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Colonel Crum Novelet

By **JOHN
H. KNOX**

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**DANGER
IN THE DARK**

A Gripping Complete Novelet
By **G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**



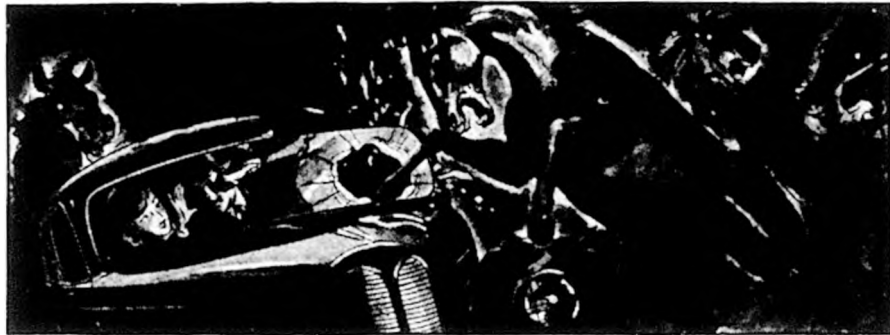
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May, 1941

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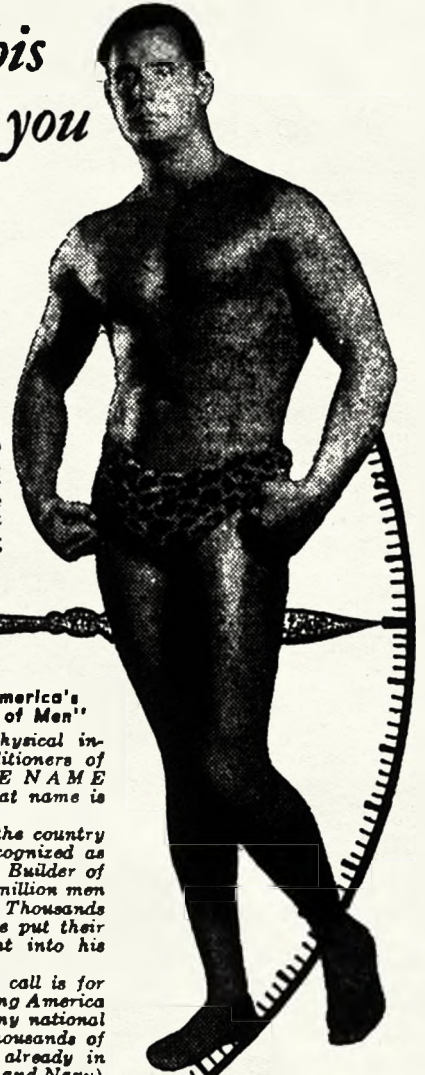
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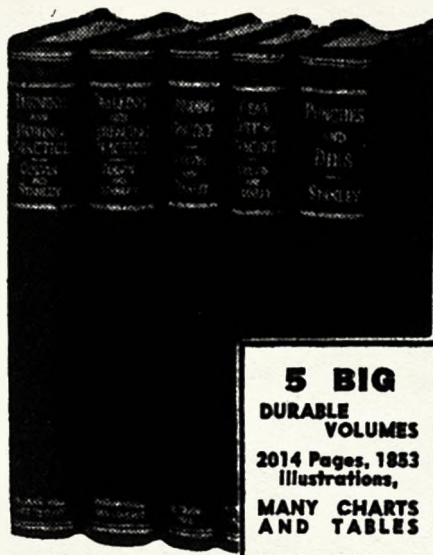
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THE BLOODY SHARK

DURING the summer of 1918, a large man-eating shark was reported off the coast of Charleston, S. C. It had been seen several times in the past few days—so one afternoon Martin Giffert and John Little decided to catch it if possible. Giffert took his motor-boat and with a large hook and line started out into the Atlantic. Little brought along a small pail of beef-blood which he had secured from a slaughter house.

About a mile off shore, Little poured the blood on the water, and the two men waited anxiously for the shark to be attracted. It is uncanny how sharks can sense blood for miles. Giffert dropped his line over the side of the now drifting boat.

Soon they were rewarded. The shark's evil fin was noticed circling around the bloody section of water looking for flesh. Gradually it headed toward the line where a piece of meat hung on the hook a few inches below the surface.

Then the shark struck. The line was pulled through Giffert's fingers with enough force to tear the skin. But he held on and began reeling in his monster catch which fought savagely, splashing the water with foaming fury.

Foot by foot the struggling hyena of the sea was pulled closer to the boat. The shark was weakening.

Then something happened which Martin Giffert will never forget to his dying day. Just as the shark was within ten feet of the side of the boat where John Little

was waiting with an iron bar to bash it to death, Giffert's eyes bulged with bewilderment. There, just above the shark, as though standing on the water, appeared the image of an old man who was grinning with glee as though overjoyed in seeing the death of the shark. The old man was dressed like a fisherman and his right leg was missing from the knee down.

It was only a flash, for the vision faded as Giffert regained his senses and once again pulled in the shark, this time close enough for Little to complete the kill.

Giffert tried to dismiss the vision as due to excitement, and the two men headed for the shore, with the shark on board.

Amid the praise of friends, Giffert cut open the shark's belly—and it was then that the vision of the one-legged sailor left lasting questions in Giffert's mind. In the belly of the shark was a human leg-bone.

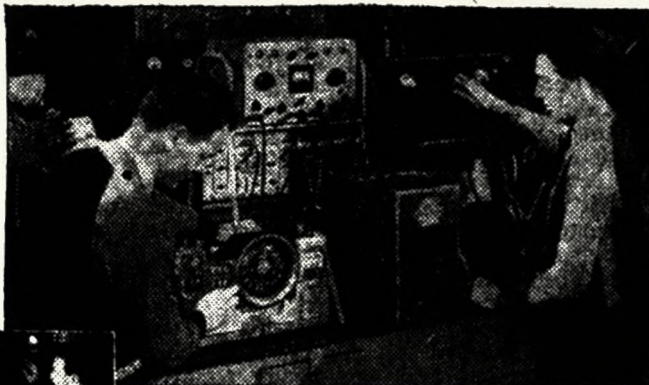
Had the old sailor's vengeance been fulfilled on the shark which had bitten off his leg? Martin Giffert still wonders.

THE SNAKE INITIATION

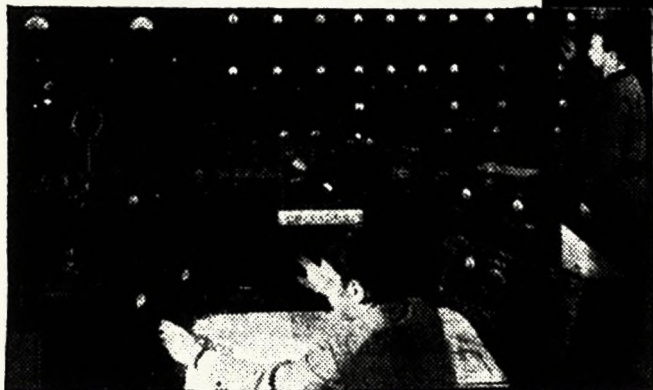
YOUNG Tod Wilson's dead grandfather had worshipped Tod when they lived on the Western Texas ranch. Once, when Tod was six years old, his grandfather had saved the boy from a rattlesnake. He had cautioned the lad that if ever thereafter the boy was confronted by a snake, he must remain motionless and call for his grandfather. The call would

(Continued on page 12)

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MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Continued from page 10)

not frighten the snake into striking—only motion of the body could do that.

Tod was eighteen when he joined a fraternity and had to be initiated. The initiators, in order to give Tod a good scare, decided to borrow a tame rattlesnake from a certain farmer. The poison sac had been removed, and the snake was harmless. But Tod didn't know that, of course.

They ordered Tod to lie on his back, naked. His hands and feet were tied. Then they dropped the snake from a basket so that it rested on Tod's stomach. The snake coiled and was ready to strike at the first movement.

Tod was terrified—and involuntarily he called for his dead grandfather, not realizing what he was saying.

Then something happened. The snake opened its mouth as though some invisible force were strangling it. In a moment the snake rolled over, dead. Tod fainted.

The boys, bewildered, after reviving Tod, had to take the dead snake back to the farmer. They knew the farmer would be furious, as he prized that snake highly. They decided to pay the farmer.

But when they confessed what had happened, he looked at them strangely.

"Where did you get this snake?" he asked.

"Why, we took it from the box in your barn. You weren't home," the leader answered.

"This isn't my tame snake," said the farmer. "I took the tame one with me to town this morning. This is a wild one—it must have crawled in the box for food. It's a good thing it didn't bite one of you, for you'd be dead by now."

BURNING WIRES

A STRANGE story was reported by an official of the telephone company in northern New Hampshire.

On September 3rd, a Mrs. Jonas, a telephone subscriber, about sixty years of age, came into the main office of the company and asked for information. She was checking on a phone call she had received from some stranger the day before about 4 o'clock. She wanted to thank the man for telling her where her dead husband's will was buried, for right after the phone call she had looked in the reported place and had found it. Her husband had been killed suddenly and never could tell her where he had hidden the important document.

After a careful check-up, it was discovered that the call had come from a farm located some distance away. Mrs. Jonas, with her daughter drove to that farm-house wondering how the farmer had known where the will was hidden, for she had never heard of the man and she was sure her husband hadn't known him either.

But her quest was in vain. When she reached the farm-house, she was informed by several people standing around that

the house had burned down about 3 o'clock the previous day. It would have been physically impossible for anyone to make a call from that place at 4 o'clock, unless tapped in by some lineman from a pole. But there was no record of this, for when she returned to the telephone company the first report was verified.

Her strange call had come through on that burned wire at the recorded time. No one could account for it—no one but the hired man who said he had seen an old man standing by the wires when they dropped from the burning walls and curled up on the lawn. He ran to the old man to pull him away from the live wires—but the old man had disappeared in thin air. The hired man couldn't understand where he had gone.

And neither can anyone else, except those who maintain that psychic power can be manifested when aided by vibrations of intense heat or rays of high frequency. What do you think?

THE DIAMOND IN THE WATER

SOME people might call it coincidence—but Miss Elsie Martinson of Chicago thinks otherwise.

When Elsie's Aunt Emma died in 1938, she bequeathed to Elsie a valuable solitaire diamond ring. The diamond had been in the Martinson family for generations. Elsie had the diamond re-set in a modern ring which she cherished dearly.

But one evening Elsie, while at the movies, discovered that the diamond was missing from the setting. A complete search was made by the theatre management, but the diamond could not be found.

Heartbroken, Elsie returned home and looked in vain all over the house. She finally threw herself into an armchair in the living room and wept, calling upon the spirit of her aunt to forgive her for losing the family diamond. Soon, exhausted, she fell asleep and dreamed that her aunt was standing beside her. The aunt was smiling, and Elsie heard her aunt say: "Don't worry, child—you will find it in the water."

Elsie awoke with a start and for a moment her dream was dismissed as she noticed a goldfish struggling on the floor in front of her. It must have jumped out of the bowl while she slept.

Instantly, Elsie picked up the gasping fish and put it back in the bowl. As she gazed into the water watching the fish recover, her eyes caught a gleam in the white sand on the bottom of the bowl. It was her lost diamond which had evidently dropped off her ring when she had cleaned the bowl that afternoon.

The fish which had made its strange leap out of the water, was the one that Aunt Emma had given Elsie a week before the aunt had died. The aunt had had that fish for many years.

A STRANGE PREDICTION

A READER in South Carolina wrote to this department recently, asking if there was any story reported in his section of the country which he could verify himself. He seemed inclined to doubt these stories.

In addition to the Bloody Shark story (addresses of the men have been sent him) the following story is reported, which came from Edward McDowell of North Wilkesboro, North Carolina. It concerns a Carson Surles who lived at Dunn, Harnett County.

Fifteen years ago, Surles, age 59 predicted the day he would die. The week before July 27, 1940, he cleaned his cemetery lot in readiness, and hundreds of people whom he had invited to his funeral declared it was unbelievable when he died of natural causes on July 27th, the date predicted. Surles told them when he invited them to the funeral that he would come back for a visit now and then.

What has happened? Let Mrs. Lamn Byrd, with whom Surles had lived, speak for herself.

"I just couldn't stand it any longer. It
(Concluded on page 113)

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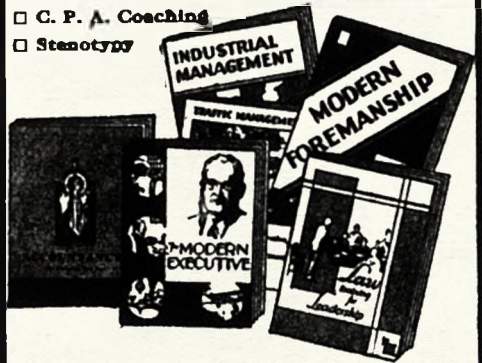
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By **JOHN H. KNOX**

Author of "The Devil's Lottery," "The Cyclops' Eye," etc.

CHAPTER I

Killers from Fairyland

THE long, sleek limousine sped westward down the moonlit highway, drawing its gleaming trailer behind it like a rocket.

In the front seat, directly under the glare of the bright dash light, Colonel Fabian Crum sat with his diminutive body of less than five feet hunched forward.

The trailer detective was now scanning the sixth newspaper he had purchased since the previous night, when a small item in a city daily

had caught his roving eye. The original article had been headed:

**KILLER WHO SAW GNOMES
DECLARED INSANE**

It had related in a brief, amusing way, how a young farmer of the Redcliffs community, who had been convicted of the murder of a farm girl, and who had claimed that the killing had been done by gnomes or elves, was to be taken to the state insane asylum for observation.

The story, though obviously of limited interest to dwellers in this distant city, had aroused the interest of the famous little scientist-detective to such a pitch that Aga Aslan, his as-



The demons saw Crum, who was trying to rescue the girl, charging straight at them

The Trailer Detective Travels Into the Grim Realm of the "Little People" and Meets a Murder Challenge That Comes From the Pages of an Age-Old Fairy Tale!



sistant, bodyguard and chauffeur, had not yet recovered from the shock of a whim which had kept him behind the wheel of the car for nearly twenty-four hours. "How," he asked now, "can you be so sure that this Bert Collins is innocent, *Effendi?*"

Crum leaned back, a confident, almost smug smile on that sharp, cynical face whose piercing eyes had caused shivers to run down the spine of more than one burly malefactor.

"I couldn't, at first," he said. "Then it was only intuition and curiosity. But since we've neared the place, and the papers are carrying more details, I have become morally certain that the man is neither guilty nor crazy, and that he has seen exactly what he claims to have seen."

"*Effendi!*" Aga's swart face expressed shock and outrage. "You believe in fables—in fairy tales?"

"Fables and fairy tales," Crum replied, "always have something behind them. But let that rest for the moment. I believe this young man is not guilty, for two reasons. First, no sane murderer would invent such an alibi. Yet I see no evidence of his insanity in the report except his claim to having seen these supposedly non-existent creatures. I find that his testimony as to that is suggestive."

"Suggestive of what, *Effendi?*" Aga asked.

"Well," Crum said, smiling, "of fairy tales, if you like. But there are details that could not have been copied from any fairy tale. Hence I am forced to conclude that he has seen the actual monsters behind the tales. And there's another thing in the young man's favor. It seems that the daughter of a neighboring farmer has stood by him staunchly, despite the brutality of the crime. You may minimize that; I don't. In medieval times there was a law that a man could be saved from hanging if a good girl was willing to marry him—" Suddenly he broke off. Then: "Stop!"

AGA obediently applied the brakes. He looked at him in puzzlement.

"The dog there," Crum said, pointing to a big Belgian police dog sitting on his haunches near the ditch with a

lost look. "This will give me a chance to try out my whistle."

He had fished in his pocket meanwhile and produced a shiny whistle, the purchase of which in a town some distance back had puzzled the Asiatic. For it was one of these dog whistles which produce a note too high for the human ear to catch, but quite audible to a dog.

Crum put it to his lips now and blew. No sound came, so far as the two men could tell, but the dog at once poked his head toward them. Crum blew again. The dog rose, came toward them in a trot and paused, wagging a friendly tail.

"Get in, old fellow," Crum invited, and he opened the door. The dog looked him over and, apparently satisfied, hopped in.

"But you do not want a dog!" Aga protested as the car rolled on.

"I've been looking for one," Crum replied, reaching back to pat the head which had appeared between two fore-paws on the seat back. "If a dog can hear a note too high for human ears, maybe he can see gnomes, too."

Which was as far as he went to satisfy the Asiatic's curiosity.

They drove on in silence, Crum leaning back with closed eyes while his mind ran over the details of the strange case. He was not aroused until some thirty minutes later, when Aga brought the car to a stop under the marquee of a lonely filling station to replenish the gas tank.

Crum looked about. A combination restaurant and beer tavern was built against the service station, and his eyes were drawn to a car parked near its doorway. It was a station wagon converted to some grimmer purpose, for the window behind the driver's seat was barred. And while Crum stared a pair of hands suddenly gripped these bars, and a face, young but haggard, appeared between them and stared out with the most desperate look Crum had ever seen.

Slowly Crum opened the car door and quietly got out. Hands in pockets, staring from side to side with the air of a tourist stretching his legs, the little detective strolled around to the back of the station wagon. He

stopped, looked up. There was the haunted face staring at him again. Crum's bird-like eyes fastened on it.

"You're Bert Collins?" he asked.

"Yes," the young man said, "but I didn't do what they claim I did. I'm not crazy, either. If I had lied, had kept to myself what I saw, maybe I'd have got out of it. But it was all the truth."

Crum nodded absently.

"Anybody else in there??" he asked.

"No," the youth said in a lower tone.

"Nobody but me. Old Bo Hooten, the



Colonel Crum

agent from the asylum, is in there getting tanked up. We been here an hour and I can't even get him to bring me a drink of water."

Crum nodded absently again. He was staring at the heavy padlock on the wagon's back door. It was heavy and formidable looking, but in Crum it inspired only a shrug. He turned and walked into the tavern.

A waiter in a greasy apron leaned over the counter talking to a mountain of a man whose fat body overflowed the stool just as his red jowls overflowed the collar of his khaki shirt. He looked at Crum now out of small,

bleary eyes. And from a loose mouth still fringed with beer foam, he bel-lowed:

"Come on in, Shorty! I don't bite!"

"Thank you," Crum said, smiling suavely. He approached and adroitly flipped himself to the top of a stool. The fat man guffawed.

"Hey, the little gent's active, by Grabs!" he boomed. "Have a drink, Shorty, if you can handle one of them big steins."

Crum chuckled good-humoredly.

"I was just going to offer to buy you one. You look like a man whose conversation would be worth it."

"Ho, ho!" the fat man roared. "I reckon Bo Hooten could tell a tale or two. I got a nut out there in that wagon now, for instance. He killed a girl and he's gettin' off soft. But don't think I missed the chance to kick the stuffin's outa him as soon as I got him outa town."

THE drinks came, and Hooten went on in this vein while Crum listened politely. Once, when the agent reached drunkenly for the salt, Crum picked it up instead and salted the fat man's beer for him. Hooten might have been interested to note that while the salt sprinkled down, something else was mingled with it—white crystals trickling from beneath the signet of a large ring on one of the little man's fingers. But Hooten didn't see.

Presently Crum excused himself, saying that he must give his chauffeur the money to pay for the gasoline. He went out, drew Aga aside and spoke a few words. A small leather kit changed hands. Crum went back inside as Aga drew the trailer out from under the marquee and parked it alongside the asylum wagon.

Bo Hooten was more noisy than ever. They finished their beer and started another, but suddenly Hooten began to feel the effects of Crum's handiwork. It didn't come all at once. First he shivered and said he felt a little cold. Crum suggested that a few more drinks would fix that. Bo decided to try it, but with his stein half drained he suddenly let it clatter

to the counter, while he himself slid from the stool and slumped to the floor like a sack of meal. The annoyed waiter tried to pull him up, but Bo did not want to rise.

"Dead drunk." Crum shook his head sadly. "Well, a little sleep, then a dash of cold water and he'll be all right." He paid the bill and left hurriedly.

Speeding down the highway again, Aga Aslan scowled as he leaned over the wheel.

"Bad business," he muttered. "Very bad."

"Yes, I agree, Aga," Crum said. "We've taken quite a gamble with the law tonight." He shrugged, turned around. "How are you and the dog doing back there, Collins?"

The young man's face thrust forward.

"Fine, thanks. But Hooten will phone Redcliffs, and I'm afraid there'll be trouble for you."

"Trouble," Crum said, "is my element. As for the heroic Hooten, I imagine that chloral hydrate will hold him for several hours yet."

The road had now reached the end of the vast plateau they had been crossing, and had begun a winding descent among jagged cliffs. Far below, under the pale moonlight, a fertile valley stretched. A cluster of lights in its center marked a village.

"That's Redcliffs," young Collins said. "And all this badlands"—he gestured toward the dark cliffs and the belt of cedars and tangled underbrush that separated them from the farmlands—"is where the little monsters live. The strip of farmland I rent adjoins the brush, and that's how I come to know about them. Not," he added, "that others haven't known of them, too. Only they say the petty thieving is done by packrats, skunks, and so on. And when a kid would tell of seeing little creatures like gnomes or elves, folks just said they made it up."

"I'm wondering," Crum said, "if you know of anyone who would be willing to hide you for the time being."

Collins frowned. "Reckon I've got a few friends left," he said. "Still I hate to ask— Wait! Right around

the next bend is old Mart Mason's cabin. He's a fearless old trapper, and I think he might—"

His speech was interrupted by the lonely, long-drawn howl of a dog. And as they rounded a bend, a light shone dimly among the trees to the left. Aga stopped the car where a path led up.

"Well, I can't tell you how grateful I am," Collins said, getting out.

Crum frowned. Up near the cabin the dog howled again.

"I think," Crum said, "I'll go with you."

The police dog in the rear seat was bristling. Crum went back into the trailer and returned with a short length of rope. Leashing the dog, he started with the others up to the cabin. In the front yard they stopped.

"Mart! Mart!" Collins called.

There was no answer. A lean hound came bounding around the corner with a snarl. But at a distance he stopped, sat down and howled again.

"Reckon Mart's gone after some wood or something," Collins said.

But Crum was watching the hound. After howling he got up, trotted toward the corner of the cabin, then stopped to look back expectantly.

"I think," Crum said, "we'd better follow that dog."

THEY did so, going quietly, the police dog sniffing and tugging at the leash. The hound ahead trotted into a path that led up through the woods. But suddenly, at a point where the trail dropped sharply, he stopped, rearing back on his haunches with savage snarls.

The men came up and stopped, too, peering down into a shallow bowl with a grove of twisted trees in its center. Nothing was visible at first, and then Crum stiffened. Down there in the grove there was a movement, a rhythmic flitting of shadows and then a weird shrill sound as of chanting small voices, wild, unearthly.

"Look!" Collins gasped. "It's them! They're dancing!"

But he spoke too loudly. At once the chanting ceased, and suddenly from the grove a line of dancing, capering shadow shapes flowed out

and began flitting over the shoulder of a hill. For just a moment they were visible against the sky—tiny bent shapes, wild and hairy.

"The Men with the Span-long Beards," Crum muttered, as if to himself. Then: "Come on."

They hurried down. The hound hung back, but the police dog strained at the rope. They reached the edge of the grove and paused. Already the moonlight seeping through the leaves had revealed a sprawled shape in the grove's center. As Collins started forward, the police dog growled harshly, and Crum snatched at Collins' coat. A sudden hissing sound had filled the air and Crum's flash snapped on, spraying a tree bole.

There, shoulder high and nailed to the bark by a crude iron spike, a deadly Copperhead snake was making violent lunges into the air. With a shiver the little detective let the light drop to the sprawled figure of a grizzled old man on the ground.

"He was lured here," Crum said. "Startled by the impaled snake he lunged forward, and then—"

Cautiously he stepped nearer. The old trapper was obviously dead, slumped forward over the shotgun he had been carrying. Crum stooped down, his sharp eyes searching for the source of the blood that stained the khaki shirt and made a puddle on the turf. Aga came forward then and lifted the body slightly. He let it drop after a moment, and the others gave a gasp of horror.

The front of Mart Mason's body was a gory mess.

Crum, still crouching there, picked up one of the dead man's clenched hands. A few wisps of coarse, crinkled brownish hair were caught between the fingers. He plucked them out and slowly stood up.

CHAPTER II

The Witch of the Hills

IT was Collins who spoke first, his voice a husky moan.

"The girl was just like that when I found her, and I saw the little dev-

ils, only closer." He laughed bitterly. "I'd have been better off if I had stayed with Hooten. They couldn't have accused me of doing this. But since I've escaped—"

"That can't be helped," Crum interrupted. "The problem of where you can hide remains. The authorities will have to be told of this at once."

Bert Collins scratched his head in puzzlement.

"Well, I can't think of anybody but old Lutie Keeber. She might hide me."

"Who is Lutie Keeber?" Crum asked.

"She owns most of this wild tract as well as the farm I rent," Collins said. "She lives down the road, all alone except for her animals. Some folks say she's crazy, others that she's a witch. I don't know. Years ago she ran away with a fellow that owned a carnival. About ten years ago, after he died, she came back and settled in her old home place, bringing a bunch of monkeys and queer-looking birds and so on. She might hide me because I've always been nice to her." He paused. "Besides, she believes in the gnomes and elves, too. Her folks came from Ireland and she's always believed in the 'Little Folk,' as she calls them."

"I think," Crum said, "we'd better try her."

They covered the corpse with a piece of tarpaulin found near the cabin and tied the police dog to a tree nearby to guard it. Then they returned to the car and drove on down the highway to a point where a dirt road turned off and followed it to a gate in a high wire fence. Beyond, a sagging old frame house could be seen, half buried in the trees and wild shrubs crowded about it. A single dim light shone through one window.

Again Collins got out and started toward the house, but Crum stopped him.

"Better let me see her first," he suggested. "You wait here."

He climbed the locked gate and went up the weed-fringed path. An odor of decay hung under the trees,

and as he neared the dark porch a wild, excited chattering from the shadows caused him to pause. Going nearer he saw that it came from a cage of monkeys. Now a parrot and several other strange-looking birds in nearby cages set up an eerie squawking.

Crum stepped to the door and knocked. For moments there was no sound. Then suddenly the door was flung open and the barrel of a shotgun appeared.

"Git back!" a harsh voice screeched. "Git back, ye little divil!"

Crum quickly flashed his light, not forward, but on himself. At once the hunched figure holding the gun straightened and in the light's reflected glare Crum saw that it was a woman. She seemed not over fifty, but her wrinkled, leering face and bent, skinny body gave her the look of the traditional witch. In grotesque contrast was the coquettishly curled brownish hair and the garish smear of rouge on thin lips and cheekbones. Completing the picture was the wide-eyed monkey perched on one shoulder.

"Lor'!" she gasped now. "I thought ye was one of *thim!*"

"One of 'them'?" Crum asked.

"One of thim we don't name," she intoned. "One of thim that dances 'round the thorn."

"Ah," Crum said, "the Little People." He produced one of his cards and extended it to her. "I'm a detective, you see. "I'm here to investigate this recent murder of a girl."

The woman's face froze. "The light of Heaven to her," she said piously. "But I know nothin' of it." She started to shut the door.

"Wait!" Crum stuck his foot in the door. "I only wanted to ask you if you believe young Bert Collins to be guilty."

The woman frowned, eyeing Crum shrewdly. Then her lips drew down.

"No!" she said. "He nivr done it. It's thim in the town as laid it on him, thim mean and spiteful villagers. I know 'em. Ain't they hated and hounded me, a-turnin' up of their noses when I married Clem Keeber? Ain't they persecuted me?"

"Then," Crum said, "if Bert Collins should escape, should come here and appeal to you—"

The woman's face went sly.

"Be ye a friend of Bert's?" And at Crum's nod, "Well, we should see in such a case. We should see."

"Thanks," Crum said, and turned away.

BACK at the car he told Collins that the woman would hide him, brushed aside the young man's thanks with a warning to lie low and await developments. Then he and Aga drove on into town.

The business district of the town was built around a square, with an old sandstone courthouse in the center. Cars were parked about it and a single light in the basement marked the sheriff's office.

Leaving Aga with the car Crum went in alone. As he walked down the basement corridor a buzz of excited voices coming from an open doorway caused him to slacken his pace. Then words reached his ears:

"—says Hooten passed out, but he looked in the wagon and it was empty. There was a trailer parked there, he says, and a little man—"

Crum stepped into the doorway.

The effect was electric. The red-faced sheriff behind the desk stopped in the midst of his speech, and the group of half dozen men crowded about him goggled with open mouths. Crum smiled, walked toward the sheriff with extended hand.

"You're Sheriff Will Page, I believe," he said. "I am Colonel Fabian Crum."

The sheriff took his hand uncertainly.

"Crum? Crum?" He blinked. "Oh yeah, I read about you. The scientific detective that travels in a trailer." He paused. "Say, you weren't the fellow drinkin' with Bo Hooten?"

"I was," Crum said. "Poor Hooten exceeded his capacity a bit. But what's this about the man he had in charge?"

"He got away!" the sheriff exploded. "The man at the filling station just phoned. You didn't by any

chance see Collins make his getaway?"

Crum looked perplexed. "I recall that the door to that wagon was closed when I left. However, there's a very pressing matter that brings me here. I had stopped to change a tire near a cabin just below the pass, when a howling dog led me to the discovery of a grizzled old man who had been rather brutally murdered."

"Murdered!" The sheriff sprang up. "I'll bet it's old Mart Mason! That's what comes of Bo Hooten lettin' Collins get away. Well, it's a good thing I got you fellows together." He glanced at Crum. "These men are the Vigilance Committee. Well, let's get outa here . . . Wait! One of you'll have to stay to answer the phone till Deputy Barnes gets back. How about you, Crib Lansing?"

The wiry little man with the butt of an old-fashioned revolver protruding from the hip pocket of his overalls, shook his head.

"Not me, Sheriff. Remember it was my daughter that was killed. I'm goin' with you."

"Reeder, you stay." The sheriff addressed a lanky-looking man with a scowling, lantern-jawed face. Reeder nodded and sat down behind the desk.

A second man, short, stocky, dressed in a business suit, and looking somewhat more intelligent than the others, volunteered to remain, too. Crum walked out with the sheriff and the others but stopped at the curb.

"There's no point in my going back with you now," he said, "since my assistant can lead you to the place. There's a little matter I'd like to attend to in my laboratory."

He stepped over to his car then, gave Aga brief instructions and sent him along with the sheriff and his party. After they had gone he stood a moment in thought. He did intend to examine the hairs he had taken from the dead man's hand, but at the moment he was more interested in gathering local gossip. And the man named Reeder was, he guessed, the father of the Rose Reeder who had stood so staunchly by young Collins.

Slowly Crum walked back into the

office. He heard the talk stop as he approached and was at once conscious of the narrow-eyed hostility with which the gaunt Reeder eyed him.

"Puzzling affairs, these murders," he said cheerfully.

"Huh!" Reeder grunted. "Nothin' so puzzlin', except that this Collins is a maniac."

"But I've heard," Crum persisted, "that the wild stretch of land where that girl was found has had a bad name for some time."

REEDER'S deep-set eyes watched him closely.

"As to that," he said, "I reckon old Lutie Keeber is responsible. She owns the land. She tells fortunes and they say does witchcraft. If she'da sold that place to me, like I been tryin' for years to get her to, I'da had that tract cleared and burned that old house of hers clean down."

"But the land doesn't look like it's worth much," Crum muttered.

"'Tain't," Gus Reeder said, "except for one little strip of farm land. But the rest could be cleared for fair pasturage. And at least our pigs and chickens would be safe from—"

"Skunks and coyotes, I suppose?" Crum asked innocently.

Reeder looked at the other man, who burst out laughing. Crum turned and the man extended a hand.

"I'm Graves Wilton," he said, "president of the little bank here. I happen to know something about that land because our bank holds the mortgage on it. What amuses me is that all these scare tales have raised the value of that worthless land to where Gus here has offered the woman twice what it's worth just to get rid of her. But the more she's offered the more stubborn she gets." He laughed again. "We could foreclose, but the land's worthless. And I don't care to run the poor old hag off."

"Yeah," Reeder growled, "you're willing to leave a plague spot there. For years I been sayin' somethin' devilish goes on out there. I knew it was bound to bust out, and then young Collins goes mad."

"Exactly what," Crum asked, "does the woman really do?"

"What do witches usually do?" Reeder mumbled. "Carry on traffic with devils. Put spells on animals and steal them for sacrifice. Get hold of young men and women and turn them into maniac-killers. Like Collins—"

He stopped, his head jerking toward the door. A girl stood there. Slender, shapely, she wore a simple little cotton frock and her hair fell in rippling corn-silk waves on either side of a lovely oval face. But she was flushed and her blue eyes were flashing with anger now.

"Father!" she cried. "I won't hear you say those things about Bert! They're all lies. You know he was convicted only on circumstantial evidence. But you've always hated him just because he rented from Lutie Keeber. And as long as she rented to him, she wouldn't sell to you. If you had only said a word in his behalf, only helped him—"

Gus Reeder sprang to his feet. His leathery face had turned ugly.

"What do you mean by speaking to your father like this, and about a convicted killer! If we get our hands on that maniac—"

He made a threatening move toward her. The girl had gone white, her lips trembled.

"If you let them lay a hand on him," she cried, "I'll—I'll tell!" Then she turned and ran from the room.

Reeder plunged after her, yelling and threatening. Graves Wilton looked at Crum and shook his head.

"Something of a brute, old Gus," he said, "but you can't much blame him. After all the evidence against Collins was pretty strong. They caught him bending over the dead girl's body and then, afterward, there was another discovery, too—a bone fished out of his woodpile. He claimed a dog had dragged it there and that he hadn't paid any attention to it. But it was a human bone, a thigh-bone. And it was just about large enough to have come from the body of another girl who disappeared about a year ago, and who was thought to have run away."

"That's interesting," Crum said. "Would it possible to see it?"

"That bone?" Wilton asked. "The sheriff keeps it in that case over there."

Crum didn't hesitate. He went to the glassed book case, reached in and drew out from among a pile of papers the long gleaming bone. His eyes ran over it with keen interest.

"I think," he said, "I'll just take the liberty of borrowing it for a few minutes."

Wilton frowned, seemed about to protest. But Crum hurried out.

A moment later he stepped into his trailer and snapped on the brilliant lights in his spotless white laboratory. Here, compact but complete, was all the equipment of the chemist, all the latest paraphernalia for scientific crime detection. Working feverishly with calipers and steel tape, Crum made delicate measurements of the bone. He consulted tables and charts.

Presently he laid the bone aside and took from a small envelope some of the coarse hairs he had plucked from the dead man's fingers. He examined these carefully under the microscope, affixed an eye-piece micrometer and took delicate measurements. Next he prepared a solution of caustic potash, placed the hairs in it and was watching the effect of the strong alkali on the roots when a gabble of voices outside caused him to leave the laboratory table and step to the door.

The sight that met his eyes as he swung it open was not reassuring. At the forefront of an angry-looking crowd of men, Sheriff Will Page stood with drawn gun.

"Well," Crum asked pleasantly, "what can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"You can come along quietly," Page replied. "You're under arrest!"

CHAPTER III

The Hanging Sacrifice

FOR a moment Crum said nothing, his inner start of alarm swiftly mastered. His cool eyes traveled over the mob, and again the sardonic

smile was on his lips. He sighed, glanced at Page.

