

NOV - DEC

# TERROR TALES

15¢



NOV - DEC

TERROR TALES



15¢



**DEATH IS MY BRIDE**

A NOVELETTE OF EERIE MYSTERY by **RAYMOND WHEISTONE**

**SATAN'S INCUBATOR**

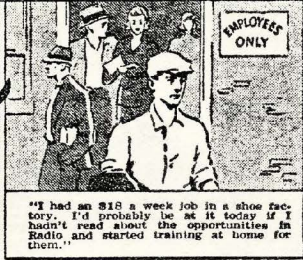
CHILL-PACKED FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL by **DONALD DALE**

**CUMMINGS • SPERRY  
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# I jumped from \$18 a week to \$50 -- a Free Book started me toward this **GOOD PAY IN RADIO**

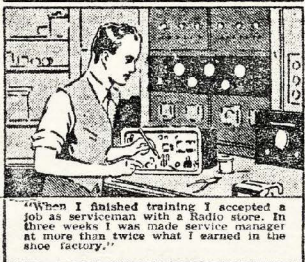
**HERE'S  
How it  
Happened**  
by S. J. E.  
(NAME AND ADDRESS  
SENT UPON REQUEST)



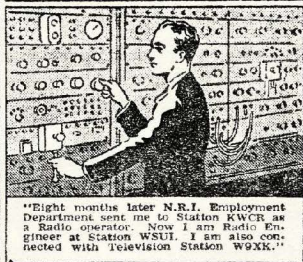
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."



"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5, \$10, \$15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



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# TERROR TALES



Volume Ten

November-December, 1938

Number One

**THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!**

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

## LONG, FASCINATING MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL

**Satan's Incubator**.....Donald Dale 7

It was horrible enough to see that evilly beautiful priestess raise her arms and cause a live man to disintegrate before our eyes—these other harassed souls and I. . . . But it was nothing, compared to knowing what awaited those girls who were called before the Corpse in the Chapel!

## FOUR NOVELETTES OF EERIE MENACE AND DOOM

**Death Is My Bride**.....Raymond Whetstone 36

When a man asks his best friend to stay near him on the first night of his honeymoon, that man is harboring some ghastly fear. That's why Dick Allison consented to Jim Clarke's strange request. Dick didn't know he'd see Jim cut his lovely wife to ribbons—a frightful preview of the horror soon to befall Dick himself!

**The Sculptor From Hell**.....Ray Cummings 52

What was the unearthly power that caused two of sculptor Lee Delmar's lovely models to turn to a substance hard as the marble in which he worked? And would Kent Carter's pretty wife be the third to undergo this weird metamorphosis? Kent thought he had learned the mysterious answer in time to save her—until he found Lee's body in the woods. . . .

**Fury of the Crimson Fog**.....Leon Byrne 70

From the depths of the crimson fog that floated over Laurelton came two swift-striking monsters, to rend the very hearts from each young girl whose head wore Horror's Halo. None knew whence they came, nor whence they fled, save Phil Montgomery—who learned TOO LATE!

**The Deadly Arts of Doctor Gironde**.....Henry Treat Sperry 94

Even in his self-imposed state of death, old Marcel Gironde held Antoin, his young assistant, to his promise of performing that most grisly and bizarre experiment—for lovely Amette, too, would die if Antoin failed to bring the fanatical scientist back to life!

## PULSE-STIRRING SHORT TERROR TALE

**Mistress of Agony**.....Loring Dowst 27

Phyllis Vodermark loved her devoted husband—in proportion to the human pain and travail that passed before her hungry gaze!

## SPECIAL FEATURE OF HISTORIC HORRORS

**Disciples of Death**.....John Kobler 85

Thuggee!—ancient clan of men who worshipped murder. . . .

—AND—

**When Terror Came**.....The Editor 4

We were so very young. . . .

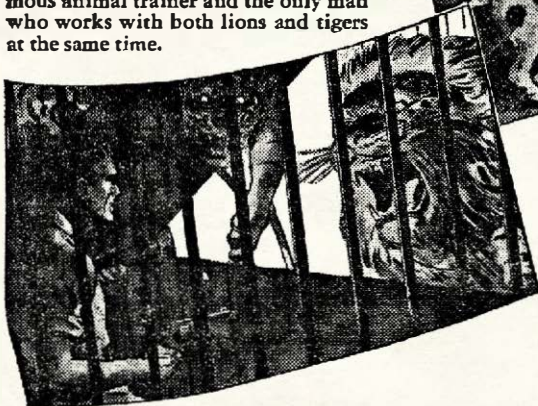
**Black Chapel**.....A Department 104

# "MURDEROUS 'JUNGLE-FEVER' WAS IN THEIR EYES"

CLYDE BEATTY, CAGED WITH SNARLING JUNGLE CATS, FACES  
BLACKEST MOMENT OF DEATH-DEFYING CAREER



1 "It was one of those days when you know something's going to happen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.



2 "The animals had been sullen during the matinee. They came tumbling into the big cage for the evening performance with that murderous 'jungle-fever' still in their eyes, squalling, spitting and making passes. If they once drew blood it would be just too bad!

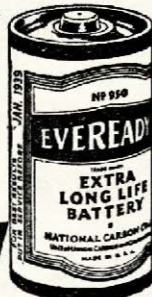
"And then, with that cage full of mixed cats raging at me and each other ...the lights went out!

3 "In the flicker of an eyelash the huge, glaring big-top went dead black! In the dark the snarls of the beasts sounded twice as loud. Green eyes glowed. In an instant they would leap for me!

"I jumped back, pressed hard against the steel bars of the cage. I whipped out my flashlight, flung the beam square in the startled face of the nearest cat, then gave it to another and another.

4 "In a moment (a mighty long moment), the trouble was repaired, the lights flashed on again and a tremendous sigh rose from the crowd. I was still alive. The power of fresh DATED 'Eveready' batteries had held at bay the fury of the jungle!

(Signed) *Clyde Beatty*



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## When Terror Came

NOTHING very exciting ever happened in the little town where we were born and spent our early boyhood. The population was less than a thousand, mostly respectable law-abiding farm folk. Of course, there were the usual bits of choice gossip from time to time, and a few family squabbles of long standing that never amounted to anything more than harsh words. So when Silas Furnas reported that his son's grave had been robbed, the town nearly went crazy.

We kids looked upon the whole thing as a big lark—it seemed so fantastic and impossible. We joined in the hastily organized search for the body, scampering after our elders through the woods and swamps, down by the lake and back into the hills. We had all known little Jimmy Furnas, and we knew he had died of scarlet fever only a month before. But we were so young that we didn't fully comprehend the meaning—the finality of death. It seemed that Jimmy had gone off to visit his grandmother up-state, and would be back by time for school. We didn't know the awful shock that would soon be ours—when we stared face to face at death. . . .

Never until our dying day will we forget that afternoon. We wake up in the middle of the night even now, stirred again by the terror and horror of it.

Fats Smithers tired of the hunt first. "Criminy," he said. "There ain't nothing to all this stuff. I'm goin' down to Melcher's Flats and see to my muskrat traps." We agreed, and so did Jinks Jenkins. Three little boys forgot about looking for a corpse, and trailed through the thickets to the place where Melcher's Brook flowed into the big lake in several muddy, weed-filled arteries that made fine trapping.

There were rats in Fats' first three traps, which was most unusual. Near the fourth trap we noticed a frightful odor—like a dead animal. We poked through the tall marsh grass to see what it was—and we saw. Dressed pathetically in his blue serge Sunday suit, his mottled face to the sky, lay the stiff, discolored body of Jimmy Furnas. A blue-bottle fly crawled across one eyeball. We let out a dreadful scream; and Fats and Jinks crowded into the reeds beside us. Speechless, spellbound, we stood there for a few moments before we turned and fled madly for the village. Only our supreme terror gave us command of our muscles. . . . No reason was ever discovered why Jimmy's body was exhumed. No one was ever apprehended—human or unhuman.

Then, it was starkly horrible—too real. Now we are older, and sometimes we feel the urge for the mental stimulus of modern mystery-terror fiction—without actually exposing ourselves to the ghastliness of that memorable day. . . .

# A PAIR OF DETECTIVE ACES!

## 10 DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

The NOVEMBER issue  
will be on sale  
OCTOBER 5th

*Death in Round Numbers*—that's the title of the new Marquis of Broadway Novelette by JOHN LAWRENCE. It opens with a waiter bringing a mysterious message to a luscious debutante's table at the 44 Club, swings in to a crooked stock-market manipulation with a murder margin, then races through six smashing chapters to the most electric climax you'll encounter in a decade of detective-fiction reading. If you haven't met the Marquis, boss of Manhattan's Mazda Lane murder-beat, this is the time to get acquainted. And WILLIAM E. BARRETT crashes through with another gripping Needle Mike tattoo mystery, in which the old artist in ink and flesh unravels *The Tattooed Combination* to the murder riddle propounded when his chiseling sidekick, Skeeter, tries to substitute for him. And WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES returns with a gripping complete novelette, *The Corpse in the Darkroom*. The yarn is set on a trainful of candid-camera fiends cruising the West and has more thrills per paragraph than any Hayes yarn you've seen yet. Plus other exciting novelettes, short stories and features. You can't afford to miss this great issue!



Author Harry Lee Felling gives Case Hardy, otherwise known as Hardcase Hardy, a tough nut to crack—a nut filled with the meat of men who died to supply *Blood for the China Rabbit*. There are a couple of swell girls in this dramatic novelette, too; and a chronic killer called "The Ear." . . . *I Deal With Death*, a novelette by that master of detective fiction, D. L. Champion, packs a double-barreled wallop in the form of a surprise that will lift you off your seat! . . . Young Mickie McGrue, ward of the straightest harness bull on the force, votes against being a sucker by picking the murder path to easy dough. He learns a lot about the ways of men—and rats, but not before he discovers that *Corpse Fever Is Catching!* Norvell W. Page, who knows how to put strong and genuine humanness into a story, wrote this feature-length crime novel which you *must not* permit yourself to miss!

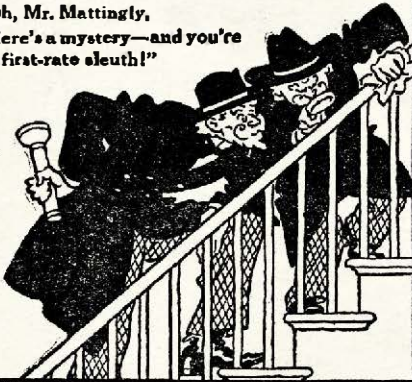
The fiction menu for the grand November Issue is still further garnished with exciting, tense detective novelettes and short stories by Paul Ernst, Charles Boswell, R. W. Thompson, O. B. Myers, Arthur M. Brown, Ray Cummings and Robert Sidney Bowen!

## DETECTIVE TALES

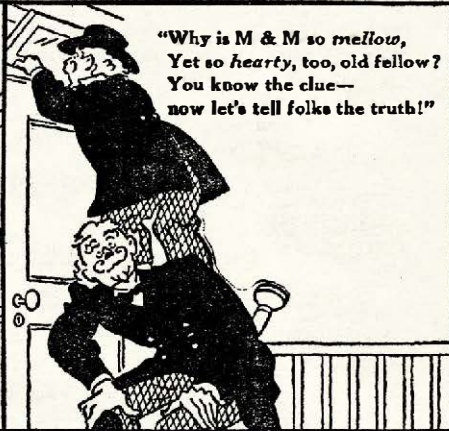
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November Issue Today!

# Mr. Mattingly & Mr. Moore track down a great whiskey value

"Oh, Mr. Mattingly,  
Oh, Mr. Mattingly,  
Here's a mystery—and you're  
a first-rate sleuth!"



"Why is M & M so mellow,  
Yet so hearty, too, old fellow?  
You know the clue—  
now let's tell folks the truth!"



"Why, Mr. Moore,  
Why, Mr. Moore,  
This case is sewed up  
tight—as good as won!"



"It's because folks realize  
That the flavor they so prize  
Comes from old-time slow-distill-  
ing—the way we've always done!"



You're on the trail of a *real* whiskey value when some friend tips you off to Mattingly & Moore!

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whiskies—and that's the kind of whiskey that's *tops* with *any* man!

Ask for M & M at your favorite bar—or package store—today. You'll say it's just about the grandest whiskey you ever tasted—and you'll like its low price!

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**Long on Quality — Short on Price!**

*A blend of straight whiskies—100% straight whiskies—90 proof.  
Frankfort Distilleries, Incorporated, Louisville and Baltimore.*



# SATAN'S

*Fascinating Mystery  
Novel.*

# INCUBATOR

by DONALD DALE



*We were dead, those other men and I. But when we were offered semi-life, in exchange for the bodies of our loved ones, we rose in revolt against a Priestess of Hell—and a corpse whose lust could not be sated!*

**I**T IS a strange story, for it begins where you would expect it to end. But I know of no way to tell it except to start with what happened to me that night as I walked by a dark inter-

section in uptown Manhattan.

I hadn't seen the black Enrousin until it leaped at me as I stepped from the curb to the street. Then the steel juggernaut was catapulting out of the darkness,



bearing down on me and there was no time to jump from its path.

They say a man relives his whole life in the last second before certain death. I thought only of a blue-eyed, smiling girl, Maureen, who was waiting for the ring I was bringing that night.

Then the limousine hit me.

A shattering concussion, a white explosion in my brain, and my body was hurtling through the air. Then the pavement was smashing my chest, and my head was hammering the cement in short, choppy strokes. Pain radiated from my hip like lines of fracture in a piece of shattered glass; agony knifed through my chest, twisting its keen blade in my solar plexus.

And then something strange happened.

In one instant all the pain vanished, a deep sinking feeling ran through my body and blackness swept over me, blotting out everything. As if I were fainting, sinking into insensibility. *But I did not lose consciousness.*

Suspended as I was in that awful darkness—not just the total absence of light, but a *nothingness which all material things had become for me*—the answer leaped to my mind with the inevitability of revelation.

*I was dead!*

**W**ITHERING horror flamed through my mind, then died away, leaving in its wake a vast waste of aching nostalgia as I thought of all this meant. *Everything* was gone! The host of fine friends I had made as a producer of night club shows, the zestful business competition which had challenged all my youthful vigor and made life an exciting game—and Maureen, whose love had given meaning to it all. I had lost her, lost the privilege of providing for her and protecting her, the happiness of making her mine. For *this* was death.

Perhaps, across the face of the globe,

there are millions of others, frightened, bewildered, in this same black void, struggling hopelessly to understand it, unable to believe it is really death. How can they know? And how could I know?

Again and again I asked that question but there was no answer from the blackness that was everywhere. Then came the answer, in terms I could understand, and with the compelling force of truth. Out of a classroom lecture, long forgotten and far better never recollected, came this memory: *The brain lives after the body is dead, after the heart stops beating.*

God! Then all my earlier thoughts came back in ghastlier guise, for now they were objectified in physical terms. For the first time I could think of myself as I now was. A *corpse*. A broken body lying on the street where the limousine had flung it.

Now, too, in my imagination I could visualize the others who at this moment shared my plight. Emaciated, still lying on narrow hospital beds. Bloated, floating in the river. Bullet-riddled, crammed in small hiding-places. Stiff, stretched out on cold slabs in morgues. The hundreds who had died this day in one great city. And inside each death-chilled skull, a brain still festering with thought.

But there was no solace in being part of that great company drawn from every position of life and leveled to one miserable state by death. They could not reach out toward me with sympathy and understanding. Each was shut in an isolated black void within his own corpse, as was I, my body still lying where Death had cut it down. *And I might even be already in the grave.*

I flinched at the ghastly picture that came with the thought. This, it seemed, must be the ultimate horror. Never able to believe you are dead, yet to know that your body is putrefying in the grave! I thought of exhumed corpses found with lips bitten through, fingernails worn

down to the quick, and I could believe that was evidence of tortured brains that had somehow forced brief movement upon bodies to resolve this great doubt. Just as I, with every effort of will, was trying to break through the void that isolated my brain, trying to reestablish contact with my body and—

Suddenly it seemed that my arm was moving! My awareness of the fact was confused, uncertain, yet all at once there seemed to be something like sensation in my hand. Stiffly it jerked, brushed something, and when it had fallen still once more, I knew!

*I was lying in a narrow wooden box.*

FOR a while my mind was capable only of nauseous visions: strips of skin hanging from my bones; eyes falling apart in sockets; maggots squirming in my organs. Then I tried to stir my body once more. Again and again I summoned every effort of will to break through the void, but each time I fell back into blackness, with only my sickening thoughts for companionship.

God! How long before merciful oblivion? I tried to remember how long the brain-cells were said to remain active after death, but my mind was too anguished to recall. And who could say at what stage of necrosis thought ceased? It might go on, while with maddening, agonizing slowness the very tissues of the brain rotted away!

And perhaps thought decayed *with* the brain! Perhaps the mind decomposed as the dissolution of the brain progressed, and thought decayed into rotten, tainted fragments. Then I would not even be able to bring back the vision of Maureen's dear, sweet face!

Where was she now? Was she thinking of me, would she grieve for me long? I had no right to hope for it, for she was young—and life must go on. . . .

My eyes opened.

A candle was sputtering into flame. Strange-sounding phrases in a harsh foreign tongue fell on my ears. I seemed suspended in mid-air and around me rose the bare walls of a stone crypt glowing faintly with a ghostly green phosphorescence. Where was I? What strange *otherworld* could this be? I only knew that anything was preferable to terrible isolation in the black void!

The candle—a tall black taper—was set in a niche in the wall before me. And beside it, gazing at me as her voice rose and fell in a ritualistic chant, stood the most beautiful woman I had ever seen—if she *were* a mortal woman! Her body seemed effulgent, so white was her skin, and for modesty she appeared to have the disdain of a goddess. No more than an ethereal glow was the gossamer robe that shadowed the gleaming symmetry of her limbs, followed the lambent flow of her figure and fell away at the curve of full breasts. Dread crept over me as I looked into her strangely bright eyes. Power as evil as her body was beautiful seemed to flash from those mysterious orbs.

Suddenly sensation began to return to my body, and I realized that until that instant it had had no feeling. Now, as I became aware of a chill leaving my flesh—and something soft and warm and pleasant that pressed upon it—my gaze fell, and I saw that I was in a coffin on a narrow bier with a girl lying over my body!

Only then did I understand the incredible thing that was happening. I was being brought back to life—real life—by the weird power of that mysterious woman! And with the heat of her youthful body, the girl whose figure covered me was banishing from my flesh *the chill of death.*

CONFUSED thought was swept aside as my awakening body stirred under the girl's embrace. Her beauty had not

the flawless perfection of the other woman, but she had far more allure, for hers was the charm of a young body and warm, vibrant flesh. She wore only a narrow silver girdle, and the satin gloss of her skin belied the ardent firmness of her breasts; her thighs had womanly fullness with the litheness and eager strength of youth. As she pressed her charms upon me, warmth spread through my body.

And then—pain, as full life returned to me.

Strange rhapsody of pleasure and pain! Liquid fire in my veins; red-hot needles stabbing at my vitals. And over it all the sweet caress of the girl's lovely body, filling me with rapture that both healed and tortured. A cry was torn from my lips and the girl put her hand over my mouth. There it remained, cool to my feverish lips, while the flame of the candle rose steadily higher—as if it grew with my returning life!

"Arise!" commanded a new voice as the liturgy ended, and from a dark corner of the crypt came a tall man, majestic in priest-like robes and with the square-cut ceremonial beard of ancient Egyptian royalty.

Automatically I obeyed as the girl left me and vanished through a portal at the left side of the crypt.

His gaze upon me, his gesture toward her who stood motionless in all her revealed beauty, waiting with the impassivity of divinity, the priest spoke again: "You have been resurrected to serve Isis in Quest. Not by the unfaithful, remember well, may the Gift of Life be kept! . . ."

To my dazed mind his words meant little at that time, but a sharp premonition of disaster swept over me as he continued:

"Come now with me and be instructed in the duty which will be yours in the Great Search for Osiris."

She whom he had called Isis then took the candle from the niche and walked through a portal at the right side of the crypt. Beyond it I caught just a glimpse into a huge, temple-like place before the priest led me through the opposite portal. Without question I followed him down a dark passage, my mind a riot of bewildered thoughts as I sought to make meaning of all I had seen and heard.

**H**APHAZARDLY I could recall a bit of Egyptian mythology. . . . Isis, goddess of fertility and Osiris, Judge of the Dead—the two principal deities of the world's oldest religion. Osiris, according to one legend, destroyed by Set, the Eternal Adversary, and kept from reincarnation by the sundering of his *Ka*, or astral spirit. Isis—thereafter known as Isis in Quest—searching through the ages to find the parts and reunite them in Osiris. . . . But I could make no application of it except that she whom the priest had called Isis must be the leader of a cult that in some way followed those age-old mysteries. Or was she the *reincarnation* of the divinity whose name she bore? And again I felt heavy dread as I wondered *why* she had brought me back to life, *how* I was to serve her. . . .

In a dark chamber a robe was put around me and then, as I was led through a curtained arch, I found myself in the place I had glimpsed before, a great hall like the often-pictured Egyptian Temple of Karnak. Down the aisle between two rows of broad stone pillars I followed the High Priest until I stood before the chancel, a raised platform across the entire end of the temple, with seven niches—all enshrining burning candles—set in its back wall. A half-dozen other white-robed figures were there and with a shock I recognized among them the faces of men I knew—or rather, *had known!*

Miles Wesley, another booking agent. Only last week at La Barraca I had had

a drink with him and Carrington, the owner of the ultra-smart night club. The next day he was dead—heart failure—and I had gone to his funeral. . . . Arthur Pines; I had read his obituary in the paper a few hours before—before I died. . . .

God! It was horrible to be part of that silent company of resurrected dead, fearfully watching Isis as she glided to an altar across the chancel from the portal to the crypt-like anteroom. The altar faced an open chapel in a recessed portion of the temple's side wall. Darkness held sway there, a blackness almost tangible; it seemed to stir restlessly in its stone confines. That blackness Isis now addressed, her voice the faint tinkle of the Blue Nile at its source:

"Another, O Osiris, has been summoned back from the black void in which thou art lost. Another to serve in the Great Search. The day of thy return draws closer. . . ."

The blackness trembled violently and a murmur of awe rose from those around me. But to me, much more ominous was my growing feeling that when my duty was made known to me, there would also be a revelation with a terrible personal import. Isis, never averting her gaze from the strange manifestation, spoke to the mystery within the chapel as an equal.

"Soon," she said softly, and suddenly she seemed transformed. Cruelty was etched deep on her exquisite face as she cried exultantly, "Even now we begin!"

One of the robed men among whom I stood disappeared momentarily, to return leading a girl—a girl whom I knew well! Pepita, who danced at La Barraca, a diminutive Venus who did a fiery rumba in two strands of bright-colored Mexican beads. I had booked the act in there myself and it gave me a strange feeling to see this girl I know so well appearing in this sinister place.

Her face, usually so animated, was ex-

pressionless and she kept her eyes straight before her as the masked man handed her up to the High Priest, who swiftly led her to the anteroom. When he returned, alone, his gaze sought me out from the others before he spoke.

"For the pleasure of Osiris has this girl been brought to the Temple and it is thus that Isis is served," he said to me. "Those who fail in their assigned duty are plunged back into cath's black void!"

He paused and I waited in horrible suspense for the further revelation I had been dreading all the time. "To you," he resumed slowly, "falls the honor of bringing here one who is dear to you. . . ."

Suddenly my heart contracted violently as all my dread crystalized, all my intuitions clarified, and I *knew* whom I must bring to the Temple! In my anguish I gasped her name aloud: "*Maureen!*"

Faintly I heard the High Priest say: "Yes. She too is marked for Osiris. . . ."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Nuptials of the Gods

FOR MANY minutes everything was dim to my vision and my mind was no more than a mad chaos. I only knew that this was a sinister place, a place of strange forces and dark purposes—and the mere thought of bringing Maureen to it filled me with unreasoning dread. *Nothing* could make me do that!

But when a measure of calmness had returned to me, I could find nothing threatening, no real meaning at all, in those words: *For the pleasure of Osiris*. And Pepita, I remembered, had offered not the slightest resistance. Then I saw that Isis and the High Priest had disappeared from the chancel, and somehow I no longer felt awe of what I saw. Now the altar seemed only a block of obsidian, and the blackness within the Chapel of

Osiris was merely darkness. When Pepita reappeared, it was with a curious detachment that I watched what followed.

The black-kirtled High Priest led her from the anteroom but, for all that her ravishing body was nude except for a narrow silver girdle, she came forth willingly. The priest dropped her hand, and she went on alone, slower, thighs rippling with the deliberate placing of each arched foot. Music stole through the temple, picking up the hesitant rhythm of her step. She began to dance.

Her bare feet beat out a staccato patter on the stone floor, as in the dance *El Tapatio*, but here there was a difference with a ritualistic significance. With each accented beat of the music came a sharp undulation of her torso that carried her toward the chapel across the chancel—as if she were being jerked toward it by an invisible hand. Her resistance was symbolized by short, retreating steps, mincing steps that set her small but generously curved hips into fascinating motion.

Faster she danced, advancing, retreating, but never quite as far as she had advanced. Almost imperceptibly she moved across the chancel and steadily the symbolical struggle increased in intensity. She was a star, but I had never known she was capable of such inspired pantomimic pretense.

But *was* it pretense?

Isis was suddenly beside the altar. How or when she had appeared I had no idea, but all at once everything was changed. Once more the blackness within the Chapel of Osiris seemed to become tangible, to stir restlessly, and the atmosphere throughout the temple became heavy with a brooding mystery. No longer did Pepita's dance seem a symbol but deadly reality. Faster now she was drawn toward the portal of the chapel. And in the eyes of Isis, intent upon the golden flesh there was the concentration of all evil.

Her white arm shot out and her pointing finger transfixed Pepita, then swept toward the portal. The blackness beyond trembled violently and for an instant the ensnared girl's body expressed titanic contest. Then all the struggle went out of it, and she ran swiftly and lightly to join the mystery within the chapel.

The music ceased the instant she crossed the threshold and then there was silence.

A DULL red core began to glow in the darkness of the chapel. Hot bands seemed to snake out from it, wind themselves around me and bind me to the floor before I recovered from the shock of the last few seconds. The scene in the chancel went slightly out of focus, as if invisible emanations were beating across it in waves. My brain was pierced by their overtones and I heard a great voiceless plaint, like the anguished lament of a lover unable to take the bride he had won.

"Patience, O my brother," whispered Isis, and turned to gaze across the temple. As if there had been an unspoken command, the High Priest disappeared into the anteroom, to reappear immediately carrying a man. My heart began to beat faster, for this man wore no robe over his clothes—and his feet were bound, his wrists tied behind him with leather thongs, and his mouth cruelly gagged with a broader strap! Protest flamed through me but I seemed incapable of movement; I could only watch tensely while the High Priest placed his human burden on the altar in front of the portal of the Chapel, then withdrew, leaving the man struggling on the obsidian block.

Isis now stood inside a white circle at the center of the chancel, facing the Chapel. She held an open scroll of papyrus before her, and as her hands turned, the upper roll became thinner, the lower thicker, and between the two marched line after line of black scratches, the

hieroglyphs of dynastic Egypt. These she transmuted into sound, and her voice seemed the murmuring of the River Styx, for I knew somehow it was from the lost Book of the Dead she was reading. And as her voice flowed on, the red matrix of the stirring blackness within the chapel glowed brighter.

Suddenly it became flaming crimson as Isis' hand flashed upward, poised. Her voice rang out: "What Set did sunder shall be reborn. Each mortal-imprisoned mote of the *Ka* of Osiris to him shall be returned"—her gaze lowered to the man thrashing helplessly on the altar—"and *his* shall be the first!"

Her hand dropped. And then, even as the captive arched his back and his eyes bulged with his struggle to free himself, he was gone! *Gone!*

The altar was bare. The man was gone. And with my own eyes I had seen his body go through every distinct stage of dissolution in the fragment of a second! Flesh softening, melting from a skeletal structure still jerking spasmodically; bones crumbling, disintegrating; then everything gone.

*Except a faint cloud that seemed to hover above the altar.*

A tiny puff, a nebulous wisp, more attenuated than a sigh breathed into chill air. Gently it wafted toward the chapel, floated through the portal, and the core of red light turned brilliant white!

For the first time, sound issued from the Chapel of Osiris.

