

THRILLING

MYSTERY

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MAY

DRAGON OF THE GOBI

A Novelet of Desert Terror

By **STEWART**

STERLING

A THRILLING
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FEATURING

**BLACK WINGS
OF DEATH**

A Novel of
Masked Horror

By **G. T.**

FLEMING-ROBERTS



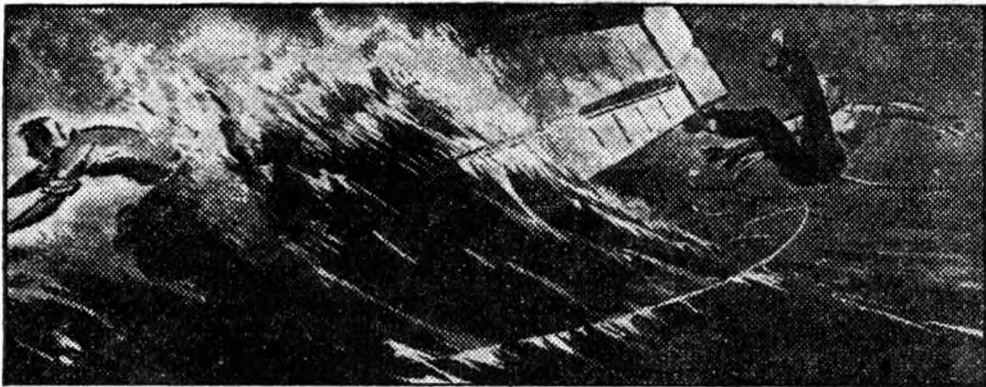
"THE HEAVY LINE DRAGGED ME TOWARD ETERNITY!"

A true experience of C. J. LATIMER, Warren, Ohio



"ANOTHER FISHERMAN and myself had just finished setting a heavy trot-line in Lake Erie," writes Mr. Latimer, "when a sudden treacherous squall lashed out of nowhere and churned the water into towering waves.

"A WAVE SMACKED us broadside, and over we went! Then I felt a heavy drag on my leg. I was caught in the trot-line and was being pulled to my doom. In the darkness, my companion couldn't untangle me!



"BUT ONE OF OUR PARTY ON shore brought his flashlight into action. Its powerful beam cut the distance and darkness—and in a minute I was free. I shudder to think of what might have happened except for those dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries!"

(Signed)

C. J. Latimer

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Co., Inc.



FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... Look for the DATE-LINE

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide UCC and Carbon Corporation

A Money-Making Opportunity

for Men of Character

EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR

AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

Costly Work Formerly
"Sent Out" by Business Men
Now Done by Themselves
at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle
exclusive agency for one of the most
unique business inventions of the day.

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

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—in integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better, more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not remained very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

Not a "Gadget"—
Not a "Knick-Knack"—

But a valuable, proved device which
has been sold successfully by busi-
ness novices as well as seasoned
veterans.

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

Some of the Savings
You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,800! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$28.80, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could give possibly list all cases here. There are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by three field agents which hammer across a district, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$3.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on one dollar's worth \$670, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has
Nothing to Do With
House to House Canvassing

How do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling? Selling is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the investment without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest business by the thousands.

EARNINGS

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

No Money Need Be Risked

In trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overrated—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory here which you can get into—regardless of size—either as an agency but does not have any price coming to yourself with as other businesses do—this because you control the sales in exclusive territory in your own business—then pay more on some individual sales than many can make in a week and sometimes in a month's time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us at once for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. Don't do it now. Address

F. P. ARMSTRONG, President
Dept. 4047E, Mobile, Ala.

RUSH FOR EXCLUSIVE TERRITORY PROPOSITION	
F. P. ARMSTRONG, Pres. Dept. 4047E, Mobile, Ala. Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.	
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Street or Route	_____
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Vol. XIV, No. 3

May, 1940

Price 10c

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Medieval Fear Hovers Menacingly Over the House of Gargan When Killer-Vampires Stalk the Night!

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Five Thrilling Short Stories

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Make me Prove

THAT I CAN TRAIN YOU
AT HOME FOR A

Good Job in Radio



**I TRAINED
THESE MEN**



**\$10 to \$20 A WEEK
IN SPARE TIME**

"I repaired many Radios when I was on my tenth lesson, and I have made enough money to pay for my Radio course and also my instruments. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 to \$20 a week—just spare time."—**JOHN JERRY**, 1529 Arapahoe St., Denver, Colo.

**DOUBLED SALARY
IN 5 MONTHS**

"Shortly after I started the N. R. I. course I began teaching Radio classes at the Spartan School of Aeronautics. After five months I was given a chance to join the American Airlines at a salary double that which I received from the school."—**A. T. BROTHERS**, 1130 Ocean Park Blvd., Santa Monica, Calif.



**\$200 to \$300 A MONTH
IN OWN BUSINESS**

"For the last two years I have been in business for myself making between \$200 and \$300 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field."—**ARLIE J. FROEFNER**, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

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**Why Many Radio Technicians Make
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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

**Many Make \$5 to \$10 a Week Extra
in Spare Time While Learning**

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio Repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many



make \$200 to \$500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. **I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT** to help you make more money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act today. Mail the coupon for Sample Lesson and my 64 page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my course in Radio and Television; show letters from men I have trained telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money-back agreement. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on a postcard—NOW!

**J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. OEO9
Washington, D. C.**

**GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK FREE
SAMPLE LESSON FREE**

J. E. Smith, President, National Radio Institute
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Dear Mr. Smith: Mail me FREE without obligation, Sample Lesson and 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" which tells about Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and how I can train at home for them. No salesman will call. (Write Plainly.)

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Has Helped Hundreds of
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THE GHOST STRIKES BACK



*at his underworld foes
in the year's most
exciting mystery*

THE GHOST STRIKES BACK

by and about

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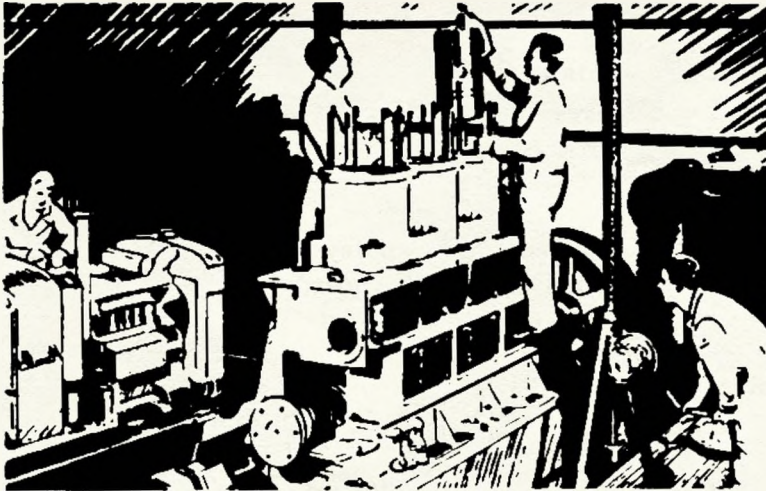
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George Chance has combined twin fields—
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For 35 years National Schools, recognized leader in Trade Instruction, has helped wide-awake men to success. Transportation allowance offered from any point in U. S. without extra cost. Earn room and board while learning. More than 35,000 graduates have been assisted. This million-dollar Trade School will supply you with a sincere, honest statement of facts about the opportunities in Diesel, Automotive and Mechanical Fields and show how you can earn more pay. No exaggerations; no misstatements. Pre-tested, easy-to-learn methods.

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Please send me, without obligation, your FREE LITERATURE and information about Diesel-Auto opportunities.

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A further saving is made by paying premium annually or semi-annually.

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Mail me without obligation complete information about your low cost Modified "4" Whole Life Policy at my age and Postal method of doing business direct.

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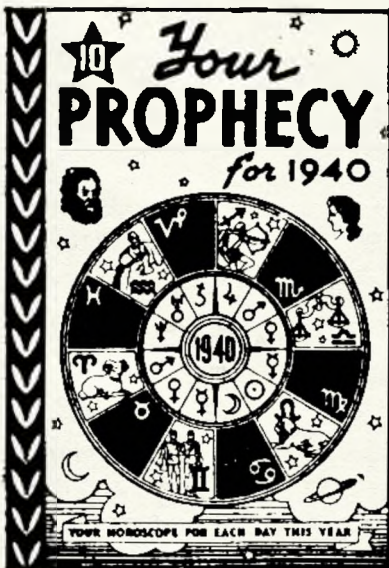


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We are willing to give you any course with the understanding that you are to pay for the Course **ONLY AFTER YOU ARE APPOINTED AND WORKING.** Should you take the examination and fail, or not be appointed for any reason whatsoever, the loss will be ours and you will not owe us one cent for the course.

**Pay for Course Only
After You Are
Appointed & Working**

So Get Started TODAY : WORK FOR UNCLE SAM!

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Please RUSH me the full particulars of your 10-week lesson course. It is understood that I am not to pay for the course until I am appointed and working. I am interested in (check box):

City P. O. Mail Carrier Rural Mail Carrier
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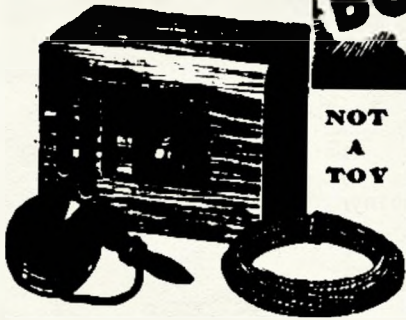
Name (Please print plainly in pencil!)

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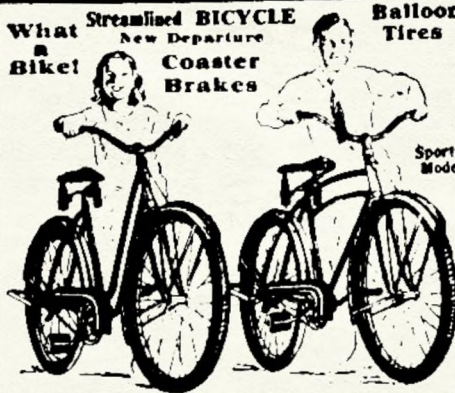
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GIVEN This amazing Radio needs no batteries or electrical connections. Is complete and ready to use anywhere. Radio yours for selling Garden Spot Seeds at 10 cts. and Mail Coupon TODAY. Fully Postpaid.

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What Streamlined BICYCLE New Departure Coaster Brakes Balloon Tires
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PIECE TABLEWARE SET



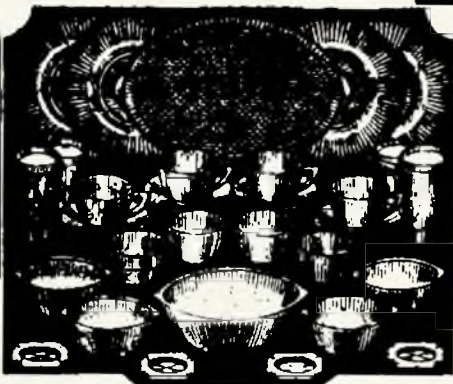
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GIVEN Latest Model—Either Boys or Girls—Your Choice. This is not a toy or substitute but the real thing you have been wanting. New Departure Coaster Brakes. This bike yours as explained in catalog. Order Seeds TODAY. Be first in your town. MAIL COUPON. Shipped by Express Collect.

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GIVEN Entire Set given as one premium. Dispose of only 24 pkts. of Garden Spot Seeds at 10 cts. a pkt. MAIL COUPON

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No Bigger Than A Dime for selling Garden Spot Seeds at 10 cts a pkt. and paying as explained in catalog



SEND NO MONEY WE TRUST YOU

MAIL COUPON TODAY for **5 FREE PROMPTNESS PRIZES!**

SENT RIGHT ALONG WITH YOUR REGULAR PREMIUM IF WE GET THIS COUPON IN THE NEXT 5 DAYS. SO HURRY! FILL OUT TODAY AND MAIL.

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- IMMEDIATE CASH
- G MEN BADGE
- REGULATION WRIST WATCH
- A DELICIOUS BAIT FOR BAIT

MAIL COUPON TODAY

Out 23rd Year

Full Size GUITAR EASY TO LEARN



GIVEN

Yours for disposing of Garden Spot Seeds at 10 cts. per pkt. and remitting as explained in catalog sent with seeds. Here is a real music maker. Clear toned, sweet and true. Order Seeds Now. MAIL THE COUPON TODAY. HURRY!

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HURRY! BE FIRST.

Leconter County Seed Co., Station 221 Paradise, Pa.

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State: _____

Street or R. F. D.: _____

Print your last name plainly below

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All information is confidential and will be held in strictest confidence. Please do not send this coupon to anyone else.

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Please send data on your Diesel courses, also free copy of illustrated booklet "March of Diesel."

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THRILLING SPY STORIES

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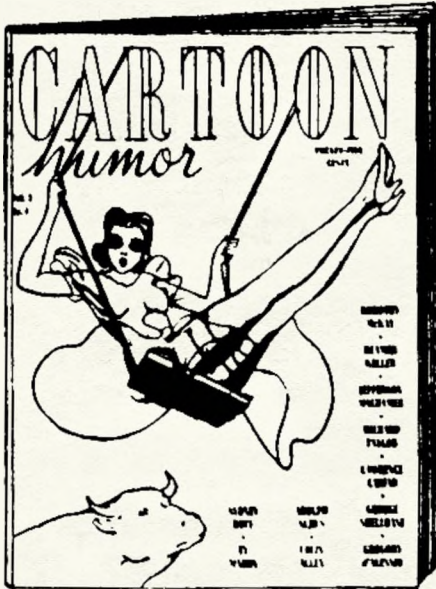
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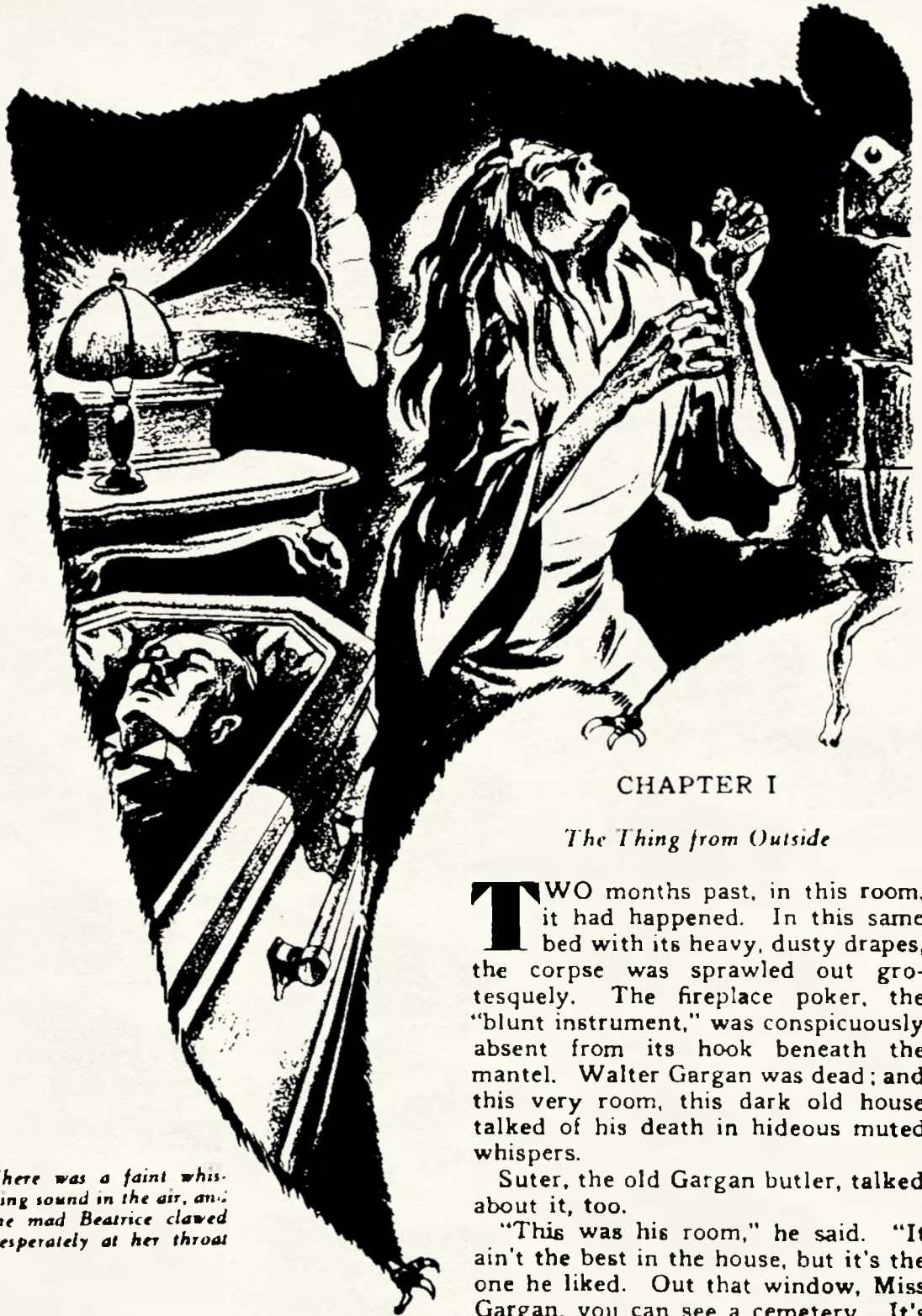
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BLACK WINGS OF



There was a faint whistling sound in the air, and the mad Beatrice clawed desperately at her throat

CHAPTER I

The Thing from Outside

TWO months past, in this room, it had happened. In this same bed with its heavy, dusty drapes, the corpse was sprawled out grotesquely. The fireplace poker, the "blunt instrument," was conspicuously absent from its hook beneath the mantel. Walter Gargan was dead; and this very room, this dark old house talked of his death in hideous muted whispers.

Suter, the old Gargan butler, talked about it, too.

"This was his room," he said. "It ain't the best in the house, but it's the one he liked. Out that window, Miss Gargan, you can see a cemetery. It's bad business having a room look out

Medieval Fear Hovers Over the House of

DEATH

By G. T.
FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "The Scourge
of Flame," "The Killer
with Claws," etc.



on a cemetery. Especially, that cemetery."

Lois Gargan, the dead man's niece, turned her head slowly as she peeled off her blue kid gloves. Her gaze came to rest on Suter, and, as when she had first seen him, the impulse to scream aloud seized her. Pity for him smothered the impulse. The poor devil couldn't help his face, or rather his lack of it.

Suter, faithful servant to the late Walter Gargan, had been horribly mutilated by mustard gas in the war so that he covered his features with a doll-like mask of varnished *papier-mache* through which his piercing and malevolent eyes ceaselessly watched her.

"Why that cemetery especially, Suter?" Lois asked, forcing herself to consider the man calmly.

Suter drew up thin shoulders.

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"Ghouls. Men who rob graves. Three new graves were opened lately. The corpses were taken out and hacked with a knife. The ghouls must be as crazy as Crazy Beatrice."

Crazy Beatrice—an upward rush of clammy air pressed against Lois' heart. She bit her lips so hard that the sharp pain cleared her mind. It was this mad Beatrice, Walter Gargan's wife, whom Lois was to care for.

"All my worldly wealth," the will had said, "I bequeath to my niece, Lois Gargan. Her retention of the estate to be contingent upon her own continued sanity, and with the stipulation—that she shall care for my unfortunate wife, Beatrice, for the rest of her days."

There was a certain decisiveness in the cut of Lois Gargan's chin. It did not mar the sweetness of her face, but it was quite apparent as she addressed the servant.

"You will not refer to Mrs. Gargan as crazy, Suter. You understand?"

SUTER chuckled evilly. "Wait till you see her."

"Take me to her apartment now," Lois commanded.

Suter shook his head. "I wouldn't go there ever if I was you. The door to her place is on the right of the stairway. I'm warning you to stay away from that part of the house."

Lois wished Suter would go away. She wanted to be alone for a minute. Walter Gargan's lawyer had given her a small sealed envelope which he said had been enclosed with the will—a message to her from the dead man. It was something that even the lawyer didn't know about. That envelope was in her purse and written on the outside, the words:

Not to be opened until you take possession of the house.

But even before Suter could leave, Steve Prime, the young man who had been instructed by the attorney to drive Lois to the house, barged into the room. Suter gave Prime a sharp look, then left the room. His faint, whispering footsteps sounded in the hall.

Lois dropped into a chair in front of the dressing table and glared at Prime.

He could be most exasperating, she thought. His straight nose delved into everything and his shrewd blue eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses regarded Lois as though she was his job. Men usually didn't consider her any sort of a task.

Prime went through the room, looked out of the window where moonlight fell in patches on the shaded lawn. He opened a drawer of the bureau, slammed it, strode through the curtained doorway of the dressing room and came out like a cyclone looking for something to blow over.

Then he stood staring at her, legs spread wide in a firm stance. Lois reflected that he wouldn't have been half bad looking if his coat and pants matched and had a pressing, and if his collar had been buttoned and his tie knotted neatly. Lois turned her back on him while she took off her blue felt hat and worried at a stray lock of hair.

"Just what are you, Mr. Prime?" she said. "You're so—well—"

"I'm a watch dog," he said. "Your lawyer instructed me to look after you. That's what I'm doing. I make a hell of a lot of dough out of this and similar jobs."

She turned in her seat, lifted her head a bit haughtily. "I am perfectly capable of looking out for myself."

"No, you're not," he told her flatly. He took a pipe out of his pocket and filled it vigorously with tobacco. "You don't get the set-up. Balmy Beatrice Gargan has three relatives by former marriages. I think that's what drove her nuts, being married three times and having all her husbands kick off violently—anyway, these three relatives aren't a sweet bunch."

"What's the matter with them?" Lois asked.

Prime shrugged and took his time about lighting his pipe. "Anthony Bishop is a card sharp. You can always remember that because his face looks like the same ace of spades he keeps up his sleeve. His sister, the good-looker, has a smile like poisoned honey. Charles Paul, the son of Beatrice by her first marriage, has twitchy lips and pulls at his nose. If he isn't a dope addict, then I never saw one."

"Well?"

PRIME looked surprised. "That unholy trio is in this house. To inherit the Gargan money, all they have to do is prove you're insane or stick a knife in you. By the way, a doctor by the name of Croftman came to them and offered his services. He's a psychiatrist and he'll be watching you closely."

Lois nodded. "There's no way of stopping them. But I'm quite certain that I'm sane."

"No, you're not," he said disagreeably. "I mean, you're not certain of anything. You're scared and won't admit it."

"I will admit it," she said. "Yes, I'm scared. This house scares me. Every door panel is so polished it's like a black mirror. I shiver every time I see my own reflection in the doors. And downstairs, when we came in, didn't you hear somebody playing Chopin's dirge on a phonograph? And I don't like Suter's faceless face. But I've got to get used to such things and I can't have you hanging around me all the time."

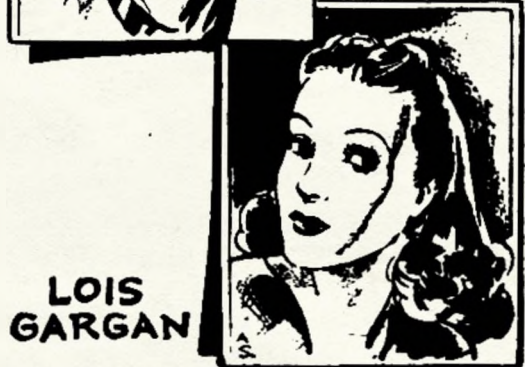
Steve Prime rubbed the bowl of his pipe tenderly on the end of his nose. "No, it wouldn't look conventional. But you have good looks and lots of dough. Even I could marry you. I guess it would be worth it." Then he went out of the room with swift strides, leaving her sitting there with her mouth open, in the process of becoming furious.

When the process was complete, she jerked to her feet angrily, cheeks flushed darkly. Her heels made clicking angry sounds on the floor. She took hold of the door knob, slammed the door hard. Steve Prime didn't even bother to look over his shoulder.

Back at the dressing table, Lois opened her purse, took out her powder puff, started slapping it angrily against her hot cheeks. And then suddenly the anger was gone. As she glanced down at her open purse she was startled.

The sealed envelope Walter Gargan had intended for her was gone!

She began to search frantically through the purse, stopped suddenly as a strange whispering sound came to her ears.



Lois dropped the purse. Her eyes searched the depths of the mirror in front of her for the source of the sound. She listened tensely. No sound anywhere. And then it came again—a slow, rhythmic flapping noise as though a high wind was whipping the canvas of a sailing vessel. The whispering within the house might only be her imagination and too much silence. But the flapping sound couldn't be attributed to the wind because there wasn't any wind. The night was as still outside as it was within the four walls of the old house.

It came again. This time her eyes were pulled to the reflection of the window behind her, visible in the mirror. And she saw something blacker than the night itself, something that crowded close to the window, beat at the glass with wings.

CHAPTER II

Vampire Bat

SHE turned, faced the window where the fluttering, hovering black thing shut out the dim glow of the night. They were wide, hideous black wings that beat their frantic appeal upon the glass, wings fully six feet

from tip to tip—membranous wings like those of a bat.

Lois stood up, facing the window. Her heart was a jarring engine bent on destroying all within her breast. For the first time in her life she understood why people died of fright. For the bat thing that hovered at her window had a human face—a gaunt, chalk-white face with dead, vacant-looking eyes and the drooping jaw of an imbecile.

She turned, fled to the door, was hour-long seconds getting it open. She rushed into the hall screaming, into Steve Prime's arms.

"The face!" she gasped. "The dead, blank face!"

"Hub?" Prime said.

"At the window," she panted. "Looking in at me with horrible, empty eyes. It had wings. Bat wings!"

Steve Prime released her, took a couple of strides that carried him into the room.

"Come in here, lady," he called sharply. Lois went to the door of her room and took a timid look inside. Prime was scowling at her, puffing furiously at his pipe, thumbing at a smudge of white on the front of his coat. "Exactly what kind of an act is this?"

"Act?" she mumbled.

"Just that. Nobody could be outside that window. There's nothing to stand on. I guess you got your pallor out of your powder box. Anyway, most of it rubbed off on my coat. You want to neck, that's just fine, only you don't have to figure up some phoney excuse for doing it."

Her lips thinned. She was beginning to hate this man, Steve Prime. But when you're half frightened to death, it's hard to get the right words.

"You mean—" she stammered, "you don't believe— You think I just wanted to— Oh, damn!" She turned and ran out into the hall. She slowed to a rapid walk, turned into the dark and silent chasm that was the stairway.

There was a man down in the hall. Pausing on the stairway Lois looked down at him. He was stout with a bald pink cranium surrounded by a circle of grayish-black hair. He had a reddish bulb of a nose and when she got farther down the staircase she saw that he had

a little black mustache under his nose. His collar gouged up into heavy jowls and his mouth was wide, tight. He elevated one eyebrow and looked at her with soft brown eyes.

Lois smiled at the man. He didn't smile back for a while. When he did his smile was expansive.

"Miss Gargan?" he inquired softly.

"Yes," she said. Her mind flashed back rapidly over Steve Prime's description of what he termed the unholy three—Anthony and Sonia Bishop and Charles Paul. This man didn't answer any of the descriptions and he didn't look unholy. He simply looked ponderous and ineffectual.

"I'm Dr. Croftsman," he announced.

LOIS knew then that he was the psychiatrist that the three potential heirs had employed to give her a mental examination. She got a tight grip on herself, extended her hand to Croftsman. The doctor peered at her hand, scowled, took hold of her wrist.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"No!" she said sharply, thinking it not fair to take her pulse that way. "I mean, yes I'm nervous. You'd be nervous too if everybody was—" She didn't finish. She wanted to say that everybody she met in the house acted crazy, but she had once heard that madmen always considered themselves the only sane people in the world.

Dr. Croftsman released her wrist. "Humph. Calm yourself, my girl. Sit down here and wait for me. I'm going to get my bag." He lumbered off to the staircase and bounded up the steps like a bear going over a fence.

Then silence claimed the house. Lois dropped wearily into a chair and her long drawn breath seemed to awake whispering echoes that were like sighs of miserable unseen things about her. Her eyes wandered, came to rest finally on the little low door beside the stairway—the door that Suter had forbidden her to enter, the door of the mad Beatrice's apartment.

It fascinated Lois with its dark oak panel where ugly laughing demon faces peered out at her from the swirling grain of the wood. She watched the tiny faces her fancy imagined from knots. They were hard to concentrate

on, coming and going like the optical illusions they were. And then, as she watched the door, her two hands clenched, her nails biting deep into the softness of her palms. The knob of the door was turning. . . .

The door swung back, and in the blackness beyond Lois sensed motion and a flashing patch of white skin that was a human face. A man stepped out, his head stooped to avoid bumping the top of the door.

He was an angular person with thin shoulder blades that thrust upward on the worn black cloth of his coat. He was hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked and his black hair flowed sadly down from the brim of his black hat. He closed the door quietly behind him, turned, started for the front door of the house before he caught sight of Lois sitting rigidly on the edge of a straight-backed chair.

The man stopped. A pinkish tongue moistened his dry lips and his eyes roved nervously from the girl to the door.

"Good evening," he said, finally.

Lois stood up. "Who are you? What were you doing in Mrs. Gargan's apartment?"

"My name is Moag," the gaunt man said. "Conrad Moag. I am an old friend of the family and my coming and going hasn't been questioned for a long time. You, I presume, are the new mistress?"

"I am Miss Gargan," Lois said coolly. "And this is my house."

"How do you do?" Moag bowed slightly. "I am one of the few select persons whom Mrs. Gargan recognizes and receives in her present pitiable state. A most unfortunate case. I hope you will not deprive Mrs. Gargan of my company occasionally. I feel that I do her a great deal of good. After all, I have buried every member of her family."

SHE suddenly felt rather foolish. This starved looking man was undoubtedly the minister of some rural church. A gloomy enough sermon his must have been.

"What church do you represent, Mr. Moag?" she asked.

The man did not smile; his lips

looked incapable of ever smiling. His red tongue darted briefly out of his mouth as he fumbled in the pocket of his coat and produced a soiled card. As he handed it to her, he read aloud:

"Conrad Moag, Mortician."

Lois didn't take the card but drew back her hand suddenly. A clammy finger drew a quivering line along her spine.

"An undertaker," she whispered dully. "You're an undertaker."

He bowed. "That is my profession. It's not a happy one." He moved to the door. "If I can ever be of any service to you, Miss Gargan, do not hesitate to call on me."

She laughed strangely. "I'm not dead! Not dead yet, Mr. Moag!" she heard herself saying. And even after she had stopped speaking, her mind kept repeating the phrase, "Not dead yet, Mr. Moag."

The front door opened and she felt the icy blasts of the night coil themselves about her slender ankles. The door closed but the cold that had entered had come to stay. For a moment she sat there, shivering. And then something knocked softly at the front door. Sounded like a distant, faint tapping sound. She stood up, started to answer the knocking, then remembered that she was an heiress now and mistress of a large house. The servant should answer the door.

"Suter!" she called. The whispering echoes of the house took up her cry and tossed it from room to room. Then there was silence. She called again. "Suter answer the door, please." She listened for the servant's footfalls. But there was nothing but silence. Finally she took three quick steps to the door, seized the knob, threw the door open before her courage could desert her. Light from the hall fell dimly across the threshold to the floor of the small stoop.

Sprawled out on the concrete, his gaunt face in agony, his long black hair over his eyes, was Conrad Moag. And crouching over the body was a hunched, shadowy figure that straightened suddenly as the light from the hall fell upon it.

Lois again saw the face that was forever to haunt her—the blank, chalk-

white face that had peered into her window with expressionless eyes.

As the thing raised its head, it seemed to grow in proportions, the black cloak that drooped from its shoulders billowing out like wings. She heard herself screaming then, a soul-piercing shrill cry of terror. Her knees buckled under her. Her groping hands peeled down along the wood of the door frame. She clung frantically to consciousness, lest in the terrible darkness of oblivion the monstrous thing seize her in its deadly embrace.

CHAPTER III

Murder Plot

IN the hazy mist that rushed upward, she saw the black shadow of wings hovering above her, saw the blank white face close to hers, felt the cold draft whipped up by huge pinions. And then the bat creature soared clumsily into the air.

"Vampire!" The word rose into her throat and she would have screamed it aloud had she been able. But logic stifled her, logic that told her this thing was not real. It was madness, sheer lunacy. She realized then that there is something more terrible than torture, more fearful than death—the fear of going mad.

The sound of feet pounded down the stairs whispered in the carpeted halls. Steve Prime was the first to reach her. He stooped over her like a crane and picked her up. She was weak and limp in his arms and his deliberate insults of a few minutes before were forgotten.

"What's the matter now?" he asked harshly.

Head buried against his shoulder, she waved a feeble hand in the direction of Moag's body. She couldn't say anything.

"Good Lord!" Prime whispered. Then he thrust her from him, said: "Here, Miss Bishop!"

He shoved Lois into the arms of a woman who said in a soft voice:

"Why, Lois, dear!"

Lois let herself be led away into the library where the woman with the soft

voice compelled her to rest on an ancient roll back couch. Lois looked up at the face of Sonia Bishop and realized that Steve Prime had not exaggerated when he had said that this daughter of the mad Beatrice by her second marriage was a "looker."

Sonia was tall, stately, blond. Her hair was drawn back in classic lines from her forehead. But there was something in her smile which Prime had correctly described as poisoned honey. Lois shrank back against the wall and buried her face in her hands.

"Lie perfectly still, dear," Sonia said. "I'll bring someone to help you."

Sonia Bishop slipped out of the room and as soon as the door was closed, Lois sat up. She felt dizzy and sick and shuddered with fear. She had to get out of this house because of the people who were in it, because of lurking madness in every shadowy corner, because of the walls themselves which seemed to move slowly and inexorably together like something out of one of Poe's tales.

She stood up, took three faltering steps toward the door before Sonia Bishop returned with Dr. Croftsman. Sonia hurried to Lois.

"No, no, my dear!" she said, smiling. "You must not exert yourself. Lie down on the couch." Sonia's hands and arms were strong. She seized Lois by the shoulders, forced her back until Lois' knees bumped against the edge of the couch and she collapsed on the black leather cushion.

Dr. Croftsman bent over her, his red bulb of a nose so close to her she could have bitten it. His heavy face grew purple because of his tight collar. His huge thumb pushed up her eyelid.

"Humph," he said after a pause. "You need a little rest. While I prepare a hypodermic, concentrate on something in the room."

He glanced around at the walls of the room and his eyes settled on a stuffed fish mounted on a walnut plaque. "That fish, for instance, young lady. Ever do any fishing?"

"No!" Lois panted.

The door of the room opened and Steve Prime strode in. "The sheriff ought to be here in a little while," he

said. "What's going on around here?"

Croftsman opened a flat case containing a hypodermic syringe and small vials of white tablets. "This girl needs a sedative," he informed Prime.

"No!" Lois begged. She struggled in Sonia's grasp, but the blond woman possessed the strength of a man in her delicate fingers. "I can't take drugs."

Prime frowned. "You could do with a little shut-eye, I guess."

Croftsman turned, seized Lois' arm, pinched up the flesh. "Concentrate on the fish, young woman. That's a sea bass. A great sporter, that fish. I've caught them by the dozens. I'm a great fisherman. You should learn about the sport, young woman. Great relaxation. Keeps a person sane."

Lois hardly knew what the doctor was saying. She was insisting heatedly that she couldn't take drugs. She didn't know whether she could or not. What she feared was oblivion, the awful darkness stirred by black wings, darkness in which a blank face with vacant eyes would be drifting like some awful, ghostly moon. And then her eyes, glazed with terror shrank back from the syringe with its needle point poised above her flesh.

She screamed when the needle jabbed at her. Then almost at once a strange sense of inward peace came over her. Her revolting body gave up its unequal struggle with Sonia's lithe strength. She sank back as though into a bed of soft black down. . . .

Long after, the darkness gave up the sounds of voices and Lois had the sense of coming alive again. Among the voices she could distinguish Sonia's saying:

"We should have killed her while she slept."

Lois opened her eyes warily. Sonia sat at the foot of the couch where Lois lay, looking down at her, smiling. On the wall behind the couch were the shadows of two men, one tall, the other a head shorter. Lois turned around.

The tall one, she knew, must be Anthony Bishop, Sonia's brother; for his tapering face with its pointed chin looked very much like the ace of spades. The other man, shorter, red-haired, nervous-lipped, had to be Charles Paul, the half brother of the two Bishops.

Anthony's dark, unsmiling eyes rested on Lois' face. His lean, graceful fingers idly shuffled a pack of cards.

"We might have smothered her with a pillow while she slept."

Sonia Bishop smiled at Lois. "My dear, do you often have the spells? It's a sort of epilepsy, isn't it?"

Lois didn't answer. Her breath came in shallow sobs. She sat up and squirmed as far away from Sonia as she could. Her frightened eyes darted from one to the other of the three potential heirs to the Gargan fortune.

CHARLES PAUL twitched his lips and tugged at his nose.

"We could have stuck a knife into her right after Croftsman gave her the sedative," he said. "We should have gotten rid of her."

Sonia Bishop raised her hands in mock dismay. "A knife, Charles, it's so messy!"

"A little poison then," Anthony suggested.