"And why am I under arrest?" he asked.

"You know why," Sheriff Page growled. "It was you that helped Bert Collins to escape and turned him loose on us again. You may think we're dumb, but we know a footprint when we see one. There was a third man with you when you went up to Mart Mason's place. We seen his footprints, and they're just about the size of Bert Collins' shoes!"

Crum, with an actor's perfect mastery of facial expression, let his features relax in a grin of incredulous amusement.

"But, my dear Sheriff," he said, "you don't mean you're arresting me on the basis of a few doubtful footprints? Didn't it occur to you that the prints were made by that hitch-hiker I left there with the dog to guard the body?"

"Hitch-hiker!" the sheriff exploded. "There wasn't no hitch-hiker there. There was a dog tied to a tree, but—"

CCRUM laughed. "Then the fellow must have bolted."

"That big flunkey of yours never said nothin' about a hitch-hiker," the sheriff snorted.

"What did he say?" Crum asked.

"He wouldn't say nothin'," the sheriff complained. "Acted like he'd forgot how to talk English."

Crum laughed again. "He has a habit of letting me do the talking," he said. "But, Sheriff, we're wasting time. If you're going to jail me you may as well go ahead. Only—" he paused, sweeping the crowd with his glance—"only it's a shame just now when I've made some interesting discoveries with regard to that bone that was found in Bert Collins' woodpile."

Again he eyed the crowd. Crum had not studied mob psychology with a famous magician friend in vain. Eyes had widened with interest, and now the wiry figure of Crib Lansing was elbowing to the front.

"Hold on, Sheriff," he said. "If that there bone throws any light on

the murder of my pore girl, I reckon we ought to listen to the feller. Now they say that there's a bone from Ed Trotter's daughter that we all thought ran away last year."

"In which," Crum put in, "they are mistaken. It is not the bone of a woman at all. The difference in the male and female skeleton in the region of the pelvis is marked. The rounded end of the bone that fits into the socket of the hip joint has, in the woman, a somewhat different tilt with respect to the shaft of the bone."

"Then it was a boy?" Lansing demanded.

"It was a male," Crum said, "but a male less than four feet tall. That is arrived at by a table compiled from thousands of tests, which establishes the height of the male skeleton as equal to 3.7 times the length of the thigh bone. It was not the bone of a boy, but of a full grown adult, as is evidenced by the degree of classification."

"What?" Crib Lansing exploded. "What's all this? A grown man less than four feet high?" He paused. "Why, he's littler than you! Look here, you're a-handin' us this stuff about elves and fairies. But I never heard of elves and fairies murderin' people!"

"Didn't you?" Crum asked. "Then your knowledge of anthropology and folklore is at fault. For our remote ancestors, who coined the terms 'Fairies,' 'Little People,' 'The Fair Ones,' were simply hiding under polite and flattering language their dread and terror of *beings* so frightful that they were afraid to call them by appropriate names. Dim shadowy shapes of horror they were, flitting on the borders of life."

"And you mean," a hoarse voice demanded, "that such things—"

"Are here, haunting your countryside," Crum finished for him. "So I wonder that you're ready to lock up a man who is qualified to deal with them."

"Crum claims he's a witch-man," he heard a native hiss in the ear of a deaf companion. But for the most the crowd was impressed.

"All right then, prove it!" a voice

challenged Crum in a surly tone.

It was what Crum wanted. He looked at the sheriff.

"Do I get a chance?"

The sheriff's political sixth-sense was reacting to the mood of the crowd.

"I reckon so," he finally conceded. "What do we do now?"

"First," Crum said, "you will release my assistant, who will drive us back to the scene of the crime. From there we will make a reconnaissance trip into the hill country. You can bring along a couple of men to guard us, if you like. But no more. We must go stealthily."

"Okay," the sheriff agreed. "But first hand over your gun."

CCRUM smiled as he passed his small but high-powered revolver to the officer. The sheriff had paid no attention to the little watch-charm pistol which dangled from a chain across his vest. This apparent toy was in reality a deadly weapon, firing one minute cartridge loaded with the deadly arrow-poison, *curare*. Crum twirled it idly as he led the way up to his car.

Aga, who had been held prisoner in a nearby automobile, was released and allowed to take his place behind the wheel. Crum and the sheriff sat beside him. Crib Lansing and another armed man piled into the back, and car and trailer headed back for the hills.

A thoughtful silence reigned as they swung through the outskirts and back onto the winding highway. The men seemed to be mulling over the strange little detective's sinister words. Finally the sheriff spoke.

"You're a queer one, Colonel," he said. "I heard you were quite a scientist, and here you are talking fairy tales. But"—he paused, frowning at the sombre hills—"there's no denying something devilish has been at work there. It ain't just that hen roosts and pig pens have been raided. Lately there've been uglier reports, things that really do look like witchcraft. Animals, pigs, chickens have been found hanging from tree branches. Not eaten, you see, but just hanging there."

"Like sacrifices to some earth or

forest god?" Crum asked.

"Yeah," the sheriff said uncomfortably. "It's the senselessness of it that makes it horrible. Mind you, I ain't doubtin' that Collins is guilty. But maybe he fell under—well, influences."

"Meaning," Crib Lansing spoke up, "Lutie Keeber. Yeah. Me, I ain't never been satisfied about that well-digger that died last year."

"More strange deaths!" Crum exclaimed. "What about that one?"

"Oh, just a well-digger, a stranger," Lansing said. "He was diggin' a well out back of Lutie's garden, but he died suddenly before it was finished. I been thinkin' there shoulda been an autopsy, but there wasn't. And after he died Lutie filled the well up." He frowned. "By Grabs, that gives me an idea!"

He didn't say what it was and Crum quickly changed the subject. He, too, was interested in Lutie Keeber, but he did not want to encourage any search of her house, which would certainly expose Collins. The car, however, passed her place without further reference being made to her and was presently brought to a stop at the trail that led to the Mason cabin.

Crum and the others piled out. A deputy squatting on the front steps had nothing to report except that Gus Reeder had been by, looking for his daughter who had run away from him. He had gone into the woods to look for her. Crum frowned seriously at this, then led the way up to the trail toward the spot where Mason's body had been found.

The police dog was still tied there. He bristled as they approached, but quieted at a word from Crum.

"I had intended to use that dog," Crum said. "But for the moment I think we'd better rely on surprise. Now the little monsters that came out of this grove headed up toward the cliffs. I suggest that we scatter out and go slowly up in that direction, looking carefully for caves into which the creatures may have gone."

"There ain't no caves," Crib Lansing said. "Leastwise none a man could get into. Only a few coyote holes."

"Then we'll look for coyote holes," Crum said.

"Not me," Lansing answered. "I got a better idea. I aim to have a look around that covered-up well on Lutie Keeber's place."

He started off alone, shaking his head as the sheriff tried to call him back. The four remaining men spread out, the sheriff staying close enough to keep an eye on Crum, and moved stealthily up the brushy slope.

AN eerie silence prevailed. Moon-rays slanting down made grotesque monsters of the shadows. There was a sense of being followed, watched by small demon eyes. Suddenly Crum, pressing through dense underbrush near a gnarled juniper tree, halted, sniffing. The smell of blood had come to his sensitive nostrils.

He pushed on then stopped, staring at something which hung dead and awful against the sky, something from which blood was dripping.

Quickly he flicked on his light. The hanging thing was a small pig. One of its hind legs was fastened in the crotch of a tree limb. Its tusks were bared, its small eyes stared glassily. Its throat was cut in a great gash.

"What is it?" The sheriff, seeing the light had come up behind Crum. Then he glimpsed the thing, too. "Now you know what I meant by sacrifice and witchcraft, Colonel!"

Crum nodded. "Take it down, will you?"

The sheriff did so with repugnance. Crum stooped, examined it briefly, then got up and began to play his light about in the brush.

"What you hunting for?" Sheriff Page husked.

"The person who brought this gruesome thing here," Crum said, "must have had it wrapped in something to avoid the blood—ah, here it is!"

He had stooped as he spoke and fished out from the foliage of a bush a wadded mass of coarse wrapping-paper stained with blood. Carefully he spread it out. There were plenty of bloodstains, but no discernible fingerprints. Crum folded it up, then gave a low whistle which summoned Aga. To his assistant, he said:

"There's a dead pig under the tree there. Take it to the laboratory and make a careful chemical analysis of its flesh. Then see if you can develop any fingerprints from this paper."

Aga nodded, took the paper and went after the pig.

"Fingerprints from paper?" the sheriff asked incredulously.

"It can be done with iodine fumes," Crum said. "Now let's go on."

Quietly they climbed on, coming nearer and nearer to the frowning cliffs. Only the faint scrape of their feet broke the eerie silence.

"Do you reckon," the sheriff whispered, "that old Lutie brings these offerings—these pigs and chickens—to feed some sort of—"

His voice died with a quaver in his throat. From somewhere to their right, a scream had knifed through the darkness. Shrill and ear-splitting, it vibrated with terror and agony:

"Help! Help! In heaven's name! Devils! Devils!"

Instantly the two men were running, Crum, despite his short legs, easily keeping pace with the panting, burly sheriff. Again the screams sounded, but this time in a wordless ululation of torment. And the same time the men halted, having reached the rocky bed of a ravine down which a narrow stream trickled. The scream had come from nowhere.

"Where are you?" the sheriff bel-
lowed.

There was no answer. Then a sudden scurrying sound, as of small creatures plunging into the brush, sent them lunging upward into a rocky clearing. But they had come too late.

In the white spot made by their flashlights, Crib Lansing lay on his back, arms flung wide, face frozen in a fearful mask of agony. There could be no question that he was dead.

"Murdered right under our eyes!" the sheriff muttered. He turned his eyes away, sickened by the sight, then stiffened.

Crum had seen it, too—a tiny, capering shape among the trees to their left. Both men sprang toward it, the sheriff plunging ahead, gun in hand. The small shape had danced out of sight now, but suddenly the sheriff's gun

blasted. A high-pitched scream rang out like an echo. A woman's scream!

The sheriff jerked to a halt, flung his light groundward as Crum reached his side. Sprawled on the ground, but apparently uninjured, lay Lutie Keeber, her face bloodless with terror. A large butcher knife which had fallen from her hand lay nearby, while around and about her, capering and gibbering with excitement, her pet monkey danced like a furry shadow.

CHAPTER IV

Orgy of the Earthlings

"YOU, Lutie?" the sheriff gasped, and the words seemed to empty his lungs.

Instantly the woman was scrambling up.

"Me?" she shrilled. "You mean you think I killed Lansing? It wasn't me! It was him, the Little People! I heard his screams and came running with the knife."

The sheriff was shrewdly eyeing the monkey.

"You can tell that to a jury, Lutie Keeber," he growled. "I'm beginning to see things now. You got more than one monkey, ain't you? Well," he turned to Crum with a glance of triumph, "I think I know how the tales of gnomes and elves got started. She uses those monkeys—"

"It's a lie!" the woman screamed. Her terror-stricken face was turned toward two more men who had come pounding up. One was the deputy who had been stationed at Mason's cabin. The other was the remaining member of the searching party. Both carried guns and the woman stared at them like an animal at bay. "I didn't kill Crib Lansing!" she screamed.

Crum was watching her with inner tremors. Would she speak, tell of Collins hidden in her house, give him up to save herself? Suddenly he caught her eye, pursed his lips and frowned. The woman seemed to understand, her jaw clamped tight. But

the sheriff meanwhile was staring at the kinky curls of brownish hair on the woman's head.

"Come along back here," he said, and grabbed her arm.

He led her back to the knifed corpse of Crib Lansing, stooped down and lifted one of the dead man's hands. From its clenched fingers he plucked a few strands of hair similar to that which Crum had found in Mart Mason's hand. Straightening, he held them close to Lutie Keeber's head and played his flashlight on them.

"There!" he said triumphantly. "You'll have a hard time explaining how your hair got in that dead man's hand!"

The woman trembled, but kept her mouth stubbornly shut. Crum stepped forward.

"May I see the hairs?" he asked.

The sheriff held them out to him, while Crum produced a magnifying glass and the small envelope in which were the remaining hairs taken from the dead trapper's fingers. These he held close to those in the sheriff's hand, and squinted at them intently.

"You'll see," he said finally, "that they seem to be identical with the ones which Mart Mason was clutching. If so, they cannot be Mrs. Keeber's."

"Why not?" the sheriff demanded.

"Chiefly," Crum said, "because they are male hairs."

"But you can't tell by glancing at them!"

"Not with this glass," Crum admitted. "But the other hairs were examined and measured with a micrometer. Scientific charts tell us that head hairs measure no more than .08 millimeters in diameter, while beard hairs measure 0.1 millimeters, the approximate diameter of these."

The woman was watching Crum now with a faint smile, but the sheriff glowered.

"Bushwah!" he snorted. "You're still thinking of that crazy gnome theory. But it's this woman, probably with Collins as an accomplice, who's been doing these killings. And she's been using those monkeys of hers to fool the superstitious. Now I'm arresting her for the crimes!"

"That," said Crum, "might be advisable for her own protection. Suppose you send her back to the trapper's cabin and have her kept there under guard. Meanwhile you and I will keep after the killers."

"The monkeys, you mean," the sheriff grumbled. But he agreed.

One of the men was left to guard the body of Crib Lansing, while the other went back with the woman. Crum and the sheriff then moved on up the banks of the ravine.

"I'd like to know," the sheriff said, "whether you're on the level or just leading me a wild-goose chase. I ain't yet convinced about that hitch-hiker." He halted, noticing that Crum had stopped and was playing his light down upon the current of the stream. "Well, what do you see?"

CCRUM didn't answer directly. "I've been wondering," he said, "why Crib Lansing, after apparently going to investigate the old well he spoke of, came up here to this stream."

"So what?"

"Well," Crum said, pointing down, "did you notice that stain there along the water's edge? Black and slightly iridescent?"

The sheriff peered down. "Looks like oil seeping from somewhere. But I never heard of oil being found around here."

"Which might explain why some-

one has been so anxious to keep people off this tract of land," Crum suggested. "It might also explain the death of a well-digger who may have struck oily water."

As he spoke, he began climbing down the ravine's bank. Now he knelt at the edge of the stream, testing the black film along its edges with his fingers. He was about to straighten, when a sound reached his ears—a sound that seemed to be carried on the water and which had not been audible from above. Voices, whispers. A woman's voice and a man's.

Crum got up, climbed the bank again, and stood frowning a moment.

"We're getting close to the cliffs," he said. "I think we'd better strike out at angles and look for coyote holes, working toward a central point. And it might be wise if you returned my gun."

Sheriff Page shook his head.

"No, I reckon not. I ain't quite sure of you yet. Anyhow, we can stay within calling distance."

Crum shrugged. "Very well. I'll follow the stream."

He started off slowly, but once the sheriff was out of sight he quickened his pace. He reached a point where the stream made a bend and the low gurgle of a spring was audible. Now, as the voices reached his ears again, he crouched behind a bush, peered

[Turn page]

From the Private Diary of Gloria N---



3 Slept wonderfully all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning. No upset or anything. Headache's all gone, too. Sure hope Jim calls me tonight.



1 Broke a date with Jim for tonight. The way my head aches, I don't feel like seeing anybody! Guess I need a laxative, but I dread the thought of taking one.



2 Aunt Helen told me to try Ex-Lax. I hate the taste of laxatives—but Ex-Lax was a pleasant surprise. It tasted just like fine chocolate.

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,

10¢ and 25¢



toward the shadows beneath a nearby juniper tree.

Two figures were crouching there. Enough moonlight filtered through the leaves for him to recognize them—Bert Collins and Rose Reeder!

"Oh, Bert," Crum heard her sob, "I couldn't bear to tell. My own father! But I've known all along he wanted this land. He found the signs of oil long ago, has schemed to get it ever since. But I can't believe he'd do all this. Only, if they try to lynch you, I'll tell!"

"Now, now." Collins patted her arm. "Others may know of the oil, too, but I begin to see why I was framed. I put my foot in it, I guess, by ranging about this tract too much, following the stream. But I paid no attention to the oil. I was just thinking of using the stream for irrigation—"

He stopped abruptly, sprang to his feet as Crum had stepped into view.

"Quiet!" the little detective hissed. "The sheriff—"

"Is already here!" a voice behind him said. "Just thought I'd try following you!"

Crum whirled, but already the sheriff's big hand was gripping his shoulder. The other hand held a revolver leveled on Collins.

"So we found your hitch-hiker after all!" Page gloated.

Collins was too stunned to speak. The girl had thrown herself between him and the gun, was huddling against him shieldingly. Crum himself was momentarily speechless, but he quickly recovered.

"All right, Sheriff," he said, "you win. My cards are on the table from now on. I did free Collins, but he isn't guilty. And I'll prove it if given a chance. If that mob gets him, you'll never take him to the jail. So I'm appealing to your sense of justice and fair play."

"Fair play!" the sheriff rasped. "You won't trick me with your glib tongue again. Collins, you're under arrest. Come forward now."

Collins hesitated, then pushed the sobbing girl away and came slowly toward the officer. Crum was tense; a tremendous decision weighed on

him. With the pattern of the whole mystery almost clear in his mind, he was seeing the wreck of his efforts, almost certain death for Collins, tragedy for this courageous girl.

BERT COLLINS had stopped now, within a yard of the sheriff. With the speed of a striking snake, Crum sprang. Both hands grasped the sheriff's gun-wrist, bore it downward as the .45 blasted. Then the sheriff's powerful arm had flung him off, sent him rolling. But not before young Collins had leaped forward in a savage charge.

Crum picked himself up quickly and sprang toward the two men now locked in a panting struggle for the gun. Abruptly he checked himself. A strange sound had come from the brush on a ridge above them, a crackling of branches, followed by a weird gabble of half-human speech. He looked up then and saw them against the moonlit sky—the heads and shoulders of weird little monsters with bearded faces and gleaming yellow eyes!

"Sheriff! Collins!" he cried. But the warning came too late. Already a rain of missiles was flying down, jagged rocks that sent him ducking in a sprawl.

The struggling men had now turned, but a heavy rock caught the sheriff on the side of the head and he fell with his gun still in hand. Collins instantly sprang toward the screaming girl, but a flying rock caught him, too, threw him off balance and sent him rolling down the steep bank of the ravine.

Now the little monsters were coming down. Gibbering wildly in their strange, guttural speech, they leaped through the air, howling, black silhouettes against the moon. The girl had stumbled back, had tripped and fallen, and the little monsters were on her!

As Crum grasped his tiny *curare* pistol and darted toward her, one of the gabbling small devils saw him. A rock sailed through the air and Crum went down in a blinding explosion of stars.

He raised his head, his senses reel-

ing as if his skull had been split. He saw the sheriff still lying where he had fallen. He looked up and glimpsed a horrid sight on the slope above—an eerie procession of small hairy monsters, four of them carrying the girl while a half dozen more danced about them, capering wildly as they brandished knives and clubs.

Crum pulled himself to his feet, and weaving drunkenly, started up the slope behind them. There was no time to summon help now, no time to wait. Desperately he forced himself on, gained the top of the ridge and stared down. The spring which was the stream's source was now visible, pouring from a jagged hole in the hillside. The little demons were going toward it—were going into it!

Now he understood why their hiding place had never been found, why no footprints had marked their lair. And even if it had been found, the hole was much too small to admit a man of normal size. Even the girl was giving them difficulties. Then one of them crawled in and began to pull her upward through the water. The others followed, vanished into the darkness.

Crum got up and stole forward. The whole thing was like some fantastic childhood dream, but he knew it was real and shuddered at the thought of what awaited the girl in the dark bowels of the hills—a fate from which he alone could save her. And he must do it alone and unaided. Gripping the tiny gun with its single lethal charge, Crum went down on his hands and knees in the shallow water, and began crawling into the darkness.

It seemed an interminable nightmare as he moved on blindly through the black water, guided only by a distant gabble that seemed to have no relation to the things of earth. Then a light shone, dim, reddish and eerie, but revealing the moving shapes ahead and the cavern beyond them. In this rock-walled crypt a fire was burning, and squatting beside it were the females of this demon species—weird little shapes, with wrinkled yellowish faces, pointed teeth like the fangs of reptiles and gleaming, almond eyes.

At first they shrank away from the

unconscious white burden which the males bore in and placed in the center of the cave. But as the males began to dance and chant about their prize, the females joined in the orgy.

IT was the weirdest thing Crum had ever seen, a saturnalia of bearded imps. And presently, when the little females went darting into the shadows to return with dripping hunks of raw meat which the males seized and devoured avidly, their howling capers were whipped to an insane frenzy.

It was upon this mad frenzy that Crum pinned his only hope of saving the girl. Everything depended on swift and perfect timing. If he were able to drop one of the leaders with the instantly lethal bullet of his little *curare* gun, he might find time in the confusion to reload. Then a mad dash to reach the girl, a second shot, perhaps a chance to kick the fire into the water which flowed along one wall, and he might make it.

It was a desperate chance but he had no choice. Cautiously he edged nearer, hugging the tunnel wall. He reached the opening, raised his tiny pistol to aim, and then froze.

From either side of the entrance two squatting gnomes who were posted there as sentinels sprang at him with hissing cries. His tiny gun cracked like a midget firecracker and the first of the charging demons fell. Then the second one hurled his club. It caught Crum square on the forehead, and this time he pitched down into complete blackness.

CHAPTER V

End of the Death Trail

CCRUM'S mind floated hazily to consciousness still trailing the veils of nightmare. For ages the din of the saturnalia seemed to have been raging, and then a detail in the smoky phantasmagoria jarred him to a full awareness of actuality. It was the flash of knives!

They had appeared in the hands of the bearded males and the weird little

females alike, crude weapons that seemed to have been fashioned from old files and bits of iron, but which gleamed with raw, cruel edges. As the gnomes danced madly about the still unconscious girl, they began a pantomime, feinting with the knives at her body in a way that made their horrible intentions clear.

Crum stirred then and for the first time realized that he was tied. Tightly drawn thongs of rawhide bound his wrists and ankles. He felt for his tiny gun, but it was gone. A moment later he saw it hanging by its chain from the neck of one of the death-elves.

A wave of fear such as he had never known washed over Crum then. He had always been prepared to meet death under horrible circumstances; it was a hazard of the calling he had chosen. But to lie helpless and see a woman butchered by inhuman demons was something he had not anticipated.

Yet, what could he do? Even if he were able to summon the sheriff's whole posse, they would not be able to reach him, would only be able to stand outside while his death cries and those of the helpless girl floated out upon the current of the water.

Crum let his head drop. He still lay near the opening and as he racked his brain, he let the cold spring water lave his burning forehead. Then a sound reached him, faint and far-away, but carried on the water. The excited barking of a dog!

Instantly Crum was alert. A ga must have learned of his disappearance, must have quick-wittedly thought of using the police dog to trail him! But the dog would not be able to follow his trail through water. And if he made a sound, the dancing monsters would be upon him. Then Crum's fingers, absently fingering the spot from which his little gun had vanished, encountered the dog whistle. He had bought it when the thought of using a dog had first occurred to him. And now, unexpectedly, it might well prove his salvation!

Instantly he fished it out, caught it between his lips and blew. Then

he waited, his ear close to the current of the spring. Not a sound had the whistle made that his ears could detect, but now, still distant but coming distinctly, a series of quick answering barks reached him.

With heart hammering, he blew again, waited. The barks were coming nearer, increasing in volume and intensity.

Suddenly the blood in Crum's veins went cold. A shadow had fallen across the water. Crum turned. One of the bearded little monsters was bending over him, knife poised, thin lips peeled back from pointed teeth.

Crum flung his torso upright. Bound as he was it was fight now or die like a trussed animal. His head butted the creature's pendulous belly, rocked him back. A howl went up from the group about the girl. Then his attacker was lunging again, and this time the knife was driving straight toward his middle. With one final blast on the whistle which was still between his teeth, Crum flung himself forward and down. As he did so, the bearded demon sidestepped, then fell upon him like a wildcat. The knife came up, started down—and then stopped in mid-air.

For suddenly, from the tunnel, there had come the wallowing splash of a huge body and a din of savage snarls which, magnified by the tunnel's acoustics, froze the squatting monsters in their tracks.

The one atop Crum, sprang up and back, his cry of terror blending with the howls of the others as a huge brown body shot like a projectile from the tunnel's blackness.

YAMMERING, hissing, lashing out madly with their knives, the small demons scattered right and left. But their efforts were useless against the maddened police dog. It was a battle of the primitive, with life or death hanging in the balance. And the hand of Death did not reach out for that heroic animal.

Those of the demon tribe who were only wounded, fled the scene, gibbering and moaning.

Crum did not pause to watch the carnage. Seizing the knife that had

dropped from his attacker's hand, he ripped himself free, seized the girl by the feet, pulled her into the current of the water and dragged her swiftly through the tunnel.

It was a wild-eyed group that greeted him when he emerged, half dead with exhaustion, but with the girl unharmed. The sheriff was there, a bandage on his head, and Aga, who sprang forward to lift his master and help him to a bed of sand beside the stream.

From here Crum saw the others—Bert Collins in handcuffs, the banker Wilton, and the girl's father. Gus Reeder was springing forward to lift her from the water.

"So you did find them," the sheriff gasped, kneeling by Crum's side. "But how that dog located you, I don't know. What and who are the little devils anyhow?"

Mopping at his cut jaw with a handkerchief, Crum impatiently waved the question aside.

"Where's Lutie Keeber?" he asked.

"Why, she's under guard at Mart Mason's cabin."

"Send for her," Crum ordered.

The sheriff nodded and went off. While Collins and the two other men were working to revive Rose Reeder, Crum spoke to Aga who was still kneeling beside him.

"You analyzed the flesh of that pig?" he asked.

"I did," the Asiatic said. "It is very strange. The meat had been needled with a hypodermic. It contained a strong infusion of an extract from *cannabis indica*."

"Hasheesh," Crum muttered. "I thought so. And the bloody paper?"

"I got some excellent fingerprints," Aga said. "I used cold iodine fumes and it brought them out fine. Then, before they faded, I fixed them with a solution of chloride of palladium." He paused to fish in his pocket. "I have a part of the paper here, with the prints."

"Good," Crum said. "Just keep it handy."

He lay back and closed his eyes, breathing deeply. He heard the girl's muttered words as she revived, heard Collins' exclamation of joy, and was glad that she had been unconscious through it all. He heard, too, the splashing, panting sounds when the big police dog came limping out of the tunnel and stopped in the water to shake and lick his wounds.

"Good dog," Crum called, and then to Aga: "See if he's injured and attend to him."

He lay back and remained with his eyes closed until the sheriff returned. He was warned of this by the shrill voice of Lutie Keeber, who was apparently being dragged up, protesting, by the officer.

"Well, here she is," Sheriff Page announced.

Crum sat up and faced the woman. The others gathered close. Under Crum's gaze Lutie Keeber seemed to wilt.

"The pygmies were yours," he accused.

The woman gasped. "And ye knew all along?"

[Turn page]

TOPS 'EM ALL!

BIGGER DRINK • BETTER FLAVOR

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

"I suspected they were pygmies from the start," Crum said. "Nothing else quite fit the facts. I was fairly certain when I found the body of Mart Mason. That trick of nailing a poisonous snake to a tree beside a trail is a favorite trap of the pygmy inhabitants of the Mountains of the Moon in Africa. And the way he was killed suggested their method of attacking elephants and other large creatures. Then there was the bone I measured, the beard hairs, the descriptions that tallied so closely with the gnomes and elves of myth."

"But you said—" the sheriff began.

"I said," Crum anticipated him, "that they were elves. And so they are. They belong to a race that once spread widely over the earth. Their bones have been found even in Europe. And there can be no doubt that they are the original dwarfs, gnomes, elves, kobolds, and so on whose likenesses our remote ancestors preserved in fairy tales. It was when I learned that Mrs. Kleeber's husband had been the owner of a carnival, that she had brought monkeys, birds, and so forth back here with her, that I guessed she must have brought something else from his sideshows, too."

THE woman had begun to sob.

"It's true," she whimpered. "So I did. They seemed harmless little critters, and I always pitied them, always hated to see them cooped up in exhibits. So when Clem died, I thought I'd just sneak them back home and turn them loose to roam in the hills like they was born to do. An' so I smuggled them in. And keep out of sight, they did, stealin' from the gardens, raidin' the hen roosts a bit, but botherin' no more than that for ten full years. And thin—well, Begob, they must have went crazy!"

"No lies now, Lutie," the sheriff growled. "We've found out a thing or two. We know about the signs of oil on your land. That's why you wanted them little devils, to keep people out."

"Oil!" the woman gasped. "Is that there oil in the water? What of it?"

Well, really, I niver—"

"Mrs. Keeber," Crum interrupted, "you are quite right in saying that the pygmies went suddenly crazy. But what you did not add was that their penchant for murder suddenly developed because someone began feeding them drugs—the killer-drug hasheesh, which was needled into dead pigs and chickens."

The woman's eyes widened.

"But I swear—" she protested.

"Fortunately," Crum said, "we don't have to guess about that." He took the piece of wrapping-paper from Aga's hand and spread it on the flat rock upon which he was leaning. The sheriff flashed his light down and a series of brownish fingerprints were revealed.

"This paper," Crum said, "was wrapped around the drug-soaked body of the pig that was left for the pygmies tonight. Now let me have a pen."

The sheriff handed him one and Crum squeezed a puddle of ink on the rock's top.

"Now," he continued, "you have only to stamp your fingerprints on the paper here, Mrs. Keeber, and I think we shall be able to make an accurate enough comparison to clear you if you are innocent."

But the woman had drawn back, her hands balled into tight knots.

"Naw, naw!" she shrilled. "It's fram'in' a pore woman you're tryin' to do!"

"Not at all," Crum said. "Fingerprinting won't hurt you if you're innocent. Here, I'll put my prints there first. We'll all put our prints there to show you— Here, Sheriff, you're next."

The sheriff squatted down and stamped his prints on the paper.

"All right, Reeder," he said, "your turn."

"That's nonsense." Gus Reeder scowled. "You got no right to fingerprint us."

"So!" the sheriff drawled. "You refuse?"

Reeder didn't get a chance to answer.

"Never mind!" a voice beside him snapped. "I'll run the show from

here on!" The group froze.

Crum bit his lip. He had not expected the man to act so swiftly. Now, as they all stared in alarm, Graves Wilton, the banker, took two steps back and leveled his revolver on the sheriff's chest.

"No need for more of this farce," Wilton rasped, his face a dull, dead mask of determination. "You have my prints there, but you haven't got me. I've worked too hard for this fortune in oil to let it slip through my fingers now!"

"Then you're the killer!" the sheriff gasped helplessly.

"Yes, I!" Wilton snarled. "My bank holds a mortgage on this land, but am I fool enough to foreclose, let the other directors find out about it before I've had the time I need to buy up the surrounding land a little at a time? Not I. There were millions to be made, if I could get enough acreage before the news got out. But what am I going to do in the meantime if fools like that well-digger get wise? Well, one can be poisoned. But when others keep tracking in, snooping along that stream—"

He stopped, glaring from Bert Collins to Gus Reeder.

"Well, my discovery of Lutie's pygmies was an answer to that," Wilton went on. "It was soon plain what those little devils could do to discourage trespassers once they were fed enough hasheesh to get really frisky."

"And if they killed others, innocent girls?" the sheriff asked.

"That has its uses, too," Wilton snapped. "If you can frame the snoopers for the crimes, so much the better."

Crum winced. "But you can't hope to get by with it now."

"Can't I?" Wilton taunted. "At least four of you are unarmed. And we have here Bert Collins and Lutie Keeber, both of whom are believed by the townspeople to be at the bottom of these murders. Might it not have happened that the two of them ambushed the rest of you? And that I happened along in time to shoot it

out with them? I think I could make the story stick, if no one were left to testify against me. And as for the ones of you with guns—"

He suddenly reached out and grabbed Rose Reeder, pulled her in front of him.

"Now make a move, one of you!" he taunted.

They didn't. But Crum knew that someone must act, knew that Wilton was perfectly capable of carrying out his brutal threat. He stole a glance at the dog. The animal, despite its wounds, had lifted its head. It was interested, but did not clearly understand. It looked at Crum as to a master for enlightenment. It would not act until some signal was given. It was up to Crum again.

"Wilton," he said, rising slowly, "don't be a fool now. Let's talk this thing over—"

Without warning he flung himself forward, diving at the man's legs. The gun sent a slug whistling past his head. At the same instant the dog charged and Rose Reeder wrenched free. Wilton's gun blasted again, and the brave animal was knocked from its course by a slug that tore into its shoulder. But its attack had covered Aga's swift charge.

Now, as the Asiatic's huge hands reached Wilton, the killer was lifted bodily from the ground and dropped in a heap from which he did not arise until the handcuffs were clamped on his wrists.

* * * * *

The tunnel to the cavern was dynamited that night, but most of the pygmies were found dead. Those that had managed to clamber out of the dog's reach soon died of the wounds received in the fray.

Lutie Keeber was the only one to mourn over them, but her relief at the ending of the horror was so great that she deeded to Bert Collins and Rose Reeder the little farm which the latter had rented for a wedding present. Even the gruff Gus Reeder was reconciled then and began at once organizing a company to drill for oil.

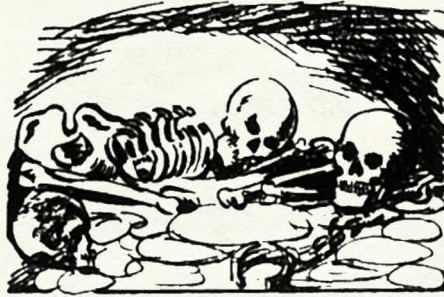
The police dog was found to be

not seriously injured, and was treated by the best doctors in town. Later he was left to convalesce in a dog hospital in a nearby city.

Both Crum and Aga got some much needed sleep that night, but were on their way next afternoon, watching the highway unwind before them again. Crum was in a particularly jubilant mood, since he had managed

to talk himself out of the task of playing guest of honor at the banquet which the villagers had wanted to give for him that night. Crum didn't like banquets of that nature.

"After all," he told Aga with a grin, thinking of the scheduled speeches, "there's a limit to the amount of punishment a man of my size can take."



