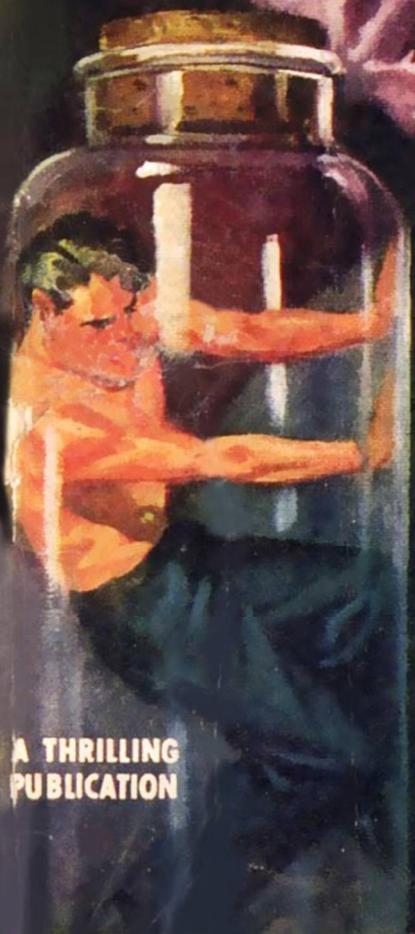


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THRILLING MYSTERY

Vol. XIV, No. 2

March, 1940

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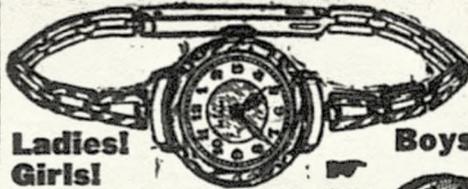
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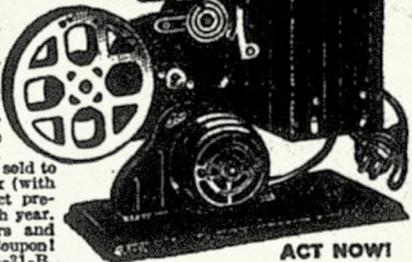
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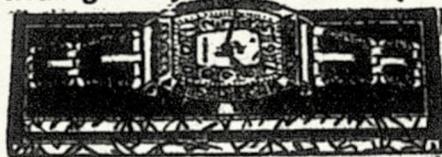
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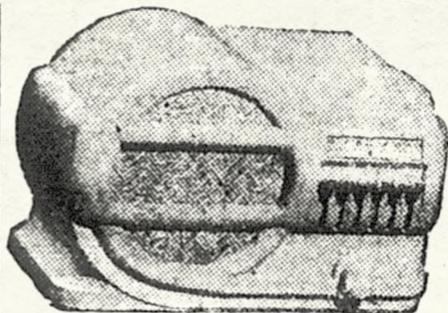
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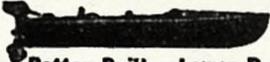
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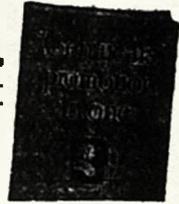
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OFF WITH HIS HEAD

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Death from Beyond," "The Swamp Thing," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Sinister Basket

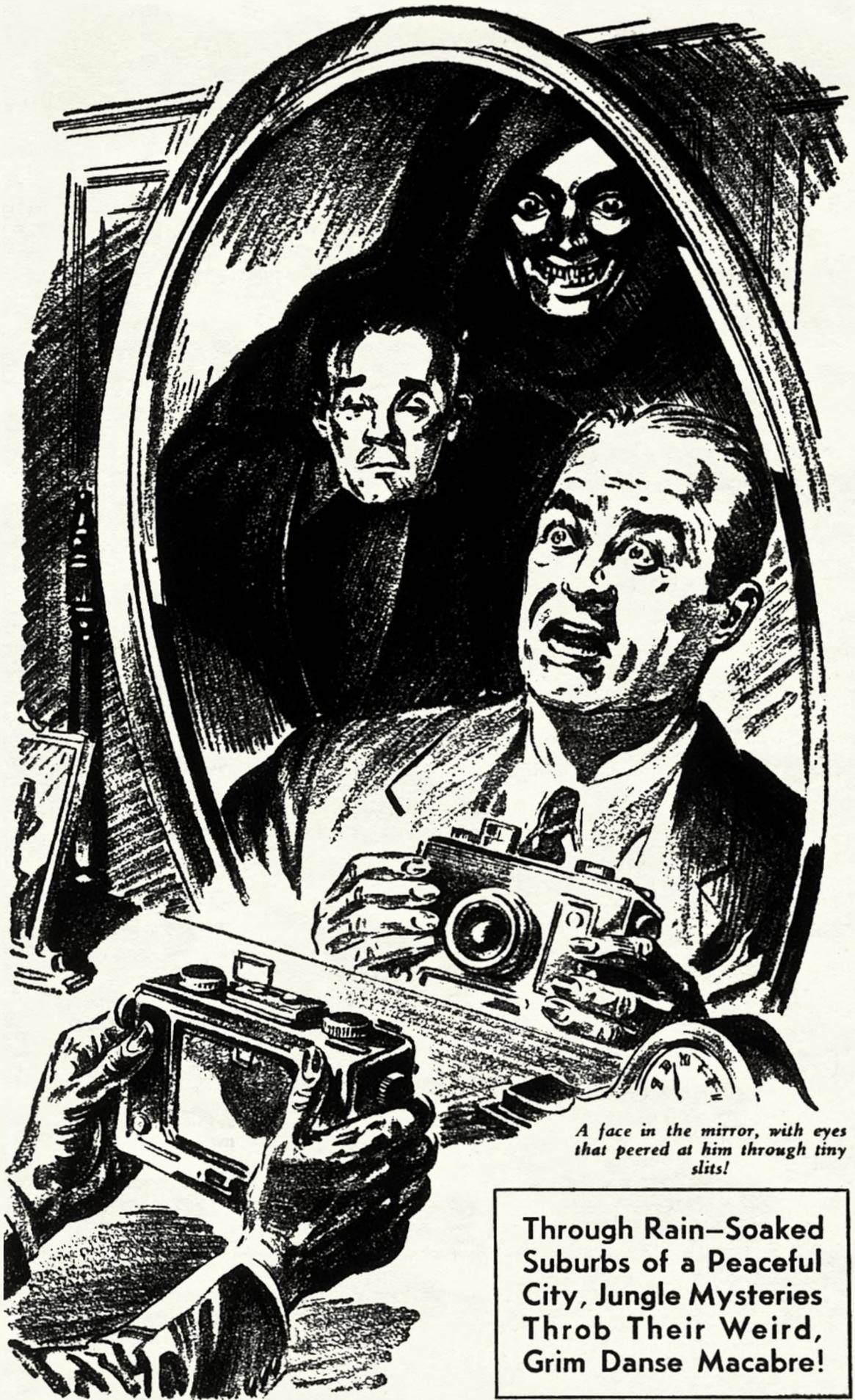
A MAN sat waiting while the customs inspector rummaged through his suitcase. Passengers milling about the pier glanced his way briefly and looked back, faces a little shocked. His clothes hung on his emaciated frame like limp towels on a rack. The cheek and jaw bones of his

face seemed barely covered by the dry, leathery skin and his mouth was set in a thin, grim line of fortitude.

This impression was borne out by the unwinking intensity of the eyes that stared out of deep sockets in his cadaverous face and by the iron grip with which his long, bony fingers hooked around a strangely woven basket resting in his lap. It might have held his life's blood.

The intensity of this man's gaze shook prying eyes loose. There was





A face in the mirror, with eyes that peered at him through tiny slits!

**Through Rain-Soaked
Suburbs of a Peaceful
City, Jungle Mysteries
Throb Their Weird,
Grim Danse Macabre!**

almost a glare of madness in his stare. He appeared to be a person who had burned up all the energy in his system in the quest of some unholy grail. His gray-streaked hair, worn long, was the only thing about him that moved as the wind, sweeping in off the bay, whipped everything else to life.

The customs man stabbed a finger at the basket in the passenger's lap.

"What's in that, sir?"

"What—what did you say?" The gaunt figure seemed to have been shocked out of a sort of trance. "This basket? Oh, do you have to look in it, too? It's nothing of value, I assure you. Nothing of value to anyone but me. I give you my word!"

A quiver ran through his body, communicated itself to his thin hands which began to shake.

"Sorry. Only doin' my job, sir. You'll have to open up."

"Yes. I'll have to, I suppose."

Those bony fingers began fumbling at a thin string of rawhide and soon lifted the cover of the wicker case. The customs man lost his smile and blood drained from his face. He called to another brass-buttoned official.

"Bill, come here."

The two men peered into the basket. "Good grief!" exclaimed one. "That's an awful lookin' thing. What on earth does anybody pick up things like that for, huh?"

The thin man put the cover back on the basket and secured it fast with the rawhide string. "You are—satisfied?" he queried, a crooked twist of a smile making a gargoyle of his cadaverous face. "I can—go—now?"

"Yeah, you can go."

The customs men watched with eerie fascination as the skeletonlike passenger got to his feet and walked slowly away.

"That guy'd give a snake the creeps. A good push an' he'd fall apart, Hank."

"You said it. I'm going to have nightmares tonight."

THE emaciated man who had just passed through the customs sat down in the waiting room. He looked down at the little basket and spoke to it in a hollow voice as though it were human.

"It has been a tiresome trip, hasn't it?" he said. "But we still have much to do. I wonder will they be glad to see us?" His lips peeled away from his teeth in a laugh that was truly horrible.

"I have years in which to do my work. They will live long," he mumbled through bloodless lips.

* * * * *

"Strange!"

The man who spoke stood at the edge of a thick wood. He was tall and gangly with a suit of rough tweed covering his lean frame. A slouch hat, pulled well down over his forehead, failed to hide the patches of white hair at his temples.

He held a flashlight in his hand and was playing the beam on a gruesome thing on the ground. The headless carcass of a big dog. Moisture dripped through the leaves of the trees and made a bleak, monotonous sound in the gathering dusk.

The mists coming hard on the heels of a twenty-four hour rain kept thickening perceptibly. When the big man's boots shifted, they made sucking sounds in the sodden turf.

"Head cut off as clean as a whistle. But where is the head?"

His companion, a young, compactly built man, knelt beside the thing on the ground and shook his head. The flashlight's shard illuminated his strong, lean-jawed face. His eyes were puzzled and harbored a vague expression of horror.

"It might be around here somewhere, the head, Dale." He bit his lips and got to his feet. "We'll look around. No knife did that. Why would anyone want to kill a dog in that fashion?"

"Don't know, unless he was a crazy man."

"I'll check up at the asylum over at Grantboro," the younger man said.

He was Detective-sergeant Bill McClarin from Haynesburg Police Headquarters. He had come over to Simeon Royle's farm to buy one of Royle's famous sugar-cured hams. Everyone within a radius of forty miles was in the habit of coming to get those hams. He had stopped his car a half mile from the farmhouse when Royle hailed him from the edge of the woods.

Royle and McClarnin began to search through the sodden short growth in the lee of the woods. The farmer's flashlight kept sweeping a path for them. Suddenly Royle stopped and he said in a husky voice:

"Look—over by that stump."

IT was the dog's head and its bared white fangs gleamed in the dusk. McClarnin took the flash from Royle's hand and got down on his knees again.

"Look at that, Royle," he said, "the way the neck bone was severed. A surgeon, a veterinary couldn't do any better. This is a damn strange thing all right. What kind of man would do a thing like this?"

Simion Royle sucked at his pipe and the sludge in it made a liquid sound. His big hands trembled. "To a dog, Sergeant, yep. What's stoppin' a crazy man from tryin' it out on a . . ." He left the grim question hanging in mid-air.

McClarnin nodded. "I'll take a look around this neck of the woods—just in case."

Simion Royle followed the plain clothes man to the car out in the road.

"It wouldn't hurt to keep a close watch on things, Royle." McClarnin said, driving up to the farm, "Forewarned is forearmed, you know."

The detective drove in through a wide gate, threw the engine into second and climbed to the top of a knoll on which stood Royle's farmhouse. There were a hundred and twenty acres or more to Mountain Spring Farm, Royle's place.

Near the house was a long, low wooden structure and two or three smaller sheds. A great field of corn stretched down from the knoll to the fence that hemmed in the back section of Royle's holdings.

In the shadows stretching out from the heavy woodland to the east were the farm sties. McClarnin could hear the faint squealing sound coming from that direction as he followed the farmer into the smokehouse.

When McClarnin was ready to leave, he said to Royle:

"If you meet any of your neighbors, tip 'em off, Royle. Maybe nothin' to this thing but. . . ."

"You can bet I will. Killin' a dog ain't nothin' unusual. But the way it was done, Mac!" He shook his head.

Just forty-eight hours later a man, driving a small ramshackle car along a lonesome road four miles out of Haynesburg, saw a delivery truck pulled up alongside the road. He knew that car even before he saw the letters painted on its green sides.

Eddie Pryne would be the driver of the grocery truck and he wondered why Eddie was parked in that lonesome place at that time of night. Braking his ancient contraption, he called out:

"He-e-ey, Eddie!"

For awhile he heard no sound. Then a disturbance in the brush alongside the road startled him. Something, someone was trying to crawl back into the road. A groan cut into the drone of an idling motor. Then the rustic saw Eddie Pryne's head, one of his blindly clawing hands, and he jumped clear of the high-bodied old car and went to the man's aid.

The driver of the delivery truck wore a light coat that was stained with blood. There was a gory band around his neck and he collapsed when the countryman got his strong arms about him and pulled him out of the ditch.

DECTECTIVE Bill McClarnin sat beside Eddie Pryne's bed in the hospital all during the night. The house surgeon had told that the injured man had a narrow squeak.

The necklacelike cut was over an eighth of an inch deep, and a little more pressure with the apparently deadly weapon would have severed the jugular vein. Undoubtedly something had scared Pryne's assailant before the completion of his horrible task.

It was already dawn when Pryne became partly conscious and began mumbling things. McClarnin leaned over close and gently plied him with questions which he answered in throaty monosyllables.

"Man in the road—hailed me—stopped." A long pause. "Dragged me—out an'—walked with a sort of stoop—dirty big teeth, I think. His eyes—his eyes—long, stringy hair and then something 'round my neck—squeezing—squeeze. . . ."

A nurse in attendance placed a quieting hand on the patient's arm and looked warningly toward the detective.

McClarnin got up and turned to a cop on duty.

"A madman is at large, Burgess. I found out yesterday. Not from Grantboro but over in the next state. Homicidal maniac. Name's Thorgensen. Got a gun somehow and shot an attendant. Just fits this description of Pryne's. We'd better comb this county."

Haynesburg police conducted a search that lasted for four days but nothing came of it. Citizens living beyond the crowded areas of the big mid-western city went abroad with fear stalking them every step. Parents kept children within four walls and slept with weapons close at hand. Newspaper writers grimly labeled the maniac *The Headsman*.

McClarnin stopped in at Royle's during his patrolling of the country roads around Haynesburg. He was talking with the gentleman farmer in Royle's small office when the door opened and a man, who had to stoop to pass through the doorway, walked in without knocking. McClarnin felt a chill go through his frame when he saw the hired man raise a blood-smeared hand to remove his hat.

"What do you want, Lund?" Royle asked angrily. "Haven't I told you often enough to wash yourself and change your clothes after the butchering?"

"Yah, but I ban work good an' hard, Mister Royle. I come tell you I got two of the bigges' hams what I ever see from two of them pigs, yah. You want 'em in big smokehouse or maybe you got'n try out. . . ."

"I'll look at them in a few minutes," Royle said. He turned to McClarnin as Lund went out. "I'm experimenting with a new process. If it works out, we'll have a ham that— But that's a secret for the present."

"How long has he worked for you?" McClarnin asked.

"Lund? Oh, seven or eight years. Best pig butcher you ever saw."

The detective trapped his lips and got up.

"Seems to like blood, that big ox," he remarked as he went out. "He even smells of it. Ugh!"

CHAPTER II

Consuming Death

THE suburban home of Martin Kelsey, city comptroller of Haynesburg, was a show place in and around the big mid-western city. A sprawling house of Norman architecture, the monument to the man's success had been erected on acreage that included a deeply wooded stretch through which a brook snaked its way. Now, in the spring of the year, the brook was full and the gurgle of its waters rippling along over its stony course reached into the house and filled the ears of its occupants night and day.

Kelsey, a well fed, well groomed man who had not yet seen his fiftieth year, sat in his den. The retreat was furnished with massive old pieces of carved mahogany that showed up richly against a warm red wall paper. A cheery fire crackled on the hearth of a stone fireplace that was equipped with wrought iron fixtures.

Over the large mantel was a stuffed wild boar's head, the glass eyes seeming to glare balefully down upon the man seated in his comfortable leather-upholstered chair. An aroma of excellent whiskey and expensive tobacco permeated the room and one would have had to look far to find a sanctuary more lavishly stocked with the solid comforts of life.

Martin Kelsey had a hobby that he reveled in. Photography. He was fumbling with a camera as he sat there and every once in a while he would glance at his reflection in a full length mirror that he had placed against the opposite wall.

It was a ruddy, square face that looked back at him. Easy living had begun to put a layer of fat over his jowls although there was still strength in the set of the jaw. The eyes were widely spaced under shaggy brows and held a direct look.

A full-lipped, somewhat sensual mouth was the only feature of the face not exactly prepossessing. Altogether the reflection was of a man who had

lived first ruggedly, then hard and a little too well to preserve the characteristics with which he had started out.

"Light's about right," Kelsey said with a grunt of satisfaction. "Ought to be quite a picture."

The door opened and a woman came in. The fragrant scent of jasmine blended with the cigar and whiskey smell as she moved into the room.

She was tall and slim with a skin like the petal of a gardenia, smooth and white and velvety. Her rouged lips were poutish, indicating a woman who was in the habit of securing her own way. Her penciled brows were arched a little too high above lustrous dark eyes that gave warmth and life to her cameo face. The black velvet gown which clung to her lovely figure matched the color of her hair and suited the cold spring night.

"Going out, 'Nita?" Kelsey asked and looked back at his reflection. "This should be quite a picture, eh?"

ANITA KELSEY made a weary gesture with a jeweled hand.

"Oh, why don't you think of something besides your picture-taking, Mart'?" she queried. "There's much more fun in Haynesburg. The Howlands and the Loring's will be at the club and a lot more of our friends. How can you lose your head over such. . . ."

"Lose my head?" Kelsey interrupted, chuckling. "Too late, 'Nita. I lost it a long time ago over you."

His wife laughed.

"So you have no head, Martin?" Abruptly her eyes took on a scared expression. "You shouldn't be here alone with that maniac running around loose. Martin, please—"

Kelsey got up and walked over to his wife. He took her in his arms briefly, feasted his eyes on her beauty.

"You run along and have your fun, honey, and I'll have mine. I can take care of myself." He kissed her and then held her off from him. "Been good, these last several years, haven't they, dear? Don't think of him any more at all?"

"Why should I, Martin? You've given me what he never could have given me. Women can fall in love with love, can't they? I'd be scrubbing in a

two-room flat if—if I hadn't gotten over being silly." She laughed and turned toward the door. "I'll send Tano in. You must be hungry."

"No, I'm not. If I need a bite, I'll go out and get me some of that ham in the refrigerator. Don't keep Tano on. It's his night off. Run along, honey, so you won't be late."

Mrs. Kelsey ran her fingers lightly over her coiffure.

"All right. Good night, Martin."

The man sighed happily when she had gone. Life certainly had been generous with him. Another year or two and his mind would be fully at peace. Time heals all things, even a conscience that has been needled by a hundred whispering, accusing demons. Kelsey hitched his chair forward and adjusted his camera.

Another interruption came almost immediately in the shape of Tano and the master looked annoyed as the white-coated servant caught his reflection in the mirror. Tano was short but heavily built. His face was squared under smooth yellow skin from prominent cheek bones to jaw line. Black straight hair was plastered down flatly on his head and resembled a skull cap, for not a single hair was displaced.

"Tano ver' sorry but *Senora* she ask—"

He untwined the long thin fingers that had been interlaced against his chest as he began to speak.

"I told her not. I won't need you any more tonight, Tano. I do not wish to be disturbed again. Is that clear?"

"*Si, si!*" Tano backed out, a slow smile breaking on his wide mouth.

Gusts of wind came at intervals and drove heavily needled branches against the roof of the Norman house with an eerie grating sound. In a nearby swale, frogs set up a hoarse madrigal that lent a discordant note to the rhythmic babbling of the brook.

But Martin Kelsey did not hear those sounds, did not sense the deadly quiet of the night. He was absorbed with his hobby, oblivious to anything else in the world inside or out. All the little intricacies that he indulged in to perfect his pictures had been brought into play and now he was ready to snap his picture.

He eased himself into the chair and lifted the camera. The image in front of him smiled back at him. Then—there was something else! Something—

KELSEY stiffened in the high-back chair. Another face than his own leered at him out of the mirror. A horrible, grinning face half hidden by the brim of a sodden black hat. Decayed yellow teeth were bared by those twisting lips. Eyes that burned like live coals seemed to sear him with their glance.

He wanted to scream. His throat was paralyzed. He fought to get his shuddering body twisted around to see if that terrible thing was really behind him but his nerve centers were congested with a sickening horror. Words bit into his very soul, words that came rocketing out of a past that he had almost rubbed out of his brain. He trembled, hearing them.

"Good evening, Kelsey. Remember Tom Rainsford? It was a bullet from your gun, I believe, that went right between his eyes. You can see the mark on his head now. They—they could not fix it up quite right. Look!" The voice was deadly, flat.

Martin Kelsey's eyes strained at their sockets. In the mirror he saw a thing that tore at his insides and made him deathly ill with a terror that had no bounds. A face in the mirror, no larger than a baseball, with eyes that peered at him through tiny slits.

Pale yellow hair streamed down on either side of that ghastly thing his grim visitor held in the palm of a bony hand. The lips were drawn back and there was the glitter of gold in a white tooth. Gold! The metal that made men kill.

Kelsey's breath came in short sobs as he looked at the thing.

Then a soul-tearing scream burst from his shuddering lips. His hands gripped the arms of the big chair and his numbed body strained forward as if thousands of volts of electricity were ripping, tearing, through him.

"N-No! No, it could not be . . . Nobody saw—nobody but. . . In heaven's name who are you?"

Strength born of desperation came to

Kelsey. There was a gun in the drawer of that desk near his elbow. He had to get it or—or—

His hysterically-edged senses felt something drop down over his head with the swiftness of a striking snake. Somehow he knew it was the end for him, even before he was jerked back into his chair and a searing strip of flame burned before his eyes, transcending all else. It bit through his flesh, cut off his breathing. Blinding crimson flashes cut him off from the world and he knew death was consuming him. Subconsciously he was aware of terrible pain, knew his eyes were tearing loose from their moorings. Blood in his mouth—warm—spurting out through his nose. Then all feeling was gone and—he was no more.

The terrible assailant stood looking down at his handiwork and a low, horrible laugh rocked the unearthly stillness. A clock on the wall hammered out the seconds, the ticking magnified a thousand times. Slowly the killer reached out and tapped the dead man on the shoulder. Kelsey's head fell off and rolled onto the desk beside the chair. The body remained upright, topped by a gory stub!

"One," counted the killer.

He took a small sack from his pocket, picked the head up by the hair with long white fingers stained with blood. He dropped the head into the sack, tucked it under his arm and glided noiselessly out of the room. In a few moments he had passed through a back door and had slunk off into the woods like a grim nocturnal beast of prey.

CHAPTER III

A Lost Art

GAIETY at a very smart night club in Haynesburg was reaching its zenith when a phone call came for Mrs. Martin Kelsey. She drained her glass at the cocktail bar and, with an impatient little gesture, followed the attendant to the booth.

"Yes—yes," she said into the receiver, "this is Mrs. Kelsey."

"This Tano, *Senora. Madre de Dios!* The master, he have lose his head!"

"He—what?" the woman gasped.

"Tano, I do not understand. You said. . . ."

"*Si, si, Senora.* The master he is dead an' the head of him, it is gone. Someone have kill him."

Anita Kelsey emitted a little moan and slumped forward. For a moment her body swayed, then fell sideways to the floor. The telephone receiver dropped from her limp fingers and banged against the wall of the booth. In an instant a club attache leaped to her side while a hat check girl ran into the cocktail lounge, screaming.

Detective Sergeant Bill McClarnin was the first to enter the room of horror. McClarnin had been around a long time and had seen death in its most violent aspects, but the sight of that headless body sprawled out in the big chair made him sick. Instantly he thought of the widow and he muttered hastily to a cop:

"Don't let her see this. Keep her out of here!

Anita Kelsey's screaming broke and ran through the house. There were sounds of violent scuffling, the exhortations of men who were holding her out there in the hall.

"We might find the head somewhere," McClarnin said. "Taken off as neat as you could imagine. Certainly no knife blade ever did it. Looks like the work of the madman."

As he spoke, the detective was searching the room thoroughly. Others took up the search outside and inside the large house. Police photographers went to work taking pictures of the entire scene, from the spot where the body was found to a birdseye view of the Norman structure from a distance under floodlights.

Not a clue turned up under more than an hour of investigation and McClarnin was forced to admit that he was stumped, at least for the time being. Tano could throw no light on the affair.

The servant repeated many times his story of having been given time off, of having pursued his usual pleasure of walking when off duty for a few hours. He had met no one on his walk, having stuck to little used roads. A search of the servant's upstairs room while he was under questioning revealed nothing.

Martin Kelsey's closest friends in life had gathered in the living room of the house. The faces of the men reflected the horror they had seen. Simeon Royle, who had been a close friend of Kelsey for years, was there along with Frank Grigsby, president of the Haynesburg Trust Company, and John Mahler, leading merchant of the city.

Grief was glaringly apparent in the gentleman farmer's eyes. He seemed to have aged ten years in the short time since his arrival. Mahler's thin countenance was ashen and his lips twitched nervously. Grigsby's teeth beat a tattoo against the rim of a highball glass as he tried to fortify himself with the dead man's whiskey.

"Knew Kelsey pretty well, didn't you, Royle?" McClarnin said, and Royle nodded. "Yep. Always thought a heap of him."

"Have any enemies you knew about?" the detective queried.

THE gentleman farmer shook his head slowly.

"Never spoke of any, but now I come to think of it, he often seemed to have something preying on his mind, 'specially years back. Once or twice I thought he was going to tell me some confidence when we were sitting here evenings, but he'd always change his mind, go back to sorting his pictures. Took some fine ones, Mart' did. Even won mention in the camera club awards a couple of years."

"I can't stand it here any longer!" It was John Mahler crying out hoarsely with a break in nervous tension. "There's nothing we can do for M-Martin. We all might be. . . . Look here, McClarnin, why can't you and your men find that maniac? None of us is safe."

"We'll get the Headsman, never you fear," the detective said grimly.

"Please God, before he starts on little kids!" Simeon Royle said with a choke in his voice. "You've got to do something, Mac."

McClarnin went back to the room where the coroner was putting things back into his bag.

"Death by strangulation—before the head was taken off," the medical examiner said. "My guess is as good as

yours as to the murder weapon, Sergeant."

McClarnin nodded, lips compressed.

"When Mrs. Kelsey is able to talk sanely, I'll get the full dope on her husband's past."

He paused to listen as shrill hysterical cries mingled with insensate laughter came from upstairs. "Lost his head—lost his head—ha-a-a-a—" was all that it sounded like. The detective-sergeant shuddered a bit as he stooped to pick up Kelsey's camera, which had fallen to the floor but was still intact.

"I'll leave you two men here to hunt for that head," he said to a couple of officers. "Might be buried somewhere around. If this was fiction now, I'd have found a dozen clues. There's nothing here but a lot of blood." He had noted one or two details that he did not choose to mention for the time being. "Of course we'll have to hold Tano as a material witness. We only have his word that. . . ."

"Him? That spig?" a homicide squad cop scoffed. "Take a head off that easy?"

"There's ways of doing that," McClarnin replied. "It's all in knowing how, I guess. Tano's only been with the Kelseys for six weeks and we can't let anything slip by us."

"Ain't you forgettin' about the maniac that's runnin' around loose?" the cop said, but the detective sergeant did not respond.

Another night! The night before the burial of what was left of Martin Kelsey, a corpse without a head in a sealed casket. A storm was raging over Haynesburg. Thunder rolled and lightning cut great rents in the drenched skies.

Rain beat hard against the roof of a big house on the outskirts of the city where Frank Grigsby lived. The owner was walking nervously to and fro in the living room, a frayed dead cigar gripped tightly between his teeth.

Grigsby's hair was prematurely gray but his thick brows were still black. He was tall and well built with a patrician mien. At the moment his face was flushed and sweat glistened on his forehead. His breath was heavy with the fumes of the liquor he had consumed.

"All right, all right, you say I'm talk-

ing crazily, Mahler," he exploded, pausing to glare down at the city merchant who was sitting on the edge of a leather upholstered chair. "But his head—Kelsey's head! Why? Godfrey, man, doesn't it tell you anything? You were down there with me almost twenty years ago. You know about heads down there! You saw—"

MAHLER nodded, slid his tongue nervously along thin lips that had gone dry.

"Yes, Frank, sure. But think back, man! There wasn't a soul who saw. Only a couple of natives and we finished them. A curse, trailing us to Haynesburg? Bosh!" The man reached for his glass with trembling fingers. "There was no curse following Pryne, was there? And he almost got it. It's just that maniac. McClarnin knows. . . ."

"Just the same, if we could find Kelsey's head, I'd feel better." He hurled his ragged cigar toward the fireplace. "Things can happen in this world. They do happen! Don't forget that a lot of white men have lost their lives trying to get what we. . . ."

Mahler's face was a mask of fear.

"I can't forget. I know one that lost his life."

"I wish to hell I had never seen that stuff sometimes. For years I slept only half the night. We lost our heads that night in the valley of the Patate, you and I and Martin Kelsey. Lost our h—"

Mahler yelled:

"Don't say that, you fool!"

His body began to shake and he braced himself by gripping the arms of his chair with all the strength that was in him.

Grigsby was already pacing the floor again, the storm in his soul raging more fiercely than the one swirling outside.

"It could happen to us. One of us next—" he muttered.

Mahler got out of his chair.

"I won't stay here and listen to you talking like an idiot," he blazed. "I—I'm going home."

Grigsby's laugh was not pleasant.

"Go ahead. It's a fine night for a murder, Mahler, in this storm."

His visitor cursed and sank down

again, seeking the solace of strong drink.

"We can't let ourselves get this way. We—we'll begin to talk in our sleep. I tell you we're making a mountain out of a molehill. It's that maniac. He happened to get Mart, that's all."

"If I only knew where he put the head, John," Grigsby said. "That's what sc-scaries me."

The doorbell jangled shrilly and both men started nervously, feeling the hair rise on their scalps. In a few moments Bill McClarnin was admitted to the room and he shook hands calmly with both men. He declined with thanks when Grigsby offered him a drink.

"Anything new?" Mahler asked.

"Something mighty interesting," the detective-sergeant replied. "I had the plate that was in Kelsey's camera developed and it's gruesome. He must have snapped the picture he was about to take when he was attacked. It shows himself with terror written on his face and the shadowy face of his attacker behind him. Looks like the maniac they've been hunting for but it's not quite clear due, probably, to moving of the camera."

Grigsby sank back into his chair with an explosive sigh of relief and McClarnin looked at him curiously.

"We still have to catch him, you know, but the dragnet we've got out ought to bring him in. You ought to lay off that liquor, however. Everybody in this town ought to keep a cool head for any emergency until a capture is made and people can be called safe."

"Good idea," said Mahler, setting his glass down, empty.

A SHORT silence. Then the detective sergeant said thoughtfully: "I've just been thinking about an association of facts. Mrs. Kelsey says her husband was on an expedition to South America many years ago into the head country. There's said to be a curse on white men who make a pass at Inca gold."

"Trying to make a big case out of a maniac's depredations?" Mahler said with a trace of sarcasm.

McClarnin glanced up quickly.

"No, but they do take heads down there in that country."

Grigsby laughed jerkily. "Ever see one of those natives, Mac? We have. John and I were with Martin on that expedition. Those natives are little guys. If one ever set foot in this country, he'd been followed by the newspaper photographers and could be tagged in a minute. Anyhow, a white man killed Kelsey—you know that! White men don't know how to take heads that way—the way they took. . . ."

"No?" queried the detective, raising his eyebrows. "Well, this white man took one that way," he said. "It's not been found yet."

There was a puzzled look in his eyes as he rose to go and Grigsby did not try to detain him.

Grigsby downed another whiskey after McClarnin had gone. He was really quite drunk and kept mumbling incoherently.

"There's one way—one way of findin' out, J-John, only one way. If one of us is next to g-go. . . ."

Mahler jumped up and shouted with exasperation:

"Y-You fool! Keep your mouth shut. I'm getting out of here."

Grigsby's fears remained to keep him company. His quaking scalden brain was alert enough to carry his thoughts back over the years that had passed to a dark and bloody night in a tropical land.

Three white men creeping toward another white man's camp on a jungle river just above the White Falls, in the very shadow of the white-crested Chimborazo, the valley of the Patate. The man sleeping beside a dying fire, two Indian sentries sitting close by. His *botelo*, on which the treasure was loaded, was dragged halfway up on the bank.

Then—shots booming through the steaming jungle. The blond man jumping to his feet to meet the bullet that chugged right between his eyes. Native guides weltering in their own blood. Three men, crazed with gold lust, feasting their eyes on the treasure.

Grigsby was back there again, standing in the lurid light of the murdered man's fire, with the sounds of the jungle swirling around him. The stirless heat burning through his insect-bitten body.

The whirring of myriad bats in the jungle fastness.

Ripe rubber seed pods exploding like gunshots all around him. Twining lianas groping for his shaking legs and hanging creepers pawing at his face. A goblin land where he had left his soul. The past rolled away from him, leaving him in the middle of his North American living room, trembling and afraid.

"If they could only—find—Mart's—head!"

Martin Kelsey's head was not far away. It stood on a little bench in a dimly lighted cellar and a man wearing a black skullcap was making a slit in the skin at the back of it. Coals of fire burned brightly in a little forge beside which was a sack of fine sand. The faint odor of camphor and spice was evident in the dank air of the place. A little basket, strangely woven, stood on a bench not far away from where the man was absorbed in his grisly task.

"An art that might be lost very soon," the feverish-eyed worker murmured. "Like the embalming secrets of the old Egyptians."

CHAPTER IV

Taker of Heads

THE funeral of Martin Kelsey attracted crowds, not only of well-known people but also of the morbidly curious. His old friends, Mahler, Grigsby and Royle, were among the pall bearers.

Once, as they were taking the coffin from the hearse to the grave in the cemetery, John Mahler stumbled and went to his knees and the casket nearly fell into a great mound of flowers near the yawning oblong hole.

He recovered himself quickly and did not see the look of impatience on Grigsby's face. Everyone else's attention was on the widow whose black-veiled head was bent with sorrow.

During the weeks that followed, Haynesburg gradually lost its aura of terror. No evidence of the maniac's presence was seen, so it was concluded that he had escaped the area entirely. The search for him was still being car-

ried on, but people were relaxing their vigilance.

