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DIME
MYSTERY
MAGAZINE
OCTOBER
GRAY
JAMES
KOBLER
AND
OTHERS
SPINE-TINGLING
MYSTERY-TERROR
NOVEL
SATAN CALLS
THE STRIKE
by ARTHUR
LEO ZAGAT

Missing Page

ANNOUNCEMENT
of New Coffee Agency Openings

●

OPEN TO MEN AND WOMEN

EARNINGS UP TO $60.00 IN A WEEK

Within the next two weeks, over 350 men and women will be given the opportunity to open up fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. If you are looking for a bona fide chance to make as high as $60.00 in a week, starting at once, this company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. You risk no money. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living. If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

Clip Out and Mail Today!!

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

(1) WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE!

Name.....
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address.....

City and State.....

(2) HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE To COFFEE AGENCY?

Mark with an "X"

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[Full time pays up to $35 to $60 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to $22.50 in a week.]

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In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of $500.00 or a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ $500. CASH BONUS ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN.

(4) CAN YOU START AT ONCE?

Mark with an "X" ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

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SEND NO MONEY

There is no money fee of any kind required with this Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. You will be notified *by return mail* whether your home locality is available. Then you can decide if the money-making possibilities look good to you. No obligation on your part. Those who apply first will be given preference, so be sure to mail your Application without delay—NOW! No letter is required, just the Application. Mail at once to

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4144 Monmouth Avenue **Cincinnati, Ohio**

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DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Volume Fifteen | *October, 1937* | Number Three

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DIME MYSTERY'S SPINE-CHILLING, REAL-LIFE FEATURE

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—AND—

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 6, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. $1.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

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Radio already gives good jobs to more than 300,000 people. And in 1936, Radio enjoyed one of its most prosperous years. More than $500,000,000 worth of sets, tubes and parts were sold—an increase of more than 60% over 1935. Over a million Auto Radios were sold, a big increase over 1935. 24,000,000 homes now have one or more Radio sets, and more than 4,000,000 autos are Radio equipped. Every year millions of these sets go out of date and are replaced with newer models. More millions need servicing, new tubes, repairs, etc. A few hundred $30, $50, $75 a week jobs have grown to thousands in 20 years. And Radio is still a new industry—growing fast!

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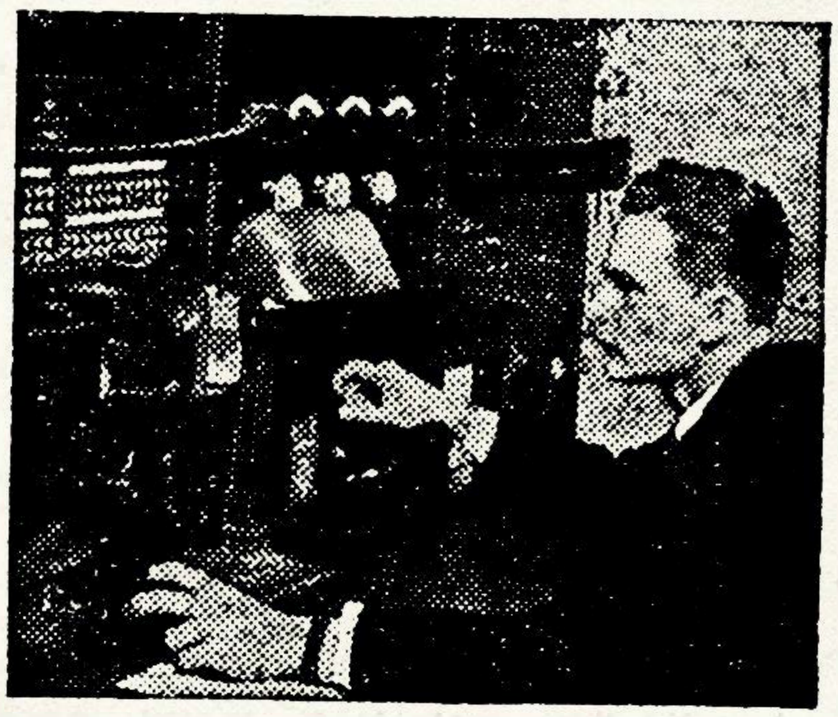

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White Devils and Black

MY COMPANION, Sid Landers, leaned on the rail at my side as we watched preparations to dock at the port of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands.

"Strange how backward the natives are here," he muttered, as though thinking aloud. "They think every white man is either some kind of a god, or a werewolf. And heaven help you if they decide you're the latter."

I stirred uneasily. After all, it was my intention to make this newest territorial acquisition of the United States my home for a number of years to come, and there was a decided hint of something ominous in Sid's tone.

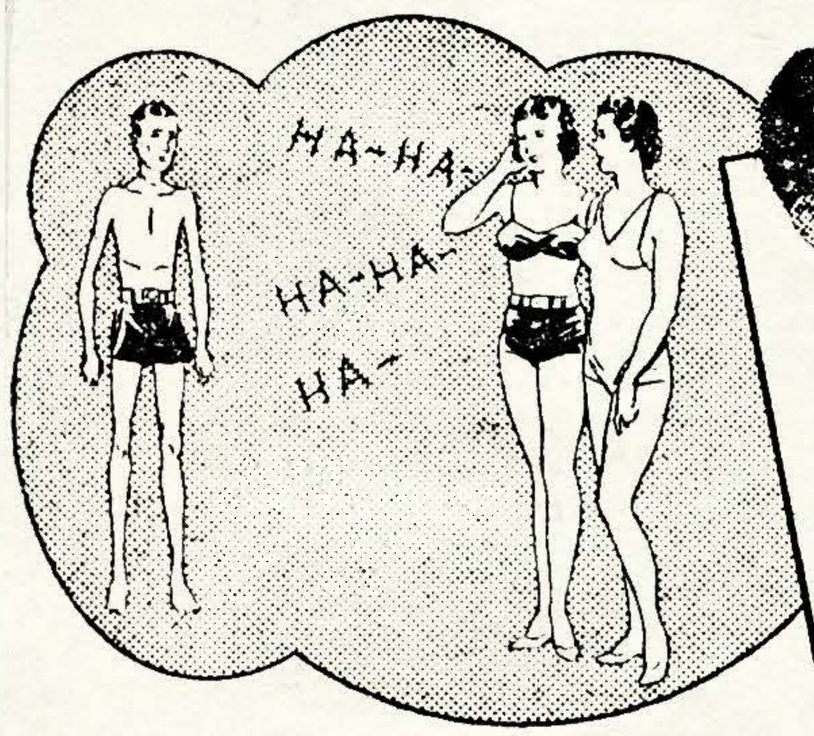
"Why—I thought the Negroes here were pretty enlightened people," I said. "Those two fellows who are coming home on this ship are certainly as well educated as the average white—"

"There are a few, of course—in about the same ratio as there are Ph. D's to grade-school graduates back home," said Sid. "The remainder of the twenty thousand blacks on the islands believe in witches, voodoo, werewolves—the whole arcana of black magic and sorcery. You'll find it very interesting . . . ."

I had my own ideas as to the last. But I didn't interrogate Sid any further. Somehow I didn't want to think any more about the matter. It aroused vague, dark emotions which threatened to grow and expand, and become all too definite in time. Primitive peoples are always vaguely disquieting. Ignorant of everything familiar to us, they seem to have a secret knowledge of their own—knowledge that is dangerous for civilized people to traffic with . . . .

My cottage was located over near the eastern extremity of the island, on a small lagoon inland from Redhook Bay. The little shack was almost buried in vines and tropical shrubbery, dwarfed by towering palms, cypress and gum trees. The second night I was there I found a small cat with its brains battered out lying across my doorstep . . . .

THE GIRLS LAUGHED AT HIS SKINNY FORM!



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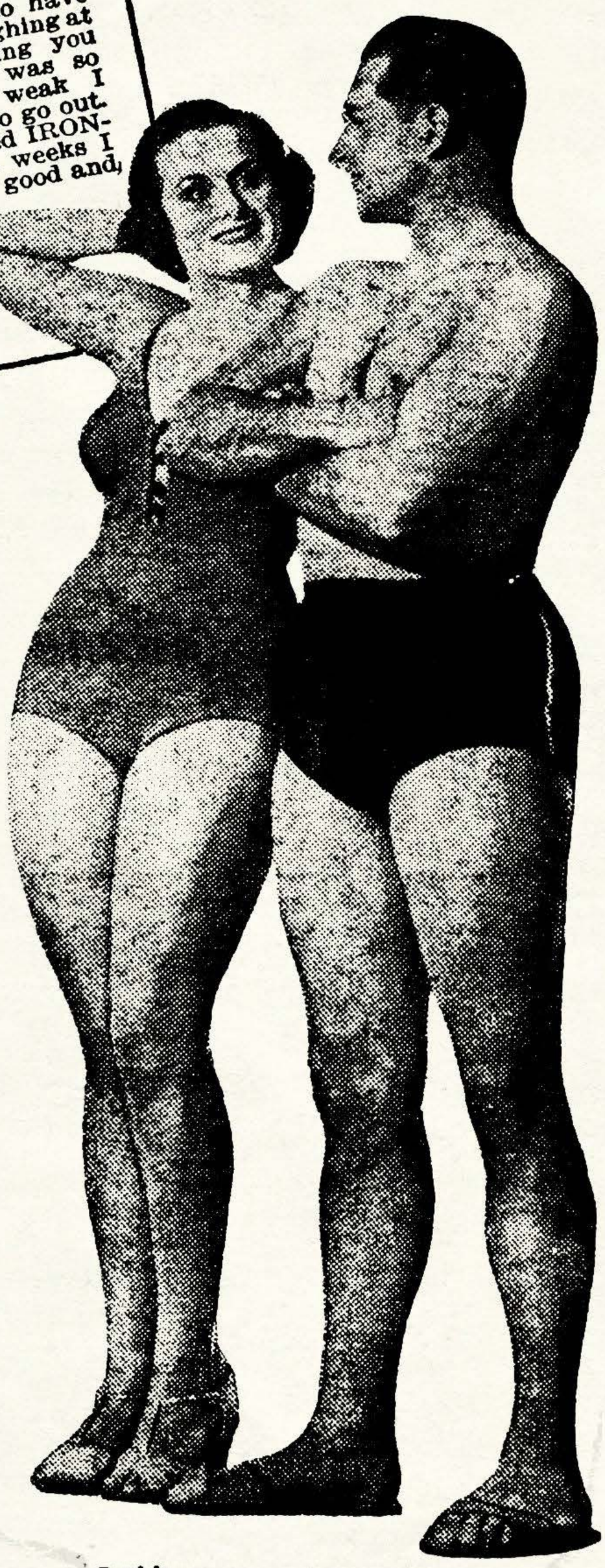
Irvin Echard



— till he gained 14 LBS. QUICK this new, easy scientific way

New IRONIZED YEAST gives thousands 10 TO 25 POUNDS in a few weeks!

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If, with the very first package of Ironized Yeast, you don't begin to eat better and to get more enjoyment and benefit from your food—if you don't feel better, with more strength, pep and energy—if you are not absolutely convinced that Ironized Yeast will give you the pounds of normally attractive flesh you need — your money will be promptly refunded. So get Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today.

Special FREE offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 8410, Atlanta, Ga.

WARNING: Beware of the many cheap substitutes for this successful formula. Insist on genuine Ironized Yeast.

Posed by professional models

There was something so horrible about that bludgeoned animal that I grew sick looking at it—and it wasn't merely its appearance. The thing signified something, I was sure—a hint of evil to come, as mysterious as menacing. As I stood there I could feel the black tides of ancient devil-lore gathering about me. . . .

Aronson, the consul, looked grave when I told him about it. "We haven't really had time to get a grip here, yet," he said. "Perhaps you'd better take a house in town for awhile. I don't really think the natives would . . . ."

"Would what?" I asked as he paused. "What the devil am I up against, Aronson?" The thing had affected me far more than I realized. I wouldn't admit it to myself, then; but I was badly frightened.

Aronson looked at me thoughtfully. "You see," he said, "several cattle died the day the boat landed. As it happened those cattle were owned by natives near Redhook Bay. Since you moved out there immediately, the natives are sure you're responsible. I'm afraid they were lying in wait for you, the other night."

"But the dead cat—" I interjected—"how do you account for that? What did it mean?"

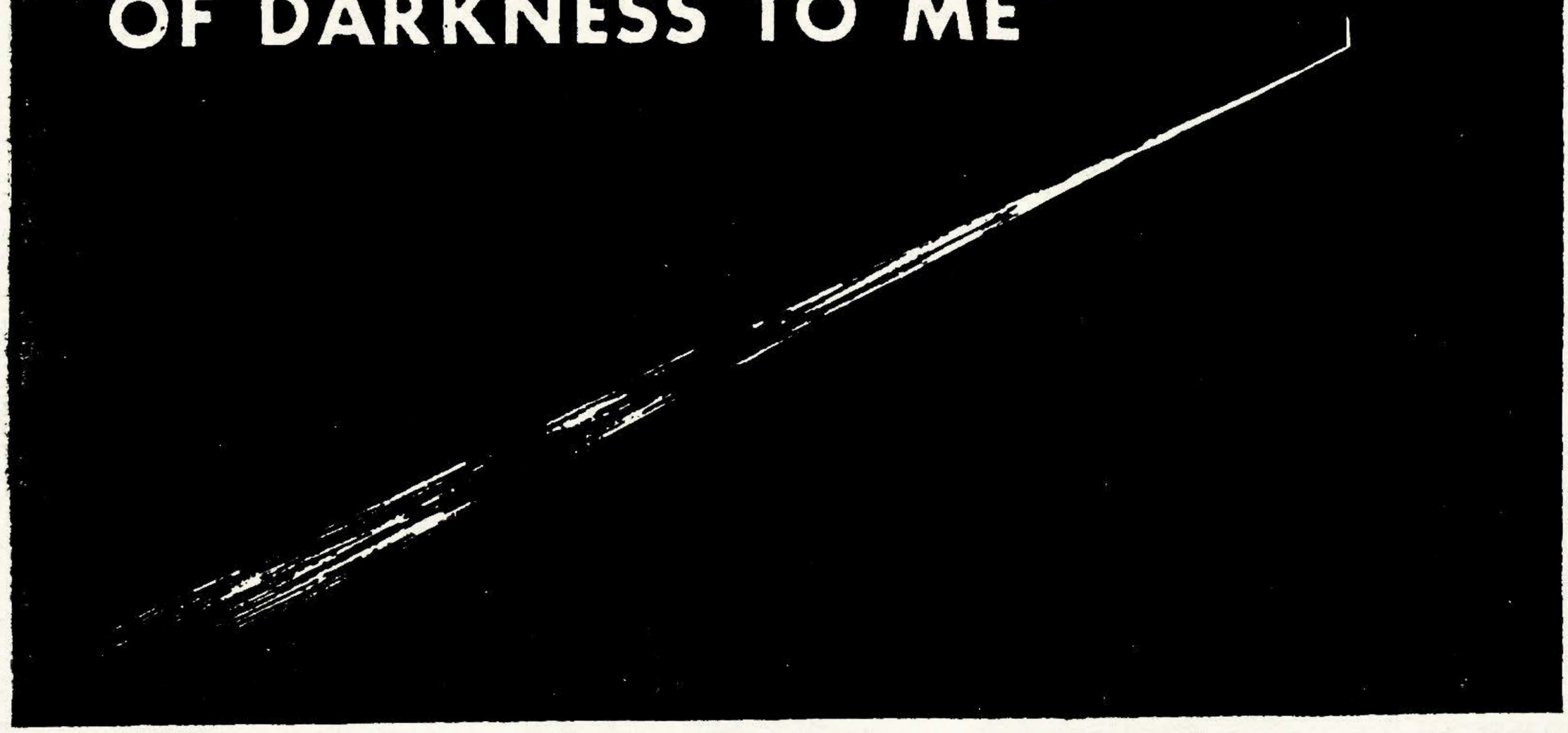
Aronson drew a deep breath. "The cat," he said quietly, "undoubtedly saved your life. It approached your door while the blacks were waiting for you in the bushes. They killed it . . . ."

"But why—why—?"

Aronson paused again before he answered. Then he said: "Magicians and devils have always been able to assume any form they chose. The cat could have been—you!"

I didn't return to the hut at Redhook Bay. I bought new supplies in St. Thomas, rented a house there. There are some things white men cannot combat with either force or reason. Superstition-inspired hate is one of them . . . .

"IT WAS LIGHT IN A WILDERNESS OF DARKNESS TO ME"



"I WAS STUCK. A wife and three kiddies — and the same old pay envelope. I couldn't see a thing ahead except the same old grind. Then one day I read an I. C. S. ad. The coupon fascinated me. A new idea struck me — it was a light in a wilderness of darkness to me! Today, because I mailed that coupon two years ago, I am a trained man — making a trained man's pay!"

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Name.....*Age*.....*Address*.....

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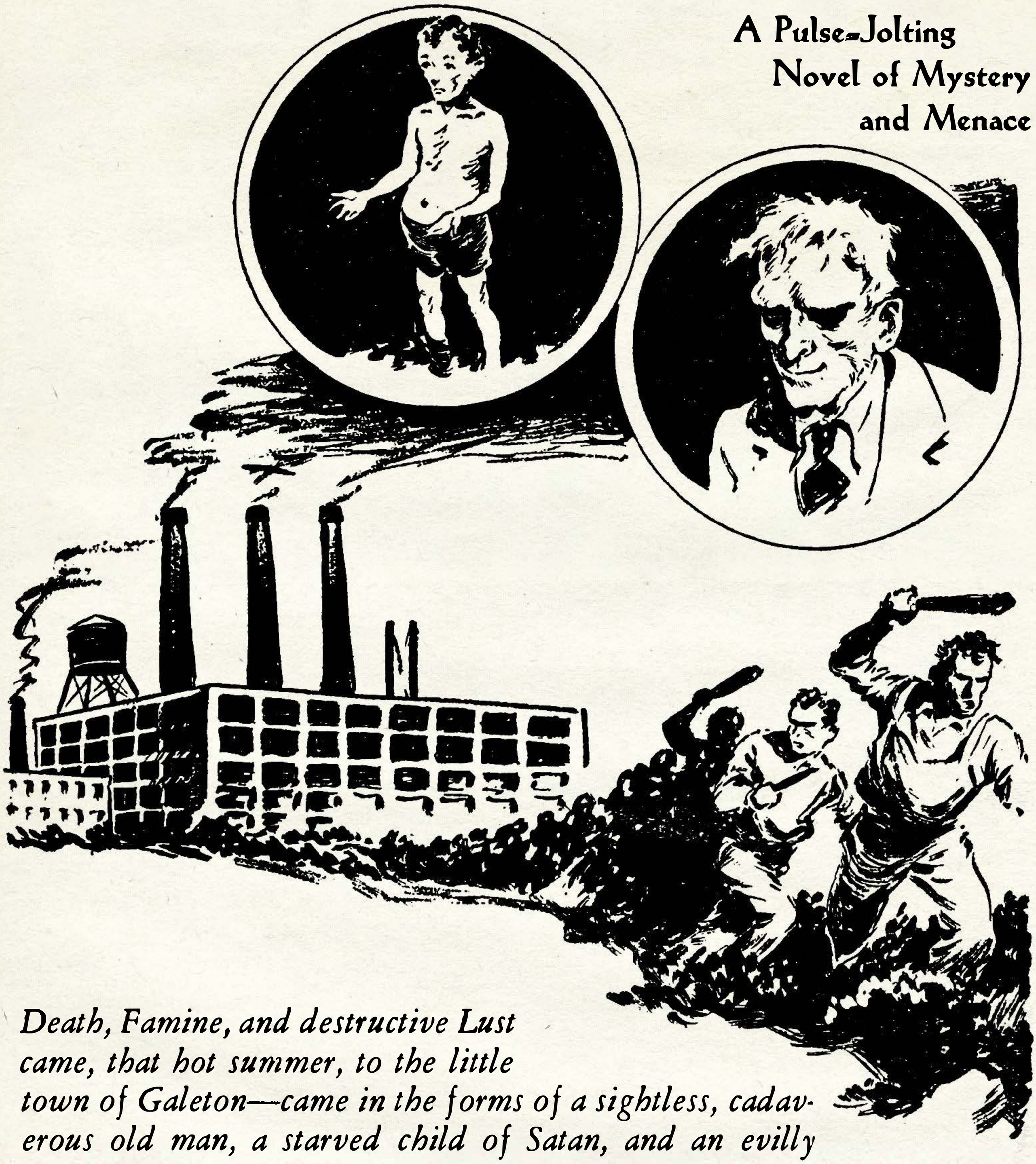
SATAN CALLS THE STRIKE

A Pulse-Jolting Novel of Mystery and Menace



Death, Famine, and destructive Lust came, that hot summer, to the little town of Galeton—came in the forms of a sightless, cadaverous old man, a starved child of Satan, and an evilly voluptuous, blood-thirsting woman. No man could say whence came this hell-spawned trio; but their arrival turned a peaceful village into a town of terror and sudden, awful death.

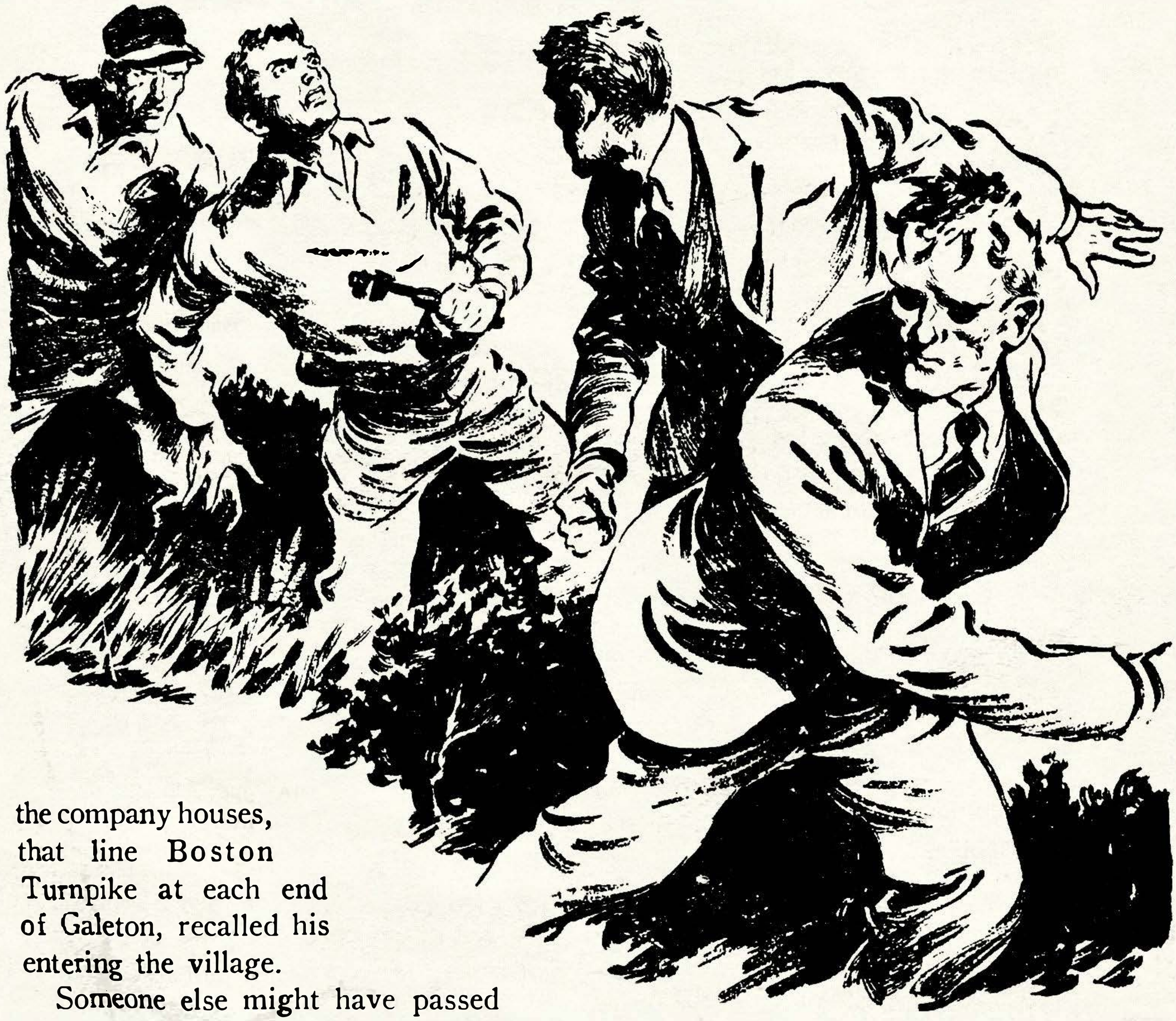
NO ONE ever discovered how the first of the terrible three came to Galeton.

The Raunt Silk Mill, where seven-eighths of the town worked, had been shut down for a week-end overhaul, and the looms had been in such condition that the layoff had extended through that Monday. In consequence there were more than the usual number of loungers at the depot, but none of them saw the grey man alight from a passenger train or come up out of the freight yard by the only feasible passage. None of the women busy about

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

(Author of "Satan Calls His Children," etc.)

wards of a whirpool of dust that drifted past her gate in the grey and brooding dusk. Such a miniature cyclone it was, she said, as a fitful wind sometimes sucks up, or as dances in the wake of a speeding truck. She was puzzled by it because not the slightest breeze relieved the sultry Indian Summer heat, and there was no truck. For this reason she watched the whirling dust jet as it whispered between the slattern fences of her millworker neighbors, breasting the little rise in the road there, till it vanished over the crest where the Turnpike becomes Galeton's Main Street.



the company houses, that line Boston Turnpike at each end of Galeton, recalled his entering the village.

Someone else might have passed the loungers or the women unobserved, but not Astaris. Not unless they were all suddenly struck blind as he went by them.

Sonia Szienkewicz, it is true, told afterSonia swore that just at the instant the slope hid it, it took on human form. But Sonia Szienkewicz was known to be overly fond of the potato vodka she distilled in

her cellar, and not even Pavel, her husband, believed her.

IT WAS Ann Wayne who first actually saw the stranger. She froze to immobility in the doorway of the A. & P., stifling a small scream, and if the big bag she carried had not had a dozen eggs on top she would have dropped it. As it was, she shrank back against the red-painted door jamb and stared wide-pupilled at the apparition that stalked past her parked roadster, walking down the very middle of the street.

He was powdered with dust from head to foot, as though he had come a long way on the sun-baked Turnpike. The dust covered with grey his buttonless and oddly small shoes, his ill-fitting suit and his hatless head that was somehow too large for his squat body, giving it an air of grotesque malproportion, emphasized by the unnatural length and thickness of his dangling arms.

But he was not altogether grey. His face was turned toward Ann as she came out of the store, almost as if he expected her; and it was his face that chilled her and twisted her throat with a soundless scream.

Over the chin and the mouth lay a crimson, five-fingered splotch, like the imprint of a gory hand. Where eyes should have been there were two black and empty pits!

Spine-prickling enough was that marred, blind countenance. What was infinitely worse was that it kept turning as its owner prowled down Main Street's gutter with his curiously soundless, gliding stride, so that those void sockets remained fixed on the shuddering girl as though to etch her picture firmly in the grey man's mind.

Ann Wayne was worth looking at. Her gossamer white frock made her a luminous small figure in the deepening, breathless dusk, as a white birch sapling is luminous in the twilit woods. She was slender and straight and graceful as a birch, but no tree could possess her tender curves of burgeoning womanhood, her wistful lips, the pert sweetness of her face that was now still and wan with icy fear.

Not until the stranger would have had to stop, or turn completely around to keep that blind look of his upon her, did he face forward again. He kept on toward Galeton's center, no hesitation in his progress, nothing in the way he moved to indicate that he had no eyes to see his way along that street where he never had been before.

Others spied him now. They watched him, their mouths agape, color draining from their cheeks to leave their countenances pallid masks of awe commingled with dread.

When the man came opposite the pillared front of the American House, he turned, abruptly, and went straight toward the hotel's entrance. He did not stumble at the curb, nor at the step-high edge of the low porch. The rocking chairs on the long verandah were rigid and soundless as his spatulate fingers closed unerringly on the door's handle, and he went through into the dim lobby.

Elijah Cantell, busy with some reckoning behind the desk counter, was aware of a sudden cessation of the drowsy murmur of the lobby sitters. He looked up—straight into that terrible grey face with its ruby mark of a muffling hand, a birthmark or burn scar, and its black eye-pits.

A sick revulsion ran through Cantell, but he was too much the veteran hotel man to let it altogether rob him of speech. "Yes?", he squeezed out. "What is it?"

If a voice can be called grey the stranger's voice was grey. "I wish lodging and board." It was an intonationless husk, one pitch above a whisper. "Your best accommodation." Each word was precisely enunciated, yet unshaded, unemphasized, as though the speaker uttered by mechanical rote, syllables alien to him.

To have this man living in the hotel and eating in its dining room would drive away all its guests. "Sorry," Cantell said. "We're full up." He lied, breaking the law that requires an innkeeper to accept anyone who can meet his price. "We have no empty room."

"I wish," the other repeated without any change of tone, "lodging and board."

"I tell you. . . ."

Blackness swallowed Cantell's sight! Impenetrable, it thumbed his eyeballs as though it had weight and substance. Somewhere within the stygian night by which he was encompassed, monstrous things heaved, crawling out of some unnameable abyss to seize and drag him down into it. . . .

"You are mistaken," the grey voice husked out of the sightlessness.

The things were rising out of the darkness toward Cantell! Almost he could smell their dank breath, almost feel their clammy, thumbless paws seizing him! "I —lied," he managed. "Lied. . . ."

THE RAYLESS dark faded to a throbbing blur out of which the stranger's blank-socketed visage firmed, altogether expressionless. Beyond its distorted periphery Elijah Cantell could once more see the drowsy foyer of his hotel, a half-dozen of his patrons seated in their familiar positions and gazing furtively over the tops of their newspapers at participants of the low-toned colloquy. There was in their faces a certain sick fascination, but no alarm. The terrible darkness, Elijah realized, had been in his own brain, not outside himself.

Somewhat to his surprise he found himself speaking. "Number five is my best room. It's right at the head of the stairs, and it has a private bath and a little private balcony." Automatically he rotated the register, automatically dipped a pen. "It is seven dollars a day, including meals."

He recalled that since the stranger was blind he could not write and put the pen back in the groove of its inkwell. Still half-dazed, he turned to take the key of room five from its hook on the rack behind him.

When Cantell came around again the man was just laying the pen down. On the register page, *on the first blank line,* a black scrawl glinted wetly!

Grey, nailless fingers plucked the key from Cantell's numbed hand. The stranger was gliding silently toward the balustraded stairs, the covert, pallid gaze of the lobby-sitters following him.

Elijah's mouth opened to call him back. He had no baggage, should pay in advance. . . . The hotelman made no sound. He could not make the demand. *Dared not!* If the blackness came again it might remain this time, and the *things. . . .!*

The stranger vanished on the landing above. There was a gust of relieved breath in the lobby and a shuffling of feet as with a single impulse, those who were sitting there rose. They came to the desk and crowded against it.

Cal Simmons peered at the register on which the grey man had written his name. "Astaris," he read. "Jest Astaris. No fust name or initial or nothin'."

"Where'd he come from?" someone asked. "Did he write down where he come from?"

"Yeah," Simmons grunted. "But it's kind of fuzzy, and I can't read it so good. Fust letter's H."

"Might be Hartford," another voice suggested. "Is it. . . ?"

"No. It's too short for Hartford. It's. . . ."

"Let *me* see it." Mr. Meyer, sharp-faced, nattily dressed, shoved through. "I'll read it." Meyer was a travelling salesman and he was the only one who was acting quite naturally. "You get used to these hick grocers' hentracks and you can read anything." He got his hands on the corners of the register and bent

over it peering at it intently, studiously.

"I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "The guy's quite a kidder." He laughed, but there was no honesty in it. "It's Hades he says he comes from. Greek for Hell."

Astaris. From Hell. Elijah Cantell stared over the heads of the crowd at the stairs Astaris had climbed, and dread lay like lead at the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER TWO

Horror Comes to Galeton

ANN WAYNE swallowed, discovered that she could move again. She went across the sidewalk, leaned over the car door and deposited her bundle on the seat. The street lamps blinked on as she straightened.

"I knew there was some reason for this sudden illumination," a fresh, young voice said behind her. "'Tis the golden hair of my lady fair, shining like a good deed in a naughty world."

"Hush Tim!" Ann turned to the tall, long-limbed youth, a warm smile breaking through the nameless fear that still shadowed her face. "What kind of lawyer will people think you if they hear you chattering such nonsense?"

"A very wise kind." Freckles gathered in smiling crinkles, but something in the lines of his firm mouth hinted at repressed bitterness, and in his brown eyes there was no smile. "Maybe that's the answer. Maybe I ought to insert an ad in the *Argus;* 'Public Notice: As indisputable proof of his perspicacity, Timothy Woodruff, LL.B. announces that he is madly in love with. . . .'"

"Silly!" The girl's tapering fingers on his arm stopped him. "Stop fooling, Tim, and tell me what's happened today."

"Nothing." Woodruff shoved a hand through his shock of russet hair. "The good people of Galeton still refuse to darken my door. In another ten years, perhaps, they will have forgotten that my father once was Shean Woodruff, foreman of the throwing room in the mill, and will come rushing to put their affairs in my hands, but I'll have starved to death by that time."

"Tim!" Ann exclamed. "You're not telling the truth. I came into Uncle Henry's office a little while ago just as he slammed up the telephone receiver and he growled at me, 'If I had that red-headed rascal here I'd wring his neck'. You *have* got a case and it's against the mill."

"Old Raunt," Woodruff grinned reminiscently, "was at his sulphurous best. He flayed me alive, and he didn't use a single cussword. Look chicken, think you can slip away and meet me tonight?"

"Timothy L. Woodruff!" The girl stamped a petulant small foot. "You tell me at once what you called Uncle Henry about!"

"Swell," the youth exclaimed. "Ten o'clock then, in the summer house on your grounds." He wheeled and was gone in a single long stride into the murk of the grocery store.

"Sorry I am a little late," Henry Raunt's dry tones rustled in Ann's ears. He was coming around in front of the roadster, from his office across the street. "Did I keep you waiting long?"

HE WAS as sere and shrunken as his voice. Despite the sultry warmth, his square-cut jacket was tightly buttoned and a high, white cravat was folded around his corded yellow neck. Beneath the brim of his black derby his face was the color and texture of a walnut sheet, but there was a keenness in his black eyes that belied his age.

"No, uncle," his niece responded demurely as she opened the roadster's door for him. "Not very long."

"Everything's ready at the mill and we're starting again in the morning. I waited to make sure that all the foremen

were notified to have their shifts on hand. By the way," Raunt broke off. "Was that by any chance young Woodruff you were talking to as I came out?"

Ann's mouth twitched in an impudent little moué, behind his back. "Why uncle! You forbade me to talk to him, didn't you?"

"I'm glad you remember that." The girl went around to the other side of the little car and slid in under the steering wheel. As she heeled the starter button the old man laid his bony, transparent hand on hers. "I was afraid you thought me too harsh," he murmured. "I'm happy you understand I interfered only because I feel that the best is none too good for my little girl."

Ann hid her look of guilt with the business of gear-shifting, of tooling the car out into the roadway. She felt mean and ungrateful to the old bachelor who had been so good to her for the fifteen years since a railroad wreck had orphaned her. She might, even, have confessed her deception and asked her uncle's forgiveness for it, except for one thing.

Passing the American House something dragged her gaze up to the little wrought-iron balcony above its porch. A grey figure stood there, misty and wraithlike, ominously overlooking the town.

"SEEMS queer," Ed Fulton muttered to himself, "to be starting the week on a Tuesday." He climbed carefully down the steep path that snaked down the hill from his cottage. It was not yet full light, and if he made a misstep he might slip and go tumbling down into the road below, from which came the monotonous shuffle, shuffle of thousands of feet on the way to the mill.

On mornings like this Ed wondered whether he was so smart building a place for himself up here in the woods, instead of living in the company barracks with the rest of the bachelors. In a month it would be black dark when he turned out, and he would have to use a flashlight. Maybe he was a fool, but he couldn't see staying among the Poles and the Hunyaks when he was boss of the jacquard looms, and the mill's most profitable product depending on the skill with which he set the almost human needles for their exacting work.

Now if he had a wife and a parcel of squalling brats, old Raunt would rent him one of the cottages on the Turnpike. The hell with that! He was better off like this. But he'd ought to have had better sense than to start out without his sheepskin jacket. The morning ground fog, swirling out from between the trees, was making his clothes damp so that they lay chilly against his skin.

Ed shivered a little. They were like ghosts, those thick wisps of vapor, on the path. That one just ahead, was exactly like a grey man, waiting for him. . . .