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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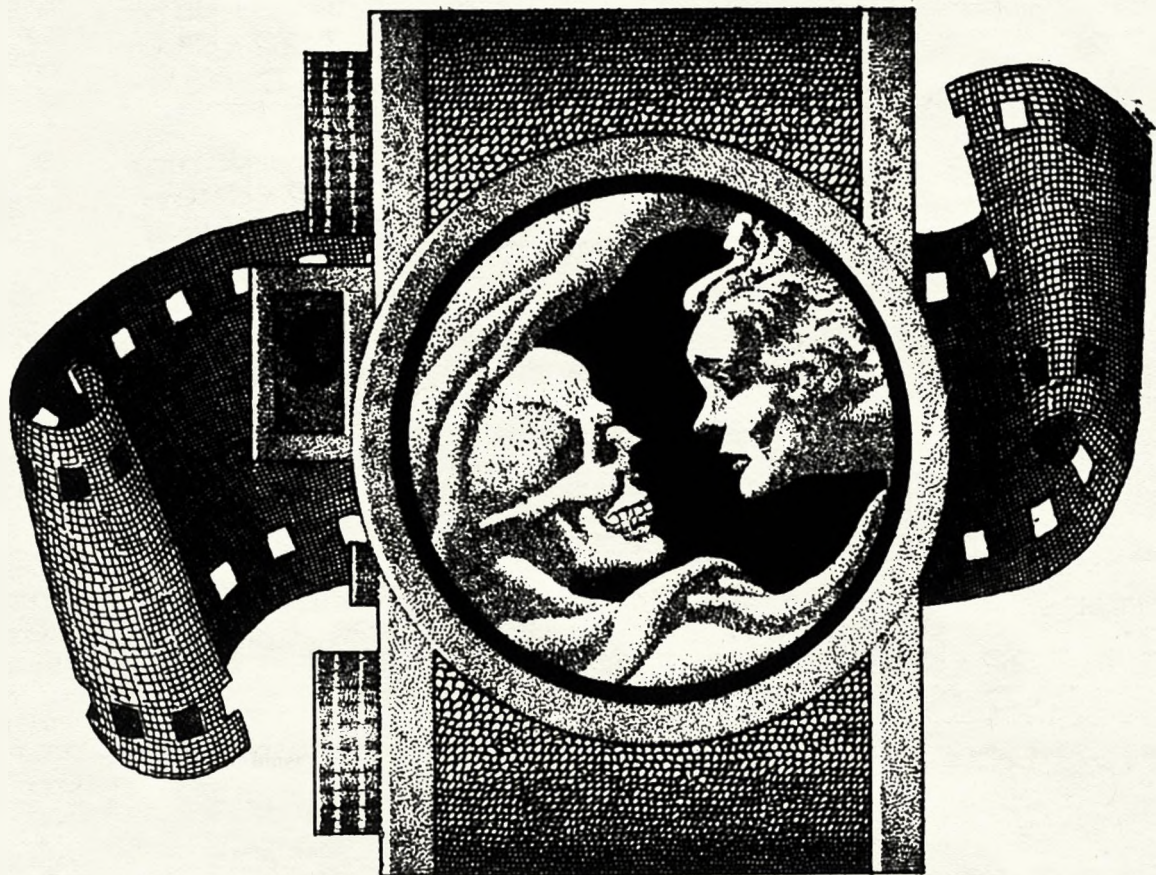
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CANDID CAMERA

By SEABURY QUINN

Author of "Doomed," "Some Day I'll Kill You," etc.



Sulkas Staged His Photographs with the Touch of a Master— but When He Snapped the Shutter, He Trapped Himself!

SULKAS reeled the film tight on the spool of his small camera, set the lens cap firmly in place. Then he smiled out across the haze-dimmed vista of the Mall with all the complacency of one who has done a day's work well. The last four frames had been used up that afternoon. Surely one of them would bring a prize.

His candid camera shots had won him honorable mention three successive Sundays in the *Times-Mail's* gravure section. One of those he'd made today was bound to put him in the money. They'd like that eight-foot, thirtieth-second shot of the blond child with her hoop, or the park

squirrel as it hung head-down against the bole of an oak tree. Animals and children always went across big, he reflected. This time he had something.

Autumn haze was in the air. Autumn shadows marched across the flagstones of the Mall. In the west the live coals of the sunset slowly died beneath the ashes of the twilight. South of the park the towering apartments were transfigured in the soft blue dust until they looked like castles in a Maxfield Parrish painting. Lights were blossoming in their windows. Behind them, in the midtown section, flashing signs flaunted their semaphore sales talks.

"You are a camera artist?"

Sulkas turned with a start. The question came in a deep, courteous voice, yet somehow he was vaguely frightened. A second ago he had been all alone, for this section of the Mall was deserted. He had not even heard a footfall on the flagstones.

"Not really an artist," he replied with belated civility. "Just an amateur looking for unusual shots. Besides, photography's not actually an art—"

Just why he stopped, he could not say. He didn't consider photography an art, like painting or sculpture. There was no reason why he should claim it was. Yet beneath the stranger's glance his words ceased as abruptly as if he had caught himself talking blasphemy in a priest's presence. Again he felt that little, scarcely noticeable qualm of nameless dread as he looked at the man beside him on the bench.

There was no reason for it. The



stranger was a foreigner, but there were many foreigners in New York. A long, loose cloak, like a naval officer's, enveloped him. His hat was a broad-brimmed black felt. His clothes, too, seemed to be a dull black that caught and pocketed the light. His skin was olive and his long, thin lips intensely red. About him was the pleasant smell of scented bath soap and fine powder. Underneath the perfume, though, lay the faintest suggestion of another odor, like the hint of decay.

"Not an art?" the deep, genteel voice answered in an almost shocked tone. "My dear sir, it is more than art. It's nature! The painter at his best can but show beholders how he saw a scene. Photography grasps the fleeting fraction of a second and holds it for eternity. How, save by photog-

raphy, can we record the stress of great sorrow, delight or terror? How can a painter, daubing artificial impressions on canvas, or a sculptor, cutting lifeless puppets out of lifeless stone, imprison such great moments of supreme emotion for the future? Only photography can do this."

"You're probably right," Sulkas said hesitantly.

HIS uneasiness was increasing. The low-spoken, well bred insistence of the argument seemed emphatic and fanatical, as if it had been shouted. When the stranger stripped a black glove from his hand, drew out a gleaming black case and selected a long cigarette from it, Sulkas looked at him in fascination.

The bared hand was white as marble, with long tapering nails as red and pointed as a woman's, yet Sulkas knew they were not manicured. A match flared suddenly. Its little point of orange flame seemed to be striking garnet flashes of reflection in the deep-set dark eyes. Smoke wafted toward him like a cloud of heavy incense. It, too, had the vaguest charnel odor.

"Emotions," continued the stranger, "they are the only things that count. The world waits for the man who can capture sorrow, delight or terror for the ages. My young friend, think of that next time you train your camera on a child or squirrel in the park. A thousand other men are taking similar pictures. They may achieve a paltry prize from some newspaper. But is that fame, success? No, my friend, that's mediocrity. Fame and recognition wait for the successful man, but he who would succeed must dare to defy convention."

He rose and turned south toward the city. The echo of his laugh came softly, almost mockingly, as he walked off.

Sulkas watched him, wondering. How had he known about the little girl with her hoop and the squirrel on the oak tree? He hadn't been there when Sulkas made those shots, yet— For the first time Sulkas noticed the stranger's limp. He leaned heavily upon a black malacca cane, hobbling as if one of his feet were deformed.

A puff of breeze snatched up the long, black cloak, raised its hem until it seemed to flutter like the wings of a giant bat.

The sun was sinking like a stricken ship into the tossing sea of cloud-rack in the west. Suddenly it disappeared. With its going, shadows closed down on the world like an extinguisher upon a guttering candle. A gust of wind came keening through the almost leafless trees. The feel of it was like an icy spray against his face. Sulkas shivered as he turned the collar of his topcoat up. There was no moon. Everything around him appeared dim and indistinct, unreal as ghosts are unreal, or objects on a foggy night.

ALL night the stranger's mocking advice stood out in his memory like the after-image of a flash-bulb's brilliant glare upon the retina.

"A paltry prize from some newspaper. . . . That's mediocrity. . . . He who would succeed must dare convention."

His ambitions of yesterday seemed childish. Why should he work to win a paltry prize from some newspaper? Fame and fortune waited for the man who dared. Well, why not? There was Hajos, rich and famous for his camera studies, and Carmody and Fischbein, hardly less well known. Why shouldn't Sulkas force his way into their select company? Why should he seek no higher goal than honorable mention or a miserable five dollars for his artistry?

It was a lovely autumn morning, cool and brisk, with sunlight sparkling on the tiny pools left by the melting frost. The sky above the half-bare trees was as blue as a china plate. A high-key day, he mused, almost too much light. The shadows would be sharp and harsh. He'd have to watch out for halation, keep the shutter closed down to a mere pinpoint—

"Oh, I'm sorry, little girl!" he exclaimed as he lurched against the broken picket fence before the vacant house. Sunk in his thoughts, he had walked unseeing into a small child who occupied the center of the sidewalk, with a kitten clutched against her threadbare jacket.

Sulkas looked at her carefully. Everything and everybody came within his range of possibility for camera study. The day before he would have snapped her picture as she stood there with the kitten in her arms. Probably he would have called it "Pals" or "The Little Mother."

The child was photogenic, no doubt of it. Her large eyes and her little pointed chin, the slim, small throat and the brush of straight black hair made her ideal photographic material. The decent poverty of her dress, worn coat, patched skirt and several-times-patched shoes, the pinch of malnutrition in her cheeks—there was pathos in the love of a slum child for her pet.

"Why not?" he asked himself. Plainly as if they were spoken in his ear, he heard the stranger's smooth, persuasive words: "Fame and fortune for the man who can depict the ultimate in sorrow, delight and terror. . . ."

He slipped the lens cap from his camera, swung the instrument before him as an army officer hangs his binoculars.

"Let me see your kitty," he said as he held his free hand toward the child. "What's her name?"

The little girl dug one scuffed shoe into the bare earth bordering the footpath. Childhood's innate suspicion of the good faith of grown-ups made her clutch her pet closer to her. Head bent until her chin was resting on the kitten, she looked obliquely up at him.

"Give me that cat!" With a snatching grasp he dragged the kitten from the grimy little hands and held it high above his head. "I'm going to kill it."

The child went suddenly rigid. Her lower lip began to quiver, then dropped and curled up like a frosted flower petal as her mouth squared with a quick retch of agony. Tears came to her eyes, rolling in big, slow drops down her thin cheeks. Her hands were clasped before her in a piteously entreating gesture.

Sulkas flipped the trigger of his camera. The light had been just right, he had maneuvered the child into just the proper position. Lighting, distance, timing—everything was per-

fect. He had made an ideal shot.

"Capture sorrow," the stranger had advised.

Sulkas had bettered the instruction. Here was sorrow, blended with surprise, fear and entreaty. A little, life-starved child was pleading for the return and the life of the thing which she loved most dearly. Here was something real at last. His feet were on the ladder. He was climbing to success and recognition.

With the squirming, mewling cat wedged underneath his arm, he headed down the steep street toward St. Mary's Park. Behind him he could hear the child's thin, piping wail. Once he looked back. The little girl had thrown herself face-downward on the grass. With her head cupped in her folded hands she was crying in a strangled plaint of anguish.

"Kitty, Kitty! O my little, little Kitty!"

THE idiot stood in his front yard, grinning fatuously at passers-by. Sulkas noticed him as he went past—a giant's bulk of body, fat but not soft, with vacant, lack-luster eyes and a mouth that sagged and drooled. His head was hideously deformed, as if it had been molded in wax and squeezed out of alignment while still warm. His whole body was massive and grotesque as the monster of an insane artist's drawing. An animal he was, a thing that knew the world only because of its impact on his five senses.

As Sulkas reached the little iron fence that shut the idiot's play yard from the street, the uncouth creature bobbed and grinned at him. Once or twice, as he might have tossed peanuts to the bears in Bronx Park, Sulkas had thrown the imbecile a bit of candy. Now the oaf came shambling toward the fence, both hands outstretched, a half-apologetic, half-ingratiating leer upon his malformed features. Sulkas paused in mid-step, almost in mid-breath. He swung his camera into position.

"Here, catch!" he called peremptorily, and tossed the little cat into the idiot's outstretched paws.

The fat cheeks creased and wrin-

kled as the grin grew deeper. Laughter bubbled up between the thick, slack lips with a noise like the gurgling of a spate of unclean water in a waste-pipe.

"Purty, purty!" cried the idiot as he ran hands trembling with delight along the terrified kitten's sleek back. His voice was high and thin and childish. Somehow it was horrifying, that weak treble coming from that monstrous bulk. "Purty, purty pussy!"

Sulkas' finger was upon the camera trigger, but some inward warning bade him hold the pressure. The kitten, terrified by the great fingers fumbling over it, had writhed and struggled to get free. Failing that it had lashed out with its claws, etching a bright trail of blood across the hand that held it like a vise. It was amazing how quickly the laughter died in the big, malformed face. The pendulous lips drew inward, as if they were a purse whose string was tightened suddenly. The puffy lids came down across the senseless eyes and veiled them till they were mere slits of pale color. The huge fists knotted. The kitten had no time to scream its dying agony. The soft ball of fur lay still where it had been thrown on the grass. There was a rising roar of laughter. It churned and boiled as if its force were so great that the idiot's gaping mouth and open throat could not provide room for its escape. Rolling like the thunder of a beaten kettle-drum, it betrayed no joy, no merriment, no gladness, only the amusement of a senseless devil watching the antics of the tortured damned.

"Now!"

The command seemed to come from somewhere in Sulkas' inner consciousness, yet from an outside source as well. He clicked the trigger of his camera. Then he hurried down the street with his spine cold, the waves of demoniac laughter rolling after him.

THE letter was on mauve paper, almost as thick and heavy as a blotter, written in violet ink in a great sprawling hand that took a line

for each six words. Brief to the point of curtness, it was like a royal command.

Come to see me at your earliest convenience and bring negatives of the two pictures published in today's Times-Mail.

Hajos.

That was all, no punctuation, no salutation, no complimentary closing, not even a date. But the thrill of it raced through Sulkas' veins like brandy. Hajos, the great cameraman, had addressed a letter to him with his own hand.

The *Times-Mail* had accepted the two prints he'd sent them. The crying child he had called "Bereavement." The laughing imbecile he had labeled "Idiot's Delight." Both had won honorable mention. First and second prizes had gone respectively to pictures showing a blond child trundeling a hoop and a park squirrel hanging head-down on the trunk of an oak tree. The irony of it had brought a bitter laugh to his mouth, but the letter from Hajos had washed it away.

Feverishly he made ready for the interview, chose and discarded half a dozen ties, fussed and fumed while knotting them. His fingers shook so, he could scarcely make them do his bidding. The subway seemed to crawl as it bore him downtown. The crosstown bus seemed slower than a snail as it bumped through the traffic. But finally, with a heart that beat so wildly it was almost stifling him, he stood before the great man's door.

"Hajos" was the only word upon the ground-glass panel, without a given name or statement of his calling. But what need was there? Hajos was Hajos. Nobody knew if he had any other name. Certainly he never used it if he had. As to his calling, would anyone add "painter" to the name of Michelangelo, or "sculptor" to Rodin's? In all the world of photography there was no name so famous or so potent as Hajos, yet Sulkas had come by personal appointment!

A soft light burned above the gleaming desk in the center of the ante-chamber. Everything about the

room was black. The black composition floor gleamed like polished jet. Dull, soot-black walls and ceiling gave back no gleam of light from the black-shaded lamp. The furniture of polished ebony was upholstered in black silk brocade.

In the coned rays of the desk lamp he described the man at the desk, lighted like an actor on a darkened stage. The lean, sardonic face had eyes as black as coal, with heavy brows like circumflexes over them. The hair, dead-black as the bushy brows, was brushed back so sharply that it left a widow's peak on the forehead. A long, hooked nose, a wide, almost uncolored mouth, long, sharply slanting jaws that terminated in a long, sharp chin made it a terrifying face. It was the face of one who knows the weaknesses and wickedness of others, and holds aloof in scorn, indifference and contempt.

SULKAS stopped upon the threshold and drew in his breath so sharply that he seemed to sob. For just an instant panic caught him by the throat. The black-globed light threw curious shadows on the farther wall. For a fleeting instant it seemed that he saw the figure of a tall and slender man in black with a wide hat and long, enveloping cloak—the stranger of the park. Then reason took the reins again. Of course there was nobody there.

"Mr. Hajos?" he asked tentatively.

"Not 'meestair,' please," the thick, harsh voice reproved. "Those who call Hajos 'meestair' insult heem. Hajos iss Hajos. It iss enough."

"I'm sorry." Sulkas swallowed his embarrassment. "You wrote me—"

"Yess." The man's reply was like a hiss. "You haf the prints of those pictures? Good. Giff them here."

When he took them in his long, thin, dead-white hand, he sat silent looking at the little negatives as he held them against the light.

"You haf the master's touch, younk man," he pronounced. "Emotions are the only things that count. The world waits for the man who can imprison supreme emotion and preserve it for the ages. Yess."

Sulkas shivered till he thought his teeth must chatter. Hajos had used practically the same words the stranger in the park had used! He choked down the fear that had possessed him. Hajos had laid the films on the desk and put his long white hands palm-down each side of them.

"I want them," he declared.

"Of course, Mr.—I mean Hajos," Sulkas stammered. "You're entirely welcome."

"No man iss welcome to anything. Everything must be paid for, and money is the cheapest thing to pay. I shall pay you for them." From the desk drawer, Hajos drew out a sheaf of bills and tossed them uncounted to Sulkas. "Take that as earnest-money on our bargain. Tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day after that, perhaps, you make the last print of the trilogy?"

"I don't think I quite understand —" began Sulkas.

The sharp, impatient exclamation from Hajos cut him short.

"You onnerstan' me well enough, I theenk. Here"—he took the little films between his thumb and forefinger—"we haff prints of sorrow and elation, no? Ver' well. Now you go out and get me a print of horror, terror, fright. What you call it iss no matter. You know what I mean. You get me a print of someone who has just found out some dreadful thing he knows cannot be so iss so. You onnerstan'? You bring that print to me and then we really begin to talk business. Yess. Now go. Hajos would be alone."

Thus summarily dismissed, Sulkas hesitated in the corridor. His head was whirling. Hajos had complimented him, said he had the master's touch. Hajos had commissioned him to take a picture. Hajos had bought his negatives. For the first time Sulkas looked at the sheaf of bills clutched in his hand. He hadn't thought of counting it, but—one, two, ten, a dozen—twenty fifty-dollar bills were in the bundle!

Hajos, the greatest master of photography in the world, had bought two films from him for a thousand dollars! He had bought them from him, Paul

Sulkas, who only yesterday had almost wept with disappointment over failure to receive a ten-dollar first prize from the *Times-Mail* for those same pictures!

THE idea did not come to Sulkas full-formed. He built it up a little at a time, picking, choosing, selecting, discarding. Finally, as a picture puzzle or mosaic is at last completed, he worked out the pattern. All was ready—actors, scene and plot. Only the performance waited, and the time for that, too, he had fixed upon.

The Stephans who lived out past Woodhaven, were giving a Halloween party. Between their cottage and the city was a long, deserted stretch of desolate country. Almost in the center of it was the old Mount Holly Cemetery, graveyard of ten generations of Long Islanders, burying place for slaves when slavery was as legal in New York as in Virginia.

A little briar-grown patch of wasteland in the corner of the fence, one plot had been reserved in olden days for the burial of suicides and executed felons, spies and traitors. That would be the ideal spot, and Valborg Pettersen should help him. It would be pretty rough on Val, but when he'd conquered stubborn fame and made reluctant fortune come to heel, Sulkas would make it up to her, and more. Besides, she would do anything for him. He knew that she'd forgive him.

He had known Valborg since they had been in grammar school together. From a chubby, tow-haired, apple-cheeked Norwegian lass, she'd grown into a statuesque, lovely woman, tall. Copper hair reached down to her knees, and she had steadfast blue eyes, a fine skin and teeth that showed as white as milk behind the vivid crimson of her long, firm lips.

Sulkas, with his eye for beauty and proportion, could not remember having seen a body that stood so straight and proudly as hers. Moreover, she loved him. Sometimes he felt unworthy, for hers was not a cheap and showy affection, but the deep, abiding love that women of the northern races

give to only one man in a whole lifetime. Any time he chose to ask her, she would have accepted him, he was certain. But with the artist's concentration on his work, with ambition battling frustration, he had temporarily held back an avowal of affection. Somehow it put heart into a fellow, especially one with artistic temperament—and Sulkas never doubted he had that—to know a beautiful girl was waiting for him, needing only his first word to declare her love with all the open-hearted fervor of her generous nature. She'd go to the Stephans' party with him, of course. They'd drive out early in the evening, spend the night in games and telling ghost tales. Then—

"It can't fail, it's sure-fire!" he told himself exultantly.

A thought bothered him for a moment. Valborg had been feeling rather low lately. The doctor said her heart was not quite up to par, cautioned her against late hours and too much exercise or excitement. But that was all a pack of nonsense. What did doctors know about it, anyway? They always had to find an ailment when a person called on them, otherwise they couldn't justify their fees.

RED apples had been ducked for, fortunes told. The guests had danced to music from the radio. Now, the empty plates of the repast stacked in the kitchen, they gathered in the firelight to spin ghost yarns. All the old favorites were paraded—the Golden Arm, the Monkey's Paw, Wandering Willie's Tale. Sulkas had grown restless. In a little while good nights would be in order, and he had to set his stage.

"Speaking of hauntings," he said abruptly with raised voice, "did any of you know that old Mount Holly Cemetery is supposed to be infested with a specially malignant specter?"

A little murmur of awed negatives went round the firelit room.

"Mount Holly, right over there by Ridgewood? Tell us about it!"

This was better, he thought complacently. Now to work.

"There doesn't seem to be much

known about it, really," he began with a light cough of deprecation. "The origin of the legend seems to have been lost. Some say it is the ghost of a sorcerer executed by the Dutch for witchcraft. There's another version that declares the specter is the wraith of a traitor who betrayed a company of Continentals to the British. Judging from the things I've heard, I'd say it is the ghost of a slave who set fire to the farmhouse of his master, and was trapped and burned to death himself.

"Just whose the ghost is seems a mystery, but there are some pretty well authenticated stories of its appearance, especially on Halloween. It must be an unpleasant-looking thing enveloped in a long white winding-sheet, with a skull for a face, all glowing with hell-fire. Its dreadful power is to blast the person who sees it with blindness."

"Blindness?" asked Tim Stephan. "How do you mean, Paul?"

"All I know is what I've heard, of course. But up to twenty years ago there was an old man out at Rockville Center. He had been stone-blind for almost fifty years. Until the night he tried to take a short cut through Mount Holly, though, he could see as well as anybody. Better than most folks, in fact. He was a famous marksman and hardly ever failed to carry off first prize at the turkey-shoots they used to have on the Island every Christmas. Well, it seems one night he found himself out late, with no way of getting home but walking.

"A storm was blowing up. He was in so great a hurry that he decided to cut through Mount Holly. He almost got through. Just as he came to the plot reserved for suicides' and felons' burial, something seemed to rise up from the ground in front of him. A form draped in a sheet, it had a skeleton's face all glowing as if it were incandescent, and eyes as green as a cat's. He stood rooted to the spot with terror. The thing went at him with a dreadful groan. Then, just as he thought it was about to seize him, it exploded."

"Exploded?" came the chorus of

listeners. "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything," he answered reprovingly. "I wasn't there. I didn't see it. I'm only saying what he said. The thing seemed to explode, vanish in a blaze of blinding light that left him dazzled— permanently."

No one spoke for a minute. Was this a hoax, a trick to force a final question and make a fool of him who asked it? At last Tim Stephan cleared his throat.

"All right, I'll bite. What do you mean, he was permanently dazzled, Paul?"

"Just what I say. He never got his sight back. They found him the next morning, threshing around the graveyard, barging into tombstones, tearing himself to ribbons on the briars, blind as a mole. He was only twenty then. He lived past seventy, but all the years between he spent in darkness."

A long-drawn exclamation of horror exhaled through the living room, almost as if it were a gust of wind become articulate. Sulkas glanced at Valborg sitting on a hassock by the fire, elbow on knee, chin cupped in one hand, her wine-red party dress splashed out upon the dark blue of the rug. The dancing firelight added strength to the rich rose in her cheeks. Lord, she was a beauty!

It was a low, contemptible trick he planned to play. Softly as a half-heard echo, but loud enough to drown compunction, came the words of the mysterious stranger in the park.

"He who would succeed must dare defy convention."

HE had let out almost all the water from his radiator when he had parked in the driveway. They came abreast of the low picket fence that shut Mount Holly Cemetery from the back road he had chosen as a "short-cut." The little gage on the dashboard glowed fiery red in warning.

"The darn thing's empty again!" he groaned.

Valborg turned questioning eyes on him. Throughout the drive she had been silent and tense. Once or

twice he'd stolen sidelong glances at her, noticed how she sat with hands clasped in her lap, her eyes directed straight before her, as though she strove to see something beyond her vision's range. His story had struck deeper in her mind than he had dared to hope.

"What, Paul?" she asked.

"My radiator's dry again. I should have had it fixed this afternoon, but I thought I could get by tonight." He shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation. "Looks as if there's nothing to do but get out and rustle up a refill."

"But where can we get water here? There's not a house for half a mile or more."

"Afraid of the fiery ghost of Mount Holly?"

"The fiery ghost?"

"That's what I asked. This is Mount Holly Cemetery." With a vague, all-inclusive gesture, he swung his arm toward the dark patch of tree-grown land upon their right. "This is where the fiery ghost comes rising from the ground. All the same, there's bound to be a well or hydrant there, where I can get a bucketful of water. Mind waiting here, or would you rather come into the cemetery with me?"

"I'll wait," she answered almost listlessly.

"All right." He reached into the luggage trunk and found the canvas bucket, all loaded with his stage properties. "Sure you won't be afraid?"

"I probably will be, Paul, but—"

"I'll be right back," he broke in. "If I see the specter coming at me, I'll let out a yell. Will you come to my help?"

"I'll come, Paul," she responded soberly. "You know that—"

"Of course I do," he interrupted. "You're a true friend, Val!"

REACHING through the opened window of the car, he found her hand and squeezed it. In the dashboard light he saw a quick flush come into her cheeks. Poor Val, she loved him so! He was a heel. But through his brain rang the refrain:

"Dare to defy convention!"

"Be seeing you," he said cheerfully and drew himself up to the fence top. "Keep your chin up and the ears open for my cry for succor."

This was going to be almost too easy, he assured himself as he picked a path between the tombstones. He'd been over the terrain that afternoon. There, by the van Repplier plot, where the copse of hemlock made a solid-black background for a white face and blond hair, was just the spot. Workmen had been busy on the old monument, scrubbing it with wire brushes, spraying it with dilute acid to eat off the grime of years. The grass about the base was seared and brittle, as if burned wherever the acid had touched it.

"Have to watch this stuff," one of the men explained when he'd commented on their rubber gloves, aprons, and heavy goggles. "Seems like when this dilute muriatic acid mixes with the moss from these old stones, it forms a poison that just destroys human tissue. If you've got a cut, even a tiny scratch on your hand, it'll give you an infection that'll take a year to cure." Avoiding the acid-scarred patch of turf Sulkas drew the things from their concealment in the bucket. A Halloween ghost costume—long white linen sheet with hoodlike top to cover up the head, a skull-faced mask with eyes of green isinglass, the little pocket flashlight with its green bulb, set just below the false-face to illuminate it. Then his camera with its flash-bulb set in the parabolic reflector—he'd need lots of light for this shot, but the heavy-duty bulb would furnish it.

Everything okay? He checked his equipment once more. There could be no second try if anything went wrong. All was in order.

He drew the ghostly costume over his clothes, set the mask in place, tested the flashlight to make sure it would properly light the skull-face with its green, unearthly glow. Then he swung his camera around his neck and focused it on a spot eight feet away, just where the path broke through the clump of hemlock. Now—

"Val!" he shouted, and excitement lent something like trembling fear to his voice. "Help, Val! Help me!"

VALBORG drew the furred collar of her coat higher around her throat. It had been hard to wear a mask of festive gaiety all evening, to take part in the bantering fun of the party when more than anything she wanted to creep into his arms and beg:

"Hold me tight against your heart, Paul. It won't be for long."

She'd taken it standing that afternoon, like the thoroughbred she was. When Dr. Mendel gave his final verdict, she had smiled at him, chin up, lips firm.

"Haven't you forgotten something, Doctor?" she had asked.

"Forgotten?" His brows drew down in a thoughtful frown. "No, I don't think so, Miss Pettersen."

"Oh, maybe I'm confused. It was a judge I thought of."

"A judge?"

"Yes, You know, when they pronounce the death sentence, they add, 'And may God have mercy on your soul'."

Now she was alone with her thoughts and they frightened her. In the faint glow from the dashboard light, her face looked sad. Her cheeks were hollow and her red lips had a tragic downward droop. If only Paul would tell her, she thought wistfully. She knew he loved her, as much as he was capable of loving anything or anybody but himself. She had read it in his eyes, but she wanted it from his lips. It would be something—not much, more than nothing but—to carry into the dark with her.

She turned to look at the deep gloom of the old cemetery. She'd be lying in a place like that before the birds came north next spring. She shuddered, and a tiny blue vein fluttered at the base of her throat. There was a thin light, like a silver needle, here and there between the almost bare-limbed trees. The early morning wind soughed through them like a ghostly chorus. Farther on, where evergreens were bunched in a small

copse, a darker darkness loomed in the night. If only Paul would say he loved her, that he needed her—

The cry came suddenly, astonishingly, pitched shrilly, quavering with mortal dread.

"Val! Help, Val! Help me!"

She was out of the car with a bound, scrambling up and over the crude fence, heedless of the rents the pickets made in her dress, unmindful of the ruin of her satin sandals and silk stockings.

"Where are you, Paul?" she called in answer. "What is it? I'm coming!"

Again she heard the cry, lower this time, seemingly exhausted. A briar reached out thorn-clawed branches, tearing at her dress. She jerked the fabric savagely, felt it rip as it came loose. With one hand she gathered up the dress above her knees. With the other she thrust back the low-hung branches of the hemlocks.

"Paul! Paul, where are you?"

Visions danced before her inward eye. Voices chattered in her mind's ear. She was in a haunted graveyard, where spirits of the damned dead walked the earth. Racial memories rose and gibbered at her, the trolls and goblins of her Norse ancestors' folk-lore, the "sendings" of the Finnish witches, the Erl-king and his troop of demon courtiers. The very trees seemed menacing, not soft and friendly like the trees in the park. Gaunt and bare and sinister, they stretched their leafless branches up to the black sky to draw down darker secrets from it.

Her breath was coming faster and her heart was wrenching like a creature in its death-throes. She was sobbing hard, dry, ugly gasps of utter exhaustion.

"Paul! Paul, where are you?"

OUT of the blackness before her it came, tall, obscene, the light that emanates from rotting things upon its bare-boned face, a green reflection as from pools of stagnant water in its fowl eyes. A winding-sheet, all smeared with patches of grave-mold, was flung around it. Teeth, long and sharp and gleaming

as a wolf's fangs, gnashed in fleshless gums. A groan, half-harrowing outcry of pain, half-wicked, triumphant laughter, came from the lipless mouth.

She stopped abruptly, as if she had run full-tilt into a solid wall. One hand went to her throat. Her mouth opened for a scream that refused to come. Everything inside her seemed to knot and contract. Her eyes were starting from their sockets. Her heart gave a cold nauseating lurch as a great blaze of blinding light flared in her face. Then darkness, black as an enveloping cloak, closed on her.

She did not feel the impact as her body struck the ground, for she was almost past sensation. Faintly, as if it were miles off and looked at through a dense shadow, she saw Paul's face above her. Around his shoulders was a wisp of flimsy cotton fabric. Torn aside and hanging round his neck by an elastic was the remnant of a skull-faced mask.

"Valborg!" he was whispering. "Valborg dear, it's all right. It was a joke, a gag to get a picture of you when you thought you'd seen a ghost. It's all right now, I tell you, Val! This is Paul—Paul!"

With an effort greater than she'd thought she could make, she raised her lowered eyelids. For just a moment she looked at him in the flashlight's glow. Love was in her eyes, and forgiveness. He had hurt her cruelly, mortally, but she was just amazed to find him unkind. A whisper breathed from between her lips.

"Oh, Paul, how could you—and I loved you so—" Then darkness fell final, absolute, eternal.

"Val!" He bent above her, hands pressed on the seared grass where she lay. "Valborg, listen to me, *please!* It's all right."

Suddenly he knew it was no use to call, to plead. Those ears that never heard him say "I love you" were past all hearing. Those quiet, lightly parted lips would never speak to him again.

"Oh, my God Almighty!"

It was not so much an exclamation as a prayer, forced from him as the

realization of his littleness, his pettiness, his utter and complete unworthiness, came to him with a dreadful clarity. Except for his ambition. . . .

Sick pain was clutching at his heart. His eyes were aching with the force of tears that would not be held back. Involuntarily he cupped his palms against his face. A dreadful pain shot down his cheeks and up his brow. A fiery liquid seemed to sink into his skin. He took his lower lip between his teeth to stifle back a scream, but flesh and nerves could endure just so much, no more.

IN the blackness overhead there burst a streak of light as the moon thrust aside the curtains of the overhanging clouds. A web of twin-

bling stars stretched clear across the zenith, like a chain of diamonds on a background of black velvet. But Sulkas did not see them as he turned his face up to the sky.

There was a sound of sobbing in the old graveyard, bitter with heart-break and despair. A weasel, scuttling to her burrow in the sanctuary of the cemetery, paused to look at the two forms stretched on the acid-blasted grass. She raised one fore-foot daintily, twitched her nose, studying the man-scent.

Then she slipped off noiselessly to her lair.

There was no need for her caution. But how was she to know the man-thing was no menace to her, that he mourned his dead love—and his sight?

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THE DAY OF DEBTS

By WILL GARTH

Author of "Fulfillment," "The Saki of Hashimo," etc.



A slimy octopus slowly rose from the depths of the pool

THE New Year's Day was drawing to a close in Chinatown. Lights were coming on in the narrow streets and in the shop windows. The winter wind was blowing from the east, as if to bring something of the spirit of Old China to the western world on this day of celebration. With the going down of the sun, in all Chinatown there was no man who owed any other man anything. For this was the day of the paying of all debts.

Chung Lee was brewing jasmine tea for himself in his little room back of his theater. The coals glowed to a ruby red in the brazier and the steam began to jet from the spout of the little copper kettle. Chung Lee set two cups on the taboret and dropped the fragrant leaves into them. Evi-

When the Spirit of Old China Demanded Its New Year's Toll, Chung Lee Paid in Full!

dently he was expecting a visitor.

He made no move to remove the kettle. His old eyes, staring at the glowing coals, held a far away look. His face, reflected in the burnished copper as in a mirror, was sober and sad.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," he said in English, knowing who his visitor would be.

A girl entered, gestured to him to keep his seat, went up to him and held out her hand. He took it in both of his.

"Happy New Year, Chung Lee," she said in a low, musical voice.

He released her hand, clasped one of his closed hands in the palm of the other, and gave them a slight shake in the Chinese gesture of good will.

"Happy New Year, Edwina Grant," he responded. Her ears caught the overtones of melancholy in his voice and her frank eyes sought his face. But she did not speak. She took off her hat and her nutria coat. There was a lissomeness and grace to her movements that smacked of the dancer. As a matter of fact, she was not clad in street dress but in costume.

She sat down and took the cup which Chung Lee handed to her, and they sipped the delicious brew in silence. They were a strange combination, the old Chinese and the American girl—the girl the very essence of modernity, the Chinese like a man out of some ancient dynasty.

Yet they were at ease with each other. This Chinese who bore within his heart and mind the wisdom of the ancient sages could nevertheless tell an American joke in a manner that would have won the approval of Mark Twain.

But he was in no mood for telling jokes now.

"It is kind of you to visit me before the performance," he said.

"Not everyone is permitted the opportunity of drinking Chung Lee's jasmine tea," Edwina replied, courteous in the Chinese manner, yet with a trace of teasing in the remark.

"Was it for my tea that you came?" Chung Lee asked, smiling slightly.

"It was to talk with a man of wisdom who has taught me much," the girl answered.

