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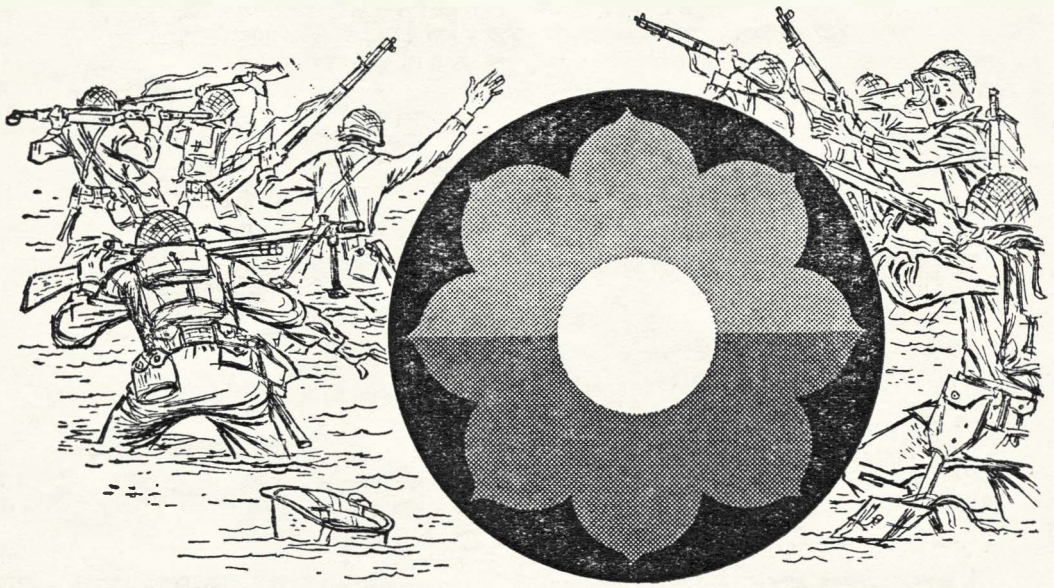
Only real men can wear it



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SEVEN CASKS OF DEATH

Fortune-teller Bela Kiss had the strangest harem in Hungary: Seventeen women, all nude—and all dead!

By
MAURICE TARPLIN
Star of
"The Mysterious Traveller,"
M B S

IN THE early summer of 1916 in Czinkota, Hungary, gasoline was rationed, but death wasn't. In that little village, not far from Budapest, there was a ramshackle house—the home of Bela Kiss, a tinsmith. When Bela was called up for service at the outbreak of World War I, the house was locked up, fastened securely with padlocks at the doors and stout iron bars at the windows. It had always been a place of mystery, with a strange reputation—for Bela was credited by the simple peasants with more than human powers for working evil. The curiously fearful, yet fascinated, inhabitants of the village had never seen the inside of Bela's house—with a single exception.

One person in the village had managed to get a peek into the house—an old peasant woman Bela had do his housework once in a great while. But her visits stopped quite abruptly.

"Bela caught me one day peering through the fanlight of the attic," she said. The door had always been locked, and, like Bluebeard's wife, she had been attracted by the secrecy. There had been a furious scene when Bela caught her. She later said she was glad she got out of the house alive—so terrible was his wrath. "I really don't know what made him so angry for there was nothing in the attic but a row of tin casks, which only contained petrol, he said."

"Petrol?" queried the town gossips.

"That's what he told me when he caught me," the old cleaning woman said.

So the rumor spread around the little village and was forgotten.

But with the coming of war, gasoline was rationed in Hungary, and as some Army troops were billeted near Czinkota, the story of the seven casks of petrol was revived.

The Army heard the tale and ordered the police to pick up the fuel. A sergeant and two constables arrived in front of Bela's ramshackle old house. The heavy padlock's on the ominous-looking old place didn't withstand the police for long.

The officers entered, mounted to the attic, and forced the door. There, ranged along the wall, were the casks just as the old woman had described them. Massive casks they were—well made and carefully sealed by the tinsmith's art—but a lustily

(Continued on page 95)

A SOLID HIT WITH MEN EVERYWHERE

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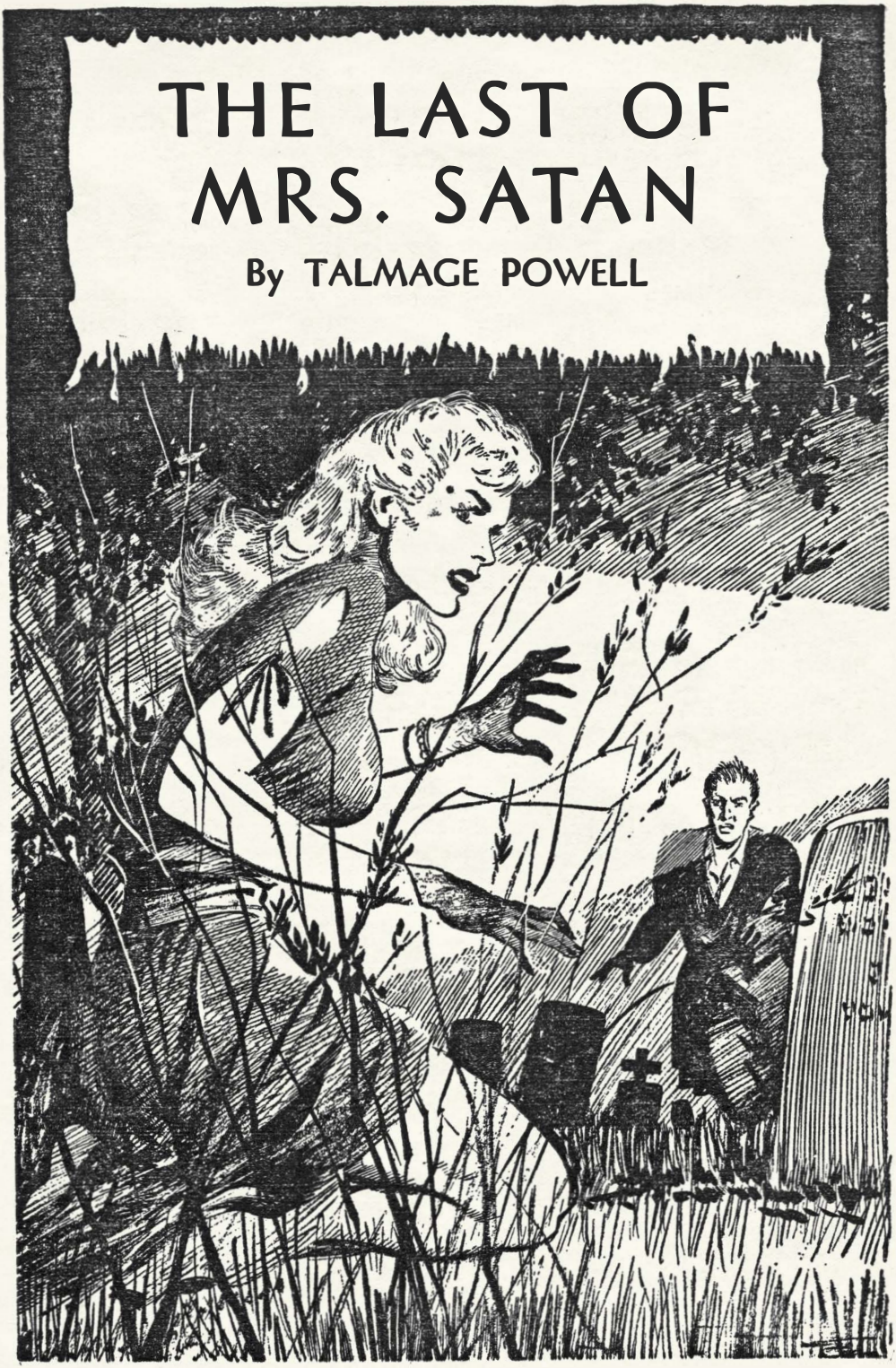
THE LAST OF MRS. SATAN

By TALMAGE POWELL



"Your hands—you've been tearing at the grave!"

Eerie Novel of Strange Evil

CHAPTER ONE

The Dark Island

IN HIS CELL, when they'd first picked him up, he'd babbled enough to cause them to look at one another and later to call in the state

Out from the dark burial crypts of ancient Egypt came the ravening, evil Thing *that attached itself to Sylvia Cotter . . . and turned her into a creature of the night whose strange hunger could be satisfied only . . . in the graveyard!*

psychiatrist. Now, looking back, he was able to remember the bumbling little doctor with a sort of amused pity. The little man with all the degrees had been so sure of his science. He had the answer: Mind was but the intangible corollary of the function of nervous tissue. The human soul? The smug little doctor had scoffed at the possibility of its existence. The vaporings of the superstitious, he called such talk.

Charlie Cotter wondered in that amused, detached way he had developed what the little doctor's reaction would be when one day he sank into the black maw of death to discover that he'd made a mistake, that, after all, the mere function of nervous tissue was not the total answer. . . .

He had found Charlie sane. Charlie had wanted desperately to be found sane. He knew he was sane and could have told them so, but when the little doctor spoke, it was the degrees speaking. No one could question the degrees. Charlie's first babblings? The degrees had a ready answer for that: hysteria and psychic shock, natural reactions to the violence which Charlie had perpetrated.

Charlie's lawyer hadn't been pleased. "I might have got you off with a prison sentence. A temporary insanity plea. But now . . ." The lawyer shrugged.

Charlie had looked at the lawyer in that new, detached way of his. The degrees had said: "This man is sane, responsible for his actions; nor can there be any serious doubt that he was not wholly in possession of his faculties at the time of the murder of Sylvia Doherty Cotter." Which was just another way of saying that Charlie had known what he was doing and should die in the electric chair. So Charlie had watched his lawyer pace. He had lighted a cigarette and relaxed, and thought it too bad that he couldn't do something to ease the lawyer's vexation. The lawyer had stamped angrily out of the cell when Charlie had started yawning in his face.

NOW, in the crowded courtroom, Charlie blinked and looked about him. He caught the judge's eye and smiled. He nodded and smiled, too, at the state's attorney. Something in Charlie's bland, mild smile caused the S. A. to redden slightly and turn his gaze quickly away, to the papers in his hand. Charlie smiled at the twelve good men and true who sat in the jury box to pass judgment upon him. He smiled at the whole courtroom. It was not a mirthful smile, nor the smile of a man who is enjoying himself. It was a fixed, held smile, and gave Charlie's lean face a faint, skull-like cast, as if he were smiling sardonically, in ironic amusement at himself.

Charlie gazed indolently out the window, looking at the blue sky of early summer and the fleecy white clouds. Somewhere in the background he heard the barking voice of a lawyer. He sensed the rustle of tension over the courtroom. He wasn't smiling now, but not because of anything that was happening about him. He was sobered at this moment because he wanted to take a good, long look at the clouds and sky. He'd probably see the sky several times more from the cell window before the end came, Charlie thought. But would it be through his own eyes? He could feel it now inside him, beating against his mind like—like vultures wings. Would this be one of the last times he would look at the sky with eyes that were really his own?

Charlie wasn't smiling now. He almost sobbed. The sky outside semed to drift away, change color until it was shot through with hinted hues of a cold, icy black. Charlie shivered. Whatever I do, he thought, I'll have to do quickly. I'll have to start the wheels turning so that nothing can stop them, turn them back.

He nudged his lawyer, whispered in the

legal mind's ear. The lawyer, a poised country club member of fifty, still flat in the stomach, looked at Charlie with annoyance in his eyes.

"I insist," Charlie said.

"But I have the case prepared in such a way . . ."

"Will I have to tell the judge myself?" Charlie asked.

In a vague distance, Charlie heard the S. A. saying, ". . . and having proven this, gentlemen of the jury, the state will ask you to bring in a verdict of murder in the first degree. . . ."

Charlie watched his lawyer rise. He went over and said something to the state's attorney. They looked at Charlie a moment over their sholders. Another moment they held a whispered consultation, then approached the bench.

"Your honor," Charlie's lawyer said, "it is perhaps irregular at this point, but my client wishes to make a statement to the court."

The court looked at Charlie. Charlie heard a gavel pound, his name being called. He got up, walked to the witness stand. He looked at all the people who'd come to the free show, the Roman carnival, and they were all just faces, grey smudges without individuality. Charlie raised his right hand and said he would tell the truth.

Charlie sat down and gave himself time to rest his elbows on the arms of the chair and touch his fingertips together. He noted that his thumbnails were a little ragged and dirty. Without lifting his eyes, he said, "Couldn't we sort of cut out a lot of the rigamarole? This is costing the state a lot of money, this trial and everything, and I'd like to save the state whatever I can. We're here to find out whether or not I'm guilty of murder, aren't we? That's the point of the whole thing, isn't it? So why don't we just come to the point? I'll tell you. I killed Sylvia Doherty Cotter, my wife. I thought about it, planned it, and went through with it. . . ."

In the hush, Charlie's words sounded very loud to him. His lips began to tremble a little. He went on: "I killed her because I loved her better than I love my own self. I killed her to save her!" But they had already said he was sane, and he couldn't risk bringing up *that* point again; so he choked the words off in him.

He dragged in a breath, and his voice flowed like grey mist to every corner of the courtroom: "There's nothing you can make out of it but cold-blooded, premeditated murder in the first degree. And since the death penalty is mandatory, there's nothing you can do with me but put me in the electric chair. . . ." A shudder might have rippled over Charlie, or perhaps it was only a breath of warm, summer air stirring his loose-hanging, slightly threadbare, single-breasted coat.

"I—" Charlie said. But after the first stunned moment, a sea of sound buffeted him. He saw reporters rushing for the door. The courtroom was on its feet, and he shrank before the impact of two hundred pairs of eyes. He heard the judge's gavel pounding, the sound almost lost in the babble of voices, the judge shouting for order.

"There is just one favor I ask," Charlie said. They didn't hear him. He licked his lips. "Please . . . just one favor. . . ."

He pushed to his feet, coming up from the stand like a man cramped, aching. They had to listen to him. They had to give him this one last favor. They *had* to!

Sweat had popped out on him, and he was trembling, the wild thought dashing at him that they would never hear him, that no matter how quiet the courtroom got, his voice wouldn't be able to reach them.

"You must listen," Charlie almost screamed. "This one favor—that's all I'm asking. Just this one single favor. . . ."

HE WAS a norm, Charlie Cotter was. He lived in a town of twenty-five thousand souls in that section of the United States called the South. It was a drab, tired, dirty old town, sprawling on the hot coastal plain, encompassed by countless miles of desolate fields of broomsedge and gaunt pines and barren acres of farms worked with much sweat. It was a town of weather-eaten brick, stone and frame buildings, and down the corridors of the town walked the ghosts and traditions of a long past. An indolent, sleepy town, muddy in winter, acrid in summer. In the town square stood a Confederate monument streaked with the water of many rains and abused by pigeon droppings. The petty aristocracy of Charlie's town lived on the Hill, where the supposed qualities of a man's long-dead great-grandparents were of vastly more importance than the qualities he himself possessed.

This was Leeston, Charlie's town, a town comparable to an old, old woman wearing a ball gown of her youth who hasn't yet tumbled to the fact that the dress is motheaten and she herself is withered and decrepit. And as death could come creping upon the old woman in her pitiable finery, so Charlie's town was the sort of place to invite black horror on silent, stealthy feet. Perhaps the horror was there all the time, in the hot, sticky nights . . . in the strange mists that flowed over the town from the dead, yellow, listless river . . . in the restless ghosts of the few strange ones who had practised black and forgotten rites in the lost days of the town's youth. Or perhaps the horror wasn't actually there. Perhaps the town was simply waiting with an evil patience for Charlie Cotter to go forth and bring the horror back. . . .

Charlie lived at a boarding house, and worked for Briscombe & Associates, Real Estate. Charlie was one of the associates, easy to smile, honest and tireless in his work, secretly a bit ambitious, but on the whole pretty well satisfied. He had a rather drab, grey sort of appearance that reduced him to a name and face in a crowd. Like most of the men his age in his town, he was lean, of English stock, spoke with a drawl, liked to catfish once a month in the river, and once a year enjoyed putting on boots, hunting jacket and cap and going on a 'possum hunt. He was usually lucky and brought two or three of the rodent-like creatures back.

On those nights Mrs. Baynes served 'possum and sweet 'taters at her long table and Charlie blushed warmly and said it was nothing as the other boarders praised his hunting prowess.

The local paper announced Charlie's wedding; and on the day that Charlie and his new bride boarded the train for their honeymoon, their friends came down to see them off. It made Charlie feel very warm and quiet, and as he stood there in the laughing, jesting little crowd, trying to express his feelings in handshakes, Charlie was about the last of Leeston's sons that anyone would have picked to beg them to put him in the electric chair in the very near future. . . .

On the train, Charlie felt a certain awkwardness. He watched the sere, drab landscape rush by. He felt Sylvia's hand stealing into his, and turned to meet her smile. If you had asked Charlie what his bride looked like, he would have said, "Well, she's kind of tall and kind of blonde and a mighty good-looking girl! Surprises me sometimes that I ever got her. She was Mr. Briscombe's secretary, y'know, and we worked in the same office for a year before she ever knew I existed." Charlie's shy laugh would punctuate his words, and you would get the feeling that he'd suddenly grown bigger, more powerful. Southern chivalry might not be exactly a myth after all; here was a man who'd fight the demons of hell for his woman's sake. Then, if Charlie spoke of

something else, he faded until he was just Charlie again.

"Comfortable?" Charlie said, holding Sylvia's hand.

"Uh-huh," she said, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"It was nice of Mr. Briscombe to give us a party, wasn't it?"

She nodded.

Charlie cleared his throat. "Would you like some water?" Then, when she said she wouldn't, Charlie said, "Nice of Mr. Briscombe, too, to let us have his Florida place and two weeks off. We never could have afforded anything like that. A whole island, all to ourselves!" Charlie felt Sylvia stir. "What's the matter, hon?"

"I—I don't know," she said slowly. "But from the moment Mr. Briscombe said we could have his place . . . something started to worry me, gnaw at me. Charlie, I feel the same way I did once when I was a little girl and stood at the mouth of a black, wet cave and tried to make myself enter. Charlie, let's don't go to that island for a honeymoon!"

"Nonsense!" Charlie slipped his arm about her shoulders. "You're a landlubber, that's all, and don't like the thought of having water all around you."

"I hope that's it," she said. "Yes, I guess it is. Being cut off from everything except by motorboat."

"We won't need anything," Charlie said. "Mr. Briscombe wired the old man down there who takes care of the place to have it ready, even to half a dozen kinds of meat in the freezer."

Which was mighty fine of Ollie Briscombe. The thought came back to nag Charlie. Mr. Briscombe had never shown that kind of generosity to him before. Certainly he'd earned it. Secretly he knew that Briscombe had never given him full due or credit in the business; he'd never said anything, made any scenes, because Charlie felt that if you didn't like your boss, it was your privilege to quit. He'd be doing that soon now, setting up a business of his own, with Sylvia a precious part of his life. And he was probably misjudging Briscombe. Still . . . the way he'd caught Briscombe looking at Sylvia during the reception. . . . And Briscombe's own home life must be hell, having Berta for a wife. Oh, what the hell! Sylvia would never have to go back in that office again. He'd make things right for Sylvia. She'd grown up in an orphanage and led a life as drab and barren as Charlie's own, until they had met and fused, two rather shy people. With her looks, Sylvia might have had many men friends, but Charlie suspected that they scared her, that he was the only person who'd ever brought her completely unselfish love, asking nothing, wanting only to give. Perhaps that was the secret of her love for him, Charlie thought. Someone to love her, take care of her, do the little things for her that no one else had ever done. It was all completely right and fine to Charlie's way of thinking. It couldn't have been better, for Sylvia with the lost, half-sad something deep in her eyes brought out the strongest in Charlie.

In the smug privacy of their compartment, Charlie listened to the clickety-click of the train wheels. With Sylvia on his shoulder, he smiled and watched the landscape rush by.

THE MAN was very old, gnarled, clad in dungarees, a faded T-shirt and canvas shoes. He sat aft in the little boat, piloting it, his grey eyes squinting ahead, his jaw working on a cut of chewing tobacco. Charlie sat awkwardly beside Sylvia in the boat, his arm about her waist to steady her. Their bags were stowed at their feet.

Charlie looked back. The white beach was receding, and the seawall forming the basin where all the little boats lay at anchor, was beginning to blend, with dis-

tance, into the background behind it. The Florida city was becoming a toy-like skyline.

Overhead, the sky was a great, inverted bowl of blue, holding a sun that spilled silver and gold everywhere. A warm breeze stirred over the Gulf. A few low swells were running, causing the boat to tip in what was to Charlie frightening fashion. Because he wasn't used to boats, of course, except now and then a flat-bottom on the sluggish river back home.

Ahead lay the island that Ollie Briscombe had gotten years ago for almost nothing on a bad debt. Briscombe had held the island, possession making it possible for him to talk with pointed modesty about his "Florida place." "Not much of an island," Ollie would say. "But it does give me privacy. It'll do as a place to hie myself to when I feel like resting."

Charlie and Sylvia had stood on the pier back on the mainland and looked at the island while the old man had started his popping outboard motor. From the mainland, the island had been simply a dark smudge on an otherwise bright horizon. Like a black and menacing dot rising out of the bright blue-green water. Now, nearing the island, it seemed to rise up out of the water and rush toward them.

Sylvia spoke without taking her gaze from the island, "We'll be alone out here, won't we?"

The old boatman, Thomas, spat at the minute wake his boat left. "No, ma'am, there's one other cottage, on the other end of the island. . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Briscombe told us that," Sylvia broke in, "but he said—"

". . . and there's somebody in that cottage," Thomas went on, unruffled. "A Mr. Steven Lawson, from some little place back up in New England. Northern half of the island belongs to a gent back in town, the southern hunk being Mr. Briscombe's property. Well, this Steven Lawson wanted to rent a place. Said he'd hunted all around Florida for a place where he could be absolutely alone, where he could get to nobody and nobody could get to him. He rented the shack on the northern hunk of the island. Nobody knowed then that you folks were going to be down here."

"What do you mean by that?" Charlie said, turning sharply to look at the old man over his shoulder.

Thomas squinted toward the horizon and said, "Nothing. This Steven Lawson just don't want company, that's all. He might demand his rent back. I brought him out the day he came. He tole me never to come close to his place, said he'd leave a list and money in a tin box on the point, for supplies. I've brought stuff out to him three times, leaving it on the point. Never seen him since the time I brought him out. Can't say as I regret it, though."

"Why?" Sylvia said. "What kind of man is he?"

"I dunno," Thomas said. "Just a man. But a huge, fat man. I'd bet he weighs close to three hundred; nearly swamped my boat when he got in it that day I brought him out. He orders enough supplies for four healthy, hearty-eatin' men."

"He must have an appetite." Charlie's laugh was edged; the tone of the old fool's voice was making Sylvia nervous. "He must suffer from hunger."

"Hunger! Mister, that's it!" Thomas said. "It's all around this Steven Lawson like a cloud. 'Course you don't see it, and maybe you folks wouldn't feel about him the same way I did. I allus had a sixth sense. I was allus different about *feeling* things than other people, even when I was a kid. Once I just *knowed* my uncle had died, hours before we got the telegram. Know what I mean?"

A MOMENT of silence clutched the boat, broken by the popping of the outboard. The Gulf breeze from the south

stirred softly, pregnant with the mysterious warmth of the tropics.

Charlie had done a little reading in his long evenings at the boarding house. He said, "Extra-sensory perception? I've read articles about Dr. Rhine up at Duke. He's pretty well established it, but he can't explain or control it."

"He orter have *me* for an experiment." Thomas tapped his chest with a gnarled thumb. He spat brown juice in the green water. "Now this Steven Lawson—"

"We'd rather talk about something else, Thomas," Charlie said almost curtly, watching Sylvia. Her fingers were tight on his arm, and she was looking fixedly at the island ahead. She said, almost too low for hearing, "No, I want to hear about Lawson. I must hear about it—his hunger. . . ."

"It ain't a natural hunger," Thomas said. Charlie shot him a dark look, but the old man, too, was looking at the island —and Charlie felt his own gaze drawn in that direction. The little boat had made good time. Now they could see white surf breaking on the beach. They could see a vast clearing across the end of the island, dotted with a few cabbage palms and tall, moss-bearded pines. A sprawling, white-frame cottage stood amid the pines—Ollie Briscombe's place. On up the island, vegetation thickened until it was a dark green mass of mangrove, hateful and hot and riotously green, like a vast, heavy cancer with a million roots in the earth.

"You can feel his hunger in his hands, little and fat and filmy, like they were covered with grease. That's Lawson's hands," Thomas said.

Charlie finally caught the old man's eye and tried to signal with a frown, a short jerk of his head, for silence, but Thomas was oblivious.

"You can feel Lawson's hunger flowing out of his big, fat, flabby body. You can look at his face and imagine a hawg snufflin' up to a feeding trough snapping all the other hawgs out of the way."

Charlie said, "Please. . . ."

Thomas didn't look at him. The old man squirted tobacco juice and said, "But mostly you get a funny feelin' about Lawson's hunger by the way he orders supplies. Every blessed kind of food you can think of, enough for four men, I tell you! It's like he's holed in that shack on 'tother end of the island—can't see it from this approach—eatin' like a dope fiend eatin' dope. But the dope does the fiend some good, and this Steven Lawson, he never gets enough. Like a man going crazy trying to find something to satisfy his hunger, way he orders them supplies!"

Charlie clenched his fist. He had the urge to turn around and punch the old fool in the mouth, but they were almost to the low, wooden pier that jutted out into the water now. They wouldn't be around the old man much longer. He could talk Sylvia's fears away.

He looked at Sylvia, and his heart lurched. Maybe it was the way she was looking at the island now. Her expression had changed. Her lips were slightly parted, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dancing. Charlie saw her as if he might have been seeing, through a mist, a new Sylvia in the place where the other one had been.

"Isn't the island beautiful, Charlie? Somehow, now, I feel as if I could stay there always! I haven't got the foreboding about it any more. Charlie," she said lanquidly, "I'm so glad the silly foreboding is all gone!"

But it hadn't, Charlie thought. If the foreboding had left her, it had just come to him. What kind of spell was the island casting over her? Why was her reaction to old Thomas' talk so much the opposite of what Charlie had thought it would be?

What kind of creature was on that island?

Charlie shook himself. The sun was hot, but he was clammy cold. He was, further, a fool, he decided. Sylvia had

called the foreboding silly. He had to remember that. Silly, silly, silly. . . . What the hell was there in premonitions? They'd go back to Leeston with the island as a romantic memory. The only trouble they'd find here would be a mildly sore case of healthy sunburn!

CHAPTER TWO

The Hand of Terror

CHARLIE held the door of the wide, screened porch while the old man carried their bags in. Charlie turned to Sylvia, smiling, coloring a little, and she let him pick her up. She buried her warm face in his shoulder, and he carried her inside. Old Thomas chuckled.

Charlie set her down in the living room, and she brushed his lips with hers. He looked at her steadily. That mist was gone now; she was the same Sylvia. For a moment, out there on the water in the boat with old Thomas' superstitious voice droning, Charlie had had a peculiar feeling. . . .

"I'd better show you around the place, Mr. Cotter," Thomas said.

He was standing in the doorway.

"I'll start unpacking," Sylvia said. "Please hurry, darling."

Charlie followed old Thomas out. "You got a well here for water," the old man said, "with a fairly good purifying system—water's a little brackish hereabouts. Water's pumped electrically into the house. Juice for it and the 'frigerator and the lights is all made by the unit out back here, in that little building just ahead. Hear the humming of that motor? That's the gasoline job that generates the juice. It's automatic. I started things up when I come out with your supplies. You shouldn't have to worry with a thing, except maybe putting a little gas in the tank. Don't know just how low it is. I'll show you where the spare gas storage tank is."

Old Thomas spat tobacco juice. "There's a boat 'bout the size of mine on a dolly, out in the building. We'll gas her, too, and roll 'er out and get her in the water, so's you can get around. You can wander all over the island if you like snaking through bayous and swamp water. Island sags in the middle like a tired mare. Kind of spooky up in there, too—black water, insects, lizards and such like."

"We'll use the boat for getting to the mainland in case we want to come over," Charlie said.

Thomas chuckled. "Just make sure you keep the boat tied up tight. Current would sweep her clear around the island. She'd beach there, but you'd have nigh half a mile walk."

They entered the outbuilding. Charlie saw in the gloom the outlines of a white motorboat on an aluminum dolly. Old Thomas grunted, and together he and Charlie pulled the boat down to the water. The old man started the motor, letting it idle for a few seconds. The boat rocked gently in the small waves that touched hungrily on the sandy shore. The old man hoisted himself up on the pier, lashed the boat to a piling, and freshened his tobacco with a black plug from his pocket. "Well, she's okay. Guess that takes care of everything. You need anything, just scoot over to the mainland. Plenty of fishing tackle in the storage room off the back porch of the cottage. Some good reef fishing around here—if you like groupers and grunts. I'll see you around."

The old man moved down the pier with a rolling gait to his own boat. He started it, and Charlie watched him become a small, dark speck on the water, heading toward the mainland in the dim, blue distance. Charlie turned and walked back toward the cottage. The island seemed a very, very silent place.

He entered the cottage, and the silence seemed to grow even more intense. Sylvia was standing at the window, like a statue.

Something in her stance, her eyes, brought a quiver to life inside Charlie. She was looking at him, right at him—right through him, her eyes giving no sign that she even saw him.

"Sylvia . . ." he said.

He moved toward her, frowning. "Sylvia!"

With a little jar, recognition flickered in her eyes. She saw him. She smiled, wanly. "I was thinking about *him,* Charlie. I was trying to imagine the way he eats. Charlie," she whispered, "why do you suppose he's so hungry?"

CHARLIE drifted up out of the dark miasma of troubled sleep. He wasn't rested; his head was thick, and his mind wearily fought waking. Without opening his eyes, he yawned a deep breath in and out and turned over on his side. He'd doze a while. He wouldn't wake Sylvia. It was too early to get up now, anyway.

He reached out to touch Sylvia, and his eyes snapped open then. He reared up in bed on one elbow. The grey murky light of an early dawn painted the room in a cold pearl color. Sylvia's place was empty, and she wasn't in the room.

Charlie threw back the sheet and stood up, barefoot. Already the day was beginning to grow warm. Charlie fumbled for his shoes, trying to think. The island, yes. They were on the island. They had arrived yesterday, and that crazy old man Thomas had told them a tale about a Steven Lawson on the other end of the island. They'd had lunch, Charlie recalled, then a swim. Last night, after dinner, Sylvia had wanted to walk along the beach and watch night fall. A beautiful night. A subtle, warm, softly lowering tropical night. Sylvia hadn't wanted to talk, simply walk and feel the warm velvet of the night.

Something had been wrong with her. Charlie had felt it, sensed it. But that was silly. Silly, silly, silly . . . like the foreboding. Of course she had been hushed—a new bride, the island and lovely night, her wedding night.

Charlie threw his maroon robe about his shoulders, listening. He would hear her out in the kitchen in a moment, he was sure. She had awakened before he had. She'd decided to make a pot of coffee before calling him. But he didn't hear her, not a single pot clatter, not a footstep, and he did not smell the aroma of perking coffee.

He went out of the bedroom. There were six rooms in the cottage, a living room furnished simply and rustically, a small dining room, a larger-than-average kitchen, two bedrooms connecting to the one bath, and the large storage room off the back porch.

Charlie looked around the living room. From it he could see the dining room, and most of the kitchen. He didn't see anything but stark furniture. A little dumbly, he looked in the other bedroom and knocked on the door of the bath. He was moving quicker now, as he went through the kitchen and looked in the storage room. It presented a large array of broken furniture, a couple of trunks, tools, fishing tackle, a rusting shotgun. It seemed to have everything it, that room—except Sylvia.

Then Charlie thought of the outbuilding. She'd gone out there. Of course. From the back porch, he called her name. His voice drifted into silence, swallowed by the swamp to the north and eaten away by the murmur of nearby surf. He ran to the outbuilding.

Sylvia wasn't there either.