"Stop, Edward Fulton!" It *was* a man,

and he was speaking to Ed in a funny kind of voice, like a loud whisper. "Go no further!"

"What the blue blazes!" The little hairs at the back of Fulton's neck bristled. The man seemed built all wrong, but that wasn't so bad as the fact that he was blind. He had no eyes at all, and there was a nasty-looking red mark across the bottom of his face. "What do you mean stop? I got to get to work."

"There will be no work for you, Edward Fulton, ever again."

"The devil you say," the foreman grated, and started on down. No crazy guy was going to make him late, blind or not blind. "Get out of my way."

The grey waith lifted a hand. . . .

The workers in the road heard a shrill scream. Something came tumbling down off the hill. It hit the road-dirt with a fleshy thud, flopped queerly.

Ed Fulton lifted to his knees. To his feet. He was blubbering and he was knuckling his eyes. His face was grey as death itself.

And then he was screaming and laughing all at once. Laughing and screaming and crying, and the sound of it was enough to turn your blood to water. The sound of it and what he was screaming.

"I can't see. I'm blind. He's struck me blind. The grey devil has made me blind."

He started to run, and he bumped right into Manya Pavlovitch. She caught, and held him, "Wait, Ed," she said. "Wait. You're hurt. We'll take you to the hosp—"

Then Manya was screaming too. She was looking into Ed's eyes and she was screaming. Ed's eyes were red as fire and they had no pupils at all. They were just red balls glaring out of his face!

TIM WOODRUFF'S law office, over the A & P on Main Street, was his living quarters as well. A screen hid a cot, and in the bottom drawer of his second-hand desk were stowed a box of crackers, a package of cheese and a paper container of milk.

At about eight that Tuesday morning Woodruff was pacing the floor of his office. He seemed to have been doing that all night, for the cot behind the screen showed no sign of having been occupied, and the young lawyer's blue eyes were bleared for want of sleep, his big-boned, blunt-jawed visage deep-lined with fatigue. But something other than mere weariness was limned on Tim's face. There was suffering there, and a certain bleak and terdible grimness that had no place on so young a countenance.

Sunlight came horizontally in through the window and struck into bold relief a white, typewritten sheet that lay flat and uncreased on the desk's green blotter, an addressed envelope beside it. Woodruff stopped prowling, stood looking down at the letter.

The youth shrugged. "Better get it off," he muttered, "so that it will be on record." He read the typing once more, carefully as if he were weighing each word.

Hamlin, Shane and Hamlin,
138 Fanuel Street,
Boston, Mass.
Gentlemen:

I regret to report that Mr. Henry Raunt yesterday unconditionally refused the proposition for the purchase of the mill here which I made to him at your instance.

As Mr. Raunt is for the present in sole control of the property, this seems to end the matter. However, should there appear to be in the future any prospect of reopening negotiations with a reasonable chance of success, I shall seize it.

I will be glad to undertake any other matters with which you care to entrust me.

Very truly yours,
Timothy L. Woodruff.

"All of which means," Woodruff murmured, "to anyone reading it, that I've muffed my last chance. The commission

on this deal would have given me a new lease on life, but it's no go. I'm through. Washed up."

He sat down, folded the sheet meticulously, slid it into the enveope. He sealed the envelope, took a stamp from the top drawer, affixed it. For a long moment his fingers drummed on the edge of the desk, as if, despite what he had said, the action were not quite final, as if there were some decision still to be made.

The drumming fingers dipped into the drawer again. They brought out two objects, put them on the desk, the letter between them.

The one on the left was a snapshot of Ann Wayne. Her small face laughed tantalizingly out of it, and one slim arm was outflung in a beckoning gesture strangely appealing. That which lay on the right was a yellowed newspaper clipping:

MILL WINS CASE

No Liability to Woodruff

Judge Parker Gibbs today dismissed the case of Shean Woodruff against the Raunt Silk Mills. "While plaintiff has shown," he said, "that the machine which tore off his arm was negligently unprovided with safety devices, it was his duty as foreman to insist on such provision, and his failure to do so constitutes contributory negligence on his part, invalidating his claim."

After handing down the formal decision, Judge Gibbs made an effort to persuade the company to grant Woodruff a pension. He pointed out that by choosing to bring suit, the crippled foreman had waived his rights under the Workmen's Compensation Law, and hence was left altogether without support for himself and his motherless young son. "This man has served you faithfully for a great many years," the jurist ended his plea, "and it seems to me only human that you aid him now that he is destitute and helpless."

Stephen Wayne, vice-president of the company was obdurate. "Woodruff has been paid good wages for his work," he replied, "and we owe him nothing."

This statement was followed by a dramatic incident. Woodruff sat up on the stretcher on which he had been brought into court, and shouted, "You owe me plenty, and you'll pay it. Some day you and yours will pay what you owe." He turned to his six-year-old son, standing beside him. "I lay it upon you, Tim, to make them pay."

Timothy Woodruff read the clipping through, and then he looked for a long time at the snapshot, Slowly his lids narrowed, till he was peering at it through tight slits, his face an expressionless mask.

"Washed up," he muttered. "That's what *they* think." He took the photo in his hands and he tore it across and across, with an odd, slow ferocity. Then he put the clipping away, picked up the sealed envelope and went down into Main Street to mail it.

CHAPTER THREE

The Second Visitor

THE MILL and the long, drab barracks where the single men and women among its workers are domiciled, lie north of Galeton. On the other side of town, a line of small, boxlike cottages are given over to the families of the married men.

Here, in number twenty-six Vega Street, Maggie O'Boorn finished washing the mountain of breakfast dishes with a sigh. When there are a man and seven brats to feed, that matutinal task becomes a long and tedious chore. Pendulous-breasted, shapeless in a dingy all-over apron, Maggie mopped up the sink, hung up the rag, and shuffled to her kitchen's back door.

Festooned in the brilliant sun, variegated garments fluttered from a line stretched between two leaning poles. They were dry now, ready to be ironed. Maggie bent wearily, lifted a wicker hamper from the little porch and waddled down into the yard.

She went all the way to the back fence that kept a profusion of rank, high weeds in check. Long ago she had learned to work toward the house, so as to carry her heaviest load the shortest distance. She set the basket down, reached work-reddened hands up to the first of the clothespins. . . .

She stiffened. From behind her, from the tangled brambles beyond the fence, had come a hollow moan, a moan so filled with suffering that in the instant she heard it Maggie O'Boorn's clumsy body turned cold as ice.

The low moan came again. She could not have heard it had she been a yard nearer the house. It seemed to have been going on forever.

Maggie came heavily around, took the one step needed to bring her to the fence, leaned over it. Her frightened gaze penetrated the interlaced, dark tangle.

"Mother Mary have pity," she whispered.

Not only the Mother of Mercy but Herod himself would have pitied the child that lay agonized in the netted brush.

It was a little weazened boy, his nakedness covered only by a few tattered, grimy rags, his dirt-encrusted skin so tightly drawn over the bones that every rib, every stringy muscle, stood out in sharp relief.

Maggie knew only that he was a child by his diminutive size. His face was fleshless as an old man's, the lips twisted away from the rotted teeth in a skull's humorless and awful grin. It might almost have been a living skeleton that lay there, except that no skeleton ever had a belly like that; a blue-tinged famine-bloated bag against which hands like bird-claws pressed in a fruitless attempt to still the pangs that wrenched that low moan from between blue unconscious lips.

This starveling was the second of the three who came to Galeton that week. The first was met with horror, the second with pity. Maggie O'Boorn, reaching down over the pickets and taking the pathetic small form into her tender, mothering arms, could not know how soon pity was to turn to terror.

THE SUN, bright through her eyelids, woke Ann Wayne. She stretched in the soft luxury of her bed, eyes still closed, like a fuzzy small kitten. She rolled over—and the pillow was wet against her downy cheek.

Recalling that she had cried herself to sleep and why, recalling the resolution that had let her sleep at last, Ann thrust the sheet back and leaped from the bed. Darting across the silky rug, she was like a boy in the flashing white silk of her pajamas, her close-cropped golden curls a rumpled cap for her eager face. She reached a white-and-gold secretary between two windows where venetian blinds were breaking the sun into slanting sheets of dancing dust motes, and almost before she had seated herself on the small chair she was writing:

> Tim dear—I just won't let you go. It doesn't matter about half the mill belonging to me and your being poor, not the tiniest little bit. You made it seem so important last night and I was so terribly upset that I couldn't think, but I did think it all out after you left me and I know now that you are wrong.
>
> Look, dear, I've thought of a wonderful way to make everything all right anyway. Come to the garden house tonight at ten. When I hear your owl hoot I'll come out and tell you all about my plan. You're *my* lawyer, you know, even if you're no one else's. My lawyer and my man, forever and ever, amen.

The room door opened as Ann was slipping the folded note into an envelope. "So ye're up!" a grey-haired woman, her form scrawny in a gingham morning apron, exclaimed. "I didn't think, comin' in after midnight like ye did, that. . . ."

"Martha, darling," the girl interrupted, running to her, the sealed but unaddressed envelope in her hand. "Don't scold me this mornng. Please don't scold me. I couldn't bear it."

"And when, since ye were a tad of six and I started tryin' to take the place of yer poor mother, God rest her soul, have ye been able to bear my scoldin' ye?" The tones were stern, but plain on the woman's time-seamed face was the deep, abiding love of a childless female who has one chick to mother. "The Lord knows you need a scoldin', traipsin' around half the night with that red-headed rapscallion, an' me pretendin' to yer uncle that ye're safe asleep in your room, the Lord forgive me for my sins. I tell ye, this is the last time. . . ."

"Till the next, you old dear." Ann stood on tiptoe to kiss the wrinkled lips. "Martha," she continued, breathlessly. "Please give this to George quickly, before he leaves with uncle for town. Tell him to make sure and deliver it early, because. . . ."

"Early!" Martha sniffed. "It's nigh eleven. Besides, George didn't drive Mr. Raunt to the town office. They went to the mill."

"The mill?" The girl took a step backward, the letter still tight in her hand. "Why, this isn't Thursday. . . ."

"No. But there was a telephone call for yer uncle right after seven. There's trouble there."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"How should I know?"

"Well," Ann shrugged, "whatever it is, Uncle Henry will take care of it. . . . If he isn't going to town I can drive down and leave this for Tim myself. What do you think I ought to wear, Martha, my blue print or. . . ?"

"Ye'll do no drivin' today, missie. Yer uncle left word that ye wasn't to go out. He was very particular about that. 'Tell my niece that she is to stay inside the house today.' Those were his very words."

The girl's eyes widened. "I'm to stay—Martha! He never said anything like that before. What does it mean?"

Martha spread her hands wide. "I'm sure I don't know."

"He said *tell* me, not *ask* me?"

"He said *tell* ye, and he meant it, make no mistake on it."

"Did he—do you think he knew I was out last night? Did he seem angry?"

"No. He was more scared like. More as if he was scared something might happen to ye if ye did go out."

"Scared! But—Martha, I've got to go. I've got to get in touch with Tim. Look. I'll get dressed and climb down the drain pipe outside my window here, and no one except you need know. . . ."

"Ye'll do no such thing. Give me that letter. If it must get to that young reprobate, I'll take it to him."

THE BUILDINGS of the Raunt silk mill ramble over acres of ground. Their age-darkened bricks are ivy-covered, so that the small windows admit very little light and the long, machinery-filled rooms are dim, and dusty and always damp.

Because of the dimness the weavers in the satin room must be doubly intent on the lustrous webs growing on their looms, watching the darting shuttles lest they be jammed for a split second and spoil a yard of the costly fabric, watching for knots in the woof, for breaks in the warp. It is no wonder then, that no one saw Astaris enter.

The first they knew of his presence was when his toneless half-whisper husked through the pound, pound of the pistons, through the clackety-clack of the spindles, not sounding over the familiar sounds but hissing through them, clear and distinct and startling.

"Stop," it said. "Stop work."

Anton Stane, foreman here, pulled the emergency switch that shut off the power;

thinking, if he thought at all, that someone's sleeve had caught in a cog wheel. Then he looked and saw the grey man, halfway down the long, murky room, his columnar arm raised high over that great, blind head, the eye-pits cavernous.

A girl screamed in the sudden silence.

"What the hell!" Stane roared, plunging toward Astaris. "Get the hell out of here, before I break your damned. . . ." His bellow broke off as he jolted into a dolly-wagon, instead of going around it, and then he was pawing frantically at his eyes, his voice high-pitched, shrill and wordless.

There was no silence, any longer, in the satin room. There was a pandemonium of terrified screams, a chaos of forms that ran everywhere, shrieking. Of forms that collided with one another, with the machinery; of stricken men and women who lurched blindly about fleeing the dark that had clamped down upon them, in a single instant; the impenetrable, tangible dark that had gouged sight from them.

Everyone of the two score men and women in that room had gone blind.

It took time to get the stricken workers, somehow, anyhow, to the infirmary where a bewildered doctor was looking down at Ed Fulton, scratching his head in puzzlement over what had blinded the old foreman. Fulton was lying on a cot, mercifully drugged to sleep.

It took time to quiet the people from the satin room, but the agonized cries were silenced at last. Henry Raunt was there by this time, and John Holdon, the mill superintendent, and between them they managed to get the tale out of Anton Stane.

"Where's this Astaris?" Raunt growled. "Where did he go?"

No one seemed to know. The guards at the gate in the high fence of steel mesh topped by barbed wire that surrounded the plant swore he had not passed them going in or out. A hasty but thorough search of the building did not reveal him. He seemed to have appeared out of thin air and vanished back into it.

After awhile some bright individual thought of 'phoning the American House. "Sure," Elijah Cantell said. "He's here. He just came in and went up to his room."

"Let's go get him," someone yelled, hearing that report. *"Get him!"* two hundred voices roared and the gate guards were swept aside by a yelling mob that poured out through the gap in the fence.

There was not one in that howling crowd who was not terrified of the blind, grey stranger. There was not one in that crowd who dared admit his terror to his neighbor. It was a mad rage born of fear that lashed them on, ravening, crazed by blood lust, along the Turnpike toward Galeton, toward Main Street and the American House.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Third Messenger

MAGGIE O'BOORN took the pitiful waif into her house. She laid him on the big bed where her three boys slept and went into the kitchen to get a bottle of milk out of the icebox.

The child ought to be attended to by a doctor, she knew, but there was no telephone in the house. She would get a little nourishment into the starved thing, and after that would be time enough to send someone for Doc Watts.

It never occurred to Maggie to send the lad to a hospital. The poor are accustomed to take care of their own.

She warmed some milk and poured it into a cup. Then she went back into the bedroom, sat down on the edge of the bed and dribbled a little of the milk between the still blue lips.

Some of the white liquid dripped across the bony chin, but some went into the

starveling's mouth, and it was terrible to see the tiny Adam's Apple work convulsively up and down in the small throat as the milk was swallowed. The first few drops had a marked revivifying effect, and with the third spoonful the little hands grabbed Maggie's wrist.

The bent brown fingers were rough on her skin, and their long nails dug deep, like the claws of some rapacious bird. "Easy now," the woman said. "Easy. You'll get as much as is good for you and no more."

The boy's eyes were still closed but Maggie was talking for her own sake. "'Tis me own grandfather used to tell tales of the great hunger in the old country, when the potato crop failed, and how when the reliefers came to the villages it was only little by little they would feed the starving children." There was about her charge something frightening, something that made her feel cold all over though the heat of the day and of the range on which her irons were set made the house an oven.

There was something about the lad that was strange, uncouth, and it made her afraid. Something in the harsh dryness of his skin, in the way that the grey crust on it looked like the scales of a snake.

It was only the dirt, Maggie tried to tell herself, that coated him.

The spoon caught between his teeth and in pulling it out she jerked the waif's head around. And the horror of it!

He had no ears! This—*thing*—she had picked up out of the thorns had no ears at all on the sides of his head!

Maggie O'Boorn heaved to her feet. The room swam dizzily around her. She lurched out of it, out into the kitchen, crossing herself, mumbling a prayer.

The litany calmed her. She got hold of herself. "Now aren't you the scarecat," she chided herself. "The poor lad has been abondoned by some unnatural mother because of his deformity, and he has been crawlin' around in the wood till he was famished to the very point of death. The Lord led him to you to save, and now you too would condemn him.

This was, of course, reasonable. Nevertheless Maggie did not turn back, but went on through the girls' bedroom and the parlor and out of the house. She had nothing in common with Becky Levy or

Greta Andersen but she was going to call one of these neighbors of hers to come in with her. She dared not stay alone any longer with the—with whatever it was she had taken into her home.

THE sound of shrill voices met her, coming from the road, and the padding of many bare feet. The children were coming from school, coming home for noon lunch.

Her own seven were always a little later than the rest, but they would be here any minute. Maggie suddenly knew that on no account must they see that which lay in the boys' bed.

She forced herself around, hurried back to close the bedroom door. It opened into the room, so that she had to go all the way in to reach its knob. She glanced at the bed.

It was empty! The child, that a moment ago she had left barely conscious, surely too weak to move, was gone. He was nowhere in the room!

He was nowhere in the house! Maggie's frantic search was interrupted by a rush of small feet at the front door, by a clamor of small voices demanding lunch. "Hurry up, mom," Dan, the oldest, called. "I gotta get back for a couple innings ball practice before the bell rings. We got a game on this after—"

"Get your hands washed then, the whole kettle and boilin' of you, before you set down." There was nothing in the mother's voice to tell of the black fear-flood surging in her veins. "Be off with you now to the pump in the yard, and don't let me catch you wipin' the dirt off on the towels either."

She went through the scamper to the icebox. Lucky thing there was cold corned beef and cabbage left over from last night. The youngsters would squawk but they'd have to eat it. "Kathleen! Get the bread out and slice it."

Maggie opened the icebox and took out the big platter she was after. She stopped stockstill, staring at it.

"Mom," Kathleen said from behind. "There's something wrong with the bread. Look, it's all green."

"Green," the mother muttered, but she did not turn. The meat on the platter in her hand was green too. It was covered over with a green slime and the stench of it was foul in her nostrils.

The bread was mildewed and the corned beef was mouldy, and there was nothing in the icebox fit to eat. She'd looked over her supplies that morning, like a good housewife, and everything had been all right then.

"Meesis O'Boorn," Leah Levy's snivelling voice said from the doorway. "Momma vants I should esk if maybe you kin lend her a couple potatoes to cook for mein lunch. Our icebox is full mit ents, und dere ain't a t'eeng fit to eat."

THE noon sun rode high in a brassy sky. The elms bordering the long, narrow park that marks Galeton as a typical New England town seemed to shrivel in the breathless heat, and from the baking roofs of the cars angle-parked along Main Street's curb a quivering shimmer rose.

Tim Woodruff strolled with apparent purposelessness along the sidewalk in front of the American House. A woman came up from behind him, brushed against him in passing. Tim felt a tug at his jacket pocket as she went on.

Staring after her, he knew by the black bonnet perched atop grey hair, by the black satin waist and pleated skirt, that the woman was Martha Hutton, the Raunt's housekeeper. He felt in his pocket and his fingertips touched the crisp crackle of paper.

Woodruff glanced about for some place where he could take out the letter and read it unobserved. The hotel porch was deserted. One of its broad pillars would

afford him the concealment he desired.

He went up to it, ripped the envelope, scanned it. Tiny muscles knotted his jaw and his eyes were agate-hard brown balls. . . . A sound came to him, turning his head. It was a muted roar as of a distant creek in spring spate, brawling between high banks, and it did not belong in the fall drowse of the hamlet.

Woodruff thrust Ann's note into his pocket, wheeled to peer north on Main Street, whence the curious tumult came. Just within sight, the wide thoroughfare boiled, its flanking buildings channeling a rushing human flood.

"They're coming to lynch him," a shrill voice gibbered in Woodruff's ear. "They're coming to lynch Astaris." Elijah Cantell pawed Tim's arm. "They can have him for all I care, but they'll wreck the hotel. They'll wreck. . . ."

"That's your car there," Woodruff snapped. "Give me the key to it. Quick." The innkeeper fished in his vest, quivering lips writhing across his pale countenance, jerked out the bit of metal. The lawyer snatched it. "Lock your back door, shove something heavy against it and call the sheriff." Tim fairly threw Cantell toward his screened entrance portal. "I'll try to hold them here."

Woodruff vaulted the low rail, bounded across the pavement, grabbed open the door of a dull-colored sedan nosing the curb, jumped into it and jabbed Cantell's key into its ignition lock.

Heeling the starter button, he chanced a single glance over his shoulder. Through the rear window he saw the onrushing mob, only a block away now; saw maddened, bestial faces, a serried panoply of extempore weapons; wrenches, spanners, fence-rails, waving in gnarled and frantic hands. Then the sedan leaped the curb, smashed upon the tavern's porch, slewed to a standstill across its door.

The roar of the crowd deafened Woodruff as he slid out of the sedan. "Stop!" he yelled, his shout cutting through the tumult. "Stop right where you are."

PERHAPS it was his command that held them at the edge of the porch. Perhaps it was their astonishment at perceiving the sedan where no car ought to be, blocking them off. At any rate the fore-runners of the mob halted; those behind piling up on them; halted long enough for Woodruff to get to the gas tank at the sedan's rear, to jerk open its hinged cap with one hand while he slashed a cigarette lighter out of his pocket with the other and held it over the aperture.

"Come a step further," he shouted, "one of you, and I blow you all to hell."

The mind of a mob operates curiously. They saw that indomitable figure, straddle-legged, grim-jawed, holding with steady hand the spark that would detonate ten gallons of gasoline. They heard his threat, and they did not think that if he carried it out he would be the first to die, did not speculate whether he would sacrifice himself to save a stranger. They quailed before his challenging stare, shoving back against the pressure of those behind, their rabid roar subsiding into muttering growls.

"What's it all about?" Woodruff demanded, following up his advantage. "What's this Astaris done?" If he could get them talking, arguing, they might not recall that there was a back way into the hotel. He was playing for time, for badly needed time.

"Done?" a big-thewed, granite-jawed fellow in overalls replied. "He's blinded Ed Fulton and Anton Stane and everybody in the satin room, that's what he's done." It was Dan Corbin, chief mechanic.

"Blinded. . . . Why that's nonsense. How could a man do anything like that?"

"Maybe he ain't a man. Maybe he's. . . ."

Crack! Tim Woodruff went down like a poled ox. A stone, thrown by some ur-

chin far back, had caught him square on the brow!

The mob surged up on the porch. The sedan was tossed aside as though it had no weight at all, and the sweating, shouting throng milled into the lobby. A chair went down with a crash, the desk counter toppled, splintered, toppled.

"He's upstairs," Elijah Cantell screamed. "Room five. He hasn't come down. Go get him but don't wreck. . . ."

The armed, infuriated throng was abruptly quiet. The stairs rose from their cluster, unguarded, undefended. He whom they sought was trapped in his room at its head, but no one dared be the first to go up after him.

Woodruff's question, Dan Corbin's reply, had brought their terror back upon them. "Maybe he ain't a man," Corbin's words rang in their ears. "Maybe he's. . . ."

What? What was this being who, without eyes, made his way about as though he were sighted? Who was seen now here, now there, and never in between—who, by a mere lift of his hand, could strike people blind?

In the gasping hush that lay suddenly upon them, one thought curdled the brain in every skull. "If I go up there, will he take my sight from me as he did from those others in the mill? Will he strike me blind?"

THEIR blood-thirst seeped away and a quivering, chill fear took its place. Fear of the dark, first terrible fear that assails mankind. Fear of the eternal dark, and the Things that crawl in the dark. Fear . . . .

"Cowards!" a woman's voice screeched. "Yellow bellies." Myra Stane was struggling through the crowd, and the crowd was parting for her. Her dress was half-torn from her scrawny shoulders, her hair straggled in wild disarray athwart her contorted face. Her eyes stared from their sockets, big-pupilled eyes in which there was no hate, no terror, but only madness. "You're going to let him go." She reached the stairs. "But I won't." She was running up, a screaming virago. "He robbed my Anton of his eyes and I'll kill him for it myself if none of you have the guts."

That shamed them into movement. The stairs were swamped by a rush of tossing, yelling men. The spell of fear was broken.

They poured into the hallway above. The woman, battering on the door of room five, felt the surge of hot bodies against her, crushing her against the wood, shoving her through the splintering panel. She went down, trampled by heedless feet, her screams unheard, and the room was filled with the crowd that was once more a ravening mob.

Only with the mob. Astaris was not there! He was nowhere in that room, though the bed, the dresser, every piece of furniture in it, were smashed to bits by the searchers.

Astaris had vanished from the room where it was certain he had been when the hotel was surrounded. Cantell swore that he could not have reached the back door without his being seen. It was impossible for him to have climbed down from the balcony to make good his escape. But he was gone.

Astaris was gone. The moments Woodruff had gained for him by his desperate stand had been sufficient for him to vanish, utterly.

The noon sun was a torrid ball, hanging high over Galeton. But in its streets a chill fear ran, the cold of a nameless terror.

LOCATING Timothy Woodruff had taken Martha Hutton longer than she expected. Conscious that Henry Raunt would demand an explanation of her absence from lunch, she decided on returning by a little used shortcut to where the Raunt Mansion sat high on its wooded

hill overlooking town and mill and Company Barracks.

She ducked into an alley between the drugstore and the bank, went across a cluttered vacant lot behind them and came out on a dirt road, the destination of which was the cemetery boardering Galeton on the west. Thus she missed the incursion of the mob from the mill.

Thus too, by pure chance, she witnessed the advent of the third of Galeton's weird visitors.

Martha had just reached the cemetery when she heard the rumble of an approaching vehicle behind her. The road was narrow and she crowded against the graveyard wall to let it pass.

She expected a hearse, or an undertaker's closed wagon, but what she saw was a flat-bedded small truck swaying toward her along the rutted trail. She glimpsed the driver, a weazened figure crouched over the wheel, his face hidden by enormous blue goggles, and then the cab was past her.

A long, narrow pine box was solitary on the stakeless platform, its shape marking it as one of the cases in which caskets are shipped.

The truck speeded up immediately after passing the housekeeper, so that it was already some yards beyond her before she resumed her journey. The left rear wheel hit a boulder past which the narrower front ones had gone safely, and in climbing it the bed of the vehicle was canted sidewise.

The case started sliding. The jolt as the wheel regained level served only to hasten the progress of the long, yellowish box. It went over the end corner of the truck, hit hard on the very rock that had caused its fall.

Martha Hutton cried out to the driver, but at that same instant the exhaust backfired, and her voice was drowned by the pistol-like report. When she called again the vehicle was already beyond hearing.

Martha reached the crate, saw that the impact had split it from end to end, and that a blackish loam was spilling out of the gap. It may have been the slight jar of her footstep that did it, but whatever the cause, the box slid off the boulder on which it was up-ended and fell apart.

The earth it had contained spread out, covering the splintered boards. On the bed that it made lay a woman's corpse!

The cadaver was so beautifully formed that it might have been the marble product of some master sculptor's chisel; thighs and flanks and nubile breasts melting into a single singing line; except that a cascade of night-black hair framed the sensitive, sleeping face and trailed across the abdomen's sensuous mound.

Martha Hutton's mouth went dry, and she felt icy, invisible fingers constricting her throat. But she did not run.

Something about the still form, some evanescent tinge of color underlying the white, transparent skin, perhaps some barely distinguishable movement, seemed to deny that it was veritably a corpse. Martha bent to it, herself scarcely breathing.

Where those long-lashed lids fluttering? The Raunt housekeeper bent closer still. . . .

The white arms lashed out suddenly, were steel bands clamped around her neck, dragged her down! A stone cold face nuzzled into her corded neck and teeth, sharp, piercing, stabbed her jugular.

There was no one near to hear Martha Hutton's scream. No one near to come to her aid as her hands thumped cold flesh, frantically at first, then more and more feebly. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Fear's Grey Pall

CONSTERNATION ran riot along Vega Street. Not a single larder in all the clustering small houses had been left

untouched by the scourge. In some the food had mysteriously decayed, between breakfast and noon, in others it had been as mysteriously invaded by insects. Becky Levy's ants were as nothing to the brown swarm of roaches on Rosita Liscio's shelves or the white worms that slimed Arina Vassilyevna's cupboard.

"Ai," Becky wailed, out in the street where the distracted mothers were gathered. "It's the *mokas* the good Lord, blessed be his name, has sent on us, the plagues like he sent to the Ejeepchans."

"Run down to Rimpelmaier's, Selma," the blond, statuesque Greta Andersen directed her eldest, "an' ged some cheese an' bread for your lunch. Tell him ay pay Saturday."

The eminently practical Norsewoman's example was followed by a half dozen of her neighbors. There was a general exodus of youngsters to the corner grocery. "Yuh know," Fannie Hirst announced to the gathering at large. "I hoid some'ting runnin' around in my kitchen 'bout nine o'clock, but when I looked there was nothing there. I t'ought maybe it was rats."

A chill crawled Maggie O'Boorn's spine. Was it the little starved boy Fannie had heard. . . ?

"I seen someding chump out from my vindow." Gretchen Maier contributed, "Aber so fast it run into the veeds, what it vass I could not see, eggsept dot it vass little und dirty lookink—"

"What time was that?" Maggie squeezed out. "What time?"

"Aboudt a qvarter to ten."

It had been about half-past ten when she first heard that moan. Maggie had an appalling vision of the small, earless thing with its bloated belly scuttering all over town, darting into kitchens and darting out again, leaving destruction behind. There was an Old Country legend, she tried to recall, having to do with a leprechaun of famine. . . .

"**Mom**! . . . Ma!" The messengers who had been dispatched to Rimpelmaier's were running back, *empty-handed*. "Mother," Selma Andersen panted up. "There's a scum like mud over everything in the store. Mr. Rimpelmaier says he's got nothing to sell. I'm hungry, mother."

Hungry! All the children were hungry, and there was nothing to eat. Nothing at all to eat, on Vega Street.

CONSCIOUSNESS came back to Tim Woodruff with the pound of running feet shaking the porch boards on which he lay, with hoarse and rabid shouts resounding about him. "Find him! Scatter and search the town! Find him before he gets away."

The feet rushed away, thudding on the concrete of the sidewalk. There was the burring of motor starters, the snarl of horns.

Woodruff's hand lifted to the throbbing ache in his temple, where the stone had struck him, and his eyes opened. He was lying against the hotel wall. The car with which he had blocked its entrance loomed above him, hiding him from the mob that was pouring out of the tavern. Lucky for him that it did, otherwise they surely would have turned on him, recalling that it was through him they had been robbed of their prey.

The rush of feet and the roar of cars died away, and the ache in Woodruff's skull lessened. He shoved hands against the boards, got his knees under him, waited an instant while the sick whirl in his head subsided, and started crawling out from within the sedan's shadow.

White sunglare met him, dazzling him. "There he is," Elijah Cantell's high-pitched voice quavered above him. "If he hadn't held them up they would have caught Astaris."

The youth's groping hand found the rear bumper of the sedan and he dragged himself erect.

"He was right on the spot," someone

else said, in dry tones that rustled like the wind in autumn leaves, "was he? Right here to stop the mob."

Woodruff's sight cleared and he saw that it was Henry Raunt who spoke, his old-fashioned garb immaculate as ever, speculation smouldering in his deep-set eyes. There was a third man with the mill owner and the hotel-keeper. The grey wings of a walrus mustache drooped on his leathery face, a badge was pinned to the lapel of his coat and his corded hands gripped a short-barreled riot-gun.

"Good work, lad," Sheriff Carter grunted. "We don't want no lynching in Galeton. Good work."

"Too good." Raunt's upper lip pulled away from his teeth in a snear. "So good it might even be he had it all figured out before-hand. Did someone 'phone you the mob was coming, Woodruff, and did you hustle here to save your confederate from them?"

Little muscles knotted along the ridge of the youth's jaw, but otherwise there was no change of expression on his face. "What do you mean?" he asked tonelessly, weakly holding on to the sedan's spare tire. "What the hell are you driving at?"

In the street only a single auto was left, the mill owner's sleek touring car. Its motor was running softly and a uniformed chauffeur, seated behind its wheel was watching the group on the porch with avid interest.

"I mean that it's evident you brought Astaris here to terrorize my workers." Raunt's reply was low-toned but there was venom in it. Hate.

Carter stared at the mill man, astonishment written large on his weatherbeaten face. "How do you figure that, Raunt?"

"He made me an outrageously small offer for the mill yesterday. When I refused it he told me that before long I'd be glad to sell at any price, if I had anything left to sell. If that didn't mean that he was planning to ruin the business I don't know what it did mean. This morning this outrage occurs, and when its perpetrator is about to be captured, who is it but this scoundrel that saves him?"

"But. . . ."

"But nothing. Arrest that man, Sheriff Carter!"

The peace officer's look shifted to Woodruff. The red-headed youth was smiling now, mockingly and without humor.

"That suits me," he murmured. "Henry Raunt of the Raunt Silk Mills is good for any damages a jury will award me for false arrest. You've made a wild charge, Mr. Raunt, and you can't prove it."

"I'll prove it all right," the old man said grimly. "When you come to trial I'll have the proof that will send you to prison for a lifetime."

"Are you sure of that?" the sheriff asked, hesitant. "Are you sure you'll have proof enough to convict?"

"As sure as I'm standing here. Stop this fooling around, Carter. Arrest this man. Put handcuffs on him and lock him up."

The young attorney shrugged. "You are a witness, Cantell, that I'm being imprisoned on Raunt's complaint." He held out his hands, wrists together. "Remember that."

The sheriff fumbled a jangling pair of handcuffs out of his sidepocket, clamped his gun to his side with an elbow, and stepped forward to manacle the youth.

Woodruff's left hand lashed forward closed on the butt of the riot-gun, snatched it from under Carter's arm. In the same split-second his right drove into the sheriff's chest and sent him reeling against Raunt. The youth whirled, leaped the porch rail, hurtled across the sidewalk and vaulted over the low front door of his accuser's touring car.

He jabbed the stolen weapon into the chauffeur. "Get going, George," he snarled. "Before I blow your guts out."

The long-bodied auto surged away from the curb, shot south on Main Street. Woodruff crouched down in the space between seat and dashboard, concealing himself from any possible spectators, but the barrel of his weapon snouted very steadily at the driver's green filmed face.

"Your boss is too smart for his own good." There was steely threat in Woodruff's voice. "Don't you be smart and try any tricks or you'll get the same dose that's coming to him. Keep looking straight ahead and drive like hell!"

By the time Carter and Raunt regained their feet, the car was a distant cloud of dust. The tycoon's countenance was purple with fury as he twisted to the sheriff as if to strike him.

"You fool!" he flared. "He'll get away, and. . . ."

"Not on your tintype he will," Carter grated, whirling toward the lobby entrance. "I'm sending out an alarm right now to the State Troopers. They'll have all the roads blocked, fifty miles around, in ten minutes. What's your license number?"

ANN WAYNE stared out of the window of her boudoir. The small oval of her face puckered with worry, she overlooked the mansion's gardened lawn, the high wall whose granite stones were hidden beneath a thick blanket of century-old ivy, the long slope of Gale Hill to the valley far below.

Dusk was settling over that far flung vista. Already it blurred the distant spread of the mill buildings, the elongated bulk of the barracks, the gridironed streets of Galeton. It seemed to the girl as though some tangible fear were drawing a grey pall over the familiar scene, some such brooding dread as lay heavy within her.

With utter futility she had tried to throw off that feeling of something wrong, of something menacing in the air. It had first come upon her when neither her uncle nor Martha Hutton had returned for lunch, had deepened when in response to her call to the mill, John Holdon had palpably evaded her inquiries, had assured her that nothing of importance had occurred there, that her uncle had gone down to his town office and was probably eating his lunch there.

She had dialed the town office and there had been no reply.

Had Martha betrayed her, giving Raunt her letter to Woodruff, telling him of their furtive meetings? Had there been an altercation between her uncle and her lover, an acrimonious flare-up of enmity between them?

Torn by anxiety, Ann had decided to disobey Raunt's injunction to remain within the house. She had been stopped at the door by old James, the butler. "May I remind you, miss," he had quavered, "that your uncle left strict instructions that you are to remain at home? I should advise you to do as he says."

She could, of course, have pushed James aside, run around to the garage and driven away in her roadster, but the habit of obedience was too deeply ingrained in her for that. Then, too, Uncle Henry must have some good reason for his unprecedented restriction. She had turned and climbed to her own suite, and had tried to read, hoping thus to shorten the time till Martha's return. But the print had run together on the page, and the words had had no meaning, and more and more heavily some fathomless dread had settled upon her.

She had now been staring out of this window for an hour. Signs of some unusual activity had come up to her from the valley; far-off shouts, cars rushing along the Turnpike, clumps of men appearing in the snatches of streets and pathways that were not hidden from her by foliage or buildings. All of it too far away for distinct vision, all of it somehow ominous.

If only she knew what it was all about!