"Thank you," said the old man. "In China, reverence for elders is in the warp and woof of Chinese life. In this country, while young people no doubt love the old folks—in fact many of your popular songs deal with this theme—they have not the patience to remain long in their company. At any rate, I am glad that you are here. I am lonely always, but on this day of the paying of old debts I am lonelier than on other days."

Whether it was the reflection of the

glowing coals, or perhaps an internal surge of emotion, Edwina could not be sure. But fire seemed to flash up in Chung Lee's eyes—a fire that burned beneath his gentleness as the latent forces of a temblor slumber beneath the good earth. It was no new experience for Edwina Grant to see that flame leap up and die.

In her contact with Chung Lee, at whose theater she learned Oriental dance forms without cost to herself save her own occasional participation in the performances, she had been vouchsafed a glimpse, every now and then, of the Chinese's secret self. To her it had been given to know that beneath Lee's old age and Buddhist compassion, there still lurked the Chinese warrior!

"How long is it," she asked softly, "since Fay Lon—went away?"

THE old Chinese's face was impassive again.

"I do not know if you mean to ask me when my daughter left my home or left this life," he said quietly. "For among the euphemisms for the fact of death, 'went away,' is one. Since language, a product of human life, should never be soiled by fear, I have ever expressed the fact of death with the simple words, 'to die.' Therefore must I answer your question in two ways."

The old man bowed his head, but went on speaking.

"My daughter 'went away' exactly three years ago today. She 'died'—no man knows exactly when. The wisest of medical examiners could not tell, at the time she was taken from the river, how long before that she had given herself to it."

"Tell me, Chung Lee," the girl said softly, "do you cherish anger in your heart against her? It is not for the young to counsel the old, but—"

Chung Lee stopped her.

"There is anger in my heart, but it is not against Little Flower. There is more than anger; there is hate, but its direction lies elsewhere. The anger is against Chung Lee, an unwise father, too strict with his daughter. The hate"—Chung Lee's voice deepened and his body shook—"is against Jos-

eph Carmen, who took her from me! Because I was too strict in the matter of her marrying the man of *my* choice, her rebellion took a perverted form and she convinced herself that the tawdry tinsel that overlaid this criminally-minded man was the pure gold of romance. So he took her from me, and when, disillusioned and broken, she went from him, it was not to her father's bosom but to the river's."

Chung Lee set down his cup.

"This has been the day of the paying of the debts," he said somberly. "So it was last year, and so the year before that. The years spin on. But *that* debt remains unpaid, weighing heavily upon me. It must be paid, and there is something in me that tells me"—his voice dropped—"that it will be paid. . . ."

His hand reached up and back, and, without turning, he took a short sword down from the wall. He drew it from the scabbard and ran his thumb with a feather-light touch along its blade.

"This debt," he murmured, "will only be wiped out in blood—mine or Carmen's."

His eyes closed, but he went on speaking.

"In ancient days, when my ancestors paid debts of this kind, they contrived to make the payment match the offense. One forebear of mine had a nephew who was taken captive by the lord of a neighboring province and made a slave. He became a weaver of tapestries. But so fine was the work, and so miserly was the lord in allowing him oil for light to work by, that the nephew went blind. Subsequently, by the fortunes of war, the lord became captive of my forebear.

"My forebear cut the lord's eyes from their sockets and gave them to his nephew to eat. 'Thou hast devoured, in thy greed, the eyes of this boy,' my forebear said. 'Therefore let thine own eyes be devoured by him whom thou hast offended.' So it was done, and there was no longer a debt between them."

HE paused, went on:

"Again, there was a cruel magistrate who condemned one of my ancestors to the salt mines, stultify-

ing justice by accepting a bribe. In the salt mines my ancestor was whipped even as he worked, and the sweat and the salt ran into the bleeding welts together, until my ancestor prayed for death. But he was strong and served out his term.

"Then my ancestor, who was not a cruel man but an honest one who could not bear to be in debt, made captive the magistrate, and stripped him to his well-larded waist. Then he lashed him with a whip of nine straps tipped with iron. And my ancestor then, weeping even as he did so, because he was not a cruel man, patiently rubbed salt into the many wounds—"

Chung Lee stopped short, observing that Edwina was trembling.

"It was not my wish to harrow you," he said softly. "The men of old paid their debts, and I must pay mine. And even though I may not be able to pay in kind as they did, still I know that I will pay it."

Edwina Grant shivered.

"You say 'will,'" she said. "I've often wondered why you never actively went in search of Carmen. I don't understand."

"Carmen will return," the old man said.

"How can you be so sure?"

"The certainty is within me," Chung Lee replied enigmatically. "But come, let us talk of something else. You have been on the streets of Chinatown for many hours today. Did you enjoy the celebration as much as on previous years?"

"No," she said decisively.

He showed no surprise at this seemingly unexpected response but waited for her to continue. And somehow Edwina Grant felt that they were not talking about something else at all, but about the same thing.

"No," she repeated. "I don't know what it was, but it seemed different this year. There were the same crowds, the same dragons, the same grotesqueries and masks. But I seemed every now and then to sense a false note in the merriment. Something seemed to be present that had no business being there. It was like hearing discords in music, or seeing an unnatural color in a painting, or an

awkward movement in a dance. Something didn't belong."

"Alien presences, perhaps?" he suggested without levity.

She looked at him, startled, but his face betrayed nothing. Again she felt a shiver course up and down her spine.

"You see, Edwina," he went on, "I did not enjoy it, either, and perhaps for the same reasons. We are two persons, Edwina, who have sensitively tuned perceptions. That is why we are such good friends and never bore each other. Yes, there was something wrong with today's celebration. A false note, you call it. Let us leave it at that and turn to more practical matters. Tonight's performance in the theater, for example."

A GAIN Edwina had the feeling that they were not changing the subject at all, that it was still the same. That it was of one thing and one thing only that Chung Lee was speaking and both were thinking, terribly symbolized by the remembered sight that beat beneath their inward eyes—the once lovely body of Fay Lon, water-logged and fish-ravaged, lying on a slab in the refrigerated dead-chamber of the morgue.

"First," Chung Lee said, "there will be a short play of the Mongol Dynasty set music, to remind our audience that China has a past. Then you, with your new dance expressing the struggle of the Chinese people against the invading armies of Nippon will show the audience China's heroic present. Then, the counting of the money—"

"The what?" Edwina broke in.

"An item that was not on the original program," the old man said smoothly. "Today, as you know, saw the settling of all money-debts. But instead of, as formerly, paying the moneys over to the individuals entitled to them, all moneys representing debts have been deposited with me and now repose in my safe. Every creditor has agreed to contribute one-fourth of his collected debt to China.

"My people like ceremony. So we are making a ceremony of the counting of the money. And we are in hopes that through the artistry of

your interpretative dancing, the creditors and the other members of the audience will be moved to open their purses still wider. In fact, my dear, I am quite sure they will."

"But isn't it dangerous?" Edwina protested. "So much money in one place. You should have a police guard."

"There will be no police," Chung Lee said. "We shall not need police. More tea?"

Edwina, staring at him, shook her head. His face was in repose, but his old eyes, staring back at her, glowed with something deadly. For the first time since she had known him, she was afraid of him. . . .

Chung Lee's theater was crowded that night, every seat taken, and all standing room occupied as well. The audience was in festive regalia and some of them still wore the grotesque heads and masks with which they had paraded in the streets.

The place was filled with the sound of their chatter, yet in that chatter, running deep, there seemed to be something different from the usual good cheer—a note of apprehension, an anticipation of menace, a foreshadowing of terror. And this merged naturally with the doings on the stage when the curtain went up.

At the edge of the rice field, the princess met the peasant. No speech passed between them, but in pantomime they expressed their hopeless love. The rice stalks parted, revealing a face. The two did not see the face and the stalks came together again. But the audience knew that the spy had gone off to report to the warlord.

The curtain fell, rose again. The princess was the captive of the warlord. Once again she rejected his suit. The warlord gave orders that she was to die. The manner of her death would be horrible. In the warlord's court was a circular pool, and out of its depths rose a slimy octopus.

Two slaves seized the girl, cast her to the octopus. The poor young farmer entered now. He cast himself into the pool and the lovers died together. The curtain descended.

The audience was silent, did not ap-

plaud. The poor farmer had chosen to die. It was a bad choice. A better choice would have been to fight. The audience understood that. But there was also something sinister in its silence.

Once again the curtain rose, to the music made by a dulcimer with sixteen sets of strings played with two bamboo beaters. Also there were flutes and two-stringed violins, cymbals and drums. And to this music, Edwina Grant danced.

IN her dance the Chinese farmer no longer chose to die. Instead he fought his Japanese oppressors. And it was not one farmer, but millions, symbolized by the great dragon that came from out the green-curtain background and hovered overhead.

Edwina Grant danced with fear in her heart, not knowing whence the fear came. Her vision was dimmed by the footlights, yet she made out Chung Lee, sitting on the middle aisle in the front row. His face looked ghastly. Vainly she sought in that face some recognition of her. But Chung Lee was staring at her as at a stranger.

And suddenly all was commotion. With a horrific discord, the music stopped. Abruptly there was a presence on the stage other than Edwina Grant. An arm reached from behind, a white hand closed roughly over her mouth, and she was jerked backward. Another arm shot beneath her own, and she saw a hand that held an automatic.

A thrill of terror ran through her. She could not see the man behind her, yet she knew that her body was being used as a shield.

For the first time since the first curtain had gone up, a voice sounded from the stage, rough and evil and murderous. And it was the voice of a white man. "Everything's under control. Open the safe, Chung Lee!"

Chung Lee had risen. Clapsed in his right fist was the short sword Edwina Grant had seen him test with his thumb.

There was a strange rustling, a strange moving in the audience, and from the stage it was difficult to make

out what was happening. Above the shuffling sounds, Chung Lee's voice rose in almost a chant: "Collect your debt, Joseph Carmen!"

And he raised the short sword. The eyes of Joseph Carmen were suddenly shot with a savage perplexity. He was trying to make out what was happening out front and was finding it difficult. Something caught his eye and his automatic spouted flame. But whether or not the bullet had struck human flesh he could not tell.

"Put down the shiv, old fool, before I blast you!" Carmen shouted, brandishing the gun.

The old man drew back his arm to strike. The girl stared at him in terror. For as he was gazing with fiery eyes not at Carmen but at her own body, as if she and not Carmen was to receive the blow. Even Carmen saw that, and he cried out:

"You crazy fool! If you cut loose with that, I'll make you kill the girl!"

Chung Lee's voice rose shrilly.

"So be it!" he shouted wildly. "The blade is long! *Through her to you!*"

And the fanatical old man, brooking no obstacle between himself and his long-sought vengeance, his eyes locked with the unbelieving eyes of Edwina Grant, drove the sword with all his might into the abdomen of the girl with whom he had so recently sipped the precious jasmine tea!

With a hoarse shout, anxious only to avoid that deadly blade which, piercing the girl, could still pierce and kill him as well, Carmen bounded back. The stricken girl slumped, leaving Carmen exposed. He swung his automatic around to level on the old man, but too late! The sword flashed in the air and its tip plunged into Carmen's heart. He died instantly.

The commotion, the commotion that was so strangely quiet, still went on in the audience. And at last its meaning grew clear. Clusters of Chinese men had surrounded individual men, stripped them of their heads and masks and weapons. The process had commenced upon the very instant of Carmen's appearance on the stage.

Not a shot had been fired save Car-

men's single one. Carmen was dead, and his white aides were prisoners of the quiet Chinese who had carried out their assignments so efficiently.

FAY LON was avenged. But at what cost! The motionless body of Edwina Grant—

But Edwina Grant was stirring. She sat up dazedly and looked down at her waist. There was no rip in the dress, no blood. Chung Lee knelt beside her, took her hands.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "I had not intended you to go through such an ordeal, but things arranged themselves in that special way after I had arranged the general scheme."

"You—you stabbed—" she could not go on.

"No," he said gently. "Even when I plunged the sword seemingly at your body, as though to seek in your death another's, you should still not have believed that I would harm you. The sword—I will show you some day how it works, when the blood is off it. I will only say now that the blade is not a single piece but composed of many pieces cunningly fitted so that it may be collapsed to any dimension. The hilt is equipped with little buttons each attached to its special spring, and by pressing the right ones, the sword can be shortened to any length desired. A convenient device for a theatrical performance where realism is desired."

They rose together. He sought her eyes again. "You have not said that you forgive me," he murmured.

She thought a moment, shook her head. His face saddened. Then all

at once it was full of happiness, for she was saying:

"It is I who must ask forgiveness of you, for doubting you even—even—Well, let us each forgive the other. But how did you arrange all this? You seem to have known that Carmen would come."

"It can be said that I lured him here," Chung Lee said simply. "I did not know where he was, nor did the police. But you have a word for it—the grapevine—and that is how it was done. Word was sent out over the country. In every city and hamlet where there were Chinese, or even a single Chinese, the word entered to find Carmen. And when he was found, to implant in his mind the idea that a big haul was to be had and why. Carmen, who had always made a specialty of preying upon the Chinese, was almost certain to rise to the bait."

"But his men?" Ewina asked. "How could you be sure you could control that part of it?"

"They were all spotted—that is the right word, isn't it?—almost as soon as they entered Chinatown. And from that moment, not a single one of them was ever out of sight of one or more Chinese. Even as they sat in the audience, disguised in their festive regalia, each one was known. And when the time came, my people acted quickly, quietly, and skilfully."

His voice rose as he faced the audience. "I thank you all," he said simply. "I, too, on this day of our New Year, no longer have any debts."

And Edwina Grant and Chung Lee bowed together to the audience. The performance was over.



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DANGER IN



By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Author of "The Scourge of Flame," "Black Wings of Death," etc.

**Menaced by a Headless Thing That Stalks Through the Night,
Dave Harris Pits Himself Against a Frankensteinian Monster!**

CHAPTER I

Death in Ice

THE deep-throated bellowing of the explosion startled me out of bed. The glass of my bedroom window had crashed out, and through the opening a raw wind out of the east molded my pajamas close to my body.

Snow had piled high in the night and across the jagged teeth of broken glass, snow blew into my room. Beyond, against the clear winter night sky, sheets of flame flung up to the zenith. I realized suddenly that the explosion had occurred at the gas works several blocks away.

Sirens screamed—that chilliest of sounds on a bleak night. By the time I could dress and get to the scene of

THE DARK

*A Complete
Novelet*



The Thing was crushing Margo in its deadly embrace

the tragedy, fire hoses were pouring water upon the flaming ruin—water quickly turned to ice that sheathed the wreckage in glaring armor.

Fifty men composed that night force at the gas works. Fifty men were trapped inside that flaming ruin, or crushed to lifeless pulp beneath the north wall that had buckled in, or hacked to bits by jagged scraps of metal from the bursted storage tank.

Lives crossed out by the meddling fingers of Fate. Lives contorted because of lack of cohesion among molecules.

They weren't all dead, these men we found among the wreckage. Some lived long enough to sob out frantic messages, as though they were trying to right the wrongs of a lifetime in a few seconds. Some uttered agonizing shrieks from blood-flecked mouths in

slashed faces. Others staggered about in the ruin, stunned by the very fact that they had been spared without a scratch.

Dr. Thurman was helping with the rescue work and he immediately enlisted me for his errand boy. Will Thurman and I had something in common, and her name was Margo. Had I not been stubborn and refused to give up newspaper work, if Margo hadn't been stubborn and insisted that newspaper men didn't make good husbands, Margo might have been married to me instead of to Dr. Will Thurman.

Thurman had been rich and handsome when she had married him. Now he was only rich. He had some sort of arthritis for which, ironically enough, he could find no cure. The pain of his ailment had gouged deep wrinkles in his face. His shoulders were twisted, his whole body stooped like an ape. Even his marvelous surgeon's hands were becoming gnarled and stiff.

Crippled though he was, he possessed one of those driving personalities which could make people work for him. His gray eyes were like steel, magnetized — wonderful eyes fronting the brain of a genius.

REMARKABLE how Thurman scoured his twisted and stiffened fingers to do the bidding of his brain, as he did what he could for the maimed and injured before the ambulance could plow through the snow drifts. Only once did he fumble, and then he beat his hands against the ridges of ice beneath him and cursed them for their clumsiness. Then I saw that his gray eyes were filled with tears and that his lips were trembling.

But when he saw me looking at him, his lips tightened and clipped out fresh orders for me to follow.

It was just before dawn, when most of the work was done, that Thurman seemed to notice me as a fellow human. He backed away from a stretcher that was on its way to the ambulance, and in doing so he bumped into me.

"How they going, Dave?" he asked.

"If you mean my feet," I said, "they've gone a long time ago. I'm just walking around on frozen stumps.

How about us downing a little hot coffee? I heard someone say that there was only one man unaccounted for. They're combing the wreckage for him now."

"All right," he agreed. Regarding me seriously, he added: "Dave, you wouldn't have made a bad doctor. You've got a good stomach for gore."

"No, thanks," I said as we started off toward a lunchroom together. "How is Margo these days?"

"Fine," he said, looking at me sharply. "I haven't seen a great deal of her in the past week or so. We just aren't home at the same hours. She might just as well have married a newspaper man, eh?" He laughed, and his voice was scratchy.

We were heading across the sidewalk when someone came up from behind and tugged at Thurman's coat. We looked around. It was a little dried-up old lady. She had a shawl over her head and a sweater tied around her shoulders. She was cold, but I don't think she knew how cold she was, because something else was on her mind.

"Dr. Thurman," she said, "I don't suppose you remember me. I'm Mrs. Kole. When my boy, John, broke his arm three years ago you fixed him up."

"Of course I remember you," Thurman said kindly. Then he added bitterly: "You've changed far less in the past three years than I have."

Thurman could never forget that painful twisting ailment that was robbing his body of its usefulness.

"Nobody could forget you," the old lady said. "Not with your eyes. You know my boy worked for the gas company. It's my John they're hunting for now. He's the only one they haven't found. I wonder if you'd mind helping them find him? I—I don't suppose he's alive, but it's just not knowing—"

Mrs. Kole's shriveled lips began quivering. She took a corner of her shawl and dried her tear-filled eyes with it.

"Of course," Dr. Thurman said. "We'll help look. And you go home, Mrs. Kole. You shouldn't be out here in this cold."

"I'm waiting for news of John," she

said. "I'll keep waiting till I hear."

It was Thurman and I who found John Kole. We were looking in the shadow of the wall that had caved in, entirely out of sight of the rest of the searchers, when I stumbled over something and nearly pulled Thurman down on top of me.

The doctor caught his balance, turned his flashlight on for me to see to get up. I got to my knees but no farther just then, because I was looking down into the face of John Kole. It looked as though he was buried under something.

THAT face—I'll never get it out of my mind. The eyes were protruding and slightly crossed. The mouth was open and silently screaming. The ghastly mask was glazed with ice, so that the face looked like the work of some mad sculptor who modeled horror in glass.

"My God!" Thurman said huskily.

He reached out his foot and touched the frozen cheek with the toe of his shoe. The whole head rolled away a foot from the spot where I had first seen it. There was no sign of the body anywhere.

"Get up, Dave!" urged Thurman. "The body can't be far from here."

It wasn't. Leaning up against the ruined wall was a jagged plate of steel that had been ripped from the storage tank. Ice had partly welded it to the wall, but we finally tore it down. Behind it was the body of John Kole.

Here was the maddest trick of whimsical Fate. Kole's body was without a scratch. Even his garments hadn't been torn. The body lay there, headless, with clotted blood and ice sealing the stump of the neck. Death and ice made the body as stiff as a statue.

For a moment, Thurman just stood there staring, clutching my shoulder.

"A head without a body," he whispered. "A brain without a body."

"You're mixed up," I said. The point wasn't worth arguing, but at times like this you have to talk to keep from getting hysterical. "You mean it's a body without a head."

"A head without a body," he repeated slowly.

I looked into the doctor's twisted face. There was no hint of horror fascination in his steel-gray eyes. There was something else, something startling. You could almost call it an expression of triumph. Not a nice expression at all. Sort of a gloating look.

I turned away, sickened.

CHAPTER II

"Do You Believe in Vampires?"

AFTERWARD I did a special story for the newspaper, covering the explosion as "seen through the eyes of a volunteer rescue worker." I played up the human interest angle of Mrs. Kole hunting for her son, and the state in which John Kole's body was found. It was a swell story. Even the hard-boiled city editor thought so.

He said it was too good, as a matter of fact. It was such good fiction that he recommended I give up newspaper work entirely.

"Let's get this straight," I said, getting angry. "Am I fired?"

"Mr. Harris, you are fired," he said unpleasantly. "You got that story out of a bottle. John Kole's body wasn't found with or without a head. Every other newspaper in town is carrying the rumor that John Kole was a nut who fired the building, caused the explosion, and is now hiding out somewhere. And only our sheet carries your priceless little gem about Mrs. Kole and her decapitated son!"

I called Dr. Thurman on the phone just to see if I was crazy. He backed up my story of the finding of the body. The whole trouble was I had supposed that Thurman reported the finding of the body to the fire marshal and Thurman supposed that I had done the reporting.

"So," my pal, the city editor, said, "I suppose the headless body got up, put its head under its arm, and walked away. When you write that up, send it to *Fantastic Fables Monthly* and don't bring it in here! If you and Doc

Thurman weren't both plastered that night, then you get out, hunt up the body and show me!"

Unfortunately there are not a whole lot of places you can look for a human body. A week went by and I had looked in all those places and found nothing. The paper fired me this time permanently and officially.

I suppose I could have gone to Will Thurman and got him to use his influence to get my job back for me, but you don't ask favors from the man who married the girl you love. So I spent some time and money drowning my troubles.

One evening I was getting a good start at the Blue Cat Cafe, when I took my eyes out of my glass and saw Margo Thurman. I had been thinking of Margo a lot lately, so my first impression was that she was just a lovely illusion that had resulted from too much rum and lime juice and too much thinking. I blinked. But it was Margo all right.

She was at a table with a couple of men. One of them was Jefferson Jennings, Will Thurman's uncle. The other was this Dr. Dix Hendrix who had been doing a lot of Thurman's work ever since Thurman had been hampered with arthritis.

I can't describe Margo. She has to be seen. She is above average height, beautifully formed. She has shimmering bronze hair and deep blue eyes that shimmer, too. That's as far as I can go. Hers is the sort of beauty that puts a lump in your throat.

Dr. Dix Hendrix was tall and pin-headed and dark-complexioned. The only thing that looked medical about him was his moustache and—come to think of it—that could just as well have been attached to a French chef.

Will Thurman's uncle, this Jennings, I didn't go for at all. He struck me as the kind of man who tries to hide his middle age with a fur coat and a football stadium. You know—a palsy-walsy with the boys, a devil with the women, a small-town toad who would make a first-rate big town sucker.

I went over to Margo's table then and they had to ask me to join them. There was something definitely wrong

with Margo. The rouge on her cheeks stood out like islands in a sea of skim milk. She looked bloodless and sick and just a little frightened. I asked where Will Thurman was. Margo replied vaguely that he was working.

"He works nearly every night in his laboratory," Dr. Hendrix said. "Poor Will! It's as though life wasn't long enough and he's trying to clinch his immortality now."

"You mean he's up to something big?" I asked.

Hendrix shrugged. "I don't know. Margo doesn't know. He doesn't seem to want anyone around at nights."

I looked at Margo in time to see a shudder quiver the puffed sleeves of her gown.

Mr. Jennings chuckled.

"Dr. Hendrix doesn't mind, really," he said. "On his shoulders and mine have fallen the pleasant duty of entertaining Margo."

A WAITER came up and Dr. Hendrix started to order.

"Just leave it to me, old man," Jennings said cheerfully. "I suppose I know more about the long tall drinks than either of you."

So it was Jennings' party and he enjoyed it very much for about an hour and a half before he passed out completely. Hendrix got a hurry-up call from a patient, and that left Margo and me alone.

I didn't care much for Jennings' snoring, so I suggested we move to another table. Margo didn't seem to care a lot what she did. So we found a place as far away from the blare of the band as we could and talked about old times. Only the old times weren't what we were interested in. It was the present that was making worms of worry crawl through my mind.

"You're not well, Margo," I said.

"I'm all right," she said. "Worried a little, maybe."

"About Will?"

She nodded. "He works too hard and too long. Every night he's all by himself in his laboratory. Locked in. If he needed taking care of, no one could get to him to help him."

"What about you?" I asked. "You

go out on parties like this often?"

"It doesn't matter." She sighed, tried to smile, but her lips were trembling so much she couldn't.

I dropped a hand over hers. The touch of her flesh startled me. Her fingers seemed carved from dry ice.

"We're waking up," I said softly. "We're both finding we've made a mistake. We're both in the same hole."

Margo's lovely eyes looked hard at the wall. She reached out her other hand and patted mine with it. Both of her hands were like dry ice.

"We'd better not talk about it, Dave. We dug the hole ourselves, didn't we?"

"We could dig ourselves out again," I said. "If we still mean something to each other."

Her hand beneath mine fluttered like a butterfly trying to escape a spider web. I held it tight.

"If we still love each other—" I tried again.

She leaned forward suddenly as though she had come to a definite decision. Her eyes were feverishly bright. Then she asked that question that changed everything in the gay, noisy room for me.

"Dave, are—are there such things as vampires?"

The hair at the back of my neck prickled up. I reached my left hand for my glass and took a quick drink.

"What's that?" I said.

"Do you believe in vampires?" she repeated.

"I'm only a little drunk," I said. "When I've had a few more highballs maybe I'll believe in them. What's the joke?"

ONLY there wasn't any joke. I knew Margo too well to suppose she was joking. She was in deadly earnest.

She took a long, quivering breath, and looked around the room as though the surroundings were entirely strange to her.

"Let's get out of here, Dave," she whispered. "I—I can't stand it. I've got to talk to you and this isn't the place for it. It—it doesn't fit the black horror of that house, or the

strange way that Will acts, or the thing that comes to me in my sleep."

"Haven't you been sleeping well?" I asked as I stood up to help her with her furred wrap.

"Too well," she said. "I never want to sleep again. What was that line in Macbeth, something about Macbeth murders sleep?"

I told myself that Margo had a bad case of nerves, but I knew better than that. There was never anything high-strung about her.

I got her to the door and out into the cold, fresh air. We stood at the curb, waiting for a cab. And then Margo collapsed so suddenly that I didn't have time to catch her.

Hands of fear, as cold as the hands of Margo, clutched my heart.

CHAPTER III

The Frightful Thing

IF the lady isn't well, there's a doctor right across the street, sir."

Three times the cafe doorman said that to me before I fully understood what he had said. I had gathered Margo up into my arms. I held her close, kissed her cold cheeks, called her by name. There was a faint stir of pulse at her throat.

I looked up from her pale, immobile face. My eyes followed the pointing finger of the doorman frantically. Across the street was the illuminated sign of a physician.

"Let me help you across the street with the lady," the doorman offered.

I shook my head. I realized suddenly that I had already permitted someone besides myself to take care of Margo for too long a time. Now that she was in my arms I didn't intend to relinquish her to anyone else. That included Will Thurman.

I lifted her, held her tightly, crossed the street to the door of the illuminated sign. I bumped the door open with my foot, entered a hallway, saw a sign on the door which read:

DOCTOR NOW IN

The doctor—I forget his name—

was a silver-haired man with spectacles balanced on the tip of his nose. He had me put Margo down on an old-fashioned couch, and after an age of pulse-taking, bobbing his head, and grunting, he informed me that she had fainted.

"I can see that," I said angrily. "But what's the matter with her? Why did she faint? Do something for her, can't you?"

"If I told you you were letting her starve to death," he said, as he went about preparing a restorative for her, "you would consider it an insult. Oh, I'm not saying she doesn't get plenty to eat, but her blood is impoverished. Simple anemia. These days you young people don't live right."

The doctor went to the couch, raised Margo's head a little in order to pour some of his medicine down her throat. As he did so the silken puff of sleeve slid down from her left shoulder. The doctor paused, his glass a few inches' from Margo's slightly parted lips.

"What's this?" he asked, startled.

I LOOKED over his shoulder. On the upper part of Margo's arm was a small, pink-lipped wound.

The doctor scowled at me.

"That wound in her arm—she hasn't given blood for a transfusion to someone, has she? What appears on the surface to be simple anemia might be loss of a large quantity of blood."

"I don't know anything about it," I said harshly. "Until tonight I haven't seen her in a long while. Bring her around and make it snappy!"

I tried to concentrate on what the doctor was doing, but couldn't. The doctor's question about loss of blood; Margo's question about believing in vampires—the two combined to form a horrible, incredible conclusion.

Vampires! Such things didn't exist today, never had existed except in the minds of superstitious peasants of Europe. And yet my body was bathed in a cold sweat at the thought.

Margo's long-drawn breath had switched my attention back to the couch. She opened those lovely

eyes, sent a frightened glance into the doctor's face.

"You're all right, my dear," the doctor said kindly. "Just rest a moment."

Margo tried to sit up. And then her frantic, frightened eyes saw me. She whispered my name and relaxed.

HALF an hour later, I called a taxi and we left the doctor's office together. On the way to the Thurman house, I held her in my arms as I had held her in the days when we had dreamed the dreams that had never come true. Neither of us spoke until we were about half-way to Margo's home. Then she asked me what had happened to her. I told her how she had collapsed on the sidewalk and what the doctor had said about her impoverished blood.

I felt her body shudder as I said that.

"Dave, a few nights ago something happened," she said. "I was very tired and Will gave me something to make me sleep sound. I had the most horrible dream."

"What, dear?" The "dear" slipped out. For a while I had forgotten that she was Will Thurman's wife.

"I don't know. I can't remember. All the time it was going on, I seemed half awake and half asleep. I only know that it was horrible and had something to do with someone biting me."

"Biting you?" I echoed. Again that thought that was too mad to utter came into my mind.

"Yes. And in the morning I could scarcely get out of bed, I was so weak. And there were a few tiny drops of blood on my nightgown. There was a mark on my shoulder—a little wound."

"Did you mention this to Will?"

"I didn't," she replied. "I couldn't. You can't discuss dreams with Will. He's too coldly scientific. And what I had dreamed I couldn't recall clearly, except that in the dark I was struggling with some sort of a monster."

"Suppose," I said suddenly, "I was to tell Will that you loved me and that I loved you."

"You mustn't, Dave. Not that it isn't true. I've always loved you. I think I only married Will just to show you that if you were going to be stubborn I could readily get someone else."

I said then that there was no reason in the world why the mistake couldn't be righted. She could be divorced and we could start all over again.

"No," she said in a frightened voice. "I can't do that. I'm afraid of Will. He loves me in a strange sort of way. I'm afraid of him, Dave."

"I'm not," I said. "Not in the least."

I let Margo into the Thurman house with her latch-key. The house was the silent abode of shadows—an old stone mansion far out on the edge of the city. Halfway across the hall Margo stopped on tiptoe. Her gloved hand went up to her throat, her eyes turning toward the sliding panel that was the living room door. The door was opening.

Will Thurman stepped into the hall. I think he must have aged ten years in the past ten days. He was all but bent double. One of his hands was clenched on the top of a cane. Two days of beard grew in the furrows of his cheeks. His dark hair was matted down over his forehead. Only his eyes were the same unchanging steel orbs.

"My dear, you go out with one escort and come home with another, I see." His thin lips curled into a sneer. "How long has this been going on, Dave?"

"It hasn't been going on," I said. "This is the first time we've been alone together since you were married. Tonight it was unavoidable."

"That's true, Will," said Margo anxiously. "You must believe me."

"Go to bed," he snapped.

OBEDIENTLY she went up the stairs, hardly able to pull one foot after the other. When she was out of sight I advanced a step toward Will Thurman.

"This has to end, Thurman," I said in a low voice. "We'd better talk it out. If you won't take care of Margo, I will!"

"I am perfectly capable of attending to my own business and to my wife," he said. "You'll oblige me by leaving this house at once."

I shook my head.

"I said we'd talk this out."

"Get out!" He raised his cane threateningly.

"You put me out," I suggested.

He turned back to the living room door.

"Stay, then, if you wish. Only there's nothing for us to discuss. She's mine, do you understand. If I had the bodily strength, I'd kill you."

He looked back over his shoulder at me. Those compelling gray eyes of his had an unholy light in them that troubled me.

"Perhaps," he whispered, "the day will come when I can do just that. Given a body—"

He stopped speaking, turned, went through the living room door.

I hesitated a moment. Should I go? Or should we have a showdown now? I knew that Thurman was legally right. And yet was it right to leave Margo in a house with a mad genius? Because that was what Thurman was. The light of madness was in his eyes, and yet his was the brain of a genius.

Suddenly I entered the living room and followed Thurman across it. In the study just beyond, I caught up with him as he was opening the door of his laboratory at the end of the room.

Thurman would have slammed and locked the door in my face, no doubt, but my job as a newspaperman had taught me something about getting in where you're not wanted. I shoved the toe of my shoe forward at just the right moment, wedged the door open. Thurman exerted all his strength to keep me out, but he wasn't very strong. I pushed my way into the room, nearly knocking him over. I grasped him by the shoulders to steady him.

"We're going to talk this thing out now, Thurman," I said. "Either that or I'm taking Margo away with—"

He ducked back out of my grasp. And as my eyes followed him I saw the Thing in the chair!

I dropped back against the door.

I didn't know what Thurman was doing because I couldn't take my eyes off the Thing. It was seated upright in a chair in the center of the white, brilliantly lighted laboratory.

It was the body of a man, but it didn't have any head. The chest of the body was covered with joined steel plates. Curved metal built up the shoulders a good ten inches above their normal level. And where there should have been a neck, there was what looked like an overturned aluminum cup.

Leading from the top of this cup were rubber and glass tubes. The cup and tubes looked something like the distributor cap and ignition cables on a multi-cylinder motor car. The tubes connected with something in the back of the Thing.

"What—what is it?" I whispered, unable to take my eyes off the headless body. I saw the metal plates on the breast of the Thing rise and fall. And from some opening which I could not see, I heard rapid, steady expulsions of air. "Is—is it breathing?" I murmured.

"Breathing?" Thurman laughed harshly. "It's alive! Look at the muscles of the brute, Dave. Look and realize that there sits my body—my new, powerful body! Headless though it is, my brain directs it. Do you think you could match your strength against mine?"

I LOOKED at Thurman. He was seated at a table. In front of him was a small box that resembled one of the early model radios in its panel layout, dials, and vacuum tubes.

"Your body?" I said. "You mean John Kole's body. No wonder you didn't report the discovery of it the night of the accident at the gas plant. You snatched that corpse, Thurman, rigged it up in some ghastly mockery of life. A Lindberg heart, an artificial lung—"

"Much more than that," Thurman whispered. "Much more. Living flesh from dead flesh, a tireless nervous system, a real being that can know neither fatigue nor fear because it has no mind. Perhaps you've seen a biologist cause the dead and severed

legs of a frog to jump by a simple electrical stimulation to nerve centers in the legs. That is exactly what I have done, except that the electrical stimulation I use originates as radio energy and is transformed into electrical energy only when it reaches the marvelous electrical brain I have incorporated in my headless man. Watch, Dave. Watch the monster of my creation!"

As he said this, he twisted a knob on the panel of that black box on the table. The laboratory rang with a strange, high-pitched humming sound, and slowly both hands of the headless monster began to move — halting, trembling movements at first as though the weight of its flesh was too much for the mechanism of its muscles.

And then the movement became more rapid. The arms extended, the fingers stiff and wide-spread. Then muscles of the thighs tightened and the whole monster came erect.