Charlie forced himself to stand outside the building a moment. He scanned the back yard. In the early grey of morning there was a faint mist over the island, twining like slimy tentacles among the trees and undergrowth. The mist moved slowly, with the silence of death, but nothing else moved.

Charlie hurried alongside the cottage to the front yard. He was still barefoot; he had forgotten that, until the tiny pieces of broken shell and sand in the yard bit into the soles of his feet. He ignored the discomfort, moving across the yard, calling her name.

Then he drew up in his tracks, hearing the faint hum of a motor. The sound came closer. Charlie ran down to the pier. It was wet and slick and cold. Through the light mist that hung over the water, he could see that the white boat was gone.

He stood midway down the pier, listening to the approach of the motor. Then he saw the boat coming up out of the mists, a vague, shapeless movement at first, then taking on the distinct lines of a low prow cutting green water. She was handling the boat awkwardly; she had come upon the pier so suddenly that for a moment Charlie was sure she was going to crash into it.

"Watch it, Sylvia!"

She slewed the boat around, cut the motor; the boat bumped against a piling, and Charlie was bending over, taking her hand, helping her to the pier.

She was pale and trembling. Her face was a white blotch the mist had turned slick. Her hands were icy in Charlie's.

She pressed herself against Charlie, and he could feel the hammering of her heart.

"Charlie . . ." her teeth chattered. . . . "I—I think he's dead!"

"WHO, SYLVIA?" But Charlie knew even before she answered. There was one other person only on the island—Steven Lawson. She had been there. Charlie wondered in that moment why it was that Lawson had crossed their path. Maybe it was just meant to be that way, he thought. It was natural for Lawson to be here. He'd wanted some place where he could get to no one and no one could get to him. Such places, Charlie knew, are hard to find, even off the coast of Florida, with its countless islands.

"His place looked . . . strange, Charlie," Sylvia sobbed. "A cottage like ours, only maybe smaller. In the mist, Charlie, it looked like something evil. I was ready to turn and go. I don't know why I went there in the first place, maybe because I couldn't sleep. All night I lay thinking about the story old Thomas told us. I got the frantic feeling that I'd never be able to sleep again, until I went up there. Maybe Lawson was sick. Maybe there was something we could do for him. When I got up there, I told myself that I was intruding, that I should turn and go. I almost did—but then I noticed that the whole cottage was shuttered with heavy wooden shutters, like those in our storage room.

"Why, I thought, the cottage is empty! Why had old Thomas told us that tale? Was he one of those old men who gets a twisted, sadistic pleasure from upsetting people? Well, if he was, I wouldn't let him! I walked to the front door. It stood open three or four inches, and I could see a chain across it on the inside, the door having swung back against the slack in the chain. Whoever had last occupied the cottage, I thought, had chained the front door, gone out the back and locked it and shuttered all the windows. But the door latch hadn't caught, and the door had blown back against the chain. I don't know if I really thought all this out in definite terms, Charlie, but I reached out to close up that crack in the door, to make the latch click so sand and perhaps moisture wouldn't be blowing into the cottage. It was just a little girl-scout deed I intended to do, then turn and come home.

"But just as I was touching the knob, Charlie, a hand shot out of the pitch-blackness of the interior of the cottage! It grabbed my arm—a loose-fleshed thing that was more like the paw of a great cat than a human hand. It was as if I had been touched by something evil beyond

words—something dead a thousand years. I screamed. I heard a mewing and snuffling inside the cottage, as the thing tried to drag me close to the crack of the door with the grip on my arm. My heart was pounding itself to pieces, Charlie! I knew I had been watched, silently, evilly, by Lawson or whatever horrid thing had chained itself inside the cottage. And the will of that creature had brought me closer and closer—like a hypnosis—until now I was in its grasp. . . . It was awful, Charlie! I tore myself out of its grasp and stumbled back. I heard the mewing inside break and fade, and I watched the groping hand tremble, and I heard the thud of a body falling inside the cottage—as if the thing in there was dying. . . . It lay close to the door, its hand and wrist still sticking out, and the hand relaxed, looking cold as death

"I felt the lancing pain in my arm then, and I saw two long scratches the thing had made on my wrist. Not deep, just enough to bring a few beads of blood to the surface. Here, Charlie. . . ." She turned the underside of her wrist up, and her cheeks went cotton white.

The flesh of her wrist was creamy, smooth, unmarred.

Charlie held her tightly against him. "Easy, hon. You've had a shock."

"But I know he scratched me, Charlie! I felt the flesh burn, as if it were festering and swelling with some kind of awful infection!"

In a nightmare clarity, Charlie supported her to the cottage. He put her on the couch in the living room. "I'm all right, Charlie. You'll have to go to the mainland, bring the police."

He left her with worry deep in his eyes, and when he was gone, she took from her pocket the tiny silver scroll; it was a thing of delicacy; it had been in Lawson's hand when he had reached from the silent blackness of the cottage to seize her. He had dropped it; it had rolled across the sagging floor of the screened porch, and when she had torn loose from that hand, numbly watching it collapse in death, she had picked the scroll up. She had glanced at it; she'd seen enough to make her unwilling to speak of it to Charlie yet. Now she unrolled it again.

One side of the narrow, gossamer paper was covered with hieroglyphics, and on the other, in fine letters of English, was written:

> I, Lawson, have transcribed the Tumbok curse hereupon. Perhaps it is my sense of irony, of injustice, but I think it fitting that the hateful curse be transcribed and carried with me, to remind me constantly of what I am. I must never forget. For I am positive now that the curse is real. I can speak of it to no one, because in this age of 'enlightenment' one does not speak of curses nor demons nor the black magic of the ancients. No, modern man scoffs—but in scoffing he proves that in the dark recesses of his own mind lurk shadows beyond his normal ken.
>
> I do not know by what ancient means the priests of Tumbok called forth the shadows to guard that Egyptian tomb, but I do know that I was the first white man to enter that forbidden place. I know that I removed the coffin lid and looked upon the three-thousand-year-old mummified man. I saw the jewels in the coffin, as was the custom of burial oftentimes during the Tumbok dynasty. In respect to great wealth, I unfortunately was like all other men. Of its own volition my hand shot out to touch the gleaming stones, and as it did so, my hand inadvertently scraped across that of the mummy. He was hard as stone, his wrappings of linen long since rags, exposing whole areas of his blackened, hard body. His nail nipped my thumb, not deeply, bringing a single, great drop of blood. I brushed it away, thinking of infection—but my flesh showed no sign of a wound!
>
> Now I know that I received an infection far beyond the understanding of human intelligence. I know the curse is working. First, the stirrings of hunger, a hunger that becomes more ravenous all the time. I know that I am going the way of madness . . . that I must find some cure. And time is growing shorter and shorter as the hunger mounts into something so strange and terrible that my mind refuses to put it into words. . . .

SYLVIA raised her gaze from the scroll, stared again at her wrist. *"My flesh showed no sign of a wound!"* She whim-

pered. Charlie must never see this tiny scroll. If he glimpsed it, ever, and expressed curiosity, she must pretend that it was something very personal. She must always pretend . . . even to herself . . . that there had never been a scratch made on her wrist by that hand. But what if . . . what if . . .? She buried her face in her hands as her sobs grated against the cottage walls.

Later, Charlie Cotter was to remember the day in snatches, as a series of jumbled pictures, some dim, some etched in hues of fire in his mind.

The mainland. The police, and Charlie telling them only that his wife had gone up to Lawson's to be neighborly.

Then Charlie, two cops and the coroner walking across the clearing to Lawson's cottage. The day was becoming a hot vacuum, filled with an unnatural hush, the Gulf lying perfectly still, like molten glass. There was something wrong with the weather. The four men saw the hand thrusting through the crack of the door. One of the cops found a bar of rusting metal and pried away the chain across the front door.

And there lay Steven Lawson in the dull light, staring sightlessly. But something had happened to him. He wasn't fat any longer. Not fat as old man Thomas had said, not three hundred pounds of blubber. His tentlike clothes enveloped him in folds. His cheeks were grimy and sunken. And in the sunken, staring dead eyes there remained something that brought a hard shudder to Charlie. Something animal—or something dark and nameless. Something of a beast, crazed, gone mad.

Charlie tore his eyes away and looked at the room. It was a mess of torn furniture and ripped cushions, and Charlie heard a cop coming back and saying the rest of the house was the same way. There were marks on the closed shutters and door where Lawson—it had had to be Lawson, hadn't it?—had torn and clawed at the wood and chains.

In the moments before death, Charlie thought, he must have been a ravening beast.

But why had Lawson lost so much weight? Charlie realized that among the litter of the room was enough food for half a dozen men—canned goods, crackers, bread, cheeses, a ham, a number of delicatessen containers. Lawson had been eating, and eating recently, as the fresh bits of food inside some of the empty cans showed.

With all that food around him, Charlie thought, he was eating—*desperately!*

The pictures reeled through Charlie's mind: A cop saying, "Back door is chained just like this one. But there are no keys around for the chain locks." They found the keys half an hour later, the sun gleaming on them in the front yard, several feet from the house. Lawson must have thrown them there, through the crack in the front door. That meant that Lawson had chained up the place, not to keep anyone from coming in—but to keep himself from going out!

But why? Lawson must have known that old man Thomas, when supplies weren't picked up, would come to investigate. In that length of time that he'd be completely alone, what battle had Lawson been waging with himself in final desperation?

Charlie wanted to get outside, in the sunlight, but something here held him, held his gaze as he watched the coroner bend over Lawson's body.

Sometime later the coroner stood up and mopped his beefy face. A cop said, "Any idea what killed him, Doc?"

"Hell, yes, but I don't believe it! Take a look at all this food, and say I'm wrong. Then take a look at Lawson, and say I'm right. Looks to me like the guy starved to death!"

For a moment nobody said anything.

Then a cop's laugh fell flat in the silence, "Maybe he never could find the right diet!"

"Well, whatever diet he needed," the coroner said, "he don't need it now. We'd better start doing something about getting the body to the mainland and making a positive, official identification."

The sun had passed its zenith when Charlie got back to the cottage. The air was like hot, white molasses. He stood a second on the pier, looking at the sky. Sullen tropical clouds were banking the south. Into the hot, awful vacuum, the wind was freshening. Charlie shivered and hurried toward the cottage.

Sylvia was asleep on the couch in the living room when he entered, nestled in a curled position like a kitten sleeping. She hadn't slept any last night. Now she was drugged with exhaustion, but in her sleep she whimpered faintly. Charlie touched her hot forehead with his palm, wiped back the few loose strands of hair. "I'll get you out of here," he muttered. "No matter what happens, Sylvia, all I want out of life is to take care of you."

He went in the bedroom and began packing their bags. A gust of air shook the cottage, dashed long pine needles from the standy earth against the screen on the window. Charlie mumbled curses while he packed. Damn the island, damn Ollie Briscombe! The honeymoon was ruined. Her wedding night would always be a nightmare in Sylvia's mind. A muggy, tropical nightmare shot through with the vision of a human hand thrust through the crack of a door. . . .

By the time Charlie was finished, pines were swaying and palm fronds were rattling in the wind outside. The hot vacuum had grown more intense; Charlie could feel it like a monster drawing against his eardrums. He snapped the last bag shut and stood up, breathing hard in the heat,

his wet shirt clinging to his back.

He went back to the living room. Sylvia was still asleep; she had tossed. One arm was lying over her face, the other hanging over the side of the couch.

Charlie touched her. He smiled as she opened her eyes and sat up. He said, "Look, the bags are all packed. How would you like to go on down to Miami?"

"But Charlie, can we afford . . ."

"This is our honeymoon, remember? This is special. We'll dip in the savings. The money was for something extra important, anyway, and what could be more important than this? We'll forget all about the island, won't we?"

"Yes, Charlie . . . forget the island. Charlie—what did they do with Lawson?"

"Took him back to the mainland. Let's not talk about him, sweetheart."

Charlie carried the bags down to the boat. On the pier he hesitated. The swells on the Gulf were beginning to wear salty caps of white-lace spume. The clouds had moved faster than he'd thought. The day had darkened. He measured the distance of the clouds, then the mainland. He licked his lips. He turned his head to find Sylvia's eyes anxious on his face.

"We can make it, Charlie!" She clutched his arm suddenly. "Please, Charlie, we've got to get away from here! We can beat the storm!"

He looked worriedly at her and made up his mind. He put the bags down in the boat.

HALF a mile out from the island, he realized that it was worse than he'd expected. The motor ran steadily and the boat cut through the water, but there were instants when the boat was weightless, helpless. To stand on shore and look at the water was never to realize its power. The water was an entirely different thing when you pushed out into the roiling arms of the green devil.

Spray dashed over Charlie's face. He stared ahead, trying to see Sylvia. She was clutching the sides of the boat, her blonde hair damp strands. "Charlie," she said. And jerked up her arm to point southward.

Charlie looked and his heart lurched and missed a beat. As it grew in intensity the storm had also grown in speed. It was rushing at them now, a wall of solid grey, blotting out the sun, swallowing all the vast reaches of the Gulf. A gust of wind caught the prow of the boat, sent it slanting toward the sky; a sheet of rain hit them and Charlie heard Sylvia scream.

He knew they'd have to turn. The mainland was too far away. He'd misjudged the storm. A novice, he'd got them in trouble.

Charlie set his teeth, tried to fight the boat around. That didn't work. He almost capsized. He widened his turn, bore to the right. As the prow pointed into the storm, the boat paused, wallowing. The motor screamed ineffectually. A breaker showered over the prow, but they were already drenched now and one more wetting didn't matter.

The impasse couldn't last long. The wind caught the boat as the prow reared, snapped it on around with sudden, shocking force. They were almost thrown in the drink by that one, Charlie thought, but at least they were headed back for the island.

He sank into the quagmire of a waking nightmare, trying to fight the boat back. Impressions melted and ran together in his mind—howling wind, driving rain, wave after wave like huge hungry tongues reaching for the boat.

His eyes searched for the pier. Not yet. Just a little more, but not yet. The squall was turning into a young gale. Under the drive of the wind, a sheet of water unrolled from the Gulf, came washing over them. For an instant the prow of the boat disappeared under the green tide. Charlie shouted.

Sylvia came creeping back to huddle

near him. Perhaps that's what did it. Or perhaps they had shipped too much water. Charlie didn't know, and he had little time to think. He knew only that at last he saw the dim outlines of the pier; but at the same moment, he knew, too, that Sylvia's movement aft, lightening the prow, had thrown them out of balance. He heard the last triumphant, hungry roar of the wind, saw the burst of water, knew that Sylvia in panic was scrambling closer to him.

Perhaps, after all, it was that final movement on her part that did it.

The boat capsized.

The water was like a hungry mouth swallowing Charlie. He fought it, choked on it, tore away the length of seaweed that slimed across his face. He bobbed to the surface, gasping, eyes smarting. He'd learned to dog-paddle in the yellow, listless river back home when he was a kid, and he was pretty good at it, but it was still simply a dog-paddle.

"Sylvia!" He couldn't see her. He dog-paddled. No sight of her. Water broke over him, carried him down again. He managed to get his coat off. He was gasping and screaming her name now, like a bug caught in the bathtub rushing toward the swirling drain. . . .

He hunted until his heart was hammering toward the stopping point, until he was gulping water with ever precious ounce of wind, until he was sinking, leaden heavy. He felt himself thrown against something hard, and knew the waves had cast him ashore, disdainful of the microbe splashing with his dog-paddle in their bosom. He dragged himself up the beach, sobbing in breath. Finally he had the strength to drag himself around to a sitting position. On the wet sand, he sat, numb, dumb, staring at the water with red-rimmed eyes that were half mad.

He didn't know how long he sat there, but gradually he realized that the squall was passing. He saw the sun once more, and it had sunk far down in the heavens. The sky was blue and deep again, and the peaceful tropical languor came back to the earth. The elements stilled, as if chastised, or like capricious djinns laughing silently behind their salty hands.

Charlie Cotter got up to look for his bride. He found the boat first, washed up about a quarter of a mile from where he had sat. He righted the craft, dragged it up on the beach, spilled water from it, and left it there to dry. The effort was exhausting, but he kept looking.

He found her ten minutes later. She was lying on her face at the water's edge, sand washed from under her and up around her so that for a moment it looked to Charlie as if she lay in a shallow grave.

He turned her over and wiped the sand from her face. Except for the ragged, tearing sound in his throat, he was mute. He knew quite well that she was dead. He picked her up and like a man with wooden joints carried her all the way back to the cottage. He carried her into the bedroom, set her down on the bed. Then he got a washcloth and cleaned the rest of the sand from her face. She was waxen and cold, but if he stood back from her, perhaps he could look at her and imagine she was sleeping.

There was no way to get to the mainland, and no way for anyone over there to know what had happened, until the boat dried out. Charlie didn't know anything much about artificial respiration, but he tried, until night had turned the cottage black. Then he raised her from the carpet, and put her back on the bed. He knew it was no use. Nothing was of any use.

Without turning on any lights, he stumbled into the living room and sat on the edge of the couch, hands hanging down between his knees. His mind began working again, and Charlie Cotter began to cry. . . .

He didn't know what time it was when he sank into the dazed sleep; neither did

he know the time when he awakened. Night was complete, deep and silent, but that for the moment didn't concern him. He reared up on the couch, staring. A pale glow suffused the dining room. . . . *Somewhere in the back of the house a light had been turned on!*

Then he heard soft sounds of movement. The glow in the living room increased as a door swung wide. He watched her walk into the dining room. His corpuscles turned to ice.

Sylvia! But the word was only in his mind. *Come back from the dead!*

He gaped like a fish out of water for breath. He saw her awareness of him as he sat in the half-darkness of the living room. He saw her smile at him, heard her speaking: "Oh, there you are, darling! I woke up ravenous. Honestly, I've never been so hungry in my whole life!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Shroud

BERTA BRISCOMBE sat before her dressing-table mirror. She stared dully at the face that looked back at her in the mirror, realizing that it was no longer young. Like her slat-like body, the face was dieted down to the cord-like muscles, giving her a gaunt, tortured appearance. Her hair was done in tight, sausage curls; and without make-up, her lips were two narrow, shrewish lines. She was not the sort of person to have many friends; she was, on the contrary, one of those thin, tight-eyed persons the world is apt to dismiss as having as much feeling as a board.

Her actions and demeanor usually bore out the world's opinion of her. A damned shrew, Ollie's men friends generally called her in Ollie's absence. She kept an immaculate, dowdy house: lace doilies on the drab, dark living room furniture, china in the dining room cabinet that was never removed except to dust. A house as stiff, silent and barren as Berta herself.

But sometimes when she was alone she was overcome with such a sense of loneliness that she wept. She ached for friends. She yearned to say something witty, to sparkle, to bring laughter to people's lips and have them crowd about her. She longed for that intangible called personality, and daydreamed of some handsome, aggressive male eyeing her so boldly that Ollie later would bawl her out about it.

But none of it would ever come to pass. Her few tries at wit had left those awkward moments that occur when people don't know if they should laugh now or later. Personality would always elude her. She couldn't unbend because she was afraid of people, terrified of the world. Without realization, as a defensive weapon, Berta had grown more and more aloof over the years, until now her cloak was complete. She was a damned shrew, said her husband's friends, like slamming a door in her face. Well, she had slammed doors of her own.

She tore her eyes from the mirror. She hated herself. She was tempted to curse the plain, unattractive face the mirror had held. She knotted her hands together. What did she have out of life? This house, of course. But it was a tomb. A little money in the bank, but she didn't know how to enjoy it, and she was too old now to start learning, she thought bleakly.

She closed her eyes. All she had left was Ollie. Even with his bald head and fat stomach and lodge meetings and "business trips" and yuck-yucking laughter, the house had always seemed brighter when Ollie entered it. She knew he tolerated her as he might a housekeeper, and while other women might let him buy them dinners and liquor and spend his money, she knew none of them could stomach him as a husband. But she didn't care. As long as she had Ollie, she at least had somebody to lay a palm on her brow when she was

ill, even if he did do it with annoyance.

Yes, Ollie was all she had left. And she was losing him. Losing him . . . losing him. . . . The words raced in her mind like an ungoverned carousel. She had known that Ollie had always had his eye on Sylvia Cotter. Ollie always had his eye on any good-looking woman. Berta hadn't missed the smirking way Ollie had hovered over Sylvia at the wedding reception over two months ago. He'd never got to first base with Sylvia, and Berta hadn't worried too much. She didn't think he'd get far with Sylvia now, but still—she was losing him.

Losing him to what? Berta thought. That was the agonizing part. Losing him to madness, that's what!

Berta sat frozen as the thought lanced through her mind. Madness. Ollie was going mad. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. . . .

Berta regarded her face in the mirror, and the image seemed to whisper to her: Remember, Berta? Remember when Charlie and Sylvia Cotter returned from their honeymoon two months ago and settled in the old Carmichael place that Charlie had made the downpayment on? They went to Ollie's island—but in all the time they've been back they've not mentioned it, and when you talk about their honeymoon, Sylvia says nothing and Charlie looks scared and changes the subject. Remember how *different* Sylvia looked when she first got back, and how the difference has grown until the whole town has noticed. Like a languid flower blossoming, as if a fairy god-mother had laid a magic wand on Sylvia. Even her name rolled off the tongue differently now, liquidly, mysteriously. It wasn't just the new way Sylvia did her hair or wore her make-up, or the new clothes she chose. There was something . . . something . . . in Sylvia's eyes sometimes. You felt their weight fall upon your back like a web of black silk. You turned and looked into the eyes and for no reason, your throat thickened and you knew you were scared, but at the same time strangely drawn. They were depthless pools, Sylvia's eyes, centuries old, as if the light in them had once belonged to Cleopatra's face. . . .

REMEMBER, too, Berta, the way Charlie has changed, the weight he's lost, the haggardness that's grown over his face, the blankness in his eyes sometimes as if he's thinking . . . thoughts too dark for expression. Maybe he's heard the faint rumors that have started about the strange lights in the old Carmichael house that are seen occasionally in the dead of night, and the remark the groceryman made to the effect that Sylvia must have an army hidden up there, the way she buys groceries—boxes and boxes of them. With the price of food what it is, too, Berta.

The gaunt image in the mirror whispered to Berta. Remember Ollie most vividly, you haggard fool! Think of something to do! Remember that moment he looked at her when she first came back from her honeymoon. You could see it then. Her eyes charmed him. He made a fool of himself pawing at her hand that day. He couldn't sleep that night when you came home. You woke in the deep, dark hush of night to see him standing like a fat specter at the window, staring out into the moonlight, staring at the Carmichael place over yonder. You heard him breathe: "Sylvia . . . Sylvia. . . ." You never heard a name dribble off fat lips that way before, did you, Berta?

You knew in that moment that you'd lost him. This wasn't just another flirtation. This was something that caused a cold, nameless thing to clutch at your heart.

Remember the weeks that have passed, Berta. She's spurned him; she's loyal to Charlie. You know that, can sense it, from Ollie's actions. And it's driving him

mad. . . . He's lost his pride, turned utterly craven. He's deserted the office, and he tries to drink himself into one continuous stupor, but it does no good. She's always there, in his mind, easing away at his sanity. He's cracking up, Berta, going to pot, unshaven, unkempt. You know that he watches the old Carmichael place, hiding and staring, waiting for a glimpse of her as she flashes past a window. You saw him there just last evening as you were coming home. You saw his back, almost completely hidden in the shrubbery, but you knew it was him, watching that house. You didn't let him know you'd seen. You crept away, came home, because you were afraid to let him know. . . .

Yet he's all you have left, Berta, and you must save him. . . .

She rose to her feet before the dressing-table mirror. She was shaking. Her eyes gleamed at her in the mirror. She would fight!

She walked to the window. Outside was darkness. The hour was getting late again, and Ollie wasn't home. She looked at the baleful shadows of tall pines nodding in the night wind, and off in the distance, on the hill, she saw the old Carmichael place. Like an overgrown tomb. Like a bulky shadow against the night sky.

She started from the bedroom. She reached the head of the stairs, heard a door open and close downstairs. Then there was a little period of dense silence. "Ollie?" she said, peering down in the lower hall.

She saw his fat shadow reeling toward the stairs, indistinctly, as if the shadows down there were swirling, a part of them detaching and coming up the stairs.

He came into the light that spilled wanly from the bedroom at her back. His face was slick, flushed, and she knew he was very drunk. His clothes were rumpled; his bald head gleamed; his eyes were blank with torture; his hands shook violently.

"Ollie. . . ." She had to say it now! While her resolve was high. They had money, plenty of it. Now she knew what the money was to be spent for. Tomorrow when he awakened, the sun of a bright, new place must be shining in his eyes!

"Ollie, we're going away. Now, tonight."

He seemed to see her for the first time. His fat face twisted. He said, "No."

"Please, Ollie! Now—we'll pack a couple of bags. The rest of the things we'll need we can send for. . . ."

"No!" he shouted, his lips trembling.

"But, Ollie. . . ." She weaseled up to him, slipped her arms about him. She saw him shudder under the touch of her hands. She saw his face work. Then she heard a stinging slap.

SHE DIDN'T feel the pain at first. She felt herself flung against the banister. She raised her hand to her cheek, and it felt numb and already swollen where his palm had lashed.

He's slapped me . . . slapped me!

She saw his face dimly, floating before her like a slick moon. She had idolized him, put up with anything, but the sting of his blow laced down inside her, bringing a dark bubble to the surface of her lonely, shrewish heart. For an instant she was aware of all his grossness, of his foolishness. Words came unbidden to her tongue. She was screaming at him, cursing him, ready to claw at him with taloned fingers. All the knots the past had put in her heart suddenly unraveled.

He seized her wrists. "Shut up! Berta, damn you. . . ."

The storm might have passed; in a moment she might have been on her knees, begging him to forgive her. But from downstairs, Ollie heard a soft ripple of laughter. As in a mist, floating distantly before him, he saw the loveliness of Sylvia's face down there in the lower hall.

Sylvia had entered so quietly he hadn't heard her. And how strange she looked—as if she weren't Sylvia, really, but a dark, ancient Power moving about in Sylvia's body. . . .

The liquid laughter came again. "Ollie . . . I knew. I could sense it. You've wanted to kill her a long time, haven't you?"

Berta choked on a scream.

"Listen to me, Ollie. . . ." The words writhed up the stairs, into Ollie's brain. "You hate her. You must be rid of her!"

"No . . .!" Berta sobbed. "Let me go, Ollie, you're hurting me. Quit staring at her like that, Ollie. Don't listen! I was wrong about her—she 's loyal to nothing but evil! Please, Ollie. . . ."

"Now!" the voice poured into Ollie's ears. "Now, Ollie! Just one push!"

He cried out hoarsely and shoved. He heard Berta's scream torn off, heard Berta's body falling down the stairs. He stood crouched at the stairhead, panting, his face oil-slick, looking at Berta's form down there at the foot of the stairs. The way her mouth lolled open . . . the way her eyes stared . . . neck broken, he thought numbly.

He stumbled down the stairs, and Sylvia laughed again. It chilled him to the core. "No! Sylvia, don't laugh at me that way!"

"They'll get you, Ollie! You know what they do to murderers, Ollie!"

"You—you devil!" He stumbled toward her, tried to seize her. She laughed and eluded him. His hand caught in the lip of her jacket pocket. The movement swung her around. They struggled for a moment and a tiny silver scroll tumbled from her pocket, landing silently on the carpet.

She broke away from him. "Stand back, Ollie! You can't move! You can't harm me, understand?"

He stood with his hands hanging at his sides, shaking his head numbly from side to side, watching her fading down the hall. Then she was gone, and he knew he was alone. Volition came back to him, and he turned off the lights here in the lower hall. Murderer, he thought. Murderer! He whimpered. He wanted a drink to steady him.

He stumbled toward the door that entered the living room from the hall. He was almost there when he stopped. He heard footsteps, crossing the front porch, stopping at the front door. . . .

He gasped for breath, pressing back against the wall, listening. A knock, a rapid tattoo of knuckles on the front door. Ollie felt sweat sliding down his face.

The knock came again. Ollie's hand inched out, seeking. On the old-fashioned table beside the halltree sat a heavy bronze vase. His fat, slick fingers closed about the neck of the vase.

" 'Ey, Ollie!" It was the voice of Charlie Cotter.

Ollie's quivering fat lips formed silent words, "Why'd he have to come! Why'd Cotter have to show up!" Ollie clutched the vase, wondering if he would have the strength to hit Charlie. A sudden sense of his own craven cowardice swept over Ollie, and he hated himself. He wished himself dead.

Out there, beyond the door that separated life from death, Charlie Cotter knocked again. Briscombe didn't move, vase clutched, waiting. . . . Then a foot scuffed on the porch; steps went across the porch, fading from Ollie's ears. . . .

GOING down the dark walk, Charlie Cotter glanced back at the Briscombe house. Only that one light burning upstairs. He guessed that Berta had gone to sleep up there with the light on. He wondered where Ollie was; he needed to see him about the Wanderly abstract. He shook his head; Briscombe and Associates was going to hell. And I know why Ollie is acting the way he is, Charlie thought.

When a man falls in love with another man's wife. . . . But he wouldn't admit it, and he wondered how long he could keep his head in the sand. Something was going to happen; he could feel it. Sooner or later, the sand would get suffocating.

He drew his hand wearily across his face, started his light coupe and drove home.

Funny that he should still think of it as the old Carmichael place. He paused in the driveway, where he left the coupe, looking at the house. It was a large, frame structure, dark now, a wise old hulk on the earth. A benign place—until he and Sylvia had bought it. Now it was a dwelling place for shadows, for something strange had entered the house with Sylvia. Charlie thought of the past two months. Those strange nightmares of hers. Or were they? The night he'd found her walking in the garden . . . sleepwalking, with that expression on her face. . . . And the cats.

Three cats had more or less adopted the place, hanging around since nobody knew when. But the day Charlie and Sylvia had moved in, the cats had retreated, backs arched, fangs showing, mouths spitting. Sylvia had said, "Nice kitties . . . kitty, kitty." The cats had screamed in terror, had run from the place, and for a moment Sylvia had been utterly strange to Charlie as she had thrown back her head and laughed. He didn't like to remember that laughter. It still sent chills down his spine. Then the laughter had broken off, and she was in his arms, trembling. "Charlie, what came over me? Why were the cats so afraid. Was I laughing, Charlie?"

He had held her that day, throat dry, knowing this place would never be home. The cats hadn't been seen since.

Now Charlie mounted the dark porch. He was so tired he was swaying. He entered the house, went up the stairs. Egyptians and cats—he tried to remember. What was it about Egyptians of ancient times and their cats? He tried to shake aside the thought. Egypt reminded him of Lawson, of Steven Lawson who had died so horribly on that Florida island. He had read all about Lawson's death in the papers. It had developed that Lawson was quite a famous man. Charlie had saved copies of those papers of two months ago. But he wouldn't think about it now. He didn't want to think of anything. He craved sleep. He hoped that tonight Sylvia would rest well.

He opened the door to her bedroom. Pale moonlight spilled across her sleeping face. Charlie looked at her several moments, tiptoed to the bed and kissed her cheek. Then he went through the door into his own adjoining bedroom, leaving the connecting door open. He undressed in the dark. As he lowered the sash halfway for the night, he looked across the distance to where Ollie Briscombe's house stood. He couldn't see anything of it, which meant that someone had turned off that upstairs light. Charlie hesitated, then decided the Wanderly abstract would have to wait. He didn't feel like getting dressed again.

HE SLEPT like a man drugged, and waking was a long process next morning. He heard the pattering of rain, looked out his window to find a grey, muggy day waiting him. He pattered into Sylvia's room. She had been very quiet during the night, he thought, and now she lay sleeping softly, a half-smile on her lips, her face framed in the curled position of her arm.

Charlie got into his slippers and robe, went downstairs. He put coffee on, and while it made, he went out and got the paper off the front porch. Back in the kitchen, he lighted a cigarette and ran his fingers through his hair. It was hair that would never turn grey, because it had a grey cast to its sandy color already; it was drab hair that mussed and stood on end

when Charlie slept and never stayed put.

He puffed on the fag, opened the paper. Black headlines leaped at him: FIEND AT LARGE!