McClarnin kept Tano spotted, for when he had first brought him to Headquarters for questioning, Tano had a wound on his hand that had been cauterized. Tano had said that Mrs. Kelsey's chow dog had bitten him. Tano had come from Quito in Ecuador, had Indian blood in him.

Since the death of his master, Tano had spent a lot of time in a low dive in Haynesburg, in the foreign quarter. One of McClarnin's men had talked to him there. Tano had been very drunk. All he could say was, "tsantsa-tsantsa" in a scared voice and he had taken another drink. . . .

JOHAN MAHLER and Frank Grigsby sat in the former's fishing lodge on a lake twelve miles from the city. Satiated with food and wine, they sat around a littered rustic table and beamed at each other. A lot of the terror that had been gripping them for the last few weeks had fled their eyes. Smoke from expensive cigars made little ringlets against the ceiling.

"Well, we need not think too much about poor Kelsey any more," Grigsby said. "We came near losing our heads too, eh?"

Mahler nodded, yawned a little. His hand seemed heavy as he knocked ashes from his cigar. The wine, he thought, was getting him.

"Might have made things nasty for ourselves, Frank. Get the authorities poking into things. Not so good. Have another glass of this wine. Tomorrow we'll do some real fishing."

Grigsby drank. When he put down his glass, his eyes began to get blurred. Beads of sweat oozed out of his face. What was wrong? Panic seized him, and a cold fear. He lifted a trembling hand with effort, then let it drop like a clump of wood against the side of his chair as his face drained white. Slowly, stark horror crept into his glassy eyes, protruding them fearfully. Mahler saw it, felt sick himself.

He tried to get out of his chair but a numbness that could not have come from mild sauterne was creeping over his limbs. He could barely move. His throat felt terribly dry and there was a

horrible singing inside his head, a whining in his ears. With terrible effort he flung chokingly at Grigsby:

"F-Frank — a doctor — something wrong. G-Get a doctor!"

But Grigsby could not say anything. He sat there like a graven image, his face getting the color of lead and his tongue was thick in his mouth like a great piece of soggy fungus. The terrible numbness kept getting worse.

The two men faced each other, their hearts gripped by an awful fear. Life was gradually slipping out of their eyes. But Mahler heard a voice and saw a face looking in at them from an open window. He tried to tell Grigsby what it looked like, while his heart contracted with terror.

He wanted to tell him about those searing, burning eyes that had the look of death itself. The horrible, grinning face under a sinister black hat. Twisting lips around yellow, worn teeth.

The words wanted to pour out from his panic-stricken mind, but only his bloodless lips moved a little.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Remember Rainsford? You would like to know where Kelsey's head is, wouldn't you? You shall look upon it, John Mahler, while you still can see a little. Looks strange, Kelsey does. His head would look very funny if it was sitting on his shoulders. Look—look at Kelsey's head!"

Mahler saw it, the terrible voice having shocked vision back into his eyes for a moment. The madman held it up by the hair. Dark hair streaked with gray. Slits for eyes, nostrils of the nose dilated!

Mahler couldn't scream out his terror. It curdled inside of him. His vision blurred and he could not see anything any more.

The killer took a long thin string from his pocket and he grinned like a gargoyle. The wind blew coarse strands of black hair across his face. His yellow snags of teeth flashed in the light of a gibbous moon. His laughter slipped toward the dark bank of the woods with a sudden gust of wind.

He was sure that Mahler and Grigsby were dead as he walked around the corner of the hunting lodge. He hurled his weight against a back door and the

latch snapped. He slipped inside.

The killer looked at the dead men in the chairs for several moments, as if the sight of them was food and drink to his body. Then he shuffled up behind Mahler and cut off his head.

Grigsby's head, too, was in the sack he carried when he slipped out of the room. He threw a lighted match in a pile of old debris in the kitchen.

"Nearly done, little Yellow Head," he muttered. "One more! The one that laughs when she hears your name. The one that wears jewels the color of your blood, bought with the gold that . . . Not much blood tonight, eh? She'll be surprised when she sees you, Yellow Head."

The wind came up quickly, whistled eerily through the high branches. Dark clouds began to sweep over the face of the moon as the headsman, madness hard upon him, broke swiftly through the brush. Rain began to pelt him when he came out on an open road. Thunder rolled out of the west and lightning tore at the roof of the world. . . .

BILL McCLARNIN and several white-faced men stood looking at the partly burned lodge, close to midnight. The cloudburst had checked the flames just before they had started eating into the two headless corpses.

The remains of Grigsby's and Mahler's repast was on the table near them. McClarnin, sick through and through, sat down for several moments to get the nausea out of him. His eyes stared at the remains of the food on that table, could not look anywhere else.

"Struck hard enough this time," he said, "Two at one smash—afraid if it had only been one, the other might run away and never come back. I wonder—the heads—why does he always take the heads?" Suddenly he got out of the chair. "You saw Kelsey's body some of you. A lot of blood. Look at those corpses! A little blood, yes. Not much. They were dead before they lost their heads!"

A man cursed, turned his eyes away. McClarnin said crisply to the medical examiner:

"I'll want autopsies performed on those bodies. You, George, wrap up all

that food that's left on the table. I think the fiend has made his first slip. That storm tripped him up."

Haynesburg shivered with horror all the next day. McClarnin, on the go every minute, stopped at Simeon Royle's farm. The first man he saw was the big stoop-shouldered man named Lund. The pig killer was washing bloody clothes in a big tub near the shack housing Royle's farm hands. McClarnin shuddered, walked to the big house and knocked on the door.

"Come in!" Royle called out.

Simeon Royle sat in the big kitchen reading a paper. A tall drab woman was putting dishes on the table. Her sharp eyes were weary-looking. She was Royle's housekeeper and she came over from a neighboring hamlet to work by the day. Generally she brought her little girl with her.

"You heard about last night, Royle? It was pretty terrible!"

Royle nodded, tamped the duttle out of his pipe.

"Heads took, huh? That's a hellish thing to do. Seen that spig of Kelsey's?"

"I looked for him," McClarnin said. "Can't locate him anywhere. But we'll pick him up. Bloody mess. Maybe not for a man who kills pigs, though."

"You mean you think someone," Royle asked, "of my—?"

McClarnin did not answer and his eyes wandered. The housekeeper's little girl came out of the adjoining room. She went to a window and looked out.

"Mommy, Mr. Lund's going to fix my dolly. Just as good as new."

"Don't bother me," the woman said and her eyes shifted toward McClarnin. The detective felt a crawling along his spine.

"My dolly lost her head," the little girl said to McClarnin.

Simeon Royle cursed under his breath. "All I hear, heads! Drives a man crazy!"

The door opened and Lund came in. He had a doll dangling from a big hand. McClarnin saw blood on his nails. Lund grinned and held up the doll.

"Looks funny, huh?" he grinned, his yellow teeth bared. "Such a little head on a big doll's body"—he laughed

strangely—"but we couldn't find the big head, could we, Ruthy? No. Looks like it shrunk, the little head."

"Get out of here, you big ox! You get too," the woman yelled at the frightened little girl. "I'm goin' out of my mind! Heads! Heads—cut off!"

BILL McCLARNIN'S flesh chilled. There was blood on the doll's clothes. Lund backed out, his eyes fixed on the doll hanging limply from the tearful little tot's hand.

"Lund fixed the doll. Lund—his blood," the detective thought.

He looked at the little girl cowering under a big shelf littered with odds and ends. An old clock, empty tobacco cans, an old coffee mill. A man's tattered sweater and an old violin with a broken string dangling.

The child reached up, caught at it. She let out a sharp cry and looked at her hand. The blood from the cut made her break out crying.

"It beats all hell what a kid can get into, don't it?" Simeon Royle said.

McClarnin nodded, felt that he had to get out of there. His scalp felt as if a million needles were pricking into it. The doll dropped there on the floor seemed a horrible thing at the moment. He mumbled something to Royle and went out.

He crossed the yard, went to that tub where Lund had been washing his clothes. The reddish water had not been dumped out of the tub. McClarnin looked around him, saw an old tin can near the bunk shack steps. He scooped up some of the bloody water and hurried away.

Lund, his eyes narrowed, watched him from a dirty window.

The detective drove back to Haynesburg, hurried to the police laboratory. The toxicologists told Mac that Mahler and Grigsby had died from some kind of poison that had them stumped.

"The food sample, was it in that too?" McClarnin asked.

The expert nodded. McClarnin ground his teeth together, sat down to review a lot of things he had been storing away in his mind the last few weeks.

He kept thinking about the doll. He pointed to the can he had brought with him.

"See if that's human blood!" he ordered.

Then he tried to stop thinking too much—about things that were too fantastic for this modern world. He'd better stick to facts, like those gruesome facts the toxicologists had given him.

A poison that could not be identified by these experts! There were people in remote parts of the world that brewed lethal poisons, the ingredients of which were unknown to modern science.

McClarnin was sure that the taker of heads was not far away. No doubt he had not been far away when he and Royle had looked down at the headless body of a dog. The killer had tried out his decapitator on the beast.

There was one way to trap the killer, a dangerous way. McClarnin was going to risk it. He hurried over to the Haynesburg Times.

"Print this!" he said to the editor, "McClarnin will have the headsman locked up within twenty-four hours or he'll turn in his badge. He knows who he is. He knows the way in which the man slipped up! Now I want to look through back numbers of your paper."

McClarnin found what he wanted. The issue of a Times dated almost twenty years back. He read:

Farrel Rainsford, father of Thomas Rainsford, young engineer who left this city several months ago to see the treasure of the Incas in Peru and Ecuador, has given his son

up for lost. Young Rainsford was said to have discovered an old map in a book purchased in a second hand store that was believed to have marked the definite location of a great cache of gold. It is thought that Rainsford's body is lying somewhere in the Amazon jungles, a possible victim of savage Indians.

"Hunh," McClarnin said. "Sometimes dead men come back. Rainsford did not bring the treasure back, but Kelsey and Mahler and Grigsby—There's the key to this!"

Frightened people gathered on street corners the next day, telling each other that it was Tano that McClarnin was going to bring in. The police had been fools not to have held onto the man once they had him locked up. Tano was the madman, a savage Indian covered with a thin veneer of civilization that could be shed in a twinkling of his dark eyes. McClarnin, however, knew that everyone did not think that way, that is, not quite everybody. . . .

CHAPTER V

Two Heads—One Basket

MISTS were hanging low over Royle's bottom lands and were slowly rising until they had nearly obliterated the farmhouse on the knoll. McClarnin stopped a quarter of a mile [Turn Page]

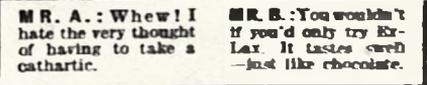
THE AWAKENING OF MR. A.



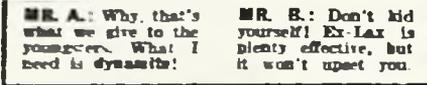
MR. A.: Whew! I hate the very thought of having to take a cathartic.



MR. B.: You wouldn't if you'd only try Ex-Lax. It tastes sweet—just like chocolate.



MR. A.: Why, that's what we give to the youngsters. What I need is dynamite!



MR. B.: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax is plenty effective, but it won't upset you.

LATER



MR. A.: Boy, I feel like a million this morning! That Ex-Lax sure is great stuff!

MR. B.: You said it, pal! We've been using Ex-Lax in our family for 30 years!

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle*! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax the next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family

10¢ and 25¢



from the gate and snapped off the lights of the car. He got out, seized with the clammy feeling that a hidden gleaming pair of eyes were watching him.

Slowly he climbed over a rail fence not far from Simeon Royle's row of sties where pigs were fattened for the kill. Maybe he should have gone right up to the knoll and called out a name. Call out, "Rainsford," and watch the man jump. Then he'd know for sure if he had the grim taker of heads.

That man would know by this time that the bodies of Grigsby and Mahler had not been burned. Nor the food left behind them. The remains of a ham, a sugar-cured ham. They knew how to cure the meat on that farm. Dangerous—look out, Mac! Keep your fingers close to your gun. A man knows you found out that the ham was poisoned with God knows what! Get into the open more—you fool!

Yes, the heavens had opened up with a torrent of water to trap a fiend. He, who had more power than the devil, had left evidence for McClarnin. Near a long smokehouse, the detective stopped dead in his tracks. A soggy step behind him, a sharp intake of breath. McClarnin turned, his hand streaking for his gun—too late!

A terrible loop was around his neck and it began biting through the skin. His breath was driven back into his throat and there was a roaring in his ears.

He thought, even though he was sure he was doomed, he would look funny without a head. Not as funny as the little doll's looked with a head ten times too small for its body. McClarnin plunged down into an abyss with the roaring getting fainter inside his head. This, then, was the way Kelsey had felt. Mahler and. . .

McClarnin opened his eyes and for several tortuous seconds he thought he was buried underground. There was a grisly dank smell and no light. His lungs felt as if heavy iron weights had been laid across them.

Slowly, things began to take shape. He sensed that his hands were bound behind him and he heard sounds. Then a light came to the subterranean chamber and a man set a lamp down on a small bench.

He turned and faced McClarnin.

"Simeon Royle!" McClarnin's words tore out of his throat even though he had guessed the farmer's real identity, been on the way to get him when that loop slipped around his throat.

The farmer shook his head.

"The name, McClarnin, is Rainsford. I think you have suspected that since Mahler and Grigsby—since the night the storm put out the fire!" The man's eyes were burning inside his head and gave off a wild feverish light. "You had the ham analyzed and you discovered it was poisoned. Clever, aren't you?"

"Yes," McClarnin grunted, trying to goad the man on. "And I guessed a lot more. You know, you were the only close friend of Kelsey's who wasn't terrified by all this, even though you first discovered the evidences of a killer whom you pretended not to know.

"The thing that's puzzled me is what have you been doing with those heads?"

Rainsford nodded. "I'll show you," he said, his voice cracking with a sort of fiendish glee.

He opened an iron door and McClarnin looked into another chamber that was reeking with wood smoke. The stuff came out into the place where he had been thrown and bit into his nostrils. Royle went inside the chamber, came out holding something by strands of hair.

"Meet Mr. Kelsey, McClarnin!" Royle laughed as the detective betrayed his horror.

McClarnin felt an icy chill and his teeth beat out a little tattoo. Kelsey's head, shrunken to a fifth of its size. Royle, the taker of heads, kept on talking.

"Be a few weeks before Mahler's and Grigsby's heads look like this. There's a woman, McClarnin. Her head, with that jet black hair, it'll be something to look at when. . ."

DETEKTIVE McCLARNIN said hoarsely: "You're a devil, Farrel Rainsford! Suppose Kelsey and the others did get the gold your son was after? That doesn't call for foul murders like these! How can a man be such a beast?"

"Easy enough," Royle said. "I

planned this revenge for a long time, McClarnin. N-No, don't try to struggle. Might have to kill you before I answer your question. Ha-a-h! I can hear sounds like a cat. I can see in the dark, have eyes in the back of my head. There is something else you must see. It will illustrate my story. Not a pretty story—"

He took a little basket, strangely woven, from a bench, began taking off the cover. He took out a little dried head, the size of an orange and it was tufted with long blond hair. He held it up close to McClarnin's horrified gaze, held it in his big hand.

"This," the gaunt man said, "was my son! Think, man—think of a father searching for his son through the hell of the jungles. Finding no trace. But when he reaches Guayaquil, stopping to look into the window of a curio shop—he finds him hanging by his hair on a hook!"

"W-Wha-a-a-a-at!" McClarnin croaked. "You don't mean. . . ."

"The little gold in the tooth there," the madman went on. "Look at the right ear where a piece of the lobe is missing. Got that playing when he was very young. Accidentally shot by a playmate. Yes, and look at that dark spot between his eyes, McClarnin!" Rainsford's voice reached a crazy pitch.

"Those savages down there in the jungle only cure perfect heads as a rule, but this one had yellow hair. They love yellow hair—So you feel sorry for Kelsey now, McClarnin? Got me three heads so far, three for one."

"B-But how could you know for sure, Rainsford?" the detective managed to get out of a leathery throat.

The man with the shattered brain placed the head tenderly in its basket.

"I made sure. That's why I waited so long. Before my son went away he told me just where that gold was hidden. Those three men left Haynesburg soon after him. They came back rich. But Tom, my son, never came back. I had to find out. And when I found my son's head, I swore I'd get to the devils that done him in.

"I stayed down there with the Jivaro, watching an old chief dry heads. Yes, McClarnin, I had to know how to do that! The others forgot about Tom's

father. He was a very obscure man, living on a little farm thirty miles north of Haynesburg. Why did I wait all these years? To make sure." He paused and eyed McClarnin fixedly.

McClarnin hardly knew he spoke. "Go on, Rainsford," he said.

"With the insurance money I collected on Tom's life, I started this farm—built it up for a purpose, only one purpose. To establish myself in the community as a citizen beyond reproach, to watch and scheme and plan. I had to be sure of the guilt of these three men. I talked with them, spied on them. Once I had the proof I wanted, I killed them with little compunction. Am I crazy? I don't think so. Ha-ha-ha-ha-a-a-a-a-a!"

MCCLARNIN had to say something. "And Lund, the escaped maniac, the dog without a head?"

"All part of a twelve year plan," the forbidding figure said. "I kept visiting the asylum, picked out a man. Told the keepers he was a relative. I planned his break. Then when he joined me outside, I killed him. It was easy to assume his identity, take his clothes. A wig, a set of false teeth colored and broken. Lost my teeth down there in the jungle.

"The dog? Ground work, that was all. Make people think. Poor Eddie Pryne, the grocery clerk, had to suffer at my hands to establish the man at large as a madman. Nice fellow. Too bad—"

McClarnin shuddered, slyly strained at his bonds. They cut into his wrists and he felt the warm blood run down his fingers. Rainsford's madness was pouring out of his gleaming eyes as he rambled on.

"A man does not make mistakes planning for years. The storm was not my mistake as I have no control of the elements. I poisoned the ham with stuff brewed in the stinking jungle. Can't buy it in a drugstore, McClarnin. A deadly brew made out of certain vine roots and tucandeira ants. They use it on their arrows down there. Jivaro, they are still deadly little devils." Rainsford laughed thickly.

"Know how to cure heads? Remove the skull and bake them with hot sand

and fill them with spice and herbs. There's another way—you can cure them afterward like hams. The right wood shrinks and shrinks them down until. . . ."

"Devil!" McClarnin ripped out.

THERE was no fear in him now. He was immune to horror. He tried to convince himself that Kelsey and the others had deserved the fate that had overtaken them. But this man had not stopped taking heads. He had another head in mind, a woman's head for his hellish workshop!

Murder was murder, no matter what the provocation. There was no telling how far this deranged man would go along his bloody, benighted path. McClarnin's head, a dozen others in the subterranean curing chamber. He sparred desperately with Rainsford.

"The woman, she did you no harm!"

"She swore she loved little Yellow Head, McClarnin. Would wait for him forever. But she married the man who killed him, Kelsey! Once I was with them and they laughed about the foolish boy who believed everything a woman told him, who lost his head. I knew—then. I wanted to kill her that night—!"

"What are you going to do with me, Rainsford?" McClarnin said.

He struggled at his bonds, remembered how the little girl up at the house had cut her hand. Catgut! It could take a head off as clean as an executioner's sword.

"I've got to kill you, McClarnin. There's one more head I want and you'd try to stop me from getting it. I'll bring Tom Rainsford's woman to him. She promised him—they'd be together forever. It will be a nice looking couple—two heads in one basket." Rainsford began laughing, his madness rising in hellish convulsions inside his head.

"A little dried face with painted lips, McClarnin, and long black hair streaming down. Yellow Head will have his mate."

There had to be a way out. McClarnin groped desperately for it. He did not relish the thought of his head hanging up in that curing chamber with Mahler's and Grigsby's.

"No one will disturb me here, Mc-

Clarnin. Only one way in here—hidden from the outside. Here is where I do my experimenting, or so those men here thought. But you know better now, don't you? I have wood here, a gasoline sawing outfit. Everything needed to dry and cure heads. I must prepare for little Yellow Head's bride."

McClarnin bit his teeth against the pain as he strained the solid muscles of his arms. Blood trickled down his lacerated wrists. But he knew a violin string could be broken if you stretched it too tight. The gas engine began to roar and Rainsford, after a wary glance at McClarnin, picked up a big chunk of wood and placed it on the carrier.

McClarnin felt the catgut snap. He was free but his arms felt like two dead sticks hanging down on either side of him. It would take them time to get strength into them. He knew his gun was gone. The maniac outweighed him by forty pounds.

The saw started screaming, rolling toward that log of wood when McClarnin played his only trump. Rising to his feet cautiously, he hurled his body at Rainsford's broad back just as the taker of heads twisted half around.

The gaunt man fell forward, hands flailing. One of them struck against the edge of the rickety bench where the dried head of his son had been placed. The basket toppled and the head fell out but Rainsford was not aware of it.

Rainsford, roaring like an enraged bull, got his big body twisted around and he gripped McClarnin in his mighty arms and hurled him against the dirt wall. The detective's breath was knocked out of him and he braced himself for death.

The devil was towering over him, eyes glittering and his hands spread wide. His lips were curled back over his teeth. He took a step, slipped on something and fell.

He tried to save himself, but his head and shoulders had fallen across the carrier, where the circular saw screamed its way back and forth through its groove. A terrible, fearful cry banged from wall to wall. It broke off suddenly, gurglingly.

McClarnin, getting to his feet, became transfixed with horror as Rainsford's head rolled to his feet. Blood from the

whirring screaming saw sprayed the detective's face. McClarnin brushed it away, his own blood freezing stagnant in its channels. He looked down, saw a dried head, battered.

"L-Looks like you took a hand in this, little Yellow Head," McClarnin said. "Enough blood spilled, huh? Still love that woman maybe. Live by the sword, they say, die by the sword. That's what the Bible says, Yellow Head."

McClarnin slumped down against the dank dirt wall. Laughing and sobbing—a tough guy like Bill McClarnin!

In the early hours of the morning, McClarnin stumbled into Haynesburg police headquarters, a wild, bloody, disheveled man.

"Got him," he babbled to the man at the desk. "Saw his head drop off. Saw

Kelsey's head—two others there being cured. Like hams. Simeon Royle's hams. Give me a drink, a strong one!"

The authorities buried four heads the next day. Three of them were put with the bodies to which they belonged. While the gruesome rites were being performed, Bill McClarnin sat thinking about a little doll in the hands of a little child, the doll's head shrunken.

He could still hear the terrible screaming of a woman in his ears. The widow of Mr. Kelsey had seen all of Tom Rainsford that had come back. The screaming of the saw— He felt blood spattering his face.

He put his fingers about his neck as if he was making sure of something.

It was hard for him to realize that his head was still on his shoulders.

Coming Next Issue

BLACK WINGS OF DEATH

A Complete Novel of Masked Horror

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

"I want a better-looking shave—
A blade priced so I really save!"

"The Thin Gillette, men are agreed,
Gives greater comfort, too—and speed!"



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

Music for the
Dead Pulses
in a Mad and
Wild Rhythm!



*I stared at the
apparition in
the doorway*

THE CORPSE MARATHON

By **JOSEPH J. MILLARD**

Author of "Carry Him Under," "A Guy Might Get Hurt," etc.

MY phone rang at nine-thirty in the evening as I was batting out the last of my copy for the *Morning Sun*. My voice wasn't any too cordial when I answered. I figured it was another screwball night club manager wanting me to rush right out to review a new floor show. As amusement reporter for the *Sun* I get lots of that.

"Brad Quinn speaking," I growled. "So what?"

Then I relaxed without turning off my hostility. I recognized the wheezing, asthmatic voice and my nose wrinkled. If there are three people on earth I despise, Sam Craig, the oily dance marathon promoter, is at least two of them. Because it was my job, I'd written up his new grind opening the next night out at Loveland Ballroom. But that didn't make us friends.

Craig's god is the almighty dollar

and the footsore slaves who enter his marathons never have a chance to win a decent prize. During his last grind, out in St. Louis, a girl went crazy on the floor and stabbed herself to death before three thousand gaping spectators. Investigation revealed that she had been a mental and physical wreck from the beginning. But the jack-leg doc that Craig hired as medical examiner had okayed every applicant who could stand up without crutches. Oh, Sam Craig was a great guy.

LOOK, Quinn! I got some news for you like you never got before in your life. You gotta rush right—”

“Anything you’ve got,” I froze him, “calls for a strict quarantine. Get out of my life, fat stuff.”

“Don’t be like that,” he complained. “This is so big I’m canceling my marathon. Honest, it’s—”

“Don’t give me that,” I growled. “I wasn’t born yesterday. You’re canceling your grind because you got kicked out of Loveland Ballroom. I know all about that Grigsby Hotel crowd trying to buy the land the Loveland stands on as a site for their new hotel. Bert Ravell made a deal with them and he’s kicked you out!”

“It’s a lie! Bert wouldn’t treat me like that!”

Phooey! Bert Ravell, who owns Loveland Ballroom, would sell his own mother for two bits. He’s only about five feet tall but it’s all meanness. He has a sadistic streak in him that’s been responsible for some pretty horrible stories at times. And it was no secret that he’d tried for years to find some sucker who would take the Loveland off his hands.

“Honest, you got it wrong,” Craig was babbling in my ear. “Look, on my desk I’m laying a hundred bucks. You rush out here and if you don’t get the biggest story you ever heard, the hundred fish is yours.”

What could I do? Much as I hated Craig, I hated losing my job worse. And the fat slug might accidentally have something. I finally told him what I’d do if this was a phony, and

went out and caught a cab for the Loveland.

The block-long barn of a hall was pitch dark when I paid off the taxi, but I knew Craig had taken over the little office at the back, behind the orchestra platform. The front door wasn’t locked and I pushed through into thick darkness that smelled as stale as King Tut’s tomb. It pushed against my face like black steam as I felt my way through the foyer and into the runway that circled the floor, back under the spectator’s balcony.

A dance hall in the dark is always a spooky place but I’d never had one hit me like this did. The minute the door closed behind me, little chills started playing tag with my vertebrae. My feet set up funny little whispering echoes that sounded like someone tip-toeing behind me.

At the same time I got the strongest, weirdest impression of being watched. I can’t explain it. It was as though something was hiding in the darkness, waiting to jump on me. Even the row of entrance turnstiles, in the gray dust covers, gave me a start.

The feeling was so unfamiliar that it burned me up. The wave of anger carried me toward the yellow knife-edge of light from Craig’s office—but it couldn’t keep me from glancing back over my shoulder into the darkness.

By the time I reached the office, I was boiling. I used a lot more energy than necessary slapping the door open and Sam Craig jumped a foot off his chair. He was sitting behind the battered desk and his moon face glittered with perspiration in the cone of dirty light from the desk lamp. He stared at me, screwing up his scared face and moving his lips without getting a sound through them.

THEN I saw the other person in the room and my rage evaporated fast. Fran Foster stood in the shadows by the desk, her hair glinting copper-gold in the lamplight and her eyes glinting trouble. Fran’s my rival, handling the same type of stories for the *Times* that I do for the *Sun* but that doesn’t stop me from getting an advanced case of heartburn every time I see her.

"Hi, fellow-sucker!" Fran said. "Did this worm take you in with his phony news gag, too?"

"Q-quinn!" Craig managed to wheeze. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" I bawled. "Why, you grease-ball, after that phone call of yours—"

"Another one!" Craig moaned and raised his hands to the shadowy ceiling. "Merciful heaven, who does these things to me? All evening I'm shivering here because it feels like somebody's watching me. Now I've got practical jokes. Look, Quinn. And you, too, Miss What-you-call-it from the *Times*. I swear I didn't telephone you to—"

"Then somebody stole your asthma," Fran snapped.

"It was Sam's voice," I snarled, lifting my fists. "It isn't the first time this slug has pulled a sour gag for a little publicity. He called us both and—"

I stopped, choked off, while cold sweat prickled over my body. Behind me, in the darkness outside the open door, an utterly cold voice said:

"I called you—both of you—to meet me!"

Fran was facing me, facing the open door behind me. I saw her eyes widen as she stared over my shoulder, then they seemed to glaze in absolute, incredible horror. I didn't want to turn, didn't want to see the owner of that voice, but I had to.

Then my throat was tying itself in knots and my hair was rising as I stared at the apparition in the doorway.

It was a skeleton! A skeleton of a man well over six feet tall—a skeleton clothed in the moldy, rotting remnants of a blue serge burial suit. There was no face. Only a grinning, fleshless skull. Bony skeleton hands poked out of the earth-stained sleeves and one of them held a big hour-glass with the top removed.

"Stop shaking, you fool," my brain barked at me. "Stop shaking! It's a gag of Sam Craig's. You'll find it's a dummy skeleton propped there in the doorway."

As if to mock my doubts, a fetor of death and decay swept to my nostrils

and nearly turned me inside out. In the midst of my spasm of retching the skeleton spoke again. The fleshless, grinning jaw dropped and lifted; bare teeth met in a horrible clatter as the cold voice said:

"You don't know me, do you? Of course my name is *Death*, now, but it wasn't always so. Two short years ago, I was Arthur Addison. Though you didn't know me, even then."

I HEARD a queer gurgling sound from Fran Foster but I couldn't tear my gaze away to look at her. I felt as though something inside me was swelling bigger and bigger until finally it would burst.

"But you knew my daughter," the skeleton clacked on. "You knew Florence Addison, Craig. You killed her!"

My whole brain felt dead. This unbelievable thing couldn't be happening. It had to be a crazy dream. For Florence Addison was the girl who had stabbed herself to death at Craig's last marathon.

"No! No!" Sam Craig's scream was so high-pitched it sounded almost womanish. He was squeezed back tight against the wall, fat hands up in front of his glistening face. "I didn't touch her! She killed herself!"

"You killed her just the same," the inexorable voice drove on. "She was your slave. I was already dead, then. She had no one to turn to. She was hungry and desperate. That was why she fell into your clutches, Craig. Living through the hell of one of your marathons or starving to death—there was nothing else she could do. And you others, you newspaper scandal-mongers, you're just as guilty as Craig. Your newspaper stories enticed sadistic customers who were willing to pay to watch his spectacles of debauchery. Without you to bring him customers, he couldn't exist."

"Hold on!" I barked as the thought of tying Fran Foster into Craig's dirty business drove everything but anger from my mind. "Anything you want to do to Craig is all right with me. But you leave Fran Foster out of it, damn you!"

"Silence, fool!" The fleshless skull jerked toward me. "I said she was as

guilty as Craig. She'll pay the same price for helping him."

"You lay a hand on her," I roared, raising my balled fists, "and I'll knock that grinning skull right off your dirty shoulders!"

I was too fighting mad to think, then. Too full of rage to realize the futility of threat against—against Death! I only saw that hideous figure start forward, lifting the hour-glass. With an animal roar of fury tearing at my throat, I leaped straight at the ghastly skeleton.

"Fool!" The Thing shrieked. "The sands of your life have run out!"

The fleshless hand jerked up, whipped the hour-glass forward. My slamming feet plunged me straight into the stinging cloud of fine sand that shot from the hour-glass, filling the little office.

It seemed in that instant that I could actually see flames writhing in those cavernous eye-sockets. The stinging sand was like a tangible evil force emanating from the skeletal figure. Then a great cloud of blackness swept down and blotted out everything.

"This is death!"

I took that thought with me, into oblivion. . . .

IN describing my return to consciousness, I am forced to pass over one period of time after I opened my eyes and saw my surroundings. I know that my first conscious thought was: "I am dead and this is Hell!"

After that, for I don't know how long, my mind was so buffeted by a series of devastating shocks that I think I went a little mad. But it was a merciful madness that cushioned my brain against the full extent of the horrors.

I realized first that we were lying on our sides, Fran, Craig and I, in the center of a vast pool of baleful red light that seemed to flame through even my closed eyelids and into the deepest recesses of my spinning brain. The lights came from overhead and beyond the fifty-foot circle of their brilliance lay thick, impenetrable blackness. Beneath us was a floor of some odd material that had a hard, shiny surface yet was flex-

ible enough to yield under the weight of our bodies so that we lay in little hollows.

But the worst horror lay in my arms, pressed tight against my chest—a moldering, earth-stained corpse that once had been a beautiful girl. Retching as my nostrils clogged with the awful mephitic of grave stench, I saw black curls slimy with tomb mould, dead shrunken eyes, and the hideous grin of rotting lips.

In instinctive revulsion, I pawed at the loathsome corpse, trying to push it away from me. Then the full horror dawned on me as I realized that the dead girl was bound to my waist by bands of rawhide, tightly riveted. Until those bands were cut, I was doomed to embrace that hideous corpse in a gruesome travesty of affection.

I twisted my head away from the leering face of my corpse mate and saw, for the first time, that Sam Craig was conscious and fighting a similar horror. His squeals of terror were inhuman as he struggled to escape from the clasp of a blond-haired cadaver. To shut out the sight of his terror, I turned still further and a shudder of agony racked me.

The skeleton had fulfilled his terrible promise. In Fran Foster's lovely arms lay a grinning, decaying corpse—the body of a young man. Her eyes met mine and the horror and revulsion in them flooded me with a hot blaze of rage that goaded me like a white-hot spur.

We were in hell—but we were not dead. And this was a man-made hell!

I told myself that and I fought to believe it, fought against the evidence of my own senses. How could a fleshless skeleton walk and talk? How could any human mind conceive and carry out such a scheme of horror as this?

I forced myself to forget those questions, to concentrate on the one tangible thing in a nightmare of hell—the determination to somehow outwit that skeleton, man or devil, and save Fran Foster.

I JERKED my head around toward the clatter of brittle laughter and saw the skeleton standing behind us.

In one fleshless hand he grasped a scourge whose multiple lashes were each tipped with a sharp-edged gold coin. As I turned, the scourge whistled through the air and liquid fire seared my back.

"Welcome to hell!" the dead voice rasped as the scourge plucked bloody stripes from Sam Craig's back and swung again at Fran Foster. "Welcome to the corpse marathon. This is *your* marathon. Get up and dance. Hug your partners and learn the delight of stumbling through weeks of torture, scourged by the promise of gold, unable to escape, even for a moment. Don't look so horrified, Craig. Your poor slaves were almost as dead as these dancers after weeks of your marathons. You wanted Florence to dance, Craig. Well, there she lies in your arms, waiting to dance with you. Get up and dance, damn you!"

The fiendish scream quivered in the dead air, and above it came the sobbing, mournful beat of music. Sweat poured from my body as I recognized the macabre strains of the "Dead March." I turned toward the sound of the funereal dirge and a gasp locked in my throat.

Beyond the circle of red light, beyond a wall of impenetrable darkness, was the lighted cubicle of an orchestra platform. On that platform sat four men who drew the throbbing music from their instruments — four moldering corpses whose rotting flesh hung in shreds, sloughed off of dead fingers as they played.

But louder than the eerie dirge was the crack and whistle of the lashes. The sight of bloody stripes on Fran Foster's back turned my horror to cold, calculating, murderous rage. I tensed every muscle.

"You can't make me stand up!" I snarled.

I returned the abrupt, eyeless stare with a gaze that held all the intensity of my hatred. I watched the cruel whip rise above me, not with fear, but with eagerness. For I was grimly goading the skeletal fiend into attacking me. I felt sure I could use the rotting corpse in my arms as a shield against the worst blows of the whip and I was praying

that in a paroxysm of rage the fiend would step close enough for my lunging hands to close on his fleshless ankles.