One foot shuffled forward. The body tottered from side to side, swayed in its tracks. Thurman spun his controls dizzyingly. Through the two glass tubes that entered the Thing at the top, I could see blood spurting into the dead body. And suddenly it came to me.

I sprang across the room and seized Thurman by the throat. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the monster lurch sideward and fall limply across a table, one foot kicking in the air at the bidding of electrical impulses.

I dragged Thurman to his feet. Our faces were so close together I could have bitten the thin nose of the man.

"Where did you get the blood for your Frankensteinian monster?" I demanded. "Where did you get that blood?"

And then, because I knew the answer to my question, I thrust him out at arm's length and smashed my left fist on the point of his jaw. Thurman crashed into a shelf laden with glassware and slid down to the floor, to stay there.

SHIVERING as though with a fever chill, I turned around and ran from the laboratory, closing the

door behind me. In the living room I met Margo. Her deep blue eyes, more frightened now than ever before, questioned me.

"We're getting out of here," I said. "Will's mad—raving mad!"

"I—I can't go, Dave," she said. "What do you mean? What has Will done?"

"I can't explain, but don't go near that laboratory for anything! All I know is that you're leaving with me. And I mean now! You're going if I have to carry you!"

I dragged her from the house wearing the same evening dress which she had worn earlier in the evening.

"You're going to my apartment for tonight. I'm going to the Norton Hotel nearby, so I can be near you. Thurman has been drugging you at night, drawing off your blood for that—"

I stopped. I couldn't explain it to her on the spur of the moment. When I did tell her what Will Thurman was doing, I would have to consider the matter pretty carefully ahead of time, if she was going to understand even a part of it. Because at that moment I was even a little doubtful of my own sanity.

CHAPTER IV

Hands of Murder

THE following day I told Margo the whole thing, or as much of it as I knew. I told her how we had found John Kole's body, how Thurman must have snatched it and taken it in secret to his laboratory. How he had pumped Margo's living blood into the dead, collapsed arteries of that decapitated body in order to endow it with something that was a sacrilegious mockery of life.

Margo passed her thin, white hands across her forehead.

"But why, Dave — why do such a thing as that?" she asked.

"He's mad, of course," I said. "But there's a double reason why he might want to try such a thing. First of all, the scientist's reason—just an experiment in reviving the dead. But the

second and principal reason is that Thurman knows his own body is doomed. He'll be an invalid, probably confined to a wheel-chair before long. But his brain would be alive. What he wanted was a tireless servant to do the bidding of his brain. Perhaps he even fancied that headless monster of his creation performing operations at his direction, or something equally impossible."

"But what's to be done? Shall we get in touch with the police?"

"I don't know," I said. "The crime he has committed is body-snatching, of course. I don't know whether the law books have something against stealing blood, but he's done that, too."

Margo shuddered. "I want to get a divorce as soon as possible, Dave. But I can't stay here, you know. He might come looking for me."

I nodded. "I'm taking you to a hotel."

Margo was terribly frightened. She looked as though she would never laugh again.

"That—that headless Thing ought to be destroyed," she said. "It isn't right that it should live."

"It's not living," I said. "It is still as dead as when Thurman and I found it. Thurman has simply stimulated the motor nerves so that the muscles act. He thinks that the blood he has been pumping through its system will keep the tissues alive indefinitely, probably. But the Thing itself is dead. As dead as anything in the morgue."

I took Margo to a hotel and found her a nice room, said good-by to her, went back to my apartment to try and think the thing through. It was going to take a lot of thinking.

Something had to be done with Will Thurman first of all. Yet I dreaded calling in the police, because that meant the newspapers would get the story, dig up pictures of Margo as the lovely woman interest in the thing and make a horrible mess of the whole business.

Late that afternoon I decided I ought to go see Will Thurman's brother, Roger Thurman, the lawyer. I was about to get into my coat when

there was a knock at my door and I opened it to admit Dr. Dix Hendrix.

"Where's Margo?" he demanded as soon as he was in the room.

"What business is it of yours?" I asked coldly. "She happens to be in the Viscount Hotel."

Hendrix sat down in a chair, uninvited, and smoothed his black hair across his pin-head dome.

"What's the matter with Margo and Will?" he asked. "I've just been out to see Will. He didn't turn up at his office at all today and I thought he was ill. I found him all alone, looking like something the cat brought in, as they say."

"And he told you that Margo was with me, did he?"

HENDRIX nodded. "He said that Margo had deserted him."

"That's a lie," I said. "I had to drag her from the house, as a matter of fact. I couldn't leave her there with Thurman and—" I stopped. No use to discuss the business of the headless monster with Hendrix. "Thurman is mad," I concluded. "You'd better get primed to step into his shoes. Because this is the beginning of the end for Will Thurman."

"He needs a rest," Hendrix said, nodding. "I've been trying to get him to go away for awhile for some time."

I didn't bother to tell Hendrix that I thought Will Thurman would probably be put away for good. He hung around for about an hour, trying to get information out of me about what had occurred at the Thurman house the night before. When he didn't get what he wanted, he left.

Then it was too late to see Roger Thurman at his office. I called his secretary and learned that he was out of town and was not expected to return to his home until late that night.

I had dinner at the hotel with Margo. Rather, we sat across the table from each other and watched the waiter push plates of food under our chins and take them away untouched. We drank coffee and smoked a pack of cigarettes.

Margo heartily approved of my placing the whole matter in front of Roger Thurman. He was about ten

years older than Will, and was a level-headed and practical man.

It was about eleven o'clock that night that I got out my old car and drove over to Roger Thurman's house. I had phoned him first to make sure that he would be at home and Roger Thurman, himself, had answered the phone.

Roger Thurman lived in a brick house on West 59th Street. He wasn't married, but for some reason preferred a house to living in an apartment.

When I got out of the door I noticed that there was no visible light in the house. And as I approached the entrance I saw that the front door stood part way open. I pressed the doorbell, heard it ring, but didn't hear any sound of approaching footsteps. Then I began to get the creeps.

An inexplicable dread took hold of me as I entered that dark and silent hall. I called out Roger Thurman's name and discovered that echoes lived here if nothing else. To hear that name whispered back to my ears didn't help my case of jitters any.

I got to groping for a light switch, which I didn't find. Finally, in that panic which sometimes comes to braver men than I in the uncertainty of darkness, I blundered through a door and into another room. And in this room there was the sound of movement—a soft, shuffling sound of movement.

There was a single window in the room, but it was wide and reached nearly to the floor below and the ceiling above. Outside a moon pierced stormy clouds with sickly rays so that a dim light glow passed through the window. Near one side of the window something was standing. I watched it, saw it move. And then I heard my heart thumping on my eardrums. Because, silhouetted against the glow from outside, I could see one dangling arm of the Thing, wide spread fingers that dripped blood!

It was here in this room with me—that headless corpse that walked endowed with artificial life! The monster that had been fathered in Will Thurman's mad brain was in his brother's house! Moonlight gleamed

on the built-up metal shoulders of the Thing as it moved closer to the window.

"John Kole," I said in a voice I scarcely recognized, "John Kole, I'm covering you with a gun!"

IT was a crazy thing to do—to talk to a Thing that didn't have a head and consequently didn't have ears. But if it didn't have a head I didn't have a gun, so I don't suppose it made much difference what I said.

The Being turned ponderously, now standing in front of the window. Then it lurched forward, crashed through the glass with its steel shoulders.

What did I do? I guess I'm just not much of a hero, because I didn't do anything except stand there in the dark and gape at the shattered window through which the headless monster had passed.

For a long time I stood there until I heard a car start up in the driveway on the other side of the house. Did the headless Thing drive a car also? Naturally not, but the person controlling it probably did!

I suppose what I should have done was run to the front door and try and identify the car as it rolled out into the street. I think I had that in mind as I moved back toward the door through which I had entered. But my foot slipped on something on the floor.

And when I got my trembling fingers to light a match I found that I'd slipped in blood that pooled out across the polished boards and came from the battered face and ripped throat of a man who lay not more than a foot from where I had fallen!

While the match lived, I got up and found the light switch, turned it on. The man who had met death at the unfeeling hands of the monster in the dark, was Roger Thurman! In spite of the riddled flesh of his face I could recognize him by his gray-streaked hair and his lean body. He was fully dressed. His hat and overcoat were on a chair, and his traveling bag stood at the hall door.

Probably Roger Thurman had received my phone call immediately

after his return from his business trip, had sat down in his living room to await my call. And instead of meeting me, he had found himself in the grip of the monster.

The monster had made murder a bloody orgy. It had taken awful vengeance upon the brother of its creator. Yet what an absurd idea that was! How could a brainless Thing have any conception of vengeance? No, John Kole was a corpse, a dead thing. I had to keep driving that idea into my brain in order to think sanely on a subject that already strained credulity to the breaking point.

THE monster itself could not have committed murder. It was the man behind the monster who had done this thing. That meant that Will Thurman was his brother's own murderer. And what was Will's motive? The two men had always been on the best of terms. Both of them had been successful in their respective fields so that the greed motive was out of the question.

It was a matter for the police, but somebody else was going to have to inform them. If I told them what I had seen with my own eyes, I was apt to be taking all future meals in the nut house.

I went out the way I had come, carefully wiped off any fingerprints I had left on the knob of the door, got into my car and drove at once to my apartment.

On the way there I lectured myself about what I had done, or rather failed to do. Perhaps I could have stopped the monster in Roger Thurman's house. I certainly couldn't pin any medal on myself for not trying.

The only thing for me to do was to go home, get out that gun I had carried a few years back when a gangland chief had put a price on my head, and then hunt the headless Thing down. If I killed it—or maybe I should say *stopped* it—that certainly couldn't be called murder.

I left my car out in front of the building, hurried up two flights of stairs to the door of my rooms. When I was bending over the lock, trying to

get my key in, a shadow fell across the door—the grotesquely twisted shadow of a man.

I wheeled, my back to the panel. The man was Dr. Will Thurman!

CHAPTER V

Death Beyond Control

IN one hand Will Thurman clutched his cane. In the other he held that black box that looked like an old-fashioned radio. The control box for his headless robot.

"What do you want?" I said harshly.

In spite of the cold outside, Thurman's face was clammy with sweat.

"Dave," he said hoarsely, "Dave, I've got to talk to you."

"You'd better talk to the police," I said.

"No, Dave. They would think me mad. I've got to talk to you. You've seen it. You know what it's like—the headless one."

"I've seen it twice," I said. "Tonight I saw it with blood on its hands."

Beneath the shadow of his beard stubble, Thurman turned white.

"Not that!" he gasped. "It—it hasn't killed?"

"Don't act so innocent!" I turned around and opened my door. I jerked my head to indicate that Thurman was to enter. He hobbled in ahead of me. I closed the door from the inside and leaned against it, looking at him and that black box with which he controlled his walking dead man.

"That Thing couldn't act on its own accord," I said. "It's dead. You're a genius, but you can't bring life into a dead body. You can only give a dead body the appearance of life by means of electrical impulse stimulation, just as you can make the severed legs of a frog kick by means of a battery and a piece of wire. You were twisting the dials tonight when your monster entered your brother's house and killed him."

"Roger—dead?" Thurman staggered under the impact of the word. "Killed, you say? I didn't know—"

"It's a good act," I cut in, "which

would have a better chance of succeeding with me than it will before a jury. And I don't believe it, even though I've seen your unbelievable robot. You used that headless monster to kill your brother tonight."

Thurman fell back into a chair. The steel-gray eyes of the man stared at me. For the first time Thurman's eyes were expressionless. They looked like the eyes of the dead.

"My brother killed?" he murmured. And then his eyes came to life. He spoke rapidly as though to hammer his meaning home with short, sure jabs.

"You've got to believe this, Dave. Got to understand. That Thing's got out of my control. It escaped from me tonight. I went into the laboratory, hoping that tonight's work would bring the Thing to perfection. I had never been able to get it to do any more than you saw last night in the laboratory. But tonight, as I turned on the radio controls, it moved with new certainty, stood up, walked without tottering.

"I was amazed and a little terrified at the perfection of the Thing. I watched it move across the room, farther than it had ever gone before. When it started through the door, I tried to make it turn around. That was the supreme test—if I could make it turn around without falling. To maintain its sense of equilibrium had been my most difficult task, for which I had employed a mercury tube level.

"But instead of turning around, the Thing walked through the door. And suddenly I realized that it was beyond the orbit of my radio control. The blood in its veins and arteries had given that dead flesh life. I couldn't even stop the Thing or cause it to fall over. I shut off my control box, depriving it of external stimulation, which always had caused the muscles to lose tone immediately so that the body would fall to the ground."

I LAUGHED sarcastically.

"But it didn't fall," I said. "It kept walking and walking. And without eyes, it found the doors, walked out into the street, walked eight miles

to your brother's house. On the way a lot of traffic cops saw it and they all fell dead with fear, I suppose, so that nobody could stop the Thing."

"Dave! Dave!" Thurman cried. "You've got to believe me. I don't know where it went or what happened. I've been working hours, nights, days on it. I'm a sick man. When I saw the life that I had actually recreated, I—I fainted. I've been hunting the city ever since, working my radio control in desperation."

"You think," I said, "that if a headless, nude corpse was seen walking the streets we wouldn't have heard about it by now? The whole town would be in an uproar."

"It isn't nude," Thurman said. "After you left the other night, I put a pair of my old trousers on the Thing and tied a ragged coat about as much of its torso as I could. I couldn't cover the mechanism which is housed in the metal shoulders—"

"What's the difference?" I interrupted. "All you've told me is a fabric of lies. I saw that Thing leaving your brother's house after the murder. Someone was thinking for it then. Without a brain of its own, someone *has* to think for it."

"Dave, suppose that the brain is not the center of thought? Suppose that some other nerve center—perhaps the spinal tissue itself—is responsible for thought? We don't know for sure. We can see a heart beating so we know that is the portion of the anatomy which drives blood through the blood vessels. But we've never seen a brain *think*."

"Fantastic," I said. "If some other portion of the body did the thinking, doctors would have found it."

"You believe in a soul, though, Dave. And what doctor's scalpel has ever uncovered a soul? Suppose that this Thing has the power of thought. Suppose it hates all that is mine because I have not let it die as other bodies die. Suppose in its center of thought it has decided to wreak a terrible vengeance on me and on my family. My brother first and then perhaps my wife. Where is Margo, Dave?"

I didn't answer him. Suppose all

this reasoning of his was accurate? Suppose the monster had some uncanny sense which had enabled it to hunt out Roger Thurman and might enable it to find Margo as well?

I turned to my writing desk and took my gun out of the drawer. I went over to Thurman and nudged him to his feet.

"You're not getting out of my sight," I said. "I don't believe you, but I'm going to suppose that you're telling the truth just long enough to see if Margo is safe. Then we're going to the police with the whole story."

We went out to my car and I drove to the Viscount Hotel, there only to learn that Margo had gone out just a few minutes earlier. It was now nearly two o'clock in the morning. What had she gone out for? I checked with the telephone operator and learned that she had received a call just before she left.

Then I checked with the doorman about the address she had given to the cab driver. It was the address of Will Thurman's home.

I got Thurman back into the car.

"Listen," I said as we got underway, "did you call Margo before you came to my apartment?"

"No," he insisted.

CONSIDERING the time element there was a pretty good chance that he was telling the truth, for Thurman and I must have spent half an hour talking in my apartment.

I jammed the accelerator to the floor and in fifteen minutes braked in front of the Thurman house. I sprang out and ran up to the front door. It was locked. I threw my weight against the door, and it didn't give an inch. Inside the house I heard Margo's piercing scream of terror!

Thurman hurried up, his radio control box under one arm, his twisted fingers fumbling with his keys with the other.

"Hurry!" I blurted. "If that Thing has hurt Margo, I'll blast your brains all over the wall!"

Thurman handed me the key. I forced my fingers to remain steady enough to get the key into the lock.

I twisted the key and the knob together and pushed into the hall.

On my way to the Thurman house I had done some heavy thinking and had come to certain definite conclusions. But if my thinking had been rational before I opened the door of the Thurman house, all reason was paralyzed by what I saw.

Standing taller than most men, in spite of the fact that it had no head, the monster was in the center of the room. And in its deadly embrace was Margo, her whole body straining against the strength of the headless Thing. One of the monster's hands dug deeply into the flesh of her shoulder. The other was at the back of her head, trying, no doubt, to dash her senseless against the steel bulwark of its chest and shoulders.

I had my gun out, but had I used it at the moment of my entrance I would have killed Margo. For the monster flung the girl away from him, straight into my arms. Margo clung to me, her indrawn breath screaming through set teeth.

I pushed her away in what might have seemed a brutal sweep of my arm. But I had to get in front of her because of that onrushing murder machine.

I fired once and my bullet crashed against a steel shoulder and buzzed off harmlessly. And then the Thing lowered its steel shoulder works, rammed me in the middle. Breath *wooshed* out of me and I felt the stab of pain from a smashed rib. I fell backward to the floor, the gun slipping from my fingers.

For a moment I couldn't move. I saw that monstrous killer in action and couldn't stop it because I didn't have the breath to get up, and because the pain in my chest temporarily numbed my brain.

I saw Dr. Thurman crouched over his radio control box, his twisted fingers frantically twirling dials and knobs, his gray eyes fixed in horror on the monster that was out of control.

He couldn't stop the Thing. Nothing but a bullet would do that, because it was human. I knew now what it was, knew its mortality, partly understood the terrible hoax it had played.

THE monster flung itself at Thurman. The doctor tried to stop it by throwing the control box at it, but the box was broken to fragments on the killer's armored shoulders. And then the arms of the Thing lashed about Thurman, slammed Thurman's head against the steel plates of its chest.

Thurman shrieked with pain. Blood streamed from his face. The killer cupped a hand under the doctor's chin, and bounced him against the wall—once, twice. Blood streaked the wall where the back of Thurman's head had struck.

The doctor's contorted body heaped on the floor. Then the monster turned, its unseen killer's eyes searching for more bloody prey. Margo was reaching out to pick up the gun I had dropped.

The moment she picked up the gun the killer came toward her. She uttered one short, sharp cry of appeal to me and flung the gun in my direction.

I was on one knee. No ball player ever pulled a better grandstand catch than I did. I picked the gun out of the air. It was a great wonder I ever got the business end of it pointing right, but I did. I pumped a shot into the middle of the killer, its stomach shielded only by the ragged coat which was tied about it.

The Thing staggered, reached out one hand for Margo. I fired again and again before the Thing stiffened in its tracks and fell to the floor, its metal work clashing against the bare boards. It wouldn't kill again. My lead made certain of that.

Margo rushed to my arms, buried her face against my shoulder and sobbed. It was agony, holding her against me with that smashed rib giving me fits. But somehow I didn't notice.

Will Thurman never regained consciousness. His skull had been fractured when smashed against the wall by the brute strength of the killer. When the police arrived at my call they made a careful examination of the murderer who must have died in his tracks from my bullets.

The first thing they did was to remove that metal structure that was

built above its shoulders. Beneath all that metal was the head of Dr. Dix Hendrix, just as I could have predicted.

It was Hendrix who had called Margo at the Viscount Hotel. When you come to think of it, Hendrix was the only one I had told about Margo being at the hotel. He had told her that Will Thurman was sick and desperately in need of her. Then he had waited in the Thurman house, waited in his monster disguise in order to kill her.

He had to kill Dr. Will Thurman, too. Thurman's will supplied plenty of motive for the death of both Roger and Will Thurman. Will Thurman had left his fortune to his brother and to his wife, but in event of the death of either Roger or Margo, Dr. Hendrix was to have the share of the dead heir.

With both Margo and Roger out of the way Hendrix would have inherited the entire Thurman fortune, together with the lucrative medical practice of Dr. Will Thurman.

The headless body of John Kole, the police found hidden in the basement together with the mechanism Will Thurman had used to give it an imitation of life. Hendrix had simply removed the mechanism from the metal shell and covered his head and shoulders with the shell. The metal chest plates came down far enough to fill in any gap that might have been visible because of the fact that the metal shoulders were raised a good bit farther than they should have been by Hendrix's head.

WHEN I had first met the headless monster in Thurman's laboratory, that had been the real body of John Kole, of course. The move-

ments it had made were, of course, the result of the artificial impulse Thurman had induced electrically to the motor nerve endings.

Thurman hadn't succeeded in creating a robot at all. He had simply caused dead muscles to contract by means of electrical stimulation. Perhaps he had gone farther with this type of experimentation than anyone else, for he was certainly a genius in his field.

After that demonstration performed with the headless body in the laboratory the night before the murders, Will Thurman had left his laboratory, for he had been occupied mentally with the fact that I had deliberately dragged Margo from the house with me.

Hendrix, who must have discovered the secret of the doctor's laboratory, simply sneaked into the house, hid the real body, removed the clothes that Thurman had put on the headless corpse, taken off the metal shoulder shell, and waited for the time to come when he could carry out his plans.

He must have waited for about twenty hours in that laboratory for Thurman to return, so he could put on that act which was to convince Thurman that his robot had got out of control. Considering the state of Thurman's mind, that wouldn't have been very difficult to do.

Then, of course, Hendrix had to kill Roger Thurman brutally. If he was to frame the headless robot for the crimes, all of his murders had to be as savage and monsterlike as possible.

So that was how it was. Maybe getting the whole nightmare down on paper will be the equivalent of getting it off my mind. Margo does much to make me forget the horror of it all. You see, we're married now.

Coming Next Issue

A SKULL HAS NO EARS

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SEVEN KEYS TO DOOM

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Author of "Four Frightful Men," "Death Is Where You Find It," etc.



Bradley sprang back to avoid the death that drove at him

THE sleek roadster slowed down to navigate a hairpin turn, and for a second the wheels lost traction and spun gravel out into the abyss. Jim Bradley, eying the dangerous mountain road, glanced at the driver.

"Why does Warstler live in this God-forsaken hole?"

Helpless in a Fortress of Doom, Seven People Must Thread a Madman's Maze—to the Door of Death!

Fred De Costa, author of a dozen travel and adventure books, let his lean, sallow face relax in a hard grin.

"He doesn't live here, Bradley. It's just a retreat for him, and the hunting's good at the right season. He bought the mansion and renovated it years ago. An amazing place. You'll find it—interesting."

Bradley's hard young face was expressionless.

"Sure, but I still don't get the angle. Why does Warstler drag us all up here?" He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a telegram. "All members of the Quest Club invited. New sensation—"

"Well, why did you join the club?" De Costa said. "You were bored, weren't you? Like all of us."

Bradley nodded. "It's a screwy set-up, a group of wealthy thrill-seekers banded together for excitement. But I like it."

He fell silent, pondering. The Quest Club had been formed by men who sought sensations. Bradley was the newest member. Since he had joined there had been a boar hunt in California and a tiger hunt in Burma—excitement enough to last him for awhile. But now he felt a premonition of some impending danger. What it was he didn't know, but he had felt the same way when being stalked by a cougar in the Sierras. His vague uneasiness made the short hairs prickle on his neck.

De Costa apparently felt nothing. He was humming a tune as he sent the roadster around a turn and down a long slant into the valley that lay below. Bradley stared. In the center of the shallow cup was what looked like a fortress.

"It's a palace," the author grunted. "Warstler's an eccentric cuss, anyway, and he's a crank on gadgets. The place is a labyrinth, full of photo-electric cells and robot machinery. He never has any servants when he comes up here. Says he doesn't need any, and I guess he's right."

There were two cars parked outside the portico. De Costa eyed them.

"Bartoli and Ganger," he observed. "The others aren't here yet. Come along, Bradley."

THEY got out of the car and approached the heavy iron door, which swung open as they broke a beam of light. Within was a short hall, at the end of which a reinforced steel door stood open. Beyond it was a dim, flickering glow.

De Costa and Bradley moved along the hall and crossed the second threshold. They were in a large, comfortably furnished room, from which several doors opened. It was faintly lit by a single candle, and gloomy shadows cringed in the corners.

Two men and a girl were sipping drinks and smoking. A sideboard was set with liquors and glassware. Both of the men Bradley knew already.

Bartoli was a world-famous actor, kin to Drew, Barrymore and Maurice Evans, a huge, bull-like figure with a strong, bony face. His features showed the marks of dissipation, but he was still vividly handsome. Ganger was a hunter by choice and profession. He was of dry leather and whipcord, slim and slight, with a brown face and keen gray eyes set in wrinkles.

The girl? Bradley wondered. She was a blonde and decidedly pretty, clad in a tailored suit that was becoming to her youthful curves. Her blue eyes met his.

"Hullo!" Ganger said, waving a cigarette at the new arrivals. "Janet, meet Fred De Costa and Jim Bradley. They're members of the club, too. Janet's my niece."

She acknowledged their greetings, and there was a brief silence, broken by Bartoli's deep voice.

"Haven't seen Warstler yet. The door was open when we got here, and we just walked in."

"As I had hoped," a new voice said softly.

They whirled toward a corner of the room where a man stood by a half-open door. He was vague in the shadow, but the tall, powerful form and the shaggy mane of white hair were unmistakable. It was Warstler, president of the Quest Club.

"Let me explain," he said. "You are wondering why I sent telegrams inviting you here, and why I requested you, Ganger, to bring your niece. Do you remember the purpose of our club?"

"Sure—" De Costa started to say, then stopped.

"To seek thrills," Warstler interrupted swiftly. "Hunting tigers, for example." He smoothed back the great mane of hair, wincing a little. "That was dangerous enough. I was the only one who suffered. A tiger got through our guns and— Well, there's a silver plate in my skull now. But those are the chances of the game. If I'd died—" He smiled suddenly. "Our arrangement adds spice to the adventure, eh?"

Janet's eyebrows puckered. Warstler glanced at her.

"Each of us has willed half of his fortune to the Quest Club. If any one of us dies, his legacy is divided among the other members. We gamble with high stakes, my dear Miss Ganger."

"Well, what's on the program?" De Costa said.

"The others haven't arrived yet. We must wait for them." Warstler stepped back through the doorway. "I'll tell you more later. Meanwhile, *hasta la vista*."

The door closed silently behind him. The others looked at one another. Ganger shrugged.

"Whatever it is, I'll bet it's good, though there's no hunting here at this season."

"I'm frightened," Janet said abruptly. She shivered as a chill gust blew in through the hall.

"What you need," Bradley said, "is a drink. Soda?"

He mixed one for the girl, and two more for De Costa and himself. They settled down to wait.

IT was not long before a car's motor died into silence, and Herbert Roth, the secretary of the club, entered. He was a tall, well built man in tweeds, with a round, well massaged face and a pipe that scarcely ever left his lips. Peering at the others through horn-rimmed glasses, he blinked.

"Hello, everybody. What are you doing here, Janet?"

"God knows," Ganger answered for her. "Warstler included her in the invitation. Seen Stone?"

Before Roth could answer, Stone was in the room, a bulky man who at first glance looked fat. The hardness of his

eyes and jaw belied that. He took off a derby and nodded as his keen glance swept around. Stone was a politician, and a big one, the boss of the state. But oddly enough, he was basically a romanticist, and membership in the Quest Club gave him something that his life had lacked till then.

"The roster is complete," a quiet voice said. "Seven men who live for excitement. Bradley, Stone, Ganger, De Costa, Roth, Bartoli—and I."

Involuntarily Bradley looked around him.

"Warstler? Where—"

"You will pardon me if I remain hidden. I'm talking through a concealed loudspeaker. First of all, I invited you here for a definite reason. Look at the door."

"It's shut," De Costa said.

"As you will see, it is locked," the voice continued. "You cannot hope to break it down. There are seven keyholes in the door, and in one of them is a key. But all seven keys must be in place before you can escape."

"What the hell!" Stone snapped. "Is this a joke?"

"When I was in the hospital, recuperating from the operation the tiger made necessary, I had time to think. We all live for excitement. But hunting isn't enough. Romance has practically vanished from modern life. In the old days, the Minotaur waited in the labyrinth, and that was a game worth playing. Today we just hunt, and it does not give us the thrills we need. They must be created artificially."

Silent, they were intent upon the locked door.

"In the hospital I thought until my head hurt. It still does, at times. I realized at last that only through a new sensation could I find sufficient distraction to make me forget that pain. I assure you that I am not mad. I am older than any of you. My life has been devoted to searching for thrills, and so I can provide the Quest Club with the ultimate in excitement.

"In four hours the house in which you stand will be blown to fragments by dynamite! Already the time-clock has been set. You have four hours to escape!"

"Good God!" De Costa whispered.

BRADLEY said nothing, but his gaze flickered to Janet, sitting white-faced and silent beside her uncle.

"Seven keys," Warstler continued, "one for each of us. One is already in the door. The others are in plain sight around this house. You may search for them whenever you wish. I think you will find this a thrill you didn't find in Burma—where your carelessness let a tiger get through to maul me!"

The voice was suddenly vindictive, harsh with suppressed rage.

"As for the girl, I am a student of human nature. Some of you may be fatalists, but you are all romanticists and therefore chivalrous. It will add a keener edge to the sensation if you are also faced with the problem of saving the girl's life. . . .

"Search for the keys. One word of warning. They are in plain sight, but—they are guarded! Good luck, fellow-seekers after excitement."

There was abrupt silence. In the dim candle-light the faces of the men looked like Benda masks. Bradley stared around.

De Costa's thin face was sharpened by danger, his eyes glittering. Roth, shapeless in baggy tweeds, stared through his spectacles. Bartoli, the actor, lifted one arm in an involuntary gesture of dramatic theatricalism. Stone's eyes were narrow slits, his jaw jutting, while Ganger's face was expressionless, hard as dried leather. His mouth a rat-trap. Bradley went to the door and tried it. The key in the lowest of the seven locks turned easily, but the barrier did not open. He tested the heavy iron key in the other locks, without success.

"Do you suppose he really means it?" Janet said.

Her uncle nodded. "He blames us for what the tiger did to him in Burma. He's lived for excitement all his life, and his brain naturally focused on that when it was injured." He looked at his watch. "Four hours. Come along!"

He tried the door through which Warstler had vanished. It opened into a luxurious studiolike room, well lighted by indirect lamps, and with Bokhara and Turkestan rugs scattered about on the floor. The others followed.

"Nobody here," Roth said, gnawing at his pipe. "It must be a gag."

He pushed past Ganger and suddenly caught his breath. Bradley's gaze followed the stubby, pointing finger. A key lay almost in the middle of one of the rugs. Roth's laugh rang out, loud in the silence.

"See? It's just a gag. No danger there."

He moved forward swiftly. Ganger's sharp cry of warning came too late. The rug moved slightly and tilted. Bradley saw Roth's big body drop suddenly from sight.

They rushed forward, stared down through the trap-door. Bradley went sick with nausea at what he saw. He was looking into a small cubical room below, where Roth was rising to his feet. Something long and sinuous dangled from his arm, whipping about like a rope.

"Good God, a hooded cobra!" Ganger rapped out.

Bradley recognized the "spectacles" on the hood, the sign of death. Roth turned up a white face, his eyes distended as he cried out inarticulately. Bradley flattened at the edge of the pit, reaching down.

"Give me your hand, Roth!"

Ganger yanked him back just in time. A sharp-edged slab of steel was sliding across the mouth of the cell. It would have sliced off his arm at the shoulder. An instant later something came sailing out through the narrowing crack to rattle on the floor.

IT was an iron key. Roth had hurled it up to the others just before the barrier had walled him in with death. Ganger got down on his knees and tried to wrench the steel plate open. It was like trying to move a mountain. His fingers could get no purchase.

"No use," De Costa said coldly. "Roth's done for. The cobra's bite is poison, and it doesn't take long to work."

Bartoli, the actor, tossed a lock of hair back from his forehead.

"So—so Warstler wasn't joking," he muttered.

"If he was," De Costa said grimly, "the joke's on us."

Bradley was staring at the metal

shutters that covered the windows. On an impulse he tried to open one. It was useless, of course. Ganger, holding the iron key, went back and tried it in the door. He found the right keyhole at last, and a lock clicked softly.

"Two keys out of seven," he said. "Five to go."

"Well, we're warned now," Ganger said. "Next time we'll know enough to be careful."

"Haven't you any feelings?" Janet cried. "Seeing poor Roth killed like that—"

"Time enough for that later," Bradley stated. "We've got to get out of here within four hours—less than that now—or we'll all be blown sky-high."

Janet's gaze fell before his. He was right, of course.

"Don't move," Ganger said suddenly. "I see the third key."

They followed his stare toward the wall, where a key hung in plain sight from a small hook. In the dim candle-light they had missed it till now. Bradley looked at the floor beneath. He seized a chair and sent it spinning against the wall. No trap-door opened.

"Gun," De Costa said laconically.

Bradley moved forward, bending low. He crouched on hands and knees beneath the hook where the key hung. An icy tendril of fear was crawling along his spine. Inside his brain a voice shrilled of danger. It was like being caught in a nightmare.

The others were watching him intently. Bradley reached up toward the key, hesitated, and examined it closely. It hung on an ordinary brass hook that had been screwed into the wall.

"It looks too easy," he grunted. "There's a trap here, but now that we're warned, we don't have to fall into it."

"Be careful," Janet whispered.

"I will."

Bradley moved to the chair and ripped a leg off it. Holding this at arm's-length, he stood several yards from the key and tried to flip it free from its hook. He failed. The chair leg was too clumsy. Ganger pushed forward with a knife in his hand. He pressed a spring and the long blade sprang open.

"This'll do it," he said.

"Don't get too close," Bradley

warned. Ganger was crouching, reaching up till the point of the knife touched the key. It would be easy now to flip the key over the hook. Flaming lightning crackled through the room! Ganger's body twisted, writhed, leaped horribly as it burned. The face blackened before Bradley's eyes. The mouth twisted in a ghastly rictus of agony.

HE went limp, falling from his straining position to lie motionless on the carpet. The knife clattered and the key tinkled softly.

Janet drew a deep, sobbing breath and swayed. Bradley caught her, feeling a surge of pity and hopeless rage against Warstler as he held her soft, helpless form in his arms. De Costa licked dry lips.

"Look at his face!" Bartoli whispered.

It was a twisted mask of sheer horror. The seared eyeballs stared up blindly, glazed and huge. The hands were clawed talons. Ganger lay on his back, his arms and legs bent up as though trying to push away an attacker.

"Get him out of sight before Janet comes to," Bradley said.

De Costa and Bartoli ripped a tapestry from the wall and covered Ganger's body with it. Stone, the politician, picked up the key and went to the door. He tried first one lock, then another, and at last found one that fitted. The tumblers clicked gently.

"The third key," Bartoli muttered. "Four to go." He looked at De Costa, Stone, Bradley. "Four lives—"

"We must be careful," Stone said in an expressionless voice.

The candle guttered and went out. Only a pallid shaft of light came through the doorway from the adjoining room. Bradley swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He looked at his watch. The hour hand was moving with incredible speed. More than half an hour had passed since they had started this dreadful quest, and already two men were dead.

With a sudden shock of cold horror, Bradley realized that he was subconsciously responding to the excitement, the suspense. Deep within him was a sense that thrilled to the emotional

tenseness of the drama. Slightly sick at the realization, Bradley looked at the others and knew that they felt the same way.

De Costa's eyes were bright, his ascetic face keen as a blade. The actor in Bartoli was responding. He looked vibrant and alive, as though standing on a stage before a huge audience. And even Stone, the hard-boiled politician, seemed to have grown in stature, his lips tight in a hard smile.

"We have something to do besides escaping," De Costa said gently.