Charlie read the story, unaware that the coffee was on the verge of boiling over. Terror had come to Leeston during the night. The Leeston *Herald* had stopped the presses to include the story.

Entering Blackstock Funeral Home sometime last night, an unknown fiend made away with the body of Mary Evelyn Ledford, age 5. Entry evidently was effected through the ambulance entrance, near which the night attendant slept. The attendant told police that he had heard no one enter. Obviously shaken, the attendant denied that anyone could have gotten past him. Police have reminded him that someone did.

Mrs. Edgar Ledford, mother of the child, collapsed at the news that her daughter's body had disappeared. Mary Evelyn, the child, was drowned just forty-eight hours ago while playing on the riverbank with two other children. Brad Ledford, the father, a factory worker, received the latest news with tears in his eyes. "Somehow," he stated, "this is even more horrible than her dying, if anything could be. Please tell in your paper that we're begging for her body back—we can't just never know what happened to her! Ask whoever took her to please send us a note and tell us where the body can be found so we can give her burial."

Police are on emergency duty. In the event that this is a wave of fiendish actions just beginning, Chief Rickard assured the press the ghoul will find Leeston well patrolled. "Little Mary Evelyn Ledford's body will be found," Rickard promised.

The child's body was wearing a pink burial dress with the initials MEL on the left shoulder at the time of the disappearance. Citizens are urged . . .

The coffee hissed, boiling over. Charlie dropped the paper on the floor, made his breakfast. He went up and dressed. Sylvia was still asleep. Back downstairs, he scraped his dishes, stacked them in the sink. The garbage container was full. He picked it up, ducked into the slowing drizzle outside.

He crossed the back yard to the old-fashioned incinerator, opened it to toss the

garbage in. A wreath of acrid smoke curled out at him. He frowned. He hadn't fired the incinerator in three or four days. He bent, peered in. The incinerator was faintly warm, as if the rain during the night, down the old, open chimney, had beat a fire out. He saw the charred cloth as the smoke cleared, picked up a stick and fished it out.

He stood with the cloth in his hand, staring at it, while his brain heaved in his skull and the grey morning came down to wrap him like a shroud.

How much deeper can you put your head in the sand, Charlie? No deeper now, no deeper now! Look in your hand, Charlie. It's the remains of a child's pink organdy dress. Charlie. Perhaps a burial dress? Look—the initials on the left shoulder are MEL. It seems that Sylvia might not have slept so well after all, doesn't it, Charlie?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Possessed

CHARLIE COTTER crumpled the scorched dress in his hand and stuffed it under his shirt. It was not too bulky. It seemed to sear his flesh, like acid. Hide it, he thought, destroy it—but some place far from here!

He looked about the backyard. No one should be there, and no one was—but you had to be careful; you never knew when somebody might pass.

He moved toward the house, feeling the cold of the morning drizzle, feeling the chill of terror eating into his insides until he was ready to cry out. He clenched his hands into hard fists at his sides and went into the living room.

Yes, now he had his head out on the sand, and he knew, he *knew!* He could see everything with a startling clarity. He listened for sounds overhead, heard none. She was still asleep. Somehow before she woke, he had to figure this thing out. No matter what happened, he couldn't let her come to the same end that had come to Steven Lawson.

He jerked open the drawer of the kneehole desk; the papers were there. Two months' old papers, giving details of Steven Lawson's death. He had saved them because his name was in them, Ollie's island was in them—and because he must have known that this moment would come, this moment when he had to find a clue to a way to save her. . . .

He sat down carefully, forcing his hands steady. He lighted a cigarette, unfolded the papers. Steven Lawson's picture looked up at him, except that it was younger than the face he'd seen on Lawson. The caption read: "Archaeologist Dies." There was a summary of the finding of Steven Lawson's body by a honeymooning couple on a Gulf island off the Florida west coast. There were the baffled statements of the police and coroner as to the cause of death. The coroner stated that it was his conclusion that Lawson had suffered a mental aberration which led him to starve himself to death. "I must admit there was plenty of food in the cottage occupied by Lawson," the coroner's statement read, "but he must have been mad. He must have been destroying or hiding the food, perhaps under the delusion that he had consumed it. To date, we have been unable to find where he was putting the food."

He was eating it, you fool, Charlie thought wildly, *eating it!*

Charlie read on:

> The whole archaeological world will mourn the passing of Steven Lawson. He will be remembered mainly for his work in Egyptology. During his lifetime, he led his profession in discovery of facts about the ancient inhabitants of the Nile basin. The books he authored include the famous *Vanished Civilization,* in which he attempted to prove that in many ways the ancients were far in advance of our modern society. "They merely turned their research in dif-

ferent paths," Steven Lawson wrote. "They reduced astrology to a science, far in advance of the sham it is today. While we of the modern world have turned our minds to the material, the ancients of the Nile devoted their research to the occult. Some records, some traces, of the results they achieved are beyond belief. . . ."

Lawson was the discoverer of the tomb of Tumbok, a pharoh of an early dynasty. Tumbok is known to the layman as the author of the Tumbok Curse, which Lawson himself deciphered. While science of course can give it no credence, many will doubtless speculate on Lawson's strange death, since part of the curse states: "Hunger you and be cursed who defiles this place."

Lawson was fifty-seven at the time of his death. He is survived by no close relatives.

Charlie dropped the papers on the desk. He was sweating, sticky, in the damp morning. Realization had come gradually, but still he was stunned. He couldn't believe it—yet he had to. It couldn't have happened—yet it had.

He could feel the sweat pouring down in his eyes now. Fairy tale, Charlie? Feel the scorched dress against your skin! It's got her, Charlie, just as it had Lawson. Lawson was a Brain. He knew. He realized that in all the tales of nether beings and all the superstitions of man there must be a basis in fact. What does man know, anyway, Charlie? Can he even explain light, electricity, magnetism? Can he slice a brain open and find a thought? Those ancients of the Nile knew many things we do not, Charlie. How they built the pyramids, their method of embalming, all secrets lost to us. What other secrets of theirs have vanished in the dim mists of many centuries? Remember the curse of the King Tut tomb, Charlie? Recall some of the legends? Lawson discovered some of those secrets that he was afraid to publish. Remember that those ancient men each had a lifetime of his own to work and delve; they weren't just shadows because they lived so long ago, Charlie. Where did their sorceries lead them? To the key that unlocked the door on some nether world? To a being, a creature, a thing—whatever you want to call it—that they locked up in the Tumbok tomb?

When Lawson went into the dark depths of the tomb, the thing was there like a leech. You saw what it did to him, Charlie. It took possession of him more and more, until in horror Lawson ran to that Florida island and shut himself away. Lawson saw the depths of degradation to which he was sinking. He had to rid himself of the thing. Kill it, and he could think of only one way to do it. He tried to starve the thing out—because Lawson realized that the thing had a cannibal hunger. . . .

There they are, Charlie, facts, right in front of your nose, finally. No hiding your head in the sand, now. When Lawson died, the thing was homeless, but Sylvia was there, struggling in the water, life slipping from her, leaving a door open for the thing to creep in. . . . Now it's got her, Charlie. She's sick as Lawson was sick. Only you can help her. You can't tell anybody about this, not in this day and age. You can only struggle blindly, knowing at least that Lawson's method was the wrong one.

CHARLIE pushed himself to his feet. Overhead, he heard the patter of feet in her bedroom. His throat worked; his lips were grey. He went up to her room and knocked. She opened the door, straightening her dress. Her eyes looked tired today, and he saw now that her hair was faintly damp.

"A little mist must have blown in on my pillow," she said. "How are you this morning, darling?"

"I—I'm fine," Charlie said.

"You're all ready for work?"

"Yes," said Charlie.

"Please hurry home, darling." She put her arms about him. "I had an awful nightmare last night. I dreamed I was moving, silently as a cat, and I could feel mist in my face."

"It was the mist blowing in your win-

dow," he said. His voice got harsh, loud: "Forget the dream! Swear you'll forget it!"

She looked at him and nodded. He turned toward the stairs. "I'll be late," he said. Then he went down. On his way out he passed through the kitchen and picked up the morning paper. He didn't want her to see it; he threw it in the incinerator as he went to the garage.

He drove his coupe down the drive. He had to get her away—soon! They might somehow trail the organdy dress that lay against Charlie's stomach to Charlie's incinerator. . . . He would see Ollie. He'd make some kind of arrangement about the business . . . give some excuse. Just get her away and try to solve the problem.

Solve it, Charlie? Who are you? Steven Lawson knew about these things, but it was a problem he couldn't solve. . . .

The grey mist of morning closed in about Charlie Cotter as he drove to Ollie Briscombe's house.

He rapped on Ollie's front door. He was trying to frame words in his mind. Wonderful opportunity in Richmond for me, Ollie, if I can just get there immediately and grab it. Knew you'd understand. Now, about the business here. . . .

He pounded on the door. He waited, and nothing happened. Somebody was in there, damn it—somebody had to be in there. He had noticed Ollie's car parked far up the drive under the canopy of trees, as he'd driven up.

Charlie put his hand on the knob, tried it. It turned. The door gave. He could see a little of the gloomy, barren hallway through the crack he made with the door. He let the door swing wider and thrust his head on in. "Oll. . . ." The word melted and died in Charlie's throat. He clutched the door jamb and stared for a moment, realizing that the huddled mound of shadows at the foot of the stairs was a human being.

Charlie pushed the door back, and when he reached the stairway, he saw that it was Berta; he saw, too, that she must have been dead for hours. Over on the carpet, he saw something that gleamed. He picked it up. It was that tiny silver scroll that he'd seen once in Sylvia's things, he couldn't mistake it. He remembered it because of the evasive way she'd kept him from seeing it, laughingly saying that a woman has her personal little objects sometimes. He'd respected that. But now an awful knowledge rocked him—Sylvia had been here . . . and Berta was dead!

He moved quickly now, down the hall. "Ollie!" There was no answer. Then, toward the rear of the house, he heard the light bumping noise. A doorway was open to his left, leading down to the basement. The bumping came from there. Charlie eased down the basement stairs.

He saw the shadow first, swaying back and forth slowly, suspended in the air. He jerked his gaze around, and there was Ollie's body, hanging on a short length of rope from an overhead pipe. An overturned crate was near Ollie's feet, and Ollie was swaying in time to the breeze that puffed through the small open window in the side of the basement. Ollie's heels gently thumped against the wall.

Charlie shut his eyes. He realized what had happened. Ollie had broken Berta's neck, and then his own. But the little silver scroll? There wasn't time to think of that now. There'd be time later.

Ollie had been acting strangely of recent, like a man possessed. . . . Charlie's head jerked up. The organdy dress burned against his skin. Yes, Ollie *had* been acting cracked as hell lately. . . .

TREMBLING, Charlie made his way to Ollie's furnace and dropped on his knees there. The furnace had been cold for weeks and wouldn't be in use again for many weeks to come; Charlie jerked the door open. He saw a stack of old papers in the corner of the basement. He

crossed to them, crumpled a mass of them in his hands, and thrust them into the furnace. He touched a light to the papers, let them char about the edges, then smothered them out. And on the charred papers in Ollie's furnace, Charlie Cotter placed the organdy dress with the initials MEL. He did it carefully, matching up the charred edges of the dress and those of the papers.

He rose, trying not to think of what he had done. Ollie was dead, wasn't he? It couldn't hurt Ollie, could it? Of course there were a few relatives of Ollie's. . . . Life wouldn't be pleasant for them after this. They might have to pull up stakes, sacrifice jobs and homes, considering the kind of small town Leeston was. . . .

"I won't think about it," Charlie muttered. "I can't afford to. It's for Sylvia . . . for Sylvia. . . ." He turned and hurried up the stairs. He tried to fight away the feeling that in some fiber of him death and decay had set in like insidious dry-rot. "For Sylvia . . ." Charlie mumbled.

He wiped his hands, composed himself when he reached the upstairs hall. He went down the hall to the phone, picked it up. "Operator! Get police headquarters! Get them over to Ollie Briscombe's house right away. Something terrible has happened!"

He had to go out on the porch to wait for them. He didn't think he could stand the house any longer. He sat down on the porch steps. What if they didn't find the organdy dress? But they would. Right there in the basement—where Ollie had died. They'd give the basement a very thorough going-over.

They did. Three of them in blue came. Charlie had to go in with them. Inside of fifteen minutes one of the cops had noticed the open door of the furnace. A little poking around, and he brought out the pink dress.

Charlie let his breath out. Come what may, it was too late to turn back now.

The news rocked Leeston, as Charlie had known it would. Ollie Briscombe, Fiend. . . . People stopped by the office all day, morbid in their curiosity, offering condolences to Charlie. "Must have been a shock to find him like that, huh, Charlie? Just going down to try to get his attention on some business, and found him and Berta like that? Well, Ollie always was a sort of queer one. Good for him he killed himself."

Good for him he killed himself. . . . Charlie tried not to think about it.

If news that Ollie Briscombe was a body snatcher and murderer rocked Leeston, the mystery was brought to an even more painful height when the body of the Ledford girl was not found. Police tried to control the people, but great crowds swarmed over Ollie's place in the late afternoon. Bands of men hunted the area. But nobody found the child's body.

Charlie somehow got through the day, living in a mental vacuum that was like hard, never-ending pain. If the body were found, if there were anything about it to point to somebody other than Ollie . . . well, they'd recall Charlie had discovered Ollie. Charlie had been in Ollie's house alone before the arrival of the police. They might question him again. They might wonder. They might ask him if he knew anything about that charred dress in Ollie's furnace. But the body wasn't found.

Charlie went home that evening, fagged. He pecked at the dinner Sylvia set before him. She, too, talked of Ollie and what a shame it was. Charlie watched her innocent face, listened to the innocent words that fell from her lips, and he wanted to weep.

He knew he would have to get her away from here. But not too quickly now. Nothing to arouse the tiniest shred of suspicion. He would have to watch her closely, carefully.

Charlie Cotter became the watchdog of the damned.

He moved into her room that night, and after she was asleep, he locked the door. There was no way down from the second-floor window. He lay touching her as she slept. The darkness was a shroud of black fear, and he did not sleep until almost morning.

IN THE NEXT two days, Charlie let it be known that he was quitting Leeston shortly. He was grey like a walking dead man; his eyes mirrored horror. The shock of what had been done by Ollie, his friend and business associate, was killing Charlie, people said. They didn't blame him for wanting to leave. Charlie was glad they put such an interpretation on his appearance.

Ollie Briscombe's relatives buried him as quietly as possible.

The day after Ollie's funeral, Charlie came home late. There was almost a spring in his step. Leeston had accepted his reasons for leaving. Leeston's sympathy would go with him. For a couple of days now he must work like a demon, get everything straight. A hard-shelled cousin of Ollie's would take over the office. Charlie would reduce everything he owned to liquid assets. Beyond that, he wasn't sure. He knew only that there was danger, imminently, for Sylvia here. There was too much chance that when and if the Ledford child's body were found, there'd be some evidence that pointed *away* from Ollie Briscombe. One step at a time, Charlie, and getting her away was the first one. After that—well, he would figure out what to do next.

He ate his dinner, busied himself a while on some book work he'd brought home. Sylvia kissed him good-night and went upstairs. Charlie kept at it another hour, his eyes tired, feeling as if they were full of grime. He yawned, stretched, pushed the work back on the kneehole desk, and went upstairs.

Sylvia was already in bed. Charlie undressed in the dark, slipped in beside her.

Charlie awoke in a vacuum of silence. He knew it was very late, very calm outside with a pale moon spilling cold light on the earth. He was groggy for a few seconds, wondering what had awakened him. Then he knew. He hurled himself up out of bed, grabbing for a light. It snicked on. The door was standing open. Sylvia was not in the room.

He grabbed his shoes, slipped them on, threw a robe about his shoulders. He ran downstairs. The back door of the house was standing open. He stood a moment, trembling, staring into the night; its hush ate at his eardrums; the soft whisper of the breeze in the eaves was the sibilant laughter of demons. . . . You were so smart, Charlie! You were such a light sleeper. You were sure she would awaken you. But *she* could go anywhere without awakening anyone. She found the key. Now she's gone. . . .

Charlie stumbled out in the back yard. He caught a glimpse of something white off there in the trees. He went running toward the thing, and when he was in the trees, he caught another glimpse of her, flitting through the night there in front of him.

"Sylvia. . . ."

She went up through the woods, up the long, sloping hillside. Charlie lost sight of her twice. He was reeling, and the trees were reeling about him, grotesque, live shadows, like strange beings reaching for him with long, leafy arms. He paused on the crest of the hill, panting. She had gained on him. Now she had disappeared again.

Off in the pale, moonlit distance, at the end of the long hill, he saw the faint, luminous glow of moonlight on headstones. The cemetery down there—and through the forest of headstones, through the moonlight, he caught another glimpse of her. She was a good distance away, and looked small, like an animated doll,

running through a toy city of the dead.

The cry knotted in Charlie's throat and couldn't come out. He ran down the long hill. He tore through brush and undergrowth at the edge of the cemetery. His foot sank in the softness of a grave. His breath was tearing in and out, his eyes throbbing, looking for her.

Five minutes clocked away while Charlie reeled his way along, not thinking, not daring to think. Then he saw her ahead, at a fresh grave—at the spot where Ollie Briscombe had been buried a matter of hours ago.

He saw something else, too—the dim figure of the watchman going toward her. He heard the watchman say, "Here! What are you doing!"

The watchman had a light; he threw it against her, and Charlie heard him shout, "Your hands—you've been tearing at the grave! You—you're Mrs. Cotter!"

Charlie was moving forward, numbed. He tried to reach her before the watchman, but his legs were lead, his breath was thick, hot syrup in his lungs. He saw the watchman approach her, try to take hold of her. But she fought. Charlie could hear the watchman's outcry and the animal sounds of her fighting. . . .

Charlie closed in on the watchman, and the man slugged with the light in his hand. Charlie staggered back, clinging to the watchman, dragging him. Charlie sensed that Sylvia had broken away. He slugged at the watchman, but the man was wiry and tough. They tripped, fell, rolled together, fighting in the earth of a fresh-turned grave.

The light rose and fell again; pain lanced through Charlie's skull. He held to the man grimly, got his fingers on the light, wrung it from the man's hands. It was his turn now to slug with the light, and the watchman went limp beneath him.

Charlie staggered to his feet over the unconscious man. He looked about for her, but didn't see her. He made a circuit of the cemetary, but still caught no sight of her. At last, Charlie wearily headed for home.

She was in the kitchen when he got there.

HE HADN'T expected to find her there. He stood looking at her a moment. He'd had one glimpse of her eyes there in the cemetery, and they hadn't been human eyes. Not Sylvia's eyes, but eyes that reflected the dark secrets of an Egyptian tomb. . . . Now her eyes were sane again, and her chin was trembling, and Charlie felt like wetting her face with tears of pity.

"You're washing your hands," he said.

A sob shook her.

Charlie moved over to her, slipped his arm about her. He held her tight, staring over her head into a horrible blankness. She pressed her head against his chest and let the dam burst. Charlie had never heard such bitter weeping in his life. It brought fire to his throat and hot tears to his own eyes. He thought he had suffered —but now he thought of what she must have endured. He hated that thing that had been back there in the cemetery. He loathed and hated it with all the passion

of the human for the inhuman. But that had not been Sylvia! This, now, was Sylvia, and he pitied and loved her to bitterness. A strange, new strength rose in him, a resolve gathering in him like a hard, glittering diamond.

"Charlie . . . I just had another nightmare. . . . But it wasn't a dream, was it?"

"No, darling."

"None of them have been just dreams, have they?"

"No," he said.

"It was me that went in the funeral home, wasn't it? It wasn't Ollie?"

He swallowed and said, "It wasn't Ollie."

Distantly, footsteps sounded out on the front porch. Charlie heard a hammering on his front door. Unmoving, he listened. A voice out there shouted, "Open up, Cotter, it's the law!"

So the watchman had regained consciousness. The watchman had called the law. They had come for her. They were here, ready to tear her away, to question her. But they wouldn't have to question long. She would tell. She would blurt everything in her hurt and pain.

She shrank against him.

Yes, they would learn everything. They'd learn it hadn't been Ollie. They'd shut her away. They wouldn't understand! And the sickness would grow on her as it had grown on Lawson, until she died as Lawson had died, in horrible pain, a ravening beast in a padded cell. . . .

Tears stung Charlie's eyes. Over her shoulder, he saw the gleam of a long kitchen knife that lay on the drainboard. He reached behind her, and his fingers closed over the knife. The front door shook under the thunder of blows. Any minute now they'd break in from out there.

Charlie brought the knife up behind her. He couldn't let them hurt her. He couldn't let them shut her away to go as Lawson had gone. A groan issued from his lips —because neither could he bring the knife any closer to her.

She was looking in his face. She had never been exactly the same Sylvia since they'd come from their honeymoon, but now, for just an instant, she was. She said, "They're breaking in, Charlie. Please, Charlie?"

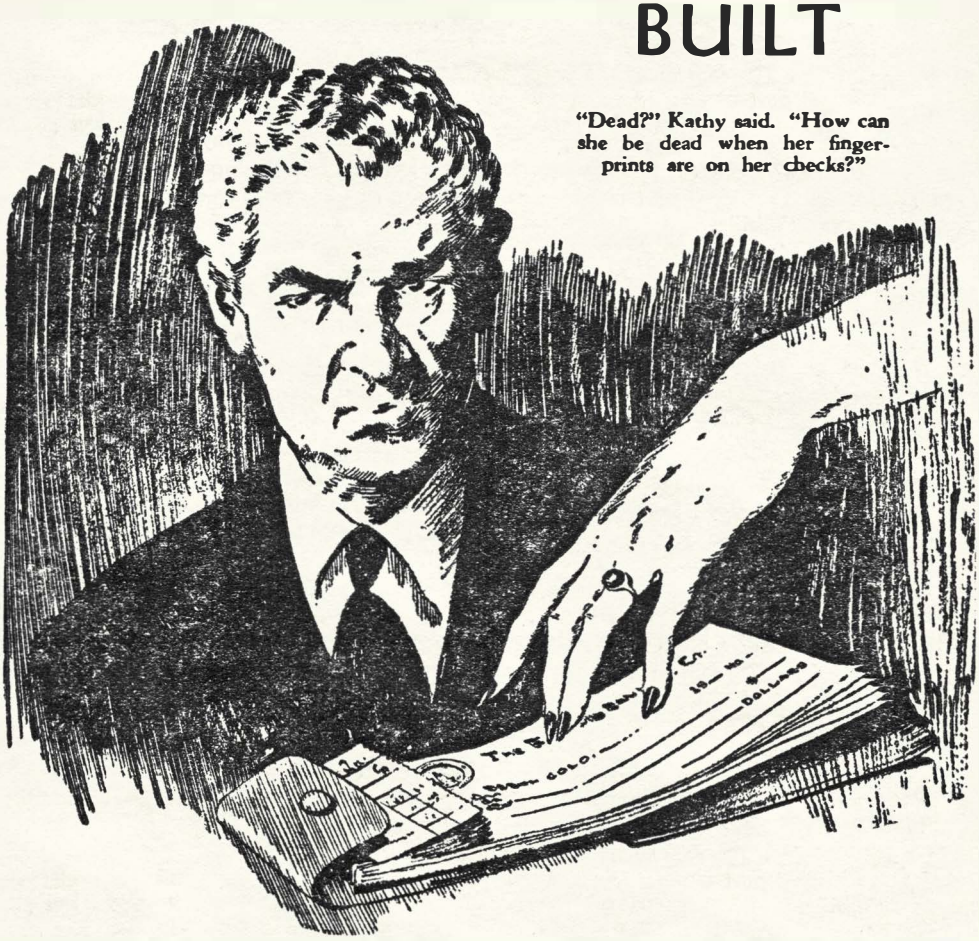
And he felt her hand creeping behind her, closing over his own fingers that held the knife. She tried to smile. She placed her lips to his, closed her eyes—and made a little movement with the hand in back of her, and the knife was swallowed up by her body. A paroxysm of pain tore her, stiffened her, snapped her teeth together, and Charlie felt the sting in his lip where her teeth had closed. He knew with an awful black dread that she had drawn a drop of blood. He knew what had happened to him. But she hadn't meant to. Maybe it had been inevitable for it to turn out this way from the beginning. He'd tried to protect her this far—he would play it through to the end. He turned his head quickly away to keep her from seeing the little drop of blood. She breathed something that sounded like, "Thank you, Charlie," and went limp in his arms.

They found him in there with her, weaping and babbling. He told them his lip stung from the cut on it—when no cut was there, though there was a spot on his chin that looked like dried blood that had dripped there. He continued babbling about the way a man named Lawson had died until they called in the state psychiatrist to see if Charlie Cotter was sane.

He was. Yet in his cell, hands hanging between his knees, he looked a little mad. He was trying to figure it out. He was remembering that Sylvia had drowned on the honeymoon. Or had she? He was stupid about such things. He knew now that he had been mistaken. She had lain

(Continued on page 96)

THE HOUSE THAT MURDER BUILT



"Dead?" Kathy said. "How can she be dead when her fingerprints are on her checks?"

By JOE KENT

The dead hand of Joan Grant pointed to her killer. . . . But what sane person will believe the testimony of the dead?

IT WAS the same place. A square little brick house with a handkerchief-patch of starved grass in front and a six-foot run of evergreen hedge under the front window. It was precisely like every other house in the block. Mike knew it only because of the broken piece in the concrete walk, where he had stumbled and fallen the first time.

"Linden Street," she had told him, the girl with the eyes of gold. That was over a year ago. "Number 49, Linden

Street," she had said and her lips were yearning. All of this was over a year ago.

This was a year later, now. And this was Linden Street. Number 49, with the crack in the sidewalk. Linden Street in Brooklyn, New York, and Mike had drunk five bourbons. He was remembering. He knocked.

A man answered the door. He was short and wiry, with copper-colored hair. It was hot and he was in shirt-sleeves. He was forty-five, Mike estimated, so he wouldn't be her husband, maybe. Probably her father.

"Is Joan here?" he asked. His voice sounded fuzzy. He was leaning against the door-frame.

"Joan?" The man blinked his black eyes behind the glasses.

"Joan. She lived here last year. I was here when she lived here. I wanted to ask her something," he said doggedly and very formally.

"Not here. Nobody— Wait a minute. A year ago? I bet I know. Come in and sit down a minute. All this stuff is new out here, you know. Numbers got changed and shifted; people moved in and out. I be I know." He left Mike waiting there and went into the hall. He dialed the telephone. Mike started to sit down and decided not to. He found himself staring at his own image in the mirror over the mantel. His dark eyes were glassy. He'd left his hat somewhere—probably at the Third Avenue bar. His face was lean, and he was just beginning to need a shave. Otherwise he looked about like any other reporter who was changing jobs and drinking. He heard the man talking at the phone, and other voices echoed from an inner room: "Call. . . . Raise twelve bucks. . . . I drop. . . ." A poker game, Mike realized. Then the copper-haired man returned

"Just like I thought. The place you're looking for is five doors down, this side of the street. They don't have a phone, though, and I don't think anybody's there. I was calling the people next to that house, and they remember the girl. They haven't seen her lately, though." He gestured widely. "Maybe you heard of me, I'm Gil Marson. I built all these houses. Marsonwood, I called it. Built it with my own money. Never borrowed a dime. Tried to get the right sort of people in, too, but I don't know so much about that certain house we're talking about. In fact, I bet you don't don't get in, even if you get an answer after knocking."

Mike was just drunk enough to pull out his billfold and put down a twenty. "That says I do. I've got some memories to straighten out."

Gil Marson dug and covered the twenty. "We'll still be playing when you get back, and I'll take your word."

Mike grinned. He *knew* he was going into that house. He'd been promising himself too long, and he'd had just enough drinks tonight. He walked down the five doors and knocked. Almost five minutes passed before he got an answer. "What?"

"Is Joan here?"

A long silence followed. "Who are you?"

"I want to talk to somebody about Joan. In fact, I am going to!

"Go away before I call the police!" the man shouted back.

"Sure, but I'll be bringing the police back with me! I came to talk about Joan, and I'm going to stay until I do!" Mike retorted.

Thirty seconds passed, then the lock began to turn. The door opened and Mike stepped in. Only one dim mantel light was on, and the man in front of him was swathed in an overcoat, even though it was summer. It started Mike to blinking. He took another look. The man was short, with copper-colored hair. *He was the man from the first house!* And this, Mike saw suddenly, was a vacant

house. Suddenly, even with his whiskey, Mike understood: The first house had been the one, but there had been a poker game there tonight. This man didn't want an audience for his next step. He—

Even as Mike's brain was closing in on the fact, the man began to fire from the folds of his overcoat. He fired three times. Mike tried to scream. He tried to turn, to run, He fell. He was dead before he hit the floor. . . .

IN PADDY'S BAR on Third, Kirk Layne frowned at the clock. It was late, almost two. Eddie was drunk. Bill had already gone, and Jeff had to go or get a divorce.

"He ain't coming," Eddie repeated thickly. "You listen to me. Mike is strictly d.t. Nothing's ever going to cure Mike."

"Is Mike a fast guy with the bottle?" Jeff asked. Jeff was young and this was his first year at the *Banner*.

"He was," Kirk said restlessly. "Something happened about a year ago. He met a girl—or *said* he did. Beautiful, as he told it. Met her at some theatrical cocktail party. I never got the straight of it, because I don't think it happened. Anyway, at dawn of that night, he was picked up and carried into St. Mercy Hospital. He'd fallen into an excavation and knocked the back of his head off. The only reason he didn't die was whiskey luck. But he swore he'd been slugged, and he screamed about beautiful girls and such. Finally we got him to take a cure. Now he's back on the bottle again." Kirk groaned.

"Well, I've got to go," and Jeff rose. Kirk knew there was no use waiting. He went home, too, to his walk-up on Forty-sixth Street. Mike's suitcase was still standing by the door, where he had left it. Kirk left the door unlocked, in case, and went to bed.

When he got up the next morning, his head ached. There was no Mike. He shaved and combed his sandy hair and tried to pry his eyes fully open. He looked like a gentle ex-pug, and that was precisely what he was. Big, gnarled hands, a crooked nose, warm brown eyes, and a way of getting mad very slowly but very completely. As a sports writer, he was as good as the best. But not today. Today he was thinking of Mike.

First thing down the office, the assistant editor got him, wanting to know where the bottle-boy was, his first day back to work. Kirk had caught all this last year, and he started growling. He started worrying, too. His head began to ache more. At two o'clock, he sent Jimmy over to cover the welcome-in of the baseball team, and he went home, half hoping to find Mike asleep on the couch. He didn't. He got to looking at the suitcase and worrying more, and thinking of the crazy story Mike had babbled about the thing last year. It never had made sense. Just something about this beautiful girl named Joan, and getting drunk, and going out to some new housing place, and she was dead. Only Mike never put it that way. "There was her hand." That was what he'd said. "There was her hand, the little topaz ring and all, just like I'd held it in the bar, but this time it was just a hand. Cut off, and there it was. . . ." So they'd gotten him to take the cure. . . .

Then the telephone rang. It was Jeff, still at the office. "Kirk, this isn't good, but I thought you better know. They've found a body and they think it's your friend, Mike. . . . Yeah. . . McBride is the dick's name. He said to call you. He's there, now."

"There" was a warehouse block of Brooklyn waterfront. The exact site was the condemned building that had once been the Gristom Trucking and Storage Company. McBride was there—a broad man with a gloomy face. It was in a large oil-and-grease-scented section of the

building. A broken motor block was on the filthy floor, with old oil cans, broken bits of chain and parts of a shattered spring. And Mike Shelley's body was there.

"Nobody's been in the place, they say around here, but the rats and stray cats, for over a year. Last time it was used, they were storing stuff for a housing project here. This noon some kid saw a pup run out here with a piece of shirt. Turned out it was bloodstained, and his mom called us." McBride studied Kirk sleepily. "When'd you last see him?"