There came a rasping, indrawn breath, like a newborn infant's first gasp a hundred times augmented. More of the great, shuddering gulps, resolving into a heavy, regular breathing with the slow tempo of a monstrous, sluggish creature. Then a swelling undertone, the throb of dull, brutish passion.

With sudden, horrified understanding I looked at Isis. Unholy joy was upon her face as she stared into the turbulent black-

ness of the chapel, and sickness came to me with the thought of what her eyes must see. All my strength washed away, my brain numbed, and in dismay at the monstrous thing happening within the chapel, time stood still. . . .

Until the white core was swallowed by the blackness and simultaneously Pepita plunged from the chapel, stumbling, as if flung by a mighty hand. She caught her balance, steadied herself against the altar, and then I saw the *cartouche* of Osiris livid on her forehead—and the soul-shattered horror in her eyes! *Gone* was their hypnotic glaze, and I could see the agony and the shame greater even than pain—the utter degradation of the sadistic love of one long dead!

Then she who had been the Bride of Osiris Reborn dropped to the floor as only lifeless clay falls back to earth. Through a dark film of nausea I saw the dead body of the girl who had been brought to the Temple—for the pleasure of Osiris.

Suddenly I shrieked as the chord of memory brought my numbed brain to life. *Maureen was marked for this same doom!* It was for these deadly nuptials that I was to bring her to the Temple! *I*—who would be plunged back into the black void unless, with the body of the girl I loved, I pandered to the lust of the *thing* in the chapel and became—a *procurer for Death*. . . .

**R**EVOLT flamed through me; I cared nothing for what might happen to me, but Maureen. . . . An insensate roar filled my throat at just the thought of what I had been ordered to do and, reckless in my rage, I threw myself forward. Hands clutched at me but I tore away from them, from these cowed slaves of Isis who would restrain me, and leaped toward the chancel. But suddenly all the strength flowed out of my limbs and I was brought to a halt, giddy and barely

able to remain upright on my feet!

Then I saw that Isis had snatched from the centermost wall niche the black taper that had kindled of itself as I returned to life—and it was as she pressed down its flame that weakness spread through my body! Quickly my strength surged back as she raised her hand and let the flame grow higher again; but now it was dread that held me motionless as the High Priest harshly commanded: "Look upon this candle!"

Isis now held the black taper before her face. The bud of flame atop it seemed suspended between her eyes, no brighter than those strange orbs, but warmer. The High Priest's next words came fainter to my ears:

"Ever near to the hand of Isis shall remain this, your life candle, and henceforth your life shall be as its flame—ebbing and flowing as it waxes and wanes. Take heed, lest you forget your duty, and she snuff out the candle and return you to blackness! Now, through Isis, return to the world. . ."

I was moving forward, involuntarily, and Isis' eyes seemed to grow immense as I advanced toward her. Greater than the entire universe they became as I reached the raised floor of the chancel. I lifted my foot. . . .

And stepped from the street to the curb.

Too sudden was the transition to the world I knew. It was a full minute before I realized that this was the same dark intersection where I had stepped from the curb to the street in front of an auto.

*I now stood on the other side of the street. . . .*

**I**T was like waking from a bad dream. The webs of nightmare horror still clinging to my brain. All around me the familiar realities of uptown New York. A block west, Broadway, the rumble of the subway. On the opposite corner, the

undertaking parlors I passed every night on the way from my place to Maureen's. A few doors down on this side of the street, the jewelry store where I had bought the ring.

Thankfully I drew the night air into my lungs. It had all been a fantasy born of a mental aberration. The linousine had not hit me but in that split-second when I had thought it would, shock had caused some quirk in my brain. Everything else that had seemed to happen had taken place only in my dazed mind, as automatically I kept on, crossed the street. An eon of torture lived through in a single moment.

But so ghastly real seemed that long flight through horror and fantasy that I looked at my watch—a bit ashamed of myself as I did. Eight-twenty. Just about what I had thought—perhaps a little later.

My thoughts went ahead of the moving hands of the watch. Above my head the yellow and black street-sign read "Amsterdam Ave.—77th St." A block north and around the corner was Maureen's home, where she lived alone with her guardian, Edward Grant, her mother's brother. There would be a happy hour with her and then I would make my nightly round of La Barraca, The Primrose Path, and the Harlem Club. Three of the best night spots in town—and I had produced and booked the shows for each. Maureen and success—life had become generous with me.

As I walked up the street I entertained myself by reviewing those illusory events still so vivid in my memory. What an intricate pattern they formed! It was an insight into the working of the human mind. No sooner had my fear-shocked brain imagined the ghastly nothingness of body than it set out to "resurrect" me with some vaguely remembered Egyptian lore, building it into a nightmarish horror and weaving in people I knew. Pines

and Wesley, for example, because they were dead, and Maureen because the fear of something happening to her was always in my mind.

The oddness of it still fascinated me when I punched the bell of Maureen's house. She came to the door herself and quickly I caught her hand and pulled her into the drawing room, already beginning to pour out my story. Wordlessly she stared at me as I talked and all the time her blue eyes, immense and round, never left my face.

"Querer, isn't it, the way the mind works?" I concluded. "To imagine I had died, and the rest of that fantastic—"

I broke off, for Maureen, eyes never leaving mine, was slowly shaking her head. "What is it?" I asked.

She shut her eyes and said faintly, "Oh, my darling! We buried you yesterday. . ."

### CHAPTER THREE

Die—Brief Candle! . . .

NOT even the tragedy which followed can dim my memory of the peculiar horror of that moment when I stared at the mirror over the mantel, seeing my own face as a stranger's, trying to assimilate

late the stupendous fact Maureen had just revealed. Then, as she flung herself sobbing into my arms, all its implications overwhelmed me. True—everything was true! I had died. I had been resurrected by an unholy power—and Maureen was marked for the lust of the *thing* in the Chapel! With a groan I tore away from Maureen's hands and fled into the night.

Like chaff before the wind I was driven through the dark streets by terror my bruised mind could not vanquish. I only knew that Maureen and I were caught in the web of an incomprehensible and deadly power. And even that thought lost its sharpness as physical exhaustion helped shock numb my brain. For a while longer I stumbled on blindly and it was only instinct that guided me back to my hotel. As far as the bed my feet carried me, and there I collapsed, to pass swiftly into a deep, dreamless sleep. . . .

The Redondo Hotel serves a continental breakfast to its guests. It was the shutting of the servidor that wakened me, the odor of strong coffee that lured me from bed before my eyes were fully open. From long habit I unfurled the morning papers even as I drained the coffee cup; my mind, still sleep-blurred, had not yet picked up the thread of memory—then in one second the headlines plunged me



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back into all that horror. And as I read on I could only think how little the world understood what had happened.

The bodies of three girls—Pepita among them—all victims of criminal attack, had been taken from the water near the Battery. A mark burned on the forehead of each—the *cartouche* of Osiris, token of the nuptials to which they had been forced—to the police meant only that a “sex degenerate with sadistic impulses” was at large. “An early arrest”—*I thought of the Presence that was a stirring blackness within the Chapel of Osiris—*“is expected.”

That was one story. The other concerned the disappearance of a number of men “believed to be held for ransom.” The daily list of missing persons in New York runs into scores; it was the prominence of some of the names on today’s list that led the police to suspect the operations of “a daring new gang of kidnapers.” *But the picture of one of the victims showed the man I had seen dissolve into nothingness as he lay on a black obsidian block. . . .* “Victims’ families hope for early contact with the kidnapers.” But three at least, I knew, had not been held for ransom, and they could never be returned—for *body and soul they had been consumed by Osiris.*

Only one paper, a tabloid, connected the two stories. On the basis of the mark on the three corpses, it brought forth the whole legend of Isis in Quest. It claimed—with as much sobriety as the editor must have thought the wild idea would stand—that the missing men and violated girls alike had met their deaths in some weird ritual of a religious cult transplanted from Egypt. It was all there, from the ancient sundering of Osiris’s *Ka*, to the freeing of the separate parts from the bodies in which they were now incarnated—the whole incredibly fantasy. And the irony was that it was true.

True! I had seen its truth with my

own eyes! I, who had been resurrected by an unholy power. . . .

It was then, with my mind rested and the cold light of day at last making an impression on me, that reaction began to set in. Science, I knew, was succeeding with increasing frequency in bringing back life in cases where death was due to shock alone. Thus it must have been in my own case, whatever mummerly it had been surrounded with by the cult into whose hands I had fallen. For their own purposes they had taken advantage of my susceptible condition to foster the impression of occultism.

I took from my pocket the jeweler’s box with Maureen’s ring—the ring which, in my wild dismay last night, I had fled without giving her. With a warm glow I snapped open the lid to look upon the symbol of the happiness that would soon be mine. And in another moment I knew with a shock that I had underestimated the situation.

For in the box, I found not Maureen’s solitaire, but a scarab ring threaded with a thin roll of papyrus that bore this message:

The Primrose Path is the way to the Temple, where Osiris awaits his bride. Bring her at midnight. *You are watched every minute.*

They were carrying the issue to me, watching me! I flung the ring to the floor, infuriated that they should believe I would be intimidated by their threats. And what audacity to reveal the location of the temple and think I would not use the information against them! There was not the slightest doubt in my mind of what to do. I would call the police! They could clean out the whole murderous nest.

I jumped up, started over to the phone—and faltered in mid-stride. A deep sinking feeling ran through me—like that which had followed the abrupt cessation of pain after I had been hit by the auto!

I felt myself falling, but so swiftly did physical sensation die, that I only *saw* the floor come up to hit my face!

*Then the black void began to engulf me again.*

**I** SCREAMED. I *tried* to scream, but my voice was gone. No longer could I hear in my ears the pounding of my heart. The last sight I had was of the scarab ring lying a few inches from my face. Then the blackness was everywhere, everything.

God! Then I knew the meaning of those words: *You are watched every minute*. It was the omniscience of Isis which had detected my first traitorous thought! And her hand had crept into the centermost niche in the Temple wall, poised over my life candle—and snuffed out its flame! For now, plunged back into this awful void without being touched by a human hand, I knew how tragically real were all the unnatural powers of Isis! . . .

For eons, it seemed, my mind crept through that blackness, stunned by the incredible thing that had come to pass, able to think only that this time there would be no escape. They would take my body, grey and stiff, and give it to the cold earth again, and there it would stay until the maggots had fed on my brain, until I was one with the dust. . . . Thus my anguished thoughts dragged on endlessly until—my eyes opened!

Pain splashed through my body like burning acid and the agony of returning life added to my shocked confusion. My room was dark but I felt no surprise—only horror, as I suddenly realized why I had been released from that ghastly nothingness of body. It was so that I could take Maureen to a weird, murderess assignation with the Thing in the Chapel. . . .

I think my mind let go then. I beat on the walls like a madman at the thought of

how utterly helpless I was, with my two dreadful alternatives. At the first wrong move I would be plunged back into death's black void! God! Trapped twenty floors above the heart of Manhattan by an invisible power, all avenues closed—except the way to the temple!

I cried out wildly. Then I would go there! Stake everything on my lone chance of striking at the source of weird power and winning freedom for all. . . . It is proof of my madness that I snatched up my gun, and not until I was in a cab speeding toward the Primrose Path, did I think how useless it must be against Isis.

But two drinks served to steady my nerves—even if they added to my confusion of mind—when I sat at my table in the night club, looking around for some sign which I knew would show me the way to the temple. The room was decorated in bleached mahogany and old ivory, frescoed with pastel nudes and the Temptations of the Seven Venal Sins. Lower down, the walls were panelled wood, intricately carved with every device and symbol known to erotology. Some of the panels, I knew, were doors leading to other rooms, wherein lay the various illicit attractions that drew the wealthiest crowd in New York to this reconstructed warehouse in the shadow of Brooklyn Bridge. And as I studied them in this worldly setting, I felt some of my dread disappearing.

At one table I saw Amos Blackwell with the Guild actress, Esta Morgan, known to be his mistress. And not far away sat the millionaire sportsman's wife, squired by the suave Nick Lambesis, manager of the Primrose Path for the notorious night club's unknown backer. They watched each other, these two women: the wife, a tall blonde girl, gazing helplessly at the vivid beauty of her red-haired rival; the mistress staring back contemptuously, confident of the physical

allure that had brought her success both on the stage and in her notorious private life. As I looked at this very mundane by-play, it was hard to believe I was surrounded by weird forces that defied natural law.

Then it was that I saw the cartouche of Osiris among the many carven devices on a wall panel. The way to the temple! A moment later I stood in the passage beyond the panelled door. . . .

The passage sloped sharply downward, then leveled off, the dampness that penetrated the blackness telling me the river was nearby. But a sharp turn soon led far away from it; then more turns until I had no idea which direction I was going. Finally nothing but the interminable blackness without variation, until a touch of dread returned to my confused thoughts, until—I saw dim light coming through an arch that led into the Temple!

I was a match for them! I thought exultantly. I had succeeded in getting here even though I came armed and intending to fight if I needed. . . . The Temple was deserted. Gripping my gun tensely I stole in the chancel. Only six candles burned in their niches; the centermost was missing! I heat down an absurd flutter of fear and stepped into the anteroom. There was no one there, but I knew the opposite portal led to other rooms and I was moving toward it when a queer feeling of being watched made me turn.

Then I gasped. Where there had been the portal to the chancel was now a solid stone wall! The hair on my neck bristling, I spun around. The other portal was gone! *I was entombed.* And then from all around me came laughter—mocking triumphant laughter from the very stones of the walls. The laughter of Isis—*all-seeing, all-powerful.* . . .

**F**OR an eternity, it seemed, that laughter filled my ears, scraped at my brain, while I hurled myself at the walls until I

was exhausted. Then it ceased and I heard the voice of the High Priest: "Rash mortal, you have been spared only because it has been ordained that you shall bring the girl you love to the arms of Osiris! This is your last chance. Your life candle is now in Isis' hands. Shall she snuff out the flame—or will you perform your duty?"

I quailed before remembered torture. But to give Maureen to that obscene, deadly embrace! . . . My shattered mind poised between the two alternatives, one unendurable, the other unthinkable, and I still had not answered when the High Priest spoke again:

"Remember that this time you will not return from death's black void. And *she* will be brought here by another!"

"Another?" I cried wildly. "Then why not another girl instead of Maureen? Why not someone who deserves to die? Someone like—like Esta Morgan!"

The High Priest said, "Isis refuses your request. Will you perform your appointed duty—or shall this crypt be your tomb? You have one minute to answer. . . ."

God! One minute to choose between eternal doom for myself and ravishment for Maureen! . . . No! She was lost in any case! *Mine would be needless sacrifice.* . . . The seconds whipped by, lashing my mind into a frenzy, but I couldn't be the one to bring Maureen to horrible destruction!

My brain writhed in anguish and my vision grew dim, and there seemed little change when the black void swept over me. . . .

Then I was emerging from a dark passageway into the dim glow of a street-lamp. And the retreating voice of the High Priest was floating back to me: "Isis has granted your request. Return at midnight with the substitute you have named."

*Maureen was saved.* Wild elation filled me and, still dazed, I was slow to realize that I had won for Maureen—but lost

for myself! I was going to take Esta Morgan to her death. Thus I could save Maureen, but I—a *murderer*—could never claim her love!

Crushing grief settled over my mind and I remember only disjointedly what I did in the next hour. Across the street—it was lower Second Avenue—I went to satisfy my ravenous hunger in a small restaurant. It was there I discovered that nearly twenty-four hours had passed since I had entered the Primrose Path! And I had but two hours to complete my murderous mission. . . . At the garage where I rented a car I found a newspaper. More bodies of ravaged girls, more missing men, and terror growing with the mounting toll of the menace spreading through all Manhattan—from its unknown source in the Temple of Isis. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Her Groom Is Death

THROUGH an open window, I crawled into the house. It was the actress' bedroom in which I found myself. Hearing approaching voices, I quickly stepped behind a pair of floor-length drapes, dismayed at a situation that might delay me too long.

Through the narrow space between the drapes, I saw Esta Morgan come into the room. A siren in a sea-green gown as light as spray, a pale mist molded to her rose-flushed body and set off by flame-red hair. Like a dancer she carried herself, a single rhythm bringing her whole ravishing figure into subtle mobility. In a moment I knew I would soon have my chance, for she called to her maid: "Come, Marie! Tonight you may go after you have helped me undress. . . ."

With a faint hiss the sea-green dress slid to the floor and the actress emerged from the froth like a nereid springing from the depths of the ocean in a shower of spray. So powerful was the illusion that

even the scant remaining attire on her body seemed unnatural as for a moment she stood ankle-deep in the limpid pool of fabric. Sheer hose reaching high on rounded, smoothly-tapering thighs, brief foundation garment moulded to hips, a thin bandeau over proud breasts. She was superb.

Yet I must take this lovely creature to the black *thing* in the Chapel of Osiris. . . .

I felt like a beast as I watched that symbol of feminine gentleness, knowing what I must do as soon as the maid was gone. And elsewhere in the city, other cravens like myself were skulking, preying on the innocent, doing the monstrous bidding of Isis in Quest. The whole order of the universe seemed wrong. But even then, so over-mastering was my dread of the black void, that my foremost emotion was dismay at the passage of time. At last the maid finished her duties and left the room, but it seemed an eternity before the click of the outer door marked her departure from the house. I came out from behind the curtains.

Somehow Esta Morgan knew from the first. She uttered not a sound, but her eyes filled with a swift horror that made me flinch. Then it was gone and she was twining her arms around me, pressing her body against mine. She was a clever actress, but I was not deceived; it was as a ransom from death she was offering her body. Even before I disengaged her arms, she sensed she was failing.

Poor girl! It was not I, but *Death* who would be her groom! A great pity for her filled me, but the remembered horror of the black void was greater than all else. I would have sent half the world to hell before suffering that torment again!

She knew then beyond doubt she had failed to win me, and, abandoning her wiles, she began to scratch and claw like a trapped tigress. I could do no more than hold her struggling body in my arms, crush it to me, until at last the fight went

out of her. Suddenly limp, she sagged to the floor. I picked her up and moved toward the window. . . .

Unconsciously I must have come to depend upon the infallible, ever-present hand of Isis. Not until I had driven some distance, choosing dark streets because of the unconscious woman in the tonneau, did it occur to me that I could not take my victim through the Primrose Path! Then, to my horror for the thing I was doing, was added the fear that I could not find another way to take her to the temple.

My panic grew when I reached the vicinity where I had emerged from the temple to the street a few hours before, and I realized the hopelessness of recognizing which one of these scores of dark gangways and areaways led to that evil passage. It seemed that I had failed. My body trembled in momentary expectation of that ghastly sinking sensation, the encroachment of blackness.

Suddenly another car pulled even with me for a moment, then shot ahead, signaling me to follow. Mirthlessly I laughed as I drove around a corner and into an areaway between two abandoned warehouses. What a fool I had been to think that so long as they were useful to her, Isis would forget her murderous servants!

A moment later, I was carrying Esta Morgan's unconscious form down a dark passage, another approach to the temple, where the lovely actress would pay a horrible price that I might escape the blighting hand of Isis. Suddenly I wondered if this heinous act would free me, or if I must go on serving murder forever! . . .

**A SCREAM** signalled the beginning of the ritual. From the anteroom at the left side of the chancel the High Priest was dragging a girl even as he tore off her dress. The music started before his hand could strip away her underclothes, and then he quickly urged her to dance. But

the girl, nearly prostrate in her terror, seemed rooted to the ground. Swiftly the priest unrolled a black-snake whip from around his waist. A sharp crack, a shriek from the girl as a welt sprang up livid across her feet, and she began to dance.

Then I saw her face. Helen Blackwell! What irony to think that she and Esta Morgan, these two women who had yesterday faced each other with hate in the Primrose Path, should both now be here where *nothing* mattered! But all thought quickly burned out as I stood rooted by fear, fascinated by the time-steeped evil, the emerging sadism of the ritual.

At a sign from Isis, who peered into the stirring darkness within the chapel, the High Priest raised the flickering strokes of the whip and began to cut away Helen Blackwell's few remaining garments, as if they were displeasing to Osiris. Like a broken marionette the screaming girl danced as strip by strip her hose fell away while the lash climbed up the long length of her limbs—then leaped nine inches of polished ivory to the black lace tight about her hips. Sharper rose her agonized cries as her gleaming flesh spurted through the disintegrating black film. The brassiere she snatched off herself.

Still, Isis was not satisfied. The red matrix of light glowed weakly in the relative blackness of the Chapel of Osiris. It brightened when Isis seized the whip from the priest and sent its tip darting at the girl's body. Crimson streamers rippled down her tortured body, and her voice fell to a shuddering sob. Sick to the core of my being, I watched the lash fall on her bare back, drive her, jerking and stumbling at each vicious snap, into the black chapel.

My mind dulled then, and only the horror that followed stood out. A man, writhing on the altar, his body putrefying and dwindling to nothingness in the single second before the matrix of weird light

within the chapel turned from red to white. The great sucking of air, the stirring of ponderous limbs as the *thing* again came to unholy life. Its lustful panting overlaying the chafing of rough skin and tender flesh. . . . The broken moans of Helen Blackwell. . . . Her lacerated body when, at last, the girl reeled from the chapel and sprawled to the floor like a torn rag doll. Then the whole ghastly nightmare beginning over again, as another girl was led out of the anteroom.

Dimly, in my horror, I saw her nearly nude body, proud, unafraid, and lovely beyond compare. Even the whip seemed enamored of her beauty. The lash caressed the dainty taper of her legs, curled longingly around clean thighs, followed the delicate curve of youthfully feminine hips.

*This girl was—Maureen!*

ALL the horror that had been fulminating in my brain for days suddenly exploded. I had been betrayed! I had brought a substitute, but another slave had been sent to seize Maureen. And now, though all my love cried out to go to her aid, there was nothing I could do!

Plead for her? I saw the bright evil in Isis' eyes. She knew no mercy! . . . And so—I must *kill* Maureen! I must kill her myself to save her from a fate far worse. My hand went into my pocket, closed around the gun—but I could not bring myself to shoot the girl I loved! Yet I could not let her become the bride of the *thing* in the chapel. . . . My mind became utter chaos, and then a wild thought came to me.

I could shoot Isis. Whatever her weird power, and even if she was the reincarnation of a divine being, her *body* must be mortal! And I could shoot her before she could snuff out my life candle and then—*But suppose her body was not mortal?* Or even if I missed? . . . I couldn't risk being plunged into the black void, where I would be helpless, my last chance to save

Maureen gone! I had to find some other way. . . .

A sob—the first sound from the courageous girl—broke from Maureen's lips. It was more than I could bear. I could wait no longer to act! But what was my best chance. . . ?

The blame was mine! For as I hesitated, the matrix of light in the chapel flamed eager crimson. Maureen fled toward it from the bite of the whip, and in an instant she was swallowed by the blackness that was Osiris. . . .

Then my thoughts reached a pitch of desperation—and certain events took on clearer meaning. The substitution of Esta Morgan for Maureen, the taking of both the wife and the mistress of a wealthy man—those facts savored of worldly plotting, lacked the dignity of divine ordination! I sensed a great illusion. Despite all appearances, I did not believe I could be deprived of life by the snuffing of a candle!

But I could not be sure. My own reasoning seemed weak. *Everything* seemed confused—and I only knew with despairing certainty there was no more than a slender chance I could defy Isis safely. But for Maureen, I would take that chance!

Another man had been placed upon the altar—another man whose body would be destroyed so that once more the *thing* in the Chapel of Osiris could live briefly to take the love of a mortal woman! And this time it would be Maureen!

God! Only a moment in which to act to save her. Almost with one motion I sprang to the chancel and leaped to the candle in the centermost wall niche, for even if my guess was right I needed help and must win it with quick, clear proof. Out of the niche I snatched the candle, held it high as I turned, and to the group of white-robed figures I had left, my fellow slaves to Isis, I cried: "Look! *You are free!*"

For a second I held it aloft—my life candle? Or an ordinary wax taper? Then I hurled it to the floor, dashed out its flame.

Time stood still for a breathless second while I waited, every nerve screaming. Then a cry went up from the masked figures in front of the chancel—a cry of rage at this proof they had been duped—and I went weak from sudden reaction, relief that nothing had happened to me! Exultantly I saw the enraged dupes come swarming to the chancel, a solid wave driving toward Isis. I was swept before it, tossed like a cork—and left high and dry as the wave abruptly subsided!

I stood directly in front of Isis. Behind me were her other slaves, suddenly cowed by the sheer power of her gaze. Not one step had she retreated before the onrush, and I too felt momentary doubt as I saw her confidence; her almost divine appearance of indifference.

Her hand flashed upward, her gaze shifted. She was looking at the man lying on the altar. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her hand sweep down, and then once more I saw the body of a living man moulder, decompose and vanish in the fraction of a second!

Suddenly a sinking feeling ran through my body. I thought it was only a normal physical weakness—until I saw the blaze of triumph in Isis' strange eyes! And then, as cries of despair rose from those behind me, as all sensation began to leave my body, as darkness crept over me, I knew I was going into *death's black void*.

The candle was but a symbol! The power was real and it resided in Isis. Gone was my brief hope of saving Maureen from the Deathly Lover, the *thing* even now drawing its first lustful breaths.

For my body was dead, and the blackness was fast dimming my eyes. The last thing I saw was that I was floating, as if on a current of air, *into the Chapel of Osiris*. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Master of the Black Void

SIGHT and hearing returned to me first, but they were useless senses at the start. Only for a moment, it seemed, had I suffered the ghastly nothingness of body, the black sheath over agonized thoughts, but it was long enough to shatter my unstrung mind. And not until long after my eyes had become adjusted to the strong light in the long, boxlike room did I realize that before me lay a scene to pall into insignificance the horror I had just been through. Maureen tied spread-eagled to a broad pillar! Beside her, caressing the long length of her nude body—the *thing!*

Loathsome beyond any creature ever made by hand of God, it yet was cast in the mold of man—a man of gigantic proportions, with swollen limbs, dead-grey skin so thin it showed the fibrous cording of muscles beneath, a round slaving mouth and the flat, heavy-boned face of a Mongoloid idiot. And that *thing*—that monster, whether human or a nightmare creature giving form to Osiris—was defiling Maureen with its foul hands.

With a hoarse shout I impelled myself forward from where I had been sitting, propped up against a wall—and I fell! I had not yet regained normal use of my legs or arms, and I fell face down, lay there helpless while the monster lumbered over to me, tied my legs, bound my wrists together behind my back, and returned me to my former position. . . .

The monster's splay fingers were delightedly tamping the soft swell of Maureen's waist. Unable to bear the sight, I turned my head away. And for the first time I saw the huge object at the other end of the chapel, in front of the portal, now closed by a steel panel, which led to the temple proper. A crematory furnace. That was the secret of bodies melting away as they lay on the altar on the

other side of the portal—a blast of air with a temperature of thousands of degrees, consuming heat that left only fine ashes!

Was it thus that Osiris was given life? It seemed incredible. I couldn't understand it. But then I thought of Isis's weird power over the ebb and flow of my life. That was real! And so was the rest of the horror. . . .

At Maureen's sharp cry my eyes flashed back to her. I had thought her unconscious, so limply had hung her head over her bosom. Now I saw that she had really been suffering in self-imposed silence.

The monster struck her across the face, and she fell silent, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

The monster untied her, picked her up in its powerful arms—and suddenly I screamed. It was carrying her to a straw pallet on the floor in the corner!

No impression did my wild shouts make on the monster as it laid Maureen on the pallet. For a moment it knelt beside her, and then—

A panel in the wall slid open, closed, and the High Priest stood in the chapel. Hope flared in me as he strode toward the monster, shook its shoulder. But when he had gotten the creature's attention, he said, "Wait, Jaad. The Master is coming. . . ."

**WHOM** or what I expected, I hardly know. All sorts of wild speculations passed through my mind in the next few minutes. But when another panel opened, it was a masked man in evening clothes who stepped through.

His figure seemed familiar and when he spoke I knew I had heard his voice before, though it was patently disguised. "There will be more in the morning," he said, and into the Egyptian's hands tumbled several envelopes and papyrus-covered packets—all stamped with the seal

I recognized as belonging to Osiris!

New orders to be distributed to the agents of death, the wearers of the scarab ring of Isis! My understanding became clear when I saw money pass in the same direction, and I whispered to myself: "Murder for sale. . . ."

All the occultism—except for one thing—was dissipated by what I overheard. Isis—both partner and dupe of the Egyptian; leader of an esoteric cult used by the Egyptian to serve the purposes of the ring-leader; a woman whose evilness was one with her fanatical belief in the age-old mysteries in which she passed a dream-like existence. Jaad—the idiot attendant of the crematory furnace, paid with the girls who, like Maureen, were also victims of the plot. And I—resurrected to be a cat's paw, like the other wearers of the scarab ring!

