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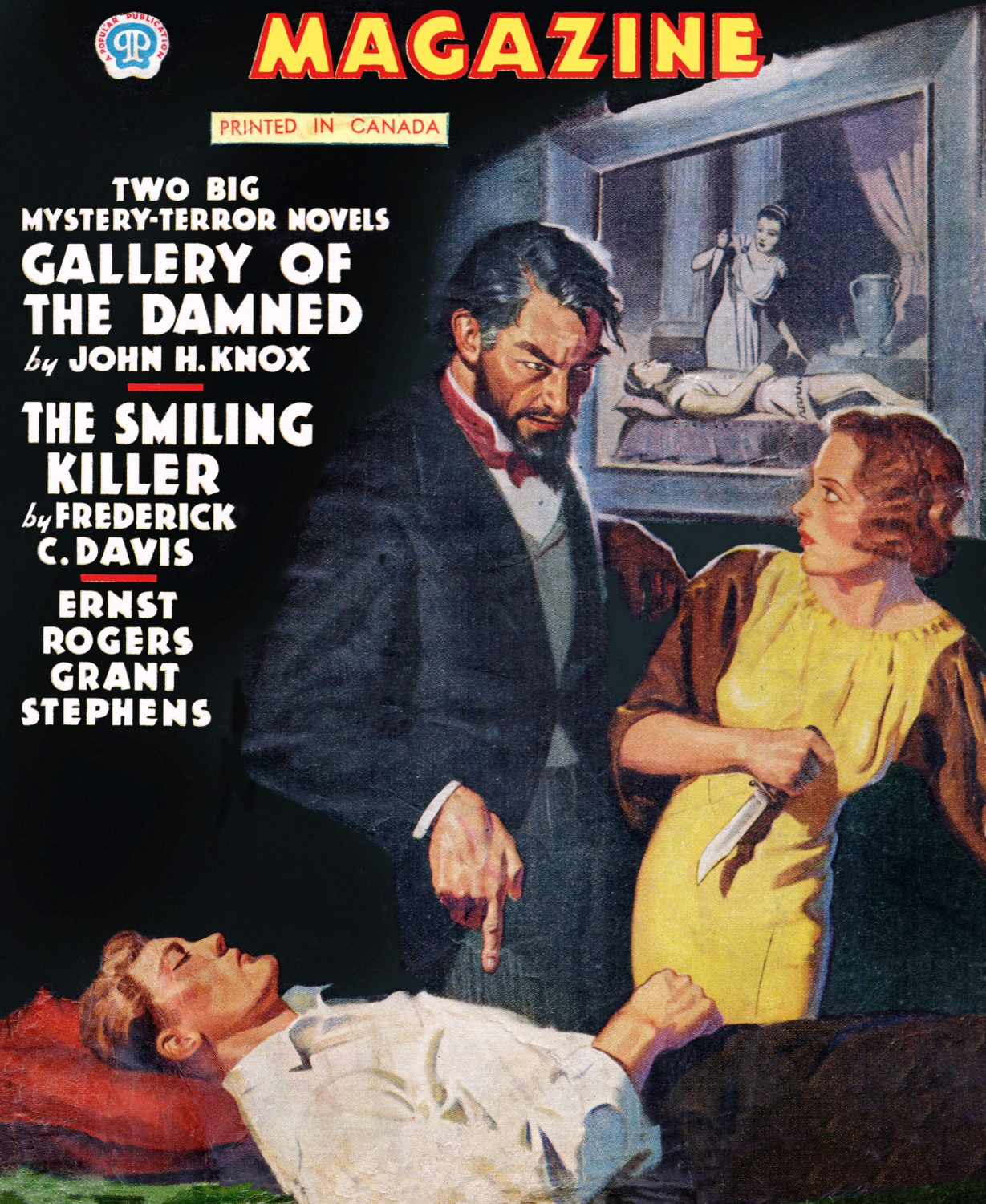
GALLERY OF THE DAMNED

by JOHN H. KNOX

THE SMILING KILLER

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DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Ten

January, 1936

Number Two

TWO FULL-LENGTH MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELS

- Gallery of the Damned**.....By John H. Knox 8
The greatest criminals of past ages were stalking the earth again, clothed in the flesh of innocent moderns. Would Guy Deraf and Frances Mormar succeed in tracking down the fiend responsible—or themselves develop the evil passions of some long-dead, monstrous human beings?
- The Smiling Killer**.....By Frederick C. Davis 48
Though with his own eyes Steve Brent had seen the master of the rending thunder at his hellish work, his frantic accusations resulted only in branding him with the stigma of insanity—leaving his sweetheart unprotected from the man all others trusted!

TWO BLOOD-CHILLING MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

- Substitute Corpses**By Wayne Rogers 86
Do you wish for your beloved dead to return? But suppose they did—demanding, as in this eerily gripping tale, that you take their place in the grave?
- Hell's Thirsty Children**.....By Garry Grant 108
Richard Wickland feared that the hell-born lure of her warm, white body might be stronger than his will—but even then he had not guessed the terrible strength of the children of the Pit!

SPINE-TINGLING TERROR TALES

- Death Dines Out**.....By Paul Ernst 37
There are some thrills one may not experience—and continue to live!
- Gift of Cain**.....By Joel Stephens 74
The possessor may kill with impunity—but at a price no man can afford to pay!
- Last Call for McQuade**.....By Henry Treat Sperry 104
High above the street McQuade awaited the woman he had introduced to death!
- AND—
- Dark Council**.....A Department 127

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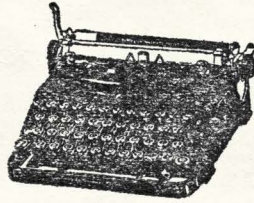
Statement of ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of March 3, 1933, of Dime Mystery Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1935. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Dime Mystery Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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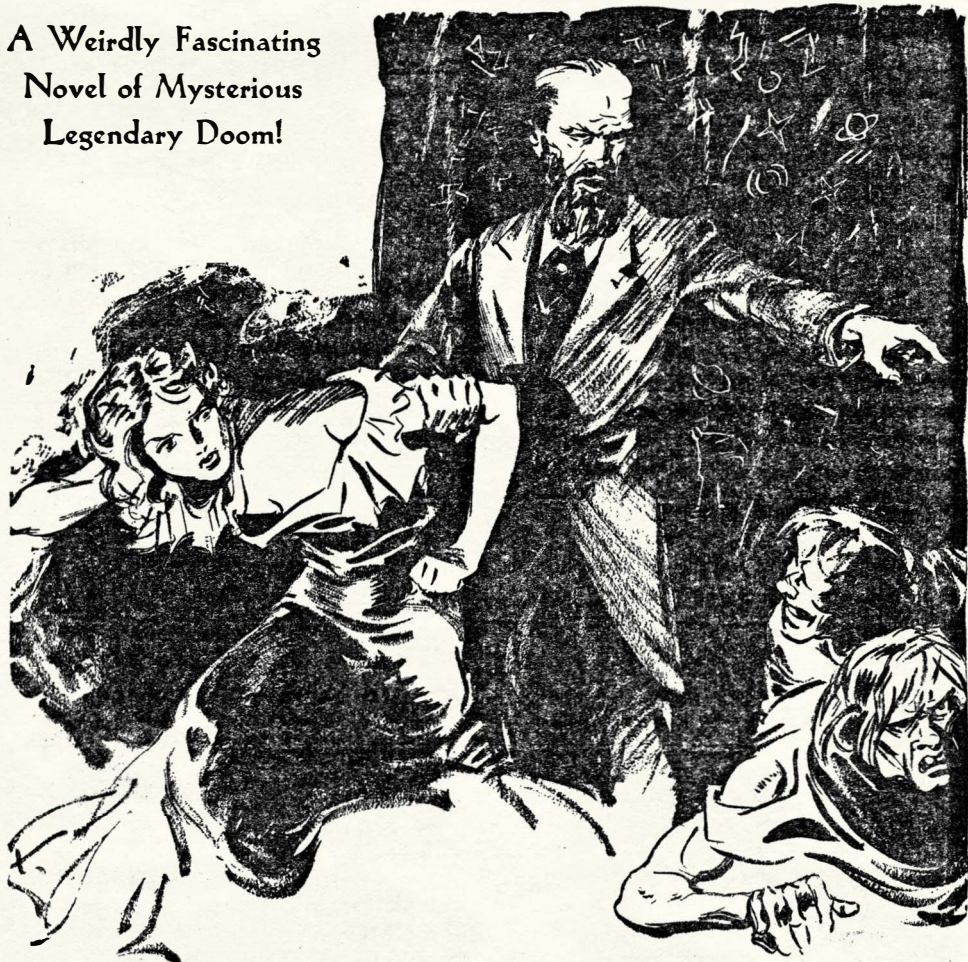
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GALLERY of the DAMNED

by JOHN KNOX

(Author of "Girl Into Mummy," etc.)

THERE were six of us in the room—six men and the dead thing that had been a man. There was something else in that room too—terror! *Terror*—no longer an abstraction, but a live thing that coiled under the diaphragm and sucked the heart and courage from a man. We didn't look at each other's eyes.

Herman Tyrone was there. He was the City Librarian, and my boss, and they had called him in on the case for reasons which weren't yet entirely clear. Chief

of Police Lee Teed was there, and Mayor Blythe, and Police Commissioner Gregg Savage, and a big hulking figure in the doorway—Sergeant Veal—whom you'd have thought a massacre wouldn't shock, but who now looked like a fat kid who's eaten too many green apples.

The dusk hung like a fuzzy blanket against the window, and a few discouraged snowflakes fluttered past against the grey-ness. I looked out over the soot-fouled roofs of tenements, over mucky courtyards

Like a pageant of crime's crimson history, they came—those sinisterly celebrated figures from out the past. Judas, the betrayer; Nero, the torturer; de Medici, the poisoner. In the bodies of half a hundred innocent moderns, they were stalking the earth again, leaving bloody mementos of their return. Would Guy Deray and Francis Mormar, trying desperately to uncover the bearded fiend behind those wholesale slayings, themselves develop the evil passions of some long-dead, monstrous humans?



plotched with leperous patches of dirty snow, and I saw the long chalk smudge of the viaduct with its fleet sparks of light flashing and vanishing. And I seemed to see the intangible something that brooded in the room became huge and monstrous, extending the shadow of its vulture wings over a whole city, where from behind locked doors men scuttled furtively at a newsboy's wailing cry. "*Mutilated Body Found. . . . Death Fiends Invent New Horror. . . .*" And there was wonder and terror on stricken, bewildered faces.

These things went through my mind because I had turned away, leaned on the sill, stared out. There had been a convulsive jerking of the muscles of my abdomen that reached to my throat, and I hadn't wanted to be sick in front of the others. Now I turned back.

Nobody had changed his position and nobody had said anything. They looked at the thing on the door. The man's body was naked, lean. The nails had been driven through his wrists, and tongues of dry brownish blood ran down the forearms. The head hung sideways, resting against one shoulder bone. Pressed down tightly over the forehead was a curious wreath that seemed to be made of the thorny stems of a rose bush, and in one side of the lank body there was a hole with blackened edges, and dry gore, like candle drippings under it. A blunt pointed-poker lay on the floor beneath the dangling feet, and it had made the hole.

CHIEF Teed turned slowly about, swept the sordid room with his eyes. Then he reached up and turned off the light.

"Let's go," he said in a husky undertone.

Two policemen were pacing up and down in the hall. We passed them, clumped down the steps, got into a police car at the front and were whisked swiftly

through the shuttling currents of traffic to police headquarters. We got out and went into the big grey building with its warm, depot smell. We went into the Chief's private office and slumped into chairs, and some of us lighted cigarettes. And still nobody talked.

Lee Teed didn't sit down. He paced the room, his hands knotted behind him. Police Commissioner Gregg Savage, fat jowled, fishy eyed, sat slumped across the table working a thick, blunt cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. The tall, thin mayor drummed the table with his fingers. Only Herman Tyrone's long, wrinkled, intellectual face showed any composure. He puffed a cigarette and eyed the others with sardonic detachment.

"Well," Chief Teed said, with a sudden hoarse grunt, "go bring him in, Veal."

Veal left the room.

"I suppose," Herman Tyrone said in his dry, scholarly voice, "that you're now going to show me the author of this charming fantasy we've just seen."

Teed stopped. "For God's sake, Tyrone," he growled, "this is no time to joke. It's for the sake of the city that I'm asking you to help us. We should forget political animosities at a time like this."

"I'm no detective," Tyrone said.

"I've got detectives," Teed moaned, "plenty of them. But this isn't routine stuff. It's bigger than individual cases; it's something hellish. A special sort of knowledge is required to grasp the clue to these horrors. You know something about abnormal psychology, about history. You're a scholar, a—"

"A librarian," Tyrone said with mellow bitterness.

Teed only scowled; Savage cleared his throat.

"But if you've caught the fiend—" Tyrone began.

"The fiend! Great God in heaven!

There are I don't know how many fiends! And they're not men, they're robots. Why this rat, this poor demented shell of a man we caught—" He seemed unable to finish.

"What about him?" Tyrone prompted in a matter-of-factly.

"Why he was trying to hang himself," Teed sputtered. "We ran him down in East Blenden cemetery. He was trying to hang himself to a tree limb, and," he added in a husky whisper, "in one hand he was clutching thirty dimes!"

"Thirty dimes—thirty pieces of silver!" I blurted the words unintentionally. My scalp was crawling, stung by little needles of ice.

Herman Tyrone sat forward with sudden interest. "Why did he do it?" he asked.

"How do I know?" Teed moaned. "You've got to help us find out. The psychiatrists say he's not crazy—not in the usual sense. It's something—something more like devil-possession!"

JUST then the door opened and we all turned. I think if the man Veal was pushing into the room had been a big ape-like creature the shock would have been less. There was something horrible about the man's insignificance. He was ragged and rat-like, with a huge nose dominating a wizened swarthy face that now had the pale cast of a cadaver. His hair was crinkled and reddish and a ragged fringe of the same color ran along his jaw and chin. He seemed afraid and yet not afraid. It was queer. It was as if the man felt his own insignificance and yet at the same time was conscious of some inner power that made him gigantic and monstrous and beyond the reach of mere men. I couldn't puzzle it out.

Veal shoved the man into a chair, and he sat there and goggled at us as if he were only half conscious.

"What's your name?" Tweed barked at him.

"Issicar—J. Issicar," the rat-like creature said throatily.

"You never did anything like this before?"

"No."

"Why did you kill John Cranston—crucify him?"

"I had to. It was my destiny."

"He was your friend wasn't he? Lived with you? What did you have against him?"

"Nothing. He was my friend. But I had to kill him."

"Who told you to do it?"

"Nobody told me to."

Teed stepped toward him with a growl, shook a knotted fist before his eyes. "You're lying! Somebody told you to do it. If you don't want the hell shellacked out of you, you'd better talk. Who told you to do it?"

The derelict dropped his eyes. "Nobody told me to do it; but I was paid."

"You were paid? What do you mean? Who paid you?"

"The old man with the black beard," Issicar croaked.

"What about him?"

"It was last night," Issicar said, frowning as one who remembers something half forgotten. "I had been thinking for several days that I was going to have to kill Cranston. I don't know why; I just knew it. Then, as I was going up to our room the old man with the black beard came shuffling along. He didn't say a thing, just handed me a little package and shuffled off. I opened it; it had thirty dimes in it. Thirty pieces of silver, you see. I went up to the room. I knew what I had to do. Cranston was sick, in bed. I sat by the bed and looked at him. I had one hand in my pocket, feeling the thirty dimes. Sudden like, he looked at me with a scared look. Then he said, just like

he'd read my mind: 'Well if you're going to do it, do it quick.' I leaped on top of him then, got my fingers around his throat. After he was dead I nailed him to the door."

For a full minute I think no one in the room breathed. Then Gregg Savage, puffing out his fat cheeks, exploded, "Jesus Christ!"

The words had a strange effect. Issicar rose from his chair as if jerked by invisible wires, and a scream—the most bloodcurdling scream I had ever heard—jangled from his loose lips where foam had suddenly gathered. The scream knifed into our ears, swallowing up the dull rumble of traffic, swallowing up everything in a hot explosion of horror. Then, before Veal could catch him, Issicar fell face forward to the floor and lay there in a stiff spasm. When Veal rolled him over his eyes were open and he was breathing, but he was as stiff as a corpse. Blood from a bitten tongue ran out one corner of his mouth and mingled with the froth of foam. They had to carry him from the room.

CHAPTER TWO

Figures of Hell's History

MY hands on the arms of my chair were shaking. I'd never had anything effect me quite like that before. There was something about it that my mind shrank from, as if the meaning behind the incident was so awful that a man wouldn't want to learn it, wouldn't want to guess even.

Herman Tyrone was on his feet now, frowning soberly. "J. Issicar," he said softly. "The very name is horribly significant. Judas Iscariot. The man believes he is Judas Iscariot!"

"I figured that," Teed said. "But the others—"

"You've caught others?" Tyrone asked.

"One other," Teed said. "But he's in the morgue—stabbed himself. I've tried to keep it quiet; there's enough panic already. And the people blame us because we can't give them an explanation . . ."

"What about this suicide?" Tyrone asked.

Teed swallowed. "It's crazier even than Issicar's case," he said. "This fellow was a fruit-truck driver. Nothing peculiar about him before. About a week ago he started going crazy. First he tortured animals. Then he tried to kill his old mother, but she escaped him, went away. His wife was afraid to tell the police because he threatened to kill her if she did. Well, he got the idea that he'd really killed his mother, boasted about it to his wife. Next he set fire to his house and danced and sang and tried to keep his wife from putting the blaze out. But she managed to do it anyhow. Then Luigi Domitius—that was his name—began to talk of killing himself. He'd awake shrieking in the night that swarms of flying ants were on him, and other crazy things. Finally he ran out to a shed behind the place and hid there, thinking the police were after him. His wife followed him and he pulled out his knife and forced her to dig a grave in the floor. While she was doing it, he sobbed and cried, 'What an artist is about to die!' and told her to bury him there and keep the grave a secret. The wife says he started to stab himself several times but didn't seem to have the nerve. It wasn't until the police, called by the neighbors, beat on the doors of the shed that he finally stabbed himself in the throat. Now what in God's name do you make of that?"

Tyrone had been listening intently. Now he cleared his throat. "I think I can tell you what obsession was preying on the man's mind," he replied. "The details give it away to anyone familiar with

Roman history. The man's attempted murder of his mother, his trying to burn the building, the dreams of ant swarms, the flight and hiding and forcing another to dig his grave, the very words of his cry, his cowardly hesitancy and his final stabbing himself in the throat, are all exact details from the life and death of Nero! I might mention too that Nero's original name was L. Domitius Ahenobarus."

TEED turned a wan smile on the sour face of the police commissioner. "Didn't I tell you, Savage? Didn't I say Tyrone was the man we needed?"

Savage grunted. "But how in the hell," he asked, "would an ignorant truck driver know those facts about Nero?"

"That's the point!" Teed said, turning to Tyrone. "There's a detail I left out. The man's wife said that he had been reading a lot lately—something he had never done before. She didn't know where the books came from, and since he had burned them, we couldn't tell. But that's where you can help us, Tyrone. That sort of people don't have money to buy books. They get them from the public library. Now it's up to you to watch for that type of people who come in and get books on some particular historical character. See?"

"I see," Tyrone said. "It may be worth trying. But has it ever occurred to you that if there's a connection between these cases it would indicate some master mind behind it all. And if that's true, *he* would furnish the books without resorting to the library."

"Mind behind it all!" Teed echoed with annoyance. "Sure there's a mind behind it—the devil in hell!"

"Perhaps," Tyrone said quietly. "Is that all for tonight?"

"That's all," Teed answered gruffly.

Tyrone bowed shortly, picked up his hat and topcoat, and we left.

A biting wind blew down the canyons of the street and thin snowflakes danced in the bleary glare of the street lamps. There was a haunted look on the faces of passers-by. My thoughts were heavy clotted things, moving slowly in a cold vacuum of dread.

For no reason at all I had begun to worry about Frances—Frances Mormar, the girl I loved, the girl I hoped to marry soon if the new city administration didn't blight our plans by kicking us all out of jobs. Frances was Tyrone's secretary, and when we had left her in the warm lighted office on the top floor of the big public library building she had promised to wait there for me. Yet the dread of what I had seen and heard had crawled like a poisonous worm into my vitals. I was worried about Frances and I couldn't say why.

Tyrone's words broke in upon my thoughts in a hoarse heavy growl. Alone with me he had dropped his scholarly reserve. "Why," he muttered, "have that bunch of crooks called me in on this? They know I hate them, know I fought their election with all the influence I have. They're going to kick me out just as soon as they can. Why have they asked me to help them?"

"Because," I suggested, "Teed and Savage and the rest are incompetent and they know it. They're new in office and afraid of public opinion. They're scared to death they won't get this murder epidemic stopped before the people are up in arms against them. They *need* your help!"

"I wonder," Tyrone grumbled. "I wonder if some of them are not mixed up in it themselves. Maybe Sam Wembly can figure it out."

SAM WEMBLEY was the editor of *The Clarion*, a small newspaper which had fought bitterly to prevent the election of the present city administration. He and Tyrone were close friends, and Tyrone had written many of the paper's editorials anonymously. I wasn't surprised then, when we came into Tyrone's outer office, to find Sam Wembley waiting there.

Tyrone greeted him laconically and slumped down in a chair. I hurried into the inner office. The light was burning, but Frances wasn't there. It scared me a little, but then I was sure that she must have stepped downstairs to the book rooms. I went back through the room where Tyrone and Wembley were talking and hurried downstairs. But none of the girls at the desks had seen Frances. I searched the whole building, and a crazy wave of hysteria was mounting to my head. No one had seen Frances. She must have gone out by the side door from the offices, they told me with wondering looks at my haggard face.

I went back to the office. "Frances is gone!" I blurted, breaking in on Tyrone's conversation.

"Well," he said, looking up, "she's not paid to stay here all night."

"But she promised—" I began. Then I dived into the inner office again. My breathing seemed curiously constricted. I stared about vacuously. Then, in her chair, I saw the envelope with my name written on it. I snatched it up and tore it open almost with one gesture. Then I gasped. The note read:

Dear Guy:

Thanks for the books. But what a queer way to give me a present, and what a queer subject to choose! I'm both puzzled and interested, so I'm going home to read. You can drop by there if you like.

Frances.

I stared at the thing like an idiot, and

suddenly noticed that the paper was fluttering in my shaking hand. What in God's name did it mean? Books—present? I hadn't sent or given her any books. Books! God in heaven! Books had come mysteriously into the hands of that madman too!

Still holding the note I dashed back through the door into the outer office. I stood there dazed, dumb as a stunned ox, waiting for a break in the conversation. Tyrone was saying:

"... so it wouldn't surprise me, Sam, if the whole thing is a frame-up—a clay pigeon for the new officials to shoot at. Teed, of course, wouldn't have the imagination for such a scheme, but Blythe has and Savage has. The idea would be first to start a panic and then show off the efficiency of the police department in squashing it. At the same time they'll get the public attention away from the gambling racket they're probably mixed up in, and which they've had to make a pretense of fighting."

"Mr. Tyrone!" I sputtered. What did I care about the damned administration and its schemes now? What was important except that Frances was in danger?

"What is it, Guy?" Tyrone asked, looking up with annoyance.

"Look here," I choked. I was beside him in two steps, shoving the fluttering paper into his hands.

He read it. "Well?" he asked, puzzled.

"But I didn't give her any books!" I stammered wildly. "I didn't . . . don't you see, she's got a bunch of books . . . like that maniac got. Somebody's . . ." the words choked off in a throat dry with the dust of terror.

Tyrone stiffened, frowned, stared at the paper again. "By God!" he swore, "if that damned bunch is trying to mix that girl up in this hellish—" he checked himself. Something in my terrified face must have excited his pity, and he fin-

ished, "But maybe we're wrong, Guy. Better hurry out to her place at once, though, and make sure."

I grabbed up my hat and was gone.

I GOT my roadster out of the parking lot behind the library building and swung it into the slippery, fast-freezing slush of the street. I managed to navigate the choked traffic lanes without accident, and once beyond the district of signal lights, swerved west over the viaduct and roared at a criminal speed up Brant Avenue to the old red brick apartment house where Frances lived. Slamming on my brakes in front of the place, I skidded the car to a stop and clambered out.

Pounding up the steps at a half run, I chanted wild prayers in an undertone. Surely she's here; she's got to be here! I reached her door, knocked, then hammered frantically, already sensing something ominous in the silence that was the only response.

"Frances!" I called hoarsely. "Frances!"

No answer. But down the hall a door opened, a woman's scowling fat face was thrust out. It was Mrs. Polk, the landlady.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "Miss Frances just went out."

"Then she *was* here?" I asked fatuously.

"Yes. She's just been gone about fifteen minutes."

"And she didn't leave any message for me?"

"Not that I know of."

"Thanks," I muttered hollowly. Then, with a sudden idea: "I want your pass key. I've got to get into her room. It's important."

Mrs. Polk was doubtful about the propriety of this, but she finally acceded. She knew how things stood between Frances and me and I guess she too was a little

alarmed at my anxiety. She gave me the key and I went into the room.

I closed the door behind me, switched on the light and stood there with my heart pounding. How awful, how empty, how terrifying even, the place seemed without Frances. I went into the bedroom and the kitchenette, just to make sure. Then I came back into the front room and bit my lip in silent agony.

Something must certainly be wrong; Frances wouldn't have acted this way unless something was wrong! Then I caught sight of the pile of books on one end of the divan.

I stepped over and snatched up the first one in my hand. It was a new book, obviously fresh from the shelves of a shop, and the title burned itself into my fogged mind:

"The Life of Madame de Montespan."

Madame de Montespan! . . . the courtesan mistress of Louis XIV, that passionate, unbalanced woman whom jealousy had driven to mad and secret depths of depravity! That lovely she-devil about whose life dark traditions cluster, initiate of the shameful secrets of sorcery and Satanism!

I snatched up the other books, glanced at each and flung it to the floor with a curse. They were all on the same subject, and all, I noticed, were books that stressed the evil and erotic side of the enigmatical woman's character.

These were the books I was supposed to have given Frances! Who had sent them; what did it mean? My brain reeled before the awful and inescapable answer to that question. Some fiend, some monster whose powers were more than human, had snatched an awful secret from the arcana of hell, and was twisting in his dark hands the helpless souls of men and women. And this devil, this *abomination*, had picked Frances for a victim, had begun the awful process which would

transform her into something not human, into a mindless robot parading in the borrowed garments of a dead personality!

It sounded wild, it sounded crazy, but I knew that it was true. Rage misted my eyes with a red fog; the wolves of horror gnawed my entrails.

Teeth gritted, fists knotted, I started to turn away. Then I stopped. A small square of paper which had fallen from between the leaves of one of the books attracted my eye. I stooped and picked it up. The thing was a printed circular. "Peace Out of Chaos," read the heading, and underneath was the message:

"In the midst of doubts, seek the peace offered by the ancient religions of the East. Seek the true path of Knowledge as embodied in the teachings of Swami Atmananad at THE SHRINE OF KARMA—2164 Railroad Street."

An oath whistled drily between my teeth. Light had dawned on my mind like a bursting bombshell. Through sheer accident I had stumbled on a clue which all the others had missed. The Shrine of Karma! Why hadn't I thought of that place? That old crumbling warehouse by the railroad tracks where a turbaned Hindu spoke nightly to a throng of ill-smelling bums, gathered there to escape the cold and forced to listen to the doctrines of that strange cult of reincarnation—the transmigration of the soul!

Suddenly I whirled about, crumpling the dodger in my hand. I switched off the light, slammed the door and went down the steps three at a time. If Frances had gone there I would find her, and I would break the lean Swami in my two hands, force the truth from him! Yet fear, gaunt and grisly, ran at my heels.

Was I already too late to save Frances?

CHAPTER THREE

Offering of the Sabbat

THE pavement of the avenue was as slick as greased skids and through the fogged windshield the clustered lights of the city danced like drunken fireflies as the car skidded and lurched precariously through the dark.

I remember it, but I scarcely noticed it at the time. It seemed that I couldn't think of anything but Frances, of the crazy, unbelievable peril that hung over her. Frances, with her soft grey eyes that were always shining bravely, her hair that was the color of honey with sunlight in it, her trim little figure that I watched for eagerly every morning of the world from the window of my office. I thought of a thousand little insignificant things, like the way a shadow would lie in the hollow of her throat and the way she cocked her head to one side when she laughed.

Then I got a hold on myself, forced myself to think. I remembered Tyrone's words that I'd overheard there in the office, and I wondered if he could be right. Mayor Blythe I knew for one of those adventurous, imaginative politicians who can get by with murder, and Commissioner Savage and the rest of his crew were a cunning and enterprising bunch. Would they go this far? Why not? And calling Tyrone in on the case would be a clever way of blinding a dangerous foe.

And what about Frances? In the back of my brain that thought kept hammering like a plunging piston. I'll pull her out of their clutches, I told myself. You can't kill a soul in an hour and replace it with another, for all the vaunted secrets of the East. It takes time. They took time with those broken wretches they made monsters of.

I swung the car into a dank street of soot-smudged buildings and headed to-

ward the railroad yards. The old warehouse loomed ahead now, its dirty windows gleaming a sickly yellow through the frosted windshield. A few cars were parked in front. I nosed up among them and got out.

The big double doors were closed tight against the cold, and as I pushed in, waves of foul, sweat-scented warmth swam around me and a vast murmur of voices buzzed against my ears. The place was crowded. The grey, nondescript man-swarm filled the rows of pine benches, squatted in the aisles, leaned against the walls, huddled around the two big-bellied coal stoves on either side of the hall. The glare from a few weak electric bulbs made a pale pretense of light, smeared ashy stubble-dark faces with a yellow sheen, pooled shadows in cavernous eye hollows. At the far end of the hall was a raised section of flooring with the remains of a broken rail, which had probably once been used for office space. Two sides of it were curtained off, leaving an open stage in the center. I moved nearer, stood near the back row of benches. Suddenly, with a queer, uncomfortable feeling, I sensed watching eyes. Not the casual glances thrown at me as I moved forward, but some secret and intent scrutiny. I glanced quickly to the left. A head turned swiftly away from my glance, a thickset heavy head, resting like a bucket on square shoulders.

THE man was on the back seat. Coarse black hair covered his head and thick whiskers masked the lower part of his face. But I studied his profile—the nose, the ear, the peculiar up-flare of the left eyebrow, and in a flash recognition dawned. Under the too-luxuriant whiskers was the face of Gregg Savage, the Police Commissioner!

Why was he here? Investigating? Maybe. And maybe for some other reason, some darker purpose.

I looked up. The buzz of voices had subsided abruptly, dwindled to silence. A figure had appeared on the stage, a figure dressed in a long orange-colored tunic. Bare brown legs terminated in flat sandals, and the lean figure moved out from the wings with an elastic, pantherish stride that bespoke power. On his head was a turban of the same flame-colored stuff, and as he turned and faced the audience I noticed on his brown forehead two horizontal stripes of white, and I happened to know what they meant.

It was the mark of Siva the Destroyer!

A silence, almost reverent, fell over the motley assemblage. You felt that the audience was in his hands from then on. He began to speak. I listened idly while my eyes searched the audience. But nowhere could I see Frances. The words of the Swami drifted to my ears in an undertone. I recognized his patter as a nebulous blending of Buddhistic and Yoga ideas, and I didn't pay much attention to it until the speaker launched into the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul. Then a phrase caught my attention, and I listened.

"The undying soul of man," said the Swami in his sibilant tones, "passes from body to body, from tenement to tenement through the dark ages of its history. Life dies in the individual but the soul is reborn in a new body. Yet there is no memory of past lives. Only when Karma is reached is the true identity of the soul revealed—only then does the soul look upon itself as in a mirror, feel the disguise of its temporary body fall away, and know itself for what it is!"

A tense hush brooded over the listeners now; heads leaned forward, horny hands gripped bench backs as they hung on the Swami's words. And then it happened.

I saw the man rise. He was in the left wing of benches, near the wall, and there

was something in his manner—deliberate, calculating, that caught my eye. Then he swung about, surveyed the audience, and I saw his face. If ever a face wore the look of devil-possession, that man's did. It was gaunt, rigid as if frozen, and his eyes were not the eyes of a man, but the yellow orbs of a panther about to spring.

My muscles tensed; I knew instinctively that something terrible was going to happen, and it did. With a sudden hoarse scream of, "Blood, blood, blood!" the man whipped a revolver from beneath the folds of his coat and began to fire wildly, indiscriminately into the crowd!

PANIC claimed the crowd then, rose and swept over it like a breaking wave. Shrill screams of agony rose, crescendoed, faded in the wild cacophony of mad fear. The aisles between the benches were packed in an instant with a fighting stampede. They clamored and fought, fell, crawled under benches. Then the sharp scream of a police whistle, and three bluecoats, clubs flailing, had burst in at the door, were ploughing a path toward the center of panic.

It seemed an age that I stood there, paralyzed, gripping the back of the pine bench. But it was really only an instant. The last pistol shot had just faded in my ears when I saw the woman rise and begin struggling with the madman. That sobered me, sobered me with the stunning impact of a new terror. For that woman was wearing a camel's hair sport coat and a jaunty little black felt hat perched on a head of golden hair. Unless I was mad myself, that woman was Frances Mor-mar!

I went into action then with shoulders and elbows. As I passed the packed center aisle I saw the end of the mad farce. The maniac had suddenly collapsed, and the woman in the tan coat was pushing her way wildly toward the side exit. The

stunned crowd parted for her. She reached the side door, plunged out, vanished, a flying smudge in the outer dark. An instant later the police had reached the man.

I fought my way to the spot, pushed up on the fringe of the circle the police had cleared. A burly patrolman was bending above the man. He lay on a bench, his gaunt, inflamed face staring up, a dagger buried to the hilt in the bloody welter of his shirt front. But his eyes were open, his mouth wide, and though blood was running from its corners he continued to gasp in the rattling voice of the dying: "Blood . . . blood . . . blood . . ."

"What's your name?" the big policeman barked.

"Jean Paul Marat!" the man croaked.

"Who stabbed you?"

"Charlotte Corday. to the guillotine with her . . ."

The strange words produced a magical hush. The policeman was jotting notes. Then, from the fringe of the crowd, a small withered Chinese pushed his way forward. Globules of saliva sputtered from his cracked mouth as he jabbered:

"No, no. I know these man. He crazy. He go crazy two, three week . . . He blake out on skin, sit in bathtub all day . . . lite crazy stuff 'bout kill everybody, chop off head, make stelets flow by blood . . ."

The police jerked the Chinese forward, began to fire questions at him. Another policeman growled: "Anybody know that woman?"

I suddenly felt sick and weak. I dropped my eyes, afraid that the man might see my face, read there the secret fear and the awful knowledge that tormented me. Then I saw something else—something that sent a flash of heat and a flash of cold zigzagging through my

thumping veins. On the floor near my feet lay a handkerchief—a woman's handkerchief with black embroidered initials in one corner.

God! I knew who had dropped that damning square of white cloth!

"Awright, get back! Get back there!" One of the policemen was shoving at the crowd. Terror froze me. I felt big hands thrust against my chest, caught a glimpse of blue uniform and brass buttons. Would he see the handkerchief, would he . . . ?

Blind instinct prompted my next move. I took a shuffling step back, deliberately tripped myself, and fell sprawling to the floor. Quickly one hand, thrust under me, grasped the handkerchief, shoved it into a pocket of my vest. Then I stumbled up, waited until the policeman had turned away, and then began pushing my way through the crowd.

Just as I reached the side door one of the policemen noticed me, yelled: "Hey, come back here!"

He was too late. Wild horses couldn't have dragged me back. I dived out upon the loading platform, leaped to the ground, staggered up and began to run.

FINALLY I paused, came to my senses. I was under the viaduct. I had left my car, but I didn't care. I couldn't risk going back for it now. I had to find Frances at once. I walked three blocks to a lighted street, hailed a taxi and gave him the address of Frances' apartment house.

Only then did I fish out the handkerchief and look at it. A faint shred of hope had held me back from the abyss of utter panic. Maybe the handkerchief wasn't Frances' after all. Now my last doubt vanished under an avalanche of dismay. The letters embroidered in one corner were, "F. M."

I leaned back against the cushions, closed my eyes. Outside the cab window

I had noticed the newsboys with frosty breaths, scuttling wildly, pink papers waving.

"Aaxtra! Read all about it! Jack the Ripper Prowls Again! Women's bodies found in alley . . ."

Horror, like a black bog, sucked me down into its vortex; weird nightmare bobbed in the churning currents of my brain. I saw the legions of the mad swarm through the city, damned souls propelling the stolen bodies of their victims. Judas the crucifier, Nero the torturer, Marat with his wolfish bloodlust, Jack the Ripper, gloating obscenely over the dismembered bodies of women! There was no end to them! The fiends of history lived again. And Frances had become one of this army of the damned!

No, not yet, not yet! If Frances had stabbed that fiend there in the crowded hall, she had done it to protect herself. It was like killing a mad dog! But where had the dagger come from? Why was she there? Frances, with her gentle, tender heart, stabbing a man? Not the Frances I had known! No, I couldn't lie to myself. Frances was not the same; the alchemy of hell was already at work . . .

The taxi slithered to a halt. I was jerked upright, opened my eyes, clutched at the door handle. "Wait," I told the taxi driver, and hurried into the apartment house.

I had had enough foresight to keep the pass key and as my feet thudded a swift staccatto on the stairs I fished it from my pocket. My hand shook as I fitted the key in the lock of Frances' door, shoved it open. I closed the door softly behind me. My heart sank. The place was dark.

I flipped on the light. The room looked just as I had left it except that the door into the kitchenette was closed. I could see into the bedroom and it was empty. Maybe she was in the kitchenette, hiding

there, frightened. For she surely must have come here after her flight from the police in the hall!

I stepped to the door quickly, opened it, then staggered back with a harsh gasp of sick alarm, clutched at the door to steady myself and stared with swollen eyes of terror. I couldn't see anything at first through the thick oily smoke that seemed to fill the room, but I was dizzy with an awful stench that clotted my nostrils.

It was the odor of burning flesh!

Then I saw the reddish glow among the dispersing fumes, and I groped for the light switch, snapped it on and turned to confront the fearful sight. There was a white porcelain table in the center of the small kitchen. At one end of it, on an inverted bowl, squatted a hideous little black idol with a horned head and fat belly. Propped against the bowl was an inverted crucifix smeared with blood that was not yet dry. And in front of that was the silver bread tray on which something was burning.

I drew nearer, holding my breath against the frightful reek, and stared. Dry twigs had been piled in the silver tray, and among the smouldering ashes lay something small and black and withered, something that emitted the noisome smell, something that—Great God! was it possible? It was; there could be no mistake. I knew it as I turned away, weak and nauseated.

The thing that had been burned on that pyre before the image of Satan was the severed hand of a child!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dream of Bluebeard

I DON'T know how I got the strength to act after that. But I did, though I moved like one in a dream. Shocked and horrified as I was, it was my protective

love for Frances that kept me going. I didn't care what she had done, I knew she was the helpless tool of hellish powers, and I must save her.

First I must get the hideous evidence of the ghastly sacrilege from sight. I emptied the smoking tray into the sink and ran water over it. Then, mastering my revulsion, I fished out the charred sticks and the pitiful fragment of burned flesh and bone, wrapped them in a bundle with the idol and the crucifix, and hid them in the bottom of a wastebasket. Then I opened the outer window to let the fumes out, and went down the hall to see Mrs. Polk.

From her I learned that someone had come into Frances' apartment a few minutes before. She had not seen who it was but supposed it was Frances. She had not heard her leave. She promised to phone my apartment at once if anyone went in again at Frances' door.

I went back down the hall, closed the door of Frances' room, and hurried back to the taxi. I gave the driver the number of the block in which I lived.

I was still nursing one tiny flare of hope. If anything had happened to Frances, I reasoned, she would certainly come to me. Even if she felt some strange madness claiming her she would fly to my arms, knowing that I would shield and protect her. Maybe, I told myself desperately, she has gone to my rooms, or has left some message there for me.

I got out at the corner, some cautious instinct prompting me not to give my address to the cab driver. I waited until he had driven off, and then, wrapping my topcoat about me, plowed into the stiff wind that swept down the avenue in icy currents.

My head was bent low against the blast, and at first I didn't notice either the car parked at the front or the figure that was moving toward it. I was almost on

him when I halted, and looked up suddenly into a black bearded face with small bright eyes shining from beneath the shadow of a black flop hat. Then the man had shuffled past me and was climbing into a car.

It took me a moment to collect my thoughts. The man had been coming out of my apartment house. He was a stranger, and a very sinister looking stranger—stooped, dressed in a long black coat, and with those peculiar shiny eyes! Instantaneously the words of the maniac, Issicar, flashed through my mind: "The old man with the black beard . . ."

I whirled with a cry on my lips. But the car was already speeding away into the night.

I hurried inside. My apartment was on the first floor. I unlocked the door and rushed into the room. I stood a moment, then snapped on the light. There was no sign of Frances. But there was something else—a brown bundle on an end table by the divan. I picked it up, tore the wrappings away. Books—a half dozen of them! Then I glanced at the title of the one on top of the stack and my blood congealed.

"Bluebeard—The Life and Crimes of Giles de Rais."