"Last night. It was about 8:30, I think. You see, he'd just returned to New York. He had been . . . in an alcoholic home, but I'm afraid it didn't work. As soon as he got back, he wanted a drink and another, and the next thing he was mumbling to himself about the same old pink-elephant tale that had sent him away in the first place. He bolted out of the bar, saying he was going out there and look for sure. That's the last time I saw him."

"What was this he wanted to go look at?" McBride asked.

Kirk frowned. "You've got me. I can't make sense out of it. All I know, last year he met a girl in a bar or at a party or somewhere. A very beautiful girl, he said, and she invited him to come out after the big party broke up. She was some actress, he thought, and had a part in a play. Anyway, as I understand it, he went out to some new housing place in Brooklyn. He was drunk. He was apt to be that way. Then, *he said*, he walked in and there was the girl's hand, cut off at the wrist. Topaz ring and all. After that, we got him to take a cure. Last night he went back and . . . well, you know as much as I do."

McBride didn't look so sure. He chewed a match and studied the shape of Kirk's mouth. "Funny story," he said without being funny. "And you wouldn't know of any motive for murdering him?"

"No," Kirk said. "Some people didn't like him. Sometimes I didn't. When he was drunk, he was rough and sardonic. Sober, he was as good as the best. But no one wanted to kill him."

"The hell they didn't," McBride said.

KIRK went home. He knew, from the look in McBride's puffy eyes, that he'd see his again. He closed the door and saw Mike's suitcase. His first impulse was to leave it alone. He thought again, hesitated, then swung it up on the couch. It was strapped, not locked. There were a few shirts, underwear, ties, socks, one wrinkled summer suit, and a ragged assortment of papers, paper-clipped into a pack. There were all sizes of paper, all kinds; they were worn and wrinkled and written on. Kirk looked at them more closely and realized that they were notes from Mike to Mike; they were stubborn efforts to recall and record every remembered detail of that affair of a year ago. Upon one sheet was the word, "sidewalk." After it, beneath, was the word, "cracked," followed by a question mark. Then the question mark was crossed out. "Cracked sidewalk," came next. Then the words, "I know. I fell. Fell on cracked sidewalk. Sidewalk *was* cracked. Crack was close to front door."

Kirk backed to a chair and began to read all the pages. One entire sheet was covered with names: Logan, Lacey, Lemon, Laden, Linden. Then, under Linden were drawn several heavy lines, and another note from Mike to himself: "It was Linden Street. *It was.* The number was 49. I know, because I remember thinking about the Gold Rush of '49 when Joan told me. I am not crazy. It did happen. It happened at 49 Linden Street."

Another page was headed: "Details about the Room." Beneath was a list: "Rug was flowery and sort of red. Every-

thing looked new, like just bought. There was a bronze ashtray, looked like a dragon's head with mouth open and red teeth and ashes were in dragon's mouth. Ugly. I heard something. It was like a little wind behind me. I *knew* I heard something behind me that last moment. I'm not crazy. They think I'm crazy. They are wrong. It isn't d.t. stuff."

On another page: "Her name was Joan. I know that. The man at the hotel will know her last name, because she cashed a check. She cashed a check at the Pagoda Hotel, and the bald-headed man will know her name. The man named Gifford will know her, but I don't know his other name, either. . ."

On the last page, over and over, were the words: "I'm going back. I'm going back. I'm going back."

Slowly, Kirk put down the pages and lit a cigarette. He noted that his fingers were trembling. and a strange hollowness filled his stomach. Mike *had* gone back. he mused, and now he was dead. And all the things they had scorned as a pink-elephant nightmare? . . . Could they have been true?

Kirk stared at the pages again. The Pagoda Hotel . . . . He knew the place: a massive middle-class hotel in the Grand Central area. And a bald-headed man knew Joan's last name. *If there was a Joan* . . . . Slowly Kirk rose and thrust the pages into his pocket.

The bald-headed man who cashed checks turned out to be Mr. Wimbley, the cashier. Mr. Wimbley frowned and tapped his lip, then Mr. Wimbley thought it might have been Miss Joan Grant. That was the only Joan he knew who was an actress, though he hadn't heard of her lately. Perhaps Mr. Ed Dunbar would know. Dunbar, the producer.

Dunbar was just leaving his office when Kirk arrived. He was obviously impatient to get his martinis. "Joan Grant? Certainly I knew her! Had a bit in a play of mine, couple of years ago. Last I heard she was somewhere. I don't know. Quit the stage. Quit everything, just like that. Nobody ever saw her. Want to ride down with me?"

He rushed Kirk into the elevator. He was a big, florid man with a bowtie and horn-rimmed glasses and he panted instead of breathing.

"Lovely kid, she was. Lord have mercy, she had a world of money, too! Never forget: In she walked and said, could she be in a play if she put up the money to produce it? Heh, heh, heh. I said, Honey, sit over in this big chair. Heh, heh."

He rushed Kirk through the lobby and then they were moving down the street. "Yes. sir. Turned out she was an orphan from Colorado, Oklahoma, somewhere. Old man Grant was a copper king out there. Left this child and her sister mil-

lions, heh, heh. Well, we just produced her a play, all right, and damned if it didn't make a profit! Then she just went *pfft!* Gone into thin air. Alas for the good things that are gone. Well, here's where I toss away a drink. Joining me, old boy? No. Well, toddle-ho, and . . . odd, now I think of it," he said. "My secretary was telling me that Joan's sister was in town a week or so again, and she was up and asking where Joan was. *She* didn't know, either. Peculiar, indeed. Well, toddle-ho again and—"

Kirk left him talking and did a double-fast back to Dunbar's office. He caught the secretary—Miss Artley, a thin woman who sniffed—just before she departed. Miss Artley looked in her book and announced that Kathy Grant had, indeed, been in asking about her sister, and had left word to call her at the Grantham House if any information turned up.

Kirk left Miss Artley talking, too, and took a cab to the Grantham House on Central Park South. A feeling was growing in him that Mike not only hadn't been grog-crazy, but very, very right. And next came the feeling that Joan, with her copper millions, was just as dead as Mike.

THE GRANTHAM HOUSE was thin and tall and purple grey. Each floor made two suites: only two and also a profit. The lobby was full of velvet silence while the doorman called to know if a Mr. Kirk Layne should be admitted.

"Mention the name of Joan Grant," Kirk said impatiently. That did it. Happy hands eased Kirk into the elevator and up he went to Twelve and the suite that looked across the twilight in Central Park. A maid let him in, and then Kathy Grant appeared. Her hair was soft red-brown and her eyes were dusty gold. Nothing about her was wrong at all, and Kirk was looking closely. "Do you know anything about my sister?" she asked immediately.

"I may, but you're going to think I'm crazy. I thought the first guy was crazy when *he* told it. You better sit down while you listen." She looked at him with suddenly troubled eyes. Kirk lit a cigarette and walked up and down the room while he told her. He told her everything that Mike had told him; he showed her Mike's notes; and then he told of Mike's murder. When he finished, he looked at her. Her fingers were against her pale cheeks. She seemed to try to shake her head. She couldn't.

"Give me . . . one of those," she whispered as Kirk took out his cigarettes. He lit it for her. Her fingers were trembling. "It's a nightmare. It's too ghastly for anything in real life," she whispered. "But—but it's the first information of any kind, and some of it fits. Some of it . . . . But you don't understand. Listen. Our mother died when we were quite young. Father died only four years ago. He was wealthy. I stayed in Colorado. Joan wanted to be an actress. She studied, mostly in California, then she came to New York. She knows . . . or knew . . . nothing about money She backed a play and was lucky enough to make money. The next I heard of her—she almost never wrote letters—she was planning to finance a housing development. She often felt that she was so wealthy and others were so poor that she should do something. But she didn't *know* anything. The last I heard of her was just over a year ago. She's written since then. I mean, there have been letters, but that's the last time I heard her voice on the telephone.

"She was always funny. I mean, she'd go away and do things and be gone for long periods, and nobody bothered because that was her way. But since last year, bigger and bigger checks have been drawn on her bank account, signed with her signature. They total over four hundred thousand dollars. And her letters have been odd. They told me not to visit her or expect me to visit her, because she.

wanted to be alone; she wanted time to 'plan her life,' she said. The lawyers got suspicious in Colorado, but the signatures seemed accurate on the checks and Joan's fingerprints were always on them."

She paused and their eyes met. Kirk was thinking of the hand, the hand and its fingers. She was thinking of it, too, he knew. She ran her fingers through her hair and continued in a weary voice:

"Finally, when the money-drain became so great, the lawyers and I decided that I should come to New York and try to trace her. I put an ad in the papers yesterday. Several people called, but none of them were thinking of the right person. Except one man. He's coming this evening, and maybe he'll know. But . . ." She moved her shoulders in defeat.

Kirk nodded slowly. Instinctively he knew that Joan was dead. Mike had been right, all the while they had laughed at him and sent him away for a cure.

"Wouldn't you like a drink?" Kathy asked. "You're tired, I know."

"Thanks. I would," Kirk said. He watched her as she left the room. She was lovely. It was too bad he couldn't have met her somewhere else—another time, without the affair of Joan. If—

The bell rang in the depths of the apartment. Joan answered and Kirk heard her saying, "Oh, yes! Send him up, please." She came back with their highballs. "It's a man named Gil Marson. He's the one who called earlier, in answer to the ad."

"Maybe he'll have better news than I did," Kirk said, because her eyes wanted so much to hope for something. The doorbell rang.

GIL MARSON was a short but powerfully built man, with curly copper-colored hair, red-brown eyes, and a gentle voice. He'd read the ad, he said, and although he wasn't sure, he thought he might know something about a girl who sounded like that. If Miss Grant would not mind telling him a little more . . . ?

"I don't know," Kathy said wearily. "I mean, I don't know where to begin. She was like I described her in the paper. Mr. Layne knows more than I do, I'm afraid."

Gil Marson looked intently at Kirk. "You knew her?" he asked quickly.

"No. A friend of mine had a—a strange experience." And Kirk told him of the tale of Mike's which had ended in Mike's death. "We laughed about it at first, because Mike drank so much. I'm not laughing, now. I believe Mike, and I'm going to find out. As he said, 'I'm going back.'" Kirk grinned, but without humor. "I *am* going back."

Gil Marson's eyes began to glisten brightly. "Both of you, listen! I am the developer of Marsonwood. This young lady—I know her. Indeed, it must be the same. And she moved into the new development. Then, *whoosh!* Into thin air and nowhere! But this much I know," and he spoke softly. "You will come with me. I recall that a gentleman was quite curious about her. Inquiring of her financial situation. He attempted to purchase a house from me, then was unable to raise the money. Then he vanished—at the same moment that this Joan Grant vanished! Is that not odd?" he demanded. "You wish to come with me? I will permit you to look into my correspondence," he said to Kathy. "We will see who this gentleman was. Perhaps he can be traced. I have an intuition."

"Yes, of course. Of course, I want to know everything, anything," Kathy said swiftly.

"I'll go along," Kirk said.

"My car is downstairs," Gil Marson said. "I shall be honored." He bowed gallantly.

They drove downtown and over the Manhattan Bridge into Brooklyn, then into the outskirts where the new Marsonwood Village was located. Gil Marson parked in front of a trim brick house and

guided them up the walk and inside.

The house was quite new and the furniture seemed new, also. Gil Marson gestured to Kirk. "You will be seated, please. My wife is ill. I do not disturb her more than necessary, but if you will step this way—" he bowed to Kathy—"we will examine the correspondence."

She went with him, leaving Kirk alone. Kirk frowned. There was something in Marson's eager manner that Kirk didn't like. There was something about this new and chilly room that he didn't like, either. It hadn't been lived in. It reminded him of a hotel room that no one had ever occupied. He listened, and the house seemed strangely silent. Why couldn't he hear them talking, even softly? Where had they gone? In such a small house, noises should be heard.

He moved his shoulders restlessly. He was nervous. Nervous from thinking of Mike. Of Joan. Of everything about the—

Abruptly his thoughts clashed to a halt, then sped into sharp focus. He jerked the ashtray off the table and stared at it. It was fashioned in the shape of a dragon's head, with red teeth, and the open mouth received the ashes. He pulled Mike's notes from his pocket. It had been the same in the room Mike had remembered! And the crack in the sidewalk . . .?

Kirk listened. Still there was no sound save the pounding of his own pulse. He opened the front door and tiptoed down the walk. In the moonlight he found the crack. He straightened and stared at the house again. He strode back into the living room and, with the notes in his hand, glanced around the room. It must be, it *was* the same place! Even to the street number, 49!

Then . . . then this man, this Gil Marson was the murderer, Kirk realized. He had answered the ad, not to give information, but to learn how much information other people had. And now—

Kirk ceased thinking and started moving. He opened the door into the inner hall and shouted. No one answered. He threw open first one door, then another. There was a kitchen, a bath, one room fitted with a felt-covered table; there was a rack of poker chips at the side. The last door opened into a bedroom where the bed was smooth and unoccupied. There was not only no ill wife in the house—there was not even a Marson or Kathy!

One at a time is his idea, Kirk realized. First Kathy, then me!

He rushed back to the kitchen, from which the back door opened. The pale grey moonlight spread itself silently over the small back yard. To the left was a garage and, at the rear of the garage at a small window, a roaming light played around the edges of a drawn shade.

He ran across the patch of grass and around to the back of the garage. Here was a door. He seized the knob and jerked. The door was locked. He threw himself forward and slammed into the door with his shoulder. In the next moment the light within was extinguished. Kirk battered at the door again, and a third time. At the fourth lunge, the wood around the lock splintered and he went hurtling into the darkness, fighting to recapture his balance. He struck something that seemed to be a table and went down. He scrambled to his feet and stumbled forward.

AT THAT MOMENT the blinding beam of a flashlight cut across the darkness and focused itself squarely in his eyes. One instant later came the thundering blast of a gun. Kirk felt the cooling twitch of pain in his shoulder, then he made a blind grab at the object into which he had stumbled. He lifted it. It was heavy. He sent it hurtling wildly into the beam of light. As the gun roared again, he threw himself face down on the

floor. All in the same instant the heavy piece of table or chair crashed into the light and the light went out. Gil Marson grunted thickly in the darkness and Kirk scrambled in, fists flailing wildly. He caught solid flesh and bone and heard the agonized exhaling of breath. The gun erupted again and Kirk swung again. The sogginess of stunned flesh hit the floor and Kirk drew back and kicked in the direction of the sound.

A scream, strangled in pain and coarse with fear, was his answer. He kicked again and the scream was a broken moan. When he kicked the third time, his foot missed. Gil Marson, he knew, was down to stay. He felt both cold and hot at the same time and the darkness was spinning around him. He tried to pull out his matches. He heard shouts and voices outside the garage. They were coming nearer. He found his matches. He struck one and stared around him as he held onto the wall.

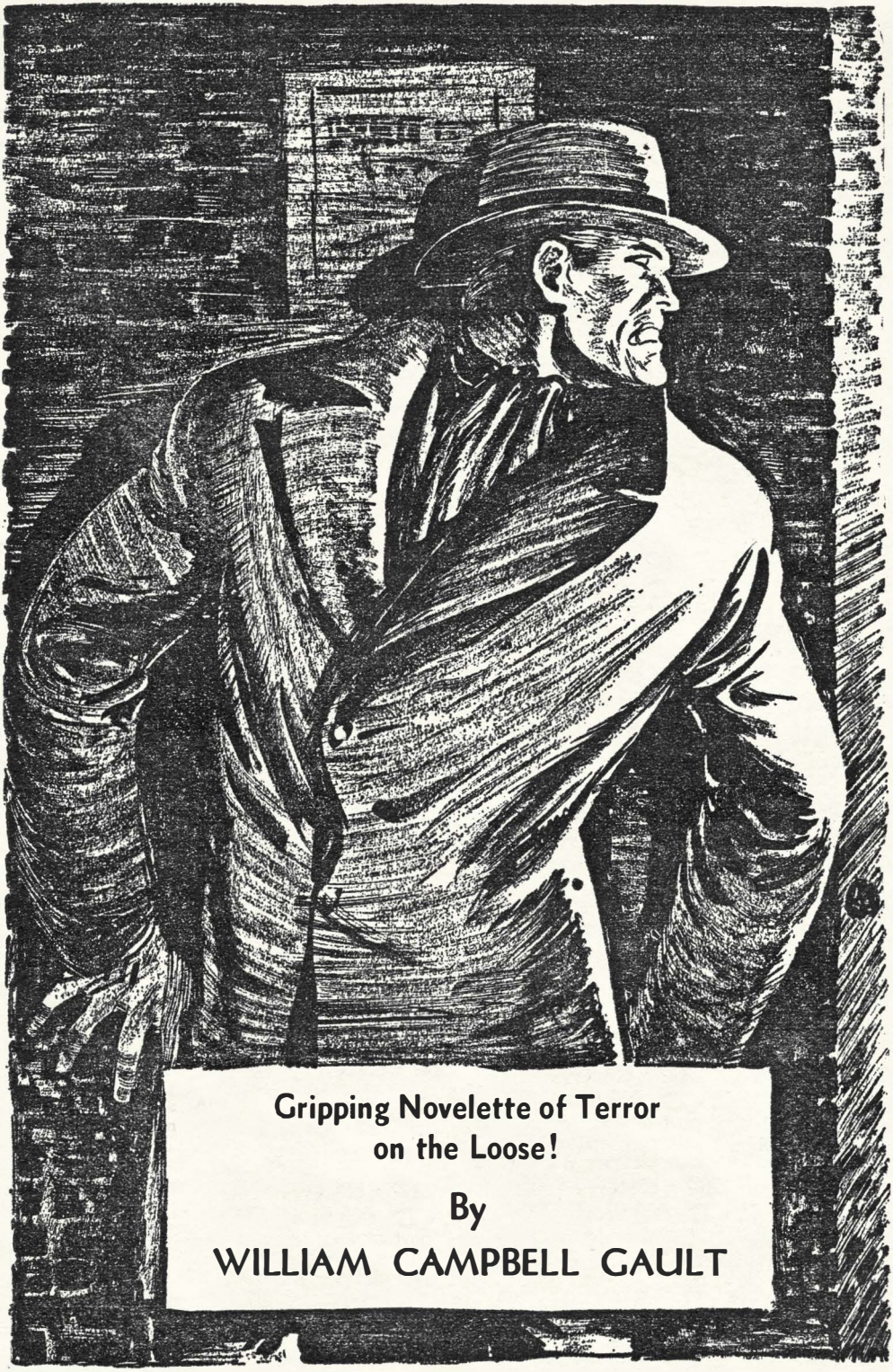
And then his eyes found Kathy's. Her arms and legs were bound, and her mouth was gagged. Her face was grey with fear and her throat was striving to scream. But as their eyes met, she ceased to strive. They knew, he and she, in that mute moment that it was over. They knew that Joan was dead, but her murderer was found. They knew that no more checks would be written and fingerprinted by a dead hand. But more than anything else, her eyes told him that she knew *she* would not die. Not tonight, and as her sister had died.

Begfore the match went out, Kirk turned to see the battered face of Gil Marson. He was unconscious, but the gun was still at his fingertips. His mouth was open. His teeth were shattered. Kirk felt his knees folding under him. He was going to have to sit down a while, he thought vaguely. But as the match went out, he took one more look at Marson.

It was too bad, he thought, that Mike couldn't see Marson now. Mike had worried about it so much, wondering whether he was crazy. Then Kirk started to laugh—not a funny laugh. Just a queer and bitter laugh, thinking how they'd called Mike crazy.

Then he felt drowsy. He stopped laughing. The people came. They untied Kathy and somebody kept saying they ought to call an ambulance.

"The hell with it," said a man who had known Marson. "We'll kick him again when he wakes up. And this other guy . . ." He looked at Kirk and then at Kathy. "He's in good hands. Watch it! There he comes up for air. Kick him just a little, Micky, then we'll call the cops. . . ."



Gripping Novelette of Terror on the Loose!

By

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

WHITE HANDS I FEAR!

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CHAPTER ONE

Madman on the Loose

IT WAS a small, dirty room facing on a narrow, quiet street in one of the backwater sections of town. It was a neighborhood where the inhabitants asked no questions and expected none, a place to hide—or be forgotten.

He had chosen well, this man who could be rational, at times. This man who was rational, at least on the surface, most of the time. He sat in the brown wicker armchair near the window, reading the afternoon paper. Below, in the street, two young girls were playing hopscotch, but the sound of their voices didn't reach him; he was intent on his reading.

John Bezel was reading about himself, about his escape just twelve hours before from the Hartford Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

The police all over the state had been

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The corner of Amsterdam and Lehigh was busy, bright and jammed with people, Rose Halper knew. . . . Who would expect to meet a strangler there?

alerted, the account read, and all transportation facilities were being closely checked. There was a picture on the front page of John Bezel, but it was a poor picture, almost fifteen years old.

The story recounted the history of Bezel and dwelt at length on his slaying of his wife. She had been untrue to him; he had strangled her. He had worn white cotton gloves when he'd strangled her; he'd left them there, beside her still body.

At his trial, he'd tried to explain about the gloves. They'd symbolized her former purity to him. He'd explained under cross-examination how important it was that he wear white gloves in avenging this stain on their marital integrity.

Nobody seemed to understand the importance of the gloves. The jury, twelve oafs, the pompous, stupid judge, the vicious prosecuting attorney—all of them seemed either frightened or puzzled when he talked about the gloves.

Even his own attorney, Cyrus Whitney, didn't understand about them, though he'd done a skillful job in the defense. He would have to look up Cyrus and thank him. He would have to look up some of the others, too. Victor Elwood and that Halper girl and Barbara . . . . But he must be careful to avoid the police. The police seemed determined to persecute him.

He rose and looked out the window at the girls playing hopscotch. He'd have to get some money. He had only a few dollars . . . .

THIS CYRUS WHITNEY, Dan reflected, was a typical example of what people called an Old Roman. He had the nose, the brow and the bearing. He had the voice. He was saying, "I'm fully aware that the police are alerted, Mr. Carmichael. They don't know John Bezel as I do. He's an extremely clever man. The police aren't . . . enough. That's why I'm here."

Dan said, "Before I set up my own office, Mr. Whitney, I worked for the department. The police in this town of ours are capable and hard working. They're making a desperate effort to apprehend John Bezel. There's a lot of pressure being put on them right now from the governor's mansion."

The elderly attorney looked displeased. "You're telling me to take my business elsewhere, Mr. Carmichael?"

Dan smiled and shook his head. "Business isn't that good. But I don't like to see a client pay for something he's getting already."

"Rather involved ethics, aren't they?" Whitney asked.

"Maybe." Again Dan smiled. "Or maybe just a subtle way of making the case look hard, a sort of advance alibi." He paused. "In the event of failure. It's this Victor Elwood you're worrying about? And Miss Halper?"

Whitney nodded slowly. "They're not my clients, you understand. But—" He paused, seeking words. "Well, perhaps these are ethics as involved as your own, Mr. Carmichael, but I feel a sense of personal responsibility for the possible actions of John Bezel. It was I who saved him from the chair. Indirectly, therefore, I'm responsible for his existence, today. I know, from my talks with John, that he felt a deep animosity towards those two. I fear for them now."

"And this sister of his, this Barbara Bezel?"

"They were friendly." The attorney was thoughtful. "Barbara was adopted, you know, as a baby. She was so much younger than John that the usual friction which might result from such an action never was apparent. John worshiped her, as a matter of fact."

"When he was sane," Dan pointed out.

"When he . . . appeared sane," the attorney corrected Dan gently.

Dan shrugged. "Well, all right. But

she's the only tie he has with this world, isn't she? Isn't it likely he'd attempt to see her, first?"

"See her? Perhaps. But not harm her. I've known him for years, Mr. Carmichael. I think I can vouch for Barbara's safety."

Dan studied the top of his desk, and then his gaze lifted to meet Whitney's. "You want me to watch the other two?"

"I want you to warn them, first. It would be impossible, of course, to keep them both under constant surveillance. It might be possible, though, to arrange some way in which you could keep them reasonably safe."

Dan nodded. "All right, Mr. Whitney. I'll see what can be arranged. I'll phone you as soon as I get a definite agreement."

The lawyer rose, and Dan rose, too.

Whitney's eyes were thoughtful. "John Bezel's defense was the first criminal case I ever handled. And the last. I'm sorry, now, that I had anything to do with it."

That was his exit line.

Dan went back to his desk, and sat there for moments, smoking and reading the afternoon paper. The story of John Bezel's escape was headlined and the account beneath the headline went into great and gruesome detail.

Dan studied the picture and guessed that it was an old one. The story was a rehash of the original one with some conjecture added. The impression it gave was that John Bezel was in town and bent on vengeance. None of the available facts supported that—but it made exciting reading.

Outside, an April sun was simulating June, but it didn't fool Dan. He wore his topcoat.

ROSE HALPER lived on the west side in a former mansion converted into a four-unit apartment building. Her apartment was on the first floor, and she was home this April afternoon.

She was a beautiful girl, with dark hair and eyes so deeply blue that they appeared black. She was wearing a lounging suit of black faille. And she was wearing a quizzical expression as she stood in her doorway appraising Dan.

"You could be the police, I suppose," she said.

"I could," he admitted. "Does it show?"

Her smile was brief. "A little. *Are* you an officer?"

"A private investigator," Dan said, and displayed the buzzer.

She still looked doubtful.

Dan said, "It's about this John Bezel. It's for your own protection I've come to see you."

No smile this time. "You're soliciting my business, Mr. —"

"Carmichael," Dan supplied. "No, I've been retained by an interested party, Miss Halper. If you'd like to call the department, I'm sure they'd clear me adequately."

She studied him a moment more and then said, "I guess that won't be necessary. Come in, Mr. Carmichael."

Dan followed her though a small hall and into a long, narrow living room, warmly and colorfully furnished. She indicated a chair near the black marble fireplace, and Dan took it. She sat in a love seat across from him.

"Who is this interested party, Mr. Carmichael? Not Victor Elwood, I hope."

Dan shook his head. "Not Elwood. You—ah—introduced Bezel's wife to Elwood, I understand."

"I did. Why the 'ah,' Mr. Carmichael? Anything shameful in that?"

Dan shook his head again. "No, but Bezel seems to think there was. He's divided his animosity between the two of you."

"John Bezel," she said, "is insane. He can be excused for whatever ridiculous thoughts he might cherish. I can't see any

excuse for the newspapers' innuendos, though. The impression they gave was that I was running some kind of extra-marital love nest. I'd known Alice Bezel since she was fourteen years old, long before she'd ever known there were . . . animals like the man she married. At a party here, one evening, I introduced her to Victor Elwood. I didn't know him very well, at the time, but he seemed like a reasonably decent sort of person. I'm sure that he was and is, and that his affection for Alice was honest and firm. Any other questions?"

She was sitting rigidly erect on the love seat. Her dark eyes seemed to be misty.

"I wasn't questioning any of that," Dan said quietly, and paused. "You said a moment ago that you hoped Victor Elwood wasn't paying for my time. Why did you say that?"

Her chin lifted. "Because he can't afford it. Because he's been converting what little money he had into alcohol ever since that—that horrible thing happened. He's a beaten man, Mr. Carmichael."

"But he's the kind of man who'd pay to protect you against this Bezel?'

"That's *exactly* the kind of man he is."

Dan smiled. "You needn't be on the defensive with me, Miss Halper. I'm on your side."

The slim figure relaxed. "I'm sorry, but the papers gave me a bad time, you'll remember." She smiled dimly. "I'd have more faith in you if you'd tell me the name of your client."

Dan hesitated only a second. "Cyrus Whitney. He's paying me, too, to protect Elwood."

"Whitney?" she frowned. "But why should he concern himself with us?"

"Because, as he puts it, he feels responsible for Bezel's existence. He saved him from the chair."

"In a case of insanity as plain as John Bezel's, I don't imagine any judge could sentence him to death."

Dan shrugged. "That's right. But a man's conscience is an unpredictable thing. The point is that Whitney feels responsible for your safety. And I hope to earn my fee."

Her hands were in her lap, and Dan saw now that they were trembling. He looked up to meet her wavering gaze. "Are you frightened?"

"No more than I was. Let's say it's more visible now. Do you think that—that Bezel might—" She broke off.

"He might try," Dan answered. "If he's in town and remembers the trial. He won't succeed, if you're ordinarily careful, and if I'm within hailing distance when you're away from the house."

She was pale. "How long do you think it will be before—" She stopped. "Of course, we can't be sure he'll ever be caught, can we?"

"Fairly sure. One thing—don't open the door to all callers as you did to me."

"I saw you through the front window, first," she said. "I haven't opened the front door without making sure who was there since I read the morning papers."

"Good. You work Miss Halper?"

"I don't punch a clock. My father had the forethought to realize anyone with my disposition might not ever marry. He left me enough to meet the requirements of living. The rest I manage with a typewriter."

"A writer," Dan said.

"That's right. So, you see, I can adjust my outdoor time to whatever you'll have available after following Victor Elwood from bar to bar."

"I'll see him next," Dan said, and rose. "Be very careful, won't you, Miss Halper?"

"You can be sure I will," she promised.

Dan was grinning as he went down the three steps to the sidewalk. This Halper lass wasn't at all what the tabloids had painted her. And he was glad of that, for some reason.

He was glad he had brought the topcoat; already a north breeze was stirring and he felt its chill.

Victor Elwood's address was a rooming house, a monstrous affair of cupolas and turrets and four assorted and unused porches. The landlady's room was just inside the door, in the front hall, and it was here Dan inquired.

"Haven't seen him for two weeks," she said. "Ain't likely to see him. He owed me for three weeks before he left." She looked at Dan suspiciously. "You a detective?"

Dan nodded. "He left no forwarding address?"

She was staring at him. "No, he didn't. You think he was maybe running away from that—that Bezel?"

"Not unless he was psychic," Dan said. "You said he left two weeks ago?"

Her face stiffened. "That's what I said." She slammed the door. Dan heard the lock turn.

CHAPTER TWO

White Gloves

THE WIND had shifted to the north now, and the breeze was cold. The girls in the street had gone back into the house. John Bezel stood in front of the window, looking down at the street outside, thinking about Alice. He'd had these urges long before the—the thing that had happened to Alice. But he'd mastered them. He'd been, before that, what was called a 'rational human being.' He smiled grimly.

It was getting dark in the room, but he didn't turn on the light. In the dark, he wouldn't see the room's griminess. In the dark he could pretend that he was back in his home with Alice, in the spotless, luxurious home they'd shared before Elwood had come crawling into their Eden.

He needed money. If he was to find a place fit to live in, he'd need money. He went to the closet and took out his overcoat. He put his neat, grey hat carefully on his head and went down the stairs to the hall below.

There was the smell of cooking in the hall here, and it reminded him he was hungry.

Outside, dusk was falling. The wind had grown colder, and he felt its chill on his bare hands, on his face. He turned and walked north, into the wind.

Past a row of mean, time-faded houses he walked, past a plumbing shop, a grocery. He was coming to an intersection, and out of the dimness, this white place loomed.

It looked ludicrous in this dreary neighborhood, a small, neat brightness in the gloom. Of glazed, white brick, white tile inside, bright and clean. Only a lunch stand, a hamburger joint, but clean, clean, clean . . . .

John Bezel stood outside a moment, looking in through the spotless glass. A white-shirted, white-trousered counterman was alone in the place, pouring water into the coffee urn. Next to the urn was the cash register, and John Bezel stared at that for some seconds before he pushed open the door and stepped in.

The counterman turned and smiled a greeting. "Evening, doc. Looks like a change in the weather."

He was a lanky young man with a scrubbed appearance, and John Bezel smiled at him. "It's colder," he said. "April is like that in this town."

"April's like that all over, I guess," the young man said. "What'll it be tonight, doc?"

"Some soup, some vegetable soup, for one thing." John Bezel took a seat at the counter and his eyes went to the cash register.

The young man reached up to pull down one of those individual serving size cans

of vegetable soup. His lean forearm was bare, and John Bezel saw the ridged muscle there. He had no weapon; there would be little chance here of getting the money he needed.

He had some rolls with the soup, and a cup of coffee. He was thinking again of Alice when the door behind him opened and somebody came in.

IT WAS a woman, not young, not old. It was a woman whose once lovely figure still showed traces of its former beauty. She was dressed brightly and cheaply in a print dress and an emerald-green flannel coat. Her face was still fairly young, but overpainted, and her eyes had a hard blankness.