"Warstler?" Bradley asked. "But he's insane."

"He's a wild animal," the author countered, smiling without mirth. "We are hunters."

Janet moaned softly. Her eyes opened. Terror sprang into them, and remembrance. Bradley hesitated, then darted swiftly as the girl turned to the nearest doorway and sprang toward it. Bradley caught her. For an instant she fought him hysterically. Then she clung to him.

"Buck up, kid," he said. "We'll get out of this." Before she could see the shrouded figure on the floor, he led her into the adjoining room. "But we've got to find the other keys. Keep your eyes open. We've all got to help."

Janet nodded. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

IT was the only way to keep her from hysteria. She must have no time to think. Bradley watched her with sharp eyes as they moved through the room, the long-piled carpets muffling their footsteps. Bartoli, De Costa, and Stone followed. The search began in earnest now.

In plain sight, Warstler had said. Yet it was difficult to locate the keys in these luxuriously furnished rooms, where doors slid noiselessly open at their approach—all but the one door they wanted to open!

From the walls, the eyes of the figured tapestries watched, cryptic and ominous. The steel shutters now meant deadly menace. Otherwise this might have been an ordinary visit, Bradley thought. The mansion had been rebuilt and refurnished completely. The rooms were incongruously restful, but

the sinister silence hung like a pall over everything.

"There must be some other way out," Bradley suggested.

"No." De Costa shook his head. He was moving cat-footed through the apartments, his eyes sharp as a hawk's. "We can't get out unless we find the other keys. The walls—"

"Steel underneath, or concrete," Stone grunted. "The wood's just a surface layer." He stroked his blue jowls. "Where in thunder are those keys?"

Bartoli was silent, but he moved about like a shadow. It reminded Bradley of the days they had spent in the Burmese jungle, with death lurking unseen in every shadow. These men were metamorphosed now into hunters, nerves strung to wire-tense alertness, not easily caught off guard. He had a fleeting thought that Warstler had been wrong in warning his victims. They were not sheep ready for the butcher. They, too, were hunters.

Downstairs they went, having covered the first story. They stood on the edge of a sunken swimming-pool. An underwater floodlight made a swath of radiance on the bottom. They could see easily through twenty feet of water. They could see—

The fourth key!

It lay on the blue-white tiles, shimmering with the movement of the water, but clearly visible. Involuntarily the men looked around, stared up at the low ceiling. A broad platform ran all around the pool, and there seemed to be no immediate danger.

"Electricity?" Stone grunted.

"No," Bradley stated. "He wouldn't try the same gag twice, or my psychology's wrong."

He looked at his watch. De Costa was removing his coat.

"Time's getting short. Somebody get me a metal lamp or ornament from upstairs."

Bartoli obeyed, returning presently with a lamp-standard and Ganger's spring-bladed knife as well. They tested the water gingerly. It wasn't electrified, but Bradley still wasn't satisfied. He glanced at De Costa, who had stripped off his outer garments.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I've an idea."

BRADLEY whipped off his own coat and tossed it into the pool. From the depths a thin, sinuous shadow shot into view, nosing about as the garment bellied out and sank.

"That," Bradley said, "is an electric eel. Not a big one. I don't think it's dangerous. But there may be more of them."

De Costa smiled grimly. "So that's the trap, eh? Brad, you go up to the other end of the pool and throw in my clothes one by one. Draw the eels up there while I dive in at this end and get the key."

Bradley hesitated, but Stone snatched up the garments and went at a swift run along the ledge that bordered the water. He threw in De Costa's coat. The author watched keenly. The eel sped away, and another joined it. They gathered just beneath Stone, nosing about the sinking coat.

"Wait," Bradley said. "Let me tackle this, De Costa."

He was too late. The author's body cut the surface of the water cleanly, became a shadow streaking down toward the light at the pool's bottom. De Costa swam down with hard, fast strokes. Nothing appeared to halt him. His hand groped out toward the key, jerked back suddenly, and then closed over it. He shot up, broke the surface.

"Broken glass down there," he gasped. "Cut my—"

His mouth opened in a soundless scream. He went under, clawing at water. Bradley felt a hand of ice grip his stomach. What was wrong? The eels were still at the other end of the pool.

But the water was changing color. It grew darker. As De Costa rose again, a stain spread out from all around him. Small shapes streaked toward De Costa, clung to him as he flailed and struggled. His shirt and trousers were in tatters, streaming out like rags on a scarecrow. Bradley stepped forward, felt Bartoli's hand seize him.

"Don't!" the actor whispered. "It'd be suicide. *Piranhas!*"

The cannibal fish of the Amazon were harmless until aroused by the scent of blood. But Warstler had scattered broken glass at the pool's bot-

tom, so that any diver would cut his hand and bring the murderous fish to the kill!

De Costa was trying to swim to the pool's edge. Stone knelt and extended his arm, maintaining his balance with difficulty. Janet turned with a little cry and hid her face on Bradley's shoulders.

"Don't look," he whispered through white lips.

But he could not tear away his eyes. De Costa was being eaten alive! The author suddenly seemed to realize the futility of trying to escape. His arm flashed up in an arc. He threw the key. It fell at Bradley's feet. Bartoli dropped his knife to the tiles and snatched for it. But he could not turn his gaze from the pool until it became absolutely obvious that De Costa was dead.

SILENTLY the four returned upstairs. It was difficult to say anything. Bradley was burning with futile, white-hot rage against the insane killer who had trapped them here. If he could get his hands on Warstler, mad though the man might be—Bradley smiled crookedly. Little chance of that. The murderer had planned his scheme too well.

Bartoli was ahead of the others, and abruptly broke into a half-run. The nightmare grip of fear that hung over them all had broken his nerve. He plunged forward, gripping the key. With a swift glance at Bradley, Stone hurried in pursuit.

"Place is full of traps," the politician rapped out over his shoulder. "That fool will blunder into—"

Bradley glanced at Janet and saw that she was biting her under lip. But she tried to smile when she met his gaze.

"I'm all right."

"Sure you are," he said. "We'll be out of this soon."

A sharp cry came to them. Fear caught at Bradley's heart. He yanked at the girl's arm, pulling her through the rooms. Then he stopped on the threshold of one.

A panel had opened in the wall, revealing a closet-like cubby-hole, empty save for a shelf. On the floor lay Bar-

toli, motionless, three iron keys on the carpet beside him. Stone was staring down, his jaw grimly set. He looked at Bradley.

"Dead," he grunted. "The blasted fool! I yelled at him to stop, but—"

"What happened?"

"That panel must have been opened while we were downstairs. When I came into the room, Bartoli was standing in front of it, reaching for the keys on that shelf. There were two of them. I saw him pick 'em up and then fall. He's dead. Look at his skin."

Bradley looked. Bartoli's face was cyanosed and blue. Sniffing a penetrating odor, Bradley tensed.

"Hydrocyanic acid gas," he said. "Probably there was a photo-electric cell in that cupboard. When Bartoli's arm broke the beam, the gas was shot off under his nose. A whiff of that stuff will kill instantly."

Stone was picking up the keys.

"Well, we're ahead of the game," he said cynically. "Two extra keys, and only one man dead. And here's the key De Costa got for us."

He led the way without another glance at Bartoli. Bradley and Janet followed. There was nothing else to do.

Only one key to get. Which one of them would die in order to secure it?

At the metal door, Stone carefully tested the keys. Two of them turned the tumblers instantly. He tried the remaining key in the other keyholes, vainly in one.

"It's stuck," he mumbled. "No, here she comes—"

He gave a soft cry and staggered back, shaking his hand. A drop of blood appeared on it. Wordlessly he pointed at the door. Bradley saw that there was a needle projection beside one of the locks. The turning of the key had undoubtedly activated a spring and shot the needle into Stone's flesh. The politician looked at his hand and then at Bradley. His lips quirked in an incredulous smile.

"Why—I'm—poisoned—"

HIS voice faded away oddly. His gross, heavy body fell. His legs twitched once in muscular reaction, and then lay still.

There was a tight band around Bradley's chest. He looked at the door, with its six keys in place, and the one empty keyhole. Warstler had not failed!

"Come on," he snapped.

His fingers gripped Janet and dragged her back into the adjoining room. Before she could speak he thrust his wrist-watch before her eyes.

"See that? We haven't time for hysterics. We've got to find the last key!"

It was like a dash of cold water. The hysteria Bradley had seen coming faded from Janet's eyes. She nodded apathetically, her senses too dulled with horror to feel this latest blow.

"Yes . . . the last key. . . ."

But it was not easy to find. The hour hand crept around inexorably, mercilessly, and minute by minute the sense of danger drew closer, more immediate. Four hours had gone by so fast, and the deadline was almost upon them!

The quest ended at the pool. Bradley's sharp eyes noticed a concealed door in the tiled wall. He opened it gingerly, but there seemed to be no danger. He peered into a small room, empty save for a shoulder-high niche which held nothing. Beneath it, fallen apparently to the floor, was the last key.

"Don't go in there!" Janet said. "Don't!"

"I'll be careful," Bradley promised. "Stay here."

Before the girl could answer, he stepped cautiously into the room. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw her hesitating on the threshold. At his warning gesture she drew back, silhouetted against the dim light that overhung the pool. Bradley advanced, his back crawling with icy perspiration. Had the key fallen from that niche on the wall? Had Warstler's plans miscarried to that slight extent? Had he planned that one of his victim's would reach into the niche for the key?

But the key was on the floor. Bradley's eyes searched for a possible trap. He saw nothing, yet he did not reach for the key. Instead he edged along the wall and carefully extended one foot to kick the object to a safer place.

As he touched it, a flicker of movement was visible from the corner of his eye. Instinctively he leaped back

to escape the death he sensed was driving at him in a shimmering flash of—of what?

Hot agony sliced his shoulder, his chest. He felt warm blood gush over his stomach. Caught off balance, he fell heavily, his head striking the floor with a sickening thud. Momentarily he lost consciousness.

His blurred vision swam into focus. He was still too stunned to move. A fan-shaped sheaf of swordlike blades stood out from the wall, whence they had sprung to destroy him. Only that instinctive backward leap had saved his life.

How long had he been unconscious? He tried to move, but it was useless. He felt the black pit of unconsciousness sliding up around him. Faintly he heard Janet's voice, surprised, incredulous.

"Roth!"

ROTH? But that was impossible. Roth had been killed by the cobra in the snake-pit. Through pain-dazed eyes Bradley could see the doorway and two figures outlined there—Janet and Roth, his tweeds torn, staring through his spectacles.

"I got out," Roth explained. "Killed the cobra. I used my knife to cut the wound open and sucked the poison out. It took me hours to find the way out of that pit. There was a concealed spring."

Suddenly he was in the little room, gingerly reaching for the key. He rose and blocked Janet as she sought to enter. She tried to get past.

"We've got to get him out. Maybe he isn't dead."

"He's dead," Roth said slowly. "One of those blades got him through the heart." He gripped Janet's arm. "We have to escape from here in a hurry."

It was like a shock of lightning through Bradley. Roth hadn't even cast a glance at him, yet he was saying—

"Roth!" Bradley snapped.

He stood up and felt the walls rocking about him. It was almost impossible to keep his balance, but he dared not let Roth realize his weakness. For Roth was the killer!

There was only one chance. Some-

how Bradley had to play for time, till he regained his strength. He staggered toward the doorway. Roth drew back, placing the key in his vest pocket. Janet ran forward to Bradley, her eyes wide.

"Hold me up," he whispered to her. Then he looked at Roth. "So you planned all this, eh?"

"What are you talking about?" Roth demanded, his eyes shifting about, as though looking for a way of escape.

"I think you know. Where's Warstler?"

Roth stood motionless.

"Wait a minute," Bradley said. "Let me figure this out. We saw Warstler tonight. Or did we? We saw him only in shadow, in candlelight. And he's about your size, Roth. Maybe you impersonated him, eh?"

Roth's face told him the chance shot had struck home.

"I didn't get here till after he spoke to you," Roth said.

"We thought you didn't. You impersonated Warstler and then slipped off, removed your disguise, and drove up as though you'd just arrived."

"But that's impossible!" Janet said incredulously. "We heard Warstler talk to us after Roth got here."

Bradley smiled. "Old stuff. A phonograph record. Warstler's voice was easily imitated. Did you kill him, too, Roth?"

Roth removed his horn-rimmed glasses and put them in his pocket.

"You're crazy," he said almost casually. "Janet, you don't believe him, do you?"

She nodded, staring horrified into his eyes. Roth was silent. Then he smiled. The mask dropped, and cold murder shone in his eyes.

"You little fool!" The epithet sounded like a curse. "Now I must kill you, too!"

BRADLEY'S mind was working fast. Did Roth have a gun? It didn't seem likely, or he'd have used it before this. And Bradley's strength was slowly returning.

"Spill it," he said. "What's the angle?"

Roth looked at his watch.

"I've time enough before you're

blown up with this place. It was a clever trick I played on all of you." Consummate egotism showed in his face.

"You killed Warstler, then," Bradley said. "What motive — revenge? Scarcely. Money? Fear? Wait a minute. You're the secretary of the Quest Club. You handle the treasury. I get it. Embezzlement!"

Roth smiled coldly. "I played the market and I lost. I took the money I needed from the treasury. Warstler found out about it. He got in touch with me immediately, asked me to come here. He threatened me with prison, so I killed him."

Bradley moved forward slightly. Roth stepped back toward the threshold that led to the stairway, and put one hand in his pocket. When he drew it out, he held a stick of dynamite.

"Stay where you are! When I mined this house, I kept this stick with me, in case of accidents." He took a cigarette lighter from his vest and held it ready. "There isn't much time. But since you're so anxious to know what I did, I'll tell you."

He retreated slowly.

"Warstler was planning a new thrill for the Quest Club. Seven keys were to be hidden, and traps were to be set. They were not death-traps, however. I made them deadly. It was easy enough — substituting real swords for rubber ones, putting piranhas into the pool, running electric current to the right places."

Roth grinned unpleasantly.

"Warstler didn't intend to harm anybody, of course. Remember the metal hook in the front room, where one of the keys hung? It was wired to give a mild electric shock, not a fatal one. Those eels in the pool were small ones. They didn't have enough current even to paralyze a man. The poisoned needle originally contained a soporific drug, just enough to put somebody to sleep for a few minutes.

"He didn't intend to use hydrocyanic gas, either. He had nitrous oxide — laughing gas. And that chamber I fell in was just supposed to imprison a victim till the game was over. I introduced the snake myself."

"I see." Bradley nodded. "You sub-

stituted death-traps for gags, made a game into a murder machine. And you sent those telegrams in Warstler's name, too. But why did you bring Janet into this?"

"So she could support my testimony, naturally," Roth said. "I had removed the poison sac from the cobra. But no one would know that, especially since I'd taken care to slash my arm to remove the 'poison'. I would be the only member of the Club left alive."

"And nobody would discover you'd been embezzling the funds. I see. Besides, we've all willed half our fortunes to the club. You'd collect that."

Bradley did not look down, but he moved his foot slightly, feeling something hard against his shoe. It was the knife Bartoli had dropped. Roth was on the threshold now, twenty feet away.

"Right. And when Warstler's body is found in the ruins of this house, he'll be blamed. Janet's testimony and mine would have proved that. But my testimony will be enough now."

He flicked the cigarette lighter and touched the flame to the fuse of the dynamite stick. It sputtered into life. Simultaneously Bradley bent and in one swift motion seized the knife and flung it at the killer.

AS Roth lifted his arm to hurl the explosive, the knife's handle struck him between the eyes, not hard enough to stun, but with sufficient force to make him stagger. The dynamite dropped from his hand. Bradley dived forward.

"Get that dynamite!" he clipped out to Janet.

He saw her move swiftly to obey. Then he was upon Roth. The killer had recovered. His foot flashed up in a vicious kick. Bradley could not dodge it, and it drove the breath from his lungs. Still weak from the blow upon his head, he closed with Roth. The two of them wrestled back and forth on the lip of the pool.

Roth's hands closed on Bradley's throat. He drove Bradley back until he slammed against the wall with stunning force. Bradley swung useless, desperate punches that somehow failed to meet their mark. He was terribly

weak and Roth was smashing his head again and again against the wall.

Bradley's arms were numb. A wave of icy cold was creeping up to engulf him. He was conscious only of those hammer blows against the back of his head, and the vicious face of Roth.

"I'll smash your blasted head in," the killer snarled, his eyes flaming with cold murder.

One more blow and he might succeed, Bradley knew. His blows seemed useless. He lifted one leg, doubling it up against his body, and drove it out with all his force. He felt his knee drive into Roth's stomach. Then the killer was reeling back, clawing at air, screaming, toppling—

Into the pool!

His screams grew louder. Bradley had a glimpse of the man's hand clutching at the brink as the blood-maddened piranhas tore at their prey. Then the hand slipped down and was gone. There was no sound.

Janet was on her knees, white-faced, holding the dynamite stick. She had pinched out the burning fuse. Bradley shook his head dazedly, staggered to the edge of the pool and looked down. In an instant he turned away, sickened.

"He's dead," he mumbled.

The girl nodded, biting at her lip.

"He had the—the last key with him."

Bradley shuddered. Roth had put the key into his vest pocket. It was twenty feet down now, guarded by cannibal fish. To dive after it would be sheer suicide. Bradley looked at his watch.

"We have ten minutes before the dynamite charge goes off. If we can drain the pool—"

"We don't know how. Besides, that would take hours."

She stopped, shocked by the look in his eyes. He sprang forward and took the stick of dynamite from her hands.

"Hold on! This'll do it. Wait!"

He fumbled in his pocket and found a box of matches.

"But I don't understand," she complained.

"Dynamite," Bradley said breathlessly. "The concussion will kill the piranhas, or stun them, anyway. I can dive down and get the key without danger. But we'll need a waterproof container."

It was not difficult to find among the bric-a-brac upstairs. After that, it remained only to light the fuse and toss the stick and its container into the pool. They retreated upstairs to wait. The explosion was faint, muffled.

FIVE minutes later Bradley, dripping wet, was fitting the last key into the lock and gingerly turning it. The door swung open. The short hallway lay before them, at its end the blue of the night sky.

The car started without difficulty. Bradley sent the vehicle racing along the road, out of the valley. As they topped the rise, the explosion blasted their ears with thunderous concussion.

"Whew!" Bradley sighed, relaxing. "I wasn't sure if we could get away in time. But we did, eh?"

"I—I think I'm going to faint," Janet said quietly.

She did.

"Not a bad idea," Bradley said to nobody in particular. "But first I'm looking for the sheriff and liquor. Lots of liquor. And then," he observed with strong emphasis, "I'm going to find a farm and raise potatoes. I want peace and quiet—lots of it."

NEXT ISSUE

Gripping Complete Mystery Novelets by **WARD**

HAWKINS, JOHN H. KNOX and **HENRY**

KUTTNER—Plus Many Other Stories!

BACK TO THE GRAVE!

By RALPH
OPPENHEIM

Author of "Death Chair Murders," "Blood on the Sun," etc.

Deep in the Night-Shrouded Bayou Country, the Cadaver of Pierre Duprey Leaves His Tomb for a Tour of Murder!

THE ancient manse was a sprawled, ghostly shape looming through the curtains of a night made blacker by cascading torrents of rain. As I goaded my waterlogged coupé toward that huge old house, the fear upon my heart grew stronger.

Fear! When I should have felt blessed relief at reaching my destination at all! Hadn't I driven like a madman the hundred and fifty-odd miles from New Orleans? Hadn't I cursed when red lanterns had flagged me to a stop back at the cross-roads?

"Levee's burst!" one of the rain-coated men had shouted. "Even if you got through, mister, you'd be marooned in that bayou country. Flood'll be cutting it off all around."

Angry at the delay I'd shown some credentials, asked if they'd never heard of me, Kent Harper—big New



A dreadful figure seemed to materialize before me

Orleans lawyer. They hadn't, of course. Actually I was just a struggling young lawyer. But the bluff had worked, and I was allowed to drive on. No flood was going to stop me! I had to get to Madeleine Duprey—lovely, dark-eyed Madeleine, who had gone back to this old, ghostly manse.

The fear in my heart leaped to my throat in a cry, when the coupé lurched because my hands momentarily forgot the wheel. As my eyes stared through the arc of the windshield wiper, a dreadful figure seemed to materialize! The figure of a man, but though it moved, though it walked, it looked like no living thing! The luminous whiteness which must have been its face, suggested death, and the grave! And it walked as if it could not see. . . .

Suddenly my car bogged down hopelessly in the rain-running ditch and it jolted life back to my fear-frozen muscles. I fought to keep the car upright. Now I was laughing harshly, for I saw only rainy black gloom where that shape had seemingly walked!

Steeling my nerves, I climbed out into the night rain, drew my slicker about me, then reached back into the door-pocket for my loaded Colt .45. Not that a gun would do any good if that thing wasn't human.

But as I ploughed toward the manse, the rain lashing my fevered face, I thought again of the scraps of torn letter I had found this afternoon in Madeleine's New Orleans room, after her landlady had told me how Miss Duprey had dashed off in her little roadster "all upset-like." The envelope, intact, showed that the letter had come from one of her cousins, Bernard Nace.

"Come back to the manse at once," I had put together. "You are the only one who can handle your father . . . He looks for you, calls your name, threatens terrible things . . . You must lead him by the hand. . . ."

I had read those scraps over and over, hunted for more. I had looked at the envelope post-mark, found the date on one of the scraps. I'd sworn

then that either Bernard Nace must have gone raving mad, or somehow I had misread those plain sentences. That letter had been written and mailed yesterday and Madeleine's father, old blind Pierre Duprey had been dead in his tomb for more than three months!

I TRIED again to laugh my fantastic thoughts away but, besides the memory of that letter, I was recalling Madeleine's own behavior whenever she spoke of her father's death. The strange look, too fearful for just grief, in her lovely dark eyes. That was even after we had come to know and love one another, long after that first day three months ago when, having seen her father's body entombed in the family mausoleum, she had come to my office, engaged me to transfer the manse from her to her two cousins, Claude and Bernard Nace, and Bernard's wife.

They had been living there, and now they were buying the home from its inheritor at a pittance which made me suspect chicanery. But the property was indeed of little value. Old Pierre Duprey, once wealthy, had died poor. . . .

A strange man he had been, this Pierre Duprey. A man of dark moods, queer beliefs, and black rages springing from the dark world of his total blindness. Strong as an ox he had been, Madeleine told me. Especially his hands—huge, sinewy hands which, once in a fit of temper, had strangled a man-sized dog.

But with Madeleine this big blind man was ever docile, kindly. She had been his only close companion since his wife's death. She had led him, her small slender hand linked in his great paw, wherever he went, from morning until night.

"But, Kent, I wasn't there the day he—his heart gave way!" Madeleine told me. "I was away visiting friends in the city. And I had sworn that if he should die, I would be at his death-bed. I would hold his hand so that he—" She had broken off, and I knew only that some strange and unearthly fear preyed on this fragile girl—a

fear that made her say she would never return to the manse she had sold. And now—

My eyes made out the shape of a roadster on the boggy manse grounds. Madeleine's roadster! She was here all right. I hurried my steps. The big house reared before me, with its columned old veranda, and a second-story gallery that ran all around the building. The left wing, where old Pierre Duprey had lived, was dark. In the other wing, a febrile glow from some windows gave the reassurance that humans dwelt there.

As I climbed onto the dark veranda, the floorboards creaked under my feet. And then one of my wet shoes felt something else, and I froze where I stood.

I had seen Bernard Nace only once before—when he'd come to sign the deed of transfer. Nevertheless, despite the gloom, I recognized him now. His glassy, unseeing eyes were peering sightlessly up at me from the veranda floor. I didn't need a second look to know that he was dead. There were huge bluish marks visible on his neck, which looked as if it had been squeezed in some vise. . . .

I must have shouted, though I do not recall doing so. I only knew that as I stood there, over that horrible corpse, sounds reached me as through a nightmare. Light flooded the veranda, and a woman screamed and screamed.

"Oh, my God!" came that scream. "It's killed Bernard! It's killed him!"

I became aware then of others on the porch. My eyes took in the screaming woman first. Carla—Bernard Nace's wife. I had met her, too, during the transfer of the deed—this fading creole beauty. And I recognized, too, the pale, thick-lipped young man who stood near her—Claude Nace, younger brother of Bernard.

These two did not seem to see me at all as they stared at the corpse. The other man with them did. He was a stranger to me—a tall, lean man whose dark clothes suggested a cloak, and whose eyes had a piercing, almost hypnotic quality. I did not like the

hollow cheeks, the too-harsh jaw.

"Who are you?" he was demanding of me.

AS I started to identify myself, Claude Nace was shouting toward the open door:

"Jason! Call Dr. Cavender down! Hurry!" And the face of an old Negro retainer had disappeared. I heard the servant muttering something about "Voodoo — dat debbil magic!" Then Claude turned to me.

"Harper!" he cried. "What are you doing here?" He faced the tall, hollow-cheeked man in black. "It's all right, Quinn. This is a friend of Madeleine's."

Quinn, who I soon learned was a guest Claude had invited here, nodded slowly. Then another man, rubbing sleep from his eyes, joined the tense gathering. He proved to be Dr. Charles Cavender, long the Duprey family doctor, who had been at the dying Pierre Duprey's bedside. Later I learned he had come here to attend Carla Nace, and the flood had kept him from returning to his own estate. Now he moved to the sprawled body, bent over it.

"Dead," came his anticlimactic but professionally final verdict. "Strangulation, manual. Marks of a huge and powerful hand—"

Carla Nace's wild, horrible laughter came again.

"Of course! Don't you see? It's *he!* He strangled Bernard with those hands of his! He came out of the tomb to kill—"

"Shut up, Carla, you fool!" Claude Nace snarled. "Dead men don't murder people! And that's what this is, murder!"

Yes, murder had been done. Somewhere loose here must be a killer. I looked at the group, at hands. But even the long, almost skeletal hands of Quinn didn't look powerful enough to crush a neck in that manner. Aloud I was demanding:

"Where is Madeleine?"

The others exchanged looks. Then Quinn spoke in his sombre voice:

"Miss Duprey said she intended to keep vigil at the mausoleum. She

went there some time ago."

"Where's the mausoleum?" I demanded.

Claude Nace pointed fearfully out into the gloom across the grounds. I didn't hesitate. As I hastened off the veranda, I heard Dr. Cavender telling the rest:

"We shall have to hold the body for the authorities until the flood can let them through. . . ."

Again I was alone in the driving rain, my hand closed around my pocketed gun. Cypress and brush loomed across the dark grounds. I pushed through it. And then a grayish oblong came into view. The mausoleum reared before me, cold and granite.

A sudden sound, like a souging moan, met my ears. I saw then that the wrought-iron door of the big tomb was ajar, swinging on its ancient, creaking hinges. My hands dug deep into my slicker for a pocket-flash I had also brought along. I sent its beam penciling ahead. Fearfully I pulled that iron door wider, and entered the tomb.

Death! I could feel it everywhere in the cold yet musty dankness of the vault's interior. My light played over iron-wrought tiers. On each tier lay a long, metal casket, for here in this bayou country the dead were always laid to rest above the soggy earth.

Embossed name-plates showed in my light on the sides of the coffins. Finally discovering that of Pierre Duprey, I gasped in dread.

It was not sealed!

The top of it lay to one side, and it required every ounce of my ebbing will power to stand on tip-toe so I could send my flashlight into that open casket. I did, and what I failed to see frightened me more than would any sight of a decaying corpse. The coffin was empty! Yet its foul odor showed it had held recently a body. Where was the body of old blind Pierre Duprey?

I whirled with a sudden cry, snatching for my gun. Someone had moved into this tomb behind me!

"Do not be alarmed," said a sombre voice then, and in the gloom I saw Quinn's piercing eyes. "I thought

perhaps you would lose your way," he said, adding that he and Dr. Cavender had taken the body of Bernard Nace into the house.

I pointed with my flash to the empty coffin of Pierre Duprey.

"Quinn, do you know anything about *this*?" I asked.

QUINN'S head nodded slowly in the darkness.

"The coffin is empty, yes. That is one reason Claude Nace asked me to come here as his guest. You see," he made a deprecatory gesture, "I fancy myself a student of the occult. I have long investigated psychic phenomena and have exposed that which is fraudulent."

"Then," I said, "you came here to prove that all this talk is wild; that whatever has happened—" I hesitated.

"So you have seen *it*, too," Quinn said, nodding sagely. "You wish for me to say it is not real? But I cannot say that. I have seen strange things, heard strange tales. There are powers that to us are unfathomable as death itself. I wish I had known Pierre Duprey alive, known whether he had contact with the world of darkness, beliefs which were brought to this bayou land by the Negroes. It is perhaps best for you not to probe too deeply into matters which you cannot hope to understand."

Was there a veiled warning in that last of his abstract statements? I had heard legends of this bayou country. Voodooism, talk of corpses that walked, of zombies. . . .

"Nonsense!" I protested shakily. "You can't tell me that such things exist. I challenge you to show me—"

But I was talking only to the dead! Quinn had gone. As quietly as he had come he had slipped out of this tomb. And as I stood there nervously, there came to me from the rainy darkness outside a new sound, the sound of a plaintive cry carried on the wind!

"*Father!*"

With my heart a lump of ice, I went dashing out of the tomb.

"*Father!*"

I heard it again, and madly tried to judge its direction. I fought my way

through more tangled brush, came finally to a space of clearing in the wild swamp-woods here beyond the tomb. And then my legs flew. I bounded to the slender, shadowy figure I had spied, to the girl who was moving through the rain, searching. I caught her in my arms.

"Madeleine!" I exclaimed. And for an instant she was clinging to me. Lord, she was soaked through. She wore only a traveling suit, which had shrunk wetly around her. Her dark hair was tumbled, rain-pearled, over the lovely oval of her face. Then I felt her struggling to free herself.

"Kent!" her voice was a moan. "You never should have come here, Kent. Never!"

I gripped one of her slender arms almost brutally.

"Listen to me, Madeleine!" I cried at her. "You're not yourself! I'm taking you back into the house. You're going to get dry, have something hot to drink, get rest. Then we can thresh this whole thing out!"

"No, Kent—no!" she pleaded, and then, as I forced her to accompany me to the manse, she was speaking breathlessly. "You remember I'd sworn, Kent, to hold my father's dying hand? It was because of what he believed, Kent!"

It was all coming out now, what Quinn in the mausoleum had darkly hinted at. Bitter, when he was first blind, Pierre Duprey had consulted voodoo-worshippers in the swamp, learned their magic. He had come to believe that the powers of darkness could restore his sight if he gave himself to them, became instead of his good self an evil tool of those powers.

"I—I laughed at him at first," the girl moaned to me. "But then came the time he strangled that dog; when he told me that already he was yielding to those powers; that he could not help himself. He said that I was the only one who could stop him. And when he died, he felt that if I held his hand it would lead him to a peaceful death! Otherwise those powers, which he said were stronger with the dead than the living, might enter his body and—"

I STOPPED her. "You musn't go on like this, Madeleine. You know you don't, can't believe—"

"I didn't want to, Kent! Even when I found his coffin empty! But then, when I saw him, I knew!"

"It wasn't him you saw!" I cried harshly, remembering again that fearsome shape.

"I tell you I saw him, Kent," she said. "And I knew him when I saw those hands. I tried to go to him, but he disappeared. I must find him now, Kent. You must go away, because with anyone else he might be dangerous. Even with Bernard, who first saw him and wrote to me."

My spine crawled as I thought of Bernard Nace, now a strangled corpse in that house. Madeleine didn't know that yet. Poor, lovely Madeleine. Strange how the souging wind seemed to speak her name as my own mind spoke it. "Madeleine. . . ." it seemed to call. "Madeleine . . . Madeleine . . ." "Yes, the wind, I was telling my rioting fears. The wind was making that name, speaking it in a tomblike voice, "Madeleine . . . Madeleine. . . ."

And then, confirming the horror my ears would not believe, the girl I was guiding suddenly broke free from me as if her lissome body had borrowed some superhuman strength. She was running through the rain and gloom. Running and answering that cry of the wind:

"Father!"

Wildly, I stumbled after her, the horrible tomblike call of her name rising nearer now. She broke through some more tangled brush in the bayou swamp. I leaped after her into another boggy clearing, and there I halted, horrified.

It stood there in the rain, horribly tall, impassive to the cascading torrent. It stood there—waiting. Its body was draped in a wet, loose shroud of black, a burial shroud. Above it was the ghastly visage. A livid thing that had, before decay, evidently been a strong lined face—now it was almost a skull, the white phosphorescence of bones illumining it weirdly. A blind skull, with eyes looking even more

blind than those of a normal dead man!

And hanging out from its shoulders, uncovered by the black shroud, were two huge arms terminating into two enormous hands. The flesh on them, too, was decayed. One of the hands showed skeletal bones protruding. I remembered what Madeleine had said about those terrible hands. . . .

"Madeleine!" came the sepulchral voice. "Madeleine. . . ."

I saw the girl then, heard her moaning as she moved toward that hideous thing which I knew now I had not imagined before. I leaped after her then, between her and the dreadful figure. I had my Colt out in my trembling hand.

And then, to my fresh horror, Madeleine was flinging herself toward me. She caught the gun in her own hand, tugged at it.

"No, Kent!" she sobbed. "No! Don't! Don't—"

I was snatching the gun from her grasp. I was laughing crazily, wildly. If this monstrosity is what she thinks, I reasoned, then my bullets cannot harm it anyway. She must know that, and yet the normal idea that a gun can hurt, kill, made her try to stop me. And in the next instant, even as I did get the gun free, the dreadful figure had vanished again.

I thought I'd seen it recede in the dark cypresses. Nor did I pursue it, for now Madeleine was pounding my chest with her puny fists, crying at me:

"I hate you, Kent! I could have gone to him, led him back to—the grave!"

With a moan then, she fainted. . . .

TENDERLY I carried her like a sleeping child to the manse. Quinn was out on the veranda, viewing the scene of Bernard Nace's death. But Bernard Nace's body was inside, sheeted on a couch in the old-fashioned living room. Carla Nace sat in a chair beside the corpse, weeping softly now. Claude Nace, his thick lips working, paced the floor.

Then Dr. Cavender came in from the library. He helped me to get Made-

leine to her own room upstairs, to her bed. Cavender rubbed her wrists and as she came to, he fixed her a sedative.

"She's had a dangerous shock," Cavender told me. "It's best to leave her to sleep."

By then it was dawn, though even daybreak little dispelled the gloom of the continued rain. Dr. Cavender instructed the Negro servant, Jason, to stand close guard at Madeleine's door, summon us if need be.

"They say," the doctor told me as we went downstairs, "that this fantastic ghost, or whatever it is, doesn't appear by day."

Nevertheless, the coffin in the mausoleum remained empty by day, as it had by night. And the rain did not abate. Wires were still down. We were still marooned and could not summon authorities. The body of Bernard Nace remained in the living room. I myself went out in the rain to make a thorough search, looking, I told myself, for the body of Pierre Duprey. But I could find no trace. . . .

As our meals were served up to us by Jason, for Madeleine continued to sleep under the influence of the sedative, I tried in talks with the others to glean some inkling that might explain the horrors and the murder of Bernard Nace. I questioned Dr. Cavender about Pierre Duprey's death. He told me how Duprey had died peacefully in his sleep, calling for Madeleine, but finally allowing his niece Carla to come to his bedside. . . .