"All right!" The whip dropped away and my heart sank at the cold indifference in the tones. "Stay on the floor if you prefer, Quinn."

Without another word, the grim apparition turned and stalked out into the darkness, vanishing from sight. Cold sweat drenched me as I lay waiting for whatever new horror was in store. For I knew that the skeleton's move was not one of defeat. There had been an undertone of gloating triumph in those last words.

"**B**RAD!" I turned and met Fran Foster's lovely eyes filled with courage and hope. "Brad, you told me once that you'd face death itself for me. I never realized until you faced that fiend tonight how much you meant it — or how much you meant to me!"

"Hang onto your nerve, kid," I whispered, my heart leaping at her words. "I'll get you out—somehow."

I turned back and saw the skeleton standing at the edge of the circle of light. Then I saw something else that plucked at my nerves with icy fingers. In front of the skeleton's feet, some dark liquid that bubbled and smoked was pumping up through unseen jets in the floor.

"Lie there if you prefer," the cold voice rasped. "You are entirely surrounded by a ring of boiling oil. In a moment it will flow out to fill those hollows made by the weight of your bodies—searing, boiling oil."

My horrified eyes saw the truth in his words. We were completely surrounded by a widening ribbon of dark, heaving liquid. I cursed as I realized how cleverly it worked. The queer, flexible floor on which we lay was higher in the center of the circle, sloping gradually away on all sides like the top of a gigantic mushroom. All around that bulge ran a very shallow trough and it was into this trough that the oil was pouring from below.

But the center of the floor was such a tiny amount higher than the trough that the weight of our bodies on the

yielding floor created hollows that were lower than the ribbon of oil. As a result, the ribbonlike trough was overflowing, seeping slowly toward our bodies, reaching out hungry, hissing tentacles of torture.

"If you change your minds," the skeleton laughed, "as long as you dance, the oil won't touch you."

With no alternative but ghastly death, we clasped our loathsome partners and struggled to our feet to begin the grim marathon of death. I saw at once that as long as we could keep moving, we were safe from the oil.

Walking on the springy floor was like walking on a mattress. The surface sagged under our feet and sprung up flat the moment our weight was lifted. The hot oil, being thick and sluggish, flowed constantly toward the hollows made by our feet. But as long as we kept moving, it never quite caught up although the stench and searing heat were a constant reminder of the grim tentacles that pursued us. Once Craig lagged behind and the creeping oil poured into the hollow around his feet. His squawl of agony sent the skeleton into gales of laughter.

"Dance, Craig! You're only learning how your own slaves felt, dancing for weeks on blistered feet. Dance!"

Time was adding a fresh torture to our burden by then, as the corpses we clasped to us grew heavier and heavier with our waning strength. I danced close to Fran and put an arm around her sagging shoulders. She thanked me with a wan smile that wrenched at my heart, reminded me with grim warning that we couldn't go on much longer.

THE ribbon of oil that surrounded us was approximately eight feet across—too wide to be hurdled, even if I knew how to rid myself of the clinging corpse. And any attempt to wade that pool would only bring agony too terrible to be borne. Yet somehow I had to get across. For my whole being was obsessed by the one determination of getting my hands on that skeletal fiend and rending him apart.

"For God's sake!" Craig screamed. "How long must we keep this up?"

"How long? How long did you make your slaves go on dancing, Craig? You've only been dancing an hour. Your contestants danced for weeks—months."

With a moan of utter despair, Craig stumbled and pitched forward onto the corpse in his arms. Instantly the hissing fingers of oil crawled toward him.

"Sam!" I yelled. "Get-up! You'll be boiled to death if you. . . . NO! Wait! Stay where you are, Sam!"

Fran stared wildly at my sudden change. Then she must have seen the blaze of triumph in my eyes, for I saw hope lift the droop of her shoulders. But there was no time to tell her of the avenue of escape I had just seen opened for a brief moment.

Two things had happened, lightning-fast, when Sam Craig fell; two things that fired me with new hope. The first thing was that the skeleton, in shrieking eagerness to watch Craig's suffering, stepped too near the ribbon of smoking oil. I saw the mold-specked burial shoe touch the oil, saw the foot jerk back in a reflex that could only mean one thing.

The skeleton could feel pain!

That meant but one thing. Though the head and hands of the figure were fleshless bone, there had to be a living human being. And on the wings of that discovery came the other casual happening that pointed a way to freedom.

As the oil spread toward Craig's quivering form, it grew lighter in color. That meant that the oil no longer poured up from below and when that on the floor spread toward Craig's body, it made the pool so shallow that the lighter-colored floor showed through.

"Lie there, Sam!" I shouted. "Pull yourself up onto that corpse so the oil can't reach you and stay there!"

I caught a split second glimpse of the skeleton, frozen in mid-gesture as the meaning of my words penetrated his fiendish mind. Then I was in motion, doing a hideous thing that was necessary if we were to find freedom.

I stepped up onto the dead feet of my corpse-partner and, using them as stilts, shuffled straight out into the barrier of boiling oil.

My guess was right. Although lapping wavelets of the hellish liquid seared my ankles and feet, I was spared the agony of stepping directly into the oil—a shock that would likely have put me out before I could get across to attack our torturer.

CLINGING grimly to the corpse, I shuffled straight through the oil onto dry floor beyond and launched myself into a dive at the skeletal form that was only then breaking into belated action after the shock of my surprise move.

I was dimly aware of Fran's cry of encouragement, of a raucous discord as the hellish orchestra stopped its monotonous dirge. Then my feet, wet with splashes of oil, skidded on the dry floor and I went down in a sprawling heap that saved my life.

For in the instant that I sprang, I saw the grave clothes of the skeleton split apart over the chest, saw a full-fleshed human hand burst through to level an automatic at me. Then I was falling, twisting in midair so that the corpse I loathed was between me and the flaming pistol as a frail shield.

I felt the shock of slugs tearing into the dead flesh, hammering the breath from my lungs. But the automatic was of small caliber and there was not sufficient shocking power behind the slugs to drive them through the corpse and into my body.

Then I was striking the floor, using the impact of my fall to rebound straight at the deadly figure. My arms encircled the limp corpse at my breast and reached beyond it to close on solid, living flesh as my plunge carried me into the legs of the shrieking figure of death. The gun blasted in my face and I felt the burning kiss of leaden death across my throat.

Then my clawed hands were gripping the torturer's legs, bringing him down onto my shoulders with a smash that drove a muffled grunt of pain from the torn body of the figure. Hampered as I was by the corpse locked to my breast, I squirmed and got steel fingers around the gun wrist. My free hand drew back, drove my fist into the terrible figure with every ounce of

strength at my command.

I heard the crunch of dry bones smashing. The grinning skull broke loose and went bobbing across the floor. The framework of human bones that my enemy had built above his own shoulders and head as a disguise was entangling him, hampering his efforts to break my steel grip or escape my smashing blows. Kicking, clawing, fighting, we rolled furiously on the very edge of the deadly pool of oil.

I heard Fran cry a warning a second before a distant gun thundered and lead plowed the floor near my face. Over my opponent's shoulder I got a glimpse of the corpse-orchestra leaping from their platform with drawn guns. In a moment I would be helpless against their combined attack.

Every ounce of strength went into a vicious twisting of the gun wrist beneath me. Suddenly bones snapped with a sickening crackle and the automatic dropped loose. I dived for it as the skeleton writhed away from me, his voice rising in a scream of agony.

WITH the gun in my hand, I twisted toward the onrushing gunmen. Without surprise I saw the contorted face of Bert Ravell, owner of the Loveland, protruding from the ruined skeleton figure. Then, rolling in agony, the ghastly figure squirmed back, and straight into the shallow pool of boiling oil. I heard a scream of unbearable torment as the oil seared Ravell's body. Then the scream gurgled away.

All this I caught in the fleeting instant while I was hugging my corpse-shield before me and triggering the automatic at the advancing gunmen. Lead from their answering fire slammed around me. A numbing blow against my hip seemed to paralyze my right leg. The impact of slugs against the frail corpse drove the air from my lungs. But desperation was giving my wild shots a deadly accuracy.

One figure went down with blood cascading from a shattered throat. Another clutched at a crimsoned arm. Then the remaining two were fleeing back into the darkness, away from the last slugs in my automatic's clip. I

lost them for a moment and cursed the darkness. Then my voice choked off as a shaft of white light split the blackness, outlining their running figures just as they started up a broad stairway.

"Halt!" a gruff voice roared. "Drop those guns or I'll blast hell out of you both."

The darkness was closing over me, then, but this time it was different. I went out, carrying a beautiful picture in my mind—the picture of a blue uniform, brass buttons, a gun and a swinging nightstick. . . .

* * *

We were sitting in the cellar under the Loveland Ballroom, Fran and I and

land was air-tight for two months and the hotel crowd wanted to start construction immediately. Unless Ravell could make Craig break his lease, he'd lose his chance of selling the ballroom at a profit. This setting, and the newspaper accounts of the suicide, gave him the idea. Ravell was almost a dwarf, you know, so he could fit the upper part of a skeleton onto his shoulders, watch us through a slit in the vest, and work the arms and jaw with wires from inside. He certainly looked like death."

The lieutenant shook his head.

"But why drag you two outsiders into it?"

"I'm guessing," I admitted. "But I

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

DRAGON OF THE GOBI

A Novelet of Desert Terror

By STEWART STERLING



a white-haired police lieutenant, in a vast room that looked like a slice of hell itself. And well it might, for stacked against one wall were half-finished signs that shouted:

GRAND OPENING
OF THE WORLD'S MOST UNIQUE
NIGHT CLUB
RAVELL'S CLUB HADES

The bodies were gone. Ravell and the orchestra leader I had shot in the throat were dead, and Craig had been hauled away, a raving maniac. Uniformed cops and detectives were poking around, studying the flexible dance floor and the jets that were intended to shoot smoke up around the dancers at the new club.

"God!" the lieutenant was saying. "Imagine digging up rotten corpses and making you dance with 'em. Ugh!"

"Ravell's streak of sadism was well known," I said. "But he had a grim purpose. Craig's lease on the Love-

think it was partly hatred for Fran and me. Our news stories ruined a shady deal he tried a few months back and cost him a lot of money. He swore he'd get even some day. But I think more important was his need for witnesses."

"Witnesses?" Fran echoed in amazement.

"Yes. I'm sure he never meant to kill us. Probably we'd have had more doped sand thrown in our faces finally and been dumped in some alley to awaken later. But in that case, Craig might think he'd only had a bad dream and go ahead with his marathon anyhow, unless two skeptical witnesses—and who would be more skeptical than a couple of hard-boiled reporters—were handy to convince Craig that he really had been tortured by the dead body of Florence Addison. When we confirmed his experience, Craig would be too scared ever to show his face around the Loveland again for fear the skeleton would be laying for him. So

Ravell imitated Sam's voice on the phone and dragged us in to satisfy his own hatred."

"Whew!" The lieutenant got up, wiping his forehead. "I'm going down and beat the truth out of those musicians who were made up to look like corpses. The way I feel, I've got to take it out on somebody. And it's mighty lucky the cop on the beat heard the shots and busted in here when he did."

"What do you mean?" Fran Foster snapped, jerking erect to glare at him.

"Listen, mister! Brad Quinn had everything under control long before your flatfoot ever got here."

The lieutenant stared, his eyebrows arched in surprise. Then his eyes met mine and a grin touched his grim mouth.

"Oh-oh!" he said softly. "So that's how it is."

"Yeah!" I grinned back at him, sliding an arm around Fran's shoulders. "That's exactly how it is."

He went away while I was tilting her face up to mine so I could prove it.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

MASTER OF SILVER GIANTS

A Novelet of Mystery Robots

By **ROBERT BLOCH**

PLUS MANY OTHER SPINE-TINGLING STORIES

When
a girl
needs
help



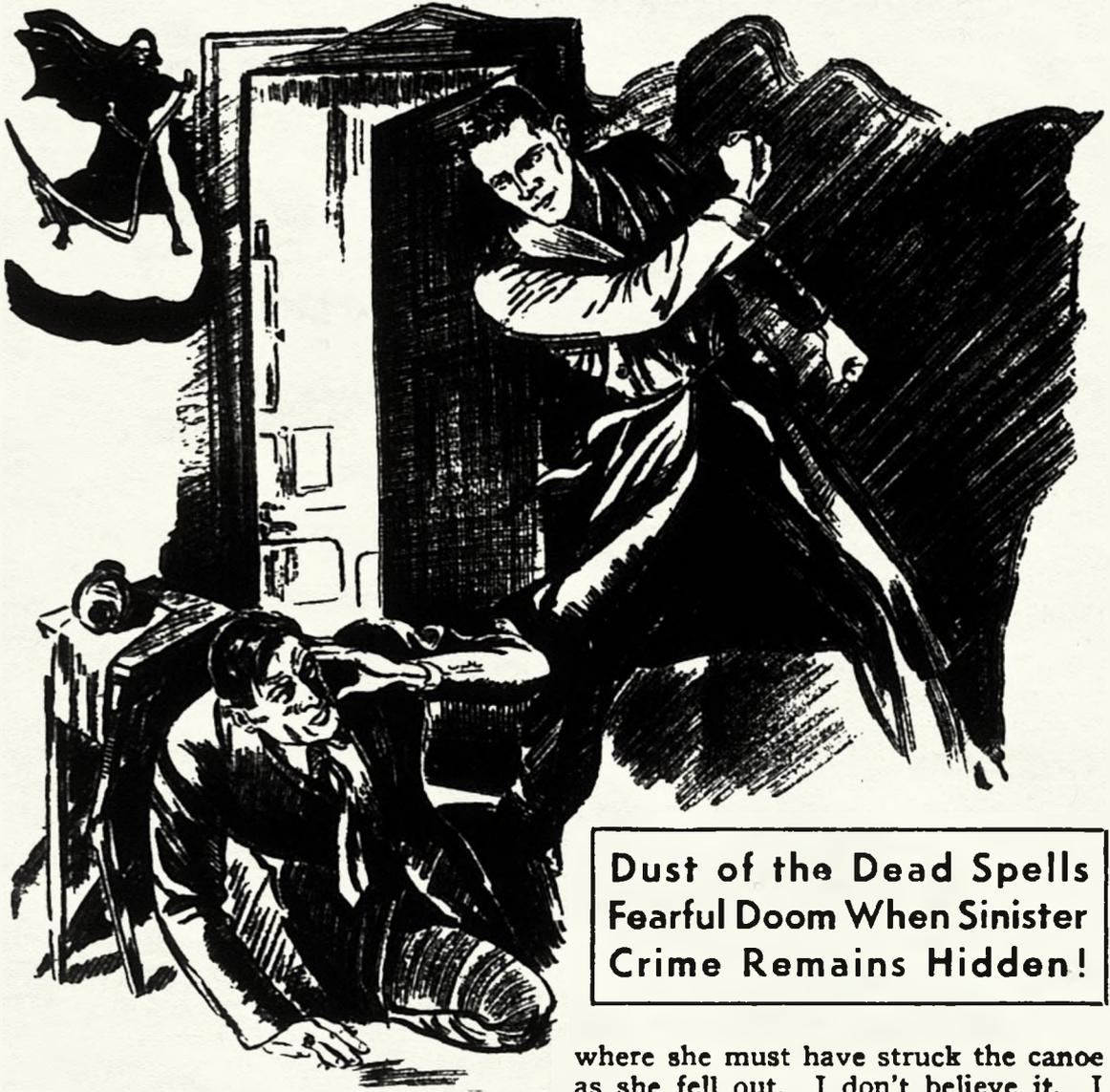
DON'T OFFEND...USE SEN-SEN

BREATH SWEETENER . . . DELIGHTFUL CONFECTION

ASHES OF MURDER

By RAY KING

Author of "The Death Song," "Destiny of Horror," etc.



Dust of the Dead Spells
Fearful Doom When Sinister
Crime Remains Hidden!

"You?" he gasped. "I thought you were dead!"

LD Abigail Lee gazed at the silent little group of her relatives, gathered in the dimly lit living room. She had shoved her spectacles up into her white hair. Her eyes were strangely gleaming.

"It's a month now," she said into the tense silence, "since Anna Lee was killed."

"Killed?" It was a startled protest from one of the listening men relatives. "Oh, for Heaven's sake, Granny—"

"Killed," the old woman insisted. "They say that bruise on her head was

where she must have struck the canoe as she fell out. I don't believe it. I got my own ideas. But, anyway, we don't have to guess, because Anna's goin' to tell us what happened! This mortal shell of hers, it's all here in these ashes. She ought to be able to come back an' take possession of them."

"Granny, don't be gruesome," Nona murmured.

"When you're as near death as I am," the old woman said with grim reproof, "you won't say that the great beyond an' death are gruesome. You watch me now. You watch Anna come an' reanimate these ashes of her poor mortal body. I been planning to try this for a week."

To Alan Brand, the old woman was eerie. During dinner, she had seemed a normal, seventy-year-old grandmother, the head of this household to which Brand's young bride, Nona, had brought him. She was white-haired, with a lined, patrician face. Her small, shriveled figure was lost in the billowy black taffeta dress she was wearing, with white ruching at her neck and wrists.

The moment she had begun talking of spiritualism, it had seemed that an excitement had come upon her, a tenseness, a quavering note in her high-pitched treble voice.

"You heard about my granddaughter's death? Nona told you about Anna?" she demanded of Brand.

"Yes," young Brand said. "Nona told me."

Anna Lee had been Nona's older sister. Anna Lee Jennings—she had been married for two years to Tom Jennings, this dark-haired, rather handsome fellow of about thirty who sat now beside Brand, staring silently at the excited old woman.

A month ago, Anna, who could swim very little, had gone out alone in a canoe, on the lake which lay at the foot of the hill behind the house. Darkness came. It was midnight when they found the overturned canoe, and more than a day later before the girl's body was recovered.

"She loved me very much," old Abigail Lee was saying. "She'll tell me now if she was murdered or not. An' none of you can stop me findin' out."

Brand felt the dark-haired Jennings lean against him.

"Just you try crossing the old woman in anything," Jennings murmured. "Wait'll you know her better. You'll see what it gets you, Alan."

Her sharp ears heard him. She shot him a look with her strangely gleaming eyes. She was fumbling at her belt, where a small ivory jewel-box hung on a tiny golden chain. She detached it and put it on the table.

"There she is," she added. "Our poor, dead Anna."

"Granny, please," Nona murmured. Her hand on Brand's arm was trembling. At his other elbow he felt Tom

Jennings stiffen as though with a shudder.

Then the living room door opened.

"Oh, I say, what's going on?" a voice greeted.

A BLOND, six foot, rugged young man stood in the doorway. He was Peter Rolf, a distant cousin of Nona's. Vaguely, Brand understood that once this Peter Rolf had been in love with the dead Anna, had wanted to marry her, but she had chosen Jennings.

"Come in," Jennings said. "Sit down, Peter. Looks like we're going to have another of Granny's seances. Damned gruesome one, this time."

The dark-haired, saturnine Jennings was nervous. Alan Brand could not miss noting it. His thumb twisted a big seal ring on one of his fingers. Abruptly, he lit a cigarette with hands that shook.

Rolf grinned. "A seance?" he said. "All right. Let's go." He slumped down into a big leather chair and began filling his pipe. "What's the matter with the crystal, the cards or the Ouija board? Aren't they working tonight, Granny?"

Was he also nervous? To Brand, it seemed so. Rolf spilled tobacco upon his vest and brushed it off with a petulant gesture incongruous to his jocular smile. A rabbit's foot was hanging on his watch chain. His vigorous brushing knocked it to the floor. He stared, with the smile fading from his face, as though he saw something significant in the fallen luck charm. Then he picked it up and laughed again.

"Why don't you try my rabbit's foot, Granny?" he demanded. "More sense to a luck charm than a Ouija board or crystal ball."

The trappings of spiritualism he mentioned—Ouija board, fortune-telling cards and crystal ball—were over in a corner of the room. Old Abigail Lee flashed a glance at them, and then at her big, smiling grandson.

"You, Peter, don't be too sure of yourself," she warned quietly. "I got Anna's ashes here. I'm goin' to use 'em to have her tell us how she happened to fall out of that canoe."

The words, the way she said them, brought a sudden shudder to Alan Brand. Did the old woman really think that Anna's death hadn't been an accident? Was she trying to frighten someone here into a confession? Or did she really think that Anna could come back and expose her murderer?

Brand had married Nona only a few months before, in New York. This was the first time he had met her family. Now he realized that he knew very little about Nona's background.

"Good Lord, what's that?" Peter Rolf was staring at the small ivory jewel case on the table. His smile was gone now. "That case—that's what was supposed to go into the Mausoleum!"

"That's Anna's ashes," the old woman said briskly. From the room corner she came wheeling a table on which a big Ouija board was mounted. It was a dead-black, lacquered surface, with the letters of the alphabet arranged in a crescent. To one side was the word NO, and at the other side YES.

"What are you going to do with that?" Tom Jennings protested. "Look here, Granny—"

"Nobody need be afraid of what the dead can say." The old woman shot a sharp glance at the staring group. "Leastwise, poor Anna certainly couldn't tell us anything that we wouldn't want to hear, could she, now?"

BRAND gasped in startled horror. He heard Nona cry out. Tom Jennings and big Peter Rolf just sat staring.

The old woman had opened the jewel-case. With trembling hand, she scattered a layer of ashes upon the gleaming black surface of the Ouija board.

"Oh, I say—" Rolf choked.

Ashes of death, the mortal remains of a woman who was dead—All of her, save that intangible something which we call the soul lay strewn here. But she was present. Brand felt as though now, into this dim room, another person had come.

The room was silent. High-speed trucks, traveling by night on the trans-continental highway, rumbled distant-

ly past the foot of the rocky hill on which the huge old house stood. But to young Brand it was a pregnant silence, a silent threat to some one who waited, terrified for ghostly accusation.

"Move that lamp," old Abigail Lee commanded sharply. "We want more light on Anna."

There was no question of the old woman's sincerity. Her thin, black-clad figure was trembling. Her wrinkled old face was drawn tense.

Brand jumped obediently from his seat. The room was lighted only by a single floor lamp. He moved it so its glow circled the fine gray-white ash heaped in a little pile on the Ouija board.

The old woman's figure, with its huge misshapen shadow on the floor, grew uncanny. She leaned over the board, tilting it, tapping it gently underneath, until the ashes of her granddaughter were spread in a thin layer.

"There, Anna dear."

Her murmur so personified the gray layer of silt that it seemed a thing alive. Brand had an impulse to protest. Instead he stepped back into the shadows behind Nona's chair, put his hand on her shoulder. Wildly, she gripped it, pressed it against her breast.

"There, Anna dear, that's all the help I can give you," the old woman was murmuring. "Come back to us, Anna. Can't you come back and reanimate this mortal dust which once was you? Come, dear, move the dust a little. Never mind the letters on the board. Form your own letters. Letters of dust—"

"Granny, don't be an idiot," Peter Rolf burst out.

"You be quiet!" the old woman snapped. "Quiet, all of you." Her voice carried a sudden power, a command that none dared disobey.

"Anna dear, write something," she pleaded. "Isn't there something you'd like to tell us?"

WAS the dust vibrating, shifting itself on the black lacquered surface? Brand was sure he could see it moving now, slithering as though it were trying to form itself into letters.

All over the board, beyond any ques-

tion the gray-white dust particles were moving, crawling, shifting.

Brand stared, tense. The idea was so weird, it annoyed him. Yet chills went up and down his spine. In the silence there was only the old woman's hoarse breathing. From far away came the rumble of a passing truck down the highway.

The ashes momentarily were stilled now, as though the struggling spirit of the dead Anna had exhausted itself trying to move them. Was the tracery of ashes formed into anything legible? Brand gaped at it. A distorted letter or two, perhaps. One might guess at what they signified, but it would be only a guess.

"That's not good enough, Anna dear," the old woman's voice pleaded. "Try again, Anna—"

As though in answer, the layer of ashes was vibrated. And suddenly Brand could not escape the conviction that the shifting, jiggling ashes were trying to spell something! Confused, grotesque letters.

Was it Brand's own instinctive desire to read something from the Ouija board? Or was there really something legible? An S? A scrawling half-broken E? An apex of two converging lines, with a wavering bisecting line across them—was that intended to be an A?

SEA? Or was it CHA? Brand knew that one's imagination might read almost anything into such scrawled, grotesque tracery. SEA? Was the dead Anna trying to say something about the sea? But she hadn't drowned in the sea. Her canoe had overturned in the lake.

Or was it CHA? What could that mean? For the horrible moment that Brand stared at the ashes, it seemed to him that now the jiggling tracery was trying to form other letters. CHA—what?

Other letters that would make it a word. He thought he saw an upright loop. . . .

Brand was cold, but tense, alert, as though with a premonition that his mind was trembling upon the verge of some startling disclosure. Something was here, ready for him to understand

that he could not quite grasp. Like a will o' the wisp, it hovered just beyond his mental vision. Holding his breath, he leaned forward, staring, pondering. . . .

Then suddenly he heard the big, jocular-looking Peter Rolf laugh, a strained, tense laugh.

"Why, Granny, don't be silly," he said. "That's only caused by the rumble of the trucks, down there on the highway! There goes another one. Don't you feel it vibrating the house?"

A queer relief swept Brand, a let-down of his taut nerves so abrupt that he wanted to laugh. Of course, that's all it was! This house here on the rock—those heavily laden, high-speed trucks. Another one was passing now. He could hear it, and he could distinctly feel the floor quiver under his feet. It communicated to the Ouija board. At that moment the layer of ashes danced and jiggled a little.

Old Abigail Lee's wrinkled cheeks were flushed with her excitement.

"You think that's all it is, Peter? Don't you be too sure of yourself. Anna's spirit maybe isn't strong enough to move those ashes all by itself. But it'll take advantage of that vibration. It'll direct the ashes as they move! Please, Anna, write something for us, dear!"

A LOW muttering of thunder, presage of a coming summer storm, sounded in the distance. The filmy curtains of the French window in the living-room, stirred with a puff of storm breeze.

"This damn nonsense," Peter Rolf murmured. "Put those ashes back where they belong."

"Please, Granny," Nona urged tremulously. "You shouldn't try such—"

"Quiet, all of you." The old woman raised her skinny arms. "Anna darling, one more try. Then we'll let you rest."

But the ashes were not moving now. No trucks were passing down on the road. With blank chagrin the old woman stared at the Ouija board, and then at the gathered shadows around the big room.

"It isn't very plain, Anna," she

pleaded. "But are you tired now, dear? Well, you lie there an' rest. We'll try it again tomorrow."

At midnight that night, young Alan Brand lay asleep beside Nona. The bedroom, here on the second floor of the little cottage, was dim and silent. Moonlight laid a pattern of casement bars on the floor, a pattern that slowly crept forward as the hours passed and the moon rose toward the zenith.

Brand had gone to sleep, pondering SEA? Or CHA? Had the ashes really tried to spell out something? The vibration of the motor trucks had jiggled them, of course. That was a physical, normal force. Had something of the dead Anna tried to take advantage of that? Tried to direct the shifting ashes to disclose who had murdered her?

Brand had drifted off to sleep. It had become a phantasmagoria in his mind. The spirit of a murdered girl lurked invisibly in the silent house, a frustrated spirit, helplessly struggling to make itself known. A terrified murderer slunk here, desperate to stop this disclosure. . . .

Some time in the night, near dawn perhaps, Brand found himself awakening upon a tide of horror. Had he heard a low moan, a faint cry like the wailing of something dead, struggling for audibility?

Whatever it was, it snapped him into alertness. He sat up in bed, peering around the dim, palid room. The house was perfectly silent. There was nothing but his heart pounding against his ribs, and the stirring of Nona beside him.

"What is it, Alan?" she murmured.

Then she was wide awake, staring up at him. What's the matter?"

"I thought I heard something," he whispered. "A low moan."

"I dreamed I was moaning." She clutched at him, shaking with fear. "Oh, Alan, did I awaken you by moaning? I guess I did. I was dreaming that something — something terrible touched me. A hand at my throat."

COLD terror struck into Brand. Nona had dreamed that something touched her! He, too, had thought he was dreaming. He was lying in bed beside Nona. Something bent over them. It brushed him with its horrible touch. He had tried to wake up but could not until he had heard Nona's moan. Was it all a dream — or reality?

"Alan! Dear God!"

In a frenzy of terror, convulsively, she huddled against him as they both sat upright in bed, frozen by a low sound—a faint rustling. It was so eerily faint that Brand could not tell whether it was out in the hall, or here in the pallid bedroom.

He leaped from the bed.

"What was that, Nona? You heard something."

"Yes." She was a pale, slim shape as she stood beside him in her flowing nightrobe, with her braided hair dangling down over her shoulders. "Yes, I heard it too."

But there was nothing in the bedroom. Only the dim silent moonlight, in a pattern of the window casement, sprawled on the floor.

Brand tried to laugh. "Well, I guess
[Turn Page]



we're still half dreaming. This is just—"

He bit off the words. There was no question of the reality of the sound they heard now. Weirdly staggering footsteps thumped downstairs. A door slammed.

"That's the side door just under us," Nona whispered. "Door to the garden."

She stumbled toward the bedroom window. In an instant he was there with her. Black trees, a faintly moonlit garden path, shrubs and flower beds dark with shadow, were visible. Then, from the house a moving blob came into their line of vision. It resembled a staggering man. They could not see it clearly. It was in the shadows between a line of shrubs. For a few steps it wavered drunkenly upright. Then it seemed to toss up its arms as it fell, merging with the heavy shadow of a lilac bush into a shapeless blob.

"Nona, you wait here!"

He would have dashed from her, gone down to investigate, but a moan from her checked him, flooded him with a new onslaught of dreadful horror.

"Alan," she strangled. "There's something the matter with me, Alan!" Stark terror was in her voice.

"The matter with you?"

"Oh, help me!"

It was a piteous cry. For that horrible second, Brand could only stand transfixed. The sight of his young wife swam before his numbed gaze. The color was drained from her face and lips. In the moonlight, she was livid, ghastly.

"Nona darling!"

She was swaying. As his arm went out to encircle her, she slumped against him, sank inert to the floor at his feet.

"Nona! Nona!" He prayed the name as he bent over her. Had she fainted? Was she dead? Her eyes were closed, her face pallid as moonlit marble.

And then he saw on her neck a tiny crimson ooze where a drop of blood had welled out. The sight of it struck horror into him. He staggered dizzily to his feet. His head was roaring. He felt cold sweat bathing him, standing out in dank beads on his forehead.

Terror over Nona? Was it wholly that?

Brand moved around helplessly. He must arouse the house, get help for Nona.

Where was the telephone? Tom Jennings would know. Big Peter Rolf would know. Or would old Abigail Lee? They were the only humans who were here with him and Nona in the soundless little cottage. The servants, he knew, went home at night.

IT was an instantaneous rush of thoughts. And then abruptly the staggering Brand was checked by a new terrifying sight. The door to the clothes closet in the bedroom was ajar. It was opening!

Something was in there, pushing its way out now!

His head roaring like the torrent of Niagara, Brand staggered back, with his back against the opposite wall. He stood panting, braced to tackle this menace.

Slowly the closet door was swinging outward. He visioned a blob within the deep recess of the closet's darkness.

"I see you, you damned—"

Brand grew aware that his voice was thick, choked. The vision of the dark slit of the closet doorway swooped dizzily before him. He felt his knees buckling, flung out his arm and his hand struck into a patch of moonlight.

Blood oozed from a tiny scratch on his finger!

Brand was only vaguely aware that he had fallen. The torrent in his ears seemed to engulf all the world. Mingling with it was a cackling laugh that moved past him. . . .

The roaring in his head seemed to have lasted for a very long time, but it was easing now. His sight was coming back. He began to see the faint outlines of the bedroom, steadying, clarifying. His strength was returning.

Nona! He remembered her suddenly. He could see her now, a pale, crumpled shape, lying by the window where she had fallen. Had much time passed? He guessed it might have been five or ten minutes.

Shakily, Brand clambered to his feet. The sight of the wide-open door, the

empty clothes closet, brought him a new rush of memories.

That escaping shape— Had it been old Abigail? The insane old woman, obsessed with spiritualism, frenzied with the belief that the murderer of her beloved Anna was here— Was she trying to kill everyone?

The vague thoughts seemed incredible as they flooded Brand. He realized that he was stumbling into the hall. The old woman's bedroom was nearest to him. Its door was open. He saw that the dim room was empty. But the bed was rumpled where she must have been lying.

At the doorway Brand tensed. All his senses strained at the sound floating up through the sinister house downstairs. He heard shuffling footsteps, the scrape of something dragging along the floor.

It came from the back of the house, faint, momentary. In a second or two it was gone.

Quietly, more alert than he had ever been before in his life, Brand padded the length of the carpeted upper hallway, descended the dim front stairs.

The newell post light shone on him as he passed. It fell on his hand, and he remembered the ooze of blood which had been there. His movements had smeared it off. Nothing was there but a tiny, almost unnoticeable mark. Had he been poisoned? It seemed impossible. He felt no sickness. . . .

The lower hall was empty. The archway to the living room was beside him, deserted, silent. Moonlight whitened the Ouija board where the ashes of the dead girl still lay.

Would the ashes have spelled something else by now?

FASCINATED by the thought, Brand moved silently forward, stood over the Ouija board. The scattered ashes had evidently shifted a little on the occasionally vibrating surface. But the general vague pattern was about the same as he remembered it.

SEA. It seemed fairly clear now. And following it was the big upright loop. An L.

Why, of course! Why hadn't he rec-

ognized that loop before? Or perhaps just now his subconscious released the idea that had been in it ever since early evening.

SEAL. What kind of seal? An animal? No.

A big ring on a man's finger, a man's thumb nervously twitching at it, twisting it, the thumb bent across the palm to worry the ring.

He realized that he had thought the gesture puzzling, something more than mere nervousness. Now he saw it for what it had been—an unconscious gesture of instinctive defense by a man terrorized, feeling himself attacked. Unconsciously his thumb would go to the ring, his weapon. . . .

Brand's pondering gaze had drifted idly to one of the living-room windows. A blob was lying in the garden. He jumped to the window.

It was the blob he and Nona had seen come staggering from the house, staggering and falling. Moonlight exposed it.

It was the big, pajama-clad body of Peter Rolf. Not dead! He was twitching, trying to raise himself up on one elbow.

Brand ran from the library, toward the side door into the garden where Rolf lay stricken.

Before he reached the little door, he stopped, frozen by a new faint sound. The sound of running water coming from the back of the house. From the kitchen? Water running in the kitchen?

Swiftly, Brand padded into the dim back hallway, past the dark little dining room. The kitchen was silvered by moonlight coming through its windows. The running water wasn't in here, but now Brand stood with a shudder chilling him and horror prickling the roots of his hair.

The sound of the water was louder—a flowing jet splashing into deep water. Now, at this close range, Brand could hear other sounds, horrible, gruesome. A choking gurgle, a splashing thump and a ghastly, panting grunt.

Numbed, he hardly realized that he had slowly crossed the kitchen. A partly opened doorway showed a faint slit of yellow light. He shoved the

door slowly wider.