She grinned at the young man behind the counter, and he grinned back. "Coffee? he asked.

"And some eggs, Barney," she answered. "This is my big day, boy." She took a stool two seats down from John Bezel, in front of Barney.

The counterman paused in the act of getting the eggs from the refrigerator and turned to stare at her. "Your big day? You mean—"

"I'm going home," she said. "I'm going back to Medford."

"You're kidding," he said. "You're ribbing me. That blarney you used to give me about going back to Medford some day, that wasn't true, was it? It was all a story."

"Oh, no," she said. "That was the gospel, Barney. And I've got the money now." She patted a fat purse atop the counter. "I've been saving a long time. The wages of sin are Medford, Barney."

He said, "You shouldn't talk so much, kid." He stole a glance at John Bezel. "You talk too much sometimes."

John Bezel looked straight ahead, his face showing no emotion.

Then, as Barney took the eggs over to the griddle, John Bezel couldn't keep his eyes from that bulging purse on top of the counter. From there, his eyes traveled up to the girl's face. She was looking directly at him; she hadn't missed his survey of her purse. In the hard, young-old eyes, fear flickered.

John Bezel looked quickly away.

Barney, intent on the sizzling eggs, asked, "When you going, Babe?"

There was a silence, a silence long enough to make her next words a lie. "I was just kidding, Barney. It was a joke, I sure took you in, didn't I."

John Bezel smiled as Barney turned to stare at the girl.

"No hick town for me," she went on. "This town is just my size. Even if I had the money, I'd never leave this town. And where would *I* get the money?"

John Bezel said, "Another cup of coffee, please."

"Sure, doc." Barney took his cup over to the urn.

"You a doctor, mister?" Babe asked. "Barney called you doc."

John Bezel's smile was deprecatory. "That's just Barney's way. I'm no doctor. I'm a librarian."

There was relief in Babe's laugh. "Hell, and I thought you were casing my roll!"

John Bezel smiled politely. He said, "I think I'll have some desert, Barney. What kind of pie is that on the top shelf?"

Barney went over to see as Babe attacked her eggs.

Outside, it was getting dark. People went by on their way to the carline; some of them late stragglers going home from work. Two men dressed in working clothes came in and sat together at the end of the counter.

There was another odor than the food in the air now. The fragrance of Babe's cheap perfume drifted past John Bezel's nose, and the flame seemed to leap within him.

He ate his pie slowly, watching Babe's progress, thinking of Alice and Victor

Elwood, thinking of Rose Halper, thinking of the asylum and the husky, white-coated attendants, the doctor's prying eyes.

The girl was through now; she put a bill on the counter, and Barney gave her her change. John Bezel pretended not to notice, concentrating on the last of his pie.

"So-long, Barney," Babe said from the doorway. "Maybe I'll drop into town once in a while, and I'll be sure and stop, if I do."

"You do that, Babe," the young man said. "And luck to you, kid."

The wages of sin are Medford, John Bezel thought. *Why should she go unpunished? Why should she profit from her lack of virtue?*

The door closed.

John Bezel looked backward casually, saw the direction the girl had taken through the huge front window. A few seconds later, he was paying for his meal.

When he reached the sidewalk, he saw her half a block up the street, walking swiftly, her purse firmly under one arm.

He moved up the dark street after her, his head down, his hat partially shielding his face. It was really chilly out now and the wind held a hint of snow.

At the next block, the girl turned. John thought she paused a moment, there on the corner, as though recognizing him, but it wasn't a long pause. The street she had chosen was even more dimly lighted than the one they'd just traversed.

There was very little pedestrian traffic here, and John Bezel quickened his steps. It was then the girl turned in at a ramshackle cottage, set back on a weed-filled lot. John Bezel paused long enough for the girl to enter the house and put on a light.

Then he walked quietly up to the front door.

There was no bell. He was about to knock, but he stopped in the middle of the action. Quietly, he lowered his hand and tried the doorknob.

It turned freely; the door moved inward almost imperceptibly as the latch released. For seconds, he stood there, making no move, listening intently for sounds of movement within.

Then, at a sound from the rear part of the house, he opened the door slowly.

The room was empty; it was a living room. From a room in the rear he heard the sounds of drawers being opened. John Bezel stepped noiselessly into the living room and closed the door gently behind him. He stood there for seconds, while from his overcoat pocket he took out a pair of white gloves and donned them ....

DAN STOOD on the porch in front of the lighted, open doorway and smiled at Rose Halper. "I thought I'd save a nickel," he said. "So I came back, rather than phone."

Rose was wearing a jumper outfit. She was wearing a white flower in her dark hair. "Come in, Mr. Carmichael. You found Victor Elwood all right, I hope?"

"No," Dan said wearily, "I didn't. He's not to be found."

She frowned. "You think—"

"No. He left his last rooming house two weeks ago, probably to beat the rent. Nobody's seen him since—nobody that I've met, anyway."

They went into the living room. Dan sank tiredly into the big chair near the fireplace.

"Some Scotch, maybe?" Rose asked. "You look as is you could use it."

"I could," Dan agreed. "With a little water." He looked up to meet Rose Halper's gaze. "You don't think this Victor Elwood could possibly be a suicide, do you?"

Her hand shook a little, as she handed him his drink. "I don't know. Alice's death hit him very hard. He's been drinking steadily. But I don't know."

Dan sighed, studying his drink. "I suppose I shouldn't fret about it. It cuts

down my labor by half. But I don't like the thought of Victor Elwood being unprotected if Bezel's in town."

"We don't know Bezel's in town," she said. "Why don't we go to a show? I've some tickets for a musical. You could be doing your duty and having a little relaxation at the same time."

Dan grinned. "Okay, if that's an order."

* * *

It was a colorful, tuneful musical with an adequate quota of legs. They came out around eleven, and the tension of the afternoon was gone. They were laughing—until they saw the headline.

"Mad Killer Strikes," it read, and directly under the headline was a four-column shot of John Bezel. There were other pictures, too, of the cottage, of the unfortunate victim, Margaret (Babe) Hart. There was a picture of Barney, and the white hamburger stand.

Dan folded the paper quickly and took Rose's arm. "C'mon, I know where we can get a cab in a hurry. We'll read this at your place."

On the cab trip back to the apartment, Rose was silent and pale, staring at the floor of the cab. Dan sensed that this tragedy tonight was a confirmation of the intuitive fear she'd been carrying all day.

At the apartment, he read most of the account aloud to her, skipping the gruesome description of Margaret Hart's mottled face and the paragraphs devoted to the reporter's imaginative recapitulation.

When he'd finished, Rose said, "They're sure, aren't they? It's Bezel."

Dan nodded. "This lad at the hamburger spot gave the police a description that fits perfectly." He shook his head. "Well, we know he's in town now."

"If it was just her money he was after," Rose asked, "why should he strangle her?"

"From all accounts," Dan answered, "this Babe wasn't exactly a Girl Scout. John Bezel seems to hate any evil but his own."

The dark blue eyes were wide now. She sat in a wing chair, staring at Dan, striving to put something into words, phrasing her thoughts.

Finally, "I won't stay here alone. Not at night, I won't. I could go to the police, but—" Her eyes met his. "But I'd rather stay here."

"You're blushing," he said. "You don't need to. I come from a highly moral family. I could sleep right here on the davenport." He grinned. "I could sleep like a log, with a clear conscience, but with an ear cocked for any intruder. Is that what you wanted to suggest?"

"I don't think it's funny," she said.

"Nor I," he said. "But at least you know you're safe now. How about Elwood, though?"

THERE were five of them in the room, in the unheated, windowless cellar room in this house condemned by the city. Three of them were sleeping; two sat against the room's south wall, sharing a bottle of cheap, raw whiskey. One of the two was Victor Elwood.

The other was just a gent named Joe, literally and figuratively. Victor had met him two days before, had given him a drink out of his own nearly full bottle, and Joe had a great capacity for gratitude.

They were getting down toward the end of the bottle now, and the numbness wasn't complete, not nearly as complete as they wished. Joe said quietly, "Think we can get another?"

"Maybe," Elwood said. "If I could get cleaned up a little. My old landlady used to be good for a touch when things got rough. If I could get cleaned up a little, maybe—"

* * *

In her sleep, Barbara Bezel stirred restlessly, dreaming some dream that disturbed her, some imaginative picture out

of the tortured thoughts of the past day. John was free. . . . John, who'd killed his wife and threatened to kill them all, who was stark mad, now was free and roaming the night. It was a thought that made it difficult to sleep.

* * *

On the west side, in Rose Halper's apartment, Rose and Dan sat quietly smoking and drinking and listening to some Gershwin recordings on the record player.

Dan said, "I can see certain advantages to a married life now, at that. Particularly where the wife has an income."

Rose smiled at him. "It's a small income, just about enough for one really." She rose. "I'm going to try and get some sleep. Maybe I can sleep if I work at it. I wish it were morning."

* * *

He had her suitcase, the suitcase she'd had open on the bed, ready for her trip to Medford He had her money, and he'd counted it there in the house, fourteen hundred and some dollars. With the suitcase, with the money, he could check in at some small, quiet hotel, some *clean* hotel. He would like that.

He could still feel the pressure of her flesh against his thumbs, though hours had passed. He could still see her staring eyes and her open mouth and feel her warm breath, hear her gasping.

He was back in the small, dirty room, sitting by the window. He couldn't sleep; the burning in him wouldn't permit sleep. He'd seen the prowl cars go by; he'd seen all the police activity in the neighborhood, and felt a moment's alarm.

But they weren't checking. They couldn't check all the houses in the neighborhood. Some of these tenements in the block held scores of people. Some of the cheap hotels had vagrants coming and going hour after hour, day after day. It was impossible to check them.

They'd caught him once. They wouldn't catch him again, not alive.

Tomorrow he'd buy a paper and see what had happened, how the body had been discovered, and if they had a better picture now than that old one. He wondered about Barbara, if she was frightened. There's been a time when he'd worshiped Barbara, but not since she'd turned against him at the trial, had supported the prosecutor. Barbara had chosen Alice's side. Barbara had all the money now because he'd been sent to that place. That's why she'd helped the prosecutor. Barbara had proven false, like all women.

He ran them all over in his mind, Barbara and Rose Halper and Victor Elwood —and Alice. Alice kept recurring. But Alice was dead, killed by his hands, the same gloved hands that had killed again tonight.

It was nearly three o'clock when he finally went to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

The Face He Couldn't Remember

WHITNEY'S office was in the Guaranty Building, a one-man office, quiet and old-fashioned, lined with books, with a dignity befitting the man who occupied it.

Dan sat across from Whitney, explaining about his search for Victor Elwood. "Of course," he finished, "the police have the facilities for that kind of a search, and they're using them. I don't doubt he'll turn up somewhere, today."

"If he's to be found," the lawyer said.

"I think he will be," Dan said.

"Miss Halper claims he was despondent, though?"

Dan nodded.

"And he's been drinking. He could be a suicide, you know, everything considered."

"He could be," Dan admitted, "but his body should have been discovered by now, no matter what method he used. That is, if he committed suicide the time he disappeared." He paused. "How about this Barbara Bezel? You feel sure she's safe?"

"With a maniac, no one can be sure," Cyrus Whitney said, "but I feel that there's a greater danger to Miss Halper—and Elwood, of course."

"If the police can't find Elwood," Dan said, "It's reasonable to expect Bezel won't, either."

"We can hope," the attorney said. "It would be better for you to stay with Miss Halper, Mr. Carmichael. We'll trust the police to find Mr. Elwood."

Staying with Hiss Halper and getting paid for it was the kind of job Dan could relish. Even without the Gershwin. But he couldn't help worrying about Barbara Bezel. If her foster brother was as deranged as the evidence showed, home could be one of his first goals after his escape. And Dan doubted that John Bezel's affectionate regard for his foster sister was an emotion constant enough to insure her safety.

It was only ten now, and Rose had said she would be writing steadily until noon. It wouldn't hurt to run out and see Barbara Bezel. . . .

Barbara Bezel lived in a very modern apartment on the Drive, up on the top floor. A maid answered Dan's ring, and he displayed the shield in his wallet.

She led the way into a small breakfast room off the dining room, where a young, fair, delicate-featured girl was eating breakfast.

"The police, miss," the maid said, and left them.

There were shadows under the girl's eyes; there was a tired droop to her young mouth. "It's about . . . my brother."

"That's right, Miss Bezel. I wondered if you shouldn't have police protection"

"I don't think so. I know he's . . . not responsible, but I don't think he'd bother me. We were very close, you know, before it happened. He'd have no reason to—"

"He had no reason to kill that girl last night," Dan pointed out. "The police are overworked and underpaid, Miss Bezel. They aren't likely to suggest a sentry. But if you should ask them—"

She seemed puzzled. "But aren't *you* from the police?"

"I'm a private investigator. I'm working on another . . . aspect of the case. I really haven't the authority to suggest it to the police for you, and I realize it's not my business." Dan paused. "It's just a hunch. It's just good insurance to have them."

She said, "Thank you, for your interest. I'm shocked, of course, by my—by John's actions. But I can't believe he'd come here. It would be too dangerous for him. At least, he would realize it's dangerous."

"That makes sense," Dan agreed. "But I—"

"And," she interrupted him, if the police thought he'd come here, they'd havet a guard around, wouldn't they?"

Dan nodded. "You're remembering John Bezel as he used to be. You're not really frightened of him, are you? You're shocked, but not frightened."

"That's about it," she admitted. "But I'd rather not talk about it, please." There was pleading in her eyes.

Dan rose. "I'm sorry, Miss Bezel. It was just this hunch of mine that persists in heckling me." He smiled. "Everything's going to be all right, I'm sure."

Only, he wasn't sure, not at all. He was no prophet with a crystal ball, but he felt a very definite and urgent concern for the girl's safety. He felt the threat to her as real and imminent. It wasn't the first time he'd experienced one of these intuitive messages, and many of them had proved sound.

Rose's typewriter was clacking when Dan returned to the apartment. She'd given him a key so that he wouldn't disturb her if he returned before noon. He let himself in quietly.

He phoned headquarters from there and talked to Lieutenant Chopko. They'd uncovered nothing new on the whereabouts of Victor Elwood, Chopko informed him. The lieutenant implied by his tone that they were dropping the search, except through the routine channels of the Missing Persons Bureau.

"Where are you now?" Chopko asked.

"At Miss Halper's."

"It might be wise to stay pretty close to her," the lieutenant said. "You were over at Miss Bezel's this morning, weren't you?"

"You're watching that place, then?"

"So far. I can't say how long I can keep a man there, though. I think she's safe, anyway. Don't you?"

"No," Dan said, "I don't. But don't ask me why."

There was a silence on the wire for a moment, and then the lieutenant said. "I wish we could find that Elwood lush. If we had him in a safe place, we could concentrate on the others."

ELWOOD had had luck that morning. Another of Joe's friends had come to the cellar sanctuary, and he'd brought two fifths with him, one of wine, one bourbon. Joe's friend had been generous; he'd shared the contents of both bottles without being asked. The haze was complete now.

He'd wanted to look presentable before accosting his former landlady. Both Joe and his benevolent friend now agreed that Victor looked presentable. The haze was complete with them, too. Not blankness, but the haze in which all ugliness of line and shape is softened. Within him there was a glow of near ecstacy. Everything and everybody was wonderful.

He had made his way on foot to Martin Street, and he was traveling north on Martin now. He was walking very carefully, bumped into no one, though forms weren't even visible to him until they were one or two paces away.

Faces, he couldn't distinguish—which was unfortunate.

On Belvedere, he paused near the newsstand. The dealer there knew him and said, "Good morning, Mr. Elwood." There was respect in the man's voice, because he'd known Victor Elwood long before this stage.

"Morning, Freddie," Elwood said politely.

"Some guy was here asking about you yesterday," the dealer said. "Looked like a cop, Mr. Elwood."

But Victor Elwood didn't hear him; he was already starting across Belvedere. The news dealer watched him go, watched the tall man who seemed to be waiting for him on the other side.

Then a customer required his attention, and he turned away.

Elwood didn't see the tall man until he was nearly upon him. Then he swerved quickly to avoid contract, and the man said, "You don't remember me, Mr. Elwood?"

Elwood stopped, and his vision groped across the few feet between him and John Bezel.

"No," he said finally. "I've had a little trouble with my eyes lately. No, I don't —I can't seem to place you."

"It doesn't matter," John Bezel said. "I'm a friend. I'm obligated to you, Victor, and I mean to repay you."

In the foggy realm of Victor's brain, the word 'repay' came through clearly. Money was whiskey, money was his mission, and it had been a doubtful mission up to now.

"Repay me?" Victor said. "How much?"

There was a pause, and then the voice said, "Don't you know how much I owe you, Victor?"

Victor shook his head mutely.

"Well, come along. You'll get everything you have coming to you. I've meant to repay you for a long time."

Victor nodded dumbly and followed his unknown friend up Martin Street, and up an alley that led off it, between Belvedere and Helmuth.

"Is it far, where we're going?" Victor asked.

"Not far" the voice answered. "It's a place where I work. It's a place that used to be a garage."

They went through a door then and were inside. Victor strained to see where they were, but his vision was inadequate. There'd been no change in temperature, just the absence of the wind to let him know he was inside.

Then he felt the stranger's hands on his shoulders, and for the first time some premonition of danger came to Victor Elwood. Then the hands were at his throat, jamming his windpipe.

He fought. With all the feeble strength he possessed, he struggled to free himself from that iron grip. The blood was pounding in his head, its color flooding his mental vision.

He kicked and scratched and twisted wildly. In vain. The darkness grew in his mind, and his actions slowed, grew weaker. Then, for one nightmarish moment, his vision cleared, and he was looking into the insane eyes of John Bezel.

That was the first intimation he had of his companion's identity. That was the last picture his mind saw, and it came just two seconds before his heart stopped.

John Bezel saw the body go limp, felt the sag of it in his strong hands and looked down with infinite satisfaction on the remains of Victor Elwood.

He dragged the shabby, limp figure into a corner shielded from the alley by the wall's irregularity. There, he covered it carefully with old newspapers.

He was smiling as he left the garage, as he stepped out into the breeze of the alley. He was still smiling, as he returned to the large, clean room he'd rented that morning at one of the west side's quieter hotels.

* * *

The sound of the typewriter ceased, and a few seconds later, Rose stood in the entrance to the living room. "Hungry, I'll bet," she said.

"Pick up your money. You won. The muse leave you? Or is my presence too disturbing?"

"Don't brag," she said. "Some scrambled eggs do it? With rolls, with a little sausage, with good, flavorful coffee?"

"You sound like a woman's page ad," he told her. "I'll help."

He set the table in the small breakfast nook off the kitchen while she scrambled the eggs. She asked as they worked, "Anything new this morning, Philo?"

"Nothing. You don't seem as frightened as you were yesterday."

"Don't I? Well, don't let your eyes deceive you. I'm no longer hysterical, but I've been living with fear now for more than twenty-four hours. I'm not writing anything salable in that room, you understand. I'm just keeping myself busy. I'm just seeing that I haven't time to think about anything but work."

Dan grinned at her. "I like you, you know that?"

"It's nice to hear," she said. "Under more favorable circumstances, it might even be mildly thrilling. You aren't nearly as repugnant as you seemed at first, either."

Dan didn't smile. He was watching her, and his face was suddenly sad. "Rose," he said, "I want you to be very, very careful. Every second I'm not with you, I want you to be on guard. Remember that, will you?"

She looked startled. Then her eyes dropped. "Your eggs are done," she said.

They turned the news on while they ate, but it was a rehash of the morning paper, and nothing they didn't already know. When he snapped it off again, he said, "I just hope the police keep a man out there at the Bezel apartment. I worry too much about her. Do you believe in intuition?"

"I don't disbelieve in it," she answered. "But I think she's safe. From all I've heard, John Bezel thought a lot of her."

"Maybe," Dan said thoughtfully. "But —oh, well, I'm not getting paid to worry about her."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Call

IN HER TOP-FLOOR APARTment, Barbara Bezel was being plagued by the same premonition that harassed Dan. The nervousness had started with his talk this morning; her young imagination had done the rest. She was just finishing her lunch, a late lunch. It was nearly two.

The maid came into the dining room, dressed for the street. "Is there anything you wish, before I go, miss?"

"Go?" Barbar Bezel said, and then, "Oh, yes. I'd forgotten it was your afternoon off. No, there's nothing, Irene." She studied the girl, wondering what her reaction would be if she asked her to stay, if she mentioned her nervousness. She had no way with servants.

"Well, then, good-afternoon, miss," the maid said.

"Good-afternoon," Barbara said. "Have a good time, Irene."

The maid smiled. "Thank you, miss."

The quiet of the apartment, after the door had closed on the maid, was complete and frightening.

Many stories below, the traffic moved by on the Drive, but its hum wasn't audible up here. There was the sound of the wind, but that was erratic, and the hush between winds seemed to be intensified by the contrast.

She tried to read, but after reading the first sentence of a story three times she gave that up. She turned on the radio, but its music only seemed to add to her sense of loneliness.

She poured out a small glass of port and drank it hopefully.

That seemed to help. She poured out another, and another. . . .

The man had seen the maid leave but the officer still stood near the entrance to the building across the street. The man had been waiting for more than fifteen minutes now, and he was getting impatient.

Many stories above, Barbara Bezel began to relax a little. She wasn't used to alcohol. She began to feel secure.

* * *

Dan and Rose played gin rummy for a while, and listened to the phonograph after that. About four, they went for a turn

around the block, but no more than that.

Rose was plainly nervous when they returned. "Why don't you phone the department," she asked, "and see if anything new has developed?"

There was, the lieutenant told Dan, nothing new. "Still earning your money the hard way?" he asked.

"That's right, Lieutenant. A man has to do his duty. You've still got a man on that Bezel apartment, I suppose."

"I have like hell," the officer said. "I've got just so many men, Dan, and a lot of crime. You got any reason to worry about her like you do?"

"None," Dan admitted. "Just a hunch."

"I don't think," the other man said, "that the taxpayers would want their money to be used on hunches. Let me know if anything develops at that end. Let me know the *second* anything happens." The line went dead.

"Nothing?" Rose said.

Dan shook his head.

Dinner was a quiet meal. They were both moody, though actually there was no greater danger now than there had been for the past two days. It was as though the imminence of death was making its presence felt increasingly as the hours of John Bezel's freedom lengthened.

It was after dinner they discovered they were out of cigarettes. Rose said, "There's a drugstore only two blocks down. Why don't you run down and get some, while I attack these dishes?"

"Why don't we *both* run down?" Dan corrected her.

She shook her head. "Dan, I can't live with this fear forever. Nobody can, and be human or normal. I'll keep the door locked. You go."

He shook his head. "Not any more, not now, Rose."

"Please, Dan. It's very important to me, really."

He was silent for seconds. Finally he said, "All right. You keep that door locked. You keep the light on over the door, outside. And don't let *anybody* in. Promise?"

"I promise."

The house seemed unnaturally quiet after he'd left. The wind outside had died down. From the kitchen, the whir of the refrigerator seemed to echo through the house.

The ringing of the phone startled her unreasonably.

She didn't move immediately. It had rung for the third time before she finally picked it up.

The voice coming over the wire was blurred and thick. "Rose?"

"Speaking." Her heart seemed to stop beating.

"This is Victor, Rose. I'm in trouble. And you're in danger. I want to see you, Rose. I have to see you."

"All right. You can come here, Victor. You'll be safe here."

"No, I won't," he said. "That detective will be back. And I—I can't have anything to do with the police. I'm leaving town, Rose, but I've got to see you first. It's for your own safety. It's you I'm thinking about."

"You . . . want me to meet you somewhere?"

"Yes On the corner of Amsterdam and Lehigh. In front of the hotel there."

She paused. "Okay, Victor. I'll be right over." She hung up thoughtfully.

That was a bright corner. If it was some kind of trick, the perpetrator wouldn't pick a busy, bright corner like that. It was only three blocks north of here and one west. If Victor was in trouble, she was morally bound to help.

She remembered Dan's warnings now, and hesitated. But no insane man would be clever enough to simulate the husky, blurred speech of Victor Elwood. Still, she had so much faith in Dan, in Dan's knowledge of these things. . . . But Victor had said, "It's for your own safety."

She went to get her coat.

IN THE PHONE BOOTH in the same drugstore where Dan was buying his cigarettes, John Bezel hung up the receiver, and peered through the glass side of the booth, waiting for the detective to leave.

When the front door of the place finally closed behind Dan, Bezel left the booth. He was smiling again. It had been a wearying, long afternoon, but dark was here now, and he was about to be rewarded for his patience.

He left the drugstore, and headed north, in the opposite direction from Dan Carmichael. The corner of Amsterdam and Lehigh was a bright corner, but he didn't intend to meet her there. On her way she would pass the alley entrance he had chosen beforehand. That's where he'd meet her. That's where he'd complete his mission of purity.

The night was cold and quiet. The afternoon's wind had died to nothing. Overhead, clouds blanketed the moon and stars, and the night had a muffled quality of shrouded shapes and muted sounds.

The fire was burning hungrily in John Bezel, and he quickened his footsteps. This would complete the pattern. This would wipe from his honor the blemishes of the whole filthy combination of incidents that had sent him to the asylum. This would avenge the lust and greed-motivated trap they had snared him with. After this he would be free of shame, of guilt, of persecution.

At the alley entrance, he paused and looked south. There was only one person in view on Lehigh. It was a woman, and she was coming his way.

John Bezel stepped farther back into the shadows at the mouth of the alley.

* * *

Rose turned up Lehigh, walking north along that quiet street. She was shivering, and it wasn't the cold doing that. *If,* she thought, *I've been wrong in this, if I've put my faith in the wrong person. . . . Oh, Dan, Dan, I hope I'm not making a mistake. . . .*

Ahead, the street seemed darker. Almost directly ahead, there was the dark blob of an alley entrance. And wasn't that a shape, the shape of a man, there in the center of the blob? Her steps slowed instinctively, as her eyes probed the gloom, watching for the shape to move, to identify itself as a man or a shadow—or a fiend.

The shape moved then and found a voice. "Hello, Rose. I've been waiting, Rose."

This wasn't the voice of Victor Elwood, nor the figure of Victor Elwood. This was . . .

She wasn't breathing. She couldn't breathe as the tall form of John Bezel stepped from the alley entrance. She could see his eyes now. Even in the dark, they glittered. She could see his hands, his white gloves. . . .

Her scream was choked off almost before it began. The strength of his fingers was terrible. She could feel the rough fabric of the gloves, and she squirmed, kicked, struck out with her hands.

She was just beginning to weaken, when the grip relaxed.

She fell back as John Bezel turned to struggle with his assailant. She saw Dan go down to one knee, and she saw Bezel's foot lash out at Dan's face.

She saw the flame and heard the smashing noise of Dan's gun. Once, twice, three times . . . . She saw the tall figure of John Bezel stumble backward, and then she saw him crumple.

SHE DIDN'T remember getting back to the apartment, but they were back there, and Dan was talking to Lieutenant Chopko on the phone.

When he'd finished, he turned to her. "Glad you trusted my judgment?"

She managed a smile, a smile that faded when she saw the grimness of his face. "Something else has happened, Dan."

"That's right. Barbara Bezel has just been found dead in her apartment. She was killed about three o'clock this afternoon, according to the medical examiner. She was just found by her maid."

Rose looked down at her trembling hands. "He killed his own foster sister."

"Maybe," Dan said. "Honey, I'm going down to see Chopko. I'll be back though. You'll wait up, won't you? To say good-night?"

"I'll be waiting," she said.

Chopko was waiting for Dan at the station, and they talked in the Lieutenant's office for about half an hour. When Dan had finished Chopko shook his head.

"It's—oh, possible. But it would be something to prove. However, I'll go along with you. . . ."

The house of Cyrus Whitney was a stone house, tall and ugly and weather-stained, in a quiet, respectable section of town. Whitney himself answered the door to Dan's ring.

"Come in," he said. "Something to report?"

Dan nodded. They went in, through a dark and high-ceilinged living room, to a book-lined study off the larger room.

Dan said, "John Bezel's dead. I shot him."

Something like satisfaction flickered in the granite face. "It's an unfortunate end. But it's the only possible one, I suppose."

"Maybe," Dan said. He didn't take his eyes from Whitney's face as he added, "Barbara Bezel is dead, too."

"Killed?" Whitney asked.

"Killed. Strangled."

Whitney shook his massive head. "That fiend, that—"

"John didn't kill her," Dan said. And then he added a lie. "He couldn't have." A pause. "She was killed at eight o'clock. John died at seven-thirty."

That hit him. "Eight o'clock!" he said. "Are you—" He stopped quickly, and his icy-blue eyes searched Dan's.

"Surprise you?" Dan asked gently. "The time surprise you?"

"Why should it, Mr. Carmichael?"

"I don't know. I saw you go into that apartment building this afternoon around three. Was she dead then, Mr. Whitney?"

Whitney's every feature showed he was on the defensive now. There was no surprise in his face. "What are you trying to say, Carmichael?"

"I think you killed her," Dan answered. "When you first came to me, there was something wrong, I sensed. And then I realized what it was. A lawyer's first duty is to his client, isn't it?"

"That's right. A good lawyer's, anyway." The attorney studied Dan without animosity. "Have you been drinking?"

"No. Well, to get on with it, you weren't worried at all about your client, Barbara Bezel. I wondered why. You were unduly worried about two people with whom you had no connection. So far as you knew, John Bezel might never come to this town, might have no remembrance at all of Elwood and Rose Halper and Barbara. But you wanted me, and you wanted the police to think he would have. Because even if he didn't come to this town, you planned to kill Barbara Bezel, using the white gloves as a trade mark to leave behind. You wanted to prepare us to accept John Bezel as the logical killer."

Still, the attorney's face showed no animosity. "Ridiculous, of course."

"John Bezel," Dan went on stubbornly, "did come to town, thereby establishing your plan more solidly. But, also, he did something else by that action. If he was apprehended before you had time to kill Barbara, your golden chance was gone. You got her, today, because you knew the maid would be away, and you

waited until the policeman on guard just then left."

The attorney's smile was bleak. "You think I killed the others, too?"

Dan shook his head. "You'd have no reason to."

"But I'd have a reason to kill Barbara Bezel?"

"Possibly. You are in charge of the estate. I'm not familiar with the terms of the will, or whether you are subject to a regular audit, but there are accountants who can determine that, and attorneys. The police have both."

The attorney raised a hand. "Just a moment, Mr. Carmichael. There's a possibility you do have something. Let's call it a—well, a story with a certain nuisance value." He rose and started toward a desk in one corner of the study. "I've enough here, in cash, I think, to make your silence worth while—to both of us."

"I don't want any money," Dan said. "Just stay where you are."

But the attorney had reached the desk, had found what he wanted there and turned.

There was no money in his hand, but there was a very impressive service automatic.

Cyrus Whitney's voice was cold as the night outside. "You shouldn't threaten me, Mr. Carmichael. Particularly, you shouldn't come, uninvited, to my home and threaten me. You shouldn't break in and have me find you here in the library going through my safe. You might know I'd kill you if you tried that."

"I'd be a lot more scared," Dan said, "if I'd come alone."

The attorney's smile was thin. "A rather time-worn trick, Mr.—"

But from the doorway, Chopko said, "And effective. Drop the gun, Whitney. Drop it—*quick!*"

ROSE said, "Do you think this Chopko has enough to make a case against him?"