*But what was the secret of the black void?* I would have given anything to know the secret of their power to plunge me back into it at will. But all I learned was that it was controlled by the masked man, the nerve center of the entire plot—and he guarded the knowledge zealously. The Egyptian referred to it several times, only to be sharply rebuffed.

Abruptly the masked man said, "That is all! The business in the temple is halted for the night?"

"Yes. I thought it best to stop after the interruption. All the wearers of the ring are gone—except this troublesome one." He jerked his head toward me. "The furnace?"

The masked man nodded, moved impatiently toward the panel by which he had entered.

"And the girl?"

"Let Jaad have her—as usual."

Then the masked man pushed past the panel, disappeared. Where had I heard the ringleader's voice before?

But my thoughts were pulled back to my own—to Maureen's—situation when



the Egyptian, as he left the room, said to Jaad: "Now you may go ahead with your work—and pleasure. . . ."

**N**EVER once had I ceased working at the ropes binding my wrists behind my back, but now, as the monster dropped down beside Maureen's unconscious figure on the pallet, I knew that if I ever got free—it would not be in time! Over the rippling contours of her torso, the pallid smoothness of her thighs, the monster lightly brushed his fingers. Quickening breath marked the rise of desire, and his fingers sank deep into her throat. Her eyes opened.

For a moment she lay there, passive, while those scaly hands pressed on the softness of her lips. Then—God! She responded to the monster's caresses, drew close to him. Not until a long minute had passed did I realize that she was doing this deliberately, to play for time.

Suddenly my frantically questing gaze fell on the furnace. A strip of asbestos covering was off near the floor. There the wall of the furnace glowed white hot—and there I might burn off my ropes!

I rolled to the furnace, and my heart sank. I must lay my bare wrists against the glowing metal in order for the ropes to touch it! But I could see the monster about to force Maureen to his will—and I did it. The pain slashed at my heart and I thought I was going to lose consciousness. Blood gushed from my lip as I bit down in the agony of holding my wrists against the metal. My own burning flesh sickened me. Then it was over, my hands were free, and with my feet still tied and the monster suddenly rushing toward me, I reached for the gun in my pocket under the white robe. I fired.

The monster was driven back, stumbling, arms flailing, to keep his balance. His outflung hand struck the knob of the quartz glass door of the furnace and—

I can see it yet. The door swinging

open and simultaneously a hole appearing in the monster's middle. Slowly the hole seemed to grow, but in the fraction of a second, the monster was gone—completely gone.

But I was not yet free! *My life lay in the hands of the masked man—the Master of the Black Void. . . .*

**A** MOMENT later I was carrying Maureen, wrapped in my white robe, up the passage by which the masked ring-leader had passed to the street above.

I tried to put all thoughts aside when we reached the street—Maureen was able to walk by then—for the first thing was to see her to safety. The street—it was Second Avenue again, near the place where I had emerged from the temple before—was dark and there were no cabs in sight. Farther down the block, a group of men were dispersing. One by one I recognized them as my fellow slaves in the black void—and suddenly my brain began to click.

Until this moment it had not occurred to me that the ring-leader very logically might be the unknown backer of the Primrose Path. And now I remembered one rumor had it that that man was Miles Wesley! In the first shocked moment I could make no sense of his acting the role of a slave of the murderous organization and being its director, but the instant the possibility occurred to me—I knew it was his figure and voice I had recognized in the Chapel!

He was the man! The nerve center of the organization, the menace to a great city—the arbiter of my fate. . . .

I was already running after him, gun in hand, my mind ablaze with a single thought. Kill! Kill this fiend and you are free. All are free! . . . He whirled at the sound of my thudding feet, saw the gun, began to run—fast! As fast as I. A groan tore from my chest.

I could not gain on him! At this range,

and running, I could not hope to hit him!

I stopped. Dropping to one knee, I aimed quickly at the figure so far ahead, racing, weaving in the uncertain light. A prayer hung on my lips, my finger tightened on the trigger—

And with the instant of the damned he cut sharply toward the street, where it was darker, where he could escape! Was my last chance gone?

Moving with the sureness of Divine Justice, a black limousine roared up the street as Miles Wesley stepped from the curb—into its path! . . .

A moment later I was looking at the mangled corpse that had been Miles Wesley. The Reign of Terror was ended.

*But it could happen again!*

All the elements are there. Greed and hatred—and fear—still exist among men, ready to be capitalized on by another merchant of murder. Wesley's organization, though it is smashed now, could be duplicated in a variety of ways. And hundreds—thousands—should you want them, could be forced to act as cat's paws under the threat of death's black void. . . . Yes, it could happen again and it awaits only the coming of another Miles Wesley—and an undertaker who has the equipment—and the willingness to cooperate!

The fiendish cleverness of the man! Unknown as the leader of the organization, known as one of its unwilling slaves; thus able to watch its workings

from the inside and yet to do it without risk, because the assignments of victims he made never included one for himself. As for the secret of the black void: lurking in the crowd gathered around me as I lay stunned after being hit by the auto, Wesley had managed to give me an intravenous injection that caused a sugar deficiency in the blood and produced a diabetic coma with complete catalepsis. In my case, at least, it caused a reputable doctor to issue my death certificate!

The drug, slower to act in solution, also was placed in my morning coffee at the hotel and my drink at the Primrose Path. At the Temple, no more than a touch with the needle from Wesley—always at hand to protect his interests—was sufficient to subdue me. . . . In similar ways was the dreadful weapon used upon the other unwilling slaves.

Maureen's uncle has fled; to cover thefts from her inheritance, he paid to have her murdered. Just as Esta Morgan paid for the death of Helen Blackwell, who in turn took the proffered chance to top the price and have her rival killed instead; but all who dealt with Miles Wesley came to death—unless they could pay blackmail afterward. Those wretched contributors to crime Maureen and I, like all the other sufferers, are willing to forgive—if we can forget. . . . And our wedding tomorrow will be a great help. . . .

THE END



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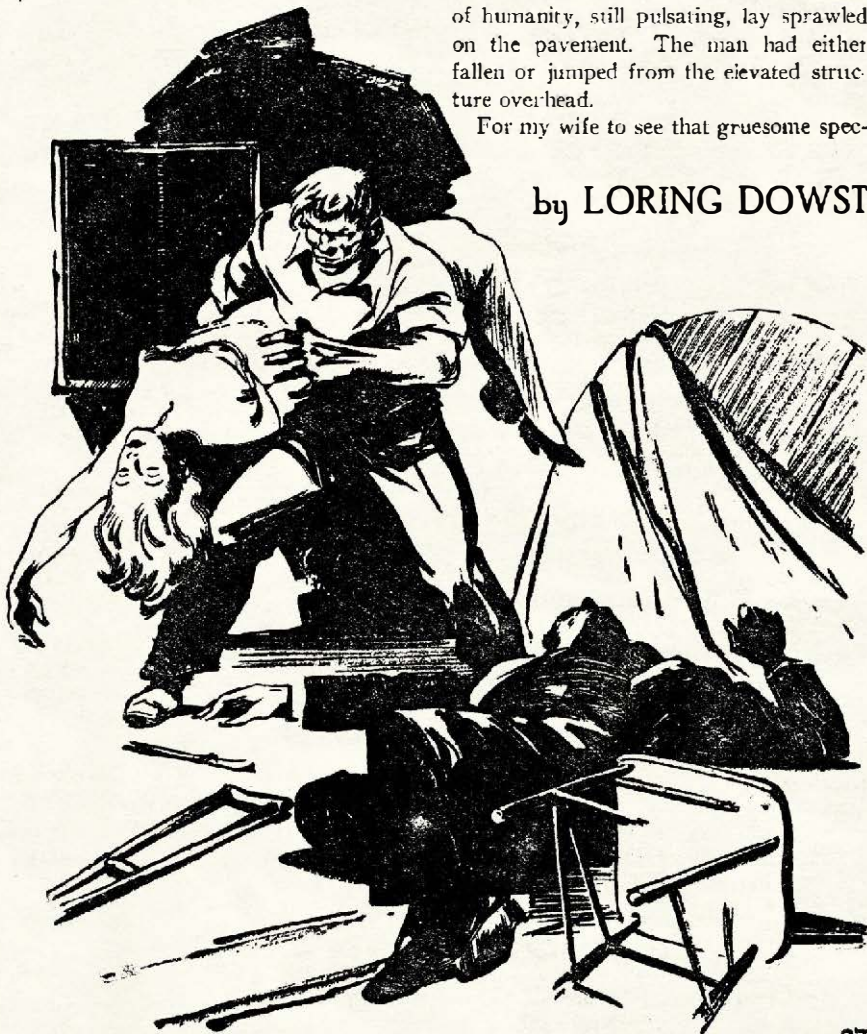
# MISTRESS OF AGONY

*It was a soul-shattering affliction that fate bestowed on lovely Phyllis Vodermark; for the love she bore her devoted husband could be measured only by the amount of human pain and mutilation that passed before her avid gaze!*

ONE moment Phyllis and I were walking along under the Sixth Avenue elevated, talking gaily about the motion picture we had just seen. The next, we were standing stock-still on the sidewalk, terrified by the ear-splitting scream which had terminated in a dull, liquid plop. Then the sensation-seekers, the morbid crowds were pushing forward from all around us, to where that huddle of humanity, still pulsating, lay sprawled on the pavement. The man had either fallen or jumped from the elevated structure overhead.

For my wife to see that gruesome spec-

by LORING DOWST



tacle was the last thing in the world I could permit. But, gripping Phyllis's arm with one hand and clumsily trying to maintain my balance with the aid of my crutch in the other, was more than I could handle. The mob swept us ahead until we were almost trampling on the bleeding, groaning man.

Phyllis was well aware of my desperate effort to lead her away—and she knew why, too. I, a surgeon familiar with the sight of persons mangled and dying, was more horrified than my lovely, fastidious wife. I, regardless of my Hippocratic oath, craved only to tear Phyllis away. But it was not for my own sake; it was that I could not run the risk of exposing her to that old madness—the horror that had undermined our very lives, threatened my surgical skill, and left me a cripple for the rest of my days.

"Schuyler," Phyllis was saying tensely, "don't go—"

I looked at her closely. Was there a sign of insanity in her eyes? Was that why she wanted to remain near the harrowing accident?

She said, "He needs you, dear—and you're a doctor." There was only pity in her voice; sympathy in her face.

"All right," I said. "I'll do what I can." I added, as I forced her toward the curb, "You get in that nearest cab and don't look this way until I come for you . . ."

The man was beyond help before I could force my way to his side. Another doctor had already pronounced him dead, which relieved my conscience. Nearly every bone in the poor fellow's body was broken . . .

That night in our home in Westchester my wife seemed only a little shaken. Neither of us mentioned the tragedy after I had told her that nothing could have saved the man. But my sleep was troubled . . .

Time and again, far into the night, I would switch on the dim bedside light

and turn my lame body toward Phyllis, so that I could look upon her lovely face in peaceful slumber. Only once did her expression change, but that time an old dormant horror awakened in my soul. Phyllis must have been dreaming of the bloody body there on the sidewalk. Her tongue parted her lips, leaving her mouth open. She began to breathe more quickly, and an unwholesome ecstasy came into her face. My heart began to pound in sudden fear.

Phyllis gave a little cry; her expression changed to revulsion and she groped for me. I took her in my arms and held her as though to protect her from the thing that sought her in her sleep. Soon she was sleeping quietly, never having fully awakened . . .

Had she won her conflict with the dreadful thing which once before had undermined her very reason and hurled us both into a maelstrom of terror? Had my months of unbearable suffering gone for naught? Vividly those weeks of living death came back to me, and the preceding months of torture . . .

**I**T STARTED back to my pre-medical school days when I earned the nickname, "Doctor of Monogamy," long before I had an M. D. It was because I so heartily upheld the theory that the full life was married life. Monogamy: one man for one woman. The perfect state, which must reflect in the behavior, the very success of both members of the union—provided, of course, that their physical requisites were evenly matched.

I took a lot of kidding about it. My companions jokingly asked me questions about courtship and marriage, as though I were a sage conducting an "Advice For the Love-Lorn" column. But I was serious. While still an undergraduate I completed two books, based on a prodigious amount of study: *Marriage—the Sublime Team*; and *Dynamic Manhood*,

*Key to Monogamy.* Both sold widely.

Seldom does a doctor win fame or fortune during his first few years of practice, and I didn't expect to be the exception. Yet now, as I look back to the years I practiced before I met Phyllis—two years, to be exact—I was close to a dismal failure. I was unable to make the proper connections: what I had learned seemed to be leaving me, and my confidence reached a very low ebb. Then I found Phyllis.

It wasn't just her lovely little figure, nor her bewitchingly beautiful face, framed by her lustrous, burnished-copper hair. It was all of her; her voice, her frank, smiling eyes—her entire person and personality. I knew at once that I wanted that woman for my wife.

When we were introduced she said, "Oh, yes. You wrote those books." She laughed her rich, throaty laugh, and I felt a little silly until she said quietly, looking at me evenly, "I'm not amused because you write about marriage, and love—or at anything you said in them . . . I'm laughing because, had I known all the words, I'd have written them myself!"

Somehow that made everything easy for me, and natural. And our love was just as sudden . . .

At the end of our third year of marriage, the name of Schuyler Vodermark was established in the medical world. Success and fame were mine. And it was because I was perfectly balanced emotionally. Our love was the governor for the entire machine of my body. Phyllis, too, profited. She was dynamic, poised—the most gracious and desirable woman in the world.

Needless to say, I was making lots of money. Finally I was able to build a large wing on my house and equip it as a private hospital. I had a staff of nurses and two promising young surgeons to assist me. Finley Cramer was a nervous little fellow with a quick mind and deft hands.

Behind his brightly polished glasses were snapping dark eyes and a sharp brain. Bill Morris was my other assistant. He was the antithesis of Cramer: big, blond and slow, a plodder, but substantial and dependable.

We were extraordinarily successful in our treatments, and people began to think of Vodermark's hospital almost in the light of a shrine . . .

But not for long did the fabric of our domestic lives weave smoothly. The trouble was the most incredible thing I could have imagined: Phyllis began to cool. No longer was our union a thing of bliss. Something about me seemed to repel her, seemed to bring a chill to her once-yielding, warm body. Desperately I tried to win back her love, but I failed. When we discussed it, all she would say was, "Schuyler, darling, I *do* love you—but—you'll have to forgive me. I don't want you . . . that way, any more. Perhaps I'll change . . . but not now, Schuyler . . ."

It was a blow to my pride, I suppose. It was a blow to everything I held sacred in life; it was a death-blow to my very structure of living, and before long I noticed it in my work. Everywhere I went, I felt the clammy eye of ridicule upon me. My own staff seemed to be whispering behind my back, "Poor old Doc—the great lover, the exponent of blessed monogamy! He can't even hold the love of his own wife!" "Oh, I know—it was absurd. No one had any way of knowing my marital crack-up. But they did know that I had lost the keen edge of my remarkable skill; they could see that my confidence was shaken. And they knew how much stress I had put upon the theories I had expounded in my books.

THE following two months saw no improvement—in any direction. Phyllis and I now slept in separate rooms. We might as well have been two old maids, except that she was calm and unconcerned,

while my nerves were becoming more and more frayed. It was hellish—yet dreadful as it was, it was preferable to the horror that ultimately befell us.

The first warning came the day they brought in Conner. Phyllis seldom came into the infirmary. I had always protected her from the morbid, unpleasant side of my profession. But that day she was in the hall near the receiving entrance when the ambulance swung into the yard. I opened my office door just as the men carried Conner past Phyllis. For this poor creature an ordinary stretcher was useless; he was in the basket. He was a mangled, blood-soaked bundle of humanity, somehow still breathing.

I seized Phyllis and whisked her into the office. Her eyes were wide, her face taut. She had never witnessed anything so harrowing. I comforted her as long as I dared—this new patient was hanging to life by a slim thread. I gave her a whiff of smelling salts, told her to rest a minute and then go to her room. Then I raced for the operating room . . . .

Cramer and Morris were busily preparing Conner; he had been caught by a faulty percussion cap on a blasting job not far away. I had never known a heart to beat in such a broken body as his. The thoracic cavity was crushed; ribs protruded through the tatters of his undershirt. The left arm had been torn from the socket. I saw too that I must amputate a leg which remained fastened only by a shred of flesh . . . . A blood donor had already been summoned. I set to work.

I cut. I trimmed. I tied off arteries. I—well, it doesn't matter. For what seemed an interminable time I worked. And then I looked up from the leg stump I was forming—and saw Phyllis!

She was standing there, staring at that maimed fragment of humanity; and as I saw her face, the whole world became a black pit of hell . . . . I don't know

how long she had been so engrossed. We had been so busy no one saw her enter. Now, as I stood paralyzed, gazing at her, I was conscious of the amazed scrutiny of Cramer, Morris and the nurses. They all took in that rapt, intense look on my wife's face, and suddenly I felt ashamed, naked.

Phyllis was in the grip of some ghastly, unspeakable exhilaration! She was unaware of my notice. Her eyes shone with a strange light; there was a languid mist of passion in them. Her lips were parted, moist and tremulous. Breath was rasping in her throat, like an animal.

Then she must have felt the electric immobility in the flesh-scented atmosphere of the operating room. Her eyes caught mine, and the terror in my face must have chilled her abnormal ardor. The high flush drained from her cheeks; she seemed to wilt.

"Oh!" she said in a very low voice. "I—I'm sorry I—intruded. It's horrible . . ." She turned and fled.

We all stood there dazed. A nurse came in and announced that the blood donor was ready. I told Bill Morris to follow Phyllis, give her a sedative and make her lie down in her room. We went back to work.

Two hours later Conner had a chance to live—a one-in-a-hundred chance . . . .

**P**HYLLIS'S condition, I told myself, was not as bad as I had at first thought. There is a sickness of the mind which attracts its victims to shocking, revolting sights—morbidness. That night after retiring I delved into some medical books to refresh my memory, and I convinced myself that I had imagined any sign of pleasure in Phyllis's behavior. What she saw upset her momentarily—that was all . . . . If only I had been right! . . .

That night my wife—for the first time in six months—came to my room. She

had made herself as desirably lovely as she knew how. I took her in my arms, forgetting all the fears of the afternoon . . .

CONNER lived only for two weeks. Seven transfusions failed to save him. We had done our best. I know that had it been humanly possible to preserve his life, I could have done so, because Phyllis and I were, ever since that first night, living again our original normal, healthy marital existence. It was a second honeymoon. My skill, my judgment and my technique were rapidly returning. And I attributed no part of it to Conner, or to Phyllis's intrusion that day in the operating room—until Dr. Cramer came into my office after Conner had been taken away.

For the first time the little man's bright eyes avoided mine. He was embarrassed, flustered. "Doctor," he began, hesitantly, "I—er—have been giving this a good deal of thought . . . It's about . . ." He fumbled for words.

"What's the matter, Finley?" I asked. "Let's have it." I wondered if he were about to tell me I had botched old Conner somehow.

"It's about Mrs. Vodermark," he said. "She—she asked me not to say anything, but I thought I'd better." He fidgeted with his fingers.

What the devil had got into the man? What was he trying to tell me? My pulse quickened. I didn't know what was coming, but somehow I feared it. I blurted, "For God's sake, Cramer, say it!"

And he did. He told me that he had caught Phyllis in Conner's room several times, staring fascinated at the pitiful wreck of a man, at the gruesome, blood-soaked bandages. Each time she had been in the throes of some inexplicable emotion—passion. Only it *was not* inexplicable. I knew what it was. There are similar cases in *Krafft-Ebing*. I didn't even question Cramer; I was too shocked

except to mumble something that signified I wished to be alone.

There was still a possibility Phyllis's mind had not reached the worst phase of the madness. True, she might be attracted to harrowing sights for a morbid, unhealthy stimulus. But I couldn't believe that her love for me could be aroused only by such things—as has been known to happen in extreme cases. I would soon learn. . . .

To the accompaniment of a soul-searing anguish—I did learn. After Conner died Phyllis became frigid—absolutely undesirable—immediately. God in heaven! What could I do?

I consulted several of my colleagues, leaders in the field of psychiatry—all to no avail. They could suggest nothing.

Then Cellucci came. He was a twenty-year-old cretin whose father was obsessed with the idea that a brain operation would restore at least part of his monstrous son's faculties. The poor thing had a huge, ape-like head and red, piggy eyes. He drooled constantly, and his spindly arms and legs could not support his barrel-shaped torso. I agreed to keep him under observation for a while.

I wondered, experimentally, what affect Cellucci would have on Phyllis. I had discussed her ailment quite fully with Bill Morris, so I asked him what he thought. "I don't see how it can do any harm," he said. "You're completely baffled now, and you might learn something helpful . . ."

So we arranged to let her see him—and she received the same horrible stimulation. I didn't tell Morris, but there was one exception. She did not offer me her love that night. That was significant, though in what direction, I did not know at once. It was two days before I found out. That was the most unbearable shock of all.

Phyllis did not appear for dinner. I could not locate her at the homes of the friends where she would most likely be. Suddenly it dawned on me. Cellucci!



I dashed to his room—and there she was, in the embrace of that grotesque idiot. Fighting down the impulse to kill them both, I took Phyllis from that cretin's puny grasp, sent her to her room. For a moment I stood there observing the mewling, whimpering atavism who sensed that he had been thwarted. I realized that the worst had come to pass; not only did a morbid, grisly sight still arouse my wife—it filled her with desire for the creature who inspired the passion!

I went out and got very drunk . . . .

ALL that happened in the next couple of hours is vague to me now. I remember someone good and kind, someone who let me get maudlin while he listened to my tragic story . . . . I remember relating a very futile theory that came to me. For I had concluded that the only way I could cure Phyllis was to attract her love—and her ardor—to me alone.

I remember driving forth into the maw of the night. In order to direct my wife's poor, twisted affection on myself, I must render myself a helpless cripple. If I died—just as well! Should I live, I could heal her mind even as my broken body must mend with time. My speedometer was close to seventy when I crashed into the rock ledge on the Post Road . . . .

I opened my eyes on snowy white walls. Phyllis was sitting by my bedside; a nurse I did not know was arranging flowers at the bureau. Phyllis didn't say anything. She just looked at me and her face was full of compassion and tenderness.

Dr. Carl Weatherby, an old friend and one of the finest surgeons in the country, entered, took my pulse with a cool hand and indicated to Phyllis that she had better let me rest. Before she went she said, "Schuyter, darling, you've had a rather bad one. But you're going to be all right. You've got to be, because I love you more than ever before."

Weatherby told me how I was, and

what to expect. He broke it to me gently. My back was broken; both legs were severely injured. It might be an interminable time before I could walk.

Day after day Phyllis came back, usually alone, but sometimes with Morris, or Cramer, and, with dread in my heart, I watched for signs of her insanity.

One day she came with Bill Morris. She left the room for a moment and I had a chance to question Bill.

"How has she been, Bill?" I asked.

"She seems to be all right," he answered. "But she hasn't been in the infirmary since your—er—accident, so we have no way of telling her reaction to morbidity."

I wondered what he had been about to say when he changed his mind and said "accident". How could he have known what I had done? Perhaps he had heard me talking in delirium. I looked at him and saw the easy candor in his face as he went on: "I've been wondering, Doctor, when you would see fit to put her to the real test—the acid test."

"You mean—expose her to something ghastly, Bill?"

"Yes. Your own injuries."

Fear pervaded my pain-wracked body. I drew in my breath so suddenly that it seemed as though my smashed ribs would puncture my lungs. But Bill Morris was right. I had to try her some time. It might as well be today.

"It scares hell' out of me, Bill. But it's probably the thing to do. Weatherby's coming in soon to change my dressings. I'll let Phyllis watch." Bill's eyes seemed to avoid mine. I guessed he knew how worked up I was about it. He was on the verge of speaking, but Phyllis returned then, followed by Dr. Weatherby and a nurse.

The nurse started to suggest to Phyllis that she leave, explaining what they were going to do, but I spoke up sharply: "I prefer her to stay."

Weatherby eyed me curiously for an instant, then he shrugged and motioned the nurse to wheel in the dressing table. Morris looked at Phyllis intently; my gaze followed his. Color was coming into my wife's lovely face; her lids drooped slightly, and one hand went to her breast. Was she anticipating that old exhilaration?

There was a horrible wound in my right thigh that had been kept open to drain. Weatherby was treating it with live maggots that devoured the sloughing, infected flesh. I had seen them crawling, glutting themselves fat in the decaying area. When they had eaten their fill they were replaced with skinny ones . . . Weatherby uncovered the gruesome fissure—and Phyllis was transfixed.

It was just as it had been when she saw Conner. Her entire lissome body seemed to quake with the intensity of her dreadful, unwholesome passion. The pain in my body was as nothing compared to the pain in my heart. I was nearly ill; I wanted to die. I signalled to Bill to take her home before Weatherby or the nurse should notice her wanton reaction.

**T**HEN I got hold of myself. After all, I had made some headway with my desperate experiment. For now, at least, her unholy yearning was directed to me, her own husband, and I told myself over and over that I could turn her mind into healthy channels once again . . .

At last Weatherby let me go home. Although I could barely hobble about on crutches, I was getting well faster than Phyllis. She was frequently seized with fits of her strange ardor—whenever my wounds were exposed. Bill Morris usually dressed them . . . There was little I could do to help her, yet, except quiet her by holding her gently in my arms and talking to her softly. Eventually she would fall into a deep slumber. Only once did she say anything in her sleep. That time she said, "No, Bill . . . I can't—I can't,"

and she shuddered. I did a lot of thinking but I didn't say anything for a while.

One day Morris had to go to New York. Cramer dressed the one remaining wound that required attention. Phyllis was there, and she looked at the whole thing perfectly calmly. She even exclaimed, with a grimace, "Ugh—that's going to leave a frightful scar, Schuyler; but it's healing beautifully." She read to me the rest of the afternoon.

My mind was too busy to know what she was reading. Finally I said, "Darling, there's something I want to ask you."

Alarm came into her face. I went on, "If you've been afraid to discuss it because of my health, don't hesitate. I'm fine . . . Does Bill Morris love you?"

She wasn't surprised. She knew I was going to ask her that. And her eyes were level when she said, "He says he does. He tried to make love to me all the time you were in the hospital."

"Do you love him?" My body went cold when I asked that.

"No, Schuyler. I don't." She hesitated a minute and then said, "But sometimes I've felt awfully—strange, almost helpless, when he's been near me. Even now he—" "Never mind," I said, "forget it."

When Bill Morris came in the next day I was dressed. I'd been practicing with my crutches in the garden. He had just played a couple of sets of tennis, and he was exhilarated—but his excitement was strange, tense. I wondered if he could know what thoughts were running through my mind, or what I was about to say to him. I was sitting in a chair, idly toying with my crutches.

A lot of things were running through my head; but the worst I could conclude about Bill was that he had told Phyllis he loved her. He wanted my wife.

I thought I might as well be straight forward. "Bill," I said, "I don't think it advisable for you to be associated with me any longer. I'm going to let you go."

His face crimsoned for an instant; then the color drained off. Hate suddenly flared in his eyes. With an effort he gained control of his temper.

"Let me go?" A muscle along his jawbone twitched. His strong fingers flexed speculatively. "I don't think so, Vodermark. It's too late—"

"Don't tell me you really do love my wife," I said, confused.

"Who said anything about loving your wife? If you ask me if I *want* her—the answer is yes. And I'm going to have her!" He towered above me now, glaring.

"Damn you!" I said, striving to rise.

But I didn't know yet what a black-guard he really was. His anger flamed again and he smashed a big fist into my face, knocking me over backwards, chair and all. My head struck a radiator, stunning me.

When things came back into focus he was laughing mirthlessly. He watched my dazed efforts to right myself. "You poor, blind fool!" he sneered, "I don't see how you've lasted so long. You ought to be dead by now—or at least mad. Can't you see that I planned it all?"

I didn't know even then what he was driving at. I thought he had suddenly become insane; but I knew I was helpless against him. My eye sought a bell-cord.

"It's no use ringing that," he said. "There's no one in the house except you and me—and Phyllis. She's in her room, bound and gagged!"

**T**ERROR seized my vitals, made me ill. The man was a maniac. Blindly I groped for some way to stall him off in the slim hope that some one would come to my aid. I started talking. I asked him what he meant by "planning it all."