Lois stood up unsteadily. She took dizzy steps toward the door of the library and found that Anthony Bishop barred her way, his odd, hypnotic eyes staring at her. Lois stopped.

"You can't keep me here!" she gasped. "All of you listen. I know what you're trying to do. I heard you plotting to kill me—"

Sonia was moving in toward her from one side and Charles Paul from the other. It was like the walls of the room closing in upon her. She saw Sonia's evil smile, Charles' twitching lips, the expressionless gambler's mask that was Anthony's face. With a cry, she sprang at Anthony.

"You were plotting to kill me!" she cried. "Let me out of here! Let me out, I say!" Her sharp finger nails raked Anthony's cheek. "Steve Prime, help!" she screamed. "Help me! They're plotting to kill me. Steve!"

Anthony melted back before her. She jerked the door open, dashed into the hall. Steve Prime came swiftly toward her and caught Lois by the shoulders.

"Get hold of yourself," he whispered. "I heard what they were saying."

"They're plotting to kill me!" she sobbed brokenly. "They said they would knife or poison me. You've got

to get me out of here. I don't care about the money. Just get me out of here!"

Steve Prime shook her and then suddenly his arms closed about her and he held her fiercely to him. Dr. Croftsman then came up.

"Our patient seems to have recovered rapidly, eh?" he rumbled.

Prime didn't say anything. He led Lois back into the library, his arm about her. He scowled darkly at Anthony and Sonia and Charles.

"What the hell is the idea?" he asked bluntly.

Sonia smiled at Prime. "I'm afraid poor little Lois is not in her right mind. She seems to be suffering from the illusion that we are trying to kill her for her money."

"A clear case of persecution complex, without doubt," Croftsman grumbled.

"Obviously," Anthony said. "Lois is out of her mind. Presuming that Sonia and Charles and I were murderers, which we most certainly are not, would we plot to murder the girl when she is in the same room with us?"

Prime nodded. "You bet your sweet life you would. You scared her into thinking that you were plotting her death so she would tell somebody. Of course it sounds mad. That's the way you wanted it to sound so that Croftsman would have a starting point for his mental investigation of Lois."

CHAPTER IV

Treasure of Diamonds

PPRIME wheeled on Croftsman. "You're not going to make any observations, get that? Let me hear you say just once that there's anything about this girl's brain that isn't okay, and I'll crack your skull for you. Get that?"

"You're acting pretty high-handed, Mr. Prime," Charles Paul said. "It's pretty clear from the way she's acting that Lois Gargan isn't emotionally balanced to handle the affairs of the estate and take care of our unfortunate mother."

Prime poked a finger at Charles Paul.

"What pot is calling what kettle black? Your I. Q. would be practically nothing if it was taken, you're so full of dope. Now sit down! Go away and sit down. Maybe I don't have the floor but I'm taking it. Sit down, Bishop." He shoved out a long arm and pushed Anthony Bishop roughly into a chair.

Before Prime's compelling gaze, Charles Paul, Dr. Croftsman, and Sonia Bishop followed Anthony's unwilling example. Prime, still holding Lois with one arm, raked the circle with his eyes.

"Anyway," he said, his anger subsiding a little, "all this is beside the point. This man, this Conrad Moag, was murdered. I'm helping the sheriff in this investigation and I've got some questions to ask you."

"I am afraid Anthony, Charles, and I have perfect alibis," Sonia said.

Prime nodded. "The three of you would lie your way out of anything." He stuffed his pipe into his mouth and clipped a match into flame with his thumb nail. "Moag's body didn't have a single mark on it—except at the throat. There were several deep little wounds there that look as though small, sharp teeth had torn at the flesh."

Lois sucked in a short, sharp breath and Prime looked down at her through a haze of tobacco smoke. "What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"N-nothing," she murmured. She dared not voice what was in her mind. They wouldn't believe her, anyway. She scarcely believed herself, but the blank-faced creature that she had seen bending over Moag's body had wings like a giant bat. Perhaps like the vampires of ancient legend, it had had small, sharp teeth.

"Perhaps," Anthony Bishop suggested suavely, "the wounds on Moag's throat were made by Miss Gargan's nails. Were they anything like this?" He tilted his head so that the light fell on the cheek that Lois had scratched.

"Nuts!" Prime said. "I'm just damned sorry she didn't dig out your eyes, Bishop." He looked down at Lois. "You tell us about Moag. Where did he come from? You were the last to see him alive, weren't you. Or did you just discover him lying there outside the door?"

"I met him coming out of Beatrice's door," Lois explained. "He said that he was a frequent visitor. Having spent most of my life in a single furnished room, I'm not used to having people run in and out and I guess I was a little scared."

SHE paused then continued.

"Anyway, Moag went out the front door. He couldn't have been gone but a few seconds when I heard a knock at the door. It sounded like a distant

Sonia laughed quietly and exchanged a knowing glance with Dr. Croftman.

"Well, well. A vampire, huh?" Charles Paul sneered.

Prime released Lois suddenly, took a long, purposeful stride forward, cracked Charles Paul sharply across the side of the face with the palm of his hand. "Any more insinuations concerning Miss Gargan's sanity and I'll really give you a beating!" He wheeled on Sonia. "Maybe you'd like some-



The bat-thing was poised over the body of Moag

tapping. I called Suter, thinking that Mr. Moag had forgot something and wanted to come in. Suter didn't come, so I opened the door myself."

"Then what?" Prime prompted.

Lois drew a breath. "There was somebody bending over the body," she ventured. "Somebody in a long black cloak."

"Well, where'd the somebody go? What became of him? I must have got to you almost at once."

"He—he ran straight at me and sprang into the air," Lois whispered.

thing of the same sort, beautiful. Now," indicating Lois, "you go on. Nobody's doubting you. If you think you saw somebody sprout wings and fly away, maybe it looked like that. You see the somebody's face?"

Lois shuddered. "Yes. It was terrible. The same face I saw looking into my bedroom window, I'm sure. A dead white and absolutely blank face such as you might see on an idiot. The eyes didn't have any more expression than glass eyes and the lower jaw hung down—"

Prime wheeled to the door, opened it, called:

"Suter, bring Mrs. Beatrice Gargan here."

The servant shuffled to the door. His voice was muffled as he spoke.

"But Mrs. Gargan is in bed."

"Bring her," Prime ordered. He turned, drew a compassing line which included all within the room with the stem of his pipe. "The rest of you stay here. Lois, you and I are going upstairs a moment." He took Lois by the arm somewhat roughly and pulled her out into the hall and toward the stairway. He marched her up the steps without saying a word and then led her into her room. He said: "Now!" and shut the door.

"Steve," she gasped, "what's behind all this? That bat-thing with wings—Don't tell me I didn't see it! Don't tell me I'm going mad."

His face was tense. "Lady, I'm not telling you anything of the sort, because I half believe you. The half that doesn't believe you doesn't because I won't let myself. I can't swallow the line about vampires."

"But—but what is it? What's behind it?"

"Who's behind it," he said meaningly, going toward the bed. "Give me a hand with this bed, will you?" He seized one of the huge bed posts and tugged with all his strength. Failing to understand what he was up to, but trusting him because there was no one else she could turn to, Lois took another of the bed posts and helped him slide out the bed a little way.

"Enough," he said. "I can squeeze in behind nicely."

LOIS watched him slip behind the bed and start digging at the floor boards with his knife.

"The more I think about this the more I think Walter Gargan was a bit touched in the head himself," Prime said. "Got that way just from living with Beatrice after she went loco. According to that letter that says half your fortune is stored in a safe under here, you're the possessor of half a million dollars worth of unset diamonds. That is," he added, as a section of the floor came up, "you were the posses-

sor. Look at that safe under there. Lock punched in by a professional."

Lois stooped, saw the steel plate of a safe door set down in the floor. The combination dial had been beaten off. Prime took hold of the door handle firmly, opened the safe.

"Empty, of course." He closed it again, looked at her, smiling ruefully. He stood up, scratching the tip of his nose with the bone bit of his pipe. He thrust his left hand into his pocket and brought out a pair of loose diamonds that glittered in his palm.

"You still have these and they ought to be worth a grand apiece."

"Where—where did you get those?" she gasped.

"Out of Moag's pocket." He shrugged. "Let's look for some logic in all this. We can't let this supernatural stuff bog us down. Moag was an undertaker. People he recently planted in the cemetery have been disturbed. Suter talks about ghouls opening graves and butchering the corpses." He put the diamonds back in his pocket. "I still don't get it," he said.

As he slipped around the bed and headed for the door, Lois touched his arm. He turned, looked at her.

"You said something about a letter," she said. "How did you know where that safe was hidden?"

He scratched the back of his ear with his pipe, looked almost embarrassed. "That letter Walter Gargan told my boss to give you when you came here. I swiped it out of your purse, opened it." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope, handed it to her. "It tells about the diamonds. I knew there were diamonds hidden in the house. My boss told me there were and it was Suter that told my boss. I imagine a lot of people must have known about it. But the letter Walter Gargan left you told *where* they were hidden. I thought I ought to see that letter, so I helped myself—"

He stopped, looked at her shrewdly. "And right now you're thinking that I'm the guy who stole the diamonds."

Lois admitted to herself that she had been thinking that, but did not voice her opinion. She followed him out into the hall. "You—you're a detective?" she asked.

"Of sorts," he said gruffly. At the foot of the steps, he turned, waited for her. He smiled a little. "I don't know what you think of me, but I think you're plenty okay, Lois." Then he hurried ahead of her into the library.

Suter was standing at the door of the room, his small malevolent eyes watching Lois through the slits in his mask. He followed her into the room and closed the door.

CHAPTER V

Prime Sees the Menace

CHARLES PAUL, Anthony and Sonia Bishop were seated on the couch. Dr. Croftsman was standing with his back to the window. Seated stiffly in a straight-back chair was a woman in a dingy gray dress. Her coarse gray hair hung in strings from the crown of her head. Her chalk-white face was as expressionless as Suter's mask. Her dark eyes stared vacantly at the wall.

Though Lois could not for the moment take her eyes from the face of the woman in gray, she knew that Prime was looking at her.

"Is that the face you saw at the window, the face of the thing you saw stooping over Moag?" he asked, in a guarded whisper.

"No," Lois said quietly. "Is—is this Beatrice?" She walked over to the old woman and rested a tender hand on her shoulder. "I've come to care for you, Beatrice."

"Beatrice," the mad woman hissed. "They who married me do not know me. They are always with me, but I am alone. They never talk. They keep sleeping. I am Beatrice."

Lois raised her eyes to the mad woman's blank face. And then it seemed a shadow moved into the room and stretched from wall to wall. The lights were undimmed, but the shadow still lingered there. Lois looked at Croftsman. The doctor was scowling at her. Her eyes shifted to Prime whose face stood out clearly in the lighted match he held for his pipe. And then she looked at Sonia—

Lois drew a quick breath. Sonia's lovely face had turned to ashen gray, leaving spots of rouge sticking out like islands. Slowly she shook her head back and forth as though signalling mutely to someone in the room—someone they could not see.

Then Steve Prime did something. Rather, he did everything at once. He dropped his pipe suddenly and jerked off his hat with both hands. There must have been a gun inside it, for two shots cracked out and smoke billowed from the crown of his hat. Lois followed the shots to the window where two bullet holes appeared. And while she was watching, a chair was hurled past her head to crash through the window glass. Then Prime was following the chair, gun in hand, his wavy blond hair flying. He jumped through the window and in the darkness outside, Lois saw the red spurt of gun flame pointing straight up.

"My God!" she heard Prime gasp in an awed voice.

Steve Prime re-entered the house through the front door. He had lost some confidence in himself, Lois thought, but none of his perfect mastery over his own nerves. He walked into the library, picked up his hat, put it on. He recovered his pipe, knocked the ashes out of the bowl, filled it again.

"What was it, for heaven's sake?" Dr. Croftsman demanded.

"A bat," Prime said, as he lighted his pipe. "I don't like bats. Suter, suppose you take Mrs. Gargan back to her rooms now."

Suter went over to the insane woman, hooked his hand beneath her shoulder and gently urged her to her feet. She turned her vacant eyes to the servant and her lax lips moved again.

"Death has been here again. I know. We are old friends. You are dead. You. You!"

SHE pointed a thin finger at Suter and the servant cursed beneath his breath and slapped down the woman's pointing finger.

"Suter!" Lois said sharply. "You ought to be discharged for that. Striking a poor, defenseless old woman!"

"Sorry," Suter mumbled. "But she worries me. Makes me nervous all the

time with her talking about death and dying."

Prime waved his hand toward the door. "Get going," he ordered. Suter and the old woman left the room. Then Prime sat down in a chair and rested one ankle on his other knee. Pipe smoke clouded his face so that when he said: "I want to know why you didn't scream," Lois didn't know who he was talking to. Then he added: "You, Sonia. You saw something at the window. What was it and why didn't you scream?"

"Why," Sonia said, "I—I was too frightened."

"Nuts!" Prime said. He threw himself out of his chair, went over and glowered down at Sonia. "You shook your head. You were signalling to the thing at the window. You know what it was."

"Sure she knows what it was," Charles Paul said. "So do I. We just don't talk about such things. Sonia was shaking her head because she didn't want to believe what she had heard."

"And what was it she heard? Speak up, Paul."

"I—I don't want to talk about it," Sonia explained, "because it sounds absurd."

"She means," Paul offered, "that she's heard about the vampire. This section of the country has a legend that the place is infested with vampires. Right, Anthony?"

Anthony nodded slowly. "And we don't choose to believe it, naturally. My own father was one of those the natives in these parts believed to be—" He stopped, swallowed hard. "Well, it was odd their finding that his coffin was empty when they went to move his remains to another cemetery lot."

Steve Prime looked sideways at the trio on the couch. His pipe smoked faster. He seemed to hold onto his nerves by clamping his jaws tightly on the bit of his pipe.

"It's true!" Sonia gasped. "We've all been in this house more frequently than either you or Lois. We've spent long vacations here. We know. We've always heard those rumors."

Prime nodded. "Vampires. They sleep in coffins. And then at night they

prowl around with bat wings on their backs. They suck blood out of babies. That's what you mean?"

Sonia nodded. "That's what we've heard."

"You know what I think?" Prime asked.

"What?" Anthony demanded.

"That you three are the damndest bunch of liars I ever heard. I don't understand this business yet, but when I do, I'm going to hit it hard." He shoved his pipe into his mouth and his jaws clamped hard. "Go to bed, all of you."

The trio got up, started for the door. Dr. Croftsman on the other side of the room, dozed silently in his chair. Prime looked at the doctor and then at Lois.

"I wish I had that guy's iron will," he said laconically. "I'll bet he can sit in the middle of this horror and dream he's fishing in the sunshine. I'll see you to your room if you like, Lois."

GOING up the stairs together, with the shadows of Sonia, Charles Paul, and Anthony marching on ahead, Lois clung to Prime's muscular arm. "D—did you learn anything? Are you getting any place?"

"If you mean about the bat-thing, all I know is what I've seen with my own eyes. My apologies to you for having thought you were a bit touched in the head. The bat-thing had a six foot wing spread and got into the air faster than an autogyro. I shot, but I guess I'm not so hot with a gun when my hair's standing on end."

He walked with her down the gloomy, shadowy corridor. "This thing's got me going, only I'm not getting to first base. First on a hunch, I pick Suter for the murderer. And then I look at the Bishop pair and dopey Charles Paul—any one of the three would make a fair candidate. And then Croftsman looms in my suspicions, though all I've got on him is that he's got a whiskey nose. Anyway, the bat-thing drops in and knocks my suspicions for a loop. It can't be any one of them."

"You—you don't believe in the vampire theory?" she asked.

"Yeah, just like Sonia Bishop does!

Sonia knows something. All that hooey about vampires was just to cover up what she knows. Only if it wasn't a vampire, then what was it? Half a million in diamonds missing, though I look like suspect number one for the theft."

"I really didn't think that," she said.

He grinned. "Then if you don't think it, I don't care who does. But when we get to the bottom of this, we'll find those diamonds." Prime opened her door for her.

There was a smile on Lois' lips as she entered her room. This Steve Prime was different from any man she had ever known. You couldn't ever really dislike him. But he was provoking.

Behind the closed door, things were different. She was alone. The huge bed with its heavy drapes was there. And on that bed Walter Gargan had died, his skull beaten in with a poker, murdered for the diamonds which had been concealed in the safe beneath the bed. Lois didn't think she could sleep in that bed. She didn't feel that she could ever sleep again, for that matter, though her eyes were heavy and tired.

She walked over to the bed, pushed back the drapes. It looked comfortable enough. If it wasn't for the drapes she might be able to sleep there, but the drapes gave her a smothering sensation.

She turned from the bed and went through the curtained doorway into the

dressing room. It wasn't a very large room compared with the others in the house, but it contained a dresser, a chair, and a day-bed. The day-bed looked as though it would be quite comfortable when it was opened—certainly more comfortable than the bed in which Walter Gargan had died.

CHAPTER VI

The Body in the Wall

LOIS took hold of the edge of the day-bed and pulled to open it out. It had one of those spring and lever arrangements so that the top section lifted and the bottom section thrust out and up until both sections came to an even plane. It operated with surprising ease so that before she could check its motion the heavy steel frame of the bottom half rammed into the wall, jarring the whole house, knocking loose a section of plaster directly over the bed. The plaster fell down on the bed, smashed into smaller pieces.

Lois looked up at the damage she had done. Her small body became rigid, frozen with a wave of arctic chill that came from the hole in the wall.

Wedged between broken spears of lathing, her startled eyes saw a withered-looking human arm, a gnarled, [Turn Page]

A SKEPTIC IS CONVERTED



ANN: I dread taking this awful-tasting medicine. It leaves me weak as a kitten.

RUTH: You're foolish to take a cathartic like that. Try my stand-by... **EX-LAX.**



ANN: Why, this tastes just like fine chocolate! But will it really work?

RUTH: Yes, indeed! **EX-LAX** is effective—yet it doesn't upset you.

LATER




ANN: Thanks to you and **EX-LAX**, I feel wonderful this morning.

RUTH: I knew you would! In our family we all use **EX-LAX**! It's so dependable.

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** next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.

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emaciated human hand clutching upward toward a human shoulder. Above the arm, peering down from the ragged edge of broken plaster, was a face—gaping jaws gagged with hardened plaster, plaster clinging to open eyeballs, plaster festooning the cheeks.

Her eyes never leaving the horror in the wall, her fists clenched until her finger tips seemed a part of her palms, her soft lips quivering, she took deliberate steps backward.

Her shoulders brushed through the curtains across the doorway, and as they fell in place again, shutting out the gruesome sight of the hole in the wall, she stared at the curtains, seemed to penetrate them. Her eyes could not get rid of the horrible picture she had witnessed.

Back against the panel of the door of her bedroom, she groped for the knob, found it, twisted it. She opened the door, turned, took stumbling steps, stopped. Lying flat on his face at her feet, his head pillowed on forearms, was Steve Prime. Lois gasped a breath, and Steve Prime looked up, blinked at her. His glasses were gone, though his hat was still on his head.

"What's the matter, lady?" he asked, grinning at her. "A faithful watchdog always sleeps on his lady's doorstep, doesn't he?"

Lois could feel the pallor of her face, the rigid chill of her legs. Her lips, too, seemed frozen.

"Steve!" she gasped. And she couldn't utter another sound, could only gesture helplessly toward her room.

Steve Prime got up, took his glasses out of his pocket, and out of their case. He put them on as he went ahead of her through the door.

"Steve, a body!" she sobbed. "In the wall. The dressing room. Oh, horrible!"

"Take a load off those ankles," he said tensely. "Let yourself down before you blow up." And then he went into the dressing room and she heard him gasp: "Lord a'mighty!" Bits of plaster made dry, rustling sounds when they fell to the floor. He came out, pale looking, his blue eyes enormous.

"Got to find Suter," he grated. "Got to get a hatchet. Hell, what a mess!

You'd better have Sonia step in with you for a moment while I hunt up a hatchet."

LOIS shook her head. "No. I'd rather be alone. I'll be all right here."

But as soon as he was gone, she knew she should have gone with him. She got up, hurried to the door, opened it, went out. Somewhere in the house, she could hear footsteps and Prime calling softly: "Suter!" More footsteps. Then silence. She hurried down the hall, down the stairway. "Steve!" she whispered. But there was no answer.

In the hall below, she looked wildly about until her eyes came to rest on the door of Beatrice's apartment. Grayish flakes of pipe tobacco ash were on the carpet in front of the door. She listened intently for a moment. From behind the forbidden door came strains of deep-toned, dragging music. Chopin's mournful dirge.

But Steve Prime was in there and she had to get to him. She took hold of the knob, turned it. The door opened easily, and she stepped into a narrow corridor, dark except for the dim light that came from the apartment at its end. The music was louder now. She hurried down the corridor, looked into a magnificently appointed bedroom that was empty. Her small nose wrinkled. There was a peculiar odor about the place—something like flowers dead for a long time, something musty, mingling in an indescribably unpleasant perfume.

She looked around for the source of the music.

"Steve," she whispered. "Where are you, Steve?" There was no answer, only the leaden beat of the death march.

Near the head of the bed was an open door. She went to it and the music swelled upward from the dark stairway leading to the basement regions of the house. Her heart hammering in her throat, she started down the steps. The pungent odor became stronger, choking, gagging. At the foot of the stairs, she saw light, paler than moonlight and faintly blue.

Lois looked into the room of the pale

blue light. Gray stone basement walls rose on either side, curved to a ceiling that was like some old wine cellar or perhaps a chapel for hidden worship. At either side of the door were huge brass urns filled with what might once have been calla lilies, their stems rotting in the water. On a table in one corner of the room stood a blue-shaded lamp and beside it an old horn type phonograph.

Four coffins were laid out in parallel fashion on the floor. Three of the coffins were occupied with the bodies of men, fully clothed, beautifully preserved. Lois drew a sobbing breath, slipped to the right of the doorway behind one of the urns. The third coffin was occupied by the corpse of Walter Gargan and bending over it, her gray hair hanging down across her face, was Beatrice.

The mad woman's loose lips mumbled. Her withered hand stroked the stone gray face, and in her eyes was a strange, ecstatic gleam.

SHE knew, then, the strange madness that made Beatrice what she was. The woman was morbidly fascinated by the dead. She loved these three dead husbands of hers. To her, they were living, sleeping perhaps, but living. And the fourth coffin, beside the one containing Walter Gargan's body, Beatrice made her bed.

The phonograph music scratched to its end. Beatrice turned slowly from the coffin of her husband. It seemed that her evil eyes must search out Lois where she crouched behind the funeral urn. Beatrice turned, approached the empty coffin.

As she did so, there was a faint whistling sound in the air, the metallic flicker of something which the dim light cast by the blue-shaded lamp never clearly defined. Beatrice reeled backwards from the empty coffin. Her two hands clawed upwards toward her throat. There was the sound of flesh tearing and a half articulate cry from the mad woman.

Lois sprang to her feet, screamed, turned toward the stairway.

"Steve! Steve!" she cried.

There was someone on the stairway, someone in that slot of blackness be-

tween the walls. Steve Prime? Was it he standing there? Lois Gargan wasn't sure.

She shrank back from the stairway, watching the shadow that lurked there, that crept slowly downward toward her.

Then faintly illuminated against the staircase wall, she saw a white hand reaching for the light switch.

"Help! Help!" she shrieked. And the light went out.

"Shut up," a voice whispered. "Shut up or I'll kill you. Don't move."

There was a buzzing sound mingled with a metallic scratching noise. Footsteps sounded close to her, someone breathing hard and very near to her. And then in the darkness the someone passed.

Across the room came the sound of the opening of a door and its closing. Up above her head, feet pelted on floor boards. Prime, somewhere far away, cried out:

"Where are you, Lois?"

She couldn't answer. She couldn't answer because there were footsteps closer than Steve Primes' — footsteps creeping down the stairs.

The light switch clicked on and the blue lamp across the room came on. On the stairway, his narrow, diabolical face extremely pale, was Anthony Bishop. His dark eyes roved across the room, pausing on Lois, moving on.

"So!" he whispered. "Your murderous claws at work again, Lois."

Lois glanced over her shoulder. Beatrice was stretched out on the floor, her body rigid, glazed eyes staring up through the tangle of gray hair. On her throat were red, jagged scratches. She turned her head swiftly back toward the stairway and found Anthony had moved within a few feet of her.

"You killed her!" Anthony accused. "You killed my mother like you did Moag. You crazy little fiend, you! Why not confess? Why not tell the truth?"

He seized her two slender shoulders savagely in his thin, strong fingers. He shook her until the room became only a blur, then released her suddenly as the door at the other side of the room opened and Steve Prime burst in upon them.

CHAPTER VII

Room of Coffins

HE looked neither to right nor to left. His blue eyes burning with blow-torch heat, he strode across the room, stepped over the corpse of Beatrice and came up to Anthony. He lashed out with both fists—two explosive smacks that landed sharply on the middle of Anthony's chest.

Anthony started going backwards very rapidly across the room, so rapidly that his feet wouldn't keep up with him and he fell backwards against one of the urns at the bottom of the stairway. The urn tipped over and water, thick with decayed vegetable matter puddled onto the stone floor.

Prime faced Lois, blinked through his spectacles. "What kind of a morgue is this?"

"Steve, someone killed her!" Lois panted. "Someone came down the stairs and killed her. I came here looking for you. There were pipe ashes outside the door upstairs and I thought you were down here."

Prime walked over to the corpse of Beatrice, looked down at her thoughtfully and then knelt beside her.

"No giant bats?" he inquired.

"I don't know, Steve. There wasn't anything except a shadow moving down the stairway. A man, I think. He told me to keep still, threatened me. Then he turned out the light."

"Killed her in the dark?"

"No. I don't think so. It was before that. It is extremely difficult to see in this dim light, but it was as though invisible hands seized poor Beatrice by the throat."

"Did you hear any sound?"

"A sort of whistling sound and something flashed through the air. And in the darkness after, there was a queer kind of buzz."

Prime went from one to the other of the three occupied coffins. "Who are these stiff?" he asked.

"One of them is the body of my uncle," Lois said sadly.

"Oh, excuse me." Prime's sharp-eyed glance probed back toward the stair-

way where Anthony Bishop was just picking himself up off the floor. "The other two corpses known to you, Bishop?"

"One is my father," Bishop snarled. "The other is my mother's first husband."

"You knew your mother was keeping these embalmed bodies here, yet you didn't do anything about it?"

"Lord no! She must have made some arrangement with Moag to get them here."

"All right." Prime nodded toward the stairway. "Go on up. If we could find Suter we might put an end to this thing. I mean the man who's wearing Suter's mask."

"What do you mean?" Lois gasped. "The man in the mask isn't Suter?"

"I don't think so. I got a look at the face of the corpse in the wall. It looks as though mustard gas had damaged it. Think how easy it would be for a criminal to kill Suter and then, using Suter's mask, impersonate the old retainer."

THEY were startled. "What's that?" Anthony Bishop demanded. "You think—"

"Once in a while," Prime cut in harshly. He led Lois up the stairway. In the hall, he stopped, picked up a hatchet he had left there when he heard Lois' cry.

Upstairs, he forced her to remain in her bedroom while he went into the dressing room and chopped away more of the wall so that he could work the corpse clear. When that was finished, he came out, plaster dust smudging his clothes and smarting his eyes. Lois looked at him.

"Suter?" she asked.

"Must be. And somehow mad Beatrice must have known that the man in the mask wasn't Suter. Remember what she said tonight when the masked servant was returning her to her apartment. She pointed a finger at him and said something about him being dead. She meant that he wasn't Suter; that Suter was dead."

"And that's why the killer murdered poor Beatrice?" she asked.

"That's it. Afraid that her mad babbling might let the cat out of the bag."

"But, providing the body in the wall is Suter's, why was Suter killed?"

Prime took out his pipe and filled it. "Sit down. We go back a little bit to the murder of your uncle, Walter Gargan. That's been on the unsolved list ever since it happened. The killer came here when Walter Gargan and the real Suter were alone. The killer had heard about the diamond treasure and that was what he was after. He killed your uncle with the poker while he lay in bed."

"And then Suter?" Lois asked.

"Not until he had tortured the location of the diamonds out of Suter. The body in the wall shows wounds that could have been but for one purpose. And then the criminal thought that by concealing Suter's body, taking Suter's mask and assuming his identity, he could remain here under the nose of the law and be perfectly safe until everything blew over. But things blew over and he still didn't leave. Why? There's only one answer."

"What's that?"

"The killer hasn't got the diamonds. Somebody else got them first. I talked to the sheriff about this man Moag who was killed. Moag had diamonds in his pocket, remember? The sheriff said that several years ago Moag was jailed for handling stolen goods. The criminal may have trusted Moag to dispose of the diamonds for him. If Moag gave him the doublecross, that's reason enough for killing Moag. The chances are that Moag hid the loot somewhere and was disposing of the diamonds a few at a time."

"And if he had them in his pocket when he left here," Lois suggested, "isn't it possible that they're still hidden in this house—hidden somewhere where Moag cached them?"

PPRIME nodded. "We've got it. Got the whole damned story right there. Except the bat-winged thing and a little red-herring which makes it impossible for the masked man we've been calling Suter to have murdered Moag, because I happen to know where the masked guy was when Moag died. I was talking to him upstairs when it happened. In other words," he concluded, getting up and walking to the

window, "we know everything but the truth. Stumped when we've got the puzzle nearly solved."

"What," Lois asked, "about the tapping sound at the front door just before I discovered Moag's body?"

"That is what they call a clue, I think. That's what Charlie Chan would call the essential clue. Only I'm no master mind and I don't know what it was. If we knew—" He stopped, removed his pipe from his mouth.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Prime turned from the window, jabbed his pipe back into his mouth, legged it for the door. "Somebody prowling around on the lawn. And it looks like the masked servant."

As Lois followed him, it seemed to her that Steve Prime's feet touched the stair treads just four times on the way down. And when she reached the hall she saw him race through the dining room, shoulder open French doors and dash out onto the terrace.

As Lois went into the dining room, some inexplicable premonition told her to stop. She looked about, eyes moving slowly along the walls and furnishings. Her heart beat faster. Because suddenly she knew.

"Steve!" she sobbed. "Steve, come back!"

She ran out on the terrace, stood there in the moonlight. Out there in the undergrowth, beyond the well-kept lawn with its high trimmed trees, she could hear Prime crashing through the undergrowth, a human cyclone chasing something that might well lead to his own destruction. And then the crackling of the branches grew fainter, and the night was still.

Lois shivered involuntarily. She bit her lip to stop its quivering. She was afraid for Steve Prime. He could take care of himself in a hand-to-hand struggle, though. He had a gun and he could use that. But he wasn't up against fists and guns. He didn't know what he was up against. He didn't know how inescapable this thing was.

Suddenly, clouds blotted the moon from sight. It was like a total eclipse. Lois drew breath in a terrified sob, looked up, saw a monstrous shadow that hovered over her head, saw the blank white face of the bat-thing

moonning down at her. Terror stifled her scream. The winged monster dropped swiftly. She turned, uttered a half-strangled cry and ran. But she ran as in a nightmare, as though each foot dragged leaden weights. The shadow was forever upon her.

She fell over something, twisted around, looked up. The black wings of death swooped down upon her. She screamed. It was a short, sharp cry like the death squeak of a rabbit caught in the talons of a horned owl.

CHAPTER VIII

Trapping the Bat

FIGHTING, she struggled to her feet, just evading the clutching hands of the monster. She ran twenty feet along the side of the house, looked back again to see the black bat soaring toward her a few feet off the ground. And this time there was no escape! Long arms lashed around her and held her fast, held her close to the blank white face.

She cried out again and again, kept calling in choked whispers for Steve, even while the blank-faced thing was trying to speak to her.

"Don't be such a little fool," the thing hissed. "I can't help the way I look. I'm an albino. I was born that way. Don't be afraid. Sonia Bishop hired me to put on this act to scare you. She gave me to understand it was all a joke. I didn't know that there was to be murder mixed up in it. . . . Listen, will you! I know the killer. I've been trying to tell someone. That guy who was killed out in front—I saw how it was done. With—"

The monster suddenly thrust her from him. It sprang backwards. A man leaped out of the shrubbery at the corner of the house. He carried a gun that spoke once, twice. The monster jerked forward and then sprang straight into the air, soaring toward the overhanging trees, crashing into the branches until the blackness above concealed him.

Lois found herself in the arms of the man with the gun. It was Dr. Crofts-

man, she knew, by the pudgy feel of his hands pressed over her arms.

"Now do you think I'm crazy?" she demanded, her voice shrill. "You saw it, didn't you? You saw it?"

"I saw it. Killed it, I hope. Where did it go to?" Croftsman released her and started walking toward the trees into which the thing had disappeared.

Anthony, Charles and Sonia stormed out of the house through the French doors. In the light from the dining room, Lois could see that Sonia's face held a worried look. Charles Paul was nervous. Anthony was white with fear.

Steve Prime came from the undergrowth beyond the trees, his long legs carrying him with tireless strides.

"What was the shooting?" he demanded. His shrewd eyes raked the group and he saw the gun in Dr. Croftsman's hand.

"Something attacked Miss Gargan," Croftsman said. "I heard her cry out and went to her assistance. I think we owe an apology to Miss Gargan. The thing she saw at her window, the thing she saw bending over the corpse of Mr. Moag, is terrifying enough, and it appears to possess wings."

Prime looked around. "Where is it? Where's the bat-thing? Did you hit it?"

"Somewhere in the trees," Croftsman said. "I was just going to look."

"It can't stay up there," Prime said. "What goes up must come down. I know how the thing navigates, because over there beyond the trees you can see a lot more than you can from here."

HE started moving across the lawn, his head up-turned, Lois following closely. She wanted to get near enough to him to caution him against the sudden death that was following close behind. For the murderer was with them now, pressing close.

She looked over her shoulder, saw Anthony Bishop, Dr. Croftsman, Sonia, and Charles Paul following her. She looked up into the trees, trying to act as though she were looking for the bat-thing, instead of trying to warn Prime that the killer was behind him.

She stopped in her tracks. A wave of nausea came over her. Something warm and liquid splashed on her cheek.

"Steve!" she called out.

Prime turned. "What's the matter?"

"Some—something dropping out of the tree."

Prime stepped in close to her, but as he did so, the others came closer. Prime struck a match and held it up.

"Blood on your cheek, Lois," he said. "Blood dropping from up there in the tree. Bishop, go get a ladder. We're going to settle this thing right now."

"Why—why get a ladder?" Anthony asked. His face in the flickering glow of a match flame was a sickly shade



of yellow. Having no cards to shuffle, his fingers kept twitching.

Prime grinned maliciously. "Because, sonny, when I was a kid and my dad wanted to give me a licking, he always told me to go get a switch."

Anthony turned slowly around and stumbled off toward the garage at the back of the house.

Prime put an arm across Lois' shoulder. "I was afraid of something like this," he said. "That's why I came here and remained when maybe you thought I should. You're the last of the Gargans, Lois, and all these three people—Anthony, Sonia, and Charles—had to do was to get you off your mental balance.

"Then they could have taken legal steps to get hold of the Gargan estate through their relationship with Beatrice. That's what they were trying to

do. That's what the bat-thing and the talk of vampires was for—to scare you into a fit of hysteria that the doc here could call insanity."

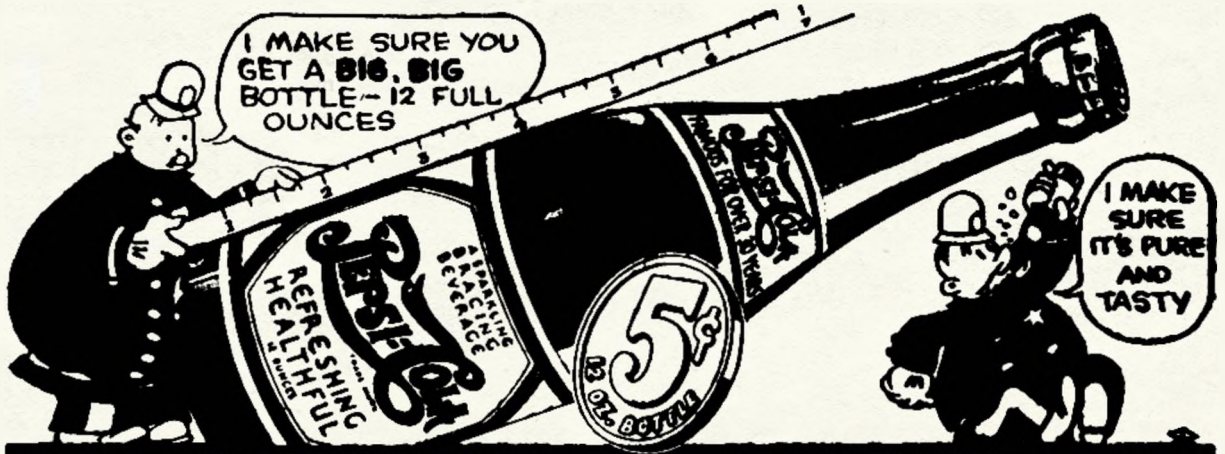
Lois smiled bravely, though she was still frightened by the lurking danger. It was all so puzzling to her, but, somehow, with Steve Prime around she felt a glowing reassurance.

