cabell had gotten drunk at a party, a girl had fallen from a window. She'd died, and the police had called it an accident. But Fred Rogers had gone to Cabell, had said Cabell had thrown the girl out in a drunken rage. Cabell, who'd been too drunk to remember, had paid for Rogers' silence. Black-mail!

"It's a lie!" Rogers said hoarsely in the darkness.

"It's the truth!" Kelley snapped.

CABELL, Kelley went on, had finally balked at paying. He'd written a letter to his cousin, Henry Hugon, explaining everything. He'd threatened Rogers with exposure.

Rogers had killed Cabell by cutting his throat. Then, when Hugon's dog appeared, attracted by the smell of blood and death, Rogers had seen a chance to shift the blame. He'd taken the teeth from the stuffed head of the bear rug, had fastened those teeth to two sticks, bolted to form a giant pair of pincers. With these, he'd torn Cabell's throat out.

"Jean must have known," Kelley said, "and you had to kill her to keep her quiet. She ran out of your cabin because you chased her. I fell and didn't see you were right behind her. You tore her throat out and buried the fake teeth in the sand."

"You can't prove it!" Fred Rogers raged.

"I can! I've got the letter Paul wrote, and I found the bear rug with the teeth gone." This was true. He'd given both to Jagger. He went on to tell a lie: "I can prove you're guilty, but I'm the only one who can."

He said that, and it got the result he'd hoped for. There was a dull thump on the trail close by. Desperately, Kelley burrowed under the boulder. He shrank there, waiting.

The world seemed to rip apart in one terrific, devastating blast. Concussion was a giant hand that beat at Kelley, hammering him. Ugly bomb-fragments snarled and tore through the brush. Kelley's ears bled and rang from the battering, but he found his

ing his life. Somehow, he staggered to his feet.

They were even now, he and Rogers, weaponless. Rogers had more strength, but Kelley had something better—a deep determination to finish this fiend who had killed so many.

Rogers met him on the path. Hands like steel hooks dug at Kelley's throat. But Kelley scarcely noticed them. There was the wet feel of the murderer's flesh beneath his fingers. He'd wanted it, and he had it now. There had never been, in all his life, so much satisfaction in a single act.

He felt himself falling, backwards, down the steep path. But it made no difference. He had only one desire,

An Embalmer's Helper Becomes the Official Executioner
for an Insidious Crew of Criminals and Spies

IN

SERVANT OF THE AXE

A Complete Novelet
of Bizarre Doom

By

STEWART STERLING



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

voice again.

"You missed me," he taunted. "Tried to kill me because I'm the only guy who can prove you're guilty."

He talked on, lashing Rogers with curses. He used himself for bait. And Rogers, desperate, frantic, took the bait. He threw the last grenade.

Kelley jammed himself breathlessly against the earth, and then it came. A sheet of fire, a thunderclap, a sledgehammer to drive Kelley's helpless body into the mud. A mass of earth broke free from above, cascaded down, half-buried him. But the boulder sheared away the screaming steel, sav-

one thought—to dig his fingers deeply into this throat, to cling there until the life of the man had gone. . . .

THERE was light, later on. There was the crowd gathered close, talking. There was Fred Rogers, not dead, but shackled and on his way to prison. And there was Troy Johnson, lying quietly upon a stretcher under the influence of a quieting hypodermic. Kelley sat on the running-board of a car, his arms around Myra.

"I figured Troy must have had you with him," Kelley said. "Didn't know if you were alive or dead, though."

"I—I wasn't sure myself," Myra answered. "When he came after me, I saw he was out of his head. I thought—well, I got panicky and ran. He caught me, and like a goof, I fainted. When I woke up I was in his cabin, and all that shooting was going on."

"Good thing you woke up when you did," Kelley said. "Don't know how Jagger would have got Troy off the Rock if you hadn't slugged Troy with a piece of stove wood. Jagger had Troy down for a werewolf, no mistake. But when he saw Troy fall and cut his chin—"

Jagger came over then, with Henry Hugon. Hugon was a crisp, gray man, with an outdoor look about him.

"I wanted to thank you for getting Paul's killer," Hugon said to Kelley. "Paul told me he was being black-mailed, but he didn't say who was doing it. He was killed the day I got here. I've been trying to catch his

murderer myself—without success."

Kelley nodded. "I remembered that bear rug," he explained. "The letter was proof you hadn't done it. And I knew if it was your dog, it hadn't done it. That left only Fred Rogers."

Hugon put a silver whistle in his mouth, blew on it. There was no sound, but the dog came bounding up. And that explained the dog's strange behavior. The whistle was a dog-whistle, too high-pitched for human ears.

"This is Butch," said Hugon. "He'd like to apologize. He claims he was only doing a watch-dog's job when he scrapped with you. He doesn't hold a grudge."

"Okay, Butch," Kelley said. "It's okay."

"Everything's okay," Myra said.

"I'm still a jailbird—" Kelley began.

"Phooey!" said Myra gently. She covered his lips with her own.

Next Issue: DEATH CALLS CINDERELLA, a Complete
Colonel Crum Novelet by JOHN H. KNOX

Men, here's one right across the plate:

Use Thin Gillettes—save dough—look great!

They whisk through beard in record time,

Yet four blades cost you just a dime!

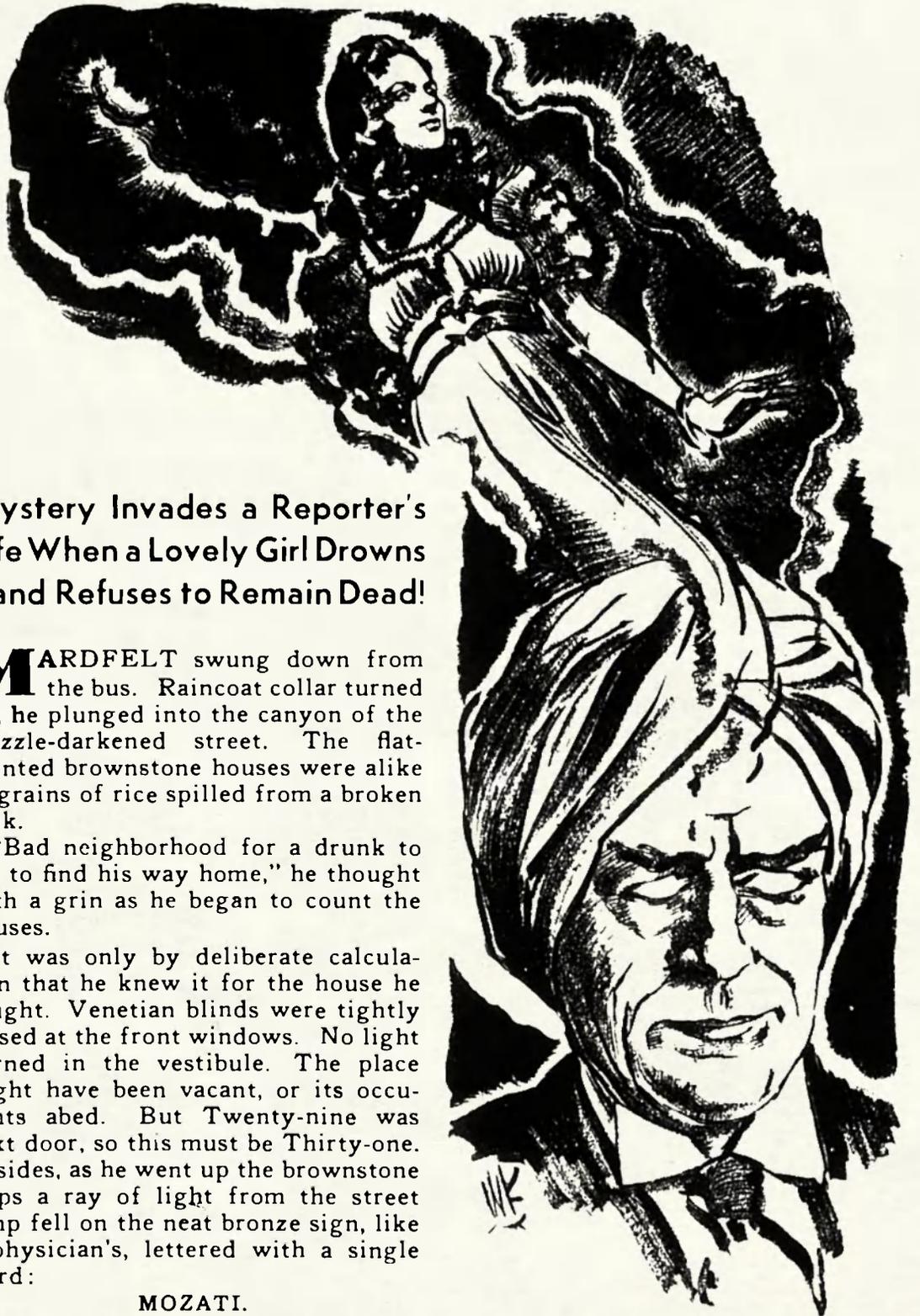


The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

I MARRIED A GHOST

By SEABURY QUINN

Author of "Candid Camera," "Doomed," etc.



Mystery Invades a Reporter's Life When a Lovely Girl Drowns—and Refuses to Remain Dead!

MARDFELT swung down from the bus. Raincoat collar turned up, he plunged into the canyon of the drizzle-darkened street. The flat-fronted brownstone houses were alike as grains of rice spilled from a broken sack.

"Bad neighborhood for a drunk to try to find his way home," he thought with a grin as he began to count the houses.

It was only by deliberate calculation that he knew it for the house he sought. Venetian blinds were tightly closed at the front windows. No light burned in the vestibule. The place might have been vacant, or its occupants abed. But Twenty-nine was next door, so this must be Thirty-one. Besides, as he went up the brownstone steps a ray of light from the street lamp fell on the neat bronze sign, like a physician's, lettered with a single word:

MOZATI.

He pulled the old-fashioned silver

A girl's form issued from Mozati

bell-knob and stepped into the vestibule. If this was just another wild-goose chase that White had sent him on, Mardfelt would have his heart's blood in the morning! Sending a man out this time of night to sit in on some blasted séance. . . . A glow of ruby light, like a darkroom's, shone against the stained glass panel of the door. The lock clicked and a neat maid looked inquiringly at him.

"I'd like to see Mr. Mozati," Mardfelt said. "I'm from the *Evening Express*."

"Mozati does not see reporters."

"But I'm not exactly a reporter," he broke in before she had a chance to close the door. "I conduct a column for the *Express*. I have a note of introduction from Mr. White."

"Mr. Ralph Sibley White?"

"The same," he replied. "He told me Mr. Mozati would be glad to see me."

She still looked doubtful, but she stepped back.

"Come into the waiting room. I'll take your note to Mozati."

Preceding him down the hall, she drew aside a curtain and snapped a light switch. The waiting room was dignified, but not somber. Somewhere, he could not be certain if it sounded in the rear of the house or upstairs, a mellow-toned gong beat a single note.

TURNING out a good daily column, keeping clear of gossip, politics and scandal, keeps a man on tip-toe for new leads. When his friend White had assured him that Mozati was a great medium, he had pricked up eager journalistic ears.

"Do you mean to tell me you've gone off the deep end?" he had demanded. "You've exposed a hundred fake clairvoyants and mediums. Are you actually beginning to believe that bunk?"

White had turned argumentatively upon him.

"You don't deny the possibility of spirit communication, do you?"

"Neither do I affirm it. I've heard you say a hundred times that mediums are just a lot of charlatans."

White had nodded. "That's true in ninety-nine cases out of every hun-

dred, but I still believe there are genuine ones. Take Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Richard Crookes and Sir Oliver Lodge. Those men were neither fools nor dupes. If there'd been any funny business about the mediums they went to, you may be sure that they'd have spotted it."

"Well," Mardfelt said, "granting they weren't imposed on, that makes just three known exceptions to the rule."

"I'm almost convinced Mozati makes the fourth. The Society for Psychical Research has subjected him to every test that's known to science. He's passed them all. I'm still neutral, but whether you believe in him or not, a session at one of his séances should make interesting copy for your column."

"Thanks," Mardfelt answered gratefully. "How can I see him?"

White scribbled a hurried note of introduction.

"Perhaps this'll get you in. His séances are by appointment only. There'll be one tomorrow night, at half-past eleven."

"You'll be there?"

"Not this time. Once you get in Mozati's house—if you do—you're on your own."

So here he was, cooling his heels in this boob-trap. Why had he done it? Why hadn't he had sense enough to go to bed, or have a round of poker with the boys at the Press Club? The door connecting with the rear room swung open almost soundlessly.

"Mr. Mardfelt? I am Mozati."

Mardfelt swallowed. What he had expected to see, he had no clear idea. Mozati's nose was large, aquiline and sharply sculptured, his eyes set wide apart beneath arched brows of almost startling blackness, his skin clear olive. But arresting as his face was, his legs were shriveled to mere skeletal remains. The patent leather shoes upon his feet might have been made to fit a five-year-old child. No one could walk on such inadequate, deformed extremities. He sat in a wheeled chair of chromium-plated steel tubing.

Mardfelt looked at the hands resting on the rubber-tired wheels. He

was struck by their extraordinary size and obvious power.

"I'm not coming as a skeptic, or even as a scientific observer, Mr. Mozati," he explained. "What I'm after is the average intelligent, but uninformed man's idea of your séance. White tells me you've done remarkable things. I should like to record them for my column. You may depend on me not to be flippant in my report of your work."

"The fact that Ralph Sibley White has vouched for you is sufficient guarantee of your good taste, Mr. Mardfelt. I have only one request to make. Please do not speak while we are sitting, nor make any movement not absolutely necessary. Extraneous sound or movement interrupts the delicate vibrations."

Mardfelt nodded agreement as Mozati swung his wheeled chair halfway around and motioned him to step through the doorway. The room he entered was scarcely larger than a closet. Mozati followed him, closed the door and pressed a button in the wall. The scarcely audible humming of a motor sounded. They rose with a slow, even motion. Mozati could not use stairs. The elevator was a clever way of overcoming his handicap.

MOZATI stopped the elevator at the arched doorway of a large room. Around a long table were seated some half-dozen people. Mardfelt could not determine exactly how many, for the only light came from a single blue bulb set in the farther wall, which stained rather than diminished the deep shadows. With the dexterity of the long-crippled, Mozati wheeled his chair around the group of sitters, taking his place at the far end of the table.

"Like the chairman of the board at a directors' meeting," Mardfelt thought as he tried vainly to appraise his companions at the table. Most of them were women, and as nearly as he could determine, neither young nor old. "Middle-aged. Spinsters or widows. Too old for romance, too young for resignation, and with abundant funds. Ideal game for charlatans."

He'd been to these spook-parties before. In a minute someone would begin to play soft music. Then Mozati would go off into a trance, speak with a different voice and transmit ambiguously worded messages from the Great Beyond. Mozati's voice, low, resonant, with the entire absence of accent that marks the perfect linguist, cut across his skepticism.

"You say that you have never heard a voice from the Beyond. Have you ever tried to listen with properly attuned ears, put yourselves in condition to receive the word intended for you? Not in the fever of your busy lives, not in the crowded city streets or in your offices can you converse with those who have passed through the Veil. Only in the calmness of meditation can you hear the spirit voices, behold the spirit forms made manifest. Lay hands upon the table, each touching that of his neighbor, so the psychic circle may be completed."

Mardfelt moved back quickly. He had no wish to form a segment of the psychic circle. His hands should be free for action, if action were required. But the others hastened to obey.

"Harry, my boy," Mardfelt told himself, "you are about to see a startling demonstration of fat bankrolls separated from fatheads, unless I'm mightily mistaken. Keep your eyes peeled!"

The soft music he had expected did not come. Instead Mozati took up a small wand topped with a little light bulb, held it vertically before him and gazed fixedly at its faintly glowing tip. The single blue light winked abruptly off. Except for the tiny lamp on Mozati's baton, the room was dark as Erebus. A minute passed, two minutes, three. From the hall below came the ponderous, pompous ticking of a tall clock. Small noises from outside filtered through the closed and curtained windows.

Mozati stared at the small lamp. Its white reflection picked his face out of the shrouding shadows of the lightless room, making it seem indistinct as a blurred photograph. Then the little lamp-tipped rod began to waver. Slowly, like a reversed pendulum, it

swung in a short arc from right to left and back again. Mozati's eyes followed it. The rod paused in its metronome-like course, wavered like a leafless tree caught in a blast of wind.

Mozati's head fell back against the cushioned framework of his chair, his eyelids closed. With a sharp, metallic click, the little wand fell to the polished table from his limp fingers. In a moment came the sound of measured, even breathing, scarcely more noticeable than the ticking of the clock downstairs.

Mardfelt shrugged his shoulders in annoyance. This was too obvious. He could fake a better trance himself. These rich, credulous fools, deceived by such a shoddy piece of acting. . . .

A sigh, half-gasp, half-ecstatic exclamation, came from someone in the circle.

"Look, the spirit's manifesting!"

HARRY MARDFELT'S eyes went wide with surprise in the darkness. He felt a sudden tenseness. Silhouetted in the darkness against Mozati's left side, just above the waist, was what seemed to be a tiny jet of vapor. It was not vapor. Instead of spurting forth and dissipating, it was oozing out like blood from a fresh wound, taking form and growing larger.

The thing expanded like a balloon being slowly inflated. Now it lost its ball-like shape, became elliptical, lengthened till it looked like a great sausage. It seemed to float upright, no longer issuing from Mozati's side, but joined to him by a filament as fine as any strand spun by a spider. Slowly, like the light of coming moonrise brightening a cloud-filled sky, brightness spread through the monstrous, floating bubble.

There was eeriness about it, but there was nothing terrifying. Mardfelt felt gentle melancholy. Vaguely crowded memories floated through his mind. A girl's soft laugh, the touch of a warm hand, the subtle fragrance of old hopes and aspirations.

From the whirling, luminous mistiness inside the giant bubble, a form seemed emerging. It was a young

girl, tall, slender, exquisite, with lovely brooding eyes. A woman at the table moaned softly, ending with a hard, quick sob. The man farthest from Mardfelt cried out with a shrill vehemence:

"Lorraine!" With a bound he left the table, stretching out his empty hands in the darkness. "Daughter, little daughter, you have come back from the cold ocean. You have come back!"

Blundering, tear-blinded, he leaped around the table edge, cannoned into Mozati and overturned his wheeled chair. The sitters leaped from their chairs. The frantic bereaved father fought to free himself from the wire wheels of the chair, screaming for the visitant to wait for him. From Mozati came a shriek of agony that was utterly blood-curdling in its shrillness.

Mardfelt saw it plainly. Like a slender rubber band subjected to a strain too great for its resiliency, the filament of light which stretched between Mozati and the girl snapped. From its severed ends he saw a dribble of bright luminance, like moonlight rendered liquid. Then, as though dissolved by contact with the air, the thread vanished.

"Strike a light, somebody! Mozati has been injured!"

There was a blossoming of tiny flames as matches struck, then the sharp *click* of a light switch. The room was flooded with a sudden glare of brightness from the ceiling chandelier. Mozati lay upon his back. His eyes were open, staring. His mouth gaped, as though an unseen hand were throttling him.

"Call a doctor!" someone shouted. "Mozati's still alive!"

"Daughter, daughter, little daughter, where are you?" sobbed the man whose charge had overturned Mozati's chair.

"Yes, where is she?"

Mardfelt jerked his attention from the disorder and looked round. He was a reporter now. Find Mozati's accomplice and he could break the story of this hoax that had made simpletons of all the scientists who'd put Mozati through their "tests."

The séance room ran clear across the rear of the second floor. Behind him was the archway leading to the elevator. She could not have gone that way. The elevator was still there. He saw a partly opened door, leaped through it to the hall beyond. Doors opened off to left and right. No one was in the rooms. If she had not escaped by the stairs. . . .

HE hurried down the hall, kicked back the door of the front room and felt along the wall for the light switch. He pressed it, but no glare followed its sharp *click*. Either there were no bulbs in the ceiling fixtures, or the lamps were disconnected. He searched his pockets, found a book of matches. The quick flame sputtered up. He recoiled in surprise.

Almost underfoot, a face looked up at him. He recognized those big-brooding eyes, that dead-white skin, the lustrous mane of dark hair. Her red lips were parted and one hand was pressed against her teeth, as though to force back a cry of dismay. She moaned like a frightened child. There was a rustle in the darkness as Mardfelt's match went out. Trying to bolt, was she? He took a quick step, blocking the doorway.

"No dice, sister. You and I are going to do some talking."

He reached out to the wall again, found a second switch beside the first. He pressed it sharply and a gentle glow of amber light dissolved the darkness.

He stood in a large, beautiful room. Everything about it but the floor was white and that was overlaid with black linoleum, waxed and polished till it shone like jet. The walls were ivory. The furniture was cream-colored, upholstered in white leather. Almost across his path a polar bear skin was spread. On this cowered the girl he sought. She wore a kimono of black crêpe above a nightgown of sheer Philippine cotton. Black satin mules with gold heel-straps were on her bare feet.

"Who are you?" she asked tremulously. "What do you want?"

"Who you are is more to the point, and how you and Mozati worked it.

I'll grant you it was first-rate stage management—"

Despite himself, Mardfelt paused in his interrogation. The girl's eyes were wide with fear and questioning. He could swear that her bewilderment was genuine. Quacks frequently made use of hypnotism. Perhaps Mozati had hypnotized her before he started his performance.

"See here," Mardfelt recommenced, dropping into a low chair and staring straight into her frightened eyes, "what's the last thing you remember?"

"Remember?" she repeated vaguely. Her slim fingers twisted and untwisted. "I—I don't know exactly. We were on the ship. We'd gone to bed. Then someone hammered on the stateroom door and—" Her lower lip began to tremble and she caught it in her teeth to steady it. "Are we sinking? Will we all be drowned?"

This was silly. He should be third-degreeing her about Mozati. Instead he took the trembling little hand in his and patted it.

"No, of course not," he comforted. "You're safe in New York. The nearest thing to drowning you'll experience is a wetting if you go outdoors now. It's raining."

"I'm back in New York? How—"

The wailing of a siren sounded in the street outside. Feet pounded on the stairs. He heard the ambulance surgeon's announcement.

"Saint Barnabus' Hospital. Where is the patient?"

"S-s-sh!" Mardfelt cautioned, snapping off the light. "There'll be a policeman with that ambulance. Keep still until they've gone."

"Why should I? I've done nothing to make me afraid of the police."

"You'd have a tough time explaining it to a desk sergeant, or a magistrate. Lie low. We'll wait till they're gone."

The tramp of feet and murmurous voices faded down the stairs.

"They're gone," he said, "but if Mozati dies, they'll be around again to investigate."

That puzzled, almost blank expression spread across her face.

"Hurry!" he urged. "They may be back again at any moment."

"Where am I?" she demanded. "I never saw this place before and never heard of this Mozati you keep talking about."

He felt a momentary desire to take her by the shoulders and shake her. But if she had really been hypnotized, she would not know about it.

"All right. If you haven't any clothes here, we'll have to do the best we can with what we have. I've a raincoat downstairs. That'll help some."

"**K**NOW where you live?" he asked as their taxi drew out from the curb.

"Of course — Gramercy Park South," she replied.

While the cab gathered speed, he studied her with covert, sidelong glances. She was quite young, not more than seventeen or eighteen. Her chin and throatline had a cameo-sharp clarity. Her skin was white and smooth. He could not remember ever having seen so lovely a face before, or a body that was worn so proudly.

Odd that he should have used that verb, he thought quickly. Yet "wear" was the word for it. Somehow he had the uneasy feeling he was riding not with a beautiful girl, but with a suffering, frightened little ghost encased in lovely flesh. Half-angrily he shook his shoulders. This wouldn't do.

"Mind telling me your name?" he asked almost gruffly.

She turned toward him. He had a definite impression that she wanted desperately to tell or ask him something, give him her confidence and ask his in return.

"I'm Lorraine Bernstein," she answered. "Father was born in the Old Duchy and named me for it."

Mardfelt acted the seasoned journalist. His voice was casual and friendly, not prying, not demanding an answer, just inviting one.

"Who is your Father?" he asked.

"Jacob Bernstein, of Bernstein, Loeb and Frankensfeld. You must have heard of him."

He nodded, hiding his astonishment. Old Bernstein was a town character. Widowed and left childless when the *Gigantic* sank with al-

most everyone on board three years before, he had offered fantastic sums to anyone who would recover his wife's and daughter's bodies. Failing that, he had spent a fortune on a monument to them. Lately it was rumored he had made a standing offer of \$10,000 to any medium who could put him in touch with either wife or child.

Like pieces of a picture puzzle suddenly fitting, Mardfelt's memories clicked together. The man who had jumped up from the table when this girl seemed to materialize, the one who overturned Mozati's wheeled chair!

"You were saying something about a ship?" he asked with elaborate unconcern. "It wouldn't have been the *Gigantic*, would it?"

"Yes, it was. Mamma and I have been visiting my aunt, the Comtesse Pelagie in Paris, but we had a chance to book return passage on the *Gigantic*. It was such fun, traveling on that great ship on her maiden voyage. . . ."

Her voice frayed out like a slowly breaking cord. She raised a hand to put the misty hair back from her brow. Her eyes met his and flickered for a second.

"I—I don't understand it," she confessed in a small, frightened voice. "The last thing I remember was going to bed. Then someone—the steward, I think—came pounding on the stateroom door and shouting something about our having struck an iceberg. Mamma was getting out of bed when the ship tilted violently. She fell and hurt her ankle. I ran to help her, but I thought the porthole was forced open and a great flood rushed into the cabin."

If she were acting, it was a virtuoso exhibition. He could feel the chill of sheer terror emanating from her.

"I must have dreamed it," she continued in an almost toneless whisper. "There I was, one moment in our stateroom with the ocean gushing in the open port. Next thing I knew, I was in that strange room and you were standing over me with a lighted match."

"You don't remember anything else?"

"Nothing else."

She was crying now, not noisily, not even audibly. She neither sobbed nor moved, just sat there with the big tears welling from her eyes. He had never seen such utter woe and hopelessness.

LIGHTS blazed in the old house across from the park as their taxi drew up. A squad car idled by the curb. By the door stood a policeman, his nightstick dangling from his hand.

"What d'ye want?" he asked as Mardfelt paused at the lower step of the square stoop.

"What's cooking?" Mardfelt countered.

"Who wants to know?" The officer eyed him with professional suspicion.

"Mardfelt, *Evening Express*."

Fishing in an inner pocket, he produced his press card.

"Oh, another reporter, hey? Okay, go on in. Doc Schwartz is in there. He'll give you the dope."

Mardfelt entered the austere grand hallway. In the drawing room to the left, he saw the body of a thin, old man sprawled on its back. From the left temple spread a great red stain, already turning rust-brown, soiling the fine Aubusson rug. Clutched in the left hand was a heavy old-style revolver.

"Hullo, Mardfelt," greeted the assistant medical examiner. "This is off your regular beat, ain't it?"

"Yeah," grunted the reporter. "How'd it happen?"

"The old boy's been a little nutty ever since the *Gigantic* sank. Lately he's been takin' up with some spookologist, tryin' to get messages from his wife or daughter. Tonight he went out to a séance and came home half an hour ago, swearin' he had seen his daughter's spirit there. She ran out on him before they had a chance to talk. He came in here and snatched that shootin' iron from a desk drawer. Said he was goin' to join her and her mother. And here we are."

Mardfelt turned away hastily. Here was an unexpected complication. Apparently the girl sincerely believed she was Jacob Bernstein's daughter. How could he tell her of the suicide?

"I'm terribly sorry," he apologized

as he climbed back into the taxi. "Your father's not home. There's been a small fire there and the house is full of strangers." He searched desperately for a way out. "Can't I take you to a hotel?"

"Like this?" she asked, glancing down at her costume—a man's raincoat over a kimono and night-robe.

He nodded. "Would you be offended if I offered to put you up at my apartment? I have four rooms. All the doors have serviceable locks."

For the first time she smiled. It made her face even more lovely, lightening her sorrowful expression.

"Thank you," she accepted. "I'm not at all afraid."

IT was just after one o'clock when the taxi swerved in at the curb before Mardfelt's walk-up apartment in Van Dam Street. Already newsboys bellowed through the streets.

"Suicide! Read all about the big suicide! Banker commits suicide!"

The boy thrust a black headlined sheet through the taxi window. The girl went suddenly rigid. She raised a hand and pressed cold fingertips against her bloodless cheek.

"Daddy!"

"I tried my best to spare you," Mardfelt told her gently.

"But we must go back right away! Mamma will need me now!"

"She's gone, too, child."

Her breath was a low, moaning sound in her throat. Tears made her dark eyes luminous, yet she was not crying.

"It's terribly hard to explain," he blundered. "There's been a time-lapse you can't understand since the *Gigantic* went—since you went aboard her. I'll try to make you understand in the morning."

He hunted her a pair of pajamas and warmed the milk to wash her aspirin down. Despite the shocks she had sustained, or possibly because of them, she fell asleep almost immediately. But sleep was furthest from his thoughts. Too many puzzling knots cried for untying. Too many contradictory elements had to be reconciled.

Was she as guiltless as she appeared? It hardly seemed that any-

one could act a part superbly as she acted hers, if she were acting. How had Mozati managed the trick? Mardfelt could have sworn that he saw her materialize from the medium's side. But that was utter foolishness, of course. Yet if she were really under hypnosis, how was he to translate from her subconscious her conscious mind?

Fumbling with his whirling thoughts, trying to reduce them to coherent design, he went to the bookcase and took down Bland's "Spiritism Explained." He might find a key to the riddle there.

Ectoplasm—The substance taken from the medium by the spirit forces to produce materialization. It is believed to be essentially a physiological form of energy, of a chemical form substantially the same as that of the human body. Mediums who are adept at materializations are said to have the power to recall ectoplasmically materialized forms to themselves at will. But if the medium becomes ill or suffers an injury while the materialized form is in being, it has been asserted that this body will remain intact as a separate entity until the medium by conscious effort of will dematerializes it by calling back its substance to himself.

Should the medium die, the ectoplasmic form sooner or later is dissipated, either withering away for lack of sustenance from the body which created it, or being disintegrated as the medium's body-cells break down in the natural processes of putrefaction. Should the medium's body be embalmed, this dissolution will be correspondingly delayed. In case of cremation of the medium's body the ectoplasmic body is instantly annihilated. . . .