They were listening to Gershwin again. Dan finished his drink and set the empty glass on the coffee table. "That's what I'm waiting to find out." He stretched. "Chopko and some of his boys are working the old gent right now. He's going to phone if—"

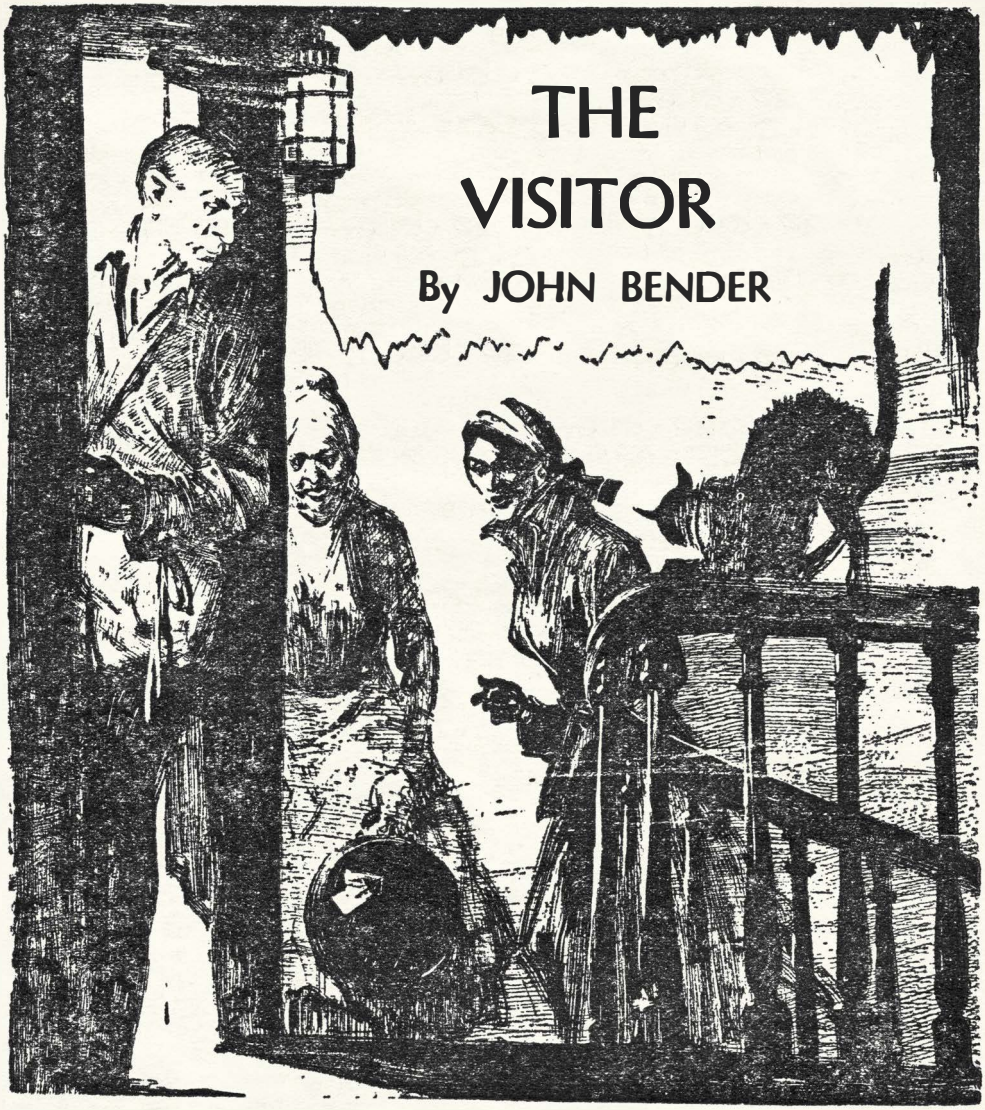
The phone rang at that moment, and Dan went to answer it. After a few words he hung up and faced Rose. "Whitney's confessed," he said quietly.

Rose sighed. "In that case, I suppose there's nothing more to wait for. I don't imagine a man of your importance would want to waste his time at something that didn't pay off in large denominations."

Dan grinned at her. "You do me an injustice, Rose. You know I want to hear the rest of that Gershwin."

THE END

"Why," Mrs. Mulvaney remarked, "it had only been the day before that old Mrs. Hutchins had up and—" Here Mrs. Mulvaney checked herself in time.



THE VISITOR

By JOHN BENDER

Who was that strange, waxen-hued creature, to whose cheeks a flush came . . . each time one of Mrs. Mulvaney's lodgers disappeared?

AFTER a hard day which had included two rows with Mr. Greck —the middle-aged, second-floor Lothario—concerning some peculiarly objectionable behavior of his cat, Mrs. Mulvaney was in no mood for midnight callers that stormy Saturday night. When the jangle of the front bell roused her from her sleep, she was of a mind to turn over and ignore the ringing. But finally, disheveled and annoyed, she padded out into the hall and put on the lights.

With a sigh of impatience she opened the door, and admitted a tall young

woman, wet to the bone, whose thin face was fairly shrunken with the cold.

"Do you have a room?" the young woman asked, and her dark brown eyes in that dead white face wrenched at Mrs. Mulvaney's very heart.

Mrs. Mulvaney told her to come inside, carefully inspecting her the while. The girl seemed a good deal better than some who had come to her door in the thirty years she'd been letting the upstairs rooms, since her husband—may the Lord have mercy on his soul!—had up and died one night of the cough. Mrs. Mulvaney thought it something of a coincidence that the girl had come this very night; but she liked the fact that the young lady had luggage—and a ready twenty-dollar bill in her hand.

In fact, the shivering girl who said her name was Jula de Mise didn't ask the price of the room. She held out the twenty and said, "Of course, I'll pay the first week in advance," and from that point on—since the room had been bringing only fifteen a week—Mrs. Mulvaney was inclined to think very well of her.

So she showed her to the newly unoccupied room, second floor, back—the one next to Mr. Greck—and that was all there was to it. Mrs. Mulvaney slipped the twenty into her ample bosom, brushed at the faded bedspread and explained about the bathroom, which was in the hall.

She noticed that Miss de Mise seemed extremely pale and drawn, nervous like, but then the girl said she'd been looking for a room all day and it had only been by chance that she'd come to this rooming house. Mrs. Mulvaney said that was the way, now, wasn't it? Why, it had only been the day before that Mrs. Hutchins, who'd had the room for seven years, had up and— Here, Mrs. Mulvaney checked herself in time and added that the aged Mrs. Hutchins had *left* them for another place.

On leaving, Mrs. Mulvaney congratulated herself that she had not mentioned that Mrs. Hutchins had had the misfortune to die in that particular room.

AS Mrs. Mulvaney went down the hall to the stairs she noticed that Mr. Greck—oh, he was a one for knowing everybody's business!—had his door open. Wrapped in his eyesore of a robe—which he no doubt fancied as a romantic touch—he came out into the corridor, smiling as he always did when he was after something.

"A new tenant, eh?" he observed. "A young lady?"

She said yes, but no more. Despite the goodness of her heart, she could not find it in herself to like this man. He looked too much like what he was—an undertaker's assistant—and Mrs. Mulvaney had uneasy convictions about him and his profession. The work of preparing bodies for the grave was, in her opinion, hardly an honorable one. In this, her ancestry shaped her thoughts: as a little girl in Ireland she had had an aunt whose mode of occupation had called for whispers when it was discussed—something to do with the making of "lay-away" clothes.

"Quite young," said Mr. Greck, in that slick-lipped way of his, whenever discussing pretty young women. "And—ah—very attractive, wasn't she?"

"Scrawny," said Mrs. Mulvaney, meaning no disrespect for the new young woman. Indeed, had Miss Jula de Mise known of this little slug of a man, she'd have been grateful for the statement, Mrs. Mulvaney thought. Mr. Greck looked upon anything in skirts as fair prey, and he could be a bother. "No flesh on her at all. Pale, too. 'Tis anemic, that young lady is. I'll tell her of a tonic—"

"Oh," said Mr. Greck, his thin lips frowning. "Oh. . . ."

So she left him there, and satisfied she was with herself for having cooled him

some. The lecherous old body snatcher!

Mrs. Mulvaney smiled within her vastness, and considered it good payment for the troubles he caused her. Him and that bloody cat of his! If she'd had the full say of it, she'd have had done with him and that terrible, razor-clawed animal which kept tearing at her hall runners. But being a landlord was not as simple as it had been in the old days. Once, she'd have turned him out—for no other reason than that she didn't like the cut of him, or the fact that his tawny, striped cat was destructive and a smell about the place. But with all the present regulations, a landlady had a time of it, for fair.

So she went and put the twenty dollars in the coffee can behind the stove, said a simple prayer for her late lamented good man and settled her hulk in bed. It was not until the following morning that Mr. Greck brought up the subject of the new lodger.

He came early, pounding on the door less than half an hour after Mrs. Mulvaney had had her breakfast tea and toast.

"I want my cat," he demanded in his shrill voice. "I want you to get my cat."

"Do you, now?" Mrs. Mulvaney frowned. "Where would I be keeping the animal?"

"*She's* got him, damn her! That new girl!"

"And what would she be wanting with it?"

His thin face blanched. "That's what I want you to find out. This morning I let Tommy out, and that new girl got him into her room. I saw him going into her room, I tell you! I saw it myself!"

"Perhaps she likes cats," Mrs. Mulvaney said.

"But she wouldn't answer when I went to get him. I knocked and knocked, and she wouldn't let me in. She's up to no good."

Mrs. Mulvaney thought otherwise, but to keep him quiet she went upstairs and knocked on Miss de Mise's door. The girl was quick to answer, and Mrs. Mulvaney apologized for the early disturbance and informed her of the purpose of the call.

"A cat?" said Miss de Mise. "I have a cat?"

"Mr. Greck thinks his cat may have come in here."

The new girl frowned. "You're mistaken, I'm sure. I don't like cats, really."

Then she smiled, and Mrs. Mulvaney was surprised, for the new girl seemed so much the better for the night of sleep she'd got. Her cheeks, indeed, were a new and healthy pink glow; she seemed much fresher and attractive.

Mrs. Mulvaney apologized again and went downstairs and brewed another cup of tea. She was a bit on edge, though for the life of her she could not tell just why, and she decided to forget about it. She gave her small place a brushing up, just a lick and a promise; then she put on her hat and went to an early Mass. She returned, much fortified, and was content until, once again, Mr. Greck came knocking on her door.

His face was a study in anxiety. "She's killed him!" he exclaimed abruptly. "I know it. I know it. Do you hear?"

"Now, now," said Mrs. Mulvaney, still full of Christian tolerance. "What's all this about?"

"My cat, Tommy! I tell you she's killed him. I know it!" He wrung his waxy hands, and the sound was like the rattling of dead flowers. "Come on, I'll prove it!"

His annoyance, or fear, brought beads of sweat right out on his forehead. He was clutching her arm. "Out in back," he said. "In the garbage can."

ALMOST tugging, he led the way through the narrow corridor of the downstairs floor, to the small courtyard in the rear. Then he rushed to a waste

receptacle and threw back the cover. He pointed.

Mrs. Mulvaney looked. She saw the usual debris discarded by her tenants, but certainly nothing more.

"It's gone!" Mr. Greck was deflated. "But I saw her. I *saw* her! She brought a towel down here and put it in the can just a little while ago. There was blood on it, I tell you—"

"Now," she said. She was sure the man was going off his head. His work, no doubt. Why, it was enough to give anyone the shakes. "Now, why don't you let me make you a cup of nice, hot tea . . .?"

His imperiously cocked eyebrows were disdainful. "You think I'm just making this up?"

Mrs. Mulvaney wondered just what to say. She ran her tongue across her lips, ill at ease. then decided on the obvious. "Well, there's nothing here that looks like a towel—or blood," she said as crossly as she could.

"But she's killed my cat, she has!"

"Killed, my foot! 'Tis probably in someone's backyard you'll be finding the blasted animal," Mrs. Mulvaney declared.

Upon that she closed the subject. She started for her room, hoping that Mr. Greck would go for his.

"She's killed him," he muttered, ignoring what she'd said. "No matter what you think. I know it, I tell you. I'll get the truth out of her. You just wait and see."

"You leave the poor girl alone," Mrs. Mulvaney said sharply.

Mr. Greck laughed his nasty laugh. "You'll see," he said. "You'll see."

And she did see. Later on, toward the end of the afternoon. she observed a remarkably subdued Mr. Greck standing in the corridor outside Miss de Mise's room; and from what she saw, Mrs. Mulvaney could tell that he was being very friendly. Slick and polished in his Sunday suit, he was, with his slippery laugh running softly through the hall. He was saying, "I'm sure that we've met somewhere before. . . ."

The girl's seductive murmur came back, "Why, yes. Of course. I was wondering if you would remember me. . . ."

Then the door opened just a shade more, to admit him to the room.

Mrs. Mulvaney could hardly contain her surprise. Why. the little devil, working an old dodge like that! But, really, it was the new girl's responsiveness that bothered her the more. Mrs. Mulvaney hadn't thought that she was that kind; frankly, the suddenly realized ramifications of the action upstairs filled her with a certain dread. She'd never had any trouble of *that* sort in her place!

She fidgeted for long minutes in her room, trying to decide upon her action, while keeping her ears open for any sounds upstairs. Once she thought she heard a foot on the stairs, and someone going to the back door, but she could not be sure it was Mr. Greck, and the suspense grew within her. Finally, she determined on the phone-call ruse. Carefully and silently she went into the hall and dialed the three numbers which would ring her right back. That done, she called loudly upstairs:

"Mr. Greck! Oh, Mr. Greck! Telephone!"

When several minutes went by without answer, she tried again. Then, when that produced no response, she was fully justified in climbing the stairs and knocking at his door.

There was no answer. At length, decided, she went to the girl's door and rapped sharply.

To her surprise it opened almost immediately, and a remarkably bright and spirited Miss de Mise looked down at her.

"Yes?"

"I—I thought I saw Mr. Greck come

in here," Mrs. Mulvaney said, "and now there's a phone call waiting for him down—"

"But he's not here," the girl said quickly. "He—he's gone."

"Gone, is he?"

"He won't be back." She smiled with those startling blood-red lips of her. "At least, not for some time."

As Mrs. Mulvaney stood there, absorbing this bit of information, the girl disappeared for a moment, then returned with some money in her hand. "His rent. He—he asked me to give you this." She held out the money.

Mrs. Mulvaney took the two ten-dollar bills, thoroughly amazed. Surely Mr. Greck was a strange one, for fair; at least he could have had the decency to wish her good-bye.

As she placed the money in her pocket, she realized that Mr. Greck's week's rent had been the same as Mrs. Hutchins'—fifteen dollars. And she found herself heading for the staircase with a peculiar pattern of thoughts chasing around in her head. The queer behavior of this new young lady, with her cadaverous look that had a way of changing to almost radiant, flush-faced beauty; the remarkable actions of Mr. Greck: his fears about the missing cat, and his insistence on a bloody towel; and above all, this sudden disappearance. . . . Could that have been himself she'd heard, the while back, when she thought there'd been footsteps and a closing back door?

She would have thought more of it, then, if she had not been still the landlady that she was, and had not noticed the sound of running water in the bathroom as she went past.

With a further sigh over the mysteriousness abruptly visited upon her house, Mrs. Mulvaney turned to the partially opened bathroom door, intent upon shutting off the tap. She had her hand almost on the doorknob when she felt the fingers on her shoulder, stopping her.

"Please—if you don't mind," Miss de Mise said apologetically, getting between her and the door.

MRS. MULVANEY frowned. "But the water's running." Through the opened door she could see it was the cold-water faucet, splashing into the sink on what seemed to be a towel. The water, sloshing about the upper edges of the basin, looked faintly pink. . . .

"I'll take care of it," said Miss de Mise, and hurried into the small room, turning the key in the lock behind her.

Mrs. Mulvaney waited for some time outside, but presently it grew very dark in the hall because it was getting late in the afternoon and the daylight was fading rapidly.

Finally, she had to go downstairs to turn on the house lights, but she went back upstairs immediately.

The bathroom door was ajar, and she found nothing in the empty room but the still-damp towel, hanging folded on its rack. She thought she could detect very faint discolorations on it. The sink, of course, was clean.

In Miss de Mise's room, where she looked next, there was a chilling emptiness.

The curtains fluttered against the open window, and the wash of cold air made her shiver. She had no idea where the girl could have gone until she saw the note, propped on the table. Just a short note, written in a quick, somehow unreal hand:

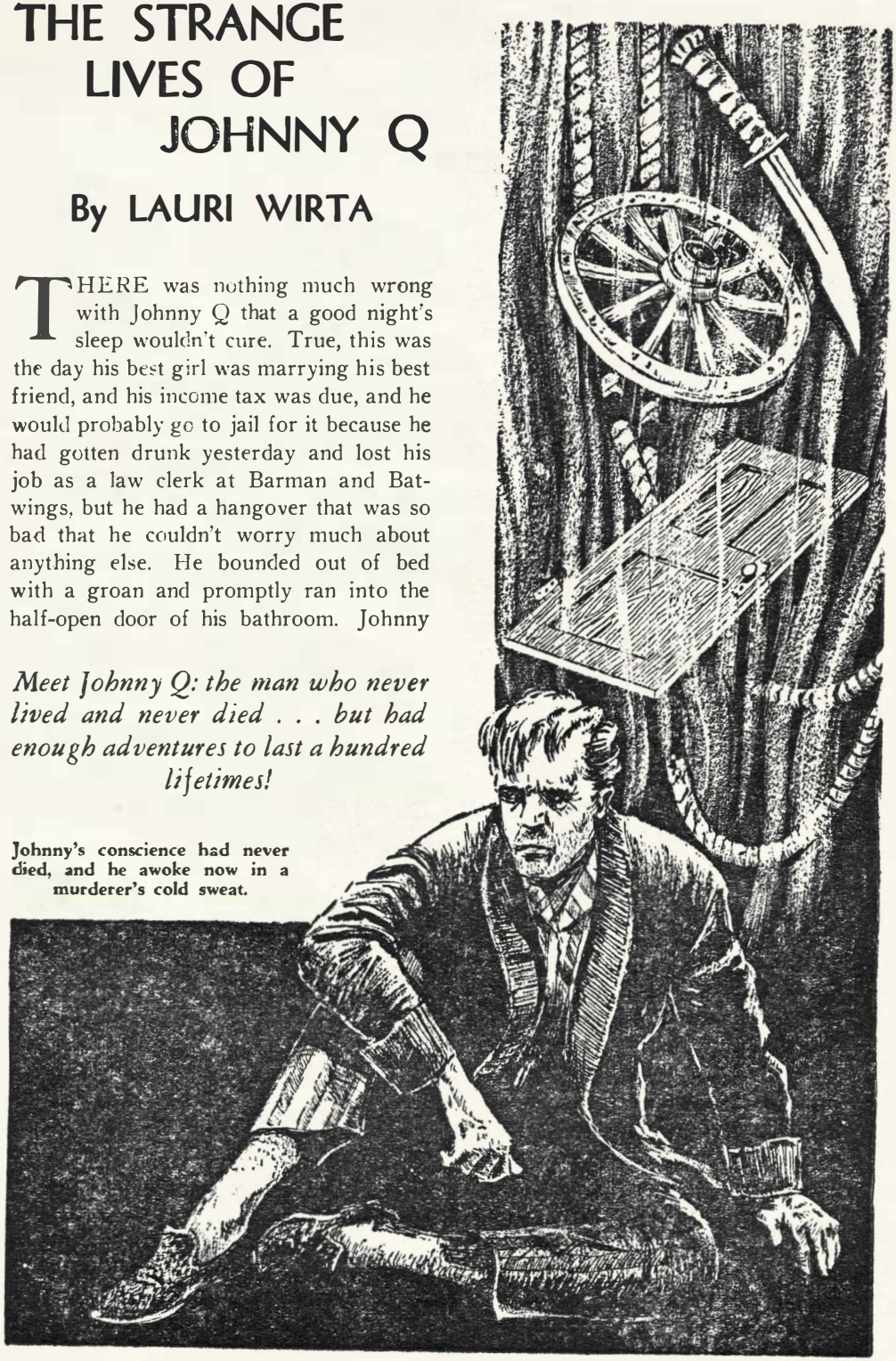
> Dear Mrs. Mulvaney—Thank you for everything. You were very kind, but you must forget me. And Mr. Greck, as well. He may never be back. But in case he or his cat do return, it would be best to have your crucifix with you.
>
> J. de Mise.

THE STRANGE LIVES OF JOHNNY Q

By LAURI WIRTA

THERE was nothing much wrong with Johnny Q that a good night's sleep wouldn't cure. True, this was the day his best girl was marrying his best friend, and his income tax was due, and he would probably go to jail for it because he had gotten drunk yesterday and lost his job as a law clerk at Barman and Batwings, but he had a hangover that was so bad that he couldn't worry much about anything else. He bounded out of bed with a groan and promptly ran into the half-open door of his bathroom. Johnny

Meet Johnny Q: the man who never lived and never died . . . but had enough adventures to last a hundred lifetimes!



Johnny's conscience had never died, and he awoke now in a murderer's cold sweat.

stumbled back and slowly sat down.

The fact that he had always known the door was badly hung—he had complained to the management about it repeatedly—did nothing to ease Johnny's hurt. He now blamed the whole thing on the door and, picking himself off the floor, swung back at it. The door caromed off the wall and gave him another shiner, besides putting him back into slumber. . . .

It was quite a violent beginning to as fantastic a sequence of events as Johnny had ever dreamed about. He had a blanket impression of himself as receding through aeons of time and everything he had learned from childhood through law school and in the offices of Barman and Batwings seemed to pass through his mind. He had often thought, rather fuzzily, of death and dying—and his last coherent impression now was that this was it. *Murdered,* he thought, *by a cockeyed door. . . .*

* * *

The next thing Johnny Q knew, he was sitting in a big place like the courthouse, with Greek pillars all around him and wearing a sheet like Mahatma Ghandi, only more formal. All around him were people similarly attired and Johnny had a panicky feeling that he was not only dead but had landed in some kind of convention —like the Odd Fellows or Rotarians—which might be worse.

It was while he was quietly looking for a way out that he saw the thing. He could hardly believe his eyes, but it was his bathroom door, all right, off its hinges, and a couple of guys were arguing politely over it. Everybody else was listening gravely, so Johnny did, too.

Finally it dawned on him—this was a kind of trial and the bathroom door was the culprit. Johnny felt cold suddenly, and it wasn't only because the big marble hall was drafty and he was wearing nothing but a sheet. It was because one of the gents, similarly dressed, was arguing that the door had attacked Johnny with intent to maim and kill, and should be summarily punished. The other man was defending the door, saying it was a good, faithful door on the whole, and its duty, after all, was keeping people out. The man argued that Johnny had simply come upon it too suddenly, and then pointed out that before the door had actually knocked Johnny out, Johnny had attacked it with his fist and the door had acted in self-defense.

At this point, Johnny decided it was high time for him to leave and not only that, but put as much mileage between himself and this bughouse as possible. Just then, though, the door's defender looked at him, scowling, and he found himself unable to move. The prosecutor then took over, saying it was obvious the door was guilty, since Johnny had been knocked clean out of his own time and place and this was ancient Greece and all the people who lived here had been dead for centuries, so Johnny was too.

That decided it. The door was pronounced guilty of murder, sentence was passed on it and in due course it was formally escorted to the nearest frontier and tossed into exile.

Johnny had followed the procession to see that the sentence was duly carried out and while he was there he saw some other things. Among the criminals being exiled from the country, along with his bathroom door, was a broken stone urn which had been so ill-advised as to kill its master while being swung by its mistress, a lady named Ariane. This did not sit so well with Johnny, who thought the lady had had something to do with it, and he would have said so, except that she seemed pretty well regarded and he didn't like to make a fuss. But he decided to get out of this crazy place before somebody with pull like hers decided to swing on him, for there was no telling where he would wind up if he got himself killed again.

WELL, they say the way a man dies has a lot to do with what happens to him afterwards, and Johnny kept thinking of this as he traveled. He had gotten himself out of his world while hating an inanimate object, so that was the sort of thing he kept seeing. Only these ancients did it legally—a knife was tried in court for murder and found guilty and punished, while the man who wielded it went free, if he had the money. A tree a man felled on his rival in love was sentenced to perish, while the fellow lived happily ever after with the girl.

Even in England, which Johnny reached some centuries later, things were as bad.

He'd hardly gotten into the country when he saw a man felled by another in a fight strike his head against a wagon wheel and die. He attended the trial and was much surprised to find the wheel being solemnly tried, rather than the dead man's attacker, a man of some standing in the community. The court finally awarded the wheel to the dead man's heirs, judging it a "bane," and directed them to punish it as they saw fit. They proceeded to kick it to bits, while the wagon's owner, a no-account farmer who had nothing to do with the killing, watched helplessly.

Of course, this system was a part of nature's law of survival since, for the most part, it protected persons of consequence. But Johnny didn't like it. Maybe it was because he had seen too much of that kind of thing. Maybe it was for more personal reasons. Anyway, Johnny decided to protest. After all, English Common Law was to become the basis of American jurisprudence in the twentieth century.

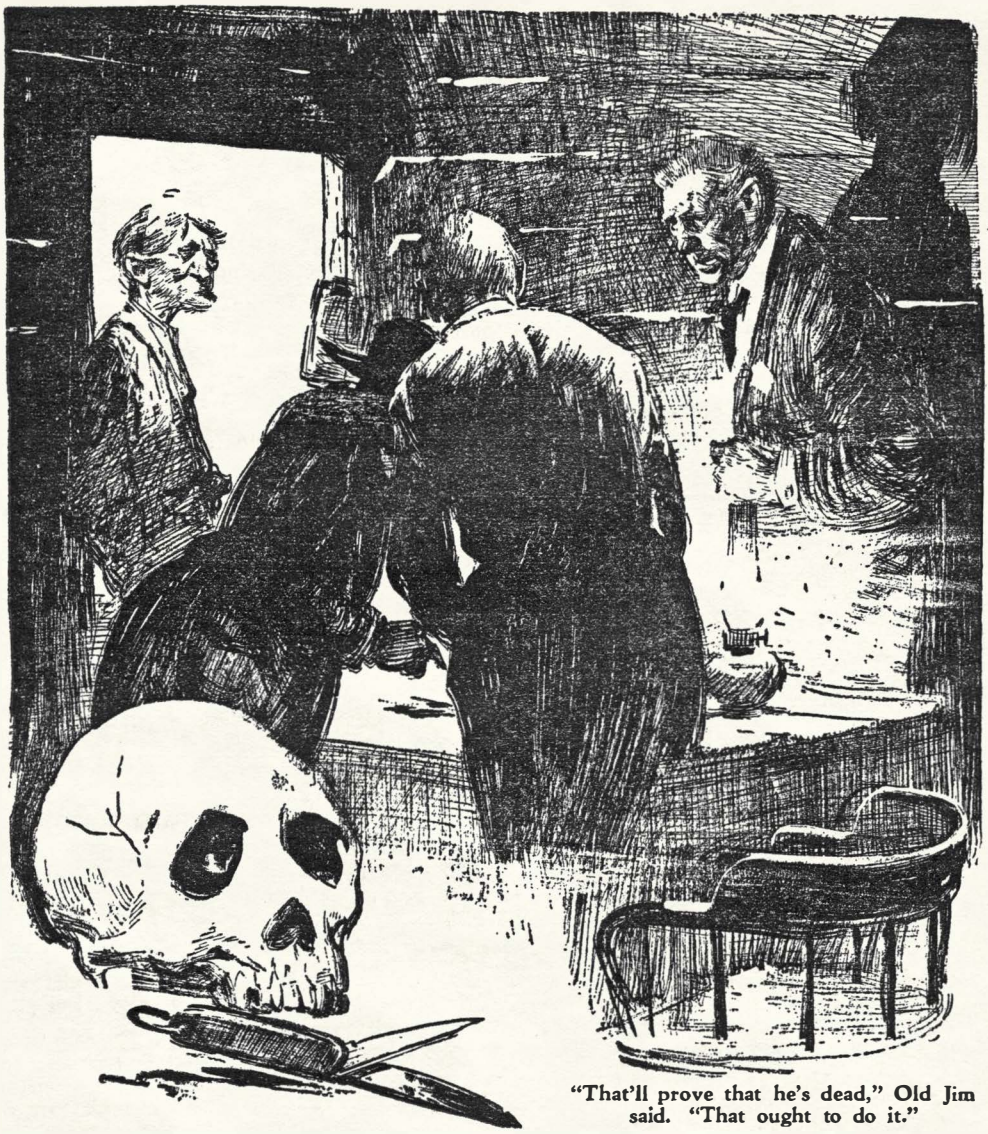
At first they though he was crazy, but he had an eternity of time and kept plugging away. Little by little people began to listen to him—or if not that, to accept his ideas as their own, as people will. Slowly the principle of compensation sank into their skulls, and instead of dooming murderous inanimate objects to perdition as "banes," they began to sell them as "deodands," meaning "given to God," and to use the proceeds for the benefit of the deceased—usually for Masses for the dead man's soul. They made all sorts of rules, some of which made sense, while others didn't. For instance, if a person was killed by a wagon in motion, the whole wagon was deodand and the deceased got impressive ceremonies; on the other hand, if the wagon was standing still at the time of the accident, only that part directly responsible was deodand, and often it wasn't enough to get a troubled soul past purgatory.

But though the system wasn't perfect, Johnny was pretty satisfied after a couple of centuries that he had the British Common Law in fit condition to be handed down to his own generation—counting, of course, further evolution along the way—and with the lessening of his labors he began to feel pretty lonely and homesick.

Despite his arduous labors, he hadn't prospered particularly—reformers are usually ragged. By the time their ideas are accepted, somebody else steps in to reap the cash and glory. In the case of the deodands, it was the church. Johnny needed a ship and he was pretty desperate and overworked—that was the only excuse he ever could think of for what he did next.

He laid his plans carefully. He'd always been pretty law-abiding, and he meant to stay within the law this time. Of course, he had a dim memory of his twentieth century conscience, but he felt he'd saved the future of democratic jurisprudence, so he thought he had at least one life coming to him. There was a man for whom he had once done a special favor, and who'd made Johnny his principal heir. Johnny hadn't particularly wanted it at the time, but now he saw where it might come in handy. He lured

(Continued on page 97)



"That'll prove that he's dead," Old Jim said. "That ought to do it."

A MATTER OF PROOF

By GROVER BRINKMAN

Out of the deep, treacherous swamps, Old Jim Fargo brought a grisly souvenir . . . to prove that the man for whom he would have given his life . . . was dead. . . .

SOMETHING was moving far up the dusty St. Croix Road. Old Jim Fargo laboriously tied a second knot in the bandage on his throbbing, badly infected finger, and shuffled inside his peeled-log shack to get his telescope. Pre-

sently he came out to the porch again, poured some antiseptic solution on the crude bandage, then carefully focused the ancient glass. He stared long and earnestly, until he was quite sure the black dot, now rapidly growing larger, was an automobile. When he put down the glass he seemed suddenly weary, and dejected in spirit.

However, when the low-slung sedan finally jolted to a stop in front of his disreputable abode, Old Jim had again assumed a nonchalant attitude. He hummed an old Creole chant as he awkwardly pared potatoes, trying valiantly to keep his sore finger out of the way.

Three strangers slid out of the car and came up to the porch. They were dark-skinned and shifty-eyed. They acted nervous and ill at ease.

The taller of the three flipped back his coat for an instant, just long enough to flash a badge. Old Jim noted the bulge of shoulder holsters.

"We're looking for a guy," the tall man said bluntly. "We're officers from upstate. They told us back at St. Croix that you were the only old-time hermit in this area who knew the Okenfenokee. We was wondering if you happened to see anyone come down the bayou."

Old Jim stopped his paring, spat derisively over the broken porch rail.

"I ain't paid much attention to the bayou, or anything else," he said evasively, waving a fly off his bandage. "Been too busy tryin' to save this blamed finger from gangrene."

"We trailed this guy to St. Croix. We're certain he was heading for the swamp. If he was, wouldn't he go in by way of the bayou?"

"Mebbe. And then agin, mebbe not. What kind of a guy was this feller?"

"He's a big man—must weigh all of 225. A surgeon by profession, red-headed, and his eyes are blue like robins' eggs—"

Something clattered to the porch floor. Old Jim tried mightily to steady his good hand as he picked up his paring knife. When he looked up, however, his weather-beaten old face had the immobility of a faro dealer.

"Big guy, you say? Hell, if he's thet heavy, the bog's got 'im by now." He sent tobacco juice over the railing again. "Nobody can go into this part of the Okefenok' less'n you're a pint-sized runt like me. Know thet, don't you?"