Ann's dreary thoughts broke off. Someone was coming up the path from the gate in the wall, was coming toward the house. He was no one she had ever seen before. Medium height, he was so thick-set as to appear clumsy till one noticed how lithely he walked. His features were gross, heavy-jowled and swarthy. Though he was hatless he carried a bundle in one hand, white and shapeless as though a sheet had been knotted about some lumpy object.

ANN leaned out of the window to get a better view of him and some sound she made attracted his attention. He looked up at her, his beady, small eyes narrowing, his thick lips twitching, as if with surprise . . . and something else.

"Yes sir," James' thin voice sounded, from the entrance below. "What is it, sir?"

The man's look drifted downward. "This Henry Raunt's place?" his harsh tones inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him I want to see him. Frank Hamlin, from Boston."

"I'm sorry sir, but Mr. Raunt is not at home."

"Not home, huh! When do you expect him?"

"I don't know sir. He did not say. Do you wish to leave a message?"

"A message. No. Just tell him that I'll be back." Oddly enough, the stranger's gaze slanted up again to Ann, so that it seemed he was speaking to her instead of to the butler. "I'll be back," he repeated, and there was that in his tone that sent a chill prickle scampering the girl's spine. "I'll be back."

Hamlin turned, and went down the path. Ann watched him till he went through the gate and was hidden by the wall. Her hand was pressed against the soft curve of her breast and against its palm she could feel the flutter of her heart.

Why wasn't Uncle home yet? What had happened to Martha? Why was there no word from her?

Who was Hamlin and why was his promise to return so palpably a threat? Did Henry Raunt know the man?

CHAPTER SIX

From the Grave

IT WAS not until dusk that the body of Martha Hutton was discovered.

This is not as surprising as may at first appear. There was no such combing of the highways and byways of Galeton for the vanished Astaris as the enraged crowd from the Mill first intended. The search started vigorously enough, but from Vega Street word ran to them of the macaber happening there, of how every bit of food in the section had been destroyed and the children left hungry. Of the little, starved Thing that scuttered in and out of the cottages but had been seen only by Maggie O'Boorn.

The married men among that harrying mob recalled suddenly that they were fathers. They hastened homeward, their faces set and pallid, the cold fingers of fear tightening on their throats.

Their co-workers might lie blinded and moaning in the infirmary at the Mill, victims of Astaris' mysterious power, but it was their children who were hungry, their children and their wives who were threatened by some new, strange terror. The gray man might get away scot free for all they cared. Who would protect their families if not they?

The single men who were left to carry on the hunt were more terrified than they cared to admit by the prospect of meeting him they sought, the first heat of their rage cooling, and so they gathered in two or three roving groups instead of throwing a far-flung net over the town and the countryside. So it was not till the sun had

set that one of these bands, following the cemetery road, came upon the smashed remnants of a pine-wood case, a heap of dirt, and a scrawny figure that lay upon them, stiff by then with *rigor mortis*.

It lay, face down and oddly contorted, on the black loam, and there was not a stitch of clothing to cover its nakedness but only a grey shadow. Hal Jenks, champion wrestler of the plant, bent to it. He put a huge paw on its shoulder and turned it over. . . . He leaped back from it, screaming like a hysterical woman.

Like a misplaced, toothless mouth, a wound yawned in Martha's neck, criss-crossed by the white threads of severed muscle and sinew, but it was not that which had ripped the shriek from the strong man's breast, not that which now held him and his companions rooted to the road by horror.

The sliced flesh was not red. It was pallid as so much veal drained of its blood. The flesh was bloodless, and the gaping orifices of artery and vein were empty. There was no blood in that obscene wound, no blood on the yellow, wrinkled skin, none on the earth where it lay. The corpse had been drained, sucked dry of its life-fluid. It was a juiceless, empty husk.

Lars Pierson, blond, nerveless son of Finland, was the first to find voice. "Gawd," he husked. "It's a vampire done this. I mind me old man telling about. . . ."

"What's that!" Pete Harron gasped. *"What's that!"*

His arm was outflung, its quivering finger pointing over the low cemetery wall.

The others wheeled, saw a black, formless wraith moving among the graves, coming soundlessly toward them, blotting out one after another the pallid stones. They glimpsed it only, and then they broke and fled, winged by panic, across field and hill, to the safety of their Barracks. . . .

Hal Jenks, slamming the great door and shooting its bolts, was startled by someone yelling behind him. A yell which was succeeded by a whimpering silence.

He jerked around, saw Dan Corbin standing above the cot on which they had left Kurt Weiss, too sick with a cold to work but not sick enough to go to the infirmary.

Kurt was there but he was no longer sick. He was dead. His throat was ripped open and no blood clotted it. There was no blood on his pillow and none on the sheet that was thrown back from his hairy chest.

THE moonlight crept blue and cold, across the floor of the American House's half-demolished lobby.

The door of a sound-proofed telephone booth scraped open and Henry Raunt came out of it. "James says everything's quiet at the house," he said, sighing with relief. He turned to Cantell, sunk deep in a big clubchair, his head in his hands. "Turn on some light Elijah," he growled. "The few cents you'll save by keeping us in the dark won't pay for the damage here."

The innkeeper pushed himself out of the chair and shambled to a switch box in the wall behind the wrecked desk. A grimy, yellow luminosity spilled down from a high hung chandelier. Sheriff Carter turned from the window out of which he was peering into Galeton's deserted Main Street.

"I ought to be out there," he husked, "with a posse, hunting for Woodruff."

Raunt stared at him, cold contempt in his eyes. "You had him and you let him go. Now it's up to the State Troopers to capture him again. We've checked on their arrangements and he'll never be able to break through their cordon. Besides, where would you get anyone to make up your posse? There isn't a man in Galeton who isn't shut up behind locked doors and barred windows, afraid even to look outside for fear of being blinded or having his throat sliced."

"It's the children that are the worst," Cantell quavered. "The little hungry children."

"They're sending a train from Hartford," Carter said, "with food. I told you I had wired there an hour ago."

"How," Raunt queried softly, "are you going to get it distributed when it does come? Who's going to drive the trucks?"

The peace-officer threw his gnarled hands wide. "I don't know. I don't. . . ."

The diminishing roar of a car outside, the squeal of brakes, cut him off. The three men in the lobby turned, slowly, fearfully to the door. There was the thump of a hesitant football outside it. The knob turned, but the lock held.

There was a revolver in the sheriff's hand as he leaned his head against the window glass. "It's—it's your chauffeur," he grunted. "It's George."

Henry Raunt beat him to the door. George stumbled in, his hat gone, dried blood matting his hair, streaking his temple and his cheek. Carter caught at him, helped him to a chair.

Raunt bolted the door and wheeled to his servant. "Well," he rasped. "Out with it. What happened?"

George lifted his head. "Right outside town," he said heavily, "he made me drive into the woods, in among the trees. I saw him jump up, all of a sudden and then he clouted me across the head. I went out like a light, come to about twenty minutes ago. This was nearer than the house so I drove back here. There wasn't nobody—on the road or on Main Street."

"No," his employer said, leaning over him. "Have you any idea of where he might have gone? Did you look around for tracks?"

"I looked," the man answered painfully, "but the dead leaves was too thick. I—I found an envelope on the floor of the car, but it was empty and it didn't have no writing on it."

"An envelope? Where is it?"

"In my—side pocket," George moved his hand to get it out, but Raunt's reached the pocket first and came away with a blank envelope that had been torn open, and another paper, folded.

"What's this?" he demanded, starting to open the latter.

The chauffeur stared at it glassily. "I—I don't know. I didn't know anything else was in there, but I was so dazed. . . ."

"I'll be damned!" Raunt exclaimed. "He's come out in the open. Look at this, you two." He held the paper up for Carter and Cantell to read.

The words on it were in pencil, crudely printed. They said:

DOOM LIES IN WAIT FOR ALL WHO LABOR FOR THE RAUNTS OR THEIR SPAWN. THEY GO OR WE REMAIN. THE THREE FROM HELL, BLINDNESS—HUNGER—DEATH.

"I WAS screwy, was I, when I said Woodruff is to be blamed for what's going on?" The tycoon's words thudded into a brittle silence. "What do you think now?"

"I—I can't believe it," the innkeeper stuttered. "Tim's a fine boy. He wouldn't . . ."

"Do you remember what his father said in the courtroom, sixteen years ago? Do you remember his swearing the boy to revenge on Stephen Wayne and on me? It's Stephen's daughter Woodruff means by 'their spawn'. Ann, the daughter of my sister, Elvira Wayne, who was Elvira Raunt. Ann and I are the owners of the Mill now and he's taking this way to ruin us, to get revenge for his father's fancied wrong."

"But there isn't any real proof Tim stuffed that note in George's pocket. Maybe someone else. . . ."

The desk telephone shrilled across Cantell's quavering defence of the young lawyer. The sheriff jabbed the receiver from its hook.

"Yes, this is Sheriff Carter. . . . Oh, Western Union." He sounded disappointed, but his next words were excited. "For Timothy Woodruff! Who's it from? What does it say?"

He listened a moment, the others watching him, tautly expectant. "I got it," he said at last. "Thank you." He dropped the receiver into its cradle and turned to his companions.

"That was a smart idea of yours, Raunt, to have me give orders for all wires for Woodruff to be 'phoned to me. One just came for him that ties him up plenty."

"If you ever lay hands on him," Raunt said dully. "What does the wire say?"

" 'Deduct ten thousand our offer to Henry Raunt. Sure he will listen to reason.' And it's signed, 'Hamlin.' "

The corners of the old millowner's mouth twitched. "You believe me now, don't you?" He stood poised, expression draining from his tired old face. "You believe me." He was staring at the paper in his hand. At length he said. "Come on, George. Come on."

"Where are you going?" the sheriff demanded.

"Home. To draw up a petition to the court to permit me to sell Ann's interest in the Raunt Mills as well as my own and have her sign it."

"But—but there isn't any need for that. When we catch Woodruff. . . ."

"*If* you catch him by morning and get him to surrender his confederates and they all confess to their scheme, it will be easy to tear up the petition. But if you don't do all that, all of it, I have no choice but to sell out. Do you think I'll ever get another soul to work in the mill unless they can be convinced beyond any doubt that the three who ravage Galeton are human and not fiends from the lowest pit of hell?"

He turned and shambled to the door, an aged and broken man. George stumbled to his feet and followed him.

"Maybe Tim Woodruff's taking advantage of what's happening," Elijah Cantell muttered, "but that Astaris *ain't* human, I'll bet my soul on that. No human could do what he's been doin'."

"What is he, then? What in God's name do you think he is?"

"I don't know. But I do know one thing. When he come in this noon his right arm bumped against the newel post of that staircase, and it wasn't the sound of flesh it made but the sound of something hard, like wood or metal. That left arm of his ain't natural."

"Well?"

"It was Shean Woodruff's right arm that was tore off in the mill. They made an artificial one for him but he died before he had a chance to wear it. He died, and they buried it with him in his grave."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Shadow in the Road

ANN WAYNE watched the dusk fade into darkness, and the darkness lighten again with the cold blue light of a full moon.

The moonlight silvered the tips of the trees on the slope below, and it lay passionless and secretive on the road that came up the hill from the valley. Ann still waited for her uncle, for Martha Hutton, dread growing within her.

What had happened, down there in Galeton? What was happening to keep both her loved ones from her? And Tim, would he come at ten?

Abruptly the girl's hand tightened on the sill, and she was leaning forward, her lip caught up under her teeth. Was that a shadow she had glimpsed on the road, or was someone moving upon it?

The black shape came a little nearer and Ann could make out the familiar outlines of Martha's bonnet, of her ill-fitted black waist and her pleated skirt.

The icy shell that had been about the girl's heart broke. She could not wait till Martha got here. She must run and meet her.

She wheeled and ran down the stairs, out of the house. Her flying feet touched the gravel of the path so lightly that hardly a pebble was disturbed. She went through the arched gateway in the old wall, and down the road.

A curving bank still hid the woman she ran to meet, but Ann saw the moving shadow in the trail, fuzzy edged as moonlight shadows always are, and called out to her.

"Martha!" she cried, that fresh young voice of hers throbbing with relief. "Martha! What's kept you? Why have you been so. . . ?" She choked off as she went around the curve and into the woman's arms.

It wasn't Martha! Even as those arms went around her, Ann saw that the woman who wore Martha's clothes was not her foster-mother. Bending back against the tightening band that held her, the girl stared into a white face framed by midnight hair, into inch-long lashes wide about eyes that were dilated and wholly mad, at colorless lips snarling away from needle-pointed teeth.

"Oh," Ann gasped, startled only, not yet frightened. "Pardon me. I thought you were my. . . ."

She couldn't get the rest out because her breast was crushed against the strange woman's breast, and the breath was crushed from her lungs.

The woman laughed, a strange high laugh that had no merriment in it but only terror, and then her head dipped and her stone-cold face was nuzzling into Ann's neck.

Sound blasted in the girl's ears, a hoarse shout, and something pounded against her. She heard a scream as the clamping arms were torn from her, and then she was sprawling in the dirt with the bestial sounds of a furious combat snarling and snorting over her.

"Not her!" she heard a hoarse voice gasp. "Oh God, not Ann,"

IT WAS Tim's voice and, rolling over, Ann saw him dishevelled, the clothes half-torn from him, straining straddle-legged above her. The woman's right wrist was clamped in his desperate grasp. Her fingers clutched a gleaming stiletto, a stiletto curious in that its blade was balanced on the other side of her fist by a bulbous swelling from which dangled a great empty bag whose fabric glinted oddly in the moonlight.

Woodruff's free fist exploded against the woman's jaw and she collapsed, a gutted mealsack, in the road.

"Ann," Tim grunted, squatting to his haunches beside the girl. "Ann!" His face was a mask graven out of granite, deeply etched by some terrific internal stress. His palm, almost brutal, shoved her chin up and to one side, exposing the neck against which the woman's icy flesh had nuzzled.

Breath hissed from between Woodruff's tight lips. "What was it you had to tell me?" he demanded. "What did you want me for?"

This was not how Ann had dreamed it would be when she told him of her great plan. She had pictured his arms around her and hers around him while she whispered it. He seemed a stranger now, staring down at her with burning eyes, a stranger somehow fearful. But she answered him.

"I won't take my half of the mill," she said, "since it makes so much difference to you. When I'm twenty next February and the estate is to be settled I'll refuse my inheritance. You'll arrange it. Then I'll be as poor as you and. . . ."

"Ann!" Some inexplicable spasm twisted Tim's countenance. "You love me as much as that. And I . . ."

"Look out," the girl shrieked. "Behind you! Tim! *Behind you!*"

The blind grey man had stepped out of the black woods, had spied them and halted, the moon-shadows blackening his vacant eye-sockets till they were stygian hell-pits.

His right arm shot up over his head as if in command. "She's for me . . ." he whispered. . . . Tim Woodruff exploded from his crouch in a low diving tackle across the road. His outflung arms clamped Astaris' knees, his shoulders twisted and the blind man pounded down.

Astaris' great head crunched against a tree bole—and split open! Its two halves spun away, two hollow spheres of *papier mache,* and Ann Wayne was staring at another face, the gross, heavy-jowled features of Hamlin, the man who had visited the Raunt mansion in the dusk and had promised to return.

"It was a mask," she gasped as Tim rose to his feet above the unconscious man from the revelation had stripped horror. "Look, far back in the eye-sockets there were lenses of dark glass and he could see through those."

"Yes," Woodruff said, his voice oddly unresonant. "It was a mask and he could see . . ." Motor roar, unnoticed till now, drowned his words, surging around the banked curve. He twisted to it, and Uncle Henry's touring car nosed around the bend, skidding to a halt.

"Got you," Henry Raunt grated. He was thrusting the short barrel of a gun under the windshield and its muzzle snouted pointblank at Woodruff. "Got you red-handed! Nice of you to leave this riot gun on the seat here. Put up your hands or I'll blast you and take pleasure in doing it!"

TIM'S arms went slowly above his head. "All right," he muttered. "Don't shoot." He seemed slumped in defeat, the stiffening out of him.

Raunt's glowering look went from the crumpled black heap of the woman to Astaris' limp body, and then to Ann. "This is the man you once thought you loved, my dear," he said to her. "Take a last look at him, and see him for what he really is. He made you love him so that he could throw you over, in revenge for what he thought was a wrong your father and I did to his. When I interfered with that he evolved a far worse scheme. He hired these people to terrorize our workers and ruin us. He hired them to blind our workers, and starve them and kill them, so that he could buy the Mill for a tenth what it's worth. But he's through now. He's going to the chair for the murders he bought, and the killers he hired will send him there."

"Will they, Raunt?" Tim Woodruff asked quietly. "Are you sure?" He was grey and worn and deathly weary. "Are you very sure?"

"To save their own rotten lives they will," the millowner answered.

"What do you mean?" Ann demanded, struggling erect. "What are you talking about, Uncle Henry? Who has been killed?"

"Kurt Weiss, and Mamie Haggerty and another girl down in the valley. And—and your beloved Martha Hutton. Killed horribly, the blood sucked from their bodies. . . ."

"The blood. . . ." rasped from the girl's throat. "How?"

The fact that it was Tim who answered her was a confession in itself. "Look at that stiletto in the road," he said, his accents lifeless. "It's hollow, like a hypodermic needle, and a tube runs through the hilt to that bulb, and then into the bag. She stabbed the blade into her victims' jugular and then pumped the blood out of them with that bulb, pumped it into the bag till their bodies were entirely dry."

"While you're in the mood," Raunt

snarled, "suppose you tell us how the man called Astaris blinded Ed Fulton and the others."

"There is a spray gun attached to his right arm, the nozzle just protruding above the tip of his cuff. When he threw his arm up the atomizer worked, blowing a fine powder into their eyes. I don't quite know its composition, but it may be something like belladonna and cantharides, and some cocaine to deaden the pain."

"And the food that was spoiled?"

"Simply enough. The dwarf had pockets under his scaly, skin-like tights in which were little bladders of mould and insects and worms. He broke them in the iceboxes and over the shelves of the Vega Street kitchens. Isn't that the way it was done, Henry Raunt?"

"So *you* say, Woodruff. You ought to know. I . . ."

"No, Raunt." Woodruff straightened suddenly, his voice no longer dull and muted, but electric. "The dwarf's scheme I guessed at, and those of the others I uncovered only just now, fighting with the woman and with Astaris. It was you who knew all the time what was being done, and how it was being done. It was you who hired them, Henry Raunt. Terror-monger. Murderer." His hand swept down to point an accusing finger at the old man. *"Thief!* I have the proof and . . ."

"Damn you," Raunt snarled. The knuckles of his trigger hand whitened with pressure.

The gun belched orange-red flame—into the hood of the car. In the final instant George had slashed down his employer's arm with a sudden fist! Woodruff leaped for the car's bonnet, threw himself over the windshield and catapulted down on Raunt before he could fire again. In an instant the mill owner was a prisoner in the powerful grip of the young attorney.

"Thanks George," Woodruff grunted. "I wondered if you were convinced I was right. That was a bad second there, when he started to pull the trigger and you still hadn't moved."

"I was watching his eyes, Mr. Woodruff, "the chauffeur responded, "because I didn't quite believe he could be what you said, even after he pulled a paper out of my pocket that I knew wasn't there till he put his hand in it. I thought maybe it was you who had slipped it there while you was talking to me in the woods. But when I saw his eyes get kind of scared when you said you had the proof, I knew you was right."

"Well," Tim sighed. "It worked out. Tie him up while I hold him so I can get to Ann. She's fainted, and she's lying right across that vampire woman and I hate to think of her being dirtied by the contact."

MIDNIGHT came to the staid living room of the old Raunt Mansion on the hill over Galeton before Sheriff Carter and the State Troopers he had summoned finally departed with Raunt and his accomplices. James shut the door softly on the two who remained behind.

"I first began to suspect your uncle," Tim Woodruff explained, "when, deciding that I could not stay any longer in Galeton after giving you up, I tried to telephone the Boston firm that had written me to make an offer for the mill. I thought I might secure some sort of position with them, you see. Information told me that there was no telephone listed under that name, and when I asked for any number at the address they had given me, I found out that it was one of those five dollar a month mailing addresses used by cheap mail order firms.

"I was thinking about that when the mob came to lynch Astaris and I saved him. He took off his masquerade, of course, while I held them up and walked calmly out when they left the hotel. It

was your uncle's sudden and uncalled for demand for my arrest that gave me the clue to his connection with what was happening.

"As a result of that accusation and my escape I had to skulk in the woods, afraid to show myself. But I saw enough of what was going on to work the whole thing out. I intended to slip away after dark and get in touch with the State Troopers, but I had to see you first, after that letter of yours. That's how I come to be on hand in time to save you from that woman, and from Astaris.

"They were both apparently coming to the house to get their pay from Raunt, or perhaps further instructions. He . . ."

"But why, Tim," Ann moaned. "Why should Uncle Henry have done all that. Was he mad?"

"Money-mad, perhaps, or simply jealous of his sole control of the family business. The time was approaching when he would have to turn over your share in the mill to you. That would have been all right, for you probably would have let him keep on managing it, except for your affair with me. He knew of our meetings no doubt, though he pretended not to, and if I married you I would be sure to insist on managing your share of the business as your father did.

"He decided to buy the plant for himself through that dummy concern of Hamlin, Shane and Hamlin, but the court would have to approve his sale of your share and would have insisted on a price too large for him to manage. By the campaign of terror he planned to run its value down so that he would be permitted to sell it for a ridiculously low price. He conducted the fake negotiations through me so that if anything happened I would be blamed for it, and he came too near succeeding in doing that for comfort."

The girl shuddered. "I still can't believe it, Tim. I can't believe that my Uncle Henry could be such a monster. Is there anyone in all the world I can trust after this?"

"Don't you," Tim Woodruff whispered, "think you can trust me? Don't you, Ann my dear?"

She looked at him, and her eyes were like stars in the wan pallor of her face. "Yes, Tim, of course. If you'll let me. Forever and forever."

"Forever, my darling." In the staid living room of the old Raunt Mansion there was silence, broken only by the soft breathing of two who were as one, so close they were in each others arms.

THE END

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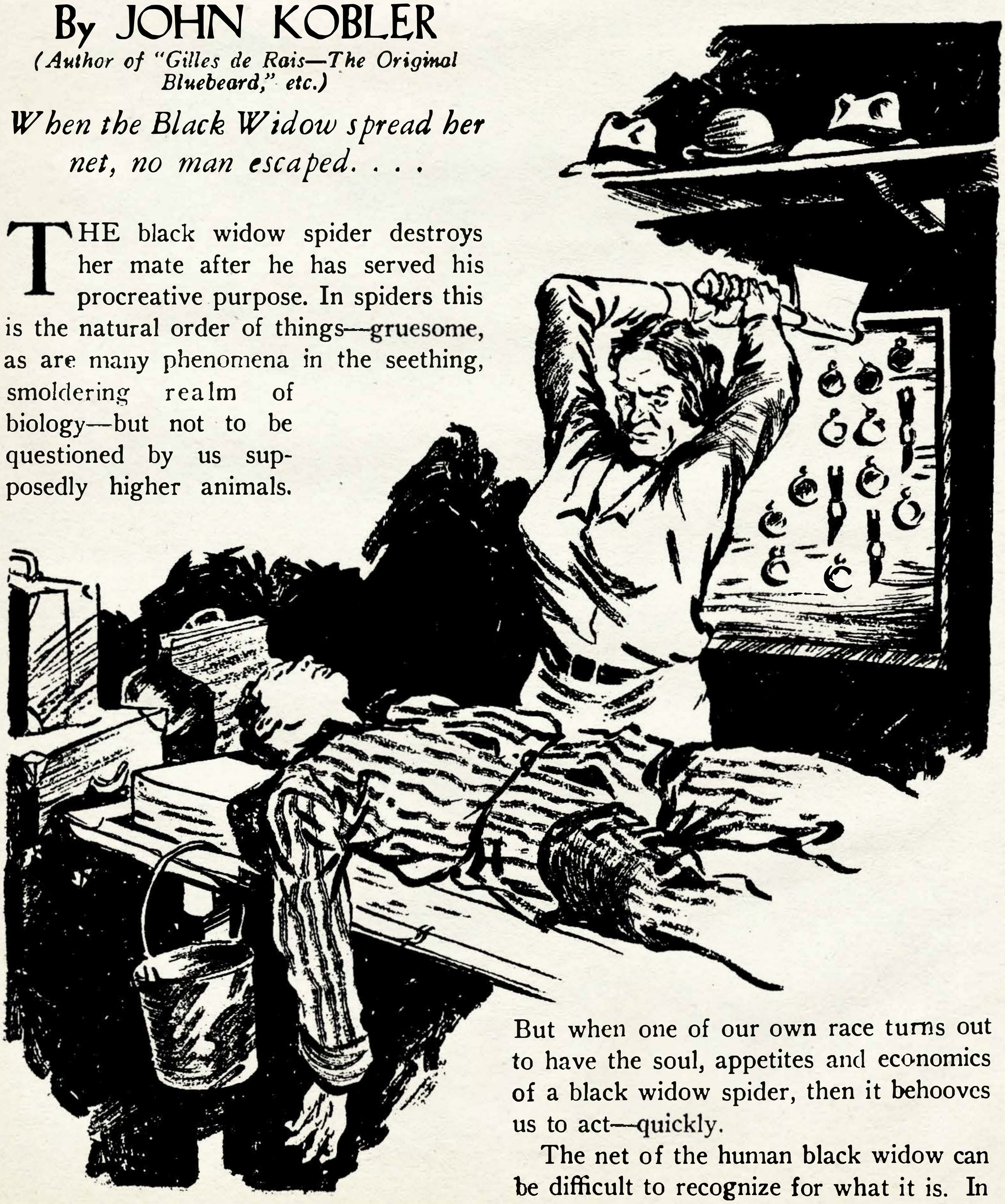
HISTORY'S GALLERY OF MONSTERS

No. 4: Belle Gunness—The "Black Widow" of Laporte.

By JOHN KOBLER

(Author of "Gilles de Rais—The Original Bluebeard," etc.)

When the Black Widow spread her net, no man escaped. . . .



THE black widow spider destroys her mate after he has served his procreative purpose. In spiders this is the natural order of things—gruesome, as are many phenomena in the seething, smoldering realm of biology—but not to be questioned by us supposedly higher animals.

But when one of our own race turns out to have the soul, appetites and economics of a black widow spider, then it behooves us to act—quickly.

The net of the human black widow can be difficult to recognize for what it is. In

the following advertisement, for instance, there is little to betray the actuality of a barbed and baited trap. It masquerades in the identity of one of those rather pathetic pleas for companionship—for love and, perhaps, even the romance that has been missed, somehow—which appear by the hundreds in newspapers and magazines all over the world:

> I am a lonely Norwegian woman with a kind and generous disposition. I live on a seventy-five acre farm just fifty miles from Chicago, with a cozy thirteen-room house, and badly need a good, kind husband to look after myself and small family of children. I have two girls and a boy of my own. The father died soon after his son was born, and the boy needs a father, one who will bring him up.
>
> I hire some help, but none of them I hire can be depended on, so that what I need is a husband. The man who comes I will entertain under my roof until we understand each other. I am competent and of a loving nature. I have plenty of money on which to live. The man I marry must have some money, too, in order that I may know he is not just a grafter and does not intend to marry me for my money. He must bring at least $1,000 in currency to show his good faith.

BETWEEN the years of 1900 and 1908 thousands of bachelors in places as far distant as Chicago, Illinois, and Oslo, Norway, read that matrimonial advertisement in their morning newspapers. Some dozen of those bachelors answered it. One of them lived to tell a startled world the nature of the "entertainment" which awaited the visitor to LaPorte, Indiana.

His name was Ray Lamphere. He was a cheap Casanova, preying on the lowest creatures of the underworld, a bigamist and a murderer. But it was largely through his testimony that the police were able to reconstruct the incredible saga of Norwegian Belle Gunness and her sinister farm where strange and terrible things were planted in the rich soil—things other than seeds.

This, then, is the story Lamphere told first at his trial, later in a more detailed version to a minister under the seal of the confessional. Circumstances eight years later unsealed the lips of the Rev. E. A. Schell,[1] pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Laporte and he was able to unburden himself of the ghastly knowledge which had been burning in his breast. . . .

The woman known as Belle Gunness was a big, raw-boned Scandinavian with the physical strength of two men and the morals of a jackal. She arrived in this country from her home in Norway hundreds of miles north of the Christiania *fjords* in the spring of 1886, spurred by two dominating impulses—the lust for gold and physical delight in the spectacle of pain and bloodshed.

Belle was the youngest of four children.[2] She was born of savage, semi-literate parents, farmers who wrested a wretched living from the hard, cold soil of northernmost Norway. Belle's innate morbid cravings were stimulated at an early age by the frequent sight of hogs butchered, by the gory hunt for the wolves and wild beasts of the Norseland, by dismal death-wakes and the blood-drenched sagas with which grisled old crones were wont to regale their grandchildren.

As a girl of seven her emotional life centered around a passion for a little gold coin which an English traveller had thrown her. This she had buried in a secret place in the forest and nightly went to dig up by the light of the moon, stroking it, gloating over it.

At fifteen she was a giant, blonde woman with muscles of steel. She could thrash any man her own age and often did. The women feared and respected her; the men loathed her, yet found themselves strangely drawn to her by

some physical fascination they could barely understand. They called her the Devil's Daughter.

What finally gave Belle's career its definite direction was something told her by Astrid Thorsen, a neighbor. Astrid had a cousin, Thora, whose husband had left for America some months previously and there died. It was at a wake in his memory that Astrid whispered, "Thora is the lucky one! Think of it, her man had himself insured with some American company and they have sent her a check for $5000!"

Five thousand dollars! The words fell pleasantly on the hearing of this savage, passionate girl who for years had hoarded a single gold coin. Five thousand dollars! Why, a man was worth more dead than alive.

Then and there Belle made up her mind. She decided to leave at once for that great, vast land of opportunity every one was talking about. There was nothing to hold her back. Her father was dead. She had neither lover nor husband. And so Belle scraped together every penny she could beg, borrow or steal and bought herself a steerage passage on the next boat out.

BELLE travelled by slow stages to Chicago, ripe for whatever adventure might befall her. But adventure at first was slow in presenting itself. Indeed, it was nine years before Belle found herself a husband, supporting herself in the meanwhile as a household drudge, cook, laundress, general maid-of-all-work.

Belle's first husband was a Norwegian worker called Olson. He already had a daughter by his first wife and Belle bore, him two more. In addition, she adopted a pitiful waif called Jennie. This gesture remains one of the most puzzling in Belle's entire career. Certainly, there was nothing either kindly or humane about her. One can only suppose that she took Jennie from the orphanage as a cheap method of getting a slavey and, incidentally, some one whom she could systematically torture.

Olson died without having insured his life, an omission which left Belle resentful and raging. However, she was still young and hopeful. There were other men. Belle was right. There *were* other men. There was, for example, old Mads Sorenson, a widower who badly needed a woman to take care of his house and a stepmother for his baby daughter Caroline. Belle was that woman. She moved into Mads' two-story home at 620 Alma Street with her brood and her cooking utensils.

This time Belle made no mistake. She began at once a campaign to persuade Mads to insure his life. At first the old fellow refused. He just didn't like the idea of gambling against death. But finally Belle made him realize that if anything happened to him she and the four girls, Jennie, Caroline, Myrtle and Lucy, would be left destitute. Mads surrendered and took out a sizeable policy with the Independent Order of Mutual Aid.

The stage was set and Belle set up methodically to commit her first and, in some respects, her most heartless crime. Her primitive mind reverted to poison, arsenic. But Belle was orderly in everything she did. She must make a tentative experiment first. She chose Mads' own daughter, little Caroline!

First she sewed the child a new white dress, smiling and fondling her as she worked. That dress was to be Caroline's shroud. The same evening before Mads got home Belle slipped into the child's soup a white powder. Then she set back and watched. Caroline greedily spooned up the soup. Within an hour she was writhing on the floor in wracking convulsions. She died that night in her father's arms. And Belle never flickered an eyelash. Her hard, yellowish face was

a mask, stony, impitiable, unremorseful.

Mads was heart-broken. He announced brokenly that he no longer had any interest in a life insurance, now that his daughter was gone. The policy was due to lapse in two days and he was not going to renew it.

Belle sidled up to him, ignoring his statement. "You are ill, Mads," she crooned. "This tragic thing has upset you. Go to bed for a few days. Let me take care of you."

And meekly the doomed man submitted. He slipped between the sheets, turned his haggard face to the wall and gave himself up to Belle's fiendish administrations. A white powder dissolved in a glass of water! Mads downed it at a gulp. Shortly afterwards he, too, was straining against the bedpost in an agony of intestinal spasms.

Belle observed her handiwork with satisfaction, smiled her slow, inscrutable smile and dashed out of the house. She ran for a doctor. "This is awful, awful!" she wailed. "My poor Mads is dying!"

The statement was not entirely accurate. Mads was already dead, lying stiff and contorted near the body of his little daughter. The doctor obligingly signed two death certificates. Caroline, it seems, had died of ptomaine, Mads of fatty degeneration of the heart. A few weeks later the Independent Order of Mutual Aid sent Belle a check for the sum of $8000.

THERE followed, however, an episode which gave Belle a nasty moment. The neighbors had never liked this dour, fierce-looking woman. Now, they began to gossip. It was strange that a man of Mads' years and strength should die so suddenly. The gossip reached Mads' brother, Frank. He was all for having a chemical analysis of Mads' internal organs made. But the officials refused to support him, and as it would have cost him $300 Frank finally abandoned the idea.

Belle was safe. True, the neighbors continued to gossip, but this was easily repaired by simply moving away. She had never like Chicago anyway. So Belle traded her two-story house on Alma Street for the place which was ever after to be associated in horror and fear with her name—the farm near Laporte, Indiana.

Belle was now sufficiently experienced to launch her career of bloodshed and plunder in earnest. She began by advertising in the Norwegian and American-Norwegian newspapers for a husband. Luck was with her. To the sprawling, lonely farmstead one morning came Peter Gunness, a Minneapolis workman. Peter was penniless, ill, and the father of two small children, but Belle saw possibilities in him. She agreed to marry him and take care of his offspring should he die, if, on the other hand, Peter would insure his life in her favor as soon as he could pass a medical examination.

Thus, for the first and only time in her life Belle devoted her energies to making a man well and happy instead of killing him. It was like fattening a hog for slaughter. Under Belle's care Peter soon recovered his health, but he failed to insure his life.

"I shall live for many years," he told the inwardly raging Belle. "You will have no need of insurance."

But Belle thought differently. Clearly Peter must be made to see the error of his ways. Belle decided to bear him a child in the hope that parental pride might awaken him to a sense of duty. It worked. Peter, proud as punch of the new baby, Philip, promptly took out a large policy for which Belle gladly paid.

The hog was fattened and willing. Belle sharpened her claws. The slavey Jennie led the numerous children off to their beds.

IT WAS Jennie who was to feel the full impact of horror. The sun rose clear and bright next morning. Jennie, lying in bed, heard the tramp of feet. That would be Belle and Peter going into the kitchen for breakfast. She jumped out of bed, trembling lest Belle whip her for oversleeping. Of all the odd members of the Gunness household Jennie was the most pitiful. She was a pale, scary-eyed child of twelve, completely under the domination of Belle, half-sensing the woman's sinister purposes and as fascinated by her as a rabbit is by a snake.

As Jennie was dressing her spine suddenly froze. A sharp scream of agony came to her from the kitchen. Then a dull thud as of a falling body. Half-dressed Jennie rushed out of the room, pattered down the stairs and entered the kitchen. What she saw made her suddenly sick and faint. Belle was standing in the center of the room, her upraised right arm gripping a huge, gleaming meat-cleaver from which dripped in slow, maddening rythm gouts of fresh blood. They dripped and fell on the ashen face of the man lying on the floor. Peter Gunness was dead. A wide gash had slit his head in two and a mess of gore and mashed brain oozed out onto the shiny linoleum.

For a moment Jennie was paralyzed with horror as much by the fixed, ghoulish glare in Belle's terrible eyes as by the bloody horror staining the floor. Then, as the situation penetrated fully into her childish mind, a high, long, piercing scream burst from her throat.

Belle remained immovable, expressionless. At last she said, "Don't stand there doing nothing, Jennie. Have Bill go for a doctor. Peter was bending near the shelf when the meat cleaver fell off and hit him. Maybe he's not dead."

But even Jennie could see that Peter was as dead as a poled ox. What Jennie suspected, what she knew she dared not say. Yet her eyes accused the monster of LaPorte, and Belle saw that accusation.

Everything went off smoothly for Belle. To be sure Lemuel Darrow, Laporte's Mayor, had some misgivings and declared that Belle Gunness should be investigated. But the woman had the Devil's luck. At the inquest the coroner accepted her story and Peter's death was officially viewed as accidental.

Soon after Belle marched down to the local bank with the insurance company's check for $3,500 and demanded payment in gold. Together with the gold coin she had saved from youth she placed this money in the little black treasure box and put it away in a locked room, which was soon to become a chamber of horrors.