HE shut the book with an impatient bang. Of all the blithering nonsense! If that girl in there were only ectoplasm, nothing but the built-up emanations from Mozati's crippled body, he'd be—

"Wonder how she's getting on," he thought suddenly. "Poor kid, she actually believes that she's been orphaned tonight. Mozati certainly convinced her she was Lorraine Bernstein."

He tiptoed down the hall, stopped at her door and put his ear against the panels. Only the persistent rustle of a small breeze whispering around the windows came to him, no sound of measured breathing, no muted sobs.

He turned the handle softly, stepped into the room. The glow of the street lamp was filtered by drawn curtains, but enough light entered to enable him to see her. In the big old four-poster she lay wan and relaxed. Her hair, unbound, was like a misty cloud against the whiteness of the pillow.

He bent down, listening to her light and scarcely audible breathing. She looked so young, so sweetly innocent. Surely she was no accomplice of Mozati's. She must have been his dupe, the unknowing tool by which he worked his trickery. Her lashes were wet, her face pale and shadowed, but a smile hovered over her red lips in slumber.

He drew the covers higher and she put up a hand, closed it over his and tucked it underneath her cheek. He sank into the bedside chair. His hand in hers, her soft cheek resting on it, he sat until the early morning light began to brighten in the sky. Presently his heavier breathing seconded her light respirations. Hand in hand like lovers they slept through the dawn.

Surprisingly she accepted his explanations at face-value next morning. He couldn't tell her she was not Lorraine Bernstein, for she would not have believed him. But when he assured her she had suffered aphasia as the result of the wreck of the *Gigantic* and had only last night realized who she was, she nodded doubtful acquiescence. Tractable as an amiable child, she agreed to stay with him "till he could get things straightened out."

His reference to the police she accepted readily, assuming that she had been guilty of a crime while her identity had been submerged. Trustfully she took his word for everything, not even asking what the crime of which she was accused might be.

"I'm the world's worst heel," he told himself emphatically, but solaced his conscience with the reflection that she would presently emerge from this obsession. Mozati's hypnotic influence couldn't last indefinitely. Meanwhile he was better fitted to protect her than anybody else. Should he turn her loose in New York, the best she could expect was confinement in some insti-

tution for the insane. At worst she might fall into Mozati's clutches.

On the medium he kept careful check. Mozati had not recovered consciousness. He lay in a coma at Saint Barnabus'. Whether he would ever speak or move again, or whether he would outlive the week, none of the doctors cared to prophesy.

THEY had been out on Long Island, to East Hampton, site of "Home, Sweet Home." Now as they walked along the station platform, they walked like people in no hurry to arrive at their goal, for that would mean the breaking of a mood. There was no need of words. A current



strong and warm as the Gulf Stream flowed between them. But finally, almost in a whisper, Lorraine murmured:

"It's been perfect, hasn't it, Harry? Home, Sweet Home—how lovely!"

Wine could not have made his blood race faster.

"Any place is Home, Sweet Home as long as you are there, Lorraine."

She raised wide, tranquil eyes to his. Her lips were trembling a little.

"That's how I feel about you, Harry."

There was no one on the railway platform. If it had been crowded as the Times Square subway station at rush hour, they would not have noticed. They were in each other's arms. Her perfumed hair was soft against his cheek. Her lips were warm and tremulous, rich with the promise of undying love.

"Tomorrow, dear?" he asked.

"Tonight," she whispered, "if we can get the license that soon."

He paused to pick up a copy of the *Express* while they waited in Grand Central for the train to take them to Connecticut. Glancing down the headlines he saw, but scarcely noticed, a short paragraph.

Mozati, the noted medium, clairvoyant and mystic, died early this morning at St. Barnabus' hospital, where he had lain completely paralyzed and unconscious for more than four months.

The deep scent of the night woods was about them as they walked slowly from the minister's toward the little railway station. They could hear their footfalls in the moss and pine needles. A little breeze sprang up. The moon rose, round and yellow.

"My dearest, it might so easily not have happened," he breathed. "It's like something you tell yourself when you're day-dreaming. That night I went to Mozati's—"

He stopped, aghast at the expression on her face. Her lips were drawn back till her teeth showed, bare and unfleshed as if they had been set in a skull. She sought to scream, but there was no breath in her. Only her eyes remained steady, luminous, instinct with love and adoration.

"Lorraine, dear! What is it?" A film seemed forming on his eyes. He couldn't see her plainly. Or was she fading from his sight? She appeared nebulous. "Lorraine! Lorraine!"

He reached out to her, but his hands encountered nothing. A sigh, so soft he could not say for certain if he heard it or imagined it, then the empty moonlight, with the night wind whimpering through the new-leafed trees.

How he had reached the house in Van Dam Street, he had no idea. It was empty now and desolate. Its little cozy rooms seemed as vast and echoing as deserted auditoriums. Each step he took reverberated like the thud of clods upon a coffin lid, evoking a fresh pang of loneliness.

The telephone bell rang sharply. Its irritable buzzing bored into his tortured nerves, as if it were a dentist's drill.

"Hullo, Harry." White's hearty

voice came to him as he picked the phone up. "Mozati kicked the bucket yesterday."

A lingering spark of curiosity moved Mardfelt.

"What'd they do with him?" he asked.

"Cremated him. Rush job, too. Took him out to Freshpond about nine last night. Put him in the retort at exactly nine-thirty."

Mardfelt laid the phone down carefully. He could still hear White's

excited voice rasping from the receiver, but something seemed to be repeating in his inner ear with the spiteful persistence of malignant laughter:

"At half-past nine. They put him in the fire at exactly half-past nine last night!"

He and Lorraine had been married just ten minutes then. They had been walking from the minister's to catch the nine-forty-five train back to New York.



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By **EARLE DOW**



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AT ALL STANDS

PIED PIPER OF DEATH

By **MICHAEL O'BRIEN**

Author of "Ice Bound," "Hater of Beauty," etc.

When the Lord of Flies Calls His Hordes of Destruction, the Minions of Satan's Apostle Go Forth to Spread Their Evil

JIM WILKINS, I was always to remember, warned me away from the fakir at the very start. But an interest in the occult has always been a weakness of mine, and this *dugga* looked like the real McCoy.

We were coming out of Jim's real estate office—he and my girl friend, Eula Wylie and I—headed for the city hall to go through another dreary wrangle over the Larkspur Lakesite project, when the weird figure happened to catch my eye.

It was a still, dismal day. The windless head of the drought and a gathering sand cloud had colored the whole western sky to a muddy red. It was against this baleful light and the deserted street that the apparition appeared from the doorway of a vacant store above which hung a sign, advertising, of all things, a flea circus.

"Wait a minute," I said, and stopped. I pretended to be interested in the fleas, but it was really their owner who intrigued me.

He was lean and tall and beardless,



Fearfully we watched, as the terrible thing rose out of the gloom

with a slant-eyed Mongol face whose porcelain-smooth skin was of an olive-green color, against which his thin and unnaturally red lips seemed painted as on a mask. That he was a man from the high steppes of Tibet was evident to me, but he wore no dirty sheepskin. On his head was a close-fitting, rimless cap of scarlet, and he was robed from head to foot in a cloak of sable, dyed orange-yellow and worth plenty of money.

"Come on," Jim said impatiently. And Eula, too, pulled at my arm.

But I lingered. It was that scarlet cap that got me. If it had been the orange cap of an ordinary Lama, I might have passed on. But I recognized it as the "red hood" badge of what is called the "Tantra System", the most grisly sect of devil-worshippers on earth.

The man apparently noticed the direction of my glance, for he asked with a smile:

"You have traveled in Tibet perhaps?"

"No, but I read books," I said, grinning. "For instance, 'The Path of the Left Hand'."

He nodded.

"The way of *Samtsched Mitschebat*," he replied.

I extended a hand.

"I'm Stanley Marsh," I said. "This is Miss Eula Wylie, and Mr. Jim Wilkins."

"I am called Hun Bogdo," the man said, bowing. "Would you care to see something?"

That was what I had been waiting for. But Eula said:

"Oh—fleas? No thanks."

The *dugpa* smiled tolerantly.

"One should not be contemptuous of the insects. My master is also called, 'The Lord of Flies'. But you need not look at fleas. Will you step—here?"

He didn't mean clear inside the building, but just into the entry space. Jim and Eula reluctantly moved up a little closer.

HUN BOGDO asked for a white cloth. I gave him a handkerchief and he spread it on the cement and stepped back. From the folds of his coat he produced a small flute and be-

gan to play. The notes were low, but shrill and metallic. It was an eerie, elfin, chirping sound. And almost simultaneously with the beginning of their queer vibrations, the locusts began to come.

I hadn't noticed any of them about, but now they seemed to be everywhere, crawling between our feet, emerging from the cracks under the door, gliding through the air with shrill, rustling sounds. And all made for the white square cloth.

Here they milled about in crawling confusion, until suddenly the tone of the flute changed, became sharper, insistent. It had a weird effect on the insects. With a shrill, grating whir of wings, they tangled in a battle royal.

At first it was sheer amazement that held us spellbound. And then, as the spectacle progressed, as more and more of the creatures joined the fray, buzzing fiercely as they grappled with their claws, I began to feel disgusted. Revolting horror succeeded this as the tangle grew into a steadily mounting pile of writhing clusters, ripping madly at each other's bodies and limbs, moved by a hate that seemed human in its intensity.

And then, from that fluid mound, almost as high as our knees now, a brown tobacco-colored sap began to flow, trickling down upon the handkerchief, running along the sidewalk. Eula turned away then with a choked cry, and Jim and I followed.

We were all a little sick. None of us remembered to thank the *dugpa* for his show, which, revolting as it was, had been staged for our amusement. I did think to turn back and toss a half dollar to the sidewalk, but the erect and lordly man did not seem to notice it. He stood there, with the flute at his lips, following us with his black eyes, paying no attention to the awful writhing heap at his feet. . . .

In his dingy office at the city hall, Mayor Gilmore Fox and the commissioners were waiting for us. Fox came straight to the point.

"Well, Stanley," he said to me, "if you've made up your mind, we're ready to sign and to meet the price the power syndicate is offering for your land. God knows our little town of Larkspur's got

to have that lake. The engineer says the dam can be finished in time to catch water next year. That'll mean our farmers can irrigate next season. Another dry year and this place is finished."

I hesitated a moment and Jim Wilkins spoke up. I'm not much of a business man, and Jim handles most of my deals. He was dead set against closing any deal that would depend for profit on what he termed the financial mismanagement of a country township.

"There are other advantages besides price," he pointed out, "in dealing with a powerful syndicate. Jim will be sure of getting his money, which is more than he can depend on, with this place going bankrupt. The power company offers to build the lake and furnish water at reasonable rates. To turn them down is ridiculous."

Old Mayor Fox looked at me. Gaunt and gloomy as an undertaker, his tired old eyes had a look of reproach.

"But I thought you favored municipal ownership, Stanley," he said.

I flushed, gave Jim a defiant look. I dislike wrangles over business deals, but I can assert myself on occasion.

"I do," I told Fox. "I'm not trying to squeeze more money out of you. It's the situation in Donville that bothers me. Those people say we're robbing them."

■ FOX shook his head.

■ "They're crazy, and just plain spiteful. Our dam will cut off Frog Creek, of course. But we've offered them the water for irrigation at the same rates we'll get from our own farmers, and they'll have twice as much water as they're getting now. The trouble is, they're letting themselves be stirred up by that old fire-breathing hippopotamus, Slosson. Besides," he added with finality, "that's all been thrashed out in the courts."

It was just as he pronounced "courts" that the door opened.

"Courts!" a deep bass voice boomed. "But there are higher courts than earthly courts!"

We all turned, and saw Luther P. Slosson standing there.

The man was repulsive. How the people of our neighboring town, Don-

ville, had ever consented to make him their mayor was more than I could understand. An obese mountain of a man, he seemed made of lard that was constantly oozing through his sallow skin. His head was hairless, rising from a base of fat jowls to a shiny dome. And there were neither lids nor lashes over his small, saurian eyes.

Yet there was power in his stance, in his voice, in the glowering expression of his flat-featured face, which gave some hint of the faculties that had enabled him to rise from an itinerant faith-healer to the undisputed leadership of the small town.

"Courts," he repeated, his thick lips twisting. "There were courts in Egypt, too. But when the servant of the Lord prayed for his oppressed people, lo the heavens were opened and the plagues appeared." He stopped, flung out one arm in a gesture toward the window. "Look!"

It was so dramatically done that we turned as a man. At first we saw nothing but the lowering reddish light and the billows of powdery dust floating past in slow currents. And then something thumped against the pane like a hailstone. A second followed, a third, and we began to notice a movement of crawling bodies along the sill. We rose then, and the cry that followed was a wail of despair.

"Locusts! My God, locusts!"

We crowded to the window, looked out and then came back and sat down. We all knew what it meant. Two years of drought had ravaged us. This third year had been almost, but not quite as bad. There was still hope for the crops if rain came soon. At least there would be seed for next year. And now—a locust migration!

I happened to glance at the door then. Luther P. Slosson was gone.

The countryside was soon aroused. The whole town flocked out into the fields, but the locusts were there ahead of us. They came down from the sky like materialized demons of the dust. They marched in crawling armies across the fields of young corn. And where they passed, they left less than Sherman—not a blade above the ground. They came through the pastures, mowing the grass off at its roots,

stripping the trees of their leaves.

We fought them with every resource at our command. Butcher, baker, banker, we sweated side by side with the farmer and his hired hands. Women fought them with flaming brooms. Men raked them into piles and flung kerosene over them.

Others dragged pans of crude oil through the fields, luring the marauders to their deaths. Still others distributed the arsenic-poisoned bran mash rushed by truck from the Government warehouse.

JIM WILKINS had a plan of his own. Mexicans from his farm arrived with trucks full of brush and baled alfalfa. This was distributed about the fields and set fire to in the hope that the smoke and acrid fumes would drive the destroyers off. The smoke and fumes from these fires, aggravated by the stifling heat and dust, choked our lungs, made the whole scene a reeking inferno, in which we toiled like the cursed natives of Sodom when the fire and brimstone fell.

We might perhaps have accomplished something if let alone. But as it was, the people of Donville, which was just across a narrow spur of hills and which had apparently been passed up by the locust swarm, could not resist the temptation to gloat over our misfortune. Led by Luther Slosson, they flocked down from the hills and stood along our fences, hurling jeers.

"Give up your dam," they yelled, "and we'll help you. Otherwise there'll be nothing left. You tried to steal our water and God is punishing you. Give up, and Brother Slosson will pray the locusts away!"

Our people tried to go on with their work and ignore it. But after a while what was bound to happen began to take place. Jim and I were working together, piling hay on the fires. I was so choked with smoke and rage that when I saw the first farmer throw down his rake among the corn rows and charge his tormentors, I had a murderous impulse to join him.

But a moment's reflection showed me the gravity of the situation. Other workers had followed suit. The murderous anger spread like an epidemic

through the wasted fields, and men and women alike deserted their posts and, flinging clods and curses as they came, attacked the jeering invaders.

"My God!" Jim gasped, grabbing my arm. "We've got to stop this. They'll be killing each other!"

We ran toward the pasture, which was now almost like a battlefield. Men rolled on the half devoured grass, crushing the locusts with their wallowing bodies as they beat and gouged at each others' faces. Women on both sides had joined the fight, too, shrilling taunts as they kicked, bit, pulled hair and clawed with their fingernails.

"Stop it!" we yelled. "Stop it!" Frantically we began pulling them apart, trying our best to keep them separated.

We got only blows and curses for our pains. They paused only to knock us aside and then returned savagely to the fighting. My nose was bleeding and my right eye was closed, when Jim finally pulled me away.

"It's no use," he panted, then added with a snort of disgust: "These are the people you thought capable of owning and managing a water system. I told you all along the apes weren't fit to own anything!"

"Never mind that," I snapped. "We've got to stop it. The sheriff—"

"He's out here. Every available man is here already."

"The militia—"

"They'd have to come fifty miles," Jim pointed out.

"Then what *can* we do?"

Jim frowned, shaking his head. Then he looked up suddenly.

"I've got it!" he almost shouted. "The only thing that will stop them. Tell them you're not selling the land to any local people. Tell them you've already signed up with the power people. Then we'll go in and sign the papers and it will all be settled. When they see that neither side is going to get the lake, they'll have no more cause to hate or fight each other."

"And they'll join to take it out on us," I mused.

But that was all right, too. We could easily get away from them. I agreed, and both of us started through the fields, shouting the news.

IT didn't have much affect at first, but gradually a few of the dazed, blood-smearing fighters got it through their heads and drew away from each other, still bristling as they listened. Then Luther Slosson heard. He hadn't joined the fighting. As he came rolling toward us, his big hulk showed no signs of conflict. But his lungs were giving their all, as he bellowed:

"It's a trick! Stan Marsh has cheated both towns, sold us all out!"

"Blast him!" Jim grated, and then he grabbed my arm and both of us started running before the angry looks spreading over the faces of the listeners could crystallize into action. We found Eula waiting at my car, and drove quickly back to town.

It looked like a ghost town now in the twilight. The streets were deserted; the lamps on the corners blinked their yellow eyes through the dusk. We drew up before Jim's office.

"I've got the papers all ready to be signed," he said. "We'll do that and then call the Syndicate long-distance and tell them it's settled. They'll send some men in fast trucks to handle these rioters."

I started to follow him in, but suddenly drew back. Halfway down the block, still standing like a lonely phantom before the deserted store front was the *dugpa* in his red cap and sable cloak.

"Wait, Jim," I said. "There's something evil about this. Remember how those locusts fought, and then the people fighting in the fields. You've heard of sympathetic magic."

Both Jim and Eula were looking at the *dugpa* now.

"Nuts," Jim said. "Maybe that devil did bring the locusts; maybe Slosson hired him to. But we're just wasting time now. We've got to get that angry mob quieted."

"But that's just it, Jim," I said. "Nothing would cool them off like getting rid of the locusts. Look, that fellow's flute playing can make the locusts fight. You saw it. Why can't he make the locusts destroy themselves? I'm willing to bet that's exactly why he's here. He follows these locust migrations and waits for somebody to offer him a fee for his magic of destruction."

"Good Lord!" Jim exclaimed. "You mean you'd bribe him?"

"You're plain right!" I said. "Seeing is believing, and there's nothing like trying. How much cash have you got in your safe?"

"Why, about five hundred bucks, I think," Jim said. "But—"

"No 'buts'." I vaulted out of the car. "Get your money. I'll give you a check for it."

Jim sputtered protests, but I shoved him into his office, made him get the money, signed a check for it and with my pockets crammed with bills, hurried out again. I told Eula to stay behind, but she paid no attention and followed me.

Eula said later that she had a premonition that I was walking into something hellish, but I was too intent on saving our little town to think of it. I barged up to the *dugpa*, and he greeted me with his phony smile.

"You have returned," he asked slowly, "to see more magic?"

"That's right," I told him. "Awhile ago I saw what you can do with these locusts. You can make them kill one another. And if you can do it with a small group, why can't you do it with the hordes in our fields?"

BUT at my words the smile faded from his face.

"But that," he said, with something like fear in his voice, "is quite a different matter."

"If you mean money," I said, "I've got it." I dug into my pockets and brought out a double-handful of greenbacks. "There's four hundred and eighty dollars there, and more if you pull the trick."

In their slanting sockets his black eyes glittered as they fastened on the money. But still, through cunning or fear, he hesitated.

"It is not just that," he said. "You see, what I have done is only a demonstration of a power. But to use this power on a larger scale would be—well, pitting myself against the purposes of the Dread One, against *Samtsched Mitschebat*."

I growled impatiently. This was, of course, the build-up for a big fee.

"All right," I agreed, "but can you do

it? I'll pay twice this much."

He looked at the money. Then his lean hands shot out, took it, began to stuff it into a pocket in his robe.

"So be it," he said, "and an equal sum when it is done. But," he paused, and a baleful look of menace crossed his dark face, "the sin shall be upon your heads."

I took Eula's arm.

"You'll have to go back, darling," I told her. "Wait with Jim until I come out."

She didn't even answer. Hun Bogdo had opened the door, and was waiting solemnly. Eula darted ahead of me and went in. What could I do?

The interior of the building was dark and musty, with that ratty smell such places have. It had once been a dry goods store, and near the back there was a center space surrounded by counters that formed a hollow square. Here Hun Bogdo lighted his oil lamp, and I saw at once that all his apparatus was prepared for a séance.

Evidently he was expecting business more profitable than his flea circus. But it didn't matter. If he could do what I wanted I was willing to pay and ask no questions.

He motioned us to folding chairs, and we sat down and faced his set-up. There was a small table on a tripod which held a crystal ball and a bronze brazier. Behind it and facing us, was a great concave mirror of polished bronze. The smoking lamp gave the place its only light, until Hun Bogdo started a fire in the brazier and sprinkled it with aromatic powders. Colored flames leapt up then to mingle with the bluish smoke, creating a weird and uncanny luminescence.

Eula was clutching my hand.

"It's all a fake," I heard her whisper between her teeth. "I know it, but I'm scared anyhow."

I returned the pressure of her hand and watched the *dugpa*. He had taken a stance a few feet from the crystal ball, in which a soft and opalescent light was playing. Now he began to speak in a low tone to us.

"Before we can assert our power over the locusts," he said, "we must bind the Great and Evil Ones. We must bind them with our incantations

and our wills. We must not falter nor be afraid. When they appear, we must face them and compel them with fearless eyes."

Eula's hand quivered. I didn't feel much like compelling demons myself, but it was too late to stop now. Hun Bogdo had stiffened. His Mongol face had become rapt, trancelike. Holding his flute in one hand he began to intone in a weird pitch which the empty walls flung back:

"*Yamantaka! Yamantaka! Yamantaka!*"

It was the salute to the Lord of Hell! His body swayed slightly. His eyes were fastened on the pluming smoke from the brazier. So were mine.

"Hail to thee, *Yama!*" he chanted. "Hail to thee, *Nguh Hukh!* Hail to thee, O Thou Dark One, *Samtsched Mitschebat!* I bind and constrain thee, O Thou Lord of Flies!"

IT was hellish, the ring of that toneless cry. The rafters of the building seemed to groan and creak under its vibrating assault. The smoke from the brazier quivered. I quivered too. A wave of crawling cold began to move along my spine like a slimy crab. Something was moving in that veil of smoke, something—

I had been prepared for the sort of hypnotism that the fakirs of India practice, but this seemed different. I was aware of the sweetish fumes of the incense, and quite sensible to the possibility that they might be affecting my brain. But that they could create in the air the thing that began to emerge, to materialize in that mass of smoke, was unthinkable.

The eyes came first. Great bulging eyes, staring bodilessly from the air, charged with an awful malevolence. And then the whole body, a monstrous, obscene shape, began to take form. Arms sprouted all along its squat trunk, and in the transparent haze they writhed like serpents, so that the necklace of human skulls about the demon's saurian throat seemed to rattle together with an audible rhythm.

A cry had started from Eula's lips but had broken off as her grip on my hand froze to a constricted paralysis. I knew that already the spell was claim-

ing her. As for myself, such an overpowering sense of evil enveloped me that I made an effort to start up, to drag her out before we were both overcome. But I seemed rooted, unable to move.

My eyes fastened on that awful face from which the currents of evil came. It was wholly visible now, with the bugging eyes and the thick, lascivious lips parted to show white, champing fangs.

"We must hold this thing off," I thought. "We must keep it at bay!"

I was conscious of casting all other thoughts aside then to join Hun Bogdo in the fearful duel. We had evoked the Thing, constrained it with mortal magic. Now we must hold it off—

And then Hun Bogdo's flute was sounding again. The notes came with an insistent, chirping shriek, and at this sound the Devil in the smoke seemed to writhe with increased fury. But apparently the spell was holding him. For now the locusts again began to gather.

The floor, I saw, was crawling with them, and they came whizzing and zooming through the air to fall at the base of the pedestal. Here they began to pile up in an awful, quivering, fighting mass, just as before, mounting inch by inch up the table's base.

Between intervals of chanting, Hun Bogdo's piping had gone on. And now, as I lifted my eyes from the writhing horde of insects to his face, I saw that his glance was fastened on Eula with a hypnotic fixation. I looked at her, and my blood ran cold. Half risen from her seat, her body was quivering to the chant, shoulders and arms twisting and twitching in a weird pulsation to the unholy currents that had worked their devilish compulsion on the insects.

Then she rose. Her white face was a strained mask on which horror seemed blended with an avid, suicidal frenzy, which the sight of the moiling locusts had inspired. You could almost feel the inexorable impulse that shook her frame as her white hands raked up across her face, constricted fingers tangling and twisting in her black hair. Then her arms shot out, and with a choked cry she took a tottering step toward the leering, multi-armed mon-

strosity in the smoke haze.

I got it then, understood the fakir's game. Intending at first only to extort money as his price for calling the locusts off, he had found an opportunity for blacker villainy when we had been lured into his trap. But this knowledge did not solve my immediate problem.

"Stop her!" I shouted, rising shakily to my feet.

HUN BOGDO withdrew a step. For an instant his black eyes flicked to my face, and a low hiss came from his painted lips.

"I cannot," he intoned. "He calls her. *Samtsched Mitschebat* demands his price!"

"You thieving devil!" I snarled, and started toward him.

And then, Eula collapsed. At a barked command from Hun Bogdo, her knees seemed to dissolve. She crumpled in a twitching heap at his feet.

Even my rage at the fakir's perfidy was swallowed up then by my fear for Eula. Dropping to my knees I clutched at her body with shaking hands. She was quivering in hideous spasms. I grasped her shoulders, shook her, called to her in broken gasps. But it was no use. Her eyes stared blankly.

With a curse I came up, fists doubled to pulp the *dugpa's* leering face.

"Release her," I raged. "Release her or I'll kill you!"

He didn't move. And then I saw his right hand in the pocket of his sable cloak. It bulged forward to outline the gun in his fist.

"I cannot," he said in a steely tone, "unless an offering is made to *Samtsched Mitschebat*—a thousand dollars, say, for a new shrine."

Well, there it was. The most transparent terrorism and extortion. And I had fallen into the trap. But there at my feet Eula was writhing under the spell of some hypnotic horror that might well be the wreck of her reason.

"I'll pay," I thought, "and then, once she's safe—"

I snatched out my checkbook, flipped the cap from my fountain pen and began to write. But with my hand poised to add the signature, I hesitated. Beyond the dim area of light in which the locusts were gyrating shrilly, I

glimpsed a movement, saw the pallid apparition of a gloating face pressed against the pane of a window. It was Luther P. Slosson—watching.

The pen froze in my hand. This sudden evidence of another human agency involved in the plot injected fresh rebellion into my blood.

"The devil with you!" I roared at Hun Bogdo, and charged him.

But he had turned, was staring at the window, too. And inches from him, I checked myself again. For there was a sudden crash of glass and the booming voice of Luther Slosson was thundering:

"It's Stan Marsh and his witch-man, caught red-handed. They're calling the locusts. They've sacrificed the girl to the Devil!"

There was a second crash and men with red-eyed, dirt and blood-smeared faces were piling into the building.

"Lynch 'em!" the cry arose, to be echoed by a score of maddened throats. "Kill 'em! Burn 'em!"

A brick sailed through the air, slammed with a resonant clang against the bronzed mirror. Other missiles followed, as with shouts and curses the mob came charging up the aisle.

But Hun Bogdo held his ground. Suddenly he whipped the snub-nosed automatic from his pocket, leveled it at the attackers.

"Stand back, or I'll shoot!" he warned.

And he did. His gun blasted defiance as a fresh volley of rocks and sticks rained into the light and the mob came on with a rush. But already I had ducked, gathered Eula's body in my arms, and, darting through a gap in the counters that surrounded us, made for a door in the side wall.

"Stop him!" someone yelled. "Stop Marsh!"

A ROCK sailed past my head to spatter chips from the plaster wall, but at the same time there was a crash as Hun Bogdo's lamp was knocked over. And in the confusion that followed, I dived through the door.

Putting Eula down on the floor, I whirled, bolted the door and struck a match. I was in a small storeroom with no outlet, save a couple of barred win-

dows. But there were several bare tables and empty packing crates, and I began to pile them against the door. That Hun Bogdo was already a dead pigeon was a foregone conclusion, and that the fury of the mob would be satisfied with one victim was unlikely. But if I could stall them off until Jim Wilkins or some other level-headed person could come to my aid, I might escape alive.

And then that hope went crashing. Suddenly above the din in the outer room came the cry:

"Fire! Fire!"

In the stunned interlude that followed, I heard the crackling of the flames, smelt the smoke trickling up through the piled tables and boxes.

What could I do? Even if I could escape the mob now, could I make it through that burning room? By the time I had pulled aside the barricade the place would be an inferno.

I ran to one of the windows. With a board ripped from a box, I smashed the pane and grappled the iron bars with my hands. They were firm. I smashed the second window. It was the same there.

I ran back to where Eula lay and dragged her nearer to the fresh currents of air. With an awful helplessness I turned back to face the steady encroachment of a fiery doom. Already the crackling of the flames had risen to a steady roar, and I could see the glare through the cracks around the door. The heat, too, was oppressive, the smoke stifling.

"Help!" I screamed. "Help! We're trapped!"

But there was no answer. Already the mob had fled. And that our small fire department could handle the blaze before it reached us was a futile hope.

I ran to the window and attacked the bars with a two-by-four that I found among the crates. I clubbed and pried and hammered at those cement-embedded bars. They didn't budge. I gripped them with my hands like a madman and shrilled hopeless cries into the black night.

But there was no answer. We were doomed. I lifted Eula in my arms and held her unconscious face close to the window so that she could breathe the

fresh air to the last. But already flames were licking at the door, reaching up through the piled debris. It was too late.

Suddenly there was a pound of feet in the alley. I couldn't believe my ears. But I redoubled my cries. And when that running shape appeared, I was so wild with relief and desperate hope that I could scarcely speak.

"Jim, Jim! Thank God!" I managed to gasp, as he trotted up.

He took in the situation with a glance.

"Stand back!" he panted.