Anthony came from the garage, dragging the requested ladder. Prime's strong, lean arms became powerful levers as he thrust the ladder up into the tree. Then he climbed swiftly, opening his jack-knife with his teeth. Lois wanted to climb up after him because Steve was the only one she could trust. Someone in the group that surrounded her was a killer, a master of an unseen weapon more dangerous than gun or knife. But she hugged the foot of the ladder until the blood dripping from above splashed around her. Then she moved a little way back, shuddering.

A TEARING of branches, Prime's short, sharp curse, and something swayed down from above. The bat-thing, its wing-like cloak standing out from its body, dangled down from the shadows, arms and legs hanging limp. And then slowly, drifting like a feather, it settled down until its toes touched the earth and its body crumpled like a wet dish cloth.

"Harness of the thing got caught in the branches," Prime said calmly, as he came down the ladder rattling his match box. "We'll get a little light on the subject and see how it works. The bat man happens to be a jumping bal-

[Turn Page]



loon artist. Balloon jumping used to be quite a sport in Europe a year or so ago. You get a small balloon, fill it with just enough gas so it won't quite pull you off the ground. Then you jump. And you can jump plenty—clear over the house if you want to."

Prime knelt on the earth beside the huddled black shape. The others crowded around. "The hoax worked perfectly here. The deflated balloon was carried to the flat roof of the house and there filled with gas. The balloon stuck up over the tree tops even when the jumper was down on the ground. To jump to a roof, a tree, or window, the guy just gave a good healthy jump that would ordinarily carry him a yard off the ground.

"The balloon did the rest. Once up, almost any hand hold would support him because of the buoyancy of the balloon. The bat disguise was also perfect for the act. The thin strong line attached to the man's harness wouldn't be visible at night, especially with all that wing flapping to detract attention from the harness and cord."

Prime handed the matches to Anthony. "Strike a light. Let's see just how good a shot the doc is."

"Good Lord! I haven't killed him, have I?" Croftsman rumbled. "I was just trying to protect Miss Gargan."

Prime grunted. "You know you can't point a gun at somebody, pull the trigger, and not expect someone to get hurt, Doc." In the light of the match, he turned the bat-man over.

The black cloak, the ends of which were knotted to the wrists of the man, spread out on the ground. The man's face was pallid. His hair was white. His eyes were pinkish, wide open, blankly staring.

"I'm afraid he's finished," Prime said. "I remember seeing this poor devil's picture in the papers. He put on a balloon jumping exhibition somewhere in the East. Strike another light, Anthony."

In the quivering match light, Prime turned the dead albino over, inspected the leather harness by means of which the line to the balloon was joined to the man. Up above the trees the balloon pulled steadily. From around the taut line, Prime pulled a piece of black,

threadlike cord. He looked at the frayed end intently and then put it into his pocket.

CHAPTER IX

The Evil in the Basement

THEN he stood up. "The sheriff will have a nice surprise in the morning when he comes to work on the Moag case. There's plenty of work for him here."

"No one could blame me for killing the balloon man, could they?" Dr. Croftsman gasped. "After all, I was just protecting—"

"You got a pretty good excuse there," Prime interrupted. "I wouldn't worry about that, Doc." He slipped his arm around Lois and started back toward the house. Sonia, Anthony and Charles Paul fell in beside him.

"What are you going to do, Mr. Prime?" Paul asked.

As they went through the French doors into the house, Prime said:

"The important thing to do is to get hold of the man who's been running around in Suter's mask. He ought to be locked up, though I doubt if we can pin murder on him. As for you"—Prime jerked his head around so that his shrewd eyes covered Sonia and Anthony and Charles Paul—"you ought to get it in the neck. All of you."

"They hired the bat-man to frighten me," Lois said. "I know, because the albino told me just before he was shot."

"It was Anthony's idea," Charles Paul said.

"It was Sonia's," Anthony declared. "But she meant it just for a joke."

"Yeah," Prime said dryly. "We'll probably all die laughing. We'll die, anyway, unless—"

The French doors swung wide. Dr. Croftsman came into the room, his mouth open, breath coming in gasps.

"I—I saw him going down into the basement, Prime!"

"Who?" Prime demanded.

"The man in the mask. The man you call Suter."

Prime looked at Lois. "Stay here. If he's in the basement, he's cornered.

I can take him easily. You two Bishops and Paul get out of the way. There may be some fireworks."

Lois seized Prime's arm, clutched it tightly. "I'm going with you. There's something I've got to say—"

"It'll keep!" He went through the French doors unholstering a gun from inside his coat.

"Steve!" Lois ran to follow, but Sonia Bishop got in her way. Lois shoved her hand into Sonia's face. Sonia seized the neck of Lois' dress in an effort to stop her. There was a rip of cloth and Lois pulled free.

"Steve, the stuffed fish, don't you remember—"

THAT almost stopped him, but then he was off again, running down the steps. And Lois followed. She followed because she never wanted to be left alone in that house again. Now that she had guessed at the truth, it might mean her death. Poor mad Beatrice, even though she would not have made any sort of a witness in court, had guessed that the butler was not Suter—and she had died.

When she was halfway down the

A Heritage of Vengeance Rises to Plague a Dismal Mountain District

IN

MY FATHER IS A VAMPIRE

Complete Novelet of
Bizarre Witchcraft

By **THORP McCLUSKEY**



ONE OF THE MANY EXCITING MYSTERY THRILLERS

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"Steve!" she cried running after the tall detective as he rounded the house to approach the outside basement door. While he was stooping to swing up the trap door over the incline that guarded the basement steps, she caught up with him. "Steve, I know what the knocking on the front door was. You know—the clue, the knocking just before I found Moag's body—"

"So do I," he snapped. "One thing at a time. You're going back to the house. There may be some shooting." He started down the basement steps and she followed.

steps, the trap door above slammed. She sucked in a short breath. There was no stopping now. She must get to Steve. She went down the steps into that section of the basement occupied by the furnace. And then into the next room which was Beatrice's chapel with its urns, its corpses, its four coffins.

She looked wildly about the room. Prime was there, his gun in his hand leveled at the man in the mask—the man they had called Suter. The man in the mask held a butcher knife. He was standing behind the coffin containing the embalmed body of Walter Gar-

gan. He watched Prime grimly.

"Take off the mask, fellow," Prime said.

The man removed the mask. Beneath was a face with a flat nose, a chin scarred as though by a knife, heavy over-hanging brows. Somewhere Lois had seen that face before—in a post office in town with a reward printed under the picture and description.

"Bugs Mayhen, huh?" Prime said. "Better drop the knife, too."

The man dropped the knife. It stuck upright in the body of Walter Gargan. His eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other.

"Well?" Mayhen snorted.

"You and your pal are going places and not coming back," Prime said. "You're the guy who punched in Walter Gargan's safe. It looked like a Bugs Mayhen job. After you tortured the truth of the location of the diamonds out of Suter, you killed Suter—you and your pal—as you had killed old Gargan. Then you cracked the safe. Moag was in on the job, too.

"He was to fence the diamonds for you, but he gave you the doublecross, thinking that because you were already wanted by the police you wouldn't dare show up to make him pay. Moag didn't know that you decided the safest place to hide was right at the scene of the crime, wearing Suter's mask and going right on with Suter's duties. And you were waiting for Moag, you and your pal.

"Your pal killed Moag for the doublecross, just as he later killed Beatrice who knew that you were not the real Suter. And do you know where Moag hid the diamonds? He was getting them a few at a time whenever he needed the money. You knew where he's got them cached?"

"Geez, yes," "Bugs" croaked. "How's about us making a split?"

"I wouldn't be interested," Prime rapped. "But you guessed that Moag had hidden the diamonds in some body he had embalmed. That's the reason behind the ghoulish work going on in the cemetery, why you and your pal have been butchering the corpses you dug up. Now, do you want to put the finger on your pal or shall I do it?"

"I think," a deep voice spoke hollow-

ly from the other end of the room, "you'd better drop your gun, Prime!"

CHAPTER X

Unmasked

LOIS whirled around, the back of her left hand going up to check a scream. A man wearing a wide hat, a triangle of handkerchief masking the lower half of his face stood there, a heavy automatic leveled at Prime. Prime shrugged, dropped his gun.

"You've got plenty on the ball when it comes to shooting, pal," Prime said. "I'm not arguing. But why the mask?"

"Get the dick's gun, Mayhen," the man with the gun growled at Bugs. "You uncover that ice yet?"

Bugs went over and picked up the gun, then he went back to Walter Gargan's coffin. "One more stiff. They got to be here." And as Bugs attacked the corpse with his butcher knife, Lois closed her eyes, kept them closed until she heard Bugs say, "Aha!" She opened her eyes, saw a bulging chamois skin bag in Bug's hand.

"Well," Prime asked. "What's next, Doc?"

The man with the gun advanced slowly. "I'm sorry you asked that, Prime. I'm sorry you revealed my identity to the girl. She'll have to go, too. Now that we've got the gems, we're cleaning up."

"She knew anyway," Prime said lightly. "Anybody would know. The bat-man drops down to tell Lois the identity of the killer and you rush out and kill the bat-man before he can get in his two cents' worth. 'Protecting Lois' is what you called it. Then there's the matter of the piece of fishing line wrapped around the bat-man's balloon cord. That also tells a story. When Lois met you in the hall for the first time tonight, you were waiting for Moag.

"Moag was in here visiting Beatrice. What he had actually come for were some of the diamonds hidden in the coffin containing Gargan's body. No wonder Moag humored the mad Beatrice into letting her have the embalmed

bodies of her former husbands in here—such an excellent hiding place for the gems Moag had hijacked from you and Bugs after you had killed Walter Gargan and Suter to get them.

"But when Lois came down the steps tonight and found you in the hall, waiting for Moag, you trumped up an excuse to go upstairs. From the front room window upstairs, you killed Moag as he went out. You admit being a great fisherman. You killed Moag by casting an artificial bait out of the window. The hooks on the bait were smeared with cyanide or some other poison so deadly that a deep scratch in the skin with the stuff is enough to kill.

"It was your casting bait dangling out of the window that Lois heard tapping on the door. After the bait had struck home, you jerked it free of Moag's throat and started to reel it in. About that time, the bat-man, out to do some more terrorizing, came across Moag's body and his line reaching up to the balloon got tangled with your fish line, broke off, leaving a clue."

HE paused, then continued.

"And you killed Beatrice that same way. No wonder Lois saw Beatrice raise her hands to her throat as though someone was strangling her. You stood on the basement stairs, cast out with that deadly bait, the hooks of which caught in Beatrice's throat. Then you turned out the lights and reeled in the line."

"If you're just killing time," Dr. Croftsman said, "don't bother. I locked the others in a room upstairs where there's no telephone."

"And that," Prime went on, unperturbed, "reminds me of how clever it was of you to pretend to be a psychiatrist and offer your services to Anthony, Sonia and Charles. They fell for it, giving you an excellent reason for getting in here with your pal Bugs and getting back the diamonds."

"Listen, Doc," Bugs pleaded, "let's bump these two and cut out the talk. I don't like it here, what with the stiffs and the crazy dead dame lying around. You take the copper and I'll settle the dame." A broad grin sliced across Bugs' evil face as he approached Lois, gun

thrust out before him.

Lois backed away, saw now that Prime couldn't help her. He was unarmed and the doctor was facing him. Both of Prime's hands were raised. He was talking fast, but what he was saying Lois never recalled. Because this was going to be death—the thing she had always tried never to think about was upon her, starkly real, infinitely terrible.

She kept backing until the back of her knees bumped something—a coffin, she knew, the coffin that mad Beatrice had used for a bed. Bugs laughed shortly.

"Would ya like to die in a die box, Toots?" he asked. "A nice idea. Out of the dark into the dark. Poetic, ain't it?"

His left hand shot out, shoved her back. She fell into the soft clammy folds of the casket. She kicked viciously at Bugs, but his big hands gripped her ankles, pulled her legs out straight. His shoulder knocked over the lid. The soft smothering lining shut out light, shut out life itself. And there was nothing left but the roar of a gun.

And then black nothingness. . . .

"Well," Steve Prime said, "this may not be your idea of heaven, but it's practically mine."

Lois, her eyes open, looked up at Steve Prime's grinning face. It wasn't quite the same face because he had lost his hat and there was a red gash across his forehead. He was sitting on the edge of Beatrice's coffin, holding Lois up with one arm.

She looked around, shuddering. Beatrice's body lay where she had lested seen it.

In the three other coffins were the corpses Lois had come so close to joining. Bugs was flat on his face near Prime's feet.

"Is — is Bugs dead?" she asked thinly.

"Not quite," Prime said. "He just forgot to remove my hat. Always carry a spare gun in your hat, lady. I got the phony psychiatrist handcuffed upstairs. He was the real brains of the outfit. He stood out head and shoulders above Moag, the fence and Bugs, the strong arm department."

LOIS shuddered. "Let's get out of here," she said, struggling to sit up in the coffin.

"I can't carry you," he said. "Got a weak back. And don't think I'm going to wait on my wife hand and foot." He helped her out, half supporting her, walked her to the stairway. Then she gained control of herself.

"You're getting married?" she asked. He shook the chamois leather bag containing the Gargan diamonds under her nose. "Why not? I won't have to

buy a diamond for the engagement ring. Might as well get married while I have such an opportunity to save money."

She laughed. "You're not very romantic."

He twisted around, facing her, held her tightly against him. "Listen, you come with me to a spot where there's a moon in the sky and one down in the water. I'll say everything right then. Everything, see?"

He didn't have to coax her.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

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LAUGHTER IN THE WIND

By **CARL JACOBI**

Author of "Flight of the Flame Fiend," "Satan's Kite," etc.



Again and again Loring fired at the fiendish beast

Jim Loring Ventures Into the Land of the Shaitan Where Portents of Evil Disaster Are Borne by the Raging Winds!

LORING got his first view of the place when the battered old army car topped a rise and halted under the blood light of the setting India sun. As far as the eye could see lay an endless expanse of drifted sand, low hillocks, and black outcroppings of granite.

"There it is," Kingsly, the resident,

said with a wave of his hand. "Kut-i-Kaftar, the Whispering Valley. That shadow a mile away is the ruins of Fort Nizar. The mine lies farther to the left."

Loring felt a slow chill rise up his spine as his eyes took in the bleak

scene. Beside him Thelma, his wife, shivered a little, though the air still shimmered with oven heat.

"It isn't exactly a cheerful place, is it, Jim?" she said. "I'm beginning to think those people were right when they advised us not to come here."

Since leaving Bombay, and all the way across breathless Sind on the Crawling narrow-gauge train, they had been warned repeatedly to change their destination—warned, but without explanation. The Afghan conductor, the porter at Jacobabad, their Sikh guide, all had declared in guttural Pushtu.

"The *sahib* and *memsahib* are going to Kut-i-Kaftar? Allah protect you! It is the country of *Shaitan*. You are fools."

Kingsly started the car again, and they jolted down the rise. In the west, the sun slid below the rim of the world, and sudden gloom spread itself over the desert.

Loring knew the valley's name came from the sounds made by the ceaseless wind as it whirled and tormented the sand. Yet, a few months before, he had been unaware the place existed. Then had come that cablegram, advising him of the death of Michael Marly and his inheritance of the platinum mine.

So many years had passed since Loring had grub-staked old man Marly, he had almost forgotten about it. But Marly, foot-loose and free to the very end, apparently hadn't forgotten. He had come close to striking it rich here in the Gandava province. On his death, he willed his one and only profitable discovery to the man who had befriended him. Estate settlement problems, as well as a rising curiosity to view his new possession, had attracted Loring to the mine. He and Thelma had combined business with pleasure and made the trip out from the States together.

They were moving down the valley floor now, the road two serpentlike ruts in the deep sand. Abruptly Kingsly shut off the motor and let the car coast to a halt.

"Listen," he said.

From far off, borne on the wings of the wind, a medley of strange, distant mutterings reached their ears. Was it

Loring's imagination, or did he actually hear low peals of sardonic laughter?

"That's why they call it the Whispering Desert," Kingsly said.

TWENTY minutes later, the car drew up before the central mine building. The door opened, and a man in tropical whites strode out to meet them.

"Welcome to Kaftar," he said pleasantly. "I'm Hobson, manager in charge."

They went into a low-ceilinged office, lit by several bracket oil lamps. Hobson trundled up chairs and pushed forward a box of Burma cheroots.

"Glad as the lord Harry to see you," he said with an open smile. "Only a week ago, I received your letter saying you were coming."

He was a tall man with a lean, incisive face, dark penetrating eyes and black wavy hair. Judging by his immaculate clothes and preciseness of speech, he seemed the essence of efficiency.

"I've been practically alone here, you know," Hobson went on. "Kingsly drops in on me every other week or so, and I have a Belgian chap who handles the books. But he's a dumb mute, poor fellow, so that doesn't help much. We'll go over the books in the morning. Meanwhile, I suppose you'd like to rest. I'll have Ali show you to your quarters."

Loring felt some concern for his wife as they began the task of unpacking their gripsacks. He didn't like the queer, drawn look in her eyes as she stood by the window, staring out into the darkness. Yet he, too, felt a definite aura of menace that seemed to be hovering over them.

Later, he lay on his cot, unable for the moment to court sleep. He found himself straining his ears for a repetition of those sounds he had heard farther up the valley.

Outside, the stars glittered with unreal brilliancy. The night seemed almost an animate thing, brooding with the age-old secrets of the East.

An hour passed. His eyes closed, and drowsiness began to steal over him. But suddenly he sat bolt upright, rigid and wide awake.

The wind had risen again, and with it had come those sounds. Human voices seemed to be whispering just beyond the audibility range. In the background, muffled, mocking laughter ran up and down the octaves.

The laughter grew nearer. Now it was a thing of actuality, trembling the very walls of the shack. Loring, peering out the open window, uttered a short cry.

A long, tawny form had bounded from out of the shadows into his vision range. Poised there motionless, it was revealed in the bright starlight. A striped hyena!

The beast padded forward uncertainly, as if attracted by the open casement. Loring could see its gleaming eyes, ghoulish face, slavering lips. A wave of loathing swept over him.

But an instant later his hands clenched down hard on the edge of the window sill. The hyena turned and retraced its steps into the shadows. Reappearing, it gripped something in its teeth, dragged it in uneven jerks over the hard ground.

For a split-second Loring stared in paralyzed horror. Then something snapped within him. He scooped a Browning revolver from his open grip-sack, took quick aim and fired.

A GAIN and again he pressed the trigger. The reports blasted like thunder in the narrow room. But when his wife woke with a scream the creature disappeared. Loring vaulted out the window and raced barefoot across the sand.

He could see quite clearly in three directions. But there was no sign of the hyena or the gruesome thing it had carried away. He was still standing there, bewildered, when lights flashed on in the shack. Hobson and Kingsly rushed out.

The mine manager, a native *khuss* thrown hastily about him, carried a powerful electric lantern and a revolver. Kingsly wore only pajamas, his moonlike face set in determination.

"What's wrong?" Hobson yelled.

"A hyena," Loring said quietly. He had control of himself now, and he was scrutinizing the ground about him with puzzled eyes. "It carried the body of a

dead Sepoy. It couldn't have gone far."

The three men made a careful search of the surrounding desert without result. The wind had died again as suddenly as it had come. Under the vault of the night, their steps grating on the sand made the only sound. Half an hour later, they returned to the mine office.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming?" Kingsly asked. Loring, had rejoined them after going to his quarters for a moment to soothe his wife. "Perhaps the legends you heard about Kut-i-Kaftar upset you."

"What legends?" Loring demanded. "I heard nothing except that the valley was a good place to stay away from."

In the strained pause that followed, Hobson put a bottle of *Makran* whiskey on the table and filled three glasses.

"I suppose I might as well tell you now," he said. "It's the one difficulty we've been up against in working the mine. Superstition, I guess you'd call it. And yet it seems more than that."

"The whole thing is tied up with Fort Nizar, a half mile from here. Used to be a British outpost when the Government needed more than a resident to keep the district peaceful. There were several white officers in charge and a company of native troopers—Sepoys!

"For some reason, the Sepoys broke out in revolt. They killed the white officers, then mutinied among themselves, not stopping until every man had been murdered or died of his wounds."

Hobson swallowed his drink and wiped his lips nervously.

"That's the story as the Government circles reported it. The natives here have a different account. They say that when the relief company finally reached the fort, they found the stockade gate closed, and no sign of the men inside. Instead, prowling about the compound, was a huge striped hyena, an animal twice the normal size. Apparently it had entered the fort, attracted by the dead bodies, and its escape had been cut off when something—the wind perhaps—closed the gate."

The mine manager shifted uneasily in his chair.

"According to the Moslems, that big hyena was not a natural beast, but *Shaitan*—the Devil himself. The Koran, of course, is none too clear in its description of the Mohammedan hell. Now, no native will go near that fort, especially at night. They believe the ghosts of the murdered troopers still man the walls. They think the hyena lurks there, sometimes in animal form, sometimes in human form, but always ready to devour them."

Kingsly nodded as Hobson finished speaking.

"And the fact that the valley gives off queer whisperings, when the wind blows the sand, has added to the general fear," he said. "Of course I'll investigate the district in accordance with your report of a dead Sepoy. But I'm afraid you must have been mistaken. You see, there are no troopers nearer than Lafahla, fifty miles away!"

NEXT morning, in the light of day, Loring found it hard to believe what he had seen the night before. Breakfast over, he went outside, to the place where he had fired at the hyena from his window.

Tracks were still there in the sand, almost obliterated by the wind. He found the marks of what might have been a dragged body. But fifty yards from the mine shack, those tracks crossed an area of rough gravel and disappeared.

Frowning, Loring gazed across the forlorn desert. The wind was blowing hard again, and the sand was whispering. Far-off native voices seemed to be calling out to him, warning him away in guttural Pushtu. Was he going mad, or did he hear the Indian word "Death . . . death" repeated over and over again?

He turned, strode to the window of his room. The distance was so short, it seemed incredible that at least one of his shots hadn't scored a hit. Then, abruptly, his eyes fastened on the section of wall directly below the window sill. He stiffened.

Fastened there with a sticky substance was a round, dislike object. He ripped it free, turned it over and

over in his hands. Shaped like a huge button, the thing was made of wood. One side was smooth. But the other . . .

The other side was crudely carved to represent a gargoyle face. Gleaming eyes stared back at him. The mouth was a gaping slit of cruel fangs. The face was like that of a hyena.

An icy chill shot through Loring.

A *djarnna*, the North Indian equivalent of the Arabic *djinnee* stone! Loring's fists clenched. The thing was a Mohammedan invention, with a history as old as the hill tribes. Given to an enemy, it meant that all the powers of evil would fall upon that person. Nothing he or any mortal could do would save him from the attacks of *Shaitan*!

Why had it been fastened beneath his and Thelma's window? What did it all mean?

Lips tight, Loring walked slowly back to the mine office. For the moment, at least, he decided to say nothing about his discovery.

His wife met him there. With her aid, he set to the task of giving the books a cursory examination.

"Everything in order," he told her at length. "Ore output hasn't increased any in the last few year, but it hasn't dwindled either. However, labor costs are a big item. Unless we can double production, I'm afraid we're going to have a white elephant on our hands."

He tapped his pencil slowly.

"Would you be willing to stay here nine months or a year until I get things working the way I want them?"

A SHADOW crossed Thelma's face, was gone in an instant. She forced a wan smile.

"Whatever you say, darling."

After that, with Hobson at his side, Loring inspected the mine. They strode past the dark-faced Baluchi workers, went down the hand-operated lift into the caverns, and took samples of the copper ore from which the platinum was obtained.

Back on the ground level, the mine manager conducted the American to a larger shack, where the testing laboratory was located.

He treated the samples with nitromuriatic acid and potassic chloride, then reduced them to a metallic state by igniting them with carbonate of potash. The samples were of fair quality.

As they were leaving the laboratory, a young man of swarthy complexion and thick lips came up the steps. He stopped short before them.

"Hans Rudin," Hobson introduced. "My assistant. He can hear you, but he doesn't speak."

There was something grotesque about the Belgian, as if his vocal deformity were visible in his features. Loring knew that was his own imagination, nothing more. Rudin's eyes were dry and glittery, and they surveyed Loring with open belligerence. Disregarding the American's outstretched hand, he nodded curtly and passed through the door.

"He's a bit unfriendly, but he does his work," Hobson apologized.

Just before sundown, Loring decided to complete his survey of the property by looking over Fort Nizar, in spite of the premonition that had been growing within him all during the day. He dropped his Browning into his pocket and headed across the compound. He was twenty yards into the desert, when his wife came running after him.

"Jim! Where are you going?"

He frowned. "Going to give that fort a look-see. If all the stories I heard about it are true, it must be an interesting place."

"Jim, let's go back to Bombay. Oh, I know you'll say I'm a silly fool. But there's something wrong here, something evil that I . . . I can feel. I can feel it, I tell you, eating into me."

FOR an instant, he almost changed his decision as he saw the gleam of fear in the girl's eyes. But he kissed her lightly, and a moment later was trudging across the sand.

The fort was a grim thing in the dying light. It rose up before him, a blackened pile of stone in the brown waste.

Somehow its very desertion seemed to warn him away.

Not until he reached the aged, ruined entrance did he halt his stride.

It was growing dark then, and the Aeolian voices whispered on all sides. Browning in hand, he passed boldly into the quadrangle. He could see the broken parapets, the catwalk where British Sepoys had once stood, training their rifles against attacking tribesmen. In places, entire sections of the wall had fallen away.

A sense of isolation swept over him as he moved forward. It had been foolish, his coming here. The place was nothing but an abandoned—

He stopped. Distinctly in the thin air, the whisperings had become audible. A husky voice sounded, uttering a command.

"Company, attention!"

Loring whirled. He saw no one. Yet the unseen voice came again from directly before him.

"Platoon A. Man the walls."

Even as the words died away, a new noise filled the quadrangle—the sound of shuffling footsteps. An instant later Loring felt himself rock backward in horror.

A squad of Sepoys was moving across the enclosure. He could see their white turbans, rifles slung over their shoulders. But where the faces should have been were only bleached white death's-heads!

Past the American the corpse platoon filed slowly. Stiffly, they mounted to the catwalk. Each man took his position, rifle trained over the wall.

Loring's heart was pounding like a trip-hammer. To his left, suddenly his staring eyes caught a door, leading to the officers' quarters, swinging shut. Here was something material he could cope with. He leaped toward it, pushed through the opening.

The passage before him was a black vault, steeped in silence. Yet he sensed an unseen presence ahead. Ten steps he felt his way, cursing his lack of foresight in not bringing a pocket flash. He lit a nearly useless match.

The passage ended in a pile of debris. Stonework and masonry had fallen from the ceiling to bar all progress. The match flickered and went out, leaving him in pitch blackness again. A faint glow materialized on the wall ahead. Slowly it grew, a vague blur of radiance that began to slide into focus.

Loring was looking through that wall now. By some miracle he was viewing the typical officers' quarters of a British outpost. In the center was a square table. Seated about it were—

It wasn't possible! Five men were there, three in the uniform of English India-army officers, two in the white turbans of native Sepoys. The clothing was intact, but the heads were white skulls!

A FULL minute the vision remained there, stereoscopically clear like a scene viewed through a telescope. Then it faded and disappeared.

Bewildered, Loring thrust out his hands in the blackness. They touched rough stone. Frantically he clawed for a secret latch or opening. There was none.

He returned in a daze to the quadrangle. Again he found himself staring. The Sepoys were no longer on the wall. The fort was deserted!

Had he been dreaming? Was this all some strange illusion fostered by the desert night?

He strode across to the far side of the quadrangle, lit another match and bent down. The stone flooring was covered in places with wind-blown sand that showed no signs of footprints. There was nothing here at all, nothing save a small piece of metal that glittered slightly in the light of the match. He picked it up idly, thrust it into his pocket.

And then Loring stood galvanized in his tracks. A slow scream of terror rose unsounded to his lips. He tried to reach for his revolver, but numbness seemed to paralyze his arms.

Padding slowly out of the darker shadows, a vague shape advanced toward him. A hyena, a striped hyena. But good God, what a hyena! The thing was enormous in size. The head, the black, hyalescent eyes and drooling fangs were utterly huge. With a low snarl it began to close in.

Blood pounded against Loring's temples. Fear gripped him like a cold vice. Then he jerked out his Browning and squeezed the trigger.

The report blasted the fort in a series of wild reverberations. But the hyena

did not alter its stride. Relentless it came on, a step at a time.

Loring fired again and leaped back the instant the animal sprang. But he went down under its rush.

A raking claw slashed his sleeve, gashed his forearm to the bone. Foul breath smote his nostrils. He gave a last frantic twist, got his revolver free and fired point-blank.

The monster uttered a cry of agony. Abruptly, it reared up on its haunches and scrambled into the shadows.

Loring struggled painfully to his feet. His body ached in a hundred places, and a stream of blood poured down his wounded arm. Mystery or no mystery, he must find medical attention before he fainted. Could he make it back to the mine—

Across the shadowy quadrangle he staggered, still clutching his revolver. But there was no further attack. He passed through the gate and began to plod slowly back across the desert. The sky above was a vast inverted bowl from which a thousand eyes seemed to be leering down at him. The wind tore at his coat. In his ears, the whisperings grew louder . . . louder. . . .

LORING regained consciousness. He was sprawled in a chair in the mine office. Hobson was forcing liquor down his throat. Across the room, Kingsly looked on with bewildered eyes. Rudin, the Belgian, sat smoking a cigarette methodically.

"In heaven's name, what happened?" Hobson demanded. "Rudin wrote me a note saying where you had gone, and I sent him after you. He found you out cold half-way between here and the fort. What in blazes did you do to your arm?"

Strength and a clear brain were returning to Loring. He got out of his chair stiffly, saw that his wound had been bandaged during his unconsciousness. In a few terse sentences he related to Hobson what had happened.

Both the mine manager and Kingsly were frowning deeply when he finished.

"If it were anyone but you telling me, I wouldn't believe a word of it," Hobson said. "All I can say is that as soon as you feel able, we'll go over and investigate the place. But I advise you

to say nothing to the workers. If they learned that any of us had been to the fort, I'm afraid there'd be trouble."

Loring nodded. "I'm done up. We'll talk it over in the morning."

He went into the corridor leading to his quarters. As he closed the door behind him, his eyes retained a photographic impression of Hans Rudin. The dumb man had just risen from his chair, and he limped badly, as if—as if his left leg had been injured!

There was a door down the corridor, opening onto the rear of the shack. With a quick glance behind him, Loring inched it open and darted outside. Careful to make no sound, he ran quickly to the entrance of the mine.

The lift-platform was at the top, in its proper place. The native workers had returned to their quarters long before. For a moment he thought he heard the faint sound of hammers pounding on metal far below. But the sound was not repeated. Scowling, he stood there a moment, then turned and headed back for the shack.

He said nothing to his wife of what had taken place at the fort. But later, as they lay in their twin cots, his brain reviewed the horror, detail for detail.

What were those strange figures he had seen marching across the quadrangle? How had he been able to see through a wall of solid stone? What was the mystery of the hyena?

Loring had seen the spotted hyena of South Africa as well as the Asiatic species before. But never had he come upon one of such size or ferocity. And the Belgian! Was there any significance in his actions? Rudin had seemed antagonistic from the start, yet it was he who had rescued Loring in the desert.

For a long time the American lay there, listening to the desert whisperings. At length exhaustion claimed him, and he fell into a deep slumber.

WHEN he awoke, the light of early dawn was filtering through the window. Not for a full moment did his eyes focus on the cot opposite.

The cot was empty! Thelma was gone!

Loring leaped to his feet, threw on his clothes and raced outside. The

compound was deserted. He ran around the shack, mounted a low hillock and stared into the desert.

Far off, almost a blur in the half light, the figure of his wife was visible, plodding across the sand. She walked slowly, mechanically. Even at that distance she seemed to move by a will other than her own.

"Thelma!"

The wind threw back his voice hollowly. Loring lunged in pursuit. As he ran, a thousand fears closed in on him. Thelma, heading for that cursed fort!

He entered a broad flat and shouted again. Like an automaton, his wife continued to pace on ahead.

Now the entrance of Fort Nizar was directly before her. She passed into the ruined stockade.

A knife probed Loring's heart. He ran on dead legs through the gate, stopped short, stared before him. The fort lay in deserted silence. There was no sign of his wife.

"Thelma!"

The words issuing from his terror-stricken throat were only a hoarse whisper. Into the quadrangle he moved. His steps echoed, and his heart began to pound madly.

Why had his wife come here like some criminal slinking from the law? What magnetic attraction had lured her from the safety of the shack to this damned fort?

Loring halted abruptly. A shroud of horror dropped over him. Ahead, that same door which he knew opened on a dead-end passage, swung slowly wide. From it came two figures, Thelma, his wife, and . . . Good God!

His wife was clad only in a filmy nightdress that revealed every contour of her perfectly formed figure. One bare arm was extended like a sleep walker. The other encircled the hairy neck of the huge hyena that had attacked Loring.

Loring strangled in horror. Across the quadrangle the pair moved, the girl speaking soft inaudible words, the hyena muzzling its foul head against her. It was the black embodiment of Beauty and the Beast. Loring felt beads of cold perspiration break out on his body.

He reached for his revolver, stopped

short. His wife glided forward and placed herself between him and the hyena. Words came whispering across the quadrangle.

"This is *Shaitan*, Jim, Prince of Evil. We have moved into his field. Do not attack or I—I will be lost."

As he stood staring, Loring's hand continued to drop an inch at a time to his revolver pocket. His fingers touched the comforting butt, touched also the piece of metal he had found earlier on the quadrangle floor. For an instant he watched paralyzed as his wife stroked the hyena.

Like a bolt from the blue his fingers identified the metal piece in his pocket. He suddenly knew its damning significance.

LIKE a madman, Loring charged, whipped out his Browning, fired as he came. The hyena leaped erect on its hind feet and sprang to meet the attack.

The shots went wild. With his wife's scream in his ears, Loring clubbed the pistol barrel into that ghoul face. Then man and monster were down, rolling over and over. Again the American felt those claws rake across his body. But this time death was no gamble, if it saved Thelma. He shot out his hands, clawing for the hyena's throat.

A terrific blow sent a wave of nausea through him. Razor-edged fangs gashed across his face, left a trail of blood. Loring doubled up his knees, kicked himself free. With a single lunge he vaulted to his feet.

There was an opening then, and he used it. The monster was momentarily caught off balance. Loring threw out both hands, seized a leg and gave a quick, bone-twisting yank. There was a dull snap and a deep-throated scream.

The struggle ended then. Like a sodden sack, the monster staggered backward and slumped to the ground. Breathing hard, Loring seized the striped fur and yanked with all his strength.

"It was well planned, Hobson," he panted. "But not planned well enough."

* * * * *

Back at the mine, Loring, Kingsly and Thelma strode quickly across the

compound to the hand-operated lift that gave entrance to the platinum caverns. They took places on the crude platform and dropped swiftly downward. On the bottom, Loring switched on an electric flash and led the way along a pitch-black tunnel.

"Hobson staked everything on the legends about Fort Nizar," he said over his shoulder. "His one objective was to keep the mine and the fort free from visitors. When we came and decided to stay on, he was afraid of discovery and was forced to take action."

The tunnel branched abruptly in two directions. Loring took the one on the right.

"Hobson was playing for big stakes," he continued. "The fact that the valley gave off queer whisperings played right into his hands. The only real thing about the whole mystery was that hyena I fired at from my window the first night. Hobson had previously trapped the animal out in the desert. He released it near the mine shack, with a dummy formed of a slab of decomposed meat and a Sepoy's uniform."

A heavy wooden door rose up before them in the light of the flash. Loring inserted in the lock one of the mine manager's keys and pushed it open. Kingsly gave a low whistle of amazement.

The place was a huge cavern, with carbide lamps suspended at intervals from the ceiling. Along the four walls ran a series of work benches, littered with tools and equipment. On the far side, piled ready for packing and shipment were hundreds of brown stocks and blue-black barrels.

"Rifles," Loring said quietly. "Exact copies of the latest model Mark VI British Lee-Enfields, short-magazine, improved type. Do you know what that means?"

Kingsly stood in awe-struck silence.

"It means," Loring went on, "that Hobson had quite a profitable business here, in addition to his managership of the mine. He was manufacturing these rifles in secret and smuggling them to the wilder desert tribes—probably the Marris, near the border. The fort served as the depot for his operations. We're directly under the officers' quarters. That passageway leads to a con-

cealed trap-door that opens onto the quadrangle.

"Once a sufficient number of guns were disposed of, there's no telling what might have happened. England is at war in Europe, so her hold on colonial India has already been weakened. It needs only the smallest spark to start a rebellion."

"But the workmen," Kingsly objected.

"Hobson was too clever to continue work in this room by day. He detailed men here at night, when there was little chance of discovery. Each man, of course, was sworn to secrecy. The rifles were kept here until ready for shipment, then carried up that tunnel to the fort, and from the fort into the desert."

THELMA shook her head slowly. "That explains the motive behind Hobson's actions. But how—"

"How were you lured to the fort? Applied-hypnosis. I daresay we'll find that Hobson dabbled in mesmerism during his earlier years. As for all

the rest, it was simply a matter of mechanics. The hyena disguise Hobson wore carried on the old Moslem legend. The native workers paraded across the quadrangle and then disappeared through the trap-door into the mine.