THERE now entered into Belle's life a character as sinister and as dangerous as herself. This was a weird, shrivelled and hideous voodoo-woman, known to the superstitious farmers of LaPorte as Black Liz. She lived, hermit-like, in a filthy, gimcrack hut deep in the woods and subsisted by telling fortunes, selling love-philtres and, some said, strong poison. Little did Belle realize when she first sought out Black Liz that she was sowing the seeds of her own destruction. But that was still sometime off. . . .

They found much in common, the giant, thick-torsoed Scandinavian monster with the mind of a savage, and the black, witch-like, subtle Voodoo-priestess. Bell, as superstitious as any African native, had gone to Black Liz to learn the future. What husbands would be hers in the future? What riches would she amass? And how was she to do it?

But Belle didn't realize how very subtle Black Liz was. The Negress knew and understood the dark sides of human nature. Murder and vice were no mysteries to her, and Belle had been in her hut scarcely half an hour when she divined

the monster's true purpose. And in that purpose she saw an opportunity to line her own purse. Like some malevolent human spider she spun a web around Belle, whispering strange, dark secrets to her, pointing the way to trap and murder more and more men—and then she blackmailed her.

Over a period of years Belle accepted on the one hand Black Liz's venomous advice, and on the other paid her regularly sums of hush-money. She had no choice, and as it worked out it was a profitable arrangement for Belle. Of the two women it is difficult to determine who was guiltier, who more deeply steeped in bloody sin.

Belle advertised. There followed a long procession of men, derelicts and tramps, some of them criminals, themselves, who hoped to mulct the supposedly lonely widow, men who came to the farm near LaPorte and were seen no more. Legends sprang up around that ghastly murder-farm. Nothing could be proved, yet the local farmers spoke in terrified whispers of sudden screams rending the still night, of groans and maniacal laughter. . . . They avoided Belle and her farm. It was the abode of the Devil and Belle was the Devil's Daughter.

For the child Jennie, life was an eternal nightmare. Half-maddened by what she saw and heard, terrified by the piercing eye of her foster-mother, she passed her days cowering in corners, her nights trembling under the sheets, trying to blot out the sounds of pain and terror that issued from the "guest room."

The first prospective husband to answer Belle's matrimonial ad after Peter's death was a handsome, twenty-five-year-old lad called Olaf Limboe. Olaf's only fault appears to have been laziness. He took one look at the Gunness farm and decided he would like to remain as the husband of the husky chatelaine.

"You know my condition," Belle told him. "You must put up $1,000 as a guarantee of good faith."

"I have it," replied the gullible Olaf and handed over a sheaf of crisp, new bills to the Widow Gunness.

He was then shown to his bedroom, adjoining Belle's storeroom where reposed the little black box, the clothes and jewelry, the belongings of Belle's previous victims.

Belle had learned her lesson well from Black Liz. That night when the house was still as death she went to work. She stole into Olaf's room. The lad was snoring loudly, blissfully unconscious that the wings of the Angel of Death were beating over his head. In her right hand Belle clutched a cloth moist with chloroform. She approached the head of the bed, stood poised a moment by Olaf's head, then with a swift movement slapped the cloth to his mouth. Olaf struggled a brief moment, but Belle's steel-like arms pinned him to the bed helpless. In another moment he was still. Belle flung open the window to let the fumes of chloroform escape, then she lugged Olaf into the adjoining storeroom.

There an array of sharp knives, of cleavers and skillets lay neatly arranged on a slab of wood. Belle placed Olaf on the slab and, seizing the longest, sharpest knife, drew it sharply across his throat. The blood spurted up to the ceiling, splashing over the mounds of old rags and linen hanging on pegs from the wall. Then she carved up the body in small, manageable segments, letting the blood run off into pails beneath the slab. The work occupied her about an hour. She worked in silence, never flinching, her mask-like face cracked with a smile of unholy pleasure, her eyes gleaming with the lust for blood.

At last the thing was done. She stuffed the bleeding members into a gunny-sack, slung it over her shoulder and stole out of the house in the little garden at the

back. She neither knew nor cared that Jennie's frightened eyes were watching her from the top of the staircase.

With a spade Belle dug a shallow grave, tossed the gunny-sack into it and piled on the earth until it was flush again with the ground. No mark remained, no tell-tale mound, to betray the destiny of Olaf Limboe, the lazy traveller from nowhere. Belle returned to the storeroom, tidied up the bloody mess, hung Olaf's belongings, his watch and knife, in their allotted place, put the coins found in his pockets in the little treasure black box and went to bed. She slept soundly.

IN THE morning Belle told Jennie that Olaf had been called away suddenly to Norway to visit a grandmother who was dying.

It was about this time that Peter Gunness's youngest child, one of the children whom Belle had sworn to care for, died of a strange illness. Her body was shipped to Chicago to be buried near Austin. The other Gunness child, Swanhilde, was claimed by distant relatives of the dead man and saved from Belle's clutches. That left on the farm Jennie, the baby Philip and the two girls Myrtle and Lucy.

The succession of men who came to the farm—now called with grim humor by the increasingly suspicious neighbors "Laporte of Missing Men"— was endless. It is not known the exact number of men Bell chloroformed and hacked to death in the night, but at least fourteen were "planted" in the weedy little garden behind the red-brick farmhouse. There was Herman Konitzer, Olaf Jensen, Charles Neiburg, Charles Ermond, George Perry, Wiley Buntain. . . . Each came and each left his addition to Belle's museum.

That museum had begun to exercise an irresistible and fatal fascination over the terror-ridden Jennie. She seemed drawn as by a magnet to the locked storeroom where lay the evidence of Belle's murders. When no one was looking she would, with trembling fingers, try the doorknob and, this failing, she would glue her eyes to the keyhole. But the keyhole was stopped up with putty.

At last, unable to stifle her morbid curiosity any longer, Jennie procured a hair-pin and prepared to dislodge the putty. She was engaged in this task when a low exclamation behind her set her heart pounding with terror. She turned around to face Belle, towering over her, an expression of fiendish glee on her face.

"You want to see what's in there?" Belle asked.

Jennie could not speak with the fear that was strangling her. Belle thrust a key into the lock and flung wide the door. For a brief instant Jennie got a glimpse of the secret chamber. She saw watches and charms dangling from hooks in the walls, suitcases and bundles, portions of men's clothes spattered with blood, and on a shelf the little black treasure-box.

"There now," said Belle, "you've seen it." She locked the door and walked quietly away.

Jennie did not know what to think. What did it all mean? Had her imagination been playing tricks with her? Was there perhaps an innocent explanation of the whole haunting business? Belle had not seemed at all angry.

That night Jennie's amazement increased when Belle announced that it was time she received some schooling. She had arranged for her to attend a school in California and Jennie was to leave in the morning. The child was overjoyed. To get away from that place of death and terror! To be free and happy like other children!

Belle let it be known throughout the community that she was sending Jennie away to school. She had ostentatiously bought $60 dollars worth of new dresses for her. Jennie's eyes went wide with

pleasure as Belle gave them to her.

"Oh, and by the way, Jennie," Belle said, "there's something I want to show you before you go."

She lead the way down the long, dark corridor which ended at the storeroom. Jennie felt herself suddenly go weak with apprehension. Why did Belle want her to go in there? The child shook herself mentally. No, she must not imagine those terrible things any more. Belle meant her no harm. Why, she was sending her away to school!

Mastering her fear Jennie followed Belle over the threshold. The woman closed the door behind them. Then she pointed to something on the table, a piece of jewelry. Jennie advanced to the center of the room and bent down to examine it. In an instant Belle was behind, brandishing a cleaver. Jennie turned in time to see the weapon descending. She saw in a flash Belle's drooling blood-lust, a maniacal gleam in her eye. Then the cleaver descended slashing through her skull and Jennie slumped to the floor.

That night there was an addition to the museum. Beside the rows of men's clothing there hung a girl's white dress.

There remained now only Philip and Myrtle and Lucy. And they were too young to ask awkward questions.

AT LAST Belle was alone. Her nightmarish secrets were safe with Black Liz. She paid the voodoo-witch enough to keep them.

So that when John Moe, of Elbow Lake, Wisconsin, presented himself at the farm with $1,000 in his billfold, Belle was ready for him. John was short, a gaudy dresser, conceited and a would-be Don Juan. In addition to his $1,000 he carried a big silver watch on a silver chain and an array of fancy and expensive clothes. John was allowed several weeks of life. Then around Christmas time Belle stole into his room, plastered his mouth with a chloroform-soaked cloth and sliced his body to bits.

John's successor was one Ole Budsberg of Iola, Wisconsin. Ole was a widower, aged sixty. He was a good worker, honest, square. But he was lonely. Belle's advertisement had touched a sentimental chord in him. He pictured in happy colors life on a farm with a warm-hearted woman of his own country. And accordingly he came a-courting after the Widow Gunness.

When Ole's sons, some months later, wrote to Belle, asking her what had become of their father, she allayed their suspicions by explaining that he had received a more attractive offer and left her for California. Actually poor old Ole had gone a few feet in the direction opposite to California's—but no further than Belle's garden.

So far all of Belle's monstrous schemes had been attended by almost miraculous luck. She was, indeed, the Devil's favorite daughter. But she had reckoned without Black Lis. The hideous old witch had larger ideas than collecting a few dollars in hush-money from Belle every now and then. In fact, she had an idea that Belle was now ripe for plucking, that her entire fortune might be diverted into Black Liz's treasury if she played her cards cleverly.

And so while Belle was congratulating herself on the success of her career, Black Liz was conferring in the privacy of her forest hut with the man known as Ray Lamphere. Lamphere was not handsome, but he belonged to that criminal type which exercises a strange power over women of Belle's nature. He knew them, understood them, had a flair for mastering and dominating them. Lamphere suited Black Liz's plans exactly. And without a moment's hesitation she told him everything she knew about the infamous murderess, the number of her victims, how she had killed them, how

much money she had got out of it. Lamphere listened with lively interest.

"Now, then," croaked Black Liz, "why don't you answer one of them ads yourself? Get Belle to really care for you. Then you and me might work something out together."

Lamphere nodded. "Sounds interesting. Very interesting."

IT WAS on June 26th, 1907 that Ray came to Belle's farm, ostensibly in answer to her latest ad. Almost the moment she saw him a curious thing happened to Belle. Love had been a stranger to her. But she suddenly sensed that she and this dynamic stranger might understand each other. For the first time in her life Belle became infatuated with a man. Not that she lost all sense of practicality. She had no idea of sparing him forever, but she would live as his sweetheart for a time, then, as her love cooled—if it did cool—she would butcher him as she had the others.

She began by offering him a profitable job as the manager of her farm. This Lamphere accepted. Then she suggested that he marry her and insure his life in her favor. And this Lamphere coolly refused to do.

Belle was taken aback. Obviously the man was no gullible hick. She could not bend him to her will as she could the others. Indeed, as time went on she realized that he seemed to be dominating her. This would never do.

Then came the hardest blow. Lamphere let slip the fact that he shared with Black Liz complete knowledge of Belle's infamy. The man was more than stubborn. He was dangerous, terribly dangerous. With this knowledge Belle's infatuation faded. At least she was rid of that burden. Next she must destroy him, profit or no profit.

But Lamphere seemed to read her mind. And he was not to be trapped. On the contrary he was just as intent to destroy her. A tense, desperate relationship sprang up between them. Each plotted to destroy the other. Each tried to guard his own life. They were like a snake and a mongoose jockeying for position before one or the other struck.

Lamphere locked his door every night. He had bored holes in various parts of the house through which he could observe Belle's movements. It was a situation at once grotesque and horrible. Two human monsters, waiting to devour each other. As the weeks passed Belle, with growing panic, began to realize she had met her master. She was losing her grip. She was being defeated, humbled. Yet she did nothing. And Lamphere did nothing. They merely sat around and watched each other, while far off Black Liz licked her chops, anticipating the kill.

On the night of January 4th, 1908 Lamphere came home from a long trip and beheld chatting in the parlor of the farmhouse Belle and an elderly man of enormous girth. A hideous man with jutting cheekbones and the flat nose of an ape.

Belle introduced him as Andrew Helgelein, of South Dakota. Lamphere eyed him coldly. He knew, of course, that Helgelein had answered Belle's usual matrimonial ad and was probably marked down for slaughter. Lamphere didn't care. Let the fellow look out for himself. It would be that much more money for himself and Black Liz when they took over the place from Belle.

But what Lamphere did not know was that Helgelein was himself a criminal who had served time in Michigan State Penitentiary for arson and larceny, that he had hopes of swindling Belle, and that he had no objections to doing a little job of murder now and then himself.

A few days after Helgelein's arrival, however, Lamphere chanced to overhear a conversation between the newcomer and

Belle and saw at once that he had another problem on his hands. Belle was saying,

"He's terribly jealous of your attentions to me. He wants to marry me so he can get my farm and money. I'm afraid he's going to make trouble for us. I'd like to give him a dose of poison. How much do you think I'd need?"

Helgelein, not at all shocked by Belle's callousness, replied thoughtfully, "I can't tell. Why not try it on a dog?"

WHEN that same night Lamphere, spying on the conspirators, saw them walking among the graves in the garden, acting as though they were trying to find a vacant spot for his own body, he decided it was time to escape. He could cope with Belle alone, but not with Belle and a killer weighing 250 pounds. So Lamphere packed his clothes, slipped out of a back window and took refuge with Black Liz.

His decision had an unfortunate effect on Helgelein. He had made the mistake of drawing $2,900 out of his bank and depositing it at a Laporte bank in Belle's name. With Lamphere gone Belle decided to make the most of a doubtful situation and accordingly the would-be murderer himself got the chloroform, the axe and the garden burial.

Meanwhile, Black Liz and Lamphere, who had no doubts as to what had happened to Helgelein, prepared to blackmail Belle. But when Lamphere went foraging in the neighborhood of the farm he obtained a piece of news which distressed him. Belle was leaving! She was getting her possessions together and abandoning her murder-farm where she could be beyond the clutches of the blackmailers forever.

Lamphere hurried back to Black Liz and relayed this information. They had a hurried conference and reached a decision. It was time, it was high time to pluck the bird. Towards midnight—it was a moonless night—the white criminal and the Voodoo woman approached the farmstead. Lamphere concealed beneath his coat an axe and a bottle of chloroform. He had learned a few tricks from Belle Gunness and Black Liz.

The weird pair let themselves into the darkened farmhouse with a key which Belle had given Lamphere. They took off their shoes and crept upstairs. In the bedroom Belle and her children were asleep. Swiftly Lamphere approached the bed, covered Belle's face with a pad saturated with chloroform. She woke up. There was a short, ghastly struggle. Belle screamed, flailed the air with her arms, bit and clawed. But she was no match for Lamphere and the black woman. They held her down until her writhing limbs writhed no more. Lamphere saw the boy, Philip, sleeping nearby. He chloroformed him, too, holding the pad over his nostrils until he was dead. Next the two girls, sleeping in each others arms, were murdered.

With every occupant of the house dead or unconscious Lamphere and Black Liz broke into the storeroom and seized everything of value they could lay their hands on. But here a disappointment awaited them. The black box, the existence of which they knew so well, was not to be found. They ransacked the house from cellar to attic. It was not discoverable. And there were at least $50,000 in that box.

There was no help for it. They dared not tarry any longer. Black Liz had a certain gruesome ceremony to perform. The gnarled old witch returned to Belle's room, carrying the axe. She swung it high and hard, severing the monster's neck with one blow. Then she dabbled her fingers in the blood in the voodoo belief that Belle's strength would pass into her own ageing body. This done, she thrust the gory head under her shawl and joined Lamphere in the hall.

The man was busy preparing to destroy all traces of the quadruple murder. From a five-gallon can he was pouring oil all over the house, on the rugs, the wallpaper, the wooden furniture. He signed to Black Liz to start running. She flung open the door and dashed out into the night. Lamphere lit a match and dropped it on the oil-soaked furniture, following the Voodoo-woman immediately after.

MEANWHILE Black Liz, hugging Belle's severed head to her breast, and Lamphere, his pockets stuffed with what valuables he had been able to find, were running from their scene of their crime. They did not run quite fast enough. A farmer drawn to the burning ruins glimpsed them both just as they vanished around a bend in the road. This was to be remembered a few days later when the charred remains of Belle and her brood were recovered.

But first stranger horrors were revealed to the citizens of Laporte. It so happened that the morning after the fire a tall stranger from the northwest got off the train at Laporte and asked where he might find his brother, Andrew Helgelein. He introduced himself as Asle Helgelein and produced a letter written him a few weeks earlier by Belle. This was the letter in which the dead monster had declared that Andrew had vanished, that she was completely baffled by his disappearance and would Asle sell his farm and come out to Laporte to help her find him. Asle was no fool and the glib letter had stirred his suspicions.

Unfortunately Asle had arrived too late. Belle was dead. Her house was in ruins.

Still Asle retained the hope that Andrew might have left the house before the fire. Spurred on by that hope he tramped out to the McClung Road where the gutted farmhouse was located and began grubbing among the ruins for some lead to help him, he knew not what.

Presently he found something which made him gasp. A man's gold watch. It was lying in the ruins together with a dozen or more watches like it. Asle recognized it at once. It was Andrew's watch. And he knew Andrew would never have let it out of his possession alive.

Feverishly Asle fetched the sheriff and cried to him excitedly that he had proof of Andrew's murder. The sheriff eyed him glumly, scratched his head. But Asle was not to be put off. He ordered a farm boy to fetch him a spade. With his own hands Asle started digging in and around what had been Belle Gunness's well-ordered orchard.

Soon his spade struck something hard. He stooped down and dragged from the clinging earth a gunny sack, bulging with hard and bulky objects. Asle, around whom the police as well as a throng of goggling neighbors had gathered, shook out the sack. There tumbled to the ground with a dismal clatter a great quantity of human bones—and a staring skull. A man's skull. Asle had found his brother.

It was not all Asle found. Five feet away from the hole he had just excavated his spade brought to light more human remains. This time a mutilated skeleton, the body of pitiful, terror-haunted, little Jennie Olson who had never gone to school in California as the neighbors thought. It was only the beginning. Another hole yielded three skeletons.

Before that mournful day was done fourteen skeletons were dug up. In the hands of one was clutched a handful of woman's hair, Belle's hair, proof that at least one of her victims had put up a fearful struggle before he succumbed to chloroform and the ax.

The dramas enacted in that frightful garden during the next days were unparalleled in the annals of crime. Hour after hour old women and youth, long-

lost relatives, friends arrived in Laporte fearing to recognize in the disinterred bones the lineaments of a man who had disappeared in answer to a matrimonial advertisement. Hour after hour a moan of anguish would rise skyward as such a recognition came.

And now everything that had been imagined and guessed and suspected about Belle Gunness was remembered by the simple farmer-folk of Laporte. Bit by bit fragments of the whole gory tale was revealed. Still a pall of mystery lay over it.

IT WAS Ray Lamphere who held the key to that mystery. The farmer who had seen him running from the burning farmstead (Black Liz was not identified) reported to the police. Lamphere was arrested, charged and tried.

He cried out to his captors: "I had to do it! If I hadn't killed her she would have killed me. I knew too much. The woman was a murderess. She killed men with as little compunction as you or I would kill a rabbit. She would have killed me next."[4]

Lamphere revealed much of what he had learned about Belle Gunness before and during his trial. But not everything. It was for the ears of the Rev. Mr. Schell[5] that the story of Lamphere's grisly pact with the voodoo-woman, Black Liz, was reserved. Under the seal of confessional Lamphere told the priest everything. Only after Lamphere died in prison eight years later did Mr. Schell feel at liberty to diviluge what he had heard.

And meanwhile Black Liz herself had died, died in circumstances which gave the final fillip of horror to the appalling history of Belle Gunness. There remained one mystery which troubled the authorities for many years. What had become of Belle's head? Only the body had been found. Nowhere among the ruins had there been a vestige of that massive, big-boned cranium.

On May 15th, 1916 that question was dramatically answered. In the woods near Laporte a shack mysteriously caught fire, was burned to cinders before help came. It was the shack of Black Liz. They found the old witch, lying on two mattresses, burned to a crisp. Between those two mattresses was the skull of a woman. In the light of what the Rev. Mr. Schell had divulged there was no doubt whose skull it was.

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[1] The revelations made by Mr. Schell were widely reported in AP dispatches to all leading contemporary newspapers.

[2] Belle Gunness's background and beginnings are given in Ione Quimby's exhaustive study of the case, included in her book, Murder for Love.

[3] New York Herald for May 3, 1908.

[4] Quoted C. L. McCluer Stevens in Famous Crimes and Criminals.

[5] Ione Quimby.

FURNACES OF THE

Year after year the roaring furnaces of the steel mills took their toll of death, of injury and blindness and destruction, until the town swarmed with maimed and crippled beings whose terrible casualties had changed them into a different species from the men around them. And then, at last, they turned—and those who had been their masters became their cringing, terror-blasted slaves. . . .

A Novelette of Horrible Revolt

DAMNED

By FRANCIS JAMES

(Author of "The Seven Arms of Terror," etc.)

MARGARET shivered, pressed closer against my arm. "Hell—they call it Little Hell!"

As we stood on the brow of the bluff, looking down where the Halstead Iron Works lay in the midnight gloom of the valley below, that wasn't hard to imagine. The dismal clank of machinery, the screams of the switch-engines on the sharp curves, the tongues of crimson light leaping from furnace doors—it seemed an earthly inferno where lost and damned souls struggled in torment.

And not merely because of the screamings and sobbings did they call it Little Hell. Every steel mill has its quota of unfortunate occurrences, men burned or caught and mangled in whirling machines. But Halstead had many more such cases than it should normally have had, ghastly catastrophies unparalleled in their hideous tortures.

Up and down the streets of the little village, they were never out of one's sight —misshapen and crippled forms of men whose arms or legs had been crushed in gears or trapped in spewing molten masses from a tapped cupola furnace.

Abnormal and sinister this was, as though in the Halstead mills some diabolical agency was at work, deliberately casting these workmen in front of the flames, human sacrifices to a malignant and breathing Moloch.

For weeks forebodings of growing dread had haunted me—fears that made me unwilling to have Margaret come here alone after dark and tonight had brought me to accompany her while she, secretary to the manager, Norman Halstead, went to her office to clean up some work in which she had got behind.

MARGARET stirred at my side. I turned and smiled down at her, vibratingly conscious in my whole being of the nearness of her warm figure and the red lips and little white chin that I had just been kissing.

Twenty-four hours before, she had promised to become my wife. I had been deliriously happy in that day of days—happy in spite of one shadow that darkened my rapture. I tried to forget that Margaret, after the moment when she had melted into my arms, had seemed inexplicably quiet, almost as though some hidden grief were weighing her down, as though she regretted her promise—so that I almost wondered if it had been my intensive wooing that had rushed her off her feet, rather than a deliberate and settled desire to become my wife.

That was but a vague and far-away haze over the brightness of my first hours of rapture—but a cloud that was destined to swell into black menace of horror that would sweep me to the verge of madness. . . .

"Let's go, Tom," she whispered. "I've got loads of work to do and I wish—"

Her voice broke in a sudden stark whisper of fear. She whirled to me. She didn't speak, but I saw her eyes, dilated, staring past me into the semi-gloom of the bluff-side.

Against the darkness of bank and trees was framed a huge blotch, a swart form without shape. A burst of flame from a chimney mouth drenched the night with blood. The light slid over the thing on the ground—slid over something.

The shape turned, a harsh, vulture-face snarled out of the darkness. A face—half of a face, for one side of the man's countenance had been swept clean from the grinning bones as though torn by the raking of giant hooks. And his bloated torso waddled on legs that had been cut off at the knees.

Revulsion stabbing me, I turned back to Margaret.

"It's only another one of those cripples out of the works," I muttered. "Some man who was caught in the steel. The place is full of them. They come back here at night to hang around, as though—"

"As though some horrible charm was drawing them back where they were hurt, back to hell!"

Margaret's whisper came through lips constricted and tense. I could feel her shuddering in my arms. In the shadows under the bushes, the cripple hobbled closer. He rattled a tin cup. Yet his single eye was fixed on us, not in appeal, but in a smouldering, malignant hate.

"I see them everywhere, in the streets, sitting on the curbstones, around the square!" Margaret's voice poured in a rush, tense-edged with hysteria. "Men without any legs, without arms, with only half of a face! And they are after me!"

Amazed, I held her off to look into her face.

"Nonsense!" I scowled. "What do you mean, following you?"

She nodded. "Yes. Always following

me and watching me. Looking through the windows into the office where I am at work, watching me in the restaurant, hanging around when I'm out in the village, dogging my steps on my way home. Trailing me everywhere, trying to touch me!"

She crept closer into my arms and at sight of the darkening terror in her eyes something of its eerie spell communicated itself to me. Perhaps she did have cause for her sudden outburst of fear at that thing behind us. Because there had been strange disappearances from the village. In the last few weeks, half a dozen girls had dropped out of sight. Where they had gone, nobody knew. Perhaps run away from home to seek a new life in the city. Or perhaps . . . .

The citizens of the little town looked at the growing swarm of cripples and shivered. They whispered that those half-human creatures were making away with the girls—taking them where and for what heinous purpose no one could guess.

I felt sweat of terror dampen my forehead. Those hideous things after Margaret? I pulled myself together, turned her away from that shape on the ground.

"Come on, let's get out of here," I heard myself muttering.

OVER stones and roots I steered Margaret down the short-cut path that wound along the slope of the bluff-side. I gloated in the steep and treacherous descent that gave me excuse to wrap my arm more tightly around her. She held my hand against her with her own fingers pressed over it.

Margaret wasn't what you would call pretty; she would never have taken a ribbon at a beauty show. But she had something that was a whole lot better than surface prettiness—vividness, charm. Personality is what they call it, I guess. She had straight-shooting blue eyes that seemed *alive* by themselves, fine-spun brown hair with a glint of red when the sun shone across it. She was a cute little trick. Her shoulder just fitted under my armpit when we walked side by side.

She sighed. She tilted her head back against my chin to look up at the full moon.

"One month, the next full moon, and you know where we will be?" she whispered. "On our vacation—together! If it were only tonight! If you and I were only miles away from this place! Miles and miles and miles—"

She shivered. She clutched my hand more tightly against her.

"Tom! Tom, no matter what I do, no matter what happens—don't ever leave me!" she almost sobbed.

I bent down and kissed her. "I'll never leave you," I promised.

WE came to level ground and started groping our way across the tangle of tracks and slag heaps toward the back door of the main office building. I was head chemist of the mills. My suite of rooms was right next to Margaret's.

We were down in the depths of the works now, pigmies in a world of gigantic forces unleashed—the deep, volcanic rumble of furnaces, the sky, hell-black with smoke-clouds that writhed and struggled like batting giants, gashed now and again by a tongue of flame like a raw wound.

A round, squat roof of soot-caked brick loomed against the background of fantastically whirling shapes. This was the small foundry where was carried on most of the experimental work on new-process steel in which the Halstead works specialized. We had to pass close by this to get around to the rear door of the main building.

My hand on her arm, I was steering Margaret over the mounds of rubble when suddenly I felt her check her advance. "Tom—what's that?" her voice stabbed breathless, tense.

I halted, stood trying to hear, and for an instant I wasn't sure. Above the high-toned clatter and ring of steel, the gargantuan purring of blowers, had come another sound, a shriller note. Was it the rasp of two metal surfaces in glancing collision, the squeal of one of the engines rounding a sharp curve—or the cry of a human soul from the depths of agony?

"Another accident," I muttered. "Some one broken or burned—"

Margaret's fingers bit at my arm.

"It wasn't an accident!' she husked. "That was a woman's voice!"

I felt my throat tighten. Yes, a girl's voice. . . . What was a woman doing at night, here in the works? What could have happened to wring out that shriek of utter torture?

"It came from in there," Margaret whispered. "That noise was there in the foundry—"

The cry had died away and Margaret was pulling me along. I had made a move to run over there, but she resisted with what seemed a queerly frantic vehemence. Neither of us spoke during the two or three minutes that it took us to travel the rest of the way to the main building. Suddenly there seemed something strange between us, an unspoken constraint. I felt myself oddly shaken.

I unlocked the back door and felt for the wall switch in the little hall. The single electric-light bulb at the top of the long flight of stairs winked out a yellow eye. I shoved the outer door shut behind me and started following her up the stairs.

With the click of that door latch I had felt relief. I forced myself to shut away the images of the terrors outside. Margaret and I were here alone, a peaceful and intimate two hours while I would sit and drink in her loveliness as she worked.

But the next moment I realized that we were not to be alone. For as we came to the landing at the top of the stairs, I saw that she had halted abruptly. She stood there staring down at a thin line of light under the door in front of us, which led into the offices.

I said: "Some one else with night work to do. Probably Robbins." Robbins was head bookkeeper. "Our tough luck—"

My key ready, I stepped toward the door. And then for the second time in ten minutes I had a shock of surprise. For Margaret slid in front of me. With both hands on my shoulders she kept me away.

"I—thanks for coming over with me, Tom, dear—and goodnight," she murmured breathlessly. Her voice was thin and tight; her lips had gone white. "I—please, Tom. I've got so much to do, please go now—"

"Go now?" I echoed, amazed. "But I'm going to stay. I'm going to wait for you—"

"No, I've changed my mind." Nervously she urged me back toward the stairs. "I don't want you to. I can work faster if you're not here. I'll see you tomorrow—"

I bit my lip. Comprehension had been slow to dawn on me, but when it did, its grim significance came with a rush. I gripped her arm. With my other hand I lifted her chin to force her to look into my eyes.

"Margaret!" Ruthlessly I ground out my demand. "What is this? Who is in that room that you don't want me to see?"

She didn't answer. For a long instant we stood there, gazing at one another, while silence closed in. A horrible silence of suspicion, silence scratched and jangled by the grinding and squealing from the works, and against that garbed background the sibilant hiss of her breathing.

In the narrow passage I spun around, bringing her on the other side, next to the stairs, myself toward the door. I jerked out of her grip. My latch key glinted in the light.

I heard her gasp as I fitted it into the

lock. Her face thrust around in front of me, frozen, stark; a choked and sobbing moan broke from her lips.

"Tom, don't! In dear God's name, don't go into that room!" she panted.

CHAPTER TWO

The Thing in the Foundry

GRIMLY I elbowed her to one side, drove my key home, twisted it. I pushed at the door, sent it swinging inward without following it.

At my foot, the illuminated sector of floor slowly widened from a thread to a ribbon, from a ribbon to a wedge-shaped band and upon the yellow face of that band was the jog of a shadow—the outline of a giant, three-fingered hand pendant over the threshold like the hanging noose of a gibbet.

I flexed on my toes. Steel-tense, fists clenched to meet the attack of whatever in God's name was inside there, I beat the door wide, heard its soft thud as it bumped against something that stood hidden behind it, and went through the opening in a flying leap that carried me over the threshold and six feet into the clear on the other side.

Landing, I spun around, facing the thing that had been standing behind the door. That shape was a giant torso without any legs that propelled itself by swinging its swollen foulness between fisted hands propped crutch-like on the floor. With uncanny, horrible swiftness he rushed.

Gooseflesh spurted on me as I leaped away from the convusively thrashing sweep of those gorilla-long arms. My jump fell short. One of his hands gripped my ankle, tripping me. I went down hard, half stunned.

A scream raucous as a falcon's shriek rang in my ears. Through a spinning haze I saw the face of the legless man, vulpine, snagged teeth dripping spittle, snarl over me, and then his hands came flailing down.

The clasp of those cable-like muscles around my throat was the grip of a brace of pythons. I gagged like a strangled cat. Over by the door I heard Margaret's terror-hoarse scream. I sensed, rather than saw or heard, the swift onrush of another something behind me.

A figure loomed over my head. Only one leg this second man had; greasy make-shift crutches jacked him up under either arm. And on those crutches he hopped with the hellish agility of an ape.

He balanced himself on one of his wooden supports while with the steel-shod end of the other he jabbed at my face. I dodged and he lunged again, with the head of the crutch braced under his shoulder to drive the thrust into my brain.

Thanks to God, my feet were not pinioned. Wildly, I kicked. My outlash tripped the one-legged man. He spun around, off balance. Arms thrashing, he came crashing on top of me.

His weight broke the grip of the hands at my throat. The Humpty-Dumpty man rolled clumsily, spun around, pawing air. I lunged like a catamount, kicked myself clear of those two screeching forms and scrambled up to my feet.

All compunction gone, I drew back my foot and sent it crashing into the legless one's torso. I heard the snick of caving ribs. The brute yelled, slumped on his face and lay, retching.

I kicked the other one's crutches into a corner. I wheeled around to face Margaret who stood half fainting, braced with her two hands against the jambs of the door.

I twisted my arm around her, got her downstairs and outside. I drew her off out of sight of that office door and then halted.

"Margaret, what is this?" I gasped. "You knew those two cripples were in there!"

She nodded. Eyes downcast, she wouldn't meet my gaze.

"Yes—not before. But when I saw the light, then I knew they were there," she whispered.

"But—" Bewildered, I drew my hand over my eyes. "But you were afraid of that one on the bluff. And those two—you tried to send me away so that you could see them alone—"

I remembered something else, too, at that moment. Of late weeks, Margaret had gone frequently to the office, evenings, when I hadn't been with her. God, had she met those creatures there at those other times?

She gripped my arms. "Oh, I was afraid, horribly afraid! I didn't know if I—if they—if I would ever come out again. But I had to see them. They were going to tell me something, something terribly important."

"They were going to tell you something!" I shook my head to jolt the clots out of my brain. "Those things were going to tell *you*—"

She lifted her face to me then, quivering, piteous with tears. Her fingers slid up my arms, came to rest on my shoulders.

"Tom, please—you mustn't ask me!" she cried. "It is something that I can't tell, not even to you. If you love me, believe me and don't ask. I'm only doing—what I have to do."

Bewilderment of terror swam in my brain, but I didn't question her any more. I slid my arm about her and started to lead her across the yard. In the shadows, dark, twisted figures stood watching us.

A COUPLE of minutes took us back where we could see the dome of the small foundry like a great swart breast against the night's bosom of stars. I halted, suddenly transfixed. For that sound had come again, an inhuman wail that rose pitch by pitch to a pinnacle of agony. And now again I was convinced that it came from that building. No doubt about it.

I started running, threading my way between slag piles and pulling Margaret behind me. Through one of the small, smoke-grimed windows, I peered inside.

"No one is there except Hans," I said. "He is just going to tap a heat."

As I spoke, the dark figure that I could see moving around inside jabbed a long iron rod into the clay plug at the base of a small blast furnace and a river of molten iron spurted forth.

From the down-curving arc of liquid metal danced a shower of scintillating blobs, yellow, green, crimson—rainbow hues spattering in fiery curves like tiny sky rockets.

The tide of hellish light stabbed the shadow-clogged corners of the room, vibrated harshly against the form of the man who stood there.

On a squat, Caliban-like torso with hunched, misshapen shoulders was set, neckless, a huge, hair-matted head. The face might have been a lump of iron slag dragged from the waste-piles, so jaggedly knifed and scarred was it into ridges and furrows. Maniacal light flamed from his blood-shot little eyes.

Old Hans Muller was insane, crazed as a hatter from half a century of living with fire, of making wife and friend and companion out of the raging, hissing, killing stuff that seethed in the round-bellied wombs of his furnaces. A mad Vulcan, and the best iron expert, the cleverest inventor of new processes anywhere in the world.

That leaping tide from the furnace mouth cascaded down to fall into trenches scooped in the cinder floor of the foundry. Swiftly the bubbling rived raced from trench to trench, filling the grooves, till at last the whole pattern of the great three-barred cross lay there, a vibrating white in the gloom.

And midway of that long upright was a dark shadow—of something. Something

that twisted and writhed in convulsions—as though a human body had been thrown there to flounder for one brief instant before that frothing whiteness dissolved it, flesh and bone.

I muttered a curse. It was a mad, an unthinkable fancy.

"Did you see that?" I whispered to Margaret. "That shadow looked like a human being, a girl—"

At her sobbing moan I spun around. Against the murk her face was a cameo of chiseled ice. Her lips were writhing scarlet lines against its frozen pallor.

I stared at her. Her paroxysm of terror seemed unreasonable, unaccountable. For that sight, eerie and weird as it had been, was, after all, nothing but a seeming horror, a trick of the dancing light and the macabre shadows. Of course no one could really have been there on that molten steel.

To that murk-clouded window pane I bent my face. Hans had gone. The heat tapped, he had departed on some other job, for he was a busy man, night foreman of the entire works.

Some dread curiosity prompting me, I turned to Margaret. "Im going in there a minute," I muttered. I took a step and then halted, my gaze whipping around to her. For she had let out a cry, gagged and rasping with fear.

"No! No, Tom, you mustn't go in there!" Her hands gripped me, trying to pull me away. Her eyes were dilated, queerly dark.

I muttered something, I don't know what. I was fed up with mysteries. The next moment I was moving around toward the door, half carrying, half dragging her after me.