I saw then that he carried a hacksaw, and as I drew back, he began to attack the bars. Shielding Eula from the approaching flames, I watched with wild eyes as the saw bit into the iron. It cut through. Jim wrenched the bar to one side with a powerful heave and attacked a second one. It came loose just as the flames along the floor were beginning to lick at my heels.

JIM wrenched the second bar aside. "Pass her out!" he ordered.

I did so, lifting her easily through the aperture into Jim's arms. He stooped to place her on the ground, and I seized the bars and started to vault out. I was hanging there when Jim straightened. He had a gun in his hand and his face was hard.

"Not you!" he snarled.

I couldn't believe my ears, not until I looked with stunned desperation into his eyes.

"I mean it," he grated. "It's not in the cards for you to come out of this, Stan. You've been the man of wealth all these years, and I've been just your stooge." His lips twisted with bitter triumph. "Now the rôles are reversed. Now I'll be rich, since you've signed those deeds for the power company."

"But I didn't sign them!" I gasped.

"Oh, yes, you did," he said. "Your signature's on them. I ought to know. I put it there myself, traced it from that check as soon as you left."

"Jim, is this some ghastly joke?"

"Indeed it isn't," he assured me. "If you hadn't been such a poor fool, if you had sold to the power company in the first place as I tried to persuade you to do, you'd have avoided all this."

"You've been in their pay all along?" He nodded.

"And mighty good pay it is. They've got to have this dam and lake here as a unit in a big power chain. I had to get it for them at any cost, though I couldn't, of course, let on how anxious they were for it. I thought tonight that I'd put the thing over when I got those fools to fighting and convinced you that the only way to stop the trouble was to refuse to give in to either side and to let the power company have your land. But after you ran out on me without signing the papers—"

"Was Hun Bogdo your accomplice?" I interrupted.

"No—no," Jim said. "That fakir spoiled my scheme. If you hadn't got that screwy idea about going to him instead of signing those papers, you'd have saved me a lot of trouble and your own life as well. But as for causing those people to fight, I did that." He laughed. "Pretty smooth it was, too. Of course they were fighting mad to begin with. But what made them really murderous was inhaling the fumes of the marijuana—it's a form of hashish, you know—which I burned in those brush fires."

"Good God!" I gasped, remembering that even I had got a taste of that dizzy, murderous rage when the fight first started. "And that stuff came from your farm. The Mexicans have been raising it, of course—"

"Whole fields of it, hidden among the corn," Jim admitted. "But never mind that. You'd better hold still now and take the *coup-de-grâce* like a man." He leveled his gun. "It'll be easier than burning."

I could believe that. Already the flames were roasting me.

"Jim, you can't do this!" I pleaded. "Let me out. I'll give up all the land!"

"Don't be a fool," he said. "I've already got all I want. The stock I'll have in the power company will make me rich. We'll get a grip on this whole county, mortgages on the farms in exchange for water rights. And this ending is too neat to spoil. You simply burned up in the fire and that's all there is to it. Nothing to implicate me at all."

It was true. There wasn't a chance.

His finger was tightening on the trigger now. If only Eula would awake— But no, I didn't want that. Then he'd kill her, too. My grip on the hot bars tightened. I meant to hurl myself against him in a headlong lunge that would likely be suicidal.

But I paused. A movement behind a row of trash cans in the alley caught my eye.

Jim saw my glance. Without altering the aim of his gun, he turned his head slightly as a bulky shape arose and came lumbering out.

"Stay thy hand, killer!" the voice of Luther Slosson boomed.

WITH an oath, Jim whipped his gun about, fired at the advancing man. But he only fired one shot. In the next instant I flung my body through the opening in the bars and my arms closed around his neck.

My weight bore him down and we crashed to the pavement in a struggling tangle. I never knew exactly how it happened, but sometime during the struggle, Jim's gun went off. And the sudden relaxing of his muscles told me that the discharged bullet had struck a vital mark.

I disentangled myself and staggered up. There was a red blot on Jim's shirt-front, and the blood was still oozing from it. He had ceased to breathe.

"He that taketh up the sword shall perish by the sword," intoned Luther P. Slosson sententiously. "I'm glad I got here, Brother. It was he who led us to spy on you, and that treachery toward a friend caused me to wonder what his game was. I heard it all— everything he said. I understand things now. I had believed that you were with the power company yourself. I thought you meant to trick the people of both towns, cheat all of us. But now, things will be different."

I was too busy trying to revive Eula to reply.

"Can you do anything with her?" I asked him. "She isn't coming out of it."

With a grunt, Slosson lowered himself to his knees, laid his pudgy hands on her face and began to make mesmeric passes.

"She is hypnotized," he said. "The

fakir probably distracted your attention with an apparition of some sort while he concentrated on her."

"That's right," I agreed. "But that apparition—it was horrible. I don't understand how he did it."

Slosson cleared his throat.

"I," he said, "have had some—er— contacts with shamans of his breed. The pedestal that held his crystal ball, I should say, contained a trap-opening by means of which a small sheet of film was exposed with a powerful light behind it. This image was shot upward into the crystal ball, into which a powerful prism had been fused. The prism then shot the image into the concave mirror, which, in turn, projected it into the smoke in a three-dimensional illusion. The wavering of the smoke caused it to seem to move."

He paused. Eula had opened her eyes dazedly. I crushed her in my arms.

"The fakir," Slosson continued, "died in the flames. It's just as well. He's been working his extortion racket in other towns where the locusts have struck. But he did have some uncanny power over the insects with his flute-music. That's why I suspected you were in with him when I saw you there together. But come, we must help the firemen fight this blaze."

The fire was finally extinguished, the Donville people under Slosson's leadership, pitching in and helping, too. Afterwards I announced that my land would be sold on one condition—that the dam and water rights should be owned jointly by both towns. This compromise brought peace and amity again.

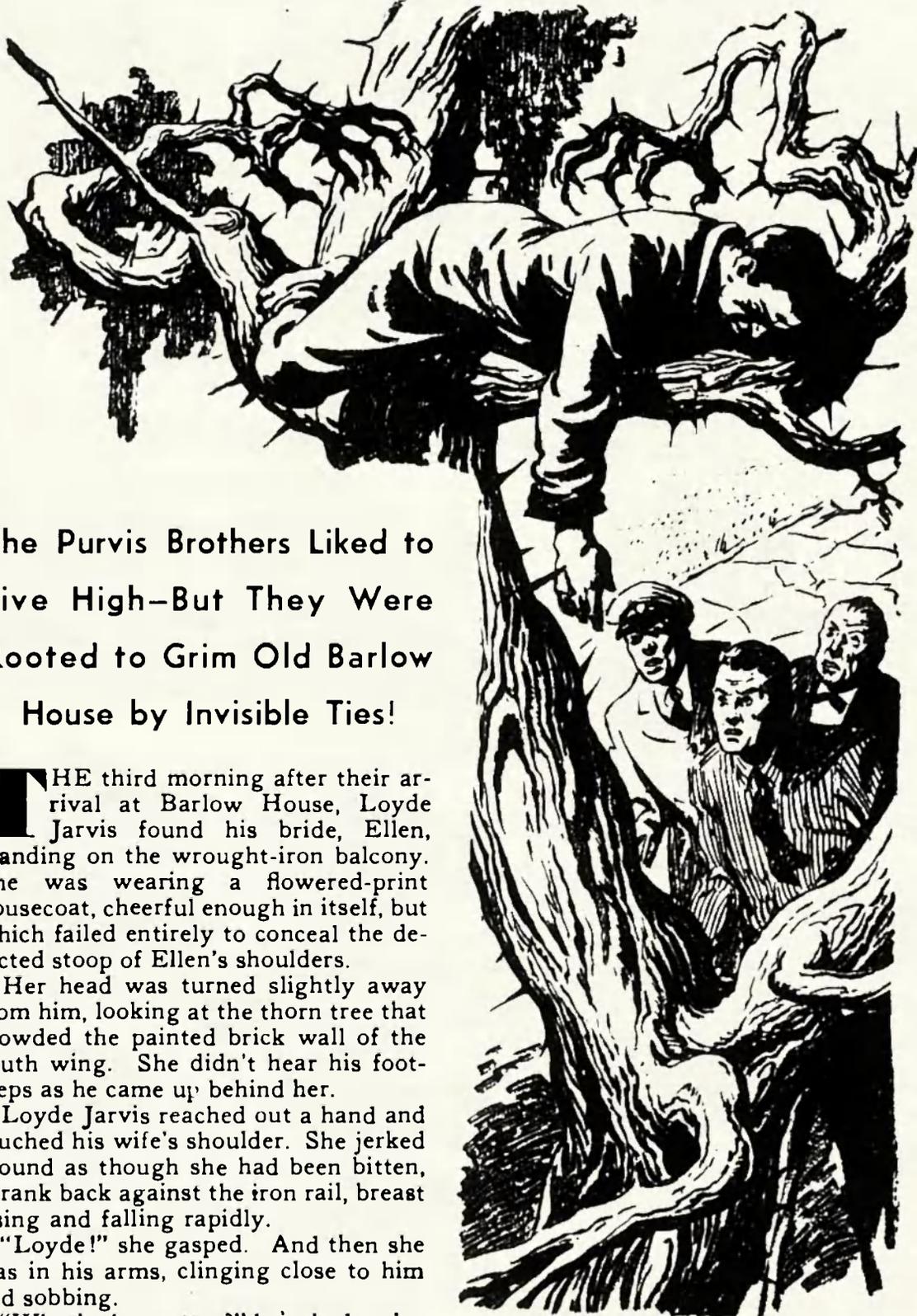
But the most remarkable thing of all was the strange action of the locusts. They left. I know there's no accounting for the queer behavior of these migrant insect swarms, and it's true that a stiff wind with the smell of rain in it, blew up just after dark.

It was then, the men in the fields said, that the locusts began to leave. But it has always seemed a little odd to me that at just the same time the man who styled himself the servant of the "Lord of Flies" was gasping out his last evil breath amidst the flames. I had myself barely escaped.

THE TWISTED TREE

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "Black Wings of Death," "The Terrible People," etc.



The Purvis Brothers Liked to Live High—But They Were Rooted to Grim Old Barlow House by Invisible Ties!

THE third morning after their arrival at Barlow House, Loyde Jarvis found his bride, Ellen, standing on the wrought-iron balcony. She was wearing a flowered-print housecoat, cheerful enough in itself, but which failed entirely to conceal the dejected stoop of Ellen's shoulders.

Her head was turned slightly away from him, looking at the thorn tree that crowded the painted brick wall of the south wing. She didn't hear his footsteps as he came up behind her.

Loyde Jarvis reached out a hand and touched his wife's shoulder. She jerked around as though she had been bitten, shrank back against the iron rail, breast rising and falling rapidly.

"Loyde!" she gasped. And then she was in his arms, clinging close to him and sobbing.

"What's the matter?" he asked, voice strained and anxious.

The pajama clad figure of Perry Jarvis was sprawled out across the tree

His nerves weren't any too good. The party at the country club the night before had been late and liquid; there was a taste of brass in his mouth.

"You—you frightened me," she sobbed, voice muffled because her mouth was crowded against the shoulder of his dressing gown. "I was looking at the thorn tree. It's a horrid thing, isn't it?"

"Horrid?"

There was only a slight inflection in his voice that made the word a question rather than a complete endorsement of her chosen adjective. The thorn tree was horrid—grotesque, misshapen, monstrous, and horrible.

"Yes," she said. "It's horrid."

"It's the largest thorn tree I've ever seen," Loyde said.

He looked across at the gnarled and twisted branches with their cruel barbs scarcely hidden by the waxy green leaves, as artificial-looking as painted canvas.

"What's horrible about it?" he asked, largely from curiosity and perhaps because he felt disagreeable.

"I don't know," she said. "Its shape, I suppose. And then the fact that it's covered with dead grasshoppers impaled on the thorns by the shrikes."

"The butcher-bird has to eat," Loyde said. "The place has been infested with shrikes ever since Perry and I planted the tree. Rapacious little murderer, the shrike."

"It's horrid," Ellen said. "What in the world ever made you and Perry plant such a tree for?"

"Oran Barlow loved trees," Loyde said. "There wasn't a thorn tree on the place. My brother and I wanted to surprise him when he came back from his ocean voyage. But he never came back."

"He was lost at sea?" she asked.

"We don't know," Loyde told her, looking over the lovely golden mist the morning sun made of Ellen's hair, looking toward the twisted tree.

Ellen twisted from Loyde Jarvis' arms, backed to the iron railing of the balcony. Her deep blue eyes jerked from one part of her surroundings to another. She was like a trapped beast, searching for a break in a net.

"It's not just the thorn tree," she

said. "It's the whole terrible place. I had no idea it would be like this. I always thought old houses were beautiful. But these gray brick walls, the mansard roof with its rusty iron trim. And that hideous iron deer over there with the hole rusted in its head."

Ellen spread her hands appealingly.

"Don't you see, Loyde, that I'm young? Everything here is old and decayed. Take the trees. Nothing but the thorn tree is really alive. The other trees are eaten with decay, hosts for fungi. It isn't life—it's an awful mockery of life. Then there's the ugly humor of that fence."

LOYDE JARVIS looked at the fence that surrounded the Barlow place. It did need painting. Aside from that, what was wrong with it?

Ellen laughed stridently. She looked at her husband's face—lean and hard except for the puffs under his eyes.

"Don't you see the absurdity of the fence? It's so high. There are spikes at the top. As though anyone would actually *want* to come in!"

"Oran Barlow loved this place," Loyde Jarvis said. "It represented achievement to him, a man whom nature would have destined for obscurity. The fence was the moat around his castle."

"He was a cripple, wasn't he?" Ellen asked, the hysterically taut muscles of her face relaxing a little.

"More than that," Loyde said as he lighted a before-breakfast cigarette. "He came up from nothing in spite of his physical handicap. He was a hunchback with twisted legs and arms—"

"A crooked gnome of a man," Ellen cut in, "with twisted limbs, like that thorn tree."

Loyde looked toward the tree, and Ellen watched him.

"You're afraid of it, too," she said, her voice husky. "Don't say you're not. I saw you shudder. The thorn tree affects you just as it does me."

"Afraid?" he said. "Don't be a silly little goose!"

"You are! Look at it. It writhes. It's like a nest of serpents. And it moves, Loyde."

"That's nonsense."

"Yes, it moves. It grows. Where

everything else rots to the roots, the thorn tree thrives and stretches out its twisted arms and spiny hands, clutching at you, clutching at the house—"

Loyde Jarvis reached out long arms. His hands closed on Ellen's shoulders. He shook her.

"Stop that," he said levelly. "I don't want you to talk this way again. Keep still about the tree."

She looked into Loyde's puffy eyes. Her lower lip trembled.

"I didn't mean to quarrel," she said quietly. "But why must we stay here, if I hate the place so? You've all the money in the world. I'm not what you think. I'm not a gold-digger. A little cottage would be all right. I don't mind living in a small town. Only I want to get clear on the other side of the town, entirely away from this place."

"We can't do that," Loyde said. "We don't know definitely that Oran Barlow is dead."

"He's been missing ten years. He's legally dead. You and Perry exercise full control over the money. You and Perry were the only ones named in the will. You told me that yourself."

"You don't understand," he said. "We owe Oran Barlow too much, dead or alive. He acted as guardian for us when we were left without a relative in the world."

Her fine lips twisted into an ugly little sneer.

"And you owe more to a dead man, a twisted little hunchback, than you do to your wife!"

Loyde Jarvis didn't have any answer. He simply looked at this beautiful woman and shook his head. After a while, he put one arm tenderly about her.

"Come in to breakfast, dear. Everything will seem brighter after you've had your coffee. The party was too much for both of us."

She jerked from under his arm.

"If I ever eat breakfast it will be in some other room than the dining room."

Loyde Jarvis looked at the thorn tree and understood. The gnarled trunk, with its lower branches squirming out toward the house, stood close to the dining room window. He shrugged,

crossed to the French windows, and entered the house alone.

DOWNSTAIRS in the dining room, Loyde's older brother, Perry, had finished his breakfast which consisted always of grapefruit and coffee. He was in the act of making his first visit to the whiskey decanter when Loyde entered.

He was a small man. Forty years had taken their toll from the black hair on his head. He had bright, greedy little eyes, a small quirk of a mouth. As Loyde sat down to the table without a word of greeting for his brother, Perry turned, whiskey glass in hand.

"I told you not to bring her here," Perry said, smiling sardonically.

Loyde looked up, one eyebrow raised.

"Eavesdropping?"

"Eavesdropping just enough to hear your Ellen say she didn't care for the thorn tree."

"She wants to move," Loyde said. "It's the tree."

"And you explained to her, did you, that we had to stay here and rot—had to stay and watch old Oran's wealth until he comes back?"

"I did," Loyde said coldly.

Perry Jarvis went over to the dining room window and stood there, his hands thrust into his pockets. The spiny branches of the tree clawed the glass in the fresh morning wind. The thorns made a screeching sound on the panes. Perry Jarvis' attitude was almost one of defiance, as though the thorn tree were a monster that he had once feared but which now was caged.

"She doesn't like the tree, Ellen doesn't," he mused. "Your wife and I are not going to agree, Loyde. Why," he added, a faint note of sarcasm coming into his voice, "I love the old thorn tree. Don't you, Loyde?"

"Love it?"

Startled, Loyde dropped his knife. It clattered on his plate and then there was that silence with which the old house abounded, unbroken except by the screech of thorny claws on the window.

"No," Loyde said, "I don't love it."

Perry chuckled, stopped suddenly as the servant entered.

"It's Dale Witcomb, sir," the servant

said, addressing Loyde.

"Who?" Loyde frowned.

"Dale Witcomb, Mr. Barlow's old gardener, sir. He was here yesterday about the drainage tiles around the house. Worked all day fixing them. I think he wants to be paid."

"Bring him in," Loyde said.

He put down untasted toast, narrowed his puffy eyes on his brother.

"Did you have old Witcomb work on those tiles, Perry?"

"Yes," Perry said with a nod. "The water was seeping into the basement. There were roots in the tiles and he cleaned them out. Roots from the thorn tree."

DALE WITCOMB, a stooped, gray-haired man in faded blue overalls, came into the dining room, his felt hat wadded up into his gnarled hands. Mouth open, he looked around the room with all its ancient, faded grandeur. Only when Loyde rapped impatiently on his coffee cup did the gardener bring eyes that were as faded as his overalls to bear upon the younger of the two brothers.

"Cleaned out them tiles yesterday, Mr. Loyde," Witcomb said. "Thorn tree got its roots right in and stopped things up. Shouldn't wonder if that ain't the trouble with the drainage sewer out in the street. Thorn tree roots spread around some, they do."

"How much do you want?" Loyde asked.

"'Bout five dollars, if that's all right with you."

"Pay him," Loyde said to his brother.

"There's some other work ought to be done," Witcomb said, as he took the money from Perry Jarvis.

"What?" Loyde asked.

"There's a whole army of little old bugs on the thorn tree. Maybe you ain't noticed. They ain't aphids, but they ain't doing the tree no good, sir. You wouldn't want the thorn tree to die, would you?"

"Die?" Loyde said dully. "No, I guess we wouldn't."

"I thought not," Witcomb said. "So I figured on spraying the tree for you, if you want me to."

"Go ahead."

"And prune it some?"

"No," Loyde said, looking sharply at his brother. "We don't want you to prune it."

The old gardener smiled.

"Well, if it ain't pruned, one of these days you'll find old Mr. Thorn Tree just pushing one of his arms right through the wall, Mr. Loyde."

"We don't want it pruned," Perry cut in. "That's the trouble with most of the trees around here. Too much pruning. You see that the thorn tree gets the spray. We can't have it dying. But don't prune it."

He laughed unpleasantly, then added:

"The thorn tree just has to live. My brother and I love it. It represents all the finer things of life to us, doesn't it, Loyde?"

Loyde grunted.

Witcomb waited a moment, twisting his hat. Then he bowed to each of the brothers in turn, and left the room.

The following Wednesday night, Loyde was in the library working on the ledger in which he kept careful account of the vast wealth of the missing Oran Barlow, when Ellen came running into the room, her lovely face contorted by fear.

"Loyde!" she sobbed. "Oh, my God!"

Loyde Jarvis got to his feet and gathered his wife into his arms.

"Darling, what's the matter with you?" he asked gently, and held her close while she sobbed. "Dear one, you can't go on this way. These hysterical outbursts—why, the servants will think I married a feeble-minded person."

"The—the thorn tree," she whispered. "Oh, I know you told me not to mention it again. I've tried not to, not because you have any right to tell me what to say and what not, but because I wanted to please you."

His arms tightened about her, hurting her with their pressure. She looked up at him with tear-glistened eyes.

"Loyde, the tree—I've got to tell you!"

HE looked down at her, and his face was a little pale, his lips drawn into a narrow red line.

"What about the three?" he asked.

"It moved, Loyde. It moved one of its—its arms. I was in the dining room, looking at some of the lovely old china. Outside, there wasn't a breath of air and it was silent in the house until I heard a faint strangled cry. I looked toward the window. The thorn tree was reaching out for me. Its claws clutched, raked down the window pane."

"The wind," he said. "It was only the wind. Listen." He held up a finger. "Don't you hear the wind, Ellen?"

But there was no wind. Only silence in the house, an ever rising tide of silence that seemed to flow into gaps of sound that living noises made.

Ellen's frightened eyes toured the large room, looked out beyond the circle of lamplight that never quite reached the sombre walls of books.

"It moved," she whispered. "The tree reached for me with its crippled limbs."

"Ellen!" Loyde's voice was sharp, imperative.

And then the tide of silence filled the hole his voice had made. There was no wind in the night. Loyde knew there was no wind. He hated wind because the gnarled branches of the thorn tree rubbed and made groaning sounds when the wind blew. Loyde's ears were always keenly tuned to the groaning of the tree.

"Loyde," Ellen said finally, "I love you. I think you love me, in your own selfish way. You love to possess me. You're proud that I'm not ugly. I want to stay with you because I love you. I think I could learn to love this house and all the old things in it. It isn't a hideous place from the inside. But the garden and grounds—can't you have the old rotten trees cut down? Can't you cut down the thorn tree, too?"

"Ellen, you're letting your imagination get away with you," he said, his voice gentle. "The thorn tree isn't a lovely thing. But it's the only tree left on that side of the house. There wouldn't be any shade—"

"Loyde," she interrupted, "there's a barrier grown up between us. I can't creep into your heart. I can't because of the thorns. It's the thorn tree, isn't it? The thorn tree between you and me.

That's it. I can see it in your eyes. The tree! That twisted, crippled tree!"

Loyde Jarvis clutched Ellen's shoulders, the curve between thumb and forefinger so close to her throat that he could feel the rapid bumping of her pulse. Ellen's eyes searched his face frantically. Her jaw sagged. As the grip on her shoulders relaxed, she moved away from him slowly, step by step.

"You wanted to strangle me," she said huskily.

"Ellen, don't be a fool!" Loyde said.

"I'll not be a fool!" she said, and laughed tautly. "No, I'll not be a fool, Loyde Jarvis!"

She turned and ran away from him. That night she slept in one of the guest rooms, her door locked. That was the night the twisted tree claimed its first victim.

LLOYDE came down to breakfast alone the next morning. He hadn't slept and his red-rimmed eyes showed it. He ordered strong coffee from the servant and drank four cups of it, black. His tired eyes kept drifting toward the window where the thorn tree shut out nearly all the light of a gray, damp day. He was asking for his fifth cup of coffee, when the old-fashioned spring gong on the front door set up a head-splitting clamor.

"Smithson!" Loyde called to the servant. "Smithson, answer the door and stop that racket, for the love of heaven!"

The servant took his hand from the turn-spout of the coffee urn, put down his master's cup, and hastened to answer the door. Loyde heard a voice that was shrill yet masculine demanding to see Loyde Jarvis. He threw down his napkin, pushed back from the table, and walked into the hall.

The milkman stood in the open door. His metal basket of bottles made a jingling sound in his nervous hands. His face was quite as white as the overalls he wore.

"It—it—it's Mr. Perry Jarvis, Mr. Loyde," the milkman stammered.

"You want to talk to my brother?" Loyde asked.

"No. Lord, no, Mr. Jarvis. Your—your brother's in the tree. I was bring-

ing the milk around to the back door when I saw him. He's up in the thorn tree! I think—I think he's bad hurt. I called to him and he didn't move."

Loyde's face became the gray of ashes. Long strides carried him across the hall. He brushed the milkman aside with his left arm, went out the front door, down the steps to the walk that was overgrown with moss. He rounded the house, looked toward the thorn tree.

He saw the pajama-clad figure of Perry Jarvis sprawled out across twisted branches of the thorn tree, seemingly locked in the deadly embrace of twisted limbs! Perry was face down. Thorns pierced the flesh of face and hands. Thorns had needled through the flimsy cloth of his pajamas, drawing blood that stained the green leaves darkly.

Above the thorn tree, the casement and screen of Perry's bedroom window were wide open. It was easy to see what had happened. Perry, drunk as he usually was by bedtime, had staggered to the low window, flung it wide, lost his balance, and tumbled into the tree. Perry had a bad heart—drink had given him that. The shock of the fall had killed him.

It was Perry's fall into the tree that had made the branches claw against the dining room window on the night before. Ellen had thought the tree had moved, but actually it was Perry falling into the tree.

Loyde turned, moved woodenly back to the front door of the house. The milkman was standing on the front steps.

"I want to call Dale Witcomb," Loyde said. "I want him to come and bring a pruning hook. I want to get my brother down. He's dead. My brother's dead."

The milkman went on his way. He told the town marshal, but by the time the law had arrived, Dale Witcomb had pulled Perry Jarvis' body down from the tree. He had used a long-handled pruning hook so as not to tear his hands on the thorns. With the hook he had literally torn Perry Jarvis down to the ground. Thorns riddled the dead man's pajamas. Thorns raked bloody tracks across the flesh, all but

tore one eye from its socket.

All the while, Loyde Jarvis sat in the library, his fingers toying with a paper knife, his eyes staring unblinkingly at the wall. Ellen came to the door of the library and stood there, her golden hair disheveled. The only spot of color on her face was the rouge on her full lips.

FOR a long time she looked at her husband. He did not turn his head away from the wall, did not start when she spoke to him.

"I told you it was a living thing, that tree," she said huskily. "Perhaps now you will believe. The tree stretched out its limbs for Perry, took him into its deathly embrace. That is what happened. It isn't what the police say at all."

"The police," Loyde said dully. "What do they say?"

"They say that Perry was pushed from the window. They say he was deliberately pushed. There are fingerprints in Perry's room. There are bluish marks on Perry's throat. Someone took Perry by the back of the neck and pushed him out of the window."

"I don't believe that," Loyde said.

"Neither do I. It was the tree, wasn't it?"

"No," Loyde said. "It was Perry's bad heart. He fell from the window and the shock killed him."

The town marshal had nothing better to offer than Loyde's explanation—that Perry had fallen from the window. The strange fingerprints proved to be that of the cleaning woman who came to the Barlow place during the day. She had been in her own home all that night and could prove it. The marks on the back of Perry's neck could have been made when he struck one of the branches in falling. If he had been pushed, there was no way of proving it.

"Now," Ellen said to Loyde that evening after they had returned from the undertaker's where arrangements had been made for the funeral, "now will you cut down the thorn tree?"

Loyde shook his head.

"Shut up about the tree," he said. "It has become an obsession with you."

Ellen sighed and went up to one of the guest rooms. Loyde heard her lock

the door. Did she think he had murdered his own brother? Did she think that, or was she trying to force him to cut down the thorn tree?

That night there was wind in the branches of the thorn tree. The twisted limbs rubbed one against the other and gave the tree a voice that groaned and sometimes shrilled like a tortured soul. The voice of the tree kept Loyde awake. He got out of bed, pulled on a bathrobe, went down into the dining room, turned on the light.

He went to the window, stood there with his hands pressed against the panes, and looked out at the tree. In the light from the window, he saw one thorny branch that clawed at the glass. There were three dead grasshoppers, impaled on thorns by the shrikes, half eaten away by the sharp bill of the butcher bird.

"Damn you!" Loyde whispered. "You twisted devil! Damn you!"

Yet he dared not destroy the tree. His span of life was measured by those writhing branches. . . .

TWO days after the funeral, Ben Harper, City Engineer, called at the Barlow house to see Loyde. Harper was a cheerful, heavy-set man with laughing blue eyes. His pleasant countenance was as out of place in the sombre hall of the old house as the polished leather boots he planted on the luxuriant carpets.

"City wants to do you a favor, Mr. Jarvis," he said, chewing on the bit of an unlighted pipe. "But we ought to have your permission to do it."

"That's gratifying," Loyde said. Harper's good humor was contagious. "I've often considered burning the south wing just to get fire department service for my city taxes."

"I guess you've noticed," Harper went on, "how the low point of your lawn is pretty often under water. You know how those trees are rotting out down there. Well, that's part of it. There's something wrong with the drainage. Folks below you on this street don't have much trouble. But those above mostly get water in their basements when it rains. Shouldn't be like that, should it?"

Loyde shook his head.

"Had me stumped for some time. We got adequate storm sewers on this street. Went down one of the manholes myself the other day, and what we got is a lot of stoppage from that there thorn tree of yours. The roots got right into the tile. Guess you had the same trouble with the drainage tile around the house. We could clear out those roots, but we'd only have to do it all over again in a year or so. That thorn tree has roots bigger than the top, I guess. What we want to do is cut down—"

"No," Loyde interrupted.

"No?" There was a puzzled frown on Harper's wide forehead.

"I said no," Loyde repeated. "You'll touch that tree over my dead body. It's the only living tree on the place. It has to stay."

Harper stood up, put his hat on his head, clenched his pipe hard.

"That's sure a mighty queer attitude to take, after what the tree did to your brother."

"What the tree did?" Loyde was very white. "You're crazy, Harper. You're not serious? You haven't got that idea, too—that the tree is a monster, reaching out to take life. Good Lord, you're worse than my wife. Now get out with your nonsense. Get out in a hurry!"

Harper didn't hurry. He stood a moment in the door, looking back at Loyde. Loyde was trembling. His hands were clenching and unclenching.

"All I got to do is take the matter before the City Council and have your thorn tree condemned, Jarvis. You want it the hard way, you'll get it that way."

"I'll kill the first man who touches an ax to that tree," Loyde said.

"Killing is big talk, Mr. Jarvis," Harper said. And he left Loyde alone.