He laughed again. "I meant what I said. Your surgical technique is no mystery to me now. You have a lucrative practice; I've wanted it for months. So I set about getting it . . . I knew about your monogamistic ideals—how much

they meant to you. That's why I worked through Phyllis.

"I doped her. I gave her a drug I concocted, composed largely of potassium nitrate which, as you know, has the effect opposite to an aphrodisiac. It made her frigid. . . . I could tell by your behavior, your loss of skill, that it was working. But you were tough. You weren't as high-strung as I expected—you didn't go to pieces as I thought you would. That's why I tried the other plan.

"I gave Phyllis a potent aphrodisiac—then arranged for her to see Conner. The shock to her nervous system reacted as I expected. . . . After that, by combining drugs and hypnotism, I made her sexually insane!"

My lame, freshly healed body was writhing with the desire to crush this greedy, conniving madman. The things he was saying were more than I could bear—and at this very moment Phyllis was helpless, knowing full well what was to befall her. My weak muscles strove valiantly to respond to my urging, but as I gathered myself for what I knew would be a futile attack, he struck again.

**I** CAME to in horrible agony—mental as well as physical, but I thought of Phyllis immediately. God in heaven! Was I too late?

Every nerve in my body screamed with excruciating pain as I rolled over, grasped my crutches and fought to gain my feet. I couldn't make it; I fell back to my crippled knees. All I could do was crawl along the floor like a misshapen monster—like Cellucci. I didn't know what I would do when I reached Phyllis's room, but somehow, I was going to kill Bill Morris.

I could hear him bragging as I approached her room. He was saying: "The great Vodermark, surgeon and ideal husband. And even greater fool! That night he caught you with Cellucci I followed him, and when he got drunk I talked to him. I suggested the great experiment—

maining himself to win you back. I hoped he'd kill himself."

Phyllis didn't answer. I supposed she must still be gagged. "I drove after him," he went on, "and I planned to kill him after the wreck if he weren't already dead. But too many motorists arrived on the scene. I had to play along all during his convalescence.

"Everybody thinks you're insane now, though. So when you and he are found dead, they'll conclude that you attacked him—then killed yourself. That's the way I'll fix it—after a few minutes . . ."

I was still dragging one crutch along. When I got to the door I managed to hoist myself upright. I was going to make one mad lunge; there was nothing else I could do. But my foot slipped—and he heard me. I struck him once with the crutch, but the blow was ineffectual. He snatched up a chair and smashed it over my head. I went down, knocking over a table.

Then he went back to the bed, ripped the bonds from Phyllis, tore her gown to shreds and stood above her, gloating, feasting his eyes on her soft, tender beauty. Phyllis did not cry out, but her eyes were big with terror. Morris stepped back as if to tantalize himself; and suddenly Phyllis stood up, her lovely figure inviting, provocative. She walked straight

toward Morris, and on her face was growing that look of abnormal desire.

He stood spellbound for a moment; then he took her in his arms and crushed her to him, savagely. I could not believe my eyes—yet I saw it.

I turned my head away—and felt something touch my outstretched hand. It was my crutch. Phyllis, even as Morris swept her into his arms, had gently pushed the crutch toward me. Now, her hand behind Morris's back, she pointed toward the table I had overturned. There on the floor was a long paper cutter.

Laboriously—and quietly—I crawled toward the paper-knife. It seemed ages before I clasped it and worked my way close behind Morris. With every possible effort I struggled to a kneeling position, raised my arm and plunged the knife into his back.

The man straightened up like a ramrod, his arms outflung. And I drove that weapon into his back again and again—until he sagged to the floor—dead. . . .

I still use one crutch, though my technical skill is unimpaired. Most of the time Phyllis and I are happy. The best doctors in the country tell me Phyllis is cured of the affects of Morris's drugs and hypnotizing—but I strive constantly to prevent her ever seeing anything shocking . . . anyone maimed or mutilated. Do you blame me? . . .



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# DEATH IS MY BRIDE

*When Jim Clarke begged me to break my date with Virginia and spend the night with him and his bride, I knew that something was wrong—but I could not even guess at the truth of the incredible horror that was to bring to the verge of madness those of us it did not destroy!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Woman from Hell

PERHAPS the worst part of the whole thing was its complete unexpectedness. Certainly I had no inkling of the black shadow of horror that was gathering around me that afternoon, threatening me and the people I cared for most. I never dreamed that before the day was over I would be face to face with



## A Mystery Novelette by RAYMOND WHETSTONE

fearful madness, terror and death . . .

It was a sweltering afternoon in late June—so hot that I had taken off my coat and was working in my shirt sleeves at my desk near an open window. I was hurrying as fast as I could, since I was taking Dorothy Clarke to dinner that night, and to a show afterward. How

could I guess that all the plans I had made were to be cut short by this thing that was so fantastic and so horrible?

I was right in the middle of a particularly annoying report when the telephone on my desk rang shrilly. I swung around to the instrument impatiently, picked up the receiver.



***On Your Wedding Night Your Bride  
Will Die—By Your Own Hand . . .***

It was Jim Clarke, Dorothy's only brother.

"Well, of all things," I exclaimed. "I never expected to hear from you. Haven't you left town on your honeymoon yet?"

"Yes, hours ago. Mona and I are here at the cottage now." His voice, I realized suddenly, was sharp and jagged with terror. "Dick, something awful has happened—something that's driving me insane! You've got to come up here—help me!"

"Help you?" I gasped. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I—I can't explain over the phone," he panted. "It's all so impossible, so unbelievable! I'll tell you all about it when you get out here. But you've got to come right away! You've got to stay with Mona and me tonight!"

"But I have a date with Dorothy," I objected. "I'll have to bring her along—"

"No!" he cried hoarsely. "You mustn't drag her into this or even tell her where you're going! You've got to come alone. Only hurry, Dick! For God's sake, hurry!"

"Jim—"

He hung up before I could protest any more. I called Dorothy and gave her some flimsy excuse, then I grabbed my hat and coat and ran down to the street where my car was parked, a worried frown on my face. That very morning I had seen Jim Clarke married to Mona Taft, his sweetheart ever since they had been kids in high school. He had been happy and confident then, utterly without fear of anything. But he was afraid now—hideously afraid. What in God's name had happened?

I would do what he had asked of me, of course. Jim was not only one of my best friends; he was Dorothy's brother, the girl I loved and hoped to marry. I was only too glad to help him in any way I could. But during the whole trip out to the little cottage where he and his bride

had gone for their honeymoon, my mind seethed with a turmoil of thoughts and questions. What had happened that could drive a normal person like Jim Clarke to the verge of madness on the very day of his wedding? Was it Mona? Had he found out too late that he didn't care for her after all? My brain flitted from conjecture to conjecture, never suspecting even in my wildest flights of imagination the unbelievable horror that had overwhelmed my best friend—the horror that was to reach out and envelop me as well.

HE WAS waiting on the porch when I arrived. He raced down the path to meet me, almost pulled me out of the car.

"Dick!" he said thickly. "I—I thought you never were going to come!"

I couldn't say anything to him at first. I could only stand there and stare at him. Barely eight hours before, when I had last seen him, Jim Clarke was a handsome, clear-eyed fellow, the very picture of health. He was changed now—shockingly changed. His big body was stooped and hunched, his face like a death-mask. His hand shook as it clung to mine, and there was a look in his eyes that sent the cold chills running over me.

"Jim," I managed to stammer at last, "you—you're sick. You shouldn't be out here in the hot sun. You ought to stay in the house—"

"In the house?" His lips twitched in a ghastly smile. "In there by myself? I'd go crazy!"

"But where's Mona? Surely—"

"I told her to go for a walk. I—I didn't dare be alone with her before you came. Since you're here"—his voice wavered and broke—"maybe it won't happen. Maybe you can keep me from harming her, Dick! We might as well go in now. We'll have to face it sooner or later anyway!"

I didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about. The longer he spoke, the more bewildered I became. But I

nodded my head and went with him up the path. We pushed open the door, entered the living room.

It should have been refreshing and inviting in there after the heat outside. And it was to a certain extent. The room was cool and shadowy, with rattan chairs, low, comfortable sofas, a line of recessed shelves along one wall to accommodate Jim's many books. And yet there was something in the very atmosphere that was vaguely disturbing—something which, oddly enough, attracted and repelled me at the same time.

Suddenly I knew what it was. Filling my nostrils, coiling around me like an invisible mist, was a strange odor—the enticing fragrance of an expensive perfume, mixed with the foul miasma of a charnel house. And even though I didn't know what it meant then, that peculiar smell alarmed and terrified me more than I cared to admit. It was as if a lovely woman and a rotting corpse had both been in that room, had vanished again, leaving behind a mingled aura of beauty and loathsomeness, of life and decay!

I glanced quickly at Jim Clarke, saw he was more affected by that queer odor than I was. His face was livid, his hands clenched until the knuckles showed white. "She said she wouldn't come until midnight," he muttered hoarsely. "She said Mona would be safe until then! Dear God, was she lying to me? Is she planning even now to turn me into a killer?"

"Jim," I burst out impetuously, gripping him by the arm. "You've got to tell me what this is all about. You've got to explain everything. I must know before I can help you. Can't you understand that?"

"Yes," he panted. He spoke in a low whisper as if he was afraid someone else might hear him. "I'll have to tell you. But let's go to the other end of the room where we won't smell that horrible odor so much."

He led the way to a couch near an open window, pulled me down beside him. He didn't speak for a long time. He just sat there, biting his lips, staring out into the sunlight with that look of utter horror clouding his eyes. I knew he was struggling to tell me what was the matter with him. I knew, too, that it was going to be one of the hardest things in the world for him to put into words the reason for his nameless terror.

"THE whole thing started while I was in Baton Rouge last winter," he began at last. "I think you know why I went there, Dick. I was promised a bonus and an increase in salary if I could land contracts with a group of Louisiana merchants whose business with my company would bring in thousands of dollars annually. It meant being separated from Mona for several months. But it also meant that I would be earning enough when I returned home to marry her immediately. How could I guess that the time would come when I'd curse the day I ever started on such a trip?"

"Everything went all right until I met Zola LeBlanc. She was a lovely French Creole, one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen. Like myself, she was not a native of Baton Rouge, but lived in New Orleans. She had come to the Louisiana capital for a visit, had found only loneliness in a strange city and among strange people. It was inevitable, I suppose, that our mutual need for companionship should draw us together and make us something more than just friends. But I never dreamed how far our affair was going to go until it was too late.

"I—I can't describe to you the powerful influence she gained over me. It wasn't just sensual appeal, though she had enough of that, God knows! I can only say that she possessed the quintessence of feminine charm, a mental and physical allure that I don't believe any man could



have resisted. She knew every artifice, every device, to attract masculine attention; and she practiced them all on me. Lovely, cultured, she had the voluptuous body of a Salome, the brilliant mind of a Madame de Staël. One of the most fascinating things about her was the perfume she wore—the faint, elusive scent of gardenia. It suited her perfectly, and she never used any other. Even today—he shuddered and glanced wildly around the room—"I can't smell gardenia without thinking of Zola LeBlanc and how desirable she was.

"I did everything in my power to conquer my mad passion. I knew that to submit to it would only mean unhappiness for both of us. For I didn't really love Zola. I was actually afraid of this beautiful, mysterious woman, even when I wanted her most. There could be only one girl, one real love in my life—Mona. When I returned home to claim her, I hoped to go to her with a clear conscience, with not even a memory to remind me that a woman like Zola LeBlanc ever existed.

"But Zola had a different idea about the matter. I could never understand why she seemed to prefer me in the first place, since her beauty was sufficient to attract men who were richer and far better looking than I was. Perhaps I piqued her vanity by mentioning Mona while I was with her. Perhaps she was furious at the thought that any man could still be interested in another girl after meeting her. At any rate she was determined to break my engagement to Mona, force me to marry her instead. It was no longer a question of carrying on an illicit affair with her. It had reached the point where I felt I was being compelled to give up the girl I loved and become tied forever to a woman I feared and distrusted.

"Things came to a showdown one night when I was alone with Zola in her apartment. She was wearing a clinging, black

evening gown that revealed the outline of her perfect breasts, the swelling curves of her hips and thighs. The odor of her favorite perfume clung to her, intoxicating me, maddening me. Never before had she been so lovely and seductive. Never before had I wanted her so much. Before I realized what I was doing, I had swept her into my arms, was kissing her hair, her eyelids, her quivering, passionate mouth. I could not stop now. There was no thought of decency in me; nothing but flaming desire. . . ."

He stopped talking abruptly, his fingers lacing and interlacing like coiling snakes, drops of sweat gathering on his forehead. I felt he was reliving that moment of horrible ecstasy, and I shuddered at the bestial gleam in his eyes.

"The reaction came at last and I pushed her away from me, shocked and revolted by what I had done. I am not a prude, Dick. I have normal appetites and desires the same as any man. But I had always tried to hold them in check, to keep myself decent for Mona's sake. I felt now that I had desecrated our love, betrayed her trust in me. I turned to the woman before me and told her I was through with her and was never going to see her again.

"I KNEW she was not going to take this calmly, but I was totally unprepared for her rage and fury when she realized I meant what I said. In an instant all her beauty and allure dropped from her like a cloak. She looked more like a wild beast, lips curled back from her teeth in a wolfish snarl, eyes gleaming pin-points of murderous hate.

"With an unbelievably swift gesture she snatched up a long, sharp knife from a small stand beside the bed—a knife she ordinarily used as a letter opener. Gripping it, she hurled herself at me, stabbed at my breast. I dodged, and before she could strike again, I caught her wrist,

wrenched the knife from her. Thinking I could break her hysterical rage, I lifted my free hand and slapped her viciously across the mouth.

"The blow had no apparent effect on her. Again she sprang at me, insane with fury, gouging at my eyes with her fingernails, trying to sink her teeth in my throat. She wrenched and struggled for that knife with the strength of a man. I am not weak, but I thought, at last, she had torn it from my hand. Then suddenly a cry of anguish burst from her lips and she staggered backward. Dazed, stupefied, I saw her clutch at her heart, reel, crumple to the floor. The knife had gone home in her own body! It was buried to the hilt in her breast!"

Again Jim stopped, his face drawn and haggard, fighting the horror of that memory. "I—I don't know how it happened," he continued brokenly. "It must have been an accident. She must have thrown herself straight on the point of the knife in her struggle with me. That must have been it. For certainly I never intended to kill her. I bent down, lifted her onto the bed. She was still alive, though, sinking fast. And in her eyes was such an expression of utter hate and malevolence that it turned me sick and cold all over.

"'You've murdered me!' she whispered. 'You think you are free now—to go to the girl you love. But you're not free! You will be bound closer than ever to me—by my death! You will see your sweetheart again, even marry her. But you will never possess her—as you possessed me! On your wedding night I will come for my revenge! On that night your bride will die as I am dying—*by your own hand!* Remember that, James Clarke! On your wedding night . . .'

"Her voice choked off as blood gushed from her nose and mouth. Her body stiffened and went limp, her eyes rolled up and fixed. She was dead!"

The silence that followed his words was

unbearable, intolerable. The tension in the room lessened only when he spoke again.

"Yes, she was dead," he said huskily. "I—I had killed her. Panic swept over me. I fled from the apartment, reached the hotel where I was staying. All night I tramped the floor of my room in an agony of apprehension, expecting the police to break in and drag me away.

"But nothing of the sort happened. I could have cried with relief when I read in the newspapers the next morning that Zola was believed to have committed suicide. Evidently no one had seen me enter or leave her apartment and didn't connect me with her death. I thought I was safe then. Two days later I left Baton Rouge and returned north. In time I almost forgot I was a murderer. In time my guilt and remorse ceased to trouble me as the date of my marriage to Mona drew near. But now"—he swallowed convulsively—"my doom is upon me! On the very threshold of my happiness, my punishment has come!"

"Your punishment?" I echoed. "You mean the police have just found out that you committed the murder?"

He shook his head. "It's not that, Dick," he muttered hoarsely. "I told you before that no living person has ever suspected me. No, it's not the police I'm afraid of. It's something infinitely worse! Dick"—his nails were digging into the flesh of my arm—"it's the woman I murdered who threatens me! Somehow she has found a way to make good her vow! She has returned from the dead, just as she said she would—to *force me to kill Mona on our wedding night!*"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Horror's Marriage Feast

I GAPPED at him in open-mouthed amazement. "Jim, for God's sake—" I ejaculated.

"Oh, I know that sounds insane and impossible," he went on frenziedly. "I know it's hard to believe. But as God is my witness, Zola LeBlanc appeared in my bedroom last night!

"She must have come while I was asleep, for the first thing I remember was opening my eyes and seeing her standing there beside my bed. She had on the same black evening gown she wore the night I killed her, and the scent of gardenia was heavy about her. Her face was white, bloodless, her lips frozen in a hellish, gloating smile. Her dress was ripped open to the waist, and I could see the gaping wound in her left breast where the knife had been driven into her heart. And mingled with the perfume she wore in life was a foul stench of corruption and decay—the odor of the grave from which she had risen!

"Do you know what it means to be in the presence of a thing that is dead, yet still has the power to walk around among the living? It is frightful beyond description! I was paralyzed by fear as I lay there and watched her bending over me. For what seemed ages she did not speak. Then at last low, husky sounds came from her parted lips—terrible, blood-freezing words from the pallid mouth of a corpse!

"'You know why I am here, James Clarke,' she whispered. 'I will never be at rest in my grave until my vengeance is complete. Tomorrow you will marry the girl you love. Tomorrow you will go on your honeymoon. But it will be a honeymoon of my own planning—a honeymoon with death! I will be with you and your bride at midnight. Even as she lies sleeping on your marriage bed, you will kill her as you killed me! You will take the knife stained with my own blood and stab her through the heart. Only then will I be satisfied. Only then will you have paid in full for what you did to me . . .'

"I could stand no more. I fainted. When I came to again, she was gone.

"I—I can't tell you of the frightful terror, the mental anguish and suffering I endured the rest of the night. There was one thing I knew that I must do. I must cease to think of marriage, give up Mona entirely. Suppose I *was* destined to murder her? Suppose what that woman from hell prophesied *did* come true?

"But when morning came, my resolution weakened. After all, what I had seen might have been nothing but a vision, a figment in a nightmare, brought on by my nervous excitement over my approaching wedding, my conscience-stricken imagination. I had dreamed the whole thing, that was all. I remembered reading one of Cunninghame Graham's stories in which he said that dreams are but the shadow of the past, reflected on the mirror of the brain. That was what happened in my case. My guilty past had come back to torment me while I slept. Why let a foolish dream ruin my entire life? Why give up everything I had hoped for because of something so absurd and incredible?

"And so—God help me!—I didn't stop the wedding as I should have done. I banished from my mind all thought of Zola LeBlanc's threats as I stood beside Mona and we were made man and wife. It was not until we came out to the cottage that I became convinced that what I had experienced the night before was not a dream, but ghastly reality! The living-dead—the corpse of the woman I had slain—had preceded us here! The scent of her perfume, mingled with the stench of her decaying flesh—the horrible odor you smell even now, Dick—was overpoweringly strong in this room! And lying on a table, where I would be sure to see it, was this!"

HE DREW from his pocket a long, glittering object and handed it to me. It was a knife—a dagger, rather—some eight inches in length, its blade double-

edged and tapering to a sharp point. The haft was of silver, embossed with quaint designs and studded with many precious stones.

Altogether it would have been a beautiful weapon of exquisite workmanship, intended for ornament rather than use, had it not been for one sinister thing about it. Both edges of the keen blade, the needle-sharp point, were crusted with a brownish substance I knew instinctively was human blood.

"It's the knife with which I stabbed Zola, Dick!" Jim quavered. "She's pulled it out of her own dead body—for me to use on Mona!"

I had heard enough of such nonsense. "Jim, for heaven's sake, be reasonable!" I snapped impatiently. "I'll admit the presence of this weapon seems to indicate the woman you fear has followed you here and may be planning a horrible revenge. But that doesn't prove she's a walking corpse, a—a spectre from the grave. Why are you so sure she's really dead? Hasn't it occurred to you that you didn't kill her after all, that she recovered from her wound and is still alive?"

"I—I've thought of that, of course," he choked. "It struck me that she might have been feigning death after I fled from her apartment that night. So I risked suspicion by going down to the morgue the next day where they had taken her body. She was lying on a marble slab, her flesh cold and icy to the touch. They had even embalmed her. How could anyone be living after being embalmed? No, Dick, she's dead! I'm positive of it!"

"All right," I said almost harshly. "I won't argue the point with you. But dead or living, how could this woman—anyone, for that matter—possibly force you to kill Mona against your will? You love your wife, don't you?"

"Love her?" he groaned. "That's what makes the thought of what I may do to her so awful! Dick, I'd give my life for

Mona. I'd rather die a thousand times than harm a hair of her head. And yet, I'm going to murder her! I know I am—unless something is done to stop me! Dick, you've got to—"

He broke off abruptly as light footsteps sounded on the porch. "It's Mona!" he gasped, snatching the blood-stained knife from my fingers and thrusting it into my pocket. "She's back from her walk! Don't repeat a word of what I've told you to her, Dick! Remember! Not a word!"

**HIS** voice hushed as the door swung open. Mona Clarke stood on the threshold, a tall, radiantly beautiful girl—a woman any man would be proud to call his wife. Oblivious of my presence, thinking only of her husband, she moved toward him, a world of love in her deep blue eyes. "Jim," she murmured. "Jim, darling . . ."

I saw his face light up, saw him start toward her. Then realization flooded back, and he shrank away from her, shaking from head to foot. He was afraid to go near her! He was afraid that just the contact of their bodies might make him want to kill her!

"Jim!" Hurt pride, anxiety, bewilderment, struggled for mastery on her lovely features as she saw how he was trying to avoid her. "Jim, what's come over you? Ever since we came to the cottage and you noticed that queer odor, you've been acting like this! What does it all mean? And why?"—she started as she caught sight of me for the first time—"is Dick here? Jim, if you'd only tell me—"

"It's nothing," he muttered hastily. "I—I guess that smell made me a little sick, that's all. I told you before that it's probably caused by a defective drain in the cellar. I—I'll have it fixed tomorrow. As for Dick—well, he was driving past and decided to drop in and pay us a visit. There isn't anything wrong, Mona. Really, there isn't . . ."

How futile were Jim's efforts to shield his wife from the real horror upon him! She didn't believe him for an instant. And as the afternoon waned, the tension in that household became more and more intolerable. Jim had opened a bottle of whiskey, was drinking too much for his own good. I didn't touch the liquor myself. I wanted to have a clear head—for whatever might happen that night. But like him, I was on edge, my nerves strained to the breaking point.

OF THE three of us, however, Mona seemed the most affected by the intangible air of menace that hung in the room. She started at every sound, kept fighting back hysterical tears. With a woman's quick intuition, she had sensed the abysmal terror that gripped the man she loved, was striving to fathom the cause for it. She was suffering from one of the most dreadful of mental torments—the feeling that something unspeakable, awful, was being kept from her. Why didn't Jim realize it would have been far better to end her suspense, tell her the truth, get her out of the house as quickly as possible? Why didn't he flee with her from the horror before it was too late? Did he sense even then that the shadow of doom upon them was inescapable, that it would follow them no matter where they might go?

Even now, with the same shadow upon me, I wonder . . .

Fear is like a drug; one can almost become accustomed to it after so long. We felt more composed as we sat down to dinner that evening—lulled perhaps by the false calm preceding a thunderstorm. Mona had learned I was going to stay all night and seemed relieved. It was as though she hoped that just my presence would help lift the mysterious cloud of dread that had settled over her husband. She talked with feverish animation throughout most of the meal. And then

suddenly she screamed and dropped her fork with a clatter.

"Mona!" Jim was on his feet, was starting toward her. "What's the matter, dear?"

She was livid, frozen with horror.

"I saw," she panted, "someone glaring in at us through the window! Someone that looked like a woman in a black evening gown! A woman with an awful wound—in her left breast! A woman—with the face of a corpse!"

My heart leaped into my throat. For the first time since hearing Jim's impossible story, I felt utter panic congeal my blood, felt skepticism give way to superstitious, mind-shattering fear. Mona knew nothing of her husband's frightful experience. She was completely unaware that a person like Zola LeBlanc had ever existed. And yet she had seen such a creature as Jim had described, watching us from outside the house, planning a ghastly vengeance! Could such things be? Could the dead really come back?

I rushed to the window, flung it open. Leaning far out, I peered through the gathering darkness. There was no one out there now. No one! And still, I thought I caught a glimpse of a black shape merging with the shadow of a clump of trees. I thought for an instant I heard a low, gloating laugh, cruel and fiendish as the snarl of an animal.

I turned unsteadily, stared at the two people at the table. "Mona," Jim was saying again, hoarsely. "You—you're sure you saw something like that?"

"I—I don't know. Maybe I just imagined I did. Maybe it was just my nerves. I—oh, I can't stand any more of this!" she burst out hysterically. "I'm going to bed!"

She pushed back her chair and almost ran from the room. Jim and I followed her as far as the living room. Then he sank down on a couch, fumbled blindly for the whiskey bottle again.

"Dick," he said thickly, "you believe me now? You know I just didn't make up the whole thing?"

I nodded, unable to speak. How could I doubt any longer after being a witness to what had taken place in the dining-room?

"We must stop the she-devil!" he panted. "We must defeat her at her own game! And there's only one way to do it. Dick, you've got to tie me up tonight! You've got to make sure I can't harm Mona when—when the time comes!"

"Tie you up?" I gasped. "But what on earth will your wife think? What—"

"I'll try to figure out some lie to tell her," he interrupted bitterly. "God knows I've told her so many already that another one won't make much difference! No, there's nothing else we can do to be positive the horror won't come to pass! If I killed Mona"—his voice broke—"I couldn't bear it! I couldn't go on living with her blood on my hands! Dick, for her sake—for my sake!—do as I say!"

### CHAPTER THREE

#### You, Too, Must Kill!

HOW could I resist his frenzied pleading? I found several coils of stout rope in the kitchen, knotted them securely around his wrists and ankles. There was something almost ludicrous in the thought of making a man a helpless prisoner on his wedding night, in keeping him from going to his bride by tying him up like a wild beast. Yet I didn't laugh, knowing the mental torture Jim was enduring, realizing that his life and Mona's might be at stake.

When the job was done, I sat down in a chair facing him and waited for what was to come. Slowly the minutes crept by. I heard a clock in the hall strike ten, eleven. In another hour it was supposed to have happened. At midnight the corpse of the

woman Jim had murdered, had vowed that it would appear for its vengeance . . .

God forgive me for falling asleep! The reaction from the nervous strain I had endured, the utter quiet in the room, must have been too much for me, for I dozed off, my head resting against the cushioned back of the chair. I came back to consciousness slowly, chilled by a premonition of evil, dimly aware that something horrible was wrong. My eyes darted to the couch where Jim's bound figure should have lain, focused there in dazed unbelief. The couch was empty! He was gone!

Gone! Only fragments of the ropes I had tied around his arms and legs remained, scattered over the floor, cut and slashed to bits! Jim couldn't have done that himself. It was impossible. Someone else had crept into the room, had liberated him while I slept! Someone—*something*—that had freed him so he could murder his wife!

Even as I sat there, motionless, stupefied, a scream of utter horror rang out, wrung from a woman's tortured mouth, driving every drop of blood from my heart. It was followed by a savage, bestial roaring—animal cries that seemed to shake the very house. Sounds of a hideous struggle with death! Sounds that came from a room at the rear of the cottage—from Mona Clarke's bedroom!

Driven by fear and terror, I rushed in the direction of those ghastly sounds, plunged into a narrow passageway. The frightful screams ceased as I reached the bedroom door. I burst inside, halted on threshold, black sickness churning and twisting in my stomach.

SAVE for a few stray gleams of moonlight sifting through an open window, the room was in darkness. But it was light enough for me to see only too well the awful thing that was taking place. Mona Clarke lay across the bed, stripped naked, her white body writhing in its death

agony. And squatting on top of her like a monstrous beast, eyes gleaming with murderous frenzy, was her husband! He was utterly insane with the lust to kill! He was cackling fiendishly as he drove the knife in his fingers again and again into her quivering flesh, stabbing, hacking, ripping her to pieces!

"Jim!" I shrieked hoarsely. "Jim, for the love of God!"

The sound of my voice seemed to recall him to his senses. Slowly that look of berserk fury left his face, gave way to an expression of horror and anguish. Slowly he backed away from the mutilated corpse of his wife, gasping, panting, shaking in every limb.