I spoke to Quinn, who repeated that there were things I could never hope to understand. I tried to speak to Claude Nace, but he was taciturn. He merely said he believed in no supernatural beings. Jason, the Negro servant, could add little to what I knew, either.

"Ah can only tell you dere's voodoo in dis house, Mister Harper," he muttered. "Voodoo is workin' its spells!"

Lastly, I went to speak to Carla, since she had been with Pierre Duprey when he died. I found her now, as the gloom and rain outside deepened once more into a new night. Carla had returned to the side of her husband's sheeted body. Her creole face, devoid

of all its former beauty, rose to me, listlessly.

"Carla," I began, "Doctor Cavender says you spoke to Pierre Duprey before he died. I thought perhaps he threw some hint. . . ."

Her face slowly came alive. She turned then, saw that sheeted form at her side. She began to cry softly. I patted her shoulder, inanely.

"There is something you can tell me," I said. Her head nodded. I heard her voice say a word, faintly. It sounded like "retribution." Then she seemed to gather breath.

"He'll kill me, too," she said. "But he won't kill Claude, or the others. It is not they who tried to sin against him. I told only Bernard. Claude didn't know; he doesn't know now. . . ."

She looked around fearfully. A curtain blew at one of the French windows as wind found its way through the cracks.

"What doesn't Claude know?" I asked softly.

She told me then, in whispers:

"When Pierre Duprey was dying, he kept calling for Madeleine. We had sent for her, but it was already too late. I—I wanted to make him happier as he died, so I went to his side, took his hand."

"You pretended you were his daughter?" I said.

"Yes, and he believed for a moment. And then he told me, 'Madeleine, my child, something for you is left, in this house. A secret—I have kept it. You must listen to me . . .'" Carla's drawn face looked grayish in the dim light. "That was all. Just that—and then he died. But as he died, his blind eyes seemed to look at me. It seemed he *knew* I was not Madeleine. I was afraid then. But when I told Bernard, he said we should buy the house. We and Claude. Then we would own whatever was in the house, without even telling Claude. Bernard said he always thought the old man had hidden away a fortune."

SO there had been chicanery in that transfer of property. Pierre Duprey had left something. Wouldn't

that be a different reason for wanting his Madeleine at his bedside than—

"So we sinned against a dead man!" Carla's voice came through my thoughts. "That is why he has come back, you see? That is why Bernard had to send for Madeleine. He meant to tell her, if only she would lead her father back to the tomb!"

I seized the woman's shoulders, shook her now.

"So you tried to cheat Madeleine!" I rapped at her. "You took for yourselves that fortune, or whatever it was. Right?"

"I—" Carla's voice froze, her eyes going fearful, then again withdrawing. I had followed their glance. In the doorway, peering at us with his piercing, hypnotic stare, was the guest named Quinn.

"It is night again," came his sombre voice. "It is time when the legends say the dead walk." He turned away, but Carla would speak no more now. Tomorrow, she said, perhaps she would tell me the rest, try to expiate her sin. . . .

The night closed in on the flood-marooned manse. The rain tattooed the roof and the wind shook the old shutters. I sat with my coat thrown over me now up in the room Madeleine occupied. I sat where I could keep watch over her as she slept. Only once she had opened her eyes, looked at me with the hurt I had seen there last night.

"Go, Kent—please go," she had murmured, and then fallen asleep again.

But I stayed, my heart heavy, my mind still trying to think sanely. A pilfered fortune, I thought. Bernard and his wife getting it. But suppose Claude had somehow found out? As one of the owners of the house, he stood to inherit all that was in it, too. But his hands were weak. And assuming that by some black wizardry he could have been masquerading as a living corpse, why should he have done so?

For the presence of that living corpse must only bring Madeleine back into the picture, Madeleine who had long since ceded the property. None of it made sense. And in the

deepening night, my dread fancies were still more convincing than my unresolved reasoning. The dead hands of that fearful apparition; I could have sworn them real, Madeleine had sworn them real. Then was it true? Had Pierre Duprey, given to powers of darkness, come back from that tomb to kill, his killing not unmotivated as Madeleine thought, but done out of vengeance?

I leaped out of my chair as again my thoughts seemed to become actual happening things!

Through the old manse, echoing through the musty corridor outside, came a woman's high-pitched scream. Then it trailed off like some turned-off radio.

I had my gun in my hand as I barged into the hall, leaving the door open. I was rushing down the hall. In the dim light I saw the tall figure of Quinn, moving near another door.

"Here!" came his sombre voice. "It came from here!"

He opened the door as he spoke and, right behind him, I ran into the other bedroom.

Carla Nace sprawled in an unnatural position on the bed across the floor. Her head lolled to one side, off the pillow. And her slender white neck—there again were those horrible bruises, where a huge hand had squeezed—crushed. . . .

I whirled to Quinn, who stood tall, grim-faced. Some corner of my mind was wondering where this strange guest, this occult student, figured in these fiendish happenings.

"Get Doctor Cavender," I snapped. "Tell him there's been another murder!"

Quinn turned, hurried from the room. I was looking around the room now, for some sign of— And then my blood froze anew, as once again I heard a faint but rising cry, as of the wind sighing.

"Madeleine! Madeleine!"

I couldn't locate it at first. I didn't even try to. Just one mad thought sent me dashing from the room of death, back down the hall and to Madeleine's chamber. And I cried out then in my horror and dread.

MADELEINE'S bed was empty! She was gone!

My wild eyes fell then on the open casements and the balcony outside that ran around the house. I had forgotten there were windows leading to it in that other room, too!

I ran out into the balcony's rainy gloom, my gun out.

"Madeleine!" It was my voice now, calling with as much frenzy as that other. I saw a white figure moving in the gloom of the railed gallery. Yes, it was Madeleine. Searching again out here. I started to dash toward her.

Something struck me then, knocked me half off balance. Again, as I tried frantically to bring my gun to bear, I smelled the gun-defying odor of decayed flesh. Across my face a horrible corpse-like arm seemed to swish gropingly. And then my throat was in a vise!

I was choking, my gun dropping from my limp fingers, my whole skull bursting as my lungs tried in vain to get air. I could feel fingers like giant talons digging into my neck and I thought that this was the end of everything.

Then suddenly, in that rainy gloom of the gallery, the awful grip relaxed. I slumped down in a heap, my lungs struggling to take in needed life-breath. As if through a dark haze I now saw that the horrible figure, with the two decaying but huge hands, had turned from me. It turned because the white-gowned figure of Madeleine had moved this way. Like an automaton she moved now, like one hypnotized. . . .

"Come, Madeleine!" the horrible figure was saying. "It is I, your poor blind father . . . You know me, do you not?"

"Yes, Father," Madeleine muttered. "I know you. You will let me lead you by the hand?"

"My child, yes. Like you always led me. . . ."

I was fighting with my will the lethargy that still held me paralyzed and voiceless—a witness in the dark to this dreadful scene. Helpless, I had to watch the girl I loved approach that

horror that waited for her. And how bravely, loyal to her father whom she loved, she did approach. Even though she must have been faint with revulsion she walked in slow but firm steps up to the figure.

"See, I will lead you, Father," she said. And her small, slender hand reached and was taking the huge hand at the end of the corpse-arm. "Come now, Father. Here is my hand. I will lead you. . . ."

Again I fought with my stubborn muscles, but all I could wrench from my lips was a scarcely-audible groan of anguish. Now I saw them moving down the gallery. I saw the girl walking slowly, patiently, on feet she could hardly move. I saw the shrouded walking corpse behind her, walking stiffly, blindly, led by her hand. . . .

They disappeared around the bend in the gallery by the time I had at last struggled to my feet. I stopped only to retrieve my gun, then I lurched along the gallery. I must find them. I must wrest that girl away from that horrible Thing from the tomb before it was too late! For I didn't know what lay in fate for that lovely girl.

I had rounded the bend in the gallery, but ahead of me now it was empty. Then I realized this was the wing which Pierre Duprey had occupied himself. His daughter, too, had lived here, previously. She must have led him back to this familiar part of the house.

I FOUND the open window even as this thought came. I went through it, into a dark room. A bedroom. I found my flashlight, sent it groping about. No one here. And yet, I noticed, there was a strange disarray about the place, as if a miniature cyclone had been loose in it. Drawers were pulled out, their contents tumbled. A closet was open, with its clothes strewn on the floor.

That disarray was to be my guiding light now. It was all that told me what course to take, what rooms and halls to go through in this desolate, vacant part of the house. I realized now that it had taken me time to come

out of the nearly unconscious state I'd been in. Time, during which that walking corpse and the girl had been in all these rooms.

I saw stairs going down. I knew they must be the way, because in the alcove at the landing a statue had been pulled from place, broken on the floor. Lower down were more signs of the disarray. I hurried down through a small living room, to a door, a study—

And then I stopped, stifling the fierce cry on my lips, and stared at the tableau before me.

This room too, was in disarray. And it was the girl who had caused it. The girl who now was fumbling at the oak-paneled wall, which even in the darkness she seemed able to find.

She was fumbling with one hand. The other was still linked, horribly, to the hand of the gruesome corpse.

"Everywhere, Madeleine," the horror intoned. "Open everything I ever opened. All my hiding places which you know. For I have left behind that which will let me rest in peace. . . ."

"Yes, Father," came Madeleine's moaning but obedient voice. And even as I looked now, a panel in the wall gave way to her touch—a panel cunningly concealed. I caught the glint of a strong-box there. And at the same time I saw the back of that gruesome figure straightening. I knew that Madeleine was facing death then. I knew—

My gun was out, pointing.

"All right, you murdering devil!" I rapped out. "This has gone far enough!"

The figure whirled, fast now, and the horrible visage confronted me. But my hand held the Colt steady now.

That was when Madeleine saw me, cried out in new, moaning fright. At once she straightened from the panel and darted around so that she shielded the figure of that corpse. Her eyes blazed at me, blazed with an anger that already showed signs of crackling sanity.

"You'll have to shoot me first, Kent, do you hear?" she cried. "I won't let you shoot at him! I won't—"

The figure behind her had moved to take full advantage of that shield. And then I saw something else. A dark snout was snaking past Madeleine's side to train on *me!* The ugly snout of a small but deadly automatic.

DESPERATION lent speed to my racing brain. In that instant I was forcing pieces of the ghastly puzzle to click in place, going over all I had heard. And suddenly from these things I knew there could be only one answer! Carla had told me that only she and her husband had learned the secret in this house. I had assumed she had found that fortune. But now I knew I was wrong. And I knew, too, that there was another who must have heard of the secret.

All in that instant, with the ugly automatic snaking out around Madeleine, my mind fastened on this.

"Madeleine, he's not your father!" I cried out. "He's a human murderer—*Dr. Charles Cavender!*"

Perhaps it wouldn't have worked if the figure itself hadn't given a snarl as of enraged hatred then. Yet, I still feel that somehow the bond of love between us made Madeleine react to my words even before she grasped them.

With a cry of pure horror now she wrenched away from the figure, even as it seemed about to move to enclose her again. Then I saw the snout of the man's automatic spit livid flame, but not before my own Colt had spoken twice.

I had not aimed to kill. I saw my shots go to the shoulders of the shrouded figure. Yet, with his own shot gone wild, he fell like a log. And when Claude Nace, the man named Quinn, and the servant Jason arrived, when we managed to remove a cleverly contrived mask, we saw that Dr. Charles Cavender was dead. . . .

"I STILL can't believe it," Madeleine said the next day.

Strangely peaceful now was the manse, with the sun streaming through the last clouds of the storm. The flood had abated. The authorities had arrived to remove the bodies. And the strong-box found behind that

panel had proved to contain a fortune in negotiable securities.

"But Dr. Cavender always seemed so kind, so honest—" Madeleine added now.

"He was broke, honey, and couldn't resist the temptation," I explained. "He'd heard your father tell Carla about the fortune hidden in the house. Carla and Bernard looked for it after they bought the house, but before they could find it Cavender started working his devil's scheme of resurrecting the dead! It accomplished two purposes: It delayed Carla and Bernard from looking any further, caused them to send for you, though Claude sent for an occult student, Quinn.

"Through you, Cavender knew he could locate the fortune. You'd led your father everywhere he went and some place you had led him must prove the hiding-place. He killed Bernard and Carla because they knew of the fortune and might tell you. He was quick and clever—the way he ducked in and out the back door of the manse, getting his masquerade-costume from some hiding place."

"But those hands!" Madeleine protested. "I tell you even if his face was papier-maché, those hands seemed real, Kent! Father's hands! I knew it when I took one, even though it was cold."

"Just your imagination," I assured her, "and maybe the effects of the 'sedative' Cavender gave you."

And to this very day, with Madeleine my beloved wife, I still keep from her the things that come back often to me in some fevered nightmare.

How we had found Cavender's murder weapon to be a gauntlet, fashioned like that of a medieval knight, a glove of steel and mesh which could be given leverage by the fingers beneath it. How this was what he used over his hand, his arms hidden in that shroud, while cleverly stitched onto the shoulders of that shroud so that they dangled within view, so that they gave forth that putrid odor of decaying flesh were those dead hands.

Yes, and I could not tell her that when the flood washed up the real

body of Pierre Duprey, stolen from its tomb where now again it rests in its sealed coffin, that body had shown the hideous results of a skilled post-mortem double amputation. . . .

And there is yet one thing more, and this I can never explain. Cavender *had* only been wounded by my bullets.

Perhaps somehow in his pain he had gripped his own throat with that gauntlet he wore, perhaps done the impossible thing of choking himself to death with it.

Impossible? Yet only this could account for the fact that Cavender had died from strangulation, with horrible marks as of a giant hand on his throat!



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The blow-torch killer swung savagely on Lash



Determined to Burn Down a Savage Blow-Torch Murderer, Lash Daggett Risks All in a Reckless Struggle Against "The Sacrificer!"

CHAPTER I

Purge by Fire

LASH DAGGETT was long, slim and willowy. His face was brown and hard as a copper penny, and the livid knife scar across his left cheek gave him the look of a pirate, which was what some people called him. Staring into his frosty eyes, Cottlefield, the psychiatrist, said:

"I haven't done much to straighten out your anti-social kinks, eh, Lash? Just because you haven't had much luck this first year as a private detective you're ready to throw it all up, disappoint your brother and the girl you want to marry. But suppose I had

a real job all lined up for you?"

Daggett scowled back at the gray-haired, gaunt-faced psychiatrist.

"Playing bodyguard to another of your pet psychopaths?" Lash said. "No, thanks." He stopped, his teeth flashing white in a grin. "Sorry. I probably would have starved if it hadn't been for the jobs you've tossed my way. But what's the use? To the cops I'm poison ivy, and to the law-abiding—"

"You're something to scare kids with, huh?" Cottlefield finished for him. "But suppose, my gallows-bait friend, that you should knock the 'Sacrificer' on his ear?"

Daggett gave a disillusioned snort. "Know any more good ones? Haven't I been trying to horn in on

A GRIPPING COMPLETE NOVELET

that ever since it started? Haven't I bothered Sam to let me on the inside?"

"Your brother's tried—" Cottlefield began gently.

"Oh, I know that. But Sam's just a lieutenant in the Homicide Squad, and the boys upstairs hate my guts. Some below stairs, too, who've tried pushing me around. I can't get a look-in." He shrugged. "That is, not without causing Sam a lot of embarrassment."

"But you would like a crack at that case?"

"I'd give my eye teeth!"

"You won't have to. I think I know who the Sacrificer is."

LASH DAGGETT stiffened. "You've got a tip?"

Cottlefield tapped his dome-like forehead with a long finger.

"A tip here," he said. "I've told you from the start that the Sacrificer is a madman, and in my profession I've met a good many madmen."

"And you think someone among your former clients is the Sacrificer?"

"Don't try to anticipate me," Cottlefield rumbled. He leaned forward. "Suppose you outline the case briefly."

Lash settled back in his chair.

"Well, the business seems to have started with Brian Throme," he began. "Rich socialite banker who gave a party at his penthouse. Nothing to hint at tragedy. No ominous happenings to lead up to it. Just the sudden discovery, in the midst of the gaiety, of the body of the banker-host, a cinder-encrusted horror on the bathroom floor. No trace of the killer who had come and gone, after burning the body of his victim with meticulous care."

"With ritualistic care, one might say," Cottlefield supplied. "Go on."

"Case Number Two," Lash said, "came about a week later. Scene, the quiet suburban flat of Eva Langley, aging singer and ex-glamour girl. Her maid found her body stretched out across the sink in her kitchen—a roasted mummy. Again no trace of the phantom killer."

Pausing to light a cigarette, he resumed:

"'Wealthy Playboy Prey of Sacrificer' is, I believe, the way the papers

heralded the next crime. This time it happened in broad daylight. John Littleton, of the ultra-ultra Littletons, is playing golf. Caddy goes back to clubhouse for something. Coming back he finds Littleton in a dry creek bed near the links. Body burned to a crisp.

"Another week passes and the Sacrificer strikes at the underworld. Caps Gallagher, racketeer night-club owner was found in his allegedly impregnable stronghold, and I seem to remember that the torpedo who found him, gagged out the remark that he looked 'like a chunk of barbecue left too long in the pit.' Well, that's the crop to date."

"Good," Cottlefield said. "Now tell me what strikes you as the outstanding characteristic of these crimes."

Lash's brow puckered.

"Well, it's the screwiest and most gruesome thing that ever hit the front pages. The way the killer manages to strike and escape is uncanny. But I guess what really stands out most is the utter lack of motive and pattern. Nothing to connect the scattered victims who don't appear to have had an acquaintance in common. In fact they seemed to have nothing in common except a lot of insurance."

"Which," Cottlefield said, "suggests murder for that reason. But I believe the police went into that thoroughly and got nowhere. The Littleton boy's mother was the beneficiary in his case, and she seems to be out of the question, as does Throme's wife and the Langley woman's sister. But the victims had something else in common, Lash, something which I think attracted a particular type of maniac. Can you guess?"

"They had all had a lot of publicity," Lash offered.

"Exactly!" Cottlefield applauded. "And that's not all. It's been bad publicity—scandal! Throme was smeared in a recent holding company investigation! The Langley woman lost her contract a year ago due to a marijuana scandal. Littleton's drunken escapades have barred him from most decent homes, while Gallagher narrowly missed the chair just recently when he was tried for the

murder of a rival. See where that leads? Those people were all offenders against conventional decency. That gives us the clue to our madman. Religious fanaticism is suggested, the judgment by fire, administered by a priest-god avenger. When I got that idea, Lash, I remembered a man—"

He paused dramatically, watching Daggett's face.

"You know, Lash," he went on, "I get a wide variety of patients—rich, poor, ignorant, learned. But even among them, Martin Clovis was a most unusual man."

"Clovis!" Daggett blinked rapidly. "Formerly Professor of Ethnology in the state university. But didn't he die some years ago?"

COTTLEFIELD shook his head. "He was quietly sent away to a private asylum. But I've made some inquiries. Through private channels I've learned that Clovis was released, supposedly to a member of his family, a couple of months ago. Only he never reached his family and they've been too terrified to tell."

He leaned back and stared moodily at the ceiling.

"I remember Clovis well," Cottlefield said. "A gray and mousey little man. Much troubled by the sins of the world, the deterioration of the race. He was always bemoaning the rottenness of high society, the corruption of money kings, the scandals of tabloid sirens and beer barons."

Lash gave a low whistle.

"But would that type of man commit murder?" he asked.

Cottlefield smiled sadly.

"That," he said, "was before he became a man-god, a priest-avenger, a scourging flame. I imagine if we could glimpse that mousey little man now, in the midst of the lonely ritual when he burns his victims, we'd see a different creature. I can picture him drawn strangely erect and terrible, intoning some horrifying jargon as he moves on the victim of his purge by fire."

"Ugh!" Lash grunted. "You've told the police?"

"No," Cottlefield said. "I saved the tip for you, Lash. After all, you're a

sort of protégé of mine. Use it to your best advantage."

Daggett stood up. He reached across the desk and took the psychiatrist's hand in a firm grip.

"Thanks," he said. "I won't forget this, Cottlefield."

Out in the street a saw-edged gale was whipping scattered snowflakes over the hurrying five o'clock crowd. Lash Daggett, swinging his trim body with a soldier's stride, felt a new buoyancy. Since a year ago when, a fugitive from a South American prison, he had reached home to find himself tagged in the tabloids as a romantic desperado, this was the first real break he had had.

Now he weighed his problem and reached a man of action's quick decision. Playing a lone hand he might win more glory, but loyalty to his brother Sam, who had done so much for him, forbade the thought. He would take his tip to the police. Aside from helping Sam, it certainly should win him the right to collaborate with the law.

There was only one drawback. Publicizing the maniac's identity might send him into hiding. In which case Lash wouldn't be able to take up the trail fresh at the scene of a crime. Not that he wanted to see any more victims, but a fresh trail was important.

Danger-trained through years of adventuring, he acted in quick, intuitive flashes. Spotting a fresh clue to point a trail, outguessing a fugitive's maneuver, detecting instinctively the lie on the lips of a rattled witness—those were the circumstances in which Lash's talents shone.

He swung into the city's main artery that led straight to the Police Building. Appreciatively, Lash sniffed the smell of danger. Fear was a living thing in the streets, a fear of the phantom that struck with unpredictable, senseless blood-lust. Even the snow-dusted cars, crawling and halting to the changing of traffic lights, seemed to share this herd impulse to huddle together.

Lash Daggett came to a sudden halt, bumping the woman ahead of him. A sudden shock had traveled back

through the crowd as a woman's scream knifed the raw air. Then a babel of cries broke out and the mass surged forward again. Lash looked up and gasped in awe.

Across the street and five stories up, a window bearing a doctor's name in gilt lettering had burst into a blaze of green and orange fire. A two-foot ledge ran along below this window, and balanced precariously there lay something that looked like a giant black cocoon. It was the target of a hissing jet of flame from a blow-torch in the hands of a figure leaning from the window!

You could barely see him through the smoke, but the lurid glare on claw-like hands, on the white patch of face around the welder's goggles, made him look like some horrible insect spitting fire upon the prey caught in his web.

For an instant then a paralysis of mute horror held the up-tilted heads of the crowd. Then the smell drifted down—the nauseous odor of cooking flesh. A woman nearby keeled over, and Lash Daggett flung his body forward like a battering ram.

Halfway to the building's entrance a back-surge of bodies caught him like a breaking wave, and amidst the chorus of shrill screams, he saw the thing coming down like a flaming meteor, turning over and over in the air.

It struck the sidewalk like a bug crushed against a windshield, and Lash reached the center of the crowd just as uniformed police began to break through from either side.

Two of them stooped by the ghastly thing that lay on the wet pavement. Two dived into the building's entrance. Seizing his chance, Lash darted in behind them. They took the elevator. He went lunging up the stairs.

CHAPTER II

Framed by the Fiend

LASH DAGGETT shoved through the buzzing crowd in the doctor's waiting room. A wild-eyed nurse had collapsed in a chair. One cop bent

over her while the other battered at an inner door. Lash joined him, slammed his own hard shoulder against the barrier with a shock that flung it open with a ripping crash.

He and the policeman dived into a small operating room. But it was empty. The air reeked with the smell from the gasoline blow-torch, but the grisly killer was gone. They moved into the next room. There was a high-legged bed here, but this room was empty, too. They turned at right angles into an X-ray room. Lash darted to an open window, stared down into the dark narrow canyon of an alley.

The cop who had been rattling the room's only other door, turned.

"Bolted on the inside," he growled. "That window—"

If the killer had escaped that way, besides the risk of a fall, there was the almost certain chance of being seen in the street. Lash sniffed at the sill. Yes, gasoline had dripped there.

He twisted his head about, looked up. Drawing back, he said:

"Quick! We've got to get to those offices above!"

Whirling, they started back. The nurse's hysterical voice reached them before they got back to the operating room.

"But I tell you Dr. Hart was in there alone! The door locked when he closed it behind him. I heard him scream for help, but I couldn't reach him. . . ."

Hart! The name clicked now in Lash's memory. The Sacrificer was running true to form. Hart was a surgeon with a questionable practice.

Daggett legged it into the room, stopped short. The plainclothesmen had arrived, together with his brother and a couple of others. Sam Daggett, a stout, frank-featured man, gave Lash a startled glance.

"How'd you get here, Lash?" he demanded.

"Happened to be on the street," Lash panted. "We've got to get to those offices above, Sam. He climbed out that way. Come on!"

He started across the room, stopped again. The door from the waiting

room had opened and a big-shouldered man was thrusting his way in. It was Police Commissioner Dennison, Lash Daggett's bitterest foe.

"Well, who is it this time?" he growled. Then he saw Lash. He snatched the fat cigar from between his teeth and glared at Sam. "What's Lash doing here? Didn't I tell you—"

Sam colored. "Lash just happened to be on the street," he explained.

"I told you I wouldn't have him associated with this case," Dennison exploded. "With the newspapers already howling bloody murder, you drag in an internationally known criminal!"

Sam's lips tightened as he fought for control.

"He's a licensed cop, Dennison. Give a man a break."

"Give a man a break!" Dennison snarled. "But Lash Daggett is an habitual criminal. He can't go straight!"

Lash saw the danger light in Sam's eye. He stepped in front of him, faced Dennison.

"You've got nothing on me," he said coldly, "and you never will have. But you'll hear from me again."

He turned, went out the door and slammed it behind him.

Taking the stairs again he hurried up to the next floor, verified his guess. The office just above Hart's was vacant. There was an open window overlooking the alley, and a rope ladder fastened to the radiator trailed across the floor. The killer had climbed up here, changed his disguise probably and escaped in the confusion.

Back in the street, Lash pushed through the jabbering mob and gained a side street. Well, there went his collaboration with the police! He glanced at the watch on his wrist, hurried his steps. He had promised to meet Nancy at six.

NANCY ADAIR was a music teacher in the city schools, and it was she more than anyone else who had influenced Lash to settle down. The plan had been that as soon as Lash was able to make a decent living as a private detective, they'd be married. And his dismal failure, Lash

reflected, certainly couldn't be blamed on Nancy.

It was she who had encouraged him at every step, had found him a few scattered clients, among them Cottlefield who, she had hoped, would also be able to tame down Lash's rebellious, roving spirit and trouble-hunting instincts.

Even now, Nancy was carrying on. In her spare time she had been trying to help him dig up some information that might lead to a job with the district attorney's graft investigation which was now in progress. For this purpose she had signed up under an assumed name at Blanco Ornauer's "Hollywood Employment Agency."

This outfit, preying on stage and screen-struck people, many of them young girls, was, Lash believed, the feeder for a series of "shake joints" called dancing academies and operated under protection bought from some official.

The place was on a dingy side street and Lash loitered past, staring through the bleary windows at the hungry-looking "clients" who waited inside. He caught Nancy's eye, sauntered on. After a moment she came out, followed him to the corner. Hooking her arm in his, she snuggled close and gave him that heart-warming smile that never seemed to dim.

Lash's hard face softened as he looked down at her proudly. What a lovely little trick she was! Snow dusted against the jaunty little pillbox on her head, melted in the smoulder of her mahogany-colored curls. Gray-green eyes laughed up into his as she whispered excitedly:

"Got something for you this time, Lash."

"A kiss maybe?"

"That and something else, too—a tip."

"I'll take two kisses instead," Lash said. "I'm fed up on tips."

Nancy gave him a quick, anxious look. She knew his moods. She remained silent as they walked the short distance to his office. It was a cubbyhole on the second floor of a dingy old building in the neighborhood.

They climbed the stairs, started down the dim hall, but stopped as a

short, muffled figure came scuttling toward them. A red nose peeped above a muffler, watery, pouchy eyes blinked under ragged brows, and from somewhere in the folds of the muffler a trembling voice sputtered.

"You're Lash Daggett, aren't you? Thought so. I been waiting for you for hours—literally hours. I want you to help me, Mr. Daggett. I'm George Darby, in the insurance business over in Hempstead."

He extended a cold, flabby hand which Lash took, asking:

"What's your trouble, Mr. Darby?"

"Why, I—" Darby stammered, "I've been seeing ghosts."

"Ghosts!" Lash quickly classified that quivering, fear-stricken face as a potential customer for Cottlefield. Darby seemed to divine his thought.

"Now don't get me wrong," he rattled. "I'm not crazy, though I admit I'm a nervous type. It may not really be ghosts I've been seeing. I've got enemies, and it's possible that—"

Lash looked at him sadly. A persecution mania was just as bad as seeing ghosts.

"I'm sorry I can't go into it with you now," he said. "But I have a pressing engagement. If you'll leave your number I'll call you later about an appointment."

Darby was obviously disappointed, but he swallowed his defeat. He handed Lash a card and shuffled out.

"Don't fail me, now, Mr. Daggett," he called back. "I need a tough man in this matter. A very tough man."

Inside Lash's office, the private detective and Nancy stood warming their hands at the gas heater.

"It seems to me," Nancy said, "that you're beginning to treat customers in a rather unbecoming way, Hawkshaw."

LASH shrugged. "I'm about ready to toss it up, Nancy. 'Give a dog a bad name—' It certainly works out that way when a man actually has been a gun-runner and a guest in some of this hemisphere's worst jails. But, look here. We can go to Mexico. I know a man who'll give me a job managing a mine—"

"And the next thing you'll be mixed

up in some intrigue farther south." Nancy shook her head. "Nothing doing. You listen to me now while I tell you about Blanco Ornauer."

Ornauer, a former vice-ring muscle man, was the operator of the Hollywood Employment Agency. Lash told her to go ahead.

"Well," Nancy said, "I signed up with them and they handed me a line about starting me off with a stand-in job for some movie star. Of course they collected the ten dollar registration fee."

"Chicken feed," Lash said. "Ornauer's not just interested in those fees."

"I know. But wait. This evening I was standing close to the desk and saw Ornauer dial a number on the telephone. He said, talking low, 'This is Ornauer. I'm trying to attend to that matter just as quickly as I can. But you know how it is.' He listened a minute, then said, 'Say, gimme a little time, can't you?' He listened some more, looked worried, then hung up. Now what does that suggest?"

"It could," Lash said, "be a pay-off overdue. If we knew who—"

Her eyes got big and bright.

"But I do!" she exclaimed. "I saw him dial that number and remembered it. Then, on a hunch, I started looking up the numbers of all city and county officials. That number was Police Commissioner Dennison's!"

"Dennison!" Lash sat up with a start. "And if Ornauer's paying off to Dennison—"

It seemed too good to be true, but Lash was a man to grab at every chance. If he could get the goods on Dennison, the D. A. was a square-shooter who wouldn't hesitate to bring the axe down on Dennison's neck.

"What's that number of Dennison's?" he asked.

Nancy told him. He picked up the phone, dialed it. Dennison had just got back from the crime scene.

"This is Lash Daggett," the private detective said silkily to the police commissioner, "but don't repeat it. I told you you'd hear from me later. Well, here's a tip. I've got some information I think would interest the D. A.'s graft investigators. Some

dope about your business with Blanco Ornauer, for instance."

Dennison cleared his throat nervously.

"Go on," he said.

"Well," Lash said, "I don't want to act hastily. I mean you might like to talk it over with me. If so, I'll be here in my office alone, until eight o'clock."

He heard Dennison swallow.

"Okay," the law official agreed. "I'll see you there."

Lash cradled the phone, grinned at Nancy. But she was frowning.

"Lash," she said, "he won't fall for that. He'll try to buy you off."

"Why not?" Lash bluffed. "He thinks I'm a crook and he knows I'm smart enough to have the goods on him. Anyhow, he can't afford to chance it." He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. "Now, you scram. Go home to your apartment and I'll call you there when the interview is over."

She went finally, reluctantly.

As for Lash, he had never had any illusions about the matter. Dennison wouldn't try to buy him off. Bump him off would be more like it. That was what he had deliberately invited by setting a murder trap and using himself for the bait!

Lash stared out his door for a moment after Nancy left. The building was an old one, housing mostly hard luck doctors, cheap dentists, and the like. The transoms in the hall were all dark now, the dingy hall deserted. Swell place for a murder. He left the door unlocked and went back to his desk. The telephone rang. It was Cottlefield.

"How did the police take that tip about Clovis?" he asked.

"I didn't tell them," Lash said. "You can tell them and they can run him down themselves."

COTTLEFIELD seemed mildly disappointed. After he had hung up, Lash took his big S&W Magnum revolver from its shoulder holster and examined it carefully. Then he sat with the gun in his lap, facing the door.

It was characteristic of Lash Dag-

gett that his faculties never coordinated so smoothly as in situations of danger. Like a sand-hog keyed to the pressure of high air, he worked best under tension. Now he sat with his blood pleasantly a-tingle and summed up the possibilities.

To get the goods on Dennison would be its own reward, of course. But the thing didn't end there. Dennison might be more than a cog in the wheel of political graft. He might even be the racket syndicate's head. If Lash could grab the hood sent to kill him, he knew some unpleasant but effective ways of persuading a man to talk. And such a songbird delivered to the D. A. would get him a Special Investigator's job, at least.

But an hour passed and nothing happened. Lash hadn't expected Dennison to waste any time. Was he waiting for him to leave, walk into an ambush? Lash decided to force the issue. He slammed his desk top down noisily, walked to the door, snapped off the light. He turned the knob, pushed. The door was locked!

This gave him a shock. While he had waited, someone had sneaked noiselessly down the hall, inserted a key and locked the door. Uncanny! He stood listening. Then the skin behind his ears gave a tightening twitch. From outside came a low hissing sound. He glanced up with a start. Colored flames were dancing against the transom glass over the door!

Lash's first thought was that the building had been fired to trap him. But as he grabbed a chair, mounted it and raised himself on tiptoe to stare out, the sight that met his eyes hit him like a blow.

The end of the dark hall looked like a little corner of hell. Beyond the bluish, smoke-wreathed glare of the blow-torch, was the bent shape of a man who seemed to be the same one seen in Hart's window. Small and old, he wore baggy overalls which hung slackly from his slight frame. But despite the greasy cap and the welder's goggles, he looked like a devil incarnate.

In the eerie glow his pallid face stood out strangely intent, horribly

smiling, as he played the spitting, crackling flame over a smouldering human body that lay outstretched on the floor like a sacrifice on a heathen altar. That the little fiend was Martin Clovis, Lash Daggett could not doubt.

Mastering his first shock, Lash smashed the transom glass with his pistol and fired. But he was in no position to take careful aim, and the shots went wild. Dropping down, he grabbed up the chair and slammed it against the door. A panel crashed out. He thrust a hand through, turned the key, quickly shoved the door open.

But he didn't step out. He dropped to one knee, poked his head and his gun forward cautiously. The hall was dark again. Even the ceiling light was out now. The reek of smoke and burnt flesh filled the air.

Holding his flashlight high, he sent a beam streaking down the hall. It sprayed the horror on the floor, showed the open window beyond with a thin mist of snowflakes whipping past.

The killer was gone.

Hurrying to the window, Lash stared out. A fire escape led down into soggy darkness. He turned back to the blackened, half cremated corpse over which green flames were still licking.

The corpse was a big, broad-shouldered man. The features were burned beyond recognition, but there was something vaguely familiar about the square-jawed head, a whisp of coarse sandy hair that had escaped the flames. Squarish, bloated hands were folded on the dead man's chest, as if he had lain down in meek submission to these awful obsequies.