It was a small hallway and foyer behind the kitchen, opening to servants' rooms. The sounds came from the bathroom. Its door was wide open.

A man was bending over the bathtub into which the water was running.

A slight, dark-haired man, but he was powerful enough for his ghastly task.

In the half-filled tub, a body had been plunged, still alive, clad in a flannel nightgown.

The man was bending down, holding a woman's head under the surface, drowning her as she futilely struggled. Through the water, distorted by it, her bloodless face was upturned. The eyes goggled, air-bubbles streamed up from her gaping mouth. Brand caught a glimpse of the woman.

It was old Abigail Lee!

IN that same second, he had a side view of the man's face. Tom Jennings, as he had anticipated—Jennings, with his thin, saturnine face so contorted by his murderous lust that it was less than human. He must have seen Brand advancing in the bathroom mirror. He dropped the twitching body of the old woman and whirled.

"You!" he gasped. "I thought you were dead!"

He ducked Brand's lunging fist. Nimbly, he was away from the tub as Brand's body struck him. They went down, but incredibly agile, Jennings tore loose.

As he rose, Brand struck at him again. They grappled in the doorway, fell and rolled on the floor in the little foyer.

The light showed Jennings' right fist, raised to swing at Brand's face. His thumb was crooked under the palm, pressing a huge seal ring from behind.

A prong sprang out from the front of the ring. He stabbed it at Brand's face!

Swiftly, Brand seized the wrist, bent it. Jennings was strong, but not strong enough. Startled horror contorted his face as Brand squeezed the wrist, forced it against Jennings' neck.

The ring stabbed deeply. For a moment, Jennings went wild with terror.

He fought madly, lunging and squirming.

Then, suddenly, the bathroom light showed his face. The blood washed down in a visible wave, leaving it chalk-white. Great beads of sweat poured out on his forehead. His eyes stared wildly. They seemed to mist as they closed and he sank inert, motionless within Brand's gripping arms.

"He used acetylcholine in that ring," the hospital physician said. "But evidently he wasn't very skillful in its use—he let you two recover from your faint too quickly."

A little group of them were gathered here around the hospital bed where old Abigail lay. She was recovering rapidly. She lay pale and shaken, but trying to smile at Nona who was gently stroking her hair.

"Acetylcholine?" old Abigail murmured. "What's that?"

"A drug announced only two years ago by Dr. Renshaw, of New York University," the physician said. "Introduced into any tiny wound it lowers the blood-pressure, causing fainting. But when it wears off, no harm is done." The physician smiled ironically. "Jennings is trying to tell the police now that he's a very humane murderer. He only wanted to kill old Mrs. Lee. He had stabbed her with the ring, made her faint in her sleep."

"And then he carried her downstairs to drown her in the tub," young Brand put in. "I suppose then he'd throw her body in the lake. It would look as though she had wandered out and fallen off the cliff path, into the water. An accident, like that of his wife, Anna, a month ago, eh?"

"I guess that's it," the physician said. "He won't confess to anything except what you caught him at redhanded. But a girl in New York, an heiress, I understand, has already heard of this over the radio. She gave the police his motive—he was engaged to her. Of course, he killed his wife to get rid of her so he could marry eight million dollars."

"An' he tackled me," Rolf Peters said wryly, "because I met him tonight when he must have been on his way to kill Mrs. Lee. I heard him in the lower

hallway but I couldn't see him. He struck at me in the dark with that damned ring. I remember staggering outdoors to get air. Then I fell unconscious."

"He evidently was afraid the noise had wakened Nona and me," Brand put in. "So he crept in and jabbed us, figuring we'd faint in our sleep. We'd never have known what had happened to us."

"But why would he want to kill me?" old Abigail quavered.

"Because he thought you suspected him of the murder of his wife," the surgeon said. "He's admitted that much. Says you were jibing at him with some absurd supernatural stuff. He thought you had some evidence against him—using the ashes of his dead wife to terrorize him. He thought he had to silence you."

The gentle smile faded from the old woman's face, leaving it grim and determined.

"Those ashes of Anna were tryin' to tell me somethin'," she insisted earnestly. "They certainly were. They would have done it, too, if I'd given them another chance."

Brand said nothing. But he was wondering. If he had not been alert to the danger of the ring, undoubtedly Jennings would have been able to stab him with it when they fought in the bathroom. And when he fainted, Jennings, of course, would have had to kill him.

Had the cold ashes of the cremated Anna succeeded in warning him of the ring? Or was it only his subconscious mind, clicking there at the last, so that his first suspicions suddenly became the certainty of a full vibrating realization?

He knew that he would never be able to tell. There is so much in Heaven and Earth that none of us will ever understand.



VAMPIRE MADNESS STALKS

in

BLACK WINGS OF DEATH

A Gripping Novel by G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

NEXT ISSUE

CLOTHESPIN NOSE

Sensational extra help for colds—with Luden's These famous cough drops not only help soothe throat, but release a menthol vapor—which, with



every breath, helps penetrate clogged nasal passages, helps relieve "clothespin nose!"

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THE MAKER OF

A Complete Novelet
of Satan's Surgery

By
D. L. JAMES

*Author of "Plantation of the Damned," "Stakes
for the Restless," etc.*

From the Slimy River Depths
Came Foul Crawling Horror
That Brought Murder and
Madness in Its Grim Wake!



CHAPTER I

Brand of the Deathless

THEY were only little clots of crawling jelly, but those clots had lived always. They had known no death since life began on Earth.

In them was the germ of physical immortality. No one except a madman would have thought of using that germ on mankind.

But Doctor Alex Maitland was mad.

Furious indeed waxed that madness when the doctor looked upon the fruits of his own handiwork—the doleful half-life his meddling with Nature had given his brother Reuben, a dreadful existence continuing on without end. . . .

Stanley Coulter had no foreknowl-



edge of Maitland or Reuben when he drove his car across the wide pine flats toward the Maitland place.

Brown needles carpeted the two shallow ruts that marked the way, muting the sound of rolling tires. To right and left, trees bled through a thousand cuts in their rough, umber-colored bark into hanging pots of red clay.

Coulter had left Lake City hours ago. Now he was well within Florida's turpentine flats, nearing his destination. Strange that the scene should impress him so somberly.

Perhaps Delia Latham's incompre-

IMMORTALITY



The walking corpse returned with a writhing head in his bony fingers

hensible message had something to do with it. Frankly, he was worried over Delia. But soon he would see her, then all would be explained.

At a bend in the road, where it swung parallel with the river, a rough board shack sheltering a turpentine-still came into view. Beyond that was a cluster of Negro cabins.

Air—hot, damp, stifling—beat from underneath the tilted windshield.

Coulter threw the car in low gear. The road here was soft and sandy, rutted deep by the mule-drawn wagons of the turp gang. Close on the left lay the river, simmering in the murky heat.

Through the palmetto thickets that covered the river bank, dark figures patrolled the shore, as if searching for something in the edge of the water. Coulter got a strange impression. Had it not been for the single white man

directing them, the Negroes would have fled from the river to the shelter of their small cabins.

The scared faces of the blacks sullenly kept down as Coulter's car growled past them through the deep sand. But the white man turned his head. He threw up his arm and came barging across the palmettos to the road.

COULTER jolted his car to a stop, waiting for the man to reach him.

"Howdy, stranger. You ain't by any chance a doctor, are you?"

The man strode to the side of the car, bent to look in upon Coulter. He was tall, lank, rough featured. Pine gum smeared his drab trousers and khaki shirt. Although young in years, he was evidently a veteran of the turp country.

"Why, no," Coulter answered, returning the cold stare of the other's hard eyes. "I'm an architect, not a doctor. Is something wrong?"

"Well, I don't know. Thought they'd sent for a doctor. Up at Maitlands, you know. If they did, it's too late."

A sudden chill seemed to push back the stifflingly heated air. Had anything happened to Delia?

"Too late! What do you mean?" Coulter demanded. "Who are you, and what are you talking about?"

"I'm Gerry Stilson," said the lanky stranger, clutching a horny, resin gummed hand on the car door. He hesitated a second. "Know the Maitlands? Is that where you're bound?"

"It is," Coulter told him. "I still don't see—"

"No offense, stranger," said the other. "But if you're intending to see old Mr. Maitland, you can't. He's in the river, Old Oscar is."

Coulter suppressed a sigh of relief, not at the fate of Delia's stepfather, but because she herself had not been mentioned.

"Drowned?" he asked.

Stilson nodded. "They'll tell you about it up at the house. I ain't got time. We're lookin' for him now."

He released his hold on the car, turned back toward the river. Coulter threw the car in gear, but before starting he again heard Stilson's deep voice.

"I'm tellin' you," he shouted, "there's mighty queer doings around these parts." With a final wave of his arm, he rejoined the blacks, who awaited him in a frightened, silent group.

The car jounced ahead. Presently, Coulter sighted the red brick walls of a large dwelling house. It crouched in the gloom of gnarled oaks whose mammoth, crooked branches were dismally draped with hanging streamers of silvery-gray moss. The road ended at a padlocked gate in the high fence hemming in the grounds.

He left the car in front of the gate. A smaller gate nearby was unfastened, opening onto a footpath that lead through the oaks toward the house. Gloominess so shrouded the place that he almost reached the vine-covered front porch before he saw anyone.

Delia sprang down the steps and into his arms.

FROM the very first glimpse of that lovely, troubled face, Coulter sensed it was more than the death of Oscar Maitland that affected Delia. She hadn't seen her stepfather for years before this present visit.

"Darling, you're trembling!" He held her close, for Delia was not the kind of girl who went to pieces over nothing. "Tell me about it."

"Oh, Stan!" she sobbed. "It's Alex—I'm sure he's insane. He has discovered some dreadful secret, something to do with eternal life. I think he experimented on his father—gave him some terrible virus or poison. And—he's brought Reuben back to life!"

Coulter couldn't make much out of that gush of words. Alex—she meant Doctor Alex Maitland. Since being discredited by the American Medical Association, he had lived here with his father. Reuben, another son, had been dead for several years. He had died of heart disease.

"Delia, calm yourself, honey," Coulter soothed. "What you're saying doesn't make sense."

"I don't care!" She clung to him again. "I want to get away from here. Right now!"

"I judged you did, when I got that queer phone call. Okay, let's go."

"I'll have to get my things. You wait on the porch, Stan. I'll only be a moment."

Delia left Coulter in the cool shadows beneath the vines. Then he saw that the porch was occupied by two persons, Lloyd Inglesby and his wife Stella, who was old Oscar Maitland's daughter. Coulter knew them slightly. They lived at Lake City where he worked for a building contractor.

Inglesby nodded shortly. He was a kittenish sort of man, with a plump, soft face and watery-blue eyes behind rimless glasses.

"Look here," Coulter said, angered by Delia's state of agitation. "You brought Delia here. If she doesn't want to stay, why the hell don't you do something to help her get back to the city?"

Lloyd Inglesby glanced helplessly at his wife. Stella Inglesby sniffed.

"So she phoned for you, eh? She must have called early this morning. The phone's been out of order all day. With this horrible death in the family, we haven't really had a moment's time to—"

"What happened?" Coulter asked. "Delia said Mr. Maitland wanted her to visit him because he was sick or something. Now I understand he's jumped in the river."

Lloyd Inglesby cleared his throat. "The Old Man must have had a premonition. Wanted to draw the family together when he knew he was ready for the final take-off."

"Family!" Stella's lips pursed together in a straight, red line. She was at an age when even a thick coat of powder and paint failed to conceal the tiny crow's feet webbing her gray eyes. "I don't see why Delia Latham should be numbered with the family. This is the first time she's ever been home to see Father since her mother divorced him."

"She didn't need to," chuckled Inglesby. "Her mother left her enough money."

"Ready, Stan!"

Coulter turned at the sound of Delia's resolute voice.

She came out, carrying a small suitcase.

HE took possession of the luggage. They went down the path toward the gate, beyond which he had left the car.

"I have such terrible things to tell you." Delia shuddered. "Father seemed all right when we got here yesterday. He wasn't a bit ill. He just wanted to invest some money for me, or borrow it. I don't know what for. Then, this morning about ten o'clock, that queer mark began to form on his throat—"

"Mark! On his throat?"

"Yes! A thin, brownish-red line, clear around his throat. He got terribly scared when he discovered it, and the mark kept getting deeper and deeper in color. He wouldn't let Alex do a thing for him. Not that I blame him! He wanted Mr. Inglesby to take him to some doctor in the city. When Mr. Inglesby couldn't start his car, he became almost frantic."

They passed through the gateway. Coulter put the suitcase in the car, and they clambered aboard.

"Finally he got Gerry Stilson to start out with him in the motor launch," Delia continued. "By that time we all knew something serious was wrong with him. Well, in about half an hour, Mr. Stilson came back alone. He was dreadfully wrought up.

"Father had had a fit. He jumped up and attacked Mr. Stilson while they were still close to shore. He either jumped or fell out of the launch into the river. . . . Stan! What's the matter? Won't the car start?"

Coulter had been grinding away at the starter.

"Confound the thing! Must be faulty ignition."

Climbing out of the car to investigate, he was halted by a gasp from Delia. She clutched at his arm convulsively, staring toward the river.

A group of blacks, headed by Gerry Stilson, fearfully carried a limp, wet object toward the house.

"It's Father," Delia said in a hushed, sorrowful voice.

Then the girl gasped, a queer, stifled cry.

A chill of horror gripped Coulter as he watched that macaber procession.

Nobody likes corpses, but even those unaccustomed to such sights have only slight thrills of distaste. This corpse, however, was more than a corpse. Or, rather, less. . . .

"His head!" strangled Delia. "*His head is gone!*"

Coulter had already seen that short stub of the neck. It projected ghastly from the dripping, mud-covered clothing that clung to the grisly shape.

Something about the ghastly stump gave Coulter a startling thought. The head had not been bitten off by some river denizen.

It had fallen off!

CHAPTER II

The Thing That Crawled

IN a hastily cleared table in the center of the large room, lay the headless body of Oscar Maitland. The Inglesbys and Gerry Stilson, frozen with horror, stood along the wall near the door. Doctor Alex Maitland was bending over the body when Coulter and Delia Latham entered the room.

Abruptly he looked up. Coulter met glassy eyes that seemed all pupils. The doctor was nearly chinless, long hair combed straight back from a wide, high forehead. Behind those distended pupils, Coulter seemed to catch the suggestion of some evil, mirthful emotion just ready to burst forth.

"As I was about to say," Maitland resumed, as if interrupted in the midst of some scientific discourse, "it is quite apparent that there has been practically no loss of blood. The body is pink and plump.

"The idea that the head was torn off by some aquatic creature, an alligator for instance, is of course ridiculous. There are no teeth marks, torn or ragged flesh. On the contrary, the end of the severed neck is clean-cut and covered with a thin, brown, scabrous membrane.

"You ask what this mean, this sudden disunion? My friends, it means a glorious, triumphant confirmation of my theory relative to physical immor-

ality through binary division. It means that the cranial member was not cut or torn away. Rather, it underwent a spontaneous recession along a predetermined line of cleavage—"

"My Lord!" Stella Inglesby's voice was husky. "Do we have to listen to such—"

"Silence!" The doctor raised an arm commandingly. "There are certain creatures of the protozoa, the amoeba for instance, that never die except by accident. They just divide, redivide, endlessly. These creatures that still exist may be considered immortal fragments of the original life-germ. They multiply, they divide, but they never die. Now, here before us, is the supreme achieve—"

"Listen here," Coulter broke in on that wild discourse. "Someone has put my car on the blink. Whoever did it better come across pronto! What do you know about it, Doctor Maitland?"

With a glassy, doglike stare, the madman's eyes met Coulter's.

"And who are you?" he demanded harshly.

"This is Stanley Coulter, the man I'm going to marry," said Delia faintly. "He came to take me back to the city."

"Well, whoever he is, I can't be distracted with such mundane matters," declared Doctor Maitland. "He should have kept better watch over his property."

Coulter felt Delia's hand on his arm, urging him to withdraw into an adjoining room. He complied. Bookcases lined the walls. There were several chairs with worn upholstering, and on the wall a large bromide enlargement of Oscar Maitland.

Delia trembled in Coulter's arms.

"I told you he's hopelessly mad," she blurted. "He's doing some dreadful experiment in his laboratory, and he wants to keep us here. He needs—material! But he's right about some things. Did you look at the—neck?"

HORROR rounded her eyes as they met Coulter's. He nodded.

"It did look odd—devilishly odd! But don't let that gibberish he's talking worry you. I don't believe he knows anything about the car. . . . By

the way, who is this Gerry Stilson?"

"Oh, he's just a neighbor who's leased the turpentine rights on Father's pine-land. He's rough, but I'm sure he's honest and wouldn't think of touching the car."

"Maybe not," Coulter growled. "But someone thought of it. Maybe some of his Negroes. Who else lives here?"

"There's a nephew, Wallace Harston. He's lived here for a long time. Ida Dalton is the housekeeper. And then there's old Jed Gisborne, a kind of handyman. That's all."

"A nephew, eh? I haven't seen him around anywhere."

"Stan, what are we going to do? I don't want to stay in this house another night. I haven't told you everything yet—about Reuben."

Coulter turned toward the doorway as a step sounded behind them. It was Lloyd Inglesby, his plump face a shade paler than usual. He looked very close to nausea.

"What do you make of it?" he asked shakily. "It—it seems like the old man was poisoned, doesn't it? What do you suppose that crazy son of his is saying in there now? If they put the body back in the river, it'll come to life like an amoeba. Ugh!"

"Will your car run?" Coulter asked, struck by a sudden idea.

"No," answered Inglesby, "it won't. I left it out back in the garage and some one stole the battery. My wife's gone to her room. She isn't feeling well. But she wouldn't leave here anyway. She thinks some one is after the old man's money. He's supposed to have quite a wad somewhere. You wouldn't think such a God-forsaken place offers much chance for a real estate man, but it does here in Florida. Old Oscar could make money anywhere."

Abruptly, Coulter grew aware of deepening shadows within the room. His eyes traveled to the window. The daylight was gone. The sun by now must have fallen beneath the pine tops.

A clatter of pottery sounded from the rear of the house. A middle-aged woman stood in the doorway, with a helpless, bewildered expression on her not too intelligent features.

"Please, ma'am," she quavered at

Delia, "there's food on the table, for such of 'em as wants it. Jed, the shif'less critter, 's been down to the jetties all afternoon shrimp'ing, an' me havin' to cook without a stick o' wood!"

"Thank you, Ida." Delia turned to Coulter, her hands clenched nervously. "Let's go out on the porch, Stan. I—I feel faint."

The thought of food wasn't very pleasant to Coulter either, at that moment. Delia shrank close to him as they passed through the outer room, where the ghastly thing sprawled on the table. The room was deserted. Outside, on the porch, Gerry Stilson leaned his tall figure undecidedly against a vine-covered pillar.

DELIA sank into a chair. A moment later a young man in white duck came out. His face was deeply tanned, his hair wavy, but his rugged features had all the irregularity of hastily moulded dough. Coulter placed him as the nephew, Wallace Harston. He didn't see Delia and Coulter.

"Great God!" he said hoarsely to Stilson. "What's happened to Uncle Oscar?"

"So it's you, eh, Wally? Where you been all day?" Stilson regarded the other closely.

"Wh-what happened to him?" stammered Harston.

"Same thing," Stilson spoke quietly, "that's happened to three of my colored boys since we been workin' your uncle's trees."

"I know. I heard about that—"

Harston broke off as the gate slammed. Footsteps sounded on the path.

"He was floatin' among the hyacinths along the river bank," Stilson hastily explained. "But his head wasn't there. Leastways, we couldn't find it. . . . Here comes old Jed. Look at him tearin' along that path! Wonder what ails him."

A strange figure hove in sight, hurrying up out of the shadows beneath the oaks. Through the moonvines that draped over the porch, Coulter saw the swart, shrunken form of Jed Gisborne, the handyman. Something white trailed behind him at the end of a short line.

He was hatless, his meager locks white as washed cotton in the quickly thickening dusk.

"Why, Jed," said Stilson, as Gisborne came to a panting halt in front of the porch, "you'll get your shrimpin' net tore up, draggin' it that way. What ails yuh?"

Jed Gisborne's seamed face was the color of unvarnished mahogany. He swallowed once or twice, the tuft of white on his upper lip bobbing up like a rabbit's tail against his thin, hooked nose.

"Where's Oscar?" he finally gurgled.

Stilson jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"I knew it!" A lump jumped up and down in Jed's skinny neck. "And 'is head— It's gone, ain' it?"

Stilson didn't reply. Wallace Harston turned half around, and apparently for the first time he saw Delia and Coulter. Jed Gisborne fumbled with the shrimp net, a small circular net that closed when the central line was pulled. His bony fingers trembled with fright.

"I ketched 'is head—"

"You what!" Wallace Harston took a quick step backward.

"Yes," continued Jed, his voice raspy, "I ketched it in this here net. . . . I was a-standin' on the cement breakwater at the south end of the jetties, like I always does, an' I tells myself it's big crab, when the net come up heavy-like. Then I dumped it out—"

"God Almighty! It was awful! He'd lost 'is glasses, but 'is eyes was clear open, a-lookin' straight an' hard right at me—"

"You caught his head in your shrimp net?" There was an odd, strained note in Stilson's voice. "Where is it? Did you fetch it?"

Jed ceased his blundering efforts to straighten out the snarled net. His deep-set eyes blinked distraughtly, and the wrinkles across his low forehead became even deeper.

"Naw! 'Twas a Devil-head, with legs sproutin' from its neck. When it seen me a-lookin' down at it, it runned off in the bushes, an' hid. Runned off like a big spider, with its whiskers a-trailin' in the sand. . . ."

CHAPTER III

Crawler by Night

A MOMENT of shocked silence followed the old man's incredible statement. Despite the fact that Coulter knew, or thought he knew, that such a thing could not take place in a sane world, cold horror froze his spine.

"Pink elephants!" he told Delia. "Or else Jed's a good liar. I'd have to see that before I'd believe it."

But when the girl's wide eyes met his, he saw mirrored in them a rising fear. His gaze swept down over her slender white throat.

With blasting suddenness he saw it. A thin, brownish-red line blemished that satin-smooth skin—a narrow, barely visible discoloration encircling her throat.

Half stunned, he tore his eyes away, as the meaning of that sinister brand filtered poisonously into his brain.

Delia must not be told!

"Come," he said quickly, "let's go down to the car. Maybe I can—"

He didn't finish. The urgency of getting the girl off somewhere to receive medical attention drove all reason from his mind. Perhaps he could rig some makeshift contrivance to take the place of the bakelite disk that had been stolen from the distributor.

"Coulter!" It was Lloyd Inglesby who spoke. He emerged from the dark interior of the house, hurried across the porch. "Coulter, my wife's ill. She thinks we were all drugged last night—given some virus or something. She's changed her mind about going away. If we can switch the battery from your car into mine, we'll all get out of here!"

"Okay," Coulter agreed. "We were just doing down to the car. Come along and we'll see what we can do."

It was slightly less dark out of the shadows under the oaks. Coulter fished a flashlight and some wrenches from a door pocket of the car. He pulled up the floor boards and began loosening the battery.

"I want to get Stella to a doctor as soon as possible." Inglesby's hand

shook as he held the flash. "Some murderous maniac is at work around here."

"Alex would scarcely have murdered his own father, would he?" Delia's face was a vague blur in the fringe of the flash beam.

"A madman is liable to do anything," replied Inglesby. "Maybe the old man wasn't furnishing him enough money for his confounded research."

Coulter stifled a curse as the wrench slipped.

"All right," he said, lifting the battery out. "Lead the way, Inglesby."

Inglesby unlocked the big gate.

"I got the keys from the cook," he explained. "May as well leave it open."

The garage was at the end of the long drive, quite a distance behind the house.

"I don't see how these folks manage without a car," remarked Inglesby. "They used to have one, but lately they've been using the launch. Here we are. I'll unlock—"

A queer, agonized scream shrilled out from the direction of the house.

"My God!" Inglesby dropped the flash and keys. "Stella!"

He tore back along the drive.

COULTER set the battery down, wiped his hands on the dew-damp grass. Delia recovered the flashlight and key-ring.

"What in the world—" Her voice faded to silence.

Coulter took her in his arms. Her breath came in little gasps. How lucky that she didn't yet know about that dreadfully significant mark on her throat!

"I suppose we'll have to go and see what's happened," he told her.

Bright light gleamed from barred windows in a long rear wing of the house.

"That's Alex's laboratory." Delia shuddered. "It's where he keeps—Reuben. . . ."

"But Reuben is dead!"

"I know. That's what scared me so when I saw him in my room last night. And his grave's been opened! It's there behind the garage."

"His grave opened!"

What hell-spawned chicanery was in

progress here? Distinctly he recalled the details of Reuben's death, as previously related to him by Delia. Reuben Maitland had at one time been a promising young lawyer. Then he had developed a dread disease of the heart. Eminent specialists had given him but a few weeks to live. So he had gone home to his father and brother, and shortly thereafter he had died.

Suddenly a bright rectangle of light flashed in the black wall of the laboratory. Framed in the open door appeared a weird, white-draped form. It seemed to poise there for a breathless instant.

"Reuben!" gasped Delia.

Then the light winked out.

"Something fiendish is going on here," said Coulter. "Something crooked! I don't believe in reanimated dead men nor crawling heads. Let's see what has happened."

But somehow the confidence he tried to put into his words sounded a little flat.

The front of the house was still unlighted. The door stood open. In deference to the girl's natural repugnance for the corpse on the table, Coulter kept the beam of the flash directed elsewhere as they entered. Hushed voices drew them down a gloomy corridor to Stella Inglesby's room.

A queer scent permeated the hallway before the open door. It was a familiar scent, yet one that Coulter couldn't for the moment recall.

Wallace Harston, his tanned face red in the light from a smoking kerosene lamp, was speaking to Inglesby, who stood in silence at the bedside.

"I was in the dining room when I heard a queer scream. I ran here to see what the trouble was. That's all I know about it."

Ida Dalton was crying noisily in the doorway, wiping her red eyes on the hem of her apron. Like a sleepwalker, Inglesby came out of the room. Harston followed after him.

Coulter left Delia in the hall. Pushing by the weeping housekeeper, he entered the room.

An icy breath seemed to fan his face. His eyes cringed from the hideous frightfulness of what lay on the bed.

Where was Stella Inglesby's head?

ABOVE her shoulders the white column of the neck ended, cleanly sheared off by a single stroke of some Gargantuan scythe. But what should have been raw, bleeding flesh, at the end of that short stub, did not look raw. A thin chitinous membrane, variegated with chiaroscuro markings, seemed to be forming over the exposed, skinless surface.

Why were those white sheets unstained by any touch of crimson? No applied lotion, no sealing compound could have so effectually stanching the blood flow. . . .

The words of a madman whirled through Coulter's thoughts. "The cranial member was not cut or torn away. Rather, it underwent a spontaneous secession along a predetermined line of cleavage." Those were the words Doctor Alex Maitland had raved.

Had Stella Inglesby's head cleaved loose divided from her body as an amoeba divides—spontaneously, the effect of some obscure and hideous virus?

"But there isn't any such poison. There *can't* be!" Coulter muttered to himself. "Anyway, some one stole the head and carried it off."

A draft sucked the muslin curtains through the open window. Pallid as a ghost, Delia stood in the doorway watching him.

"Why are you looking at me so queerly?" she cried in fright.

Coulter couldn't tell her why. He tore his eyes from her white throat, from that deepening, ghastly line.

"Nothing," he muttered.

A dark shape in the corner of the room drew his attention. It was a pile of clothing, but something bulged under it. He pulled away the clothes.

He found a storage battery!

So Inglesby had lied. He had removed the battery from his own car, hid it here in his room. But why?

When he came out, Jerry Stilson was in the hallway with Delia.

"Someone else will have to set up with Old Oscar," Stilson said. "I was fixin' to keep the deathwatch myself, but not if this keeps up."

Inglesby stood before an old-fashioned tall mirror. In terror, he scratched matches, holding them close to his throat.

"It's there—the mark," Coulter heard him muttering. "My God! We've all been poisoned!"

Coulter grasped his shoulder, shook him.

"Come on, we've got to get the police here. Has anyone tried to phone?"

"The phone's dead," spoke up Wallace Harston.

With the flashlight in one fist, Delia's small, cold hand in the other, Coulter started along the hall toward the front of the house. Fear, like cold, slimy coils, tightened around his heart. He felt no fear for himself but for the girl at his side. Around her slender, white throat he knew that fateful brand burned deeper.

The others followed. No one spoke. Their footsteps resounded hollowly on the linoleum-covered floor. Ahead of them, hidden by the clammy darkness that filled the big front room, sprawled the horrible headless corpse.

Coulter edged through the door a single step into the room. Involuntarily, the bright flashlight swept over the table on which the corpse of Oscar Maitland had been stretched out.

It was gone!

ASOUND, a furtive slithering sound drew his eyes downward. Then he saw the corpse. Knees hunched awkwardly underneath, arms flung out on either side of that ghastly neck-stub, it lay on the floor near the table.

Again came that gruesome, sliding sound.

Creeping from behind the crouching corpse came the horror. A hideous thing crept forward on fresh-sprouted tentacles.

Coulter heard a choking cry behind him. It sounded like Stilson. Above the strangled gasp, Delia's scream pierced keenly.

But he could not tear his eyes from that incredible monstrosity—that thing he would have sworn could not exist except in the dreams of a madman.

Limned vividly in the wavering beam of light he saw it only too clearly. He

could not deny it was the head of Oscar Maitland.

It stood upright in the center of a mat of twitching pseudopodal legs the color of raw beef. Fingerlike projections, a dozen or more, six inches in length, sprouted from the severed neck.

Coulter shrank from the open eyes, the seamed forehead, the trailing beard in which bits of twigs and a brown dead leaf had become enmeshed. Stringy wisps of gray hair, in life combed carefully over the pink bald spot, now hung dankly over the eyes and ears.

All this and more Coulter saw in that first brief interval. Like a statue, paralyzed, he stared while the incredible head crawled around its own corpse.

At last, apparently satisfied, that thing of hideous, impossible life deserted the corpse. It crawled for the doorway, carefully avoiding the legs of the table. Over the threshold, onto the porch, it disappeared into the night.

"God!" Inglesby was slumped against the wall. "I—I'm poisoned! Get me to a doctor, quick!"

Coulter turned on him savagely.

"You damned rat!" he snapped. "Can't you think of anyone but yourself?"

Delia was biting her lips, her lovely face deathly white. Coulter fought not to look at the glaring line around her throat as he drew her toward the door.

One thought consumed his brain. Get her away from that house of madness and horror. Get her where she can receive medical attention before it is too late!

CHAPTER IV

From the Grave

DELIA and Coulter stood at the edge of a fresh pit in a thicket of vines. Darkness, a tangible blackness, wrapped weighty arms around them.

"It's Reuben's grave." Delia's hand, cold as ice, clenched Coulter's. "See? There's the headstone, tipped aside."

They had been wandering around in the darkness, searching for the storage

battery Coulter had left near the garage. Delay clawed at his heart, his brain. Every moment, that obscure, mephitic change ate farther into the neck of the girl he loved. Swiftly she approached the disgusting immortality of the ever-dividing, never-dying amoeba.

Fog from the river blurred the streak of flashlight. Weakly it struggled down into the grave, yellowed a moldering, splintered coffin.

"It's empty, sure enough," he said tautly. He shifted the light to the tilted block of marble. "In Loving Memory Of Reuben Maitland." A multitude of nameless, incredible thoughts surged grotesquely through his brain. "Nineteen-six—nineteen-thirty-one—"

Then, abruptly, it happened.

There was no warning, merely a slight, furtive rustling in the vines. Coulter whirled. A white-draped thing threw itself upon him.

He dropped the flashlight. Delia's scream shrilled once. Darkness fell.

Then Coulter battled desperately with a panting thing that gibbered half-human words.

He was taken unprepared. Blinded, he didn't know what he fought. He managed to get in several good short-arm jolts. His pistoning fists sank into a material body.

Gibbering, whining, the thing drew back. Coulter heard a swishing sound, like a swinging club. The next second his head burst with pain and flame. . . .

When the world came out of black night again, he lay on his back on a hard, smooth floor. He tried to place himself, to recall what had happened. Glaring, bluish-white light sliced his eyes. He groaned. Agony leaped down the side of his head and neck. He raised his hand. Something damp and sticky was there— Blood!

He heaved himself over on his face. Now the light didn't hurt so much when he opened his eyes. Delia's frantic voice called his name over and over, coming from a short distance away.

Groggily, he looked about. Vertical iron bars crossed the line of his vision. He was in a cell-like chamber. Light came through the bars from a hissing gasoline lantern.

He looked for Delia. She wasn't there. A narrow cot and table crammed the cell. Somehow, the place bore the appearance of having been lived in for a long time.

He raised himself on his knees, then finally staggered erect. Through the bars he could see into a large room. It looked like a hospital surgery, only it was cluttered with incongruous objects.

A large, square glass tank, like a goldfish aquarium, stood at one wall. In the colorless liquid that nearly filled it floated four human heads. Three were black. The fourth—

God in Heaven! He stared at the dead face of Stella Inglesby!

HORROR whipped him to full consciousness. He recalled all that had happened in the last few hours.

Again came Delia's urgent voice. Coulter's eyes focused on two surgical operating tables, each holding a human figure.

"Delia!" he shouted. "What happened to you? Are you—"

"Stan! Thank God, you're not dead!" Delia twisted her head to look at him. She lay strapped tightly on a table, her clothing in tatters. "When they dragged you in, I saw the blood. I thought you were—"

"They? Who do you mean?" His thoughts were still muddled. He stared about the cell, trying to find a way out. "Where are we?"

"In Alex's laboratory!" Panic ran through the girl's voice. "He helped Reuben drag you in here."

"Reuben! Then it was—"

"Yes. He hid in the vines near his grave. He's horribly changed!"

The form on the other table groaned, writhed its head sidewise. Coulter recognized the plump, white face of Lloyd Inglesby. Bloodless lips mumbled incoherently.

Coulter glared out between the inch-thick bars. His brain seemed to hammer against his aching skull.

A heavy metal door barred him in the cell. There were no windows in the strong brick wall. In the outer room he saw nothing of the mad doctor, nothing of the thing that had attacked him at the grave.

He tugged at the bars, trying to bend them apart. Although in that moment of nightmare his strength was more than human, those bars resisted his mightiest effort. Dripping sweat and blood indiscriminately, he was forced to stop and think coherently.

Inglesby was a bound prisoner whose delirious muttering gave evidence of a wandering mind. Coulter had to drop the sharp suspicions he had formed. These suspicions hadn't explained anything, but they were a lot better than admitting the incredible reality of crawling heads and living corpses.

Now his mind strove to find some mundane answer, one not involved with the supernormal.

"Delia, darling," his voice was hoarse, "they didn't—harm you, did they?"

"No, Stan," she called in answer. "Alex just looked at my throat. I don't know why. He acted disappointed."

"This nephew, Harston," Coulter stated, "would be in line to inherit the whole fortune if all the Maitlands were killed off."

"I suppose so," said Delia. "Why? Do you think—"

"Listen! Someone's coming . . ."