I continued to hold the book in my hand, staring at it stupidly. The old man with the beard had been in this room and had left the books! And that meant that I too had been selected, that I—Great God! . . . Bluebeard! Giles de Rais, that sinister sadist and mass murderer whose very name is a stench in the nostrils of mankind! And I had been chosen . . .

Feverishly I pawed at the other books. "Bluebeard—A portrait of the Original," "A Gallery of Monsters," and so on. All dealing wholly or in part with that same abysmal Satanist of medieval France!

I flung the last book down with a hoarse curse. As I did so a typewritten sheet fell out and lay face up on the divan. I snatched it and with horrified amazement, read:

"Genealogical Note."

"On October 27, 1789, the ship *Fleur de Lis* landed a load of French immigrants in New York. Among them was one, Henri Paul de Rais, a lineal descendant of Giles de Rais. Settling in New York, Henri Paul de Rais, in order to escape the odium which still clung to his once illustrious name, changed it to the Anglicized equivalent, 'Deray'."

That was all. I let the paper flutter to the floor. Through the fog that hung thick over my stunned mind a ghastly conjecture was thrusting its hideous shape. "No, no," I muttered aloud, "it's absurd!" Yet, as little as I knew of my ancestry, I did know that they were French, that they had come from France in the latter part of the eighteenth century and had settled in New York. And I did know that my name was Deray, and that my father's name was Paul!

I SAT down and felt the panic gathering in me, a slow swelling sensation through my whole body. I felt it particularly in my throat. "This is idiotic!" I said quietly—too quietly. I could hear my temples throbbing. "This is absurd!" I reiterated.

Then I remembered the others, realized that they must have thought it absurd too. And I thought of them later, thought of Issicar, standing pale and ghostly before that awful mockery of the crucifixion, saw Domitus, the knife at his throat, saw the others in a grisly and multiplying horde, and among them Frances—and I! And finally I saw the thick head and shoulders of Gregg Savage, hunched in his disguise, watching the ghastly show.

I sprang to my feet then, my fingernails digging into the flesh of my palms. "Damn him to hell!" I shrieked. "I'll kill him—tonight!"

Then I was horrified at my outburst, clapped my palm over my mouth. Had anyone heard? I turned around, walked to my telephone and dialed Herman Tyrone's house. Tyrone himself answered. His voice over the wire sounded comforting, but far away.

"Mr. Tyrone," I choked, "this is Guy Deray. Gregg Savage is mixed up in this hellish business. I'm going to see him tonight; I'm going to kill him! I just wanted to tell you why—"

"What in God's name?" came Tyrone's excited voice, "Are you mad?"

"Not quite," I said, "not yet." Then the whole thing tumbled from my lips. When I had finished, Tyrone said:

"Now listen to me, Guy. You'll do nothing wild and rash tonight. That would be playing into their hands. And the thing is getting worse, the madness is multiplying to an epidemic. You may be quite right about Savage, but in your case, I imagine, they're only trying to scare you. You don't think a mere set of books can derange your mind?"

"No," I stammered, "but I'm afraid it's just the first step. Then there's Frances—"

"You may be mistaken about her," Tyrone said. "Anyhow I don't think they'd do more than frighten her badly. The thing in her room was probably a set-up. But at any rate I'll get a man from the D. A.'s office to get on her trail, and I'll keep in touch with you. Now you're worn out, your nerves are ragged, and you'd better go to bed and get a few hours sleep. You hear? Get some rest, so you'll be able to carry on. Will you do that?"

I promised. I was too exhausted to protest. He was probably right, and my

nerves were certainly frayed. But I didn't believe that I could do what he suggested anyhow—not with Frances unaccounted for.

I went over and sat down on the divan and began looking at the books. I stared at the weird illustrations. Tyrone was right, I told myself doggedly. No mere set of books can derange a man's mind—not mine anyhow. I began to read, just to show myself that I wasn't afraid of the damned books. And my mind was so weary, so tormented with worry, that I found the reading relaxed me. I read on and on. . . .

SUDDENLY I jerked up. My head had fallen forward; I had dozed. I shook off the drowsiness and went on reading; the book had absorbed my interest with a horrid fascination. I dozed again, jerked myself awake. This time I got up. I was definitely sleepy now. Well, I would set my alarm clock and get two or three hours rest—three would be enough. Then I would go on with my plan to find Gregg Savage and choke the truth from him. In the kitchen I mixed a toddy and then went to bed.

I dozed, awakened with a start. Something had scratched against the window screen. Without even moving my head, I rolled my eyes to one side, stared out. The cold air was like a luminous poison; all was still. Silhouetted against the pale light were the bare branches of a box elder by the window. A branch must have brushed the screen!

My eyes rolled back against the darkness of the room. Against that screen of gloom the weird shadow shapes paraded again—scenes from the life of Bluebeard, scenes of dark carnage and unholy lust. I couldn't banish them.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something, and suddenly with a shock of terror, I realized that it was

no tree limb this time. It was a shadow on the screen, black against the pallor of the night—the shadow of a human head.

With a dreadful slowness I rolled my eyes toward the apparition. It was real! Under a black flop hat there was a dim and ghastly face, a black beard, strange inhuman eyes! It was the face of the old man I had seen in front of the apartment house!

I felt the impulse to rise, to throw myself out of bed. Then suddenly with unutterable horror I realized that I couldn't move, couldn't speak!

I thought of an insect impaled on a pin, of a rabbit paralyzed with terror before the hunter's gun. I was like that. And those terrible eyes were boring into me like heated pistons, stunning me, sending into me the evil and irresistible currents of an alien will.

And then I saw that the lips were speaking, saw them move slowly, and the words, meaningless to my conscious mind, seemed nevertheless to speak to some other part of me, some part that was deep beneath the surface of thought. Like a sweetish syrup those words flowed over me, poisoning and killing consciousness with the painless, stifling nepenthe of ether fumes.

And then I was slipping away, slipping slowly into a vast black hole that had no bottom—sinking, sinking . . .

IT was a strange and horrible awakening. My head ached; there was a dozey, lifeless feeling, a disinclination to move, and an awful gnawing sense of remorse. Then I remembered the dreams.

I had dreamed that I was Giles de Rais—Bluebeard—and I had lived and acted the awful crimes which are laid at his door!

Now the scenes tumbled back to me in wild confusion, scenes laid in olden France. I had been a man of consequence,

a Marshal of France, an imposing man with a stern wolfish face and a beard so black that it looked blue. I remembered battlefields with the hooves of the horses trampling on dead and dying bodies, and the smell of blood in the hot air had been spicy and sweet. That was strange. For the smell of blood has always been unpleasant, even repugnant to me!

And there were other scenes of blood too, scenes not ennobled by the clangour of battle, scenes dark and shadowy in which grey confining walls, and eerie yellow torch flames, and silence and the flash of knives figured prominently. Solitary scenes these, in which I was a lone and hooded figure, creeping in clammy dungeons, driven on by a terrible and unnatural hunger. And there was a certain dark room where cadavers multiplied like the carcasses of flies in a spider's web. And I had gone there often, sometimes alone, sometimes with a companion—a woman, a child, whose trembling uneasy looks and frightened questions had delighted me. And I remembered the clang of a heavy door, a scream muffled by stone walls. And later, I would go creeping from that unballowed place—alone!

How could such things have run through my mind? I was sickened at the memory of them. Then I remembered something else—something that caused cold daggers of ice to stab through my quivering body. There had been other dreams in which the modern had mingled with the ancient. There was a child I had lured into a sinister room to murder, and strangely that child's face had been the face of the newsboy on my corner. And this time I had done the thing with a knife, a butcher knife, and I had washed my bloody hands in a porcelain sink!

I sat up abruptly in bed. This was madness! Why was my whole body trembling? Dreams are that way—con-

fusing, fantastic. I must put these morbid fancies out of my mind! They were nothing but dreams!

I jumped out of bed, started to the closet where I had hung my clothes. Then I saw them hanging over a chair near the bed. I stopped, puzzled. I was certain I had hung them in the closet! Must have been a bit foggy in the head last night! Hadn't I imagined that face at the window, too?

I slipped into my underwear and pants and started through the kitchen to the bathroom. Grey light filtered weakly through the window and at first I didn't notice anything wrong. Then, almost at the door, I halted with a jerk. Something lay on the floor there. What—?

I sprang to the wall switch, snapped on the light, drew nearer, stiff legged, staring. Newspapers! A whole thick stack of newspapers. I saw the black headlines that screamed: "Jack the Ripper Still at Large . . ." I saw, but the message scarcely registered. I was thinking of something else. . . .

I kicked the papers aside savagely, grasped the knob of the bathroom door. Then the strength seemed to fade from me like snow in the sun. My whole body wilted as if every bone socket in my skeleton had crumbled and my muscles were fighting to keep the limp shell of my body erect. I had opened the door—only a few inches, but wide enough. Now I clung to it, gasping, fighting for air while the world rocked and reeled before my eyes.

What I had expected to see in that room was there. The boy was there—the news-boy! He was in the bathtub, in a pool of blood. There was a butcher knife on the bathroom floor and it had come from my kitchen. And my shirt was lying over the sink, and it was splashed with scarlet stains!

I won't speak more of that. Even now I

can't write it down without a swimming of the senses, a sick convulsion beneath my ribs. As for my condition at that moment when the realization of what I had done, of what I was, swept over me, I can only say that it was a yammering madman who turned and went reeling out of that place.

CHAPTER FIVE

Army of the Accursed

WHEN I came to my senses I was on the divan. I don't know how long I had been there. But my horror-stricken mind had been digging back into confused memories, reconstructing piece by piece the shadowy picture of my loathsome crime. Yes, I had done it!

I was a monster then, I was no longer myself! The awful burning eyes of that accursed apparition at the window had done something to my soul. And this, this was only the beginning!

I staggered to my feet, seized by the sudden wild panic of one trapped in a burning building. I wasn't afraid of the police, I wasn't afraid of the consequences of a discovery of my crime. *I was afraid of myself!*

Conflicting impulses struggled in my fevered brain. I wanted to scream, to run into the street shouting my crime to the world, begging to be killed. I even snatched up the telephone, intending to call the police, confess. But I set the phone down again. I couldn't do that—I couldn't! It was the thought of being dragged before the accusing eyes of my fellow men, branded as a monster, a loathsome fiend, a thing no longer human! I couldn't bear that. Better be my own executioner!

I stumbled into the bedroom, fished my revolver from the dresser drawer and came back. I made sure that it was loaded. I stood in the center of the room

and closed my eyes. I muttered a prayer, felt the cold muzzle of the gun against my temple, felt my finger tight on the trigger. Then, as abruptly as I had raised it, I lowered the weapon.

"Coward!" my brain was shrieking, "You're taking the easiest way out. And you're leaving Frances. If you're going to die, why not give your life in a final desperate struggle with the fiend?"

God! how that helped me. I still wanted to die, but now I could die like a man, and if I could drag down into the abyss with me the loathsome monster-maker who had made the city a shambles, I would ask nothing else of God or man!

I thrust the pistol into my pocket, went back into the kitchen and flung the pile of newspapers into the bathroom—being careful not to look at the thing in the tub—and then locked the door. I was ready for the fight. I went to the telephone and called a taxi.

When the cab deposited me a half hour later on a dark corner in the wholesale district I had already worked out my plan of action. First I would go to the Shrine of Karma, search the place. If I found the source of evil there, I would sell my life dearly. If I should escape with my life, or if I should not find there what I expected, I would go on to Gregg Savage, the other officials, and at the point of a gun I would discover the truth!

With my coat collar turned up against the chill air I went stalking in the shadows through the odorous market district, now stark and sordid in the greyness of approaching dawn. Across from the dilapidated building which housed the Swami's cult, I stopped to stare. My car was still parked at the building's front. Apparently the police had overlooked it. No lights showed in the dirty windows of the hall.

I crossed the street, circled the place

stealthily. Still I saw no light. I crept up on the loading platform and tried the side door. It was locked. I crept to the back of the building and in a pile of debris and broken machinery I found a leaf from an automobile spring. Then I went from window to window until I found one on the far side which had one of its bars torn loose. With the spring leaf I managed to pry the window open. I paused then, staring into the dark interior of the building, listening. But there was no sound. I crawled inside.

The wide hall was silent, appeared to be empty. The wan light from the windows made a grey twilight. With my revolver in one hand I started back toward the curtained space behind the stage. It was dark beyond the curtains. To the left I made out walled off rooms. The place seemed utterly deserted. I went to the first door, opened it softly and stepped back. No sound. I stepped inside, then stopped with a jerk.

Light seeping faintly through the drawn blind of a window revealed an iron bedstead, and on it a motionless figure. I held my breath, peering. The figure did not move. The sound of gentle breathing now reached my ears. Holding my gun trained on the recumbent shape, I struck a match with my left hand.

I let it fall. God in Heaven! The figure lying on that squalid bed, covered only with her topcoat, was Frances Mor-mar!

IN an instant I was beside her. "Frances —Frances!" I whispered huskily.

She raised with a start; her hand flew to her mouth as if to stifle a scream, and then she recognized me. "Guy!" she sobbed, "Guy!" and flung herself with wild abandon into my arms.

"Darling," I breathed, holding her close to me, feeling an awful, gnawing bitterness at the thought that the hands that

caressed her were the hands of a murderer, "why didn't you come to me, darling? What are you doing here . . . ?"

Stifling her sobs, she told me. The books, as I suspected, had been accompanied by a note saying that they were from me. She had gone home and had been reading there when a Western Union boy had brought a typewritten note, also supposed to be from me, and asking her to meet me at this place. She had thought it was some joke connected with the books and had come. Mystified, she had looked for me and had then found a seat and waited. When the man sitting next to her had jumped up and started firing, she had tried to wrest the pistol from his hand.

"But that dagger," I stammered, "where did you get that dagger?"

"Dagger? But I didn't have any dagger!"

"You didn't stab him then?"

She drew back, stared at me. "Oh, my God, Guy! You thought that too? I knew the crowd thought so; that's why I was so terrified and ran away. But I didn't stab him. I was struggling with him for the gun when he whipped out the dagger with his left hand and stabbed himself. I knew they thought I'd done it, and in a wild panic I ran. I hid outside, shivering with cold and terror. They looked for me but couldn't find me. I was afraid they'd trace me to my apartment and I didn't know what to do. When they had all gone and the place was dark I crept out from my hiding place and ran square into the Swami. He had been hiding too, afraid that the police would blame the thing on him. He told me that I could hide here until I thought it safe to go home."

"And where is he now?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "He left me here and I haven't seen him since."

"Then you didn't go back to your apartment after leaving it the first time?" I stammered.

"No," she said, "I stayed right here. I intended to get up and go in a few hours, but I must have fallen asleep."

I hugged her fiercely to me now. Hot tears were stinging my eyes. In a few moments I must send her away to safety, and I might never see her again! "Darling," I choked, "I want to ask you about those books. They didn't affect you, did they—upset your mind?"

Why did she hesitate then? Why did that little shiver run through her frame? "I, I don't know, Guy," she stammered. "It's rather queer about that. I did read some from the books, but it was a typewritten paper in one of them that affected me most," she paused, laughed nervously. "It's rather silly, but it said that I was descended from the family of Madame de Montespan. Her maiden name, you know was Mortemart!"

My muscles jerked with a quick spasm; then, to cover it I forced a laugh. "That's absurd, of course," I said. "You didn't let it prey on your mind, did you?"

Again she hesitated. "No," she said, "not at the time. But now that I think of it, that must have had something to do with those crazy things I've been dreaming"

"Dreaming!" I blurted. "What did you dream?"

A little breathless gasp escaped her. "They were rather awful," she said throatily. "It seemed that I *was* Madame de Montespan, that I did ghastly things. Let's don't talk of them. But I wonder—?"

"Wonder what, darling?" I husked.

"Why how in the world I ever knew the details of such loathsome things—such things as the Black Mass . . . ?"

I STIFFENED. The room had begun to rock giddily before my eyes. I did

not want to question her any more—not now. “Frances,” I said hoarsely, “you must get up now and get your coat on. My car’s in front of this place. I want you to get into it and drive straight to Herman Tyrone. Tell him to keep you in hiding until he hears from me. And whatever you do, don’t go to your apartment!”

“But Guy—” she began.

“Please, darling,” I said, “let me wait until later to explain. If you love me you’ll do exactly as I say.”

I bundled her into her coat. She was shivering now as I piloted her from the room. We stopped in the center of the stage and I gathered her in my arms for a final embrace. I could scarcely trust myself to speak. I pushed her away from me finally, mumbled between gritted teeth, “The front door—hurry, darling!”

She nodded, turned away. She took a half dozen faltering steps and then stopped.

I didn’t see at first what had stopped her—not until she screamed. Then I plunged toward her, caught her in my arms as she stumbled back and toppled. At the same instant the *things* came out of the shadows.

They didn’t come with a rush; they didn’t move like anything human or animal that I had ever seen. They moved like robots, or like dead things that neither feel nor hear nor see. There must have been a dozen of them in front of me—revenant shapes in baggy garments that seemed stiff with grave mould, revenant faces with gaping mouths and dead staring eyes—soulless, mindless monsters, moved by the currents of an alien will.

Shambling slowly, unsteadily, like automatons they came toward us. Frances was a limp weight in the crook of my left arm. Dragging her with me, I backed away, then spun about. But there was no opening for escape. They were behind

us too, around us, converging slowly in a tight circle.

For an instant I stood paralyzed, staring into those ash-grey expressionless faces while my muscles twitched impotently with spasms of horror. I seemed to know that guns and bullets would not stop these monsters. Then the madness that lay in their dead-fish eyes seemed to invade my own brain. I leveled my pistol at the nearest shapes, emptied it in their faces. The swift concussions blasted the silence and three of the shapes pitched to the floor. But the others paid no attention. On they came trampling over the bleeding bodies of the fallen.

I let Frances slip to the floor then. I fisted my hand around the empty pistol and using it as a club sprang into the ranks of the creeping horrors.

IT WAS a nightmarish thing, that fight against those numb, soulless ghouls. For they fought in silence, without savagery, without spirit of any kind. It was like battling a horde of corpses that keep hurtling down upon you from some abysmal chute. Yet I was fighting like a panther, beating at their flabby bodies, raking, jabbing, hammering with the pistol at their slime drooling, cadaver-faces. I saw flesh ripped by the gunshot, saw eyes jabbed into bony skulls, saw them fall before my plunging savagery, only to rise and lumber hideously toward me again.

And nowhere could I beat an opening through the ring of death that hemmed me in, that was gradually pounding and dragging me down with the slow heavy hammering of insensate club-like fists, the dragging tearing weight of taloned, pawing hands. Like the cold, gelid tentacles of an octopus they sucked me down into the reeking whirlpool of their bodies, crushed the breath from my lungs, crushed

life and light from my terror maddened brain.

Then the darkness was sweeping over me in rhythmic waves and I was shrieking Frances' name, telling her to run, to escape. And then I could not even shriek any longer, could only struggle like a dying worm beneath a black ant swarm. After that it was over, and the dark merciful currents closed over me, swallowed me in grateful oblivion.

CHAPTER SIX

Dark Bondage

I CAN'T remember any particular point at which my senses returned to me. There were periods of darkness and periods of semi-darkness in which my consciousness was like that of an infant who sees and hears without comprehending, and a weird pageant of shadow shapes passed before me and around me and left no definite impression on my mind.

Then there was a pain—and a memory of greater pain—and I began to be aware of my existence. I moved weakly, but my limbs, my whole body seemed to be encased in a straight-jacket. I was sitting upright but I could move neither forward nor backward, and there was a frightful aching pain in my left leg. I tried to move it—making only a weak effort—yet it sent a searing flame of agony through my entire body until it seemed to tear at my scalp, blind my eyes.

I didn't try to move again. I sat with a sick throbbing in my stomach and stared at the scene which I seemed to have been watching for ages.

The room which I was in was dark. But through an open door in front of me I could see into a low-ceiled room, lighted by the dim reddish glare from hidden lamps, and there was a buzz of activity there. Grotesque shadow shapes like the

ghouls who had beat me down were moving about; there was a buzz of low voices, cries of agony at intervals, and cold commands in a certain voice which affected me strangely. From time to time I heard this voice call out names. But it was incredible that those names should be linked together, for ages in history separated them, and they were names of infamy: Tamerlane, and Cesare Borgia, and Caligula, and Catherine de Medici and Messalina were jumbled together with names of monsters of the modern world. For a wild instant it seemed to me that I must have died and awakened in hell, a damned soul among the damned.

Then I noticed that the dungeon-like room beyond the door was crowded with grisly engines of torture. There were the racks on which a body could be stretched with ropes and pulleys; there was the Iron Virgin, that oaken cylinder with hinged doors and an interior studded with spikes. On the floor lay a wretch whose body was being crushed slowly beneath the weight of flat stones. And there was the *strappado*.

I watched it operate. The naked body of a man was hanging by his wrists. Weights were attached to his ankles. A pulley creaked and he was hoisted to the ceiling. Then he was allowed to drop with a jerk. The rending shock tore a shriek of agony from his throat, and he hung there, moaning and blubbering, and I knew that his shoulders had been dislocated. And while he whimpered in torment a voice spoke to him, that awful voice which I remembered as a part of my dreams of pain, and the voice was saying:

"You are Ivan the Fourth, Czar of Russia. Your wife is Maria Nagaya. You have murdered your son in a fit of rage and with your own hands have strangled your enemies. You are now going to massacre the citizens of Great Novgorod."

I saw the thing repeated, not once but many times. And then I saw them bring out a girl, a girl with wide terrified eyes, and a disheveled mass of golden hair. Thumb screws were tightened on her wrists, and as they tormented her she screamed. And those screams jerked me suddenly alert, sent claws of terror ripping at my quivering nerves, and I began to scream too. For I had realized that the woman was my sweetheart, was dearer to me than life itself. And yet I could not remember who she was!

BUT my screams had caused her tormentors to turn toward the door of my cell. One of them cursed me, and I saw that he was a lean, stooped man with a black beard. His companion was dressed in a black gown and a hood like an ancient hangman. Now they left the girl and came toward me.

They paused in the doorway, stared at me curiously, and the bearded man said, "What's wrong with you, Bluebeard?"

"I'm not Bluebeard," I rasped, and cursed him.

He laughed. "Who are you then?" he asked.

The harsh oaths sputtered to silence on my lips. I couldn't answer. Cold horror jelled my blood. Who was I? I stared at my questioner with dumb hatred. Under the shadow of his black hat I could see nothing but the yellow pin-points of light that crawled in his eyes. Was this man the devil himself, that he could paralyze not only speech but thought with the burning currents of his diabolical eyes?

"You see," the fiend spoke to his hooded helper, "he has already lost his own identity. But his other soul, the soul that will replace the old one, is not yet fully born. We must melt his soul again in the cauldron of pain and shape it to our purpose."

Melted in the cauldron of pain! Merciful God! I knew now what that meant. I looked down, saw the thing that encased my foot and leg. It was an iron boot reaching to within a few inches of my knee, and now the hangman had knelt beside me, had picked up a hammer and a wooden wedge.

The hair on my scalp began to crawl, and the sickness clutched again at my stomach. I began to writhe against the straight-jacket. But it held my arms pinioned fast, and outside of it were ropes binding me securely to the heavy chair in which I sat.

I couldn't escape; there was not the remotest chance, and I knew it. And now the frightful torture was beginning again. I felt the wedge thrust in between the iron boot and my leg. The hammer began to tap. I shut my eyes, clamped my teeth down on my tongue. My jaw muscles quivered. Tap, tap, tap! went the hammer, driving the wedge deeper, crushing the bones of my leg and foot like a vise. I reared up against the ropes with a spasmodic jerk, fell back, weak and dizzy with the fearful pain that coursed up from the crushed bones of my leg and shot in flame-like flashes through my boiling veins, burned into scarified nerves, until my whole body was one terrific ache, and each tap of the hammer was like an ice pick jabbing at my temples

I had sworn not to cry out, but as the wedge went deeper and the pain of pinched pulverized flesh was swallowed up in the intenser agony of cracking bones, a bloody froth gathered on my lips, and animal-like groans were forced from my lungs by the convulsive jerking of my diaphragm.

Tap . . . tap . . . tap!

The world was reeling. Blinding flashes of fire spread round me, seemed to be sucked into my lungs, seemed to be eating at my disintegrating vitals. I began to

pound my head against the wooden back of the chair, praying for death, swift and merciful to blot me out. But death wouldn't come, though my entire body seemed swollen now until it was one monstrous boil puffed to the bursting point with internal heat. I whimpered then, blubbered, sobbed, wailed sickly. There was no longer strength enough in me for a scream.

And then I heard the voice speaking, and my senses seemed to clutch at it, cling to it, mad for any distraction from the eating pain.

"Think of nothing but what I am saying," the voice intoned. "Fasten your mind on it; it will carry you out of the pain, out of yourself. You are Giles de Rais. Your soul is the soul of Giles de Rais, the son of Guy de Montmorency-Laval, the adopted son of Jeanne de Rais. Though born in the fifteenth century, your soul is still alive, has been resurrected in a new body. For a while that will seem strange. Then you will be accustomed to it. You know the life you have lived; you know the ruling passion that sways you—your love for blood, your ecstasy at shedding it, the intoxication of secret murder and secret torture. In the dungeon of your castle were the bones of one hundred and forty of your victims whose cries for mercy were sweet in your ears, and whom you slaughtered with joy. Already, in your new incarnation you have done one murder. You will do others. A whole city teeming with potential victims awaits you. Go among them as a wolf, sate your gnawing fierce hunger. . . ."

Tap . . . tap . . . tap!

I could still hear the hammer forcing the wedge a little deeper, a little deeper. But I no longer felt the pain. The soft currents of the voice were bearing my consciousness away. Presently the voice itself faded, became confused, indis-

tinguishable from my own thoughts. And presently my thoughts themselves ceased.

I AWOKE with a start, sat up abruptly, stared about me. I seemed to be in the same narrow room, but I was on a bed. There was a dresser with a mirror in the room and a candle shed its wan radiance over the scene. I was fully dressed, even to my coat, and I was listening intently. It seemed to me that a voice had said, "Get up; it is time to go."

I flung my legs off the bed. A sharp pain shot up from my left ankle to my thigh. I winced, touched the leg gingerly with a finger. It was swollen, sore. But I was able to move the foot, the toes. I got up, tested it with my weight, took a few steps and stopped before the dresser. I drew back with a start. A strange apparition confronted me in the glass—a face that was haggard, lean, sinister and with a black fringe of whiskers running down the jawbone to a pointed beard, and a black mustache curling down from the upper lip to meet it.

But I didn't have time to puzzle that out. The door had opened behind me and I turned to see the hooded hangman standing in its embrasure. My first impulse was to cower away from him like a dog that has been whipped. Then I seemed to understand that he would not torture me any more.

"It is time to go," he said.

I stood still while he came up to me, fastened a blindfold over my eyes. Then a cane was thrust into my hand, a hat placed on my head, and taking my arm, the hangman led me out. "The cane," he told me, "contains a thin steel sword-blade. You will need it."

I felt the cold air as we came outside. Then I was pushed into a car. The car sped away. I sat there in utter darkness, leaning on my cane. My mind seemed a total blank. Finally the car stopped.

"Do you know who you are," asked a voice from the front seat.

"I am Giles de Rais," I answered automatically.

"Do you know what you must do?"

"Yes, I know." The answer surprised me even then.

The car door was opened; I was helped out. I stood there dumbly, heard the motor of the car roar as it shot away. Then I removed the blindfold from my eyes.

I was standing at the west end of the viaduct. It was night again. Behind me gleamed the lights of the business district; ahead and to my left was the street on which my apartment house stood. My apartment? That did not seem entirely clear. Then I remembered; it was the apartment of the man whose body I now occupied. He was a different sort of person from me—a law-abiding fellow whom I now regarded with contempt. But at last I had got the upper hand of him, after living hidden in his blood and brain for all these years. Now I, Giles de Rais, was master!

That thought warmed me with a savage feverish glow. I knew now what it was that I had to do. There was a murdered boy hidden in the bath room. He must be concealed. And I must have another victim—tonight!

I began to walk, limping, but with quick, nervous strides. My cane tapped on the pavement. There was a sword inside that cane, a strong keen blade, ready to my purpose. I passed lighted houses, staring at them with a feverish, furtive hunger. I was a lean wolf who had strayed into a peaceful sheep fold. I was a hungry wolf with the smell of blood and the bleat of victims tantalizing my mind. Once a child ran across a yard, stumbled up the steps of a house. My whole frame quivered; it was all I could do to keep on

moving. The thirst for blood was hot in my throat.

A sort of drunken savagery was mounting in my veins. I was impatient. I wanted to gloat over the hidden corpse of my victim, I wanted to capture another. I was in the middle of the block next to the one in which I live when I stopped suddenly like a hunter who sights game. Under the bleary street lamp at the corner, a woman had paused, was staring at the houses across the street. She was young, with a small trim figure outlined by her dark coat, and under a small black hat her dark hair gleamed like carved ebony. A strange excitement shook me. I saw myself grasping the coils of that black hair, jerking her head back so that the soft curve of a throat was exposed, drawing the keen blade of my sword across that curving whiteness!

The woman moved on. I followed at a safe distance, breathing hoarsely, watching her with feverish eyes. And then, in the shadow of some shrubs in front of my apartment house, she stopped.

I stopped too. Then, with a furtive movement the woman darted across the yard, crept into the shadows and made her way toward my window!

Astonished, I hurried forward, got behind the shrubs where she had stood. What could it mean? The woman had stopped at my window, seemed to be fishing for the latch to the screen. I felt my muscles tighten with alarm. She had managed to open the screen, was crawling into my room!

A hot wave of alarm swept over me. I thought of the ghastly cadaver that lay behind the locked door. The woman must be a police spy, creeping in to find the proof of my guilt!

LIMPING quickly across the lighted space, I gained the shadows of the building, stole along softly to the window,

and peered in. The woman's shape was a dim silhouette in the doorway that led into the front room. Now, with slow, exploring steps, she went on.

I lifted myself over the sill, careful to make no sound, careful not to let my injured leg drag or knock against the wall. I lowered myself to the floor in the shadow of the bed, crawled along on hands and knees to the door through which the woman had passed, and there straightened up and stood flattened against the wall. I was throbbing now with a crazy fit of hatred and bloodlust. Here was a victim ready for my uses, and the fact that she was a spy would make the murder doubly sweet!

I stiffened. The woman was coming back with slow, groping steps. I would seize her, bind and gag her before she could cry out. Then I would take my time about killing her.

She was in the doorway now. Another soft step and she was in the room. She hadn't seen me! I sprang.

My arms went around her from behind; one hand reached up and clamped across her mouth, stifling the cry that came gurgling from her throat. A hot wave of madness misted my mind. She struggled in my arms like a bird caught in the coils of a snake. I threw her across the bed, still holding one hand tight against her lips, and reached for a sheet with which to gag and bind her. But with a sudden jerk she threw her head free and one short scream ripped through the silent darkness.

But that was all. My fingers closed quickly on her throat. My head was throbbing now, pulsing with the hot currents of my mania. I wanted to save her, to torture her with the cruel sword blade, but once my fingers had buried themselves in the soft flesh of her throat I couldn't turn loose! I felt her body shake and quiver, felt it stiffen finally with a spasm

and go limp. I drew my hands away quickly. But she was already silent and motionless.

I felt that I had cheated myself. Her death had been too swift. I limped back to the door where I had left my cane leaning. I gave the handle a sharp twist and a pull; the long thin blade flashed out. In two strides I was back at the bed. I raised the sword in my right hand, seized her black tresses in my left and yanked to lift her head. But instead of what I expected, the hair came away in my hand!

I paused, puzzled. The woman had been wearing a wig. In the dim light from the window I could see the tangled mass of lighter hair that had been beneath it. Strange! Curiosity stung me and I went to the window and pulled down the shade. Then I closed the door into the next room, switched on the light and turned back to the bed. I took two faltering steps and stopped. The sword fell from my hand to the floor. My limbs had begun to shake with an ague of horror.

The horror came on me before I understood the reason. Understanding came gradually to my crazed mind. There lay the woman, her pale lovely face staring up from its bed of yellow hair, and I knew that that face was familiar to me, was dearer to me than life itself. And I had murdered her!

But who was she, and who was I? I was certainly no longer Giles de Rais. A fearful sickness had seized me; cold sweat stood out on my skin; the strength that I had felt an instant before was draining from my body like blood from a severed artery. Then, in a blinding flash that stunned me like a bolt of lightning, the whole hideous disguise that had masked my soul fell away, and I knew—knew the unspeakable horror of what I had done.

I knew then that I was Guy Deray, that I had been temporarily transformed into a monster, and that I was now myself

again. And the woman I had murdered was Frances Mormar!

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Thief of Souls

THE agony that gripped me then cannot be conveyed in words. The physical torment I had suffered was nothing compared with it. The anguish of the damned wracked my cringing soul as I bent in terror above the woman I loved, praying in silent, mad despair that she might be still alive. But I knew that it was a futile hope. Even before I had pressed the mirror to her lips and brought it away untouched by the faintest moisture of breathing, I knew that the utmost horror had been reached, and I had decided what to do.

When I knew that she was dead I didn't hesitate an instant. The agony that convulsed me was too great to endure. I could not bear to think on it another second. I was like a man whose body is wrapped in sheets of flame. I wanted death, wanted it instantly!

I picked up the sword from the floor and stumbled into the next room. In a swift flash my mind had assembled the details of my suicide. I knelt on the divan. I braced the hilt of the sword against the cushions and placed the point against an interstice between my ribs—just above the heart. A forward lunge and that would be all!

"God in heaven, forgive me!" I choked and ~~threw~~ myself forward.

But the sword point barely penetrated my flesh. Something was dragging me back, something soft yet strangling, that had coiled about my throat, choking off the scream that died to a harsh rattle. I heard voices then, but I could not make out the words. Some tremendous force jerked me to the floor, flung me face down

with a stunning shock. Then hands were working over me, tying my arms and legs, forcing a gag into my mouth and binding it fast about my head. Then I was carried into the next room and flung face-down on the bed beside Frances.

I lay perfectly still, too stunned at first to think. And then I began to listen to the voices.

"You see," said one voice, "you can't be sure about them. He went through with the first part of it alright. But when he saw who the girl was it shocked him back to his original character. We'd better have let him kill himself, I think."

"But it worked with the others," the second voice protested. "The difficulty, of course, is that we are using three different forces—the pain that shocks the nervous system and jars the ego loose, the hypnotic suggestion which creates the new personality, and the *dhatura* which numbs the brain, inhibits the normal impulses, fogs the memory and makes the mind pliant and obedient. The problem is to get the right amount of each. I think in his case we should have used more of the drug."

Dhatural I knew of that strange Indian drug and it explained many things to me now. It explained what had been wrong with me that first night when I had lain paralyzed and seen the face at the window and had listened to the fiends' hypnotic words. My whiskey had been drugged! It explained too the loss of memory which had made me fall so readily into the delusion that I was Giles de Rais. But obviously the fiendish alchemy had not completely succeeded with me. And now . . . ?

"Since we can't absolutely depend on it," the first voice was saying, "I think we'd better kill him and get the rest of our program over with tonight. Deray is liable to realize when he regains consciousness that he didn't really commit the

murder of the boy, that you suggested all the details to his mind through hypnotism, and his remorse at having killed his sweetheart is liable to drive him to a confession that will expose us. I think this test has proved that your process of transformation will work on only certain types . . ."

The light was suddenly snapped off. They were moving into the other room. The rest of their talk drifted to me muffled and fragmentary. But I caught the gist of it. They were planning to set the apartment house afire. They would start it in the basement after saturating all walls they could get to with turpentine. They intended to burn me alive with the body of Frances!

It wasn't the thought of being burned alive that electrified me then. I had passed the point where fear of death or physical suffering could move me. Frances was dead—dead by my own hands—and I no longer wanted to live. But an acute and harrowing torment clutched my mind when I realized that the fiends were within a few feet of me and that I would be forced to die without being able to unmask them. I knew their awful secret, but I would have to carry it into death with me and leave them free to go on with their ghastly crime.

I heard the door into the hallway close. They had gone out! God in heaven! if I could only free myself! But how? My hands were tied behind me; my ankles were tied together; my mouth was gagged so that I could not make the faintest sound. And in a few minutes the flames would be leaping up from below, licking into the turpentine-saturated walls.

WILD prayers shrieked in my tormented brain. "God, God," I prayed, "if there is a God, show your power now, I don't ask for my life; I don't want it. But give me a chance to rid the world of those fiends!"

I can't say that I expected a miracle to happen; I didn't really have that much faith. But when I suddenly felt the cloth that was tightly stretched across my mouth begin to loosen, it seemed a direct answer to my desperate prayers. Then the cloth was snatched away. I spat the gag from my mouth and lifted my head.

Did I expect to see an angel sent down from heaven to free me? I did see one anyhow. The angel was Frances and she was sitting up and her hands were busy with the bonds that held my wrists.

"Frances," I gasped, "Oh, my darling. . . You're not dead!"

"I was almost dead with fear," she whispered, working frantically to untie the knots. "But I didn't know that it was you, Guy, and of course you didn't know me since those fiends had disguised me too—with that wig and all—before they turned me loose. But when you attacked me in the dark, strangled me, I saw that my only chance was to pretend that I was dead. I faked the spasm and then lay and held my breath until you were convinced that I was dead. I didn't know who you were until I heard them talking just now . . ."

"Hurry, hurry," I whispered. "You've got to get me loose before they come back."

The last knot came free; my hands were loose and we both attacked the bonds that held my ankles. Now they too were free! I stood up, grasped Frances by the shoulder. "Crawl out through the window!" I said huskily. "Phone the police. I'll try to keep them from escaping before the police get here."

Frances ran to the window. I stumbled to the wall switch, snapped off the light, opened the door and stepped into the front room. Then I froze stiff. The door into the hall had opened and closed swiftly and a dark figure had passed inside. I knew that he was standing

there, gun in hand, waiting for me to move!

God, but there was agony in that moment! To be so near victory and then to be cheated by that narrow margin! I turned frozen eyes toward the dim outline of the divan. I could not see the sword, but I knew approximately where it was. I bunched my muscles for a leap. Then he fired.

Like a striking serpent, the tongue of yellow flame leaped toward me in the dark and I felt the slug whistle past my ear. But I had already ducked, lunged for the divan, was groping frantically for the handle of the long, sharp blade.

Again the gun blasted the silence, but the shots went too high, and in the next instant I had staggered up, was springing like a tiger toward the spot where the yellow streaks of fire had blazed.

They blazed again. Something struck my left shoulder a sharp blow, stung like lancing fire. But the impetus of my rush carried me on. The point of the blade struck something; my weight forced it forward. There was a hoarse scream of pain. The pistol exploded again but the flares leaped ceiling-ward and the next instant the sword was ripped from my hand by the collapse of the body in which it was buried.

I almost fainted then, but I fought to keep myself erect, staggered to the wall, switched on the light. Then I turned and the horror that rose and broke like a wave over me found voice in the wild and desperate cry that shrilled from my lips.

For the man who lay on the floor with the blade of my sword buried in his heart was Herman Tyrone!

Then the door opened and I spun about. Frances was standing there. "Frances," I gasped hoarsely, "it was a ghastly mistake! It was dark, I couldn't see . . ."

I paused. Why didn't she say something? She looked at him and smiled

bitterly. "No, Guy," she said softly, "it's not a mistake. Look at the pocket of his coat there. Isn't that a black wig and beard sticking out? Herman Tyrone was the fiend! He was careful to camouflage his voice, but once, there in the torture room, his beard fell off . . ."

"Then," I interrupted, "you weren't so strongly affected as I, I suppose?"

"I pretended to be completely subdued," she said. "He thought he had succeeded perfectly with me. He had commanded me to come here when he turned me loose. I didn't know why, but I did want to find you, to tell you what I had discovered; so I fought to keep my sanity, and succeeded, at least partially. But of course I didn't know you when you attacked me. That horrid beard glued to your fooled me even after you had turned the light—"

She stopped. The wail of a police siren knifed through the night, whined to silence in front of the house. Hungrily I gathered Frances in my arms, and despite the repulsive beard, she pressed her warm lips against mine.

The next moment the door was flung open and we could see the bluecoats pounding into the already smoking hallway.

THEY caught the man in the basement who was kindling the fire. He was Sam Wembley. At first he was stubborn and refused to talk. But about sixteen hours of grilling broke him down. He saw that the jig was up and told everything, and not, I think without a certain defiant pride that went with him to the gallows.

It was he who had first lured Tyrone into the gambling racket. Under the protection of the old administration the two of them had cashed in profitably on a string of slot machines and other gambling devices. Then the smash had come—the

election of new city officials. All of their savings had been spent trying to beat the new candidates. Tyrone had even stolen library funds to keep Wembley's paper going, but to no avail.

It was then that Tyrone, overwhelmed with defeat, crazed with the fear of exposure, had evolved his hellish scheme. He and Wembley would stage a reign of terror in the city. This would divert the threatening investigation of his own defalcations, and would throw the public into a panic which he hoped would result in the overthrow of the new officials. He had planned, however, to have them murdered outright if this did not succeed.

The chief problem, of course, in such a scheme was how to get the necessary funds to carry on the hellish business. He had no available money to hire assassins. That was where Tyrone's "reincarnation" scheme came in. He was a scholar and a student of abnormal psychology and he had worked out the process by which, through hypnotism, torture and drugs, the weird prototypes of dead monsters could be created. The Hindu's temple they had found a convenient place

to single out the types they needed, minds already prepared by the Swami's teachings. The Swami himself had been unaware of his part in the crime.