The tall man was scowling. "They told us as much in St. Croix. That's why we came all the way out here. You're the only guy who can go in and get this fellow."

Old Jim perked up his head. "I ain't no man-catcher, mister. Besides, if this guy is a hard egg, I'm liable to stop a bullet—"

"There isn't much danger," the tall man returned. "Doctors don't carry guns. Besides, if your theory is right, he's liable to be a mile down in the bog by now."

Old Jim nodded. There was no way out, evidently. Laboriously he slipped into hipboots, donned a dirty old hat. "I'll go," he said wearily, "but it's liable to take hours. Better come up an' cook some grub. There's sweet potatoes ready, an' a squirrel—"

The tall man peeled off a bill from an overly fat roll. Old Jim was scowling, rubbing an imaginary bite on the top of his cranium, as the tall man crammed the bill inside a pocket of his dirty vest.

"We've got to get this guy, see?" the tall man persisted. The statement undeniably was an order.

"Scared I'll bring 'im out dead," Old Jim argued. "If he don't know the swamp, some varmint'll git 'im, even if the bog don't."

"Just so we have some proof," the tall man concluded. "Some positive proof."

MINUTES later, Old Jim was poling his scarred pirogue down the bayou, following the black waterlane that led into

the heart of the swamp. There was a hard, steely light in his watery old eyes as he poled deeper into the treacherous bog. From time to time he spat derisively into the brackish water, as if ridding his mouth of some extremely bitter taste. . . .

* * *

The scorching July sun was well past the meridian when he finally came out of the swamp. He was alone. The trio shuffled down to the muddy bayou edge to meet him.

"I found 'im," Old Jim began, wiping his brow, "but I can't git 'im out. He's in the bog. Must have floundered right onto a big cottonmouth. Can't move 'im, for the bog won't hold me up thet long, and my one hand's no good. Was wonderin'—"

"Nix on that!" the tall man interrupted. "Not on your life! If the bog won't hold you, how could any of us go in? We're all heavier than you."

The tall man scowled as he pondered, tossed a pebble idly into the tepid stream. "All we need is some evidence that this guy is actually dead—some positive, undisputable proof."

"Proof?" echoed Old Jim, "you mean—"

He left the sentence unfinished, turned back to his boat, grimacing at the pain in his puffed finger.

Without farther parley he started poling his batered pirogue back into the Okefenokee. But now a whimsical smile lingered on his leathery face despite his pain.

Finally he grounded the pirogue on a low mud bank, whistled softly. A giant of a young man came splashing through the slush and bramble toward the boat. He was mud-spattered, dirty, haggard, but his blue eyes burned with an intense light that changed and softened as the older man approached.

"They want some proof you're dead, Nat," Old Jim said.

A film of fear suddenly veiled the eyes of the younger man. "Take them my class ring, clothing—anything," he began feverishly.

"That wouldn't do. The tall one would catch on."

"He's too damned smart." Nat Fargo wiped clammy sweat off his freckled brow. "Watch him like a hawk, Dad. Don't even hint we're kin. He thinks I come from the Everglades instead of the Okefenokee. He's a snake, and he'll try to get me if it takes a lifetime. All his mob are behind bars, excepting these three. My evidence put them there."

"Calm down!" Old Jim said, scratching his seedy old head in bafflement. "We'll figure out somethin'. You're safe here. Nobody knows 'bout the cabin on the island but me an' you. You can stay here till the law catches up with these birds, and that shouldn't be long. Let's see. . . ."

* * *

A pair of whippoorwills was circling high above the mirror-like surface of the bayou, cuting mad capers in the cobalt sky, when Old Jim came out of the swamp for the second time.

"Here's your proof," he told the tall man. "Positive proof."

As the trio gathered around the oilcloth-covered table in his kitchen, he unwrapped his red handkerchief. The tall man took one look, prodded gingerly with the tip of a pencil until he was certain of the insignia on that gold band. Then he turned away without a word. His two henchmen made wry faces and hurried outside.

When the last exhausts of the big car dimmed into the distance, Old Jim smiled.

"Thet son o' mine'll be the greatest doc in the world some day," he soliloquized, as he studied his bandaged hand. "Takin' off thet old rotten finger didn't hurt a bit!"

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson

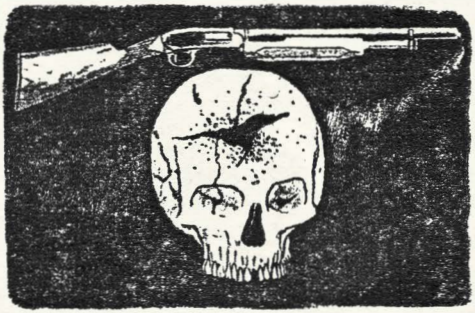
Balancing his corpse budget proved the undoing of Alfred Leonard Cline, who made a living by marrying and murdering wealthy women. With strange carelessness, he buried one of his wives under a false name, then found himself faced with the necessity of providing another corpse to satisfy inquiring relatives. His next wife, properly murdered and cremated, filled the bill—but she, too, had nosy relatives, and Cline found himself in the unusual situation of marrying a poor old widow, to eke out his corpse budget. He murdered her, too, but the supposedly friendless woman did have friends, whose investigation brought the crime series to light.

Technicalities prevented Cline's trial for murder. But he's doing 126 years for forgery in connection with letters written by his wives after their demise!

The friends and in-laws of Arthur Waite, who posed as a successful young surgeon, were so convinced of his authenticity that his method bears reviewing. He would simply drive to Bellevue Hospital, with which he was not remotely connected, with a companion, whom he would ask to wait in the car outside. After an hour's loitering in the busy corridors he would emerge, fatigued but triumphant after another successful "operation." This little trick came to light after two of Waite's in-laws died of poisoning—both crimes so subtle that neither was discovered until the bodies had been exhumed. Up to then no one had suspected—not even the wife who had been his childhood sweetheart—that his only medical training was an eight-day research into poison. Waite died in the chair.

Mrs. Florence McCreary, of Eldorado, Ill., was so tired that—"I'd shoot myself if I had a gun." Her eight-year-old son heard her mention this, went and got a shotgun, brought it to her. Mrs. McCreary was just beginning to explain adult exaggerations to him—when the gun went off. She died instantly.

A strange twilight of horror became the lot of James E. Makusker, brilliant Philadelphia editor, who was brought to court for allegedly murderous behavior—after working hours. A judge sentenced him to the world of sane men by day—but each night he had to sleep in an insane asylum. After some years of this, he was once more pronounced sane, but his estate, administered during this period by a trust, though he was adjudged perfectly capable of carrying on other business duties, had shrunk from $60,000 to $500—and even on his death-bed, Makusker claimed he had been fraudulently convicted!



——— WHO WILL KILL

Terror-Packed Murder Novelette

By

FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

The Stranger

IT WAS after midnight and Joe was just sitting there, having a slow beer and talking to Paddy behind the bar. The place was quiet, and even the noise from an occasional El train seemed sleepier now. In another ten minutes, Joe would have gone home. But right then this guy came in with the girl and they sat down in the front booth, facing each other, and Joe got a look at the guy's face as he ordered two bourbons. It was Softy.

For a minute Joe couldn't remember

CLAUDE?

In the old days they might have put a bell on Claude, Joe thought . . . a sign that would cry out: Do not speak with me. Know me not, or you are damned! *. . . But now—now there was only one sign that could be hung on that trembling, six-foot mass of killers'-bait:* Claude Mardle . . . R.I.P. . . .

"It's a terrible feeling," Claude whispered. "And it won't go away. I keep feeling that I'm going to die tonight. . . ."

his real name: just Softy, the name everybody in the neighborhood had called him, except his mother. Then Joe remembered his mother's name: Mrs. Mardle, a frightened-eyed little woman who'd taught history when the regular teachers got sick, and the rest of the time made hats and blouses and things. Everything she did was for Claude. That was it, Claude Mardle.

It was fifteen years, anyway, Joe was thinking. Hell, was it *that* long. . . ? But fifteen and fifteen made thirty; he was thirty, and he'd been fifteen when the old man died and they'd left Brooklyn, he and Connie, his sister.

He realized Claude was staring at him, his pale blue eyes struggling to recall. Then he did, and his long soft face was suddenly radiant. "Joe! Joe Carroll, that's who it is!" It was a shallow voice, rather high-pitched. It was lonely. Just as lonely and friendless as it had been fifteen years ago, Joe realized.

Joe got up and smiled and went over, holding out his hand. "Hello, Claude," he said.

"Aw, you remembered my name!" It was pathetic, how surprised he was, and grateful. Then he was introducing Joe to the girl. Her name was Sara Arlen, and she wasn't the kind Joe would have figured for Claude. Her hair was the color of dark honey, page-bobbed at her shoulders, and her eyes were the color of autumn. Her figure was smooth and curved, like a swimmer's.

Then Claude was saying Joe had to sit down and he was going to buy a drink. Did Joe know how long it had been? Golly, those were the days!

"Yeah, the great days!" But they hadn't been, and Joe felt shabby at the memory. Claude—Softy. . . . Maybe there was always one kid like that in every neighborhood. The kid who didn't know how to play or fight, who was afraid to come downstairs. Fat and big for his age, and sort of damp under the chin. Clumsy and never clean, but always with clean clothes. And the pigeons. . . . Joe remembered the mouse traps Claude used to bait with bread, catching the pigeons that came to the window ledge. Then he'd pulled out their tail-feathers and watched them trying to fly. And laughing—a nervous high laugh, sometimes clapping his hands.

Joe saw Claude's eyes now, and they seemed to beseech him not to remember. To say, "See how I've changed? Don't remind me, please."

JOE STARTED talking then. About how he'd started as a copy boy at the *Banner* and then become a reporter. Then the Army and he'd gotten to know Sol Garadine in Italy. Garadine produced plays. He'd been running a bunch of USO outfits then. So when he came back, Joe had looked him up, like Sol told him. Now he was doing publicity for Sol. How about Claude?

"I guess I haven't done much of anything, exactly," Claude said slowly. "Just wandering around. . . ." The words faded, but his lips rambled silently then grew still and he stared at his thick white fingers. "Drifting. Hunting for something, sort of." Again his lips worked mutely. Then Joe noticed Sara's hand.

Her left hand. It was clenched on the table's edge until whitness showed under the fingernails and a vein stood out on the thumb. There was something so quietly violent about the hand that Joe looked up at her face. Claude was talking again, in a note of anxious eagerness.

"Just walked in here. Place I'd never seen before, and there you were! Starts a man to remembering, you know. Times back there in Brooklyn. I wonder what whappened to all our gang, anyway." But Claude had never been part of the gang "And slipping into the Rialto picture show from the fire escape." But Claude

had never slipped in: Claude had worn a tie and gone in the front door and sat by himself. "And the fights! Say, those were the days, Joe!" And maybe, Joe thought, it was honestly warped by the wishing in Claude's memory; maybe he *did* believe he'd done those things.

Maybe. But Joe kept watching Sara's face. She might have been hypnotized. Her golden-brown eyes were focused on Claude's fingers and there was torment in her eyes. Still Claude was talking: ". . . but sometimes a guy gets lonely, you know. You go places and you say hello, but then the party's over and you're sitting there by yourself. Lonely."

Joe took a deep drink of beer. The gnawing humility of Claude's words made him cringe inside. He'd buy a drink and get the hell out. Claude's voice kept on, like a patient phonograph playing in a vacant room, and playing a dismal song.

"I get to thinking, sometimes, sitting up there in my apartment and it starts getting dark. It just seems like something's wrong. You get this feeling that you've got to get up and move things a little. An ashtray or a chair and the shade, so as to make it right. But—but that isn't what's wrong, Joe. You know? You know the feeling? That something's wrong and yet you can't find out exactly what it is?"

Joe blinked, then laughed a little too loud. "Something's always wrong, Claude. When it gets like that, it's time to take a vacation or another drink or—"

"No. No, not this thing I mean. This thing is . . ." He stopped and Joe could see his lips struggling and his eyes struggling to dredge up some incoherent message. Joe felt perspiration along his collar and tension across his shoulders. Suddenly this whole affair had an element of monstrous clumsiness, and he had to get out.

"One more drink, Claude, on me. I've got to go," he said abruptly. "It's late."

Claude gave no indication that he had heard. His lips were still struggling. "Like the days were going backward. That's the way it is, somehow. Sitting there and the dark getting thick all around and nobody to talk to, and suddenly it seems like this is a minute—an exact minute with all the parts and pieces just the same—where you've been before."

"You're shaking yourself. Have a drink and I've got to go."

This time Claude heard and a terrible disappointment spread over his face. "But I wanted to talk a little. Sit around and have a few drinks. I was just thinking to myself today, if there was just somebody to talk to. Then walking in here and finding you, and old times and all. Golly, Joe, you know we're friends from a long time back. A long time. . . ." His words drained away. The expression on his long, yeasty face was haunted in loneliness, and his eyes resembled pale blue marbles, half covered in a saucer of thin milk.

In that moment Joe realized that he loathed Claude Mardle. It came to him in violence, like nothing he had ever felt before, and for that moment it consumed him totally. Then something—perhaps a gasp from Sara—awoke him and he saw her eyes, fixed in strangest awe and understanding on his face. For that instant, before shame took him and bowed his head, they shared one glimpse of horror.

Like a distant drumbeat, Claude's words beat on: ". . . and we'll sure be getting together, Joe. Maybe you don't get the feeling like I do, but somehow it's almost like . . . well, destiny. Coming in here after feeling like I have, and finding you from old times and all. Gosh, and we were kids back there in those days, Joe, you know?"

"I've got to go!" Joe was on his feet, making himself smile into Claude's face.

Then he looked at Sara Arlen. Her autumn eyes were pools of dusty gold. She smiled and said good-bye until next time, gravely, as though she were quite sure there would be a next time. Joe turned away.

The cold rush of February wind felt clean against his cheeks. His hand felt clammy from Claude's grasp and his face that had been so close to Claude's seemed to carry the vapor of Claude's breathing. Joe had known no sensation like this in his life, and his brain recoiled from any attempt to retrace, to understand. He rushed on against the cold wind, drinking in deeply its unsoiled freshness.

THE NEXT MORNING the affair had the taste of hangover between his teeth and his head ached slightly. He dressed slowly, and when he reached the street he stopped and blinked vaguely into the brittle brilliance of the winter sunlight. For a moment he could not remember what he had planned to do today. Lunch. . . ? Lunch with Torgerson, that was it.

They went to Phillipe's and Torgerson's voice buzzed incessantly. Joe said yes and no and great stuff. Torgerson started telling the one about Raymond Bradcliffe, when he came in from Hollywood. Joe had heard it eleven times. He sat there, staring in artificial amusement at Torgerson and realizing how much he despised this waspy little columnist. Then he found his mind wandering, his eyes wandering over the tables—looking for a long, yeasty face, for pale, yellow hair and wistful blue eyes. He stiffened. There! Across the room by that door where—but it wasn't Claude. It had almost been Claude. . . .

"But really, you should see it," Torgerson said. Joe turned.

"What?"

"Your expression, old boy. Quite the most depraved look I've seen in years, just then." He cocked a brow. "I could have sworn you wanted to kill someone, then. But certainly not me?"

"To kill someone. . . ." Joe repeated the words strangely. How odd and how incredibly simple they sounded. *To kill someone. . . .*

Abruptly he stood up and there was cold perspiration on his face. He felt ill, as if he could not breathe. It was just as it often was in books: exactly as if a hand were gripping his throat and closing very slowly. Very, very slowly. He stammered something about being sorry, not feeling well. He turned and stumbled out.

The sensation of choking dissolved before he had walked three blocks, and he felt ridiculous. He damned himself for being a fool. Now he'd have to endure another lunch with Torgerson to apologize, and before evening it would be around that Joe Carroll was on the skates. Drinking, you know, old boy.

Joe stopped. Over the shoulders of the crowd, yellow in the sunlight, was moving a long head set on stooped shoulders. Nearer. Nearer. Joe watched. But it wasn't Claude. It had only looked like Claude. Joe closed his eyes for a moment and felt the concrete tilting beneath his feet. Again he was cold and shaking. Quickly he opened his eyes to retrieve his balance. He was standing in front of a bar, and suddenly he needed a drink—a stiff drink, and quickly.

He drank it and ordered another and stood there talking to himself. "Listen, this is crazy. This is the stuff that makes the walls start talking, and it's not for Joe." He looked at himself in the mirror. Average everywhere. Black hair, brown eyes. Just a face and a fifty-dollar suit and a hat that had lived in the rain. But nothing *wrong*.

"I'm making a spook of the guy. Twisting him around, puffing him up, when he's nothing but an awkward, lonely guy

we used to call Softy. Another look at him and I'd see it the way it is. So I'll take another look and be sorry for him, and walk out and forget him." So Joe hunted the name in the Manhattan directory. There it was. On Park Avenue, too. Claude answered.

"Golly, it's good to hear you, Joe! Maybe you wouldn't believe it, but I was just sitting here and thinking maybe you'd call. You come on up and we'll just chew the rag. Old times and all, and then we'll pick us a place and eat dinner. Sara's coming around at four. It's going to be mighty fine, with everything we've got to say."

Joe replaced the receiver slowly, frowning. Already he knew it was not going to be just a look and good-bye. Suddenly the whole thing seemed fantastically unreal: his presence in this booth, the promise to spend an afternoon at Claude's, the total disregard for work he had planned to do. Of course he couldn't go to Claude's. It was insane to have called. Now he would call back. . . .

But he simply sat there and his body felt sucked of its life. His muscles felt limp and exhausted. Thought was an impossible effort. At last he turned and went out to take a cab.

CHAPTER TWO

The Pistol

IT WAS a massive grey stone building in the Sixties and Claude had half of the top floor. He opened the door himself, and his soft face was radiant with pleasure. He kept saying, "Golly, golly," and trying to take Joe's coat. From the entry hall, Joe entered a living room into which his entire three-room apartment could have been placed twice. Grey carpeting was like a sea of glass from wall to wall, and a bank of doors faced east across a broad terrace. There was a frozen magnificence here. Utterly cold, totally impersonal and unlived-in, and somehow terrifying in its stark extravagance. It was bleak as a glacier, and it was Claude's. Joe kept staring, telling himself: All this is Claude's. Claude, the fumbling, frightened kid from Brooklyn. Somehow he'd grabbed all this.

". . . have to mix them myself," Claude was saying. "I don't know why they won't stay, because I pay what they ask for, but they just stay a day or two and quit. I don't know. A lot of people are that way, seems to me." He smiled and hurried out. Presently Joe heard the sound of cracking ice. He walked around until he noticed the goldfish bowl on the radiator. But the fish weren't swimming. They were dead. The water was hot from the radiator. And for some reason, Joe remembered the pigeons and the mouse traps.

Then Claude came back with the cocktails. He walked with his fleshy stomach protruding, his broad hips shaking, and his shoulders narrowed until they seemed almost deformed. Joe tried to decide what was wrong with Claude's body. But there wasn't a single one thing, he realized. It was just as though it had been assembled from many cast-off parts, by workmen intent on playing some cruel yet comic joke. And there was nothing Claude could do about it.

"Thanks, Claude," Joe said, taking the cocktail. "Nice place."

"Yes. I haven't been here long. Eight months, now. It's pretty. But sometimes . . . I don't know. Lonely. I keep thinking I'll get around and meet people and then it won't be this way. . . ." His voice wandered off until it was scarcely an echo. His eyes were empty in their blueness. "Elsie would have liked it. She liked things blue, you know."

"Elsie?" Joe asked.

"She was my first wife. Always liked pretty things. And pets, too. Used to

keep goldfish. Lots of them, but after we got married, they all seemed to die. I don't know. . . ." He blinked sadly. "But you didn't know I'd been married, I guess." Joe shook his head. Claude drank slowly. "Twice. First Elsie, and then Marion. I thought you might have read about it in the *Star.*"

"No." Joe waited, feeling the silence crawling again. "Tell me about it," he said with sudden intensity.

"They—they're dead," he whispered. A tremor worked down his soft throat. He emptied his drink. "Both of them are dead," he repeated.

The chimes rang at the front door then, and Claude half-stumbled as he turned. A flush of happiness washed across his face as he hurried toward the door. "Bet it's Sara. Early for her, but most of the times she's early. If—golly! I *knew* it was going to be you! You know who's here? Joe! Old Joe's here!"

"Joe? Oh. . . ." Then she appeared in the doorway. Joe started to speak, but saw her face. Then she was coming toward him—never had anyone walked so slowly—and her eyes were locked with his. When she stopped, there was hardly a foot between them. Her face was white. Her lips seemed to struggle desperately beneath the surface.

"You—you came . . ." she whispered. "Oh, thank God," she breathed. Without another sound, she swayed. Joe caught her as she fell.

"Damn! Where can—" he began. He saw Claude's face; he would never forget. Horror and ecstasy were tangled in a grotesque struggle that stripped the face of some basic human quality and left it naked. The lips made a wordless, bleating sound and the ecstasy disappeared.

JOE PUSHED past him and carried Sara to the long couch. "A towel. A towel with cold water, Claude," he said sharply.

"Yes. Yes," Claude gasped and hurried away. In less than three minutes Sara opened her eyes and saw Joe. He saw the panorama of memory crowding through her eyes and he heard her sigh wearily as she closed her eyes again.

"Maybe a little brandy, you guess, Joe?" Claude worried. Joe nodded and Claude hurried away again. Sara opened her eyes.

"My purse? What did I do with my purse?" she whispered.

Joe looked around and saw it on the floor. He reached down.

"Please, I'll get—" Sara started desperately, but Joe's fingers had already closed upon the blue cloth and he was lifting it. He stopped. A strange numbness went through his fingers; then he was handing the purse to Sara and they were staring at each other in a silence that required no words. Each knew what the other knew. There was a gun in Sara's purse.

"Just a little brandy," Claude was saying eagerly. "Golly, you sure worried me, Sara."

"No. I've got to go. I've got to go," she repeated tensely. She managed to stand and focus her eyes on the door.

"But Sara, you can't!" Claude cried. "You just rest and take it—"

"I'll take you home," Joe interrupted. "I'll—"

"No, no," she said in a driven voice. "Please, just let me alone. I'll be all right if you'll just let me alone." Carefully, watching exactly where she placed each foot, she crossed the room and closed the door. The serpents of silence began to writhe, to climb. Claude swallowed.

"She ought not to go away like that, not feeling good, Joe."

Joe kept staring at the closed door. "Did she . . . ever faint before?" he heard his own voice asking queerly.

"Not a single time, and it worries me. It makes me think. . . ." It was quite a

while before Joe realized Claude wasn't talking. He glanced at him, and Claude's lips were parted. His eyes were beyond the room, beyond this day and hour, far back in the past. "It's like that feeling I was trying to tell you about last night," he said faintly. "The feeling about the days moving backward and all this happening before. Every part of it, even something you can almost smell. Like lilies. Sad and kind of gentle and melancholy. Just like lilies. It was just like that with Elsie."

Joe felt himself breathing softly. "Tell me about Elsie."

Claude's fingers opened and closed, and he kept staring through the bank of glass doors toward the clouds. "She killed herself. I guess she was sorry and couldn't quit thinking about it. Maybe she even thought I was mad about it. But I wasn't. I honestly wasn't mad, Joe," he said humbly. "But I couldn't tell her. I mean, she wouldn't understand. And that night she killed herself.

"But why did she think you were mad, Claude?" Joe asked softly.

"She was sick, Joe. In her mind, I mean. Sweet and kind and just about perfect. But then this other thing started. Just sickness in her mind. But she would have come out of it all right, and I wouldn't have held it against her a minute. I told her and *told* her I still loved her, but . . . it didn't make her feel right."

"But what did she *do?* What was this thing?" Joe asked harshly.

Slowly Claude's eyes came back to meet Joe's. "It was when she was sick and didn't know. One time she tried to kill me. It was with a gun, but the bullet went in my shoulder and in a week it was okay. She didn't really mean to, see?" He touched his lips with his soft fingers. "She was sweet as she could be, Joe."

Joe stood there, and every move Claude made took him farther from reality. It was only the intertwining of shadows in twilight. All of this was a shadow-play, of course. A dream. One long dream.

"Those lilies and the way it gets lonely up here and . . . well, it just seems like I can't get to know people like some men can," Claude was saying. "That's why it feels so good, seeing you. Knowing you from so long ago. Sometimes I get a feeling. I can't explain, but I get afraid, Joe. The days keep turning backward and I—let's have another drink, Joe," he said in a rush.

"I—no!" Joe's voice was raw. "Not today. Another time. I've got to go!" The green-and-gold walls seemed to float along beside him as he moved across the grey sea of carpeting. He felt he would never reach the door. It was exactly the feeling he'd known in dreams: walking, walking, eternally walking—and moving not an inch. But at last he grasped the knob, turned, walked out and closed the door.

THE LITTLE REDHEAD at the morgue desk of the *Star* smiled pertly and asked what Joe was needing today.

"A couple of things on a man named Claude Mardle," he said. "I don't know the dates. Not even the years. All I know, his first wife tried to kill him and—"

"Missed and shot herself later. Then the next wife was killed," the redhead supplied glibly. "That's getting like a best seller around here." She tripped off and returned with two of the canvas-bound volumes. "Here," she said, flipping the pages of one. "And here." She found the place in the other.

"You get many calls for this?" Joe asked her.

"Naw, I was really kidding about the best seller. There was just a girl came in a couple of months ago with the same idea you had. That was the first I'd heard of any guy named Mardle and it took a while to find it. But mainly what made me re-

member was the girl and how she acted when she read it. That's what got me reading it—trying to figure out what gave her the shakes."

"And I'll bet you remember what the girl looked like," Joe said.

"She won't break any mirrors from scaring them to pieces. If you mean, what did she look like, she looked cream and gold. Nice brown-gold hair to here and a kind of thoughtful face."

"That's what I meant," Joe said quietly. He lit a cigarette as he looked at the earlier newspaper. It was almost five years old. The story was from Los Carla, California. There was a picture of Claude, his limp face caught in a moment of bewilderment and youth, and another picture of a woman. A quiet, middle-aged woman with a plain face, a mild face.

The story told of the suicide that morning of Mrs. Claude Mardle, whose berserk attempt upon her youthful husband's life eight days before had left her stricken with guilt and grief. The young husband, still confined to Elizabeth Hospital with a bullet wound inflicted by his wife, was crushed when informed of the suicide. Throughout the eight days since the irrational attempt on his life, he had reiterated his devotion to his wife of eleven months, and had sent countless messages of forgiveness to her. To no avail. Dr. Gibson Harriman, physician to Mrs. Mardle, had described his patient's condition as one of extreme depression and melancholia, and stated that the patient was at total loss to explain any motive for her attack.

Mrs. Mardle was the former Elsie Warrington, widow of the late Ben Warrington, millionaire construction engineer of San Francisco. The bulk of her fortune, reputed to exceed ten million dollars, was left entirely to the youthful husband whom she had tried to murder.

That was all. Joe stood there, staring at the maze of type until it blurred and began to revolve in a grey-black haze. Five years ago. . . . Claude couldn't have been more than twenty-eight, then. The woman seemed at least fifty-five. And ten million dollars. . . .

Slowly, he turned toward the later newspaper and shook his head, clearing his vision. The story was two years old, from Mt. Cloud, Vermont. There was only one picture—that of a thin, rather bony woman, perhaps forty-five, dressed in climbing togs and standing in the snow. The caption read, "Dies In Fall."

Mrs. Claude Mardle, bride of less than three months, had been killed in a freak accident on the north face of Mount Cloud while she and her young husband were attempting a crossover on one of the treacherous shelves. Mrs. Mardle, an experienced climber, had been tutoring her husband when the accident occurred. Guides at Mount Cloud Lodge had warned against the climb in the face of a gathering storm, but the warnings were ignored. Mrs. Mardle was climbing, ahead of her husband, when, in some unexplained manner, the rope became severed and Mr. Mardle fell. By sheerest luck, he had clutched the shelf and dragged himself to safety. Mrs. Mardle, in attempting to descend back to him and effect his rescue, had lost her position and plunged past him to her death. Fourteen hours later the searching party had found her body and removed the distraught husband from his precarious perch. Claude Mardle, it would be recalled, was the would-be victim of his first wife's murder attempt which led eventually to her suicide. She had been Elsie Warrington, of the San Francisco construction millions. This second Mrs. Mardle had been Marion Frost, an instructor of English at Berkline College for girls before her recent marriage to Claude Mardle.

Again the type grew hazy and began to revolve in Joe's vision. In some unexplained way, the rope had become sev-

ered. . . . Guides had warned against the climb. . . . Severed. . . . Warned. . . .

"Find what you wanted?" the little redhead wondered.

Joe looked up vacantly. "Wanted?" he echoed blankly.

"Sure. I mean, you asked for—" Her eyes widened in amazement. *"You, too!"* she gasped. "Say, what's this thing got that a girl like me can't see, anyway?"

"I wish I knew," Joe said as he turned and walked out slowly. It took him several minutes to realize it was almost dark. Winter twilight was coiling through the streets. Cabs were snaking through traffic. Crowds were pouring toward Grand Central Station from all directions. A day was over. Men and women had done their work and now they were going home, just like yesterday.

He stood there, jostled by the crowd, scarcely aware of sounds, and he asked himself in a wondering voice: "What has happened to me?"

Lunch with Torgerson. But that seemed like a pinpoint, dim in a remote past. The only reality of this day was, strangely, the most dreamy interlude of all: those moments in Claude's vast and glacial room, with the silence coiling, crawling, and Claude's humble voice cringing upon his ears. That was reality.

That, and the gun in Sara's purse, Joe thought.

Sara and a gun . . . Sara and a gun. . . . It took the shape of a curious chant in his brain. He glanced about him suddenly, as if trying to discover where he was. Here was a cigar store. Here were the telephone directories. Here was her name. East Forty-sixth Street.

CHAPTER THREE

Tonight . . . I Die!

IT WAS a four-story brick walk-up between Second and Third Avenues. He pressed the bell of Sara's third-floor apartment and heard it buzzing angrily. From the floor above came gusts of laughter brought on by a radio comedian and his stooge wife. The door opened and Sara stood there in a blue bathrobe and candy-striped pajamas. Her hair was brushed up, so that it seemed shorter and crowded with careless curls. Her face was pale and her eyes were larger, darker. "Oh," she said faintly.

"I would have phoned, but I didn't think you'd see me."

She moved her shoulders slightly and Joe walked in. This was a small living room with an in-the-wall kitchen at one end, a card table set up with a typewriter, ashtray and empty coffee cup. The ashtray was overflowing. A pair of shoes lay under the table, and there was a veneer of dust, scarred by fingermarks here and there. The room was almost dirty. There was something about it that made Joe think of disintegration, of slow collapse.

Sara must have perceived. She closed the door into the disordered bedroom and pushed wearily at her hair. "I haven't cleaned. It looks like hell and I can't help it."

"How do you feel?" he asked quietly.

"Feel? Oh, that . . . I've never done that before. Makes you feel like a fool. I feel all right, now." For a moment her eyes met his, then wandered nervously away.

"You haven't eaten?" he asked. She shook her head. "Why don't you dress and we'll go out somewhere," he suggested. She hesitated, started to answer, then shook her head again.

"I don't want to get dressed again," she said in a low voice.

Joe watched her as he opened a pack of cigarettes. "Is it because you might go back to Claude's, if you dressed?" he wondered.

Her head jerked up and she stared at him. "What made you think that?"

"It's true." He kept watching her. A

flush started up her cheeks, then faded, and she made a hopeless gesture as she turned away toward the window. Still, Joe watched her. He could almost feel the tension of muscles along her back and shoulders. He knew that, if he could see her fingers, they would be clenched. Everything about her this moment was locked in struggle.

Slowly he crossed the room until he stood just behind her, and he touched her arm. "Maybe it would be better to talk about it, Sara," he said gently. "I think I will understand."

"No. No, you—" she started brokenly. She stopped and turned and her eyes were glistening. Her lips were parted in terrible awe. "You—you mean that you—"

"Want to kill him, too. It's only beginning with me. This is the first day, but I already realize." He paused. "How long has it been happening to you?"