"The vision I saw on the passage wall was accomplished by a stereopticon which Hobson concealed in the stonework. The lantern was equipped with a slide, showing the dead officers. He used a graduated shutter so the scene could fade out slowly.

"That's about all, I guess. It was Hobson, too, who put that *djarnna* stone under our window. He unconsciously profited by the fact that Hans Rudin had a lame leg, thus diverting suspicion from himself. Your own visits to the mine, Kingsly, were fairly regular. Hobson was able to take the proper precautions before you arrived, every so often.

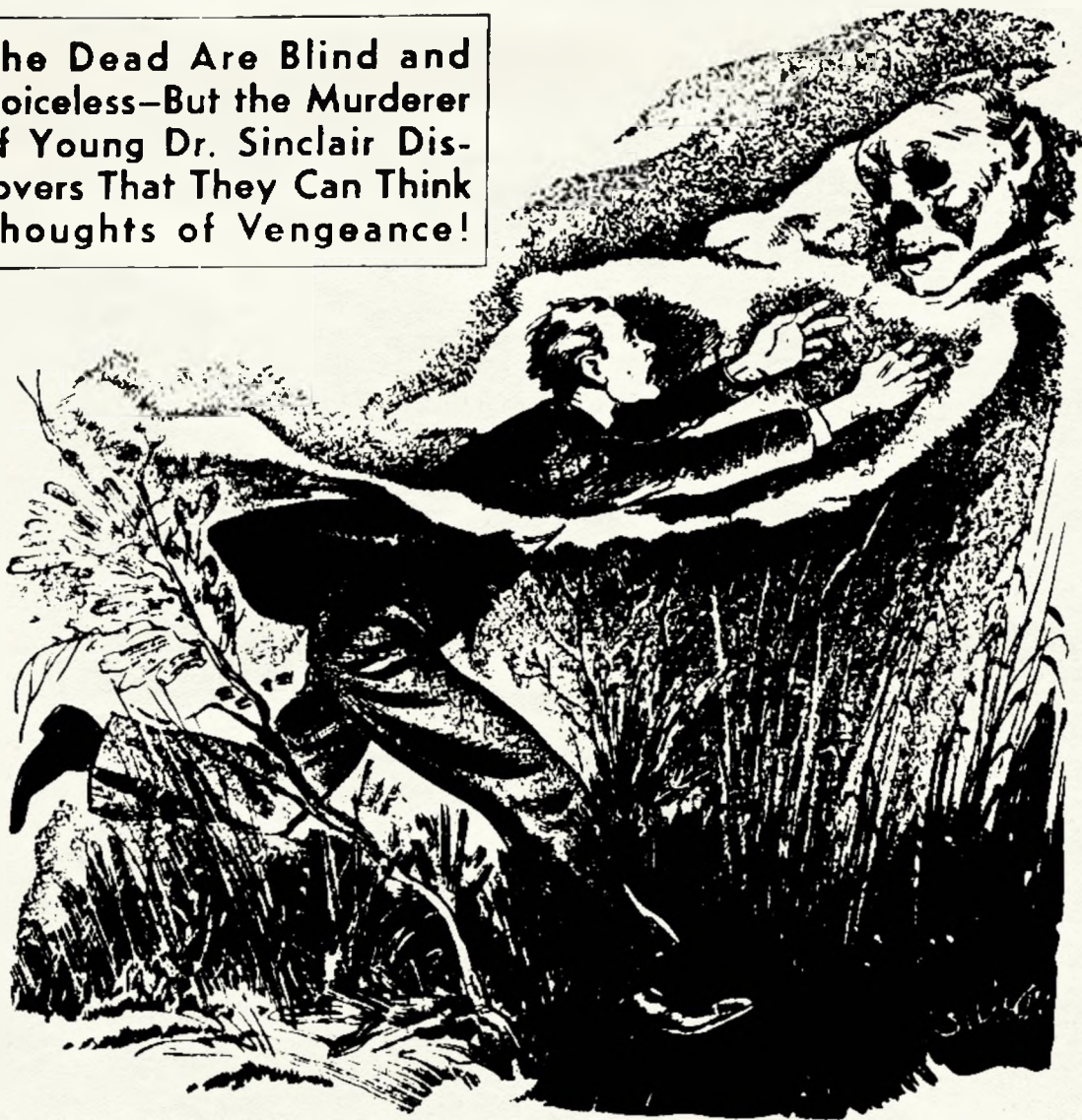
"He missed only one small detail, which I failed to recognize at first. The thing I found on the quadrangle floor of Fort Nizar was a modern rifle firing-pin."

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"I'll get you," he shouted. "You're not dead!"

THE GHOST OF THE BRAIN

By **RUSSELL STANTON**

Author of "The Very First Year," "Purple Fury," etc.

THE morass was dark and somber. At the slimy surface, where the bog of quicksand lay in little oozing hollows, with islands of marsh-grass between them, it was almost black. Overhead, a pallid moon straggled fitfully through the heavy broken

cloud masses. The trees along the higher edge of the bog drooped in the stagnant, breathless summer air. The moonlight edged their tops with silver, but the shadows beneath them were solid shapes.

It was mid-evening. The lights from

a log-cabin bungalow slanted down to the morass with a cheery yellow glow.

On the verandah a tall, slender young man sat staring. The wisps of vapor rising from the bog interested him. Dr. Lee Sinclair was enough of a scientist to know, of course, that the breath of the marsh would condense in the night air. White moonlit wisps oozed upward like little ghosts, hovered briefly, and then dissipated into nothingness.

But suddenly he stiffened. That round green blob under the line of willows—that was no wisp of vapor!

Sinclair held his breath as he watched the green, luminescent ball, the size of a man's head. It was floating slowly in the air, along the shadowy bank under the trees. For a moment the young man watched it, breathless.

Lee Sinclair was the son of a famous surgeon. He was himself a young doctor of considerable promise. But he was really more interested in spiritualism than in surgery or medicine. He believed in the possibility of the dead communicating with the living. Perhaps, he had often told himself humorously, he really believed in ghosts. He certainly had never seen one—before.

Was he seeing one now? He stared at the round, greenish, luminous ball. It was down in the marsh, no more than a hundred yards away. It had stopped floating now and was hovering motionless under a tree branch.

"Well, that's not marsh vapor," young Dr. Sinclair muttered. "But if it isn't, what the devil is it? Am I seeing a ghost at last?"

He tossed away his cigarette. Soundlessly in his rubber-soled tennis shoes he pattered the length of the verandah, jumped over its rail and started cautiously down the declivity. The moon had gone under a solid black cloud bank now. In the intensified darkness, the round, glowing ball was plainer than ever. It hovered six feet above the ground—the height of a tall man's head! But there was nothing under it.

FROM a distance of no more than fifty feet, Dr. Sinclair stared at the apparition. Suddenly he grinned.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he whispered, and dashed forward.

The bole of the tree-trunk behind the

glowing green ball was dark. But it was not dark enough to hide the thin black stick on which the ball was poised.

"Come on out of that!" he called. "What the hell—"

No one was there. The six-foot black stick was shoved into the soft earth under the tree, within a few feet of the edge of the bog. The round glowing ball was a globe of waxed green paper, with a tiny lighted candle inside.

Smiling wryly, young Sinclair reached to pull it up. Someone who knew his weakness for ghosts had been hoaxing him.

But abruptly a dark blob slipped from behind the tree-trunk. The blob leaped!

"Good God—"

Sinclair caught the glint of a naked knife blade. The pain of it was a weird stab of fire in his chest. He knew that he had fallen, that blood choked up in his throat. He was drowning in a sea of blood—coughing blood, swallowing blood— The whole pallid, shadowed world swayed and slipped under. The fire in his chest raked hot claws deep in his heart.

"Got you, by God! This is the end of you, Lee Sinclair!"

He recognized the voice. He knew the white, thin-lipped face, though it was contorted with blood-lust and murderous hatred. The blood in his throat choked him. "Why, James? Why—why are you—killing—"

"Oh, so you know me? Well, that's all right. You're going into the quicksand. They'll never even find your body." The assassin's voice was a sinister chuckle. "Lured down here to your death—by one of your own silly ghosts. There's a laugh!"

Young Sinclair could feel the knife slip between as his murderer pulled it out. He felt his blood stream out, searching for the blade. He saw the man fling the knife far out into the quicksand bog.

"And now you're going after it—"

Helplessly he felt himself being dragged, then lifted.

"James—" he strangled. "Damn you—I'll come back. You—you can't get away—I—I'll haunt you—get you in the end—"

Even at the brink of death, Dr. Lee Sinclair knew that his words were foolish. But he meant them. God knows, he meant them. . . .

James was lifting him now. . . . How silly for James to have killed him. Silly for anyone to kill. . . .

Sinclair vaguely felt himself being thrown. Then he seemed to know that he was in the quicksand bog . . . face down . . . God! No chance to breathe with his face, his head, going down into the ooze! But the blood in his throat was drowning him anyway. . . . The end—or was it only the beginning?

Some such thought—his quest for the great mystery, knowing now that he neared it—was in young Sinclair's mind. But then the fire in his chest engulfed all his world. And young Dr. Sinclair died.

Who shall say when death comes? He had stopped breathing when he hit the quicksand, yet his heart raced on, for whole minutes. Then the drain of blood made it stagger. Reaching for blood, finding none it struggled on a little longer. Then it faltered, pounded. At last it stopped completely.

Half an hour later, the horrified group of men saw one of his legs. The quicksand had not yet been able to suck it out of sight. When at last he was pulled out, there was nothing that science could do to get the quicksand out of his lungs, to heal the stab wound, clear his blood and start up his heart again. Dr. Lee Sinclair's brain and body were wholly engulfed in the unbreakable grip of death.

THE gray-haired Dr. Arthur Sinclair was speaking grimly. "I'll admit it's a gruesome sensation. But I'm a scientist first and a father afterward. That this is my son does not—or should not—matter."

The shadowed room was tense and silent. It was a big, rustic room at the back of Dr. Sinclair's summer bungalow. This was the laboratory where he conducted the weird experiments that had given him national renown.

He was a tall, spare man of sixty, with a lean, handsome, smooth-shaven face, gray eyes under bushy brows, and a mass of tousled iron-gray hair.

The room was dim. Shadows

splashed its walls where shelves held lines of bottles and a litter of chemical apparatus. Glass cabinets of surgical instruments stood against the distant wall. A huge X-ray machine, a mechanical lung, smaller respirators and an oxygen tent were shoved aside. These were the paraphernalia with which this scientist experimented on what we call the dead.

One end of the room was curtained off now. Dr. Arthur Sinclair stood before the curtain, facing the small group of men who were his invited guests. Only one young woman was there—his daughter Anne. Her face was pale, tense. Her lips were quivering. She drew them between her teeth, trying to hold them still. Beside her, one of the onlookers whispered,

"But, Miss Sinclair. A thing like this, and after all it's your own brother—"

She smiled tremulously. "Oh, I—I often help father with his work. I'm all right."

A young man sat at her other elbow. He was a tall fellow of perhaps thirty, with sparse sandy hair, a weak-chinned but handsome face, and a small mustache. He leaned toward her, slipped an arm around her and drew her to him.

"Anne, dear," he whispered. "You're sure it won't bother you too much? Shall I take you out?"

"No. No, James, I'm all right."

Dr. Sinclair was still speaking quietly.

"I'm sure I don't have to explain my work of the last few years. My experiments have had the object of keeping human organs alive outside the body which has—as we say—died. There is nothing new in it. I have only taken up where others, more famous than myself, left off. But tonight I have something here to show you. *This* is just a little different. I came upon a sudden opportunity—just a week ago—to obtain a human brain which was undamaged—"

His voice trembled, but he mastered it and he went on.

"Undamaged by the stab wound. It was a healthy body, a healthy brain. I had it here in my laboratory when the blood in it had been stagnant for only a matter of minutes. My son, Dr. Lee

Sinclair, gentlemen. He—he was murdered by someone unknown, just a week ago tonight.”

The silence in the big, shadowed room was electrical. Young James Martin, the tall sandy fellow who sat with his arm around Anne, again leaned over her.

“By God, Anne!” he whispered. “I don’t want you subjected to this.”

She trembled against him.

“But I—I’m all right, James, dear.”

Young Martin was her fiance. Like herself, he had often helped the famous Dr. Sinclair in the weird experiments that challenged death. Now he sat staring, tense, almost unbreathing. His glittering eyes were fixed upon the curtain which Dr. Sinclair was drawing aside.

“My son, gentlemen. I have here all that is left of him—*alive!*”

A SHUDDERING gasp went around the room as the curtains parted. A white spotlight illuminated a table on which a great globe was standing. The globe was almost full of a faintly pinkish liquid. Wires and twisting tubes led into it through small side apertures. They were connected to the wall at one side, where an array of mysterious apparatus stood shadowed.

Within the globe, distorted by the pink liquid, a human brain floated— weird, pulsating convolutions of living human tissue!

Tiny threadlike wires gripped it. Tiny flexible tubes pulsed with the nourishment they were supplying it. For the cells of this mysterious organ, a human brain were alive. From this one portion of young Dr. Lee Sinclair, death for a time was held at bay. In this blind, isolated human brain, the unfathomable miracle of thought must still be going on. For all its blindness and isolation, when a living human brain is nourished, it must throb with thought. The gray convolutions of this one quivered so that the liquid was stirred with tiny ripples on its surface.

Of what was the murdered brain thinking?

The weird question undoubtedly was in the mind of everyone in the room. Suddenly the grim, old Dr. Sinclair voiced it.

“I—I’ve been wondering if my son knows who killed him. I feel certain that he does. He must be—must be thinking about it now. And I wish he could find a way of letting me read his thoughts—”

There was suddenly nothing of the scientist in old Dr. Sinclair’s quivering voice. He was staring at the floating, pulsating brain of the son he had so dearly loved. The color had drained from his face. Abruptly he seemed years older, for now he was a father, pleading.

“Lee, isn’t there some way you can tell me what you’re thinking? I’ve kept this much of you alive. I can keep you alive a day or two longer. I couldn’t keep your voice, nor any of you except your silent, helpless brain—”

What a mysterious thing it is, this silence we call death! There was only impending death here. This living, inarticulate brain in a day or two would be dead. Who shall say that the most important parts of young Dr. Lee Sinclair were dead? His legs, his arms, his skull—that broken, murdered body which now was mouldering in its coffin? Or this living brain?

To all the breathless, shuddering onlookers, young Sinclair was here. Only his narrow house was gone. He was blind without eyes, deaf without eardrums, mute without a larynx and lungs. But those were mere mechanisms which had broken. Still—he lived, for he was thinking! And yet he was dead, for he had no mechanical way of communicating with the world from which death had isolated him. . . .

“Lee, dear—Please think of some way to tell us who killed you—”

The rasp of a chair being shoved back shrieked through the silence of the room. James Martin, with his arm still around Anne, jumped to his feet.

“Dr. Sinclair, I’m sorry. I must protest. This is too much for Anne. I’m taking her out.”

The girl did indeed look pallid. Though she clung to him, she spoke emphatically.

“No, James. I’m all right.”

The glance she exchanged with her father fully escaped James Martin. The elder Sinclair came forward.

"Oh, Anne," he said. "I'm really sorry."

His gaze, suddenly harsh, swept her and Martin. Then it moved to a quiet, dark-haired young man who sat apart from the group of scientists. The dark-haired young man shifted his head a little, almost like a nod, but his face remained expressionless.

"Yes, I guess you're right, Martin," Dr. Sinclair added. "Take her out. We—we're about through here anyway . . . I think that's all, gentlemen. I just wanted to show you what I have accomplished with the human brain. The human brain, to my knowledge, has never been kept alive outside the human body so long before." His laugh was a little hysterical. "That, at least, we might call a contribution to science."

Again he turned back to the weird illumined globe, where the gruesome brain pulsed. No man who still lived could read its thoughts. Nor could anyone read the thoughts of another brain here in the room—the brain of James Martin as he led the trembling girl outside and stood with his arm around her, murmuring words of comfort. . . .

Dr. Sinclair suspected him, of course. James Martin knew it now. That dark-haired young fellow Sinclair had introduced as Peter Jones—was he a detective? Damn them all; they knew they had no evidence. This was just a weird trick to frighten him, to make him act guilty. They thought he'd do or say something that would betray him.

"That was too ghastly for you, Anne," he was murmuring. "Poor Lee was—"

Was she drawing away from him a little? Did she, too, suspect him? He had worked so hard to win her love. Was it being killed by her suspicion that he had murdered her brother? That would change everything for Martin. The possibility of it set him shuddering.

He was still pondering it when he sat in his dark bedroom at the end of the bungalow's long hall. He could not dare proceed with his plans. Yet only a few hours ago they had seemed so rational! That dark-haired fellow, Jones—detective or not—had gone back to the city with the group of visiting

scientists. There was no one in the house with Martin, save Anne and her father. It would be easy to smother Sinclair in his bed, and toss his body to be sucked down by the quicksand. Even if they found it, they would have no proof. He could have wandered down there distracted by Lee's death. Everybody knew he was a little demented. They would think he had fallen in and died.

MMARTIN had plotted it all carefully during the week since he had killed Lee. He knew a turmoil must come, and he would comfort Anne. It would bring them even closer together. And then, when it was all in the past, he would marry her. Her beauty, her father's fortune, Lee's fortune, the patents and medical processes, would all be his. Nobody then could ever discover that Martin had stolen some of those processes, that he had patents pending on them in his own name. Lee had discovered that. But Martin killed him before he could tell.

It was all so simple. His kisses and practised words of love had made the impressionable girl think she loved him. But was that changed now? Damn her, he wouldn't let it be changed! With her father dead, she'd have only him to rely on, for there would be just the two of them left. Her suspicions, even if she had them, would melt away under his kisses.

God, how hot the room was! James Martin sat on his bed, with beads of sweat cold on his forehead. He sat listening to the silence of the big house. But he heard the croaking of the frogs at the lower end of the swamp. Were Anne and the old man asleep, or should he wait a little longer?

Martin had always believed he was a man without nerves. But his nerves were jangled now. He had always thought that in anything vital, he would make no errors. But what a fool he had been to stab Lee! Chloroform would never have been noticed when they found the body. It was queer, that he had had his vague premonition. He had known that Lee would be found before the quicksand dragged him under!

Shuddering Martin recalled how he had pulled out the knife and flung it

away, fearing it might be identified as his. He still felt Lee's flesh clinging to the blade. . . .

Martin's mind went back to that ghastly night a week before. He had safely hidden the little green lantern with which he had lured Lee from the veranda. He had gone back to his room, waiting to rush out at the shouting of old Dr. Sinclair and the other two men who had seen Lee's leg in the mire. Had Martin's face or manner betrayed him that night? Something had made old Sinclair suspect him, even though he could prove nothing. Well, what the hell of it? Nothing mattered now, if he went ahead with his plans. . . .

Quietly he would go into the old man's bedroom. Everything would be over in a few minutes.

But would it? The sweat was pouring out on Martin. His pounding heart thumped against his ribs as he rose from his bed and started into the hall. What was the matter with him? Why was he so terrified? He hadn't felt like this when he had killed Lee. But Lee wasn't dead! That cursed brain of his was still living, still thinking thoughts—thinking of Martin! Of course the damned thing was thinking of Martin. Lee had recognized him, just as the knife went into his chest. He had called Martin by name. That gruesome, living brain would still remember. . . .

In the dim narrow hallway, James Martin suddenly stood panting. For the first time in his life he was really terrified. Would that brain be able to disclose its thoughts? Tomorrow, with old Sinclair dead and Martin comforting Anne, would Lee's brain find some way of telling what it knew? Absurd! And yet—those pulsating convolutions of the brain's living tissues—

Fascinated by his horror, even while old Dr. Sinclair spoke, Martin had stared at those quivering convolutions. Martin's numbed, frightened mind had gone back to that day when he and Lee had discussed the Morse code. Both of them were familiar with Morse. Was the brain trying to pulsate with dots and dashes?

Martin killed me . . . Martin killed me . . .

He had even fancied, tonight, that it had been trying to pulsate that message of doom.

IN the hallway, Martin stood irresolute. Perhaps he had better kill the brain first—shut off the current in the saline liquid—cut off the threadlike streams of nourishment. The damned thing would instantly die. . . .

Martin turned, was moving slowly back along the hall. He halted in terror. Behind him he heard a faint shuffle of dragging footsteps. He darted into his bedroom doorway, stood stiff, peering in the darkness. Pallid, with grim, set face, clad in dressing gown and slippers, old Dr. Sinclair stalked past the door. His slippered feet shuffled weirdly in the stillness. In a moment he had turned the hall angle and was gone. The laboratory was in that direction.

Cautiously, Martin followed. Now was as good a time as any. Kill the old man in the laboratory, kill the damned brain too!

But he'd have to be careful of noise. Anne's room was fairly close and she might hear him.

The laboratory was dim, with just a few faint streaks of moonlight straggling into its windows. At one of the two doors, Martin crouched, peering.

"Is that what you want, Lee? All right, son—" It was only a murmur as though the old doctor were talking to himself. "All right. Good-bye, son."

With the moonlight glistening on his tousled mop of hair, Sinclair was only a dimly visible black blot. He was turning away from the shocking globe where the living brain pulsated. The globe was dark now. The spotlight which had been over it was extinguished. But there was enough moonlight so that Martin could see the floating brain. And he saw old Sinclair kneeling on the other side of the room, his clasped hands on a chair-back. Kneeling, he gazed up at the wall on which a little Crucifix was hung.

It was incredible, this agnostic scientist, praying for the son he loved. But Martin, crouching, wasn't thinking of that. Jump on him now—his back is turned . . .

In another second Martin might

have leaped. But suddenly he was stricken with horror. All he could do was suck in his breath and stare. He only saw the dim outline of the globe on the distant table, with moonlight shining through its pale-red liquid.

But what was that? Something like a dim green-red mist was rising from the globe! A stream of something imponderable silently oozed up, congealing in the air just above the surface of the pale-red water. . . . A blob, purplish now, a weird little wraith took form!

Horrified, Martin vaguely knew that old Sinclair had risen from his knees. Sinclair did not see the purple hovering shape as he turned and left the room by the other door.

Go after him. Kill him now. . . .

But the thoughts were vague in Martin's terrified mind. He could not act. He could only stare numbly at the purple ball hanging over the brain in the globe.

Was it the ghost of the brain? To Martin the ghastly, flattened blob of mist had divided itself into two lobes. The convolutions writhed and twisted like snakes, moving, floating forward to attack Martin!

ONLY then did Martin realize that he had staggered into the laboratory. Where was the damned thing now? Then he saw it again. It had floated over to one of the windows, where the moonlight struck full and horrible upon it. Now it was changing from a brain into a head—the rounded skull, the hair, the face . . . It hovered in the window for a second. Then it turned, wordlessly jibing.

It was Lee's face, pallid, contorted with the agony of death—the face that had tortured Martin's thoughts for a week!

"Damn you, I'll come back! You can't get away with this! I'll haunt you!"

Was the damned thing saying that now, or was Martin only thinking it out of his horrified memory? Lee had always claimed he was psychic. If anyone could he would be able to come back. . . .

The ghost of Lee's brain was coming back to accuse him! Martin

heard himself crying in a frantic whisper.

"Go back into the brain, you fool! You—you can't come out like this! Ghosts come from the dead, not the living . . . Damn you, I'm not afraid of you!"

But it wouldn't go back. It floated out the window.

Martin was hardly aware that he had leaped out the low window. He stumbled on the rocky ground as he ran.

"Damn you, come back! You can't roam around like this. You're not the ghost of anything dead."

Was he shouting it, or only thinking it? That didn't matter. He must catch the damned thing. It couldn't talk yet, but it might. For a second it seemed to be hovering almost within his reach. It was only the ghost of Lee's brain, not his face—just the flattened lobes of his living brain, writhing like twisting snakes, pregnant with accusing thoughts. Suddenly Martin was shouting.

"Sure you know I stabbed you! I killed your body! What are you going to do about it? You're nothing but a wraith. When I get my hands on you, I'll fling you away like a puff of smoke!"

He felt the muddy swamp bank under his hands and body. But instantly he was up.

"Damn you! You can't float around like this—" He knew he had fallen from the bank. The purple thing was low to the ground now. Viciously Martin flung himself upon it.

And then he knew that his panting breath was sucking sand, not air. Liquid sand went into his tortured lungs like fire. But he still yelled a bubbling scream.

"Damn you, I've got you. . . ."

Perhaps he did have it. Perhaps it had him. But those of us who still are living cannot know that. We only know that for a few seconds, Martin lay face down in the quicksand, his body futilely struggling as it sank.

Old Dr. Sinclair was talking to the gathered group of policemen who had come from the nearby village.

"My daughter and I heard him. We stood at one of the hall windows, saw him run down the hill. According to

what he was shouting, there is no question he was my son's murderer." The grim old surgeon held his shuddering daughter against him. "You—you're lucky, Anne. Thank God, for your sake—"

The group stood in the dim laboratory, where the gruesome brain still floated in the pale pink saline. The dawn had not yet come, but it was dimming the stars. Off to the east a thunder head blackened the sky. Sheets of lightning streaked over the horizon.

"Oh, my Gawd! Look, Doctor," a policeman gasped.

FROM the saline surface in the globe, a little purple mist was rising—a flattened, hovering ball. For a second it seemed to hang in the open window. Then it floated swiftly down the slope, out over the morass, clinging to the quicksand surface. Instantly it merged with the upward swirling vapors of mist, the fetid breath of the swamp.

"A ghost!" the policeman muttered. "The ghost of the brain!"

Startled for a moment, Dr. Sinclair quickly recovered himself.

"It looked like it, didn't it? But it was only ionized air. I—I changed the electric pressure in that saline liquid very materially awhile ago. On

a damp night like this with a low barometer, ionized air is very likely to form. You see those ionized balls quite often before electric storms. And the artificial conditions I have here—" He let his voice trail away.

"Well, it still looked like a ghost to me," the awed policeman muttered.

"But how could it be a ghost?" somebody else said. "It couldn't, could it, Doctor? Because that brain is still alive."

Old Dr. Sinclair's expression was very strange.

"I came in here tonight," he said, "because it just seemed to me that my son wasn't satisfied. Something he wanted me to do." The surgeon was grimly smiling. "My son, Lee, always believed he was psychic, you know. Maybe he was. Suddenly tonight I seemed to understand what he wanted. So I came in here and—did it."

Sinclair was gazing at the brain now, where it floated peacefully in the pinkish liquid.

"I guess I see now why you wanted me to do that, Lee," he murmured. He turned to the staring policemen. "Perhaps that was ionized air. But I can't help wondering. You see, I just seemed to know that Lee didn't want his brain to go on living. So I—I came in here and killed it."

NEXT ISSUE

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF!

A Novelet of Fiery Doom by SAM MERWIN, JR.

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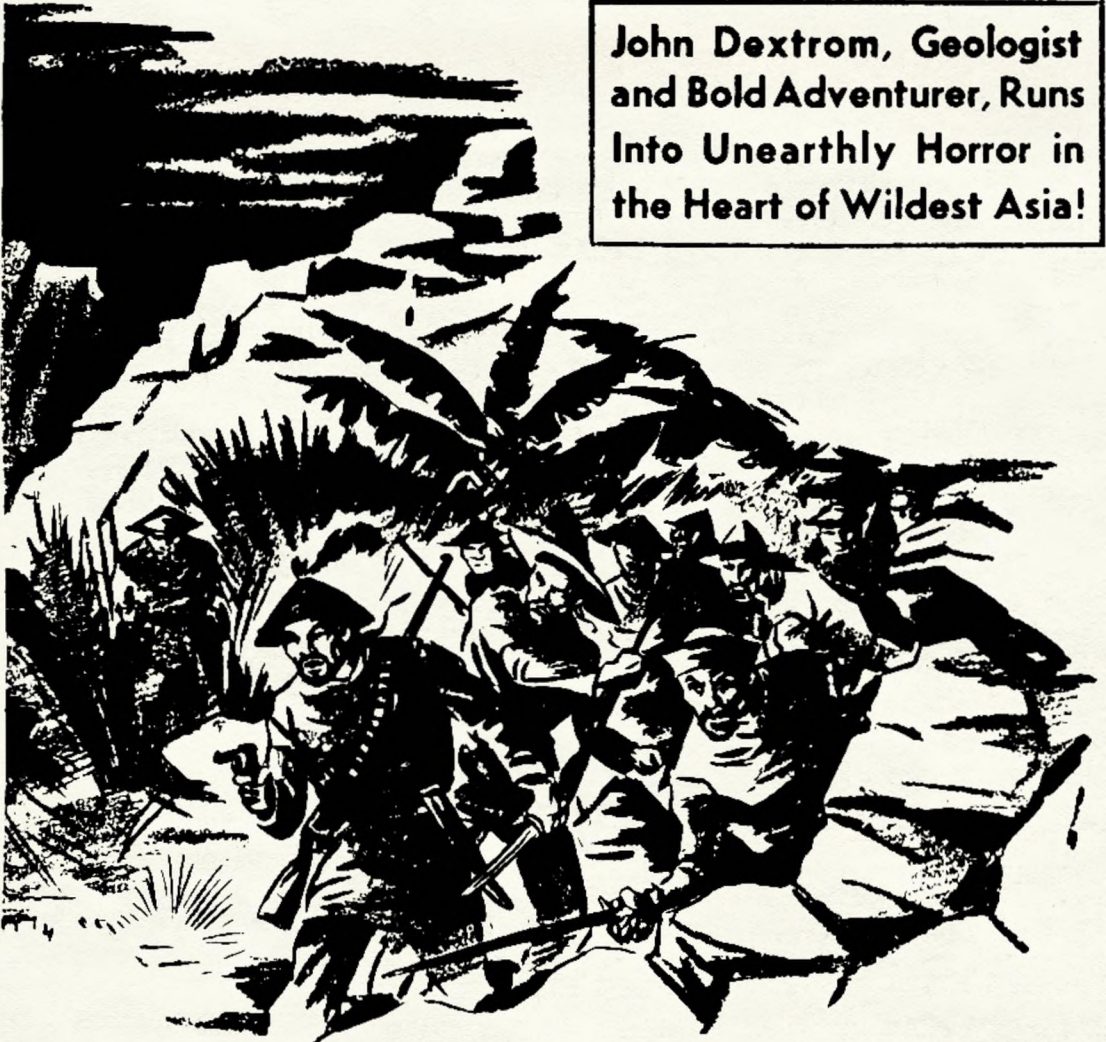
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The thing snaked toward me with paralyzing swiftness

John Dextrom, Geologist
and Bold Adventurer, Runs
Into Unearthly Horror in
the Heart of Wildest Asia!



DRAGON OF THE GOBI

By **STEWART STERLING**

Author of "The Devil's at the Door," "Shake Hands with the Butcher," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Lamaserie

YOU think I'm sun-touched, but I'm sane and sober enough. I tell you I had my fist on ten million bucks, out there in the desert. Not China dollars, either. But I

wouldn't go back after a penny of it, even if I could. Why wouldn't John Dextrom, oil expert and adventurer, go back? I'll tell you.

For twenty years I've been smelling out oil pools for the mahogany-desk boys to exploit. I haven't called many wrong turns or I wouldn't be at it, now. I found that where there's sand there's

A NOVELET OF DESERT TERROR

likely to be oil, and where the two are together, there's usually blood mixed with 'em before the liquid gold can be deposited in a bank. And there's blood enough on those red sands of the Gobi, already. I wouldn't risk any more of mine out there, though there are more riches waiting than any man could ever spend in his wildest dreams. My hair still rises at the thought of the Dragon, and I haven't quit coming out of nightmares, screaming and wet with sweat. As far as I'm concerned, the riches will stay there until the bones I buried, beside the well of the Dragon have crumbled to powder.

I don't mean any mythical monster on a Chinese flag; I mean a gigantic, hideous, blood-red creature that creeps at you like a nightmare come to life. Certainly, I saw him myself. God knows it was horrible!

Two years ago this month, I set out from Paotowchen with Lyle Merriam, F. R. G. S., and a hell of a good scout, in addition to being one of the best geologists that ever worked for the Dutch oil outfits. With us was Li Fan, my wise old number one boy, and a model '36 jalopy.

It wasn't my first trip across the Gobi. I'd been up the Kalgan-Urga Trail in '31 before the Japs were holding Shanghai and Pieping, but this time we headed due west, along the Yellow River—farther and deeper into the desert than the Andrews expedition had gone. We figured on making a hundred miles in the cool of each night, and carried gas enough for ten nights' running and food for two months.

THERE isn't any dawn, out there. Just night until the sun crawls over the rock-rim of the desert, and suddenly it's broad daylight. Our first morning out, we pulled up at a nameless lamaserie that looked like a red-and-white filling station. I parked our tin camel, pitched the sun-tent, and sent Li Fan ahead to make arrangements with the lord high muckamuck at the temple.

Along about noontime, when everything that's got more brains than a lizard stays in the shade, I dragged myself off my camp cot. Merriam was sleeping like a man who hadn't rested

in forty-eight hours. I poured a dipperful of lukewarm water out of our canvas drinking bucket and dumped it over his head.

"Up an' at 'em, Professor," I told him. "Put footie in road. Boss lama told Li Fan he'd give audience at high noon."

Merry squinted at the heat waves shimmering up from the rock floor of the desert, put on his glare goggles and peered up at a blazing sun that looked about three times its normal size.

"All right, John," he told me. "It's as high now as it'll ever get. But I don't know why the devil we have to hobnob with this high priest. He doesn't rate any title from the government, does he?"

"There isn't any government worth the grease in our gear-box out here," I answered. "Kucmintan's too busy guerill-ing Japs. Japs' puppet government in Suiyan has its hands full fighting bandits. Bandits are playing both ends against the Soviets. The only big bugs out here are the lamas. So, if we want to get to Barakh Usu, we need to get this fellow playing on our team."

While I called Li Fan, Merry ran a comb through his Vandyke. You never saw a beard like his. It was four weeks ragged and wind-bleached in the hundred-and-ten degree oven we'd traveled in from Suiyan, but Merry thought it gave him a standing with the coolies because mandarins wore beards!

When my broad-faced China boy with the coffee-colored eyes came along, we crossed the lamaserie compound, pushed aside a felt drape over a narrow door and walked into the prayer-hall without ceremony.

It was a narrow, low-ceilinged tunnel of a room. On a raised platform at the far end, stood an octagonal red box mounted on a horizontal wagon-wheel. The sides of the box were painted with Tibetan characters in black and gold. Sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the wheel was an old boy with a face so lined and seamed he looked like something unwrapped from a mummy-cloth.

Li Fan bowed three times, once for each of us and muttered something in the guttural Mongolian dialect. The

old lama answered in a voice that sounded like the squeaking of a rusty hinge.

"You travel far?" he asked us.

"Ten camel marches west of the Hwang Ho, O wise one. We come for your good counsel."

I put a silver coin on the rim of the gilt-lacquered wagon-wheel. The lama reached out a wizened claw, swept the metal into the cuff of his robe and spun the spokes slowly. I was reminded of a roulette outfit. Anyway, the thing was different from the usual cylindrical prayer-wheels.

"What do you seek?"

"Great wealth, buried deep in the ground," Li Fan told him. "Near the well at Barakh Usu."

The priest stared at us for a few seconds, while the gayly colored prayer-wheel clacked off its supplication to the dalai lama. Then he put out a hand and touched the wheel. It stopped abruptly.

"There is naught but wind and dust and death at the well of Barakh Usu," he rasped. "It is a dry cup at the end of a long journey."

I COULDN'T expect Li Fan to make him understand why two white men should want to trek half-way across the Gobi just to see if the geological formation was right for drilling petroleum wells, so I simply had our interpreter tell him we hoped to find riches where none had found them before.

The lama made that curious Mongolian gesture of putting the tips of his thumbs together and holding his fists out clenched.

"I cannot tell you how to guide your caravan toward Barakh Usu," he squeaked. "For no man who has reached there has ever returned."

That staggered us a bit. Merry'd learned about Barakh Usu from an old manuscript he'd uncovered in a monastery in the Altai range. It had mentioned the well as "the descendant of the blue mirror of heaven," which meant to us that it occupied part of the floor of a dried-up lake. A better place to prospect for a deep-strata pool couldn't be imagined, but this business about no one's knowing where Barakh

Usu was, rather floored us somewhat.

"Is it because of great danger, O Son of the Sun, that seekers of the great well fail to return?" Li Fan inquired.

The lama cackled like a malicious old bird.

"Not danger," he answered. "Death. From the creeping Dragon whose flaming eyes numb the beholder, whose scorching breath strangles all who approach." He gave the spokes of the prayer-wheel a little push. "The only living things which dare approach the well of the Dragon,"—he smiled slyly—"are the vultures."

This mummery didn't faze me. I'm used to medicine-man stuff, whether it comes from a *porro* priest on the ivory coast or an Afghan fakir. But the lama's reluctance to recommend a guide puzzled me.

Directions in the old manuscript placed the dry lake due south of the tallest peak of the Altai. All we had to do was sledge along due west, and use the sextant I had with me. But we had to have a guide, not to tell us where to go, but to keep us from having our skulls cracked while we slept. And the lama was the proper one to arrange for protection from roving bandits. I had Li Fan press him.

"Some there must be who do not fear this monster, O influential with the gods! Send us such a one and many coins will clink upon your wheel. There will be many gifts." Li Fan put his hands to his eyes, making circles with thumbs and forefingers. Mongols will trade everything they own for a pair of binoculars.