THE cavernous, smoke-filled building seemed alive with the roar of the furnace, labored breathing of a monstress pregnant with the churning offspring of steel in her firebrick loins.

My feet made thinly squealing sounds in the cinders as I started to move around. I took a couple of steps toward the triple-barred cross in the middle of the floor where, a short while before, my fancy had made me think that I saw the form of a human being writhing in torment. The crust had partly cooled now, had hardened to a dull red glow.

Shielding my eyes from the still fierce radiation, I slid closer. Behind, I heard Margaret's feet dragging over the cinders, and the thin, hissing rasp of her breathing.

I bent over the iron. For an instant, I stared. I whispered an oath while my skin rolled with cold shudderings in the torrid heat.

For out of that vibrating redness, something seemed to reach up toward me—beckoning—a human arm and hand, charred to coal blackness, twisted and writhing, the fingers claw-hooked.

Muttering crazily, I groped on the floor till I found an iron bar, a short furnace poker. I reached over and with its end I tapped that five-fingered claw. I listened for the hard ring, the metallic clanging that would tell me that it was just my imagination, a chance splashing of steel solidified in fantastic replica of a human member.

There wasn't any clanging echo. At the touch of the bar, that charred, cindery shape collapsed in a puff of dust. With an eerie pattering, a couple of still unburned finger bones clicked down on the metal. And up from the grey film of ashes, a rounded yellow circlet glinted radiance like a tiny sun.

I raked the yellow thing off the steel and on to the foundry floor. I waited till it had cooled and then picked it up.

It was a gold bracelet from the slender wrist of a girl. . . .

I dropped the damning thing into my pocket and dragged my feet around to face Margaret. Hands crushed to her throat, she stood sobbing and shivering.

"Hans! Hans killed her!" I was trying

to talk sanely, but my insides were twisted into a knot. "Did you know this, Margaret? Did you know that some one was dying here when you heard that scream? Was that why you didn't want to come in?"

She broke down then. Wildly, she clung to me. I felt the convulsive tremors that racked her slim figure.

I didn't ask her anything more. Cold though I was with crawling of horrors, this was no time to try to cross-examine her. I got her out of that place. I took her home—and on the way there, one other thing happened. I remarked that there was no doubt that Hans had killed the girl; he was a dangerous madman. I would tell the police.

She stopped short at that. She whirled to me again.

"No! No!" The words burst from her lips. "If you love me, don't ever tell anyone what you saw tonight!"

CHAPTER THREE

Horror's Talisman

I DIDN'T go to the office the next day. My mind was too distracted to concentrate on my work. I went for a long walk in the country. I hoped that in the calm of the sunshine and trees I would be able to find some light in this darkness.

But no light came, and toward dusk I found myself ringing the bell at the great house on the hill, ancestral mansion of the Halsteads, for generations owners and operators of the works.

Only old Madam Halstead, white-haired and aristocratic dictator of the clan, and her son Norman, the manager, lived here permanently. But I thought that some of the other members of the big family were here at the moment. And when the butler ushered me in, I saw that I was correct. In an irregular circle around the old dowager sat four or five whose faces I now knew more or less well.

There was plump and pink-skinned Rodney, with his round, petulant face of a spoiled child. By his side sat his most recent wife, a tall, yellow-haired woman with a sullen, twisted red mouth. Over across from him lounged wasp-eyed little Sam and his cousin Myrna, exotic as a poison orchid with her full-blown and brazenly revealed figure.

They and three or four more, I wouldn't remember. Nor does it matter, for the Halsteads of this generation the madam excepted, were to my thinking all alike, as unlovely a lot of predacious idlers as ever squandered in swinish luxury thousands of money that they hadn't earned.

A sudden silence clapped down at my appearance, and it didn't take an instant to sense the grip of suspense that was tightening the nerves of everyone in the room.

"I am glad to find you all here," I began without preamble. "I came up to see if any of you know anything about this business that is going on down in the works. There's something hellishly wrong—"

"Wrong—don't you think we all know that?" Rodney broke in in his thin, aggrieved treble. "I don't know why I ever came to this God-forsaken hole, where I'm liable to be killed any minute. Did you know, mister whatever-your-name-is, that my sister Karol had disappeared? Went out to walk yesterday and never came back?"

"Disappeared—your sister?" I echoed.

"Yes, disappeared, vanished," Rodney snapped. "We've been trying all day to locate her, called up all her friends where she might have gone. And only a few minutes ago we got a clue. One of the maids has just remembered that late yesterday afternoon Karol had a telephone call from some girl, a Miss Margaret Ames, asking her to meet her down by the works at eight o'clock. It seems that

this Ames girl is my brother Norman's secretary. He tells me that she is engaged to you. Is that correct?"

"Engaged to me—yes, Miss Ames is my fiancée—"

Dully I heard myself muttering reply, for my mind was stunned by a hideous premonition.

"Miss Ames couldn't have phoned to your sister." My voice came to me from miles away. "She was with me all the afternoon and till quite late at night. We drove to Silver Creek and went to the movies."

My throat tightened anew as I muttered that. For although it was true—we had gone there before returning to the office—I remembered that Margaret had gone to a phone booth in the early evening and put in a call—a mysterious message about which she would tell me nothing.

We talked some more, but it didn't add up to anything. I saw their eyes on me, suspicion-hard, as I picked up my hat and moved toward the door. The last thing I heard them saying was that they were sending for private detectives.

I pushed my legs down the graveled drive and through the gate to the street, and a specter of horror walked, gibbering, at my side.

Even if what I had said was true, if Margaret's call had not been to Karol Halstead, she had known what had become of her. She knew who was there on Hans' molten cross!

FROM the big house on the hill, I drifted back to the village, and the cripples were there. The little country town in the out-of-the-way Pennsylvania valley, supported almost entirely by the patronage of those who worked at the mills, was alive with them this midsummer evening.

Like Frankensteins of horror poured up from some workshop of hell, they paraded the sidewalks. With the coming of darkness they had become bolder, more insolent. And suddenly it came to me that these broken ones hated well, sound people! With malignant ferocity they loathed them. They wanted them to be broken and shattered and horrible as they were.

A face glared up at me from between the crushed shoulders of a man who went on all fours like a dog, hands shod in frayed leather mittens. The light slid over his countenance, somehow obscene in its huge expanse of grey-white skin, in its tiny pursed mouth, its flattened nose, its lidless malevolent eyes.

The silk-sheathed leg of a girl moved past the cripple's face. His leather-cased paw flicked out, grabbing. He tripped her. She screamed and went down.

He squealed beast-glee and jumped for her. There was an uproar. Men came dashing into the circle of screaming women, flourishing clubs. Savagely, they belabored him while he lay on his back, howling and thrashing.

I turned away from that sight, I wandered on through the crowds. The air was tight; faces were angry and white. Already a dozen families of mill workers had abandoned their jobs and their homes and fled. And the girls had gone on disappearing—two more in the last three days. And four more of the laborers themselves had vanished as though the ground had opened beneath them.

And I knew now what I ought to do—I ought to go to the police and tell what I had seen in Hans Muller's foundry. . . . What would happen then, I foresaw all too sickeningly well.

Margaret's connection with the maimed men would come out, her alleged phone call to the Halstead girl would be probed, maybe established. And swiftly the chain of evidence would link her to the girl on the molten cross.

I groaned in despair. God, how *could*

it be? Dark, ghoulish forces, driven by human brains, were at work here. By some grim caprice of circumstance they had got hold of Margaret. By threat of still darker horrors they were terrifying her to carry out their commands. To carry them out to the extent of luring Karol Halstead there to the mill?

FOR hours after I went to bed that night, I thrashed and tossed. I thought that sleep would never come to bring surcease to my agony. But at last weary nature took control.

How long I had slumbered when that dream came, I don't know. It was a dream, yet a vision stamped with the horrifying conviction of reality.

For there was a picture of three figures standing above me—two faces ogre-like in savage cruelty, and between them Margaret's countenance, a pallid and twisted blur. Her hands reached down, touched me. Then came consciousness of a mordant fluid against my lips. A cloth crushed that liquid into my nostrils, gagging and choking me.

The dream faded. I was alone in the room. And then came drumming of feet through the house, the other occupants roused by my outcries. The lights went on. Dizzy and panting, I pushed myself up and sat blinking into the wondering faces that peered through the opened door.

"I'm afraid that I had a bad dream." I mumbled apologies. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you all—"

Their eyes queerly strained, they murmured commonplaces and withdrew. I pushed myself out of bed, stumbled across the room to hold my head under a cold stream from the water faucet in the wash bowl, for I was still groggy from the dose of chloroform that I had had.

If it had been a dream, why were my lips raw with the acid searing of that stuff? And why was the corner of the heavy gold seal ring that I wore on my fourth finger wet with something that glistened ruddily red, a droplet of blood?

I pulled on my clothes, let myself out of the house without again wakening its other occupants. In a run I started down the street while a vision of something utterly hideous leered at me.

IT WAS about a mile to the house where Margaret lodged. It took me at most fifteen minutes to cover the distance on foot.

Her room was up on the second floor. A clock had just struck two, but there was a light in her window.

I didn't ring and ask for her as perhaps I should have done. For I had a dreadful presentiment that she wouldn't see me. And I had to see her. God, I had to see her when she wasn't on guard—I had to know.

At one corner of the big, old-fashioned country house stood an ell with a stout climbing vine running up to its roof. I clawed my way up its branches. Along the ridge pole of the ell it was only a few steps to the window of Margaret's room.

Noislessly, I slid over there. Through an inch-high crack under the shade I peered inside.

Margaret stood there looking at herself in her mirror. She had undressed for bed; she was stark naked. The glow of the rose-shaded lamps threw a pearly sheen over her shoulders, the full roundings of her legs and thighs, the creamy curves of her bosom.

The sight of her unguarded loveliness sent my blood leaping. And then that pulse-spring of lover's fervor chilled to a numbing coldness. For as she stood there, she was scrutinizing her bosom, peering with tightened eyes at a long, jagged gash that still oozed trickles of blood down the little rounded hollow between her breasts!

In that moment, madness must have swayed me. For I lunged at that window sash, I hurled it up and the next instant

I was climbing hurriedly into her room.

She whirled. For an instant she faced me, jaw sagging, eyes dilated.

"Tom! Tom, what are you doing here," she gasped.

Just that, before she realized her nudity. Face crimson, she sprang back, dragged a kimono from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her. Angry-eyed now, she faced me. "Tom, what is the meaning of this," she cried.

I blurted something. I gripped the folds of her dressing gown, yanked them apart from her clutching fingers.

"You tell me—what is the meaning of that?" I stabbed a finger at the mark on her bosom. "I did that to you! I did it twenty minutes ago when you and two of those cripples tried to chloloform me."

For a long instant then, neither of us spoke. Margaret was drawing away from me. Inch by inch, she shrank backward. Her lips spilled apart, her eyes were bottomless pools in which horror crawled.

The sight of her piteous figure tore at my heart. A wave of contrition swept over me. No matter what ghastliness she seemed gulity of, she was mine—mine to love and protect.

I swept her small, tense figure into my arms.

"Darling, what is this?" I groaned. "It doesn't make any difference what you are mixed up with, I love you! I love you and I want to help you. For God's sake, tell me what's happening!"

Her lips fluttered. A pent sigh, infinitely hopeless, infinitely sad, broke from her lips. She pushed back in the curve of my arm, she turned her eyes up to me. Her fingers trembled up. Tenderly they brushed over my face.

"You mustn't stay here, Tom, where death walks the streets, where it flies in the air!" she whispered. "You must go away. Go now. Forget me. If you love me, go ten thousand miles from this place and never come back!"

And that was all there was to it. I talked with her still more, but it wasn't any use. And so at last I crawled back out of that window. I went away the same as I came.

CHAPTER FOUR

Carnival of the Damned

IT WAS after midnight a week later. From roaming around the works I had gone back to the village. I stood leaning against the wall of a store, heart-sick and spent.

And suddenly then I became aware that the cripples, usually not much in evidence in the streets at night, were on the move. By ones and twos they came hobbling and creeping and trundling themselves on their little wheeled platforms.

The scattered tricklings solidified into a river. A couple of hundred yards down the line, they had spread out and were surrounding a house. There was a crash of a smashed door, then a man's curse and a woman's squeal. I caught a glimpse of a struggling white figure born aloft, screaming, on a thicket of clutching hands.

The other way, the blue-coated figure of one of the town's two constables came lumbering along.

"The cripples are out. They have broken into a house and taken a woman!" I yelled as I ran up to him. "Come back here and stop them!"

The law man didn't move. He only whispered: "The cripples! Another woman! God!"

"Are you afraid?" I shouted. "You've got a gun, haven't you?"

Feet pounded behind us. It was the other officer, the frightened man's colleague.

"They're gangin' up down at the other end!" The new arrival panted. "'Bout a hundred of 'em. They're bustin' into all the houses. Listen—"

The breeze brought a jangling of howls and screams. In a church tower the bell started tocsinning frantically. The street down which I looked seemed alive. It crawled with a black current like a gigantic insect invasion.

I heard revolvers banging. I saw the two constables standing their ground against the flood that seethed around them.

In the tree-shadow where I had jumped for concealment, they hadn't spotted me and I had no intention of becoming embroiled in this affair—yet. Something told me that there was a much more important mission for me to perform. The next instant I had slid out of my cover and I was running toward a side street that led to an all-night drugstore where there was a telephone.

Why I should suddenly have gone cold with fear at thought of Margaret, I didn't know. Bitterly I told myself that she was one of them, she was their partner, they wouldn't hurt her. Some instinct beyond reason was driving me. In this hour of horrors, I had to know that she was all right!

Eternities dragged, it seemed, before I heard a cracked voice at the other end of the wire. It came, I knew, from Mrs. Dexter, Margaret's landlady.

"Margaret—please call Miss Ames to the phone," I said.

"She isn't here—Margaret isn't here!" The old lady's cry was a rasped spurting of horror. "She's gone! They've taken her away! The cripples just broke into the house and got her—"

The woman's voice broke in a scream, a gurgling wail that cascaded up the octaves of terror. A guttural shout croaked over the wire. And the next instant the line had gone dead.

The phone dropped from my limp fingers. All creation seemed to have stopped. Margaret gone!

I spilled out of the phone booth into the store. Vaguely, I realized that the clerk had fled, the lights were extinguished. I was there alone. The glass fronts of the show cases shimmered like spectral mocking eyes of the horror that gibbered there.

No—not alone, for suddenly in that darkness a noise had become audible. A figure loomed from the shadows. It moved and I saw dimly a tall, stoop-shouldered form, wearing a long coat and broad-brimmed hat, who jacked up his one-legged form on a single crutch.

The darkness rustled, it spat a grey tongue—blade of a knife that came spinning end over end. I ducked and felt the spurt of warm blood as the thing sliced my ear. And the next instant I was on top of the thrower, my fist lashing out with the weight of my body behind it.

With a squealing croak, he went tumbling into a heap. Before he could start to crawl, I came down in a flying leap with my knees in his belly. I anchored him by the throat while with the other hand I got out my pocket knife and opened a blade.

"You've seen those blind men with tin cups on the street corners?" I grated. "A man without any legs *or* any eyes ought to drag down twice as much."

I jabbed the tip of the knife blade into one of his eyeballs enough for him to get the feel of it.

"Talk!" I snarled. "Tell me where your gang has taken my girl!"

The rat looked up at me and he knew that I meant business. He was yellow.

"Don't cut me again, for God's sake!" he whined. "Let me up and I'll talk—"

"I'll let you up and you'll show me!" I gritted. "You'll take me there—"

CHAPTER FIVE

In Hell's Red Halls

I WON'T take time to detail every move of the next fifteen minutes. How that cripple, with my knife digging into his

ribs, led me by side streets around the town . . . How he took me back to the works and across the yard to Hans Muller's foundry . . . How he led the way into the now empty room and around behind the great brick curve of the furnace; how with a key, which he produced from some hiding place, he unlocked a narrow door that seemed to be a part of the furnace wall itself.

From our feet a flight of steps led down into semi-gloom. A light, coming from somewhere ahead, cast the one-legged man's form into scarecrow relief as he crutched his way down the descent of dust-covered stone steps. Stiflingly hot it was in here, with the roar of the blowers thundering at my very side.

After a drop of perhaps thirty or forty feet, the steps came to an end. A candle stuck on a hook in the wall showed a cinder-floored passage straggling off into distance.

The tunnel widened as we followed along. On either side opened irregular spaces lined by crumbling black walls. Rusted hulks of machinery loomed in the shadows, skeletons of long-dead colossi. It was like a machine-cemetery visited by a tornado.

I knew now where we were, for suddenly I remembered how I had been told that the old, original Halstead mills had been overwhelmed and half buried by a landslide that poured down on them from the bluff half a century before. Rather than go to the expense of digging them out, the ground had been leveled off, filled in still further and the news mills, with all modern equipment, built on top of the ruins. These tunnels must be a part of the old works that had not been entirely buried, or else had been recently excavated.

A dozen steps more we moved through the breathless heat. We rounded a turn and at the end of another short stretch was a door. And then suddenly I halted, for against the roar of the air in the furnace pipes another sound had become audible—men's voices in guttural shoutings; voices aflame with a horrible joy, and against that background, a mad shrilling of women.

I gripped the arm of the cripple. I spun him around facing me.

"What is in that room?" I cried. *"What is going on in this place?"*

He sneered, he started to spew out some foulness, and I blasted him on the chin with an uppercut that started down at the floor. He dropped like a shot ox.

I tied him hand and foot with his own belt and necktie. I gagged him with three handkerchiefs. I went to work on him, pulling off his greasy trousers and coat. I divested myself of my own garments and pulled his filthy habiliments on over me.

We were about of a size, and when I was clad in his ragged old coat, with his broad-brimmed hat shielding my face, his crutch under my shoulder, one of my legs drawn up under the coat and a handful of floor grime plastered over my face, it would have taken more than a passing glance to tell us apart.

I left him there and hobbled the half dozen yards to the door. No one was watching. It wasn't locked. I pushed it ajar and crutched myself over the threshold.

A couple of yards I sidestepped into a dark corner. There I stood looking around, and at what I saw, my blood froze a drop at a time.

A HUGE circular chamber, half a hundred feet from floor to black-domed roof, the main room of the old works . . . Around the walls, lips of ancient furnace troughs drooled frozen slag. Rows of great vats towered a score of feet high. Blobs of gaudy-hued vapors billowed upward in scalloped parachute clouds to lose themselves in the murk at the summit.

Over across, one blast furnace was go-

ing. And against the tide of crimson light that beat from the open door, a circle of dark, gnome-like forms was outlined. Imps of the pit they seemed to be, drawn by some unholy spell around the Moloch whose talons had blasted and broken them.

And other figures were there, too, figures of girls. Maybe a dozen of them in all, and I recognized them, those who had been kidnaped. Stark naked they were, and with them the cripples were playing. Playing—God!

I realized now where I had come—to a hidden club room of those broken and damned. And up on a raised platform at one end stood their presiding genius, Hans Muller. The red glare beat on his face, his wildly jerking lips and his little crimson pits of glittering eyes.

And now another figure was with him. A tall and slender form in a black robe and mask. This newcomer stood close at his elbow. He was talking rapidly, his words inaudible in the drone of the blowers.

All this I took in at a glance. I whipped my gaze around. And then suddenly I saw Margaret. She was there in the crowd with the other girls. They had stripped off her clothing, too. God, she stood there stark naked with those lechers' eyes devouring her! Pawing her with their filthy hands. . . .

I had no illusions. I knew the sort of death that awaited me if they should discover my presence. But in another instant I would have been out there, regardless of consequences, had I not heard Hans' voice ring over the uproar. He waved for attention.

"Children of hell, listen to me!" he cried. "Fire has made you what you are, broken men who must crawl while others run and laugh. Fire is beautiful, fire is cruel. It is a women whose white body dances for you before she sends you to hell. She is your mistress now, you come here to worship her. You maimed and damned hate the healthy and sound! You have sworn to destroy them, to make them like you. Every night you give one of them to your mistress of fire!"

In the background the mob parted before two figures who came leading a man into the arena. Stark nude, he was a magnificent physical specimen, one of the Polish workers from the open hearths. Madly he battled, although tied hand and foot, against the burly ruffians who pulled him along.

Swiftly they dragged him to an open space in front of the roaring furnace. A deep groove had been dug in the floor from the furnace mouth, and now I saw, midway of it, an iron stake.

The victim's two warders half led and half carried his shrieking form to this stake and to it they tethered him with chains of tempered steel.

Hans was talking again, flourishing his arms to still the growl of anticipation that ran through the mob.

"We have taken an oath of fidelity," he screamed. "Death is the penalty of traitors. We have one here tonight who has tried to betray us. She has spied on us, she has been trying to find out where our meeting place is so that she could tell the police. She has talked with our members, she has pretended to be working for us, getting the village girls out alone where we could get hold of them easily."

I GASPED in a soul-chilling onrush of understanding. And the next moment I saw the same two ruffians who had brought in the Polock dragging Margaret across the floor between the lines of the cripples. They were carrying her toward another stake set beside the first one in another trench dug in the floor.

The eerie sheen from the furnace gases slid over her shoulders and arms, her ivory breasts. She sagged limp in their arms. Her eyes were closed, only her lips fluttered faintly.

"Two! Two sacrifices tonight!" Hans danced and yelled on his platform while that black-robed form hovered behind him, whispering, prompting.

They led Margaret up to the stake, but they didn't fasten her to it as yet, for something else was to precede. A long pole in his hand, Hans jumped to the floor in front of the furnace. Dexterously, he drove its spear-head into the clay plug at the base of the fire-pit.

A leaping white cataract belched from the hole. Down the groove in the floor a river of hissing stuff boiled toward the naked feet and legs of the man who was tied there.

Once he yelled. His white figure leaped at the torture stake—leaped once and then crashed down, feet burned away, into that seething and churning white. The next instant he had disappeared, save for a scum of charred cinders washing to and fro on the face of the steel.

With expert skill, Hans had plastered a cone-shaped plug of moist clay on the round disc at the end of another pole and jabbed it into the hole in the side of the furnace, damming the flood.

He stood back, face glistening with sweat and grinning insanely. He caught the eye of the men who held Margaret and beckoned him forward.

Centuries seemed to drag while I stood there, spellbound by a vision of ghastliness. God, Margaret tied to that stake, and in a moment that river of steel would come, snatching its white-hot fangs at her white flesh! And what should I do, what could I do single-handed against that mob of howling fanatics?

It was the jangle of those steel links clasping around Margaret's leg that seemed to detonate something inside of me. I was only half conscious of what I did as I stormed out of that corner. In that last instant I remembered how chance had put a weapon into my grasp. That crutch with its sword-sharp metal tip that I had taken away from my cripple guide! I gripped its five-foot shaft of heavy wood in my two hands, the butt to my thigh, and it was a bayonet.

Into the midst of those creatures I stormed, jabbing and slashing, and I took them stark by surprise. Satanic, hate-knotted faces whipped around in amaze. Hands beat at me, clutched for my throat. And then a lithe, whip-slender form, slim as a snake, without any arms at all, leaped, teeth clicking across my jugular.

I knocked him aside, tripped him and drove my spear a foot into his vitals. He squealed like a rat.

Head down, arms pumping, I was blasting an opening toward Margaret. I heard the crunching of my steel-shod wood through flesh and bones. A face vanished in a blur of bleeding pulp. They swarmed around me on their hands and knees, their little wheeled platforms. Crazily, I cursed as I stabbed them, a lancer sticking a pack of rabid wild pigs.

Through an opening in the tangle of forms I caught sight of Margaret. They had got her into the trench, they had finished tying her to the stake. Gibbering insanely, Hans had swung around toward the furnace. He snatched up the long tapering pole.

Only a thin line of figures stood between me and her. They broke and went streaming in flight as I charged. I crashed into the open to face Hans. In front of the furnace he stood staring, astonished, the iron pole still clutched in his hands.

He saw me running toward Margaret. He yelled, he spun around. He swung the end of the tapping pole toward the clay plug in the furnace door. Only an instant it would take him to drive home that thrust, long before I could get there.

Once I yelled and then with all the frenzied power of my arm and back behind it, I hurled that crutch spear-like through the air. While it was halfway

across to him, Hans' shoulders bent to his pole.

But in his haste he missed his aim. I heard the clang of the rod against the brick wall of the furnace. And the next instant a splashed tomato was trickling rivulets of ruddy juice down through his beard.

Hans' body lay limp on the edge of a shimmering white pool of hissing steel. But I didn't yet run to Margaret. One instant I took to whirl toward the robed and masked figure that I saw fumbling a gun from under his clothes.

I heard the roar of the explosion, felt the hot breath of the slug past my face and then I was on top of him. I sent him crashing to earth before he could get his weapon around and while I knelt on his stomach I ripped the mask from his features. . . .

To gaze into the ashy-white and twitching countenance of Rodney Halstead.

IT WAS a couple of hours more before the whole thing came into the open. . . . I kept Rodney covered with his own gun while I unfastened Margaret and she hunted up her clothes. I drove him ahead of us while with my arm around her I led her back up those cellar stairs.

With the eyes of a dozen cops welding a merciless ring around him, the heir of the Halsteads caved in and spilled the truth. Rodney was the most dangerous of all persons, a weak and cowardly man driven into a corner, so desperate that he became a human rat, utterly reckless wholly ruthless to the sacrifice of life, if only his own neck could be saved.

He had embezzled large sums, tens of thousands, from the funds of another company of which he was a director. The president and real owner of this other outfit was a man who knew how to get what he wanted, especially from a craven like Rodney. When he discovered the theft, he didn't threaten him with prison, he told him that he would have him killed if the money wasn't replaced. And in Rodney's yellow soul, he knew that he would.

Rodney was convinced that his family wouldn't come forward to save him. He had been caught this way twice before, and he had been told by his mother, who knew him only too well, that the second time she had saved his skin was the last. His only hope was to get the works into his own hands. If he could run them down so that his mother would have to close them and liquidate, his straw man could bid them in for a song. And after the terror had subsided, he could sell them again for a good sum.

Hans was half mad, anyhow, and Rodney had found it easy to work on him. He bribed him with five thousand dollars. And Hans had grievances, too, over which he brooded with virulent bitterness. He had earned millions for the Halsteads with his inventions of new-process steel, with no recognition nor reward. He hated them and everything that stood for them.

He hated, too, the other workmen. Years ago, it seemed, he had had a son, a promising young engineer, at work in the mills. He had been horribly killed in an outlashing of molten steel. The old iron-master blamed the tragedy on the carelessness—or jealous dislike—of the youth's associates on the job. Years of brooding over his loss had filled him with an insane enmity against the well and laughing men who poked derision at his deformities.

When not experimenting, Hans was night boss of the mills. Without trouble he could fix things so that accidents happened to the hands—and he never seemed to blame. Then he had got together the maimed men and hatched up his society of the damned, with its meeting place in the old cellar, about which everyone had forgotten. He picked out half a dozen of the fiercest to kidnap the girls and the

well workers. It was another mad idea.

These girls he gave them to play with in their orgies. The workmen he had burned in the rivers of steel. But even the cripples wouldn't have done this to their former pals if they hadn't been maddened by the drugs that Hans gave them in the liquor he served. The idea of the human sacrifices was to work the cripples up to such a pitch of sadistic frenzy that they would do anything that he told them to. For him this was play, a game that fed his pent and maniac bitterness.

THE disappearance of the workmen and girls from the village, Rodney figured, would before long blow the town wide apart. His mother would have to close down the works and his plan would enter its second stage—the bidding in by his straw man. Karol and Myrna, his sister and cousin, he hadn't intended to kill. But they had caught him in conference with Hans, and he was convinced that they guessed what was going on.

As for Margaret. . . . Too late now I could see it all—or most of it. All alone, in terror of worse than death, she had been playing detective.

"I suspected Rodney and Hans. I was trying to get into the confidence of some of the cripples and find out where their meeting place was," she whispered, her hand reaching for mine. "That was why those two were waiting for me that night in the office. And that other night, when you were in bed,—I didn't come with those men. I had been watching your house. I was afraid they would consider you dangerous and try to kill you. I followed them when they broke in and went to your room. I wasn't trying to chloroform you. They were doing it and I was trying to drive them away and get you to wake up. You were half asleep and the drug had made you all confused or you'd never have imagined that I'd—"

I crushed her little white hand in mine and I groaned in shame of my blindness, my lack of faith. Of course it was easy to see why, after that, they had brought her here. They knew she was spying on them.

And of course Margaret had never telephoned Karol Halstead. It was a village girl with whom Rodney was thick, whom we found later, who had done that and given Karol's name. Rodney himself had had his sister and cousin tricked into spots where they could be kidnaped!

There was only one question more—why Margaret had got herself mixed with these horrors in the first place, why she wouldn't tell me anything about her connection. And that came out at last, too. Between sobs she whispered it into my shoulder. It was that hesitation, that shadow that I'd puzzled at in her eyes.

She had a brother Jack who made a bad mistake years ago—and had done time for it. On coming out, she had got him a job in the works. Something—some hidden shame or I don't know what—had made her shrink from telling me of the skeleton in her family closet.

And Jack had been one of the first hands to be caught and blasted in Hans' searing steel. He had died after a week in a hospital. And then Margaret had set herself to prove what she believed—that Rodney and Hans were the men who had murdered him. . . .

Margaret and I didn't wait the six months we had planned. We got married the next day. We got out of that town and I found a job elsewhere.

That was a year ago, and every one of those days I have tried to atone to her—for many things. And as I turn to look into her eyes now as she sits beside me, I know that I have succeeded. . . .

We have found peace, at last.

THE END

By RAY CUMMINGS

(Author of "House of Horrible Laughter," etc.)

The Horror at Black Glen

She was beautiful beyond the power of words to describe; but I knew that I had met a kinsman of hers—a kinsman with a shaggy hide and white, gleaming fangs. . . .

"IF YOU'RE going up Black Glen way," the old innkeeper said, "I wouldn't aim to get caught out there after dark."

"Why not?" I demanded. But there was something in the way he said it that would not let me smile at the remark.

"They say it's a dog," he said. "A big shaggy black bitch, them what's seen her says." He gathered up the dishes of the luncheon he had served me. "That'll be three an' six—an' a shilling extra for the

ale." He held out a hand expectantly.

"A wild dog—" I said.

"Or a wolf. She killed a little girl last night over in Sugworth Copse—mangled the body an' dragged it part way down the glen. Eatin' it, I guess, when the searchin' party come upon her. She got away, but they'll get her tonight—a hundred armed men'll be out there in the woods tonight. They'll get her—"

"The dog?" I said. "A mad dog—"

He gave me a sidelong glance. "Bitch dog or wolf—that's what they say. But what I think—some things maybe it's best not to talk about. Three an' six, an' the ale—thank you, sir. Thank you very kindly. There's your bike by the fence—come again sir—we don't get many Americans here—"

With my small pack strapped to my back I rode away down the sunlit English pike. It was mid-afternoon. Looking back on it now, what the old Innkeeper had said—and implied—didn't impress me much. The sunlit, flowered countryside, here in the undulating hills of North England was too cheery. I was on a holiday—cycling the length of England. I am an American. My name—Lee Cranston. I was twenty-six, that summer when the horror of Black Glen plunged upon me.

I had never heard of Black Glen until the Inkeeper mentioned it. But this section up near the Scottish border interested me; a branch of my family had lived here a few generations ago. I am not much on geneology—but I was intrigued at the history of one of my male ancestors. He had been, quite evidently, a handsome, gay young blade. My mother's grandfather. The records I had perused stated that he had come to an untimely end—when still in his twenties—through love of a woman. An indiscreet love, I gathered. Certainly it must have been at least that, since it caused his death. And there was a hint of some darkling mystery about the affair—something grewsome, not to be recorded, since—if true—(as the chronicler carefully stated) it would be a blot upon all this otherwise illustrious family.

That intrigued me. I was planning to stop at one of the larger towns up here, tomorrow, and search their local records. . . .

I HAD no intention of stopping at Black Glen; I knew nothing about the place. Sundown found me still twelve miles from the town of my destination for the night. The sunny afternoon had given way to clouds—a great bank of them rising in the west into which the setting sun plunged so that the darkness swiftly came.

The country here was wild now. For an hour I had been mounting out of the rolling, cultivated fields, into jagged, forested hills, broken and tumbled, with ravines and gullies, black now with night; and jagged buttes and spires overhead from which the dying daylight was rapidly fading.

I must have been, without knowing it, at the summit over Black Glen, when the air hissed out of my front tire. And as though fate now were determined to plunge me into the horror, I found myself upon the upper brink of a broad glen-like ravine, with the lights of a house a hundred feet below me at its bottom.

It was the only house I had seen for a mile or two—a miniature stone castle, perched upon a ledge, with a stony babbling river at its front base. Trees arched over the little spires of the three story structure. Behind it, the glen seemed to break into the crescent receses of a forest, darkly spreading back into the lower distance.

And then the storm broke upon me—a gust of wind, with slanting, splattering raindrops and distant muttering thunder. For a moment I hesitated. . . If only I had known! Certainly, if I had had the re-

motest premonition, nothing could have induced me to descend this steep rocky little path that left the road here and wound down into the glen, quite obviously to the house. But I had no such premonition. What the old Innkeeper had said did not occur to me. I was getting out my raincape—ruefully surveying the flat tire. And I was hungry. . .

Wrapped in the raincape, I pushed the bicycle down into the glen. The path crossed a small aerial bridge over the pounding stream and wound in a crescent back into the forest, circling to approach the Castle from the rear. It was black here under the trees. Black and eerie—a queer somber soundlessness of this depressed area with the jagged spires of the hills high overhead. The quavering light of my bicycle lamp wavered ahead of me as I pushed it along the path.

I could see the lights of the house now, partly masked by the trees, on my level and only a hundred feet or so ahead. The soundlessness was broken only by the babbling of the river—the crunch of my feet on the path—

Abruptly I stiffened, stood clinging to the bicycle, staring into the blackness of the forest glades. A rustling, crackling of the underbrush had sounded nearby. Something was plunging through the thickets. And suddenly on the path some twenty feet ahead of me, a grey-black shaggy shape appeared. My little bicycle headlight illumined it. Dog, or wolf? A huge female brute; a hundred pounds or more. Its eyes gleamed with my light on them. It was panting—the shaggy sides heaving. The white fangs were bared, with blue-black jowls drawn back. But not with a snarl; with breathlessness . . . and a white froth of saliva dripped from the hanging tongue.

For those seconds its brute gaze crossed with mine over my little light. I was unarmed. I stood, for those seconds, with the fleeting idea that if it attacked, I would hold the bicycle in front of me . . . then suddenly the shape of it was gone as it slunk on across the path again. I could hear the crackling in the underbrush.

I had started forward, hastening for the nearby house, when abruptly the shaggy thing reappeared behind me. Closer now, in the path only a few feet away. I whirled the bicycle to confront it. The great female brute was groveling now, advancing slowly—like a dog, ingratiating, trying to placate its master. I held myself tense. I was afraid to turn my back—to retreat. Then suddenly the fear that it would attack me was gone. It groveled at my feet, with the bicycle between us. . .

There are things of horror that are beyond words to depict—things of horror which one may sense beyond conscious thought. I stared down into the groveling brute's upturned gaze. The eyes were black pools, red-rimmed; pools that swam with turgid horror—with something gruesome, unnamable. A sort of longing? As though here were a whimpering, whining longing, soundlessly translated to be just the staring of red-rimmed animal eyes. Two turgid windows, into which I was gazing at something horrible. . .

I do not know if I spoke to the brute or not. I recall—with the stabbing ironical thought that one must never show fear to a menacing animal—that I leaned over the bicycle cross-bar and patted the matted hair of the head. At my touch the whole groveling body suddenly was trembling. Then the brute leaped up and wildly dashed away, with a crashing, crackling of the underbrush, until presently there was only silence.

For a moment I stood transfixed, bathed with a sweat of shuddering horror at the memory of those staring, red-rimmed animal eyes. Then shoving the bicycle ahead of me, I approached the house.

THE main door was a great oaken panel, with a heavy knocker. At my knock, after a moment of silence, I heard a bar sliding. The door slowly drew inward, disclosing a lamplit foyer: and the tall figure of a man. He stood, somehow queerly tensed and expectant as the opening door disclosed me at the threshold.

Then, perhaps as he saw the bicycle beside me, he smiled.

"What is it?" he demanded.

I told him I was a belated tourist. I was glib enough, asking shelter—I had had to do this sort of thing several times before on my trip. And the flat tire, my wet raincoat and the storm behind me were obvious.

"Come in," he said. A lightning flare and a crack of thunder made him add, "You can't ride to Greatcote tonight, young man. We'll make you comfortable. I am Sir Phillip Grange—"

He was a distinguished looking man of perhaps forty—dark hair greying at the temples, smooth shaven, with rugged, though not handsome features. He was dressed in dinner clothes, with coat discarded; and as we passed along the hall and into a dimly lamplit, luxurious library, he picked his jacket up from a chair and put it on.