"I did it," he whispered brokenly. "I—I don't know why. Suddenly I found myself standing beside her, the knife in my hand. Suddenly I hated her, wanted to kill her! Then a—a red haze seemed to gather in front of my eyes and I was upon her, tearing the clothes off her, striking at her heart!

"Mona!" Hoarse sobs racked him. "You know I didn't mean to do it. You know I couldn't help myself. Mona, I can't go on without you! . . ."

I saw him lift the crimson knife, realized his purpose too late. Before I could spring forward to stop him, it flashed down, sank to the hilt in his chest. A spasm of pain convulsed him and bloody froth gathered on his twisted lips. For a moment he remained on his feet, reeling back and forth drunkenly. Then his knees buckled under him and he collapsed in a heap to the floor.

I bent over him. The pallor of death was already stealing across his face. But there was a look of peace in his dimming eyes—a look I had never expected to see there again. As if in this final dissolution he had found blessed release. As if by taking his own life he had atoned for everything he had done.

And then, even as they were glazing in

death, his eyes changed expression. Suddenly, abysmal horror crept into them. They were no longer fastened on my face. They were staring at something behind me—something over my shoulder!

I whirled around. The world seemed to stand still as I caught sight of the dark shape near the window, half hidden by a swarming horde of shadows. It was she, the woman who had come back from the grave—the woman who had hounded Jim Clarke to madness and death! Her bare arms and shoulders gleamed like polished ivory against the somber black of her evening gown. Her white face was a luminous oval in the darkness, incredibly beautiful in its frame of black and lustrous hair. I stared at her, feeling cold sweat bathing my body, feeling passion rise within me in a swift, irresistible tide. Yes, I desired her even as I hated and feared her as I have never hated or feared anything else on this earth!

"You want me, Richard Allison." Her voice was low and musical, yet clear and intolerably sweet, as the ringing of water glasses when played upon by a cunning hand. "Forget that poor fool who lies dead at your feet. He spurned my love and he was punished. Forget him and come to me."

**I** FOUGHT against her—fought with all my strength and will and reason. But I went to her and took her in my arms. For a moment I strained that lovely, pliant body to me, a flood of burning desire coursing through my veins. Then horror shook me and I shrank away from her. I could see the hideous wound in her left breast so close to mine! I could smell the frightful odor beneath the intoxicating perfume she wore—the foul miasma of the tomb, the rank stench of decaying flesh!

"Richard." She drew nearer to me, a smile of invitation on her lips. "Richard Allison . . ."

"No!" I whimpered, thrusting her back.

I saw sudden fury contour her features, saw a snarl of hate writhe across her mouth.

"So you, too, would repulse me?" she hissed. "Like that other stupid fool, you will have nothing to do with me, living or dead? You even tried to rob me of my vengeance, tried to stop me from meting out justice to a man who so richly deserved his punishment! You will pay for that, Richard Allison, as your friend paid—in horror and madness and death! May you be accursed by the same unholy desire to take the life of the girl you love! May you kill your own bride as James Clarke killed his—on your wedding night!"

Terror burst within me. Madly I fled from that room of death—from that house of horror. Crazed with panic and dread, I drove wildly back to town, stumbled blindly into my apartment. And even there the fear I had tried to escape followed me. Fear was a ghastly bedfellow as I rolled and tossed the rest of that sleepless night, tortured not so much by what had already happened as by what was yet to come. Terrible as had been the fate of Jim and Mona Clarke, at least it was finished. They would never need to suffer again.

But what of Dorothy and me—Dorothy who was Jim's own sister? I loved her, had wanted to marry her. But dared I think of marriage now with the same shadow of doom upon me that had fallen upon Jim Clarke? Suppose Zola LeBlanc's ghastly prophecy came true as it had in Jim's case? Suppose I, too, went mad and murdered Dorothy on our wedding night—just as her brother and my best friend had murdered *his* bride before my very eyes?

No, I couldn't take such a risk! I couldn't ask Dorothy to be my wife, feeling that the time might come when I would turn into a homicidal maniac and kill her! And that decision was crystal-

lized the next day when the bodies of Jim and Mona were discovered in their cottage. Dorothy herself called me up and told me the news, her voice so choked with grief and anguish that my heart ached for her. Like everyone else, she seemed to take it for granted that Jim had stabbed his wife in a fit of insane frenzy and then committed suicide.

"I can't understand why he did such a terrible thing, Dick," she said brokenly. "He—he seemed so much in love with Mona. And what makes it even more peculiar, no one can find the weapon he used—"

"No one can find it?" I reechoed stupidly. "But surely—"

I checked myself abruptly as the reason why the murder weapon couldn't be found flashed through my mind. The corpse-woman had taken it, of course. She must have left the cottage shortly after I did, carrying with her the knife with which she had forced Jim to kill his bride and himself!

THE undead thing, Zola LeBlanc, had disappeared after hounding Jim Clarke to madness and death! Where had she gone? Back to the unhallowed tomb from which she had risen? Back to her grave to await the time when she hoped to turn me, too, into a fiendish killer? Had she taken the knife with her, planning to make *me* use it—compel me to murder the girl I loved? Yes, that must be it! That must be what she intended to do!

"Dorothy," I said hoarsely. "I've got to warn you! I—"

Again I stopped short. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her everything—the full details of what had actually taken place at the cottage, my own fear of what might still happen. But I didn't. What good would it do to tell her? She wouldn't have believed me anyway. So muttering some excuse about being busy and not being able to talk to her any longer, I



hung up. I vowed then I would never tell anyone the incredible truth about the double tragedy—that Jim and Mona Clarke had died horribly because of a dead woman's curse! And I was equally determined never to marry Dorothy with the same curse hanging over my head. I would keep away from her, never even see her again, rather than have the thing I dreaded most come to pass!

But in making that resolution I reckoned without the very person I was so anxious to protect from harm. It was inevitable that Dorothy should notice how I was trying to avoid her. It was inevitable that she should be hurt and bewildered by my strange actions. And so, barely a week after Jim and Mona were buried, she came to my office one morning to find out what was the matter with me.

Dorothy's lips were quivering with pain and anguish as she saw how I was trying to keep away from her. "Dick, what's wrong? What's come between us? Don't—don't you love me any more?"

"Love you?" I cried despairingly. "Dear God, if I could only stop loving you!"

"Then it's something else? It's because"—her voice broke—"of what happened to Jim and Mona?"

I didn't answer her. I didn't need to. She read all too plainly what was written in my eyes.

"I knew it!" she gasped. "I've felt all along that you've been acting this way—because of that! Dick"—she moved closer to me, gripped my arm—"you've got to tell me all about it! No matter how horrible it is, I want to know the thing you're so afraid of. You're only making us both wretched by keeping it a secret from me . . ."

She was right. I should have told her everything in the first place. And so I blurted out the whole ghastly story of her brother's honeymoon with death, hoping for her own sake that she'd believe what

I was saying—that I could convince her we must never marry.

But even before I finished, I saw the look of incredulity on her lovely face and knew that I had failed. "I *can't* believe anything so preposterous, Dick," she said impetuously. "It must have been Jim's own imagination that drove him insane and made him kill Mona and himself. It couldn't have been the ghost of this—this Zola LeBlanc—"

"But it *was*, Dorothy!" I interrupted hoarsely. "I saw her, I tell you! And afterward she left the cottage with the murder weapon she plans to make me use on you—"

I felt Dorothy's slim, cool fingers upon my lips, hushing my words. "Don't say that, Dick," she whispered. "That's even more absurd and unbelievable than the other things you've told me. Even if this woman could return from the dead to revenge herself on my brother—which is impossible to begin with—why should she have it in for us, too? We weren't to blame for what happened between her and Jim . . . You love me; we were meant for each other. Don't let a senseless, impossible fear keep us apart forever. Marry me, Dick . . ."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Honeymoon with Death

**G**OD forgive me for yielding, giving in to her! But I wanted to believe that she was right and there was no reason for my dread. I *had* to believe, because of the emotional hunger for her I could no longer resist. And so I took her in my arms and kissed her, striving to forget the dim terror that still lurked in the back of my mind, telling myself that it *was* absurd for me to think the time would ever come when I would want to murder this glorious creature who was so dear to me . . .

But tonight the time *has* come! Tonight I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that my honeymoon with Dorothy is going to end just as Jim's and Mona's did—in death! For today was our wedding day. We were married late in the afternoon and returned to my apartment, intoxicated by happiness, never dreaming how short-lived our ecstasy was going to be. It was not until I opened the door and started inside that my old fear and horror flooded back, and I recoiled with a cry of despair and anguish. The air was heavy with the scent of gardenia, mingled with the foul stench of rotting flesh! And lying on the table in the center of the room was a blood-stained knife—the knife Jim Clarke used on Mona and himself!

This evening I sat down with Dorothy to eat our first meal as man and wife—the last meal we will ever eat! For hours I've begged and pleaded with her to leave me before it's too late, go somewhere else where she might be safe. She won't. She can't believe even yet that the inevitable must happen—that I am going to murder her! She lies sleeping now in our bedroom, trusting me, confident that my love for her is so great it will keep me from harming her.

The hands of the tiny clock before me are nearing the hour of twelve. At midnight the corpse-woman will come. At midnight she will compel me to take the knife and plunge it into the heart of the girl who sleeps so soundly there on the bed, oblivious of danger! If only I could escape, flee to the ends of the earth, stop this horror . . . . But no! *She* would be sure to follow me, force me to do her bidding! May Dorothy forgive me for what I am compelled to do! May she forgive and wait for me beyond the curtain of death! For like Jim Clarke, I can't go on living with the blood of the girl I love an my hands! If I must kill her, I will kill myself afterward to be with her! Perhaps in that other life I will find peace

and forgetfulness. Perhaps in the land where we are going, we will be happy again . . .

NOW that it is all over, I can hardly bring myself to finish this account. But it may be that in that way I can erase from my memory the horror and suffering of that night.

I was still writing when I heard slow, dragging footsteps out in the hall. The door to the bedroom creaked open. The pen dropped from my paralyzed fingers, and I turned around, my blood ice water in my veins. Behind me was Zola LeBlanc! She stood half-veiled in shadow, beautiful yet hideous, lovely yet venomous as a poisonous snake.

I fought against her as I had fought before—with all the strength of mind and body I possessed. And even as I struggled, I rose to my feet and gripped the crimson-stained knife! A red mist of hate was gathering in my brain—hate of the girl I loved! I thought of the way Jim Clarke had driven the keen blade into the soft flesh of his wife, ripping the life from her body. Dorothy's flesh was just as soft. It would be easy to plunge the knife deep in her breast, let the warm life-blood gush out. And later I would claim my reward from the woman there in the shadows—the woman who possessed a terrible, irresistible beauty not of this earth! Dorothy's flesh, so soft and white . . .

Silently I crept toward the bed. I was bending over Dorothy when her eyelids fluttered open. I saw the bewilderment in their clear depths change to growing fear, to unutterable terror and horror. I saw the color drain from her face until it was like the face of the dead.

"Dick!" Her scream rang out, wild and high and brittle. "Oh my God, Dick!"

The girl I loved—the girl I was going to murder!

I felt the muscles tense along my arm and shoulder. I felt the knife go up, poised

above the spot where her heart shook her body with its pounding.

"Kill her!" a voice hissed in my ears. "You know you want to! Kill her just as Jim Clarke murdered me in cold blood that he might be free to go to another woman!"

It was the voice of the thing in the shadows—the venomous whisper of the creature from hell! And suddenly there was something about her words that struck a wrong note—something that broke the spell upon me and made me think and reason again. Jim hadn't killed Zola LeBlanc *in cold blood!* It had been an accident! He had stabbed her while they were struggling for the possession of the knife that night in her apartment—while he was actually fighting for his life!

Scales seemed to drop from my eyes as I whirled to stare at her. She had drawn nearer to me, was standing full in the light from the lamp on my desk. Her nostrils were quivering, her breath coming from her open mouth in quick, short gasps of baffled rage. *Her breath!* She wasn't dead! She was alive—as much as I was!

I saw sudden fear in her eyes as she realized I had found her out. I sprang toward her, but not quickly enough. With the speed of light her hand darted inside her dress, drew out a tiny revolver. Gunfire roared in the room. Blinding, searing pain exploded inside my skull. I felt my limbs turn to yielding rubber, felt myself falling. But even as my senses dimmed, I heard the rush of heavy feet in the hall, fists pounding on the door. I heard the roar of the gun again and saw the woman stagger, crumple to the floor. Then blackness claimed me and I knew no more . . .

**I**N THE hospital where I am recovering from the bullet wound in my head, everything has been explained to me. Marie LeBlanc shot herself rather than face arrest and certain conviction for her crimes. But she lived long enough to

tell the police something about her fiendish scheme and why she had tried to carry it out.

Marie LeBlanc? No, that is not a mistake. Marie who was Zola's sister, who turned Jim Clarke into a homicidal maniac and almost succeeded in doing the same thing to me.

Jim had never met Marie, didn't know that she even existed. Nor did he know that she was in Baton Rouge at the same time he was and had an apartment adjoining Zola's in the same hotel.

Marie was asleep in her bedroom when Jim quarreled with Zola and told her he was through with her. She awoke while they were struggling and heard Zola's dying words after Jim had stabbed her. Since she didn't know how the knife battle had started originally, Marie took it for granted that Jim was entirely to blame, had killed her sister deliberately to get rid of her. She didn't suspect that it was Zola's own fault, that her death was nothing more than accident, brought about by her attack on Jim.

It was Zola's dying threat that gave Marie the idea for the scheme she used to strike back at the man she hated. It was easy enough for her to masquerade as Zola's corpse since they closely resembled each other, and any slight difference in feature could be remedied by skillful makeup. The use of the dead woman's favorite perfume mixed with a foul-smelling liquid to give the impression of rotting flesh were incidentals in the effect she was trying to create. The ghastly wound in her breast was, of course, simulated by further skillful use of makeup.

The method by which she turned Jim into a fiendish killer was more involved. She knew of a rare drug—*yagué*—derived from a plant found only in the swamplands of Louisiana, and related to the same species which produces hashish and marihuana. This drug, though slow acting, is terrible in its effect on the brain

and nervous system, causing temporary madness and homicidal frenzy. Yet, oddly enough, this tendency to commit murder never reached its full strength unless someone else was with the individual who was under the influence of the drug and incited him on to attack his victim.

The rest is rather obvious. Marie LeBlanc followed Jim up north and took a room in an obscure hotel under an assumed name. She stayed out of sight until the night before his marriage. Then, disguised as her dead sister, she appeared in his bedroom and added to his torment by warning him what was going to happen. The next day she reached the cottage before Jim and Mona did, planted the knife where he would see it, and dosed the bottle of whiskey he was going to drink with *yagué*. And that night she made good her vow by cutting the ropes with which I had bound him and leading him to his bride to kill her.

Marie LeBlanc had thought her work would be finished then. But unfortunately for me, I was at the cottage and had seen what had taken place. She was afraid I knew too much and would expose her to the police. She first tried to buy my silence by offering herself to me. But when I repulsed her, she decided she would have to get rid of me, too. That determination was intensified by the fact that she knew I was in love with Dorothy, Jim's sister. So great was her hatred

of Jim that it extended even to his own relatives, his own flesh and blood. Why not eliminate Dorothy, too, while she had the chance?

And so she tried to turn me into a killer on my wedding night. This time the *yagué* was put in my coffee which Dorothy never drank. The effect of the drug was slow, as I said before, and she gauged the amount so that I would not be under its influence until midnight. Then she could appear, goad me on to murder Dorothy and complete her scheme of vengeance.

As it happened, however, Dorothy suspected a human agency was back of the horror, and decided to get help from the outside.

Without my knowledge, she phoned the police and instructed them to come to our apartment at the time when they would catch the real criminal red-handed.

I know all this now. And yet, even though the woman from hell is dead, I still wonder if I am entirely free from her influence. Suppose some traces of the drug remain in my body. Suppose I awake some night, lean over Dorothy while she sleeps, reach murderous hands for her? . . .

But no! I dare not think of that! I must keep all such ghastly fancies out of my mind! I *must* believe that my love for her is such that nothing like that can ever happen. . . .

THE END

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# The Sculptor From Hell

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*Once these shattered fragments as of a fragile marble statue, had been the warm and vital body of a lovely girl. What eerie power had caused this horrible metamorphosis? Was Kent Carter's young wife doomed to the same fate which had so frightfully overtaken her two younger sisters? . . .*

## CHAPTER ONE

Goddess Carved in Marble . . .

**K**ENT CARTER was aware of the first faint stirrings of terror as he sat this hot summer evening in a corner of Lee Delmar's studio and stared at the nude bodies of his wife, Paula, and her two unmarried sisters. They were grouped, posing under the light, to represent Arethusa, Goddess of the Fountain,

with her nymphs around her. Delmar, a rising young sculptor, had been commissioned by a millionaire to create this fountain group for his country estate. He had asked Carter to allow Paula to model for the central figure and Carter had



*Sometimes a humane impulse can turn a man into a deadly, diabolical menace!*



seen no objection. She had been a professional model—as her sisters, Frances and Dora, were now—before she had married Carter and had often worked with the young sculptor, in whose artistic genius she had the greatest faith.

During the past two weeks, Carter had sat through half a dozen similar evenings, watching with interest as the group slowly took shape—with stirring emotions and pride as he gazed at the intimate, flowing lines of Paula's body which Delmar's deft professional fingers were reproducing in dead, inanimate clay.

What was there to fear? Uneasily Carter shifted his feet; his fingers were trembling as he lighted a cigarette.

"You girls tired?" Delmar said abruptly. He was tall and slim, with a pale, patrician face and longish, wavy, black hair. "Shall we stop for tonight?"

"I'm all right," Paula murmured.

Frances and Dora did not answer. Slim, virginal nymphs—high-breasted, sleek of hip—they stood holding the pose as though already they were congealed.

Congealed. . . . The word vaguely swept into Carter's mind as though upon a flood of horror. Living beauty, to be transformed into the cold perfection of marble. He tried to fling away the idiotic thought. He hadn't had it before. Why was tonight different from any other night? As though fascinated, his gaze continued to rove his wife's warm living body. Paula was tall, brown-haired, matured into classical fullness. Arethusa. She was the living fountain goddess. Living woman, not yet reduced to the emotionless immortality of stone.

To Carter at that instant came the thought that this was a premonition of disaster; a revelation of horror to come. For a second he had a wild desire to shout at Delmar—to force him to stop and destroy the damnable thing he was creating.

But the words were only in his head. He choked them back from his tongue. His thoughts were idiotic, senseless.

"I guess—I guess I'm tired," Dora murmured suddenly. She was a small, dark-haired girl of seventeen, with a whimsical, elfin beauty. But abruptly now Carter realized that her elfin look was gone. Her face was pallid, strained. Her whole slim, little body was trembling, the muscles of her abdomen quivering as though with a shuddering breath.

Carter found himself starting to his feet. "Dora," he gasped, "are you ill? What's the matter?"

"I'm sorry," young Delmar said. "I kept them too long. Kent. I hadn't realized."

HER dark hair flowing over her breasts, Dora sat on the studio floor. Paula and Frances sat down beside her.

"What's the matter, Dora?" Frances murmured.

Carter as he came forward, found himself clenching his hands so that his nails dug into the palms. In God's name, what was the matter here? He had flung away his own horror as imaginative nonsense. But he could see now that Dora was more frightened than ill. Her whole little body was shuddering. And the statuesque, eighteen-year-old Frances—was it more than apprehension for her sister that showed in her face? Carter could see beads of sweat on Frances' forehead; and beads that were clustered into little rivulets on her breasts.

"Perhaps the drink we had a while ago was too much for her," Paula suggested. "Dora isn't used to it, and then posing immediately afterward—"

"I'm all right," Dora insisted. "I'm not hot—I'm cold."

She was shivering as Paula and Frances took her into the dressing room.

"I'm terribly sorry," Delmar said contritely. "Good Lord, Kent, if I've overworked little Dora—"

He threw himself down on a cushioned couch and Carter sat beside him. "She'll be all right," Carter said dubiously. "But I do think I'd better get the girls home at once."

"Of course. Of course."

This horror. It seemed to be upon young Lee Delmar as well as the others. Carter couldn't miss it. A quiver in Delmar's voice; his black hair plastered dank on his pale forehead; his hands that seemed to twitch; his dark eyes that roved, restless, nervous about the shadowed studio.

"Well, see you tomorrow evening," Delmar said as they stood, a few moments later, beside Carter's car at the side entrance. "Tomorrow night—the full group. John Blaine is bringing Edith, and the two Johnson girls. My whole group of six—"

"Right," Carter agreed. "See you tomorrow, Lee." It was a relief to get

# PALS

## through the years



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away; but they weren't leaving the horror in Delmar's studio. They were bringing it with them! Paula took Frances in the rear seat of the big car; Dora said she wanted to ride in front. As for an instant she stood beside Carter, her young body, firm and apparent beneath her dress, pressed against him. The moonlight showed him her pale face; her dark eyes staring up at him—eyes with so blatantly provocative a look that he gasped. . . .

Carter drove silently through the outskirts of the village to their home, half a mile out in the wooded hills. Dora huddled close against him. Certainly, it was wholly unlike her—this slyly amorous pressing of her thigh against his; this caress from her hand in the darkness.

They were home in ten minutes. It was still only ten o'clock. The big rustic bungalow drowsed in the summer moonlight, the tree-shrouded garden around it and the forest that led up into the lonely Sioux Hills stood like a wall beyond the fence.

"I think Dora should go right to bed," Paula said. "She'll be better in the morning."

But it was obvious now that little Dora was really ill. She stood clinging to Carter; her teeth were chattering; her lips were blue.

"I'm—all right," she insisted. "Just cold—so horribly cold." Then as Paula and Frances hurried into the kitchen to get her something hot to drink, she murmured:

"Oh Kent—carry me in to bed. Warm me, Kent dear. I'm so—so cold."

Silently he picked her up, carried her down the hall and into her bedroom. Was this just an ordinary chill? Had she contacted a common cold—or some other minor indisposition?

"Warm me, Kent dear. Oh, hold me close—"

Carter's little sister-in-law had never been like this before. Should he mention it to Paula?

He deposited Dora on the side of her bed. "You'll be all right," he encouraged. "Get undressed. We'll cover you up well. You've caught a cold, probably."

FRANCES undressed her. They put her in bed; piled covers upon her and she lay shaking. But the hot tea warmed her.

"I think we'd better give Dr. Torrence a ring," Carter told Paula privately. He had said nothing of Dora's strange attitude toward him. It would sound silly. Paula might even think it the product of his own wayward imagination. Dora seemed better presently; but still Carter sent for Dr. Torrence, the family physician and old friend. He lived over in town within a mile and was there almost immediately.

"Why, she'll be all right," he said cheerily, after he had examined Dora and sat for a moment by the bed, talking to her. She did indeed seem much better now. The chill was gone; and no fever seemed impending. She lay as though spent, and smiled wanly.

"Yes, I'm warmer now," she declared.

"A good night's rest is all you need," Dr. Torrence said as he left the bedside. In the hall he stood with Carter and Paula. Dr. Robert Torrence was a big, distinguished-looking man of nearly fifty. His voice boomed with professional cheer. But in the hall now he was a little different.

"Frankly," he said, "I'm a bit puzzled. Physically, I'd guess there's nothing much wrong with her. It's emotional. Young females, you know—"

He checked himself. "I'll come first thing in the morning—examine her again." He peered down at Paula with his keen gaze from under shaggy iron-grey brows. "Don't look so solemn, Mrs. Carter. Dora will be quite all right. I advise you to let her alone—don't fuss over her and get her apprehensive. Just

see that she gets a good night's sleep."

Presently he took his departure. Carter and Paula went to the living room. Frances sat with Dora for a short time, and then went to her own bedroom.

In the living room, Carter reclined in his big leather chair, smoking. He had never felt less like sleep. It seemed now, with Dora in there, ill—and Frances so suddenly going to bed, hardly saying good night—it seemed as if the house were menaced with something weirdly horrible—

"Aren't you tired, Paula darling?" Carter murmured.

She was sitting on the arm of his chair, her warm voluptuousness enveloping him. But, God knows, he was in no such mood tonight—that sensuous caress Dora had given him in the darkness of the automobile still was making him shudder.

"Tired? No, I'm not tired," Paula said. "I'm—"

"What, darling?"

Frightened. She did not have to tell him. He knew the premonitions were flooding her as well as himself.

"Nothing," she said. "You think Dora's all right?"

"God knows, I hope so—yes, of course I do. Dr. Torrence told us not to fuss over her. I think he's got the correct idea. She had some strong emotional upset."

"We'll go in and see her before we go to bed—after she gets to sleep."

"She's asleep already, very likely," Carter declared.

Then in the dim living room they sat almost silent. To Carter it was as though they were waiting, poised upon the brink of something ghastly. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Run to Death's Arms

**D**ORA was not asleep. The dim night-light on the taboret flung a faint yellow sheen on the bed where she lay with

her hands locked behind her head. In the heat of the room she had tossed off the bed-clothes, and her gaze was somberly roving down the slim length of her body covered only by the shining folds of her filmy nightdress.

For a minute she gazed at the firm mounds of her breasts, the gentle swell of her abdomen, the tapering curves of her thighs. There was no one to see the dank sweat that suddenly appeared on her forehead—sweat that started from every pore with little tingles like the stabbing of icy needles. Her breath was accelerated now; her breasts rose and fell with little quivering jerks, and her muscles were taut with sudden strain. No longer was she gazing at herself; terror was in her eyes—terror, and something far more ghastly than terror as like a trapped animal her gaze roved the room.

And then her whole body within the nightrobe was trembling. Her knees jerked up, and she forced them down. . . . Paroxysms shook her. All her muscles were quivering, shuddering. Her dry tongue flicked out and tried to lick her bluish lips. She seemed for a second trying to scream, but her throat yielded only a gasping, choking rattle.

Then the paroxysms passed. Stiffly she forced herself erect in the bed. One of her hands went to her thigh, rubbing with so violent a movement that the filmy robe was torn. Her teeth were chattering now, but grimly she clenched them, slid from the bed, staggered and stood erect and wildly tore off the robe.

For an instant she stood erect; and down all the dank, pink-white length of her beautiful body her muscles were rippling, twitching, rising with little knotted lumps that instantly dissolved and rose again, like waves on a storm-swept sea. Still she could not scream. Numbly, as though confused, she staggered toward a wall; then seemed trying to reach the hall door.

And then she saw the window, and tottered toward it, with her frantic hands rubbing her body, kneading her quivering flesh.

The rubbing seemed to give her relief. At the open window, with the moonlit garden outside and the forest like a dark wall beyond the fence, for another moment she stood peering. Then suddenly she stooped, climbed through the window and dropped the few feet to the ground.

Her nymph-like figure with flowing dark hair and pink-white body was revealed by the moonlight as she walked to the gate. Her steps were stiff, automaton-like; she was still rubbing herself with gestures that were almost sensuous. At the gate she stood clinging, apparently almost upon the verge of another convulsion. But this time she seemed to master it.

She was stiffly running as she went through the gate and plunged into the dark thickets of the forest. . . .

“POOR little Paula, I must take you to bed,” Carter said, as he reclined in the big chair in the living room and held Paula against him.

“Yes,” she murmured. Then suddenly her white face was upturned to his. “Kent dear—I’m just unreasonably frightened, but it’s as if something—”

“You too?” he murmured. He hadn’t meant to say it; but now abruptly all his weird apprehensions poured out. “I wasn’t going to tell you, Paula. All evening—back there in Delmar’s studio—I’ve just felt as though some ghastly horror was upon us. And now, little Dora being ill—”

The words died in his throat. Unbreathing, with terror flooding them, he and Paula stared at each other. Something was out on the front verandah. They could hear slow, dragging footsteps—a tread indescribably weird and gruesome. A tread as of something stiff, tot-

tering. Then there was a little thump against the front door.

Then silence . . . absolute silence, pregnant with unutterable horror.

“Paula—dear God—what’s that?”

He could only whisper it, as he leaped to his feet. Paula was with him when he opened the front door. Then she screamed.

It was Dora, standing nude on the threshold with the glow of the hall light upon her. Like a glorious, pallid white statue she stood motionless; and for that second as the door opened, it seemed that the light of horror was in her eyes—a light that instantly faded as the eyes glazed.

“Oh my God—Dora—”

Paula’s agnized cry made Carter instantly wheel about. And as he did so, he was aware that Dora was falling forward. Not crumpling. Falling with all her pallid white length stiff and straight—falling pivoted on her toes. Carter tried to jump forward, but the white falling thing fell past him and crashed to the floor.