The lama's skinny hand plucked thoughtfully at his robe while he studied us, curious as to why we failed to show fear.

"There is one," he answered finally, "bolder than the wild boar, swifter than the antelope. Fear is a stranger to him. It may be he knows the direction in which the Dragon-well can be found. I will ask."

I put down enough silver to keep the prayer-wheel spinning until sundown; and we went back to our tent. While Li Fan broiled antelope steak, he told us what he'd learned in the lamaserie compound.

"Some say this Dragon is bigger

than the Great Wall, others that it is older than the desert itself."

Merriam held out a burning glass, lit his pipe from the sun.

"Sounds like a prehistoric monster. But it's utterly inconceivable that a *baluchitherium* could still exist. More likely, somebody's seen an overgrown rock lizard and built up a legend about it."

"Most likely of all," I put in, "we'll find it's a protective devil thought up by one of these mumbo-jumbos to keep strangers from molesting some treasure hidden at the well."

CHAPTER II

Desert Rescue

NEXT day we were forty miles nearer the answer to our suppositions. For the lama did send us a guide, a blue-pantalooned Mongolian in shiny black knee-boots with curled-up toes, a little conical yellow straw hat perched on his thick black hair, and a black string of chin-whisker which made Merry feel ashamed of his blond goatee. Prince Orok, he called himself. He may have been a prince at that, for he had a file of those runty little desert ponies and a crew of murderous-looking cutthroats at his back.

We made a deal. Twenty bucks in silver money, one pair of my finest-lensed night-glasses and a dollar flashlight. The flashlight clinched the bargain. Prince Orok agreed to take us within one camel march of Barakh Usu. Farther than that he could not go because of his men.

"Less than a year ago," he told Li Fan, "a caravan of twenty camels made for this well which you seek. No one has ever seen the drivers since that day, though four of the camels returned riderless after a week. Truly it must be a powerful dragon to swallow a caravan entire."

We set out together on a pitch-black night, our six-cylinder chariot bumping along over the rock floor of the desert in second gear so as not to overrun our mounted escort. It wasn't until morning, when we halted near a village

of round, felt-covered yurt huts, that I suspected something was wrong.

I had supposed the sun would rise behind us; it came up at my right elbow. While Li Fan was scouting around for drinkable water I put it to Merry.

"The beggar's doublecrossing us. We haven't made a turn for the last four hours. We've been heading due north instead of west all this time."

"This village must be Orok's bailiwick, then. Expects to hold us for ransom, I daresay. Case of fight out, eh?"

"Talk our way out if we can, Merry." I tapped the metal case that contained our auto-ordnance sub-machine gun. "Let this fellow here chatter for us, if we need to. I haven't come this far to be held up by a stinking mob of Mongolian sheep-herders."

"If we're going to make a break, the best time to make it's when the ponies are tired. Which would be right now."

"You called a card," I told him, and my mouth remained open, my eyes opening even wider. For, strolling down the gravelly road that served as the only street, came two people who might have stepped out of a taxi at Forty-second and Broadway.

The man was sixty or so, weather-tanned and a little on the thin side. He wore a linen suit and pipe-clayed helmet. I can't tell you what the girl wore. I have forgotten. But I haven't forgotten the lithe, free swing of her walk, the slow, easy friendliness of her smile or the calm directness of her eyes.

"Welcome," she called cheerily. "Welcome, fellow prisoners!"

THAT was a salutation to jar us. And we found out she wasn't fooling. She and her father—he was Dr. Evan Ethan, attached to the American Mission group at Kwangchen where Anne was acting as nurse—had come down from Paotowchen at Orok's request, to perform a serious operation on a princess of the local Mongol ruling house. When they reached this yurt village, they discovered that Orok had deliberately misled them and, though they were now treated as privileged guests, it was plain he had no intention of releasing them.

There wasn't any question of ran-

som. Orok had made it plain that Dr. Ethan could leave at any time — even offered to provide him an escort back to railhead. But Anne wasn't to go. As yet the bewhiskered bandit hadn't offered to make her Princess Orok; there were already three or four of these lurking somewhere in the evil-smelling felt huts. But his intentions were plain and, needless to say, extremely repulsive to the twenty-year-old girl.

She and her father were free to come and go as they pleased, inside village limits. Beyond those limits there were no guards—only a pack of wild Tibetan mastiffs. These wolf-fanged darlings stood almost as tall as a pony. They were fed from puppyhood on dead human flesh and had learned to like the taste of it. They weren't particular about its being dead when they start to work on it, either.

We were the first whites the Ethans had glimpsed in a month. They seemed to feel that, somehow, our being there was a hopeful sign. I knew to the contrary. Orok wouldn't have let us get anywhere near these kidnaped prisoners if he had any intention of letting any of us see civilization again.

"The treacherous devil probably feels it doesn't make much difference whether we're to die here or at the Dragon-well," grumbled Merry. "So long as we're determined to die, I suppose he feels it's foolish to make the trip to Barakh Usu and back, when he can just as well rob us and put us out of our misery here."

Dr. Ethan pricked up his ears when he heard Merriam mention the Dragon.

"I treated a man once who claimed to have seen this horrible apparition, or whatever it is," he said. "He was in the last throes of a fatal illness and kept starting up out of his delirium, screeching: 'Don't let him get me. Don't let him touch me.' If I hadn't known the man was a Mohammedan and forbidden to drink liquors, I'd have said deets. But it wasn't. He must have seen something pretty frightful to affect his mind like that."

Li Fan returned empty-handed, but full of news, which he'd overheard by pretending he couldn't understand the

Inga dialect. The prince was not going to delay any longer in the matter of Anne Ethan. He intended to seize her that night, and far from expecting Merriam and me to present any difficulties to his conquest he was arranging to use our presence in the village to make the seizure of the girl possible.

There was to be a banquet, a feast-royal of the wandering desert tribe over which Orok ruled. We were to be guests of honor, all four of us. And as the best means of disposing of Dr. Ethan, Merry and me, we were to be poisoned by the food we ate and the rice wine we drank. Afterwards, what would happen to Anne was not fit for repetition by my number one boy.

NATURALLY, we didn't intend to fall in with Orok's scheme. We held a council of war in the hut set aside for the Ethans. Li Fan stretched out in front of the door, feigning sleep, ready to warn us if they should rush us.

We decided to take the bull by the horns and make a break, getting away in the car without any delay. We didn't have enough water and there was no assurance we could outdistance Orok's pursuit, but once we'd got clear we'd at least have a fighting chance. The Ethans would have to leave everything they had brought with them. Luckily Merry and I had left most of our belongings in the jalopy. Dr. Ethan stuffed a few instruments and drugs in his coat pocket, and we got set.

We were all ready to crash out of the tent when Li Fan hissed a warning to me.

"They come, now. Twenty of them, on horseback. All with rifles. They are to escort you to the banquet."

Dr. Ethan started to shiver, though it was easily a hundred and fifteen in the shade, but Anne kept her head.

"What orders, Captain Dextrom?" she asked me calmly, her face whitening.

"Fight," snarled Merry.

"Not yet," I said. "Let's try bluff first. We'll accept the escort, but insist on paying our visit to the prince properly mounted."

"We have no horses, Captain John," Li Fan whispered.

"We're white men," I said. "We have our own metal mount. So we'll ride with proper ceremony in the car. Relax and act gay."

The ragged troop of squat, shaggy ponies and their equally unkempt riders were drawn up in a half-circle before our yurt. The doctor made heavy going of our bold front, but Anne and Merry carried it off. They laughed and joked as we strolled right up to the horsemen, nonchalantly forced them aside and meandered leisurely toward our automobile.

The leader of the troop was baffled; he hadn't been given any instructions as to how we were to be brought in. Of course, he was well aware of Orok's designs on the girl. Therefore she must not be harmed. Since she went arm-in-arm with Merry and her father, they were unwilling to chance the prince's wrath by interfering.

Those long-whiskered, cone-hatted ruffians scurried and scuttled around us on their ponies in concentric circles raising a devil of a dust and making enough noise to frighten a banshee, but they didn't quite dare to start anything.

WE got to the bus, climbed in, slammed the doors. Merry raced the motor. Some of the ponies bucked and shied when he throttled her down so she backfired once or twice. It gave me time to unlock the sub-machine gun case and get the weapon ready for action.

I put Li Fan in the front seat with Merry and Anne. Doc and I brought up the rear. I poked the nose of the fifty-shot through the back window.

"Take off!" I shouted to Merry.

When Merry let the clutch in, the leader of the bandit cavalry was not more than a dozen yards away, directly in front of us. The car leaped forward like a jack-rabbit, and that bandit's horse went away from there in one hell of a hurry. We were through the ring of horsemen and heading for the open desert before the first shot came.

I pushed down the trip of the sub-machine gun and let her stutter. At first they thought it was more backfire. They hadn't ever seen one of those lead chatterboxes in action. I picked two or three bandits out of the

saddles and then dropped a half-dozen of the ponies, more because I was afraid some stray shot might puncture a tire than because I thought they could overtake us. We could hear the whole village screaming and yelling as we got up speed.

From the shade of some trade-good boxes, where they had been resting, the pack of ugly mastiffs came streaking toward us. I gave them one burst for luck! Three of them dropped, but the rest weren't like their masters. They didn't stop. We had them trailing us for five miles before they gave up.

By that time, there was a cloud of dust on the horizon behind us and we knew the pursuit was on in full force. But the sun was already touching the rim of the desert; in a few minutes we'd have the advantage of darkness. Of course, they could follow our tire-tracks in the morning, but if nothing went wrong we should outdistance them easily by sun-up.

"Which way," called Merry over his shoulder, "back toward Paotowchen?"

"There's only one place where Orok won't be able to intercept us and where he won't dare to follow," I answered. "Make it southwest. The well at Barakh Usu."

CHAPTER III

Tragedy at the Lake Bed

TWO nights we traveled so. During the day we rested. From an hour after sunrise the Fahrenheit was never under a hundred until sunset and never above fifty after an hour of dark. We were climbing steadily up the high shelf of the Tibetan plateau. We held ourselves to a cup of water every twenty-four hours, and we slept cramped up in the car for fear of having to make a sudden start.

Then the wind rose and, with it, dust. You've never seen dust till you've run into one of those Gobi blind-storms. Day darker than night. You can see through the dark with your headlights, but you can't see through a fog of pulverized red sand.

It was when I took my twelve o'clock

star shots on the third night that we reached the line due south of the Bogu Altai. We stopped where we were. It was good we did so. Another mile would have run us over the side of a great series of stairlike cliffs, dropping giant-step by giant-step to a dry lake-bed a thousand feet below.

We drove to the rim in the morning and looked down into what must be the largest natural amphitheater in the world. Half the people in New York could have crowded on those mammoth rock ledges and gazed clear down to the very bottom of what had once been an enormous lake. There, like an emerald at the bottom of a bowl, was the well of Barakh Usu.

There was no mistaking it—the only green spot we'd seen in two hundred miles of dirty brown desert brush and red gravel. There were trees and grass, and a blue pool of water, maybe fifty feet across.

I figured we could rest up a couple of days and then head southeast and so avoid the prince's vengeance. In a few days we should hit the valley of the Yellow River, and Anne and her father would be safe.

We couldn't drive down to the well. We didn't dare to leave any of our party up here. And we *had* to get to that water.

It took us half a heart-breaking day under the furnace blast of that merciless sun, but we got down. We rolled in the lush grass, drank our fill of water, and saw no sign of any dragon.

Unless the thing Merriam found on the wall of the cliff facing the edge of the pool could be called that. It was the fossil imprint of the largest beast that ever walked the face of the earth. Merry went into detail about the humerus and the radius of the *baluchitherium*. Doctor Ethan estimated its length as twenty feet and its height as more than twice that of the largest elephant. The creature must have been as big as a two-story house when he lived, fifty million years ago.

We knew that such a monstrosity had been dead long before man appeared on earth, but there was a brooding, electric feel to the very atmosphere which was stifling, deadly. It made you want to scream.

"There's your dragon," whispered Anne. "I don't wonder these superstitious Mongols are afraid of him. He's terrifying enough—even in stone."

BUT it didn't seem to me any fossil remains could have thrown a scare into those hard-bitten hunters of the desert, the sinister slit-throats of Prince Orok's crew. And I was right.

For I was checking my sextant figures at sundown when I heard Li Fan cry out in terror from beside the well.

"Quick! Captain John," he screamed. "Come quick!"

I sprinted to that pool in nothing flat. My forty-five was in my hand, believe me.

But there was nothing there, nothing except the grotesque shadow Li Fan made as he crouched doglike on hands and knees in the long grass at the edge of the water's mirror surface.

"I have seen it," he shrieked, and every muscle in his body trembled as if he had the ague. "Only one minute ago, it was there—high in the cliff." He pointed to a vast, black cave entrance some thirty feet above our heads. "Red as blood gushing from a dying man's mouth, it was, Captain John." His voice trailed away feebly, and he slumped to the ground in a dead faint.

I picked him up, yelling hastily to the others who were searching for fuel along the base of the sheer cliff.

"There's nothing there, Li Fan," I calmed him when he came to. "Look up for yourself. Nothing moving at all. What's the matter with you, boy?"

Feebly he pointed overhead at the cave entrance.

"I saw it!" His breath came in a shrill whistle of sheer panic. "Bigger than the one that is dead, there in the stone. Its head like the snake which sleeps in the rice beds, its eyes—ah!" He pawed the air helplessly, babbled in his native tongue so that I couldn't understand.

He never spoke anything else that was understandable, for he fell into a coma and died just an hour before dawn.

We buried him quickly, before the vultures got wind of him. The Mongols never bury their dead; they place their nude bodies on the rear of a two-

wheeled cart and jounce over the rubble-strew desert, leaving the carcass to fall where it will.

But Li Fan had been more than a body servant to me; he'd been a friend in many a long pull and close call. I'm not ashamed of the lump that was in my throat when I piled the last rock on top of his crypt.

We were all under a strain. Our conversation was jerky and irritable, the way men talk when nerves are taut.

Anne thought Li Fan might have been somehow poisoned in Orok's village, but the doctor shook his head.

"There was paralysis, right enough, which might have come from a drug, but there was a high fever which couldn't have. His heart action went up incredibly. I've never diagnosed a death as due to sheer fright, but I believe that's what killed Li Fan."

I didn't quite agree, but I didn't contradict. The doctor couldn't have understood how many times Li Fan and I had walked together in the valley of the shadow and been unafraid. He had no nerves, that yellow-skinned friend of mine. If he was terrified out of his senses, I for one was certain there was a reason for it.

"There's something jolly queer about this place," Merry said. "It didn't get its evil reputation for nothing. Old Li Fan *did* see something. I'm convinced. There's just the barest possibility that there may be—something in that cave which no man alive has ever seen before. Some throw-back into the dim mists of unrecorded time—" He stood up from our little campfire of antelope chips, tightened his belt, patted his hip holster: "I've done a bit of cliff-climbing, one time and another. I believe I'll just have a look-see up there."

He went up, too. Anne tried to talk him out of it, but there wasn't any stopping my British partner.

I wouldn't let him go alone, of course. But there was only one place where it was possible to climb that steep, vertical wall of crumbling sandstone.

So it was agreed Merry should go first, while I stood back fifty feet from the face of the ledge, covering him with my rifle. I didn't dare trust the sub-machine gun at that range. It was no good for accurate shooting.

Merriam waited until the first quarter of the sun's disk had inched above the horizon, then started up with his geologist's pick in his hands and his sixteen-millimeter camera slung over his shoulder. That was like Merry, planning to take a few feet of film of whatever ghastly sight should meet his eyes.

He climbed easily, chiseling out steps where there was no foothold, clinging to the face of that wall of red stone like a lizard. He finally got his hands to the lip of the cave floor, pulled up to his elbows and hung there a moment looking into that impenetrable blackness. For a long minute there was no sound except the rustling of the grass at my feet.

"For God's sake," I shouted. "What do you see?"

He waved a hand at me, as if warning me to be still. He swung a knee to the cave mouth. I could see him go rigid with shock, set my sight over his right shoulder, watched him fumble with the mechanism of the movie camera. He got it whirring but, even as he did, he recoiled as if there were a deadly viper before him on the cave floor. If there had been, of course, I couldn't see it from my lower angle. He staggered to his feet, lurched dizzily, and before any of us could yell a warning, stumbled backward off the cliff.

It didn't kill him. He had a broken clavicle, the doctor reported—but it might better have been a broken neck. Merry had gone clean out of his head. He was stark, raving mad. He moaned strange gibberish about a snake head.

". . . dozen eyes . . . scorpion's tail . . . on the film . . . it's all there . . . red . . . those tentacles—"

DOCTOR ETHAN did his best. Anne nursed Merry like a staff of nurses all through that fearful day. But he never came out of his delirium, never ceased his lunatic descriptions of the thing he had seen. There wasn't much I could do. I tried to pull him out of it. I stood back from the cave mouth and blasted a full clip of forty-fives into that unfathomable gloom.

"I've killed it," I reported to him, hoping he'd noticed the shots and would believe I'd finished the Thing he was afraid of.

He paid no attention, just rambled on.

"Estimate sixty feet in length, at least . . . pinkish, spiny back . . . no known species . . . perfectly frightful. . . ."

I wandered around the bottom of that lake basin like a mad man myself, trying to think up some way to jolt Merry out of his stupor of fear. I saw enough to do it, too. I rushed back to where Anne was holding a water compress on his forehead.

"Merry!" I shouted. I wasn't faking enthusiasm this time, you can be sure. "There's oil here! Millions in oil! No mistake about it—under this whole lake bed. Either this is the biggest pool man ever tapped or I ought to go back to hoisting drill rods. It's tremendous, Merry—we're made, you hear? All the money you'll ever need, Merry."

He looked up at me without even seeing me.

When I close my own eyes for the last time I know what I shall see—that look of unbelievable, uncontrollable horror deep in Merry's staring pupils.

He shook his head a little, rolled over on one side. Then his pulse simply stopped.

That settled it. We had to get out of there, the faster the better.

Say all you like about the psychological effect of such things. The truth is, all three of us were feeling very ragged as we made a second mound of rocks beside Li Fan's burial place. I don't think we bothered to discuss it, but the minute we finished our unhappy task we started back on the gruelling climb up those shelving cliffs on the opposite side of the lake.

The sun was boring down with a heat that was like a tangible burden. We had no business moving in the middle of the day, but neither Doctor Ethan nor Anne complained at the pace I set. I wanted to get back to our car, to get the gears in motion and roll away from the well of Barakh Usu—fast!

I might come back, I thought—some-time. There was oil here, right enough. Perhaps the richest pool since the Mesopotamian wells came in. But right now I wanted to get that girl and her father out of the valley of the Dragon! For the moment I'd completely forgotten about Prince Orok!

The sun was almost at the meridian altitude when Anne called to me sharply. You can imagine what I was afraid of, but she wasn't looking at anything nearby. She was pointing in the opposite direction from the cave, at the top lip of the last ledge.

Racing toward us was a pack of those hideous, runty Mongolian ponies, only they were larger than camels and the men on their backs were ten feet tall. A mirage, of course. The dust-filled air from that sand-storm refracted the light across long miles of desert. And brought Prince Orok and his gang of mounted ruffians into our vision!

For the briefest fraction of a second, there flashed through my mind the supposition that perhaps the Thing that had scared the senses out of Merry and Li Fan was also a mirage. Then my reason got its grip. You don't have mirages in caves, or in half-light. Besides, my partner had known all about the tricks of desert air; he wouldn't have been fooled by anything like that.

The doctor laughed uneasily at the monstrous procession of mounted figures which, even as we gazed, wavered, grew faint, and vanished.

"If we can see them," he asked, "the question is, can they see us?"

"No," I said, "light's in the wrong direction. We'll get away before they're within eye-shot."

But we didn't. For once, the dust-protector I put around the air intake of the carburetor, hadn't worked. The line was clogged!

CHAPTER IV

The Dragon of Barakh Usu

IN our dire need and my desperate haste, I made matters worse. Three long hours I sweated over that blistering metal, with the sun beating down on my back like a hammer and the buzz of the sand flies roaring in my ears.

I got it fixed at last. But, even so, I had to nurse the motor along. We got under way, but we hadn't covered more than three miles when there was a swirl of dust over the top of a rise a quarter-mile ahead, and there was

Orok and his blood-thirsty horde. Riding at us, hell for leather. The prince was in the lead. He had peacock plumes fixed to his hat, which meant that he was out for gore. They yelled at sight of us like a pack of jackals, wasting cartridges long before they were in reasonable range.

"Let me drive," begged Anne. "You and Dad will have other things to do."

We did have. Doctor Ethan took the Mannlicher while I tested the mechanism of the fifty-shot. And then that heart-breaking motor began to cough and splutter and buck. For one nerve-racking moment it stopped completely. Anne got it going again, but we weren't sure of it for one second. We couldn't have outdistanced a lame goat with the car staggering along that way.

There wasn't anything to do except to turn and dash back for the well. There, at least, we'd have our backs against a good solid rock wall, and there'd be water enough to let us stand a siege. There, too, perhaps we'd be safe from the Mongol and his men. Maybe they knew better than to want a close look at the dragon that had already cost two of our party their lives.

We got back to the rim of the bowl—just barely! We tumbled out of the car, and I scattered those ravening wolves with a drumful of hot lead. We half-tumbled, half-jumped down over the ledges toward that little spot of green grass and blue water far below.

We had a break then, only I hadn't thought about it before. The Mongols couldn't ride down those ledges any more than we could drive. What was more important, once off their ponies, those black-haired, russet-faced devils were practically cripples. Those curly-toed, high-heeled shoes tripped them, made them run with a choppy, tied-in stride. We beat them to the well, hands down.

We had a ready-made fort waiting for us, two stone mounds of our own making. They did double duty now, serving as breastworks. I gave Anne my pistol with instructions as to where to put the last cartridge—if it came to that. Then, we piled up a few more chunks of sand-stone and shale between the two graves and prepared to shoot it out if they should dare to come closer.

Only one of them did, the prince.

There wasn't anything of the coward in that fellow's makeup, for I could've potted him through the short ribs easily with the Mannlicher. I think he knew it and took the gamble, anyway.

He shouted at us hoarsely. Doctor Ethan understood him a little, enough to make out that Orok offered free conduct to Anne's father and to me if we would turn her over to him.

I put a slug in the dust at his feet for an answer. The yellow man went berserk with rage and frustration. He fell flat on his face, howled frenzied commands at his men. They were afraid to come closer to us and, consequently, to the well, but they were more afraid of what Orok would do to them if they held back.

THEY spread out and started to close in on our flanks. They kept snaking in toward our rock-fort, creeping closer here, making a tentative dash there. The doc and I did our best to discourage them. We got three, cold. Doc took a rock sliver through the flesh of his cheek, but we had no other casualties.

We slowed them up, but we couldn't stop them. I knew that the moment it was dark there would be a rush. I would get some of them, maybe a good many. The doctor would kill a few more, but there were too many of the brutes. There could only be one end—our bones left for the vultures to pick clean and Anne in Orok's filthy hands or dead with us.

I put it up to them, flatly. "We have no chance at all this way. There might be one other."

Anne knew what I meant.

"The cave? Why not? Let's try it," she said bravely.

Doctor Ethan agreed. "Whatever it is—up there, it can't be any worse than what's going to happen to us down here."

I thought that, too, and we made our plan. The instant it was dark the doctor would go up the cliff first, Anne would follow while I held the bandits off. The Ethans were to wait for me at the rim of the cliff and together we'd face whatever was hidden in the back of that cave.

Now that our minds were made up we were eager to make the try, but it seemed hours before the sun sank back of those ledges opposite. It mushroomed out in the last instant, as if a giant thumb had squashed it down against the horizon like an orange balloon.

"Go!" I snapped at the doctor, and he started up the cliff.

The Mongols howled savagely, sent bullets spattering against the rock. I emptied half a drum at the encircling horde. I heard Anne scramble up the first few feet of the cliff.

And then, *I saw it!*

To say I couldn't believe my eyes wouldn't be putting it half strong enough. I thought I was losing my mind. I squeezed the stock of the gun tight against my cheek, to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

It's pretty hard to describe something that's utterly different from anything you have ever seen or heard about. And that's what this incredible Thing was! It came slithering through the grass where the last rays of light glinted on the surface of the pool. It was about the length of a railroad car and as big around, but I had the feeling that I wasn't seeing all of it, even so—that it was still emerging from the pool where it had been hidden.

It was exactly the color of blood. It had a head that looked like some monstrous insect's, dozens of protruding eyes, a fringe of writhing, whip-like tentacles around a serpentine snout. It had no legs at all, but hundreds of short, stubbly pink excrescences that kept swelling and deflating as it moved toward me. The whole creature looked hideously bloated. I had the sensation of seeing, *inside* its hideous, half-transparent body, the half-digested things it had taken into that obscene maw.

I heard high-pitched shouting and realized I, myself, was yelling in a frenzy of fear. The Thing snaked toward me with paralyzing swiftness, writhed and twisted until I couldn't see anything except that puffy, translucent body.

I remember wondering whether my muscles would coordinate when my mind ordered them to depress the trip of the sub-machine gun. They did. The

roar of the gun sounded in my ears like a dozen men firing at once. I felt a scorching weight on the top of my head plunging me forward on my face, with the gun still spewing flame. A deadening, crushing force bore down on me, suffocated me, blotted out all power of resistance.

I have a recollection of struggling under a terrifically oppressive, slimy heat, of becoming gradually weaker, until I was conscious of being thrust alive into a searing flame. . . .

MY recollection wasn't altogether wrong, either, because the heat had been there and the weight and the slimy wetness.

I came to my senses long before I dared to open my eyes. I was being tossed in a sea of nausea. My head felt completely empty. It took a long time for each separate thought and sensation to function.

When I did open my eyes, I was in the back seat of the car with my head in Anne Ethan's lap, and a soaking towel over my forehead. We were jolting along through the desert night.

I couldn't find my voice for a while, but I could listen, and Anne told me:

"You've been unconscious for three days and nights. You've had a terrible fever. You're very weak, and you've got to lie perfectly still until we get somewhere to put you in a hospital."

Well, I couldn't lie still. I was too surprised to find that I was still alive, too concerned to know what had happened, especially about that marrow-chilling Thing that gave me the eternal shudders. It took me a long while to piece it together.

Anne told me how Orok and his men had rushed our redoubt just as she climbed the cliff to the cave. How, at the last minute, when they were virtually on top of me, I stood up and blasted away with the sub-machine gun, killing and wounding a good half of them. Orok died practically at my feet. Anne's father had gained the cave mouth by then and was firing down at them from above. Leaderless, many of them wounded, and so close to the cave that had been long a place of fear and terror, the bandits broke and fled.

For a day and night the Ethans

couldn't believe the Mongols had really gone. Then, with prodigious effort, they dragged me bodily up those shelving ledges, put me in the car and got it moving. The doctor had dosed me, and Anne had nursed me, night and day, all that time.

We were within a few miles of the Yellow River when I came to.

"But in the name of all that's good," I begged, "tell me what I saw! What was that Thing?"

Doc Ethan stopped the car.

"There wasn't anything in the cave, of course, Captain Dextrom, even though Li Fan and Merriam saw the same Thing you saw. Went out of their minds with it—lost their lives to it."

"But, Doc," I pleaded. "What—"

"The smallest living thing in all the world," he answered. "A germ. A single microscopic organism that floated slowly across the retina of one of your infected eyes at just the moment when your pupils, contracted by the bright sunlight, began to expand in the half-light of dawn or sunset."

I shook my head. "It wasn't anything like that. It was there! I—I saw it."

"Of course you did," he agreed. "Just as much as you see me now, or Anne there, and just as truly. Only, because this particular infection attacked your eyes first of all, and because of its position across the focal axis of the delicate

camera mechanism of your eye, it was magnified billions of times, while normal objects remained unaffected in your vision. The germ's image was superimposed on your visual sensory nerves, and was quite as real as anything you ever saw before."

I TRIED to ask questions, but Anne put a hand over my mouth. The doctor went on:

"Sometime, under the slide of a high-powered microscope, you may be able to see that monster again. For I have taken a serum of your blood. If the germ lives, I will have run down the terrible, though tiny, assassin that took the lives of those who drank the water at that ancient well of Barakh Usu. Some obscure form of Asiatic cholera, I should say—perhaps one of the plague germs that once devastated half of Asia. Anne and I were lucky. We must be immune to that form of cholera."

I wouldn't know about that, of course. I don't even care to look through a microscope's eye-piece on the chance I might see that Thing again. All I know is that somewhere west of the Yellow River and south of the Altai—maybe covered under a hundred feet of drift-sand by now—are millions of dollars worth of petroleum.

I wouldn't go back to get a single penny's worth of it! Don't blame me, do you?

Next Issue: Novelets by JOHN COLEMAN BURROUGHS and JANE RALSTON BURROUGHS—SAM MERWIN, JR.—and THORP McCLUSKEY—Plus Many Other Stories

College Humor

15

THE BEST COMEDY IN AMERICA

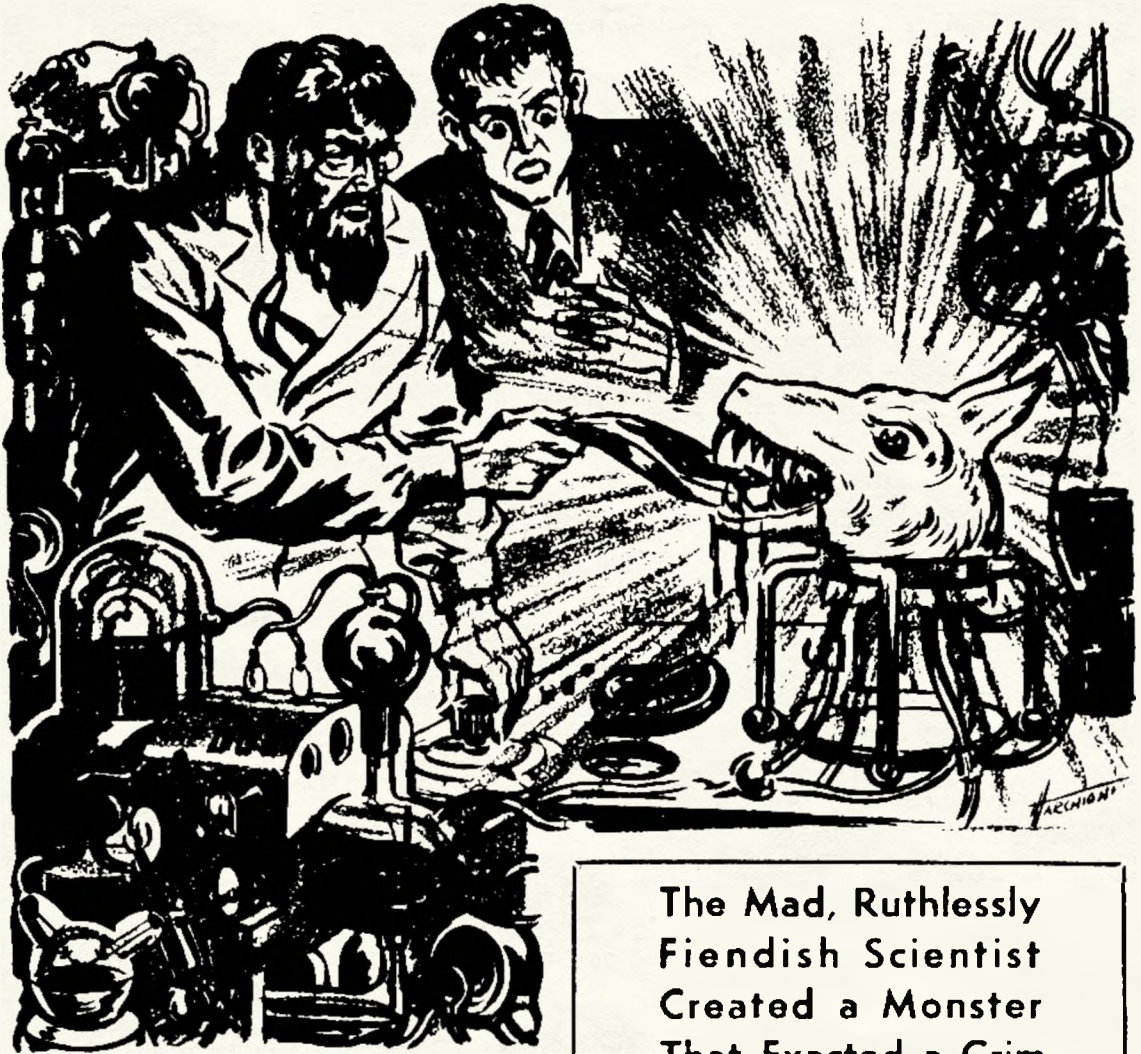
FICTION • SATIRE • CARTOONS

ON SALE EVERYWHERE!

I FOUND DOCTOR MOROKOFF!

By DAVID BERNARD

Author of "Dread Command," etc.



The head of the bodiless dog snapped at the meal

The Mad, Ruthlessly
Fiendish Scientist
Created a Monster
That Exacted a Grim
Toll From Humanity!

FOUR men were involved in this story. Two lie dead in the southern part of British Guiana, their hideously slashed bodies bearing testimony to my story. The third one is alive, but he shrieks uncontrollably whenever the merest mention is made of his experience. It would not surprise me in the least to learn that

he's now in some asylum for the mad. God knows I don't relate this from any desire to shock and horrify, as I have been shocked and horrified. I got mixed up in the sorry affair because the Associated Press had me working on the north coast of South America at the time the *Globe* began its campaign to "Find Doctor Morokoff."

With the *Globe* making this cynical, cold-blooded old Russian into an altruistic research worker having only mankind on his mind, public opinion soon had him tagged as a scientific Livingstone. My boss made me into the necessary "Stanley."

Morokoff, with an assistant, had settled somewhere in the desolate region of the white Indians in British Guiana. The *Globe* hinted at the doctor's capture, possible torture and murder at the hands of the savages.

I had accompanied Roth, the discoverer of these strange people. I knew the Waiwais (that's the name, meaning "tapioca," given them by their dusky brethren) to be friendly, honest, poverty-ridden, and on their way out as a human species. By boat and burro I reached the settlement of their miserable huts, three days south from Georgetown.

One thing I learned from the Waiwais was that they were scared stiff. Until two days before my arrival, they had glimpsed a strange white man who kept his face shielded by his upraised cloak, scurrying like some hunted beast through the adjacent forest. I gathered from their dialect that the stranger had been watching them. Then he had evidently departed, heading north-by-west through the dangerous jungle.

I sensed a red-hot yarn in this mysterious white man, searching for something or someone in that uninhabited area. It seemed far-fetched, but I could not help thinking that he and Dr. Morokoff were somehow connected. This belief was strengthened when I learned from one old Waiwai that the cabin of the strange bearded man with his many animals and frightening noises lay off to the northwest on one of the branches of the Esse-qui-bo.

Rigged out in storm boots and breeches, carrying knapsack and canteen, I made my way on foot. At times I had to hack my way through the heavy vegetation. At other times I made my way unimpeded along hot, dry, virgin desert that took its toll in fatigue and thirst. I had estimated three hours, the Waiwais four. They were right.

WHAT kind of man would bury himself so far from civilization? Well, Morokoff had had dozens of personal battles with fellow-scientists, whom he openly accused of stealing his ideas and processes. Such suspicion might account for his isolation. Then, too, he had gone in for some pretty disgusting vivisection, and that was the cause of a whole anti-vivisection movement.

I recalled reading in college his treatises on Pain—which he boasted were all derived from objective study and thorough observation. The subjects treated were human as well as animal. The publication of this study was followed by Morokoff's banishment from Venezuela, where he had isolated himself for years.

Remember the photos one newspaper published? There was that one of him smiling proudly through his thick, Mephistophelian beard, while monstrosities capered awkwardly on the ground before him—Dogs, crawling helplessly on amphibian legs . . . Large rats, with teeth growing from their hind quarters—these were the fruits of this surgeon's perverted genius. They were derided as fantastic trickery, but all of them were later verified by modern pioneers in the field of organ grafting.

Then, after another long period of isolation, an ugly rumor came from Mexico. Morokoff had revived a dead man! But when he fled the police, he left behind him a man who had been driven insane.

Weary and sweat-soaked, I reached the cabin I was seeking. There, in the utter seclusion of heavy thicket, a laboratory with the fullest equipment had been rigged up, with suitable living-quarters attached. Three men I found there—and horror unforgettable. But the three men and the horror have no meaning without the background.

This is what I gleaned from the unfortunates, particularly the man working with the doctor as his assistant. This is the story I found when I found Dr. Morokoff.

* * * * *

Night after night, in his secluded retreat not very far from Constancia

in southernmost Mexico, the great physiologist, Sandor Morokoff, would din this into the ears of his two young assistants.

"The heart stops beating, and we say death has occurred. In truth, death does not occur until the body's cells begin to break up, decay. I tell you, this often does not happen until long after the heart has stopped beating!"

That evening in 1926, it was Sergei who sat with Morokoff, listening to the doctor's harsh voice. He was staring helplessly into those hypnotizing little eyes, watching them glow as the doctor rasped on.

"Countless times I have removed the stopped hearts of so-called dead animals, massaged them into activity, and replaced them. Thus I restored the dead to life. Why not try it with a higher creature—with man?"