The following afternoon, Harper returned to the house, bringing a gang of laborers with him. He led his men through the iron gate, around to the south wing of the house where the thorn tree stood. It wasn't until he heard the first bite of the ax that Loyde Jarvis knew they were there.

Loyde came out of the house, his lips set in a thin straight line. Harper saw him coming toward the tree, and

with a wave of his hand, checked the worker who manned the ax. Harper walked to meet Loyde Jarvis.

"Sorry it had to be like this," Harper said, bringing an official document from the pocket of his jacket. "But I got a right to do what I'm doing. It's for the benefit of a lot of people, and you'll just have to give in."

LOYDE ignored the city engineer. He stepped in close to one of the overhanging branches of the tree and stood there with his hands in his pockets, his puffy eyes encompassing the circle of workmen.

"You men get out of here," he said. "I told Harper that I'd kill the first one to touch ax to this tree. There'll be blood shed if you carry out Harper's order."

The workmen backed away, stood there leaning on their tools, looking from Harper to Loyde Jarvis.

"You men go right ahead," Harper said. "Talk's a dime a dozen."

Loyde Jarvis pulled his right hand from his pocket.

"He's got a gun!" the man with the ax said.

Harper's eyes narrowed.

"I don't think he'll use it, boys. I've met men like him before." He advanced slowly toward Loyde. "Put down that gun, Jarvis. You can't use it anyhow!"

Loyde's right hand trembled. He backed a step. Harper continued to advance. Then suddenly he stooped, picked up a cross-cut saw, threw it at Loyde Jarvis.

Some say that Loyde Jarvis backed into the overhanging thorny branch. Others say the branch dipped to meet him, actually took him by the throat in its spiny clutch. And well it might, considering that there was quite a breeze that day. Anyway, a thorn spiked Loyde Jarvis in the back of his neck. He winced with sudden pain, put his hand to the back of his neck. He took three steps forward, his legs becoming suddenly rigid.

Before he fell forward to the ground, his mouth widened into a humorless grin that was horrible to look upon. Beneath his pale skin was a bluish tinge of color, almost as though the twisted

tree had grown hands with which to strangle him.

By the time the shock had worn off and Harper and his men could get to Loyde's side, he was dying. Above him, the thorn tree writhed in the wind, rubbed its twisted branches as though in satisfaction.

Loyde tried to speak, tried to tell them about the tree. But preceding death was a strange paralysis of jaws and tongue. He couldn't utter a sound. Only the tree talked with its scraping tongues, and there was no interpreter to tell its story.

They carried Loyde into the house. His terrified wife called the doctor. And then Harper went out to his men.

"We're taking the tree down," he said grimly. "Only we've got to do it without touching a single thorn. Throw a rope into the top. We'll chop nearly through the trunk and pull it to earth. And don't touch a single thorn, understand?"

Loyde Jarvis died as the tree was felled. The doctor who watched helplessly at his bedside said poison had killed him—aconite, probably. It was difficult to distinguish its action from heart failure. He stated that further investigation would undoubtedly reveal the same cause of death for Perry Jarvis who had been buried only a few days before.

Out on the lawn, Harper kept his men grimly at their task. When the thorn tree was felled, he ordered that the roots be dug up. It was at the very center of the root system, close to the tap, that they found the skeleton of a human being—a skeleton with a malformed back and twisted arms and leg bones.

IN the gathering gloom, workmen and neighbors stood about the hole that had rooted the tree. They watched Harper, the town marshal, and a doctor carefully remove the rotting skeleton.

"Bullet hole in the skull," the doctor called up from the cavity in the earth. "They murdered old Oran Barlow, all right. The poor old man never went on that ocean voyage at all. They killed him for his money, Loyde and Perry did. It was right after he disappeared that the Jarvis boys planted this tree.

Ten years ago. Some of you can remember. I can.

"It was a good-sized tree and there was burlap around the roots when it was delivered from the nursery. A pretty easy thing to hide the body underneath that burlap and plant the tree and the corpse right here in broad daylight."

"I can remember," Harper said. "A lot of us wondered if the tree would live, it was so big to move. But it lived all right. It lived to settle the score."

The matter should have ended there. Gossip colored the tale with a story of how the tree was nurtured from the crooked corpse of old Oran Barlow and grew as crooked as the horrible thing locked within its roots. Gossip had it that there was a subtle poison fermented in the rotting body of the murder victim—a poison that had been carried with the sap to every branch and thorn.

Ben Harper, who was an engineer and therefore a realist, thought possibly the whole tree had been sprayed with poison—something that contained acnite. He went to the little cottage where Oran Barlow's old gardener, Dale Witcomb, lived. In Witcomb's

garden he found wolfbane, the plant from which the poison used had been extracted.

He figured his hunch was about right. Witcomb had sprayed the tree with poison, then slipped into the house after dark to push Perry Jarvis out of the window and into the thorn tree. Perhaps he had intended to do the same with Loyde Jarvis when the opportunity came along.

Entering the cottage, Ben Harper found Dale Witcomb stretched out on his cot, just the shade of a smile on his lips.

There was a glass beside the bed and it held a slight trace of poison. Dale Witcomb was dead, a suicide.

On a shelf in the cottage, Ben Harper found a piece of paper, held down by a root cutting which obviously old Witcomb had dug out of one of the drain tiles around the Barlow house. The root had grown through a silver belt buckle on which the monogram of Oran Barlow was still distinguishable.

On the paper, Dale Witcomb had penciled:

"Mister Barlow was sure mighty good to me."

And that told the truth eloquently.

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CHAPTER I

The Follower in the Wake

YOUNG Steve Decker's hard face went grim, but he didn't move. He just looked at the impossible hand-print on the cabin door, and waited. The only sound was the rhythmic purring of the yacht's engines from below. An electric light in the ceiling gave gleaming reflections from the polished brass and woodwork of the *Kestrel's* passageway.

The hand-print hadn't been there ten minutes ago. It wasn't human. It had been made, apparently, by somebody with webbed fingers, and with the little finger missing from the left hand. Decker touched the wood, and his hand came away smeared with foul-smelling, greenish slime.

He looked at Mike Morlock, standing beside him. Morlock was a thin, gaunt, spidery fellow in his forties, with curly blond hair and sunken cheeks. He was the gossip columnist on the *Call-Inquirer*, where Decker himself served as managing editor.



Decker knew that it would take fast thinking to prevent a massacre

"Well, June was right," Morlock said.

Decker nodded. "Yeah." June Hamilton, the columnist's assistant and Girl Friday, had come running on deck to tell Morlock of what she had seen on her cabin door—and Decker had been talking to the gossip-writer at the time.

So now they stood in the passage, hesitating.

Suddenly Morlock reached out, clicked over the latch, and pushed the door open. He stared into the darkness. Moonlight filtered through the portholes, revealing little. Decker



turned on the light. The little cabin was empty.

"What's the angle, Mike?" he asked.

Morlock shook his curly head. "How should I know? For three days we've been finding hand-prints and screwy tracks all over the yacht, ever since we put out from the Sound. A gag, maybe?"

"You're the gagster in this crew," Decker grunted. "I know your rep. Anything for a scoop, even if you have to fake ghosts attacking the publishers of the *Call-Inquirer*."

"You think I'm responsible?" Morlock said belligerently.

There was a curious fetid odor in the room. Decker crossed to the porthole and opened it, letting the salt Atlantic sea-wind blow in from the dimly-lit deck outside.

"Well, you've been radioing this junk back to New York," he said. "It—"

"It's a thrill for the readers. The only kick they get out of the *Call* is my column. The stodgiest paper I ever worked on. As conservative as the *Family Journal*."

He was right, Steve Decker knew, for he himself had often chafed under the rigid, die-hard policy of his paper.

But his objections had brought no response from the owners, though the managing editor realized that there was dissension among them. Keith and Quester were conservative to the core, and looked it. And they held the majority of stock, controlling Durbarton, who wavered, and Monk, who advocated turning the *Call* into a tabloid.

"We've been losing money for years," Monk had said during the last conference. "How can we declare dividends unless—"

Yet the others had voted him down. It was at that meeting that Decker had been promoted to managing editor, after Bill Tarney, the former occupant, was made a member of the firm.

But Tarney, too, was a conservative, so the columnist Morlock remained practically the only ray of light on the paper. And his scoops were good ones, rivaling Winchell's. But faking slimy hand-prints was cheap stuff!

This voyage had been in the nature of a celebration. Keith, the oldest of the owners, owned the *Kestrel*, and had invited the others along "to celebrate our promotions." He meant Tarney and Decker, of course. But Morlock was invited, for reasons of policy, and he brought along blond, pretty June Hamilton.

"She's the only one who can transcribe my dictation," the columnist grinned. "Can't write my column without her."

He wired his stuff to shore, of course—but the voyage was almost over. The *Kestrel* was down South, far beyond Hatteras, gliding along in perfect weather and smooth seas. The only trouble had been the mysterious tracks found aboard.

Decker wasn't superstitious. Still, he couldn't repress a little shiver when a shrill, frightened cry came in through the porthole. A scream from June Hamilton!

Morlock was behind him as he sprang into the passage and raced along it, coming out on the moonlit deck.

Briefly he stared around, puzzled. Then a stir of movement at the after rail caught his eye.

"There it is—no, wait!" someone said. "I don't—"

Morlock and Decker hurried toward the others. Bill Tarney's immobile, long face turned to them. He gestured toward the wake.

"Look!"

For a moment Decker saw nothing. Then there was a glimpse of a shapeless dark something that rolled to the surface in a welter of foam, a rounded black bulk in the moonlight, impossible to make out clearly.

Quester, one of the owners, gulped.

"It—it's following us!" he squealed.

And so it was. The yacht was making good headway, yet the thing that pursued seemed to be gaining, ever so slightly. It was merely a shadow in the dimness, but there was a suggestion of semi-humanity about the bulk that was shocking.

June's face was ivory white. Dwarfish, wizened Keith, another of the publishers, came racing up with a flashlight. He clicked on the button and sent the white beam lancing over the rail. The ray wavered on the turgid waters of the wake and then found the—follower!

A GASP of incredulous horror went up. Decker couldn't help the instant of sick loathing he felt at sight of that blindly staring face that was visible for an instant, fish-like and yet partaking hideously of the human.

The creature had the skin of a great lizard, glistening with sea-water, and it was hairless. Naked, it glided through the sea almost without effort. Into Decker's mind flashed the memory of something he had once read:

"And thrice we saw the Swimmer . . . The Thing that may not drown. . . ."

It was gone then. It had either dived or fallen behind. There was no trace of anything unusual in the white boiling of the moonlit wake. Yet no one spoke for a minute.

Little Keith broke the stillness.

"I need a drink," he said shakily, and headed for the saloon. The others followed.

Quester sat down beside Keith, who was his brother-in-law, and looked at him intently, as the steward busied

himself fixing drinks. Bill Tarney's stolid face hadn't changed, but then it never did. June drank her Scotch-and-soda hurriedly. Morlock was biting his lip in suppressed excitement.

Abruptly fat Quester jerked his thumb at the steward.

"Get the others—Mr. Dubarton, Mr. Monk, and Dr. Tanner," he ordered.

"Yes, sir." The steward left the saloon.

In answer to inquiring looks Quester said one word.

"*Dagon!*"

Morlock started to laugh.

"Shut up, Morlock," snapped Quester.

"Okay," the columnist said submissively. But there was a gleam of amusement in his eye. He turned to June. "Get my files on John Severn, will you, kid? I think we'll need them."

The girl nodded and went out.

"You don't think Severn's dead?" Keith said nervously.

"Yeah," Morlock affirmed.

"Drowned. His body was never recovered. I know. I wrote the series of articles that exposed him and broke up his cult."

"And I okayed them," Tarney grunted. "Charlatan, crook, maybe lunatic. But he was cleaning up."

The columnist grinned. "Sure he was. There'll always be screwballs in this world. His *Cult of Dagon*, with its headquarters on that island off the Florida coast, was what jumped our circulation when we ran the expose."

"It isn't now," Tarney added. "After Severn committed suicide the place went to seed. Only two months, but there isn't a soul on the island now."

JUNE came back with a sheaf of papers. She handed one to Morlock, who read:

"Cult leader commits suicide. Yesterday John Severn, notorious cultist and alleged swindler, leaped to his death from a tower in his castle off the Florida Keys. Stating that his organization had been broken up by articles published in this paper, he left a note declaring that he would revenge himself upon those responsible for the collapse of his cult. Severn, who con-

tended that—" Morlock hesitated and rubbed his eyes. "Contented that he possessed miraculous powers drawn from the ocean—"

"Go on," Decker said, as the columnist paused again.

But the other didn't reply. He slumped forward in his chair, the paper falling from his hands. His body leaned and fell.

Startled, Decker glanced at the others, and gasped. The others were asleep! Keith, Quester, Tarney, June Hamilton, were all sound asleep.

Decker sprang up—and his legs collapsed under him. Frantically he tried to overcome the drowsy lethargy that surged up to enfold him. Surged up like a deep sea, overwhelming, inexorable!

He slept.

CHAPTER II

Dagon's Isle

SOMEONE was shaking him. He heard June's voice, as from a great distance, frightened, insistent.

"Steve! Wake up! Something's happened—"

"Okay, kid," Decker muttered, opening his eyes to stare up at June's pale face.

He was still in the saloon, and had a sick headache. He sat up, noting that the bodies of the others were where they had fallen the night before. For it was daylight now. Decker got up, rubbing his temples.

"What's wrong now?" he asked.

"There's no one on the *Kestrel*," June said, trying to keep the panic from her voice. "The crew's gone—and the captain."

Decker, seeing the fear in the girl's eyes, gripped her soft shoulder.

"Buck up. We'll investigate."

Together they tried to wake the others, without result. The apparently drugged slumber was deep. At last they went out on deck, and saw the impossible.

The *Kestrel* lay not far from a small island, and to the west was a low, blue expanse that probably was the mainland. But it was the island

itself that riveted Decker's gaze. Rocky, not very large, it was dominated by a castle that stood on the highest crag. The castle was shoddy in the morning sunlight. Cheap stucco had been substituted for solid stone, but it looked weirdly incongruous in that setting.

Decker recognized it from photographs.

"Severn's island!" he gasped. "The cult—"

June nodded. "I saw that. How did we get here, Steve?"

"Dunno. Some of the lifeboats are missing. The crew might have left in them—though God knows why. Reminds me of the *Marie Celeste*." He regretted the words immediately, for June turned away. "Let's search the yacht," he suggested.

They did, finding it deserted. It was like a phantom ship, peopled only by those enthralled in sleep, with the silent towers of the castle brooding over that endless blue sea. But they did make one discovery. A burly figure came reeling out of a companionway, staring around dazedly.

Decker saw the lined young face, the shaggy dark brows, and recognized Dr. Rudy Tanner, nephew of Keith and Quester.

"Steve," the physician said thickly, "and June, eh? What's up?"

Swiftly Decker explained. Tanner shook his head.

"Drugged, I guess," he said. "I was having a drink with Dubarton and Monk, and we all passed out. Nobody on the ship, you say?"

"Not a soul," Decker said.

"Well, let's radio for help."

At this practical suggestion they headed for the wireless room, to find disappointment there. The equipment had been ruthlessly smashed. And there were curious, sticky stains here and there. In one place the print of a hand, with the little finger missing, and webs between the fingers. Decker rubbed it away unobtrusively.

But June wasn't looking. She was staring out the door.

"The yacht—it's sinking, I think!" she said abruptly.

One glance at the tilted horizon confirmed her words. Decker went white. He sprang outside.

"Come on, Rudy. We'd better check up."

That was easily done. It took only a few minutes to see that the yacht was doomed. Water was already cascading into the hold, and she was settling swiftly.

DECKER turned into a furiously active machine. There were six helpless men on the *Kestrel*—no five, for Quester woke up unexpectedly—and they had to be saved. Such boats as remained were inspected, and one of them was loaded with the motionless bodies of the sleepers.

It was ticklish work, for the yacht was settling with dangerous speed, but at last the lifeboat was free from its davits. There was no time to save anything except human life. Only when Decker and Dr. Tanner were pulling for shore, with June and Quester staring back at the sinking craft, did they relax at all.

And yet, Decker thought, safety was an illusory thing. The dark mystery that surrounded the situation was still unexplained. What had happened in the night, weeding out officers and crew from the *Kestrel* and bringing it to this island, where a man had committed suicide and left only a curse to live after him?

Even in the hot morning sunlight Decker felt slightly cold, remembering the slimy tracks he had seen, and the black Thing that had bobbed in the wake.

The boat grated on sand. Decker looked back to where the bow of the *Kestrel* was dipping, for the last time, into the sea. Then he nodded to Dr. Tanner and Quester.

"Okay," he said. "Let's unload."

The physician had brought along his bag, and busied himself with a stethoscope, reassuring himself that the others still lived. Presently he began to revive them, not as difficult a task as Decker had expected.

Monk was the first to recover. He was a squat man in his fifties, somewhat resembling a shaven gorilla with his blue-black jowls and receding forehead. But he was one of the smartest men in the newspaper game, and Decker was glad to have him for a

companion when the two of them, accompanied by Quester, set off to explore.

"May be somebody on the island," the latter grunted, wiping sweat from his fat cheeks. "I need a drink."

Decker nodded. "I want to get this news back to the office. It's worth a headline."

They left June and Dr. Tanner trying to revive the others, and started up the slope toward the castle. It was tropically hot, and there was little shade, save for a few palms that grew near the water's edge. But the path grew more craggy and barren as they mounted, while above them the castle seemed to increase in size. Blistering heat shimmered up from the glaring white walls and towers.

Then the great doorway loomed before them, open, so that the dim interior was visible. Without hesitation Decker stepped inside, and the others followed. But he stopped then, staring.

The place had been described in Morlock's exposé articles, yet cold print could give no idea of the home of the Cult of Dagon. It was like being undersea, curiously cool despite the heat outside the walls.

Sand-colored rugs covered the floor, and dust rose from them in clouds. The high-vaulted ceiling of the big room was roofed with green glass, through which light filtered eerily. There were no windows.

Pillars rose here and there, carved to represent coral, with dried seaweed festooned about them. The walls were of glass, and Decker saw that fish had once swum behind them, though now the huge aquarium was lifeless. The waters were stagnant.

A fetid, overpowering stench filled the place, and, through the glass, he could see the small skeletons of fish lying on the sand, in the aquariums where the water had not turned black with rotted sea-growth. The skeleton of a conger eel was twisted about a rock grotto where it had caught and remained.

It was utterly silent, save for the faint crashing of the waves on the islet's shore. The home of Dagon—and, now, of death!

Only echoes answered Decker's shout.

"Nobody's home," he grunted.

"We'd better search, anyway," Quester said. "There may be some liquor."

THEY broke up, the better to investigate the labyrinthine interior of the castle more quickly. But they found nothing. The undersea motif had been carried out through all the rooms, and the trident, emblem of Poseidon, was carved everywhere. Only dust and the eternal foul odor of sea-rot filled the great structure.

They met in the main hall by which they had first entered—at least, Decker and burly Monk did. Quester didn't appear, and they waited impatiently.

"Where is he?" the editor asked.

"He'll be along," Monk growled. "You better get down to the beach and bring the others here. I'll wait for Quester."

Decker obeyed. He was worried about June, more than he cared to admit, and was relieved to find the group safe and sound, with the unconscious men revived.

Bill Tarney's long, stolid face was rather pallid, and the dwarfish Keith was shaking visibly. Morlock, the columnist, was biting his thin lips and cursing in a low undertone. While the last of the group, Pierre Dubarton—co-partner in the *Call-Inquirer*—sat on the sand, drinking out of a pocket flask and nervously rubbing his Vandyke.

"Okay," Decker said. "The castle's empty, but it'll be a shelter. And we'll need that, by the look of those clouds coming up. Let's scram."

They did, finding Monk still on guard in the hall. Quester had not yet reappeared, and Decker suggested that a search be made. He turned to Morlock.

"The mainland isn't too far," he said. "Do you think you can row there and get some help before the storm breaks?"

"Sure." The columnist waved jauntily at the others and went out again.

"There are beds upstairs, if we can blow the dust off them," Monk sug-

gested. "Meanwhile, let's find Quester."

The search was fruitless, though Decker found something for which he wasn't looking. Tracks. Tracks of greenish, ill-smelling slime, and the print of a webbed hand on the wall.

Morlock came back, looking worried.

"The lifeboat's gone," he said. "Scuttled. A big hole punched in the side. I could see it through the water, but it's no good to us now."

The group exchanged fearful glances.

"They'll have planes out looking for us," Decker said unconvincingly.

"In this storm?" Morlock's sunken cheeks quivered.

They broke up chairs for firewood and kindled a blaze in the middle of the big hall, drawing the carpets away from the stone flooring.

Night came on, slowly, draggingly. Decker had never seen time lag so. A shadow of fear seemed to hang like a shroud over them all, nameless and yet almost palpable. There was a question in every mind. Where was Quester?

Decker got up nervously and wandered away, smoking one of the few cigarettes that remained in his case. He went along a hall, pausing beside a window that looked out into the night. Rain beat upon the glass. Lightning flickered balefully across the sky. John Severn had leaped into the sea that surged so wildly far below. . . .

He shook off the thought, but jumped, nervously, when a hand touched his arm.

"Steve," June's voice said. "I—do you mind? I'm out of cigarettes."

He gave her one. In the glow from the lighter their faces leaped into wan illumination, Benda masks. Decker looked up at the heavy, wrought-iron chandelier above them.

"Rather dark, eh?" he muttered.

June took out a flashlight. "I brought this."

"Good kid!" Decker patted her arm. "If we—" He tensed abruptly. "Hear that?"

It came again—a soft splash from nearby. June clicked on the flashlight

and sent its beam spearing out. The circle wavered over the wall and came to rest where a black gap loomed. It had not been there before, Decker knew.

He grabbed the light. "Get back to the others, kid," he said, and leaped forward. The light revealed a passageway leading into the wall and beyond. A secret panel?

Decker's feet went lightly over slippery, slimy rock. The passage turned. Before him lay a vault, black as Erebus, through which the pale beam lanced whitely. Oily dark water shimmered.

In the center of the room was a pool of water, its surface unbroken. But Decker had no eyes for it. He focused the glow of his light on a still, crumpled form that lay on the lip of the basin. He recognized it by the gross, flabby bulk even before he saw the fat face, rigid and contorted now in death.

Quester's face and clothing glistened, coated with green slime.

Behind him, Decker heard June cry out in horror. She had followed him.

Abruptly something splashed in the pool and Decker sent the light out there, a circle of whiteness against the dark of the waters.

And from that darkness something rose into view, a scaled and shining head with blindly staring eyes, with gills in the malformed neck, and the skin of a monstrous plated lizard. The horror rose from the abyss and hung motionless for an instant.

The slit of a mouth parted. A webbed, taloned hand was lifted in a gesture of, somehow, archaic menace. Then it was gone.

It sank without a ripple, leaving only the smooth surface of the water to reflect the flashlight's glare.

CHAPTER III

Terror Out of the Sea

DR. TANNER stood up, stretched his burly form, and stared into the fire.

"Apoplexy," he said. "Thrombosis

of an artery of the brain, apparently."

Decker peered intently down at the corpse.

"Yeah, but what caused it?"

The physician shrugged. "Strong emotion, perhaps. There's not a mark on Quester, except that the lips are bruised a bit. That might have happened in falling. Except that—"

"Where's Keith?" Morlock said suddenly. There was a brief silence. The columnist shouted, "Keith!" Echoes bounced back from the gleaming glass walls. The room was filled with a ghastly green glow as lightning flashed overhead, filtering through the transparent roof.

"Maybe he stayed in that hidden vault," Decker said. "Let's have the flashlight, June."

He was back in a minute, shaking his head.

"Nothing there. Shall we—"

"Search?" Bill Tarney's immobile face was pale. "With one flashlight between us?"

It ended with Dr. Tanner, Decker, and Tarney remaining by the fire with June, while Dubarton, Morlock, and Monk made the search.

"None of us should run the risk of being alone in this place," Decker said grimly. "There's something going on here that isn't exactly healthy." He was remembering the hideous apparition he had seen in the pool.

"Nuts." Morlock grinned, and followed his two companions. A little silence fell. In the corner, amid the green shadows, the body of Quester lay, covered by a carpet. The rain drummed incessantly on the glass ceiling.

Occasionally a flare of lightning would transform the men's faces into strange masks—like drowned corpses, Decker thought uneasily. Foolishness, of course, but the dead Severn had performed rather ghastly rites here, according to the exposé.

Tarney seemed to read his thought.

"Just what went on here, anyway?" he said. "Who was Dagon?"

"An old Phoenician fish-god," Dr. Tanner told him. "One of the oldest deities on earth. As for Severn, he revived the cult, with trimmings."

"Severn said all life came from the

sea," June said steadily. "That evolution there followed a different path from the one it took on land. There were—well, branches. One form of life stayed under the ocean, instead of emigrating to the land, and evolved there. Dagon, Severn taught, was the nominal term for something that was very old and very horrible when mankind was swinging through the trees."

"An old idea," Decker said shortly. "H. G. Wells and others wrote it up long ago."

"In fiction—yes." The girl was looking up, a peculiarly rapt expression on her face. "But Severn believed in what he taught. He said man could go back to the sea again, if he knew how. Ever see the man, Steve?"

"Pictures of him, that's all," Decker said. "Severn looked like a fish, or a lizard. Nothing definite, just that his eyes were big and glassy, and ugly. One finger was missing from his left hand."

Bill Tarney nodded. "That's right. I never saw the man either, except his pictures, he was bald, with whiskers like a catfish. He had wrinkles on his neck that looked like gills, and his skin was almost scaly, and appeared to be cold as ice. Used to spend a lot of time in the water."

"Well, he drowned himself in it," Dr. Tanner grunted. "Eh, Steve?"

Decker looked up sharply. "What? I—just thought of something. Yeah, he drowned himself, all right."

AFTER a moment Tarney stood up and stretched.

"I'm going to catch a nap," he yawned.

"Fine time to sleep," Tanner said. "Got sleeping sickness?"

"How'd you guess?" Tarney smiled. "I did have, ten years ago, but I got over it—out in Africa. . . . Tell you about it sometime." Tarney was rolled up in a carpet, his immobile face turned away from the fire. "Call me if anything happens."

Dr. Tanner, with a grunt, found a carpet for himself. Presently he was snoring. Decker noticed that June was shivering, despite the fire's heat, and reached over to draw her close.

"Scared, kid?" he asked.

She bit her lip. "A—a little."

"Don't blame you," Decker said, staring into the writhing crimson of the flames. "This is a funny set-up. We're completely isolated till the storm lets up. Even after that we've no boat. Though we can send up smoke-signals that'll be seen from the mainland."

June looked up as lightning made the ceiling a sheet of flaming emerald. In its glare the walls looked black. They seemed to be at the bottom of an undersea abyss, and something of the utter cold and loneliness of the great waters crept into Decker's mind, chilling him. Was it possible, he wondered, that life—intelligent life—actually existed under the ocean? Fantastic!

"Do you think Severn has—come back?" the girl said.

"Don't talk like that!" Decker snapped, more sharply than he had intended. "Dead men are dead. And so is Severn. He was a thorough swine."

"Do you think it's wise to talk about him like that?" June asked.

"'A skull has no ears,'" Decker quoted, smiling crookedly.

The girl went off at a tangent.

"Severn was trying to go back to the sea," she recalled. "He said the seeds of submarine evolution were in every human being, that we could even develop gills, under the right treatment. Maybe he didn't die, Steve. Maybe he just—went back to the sea."

And, in that green-lit and terrible hall, where the firelight seemed so futile and ineffectual, Decker could not bring himself to laugh. He remembered the horror that had followed the yacht, that fish-headed and slimy thing he had seen in the pool, and wondered.

Severn had sworn vengeance on those who had ruined him. And the *Call-Inquirer*, and the men behind it, had published the exposé.

"Nothing human killed Quester," whispered June. "He died of apoplexy."

The sound of running footsteps brought the two to their feet. Dubar-ton and Monk came hurriedly into the hall, staring around with pallid faces.

"Is Morlock here?" the former asked excitedly, tugging at his Vand-yke. "No? Then—then he's gone."

"Gone?" Decker's form tensed. "What do you mean?"

The other shrugged. "He just wasn't with us. We heard a scuffle and flashed the light back, but there was nothing. Morlock had disappeared. We thought he might have come back here."

Decker grabbed the flashlight, said, "Wait here," and fled. He heard June coming after him, but didn't order her back. Besides, he thought, she was safer with him—if he found what he expected to find.

He went directly to the secret panel in the wall. It was still open. The low lapping of water sounded from beyond the darkness.

The pool lay untenanted, empty, with no sign of a dweller. But Keith's body was on the marge, small and wizened and pitiable, with the same cyanosed face that Decker had seen on Quester. The publisher was quite dead, and his features and clothing were coated with sticky, shining green slime.

"June!" Decker said sharply. "Go get Dr. Tanner!"

"Is he dead, Steve?" the girl murmured.

"Yeah. Apoplexy, I'll bet."

"I'll get—" Her voice broke off in a little shriek. "Steve!"

DECKER whirled, flashing the light on the girl. The scene sprang into white brilliance for an instant, etching itself like flame in the man's mind. June was tottering on the brink of the pool, her eyes wide with stark horror, and something had reached out of the water to seize her ankle and drag her down!

It was a hand, webbed, with the little finger missing, with the corrugated green skin of a shark. One instant June staggered there—and then fell!

From the black surface two frightful arms rose, curling about the girl's body. Instantly she was dragged down, her cry stifled in a bubbling scream. The turmoil of waters died.

"June!" Decker said hoarsely. He glared down, but no trace of the girl

was visible. Only from the dark abyss something had come briefly, to return with its prey. Decker thought of Severn, and June's words:

"Maybe he didn't die. Maybe he just—went back to the sea."

It was sick fear of the unknown that gripped Decker then as he stuck the flashlight in his pocket and dived, before he allowed himself time enough to think.

His skin was clammy, and the shock of the icy water was like a hundred chill hands clutching at him, dragging him down.

He kicked out vigorously and swam down, eyes open, but useless to him in the dark. His hands clawed out, seeking, but finding nothing. With a silent curse Decker shot up to the surface, gasping with relief as he drew fetid air into his starved lungs. He treaded water quietly, listening.