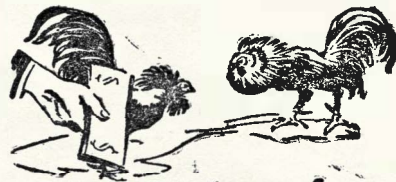
Tyrone's reason for choosing Frances and me among his victims was that he was afraid that sooner or later one of us would penetrate his secret. But we were the stumbling blocks in his scheme, for our minds had not yielded to his sway as completely as the neurotic wrecks he usually chose.

The secret torture chamber was in the basement of Wembley's printing plant. The poor wretches found there by the police were taken to asylums. Frances and I were the only victims who escaped permanent mental derangement, and even at that we were left with mental scars that took longer to heal than the results of physical torture and bullets.

But happiness had a lot to do with our eventual permanent recovery. I am now the City Librarian, having stepped into Tyrone's former job, and Frances is no longer the librarian's secretary, but his wife.

THE END

Get Best it's
a gamble

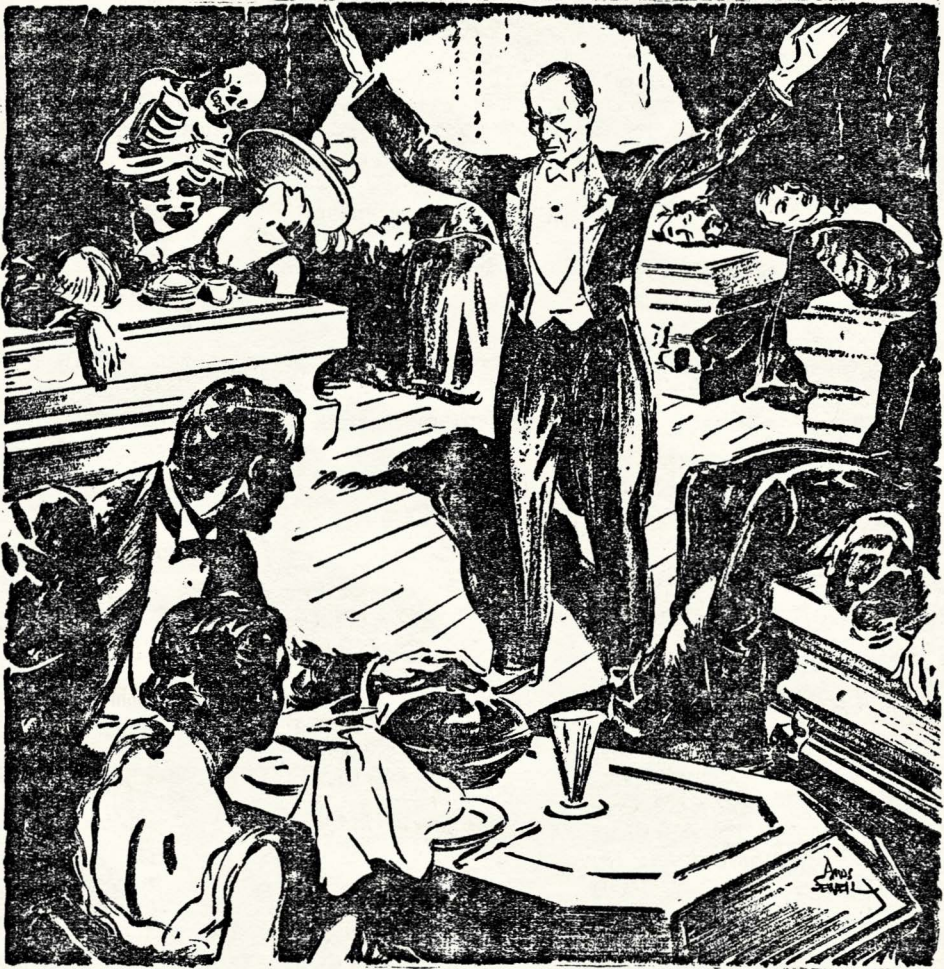


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PROBAK JUNIOR

Death Dines Out



by PAUL ERNST

(Author of "They Wear Death's Face," etc.)

They were jaded, satiated with the ordinary pleasures of life—those patrons of the Cafe Styx. But there are some thrills that mortals are not permitted to experience—and live . . .

THEY said it was the soup. They put the chef through the official wringer in an investigation that lasted for weeks. They checked all the ingredients used by all the food manufacturers that went into the consommé that night.

The police turned hand-springs trying to pin the blame on somebody for what happened. Naturally! Anything as cataclysmic as that was is pretty important!

In the end they reiterated that it was the soup. You read about it. It was my

story you read in the papers months ago. I laid the blame on the consommé too, though I was there that night and know better. But I couldn't have given the real yarn. Hell, they'd have put me in a strait-jacket.

I covered the thing throughout. It was just a matter of chance. I was the guy nearest at hand when the city editor bawled out from his desk that some bird was starting a new kind of café and somebody'd better hop over to his place and get the dope on it.

I hopped. Publicity gag, I thought with a shrug as I took a taxi for the address the city editor had given me. But I had to admit there was a good story in it.

A guy named Macey, retired restaurateur with a little dough to play with, had opened a novelty joint. Rather, he was going to open it next night, and was having a final rehearsal today.

He was calling his place the Café Styx. It was copied after a place in Paris known as the Café Morgue. You've all heard of the Paris joint, probably. Everything in it had something to do with death. The waiters wore undertaker's black. Table linen and drapes were black. Coffins stood around the walls, upended, and the waiters stood in the coffins when they weren't circulating around among the tables which by the way, weren't tables; they were coffins, too, resting on trestles, with four to six people seated around each. Light was given from candles, church tapers, of the sort used at a wake.

Old stuff on the Continent, but kind of new in New York. There ought to be a half column in it, I thought, as I got to Macey's place.

His address was that of a fair-sized office building on West 45th Street. But he wasn't holding his rehearsal in the café room itself. The decorating on that wasn't quite ready yet. He was holding it in a vacant display room on the street floor of the building.

MACEY, a plump little man of sixty with snow-white hair and red-apple cheeks met me at the door. He greeted me profusely, and was only sorry there weren't about ten of me. Publicity is everything in a venture like his; and the more reporters the merrier.

"The main feature of the new Café Styx will be its exclusiveness," he said, as he took my elbow and guided me into the vacant storeroom off the building lobby. "I'm only going to have tables for forty people. The cover charge will be twenty dollars to ensure the right kind of patrons. Such a small attendance won't give me much profit, but the café is a plaything rather than a business venture."

I swallowed my grunt at that. Plaything? Forty people at twenty bucks a copy is eight hundred bucks. Eight C's a night isn't a bad take in any man's language!

"I think I'll have the mob clamoring at the doors," Macey said smiling, "in spite of the charge."

Well, there was a good chance of that, too, I conceded. Put a terrific price on something, publicize the prize broadcast, and sometimes the gang goes nuts over it. The Café Styx might fall into this category if every one in New York knew it cost so much to go there.

You know how that works. "The boy friend took me to the Café Styx last night," a girl could say, off-handedly. At once whoever she told it to could look at her with envy because she knew a guy who'd pay out forty fish just to get her and himself seated some place where he could mingle with a lot more suckers! The ladies would devil their men to take them there, and the men would like to be known as guys who could afford that much.

"I guess you won't have much trouble collaring forty an evening," I nodded. "Let's see the works."

"You'll have to use your imagination," Macey said, pointing around the bare room. "The place downstairs will be very weird. Weird enough to give the most jaded nerves a thrill. Without the trimmings up here it might look kind of silly."

And it did seem kind of silly at first. But not later!

There were six waiters in the store-room. They were dressed in regular street clothes, but you'd know they were waiters just the same. And there was a pretty little red-haired girl who I soon divined had something to do with hat-checks. And there were two gorgeous blondes, almost like twins, who were to regale the forty exclusive customers at regular intervals with song and dance.

The nine were standing around the big bare place looking kind of sheepish.

"We'll start," Macey said in a loud voice. And they snapped to attention.

"This gentleman and I will be customers," he went on. "Go through your parts as I've told you how to do."

He led me back to the door, and turned the light switch there. The big room got pretty dim, with only the late afternoon light coming in at the far windows. The six waiters lined up along one wall, and stood with arms folded and faces blank.

Macey walked me forward from the door as though escorting a woman.

"We cross a bridge here," he said. "In the real café room there's a little river, water with a couple of gallons of ink in it to make it black. It circulates around and comes under a small bridge. That's the River Styx. See?"

I said I saw.

"I thought for awhile of having a little boat take the customers across, with an old guy dressed up like Charon to push it. But that would be too expensive, so we just cross a little bridge. Now we're in the café room." We were in the center of the display room. "We seat ourselves here, at a table made of a coffin."

We sat down in two stained oak chairs looking lonesome in the big room.

"Waiter," said Macey loudly.

The nearest of the six standing with their arms folded walked to us. And I got a kind of shiver at the way he acted.

He was a tall, thin guy, as were the other five. He sort of stalked instead of walking, coming at us stiff-legged, with his arms still folded. His eyes looked glassy, and his face was dead white with deep lines in it.

"He's supposed to be a walking corpse, like the rest," Macey told me. He didn't have to tell me—I could guess that!

The man never said a word. He just came to the "table" we were supposed to be sitting at, and stood there.

"Very good," said Macey to the man. "Cigarettes!"

The red-haired girl started at that, and walked toward us.

"A little economy," Macey said. "The hat-check girl is also the cigarette girl."

"She's also a kind of sick girl right now, isn't she?" I said, staring at her.

I've said she was pretty. She was more. She was beautiful. Not as statuesque as the blonde entertainers, but good looking enough for any guy. But she didn't look right at the moment. Her face was white as a sheet, and her eyes were wide and starey.

Macey's lips twisted.

"I'll have to fire her, I think. No, she isn't sick; she's just superstitious. She thinks this death business might mean bad luck."

She came up to our chairs.

"I'll have two packs of cigarettes," Macey said.

The girl went through with her act. She didn't blink an eyelid or move a muscle. She stood there, playing dead on her feet. Macey pretended to make change, and take cigarettes from a tray she wasn't carrying.

"You're not very talkative," he said with a grin.

It was a cue line, I saw; something a customer might say.

"Corpses are never talkative," the girl came back docilely, her voice a monotone. "And I am a walking corpse in this place of the dead . . . *Oh!*"

For a second her self control cracked. She stared at Macey and me with wild eyes. Horror was in her face. Then, as Macey glared, she bit her lips and came out of it.

"If you're a corpse I'm an undertaker's assistant," said Macey, still in his rôle of fresh customer. "How about a date?"

"It isn't wise to make dates with death," said the little red-haired girl.

Then she gasped and fairly ran from us, cowering in a dark part of the room. The two blonde beauties laughed aloud, and a couple of the waiters snickered. But the girl paid them no attention. She cowered there, staring with wide, wild eyes at empty air.

"Yes, I'll have to fire her," said Macey. "Now we'll go through with the main feature of the evening. The midnight novelty."

He raised his voice. "It is now one minute to twelve," he said.

The dancing blonde looked as tragic as a girl can look when she's chewing gum. The singing one sang more sorrowfully. The waiters were like ramrods.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Macey said, addressing a non-existent crowd. "In thirty seconds we shall enter the land of the dead. At midnight all in the Café Styx become only animated bodies. Prepare and beware!"

He said to me out of the corner of his mouth: "How do you like it?"

Well, I didn't like it. But I saw no point in saying so.

"It'll be a novelty," I said.

Macey straightened up and stared around. He began knocking on the back

of his chair. One, two, three—twelve strokes.

"It is now midnight." I heard the strained breathing of the others in the place. "Twelve! The witching hour! Ladies and gentlemen—*death is here. . .*"

There was a scream. I hope I never hear another one like it. The hair on my neck crawls when I think of it.

The scream was followed by a flopping thud. The waiters began running toward the dark corner where the red-haired girl had retreated, and Macey and I joined them.

She lay in a queerly huddled heap on the floor with her tapered silken legs bent at the knee as if she wanted to run. And Macey cursed as he straightened up.

"Dead! Damn it! She must have had a heart like a leaky sieve, for a little play-acting like this to get her. Oh, damn it!" He snapped his fingers in agitation that had all too little to do with the dead girl. "Well, I'm not going to put off the opening for this. It's not my fault she scared herself to death. Come and have some champagne. Have anything—only be easy on this part of the story when you write up my café!"

I left without the champagne—and I did not shake Mr. Macey's plump white hand on the way out.

That girl, lying there dead, got me. . . .

I THOUGHT the whole thing was pretty lousy. A joint where you were served by supposed corpses and ate off coffins! It was about the bummiest taste possible. But there had been an underlying eeriness about it—even in the rehearsal in a bare display room—that made me feel a little cold when I thought of it. I could understand how a person with a weak heart like the little hat-check girl had let her nerves get keyed up to a point where the manager's whip-lash sentence, "*Death is here. . .*" could knock her over.

I wrote a story about the Café Styx

that held every sentiment I had against it. I knocked that joint from here to breakfast. I told in detail how the red-haired girl had passed out from the shock of the rehearsal—how play-death had become the real thing. I intended to kill Macey's place before it was ever born.

And I was a sucker for trying it! I forgot the adage that only one kind of publicity beats the favorable kind, and that's unfavorable publicity. The mugs were falling over themselves next night to get in at the opening. . . .

I GOT there at eleven with Alice Carter. Bring a girl, Macey had said, so I'd fit in with the crowd and not be a stag and therefore conspicuous. Bring a good looker, he had added. So I'd phoned Alice, who has copper-brown hair and brown eyes you could light cigarettes at, and streamline curves that, in the white satin evening dress she wore, made the other dames bite their lips and hate her. Alice Carter, who is the future missus—but, I'd had a job getting her to come.

"How morbid!" she exclaimed over the phone when I gave her a little description of the atmosphere of the Café Styx. "That's not my idea of a good time—to eat off coffins and be served by dead men. It's blasphemous, somehow!"

I felt as she did. I could see how such a joint would thrill jaded senses. But the prospect didn't thrill Alice's or mine. Guess our senses aren't jaded, because we both hated the idea, and I only went because the paper told me to, and she only came along because she kind of likes me—naturally.

We entered the lobby of the office building in which the cafe was located. At least three hundred people were there, having read my half-column in the paper and being anxious to be among the forty allowed inside. It was an odd crowd, top-hatted and colorful, in a lobby devoted during the day to soberly-clad business

people going up in elevators to their offices, and at night deserted save for the bunch going through it and to the basement where Macey had located the weird café.

Downstairs, Macey himself was at the door, behind the red plush rope that kept the crowds back. He let the first forty in, and then shut the door. And Alice and I got our first good look at the joint.

It wasn't much like the bare display room upstairs in which I'd seen the rehearsal! It was, as Macey had boasted—plenty weird.

Around the underground room were six coffins standing upright against the walls. In them the six waiters stood, glassy-eyed, frozen-faced, with arms folded across their chests. They were not in waiters' clothes. They were clad in black tights which fitted their bodies like skins and on the fronts of which were faintly to be seen the outlines of skeletons.

The café room was draped in funereal black throughout; the linens were black; even the dishes had black bands around them. Ten coffins on trestles surrounded a scrap of dance floor, with four chairs around each coffin. The hat-check doorway was shaped in the outline of a skull, with the counter painted to represent the top of a row of decaying teeth. Between it and the room was the little black River Styx Macey had mentioned.

Alice and I walked over the bridge and seated ourselves at one of the coffins. Opposite us were an oldish young man with a silly grin on his face and a pretty black-haired girl, who was staring around with large eyes and making wise-cracks that didn't sound as if she quite meant them.

Alice looked at me with eyes in which there was no humor.

"This is blasphemous," she said, as she had over the telephone. "Meeting in a crypt of a place like this to dance and be entertained, with burlesque death all

around us. It's just too sickening!"

I shrugged. It *was* pretty terrible. The dim light from a score of great candles flickered over the polished black lids of the coffins which were our table tops. It shone dully on the staring eyeballs of the "dead" waiters. It glinted from the inky black waters of the River Styx, and made dancing distorted shadows behind the forty seated people; shadows like monsters ready to leap and devour them. If I'd thought the rehearsal was eerie, I was nuts. It wasn't in it compared to this!

"I keep thinking of the girl who dropped dead yesterday afternoon," murmured Alice, as if she'd read my thoughts about the rehearsal. "Do you suppose it could have been some sort of punishment for playing such a part. . . ?"

"Punishment?" I said, frowning.

"Yes. I don't think Death would like this play-acting, this burlesque of the grave."

"Death isn't a person; it's only what happens to you when you stop breathing," I said, acting more hard-boiled than I felt. "I don't go for this graveyard stuff at all, but I guess there won't be any 'punishment' coming out of it."

The orchestra, five men in black tights like the waiters, started playing. Alice and I danced, with nineteen other couples dancing cheek to cheek around us. The music was a funeral march set to foxtrot cadence.

The people in the place were glittering of eye, hectic of color. The women's voices were shrill and feverish as they laughed at the corpse-like waiters and exclaimed at the novelty of eating off of coffins. The men's were almost as high, almost as hysterical. Macey had got his jaded crowd, all right! And their night-worn nerves were getting the kick from it that he had foreseen.

Alice pressed my arm as we walked from the floor back to our table, or, rather, our coffin.

"These people laughing and dancing," she said with a shiver, "with death all around them. It's almost biblical. It's obscene, defying death, making fun of the tomb. Some orgy like this must have been going on in the temple when the letters of fire appeared on the wall. People like these must have filled Sodom and Gomorrah, before the great destruction."

"Hey, you're getting pretty highbrow for a reporter." I tried to laugh, but my laugh was a flop; for I felt just as she did.

The whole business of the Café Styx was too much like getting drunk and disorderly at a funeral to suit me. Drunk and disorderly were precisely the terms to fit that crew.

All of them—men who lived only by electric light after ten in the evening, and girls who were their companion-moths—were going rapidly haywire. The burlesque of death was intoxicating to their satiated senses, where it would have been only frightening and disgusting to normal people.

It was passing rapidly from make-believe to a sort of frenzied philosophy. Eat, drink and be merry, for death is all around us. Live fast, for you won't live long.

BY a quarter of twelve the choice bunch of night-rounders in the Café were having themselves an orgy that would have abashed the Romans.

The waiters in their gruesome black tights were kept busy stalking back and forth with drinks. Macey was trying to serve a dinner, too; but few people wanted food. They all wanted liquor, and were tight to the eyebrows and getting tighter all the time.

I remember small glimpses of those people. They are etched on my mind unforgettably.

The tall blonde girl in a blue dress cut low, with one shoulder strap slipping every few minutes, who chucked one of

the death's-head waiters under the chin while the rest at their coffin-table laughed uproariously. The reeling man who tried to make a date with the new hat-check girl, just as Macey had rehearsed the act with the one who had dropped dead, and was told that it was unwise to make engagements with death. The plumpish woman in black who stepped to one of the coffins, in which the waiters stood when not busy, and told her escort to please take the measurements, as it fitted her perfectly and she wanted a stylish fit after she was gone.

"Let's get out of here," said Alice, staring at a fat man who had a girl on his lap and was thumping his empty glass on the coffin lid in front of him to attract the attention of the walking dead man who served them.

I looked at my watch. "Wait a little longer," I said. "At midnight the big blow-off comes."

"What's that?"

I told Alice what I'd learned at the rehearsal yesterday.

"At midnight the lights go dim. A spotlight plays out with this special kind of light that picks out a certain paint and makes it phosphorescent where you could hardly see it before. The skeletons you can dimly see painted on the waiters' and musicians' tights are of that paint. So you'll get the pleasant illusion that skeletons are waiting on you and playing music for you. Also Macey announces that it's the witching hour, and death is here and how do you like it?"

Alice caught her lip between her teeth. I'd never seen her so pale.

"This is—horrible!" she burst out, loudly enough so that the other couple at our coffin-table heard—and sneered. "How can people do this!"

She looked at me, seemed about to say something, then stopped.

"Go on," I said. "Get it off your chest."

"I've never felt before as I do now,"

she said finally. "I feel as though—something is going to happen here. Something awful!"

"A raid'll happen if Macey lets his guests get as mellow as this every night," I retorted. "Look at the jane in green, and the bald-headed bank president, or whoever he is, she's with!"

"Don't joke," Alice said. I could see the pulse in her throat pounding unevenly. "This has got far past a joke, or novelty. Look around you! Those waiters—are they acting, or are they really dead men waiting on us? The two blonde girls who entertain—are they alive and warm, or are they cold corpses?"

"Pretty hot corpses, I'd say," I joked, trying once more to be flippant. The two girls were in costume consisting only of several narrow strips of black. I'd never seen such enticing complexions or so much of them.

Alice's eyes made mine waver.

"Something dreadful is going to happen here," she repeated, "and I'd like to leave before it does."

"Now you're getting into the state the hat-check girl must have reached yesterday when her weak heart knocked her over," I began. Then the distress, the dim horror in Alice's brown eyes stopped me.

"We'll go—right after twelve," I said, reaching across the coffin and squeezing her hand.

I WANTED to go right away. I'll admit it now though I wouldn't have then. I didn't want to wait till midnight. I kept remembering what had happened yesterday afternoon. I could see Macey standing up at the rehearsal and addressing the non-existent crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen, in thirty seconds we shall enter the land of the dead. At midnight all become only animated bodies. Prepare and beware!"

And then I could recall him saying:

"Twelve! The witching hour! Ladies and gentlemen—death is here!" I could hear the scream of the unfortunate girl who had been cowering in the shadows, and hear the thud of her body as it fell. . . .

But I couldn't leave before midnight. I was covering this place, a not important assignment, but one I felt I must go through with.

I stole a look at the girl, now selling cigarettes from table to table, who was taking the place of the red-haired girl. This was a red-head too, more coarsely featured than the other. She was frightfully pale; but I knew that she, as well as the other employees, was made up for pallor. Would she scream and—

"I think I'll have another drink," I said.

At my glance, the waiter who took care of our table stalked up. He stared at me out of glassy, unblinking eyes. His hand touched mine as he took my glass, and I thought it was colder than a hand should be—like a dead man's hand. So much for nerves and what they can do to you!

The rest were through with their pretense of eating a dinner. They were all drinking more and more heavily. As for Alice and I—we hadn't even pretended to touch food. We'd had only a highball apiece. The fact that we were probably the only ones in the café who hadn't eaten anything was made much of later by the police in their persistent search for a natural explanation of what happened there that night. . . .

At five minutes of twelve the two blonde girls came onto the scrap of dance floor, to do another of their numbers. I felt a little chill go through me as they began the act they'd pulled at the rehearsal yesterday, just before the red-haired kid passed out and on.

One began singing the lugubrious song about the river being her destination because her sweetie had left her. The oth-

er began a lithe, slumbrous dance to the funereal strains of the song.

The men and women, packed in the room and all doing figuratively what the one girl had done literally—chucking death under the chin—leaned forward to stare with lustful eyes at the nearly nude bodies of the two. The waiters, relieved for a moment of their duties, stood with folded arms and dead faces in the upright coffins.

Then, at two minutes of twelve, with a suddenness that brought a universal gasp, the candles in the cafe room flickered out. I don't know what device Macey had thought up to extinguish them all at once, but it was done. For a second the room was in darkness, and then a spotlight burst into flame from over the door, and another gasp came from the crowd.

These revellers were struck with something more than surprise, even though they were so tight by now that you wouldn't think they could tell light from darkness. The spotlight was the one I'd described, picking out the phosphorescent paint on the black tights of the employees.

Instantly the orchestra became five skeletons, thumping at piano and drums, drawing bowstrings over violins, playing the saxophone. In the six coffins, upended along the walls, six skeletons stood. The hat-check girl, dressed in black silk tights, became a stiffy perambulating skeleton. At the center of the room, dancing and singing to funereal music, were two dazzlingly white, almost nude feminine bodies.

THAT last touch added ghastliness to the picture in a way it is hard to describe. Had all there become skeletons, it would somehow have been less nerve-racking than to have these two remain as they had been, to dance and sing with bodies so white they looked blanched among skeletons of the long-dead.

"My sweetie's gone and left me so I'm gonna die," crooned one of the two, while the other writhed in a dance representing the last spasms of death.

"My God, I can't stand it," whispered Alice. "Get me out of here!"

Macey's voice suddenly sounded out. At the sound of it the two entertainers stood still on the dance floor. The waiters stiffened more than ever like waiting skeletons in their gruesome sentinel boxes. The hat-check girl became motionless, leaning over a coffin-table while a man took a cigar from her tray. I felt a wave of cold sweep over me.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "In thirty seconds we shall enter the land of the dead. At midnight all in the Café Styx become only animated bodies. Prepare and beware!"

The crowd shrieked and laughed hysterically. "Beware!" a dozen people mocked, booing after they had rasped the word in a mock villain's hiss. Macey grinned, too.

But I saw the piano player get up suddenly, as though a cold hand had touched his shoulder, and slide through the curtained doorway in the rear through which the almost nude blonde entertainers had come. It was a retreat that was almost a flight, as if he couldn't bear any more of the grim masquerade.

"Prepare and beware," the drunks and their shrilly laughing women kept echoing.

Then Macey held up his hand again, and there was silence. He had his watch in his hand and kept looking at it.

From somewhere concealed behind the sable drapes of the walls a clock chimed. One, two, three—slowly twelve notes rang out. As they sounded, one by one those seated at the coffin-tables turned to look deeply into each other's eyes, as Alice and I were doing at the moment. And in the gaze of all there was, for the first time, doubt and a vague realization of the un-

wholesomeness of the thing they were doing.

But Macey didn't seem to catch any of this, or to hear the strained way the breathing of most in the room sounded.

"It is now midnight," he called, after the last stroke of the clock. "Twelve! The witching hour!"

I saw the piano player come back into the room, silently, and take his place again; and as I saw his tall, emaciated figure, I was bewildered. He seemed to have recovered very quickly, because only half a minute had elapsed since he had left, hurriedly, as if he could bear no more of the tragic burlesque.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Macey cried. "Prepare . . . death is here. . . ."

THE emaciated piano player slowly turned on his stool.

I don't know how it was I happened to be looking at him. Pure chance, I guess. Anyway, I was. There was something about him. . . .

I couldn't see his face, of course. With the spotlight, the employees had dropped black masks over their faces on which were painted skulls, to go with the skeletons their bodies had become. So all I saw of the piano player's face was a gleaming, phosphorescent skull.

"I can't stand it!" Alice's shrill whisper rang out.

Macey said once more: "*Death is here!*"

He faced the orchestra and lifted his hand. . . .

There are moments that beggar language, and this was one of them.

With that lift of the hand, the orchestra was again to start playing a funeral march. The waiters and the hat-check girl were to parade around the dance floor, seven skeletons with the smallest skeleton leading.

But none of that was done. Nothing happened.

The orchestra didn't begin to play. The

waiters didn't parade, nor did the girl. Every one was moveless, and everything was silent.

Silent? God, it was quiet! You could hear the clock behind the drapes tick. You could hear the hoot of a taxi up on the street. You could hear an elevator somewhere carrying a lonely night office worker down from his overtime.

That was all you could hear. In the café itself, there was not one sound.

"Well," I said to Alice, not quite recognizing my own voice, "why don't they start something? Is this a gag?"

My voice fell. It had sounded like a trumpet call in the ghastly silence. Alice was staring at me with parted, blanched lips and dazed eyes.

No one else in the place looked at me, or moved, or said anything!

I could feel my heart begin to hammer in my throat, and the salt sweat sting my forehead. This silence! This motionless!

"Macey!"—I called, my voice high and cracked.

Macey paid no attention. He stood where he was, facing the orchestra, hand upraised. And the orchestra sat rigid, no hand touched to instrument, five skeletons in the eerie beam of the spotlight. . . .

No, not five. Four. I saw hazily that the piano player was gone again, somewhere, somehow.

"Oh, God!" whispered Alice at last. "These people—look around—see. . . ."

Seconds to realize what had happened! Seconds to believe it. For some things are unbelievable in spite of the proof of the eye!

THE two at the table with us had frozen into immobility as absolute as that which held Macey and the orchestra. The man sat upright in his chair, staring straight ahead at empty air. The girl, elbows on coffin-lid, chin on hands, also stared blindly at nothing. All the others

were the same way—men and women like life-size dolls with the springs unwound—only somehow more terrible than any dolls.

Then, like an echo of Macey's words—save that an echo can not come a minute after sound—came the dim whisper: "Ladies and gentlemen, death is here. . . ." At least I thought I heard it, and Alice thought she did too, though neither of us could swear to it.

Then things began to happen. . . .

Alice's scream ripped out, awful, hoarse—the scream of one whose reason is tottering. And I saw what she was looking at, and shouted, too.

Macey!

His plump, white hand was sagging, and as his arm lowered from the signal the orchestra had never followed, his body lowered too. It sagged toward the floor, hit it. I'd heard a thud like that before—the zopping thud of the hat-check girl's lifeless body, yesterday afternoon.

Macey lay where he had fallen. There was another thud, and I saw, with eyes that seemed to see through red mist, that one of the orchestra had slumped from his chair. The same awful thud came from behind us somewhere, and then still another, as a waiter fell slowly out of his coffin, like a leaning skeleton, and smashed squarely on his face on the floor.

"God in heaven!" screamed Alice. "They're all—They're all—"

The girl opposite us sagged sideways, slowly. Her chin slipped off her hands, her elbows slid from the coffin-top. In an arc that seemed to take ten seconds to complete, her body bent oddly in the chair. She thudded to the floor head first, body following in grotesque and angular curves.

Panting, with her hand squeezed to her breast and her eyes maniacal, Alice sobbed out the words that were turning my own brain to molten lead that seared my skull.

"They're all—*Oh, God, they're all dead!*"

This time the dim whisper I thought I had heard came again—and it *was* an echo. Though this, also, is something I'd hesitate to swear to.

"All dead—all dead. . . ."

But while the dim whisper was sounding I was stumbling, with the unconscious body of Alice in my arms, toward the door.

As I walked I had to step carefully, to avoid trampling on expensively clad forms that lay in heaps among the coffin-tables and on the dance floor, like worms whose pallid lengths dot the spring sidewalks after a heavy rain. . . .

YOU read the headlines months ago: *Poisoned Soup Kills Fifty*. And the further account: "Last night at the Café Styx, opened for the first time, fifty men and women died from poisoned food. The café, decorated to resemble the famous Café Morgue of Paris, became in tragic truth a morgue when all the diners, the waiters and the entertainers, collapsed and a doctor, called in from the street, pronounced them dead. It is almost a certainty that poison put in the consommé is responsible for the wholesale murder."

Sure, I wrote that. But now I'm writing what really happened that night, and you can take it or leave it. Poison in the soup! The waiters didn't drink any soup, nor did the orchestra; and they were found dead. Nor could any autopsy discover definite traces of any poison. . . .

No, I don't know the straight of it. I only know that Macey said, "Death is here," and from that moment on no one moved. And I know I seemed to hear a whisper, "Death is here," when I saw the piano player leave the room and seem to come back again in a few seconds and turn his skeleton face slowly on the assembly in the Café Styx.

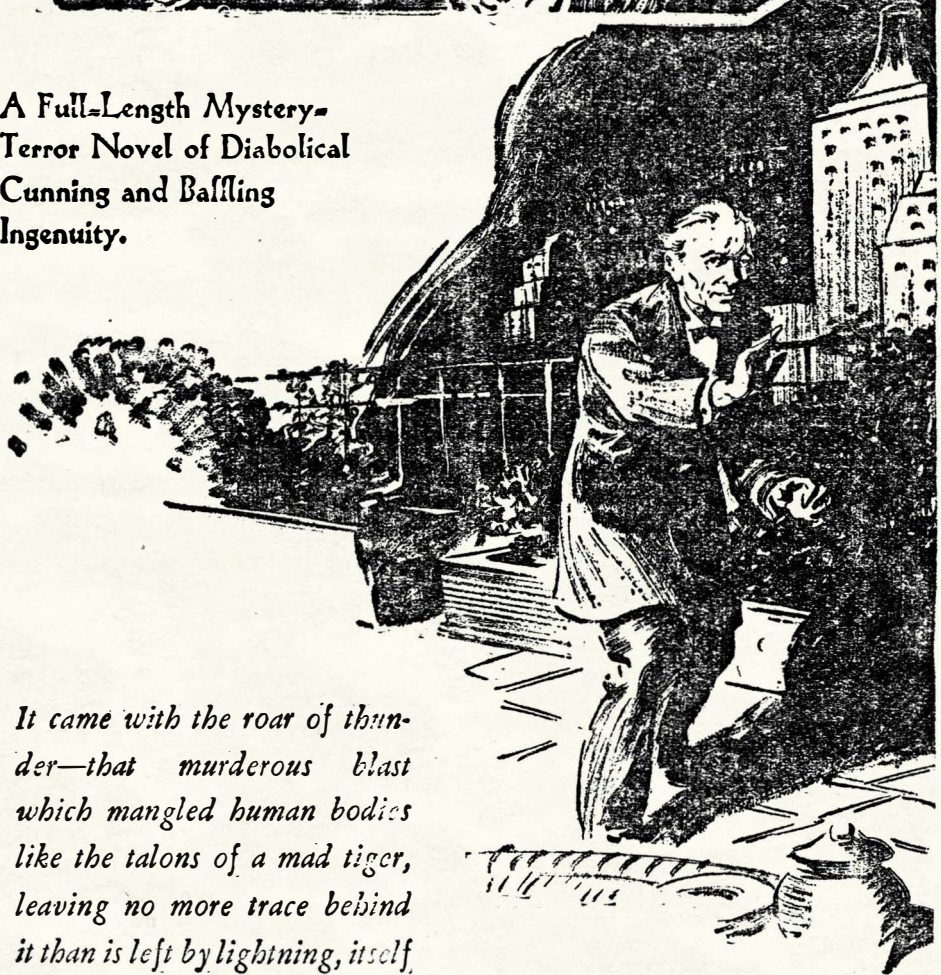
But that can't be possible because the man was found later in a rear dressing room so deep in a fainting spell that he couldn't possibly have moved—did not, indeed, move for many hours afterward. But if it wasn't he, then who—?

Oh, hell, I give it up. I can't even figure out why Alice and I were spared, unless it was because we didn't participate in spirit in the deathly burlesque. But you can see now, I guess, why I fell in with the prosaic poison theory of the police, even though I was there that night—and know better!





A Full-Length Mystery-
Terror Novel of Diabolical
Cunning and Baffling
Ingenuity.



*It came with the roar of thun-
der—that murderous blast
which mangled human bodies
like the talons of a mad tiger,
leaving no more trace behind
it than is left by lightning, itself.*

*. . . But, though with his own eyes he had seen the master of the shat-
tering bolt at his hellish work, Steve Brent's frantic accusations resulted
only in branding him with the stigma of insanity—leaving his sweetheart
unprotected from the man all others trusted!*

THE SMILING KILLER

by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

STEVEN BRENT guided the roadster through a storm-sodden wind while he huddled in the warmth of his raincoat, and peered through the windshield segment cleared by the wigwagging wiper. The tires peeled along greasy pavement blearily reflecting the garish neon glare of the street, and the checkerboard



pattern of tower windows. As he turned through the running gutter of the last corner, Steve Brent was glad that the trying three-hour run into the city was over.

He could not know he was reaching a destination fraught with haunting, maddening horror.

Philip Brent, wrapped in wool-lined rubber, sat tensely beside him, lips strained, eyes anxious. The brothers had scarcely spoken since leaving their country home in Wilton. Perhaps, Steve thought, it was because Phil was dependently thinking of Wanda Seward—longing for her even while reminding himself she was engaged to marry another man. An imperative telephone call from the girl had started them off together through the sluicing rain.

"Something's troubling Wanda—something serious," was all Philip had said after hearing her brief message. "Drive me into town, Steve, like a good chap, will you? I feel a bit shaky and—let's get going."

Now Mackland Moors stood directly ahead, a rearing apartment building topped by the most sumptuous penthouse in the city—a garden spot in the midst of gaunt, sooty spires, where Wanda and Diane Seward lived. Steve Brent slowed as he neared the broad, arched car entrance that gave into a spacious, landscaped court. Relaxing, he asked wonderingly:

"Did Wanda explain what's wrong, Phil?"

"Not definitely. She said it's important—she had to see me before Mal leaves town." The girl Philip Brent loved was engaged to marry Malcolm Drew, successful young broker. "He's leaving for Florida early in the morning, to be gone a month, and it has to be cleared up—whatever this matter is—tonight. I'm not sure why she's turning to me now—as a

friend, I suppose." He spoke bitterly. "Who's that standing there in the rain, Steve? Isn't it—?"

The lashing storm had driven the city's millions indoors. Only a few were abroad tonight, tip-toeing through sidewalk puddles, gripping streaming, wind-filled umbrellas. Yet the little man at the court entrance seemed unaware of the wet turmoil. His Chesterfield trickled, his derby dripped—apparently he had been standing there many minutes, unmindful of the storm. His beneficent, familiar face, dewy with the flying drops, had lighted with a kindly smile of recognition as the roadster swung toward the arch.

Almost instantly, as Steve Brent glimpsed him, his expression underwent a startling change. It was as though the little man had suddenly sighted a mortal enemy, and the friendly glow of his mild blue eyes chilled into a fearful hostility. The smile was displaced by an expression of concentrated malevolence. Then I saw that the strange little man was gripping a weapon—was raising it swiftly to his shoulder.

The thing leveled with terrifying quickness, pointing straight through the open side of the roadster at Philip Brent—a shotgun! That instant of time stood still while Steve Brent stared. His eyes saw a thing which his mind told him was incredible—this little man, standing in a city street unafraid of observation, aiming a deadly weapon at his brother. Its muzzle loomed only a few feet from Phil—and Phil Brent was gazing at it in bewilderment, making no move to protect himself.

As though striving to awaken himself from the horrors of an exhausting nightmare, Steve Brent sought to escape that fantastic apparition. Automatically he thrust the accelerator pedal down. The roadster leaped, surging with sudden power, into the arch. In a few mad seconds it gained terrific momentum—and as

it sputtered, the leveled shotgun, a mild blue eye squinting behind the sights, followed Philip Brent's head.

There was a deafening explosion. Blinding light flared. It burst from the barrel of the shotgun like a thunderbolt.

The surge of percussion that struck inside the roadster robbed Steve Brent of his sight, sucked the breath from his lungs, as though he had been suddenly struck by the torrent of an icy Niagara. The stupefying explosion jarred the whole roadster. The car hurtled into the court like a wheeled projectile, while a stone column of the arch cut from view the cherubic little man with the shotgun.

STEVE BRENT'S vision returned, distorted, bleared, to reveal a horror in the seat beside him. He was only dimly aware of the swift, lurching movement of the car as he stared at a ghastly red thing that had been a man.

Philip Brent's head was a crushed, crimson mass. Steve Brent's leg thrust rigidly against the gas pedal while his eyes recoiled from sight of this hellish thing that had been his brother.

A wild cry sounded within the court—a crazy shout of warning—and the next instant a world-crashing shock enveloped Steve Brent. Hurling against the steering-wheel, he saw a stone fountain cleaving and disintegrating in front of the windshield. Jagged fragments of marble exploded against the car as Steve Brent madly twisted the wheel.

The sudden lurch tipped the roadster. Its lifted wheels spun and its metal ripped with a shattering screech. Then the car crashed against a massive column—and Brent catapulted out through a burst door. He plunged to the wet pavement and sprawled in the driving rain, the blackness of oblivion flooding into his mind.

He fought it. Staring at the mangled roadster, he knew nothing of the rubber-

coated doorman who frantically clattered up to him, nothing of the horrified faces craning out of the streaked windows. The car lay wrecked on its side, its wheels spinning—and beside it, within reach of Steve Brent, pelted by the rain, twisted grotesquely in a reddening puddle was the face-less body of his brother.

A soft voice reached through the dizzy whirl of Steve Brent's senses: "Handle him gently. He's not badly hurt, but the shock has stunned him." Helpful hands gripped his arms as he raised his aching eyes. An uncontrollable moan of terror broke from his lips at sight of the little man who was bending over him, striving to aid him to rise. The little man with the mild blue eyes and the cherubic face who had fired the shotgun at Philip Brent's head!

He was there—*there*—holding Steve Brent's arms like an evil angel claiming his prey for the everlasting fires of Hell! The sight of him lit fires that leaped and flared in Steve Brent's brain until it seemed that the flames destroyed his consciousness, and he sank into all-enveloping blackness. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Ghostly Marksman

STEVE BRENT paused at the silver door. His forehead was plastered with gauze and his left wrist was bound, but he was scarcely aware of the pain of the gashes. A dread filled him—a dread of passing through this silver door.

"Go right in, Steve," the man at his side said cheerfully. "There's nothing more we can do now. Don't worry. They're waiting for you in there."

It was hours since the accident, but Steve Brent was still stunned by the shock, by the incredibly horrible image etched in red in his memory. He tried to

convince himself that he had not actually seen it, that this dread he felt was utterly groundless—but he did not touch the silver knob. He knew the door, when it opened, would reveal the little man with the mild blue eyes. As certainly as though his vision could pierce the shining panel, he knew Gresham was in there now, soft-voiced and gentle mannered—"waiting for you."