A sudden blast rocked the small house, hurling Sergei and Morokoff from their chairs.

"Caspard — in the laboratory!" gasped Sergei, pulling himself up.

"Fooling again with my chemicals!" shouted Morokoff.

He led the race to the laboratory. The door was unhinged from the incredibly violent explosion. The interior was choked with dense, hissing fumes that defied them to rescue the poor devil lying inside.

"Acid!"

Sergei coughed spasmodically, shoved back by the biting fumes. Morokoff held a handkerchief over his nose and throat. He plunged through the room, kicking out each window. The fulminating clouds swirled out. And there on the floor lay Caspard.

They carried him into the adjoining surgical room. Morokoff put on the light. Sergei, staring at Caspard, screamed with naked horror.

Caspard's skin was a mass of hideous gashes and burns. But it was his face that nauseated Sergei and Sergei had no weak stomach.

Mutilated and seared, it was a ghastly, blistered, discolored face that was not a face! Shuddering, Sergei put a finger to Caspard's pulse. He murmured in thankful prayer as he found not a trace of heart-beat.

"Dead — far better dead!"

Morokoff brushed him aside to make his own examination. Abruptly he faced Sergei, a curious glint in his close-set eyes.

"Dead, yes! But only to our examination. One minute ago he was breathing, alive. Is that not so?" His voice rose with repressed excitement. "Only the heart has stopped!"

At his command, Sergei helped Morokoff place Caspard atop the table.

"Adjust this lamp above him," the doctor rasped. "Prepare antiseptic."

As he had done for years, Sergei obeyed dumbly. Morokoff began laying out surgical instruments and carefully filled hypodermic syringes near the table. Not until then did Sergei realize the soul-shaking intent of the doctor.

Sergei protested, only to have his words ignored, then silenced by the angry outburst of his master. Gaping in horror, Sergei watched Morokoff cut through the abdomen. As in a nightmare, he obeyed each command grunted at him by the surgeon.

A BOXLIKE contrivance was placed near the hip of the prostrate Caspard. Methodically, Morokoff cut through the pericardium, the two-layered sack in which the heart is contained. Then, in a swift series of moves, he buried the hypodermic needle in the left ventricle, emptied the syringe of adrenalin. With a lunge he pressed a switch on the box, which Sergei had fastened by two wires to Caspard's large sciatic nerve.

As one fondling a delicate pet, Morokoff began to massage the exposed heart. A tremor coursed up and down Caspard's body.

With a sudden cry, Morokoff carefully replaced the heart in the pericardial folds. Sergei tottered dizzily against the wall. His master proceeded grimly to the precise completion of the bizarre operation.

Breathing hard, a full hour later, Morokoff stiffened suddenly. He turned to Sergei, his sallow face lighting with a smile that would do credit to Satan himself.

"Examine the pulse now, Sergei."

Sergei's clammy, quivering fingers

pressed upon the dead man's radial artery. Something beat against his touch, faint, irregular, but indisputable.

"He—he lives!"

"Because," came the cold, assured response, "he never truly died. Only the heart. We must be vigilant or it will stop again, this time for good. We shall feed him through the veins, and inject adrenalin and those other endocrine extracts I have prepared. Now we must give close care to his wounds and burns."

UNTIL then, Sergei had followed Morokoff's orders. But now he grabbed the doctor by the sleeve.

"Almighty God!" he cried. "He may live, he may walk again. What have you done? He looks like a gargoyle! Surely he would have chosen to stay dead, rather than live, mutilated and hideous—"

"Sentimental fool!" Morokoff snapped. "Did I not respond to what my slobbering critics call humane instinct? I saved his life." He paused, a half-smile on his thin lips. "By fortunate coincidence, Caspard thus became my first human subject. This experiment is so close to me that it is my very life!" he cried loudly, pounding the table with his palm. "But do not worry, Sergei. Caspard will never know the ultimate outcome."

"He will if he survives."

"Ignoramus! Is it this poorly that I have taught you? Have you forgotten that the blood carries oxygen to the cells and takes waste products away from them? Within nine seconds after death, the nerve cells instantly deteriorate. Caspard's brain, therefore, will be considerably damaged."

"Then he will be—"

"Deranged? Assuredly so. To what extent of course depends upon the resistance of the cells, and on other factors." Morokoff shrugged. "What use to speculate?"

Sergei fell back, aghast.

"You knew all this—and yet—"

"Shut up!" Morokoff moved as if to punch his assistant, who retreated, cowering despite his superior build. "Sentimental child! If he survives, he will prove my theory at which my high-

minded jackass scientists sneer today. But more, he will prove by his condition that what we need for this work is a perfusion pump. We need a machine to keep blood circulating, while we work to restore the pulse and respiration. Then the brain cells would not be damaged. We need an artificial heart-and-lung machine. Some day, perhaps, eh?"

Weeks passed into months. Caspard lived—semi-human, deformed in body and mind. Death had injured his brain cells. But as time went on brief periods of sanity raised the fog that squatted on his brilliant scientific mind. Then Caspard, realizing what had been done to him, would go into a fearful, murderous rage, screaming his hatred for Dr. Morokoff. When this amazing resurgence of sanity occurred the second time, Morokoff turned Caspard over to the police.

Caspard waved his fists, shrieking as five officers dragged him off to the asylum.

"You're not through with me, Morokoff! We will meet again. You did this to me, Morokoff—but you'll pay. You'll pay! I'm coming for you, Morokoff—"

And then clarity faded. His tirade choked off in a blood-chilling cackle of mindless laughter.

"I will not make that mistake the next time," Morokoff commented.

But his calloused nature had not been much affected by the ghastly result. Morokoff was already prepared to leave Mexico when the authorities came to investigate the cause of Caspard's appearance. With Sergei, Morokoff fled from the country. He spent some time in Europe, and then returned to the United States.

Morokoff's income increased. One by one, his startling experiments were corroborated by advancing research. His once-derided texts became increasingly popular in the schools. His passion, now, was the need he had perceived after the Caspard experiment. But none of the models he constructed, nor any of the artificial heart apparatus he was shown in the laboratories of Europe, proved of any great worth.

At various laboratories, Morokoff studied and scoffed at what he heard and saw while journeying through the

United States. Here, however, he gathered the information that led him to the greatest triumph of his brilliant, perverted career.

More jealous of his secrets than ever, he sought out the isolation of British Guiana. And when he was working in the cabin laboratory, upon the final stages of his new achievement, not even Sergei was permitted to enter the room. Some five years had passed since the ill-starred experiment in Mexico. Then, after long, anxious months, Morokoff called Sergei into his private laboratory.

ALONG the tables lined with experimental animals, Morokoff led his helper. Then he pointed.

Affixed to a traylike stand was a dog. Rather *the head of a dog!* From the neck several thin rubber tubes coiled, making contact with a curious glass and metal machine that stood on the floor nearby. Through its almost countless tubes, a familiar crimson fluid streamed, to the accompaniment of a rhythmic chugging and hissing.

"See!" Morokoff pointed to the eyes of the dog. Sergei had already perceived a faint twitching in the closed lids. "Ten days I have kept it alive like this!"

He pinched one ear. It withdrew. A pull on one lid started a spasm of blinking. The eye opened, then the other, staring emptily. Morokoff hissed as Sergei gaped.

"Severed completely from the body, but the main blood vessels are connected here." He pointed to the glass machine that all the while kept up its chugging and hissing.

"This is my triumph—the Heart of Dr. Morokoff! Electricity operates it. Here, the eccentric wheel of this motor pumps the dog's blood—which I drained into the machine—through these glass tubes. Here, where it hisses—this is the breathing part, the lung. The blood is bluish as it leaves the head. But as it passes the lung part, it becomes reddish, charged with oxygen. Now look, Sergei!"

Morokoff took a small piece of meat from the table, put it to the dog's nose. The nose wrinkled, the head quivered. Slowly, with what seemed terrible ef-

fort, the jaws parted, snapping together as the meat was pushed into the mouth. The head gulped, and Sergei gulped also as the meat slipped out of the severed throat and fell to the tray. Morokoff snickered.

"God Almighty!" wheezed Sergei. "You have hardened me to your experimentation. But this, what can be its possible purpose?"

"Purpose?" shrilled Morokoff. "Purpose? Fool! What do I live for? To demonstrate my skill and power, to satisfy curiosity without which I would rather be dead!" He paused a moment. "Well, if you would talk of purpose—Is not this another milestone in the achievement of my purpose? Have I not striven for years to restore the dead to life?"

"The dog whose head you see here was etherized, and I drained its blood, though first mixing it with Germanin, the chemical used to prevent coagulation of blood. I removed heart and lungs, connecting the main arteries to the machine and mixing the blood in the machine with soluble food elements. With the machine pumping, as it is now, every vital function was awakened in the dog. I have demonstrated the full efficiency of my machine. By successively removing parts until only this head remains, I have proved what my books long ago maintained. An animal can exist as mere brain.

"So, you see, thus far my work has been successful. But the crowning step is next."

A peculiar glint had come into Morokoff's eyes as he spoke. He leered triumphantly at the wide-mouthed Sergei.

"What do you mean?" Sergei asked uneasily, backing away.

"I need a larger animal," Morokoff said advancing. His lips parted in what seemed to Sergei a hungry grimace. "A mammal higher in the scale of evolution than a dog. The Heart of Morokoff is without a discoverable flaw. But as a man of science, I can not *know* until I have kept alive a highly complex organism—a man!"

Sergei gasped as if invisible, irresistible hands had grasped his throat. Frantically, he turned and ran from the laboratory.

Through a tortured, sleepless night

he stayed locked in his room. Wild visions tortured Sergei—Morokoff and his mad quest—Caspard, horribly disfigured in the Mexican asylum in Mexico—

But the doctor remained closeted within the laboratory.

With the approach of the next evening, Sergei decided to leave the man forever.

He had completed packing, when he heard the door of his room closed stealthily behind him. He stiffened. A hard round weapon jabbed into his back. A treble voice cut at him from behind.

"Not a sound, Sergei, or I will shoot you!"

Sergei shook as one with a deathly chill.

"Caspard!" he cried, without turning around.

"Silence!" came the stern retort. "I will not warn again."

But Sergei whirled around, gasped into the face of Caspard. Hands pressed to his eyes to blot out that unspeakably hideous visage, he sank limply down upon the bed. An insane giggle slipped past Caspard's lips.

"You!" Sergei stammered, gaining some degree of control. "How?"

"They said I was sane!" hissed Caspard, putting his frightful face close to Sergei's. "Money—I had some left to give them. That helped. But I have mastered this to a great extent. Yes, the doctors were amazed at my change—though it keeps creeping back, again and again—

"But the will, Sergei! That's what did it. That's what kept me fighting, kept me from killing my cursed self. One thing, one objective, one day to live for. Now—He's in the laboratory, isn't he?"

Sergei shook his head. Caspard waved the pistol at him.

"Don't lie to me, Sergei! I've been watching this cabin for days now. I've watched him at work through the window at the far side. It's not shaded at the top. For months I followed you, always just a step behind. I will not give up after these years of waiting, waiting and praying! Now I will present myself to the master who taught me so well."

Sergei stood up. Caspard's gun leveled.

"I would love to have you witness the joy with which the warm-hearted doctor will receive his handsome pupil." Caspard declared slowly with grim humor. "But you will disturb things."

With that he ordered Sergei against the wall. Swiftly he wrapped the bedsheet around his legs and arms until Sergei resembled a mummy. Then he pushed the helpless man into a corner, with a gag in his mouth. Caspard ran out, locking the door.

* * * * *

TWO hours later, I entered the cabin. Hearing Sergei floundering about and moaning through his gag, I rushed into the room and unbound him.

Wild-eyed, yelling something unintelligible to me, he dashed wildly from the room.

I ran after him to the laboratory. We paused. The door was not locked. From within came the rhythmic chugging and hissing of the ingenious machine. We heard a voice that Sergei identified as Caspard.

"Ah, the anesthesia has worn off. You see, do you not?"

We heard Morokoff groaning loudly, as if in great pain.

"Look, Dr. Morokoff. The hideous man from whom children run in terror! Look at me, your faithful pupil."

That voice cracked suddenly into a mad cachination of laughter. Morokoff groaned more loudly, agonizedly.

"Ah," shrilled Caspard. "You wilt, you recognize me. Feast your eyes on the frightful thing you brought back to life!"

"No— It can't be! Sergei! Help!"

Sergei ran headlong into the laboratory. I followed, pausing abruptly behind him as he stopped. We threw our hands up in response to the menacing wave of Caspard's pistol.

"No one will help you," Caspard gritted aside to Morokoff.

I followed his gaze. The gorge swelled huge in my throat.

On a workbench, propped against the wall, pinioned by ropes fastened to the wall lay Dr. Morokoff.

His exposed abdomen was severed, clipped and folded back with consummate surgical skill and neatness! Two

rubber tubes coiled from the bright-hued opening—snaking forth to join with the steadily pumping and hissing glass apparatus. But now the alternately bluish and red fluid coursing through the maze of tubes was the life-blood of Dr. Morokoff himself!

Sergei, face colorless, swayed against me.

"Sergei — Caspard —" Morokoff moaned. "My h-heart—"

I managed to tear my gaze away from his ghastly purple face. I saw now that Caspard was holding in his hand a gruesomely familiar pear-shaped object. He threw back his head as I gaped, a humorless cackle rolling from his twisting lips.

"For God's sake, Caspard," Morokoff slobbered. "Give me back m-my h-heart!"

Caspard shoved the organ under his nose.

"I will, yes! When I'm done with it! Listen, Dr. Morokoff. You love your laboratory—where you torture to satisfy your rotten, perverted curiosity. You love to live. You love above all your great achievement—the Heart of Dr. Morokoff! Well, I'm giving you life. Here in your laboratory, I'm giving you a chance to prove the wonderful efficiency of your invention. Live, live on, Dr. Morokoff!"

Caspard hurled the organ to the floor. Carefully he aimed his gun at it, a sneer on his lips.

"No, no!" Morokoff screamed.

That wild, wailing entreaty was drowned out by the explosion as the bullet tore through the heart into the

floor. Before the roar had subsided, Caspard reloaded the gun. He thrust it into his mouth and jerked the trigger. I spun my head away, but I could still see the sight in my imagination.

SHUDDERING like a hysterical woman Sergei fell to the floor and literally crawled to the door and out of that ghastly place.

My feet seemed rooted to the floor, though I tottered giddily.

"Sergei—Sergei—" Morokoff's voice came to me as from afar. Perhaps he thought I was Sergei. "Sergei—you can do this— For me, Sergei— The scalpel is here, and I'll guide you— But quick! You must work fast. Cut him open—take his heart—for me, Sergei. For me!"

I took my hands from my eyes. He was foaming at the mouth.

"Quick, I must get a heart—I can't stay here for long—"

Chug-chug — hiss — chug-chug — hiss—

My eyes went from him to the rhythmically pumping machine. Scarcely aware of my action, I kicked out savagely.

There was the sound of glass shattering. The chug, the hiss, died off into a low hum. There was the spatter of fluid running to the floor. Morokoff was a deathly purple, his body stiffening. Imagination, perhaps, but as I suddenly gained control over my muscles, I heard the cabin resound with an ear-cutting shriek.

I ran! God in heaven, how I ran from that accursed room!



Drowning Is No Horrible
Death When the Invisible
Nemesis Creeps by Night



She stared at him in silent hate

SATAN'S STRANGLER

By **ARTHUR K. BARNES**

Author of "Wings of the Harpy," "Zombie! Zombie!" etc.

TOMMY DUKE heaved in the last sandbag with a muddy splash, and straightened up to stare at the feeble barrier his grimy hands had built.

On three sides, almost as far as the eye could reach in the gathering dusk, stretched the ugly waters of the flood.

Duke watched a barn float by, with a terrified dog howling dismally on the insecure roof.

The flood chuckled slyly as its fingers scraped at the little island, clawing away chunks of the rapidly disintegrating soil.

Duke shivered. The few sandbags

they'd managed to pile up against the brunt of the flood wouldn't be much protection if the waters rose any higher. He glanced at the sky, a torn, dirty canvas bellying with rain, dripping slowly. . . .

Duke turned away, plodding through muck. He stopped as if he had smashed suddenly into an invisible wall.

Peering out at him from the bushes in silent hate was the face of a young woman. But it was a face the like of which Duke had never seen. The cheeks were sunken, the eyes enormous black pits that hinted of unspeakable things. Her hair coiled about head and neck in dank, black ropes. Her mouth was a splotch of blood on the corpse-like pallor of her skin.

Duke felt a shock, as if he had seized the poles of a big battery. His soul twisted in the grip of conflicting urges.

One part of him shrank in revulsion at the very sight of the strange girl. Something else inside him set his veins afire with an unholy desire to seize her in his arms, to smear that red cupid's bow with his mouth, to run hand in hand with her through the night.

He felt somehow as if they were not strangers. Near-recognition lurked just beyond the grasp of his senses.

He shook his head to clear it of these unaccustomed emotions, and looked up to find the girl had vanished, utterly without sound. Duke ran at the bushes, tromped around among them lighting matches and squinting at the ground. But not a trace did he find of her passing.

Was she a hallucination? She was a vision that he didn't want to see again, and yet, paradoxically, one that he yearned to look upon once more. Beauty she had, in an unearthly way. But Duke had the curious sensation that he had just gazed upon Death incarnate.

That was nonsense, he told himself savagely. Probably some half-starved farm girl, lost and frightened. Or maybe it was that mulligatawney they'd had for dinner. Indigestion does funny things sometimes. With these strange thoughts he moved off through the darkness.

HALFWAY back to the house he heard other footsteps. Presently a short, chunky form resolved from the gloom. A harassed voice called:

"That you, Duke?"

"Right. What'd you find at the other end, Dr. Rohman?"

The doctor fell in step, his round, open face lined with worry. Though he was only in his middle thirties, the trials of a country practice had made Rohman look much older.

"Water," he said. "And plenty of it. We're cut off, all right. Half a mile or so down-stream this ridge rises above the river again, but that doesn't help us any. We're marooned. Six hungry people and nothing to eat but that terrible mulligatawney Hoag and I threw together. . . ."

Duke grinned. "I've eaten worse. Rather eat it than have to swim out of here. Any chance of that?"

Dr. Rohman pulled his shapeless black overcoat tighter.

"I hope not. Of course, I've lived in this section only a few years, since Ellen and I married, and I've never experienced a flood of quite these proportions. But I hardly think it can rise over a foot more. No doubt a rescue party'll take us off as soon as the weather clears. A pity you're trapped here with the family. I hope it doesn't hurt you in—or—a business way."

Duke shook his head uncompromisingly. "I've no intention of leaving this farm while Jason Hoag remains, imposition though it may be."

Tommy Duke was land agent for the New Southern Railways. Hoag held the same position for the C. C. & F. The companies both wanted the ten mile long hogback of farm land, most of which was high enough to obviate the annual flood danger.

Each company wished to build a railroad spur to tap the newly discovered coal deposits in neighboring Chafford County. Henry Gibraltar had given each company an option, dated the same day, and let them fight it out. He had thought it a huge joke. But neither company had any stomach for a tedious court battle. So each had sent its toughest and hardest-fighting trouble-shooter to the scene in an effort to win

swiftly and inexpensively.

So far Duke and Hoag were stalemated. Duke was playing a game of watchful waiting against his admittedly unscrupulous opponent, a man who would literally stop at nothing to achieve his ends. Plenty of ugly stories were whispered about Hoag's business methods. With the backing of the wealthy C. C. & F., even murder was said to be a weapon Hoag was not unfamiliar with.

Dr. Rohman understood most of this, and started to murmur conventionalities, but he never finished them.

For, ringing through the thickness of the cloudy night came the shrieking of a man in mortal terror, hoarse, hideous. It died in bubbling moans.

ROHMAN and Duke slogged through the mud at full speed, stumbling over shallow ditches, plowing through underbrush where the land was not under cultivation. Quickly they came in sight of the rambling old farmhouse, squatting black and forlorn at the edge of the flood. A huge barn hunched darkly nearby. Curtained windows showed orange, like misplaced eyes in a lopsided face.

Duke arrived first, burst into the front room. He stopped so short that Rohman catapulted into him from behind. They both stared appalled at the scene before them.

An overalled man was on the floor, scrambling about in aimless terror on his knees. Blood was everywhere splattered over rugs, walls, furniture. It poured in a scarlet stream from the stricken man's mouth.

But most ghastly of all—in the guttering lamplight, he seemed to be wrestling mightily with some unseen Thing. He clawed at his throat, gouging and flailing about as he sought to rid himself of an invisible devil's cargo. He fought a losing battle for breath, dragging in prolonged, laboring snorts. His face was turning blue; his tongue protruded. He stuck out one hand blindly toward Dr. Rohman.

"Doc!" he begged in a bloody whisper. "It's chokin' me! Fingers, little fingers inside me—so I can't breathe! Take 'em away, can't yuh, Doc?"

Bloody spume dabbled his lips. He writhed stiffly in a final convulsion.

Quick, sharp footsteps hurried down nearby stairs, and a well-built man dressed perfectly in dark cheviot came in. This was Jason Hoag, his unusually handsome features dark now under stress of emotion. His manicured finger wobbled just a bit as he pointed to the body.

"It's Fred Gibraltar," he said unnecessarily. "He—he went down as I entered the room. It was terrible. Your wife was here, too, hysterical. I thought she shouldn't see her brother in that condition, so I took her upstairs to her room. She needs a sedative."

Hoag had been dancing attendance on Mrs. Rohman ever since he and Duke arrived, pursuing some subtle scheme of his own.

Dr. Rohman nodded brief thanks, directed that Fred Gibraltar be carried into the small den just off the living room.

Then he chased the two men out and prepared for an examination.

Incongruously, Duke's mind went back to Rohman's earlier remark: six hungry people . . . Well, there were only five now. Henry Gibraltar, his granddaughter, Mrs. Ellen Gibraltar Rohman, the doctor, Hoag, and Duke.

But another guest had come to take the place of Fred. He would occupy no chair, and consume none of the two-day-old mulligatawney that Hoag and Dr. Rohman had thrown together for meals.

But he was there, and his presence would be felt by everyone.

His name, and Duke felt the chill fingers of unease crawl up his spine, was Death.

The wind prowled about the ancient house, snuffling and moaning. Rain muttered with secret voices on the roof and the flood slithered darkly past. The whole island quivered when a big chunk broke off and tumbled into the water.

A family conference was being held, sitting in inquiry and judgment on the death of Fred. As always, the conclave was utterly dominated by the incredible figure of Henry Gibraltar. Even Death, the unwanted guest,

skulked in the wings when Henry Gibraltar trod the stage.

TOMMY DUKE stared at him, as he stared when first he had come to this farm to discuss business with his tricky host, as everyone stared whenever that strange man stood before them and spoke.

Gibraltar was well over seventy years old, but he still stood six foot four, straight, solid as an oak, with the arms of Atlas and a voice like a brass gong. Fierce-eyed and lusty, like the Immortals, he was cut from an epic mold.

"Well, Doctor!" Gibraltar's tongue was an instrument that could animate, soothe, command, plead. It could also cut like a whip. "Well, Doctor! May we have the benefit of your years of study and wealth of medical experience? What is your opinion of my grandson's strange death?"

Dr. Rohman hesitated, wetting his lips, trying to look judicious.

"Come, come, Doctor! No need to dramatize yourself!" Gibraltar applied the spurs again. "One syllable words, if you please."

Rohman went pink, shrugged.

"I shall sign the death certificate naming lung hemorrhage as immediate cause, pulmonary tuberculosis as the contributory cause."

Gibraltar's snort was a blast of disgust.

"TB! Bah! That's a damn lie, and you know it! Till two days ago Fred was healthy as a horse. Besides, any fool can tell at a glance the boy was strangled!"

"He had a cough that grew rapidly worse. Constant low fever for the last two days. I wanted him to stay in bed, but he disobeyed me."

While the doctor and the elder Gibraltar jostled verbally, Duke glanced covertly about to see how the others were taking the tragedy.

Jason Hoag apparently gave not a damn about Fred's death, but listened to the argument with some strange emotion glittering in his eyes like salt on candle flames.

Ellen Rohman showed the only signs of genuine grief as she huddled in a

corner, seeking darkness to hide her tear-streaked face. Spasmodic sobs shook her frail body now and then.

She was not an attractive woman. She had a sallow complexion and a mousy face, but she'd been a good catch for Rohman. As country doctor under the benevolent despotism of Henry Gibraltar, he was assured that no one within fifty miles dared go to any other physician.

Duke's attention was jerked back to Gibraltar's roaring voice.

"In other words, you actually haven't the slightest idea what's happened here tonight! Is that it?"

Rohman had been badgered beyond control. He suddenly snapped back:

"No, that's not it! As a matter of fact, I *have* seen cases like this before. I studied a year on the continent, when my family had money, and I saw cases that—" He stopped.

Jason Hoag slipped deftly into the breach. "I think I know what the doctor doesn't want to say. Death from the *evil eye!*"

SWIFT silence, then, alive with sullen undertones of sound. Gibraltar stared with amused incredulity.

"Evil eye! You mean the silly gypsy stuff?" he asked.

Duke remembered the face he had seen peering at him from the bushes. A gypsy girl? Perhaps—

Then Rohman's tongue came loose with a rush.

"Exactly. Gypsy stuff. You ought to know something about it yourself. You spent most of your life helling about the world. Think back. Sure you never ran across anything like this? It happens, you know. And there are plenty of civilized countries where they don't sneer at mention of the evil eye!"

"The evil eye!" Gibraltar threw his head back, mouth wide to emit a bellow of scornful laughter. But the sound never came. His teeth clicked as sudden memory smote him. He looked strangely toward the room where his grandson lay in horrid death. "Gypsy stuff!" he muttered, and trembled like a forest giant when the axe bites deep.

"And what's more," Hoag pressed the argument home, "there's a bunch of

gypsies marooned with us on the island!"

Gibraltar gauped. "Gypsies in this section? Why, it's been years." Sweat popped out on his forehead. He turned blindly for the door and out into the storm. "Gypsies," he was mumbling. "I've got to find out for certain!"

Duke sprang up to call him back, but too late. He turned to Dr. Rohman.

"You shouldn't have let this evil eye nonsense get started, Doctor. It's been a terrific shock to him."

"Nonsense, Duke? I'm not so sure it is. Frankly, I thought Fred died of poison, but now I know he did not. Whatever I may put down on the death certificate to fulfill the requirements of law and sanity, Fred Gibraltar died of nothing known to American medical science."

"But you said pulmonary tuberculosis!"

Rohman snorted. "I said that to keep from being dubbed an incompetent quack, or a madman. Actually," he passed a worried hand over his face, "Mr. Hoag's explanation covers the situation damnably well!"

Duke looked around a little wildly.

"Then Gibraltar may be in danger of his life. We can't leave him out there alone."

Duke plunged out into the wind and stinging rain in the wake of the ancient giant. Rohman's pattering feet trotted after.

The sputtering glow of a bonfire guided Duke and Rohman to the far side of the island. It marked the site of a curious encampment. There was a small old roadster pulled up beneath the trees, and behind it a battered relic of a trailer. Gypsy caravan, modern style.

Hunched around the fire was an aging couple—an old crone wrinkled and hideous, a man looking like a pirate with earrings, bandanna, faded red leather jacket. Both of them glared at the intruders with malevolent eyes.

TOWERING before the hissing blaze was Henry Gibraltar. Facing him on the other side was the strange-faced girl whom Duke had glimpsed earlier in the evening. Again, at sight

of her weird beauty, Duke felt a throbbing at his temples.

At last the taut silence was broken. Gibraltar spoke uncertainly.

"You—look just like—Rosella. You must be her granddaughter."

"She is Rosella," chanted the girl.

Her queer reference to herself in third person gave Duke a nasty shock. It was as if she were a dual personality, perhaps only a sort of ectoplasmic shell, with soul and bodily substance guiding her from a safe place far away. Her black eyes were fathomless, unfocused pools, looking at once upon everything and nothing.

Gibraltar was shaken. The girl's voice went on, lifeless and clicking, like dead bones rattling.

"She is Rosella. He is the devil Gibraltar who wrought evil to her house. The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children, even unto . . ."

The toneless voice droned on and on, reciting Biblical phrases, cursing Gibraltar. Every syllable seemed to carry a foul blasphemy. Duke shuddered.

The girl's veiled references were no mystery either to him or Dr. Rohman. The story was familiar to them. During Gibraltar's wild and misspent youth, one of his escapades had been with a gypsy family in Transylvania. He had had an illicit affair with a young girl named Rosella, been found out by the gypsy chieftain, and had to fight his way free, taking most of the gypsies' valuables with him as he fled.

They had cursed him, no doubt, but the gypsy curse must be administered direct, not by long distance. So he escaped unharmed.

It was the kind of yarn Gibraltar reveled in. He had told it proudly at every opportunity. He backed it up—here Duke's memory clicked—with a tintype bearing remarkable resemblance to Rosella. That was why Duke had thought he recognized her earlier in the evening.

Duke admitted that, before the fire, over rare port, it did make a good after-dinner story.

But out here in the wind and the rain, with Fred Gibraltar horribly done to death, and the half-century-old curse of

vengeance coming to sudden life in the reincarnation of the repellently attractive Rosella.

LACKLUSTRE hair and enormous eyes seemed to absorb the fire-light without any reflection. Her voice went on mechanically, like a cheap phonograph.

"Rosella has beaten the deserts and the mountains and the seas and even death itself, waiting for this hour. Rosella is an avenger. Thine own children have perished. And now thy children's children."

Duke's stomach tightened in premonition of calamity. It was a fantastic, incredible scene, utterly beyond belief, and yet damnably convincing. Somehow, the most horrible part of it was the way life and strength appeared to seep quietly out of that gigantic body whose vitality had always seemed endless.

Then Rosella's recitation died away to silence, and she suddenly sprang close to Gibraltar to wave twisted fingers before his face. There was something so hideously suggestive, so subtly obscene in that gesture, that Duke's flesh crawled.

Gibraltar burst out in a prolonged coughing fit. Rohman and Duke exchanged a horrified glance.

The doctor hurried to Gibraltar's side to relieve him with a drink from a pocket flask. He gulped the fiery stuff down neat, straightened up to gather the remnants of his courage.

"I know what you think," he gasped. "But you're wrong. Just a touch of flu, maybe, nothing to do with this crazy rigmarole. And don't let her kid you she did anything to my son and daughter-in-law. They were killed in the War. Besides, Rosella's been dead, probably for years, moldering in her grave. This—this woman's probably the illegitimate daughter of an illegitimate mother.

"My granddaughter! Sweet child, isn't she? Trying to scare me to death with a lot of junk about the evil eye. Rot!"

But as he started to leave the gypsy camp, he stole a last look at Rosella. What he saw made him stagger off

through the brush like a drunken man, clothes hanging on his shrunken frame as if sizes too large.

Dr. Rohman ran after him. Terror skulked at their heels. Over the spat of rain and crackle of the fire, Duke could hear Gibraltar cough rackingly time and again.

Duke followed, sliding awkwardly in the mud, fighting to find something logical in this tangle of ancient wrongs, warped vengeance, foul curses. He found none. This was the stuff of another age, long silted over and buried in the dust of time—things of a world apart, a world of unearthly forces.

For the second time within the hour, the night was racked by screams.

It was a woman's shriek this time, hanging in the thick air like the lingering pain of a burn.

The terror of it sickened Duke's brain. Swiftly as he could, he plowed doggedly through the muck back to the farmhouse. Grim despair was in his heart, the despair of a man who knows he will be too late.

Mrs. Rohman was lurching about the room in terror, sobbing and screaming and begging the others to do something. Jason Hoag stood with bulging eyes, his dark face curiously pallid. Dr. Rohman fumbled in his bag aimlessly.

"Astringents," he muttered. "Yes, some sort of astringent."

AS always in that house, the scene was dominated by Henry Gibraltar. He played a new role this time, however. It was Tragedy. Legs out-thrust wide and planted firmly, he stood upright in the center of the room braced like the rock that bears his name. He was bold and defiant to the very end.

Even as Duke entered, Gibraltar turned his head in a quick, jerky movement, glowering at someone behind him. His hands were at his throat.

"Let go. Let go. If I ever get my hands on you . . ." Suddenly he belated a challenge. "Show yourself! Strangle me if you will, but do it man to man! Make yourself known!"

He glared around wildly, clawing desperately at his neck. A great gout of bloody froth burst from his mouth

and apewed over the entire room.

Hideously, Gibraltar reeled about in his macabre bout with unseen death, bobbing and twisting. He came roaring to the inevitable climax.

The house shook with the thunder of his fall.

Hoag tried to catch him, but the dead weight was too much. The watchers stood like waxwork figures with painted masks of numb terror as Gibraltar retched out his life on the bloody, threadbare rug.

The instant before Gibraltar's contorted body relaxed in death, he gave one final racking cough. Up from the depths of his throat, in the laxly open mouth, boiled a ghastly forest of pale yellow wormlike things, dabbled with crimson spots, crawling nauseously in Gibraltar's dying rattle of breath.

Mrs. Rohman, past screaming, collapsed in a merciful faint. Even Hoag wavered uncertainly and stumbled out the door to be sick.

But something snapped in Duke's brain. With a sharp cry, he dropped to one knee beside Gibraltar, peered closely at the now quiescent nest of stringy horrors. He poked at them with a pencil point, then sprang up to gaze around like a man shellshocked.

His mind was totally devoid of coherent thought, unable to reason. One thing only dominated his consciousness. He heard his lips framing words.

"I saw something just like this once. The man had been cursed by the evil eye. Gypsy death!"

The three male survivors of the holocaust looked at one another, then jerked as the same thought struck them simultaneously.

"Gypsy death!" cried Hoag bitterly. "Rosella!"

AS ONE, the three of them whirled and stampeded out the door, running through the stormy night with a single idea flaming in their shocked minds: revenge on the gypsy sorceress, Rosella!

They crashed in on the gypsy camp like a cyclone. The old couple still crouched over the dying fire, and the disheveled boy was asleep in the seat of the car.

But nowhere did they find Rosella. Bit by bit, they went over the neighborhood of that camp ground. They practically tore the trailer apart.

"She knows what's coming to her!" shouted Duke. "She's hiding! But she can't get off the island!" He seized a brand from the fire, held it as a torch. "Let's scatter!"

Like some terrible, avenging specter with a flaming sword, Duke stumbled through the darkness. Hunting the girl Rosella as he would a snake, he was conscious of her terrible charm, almost afraid of what might happen if he did find her.

A half-hour later, exhausted, the madness gone from his brain, he made his way back to the now scattered fire. Rohman and Hoag were not there.

He shouted questions at the two old gypsies sitting in the trailer. They simply glared stonily at him and muttered to themselves in unfamiliar syllables.

"*Hindity mush!*" Duke suddenly snapped out. "*Balichano!*"

The gypsies looked back expressionlessly. Duke stood staring from unseeing eyes, fighting the new idea that had come to him.

He remained motionless for so long that the old crone finally leaped out of the trailer, screeching at him. Swiftly, her gnarled claws swept before his face in the immemorial sign of the evil eye. Then, deliberately, she stood on tiptoe and spat in his face.

A gasp sounded behind them. Duke whirled to see Dr. Rohman enter the clearing. His overcoat was drenched.

"Duke!" he wheezed. "That—wasn't that another curse she—"

Duke drew the doctor urgently aside into the shadows.

"Now listen, Doc, and get this straight," he said tensely. "I've just made a discovery. These people aren't gypsies at all. They're phonies! A moment before you came, I spoke to them in their own tongue. I picked up a few words of it knocking about the world when I was a kid. I called 'em names no real gypsy would take. They didn't understand!"

Rohman struggled with this new conception.

"Maybe— Aren't there different dialects for different groups of gypsies?" he asked.

"That may be, though I believe the different groups are all more or less understandable among one another. But, more than that, you just saw that old woman make the sign of the evil eye and then spit at me. No gypsy in the world would do that, because spitting in the face is the one accepted way to remove the curse!"

"Then how did Fred and Henry die? I swear I never saw anything like it in my life. You said yourself it was gypsy death."

Duke started to say something sarcastic about fools duped into believing stuff like the evil eye, but checked himself as he remembered the fear and hate that blinded his own brain.

"It was gypsy death, caused by *drei*," he explained, his voice quivering with disgust.

ROHMAN looked absolutely blank. "What's that?"

"*Drei* is the favorite gypsy instrument of death. It's a brown powder consisting of thousands of sporules from a certain species of fungus. These fungoid sporules have the peculiar property of being further developed only by contact with living animal matter.

"*Drei* is usually administered in a warm drink. Then they attach themselves to the mucous membrane in the throat, the trachea and bronchii, and germinate. They throw out millions of these fibres, which grow with incredible rapidity to about twelve to eighteen inches. They penetrate the lung tissue and—" Duke made a gesture of finality. "It does look a lot like pulmonary tuberculosis."

Rohman nodded slowly. "I begin to see. The gypsy stuff was just a cover-up. But what's behind it, then?"

"Jason Hoag!" was Duke's grim response. "I hate to accuse any man of what I believe about Hoag. But here's how I figure it.

"The two elder Giblartars are dead. The property now belongs to your wife. Forgive me for saying this, Doc, but Mrs. Rohman obviously favors Hoag

over me in our battle to acquire the Gibraltar holdings for a railroad spur.