Coulter had caught the metallic click of a slipping bolt. A door swung open in the outer room where Delia lay. A tall, gaunt form, clad in a white, flowing wrapper, appeared in the opening.

"Reuben!" cried Delia.

GIBBERING and mouthing idiotically, the thing came padding across the floor on bare feet. A naked, bony arm hung out of the short sleeve of its white covering. Clenched in its fingers dangled a hideous object that was part hair, part flesh, part—

The bare feet padded across the floor to the glass tank.

Its arm raised, dropped the queer round object into the tank.

Again that gaunt, fantastically deformed figure crossed the floor to the door, opened it and departed.

Coulter's eyes clung to the glass tank. Those ghastly heads were bobbing about in the clear liquid. But now there were five heads, and the fifth head was—

"My God!" Coulter yelled hoarsely. "They've got Harston!"

"Stan,"—Delia's voice was edged with hysteria—"Stan, tell me truly, is there a mark on my throat?"

Coulter didn't answer for a moment. Horrible dread stiffened his throat muscles. Would Delia be next? Would that charming head, with its clear, wide eyes, its short-bobbed curly hair, be next to join the five already in the tank?

"Stan!"

Loving her so, he couldn't stand that thought.

"No," he declared. "That is, I can't see from here, darling."

Savagely, he renewed his struggles to bend apart the bars of his prison. Futile moments passed, until the mad master himself burst into the room where Delia lay helpless.

"Maitland!" Coulter shouted. "What in God's name is the meaning of this? Are you completely mad? Let me out of here, damn you!"

But the madman gave not the least evidence that he heard.

Bending over Delia, he looked closely at her throat. He shook his head, muttering indistinctly. Then he quietly began laying out glittering steel implements from a glass cabinet.

"Life unceasing," he stated. "To you the dearest wish of humankind shall be granted. Eternal existence . . . Think of it! And only I am able to grant that boon—I, the benefactor of a death-cursed race!"

Coulter went mad then.

That maniacal surgeon, antiseptic gauze over his mouth and nose, bending over the girl Coulter loved, was more than he could sanely stand. But there was nothing he could do about it. He could only batter his hands into bleeding wreckage against the iron bars of his cell.

Evidently that first dose was not working swiftly enough on Delia to suit Doctor Alex Maitland. Now he prepared to take more stringent measures.

A hypodermic syringe flashed in his gloved hands. He filled it carefully from a small vial of green liquid. Delia cringed, white-faced, away from him.

"Stop!" Coulter shouted. "Stop, I

say! You can't do that. Stop!"

BUT the madman paid no heed. One gloved hand twisted into the sheer fabric of the torn frock at Delia's throat. He ripped it down, baring the soft albescent contours of her helpless body to his maggot-brained tampering.

"Don't! Please don't!" Delia strained against the leather straps that bound her wrists and ankles. "I don't want to live forever. Please— Oh, please go away!"

Coulter added his own frenzied shouts, pleading and cursing in a single breath. But the fiend persisted inexorably in his purpose.

Pulling the glove from his right hand, he thrust his fingers through the steel rings on the hypodermic cylinder, set his palm against the extended plunger. For a second he pawed at the trembling body of the girl. Then, viciously, he thrust the needle deep into her milk-white flesh.

Delia screamed as that dread virus entered her veins. Coulter clung to the bars, his mouth hanging impatiently. It was too late!

The outer door opened again. Reuben had returned, nor was he empty-handed. Another head dangled from his bony fingers.

Gibbering idiotically as before, he padded on bare feet a few steps into the room. Something writhed at the base of the head he carried by its scant locks of white hair.

Something quivered there like long worms, the color of raw beef.

Reuben stopped, set the thing on the floor. Immediately it began creeping across the floor.

It was the hideous crawling head of Oscar Maitland.

Nausea gripped Coulter as he watched that thing of devilish life, watched those repulsive tentacles scamper like a monster spider.

His eyes flashed back to the surgeon. That fiend had not yet replaced the glove on his right hand. For the first time Coulter regarded that hand attentively. Suddenly a rising excitement surmounted the numbing despair that stifled him. For he had seen that hand before.

It was not the hand of Doctor Alex Maitland!

Fresh pine gum is most difficult to wash off. That hand was covered with dark blotches.

"Stilson!" he shrieked. "You Devil from hell—I know you!"

CHAPTER V

Satan's Own Surgery

GERRY STILSON swung around, glared at Coulter through the bars. Calmly, without the least haste, he then removed the surgeon's smock and the gauze. Moreover, he deserted his pose of rustic simplicity. Coulter now saw him as he really was—a cunning, steel-nerved conspirator, in whose dark, agate eyes glinted a murderous light.

"A fool stunt," Stilson sneered, "letting me know you were wise." He laughed harshly. "I was saving you alive as an eye witness against Alex, but now—"

He shrugged, turned away, assembling a queer, yet simple apparatus. A storage battery—the same one Coulter had found in Stella Inglesby's room—dangled two long, insulated wires which he twisted together like a lamp cord and fastened to the battery with spring clips. At the other end of each of the wires was a wooden handle. On one was a push-button switch. A short length of thin, bare wire connected the two handles.

Coulter was aware of these preparations only vaguely. His entire attention was centered on escape.

Delia was still conscious. Her wide eyes stared on hopefully as he demolished the wood frame of the cot, trying to find a piece large and strong enough for a lever.

Now Stilson had the apparatus assembled. Holding the wooden handles, by thumbing the switch he could release the current into the short connecting wire.

He tested it twice. Each time Coulter saw the short wire leap into glaring, white-hot brilliance.

Stilson's harsh laughter rang out.

"Nichrome wire," he explained to Coulter through the bars. "I got it from an old electric heater. Such a short piece draws a hell of a current, and it won't last long without burning in two. But it lasts long enough!"

He approached the table where Lloyd Inglesby lay muttering and pulling at the straps that held him down.

"I'll show you how it works." Stilson laughed exultantly. "So you can see what's coming to you and your gal."

He looped the wire around Inglesby's neck, pulled upward on it, thumbed the switch.

Suddenly incandescent, the white-hot wire sank into Inglesby's neck like a warm knife into butter.

There was a single agonized shriek. Steam hissed out as blood burned, dried, coagulated into hard-baked, chitinous plugs that sealed arteries and veins. The wire drew into a narrow loop, burning its way through the bone. Then it jerked free.

Inglesby's head fell to the floor, rolled a few turns, stopped.

Cold horror crawled down Coulter's spine. That stench—he knew it now. It was the scent of burning bone, such as he had once smelled in a blacksmith shop.

Stilson walked over toward Delia, the flexible, twisted wire trailing behind him on the floor.

A SUDDEN gibbering from Reuben drew his attention. Reuben padded swiftly on bare feet to the other door.

"Reuben, come back!" Stilson dropped the implement of death. "Damn that half-wit. He's sneaked out. He didn't like seeing me burn off that head." He strode toward the door. "I'll be back," he promised, leering.

Awful moments passed while Delia and Coulter waited for the return of Stilson, timeless moments while they waited for that foul fiend to come back and finish his work, silent moments there in Satan's surgery, where horror still crawled across the floor with sodden, slithering noises.

The crawling devil-head—the head of Oscar Maitland!

Coulter had almost forgotten that creeping horror—the thing that under God's rule could not be—until he saw it creeping across the laboratory floor toward the bars of his cell.

Suddenly hope gripped him. The thing became entangled in the trailing wire Stilson had dropped, dragged it closer and closer to the bars—closer to his reaching fingers.

Then at last he had it. He pulled on the wire, hauled the entire murderous device into his cell.

wire was now, for the time being, harmless. Working with frantic speed, Coulter jabbed the stub of a match in at the side of the push-button switch, wedging it down.

Then he tossed the contraption back into the outer room.

Only just in time! The outer door opened and Stilson appeared, dragging the idiot with him.

"I'll put him back in his cell," Stilson said, locking the door, "just as soon as you're done with it. Reuben should

MYSTERY HEADLINERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE

BLACK WINGS OF DEATH

A Novel of Masked Horror

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G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS



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His first urge was to destroy it. But that would delay matters, he reasoned. If he could only pull the battery closer.

Again he tugged on the wire. The battery rocked, the clips held. Slowly it began to slide toward him.

Would Stilson come back before he was prepared? Cold sweat ran down Coulter's face.

When at last he could reach the battery, he drew it up close to the bars and disconnected one of the clips. The murder-loop at the other end of the

have died years ago, as he was supposed to have. Now then—"

A GAIN he picked up that inhuman device, his cruel gaze fixed on Delia.

"Wait!" Coulter pleaded. "For God's sake, wait!"

His heart seemed to leap up into his throat, choking him. Would Stilson notice that the switch had been altered—or that the battery now rested within Coulter's reach?

"What have you got against the girl?" he cried.

"She's hooked up with the Maitlands, isn't she?"

"But the Maitlands, what—"

"Old Oscar tricked me, that's what! For ten years I paid taxes on that section of bogland I own, hoping some day it'd be worth something. Meanwhile I sweated blood trying to make a living with a turp lease on the Maitland pine flats.

"Then, a couple of weeks ago, old Oscar offered me five dollars an acre for my bogland. I jumped at the chance. But he didn't have the cash, and that was what I wanted. So I gave him an option to buy it within three months, all signed and sealed and legal as hell.

"Three days later I learned about the ship canal that's to pass right through the heart of my bogland, draining it and making it worth five hundred an acre to muck farmers.

"Well, I figured to stop old Oscar, or any of the Maitlands, from taking up that option. Right away Oscar sent for the Inglesbys and his stepdaughter here, trying to raise the cash and keep the profits all in the family."

COULTER crouched against the bars, within arms length of the battery. Twice he saw that bare wire curl up around Stilson's wrist as he talked, but it didn't stay long enough for him to act.

"But that mark around their throats," Coulter said, hoping to keep Stilson talking, "and the crawling head. Why did you choose that way of going about it?"

Stilson laughed smugly. "Some stunt, eh? I fastened old Oscar's head on the back of a turtle, gave him a nice fringe collar cut from a red rubber inner tube. Real smart, eh? I fringed the collar to look like legs, but actually to hide the turtle's shell."

This disclosure was a little late. Coulter had already penetrated the secret of the head's apparent life. The turtle had wandered right before his eyes.

"Of course Jed Gisborne was lying about catching the head in his shrimp net," Stilson continued. "I put him up

to that, made him think it was all a joke for Harston's benefit.

"Alex and his crazy experimenting gave me the idea. He was trying to concoct some dope that would make animals divide like amoebas. It wouldn't work, of course. So I told him he ought to try it on humans—the blacks, for instance. Sure enough, he put some of the stuff in the spring where they get water. He forgot it's piped here as well.

"The next day I brought him three Negro heads. He was crazy, of course, but since then he's been crazier. Then, last night I dumped some real dope in the spring—dope that made every one take a damned deep sleep—deep enough so I could go around and paint that brand on their necks with silver nitrate. The stuff doesn't show up at first, but by and by combines with the salt in perspiration, forming silver chloride. It's still invisible until strong light falls on it, then it begins to darken like photographic printing paper. Meanwhile, just as a precaution, I turned Reuben loose, and this morning I cut the phone wires."

"Reuben?" Coulter's eyes were glued to that devilish thing in Stilson's hands. Would his chance never come? "But Reuben has been dead for six years."

Stilson was growing impatient. He took another step toward Delia. He stretched out a hand to grasp her hair so he could raise her head and slip the wire around her throat.

"Reuben didn't die. Everyone but old Oscar and Alex thought he had. When Reuben came home expecting to pass out any moment, Alex operated on him. The operation did away with his heart trouble, but it made an idiot of him.

SEEING him around that way is what worked a screw loose in Alex. Neither he nor the old man wanted folks to know about it, so they planned and carried out a fake death and funeral. Reuben's been living in that cell for years. I opened the grave just to—"

That was as far as Stilson got. The next second his mouth widened in an agonized scream.

COULTER'S opportunity had come. The nichrome wire curled up around Stilson's wrist. Realizing it was his last chance, Coulter's hand snaked out and between the bars, slipped the spring clip back on the battery.

Instantly, the incandescent wire sank bone-deep in Stilson's flesh. He screamed, jerked at it, tried to tear it away.

Presence of mind might have saved the fiend. Instead, he dropped the wooden handles that were supposed to protect him. The white-hot wire remained looped around his wrist.

He snatched at it with his bare hand. All at once, both his hands were entangled in his diabolic invention. The brilliant, glowing thread of metal cut through flesh and bone with a speed like lightning.

Steam gushed up as blood and flesh burned away. Screaming and thrashing around, he upset the table on which Delia was bound.

But Coulter wasn't watching any

longer. The table crashed against the bars of his cage. He tore at the straps that held the girl.

Released, she sprang up and opened the door of his cell.

He had no difficulty in getting the best of Stilson and shutting him up in the cell to await the police—for Stilson had no hands left.

Coulter found Doctor Alex Maitland locked in another room. He is now in an asylum along with Reuben.

Medical examination of Reuben disclosed the nature of the operation that had preserved his life at the expense of reason—total excision of the thyroid.

Thyroidectomy has long been known to cure certain forms of heart disease. But, without lifelong, constant dosing with thyroid hormone, it causes idiocy and morbid physical changes. Therefore it is almost never resorted to.

As for Delia, the hypodermic given her proved innocuous. She is now Coulter's wife, and they often think with inward shuddering of that hellish interval spent in Satan's Surgery.



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ROMEOS



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A Dead Man's Crew Spreads Terror
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Vessel in the Frozen Antarctic!



Before he could raise his arm in protection it was on him

PHANTOM OF THE SHIP

By **DON JOSEPH**

Author of "Grim Evidence," "Soul of Terror," etc.

JOE AMOS looked out of the window of the main hall in silent meditation. The raging Antarctic storm prevented him from seeing what his eyes unconsciously searched for—the shape of the inanimate thing that had broken the morale of the supply base.

The rage of the whirling snow dropped for a moment as he peered again to get a glimpse of the skeleton superstructure. He was not a sailor, was not superstitious, and still he could not help shivering when he thought

about it.

And he thought about the "Death Ship" a lot these past few days. The *Albatross* was its real name and it had haunted the supply base of the expedition ever since they had landed on the edge of the Ross Barrier Ice.

Behind him he could hear the angry voices of the men arguing—the calm, logical voice of Captain Squire, leader of the expedition, the high-pitched nervous voice of Tom Banton, the meteorologist, and the plain angry voice of Tony Green, electrical engineer and

electrician for the expedition.

But Amos wasn't listening to them. He knew they would not get anywhere anyway. He was relieved that Squire had come back from the advance post across the Barrier Ice up at the Beardmore Glacier. And he had come back in the nick of time!

He had pushed his way into the main hall just a few minutes after the storm broke. Had he tried to land his plane ten minutes later he would have killed himself. He had walked into the suddenly hushed room with long strides and had thrown some specimen of gold ore down on the table.

"That's why I'm back," he said, an enigmatic smile on his weather-beaten face. He hauled off his goggles that were becoming fogged in the warmth of the hall. "We just found the deposit in the glacier a few hours ago. . . . What's wrong? Don't you like it?"

He turned sarcastically to Green who was twisting the piece of ore in his fingers, a sour expression on his face. Green's sharp eyes came up from the specimen and fixed Squire's look.

"No," he said, and scowled, "I don't. The samples you brought back to America a year ago were richer than this."

A stormy expression swept over Squire's face. He was not used to being contradicted. The other men sat tense, waiting to see what would happen when the cold, purposeful nature of Squire crashed against the hot-tempered Green. But suddenly Squire smiled broadly.

"Come on," he invited. "We'll go over to the laboratory and see."

When the two returned it was easy to see that they had been quarreling. Anger and disappointment struggled for mastery in Green's expression. Squire simply looked annoyed. Green who had put up half the funds for the expedition, was a highly successful engineer back in the States. But the isolation and tension at the base had recently turned him into a suspicious and sullen man.

THE heavy lines around his thin lips were etched a little deeper as he dropped into a chair.

"What I don't understand," he snarled aggressively. "is how one specimen could be almost entirely free of base metals and this one so loaded with them that it wouldn't be worth carting a shipload of the stuff back to America."

Green was short and assertive. Squire was a big man, sure of himself, and always the leader.

"I can't explain it," he said soothingly. "Probably the shifting ice of the glacier covered up the old deposit and uncovered this poor one."

Amos was glad the argument ended there. For a few moments the air crackled with the electricity of barely controlled emotions. His eyes strained again anxiously to penetrate the white wall of the driving snow. Behind him now the men were talking in hushed voices about the shrouded corpse, and Amos, who had never had much time for superstition before, couldn't shake the dull shudder from between his shoulder blades.

He realized then that it was not the Death Ship he was trying to see. It was the walking corpse, the frozen body in a stiff shroud that his eyes unconsciously sought.

The men had called the boat the Death Ship ever since the expedition had landed. It was an old clipper with sleek lines that had got caught in the ice pack long before steamships had ever ploughed the Seven Seas. When the crew of the expedition had climbed to the deck to explore the old ship they had suddenly stopped in a strange, silent circle. In the middle of the deck, as though it were waiting there to receive them, was the stiff blot of a shrouded corpse. A shiver ran through the suddenly arrested crowd of men. To the superstitious sailors it was a foreboding of terror.

Amos felt his own hair rise in horror, the skin along his spine prickle queerly as he recalled how the wind had rippled the heavy canvas of the gray sheeting. For a moment the Antarctic gale had seemed to bring that mound of death to life. It was only an illusion, but a horrible one. The shrouded dead thing lying there on the deck had suddenly seemed to cloud the white polar regions

with a vague indefinable menace.

As second in command Amos felt he had to try to dispel this gathering cloud of fear. More as an example to the men than out of any curiosity he controlled the repulsion within him and touched the thing. It was frozen hard and rigid, and all he could tell about it was that its left leg, from the hip down, was wooden.

Down in the captain's cabin Amos had found the ship's log. He remembered the log pretty clearly. The boat had sailed from Boston in 1815 to go around the Horn. Disaster had dogged its wake from the beginning. In the tropics it had been becalmed for weeks. Amos remembered the entry after the first sailor had died from thirst when the captain had written in a firm old hand:

Something's wrong with this ship. It won't let the crew die. The men swear Isaac has been walking in the ship's wake ever since we threw his body overboard. Last night I saw him in the moonlight. Isaac's ghost! The men are right!

Then a later entry:

We've found why the ship's cursed. One of the crew murdered a sailor in the hold after we cleared port. We found the body and we've hung the culprit from the yard-arm. The ship's moving now!

But before the ship made its South American port nearly half the crew had died from scurvy and the curse had not been taken off the ship. Maybe the man had cursed the boat just as his throat was slit from ear to ear, while he could still talk. Anyway, the log reported that all the bodies that had been given an ocean burial were waiting for them outside the port, had taken up the trail of the ship as she headed on southward.

THE grim spectres in the wake began driving the living members of the crew mad. A gale at the Horn had ripped away a mast, crushing the first mate and the cook. The sails were torn away, and the death ship had started its grim drift to the Antarctic Circle, the spirits of the dead walking patiently in the wake of the floating coffin

of living men.

What had happened to those who were still alive when the ship was caught in the ice pack was not recorded in the log. Perhaps the terror-stricken men had wandered madly over the ice, fleeing from the dead crew. And they had frozen to death in the same kind of a storm at which Amos was looking.

Amos laughed ironically as he thought that now the sole survivor was a mysterious corpse in a gray shroud, and that the corpse was looking among the winds of the South Pole for the spirits that had scattered there more than a century ago.

It was looking for them! That was what was causing all the trouble at the base. The men had got the idea that it was prowling around the camp and no amount of argument could remove the fear from their inner souls. Some of them swore that they had seen it wandering mournfully over the ice. No one ever got close to it. None of them had ever wanted to. The foggy weather of the Antarctic plays strange tricks and maybe it was trying to lead them to the same deathly fate its crew mates had found. But Amos, himself, had never seen it gliding ghostlike through the sea smoke.

And as foolish as it seemed to be affected by the fantastic idea, he had a feeling he could not dismiss that something strange was happening down in these fog-bound regions at the bottom of the world. That feeling chilled him despite his efforts to shake off the eeriness that his common sense told him was induced by the superstition of the others, the unhealthy presence of a dead man lying in a shroud out under the open sky.

The crisis in the affairs of the base had come when they had discovered that the corpse was not even bothering to lie down again in the same spot. For some reason that discovery had frozen the blood in their veins. Banton had noticed it first when he was up on the camp pole one day taking a wind reading. He saw that the shrouded body was not lying on the top deck anymore. It had disappeared!

Amos had refused to believe it at

first. Corpses could not walk, not even at the South Pole, whatever the others said. When he climbed the pole for himself and saw the frozen mound of death was no longer lying on the deck he wondered who among them would have the nerve to carry away that grim legacy from the past. And furthermore, what could the motive be for such a ghoulish act?

But the hope of the others was short-lived. It had not left the ship. When they went aboard they had stumbled across it on the deck below, still stiff and grim. The lantern had suddenly gone out as they looked at it, as though some evil spirit had blown on the flame over their shoulders. They had fled in horror!

As their frightened footsteps had echoed frantically through the darkened recesses of the hollow hull they had felt their hair rise along their spines. None of them had had the courage to turn his head until they had tumbled off the ship. It had felt as though the shrouded thing was silently following them, had suddenly stood up when they turned to flee and had followed them quietly through the corridors and up the stairs. When they looked back at the ship from the ice below the deck was empty!

That was when they had tried to radio Squire at the advance base. But it was useless. The radio would not cut through. That had happened before. It was not even unusual in the Antarctic for the radio to go dead for long periods, silenced by the electrical emanations of the Aurora Borealis. But this time it seemed prophetic. It was isolating them from the real world.

THEY had been careful, though, not to show their uneasiness around Mrs. Hatton, wife of Archie Hatton the carpenter. She was the only woman on the expedition and they had taken her along because she was a big strong Irish woman and a good cook.

But maybe it was an error to keep all this from her. Maybe she should have been told. And now that he thought about it, where was Mrs. Hatton? The question made Amos uneasy. She was always up in the mess hall before this.

The knowledge that she instead of her husband sometimes went to the Death Ship for wood did not make him any more comfortable about her absence.

As he strained his eyes, peering out through the misty, driving snow, Amos suddenly felt as though a cold draft had blown through his fur coat. It was a damp, clinging cold like the breath from another world.

He pressed his face against the window, staring tensely. Far out in the shadowy white fastness he thought he saw something gray drifting stiffly through the gloom. Appearing and disappearing in the raging flurries of driving snow, it could not be seen clearly. In fact, its presence was more like a suspicion than a reality.

For a moment Amos felt the same panic seizing him, the same shuddering fear that had overcome the others. An icy hand seemed to be clutching at the base of his neck. Then he clenched his fists and forced himself to smile.

This was the chance he had been waiting for, the chance to investigate this thing, to show it up as someone, something that was not supernatural. After all, Squire would soon be returning to the advance base, but Amos had to maintain the morale at the base. And the morale was crumbling rapidly. It faded back into the wall of snow again as the angry voices of the men rose behind him.

Green was arguing with Banton whose large nose twitched with his own anger.

"How do I know you stole my cape?" Green shouted, unaware that the Thing that had set them all on edge was even then wandering around outside the door. "Why, you've wanted it ever since I first showed it here. But you can't get away with it, man! We'll need it some day. Then we won't have it, thanks to you, you damn thief!"

Banton's broad shoulders had been writhing as Green worked himself into a fury, and as fast as the accusation was made his fist lashed out at his accuser. As fast as he swung Captain Squire's hand shot out, catching the blow in mid-air, turning the man around to face him.

"Look, here, you two," he ordered

sternly, "you've worked yourselves into a frenzy over this corpse. There's enough hatred on any expedition where men are locked up together for a year, without adding fear of a ghost to it. Now, pull yourselves together and stay away from the damn ship if you're so sure the thing walks."

Captain Squire was a tall, powerful man in his early thirties. A famous Antarctic explorer. Amos had never imagined that he could be afraid of anything but he noticed with a queer jerk that Squire had not denied that the corpse was wandering around the ice. That it was possible! He had not been able to hide a note of fear in his voice.

The other men noticed it too, and they stiffened. They had relied on Squire to quiet this whole thing up. He was the leader of the expedition. Green stamped his wooden leg on the floor impatiently. He had lost his left leg in an accident years before and the wooden peg had become so much of him that you could better tell what he was thinking by the way he used the appendage than by the gestures of any of the limbs he was born with.

Amos noticed that this time the tapping was nervous, frightened. He kept his own eyes glued to the window, breathlessly. And then he saw it again! Gray, formless, it was drifting with its unnatural stiffness toward the hall. He still could not see it clearly, but his eyes seemed to be telling him there was something there, if he could still believe his eyes. He shivered slightly and pulled his parka hood up over his head before he turned to go out the door.

AS he stumbled through the snow Amos was not sure he was following anything. A confluence of winds carrying the whirling flakes could produce a shadowy form like the one that appeared and disappeared ahead of him. It was only some weird, some half-forgotten instinct that told him there was a presence ahead of him in the storm. Desperately he fought the swooping wind—and a sudden uncanny fear.

It pulsed against his brain in surging

waves, tore at his sanity with brutal talons.

Like some great prehistoric rat he crawled over the thirty-foot drifts, his heavy furs giving him the appearance of a rodent. When the wailing force of the gale dropped for an instant he paused to catch his sobbing breath. Always ahead of him was that gray, formless spectre.

The driving hail of icy snow particles bit into his face, but his back tingled with a barely suppressed dread as though the spirit of the storm were running its icy fingers along his spine. He realized suddenly that after a wide detour the Thing was leading him toward its home, toward the Death Ship!

Amos staggered on, trying to wipe that grim thought from his mind. The gale roared again with renewed vigor, pushing him backward, warning him against the Death Ship. The shrouded corpse had not bothered the men at the base because no one had bothered it. Now that he was going into its domain Amos wondered whether it would not take its vengeance for his interference.

And then, as if in answer to his silent question, his toe struck something soft, half buried in the snow. Even before he turned it over he knew he was going to find the tired old face of Hatton.

Hatton was one who had not been afraid of the corpse and had been taking lumber from the boat. Was this his punishment? Amos wondered grimly, his eyes held in horrible fascination. That Hatton had died in agony was plain from his wide, bulging eyes, his face twisted as though he had seen all the hobgoblins of hell before he died.

An instant later Amos saw Banton's large frame looming through the storm.

"My God!" was all he could say for a moment as he stared at the body, his face haggard within the furred frame of his hood. "What killed him?"

"I don't know," Amos answered dully. "I just found him lying here face downward in the snow a moment ago. He looks as though his blood just froze suddenly in his veins. He'd have curled up if he'd got lost and froze to death naturally. I saw him alive less

than two hours ago."

"I saw him later than that," Banton shouted above the storm. "I saw him not more than twenty minutes ago. He came staggering into the hall only a couple of minutes after you left. He was shouting hysterically that his wife had disappeared. That the shrouded corpse had got her. As we left the hall to search for her he ran on into the storm shouting that he'd find her on the Death Ship—that that was the place to look."

Banton looked sick. "And so it got him here," he said in a husky whisper. "Got him before he could ever get to the damned boat."

But Amos was not listening as he crouched there beside the body. He was wondering how old man Hatton had died. Who had killed him? If he had died by a human hand, whose hand was it among these few souls at the base? But no corpse would freeze out straight like that in this cold, and there were no marks on the body! Maybe there was only one answer—the shrouded corpse.

Desperately he cursed himself for holding the thought for a second. A frozen corpse that killed. Nonsense! And yet, he wondered, what had killed Hatton? And how, by all that's holy, had he been killed?

CURTLY he ordered Banton to carry the wizened little body of the old man up to the main hall. Banton picked it up gingerly as if it were no more than a baby and stumbled off in the direction of the building. When he was out of sight Amos gritted his teeth and plunged on toward the Death Ship. There was an errand to be done. Hatton had died trying to save his wife. Maybe she could still be saved!

He pushed on against the weight of the hurricane-massed air. Breathless. Falling. Rising again. But there was no turning back now. And then the wind stopped suddenly in the lee of the hull and he plunged against it, gasping. It rose straight above him like a dark prison wall, reaching to the snow-swept sky. He paused tense, a sinking feeling in his stomach. But there was nothing around except the driving snow.

Desperately Amos tried to control his feelings. He tried to dismiss the idea of the shrouded specter, the corpse that walked. He had to, if he was to think clearly. After all, the rest of the men there were sailors or under the influence of nautical superstition.

Even Green and Banton had fallen under the spell of the sailors' credulity on the trip down. They were ripe for any superstition that might come along. But hundred-year-old corpses did not walk, not even at the South Pole where everything seemed to work differently. And yet, if a man had killed Hatton, what was the motive for the murder of a poor carpenter?

Amos was still thinking of that when he realized with a start that it was Mrs. Hatton's parka hood he was turning over idly in his gloved hand. It was lying beside a plank that led up to the top deck of the Death Ship. As he started to crawl up it, leaning sideward against the wind, he recalled dimly that the plank had not been there before the storm broke. Then, halfway up, as the gale tore at him, he thought he saw a twisting eddy of snow up on the deck that might have been a man—a shrouded man! His breath stopped short. Again he felt that grisly sensation of hair rising along his scalp.

Time dragged insupportably as he slipped and fought his way up the plank. But when he reached the top he could see nothing. The wind was sweeping the flying flakes across the deck in a smoking tempestuous fury. He gritted his teeth as he headed down the companionway.

What he would meet in the dark groaning interior of the ship he did not know. Could not guess. Could not allow himself to think about. Deep inside himself he felt all the horror that this frozen world of ice and snow concealed. He called Mrs. Hatton's name haltingly, but there was only a mocking echo from the resonant hold of the boat.

Suddenly he felt himself break out into a cold sweat. His hair stood up on the back of his neck as he felt his toe strike against something soft, furry. He remembered that it was the spot where the men of the expedition had last seen the shrouded corpse. But the

corpse would not be soft!

In the darkness he fumbled for a match. Lit it. As the trembling flame rose from the stick he felt his eyes start with this new fear. He was looking down at the body of Mrs. Hatton, stretched out stiff, not curled up as a person does before freezing to death. And on her face was the same look of awful fear he had seen on the face of her husband.

He whirled around, looking for the other body, the body in the shroud. It was gone! Wherever he turned he had the grisly feeling that something was behind him.

THE thought had no sooner flashed through his mind than he stiffened as he heard an ominous thumping on the deck above him. Could the corpse be using a cane—or a wooden leg? That was it! He recognized it now. The corpse did have a wooden leg. And then, with a strange lack of logic it flashed through his mind that Green too, had a wooden leg. Was the phantom so unhuman after all?

Amos waited tensely. Heard the thumping of the leg coming down the companionway toward him. Then, down the corridor he saw a gray form moving jerkily. The ice pressure on the hull was making the ship groan like a dying man as Amos suddenly recalled the gaping hole in the ship's side, torn there ages ago by some sharp rock. He saw the floor start to open beside the body of Mrs. Hatton as the hull gave beneath the pressure.

Even as he turned to run Amos knew that there was nothing he could do alone on the ship. He could escape through the hole in the side. Down, down he ran through shadowy parts of the ship where he had never been. Through a room fitted up like a laboratory.

He paused a minute. Whistled. This was new! They had not had laboratories when the *Albatrose* had sailed the Seven Seas.

Up above him he heard the thumping coming closer. Through another door he saw the light from the ragged cut in the ship's side, and in moments more he was out of the Death Ship. Outside

the storm was still raging with primal fury.

For what seemed hours, Amos staggered in what he thought was the direction of the main hall. But it was not until he stumbled over Squire's plane, buried in the snow, that he knew he was off the track. Under the cowl he scooped hurriedly in the snow and then pushed on with renewed haste.

When at last he tumbled into the protection of the main hall Banton and Squire were pacing around nervously. Green was missing!

As fast as he could get his breath Amos gulped out the story, saw the faces of the two men get even whiter.

"You're coming back down there with me!" he heard himself shouting at Squire. "Right now!"

For a moment Squire drew back as Amos glared at him. Then he clenched his teeth and picked up his hood and goggles.

"Come on, Amos," he said in a whisper. "Let's get going."

How he lost Squire in the storm Amos never remembered. All he knew was that he was approaching the Death Ship alone. When he found Squire's goggles near the plank he knew that the captain must have gone up into the ship ahead of him. He plunged down the companionway without even trying to tread quietly. He was angry now. There was a human pattern to all these things that had happened—or he thought there was.

In the hold he slowed to a stop. Lit a match. The body of Mrs. Hatton was gone! A ghastly shadow of fear clutched at his heart as he heard a slithering sound on the deck. Now there was something behind him! He whirled around, still holding the burning match high, and felt his flesh creep. He had not expected to see that!

Walking toward him with stiff jerky movements was the shrouded corpse. The ageless gray cloth hung limply about its frozen body as it had on the upper deck. Amos' heart raced sickeningly as it came on toward him swiftly.

And then, before he could raise his arms in protection, it was on him. Holding him with ice-bound arms. He felt a piece of cloth slipping down over

his head. Did the Thing wrap its shroud around its victims before it killed them? The question shot through his mind as he heard a click at his throat, a low hissing in his ears. There was something dreadful about this shroud of death, this hissing sound like the last breath of a dying man. There was something noxious about it. It was killing him!

THIS was how the others had died. This was what had put the imprint of fear into their dead, staring eyes. He tried to hold his breath as he writhed on the floor. Felt his mind slipping into madness as his heart pounded in its irresistible demand for air. But the Thing clung to his arms. Held him as the hissing sound grew louder in his ringing ears.

With a final blind effort he got his arms loose and flailed aimlessly with his fists. His desperation gave him a needed moment of lucidity. In a flashing thought he realized that he could not win this way. Could not win at all if this really was the shrouded corpse. He could feel the hard body of the Thing as he shot his arms around it.

And then, his hands came in contact with a hard mass on its back. Like a brilliant stroke of light the idea of Green's stolen robe came to him. Batteries! With a lunge he tore them loose. He beat the tense body above him with them. It stopped struggling a minute as though only realizing then what had happened to it.

Amos felt his blows were too feeble to stop his assailant. But he had another plan in mind as his head whirled dizzily inside the hood. Would it work fast enough, his plan? The sound of the frigid polar wind seeking to find an entrance to the hull with keen fingers came to his dull ears with welcome violence. The blows that were now raining down on his numb face seemed to be losing their force. The hands that strove to catch his flailing arms were grasping with less energy.

His head ached with a blinding keenness that seemed to split it down the center. His stomach turned and turned slowly within him with a revolting nausea. This was not the breath of the

dead inside the hood; it was a poison gas. And the only poison gas at the base was carbon monoxide. -

He could feel the body on top of him shuddering as though in terrible fear. It started to try to tear his fur coat from him, suddenly screaming wildly. It succeeded in getting his coat down to his shoulders when his own fingers found the deadly catch at his throat. He forced his panicky mind to slow down, held his last breath while his numb fingers fumbled.

There was the saving sound of the snap giving, coming loose, and the feeling of clear fresh air on his face as the body above him rolled to the deck floor with a heavy thud.

When he came to, Amos saw Green standing above him with a storm lantern. Banton was forcing brandy between his lips. As soon as he felt stronger he got to his feet and led the men over to the body. He wondered dimly how the two of them had ever got up the nerve to come to the ship when he and Squire had not returned.