"You—came down the path from the upper road?" he was saying.

"Yes," I agreed.

He had remarked that he would provide me with supper, and give me a room if the storm continued and I cared to stay the night. His look, his voice, were those of an English gentleman of refinement and wealth. Curiously he spoke as though he were alone here in this little castle. Were there no servants?

As though in answer to my inquiring glance as we entered the library, he said,

"My domestics are on a week-end holiday. Just my wife and I are here—"

Again I was aware that he seemed expectant, standing before me as though listening—waiting. And then he said, "You—didn't see anything queer coming through the woods?"

"A wild dog," I said. "Or a wolf—but it didn't attack me—just came up and then made off."

For a breathless second he stared at me blankly. "I have heard about that roaming wolf," he said slowly. "I have never seen it. They say—they say it killed a child last night—"

"So the Innkeeper told me down at Blaney."

"I doubt that it did," he said. He had taken my hat and coat and pack and tossed them to a chair. "My wife will be downstairs presently." And then he added with what seemed a very strained smile,

"Suppose we go to the kitchen. My wife and I have had our own supper—"

I think I was murmuring something of disclaimer at bothering him. I recall that my thoughts were whirling. The horror which had been upon me in the woods had not lessened, for here in this house, upon this Sir Phillip Grange, there was seemingly so great an aura of grewsome mystery that I was inwardly shuddering.

"Why, that's quite all right," he said, at my murmured apologies. He led me along the foyer, through a dining room—"When Lady Grange comes downstairs she—"

The words died in his throat. From the woods, outside this rear of the house, a long, eerie howl came floating.

"The wolf," I murmured.

Grange stood stricken—a statue of a man with the blood draining from his face.

"Why—why it does sound—" Again his words were checked. From outside came the reverberating crack of a shotgun. Then another. . .

"Good God," Grange murmured. He stood gripping me. Then he dragged me across the lighted kitchen. We flung open the rear door. The rain had increased;

wind now was roaring through the forest trees which crowded close here. And Grange gasped,

"Cranston? You—you hear that?"

I HEARD it, most certainly—the sounds of shouting men; the tramp of feet in the underbrush. Men advancing, apparently toward the house. In the doorway we stood silhouetted with the light behind us. The woods were black, with just the shafts of the house-lights illumining the nearby ground and the pelting, glistening rain.

The commotion in the woods increased. Now we could see darting torch-beams. Then from the forest glades, the figures of men came running. There were a dozen of them—brawny farmers—a posse out hunting the wolf. Some had shotguns; others bludgeons and farming implements.

A dozen wild-eyed men—but more of the mob were behind. They burst from the woods as though charging the house.

"Stop!" Sir Phillip called. "What do you want here?"

"Go on—Gor blimey—don't let 'em stop yer!" somebody back in the trees shouted.

But the leader of the mob, at sight of Sir Phillip, checked his rush twenty or thirty feet from us, and stood brandishing his shotgun with a milling group around him.

"The dog," the man shouted at us. "She went in there—don't you go lyin' about it—"

Then several other voices were shouting at us at once. Threats. Imprecations. The mob behind the leader surged forward, showing him; and suddenly I realized that Grange beside me was standing livid, with a leveled revolver in his hand. The mob saw it. Their shouts increased. Wild fragments. We were holding the wild dog—they were coming in now and search the Castle.

But at sight of Grange's weapon the leader still hesitated; the bravado of the others weakened so that they only milled around him. And Grange shouted over the turmoil:

"There's no wolf here—no dog here—stay back I tell you. If you come, there'll be bloodshed—"

No wolf here? Then why wouldn't he let them in to satisfy themselves? The thought stabbed at me.

"We'd better go inside," I murmured. "They're pretty wild—one of them might take a shot at us."

I pulled at his arm, and I moved suddenly backward and banged the kitchen door.

"Any bar for this?" I demanded.

There were big iron hasps. Grange seized a wooden bar which stood against the kitchen wall. We dropped it into place. We were both panting. The shouts continued outside—shouts of rage now; and sounds as though the men were spreading to surround the house . . . Grange and I were blankly staring at each other. And another thought rushed at me: Where was Lady Grange? Upstairs? Surely this commotion would have brought her down.

Then I heard a door bang in another part of the house—running, approaching footsteps—

We whirled. Into the kitchen from the dining room a woman came running.

"Magda—"

Grange gasped it, as he numbly stared at her; and Heaven knows I was staring, transfixed, flooded with such thoughts of horror that my senses were blurred. She was a small, slim, dark-haired young woman of about my own age. Magda—Lady Grange. A face of foreign cast—a dark, mid-European beauty. It was a pallid face now; contorted with terror; her dark eyes were wide as she stared at her husband. She had been outdoors—quite obviously had come dashing in now

through a side door of the house. Her blue net summer dress was wet with the rain; mud-smeared; torn and disheveled. She was panting, breathless from running.

"Phillip!" she gasped. "They—those men out there—they frightened me. I was just—out walking when the storm came up—and then I heard shots and ran for home—"

"Oh—yes," he said.

In the sudden silence, there was only the panting woman's breathing. The shouting mob outside had spread out, as though some of them were beating the woods, again looking for the wolf.

HERE in the kitchen, Grange was making a grim effort. "We—we have a visitor here, Magda—" His glance turned to me. "This is Lee Cranston—an American—his bicycle broke down, and he's hungry—"

"Oh—you're very welcome, Mr. Cranston." She was trying to smile with polite formality. Her gaze met mine. Her eyes were dark turgid, unfathomable pools. But as I stared, with a sudden strange shuddering thrill running over me, it seemed that I could see something in her eyes that was grewsomely horrible. A longing? A mute longing as she stared at me?

She had collapsed to a low stool here in the kitchen. Involuntarily I took a step toward her, with my fingers twitching as though to reach over the crossbar of an invisible bicycle and pat the sleek glossy blackness of her beautiful hair.

GRANGE broke the horrible spell which in that second was upon all three of us.

"That crazy mob wanted to break in here, Magda," he said. "I told them there was no wolf or dog here. You should not go out alone at night, my dear—that wild dog might attack you. It's dangerous—"

The kitchen windows were black rectangles with glistening rivulets on them. My gaze drifted to one of the windows; and suddenly now I saw a face pressed against it—the face of one of the infuriated farmers, gazing in now upon us. Gazing at the panting, disheveled, beautiful Lady Grange.

I must have gasped something. Grange and the woman followed my gaze—saw the face at the window; and simultaneously, upon the kitchen door men were pounding.

"We see her!" a voice shouted from outside. "Open up here—"

Grange's weapon again was in his hand as he whirled, white-faced for the window. The kitchen wall-switch was beside me. I reached and snapped off the kitchen light. Darkness enveloped us.

In the confusion—the pounding on the door—the shouts of the mob, I moved, bumped into Grange, gripped him.

"We'd better take her upstairs," I gasped. "Bar ourselves in a room—have you a telephone?"

"No . . . Magda! Magda—"

Where is she? I groped the kitchen. . . At the outer door, I shouted through the heavy oaken panels:

"You'll go to jail if you break in here! And you'll get a bullet in you. Keep away—"

"Magda—Magda—where are you?"

Grange was groping in the blackness of the kitchen. Then he stumbled against me, gripped me.

"She must have gone through the dining room," I murmured.

We ran through the dark dining room. In the dim foyer, Grange dashed for a small side door. It was unlatched. Had she gone out? Again we both stood numbed. From outside in the distant woods the mournful howl of the wolf again sounded. The crack of a shot answered it. The shouts of the men at the

back of the house rose in a turmoil. Then we could hear them running—chasing the wolf so that presently they were far away and there was only silence, with Grange and me staring at each other. And then he muttered,

"Good God—Magda—she—she must be here in the house somewhere—"

We called, "Magda—"

This unbelievable thing! My senses were whirling with it. Surely the woman was here—

And I was shuddering with still another thought—a grim, ghastly question: Why was I shaking with anxiety over the beautiful Lady Grange? Why was I remaining in this house—barring the infuriated farmers? Why was every fibre of me longing—still with a shuddering horror—but longing to touch the sleek black hair of this beautiful woman? Longing again to gaze into her beautiful eyes—twin pools of something ghastly horrible. What was there, within me, responding so swiftly? A grisly lure—

"Magda—Magda—"

We were both calling it now; and then suddenly the little side door which we had left unlatched, burst open. The panting white-faced Magda darted in.

"I—they've gone!" she gasped. "They won't bother us—they're chasing the—wolf—"

Rain, or was it cold beads of sweat, stood on her pallid forehead, where her hair was streaked with mud. In a wall-mirror she chanced upon her reflection—stared—and abruptly laughed tremulously.

"Why I—I look pretty awful. I'll go fix myself, Phillip—can't you manage a cup of coffee and sandwiches for Mr. Cranston? I'll join you—"

HOW can I depict the two hours of the evening that followed? The mob of farmers in the surrounding woods still were searching. But they were more distant now. We three were alone in the house—undisturbed—three of us, and the nameless horror which was stalking here among us.

We tried to ignore it. An animal was roving the woods, the farmers were searching for it. Lady Grange had been out walking and the storm had driven her in. Upon that basis, the subject now was tacitly ignored.

A little supper was served me. We talked of America—of my impressions of England. With other circumstances I could have found this Sir Phillip Grange a very interesting companion; and his wife—a charming hostess. But beneath the surface of our sometimes halting conversation, there was a vast torrent of conflicting emotions obviously upon each one of us. And a lashing, driving horror. . .

I recall that there was within me a wonderment that I did not fix my bicycle tire and leave the ghastly house. The storm was raging with a greater fury than before; but doubtless I could have ridden to the nearest town in safety. Grange was politely urging me to stay; but I could see that he did not want it. Was he living here in this secluded little Castle in the gloomy depths of the glen—to seclude his wife? It seemed so. The horror submerged within him now was certainly nothing new.

But Magda Grange would not hear of letting me go out into the storm.

"Why, that's absurd, Mr. Cranston,"

"You felt it," she murmured. "I could she said, when lamely I suggested it.

I saw her husband intercept the glance she flung me. A torturing jealousy was upon him, mingled with his horror, so that when I agreed to stay, a grim hostility seemed to come into his attitude toward me—a menace masked by his well-bred politeness.

Recklessly I ignored it. The beauty of Magda Grange, like a weird spell was upon me. A wild sort of intoxication.

She had groomed herself now into a perfection of dark, mysterious beauty. I found myself laughing with her—gayly chatting—as though both of us were intoxicated, ignoring the growing moroseness of her husband.

"I hadn't—realized tonight would bring us such a guest," she said breathlessly. "The storm did us a favor, didn't it Phillip?"

A driving recklessness. Then there were other moments when I found her staring at me with those beautiful, somber brooding eyes—that look which made me shudder at the grisly stirring of my own responding emotion. . . The stirring of something unnamable within me—indescribable save that it was a lure of something so unnatural—so hideous and yet so alluring—that my gorge rose and I could feel the sweat pouring out on me as I clenched my fists to fight it . . . Useless—the thing grew stronger every hour; I was submerged in it . . . .

Then at last midnight had come; we went upstairs and they showed me the bedroom I was to occupy.

"Phillip is just down the corridor," Magda said, still with that queer breathlessness. "My own room is in the other hall."

"Good night," Sir Phillip said. "I think the storm will be gone in the morning. You'll be comfortable here."

"Oh quite," I agreed.

Resolutely I closed the door upon the turgid, intense gaze of Magda's eyes. . .

I did not undress. I was trembling as I blew out the little lamp and threw myself on the bed and lay in the steaming darkness listening to the storm. The rain still was pounding; but the wind had slackened. And then the rain eased. Again I was conscious of that queer soundlessness, here in the depths of the black glen . . . The house interior—soundless forest with just the babble of the stony river in front of the Castle. . . .

AND it seemed as I listened to the soundlessness, that the bursting horror here—in the glen, the house, the room, and within myself—the bursting horror was trembling upon the verge of a scream. As though I could not lie here silent, but must scream with shuddering terror—scream because I was trapped by Magda's eyes. . .

My thoughts wandered as I drifted into sleep. . . A female wolf, with eyes red-rimmed—a brute ingratiating so that I had patted its head. . . I longed now to pat that beautiful sleek head of Magda. . .

I must have dropped into complete unconsciousness. . . "Lee! Lee Cranston—" Was I dreaming it? "Lee—"

It was a soft furtive voice, awakening me upon a flood of horror and wild desire as I heard my name. I opened my eyes. Time had passed. The night was advanced; the room was pallid with fitful moonlight straggling in my window.

"Lee—"

My door slowly opened. The slim, white figure of Magda, Lady Grange, stood in my doorway. Her filmy white night robe fell in folds to her feet; her sleek black hair hung in braids over her shoulders.

Her eyes were turgid pools of ghastly desire as she came gliding toward me. . . .

"Magda—"

I was aware of myself sitting bolt upright, tensed, staring at her with a numbed fascination as she approached me.

"Lee—so long I have waited—searched for you—"

With a shaft of moonlight between us she stood drooping, suddenly trembling, with the humility upon her of a woman who has surrendered unasked.

"I don't understand," I murmured. "Searched for me?"

"Yes." She was trying to smile; she moved sidewise, sat upon the foot of the

bed, not touching me. As though now with desperate effort she was fighting for calmness, for normality to voice this thing that so obviously possessed her.

"Searched for you," she said. "Oh yes—and I recognized you at once. Didn't you recognize me?"

"Recognize you?" I could only sit numbly echoing her words.

"You felt it," she murmured. "I could see that you felt it—"

Felt it? God knows I could feel now surging within me a vast sweep of horror—the stirring of some ghastly lust . . . A longing of my twitching fingers to reach out now and pat the sleek glossy blackness of her beautiful head . . . as though to reach over the cross-bar of a bicycle—

"Don't—touch me! Keep away from me—"

Was that my strained, agonized murmuring voice? The words struck her like a physical blow so that she shrank back.

Then she fought back the inner paroxcysm. Again she was faintly smiling—the luring, sensuous half-smile of a beautiful woman.

"You are frightened," she murmured. "That's because you don't understand the thrill of it. The wild, glorious thrill—"

She was fingering a little chain on her neck, upon which hung two ivory miniatures. She detached one of them and suddenly held it out to me.

"I had an ancestress," she murmured. "My mother's grandmother. She lived here in Greatcote. I look very like her—"

The moonlight fell on the tiny painted face of the ivory oval—a young woman, black-haired, somber with Magda's strange exotic beauty.

She was even more breathless now. Her breast was rising and falling under the filmy night-robe. Her red tongue flicked out and licked her dry lips. "My great-grandmother—her name was Tara. She was married—but she fell in love with another man because he—he looked like a poet and still like a young Greek God, because he was so strong and handsome. And they loved each other—and Tara's husband—madly jealous—he trapped them by night—caught them together—"

I COULD feel her burning gaze upon me now; but I was only looking at her twitching fingers as they toyed with the miniature.

"Her husband left a record of the tale. He—he would have killed them both—but in the sweep of their terror as he confronted them, both of them became great shaggy beasts—wolf-dogs who snarled at him—fawned upon each other and then rushed from the house. For years, together they roamed these woods—that was many years ago—"

Wild tale out of the past. That husband killed his wife and her lover, of course; hid the bodies—and created the gruesome tale so that he might not be judged a murderer. . .

"Can't you feel it?" she was murmuring. "You and I—and I have been so lonely, waiting for you—you and I, to roam these woods together—"

And then suddenly her twitching white hand came out and gripped my wrist.

"Can't you feel it now?" She almost hissed the words. "Lee—my darling—"

And then I heard my agonized voice: "No! You're damnable—get out of here—"

And suddenly she lunged upon me, her fingernails gouging at my eyes, her mouth nuzzling my throat, with teeth snapping like fangs. I staggered to my feet, and she was up with me—fighting, snarling, both of us like animals, reared. . .

"You damnable creatures—"

The voice of Grange roared suddenly at us from the bedroom doorway—Grange in trousers and shirt. His face was livid; the moonlight glinted on the naked knife-blade in his hand as he lunged for us.

At his voice the snarling Magda turned and cast me loose. As I plunged from her, I saw her groveling on the floor. . . Grange was rushing me—

"Wait!" I gasped. "You don't understand—"

His knife plunged for my chest, but I caught his wrist. He was raging with a mad, jealous, horrified fury. For a second or two we stood swaying, fighting for the knife. Then I twisted it from him, and flung it away.

"Sir Philip—"

But he ignored my words. With a wild cry he plunged after the knife, stooped and seized it. Magda was on the floor beside him, ghastly, groveling demoniac thing that had been a woman—and suddenly her husband whirled and plunged the knife into her white breast. For a second he stared numbly at me and then at her. The knife again flashed upward, down to his chest—and he fell upon it, ramming it to its hilt.

For a horrified moment I stood transfixed in the pallid moonlit bedroom, gazing at the weltering horror at my meet. . . Grange was dead; the woman was twitching—dying—

Upon impulse I snatched that second ivory miniature from the chain around her neck. Clutched it, and with it, fled from the shambles of the room—down through the silent house. My bicycle had been left at the front entryway. My mind was still so blurred with horror there was only the thought that I must get the bicycle and ride away.

I had trouble finding it; Grange had put it in a closet. Then I wheeled it out. Did I hear staggering footsteps, back by the stairs at the other end of the dim hall? A little side door to the house, slamming?

To this day I do not know whether that was my wild fancy, or reality. I fled through the front door—saw the flat bicycle tire which it would take me half an hour to fix—and I shoved the bicycle over the brink into the little river.

Then I ran the length of the house, plunged back into the woods. The moonlight shafts occasionally filtered down; and abruptly I realized I was still clutching the ivory miniature. For a moment I stood, with moonlight upon it, staring upon it, staring at the face of a young man—a face extraordinarily like my own.

I cast the damnable little oval away as though it were a viper. . . And as I turned, suddenly beside me there was a groveling shape—the shaggy, grey-black shape of the giant female-wolf. It hitched toward me; and as I stared with horror, the moonlight showed blood matting the lighter hair of its chest. . . A gaping knife-wound. . .

For a second or two the twitching brute seemed trying to reach me. Then it quivered and lay still, with legs stiffly outstretched and blackened tongue lolling out. . .

* * *

The farmers stabbed that roaming, predatory wolf, of course. . . The ancient wild tale of Magda's ancestor and mine—all fanciful, of course. Magda, Lady Grange—she, doubtless, was merely obsessed with brooding—and she was frustrated perhaps in her marriage to the much older Sir Phillip, who kept her secluded so that she brooded with an obsession that she thought was reality. . .

I still tell myself all that. Ten years have passed now. I thank God that never since that ghastly night in Black Glen have I felt the stirrings of that horrible lust. It was hysteria, of course—my wild thoughts creating it. . .

I am happily married now; we are sure there is no taint in me. And yet—after all these years—I can never let a huge shaggy dog come near me without feeling a torrential, gasping rush of horror.

CHILDREN OF MURDER

All New York was in a seething turmoil. Terror reigned supreme while hundreds of men and women died horribly, and bands of shrieking, predatory children raced, maddened, through the streets. . . . A masterful story, vividly told, which—we warn you—will haunt you in your sleep!

CHAPTER ONE

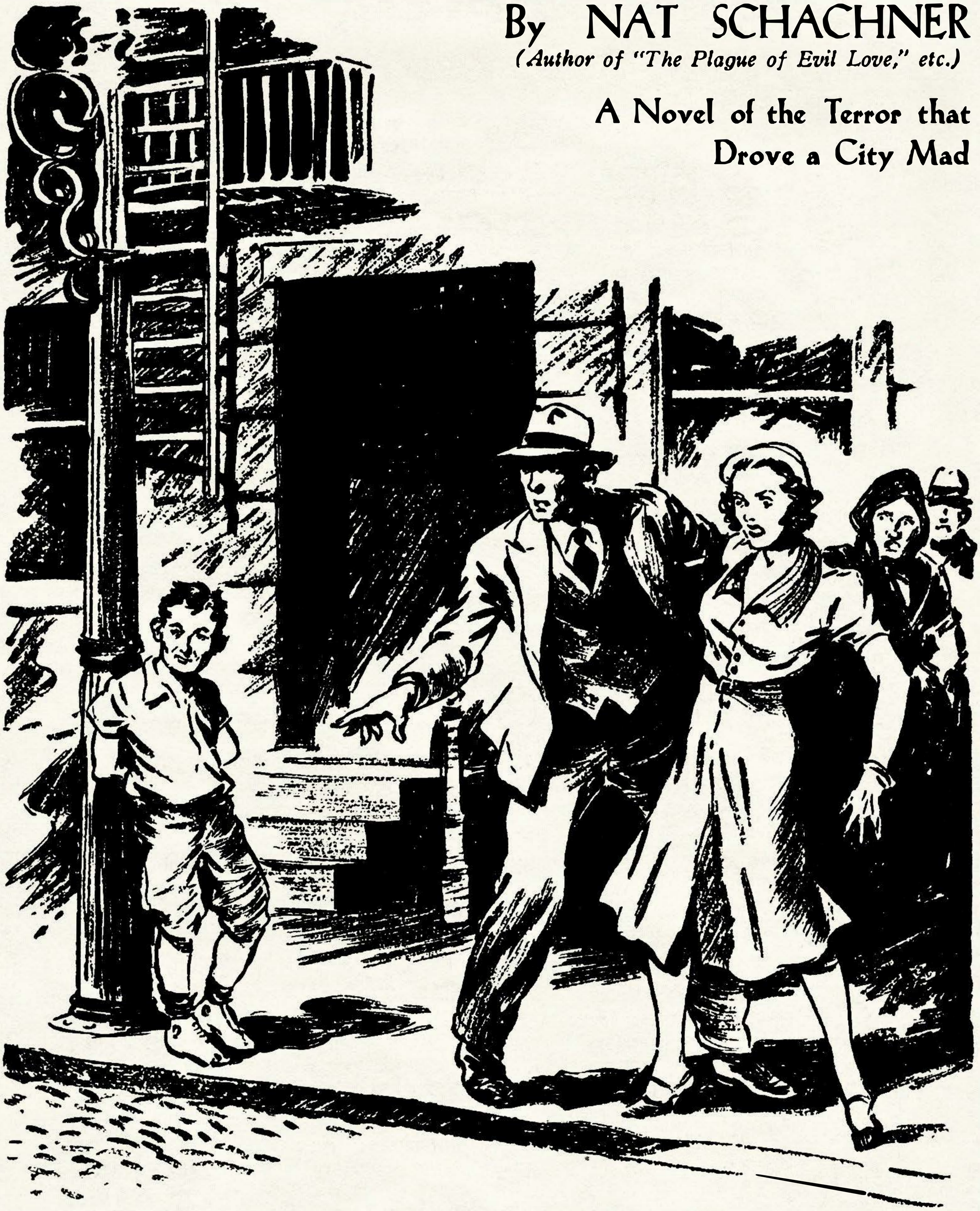
Honeymoon in Hell

IT WAS by mere accident that Jessica and I happened to be in New York on the very day that the Terror struck. As everyone knows who survived

By NAT SCHACHNER

(Author of "The Plague of Evil Love," etc.)

A Novel of the Terror that Drove a City Mad



the ordeal, or followed its dreadful course in the headlines of the world, the first tragedy occurred on the afternoon of June 26th.

On the morning of that day, all unknowing, we had stepped off the Chicago flier, eager to catch our first glimpse of the great and fascinating metropolis that is the mecca of all Midwestern honeymooners. Jessica Tarrant had become Mrs. Rodney White only three days before, and I was still slightly intoxicated with the idea.

James Tarrant, Jessica's uncle, had met us at the train, and whisked us to his magnificent duplex apartment on Park Avenue. It had been at his urgent suggestion that we had come. He seemed preoccupied and rather harried, however, for a man of so much wealth. He fidgeted uneasily all through lunch, then excused himself hurriedly.

"An important appointment," he mumbled into his liqueur. "You children run along now and see the town. We'll do things right this evening, though. Dinner at the Colony, a show, and a midnight snack at the French Casino." He shook hands with me cordially—a tall, stooped man with quick, nervous movements and a worried look. He was still active in his business; something to do with the manufacture of chemicals, I knew vaguely. Then he was gone, leaving us to our own resources.

Jessica thrust her arm gaily through mine. "Let's go slumming, Rod," she suggested enthusiastically. "I've heard so much of the East Side, of the ghettos of New York. I'd rather see swarms of people, strange, exotic folk, even smell the smells of crowded sidewalks, than visit a lot of stodgy monuments and museums."

I, being very much in love, and newly married, naturally assented.

WE TOOK the subway down to Grand Street, walked east through a maze of narrow, crowded streets. I had never seen so many people together in one place in all my life. They jammed the sidewalks, they flowed into the gutters, they hung out of windows in the shabby tenements; they gesticulated, they chattered, they bargained with hucksters; and everywhere under foot, dodging death in front of honking cars, were dirty-faced children.

Jessica almost danced as she walked. "I adore children," she said fervently.

"So do I," I muttered, wrinkling my nose in some disgust. "But not these smudgy little brats with their weazened faces and all-knowing eyes. And as for smells, darling, I hope you've had your fill. Let's get out of here."

But Jessica, bright-eyed, breathless, was pulling me by the hand. "Look at that perfectly quaint little street," she exclaimed. "Come on, Rod. We've *got* to explore it. It might be a street in Europe."

We were nearing the East River now, and the street she had pointed out twisted crookedly between tall, leprous-looking tenements down to the dull gray waters beyond. The sunlight never penetrated its murky depths, and even the people who sat hunched on the stone stoops or who walked with slow, slouching steps along the narrow sidewalk seemed of a different race than the loud-chattering gesticulators we had just left. An overpowering smell of decay, of stagnant bilge, literally smote me in the face.

"Better get gas masks, then," I grumbled, but I followed nevertheless. Far better had I yielded to my first instinctive revulsion and insisted that we turn back!

The street was quiet, listless. Men slouched by, thin coat collars lifted over ragged, collarless shirts, though the day was hot. Shrivelled women stared after us with hostile eyes, resenting our presence. Even the children, swarthy, foreign in look and attitude, moved with stealthy tread and scuttered away at the sound of our feet.

"Now look, Jessica," I began, "Don't you think this interest of yours in how the other half lives is rather morbid? These people—"

I cut short abruptly. The half-formed word hung frozen on my lips, died in a swift tightening of muscles and paralyzed breath.

Directly in front of us a man had screamed.

I had heard men, and animals too, scream in the agony of death before. But never had I heard such terrible, high-pitched, tortured sounds issue from any human throat.

I had noted him casually in the semi-gloom. A derelict, manifestly—a homeless bit of the flotsam that washes eternally in the slums of big cities. The frayed collar of his coat sawed at his unshorn hair, his nose and eyes alike were

bleared with rheum, his feet flapped in toeless shoes. He shambled toward us, ready with his beggar's anticipatory whine.

Then he had screamed.

His hands flew suddenly to his throat, then beat down upon his body with furious blows. He leaped high in the air, writhed and twisted in horrible convulsions. And all the while the shrieks of agony flowed unendingly from his pallid lips.

"Good God!" I jerked out, and ran toward him.

But all at once the tortured man's body seemed to burst into flame. In a single second he blazed up like a pitch-pine torch. Clothes, flesh, bones wreathed in a billow of fire and smoke. A single moment his convulsed countenance turned to us through the licking glare, then it too exploded into a seething furnace.

Suddenly, he was down, a blackened smoking corpse, faceless, hairless, the clothes burned from his twitching body, the flesh seared from his bones.

IT HAD all happened so instantaneously that I had made only a few steps toward him when the end came. A split second's horrible silence; then the street awoke. Shouts, cries, the screams of women, the shrill whistle of a policeman.

I stared as one benumbed, heedless of the pounding feet behind us, even of Jessica's tense pull on my coat sleeve.

"It's impossible!" I moaned. "There was no one near him. Nothing hit him. Yet he burned to death as though he were inside a blazing furnace. How could—"

I became aware of the crowding people, their horrified, yet almost gloating faces. A policeman pushed his way importantly through the fast-growing mob. Then the thing that lay motionless on the stone sidewalk struck him. "Holy cats!" he gasped. "Wh—what happened? Who saw it?"

I started forward, only to be jerked back by Jessica's hand. She was pale, sick. "Don't go," she husked. "You can't do the poor fellow any good, and we'll be pestered by the police and reporters for weeks.'"

"But it's my duty as a good citizen to tell what I know," I protested.

"You know nothing," she answered slowly. A curious fixed look had come into her eyes, hiding the horror, the sickness, that had filled them before. I followed her gaze.

On the opposite side of the street a little boy lounged nonchalantly against a stoop, his hands in his pockets. He had not joined the pushing, morbid mob that milled around the charred remnants of what had once been a man. His features were pinched and smudgy, his appearance that of a typical gamin. But his large eyes were intense on the scene, greedy, glowing with an unholy luster. He could not have been more than ten.

So fierce was his absorption that at first he did not notice our glances in his direction. But suddenly he looked up, saw us. The glitter died in his gaze; a look, half fear, half sullen defiance, took its place. He averted his eyes, hunched his shoulders, started to shuffle rapidly down the street, hands still deep in trousers pockets.

"Filthy little beast!" I muttered venomously. "Did you notice how he gloated on the sight of that horrible body? If I had my way—"

But Jessica was tugging sharply at me. "Quick, Rod," she whispered. "Let's follow that child."

I stared, laughed disagreeably. "Surely you don't want to adopt the little dear?" I said with fine sarcasm. I knew my wife's penchant for children—any child! She adored them all.

Jessica ignored my sarcasm. The boy had disappeared around a corner. She literally pulled me along. Her hand trembled, her face was white and drawn. "I

don't know what it is, Rod," she panted. "I never felt this way about a child before. But there was something loathsomely evil in that little boy's face. I shivered as I looked at him."

"More swell reasons why we should chase after him," I grumbled. My nerves were jangled from that which still lay on the ground behind us.

"Don't you understand?" Jessica's voice sounded choked. "That boy was there, leaning against the stoop, watching that poor man *before* he died so hideously. And he never moved, or cried out, or showed fear all during the catastrophe; just stood there and—and gloated. It's not natural."

"Damn right it isn't!" I said, startled. Instinctively I hastened my pace. We swung around the corner, left the crowd still milling over the gruesome body. An ambulance clanged madly, more policemen were hurrying up.

HALF way down the block, we saw the little boy. He was walking swiftly, head bent, looking neither to the right nor to the left, hands still deep in his pockets. Beyond lay the river, turgid, sullen even under the impact of dancing sunlight. A tug steamed slowly, tracing a black smudge against the sky. A truck rumbled by.

It was I who set the pace now, to follow that youngster wherever he was going. Strange thoughts whirled in my brain. Doutbless I was a bit unhinged by what I had seen. It was ridiculous to associate a little boy of ten with the horirble tragedy we had witnessed. It was incredible too. But we held to the trail.

The boy had not seen us, had not looked back once. His movements were swift, purposeful. We turned the corner into River Street to see him dodging among strolling sailors, hustling longshoremen, heavily laden drays, huge boxes that encumbered the sidewalks.

Dingy freighters lay at ancient piers, taking on freight, unloading. The air drooped with heavy odor of sea, decaying fish, ripe bananas and tangy spices from Oriental ports. Lascars with dark, savage faces and bright tinsel earrings swaggered by. Filipinos mingled with Cockney sailors from a British tramp. Warehouses gave way to ship chandlers' shops, dingy with ancient ropes and rusty binnacle lights; saloons foul with stale whiskey slops alternated with one-night clip joints; a deserted seamen's chapel was mocked by chattering apes and parrakeets in a neighboring pet shop.

But the boy dodged on, and we followed. The street grew fouler and dingier, the legitimate bustle of the sea disappeared, to give way to more furtive buildings, to men shuffling along to strange destinations. Jessica gripped my arm.

"Perhaps we'd better turn back," she whispered. "After all, it was only a silly notion of mine."

I am a stubborn man, I must confess. I should have listened to her, should have dropped this seemingly profitless chase. We would have both been saved an infinitude of nightmare horror and suffering that still etch deep into our bodies and souls. But I just gritted my teeth and played the hunch my wife had first had, and which now I had taken over. The memory of that unfortunate derelict, blazing suddenly like a torch, had tinged my brain with a certain madness.

Then I stopped short with an exclamation, gripped my wife's hand unbelievingly. One moment the boy had been shuffling close to the wall of some particularly evil-looking houses not two hundred feet ahead; the next, he had disappeared. I had not seen him duck into any doorway, and the afternoon sun made a dingy brightness of the tawdry street. But vanish he had; and he did not reappear.

I swore in bewilderment. Jessica was frankly trembling now. "Rod, darling," she implored. "I've had enough. Let's go back, before it is too late."

"Too late for what?" I growled. "I'd hate to have it said that Rodney White got scared of a ten year old street urchin. You started this; now I'll finish it." Brutal talk to the girl one had just married and loved insanely, but the poison that was soon to envelop all New York was evidently already sapping my emotions, my reason.

I hurried openly to the place where I had last seen the gamin. Jessica, lips tight, cheeks drained of color, was at my side. I stood staring blankly at the tight-crowding walls. There was no alleyway through which he might have suddenly dived. Two warehouses stared back at me, tight-boarded, deserted, faceless against the sun.

But between them, squatting low like a nondescript beast, was a little shop. It looked equally dark and deserted, its solid wooden door chained and padlocked. Its solitary window was grimey with accumulated dirt; nothing stirred within its darkling depths.

Then a shaft of vagrant sunlight pierced the filth. I started back, heard in a horror-stricken haze Jessica's faint cry. A head was grinning out at us through the filthy window; a head of snarling evil and unutterable hate. Dead black hair plastered over swart, distorted features, and the eyes that glowered at us were wide and queerly drawn at the edges.

Next to it was another head, peering out at us with twisted mockery. A face even more incredible than the first. So tiny it could only have been that of a nine-months babe, yet infinitely old in its expression of savage malice and yellowed fangs. A fuzz of back mustache stubbled its retracted upper lip.

"Rod, darling," Jessica moaned. "They're watching us. They're moving; coming out after us! Let's get away. I'm terribly scared!"

Stiff legged, feeling my own lips snarl back like those grinning heads, I strode to the window, wiped vainly with my hand at the encrusted grime. I cupped my eyes, peered in.

My wife's fingers plucked at me; I disregarded her. Then suddenly I turned, grinning wanly. "They're not alive," I said. The sweat poured from my forehead. I had been more afraid than I would care to admit. "They're human heads, all right, but they're dead."

"Dead?" echoed Jessica in alarm.

"They've been dead a long time," I hastened to add. "One is doubtless that of a Papuan—a head hunter's trophy. The other that of a South American Indian. You've heard of how the tribes in the Amazon manage to shrink the heads of their slain enemies to the size of a tiny doll."

My wife shuddered. "But what are they doing in that window?" she asked.

I frowned at the dirty glass. "A curio shop of sorts, I suppose," I muttered. "Rather ghastly, I admit, but there's no accounting for tastes—and especially the tastes of sailors."

I jumped almost a foot at Jessica's sudden clutch at my arm. My nerves just then were not too steady. A voice had spoken—from nowhere. A thin, quavering voice, freighted with a queer jangling palsy.

"Will you be pleased to enter?" it said. "I have rare and curious things to show you."

WE BOTH seemed rooted to the ground as the wooden door of the shop, padlock and all, swung silently open. A stale, dank odor rushed out into the street. Then a light sputtered into being, a candle held high over a figure's head, framing him in a halo of yellow illumination, making the darkness behind more

thick and impenetrable than before.

He was bowed and gnarled with age, and a long black robe shrouded his spare form, flowed down to the floor itself. On his bald forehead rested a pointed hat, high-crowned. From beneath its brim, a few wisps of muddy grey haid straggled to his shoulders. But his face was uncannily like that of the doll-sized mask which rested in the window. Wrinkled parchment, bony nose, yellowed front teeth, eyes that veiled their cunning in a horrible attempt at a smile of invitation.

"Will you be pleased to enter?" he repeated.

Jessica bit her pallid lips, answered unsteadily. "No—that is—"

I felt my jaw ridge into hard knots. I made a sudden decision. "We'd be glad to," I said loudly. I pretended not to hear my wife's little exclamation, nor feel her restraining hand. I wanted to see what was inside that shop which held human heads within its grimy windows.

The old man smirked and bowed. "Of course," he quavered, and cast a sidelong glance at Jessica. "I have things of much interest—especially to such a young and pretty lady."

Cold air stirred down my spine. Already I regretted my decision, would have given worlds to have withdrawn it. But stubborn pride led me in; pride and the knowledge that I was more than a match for this palsied creature in outlandish costume.

The candle thrust its feeble light unsteadily around a crowded den. Vaguely it pricked out half-visible things on the tiers of shelves, things that pressed Jessica closer to my side. I felt her trembling violently. Out of the corner of my eye I had noted that the door had swung noiselessly shut behind us. The conviction grew on me that it had locked; that we were trapped. The window through which we had peered at the gruesome trophies of the headhunters was shielded by a high, stout panel. The interior of the strange little shop was wholly cut off from the outside street.