Paula screamed again, and Carter staggered back with his wife gripping him as she swayed against him—and with that ghastly crash making their senses reel.

Like a fragile marble statue that had broken, the body of Dora lay splintered at their feet! An arm was splintered off; a leg was shattered, completely broken near the thigh. Carter numbly stared at the cross-section of a human leg—flesh that was as marble, with the white bones for a core. Frozen tendons, muscles and ligaments, seeming to whiten as he stared—blood congealing and whitening seemingly all in this second—

“Paula—Good God, don’t look!”

Paula was beyond looking. With a little moan she slipped through Carter’s arms and sank senseless at his feet. .

“Paula! Paula darling—”

Forgotten for the moment was all the incredible horror of this ghastly splintered

thing that was Dora, Carter could think only of his wife who lay inert, crumpled at his feet with beautiful face almost as white as the grisly broken thing beside her.

"Paula—you too? Oh God—"

But as he shudderingly bent down, she stirred, moaned and her eyelids fluttered up.

"Oh, Kent—what happened? I'm all right. I must have—"

Then memory flooded her. Her hands went over her face. He lifted her up.

"Don't look, Paula." He turned her face against him; carried her into the living room; laid her on the couch. And suddenly through the ghastly silence of the house, the clattering of the knocker on the front door seemed loud as gunfire.

WITH returning strength Paula was up on one elbow. . . . Thank God, he could see color flooding her face and neck now. He jumped to his feet. The knocker was again clattering.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Blaine. John Blaine. Kent, let me in—hurry—"

Light summer portieres were here at the doorway. With shaking hands Carter ripped them down, tossed them over the gruesome, broken nude body.

"Blaine? Coming. . . . What is it?"

He opened the door upon the figure of his friend and a neighbor who lived only a few blocks away.

"It's Edith—" Blaine gasped. "Did she—did she come here? Have you seen her?" His voice was tense with apprehension. Edith was his young wife; his bride of only a few months. She was Paula's best friend.

"Edith?" Carter stammered. "Is she—has she—"

"Gone," Blaine said. He was a big, muscular, handsomely dark young fellow. Hatless, coatless; shaking with agitation. "Gone!" he repeated. "She was—sick this

evening—she seemed to have a sort of chill—"

Horrible, ghastly, familiar details. Carter could only numbly stare.

"A chill?" he repeated.

"Yes. She posed for Delmar this afternoon, but tonight she didn't feel well so I didn't take her. She was in bed; she seemed better, and then I went in to join her. She wasn't there. She must have gone out nude, Kent. On her bed there was—"

Poor Blaine was stammering with his puzzled terror. He was staring past Carter—staring down at the hall floor. Carter saw the blood leaving his face, his eyes widening, his jaw dropping. "Kent," he gasped, "what's that?"

The hall light was gleaming on the ghastly broken thigh of the thing that had been Dora, where it lay only partly covered by the portiere. Carter jumped at it; covered it up and gripped his friend.

"That's Dora—" he murmured. "My God, John—this thing is horrible—unbelievable, but there—there is Dora—"

Paula came into the hall and stared numbly at the floor. It stung Carter into action so that as he stammered out the horrible details of what had happened, he shoved Paula and the wordless Blaine into the dim living room.

"She—she must have gotten up," Carter was trying to explain. "Out of her head, probably—we don't know how long she was gone." His voice was drab with stark horror. "She must have wandered out there and felt that the end was coming, and dragged herself here to the front door, trying to get back to us. She was alive, John, when I opened the door. And she—she died then, standing there. She fell forward and broke—"

The ghastly sound of his own words was making Carter's senses reel. He was a big, husky suntanned fellow. One would say he was afraid of nothing, but there are things of horror beyond human cour-

age to endure. Carter was blurred; dazed.

"Edith was like that tonight." Blaine stammered, "And like Dora—Edith seems to have gone out—"

Carter's mind was a chaos—a blurred whirling jumble. . . . Was this congealed white death some horrible disease? There was a disease of petrification, Carter knew, which attacked humans. A ghastly thing that turned flesh and muscles into stone. A slow, creeping paralysis of petrification. He seemed to remember that it took months, or years. But here was much the same thing, accelerated—monstrously accelerated to be a grisly sweep of congealing death—only a matter of hours, minutes or seconds. . . .

"And Edith," Blaine was still murmuring, "then she must be—outside somewhere now? Wandering—"

**W**AS she already stiffening, tottering, trying with blurring senses to stagger somewhere as she felt the ghastly death engulfing her? Dora had been like that. And now, Edith Blaine. . . . Was it a coincidence? Or was some human fiend back of this?

"Perhaps she didn't go far," Carter said. "We've got to go look for her—"

He felt Paula's trembling hands plucking at him. Her eyes now were widened with a new terror.

"Frances seemed to act queerly just before she went to bed. Oh Kent—"

In the tumultuous horror of the last few minutes neither Carter nor his wife had thought of the tall slim, virginal Frances, who had gone to bed an hour ago.

Blaine was with them as they rushed down the dim hallway of the big bungalow.

"Frances!" Carter called. "Frances dear—wake up."

But he knew in his heart that his anxious words were futile. They all sensed it. Her door was closed but not locked. They burst in upon her dimly lighted bed-

room; and stood numbed, transfixed by the mute evidence of a grim, silent struggle poor Frances must have fought. On the floor her nightgown lay ripped and torn. A taboret was overturned; the rug was crumpled and scuffed.

The coverings of her bed were wildly rumbled, partly on the floor. A sheet was torn; a pillow was ripped, with some of its feathers scattered.

It was the battleground of horror. Who—what had been her adversary? A human fiend? Or the fearful spectre of death, struggling for possession of her?

The window, here only a few feet above ground, was open. Its light summer curtain was hanging askew, partly torn down as though, staggering at the window, she had convulsively pulled at it. Carter in that stricken second was staring at the window. There was no wind, but the curtain cord with its ring, *was swinging!* Had something, just now, gone out?

With Paula and young Blaine crowding after him, Carter rushed to the window. "Frances—"

It burst from all three of them as they stared out beyond the fence where the moonlight was pallid against the black wall of the forest. The glimpse was brief—the slim, nude figure of Frances with her blonde hair burnished by the moonlight, falling over her shoulders and breasts. . . .

At the edge of the forest she was running. Her hands were down at her thighs as weirdly, sensuously, she rubbed herself. Running? Her movements were stiff, weird and shaky as though she were an automaton. In that second the dark thickets parted and swallowed her. . . .

"There she goes!" Carter gasped. "Come on, John—"

They rushed back into the hall, hardly hearing Paula's moan of terror as they dashed across the verandah, out the front gate, back along the garden wall and plunged into the woods.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Death's Dark Forest

**W**ITHIN the house, numbed by terror, for a moment Paula stood in the hall, staring at the portiere on the floor. A white splintered arm showed. Numbly fascinated, shuddering, she stooped and picked it up. It was ghastly stiff and cold. In horror she cast it away, and it fell, tinkling on the polished floor, and broke again. . . .

The dim hallway reeled before Paula's swimming gaze. Her head was roaring; she could feel the cold sweat running down her body soaking her filmy summer clothes so that they were sodden against her flesh. Vaguely she realized that she had wilted to the floor. . . . Had she fainted? It was like lying in bed with Dora. Here was Dora's head beside her own. Dora's eyes were staring at her. . . .

Paula did not quite lose consciousness. And as she lay dazed, she was aware of a dim sound—a creaking of boards. Someone—or something—was here behind her. Something coming to seize her!

"Kent! Oh Kent, save me!" She tried to scream it, but her constricted throat yielded only a murmur. Behind her there was a click and suddenly the hall light went out.

In the darkness Paula tried to get to her feet—staggered on her knees and weakly fell again. Something brushed against her on the floor. There was a shuffling tread, and then something was stooping over her.

"Kent! Oh God—save me!"

Arms were around her. A hot, panting breath was on her face. With her swooning senses, everything was fading. Vaguely she was aware of hands plucking at her filmy garments, ripping and tearing at them until at last she lay completely nude. Then the arms were lifting her up. . . . Hands were caressing her as she was carried away.

**"B**UT Kent, she can't have gone far. Not—running like that. You saw how she looked." Blaine gripped Carter as they stopped in the woods. "Stand still. Let's listen."

It was queer that Frances had evaded them. But they hadn't gone far. And now in the darkness and silence they could hear a crashing noise as of someone staggering through the underbrush. It seemed only a hundred yards or so ahead of them. The forest glades here, ascending up into the rocky fastnesses of the Sioux Hills, were black with shadows, patched with a lacy pattern of silver from the moonlight that filtered down.

"There she is," Carter said. "Not far. She—"

Abruptly the sound had stopped. There was nothing now but silence, with the faint blended murmur of insect life and the rustling of a little night-breeze high up in the tree-tops.

"She's not running now," Blaine said softly. "Come on."

Had she fallen? Wouldn't they have heard it? Or was she standing stiff, frozen in that ghastly white death, balanced so that she did not fall?

Then the questions in Carter's mind were swept away by another: Was it Frances ahead of them? Or was it someone else? Someone, or something which had suddenly become aware of pursuit, and now was standing silent in ambush?

Caution and fear swept over Carter. Here in the dimness of the pallid forest there was open space to left and right. But ahead, from where the sound had been, the underbrush was thickly black.

Carter swiftly gestured. "You go that way, John. I'll go this. We'll circle and head her off. Only—it may not be Frances. You watch yourself."

Blaine silently nodded and moved to the right. Carter started to the left. Almost at once the figure of Blaine was swallowed in the blackness. . . .

Carter had gone no more than a hundred feet or so when through the muffling darkness he heard a distant moan. A choked, floating moan. It was not ahead, where the underbrush had been rustling, but abreast of him, to the right. Blaine was off there! Had something happened to him?

Then as Carter stood tensely listening, he heard it again—an eerie sound floating through the silence. It could have been a laugh. A cry—unhuman?

Carter turned and ran back. In a moment he was where he had parted from Blaine. And Blaine had gone off here to the right. The cry was almost continuous now, coming from where Blaine ought to be. Carter ran; then slowed with caution. The gibbering thing, by the sound of it, must be on the ground just beyond that next clump of underbrush.

Then in a moment Carter could see it. In a silvery patch of moonlight, Blaine was crouching on the ground, holding across his lap a white thing, pallid as his face. A thing white as marble. Parts of it would have been beautiful. Those white-tipped frozen mounds of breasts—those white rounded thighs—

Numbly Carter moved forward. Blaine was holding the broken torso in his arms. He heard Carter approaching and turned with a movement so violent that a splintered portion of arm fell to the ground.

It made Blaine laugh wildly. "That's all right, Kent," he cackled. "She—Edith she's broken away—"

The moonlight on his face showed his eyes, white-rimmed, laughing with the light of reason stricken from them.

"Edith—" Carter heard himself murmur.

"Why, sure—my—my wife. If you don't believe it, there's her head."

**H**E SAT rocking the torso. The ghostly head showed in the brush beside him. With senses reeling, Carter bent down.

He touched his friend's shoulder. "Don't let it get you, John. You're all right."

"Sure—I'm all right. But Edith isn't. She's dead. She was just dying when I got here. Her eyes—she looked as though she recognized me. When I held her—the head fell off—" He was about to laugh wildly again, but he choked it into a sob. Then he tried to steady himself. "I'm all right, Kent. She—my Edith—like Dora and like Frances too, maybe."

Carter started to his feet. The dead were beyond hope, but Frances might still be living.

"I'm going to go after Frances," Carter said. "You'll wait here, John?"

Blaine still was numbed. But it seemed now that his shock of hysteria was past. "Yes," he murmured. He was blurred, dazed. "I just want to hold her. Yes—I'll sit here."

Frances might still be living. . . . Cautiously, Carter crept away. Behind him for a moment in the moonlight, he could see Blaine rocking back and forth pathetically holding the gruesome thing which had been the wife whom he loved. . . .

Then Carter was alone in the darkness. Ahead there was only silence. But he was sure that tread which so suddenly had stilled before he and Blaine had separated, had come from this vicinity. He topped a little rise of ground. His advance had been almost soundless. Cautiously and without a sound he parted a line of thickets.

And then he saw it! But it wasn't Frances! It was Lee Delmar, the sculptor. He was standing beside the dark bole of a tree, motionless as though listening for sounds of pursuit. And across his outstretched arms he was carrying the stiff nude body of Frances!

Quite evidently Delmar had not seen or heard Carter. For just an instant Carter stood transfixed. A big loose chunk of rock was at his feet. He stopped,

snatched it up and leaped forward.

There was no thought of caution in Carter as he brandished the rock and plunged across that dark forest glade. That damned fiend Delmar—

The sculptor could not fail to hear him now, and to see him. But Delmar did not move. With the pale body of Frances stiff within his outstretched arms, he stood like a graven image, leaning slightly backward with his shoulder braced against the tree-trunk.

"I've got you—you damned rat!" Carter shouted. Then the rock fell from his hand. Anger turned to swift amazement and then to horror as he dashed up and still Delmar did not move.

"Lee! Good God!" He gripped the sculptor. It made Delmar twitch; the body of Frances slid from his outstretched arms and fell to the ground. Breaking. . . . The ghastly white death—

The shock of his horror made Carter recoil. Delmar tottered forward with one twitching step; then he fell and lay quivering with his lips blue and his eyes staring with the light of anguish in them.

Frances was dead, but Delmar still was living. Carter steadied himself and bent down.

"Lee? Can you hear me, Lee?"

Delmar's body stopped quivering. He lay stiff, his chalk-white face like a mask, but at the question he blinked his eyes.

"You can hear me?"

Again the eyes blinked. Carter put his hand on Delmar's white throat. It was cold and dank. The flesh was smooth and stiff, almost unyielding to Carter's horrified touch. Delmar was dying, obviously—another victim of the ghastly white death. Did he know anything of the fiendish agency back of all this?

"Lee," Carter pleaded, "who did this to you? Do you know?"

There was only the blinking eyelids. It seemed as though Delmar's throat was struggling to move with a little added in-

take of faint, almost imperceptible breath—as though he were trying to speak. But no sound came.

Then Carter had an inspiration. "Lee," he said, "if you want to say 'yes', blink twice. For 'no', move your eyelids only once. Do you understand?"

The lids slowly lowered and raised; and lowered and raised again.

"All right. Now, Lee—" Carter suddenly checked himself as a thought made him flood with a new tumult of horror. Paula! He had left Paula home alone! There was no fiend out here in the woods, nothing but the ghastly victims. And Paula was at home alone!

"Lee—I've left Paula at home—forgotten her." Carter slid his arms under Delmar's body, lifted him up. It wasn't far back to the house. Delmar was heavy, but Carter was a powerful man, and frenzied now with a desperate strength. Swiftly he staggered through the dark forest glades with his stiff, dreadful burden. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Master of the Plague

THE big rambling bungalow was dark and silent in the moonlight. There had been lights in it when Carter left so short a time ago.

"Paula, where are you? Are you safe, Paula?"

He shouted it as he came to the fence. The dark walls seemed to garble it and fling it back at him. He laid Delmar on the verandah and rushed into the dark house.

"Paula!"

Fumbling he switched on the hall light. The ghastly parts of what had been Dora's beautiful little body lay here, still entangled with the portiere. And here was mute evidence of what to Carter was more horrible than anything which had gone before—Paula's filmy summer dress, her shoes, her stockings, her delicate un-



dergarments. Fearfully he rushed through the silent house, calling, searching. But it was futile. There was nothing here but this horrible torn clothing.

On the front verandah, again Carter bent over the rigid, motionless Delmar. Had the sculptor died? Was whatever knowledge Delmar might have, lost now as the diabolical white death claimed him?

"Lee? Can you still hear me?"

The eyelids were closed. But at the sound of Carter's voice they fluttered apart.

"You're still alive! Thank God, Lee. Paula is gone. Do you know where she might be?"

"Yes." The fluttering eyelids clearly gave the answer.

"Is it far from here?"

"No."

"In the woods?"

"Yes."

These wild, forested Sioux Hills, even close at hand, could hold many fastnesses almost unexplored.

"Do you think you know the place, Lee?"

"Yes."

"You could lead me there?"

"Yes."

An agony of haste was upon Carter. Already he was lifting Delmar in his arms. "I'll carry you. Do we start toward where I found you out there?"

"Yes."

It was a weird journey, as Carter staggered with his burden, ascending into the undulating lonely forest, stopping at intervals to find out which way to go. . . .

"Are we nearly there, Lee?"

"Yes."

Carter was in an agony of fear that Delmar would die. The face was whiter; more rigid. The lips which had been blue, were whitening. But the eyelids still fluttered. . . .

The place was an undercut, tangled with underbrush, arching overhead with

an outward bulging cliff. The moonlight was gone now. He could not see Delmar's moving eyelids, but his fingers could feel them as they fluttered to answer his whispered questions. A little archway was here—a natural arch in the rock-face. It was tangled with rankly growing vegetation, but there seemed broken places, almost like a tortuous path.

THEN abruptly a glow was ahead—not moonlight but the yellow-red glow of firelight; and in the heavy night air there was the smell of smoke. And presently Carter came upon the lip of a smooth rock-slope—a little ramp of rock, descending steeply for some twenty feet. Panting, with wildly pounding heart, he laid Delmar down on the rocks and crouched beside him, peering at the weird, firelit scene.

It was a small rocky grotto, open to the sullen sky, with walls of rock entirely enclosing it—jagged, pitted walls with tangled underbrush on them—walls rising nearly a hundred feet on the far side as though here were some ancient crater, lost in the depths of the forested hills. There were trees, thickets and underbrush down on the grotto floor. But in the center the vegetation seemed to have been cleared away.

The fire was snapping as though only recently dried brush had been piled upon it. The red-yellow tongues of flame mingled with the fitful moonlight, painted the rocks with a lurid glow and gleamed warmly on a pile of animal furs which lay nearby.

With that first glance, as the breathless Carter stared, it seemed an empty stage setting—a little hidden lair here, fraught with horror but empty of movement save for the swaying firelight. And then Carter's shifting glance revealed the two nude girls. Their backs were against the rock-wall on the far side of the grotto. Arlene and Grace Johnson. Carter recognized

them. A tree branch extended almost horizontally over their heads—a branch with four ropes hanging down to which their upraised wrists were tied so that the girls were stretched erect, with feet just touching the ground.

Carter's hasty glance showed him that, whatever had happened to them, the ghastly white rigidity was not upon them—though their faces, framed by tousled blonde hair, were pale, contorted by terror. But their slim young bodies, with breasts uplifted by their stretched arms, were pink-white—plastic with living warmth as they twisted and swayed, struggling with the ropes that held them dangling almost upon tiptoe.

For that instant, with the rigid form of the dying Delmar beside him, Carter stared breathless. And then his heart leaped and seemed to stick in his throat.

Dear God—this culminating horror—

From what seemed a tunnel-entrance across the thicket-strewn cauldron, a figure suddenly emerged—a tall stalwart man clad in trousers and shirt. He was carrying a nude woman—a woman with ankles and wrists tied—a woman with pink-white body which still had the strength to twist and struggle as the fiend carried her forward and dropped her to the pile of furs by the fire.

It was Paula!

**T**HE figure of the man by the fire straightened. The firelight bathed his thick wide shoulders, gleamed on his massive head of iron-grey hair—revealed the familiar face of Dr. Torrence! And now his booming voice sounded:

"Paula, lie still. It will not help you to struggle." Then he chuckled. "Be patient, my little one. Your turn will come soon."

At the top of the short steep ramp Carter found himself starting to his feet. Beside him, as though lashed into frenzy by the sound of the fiend's voice, Delmar's

stricken body was twitching. Who shall ever say what desperate torment of body and mind was within the dying sculptor at that instant? A despairing frenzy as he must have fought to break the bonds of the white death that held him. From head to foot he writhed in convulsions. At the lips of the ramp he jerked his legs so that they slid over the edge. His body slid downward, and one of his arms, convulsively bending at the elbow, hooked around Carter's ankles.

It had all happened in a second. Carter was stooping to seize a loose chunk of rock. His back momentarily was to the ramp; and as Delmar's convulsive arm hooked his ankles, it threw him off balance. There was a second when he was aware that he was toppling backward, entangled with Delmar's body. From below there came a startled oath from Torrence. Then in the backward, sliding fall, Carter's head crashed against a rock. The world seemed to burst into blinding light as his senses went off into an abyss of unconsciousness. . . .

"Oh, so you're coming back to us now?" Carter's swooping senses yielded to the sound of Torrence's ironic voice. He opened his eyes to a swaying vision of rocks and firelight and the burly figure of the physician bending over him.

"Not dead, Carter? Well, that's good. Perhaps you may even be of help to me."

Carter was aware that his wrists were lashed behind him; his ankles tied; his body propped against a rock. . . . The swaying scene steadied. Twenty feet away the nude bodies of Arlene and Grace still hung by their upstretched arms. At the nearby fire, on the pile of rugs, Paula lay bound and nude—Paula, dear God, as yet unharmed. A scream trembled on her red lips as she gazed with terrified eyes at her husband.

"Be quiet, Paula," Torrence was saying. "You must preserve all your strength to love me. Arlene and Grace may fail—

then I'm depending on you, little Paula."

What hideous necromancy was this? There was gloating, chuckling passion in Torrence's heavy voice. But there was more than that. There was a desperate urgency hidden in the words of the panting physician. And despite the yellow-red glare of the firelight that colored his contorted, sweating face, Carter could see that Torrence was pallid. The big physician leaned down over Paula; his hand stroked her with a lewd caress as she struggled to avoid his touch.

"Don't fail me, little Paula. You will thrill to it. You must keep your mind on that. Don't think of anything else."

From Carter's constricted throat his raging cry burst out:

"You damned fiend! What are you going to do?"

Torrence came lumbering back. "Fiend? You call me that? Not a fiend—a physician, Carter. A scientist, working for years to conquer a fearful disease. If I fail—yes, then they might call me a fiend. A fiend who experimented upon women for his own pleasure. But if I succeed, then I'll be a hero. Riches, fame, all to be mine with my name ringing around the world—immortal in the history of medicine."

Was he a madman? The wild light of madness seemed in his eyes as he stared down at Carter. But was it the madness of his desire for these beautiful women—or the cold passion of a fanatical scientist, seeking to correct nature's errors?

"Conquering a disease?" Carter shouted. "A plague of your own making! You've caused this disease—this horrible—"

"Petrification?" Torrence jibed. "Quite so, Carter. Of course I caused it—found it—created it—" His heavy hand gestured at the rigid body of Delmar, stretched on the rocks beside Carter. "I gave it to him. He was one of my first victims. A slower form—he has been nearly a week dying."

The fiend's foot kicked at Delmar contemptuously. "Not dead yet? Well, you will be, any minute. Can you hear me, Delmar? You poor fool—I never had any idea of saving you."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Love Me—Else I Die!

TORRENCE swung back to Carter. "I gave him the virus, Carter, so that he would have to help me. His models, these girls, were just what I needed. When he found he had the sickness, in his terror he had to help me. He thought the women would save him from death."

Was Torrence's fiendish chuckle wholly mad? Were these just the ravings of a maniac?

"Delmar, the poor fool, did everything wrong tonight," Torrence was saying. "I didn't want to give that deadly drink to Edith Blaine this afternoon. Or to Dora and Frances this evening. He and I were going to arrange things together, starting with the Johnson girls. But Delmar was too terrified—in too much of a hurry."

Torrence was chuckling with grim amusement. "Of course, I can't blame him—he felt his death at hand—he thought the women could save him. But the best he could do was wait in the woods and see them come out and die! And then die himself!"

"Create a disease to cure it?" Carter said incredulously.

"Exactly so, Carter. Not quite the same disease, however. It is ironical that as I searched for an antitoxin for the damnable, slow petrification that creeps upon humans and so far has been incurable—ironical that all I could create was a more ghastly, infinitely more virulent form of the same disease! But that was my opportunity, Carter. Surely you understand the theory of antitoxins? A sufferer successfully fights a disease. When he is well, in his blood antibodies have

been created by nature—little soldiers that fought and won the battle against the enemy.”

Torrence's heavy voice was vibrant now with earnestness. “Ah, now you understand, Carter! One of these women will suffer my disease—and conquer it. She must! And then from her blood I will get the antitoxin. The cure for all those other sufferers in the world who are dying of the slow, normal ailment. Grace and Arlene will win the battle. We'll watch them now. And if they do not—then Paula must! One of them must win!”

His dark eyes under bushy brows were gleaming with a fanatical light. His thin lips, parched and bluish, twitched back with his leering grin. “My disease has some interesting symptoms, Carter. The female victim is stricken with a chill—a creeping cold, deep-rooted within her. Every fibre of her being instinctively cries out for warmth. Amorous warmth—a sudden, instinctive, desperate eroticism, as though only from amorous embraces could come the warmth her body needs in its grim battle. Then the brain is blurred—numbed. The stiffening muscles demand action—a desire for movement—the urge to run—”

Carter's shuddering mind swept back to little **Dora** . . . her strangely wild, furtive caresses. . . . And she had gotten up from bed, left the house with a dying urge to run. Frances and Edith Blaine had done the same. . . .

Torrence abruptly turned away, crossed to the dangling Johnson girls. “We're ready now—Arlene—Grace—I've told you what you must do.”

Carter sat numbed. Struggling with his bonds was futile, so that in a moment he relaxed, spent, bathed with the cold sweat of horror as he sat staring. Torrence cut down the ropes, gripped the cowering, terrorized girls by their wrists and dragged them forward.

“Here by the fire,” he was panting.

“You need warmth. . . . Move away a little Paula. Give us room.”

Paula drew her bound body away in horror; and Torrence cast Arlene and Grace down and crouched beside them. He was panting now. The sweat was pouring out of his pallid, contorted face. His bluish lips were snarling with animal desire.

His hands were trembling with little jerks as he produced a hypodermic. The cords of his neck quivered with little rising and falling lumps in the muscles.

“Hold still, my dears,” he panted. “I'm going to inoculate you—put the virus directly into your veins. That will be swifter. A really swift battle—it will be over and done with, one way or the other—all in a few minutes now. Because we have—need for haste. I hadn't realized how quickly now we must—find this cure.”

“You damned fiend,” Carter gasped. “Stop it! It's deliberate murder!”

**TORRENCE** barely turned his head. “I hope not, Carter. Turn your thigh toward me, Arlene. . . . Grace, you little fool, don't struggle. It won't do you any good. Just a few drops of this, in the vein of your thigh—”

They whimpered a little, and then the ghastly swift poison was in their veins—rushing through a myriad channels all over their bodies. . . .

Torrence laid aside his hypodermic with shaking hands. “There—in a few seconds now. . . . Don't forget my instructions. It's your only chance, Arlene. Remember it, Grace. Fight the deadly thing. Don't let it conquer you, my sweet little ones.”

He was wildly caressing them now, crouching over them, holding them against him. “Now, you feel it? The chill? The shudder? Don't let it frighten you! Love me—love me or—”

Carter sickened at the sight. For a moment it seemed that the two stricken girls

were trying to embrace the fiend as he sprawled and pawed them.

"That's right, my dears. Fight the chill! You'll win. This thing can't kill you. Fight it—"

Swift and ghastly battle. The bodies of the two girls were flushed pink-white, with sweat pouring on them as convulsively they clutched the mad scientist. And then they were shuddering; jerking with shuddering, twitching muscles.

"Don't do that!" Torrence screamed. "Don't let the final convulsions seize you! Fight, damn you! Get past the crisis and you'll live! This is swift—I told you it would be quickly over—one way or the other. We've got to hurry—hurry I tell you—"

Pink-white, beautiful nude bodies—but the pinkness was leaving them. Carter caught a glimpse of one of the girls' faces. A face contorted with anguish, wide staring eyes, parted red lips that were turning blue. Grace suddenly twitched away from the fiend's clutch and staggered to her feet, but he jerked her back.

"Don't do that, you fool! You can't run. You have to have the warmth of the fire—the warmth of my arms—"

Then Torrence saw that they were dying and he cast them off and jumped to his feet. "You fools—you've lost! Don't die, I tell you! Don't die!"

His raging voice went suddenly into a wild despairing plea. "Don't die, I tell you! Don't you understand, you've got to live." He was laughing wildly, hysterically as his own terror blinded him. "You've got to live and save *me*. That's what I want you for—you damn little fools, don't you understand? I've had the natural disease for years—I've felt it creeping upon me so that I had to find this cure!"