"Go right in, Steve," the man at Brent's side urged again. "You've got to have some rest, you know."

John Babbage, lean and sharp-eyed, guardian of Wanda and Diane Seward, and an attorney of wide reputation, opened the way. Brent went in slowly. He paused again, abruptly, eyes widened, a nameless fear knifing his heart. He looked at a coat and hat resting on a chair. The Chesterfield was carefully folded, the derby precisely placed. They were wet. *Wet!*

"Steve!"

Brent turned, and suddenly Diane was in his arms—the girl he loved, the girl he was going to marry. He crushed her close, breathing deep of her perfume, the warmth of her heart coming like balm to his tortured nerves.

But even as he held her he look haggardly along the hallway, toward the library. Cozy evenings, with cheerful drinks, the fireplace crackling, the radio filling the hushes with sweet melody—he remembered. But it couldn't be like that in there now. Not like that now if. . . .

"Is he here?"

Diane drew back at the sharp breathlessness of his question. Grief shone in her limpid eyes, and profound sympathy—and alarm. She asked softly: "Who, darling? Whom do you mean?"

The fear kept him silent, and drew him to the library door. He saw them. As Babbage had said, they were waiting for him. Harvey Brent, his stalwart younger brother, whose face was white and drawn

with shock—a face so like Phil's that sight of it hurt Steve. Malcolm Drew, impeccable in a trim tuxedo, gravely nervous in spite of his cultured suavity. And Gresham. Gresham was there. The little man with the faded blue eyes and the plump jowls and the kindly, gentle manner.

Steve Brent stood stock still, looking at Gresham. He scarcely heard Mal Drew's murmured expression of sympathy, scarcely felt the reassuring grip of Harvey's hand. He did know that Diane's arm was slipping snugly through his, and he sought her cool, slender fingers—but he kept staring at Gresham. He asked himself: What is this man? *What is he?*

Was he really the managing genius of the narrow-gauge railway in Colorado which Diane and Wanda Seward had inherited as part of their father's vast estate—or was he a being from another world? Was he actually a living, breathing person, a guest in this sumptuous penthouse, or was he a supernaturally gifted immortal who had entered through closed doors, unseen, unheard by the others?

HE STIFFENED—because Gerard Gresham was coming toward him. Gresham was smiling, gently proffering his hand. His fingers crept into Steve Brent's cold palm and pressed tenderly. "Please, my boy—though words mean so little in this hour of bereavement—let me try to say how profoundly I share your grief."

Shuddering, revolted, Brent looked down at the fingers curled into his—the fingers that had pulled the trigger of the murderous gun. . . .

"Where's Wanda?" Steve Brent asked it so suddenly, so sharply, that the others were surprised into silence. And because they were silent, he asked again, even more ringingly: "Where is Wanda?"

Mal Drew answered: "She's in her room, Steve. She's been there ever since

she heard. We'd better not disturb her. Sit down, old man. Take it easy."

"Steve, you've got to understand all this," John Babbage said in a soothing tone. "It's very serious. The charge is manslaughter. The investigation isn't complete, you know, but the district attorney is convinced Phil was killed in the accident. You'd been drinking, hadn't you?"

Steve Brent had been through all that. They had asked him an endless succession of questions at police headquarters. This was one of them—he'd already answered it twenty times. He didn't know by what legal process Babbage had won his temporary freedom, nor what ordeal he must face next, but he was certain of this one thing. His words came wearily, automatically:

"Phil and I each had one drink, before we left the house, because it was damp and cold."

Babbage went on firmly: "As your lawyer, Steve, I've got to know the whole truth. Bennett, the doorman, says you drove into the court like a maniac. He shouted at you, but you were traveling under terrific momentum. Don't you understand, Steve? This is manslaughter. If you stick to this fantastic explanation of yours, I can't hope to clear you."

Brent asked huskily: "Didn't anyone else—anyone at all—hear the shotgun go off?"

"There wasn't any shotgun."

"I tell you I saw—!"

"Listen, Steve." Babbage's hand closed on Brent's trembling arm as he explained with elaborate patience. "What I'm saying to you now cannot be questioned. A few minutes before the accident, Mr. Gresham left this penthouse. Karl—the elevator attendant—is absolutely certain Mr. Gresham was not carrying a shotgun. Bennett is just as sure of it. Look at Mr. Gresham now, Steve. He is a very short man. Do

you believe it possible he could have concealed a shotgun on his person?"

Brent admitted tightly: "No."

"Mr. Gresham was returning just as you swung into the archway. He says he raised his hand to greet you and was startled by the way you literally hurled the car into the court. The crash came a second later. Mr. Gresham was the first to reach you. He didn't have a shotgun then, of course. If he had had, he couldn't have disposed of it so quickly. That's doubly sure because the entire court, as well as the street, were searched by the police immediately they heard your story. Do you understand clearly now, Steve—there wasn't any gun?"

Brent asked insistently, dazedly: "Didn't anyone else hear the report?"

"It was storming, Steve. Immediately preceding the accident there was a deafening crash. It was thunder."

"Thunder?" Brent pulled himself up stiffly. "Are you all crazy? Do you think I'd mistake a burst of thunder for the report of a shotgun, aimed point-blank at Phil, with Phil right at my side? Look at me. I'm not hurt much. You saw Phil—afterward. The accident—just the accident—couldn't have changed him into . . . that!"

Diane Seward said softly: "Steve, darling, no one can predict what will happen in an auto accident, or explain it afterward. The driver has the wheel to brace against, you know, but the passenger may be thrown forward with ghastly force. You're placing Mr. Gresham in a very trying situation. He understands, of course, but—there's no possible reason why he should—"

"I saw it!" Brent snapped the words out vehemently. "I saw it!" Over and over again he had said that at police headquarters while his questioners had answered with skeptical stares. "I tell you I saw it!"

"You couldn't have seen it, Steve," John Babbage said quietly. "There's one thing to prove it beyond all doubt."

Brent challenged: "Well?"

"I haven't mentioned it before, Steve, but I have word of a preliminary report by the medical examiner. Phil was not hit by a shot gun charge. Not the smallest particle of shot was found in his body—not a single one. Isn't that conclusive proof you really didn't see—"

Brent interrupted, his shoulders squaring: "I have a question. I mean it literally. I expect an answer Do you think I'm mad?"

SILENCE followed. Diane's fingers tightened on Brent's hand. Baffled by his dogged insistence, Babbage implacably stared. Harvey Brent blinked, too appalled, too bewildered, to speak.

Malcolm Drew frowned gravely, head wagging. Gresham alone answered—Gresham, whose blue eyes Steve Brent had seen squinted mercilessly behind the sights of a shotgun, whose eyes now glowed with kindly sympathy. The little man said in a gentle tone:

"Of course not, my boy. The shock of the accident has distorted your memory—I think we all understand that. Your mind will be clearer after you've rested." He turned with a slow gesture to Babbage. "We're being unkind to the boy—questioning him when he's in this condition."

Babbage answered grimly: "That won't stop the police. They'll get at him again before he's had a chance to rest. I've got to straighten this out in his mind now." And again to Brent: "The very fact that you started from Wilton in the storm weighs against you, Steve. Fifty miles—it was actually inviting an accident. You couldn't have realized how dangerously fast you were driving when—"

Steve Brent demanded sharply: "Where's Wanda? She can tell you why

we did it. She phoned Phil—some important matter—asking him to come. We started right away."

Malcolm Drew asked quickly: "You say Wanda phoned Phil tonight, Steve?"

"Yes. About eight-thirty. She was very worried, but I didn't drive fast—I realized it was bad going. She insisted on seeing Phil before you left town, Mal. She didn't explain—"

"I had dinner with Wanda, here tonight, Steve," Drew said quietly. "We sat down at eight. I'm positive she didn't leave the table until coffee, then we sat by the fire and talked—until we heard the crash in the court. There's something wrong there, Steve. Wanda did not call Phil."

Brent demanded again: "Where is she?"

"Resting in her room, Steve," Diane told him anxiously, "but you'd better not—" "I've got to see her!"

He strode along a hallway with Diane at his side, suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of unreality. Everything that had happened was a fantastic dream. Wanda hadn't telephoned Phil. They hadn't driven three hours through the storm. They hadn't seen a gun in Gresham's hands. There hadn't been an explosive report—only a burst of thunder. But one thing was true. Phil was dead. Steve Brent's brother was horribly dead.

He stopped short at the door of Wanda Seward's room. He turned suddenly on Diane and took her arms in his hands. The dark lines of his face grew deeper as he gazed into her clear eyes, as she anxiously studied his. He said in a husky whisper:

"It isn't what they say. I'm suffering from shock—yes, naturally—but my memory isn't playing tricks. I remember every detail with perfect clarity. Every word I've spoken is the absolute truth. I don't know what he is, Di—whether he's a man, or a fiend incarnate, or Satan him-

self in human form—but I'm certain Gresham killed Phil . . . with a shotgun."

The girl was silent.

"You can't let him stay, Di," Brent went on earnestly. "You've got to get him out of this house. While he's here, I'm afraid—for you. Don't you understand?"

He passed a trembling hand across his eyes. "I know. You think I'm mad, just as the others do. Even you think that." He laughed brokenly, gripping the knob of Wanda Seward's door. "I don't blame any of you. I almost think myself—I'm crazy." He began to open the door, his face pinching with painful self-doubt. "Wanda—come out, will you?" he called through the crack. "I've got to ask you if—"

A stifled scream broke from Diane Seward's lips.

STEVEN BRENT stood frozen, staring across the softly lighted room, Diane's hand clutching his. His aching eyes were fixed on the window opposite the door—a broad casement window that was flung wide. Its satin drapes were rustling in the gusty wind. Rain whipping in had already darkened the rug and pooled on the floor. Empty blackness yawned beyond the glistening sill—and Wanda was not in the room.

"Wanda!" It was a despairing, grief-stricken moan from Diane. "*Wanda!*"

Brent sprang to the window. He leaned out. Spattering rain was streaming down the high wall. A dripping glow spread from a few lower windows into the sodden park that framed the building. Something was lying down there, its outlines blurred in the downfall—something Brent dreaded to see.

He whirled away suddenly. The stark whiteness of his face, the fierce gleam of his eyes made Diane recoil. He strode into the library and stopped short with four men staring at him—but he peered at only

one. Gresham. It was Gresham who broke the silence anxiously:

"Is something wrong?"

Brent snapped: "Call the police! Get them back here!"

He sped to the elevator, jabbed the button, hammered the panel. His crazed, rasping command frightened the attendant into speeding the cab to the foyer level without a stop. Brent was scarcely aware that Mal Drew and John Babbage were with him when he ran out into the rain, around the building, to the thing he had seen huddled on the wet grass.

She was there. Her arms were out-flung and little puddles had formed in her palms. Her exquisite evening gown was soaked to her skin. Sight of her halted Brent, froze Drew and Babbage. Her chest was crushed. The horrible, misshapen thing that had been her head lolled from a once lovely throat that was twisted, torn to the spine. A thin fog shrouded all that was left of Wanda Seward—the girl whom Philip Brent had loved, who had died the same ghastly death as he . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Terror of Doubt

STEVE BRENT backed from the room. His stinging eyes clung to the little diamond watch on the wrist of the broken body of Wanda Seward. He had carried her in his arms, out of the rain, and placed her there on the bed. No one had thought to close the window. The satin drapes riffled, and drops pelted on the sill—the only sounds in the hush. Brent, the last to go, closed the door quietly, his numb lips working.

"Twelve-forty."

The little watch had stopped on the minute. It had happened while Steve Brent was at headquarters, enduring an ordeal of questions. At that moment of

doom, Wanda Seward had known Phil Brent was a corpse. Had she been alone in there, or had she found herself suddenly facing a pudgy little man with faded blue eyes—a man pointing a shotgun at her? The thought hurried Brent into the library. Just beyond the door he stopped short, peering at Gresham.

Diane was huddled in a huge chair, sobbing, a lace handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Mal Drew's arm was reassuringly around her. Babbage, face drawn, was looking at Steve Brent—but Brent was staring at Gresham. The lawyer said gravely:

"The police are coming. Mr. Gresham called them."

Gresham had called the police! Why hadn't he gone down with Brent and Babbage and Drew? Because he already knew what they would find? Why hadn't he entered the room where Wanda Seward now lay dead? Because he had killed her there? This little man whose faded blue eyes could cease being mild and kindly and become sinister, murderous . . .

"You did that!" Brent spat out. He had not turned his eyes from Gresham. "You killed her!"

He flung himself on Gresham. He clamped his fingers around the little man's soft throat. He felt hands tearing at his arms and shoulders—Babbage and Drew trying to pull him away—but he clung. The little man's eyes were popping with terror. His tongue writhed out as he gulped for air that would not come. Brent kned him down, digging his thumbs deep into Gresham's windpipe.

"You did it—you did it—you did it!"

Knuckles cracked against Brent's jaw and toppled him aside. His hands tore free of Gresham. Pulling himself up, he saw John Babbage facing him with fists raised. Babbage's blow had knocked Steve Brent away. Diane Seward rushed to him, her eyes wildly imploring. He watched Gres-

ham stagger up, swollen-faced, gasping.

"I'm all right—quite all right," the little man managed. "I realize—the boy's frightfully upset. We'd best say nothing of this to the police—for his sake."

Steve Brent snapped: "Listen! Who was here with Wanda at twelve-forty? You weren't, John. Were you, Mal? Were *you*, Gresham? Yes, you were here! You must have been here! You killed her as you killed Phil!" He peered at the others. "Twelve-forty—that's when it happened. Did you hear an explosion then—the report of a shotgun going off?"

He had started forward, but Diane's hands were on his shoulders. "Please, Steve. I think Wanda was in her room then, but we were all so upset, we can't remember distinctly. It was storming—you remember, Steve. Thunder makes deafening echoes in the streets—it shakes the whole house. Darling, you must—"

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "You thought it was thunder. It wasn't! It was the report of a shotgun—the gun that killed Wanda."

Diane pled again: "Please, Steve!"

They wouldn't listen. He turned away abruptly. Again he thumbed the button of the elevator. When the cab opened he gripped the attendant's arm. The bald-headed Karl shrank back in alarm as Brent demanded:

"Did you hear an explosion at twelve-forty? A report like a shot-gun at exactly twelve-forty? Did you?"

Karl mumbled: "Why, Mr. Brent, it was thundering. Maybe that's what you mean."

It wasn't what Brent meant. Someone must have heard—someone could tell him the truth. He left the elevator at the highest level beneath the penthouse. His knuckles rapped at one door after another. Once there was no answer. Twice women in fluffy robes came to the door, once a bleary-eyed man in pajamas. Brent

saw them shrink away when he asked his question, a fearful light in their eyes—dread of the insane.

"Did you hear a shotgun report at exactly twelve-forty tonight?"

"There's always a lot of noise," the thick-tongued man said. "Almost every day there's a terrible crash in the street. I think sure a couple of cars are smashed up, but there's nothing there. Sometimes it sounds like a revolver going off, but it isn't. Nobody would shoot off a shotgun in the city, would they?"

KARL eyed Brent strangely as the car ascended. Brent paused at the silver door. He told himself: "Inside this house there is a murderer. Phil is dead. Wanda is dead. No matter what it seems, they were killed in the same way by the same man—Gresham. He's in this house now. There must be something—some little thing, somewhere—that will prove I'm not insane."

He went in quietly. The Chesterfield and the derby were still resting on the chair. They were Gresham's. They were wet. Brent stood looking at them and listening, making sure no one had heard him come in. He stepped into the hallway, walking silently. There were voices in the library. The four men and Diane did not know Brent had come back. He paused at the door of Gresham's room.

With grim, quiet thoroughness he searched it. He examined the closet, the drawers of the bureau, the bed. He knew, as he scrutinized every possible hiding place, that he would find no concealed shotgun, but he persisted. Straightening from Gresham's huge handbag, he saw the connecting door standing ajar. The adjoining room was John Babbage's. Brent sidled into it.

He saw at once that the bedspread had been disturbed. He peeled it back. He looked under the pillow, then ran his hand

under the mattress. For a moment he stood absolutely motionless. His fingers were closed on something hard and curved. It wasn't a gun. It had separate, loose strands—and it was wet. Wet, like Gresham's coat and hat. Brent slowly drew it out. It was a coil of rope.

Brent's aching head pounded as he gazed at it. It was thin, hard-woven clothes-line. Five lengths of it were tightly knotted together. And it was damp. It had been out in the rain—sometime tonight. Brent gripped the coil as he smoothed the bed. The four men and the girl were still talking in the library—talking about him, Brent knew. He went out of the room and silently along the hall.

He stepped through French doors into dripping darkness. The windows of the library sent an amber glow across the gardens. Gravel walks twined through the flower-beds on three sides of the duplex penthouse. A wrought-iron fence bordered the grounds. Still holding the coil of rope, Brent went quietly to a pergola set at the edge of the street chasm.

He looked down. The gleaming sidewalk was broken by a ramp directly below. It was the car entrance into the court. The spot where Gresham had stood lay directly under Brent's narrowed eyes. He straightened, looked around, took up a stone from the border of the path. He tied one end of the rope around it. He lowered the stone over the fence and let the strand out hand over hand. He did not stop until almost all of it was down. He knotted the other end around a post of the pergola and peered again over the brink.

The stone had reached the sidewalk. The rope plumb-bobbed near the spot where Steve and Phil Brent had seen Gresham standing with the shotgun leveled. Sheve Brent's heart hammered with a wild hope as he straightened.

HE had come out quietly, but he made no attempt to conceal his movements as he went back. He thrust open the French doors that gave into the library. As he stepped in, the four men turned in alarm, and Diane sprang up. Ignoring their wondering eyes, he searched their faces. He walked up to Malcolm Drew and said: "Mal, I want to talk to you alone."

They went into the adjoining study. It was a cozy room, cluttered with relics and specimens gathered from the four corners of the world, pungently flavored by tobacco. Before his death, Martin Seward, Diane's and Wanda's father, had controlled his far-flung enterprises from this desk. Working here, he had amassed the millions which the two girls had inherited through the guardianship of John Babbage. Steve Brent thought grimly of that as he closed the door—because he had found the rope in Babbage's room.

Brent said: "I'm going to talk frankly, Mal."

"Of course."

"Phil loved Wanda. I don't know exactly why they never quiet struck it off. Wanda obviously preferred you. You're a more glamorous sort than Phil was—I think she liked that. Still, she did love Phil a little. Do you think she loved him enough to kill herself when she heard he was dead?"

"It's a terrible shock to me, you know, Steve," Drew answered. "I'm trying to reason it out. It must be true. There's nothing else to think."

Brent went on: "I think Wanda loved you far more than you loved her, Mal. She had a great deal of money—that was important to you, wasn't it? Don't be offended. We can't mince words now. I'm not saying you were going to marry Wanda for her money, but that entered into it. She probably knew it. She did love you more than Phil. That's why I'm trying to decide whether she loved him

enough to kill herself when she heard he was dead."

"She was terribly broken up, Steve. There's nothing else to think."

"But she didn't commit suicide," Brent said flatly. "She was murdered, exactly as Phil was murdered. Maybe she was thrown out of the window—dead. Maybe the terrific percussion of the shotgun knocked her out. There *was* a shotgun, Mal. I can prove Gresham killed Phil with a shotgun, because I can prove the way he got rid of it—and Wanda was killed with the same weapon."

Brent saw doubt cloud Drew's eyes.

"There was a rope tied to the shotgun Gresham used. It ran up the side of the building to the pergola in the garden. There had to be someone up here to pull the gun up immediately the shot was fired. It was John Babbage. I found the rope hidden in John's bed."

Drew stared. "Where is the rope now?" he asked quickly. "Wait a minute, Steve. No matter what you've discovered there couldn't have been any shotgun. Absolutely no shot was found in Phil's body—you've forgotten that."

Brent pressed on grimly. "Gresham actually did the killing, and John aided him. Half of Wanda's and Diane's inheritance is still to come to them, and it's completely in John's charge. There's only one answer—he's misused their funds. Wanda must have learned of it. She must have wanted you and Phil to look into it and help her straighten it out. That's why she phoned Phil and wanted him to come here before you left town."

"But she didn't phone Phil," Drew protested breathlessly. "And I had no intention of leaving town. I told you that."

Brent studied the growing doubt in Drew's eyes. "You're the only one I can tell this to. I can't let Gresham and John Babbage learn I know of it. It would ter-

rify Diane if I told her. You've lost your fiancée, and whether you were marrying Wanda for her money or not, you've lost your potential share in her fortune. I've got to trust you because—I'm not quiet sure I can trust myself."

Mal Drew said tightly: "Everything you've said is built around your finding the rope. Where is it now?"

"I tried it down the side of the building to make sure it was long enough. It is. I left it tied to a post, so you can see for yourself. Come out with me now, Mal."

The skepticism in Drew's eyes taunted Brent as he opened the study door. Gresham and John Babbage and Diane were still in the library—they grew silent when Brent entered with Drew. An icy chill congealed Brent's heart when he realized he had left the girl alone with Gresham and Babbage. He went to her so quickly, closed his hand so hard on hers, that her eyes widened with alarm.

"I want you to come," he said huskily. "Stay close to me, Di."

HIS arm crossed her shoulders protectively as they went to the door. His aching eyes kept fearfully on Gresham and Babbage. The little man with the mild blue eyes was smiling beneficently. Babbage was fumbling with his watch-chain, frowning with worry. Brent gestured Drew out and closed the door. He said tensely:

"I'm not imagining all this. I'm telling the truth. Good God, don't you see how horribly difficult you make it by not believing in me? Don't look at me like that!"

They turned their gazes away. Brent was seized with a savage impulse to shake them, to make them understand. He strode past them abruptly and stopped at the pergola.

"Look at it," he said, pointing at the

post. "See for yourselves. You won't doubt me after you've seen—"

His voice faded. He stood peering at the post, lips numb. Malcolm Drew edged past him. Diane, unaware of Brent's purpose, could only stare at his haggard face. Brent watched Drew's hand pass up and down the pole. He watched Drew look over the iron fence, down into the street. Drew turned back to say softly:

"There's no rope here, Steve."

Brent burst out: "It *was* there! I put it there myself! I found it in John Babbage's bed, and brought it out, and tied one end to the post. The other end had a rock on it. I took the rock from the walk. There—you can see—"

They could see no stone was missing from its place. Steve Brent's finger indicated an unbroken border of the garden. The rock he had tied to the wet rope was resting snugly in its socket of earth. He stared incredulously, stricken anew with a terrifying doubt of his own sense. Suddenly he spun and gripped Diane's shoulders.

"Listen, Di! You've got to get them out of the house—both of them! Gresham and Babbage. They killed Phil. They're responsible for Wanda's horrible death. They'll turn on you next. They'll murder you in the same ghastly way. Tell them to get out, Di! Get them out of this house before it's too late!"

She shrank from him, eyes widened, face white—shrank back as far as his clutching, trembling hands would allow. His teeth bared with the vehemence of his plea. Drew seized his wrist, forced one arm down. He saw the same haunting light in Drew's eyes—the gleam that said "This man is insane!" Brent's closed fists shook as he faced them, speechlessly obsessed by desperate fury. A moan of despair tore through his throat as Diane hurried from him, toward the French

doors—toward the room where Gresham and Babbage were waiting!

Brent cried out a protest and sprang after her. She flung the doors wide—she fled from him in terror. Brent's wrath turned instantly on the two men standing near the fireplace. They had started toward the girl, as though to shield her from him, but he stopped them with a savage rush of words:

"Let her alone! Don't touch her! If you even go near her, I'll kill both of you! Do you hear that? Don't touch Diane!"

They stood stock still. Gresham and Babbage frozen near the table—the little man's mild blue eyes wide with alarm, the attorney's face lined with a scowl. Diane near the outer door, lips parted in dismay, eyes clinging to Brent. Malcolm Drew behind him, hands raised as if to grapple. Brent's gaze passed from one to another of their faces. He forced his voice to be gentle as he said:

"Don't be afraid of me, Di—not of me."

A heavy knock sounded. It came from the silver door. The rap rattled into the hushed room again before a single movement responded. Diane turned to answer the summons. Steve Brent forced his straining muscles to ease while he heard the door opening, gruff voices speaking, brisk footfalls approaching. He gazed haggardly, hopelessly, at the men who stepped into the library.

They were from police headquarters.

CHAPTER THREE

Suspicious Eyes

THE detectives from headquarters were leaving. They came out of the hallway that passed Wanda Seward's room and went to the silver entrance. One carried a huge case—the official photographer. Another was a solemn man with a short vandyke beard—the medical examiner.

The others were members of the homicide squad. Each one of them, as he passed through the library, turned a searching, pitying scrutiny upon Steve Brent.

He sat erect in an easy chair near the fireplace, striving to fight down the dread. He had already answered their countless questions. He had seen again that profound skepticism in their eyes. He had heard Babbage talking quietly with them in the next room—about him. He had guarded every word he had spoken, telling them nothing they had not asked for, seeming to agree with their attitude, because he was trying to make them think he was sane.

The men from headquarters were gone. Diane had retired to her room. John Babbage and Malcolm Drew and Gerard Gresham stood quietly in the library, looking at Steve Brent. Babbage went to Brent, pulled a chair close. Brent gazed at him intently, rigidly, thinking over and over, "This man is a murderer. He helped kill my brother. He's a murderer."

Babbage spoke quietly. "Try to understand, Steve. Wanda must have loved Phil a great deal more than any of us suspected. She was overcome with grief when she heard he was dead. She couldn't have known what she was doing when she threw herself out the window. It *was* suicide, Steve—the police are satisfied it was."

Brent asked tensely: "Didn't they find the rope and the shotgun? Didn't they even look?"

"They didn't look, Steve—because there wasn't any gun. The medical examiner made sure of that in Wanda's case, too. There is not a particle of shot in her body—not one. You've got to convince yourself, Steve. There wasn't any gun."

Brent blurted: "I saw it—when it killed Phil! Wanda was killed in the same way!"

"Listen." Babbage's hands fastened firmly on Brent's arms, and Brent shrank from the contact. "For your own sake, Steve, you've got to listen. There's a charge of manslaughter hanging over you—and that may not be all. The police are becoming suspicious—of you."

Brent started up. "Of *me*?"

"We're your friends, Steve. We know it's preposterous. But the police are piecing things together. Phil shared your father's estate with you and Harvey—a great deal of money. His death adds to your fortune. It was the same with Wanda and Diane. Wanda's death doubles Diane's wealth. You're engaged to marry Diane. The two deaths mean millions to you. That's what the police are thinking of now."

Brent pulled himself to his feet. "Somebody's not thinking straight," he said huskily. "The police believe Phil died in the accident, they think Wanda committed suicide—but now you're talking of murder. I've got more money than I'll ever need. Who's mad enough to think I'd kill my own brother, and my fiancée's sister, for money I don't want?"

Babbage countered: "That's not quiet it, Steve."

Brent laughed bitterly, brokenly. "What sort of logic are they following? If I killed those dearest to me to get money I don't need and don't want, I'll murder Harvey next. Is that what they think?"

"That isn't it," Babbage repeated. "We know it's absurd—you couldn't have done it. But I heard Crader, one of the men from headquarters, talking with the medical examiner. 'Do you think he could have killed his brother on the way to town, and deliberately crashed the car with his brother already dead?' Then he asked: 'Is there anything to show he threw the girl out of the window?' I'm trying to tell you, Steve as well as I know how—"

"Twelve-forty," Brent broke in. "It

happened at twelve-forty. That's when Wanda's watch stopped. I was at police headquarters then, with you, John."

"Watches can be set, the hands changed to indicate a different time. It's been done before this, to establish an alibi."

"But it's impossible! I didn't even see Wanda tonight until I found her, down there. The whole thing's impossible! Why, Mal had dinner with her—he knows I didn't see her. Good God, they suspect *me*, when I'm the only one who knows the truth. From the first I've tried to tell you—"

"Of course it's impossible, Steve," Malcolm Drew interjected. "John is only trying to get you to see that you've got to be extremely careful of what you say and do, because the police—"

"Yes," Brent said tightly. "That's right. I've got to be careful."

"They realize it's a far-fetched motive," Babbage said, "but you've been behaving strangely, Steve. I'm afraid they may act. They may lock you up—in an institution. Can't you see the way they look at it? Either you've lost your mind, or you're faking all this so you can plead the legal defense of insanity."

"Faking!" Brent blurted. He wanted to laugh, but the sound congealed on his lips. He mumbled: "I—I've got to be careful."

HE stepped past Babbage, and went into the hall. Perhaps, he thought, they believed he was going to lie down and rest—that's why they made no move to follow him. The mere thought of rest was abhorrent to Brent's tortured mind. He walked slowly to the door of Wanda Seward's room and closed his cold hand on the knob.

She was lying on the bed where Brent had placed her, shrouded by a sheet. He stood a moment, chilled, gazing at the inert outline beneath the whiteness. The

rug was still wet under the sill, the floor was still glistening, but someone had closed the window. Brent looked at it strangely, and saw the marks of water on the wall around it—water on the wall where the wind could not possibly have blown the rain.

He searched the room intently. Something lying in the shadow under the dressing-table drew his tired eyes like a magnet. He took it carefully into his fingers. It was a cork. Quite an ordinary cork, new—and wet. *Wet!* Brent smelled of it, but it had no odor. He peered at the bottles of cosmetics on the table, then strode into the bath and looked at the bottles in the medicine cabinet. They were all stoppered. The cork had come from none of them. But—

The rope. The rope had vanished and was still missing. Brent thought of it as he let the cork lie on his moist palm. Perhaps the rope was hidden somewhere in the garden. A new thought took Brent out of the bedroom where the dead girl lay, and along the hall. He passed through the kitchen and opened the delivery entrance. An iron leaf sat flush with the wall beside the panel of the service elevator. It was the incinerator drop.

Brent opened it. Fumes floated out. In the basement, he knew, the refuse was being burned. If the rope had been dropped down the chute, it was probably already destroyed. Brent felt a strange certainty that he would never see it again—a doubt that he had ever actually held it in his hands. The rope gone. Now there was only this new, wet cork. Brent went back along the hall slowly, staring at it as it lay in his hand.

At Diane's door he paused. "Are you all right, Di?" he asked softly. "Are you resting?"

Her voice answered faintly: "Yes, Steve. I'm quite all right."

"I'm going to stay here tonight," he told her. "Right here, outside the door."

She made no answer to that. God! Didn't she realize the danger? Didn't she know how fearful he was that it would happen to her—the same horrible death that had claimed Phil and Wanda? Was she afraid of him—of *him!*—instead of that evil little man with the faded blue eyes—and Babbage? Her silence increased the agony of his misgivings. He strode, with sudden determination, to the door of John Babbage's room.

He slipped into it quietly. He searched it minutely, every corner of it, every inch. This room was always at Babbage's disposal, and he used it often, but more frequently he slept at his club. He had not slept here for a week, but perhaps he would stay tonight—to sleep in that bed where the wet rope had been concealed. Here—so close to Diane! The thought had put a frost on Brent's heart by the time he completed his fruitless search.

Gresham's room—that was next. Brent went into it by way of the connecting door. He looked around carefully, his gaze sharpening on Gresham's huge case. Its saddle-leather was fresh and clean. It appeared never to have been used before. Brent wondered if that fact meant anything as he probed into it. He was surprised to find that the linen, the suits—everything in it was also new. A man traveling East on important business would equip himself with new personal articles, of course, but—*everything?*

Brent straightened with a small paper bag in his hand. He had found it tucked deep in a corner of the case. He dreaded to open its mouth, but he slowly uncrumpled it. He turned its contents into his palm—and his breath stopped. He stared. Corks! Four clean, new corks, exactly like the one he had found in the dead girl's room!

BRENT'S hand clamped on them. He jerked from the room, strode into the library. He slowed, thrusting his fist into his pocket, because he saw the little man with the faded blue eyes was not there. John Babbage and Malcolm Drew had abruptly stopped talking at Brent's entrance. He asked them with a snap:

"Where's Gresham?"

"He just stepped out, Steve. He's going to the chemist's to get a sedative. He'll be right back."

"How do you know he'll come back?" Brent asked in a rush. "How do you know you'll ever see him again? He came from hell—maybe he's gone back there to stay—with his bloody work done!"

He knew they were staring after him as he strode out the silver door. He thrust at the elevator button repeatedly. When the grille slid open he gripped the startled Karl's arm. "Go all the way down—don't stop!" His nerves burned while wind soughed past the descending cab. He shouldered breathlessly into the foyer, loped toward the entrance. He hurried into the court where the roadster had crashed—and then he saw Gresham.

Clad in Chesterfield and derby, the little man was sauntering into the street.

Brent did not see the grave-faced man standing just outside the entrance—a headquarters detective who turned startled at his quick move after Gresham. He sprinted toward the arch. His hand slapped down to Gresham's shoulder. He whirled the diminutive man and spoke through clenched teeth.

"You know the truth! You know what the corks mean! You're going to tell them—everybody! I'll beat it out of you."

Gresham recoiled before Brent's fist. His derby tipped off and bowled on the pavement. He uttered a strangling cry as Brent drove him blow by blow, against the stone pillar of the arch. Brent's knuckles grimly punctuated his rasping

demand: "Tell the truth! Tell the truth!" Gresham was cringing, struck breathless when hard, strong hands gripped Brent's shoulders.

Torn back, Brent peered furiously at the solemn-faced man who straddled in front of him. Crader. That was the detective's name—Brent remembered it confusedly. Crader had asked him countless questions at headquarters, and in the penthouse, and now he was keeping Brent from Gresham. Lips working, Brent stood with fists clenched, while Crader said gruffly:

"Look here. You can't do that. What's the matter with you, anyway? You're free right now because you've got a damn' good lawyer, but you're not going to stay out of the jug if you run amuck like this. What do you mean—assaulting Mr. Gresham?"

Gresham, pulling himself up, mumbled: "It's all right, officer. He's too upset to know what he's doing."

"All you have to do is prefer charges against him," Crader answered. "Felony assault and battery. I'm a witness. That'll keep him in the ice-box a while, where he belongs."

Cold bewilderment flooded into Steven Brent's mind. Utter hopelessness held him silent while he heard the little man with the mild blue eyes saying in a kindly, gentle tone:

"No, no, officer. I won't prefer charges, of course. I'm only too sorry for him. We'd best forget the whole thing. He's badly shaken—he needs sleep and rest."

Brent turned slowly back to the entrance. He walked stiffly, woodenly into the foyer. The little man's words echoed in his ringing ears. "He needs sleep and rest." Brent was going to try to rest . . . to rest . . .

HE dozed that night in a chair outside Diane's door—a succession of fits of

uneasy sleep from which he repeatedly awoke, chilled with a clammy sweat. In his fragmentary dreams he saw a storm lashing over the city, saw lightning flaring, heard thunder, crashing. Each deafening burst was a roll on the drums of doom. Each time Brent awakened to listen into silence, wondering if he had really heard it—the death thunder.

The sunlight streaming into the rooftop garden next day did nothing to alleviate the consuming dread in Steve Brent's heart. He watched Diane constantly, yet he knew she was unhappy, fearful, because he was watching her. Wandering in the garden, dozing in the library, he tried to reason it out. He constantly fingered the corks in his pocket, because they assured him his senses were not distorted, but over and over he warned himself: "I've got to be careful . . . careful."

He was alone with Diane when evening came. When she nervously excused herself, immediately after dinner, he sat in silence in the library. What was it, he asked himself—the name psychiatrists had for a fear of thunder? *Astraphobia*—that was it. A kind of madness. Fear of thunder—chilling fear created within his own haunted mind—

He heard it now! It rocked through the room, bringing Brent stark upright, beating on his brain. Cold sweat beaded his forehead—but then he laughed. This wasn't thunder. It was only someone knocking at the door. That was it—someone rapping. Brent told himself, as he went to the silver door to answer the summons, that his worn nerves had magnified the sound—but he was wrung weak by the dread that had seized him.

It was Harvey. Steve Brent's younger brother came in quickly, his eyes anxious. He strode directly into the library, to make sure no one else was there. Flinging off his hat and coat, he stepped close to Steve.

"I've found out something," he said.

"I've got to tell you. I don't want to be overheard. Let's go in there."

They went into the study. Steve closed the door gently. His brother took a telegram from his pocket, fingered it, thrust it back. He motioned Steve into a chair, faced him squarely. He blurted abruptly:

"I don't think you're crazy."

Perhaps he didn't mean it. Perhaps he was only trying to give some reassurance, however groundless. Steve Brent warned himself silently again that he had to be careful. Aloud he asked: "What have you found out, Harv?"

"You've suspected Gresham from the first. Nobody else would listen to you. I had to do something to keep myself from—from going off balance about Phil. He isn't Gresham, Steve. He isn't Gresham at all."

"Who is he?"

"Gresham is still out West. I wired first thing this morning. I got an answer a little while ago. Gresham sent it. He's still out there, attending to business. The man who's here—the man we *think* is Gresham—isn't Gresham at all."

Tensely: "Who is he?"

"I stole something from his room last night—the man who claims to be Gresham. I took his silver hair-brush. You know Edward Herndon. He's an amateur criminologist. I got him to develop the fingerprints on the hair-brush, and he checked them. They match a set in the files at police headquarters. The name on the card is William Burkley. He's the man we thought was Gresham."

"Burkley?"

"Yes. It's an old card. Burkley used to be a small-time actor. He was convicted of grand larceny. While he was in prison he seemed to lose his mind. They transferred him to the state hospital for the insane. He seemed to fear that somebody—everybody—was persecuting him, but he was better when he was released."

Steve Brent asked—carefully: “Insane?”

“Herndon explained it to me. Burkley’s type of mental derangement is called paranoia. People who have it either suffer from delusions of grandeur or delusions of persecution. Those with the persecution mania are dangerous. They’re apt to strike at anyone they think is plotting against them. They’re the type that make insane killers. Steve. Where did this man come from?”

“John Babbage brought him here.”

“Wanda and Diane had never seen him before, had they? I remember, Babbage said it was business—something about the narrow-gauge railway in Colorado. Perhaps Babbage had never seen him before. Martin Seward handled his own affairs until his death, then Babbage took all of them over. Perhaps we’ve all been tricked. It’s possible nobody here—except us, now—knows who he really is.”

“Somebody knows. He had the gun, down in the street. Another man pulled it up the side of the building with the rope. Two of them were working together—this little man we thought was Gresham, and somebody else.”

HARVEY BRENT stood up. “I’ve got the proof he isn’t Gresham. It bears out everything you’ve said, Steve. It comes down to his being a hired murderer. God, he’s in this house as a guest! What can we do?”

Steve Brent said tightly: “You wait here, Harv. I want you to tell this all over again to Di. She’s got to hear it and believe it. She will if you tell her, but she may doubt me. You stay here. I’ll bring her in.”

Steve Brent stepped from the study quietly. Closing the door, peering around, he felt a chill sense of presences. Someone had come in while he and Harvey were talking in the study—he told himself that

—but there wasn’t anyone in sight. He walked through the library slowly, eyes shifting warily right and left. Once in the hall he hurried to Diane’s door. His imperative knock brought a breathless response:

“What is it?”

“Come here, Di.”

She opened the door while enfolding herself in gossamer silk. Her slender ankles were bare beneath an edge of soft lace, her small feet were clad in golden mules. She was a lovely vision to Steve Brent’s stinging eyes. While she anxiously studied his drawn face he said quietly—carefully:

“Listen, Di. It’s all getting clear in my mind now. While Mal and I were in the study, last night, talking about the rope, someone overheard. He went out and pulled it up and took it away. Do you remember either of them leaving the library while Mal and I were in there, Di—Gresham or John Babbage?”

“I don’t remember, Steve.”

His lips pinched. “I’d hoped you would. It’s important. Because that’s how it happened—how the rope disappeared. There was a rope, and there was a gun. There *still is* a gun, Di—do you understand that? It’s hidden somewhere—still hidden because nobody would believe me, and look for it. Now you’ve got to admit I’m telling the truth. It’s for your sake, Di. If that gun shoots again—if the thunder strikes—”

It struck even as Steven Brent spoke—a thunderclap that jarred the walls! It boomed in his ear-drums as he stood chilled. He looked up tightly while the reverberations echoed, scarcely daring to read the truth in Diane’s eyes. Had he heard the death thunder actually, or was it a concussion inside his own mind, imagined, unreal? He forced himself to look down, and then he saw it in Diane’s face.

White, stark terror! She too had heard it!

He whirled, ran along the hall, burst into the library. He had left the door of the study closed, but now it was open. Through it he could see—the thing. The horrible, ghastly thing left by the thunder of doom! It was there, sitting in a chair in the corner, the red apparition that had been Harvey Brent. Head broken, faceless except for a mass of trickling blood, chest crushed, dead arms dangling. Claimed by the death that had already preyed upon Phil and Wanda—at the instant the thunder rolled!

CHAPTER FOUR

Haunted Fugitive

NO one else was in the room. No one in the study, except the terrifying remains of Harvey Brent. No one in the library except Steve Brent, standing with every muscle clamped in an icy rigidity, and Diane Seward, paralyzed with terror in the doorway. There was no sound now. But through the doorway Brent stared transfixed at the horror the thunder had left.

"It's not storming," he whispered. "There was a gun." He turned stiffly, gripped Diane's shoulders, forced her eyes away. "Go back to your room, Di. Go back! Good God, this can't happen to you! You've got to go back!"