The old shopkeeper chuckled with wheezing breath as he lowered a lantern from the ceiling by its swinging chain, turned up its charred wick, rimmed it with flame from the light of his candle.

"I have many pretty things," he cackled, "many pretty things that your wife must desire. Look!"

We stared around the dust-covered shelves. The dust lay thick upon everything. As though nothing had been touched, nothing moved, for many years. My body stiffened; I heard Jessica's breath come and go very fast.

It was a strange shop we had blundered into; a damnable shop!

There were more of the hideous human heads grinning down at us along those shelves. An Iron Maiden stood upright against the farther wall, open on its pivot, disclosing the grim serried spikes that long ago had pierced with slow-increasing pressure the unfortunate victims within. Their tips were a rusty red. Somehow I knew that it was blood. A stout rope dangled from a smoky beam.

"That," he said with queer pride. "is the rope that hung Captain Kidd." Then he pointed to a knife-like edge in a slot. "And that," he whispered, "is the very guillotine that sliced off a thousand pretty heads in Paris." His gaze returned slowly to Jessica. "You, my dear, have just the slenderness and grace of neck for my plaything."

I HAD had enough of it. My hair had bristled at the sight of the other trophies on those rows of shelves. Goblets filled with a thick, syrupy red liquid that looked horribly like blood; instruments of torture, garroting bows, wicked Malay *krises,* able to disembowel a man at one cruel thrust, devil masks of the Congo, turnscrews to squeeze the victim's

brains into a pulp, stuffed bushmasters and cobras with beady, glittering eyes, most poisonous of snakes.

The old man himself was like one of his withered, dust-covered trophies. His snake-like eyes had not removed from Jessica's shrinking form. "Would you care to buy?" he asked insinuatingly. "I have something special for the lady. The very ring that Borgia used to poison her friends. Perhaps—"

"No; we don't care to buy," I answered angrily. The old man with his high-crowned hat and long black robe was obviously mad; his brain turned by long immersion in this airless shop with its sinister trophies. It was ridiculous to believe that he had the hangman's rope used on Captain Kidd or the Borgian ring that had long since disappeared from history. It was just a curio shop, leaning toward the macabre. Doubtless the trophies were fakes, and just as obviously they had not been disturbed for years.

Yet I could not restrain a certain uneasy prickling of my skin. I would be glad when we would emerge once more into the open street, into the sunshine. But being stubborn, I held like a hunting dog to my point. Warily my eyes searched every nook and cranny of that evil shop. No sign of the boy, no sign of any exit other than the outside door.

"What," I demanded suddenly, "has happened to the little boy who came in here some minutes ago?"

Jessica gasped once. Then there was silence. The queer shopkeeper had tensed within his robe. His eyes, deep-socketed, blazed with hellish fires. The very walls seemed waiting for the answer to my imprudent question.

Then he turned, slowly, pivoting. A mask of blankness had fallen on his lank features. "Boy? What boy?" he mumbled. "I have seen no boy."

I knew that he lied; yet I was glad. I had the feeling that I had stepped unwittingly into a hellish brew—and Jessica was with me. I wanted to get out as fast as possible.

"Okay, my mistake!" I said with false heartiness. "He must have ducked around the corner." I grinned. "He looked from a distance like the son of a friend of mine." A lame explanation, I realized; but it was the best I could do on the spur of the moment. "Now," I went on cheerfully, "we'll be going."

The shopkeeper made no move. His eyes burned on my wife. "No one," he whispered dryly, "leaves the store of old Jem until he buys."

"That's what *you* think," I retorted with a creditable amount of sarcasm, and strode to the door. I reached for a knob. There was none. I dug my fingers furiously into the crack between door and jamb, tugged. The door did not budge.

I whirled on the old man, fists clenched, heart pounding with anger. "Now listen to me." I snarled. "We're not buying any of your filthy wares; and furthermore, I'm giving you three seconds to open this door, or—"

He had not stirred. His hands were concealed in the folds of his robe. Jessica saw something move, cried out sharply. "We'll buy, Rod—anything! Tell him we'll buy!"

Instead, I bunched my muscles for the forward drive. Yet somehow I had a sickening realization that I would never reach him alive—that we were both completely at his mercy.

The old man cocked his baldish head suddenly to one side. He seemed to be listening to voices inaudible to us. Without knowing why I did it, I halted in my tracks. The perspiration streamed down my face. I heard no sound, no voice. To whom was he listening?

Slowly he nodded his head, as if in reluctant confirmation. His nut-withered face wreathed into an evil smile. His skinny hands emerged into the open.

"Yes, yes," he chuckled to himself, "that will be better—much better!"

He rubbed his hands together until the dry skin crackled, while I stood in open-mouthed amazement. Jessica huddled against me. I could feel the loud thudding of her heart through her sheer silk dress.

Slowly Jem lurched forward. "Yes, yes," he repeated. "It will be better thus." His bony finger stabbed at the smooth panel of the door. It swung silently open. The fetid, musty air of the shop whooshed out into the street. Sunlight blazed. Never in all my life had sunshine and a dirty, debris-strewn street filled me with such delight.

I grasped my wife by the arm, hurried out.

Jem made no move to stop us. But behind, just before the barrier swung once more into tight seclusion, I heard his wheezing chuckle. "Later, you will buy!"

CHAPTER TWO

Coming of the Plague

BREATHING deeply, we walked as fast as we could. Somehow we dared not look back. "What a horrible old man; what a dreadful shop!" Jessica shuddered.

I said nothing. What had he meant by that last remark? Was he playing with us as a cat does with a mouse, knowing full well he could place his sharp claws on us again? Almost angrily I tried to shake off my uneasy forebodings, to convince myself that Jem was merely a harmless old madman, whose brains had become addled from the grim curios in which he trafficked. For the nonce, I quite forgot the frightful immolation we had witnessed, the little child we had followed.

We were reminded of them soon enough, however. The afternoon sun had wester ed below the Jersey flats, and we were too shaken to linger long in the streets that fronted the river. I hailed a cruising cab, told him to drive fast for Park Avenue and Tarrant's apartment.

But there, in the great dropped living room with its wrought-iron balustrades and costly furniture, we found company. Men I had never seen before, talking in strained, rasped voices, huddled together in the center of the room as if they feared to stand apart, to show themselves alone.

Their talk hushed suddenly as we came in. Fear was obvious in their haggard eyes, in the way they jerked back from our abrupt entrance. But James Tarrant's voice rose loudly—to loudly, I thought. "It's all right. That's only my niece and her husband. Just married, you know. Came to visit New York. Ha—ha!"

His laughter was forced. He seemed more stooped than in the morning; the corners of his mouth twitched; there were new wrinkles around his eyes. He hurried forward to greet us. "Thank God you're all right!" he husked. "I was worried—" He pecked at Jessica's cheek, shook my hand.

For the moment I was staggered. "How did you know—" I started unthinkingly, stopped.

"Know?" He threw out his hand with a gesture as if to ward off something. "Why, everyone knows. The city's already crazy with terror. That's why these gentlemen are here."

In spite of my shock, of my own sick fear, I was a bit scornful. The town I came from boasted only a few thousand people, but they wouldn't go haywire because of what I had witnessed, gruesome enough though it was. "You mean New York City's scared to death because a single man dies—"

A gentleman withdrew himself from the huddled group. He was striking in appearance. His tall, spare form was carefully encased in correct frock coat, grey striped pants, patent leather shoes. A monocle glittered in his eye. Behind it

stared a glacial, supercilious coldness. His face was abrupt and angular, his manner that of one born to command.

"A single death?" he echoed in the precise English employed by cultured foreigners. "My dear sir, my dear young man where have you been all afternoon? Already a hundred men and women have flamed unaccountably to a terrible death, and the list mounts every minute!"

I FELT the cold trickle of fear in my veins. Jessica gave a little moan. "A hundred?" I gasped. "I thought there had been only one—on Cliff Street."

My wife's uncle introduced us with a certain futile distraction. "Count Lockhorst, this is my niece, Jessica, and her husband, Rodney White."

"The chap on Cliff Street was the first to be struck down," said another man quietly. He was dressed in a plain blue sack suit that could not conceal his bulging shoulders. His face seemed carved out of a solid block of granite, and his eyes were gimlets. "Since then, all over the city, over a hundred more have burned to cinders, on open streets, in full view of thousands."

"It's about time that your men put a stop to it, Inspector Byrnes," a paunchy, heavily-jowled man said violently. "Why don't the police do something about it? We're paying taxes for protection. Why, by tomorrow, there won't be a soul that'll dare to venture out into the streets."

Inspector John Byrnes turned slowly to the last speaker. He surveyed him with a certain studied contempt. "We can't put a stop to something that we know absolutely nothing about. It's a fantastic situation. People burning to a crisp suddenly, without rhyme or reason, in full view. We've already checked with scientists, including Mr. Tarrant's factory superintendent, Philip Jaeger. That's why I came here this evening. They all agree it's impossible for human flesh to burn like that, no matter what chemical or combustible might be used. Isn't that so, Mr. Jaeger?"

A short, grey-haired man nodded uneasily. "That's right, Inspector. We've been manufacturing chemicals for years, especially of the combustible type, and there's nothing in my experience that could produce such an effect. Besides, the victims would have to be drenched with liquid, and from your descriptions, there wasn't a chance of that."

"So you see, my dear Ambrose Twombly," Inspector Byrnes told his critic with soft emphasis, "we are helpless thus far. Even if you *do* pay taxes for our support, which I doubt."

"What do you mean by that crack?" Twombly blustered. "I'm a reputable broker. You can ask Mr. Tarrant. He asked me here to discuss a new flotation of stock for his business."

"Our records," mused Byrnes as if to himself, "have a file on a certain Ambrose Twombly who is a cheap confidence man, a grift artist who followed the circuses and raked in the yokels' small change. That wouldn't be *you* by any chance?"

The paunchy man paled, rallied. "Sir," he puffed, "that is libelous. I'll take it up with your superiors at once."

"They'll be very much interested," murmured Byrnes.

"Here! Here!" protested Tarrant. "You mustn't insult my guests. We have business to attend to. Count Lockhorst is in New York on a mission from his government to negotiate a contract with me for a large supply of chemicals. Now if you'll excuse us, Inspector—"

Byrnes did not move. His keen eyes probed thoughtfully around the taut circle of men, came to rest on myself and Jessica.

"There is one further point," the Inspector said suddenly. "We've checked eye-witness accounts of every burning so far. Except one. No one actually saw

the first man burn to death—in Cliff Street. But a woman happened to look out of a window, just before it happened. She claims there was a couple walking in the street, close to the spot. No one else was there, but the unknown bum. But when the police arrived, the couple had vanished. She *thinks* she might identify that young man and young woman if she saw them again. They were well dressed, and obviously not of the neighborhood." He swerved quickly on us. "Do *you*," he asked pointedly, "know anything about them?"

Jessica turned pale as snow, swayed unsteadily against me. "No! no!" she said faintly. "How should we?"

I TOOK a deep breath. I cursed myself for having betrayed ourselves by my unfortunate earlier remark. Inspector Byrnes was obviously not a foeman to be despised. "Yes, I do," I said steadily. "In fact, Inspector, *we* were the couple."

A faint stir ran through the men. A slight shrinking, as it were, as though somehow we had been responsible.

"Ah!" the policeman said softly, with a satisfied nod. "I thought it might have been you. Now tell me about it."

I did so, as rapidly as possible. I even told the story of our wildgoose chase of the little gamin, of our experiences in old Jem's grisly shop. As I talked on, I noted a certain stiffening on the part of Philip Jaeger, the mill superintendent; a queer ghastly pallor that overspread his face.

Another man entered quietly just as I finished. He spoke in a whisper to Tarrant. He was youngish looking, with coarse, straight black hair, and a wiry, muscular body.

"Good God!" ejaculated my wife's uncle, and fell back. "Listen to this, Inspector. This is Bayard Dickson, my assistant superintendent under Jaeger. He just told me—"

Byrnes waived him aside. His probing glance made holes through me. "What you say, White, about old Jem is of course nonsense. We know him well in the department. Mad as a hatter, but a harmless old coot. Prides himself on being a hypnotist, too. He's been in that shop of his for over twenty years, pottering around those silly curios he has. The sailors and longshoremen laugh at him; he hasn't sold one in years. As for children, he hates them. The kids in the neighborhood follow him and throw stones. No, you're all wrong there, White. You two just allowed the grisly atmosphere to get on your nerves, especially after what you had been through. But as for the little boy—"

He walked swiftly to the table phone, lifted it, spoke into the receiver: "Spring 7-3100, please!"

Police Headquarters!

Then: "Hello, Tim, get me Clancy, pronto. Hello, Clancy; yeah, this is Byrnes. Got the files on these fire-deaths before you? Good! Now listen—" His voice lowered, became inaudible. Then he stopped and listened in turn. When he finally pronged the receiver and turned to face us, his eyes were hard and his jaw set.

"In every case, except one," he announced, "some witness deposed that there was a child on the scene. Little boys, little girls. Ages approximately from eight to twelve. No older, no younger! And now you've completed the file on Cliff Street."

Bayard Dickson said slowly into the stunned silence. "I was just telling Mr. Tarrant. On my way over here, I saw a woman burst into flames and fall screaming to the sidewalk, just outside this door."

A sigh of horror rose from the men. Philip Jaeger's voice was broken with terror. "It's coming closer—to us."

Byrnes jerked out of his seat. "Was there any child present Mr. Dickson?"

The man wrinkled his forehead, tried to think. "I don't exactly—" he started; then: "That's right; I remember now. Leaning against the wall of the next house, about thirty feet away, was a youngster. I thought she seemed too calm and self-possessed about it. It wasn't natural."

"She?" gulped Twombly. He hadn't spoken since Byrnes had faced him down.

Dickson nodded. "It was a little girl —about nine, I should judge."

Byrnes cursed, went swiftly for the door. For a big man he could travel fast. "If only I can catch the little brat," he flung over his shoulder, and was gone before we realized it.

BUT even in the depths of my horror, I knew he would never lay hands on on her. I am as sane and skeptically unsuperstitious a man as you could find. But that youngster we had seen had something malign, utterly evil about his weazened face that made him seem not quite human; a changeling in childish form. And now all these others!

It might be sheer coincidence that they were present at the scene of every horror, but I didn't believe it. I knew that Jessica for all her love of children did not believe it; and worse still, I was certain that New York tomorrow would not believe it.

In the middle of our sickish silence I heard Count Lockhorst say with thoughtful intonation, "This reminds me of certain episodes that occurred in the remote mountains of my own country. But there the peasants, superstitious folk, attributed the plague to a witch."

"What happened finally?" Jessica asked timidly.

He fixed her with his precise glance through the staring monocle. "They burnt the witch, my dear lady, and the plague was over!"

Twombly's loud, vulgar voice interjected. "Bunk!" he declared vigorously. "This is America, God's country; not backwoods Europe! I'll tell you what it's all about."

We swerved to him. He had recovered his assurance, now that Byrnes had left; his jowls wagged pendulously.

"What?" asked Jaeger faintly.

Twombly took out a big cigar, lit it, puffed violently. "It's just a blackmail stunt, that's what it is," he declared with confidence. "Some wise guy's trying to scare New York out of its wits; then he's gonna try and collect from the big shots for protection." He whirled on my wife's uncle, shot out a fat finger. "Like you, for instance, Mr. Tarrant."

Tarrant shrank back. "Me?" he spluttered. "Why, it's—it's nonsense!"

But the broker—or confidence man—jiggled his cigar vigorously. "Yes, sir, that's what it is. Mark my words! Me—I've seen it before." He had forgotten his pose, had reverted to the argot and manner of his former life.

Dickson said with scorn. "Your explanation, Mr. Twombly, of course explains—everything. Just how this—uh—trick is worked by your mythical blackmailer—for example."

Twombly sawed at his collar, as if it had suddenly become too hot. "I—I don't know how he works it—but mark my words—it's a racket all right." His little eyes darted around the room. "Gotta be going," he muttered. "It's late—an appointment." He sidled toward the door.

"I'll go with you," Dickson announced. "In spite of everything, Mr. Tarrant's plant must be kept going."

It seemed to me he cast a faint glance of contempt toward his superior, Philip Jaeger. The latter was a greenish-yellow, but he said nothing. My wife's uncle took a deep breath, looked at Jessica and myself.

"If you'll excuse us three," he hinted, "we have business."

CHAPTER THREE

Fiery Death

WE TOOK the hint, left Tarrant, Count Lockhorst, and Jaeger in the library, climbed slowly to our room on the second floor of the duplex. Jessica was paler than I had ever seen her. "Rod, darling!" she said suddenly.

I paused at the window which overlooked the street. I was making sure the fastenings were tight. In the distance, far down the side street, I had caught the red reflection of flame somewhere, heard the faint echo of a scream. "Yes, Jessica," I said very loudly to hide that horror-fraught sound, blocked the window with my body to conceal the telltale glare.

"I think," she remarked quietly, "we've been marked for destruction."

"Eh, what's that?" I exclaimed startled. All evening the same thought had been etching into my vitals.

"We've seen too much; know too much," she persisted. "Everyone downstairs heard us pin the blame on little children; they heard us accuse old Jem. Tomorrow all New York will know about it as well."

"Dickson didn't hear," I protested.

"I saw him," she answered. "I saw the door open slightly just as you started to talk. Then it didn't move another inch until you had finished. When you were through, Dickson came in. He had been listening outside all the while. Why?"

I couldn't answer that one; couldn't answer anything. "As for old Jem," I evaded, "Inspector Byrnes gave him a clean bill of health."

"Do you believe it?"

"No!" I answered heavily, and went to bed. But close to my hand I placed the stout poker from the fireplace.

Nothing happened that night.

But in the morning hell had broken loose.

We were awakened by loud voices below, by the tramp of feet, of banging doors. Hastily we dressed, went down. Tarrant was in the breakfast room, his orange juice untasted before him, his coffee getting cold. His face was ashen-grey, his eyes staring. Seated with him at the table were the same men who had been there the night before. Only Count Lockhorst seemed calm. He was sipping coffee with manifest enjoyment.

"Great Heavens, Uncle!" Jessica slipped from me, ran to him in alarm. "What has happened?"

"Happened?" he gulped, and almost choked. "First look at this."

He thrust a newspaper into her hand. I read the headlines hastily. They were easy to read, yet the tremendous type blurred and danced before my eyes. The ink was still wet, as though the edition had been rushed off the press at break-neck speed.

"The Terror Spreads!" it screamed. "New York Scene of Indescribable Horror! At Time of Going to Press Over 500 People Have Perished in Flaming Holocausts. More Dead Each Minute. Police Baffled; Scientists at Loss. *Extra-Special.* Human Torches Attributed Somehow to Children. Suggested by Jessica White, Niece of James Tarrant, Wealthy Manufacturer. It has been discovered. . . ."

I read no more. A sick feeling overcame me, left me weak in the knees.

"What damn fool," I demanded harshly, "was responsible for coupling my wife's name with that story?" I looked pointedly, with clenched hands, at Inspector Byrnes.

He shook his head in the negative. There was fine lines of worry beneath his eyes I had not noticed there the night before. "If you mean me, White," he said, "you're mistaken. I wasn't responsible for the leak. But there's more news. Mr. Tarrant, show him."

My wife's uncle thrust out a trembling hand. "Look at this, Rodney," he quavered. "I found it under the door early this morning."

I took the sheet of paper. It was of common texture, impossible to trace. The writing had been crudely printed in childish letters. *Childish?* I felt the warm perspiration trickle slowly down my back as I read.

> You are next; you and your niece, Jessica White. You have witnessed my power; it is only a foretaste. Do you wish yourself and your niece to become flaming torches? If not, place a red card in the window overlooking Park Avenue. Get $100,000 in cash, small bills, unmarked. You will receive instructions what to do. It will do you no good to go to the police; that will only hasten matters.

"AND a half a dozen other men of wealth received the same kind of communication this morning," Byrnes added.

"Blackmail!" Ambrose Twombly boomed. "Just what I had expected. Just exactly as I told you."

"Oh, you did?" The Inspector narrowed his eyes.

Twombly drew in his horns hastily. "Sure, Mr. Byrnes," he said placatingly. "Don't it look to you like that kind of a racket? First you scare the living daylights out of a whole city; then you concentrate on the fellows who can pay for their scares."

Byrnes nodded thoughtfully. "It begins to look that way," he murmured.

But I was in no mood for useless chatter. The hideous menace that enveloped New York had now definitely narrowed its net to Jessica. The monster had shown his power; now he intended to strike. My heart skipped a beat; stopped. "What do you intend doing about this, Mr. Tarrant?" I asked unsteadily.

All eyes turned to the old man. He was haggard, shrunken into himself. "Do?" he echoed. "What can I do but pay? It's my life, and Jessica's."

I started to breathe again. Jaeger was mumbling to himself. "Of course, that's sensible."

Even Byrnes nodded. "I hate to say it, being a policeman. But we're helpless—as yet."

Bayard Dickson, however, jerked forward. "Do you realize what that means?" he snapped. "That's about every cent of cash you have, Mr. Tarrant. We were going to use it to put through our contract with Count Lockhorst's government."

The Count set down his empty cup. His monocle held motionless in his left eye. "My government will insist on deliveries according to the terms," he said evenly.

Dickson turned on him with a snarl. "If Mr. Tarrant pays this blackmail the whole deal is off then," he cried.

"What would you do in my place?" the old manufacturer quavered.

The assistant superintendent's face was a hard, set mask. "Fight them," he gritted. "This contract's your only chance to pull you out of a tight hole. Mr. Jaeger knows that as well as I. There's no proof that this blackmailer actually has anything to do with this mess. Perhaps he's only horning in." His voice sharpened. "Doesn't it strike you as funny that he should know exactly how much free cash you have?"

Byrnes narrowed his gaze. "Good point, that!" he murmured.

I spoke then. "My wife's life is involved. How about it, Tarrant?"

He nodded wearily. "You're right, Rodney. We can't take chances. The contract must drop."

Count Lockhorst rose, adjusted his frock coat, bowed with clicking heels. "In that case," he smiled thinly, "I shall leave you. My government requires those chemicals at once. There are other manufacturers. Good day!"

The red card flaunted its message in the window according to instructions. And over the city, in half a dozen other homes of wealthy men, the same sinister oblong appeared. I never knew exactly what Tarrant had to do to turn over the money. All I know is that it was done. For, that evening, he seemed to breathe easier; there was a little color in his cheeks, and he even cracked a very poor joke.

But my fears for Jessica were not allayed. What Dickson had said stuck in my craw. She knew too much; so did I, for that matter. But I wasn't worrying about myself.

NOR did the terror that swept New York abate. By evening of that day no more newspapers appeared. The staffs had deserted en masse. During the day hundreds more had flamed to hideous, screaming deaths, always in the open streets, always in full view of scores of horrified, helpless people. There started a mass migration, the greatest in the history of the city. Men and women fought frantically to get out of town. The railroads were jammed, every automobile road was filled with struggling, fighting, tearing humanity. People died unnoted in the crush; no one was any longer human; all instincts were submerged except the solitary one of self-preservation. The Flaming Death was on every one's pallid lips; a single outcry created a new stampede.

The children suffered especially!

Inspector Byrnes had sent out strict orders to his men to seize any child found near the scene of a human torch, to bring him in for questioning. It was easier said than done.

No one knew where the next blow would fall. Always there was a mad rush away from the ghastly spot, and by the time the police appeared, only the crisped body of the tortured victim remained.

But once a daring policeman happened to be present. Sure enough he saw the inevitable child, a little boy of mine, gloating in a nearby hallway. He grabbed at him. The story was later told by a wild-eyed, shaking onlooker. The child had squirmed under the big hand. Suddenly the officer loosed his hold, staggered back with a great outcry. The next moment he was a mass of soaring flames. There were two screaming, burning pyres instead of one.

After that, even the bravest of men steered clear of every little boy or little girl who happened to be seen in the streets.

On the third day the fearful tragedy grew in dimensions. Parental love—the most powerful and most altruistic of all human emotions—gave way to the prevalent madness. It was now definitely established that somehow, in some inexplicable fashion, these mere tots were involved in the grisly horror that had invaded New York. Mothers who would have died for their offspring, fathers whose whole ambitions had been wrapped up in the future of their young, now looked at them askance. No one knew whose child might be the next to bring torture and flaming death to his elders.

Suspicion grew to panic, panic to utter madness.

Who started it, no one ever knew. But the cry arose, spread. *"All children are accursed!"* The parents succumbed to the horror. In unleashed fear, with blind cruelty, they thrust their erstwhile beloved ones out into the streets, barred doors and windows behind them, cowered and trembled in the semi-darkness.

The bewildered youngsters cried and wailed on innumerable doorsteps, pleading heartbrokenly for admission; their tiny minds clouded with primeval terrors. But the shivering parents hardened their hearts and threw missiles at them from the safety of upper windows, bade them begone.

Huddled, frightened, not knowing which way to turn, the tots sought the safety of their own kind. Little groups grew in size, merged to form great bands. They roamed the streets, crying, begging those adults whom starvation or fear still forced to hurry through the streets, for food, for shelter. But strong men fled at their approach, panic emptied the streets as they toiled wearily along.

Little boys, little girls, innocents, cast out, driven by the demons of superstitious terror, of universal panic!

It was heartrending to watch them from our vantage point on the upper floor. Their wails grew weaker and weaker as sun and hunger and thirst took their toll. Yet no one dared help. How could they, when it was not known whether some of the true fiends had not insinuated themselves into the wandering groups of innocents, awaiting their opportunity?

EVEN Inspector Byrnes, on that third day, shook his head wearily. He had come to get from Tarrant the story. once more, of how the blackmail money had been paid over, seeking a clue. There was none. "It sure tears my heart out, Mrs. White," he said gruffly to Jessica, "but what can we do? Not one of my men would touch any youngster with a ten foot pole."

Jessica was decidedly thinner now. The dreadful terrors of the past three days had taken their toll. Yet she had steadfastly refused my pleas to quit town. "I can't leave Uncle Jim alone," she averred, "especially after the servants have deserted in a panic. He needs me, poor old man."

But her cheeks grew hollow and her eyes clouded with gnawing fear. Now they flamed angrily at Byrnes' words. "Big husky men," she exclaimed, "afraid of those little darlings, watching them suffer and die without lifting a hand!"

A great band had just swung around Eighty-seventh Street into Park Avenue. They filled the sidewalk from end to end, spilled out into the street. They staggered wearily along, dragging their sore feet, their voices hoarse from begging an alienated, heartless world to take pity on them.

"I can't stand it any longer," Jessica cried suddenly, and fled for the stairs.

"Here," I shouted in alarm. "Where are you going?"

But she was already in the butler's pantry on the ground floor, rummaging.

"By God!" swore Byrnes with a certain admiration, "she's going to feed them."

My muscles released from their first paralysis. I raced after her, taking the winding steps two at a time. For three days I had held her in the house, guarding her sleeplessly against the inevitable attack. Of all New York, a deep instinct had warned me that the hidden monster who had unleashed this madness, had marked *her* for destruction. Myself as well, perhaps. And now she was voluntarily delivering herself into the hands of those who lurked outside, waiting, waiting. . . .

"Jessica!" I cried frantically. "Wait! Don't go—"

She may have heard; she may not. But the bang of the front door was a trip-hammer crashing on my heart. I whirled, catapulted after her.

She was out in the street, calling on the milling band—there must have been over three hundred in it—waving in her slender hands loaves of bread, a huge round cheese. They stared at her a moment like shy wild beasts; then, with a clamor of hoarse little voices, they swarmed around her, tearing at the bread with greedy paws, clambering over her central figure for the luscious cheese she still held aloft.

Even as I raced for her, wild anxiety hammering in every vein, I noticed one little girl. She was in, but not a part of, the childish horde. Her sallow lips were

not tear-streaked; there was an air of malicious stealth in the way she sidled through the hungry, maddened waifs toward my wife. I had seen that same rapt, gloating expression on the little boy in Cliff Street. Her left hand was invisible, bulging in the pocket of a thin jacket that she wore.

Horror exploded in my brain. Already the little girl had pushed her way through the outer throng of squirming children, was coming closer to my wife.

With a shout of warning I hurled forward. Yet even as I sprang, I knew that I would be too late; that never could I reach that little fiend before she had done her loathsome work.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Curse Draws Nearer

I HIT that screaming horde like a battering ram. I tossed the squalling youngsters to the right and left. The little ones cowered, then screamed and clawed at my hurtling body with vicious little hands and feet. They had become creatures of the wild; reversions to the beasts.

Jessica turned a startled face in my direction. But even as she turned, her eyes widened, filled with a terrible fear. She had seen the child, had surmised the full horror from her evil-twisted little countenance. In desperation I took off in a low, smashing dive. The squalling horde of little folk gave way with high-pitched pipings of terror. Jessica was backed up against the wall of the next apartment house, pinned in by swirling, screaming children, unable to move.

Somehow my clutching fingers caught at the thin jacket of the little devil just as her fist bulged in its pocket. I jerked savagely. The jacket ripped.

Someone screeched, a high, queer animal scream. Madness, terror, stampeded those children. In seconds I had clambered to my feet, alone in an echoing street, staring stupidly at the fragment of cloth in my hand.

The girl from whom I had torn it was gone; all children were gone. Only the diminishing rush of little feet, of thinning screeches came to my ears. Had I said *all* were gone? I was mistaken. Before my very eyes an unrecognizable little form was twitching on the ground, its body still enveloped in the hungry fires. My wild jerk had swerved the aim of Satan's imp, had brought horrible death to an unknown waif while Jessica had been saved.

Jessica!

I started, shrieked out the name. The canyon walls engulfed my cry, sent it back muffled, mocking. Jessica was gone too! While I had staggered to my feet, while the children had stampeded, Jessica had vanished.

I raced into the adjoining hall. It was ornate, elaborate, in keeping with the expensive apartments above. But it was empty. Whoever had lurked in its corridors, waiting just this chance, had had plenty of time to seek his lair with his prey.

My feet beat a desperate tattoo out into the street again. There Inspector Byrnes, eyes narrowed, caught up with me. A gun glinted in his hand. His gaze shuddered away from the poor little motionless body. "Where's your wife?" he gasped.

"They got her," I said dully. "They were waiting for her to come out. Perhaps they even led those children to parade past, to lure her out."

He swore, slowly, with feeling. "By damn! She must still be in this building, then. I'll get a squad, search every room, every cranny. I'll get her back for you." With that he spun on his heel, raced back to Tarrant's duplex, to phone.

I watched him go with ashes in my

heart. Already, I knew, the monster had whisked her away. There were half a dozen exits on different blocks. I started to run after the Inspector, to tell him so; thought better of it. A wild thought wormed its way into my brain. After all, what did I know about Byrnes? Why had he taken such an interest in the case of James Tarrant? Other men, of more wealth, had been threatened, yet he was always around when trouble started. I was pretty close to insanity just then.

Then my thoughts grew even madder. Tarrant had insisted we come to New York. Why? He had not seen Jessica for years; ever since he left the Midwest. And among the people with whom he had surrounded himself there was not one whom I could trust.

I hunched my shoulders, mumbled to myself. My hands were outspread claws; madness gnawed at my mind. I would find Jessica alone; kill the one responsible for her abduction with bare hands. I started on a shambling run. Old Jem's—the black-robed shopkeeper's—where human heads adorned grimy windows and nameless instruments of torture gathered dust on shelves—that was my destination.

HOW I got there I never knew. My brain was a welter of insanity; my feet moved of their own volition. There were no subways running, no taxis. The streets were empty, left to the Horror that stalked with sudden flaring death.

Suddenly my senses returned. I found myself leaning against a tight-shut warehouse wall, gasping for breath; tired—very tired. But just in front of me was a grimy window, hiding within its depths macaber secrets.

And Jessica?

I lurched forward with a cry. I was just an unthinking animal seeking the mate who had been reft from it. I had no other thought, no saving caution. So it happened that I did not notice the figure who had been dogging my staggering footsteps this past several minutes; I did not see him slink closer and closed.

The door of the shop was blankly dark. I lifted knuckles, pounded savagely. "Open up, damn you! Give me back Jessica!"

But even as my knuckles bruised, I heard the pad of approaching feet. Instinctively I half turned. The man was almost on top of me. He stiffened at my sudden swerve, lurched to a halt almost at my side. His right hand was hidden in his coat pocket.

I sucked breath sharply, lifted my fist. A flame of fury overcame me. It was Ambrose Twombly, fat, paunchy, panting. His shifty eyes widened with alarm. "Look out behind you," he screamed.

I laughed horribly, started to spring. That trick was old as the hills.

Then the back of my head exploded into a million rushing stars. As the night of oblivion folded around me, it seemed that Twombly was running as fast as his fat legs could carry him! It seemed also that I heard the screech of tires, and a loud report, as if a tire had blown out. . . .

"OKAY, White! You're all right now!" The voice sounded familiar, ripped through the pain that blasted at my head. I opened my eyes, looked blearily around.

I was lying propped up against the tight-shut and padlocked door of old Jem's shop. Inspector Byrnes was staring down at me, grinning. The gun in his hand was still smoking. A police prowl car stood at the curb, its engine running. Two blue-coated men were lifting a limp body into the seat.

"Wh-what happened?" I gasped.

"Saved your life, I suppose," Byrnes grinned with satisfaction. "But better still, I split the case wide open, got the man responsible for the Terror. There'll

be no more human torches; no more blackmail."

I sat up abruptly, heedless of the clotted blood on my head.

"Who was it?" I gulped.

"Ambrose Twombly!" Byrnes said with satisfaction, and jerked his thumb toward the limp form in the car. "I suspected him right away, from his old record. A cheap grifter gone haywire, trying for big business. I had my handwriting experts check up on the blackmail notes. We had samples of his writing in our files. The printing gave him away. For he had a queer habit of always printing his capitals instead of writing them in script. They tallied exactly. I was waiting for the last confirmation when your wife ran out on us. When I got back to phone, Twombly too was gone. He had skipped just as I suspected."

The Inspector's smile widened. "I sent out an alarm, then thought of you as well. I remembered your obsession about poor old Jem, hustled down here with a couple of men. Got here just in time to find you lying dead to the world on the ground, and Twombly running like hell. I yelled for him to stop; he pulled a gun, and I let him have it. He confessed writing the notes and collecting the money just before he died. Everything's washed up."

I struggled dizzily to my feet, shook my head. That smack on the base of my skull had not helped me collect my thoughts. Yet I felt a vast, overpowering relief. New York freed from the madness that had overwhelmed it for days; life once more normal, Jessica. . . .

"Jessica!" I cried weakly. "I forgot my wife! Where is she?"

Byrnes clapped me jovially on the shoulder. "Don't worry about her," he assured. "As long as we got the Master Mind, she'll come through okay. No doubt my men have already found her. I left orders for them to finecomb the neighborhood."

CHAPTER FIVE

Horror Comes Home

BY THIS time my brain had cleared. There were certain discrepancies. That blow had knocked me out, for instance. Twombly had *not* hit me; he couldn't have. And Twombly had been in Tarrant's house while Jessica had been seized. He couldn't have gotten out fast enough to do the trick. Furthermore. . . .

"Did Twombly confess to the torch murders, and how they were done?" I demanded sharply.

The smile wiped off the Inspector's face.

"N-no," he admitted slowly. "Can't say as he did. He died just as he confessed to sending the letters and where he hid the swag. But it musta been him, all right. Who else—?"

"Remember what Dickson, Tarrant's assistant superintendent, said?" I broke in excitedly. "That the blackmail stunt might have been a mere horning in by someone who saw a chance to take advantage of the Horror? That would fit Twombly right enough; a cheap con man who saw plenty of money ahead in the universal fear. He hadn't brains enough to start the thing himself. What did he know about this mysertious principle entrusted to devils in the guise of little children, that causes human flesh to burn like gasoline-soaked rags?"

Byrnes shifted uneasily. "He must have!" he declared without conviction. "Who else—"

"Old Jem!" I said emphatically. "We trailed that first kid here. And Jessica is in there now!"

Brynes lost his hesitancy, laughed out loud. "There you go again, blaming poor old Jem. He's a harmless moron, I tell you; couldn't plan a stunt like this."

"Nevertheless," I retorted stubbornly, "I want his place searched."

Precious minutes went in argument over that. Byrnes yielded.

The place was dark within, musty; as if it hadn't been used for years. The policeman searched around half-heartedly, obviously a bit leery of the gruesome trophies that filled the shop. But there was no sign of Jem; no sign of any exit or hiding place.

We were out in the street again. I was baffled, beside myself with helpless futility. Somewhere Jessica was captive, under torture, dead perhaps . . . .

The policemen clambered into the prowl car, shoved the dead Twombly callously aside. "Better come with us, White," Byrnes advised. "I'll bet your wife's on her way to headquarters right now."