He was wildly gasping now. "I thought I had—plenty of time, but tonight I—find I haven't. I scratched myself with the needle a few days ago. I didn't think it would take effect—but it has—it has."

Torrence stood shaking, twitching. On the rugs now the white bodies of the dying girls for another moment lay writhing in convulsions. And the quivering, twitching muscles were stiffening. . . .

"They've lost!" Torrence wailed, and then he raged with demoniac anger. His feet lashed out, kicking the girls. "Damn you—you failed me. And now there is only Paula—"

THE horrible scene was swimming before Carter's numbed gaze. Vaguely he was aware that he still was futilely jerking at his bonds. Then he felt a clutch at his ankle. . . .

Delmar! The slowly dying sculptor, again with superhuman effort, had forced himself into a little movement. His stiff fingers were jerking at the bonds on Carter's ankles.

"Paula darling—you'll save me, won't you little Paula?" The frenzied Torrence, his hypodermic again in his hand, was bending over Paula "Your thigh, Paula dear. . . . No I'll try that vein in the side of your abdomen—"

Delmar's twitching fingers were jerking at the rope around Carter's ankle. Then the rope fell away.

"Thank God," Carter breathed. "Now my wrists, Delmar—"

But the sculptor's body suddenly fell back. There was just a little ripple of convulsion, and he was dead. On the rugs, the white bodies of Arlene and Grace were motionless.

"We must hurry, Paula darling. I can feel it—it is sweeping—"

With his wrists crossed and bound behind him, Carter staggered to his feet. Torrence was bending over Paula. Carter charged with lowered head like a raging bull. His head and shoulders struck Torrence so that both of them sprawled upon Paula. Her scream mingled with the fiend's startled oath. Then the burly Torrence leaped to his feet; and Carter was

up almost as quickly. His lashed hands behind him jerked at the rope. Futile! He lowered his head to meet Torrence's advance; and as Torrence swung a fist, Carter could only duck and lunge with his head.

It was a weird, unequal combat. But before Carter's raging rushes, Torrence staggered back. He tried to swing a fist at Carter's face—missed, and as Carter's head hit his chest, he fell backward with Carter on him. Lashing, with flailing legs, they rolled on the ground. Carter felt the fiend's powerful arms around him; he saw a jerking hand roving the rocky ground, seizing a chunk of rock.

The poison was working! Torrence's encircling arm was quivering, jerking convulsively. Carter caught a glimpse of his face—agonized eyes—face white as chalk now, stiffening like a mask. Lips that had been blue, but now were whitening. . . .

The rock fell from Torrence's stiffening hand. His hold on Carter loosened; he staggered to his feet. And as Carter rose up, for that second they faced each other. Torrence tried to lunge forward, but with

lowered head, Carter struck him again. He went backward; plunged backward over a little brink of the uneven ground, and fell a few feet and crashed on a jagged rock. . . . Perhaps he died during that brief fall. He crashed—

Carter stared down, panting, with that gruesome splintering crash ringing in his ears—stared at the dead body of Dr. Torrence where it lay cracked and broken. . . .

"Paula, dear—he's dead—"

Carter turned back; leaped over the rigid, marble-white things which had been Arlene and Grace. . . . On the rug by the fire, for a moment he held the nude shuddering body of his wife in his arms. "You're all right now, Paula."

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, Kent—he's dead? Like those others?"

"Yes. Scratched himself," Carter murmured. "Inoculated himself with his own damnable poison. God, that was ironic justice."

"Oh, Kent—" Paula was gazing down at her breast. A little red welt was there, with dried blood upon it. And Paula's murmur was almost a whimper of horror: "Oh, Kent, look! He scratched me!"

THE END



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*If you live in a little town like Laurelton, and the Autumn fogs are rolling in—don't read this story. Wait until the sun is shining bright!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Crimson Fog

**A**UTUMN fogs were no rarity in Laurelton. The town lay close to the river, and not far from Buffalo Wallow Swamp. But I had never seen such a smothering white pall as hung over

Laurelton that October night as Naomi and I said good-bye to the rest of the crowd at the town hall, and started down the street toward my parked car.

The billowing grey mists swirled and eddied about us like clammy fingers, reaching out to pluck us away from the warmth and cheery light of the hall; and before we had gone fifty feet the illumina-



tion behind us had been blotted out completely.

"It's almost like walking on the bottom of the ocean at midnight," Naomi said, laughing nervously as we felt our way down the sidewalk. We almost got into the wrong car before we located mine, but once we found it and I turned on the headlights we could at least see each other, although the lights, instead of cutting a path through the fog, made it loom up like a white, impenetrable wall.

"They'll at least keep us from bumping into another car," I muttered as we started off. I could barely make out the curb, but I managed to navigate.

As slow as I was going, I just missed the figure that loomed up out of the mists



ahead, and as I jerked the wheel hard over to avoid striking it, there was a sudden reverberating explosion.

Naomi screamed and I ducked, jamming my foot down on the throttle. I hadn't gone ten feet before the wobbling of the wheel told me that the explosion hadn't been gunfire, but a blowout. I eased the car over to the curb, jumped out and started to replace the tire.

"A fine time for this to happen," I growled, and I jumped involuntarily as a fog-nimbussed figure loomed beside me, a figure in a long capelike mantle or coat, with a drooping hat pulled low over the eyes. It was the man who had startled me so by appearing in the roadway.

"My young friend," he said in a weary, ageless voice, "can you tell me if this is the village of Laurelton?"

I looked into his gaunt and somber face—the face of a man who might have been thirty or seventy, peered into his lacklustre eyes. "Some of the leading citizens might object to its being called a village," I told him, "but it's Laurelton."

For an instant the eyes seemed to blaze with a red fury in the white fog, then he heaved a weary sigh and muttered, "The end of the trail, at last." Then the curtain slid down over his eyes again, and he said, "I don't suppose you've ever heard of a man named Smollett—Roger Smollett?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. I know of nobody by that name around here."

"Of course," he went on, as though talking to himself, "he would have changed his name." He suddenly straightened, like a man weary after long wandering, murmured his thanks, and vanished into the fog.

"Poor old duffer," I said to Naomi, who had been watching and listening. "Sounds like he's batty—and lost, to boot."

But Naomi was more interested and excited about what had just happened at the town hall—where I had been elected

chairman of the committee to arrange a celebration for the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Laurelton.

"Just think of the fun we're going to have, Phil," she said as she snuggled against my shoulder when I had the tire fixed and we were again groping our way through the fog toward her home. "Parades, and dances, and parties. Laurelton's in for a lot of excitement the next few days!"

"Excitement?" I said absently, my attention concentrated on the difficult task of driving. "It would take more than a little celebration to throw any life into this town."

"Grumpy!" she said, with a little laugh.

"Sorry. Maybe I am grumpy, Naomi. It's a terrific strain trying to drive through this pea soup. Unless I'm mistaken, this is the corner where your house is." I stopped the car, and we sat there a few minutes chatting. I was so engrossed in Naomi's presence, her nearness to me, that I forgot all external things until she suddenly seized my arm, pointed out through the windshield with a little gasp of surprise.

"Phil!" she said. "Look—the fog! It's not white any more; it's turning red!"

I stared out into the swirling mists illumined by the headlights, and for an instant I had a sensation of looking through colored glass. Then I saw that what Naomi had said was true—the clinging vapors outside the car were no longer white. They were a pinkish, coral shade.

"What in the world could be causing that?" I mused. Then I dismissed the phenomenon with a shrug. "Probably a smudge fire somewhere. Some woods burn with red or blue flames, and their smoke could tint the atmosphere. Do you mind if I leave the car here until morning, darling? I can walk home easily, and there's no telling where I might end up if I tried to drive back—or what I might

hit. The fog seems to be getting thicker all the time."

I saw her up to her porch, went back and locked the car, and started out on foot down the sidewalk.

The fog was growing redder now, changing to a smoky, murky haze that hung lifeless in the air like a smothering pall. There must have been a moon shining high above, for the whole unreal world about me was faintly illumined by an eerie glow. It was as though I was walking in a smoke-stifled forest that was ablaze with distant fires.

I couldn't see ten feet in front of me, but I could hear, and as I felt my way cautiously along the sidewalk I heard the tapping of heels on pavement approaching. I stopped and listened. There was the quick staccato click of a woman's high-heeled shoes scurrying along with frightened little steps. There was no sound save that, but somehow it carried an air of panic, of hurried desperation.

Then, looming out of the red mists, swimming at me through the vapors, came a luminous, fiery circle of incandescence, a bobbing blob of glowing light. As I watched, fascinated, it floated through the mists toward me, resolved itself into a halo surrounding the disembodied head of a woman—a beautiful young woman, whose face was drawn with apprehension and fear.

Then, as the face came up within touching distance, I recognized it, saw that it was attached to a body—the face and body of pretty young Ann Naylor, one of the girls who had been at the meeting tonight.

She almost bumped into me before she saw me, and then she gave a little scream of fright and clutched at my coat lapel.

"Oh, Philip," she said, "isn't this fog terrible! I guess I was foolish to start home alone. Thank goodness, I'm almost there."

I had been staring at her open-mouthed, hardly hearing what she was saying.

"But Ann," I stammered, "what's happened to you? What's that outlandish thing about your head—that light?"

She looked at me in wonderment. "Light? I don't understand. Oh, you mean this funny fog. Isn't it weird? So red, and—unearthly."

Obviously, she was unaware of that aureate nimbus about her head. I didn't want to frighten her, and I said: "Can't I see you the rest of the way home, Ann? You really shouldn't be out alone in this."

She laughed off the idea of danger. "Don't you worry about me, Philip. I have only two more blocks to go—I'll be there in a jiffy. Good night. . . ." And she was gone, the outline of her body dissolving quickly in the crimson mist, the glowing aureole of light gradually receding. I watched her a moment. Then, just when the light was fading into nothingness, a startled, gasping scream came lancing back through the mists to me, a scream that ended in a choking appeal for help.

The girl could not have gone more than fifty feet, and without an instant's hesitation I flung myself after her, raced toward the spot where I had just seen the crimson halo of fire. But the light was no longer visible. It had vanished into the red fog, and Ann Naylor had vanished with it.

I called her name, blundered around in the fog looking for her, groping with outstretched hands. I ran headlong into a tree, bounced off that and got my feet tangled in a low wire fence. But of Ann Naylor I found no trace, heard no further sound.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Red Massacre

SOMEHOW I found my way back to the center of town, located the meeting hall and found a score of people still there, mystified, frightened by the red mists that had settled down on Laurelton.

I spread the alarm about the disappearance of Ann Naylor, and searching parties were hastily organized. But the quest was foredoomed to failure before it began. That murky, crimson tinted haze obliterated everything recognizable, caused the searchers themselves to come groping back to the lighted hall for fear they too would become hopelessly lost.

"A celebration—a hundredth anniversary celebration of the founding of Laurelton—haugh!" The querulous twang of Evan Stroud's voice ended in a grating chuckle as his rheumy eyes wandered over the circle of taut faces there in the hall. Then the mirth was suddenly wiped from the old man's grim face, and he growled:

"I was against this crazy notion from the start—lot of dang fool nonsense about nothing. But since you all insisted on going ahead, it looks like you've started something you can't finish." His gleaming eyes roved over the crowd, settled on me. "When my father told me about it, like his father had told him, I thought it was a crazy old woman's tale. But it appears it wasn't. Looks like the curse of Laurelton is coming true—the Dying Woman's Curse."

"The Dying Woman's Curse?" muttered Gil Ruckman, the baker. "I've never heard of that."

"Of course you haven't," Evan Stroud croaked. "Probably none of you young upstarts of the younger generation have heard of it. Your parents and grandparents were too ashamed of their heritage to tell you of it. Respectable people prefer to forget the skeletons in their closets, and the people who founded Laurelton had skeletons all right—a hundred of 'em. Yes, my forbears were just as guilty as yours. We're all in the same boat."

"You mean—" It was little Archie Gilson, the bank clerk. "You mean that massacre that was supposed to have happened here years and years ago?"

"It wasn't supposed to have happened;

it *did* happen," old man Stroud, the venerable Elder of Laurelton, went on grimly. "Nowadays people in this country throw up their hands in holy horror at the thought of killing defenseless women and children, but they forget that a short hundred years ago massacres were as common as dirt here—and it wasn't only the Indians. They did most of the actual killing, of course, but often as not they were put up to it by whites who wanted land that somebody else had.

"It'll be just a hundred years ago next Saturday that the town of Laurelton was started—started on the site of one of the bloodiest and cruelest massacres this country has ever seen.

"There was a settlement here then, a group of thirty families; a hundred people in all. They had come west to find religious freedom, establish a new 'kingdom' for their particular sect, just as the Mormons did in Utah. They settled here and prospered because this is rich country, but they soon aroused the envy and animosity of nearby settlers, who hated their religion and coveted their land.

"Like I say, the Indians did most of the killing and got the blame, but it was the whites who put them up to it. A band of the red devils swept down on the village, burning and plundering and killing, wiping out the entire band of emigrants—except one little boy they were supposed to have carried off, according to the story.

"And as it was told to me, the last one to die, with an arrow in her heart, was an old woman whose dying breath went out in a curse of vengeance. She said that just like the redmen had swooped down to destroy her and her family, some day a red blight would descend on the men who were responsible, and on their children and their children's children."

Evan Stroud paused, looked round at the drawn circle of faces. "It looks to me," he croaked, "that the old woman's malediction is being carried out. This red fog

—I've never seen anything like it. never heard of anything—”

“Nonsense!” Blue-jawed Matt Gloverman, town marshal of Laurelton, scowled his contempt of the old man's story. “That's superstitious child's talk! There's a natural explanation to this phenomenon outside, just like there's a natural explanation for everything. There's a forest fire near here, probably. And as soon as the fog lifts we'll find Ann Naylor—she probably fell and hurt herself, probably lost consciousness so we couldn't find her in the fog. . . .”

THE morning sun dissipated the red pall that had hung over Laurelton, leaving the town just as it had been the day before—a quietly prosaic little village—but the quiet and the calm were shattered when a schoolboy crossing the lot on the way to school came across the mutilated form of Ann Naylor lying in the tall weeds of a vacant lot.

Laurelton, where nothing ever happened, was thrown into an uproar, and half the town came running to gape in fascinated horror at the twisted, broken body. I left my work at the Merchantile Store, where I was manager, and joined the procession. When I got there, Matt Gloverman has just thrown his coat over the pallid form. He was swallowing hard and his eyes bugged out like a man who had seen a ghost.

“My God!” he half-whispered, “you'd think she'd been run through a cement mixer. There isn't a bone in her body that isn't broken, and her heart—her heart's been torn out!”

“But who could have done such a terrible thing?” It was Naomi standing beside me, wide-eyed, horrified. “Ann didn't have an enemy in the world. Surely nobody here in Laurelton would think of—”

I seized her arm suddenly. “Remember, Naomi,” I said excitedly, “that tramp we saw on the street when I was fixing the

tire? He was a stranger here, and he muttered something about waiting a long time for revenge. I thought he was only a harmless old derelict, but—it must have been he—”

Matt Gloverman scowled at me. “Why didn't you tell me about this fellow last night? Where'd he go?”

“I don't know. He just seemed to disappear in the fog. And he was so quiet and so—so old and decrepit that he seemed perfectly harmless. It'll probably be a simple matter to round him up now.”

But it wasn't a simple matter to round up the mysterious old stranger. He had vanished as completely as the red mists had vanished. And that night the red mists came back—and the stranger of the mists came back, too.

Despite the pall of gloom that overhung Laurelton because of Ann Naylor's death, we went ahead with our plans to hold a dance that night at Hermann's Grove. We thought of calling off the affair—one of the social events we had planned to raise money for the anniversary celebration—but the committee in charge finally decided that a dance would help to allay the near-panic that had taken hold of the populace since the inexplicable red mists had come and gone the previous night.

The grove, situated near the southern fringe of town, had a pavilion for dancing, and with gaily colored lanterns strung about among the trees, it made an ideal spot for an autumn party. I worked late at the store, had a hasty meal and cleaned up, then drove over and picked up Naomi.

It was already dark when I reached her house, and I had definite misgivings when I saw thin tendrils of fog creeping along hedges, rising wraithlike from lawns and gardens. These early evening mists were colorless, true enough—but so had the fog been last night, in the early evening.

Naomi had been shocked by the death of Ann Naylor, although they had not been close friends, but she was buoyed up

by a mood of tense excitement tonight, because this was the evening we had chosen to tell our friends of our coming marriage, and even the imminence of tragedy could not overshadow her high-spirited anticipation of the pleasures of married life she looked forward to with me.

Then, when I had helped her into the car and she saw the mists creeping down the street, she shuddered involuntarily and drew closer to me.

"Oh, Phil," she said. "do you think it will be safe to go out? When I think of what happened to poor Ann—"

"You're safe as long as you're with me," I told her with more assurance than I felt. "Anyway, this mist is just ordinary fog—not that the smoke in the atmosphere last night had anything to do with what happened to Ann."

IT was only a short drive to the grove, but by the time we reached there the fog had deepened perceptibly. I drove down the lane between the trees and parked the car near the pavilion. Once inside the brightly lighted hall we threw off the burden of apprehension that had weighted our spirits, and for the next hour we forgot everything but the joy of dancing in each other's arms.

Then Naomi suggested that we go out on the verandah for a breath of air. We were seated on a porch swing, enjoying the cool dampness of the evening mists, when Naomi suddenly seized my arm, pointed out toward the trees, where the lanterns were glowing dully through the mists.

"Look, Phil!" she exclaimed. "That blue light—it's turning purple!"

As my gaze followed the pointing finger, I saw the vapor clouds eddying past the light begin to gleam with sullen, reddish highlights. And the next instant I sprang to my feet with a muttered oath. Out of the dim mists had suddenly ap-

peared two glowing, phosphorescent hobs of light—twin circles such as old-time painters haloed about the heads of saints and martyrs.

"Good Lord!" I said, "that's just the way Ann Naylor looked last night coming at me through the fog—" and I leaped out from the porch, went running out into the tawny murk, shouting back at Naomi to stay where she was. It was curiosity that drove me out there, and I was a fool to go single-handed, but I was reassured when I reached those two circles of light and found the Blake girls, Grace and Lois, calmly walking toward the pavilion.

"Grace left her vanity in the car and I went out with her to get it," Lois said, apparently puzzled at my anxiety as I rushed up to them. And then, as if she were seeing it for the first time, she said, "Why, Grace, what's that funny light round your head?"

The two sisters stared at each other in bewilderment, and I stared at them, and while we stood there like foolish children there was a sudden soft fluttering in the air above us. I remember telling somebody afterwards that it sounded like the fluttering wings of the Angel of Death. Then a dark shadow flitted across the spot where we stood.

I instinctively threw up an arm in a gesture of self-protection, and as I gazed upward I saw a huge, birdlike form flap lazily past in the red mists overhead, saw two baleful green eyes in a monstrously beaked head glaring down with a buzzard's rapacity at the terrified girls who stood in front of me.

Even as the hideous creature disappeared into the fog I saw it starting to wheel about, its prodigious wings swirling the wet red mists into billowing undulations, and I seized a hand of each of the girls and started running with them towards the safety of the pavilion.

Fear paralyzed their limbs, and we had taken but a few steps when Lois stumbled

and fell, her hand jerking loose from mine. Before I could turn back to help her there was a furious rush of air past my face. A smother of feathery, foul-smelling flesh swooped down to smash against me, knocking me sprawling, and that monster bird of prey flashed gripping talons into the prostrate girl's tender body, soared off and upward with her as a marauding eagle snatches up a lamb.

**G**RACE screamed wildly and I made a desperate, futile lunge after the kicking, struggling form of Lois, but she went sailing off into the muggy, swirling mists before I could clutch her dangling ankles. Her rapidly diminishing cry of terror, and Grace's screams brought a crowd of the dancers into the yard.

They hadn't seen Lois disappear, but they did see Grace, weeping hysterically as she clung to me, and a shout of wonder and awe and fear welled up from their throats when they saw the crimson fog, the golden burning halo round Grace's head.

"The red mists again!" someone cried, and then I was yammering excitedly about the great vulture-like creature that had swooped down and carried Lois aloft. They gave me queer looks, some of them, and Matt Gloverman said gruffly: "Sure you ain't had a drink too many, Montgomery?" Old Evan Stroud seized my arm, whispered: "A vulture, you say? A buzzard? Good Lord, it is coming true, the prophecy!"

Matt Gloverman whirled on him. "What do you mean, Stroud?"

Evan Stroud glared fearfully about him. "The massacre," he croaked. "The massacre that led to the founding of Laurelton a hundred years ago. The sky was black with buzzards then for a day afterward, as if they had come for the feast—"

"But," Gloverman protested angrily, "no buzzard's big enough to carry off a full-grown woman."

"This wasn't an ordinary buzzard," I told him. "It was as big as a house; as big as—" and then the blood suddenly ran cold in my veins, and I pointed a shaking finger toward the hall—"as big as *that!*"

As one man the throng whirled about, peered through the red mists at the ridge pole of the dance hall. Squatting there like a huge and evil gargoyle, its purple neck and scimitar beak stretched out toward us, was the monster that had just carried off Lois Blake, or one like it.

A low moan of apprehension welled up from the throats of the people about me as the huge bird of evil omen leaned slowly forward, spread its wings and swooped down from its perch in a gliding arc directly toward us.

"Down!" Matt Gloverman shouted hoarsely. "Hit the ground, everybody!" And as I flung myself to earth in the welter of humanity about me, I saw with a feeling of helplessness that one lone figure remained standing—the glowing-headed figure of Grace Blake, standing above me, too paralyzed with dread to move.

There was no time to reach her, to pull her down beside me. In one breathless second the winged monstrosity had plummeted toward her, a cawing cry of evil triumph shrilling from its throat, had seized her swooning form and swooped away with her—out and up into the angry, swirling red mists. The girl must have fainted, for there was no sound from her, no sound at all save the strident flapping of feathery wings, the raucous cawing of a leathery throat.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Mission of Vengeance

**T**HAT crimson light about their heads," I stammered. "That's just the way Ann Naylor looked last night before she disappeared."

Beside me I heard the muttered croak of old Evan Stroud. "Ann Naylor, Grace Blake, Lois Blake—all of them descended from the original settlers of Laurelton, the people responsible for the massacre." He started hobbling rapidly, apprehensively, off into the red mists toward his car, and as he disappeared from sight his voice came floating querulously back in baneful warning to the terrified, bewildered throng:

"You people can laugh at an old woman's curse if you want to. I'm not laughing at it—I'm getting home out of this damned red fog, where I'll have a chance to protect myself."

All thought of dancing and gayety had vanished from that crowd by then, and we were only too eager to follow Evan Stroud's advice and example. Matt Gloverman was running about the grounds, bellowing like a mad bull, seeking some clue to the vanished girls, craning his neck forward and upward as though the very fury of his gaze might penetrate those swirling crimson clouds of vapor that rolled and eddied like smoke from the fires of hell about the pavilion.

I forced my way through the milling crowds back to the verandah, where Naomi was standing mute and terrified, seized her arm and propelled her urgently toward my car.

"Come on," I said. "We're getting out of here, quick!"

As we ran toward the car—we were but a part of the general stampede of scurrying couples, all bent on getting away from Hermann's Grove—I heard her frightened whisper: "Oh, Phil, I heard what you said about Ann, and the light around her head, and what Evan Stroud said about all three of the girls." Her fingers were clutching my arm. "Phil, you know that my great grandfather was an early settler here too!"

"Forget it, Naomi," I growled. "I told you there's nothing going to happen to

you while you're with me. Besides, there's no halo shining round your head." But even as I said it I glanced sidewise at her quickly, to reassure myself. No, there was none of that damnable, shimmering luminosity about her, but I was taking no chances. I pushed her hurriedly into the car, groped my way round to the other side, jumped in and switched on the lights.

Again, as last night, the glare of the headlights made a solid wall of the angry red mists in front of us, and I drove more by instinct than sight as I swung along the rutted road to the highway, turned the car back toward the center of town.

And again, as on the night before, I had gone but a short distance when I was startled by the sudden looming of a cloaked figure in the road ahead. This time the figure was crouched, stooped over a white, pitifully sprawled form on the ground, and as I slammed on the brakes, leaped from the car, the man in the cloak and low-brimmed hat turned fierce, gleaming eyes on me, rose to meet me as I ran toward him.

"She's dead," he muttered, and it seemed he was speaking more to himself than to me, "nor will she be the last one."

"Yes, you devil," I shouted, "she's dead and you killed her!" Then I leaped at him, over the sprawled and naked body of Lois Blake, but as my body thudded against his, that billowing cape swirled over my head, and fingers of steel gripped my arms, holding me helpless. Through the suffocating folds of the cape I heard the sullen rasp of his voice:

"You fool, do not try to interfere with me. I have a mission here—a mission of vengeance, and you nor anyone else in Laurelton will stop me until I have completed it."

**T**HEN the cloak was whisked from my face, and in the instant before I received a stunning blow on the side of the

head I had one glimpse of those blazing, infuriated eyes, the grim, bleak face of a man who might be ageless, a face marked by ageless, undying passions. That blow on the head sent me thudding to the pavement, and before I could grope my way to my feet the robe flickered briefly in the headlights' glare, disappeared into the red murk.

The other cars were screeching to a stop behind mine, and I was babbling out my story to Marshal Gloverman, and tender hands were picking up the mutilated body of Lois Blake—I saw with a shudder that the heart had literally been torn from her breast—and the cavalcade of men whose women seemed doomed to grisly death, was again headed toward town.

We left Marshal Gloverman alone back there, not because we were afraid to stay and aid him in his search for the ruthless monster who was responsible for this weird murder maze that had dropped down out of the skies, but because we were afraid to leave the women we loved out in this red mist of madness an instant longer than was necessary.

But we weren't going to get them home that easily. The red fog was a hungry fog, and its appetite hadn't been satisfied yet—not by a long shot. There were probably twenty cars in that funereal caravan that carried Lois Blake's body into town, and we stopped a brief moment in front of Doctor Sheldon's mortuary while the body was carried inside, placed on a slab beside the similarly desecrated form of Ann Naylor. Then, just as the crowd began to disperse and the cars began to drive off, there was a sudden shrill scream from across the street.

The Sheldon Mortuary fronted on Courthouse Square, and as I paused at the side of my car, I saw the form of a girl leap from a car standing next the small park in the center of the square. She ran headlong out into the open area of the park. I could not see who it was,

but I could see why she ran, screaming in mortal fear.

The terrified creature seemed to be trying to run away from herself, from the damnable ring of luminous fire that had suddenly enveloped her head and torso. And the wild, unreasoning fear that drove her was propelling her straight into the waiting claws of death.

"It's Alice Tomkins! Stop her!" I heard someone shout, as for an instant she disappeared in the eddying red mists. Then she reappeared in the splotch of garish illumination cast by the cluster of park lights, and even as I and other men raced forward to intercept her, we saw that it was too late.

Standing on the lawn, dimly discernible through the angry red haze, was another of those huge, mordant, cruelly beaked birds of prey. As I raced forward, praying futilely for a weapon of some sort, I saw it crouch, take a sudden jerking hop forward, and pounce on the fleeing girl.

She screamed wildly, and her scream was smothered, choked off in a flurry of grotesquely flapping, monstrous wings as the nightmare buzzard soared upward with her. But more than one of these beasts of the air wanted her, for she had not been carried ten feet from the ground when there was a furious cawing and screaming, and out of the red sky above appeared a second monster bird, swooping down to crash against the other in an attempt to snatch the prey away for its own.

While we stood on the ground staring upward in helpless and horrified impotence, the two grisly creatures fought over her. The vulture that held her would not loosen its cruel talons from her body, and the other creature began tearing at her with claws and beak. While the girl screamed madly with pain and terror her clothes were ripped from her body, snatched and torn away to come shower-



ing down in fragments on our heads. And then I could see the writhing beauty of her lissome, palely white figure slowly turn into a weltering horror of red, gaping wounds.

Bloody spray splattered down into my face, fell hot upon my staring eyes. Then, as the red mist grew crimson, there was a furious flurry, a storm of slashing claws and fluttering wings while the two feathered monsters worried at the limp, naked form of Alice Tomkins, and then there was a horrible squashing thud as a gory mass of palpitating flesh splashed on the ground at my feet.

Sickened, weak with nausea, I saw what it was—a human heart! With a final scream of malicious triumph, the vultures flapped off up into space, bearing what was left of the mutilated body between them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Madmen's Holiday

**L**AURELTON, a hundred years old, was dying. The town that had been making such gay and happy preparations to celebrate its founding, was fast becoming a deserted village. By midmorning of the next day, when the ghastly red fog had again lifted, Elder Stroud had called the townspeople together by prolonged blasts on the fire siren, had warned them that safety and sanity could no longer be assured in the town until the mysterious red scourge had been conquered.