"It's been so—so long. . . . Forever, it almost seems." She choked. Her voice broke and she covered her face with her hands, and suddenly she was crying with deep, tearing sobs that ripped her breath away but would not cease. Joe held her in his arms. She could not hear what he said. The sobs kept tearing her. Abruptly, then, they were gone, as though smashed, and she was gasping for breath and trying to talk. The words came tumbling, fighting in their frenzy to escape, only half coherent.

"Can't . . . just can't. . . . I try and try and I can't think or make myself do —do anything any more. There's nothing but him. Him, him, him! Everywhere, in every shape, always! I've got to kill him and I don't know why except . . . I just don't know."

"Sit down. Here." He held a cigarette for her and lit it. She closed her eyes.

"WHAT do you think of me?" she asked shamefacedly.

"Don't hide. Look at me. Have you ever tried to get away from him? Away from New York?"

"A thousand, a million times a day—but it's no good. Once, I got as far as Pittsburgh. I was going home to St. Louis. But I couldn't. I left the train and came back. I *had* to see him. If I didn't, I would die. . . . The feeling was worse than dying, somehow. It creeps and sinks into your pores and fills you with his face and his gnawing, lonely voice. It— If he were only mean or cruel, it would be so much easier. But the way he is, it's like a mist. You tear at it and try to fight your way out, and all you can get is emptiness. I just . . . I can't explain."

"How long have you known him, Sara?" Joe asked calmly.

"Four months. Four months and nine days," she said fixedly. "It started the very instant I laid eyes on him. I was in a line, waiting to get tickets for a play, and he was just in front of me. Standing there, stooped and looking homeless and sort of cold, and his expression fascinated me. He said something about it being a good play, he'd heard, and we talked along until we got to the window. It was only five minutes at most, but when it was over he asked if I'd like a drink. I accepted. It had already happened. The grotesque fascination. I couldn't have refused if my life had depended on it. Since then. . . ." She stopped and stared around the dirty room and moved her hand listlessly.

"You see what it does. I can't think or remember things, and I don't give a damn whether this is clean or I eat or whether it's day or night. I had a job with a publishing company. They fired me. My money's gone. So I take his money. He wants to marry me. He doesn't *know*. That's the terrible thing. He doesn't *know* what he does to you. He destroys everything in you but the—the nightmare of hate for him, the hunger to kill him. And the man never even

imagines," she whispered. "I can't fight myself. I try, but I can't. I just can't do anything," she whispered in dreadful bewilderment. She looked up at him slowly. "I went there to kill him today. That was why I fainted. When I saw you and knew it couldn't be today, something snapped. But I was going to kill him today."

"I know," Joe said quietly. He lit another cigarette and paused at the window. Of course, there had always been certain people of such powerful personality that they, in various ways, had commanded worship, or adoration, or hate. The stories of Helen of Troy, Joe kept thinking. Joan of Arc. Multitudes had loved them. Napoleon, Hitler. Many had hated them, many had worshiped them. The power of a personality was a subtle affair, but Joe had never heard of a thing like this with Claude. A man cursed, and cursing others, with this morbid appeal. It made him think of the bells that lepers had worn long ago, warning the public from the streets. To put a bell on Claude . . . a sign that would cry out: Do not speak with me. Know me not, or you are damned. . . . But of course, it was ridiculous.

"But half of it," he said aloud, "comes from thinking of nothing else. Of dwelling on it incessantly. Suppose that you and I agreed to help each other fight. Each night we could go somewhere together. If either felt the urge coming on, we would *not* go to Claude. We would call the other, no matter when, and the other would come to help. The same idea the alcoholics use in breaking away."

"Yes. Perhaps," Sara said slowly, uncertainly.

"We'll start now. Get dressed and we'll go to dinner, then a movie."

IT WAS one-thirty when Joe said goodnight to Sara. "Tomorrow night. Dinner again," he reminded. "If it gets you, phone me before dinner. Promise me you'll do that."

"I promise." She smiled and her eyes were gentle. Upon another night and without the shadow of Claude, he would have taken her in his arms and kissed her. And her eyes told him that she understood. "Tomorrow," she said and closed the door.

Joe walked slowly down the stairs and turned into the wind. It reminded him of last night and the frenzy of his flight from Claude. But he must not think of Claude. Think of Sara. Think of dinner tomorrow. Think of the show they had seen tonight.

He paused. Here was Paddy's saloon. Paddy was leaning against the bar, chewing his cigar. Joe hesitated, thinking: Last night . . . just a little earlier than this, Claude walked in and all of this—

His thoughts shattered. An involuntary cry escaped him. From the front booth Claude was rising awkwardly, waving his soft white hand and smiling eagerly. Waving, smiling at Joe!

He has been waiting for me, Joe realized. Watching. And here he was.

"Golly, Joe! I just said to myself, this was the last drink if you didn't drop in before I finished. But I had a feeling. How about sitting down a while and just talking? You and me."

Joe did not move nor answer. He was remembering with terrible clarity the words Sara had spoken: "I couldn't have refused if my life had depended on it. . . ."

As a man might walk in a dream, Joe entered the doorway and sat down with Claude. Claude mopped his damp face and smiled at Joe—a strained grey smile. A tragic smile.

"I guess you're going to laugh when I say this," he said clumsily. "I guess it's my nerves, Joe, but I was sitting up there by myself tonight and suddenly I got scared and shaking until I couldn't breathe, even, and I had to get out. I had

to go somewhere. I called you and Sara and then I came here, just hoping. It was the worst feeling I ever had. It almost made me sick."

"Yes?" Joe heard himself asking thinly. "What kind of feeling?"

"It was—was the feeling I was going to die," he said jerkily. "Just like something had pulled back a curtain and let me look ahead. And it showed me that this was the last night I'd be alive. Tonight." He stared at his drink, then lifted it, spilling a little down his crumpled shirt front. "It's a terrible feeling, Joe," he whispered. "And it won't go away. Keeps following me." Suddenly he looked up and his eyes were filled with the frightened blueness of a child's. "You don't guess I could know, do you? That I would die tonight?"

Joe wanted to laugh wildly. He wanted to scream, to hurl over the table, smash the glass and go stalking out the door to laugh into the wind, until his laughter shook the sky.

Very softly, very coldly he answered Claude: "Maybe this *is* your last night. Maybe you're different and *can* see ahead. Maybe you *are* going to die, Claude."

The words seemed to penetrate the limp flesh of Claude's face and reduce it to a formless dough. His lips struggled to execute some phrase. They failed and remained open, moist and colorless. And Joe felt something within him vibrate in ecstasy. He could not draw his eyes from Claude's. He felt suddenly that his entire existence depended upon some stalking journey. The world became a jungle and here was the trail. The prey was hidden within Claude, and he must drive it down. He must stalk Claude. Stalk . . . stalk. . . .

"Haven't you ever thought about death and murder? About Elsie?"

"Elsie . . . she was sick, Joe. You . . . she was sick."

"Yes. Have another drink. Let's talk a long time, Claude." His voice seemed to dance in front of him. It became a naked savage, writhing in primitive rhythm. How strange it felt, seeing it from a tiny corner of the brain—his, yet beyond his grasp. Ah, how it danced!

"Elsie was sick, yes," he said. "What made her ill? The yearning to kill you? The death lust, like a fever, that you communicated to her. Don't you understand that lust in you? The pigeons, remember? And the goldfish? What *made* you put the bowl on the radiator, Claude?"

Claude was staring into memory with fixed and glassy eyes.

"And what about Marion? Think, Claude! You didn't tell the truth to the newspaper. You know what *really* happened! Marion caught the fever of death-lust. She planned to kill you on that mountain. Marion cut the rope so that you would fall. But you saved yourself, and when she came back toward you—not to save, but to kill you—*you* killed her!"

Claude began to whimper. He fumbled in his pocket for his handkerchief, and as he pulled it out, something small and reddish fell upon the table. And then Joe saw. It was a goldfish. A dead goldfish, but a semi-circle was gone from the corpse. A semi-circle in the shape of a man's bite.

As Claude saw it, he screamed. He lurched to his feet and plunged toward the door. Joe's naked savage faltered in its weird rhythm, began to stumble and collapse and disappear in a mist. A cold, wet chill struck through Joe's body and he began to shake, as though wrestled by a giant hand.

I am insane . . . insane, insane, insane! Over and over his brain screamed at him. I wanted to kill him tonight! To torture him and then to kill him!

"Say, Joe, you all right?" Paddy asked uneasily. "You and that guy. . . . The way you look—"

"Give me a drink quick, Paddy. I'm

crazy—crazy as they come, Paddy."

"Somebody is," Paddy agreed. "You better tiptoe easy for a while, maybe."

"Yeah." He sat there and Paddy brought the drink and he forgot it. Presently Paddy came back.

"I don't like to say this to you, Joe, but why don't you go home? This isn't natural for a man like you. I think you ought to go home."

"Home?" Joe stared at him blankly. "And sit there? Think about it? And then— No!" he cried. "I've got to go back to Sara!" He stumbled to his feet and rushed out the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Bait

HE RUSHED up the stairs and knocked frantically at Sara's door. With his knock, the door swung inward slightly. At that instant the premonition struck through him. For if Sara were here sleeping, he thought, surely the door would not be ajar. She was gone, and she had departed without thinking of the door. . . .

He breathed the dark silence, then softly called her name. There was no answer. He tiptoed in, found the light switch, and peered around the disordered room. The door to the bedroom was open. The bed was empty.

When Claude fled from me, he came to her, Joe thought. They went away together. *And this is the night he will die.*

There was no doubt in his brain. Claude's deathly intuition had assumed the reality of inevitable fact. It was certainty in Joe's mind: *Claude would die tonight.*

Perhaps they have gone to Claude's apartment, he thought furiously. Before the thought had fully crossed his brain, he was running down the stairs and into the street. He found a cab two blocks west and gave Claude's address.

Dear God, don't let her kill him, he kept whispering to himself. Don't let it happen to her. If he must be killed—

Joe's thoughts halted and began to struggle in his soul, and perspiration coursed down his cheeks. "If this *is* the last night, must *I* be the one to murder him?" he asked himself starkly. "*I* rather than Sara? . . . Is that the way I want it?"

His soul would give him no answer. The cab seemed scarcely to crawl through the dark streets, and his muscles ached from striving to force it faster. If this night ever ends, he thought desperately, we *must* get out of New York! We must go—

"Okay, mister," the cabby said. Joe started awake, thrust a dollar bill at him and hurried into the building. A dour-faced elevator operator carried him up in silence. Just as he turned the L of the hall, he heard the shot. Then a scream and a scrambling of feet and another scream of horror. Sara's voice!

He leaped toward the door and found it unlocked. His momentum sent him stumbling into the vast glacial room. He saw Claude, huddled against the wall, the grey paste of terror quivering on his face, and his body like a sack of rags, boneless and lumpy. But what brought Joe up with a gasp was the sight of Sara. Sara and the man in grey.

The gun was at her feet and her fingers were stiff as steel talons. Her eyes were locked on Claude and they seemed to be dying a terrible quiet death. Even her face seemed half lifeless. And the man's hard fingers were gripping her wrist. His grey-blue eyes were brilliant as winter sunlight on ice. It took Joe's brain ten seconds to journey down the path of recognition and pull the name to his lips:

"McCauley," he gasped. The concrete block of a man pivoted and stared. The muscles stood out like ropes beneath the flesh of his jaws.

"What are you doing here?" he asked coldly.

Joe could only echo the question: "What are *you* doing?"

"I haven't been a dick fifteen years not to know the shape of a gun inside a cloth purse. Or the look on a face when it's thinking about a gun. So I just walked along and rode along and leaned in the door and listened, and here we are." His unyielding eyes studied Joe's, then followed their focus toward Sara's face. "I believe you must know the gal, Joe," he said curiously. He released her wrist and stepped back a few paces, so that he could regard them both as a stage director might consider a scene. Then he gazed at Claude and finally pulled at his stocky chin. "Nobody's talking, huh?" he said softly.

JOE SCARCELY heard. Slowly he moved toward Sara and touched her arm. She turned and gazed at him and her head moved slightly, as if she were a child unable to understand some simple puzzle.

"I knew he was following. It didn't matter. It was just . . . the only thing that could happen, somehow. When Claude said he was going to die tonight, it was just like he'd said I had to kill him. It was just like a road that I had to follow. But no one will ever understand."

"*I* understand. God, how I understand! I— McCauley, you haven't the faintest idea what you've fallen into," he said furiously. "You—you simply think you spotted a girl with a gun and tailed her to a rich man's apartment and put the mash on a murder. You don't have any idea!"

"No? . . . Maybe you'll explain it," McCauley said with mild irony.

"Explain? I don't know whether I can or—" He stopped and felt a wave of futility flood him. McCauley, the Talking Rock: that was what the reporters had called him for years, from the time he was just a plainsclothes dick, and before that a cop.

"You were starting to tell me," McCauley reminded.

Joe pulled down a long, heavy breath. He looked at Claude, at the perspiration that rolled off the yeasty jowls and spread darkly into the blue shirt collar. "You can tell him," he said slowly. He walked across the room to stand in front of the sack-like figure. "Tell him!" he suddenly shouted. "Tell him about Marion and the rope on the mountain! Tell him the truth! You know it, damn you!"

Claude wet his lips and swallowed. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're lying! Tell him the truth! Tell him they all tried to kill you! Tell him it's you, not Sara!"

"No, no!" he cried.

Joe seized his lapels and shook him. "Can't you show some guts once in your life!" he raged. "You were always yellow, but you can at least tell the truth! You can at least—" His voice choked. His hands sank to his sides and he shook his head heavily. "I'm sorry. Maybe you really don't know and it's not your fault, but—" He turned toward McCauley desperately.

"Listen, and *try* to get some idea of what I'm saying. This guy—I've known him a long time. I mean, I used to know him. Then last night I saw him again and something started happening inside me. The way it worked out, I wanted to kill him. No motive. Nothing rational. Get that. I just wanted to kill him. Then I found out about his two wives. The first one tried to kill him; when she failed, she committed suicide. She could give no motive. The second wife was killed in a fall from a mountain, but Claude *knows* that isn't the whole story. He's afraid to admit the truth: that he killed her, after she tried to kill him. But both of them wanted to kill him. And he can't keep servants. Why? Because they get the

feeling and pull out before it bores too deep. Sara had no motive tonight. *None.* She's tried to fight it, but when it gets you, you can't fight."

"Just gets you?" McCauley repeated. "You see him, you want to kill him. Like that?"

"Maybe not everybody," Joe said in a frayed voice. "Maybe it works only on certain people. Like musical pitch or—or—" He floundered to a stop, realizing the hopelessness of his effort. And McCauley laughed. It was not a happy sound. McCauley's laughter was never a pleasant sound.

"I've listened to all kinds of stories, but this is different. This is really cute. A guy you've got to kill!" He walked over to Claude. "You tell about it. Why did the girl take a shot at you?"

"I don't know. I don't. I just get lonely and want to talk to people." He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. McCauley stared at him oddly for a long moment, then gave a short grunt and turned toward Sara.

"And you claim there wasn't any motive?" he demanded stubbornly.

"No. There wasn't any reason. I just—" She stopped and put her hand slowly to her face. "I can't tell you . . . how it is. . ." she stammered. She began to shake terribly and sob. Joe rushed to her. McCauley's face got red with fury.

"Somebody is kidding me and I'm not laughing," he said angrily.

HE STRODE back toward Claude. "So you just get lonely and want to talk to people?"

Claude nodded. "But tonight I was afraid. It was like there wasn't much time left, you see? Like tonight I was going to die."

"You came close enough. If I hadn't. . . " His words trailed away. He frowned strangely. "What are you looking at?" he asked, his voice tense.

"You," Claude whispered thinly. "It's in your eyes. Just like it was in hers. Like it was in Elsie's before. . . " His lips began to move soundlessly and his hands spread themselves on the wall behind him.

"What's in my eyes, you fool? What're you talking about?"

"You—you want to—to kill me. I see it . . . see it. . . ."

"Are you crazy?" McCauley whispered harshly. "I don't give a damn about you. I never saw you before tonight. Why should I want to kill you?"

"You . . . I don't. . . " Claude's face was crumbling into folds of terror. He was sidling along the wall away from McCauley, and his fingernails made a sustained gnawing sound on the plaster.

"Answer me, damn you!" McCauley raged. "Why would I want to kill you? I've got no motive! I *saved* your life, didn't I? Why would I want to— Damn you, stop drooling at me and crawling away! When I ask you something, I want— *Stop that!*" In a burst of fury he reached out and seized Claude's throat.

"Don't! You're going to kill—" Claude strangled. Joe could not breathe. He could not drag his eyes from the sight, and he felt Sara grow stiff as a corpse as she watched with him. McCauley's face was crimson with fury. His fingers ground down on the soft throat and his hands shook the sack-like body.

"Answer me! Why should I kill. . . " The fury of the hot words faded. Joe saw a mist of strange ecstasy flow over McCauley's face, dispelling the flush of fury and coaxing the lips into a faint smile. McCauley's hands shook no more. Instead they were perfectly rigid, and the fingers were knotted into claws that were slowly closing. And slowly Claude's face was loosening. The features seemed to dissolve, to bloat themselves. The eyes rolled upward.

Sara screamed. One high, nightmarish

scream. It. seemed to wake McCauley from some dreamy meditation. He turned his head slowly to gaze perplexedly at her. "What?" he asked blankly. And as he spoke, his fingers relaxed and Claude slipped to the floor. McCauley turned and stared down. A cry more animal than human broke from his throat. He bent down to seize Claude's shoulders.

Claude moaned. His glazed eyes struggled to fix themselves on McCauley. His tortured lips strove to form words. McCauley straightened and swayed in his tracks, as though a skull-splitting blow had been delivered across his head. He turned and fixed his eyes glassily on the door and stumbled across the room.

Joe could not move or speak. There was something in McCauley's expression that defied any sound. It was the look of a man who had walked through the dark garden of madness, and whose eyes would never forget the sights that he had seen. He was gone, then.

Claude moaned and struggled to sit up. Joe grasped Sara's arm and pulled her toward the door. Somehow they reached the street and were plunging into the face of the cold wind. Neither spoke. Neither could speak.

"PACK your clothes," Joe said when they reached Sara's apartment. "After that, we'll get mine and then it's a train. Any train. The first to anywhere. Hurry."

"Yes, Joe," she said faintly.

When she had finished, Joe carried the two suitcases downstairs and they took a cab to his apartment. He packed swiftly, scarcely thinking of what he was doing. He paused momentarily to wonder if he would ever return here. And if not here, would he ever be able to stay anywhere? Or would he not always be moving on? Endlessly driving himself. Would he not always be fleeing from himself, so long as Claude lived?

But it was useless to think. He thrust the last shirt into the grip and slammed the top. "Let's go," he said to Sara. When their eyes met, he realized she had been thinking of exactly the same things as he. He turned off the light and they went down the stairs.

"Grand Central Station," he said. The cab began to move. We are going, Joe thought fixedly. Going away. Away from Claude. Away from the fatness, the terror, the ecstasy. Going. . . . His fingers ground into his palms. He could scarcely breathe. His chest felt as though it would soon explode. He could not exist, could not endure the flight. . . .

Sara cried out, softly, brokenly, and clutched at the handle of the door. Joe seized her and in the agony of horror, they looked into each other's eyes and knew the inevitable truth.

"Oh, dear God," she whispered. "Dear God."

"Yes," he said simply. Then he told the driver they were not going to Grand Central Station. They were going to Park Avenue. He closed his eyes and their fingers were locked together.

The cab stopped. They got out, forgetting their luggage. Joe noticed his watch. It was four-fifty. He realized with dreamy serenity that Claude's night was almost ended.

The elevator was closed. They climbed the stairs slowly. At the door they looked at each other. The gentle sadness of her face seemed the most lovely expression he had ever seen. "I love you," he said.

"I know. I love you," she whispered.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"Yes. But we can't help it. It's just that way."

"I know." And then the door opened slowly. A huge, shabby man, his skin weathered and brown, his hair crudely cut, his face battered and puffy and gentle as a child's, stood looking at them awkwardly.

"We're looking for Claude Mardle," Joe said.

"I guess he's resting," the man said in a gentle voice. "He doesn't want to talk to me any more, maybe." Then he smiled. "I'm Eddie. I guess I was the best heavyweight in the world. You want to talk to me?"

"No, Eddie. Not tonight. I've got to see Claude." Joe walked slowly into the glacial living room and stopped. Claude lay on the couch, his arms folded over his chest, his eyes open and fixed on the ceiling. But it was the expression upon his face that stopped Joe, an expression Claude had never worn before.

It was a happy look. A relaxed look that knew no fear. It was a look of simplicity and peace. It had never been there before.

"Claude?" Joe whispered. He tiptoed to the edge of the couch and touched the soft flesh. Claude Mardle would never disturb him again.

"Once I met him, see?" Eddie was saying happily. "Then I talked to him again, and always I was thinking I ought to go see him. Don't know exactly why. I just wanted. . . " He frowned slowly. "Yeah, now I remember. I wanted to show him how I used to hit 'em. Left and right and that was the ball game. I always dreamed of showing Claude."

Joe turned slowly and stared at the huge child-like face. "And tonight you showed him?"

"Yeah. I got to where I couldn't sleep, thinking of how I had to show Claude and —and about him and the dogs and all. So I—"

"The dogs?" Joe asked faintly. "What about them?"

"He always told me to bring him dogs. Little dogs and all kinds of dogs, and he'd pay me, and when I said I didn't know many dogs, he asked could I get anybody to bring him dogs. I got Freddie

to get him dogs. Little puppy dogs, see? And Claude would pay him, and after they died, he'd pay Freddie to take them away, too. I guess he had kind of hard luck with his dogs. Maybe they didn't like being in an apartment. Maybe it wasn't good for them."

"Maybe not. No," Joe said softly, "I guess not."

"But I just kept thinking of Claude and dogs and all, so tonight I came up and I showed him about my left and right, and after that he just seemed kind of tired and went to sleep, so I folded his arms and all. I guess he'll wake up in a minute and we can talk again."

Joe looked at Sara and she looked at him. She seemed to sway slightly. Joe could hardly breathe. He turned back to Eddie.

"Listen, Eddie, Claude is tired and he won't wake up for a long time. You come with us, Eddie."

"Sure. What's your name?"

"Joe."

"That's a nice name. My name is Eddie. But Claude's tired, it looks like, huh?"

"Yes, and he's going away, Eddie. Don't try to come back and see him, because he won't be here. Don't tell people you came tonight. Lots of people wouldn't understand. You just go ahead and forget it, Eddie."

"Sure. You know I was the best heavyweight anywhere, Joe?"

"And you're a nice guy, Eddie. I'll be owing you plenty forever." They stopped on the street. "Tell me where you live. I want to do something for you." Eddie smiled happily and gave his address. Joe and Sara watched him walking away, weaving slightly. He vanished. They turned and looked at each other and, without a word then, they opened their arms.

THE END

SEVEN CASKS OF DEATH

(Continued from page 6)

wielded crowbar soon smashed in the lid of one to reveal the remains of a young woman, naked except for the thin cord around her neck. A cord that had brought her death.

Six casks remained for examination and one by one their six lids were broken open. Six more human beings were brought to light in that upper chamber—each a naked woman, each of them strangled.

Further examination of Bela Kiss' abode brought to light a well-kept dossier of the woman Bela had been in touch with. It appears he had run a fortune-telling establishment on the side. The women evidently came to him to find husbands or lovers. Seven had found a tomb within the casks. Ten others were unearthed from the garden in the rear of the house.

Detectives immediately traced Bela to a hospital, near the Western Front. But Bela Kiss had evidently "Died From Wounds." Then the police told the nurse why they had wanted Bela Kiss.

"What! That bright-faced young man the murderer of 17 women!"

The police were puzzled. "You must be mistaken," they said. "Bela was at least 40 and, according to our information, quite ugly and deformed."

Then the story came out. Bela Kiss, knowing the great chance he would take if his secret at home was discovered, took the identity cards of a Corporal Mackaree, a young boy who died soon after his entry to the hospital, and gave Mackaree his. Bela Kiss has eluded the police since that day in September 1917, and despite the lapse of 30 years, may still be wandering the face of Europe. An unhung bluebeard, whose crimes might never have been found had it not been for gasoline rationing!

TALMAGE POWELL

(Continued from page 36)

in a near-cataleptic state, perhaps induced by shock, a flicker of life left that Charlie had been unable to discover. But now she was dead, really dead. And Charlie was glad for her. She had escaped.

Now he must do likewise. He knew it had him, this unseen thing, for inside of him he felt the awful stirrings of a hunger that was vast and strange. Lawson, then Sylvia, now me, Charlie thought.

There was only one thing more that Charlie wanted as he sat in his cell and cracked his knuckles. He wanted freedom from this growing stirring of a vast hunger. He wanted relief. He wanted to forget. He wanted to see Sylvia again and tell her everything was all right with them now. Yes, he wanted only to be with Sylvia again.

* * *

Charlie Cotter stood on the witness stand, licking his lips, looking at the courtroom before him. "Please," he was shouting, "just this one favor. . . ."

They could hear him now. They were looking at him, waiting for him to speak. He looked at the spectators, the jury, the white-haired man on the bench. "This one favor that I'm asking the court is this—to please sentence me quickly. I—I couldn't stand the waiting. . . ."

In the judge's eyes, Charlie saw sadness, pity, and a light of understanding. The judge didn't understand, of course, not completely. The judge thought he simply couldn't stand the long days in the death house. Well, let the judge think that, Charlie thought, as long as I see that look in his face that means he's going to grant my favor.

Charlie Cotter sat down. He felt a sweep of calm that he hadn't known in months, such a calm that he wanted to laugh aloud with it. He closed his eyes and whispered, "Wait for me, Sylvia."

THE END

The Strange Lives of Johnny Q

(Continued from page 71)

his friend aboard a ship, and then let a heavy hawser fall on him—accidentally.

He hoped to accomplish two things—to have the ship declared deodand, and then buy it out of the rest of his inheritance. But there was an unexpected snag. The ship's owners hired a smart lawyer who argued that a ship in salt water could not be held responsible for murder, since salt water was considerably rougher than fresh, and anyway, all legal precedents for a ship's being declared doedand had dealt with fresh-water vessels!

So the case went against Johnny and he realized he'd killed his best friend for no good reason and felt pretty mad about it, because right around then a very peculiar thing happened.

HE HAD supposed that when he died his conscience had died with him. He was wrong. He awoke now in a murderer's cold sweat. He was lying in his own foyer, in front of his bathroom, whose door was askew. Tender hands were holding him; a tender voice whispered his name over and over. It was Myrtle.

The way she was looking at him, there was only one thing to do—so he kissed her.

It wasn't till after that, that he remembered that this was the day she was to have been married to somebody else, and that that was the reason he had gotten drunk yesterday and lost his job. He asked her about that and she told him no, she wasn't married, wasn't going to marry Walter, ever, because Walter had been perfectly horrid about her coming here when she'd gotten worried about Johnny's not showing up at the church to be best man. He thought that over and decided that Walter had been right, but he didn't tell her that.

Instead, he said, "Then you can marry me."

She said, "But you haven't got a job."

Travel is very broadening, though, and Johnny looked at the bathroom door, which was definitely askew, and said, "Let me worry about our finances from now on, honey."

Johnny got up and staggered to the phone and called a lawyer. The lawyer came, looked at the door and decided Johnny had a case. The management of the building settled out of court, giving Johnny a couple of months rent free and a new bathroom door and the lawyer got something, too. So Myrtle moved right in and pretty soon Johnny had another job.

Well, you would have thought that his troubles were over, but they weren't. For a while everything went smoothly and Myrtle and Johnny had a baby. Then one day Johnny gave a casual acquaintance a drink out of some private stock he kept in the house, and the acquaintance turned out to be a prohibition agent and raided Johnny's place and it was almost like the pre-deodand days in his dream. The judge decided that since a bottle of liquor was found on the premises all the contents of the house, including the baby's crib and the sofa and Myrtle's piano, were to be confiscated.

What with the baby sleeping on the floor and Myrtle crying and not even a table in the house to eat off, Johnny went looking for the prohibition agent and shot him dead. He was tried and convicted, but then he had a break. His lawyer discovered that through a typographical error the word "feloniously" had been omitted from the original indictment charging him with murder—and the Court of Appeals ordered the case dismissed.

It's pretty hard, these days, to get Johnny Q. excited over a point of law.

Maybe Johnny Q himself never existed, but all cases mentioned in the above article are true, and actually did *happen.—Author's note.*

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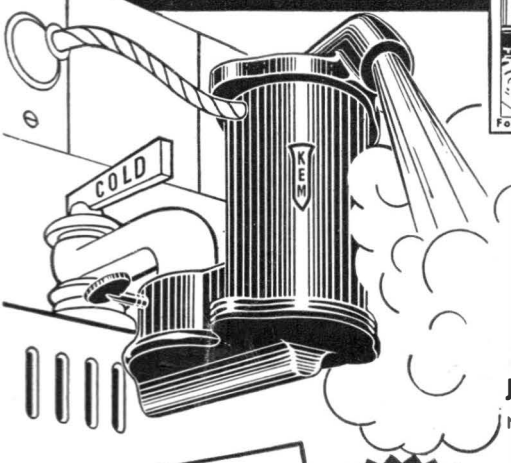

Seems too good to be true until you see steaming hot water running continuously from any one of your cold water faucets! With the revolutionary new KEM INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER you get as much hot water as you want—right when you want it! All without waiting, fussing with fires or the landlord!

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Not just hot water, but water at *exact heat desired*, is what you get with this amazing new heater! A slight turn of your faucet gives you water of any desired temperature from warm to extra hot.

Easily and Quickly Attached

Takes only a few seconds to attach or remove KEM INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER. No special skill or knowledge required. Easier to operate than the average electric iron!

Fits Any Standard Faucet

KEM INSTANT HOT WATER HEATER fills a long and urgent need in basement, garage, cottage, tourist camp, office and factory—and when home hot water supply fails in kitchen or bath.

Fully Guaranteed

Heater is precision made and guaranteed against any and all defects in material and workmanship. With ordinary care, it gives many years of satisfactory service.

KEM COMPANY, Dept. 37, 18 E. 41st St., New York 17, N. Y.

✓ Check THESE ADVANTAGES

- √ NO MOVING PARTS to wear away or get out of order
- √ Runs on AC or DC current
- √ Constructed of handsome hammered aluminum
- √ Measures 2¾" x 3¾", requiring small storage space when not in use
- √ Fits any standard cold water faucet
- √ Carries 7-foot extension cord
- √ Takes only few seconds to attach or remove
- √ Exceedingly low cost operation — only a few cents an hour
- √ Fully guaranteed against defects in material or workmanship

NOW ONLY $3.98★

YOUR MONEY REFUNDED WITHIN 5 DAYS IF KEM HEATER FAILS TO GIVE INSTANT HOT WATER!

Don't be inconvenienced another day by lack of hot water in home, cottage, office or factory. ORDER YOUR KEM HEATER TODAY! SEND NO MONEY. Just fill in and mail coupon and then pay the postman $3.98 plus postage when your heater is delivered, or send $3.98 and we will pay postage.

KEM COMPANY
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☐ Rush KEM HOT WATER HEATER C.O.D., I'll pay postman $3.98 plus postage.

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SEND NO MONEY . . . pay postman $3.98 plus postage or send cash and we pay postage. If not completely delighted return within five days for refund under our **you-must-be-pleased—or money-back guarantee.**

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You'll see those nickels and dimes rapidly add up to mighty dollar bills with this new Juke Box Bank that's a gay plastic reproduction of the tuneful Juke Box down at the corner soda fountain. Bring it out at parties or when company comes to call. The coins and currency will really pour in, because **everyone** wants to see it light up electrically and flash its bit of advice: "It's Wise to Be Thrifty"—to which we might add: it's **easy** to be thrifty when you have an attention-getting, fun-producing Juke Box Bank.

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Put Your Coins in Slot and Press-in! JUKE BOX BLAZES WITH LIGHT AS IT FLASHES: *It's Wise to be Thrifty*

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