No sound, no motion. The stagnant, dead water was utterly silent. The iron cold of it was like fetters.

Decker fought down panic. June might be drowning under his feet, held by the grip of the sea monster. And he couldn't help her!

Snarling in sudden rage, he dived again. If he had to cover every inch of the pool, he'd find the girl. It was very deep, but at last, with lungs aching, he reached the bottom, plunging his arms to the elbows in sticky mud. He felt something slimy touch his hand and wriggle away in startled fear. It was gone instantly under the mud, but nausea tore at Decker's throat. He could imagine, with sickening vividness, being caught in that sticky mud, engulfed and strangled, with the oozy stuff creeping into his mouth and nostrils, and those soft, horrible slimy things crawling to the feast. . . .

Clamping his jaws together, Decker, expelling air, swam up. The fetid air of the pool was like a feast. Yet he did not remain above water long. He swam down again. He tried the flashlight, but, though it was watertight, its ray was ineffectual in the thick, watery darkness.

Nothing—nothing but the slimy mud and the black water. Decker swam toward the wall, scarcely waiting to gulp air before diving again.

By this time June must almost certainly be dead. Or, if not— He shuddered away from the thought, sick and shaking at the memory of the sea-Thing.

Suddenly, something crashed against the back of his head with stunning force. Water poured into Decker's lungs before he could compress his lips. Coughing and choking, he felt above him and discovered that he had come in violent contact with rock. Desperately he felt about.

He was in a tunnel, an underwater passage, small and straight. But which way lay safety? He must have swum into its entrance while under the surface of the pool. Where did it lead?

In the darkness there was only one thing to do, and Decker did it. He swam on as rapidly as he could, doubling and straightening out his legs, trying not to think of the agony inside of his chest. He had swallowed a good deal of water. If he didn't reach air soon—

HE came to the top of the tunnel, and felt rock. But no air. His stomach seemed to squeeze inward upon itself. He swam on, a red curtain falling about him, folding in over his brain, so that his movements were automatic.

Unless he could breathe within a very few seconds he could hold out no longer, and the stagnant, icy water would come pouring into his nose, his mouth, his lungs, choking and strangling him. He would sink to the bottom of the pool, to lie embedded in the sticky mud, a rotting corpse.

So vivid was the thought that Decker was actually surprised when one of his nails broke on shelving rock. His throat and chest on fire, he flung himself up, feeling the blessed coolness of air all about his face. Air!

He breathed, great choking gasps, coughing and gasping, stumbling to a rock wall he felt rather than saw, and leaned against it. He would have fallen otherwise.

Briefly the world was unstable about Decker, and it was only dimly that he perceived that there was—light.

Pale yellow, it came from a curiously carved lamp that stood in a niche in the wall. Decker looked around, still coughing. He was in a tunnel that ended at his feet, in a pool of black water. And, on the ground, was a trail of greenish slime and water.

Someone — or something — had walked here, and dragged a burden after it. The sea monster—and June! Decker picked up the lamp and hurried along the corridor, shielding the flame with his palm.

And in his brain a thin, insistent voice seemed to whisper:

"Severn looked like a fish. He said the seeds of submarine evolution were in every human being . . . Maybe he didn't die . . . Maybe he just—went back to the sea!"

CHAPTER IV

Lair of the Sea-Thing

THE slimy tracks were everywhere. Once, on the wall, Decker saw the print of a webbed hand that was all too familiar to him. The fetid, choking stench filled his nostrils. The stagnant air might have been that of some cavern far below the ocean bottom.

The passage led down. Occasionally, in the walls, Decker saw green-glass panels, and, through them, the rooms of the castle proper.

So Severn had used this corridor to spy upon his cult members, eh? And for what other purpose? Decker's mind shuddered away from guesses.

His logic was useless in the face of sheer physical repulsion that amounted almost to nausea. He had seen the horror. Whatever it was, from whatever place it had come, it was frightful. Evil had breathed from it, and something alien.

Down the tunnel went, and down. It ended in a large room that, Decker guessed, was beneath the castle, perhaps at sea-level. A glance at the pool in the cave's center, confirmed his surmise. This was sea water, salty and fresh. It was, no doubt, connected with the ocean by some underground

valve or natural tunnel.

The cavern was walled and floored with green stone, jade perhaps. Bas-reliefs covered the walls. The roof was also surfaced, this time with marble, and from its center, directly above the pool, hung a ponderous metal object that resembled a huge censer.

It was as large as the basin itself and, Decker saw, could be lowered so it would cover the pool like a lid. A chain, connected with the censer's top, ran across the ceiling and down the wall to connect with a windlass about which the links were wound.

The underside of the metallic bowl was studded with sharp-pointed hooks, on several of which blackened objects were impaled. Staring up, Decker decided not to hazard a guess as to what they were.

The cave, he had seen at a glance, was untenanted. But against the wall stood an odd contrivance, resembling an oversized suit of armor, made of strong steel.

Decker examined it, after first making certain that no other outlet from the cavern existed than that by which he had entered. The slimy tracks were no longer an aid, for the floor was a veritable carpet of greenish, slippery ooze.

What purpose had the armor served? Protection? Had Severn used it to protect himself from—what? From something he summoned from the depths of the sea? Decker stared up at the metal censer and its hooks. Those hooks might have been baited, to lure sea-creatures into this cavern. And then, conceivably, they might have been driven into the pool above.

The whole thing was abnormal, horribly so. Severn must have been a madman. No sane man would have tampered with knowledge so black and alien.

Whatever Severn had called, or tried to call, out of the sea, was gone now. There remained the lizard-skinned monster Decker had glimpsed already. A creature with the little finger missing from the left hand, just as—Decker's face whitened as he remembered—just as a finger had been missing from Severn's hand!

The vengeance of the sea. . . .

Decker snarled an oath, but the sound was oddly disquieting in this still, silent place. Quester and Keith had died of natural causes. Apoplexy, sure! Natural, if one forgot all the other circumstances surrounding the deaths.

Decker paused suddenly, lifting his lamp high. Was the lapping of water against the side of the pool louder now? The surface seemed disturbed. It— Something was rising from the depths!

Not the creature Decker had seen before. This was gigantic and utterly dreadful. Water cascaded from a huge, dark, rounder surface as it rose slowly into view. What it was Decker did not know. He had only the brief glimpse of the Thing as its Titan back wallowed for an instant in the dim lamplight.

Then, with a bubbling and seething of the water, it was gone, plunging down into the abyss whence it had come.

Too late Decker heard the soft sound behind him. He started to whirl, felt a sharp blow crack against his temple—and lost consciousness. . . .

HE woke up. He was still in the cavern, lying flat on his back, staring at the marble roof, dim in the shadows. An attempt to sit up brought only a twinge of pain. His arms and legs were tightly bound.

The bottom fell out of Decker's stomach. He wasn't a coward, yet now he knew that he was utterly at the mercy of whatever unknown horror haunted this place. He could not even use his fists to defend himself. He was helpless, lying here in the gloom, and anything might creep upon him and do whatever it desired.

He turned his head. A figure stood beside him.

Staring eyes glared into Decker's. The pinkish, inflamed gills on the horror's neck seemed to quiver gently. The fish-like, frightful face glistened slimily in the lamplight. Sharp teeth were bared in a gaping smile.

It was alive! Decker saw that, and he saw, too, that it was no mask covering the face of a human being. The skin hung in gleaming plates, like

those of a crocodile. The creature was naked, and from its webbed hands water dripped to *plop-plop* upon the stones.

Dagon, Decker thought. It is Severn. He never died. He—went back to the sea. . . .

In silence the horror moved and came forward. Its fingers seized Decker, and at the touch of the rough skin he shivered uncontrollably, fighting down an impulse to scream and scream again. He bit his lips until blood came. He was being dragged across the cavern to the wall.

A tunnel gaped there, where none had been before. Into its depths the sea-Thing plunged, dragging Decker after it. The foul odor of dead rotteness was a choking stench in the man's nostrils. His stomach was tight, cold, hard.

Up a turning, slanting passage they went, emerging at last on a little ledge that, Decker saw, overlooked the cavern they had just left.

Slightly above them, and twenty feet away, hung the great metal censer that dangled above the pool. The monster let Decker slide to the ground and turned, seizing a rope that was twisted about a stanchion in the wall.

It pulled. The other end was fastened to the censer, which slowly began to swing toward the ledge. At last it was not a foot away, and then the monster paused, knotting the rope carefully about the stanchion.

Decker could see the underside of the great bowl clearly, and the sharp hooks that jutted from it. On some of them he noticed again the black things that had been impaled there. He felt himself lifted, thrust forward. Vainly he tried to struggle.

A twinge of pain shot through his wrists. He hung helpless by one of the hooks, over which the rope that bound his hands was looped. His shoulders were almost wrenched out of their sockets as the strain came suddenly.

GIDDINESS pervaded him. The censer was plunging away from the ledge in the wall, swinging in a great arc across the cavern, back again, dizzily, sickeningly. Blood trickled from Decker's wrists. He

was swinging helplessly with the motion, swinging in utter darkness, for now even the glow of the little lamp had vanished.

It was unreal. There was only vertigo, and pain—wrenching, fiery pain that tore at his arms, hands, shoulders.

Slowly the motion decreased. Light came. Looking down from his height, Decker saw the sea-Thing emerge from the tunnel in the wall, and stand for an instant, staring up. Apparently satisfied, it went to the windlass and waited.

Directly beneath Decker where he hung, was the pool. And now the censer had stopped its swaying and was motionless. Seeing this, the monster made a sudden movement.

The surface of the water leaped up, stopped, and approached again more slowly. The censer was descending as the windlass gradually unwound. Hanging helpless from it, Decker was being lowered into the pool. The thought of drowning in those black waters was ghastly. Yet Decker's throat was dry; he could not cry out. If he had, what good would it have done? Grimly he tightened his jaw muscles.

What had become of June, he wondered. He twisted his head to stare at the monster. Then ice water chilled his feet and crept up his legs, his thighs, his stomach. The view of the monster was shut out by the lip of the pool.

The water touched Decker's throat. Abruptly the motion ceased. What now? He waited.

No sound, no movement. Apparently nothing else was to happen for a time. Drowning was not to be his fate. It was something else.

Decker remembered the black bulk he had seen rising from the pool. He was being used as—bait!

The full ghastliness of it was obvious at once. Had the censer been lowered completely, its edges would have rested on the pool's rim, and Decker would have been several feet submerged. But, as it was, he remained fully conscious, waiting for the terror that would rise from the depths to claim him.

Sudden fight welled up inside him.

He wasn't a lamb, to be tethered to a pole and left there as crocodile-meat! While breath remained in Steve Decker, he could still fight, somehow, some way. If he could only free his hands—

How much time did he have? It was impossible to tell. At any moment the monster might come, and before that moment, Decker had to escape. A dim light still flickered in from the lamp. In its glow he examined the ropes that held him. The knots were beyond his capabilities, but the rope itself was hooked over sharp metal.

Yet he hung by them, upright, submerged to the neck in water, with his arms stretched above his head.

There were other hooks. His legs were still bound, but by dint of contortions and Herculean effort, Decker managed to get his feet over one of the other prongs. Something gave squashily against his heels, and he battled down nausea. No time for that now.

He slid down gently till his weight rested on the underside of his knees. Then, slowly, carefully, he began to chafe the ropes that bound his wrists against the metal of their captive hook.

IT took time. Every moment, Decker expected to hear a seething and splashing of water about him. He was drenched and dripping. The hairs on the nape of his neck crawled with expectation. But at last he finished his task. His hands were free.

He did not wait to untie his feet. Instead, swinging from hook to hook, he made his way like some weird Tarzan to the pool's edge. There he peered out.

The cavern was empty. The lamp stood on the floor where it had been set, but of the sea-being there was no trace. Decker heaved himself out on the stones with a great gasp of relief. He took a moment to recover his breath before untying his legs.

Cramped muscles sent twinges of agony through him. Blood smeared his wrists and hands. His clothing hung clammily, clinging to his skin, but Decker could not mind these min-

or discomforts now. He had to find June. . . .

The tunnel still gaped in the wall, the one into which the monster had dragged Decker. He picked up the lamp and entered, walking warily, staring ahead with narrowed, watchful eyes.

No sound, no movement. Would he come out on the same ledge as before? There must be another way.

There was—just a black hole that veiled another passage. This one slanted up. Slime was on the ground, and once Decker's foot slipped, so that the lamp fell from his hand and went out. Cursing, he stood motionless. His own matches were water-soaked, and his lighter, as he found when he tried to use it, was equally useless. The only thing to do was to keep going.

He did, blindly, feeling his way, until he ran headlong into the rough planks of a door. Gingerly he found the latch and pushed it open. Light blinded him.

He looked into a room, small and stone-walled, empty save for a door in the further wall, and a hook in the roof, from which something hung. A man hung there, bound and gagged, head down, red-faced and with bulging, distended eyes. It was Mike Morlock!

Decker sprang forward, a dozen thoughts running chaotic through his mind as he released the wire that supported Morlock and lowered the man to the ground. Apoplexy, eh? So this was the way Keith and Quester had died! Hung up by their heels until the arteries of the brain gave way under the pressure of blood.

A towel was wrapped around Morlock's ankles, to prevent the wire from cutting into his flesh. There had been no marks on Keith or Quester, either, save for bruised lips, caused, no doubt, by the gag.

Was Morlock alive? Decker could not tell. He knelt, supporting the reporter's head against his chest so blood would flow from the congested membranes.

Morlock's red-veined eyes moved. He could not see.

"I—never thought—he'd try this,"

he whispered thickly. "My own fault for not. . . ."

The gasping voice stopped. Decker saw that the columnist was dying. He put his mouth against the other's ear and said:

"Who did this, Morlock? Tell me!"

"We been in it for—years—together," Morlock muttered. "Blackmail. . . ."

"What?"

The heavy head rolled. "Yeah. . . . Columnist. . . . Perfect set-up. . . . When I got scandal—they paid me plenty—or I'd splash the dirt all over the *Call*. . . . Then he. . . ."

"Who?" Decker demanded. "Who was in the blackmail racket with you, Morlock?"

"Hello—Steve," the columnist gasped. "Play this up. . . . It'll make headlines. . . ."

Morlock was still then. The staring eyes did not close, but a film crept over them. Decker saw that Morlock was dead.

CHAPTER V

"I've Solved the Mystery!"

QUICKLY, Decker turned to the door in the farther wall. He walked to it noiselessly and eased it open. He looked into another room.

What he saw there made him lunge forward with an oath. Another figure was hanging from the ceiling. A girl's slim form, her face scarlet with blood. June Hamilton!

It took scarcely a second to get her down, yet Decker's fingers seemed all thumbs. His hands shook as he tried to revive her. He knew, quite suddenly, that he was in love with June Hamilton.

He felt certain of it when her eyes opened, and fear sprang into them then vanished as her arms went out. She clung to Decker, gasping, and he soothed her with meaningless small words.

"Okay, kid," he muttered. "It's okay. Take it easy. Nothing to worry about now."

But he knew there was plenty to

worry about. He glanced up, saw a passage leading from the room. To safety, perhaps?

He hesitated. It would be possible to retrace their steps, but that would mean a swim underwater, and he dared not risk it in June's near-hysterical condition. No, he'd have to take a chance. If only he had some weapon! But the room was empty, completely so.

"Feel okay now?" Decker asked, and at the girl's nod helped her to her feet. "Then we'll scram. I've an idea now what's behind this."

The flashlight in Decker's pocket was useless. He had discovered that long ago. But in darkness they felt their way up along the passage. Hours seemed to pass.

"Do you see light?" June's voice was excited.

"Yeah," he grunted. "It—"

Decker whirled suddenly. The glow was coming from behind them. Far down the passage he saw the gleam of a lamp, held in a webbed, inhuman hand. The light glinted on slimy, plated skin. In one hand the Thing held the lamp. In the other—

"A fish-god with an automatic!" Decker whispered. "I thought so!"

But the weapon was no less deadly, and the being came on without pausing, its huge eyes staring.

"Come on," Decker said softly. "It doesn't see us yet. Can't be sure we took this passage."

"You're leaving tracks, Steve," the girl reminded.

It was true. Decker's immersion in the pool had soaked his garments thoroughly, revealing their path to the hunter that followed. The only recourse was speed. Decker didn't know where this tunnel led, but it must lead to safety, else the sea-creature would not be so anxious to stop them.

He dared not stop to fight. There were no side passages in which he might wait to ambush the enemy, and he was unarmed. If he stopped a bullet, it would leave June at the mercy of the Thing.

The two fled on. The girl's strength was giving out, and now Decker practically carried her. The monster followed, and, though they occasionally

lost sight of it as the passage turned and twisted, always it came into view again. The automatic glinted ominously. Decker's mind was working at lightning speed. The only gun on the island—

Was it?

ABRUPTLY the whole plot clicked neatly into place in his brain. There were still gaps, of course, but most of the jigsaw puzzle was filled in. The real killer had betrayed himself, unsuspectingly, in a word he had said. And now Decker realized the truth.

But how would it aid him now? The monstrous hunter came on. Ever the tunnel led up. Until—

It ended. Ended in a glass panel, through the faint greenish tint of which Decker could see the great hall of the castle. It was still night, apparently, and the fire blazed where the carpets had been cleared from the stone floor. There were figures seated around it, Dubarton, Monk, Dr. Tanner, Bill Tarney. Scarcely a dozen feet away, yet separated by a thick wall of glass.

The light from behind grew brighter.

"Must be a spring lock here," Decker muttered, searching frantically. June was completely unconscious now, and he held her awkwardly in the crook of his arm as he hunted. The *pad-pad* of footsteps was completely audible.

The hunter came on. Decker did not turn. He felt a section of the wall give slightly under his hand.

The whole glass panel swung outward silently. Simultaneously the light from behind went out. Decker, the skin of his back crawling, plunged out into the hall, lost his footing and went staggering down to hands and knees. June lay in a motionless huddle beside him.

The four about the fire had leaped up and were staring at Decker and the gap in the wall behind him. Dubarton, looking Satanic in the firelight, with his Vandyke and tilted eyebrows, gasped:

"Steve! Where—"

Decker remained on the floor,

breathing heavily, looking around. The black hole behind him was still there. He heard a soft stir of movement from within it, but the others did not. They were too astonished.

Death lurked there, hidden in darkness, murder trembling on the trigger. Decker knew that it would take fast thinking—faster than he had ever done in his life—to prevent a massacre. He was weaponless; so were the others. And yet, there was a way!

He looked down at June's helpless, unconscious figure, and then around at the others. Dubarton—Mephisto caught off-guard, his eyes wide. Bill Tarney—long face immobile as always, staring. Monk—squat and shaggy, leaning forward with dangling arms. And Dr. Tanner—his lined features ruddy in the firelight.

"I've solved the mystery for you," Decker said, and waited. Now, if ever, he would feel the thud of lead smashing into his spine. . . .

DECKER sprang to his feet then. But the bullet did not come. The killer hesitated to reveal himself unless necessary.

"Let's call the murderer Mr. X," Decker went on. "A bit theatrical, but it'll have to do. Mr. X wanted to kill three men and a girl, Keith, Quester, Morlock, and June. I just happened to get in the way, so my number was up, too. Everything was ready-made when we took this yacht trip. Dr. Tanner was along, to prove that the deaths were from apoplexy—yeah."

In a few words Decker told of what he had seen below, and how Morlock had died.

"Mr. X," he continued, "doped our grub on the yacht, so we all passed out, passengers and crew, at about the same time. Only he remained conscious. He unloaded those he didn't need, put 'em in lifeboats, and lowered the boats.

"Easy to do, on a modern boat. Then he headed for this island. Steam was already up, and we weren't too far away. When we got here, he opened the sea-cocks and pretended to be unconscious, doped."

Monk's heavy shoulders seemed to hunch forward.

"You're sure of that, Steve?" he asked.

Decker nodded. "I'm sure of a lot more, too. Severn's island—the place and the curse were ready-made. Severn had sworn vengeance on most of us before he died. Mr. X simply got somebody to masquerade as Severn, and he faked the slimy tracks and hand-prints on the yacht."

"That thing we saw in the wake," Bill Tarney broke in. "How—"

"A dummy, towed along on a thin wire which was invisible in the moonlight. That was easy enough. The sea-monster itself? Well, I saw it, and it didn't look very human. Make-up helped the illusion a bit, but the lizard-like skin wasn't faked. Ever hear of ichthyosis—fish skin disease? You see victims of it in side-shows sometimes. The skin gets thick and scaly, dark horny masses that look like a reptile's hide. Mr. X found a man with ichthyosis and paid him plenty for his help."

"The little finger of the left hand?" someone said.

"I'd have it amputated, too, if somebody paid me enough," Decker said, with grim humor. "It was necessary to carry out the fake. Nobody'd ever believe the fantastic story we told, and it'd be laid down to mass illusion—auto-suggestion. The victims would have died of apoplexy, and not have been murdered."

"What's the motive?" Monk asked.

Decker was acutely conscious of the black hole in the wall behind him. The crisis was approaching.

From the corner of his eye he could see June's motionless form, and imagined the feel of bullets thudding into her body, and into his own. Everything now depended on a great bluff.

CHAPTER VI

Bury the Dead

"I'LL go back a bit," he said. "Morlock confessed to me that he was running a blackmail racket, suppressing stories if the victims would come through with heavy sugar. He

wasn't alone in the game. Mr. X was with him. He was the contact man, making all the arrangements, and splitting the take with Morlock. John Severn was one victim, but he wouldn't pay up. He refused, and Morlock ran his exposé. But Mr. X had already seen Severn, tried to squeeze dough out of him, and failed."

Decker hesitated, his muscles tense, his nerves jolting.

"Mr. X is right here with us. He made one bad break. Tonight, awhile ago, we were talking about John Severn and Mr. X said he'd never seen the man, just his photograph. But in the same breath he mentioned that Severn's skin was scaly—and cold as ice! How could you tell that from a photograph—Tarney?"

Bill Tarney didn't move. His long, immobile face didn't flicker at all.

"You're crazy," he said softly.

"I'll go on, Tarney. You were managing editor before you were promoted and I stepped into your shoes. But you always gambled a lot, and lost heavily. You needed the dough you got out of the blackmail racket to keep going. Then, when you were taken into the firm you saw a chance to step out and really clean up."

"I still say you're crazy!" Tarney growled.

"But you had to get rid of Morlock, so he couldn't have a chance to blackmail you later. And you figured June, being Morlock's secretary, might know something, though she didn't. You're one of the publishers of the *Call-Inquirer* now—a member of the firm, owning stock in it. Why did you want to kill Keith and Quester, and not Dubarton or Monk?"

"It's a good yarn," Tarney said dully.

By the tenseness in the air Decker knew that the crisis was very close. And he sensed the change in Tarney's eyes.

"Keith and Quester were conservative to the core," Decker plunged on. "They owned the majority of votes and kept the *Call* stodgy and conservative. If the paper went tabloid, it'd clean up. We all know that. But as long as those two were alive, it was no soap.

"Monk? He's been yelling for a change of policy for years. Dubarton? He's on the fence; he'll string along with the winning side. And Dr. Tanner, who'd inherit the stock of Keith and Quester, is for the change in policy. With the two conservatives out of the way, the *Call* would go tabloid, and you'd be making plenty for yourself."

Decker's eyes held Tarney's.

"It wasn't only money. You're unhealthy mentally, you know. You said you once had sleeping sickness, but recovered. You never really got well. The chronic effects of *encephalitis lethargica* sometimes show in a mask-like face—and unstable emotions. That's what's wrong with you, Tarney.

"You've always wanted to be respected, a big shot. You wanted to be on top. In your unstable mind you figured that the method didn't matter as long as you got on top, making big money, without the danger of jail always facing you. You must have worried about that a lot when you were with Morlock in his racket."

"You can't prove a thing!" Tarney said abruptly.

"How do you suppose I learned all this?" Decker asked. "Guesswork? Your assistant confessed, after I roughed him up a bit. You're facing the chair, Tarney. Your name will be in headlines, all right. 'Editor goes to hot seat!' Big publicity, eh? You can think of the extra editions we'll be selling while you fry."

"Shut up!" Tarney's voice cracked in a scream. "Shut up! I—I— It was Roth, a man who got dirt for me. It was all his idea. I just wanted to scare you all. A practical joke! A headline for the *Call*! He's crazy, but I didn't know that! I had nothing to do with—"

DECKER'S heart leaped. He'd won the gamble! On a normal man the bluff might not have worked, but Tarney's emotions were not normal, stable ones. Now—

Now Roth came out of the gap in the wall, and Decker turned as the lizard-skinned man snarled:

"You double-crossing rat, Tarney!

You're lying and you know it. But you can't frame me! I'll show you what it means to try and leave me holding the bag!"

The automatic snouted as Tarney's hand dived into his coat and came out with a heavy service revolver. Roth's bulging eyes widened still further. He squeezed the trigger.

The automatic clicked. It had missed fire.

Almost simultaneously came the roar of Tarney's gun. Roth screamed, clawed at his chest, and collapsed. His blood stained the gray carpet.

above nearly at the marble ceiling. At the edge of the pool, Tarney stood at bay, his gun aimed and ready.

Decker halted, seeing from the corner of his eye that Dr. Tanner, Monk, and Dubarton were with him. He said, "Come on," and began to walk forward. The others followed.

"Keep back!" Tarney screamed, and thrust out the revolver.

Decker stopped. "You can't get away. You're trapped!"

"Am I?" Tarney gloated. "This pool has an outlet to a tunnel that runs through to the beach, by the dead

The Cinderella Pageant in Bannon City Turns into a Parade of
Murder When a Hooded Killer Stalks

in

DEATH CALLS CINDERELLA



A Complete Colonel Crum Novelet

By JOHN H. KNOX

PACKED WITH ACTION, THRILLS AND SUSPENSE

Coming in the Next Issue

Decker leaped at Tarney, but too late. The killer dived for the hole in the wall, forgetting everything else in his mad panic to escape. He whipped a flashlight from his pocket and fled.

Decker was after him, the others at his heels. Down the curving, treacherous tunnel they went, slipping and sliding, following the will-o'-the-wisp of the light. Down through the room where Morlock's body lay, down into the cavern of the pool. . . .

The great metal censer had been raised, Decker saw, and hung high

palm there. I've a little launch hidden near it. How do you suppose Roth got here?"

"You can't get away with it," Decker warned.

"I'm going to head south—out of American jurisdiction." Tarney laughed insanely. "Then I'll keep traveling. I still have some money, and I'll get more. But first, I'm going to even up a debt."

"You can't kill us all," Decker said.

"Yeah. I got just one bullet left." Tarney chuckled. "I shouldn't tell

you that, but it doesn't matter, now that I'm safe." Still keeping the gun aimed at Decker, he knelt and carefully lowered himself into the pool. Only his head and arm was visible now.

"I'm going to shoot you, Decker, and then dive. I'll be outside and in the launch before the rest of you can stop me. And then—"

Tarney's finger tightened on the trigger. Decker's muscles tensed for a hopeless leap forward. But he knew that death's cold wings were very close to him.

There was a little click—and a metallic rattle. From above something came plunging down. Decker saw, almost without realizing it, that the huge metal censer was dropping toward the pool!

Tarney saw it. He flung back his head and fired up, madly, uselessly. Then, with a deafening crash, the iron bowl thundered down, splintering on the edge of the pool, for an instant hiding the entire surface of the water before it fell apart.

Dusty clouds of ruin rose in the darkness as Tarney's flashlight vanished.

A MATCH flared, in Dr. Tanner's hand. In its glow Decker saw the windlass that controlled the censer, and clinging to it a frightful, contorted figure. It was Roth, blood dripping from the wound in his chest, trickling down the scaly, inhuman skin. With hate stronger than death, he had managed to drag himself after

the others, to exact vengeance and kill the man who had shot him.

He fell, silently, and lay motionless.

Tanner moved the match forward, lit another. The surface of the pool was tinged with red. Things were floating upon it—mangled, dreadful things. . . .

"Tarney's dead," Decker said shortly. "I—" He gulped. "No mistake about that. What about Roth?"

"He's dead," Dr. Tanner said. "God knows how he managed to live long enough to get here."

"Lucky for us he did. Come on. We know there's a launch hidden near a dead palm, and it won't take us long to find it. Then back to the mainland."

They started back up the passage. Decker, bringing up the rear, was scowling. The *Call* would have big headlines within a few hours, as soon as he could reach a phone. And June—well, she'd be out of a job, what with Morlock dead. Maybe she'd like the job of housekeeper to a managing editor.

Then, suddenly, Decker went cold inside.

He was remembering something he had seen in the cavern behind him. A black and gigantic bulk rising briefly from the pool and then dipping below the surface to vanish forever.

Had Severn actually succeeded in calling—*something*—out of the deep?

Nuts! A giant squid, or a shark. That was all. Only—only Decker wasn't quite sure.

And he would never be sure.

Next Issue's Headliners

SERVANT OF THE AXE

A Mystery Novelet by STEWART STERLING

DEATH CALLS CINDERELLA

A Colonel Crum Novelet by JOHN H. KNOX

THE TALKING TOWER

A Gripping Novelet by EARLE DOW

SOUVENIR OF DOOM

By **RAY CUMMINGS**

Author of "Castle of Horror," "Midnight Fiend," etc.



"I'm not afraid of you, Wilkes," I muttered

A Ghost of Vengeance Rises
to Haunt the Ghoul Who
Dares Disturb the Slumber
of the Once-Peaceful Dead!

MY name is John Carse. Oh, I don't mind telling what happened. Now that the weird, damnable thing is so nearly over, I find it rather amusing. And horrible. The horror of it is worse now, of course, than it ever was before, because the ghastly pallid shape is here with me, trying to frighten me as I write. But I won't let it.

I loved Brenda. Is that what every-

body thinks? I suppose it is. Well, let it go at that. She is a beautiful woman. Lustrous dark eyes and wild, dark bobbed hair that frames her face. I am tall and blond, and handsome enough. Lots of people said we would make a fine-looking couple.

But Brenda didn't choose me. I did my best to make her love me. I thought I had succeeded. And then Robert Wilkes came along—a smallish, dark fellow, not particularly good looking. You can't fathom a woman. What's the use of trying?

Wilkes fell in love with Brenda at once—natural enough, with her beauty and her money.