"Hoag heard Henry Gibraltar tell that yarn about his trouble with the gypsies. It was a perfect way to confuse the issues. He'd decided to rid himself of the Giblartars and make sure the property was in favorable hands, thus assuring his company of the right-of-way.

"It was easy enough to pick up two or three tough customers, perhaps a down-and-out actress resembling that tintype, and instruct them in their parts."

"But why such a terrible way to kill them?" Rohman cried.

"Because it's almost a foolproof murder. After the victim is cold, the *drei* also dries and crumbles to nothing, so ordinarily there'd be no way to learn what happened to the Giblartars. Not one man in ten thousand would suspect, or has ever heard of, *drei*. Just bad luck for Hoag that I happened to be here."

"But if he had such a perfect crime mapped out, why bother with the gypsy angle? He was safe anyhow, wasn't he?"

"Red herring!" snapped Duke impatiently. "Hoag was careful. He wanted to be sure our minds were on something else while the only evidence of the crime dried up and disappeared. Also, in the rare possibility that anyone felt like making a fuss with the law, what would we have to tell the police? A fantastic yarn about gypsy curses and men strangled by invisible fingers of death! A cinch none of us would feel like telling *that* story to a jury!

"No, Hoag was clever. Barring rotten luck, he had things fixed so everyone involved would firmly insist on silence!"

ROHMAN digested this theory in lengthy silence. Finally his eyes lifted to stare calculatingly at Tommy Duke. Duke smiled grimly.

"I know what you're thinking. I seem to know a hell of a lot about this *drei* myself. But be reasonable. If I were the criminal, would I be standing here giving you the whole works?"

"I was wondering why you didn't tell us it was *drei* when you saw Henry died of it."

"Because I was too stunned to think straight. Evil eye or *drei* I still thought it gypsy deviltry. All I could get my mind on was immediate revenge."

Rohman passed a sodden handkerchief over his face.

"I guess it's Hoag all right," he said. "God knows what he's up to now. Mixing up more of his hellbrew mulligatawney, maybe. That's the medium he must have used to administer his devil's potion. Haven't developed a cough, have you?"

Duke shook his head. "No. And we would've known it by—"

Dr. Rohman's eyes suddenly fixed on a point over Duke's shoulder. Terror rushed into them, made them bulge.

"Duke!" he choked. "Look out!"

Duke spun, seeking to penetrate the inky blackness. Did something loom there, darker than darkness itself? He lunged. Invisible cloth flicked across his face, foul, musty, reeking of death. Thick fingers wrapped like slugs about his pulsing throat, squeezing.

Duke staggered, fighting for purchase on those slippery fingers. Viciously, he swung his fist about him, but failed to strike a target. The fingers tightened. Again Duke groped behind him with clawing hands, seeking for the murderous Thing fastened to his neck. He gripped emptiness.

A miasma of cold horror lay its icy touch on his heart. Panic seized him. Had he been wrong about Hoag? Was there, indeed, an invisible strangler at large? Was he, too, doomed at the hands of something human eyes could not see, against which human strength could not avail?

Duke's lungs began to burst. His tongue lolled helplessly from his mouth. Roaring filled his ears. Tommy Duke sank into shadows. . . .

They were thick — thick! They crawled about him, whispering, mocking, stifling him with unreal substance. Through the dark smother only the moldy odor of earth was unmistakable, the grave-stench!

The swarming shadows withdrew.

Their laughter swelled and sank. It was not laughter. Only urgent whispering, a furtive tugging at his garments.

Duke's eyes opened on blackness like Hell's bottommost pits. His throat was raw. His head ached abominably. He strove to sit up, could not. He was bound so tightly that every movement of wrists or legs was torture.

Duke was aware of something smooth and soft beneath him, something that wriggled and heaved feebly and whispered pleadingly.

"Oh, please, wake up, mister. Please!"

Duke reared back as if he had found himself caressing a spider. Memory quickly calmed him.

It was the girl Rosella, but she was not to be feared. He remembered now that she was just a tool in other diabolical hands. He twisted aside and relieved her of his dead weight.

Instantly the girl sat up and put her lips to his ear.

"We haven't much time, you've been out for so long. If we sit back to back, I think I can get you loose. But hurry!"

Somehow Duke managed it, then lay apathetically while long, wiry fingers plucked in nervous haste at the rope wrapped about his wrists.

His dazed mind was trying to orient itself. It was fully three minutes before he finally realized they were in the old Gibraltar barn by the edge of the flood. The place was empty now, except of familiar farm smells, the stink of manure, of old hay.

And, above all, he caught the odor of freshly turned wet earth, like a newly opened grave!

BUT he listened to Rosella's panted explanations of how she had become involved. It was an old story. Down-and-out show girl. Broke, half-starving. A strange man with a faded tintype that looked like her. A proposition. She hadn't known there would be death. Just an elaborate practical joke, she's been told.

Duke's wrists came free. With that freedom, his brain snapped back to normal. He stooped, untied his ankles,

gently massaged circulation back into them. Then he peered at Rosella in the darkness.

She looked back at him, wide-eyed, trustful, yet frightened.

"Don't you believe me? What are you going to do with me?" she moaned.

Duke smiled grimly. The ghastly make-up was off her face now. She looked just what she was, a slim, hungry kid, not bad looking in a sharp-featured way, right now bewildered and badly scared.

Duke quickly released her, matched her own careful whisper.

"I do believe you. I'm going to try and help you escape from the terror that is loose on this island. We—"

The barn suddenly lurched violently, slid a few feet downward. The flood poured eagerly in the lowered end.

Duke became conscious of a rhythmic scuff-thud, scuff-thud that had been going on, more felt than heard, just beyond the range of his senses. It was somehow associated with the smell of dank earth, of tombs.

He moved awkwardly across the slanting floor to peer out the barn's only window. What he saw sent a thrill of exultation through his veins.

Jason Hoag was below, digging, digging, digging frantically to undermine the barn and send it and its occupants to destruction in the raging flood. A lantern threw dim rays on his face, which shone with buttery slickness as he labored.

"What is it?" Rosella whispered.

"Hoag! It's Hoag! He thinks he's going to launch us into the river. Hasn't the guts to kill us outright, so he's doing it this way!"

Duke laughed soundlessly. He plunged cleanly through the window, down upon the unsuspecting digger.

Hoag collapsed with a startled shout. He never had a chance. All the pent-up fury of a man who has been cheated, throttled, led through a night of terror was in Duke's battering fists. He pounded Hoag long after the man was unconscious.

Duke crawled upright, trembling with an excess of bloodlust. He spun wildly around. Rosella's scream clawed at his ragged nerves.

The girl's face dragged back from the black square of the window. She was fighting like a demon, clawing at her throat, beating at Nothing!

Darkness was all about her. Duke could see no hint or shape or substance. He stared at the senseless Hoag. The clammy sweat of fear chilled him.

He *had* been wrong. The invisible strangler was at work again!

FIERCELY, Duke concentrated on the thought that the thing *must* be human. He snatched up the lantern with unsteady fingers, grabbed Hoag's shovel, leaped for the rickety doors at the front of the barn. He thrust the lantern high and rushed in.

Duke was expected. The instant he re-entered the barn, a thick rope encircled his neck from behind, trapping also his left arm, upraised with the spade in striking position.

That was all that saved him from being instantly strangled. The lantern was dashed from his hand. It went out after a single bright burst of flame, which revealed a dim figure like a black, many-winged bat, monstrous and illusive. The musty smell of age and death was strong.

Duke began to laugh in half-mad triumph. All he had to do was follow that strangling rope, and he would find a creature of flesh and blood. A fiend? Yes, but human, with a face that could be battered out of recognition, a belly to be pounded until he vomited in pain, a head to be bashed in.

With a shout Duke felt along the rope, got his direction line, charged with free hand swinging.

It sank wrist-deep in a chunky stomach. The invisible strangler grunted in pain.

Duke leaped again with a terrific smash to the body.

The rope tightened savagely around his neck, making his eyeballs pop. But the trapped arm again gave him the slightest of leeways to drag in reluctant breath.

And now the darkness was working for Duke, and against his adversary. He couldn't dodge the fist that smashed repeatedly into his belly.

A frightened squealing began to

yammer through the stinking darkness. The rope about Duke's throat loosened, fell away.

Instantly, he seized the spade in both hands and swung blindly in a vicious circle. It struck something yielding, with the ugly sound of a knife plunking into a rotten melon.

There was a choked cry, a spattering of liquid, a heavy thump and aimless thrashing about on the barn floor.

Duke, momentarily sickened, fought the nausea down and groped for the wreck of the lantern. By its light he located his victim.

It was Doctor Rohman!

The sweep of the shovel blade had all but decapitated him. He lay in a bloody heap with the voluminous folds of his old black overcoat, such good protection in the darkness, fallen loosely around him.

By some miracle he was yet alive, though life was draining from him with every pulse-beat. His eyes opened and saw Duke.

"You were right," he whispered. "Right about phony gypsies . . . the *drei* . . . And you guessed reason . . . turn attention elsewhere, fix it so none o' you would ever dare tell it to judge . . . But wrong, wrong about the criminal. That was me!" He laughed a dying, bubbling laugh.

ROSELLA crept into the protecting circle of Duke's arm, sobbing quietly.

"And wrong about motive, too . . . I wanted Gibraltar holdings myself, so I got rid of the Gibaltars in a way . . . that would make you and Hoag want to forget this part of the country . . . for the rest of your lives . . . At least until those options expire, in a few days."

He strove to raise himself in a sudden access of feeble rage.

"D'you think I intended to be a two-bit country doctor the rest of my life? If so, you're crazy! . . . My family once had money. I traveled. I lived. I fixed it so I could have those things again. Gibraltar's land belongs to the Rohmans now!"

His smile was incongruously triumphant.

"Had to change plans a little when

I saw how smart you were. Knew you'd figure it all out right eventually. Had to get rid of both you and Rosella . . . shut your mouths . . ." His voice died away.

Duke leaned close. "But why, Rohman? Why? This stuff is worth nothing as farm land! It's only value was as a railroad right-of-way."

After a long silence, Rohman's mouth opened again slowly.

"Think so? Coal found in Chafford County. Fools around here think a coal vein stops with the county line. Look." He withdrew one hand where it had been hidden under the coat. Something black and shiny gleamed in it. "Right from heart . . . of Gibraltar property . . ."

He never spoke again.

Rosella gasped. "Why, isn't that a piece of coal?"

Duke picked the stuff up, dug his fingernail into it. It crumbled under the pressure.

"No," he said. "Poor devil, he did all this for a bunch of worthless lignite. The stuff looks like coal. In fact, in a few more million years it would be coal. But as is, it's worthless. Any geologist could have told him, but I guess he was afraid his precious secret would get out."

There was a noise from the door, and Duke turned to see Jason Hoag. The man's amazed face was a book. He had heard Rohman's story.

"Sorry, Duke," he croaked. "But Rohman told me you were behind the whole plot. I didn't want to kill you and the girl outright, but was willing to let you drown in the flood."

"So I guess the doctor's change of plan included blackmailing me out of my option later on by threats of revealing to the police my part in your drowning. No hard feelings?"

Duke snorted. "Gosh, no! You should 'a' heard what I said about you only an hour ago!" He stuck out his hand, gripped Hoag's. "And about this option business, I guess we can fix it up somehow without battling each other all over the state, eh?"

Hoag grinned, a little crookedly where Duke's fist had struck.

"Sure. Thought I'd tell you. There's

a rescue party coming." He pointed out the window, where a cluster of lights crawled across the dark waters. "So you've only got a few minutes more alone!"

"Alone!" Duke's face flamed as he realized Rosella had been in his arms for the past ten minutes. He looked

down at her upraised eyes. Memory of the almost irresistible attraction he had felt for her at first sight made him chuckle.

Duke wondered just what the kid would look like if someone fed her decently. Rather nice, he decided, smiling at her.



MYSTERY HEADLINERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE

HYBRID OF HORROR

A Novelet by JOHN COLEMAN BURROUGHS
and JANE RALSTON BURROUGHS

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF!

A Novelet of Fiery Doom by SAM MERWIN, JR.

MY FATHER IS A VAMPIRE

A Novelet of Bizarre Witchcraft by THORP McCLUSKEY

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 179, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

CELLAR OF SKULLS

By WILL GARTH

*Author of "Fulfillment," "King of Killers," etc.
(Illustrated on the Cover of This Issue)*

A Nightmarish Dream Turns to Cold Reality When Nina Benson Suddenly Faces a Horrible Ordeal

TO awaken from a bad dream—a thing of nightmare and horror—and to find oneself in one's own bed, safe and sound, with a soft spring breeze blowing through the open windows, is an experience known person-

ally by most humans. But to awaken from a bad dream to a reality more horrible than any phantasmagoria of sleep, is strange, and terrible—and rare.

Moreover, in deep nightmare, all the dreamer's senses do not operate. For instance, although he sees and hears, he does not smell.

Nina Benson smelled blood. She was awake and she smelled blood. In her dream she had been in rooted flight from a demon—rooted because only the attempt at flight had been there, not flight itself. In nightmare

one cannot flee, one can only desire, with terrible urgency, to run while the feet seemed sucked in mire. But now, awake, it was the same—she could not move.

How does one tell one is no longer dreaming? What is the difference between waking and sleeping. The answer is memory—memory of the actual happenings in the time before the dream. The dream comes in between, but when the dream is done, the mind puts it aside and joins up the waking past with the waking present so that no seam shows and all the threads are whole.

So, even though Nina awakened to horror—a horror like the dream, only worse—she knew that this was not her dream continued, but gross and terrifying reality! Yet the immediate past before the dream, though it came back to her and told her she was not dreaming now, was not as clear as it would have been had not the nightmare intervened.

It was blurred, dream-like, with its own overtones of horror.

She was at the Medical Center dance, meeting the colleagues of the man she was to marry—young Doctor Merritt. Bill Merritt, junioring at the Center, had been supposed to escort her, and they had both looked forward to an evening of fun and dancing. But there had been no dancing with Bill, neither had he escorted her. In fact she had not even seen him that day.

There was nothing mysterious about it. Bill was a junior—therefore, at the beck and call of his superiors, and in fact he had not even had time to inform her by phone that a mass accident case would keep him busy assisting in the Emergency Operating Room for an indefinite number of hours. Nina



Nina Benson

assumed that it was something like that—she was getting used to being a doctor's wife even before her marriage.

Anyway, she was not exactly a stranger at the dance. Even though this was her first visit to the new Center, she was known by a few of the older physicians who had been associated with her father, the late and highly esteemed Doctor Benson—a man who had been well-beloved both as a surgeon and a man. It was as Doctor Benson's daughter and the fiancée of the promising young medico, Bill Merritt, that she was introduced.

DOCTOR WARNER led her over to a man in evening clothes who was sitting down.

"I want you to meet Doctor Wirt," he said as they approached the man.

The man rose, evidently having heard what Doctor Warner had said. He was a cripple. His right leg was off at the knee, and he supported himself with a crutch. In addition, his right hand had been amputated a little above the wrist. His face was long, lean and cavernous, and a sardonic light gleamed in his eyes. A thatch of gray, unkempt hair covered one half of his skull. A livid scar, in the shape of a question mark ran around that part of his skull which was bald.

"Ex-doctor," he said, bowing stiffly on his crutch.

"Doctor Wirt means that he isn't practising," Warner said smoothly. "Wirt, this is Nina Benson, engaged to young Bill Merritt."

"Benson—Benson, did you say?"

"Daughter of the late Doctor Benson," Warner added.

"Quite so," the cripple rasped, and his eyes glowed even more sardonically. "I remember Doctor Benson quite well."

Doctor Warner looked at him a little sharply, as though detecting an undertone of hidden meaning in the apparently innocent words.

"Doctor Wirt, although he doesn't practise," Warner said, "is still connected with the Center. Brain work is his specialty. You're going to be a doctor's wife, so you should know these things."

"Bill has told me about Doctor

Wirt," Nina said, smiling, though somehow she had to force the smile. "How he maintains residence in the Center, though retired, and engages in research which I am sure will lead to valuable results. . . ."

Nina became aware of a sudden strong desire that Bill would come. She was aware also of a feeling of repulsion. Yet she told herself that the feeling was unjust—this man could not help the fact that he was a cripple and that his skull had been so strangely branded, echoing the question mark that seemed constantly to shine out of his eyes. . . .

Memory grew hazy for Nina Benson. The past that would join the present and thus assure her that she was not dreaming, was now blurred.

"Would you like to visit my workshop downstairs," she seemed to recall a voice saying—and if the same voice had said: "Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," it somehow would have sounded the same.

And then there was a sickish sweet smell, a choking, a moment of heart-stopping fear—then sleep . . . and dreams.

IN the dreams a voice spoke, half familiar, half strange, charged with anger and hate and grief, sad with memory and glad with the anticipation of some mysterious vengeance. There was no sickish, sweet odor now, so closely resembling chloroform—there was no smell at all. But the voice said:

"He cut off my leg and cut off my hand. He was a butcher. He could have saved them and he didn't. Had he been on the operating table, and had I been the man in white, I would have saved them. But he left me to be a hobbler to the end of my days, half a surgeon and half a man. 'Amputate!' he said. 'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off!' But my right hand did not offend me, it offended him. Head Surgeon he wanted to be, and I threatened that ambition. So he turned a simple job of antisepsis into an amputating butchery, and thus won to the position that should have been mine! Any other man would not have had that ambition, and I would have had my leg and hand.

"Oh, I see it—I see how it happened.

The accident—the crash of automobiles! Then the ambulance—and where should I be brought but to my own hospital! By all the malignant fates, it had to be here! Then the conference of the surgeons, debating over the patient who was their professional colleague.

"The invocation of the standing custom—that surgery on a hospital colleague was to be anonymous in so far as the patient was concerned. Whatever the result, good or bad, he was never to know who the operator had been. The case was an emergency—septic poisoning never waits—it was too late to call in an outside surgeon. One man takes the job, the others stand by. No nurses present, only doctors, and all sworn in honor to secrecy. And who is the surgeon? Who can it be—who else could it be—but Butcher Benson!"

NINA awakened out of her nightmare, hearing her name called—awakened to reality. And the reality was not the end of horror but the continuation of it! Flight in her dream and flight in reality were alike impossible. Just as she had been unable to move in the one, she was now immobile in the other.

The smell was not a thing in the past but in the present. It was not chloroform, it was blood. The great slab she lay on was stained with it, impregnated with it. Gyves encircled her upper arms, gyves themselves attached to the slab, and her feet were linked to the slab with chains.

Over her bent the figure of her dreams, cadaverous, sardonic, curious.

"Awake, my dear?" he questioned. "Welcome to my Golgotha. Yes, that's what I call my little laboratory—the place of skulls. See, twist your head a little, and you will see them—skulls. I'm a brain man, remember—at least I was one, until a butcher made a hobbler out of me. I could not make the Butcher pay for that. Death robbed me of him. In fact, I did not always know that he had been the one. You're not the butcher, but you're the butcher's daughter—so be it, I am satisfied. For my hand and leg, your skull, golden-haired. It will look very much the

same as the others when I am through with it, but I will recognize it, and, looking at it, will forget my leglessness and handlessness. Something that cries in me will be appeased and my mind will have rest.

"Do not look for help. None will come. No one comes here unless sent for—they respect my privacy here. I observe your nostrils twitching. Is it the smell of blood? No, my dear, it is not human blood. Just guinea pigs. You are the first live human to be stretched out on that slab, and you will be the last. What's that—you said something?"

Terror filled Nina Benson, but she was fully awake now and her mind was functioning. Out of her dream, which she now recognized as only half a dream—out of what she had heard—she was able to grasp something of the meaning behind the madness that animated this new acquaintance of hers. When he had been brought in from that accident, he had been operated on by one of his colleagues. This operation, in accordance with long-standing custom, had been anonymous. Yet somehow, subsequently, this poor wretch of an ex-doctor had learned, or at least thought he knew, who the operator had been.

Victor Benson—her father!

And the twisted brain now sought assuagement for its misery in making a skull out of the daughter of the man who, Doctor Wirt mistakenly thought, had amputated not out of necessity but out of malice and ambition.

"Doctor Wirt," she choked. "Let me go! My father, if he really was the one who amputated, could only have done so because he had to do it to save your life. My father was one of the finest men who ever lived. Doctor Wirt, you don't know what you're doing—"

"I know exactly what I'm doing!" came the rasping answer. "Look! Look up!"

NINA looked up and saw suspended directly over her neck a terrible instrument of destruction. It was a tremendous, crescent-shaped thing of steel, with a razor-sharp edge, and it was suspended on a rope from a rafter.

Doctor Wirt's purpose was plain when he drew a knife from his pocket. He meant to cut the rope, and the scimitarlike thing of steel would fall and sever her head from her body.

"A trophy from a Turkish doctor, presented to me long ago. I have at last found a use for it. Even a one-handed surgeon can cut a rope—"

"Doctor Wirt, you're mad! Even if you killed me, you can't dispose of my body. You'll be convicted of my murder, you'll be executed—"

"Even so," came the insensate response, "one spurt of blood from your white neck will repay me for all of that torture—"

He suddenly broke off.

"What's that!"

The door to the cellarlike laboratory crashed inward, and a figure in trousers and white shirt catapulted forward. The automatic in the figure's hand spat fire, the knife in Wirt's hand clattered to the stone floor. The next instant a

fist crashed into the doctor's jaw. He slumped.

Bill Merritt knelt, pawed the body, came up with keys. The next instant Nina Benson was free. In a blend of hysterical laughter and tears she told Merritt what had happened.

"I met Warner in the corridor," he said quickly, explaining his unlooked-for advent. "He told me he had left you with Wirt. I looked for you, couldn't find you. I got busy on the callaphone. Wirt didn't answer. I got Warner. We both thought of the same thing at the same time—that Wirt had somehow guessed who had operated. That's why I came with the pistol. When I knocked for a full minute without getting an answer, I knew I'd need it. Well, we'll take Wirt over to the Psychiatric. That's where he should have been sent long ago. Poor fellow—crazy, of course. Darling, it must have been terrible—"

"It's all right now," she whispered.

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When Professor Scorpo Begins His Weird Experiments Jim and Vicky Are Drawn Into a Ghastly Whirlpool of Terror!

CHAPTER I

The Brain-Ghoul

I KISSED Vicky gently.
"Damn you!" she said.
I kissed her again.

"Yes, you and Uncle Jeff, too!" she added. Then her heart-shaped face clouded, and long lashes fell over her troubled eyes. "Oh, Jimmy! If only Uncle Jeff hadn't died, if only he'd left his money to the Old Folk's Home or a dog hospital, or even a flea circus! But he had to leave it to me, and—"

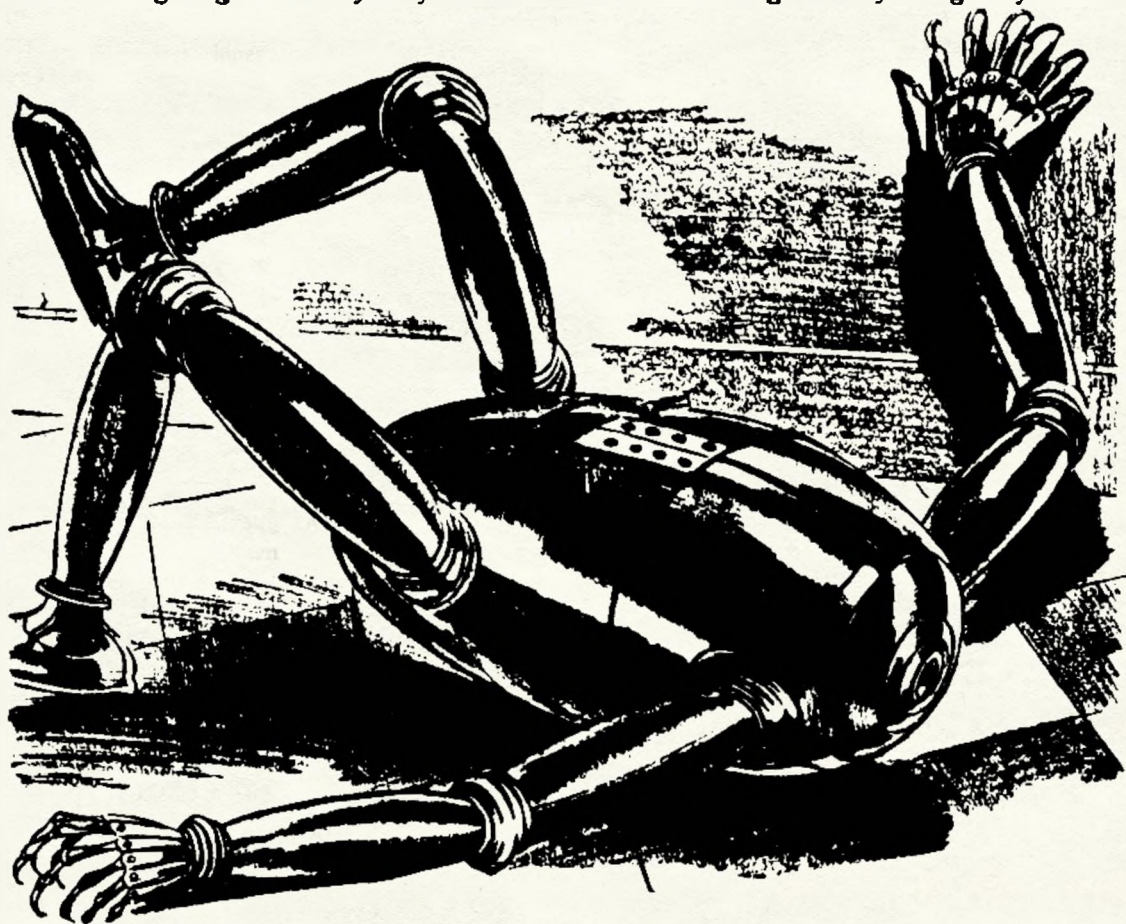
"I'm not going to marry anyone for

her money," I finished, grinning. "Sorry, Vicky, but that's the way I feel. I've been sweating for a raise these past three years so that I could support you. Finally it comes through, and my fifty a week turns out to be cigarette money to a girl who's worth half a million."

Both of us stopped smiling.

"You understand that, don't you?" I said. "It's not just false pride, Vicky. Working for you, for us, meant something to me. And I can't fall back on your money now; it takes all the meaning out of our being together."

Vicky pouted. "Meaning? Oh, there is no meaning in anything any more."





The metal man had fallen to the floor, the silver skull rolling across the hall, a ball of grimacing horror

A Complete Novelet of Mystery Robots

A month ago you and I were engaged, planning our wedding. Uncle Jeff was alive and well. Then that horrid accident, and Professor Scorpo coming and taking away Uncle Jeff's—oh, I can't stand thinking about that!" She shuddered closer in my arms.

"You'll have to think about that," I said gravely. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I still believe there's funny business somewhere."

"He had the papers," Vicky answered.

"Yes, I know. But it doesn't match up," I mused. "Consider the facts again. Your uncle gets a phone call at midnight a month ago. Right?"

Vicky nodded.

"He rushes out, wildly excited, telling you something about just talking to Arnold Stern. Right?"

Again Vicky nodded.

"But Arnold Stern has been dead for six months. He was your uncle's business associate. He'd been dead for six months. Right?"

THIS time Vicky just trembled. "That's screwy enough for me. Your uncle gets in his car, drives off, and plunges over the cliff on Beach Road. The car burns, your uncle's body is practically unrecognizable, except for the rings and the clothing. You inherit the money. And then this Professor Scorpo goes down to the morgue with this paper bearing your uncle's signature—an agreement willing your uncle's brain to Scorpo for 'experimental purposes.' He takes it away, refuses to explain, and disappears."

"I don't want to talk about it," Vicky pleaded.

"Sorry, dear. I must. I've got a hunch. Just who and what is this man Scorpo?"

"I—I don't know. He used to work at the plant with Uncle Jeff. He was an industrial chemist. Then he retired. He used to visit with Uncle Jeff and with Arnold Stern, and I guess Uncle Jeff signed that paper as some sort of joke. He never told me why."

"Well, it doesn't make sense," I argued. "You know I've been suspicious about the whole affair. Today I stumbled on something that makes the whole thing smell. Your uncle spoke

of talking to Arnold Stern on the phone that night, yet Stern had died five months before."

"But my uncle was—upset," Vicky faltered. "He must have been confused, worried. The coroner's jury said—"

"That your uncle was mad. Oh, they didn't put it so bluntly, but that's what they hinted. Business worries, hallucinations. I thought so, too, until today. I began to investigate the past of Arnold Stern. He died in an explosion at the plant, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"But do you know what he'd done before he died?" I asked softly. "He'd signed a paper leaving his brain to Professor Scorpo. And after the explosion Scorpo went to the morgue and claimed his legacy."

"Jimmy!"

"It's true. I hate to upset you like this, Vicky, but don't you see? Once a reporter, always a reporter. I knew something was wrong, somewhere. I'm going to go to this man Scorpo, if I can trace him, and demand a showdown. On that night last month when your Uncle Jeff was phoned by the dead voice of Arnold Stern—"

The phone rang. Its cery tinkle cut across my words. Night, and a ringing phone—the same phone that had rung for Uncle Jeff. I rose, walked to the hall, while Vicky crouched in the shadows of the sofa behind me. I picked up the receiver with a none too steady hand and cleared my throat. "Hello?"

It was no dead man's whisper that reached my ears. "Clayburn?" snapped the voice. "Thought I knew where to find you on your night off."

"What's up, Chief?" I asked.

"It isn't your night off any more, Clayburn. There's been a blaze of a fire over at Jacob Trent's place—you know where it is, about a mile down from you. Hop down right away and cover. We're standing by on the morning edition."

"Right."

IHUNG up, turned and explained. "Take me with you," Vicky pleaded. "Don't leave me here alone, Jimmy." There was honest entreaty in her eyes.

"Come on," I snapped. We swung

out of the room, down the hall, out the moonlit walk, into the drive. My jalopy was parked half-way up on the gravel. I led the way, Vicky clinging to my arm.

"Jimmy!"

Her scream cut the still, dark air; her hand yanked my shoulder, spun me half-way around.

"Look—over there!"

Trick of moonlight, trick of madness—call it what you will. I saw it there, crouched by the side of the car, heard the glass tinkle as its arm extended through the window, heard that monstrous crunching on gravel.

It was a man. But men are not eight feet tall. Men do not have arms and legs of hammered silver. Men do not have metal bodies. Men do not have faces set in a grinning snarl of steel. The ghastly visage that was raised to mine in the moonlight was not human, not animal, not anything known to sanity. I stared into a silver skull, and as I stared the great figure rose and lumbered stiffly away. I raced after it, but the thing moved swiftly despite its jerky gait, and crashed into the shrubbery.

"Come on, Vicky, we'll go after it in the car," I shouted. I turned. Vicky swayed against the hood, her eyes pools of fear.

"The—the car," she murmured.

I turned. The front window glass had been shattered. Peering in, I saw the smashed panels of the dashboard. An iron arm could break the glass, an iron fist could hammer the dashboard.

"What was it?" Vicky breathed.

"A man in armor," I hazarded. "Probably some drunk from a masquerade." Even drunks feeling high aren't eight feet tall, and the thing had not worn armor, but I didn't tell Vicky that. "We'll have to use your car," I said. "Come on, there's a fire to cover. We'll attend to this other business later."

It must have been an hour before we stood in ashes, the grim ruins of what had once been Jacob Trent's home but which was now his tomb.

"You're too late," Sergeant Brady greeted me. "It's all over."

"What's all over?" I asked.

"Trent's body," said Brady. "Pardon me, Miss. But it's the truth I'm telling

you. When we found him he was burned to a crisp. The place went up all at once; must have been like an oven."

"How'd it start, Sergeant?"

"I dunno, me lad. Have to wait for the investigators' reports. Guess he was asphyxiated or something. He was all alone, the butler was out. He must have fallen asleep in the library and the place went up in smoke." Brady was voluble. "The safe was melted down. We got the will, though."

AT this I frowned thoughtfully. "Where's—the body?" I asked.

"You're too late for that, too, me lad. It's down at the morgue, and a fellow has already showed up right away with a certificate."

"Certificate?"

"Yeah, a paper Trent made out to him, leaving him his brain when he croak—pardon, Miss, when he died."

"What was his name?" I snapped.

"Professor Scorpo, he called himself," answered the Sergeant. "How he heard about it so quick, and what the divvil he wants with the poor cooked brain of Jacob Trent—"

"Scorpo!" It was Vicky who gasped the name.

"Come on," I said, pulling her away. "I've got all I want. I'll phone it in and call it a day."

But Vicky wasn't to be dissuaded. "What does it mean?" she persisted. "First Arnold Stern, then Uncle Jeff, and now Jacob Trent. All leaving their brains to Professor Scorpo, all dying—why, it's murder!"

We climbed into Vicky's car and started down the road. I turned to Vicky with a reassuring smile.

"Not so fast," I said. "It's too pat for murder. Scorpo can't be a killer. What reason would he have for killing Stern, who left his money to his sister, or your Uncle Jeff, who left his money to you, or Trent? No financial gain. I've prowled around the files down at the office, and I know that Scorpo hadn't quarreled with your uncle or Stern, so it wasn't a revenge motive, either. And nobody but an idiot would brazenly appear immediately after a man had died and claim his brain. He'd know suspicion would be cast on him right

away. It just doesn't make sense."

"And yet Scorpo's name keeps coming up," Vicky reminded.

"I'm going over to call on our friend the professor tomorrow," I announced. "Perhaps something can be settled then. So let's not bother ourselves any further tonight."

"Jimmy, I'm afraid." She snuggled close. "That—that thing wrecking your car tonight."

I had been afraid she'd remember that. I remembered it, too, and for some reason it affected me a lot more than the deaths. I could still see that silver skull grinning at me, that incredible iron figure lumbering off.

"Forget it," I coaxed. "See you tomorrow. Turn in and get a little rest. I'll call you first thing in the morning. Good night."

I hopped out at the curb in front of my hotel. Vicky slid over into the driver's seat, then turned her mouth to mine in a long kiss.

"Keep your chin up," I whispered. "And don't worry."

CHAPTER II

House of Iron Bondage

YEAH, don't worry, kid. *I'll* do that.

So thinking, I entered my room. After five years in a reporter's berth you get so you can sense news. Now, for the first time, I was sensing evil. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Sudden, mysterious deaths, dead voices, the claiming of corpse-brains, and finally that utterly unreal figure that crept up to my car.

Why had my car been smashed? Why did that thing follow me? Who knew of my investigations? What was waiting, watching, lurking for Vicky?

I undressed, switched out the lights, and lay in darkness as black as my forebodings. The room was still, and I could hear the rustle of the sheets as I pulled them over my body in bed. I could hear the rustle of the thoughts that crawled maggotlike in my brain, feasting on my sanity, stripping my skull of all save naked fear.

Oh, I was an imaginative fool. I was behaving like a child. But I had seen that silver monster, I had seen that steel skull leering in the moonlight. I had seen three men die, and now I lay in darkness, listening to the rustle of sheets like the rustle of a shroud-cloth.

I heard more.

In the hall, outside my bedroom, sounded heavy footsteps, coming this way. The footsteps were too heavy. They clanged like—*iron*. And they ceased just outside my door.

I slipped out of bed, groped through darkness to my dresser. The pistol slipped into my hand and I gripped the butt as I moved over behind my door.

The *thump-thump-thump* of that steel tread having halted, the knob turned. I stood tensed, raising the pistol, butt foremost. Steel grated in the lock—a skeleton key. The door opened, and simultaneous with its inward swing a shaft of moonlight sped through the window of my room. A figure entered.

Without hesitation I acted. The pistol butt swung down in a vicious arc upon the head of my unknown visitor. The pistol butt swung down—and my wrist wrenched in a numbing shock as the weapon smashed into something hard and jerked from my hand to thump on the floor.

The figure never wavered, did not fall. Instead, its gigantic bulk moved forward, looming in the moonlight until I saw its shining face, the horrid, unmoving silver features of a robot.

Eight feet tall, a man of metal, an automaton!

The thing walked stiffly, jerkily. This was no human being, though the huge body was built in horrid mockery of human form. Two great steel columns were the legs that supported a gleaming barrel-body. From the shoulders long jointed arms extending with crab-like appendages for fingers. The thin pipe of the neck bobbed beneath the silvery skull-head. For one grotesque moment I had a wildly incongruous thought. My mind went back to childhood, and the Oz books. This hideous thing was exactly like the Tin Woodman of Oz!

Only it wasn't. And I wasn't living in a child's fairy tale. I was standing huddled behind my bedroom door,

cowering before a monster of metal eight feet tall that walked like a man but didn't have man's weakness. I was helpless, staring into the shining face that was like grinning death. The mouth was a slit in metal, there was neither nose nor cheeks, but under a steel plating shone goggling eyes of glass. The eyes turned on me, and the steel mouth jerked back on repulsive hinges, and I heard a voice.

A voice that could not be. A voice coming from a robot, from a steel body, a shrill, mechanical voice emanating from no human vocal cords. The words chilled through the darkness.

"You are James Clayburn?"

"Yes," I whispered.

The thing had no ears, it couldn't hear—or could it? It had no heart, no lungs, yet it lived. It had no eyes, yet it saw. Oh, it was intelligent, all right! And that mocking, mechanical voice shrilled on.