He thrust her along the hallway. He went with her into the room that was so appallingly similar to Wanda's. He strode to the door that connected with Diane's dead sister's, and made sure it was locked. He turned the latches of the casement windows hard into their sockets and drew the drapes to cover every inch of the panes that looked out into the garden. The girl stood trembling in the center of the room as he retreated toward the hallway. He said in a husky whisper:

"Lock the door. Don't let anybody in. If it's Gresham or Babbage, don't answer. Don't come to the door unless you're sure it's me and remember—"

It struck again! The thunder! The bolt of sound broke somewhere outside the house, somewhere in the gloom of the garden. It jarred the whole room, stirred the curtains, clinked the crystal bottles on the dressing-table. It blanched Diane's face to the whiteness of death and stopped Steve Brent's breath. Flat echoes rattled back from the surrounding spires of the city while he stood stock still.

"Lock the door!"

He stepped back stiffly, closing the door, gripping the knob. He made no move until he heard the key twist, then he tried it. It was locked. Diane could not be reached now—by any human thing. She was safe from any being that walls and locks and doors could stop, but . . . Brent rooted the terrifying thought from his mind as he started away—the thought that there was something here, something in this house, wielding a black power that could not be fought. A demon's voice that spoke with a roar like thunder . . .

Brent went slowly into the library. It was silent. The study door was open, and the red horror was sitting beside the desk. No living being was in sight. Brent turned slowly to the French windows. They too had been closed, like the door of the study when Brent had left it, but now they were standing ajar. Something had gone out—something had had to open the doors to get through. Brent's cold hands pushed them wider. He peered into the glowing gloom of the garden.

"It was a gun," he murmured.

He went along the gravel walk. Each step was a slow, crunching sound. The city towers reared in the sky like giant ghosts. Their lighted windows were crooked eyes watching Brent as he groped through the darkness. He looked down

into the street and saw cars passing, couples walking, as though nothing had happened. The deep, white well of the court was hushed. But here, in the blackness of the sky gardens, there was something—something Brent knew was there before he found it.

It was lying far in the corner of the landscaped roof. Brent saw it vaguely, and walked slowly toward it. It had crushed down the flowers, but it was framed by trembling stalks and blossoms. Its blood was wetting the soil. Brent thought at first it must be a horror reflected in his own eyes, but he was sure of it when he heard the drip-drip of crimson from the gaping mouth of the broken head.

Gresham. The little man lay twisted, arms and legs stretched straight and loose, as though he had been hurled to the spot by a terrific force. His mild blue eyes were blotted over by crushed red. The power that had flung him down had made his chest a pooled cavity. The power of the thunder—the devastating destruction that he himself had wielded, had struck him down among the flowers.

THERE was a gun." Brent heard voices in the library now, but they meant nothing in the turmoil of his mind. "He was killed with a gun." He threshed bushes aside, peering at the wet earth, searching. "It's somewhere—it's got to be somewhere—the gun." He went along the walk, eyes intent, unaware that three men were coming from the library. "It's here—it must be here." He stopped short, gazing startled at the silhouetted figures.

Crader—a wary light in his eyes. Drew—wordless with anxiety. Babbage—shoulders drooping with despair. They said nothing. Brent suddenly strode past them. He hurried through the library, ran into the hall. Pausing breathless at Diane's door, he rapped quickly.

"Are you in there, Di? Are you all right?"

"Yes, Steve." It was a whisper. "Who—who's out there with you?"

"Listen," he said tightly. "Wait until they're gone. If they ask you to come out, ignore them. It isn't safe, Di—while they're here. Make sure they're gone, all of them, before you open the door. I've got to get you away from here. The same terrible thing will happen to you if you don't come with me out of this house!"

"Yes—Steve."

Brent went back. When he entered the library, Babbage and Drew and Crader were there. The detective was at the telephone, uttering clipped monosyllables. Babbage tried to speak to Brent, but no words came. Crader, turning from the instrument, confronted Brent squarely.

"I've got orders to hold you."

"Hold me?"

"Last night I saw you jump on Gresham like a madman. Now he's dead."

Brent stared. "Yes, he's dead. You think I killed him. That's right, isn't it? Gresham and Harvey. You think I murdered them both."

"You've been saying Gresham is a killer," Crader stated flatly. "Well, he didn't kill himself—but he's dead the same way as the others."

Brent began: "Diane can prove—"

"You'll have plenty of time to make a statement," Crader interjected. "However the hell you did it, you were right here when it happened. I heard the explosions down in the court. Here alone. Babbage and Drew can bear that out, because they came up, one and then the other, right afterward."

"That's what Diane can tell you," Brent resumed. "She can prove—"

"Look here." John Babbage stepped briskly to Crader's side. "I'm Mr. Brent's attorney. You can't hold him. He's free on a writ of—"

"The charge this time," Crader interrupted, "is suspicion of murder. There'll be a commissioner in here, in a few minutes, with a warrant. He should have been locked up sooner. This time he won't go free on any kind of a writ. Not on that charge."

Brent was trying to think. "They're going to lock me up," he told himself. "No matter what I say, they won't believe me—they think I'm guilty. Suppose I show them the corks. That would only convince them I'm mad. It will be all the more cause for locking me up."

Crader said: "Sit down, Brent. You won't have long to wait."

Brent remained standing, looking toward Diane's room. He thought: "They're going to lock me up. Once they put me in a cell, I won't be able to get out. They'll keep me there, away from Diane. They won't listen to the truth. Not even Diane realizes the danger. Nobody can help her but me—and they're going to lock me up."

Babbage was saying: "I'll do everything possible, Steve. I promise they'll never bring you to trial. Just rely on me, Steve—don't worry."

Babbage—in whose room Steve Brent had found the coil of rope that no longer existed. He told himself: "I can't let them lock me up. For Diane's sake, I can't let them. Nobody knows except me—nobody dreams the truth. I'm the only one who can really keep her safe—that's why I can't let them lock me up. I've got to get away somehow—somehow . . ."

His eyes had turned toward the entrance hall. The silver door. The elevator. The way out was open now, but it would be closed when the other police officials arrived—closed forever. Crader alone stood between Steve Brent and escape. Brent's fist tightened as he realized it. Suddenly, without warning, his knuckles shot straight to Crader's eyes.

Crader lurched back, bellowing, arms windmilling. As he sprawled down, Brent whirled. He sprang along the hall, out the silver door. The surprise of his move kept Babbage and Drew motionless but, looking back as he sidled out the entrance, Brent saw Crader crawling up. He pulled the door shut and reached across to the elevator button. As he pressed the little spot of mother-of-pearl, the knob twisted in his clenched hand.

Crader was bracing on the other side, trying to pull the door open. There was no other way out—Brent's strength alone kept the detective inside. He dragged back with all his strength, holding the door shut, teeth bared with the effort. He heard the faint whirr of the elevator coming up. Knee pressed to the wall, tight muscles throbbing, he waited until the panel of the cab slid open.

He whirled into it, slammed it shut. It closed as Crader lurched across the hall. Brent brushed the frightened Karl aside, thrust the control handle to the down position. He ignored the flickering of red numbers on the annunciator while the cab plunged. He let it pass the foyer level, switched it to a jouncing stop opposite the basement grille. When he shouldered out the PH signal was gleaming crimson on the board, but the buzzer had ceased rasping. Brent knew Crader was rushing down the stairs.

He hurried along gloomy cement corridors. He bounded up iron steps and pushed a door wide. He sprang out into darkness and ran.

THE newspaper headlines read:
BRENT STILL MISSING; POLICE CONTINUE HUNT.

The Steve Brent who crept back to the service entrance of Mackland Moors under cover of darkness was gaunt-faced, bearded. The two days and the night that had passed since he had fled from this door

were a nightmarish memory. All the while the police had searched for him, he had been huddling in the darkness of an empty warehouse only a few blocks away. His hunger and thirst were a pain he forgot in his consuming anxiety for Diane. He had not dared come back sooner, but knowing he must be captured before long, that his absence was a danger to the girl he loved, he had risked a stealthy return.

The police were watching the front entrance, he knew, but this rear door was unguarded because it could not be opened from the outside. Brent pressed against the wall, seeking the thick darkness as he watched the shining panes. When he saw a shadow blot over them he tensed. A man opened the door, came out, began striding away—one of the staff. Brent sprang before the automatic device had fully closed the way. He sidled through and stood breathless, listening.

It was quiet in the cold corridors. Brent went quickly to the panel of the passenger elevator. His ring brought the cab down. Karl stood with eyes bulging as he stepped in. He closed the panel, put one hand beseechingly on Karl's arm, fumbled a banknote from his pocket.

"Take this," he said pressing it into Karl's hand. "Don't tell them I've come back. Is Miss Seward all right? Is she up there now?"

Karl gulped while he reluctantly fingered the bill. "She went out a little while ago with Mr. Babbage and Mr. Drew, but she said they would return soon. Will they do anything to me for not telling them—the police?"

"No. Take me up, Karl. I've got to get in—you have a pass-key. It's my only chance. Once they lock me up, I'll be helpless. You like Miss Seward, don't you? You don't want anything to happen to her. It's for her sake."

"Yes, sir."

The cab glided. Karl ignored the calls

flashing on the board. When he left the elevator at the penthouse level he drew the pass-key from his pocket. The bolt clicked back. Brent waited until Karl was gone. He opened the silver door and stepped into silence.

In the hallway he paused, looking at a little table on which a chromium lamp sat. Several envelopes lay in the amber glow—the late incoming mail. Brent fingered through them, suddenly shuffled one out. He ripped it open, pulled out folded papers, peered intently at a small slip. A chill gathered around his heart as he studied a cryptic notation:

3—WTN CT—60.

He put it carefully in his pocket. Following the hallway, he paused at the door of the room that had been Gresham's—or Burkley's—but went on after a moment. His one hand, thrust into his coat pocket, fingered the corks. At the entrance of Babbage's room he paused again. He opened it to find it dark. At the snap of a switch he stood in dim light, his narrowed eyes searching.

So few places in which a shotgun might be hidden—so few. So many hours had passed since Brent's escape—so many opportunities for getting rid of it. It might be lost forever. It might still be buried somewhere in the garden. It might be concealed somewhere in this room. It might be waiting—waiting to drum out its thundering doom at Diane

Brent's search took him to the closet. Only a few garments hung in it. A dinner jacket, for Babbage sometimes changed here. A black overcoat, unused for months, dust on its shoulders.

A moth-proof bag containing—what was it? Brent stood stiff, hands pressing the stiff paper, feeling something hard—something long and hard. Suddenly he ripped the big envelope open.

It was there.

IT was hanging upright, supported on the hook by a cord tied around its walnut stock. Its dark barrel gleamed with a sinister lustre. Brent's hands went to it slowly. He lifted it down, fingers numb. It was a heavy, evil thing, fraught with an odor of horrible death. The shotgun. Brent had seen it in Gresham's hands—or Burkley's. Now he had found it hidden in John Babbage's closet.

A cork was inserted in its muzzle. Brent's breath was a sibilant rhythm as he gazed at it. A cork, like that he had found in Wanda Seward's room, like those he had dug out of Gresham's case—or Burkley's. He twisted it out. It yielded easily. Inside the long barrel, as Brent peered directly down into it, something glittered. A liquid. A clear, odorless, tasteless liquid. Water.

Brent remembered the stunning shock he had felt at the instant of Phil's death—a cold, ripping force like the sting of an icy cascade. He remembered the water on the walls of Wanda's room—water where the wind could not have blown the rain through the open window. Flying water. Water in the barrel of the shotgun. It started something clicking in Brent's mind. A fog began to lift from his senses, making everything blindingly clear.

Where had he heard it or read of it? It didn't matter. A strange method of suicide, wielding a ghastly efficaciousness. Used sometimes by mine-workers, or by someone. . . . That was it. A suicide case reported in the newspapers. A miner had done it. He had filled the barrel of a shotgun with water, pointed it at his own head, tripped the trigger with a stick. "More destructive than a charge of shot," the account had read. "Sometimes it destroys the gun as well as the man, but not always. The column of water is shot out of the barrel and strikes with the impact of a bursting iron projectile."

And there was water in the barrel of this gun.

Brent's pulse pounded as he thrust the cork back into the muzzle. He upended the gun, broke it, fingernailed at the seated shell. It came out slowly, with a sticky sucking sound. It was only half a shell—the fore half, ordinarily containing a charge of shot, had been sliced off. It had been smeared thickly with vaseline to make the breech watertight. It was the source of the thunder—thunder that might strike again—at Diane.

Brent's mind was clearing rapidly. He tipped the gun to spill a little of the water out of the breech. He took one of the corks from his pocket—one of those he had found in Gresham's case, or Burkley's—and pushed it into the barrel. He thrust it far down until his finger could reach no farther. He rammed a second after it. He thumbed the shell back into place, then closed the breech. He carried the gun out of John Babbage's room.

He was placing it on the library table when he heard the clack of the elevator grille. Steps sounded at the silver door. Brent waited tensely while it opened. Diane came first into the library, her face drawn and wan—and stopped short. "Steve!" Babbage and Drew hurried in at the sound of her voice, and slowed at sight of Brent. He waited until they were through muttering their amazement. Then he said quietly:

"You see, there was a gun."

They looked at it appalled—the gleaming weapon lying on the library table. None of them made a move toward it. Brent studied Babbage's lined face, then Drew's. He said quietly:

"I wonder why it was kept here, loaded, in spite of the danger of its being found. Because it might have to be turned on Diane? In the event she said something to reveal she knows too much—too much about why Phil and Wanda

were killed? You're staring at me as though I were insane. I'm not mad. I was never more rational in my life."

"In your room, John," Brent answered. "Hidden in the closet in your room."

He turned quickly, hearing again the sliding of the elevator panel. He strode to the silver door. The knob twisted as he reached it, but the automatic lock barred it from the outside. A hand rapped heavily on the panel. A husky voice called in:

"Open the door! We know Brent's in there! Do you hear? Open the door!"

Brent said quietly: "Hello, Crader. Yes, Brent's in here. But I'm not going to let you in—not yet. Don't try to break the door down. Just wait there and listen. I can't possibly escape this time, you know. Just listen, and you may hear something enlightening."

Crader: "I thought there was a damn' good reason why that elevator boy looked scared out of his skin. You're right, Brent—this time you're nailed. Open the door!"

BRENT turned away without answering. Knuckles rapped again as he went back to the library. Diane and Babbage and Drew were staring at the shotgun lying on the table—at the gun with the cork fitted loosely into its muzzle. A quick chill took Brent's heart without warning. Diane. In all his forced, cold, logical reasoning he had taken no account of the possibility that Diane. . . . He had set a trap for a murderer, and if it was Diane who had—

He fought the ghost of madness that came back into his mind. He strove to retain the clarity of his senses as he turned to face the girl and the two men. They were looking at him now. It was Babbage who broke the silence with:

"You found that gun in my room?"

"In your room, John. I found the rope there too. It was you who brought Gresham to this house. His name wasn't Gresham, but Burkley, because the real Gresham is still out in Colorado. He was once an inmate of an asylum for the insane, and he was brought here as a hired killer. Harvey was murdered because he'd found proof of it."

Babbage blurted: "Good God! Do you think I'm guilty of this horrible thing?"

"The truth will come out—easily now," Brent went on without answering. "It's only necessary to check the whereabouts of everyone each time a death occurred. You'll find the proof of what I say—that the supposed Gresham killed Phil—that he or the man who hired him shot Wanda—that Gresham himself was killed because he knew too much. If Diane had betrayed, by a single word, that she suspected, she would have died the same horrible way."

Babbage exclaimed huskily: "You can't think I did this thing!"

"You've had ample opportunities for malefactions, John—with the bulk of the Seward estate in your hands. It's certain now Wanda discovered she had been robbed by one in control of her funds. That's why she wanted Phil's help—because she could trust Phil." Brent's eyes leveled at Malcolm Drew.

"How much did you steal from her, Mal? So much you could never hope to make it up?"

Drew's tongue licked over his dry lips. He stood rigid beside the table, hands half lifted, blinking rapidly. The strained hush held until Diane whispered:

"Wanda gave him a power of attorney months ago—I remember now she told me. Mal argued her property wasn't being administered properly. The Colorado railway was one of the things he took control of through the power of attorney."

She was worried about it lately, but she didn't say—"

Babbage declared: "You introduced me to Gresham, Mal. I accepted him without question because—"

"Drop that!"

The words broke from Brent's lips at Malcolm Drew's swift move. Drew half spun. When he straightened, retreating, the shotgun was gripped in his hands. He lifted it to his shoulder, lips working—and leveled it at Brent. Impulsively Diane rushed to Brent's side. He gestured her away anxiously, but she clung to his arm while the steadied gun pointed at them both. Drew took slow steps backward, eyes gleaming with a mad maliciousness, while Brent said tensely:

"You didn't love Wanda enough to keep from robbing her. You loved her so little, the stolen money so much, you didn't hesitate to kill her. You knew she was finding out—that's why you planned it all. You heard her telephone Phil to come, but you didn't know how much she'd told him. That's why your hired killer murdered him, why you turned that damnable gun on her."

Drew said huskily: "Don't move. You'll die the same way if you take a single step toward me."

Brent went on. "You denied in front of everyone that Wanda phoned Phil. You lied about it for the same reason you killed—to cover yourself. Here's proof of it, Mal." Brent drew the ripped envelope from his pocket and indicated the slip of paper, never taking his eyes from the leveled shotgun. "This is a bill from the telephone company. That notation means a long distance call to Wilton, Connecticut, on the third of the month. You did it all—murder breeding murder—to escape the consequences of what you'd done, but you can't escape now, Mal."

Drew warned again: "Don't move!"

Brent was smiling tightly. All doubt

was driven from his mind now. His thoughts were diamond clear. The spectre of madness was exercised by the light of the facts he firmly grasped. He raised his hand in a beckoning gesture.

"It's hopeless, Mal—you know that. Put down the gun. . . . All right, Mal. I'm going to take it out of your hands. You don't understand. It's a thing that kills horribly. It will kill you if you pull that trigger. I'm not bluffing. It's true. I'm going to take that gun away from you—"

Brent took a slow step forward. An anguished moan broke from Diane's lips as he forced her hands off his arm. He took another step toward that gleaming, corked muzzle—and he saw a wild light spring into Drew's eyes, saw Drew's finger tighten on the trigger. He took still another step with the shotgun pointing straight at his head. And yet another step. . . .

Thunder! The death drums! The rumble of doom echoing in the room! Fanning flame made lightning. Stinging water sprayed. Dark drops marked the walls and ceiling as they jarred with the power of the concussion. And before the eyes of Brent and Diane and Babbage the red horror appeared.

He stood balanced a moment on outspread legs—the man whose head was a mashed crimson thing, whose torn neck flowed scarlet, whose chest was an oozing hollow. Four times, secretly, that shotgun had blasted out rending projectiles of water, but this time the thunder had boomeranged. The inertia of two corks, rammed hard into the barrel, just in front of the powerful shell, had burst the breech with terrific power. A trap set for a murderer—a trap Brent had warned Drew against—had claimed him for the same ghastly end he had visited upon his prey.

One moment he stood balanced, the cleaved, misshapen gun in his hands, star-

ing eyeless, broken mouth dripping. The weapon fell first. Drew tottered down with a crunching thud. All the echoes of the death thunder were gone when he sprawled and lay still—but on the silver door there came a sudden, sharp rapping.

BRENT found Diane in his arms—Diane, sobbing, clinging to him. He held her close, breathing deep of the rich

scent of her hair, his worn nerves feeling the blessing of her warm nearness. He was lost to everything—even to the horror on the floor—for a long, ecstatic moment. Then the reality returned—clear and clean, free of the phantom of madness. There was a frantic knocking in the hall . . . men from headquarters demanding entrance.

Brent went to the door and let them in.

THE END

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GIFT OF CAIN



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A dangerous gift—the ability to kill whom you please without fear of consequences; for the mark of Cain can be worn by no man save in terror and deathless remorse . . .

I'LL never forget the shock that came over me when I first saw him. It was in one of those deep gorges that lay between my cabin and the mountain settlement of Pine Bluff. It was a wild place, where the mists hung even in the summer. And it was winter now and the sun had just set behind the higher peaks.

The twilight had come on with a rush, changing the green of the pines to a feathery purple and causing the snow to gleam with a weird bluish light, like the atmosphere of some submarine world.

"Why it doesn't even look like a part of the world at all!" I had muttered. And then I saw him.

For a moment I stood stock still, utterly incredulous. Ahead of me, sharp and clear in the snow crust were the tracks I had made not two hours ago when I had passed along this same trail. Yet there he lay, not ten yards distant, face down as if dead, and the tracks that led up to him were certainly a day old—their edges rounded, the hollows already partly filled with blown snow. Was it possible that I had passed that near and had not seen him?

I stumbled toward him, but when I stood above him, my blood still tingling from the first shock. I felt something else—a distinct quiver of revulsion! Why? I could not say. He was small, and the rusty black coat of outmoded cut was much too large for his shrunken body; yet the sleeves were too short for his hairy arms. The position in which he was lying too had something unnatural, un-human about it, and there was something knotty and knobby about his feet that had twisted his worn moccasin boots out of shape. At any rate, I hesitated a moment before I touched him.

Then I stooped down and rolled him over and the disagreeable impression was intensified. His face was incredibly hairy, curiously shaped, and the skin of his nose, forehead and upper cheeks was the color of the yellowish clay you find around mountain springs. He looked aged, yet ageless, like an old shard of pottery dug up in a ruin. His teeth were large, angling out so that the lips were pushed forward like a snout; his ears were large, pointed, fuzzy, and there was a peculiar mark on his brow. At first I thought it was a smear of blood and tried to wipe it away with my hand. Then I saw that it was some sort of birthmark—a brownish X crudely formed as if made by two hasty strokes of a finger.

Well, I didn't allow myself to hesitate any longer. Already my skin was crawling

queerly and I could feel a crazy impulse to go off and leave him there. So I hefted him quickly, threw him over one shoulder, and plodded back to the trail.

But the farther I carried him the more uncomfortable I felt. He wasn't heavy at all, but the touch of his body against mine was vaguely yet unmistakably repulsive, and I didn't feel that glow of satisfaction that comes from doing a good deed, helping a fellow-man. I felt instead an inexplicable sense of guilt, as if I were doing something criminal, shameful!

It was idiotic, but it got under my skin, and when I got to the cabin and my dog instead of bounding toward me, as he always did when I opened the door, cowered back growling, I cursed him and gave him a kick. I had never kicked him before, and he went streaking out with frightened yelps and his tail between his legs.

I laid my burden down on a Navajo rug, not too close to the fire, and began to work him over. But I found it a disgusting task, found chills running up from my fingertips through my whole body each time I touched him. Luckily, he wasn't really frozen, and presently a little color flowed into the ochre pallor of his face and he opened his eyes.

I drew back from him with a shudder of relief. "Feeling better?" I asked.

HE DIDN'T say anything. His mouth hung partly open and his breath came jerkily between his yellowed teeth. I repeated the question but still he didn't answer, didn't even attempt to make a sound. Yet he stared at me with a steady, impassive gaze as if he understood exactly what I was saying.

That irritated me. I went into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of whiskey and a glass. I poured a glass and pressed it to his lips. But at the smell of the whiskey fumes, a look of fright, of nausea overspread his features, and as I

tilted the glass, he jerked his head about and spat, spewing the liquor out and knocking the glass from my hand. I next tried coffee, then tea, but with no better luck. He wouldn't drink it. Finally I warmed a pan of milk, and he drank this greedily—though he seemed to have difficulties with the glass.

"That's better, eh?" I asked as I straightened again.

He just looked at me. Then he stretched his jaws a little and licked his crinkly whiskers like a cat. I turned away quickly.

When I came back from the kitchen I walked along the left wall, behind him. I wanted to study him without being seen; I was afraid now that the loathing I felt for him would show in my face. I watched him. He lay perfectly still, and I noticed how thick, square, short-fingered his hairy hands were. I moved to the left, glimpsed his face, stopped with a repressed gasp. Light from the gasoline lamp slanted across his features, seemed to elongate them, emphasizing the low, narrow forehead, the shaggy brows pointing down toward the long bridge of the nose and the feral snout. A shudder passed over me then, and my mind framed the words: "Why he *isn't* human! What is he?"

I hadn't made a sound, but as if he had heard my unspoken question he moved his head and his amber eyes rolled up and back, searching for me. I turned away quickly, went round the table and moved the lamp to my desk against the wall. I sat down, got out pen and paper and tried to concentrate on a letter that I had to write. But I couldn't get my mind on it. I knew that he was staring at me but I didn't want to look at him. It was almost like a duel between us and I felt choked with anger. Finally he won; I looked around sharply. He was staring at me, calmly, intently, unwaveringly.

I bent over the desk again, began to

think of the letter, of the girl to whom it was to be addressed. It was a letter to tell her that she must not come to see me as she had planned. It was to congratulate her on her forthcoming marriage. It was above all things to hide the secret hurt in my heart.

I made several starts and threw them aside impatiently. It was hard to make her understand, without actually saying it, that I couldn't bear to see her again—not after I had steeled myself to give her up. But as I tried to write it I found my throat getting hot and tight with anger while a flood of bitter memories rose around me—memories I had put from my mind, hatreds I had stifled; above all a hatred for her stern, bigoted father who stood between us.

But hadn't I fought that back before—the bitterness, the harsh hate? Hadn't I come out here to forget, and hadn't I found strength and self-control? Why was this evil tide rising up to submerge me now? Suddenly I thought of *him*, the misshapen, odious creature I had dragged in from the snow, the thing whose nauseous yellow eyes I could now feel fastened on the back of my neck like hornets. "Why he's poisoned the very atmosphere, the unnatural beast!" I muttered, and swung about to face him.

HE LAY in the same position, and as I had known, his hot bright eyes were fixed on me steadily. They met my glance with a clash that was almost physical, and again I had that sensation of touching a snake, a toad, or some slimy creature of the earth.

Then, with a little twinge of conscience, I noted something else. His expression had undergone a frightful change. His thick, blubbery lips were parted in a painful mockery of a grin, and his eyes were dumb no longer, but freighted with some message, with something horribly beseeching,

yearning even; and in them was a sort of animal clairvoyance that seemed to look straight into my thoughts.

I started up from my chair then, took a step toward him. I thought he must be in pain. My impulse was to do something for him. Then came the strange reaction, like an echo following a shot, and instead of wanting to help him I wanted to trample him, crush him, kill him, as if it were an abomination that he should be alive and on the earth!

Yet his eyes were looking at me with what was patently a look of affection, gratitude, and a mute, humble appeal. He seemed to be trying to make me understand that he sympathized with me, wanted to help me, to reward me.

Ugh! It was a disgusting feeling. It was as if a wounded snake had crawled upon my body, was nuzzling me with his cold reptilian snout, licking at me with a tremulous, loathsome tongue! "What is it?" I heard myself gasping hoarsely, gruffly, "What do you want?"

His lips peeled away from the slimy, discolored teeth. He didn't make a sound, yet I felt that he understood exactly what I said, understood more than I said, understood the revulsion I felt for him, and with his liquid amber eyes he was reproaching me.

Then he lifted one hand—I almost said paw—and made the sign.

Now that was a curious thing. It was utterly meaningless to me then, yet I knew at once that it was deliberate and that it had significance. The sign was made with the thumb and the two first fingers of the right hand, twisted about to form a peculiar symbol, and held against the teeth. He continued to look at me intently.

"What is it?" I repeated, taking a step nearer and feeling my knee joints quiver slightly. "Are you in pain?"

Again he made the sign.

I stopped. His eyes were trying to say something to me. Then I understood in a flash. He wanted me to make the sign too; he was trying to teach it to me. As quick as thought, my fingers had twisted to form the symbol. I found that it was very hard for my fingers to make it, but I managed to imitate it approximately, and scarcely thinking of what I was doing, I lifted my fingers to my lips.

A strange thing happened then. The creature's body seemed to go limp, as if only some terrific effort of will had kept his muscles tense until he could accomplish what he wished to accomplish. His hand fell away from his mouth, and his eyes, still fastened on me, began to fade slowly like the light of an expiring lamp. Too late I realized what was happening to him. By the time I had started forward again the rattle was in his throat. By the time I reached him he was dead.

A curious cold was in the room now as I drew away from him, straightened. A chill wind, like a breeze from beyond the stars seemed to blow over me. Who was this strange creature that chance had thrown in my path; what was the meaning of the sign he had made, had obviously seemed so anxious to teach me? Why, it was almost as if he wished to leave a gift to me, a reward for bringing him in out of the cold, trying to save him!

I WENT back and sat down in my chair, a little weakly. I twisted my fingers about to form that peculiar symbol and looked at it. Then a thought struck me, struck me like a blow. Could it be? It was preposterous! Yet that odd design formed by my fingers was very like a certain symbol of antiquity about which archeologists had written, a symbol sinister and fearsome, known to the priests of Chaldea and Egypt, held in awe by the Gnostics and Necromancers of later days—a symbol that it was supposed had

originated with races more remote than any known to man, races that had vanished in the dim past before history.

"Absurd!" I exclaimed. But I continued to look at the symbol my fingers formed. Then, half laughing, I lifted it to my lips as I had seen him do. I was facing the window now, and the reflected light from the fire was playing on the pane like waving pennants of red. Beyond was the leaden grey of dusk. Then something moved on the window sill outside—a scampering, furry shape. That pack-rat who had been too smart for my traps! I instantly thought of getting my rifle to shoot him.

The rat had reached the middle of the window as that thought flashed through my mind. He got no farther. For suddenly I saw him leap up with a quick spasmodic jerk and fall out of sight below the sill.

In an instant I was on my feet and running outside with my flashlight. I found the rat lying on the snow. He was quite dead. But what had killed him? Then I saw. Near him lay a heavy icicle, broken in three pieces, and the lower end, I saw had been needle-sharp. And on the top of the rat's head was a single drop of blood. That icicle had fallen from the edge of the roof, had struck the rat on the head, penetrating his brain and killing him instantly.

I straightened up, feeling a little dizzy. What a curious coincidence! One would almost believe. . . . I looked up at the roof from which the icicle had fallen. What had caused it to fall, to fall with such force as to penetrate the rat's skull?

I shook my head and went back into the house. The creature on the floor looked even more forbidding in death than in life. I covered him with a sheet and went to the kitchen and poured myself a stiff drink of whiskey. Then I ate a cold **snack** and went to bed.

But I couldn't sleep. The dead thing that lay between me and the glowing hearth continued to intrude upon my thoughts. I lay and watched the play of light and shadow on the beamed ceiling and tried not to think of him. Instead I began to think of Shelia. I thought of her in the arms of Larry Drew, the young man she was going to marry, and such a wave of bitter jealousy swept over me that I was frightened. I put the thought of Drew aside. But another picture flashed into my brain, and this time a black murderous haze of hatred misted my eyes, and I saw a clear and distinct picture—a horrible picture—etched on my consciousness with lines of fire. . . .

I came to my senses with a jerk, realized with sudden alarm that in that swoon of hate my fingers had automatically formed the symbol and lifted it to my teeth. This was awful—that having once made the symbol I should do it again unconsciously. I jumped up and went into the kitchen for another drink. I noticed that the hands of the alarm clock pointed to nine o'clock. I looked at my bed with a sort of dread and stole a cautious glance at the thing under the sheet. Could that unnatural creature, even in death, control my thoughts? I wouldn't admit it. I went back to bed, and this time I forced myself to lie still, to make my mind a blank. And this time I slept.

I AWOKE to grey skies and falling snow. I sat up in bed and the memories of last night came back like a dimly remembered nightmare. I stepped into my slippers, flung a bathrobe over my shoulders and started toward the hearth. Then I stopped. A cold wave of hysteria swept over me and for an instant the room rocked and spun. The pallet on the floor lay just as I had left it, but the weird dead thing that had lain upon it was gone!

I closed the door, but the cold silence of

the room was suddenly oppressive, unbearably so. I couldn't stand it. I dressed hurriedly and started for Pine Bluff.

I got there just as Luke McVail was opening the general store and post office. "A message for you," he said excitedly. I shivered with a frightful premonition.

"Young lady phoned in about ninety-three last night," he went on. "I took the message for you. Miss Shelia Wickwar's the name. Seems she was drivin' up to your place with a young man, and on the high ridge this side of Placer they had an accident. Tire went flat. The young man got out to change tires, slipped on a rock and went over the bluff. . . ."

I didn't hear the rest; it seemed that an iron band had tightened about my temples. I leaned weakly on the counter, listened to the roaring in my ears. I didn't need to hear the other details of the catastrophe. I knew them already. The picture was burned into my brain. I saw the lighted car and Shelia inside. I saw a dark figure outside trying to pull loose a rock to scotch the wheel. I saw that figure sway on the edge of the road where the bluff dropped sheer for three hundred feet. I heard a scream. . . .

It was all clear in my mind because it was the exact picture that had flashed into my mind as I lay in bed the night before and unconsciously lifted my twisted fingers to my lips!

* * *

AND that was how I came to know the power of the death-wish that had passed to me at the death of the loathsome creature I had befriended, and things began to happen swiftly after that.

I didn't go to Drew's funeral, though Shelia begged me to come to her. But I couldn't. I went back to my cabin and shut myself there like a hermit. I cowered in my dark cabin like a hunted thing, fearing everything, fearing mostly myself. And

then spring came and there was a glad bright sky and sprouting green leaves, and the horror inside me thawed like the snow and I weakened.

I told myself that it had all been a delusion—that it was only telepathy and coincidence. I had to tell myself something, because I had to see Shelia.

I went in and I saw her and it was just as I expected it to be. Once in each other's arms again, we knew that we must have each other, that anything else was unthinkable, had always been unthinkable. And so I appealed to old Leonard Wickwar again.

I came out of his house blind and crushed with rage. He had not been content simply to refuse me this time; he had insulted me, trampled on my pride. I had come from a poor mountain family, had run away from home in my teens, had been picked up for stealing food and sent to a reform school. There was nothing else against my record, and I had lived that down. But Wickwar dragged that up and waved it before me like a red rag before a bull, and he told me—and he was not a man to change—that I should never have Shelia as long as he was alive, even if he had to use a gun to make sure of it.

I believed him. I knew that I could take Shelia anyhow, but I knew that it would mean tragedy for her. I went away without talking to her and brooded like a madman, roaming the streets, fighting the devil that was reaching up to get hold of my mind. Dark found me wandering near the big saw mill which was old Wickwar's property. I drifted toward it, drawn by the busy hum and the moving figures of the workmen. I stood in a doorway and watched, letting the roaring sounds flow over me soothingly.

And then I saw old Wickwar. Though wealthy from his birth, he was a man who liked to mingle with his workmen, affecting

their blunt ways. I wasn't surprised to see him there. He was standing near one of the long tables where the wet green lumber was carried from the saws to the "green chains" or sorting table, and he was talking to one of his foremen. But suddenly there was a jam of lumber on the table, and the chains grated under it, piling it higher and higher. In a flash old Wickwar had seized one of the small picks used for straightening the lumber and leaped to the table.

I couldn't help admiring that. Surely there was something in that rough, blunt man that I could appeal to! It was a flimsy little hope but I acted on it at once. I strode out and stood by the table to get his attention. He was hopping to avoid the lumber which was moving steadily again on the chains. Then he saw me, waiting hopefully to make a final appeal. His face darkened with an angry scowl and he bellowed at me. "Get out of here, you—!" and he used a stinging epithet.

My brain seemed to go black then, and out of the billowing mist of darkness I saw the fingers of my right hand forming the symbol, saw it rising to my bared teeth, rising with a horrible, inexorable motion which I seemed powerless to stop.

I remember a scream; I remember the wild shrilling murder-cry of the saw as it bit into something that was not timber. I remember shouts, the sudden cessation of the machinery's roar, and then I had turned, was outside, stumbling through darkness. . . .

THAT was murder, and I could not evade the fact, though it was murder for which no law of man could touch me. And the horrible part of it to me was that I could feel no deeper guilt than I did. It was as if I had lost some faculty for shame, some quality of humanness. Not that I didn't suffer, but that was mostly on

Shelia's account. And I was worried, even a little terrified at my own depravity; yet for the man who was dead I could feel nothing but a cold indifference. But I swore that I would never use the power again.

What happened after that was inevitable. After a decent interval Shelia and I were married. Her mother had been dead many years and the only sharer in her father's estate was a brother who was the manager of a plantation in Hawaii. He was left a sum of money and the rest of the property went to Shelia, and it fell to me to assume charge of the mill and the lumber interests.

But a new and alarming knowledge came to me at this time. It came to me after two busy months in which I had tried to manage the business, and had failed. I asked myself what was wrong, and I found two answers. First, I seemed to have lost my hold on people. I had always prided myself on a certain executive ability; now it was gone, and I had to face the fact that men had begun to shun me with that instinctive shrinking which no amount of dissembling can conceal. Second, I found that the aversion which people seemed to feel for me was echoed in my own heart. I began to shun gatherings, avoid all unnecessary contacts with an almost animal-like fear and distrust. I began to be afraid of the very buildings, the crowded streets, the busy offices.

I fought against all these things, but in the end I was beaten. I told Shelia that living in the woods had spoiled me for life in even so small a town. I could see that she was a little hurt, a little disappointed in me, but she hid it, as I knew she would. We had been so supremely happy that not the filmiest cloud had ever come between us!

So the business was left in the hands of a trusted employee and Shelia and I moved

back to the woods and built a beautiful stone lodge on the site of my old cabin. And life became wonderful again.

I'd never realized before how much the forest had got into my blood—the lure of rocky crags, the wind in the pine branches, the smell of earth, of leaves and rain and even animals. I now spent whole days wandering, hunting. But there was something queer about that too. A gun had always been as natural to me as a hat, yet now I seemed unable to use a gun with my old skill. I couldn't figure exactly why; but it was just like trying to use a hammer with my left hand. I worried about this a good deal and then one day a surprising thing happened. In a gully beneath a cliff I found the carcass of a dead cow picked white by the birds, and for some reason which I didn't at once understand a particular curved bone attracted me. I pulled it loose and squatting down with a queer feverish thrill, I began to shape and smooth it with sharp stones. I worked with complete absorption and, almost before I knew it, I had fashioned a curious instrument, something like the boomerang used by Australian savages.

I straightened, staring at the thing with an almost childish pride. Then I noticed a squirrel on a high branch of a fir tree. Without even thinking, I drew back my arm and flung the bone. To my amazement it whizzed through the air, struck the squirrel squarely on the head and killed him instantly.

THIS was wonderful—fascinating! I soon found that I was more accurate with the bone than with the gun. I went home that night loaded down with my kill and proudly showed my new weapon to Shelia. But her reaction startled me. She looked at me strangely a moment; then her eyes narrowed, almost in fear, and suddenly she burst into sobs.

And in this I found a real cause for

fear. For I had seen in her the same curious inward shrinking which I had become accustomed to expect from my fellow men. I had grown used to that. But Shelia! That was different. I brooded over it during long hours in the forest, but nothing that I could do seemed to help any. I began to feel that perhaps the loneliness of the forest had upset her nerves, and when she suggested that she spend a month with an old school friend in town I readily assented.

I began to feel better after she had gone, more confident that a month in town would revive her enthusiasm for the wilds. How could anyone fail to feel the spell of the dark woods, the lure of the caves, the heady odors of leaf mould and foliage and earth? I took to roaming clad only in shorts and rude sandals.

One night I stumbled into a bunch of tramps camped by the railroad track in the canyon. Seeing me come out of the dark, a naked man carrying a bone weapon, one of the tramps leaped up and attacked me with a club. I killed him—killed him as calmly as I now tell it—not with the fearful power of the death-wish which I had all but forgotten, but with my bone boomerang. The others fled, and I went off from the dead man and thought no more about it. No one suspected me when he was found.

So the days passed and the date for Shelia's return drew near and I was happy. And then one day I was drinking at a mountain spring when something about the reflection of my face in the water caught my attention with a sudden shock. It wasn't my rough beard or matted hair; I had grown used to that. It was something else—a faint brownish mark on my forehead, a crude X, as if two hurried strokes of a finger had made it. I jerked up my hand to wipe it off, but it didn't come away. Then I remembered. The

thing which had died in my cabin had had that mark on his brow:

I hurried home to look at myself more closely in the glass. But when I got to the clearing in which the lodge stood, I saw that there was a look of occupation about the place. The door was open; blankets were hanging out to air. Shelia had returned!

The glad wave of joy that swept over me then swept everything else from my mind. I literally ran in to meet her, to hold her in my arms again! And then came the frightful shock. For as Shelia turned at the sound of my voice, I saw the glad smile vanish from her face to be supplanted by a look of stark horror, and a cry of fright burst from her lips.

She recovered quickly, but I had already seen and understood, and I didn't try to touch her then. It would be different, I thought, when I had shaved and cleaned up. To cover the confusion, I laughed at my own appearance.

"But Malcom!" she gasped. "There's blood on your forehead!"

"It—it's a scratch," I lied, tongue-tied with dismay.

But she continued to stare. "Malcom," she said finally, in a strained tone, "I'm going back to town. I feel—I feel sick."

"No!" I said. My heart was beating against my ribs.

"But Malcom . . . !" And she began to plead with me, making all sorts of excuses which I didn't even hear. It would be only for a short while, until she was feeling better. Then she would come back.

But something in my brain had set, gone hard as concrete. I said stubbornly: "You cannot go back!"

"But I will go!" she flung at me hysterically and started for the door.