Lash bent nearer. His eyes fell on the blackened signet ring then and a wild surmise flickered in his brain. Stooping, he thrust a hand into the smouldering ash of the coat, jerked out a half burned billfold, flipped it open. His jaw dropped as he stared at the name on the scorched identification card:

ROY M. DENNISON
Commissioner of Police

CHAPTER III

The House of Ghosts

IN all his chaotic career, Lash Daggett had never been so utterly taken aback, all his previous calculations wiped out at one stroke. Since his first glimpse of the smiling flame-fiend in the hall, he had gone on the assumption that Dennison, tied up in some way with the Sacrificer, had framed him. The frame seemed obvious still, only Dennison was the murdered plant. What did it mean?

A sound from the darkness of the stairs leading down caused Lash to snap off his flash and move with long, soft strides toward the stair well. Crouching, he peered down. The shadowy shapes of two uniformed policemen showed against the street entrance.

"He said to come up if he didn't get back in twenty minutes," one of them was grumbling.

Lash drew back. So Dennison had brought a couple of officers with him. He must have made them wait in a parked car some distance away, however, or they'd have heard his door crash. But if they caught him here, with Dennison's burned body—

"Maybe we better sneak up," the other cop said.

Lash whirled, staring toward the window at the hall's end. His brain, trained to lightning calculations, signaled a negative. He couldn't make it in time without being heard. Caught on the fire escape, he'd be a clean target for their revolvers.

Already their feet were on the stairs. Lash ducked back behind the partition that closed off the stair well. He crouched there like a poised puma.

The stairs creaked under heavy feet. Halfway up there was a halt, a panting whisper.

"What's that smell?"

The beam of a flash lanced up. Feet pounded again with a rush, reached the landing, stopped as the flash beam came level with the floor.

"Holy mackerel! A burned corpse—The Sacrificer!"

Pistols scraped from holsters. The cop in the lead wasn't three feet away. His flash started swinging to the right. Lash dived.

Veteran of countless street battles in the black alleys of South American towns, Lash knew the value of timing and the lightning stroke. His charge caught the first cop from behind, doubled his knees like a hinge. Falling back over Lash's shoulder, his gun crashed wildly as he lurched against the cop behind him.

Streaking under his flailing feet, Lash spun, struck again like the rebound of a whip. The second cop, his balance recovered, slashed out with a blazing gun. But Lash's rush flung him past danger. His arms whipped round the cop's middle, bore him back. With a crash they struck the stairs, rolled, came to a rest briefly with Lash on top.

Disentangling his arms, Lash rapped the barrel of his pistol in a vicious swipe against the cop's skull. Then he swung around in a crouch, cleared the rest of the steps in one leap, and ducked into the street with a slug singing past his ear.

Frightened pedestrians scattered as he emerged, ducked for cover as he loped for the alley, skidded in, and plunged for the back lot where his car was parked. He got the cold engine going just as a police whistle shrilled at the alley's opening and orange-colored rockets started blasting the dark.

Slugs rattled like hail against his fenders as the old but powerful car jumped forward. He didn't take a good full breath until the stream of traffic was swirling comfortably about him and he was heading for the outskirts of town.

To one unacquainted with Lash Daggett's tactics and temperament, what he had just done might have seemed the sheerest folly. But the first tenet in his philosophy was: Keep your hands free. Whether or not Dennison's murder could be pinned on him was one thing, but the inescapable fact that he would be clapped in a jail cell was another. And that someone had attempted to frame him seemed clear. But who?

OBVIOUSLY someone who had known that Dennison was coming to his office, someone Dennison had told of his errand. Blanco Ornauer? It seemed possible. And that meant that Ornauer, or the ring he was tied up with, must be using the madman Clovis as a tool. An extortion racket possibly. Maybe Dennison had been mixed up in it, too, but had become too dangerous to the others who had decided to bump him off, framing Lash at the same time.

Lash wished he could talk to Nancy, question her further about Ornauer and the agency. But to go to her apartment, even to telephone her now, might put her on a spot. The police would be looking for that. Better wait until things had cooled off a bit.

Cruising dark streets while he pondered his next move, Lash's thoughts returned to Clovis. Did his family still live in the suburb of Hempstead, where the university was located? Hempstead! That was where the nervous little man who saw ghosts lived. The little man, what was his name — Darby? — might know something about the mad professor or his relatives. And Darby's place might make a good hideout, provided he got there before Darby learned the alarm was out for him.

It was only a ten minute drive to Hempstead and Lash easily located the address printed on the card Darby had given him. It was a neat little cottage, isolated from its neighbors and facing a park.

A sign in the front yard read:

GEORGE P. DARBY
Insurance and Rentals

The house was dark. Nevertheless, Lash stepped to the front door and rapped vigorously. At first there was no answer. Then, after a furtive movement inside, the door opened a crack. A flashlight blazed, and just below it the barrel of a shotgun poked out.

"Oh! You, Daggett?" a voice gasped with relief. Watery eyes behind the flashlight's glare widened with pleased surprise. "So you didn't forget me? Come in, man, come in."

Lash stepped in. Darby closed and locked the door behind him.

"I told you I'm badly scared," he said nervously, "and I'm not taking any chances, Mr. Daggett. I live alone, and a man who's poked his nose into an insurance-murder plot has got to walk wary, I can tell you."

"Insurance-murder plot?" Lash said. "I thought it was ghosts you were afraid of."

"There are ghosts, too," Darby said mysteriously. "I was afraid to tell you anything this afternoon, but now I'm going to spill it."

He led the way into a front office room. The only light here came from a fire in the hearth and all the shades were closely drawn. Darby motioned Lash to a chair, then sat down and fondling his gun nervously, plunged into his story.

It seemed he had been approached a month or so ago by a woman who wanted to take out a large insurance policy on her sister. But something about the woman had made Darby suspicious. He had turned her down, and the woman had left after dropping an angry warning to him to keep his mouth shut. Darby had brooded about this, had felt it his duty to warn the woman's sister.

She was a young woman by the name of Kate Bailey who had come to Hempstead recently and opened a rest home for tuberculars. It was just across the park and Darby, afraid to approach her by day, had sneaked across the park one night. But he hadn't been able to get up the nerve to go through with his plan.

He repeated the attempt several nights. Then he began to notice shadowy figures pacing the park, who ducked out of sight at his approach. Once a light had fallen on one of these muffled shapes and he had been horrified to see that the man had no face at all—just a bare white patch where his face should have been. Darby, convinced that the phantom shapes had been shadowing him, went home, locked his doors and crawled into bed with his gun beside him.

But later, hearing a sound outside his window, he had snapped on his flashlight suddenly and had seen the

face of a dead man peering in.

"You mean, I suppose," Lash asked at this point, "that the face looked like a dead man's—like a corpse?"

DARBY'S eyes narrowed.

"No," he said, "I don't mean that. Maybe I shouldn't tell you, because you'll say I'm crazy. But I knew that man was dead, Mr. Daggett, because I'd seen his picture in the papers just the day before. He was Caps Gallagher, the racketeer who was killed by the Sacrificer!"

Lash Daggett sat up straight, his eyes boring into Darby's twitching face.

"You're sure? But how can you explain—"

"I can't," Darby said. "But I know this. Either I saw Gallagher's ghost or I saw Gallagher himself. If it was Gallagher, then he wasn't killed by the Sacrificer. And if he wasn't, what then? Most likely he must have been in with the Sacrificer. They must be running a syndicate, killing people to let their relatives get the insurance. And Gallagher, being the brains of it, eliminated himself from suspicion by faking his own murder!"

"You might have the right explanation at that," Lash said. He stood up, reached for his hat.

"Where are you going?" Darby asked.

"I'm going to have a look at that rest home across the park."

"But they'll know I gave them away!" Darby wailed. "They'll come here and kill me!"

"If you can't protect yourself with locked doors and a shotgun," Lash said, "you'd better go to a nursing home." He went out.

With his coat lapels turned up and his hat pulled low, Lash headed across the dark stretch of the park. The light flurry of snow had stopped, and a clammy fog hung in the air. Treading quietly on the snow-dusted grass, he reached the street on the park's far side, moved along in tree shadows, peering at the houses facing him.

One was a two-story brick apartment building surrounded by trees, and he started across toward it. But just then an ambulance came skim-

ming around a corner and drew up before it. Two men leaped out, opened the back end and slid out a stretcher on which lay a shape covered by a blanket. They carried it in.

After a few moments they returned. But not alone. This time two men and a woman came with them. All were muffled in coats with high-turned collars, but as they came under the light above the door, Lash stiffened and his eyes narrowed. Their faces were invisible, hidden by what looked like white flat masks up to the eyes!

Each carried a bag and they followed the two men from the ambulance who helped them into the back where the stretcher had been, closed the doors and drove off.

WELL, there were Darby's phantoms. But patients in a tubercular rest home don't wear their faces bandaged. The wild conjecture that had flashed into Lash's mind was taking shape now.

Heart thudding with excitement, he drew back into the shadows, walked to the corner, crossed the street and proceeded to the alley that ran past the back of the rest home.

Reaching the place, he sneaked past a double garage and into the shadows of the trees in the yard. Several of the building's windows were lighted, but the shades were all drawn. But there was one on the ground floor whose shade lacked about an inch of meeting the sill. He crawled over to the wall, crept to the window and cautiously lifted his eyes.

He looked into a small white-walled room furnished with a high bed, medicine stand and dresser. The bed was only about a foot from the window, and a thin-faced man lay there, gowned shoulders and arms above the sheet holding a newspaper which he was reading.

One glance at the man's face was enough for Lash, who had glimpsed it in a photograph of a family group on a desk in a certain office that afternoon.

Reaching up slowly he made a scratching sound with his fingernails

on the screen. The man in the bed, startled, thrust his head toward the window. Lash waited a moment, scratched again, ducked down out of sight.

Above him he could hear the window being cautiously opened. Thrusting a hand under his coat, he brought out his revolver. The window was open a good foot and a half now. Like a jack-in-the-box, Lash rose, gun focused on the staring white face which had suddenly frozen rigid.

"All right, Dr. Hart," he grated. "One chirp out of you and you get it between the eyes. Open that screen, then raise your hands."

Hart didn't let out a sound; he seemed to be having enough trouble breathing. Shaky fingers reached out and unlatched the screen, then reached for the ceiling. Lash pulled the screen open, lifted himself easily over the sill.

Keeping an eye on Hart, he lowered the window again, pulled the shade to the bottom. Then he backed to the door and with his free hand, shoved an iron chair under the knob. He stepped sideward to the closet next, reached in and pulled out a pair of pants and an overcoat.

"Get into these things," he ordered under his breath. "You're coming along with me."

"What's the idea?" Hart jittered. "What do you want?"

"I want you, Dr. Hart," Lash told him. "I'm going to take you to a quiet place where you can supply the missing details in this murder for insurance swindle."

Hart began pulling the pants on, while Lash continued in a cold whisper:

"I might have known all along that our Sacrificer was too inhumanly clever to be working from the outside. I might have guessed he was in cahoots with his supposed victim. I doubt if you used the little madman at all except in cases such as the set-up where a corpse supposed to be Dennison was burned before my door. A pretty slick scheme you had.

"A corpse, already burned, was hidden near the place it was to be found. It could be dragged out in a jiffy, a

little gasoline sprinkled on it, and lighted to give the appearance of a fresh burning. This could be done by the supposed victim himself. Then he could quietly make his escape. Of course, in your case, you wanted to make a show before the crowd. You might have had the maniac, Clovis, there with you, but I doubt it. My guess is that you donned the disguise yourself, appeared at the window spraying the corpse with the blow-torch, then climbed up to the office above and escaped in a different disguise."

Stuffing the gown into his pants, Hart asked in a shaky croak:

"How'd you find this place?"

"Never mind that," Lash said. "But you should have been more careful about letting your patients take their nightly walks in the park with their faces bandaged up. That was a dead give-away. I guess you've been performing the facial surgery on the others, and I suppose you called in some other crook surgeon to do the work on your own pan."

Hart had slipped on the coat, stood shivering in his bare feet.

"Look here," he whined, "give me a break. I was forced into this, they made me—"

"You were forced into it," Lash said coldly, "by your own criminal practices. Like the rest of them you were trying to escape an ugly past. I imagine someone had the goods on you for the sort of operations you've been performing. With your face altered and the insurance paid to your wife, you'd have faded away and started again somewhere else."

"My wife's innocent!" Hart gasped. "She doesn't know—"

"I imagine that's true," Lash interrupted. "Probably true in the other cases, too. The innocent beneficiaries probably identified those bodies in good faith. Only later they were to learn of the ghastly hoax. Then it would be too late. Like it or not, they would have to keep quiet or betray a loved one to the law. They wouldn't know that murder was involved."

"Murder?" Hart gulped. "No! The bodies were supplied by grave robbers."

"We'll see about that," Lash said, "when you squeal on your pals. I doubt if you had the brains to think the thing up. A clever scheme, spotting people like you who were faced by ruin and disgrace and failure, showing them how to escape it all, change their identities and feather their nests with fat insurance checks. Get into those shoes now. We're going out that window."

He stopped, as a gentle rap had sounded on the blocked door.

"Get to the window!" Lash whispered.

Shoving Hart ahead of him, he reached the window, flung it up.

"Out with you! And no tricks!"

Hart scrambled out. He struck the ground, straightened, lifting his arms cautiously in the air. Lash poked his head out to make sure the coast was clear.

He never saw what hit him, but it must have been a sandbag. There wasn't much pain. Just one quick twinge at the base of his brain, then a heave forward that sent him floating off into darkness.

CHAPTER IV

In the Hands of Death

DAGGETT had a dull headache when he came to his senses, but that wasn't what worried him. What worried him was the fact that he had momentarily played the incautious fool and was now in a jam. He lay on a cold, clammy cement floor, his wrists and ankles bound, and utter darkness around him.

A fine place for Lash Daggett to be, especially when he had just unraveled the cleverest insurance swindle he'd ever heard of. He'd had it all so pat that even Hart hadn't been able to deny a detail. Now he quickly ran the other cases through his mind, verifying his conclusions.

Throme, the banker, facing possible embezzlement charges. Eva Langley, disgraced, facing poverty. Young Littleton, with no money of his own, with a bad reputation, no future. Gal-

lagger, the gangster, menaced by the law on one hand and his vengeful enemies on the other. Dennison, faced with exposure and prison. Dr. Hart faced with the same.

No wonder they had welcomed the chance for an out. And cleverest of all was the use of the maniac, Clovis. Aside from detracting attention from the insurance angle, the startling circumstances in which the fake-murders took place had been such as to remove any suspicion that the burned cadavers might not be the persons they were supposed to be. But who had engineered the thing, sold them on the idea, furnished the matching bodies?

Lash couldn't answer that—yet. Besides, in his present situation, an answer wasn't worth much to anyone but himself.

He began to roll his body over and over until he encountered an obstacle—a cement wall. He must be in the basement of the phony rest home, he thought. Rearing up on his knees, he began to inch his way along the wall, looking for an opening. But a sudden sound caused him to drop flat, roll back toward the center of the floor where he had awakened.

He came to a rest, limply, just as a door opened and an electric light snapped on.

Lying still, he stared through slitted eyes, as two men, carrying a stretcher, marched through the sound-proofed door. One was squat and short; the other, thin, sallow, but with the shifty look of a hophead. Both were typical underworld hoods, but it was the stretcher that interested Lash.

They rested it on the floor and he saw that the figure under the sheet was that of a girl. She lay utterly still, with only her closed eyes and her tumbled black hair showing above the covering that hid the rest of her face.

The two thugs stared at her, the thin one with an ugly leer.

"Gosh," he panted, "I'd kinda like to see the old coot go to work on her."

The short one glared at him.

"Nuts, you blasted junkie. He's gotta work alone. One of these days they'll put him to work on you if you hang around starin'. Get out!"

They left, closing the door. Lash

[Turn Page]



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lay with his heart hammering in angry disgust. He understood now. This girl was the next victim. Probably she had been chosen because she resembled the woman who operated this infamous hideout. Things were probably getting a bit too hot, and this woman was going to do a fade-out herself. Was the girl already dead, or—

Lash raised himself, made a move toward her, but dropped flat again as a door in the side of the room opened. This time it was all he could do to repress a start.

Framed in the doorway were two figures. One, the crouched, white-faced little fiend, in greasy coveralls and goggles and with the imbecilic smile on his lips, was holding the now familiar blow-torch. But to Lash, the figure behind him was even more interesting. Thick-set, bull-necked, with white hair, albino eyes and a thin-lipped feral mouth, he was Blanco Ornauer, operator of the Hollywood Employment Agency.

On seeing him Lash realized, with a sick qualm, that the last detail had fallen into place. The Hollywood Agency, purporting to place applicants in jobs "doubling for movie stars," was the trap in which the victims for this ghastly murder-swindle were caught!

He was glad he had told Nancy to go home. Glad he hadn't sent her back to do any more investigating in that vulture's nest! For now Ornauer, with a cunning smile, was lighting the blow-torch. And as its flame hissed out in a blue-green jet, he gave it back to the madman and shoved him into the room.

"Okay, Clovis, there's your next sacrifice," he grumbled.

THE little man, crouched, intent on this prey like like some venomous spider, now turned with a snarl.

"I'm not Clovis!" he said. "Why do you call me Clovis? I have shaken the shell of Clovis off." He straightened, the horrible smile coming back to his watering lips. "I am Tezcatlipoca, the Fiery Mirror of the World, the Avenger, the Purger by Flame of the world's wickedness!"

Ornauer laughed, gave him another shove.

"Okay, Tezcat, have it your way.

But there's a girl who has sinned against her vow."

Raw horror crawled in Lash's mind now as he got the set-up. The little madman must be kept here a prisoner, brought out only on certain occasions for show purposes. Usually it was like this—a lonely sacrifice in this basement hideout. And now Clovis, the maniac-avenger was moving toward another of his fiendish sacraments!

Ornauer watched him a moment. Then even he seemed unable to stomach what was coming. He turned back into the other room, slammed the door behind him and locked it.

There was silence in the cold room now. It seemed to Lash that he could hear the churning of his own blood as the slaving lunatic, holding the spitting blow-torch before him, moved with a slow shuffle toward his sleeping victim.

Sleeping? Lash prayed that she was dead. Gathering his strength for a rolling, kicking rush, he determined to do the best he could. Already his arms had been twisting and straining against the ropes to no avail. But if he could get upright, he might make a hopping rush—

The madman stood above his victim now. He paused, lifted his eyes, and Lash saw in its full horror the beginning of the terrible scene which Cottlefield had hinted at. Foam now flecked the smiling priest-god's lips. He lifted one hand, and strange words whistled between his bared teeth.

"Witness, *Huitzilopochtli!*" he intoned. "Witness, ye black soul-devourers of *Mictlan*. Send forth your bats to take this soul I now deliver into your hands. *Tezcatlipoca* has spoken!"

The horrible names of the bloody Aztec gods rang in Lash's ears like something in a nightmare. Now it was plain in what field of ethnology the mad brain of the old scholar had been arrested.

Groping at a straw of hope, Lash began to rack his mind for details of that ancient religion, scraps of knowledge that had come to him in years of adventuring in Mexico. A memory clicked. *Tezcatlipoca* had been the evil enchanter-god who had tricked

[Turn page]

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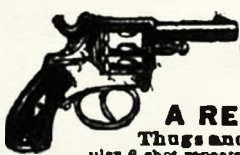


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the Feathered-serpent, *Quetzalcoatl*. If he could think of something to catch the madman's attention—

But just then Clovis stooped. With a flick of his free hand he whipped the sheet away from the figure of his victim.

Lash didn't get it at first. He saw the trim and shapely little body. He saw the bound hands and ankles, the faint signs of breathing which told that the girl was still alive. Then his eyes focused on the sleeping face.

A warning tremor rocked his frame, a current of ice stirred his blood. Wildly his eyes fastened on the black hair, screaming a denial to his mind. It couldn't be Nancy! That hair— But with terror pulping his nerves, he knew it was. The hair had been dyed to make it resemble that other woman's. Nancy hadn't gone home after all; she had gone back to Or-nauer's Employment Agency. Now she was there on the stretcher, drugged, helpless, with the flame already spouting toward her!

AN involuntary scream of rage blasted from Lash's lungs then. With a violent heave, he flung himself to his knees, began tottering upright.

"Stop it, you fiend!" he screamed. "Stop it, or I'll—"

The flame of the blow-torch had already licked down, searing a crimson patch across Nancy's cringing flesh. With a shrill cry of pain she came out from under the drug. But Lash's cry had caused the lunatic to turn. Now his slitted eyes stared with suspicious alarm.

"Who are you?" he snarled, poking the torch's flame toward Lash.

It was an awful moment. All of Lash's strength was gathered for a desperate leap. But suddenly he froze stiff as a statue. Staring back into the crazed man's eyes, he said:

"I am *Quetzalcoatl*, the Feathered-Serpent, Lord of the Dawn, Sender of the Wind!"

He paused. Into the dazed lunacy of Clovis' face had come a flicker of comprehension. It was as if for the first time the little maniac was hearing his own language spoken, hearing a confirmation of his insane pretensions. Quickly Lash seized his advantage. Lifting his eyes he began

to solemnly intone a chant he had heard spoken by an actor in a pageant depicting the ancient ceremonies of the feathered-god:

- O palace glittering with *quetzals*,
- O palace of my beloved birds,
- O palace rilling with rubies . . .

He got no further. In the twisted scholar-brain of Professor Clovis the words had sunk with a familiar ring. He took a step forward, smiled a savage smile.

"The Chant of *Tula!*" he exclaimed. "Then you are *Quetzalcoatl*, my ancient enemy, delivered to me bound for the sacrifice. Praise to the bat-gods of *Mictlan*, who sit under their black sky! You, I shall destroy first!"

CHAPTER V

The Murder Merchant

IT was what Lash had wanted. With set teeth he watched the madman's slow approach. Beyond him, Nancy was sitting up, her face set in a stupor of wordless horror. Now the hot blast of the flame pushed forward by the lunatic was already scorching the vest over Lash's stomach. He gathered his muscles for a charge, and just then the pent-up scream in Nancy's throat burst free.

It didn't stop Clovis, but it startled him into a half turn. For an instant the jet of the fire was deflected at an angle and, ducking his head, Lash launched himself in a blind lunge.

The hot flame of the torch lashed across his left side with withering heat, but his head struck the maniac under the chin. Clovis staggered back, dropping the blow-torch. The weight of Lash's body bore him crashing to the floor.

Raising himself, Lash saw with a surge of hope that the fiend lay still, stunned by the fall. He turned to where the torch lay hissing its jet of flame across the floor. Flinging himself on one side, he backed up to it until the edge of the searing flame blasted against his bound wrists. The torture was indescribable but as he strained he felt the charring rope

[Turn page]

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strands give—break. Rolling away, he thrust flame-scalded hands into his pocket, fished his knife out, ripped his ankles free and sprang up.

Then feet were hammering on the stairs beyond the locked door now. Lash had not expected them to pay much attention to the first screams. They must have heard the screams of burning victims filter through the sound-proofed doors before. But now someone had become suspicious.

Stooping, he snatched up the still hissing torch and ran to the door. He stepped to one side as it opened, then rammed the blow-torch forward. Blanco Ornauer, gun in hand, a look of startled terror on his face, staggered back before the blast. Then, with an oath, his gun came up. But it was too late for Lash to retreat now.

Savagely, he lunged ahead. A bullet jarred against the bone of his left arm. The arm dropped limp, torn and twisted by racking pain. But his lunge carried the spitting flame straight into the albino's fear-distorted face. The gun dropped. Ornauer flung his hands up wildly to shield his eyes, fell back. Lash ducked, dropped the blow-torch, snatched the dropped revolver and sent a bullet ripping into Ornauer's chest.

He straightened as a door at the head of the stairs came open and the two thugs lurched down with guns blazing.

But Lash was in his own element now. Hand to hand fighting in barricaded streets, room to room fighting in stormed fortresses, was old stuff to him. Teeth grinning whitely against his scarred brown face, he flung himself through a hail of lead to the shelter of the doorway, crouched, aimed with the deadly cool accuracy of a man who knows that one steady gun beats a dozen in wild, excited hands.

The thugs on the stairs learned it, too. The first as he clutched convulsively at his belly and pitched forward; the second as, with teeth slammed back into his throat, he sprawled backward.

TAKING a deep breath of the gun-smoky air, Lash rose to his feet. The hot revolver hung limply at his right side. It was too late to jerk it

up when the cool voice behind him commanded:

"All right, Lash, drop it and close the door. Then you can turn. My gun it not aimed at you but at the girl."

It was those last words that took the decision out of Lash's hands. He let the gun fall, kicked the door shut, raised his hands. Then he turned and stared into the coldly smiling face of Anson Cottlefield, the psychiatrist.

"What, no surprise?" Cottlefield chuckled, holding a revolver leveled at the figure of Nancy. "Don't try to tell me you guessed it?"

Staring back at him with level eyes, Lash shrugged.

"Of course I didn't expect to meet you here so soon," he said, "but a few things had occurred to me."

"Such as?" Cottlefield asked easily.

"There needed," Lash answered, "to be a very subtle brain back of all this, a brain capable of considerably more finesse than Blanco Ornauer was capable of. There needed also to be a man in a position to learn the secret misfortunes of prominent people who might welcome a chance to wipe out their identities and start over again with fat sums swindled from the insurance companies."

"A sort of Lord of Nirvana," Cottlefield laughed, "showing the way to well-heeled ease and forgetfulness, eh?"

Lash nodded. "And a psychiatrist of your prominence was eminently equipped for that, hearing as you do the secret confessions of so many troubled hearts. There was also the fact that you were so anxious to use me in establishing the maniac-murder angle, with Clovis the goat, so that you could divert attention from the insurance idea. Also, there was the almost uncanny timing, the anticipation of my moves. But these of course were only general observations. I didn't really decide it was you until I saw Clovis go into his ritual."

"How was that?" Cottlefield asked.

"Remember the description you gave me," Lash said, "of the madman's probable procedure? Well, Cottlefield, there were many ancient religions, many rituals of sacrifice. It was a little too clairvoyant for you to have so accurately described the exact pro-

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cedure of Clovis tonight—even to the lifted hand, the intoned jargon. It suggested to me that you had actually seen it done."

Cottlefield laughed. "Splendid," he applauded. "I knew you were a fighter. Now I see you have a brain, too. Incidentally you've done a wonderful job for me tonight."

"By liquidating your assistants?"

"Quite. I knew you were good at that. It's one reason I wanted to keep you interested in the case."

"Now, however," Lash said, "I'm only in your way. Everybody's been killed off but your customers. You've sent them to another hideout. You've probably taken a good cut of the insurance money and you'll continue to bleed them indefinitely. Now you plan to kill Nancy and me and make it look like a fight to the finish took place here."

He glanced at Clovis, still lying unconscious.

"A slug from my gun will finish him off, of course," he continued. "But there's a difficulty, Cottlefield. Most of your victims, I imagine, were picked by Ornauer because they had no relatives and friends. But Nancy has a friend who knew she went to Ornauer's agency tonight to take a job doubling for some actress."

"Well?" Cottlefield asked. "That will only lead to Ornauer. No one else knew of my connection with him. No, Lash, I don't take chances. That's why I decided to end this game now and turn to something else. I don't overplay my hand." He paused and the light of egomania glittered in his eyes. "With my brain, Lash, and your genius for action, we'd make a great pair!"

"Is that an offer?" Lash asked.

Cottlefield studied him intently.

"No. I once hoped for something like that," he said. "I never wanted your anti-social complex cured, but," he looked sadly at Nancy, "this young lady seems to have succeeded in spite of me."

NANCY broke into sobs.

"Oh, Lash, it's all my fault," she wailed. "I should have gone home like you said instead of going back to Ornauer's place."

"Stop it!" Lash silenced her. "If

you'll swear to keep your mouth shut, I may take Cottlefield up."

With a reproving smile, the psychiatrist shook his head.

"No use, Lash. Your bluff doesn't take me in." Holding his gun steady, he began to step sideward, getting both Nancy and Lash in a direct line. Lash knew it was coming then, knew that his last resource had failed. Bracing himself for a desperate leap that would throw his body to the protection of Nancy, he suddenly jerked his eyes toward one of the basement's small blinded windows.

Cottlefield heard it, too—a gentle rapping on the glass pane. He frowned as a voice began to call:

"Daggett, Daggett, are you in there?"

"Who's that?" Cottlefield hissed under his breath.

Lash thought fast. "It's my taxi driver," he whispered. "I left him with his taxi over in the park. I told him a man had hired me to investigate a haunted house."

"Then get rid of him!" Cottlefield snarled, "or I'll send a bullet into that girl's stomach this minute. Tell him something to make him leave."

Lash nodded. "Darby?" he called. "That you?"

"Yeah," the quavering voice answered. "I got a little worried and when no one answered my knock—"

"Oh," Lash said, "there's nobody here but me and the ghost. You were right about that ghost after all. It was just—"

It was as far as he got. The look of relief on Cottlefield's face changed to angry alarm as glass crashed and the shade fell from its fastenings. Wildly he flung his gun about, but already the barrel of a shotgun was rammed in.

A pale, twitching face showed behind it. Then for an instant the smoky blast of an explosion swallowed up the scene and Cottlefield pitched backward, his shirtfront riddled.

Then George Darby was kicking his way inside. Dropping to the floor, he straightened, gazed in horror at the bullet-filled, gasping shape of Cottlefield.

"Gosh!" he moaned, his lips twitching, his watery eyes rolling, "Gosh, I
[Turn page]

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killed him. I got excited and let both barrels off at once—”

Lash dropped down beside Cottlefield, raised his head. The psychiatrist's dying eyes rolled, blood trickled from his mouth.

“You win, Daggett,” he gasped. “I knew—I was no match for you—in a fight . . . But I never—thought you'd outwit me . . .” It ended in a rattle. His head fell limp.

Lash stood up. Long strides carried him to Nancy's side. His injured arm was a torment of pain, but he managed to shuck off his coat, cover her and draw her gently to him.

Darby, shaking all over, was still goggling at the body of Cottlefield.

“Should I have done it, Daggett?” he gulped. “I didn't know, but when you said I had been right about the ghosts, I guessed— And well, when I saw him with the gun, I let go. What you said about me tonight stuck in my craw, Daggett. I decided I'd been a coward long enough.”

Lash laughed grimly. “Don't worry, Darby, you're a hero now. You just killed the Sacrificer.”

“The Sacrificer!” Darby's jaw dropped. “A hero? Me?” His face resumed its habitual expression of alarm. “You mean cameras, reporters? Gosh! I'll have to lock my doors sure enough now!”

Smiling, Lash turned and began unfastening Nancy's bonds.

“Yes,” he said, “and I'm mighty glad to have you here to share the responsibility, Darby.” He sighed. “My brother, Sam, will be making cracks about my loose gunplay again.”

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

MURDER BEACH

A Gripping Complete Novelet
of Werewolf Mystery

By **WARD HAWKINS**

MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Concluded from page 13)

was getting on my nerves and I couldn't sleep—so we had to move."

Recently, Mrs. Byrd related how Surles woke them up at night, knocking on the door. "We could see him just as plain as daylight and he kept coming back every night."

Another family, Mr. and Mrs. Alonzo Williams, moved into the place a short time ago. The same thing happened, so they told Colonel O. P. Shell. Surles came back to haunt the place and now the Williams family has pulled up and gone.

Yes, "there are stranger things in heaven and earth" than philosophy would indicate!

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dear Chakra:

I frequently dream of standing on a mountain overlooking palm trees and water and see an old man in ancient garb reading a scroll before an altar. What does this portend?

Arthur Lance.

Dear Mr. Lance: That either through heritage or reincarnation you were associated with law enforcement and that you would succeed in the profession of law. This is a common dream of those who have been great lawyers, or should be. If you can't be a lawyer, try the police force.

Dear Chakra:

I live near New York. Can you tell me of anyone in New York who has some authentic spirit photographs?

John Seldor.

Dear Mr. Seldor: Write to Dr. Hereward Carrington, 45 Grove St., New York City, or Harry Villiers, 147 West 75th St., New York City. Both men have excellent collections and they may let you see them.

Dear Chakra:

What is the best way to remove the cause of a haunted house?

Alice Beacon.

Dear Miss Beacon: Remove any metal such as iron beds, candlesticks, door knockers and irons, etc.—then repaint the house after a thorough washing and fumigation. This works in practically every case. Old metal attracts psychic vibrations.

Dear Chakra:

I have heard about a method, I think it is Yogi, of inducing sleep by opening and shutting the eyes. What is this mystic method?

Tilford McBride.

Dear Mr. McBride: Recline first on left side for five minutes and then on your right. Fix your gaze on some dim object in the room. Inhale deeply and shut your eyes. As you exhale, open your eyes and look at the object. Repeat this 13 times and you should be asleep. If not, repeat it and keep your eyes shut every other exhalation. This is an old Hindu method.

CHAKRA.

MYSTERY-SCOPES

(Appears in Every Issue of
THRILLING MYSTERY)

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28x4.25-20	1.85	6.50-20	2.35
28x4.50-20	1.85	7.00-20	2.60
28x4.75-20	1.85	7.50-20	2.85
28x5.00-20	1.85	8.00-20	3.10
28x5.25-20	1.85	8.50-20	3.35
28x5.50-20	1.85	9.00-20	3.60

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28x4.25-20	2.35
28x4.50-20	2.60
28x4.75-20	2.85
28x5.00-20	3.10
28x5.25-20	3.35
28x5.50-20	3.60

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Size	Three Tubes
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28x4.25-20	3.75
28x4.50-20	4.00
28x4.75-20	4.25
28x5.00-20	4.50
28x5.25-20	4.75
28x5.50-20	5.00

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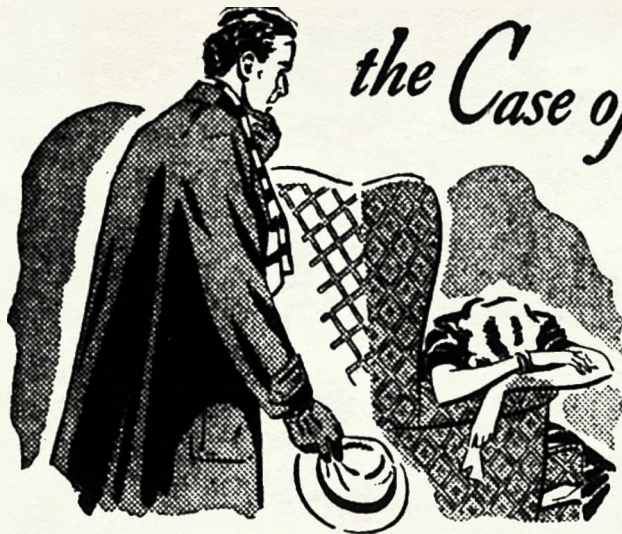
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the Case of the Crying Wife

1 Ann doesn't cry easily—but that night I found her in tears! "I can't help it," she sobbed. "All the things we were going to do—buy a car, build a home—remember? And here we are—married three years, and just barely making ends meet! I thought our dreams might come true—but it's no use." I made up my mind right then to "have it out" with the boss.



2 "Look here!" he said. "I can't pay you more unless you're worth more! And frankly, John, you lack the *training* a bigger job needs. Ever hear of the International Correspondence Schools?"



3 When I learned the boss was a former I.C.S. student, I signed up *quick!* And what a difference it made in my work! I'd never realized until then how *little* I knew about the business.



4 I'm happy, and Ann's happy, and I guess the boss is happy. (At least I've had two "raises" in the last year!) And here's the very same coupon that I mailed, staring you in the face!

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