His ungloved hand felt around the body, felt the resistance wires that had provided the heat of the garment, that had permitted it to go lightly clad despite the murderous cold.

There was no heat in them now! He had seen to that when he tore the batteries loose. The frigid cold, more intense than any refrigerator, had struck with almost instant force once the protection had been removed.

Amos seized the hood and tugged. The stiffening body yielded a little before the cloth gave way, dropping the head back against the boards with a solid thud. He did not have to look, but he watched the two men bend over to look at the face. He heard them gasp as they recognized the long aquiline nose, the high cheekbones of Squire.

Squire, the leader of the expedition!

ALITTLE later, down in the hold of the ship the three men sat around a crucible, staring at a rich gold precipitate at the bottom of the receptacle.

"I suspected he brought us a poor specimen," Green said bitterly.

"A specimen from another deposit,"

Amos corrected him. "He must have pointed out the poor one to the crew. Then he got back here several hours before the storm broke, gliding his plane in to keep us from hearing it. He took enough equipment from the regular laboratory to test the richness of the second deposit here secretly. It was even better than he suspected.

"In the meantime the storm had broken, and Mrs. Hatton, who had taken refuge in the ship when she came for some wood, saw him at work. The success of his plan to kill you, Green, depended on absolute secrecy. He had to kill Mrs. Hatton, hoping to dispose of the laboratory without our knowing it was ever here, and letting us assume that she had died naturally from exposure. We wouldn't suspect him anyway, because we thought he was still up at the advance camp. But things began breaking too fast for him.

"He probably just borrowed Green's cape on the way up to the mess hall, but when he learned of our fear of the walking corpse he saw his chance to use the cape to keep us away from the ship. Then, when Hatton headed for the Death Ship, Squire caught up with him and killed him, the same way he killed Hatton's wife—with the hood. It was Hatton's body frozen straight out that made me suspect that something more human than ghostly was involved. Then Squire went on aboard the ship but since both Green and I were aboard he couldn't attack either of us for fear the other might come to the rescue. But the fact that I had seen his laboratory put me on the murder list anyway.

"You know the rest. On our way down, he separated from me and beat me to the ship. When I came aboard he was waiting for me."

Green's eyes were burning coals of anger. "Yes," he snarled. "I guessed the motive for all this killing when I came down through the hold here looking for Mary Hatton. I didn't have time to investigate because I thought he was behind me, but I guessed the reason for this lab here."

"Well," Amos cut in, "I didn't guess it was Squire until I tumbled across his plane and found that the snow hadn't melted under the engine, as it would

if he had landed before the storm."

Amos put his head in his hands. It still ached like the hammers of hell were beating inside his skull.

"That hood was really a portable death chamber," he went on. "A bend here in the wire at the bottom of the sack made a strong catch so it would hold about the throat. Then he wired a carbon monoxide cartridge that he carried for our small open air stoves to the heavy wire. When he pressed the catch to, the soldered point opened the cartridge, released the condensed gas."

"Green's a strange thing," Green said, shaking his head sadly. "He couldn't be satisfied with half a fortune. He had to plan to catch me alone in one of the huts to make it look as though I'd died of carbon monoxide from a poorly ventilated stove, so he'd get it all without being suspected."

"And that ends our phantom," Amos said weakly, managing a smile. "It never did wander about the boat. It simply fell from the first deck to the second when the ice pressure on the hull opened a wide crack where it was lying. Then, when the pressure was withdrawn the crack closed up."

Banton still looked puzzled. "Maybe you're right," he said in a hushed voice. "But how do you explain your seeing the corpse, Amos, when Squire was in the hall with us? How do you explain our seeing it when Squire was up at the advance camp?"

Amos shrugged his shoulders and his voice was a whisper. "I don't know," he said, "unless—unless it was our imagination spurred by superstition, or the shrouded thing really did—" He stopped in eloquent silence.

Outside the storm had subsided and only the sea smoke hung lazily over the far-off ice. As the three men reached the main hall Green turned to look back at the Death Ship. Amos felt him go rigid beside him.

"Look!" he gasped.

Amos took off his goggles to see better. There, unreal in the drifting fog, was a dim figure that seemed to be moving out toward the open sea. A shapeless figure. Amos gulped and blinked his eyes. When he looked again there was nothing but the polar ocean.

HATE'S HAVOC



A scream broke from her lips

By BERNARD BRESLAUER

Author of "He Who Spoke," "A Touch of Shark," etc.

**In the Thundering Night Loathsome Hate Shakes
Deirdre's Soul as Dark Death Answers Her Summons**

THE heavens were emptying themselves. Wind and rain stripped the last leaves from the maples on the lawn, and their wet, naked branches were now like strings of some great instrument making fiercely mournful music in the night. Thunder's growl answered thunder's clap, and in the sky-splitting strokes of lightning, the big house on the lawn flashed into vision and back into darkness with an almost regular rhythm.

Within the house, in separate rooms, three people paced—two girls and a man. The man strode to the window. His room was in darkness, but a sudden flash of lightning revealed him

standing by the French windows, a clenched fist upraised.

His face was contorted, whether by hate or by grief it would have been hard to say, and his chest seemed charged with some inward burden struggling for liberation. It was strange, therefore, that when he spoke, seemingly addressing the storm, his words came forth only in a whisper. What he said was simple, and then suddenly sinister.

"What a night . . . for it. . . ."

He resumed his pacing, his steps muffled by the high-piled rug.

Benita Gray, in the next room, heard neither his steps nor her own. She too paced, like someone caged and impa-

tiently waiting for freedom. The girl, beautifully proportioned in her five feet two inches of height, looked like a lovely, animated doll walking the large room.

The lights were off in this room also, and only the lightning illumined the slender figure, the titian hair, the large brown eyes. In the instant of one such flash, she glanced at her wrist watch and a shudder ran through her. It lacked a few minutes of twelve.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," she murmured, and then repeated it. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

But it seemed to her, in that moment, that there were shapes all around her, breathing near her.

It was the darkness, she told herself, and the shapes were merely imaginary representations of her fears—groundless fears.

"It's the hour and the storm," she murmured, and she quoted, almost lightly but still in a whisper:

*"'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself
breathes out
Contagion to this world. . . ."*

Then, suddenly, as the thunder cracked, she cried out aloud, despairingly:

"Don't hate me, Deirdre!"

IN a third room an auburn-haired girl stopped short. It was as though she had heard that cry. But she couldn't have. Her room was at the other end of the house, all doors were closed and the walls were thick.

She listened to the sound of the wind, the thunder, the rain. Her eyes, brown too, were wide, and there was a peculiar rapt expression on her face. She had a doll in her arms, a doll with titian hair, but at the moment she seemed unaware of what she was carrying. The night-light—the only illumination in the room—set faint glints in her auburn hair.

"The wind hates, the thunder hates, the rain hates, I hate," she said softly, in almost a chant and like a child repeating something by rote. "The wind

hates, the thunder hates, the rain hates, I hate. I hate Benita."

The last words came throatily from her red lips.

Suddenly she was on her knees, rocking the doll back and forth in her arms, stroking its titian hair.

"No, no," she crooned. "I don't hate. It's wrong. I mustn't. I don't."

But, without volition, the hand that had been stroking the doll's hair strayed down—strayed down to the throat. The fingers curled round the doll's throat—But they did not tighten.

Her face held a remembering look. Her lips moved, giving a word picture of the scene she was remembering.

"He rang. Benita answered the door. He took her in his arms, kissed her. I saw them, they saw me. He moved away from her guiltily. She blushed. He said he'd mistaken her for me. He lied. He loves her. I hate her, I hate her, I hate him."

Her hand, which had moved away from the doll's throat, strayed back. Again the fingers did not tighten. She was still on her knees, but her head was slightly turned.

"Sh-h," she whispered. "Someone's in here with me, listening. Mustn't talk about it. No, there's no one here. There's only the storm outside and me inside—"

She clapped the back of her hand to her mouth.

There was someone here!

A tall dark figure stood just inside the door.

A premonitory shiver ran over the girl. She felt suddenly cold. The odor of perfume and sachet, characteristic of a girl's bedroom, seemed to have departed. In its place was a smell of dankness, as of wet earth, and an odor of decay, very faint, as of the grave's corruption.

The girl's delicate nostrils quivered. The doll escaped her nerveless grasp, fell soundlessly to the rug. Her bosom heaved.

Then her lips parted, and from her pulsing throat a shriek went out. It was the more terrible for being soundless—a shriek seen but not heard, made by lips but not by vocal chords—for the larynx was paralyzed by horror.

A MINUTE passed, a minute of silence and inaction. The girl stood in the center of the room, the doll at her feet. The dark shape remained motionless. Then, from the girl's lips, came speech in a whisper:

"Go away . . . I do not . . . want you."

There came an answering whisper.

"You know who I am then?"

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

"You're Death."

"Death for whom?"

"For her."

"Her name?"

"Benita."

The solitary light on the night table suddenly went out. The figure of Death mover farther into the room. His cloak rustled, and there were two points of light to mark his eyes.

Something cold touched the girl's bare arm.

"Come," Death whispered. "Let us go to Benita."

A shudder ran over the girl.

"No," she breathed. "I said nothing. You heard nothing. I did not send for you. I do not want you—"

"Come. Benita. . . ."

And suddenly Death loomed up preternaturally tall, the black cloak rustled, the floor suddenly fell away from beneath her feet, and as she had cradled the doll in her arms a few minutes before, so now Death cradled her. The smell of the grave was stronger in her nostrils, but she no longer strove to shut it out. Her breath was coming fast, her young bosom heaving.

Her voice was far away in her ears—a small voice, made small by Death, which made all things small.

"Where there's no blood, there's no blush," she whispered, "You'll take all of Benita's blood away and she'll never blush again. You will, you will. Then he'll never kiss her, never love her."

She snuggled closer, nestled, cuddled. But shudders racked her, and all the while she was conscious of the smell of the grave, the work of the worm, the rot all flesh was heir to. She wanted to leave the arms of Death, and she wanted to stay. But there was no

strength in her limbs, Death held her fast, and she gave herself up to him, one part of her horror-filled, the other unresisting even in thought.

It was dark in the place where Death finally set her down. He set her down in a great chair. His fingers touched her cheek. They felt large—large as a man's hand. Everything felt large. The arm of the chair she sat in—the ridges in the carved design. The ridges were huge. She felt roughnesses in the texture of the fine-grained wood. Everything seemed to have grown.

Suddenly there was soft light in the room. And now from the lips of the girl came a shriek that was audible!

Death made all things small! She had had that thought before, but it had only been a thought, a metaphor, a figure of speech. Now she was small! She small because the *other* was small. Benita, titian-haired Benita! Death was holding her—on his finger tips!

DEATH'S guise had changed. The cloak of blackness was now a surgeon's gown of white.

The girl in the chair did not, could not move. The ridges of the wood-carving were huge beneath her fingers. She knew why now. She too, was little. Death had done this to her, and to Benita. It was no longer a thought in the mind, it was a fact in a physical world. For the Surgeon Death held Benita in the palm of his hand.

Death now had teeth. Lips parted over them and they grinned.

"For my tasks, Deirdre," he said—and his speech was rhythmic, like a corpse swinging on a gallows while a wind blew—"I adopt the guise proper to each. Sometimes I come in the shape of a gangster, hat slouched, collar turned up, as he lurks in darkness, awaiting his intended victim. To the soldier, I come in the shape of another soldier, bayonet fixed or rifle aimed, and whichever one dies, I am never the one but always the *other*.

"I come in hate, in greed, in accident, in battle, in pain, in sickness. Soon, late, always I come—and always in proper guise. For the blood-letting I am soon to do, the surgeon's garb . . . as you see. . . ."

But the girl addressed as Deirdre no longer saw. It was dark again. And then, the light came back, soft and lambent. Death set a glass object down on a huge table. It was a gigantic specimen bottle, corked. He placed another one beside it, uncorked them both.

"For you, Deirdre," he said, "and for him!"

The lips of the girl on the chair opened.

"Him?" she breathed.

"Yes. He is here. Every triangle has three sides. Here is Benita, there are you. And here"—Death's left hand came up—"is Tom Grant!"

Between the fingers of his left hand he held a man, stripped to the waist, lithely muscled, his face agonized.

A voice cried—Tom Grant's voice—"Deirdre, I love you! Not anyone else! Not Benita! But you!"

The rapid beating of Deirdre Gray's heart was evident by the visible throbbing of the pulse in her smooth throat, but her face was impassive, her answering voice low and monotonous.

"You love Benita. You don't love me. You kissed Benita. You knew it was she, not me—"

"He didn't!" Benita cried, her face as agonized as the man's, and she seemed to struggle to free herself from the fingers of Death. "He didn't know! It was a mistake, a mistake any man could make. We're twins, Deirdre, twins! You're my sister! You know that! So when Tom kissed me, he really thought it was you.

"Deirdre, listen to me! After it happened, and I saw what it did to you, I changed the color of my hair so that it couldn't happen again. You know that too."

"I know that you changed the color of your hair," came the voice of the girl in the chair, and now there was a current of passion beneath its dead level of monotony. "But you didn't change it so that Tom wouldn't mistake you for me. You changed it so that he wouldn't mistake *me* for *you*. So that he wouldn't kiss me, mistaking me for you! You took him from me. If he loved me, he wouldn't have been mistaken that time. You stole him!"

"Deirdre," the girl in the hand of

Death cried desperately, "try to understand! Try to believe me!"

"Hush," said Death.

AND now the man, Tom Grant, twisting and squirming between Death's fingers, gasped hoarsely:

"Deirdre—she's your sister, your twin. The light wasn't good in the hallway. I love you, Deirdre, you alone. I always will. Why is Benita being tortured this way? What has she ever done to you? She loves you. . . ."

The voice of Death suddenly broke in.

"Enough, Tom Grant."

And Death popped the man into one of the bottles, corked it.

The breath of Deirdre Gray came faster. Words gushed from her heart.

"Let him out . . . he can't breathe . . . I can feel him choking . . . let him out!"

But the words did not get past her lips, which moved soundlessly. She felt suffocated, suffering the man's suffering. But the words, the words in her heart—she did not speak them.

"Deirdre"—it was the voice of Benita again—"I changed my hair . . ."

"You told me that before," the girl in the chair said quietly, and her tones were the more terrible because of their softness. "You started using a white face-powder too—to kill my memory of your blush."

"It was because I knew what just that one little mistake had done to you. Deirdre, you're sick! That's why you hate me. That's why you bought a doll, gave her hair like mine, so that you could speak out your hate to her. Deirdre, what do you want of me?"

"What the surgeon is going to take from you," said the girl in the chair. "Your blood. So that you'll never blush again."

"Deirdre, you're so tiny. . . ."

"So are you. We're all small in the presence of Death."

"Deirdre, what's happened to us?"

"Hush," said Death. "Deirdre, what you seek, you shall have. Benita bloodless. It is *you* who desire it, you who will it, and you must watch it happen—from in here, where there is no escape except by love."

Death tapped the empty specimen bottle.

"Except by love," he repeated.

The girl in the chair felt the grasp of two strong and enormous hands about her waist. The next instant she was popped into the bottle! There she was, clad as her sister was, her breath choked as Tom Grant's was choked. And she saw her sister in the Surgeon's hand— clad in that red ballet costume, the twin of the one she too had worn to the ball that now seemed so far in the past.

She saw the hypodermic syringe in the surgeon's hand.

She was silent in her tomb of glass.

She saw Tom Grant futilely beating against the bottle.

"He wants to rescue her," she thought wildly. "But he can't, he can't! Take her blood. Surgeon! Take it, take it—TAKE IT!"

To the crescendo of her passion, her complete abandonment to the overmastering desire that had been bottled up within her, her wild voicing of her inmost thought, the needle thrust home!

Slowly the plunger came back, and from out of the heart of Benita flowed its blood, filling the hypodermic.

SHE saw Tom Grant struggling. That was strange. She saw Tom and Benita at the same time, yet she faced only one way, and only the surgeon and Benita were within her line of vision. Yet she saw Tom, too.

"He struggles for her," she muttered dully. "It's too late."

There was the sound of shattering glass! Tom was free! He was going

to Benita! Let him go to her. But he wasn't. Again came the sound of glass shattering. It shattered about her. She was being freed. Tom was freeing her!

His hands reached out for her, his arms were about her, his lips—

A great weight was lifted from her. She no longer saw Benita. But all at once she did—Benita and the surgeon. Slowly the blood in the syringe was flowing back into the bosom from which it had been taken.

Benita was coming to her, Benita was holding out her arms. Her own arms went out, and she welcomed Benita into them. Again she saw nothing, neither Benita nor Tom nor Death. But she felt Benita's lips on her cheek, felt Tom's lips on her lips, felt herself lifted and cradled in his arms, as she had been cradled in the arms of Death. And in those arms she fell asleep. . . .

* * * * *

The girl put her small hand into the doctor's big one.

"Good morning, Deirdre," said the psychiatrist, looking down at his patient with eyes familiarly kind and quizzical. "I'll be with you in a moment."

"Oh, but Doctor Kendricks, that's what I came to tell you about."

The girl spoke eagerly, impulsively. "I feel fine," she said. "Never felt better." In fact, to be perfectly frank, Doctor Kendricks, I don't think I have to come to you any longer."

"Well, well," the Doctor's voice boomed, "nothing pleases me more than to hear a patient say that. You're quite
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College Humor

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CENTS

THE BEST COMEDY IN AMERICA

FICTION • SATIRE • CARTOONS

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THE DEAD WHO

A Baffling
Weird
Novelet



The gruesome corpse, limp as a drunken man about to fall, came wavering toward them

Foul Dead Rise from Mouldy Graves and Haunt Lonely Sleepy Valley With Frenzied Madness

CHAPTER I

Up from the Grave

THE first of the weird incidents which marked the beginning of the terror occurred at the edge of the Sleepy Valley graveyard. It was a softly moonlit summer evening. The wooded hills, dotted with luxurious country estates, were shining with silver. The somber willow stream that wound beside the big cemetery in the center of the broad valley, glistened pallid. The drooping trees were dark with shadow.

On the shrouded little path between the low cemetery wall and the bank of

the stream, a young man and a girl were sitting. Beside them the undulating spread of tombstones shone like eerie ghosts in the moonlight. From the stream, into the heated air of the summer evening mists rose little glowing spirals which hung poised, like hovering wraiths.

The young man and the girl were engaged to be married. To them, there was nothing here which was frightening or gruesome. They were talking of themselves, their future.

"But it seems too long, Ruth," he was saying. "Waiting until September."

"Nonsense, Alan dear. How can you expect a girl to get ready for her wedding all in a"

WALK By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "Murder by Mail," "Dead Man's Trep," etc.



The words dried on her smiling lips as she sucked in her breath with a sudden gasp. Her face was suddenly drawn in the lines of stark fear. She was staring out into the pallid graveyard.

"What's the matter, Ruth?" he demanded.

"That — that grave over there. Look!" Her voice was hollow, hardly audible.

The man stared. To young Alan Grant, for a second or two, it was only a stare of puzzled surprise. A startled wonderment.

And then an amazed horror flooded

him so that he jumped to his feet, drawing the slender brown-haired Ruth Thompson up with him. Transfixed, they peered. The girl clung to him now with terror-stricken fingers.

It was a grave quite near them, a mound of new earth on which the funeral flowers still lay in a little withered heap. The new marble headstone gleamed silvery-white in the moonlight. Grant knew who was buried here. It was a middle-aged farmer from down the valley, a fellow named Peters.

It had been a tragic thing, some three months ago. The stalwart Peters, with his crops gone bad for the two past

summers, failing to finance himself for this year's harvests, had brooded. Then suddenly he had lost his reason, killed his wife and infant child. And had run wildly to report it to the police. He had cut his throat before their horrified eyes.

The insane Peters was buried here. And as Grant and the girl now stared, they saw that the mound of earth was moving!

For that stricken moment they could only stand and stare. The soft, loose dirt of the three months' old grave was moving, as though some gigantic worm underground were struggling up! A crack opened. A little heave of dirt rose up and fell aside with a ghastly rattle and thump in the silence of the moonlight night. A heaving, breaking gravemound! Like a hatched egg, with shell breaking from the struggles of its emerging occupant! The insane Peters, dead three months with slashed throat, emerging now from his grave! Clods of earth were falling aside. A crevasse yawned.

HORROR so numbed them that they stood transfixed, shuddering, chilled, so that the weird unearthly scene blurred before their gaze. How could the dead man struggle up now from this grave which had entombed him for three months? Yet, he was doing it! The clods of earth were being shoved aside. The little mound was breaking upward!

How long they stood there, breathless, Alan Grant and Ruth Thompson never knew. Then, suddenly, she sagged against him, fainting from terror. Quickly, he seized her, lifted her slim body into his arms and ran swiftly back along the path.

"I'm all right, Alan," she murmured presently. "You can—put me down."

He set her on her feet tenderly. With his arm around her, they ran on. Then, from a little distance where the path wound up an ascent to overlook the river and the undulating graveyard, they stopped, panting, turned and stared again. The grave of the insane Peters was still in sight down there by the river. Its headstone was a tiny white blob.

The ghastly incredible thing hadn't been some wild trick of their imagination. A hole yawned there now, at Peters' grave. A hole from which clods of earth rhythmically were rising, earth and stones coming up and falling aside with a clatter of grisly little thuds which were audible even at this distance.

A dead thing emerging! Was the coffin down there broken now from the heaving struggles of its dead occupant? Grant's horrified imagination pictured the upward heaving lid, lifting and scattering that soft stony earth.

"Ruth, are we crazy?" he gasped. "Do you see what I think I'm seeing? A dead man coming out. . . ."

They stared, holding themselves against the numb instinct to run, held by the fascination of horror.

The weird struggle of the emerging thing went on. And then, suddenly, from the black rectangle which was the yawning grave, an arm came up. Then a head and shoulders reared, thick wide shoulders, a head of straggling gray-black hair.

The dead, mad Peters! From the grave his body came struggling up until in a moment he was standing on the ground, sagging against his tombstone, exhausted by his struggle. One of his arms was around the marble headstone to steady himself.

Unearthly figure! At this distance, Grant could only imagine the slashed throat. But the head dangled sidewise horribly, unsupported by the muscles that had been cut. The undertaker's white surgical bandage over the gaping wound was dimly apparent.

"God in Heaven!" Grant murmured.

The ghastly thing was staggering away from its grave now. Its knees were buckling as it walked with exhausted, dragging step. It was threading its way uncertainly among the tombstones! It was coming up the hill!

Again Grant fled with the girl. Was this ghastly roaming thing really an insane man who had killed his wife and child?

Had he come out of his grave now, seeking some new victims? The horror within Grant was even more ghastly as

he realized that it was true. Fearfully he shot a glance behind him. Far down in the graveyard the staggering dead thing was still visible. It had stopped again as though gathering strength, steadying itself against the side of a tombstone.

THEY had turned at the upper corner of the cemetery. A small cottage was here, with a big workshop where headstones were engraved close beside it. Now, at eleven o'clock this Sunday evening, both buildings were dark and silent.

"Old man Dillon should be here," Ruth said, her voice trembling.

"Asleep, probably. We'll rout him out, and call the sheriff."

Big Jake Dillon, engraver of headstones, was groundkeeper of the cemetery. He lived here alone in the small, two-story cottage.

Furiously, they pounded on its big knocker. There was only silence. From here, the ground out in the cemetery rose over a slight hillock. The staggering dead thing was in a hollow behind it. Grant was tense, shuddering. Did he dare hesitate here with Ruth? The damnable thing might come over the hillock at any moment.

It was half a mile to the home of Grant's family, one of the luxurious summer residences on the southern, inner slope of the valley. Ruth's home, where she lived with her step-uncle, Eben Thompson, was just beyond it. Too far to go! The sheriff should be notified at once!

It was a swift rush of incoherent thoughts that poured through his head as Grant pounded on the gatehouse door. Then suddenly as he rattled the knob, he realized that the door was unlocked. It yielded abruptly to their pressing bodies and they staggered forward into a dark hallway.

"Dillon! Oh, Dillon. Wake up!" Grant's peremptory call echoed eerily through the silence of the dark house.

Ruth quickly drew the outer door closed after them. Grant reached out and shot the bolt. At least that would bar the ghastly roaming thing if it came here! The door closed out the moonlight. The little hall here was black.

"Dillon! For God's sake, aren't you here? Where's your telephone?"

No answer! Nothing but a heavy brooding silence.

"I think I remember a telephone here in the reception room," Ruth whispered.

CHAPTER II

The Dead Die Again

IN a dim, wicker-furnished reception room they found a telephone on the wall. Grant seized it, called Sheriff John Stark in the Village of Sleepy Valley two miles away.

"You're drunk," the sheriff growled, when he had listened to Grant's half coherent rush of words.

"Am I? Well, you come and see. Miss Thompson and I are in the gatehouse. Dillon doesn't seem to be here."

"Alan—Oh my God—Look!" Ruth suddenly gasped. She had gone to the moonlit window. "Alan! It's out here now!"

Grant gasped it to the Sheriff.

"Holy Mother of God!" the sheriff's voice sputtered. "I'll be right out there."

Grant hung up, joined Ruth at the window. Out among the tombstones, some fifty feet away, the ghastly figure of the dead Peters stood wavering.

The knees of the corpse were almost buckling, but with demoniac strength it held itself erect. Grant's gorge rose at the ghastly sight, black burial clothes shrouding the gaunt figure. The head was bobbling as it rolled sidewise on its gaping neck. Then the unearthly thing took a forward staggering step, and the moonlight fell upon the face.

The sight was horrible! A noisome countenance, pallid, pinched and bloodless, the rotted horror of a man's face three months dead! The dead eyes were staring wildly with their weird look of insanity.

"Oh Alan, what shall we do?" Ruth's voice was a whimper of terror.

"He—it—the damned thing can't get in here. Look, it's moving away."

The grisly walking corpse, as though

confused, demoniac, had turned and was staggering diagonally off. In a moment it was lost behind a big gleaming mausoleum. In the dim little reception room, a new rush of horrified thoughts swept Grant. Where was Dillon? If he was here, why hadn't he answered? Was he upstairs now?

Under any normal circumstances, the husky young Grant was afraid of nothing. He strode back into the hall. At the steeply ascending little stairs he pushed Ruth away.

"Stay here just a minute," he admonished. "I'll go up. That thing outside can't get in—"

"Through a window, maybe, Alan? Oh my God, don't leave me!"

"I won't be half a minute."

He went up swiftly. There were two bedrooms upstairs. He dashed into them. No one, nothing, here. The room which Dillon used was in order. The bed was unrumpled.

"Alan! Alan!"

From down in the lower hall, Ruth's terrified voice floated up. He took the steps three at a time to dash to her side.

"I heard something!" she whispered, shivering. "Back by the kitchen! Oh Alan, something is here in the house with us. It's gotten in the house."

HE kept her behind him as he advanced slowly into the dim narrow back hallway. The dark kitchen doorway yawned before them. There was no sound—save the pounding of his heart against his ribs and the tremulous breathing of the girl. Then he heard a whimper, a rustle and a vague scraping thump. Something was here in the dark kitchen! Something—down on the floor in the corner. It moved! And then he saw it vaguely.

With a pounce, Grant was down on the floor. The figure squealed as he seized it, jerked it erect. A voice gasped shrilly:

"Oh my God! Oh, don't kill me!"

Suddenly Grant laughed hoarsely. The straggling moonlight through the kitchen window revealed the cowering captive—a big, overgrown boy, with an overlarge head that wobbled on a spindly neck.

"Good Heavens, it's only Willie Green!" Grant exclaimed, immense relief in his voice. "Willie, what in hell are you doing here?"

It was the son of the housekeeper at Ruth's home, the half-witted houseboy. He was chattering with terror. In infancy he had lost one eye. The empty, red-rimmed socket was squinted now with his fright. The other eye stared wildly at Grant.

"Was goin' home from the movies," he chattered. "There's a dead man walkin' out there in the graveyard. I seen him—"

"So did we," Grant agreed. He eyed the boy grimly. Willie's mind, child-like, was incongruous with his powerful, nearly six-foot gangling frame. "Where's Jake Dillon?" Grant demanded.

"I dunno. I came in here to tell him what I seen—Then I got scared worse. I heard you come in here. I thought it was the dead thing so I hid here in the kitchen."

He checked himself, sucked in his breath with new terror.

Grant stiffened, and flung a protecting arm around the girl's trembling body. Outside the house, footsteps were audible. The tread of heavy footsteps on the gravel path. Willie squealed.

"Shut up!" Grant admonished.

For a moment the three of them stood in stricken silence, enveloped by the dimness of the kitchen. Was it the dead man walking outside? The tread sounded firm, heavy. Someone approaching the front door. Then the knob rattled. A low muttered voice sounded, with words that were faintly audible in the silence:

"What in Hell!"

Grant shoved the big half-witted youth back into the kitchen. With Ruth close beside him, he strode forward through the hall. The knob of the front door was being impatiently rattled.

"Who are you?" Grant said suddenly.

"An' sure, who the hell are you in my house?" the outside voice retorted.

"Jake Dillon," Ruth said.

Grant threw the bolt of the door. A switch was here in the hall beside him.

The place flooded with light as Jake Dillon strode in.

"Well, Mr. Grant—Miss Thompson—"

DILLON was astonished, trying to be deferential to these wealthy young summer residents of the Sleepy Valley summer colony. Then he gaped as the chattering, white-faced Willie came shambling forward.

"Say, what the devil, if you don't mind my askin'!" Dillon gasped. He was a big, beetle-browed fellow, thick-set, powerful, with long dangling arms. He stood gaping with incredulity as Grant swiftly told what had happened.

"That suicide Peters came out of his grave?" Dillon growled. "Is that what yer tellin' me, Mr. Grant? Sure you're joshin'—"

"He ain't! I seen it too!" Willie Green chattered. "A walkin', insane dead man. I seen him comin' up the hill through the graveyard. He's out here now, somewhere."

"You didn't see him?" Grant demanded.

"My God no! I just come from the village. Been there all evenin'."

"Well, it's out there just below the brow of the hill," Grant said. "It was up here within fifty feet of the door a few minutes ago. Ruth, you stay here with Willie. Come on, Dillon, I'll show you."

The cemetery keeper's hamlike fists had doubled. But they relaxed, and at the door he suddenly hung back.

"I dunno," he mumbled. "Glory be! I ain't afraid of nothin' alive. But how can you kill a dead man? He's already dead."

How indeed? The terror of things gruesome, unnatural, not to be understood, is like no other terror.

"I phoned for the sheriff," Grant said. "He ought to be here any minute."

The sound of the sheriff's arriving car mingled with Grant's weird thoughts. The car came dashing up the nearby road. Then it stopped, and the stalwart sheriff and three other men tumbled out of it.

"Oh, here you are, Mr. Grant," the sheriff greeted. "Look here, if this is some practical joke or something—

dragging us all the way out here."

"It isn't," Grant said fiercely. "The cursed thing is out there in the cemetery. Or if it's gone, you'll see its open grave. Miss Thompson and I saw it. So did Willie Green here. It heaved itself up out of its grave, and. . . ."

"Oh my God, here it is!" one of the men suddenly gasped, his voice broke.

At the brink of the nearby hill the ghastly figure had appeared. Straggling clouds momentarily obscured the moon. But the weird staggering corpse was closer now than before. And this time, with its limp dragging step, it was advancing upon the house!

"It is Peters!" the sheriff murmured. The automatic in his hand leveled before him. But his arm shook. His voice quivered with awed terror. "Peters—a dead man—"

The grewsome corpse, limp as a drunken man about to fall, came wavering forward. One of its arms seemed gesturing, as though it was trying to disperse this little group of frightened, living people. Then the sheriff's gun spat its flame and leaden slug. His trembling hand sent the shot wild. But he fired again. The staggering corpse flung up its arms, fell face down.

Grant with the other men, in a moment ran forward. It was the corpse of Peters beyond question, the noisome rotting body of the insane farmer who had killed his loved ones and slashed his own throat three months ago. The stench of the grave rose from it now as it lay motionless, with the sheriff's bullet in its rotting brain!

CHAPTER III

Ghosts Walk Too

THOSE were the first of the weird incidents which came to engulf the quiet neighborhood of Sleepy Valley with terror. A dead man, rising from his grave, staggering away, to do God knows what, then brought down, rendered inert by a sheriff's bullet. The thing was so incredible that the outside world, hearing of it by radio and newspaper, gave it little credence.

But Sleepy Valley could not smile or scoff it away. The rotting corpse of the insane farmer Peters was carefully examined. There was nothing about it that seemed abnormal. It was a rotting thing which had been dead for three months, with the Sheriff's bullet embedded in its brain. Its grave too, was examined. A yawning hole of upheaved earth, with the broken coffin at the bottom.

Even then Sleepy Valley might have treated the thing as a ghastly passing incident, never to be explained. But the next night another grave yawned! Another dead man was seen roaming!

This one was not caught. The first night, only one, nearby farmer saw it. Then the next night hysterical reports said that it had been glimpsed staggering through the woods, far down the valley from the graveyard.

A wave of hysteria swept the somnolent little village, the wealthy estates, the broad farming areas back from the valley. And then, a young girl claimed that a dead man had awakened her by knocking on her bedroom window. . . .

"But that's all nonsense," Ruth's uncle exclaimed a few evenings later. He was in his home where a few of his friends among the summer residents had gathered. "This sort of wild tale must stop. These ignorant farmers will plunge us all into panic. Why, good God, a dozen families here on the south slope quit their homes today! Went back to New York. This is madness!"

He was a big, distinguished looking man of forty-odd, this Eben Thompson, Ruth's uncle. He stared gravely at his guests, with apprehensive, blood-shot eyes. But he was obviously not so scoffing as he wished to appear. He tried to smile, but his gaze kept straying to the shadowed room-corners. His fingers ruffled his iron-gray hair with a nervous gesture.

"Corpses stalking around our graveyard," young Grant's father muttered. "Every time I say that, it sounds wilder. Yet it's true! There was one that did, undoubtedly. My son saw it—my son and Ruth—others."

Intelligent men, faced with the impossible, which suddenly had become an indisputable fact! They could only

reiterate futilely the same incredible phrases.

Terror was here, even in this quiet living room of the luxurious Thompson bungalow where none but intelligent, educated people were assembled. Young Alan Grant could feel the terror now as he sat quietly in a shadowed corner beside Ruth—feel it within himself, and sense it from the others. The moonlit rectangles of the living room windows were things of horror, as though any moment, here, within half a mile of the big graveyard, a dead man might appear at one of the windows—dead eyes staring in, malevolent with hatred for the living.

MAYOR ALLEN of Sleepy Valley, rotund, cherubic, was here at Thompson's this evening. His face was anything but cherubic now, with its habitual smile faded into a grayish grimace. He mopped his bald-spot.

"Jake Dillon is watching the graveyard all night every night," the mayor said. "But if any more of those dead things come out. . . ."

"Oh quit it," Eben Thompson rejoined querulously. "Don't let's sit here chewing over this like hysterical women. Who would like to play some bridge?"