Brenda, at the showdown when we both proposed to her, chose him. I remained his friend, and hers. Why not? That's what she said she wanted. She was very fond of me, she said. You know, the usual sort of stuff a woman hands out when she refuses a man.

Then Wilkes and Brenda set their wedding day. I was to be best man. I let it go at that. I guess people were sorry for me and thought I was a good sport. I had the feeling always that Wilkes would never live to marry Brenda, but of course I didn't say so. I had the feeling stronger than ever, that foggy morning when in his garage I shook hands with him and warned him to drive carefully, on that hurried trip he was making to get Brenda's mother and bring her to the wedding.

"Take it easy," I said. "That mountain road is tricky—particularly when it's foggy, like today."

"Sure, sure," he grinned. "This is no day for me to take any chances. Anyway, I'm always a careful driver."

He'd always been a fast, reckless driver. Damn fool. Brenda's mother was coming to the wedding by plane, but the fog had driven it down.

We had no word of the accident to Wilkes until nearly noon—only two hours before the time set for the wedding. Brenda collapsed into my arms, fainting with the horror of it when the police call came to tell us that Wilkes' car had gone over a cliff. And later that afternoon, instead of the wedding, they brought him back, too mangled for Brenda to see.

Well, I've got a little souvenir of his

death. I wouldn't show it to anybody. That would be crazy. I'm not like that.

Eight months went by. My gentleness and sympathy gradually dimmed Brenda's memory of Robert Wilkes. After all, she wasn't his widow; she had merely been engaged to him. She was very fond of me; she always had been; and certainly she was too young to pass her life in grieving.

She thought I was reluctant to marry her! She thought too, that I was afraid of her money—afraid of what people might say, that I had been after it from the beginning. She felt humble, and a little guilty, she said, that she was taking me as second choice. It was in her mind then that quite likely I was abnormally jealous of Wilkes' memory.

WELL, Brenda and I were married. I had no idea, of course, that Robert Wilkes would try to come from his grave and take my wife from me. That's foolish. I don't believe in ghosts. The vengeance of a ghost—that's all rot. You can't be haunted by a thing that's dead. The dead aren't dangerous—they're perfectly helpless, lying festering in the grave.

That's what I thought. Fatuous fool that I was.

I first got the idea, from Brenda herself, on our honeymoon. I realize now what a damnably weird incident it really was. We were in a canoe, loafing along the lakeshore at sundown, not far from a little summer hotel where we were spending a week. She was reclining in the bottom of the frail craft facing me as I paddled in the stern. The faint golden sunlight painted her beautiful figure and glinted in her tousled bobbed hair.

I remember I fumbled in my trousers pocket for cigarettes. Then I recalled that they were in my jacket which was lying on the canoe bottom, beside Brenda. I leaned forward to get them, and the canoe wobbled a little precariously.

And suddenly she burst out:

"Careful, you'll overturn us! Remember, you dumped us out yesterday."

But Brenda and I had never overturned in a canoe. It had been Robert Wilkes and Brenda, a year previously, when he was wooing her, just before

they became engaged! I had heard about it, and now I stared at her.

"So you're getting me mixed up with him, are you?" I said. "I suppose, when I kiss you, it could be him doing it. Is that the idea?"

"John dear," she protested. "Don't be absurd."

That was the first. Just a little thing like that. Surely it was perfectly normal—just an association of ideas in Brenda's mind. She had subconsciously been thinking of that other time, so similar to this, and the memory of it burst from her. Wilkes was starting to haunt her? Nonsense. I'm too smart to believe in a thing like that. But she was thinking of Wilkes, always. Untrue to me, curse her, in her mind, which is the only way she could be.

I was jealous. All right, let it go at that . . . Second choice . . . Second choice . . . Little hammers began pounding that in my brain. I've always had little hammers there, ever since I was a child. They pound until my head aches and I could scream. But I wouldn't ever tell anybody about it. People get queer ideas about you, when you admit things like that.

Second choice. Brenda still loved Wilkes, of course. I found that out on my honeymoon, and I've known it ever since. I had a big decision to make, once I was sure of it. Brenda couldn't get Robert Wilkes, naturally, because he was dead. But she could keep on loving his memory, and she'd pretty soon tire of me.

Obvious, wasn't it? And then I'd lose her—and her money. All my plans—yes, to get her money right from the beginning, all gone to waste. But I'm too smart for that. You'll see. You'll realize when you read this how clever I was, not to let my plans get shot to pieces like that.

PEOPLE can go insane from too much horror. They can kill themselves, in a frenzy of terror, just to try to escape it. Oh, it was so easy for me to make Brenda think that Wilkes was haunting her! First I pretended to be jealous of his memory. I was always by temperament a little morose—the jealous type. It wasn't that I said

much, just let little remarks slip. And I took to looking at her queerly. My supposedly chance remarks made her keep thinking of him, you see? Then I'd have sudden outbursts of jealousy when I pretended that I thought he was haunting her. And sometimes I would sit morosely brooding over it.

So easy to get her brooding herself, and to get her frightened! And she felt sorry for me. What a laugh! Don't you see how clever I was? With the vision of Robert Wilkes seeming now to have come between us, when Brenda was lying in my arms in the dark, I knew it was horribly easy for her to imagine that I was Wilkes.

She thought at first that she was hiding her thoughts from me, but I could easily contrive little things to betray her. She and I riding in our car. An embrace. But she and Wilkes too, had done that, and the damnable memory would seem to leap, confusing her, trapping her into some chance murmur which I would seize upon in a burst of jealous rage.

Naturally then, we quarreled, and I took a separate bedroom in our little bungalow.

"He's got you, Brenda—by God, he has," I told her that night. "You've been lying to me. You loved him—you still love him—"

"No, John. Don't be silly." She could only stammer it. She was white-faced with her terror.

"I was your second choice, and you love him, not me." So convincing for me to rage, helpless, baffled! "He's got you. Your mind, your soul. And now he wants your body. All right—all right—how can I stop him?"

Livid with my pretended rage, I stalked to the door. And then I went back, shaking as I stood before her.

"Well, anyway I've got a little souvenir of him."

That burst from me. I hadn't meant to say it. But it didn't make any difference; she couldn't understand it anyway.

"A little souvenir of horror," I raged. "That's what I've got. A dead man takes your wife and you can't stop him. All right, you fight it out with him, Brenda. But don't lie to me any more."

That was the night that I rushed out

of the house, and it was nearly dawn before I went back. Pretty darn clever? She thought I was staying away to give my gruesome rival every chance to get her—if he could. How could she help but be terrified?

We were really estranged now. I was always morose and brooding. I took to leaving her alone almost every evening until midnight, so that she'd have plenty of time to think and be terrified as she stared through the window at the graveyard where Wilkes was buried. That too was part of my plan—this little bungalow which I had taken was just up the hill from the big graveyard. From our living room windows you could see over the brow of the hill, down into the hollow where by moonlight the headstones were pallid as ghosts.

I COULD see what terror was doing to Brenda, those nights. Her face was turning gaunt, hollow-cheeked, with that wild dark hair framing it, and those big wild dark eyes looking now as though the light of madness was coming in them. One can so easily go mad with too much horror. They can kill themselves, just to get release. I ought to know, because I'm fighting it myself as I write this. That's ironical too—that Robert Wilkes from his grave dares attack me, with the same weapons of terror that I used against Brenda!

I even dared, there near the last, to mumble with a gibbering voice in the night, so that Brenda would think that the ghost of Wilkes was talking to her. That was easy when we had separate bedrooms. All I had to do was get out through my window and sneak around the house to hers. A hollow, sepulchral voice gibbering out of the moonlight can be very terrifying. Like this:

"Brenda darling—don't you want to come to me? I'm Robert—who loves you always. Don't you know you want to come to me? You must—come back with me, some night soon."

And then I would hear her whimper: "No! No, Robert. Dear God, no! Go away—I'm afraid of you—"

Oh, she was afraid all right!

I guess that was when I first realized I was playing with fire. Maybe by do-

ing these things, I gave the damnable Wilkes his chance at me. There are a lot of things about life and death that none of us understands. Who shall say what weird forces I was unleashing? Can't you imagine that Wilkes was lying festering down there, with maggots crawling in his brain, but with something of him hating me, wanting vengeance on me? Something was hovering, watchful, waiting its chance?

Maybe I was fascinated by the idea—fascinated by the gruesome horror of thinking that now I actually was pitted against Wilkes. And so, those evenings when I would stay away from Brenda, I used to pass the time by going down sometimes to the graveyard, sitting on Wilkes' grave, jibing at him.

The graveyard by moonlight was a brooding, pallid place. Now in the heat of midsummer, by night it seemed to steam with the fetid breath of the dead, mingling and overpowering the scent of the flowers. Wilkes' grave was down in one corner, pretty well out of sight from the upper road, shrouded by a line of somber willow trees that lined a sullen little stream which wound through the valley.

There was just a small simple headstone and the mound of earth. I remember that first night what fun I thought it was to sit there at the foot of the grave, listening to the croaking of the frogs along the sodden banks of the stream, the chirping of the crickets in the trees, and letting myself imagine that the baffled Wilkes was struggling to make himself heard through those normal night-sounds.

But he couldn't. Of course he couldn't. The souging of the faint night-breeze—that wasn't his voice. He wanted it to be, of course. Down here under the ground beneath me he was struggling, hoping that I might think the breeze was his voice. But I didn't.

THERE'S fun in jibing at a rival whom you've got just where you want him.

"You can't stop me doing this to Brenda, curse you."

I muttered it at him and he couldn't answer, because he was down there, festering in the ground. Maggots were

eating his vocal cords—how could he possibly answer? It was amusing, he was so perfectly helpless. It made me laugh. Once I got to laughing so that I could hardly stop.

"You'd like to help Brenda, but you can't, can you, Wilkes? Funny, isn't it, how helpless a man is when he's dead? Brenda's pretty terrified tonight. Didn't you know it? Well, she is. She's up there now, sitting in the living room, wondering if the ghastly thing which is you now, is coming up there to get her. A good joke, eh? And what can you do about it? Not a thing."

It was fun, taunting him. It made the little hammers knock harder than ever at my brain, but I didn't mind it.

Sometimes, by a trick of the moonlight, I could almost imagine that he was oozing up in his baffled rage at me—oozing up and spreading out until he was a great pallid shape, reaching down at me with bony fingers, trying to get at me. But he couldn't. The gulf between the dead and the living protected me. I knew it was only a trick of the moonlight anyway. Just that, of course. You can't blame me for having my heart pound, though, as I felt and seemed to see the wraith of him, out of his grave.

"Get back, you blasted thing," I told him. "Get back where you belong."

I remember that I sprawled down on the grave, pounding it with my fists.

"Go on, get back. You can't stay out here. That's a crazy joke, you coming out. You think you're going to frighten me into letting Brenda alone. Well you can't curse you. I've got Brenda just where I want her."

Of course he couldn't answer me. The dead can't answer the living. But I couldn't stand the pallid look of him, that night, and so I ran, up along the winding paths, with those white headstones like eerie ghosts in the moonlight all around me. You can understand that just for a minute I was in a sort of panic. It was as though all the dead here were suddenly menacing me, a legion of them, marshalled by Wilkes, trying to close in on me as I fled along the path.

I was glad to get out of the accursed place that night. But mostly I was afraid of the knocking of the little ham-

mers at my temples. Wilkes seemed to be gripping the handles of the hammers now, beating them with their ceaseless tattoo . . . Stop it . . . Stop it . . . But I couldn't make him stop. I can't now, as I sit writing this. He's still doing it. Fatuous fool that I was, thinking he couldn't find a way to hurt me!

I was doubly glad that I had a separate bedroom from Brenda now, because I had to fight off the damnable thing that was always with me. That got to be a sort of torture, even though I knew he couldn't hurt me. The only weapon the dead have over the living is fear. I knew that, and I fought not to be afraid of him. But I had so many sleepless nights when, in the darkness of my bedroom, I seemed to be able to see the pallid shade of him, hovering over my bed. . . . Blast you, why don't you stay in the graveyard? What right have you got up here?

I DIDN'T dare scream it at him. Brenda would have heard me. But I thought it and he must have understood, because sometimes his face was grinning. No! That was my memory of him when he had been alive. This gruesome phantom of him that stalked my bedroom was a ghastly, broken thing—the ghost of a mangled body—mangled by a terrible automobile accident—a ghost with burning eyes in a face that festered with maggots from the grave.

Oh, it wasn't Brenda who was really haunted! It was I. What damnable irony!

I had every reason to decide to open up Wilkes' grave. It was all Brenda needed now—a sight of that festering thing—to push her over the brink into insanity. I had always planned it as my climax. And then suddenly I realized one night that it was the only way I could fight Wilkes himself in his attack on me. Dig him up, frighten Brenda with him and then scatter him. A ghost can't haunt you, if you've dug up his bones and rotting flesh and scattered it all over miles of the countryside. He'd know then that I wasn't afraid of him.

It was horrible. I had to force myself to it. The thing took me three

nights of digging. I was conscious always that something of Wilkes was there, trying to stop me. But he couldn't. I was particularly glad that the grave was in such a secluded spot. I had to chance that no one would see, during the daytime, that it was being disturbed. And no one did.

Then at last I got the coffin open, and him out of it. Horrible. But you can realize how brave I was, steeling myself to lift that festering broken thing up in my arms, hauling it up out of the opened grave, stretching it out on the mound of earth on top.

"Curse you, Wilkes," I muttered. "I'm not afraid of you. Come on now, let's go up and frighten Brenda."

I kept mumbling it at him over and over, and he couldn't answer. All he could do was rattle his broken bones as I lifted him. I had to be careful that he didn't fall apart while I carried him up the hill. His skeleton was mangled, broken by the crashing automobile in which he had died. The hip bones were smashed. By the time I got him half way up the hill, one of the shoulders was gone and there was no left arm. But that was all right, I wanted to strew him around the country anyway.

It was a horrible trip, lugging Wilkes up that hill. Clods of putrid flesh hung from him, flesh with crawling maggots. I guess some of the clods dropped off as I carried him. I could feel them oozing under my fingers, with his rotted clothes in tatters where I gripped him. . . . Curse you, Wilkes—don't you realize now how helpless you are? This is fun, isn't it? You and I, doing this to Brenda. . . .

I could see the light in the living room windows, when I neared the top of the hill. She would be sitting there, waiting for me to come home. It was a few minutes before midnight. I had timed everything exactly right. Brenda would be most afraid, at the coming of midnight, which is when things are supposed to rise from their grave.

I PICKED out the window I would use. It was open at the bottom, and there were shafts of moonlight striking into it. Through it I could see Brenda, sitting in her chair by the table with the lamplight painting her. She was trying

to sew, but I knew her mind wasn't on it. And she was pale, gaunt-faced. . . . Come on now, Wilkes. Let's do our stuff. He couldn't answer me. No matter how much he hated doing this, he couldn't help it.

I got him up to the window, standing well behind him so Brenda couldn't see me. Then I heard the clock on the mantle chiming with its tiny breathless voice. Midnight. Just right.

Brenda heard the low scraping sound of Wilkes' bony hand as I dragged it along the sill. I saw her look up, startled. And then she leaped to her feet, swaying, as she stared at Wilkes' ghastly hand and arm slithering along the windowsill. . . .

I lifted him up, held him in the window so she could see at least half of him. Spawn of the grave. Robert Wilkes, her lover—not as she remembered him, but the reality of what he was now. The stench must have swept into the room to nauseate her. I guess she thought he was grinning at her. I was doing the grinning, crouching there behind. But all she could see was Wilkes—his face with his monstrously horrible jaw hanging loose, with threads of putrefied flesh holding it. His festering eyeballs, putrid pools that must have seemed glaring at her—and the sagging mouth that seemed grinning.

Pretty clever of me to arrange all this? I jiggled him so that his bones scraped against the window—just as though he were trying to climb in to get at her. I lifted up one of his knees and put it on the sill. Certainly it must have looked as though, in another instant, he would be in the room with her. . . . Her lover. . . .

For that instant, transfixed, she stood and stared. Fascinated by horror. You can get that way. Just numbed. And then I heard her muttering:

"Oh Rob—Rob, go away—I don't love you now—"

How could she? Her lover, as he was now—not as she remembered him. You can imagine how I gloated at that. I could hardly keep from chuckling. But instead, I talked for Wilkes. Hollow, graveyard voice, mumbling:

"Brenda, you must come with me—you're mine—"

Her lover— And then Brenda screamed. Just what you'd expect—a wild, blood-chilling scream of mortal terror. With a hand flung up against her mouth, she had backed away from the window. I chuckled. She couldn't hear me now, she kept on screaming. And then she ran. There was a door to the living room which opened into our side garden. Numbed, chattering, and then screaming again, Brenda came bursting out through the door, into the moonlight—running. . . .

AND Wilkes and I ran after her. You can't blame me if it was a chaos of horror for me, dragging that stenching thing with me as I chased Brenda. And all the time the damnable something that you might call the ghost of Wilkes was pounding the little hammers in my brain—

"Stop it—Stop it, curse you. That's the only thing about you that I can't stand!"

I guess I shouted it at him. What difference? Brenda was screaming so that you couldn't hear anything else. But I wasn't afraid of Wilkes. Not even now.

"I've got the little souvenir of you, right here in my pocket," I mumbled at him. "You don't know what the souvenir is," I jibed. "But I've got it, blast you."

Or did he know? Maybe the dead know everything. He knew enough to keep pounding the little hammers in my brain. But his stenching body was helpless. I could feel it falling apart as I ran with it, pretty close behind Brenda now. But that was all right. That was what I intended—strew him over the countryside. You can't be haunted by a thing that is strewn apart and scattered. . . .

I remember that at last the screaming Brenda fell. And I fell too, with what was left of Wilkes spewing itself down upon us. Then there were only Brenda's screams and that ghastly pounding in my head rising to blot out everything else. I was just conscious that people were coming from a nearby house. . . .

And now they've got me here, in this little room with bars at the window and a locked grating door. The local jail—

just temporary, they say, until I can be committed to an insane asylum. They think I'm insane, because I wouldn't tell them anything except that I dug up Robert Wilkes because he was haunting me. They found what was left of the body of Wilkes—mouldering bones and shreds of decaying flesh—spewed on me and Brenda, there in the road. Stupid fools, not to lock up Brenda, instead of me.

I'm not insane. Really I'm not. I'm the victim of the most ironical trap in which any man ever was caught. Can't you see it? Maybe I gave the ghost of Wilkes his chance to come out of his grave, by pretending that he was haunting Brenda. I scattered his bones that night. God knows, I did my best.

But he's still after me. He's here with me now. He oozes in through the bars of my window at night. I used to scream when he did it. But that only brought my jailer, convincing him more than ever that I'm crazy, because of course he can't see the damnable pallid shape of Wilkes which is crouching in here with me.

It's trying to make me kill myself. That's the only way it can hurt me. But I won't. *I won't*. I would, if I were really insane. Of course, that's exactly what I'd do, to rid myself of this torture, this horror that pours cold sweat out on me and makes my brain seem on fire with the little hammers pounding at it.

JUST to rest . . . to be in darkness and silence, with nothing horrible happening at all. How wonderful that would be! I was thinking that today, when Brenda, curse her, came for a minute and gazed at me so sorrowfully. She doesn't know what Wilkes is doing to me. She can't. If she did, she'd chuckle. She'd say, or she'd think: "Well, I can realize how you feel!"

I'm fighting Wilkes all the time. The pallid thing which is all that's left of him now is lurking over there in the corner, right this minute, watching me. He's making those hammers pound in my head—worse now than ever. But I'm fighting him.

Tonight, as I write this, I've got that little souvenir of him here on the paper.

(Concluded on page 113)

Weird Occultism Challenges
the Keen Brain of the Clever
Scientist-Detective When the
Midas Touch of a Dead Hand
Turns Men Into Statues of
Precious Gleaming Metal!



"Neither of you will go
back," said the fiend
with the evil yellow
face



THE DEAD IN ARMOR

By JOHN H. KNOX

Author of "The Death Elves," "The Cyclops' Eye," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Midas Touch

POLICE Commissioner Job Walden of Rockton leaned back in his swivel chair and cocked a shrewd eye at his visitor.

"Well, Fabian," he said, "when your trailer-laboratory stops in a town it's usually a storm warning. But this time I hope that nothing more exciting than our mountain air and our good golf courses have drawn you."

Colonel Fabian Crum, his trim small

body erect in a big chair that barely let his head and shoulders appear above the level of the shiny desk-top, smiled at his old friend.

"Everything's quiet, is it, Job?"

"Well"—the commissioner spewed a cloud of smoke around his fat cigar—"I thought so. But I just work here. We've had a little trouble with slot-machine racketeers, and they say there's a slight flurry in the green-goods line. But as far as bizarre murders are concerned—" He stopped. "Say, don't tell me there's going to be—"

A COMPLETE COLONEL CRUM NOVELET

"You think I can smell out murders in advance?"

"By the Lord Harry," Job Walden said, "I've know you long enough not to doubt it. But don't sit there like the Sphinx. Out with it! Who's marked for death in our peaceful city?"

"Now, Job," Crum reproved gently, "you're asking entirely too much. The best I could do at the moment would be to name three men, any one or all of whom *may* be murdered."

Walden's drooping cigar shot out horizontal between suddenly clamped teeth.

"Look here, you're joking! Who are the men?"

"Marius Hayden," Crum said slowly, "Cash Biggs, Bronson Utter. Know them?"

"Know them!" Walden barked. "Who doesn't? Promoters of the fabulous Silver Midas mine. Hayden's daughter is a good friend of my daughter. Swell girl. But look here, Fabian, you're kidding."

"Far from it," Crum said, and his face was serious.

"Why, you cold-blooded devil!" Walden growled. "You sit there calmly and tell me that three men are likely to be murdered, and them not even warned?"

"Oh, I warned them," Crum said, "as soon as I hit town."

"Suffering cats! I suppose you just called them up and said, 'You're going to be murdered. Can I do anything for you?'"

"I added my name," Crum replied. "But they insisted on taking me for a crank when I gave them the name of their possible killer."

"Why so?"

"Because," Crum said placidly, "he's a dead man."

"A dead man!" Walden's eyes bugged from their sockets.

"Officially," Crum said. "I refer to the famous astrologer, alchemist, spiritualist, con man, and ex-counterfeiter, Mr. Midas."

"Mr. Midas!" Walden snorted.

grimly. "I saw him in his coffin just before they piled dirt on it. I'll never forget that ugly yellow face of his. I went to the funeral because of the sensational suicide note he left, threatening to come back and take vengeance on his enemies."

"By whom," Crum said, "he meant Hayden, Utter and Biggs."

"Sure. I suppose they did cheat him on that Silver Midas deal."

"No doubt of it," Crum asserted. "They were just shady speculators operating on a shoestring when they got hold of that supposedly worthless property and floated the Silver Midas company. It was their tie-up with Midas that put it over. He was the current rage because of some rather uncanny predictions he'd made, and the wives of rich men were flocking to his door. When Hayden, Biggs and Utter made a deal with him, used his name, and got him to puff their stock, it was a sell-out."

"And the fact," Walden added, "that the mine turned out a bonanza was a pure accident that surprised the speculators."

"But tempted them to cheat the man who had put it over."

"Agreed," Walden said. "But it doesn't explain how you, a famous scientist, can make the weird prediction that this dead occultist will come back and murder them. Are you dealing with the occult too?"

"I hope not," Crum replied. "One can't always be sure. This fellow Midas did some astonishing things in his lifetime. However"—he reached in his pocket and produced a large newspaper clipping—"this is what gave me my first glimmer of—shall we say—the truth."

Walden took the clipping and looked at it. It was a photograph of three smiling men, each holding in his hand a small shiny object. The caption read:

UNKNOWN ADMIRER HONORS
MIDAS PROMOTERS

An inset showed enlargements of the little objects, which proved to be minute statuettes of each of the three men. The text beneath the picture

HE leaned back and chewed the cigar which had now gone out.

"Well, he *is* dead," Walden said

explained that on the fifth anniversary of the launching of the famous Silver Midas Company, the promoters had received from an anonymous admirer, doubtless some stockholder who had been made wealthy, the beautiful and lifelike little statuettes, each inscribed with the words:

MAY THE MIDAS TOUCH NEVER
FAIL YOU

"Well, good heavens!" Walden exclaimed. "What about it? The gifts



Colonel Crum

were expressions of good will."

"I'm far from sure of it," Crum answered. "In the first place, if you remember, King Midas' power to change all things he touched to gold became a curse. In the second place, did you look closely at the little symbol at the end of the inscription?"

Walden stared at the enlargement again. "Why," he said, "it looks like a closed hand, just the signature of the artist, perhaps."

"The signature of the sender, at any rate," Crum amended. "It is a clenched hand with the thumb thrust

up between the first and second fingers. The Italians call it the sign of the *mano in fica*. But it was known to ancient sorcery the world over as 'the Hand of Malediction,' and is a symbol malefic and terrible, a curse of the deepest malignancy."

Walden squinted at the symbol with an expression of repugnance.

"You're doubtless right, but—"

"The esoteric symbol itself suggests the occultist, Midas," Crum went on. "But that isn't all." He reached for his billfold, brought out a one-hundred-dollar banknote and slid it across the desk. "You mentioned a flare-up of counterfeiting."

Walden examined the bill carefully. "Yes, this is a phony, but excellent work."

"So my friend in the Secret Service told me," Crum replied. "But he said more. He said it came from plates used by Mr. Midas in his counterfeiting days, before he ostensibly reformed and became a soothsayer for the smart set. They keep records of those things, you know, and he said further that until recently none of those bills has showed up since Mr. Midas—er—died. Now a few are appearing, just a few, such as a counterfeiter, released from a stretch, might pass for expense money."

WALDEN made an impatient gesture.

"Released from a stretch!" he growled. "You mean a stretch in perdition?" He got up and paced across the room. "Blast it, you've got me upset, Fabian. Not that I believe—" He stopped, looked at the little scientist-detective sharply. "See here, since you've predicted this much, do you have any idea as to just how—"

"How they will be murdered?" Crum finished for him. "I can only make vague guesses. But I'm afraid it will be something rather horrible. This man, Midas, was a diabolist of the blackest dye."

"I know," Walden muttered. "I know. I remember the devil's hideous face as he lay in the coffin, all yellow as if—"

"As if he were turning to gold?"

Crum asked. "Well, you know he claimed to have found the fabulous *lapis philosophorum*, the magic catalyst that transmutes all metals. He claimed, too, that he could change any substance into any metal desired."

"Yes, yes, I know."

Walden was chewing his cigar furiously. He sat down at his desk, took up the telephone, hesitated, staring through the window at the darkening sky, listening to the hum of traffic below. He was, Crum knew, telling himself that, after all, this was the Twentieth Century.

Finally he dialed a number.

"This the Hayden residence?" he asked. "Let me speak to Mr. Marius Hayden, please. He isn't there? Then let me speak to Miss Gilda." A pause. Walden drummed with his fingers on the desk. Then: "Gilda, this is Commissioner Walden. Your father—"

He stopped. Crum could clearly hear the vibrant, youthful voice of the girl at the other end of the wire.

"Oh!" she gasped. "What is it? Tell me quickly!"

"But, Gilda! It's nothing. I simply wanted to ask where he is."

"But, Commissioner, you see—well, he didn't come home last night. I thought nothing of it then, since he often stays at his club. I was away all day and just got in an hour ago and they were calling from the office, said he hadn't been there. So, since his car was gone, I thought maybe he had driven out to the lodge in the mountains. I sent our Negro chauffeur out there to see. He just phoned—"

"Yes, yes, what did he say?"

"I couldn't make it out," the girl said distractedly. "He just moaned some garbled words, something about blue lights, a frozen ghost—"

Walden caught his breath sharply, then got a grip on himself.

"Tut, tut, Gilda," he said. "It's probably nothing. I'll drive out there and see about it myself. You just sit tight meanwhile, and I'll call you."

He hung up. The red tint in his face had faded. He lifted the phone again and snapped an order for a car. He turned to Crum. The little detective was already on his feet. Together they hurried down to the car.

With siren shrieking, they flashed through stop signals. The lights of the suburbs scattered about them. The big car plunged up a winding drive into the mountains. Dusk had become dark, flowing out of the shadowy pines to make a tarry blackness around the headlights. A few lights of lonely lodges winked past, then they turned into a lane leading up through the trees. A rambling log cabin appeared. A graveled drive swung around it. The cabin was dark.

"Guess the Negro beat it back to town," Walden said. "Probably let some prowler scare him."

His words broke off. The police car had stopped and its lights sprayed directly on the house. But from around the corner where the driveway curved, they noticed a bluish luminescence in the air.

"Snap off the lights," Walden said.

THE big Irish driver did so, and now in the black darkness, the bluish light hung like a jeweled mist in the air. Colonel Crum was out first, leading the way with drawn gun. Walden followed, with the driver bringing up the rear. They rounded the corner and stopped.

A gray roadster was facing them. The bluish light came from inside it—from a sputtering candle, upheld by something. Could it be a hand? They stepped nearer, and into Crum's mind flashed the quoted words of the Negro chauffeur: "A frozen ghost."

For something was leaning forward behind the car's wheel, staring out at them sightlessly. Something that held the candle, sputtering its blue light like goblin fire. But what the blue light gleamed on was not human flesh.

The big police driver muttered something, crossed himself. But Crum stepped forward, flung the roadster's door open, sprayed his flash in. The figure seated there, elooms on the wheel, staring forward with an awful grimace of agony on its lean features, was certainly the man whose picture had appeared in the clipping above the name, "Marius Hayden." Every detail of the tortured face was clear cut, every wrinkle in the hands,

the clothing. But from the hair of his head to the shoes on his feet, he was a gleaming thing of metal.

"It's Hayden," Walden gulped. "It's Hayden all right. But God help us, he's turned to silver!"

CHAPTER II

The Dead Demand Payment

IT was, of course, the obvious, if incredible, first impression. Crum, however, leaned nearer and tapped the silvery surface with a fingernail. He looked again at the awful grimace of agony on the dead face and felt a giddy sickness wrench at his stomach.

"Silver-plated," he said. "Not by electrolysis, I should say, but probably by the Schoop process, or the electric pistol."

"How's that?" Walden managed to ask.