"You had better keep out of Professor Scorpo's affairs," it said. "I was sent here to deliver that message."

I stared aghast. "What — who are you?" I whispered.

There was a long pause, and the robot turned towards me.

"I am—or I was—Arnold Stern."

The words knifed through sanity.

"It's a trick!" I shouted, though my senses shrieked denial. "It's a trick!" I repeated, more to save my reason than in any hope of denial. I sprang forward; I had to act. That grinning silver thing stood awaiting my charge.

I scooped up the pistol as I ran, and again I smashed it forward, this time into the hideous metal face. It clicked against steel, and then the robot's arms went up and I was locked in an iron vise. I felt no flesh beneath my flailing fingers, nothing but brazen metal, hammered and hinged.

I clawed wildly at a steel throat, and in my desperation I tore at the goggling, bulging glass facets of the monster's eyes. And then the iron arms squeezed. I fought a thing without breath or being, a thing I could not kill. And it bent me back in its grasp, its horrid face came close, and a silver fist raised and smashed into my jaw.

I went down into black tunnels of nightmare, with the final glimpse of

that iron sneer boring into my brain.

The clicking, metallic voice droned through a mist. "Keep out of Professor Scorpo's affairs. I was Arnold Stern. I know."

I LAY where I had fallen, sunlight streaming into my empty room when I awoke and fingered my bruised temples. Only the swinging, half-open door remained to recall my midnight visitor—only the door, and the grisly words I could not forget.

So *that* was Arnold Stern; *that* was what had called up Uncle Jeff and spoken in a voice that should have been forever silent in a six months' grave. A metal monster, but with a human brain!

I couldn't refute it. Professor Scorpo, coaxing his friends into willing him their brains for "experimental purposes." "Experimental," indeed! What madness had he conceived whereby he took the brains of dead men and used them to animate giant bodies of steel? What crazed quirk of the scientific mind had aided him in the perfection of this incredible outrage to sanity? Human brains, slaves in steel—but why?

A shower cleared my aching head of pain and gnawing fear alike. There was only one way out, go to Scorpo and demand an explanation. He had a legal right to the brains; the signed papers gave him that. No law in the land would be able to deal with this incredible problem of brain-slavery in the bodies of super-robots. Scorpo held the whip hand, and yet the whole affair was insane. And if he threatened me further, or tried to harm Vicky—

Vicky! I must go to her at once, tell her, and then seek Scorpo. I dressed hastily, and took a cab. In fifteen minutes I was banging on the door.

Della, the maid, answered.

"Oh, Mr. Clayburn," she greeted me, "I'm so frightened."

She didn't have to tell me that. One glimpse of her haggard face and twitching lips betrayed incipient hysteria.

"Where's Vicky?" I demanded.

"Miss Vicky's gone out," stammered the maid. "Something awful's the matter with her, Mr. Clayburn, something awful."

"Out with it!" I snapped.

"She got a phone call this morning from her Uncle Jeff."

"What?"

"I took it, and I'll swear it was his voice. She talked to him and he told her to come to Professor somebody's house right away." Della began to sob, but I shook her shoulders.

"What was the man's name?"

"Here, on this paper. She wrote down the address for you, too."

I took the paper Della proffered. Professor Scorpo. Number 43, Beach Road.

Scorpo, all right. And Uncle Jeff's voice from the grave!

"Phone!" I shouted. I called desk, told the chief I wouldn't be reporting, and hung up before he could muster an oath. Then I dialed for a cab.

DELLA sobbed on my shoulder, but I had other things to think about. The cab arrived, and I was in it before it had stopped moving.

"Step on it, buddy!" I ordered, giving the address.

He stepped. Soon the wooded ravines of Beach Road flashed by the windows. Number 43 was on the hillside, on a little cut-off we almost missed. The road was dusty, and I saw the tire-marks of Vicky's car. We crashed through a tangle of hanging trees until the forest-hidden house loomed up on the lofty promontory overlooking the sea. It was a long, rambling two-story structure with a rounded roof that made it look like a gigantic brown leech clinging stubbornly to the hillside.

But I had no time for fancies. And I wasn't a fool. I hopped out, paid the driver, and added five dollars. "Listen, pal," I told him, "I've got a call to make here. If I'm not out in fifteen minutes, streak down the road and call a couple of state troopers. And get back fast." The driver blinked until I shoved my press-card under his nose, then nodded.

"Monkey business going on in there?" he asked, and I nodded grimly.

"Monkey business," indeed! That was an understatement.

Upon the porch, finger on the bell, I waited. And the door swung open. I started. There was no butler in the doorway, no maid; but an eight-foot bulk loomed before me. One of Scorpo's robots! My hands rose involun-

tarily—as did the hairs on my neck. A silver visage spawned in nightmare yawned before me and from the slitted mouth came sounds.

"Come in. You are expected."

The automaton turned and stalked down the darkened hall on ponderous, weighted feet. I followed. I would have followed old John T. Devil himself if he led me to Vicky. But this was something worse, something wrested not from myth, but from the cold cruelty of scientific logic, not an imaginary evil but a real one. The robot thumped down the hall, into a large room, and across the floor.

"Jimmy!"

Vicky was in my arms. She clung there while I surveyed the library with a swift glance.

"Ah, Mr. Clayburn, I believe."

The voice, brittle and precise, caused me to turn.

A tall man arose from a seat at the fireplace. His unbelievably elongated limbs were draped in black, so that the long, thin fingers pressed against his breast shone with accentuated pallor. He had the body of a spider and the face of a devil—a long, slitted mouth and over-large eyes of jet. His hair bristled in a wiry shock, but all I could see was mouth and eyes. Spider-body, spider-mouth, spider-eyes.

"I am Professor Scorpo," he said.

I didn't hear that. The nursery rhyme about the spider and the fly jingled in my brain.

"Jimmy! What are you staring at?"

VICKY'S voice recalled me to reason. I faced Scorpo without flinching.

"Sorry. I rushed over so fast I'm still a little bewildered."

"Naturally." The professor bowed. "I'm glad you came."

"You didn't seem so glad last night," I ventured. "Your — ah — messenger didn't extend a very cordial invitation."

The shot went home. Was it fancy, or did a flicker of annoyance rise in those deep-set eyes?

"I am sorry, Mr. Clayburn, truly sorry. I was a fool. This morning I experienced a change of heart. I decided it would be best if I had both you and the young lady call in order to explain

certain things which I know must puzzle you. Naturally, I can understand that in view of the unusual nature of my recent experiments, suspicion might be aroused. So I wished to take this opportunity to clear matters up."

I dead-panned. But Vicky hastily supplemented Scorpo's remarks.

"You see, Jimmy? It's all right. I was frightened when I came, but now that Professor Scorpo has told me a little about what he's doing, I'm beginning to understand."

"Exactly." Scorpo bowed. "And now, to prove my good faith, I'd like to show you around my laboratory. You understand, Mr. Clayburn, that my work hasn't yet approached the point where it can be made public. But I progress, and when I lay my findings before the world, rest assured that I shall give you and your paper a—'scoop,' I believe you call it. Now, if you'll follow me."

The tall black figure moved out of the room. Vicky's blue eyes stared trustingly into mine, and her grip was cool on my arm. I had no one to stare at with trust, no one to grip, except that waiting cab-driver. I wondered if I'd need him.

Meanwhile, there was Vicky. So I smiled down at her and stepped after Scorpo. We entered the hall again, and Scorpo was joined by the grotesque silver figure of the robot servant. At the end of the hall we halted before sliding doors of steel, firmly closed.

"Electrical lock," Scorpo called over his shoulder. "Can't be opened by key. That's where robots come in. You know that thought is electricity—that's one of the principles on which my robots have been constructed. But I won't confuse you further. Watch."

He beckoned to the motionless metal figure.

"Number Five," he said.

"Yes, I hear."

"Your head, please."

Then it happened, happened as though in nightmare. The giant robot lifted silver arms and fumbled with its neck. There was a sharp click, and then the head began to revolve, to turn on metal screws. The arms lifted the robot head from its shoulders!

Vicky gave a shudder at my side as the headless monster stood, self-decap-

itated, and with fumbling fingers pressed the metal neck at a spot in the center of the doorway. The doors slid open with a jerk, and the smiling professor beckoned us to enter.

CHAPTER III

Prisoners of Hell

BEHIND us came the echo of a thunderous crash. The metal man had fallen to the floor, the silver skull rolling across the hall, a ball of horror.

"The brain connection is severed when the head is removed," Scorpo explained. He stooped and adjusted the automaton's head to the neck. The creature rose and backed away stiffly.

"Now," said Professor Scorpo.

We stood in a large, white-walled room before an altar to science. Bunsen burners flamed before the fane of the God of Reason, and retorts sparkled like altar-jewels. Test-tubes stood candlelike in racks, huge electrical machines took the place of sacred statues, and over all was the odor, not of sanctity, but of chemicals. And at the farther end of the room, resting on slabs like bodies at a church funeral, were the men of metal.

There were five of them, lying motionless in a row. On a table nearby were extra skulls, extra arms, extra limbs, and extra round bodies shining in the strong light. There were coils of wire, cold spikes of steel, and in the center of the table a solitary glass jar. It contained something that looked like a sponge; a bloody sponge flecked with horrid gray. I recognized it instantly for what it was—a human brain!

Scorpo turned towards us.

"There," he said. "This tells it all, better than my words. I shall not bore you with a long history of my experiments, nor any intricate explanation of how I managed to achieve my effects. Working on the theories of Pavlov and the Russians, and on the notion that thought is electricity and hence governs life, I began my work.

"I have learned how to build bodies of metal, patterned with an intricate electrical system that corresponds to

the human nervous system. Naturally, I kept my earlier and unsuccessful efforts a secret. Recently I perfected my theories and began to put them into practice. Kind friends of former years were good enough to will me their brains for the work. Men like Arnold Stern, Jacob Trent, and your uncle."

He nodded at Vicky.

"Then it's true?" she gasped. "You've put my uncle's brain into—into one of those monsters?"

"Exactly. But the robot is not a monster. He has a man's brain, and can use it. He can control his metal body, subject to mechanical adjustments. Think of it—I have conquered death! There will be no death. Metal bodies do not wear out and the brain, kept alive in a saline solution actuated by electrical stimuli in its metal case, lives forever! Think of the possibilities!"

"I'm thinking of my uncle," Vicky flashed out. "What have you done with him? I'm not interested in your awful studies. I want to know what you've done with Uncle Jeff?"

Scorpo sighed, a weary and discouraged sigh. "I'm afraid you're like all the rest. That's why I've been so secretive about my experiments. That's why I had friends sign over their brains instead of using unclaimed bodies from the morgue. Because if people found out the nature of my experiments they wouldn't understand. You don't, my dear. You want to see your uncle. Very well. I'll show him to you."

SCORPO stepped to the wall and pressed a buzzer.

I stood tense, watching the smiling professor. What hokus-pokus was this? Uncle Jeff was dead, and Scorpo was a charlatan. Or was he? Could he make dead brains live in metal bodies? Was he mad, or a genius, or both?

I stood there as the buzzing echo died away and was replaced by a new sound, one that had become dreadfully familiar in the past two days. The iron clang of metal feet.

"Oooh!" wailed Vicky.

And into the room stepped Horror. A horror in steel, but one without a face, without eyes of glass. The thing lumbered blindly into the room, knock-

ing against the wall in the doorway, and then swaying with outstretched arms. This robot had a plain metal globe set where the head should be, and there was no countenance at all; only a mouth-slit.

"I have not given him eyes yet," Scorpo whispered. "It takes time for the reorganization process, and he has been here less than a month."

"That isn't he—it can't be!" Vicky sobbed.

"Vicky!"

The voice came from far away, from far away, indeed. A voice from the grave, a voice from a metal coffin, a voice from the metal monster swaying before us.

"Uncle Jeff!" she screamed.

"Is that you, Vicky? I called you today. Professor Scorpo let me call you when I begged and begged. Now you're here, but I can't see you. I can't see you because I'm dead, Vicky, dead, dead—"

"Stop!" screamed the girl, her face contorted in pain. She turned on Scorpo with blazing eyes.

"You beast! You filthy ghoul! Taking him and making him a slave, a prisoner in a metal hell. You ought to be burned at the stake, as they burned sorcerers in the old days!"

Scorpo's spider-smile was steady. "I expected this," he said calmly, shrugging.

And then the horrid voice came again from the robot.

"Vicky," it whispered. "You don't know what it's like to be this way. I never dreamed when I willed my brain that he was going to do—what he did. You don't know what it is to be alive in a body of metal, without seeing.

"There's a switch in my side. When he turns it off, I go back to death, and when he turns it on I must walk at his command. I'm his slave, Vicky, his slave! Make him let me go, Vicky, back to the grave, to peace. Make him, Vicky, you must!"

"That will do. Go." Scorpo's voice crackled in command, and the robot turned and lumbered out. Vicky's woman-heart forced her arms toward the retreating metal figure, but her eyes recoiled in horror from the sight of the monstrosity.

"Let him go," she whispered to Scorpo. "Oh, you must release him from *that!*"

"He'll be dead," Scorpo reminded her.

"Better than this hell." Her voice rose. "You must let him go. You must! The police—"

"Will do nothing," Scorpo finished. "Have you forgotten the agreement?" He drew the folded paper from his breast and flourished it. "Your uncle's signature gives me his brain after death. I can do with it what I will, and no court in the country can touch me."

"I'll do anything," Vicky whispered. "Anything."

I COULDN'T stand any more. I stepped forward.

"Listen, Scorpo," I began. "You're pretty smooth, but I think I can persuade you. To begin with, I'd like to make a few inquiries about just how Vicky's uncle met his death. That burned car story doesn't satisfy me."

Scorpo's face remained calm, but I noted the trembling of his hands. Then Vicky interrupted.

"Never mind, Jimmy. Professor, listen to me. I've got money — lots of money. I'll sign it all over to you if only you'll let Uncle Jeff rest in peace."

"So?"

"A quarter of a million dollars, all yours! You can use money in your experiments, can't you? You can get other bodies, expensive equipment, all you'll need."

"There is something in what you say," Scorpo mused. "I could find a place for that money in my work. It is expensive, and in order to present my secret properly to the world of science I shall need funds. Besides, I understand your feelings in this matter, and so—"

"Take it," Vicky begged. "Take the money and let him go!"

"No!" I said.

They both faced me, but I kept my eyes on Scorpo's.

"She'll give you no money," I announced. "Not a penny. And you'll present nothing to science. You'll make your presentation before a jury, Professor Scorpo. You're a murderer!

You were clever enough. You thought your very boldness would hide the facts. But you killed Arnold Stern, and Vicky's uncle, and Jacob Trent arranging it so that their deaths looked like accidents, in order to get their brains. You're a murderer, and the fire investigators' reports on last night's blaze will prove it!"

I stepped back to Vicky's side, and that proved my undoing. I never saw them approach, but at that moment my arms were caught in a literal grip of steel. Metal hands squeezed my wind-pipe, metal fingers held my elbows. I was powerless to kick out at robot bodies.

Scorpo's spider-smile was grim as death.

"So?" he said. "You force me, Mr. Clayburn."

A shrill scream sounded at my side. I wrenched my head around and saw Vicky struggling in the iron arms of a gigantic robot servant. The metal man picked her slender body from the floor and held her like a child, one great paw ripping free a piece of her blouse and pressing it as a gag against her mouth.

"Vicky!" I yelled. I tore at the pinioning grasp that bound me, rocked forward, and then was lifted from my own feet by the huge arms of the automaton.

"Sing him a few nursery rhymes," Scorpo chuckled. "Meanwhile, I'll convince the young lady in the matter of that donation she offered me."

"There's a delegation of state police on their way," I yelled. "You're finished, Scorpo."

"You mean your arrangement with the cab driver?" mocked the professor. "Here."

He waved an arm. Another robot entered on ponderous feet. In his arms he bore a limp figure with a hideously dangling neck. As I stared into the dead face of the driver, Scorpo's chuckle rose.

"Take him out," he commanded. "Bring the girl here to the table. I've never had a woman robot before. It may prove interesting!"

His chuckle boomed, but above it came the sound of Vicky's frightened scream. The robot bore her to the

(Continued on page 108)

HORROR SCOPES

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THE BLUE SPIDER

THERE have been many weird stories of spiders—but this one is the strangest spider story ever reported to this department. It comes from Walter Martin, who resides in Connecticut.

One morning last fall, Martin's wife, who hated spiders, called his attention to an ugly blue spider on the wall of their country home. She insisted that her husband kill the thing at once. She wouldn't go near it. But Martin never liked to kill spiders, so he got a glass tumbler, put it over the spider and slid a piece of paper under it.

He started to carry the spider outdoors to release it, but his wife grew angry. She pulled the paper out of his hand and the spider dropped to the floor. Savagely, she stepped on it and was then satisfied. She criticized her husband for being so foolish about insects.

That afternoon Martin went out in the back field to gather some mushrooms. He liked them and had picked them every year at this time. He prided himself on his ability to distinguish mushrooms from toadstools. Walking back to the house with a basket under his arm, he noticed a blue spider on one of the mushrooms.

As he was about to brush it off, he saw his nextdoor neighbor in the yard. The neighbor was an entomologist. Martin called him to ask what kind of a spider this one was. It was of the same species as the one Mrs. Martin had killed that morning.

The neighbor was surprised to find this type of spider so far north, and desiring to keep it, he went to his house and got a small

bottle. He put the spider in the bottle and inserted a cork tightly. As he slipped the bottle into his coat pocket, he glanced again at the mushroom it had been found on. Then he exclaimed:

"Good Lord, man—don't eat this one. See the green dots on it . . . it is deadly poison. If it doesn't kill you it will give you violent cramps."

Martin was surprised. It was a type he had never seen before and greatly resembled a mushroom. It was the only poisonous one in the entire basket.

Martin thanked the neighbor. As the neighbor was leaving, he withdrew the glass bottle from his pocket to look at it again. But the bottle was empty. A careful search of clothes and the ground could not reveal it. The cork was still in the bottle, however.

The spider had disappeared as though it had been a ghost! Had the spider whose life Martin had tried to save that morning returned to save his? The neighbor declared that spiders are the most uncanny of insects. What do YOU think?

THE ESSENCE OF BLOOD

THERE has been discussion of late on the question whether or not human blood carries with it other than purely physical properties. In other words, is there a psychic or metaphysical quality which under certain conditions, reacts on the mind?

Through a strange confession, a story has come to light concerning a rich young girl, Mary J—, who some years ago was in an automobile accident and lost a large amount of blood. It was necessary to rush her to

the hospital where she was given a blood transfusion consisting of more than the usual quantity. The donor was a poor girl, Helen W—, the only person available who had the same type of blood as Mary J—.

Mary was engaged to a young banker of the town, and the wedding was announced shortly after the recovery. But unknown to Mary, Helen, who had supplied the blood for Mary's transfusion, had been in love with that banker. He had jilted Helen for Mary. Helen's love had turned to vicious hate.

Helen had an aunt whom some people called an old witch—and one day the aunt summoned Helen. She asked if Helen still hated the banker. Helen said she did—and the girl also.

"Well," said the aunt, "so do I hate him—and his father as well. We'll take our revenge. On the day of the marriage, come to my house early."

Helen came two hours before the wedding, scheduled for 3 P. M. The aunt had prepared a dummy, representing the young banker. Then for two hours the aunt kept chanting to Helen: "You hate him—you hate him—you hate him—you want to kill him."

Gradually Helen became hypnotized. Her hate had reached a boiling point. And then on the stroke of three, the aunt shouted:

"Now is the time to kill him. Grab him by the throat—scratch his eyes out—strangle him—beat him—beat him—beat him!"

And in a trance, Helen struck the dummy, until in exhaustion she fell to the floor.

That evening the newspapers carried a startling account of how Mary J—, at the altar, had suddenly gone wild, striking at her intended husband and painfully scratching him until she fell in exhaustion, mumbling, "I hate you—I hate you—I hate you."

The father of the young man had called off the wedding indefinitely. The doctor had pronounced the tragic affair due to a nervous breakdown.

But the old aunt, back in her lowly shack, gleefully cackled: "Blood is the essence of the soul! He who drinks your blood, is your slave."

THE HEAVY WATCH-CRYSTAL

WHEN Tom Doogan was a lad, he always admired the old-fashioned watch his father carried. The crystal was of the bull's eye type, as thick as a magnifying glass. Grandfather Doogan had first carried the watch, and as he was very near-sighted, the crystal had been made to order. The numerals appeared very large.

One day Tom's father told him the secret of this family heirloom—that it had once saved the life of the grandfather when he had fallen on a spike. And likewise, the father's life had been saved when as a policeman he had been shot by a bandit. Thus, a belief had grown up that the watch was a guardian angel. Tom's father believed the watch carried the protection of his mother's spirit, for it had been Grandmother Doogan

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 103)

who had given the watch to her husband shortly before she died.

Time passed, and Tom Doogan, now a watchman of a government warehouse, carried the watch on his daily rounds. On afternoon he scented gas in one of the compartments of the huge concrete structure. Believing that a pipe might have burst he ventured in the small compartment and as he did so, the door slammed shut on him.

He was locked in. His key was in the outside of the lock. There was only one small window above his head, through which the sun was shining. But as he was climbing to the window to summon help, the gas overcame him, and he dropped to the floor. His watch flew from his pocket, face up.

Doogan felt consciousness leaving him. He knew he was finished. Almost paralyzed, he aimed his pistol at the glass window. But his sight was bad. The last thing he remembered was lying helpless on the floor and seeing his watch. He gasped the name of his grandmother, remembering the story of the watch.

Then something happened, which he learned about later when he came to on a hospital cot. The sun, coming through the window, reflected on the heavy crystal of the watch, intensifying the heat which concentrated in a tiny ray on a metal fuse of the electric sprinkling system on the ceiling. The heat opened the sprinkler, which at the same time summoned the fire department. Firemen arrived in time to save Doogan.

The fireman who was first to enter the room said: "Tom—I could swear I saw an old lady standing in the corner when I first found you—but it must have been just a shadow."

THE SMUDGE ON THE WALL

SOME weeks ago a woman residing in Greenwich Village telephoned to this department asking if Chakra would mind calling on her some evening. She wanted to tell him of a strange coincidence.

A call was made at her apartment in Greenwich Street, where she resided with her husband. This is her story:

"One afternoon, returning from shopping, I noticed a black smudge on the wall alongside of the electric lamp socket. I realized at once that it was carbon caused by a short circuit. So I summoned the electrician at once. He was surprised that the fuse hadn't blown out. Then he looked at the black smudge and noticed that it wasn't carbon, but a mark caused by a heavy pencil of some kind. He repaired the wires which were just on the point of causing a short circuit. He told me that they probably would have caused a fire because the flimsy covering of the davenport hung right alongside of the socket. He said: 'Whoever put that mark there, saved your home, if not your life, for it might have happened while you were asleep on the davenport.'

"I tried to figure how on earth that mark came to be there. Then it dawned on me with strange bewilderment. That is why I

wanted to speak to you, Chakra. You see, six months ago we lost our only child, a little boy of three. Whenever he found a pencil, he would mark up the wall. Many a time I had to scold him.

"My husband was so interested that we examined the mark carefully and tried to discover the pencil that had caused it. Suddenly we came to the conclusion that it was caused by my eye-pencil. I rushed to the bathroom closet to look, and the eye-pencil was gone. I know I had left it there.

"I looked high and low. And where do you think I found it? It was in a box, way in back of the clothes closet, where I had hidden all of my dead boy's toys, intending some day to give them away. On my oath, I know I never put that eye-pencil in that box. It must have been my little boy who came back to save us. This gives me the greatest joy of my life—and I wanted to tell you about it."

RED MEANS DANGER

ACCORDING to man's custom, red implies danger ahead. But perhaps this is based on psychic law, which may be inferred from a story reported by Thomas Haas of New Jersey.

One evening Haas drove home from work and parked his car in front of his suburban home. A few minutes later his sister came in. She said:

"Tom—have you been driving through red paint this afternoon? When I came in a few minutes ago, I noticed red paint all over your front tire. It was even dripping. I didn't examine it closely, but it struck me as strange."

Curious, Tom went out to investigate. His car was gone. It must have been stolen. He asked his next-door neighbor whether anyone had driven off a few minutes ago. The neighbor said he had noticed a man get in the car, but had thought nothing of it.

Haas then notified the police. They said they would report to him any information they could obtain after an alarm had been broadcast. Meanwhile, Tom questioned his sister. She re-iterated the story of red paint on the right front tire, which she insisted was covered with red—and dripping.

Late that night the police phoned to Haas asking him to come to headquarters at once. He rushed down. Then he was informed that his car had been found, but the car had killed a man. The driver had been captured after a wild chase. He was long wanted by the police as a car thief. While speeding around a corner, the right front wheel had knocked down a pedestrian whose blood had splattered the tire and it was on this evidence that the man would be convicted, for the crook had tried to claim that a car in front of him had struck the victim.

But Haas, due to his sense of justice, then told the police what his sister had said. For a while it looked bad for Haas—maybe the blood was on the car when the thief had stolen it. So experts were called. A test of the blood on the tire and that of the

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 105)

victim was made. They matched. It was impossible for the blood to have been on the tire before the time of the accident.

Haas was told to forget it. Said the chief of police: "Just another of those mystic premonitions about which the police know a lot, but never dare to talk about for fear of being laughed at. What your sister saw was not of the factual police world, but something beyond the knowledge of man or scientific fact."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra:

Can accidents really be prevented—or is a man doomed when his number is up regardless of conditions?

GEORGE HUNTER

Dear Mr. Hunter: There is much to prove that some men must die at stated times. Last November in Toms River, N. J., Sterling Moore was being rushed to a hospital to save his life. As the ambulance was speeding along, it collided with another car and overturned. Moore was killed, but not the driver. There are hundreds of cases like this, where fate strikes a man and then, hampered by science, strikes again in defiance.

Dear Chakra:

My friend always drives slow when he sees a mark in the road where a previous accident occurred. He says that these spots are cursed and that death sticks to favorite spots. Is there anything to this belief?

HELEN DUNNING

Dear Miss Dunning: Read this item which appeared in the New York Herald-Tribune last December 2. "Francis Markham . . . was fatally injured today when he was struck by an automobile on Merrick Road at the spot where his father was killed by an automobile in 1932. A few hours later, a car driven by John H. Reitz of Brooklyn, skidded into a tree killing an occupant, Harry P. Clark, at the same spot." Evidently the angel of death becomes very active at certain times at the same spot.

Dear Chakra:

I attended a seance with a friend who claims he heard voices that I couldn't hear. Did he hear them with his physical ear? Other people who attended, said they also

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heard the high pitched sounds. Is it because I am not psychic?

GRACE DEEDS

Dear Miss Deeds: Perhaps your ear isn't tuned as high as the others. According to Professor Kemp of Brown University, who made a check-up of college students, few people can hear sounds of more than 12,000 cycles, although some people can hear much higher vibrations. Ordinary sounds have a frequency of only 250 to 2000 cycles. Usually sounds recorded in seances are well over the 12,000 mark. What causes them no one knows. Mediums have emitted sounds under trance which are far higher than human ear maximum but can be heard by electrical means. It has been said that one's subconscious mind actually emits a vibration that can be heard with proper attachments. This is still in the experimental stage. It may lead to a great discovery in time.

Dear Chakra:

Has anyone ever seen the ghost of an animal?

GUS NEWBERGER

Dear Mr. Newberger: There have been many cases reported and sworn to.

Dear Chakra:

What is the best argument in favor of life after death?

JERRY NELSON

Dear Mr. Nelson: The fact that man can project his astral body regardless of physical means. Science can find no seat of the astral body within the human body itself, leaving the argument that the astral body does not depend upon the physical body, therefore is a force of itself which cannot be destroyed by destruction of the physical.

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MASTER OF SILVER GIANTS

(Continued from page 101)

table, and its iron hands clawed at her bared flesh. My head was buried helplessly against the steel chest of my captor as the robot dragged me away to the basement of this terrible house.

The cellar door clanged shut behind me. I rushed to the bars of the cell into which I had been thrust and rattled them in a fury of impotent rage. I screamed aloud at the thought of Vicky, upstairs in that chamber of scientific horror.

The echoes of my shouts rang helplessly along the dark corridor. Then there was silence.

Suddenly there was a clanking sound; the grisly, familiar clanking sound that would forever haunt my dreams. Was my captor returning to finish me off? No, the footsteps were closer. They moved up and down, almost at my side. Was I going mad?

I pressed my ear to the left wall of my cell. The iron tread came from just beyond, along the wall. Someone—something, rather—was pacing up and down in a room next to mine.

"Who is it?" I called guardedly.

There was silence.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

A long pause. Then:

"Jacob Trent," answered a voice.

CHAPTER IV

Secret of the Metal Giants

JACOB TRENT! The man burned to death in his home last night, the man whose body Scorpo had accompanied to the morgue, with a paper claiming the brain. It couldn't be—and yet it was!

"Trent, can you hear me? I'm Jim Clayburn, remember me?"

"The reporter? What are you doing here?"

"I'm Scorpo's prisoner."

"In iron? Like me?"

"No. Not yet." The words slipped out of me quite grimly. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know, Clayburn. I'm so confused. The last thing I remember is sitting in my parlor and falling asleep. When I woke up I was in this body.

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Scorpo told me how he'd claimed my brain after the fire and brought me here. But I never knew he meant to do this to me."

The tones were filled with agony.

"When I awoke I was lying on the operating table upstairs, with a steel body, steel limbs, steel face. I saw it in the mirror before they took off the electrical attachments and Scorpo taught me to walk. You know he teaches us again. We're like children at first."

"Were you blind?" I asked.

"Yes, and then he gave me eyes. I don't know how. I don't understand how he keeps me alive."

"Do you feel anything?" I asked. I had to know that. I still couldn't believe the impossible.

"Yes. I feel tired—heavy. It's hard to walk, hard to move. Of course, there is no thirst or hunger, or anything else. I just walk and do what I'm told. There's a switch in my side. All the robots have switches. Scorpo comes in every once in a while and turns off the switch. Then I fall asleep—or fall into death again, I don't know which.

"But, Clayburn, this is hell. I've got to get out. I want to be free, not Scorpo's slave. I can't stand to look at myself, to know I'm alive when I should be dead. For days now I've pleaded with Scorpo to let me call my relatives and talk to them. Maybe they can free me somehow. They have all my money. For days I've pleaded, hoping he'll relent and agree."

"For days?" I repeated. "Trent, how long have you been Scorpo's robot?"

"I guess about three weeks," Trent answered. "That's what he told me. He turns me off quite frequently, and I lose track of time."

It hit me then. Trent claimed that he'd been here three weeks, but he'd only died last night!

I thought fast. "Trent, you want to get out, so listen to me. You've got an iron body. You can smash your bars—you're in a cell like mine, aren't you? I thought so. Well, smash them. Let me out. I can help you, Trent. I'm the only man who knows Scorpo's secret."

"You do?"

"Yes, of course," I bluffed. "I'll

(Continued on page 110)

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(Continued from page 109)

promise to save you if only you'll free me and help me. At once, Trent! Jeff's niece is upstairs, in danger. We've got to stop Scorpo in time. Smash those bars, Trent!"

He heard, believed. He had to. The iron feet clanged forward. Steel met steel as his hands clawed at the bars, bent them. I stood in a frenzy of urgency. And then, with grinding wrench, something gave.

A moment later the figure of the robot that was Jacob Trent stood before me. Again the fists thudded against the bars of my cell. They bent back. The lock was splintering. The metal giant lunged its body against the lock. It grated and shattered. The door swung open. I was free!

"Come on," I urged. "Not a moment to spare."

As if to corroborate, a sound rose from above—a sound that turned my blood to glacial ice. It was Vicky's scream.

I raced forward down the corridor. Trent lumbering at my heels. Up the stairs we crashed, and down the hall. The laboratory door was open and we sped in—into a world of fear.

The machines still stood around the table, the tall, weird electrical machines, like inanimate robots with insane heads together, peering down with eyes that shot sparks at what was lying on the table. And Professor Scorpo was bent over the table, hammering with a great steel mallet at something that screamed and screamed.

Vicky's clothes lay in a huddled heap on the floor.

"What's this?" Scorpo wheeled. One slim hand went to his waist, and the blunt muzzle of a revolver snouted towards me.

"Get him, Trent!" I shouted. "Bullets won't hurt you!"

Scorpo raised the weapon and fired point-blank at the steel chest of the robot. But Trent lurched forward and swept the gun aside with one gleaming arm. Then Scorpo raced around the table, the automaton at his heels, I darted forward, but cold hands gripped my neck.

The three robot servants had thundered into the room and come toward me. Their grinning skull-heads gaped,

their iron arms menaced, and the barrel bodies bore me back under their ghastly weight. My clutching fingers fell on Scorpo's great metal mallet. I raised it in both hands like a battle-axe and brought it down with all my strength on the head of the first robot.

The silver skull smashed inwards and skidded from the pipe-neck as the monster floundered back and fell, writhing, to the floor. The second robot was upon me. I brought the hammer up again and smashed squarely into the evil glassy eyes. With a shrill scream of horror, the gigantic automaton toppled. The third giant crushed me from behind. As I drew the mallet up, iron fingers wrenched it from my grasp. A steel fist thudded against my back and, as I fell forward, the ponderous metal man was upon me, feet uplifted to crush my chest into pulp.

"Look out!" screamed Scorpo's voice.

Trent charged the robot with lowered head. His steel skull rammed into the other mechanical man and hurled him back. Then Trent was upon the monster, and his feet stamped and pounded and tore. I bounded erect, and my searching eyes fell on Scorpo. He stood at the table, revolver in hand, again the master.

"Stop!" His voice razored the room. "Not so fast, Clayburn," he snapped. "You're too late. Look there!" His finger stabbed at the figure on the table, the figure held by wires attached to the electrical apparatus.

It was not Vicky. It was the gleaming metal body of a robot. As I gaped, the slit mouth jerked, and a voice, Vicky's voice, came from the steel throat.

"You're too late, Jimmy!"

I half-reeled.

"You see?" Scorpo purred. "She defied me, and this is her fate. I have placed her brain in the steel skull. The operation is a simple one. If you attempt to harm me further, she suffers, as only I can make her suffer."

I stood stunned. Vicky lost to me forever? She was a woman of steel, a robot. Scorpo had triumphed.

"No!" I shouted. I lunged forward. A bullet blazed, scorching my arm. I didn't halt. My leap carried me to the

(Continued on page 112)

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(Continued from page 111)

mad professor's side. My fist crashed into his body, sending the revolver flying across the room. Scorpo's arms swung up, clawing at my face. I drove my left into that snarling spider-mask and his head snapped back.

He lurched blindly into the tangle of machinery and wires snapped. There was a roar, a blaze of crackling heat that seared my eyes with ultra-violet lightning, and then the smoke cleared. Scorpo lay where he had fallen.

The robot Trent lumbered to my side. Silently he lifted Vicky's metal body into my arms. Deep sobs came from the robot throat.

"Too late," Vicky's voice whispered. "No," I grinned. "I've figured it out. Listen." I held her steel form close.

"It's a fake. Scorpo was clever. He knew too much to blackmail his rich friends outright so he cooked up a fantastic but eminently persuasive scheme. Arnold Stern, your Uncle Jeff, and Trent were all drugged. In two cases their homes, and in one, a car was burned. But Scorpo started the fires after drugging the men and dragging their bodies out."

"But the bodies in the fire?"

"Substitutes, provided by Scorpo. Possibly bodies he got for medical purposes. Burned, with rings and clothing switched, they defied identification. Scorpo took the drugged men and put them, not into metal bodies, but into metal suits he built for that purpose."

"Metal suits?" Trent interjected.

"Of course. His servants wore them to heighten the illusion. Take a look at the ones whose 'heads' I crushed. The heads were artificial—no brains in them, just a steel shell. He's a six-foot man and his head is about chest-level in the armor."

Trent bent over the fallen bodies of the three servants. "Right," he announced. "But I don't understand. Am I in a steel suit? I haven't eaten, or slept, or felt—"

"Your story gave me the clue," I answered. "You thought you'd been here for weeks, but actually you were brought here last night. Scorpo put you in a suit at once, and drugged you. That switch in your side he said he

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"Uncle Sam sure did help—

make tobacco better than ever

... and Luckies always buy the finer grades," says H. H. Scott, 12 years an independent buyer

IN A NUTSHELL, here's why we ask: "Have you tried a Lucky lately?"

1. With the scientific help of Uncle Sam, farmers have grown the finest tobacco in recent years.

2. Among independent tobacco experts, Luckies are the 2 to 1 favorite. Experts like H. H. Scott point out that Luckies have bought the choicer grades of these better-than-ever tobaccos. So *Luckies* are better than ever!

3. These finer tobaccos have been aged from 2 to 4 years, and have been *further* mellowed by the "Toasting" process, which takes out certain throat irritants found in all tobacco.

Try Luckies for a week, and see why... WITH MEN WHO KNOW TOBACCO BEST—IT'S LUCKIES 2 TO 1

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Actual color photographs. Before the harvest—inspection of a crop of better-than-ever tobacco grown at Willow Springs, N. C., by U. S. Govt. methods. (Below) H. H. Scott looks over some fine leaf after it's been cured.



Have you tried a
Lucky lately?