"Dillon has asked the town council to furnish him a permanent guard," the mayor persisted. "Why, good Lord, of course we will. Sheriff Parker and his posse are scouring the woods for that corpse they say was roaming there—"

"Trying to capture a dead man!" young Grant's father said with a lugubrious laugh. "We've come to that! How can you blame Parker's nerves for being shattered, his posse for being so nervous that they're afraid to scour the woods at night? My Heavens, we don't want our community ruined. People selling their homes for next to nothing and moving out. They're beginning to do just that already."

Outside the Thompson living room the sound of an arriving car was audible. At the portiered doorway of the living room, unnoticed, the gangling figure of Willie Green was standing. He was listening, awed, apparently frightened as his single eye stared

weirdly from one to the other of the speakers.

"Sleepy Valley!" Mayor Allen was exclaiming. "How we've all fought to keep the noisy highway from coming through to disturb our romantic quiet! He laughed ironically. "And now, if this damned weird thing keeps up, all the world will be tramping here to our door. Sleepy Valley, overrun with newsreel cameras, newspaper men, broadcasters."

"Publicity that won't do us any good," Grant's father assented. "If people are afraid to live here. . . ."

The front doorbell rang harshly. A visitor arrived, a tall, stoop-shouldered man named John Stark. He was a road construction engineer, chief prospective bidder for the projected road. Young Alan Grant saw him stop and pat Willie's shoulder, murmuring something to the half-wit as they passed at the door.

Stark was grave and grim as he greeted the half dozen people here.

"They told me I'd probably find you here, your Honor," he said to the rotund little Mayor Allen. "Look here, I don't want to add any fuel to this weird thing. I haven't told anyone—" He stared around the room.

"Told anyone, what?" the big, distinguished-looking Eben Thompson demanded.

"Why I—I saw another one of the damned things!" Stark said. "A woman, this time. My God, she must have been dead for years. Horribly rotted, with grey hair streaming down, shrouding a body with clothes and flesh rotting away from it. I saw her face—not much more than a skull with noisome pits of flesh. But she was walking, staggering!"

Ruth, the only woman in the room, gave a little cry of horror.

"Easy, Stark," Eben Thompson warned. "When was this?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Thompson—Why, it was just after sundown tonight. She was walking by the river. Then she fell in—sank."

IN the awed horrified silence, a maid's voice sounded from the doorway.

"There's a telephone call for Mr. Alan Grant."

"Who is it?" young Grant demanded as he jumped up.

He was tense. It seemed suddenly as though now, tonight, the unearthly thing must be breaking in with some new horror.

"A man," the maid said, as he drew her out into the dim hallway. "A man. He wouldn't give his name. But it sounded like—like Mr. Dillon over at the cemetery. Oh Mr. Grant, is this terrible thing. . . ."

Grant brushed past her toward the telephone at the other end of the long hall. And suddenly from a shadowed recess, Willie Green jumped forward.

"Say Mr. Grant, listen! I got somethin' to tell you." The half-wit's single eye glowed with his excitement. His voice was low, furtive.

Momentarily Grant paused, the big loutish figure of the boy barring him from the telephone. "What is it, Willie?" he demanded.

Willie's voice dropped lower.

"I seen that walkin' dead woman Mr. Stark was talkin' about. Only he lied. I seen him watchin' her as she walked along the river path. She didn't fall in no river. She went off from the path an' went into the cliff."

Was that what Jake Dillon now was calling about?

"Thanks, Willie," Grant said. He tried to shove the boy aside, but the half-wit clung to him.

"Wait Mr. Grant, listen! I got somethin' else to tell you. That walkin' dead woman—I was so scared I stood by a tree an' she passed pretty close to me. She was in the moonlight, an'—Listen, Mr. Grant, the ghost of her was there too. I seen it, I sure did."

"All right, Willie. . . ."

"No, listen. It had eyes, I'm tellin' you. They glared at me. Two floatin' eyes! But her corpse didn't have no eyes, because her face was too rotted. . . ."

Grant shoved him away and seized the telephone.

"Hello," he said. "This is Alan Grant."

"I'm Jake Dillon," the cemetery keeper's low hurried voice answered. "I got something I want to tell you, Mr. Grant."

Almost Willie's exact words!

"What is it?" Grant demanded.

"Not over the phone. There was a woman came out of her grave tonight. I saw the grave—old lady Johnson who died more than five years ago. My God, I guess she's around here somewhere."

"I heard about her," Grant said. "Phone the sheriff, Dillon."

"I did. He said there was a Mr. Stark who notified him. He said him an' some men were lookin', but they couldn't find any corpse. They were here a while ago. Somethin' I want to tell you private. Come over here, will you?"

The telephone clicked as though it had been disconnected. Grant rattled the receiver.

"Hello, hello, Jake Dillon?"

"Yes, I'm here. Listen, come over, Mr. Grant. It's damned important. I can't dare tell you over the phone."

"You're at the cemetery gatehouse?"

"Yes. Come to the back door. Come by the road. Sure, if I was you, I wouldn't go down through the cemetery."

DILLON hung up. For a moment Grant stood beside the little telephone taboret, pondering. The big half-witted Willie Green had shambled away. Then Grant thought he saw him at the other end of the dim hallway, where a small side door led into the shadowed outer garden. The door seemed to open. Someone or something darted out. Grant ran down the hallway, out into the yard. Nothing was visible outside but the dim outlines of shrubs and trees, faint in the starlight. Overhead, the moon was shrouded by a low, swiftly passing cloud.

It was only a scant half mile to the cemetery gatehouse. Grant walked quickly. Dillon's voice had been urgent. Was this something more than the gruesome mystery of corpses breaking out of their graves?

Grant thought so, of course. Something rational back of all this horror, this terror which for days now had been throwing little Sleepy Valley into hysteria. Why had John Stark, the construction engineer, lied about having seen the ghastly corpse of the old wom-

an throwing itself into the river and sinking? Or had Willie Green been mistaken, or lying about that?

The ghost of the walking corpse, a ghost with glowing eyes! Could a ghost animate the body which in life it had inhabited? Absurd! Behind all this, something rational must be lurking—something murderous?

The big undulating, pallid reaches of the graveyard were beside Grant now. Winding paths between eerie white blobs of the tombstones, and the occasional rectangles of the larger, marble and granite mausoleums.

No staggering corpse was visible, but the brow of the hill here hid most of the cemetery in the lower hollow. The front of the little cottage gatehouse of Dillon was dark and silent, and as Grant approached it, a sudden wariness was on him.

Had Dillon lured him here? That seemed unreasonable, but Grant was unarmed. For a moment he hesitated. He was close beside the cottage now, and presently he advanced, walking on the grass beside the gravel path, so that his footsteps were soundless. The side reception room windows were dark. At the rear of the house, one of the side kitchen windows showed a little light.

Soundlessly Grant crept to it. The shade was almost down, but stooping, he could see through the crack under it. At the kitchen table, big Jake Dillon was sitting. A shotgun was lying on the table at his elbow. He was partly facing Grant, examining a big chunk of something black in his hands. It glistened in the light, a jagged irregular black lump as big as a man's fist, with the light shining from its myriad facets.

In a moment Grant was at the back door. His knock at once brought Dillon.

"Who is it?" the gatekeeper's voice demanded through the door.

"It's I, Alan Grant."

The doorbolt shot. The door opened, disclosing Dillon's bulky figure. Grant's swift look past him showed that Dillon had left the shotgun on the table. Grant stepped in. Dillon shoved the door closed behind him and shot the bolt. The gleaming black chunk was in the

cemetery keeper's hand. He turned from the door, tense, excited.

"Did you see any walkin' corpse as you came along?" he demanded.

Grant shook his head.

"What's that you've got there?"

"I found it. I want to ask your advice."

THE big kitchen centerlight was not lighted. There was only a single hooded globe over a cabinet against the inner wall. Dillon drew Grant there.

"Let me show you under the light. I found this tonight, Mr. Grant. Down by the river."

"You had something to tell me? About this?"

"Yes. This, an' that corpse of the old woman—" Dillon shuddered. But in his tense voice and his gleaming eyes, it seemed to Grant that there was something more like cupidity. "I saw her when she came out of her grave, but I guess maybe she didn't see me."

Amazing that anyone could talk so calmly about a dead woman! But Grant accepted it. How else could one talk, these weird days. Silently, Grant listened to the cemetery keeper's low, swift explanation.

Just at dusk tonight, he had seen the staggering figure of the rotted corpse of old Mrs. Johnson. Then he had lost sight of it—and in searching around he had stumbled upon a small cave-mouth, in the honeycombed cliff, at the north slope by the river.

"She wasn't in there," Dillon was saying. "I never did see her again. But in the cave I found this. A whole pile of it's in there, with burlap bags thrown over it."

He displayed the glittering black rock.

"What is it?" Grant demanded.

"Black marble. Listen, Mr. Grant, I know somethin' about marble. I ought to! I work with it a lot here with the headstones. But this isn't ordinary marble. It's statuary marble. It's as fine-grained, as pure as Carrara marble. And Carrara marble's only white. This in the cave is all pure black."

A rush of wild conjectures leaped

into Grant's enraged and startled mind.

"I didn't know who to tell," Dillon was adding with swift, vehement earnestness. "But I can trust you. I want to know what to do about this. If maybe there's deposits of that around here—under the graveyard maybe, so deep that it's never been found before—it might come out in these caves, or the lowlands down by the river. Millions maybe, for any of us who owned. . . ."

A loud sound in the kitchen checked him, a slow scraping, a little scratching creak.

Grant and Dillon whirled.

To Grant it was a chaos of numbed startled horror. The kitchen was empty, save for themselves. A window behind the table was open, with moonlight streaming in now mingling with the kitchen light. Through the window, Grant had a glimpse of the empty side yard.

"Holy God!" Dillon suddenly gasped.

He staggered sideways, stood staring across the kitchen with his heavy jaw sagging, his eyes fairly popping. And Grant stared for that stricken instant, frozen with horror.

The shotgun on the table was moving! Grant gulped, unbelieving, his eyes wide with terror. Slowly it moved at first, with the low scraping sound which had attracted their attention. Then, abruptly, it moved rapidly sideways, reared itself up into the air, suspended by levitation as its barrel swung with muzzle pointing bluntly toward Dillon.

And then it spat—a roar of flame, smoke and leaden shot hurtling across the big kitchen. The electric light bulb splintered and was extinguished. But the moonlight still showed the suspended gun as it floated in mid-air. Then the other barrel roared.

Grant closed his eyes involuntarily at the sight. The big body of Dillon, face torn away by the concentrated buckshot charge, crashed to the floor. For just a second longer the gun, floating in mid-air, hung'poised. Then, as though suddenly the weird force which had animated the swinging shotgun were expended, it dropped, hit the floor with a rattling thump and lay motionless!

 CHAPTER IV

The Phantom Killer

IN the smoke-filled kitchen, Grant crouched, his senses reeling. The roar of the gun seeming still to echo through his horrified brain. The dead bleeding body of Dillon lay beside him with the moonlight on it, face blown away, a mass of gory pulp.

He groped his way frantically for the door. The gun lay here on the floor, inert now as he staggered over it. The back kitchen door wouldn't yield to his frenzied jerks. Then he recalled that Dillon had locked it. He fumbled, slid the bolt, staggered out into the pallid moonlit night. The air cleared his gasping lungs, reeling head.

Nothing was visible here in the upper reaches of the cemetery. For a moment he stood peering around him, his flesh creeping in grisly anticipation of new terrors. Then he realized that his right eye hurt. He recalled that with the first blasting shot which had crashed over his head and extinguished the light, he had thrown himself sidewise and down. His face had struck a corner of the kitchen cabinet. The blow was puffing his eye. The bruised flesh around the socket was swelling it shut.

With his head cleared, he started back for the gatehouse. He must phone for the sheriff, and for Eben Thompson to notify his father. At the back door, he stopped momentarily to gaze into the cemetery, then tensed. Far down to the right, where the reaches of the cemetery sloped off to the river, something was moving! A walking corpse? A weird unearthly-looking man's figure was walking with staggering tread.

Grant was hardly conscious that he had run from the little gatehouse and was dashing down the hill. For just a moment he saw the staggering distant thing more clearly. A dead man! One of its arms waved limply.

It staggered with dragging tread, as though its legs were almost paralyzed. Then it fell. It rose again. Horror filled Grant as he ran. But there were other things on his mind now. The gruesome

horror of the supernatural was mingled with the grim determination to probe this mystery.

The staggering dead thing had vanished when Grant reached the foot of the hill. Had it wandered toward the river? He turned that way, came to the river path. It was darker here. Moonlight glistened on the sullen, slow-moving water. The willows drooped, heavy, hardly moving in the breathless night air. To one side, four or five hundred feet up the stream, a small footbridge crossed it. Was there something crouching behind the rail, midway on the bridge?

For a moment Grant thought so. He started that way, turned a bend of the stream where a jagged rocky cliff-face stood almost at the river's edge.

For an instant, as Grant passed beyond the end of the cemetery, he swept a glance in at the pallid tombstones. He stopped, shocked with a new rush of startled horror.

Half a dozen graves yawned here! Ragged holes out of which, quite evidently, the ghastly dead occupants had emerged! Was the big cemetery about to spew out all its dead? Dead people, noisome, stenching things, revolting now at their entombment, struggling out to attack the living!

Grant flung away the wild crazy thoughts. Of course they were wild! This must be something different from that, the work of a scheming, rational, murderous living villain. A countryside terrorized. People moving away from a cemetery which seemingly could not hold its dead. Black marble, perhaps in a vast deposit somewhere here, a deposit of pure black statuary marble perhaps of incalculable value. Jake Dillon, killed by that ghastly gun so that he could not tell what he suspected.

THE rush of half coherent thoughts surged through Grant's mind as he turned back toward the river. And suddenly, again, he saw a moving figure. An upright blob, on this side of the river, past the end of the little footbridge. Shadows at the bottom of the ragged cliff engulfed it. Then he saw it again. A staggering corpse? It did not quite seem so, this time!

Quietly Grant stalked forward until the figure was no more than fifty feet ahead of him. He saw that it was a man prowling, poking at the ragged, rocky face of the little cliff. A small flashlight was suddenly illumined, its little spot of light slowly moving along the face of the rocks as the man shifted forward. He came presently into a patch of moonlight.

John Stark! The construction engineer! He was prowling here, searching the geological formation of the cliff-face down here in the hollow, lower than most of the cemetery level. He was probably searching to determine the location or the extent of the rare deposits. Grant could not doubt it.

And other things now came leaping into his memory. That click of the telephone when he was talking to Dillon. Had that been Stark listening at some telephone extension in Eben Thompson's home to overhear what Dillon was saying? That figure darting from the Thompson hall, out the side door—had that been Stark too?

Grant's fists clenched, his jaw hardened with determination.

The prowling man did not hear Grant approaching. Grant crept silently, cat-like, his fists doubled. Suddenly he sprang.

Stark's little handtorch clattered to the ground as he whirled swiftly. He met Grant's rush with a blow in the chest. Their bodies collided. Grant's fist smashed into Stark's face and he went down, Grant on top of him.

"You damned murderer," Grant panted. "Got you now—"

In the background of his consciousness he was ironically aware that he had assaulted the construction engineer with very little evidence that the fellow was the murderous villain. But the look of sheer fury and fear on the fellow's face convinced Grant that he had made no mistake. Stark ripped out an oath, and with incredible agility twisted loose, heaved Grant away and jumped to his feet.

Grant was up almost as quickly. He saw that his adversary had turned to run. Already Stark was ten feet away. Then he checked himself, whirled again to face Grant. A big huntsman's knife

hung in a holster at his belt. He had had no time to draw it during Grant's first onslaught. But in the moonlight now, as Grant gathered himself to leap, he saw Stark's hand go for the knife.

Then with a gasp, Grant drew back. He stood staring, shaken despite all the weird things of incredible horror that he had witnessed. Now he could only stand limp, frozen into silence.

Stark's hand was reaching for the knife. But it never got there. . . .

From the holster the knife came slithering, floating mysteriously in the air. The moonlight glittered on its steel blade as for a split second its point poised in front of Stark's wildly staring eyes. Then, almost too quick to be seen, it plunged itself point first into his chest!

STARK'S scream of terror turned to a choked rattle of the blood in his throat as he fell, the knife buried to its hilt.

How long Grant stood there numb, he never knew. Then he ran forward, bent down. Stark was dying. With every gasping breath, blood gushed in a crimson stream from his mouth. His white shirt was a welter of crimson around the buried knife. His glazing eyes stared upward, trying to focus on Grant.

"Got me!" he groaned. "Come closer—I'll tell—"

The blood in his throat choked him. Grant bent low, his lips close to Stark's ear.

"Black marble goes under the cemetery," Grant hissed. "You were hoping to buy it, to make it useless as a burying place."

"Yes, that's true. And to have the motor road come through here for transportation. There would have been millions for me. We probably couldn't patent the—this way was best—everything going fine. But he—"

"He?" Grant bent lower. The dying man's breath gurgled horribly in his throat. "I could have—gotten the road through," Stark gasped. "And the way we've been terrorizing—all this property would be easy to buy. But he—he wouldn't share equally. Damn him, I knew I couldn't trust him when he fig-

ured he didn't need me any more. Now he's killed me—like he'll kill you."

A torrent of blood choked the faint words. For a moment Stark's body twitched with a feeble paroxysm. Then he was motionless, dead glazed eyes staring blankly up at Grant, the light of the living gone from them.

For an instant Grant stayed there on his knees. Then a chilling burst of laughter from the moonlight nearby brought him shuddering to his feet.

"The ghost of a walking dead man killed him! I seen it! I seen the ghost stab him! I can see ghosts in the moonlight! Other people can't see 'em but I can! I seen this one kill him!"

Out midway on the little footbridge, the half-wit Willie Green stood gibbering with insane laughter. Grant rushed for him, but he fled across the narrow bridge. On the opposite bank, Grant caught him.

"Willie! Damn you, stop laughing."

Horror, excitement, seemed to have thrust the half-witted boy into hysteria. He laughed wildly.

"Don't kill me, Mr. Grant! I didn't kill nobody. I jus' been watchin' what's goin' on these nights. I told you I saw the ghost of that dead old woman. Sometimes they're right beside the walkin' corpse—but sometimes I seen 'em loose."

"You saw a ghost here just now?"

"Sure I did."

He burst again into his chilling, eerie laughter. Grant shook him roughly by the shoulders.

"Stop that, Willie! Tell me quietly now, a ghost was here, it stabbed that man with that knife?"

"Sure it did. I seen it!"

"Then which way did it go?"

Willie gestured.

"Over there, other side of the river."

"You mean over along the bottom of the cliff?"

"Yeh. There's a cave-mouth there. All the walkin' corpses go into it when they get through roamin'. An' they come out of it, too. That's where the corpse of old Mrs. Johnson went. I guess they all live there when they ain't walkin' out through the graveyard."

The cave which Jake Dillon had described, when he had found the bags of

black marble! Grant shoved the hysterical half-wit away and strode for the bridge.

"Where you goin', Mr. Grant? You goin' to that cave? Ah my God, not with me!"

"You go home, Willie. You keep your mouth shut, hear me?"

The half-wit turned and fled. Grant crossed the bridge. At the weltering body of Stark he stopped, drew out the knife, wiped its bloody blade on his jacket and put it in his pocket.

The cave-mouth yawned black and silent. More tense, more cautious than he had ever been before in his life, Grant moved through the little ten-foot winding passage. In the solid blackness he stood a moment, listening, waiting tensely for his eyes to adjust themselves to the greater darkness.

A little glimmer of yellow glow was faintly apparent. The tunnel turned an angle, opened into the fetid cave. Grant stared. Nothing here. Over by one wall he saw the pile of black marble chunks. They were in burlap bags now.

The glow was coming from a distant recess. Cautiously Grant went there, saw a huge flat slab of rock that seemed to have been moved aside.

Faint, flickering yellow light streamed out. Knife in hand, again Grant advanced into another little tunnel. It was only ten feet long, a steeply rising rock floor with a little brink ahead where it opened to the inner grotto, from which the yellow glow was streaming. Slowly Grant went up the ascent. At the brink he crouched, the hair crawling upright on the back of his neck as he stared breathlessly at a scene of incredible, ghastly horror.

CHAPTER V

Conclave of the Dead

IT was a large grotto, of mouldy earthen floor and glistening rocky walls from which moisture was soddily dripping. On large stones, to one side, a big candle stood. Its faint eerie glow dimly illuminated the under-

ground apartment, casting crouching monstrous shadows on the rocks.

Peering, Grant sucked in his breath, with his first swift glance of horror. In a little group, where the candlelight fell full upon them, the ghastly occupants of the hidden grotto were gathered.

Conclave of the dead!

Nearly a dozen corpses were here—men and women, ghastly things spewed from the grave. Some were lying stretched on the ground as though asleep. Others sat propped against the rocks, mutely staring at each other with rotting eyes. It was a ghastly conclave, so ghastly that here, at close range, Grant was sickened.

The candlelight painted the horrible dead faces, the pinched, gray-white rotted countenances. Some, dead for years, sat with mouldering garments barely clinging to the festering horror of their dead flesh. Faces pitted, leprous with crawling maggots.

Mute, silent company of the dead!

One of them began moving from behind the main group, a ghastly decaying figure of an old woman struggled to her feet, staggering forward with limp, dragging leg. Old Mrs. Johnson, her face bones visible behind the moist festering flesh. Her eye-sockets, pits of horror, seemed to stare around at her dead companions. Her rotted mouth yawned with a ghastly grimace as she regarded them.

Slowly she dragged herself forward as though about to administer to the others who sat so horribly, silently staring at her. Then suddenly it seemed as though her strength gave out. She slumped to the floor, her back braced against the wall. On her rotted neck,

her head still was bobbling. After a moment it settled to one side, grotesquely dangling.

Then suddenly, the weird animating force transferred itself to the candle. The flame flickered. Then the candle rose waveringly up from the rock, poised in mid-air, crossed the cave and settled itself down again.

The first sweep of horror had left Grant. Tense, alert now, he was peering with appraising eye, freed at last from the confusion of terror of the supernatural. Vaguely he was aware that his right eye was throbbing with pain. The blow from the corner of the kitchen cabinet when he had thrown himself down as Dillon was shot, had puffed the flesh. His right eye was closed now. With his left eye he stared intently. One-eyed, like the one-eyed half-wit, Willie Green.

"I seen the ghost that stabbed Mr. Stark!"—Willie's words echoed in Grant's mind.

And Grant was noticing things now, little things that no one would ever notice in the horrible moonlight of the graveyard. The corpse of old Mrs. Johnson, as she had come forward here, had had an arm missing—a blank area which was restored when she slumped inert. The bottom end of the candle as it swayed through the air, was gone.

WAS it an almost invisible black ghost here, doing these things? In those few seconds, as he stared, Grant was aware that down on the ground he could dimly see a moving patch of blackness, a small irregular area where the ground was blotted out. And above it, very vaguely now he

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could discern a moving outline—an upright black shape of emptiness. The background of the candlelit cave was visible, as though it mingled or was visible through the blob of blank, blurred emptiness.

And then Grant saw the eyes. As though the silent shadow of nothingness had suddenly turned to face him, two round holes, side by side, were apparently nearly six feet above the ground. More clear than the blank shadow itself, they were weird tiny holes, like eyes staring. And then, the candlelight seemed to glint on them. Tiny panes of glass!

Grant had moved now over the brink, into a rock shadow where he stood flattened against the wall with his knife clutched in his hand. The vague blob of emptiness was fairly near him. His legs tensed as it came closer. Then he leaped.

The almost invisible thing must have heard him. Grant was aware of the eyes turning in his direction. He hurtled against a solid body. An arm went around him. A gloved hand gripped his wrist as he tried to stab with his knife.

At the contact, Grant felt his hands tingling with an electric shock. There was a hiss of discharged current as he and his adversary swayed, locked together, grimly struggling—a little sizzling hiss. Then the hiss was gone. Suddenly, in the eerie candlelight, Grant found himself clutching a black-robed, hooded man. He wore a visor pane of tiny eye-holes, covered with queer-looking glass, that glowed luminously.

The knife had fallen to the floor. For a moment they swayed, struggling fiercely. Then, abruptly Grant tripped, staggering over one of the corpses. He fell, the bulk of the robed man on top of him. Strangling fingers gripped at his throat, shutting off his breath. The weird little eye-panes stared down at him. He could see now where it seemed that a metal brace held them at the bridge of the man's nose. A pincenez brace that would mark the nose-bridge.

Grant's mind in that split second swept back to the scene in Eben Thompson's living room, where half

a dozen men had been gathered. These glasses, operating under strange optical conditions of polarized light perhaps, to see out through the area of electric invisibility which this murderous villain had flung around himself—that strain would easily make a man's eyes go bloodshot.

He remembered seeing those bloodshot eyes! And now he recalled, what before he had barely noticed—that same man who never ordinarily wore glasses, had had a red mark at the bridge of his nose!

"Why," Grant gasped. "By God, I know you, Eben Thompson!"

Ruth's step-uncle! It was Eben Thompson who had joined with Stark in this daring scheme—and then had murdered Stark, to keep all the huge stake for himself!

"By God, I'm onto you at last!" Grant's words, hissing with all the force of his cold hatred for this beast, startled Thompson. Momentarily his grip on Grant relaxed.

And as Grant heaved and struggled against his powerful adversary, the hooded mask over Thompson's face was torn askew. The candlelight showed his red-rimmed, watery eyes, his sweating features, contorted with a murderous lust.

"You, Grant," he panted. "Should have done for you long ago. I thought—what you were seeing would add to the terror. My best witness—"

He was chuckling. He thought that his weight was holding Grant pinned. But with a frenzied desperation, Grant tore loose, lunged away, and plunged back.

The impact knocked the older man off balance. Thompson's head went back against a jagged point of the rocky cave-wall. Then, with the chaos of his own wild frenzy, Grant tore him from the ground, hurled his head down, pounded until Thompson's skull cracked, until the body went limp, dead.

The eerie candlelit cave was suddenly silent. The mute dead things, sitting as though in ghastly conclave, stared at Grant horribly as he staggered past them through the fetid caves, out into the freshness of the moonlit summer night. . . .

THE huge deposits of amazingly pure black statuary marble have enriched little Sleepy Valley. The details of the electric invisibility which Stark and Thompson so gruesomely used, are fairly well known now. They are not given much publicity, being a thing too dangerous in the hands of skillful criminals.

Obviously, it was Stark who developed the apparatus. Much of it was found hidden in his home and secret laboratory in New York. In principle, its working was simple. A fabric treated with special black dyes, electrified so that, in effect, it was totally incapable of reflecting light. There was a complete color absorption, except for the two small areas of insulated glass, the eyeholes through which the wearer was enabled to see outward through the dead-black area surrounding him.

There was a faint reflection here, the eyes of the ghost which Willie Green saw upon several occasions. The clutch of Thompson's hands upon the corpses, the gun, the candle, created areas of blankness, unnoticeable in moonlight.

The limp, dragging legs of the corpses, supported by the invisible Thompson, added only horror. But in the cave, at closer view and calmer, more appraising gaze, Alan Grant saw quite clearly the blank space that was the clutch of Thompson's hand upon the candle.

The total absorption of light would not, of itself, have created the complete illusion of invisibility—merely a hole of blankness behind which the back-

ground was blotted out. A sort of black, ghostly shadow. But in the working of the Stark-Thompson apparatus it was found that around the body so enveloped, a natural magnetic field was created.

As Einstein demonstrated many years ago, light-rays, passing from a background around an obstructing object, are bent to follow the natural curve of the magnetic field.

Thus the normally reflected light-rays from the background behind Thompson, instead of being blocked by his body, were in a large measure bent around it, reaching the observer in front so that he saw the background apparently unobstructed. The observer's attention thus was focused away from the black shadow.

Curiously, our two eyes are a material aid in this portion of the optical phenomena. With two eyes, viewing an object from different points, we are always enabled partially to see around any obstructing object. With two eyes we see some of the background which, with one eye, is not visible. A two-eyed man thus, had less chance of seeing the slight abnormality of the weird scenes, while to a one-eyed man the illusion of invisibility was partially destroyed. Ironic, that Grant, with one eye injured and closed, and the one-eyed Willie Green, were best equipped to see the murderous Thompson!

Grant and Ruth are married now. They have moved from Sleepy Valley. The graveyard there brings too many ghastly memories.



THE SCOURGE OF FLAME

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "The Corpse from G-2," "The Haunted Man," etc.



A wail of anguish came from the tortured body

**When a Mystic Prophet Summons Forth the Wrath of God,
Death Itself Becomes a Blessing!**

WHAT happened in Westfall that night didn't have anything to do with the fact that Rima is a beautiful girl, dark-skinned, dark-haired, blue-eyed. That we had come to Westfall during the vacation months to find out whether we were really important to each other doesn't matter, either.

I mean, it is entirely our own affair.

To say that we found what we were looking for, scrutinized it critically and decided it was love, only brings the conclusion up to the beginning of the story. What really matters is the story itself. And, perhaps, the storm which preceded it.

We had planned to spend the evening walking along the beach, but a rumbling on the horizon across the

bay forced us to leave our sandy paradise. The narrow road leading to the village stretched ahead, black as the highway to hell. Interlaced branches of trees, which in calm weather formed a vaulted roof over the road, now lashed back and forth, to cast monstrous moving silhouettes at our feet when the lightning flared.

And then a silvered scimitar of light split the sky wide open, and all the water that the clouds had blotted up tried to escape through the rip at once.

"Dick," Rima said, snuggling into the shelter of my arm, "storms give me the creeps. They set my nerves on edge, make me show all my bad points. Let's get out of this."

There was no place for shelter along the road, except that cottage we had noticed on our way out. It was natural that we remembered it, because cottages held a peculiar and delightful significance for us.

There was about a foot of roof sticking out over the doorway and we found our way to it. I knocked three times, like a ghost. Because of the thunder and the wind, I couldn't hear any footsteps approaching. But the amber porch lantern came on, warning us that the door would be opened. I remembered then that the cottage was owned by an old couple named Thorn-dyke.

A man thrust head and shoulders out into the night. He was tall, gaunt and grizzled. There was an odd look in his faded blue eyes—the kind of look you'd expect to find in the eyes of a child who plays hide and seek late at night, expectant and half frightened.

Afterwards, I thought the expression was that of an old man who knew that Death was at his shoulder, hiding in the shadows, his black cloak rustling.

"Sorry to trouble you," I said, "but Miss Landon and I are getting pretty wet."

I smiled at the old man. He didn't smile back. He stuck himself farther from the door, cupped one ear with his hand.

"Eh?" he said.

I started to say it all over again, but

the keenest of ears couldn't have heard. Lightning cracked down and exploded in a thunderous roar that momentarily halted time. Something galloping around in the attic of the sky kicked over a tub of water, it seemed, and the entire contents were dumped in the cottage doorway.

Then bright, blue-white light burst directly in front of me, taking a horrifying snapshot of the old man's face—his hollow cheeks, his eyeballs starting from their sockets to stare heavenward.

RIMA screamed and grasped at me. The weight of her threw me unexpectedly off balance, carried me a yard from the door. The old man tottered forward, a wail of anguish ripping from his lips. Long tatters of blue flame licked up across his chest, masked his face. Like a horse caught in a burning stable, he went mad and dashed frantically from the house.

"Don't run!" I shouted at him. "Lie down!"

He didn't do that. Garbed in flame, a human torch, he fled into the trees.

"Dick!" Rima cried. "We've got to help!"

And then she set me an example by running out after the old man. I caught up and passed the girl. But when at last the gaunt oldster dropped to his knees, the last flicker of flame from his shirt outlined a black and blistered face, the charred and cracked flesh of his chest.

I peeled my soaked polo shirt off and wrapped it around him, smothering the flame.

"You're okay," I panted. "We'll get you back to the house and have the doctor in."

He moaned in agony as I touched his burned chest. His eyes, I knew, would never see again. And then, blissfully, unconsciousness drifted over him.

The last words he whispered were: "*The sword of God!*"

Well, we got the poor seared body, barely alive, in what appeared to be a comfortable position on the couch in the house. As we did so, something fell from the blackened rag of a shirt, struck the carpet. Almost at once,

Rima and I noticed the thing that had fallen. It was a round disk of metal, and it was hot enough to scorch the rug.

Rima picked the disk up with a water-soaked handkerchief and cooled it off, while I went to the phone and called Dr. Hart, the town's best-known physician. When I turned from the phone, Rima was there with the metal disk in her hand.

"It's some sort of a medal. A symbolical medal, I think," she said. "It has Mr. Thorndyke's name scratched on the back of it, and there's a pin for holding it in place."

I took the disk from her hand. There was a picture of some robed figure embossed upon its surface. I put the disk into my pocket, intending to give it to Mrs. Thorndyke. But I didn't do that because before the doctor got there, Thorndyke was dead.

Rima and I knelt beside the couch, our eyes averted from the blackened horror this man had become. The air was heavy with the smell of burned flesh, but we tried to ignore that.

"'The sword of God,'" Rima muttered. "What did he mean? Was it lightning that struck him?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't think of any answer. I had never seen a man struck by lightning, but somehow I didn't feel that was what had happened to Thorndyke. I didn't think lightning would set a man on fire. There just wasn't any natural explanation, and I would have never admitted anything supernatural.

Mrs. Thorndyke had been at a club meeting. The girl at the town telephone switchboard had known where she could be found and informed her that something had happened to her husband. So Mrs. Thorndyke came out with the doctor and a man named Harris, the town constable.

Harris was importantly paunchy, and the pants of his blue uniform weren't long enough to cover his shinbones. He had a pair of holstered revolvers and kept posing with his big hands on their grips.

IT was above the sobs of Mrs. Thorndyke and the comforting words of Rima and Dr. Hart, that I had to tell

Harris our incredible story. He scowled heavily when I had concluded.

"Listen, Mister, how can a man just bust out in flame, huh?"

I told him I hadn't the slightest idea. And I hadn't. All the ideas I had revolved around supersition, so they weren't worth voicing.

Beneath the policeman's watchful eyes, I got Rima and led her to the door. On our way out, Harris called after us.

"Don't you two skip town for a few days. We ain't at the bottom of this yet."

Rima whispered to me as we left. "Dick, he thinks we had something to do with it! 'The sword of God'—what could it mean, Dick? Nothing but lightning, surely. You don't think that metal disk Mr. Thorndyke had could have attracted lightning, do you?"

I didn't. I took Rima to Mrs. Shephard's, where she had rented a room, and then I went to what Westfall calls a hotel and changed into some dry clothes. As I was coming down the steps into the lobby, a stranger was registering at the desk.

He was a beefy, dish-faced man who filled the room with the aroma of expensive cigar smoke. He had an impressive array of luggage about him and he wore a diamond that rivaled a crystal chandelier.

"Can you tell me where to go to find the Thorndyke house?" the stranger asked.

The clerk blinked. "Are you a relative?" he blurted, and flushed. "I hope not, because something has happened to Mr. Thorndyke. He was burned to death. Hadn't you heard?"

"No," said the man. His unconcern implied that the negative answer was to be divided evenly between both questions.

"It's a very queer thing, from what I heard over the telephone, Mr. Cameron," the clerk went on. "Do you—do you believe in the direct intervention of the Divine Hand?" he stammered, and then looked foolish.

Cameron shook his head. "No. Any heirs to the Thorndyke place?"

"Why, Mrs. Thorndyke would be

the only heir," the clerk replied.