"Silver wires connected with an electric system," Crum explained, "are fed into the pistol. Where the wires meet, an electric arc is set up and the melted metal is sprayed out by a jet of compressed air. The spray is so fine and cool that it may be received on hair and flesh."

"And you think it was done while—" Walden seemed unable to finish.

"I told you," Crum said, "that this Midas was a diabolist. Yes, I think it was done while Hayden was alive. The autopsy will probably disclose the presence of nupercaine, or some other paralyzing spinal anesthetic."

Walden turned away without a word and went to find the telephone in the cabin. Crum meanwhile blew out the sputtering blue candle, which obviously contained some chemical such as stage magicians use for weird effects, and began playing his flash obliquely over the surface of the silver image. He scarcely hoped that the devilish criminal would have been so careless as to leave fingerprints, and he found none. The surface had undoubtedly been wiped. But the thing had been lifted in, and probably wiped

afterward, in which case, some surfaces might have been overlooked.

Crum followed Walden into the cabin. When the commissioner had finished with the telephone, Crum called the tourist court where his trailer-laboratory was parked and spoke to his assistant, the giant young Asiatic, Aga Aslan.

"Get out here as quickly as you can," he said, after giving directions. "Bring your fingerprint kit and don't forget foils."

The men from Police Headquarters arrived first, then the hearse from the morgue. Aga, in Crum's big car, drove up just as the gruesome image was being lifted out. Crum spoke to Walden and the commissioner gave an order to leave it lying on its side a moment.

Aga and Crum stooped beside it with the fingerprint kit. The experts from Headquarters who had already examined the silver surface smiled wisely. But Crum immediately began examining the silvered soles of the shoes.

He was rewarded. The soles had been touched in the lifting of the image. Deftly he dusted the surface with black powder, peeled the thin celluloid cover from his foils, pressed the lower layer with its transparent paste to the black outlined prints, and then replaced the thin covering. He made a dozen or so of these in a few moments.

"I'll bring these by Headquarters as soon as I print off a few copies," he told Walden. "Now I'm going to my laboratory."

"Hey!" Walden protested. "Don't run out on me now."

"You," Crum said, "have the unpleasant job of notifying Hayden's daughter, and his partners. I suggest you get them together somewhere, say at the Hayden house. I'll drop by as soon as I've sent this prints to Headquarters for comparison with your files."

He got into his big car, and with Aga behind the wheel, they roared back down the mountain road and into town. At the tourist court, they went immediately into the trailer-laboratory which always followed Crum's

car in its wanderings over the continent, and set to work.

THE trailer-laboratory was marvelously compact and complete, containing in its gleaming white cubicle all the equipment for modern scientific crime detection. The present operation, however, was a comparatively simple one. The transparent foils which Crum had employed could be used directly as photographic plates for developing. Prints of the dozen or so samples were soon on the belt of his miniature drier.

"As soon as these are dry," Crum said to Aga, when this was done, "take them to the fingerprint bureau at Headquarters and get the men there to search through their files at once. Wait there, and if anything turns up, let me know. I'll be at the Hayden house."

He called a taxi then, since it was rare that he drove his own car himself, and was deposited in front of a small but elegant house on a high terrace, where Hayden, a widower, had lived with his daughter. He found Walden waiting for him, pacing a flagged porch. French windows gave on a lighted living room where five people were gathered.

"I thought," Walden said, "that I'd give you a line-up on this crew before you meet them."

He drew the little detective toward a point of vantage and nodded at a burly, bull-necked man who sat furiously chewing a cigar while he listened to the rapid chatter of a dark, exotic-looking woman who sat beside him.

"That's Cash Biggs," Walden said, "and his second wife, who was the actress, Cordelia Cavanaugh. There's talk, incidentally, that she's played around with both of her husband's partners. Not a nice woman."

He turned, indicated a wiry, brown, carelessly dressed little man with a seamed, hard-looking face. He was lounging in a deep chair nearby. The man's left hand, resting on the chair arm, was crooked as if paralyzed, and two of the fingers were missing.

"Bronson Utter," Walden whispered. "A hard little nut. An ex-

prospector, he's the mining expert of the group, just as Hayden was the financial brains, and Biggs is the promotion wizard. I think Cordelia's got a crush on Utter, but what he thinks of her is hard to tell."

The two remaining occupants of the room sat off to themselves on a divan. A slender girl in a greenish tweed suit, with the loveliest ash blond hair Crum had ever seen, was leaning on the shoulder of a tall, muscular young man whose eyes stared somberly at Cash Biggs.

"Gilda Hayden," Walden said, "and Carey Biggs. The boy's in love with Gilda, though Hayden opposed the match. He's also at odds with his father and his stepmother. Cash wanted him to go into the business, but Carey insisted on being a sculptor, and was disinherited."

"A sculptor," Crum repeated. "Interesting. Shall we go in now?"

Crum's entry created at least a momentary diversion for the preoccupied people. His small figure, less than the average man in height, but trimly muscular and jaunty in his well tailored black suit, was oddly at variance with the burly commissioner. But once the introductions were over, Cash Biggs began with a sort of surly truculence:

"So you're the fellow who phoned and warned us? Well, old Marius certainly got his. But what's this nonsense about that dead quack, Midas?"

Bronson Utter gave a sour snort. "There was talk when he died," he chuckled, "that I poisoned him. I wish to the devil I had. I'd have been sure he was dead then."

"And you aren't sure now, Bronson?" the exotic Cordelia Biggs asked in a throaty, affected voice. "I thought you were a complete skeptic."

UTTER merely laughed, shrugged. But Crum noted how the woman's liquid eyes dwelt on him with a look half admiring, half predatory. Her husband seemed to notice it too.

"It isn't the fact that he died," the big man rumbled, rolling it out with relish as he stared at Utter. "It's the way."

That meant nothing, necessarily, except that Biggs smarted under his wife's infidelities with both partners. But the woman gave him a look almost of hate, and young Carey turned toward him angrily.

"Father! Under the circumstances—"

"Oh, rats!" Biggs growled. "You and your sensitive temperament! What are you moping about? Hayden didn't like you. But now you and Gilda can get married. You can get a share of the company, after all. It's a cinch you'll get nothing from me as long as you keep up this 'art' nonsense."

Carey flushed, glared, but did not answer.

"Oh, hush, Cash," Cordelia said, with a quick look at Crum. Then to the latter: "But you'll save us from this dead man, won't you, Colonel?"

Crum ignored the faint sarcasm. "What I'd like to inquire," he said, "is what you all intend to do when the killer makes his demands."

"Demands!" That was a simultaneous exclamation from Biggs and his wife.

"Of course," Crum replied. "Vengeance is no doubt a part of the motive, but he won't be satisfied with that alone, you may be sure."

"Well, I," said Utter, "shall tell him to go to the devil—or back to him."

Biggs looked at him and tried to duplicate the bravado.

"Same here. We couldn't pay extortion money if we wanted to. I couldn't, anyhow. Not without selling my stock in the company." He turned on Walden almost angrily. "Look here, you've got to get to the bottom of this, grab this maniac, whoever he is, and—"

He broke off. A telephone in a wall niche jangled. Cash Biggs, who was nearest, sprang up to answer it. But with the receiver at his ear, he suddenly gave a start, whirled toward the room, his eyes wide. The others heard it too then—a thin-edged, sibilant voice like the hiss of a serpent, saying:

"This . . . is . . . Mr. Midas."

Biggs was on his feet. His face had the apoplectic look of someone who

is choking. "Good Lord, it's *his* voice!"

No one paid any attention to him.

"You have seen what happened to Marius Hayden," the voice crackled on. "Do you want to hear and feel what happened to him? Do you want to know how he felt when that sarcophagus of silver was slowly closing about his living body? Listen!"

There was a pause. A phonograph needle made a brittle scratching sound. Then a voice was sobbing, a man's voice, wrung with torment and terror:

"Don't, don't, for the love of mercy, not that! Let me buy my life! Or kill me—with a gun, a knife—but not that! Don't—*don't* bury me alive in that sheath of silver!"

It ceased abruptly. Gilda Hayden, who had sat up, rigid, voiceless, through it all, slumped silently in a faint. Carey Biggs caught her in his arms, carried her out as a maid servant came running.

But the serpentine voice was hissing from the receiver again:

"You have heard it? That shall be your cry, Bronson Utter, your cry, Cash Biggs, your cry, Cordelia Biggs, your cry, Gilda Hayden, unless my instructions are followed. I want one million dollars—a third from each of the chief Silver Midas shareholders. Tomorrow night at eight o'clock you will have the money there at the Hayden house. You will pack it in a cheap black suitcase purchased for a dollar ninety-eight at the Hart Luggage Shop. The money will be in unlisted one and two hundred dollar bills. It will make a bundle weighing between fifteen and twenty pounds. You will wait there for further instructions. Do not attempt to set traps. I am giving you the chance that Marius Hayden did not get. Good night."

A FAINT click from the other end of the line was audible. "A million dollars!" Cash Biggs gasped, breaking the tense and terrible silence. "Three hundred and thirty-three odd thousand each. It's preposterous! Why, I'd have to sell—" He frowned, apparently thinking of Hayden's pleading voice.

Utter was tense. "He'll have to take it from me!" he growled.

Walden had stepped to the telephone, snatched it from Cash Biggs' hand.

"Operator, this is Police Commissioner Walden. I want that call traced at once." He turned back to where Crum was standing, studying the reaction of the others.

"I doubt if that will do much good," the little detective said. "He probably had a portable phonograph and carried it to some safe place. You may get a description of him, but since we already know—"

Biggs snorted. "You don't really think . . . But it's impossible. That man is dead. Somebody merely has imitated his voice cleverly."

A knock at the door interrupted. Crum stepped into the vestibule to answer it. It was Aga. They spoke in whispers. Crum went back into the room.

"My assistant has just come from Headquarters," he said. "They were able to match a couple of the fingerprints I took from Hayden's feet."

"Well, whose prints were they?" Walden snapped impatiently.

Crum's eyes swept the group. "Those of a man by the name of Nicholas Rentzig," he said. "An ex-counterfeiter, confidence man, spiritualist, fakir, astrologer. He called himself Mr. Midas."

CHAPTER III

The Man with the Golden Face

COMMISSIONER WALDEN rode back to Police Headquarters in Colonel Crum's car. He was a badly shaken man.

"I can't believe it," he kept repeating, "I can't believe it, and yet—"

"If I were you," Crum said, "I'd issue an order to have the body of Mr. Midas exhumed."

"But, Fabian! I'd be a laughing-stock!"

Crum shrugged, turned back to staring at the little silver figurine which

he was holding. It was the statuette of Bronson Utter. He had borrowed it before leaving the Hayden house.

When they reached Police Headquarters a report was waiting that the call had been traced to the Union Depot. A witness had seen a tall man with a yellowish face go into a telephone booth with something that looked like a portable typewriter or phonograph. He had heard nothing because he had gone with the crowd which at that moment had surged toward the gates to welcome an arriving movie star.

There was also a report from the morgue. Enough of the silver plate had been removed to identify the body beyond doubt as that of Marius Hayden. A large amount of nupercaine had been found in the spinal fluid.

"You were right," Walden said. "He was buried alive in a sheet of silver armor. How I'd hate to be in those people's shoes! Well, I've got half the force scouring the town for that yellow-faced devil—revenant, or whatever he is. And the Biggs and Hayden houses are under guard."

"What about Utter?"

"Oh, that little fire-eater. My men report that he refuses all protection. He lives alone at a hotel. Says he's got a gun and knows how to use it, which I don't doubt. . . . What are you doing with that image?"

Crum was still fingering the four-inch statuette of Utter.

"Just studying it," he replied. "Excellent work. Not amateurish at all. Seems scarcely possible it was made from mere photographs."

"What are you getting at?"

"I'd like to visit Carey Biggs' studio," was all Crum said.

"Say!" Walden opened his eyes wide. "There's an idea. Young Biggs certainly stands to profit by Hayden's death, as his father pointed out. He gets the girl, the Hayden money, and settles a grudge. . . . Well, his studio's in a dingy old building down in the industrial section."

"Then let's visit him," Crum suggested.

Walden drove his own car this time. He piloted it into the dark industrial section and stopped before a sooty

three-story brick building with a large "For Lease" sign on its front. They climbed two flights of rickety stairs and stopped before a door that bore Carey Biggs' card.

The place was dark, and there was no answer to their knock. But Crum produced a small leather kit and exposed a set of gleaming master-keys, the gift of a famous locksmith in Switzerland. He set to work, ignoring Walden's protests that it was illegal entry. He pushed the door open and stepped in, followed by the still grumbling commissioner.

His flashlight revealed a barnlike room, crowded with a sculptor's equipment—platforms smeared with clay, finished and half finished creations in clay and marble, a bench with casting apparatus, various bronze works, and tools. Crum found nothing among the casts that interested him and turned his attention to the tools, particularly the engraving styles, and the small instruments.

He gathered up a few of these, and was about to turn away when the sound of feet on the stairs caused him to snap off his light. With a hand on the revolver under his coat, he waited.

THE footsteps stopped at the door, a key grated. The door opened and the light flashed on. Carey Biggs stood there, flushed, glowering.

"Saw your car down there, Commissioner," he growled. "If you had asked me, I'd have been glad to show you around the place."

Walden looked embarrassed. But Crum said suavely:

"We were sure you'd take our visit in good spirit. The fact is, I wanted your professional opinion about these little images that were sent to your father and the others." He produced the figurine of Utter.

Biggs strode forward quickly.

"Well, what about them?"

"The workmanship is professional," Crum said. "I thought you might get some idea of their maker from the style of execution."

Young Biggs had stopped, was frowning.

"I've been asked that before. I don't think their maker could be identified."

"Oh," Crum said, "I differ with you there. This little image, for instance, was cast. But afterward, some sharp tool was used to sharpen the outline in places, touch it up. And you surely know that the cutting edges of tools are quite as susceptible of identification as fingerprints. By microphotography, in my laboratory, I could soon determine from a given group, the tool that had done the work. That's why I am borrowing—"

The color in the youth's face had gone from red to white. His mouth opened. There was a desperate, hunted look in his eyes. Suddenly he wilted, slumped into a chair, ran his fingers through his hair.

"I should have admitted it!" he said huskily.

"What do you mean, Carey?" Walden snapped.

"I mean," the youth said, "that I made them. They were ordered by mail. I was well paid, and the customer wanted secrecy, for purely personal reasons, he said. I mailed the statuettes out to a general delivery address." He looked up desperately. "How in all creation could I know—"

"And how in all creation do I know," Walden growled, "that you aren't lying now? Even after Hayden was murdered, you didn't tell us!"

"But then I was afraid that—"

"As you well might be," Walden said grimly. He had produced a police revolver from his pocket. "You're under arrest, Carey. You've certainly got a perfect motive, and you can do the rest of your talking at Headquarters. Bring the tools along, Fabian. We may need them."

He prodded young Biggs to his feet. They started for the door. The door opened again, and Gilda Hayden stepped in. She was flushed, trembling, but her mouth was set in a straight firm line and her right hand held a small black automatic.

"No you won't!" she snapped, her blue eyes flashing. "You're not going to pin that awful crime on Carey, just because you can't catch the killer. It's bad enough" — she choked — "what happened to Father, without this! Put your gun down. Commissioner, turn Carey loose, or I swear I'll shoot!"

The girl was obviously on the verge of hysteria. Her finger twitched dangerously on the trigger of her gun. Walden lowered his revolver.

"Now look here, Gilda, you're out of your senses!" he protested.

She started to reply. But just then the lights went off.

Carey Biggs made a rush for the door. Crum and Walden dived after him. But the door slammed shut in their faces. Young Biggs had dragged the girl outside with him.

Crum fumbled for the knob, got the door open. But feet were already pounding a rapid tattoo on the stairs. The two men plunged into the hall, stopped. From below a fusillade of shots rang out, dappling the darkness with orange blobs, sending slugs whistling past them.

THERE was a rush of feet. The girl screamed. Walden had ducked back into the doorway. Crum had dropped behind a newel post. In the flares from below they could see shadowy black shapes, hooded, almost invisible in the darkness. The girl's screams had ceased. Crum's gun began blasting at the flare-splashed figures.

Then abruptly the firing below ceased. There was a rush of scuffling feet on the lower stair. Gun in hand, Crum started down. Walden followed. Crum reached the landing first, turned, almost stumbled on a sprawled shape. He whipped out his flash, hesitated, snapped it on.

Instantly he dropped to his knees, bending over the prostrate body of Gilda Hayden. There was an ugly bump on the pale whiteness of her forehead. He got an arm under her, raised her. She opened her eyes.

"Carey—Carey!" she screamed. "Where's Carey?"

"That's what we'd like to know," Walden rumbled.

He ran to a window at the end of the hall. A powerful motor roared in the street below. Walden sent two shots out the window, turned back, swearing.

"Too late—they're gone!" He glowered at the girl who was stumbling to her feet. "See what you did? Helped

his accomplices stage a rescue!"

"No—no!" she sobbed. "That isn't true! They slugged him. They rose up out of the darkness like ghosts. And one had an awful bony face that shone yellow, like gold. Oh, why didn't they take me too! At least I could be with Carey, see where they're taking him!"

"They had good reason for not taking you, my dear," Crum said. "They left you behind to raise the Hayden share of the ransom."

"Then I *will!*" she cried fiercely. "Anything to get Carey back!"

Walden snorted. "I can do nothing to prevent that, I suppose. But right now you're going home and you're going to stay there, because there's going to be a detective sitting at your door!"

Crum returned to his trailer-court and was not disturbed that night. He had expressed the opinion that there would now be a lull in the fiend's activities until the money was raised. But in this he was apparently wrong. The first news he received next morning was that Bronson Utter had vanished.

"The little fool!" Walden growled, as he and the little colonel sat again in his office. "He *would* brag and play the hero. Left his hotel about midnight after answering a phone call. Nobody's seen him since."

"And how's the stock market this morning?" Crum asked.

"Stock market?" Walden blinked. "Oh!"

He grabbed his telephone and made a call, racking it a few moments later.

"Well, our phantom fiend is having it all his way," he said. "Huge lots of Silver Midas shares were dumped on the market this morning as soon as the Exchange opened."

"Selling good?"

"Yes. They said that the sudden dumping didn't cause the price depression that would ordinarily have resulted, because everyone knew that the sales were forced by the need for ransom money."

"Ah," Crum said in a way that caused Walden to raise his eyebrows slightly. "Both Biggs and Gilda Hayden are selling out, of course," he

added. "But I wonder about Utter's stock."

Utter's stock, it developed, was selling too. A quick call to Utter's lawyer elicited this information, though it required threats on Walden's part to make the lawyer open up. The man was terrified. Utter had called him at two o'clock that morning and ordered the sale and the contribution of three hundred and thirty odd thousand dollars to the ransom fund. The lawyer had hesitated, but a special delivery letter in Utter's handwriting had given him the necessary authority, and he had proceeded as ordered. Utter had seemed in desperate fear, he said.

WALDEN swore softly and mopped his sweating brow as he hung up. Crum paced the floor, hands behind his back.

"That Silver Midas mine is located at Nuggettsville, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yeah," Walden answered abstractedly. "Why?"

"I have a friend, a mining engineer," Crum mused, "who works for the Grant-Hodge outfit there. I think I'll call him long-distance."

He did so. Walden meanwhile went out to check on the progress of the man-hunt. Returning about forty-five minutes later, he found Crum smiling.

"Well, did you get any information?" he asked.

"Yes," Crum said, "but in the strictest confidence. There's a floating rumor, my friend says, that Silver Midas is failing. Everything possible is being done to hush it up, of course, but such is the talk."

"Heavenly days!" Walden gasped. "If that's true, then that whole bunch is profiting by being able to unload their stock on the excuse of raising the ransom. But could that be the motive?"

"It could be a part of it," Crum said thoughtfully.

"Well" — Walden sighed — "you've picked a bad time to go back on your former theory—about Midas I mean. I acted on your advice and had his grave dug into. There was nothing but the crumbled remains of a dummy in his coffin."

"And a trick coffin to boot, eh?" Crum said.

"How'd you know?"

"Oh, just a guess. It's an old trick used by fake mediums. Some crooked doctor doubtless signed his death certificate. The rest would have been simple for a trickster like Midas. He probably lay in the coffin while it was open to the view of his friends and followers. One end was probably near a trap door hidden by flowers. The coffin was probably closed while Midas slipped out and the dummy was slid in. Then I'd guess that an accomplice opened it for just a moment to give some late arrival a glimpse—and of course show the others he was still there. The carefully made dummy would have passed that brief inspection before the coffin was finally closed and carried to the grave."

"Yeah," Walden admitted, "that's what happened. I was there. But how in the name of time does this tie up with your hints about an inside job?"

"We'll have to find that out," Crum answered.

CHAPTER IV

Rendezvous with Horror

AS the day wore on they seemed no nearer a solution. Late evening came and Walden and Crum drove to the police-guarded Hayden house. On a table lay the huge ransom in piled greenbacks, neatly done up in bundles. Cash Biggs, haggard and subdued, paced about morosely. Gilda Hayden, pale and tense, sat staring off into space. Presently Cordelia Biggs arrived with the cheap black suitcase specified by the kidnaper, and the money was packed into it. They sat and waited for the fiend's call.

It came sharply on the dot of eight. The jangle of the telephone sent a shock through the nerves of the whole group. Cash Biggs answered. Again the snakelike hiss of Midas' voice could be heard by the others.

"All, I trust, is ready? Good. A

little persuasion had to be used on Mr. Utter, but I trust his money, too, is there. Now listen closely. The lives of both Utter and young Biggs, as well as the lives of the rest of you, depend on absolute obedience to instructions—and on keeping the police from attempting a trap. Now—at exactly eight-thirty, Cordelia Biggs will leave alone, with the money under the turtleback of her car. She will drive out the Pine Canyon Road, turn off toward Crater Lake, and stop at the nearest point to the high bluffs above the water. She will take the suitcase and climb up. I will attend to the rest.”

The connection clicked off. Cordelia Biggs was trembling. Cash looked at her and bit his lip.

“Sorry, Cordelia, but we’ve got to save Carey.”

They went out to put the money in her roadster. Walden drew Crum aside. “I’ll be eternally blamed,” he said, “if I’ll see that pay-off take place without some effort to trap the fiend!”

“Then let me make a suggestion,” Crum said.

The result of the conference was that Crum and the police commissioner slipped away. Taking with them a Sergeant Halsey, reputedly the best marksman on the force, they drove to the Municipal Airport, where a plane and pilot arranged for by telephone were waiting. Without the loss of a moment, the three men climbed into the plane and were swiftly flown twenty-five miles to the resort town of Pine Canyon.

Here a car, also arranged for in advance, carried them to a point only half a mile from the towering bluffs that overlooked the small deep mountain lake. Well armed, and carrying small torpedo rocket flares which Crum had perfected in his own laboratory, they began climbing silently up on foot. They should reach the bluffs, they calculated, some minutes ahead of Cordelia Biggs.

As they neared the rocky peaks they spotted a dim point of blue light flickering weirdly among the crags.

“We must go carefully from here,” Crum cautioned. “Get as near the light as possible and then wait.”

They moved upward with the stealth of Indians until they reached a nest of rocks from which the blue-sputtering candle was visible. It was a garish and ghostly beacon, flaring there against the sky. For it appeared to be on the bluff’s very edge, thrusting up from a rocky crevice, in which, they presumed, the collector of the ransom was hiding.

“We’ve got him now,” Walden whispered jubilantly, “with his back to the lake—a sheer drop of two or three hundred feet.”

Crum, however, was silent. The silent minutes dragged. It seemed an age before they heard the scrape of feet on rock, the panting breath of Cordelia Biggs as she labored up the steep trail with her heavy burden.

THEN she came in sight, stopped, breathing heavily, while she rested. But after a moment she started on toward the light. She wore riding pants and laced boots, and her willowy figure seemed strained to breaking by the heavy case. Slowly she neared the glare. But suddenly she stopped and her shrill scream knifed the silence.

“Bronson, Bronson! Oh, my God!”

The men burst out, springing toward her across the rocks. The shadowy crevice came into view. They checked themselves with gasps of horror. For the thing that supported the sputtering blue candle was now visible. It was an uplifted hand, a crooked hand with two fingers missing—a hand of silver! Beneath it, lying flat, face up, and seemingly balanced on the very edge of the precipice, was a gleaming silver body. The blue light gleamed weirdly on the wrinkled features of Bronson Utter!

Their first shock of amazement over, the men started forward again. But the woman did not appear to have noticed them. Still screaming, she tottered forward. The heavy suitcase dropped. It struck the feet of the silvered horror and the thing gave a jump that was almost lifelike, tottered on the cliff’s edge for an instant, then went plunging down, head-first.

They heard the hollow echoes as it crashed against the rocks below, then a dull splash as it struck the water of

the lake three hundred feet below.

The woman had fallen to the ground, sobbing hysterically. Near her, a paper which had lain beneath the thing, caught the light of Crum's flash. He picked it up. Printed in small letters were the words:

You were warned not to set a trap.
—Midas

"It's uncanny!" Walden gulped. "How could he have known?"

"He could have guessed," Crum said. "There were ten chances to one that we would do it."

"And he let the money go!" Walden exclaimed.

"I'm not so sure," Crum replied. "He was pretty definite about the type of suitcase to be used."

He stepped over and knelt down beside the black case, ripped the straps loose and flung it open. It was filled with neat packets of greenbacks.

"You see—" Walden began.

But Crum had extracted one of the bills, was rubbing it vigorously against his shirt cuff. A faint smudge of green ink appeared. He flipped out his pocket lens and squinted at the bill intently.

"Phony," he pronounced. "Made from the same plates as the counterfeit I showed you yesterday." He turned toward the sobbing woman. "Did you drive straight here without a stop, Mrs. Biggs?"

The woman lifted her tear-wet face.

"Why, no," she said. "I had to stop about halfway up here to change a tire. There was a roofing tack in it, and more of them in the road, I noticed."

"And your spare tire was under the turtleback where the money was?" Walden growled. "And the flat tire was a front one probably?"

"Yes," she said. "But I didn't see anyone."

"You wouldn't," Walden groaned. "Well, he's been too smart for us—planted the tacks, sneaked up while she was fussing with the wheel, and while we waited here miles away!" He looked at Crum. "But why did he go to the trouble to pack that case with the counterfeits?"

"He didn't expect the substitution to be discovered yet," Crum replied. "Which would have given him a period of safety for his next move."

WALDEN chewed his lips in silence. Then he drew Crum aside, his eyes narrowed.

"Notice how that woman's sobbing over Utter?" he whispered. "I'll bet she wouldn't sob like that over her husband. And I'll bet Biggs knows it. Now Hayden and Utter are both dead, and somebody has reaped a nice profit. And Mr. Biggs is still alive. I'm just wondering if Mr. Biggs himself may have a finger in this pie."

Crum didn't answer at once. He had taken from his pocket the little figurine of Utter and was staring at it again. It gleamed in his hands, a horrible and exact replica of the awful thing that had plunged from the cliffs. Even the crooked hand was outthrust, so that it was easy to imagine a tiny candle sputtering there.

Crum looked up as steps sounded on the trail again. Two plainclothes men came into sight.

"Catch him?" one of them called out.

"No," Walden answered gruffly. "What are you doing here, Turner? You were told to stay at the Hayden house."

"I stayed," the man panted, "as long as there was anybody to guard. But Biggs got a phone call and left."

"You let him leave?"

"Couldn't stop him. It was his boy's voice. I heard it myself. Then another voice gave him instructions which I couldn't hear. But Biggs was wild. Said he had to save his son and threatened to shoot us if we tried to stop him. He jumped in his car and raced off. We followed, but he did start shooting at us. We saw him head for the Pine Canyon Road, but we never could pick up his trail after that."

"Well, and what about Miss Hayden?"

"Oh—the girl." Turner looked sheepish. "She slipped off while we were arguing with Biggs."

Walden cursed until the air was blue. Crum drew Detective Turner aside.

"You heard a part, at least, of that call," he said. "You heard Carey Biggs' voice, but you couldn't hear the other one. Why?"

"Well," the man said, "young Biggs was yelling, for one thing. His voice was loud. The other voice was just a hiss that got drowned in another noise, the throbbing of a motor of some sort."

"An automobile motor?"

"No. Sounded more like a Delco plant."

"Ah," Crum said. He turned to Walden. "You better send Mrs. Biggs back to town with Turner. But see that she's properly guarded this time. We don't want any more disappearances. Then, I have a plan—"

After Turner had led the sobbing woman away, Walden asked:

"Well, what's on your mind?"

"The throbbing of a Delco motor," Crum replied.

"Meaning" — Walden nodded — "one of these mountain lodges? But there are scores of them equipped with Delcos."

"I know," Crum agreed. "But this one must be somewhere between here and town. Anyhow, it's something. Now there are four of us here. Three of us will be dropped out at points along the highway to start searching. The other will drive back to Pine Canyon, telephone in for reinforcements and instruct the pilot of the plane to soar over the hills and watch for a signal flare. We've all got rockets, and the one who locates the place will quietly give a signal and wait for help."

The suggestions were swiftly followed. Some thirty minutes later, Colonel Crum himself was dropped off on a lonely stretch of highway by the driver who had already let Walden and Halsey out at other points.

AS the car turned back toward Pine Canyon, Crum lost no time in deserting the highway for the shadows of the trees. He struck off at an angle toward a lane that led up to a group of cabins. As he moved toward them, he listened for the sound of a Delco. But only the sound of forest insects broke the silence. He reached the lane, started to follow it.

Suddenly he stopped. A beam of moonlight gleamed on the metal fixtures of a car parked near a clump of shrubs. Crum started to draw back, but he was too late.

"Stand where you are!" a woman's voice said from the car. "I've got a gun trained on you."

Crum stood still. But a wave of relief throbbed in him.

"Miss Hayden," he whispered. "This is Colonel Crum."

Instantly the car door came open and the girl stepped out. As she came near he saw that her lovely face was strained but determined.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"By sheer accident," Crum said. "But you didn't come here by accident. Did you hear that Delco over the telephone, too?"

The girl gave an exclamation of surprise. "I certainly did," she said, "but I didn't tell those detectives. I decided I'd go after Carey myself. I remembered that a girl friend of mine told me that her family had sold their cabin to a stranger recently. It has a Delco, so I thought—"

"Something of a detective yourself," Crum chuckled. "But now, Miss Hayden, you'd better leave things to me and go back—"

He stopped. A sibilant voice was speaking from the shadowy brush.