In two swift bounds I had overtaken her. I caught her arm, pulled her back. "I can't let you go!" I said huskily. Then

I half dragged, half pulled her to her room and locked her in.

I felt awful as I stood outside that locked door and listened to her frightened cries. I wanted to go down on my knees before her, beg her to forgive me, to give me a chance to make her love me again. But I knew it would be useless now, and I had another plan. . . .

NEAR the village of Pine Pass there was an old missionary doctor who lived alone on his pension. He had been in Africa for forty years and had seen many strange things. I would go to him, confess everything and ask his help and guidance. And I would get him to intercede with Shelia on my behalf.

I started out to his place now without stopping for anything. I reached his little cabin just at dark. I saw the startled, fearful look on his face as he admitted me, but I didn't care. I would soon explain everything to him. I sat down in the chair he offered me and plunged at once into my tale.

The old man listened, rapt, intent. Would he laugh at me, tell me it was nothing but imagination? I poured my whole soul into my story. Then I finished, breathless, searching his face with frantic eyes, waiting for his answer.

It came swiftly and it was neither the incredulity nor the ridicule I had half feared. It was something that seemed to me incredibly inhuman, cruel, terrible. For the old man jerked suddenly at a drawer in a table, pulled out a heavy revolver and leveled it at me. Then, in a voice that quavered with mortal terror, he croaked. "Go! Out of my house. Go at once!"

I staggered up, stunned and horrified. Then my awful despair found voice. "But you *must* help me!" I shrieked. "You've got to help me. Your religion, your God demands that you help me, help any of

your fellowmen who are in trouble and pain!"

"My God," he said, "demands that I help my fellowman—but not you! You must go at once. I can do nothing, nothing! When you are alone, read the fourth chapter of Genesis. Go now—be quick!"

I turned and ran.

Outside in the dark of the hills, with the sweet silent forest about me, I vented my anguish in animal howls. What had he meant—what was I—what had I become? Was I no longer human, but something that belonged here with the wolf, the coyote, the night-owl?

I went on, sometimes stumbling, crying, sobbing, and sometimes cursing in a wild excess of rage. Man, my fellowman had cast me out, had placed me lower than the beasts, had made me an object of fear and revulsion. And yet, and yet . . . In my brain and body was a power greater than any man knew, the heritage of vanished races of creatures who had lived closer to the earth, who knew the fearful secrets that later races could not even guess! I was a death-man, a living embodiment of the power of the inexorable Reaper!

My madness dulled to a sullen rage, a fierce sense of power. Man had scorned me; I would show him my power. What did I care for his pitiful sympathy, I who was the equal of the lightning, the flood, the hurricane?

Then I thought of Shelia, and hot pain stabbed me again. She was the only tie that bound me to the world of men, but I loved her, loved her more than life itself. Now I would have to give her up; I must reconcile myself to that.

I came dazedly into our clearing, staggered toward the house, rehearsing in my mind my last speech to Shelia. Then I stopped with a jerk. There was a light in the garage—the headlights of an automobile—and it was not my car, but another which had been driven in beside it. I drew

nearer, peering around the corner of the house. Then I stiffened and my heart stood still.

Silhouetted against the light were two figures, standing by the open door of the car. One of them was Shelia and one was a man—a stranger whom I had never seen! And Shelia's arms were around him.

SOMETHING in my brain seemed to crack then. This was too much for my shattered nerves and mind. Shelia had not only ceased to love me, but she had found another. That month in town!

The agony of that moment is indescribable. I had determined to give her up, yes, but not to another, not to a man who had won her love while she was still my wife! Swiftly, deliberately, my fingers twisted to form the symbol, and with a jerk I brought it against my teeth and stared at the man with slitted, burning eyes.

At almost the same instant the man moved, took a step away from Shelia. Then something tripped him. He lurched backward, struck a rake that was leaning against the wall. The rake fell sideways along the wall and struck an axe that was resting there on pegs. The axe fell; Shelia screamed—and I had murdered another man!

I ran forward. Shelia had thrown herself on the man's fallen body, was sobbing wildly. As I came up she straightened, and the look on her tear-wet face was terrible. "You did that!" she screamed. "You killed him!"

"I?" I asked. "How could I have done it? Who is he?"

"Who is he?" she shrieked. "He's my brother Alfred and he came all the way from Hawaii to visit us. When I saw you today I was afraid for him to see you; that's why I wanted to go back before he came out here. And now you've killed him, you beast, you monster. I don't know how,

but you did it. You're not human—I know that!"

Her brother! God in Heaven! And in some way she had sensed the evil in me—the hellish power that had murdered him. I pulled her out of the way, lifted the man and carried him into the house. He was bleeding from an ugly gash in his scalp, but he was still alive. I ran back out, jumped into my car and raced for the doctor.

It was a mad ride, and it was hours before I found a doctor and got back with him. And by then the man was dead. I had expected that, but what struck me numb with unutterable horror was to find Shelia lying in a feverish delirium on the couch in the long front room. She was raving, tossing, completely mad! The doctor ran to her.

"Your wife," he gasped, "you didn't tell me. . . ."

"But she was all right," I stammered. "The grief has done it. . . ."

"Grief?" the doctor looked up at me strangely. "I have seen much hysteria from grief, but this—" He bent to examine her. I stood paralyzed, my breath locked in my lungs, my heart frozen until the doctor straightened, reached for his bag.

"What is it?" I grated, "Is it serious?" Staring into Shelia's flushed face I read there an agony beyond words.

"Serious?" the doctor asked. He seemed stunned too. "I've never seen anything like it. I don't know what it is. But her fever is nearly a hundred and six. She's dying!"

Dying! The word volleyed in a wild shriek through my brain. Now I understood. She had been standing near the man when I had made the death-sign and a part of the power had spent itself on her!

I turned and went staggering from the room, stumbled into my study. I was laughing softly, crazily; while my whole

body shook with a fearful chill. I snatched a Bible from the bookshelf and fumbled drunkenly with the pages. I found the fourth chapter of Genesis and began to read, tracing the letters with a shaking finger, mumbling the words like a child. It was the story of Cain, the first murderer, and of the curse God placed upon him. But it was all dazedly vague until I came to the thirteenth verse, and then the letters stood out sharp and clear:

"And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth. . . . I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond, and it shall come to pass that everyone that findeth me shall slay me.

"And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him."

I slammed the Bible shut. So that was what the old missionary meant! The power that I had had come down from the accursed father of murderers. And had that hideous creature been Cain, who had wandered the earth for ages? And had his awful burden of guilt and shame passed on to me, along with the death-power he had taught me?

I could not know. I do not know now. But I did know that Shelia was dying, that I had murdered her. Unless, unless. . . .

I staggered up, burning with a sudden excitement of hope. I ran into the room where the doctor was still bending above my wife.

"How much longer can she live?" I asked.

"Maybe ten minutes," he said. "Maybe thirty."

"She will not die," I said, and I went out.

* * *

THE man who had been speaking stopped and looked into our faces. We

were huddled about the stove in the back room of Charlie Peavy's store, and the man had come in to warm himself and had begun his tale without invitation.

"And then what?" Joe Kurfees asked him now.

"That's all," the man said, and he got up.

We all looked at him sourly. He resembled the man in his story all right, even to the disagreeable impression he made. And I swear to God I thought for a minute I actually saw the Cain mark showing on his forehead! Now we all felt tricked as if he had been making fun of us. He just stood there, warming his hands and smiling wisely. Then he nodded, walked to the door and went out. . . .

"Well, I'll be damned," Sid Bowles sputtered, "ain't that the damndest craziest yarn? Reckon he thinks he's smart, leavin' it without no endin'. Ain't he the most colossal liar you ever—"

He didn't finish. There was a noise in the front of the building. The door had opened and closed, and a man had stomped in and was calling loudly for a drink of whiskey. We all got up and drifted forward.

"For Cris' sakes, Doc, what's wrong with you?" we heard Charlie Peavy ask.

And the voice of the other man was

mumbling, "I may be crazy, but I'm damned if it's possible, and yet it happened—I'll swear it did!"

"What the hell?" Peavy exclaimed.

"This fellow," says the doctor, "he comes to me to get me to treat a fellow with a broken head. That fellow's already dead, I find, but the other man's wife, whom he swears was all right when he left her, is dying in delirium—dying! Then the man comes in and says she won't die, and goes out. And after he's gone about ten minutes that fever drops. Not slowly, but all at once. Like that!" He snapped his fingers. "And not only that but the woman sits up and there's nothing wrong with her at all!"

"Damned funny," Peavy says, "but still—"

"Wait a minute," says the doctor. "That's not the craziest part. The craziest part is what I found later, by the roadside. . . ."

"What?" Peavy asks.

"That man—" the doctor half yells—"the crazy damned fool. He's dead—hanging by his neck from a tree limb—"

"Where?" Peavy gasps, looking wildly toward the door. "Not, not out there?"

"Oh, my God no," the doctor answers, "about twenty miles back down the road. Where can I find the sheriff?"

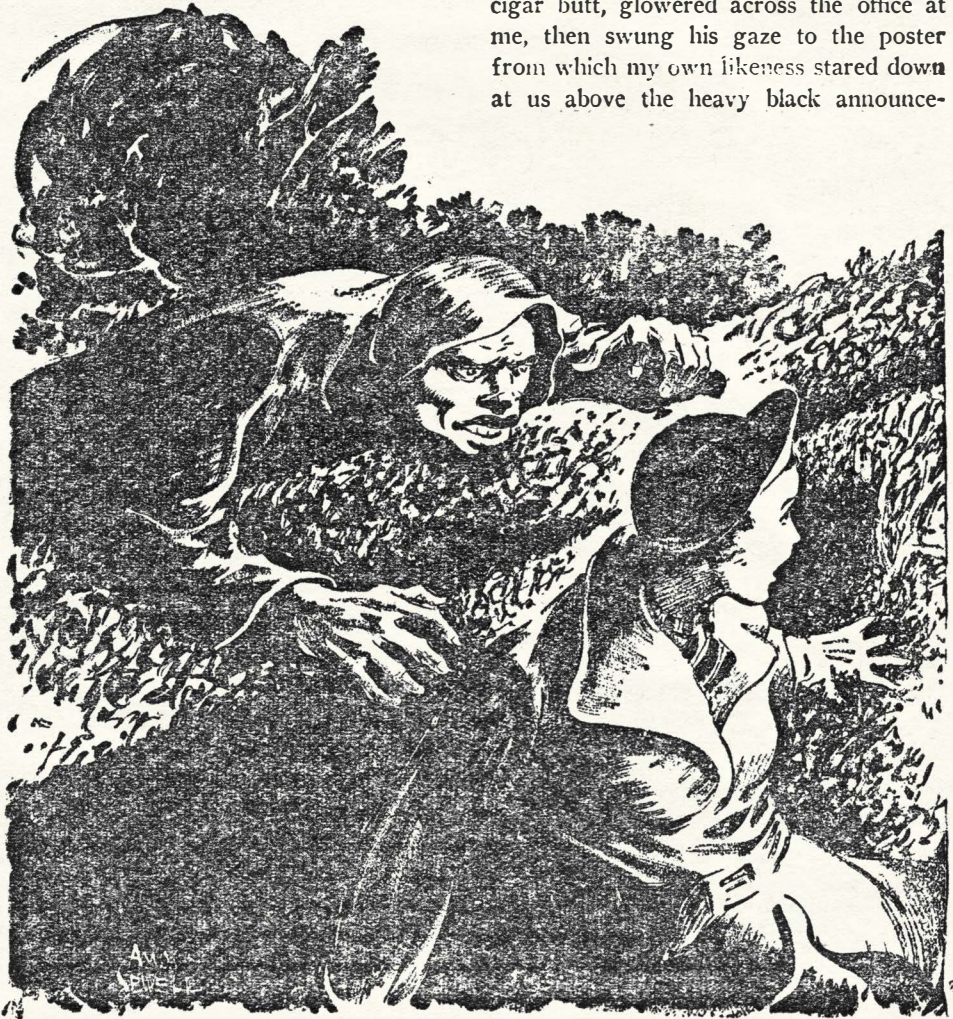
SUBSTITUTE

You bereaved ones—you who have lost a son, a mother, a sweetheart—do you pray for the return of your beloved dead? And what if—as in this eerily gripping story—they should come, demanding that you take their place in the grave?

“THERE’S somethin’ funny about this campaign, Pete. Nigger in the woodpile somewhere. Things have been altogether too damned quiet to suit me. I know that county seat

gang, and I know Seymour Lacey. I’m bettin’ my last nickel he’s got somethin’ up his sleeve, all ready to spring on us. Somethin’ nice and crooked, too.”

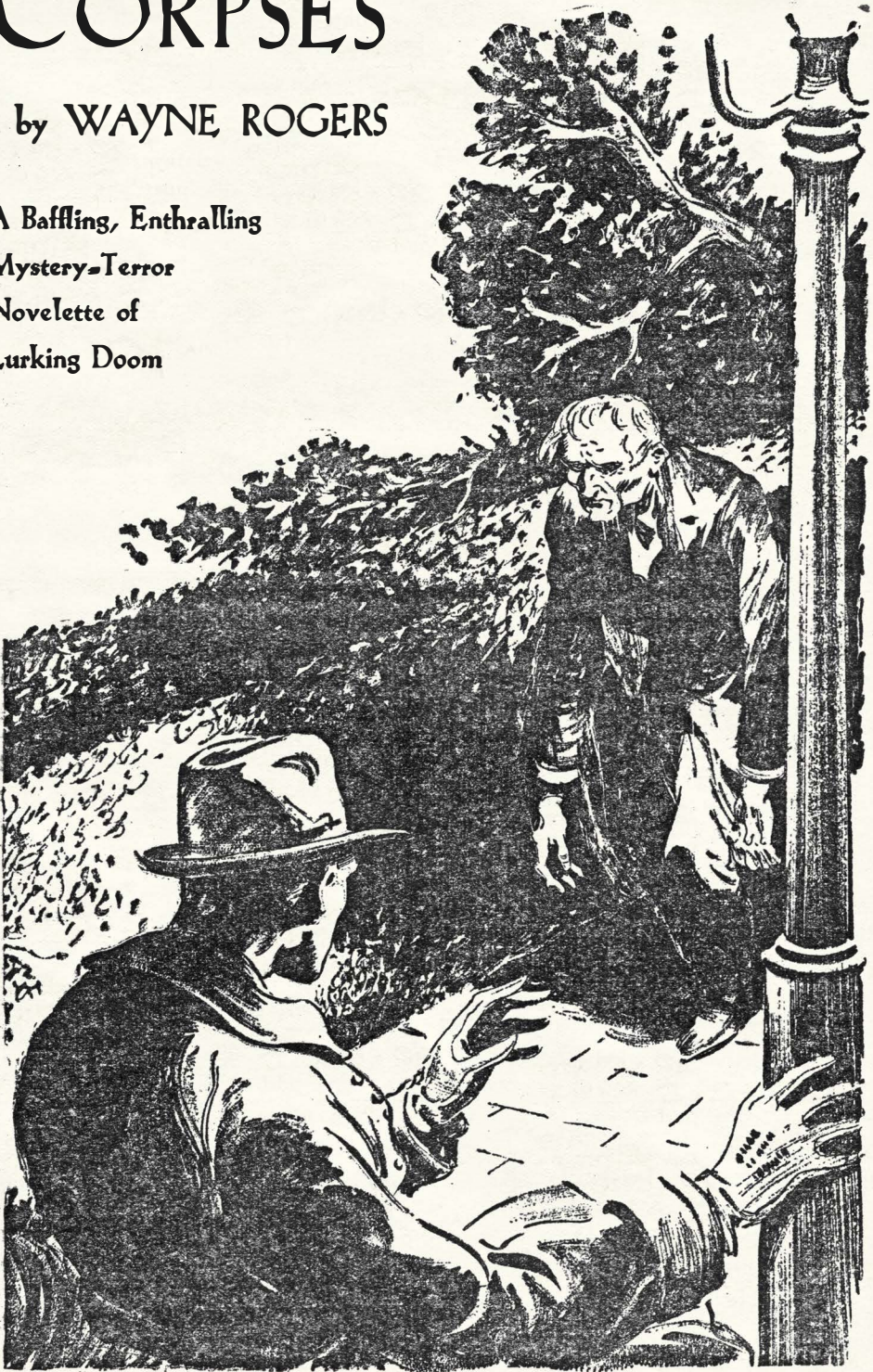
Jeff Perrin, the senior member of our law partnership, chewed viciously on his cigar butt, glowered across the office at me, then swung his gaze to the poster from which my own likeness stared down at us above the heavy black announce-



CORPSES

by WAYNE ROGERS

A Baffling, Enthralling
Mystery-Terror
Novelette of
Lurking Doom



ment: "Peter Hadley for County Welfare Agent."

"Think they're gonna let you walk in and grab off that plum, after they went to all the trouble of putting a bill through the legislature creatin' the job for themselves?" he scoffed. "Mark my word, Pete, there's gonna be hell poppin' before we're through."

Jeff was a cantankerous old fire-eater, but he did know politics, and I shared his surprise, if not his uneasiness, at the peacefulness of my campaign for the County Welfare Agent nomination. I expected a fight, rough and tumble, with no holds barred, but instead things were so quiet that a stranger in Waldon would not have known that a primary election battle was to be settled in less than two weeks.

"Where's George Grant?" Jeff complained. "Thought he was supposed to be down here by nine o'clock. He's just like the rest of you young fellers—!"

The shrill squeal of brakes drowned out his words as a coupé jarred to a stop at the curb. Then the office door flew open and Nella Corbin catapulted in, to stand white-faced and breathless as she strove to master her terror.

"George—he's gone!" she gasped, and her dark eyes were round and filling with tears. She was trembling like a leaf.

Disregarding old Jeff, I put my arm around her and drew her down onto my lap, to let her cry it out on my shoulder.

"You know I said I'd drive up to get George," she said through her sobs. "I was almost to his place—just at the foot of the hill—when I saw him start walking down to meet me. He was plain in the light of my headlights, Pete. Then—then suddenly there was a flash of white in the road—just a whirl of white—and George yelled—and he was gone!"

"I was scared stiff—so badly that I stalled my motor part way up the hill.

When I got control of myself, I started up the hill again. I went past the place where he had been, just as slowly as I dared. But he wasn't there. He wasn't home either. I came back down in low, watching the side of the road, but he wasn't there anywhere, Pete. He's gone!"

"So it's started, eh?" Jeff muttered. "Kidnaping. Must be some reason why Lacey's crowd want Grant out of the way. Well, this is more like what I've been expecting."

"No, it wasn't a kidnaping, Jeff." Nella had gotten control of herself; her voice was low and certain. "It wasn't anything like that. It was just a flash of white . . ."

"Sure—a bedsheet thrown over his head as he passed a clump of bushes," Jeff grunted. "Look here, Pete, you know that Seymour Lacey will carry the county seat and that end of the county, and you know you'll carry the west end. Which makes it about an even break, with the election to be decided right here in Waldon. And, finally, you know that you'll carry Waldon. So it's here that we've got to look for devilment; they've got to lick you here, and this is the openin' gun."

I wanted to believe Jeff, wanted mightily to believe him—but as I looked into Nella's eyes doubt gripped me. There was stark terror in the depths of those lovely eyes. Nella had seen something that had shaken her, chilled her soul.

"He's gone," she whispered, white lipped, "and something tells me that we'll never see him again, Pete!"

HALF an hour later that ominous prophecy rang in my ears, and a dread premonition grew within me that she had spoken the truth. In Nella's car we had driven to the foot of the hill leading up to George Grant's home. Foot by foot we had combed the road to the top of the

hill, but there was no sign of George. He was not at home, and his widowed mother had seen nothing of him since he left the house to go down to my office.

Doubt and worry rode me that night as I left Nella at the hotel, which her father owned, and walked home. What was behind George's disappearance? Was it a political maneuver? Did Lacey and his henchmen intend to force me out of the race, by threatening the life of my friend? Would Lacey stoop as low as that?"

Subconsciously I raised my eyes and glanced up at the porch as I passed the house of Lacey's mother. He had gone to live in the county seat several years before, but his mother still lived in Waldon. A tingling sensation raced up and down my spine as I glanced at that porch. Seymour Lacey was there, leaning indolently against one of the posts, an enigmatic smile on his thin face.

"'Lo Pete," he nodded, and the smile became mocking, tantalizing, seeming to hint at highly satisfactory things he might know.

What did his presence there mean? Was it only coincidence that he was in Waldon at the time George Grant disappeared? Or had Lacey had a hand in whatever had happened to George?

I asked myself those questions again and again the next morning, when there was still no word from George—and when I learned that Arnold Kramer, another member of my campaign committee, had not come home the night before.

Two men disappeared, apparently snatched from the face of the earth, in one night! Now Waldon's tranquillity was disrupted with a vengeance. But that was only the beginning. . . .

It was toward evening that day when grisly horror stretched out a clammy hand, to grip the town by the throat. Dusk was deepening, and the store lights

were blinking out into the early fall evening gloom, as I came out of the post office and paused on the steps. The small town street was unusually quiet, unnaturally hushed. Nobody moved, nobody seemed to breathe—except that stooped figure plodding slowly up the block.

Every eye was turned toward him, and in his wake he left a trail of blanched faces, of bulging eyes, of gaping mouths. He paid no attention to them. Mechanically he shuffled along, looking neither right nor left, his eyes staring straight ahead of him.

Those eyes were what caught my attention as he approached me; they were dull, glazed, empty, unseeing. Then I saw his skin—and my flesh recoiled, seemed to shrink back. His skin was ghastly; a sallow, fish-belly white, mottled with scabrous patches of sickly blue and the dull grey of death.

His was the skin of a corpse long dead! And that was what he was, I realized suddenly, as startling recognition crowded into my reeling mind! That stooped figure was old Perley Grant, George's father, who had been lowered into his grave more than a year ago!

Now he was moving past me, almost noiselessly, and my nostrils caught the musty odor of the grave, the sickening stench of decay, that emanated from him. Bareheaded, frock-coated, just as he had been laid out in his coffin, he trudged along this street of the living. . . .

"God Almighty!" I whispered to myself with lips that felt numb. Such a thing could not be. Perley Grant was dead, long since putrefied; he couldn't be there on the street!

But he was.

"Feel his coat and see for yourself—he's real," a voice whispered inside of me. But I could not move a muscle to obey.

Petrified by horror I stood there until

the stooped figure reached the corner and turned up the side street. He knew where he was going; he was on his way home!

ONLY when he was out of sight did the paralysis leave me. I saw that my hands were trembling; that the palms were cold and wet with perspiration. I was weak and shaken, and felt that a stiff drink would do me good—but then I remembered that George's mother was alone up there in that house on the top of the hill. I couldn't let her face this incredible horror all by herself.

Determinedly I drove my reluctant feet down the street after that living dead thing, felt the hair stiffen on the back of my neck as I passed him and hurried up the hill to break my unbelievable news as easily as possible to George's mother.

Women will always be incomprehensible to me, but Mrs. Grant astounded me. I expected her to faint, to fly into hysterics, or to throw herself upon me for protection. Instead, her white face set calmly, and she looked up at me with eyes that were fearless.

"This will always be Perley's home," she said quietly. "He is welcome whenever he comes. If he—"

Old Perley's footsteps sounded out on the road. Slowly he came into the driveway. Without a glance at either of us, where we stood in the front yard, he crossed to the door and went into the house. Through the window we could see him sitting in his rocker beside the open fireplace.

"You can go now, Peter," Mrs. Grant said softly. "You need not worry; I'll be all right with him."

Dazedly I stumbled my way down the hill, straight for the one place that might hold the answer to this ghastly riddle—the cemetery. But I was not the only one who had had that inspiration; there were

several dozen others gathered around Perley Grant's grave when I arrived.

The mound itself had been freshly rebuilt, I saw at once; the job had been done carefully, but the broken sod and the freshly disturbed earth were undisguisable.

"All right, let's dig," the police chief commanded, and the loose earth was scooped aside.

The hole grew deeper. Then shovels thudded against wood, and the top of the pine box was uncovered. While I clenched my hands and stared down into the hole, the cover was pried loose, lifted, and the coffin was exposed.

An empty coffin, of course, I told myself. But it wasn't empty. Beneath the lid lay the white, bloodless body of George Grant!

CHAPTER TWO

Milk of the Dead

WALDON gasped in amazement and doubted that what it had seen and heard could be true. But before the horror was twenty-four hours old, another resurrected corpse walked down the main street. Head held high, his thick mop of white hair flowing back from his ghastly face, Colonel Tremaine stalked through the town, without a glance for those who had once been his closest friends. Wordlessly he marched into the house that had once been his, and took his place among the horrified members of his family.

With fearful certainty of what we would find, we went to the cemetery, to the colonel's grave. It was freshly rebuilt, and in the coffin which had housed his body lay the blood-drained corpse of his son, who had disappeared the same night as had George Grant.

That afternoon Mary Lee disappeared—and the next day her dead mother

walked unseeingly past the shop windows of Main Street that had always fascinated her.

Before the week was out the death toll had mounted to five, and in their places sat five living corpses, five mute death's heads whose presence brought the chill of the grave with them.

But it was old Jeff who steadied me and preserved my sanity—old Jeff and Seymour Lacey's satisfied smile. I remembered old Jeff's warnings of trouble, and *even* after he had forgotten them I told myself that there must be a human agency behind this deviltry. Corpses did not come to life of their own volition; the dead did not arise from their graves—to walk supernaturally. Somewhere behind this ghastly nightmare was fiendish human scheming; I clung desperately to that belief. And I remembered Lacey's contented grin that night on the porch of his mother's house. Lacey and his crowd were the only ones who had anything to gain by this carnival of horror.

"Curses, hell!" I ground out. "The only curse on this town is human greed and devilishness."

With that I stamped out of the office and didn't slack my furious pace, until I stood outside Mrs. Grant's door. George's mother strove to smile a welcome, but I could see that her face was lined and drawn; that the horror with which she lived was fraying her nerves and snapping her strength. Inside, beside the fire, crouched what had been Perley Grant, just as he had stepped from the grave.

His leprous face fascinated me, and I could not keep my eyes off him as I talked to his wife. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him get up from his chair, walk to a cupboard and return with a glass and a pint milk bottle two-thirds filled with a crimson fluid.

Blood! My own blood seemed to chill

in my veins as I watched him pour half a glassful of the noxious dose—and raise it to his lips. Human blood—yet it was thin, not coagulated. It must be in some sort of chemical solution, I decided as I saw him drain the glass.

Mrs. Grant would not meet my eyes when I turned to her.

"It comes in the night," she whispered, as if she feared the thing by the fire would hear her. "Someone leaves it at the door—I hear him taking it in—and he has it in the morning. That's all he eats and drinks—and all he does is sit there like that."

So there was a regular delivery system—a red milk route for the dead—to keep these creatures animated. That gave me the inspiration I had been seeking. This would give me an opportunity to trap the devils who were behind those ghastly, walking cadavers.

GLADLY I got out of that house where death had come to sit with the living. The warm sunshine outside thawed the chill out of me, drove the numbing horror from my mind. But when I got back down into town, the gloomy pall, the dread fear of the unknown, descended upon me again.

In the post office I gathered a dozen men around me, and put my proposition to them: as soon as it was dark we would go up to the Grant place and take positions around it; we'd wait there in hiding until the deliverer of the crimson milk arrived. Then we'd jump out, grab him or shoot him down—or both . . .

The faces around me paled. Eyes glared at me, as if I were the dread scourge myself.

"Out there—in the dark?" one panic-stricken fellow croaked. "What chance would we have? Ye can't fight a thing like that with bullets!"

His terror spread around the circle,

and in less than a minute they deserted me, as though I had the plague.

It wasn't easy finding men who were stout-hearted enough to tackle that eerie vigil, but I bulldozed the police chief into agreeing to go with me. He wanted plenty of company, and before dark a dozen of us had gathered in the police station, armed with guns and clubs. When night fell we started up the hill toward the Grant place.

Nothing had been said to Mrs. Grant about our plan. It was better that she know nothing of it. Silently we crept through the darkness, took up our positions so that we commanded the doors and all the windows.

"When he comes let him get right up to the door before you close in," the chief warned.

Then the endless wait began. Crouched in a clump of bushes near the front door, I stared out into the darkness until my eyes ached. There was no moon, but the dim starlight peopled every patch of blackness with unknown dangers ready to creep out and pounce upon us.

Hour after hour dragged slowly by. The house was dark and quiet. Not a sound but the buzz of night insects came to our ears. I twisted and turned frequently to relieve my cramped muscles.

Once I tensed, certain that I had seen a dim white shape out at the entrance to the drive! But stare as I would I caught no further glimpse of it. Must have been a trick of my imagination, I decided.

The night was almost over. Dawn was just beginning to grey the eastern sky above the hills—when suddenly I seemed turned to ice!

The stillness was ripped apart by a blast of terrified screams from within the house—screams that were chopped off short, strangled, to end in a gurgling gasp.

For long moments none of us moved, held transfixed in our hiding place by

that terrifying outburst. Then we leaped from cover, ran to the door, smashed it in with our shoulders, and plunged headlong into the house. The beam of my flashlight swept across the living room, came to rest on the seat beside the fireplace. It was empty.

"My God—he's killing Mrs. Grant!" I shouted as I led the way toward the back bedroom, from which the gurgling moans were coming.

But they stopped before we could rush through the door, before my flashlight could center on the thing that had been Perley Grant, but was now a loathsome vampire straddling the body of the dead woman while his hungry lips sucked the warm blood from her torn throat.

Bullets can kill a vampire. We proved that as we riddled the blood-sucking creature with lead, and saw him collapse in an obscene heap from which even the false life had fled. Nauseated, I stumbled out of that house of doom, and stood in the doorway, gulping in great draughts of the clean early morning air.

Then my eyes turned to the doorstep beside me—and the prickles traveled up my spine! There on the step stood a mocking bottle—a pint bottle filled with the crimson milk of the dead!

CHAPTER THREE

Gallows Legend

DURING those long hours of tedious waiting, I had had plenty of time to consider from every angle the terror that had enveloped Waldon, and one point in particular struck me significantly. In each case one of the victim's parents was dead.

That fact came home to me with new force. Nella Corbin was motherless. Perhaps, even now, the white-sheeted death had snatched her away—to reappear a

pale, blood-drained corpse in her dead mother's coffin!

Anxiety and heart-quickenings foreboding spurred me down the hill and into the town. It was now full daybreak, but there was not a soul on the streets. Waldon looked quiet and peaceful but in the hotel terror was already awake, torturing its latest victims.

In the little sitting room I found Nella, wearing her pajamas and a negligée, trying to comfort young Rose Howard, while Mrs. Howard wailed for her son Clay who had disappeared during the night.

"He left here 'bout ten o'clock, Mrs. Howard," Nella's father repeated wearily. "Just like I told you—he was settin' out there in the office talkin' with three—four others. 'Bout ten o'clock he got up and went home. Last I see of him he was headin' in your direction."

"That's when I heard that awful yell," Rose sobbed. "It must have been a little after ten. It sat me right up in bed. Mother and I were afraid to go out in the dark—see what it was. After that it was quiet."

A yell in the dark—and Clay Howard was gone, another victim of the terror. Young Howard was another of my staunchest supporters. . . .

Was it just coincidence, I asked myself, that the victims of this hellish killer were all my friends and political supporters?

Nella must have read my thoughts, for her frightened eyes turned to me, and then she was in my arms, shaking with the terror that blanched her cheeks.

"Please give it up, Pete," she begged. "I don't know what this is all about; it seems that some awful evil has been loosed on the town, something we don't understand—can't fight. But I'm terribly afraid for you. It's taking your friends, one by one, and coming closer and closer to you. Maybe if you give up this cam-

paign it will stop. I—I couldn't stand it if you disappeared like this!"

"You're letting this thing unnerve you, dear," I said, trying to soothe her. "I'm in no danger, but I want you to stay here in the hotel where you are safe."

"Nobody is safe anywhere," Nella said softly, in a voice that startled me by its ring of absolute conviction. "Even here in the hotel I hear strange noises at night—and there is nothing when I try to investigate. Sometimes I almost think the place is haunted! You know the story of old Chapin, Pete. . . ."

Yes, I knew the story of old Chapin. Twenty-five years ago Waldon had been quite a live town, and the hotel, then owned by one Simon Chapin, had been a gay place, famed for the wild revels he staged. But Chapin's prosperity ended when the townspeople wiped out his business by voting dry. He tried to buck the law for a while and landed in jail, and while he was there his wife and child died. He had never come back to Waldon after that.

"So you're hearing old Chapin's ghost," I laughed. But I was worried by the knowledge that she was giving such thoughts serious consideration. "When we get to the bottom of these murders we'll find a human devil, not old Chapin's ghost. . . ."

"Not old Chape's ghost, maybe," came a high-pitched cackle from the doorway, "but how about Lem Porter?"

Tom Bowen, the ancient who had spent his life as clean-up man around the hotel, stood there squinting at us with his weak eyes.

"Back in seventy-nine 'twas when the mob dragged him outer here—right outer this settin' room—an' hanged him. An' after they got him strung up they found he hadn't never done nothin' at all." Old Tom shook his head knowingly. "Lem

has a score to settle with this town—that ain't never been paid."

BACK in my office I wrote down the names of those gruesome returned ones, and studied them. Again a significant fact leaped out at me. All of them had died at the same time, a little more than a year ago, aboard the *Queen of the Lake* when she went to the bottom of Lake Winnewaska.

That tragedy was still fresh in the memory of the town—and in my memory, too; for I had lost my mother on the ill-fated boat. The combined churches of Waldon had been enjoying an excursion that day, and the boat was nearly back to shore when a mysterious explosion blew her apart. Sixteen of our people died in the lake—all old folk who were not able to reach shore. Each of these resurrected corpses had gone down with the *Queen of the Lake*...

But what of that? I shook myself as I caught my mind straying into strange, unthinkable channels. Those poor victims of the excursion were just as dead as any other corpse. There could be no coming back to life for them.

Besides, they had been embalmed, which would preclude any chance of their reviving even if they had not been entirely dead when taken out of the water. Our own undertaker had been among the dead, I recalled, so the bodies were embalmed in Lacordia, the town nearest the lake.

On a sudden hunch I decided to drive to that town and interview the embalmer, in the faint hope that he might be able to throw some light on our ghastly mystery. Anything, no matter how wild a chance, was better than sitting helplessly while unseen death swooped down and snatched up its next victim.

But the Lacordia undertaker was not very helpful.

"I don't do my own embalming," he

told me, "but I remember those *Queen of the Lake* cases very well. I had a very good man working for me at that time. He came to me only a short while before the accident. The man I hired before that had just drifted off and left me flat, so I was very glad to get this feller. But he quit soon afterwards—not that I blamed him—because I couldn't afford to pay him what he was worth. He was a good man—yes, he handled all the *Queen of the Lake* cases. But there ain't no way of finding out where he is now."

It was dark as I drove along the valley road back to Waldon, and the eerie menace of the place seemed to reach out and encompass me as I approached. The roadside which, a few weeks before, had been innocent of anything more startling than a darting rabbit or chipmunk now seemed lined with peril—a place to be watched with narrowed eyes. Anything could happen...

Suddenly, there ahead of me, the beams of my headlights played full upon a waving white figure. I jerked taut behind the wheel, slammed my foot down on the brake as I heard a shrill scream. The white figure was wrestling with someone there in the roadway—with a girl!

For a brief second she was full in the glare of the lights—and I stared aghast at Nella, her face contorted with terror, her dress half torn from her body, as the creature dragged her toward an opening in the bushes!

With a roar of rage, I was out of the car, racing forward, to throw myself frenziedly at the white-draped snatcher. There was solid muscle beneath that shroud-like white robe, and my flailing fists drew a snarl of pain.

Abruptly the thing released Nella, and whirled on me. Under the white cowl I glimpsed a bony white face and eyes that were blank, seemingly without irises. A ghastly death's-head!

Frantically I lashed out at his expressionless face, struggled to slip out of his grip. But it was no use; my blows didn't seem to reach him, and they were becoming weaker. My spine was in agony; at any moment I expected to hear the bones snap.

Back—back—the death's-head looming over me. Nella was screaming and pounding away futilely at the creature. But I knew it would be useless. This was the end. The snatcher would carry me off. My bloodless body would be found in my mother's coffin!

Lights started to dance in front of my eyes, grow brighter—and then I heard voices, realized that I was looking into the headlights of an automobile which had just come to a stop. At the same moment that excruciating grip loosened, and I was able to straighten my back as I toppled over and fell in the road.

Quickly the white-robed figure dived into the bushes. I could hear him making his way up the hillside as Nella knelt anxiously beside me to see if I were hurt.

"I saw that awful thing prowling around behind your house," she panted, "so I ran most of the way here—to stop you—to warn you—before you drove in. But he followed me—caught up with me—just before you came along."

So the death creature had been stalking me—or my sister, Jane!

The noise of his flight had ceased. There was no road up that hillside; nothing until the crest, which was part of the Dillon estate, now occupied by Daniel Rawson, a Boston man who had rented it for the summer. He was an unsociable, eccentric individual about whom we knew very little. . . .

"Lucky thing for you I drove over to Waldon tonight, Hadley," a voice interrupted my speculation, and for the first time I recognized the man whose timely arrival had been my salvation. "If I'd

come along a couple minutes later, it looks as if my rival would have been eliminated very effectively," Seymour Lacy chuckled.

What was he doing there at that moment? Was it coincidence again—or was he in league with the white-robed snatcher? Angry suspicion leaped into my eyes, and made me forget that I owed my life to Lacey. But he only grinned, as if the thing were a devilish joke that amused him mightily. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Exodus from Death

WALDON looked like a ghost town as I drove Nella to the hotel. Not a car but our own was on the streets; not a soul walked the sidewalks. The stores were closed and dark, for lack of customers, and houses which had always been brightly lit at night were now dark—sombre evidence that their owners had given up and fled, before death should swoop down on them.

"Clay Howard's father came back today," Nella whispered as we passed the dark Howard home. "He's in there now, alone, sitting at the window the way he always did. Rose and her mother are staying with us at the hotel."

Empty houses with resurrected corpses sitting and staring blankly out of their dark windows! It would be only a question of days before Waldon became a town of the dead—of the frightful, walking dead!

Then began the exodus, the precipitate flight which had already drained the doomed town of half its population. The other half, I knew, would be gone before the week was out, if the terror were not ended.

That was the alternative I faced—to flee or to run this white-robed death to the ground. If I fled, I would have to go

alone, for Nancy would not desert her father—and he would not leave his hotel. So there was no alternative. . . .

Grimly I climbed back into my car, and headed for the Dillon estate and Daniel Rawson.

Perched there on its hilltop, the place had almost a bird's-eye view of the town. With field glasses, anyone in the house could watch what was going on in the streets below, I judged as I climbed out and walked up the stone steps. From here the white-robed death could mark his victims, and watch them as a hawk watches its helpless prey. . . .

A Negro servant answered my knock, and ushered me into the big living room, where Daniel Rawson sat in a large easy chair, swathed in a bathrobe and with a blanket over his legs. Rawson was an old man, but his hair and mustache and the short, curly beard which covered the lower half of his face, were still a rusty brown. He was hook-nosed and had piercing brown eyes which moved continually, darting rapier-like glances around him, with lightning swiftness.

An unusual man—both in appearance and in the powerful personality I could fairly feel as I sat talking to him. A man one would not forget. I was fairly certain I had never seen him before yet there was something oddly familiar about him. . . .

He listened to my account of the white-robed creature that had fled up his hillside, but shook his head helplessly.

"We don't have much to do with the rest of Waldon, you know," he reminded me. "We stay up here by ourselves, so I'm sure I can't help you solve your problem. If this skulker dashed into the bushes down beside the highway, he probably hid there until you were gone. Certainly we have not seen him up here."

He flexed his strong hands, and looked down at his legs regretfully.

"If there is anything I can do—but I'm afraid I'm not good for much any more. I'm pretty much an invalid these days—my heritage from the years I spent roaming the jungles."

He smiled a little sadly, and I tried again to remember where I had seen those piercing eyes and that hooked nose, but with no success. Daniel Rawson still puzzled me as his man ushered me out of the house. I drove back to the ghostly town.

SO still were the streets of Waldon that I could hear my office telephone ringing like an alarm, even before I shut off the motor, hopped out of the car, and unlocked the office door. The voice coming over the wire was that of Judge Parker, who had been the first to urge me to seek the nomination for County Welfare Agent, and who had been working steadily in my behalf.

"I'm falling down on you, Pete," he said reluctantly. "I'm running out—but there is nothing else I can do. That hellish white creature chased my daughter, Lillian, tonight. I tremble to think what would have happened if she had not gotten away. She's all that I have now, you know, Pete. It would kill me if anything happened to her. So we're packing-up, getting out of town in the morning."

One by one they were falling away. By primary day there wouldn't be a dozen voters left in town. . . .

As I sat there, slouched in my desk chair, I could see Seymour Lacey's satisfied grin—the smirk that seemed to hint at things he knew and could tell if he wanted to. Suddenly I decided that Lacey was going to explain that grin; was going to tell what was behind it, whether he wanted to or not!

Grimly I drove around to his mother's house, and strode up to the door. There were lights in the windows, but my knock brought no answer. I hammered on the

door again, louder. In the silence that followed I caught the sound of low sobbing.

"Go away! Oh, please, go away!" came the terror-stricken plea when I pounded again. "Haven't you done enough?"