"Good," nodded Cameron. "Anything else?"

"A very queer thing," the clerk said quickly. "There's a young couple staying in town here and they were with Mr. Thorndyke when it happened. Frankly, I'm a little bit suspicious—"

He looked around and saw me coming down the steps. He cleared his throat noisily and slapped at the call bell on the desk. A rather futile move, I thought, considering that he was the bellboy as well as the clerk.

Well, when I got to the Shephard house where Rima was living, Harris was pacing back and forth in the parlor, his flat feet coming down on the floor like a pair of laundry irons. And this Buck Johnson was pacing right behind him, a silly grin on his face.

I suppose every small town has its prize screwball. Westfall had Buck Johnson. Buck was undersized, scrawny, with one eye which never seemed focused on the same object as its mate. He was called "Buck" because of his front teeth. He owned a small tin shop on Main Street, but I had never seen him working at it. Most of his time he spent following Constable Harris around, continually making fun of Westfall's sole symbol of law and order.

Right now Buck Johnson had a pair of toy guns from the dime store stuck in his belt in imitation of Harris' revolvers. And as he walked, he thrust out his belly as a part of his impersonation, and this left his back caved in.

RIMA was sitting stiffly on the edge of the couch in the parlor. This crack-brain Buck Johnson was trying to show off and get her to laugh at him. But Rima didn't look as though she would be doing any laughing for a while.

Widow Shephard was sitting in her patent rocker, her black eyes as sharp as her flying knitting needles. She saw me before any of the others.

"Don't worry, young man," she promised. "I wouldn't let this big fool policeman put on any third degree in here. He's been downright insulting to your little lady over there."

Harris turned, saw me. Before he said anything to me, he turned to Mrs. Shephard and shook his finger at her.

"You keep out of this, Widow Shephard! You can't stand in the way of the law."

Just behind the town constable, Buck Johnson struck an imitative attitude and winked at me. I went over and sat down on the couch beside Rima.

"Listen," Harris addressed me. "How could Mr. Thorndyke bust out into flame like you said he did?"

"I don't know," I said. "It was certainly damp enough and he wasn't smoking."

"Don't be funny!" Harris roared.

I had no intention of being funny. Thorndyke had not been smoking. If he had, that might have explained what had happened, provided his clothes had been soaked in gasoline first—which they hadn't.

"Don't be funny!" Buck Johnson shrilly echoed. "The law pulls all the funny stuff around these parts!"

Harris wheeled and cuffed Buck Johnson down into a chair. Mrs. Shephard got up quickly from her creaking rocker. Her eagle-beak nose widened at the nostrils as she started for the town policeman.

"Don't you start any rough-house in here, Sam Harris! I've listened to about enough out of you! You get out of my house and leave these two nice young people alone!"

She gave him a push toward the door, threatened him with her knitting needles, and Harris made a somewhat hasty departure.

"But all this doesn't settle the question," I said, as Mrs. Shephard returned to her chair. "What killed Thorndyke?"

"The sword of God'," Rima muttered, her brow furrowing. "What could that mean?"

"What's that?" Mrs. Shephard asked sharply. She stood up. I thought her face paled a little.

"Lightning, maybe," Buck Johnson suggested.

Mrs. Shephard went to the stairway. Her gnarled fingers were clutched on the banister.

"A man of sin shall be smitten by

the sword of God," she said in a solemn voice—and went up the steps, the rustle of her skirt a foreboding whisper from the shadows. . . .

Rima and I, like the townspeople, attended the interment of Mr. Thornydyke. That afternoon a leaden sky dipped its rim into the gray waters of the lake. There was a cool wind off the water. At the grave, supporting the aged Mrs. Thornydyke, was this man Cameron, who had registered at the hotel the night of the tragedy.

CAMERON had been so callous then at the news of Mr. Thornydyke's death, that it struck me as peculiar that he should now be one of the chief mourners. During the last words of the officiating churchman, I left Rima's side and stepped over to the hotel clerk, who was also attending the services.

"Who's the man with Mrs. Thornydyke?" I asked.

"Big promoter," the clerk whispered. His look reprimanded me for breaking the silence, and he hid his eyes in prayer.

Suddenly, a shrill voice broke out from the rear of the crowd around the grave. I turned, saw a wizened old man with deep-set eyes in a skull's face, pushing his way through the throng. His long white hair waved wildly in the wind, and in the dark caves that were his eyes, pale lights like distant lightning played.

"Professor Nash!" somebody near me whispered.

I looked at the whisperer and saw that it was Rima's landlady, Widow Shephard. Color had seeped from the old woman's face, and I saw that her thin shoulders quaked as she looked upon the wizened man with the flowing white hair.

Professor Nash elbowed his way to the edge of the grave. Not a sob, not so much as the rustle of a skirt broke the silence. The gray sky pressed down upon us like a celestial threat. The officiating minister closed his Bible soundlessly.

As quietly Professor Nash stepped to the head of the grave, his deep-set eyes raised to the heavens. And slowly he bowed his head until the

pale flashes within his eye sockets were like X-rays, piercing the coffin, seeing the blistered and blackened remains of the corpse itself.

"This man has sinned," his voice squeaked. "Let all men know and fear the wrath of the Lord. He who sinneth, the Lord will smite. And the weapon of God is the sword of fire."

Doubtless he would have carried his denunciation farther had it not been for the undertaker, who at that moment stepped to Nash's side and put a hand on the old man's shoulder. The undertaker whispered to him much as a mother might to a child who is misbehaving in public. And, somehow, the undertaker managed to quiet him.

On the way from the grave to where the cars stood in the drive, I approached the minister who had officiated at the burial.

"Who was the old man with the fly-away hair and the deep-set eyes? What's all this about 'the sword of God'?"

The minister—I do not recall his name—informed me that Professor Nash was a fanatic who had leased a tumbledown assembly hall on the edge of town and was making a pretty good thing for himself as a prophet of damnation—and how to avoid the pitfalls of human existence.

I hurried forward to rejoin Rima, and as we walked along the road to the car which had brought us, we passed the automobile in which Mrs. Thornydyke and Cameron were seated.

"I don't want to talk about it now!" I heard Mrs. Thornydyke choke out between sobs: "Be—because, Mr. Cameron, I don't own it any more."

I looked back over my shoulder and saw Cameron chop his teeth together on what I felt certain was a silent curse.

There was devilment in Westfall! I didn't know what it was nor from whom it emanated, but it was there, all right. And ghastly, gruesome murder played a part in it!

Our way back to the Widow Shephard's place, Rima leaned close to me.

"Did you notice the medals?"

"What medals?" I asked.

"The medals like the one that fell from the burned garments of Mr. Thorndyke that night," she said. "I saw at least a half dozen of them at the funeral. Mrs. Shephard wore one. Dick, could it be that those metal disks attract lightning?"

I laughed. Then, because this was no laughing matter, I kissed her quickly on the forehead.

"That's impossible," I told her.

"Suppose, just suppose those medals *did* have some mysterious force so that they could attract lightning. Dick, I've got to find out something about those medals!"

What she found out was that Professor Nash gave them to the faithful followers who contributed to his "psychic readings." Mrs. Shephard showed me hers. It was identical with the one Mr. Thorndyke had worn, except that in the soft metal at the back of it, the name of Mrs. Shephard was scratched in with some sharp instrument.

The medal, Mrs. Shephard informed Rima, represented an ancient mystic—"who was burned."

It didn't make sense, what Rima was thinking. But the idea haunted me, the idea that these medals were a means of calling down the lightning upon the sinners of Westfall. So that evening, when thunder rolled hollowly on the distant horizon, a cold shiver played up and down my spine as I sat alone in the Shephard parlor, waiting for Rima to come down.

The silence after the thunder was somehow awful, as though some heavenly voice had spoken wrathfully and the world knelt in dread obedience. There was nearly always at least the cheerful click of Mrs. Shephard's knitting needles. But Mrs. Shephard was evidently upstairs in her bedroom.

A moment later, as the reverberations of thunder shook the house to its foundations, a shrill cry sounded from the upper reaches of the building. I rushed to the stairway, calling out hoarsely to Rima. I took the steps three at a time, dashed down the hall to Rima's room. Her door was opening and she came running out, to stand with eyes wide and every nerve taut.

"Mrs. Shephard!" she gasped and flung herself at the door directly opposite hers. Her frantic fingers fumbled with the doorknob, couldn't seem to get the door open. I pushed her aside, only to find that the thing was locked.

"Out of the way, Rima! We'll break in."

I backed into Rima's room and came running out to smash the door with my left shoulder. The lock gave, the door yielded. I rushed into the room.

Poised on the sill of an open window was the Widow Shephard. Flame licked upward across her bosom, illuminated her terrified face. She swayed backward, one arm breaking through the cloak of fire to clutch futilely at the window frame. And then she fell.

We heard her body strike the roof of a low shed directly beneath the window. And then, as we rushed to the sill, we saw this ghastly human torch roll the length of the shed roof and plunge to the earth.

Then there were no more cries, no more sound. But down below, the shadows were ruddy with the fire of human sacrifice.

Rima yanked at my arm, pointed at the window sill. I couldn't see the significance of the thing she pointed at, then. It was simply a fine-drawn line made up of tiny droplets of water. Just water. I know, because I touched it with my finger and tasted the stuff before leaving the window.

"Get hold of Constable Harris!" I ordered Rima. "I'm going to go see this Professor Nash."

I PLUNGED down the steps and out of the house. This thing had gone too far! And if this fanatical Nash had a means of calling down the wrath of God, I was determined to discover by what right he held this terrible power.

I found the assembly hall which the fanatic made his home as well as his meeting place. Lightning on the horizon flared through the holes in its roof and illuminated the steeple which sat on top, askew like a carnival cap on a New Year's Eve celebrant. I moved up the sagging steps, lifted up

on the sagging door, so that I could swing it open without its dragging on the floor of the porch.

I looked into the place, across the parallel rows of seats. The rostrum was draped with black cloth in imitation of an altar. Two candles burned beside it. I approached on tiptoe, aware that from somewhere up near the rostrum came a choked, gurgling sound that was some ghastly relation to laughter.

Halfway down the aisle, I stopped. At the foot of his altar, I saw Professor Nash, his small body rigidly convulsed, his face paper-white. From parted lips, white froth exuded with the gurgling laughter and smeared down across his chin. His deep-set eyes stared glassily at the ceiling.

I took no more than one look, then turned and ran from that mental charnel house out into the road. A car swept down out of the light, and I was caught suddenly between the twin beams of its headlamps. The driver jammed on his brakes, and but for the fling leap I made toward the ditch, he would have run over me.

"What the hell—" an irate voice demanded.

I gathered myself up, crawled to the top of the ditch and saw Dr. Hart leaning out of the window of that car, his bald head looking like a full moon in the darkness.

"Hart, there's something wrong with Professor Nash," I said. "He acts as though he's been poisoned!"

Hart grumbled something, pulled his car off the road. I came up out of the ditch to join him at the side of the car. Hart grunted, reached over for his medical kit.

"He's having one of his fits again. The man's an epileptic. Some of the villagers have the idea he's possessed of the Mystic Spirit. That's the reason he has such a large following."

"Possessed of the devil would be more like it," I said, as I followed Hart into the assembly hall.

The physician took one look at Nash. "He's just about out of his fit now. However, I think it would be well to take him to my little hospital."

So we carried Nash's epilepsy-stiffened form to the car, put him on

the back seat. And on the way into the center of Westfall, I told Hart about what had happened at Widow Shephard's. He was considerably more concerned than he had been over Nash's fit. Instead of going to the little hospital he maintained, he drove at once to Mrs. Shephard's house.

The place was overrun with townspeople. Dr. Hart's rival for Westfall's practice had been called in, and we learned that Mrs. Shephard was dead. It was the fall from the roof which had killed her. But had she survived that, it was doubtful if she could have lived because of her burns. The "sword of God" had struck again!

SOMEHOW, I associated this fresh tragedy with what I had seen in front of the altar of Nash's meeting place. Devil-doctors of the Congo, I had read, in practicing their spells that resulted in the deaths of enemies in tribal districts many miles distant, went into ecstatic trances that closely resembled epilepsy.

The thought was so strong in my mind that when I saw Professor Nash stagger from Dr. Hart's car a few minutes after our arrival, I found myself avoiding his deep-eyed glance. And when I thought he was coming toward me through the crowd that milled around the Shephard place I went quickly into the house.

Constable Harris saw me and pounced. "Where's that girl friend of yours?" he demanded.

"Rima? Isn't she here?" I looked around the parlor, at the sheeted form of Mrs. Shephard on the couch, at the two grave-faced doctors standing beside the corpse.

"She called me on the phone, and when I got here," Harris went on, "she had gone. It's my opinion—"

Out in the hall, the phone rang. I heard the receiver removed from the hook. In another moment Buck Johnson, the village clown, stuck his head around the corner of the door and grinned at me.

"Anybody here named Dick? A female wants him on the phone."

I brushed past Harris, went into the hall, picked up the dangling receiver

and faced the wall phone. It was Rima.

"Dick," she said excitedly, "I think I've got the truth! Meet me down in front of the barber shop as soon as you can. I think I know what 'the sword of God' is. It's those medals—but just wait until I show you!"

"Where you off to?" Buck Johnson called after me as I ran through the front door.

I didn't answer because I knew that Constable Harris would delay me if he got the chance. I ran over to Main Street and sighted Rima standing in front of the barber shop a block away. She came running to meet me.

"Listen, Dick—"

"What is all this?" I interrupted.

"Not so much noise," she cautioned, though as far as I could see we had the town to ourselves, except for the swiftly passing cars along the state road which merged into Westfall's Main Street.

"We go right up this alley here," she said. "The back door of the shop wasn't locked—"

She caught my arm and dragged me into a muddy driveway between the barber shop and Buck Johnson's tin shop. Except for the fact that we were hanging on to each other, we could have got lost in the darkness of that narrow alley.

I heard Rima fumble with a door, then heard the creak of hinges.

"Come in," she whispered. I stepped inside and closed the door. Rima struck one of my paper matches. The yellow flame heightened the excited flush of her cheeks. She cupped the flame in her hands and found the light switch with it. With the light on, I could see that we were in the back room of Johnson's tin shop.

"Over here," she whispered, and crossed the room to a work bench which contained a cabinet of drawers.

"Listen," I said. "You know this amounts to breaking and entering? We can go to jail for this."

RIMA pulled open a drawer. I could see the rapid pulse at her throat.

"The ritualistic medals are in here. And up there on the shelf above

is the portable furnace he uses for casting them. And there's the mold—"

"What of it?" I looked into the drawer. There was perhaps a score of the mystic symbolical medals which Professor Nash gave out to members of his psychic groups.

"Why," she said, "Buck Johnson makes the medals for Professor Nash! And for anyone who ought to die, there's a special treatment for the medal. Look!"

She opened another drawer and took out a large metal tobacco box and opened it.

"I drained all the oil out of here," she explained, "trying to see just what the stuff was. They keep it in oil, so that no water can get to it. It's metallic potassium. I didn't study high school chemistry for nothing, Dick!"

I looked. Rima poured from the tobacco box perhaps a score of silvery-gray lumps the size of a hickory nut. They rolled out across the top of the work-bench.

"You see," Rima said, "he faced the medals that are to go to his victims with this metallic potassium. Even a drop of water on the stuff causes instantaneous flame—the white-hot flame of hydrogen gas—because the potassium liberates hydrogen from the water."

"Good Lord!" I gasped. "That—that cross-eyed fool, that clown—"

"Yes," a voice sneered behind me. "That 'half-wit'—the smartest man in this town!"

I turned around. Buck Johnson stood in the door, grinning his silly smile. In each of his hands was a gun—those guns that had come from the dime store toy department. I knew now why he carried them. I knew just how deadly they were.

They were water pistols! Suppose he directed their needle spray of water at one of the potassium-faced medals that his victims wore—why, that was how he had killed Widow Shephard!

This Buck Johnson had crawled up on the shed roof, sighted his water pistol at the medal on her breast. As soon as the water struck the medal, hydrogen flame had set Mrs. Shep-

(Continued on page 111)



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DEATH HOUSE PROMISE

HANNAH Weigand had always loved her brother Matt, even though he had fallen into bad company and finally became involved in a murder. For that crime, he had been electrocuted in Sing Sing.

But in his sister's eyes, Matt was a good boy. It was Matt who had made it possible for his orphaned sister to become a hair-dresser and open a shop of her own.

Each year on the anniversary of Matt's death, Hannah would visit his grave and leave flowers. She felt that he was close to her. She had never forgotten the last day she had seen Matt in the Death House. How brave he was! He said he didn't know where he was going, but he was sure he would always be around to keep her out of danger.

One evening recently, she came home from work to get ready for the theatre. She was going out with a girl friend. She curled her hair and then decided to take a bath. She filled the tub and was just about to step into the tub when she heard three distinct knocks on the front door. Believing it was her friend, she slipped into a bathrobe and went to the door. But nobody was there. For some reason, she thought of her brother.

A bit bewildered, she walked back to the bathroom. And there to her dismay, she saw that the curling iron which she had left setting on the side of the wash bowl had slid into the tub of water. The current was on from the main socket although turned off at the iron. Still, the water would have made contact through the switch—and had she been in the tub when the iron fell in, she would have been electrocuted.

Had her brother's dying promise been ful-

filled? She believes he saved her from his own fate—electrocution.

THE HORRIBLE FACE

MRS. LUCILLE WILLIAMS, of New Jersey, was washing clothes one day in the cellar. She had told her four-year-old daughter to go out in the back yard and play.

While scrubbing the clothes in the tub, Mrs. Williams' eyes were fixed on the soap suds before her. Suddenly the suds seemed to part—and in the dirty gray water, she saw a horrible face looking up at her. The face was that of a monster—its mouth grinning in fiendish glee—its tongue hanging out—and its hideous fangs seemed to drip blood.

So terrified was the woman that she slapped her hands madly at the vision, splashing soap suds into the air as the vision faded.

Some of the suds flew into her mouth and began to burn her tongue and lips. She choked—and then desiring to get the caustic suds out of her mouth, she rushed upstairs to the bathroom for a mouth wash.

Just as she reached the bathroom, she saw her little girl standing on a stool and reaching into the medicine closet. The child held a vanilla bottle containing a liquid.

"I want some vanilla," said the child who was fond of drinking water slightly flavored with vanilla.

Frantic, the mother grabbed the bottle before the child could put it to her lips. The bottle contained carbolic acid.

The mother had beaten the monster to his fiendish anticipation. To this day, she believes she saw a creature of hell—but by

striking back at it—perhaps guided by a guardian angel—had unwittingly been able to prevent the unholy fulfillment of cruel, satanic tragedy.

WHISPER OF DEATH

JOHN LONGACRE, a salesman for a Pittsburgh concern, was asleep in his room on the tenth floor of a hotel near the Pennsylvania Station in New York City. He had had a busy day calling on New York buyers—and had slept soundly all night.

Just after dawn, he was awakened suddenly by a woman's voice, whispering: "Goodbye, my darling—we shall be together, always."

The voice was emotional and was so depressing to Longacre that he jumped from his bed believing someone was in distress. But no one was in the room but himself. Somewhat superstitious, and knowing that his wife had been ill when he left Pittsburgh, he thought perhaps it was an omen. So he immediately put through a long distance call to his wife. But she was all right.

Still bewildered, for he was sure he had not been dreaming, he went over to the window to close it. He glanced down on the fifth floor extension of the building. There he saw several people standing on the roof, looking at two bodies lying there—a man and a woman.

In a few minutes he learned what had happened.

It can be explained by this newspaper item which appeared in the New York Journal that afternoon:

"Plunge Kills Two In Pact. They had been married 15 years and were down to their last dollar. They could not stand privation, illness, hunger and fear of failure. And so Samuel Walker, 40, and his wife Anna, 36, calmly decided, during a long and dreary night of debate at a New York hotel, to end their lives together in a suicide pact. Soon after dawn they climbed to the window of their 27th floor room, and after saying their last farewells, plunged to their deaths."

Had John Longacre, a stranger lying on his bed 17 floors beneath them, heard the woman's dying whisper of farewell to her husband as she broadcast it into the cosmos of eternity before passing into the Great Unknown? Who knows?

THE CHINESE-INDIAN GHOST

A CERTAIN young actress who is making good in Hollywood has a strange secret she tells only to her most intimate friends. For that reason her name cannot be mentioned here.

Few people know that her mother was part American Indian, and that her father was one quarter Chinese. She looks like a typical American girl. When she was in her teens, she went on a vacation trip to Alaska. She had made up her mind to become a trained nurse after graduating from school.

While in Alaska, she and several other

(Continued on page 106)

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

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(Continued from page 105)

girls went to see a native fortune teller, an old woman of mystery who had built quite a reputation for uncanny predictions. The moment this young girl walked into the fortune teller's hut, the old woman stared at the American girl with admiration.

Then the old mystic dropped on her knees and lowered her head in homage to the girl, muttering something that sounded like: "Ma-hah-jah." This was repeated for several minutes.

Then the old lady revealed that this girl was a reincarnated princess who had, years ago, come from China across the Bering Sea and whose descendants became American Indians. She was the first real American princess.

The young girl had never told her friends of her Chinese-Indian blood—so she was greatly taken back by what the old woman said. How could she know? Later, the girl came back alone, to see the fortune teller—and this was the advice she was given:

"Do not become a nurse. Someday you will be the greatest actress of all times, and years later, the first lady in the land. So start at once to prepare. Go to Hollywood within three years—and fate will make your path."

There were other secret instructions given, which this girl followed out—and up to this present moment, every one of those predictions has come true . . . and through the strangest coincidences.

Within five years from now, this girl expects to win the great Motion Picture Award. When this happens, she will reveal her full story to the public—and also tell of a strange visitation to her room one night—a womanly ghost which looked like her, but much older. The apparition wrote a message on the mirror—a word in ancient Chinese, which when spoken sounds like "Ma-hah-jah."

THE CURSED FOOT

FRANZ ROSWALT, the well known novelist of Berlin, Germany, told this story recently to a group of writers in New York City.

When Roswalt was in Germany, he used to spend his summers in the Black Forest. One afternoon, a strange old man strolled by the camp. The old man asked for a crust of bread. Roswalt fed him—and then the novelist noticed that the old man wore a peculiar piece of leather on his right foot. It was not a shoe—but evidently a covering to hide a deformity.

Back in Berlin a few days later, Roswalt described the old man to a friend of his. "Oh," said the friend—"you met old Hessen, the devil's beggar." Then the friend revealed this story.

Many years ago, Hessen lived near a village church. At the entrance to the church was a collection box in which church-goers dropped coins for the milk fund for the poor babies of the community.

One day a rich visitor deposited a gold

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

coin in the box. The pastor noticed it. But later when the box was opened, the gold coin was missing. Who was the thief?

Whoever he was, he evidently had been stealing money regularly, for when the pastor checked up, he found that many others had dropped large coins in the box from time to time; but only small coins were found when the box was opened each week.

Time passed. The thief could not be discovered. Then one day, Hessen's foot was crushed in an accident on his farm and he was taken to a doctor. The doctor tried to repair it, but in spite of medical science, the foot grew into a strange deformity, until finally it became a perfect goat's foot. It was this strange fact which gave the pastor his clue. He accused Hessen of stealing the milk-fund money—and Hessen confessed.

"You see," explained Roswalt's friend—"the milk that was purchased for the poor babies was goat's milk."

What strange code of justice put this curse on Hessen? Was it his own conscience or some holy law of retribution so often associated with goats? Since the beginning of time, there are records of men being cursed to take the form of goats. It is still the punishment for thieves among a certain sect in Africa.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

To Chakra:

A friend of mine says she attended a spirit seance where the medium took the fingerprints of a ghost—and the prints showed no lines—just a smear. The medium said that only ghost-fingers fail to show fingerprints. Is this true?

HELEN BEEMS

Dear Miss Beems: No! People suffering from a disease called "keritasis palmaris plantarius," have soft calluses on their finger tips which shed skin making fingerprinting impossible, as loops and whorls disappear. That so-called "ghost" may have been one of these people. This was probably the fake medium's alibi for not being able to produce fingerprints on ghosts known to the spectators.

To Chakra:

Is it true that the late General Foch of the World War, predicted the second World War to the very year?

MAX GEIM

Dear Mr. Geim: Yes. When the Germans signed the Armistice in November of 1918, Foch turned to his aides and said: "Let the armies stand at ease. The war is postponed for 20 years." The Armistice was in its 20th year when the second war started.

To Chakra:

Can you tell me of any individual having been born with a veil—and whose life has been miraculously saved against all odds? I have heard of this veil superstition, but never knew of any case to indicate its truth.

WILLIAM NEIL

Dear Mr. Neil: There are many. One recently is Peter Torsiello of New York City

(Concluded on page 108)

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(Concluded from page 107)

who is alive today although he fell from the roof of a 12 story building on West 28th Street. He landed on the luggage compartment of a car parked beside the building, and his fall was broken.

To Chakra:

My sister and I were sure we had seen a ghost on our front lawn, until our teacher said we had seen a will-o'-the-wisp. It was a misty glow about three feet long. It traveled about 35 feet then stopped and disappeared into the ground. Do you think it was a will-o'-the-wisp, or is my teacher trying to console my fears?

JENNIE LEIGH

Dear Miss Leigh: Your teacher is probably right. This phenomena was caused by phosphorous gas arising out of the heavily fertilized soil which had been dampened by rain. It appears as a glow rather than a light and it is not infrequently seen in the peat bogs of Ireland, where Irishmen often call it a banshee.

To Chakra:

A friend of mine who was in Africa, claims that he saw a medicine man who could predict death coming to a man, by the color of his blood. Is this a scientific fact?

KAREN LUFFERS

Dear Miss Luffers: Yes, this is known to science. Blood begins to darken when its cells no longer carry oxygen, a condition which presages death. Many physicians use an "electric eye," to watch for this condition when a person is very low, so the doctor can administer oxygen before it is too late.

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BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

HATE'S HAVOC

(Continued from page 79)

sure? Quite sure you have nothing to talk to me about?"

"Nothing, Doctor."

"No more gibberish such as I have been hearing from you these past few weeks, about dolls and titian hair and blushes?"

"No more gibberish. It was gibberish, wasn't it? Tom loves me. I know that. I've been a silly, such a silly. I've really wasted your time, which you could have given to patients with something really the matter with them."

"I daresay," said Doctor Kendricks with a chuckle. "And how did you make this discovery of the obvious—that Tom loves you?"

"I don't know. I just woke up this morning, and just knew it, that's all. And when Tom called for me this morning, all I had to do was look in his eyes. Any woman can tell when a man loves her. Tom's waiting outside. I've got to run. 'Bye, Doctor."

The small girl stood on tiptoe, caught his shoulders in tiny hands and kissed the bending Doctor Kendricks on the cheek. The door closed behind her.

Doctor Kendricks was not surprised to see it open again, admitting Tom Grant. Grant closed the door.

"I told Deirdre it wouldn't be polite for me to run off without saying hello," he said. "But I guess you know what I've come for. Of course I understand how some of it was worked—the vocal part you let Benita and me in on. But some of the medical and psychiatric features puzzled me—"

DOCTOR KENDRICKS chuckled again.

"Of course," he said, "and in the first place, Deirdre was prepared for her visitor of last night beforehand. The preparation took place right here in this room. A judicious mixture of hypnotism and suggestion. The puppet figures, naturally, you know about. Not that that was the only method that could have been used. It just so happened that Deirdre's physician was also an expert puppeteer—the hobby has given me the relaxation the demands

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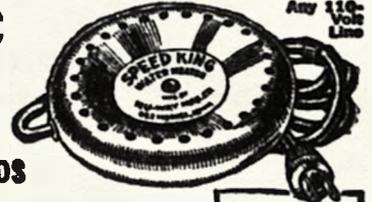
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(Continued from page 109)

of my profession require. It's strenuous work, probing into the soul.

"It became clear to me, after several sessions with Deirdre, that unless the emotions of mingled hate and love which she was repressing could find an outlet, an incipient psychotic case would progress to an active psychosis. I was not long in grasping the set-up—the various clues obtained from Deirdre's unwilling revelations were enough—the hair, the blush, you, Benita and so forth.

"After that, the problem was merely how the thing was to be managed. How was Deirdre to be made to see her inmost thoughts and desires in action, and so purge herself of them? For it was those thoughts and desires that were making her ill and threatening to ruin three lives.

"It was necessary to keep Deirdre at a level of consciousness that would permit her to believe in the reality of what she was witnessing, and at the same time prevent her from seeing its falsity. For this I used a drug—a drug that acts the same as the toxins of fatigue, that induces what we call a lowered threshold of consciousness.

"When one is in such a state, tactile sensations are much exaggerated. Everything one touches seems large. And so Deirdre was prepared for the diminutive size of you and Benita, not knowing of course that what she was seeing was merely a puppet representation. And by tactile suggestion, she was made to identify herself with the puppet that represented her. It was all real to her, or rather to her subconscious—it was natural then, that you were all small in the presence of Death.

"Well, the drama of the subconscious was acted out with the help of my assistant and the voices of Benita and yourself. You escaped. You went to her. To *her*, not to Benita. Her subconscious animosity toward Benita was also acted out. She saw her desire fulfilled. But your love was certain now, and her animosity was gone. In short, she went to sleep in your arms, cured, and woke up that way this morning."

"And she'll never know, Doctor?"

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Tom Grant queried hesitantly.

"She'll have total amnesia for what happened last night. Marry the girl, son. You'll have nothing to worry about."

A minute later the doctor stood at a window, looking out onto the street.

Deirdre Gray and Tom Grant had just entered Grant's car. They leaned close, kissed.

"Benita Gray can change her hair back to its original color," the doctor murmured. "If I know as much about the soul as about the mind, that young fellow from now on would never mistake Deirdre Gray for anyone else even if she was quintuplets."

THE SCOURGE OF FLAME

(Continued from page 103)

hard's dress on fire. The droplets of water on the window sill had been from Buck Johnson's gun!

He would have killed Mr. Thorn-dyke the same way—if nature hadn't beat him to it. The night that Thorn-dyke opened his cottage door to us, the rain had found the deadly medal pinned on his chest first.

Then—"Wh-what are you going to do?" Rima stammered.

"There's likely to be an accident," Buck said. "I think my shop's going to burn down. I don't care much, 'cause I got insurance. You ought to care, though, because you're going to be right in the middle of it."

I saw his two water pistols tilt. His focusing eye measured the distance to the work bench.

"Wait a minute, Buck," I said. "Wait. I don't get all of this. Nash hasn't had anything to do with it, has he?"

Buck shook his head. "He just hired me to make medals for certain of his flock, that's all."

"And that rich Mr. Cameron who's staying at the hotel—the promoter," I said. "Is he an oil promoter, by any chance? I've heard rumors of there being oil on the east shore of Lake Michigan."

(Continued on page 112)



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(Continued from page 111)

Buck nodded. "You guessed right. Most everybody around here has heard about it, but they don't take it seriously. Now me, I've seen oil floating on the top of the swamp that adjoins the Thorndyke place and Widow Shephard's farm. I tried to buy the land legitimately, but they wouldn't sell."

"So you killed Thorndyke in order to deal with his widow while she was grief-stricken and didn't know what she was doing," I told him.

"That's the idea," he said. "And I'll get my hands on the Shephard property as soon as I can see young Wally Shephard, who's away at school. Now, are you talked out? Because the next thing you'll be saying is 'ouch'!"

I sprang to the right, hit Rima with my shoulder, knocked her to the floor. My right hand went out across the bench, seized a pair of heavy tin snips. And at that same moment, a sheet of blue-white flame leaped up from the work bench. As I turned toward Buck Johnson, I saw his pistols streaming water at the little lumps of potassium on the bench.

He sprang backward toward the door. I knew he must have some way of locking us into the white-hot oven he had made of his shop. I jumped after him, saw that I didn't have a chance, raised the tin snips and threw them with all my strength.

The snips hit Buck Johnson in the chest with such force that he staggered sideward, missed the door. I had cut him off! I came in close. He bobbed down to the floor, came up with the tin snips. He had them by the blades. I knew I couldn't escape the blow from the heavy shears, but I ducked anyway, grabbed him at the knees.

I had him off balance, so that when the shears fell, they glanced off the left side of my neck. The deflected shears must have struck a nerve, because instantly my left side seemed completely paralyzed. I went down on the floor on top of Buck Johnson, my lashing right fist connecting again and again with his face as he fought madly to hack at me with the shears.

Then very suddenly it was over. I tugged the snips out of his hand, threw them across the room. The fingers of my right hand dug into his throat. I had him where I wanted him now. He was such a scrawny little man, I could have throttled him with five fingers.

Perhaps I would have, if the door hadn't been burst open at that moment by Constable Harris and some of the other townspeople who were attracted by the fire which had broken out along the shop's wall.

They dragged Buck Johnson and me out of the blazing room, still struggling. There had to be an explanation, of course. I told them what I knew, and Rima chimed in which some of her chemistry.

As we walked away from the burning building, away from Buck Johnson who was even now fighting against Harris' handcuffs, the wealthy Mr. Cameron who had registered at the hotel came down the street, swinging a briefcase in one hand.

"Beg pardon," he said politely, stopping Rima and me. "But could you tell me where I can find one Buck Johnson, who now owns the Thorn-dyke property? That is, so I have been given to understand."

"Yes," I said. "His address is going to be the jail house for the next month or so. After that, I suspect you'll have to call on him in hell."

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30x6-27	\$4.45	30x6-27	\$4.45
30x6-28	\$4.45	30x6-28	\$4.45
30x6-29	\$4.45	30x6-29	\$4.45
30x6-30	\$4.45	30x6-30	\$4.45

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES		SIZES	
Size	Price	Size	Price
30x6-20	\$4.45	30x6-20	\$4.45
30x6-21	\$4.45	30x6-21	\$4.45
30x6-22	\$4.45	30x6-22	\$4.45
30x6-23	\$4.45	30x6-23	\$4.45
30x6-24	\$4.45	30x6-24	\$4.45
30x6-25	\$4.45	30x6-25	\$4.45
30x6-26	\$4.45	30x6-26	\$4.45
30x6-27	\$4.45	30x6-27	\$4.45
30x6-28	\$4.45	30x6-28	\$4.45
30x6-29	\$4.45	30x6-29	\$4.45
30x6-30	\$4.45	30x6-30	\$4.45

SEND ONLY \$1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. (\$4.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. **ALL TIRES BRAND NEW - GUARANTEED -**
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I have been surprised at the practical manner in which even advanced work is explained. It is a lot easier than I had expected. I only wish I had started this plan of getting ahead a few years earlier. But when I was 18 to 20 I felt pretty sure of myself. I didn't take enough stock in what more experienced people told me about the importance of being thoroughly trained for the job I wanted.

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American School, Dept. G-358, Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago

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I have checked the line of work in which I would like a good job. Please send me without expense or obligation on my part a copy of your Bulletin and an early lesson in the field I have selected.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Automobile Repairing | <input type="checkbox"/> Electric Refrigeration | <input type="checkbox"/> Merchandising |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping and Cost Accounting | <input type="checkbox"/> Heating, Ventilating, Plumbing | <input type="checkbox"/> Private Secretary |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Incl. C. P. A. Coaching | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship |
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