I jumped on the running board. "Okay!" I said loudly, "I think you're right. I made a mistake about this place."

"That's the ticket," Byrnes agreed heartily, as the car picked up speed and skidded around a corner. "But get in; we'll crowd a bit."

I jumped off just then, landing stiff-legged on the street. "Hey! What the—" yelled the inspector, leaning out, redfaced.

But I waved my hand and ducked into a little alley, kept on going. I had a plan, and the police didn't fit into it.

I raced through to the other end, whirled a corner, found myself again on River Street, on the farther side. I slid into a hall, settled myself down to watch.

IT SEEMED like hours; it must have been only minutes. A few men hurried by, scared, ready to run at a shadow. A policeman walked warily in the middle of the street, gun hand close to his holster. Then again silence, while the broken door sagged cavernously into Jem's curio shop.

I was just giving up all hope when a boy of about twelve came furtively down the street. He was older than the others I had seen, and his face was sharp with premature evil. I huddled into the shadows just in time. He had glanced swiftly up and down the deserted street. No one in sight. Then I saw him hesitate, puzzled, at the broken door.

He looked both ways again, bent, and—I rubbed my eyes. He had vanished; even as the first boy had vanished.

Fear pumped my heart; my skin was ridged with cold. Yet I sidled along the walls of the warehouse until I reached the very spot where the boy had disappeared. It was a little to the left of the door, directly under the grimy window.

Recklessly, crazily, on hands and knees, I pawed along the solid panel of the store front. I had to solve the mystery; it was my last chance to save Jessica from the horrors that awaited her.

My thumb caught on a little bulge, pressed. Blackness yawned suddenly before me. A sliding panel had opened. With a fierce exultation I lowered myself into the cavity. There was another whir. The panel had slid shut behind me. But as it did, a dim light glowed. A hooded electric light actuated by the closing mechanism.

It revealed a passageway leading deeply down. I took it, panting with anticipation. On and on; then suddenly it slanted upward. I crept slowly up the grade, making no noise. For a new light glowed directly ahead—baleful red through a narrow slit.

I knew where I was. The tunnel had gone directly under Jem's shop, had burrowed its way into the abandoned warehouse to the left. I clenched my teeth. I was approaching the very lair of the Terror that had gripped New York!

A door barred my way. The red flame streamed through a narrow opening. I crouched as I heard voices. One was harsh with rage, unrecognizable.

"That damned fool Twombly almost wrecked the whole scheme," it snarled. "A two-bit crook, trying to chisel in on things he didn't understand. You sure the cops got him, Jem?"

"Positive, Master," quavered another voice. Unmistakable, that one! "I saw the police shoot him down. He crumpled fast.

But I had to duck inside and take the secret passage behind the false shelves, and leave that feller, Rodney White, outside."

The first voice swore. "You make a mess of things, Jem. Your idiot mind can't think of more than one thing at a time. You should have dragged him in."

"Yes, Master," whined the half-wit.

"But maybe everything's just as well. White is dead, no doubt, from that smack on the head. And Twombly will be a swell fall guy. The dumb cops will be sure he was the Master Mind in back of everything. And since we've accomplished our purpose, and intended anyway to call a halt, they'll be doubly sure it was Twombly. I've demonstrated to your satisfaction that I spoke the truth, haven't I, Your Excellency?"

I started, almost gave myself away. The new voice that filtered through was precise, calm, impeccable. Count Lockhorst!

"I think I may safely say you have succeeded," the foreign agent admitted. "Your invention will prove of incalculable value to my country. Think of it—London, Paris, every great city on the Continent, in the grip of the Flaming Death. Thousands of children, hypnotized by a tool like Jem, lured into his net, carrying the tiny mechanism through populous streets. A touch on the spring, and those strange rays you call the Z-Ray impacts invisibly on the proposed victim, fuses all organic matter, including the living cells of the body, to incandescence. Why, within a month, all Europe will be at the mercy of my country."

THE first man laughed disagreeably. "You wouldn't believe me before."

Count Lockhorst said coldly, "A million dollars is not turned over to an inventor simply on faith."

"Well, give it to me now."

"Just a moment. There is this young woman. She knows too much. What will you do with her?"

"Leave her to me. She butted into something, and she'll take the consequences."

I heard Jessica's wild scream.

I had been crouching against the door, my brain churning with horror as the brutal plot unfolded. My muscles moved of their own accord. In a red haze I jerked the door ide, catapulted in.

Two men whirled at my smashing entrance. Count Lockhorst, tall, carefully dressed, monocle firmly fixed in eye. He was opening a small leather bag. I caught a glimpse of green bundles of money. Jem, in his outlandish robe and high-crowned hat, bobbed with jaw agape.

But the third man had his back to me. Something glinted in his outstretched hand. A shining tube, no bigger than a penny whistle. At the anterior end it swelled to a metal bulb. He aimed it directly at my wife.

She was stripped to the waist, bound helpless to a chair. Her clothes hung in tatters about her, displaying her lovely rounded breasts, the white glamor of her legs. Her eyes clung in stark terror to the tiny weapon.

I saw the bulb compress just as I lashed forward. Jem screamed idiot warning; Count Lockhorst's hand fell away from the bag, caught at his pocket. I struck the Master full tilt, knocked the little tube from his grasp, sent him hurtling against the wall.

"Rod, darling!" sobbed Jessica hysterically. "I knew you would come."

But behind me a gun crashed. I felt a stab of pain across my side where the bullet had plowed. White-hot agony it was. I flopped to the floor with a groan.

"This unlooked-for intrusion makes it perfect," Count Lockhorst said coldly. "He is the last one who could possibly trace us. Get him, Jem!"

But the man I had hit wobbled to his

feet. His face was a snarling mask of hate. He lurched toward me. "I'll torture him bit by bit," he howled. Jem rubbed his withered hands with glee. "Let me help, Master," he chuckled.

I groaned, rolled convulsively. It was not all acting. The sight of the Master Mind, the inventor, the monster who had staged horror in New York as a mere demonstration, had the effect of a stunning blow.

He was Bayard Dickson, Assistant Superintendent in Tarrant's factory!

HE CAME toward me with licking lips and gloating face. I groaned louder, rolled again, kicked surreptitiously at the devilish tube where it had fallen unregarded. I uttered a desperate, silent prayer. If only the spring had caught; if only I could aim it right!

Dickson was almost upon me when a wild scream filled the small, pine-boarded room into which I had penetrated. Old Jem leaped high into the air, beat at himself with clawing hands. Then suddenly he was enveloped in flame; inextinguishable, leaping. The others swerved at his tortured cry.

In that moment's respite I hurtled to my feet, slammed a swift right to Dickson's jaw, lashed out with furious hate at the foreign agent who had spoken calmly of devastating Europe. They both went down with sodden thumps.

There was no time to lose. Jessica's despairing cries smote my ears. Jem had flung himself in tortured blindness against the flimsy panels. They gave, and immediately flames flicked up, exploded into roaring blaze. In seconds the warehouse was a seething inferno. I learned afterwards there had been cans of alcohol stored on the outer floor.

I raced to my wife, tore at her bonds, lifted her fainting body in a frenzy of haste, staggered into the tunnel just as the walls of the torture chamber collapsed on the three men within.

I beat the flames to the street by bare seconds, fell into Byrne's brawny arms. Behind, the gaunt warehouse was shooting fire to the sky. "The children!" I gasped. "They're inside!"

The Inspector squinted, shook his head. "They've burnt to a crisp by now," he said soberly. "And maybe they're better off, after what they went through."

I looked back, shuddered. Jessica, covered with a patrolman's coat, squeezed my hand. "They're all destroyed, Rod," she said, "invention and all. Thank God the world is free from such a nightmare possibility."

THE END

DEATH CAME CALLING

By RUSSELL GRAY

(Author of "The Maid and the Mummy," etc.)

Joseph Wilson knew the boundless horror of those who are beloved by the dead. . . .

THE MAN who stumbled into the police station looked as if he had just come from a slaughter house. Blood spattered his trousers and streaked his face. The front of his shirt looked as if it had been dipped in blood.

Instinctively we knew that it was human blood, and it was obvious that it was not his own.

He went up to the high desk behind which the lieutenant sat and just stood there, saying nothing. He dropped his eyes to his right hand, and we noticed that it was tightly clenched. The hand was covered with blood and bits of gore.

Slowly the hand opened. We edged closer, staring with a kind of fascination as the fingers loosened, as the palm spread out. On his palm lay a bloody chunk of meat.

"Her heart," he said. "I tore her heart out."

I felt the tingling of the nerves which every trained police reporter experiences when he knows that an important story is about to break. For two weeks nothing more important than petty burglaries and dog-bites-child stories had occurred in Moundsville. The city editors of the two local papers—I worked for the *Courier*, and Cliff Borrows for the *Express*—seemed to blame Cliff and me for the lack of sensational stories.

And we ourselves were plenty bored. We'd been playing two-handed pinochle when this man came in.

"Now she'll stay dead," the man was mumbling. "That was the only way—to tear out her heart."

He reached his hand up to the desk, as if to offer its gory burden to the lieutenant. Instinctively the lieutenant pulled back.

Besides Cliff and myself, there were a couple of patrolmen and a detective in the room. Yet for a minute or two nobody made a move toward the man. They just gaped at him and at the thing in his hand.

The man went on talking, more to himself than to any of us. "She died once, two months ago. Then she came back. She wouldn't stay dead. They say that if you take a person's heart out . . . ."

The detective was the first to move. That was Bart O'Neal, the most intelligent man on the force.

Gently O'Neal led the man to a chair and coaxed him into dropping the gruesome thing in his hand onto a spread newspaper. Then, in a quiet, friendly voice, O'Neal questioned him. The man responded mechanically. He gave an address and his name—Joseph Wilson. The body, he said, was in his room.

Some of the police rushed out of the station. Cliff Borows went with them. Outside, cars roared away to the address Wilson had given.

I stayed behind. I sensed that the real story was in what Joseph Wilson was saying. A police stenographer had pulled up a chair and was taking down every word. Wilson was not only willing to talk! he was anxious.

WHEN I returned home from Enid's funeral that day months ago, (Joseph Wilson said) I found Enid waiting for me.

She was dead. I had seen her dead body in the coffin; I had seen the coffin lowered into a hole in the ground and covered with earth. And now here she was in my apartment, and she was saying, "You cannot get rid of me so easily, Joseph Wilson."

As God is my witness, I had not wanted Enid to die. I had refused to marry her, had refused to become the legal father of the child she was to bear which may or may not have been mine. I had wanted to be rid of her, but not that way.

Enid Hawley was one of a rather wild young set I ran around with. We were all more or less alone in the city, without relatives, without responsibility aside from our jobs. The sons and daughters of farmers in this and neighboring counties, we had come to the nearest city to try and make our fortunes. We were lonely and we found each other. We were young and we had wild times.

None was wilder than Enid Hawley. Blond, voluptuous, a cupid's-bow of a mouth forever shaped as if for a kiss, most of the men fell for her sooner or later. I did. And almost as quickly I tired of her. We had had some fun together, and that, I had thought, would be that.

Then one evening a couple of months ago she had come up to my apartment. I was annoyed when I opened the door for her. But when I saw the distraught expression on her face, I knew that something was wrong.

"I'm desperate," she began before she

had taken more than three steps into the apartment. "I don't know what to do. We are going to have a child."

I stared at her. I said nothing as the full implication of what she had just told me sank in. My first reaction was one of extreme fright. I saw myself tied down to a girl for whom I did not care; saw an overwhelming obstacle come between me and Gladys Paige, whom I had met a short time before, and whom I loved as much as ever man loved a woman.

During those first few minutes it did not occur to me that I might not be responsible. Clearly I remembered that first time: a picnic on which a number of us had gone; Enid and I wandering into the shade of the woods; her voluptuousness which had set me on fire and her passionate response to my caresses.

There had been other occasions after that—two or three, I don't remember exactly. Then, as I said, I had broken away from her. And now . . . .

"You have to marry me," Enid was saying. "I couldn't bear it if—if I wasn't married. The disgrace . . . and my family . . . my father would kill me."

Marry her! Marry a girl for whom I did not care and give up Gladys Paige! That was too great a price to pay for a few thoughtless moments of pleasure. Frantically I groped for a way out.

And then it came to me. I had not been the first man nor the last. The men of our set spoke lightly of Enid. Freely they told of liasons with her.

Savagely I turned on her. "How do you know it's my child?" I demanded.

She stepped back, as if I had struck her. "How do I know?" she repeated, bewildered. "Why, you . . . ."

For a minute she almost convinced me that I wronged her by even suspecting that there might have been another man. After all, men have a way of lying about conquests. But all of them could not have lied. She had probably decided to claim me as the father because I had the best future of any of the men. I was a minor executive in the Moundsville Trust Company.

I say "was" because . . . . But I will come to that later.

Well, I need not repeat everything Enid and I said. She was pleading, I was yelling. She said she loved me and all that. I didn't believe her. Told her as much. Told her that maybe I was the father and maybe it was any one of half a dozen others.

She flinched when I said that. I guess it was pretty brutal of me, but I was angry and wanted her to leave.

She turned to go. With her hand on the knob of the door she paused. "If you don't marry me I'll kill myself," she said in a low strained voice. "I couldn't stand the disgrace."

She left.

Later that night she jumped into the river and drowned herself.

LORD knows I did not want to attend her funeral. Although the child had not of necessity been mine, I could have saved Enid had I been more kindly, more willing to help. In a way I was responsible for her death.

For a while I was afraid that she might have left a note behind. My name would be involved; I might lose my job at the bank; worse still, I might lose Gladys.

Fortunately there was no note. According to the police, her death was put down as an accident, although there was some talk of suicide.

I attended the funeral because all her other friends did. I could not afford to allow suspicion to fall on me. Before her coffin was forever closed, I viewed her body. She was as attractive as ever, even in death. The undertaker had painted her lips, rouged her cheeks.

As I stared down at this girl whom in life I had held in my arms, a strange

desire came over me. I found my face lowering itself down to hers as if I were about to kiss those cold lips. The power of carnal attraction of that dead body was irresistible, maddening, unholy.

"Joe!" Bill Standard cried out. "What on earth!"

Bill was a friend of mine, had been a friend of Enid. We were alone at the moment in the funeral parlor where the body lay.

Just then people came in—a man and woman of sixty or so and two husky young men. Enid's family. They had come from their farm to bury her. If they had known my part in her death. . . .

I left the cemetery after I had heard the first few shovels of earth thud on the coffin. I drove home in my car, thinking of Gladys Paige, of how sweet and lovely she was. And I told myself that perhaps it was for the best that Enid was now forever out of the way.

I let myself into my apartment, and there stood Enid Hawley.

She wore a red jersey dress—the one she had worn when she had come to my apartment three nights ago. The dress in which she must have drowned herself. It was wet. Moist spots appeared on the carpet where water dripped from the dress. The wet material clung to her like a sheathe, boldly outlining her buxom breasts, her sensuous hips and thighs.

At first I thought she was a vision, and so I could look at her without any profound emotion. Then she moved, and a great fear swooped down on me. With dreadful certainty I knew that she was no part of a conscience-stricken imagination.

Cold sweat poured down my spine as she moved toward me; and to my horror I felt myself going toward her. I had found Enid desirable in a casual sort of way several months ago, but never as desirable as now. I fought against going to her, fought to force myself to flee from her presence. It was useless. She was physically dead—and physically desirable.

It was then that she said, "You cannot get rid of me so easily, Joseph Wilson—and the next thing I knew she was in my arms. Horror gripped me as I strained that body against mine.

"You are dead!" I gasped into that white, bloodless face. "Dead!"

The corners of her mouth smiled. Have you ever seen the smile of a woman who is dead and yet walks the earth? It is terrible beyond description. I trembled violently and—God help me!—I kissed her.

"Dead!" my brain shrieked. "You are making love to a dead woman!"

And a great weakness came over me. I swayed dizzily. A black cloud passed over my eyes.

PERHAPS a long time passed. Perhaps it was only a moment. When I opened my eyes again, I stood alone in my apartment.

I poured myself a drink and laughed. I felt as if a great load had fallen from me. I had been more disturbed by Enid Hawley's death than I had thought. My imagination had played a trick on me. Probably I had been very tired when I had returned from the funeral and had taken a short nap during which I had dreamed that she had returned from the dead. Some dreams are amazingly real and. . . .

The glass stopped a few inches from my mouth and went no further. With unbelieving eyes I gaped at moist spots on the carpet. There were three, about a foot apart, and they looked as if they had been formed by water dripping from wet clothes.

The glass shook in my hand and spilled some of its contents. There was no sound save the fear-laden panting of my breath.

I wasn't much good at the office the next day. I could not concentrate on my work. Frantically my mind groped for

a logical explanation for those moist spots on the carpet.

Then, as I was riding from the office on a trolley car, it came to me. Earlier I had spilled something, whiskey or water, on the carpet and the fact had slipped my mind. Pure coincidence, that was all; or else it had been the subconscious memory of those spots which had inspired the dream of Enid's return from the dead. Of course.

The trolley was crowded. I had a seat, but many were standing. Several people got off and others shifted their positions—and there was Enid sitting opposite me.

She wore that clinging red jersey dress, and the corners of her mouth were twisted into that terrible triumphant smile of the dead who have somehow cheated death. Then a man stepped between us and I could no longer see her. For several blocks I sat bathed in sweat, possessed by terror.

Finally I could stand it no longer. I rose and stepped around the man who blocked my vision. Where she had sat there was now a little old woman. Enid was no longer on the car.

I was on my way to the home of Gladys Paige, the girl I loved and who loved me. She was the daughter of my employer, Chester Paige, president of the Moundsville Trust Company. Some of you may know her. You've seen her picture in the papers, so I need not describe her. You know how beautiful she is. I was the luckiest man in the world to have a woman like that love me.

I had dinner with the Paiges. During the meal Gladys observed: "Is there anything wrong? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

I jumped in my seat at that and then laughed weakly. "Just a headache," I said. "Afraid I'm not very good company tonight."

But later, when Gladys and I were in the garden, I forgot about Enid. Glady's kisses could drive from a man's mind everything but the loveliness of Gladys. After a while a chill came into the air and she went into the house to get a wrap.

As soon as she was gone, that fear returned. I strode back and forth, smoking, resolved to ask Gladys to marry me as soon as possible, With Gladys I could hope to fight this creature from the dead that called itself Enid.

"Joseph Wilson."

The voice which called my name was as low and as unsubstantial as the breeze whispering through the trees. I stood without motion, telling myself that I must not turn, that I must run into the house and join Gladys. And I turned.

YOU have heard women described as unearthly beautiful. Well, it was never quite appropriate until that moment. Enid stood in the moonlight. She was not of this earth and looked it; yet her prominent breasts in that red jersey dress, every curve of her body, was eloquent of sheer physical voluptuousness.

She was not as lovely as Gladys nor as desirable, and I feared her more than ever man had feared woman and the sight of her struck black terror to the core of my being. But I quivered with sheer animal lust as I looked at her.

It is hard to explain this. I cannot understand it myself. The woman was dead. She should have been rotting six feet under ground. But there I was . . . .

She ran her hands over her breasts, down the curves of her lips. "You desired me once, Joseph Wilson, when I lived," she said. "Now that I am dead, am I not even more desirable? The dead know more about love than the living. Take me, Joseph Wilson."

Through sheer force of will I sent my mind back to Gladys who was in the house; to the sweetness of Gladys and my love for her—and I went to the dead girl. She was in my arms and my lips

were against hers, and I knew that this was death and I did not care.

"Joseph!"

My arms fell from Enid. Slowly I turned, and as I turned I saw that smile of triumph on the lips of the dead girl.

Gladys stood a few feet away. Her face was a mask of pain. Then her face became haughty, proud, and she said stiffly: "I am sorry I intruded."

"Gladys, let me explain. I did not know . . . I did not mean. . . ."

"No explanation seems necessary. You might at least have had the decency not to bring your women to my garden."

"Gladys, please!" I swung around to Enid. Dead or living, at that moment I would have torn her apart limb from limb with my bare hands.

She was no longer there. She had vanished.

"Gladys, it's a blackmail plot . . . something. She forced herself on me. I was waiting here when—"

Gladys' voice was stiff, emotionless. "I saw how you went to her, how you placed your arms about her, how you kissed her. She hardly appeared to be forcing herself on you. Good-bye."

I ran after her, begging, humbling myself. It was no use. Who can blame her? The only reasonable explanation I could give was not reasonable.

Time passed—a week, ten days. During that time I did not see Enid again. Perhaps she had returned to the dead where she belonged.

My clumsy letters of explanation, in which I gave every excuse but the true one, were unanswered. When I called at her home, I was told by the servants that she did not wish to see me.

But at last my persistence was rewarded I met her one afternoon coming from the office of her father. I followed her down the hall.

"Why let one incident blight our lives?" I pleaded. "Even if I were to blame—and I swear I was not—can't we be sensible about it?"

More talk like that, and I saw with joy that she was coming around. At last I persuaded Gladys to step into my private office where we could talk the whole thing over. A short while later we were again on the best of terms. We kissed. I accompanied her to the street.

When I returned to my office, Enid Hawley was there.

She stood with one hand lightly on my desk, her full body damnably enticing in that red jersey dress. I turned my eyes from her. Already I felt that throbbing in my veins which signified the hellish carnal effect her body had on me. But, damn her, this time I would not succumb.

"Get out!" I screamed. "Get out or I'll kill you!"

"You cannot kill the dead," she said, and that smile of hers played on the corners of her mouth.

HER hands fumbled at the neck of her dress. The top of her dress dropped from her shoulders, and she stood before me nude to the waist. At the same time she began to move toward me. Her tantalizing breasts rose and fell as she walked.

I backed away, my breath coming in agitated gasps. "Get out!" I cried. It did not occur to be to run out of the office. I think now I backed away only because I knew that there could be no flight that way.

I hated her and feared her, but I wanted her to come to me. And when at last her arms were about me and she pressed her body to mine, I fought her, but I fought feebly, without will.

The door opened and closed. I pushed her from me and swung around. Chester Paige, president of the company and Gladys' father, stood in my office!

For perhaps half a minute there was

no sound, no word. There was a sheaf of papers in Chester Paige's hand. His mouth was half open and he stared incredulously at the woman who was nude to the waist and from whose arms I had just broken away. Then he left.

Enid was gone too. There was a side door leading out of the office. She might have left that way. She might have simply vanished.

The next morning I did not leave for the office. I knew it was useless. The letter I expected from Chester Paige was delivered in the first mail. He had not wasted any time. The letter was terse. I was fired. Also, he did not consider me a fit person to associate with his daughter and forbad me to call on her.

That evening I made what I knew would be a futile attempt to see Gladys.

She came to the door herself, said she never wanted to see me again, and slammed the door in my face.

What could I do or say? Chester Paige had seen me make love to a nearly naked woman. My only excuse was a ridiculous story which nobody would believe. Everything I had worked for, everything I held dear, crashed about my ears. Enid Hawley had had her revenge.

The weeks that passed were of a pattern. I went down and down the ladder of degradation. I had thought that Enid had done her worst, that now she could return to the dead from whence she had come satisfied with her vengeance.

Vain hope. There was no end to her hatred. She continued to plague me. I got another position as a bookkeeper with an insurance firm. Two days later I lost it when the office manager came upon me in the employee's rest room with a half-naked woman in my arms.

My next job was driving a taxi. I was fired late the same day without apparent cause. I suspected her method. She must have used that body of hers as a bribe to the boss.

And so it went. There were other jobs. I held none more than a day or two. She used either one of the two methods I have mentioned. She did not go in for variety. She did not have to.

A time came when my savings were almost exhausted. Suddenly it occurred to me that her power to resurrect herself might extend only to the city where she had died, that if I would flee from Moundsville she might not be able to follow me.

And so I left the city. I went all the way to Chicago, and after a couple of days I got a job as a shipping clerk. I saw no sign of her all day, and when I left for the night I was not fired. I had foiled her.

The next afternoon, when I went to a little used section of the warehouse to fill an order, she was standing with her back to some crates. A sob of despair husked from my throat. I heard steps in the distance. Probably the foreman. She was unhooking the top of her dress. I fled from that place, not even stopping for the pay that was coming to me.

I thought of suicide, and dismissed the thought when I realized that that was exactly what she wanted me to do. And then it struck me that perhaps she was not dead after all.

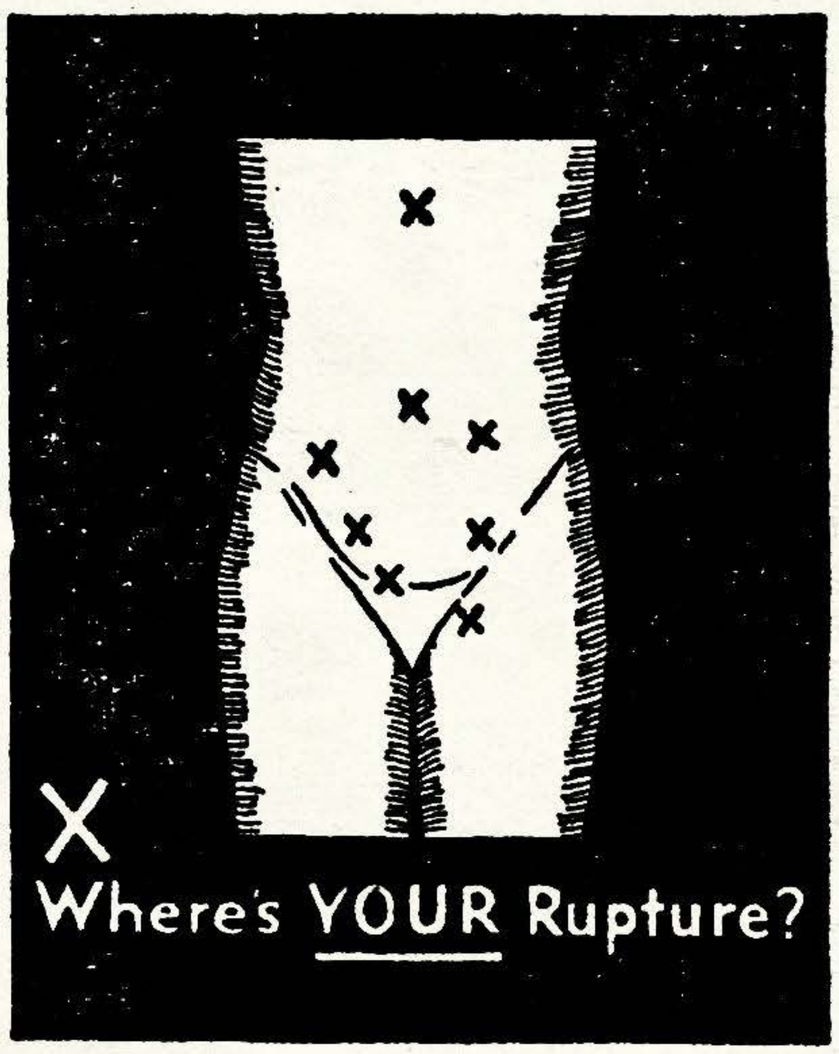
I HAD assumed all along that she had returned from the dead. But possibly in some way she had not really been dead. She might have been feigning death when I had seen her in the funeral parlor and then had bribed the undertaker to bury an empty coffin.

Desperately I nursed that hope, clung to it. If she were mortal, she would be vulnerable. A living woman I could fight.

I returned to Moundsville. In the dead of night I stole into the cemetery and dug up Enid's grave. Strangely enough, I was not very frightened as I dug for hours surrounded by the silent

(Continued on page 107)

don't Worry about Rupture



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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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THE RIVER STYX

I SAW the twelve figures, all hideously bloated, like corpses drawn from the water in which they had long rested. All were bent and broken, walking with bloated right fist upraised against the sky as though invoking the powers of hell against those of heaven.

Twelve figures walking one behind the other, with no slightest sign of awareness of my approach; my feet bearing me forward, I don't know how. I found my hand gripping my gun as I charged blindly into this dreadful congregation whose coming had been presaged by crumbling houses and the shrieks of the maimed and the dying. Strong buildings had collapsed —as though the dragging footsteps of the twelve shook the very earth.

I raised my gun to fire . . . . And at that moment I tripped, stumbled on a few steps and fell flat. My head hit with a force that sent great waves of light flashing behind my eyeballs. After that I knew nothing . . . .

Private Operative Roy Sloan's mind might be full of fearful questions regarding the identity of that dreadful group, but there was no doubt in the stricken, terror-ridden minds of the inhabitants of the little village of Newton—they *knew.* Knew that these twelve had returned from watery graves—that the days of all in that terror-haunted town were numbered, while their homes crashed down about their ears and horror raged rampant throughout the valley . . . .

Their fate, and the fate of Roy Sloan and the girl he learned to love while hell yawned for them both, is told in the mystery-terror novelette "Twelve Who Were Damned" by Paul Ernst, which appears in the November issue of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE — Out October 8th.

(Continued from page 104)

dead. I was not afraid of the dead who slept peacefully in their graves. It was the dead who walked among the living whom I feared.

At length the gruesome task was finished. I pried open the coffin with an iron tool I had brought for the purpose. The stench started before I had loosened the first board. By the time the lid was off the smell was nauseating.

It was not the sight of the thing in the coffin that made me cry out in horror. That was hideous enough—the corrupt, decayed flesh of what had once been an attractive woman.

What was infinitely more horrible was the fact that the body was there at all.

After that I went mad for a time. I think I must have covered the grave up again with extreme care, for, as as far as I know, there was no word of an attempted grave robbery in the papers.

The next thing I remember was that this morning I was sitting in the room I had rented in a boarding house with almost my last dollar. I was hungry. I counted my money. There was a little over two dollars. When that was gone I would starve to death. Enid would not permit me to earn more.

And yet, such is the desire of the human will to cling to the last remnants of life, I still did not give up. There might be a way I could free myself from her. If I could kill her. . . .

Kill her! You cannot kill the dead, she had said. And she had been killed once.

But there were ways of killing the living dead. Driving a stake through her heart, for example. I had read of that.

In a cold, detached manner I set about finding a stake and whittling it down to a sharp point. Then I set about luring her up to my room.

That was not hard. She had seen to

(Continued on page 108)

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it that I would know no woman. Twice after Gladys had thrown me over I had grown hungry for female companionship and had invited women up to my apartment. And twice Enid had appeared and, by her presence, had driven them away.

I picked up the first woman of the streets I saw. An unappetizing creature whose touch, when she tucked her hand through my arm, revolted me. She wasn't in my room five minutes before Enid came in. I threw the woman what money I had had in my pocket and told her to leave. Then I turned to Enid.

She was smiling again, of course—she always smiled—but the smile left her lips abruptly when I sprang at her. Something like fear leaped into her eyes. Then she was on the floor and I was on top of her.

I'M not sure just what happened then. I was like a wild thing. The stake was in my hand and I drove it into her left breast. I pulled it out and drove it in again and again.

But I could not be sure that I had driven it through her heart. I don't know much about anatomy. So I clawed into her with my hands, pulling the flesh away and from the wounds I had made with the stake. I tore out her heart.

Now she is dead. Now she will stay with the dead where she belongs. Now she will let me alone.

Or will she? Oh, God, if she comes back again!

You'll save me from her if she comes back? You're the police. You can protect me. Say you'll protect me! Please!

* * * *

As soon as Joseph Wilson finished his story I made for my car. I swore at myself for wasting precious time listening to the ravings of a nut. A woman returned from the dead! Did he think we

(Continued on page 110)

Steady Work

As nearly all manufacturing and building starts on the drafting table, the draftsman is one of the first to be hired, last to be laid off. His blueprints, his specifications, give the final word in what the workmen are to do

Good Pay

The draftsman has been called the Junior Engineer, which accurately describes his work, position and pay. He combines knowledge of principles, mechanism and construction details with ability to draw plans and indicate methods. Usually his salary is considerably above the wages of the mechanic and, of course, less than that of the engineer.

Become a Draftsman

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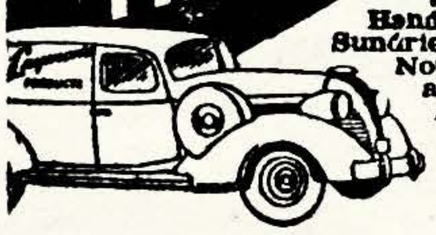

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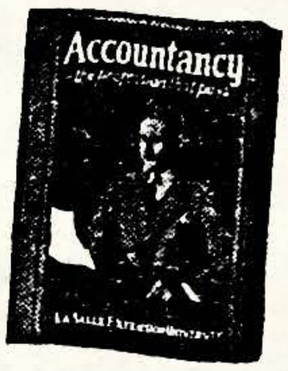

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This Book FREE!

LASALLE EXTENSION
Dept. 10334-H Chicago

(Continued from page 108)

were gullible fools, or that we were as crazy as he?

The real story was in a room in a boarding house. As I sped there in my car, the headline of the story I would write flashed through my mind: "Fiend Brutally Slays Young Woman."

Well, it was the work of a fiend all right, the sight that met me when I walked into that room, but it was even worse than anything I had imagined. The police hadn't touched the body yet.

The rug on which the woman lay was literally saturated with blood. The red jersey dress she had worn was in strips. There was a hole on the left side of her chest—a hole which had been gouged out by the naked hands of Joseph Wilson. Near the body lay a bloody wooden stake.

And she was certainly no woman who had died and then returned to life. She'd died only once, an hour or two ago. And to think that a short time ago I had been nearly taken in by the wild story that madman had made up!

During the trial of Joseph Wilson for the murder of Gertrude Hawley, he repeated the same story almost word for word. But I, and almost everybody else who listened to him, believe him this time.

Not that we stopped thinking that he was mad. As a matter of fact, he was found insane by the jury and is at present in an institution where he may recover.

For the defense brought out certain facts. I said that he was on trial for the murder of Gertrude Hawley. That's not an error. It was Gertrude he had killed, not Enid.

Gertrude, twin sister of Enid.

The defense produced letters found in the room where Gertrude had been living since the day Enid had been buried. Letters written by Enid to her sister Gertrude who had a position as a private secretary in New York. Pathetic letters

in which Enid wrote that if Joseph Wilson refused to marry her she would kill herself.

And amid the possessions left behind by Enid were letters from Gertrude. Gertrude swore that if any harm came to her sister she would not rest until she made Joseph Wilson pay to the limit of human endurance.

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Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

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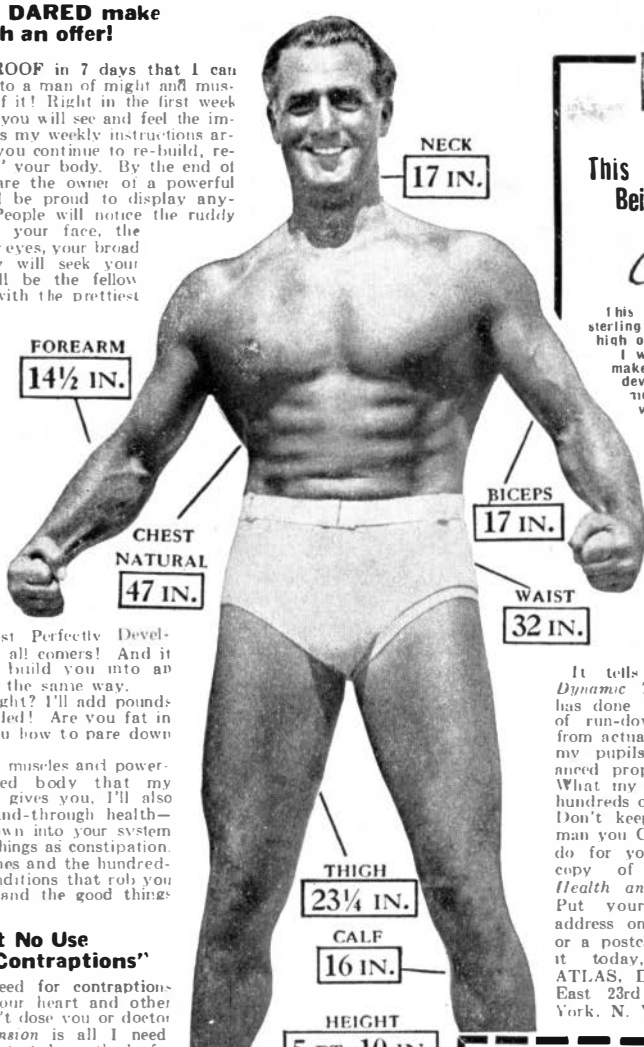

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MISS GLORIA WHEEDEN says: "I always think of smoking Camels and eating as going together."

(*Right*) **HAROLD "DUTCH" SMITH,** who holds Olympic diving championships, says: "I've found great pleasure in Camels. I long ago found Camels restore my energy after a strenuous meet."

(*Left*) **PETE DESJARDINS** — internationally famous diver—speaking: "Divers like a *mild* cigarette that doesn't upset nerves. That's why I prefer Camels."

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