"Mrs. Lacey!" I shouted. "Mrs. Lacey—it's Pete Hadley! Open the door, and tell me what's wrong!"

Slowly, hesitantly, her footsteps approached the door. The key turned in the lock, and I pushed my way inside, to confront a tear-stained, wide-eyed face that mirrored a mind on the brink of madness.

"He's gone," she said dully, over and over again. "He's gone. Seymour's gone. He screamed, and then he was gone."

Gently I pushed past her and went into the ground floor bedroom where a light was burning. The bed was in wild disorder, a chair was overturned, and Seymour Lacey's clothes were scattered over the floor. The window was open.

That was all. But it told the dread story unmistakably. The white-shrouded snatcher had swept down again, had pounced on Lacey in his sleep and had grabbed him out of his bed. My theory about my political rival was not correct.

BUT if Lacey and his cronies were not responsible for what had been going on in Waldon, what was behind this mad carnival of horror? If it was not a human agency that motivated these killings, could it be that some dire spell out of the vast void, about which man knows nothing, had descended upon the town? Was that death's-head creature, with whom I had fought, a denizen of some fearful half-world?

Dazedly, and with my own world crumbling about my ears, I drove home, put my car in the garage. My father met me at the door, and one look at his worried

face was sufficient to warn me that there was something horribly wrong.

"Where is Jane?" he demanded nervously. "Didn't you bring her home with you?"

"Jane?" My voice caught in my throat, and sounded strange and unnatural. "Where is she?"

"Why—at your office. You telephoned and asked her to meet you there. I wouldn't have let her go—except that you said it was so important."

So my sister was gone. She had been called to die, and had gone out alone into the night to answer the fatal summons, to keep a rendezvous with that white-shrouded monster!

"I didn't call Jane tonight," I whispered, and then I sprang to the telephone and called the hotel.

Was Nella safe? That question burned and throbbed in my mind as I held on to the receiver. At last the hotel answered. Nella was in her room, she had gone to bed, her father said. But I insisted that he go up and make sure that she was all right.

For a nerve-wracking eternity I stood there waiting impatiently, yet dreading to hear his voice. Then it came, slow, puzzled, quivering with mounting alarm.

"Why—why, she ain't there, Pete," he told me uncertainly. "Her bed's mussed, but she ain't in her room—and I can't find her anywheres around the hotel. Still I'm sure she never went out."

That was all I needed to know. Nella was gone! My heart seemed a dead thing within me, and the will to fight seeped out of me. I would never see her again, never hear her voice, feel the touch of her lips, look into her lovely eyes. Tomorrow we would go to the cemetery, and find her lifeless, blood-drained body stretched out cold and stark in her dead mother's coffin!

The cemetery! Perhaps it was morbid

curiosity that took me there; perhaps a last, lingering hope that in some way I might be able to thwart this latest and culminating tragedy.

THE graveyard was just beyond a little knoll behind the hotel. It was dark, and the white shafts of the monuments loomed eerily in the glow of my flashlight. All around me I imagined the white-shrouded creatures to be hovering and darting.

Cold, sick at heart, I walked in a numb trance to the Corbin plot, and turned the light on the mound beneath which Nella's mother's body should be lying. As I expected, the grave had been recently disturbed. The newly turned dirt was still damp and fresh-smelling. Perhaps Nella was already down there in the refilled grave. . . .

Our own family plot was a few aisles farther down the hillside. Without conscious volition my feet turned in that direction, my light flashed over the family monument, came to rest on my mother's grave—and my startled eyes fairly bulged out of my head!

The grave was open! It was only partially refilled! I must have come along in time to interrupt the ghoul in the midst of his unholy task! He must have fled at my approach. But where?

Suddenly I remembered the queer noises Nella had been sure she had heard in the old hotel. Frantically I raced across the cemetery, vaulted the low stone wall and dashed up the knoll. From the top I trained my light on the rear of the hotel.

There, for just the fraction of a second, I saw a white form crouched against the foundation of the building. Then it disappeared through a cellar window.

In reckless desperation I ran down the slight hill, and dropped to my knees beside the window. It was open, but my light, when I played it around the junk-

littered cellar, revealed no sign of the white-draped figure. Yet I knew he had gone in there. I was going after him.

Quickly I thrust my feet through the opening, and then dropped down into the darkness. In a moment I was on my feet, crouched, playing my light around the cellar. In the next moment something heavy landed on my back, powerful arms seized me and I was lifted, struggling futilely, into the air.

It was too late then to regret my foolhardiness. The white-robed creature had me, swung me over his head as if I were a doll, and dashed me down on the hard floor. The breath was knocked out of my lungs by the force of that impact, my senses spun dizzily, and soothing blackness settled down over me, to lull me into helpless semi-consciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Death's Anteroom

DIMLY I was aware that the creature had hold of me by the wrist, and was dragging me across the cellar floor to a distant wall. Then, miraculously, a low doorway appeared before us, and a gust of cool air swept over me. My head banged cruelly against the stone wall. . . . The next thing I remember was being dragged along a cold, damp passageway, a Stygian tunnel that seemed to bore on into endless eternity.

A flash of light against my unseeing eyeballs at last told me that we had reached the end of that black tunnel. I was hoisted up, slammed down on a hard chair. I could feel ropes being looped around my arms and my legs, could feel myself tied up tightly.

Consciousness ebbed and flowed over me in giddy waves. Gradually I became painfully aware of my throbbing, pounding head, and my eyes fluttered open,

winked against the light, and then steadied on the weird scene around me.

I was in a large cellar chamber lighted by bright lanterns suspended from the ceiling beams. Around me were piled heaps of tanks, glass jars, coils, bottles, all covered with the thick dust of years. Evidently the place had once been a distillery—probably an illicit still.

But now it was serving a far more sinister purpose. In the center stood two long tables that were waist-high, and to one of them a tall white creature was strapping the naked body of a young girl. That creature fascinated me. He wore only a loin-cloth, and his skin was an unhealthy bluish white. Then he turned toward me and I got a look at his face, thin and gaunt, with high cheekbones and almost colorless eyes—a death's-head surmounted by white, kinky hair.

The fellow was an albino Negro, a giant in size and with prodigious strength. He was the white-sheeted death that had been prowling the streets of Waldon.

As he stepped aside I could see the face of the girl on the table—and my heart stood still in my breast. It was my sister, Jane, so scared that nothing but little inarticulate moans issued from her lips as her terrified eyes rolled wildly, looking around that hellish cavern, in frantic hope that somewhere there might still be a chance to escape the fate that awaited her.

I looked around the cellar chamber, too, and again the clutch of horror tightened around my throat as I saw the ghastly figure that sat on a bench at the other end of the room. It was old Charlie Lacey, Seymour's father, sitting quiet and unseeing, an eerie spectator in his formal grave clothes. Sprawled at his feet on the floor was what was left of his son—the naked, bloodless body of the man I had suspected of being responsible for these diabolical outrages!

There was no hope for Jane there. Nor was there any hope in the only other occupant of the place, Nella, who sat tied to a chair, as I was. There was a gag in her mouth, but it could not mute the terrified appeal that screamed from her eyes.

Desperately I tugged at the ropes which bound me to the chair, but they did not give a fraction of an inch. I could barely squirm, and hope of getting free by my own efforts was non-existent. If someone else would only find this hell-hole and come to our rescue. . . .

As if in answer to my fervid prayer, a door that led into a partitioned off cubicle at the far end of the cellar opened, and out stepped a tall figure dressed in a white surgeon's coat, a gauze mask covering the lower half of his face.

I didn't have to see that part of his face to recognize him; the hooked nose and the piercing dark eyes were sufficient to identify Daniel Rawson. Disinterestedly he glanced at me, then walked to the table and grinned down at the naked body of my sister.

"What in hell is the meaning of this outrage, Rawson?" I shouted at him, but he merely raised his hand as if to placate an unruly child.

"Wait—wait. Just have patience, and you will learn all about it," he mocked. "Ah—perhaps this will give you an inkling."

The albino had stooped beside the opposite wall of the chamber, and now he came upright with a gruesome burden in his arms. It was the gaping-mouthed corpse of my mother!

Unconcernedly he carried the body to the other table and stretched it out, while worms of horror crawled through every part of me. My mother! Once she had been the dearest being on earth to me; now she was a shocking, repulsive men-

ace from which I shrank in awful loathing!

NOW Rawson had a keen scalpel in his hand. He busied himself over the corpse, and I saw that he was making an incision in the left wrist and was attaching a tube to it, a rubber tube which he carried over to the other table.

Somewhere I had seen those eyes and that hooked nose before. Where? . . . Like a flash it came to me! On the *Queen of the Lake*—that day of the tragedy! I remembered having passed the man on deck, and having felt an eerie sensation as his strange eyes probed into mine.

"You were on the *Queen of the Lake* the day she sank," I heard my voice saying. "God Almighty! I believe you're some sort of evil monster, some spawn of the devil, Rawson!"

"No, nothing supernatural," the fiend chuckled. "Just a mortal man—with a very long memory. Yes, I was aboard the *Queen of the Lake*. That is why she blew up so mysteriously. I arranged that very carefully. If you—"

Jane screamed shrilly as the sharp knife cut into her right wrist, but the inhuman devil paid no attention to her. He went right ahead with his horrible work, fastening the other end of the tube to the incision he had made.

"If you had bothered to investigate the embalmer who took care of your mother's body," he went on talking, "you would have recognized me in him, too. That was another phase of my very carefully arranged plan."

"Then you murdered those people on the *Queen of the Lake*!" I shot at him. "Murdered them so that you could practise your ghoulish tricks on their bodies!"

"No—no," he chided me gently, and I could see that he was playing with me, exulting in the opportunity to brag about his fiendish cunning. "No—not murder.

You see, they never were dead, really. Just a shot in the arm with a hypodermic needle, that was very easy in all the confusion on board after the explosion. Just a dose of a drug that keeled them over and simulated death realistically enough to fool the cleverest physician—let alone the old country dodo who pronounced them dead. And then they came to me, to be embalmed, but actually to have the drug dose increased, to be laid out nicely in a death trance that would last for years."

He chuckled evilly, and there was a peculiar, harsh, strident cadence to the sound. I stared into his gloating eyes—and what little hope of escape I may have cherished was wiped out utterly. The man was mad, a crazy man dabbling obscenely with life and death!

There was no use appealing to him, no use threatening him. Nothing I could say would swerve him from his insane purpose. We were absolutely helpless in his hands.

While the perspiration oozed from me, and my staring eyes burned in my head, I watched helplessly as he plied his devilish knife on Jane's body, slitting her soft flesh with the keen blade, and letting loose crimson streams.

Jane screamed and moaned, fought desperately against the ropes that bound her to the table, while her blood ran down in rivulets, to follow indentations in the surface of the table and flow off into glass containers already half filled with a pinkish mixture. Slowly her body was being drained of its life fluid. . . .

"You inhuman beast!" I shouted at him, though I knew my words would have no effect.

He smiled evilly and shook his head in pretended reproach.

"You wouldn't want your poor old mother to starve, would you?" he chided. "You see, during the year that she lay

beneath the ground she had to do without food, so her entranced body slowly burned up its own blood, until now her veins are practically empty. Besides, her digestive system is somewhat out of practice and could hardly handle ordinary victuals. We solve that problem by feeding her a solution of blood and certain chemicals."

Then I understood fully what the inhuman monster was about to perpetuate. My mother was to be brought back to a fearful half-life, fed on the blood of my dying sister! The nauseous crimson milk that would be delivered to the resurrected corpse would be the chemically diluted blood of her own daughter!

WATCHING my face like a hawk, Rawson was quick to see the horror and revulsion that surged through me.

"Yes, you have figured it out about right," he mocked. "This blood your sister is donating will be the staff of life for your poor old mother when she comes back to rejoin her rejoicing friends."

"You bloody fiend!" I spat at him. "Torturing and killing a lot of helpless old people who never did you any harm!"

Rawson's face became livid, and his blazing eyes narrowed to pinpoints of stabbing hate.

"Never did me any harm!" he screamed at me. "Those nosey busybodies who sent me, Simon Chapin, whom they ruined, to rot in prison!"

Simon Chapin! The one-time owner of the Waldon hotel! Nella's womanly intuition had been right; not Chapin's ghost but the crazed fiend himself was at the bottom of this venomously conceived terror.

"They killed my wife and baby!" he snarled. "Now I have their dirty lives in my hands—and I'm killing their brats, besides! I've waited a long, long time to even the account with this rotten town

—years while I sweated in the jungles of Santo Domingo. But I learned things there that you and your precious kind know nothing about. These busybodies have been the living-dead for a year, because I made them so. Now they're going to be dead-alive, a curse on the face of the earth, as long as I want them here."

He was working himself into a feverish rage, howling his hatred, and striding up and down between the tables.

"Sixteen of the meddlesome busybodies I got—when the *Queen of the Lake* sank. They are paying now for what they did to me, and as soon as I have finished with them I'll get after the others—until I have settled my score with every one of the rats who closed me up and sent me to jail. Death is too good for them, they'll get a living death that will murder their souls as well as their bodies!"

THE madman was beside himself. The realization of his macabre revenge had been too much for him; it had torn loose his last feeble grip on sanity and made him utterly insane, utterly bestial. Like a caged lion he paced between the tables while he cursed and reviled his foes until he lunged into and snapped the rubber tube which connected Jane's wrist with that of the corpse.

Startled, and fuming with ungovernable rage, he leaped back and crashed into the table on which the gruesome corpse was stretched. For a moment the table tottered, then overturned. The corpse flopped to the floor, and the heavy table fell on top of it, bashing in the skull.

Waves of nausea swept over me as I tried to tear my eyes from the sickening sight—but I thanked God for what had happened. Now, at least, my mother was dead beyond recall; she would not have to roam the earth again, a hideous, terrifying nightmare.

Chapin kicked at the dead clay viciously,

and leaped across the overturned table, to stand in front of me and smash his fist into my face again and again.

"That was your fault!" he screamed. "But it won't help you! Your turn will come just the same! You will lie there on the table and slowly be poured into the bottles to feed my walking corpses! You have only speeded up the next treat I have in store for you." He whirled on the albino and howled: "Take that girl off the table! Dump her over there on a bench! Put the other one in her place!"

Now it was to be Nella's turn!

The gaunt white creature untied her, tore the dress from her body, ripped off her shoes and stockings and tossed her onto the table, to bind her there securely. Simon Chapin leered down at her, took the gag from between her jaws, and laughed at her terrified screams as he tore away her undergarments.

Red madness drove the horror out of my brain as I saw the girl I adored stretched out there helplessly before that bestial madman. I tugged and tore at my bonds until my wrists were running blood, and the throbbing in my head threatened to plunge me back into unconsciousness.

It was no use. There was no escape that way. The gaunt albino was straightening up the overturned table. Callously he dragged the corpse off to the other side of the cellar.

"Bring the other one!" the fuming Chapin yelled impatiently.

The albino bent down near the farther wall. He straightened up with the corpse of Nella's mother in his arms. He was coming over to stretch it out on the table next to the one on which Nella's white body writhed and contorted, in a pathetic struggle to get loose. He was coming past me. . . .

Heaven-sent inspiration flashed in my mind at that second, and I made the most desperate and momentous gamble of my

life. As the unhealthy white creature passed in front of me, I put every bit of my strength into a frantic heave that toppled my heavy chair against him.

Angrily he lashed out at me and his hard fist clouted me on the side of the head, to knock me spinning into a pile of dusty glass bottles and retorts. Glass smashed and splintered all around me, and my head banged against a wooden bench. I gasped once, then closed my eyes and lay perfectly still while the albino glared down at me. Satisfied that I was unconscious, he continued on his way to the table with his grisly burden.

THE moment I knew I was unobserved, my fingers started feeling around for a sizable piece of the broken glass. If I could get a piece of one of those broken bottles under the rope that bound me. . . .

My fingers were cut and streaming blood, and the sharp pieces of glass stabbed into my arm and shoulder as I wriggled and squirmed, in my frantic efforts to find the sharp edge I needed.

Then I found it—the bottom half of a large, gallon-size bottle, which had been smashed by my falling chair. Clenching my teeth against the pain that ate into my wrists, I sawed away on that sharp edge—until the bottom of the broken bottle was awash with my blood.

Nella screamed terribly. I could see that the gloating fiend had pushed the sharp point of his scalpel into her wrist, to bind one end of his rubber tube over the spurting blood that came from the incision. And then I felt the first strand of rope fall away.

With redoubled energy I went at my task, sawing and rubbing away until, one by one, the strands of the rope fell away. Then my ankles! The two devils at the table were too busy with their hellish work to notice when I bent over, tore at the knots that bound my legs to the chair.

At last they were untied, and I crouched there in the wreckage while my tingling arms and legs tensed.

With a heavy bottle in one hand and a jagged shard of broken glass in the other, I leaped. Luck was with me. The bottle came down with all my strength and shattered to a thousand pieces over the albino's head, before he knew that I was loose. Then I whirled on Simon Chapin.

The madman snarled savagely and the razor-sharp scalpel wove a glittering pattern before my eyes. It swopped at my neck and left a crimson trail, barely missing my throat. Then it sank into my shoulder and stuck there, while waves of agony seared through me.

But that fraction of a second while Chapin struggled to free his weapon was all that I needed. The jagged glass dashed into his face, tore and bit cruelly. Chapin staggered back, gasping, and I was on him again, wielding my terrible, crude weapon.

He went down. I pounced on him, beating, punching, clawing, stabbing blindly at his hateful face. . . .

WHEN I staggered to my feet his enraged howls and his blubbling pleas for mercy had ceased. Half blind

with pain, I staggered to the table on which Nella lay, plucked the scalpel out of my bleeding shoulder, and slit the ropes that bound her.

For a moment we clung to each other, the horror chamber around us forgotten. Then I picked up Jane's unconscious body and led the way to the low tunnel, through which I had been dragged. We groped our way down its dark length, back to the cellar of the hotel.

The terror was at an end. I remembered what Chapin had said about the diet of those poor revived ones. We would send for the best physician in the country to watch over them and the other living dead still in their premature graves, until they were restored to the full life from which they had been snatched by Simon Chapin's fiendish needle.

There remained only to place a charge of dynamite in the horror chamber beneath the cellar of the hotel barn where, in the days of his prosperity, Simon Chapin had distilled the fiery beverages that brought about his own ruin.

I left that to others. I had a honey-moon on my hands—and I wanted to spend it far from even the memory of what we had suffered.

THE END

LAST CALL FOR MCQUADE

by HENRY TREAT SPERRY

(Author of "Dream Monster," etc.)



High in the air, seven hundred feet above street level, Jeff McQuade was waiting for the woman he had introduced to Death.

McQUADE sat on a girder on the seventieth floor and watched the steel workers eat their lunches. Many had brought them in the same sort of tin pails he had used many years ago. The top was a flat canteen with a cup about two and one-half inches in diameter. You could pull it off and use it for a cup for the coffee in the canteen. The

pails held a couple of sandwiches, a piece of cake or pie, and an apple or an orange. Maybe a little bowl with some cold beans or potato salad. The lunches were just the same, too. His mind went back to the time when Beatrice had put them up for him every day excepting Sunday. . . . Beatrice . . .

Perhaps he had better start a conversation with one of them—with Quinlan, the foreman. It was rather strange, his sitting here like this. The men shot occasional curious glances in his direction—wondering, no doubt, what the famous architect, Jeff McQuade, was doing in their midst.

Well, it didn't matter greatly what they thought. The important thing was that they see him. At least twenty of them could swear that McQuade had been there all the time, between twelve and one. . . .

Quinlan had disappeared. He could talk to some of the other men—but why bother? That might be considered suspicious, in itself. He wasn't given to the practice of fraternizing with the workmen on his projects. It had been a long time since he had felt that he had anything in common with such as they Strange, how a smart woman can shift your viewpoint for you—make you completely over, so that you even forget what sort of person you used to be. . . .

And what sort of a person would he be from now on—now that Bee was gone? Would it really make any difference? But they had been so close for so many years—not at all like most of the married people of their acquaintance. . . .

Twelve-thirty by the Prudence Building clock across the way. . . .

It must be over by this time. . . .

She always got up before twelve-thirty and had breakfast on the chaise-longue—she could never get used to having it in bed. . . . Would the police find that electric spring-switch in the upholstery of the

chaise-longue? But why should they even look for such a thing? She would lean back against the cushions. That would close the switch, and her body would be in just the right position for the heavy knife that would fall from the chandelier as the electric clip released it. . . . The maid would come and find her. Clearly suicide. . . .

He hoped they would remove the body before he got there. It would be rather terrible, seeing Beatrice. . . . like that. She had been such a beautiful girl—she was still beautiful. That was her curse—and his. She attracted men—one man in particular, of late months. . . . He wondered how long it had been going on. Perhaps ever since she had met the fellow in Venice, two years ago. McQuade had been incredibly blind not to have guessed it long since. . . .

Would it be very painful? Not if it struck clear through to the heart, which it should do. . . . But even if it didn't, the shock should be fatal instantly—Bee's heart was very bad. . . . But supposing it wasn't? Supposing it just slashed her cruelly and she didn't die right away? Supposing—good God!—supposing she lived long enough to tell someone that the knife had dropped from the chandelier? That would be a dead give-away. The success of his plan—his own life, even—depended on his device's remaining undiscovered. He had had to make that gamble—but it was a small one. . . .

Nevertheless, McQuade was conscious of a slow tensing of his muscles. He began to perspire, although it was cool up here on the seventieth floor. . . .

Twelve-forty-two, by the Prudence clock. . . . *It must be over by now. . . .*

IT was ghastly—this waiting. People spoke with careless exaggeration of minutes seeming like hours. But the minutes really seemed like hours to McQuade. The trite figure could be true. . . .

She had gotten up from the bed, crossed to the center of the room, pressed the button in the floor that called the maid—he had seen her do it scores of times—and then leaned back against the cushions of the chaise-longue. . . .

How did it feel to be stabbed? It would burn. It would be cold and hot at the same time. Like that time when he slashed his arm with a draw-knife. Then you see blood spilling out and you feel helpless and panicky. . . . You feel like shouting for help. . . .

There was Quinlan, now. He had just gotten off the elevator, was gazing about as though he were looking for someone. Now he saw McQuade, nodded and came toward him, walking carefully across the loose planking laid over the lateral girders. . . .

He was standing there in front of him, speaking to McQuade in a respectful voice. "Mr. McQuade," he was saying. . . . "your wife. . . . on sixty-five. . . . would like to see you for a moment. . . ."

No, that couldn't be right—he had misunderstood Quinlan.

"Not Mrs. McQuade?"

"Yes. She would like to speak to you— if you aren't busy. . . ."

Busy? . . . No, he wasn't busy. . . . He was just. . . .

"You're quite sure. . . ?"

Quinlan was looking at him strangely. "I don't know how she got up here, sir. The time-keeper has strict orders. . . . However. . . ."

Beatrice. . . . Then. . . .

Suddenly he was glad—deliriously happy, all in an instant. She had escaped. They could patch things up—begin anew. Christ—he must have been insane to have plotted her death. . . . to have been so blind as not to have understood that he would love her forever, no matter what she did.

He rose suddenly to his feet, brushed past Quinlan, nearly broke into a run across the loose boards. Quinlan, behind

him, gave a startled exclamation. Dangerous business. But McQuade knew he couldn't fall. Nothing could harm him, now. He and Beatrice would be back together, as in the old days. Oh, thank God she had escaped that damnable, cowardly trap he had set for her. . . .

He waited impatiently for the elevator, watching it ascend clear from the ground—a tiny speck in a square, distance-tapered shaft, seven hundred feet down. But it came upward with flashing velocity. Twice as fast as the heavy, luxurious cars that would replace it before the building was finished. . . .

When the crude open car reached his level, he shouldered the denim-clad operator aside, threw in the control himself, and shot down to the sixty-fifth floor. He stepped off and looked about. The car dove on downward.

He saw her almost immediately. She was clear over on the east side, leaning against one of the great risers, gazing out into space. He started walking toward her rapidly.

She was fearfully, dangerously near the edge. He must not call to her or even speak until he was close enough to grab her, in case she should be startled at the sound of his voice—perhaps lose her balance and. . . .

Merciful Christ! What sort of man was he? A few hours ago he had cold-bloodedly plotted her death. Now he was trembling with apprehension lest she fall. . . .

He approached her on tip-toe, was within just a couple of yards before she turned around. . . .

SOMEHOW he couldn't see anything but her eyes, at first. They were enormous—liquidly dark—as though they were all pupil. And they were not looking at him, they were fixed on some point far beyond and above him. She didn't seem to be aware of his presence. Her pallid, beautiful face had a drawn, intent look,

as though she were listening to something he couldn't hear at all. And now her lips moved soundlessly, as if she were making silent answer to an unseen companion. . . .

Then McQuade's gaze moved downward, down the white roundness of her throat, down to the soft whiteness of her breast. Her breasts were naked. She wore a brown street suit, but the jacket was open, pulled back, exposing her breasts. Just beneath the left one the haft a heavy knife protruded. Below that the blood had spilled redly down the gleaming flesh to the slender girdle, flooding over down the skirt, streaking it. . . .

McQuade stood there without moving. There was a humming in his head. It seemed to gather in his brain, somehow, and emanate from his lips and nose, so that they vibrated, stiff and cold with the humming. He could hear it. . . .

But it wasn't humming. It was a stiffness and a coldness—and a vibration. He was screaming—screaming endlessly without need to interrupt it for more breath. The screaming poured out of him without assistance from his lungs. . . .

There was a taste of blood in McQuade's mouth—and then all his muscles seemed to be galvanized at once, so that his whole body vibrated with his screaming. His hand shot forward with a volition that seemed not his own to grasp the hilt of the knife. He leaped forward to pull the knife from his wife's white body—but Beatrice wasn't there any more, and looking down he was amazed to find that he was staring straight below at the street. He felt very light, as though his body had ceased to have any weight at all—and suddenly his brain cleared. . . .

* * *

YOU are falling, McQuade—falling . . . falling. . . .

It's like this, McQuade. . . . You often

wondered what it was like. Remember the time Charlie Grover fell? You were down on the twentieth level when you heard his scream, and you looked up in time to see his body flash by. You wondered, then, what it was like. Now you know, McQuade. . . . It's like this. . . .

It's slow—you can count the floors as you go by. You're floating. It doesn't seem possible that you will hit hard enough to dash your body into flying particles of bloody flesh. . . . But you know what that is—the acceleration of the mental processes that always occurs at times of extreme danger or excitement. You're not really floating. You're falling, McQuade . . . falling . . . falling. . . .

That's the thirtieth. There are Steve Tucker and Walt Dailey and a few of their crew. Their faces are ghastly, fear-tautened. To them your body is hurtling downward toward the pavement just as Charlie Grover's did. Why don't you believe it, McQuade? You're really falling. The pavement is coming—the hard, murderous pavement. You are nearer—nearer. . . .

You can hear the street sounds, now. They don't know you're coming, down there. They don't see your body hurtling down . . . down. . . . You can hear voices—one voice in particular. It is high and shrill—as though it were calling to someone. . . .

Why, it's you, McQuade. . . . Someone is calling McQuade. . . . McQuade. . . .

Look down—you can see him. It's a little chap who stands there near the corner of the building. He is holding a newspaper up so the passersby can see the headlines. He has a bunch of papers under his arm. You can almost read those headlines, yourself. But there's no need for that—you can hear him, now—quite plainly. He is shouting:

"Jefferson McQuade's wife commits suicide. . . ."

HELL'S THIRSTY

An Eerie, Compelling
Novelette of Hideous
Peril



Her pleading eyes, the warm invitation of her white body, warned Richard Wickland that such hell-born lure can be stronger than a man's will. But he was to learn that though he might not succumb to seductive wiles, the children of hell are provided with other, more subtle means of gaining satiation for their fiendish lusts.

CHILDREN

by GARRY
GRANT



IT WAS a very pleasant dinner party, there in Halfway House, with the logs singing in the fireplace and the cricket chirping on the hearth—very pleasant, until the wine was served.

Richard Wickland felt the first penetrating chill of horror when he noticed their eyes—the eyes of the young man and the girl seated opposite him. Hugh

Quintard was a handsome young giant. His sister was a being of enchanting beauty—ethereal and poetic, she seemed. Their eyes were identical, dark, brooding, lustrous and—it was this that shocked Wickland, and sent the electrical tingle of dread along his nerves—hungry.

Their eyes were glowing with a nameless hunger.

At first it had merely annoyed Wickland—the way Hugh Quintard looked at Judy. Judith Easton, his fiancée, was seated at Wickland's side. Not once, since they had sat down at the table, had Quintard taken his eyes from her. They clung—an expression of some strange, deep inner force that Wickland somehow felt along frosty nerves.

A brazenly open attempt at flirtation? It wasn't that. Wickland was sure of it now. What he saw in Hugh Quintard's eyes was not the normal hunger of a man for a woman. It was something more profound—something reaching out from the very depths of a mysterious soul—something he could not identify, but . . . horrible.

Wickland squared his shoulders with a frown. "Look here," he said silently to himself. "You're not feeling quite right. Or perhaps it's this deceptive candle-light. You're seeing things, old man."

He looked across the cozy room, steady-ing himself. Its snug warmth had appealed to him the instant he had stepped through the oaken entrance. It had been a long, trying drive through blanketing fog that bored its chill to the marrow. Twice Wickland had turned into blind side-roads before locating Halfway House. The glowing beacons of its windows had led him and Judy at last to this somber yet comfortable room—a place where he had never been before.

He *had* thought it strange—this urgent invitation to dinner. He had not seen or heard from his Uncle Noah Kevan for more than fifteen years, but a telephone call had sought him out, and a cackling voice had pressed on him a promise to come without fail. Wickland remembered now—and he had thought that strange, too—how Uncle Noah had courteously resisted his suggestion to bring Judy.

"After all these years—we were such good friends when you were a little shaver,

Richard,—wouldn't it be better if you came alone?" Kevan had said. "Perhaps the young lady might be bored by our reminiscences."

"Not Judy," Wickland had answered, echoing his uncle's disarming chuckle. "She's a forthright young woman, and if she's bored she'll say so and do something about it. You'll like her. We're going to be married soon, and of course I want you to meet her."

HE had brought Judy Easton, and she had been as immediately charmed as he by Halfway House. Absorbing the warmth of the fireplace she had exclaimed: "It's perfectly named—halfway between heaven and earth!" Wickland recalled now that Noah Kevan had answered only with a short laugh—and there had been something derisive, something sardonic, in that dry chuckle. The other two—the lovely girl and her brother—had not laughed at all, nor even smiled.

"May I present Vira Quintard, and her brother, Mr. Hugh Quintard?" Kevan had said when he introduced them. "Surely you remember their father, Richard. Professor John Quintard, the noted psychologist. He often came to the house when you were young and later, when you went to college, you studied under him."

"Professor Quintard was the most fascinating man I ever met," Wickland had answered. "He was always so engrossed in his researches, and his mind followed such extraordinary channels. I've often wondered what became of him."

"Didn't you know, Richard?" Kevan had asked quietly. "He died many years ago. He lies buried behind this house."

And Wickland recalled that Vira and Hugh Quintard had said nothing. Remembering these details now, as he looked around the room, they took on a new significance. Nothing—neither the girl nor her brother had uttered a word. Somehow he had felt they had included them-

selves in the running conversation, but he was sure now they actually had not. Perhaps the mere attraction of their presence had given him that impression—the girl so strikingly lovely, her brother clean-cut and powerfully built. But he remembered now, distinctly, that not a syllable had passed their lips.

Wickland was struck by details in the room that he hadn't noticed before—details that gave a new and unknown meaning to Halfway House, an atmosphere that was somehow full of dread.

The windows. They were extraordinarily narrow—so narrow, Wickland realized, that a person of average build would have difficulty climbing through. The frames, he noticed, were held in their casements by strong latches turned deep in their sockets. And locked? Were those keyholes he saw? Locks on the windows! Why? Latches alone were enough to prevent any prowler's breaking in. Locks could have only one purpose—to prevent someone inside from stealing out.

Wickland's gaze returned to Hugh Quintard. Quintard had not stirred. Not even his eyes had moved. They were still directed at Judy—dark, ominous, filled with that nameless craving. It was as if those eyes were a magnet drawing the soul out of her. Living, voracious things devouring her—evil, lustful animals preying

Wickland shook himself. He must be mistaken. The candles cast illusive, flickering shadows, and perhaps he was imagining it all. The thick fog outside the panes was a fantastic grey swirl that sprinkled the glass with drops of dew, and in each of the little globules the tapers were reflected as brilliant, microscopic flames. In this comfortable, cheery house was there something fearful and uncanny? It was an odd notion. Of course he was mistaken. Wickland told himself that.

But it was, in spite of the warm glow pervading it, strangely like a monastic retreat. Halfway House stood remote from the city, far from the main highway, lost in the recesses of the hills. In the dim shine its stone walls seemed mouldering with age, impregnated with a secrecy distilled out of the past by the smouldering fires of time. It gave Wickland a sense of security, and at the same time a feeling of imprisonment

WICKLAND shook his head to clear his senses. It *was* warm in the room—stupefyingly hot, in fact. The heat—and, of course, the wine. Kevan had served an excellent, dry, white vintage. None had been placed before Vira and Hugh Quintard, but he had relished every drop. He wondered if a single glass of wine could so entangle his senses. It seemed unlikely, yet

The wine, of course. There was no logic in his becoming obsessed with such nightmarish notions when Judy, for instance, was chattering so casually and so cheerfully. Perhaps he was becoming ill. Judy had seen nothing disturbing, and her sound level-headedness could always be relied on. If Judy had not noticed. . . .

Gazing at her, Wickland felt a new, sharper chill pierce his heart. She was talking pleasantly, but he realized now that her words were masking a growing fear. The shine in her eyes when she laughed was not merriment, but alarm. She had scarcely sipped the white wine. She was trying to keep her gaze from Hugh Quintard, but in spite of her effort she glanced across the table—glanced, lips tightening with revulsion, then tore her eyes away only to look again.

An uncanny sensation that he was being watched caused Wickland to look away from Judy. He gazed at Vira Quintard—gazed and felt his blood rush. She was looking at him—intently, searchingly—

yes, hungrily! In her dark smouldering eyes there was that same nameless yearning, that profound craving that silently pled. The fascination of her eyes held Wickland—held him cold and motionless.

A creak sounded at the door. Brack came in. The lean, towering manservant, his bald head and aquiline nose shining in the light of the candles, approached the table with halting steps. At each stride the creak sounded—the rasping of some movable part of an artificial limb. Brack limped to the table—*creak, creak!*—carrying a tray.

Another bottle of wine was on it, three crystal goblets, and two larger ones of crimson glass. Brack placed the three before Kevan, Judy and Wickland. He served them a glowing red wine from the bottle. He did not turn its neck into the crimson goblets. He placed the large vessels in front of Hugh and Vira Quintard, and turned away. Wickland saw that they were already filled—filled with a liquid that seemed to shine as deeply scarlet as the glass.

Wickland stared. Vira Quintard's beautifully slender hands clutched her goblet. She crouched forward, her exquisite back and shoulders full in the light of the candles, revealed by the stunning crimson evening gown she wore. This, Wickland realized suddenly, was what she and her brother had been waiting for—the stuff in these glasses! And she was crouching at the edge of the table, gripping the goblet as though she feared someone might tear it from her.

Then he saw her teeth. They were no longer masked by an enigmatic smile. Her ripe lips were drawn back tight, her teeth exposed in a grin of barbaric delight. And her tongue! Wickland sat rigid, watching it—narrow and long, moving with reptilian swiftness. She was not drinking. She was *lapping up* the crimson contents of the goblet!

Hugh Quintard held his glass as avidly, as jealously as his sister. His thin tongue flickered over its edge. When he straightened, red drooled across his chin and spotted his shirt-front. Wickland felt Judy recoil, silenced by her dismay, the conversation abruptly broke. The tongues of Hugh and Vira Quintard were creeping over their lips, drawing in fugitive, crimson drops—drops red like wine, but even redder and richer—like *blood!*

Judy Easton sprang up, her cold hand seizing Wickland's. His arms encircled her reassuringly and he felt her tremble. The slow, casual movement of Noah Kevan turned their aching eyes. Wickland's uncle, rising, calmly clearing his throat, asked with kindly solicitation:

"Is something wrong? Has anything disturbed you?"

Wickland asked tightly: "We don't mean to be rude, but do you mind if we go? Judy is upset—I think the fresh air will help her feel better. I'll take her to the car and—"

Kevan clucked. "It's a pity. But you're to spend the night. In fact, I wanted you to spend the whole week end. I'll show Judy to her room. She'll feel better if she rests for a while, and a little brandy will steady her nerves."

"No nothing—thank you. I—"

Kevan looked intently at Wickland. "I had an important purpose in asking you here—and we haven't yet had an opportunity to discuss it. It will mean your earning a great deal of money. I have certain duties to perform which I—I no longer can handle properly, Richard. I want to entrust them to you. I'm a sick man; I haven't much longer to live—perhaps only a few weeks. There's no one else"

Wickland peered at the girl and her brother—both oblivious of everything

around them, both gluttonously chewing raw flesh

WICKLAND mentally shook himself. There was something beyond understanding going on here. "We'll discuss the matter later," he said, "but now—"

"There's no one else I can turn to, Richard," Kevan went on as though Wickland had not spoken at all. His eyes were filled with an urgent light, his voice was pleading. "It is a trust, a promise—one I cannot fail. Not even death can release me from my pledge. I appeal to you, Richard, because in all the world there is no one else—"

A gleam of light on the dewed windowpanes brought silence into the room—silence save for the slavering sound of drooling lips. The shine in the fog brightened as a grinding noise came out of the hush. A car was approaching Halfway House along the winding drive. Noah Kevan, turning to the door, implored:

"I beg of you, please wait. Don't go."

Startled anew, Wickland saw his uncle pause at the massive entrance. He watched in dismay while Kevan took out a large key and slipped it into a concealed lock. A heavy sense of oppression flooded over Wickland with the realization that he and Judy had actually been captives within these mouldering stone walls without knowing it! Secretly their host had shut them in! Now—the way was again open. . . .

Wickland strode to the entrance as it swung wide, his numb fingers twined around the cold hand of the girl he loved. The glare of headlamps in the fog made a grotesque shadow of Kevan as the approaching car turned the last bend. He gestured Wickland and the girl back, but it was not the silent command that stopped them.

A sudden, rending crash broke through the mist. Metal ripped with a wailing screech. One of the two dragon's eyes in

the fog blinked out with a shattering of glass. A moment later there was silence in the gloom, broken by a muttered curse. Noah Kevan, starting forward, exclaimed: "Pencheon's gone off the road!"

The dry-voiced man turned back in sudden alarm. The approaching car was damaged, and the driver was possibly hurt, but Kevan's first thought was to close the door. Before it jarred into its jamb, blotting the room away, Wickland saw the girl and her brother still crouched at their crimson goblets, frozen motionless by the crash. Before Kevan turned away, Wickland saw him fasten the door securely with a key.

Wickland kept Judy Easton at his side as he hurried toward the damaged car. The glare of the one headlamp showed him it had missed the last bend and rammed into a tree. Its fender was crushed and its radiator was trickling water, but the damage was not great. A stocky man, with damp coat collar turned high, stumbled into the glow muttering maledictions.

"Pencheon, are you hurt?" Noah Kevan asked.

"Cut my hand, that's all," the chunky man growled. "Lucky I got here in this damned fog." He stamped past, toward the entrance of Halfway House, leaving the car blocking the drive. "Come on, Kevan, let's get this over."

Noah Kevan seized Wickland's arm. "Richard, don't desert me. I beg of you, don't go. I'm an old man, weak and afraid, and I'm not equal to this any more. I promise, you and Judy will be safe. If you leave me now it may mean death for me—a horrible, ghastly death."

The pathetic appeal of the old man touched Wickland's heart. It bespoke all the kindness and camaraderie that had made Uncle Noah dear to Wickland as a child—and it bespoke a consuming dread, an overwhelming fear that could not be

denied. He allowed Kevan to lead him to the entrance, while Judy Easton kept at his side. The man named Pencheon was waiting there. Quickly, taking the key from his wet palm, Kevan inserted it in the lock.

Wickland protested: "If I were alone, you understand, it would be different. But for Judy's sake—"

"I swear she'll be safe! I'll do all in my power! I beseech you, don't desert me now!"

The girl at Wickland's side said quietly: "It's all right, Dick." The key clicked in the lock. Pencheon, thrusting against the heavy door, strode in first. He stopped short, glanced at the table, and turned his back. His manner, Wickland and the girl noted as they followed Kevan in, showed that this was no new sight to him—this lovely girl and her husky brother gnawing raw meat. He shrugged, lifting one hand and said: "It's only a scratch."

His fingers were streaked with wet blood.

A shrill cry broke from the lips of Vira Quintard. A snarl tore from the throat of her brother. They leaped up and poised, their eyes flashing, their distended nostrils quivering. Kevan whirled in abject alarm, and Pencheon recoiled. The girl and her brother, their lips and chins smeared with red, moved from the table—moved with slow, panther-like tread, lips drawn, their pointed incisors gleaming, like savage animals tensed to spring.

"Get back!" It was Noah Kevan's frantic cry. "Stay back, you devils! You lusting imps of hell—!"