"Neither of you will go back just yet, Colonel. You are covered by eight guns. Drop your weapons and raise your hands."

There was nothing to do but obey. Crum let his gun fall. The girl did likewise. Both lifted their arms. Black-hooded shapes emerged from the shadows. In their center a flashlight blazed. Behind it leered a lean face that gleamed like gilded leather.

"Well, Midas, you seem to have called our hands," Crum sighed.

Though his gun was gone, Crum still had the little watch-charm pistol which always dangled from a chain across his vest front. Firing a single cartridge, loaded with the potent arrow poison, *curare*, it was a hole card saved for the most desperate emergencies. But it was of no use now against the eight guns of Midas and his henchmen.

He had also the small rockets in his side coat pocket, but to light one of them was impossible now. For the time being, his wits alone would have to suffice.

Led by Midas, and flanked by his eight henchmen, Crum and the girl were marched toward the cabin which stood off from its neighbors in thick trees. The Delco motor was no longer throbbing, and the upper part of the building was dark. But dim lights shone through the blinds of basement windows, and it was into this lower space that they were herded.

It was a spacious cement room, furnished as a play room, with gaming tables and comfortable chairs around the deep fireplace. But there were other objects stored there now, filling one corner — presses, die-stampers, power cutters, compressor machinery. All the equipment for counterfeiting coins and banknotes. In front of this machinery Carey Biggs lay on the floor, bound and gagged. They saw him first, and as the girl choked back a cry, Crum glimpsed Cash Biggs in the opposite corner.

He was seated upright in a chair, unbound, but strangely still, except for his quivering face and rolling eyes. His feet and legs, up to the knees were already coated with silver, and beside him on a spattered work bench lay the silver spray pistol, trailing its electric wires.

“WELCOME to my workshop.”
The man called Midas leered. He turned to his henchmen. “Tie them up, men. Then I will treat them to a little amusement while I finish my artistic labors.”

The hooded thugs seized Crum and the girl, drew their hands behind them, bound their wrists and ankles and shoved them roughly to the floor. Crum fell in front of the big fireplace which was half filled with resinous pine logs. He raised his head just as Midas picked up the spray gun and snapped on the current.

What followed was ghastly. Cash Biggs began to whimper. Obviously deadened by the anesthetic, only his blubbing, quivering lips were able to move and the sound that came out

raked the nerves. Gilda Hayden had raised her head to watch too, but was too frozen with horror to utter a sound.

Crum clenched his teeth as the gaunt fiend, whose naturally yellow face had been made more horrible still by the addition of greasepaint and gilding powder, bent with fiendish relish to his awful task.

CHAPTER V

Guests of Mr. Midas

THE silver spray plumed in the air, the clinging sheath rose higher and higher about the frozen body of the doomed man. His cries were piteous and terrible. Crum felt that he had to stop it somehow, if only temporarily. He could think of but one way. He played his ace card.

“Where’s Bronson Utter?” he suddenly called out.

The lean figure of Mr. Midas gave a start. The spray gun was snapped off. The fiend turned.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You know what I mean,” Crum retorted smoothly. “You two have played this thing cleverly, Midas, but not perfectly. For one thing, that silver-plated dummy of Bronson Utter, which was—not quite by accident—knocked off into the lake, should not have been made *exactly* like the little figurine. Hayden’s body didn’t exactly resemble his statuette. Of course, in Utter’s case, what you did was simply make an enlargement of the figurine, but you should have changed it, slightly at least. Or you should not have let me see it.”

The gilded face of Mr. Midas glared.

“Guessing, eh, Colonel?”

“No, it’s more than a guess now,” Crum replied. “When I first heard the rumor about Silver Midas playing out, and saw how raising this ransom allowed the stock to be sold off without creating suspicion or a panic, I guessed you had an accomplice within the group, Midas. And Utter, being

the mining expert, would be the most likely to have known the secret of the mine's failure. Then there was that statue of Utter, identical with the figurine, falling into the lake, so fortuitously and hence beyond our examination. There was the clever engineering of the ransom collection. . . . Well, you might call these guesses. But I am not guessing any longer. Now I am sure."

"And just why, if you don't mind sharing your wisdom?"

"Because," Crum said, "you are now proceeding with the murder of Biggs. Why? The murder of Hayden, the kidnaping of Carey Biggs—they served to terrorize the others into paying. But now you have the money. Now you should be covering your trail, fading out with the loot. Instead, you are proceeding with this murder which is an utterly useless risk, unless—"

"Unless?"

"Unless," Crum repeated, "it is because Utter wants Biggs' wife."

At these words, Cash Biggs, half dead with terror as he was, found strength to protest.

"No—no! I won't believe it about Cordelia!"

"No," Crum said, "you won't believe what you know is true. That's why you're dying. If you had been willing to divorce her, or let her divorce you, you might have saved your life. He could have let you live then."

He had been leaning on one elbow. Now he shifted his weight. His sharp eyes watched the face of Midas. Even the fiend was being held by the sheer intellectual pleasure of seeing a puzzle unraveled. Crum pushed his bound hands a little nearer to the pocket of his coat. His fingers began fumbling delicately for the two torpedo rockets.

"Isn't it clear to you yet, Biggs?" he went on. "Midas has planned all these years since his faked death to get revenge—not the revenge of a madman satisfied with murder alone, but the revenge of a cunning man who means to make it pay. That he planned it alone, I feel confident. He intended to milk you of the profits of the Silver Midas mine, and with the

proceeds probably finance some gigantic counterfeiting ring. But evidently he picked Utter as his first victim. And what happened? Utter, like certain modern nations, bought the enemy off and joined hands with him. Being on the inside, he contributed much to the smoothness of the scheme, and—"

HE stopped again, cleared his throat. Two of his slender fingers had reached into the coat pocket, were drawing the rockets out.

"And Utter," he went on, "not only saved his life, but saw a way to gain his private ends, too. Under the cover of the kidnap scare the mine stock could be sold at par. If he splits equally with Midas, he gets much more than his own share would have been. But—"

He hesitated, as if stressing his argument. Behind him, his fingers, holding the rocket torpedo, were feeling back, touching the piled logs in the fireplace, calculating, estimating.

"But," he reiterated, "the main thing that influenced Utter was his passion for Cordelia, whose husband would not give her up. By this murderous scheme, he would kill both her husband and his rival, Hayden. And the fact that Cordelia made herself his willing accomplice, helping with the substitution of the counterfeit for the real ransom money, knocking the statue of Utter off into the lake, putting on an act for us, was a great advantage. The plan now, I imagine, is for Utter, supposedly dead, to head for South America or Mexico, to be joined later by Cordelia with the balance of the liquidated Biggs estate. Unless—"

He dragged the last word out with narrow-eyed emphasis. His feeling fingers had embedded the metal pin of the rocket in a log in the fireplace behind him. It was a gamble, he knew. But as best he could, he had calculated the curve of the flue, and since the chimney was a big one, he believed that the rocket would clear it.

"Unless, my dear Midas," he continued ominously, "your friend Utter plans at the last moment to murder you and take all the plunder!"

Midas had stiffened slightly at the sinister insinuation. A wary and thoughtful look flashed across his cunning face. Crum's hands, behind him, were working fast. He broke the second rocket open, spilled out the powder, began scattering it with thumps of his fingers.

"Utter has already betrayed one set of friends—" Crum began again.

But a bluff peal of laughter suddenly echoed in the room.

"Divide and conquer, eh, Crum?" a rasping voice asked, and Bronson Utter stepped through a doorway and into sight.

He held a gun in his hand, but held it negligently. He was puffing a cigar, and he gave his yellow-faced accomplice a genial wink. The lounging thugs relaxed.

"No, Midas"—the ex-pro prospector chuckled—"we're both in it too deep to try to doublecross each other."

"You're in it plenty deep, Utter," Crum said quickly. "You don't suppose I failed to have Cordelia held for questioning? You don't imagine she's free to carry out the rest of your plan?"

Utter's face twisted in a snarl.

"And you don't suppose you haven't signed your own death warrant, Crum?" He came forward, his gun raised. "As for Cordelia, she'll never talk. They'll get no proof."

He was standing almost over Crum now, leaning forward, snarling his words around the cigar still clamped between his teeth.

"As for you, I'm going to have the pleasure of silencing your glib tongue myself!"

Crum moved as if startled by the words. He swung his feet about, a little nearer to Utter's legs.

"And if Cordelia does talk," he yelled above Utter's growl, "she'll tell where this place is, and Midas will pay dearly for *your* mistake!"

He could not see Midas' face as he spoke. His eyes were fastened on Utter who, with a curse, had swung his gun down. Crum had only time then to throw all the muscular coordination of his agile body into one supreme gamble. He doubled his legs back and kicked.

UTTER'S gun exploded. But Crum's heels had slammed against his knees. Already bending slightly, the blow knocked Utter's legs from under him. He lurched forward, while Crum, quick as a cat, flung his body sideward and came upright. Utter hit the floor on the heels of his hands, but the cigar was jarred from his mouth. It struck the hearth, bounced, landed on the scattered powder, which flared up in a sheet of flame that whipped about Utter's exposed face.

Howling as he clapped his hands to his eyes, Utter rolled over. The flame from the powder had blazed up into the logs and there was a *whoosh* as the burning rocket fuse reached the powder.

It passed unnoticed in the crackle of the fire, the howls of Utter, and the swift episode that followed. For, once on his feet, Crum, bound as he was, was about to hurl himself at Utter's head, when from the corner of his eye he glimpsed the man called Midas.

Midas had remained perfectly still, a cruel smile on his thin lips. The thugs, waiting for his orders, did likewise. Now the colonel knew he had played his cards well, for Midas' bony arm was lifting as he leveled a gun at Utter. Half the weight of the body was pulling at that trigger finger, Crum knew.

The gun blasted, not once but five times, as the yellow-faced fiend coldly poured lead into the jerking, twisting body of his accomplice. Only when Utter's body lay still and bleeding did he turn to Crum, an abstracted look of pleasure in his bloodshot eyes.

"Now," he said, as he reloaded, "what started that fire?"

"I broke open a cartridge," Crum lied, "and scattered the powder."

It served, at least for the moment. Midas turned, started snapping orders at his henchmen.

"Start loading the machinery in the truck," he ordered. "We've got to clear out of here now. I never was in favor of letting that woman in on the secret. Snap into it. I'll handle the remaining liabilities we have here."

Crum shuddered inwardly at the inhuman callousness of this cold fiend

who had just murdered his partner. But nothing in his well schooled features betrayed it, as he said blandly:

"It seems to me that since I warned you, a natural sentiment of gratitude should—"

Midas' cold laugh cut him short.

"My dear colonel," he said, "do I look like a man with a surplus of sentiment?"

A man of less aplomb than the little detective might have been jarred to silence by this reply. But Crum's sensitive ears had just heard the faint hum of an airplane motor. His rocket had been seen! Now he must stall. He shrugged, smiled.

"No," he admitted, "you don't. It was, in fact, my intuition of your power to make a coldly logical decision that tempted me to oppose Utter."

Midas laughed, stepped nearer, fingering his gun.

"Well, I'll say for you that you're a cool one."

Crum stared into that evil face behind which lay all the sentiments of a rattler. He stared past it, saw the thugs go grunting toward the door with a heavy piece of machinery, saw the faces of the three helpless victims looking to him for succor.

"Thanks," he said suavely. "A man has to die sometime. I prefer to die at the hands of a mental equal, rather than to have fallen into the hands of some stupid blunderer." He paused. "I don't suppose, by the way, you would consider it too great a risk to allow me to enjoy a smoke before—"

Midas smiled. "Turn around," he said tolerantly. "You're a rare bird. No, I trust I can defend myself adequately." He said that in a spirit of easy confidence, and Crum felt the touch of a knife, ripping his wrists free.

"Thanks," he muttered.

HIS right hand swung negligently past his side and up. He turned slowly, carelessly, with an air of fumbling for a cigarette. But his fingers were gripping the tiny *curare* pistol on his watch charm.

Midas was not off guard. He was a cat enjoying his play with a mouse, but a wary cat. His gun was up. But

he waited for Crum to turn completely around. That was a mistake. Crum didn't. Crum suddenly raised his left arm and fired under it.

The little gun made a faint *spat*, like a miniature firecracker. But Midas froze as a jaguar freezes when the faint prick of a *curare*-tipped arrow strikes him in mid-charge. And, as a jaguar falls, Midas fell. He was to all practical purposes a dead man when he hit the floor.

Crum, on the contrary, was much alive. To seize the knife and rip his ankles free was a matter of seconds. To grab the loaded revolver required another. Then feet scraped outside the door. The first of the thugs came in. Crum sent a slug into his belly and dived for the light switch.

The other hoods had sprung back instantly. Now their guns blasted from around the sides of the door. Crum dropped, took as careful aim as he could, and fired. But the targets were poor. Presently his gun was empty. And he had no cartridges to reload.

He hoped they didn't know it. There was not a sound in the dark room. Carey Biggs was gagged. Cash Biggs and the girl maintained the silence of terror. Crum moved catlike about the room, searching for another weapon. If he could just hold them off for a few more minutes! That rocket must have been seen. Rescuers would be hurrying—

"Hey, he's outa ammunition!" a hoarse growl came from the door.

The beam of a flash bored in through the darkness. Crum dived for the shelter of the opposite wall. Slugs chased him like bees. It wouldn't be much longer now.

Then a sound broke in from outside. A fusillade of shots rang out. The thug holding the light dropped with a groan. The other whirled. His gun spat once. Running feet blended with the firing now, shouts rang out.

Crum snapped on the light as the rescue party burst in. Aga, his big assistant, came first. Walden followed close at his heels. Armed detectives swarmed in the doorway.

"We got here as quickly as we could, after we saw your rocket sig-

nal," Walden panted. He suddenly caught sight of the dead Bronson Utter. "Utter! But I thought—"

"Get these people free," Crum said. "Then I'll explain."

Gilda Hayden and Carey Biggs were speedily released, and the way young Biggs rushed to grasp Gilda in his arms showed that he was unharmed.

They turned to Cash Biggs next. The silver plating, sprayed on over his clothing, had not gone higher than his legs, and aside from his drugged condition, he appeared sound. Meanwhile the searching detectives had found the suitcase containing the good money.

As they rode back to town, Crum gave his explanation in full. He learned that Cordelia Biggs had made a desperate effort to escape from the detectives guarding her, but had been restrained. As soon as they reached Headquarters, the woman was brought in, and once Crum had exposed the inside working of the plot to her startled ears and reported the death of Utter, she broke down and made a full confession of her part in the plot.

Crum was a weary but contented man as he sat over cigars and coffee with Walden later. Already the newspaper presses were rolling out the sensational story, and Crum had managed to convey to the reporters the cleverness of Commissioner Walden whose modesty restrained him from claiming for himself his full share of glory.

For Colonel Crum himself, a case finished was a case forgotten. Midas and his devilry were already ancient history. What he was interested in at the moment was a story Walden was relating—a queer rumor, nothing more, of an astonishing happening in a nearby city, which had reached the commissioner's ears.

Walden thought it amusing, but scarcely worthy of belief. He didn't know that Crum was already planning his departure.

Next Issue: COLONEL CRUM in
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THE SEWING SKELETON

HISTORY has recorded many strange dreams of women, such as that of Caesar's wife, who saw her husband murdered; Joan of Arc, who dreamed she was leading the legions of France years before it happened; Madame du Barry, who dreamed of her king's doom; and Josephine, who saw Napoleon defeated in Austria. But one of the strangest dreams recently brought to attention was that of a six-year-old girl who was coming to America on an English ship. The name of the vessel cannot be revealed for obvious reasons.

On the morning after the first night at sea, the little girl's mother asked her how she had slept. The child answered: "I had a funny dream, Mommy. I saw a skeleton sewing on a sofa."

The mother laughed. "You must have been thinking of that lady who was knitting on deck yesterday. I admit she was painfully thin."

That afternoon the mother was being shown around the ship by the Captain, whom she knew well. The child was with them. They had visited the Captain's cabin, the bridge and other points of interest, and finally they reached the radio room.

As the child came in, holding her mother's hand, she saw a sofa at the far end of the room. Her eyes sparkled.

"That's the sofa I saw in my dream, Mommy—where the skeleton was sewing."

"What's that your child said?" asked the Captain, who believed in psychic phenomena. And the mother laughingly explained.

But the Captain didn't laugh. He spoke to the child: "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said, "only there weren't any cushions on it." And the child ran over to the sofa and pulled the middle cushion off. "See," she said, pointing to a crudely sewn seam in the lining, "that's what the skeleton was sewing on."

The Captain grew serious and asked the radio man what had happened to the sofa, and when it had been repaired.

There was no explanation. The Captain and the radio man examined the sofa carefully. Then the radio man exclaimed: "There's a watch ticking inside." And with that he tore open the lining.

Inside was a time bomb evidently set to go off at mid-ocean. In no time it was removed and thrown overboard.

That child's strange dream had saved the ship from fire and perhaps destruction due to loss of radio equipment which would have been blown to bits by the explosion. Was it coincidence, or a strange psychic premonition brought to the mind of a sleeping child who had faith?

THE FACE IN THE EYE

THERE has been much discussion in the past on the psychic quality of an animal's eye, especially the eyes of horses, dogs and cats. There are many cases on record of animals' eyes reflecting images when seen under certain light. In fact, it has been said that a horse's eye is as strange as a crystal ball.

This statement seems to have been veri-

fied by a happening on a farm of Joshua Morton in Alberta, Canada.

One summer afternoon, Mrs. Morton stepped from her farmhouse porch and walked past the meadow fence to gather eggs in the chicken coop near by. As she approached the fence, a favorite horse of the Morton's, named Jerry, came galloping up to the fence from the far side of the meadow, and whinnied strangely.

"Sorry, Jerry," said Mrs. Morton, "I haven't any apples for you now."

But the horse continued to whinny softly, almost pathetically, and Mrs. Morton went over to him and stroked his head. The sun was shining brightly. As she looked at the horse's near eye, she was startled. She saw her husband's face quite distinctly, as though he had been standing beside her looking into the horse's eye which reflected his image.

"Joshua!" she cried, as she looked to the far side of the meadow near the brook where her husband had been digging post holes.

But she couldn't see him. Sensing something was wrong, she ran to the brook where she saw her husband lying on the bank. He was choking. His face was blue. Instinctively she pounded his back to help him catch his breath.

In a moment he gasped freely, and very soon he was breathing again. After the exhaustion caused by almost choking to death, he was able to tell his wife what had happened:

"I was chewing on some salted peanuts I had in my pocket and one lodged in my wind-pipe. When I couldn't breathe, I tried to jump on Jerry to get to the house so you could help me—but I couldn't make it. I must have frightened the horse, for he ran from me and I dropped, exhausted. Thank God you got here in time."

What caused that reflection in the horse's eye cannot be explained, of course. Was it a telepathic message or some strange psychic power of the horse's mind which had realized its master's danger? Who knows? But horse lovers will give full credit to the horse whose whinny attracted the wife's attention.

THE WATER SPIRIT

SOME few miles outside of Mexico City there is a deep lake. In some parts it is almost impossible to reach bottom due to the lake being located in an age-old crater. Swimming had been prohibited in the lake, for the treacherous currents were dangerous even to expert swimmers.

But a fearless and daring young boy, Carlos, the son of a prominent Mexican, went swimming one hot afternoon with several friends. Suddenly he disappeared—and though his frantic pals kept diving in various places, his body was not recovered.

His heart-broken parents searched for several days, but in vain. The body had disappeared forever, evidently being swept to some hidden cavern many fathoms below and held by currents of the deep.

The parents resigned themselves to their

[Turn page]

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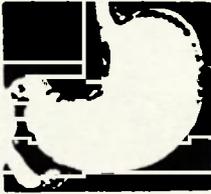
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loss. But great was their agony not to be able to give their son a religious burial.

One evening, about five nights later, guests at the Mexican's home were talking about the drowning. A Hindu prince was present. As the story was being told to him, one young lady spoke up, saying that that afternoon, while driving past the lake, she had seen a black swan upon it. Instantly the Hindu asked her if black swans were common on that lake. "No," answered the guests—no one had ever seen a black swan there before.

"Then," said the Hindu, "if you will take me to that lake, I think I can find that boy's body."

The next morning, several people accompanied the Hindu and the girl. The young lady pointed to the exact spot where she had seen the black swan.

Without warning anyone, the Hindu jumped in the water and swam to the spot. Then he disappeared.

The onlookers gasped. Had the Hindu committed suicide? And as two minutes passed, they were sure he had become another victim of the dreaded lake.

But they were wrong. Suddenly the Hindu came to the surface. In his arms was the body of the missing boy.

It was not until after the funeral that the Hindu reluctantly revealed this much and no more: "You did not see a real swan, Senorita. I cannot tell you what you did see, but it told me where I could find the boy."

Investigation of Hindu lore has revealed this belief: "A Black Swan hovers directly over him who awaits entrance into seventh heaven."

THE PSYCHIC SHADE

THERE is a husband in Illinois, a fingerprint expert, who does not laugh at his superstitious wife any more. He changed his attitude several months ago.

Years ago when the wife's mother was alive, she too was superstitious. Whenever some odd noise or action occurred around the house she believed it symbolized a spiritual message. The daughter, never certain, did not ridicule her mother. The son-in-law did.

Later, the mother died, and there was little talk in the household about psychic phenomena. The husband was a practical man.

One evening, as the husband and wife were sitting in the living room, the shade in the large window rolled up suddenly. The action could not be accounted for. The wife said that perhaps it was a sign. But the husband snapped: "Don't be like your mother."

The next day, when the wife learned that her brother had died the same moment the shade had flown up, she mentioned it to her husband.

"Just a coincidence," was all he answered.

But the wife would often refer to it in company. And the husband would always ridicule the whole business. Most people agreed with him.

A few months ago when friends were gathered at the home the subject of psychic phenomena came up—and as usual, the husband told, in detailed mockery, all about the window-shade coincidence. When he looked around to see how his wife was taking the ridicule, she had left the room.

Later he found her in the bedroom, weeping. She was closing the bureau drawer.

"Why the tears—and what have you put in that bureau drawer?" asked the husband.

The wife answered: "I keep that shade in the drawer—I had another put in its place."

The husband couldn't understand it. "That was a new shade—just because of your silly sentiment and superstition, you don't have to treasure it."

"But I do," said the wife. "It has mother's fingerprints on it—and you know she died long before we bought it. I didn't want to tell you because you would only laugh and say I had put them there."

"Let me see it," demanded the husband. As he examined it, his face whitened. There on the bottom of the shade were the distinct prints of his mother-in-law, for he had remembered them well, having examined her fingerprints and those of his wife's when he first took up his profession. He knew how impossible it was for his wife to fake the mysterious prints.

THE LINE OF LIFE

ALTHOUGH palmistry is one of the oldest of mystic sciences, it is frowned on by many, mainly due to the philosophy of fatalism which it implies. But there are others who claim that everyone has two fates just as one has two hands. No one is doomed if he has sufficient will to prevent it.

This has been brought out very clearly by a true story sent to this department by that well known author, Carl Rathjen of Alhambra, California. Let Mr. Rathjen tell it in his own words:

A friend of mine went to see a palmist recently—not a professional one, but a man who reads palms as a hobby and therefore was more interested in true readings. The palmist told my friend many things which were true, but my friend was skeptical. He didn't take much stock in the lines of his hand.

The palmist studied my friend's hand carefully and then reported that my friend was going on a trip shortly.

"Yes," was the reply, "I am going on a hunting trip."

Then the palmist answered seriously: "Do not go, or you will lose your life."

My friend laughed, but his wife didn't. The palmist made my friend look at his own hand carefully. At the spot representing his present age, there was a distinct break in the line of life—a gap of about one-eighth of an inch. Again the palmist warned him not to take the trip.

My friend went ahead with his plans in spite of his wife's pleadings. Finally after

[Turn page]

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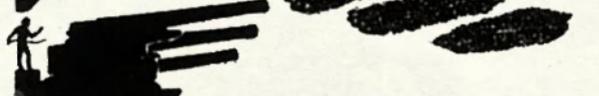
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his wife had begged him not to go for her sake, he agreed to call it off, for his wife had worked herself into a highly nervous condition.

So his companions went on the trip without my friend. As they left, he condemned himself for being such a weakling. But it wasn't many hours later when news shocked him. His four companions were all killed in an automobile accident. Anyone in that car would have met death, so terrible was the impact.

But that's not all. My friend still believing it was all coincidence and not palmistry prediction, refused to give credit. However, a few days after the funeral of his friends, he and his wife happened to look closely at his hand. The break in the life line had closed up. Now there was no break at all.

This disproves the idea of fatalism attached to palmistry; and it is believed by real palmists that one hand shows what might happen, while the other hand shows how a person has altered or governed that trend, by will-power and decision.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra:

I have heard that if one steals a ride in a

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hearse, that he will die within a year. Is this true?

Sid Garfield.

Dear Mr. Garfield: This is an old English superstition; but a case was reported recently in the New York papers as follows: "The theft of a hearse by Joseph Monaco, 18, of 7805 18th Ave., Brooklyn, turned out to be a prophetic act today when Joseph was found dead of heart failure in his cell in Raymond Street jail."

Dear Chakra:

I have been told that it is possible to look inside of your own brain. Is there anything to it?

Mabel Levis.

Dear Miss Levis: Yes. Here is how it can be done. Look out a dark window or at a black-board, holding a lighted candle in your right hand so that the flame is just below the tip of your nose, about six inches from the face. Turn the pupils of your eyes, upward, fix your gaze upward about a 60 degree angle, then move candle backward and forward in front of face, keeping it in such position that the flame is parallel with the eyes. This produces a counter irritation of the retina—the rhythm of the optic nerve causes a reflex action of the brain, and you can see the part of the brain that rests against the skull in the back of the head with its heavy channels and small blood vessels. Certain Hindus create trances by this means, or self-hypnotism.

Dear Chakra:

I have often seen an aura around people. Can I tell which is good and which is bad?

Henry Viller.

Dear Mr. Viller: According to those who have written on the subject, the blue aura is best—while the smoky red shows a bad temperament or sickness. A black aura closing in on one indicates death within a fortnight. See the recent book entitled SCARE Me, by Ed Bodin. It has a chapter on auras.

Dear Chakra:

Can you tell me the name of the book which tells about a man's conversation with his dead wife through a medium?

Helen Gibson.

Dear Miss Gibson: Yes—it is called "The Unobstructed Universe," by the prominent author Stewart Edward White.

—CHAKRA.

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To share in this series of experiments, all you need do is to submit a question by letter or on the coupon below. The answer to your problem will enable you to verify or refute psychic impressions.

Questions about health, divorce, and speculation are excluded. Only questions that comply with this stipulation are considered eligible for an impression reply. Please enclose a stamped envelope, and accompany each question with ten cents in stamps or coin to help defray the cost of this test.

Here are a few authentic questions and answers from this popular program!

Amelia P., born September 16, 1903, asks: When will my brother come home?

Answer: February.

Frank G., born November 4, 1895, asks: Will I receive my share of the inheritance soon?

Answer: March seems favorable.

Bertha K., born January 8, 1910, asks: Will I find my missing rings?

Answer: No.

Warren E., born May 24, 1900, asks: Will my father sell his farm?

Answer: In the late spring.

Loren F. G., born September 29, 1904, asks: When will I marry?

Answer: Early fall.

Carola S. T., born July 4, 1897, asks: If I take a civil service examination this spring will the results be favorable?

Answer: Yes.

Vall J., born February 25, 1892, asks: Will my sister come to America to live or go elsewhere?

Answer: The vibrations are favorable for America.

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I submit the following question for psychic research, and am enclosing 10c to help defray cost of this investigation; also an envelope for reply. (Please place stamp on return envelope.)

Name

Street

City..... State.....

My birthday is.....
Month Day Year

My question is.....

TM7

SOUVENIR OF DOOM

(Concluded from page 85)

It's just a little thing—a couple of inches of soft metal. You can easily bend it.

Or unbend it. That's my joke. Unbend it, don't you see? And if I ever did decide to kill myself, it would be amusing to use my souvenir to accomplish it. I guess it would work. I don't know. It might be interesting to try. If I can keep from groaning or crying out. . . . I guess you bleed to death pretty quick if you go at it right. If I don't make any noise, they won't find me till morning. Surely I ought to be dead by then. Suppose I try it. . . .

* * * * *

The body of John Carse was found weltering on the floor of his cell. His bleeding wrists and his neck were slashed with jagged cuts. His scrawled little manuscript lay on his table.

"Judging by what he wrote," one of the policemen said, "seems like he was always just plain nuts. Eh, doc?"

"I wonder," the physician murmured. "There's something queer about this that he's never told."

"He sure knew something about anatomy," a younger doctor said. "With that little weapon he managed to open both of his external jugular veins—and by the look, he stabbed into one of the internal jugulars also."

"Souvenir of horror—what the devil's he mean by that?" the jailer demanded.

The little piece of soft metal still was clutched in Carse's blood-drenched fingers—two parallel prongs of the pliable metal, pressed close together, with a tiny U-shaped top. Despite the fresh blood on it, the metal pin showed that it had been rusted and was thick with grime and grease.

"A cotter pin," one of the men murmured. "A big one, that looks like it had been used plenty, too. Now what the devil—"

The cotter pin which Carse had taken from Wilkes' automobile, that morning just before he said good-by to Wilkes in the garage. And the new pin which Carse had put in that old-fashioned steering post, and did not fasten by bending it, would so easily jog out, rounding mountain curves.

And Carse had kept the old one—his souvenir of horror.

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| 28x3.25-18 | 2.45 | 1.15 |
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| 28x3.25-21 | 2.50 | 1.15 |
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| 6.50-18 | 2.75 | 1.05 |
| 28x3.50-19 | 2.75 | 1.15 |
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| 8.00-22 | 2.15 | 1.95 |
| 7.00-20 | 4.60 | 1.65 |
| 7.00-22 | 4.15 | 1.75 |
| 8.25-20 | 4.75 | 4.95 |

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H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

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RELIEVED
QUICKLY**

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

**H. F. SENT
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Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



**PAY NOTHING
TILL RELIEVED**

Send Coupon

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28 at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

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

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

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Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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