He bounded to a cranny beside the fireplace. He was obscured in the shadow an instant. When he whirled back he was gripping a blacksnake whip. In terror he cracked its lash at Vira Quintard and her brother. Desperately, the blows swift and powerful, he struck at them. They re-

coiled while snarls broke from their bloody lips. They tensed—and sprang.

They flung themselves with avid savagery at Pencheon, snatching at his crimson hand. He struck out wildly, crouching against the wall. With the blacksnake cracking like fusillading rifles, Kevan bore down upon them. The smarting lash whipped them back. A scream of pain tore from the girl's lips as she spun away. Cowering, her brother shouldered through a door. And Kevan lashed after them, beating them up a flight of stairs, his quaking voice shrill:

"Lusting devils! Lusting for fresh human blood! Get back! Get back!"

Richard Wickland stood rigid, Judy Easton's icy hand clutching his, while the human snarls carried from above. The sounds became muffled and far away. Twice hinges creaked, and twice heavy doors thumped shut. Pencheon stood trembling, staring at his crimsoned hand, pale with speechless terror, while a fearful hush filled Halfway House.

CHAPTER TWO

The Whispering Night

A RHYTHMIC creaking broke the strained quiet and turned Wickland toward the shadows fluttering beyond the fireplace. Limping at each step, his hairless pate and eagle-like nose gleaming, Brack came to clear the table. In the most casual manner, as though nothing at all unusual had happened, he took up the two gory plates and returned with them to the kitchen.

Footfalls sounded in a hallway above, and Noah Kevan shuffled down the stairs, the blacksnake whip curled in his hand. His face was deathly white, his breath rapid. He returned the whip to its place beside the chimney and, turning to Wickland and Judy, uttered his dry cackle of a laugh.

"Mr. Charles Pencheon," he introduced. "My nephew, Richard Wickland and his fiancée, Judith Easton. Mr. Pencheon is my attorney, Richard. We have a certain legal document to study which may keep us busy for some time. Tomorrow morning you and I will discuss the other matter I mentioned. I'll show you to your rooms."

He trod up the broad stairway, gripping the balustrade, panting at each step. Judy Easton, with a self-reassuring lift of her chin, followed him at Wickland's side. In the upper hall they heard a muted sound of nervous pacing. It was loudest when they passed two doors—doors as stout as the oaken entrance of Halfway House. Noah Kevan paused in front of them, tried the knobs, and found them firm. With a disarming smile he said:

"You see? You'll be perfectly safe."

A gracious host, he opened a room for Judy and another for Wickland across the hall.

When Kevan ambled away, the sound of pacing in the other rooms was gone. Wickland waited in the doorway, listening to the rumble of voices below—Kevan's earnestly mingling with Pencheon's. He quietly crossed to Judy's room. She came to him quickly.

"Afraid?" he asked as they studied each other's eyes.

"Of course I'm afraid, Dick. I'm trying not to show it, but I *am* afraid."

"Both of them," he told her, "are locked in. I'm quite sure they haven't any keys—they can't get out unless they're released. Suppose you leave your door ajar. If anything should happen in the night, I'll hear you call—but of course nothing will happen."

She echoed: "Of course. I'll be all right, Dick."

The voices downstairs were speaking now with a more strident note. While Wickland listened, pondering the dread

riddle of the Quintards, Judy Easton wearily lowered herself to the bed. When he turned, her eyes were closed. She did not stir when he darkened the room. Closing the door partly, he crossed to his own room. While he sat watching the wreaths of fog twisting past the windows, the edged voices became sharper.

Quick footfalls ended the heated exchange of words. The heavy entrance thudded shut, and a bolt rasped into its socket. A snarling sound came out of the mist—the starter of Pencheon's car. A gleam crossed the dewed windows of Wickland's room as it backed and whirred down the road. When it was gone, there was no other sound in the house.

WICKLAND waited for Kevan to come up, but no step came on the stairs. Wondering, he went quietly across the hall. The silence in Judy's room told him she was dozing. In search of Kevan he went quietly down the stairs. Only the red glow of the dying coals in the fireplace shone in the hushed gloom—every candle had been extinguished. Wickland was conjecturing whether Kevan had gone with Pencheon when, pausing beside a closed door at the base of the flight, he heard the sibilant rhythm of deep breathing. Kevan was in the closed room, Wickland knew, already asleep—sleeping so easily in a house where horror dwelt.

Wickland ascended the stairs without a sound. Passing the two locked doors, he returned to his room. For a while he sat looking across into the darkness where Judy lay. He shrugged away a residual feeling of fear, and stretched out on the bed. He lay awake, ears alert, but the stillness was a sedative that eased his tired nerves without his knowing it. The hush lulled him into an unwilling doze.

The sound of a quiet step awakened him. He looked intently at the shadow in the doorway without being certain it was there. It came silently toward him, bring-

ing a rich perfume. He elbowed up, half suspecting he was dreaming, but it was there, almost invisible—that face.

The dark eyes were pleading. The very whiteness of her skin begged sympathy. Her red lips parted in a whisper of imploring softness.

“Won’t you help me?”

She was kneeling beside the bed, her face very close to Wickland’s—so close he could feel her perfume as a radiant warmth, so near her breath was on his own lips.

“Don’t you know how unhappy I am—how I need your help? For almost longer than I can remember—for so many years I’ve forgotten how long it really is—I’ve been waiting for you to come. In all that dreadfully long time no one has entered Halfway House that I dared ask for help—until now. What is it like—the world you come from . . . ?”

“Come,” she said.

Her cool, soft hand crept into Wickland’s. He rose to her side. He went with her along the hallway, into a flood of light. He saw that now one of the two heavy doors was standing open, but he wondered only vaguely how it had become unfastened. He could not take his eyes from Vira Quintard. She was no longer wearing the scarlet evening gown. Her slender body was draped in filmy silk that shone with a rainbow luminescence when she stepped into the light of the open door. “Since I was a child this has been my prison. If I have ever seen the outside of Halfway House, I can’t remember it. What have I done? Why does he keep me here? Won’t you help me get out? Please, won’t you help me?”

She rushed on, her spell enfolding Wickland at each pleading word: “I know nothing of the world outside—nothing except what I see through the windows. In the garden behind the house my father is buried. I watch his grave and

wonder—why did they open it? Why did they disturb his rest?”

Wickland snapped: “Who did that?”

“*He* did. It awakened me one night—the scraping of shovels. I saw them digging, deeper and deeper, by the light of the lantern. They lifted the coffin out, and opened it, and then—” She stepped silently into the room. “Come, I will show you. It is there—”

Her breath caught. Wickland turned to the sound stealing into the room. A shuffling tread paused near the open door. The face of Noah Kevan appeared in the glow. Wickland was startled at the expression of utter horror that sprang into Kevan’s eyes—startled again by the girl’s quick movement and the savage snarl that burst from her lips.

“Come out!” Kevan gasped. “Richard, in God’s name, come out!”

HE gripped Wickland’s wrist at the instant the girl flung herself against the door. Her eyes glinted with a ferocious light as she tried to thrust it shut. Her red lips parted with the effort, and a chill struck through Wickland’s heart at the white gleam between them. Pointed teeth—razor-sharp incisors! Then he remembered the crimson goblets.

He forced the girl back and shouldered out. Breath beating with fear, Kevan tried to pull the door shut. Vira Quintard’s hands were gripping its edge—hands still marked with red. One of them swiped at Kevan’s face with jungle ferocity. As he jerked back in terror the door flashed open and the girl darted through. Before Wickland could steady the quaking old man, she was gone from the light.

“God! Get her back! Get her back!”

Bare feet flew down the stairs. Wickland hurried down with Kevan stumbling beside him. Through the door they saw the girl standing in the living room, facing them, eyes glimmering with the defiance of a trapped animal. Before they

could reach the door she leaped to it and slapped it shut. Kevan, gripping the knob, thrust vainly against a strong bolt.

"She can't get out of there," he panted, drawing back. "The doors and windows are locked, and I have the only keys. She can keep us away, but she can't get out."

"What are you doing to her?" Wickland demanded. "Why are you keeping her captive? Surely you're being unjust if—"

"Your chivalry, Richard—" Kevan straightened, his pupils circled with white, a ghastly smile quirking his dry lips—"your chivalry might have cost you your life. I might have found you tomorrow, lying on her bed, a corpse—your blood sucked out—if I hadn't heard. . . ."

He stepped into the room standing open at the base of the flight. He listened as Wickland followed. The terror in his eyes remained as he went on breathlessly:

"You think I am cruel because I keep Vira and Hugh prisoners? Listen to me, Richard. I am an old man before my time. I am worn with care, exhausted with constant strain, because of them—because of the promise I made their father. Every night for an eternity I have lain here at the foot of the stairs, scarcely daring to sleep, listening, always listening—for fear they might escape." He asked quickly: "Did you—you let her out to-night?"

Wickland, conscious of the silence beyond the bolted door, answered: "No."

"I wonder—" Kevan rushed on. "It's fear that's sapping my life away—fear of them—fear that if ever my vigilance fails, they will break out, and the deaths of innocents will be laid at my door. I see them when I close my eyes—picture them in my imagination—the thing that will happen if ever they break loose. . . . the bloodless corpses."

Silence beyond the bolted door.

"No one knows they are here with me—

on one but Penecheon and now you. Since they were children, I've kept them here, guarding them night and day, because I promised. You knew that John Quintard killed himself? He did it because death was the only escape from the curse that damned him—the only escape from a hunger for human blood. They have it, Richard—John Quintard's children—the vampire spawn of a vampire."

A freezing chill was coursing through Wickland's body.

"Lovely those children were, Richard—beautiful youngsters—but cursed with a lust for human blood. John begged me to shelter them, to keep them here, and the unsuspecting safe from them, before he rid his soul of the evil with poison. I have been more than their keeper. I have tried to learn the secret of their curse, to cleanse them of it."

KEVAN'S head raised as he listened for a moment; then he went on: "They were known ages ago—lycanthropy and vampirism—but modern science scoffs. Scoffs! While I have sold my life to it! There is nothing I haven't attempted, Richard, to help them. What is a vampire? The old beliefs say a vampire is the soul of a dead man which quits the dead body at night to suck the blood of the living. Such is not the case here, Richard, but in my desperation I attempted to kill the spirit which might have put the curse into Vira and Hugh—the spirit that lived in John Quintard's corpse.

"Was it madness to open his grave: Was I insane to pry into his casket and sever his head? I did that, Richard—did it because tradition proclaims that to be the way to send a vampire down into the depths of hell to stay. But it accomplished nothing, except to sear my conscience. It gave them no help—and it was my last resort."

The despair in Noah Kevan's eyes held

Wickland silent. The old man whispered on:

"Now my days are done. Death will come soon. My heart, Richard—constant strain. I cannot abandon my pledge to John Quintard. His two children must have a guardian. That is why I called you here tonight—there is no one else I can appeal to. You, Richard—you must keep them and guard them against—"

The chill that struck into Wickland came with a scream that shrilled down the stairs. It stopped Kevan's quavering plea and spun Wickland about. They poised a moment, frozen with consternation—and it came again. Wickland flung himself up the stairs crazily as Kevan scrambled at his heels. They sped toward the open door of Judy Easton's room. There were frantic movements in the dark, the bed was creaking, the girl was strangling.

Savage fury broke upon Wickland as he flung himself into the gloom. He slammed trained fists toward the dim face he saw—the face of Hugh Quintard. Gleaming incisors were bared in a snarl. Kevan, stumbling desperately into the room, was spilled aside when Quintard leaped out. Fast footfalls beat in the hall and down the stairs while Wickland fumbled for the light-switch.

The terrified girl crouched in the glare, horror-stricken, breathless. She flung herself into Wickland's arms, but he tore her back. Looking out to see Kevan struggling up from the floor, he snapped:

"Stay in here, Judy! Bolt the door! Don't open it for anyone but me!"

An oozing trickle shone red at the side of her neck, flowing from a cut made by knife-sharp teeth. Wickland twisted from her and stepped out. When the bolt snapped into the socket, closing Judy in the room, he hurried down the stairs with Kevan. They paused, staring through an open door, into the glow of the fireplace. The living-room was empty.

Gusting cold air turned Kevan in speechless alarm to the rear of the house. At the end of the hall a heavy door was standing wide open. The old man wavered to a paralyzed stop in the clouding fog.

"They're gone—both of them! We've got to get them back, Richard—do you hear? If we don't—God!—we'll see their awful handiwork again and again—the bloodless dead!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Faces Outside

A RAPID creaking sound turned Wickland. Brack was hurrying into the hall. Completely garbed, his cadaverous head gleaming, he limped quickly toward Kevan. The old man whirled upon him with sudden fury. Kevan gripped the manservant's arms and shook him like a child.

"Did you do that, Brack? Did you let them out?"

Brack answered with undisturbed gravity: "No, sir. I couldn't have let them out, sir, even if I had wished. I have no keys, sir."

Kevan probed a trembling hand into his pocket, peered at the ring of keys he brought out and thrust them back with desperate impatience. "No matter. We've got to find them and bring them back. Go along the wall, Brack. Beyond the garden, Richard—look over there. Be careful. They're strong as demons. They'll throw you down if you give them a chance—and drink your blood!"

Wickland felt his way along the wall. The mist was a living thing that twined claws around his neck, that pressed wet fingers over his eyes. Groping in the turbid murk of the garden, he could see only the shining windows of Halfway House—nothing more until his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. He discerned,

then, something white rearing from the ground. A headstone. The name, *John Quintard*. The grave in which a beheaded corpse lay.

Brack was near—Brack was moving somewhere in the night, coming closer and closer. The fascination of the repeated rasping noise held Wickland at a standstill while his eyes probed the fog. *Creak—creak!* There was nothing to see. Only that sound in the cold steam, coming nearer. *Creak—creak!*

“Steady, Brack.”

Brack’s voice: “Have you seen them, sir?”

“No.”

“We’d best go back to the house, sir.”

“Very well, Brack.”

Wickland went toward the glow. Unseen things snagged at his feet. He bumped into something that stopped him until he fumbled around it. Each step he took was uncertain—but the creak of Brack kept at his side without hesitancy.

Suddenly the sound quickened. As suddenly it stopped. Wickland discerned the open door, then the lean shadow of Brack. Brack’s head was bowed. He was looking down at a figure that lay on the drenched grass. As though in a nightmare, Wickland saw Noah Kevan sprawled there, face twisted into a mask of horror, and blood gushing from an incision in the side of the neck—a cut made as if by razor-edged teeth.

“God above!”

Horror paralyzed Richard Wickland, held him rooted, stopped his breath—horror more overwhelming than the strength of his will. Brack did not stir, but Brack’s muscles had none of the drawn agony of Wickland’s. Wickland forced himself to move. He was stooping beside Kevan when Brack said gravely:

“I’m afraid there is nothing we can do to help him, sir. You see, his jugular vein

is severed, but the wound has stopped bleeding. I’m afraid, sir, he’s dead.”

WICKLAND straightened stiffly. A mad impulse urged him to shout: “Judy! Judy! Are you all right?” He could see her white face at the narrow window above. Her voice was faint: “Yes, Dick. I’m all right.” He looked again at the ghastly neck of Noah Kevan and heard himself ask:

“Did we frighten them off?”

“I think so, sir. But they’re watching—I’m quite sure they’re watching—and they’re still hungry, sir. We can’t leave the master here, of course. Unless we protect him from them—”

“Let’s get him into the house! Hurry it, Brack—for God’s sake!”

Brack moved, and again the creak sounded. “Quite right, sir.”

The casual solemnness of Brack’s voice was as biting a horror to Wickland as the twisted face of the dead man in the wet grass. He seized Kevan’s shoulders while Brack lifted Kevan’s feet. They went through the door, the dead man sagging between them. Wickland slammed the weighty portal shut and shot the bolt into its socket. They went along the hall, into the room where Kevan had slept the restless sleep of the vigilant, night after night, endlessly—and now his dread watch was at an end. They put him on the bed.

“The keys, Brack.”

“Yes, sir—the keys.”

An uncontrollable shudder trembled through Wickland’s body as he reached into the dead man’s pocket. He found the first empty. He probed another and found it empty. A third—empty. The fourth—empty. He straightened, turning to Brack. A sardonic smile curved Brack’s thin lips.

“The keys, Brack!”

“You have them, sir?”

“You know damned well I haven’t! You reached him first. You’ve taken the keys.”

Brack said calmly: “No, sir.”

"Give me those keys!" said Wickland.
"I haven't them, sir."

Fists clenched, Wickland conquered an impulse to slap that demonical smile off Brack's lips. He thrust Brack aside, strode out. Bending over the telephone in the living room, he flicked through the directory. "The lights, Brack—bring candles!" He looked up, but Brack was not there. Quick strides carried him back to the room where the dead man lay. The bald manservant was turning from the bed.

"Look here, Brack. What was it you just took from his pocket?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You had a paper in your hand. You got it out of his coat. I saw you slip it out of sight. Hand it over, Brack!"

"You're mistaken, sir, if I may say so, sir."

"Very well, Brack. This is murder. When the police take charge and ask questions you'll find it rather difficult to be insolent. If there are any other servants in this house—"

"We are quite alone, sir."

WICKLAND returned to the living-room and the telephone directory. His fingertip slid to the number of Charles Pencheon. Pencheon's voice rasped in sharp exclamations while Wickland spoke crisp syllables, steadying himself.

"I am calling you because you are Uncle Noah's attorney. The police must be notified at once. You'll be better able to explain this matter than I."

Pencheon answered tightly: "I'll call them immediately. I'll be there inside ten minutes."

Brack was standing in the glow of the fireplace, his sardonic smile gleaming in the light of a candle. A soft call turned Wickland quickly: "Dick! Dick!" He strode from the room, chilled by Brack's damnably unshakable poise, and ran up the stairs. The door of Judy's room inched

open as he neared it. In a burst of anxiety he asked: "Are you all right?" He forced a smile as she came out. Nodding, her lips firm: "I'd rather not be alone in there, Dick, that's all." He took her arm, and as they went down together, silently, he felt it tremble. Brack walked out of the room as they entered.

Faintly Judy asked: "My—my neck, Dick. Is it still bleeding?"

She touched it with a blood-spotted handkerchief as he brought a candle close. The incision in her skin was red and swollen, like two lips bespeaking the horror of the human devil who had made the wound. She shuddered as Wickland carefully inspected it.

"It's stopped bleeding, Judy. It didn't reach the vein. Whoever let them out must have known—"

"I—I didn't know he was there, Dick, until it was done. There wasn't any pain then. I looked up to find him bending over me—and I felt his tongue." She gripped his hand suddenly. "I heard everything. I know we can't go now. But—Brack *could* have killed him, Dick."

"Yes."

"I saw—just before he went out of the room—I saw something inside Brack's coat. Just now. It had a long, curved blade, and a sharp point—like a pruning knife!"

"A knife?" The twinge that went to Wickland's heart might have been the cold steel itself. "Are you sure you saw that, Judy?"

"I saw it. And—it had blood on it, Dick—fresh blood."

Again they heard it in the darkness beyond the door—*creak, creak, creak!* That maddening sound, and a brightening glow, told them Brack was limping along the rear hall. Brack, coming with a knife, each alternate step signaled by a squeak that drew the nerves to the snapping point. He came into sight and paused, the flame

of the candle reflecting in those eyes that never lost their diabolical gleam.

"All the doors, sir," Brack said, "and all the windows are fast."

"I'll take the keys, Brack."

"But I haven't the keys, sir. Perhaps I should have mentioned it sooner, sir, but it appears you've injured your hand."

"My hand?"

Wickland raised it slowly, and for the first time felt the sting of the pain. The flesh had parted at the outer edge of the palm. The bright red ran—and suddenly he saw eyes looking at it—lusting eyes.

THE face appeared in the mist outside the window—a white face with luminous dark eyes, with red lips piteously parted. Its expression was one of pathetic, pleading hunger—and the avid eyes moved downward as Wickland lowered his hand. He was aware then of a second face—a man's—hovering like a phantom in the fog behind the girl's. He followed the line of its gleaming gaze to the incisions on Judy's white neck. The dread realization struck her like a blow, and she shrank back. The thought stabbed cold through Wickland's brain, that they were waiting outside—waiting and thirsting for warm, salt blood.

The slender hand of Vira Quintard raised to the pane. Her nails scratched the glass. Her beseeching voice carried in softly as Wickland and Judy stood cold as marble images.

"Please—please let me in. It's cold—bitterly cold. It's cruel to shut me away from the fire. This is my house, my only home. It is you who belong out here, and I in there. How can you deny me a little warmth when I am suffering so? Please—open the door."

A warning voice, echoing in his memory, stopped his unconscious move toward the window: "We shall see their handiwork again and again—the bloodless dead!" He remembered it now with sting-

ing clarity—those exquisite hands clutching a goblet brimming with blood. He stopped short, Judy's hand tight in his, as she whispered: "Don't, Dick! Don't forget! She's pleading with you because she's hungry—hungry."

And from the doorway, Brack's wry voice: "The doors and windows, sir, are all quite fast. They cannot enter, unless you let them. It is dangerous, sir, to yield to your doubts. One night, sir, years ago, when I took pity on the girl—"

Wickland turned to see Brack's lean finger curling into his collar. The bald manservant opened a gap, exposing a small welted scar. It throbbed above the jugular vein, in precisely the position of the fresh wound in Judy's white neck. Suddenly, shot through with tremors of cold, Wickland turned Judy from the window. He thrust his bleeding hand into his pocket—and the move brought a snarl of rage from the face wreathed in fog.

The knob of the door twisted and shook. From the windows beyond came the sound of scratching—of nails prying at the sashes, trying to open the way. Then, quickly, at the back of the house—a bolt jarring in its socket, fingers clawing at the glass. The noise was all around them, a constant prowling in the fog, animals snarling in the hush. Two children of Satan, trying to break in, possessed with a thirst for the blood they had seen—warm, live, human blood.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Thirsting Wait

BRACK creaked away into the darkness. From all around the house the furtive sounds came—the scratching at the windows, the pounding and rattling at the doors. Wickland, circuiting the room, jerked the curtains on their rods to cover the frosted panes. He took Judy's arms, and held her firmly, his eyes commanding

her courage while his own heart beat cold.

The scratching and the prowling abruptly ceased. Silence shrouded the house while Wickland and the girl listened. Something, some slight warning their ears had not caught, had startled the blood-seekers. They heard it in a moment—a purring that grew into a snort. Lights gleamed through the chinks in the curtains as a car crawled close.

“Pencheon.”

From the hallway came the creak-creak of Brack. A candle limning his lean face with black lines, he shuffled toward the table. Wickland, moving to the bolted rear door, paused at a metallic rattle. He saw Brock extending a ring of keys. His sardonic smile slowly returning, the bald manservant said coolly:

“The front door will be closer to Mr. Pencheon’s car, sir. I suggest you open it as briefly as possible—only long enough for him to slip in. And the whip, sir—perhaps you should have it handy.”

Wickland snapped: “Brack, you denied having these keys—but you had them.”

Gravely: “Yes, sir.”

“You also have a knife—do you deny that, Brack?”

“A knife, sir?”

“Give it to me, Brack! It’s in your inside coat pocket. Hand over the knife, I say!”

“But I have none, sir.”

Judy Easton protested breathlessly: “But he has, Dick! I’m sure of it. I saw it!”

Grimly Wickland demanded: “You’ll give me that knife, Brack, unless you want me to take it away—”

The car had braked near the house. The clack of a door had told of Pencheon’s alighting from it. Footfalls crunching in the gravel of the walk had marked his approach to the door. A rattle of the knob sounded as Wickland spoke—then, suddenly, there was a cry. A choking, stran-

gling, sobbing scream, stifled in an instant—followed by the short, angry snarls of prowling human jackals!

Wickland whirled to the door. With the blacksnake whip gripped in one cold hand, the key driving into the lock, he felt the lance of horror in his heart—for now, outside the door, there was silence.

HE OPENED the door slowly, bracing against it, and stood with drawn muscles strapping him rigid.

He stared into grey emptiness. Pencheon had come to the entrance of Halfway House, but Pencheon was not there. Loose gravel lay on the door sill, thrown up by scuffling feet. Dark blots marked the worn wood. Wickland’s dipping fingers came up wet and red. Knives of terror cut at his nerves as he gripped the whip and snapped over his shoulder:

“They’ve got him! They’ve dragged him away! Get outside, Brack—try to find them. Judy, for God’s sake keep the door locked—locked against *everything*—until we come back!”

He thrust Brack into the mist. Judy was at the door, tensed to thrust it shut, when Wickland reached for a flashlight that lay on the fireplace mantel. Instantly he eased out, the portal thudded into its frame and the bolt slid into the socket. Pencheon’s car was turning dim beams on the front of the house. Wickland strode out of the glare, heart pounding with dread, turning the flashlight into the mist—searching for blood vandals and their prey. . . .

The torch was a mere spot glowing in the gloom, revealing nothing. Somewhere in the fog a rhythmic squeaking quickened—Brack, prowling with uncanny sureness of foot in the turgid mist. Whip raised against the unseen vultures of the night, Wickland ventured into an endless, clammy void. Each step a promise of fanged doom, he went on, hearing the

creaking of Brack, but no other whisper of noise.

No other sound until the squeaking abruptly stopped, and Brack's hushed voice called: "They're there, sir—there! Between us!"

Wickland's taut muscles snapped him about. Against the glow of the car's one headlamp the towering shadow of Brack shafted a silhouette into the writhing mist. His torch probed ahead of him as he leaped—and showed him the horror. In sheer revulsion he stumbled to a stop, nausea striking him like a blow, seeing them crouched over the dark, sprawled form in the grass.

The girl huddled, clutching Pencheon's wrist, her tongue a wavering, crimson ribbon. Her brother stooped at Pencheon's shoulder, arms avidly clutching the body of a man whose crushed head lolled. The ghastly frigidity of Wickland's muscles broke against his wild lunge forward. He leaped, blacksnake crackling, toward two white upturned faces smeared with red.

In a mad frenzy he slashed the whip. Savage snarls answered the beating of the lash. Wickland's arm threshed it with ferocious rapidity, fighting them with their own inhuman savagery. Their bared fangs flashed as they crawled back from their prey. Snarls broke again from their slavering lips as his whip won a few scant feet. The still form lay behind him, shrouded with mist, while he faced avid, gleaming eyes.

The lash snaked into the grass as he stood straddled. Behind him Brack gripped Pencheon's shoulders. A quick *creak-creak* and a rustling of wet grass told Wickland the manservant was dragging the limp body toward the door. He retreated, whip again poised, scarcely able to see the white faces that followed him. **Breathless at the door**, Wickland whis-

pered a command that was answered by the quick drawing of the bolt.

"Inside, Brack!"

They lunged against the panel, heaving Pencheon. Whirling, Wickland jarred the door shut and twisted the key. He jerked back, the breath sapped from his aching lungs by the obscene fury that struck the outer panels. A hideous gibbering drilled into his ears while the knob spun and shoulders thumped against the entrance. He stood, eyes revolting at sight of Pencheon, Judy trembling at his side—and suddenly the barbaric storm at the door subsided.

Solemnly Brack said: "I'm afraid, sir, Mr. Pencheon is dead."

"But his blood is still alive. We've cheated them of their meal, Brack. They're certain to come back."

G RIMLY Wickland raised Pencheon's shoulders. He saw, as Brack helped him carry the dead man, that a bandage had been stripped from the attorney's injured hand. In the room at the base of the stairs they placed Pencheon on the bed beside Noah Kevan. Brack went back, that nerve-fraying creak marking each alternate step, while Wickland peered grimly at the two men, dead side by side, jugulars slit—the toll of the children of Satan.

A jarring crash straightened Wickland with a jerk. He strode back to the living-room to find Judy Easton retreating in terror from the entrance. It was shaking in its frame—shaking as heavy blows struck it. The wood cracked and groaned as Wickland twisted breathless to the window. He snapped the drapes aside to peer with haggard eyes into misty confusion—at the maddened *things* battering on the door.

The girl, clad in gossamer, her face twisted by inhuman fury. Her brother, muscles bulging, gripping the frame of an

iron gate. Wickland had seen it while driving to the house—the iron-barred rectangle hinged to a stone post. It was massive, ponderous—and yet Vira Quintard and her brother were hurling it against the entrance as though it was a puny thing of light wood. While Wickland poised breathless on the sill he saw a split panel driven inward!

"They want the bodies!" He sprang back, hand closed hard on the ring of keys. "We can't keep them out now. They're coming after the bodies."

Judy shrank from the cleaving door as Wickland sped to the room where two dead men lay. Slapping the door shut, he paused appalled. There was no key-hole in this door, no lock. Only a bolt on the inside could bar it—useless now! Wickland returned to see a heavy fragment of oak spinning from the entrance, propelled by the ponderous, driving weapon. Through the opening, the twisted faces of the girl and her brother—driven by an evil hunger.

"Go back to your room, Judy! Quick!"

Wickland's voice was lost in the deafening hammering at the door, in the snarls that carried through with gusting fog. Judy Easton stood paralyzed with fear while he sped along the hall in blind search of something that might keep the blood-thirsters out—something to keep them from violating the dead. In the kitchen he found it—a spouted can, heavy and full, sitting behind an oil stove.

He swung it back, glimpsing the widened gap in the door, the sharp corner of the gate again crashing through. Beside the bed of the dead he paused, muscles aching with tautness, streaming the kerosene on the floor. It pooled limpidly on the carpet while guttural cries echoed from the entrance, while the splitting wood cracked again and again. Hurrying out, matches ready, Wickland heard a strangling cry from Judy:

"They're coming in!—Oh, stop them!"

Vira Quintard was writhing through the jagged opening, her face evil with bestial craving, her smouldering eyes on Wickland. Behind her her brother's twisted features gleamed with wild, Satanic ecstasy. Sharp splinters ripped at the girl's gossamer gown as she pushed through. Ragged fragments of silk drooped to reveal the lithe whiteness of her body—a body supple as a jungle cat's without its fur—as she poised, lips drawn. Unaware of her own blood trickling down her arm from a deep scratch, she went slowly, on bare feet, toward Wickland—fangs glinting.

Wickland whirled back, a match flaring in his hand. It streaked into the oil. Another and another followed it as he rapidly touched growing, black-capped flames into being. Fumes were sheeting up, a blinding glare was leaping, when he turned. Vira Quintard, in the doorway, her nails curling like talons, was tensing to leap.

A sharp, stifled scream drove Wickland toward the door—a cry of terror from Judy. The strength of his desperation thrust him past the thing in the doorway. Vira Quintard's claws dug his flesh before he tore himself loose. He sped across the living-room to the corner where Hugh Quintard was crowding Judy into the trap of the meeting walls. He snatched up the blacksnake as he ran and whipped it savagely into the leering face of the son of Hell.

Again and again he struck, but Quintard's paws kept tight on Judy's arms. She yielded perforce to his brute strength as he brought his gleaming teeth close. Wickland tore at Quintard's shoulders. His frantic lunge backward brought Judy out of the corner, but still Quintard trapped her in his crushing fingers. Wickland struck, blow after blow, into the face he loathed. His whole strength crushed

Quintard against the wall—and Quintard, as Wickland straightened, poised to leap.

“Dick! Behind you! *Behind you!*”

The girl was padding toward Wickland, her exquisite body denuded in silhouette by the glare of the flames behind her. He twisted about as the girl raised her clawed hands, and his gaze flew to her brother’s avid, feral face.

“Look!” he cried. “Blood! Fresh blood! *Her* blood!”

Hugh Quintard looked at the crimson streaking his sister’s twisting arm. For a moment they were motionless while the girl raised the wound toward her mouth. Her wavering, crimson tongue touched the seeping drops—but the sound of a snarl caused her to whisk it away. A snarl from the lips of Hugh Quintard as he glided toward the bleeding girl. His hunger turned upon one who herself hungered! She saw the lust in his eyes—the desire that spelled her own horrible death—and screamed.

VIRA QUINTARD screamed, and fled in terror across the room—in terror of the same mad craving that made her its slave. Her brother darted after her, his steps quick and silent as a panther’s. She whirled in the far door as flames crackled behind her. Madly she twisted from his closing arms and leaped. The brilliance of the flames enmeshed her.

Hugh Quintard, fury snarling from his slavering lips, sprang into the furnace after her. Stricken, eyes drawn to the ghastly sight, Wickland saw them through the blaze—saw them fighting in the fire, lost to its burning torture in the greater torment that raged within them—the crimson lust. He tore himself away, gripping Judy’s arm, and plunged into the ghostly night.

While Wickland stared into the blinding shine of the spreading flames, the choking screams grew still. Somewhere

in the mist, faintly audible through the crackling of flaming timbers he heard a rhythmic rasp—*creak, creak!* The realization filled him that Halfway House was doomed—a realization like the blessed awakening from a terror-haunted dream. . . .

Headlamps were gleaming on the drive. A car was coming up.

The police. . . .

THE curved knife, razor-edged, its point sharp as a needle, lay on the broad palm of the chief of police. In his other hand he held a folded paper. In his eyes, as he gazed at Wickland and Judy, there was a strange light. Doubt.

In the two days that had passed since that ghastly night, Wickland had grown to shudder at sight of this officer as he did at thought of Halfway House. Questions—endless questions. Statements—one after another. Solemn pledges to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth—pledges solemnly kept—then doubt in the eyes of the officers. After that, the same cheerless cell to which he had been taken, with Judy held in another, far out of sight.

Today Brack sat at his one side, Judy at the other. The man who faced them across the desk had those dictated statements arrayed before him. His eyes were kindly and understanding, his manner crisp. Dr. Gregory Marshall—Wickland had barely heard the name. But as he listened to Dr. Marshall’s smoothly confident voice, the balm of hope came to his heart.

“I believe these statements to be the explicit truth. I believe them especially because we have found corroborative evidence. In a safe deposit box, held under the name of Noah Kevan, we discovered a diary, years old, which set out Kevan’s pledge to John Quintard. It records the first year of Kevan’s custody of Quintard’s monstrous children. It is quite true,

Mr. Wickland and Miss Easton, you almost met your death at the hands of human vampires.

"Vampirism is a condition, you may not know, which can be brought about by hypnotic suggestion. The word often repeated by John Quintard in his tortured sleep—a word recorded in Kevan's diary—gives me the clue. *Latah*. The Malay word for the influence of suggestion. No doubt Quintard, making his researches and experiments in the Far East—a noted skeptic, as you remember—underwent hypnosis and allowed the craving to be implanted. And the effect of it on his children—

"Who knows?" Dr. Marshall shrugged. "Quintard, unable to control his awful secret, could not keep it from them long. Picture two young children, tragically impressionable, learning the ghastly truth about their father. Imagine the dread in their minds—the fear that this same craving was in their blood—and imagine that dread growing until it actually became the same madness. But—" again a shrug—"it is no mystery out of the occult, no black witchery. Modern science recognizes it as a mental affliction."

The chief of police cleared his throat. "Our investigation clears you of all connection with the two deaths, I am happy to say. Pencheon was killed by the two Quintards. But Kevan was killed by Pencheon. How do I know? This pruning knife, bearing his fingerprints, is the weapon that made the cut in his neck. Brack found it in the grass beside the body and saved it.

"This document—a will. Signed by Kevan, mind you, and bequeathing the Quintard fortune, held in trust, to Pencheon. Brack's story—corroborated now—is that Kevan planned to direct the funds into certain institutions of psychiatry. Pencheon was to draw a will to effect that. Instead, he drew up this one and tried to trick Kevan into signing it—and almost succeeded. Because Kevan saw him switching the two wills the night of the signing, and because Kevan then held the power to ruin him, Pencheon committed the murder—hoping the guilt would be fastened on the Quintards, and that the false will would be found, making him wealthy. Pencheon had duplicate keys to use in case of an emergency. He liberated the Quintards.

"I'm sorry, Miss Easton, Mr. Wickland, that we had to hold you, but there was no way out. Now you are free—free to go."

Brack had risen. His sardonic smile widened as he extended his hand. "Knowing all I did, sir," he said, "I thought it best to safeguard the truth by concealing the knife and the keys. I was, you see, sir, serving the master to the best of my ability, even when he lay dead. Your pardon, sir. Your forgiveness, miss. I bid you good day."

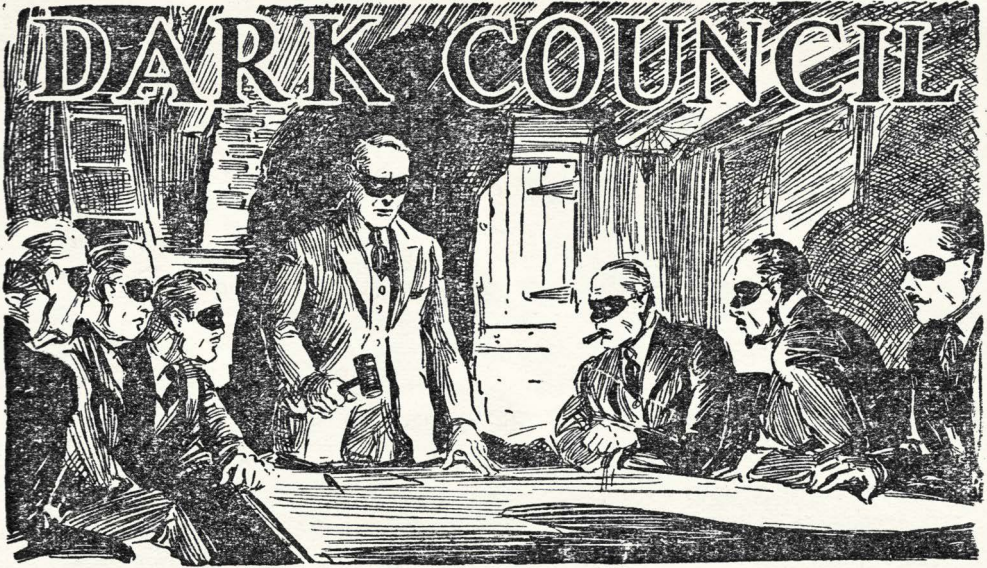
He went out slowly, each step a creak. He was gone when Wickland and Judy stepped into the sweet warmth of the sunshine, arm in arm. Now the sky above the hills was clear even of the smoke that had marked the doom of Halfway House and the drinkers of blood.

THE END

A Long, Spine-Tingling Novel of Mysterious and Terrifying Doom by

HUGH B. CAVE

in *Dime Mystery Magazine* for February *Out Jan. 10th!*



PROFESSOR EUGENE BUCKNELL not only occupied the Chair of Psychology in a small but high-ranking Eastern university, he was a practicing psychiatrist, as well. An extremely busy man, he had, he realized, been rather over-doing things of late. As he walked home in the gathering dusk of a late autumn day he became definitely alarmed at a suddenly apparent series of symptoms in himself that he could hardly fail to recognize.

What was this strange, haunting fear that suddenly swept over his senses, flooding his being with a hollow, sick sense of threatening peril? What but agoraphobia—the fear of open spaces? No psychiatrist could fail to diagnose that sensation accurately. Nor did the fact that he could put a name to it—could recognize that this paralyzing terror was but a figment of his own brain without exterior causation—help the professor to argue away the freezing dread that was like an icy lump in his chest. He trembled, and felt his lips and nostrils and the backs of his wrists grow stiff and cold. It took all his will power to stifle the moan of terror that arose to his lips. Absurd that a modern man of science should be as unable to combat this internal enemy as the most ignorant peasant! Yet—there it was. And fear writhed in his heart. . . .

He must get home quickly, away from this horrible void that was like the blood-chilling emptiness of inter-stellar space, for all that it was filled with huge buildings, trees, houses and swarming masses of people. The professor was faint and sick. He was like a man who teeters on the edge of a girder hundreds of feet in the air, and as he neared his home he quickened his pace in his frantic desire for the sanctuary afforded by four walls and a roof.

And that was proof that the professor's scientific objectiveness had indeed deserted him. How many times had he listened to a recital of symptoms identical with those he was now experiencing! How many poor, overworked victims of a too complex civilization came to him on the verge of a nervous breakdown, with the multiple terrors of fully developed psychoses tearing at their nerves! There was but one hope for them. Rest—a change of scene—and close

surveillance at all times by trained psychiatrists. . . .

Professor Bucknell flung open the door of his home and slammed it behind him as though he were but a hand's-breadth in the lead of a pack of ravening wolves. In a state near to hysteria he leaned back against the door and shuddered, pawing at his mouth with a clammy hand that shook like a leaf in a gale. For a moment only, he knew a sense of relief—and then he opened his eyes and looked dazedly about him. . . .

The hall was dark where the professor stood, lit dimly only by a small yellow bulb hanging from the ceiling. As his widening eyes focussed on that light, it seemed to the professor that it became even dimmer, melting down to a mere pin-point of illumination, which permitted skulking shadows of monstrous forms to glide out of the corners and stalk toward him. Then the walls themselves were closing in upon him, toppling forward from their bases, swinging dizzily down to crush and envelop him in the murky blackness of oblivion. The very air had become a turgid, stifling darkness that choked and suffocated him so that he could not even scream as ultimate terror flooded his senses and he crashed to the floor unconscious. . . .

Most moderns are more or less aware of the actuality and nature of the different forms of psychoses. The strange thing, however, is that this awareness does not insulate them against the ravages of mental ills. Nevertheless, enlightenment is ever of benefit to the mind and soul, even though it prevails not against the inner foes. Such abnormal emotions hold a fascination that appeals to all curious-minded readers, and DIME MYSTERY has utilized them for some of its most engrossing stories.

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