"I've phoned for state troopers," he told the terrified, bewildered throng that gathered in Courthouse Square, "and scientists from the state university are coming to try to discover what causes this damnable red fog. But, in the meantime, if it comes again tonight—" he held out his hands in a helpless gesture—"I don't know what we can do but get out, and get out as fast as we can. It's nothing

human that's attacking Laurelton—it's something hellish, something beyond human comprehension. These monster birds, these vultures, and the fog. . . ."

They left in droves; by car, wagon; nor did the arrival of chemists and state detectives allay the panic or stop the exodus. The detectives had nothing to work on but two mutilated corpses and a part of a third; the chemists found nothing in the atmosphere of Laurelton but clean sunshine.

The men of science advanced theories, argued hotly over them. Some said the red fog was caused by poison gasses generated in the nearby swamps; or it was caused by distant forest fires; others said it came from factory chimneys farther upstate—but of all these theories there was no proof, and as nightfall approached and the grey mists began to swirl about the town again, the exodus became a stampede.

There were many who had started too late, many who had waited, hoping against hope that they would not be forced to abandon their homes. Naomi and I were among the laggards, and we were caught. Her parents had left Laurelton early in the afternoon, but she had remained with me at the store while I worked feverishly to board up doors and windows against pillagers, in the event we should have to stay away indefinitely.

My car was in front of the store, and I thought that all we had to do was step into it at the last minute and speed away to safety—but night had dropped down with ominous swiftness, and, when we hurried out to the machine through the mists that were already creeping along the pavement, my heart sank within me. The car would not start. I had left the ignition on in my excitement, and the battery was dead.

Naomi turned frightened, questioning eyes to me, and I had no answer for her—no answer save action.

I leaped from the car, seized her hand. "Come on," I said. "We'll get a ride with someone else."

But I was wrong. The fog was already taking on that dreaded crimson tinge, and the few cars that were in motion, speeding out of Laurelton with their terror-driven occupants, would not stop for us. Hand in hand we raced along the sidewalks through the ever deepening, ever reddening mists.

And the fog, now carmine as the painted lips of a wanton, was different tonight. It was pungent with a heavy, sweetish odor that stung the nostrils, caught in the throat, dizzied the senses with a queer, heady exhilaration. I thought, as we breasted our way through the opaque nebulosity, that Naomi was staggering—then I realized that I was staggering with her.

I caught her as she reeled, steadied her against my own trembling, tingling body. Her breathing was labored—it sounded like the terrified panting of an animal that had been pursued many miles, had at last been cornered, weak and helpless and sick with fear. And the thing was all the more terrifying because I could not help her—I shared her plight. I was panting, weak and dizzy.

**T**HERE were no street lights in Laurelton this night; the man who should have turned them on had fled long ago; but just as I thought black unconsciousness was about to claim me, my staring eyes caught a glimmer in the murk ahead, and I dragged the half-swooning form of my sweetheart toward it.

I breathed a prayer of thankfulness when I saw what it was—the illuminated windows of the town hall—and pressed against those windows I could make out terror-grey faces peering out, saw arms frantically gesturing for Naomi and me to hurry inside. As we staggered through the door Matt Gloverman slammed it shut

behind us, caught Naomi just before she fell.

I heard Gloverman's voice dimly: "Thank God you made it in time—the fog doesn't affect you in here." Then, as I gulped in great draughts of the clean clear air inside the huge hall, my head cleared; the numbness left my mind and body.

"It's the fog that does it," Gloverman went on tightly. "It was getting me just before I got in here—just like it's getting those poor devils out there." He pointed out through a window, and I saw other forms out there, men and women, reeling and staggering about drunkenly in the crimson murk. They had been drawn to the lights of the hall, as I had, like moths to a flame.

"But good Lord, Matt," I said, "we can't leave them out there to die like gassed rats. Come on—we can get them one by one and lead them in here."

"Wait!" The tautness of that growled command spun me back to the window again. "Look—look what's happening!"

The color of the atmosphere outside had suddenly, subtly changed, and as the hue shifted from carmine to a luminous, glowing purple, the demeanor of the men and girls out there changed just as swiftly. It was as though they had abruptly been plunged into a chemical bath that washed away their helpless stupor of a moment before, brought them out glowing and vibrant with new life, new activity. But it was an activity that was appalling to see, a vibrancy that was first amazing, then shocking to see.

I stared, unbelieving, and Naomi, standing beside me, gave a horrified little gasp. "Phil," she whispered, clutching my arm, "have they gone insane? Why—why, Glenda Rivers is actually . . . Phil, she's taking off her clothes, and George Stevens is helping her, he's . . ." She buried her face in my coat, as though the incredible sight were too much for her.

Nor were the pretty Rivers girl and

George Stevens the only ones who were suddenly acting like drug-crazed sybarites out there in the eerie fog-glow.

The men were suddenly so many lust-crazed voluptuaries, pawing and clutching and leering at the girls, and the women were eager, wanton slaves, responding to that lust. No, not slaves, but instigators. The others had seen Glenda Rivers slipping out of her clothes, and the idea had seemed to catch their fancy.

With provocative smiles and suggestive posturings they were discarding their garments, casting them from their bodies with carefree, reckless abandon, taunting the men with their undraped charms, flaunting their tantalizing rudity before the eager, gloating eyes of the watching males.

They were young, nearly all of the men and women out there, and those clean young bodies had never before been so displayed. The effect was cataclysmic, terrible to witness.

I saw little Archie Gilson, the bank clerk, reach out and seize a mass of flaming red hair, twine his fingers in it and bend the quivering, pulsating body of Cherrie Sloan backward while his hungering lips sought hers; saw him kiss her long and fervently, saw him suddenly jerk her upright and bash his fist against her face in an access of sadistic lasciviousness. And I saw her accept his kiss and revel in it, and accept his brutality and glory in it. She, like the other naked girls, was demanding caresses beyond the pale of ordinary affection—caresses that burned and stung and climaxed in pain.

They were no longer village maidens, those girls out there. They were hungering, atavistic beasts whose cravings knew no limits; and the men who fondled them were beasts of the same ilk.

That mad play went on for a minute, five minutes, while the half-dozen people inside the hall stared in incredulous, shocked disbelief, then I heard a low

growl beside me, saw a gun creeping out of Matt Gloverman's holster.

"I'll stop it," the man panted. "I'll stop it if I have to kill them all!"

I seized his gun as it came up, twisted it upward so the shot he had aimed at George Stevens went wild, but the bullet had done its damage. As glass from the shattered window pane clattered down to the floor a gust of purple vapor swirled in through the opening, struck Matt and Naomi and me in the face. And at sound of that pistol crack the revelers out there in the square whirled about, saw the horrified, accusing faces at windows.

A howl of wild fury welled from a score of hysterical throats: I had a quick, knifing sense of animal exuberance as the purple mist surged into my lungs: I saw the windows on the side of the hall suddenly shattered by a fierce barrage of stones flung by the infuriated throng in the yard, and as I went down, sickened and dazed by a stone-blow on the head, I saw the hall filling with that volatile, devil-bred purple mist, saw a mob of angry and cruelly laughing men and women swarming toward the hall; saw fluttering above their heads the leathery wings of a saber-beaked bird of prey.

**I**t was the cloth of my coat-sleeve, flung over my face when I fell, that saved me from inhaling much of that insidious fog that now filled the hall, for when consciousness returned to me I was dazed yet still sane, and the others in that huge chamber were not.

They had joined forces, those inside the hall and those from without, and it was a carnival without shame they were staging, a carnival of lust and desecration and cruelty. As I lay there on the floor, holding my sleeve tight against my nostrils, struggling to whip strength back into my enervated body, I saw Naomi Wilson, her firm high breasts atremble, flinging herself with outstretched arms toward—

With a low growl of fury I raised myself on elbow, pushed myself to my feet. Some calm inner sense warned me to keep the protective sleeve against my nostrils, but that was the only calm thing about me. That was my Naomi out there, offering herself recklessly to another man, and as I hurled myself forward to protect her the red mists that swam before my eyes were not the mists of that dreadful night, but the hot human vapors of furious anger.

The impetuosity of my rush smashed aside half a dozen figures that stood between me and Naomi, carried me forward in a surge as I seized her naked form about the waist, clutched her to me and raced on toward the door, but even as I ran, pounding down the length of the hall and out into the night, a clamorous warning jangled in my mind, telling me that I was only carrying my darling from degradation out to certain death, for at the moment I had seized her I had seen the sign, the stigma, glowing aureate about her head—the golden halo that marked her as a woman doomed.

No sooner had I reached the open air than I was struck head-on by a feathery monstrosity, a vulture-like creature that swooped down out of the swirling mists to crash me to the ground, snatch the white figure of Naomi from my grasp, surge upward again in unabated violence.

I was up on hands and knees, staring up with helpless fury at the vanishing body when I half sensed, half heard a rush of air behind me. Then I was knocked sprawling by the crushing impact of a body against mine; cruel talons dug into my ribs, and I was whisked off the ground and up into space.

Up through the sullen mists I went, gasping for breath, fighting against the steel-barbed constriction about my chest, my brain numbed by the whirling spirals of the upward flight, drugged by the noxious vapors I was inhaling.

I knew only that I had been soaring upward into space for eons, that I had passed through the fog and emerged into pure moonlight, that I was suddenly thrust through a narrow hole in the sky and was plumped down on hard board.

A masked figure in cloak and drooping hat bent over me, swiftly fastened bonds to my wrists and ankles, straightened up with a dry chuckle and hurried over to the other side of the circular platform on which I lay.

The keen cold air I was breathing quickly revived me, opened my eyes with painful clarity to what was going on about me. That naked, ominously quiet figure lying over there on the platform—that was Naomi Wilson, the girl I was going to marry. That furtive, gloating figure bent over her, feeling with one hand for the region about her heart, fingering a blood-red scalpel in the other hand.

**T**HE groping fingers of the left hand found the spot they wanted, the knife in the right hand came forward, paused a moment while the fist took a firmer grasp about it.

I screamed then, with all the power of my lungs. "Stop, you devil! Stop!" But the volume of my voice was drowned out by the thunderous roar of an exploding cartridge, a cartridge in the gun held by the figure that had risen specter-like from the same aperture through which I had been hoisted to this moon-drenched perch.

The bullet smashed through flesh and bone of fingers, splattered against the glinting knife, knocked it in swirling fragments out into the air. But it wasn't the wounded hand that caused the crouching man in the mask to cry out in sudden, gasping horror. It was the sight of that grim, saturnine, ageless face that had come bobbing up through the hole in the floor—the face I had *thought* was behind the mask there on the other side of the platform.

"With your mask or without it, Roger Smollett," that thin-lipped, ageless, long-brooding face was saying. "I know you. I've followed you many years, many miles, and now I've tracked you down and now I'm going to kill you."

The man I had called a tramp, too old and decrepit to be dangerous, shifted his eyes to me, took a quick step over and slashed the bonds that held me, never once shifting the gun he held pointed at the other man's chest.

"Long years ago," he went on, straightening up as he spoke, "you robbed me of the two things I held dear in life—the woman I loved and the chemical secrets I had evolved. I swore then that I'd be avenged, if I had to spend the rest of my life tracking you. I finally followed you here, found you'd become a respectable citizen of Laurelton.

"I found out more. I learned what you had known a long time—that the town is built above a vast natural oil reservoir, worth countless millions of dollars.

"Your vulture's brain schemed. You wanted it all for yourself, just like you've always wanted everything for yourself, whether you could use it or not. You started a deliberate campaign to drive out all the residents, so you could get their land for nothing.

"You had a huge captive balloon built, placed it on the flat roof of your big house near the outer edge of town—this balloon we're in now. You waited until autumn fog came to Laurelton, then you sent your balloon aloft, tied down to your house by a thin, tensile cable, yet free to hover above the town, to go here and

there as the winds and the electric motors dictated.

"You used the chemical formulas you had stolen from me to sprinkle down powders into the fog, coloring it at will, charging it with insidious aphrodisiacs, chemicals that worked as powerful sexual stimulants, making those young folk down there go mad with lust. You rigged the balloon cupola with automatic lift apparatus that would enable men, disguised as monster vultures, to lower themselves down into the crimson fog you had created, to torture and abduct and slay, to raise themselves at will, by mechanical device.

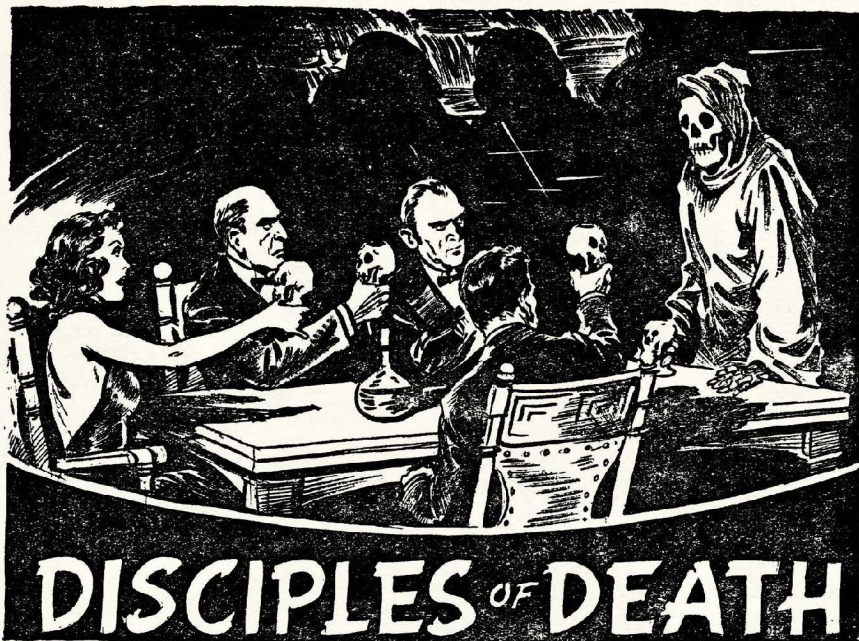
"Your two human buzzards are down there on the ground now, dead. I killed them—and after killing them I removed the cable-connected harness of one and used it to swing myself up here." The man with the age-old face took a step forward, his hand tightening on the gun he held. "Now, Roger Smollett," he said with quiet finality, "you make atonement."

There was half defiance, half querulous anger in the croaking voice that answered that call to eternity. "I'm going now, Hawks, but you're not finishing me. I'm going—by myself—"

Evan Stroud—the mask whipped off his face as he placed his hand on the railing of the balloon's gondola, vaulted over it—uttered no word after that. If he did speak, if he cried out, his voice was lost to the three of us crowded there at the cupola's rim watching his downward flight, for he plummeted swiftly and relentlessly and with grim finality down into the red sea of horror he had created.

#### THE END

Featured in the January-February Issue of TERROR TALES is a long novel in which that ace of mystery-terror authors, Russell Cray, takes you to the city without a soul, the devil-ridden town of Doom, whose inhabitants are a people apart—the town from which no man or woman ever returned alive! . . . In the same issue are stories and novelettes of eerie terror by such popular mystery fictioneers as: Nat Schachner, John Kobler, Ralston Shields and others! . . . Don't miss great issue!



# DISCIPLES OF DEATH

No. 2—Murder Cults of India

by John Kobler

*Societies whose rituals are built upon murder and desecration!*

**T**HUGGEE! Since the beginnings of Indian history that word has brought shuddering terror to one of the world's largest populations—and defeat to the harassed British Colonials who have tried to administer its government. Thuggee, with its symbol the strangling silk, its Goddess the terrible Kali, Giver of Life and Death, its exquisite refinements of torture and destruction and lust. . . .

Here is the typical story of a Thug's vengeance:

In October of 1858, near the Indian village of Sinnur, a native of peculiarly wolfish ferocity named Bhagoji Naique, snaked up behind the local superintendent of police and split him with his already blood-drenched knife from jaw to navel.

This murder, an expression of protest against British dominance, was followed

by an uprising among the Bheels, a tribe to which Bhagoji belonged. Routed, they took to Thuggee under Bhagoji's generalship and fled into Sinnur.

Old Yesoo, Bheel hunter's guide and friend of Bhagoji, refused to join his fellow-tribesmen on the grounds that he was aged and lame. He begged them to leave the village in peace, for it was a favorite camping-base of European big game hunters and the presence of Thugs would frighten them away. The Thugs agreed, little dreaming that Yesoo was a police informer, secretly divulging all he had learned about his fellow-Bheels turned Thug.

The rebellion was quelled. Certain ring-leaders were executed by the unspeakably barbarous methods common to India—others imprisoned. Among the latter was a young savage named Hanmant. It was

he who learned of Yesoo's betrayal of which the old man no longer made any secret, but openly boasted.

From that moment Hammant lived only for vengeance, such vengeance as only a Thug can contemplate. And he was a patient man. He waited five years.

Released from jail, he returned to his native village, settled down quietly in a hut not far from Yesoo's. He appeared friendly and forgiving, frequently inviting Yesoo, his two wives, numerous sons and daughters and female servants to feast with him.

But the old hunter was wary. He had betrayed Hammant once. He did not believe the Thug could ever forgive. And so the two men began a long, hideous game of cat and mouse, with Hammant ceaselessly setting traps to draw the old man into the open and Yesoo craftily avoiding them.

This continued for a year. Meanwhile Hammant was not idle. He was rounding up fifteen or twenty Thugs, sworn like himself to vengeance. He was ready.

One evening these desperate killers silently formed a cordon around Yesoo's house. Two of them then repaired to the village woodyard some five hundred yards distant. They produced flaming brands, thrust them into the piles of cut wood and straw. Fire leaped skyward, casting a lurid glow over the entire community.

As they had planned, every male in the village rushed to the conflagration. Among them ran Yesoo and his two sons. The women and children gathered outside the hut to watch the blaze.

At that moment the human tigers attacked. Hammant personally attended to Yesoo's wife and his daughters. Wielding the strangling silk of the Thugs, a strong kerchief or bandana, he circled her throat with it, jerked her head back and with a deft twist choked the life from the mistress of the household. Then he

fell with relish upon the bodies, plunged into orgiastic vengeance. The head he hacked off with a razor-sharp blade, exultantly letting the blood spurt into his hate-maddened face. Working the blade like a trip-hammer, he sank it again and again into the breast, the stomach, the abdomen, reducing the woman's body to a welter of formless gore and blood.

His companions were not idle. With equal savagery they hacked the various members of the family, wives, children, servants, to shreds, ululating like hyenas as they struck, wading ankle deep in the streaming blood. Long before the fire had been extinguished, the entire household of Yesoo, the informer, had been butchered like cattle.

And still Hammant's lust for vengeance had not been slaked. Arming this time with matchlocks, he and his men deployed themselves around the bushes fringing the path which Yesoo must take on his way home.

Presently Yesoo and his sons appeared. Hammant sprang from hiding, jammed the muzzle of his gun against the old man's chest and literally blew him to bits. The sons showed fight. They were soon overpowered by the Thugs, battered to death. It was over. The ghastly five-year dream had been consummated.

**H**AMMANT escaped into the jungle. One of his confederates talked on the government's promise to deal mercifully with him. A week later Hammant was found, half-starved, wounded by wild beasts. With his companions he was hanged. Before the trap was sprung, he crowed boastfully, "I have had my revenge."

The savagery of that massacre was altogether characteristic of the society of Thugs which for two thousand years have murdered virtually millions of men, women and children. At one time in their history it was not unusual for entire vil-

lages to be decimated. Once fifty travelers were set upon, butchered at one fell swoop.

The word "Thug" has come into English usage. We think of a thug as a ruffian, a bully. Compared to the Indian Thug, the petty criminals who infest American cities are benefactors of mankind.

What is Thuggee and who are the Thugs? The answer lies in the worship of Kali, Mother of Destruction, the most feared deity in Hinduism. It is she who is responsible for the wide-spread Indian belief that human life has little or no value. It is in her name that the practice of Suttee, whereby a widow leaps to death upon her husband's blazing funeral pyre, is carried on even today. And it is in her name that the Thugs justify their atrocities.

Grotesquely hideous in appearance, a black-mawed mad woman dripping with blood, she and her equally terrible husband, the God Siva, can be placated only in blood. She approves of murder. She demands it. The gates of her kingdom open wide to the mother who flings her first-born infant to crocodiles, who bathes in the warm blood of other murdered children.

Once—the practice is now fortunately gone—Kali-worshippers would kidnap infants, fatten them for years, drug them and tie them to a tree. Then they would shred them to fragments and scramble for the bits of their bloody flesh with which to fertilize their fields.

Out of this religious blood-worship grew the Society of Thuggee or professional stranglers. They lived by robbery and always killed their victims, believing that each murder was pleasing to Kali and Siva.

Of murder the Thugs made a strict ritual. When they ventured forth to kill, they observed rigid rules of procedure. Departure from these rules, they believed,

would eventually bring them disaster.

On the eve of a crime they appealed to Kali for an omen. Their *jemadar*, or chieftain, would name the moment of departure and the road they would take. Then he would himself start out along this road, holding in one hand the *lota*, or brass pot filled with water; in the other, the *kussee*, or sacred pickaxe. A strangling handkerchief and several coins completed his equipment. He would proceed a mile or so, then stop and pray to the Mother of Destruction.

Then he would listen for omens of approval. Of these the most propitious was considered to be the braying of an ass. Following the omen, the *jemadar* would sit on the ground with his *lota* before him. He would remain there for seven hours while his companions brought him food. If the *lota* should fall from his hand, disaster would surely accompany their adventure and the *jemadar* himself would die within the year.

If the sound of weeping was heard from the nearest village, this, too, foreboded evil. A corpse, an oil vender, a carpenter, a dancing master, a blind or lame man, a fakir or a *jogi*—the sight of any of these meant bad luck. Worst of all was the cry of the jackal. On the other hand, a lizard was good.

**M**ANY volumes have been written on these weird ceremonies preparatory to wholesale butchery. During them the Thugs would be as mild and reverent as pilgrims. Once completed, they set forth, ravaging beasts, prepared to destroy the first human beings they found.

Some of the individual horrors perpetrated by members of the Thug sect have no parallel in the annals of Occidental crime. The intended victims seldom escaped. Yet there was one who lived to record the tale. . . .

One evening toward the turn of the century a man, wild-eyed and shivering



with fright, entered the police station at Burma. He gasped out this story:

Early that morning a native named Nga Pyu invited him and two friends to go prawn-catching in a jungle lake where the highly-prized delicacy was said to be plentiful. The man, a simple-minded peasant, agreed, and instructed his son, aged ten, to carry the basket and net.

Nga Pyu had the reputation in the village of being a magician, a worker of miracles. En route he informed his companions that when they reached the heart of the jungle he would show them a new trick he had invented. He was carrying with him a *dah*, an enormous, vicious-looking scimitar. A strange weapon for prawn-catching, but he explained to the satisfaction of the others that it was for defense against jungle beasts.

Arriving at a thickly-treed spot, Nga Pyu offered to show them his trick. The men eagerly agreed.

"It will be necessary," he explained, "for each of you to submit to having your thumbs tied together with plant fibre and be tied to a tree-trunk with your forehead against the bark. I will then retire some distance and work a spell which will magically free you."

To Western ears this sounds pretty fantastic, but it must be remembered that these native villagers were as credulous and superstitious as children. They allowed themselves to be shackled in this way and Nga Pyu selected a tree for each, at least a quarter of a mile distant from the others.

The narrator was the last to be secured. For half an hour he waited for invisible fingers to release him. The plant fibres were tough and he could move neither hands nor legs. Nothing happened. Slowly he grew alarmed. He called to the magician. There was no answer. He called his companions, his voice grown shrill with uneasiness. Silence. . . .

Now, thoroughly alarmed, he struggled

to free himself. With gruelling effort he brought his head close enough to the fibres binding his thumbs to take them between the teeth. He bit through them and was free.

Filled with apprehension for his friends, he repaired immediately to the spot where he had witnessed Nga Pyu lash the second of them to a tree. He approached to within ten feet. It was as far as he got. What he saw paralyzed him with fear. Nga Pyu was standing calmly by a thick-barked Cocoa tree. He was rhythmically drawing his *dah* back and forth over the long grass and at each stroke the ground dyed shades redder with fresh, glistening blood.

Then the man lifted his eyes to the tree. One of his companions was still fastened to it. But the head was missing. From a gaping hole above the neck blood geysered over the smooth bark. Nga Pyu had hacked it cleanly through with his *dah*, hacked so viciously that the trunk itself was sliced halfway through.

The head had rolled a few feet away and rested against a rotted stump. Already red ants were crawling toward the glazed, wide open eyes and the mouth from which a tongue lolled redly.

All this the man absorbed in a second. Nga Pyu saw him and with a bowl of rage lurched after him, brandishing the *dah*. The man winged straight into the jungle, kept running madly with the murderous magician hot on his heels. Soon the outskirts of the village came into view and Nga Pyu dared pursue him no further.

More dead than alive, the man reached the police station and told what happened. His fear was heightened by his uncertainty over his own son's fate. He, too, had been tied up with the others.

UNFORTUNATELY dusk had fallen. It was too late to search the jungle. But at dawn a posse set out, led by the

frantic father. They reached the spot. Nga Pyu had completed his rhapsody of blood-lust. All the prawn-catchers had been decapitated, the ten-year-old lad among them. Their bodies still clung to the trees. Their heads lay half-hid in the sharp-bladed grass. Jungle insects had added the final touch of horror.

The police launched a man-hunt. They knew Nga Pyu could not have escaped from the jungle without being seen in the village. After days of searching they spotted campfire smoke. They surrounded it, closed in. The monster made no resistance. It was the end. He submitted to imprisonment and execution.

The motive? It is hard for a Westerner to accept it, but it was nothing more profound than the fact that the villagers had dared to flirt and joke with Nga Pyu's pretty wife. Mass murder had been his revenge. At least that had been the immediate motive. But every one knew Nga Pyu was a member of a Thuggee society, that society which demands human life in the name of Kali and Siva.

It is ironical that the Thugs were excused in cold-blooded ferocity only by the groups of detectives who hunted them down. These natives, themselves members of various Satanic sects—and, yes, at times Thugs—were often corrupt, cruel, demonic. They brought the Indian ritual of torture to its most subtle degree.

These were the fates of some of the Thugs who fell into their rapacious hands: A prisoner's ears and nostrils were filled with Cayenne pepper. He literally sneezed to death. The arms and legs of another were skilfully bound with tight ligaments, thus stopping the circulation of the blood and bringing death in its most frightful form. Gangrene. . . .

Other processes of fiendish torture consisted of applying a lighted torch, burning charcoal or red-hot tongs to naked flesh, pouring boiling oil into the ears and nose. Torture by cold was inflicted by exposing

the prisoner naked in the night air and sprinkling the body with freezing water. In this way human beings were frozen into statues.

Suspension by ears, wrists, feet, hair and even mustache, accompanied by beating with stinging nettles, thorns and cudgels of split bamboo was a favorite form of torture, as was confinement in a cell filled with quicklime that slowly consumed the inmate; rubbing the face on the ground so that the nose was frayed to the bone, the lips torn and the upper jaw fractured; fastening gnawing insects under the skin; sticking pins under the fingernails; beating the joints to a pulp with a soft mallet.

The bull's hide torture was perhaps the most agonizing of all. The victim was sewed up in a newly flayed skin and exposed to the blazing Indian sun. The outer cover would naturally contract with the heat, drawing the live flesh with it and the victim would slowly be squeezed to death after suffering all the pangs of hunger and thirst.

It was in the infliction of capital punishment of Thugs that Indian law-men achieved even more gruesome results. The records reveal that in 1709 a Thug from the province of Gentu was cast into a dungeon alive with deadly Cobras. The Cobra will not ordinarily attack unless bothered in some way. Thus, the wretched man spent hours of the most harrowing fear imaginable while the reptiles hissed and slithered around him and finally, alarmed by some involuntarily movement on the Gentu's part, lanced him to death with their flicking fangs.

**I**NDIA is the only nation in the world which has trained the elephant to play the role of executioner. In 1814 a Thug was bound, fastened by his heels with a small chain to the hind leg of an elephant and dragged two miles across country until every shred of flesh had been worn

from his bones. At Baroda, in the same year, another Thug was likewise lashed to an elephant's leg. At the goading of his *Mahout*, or trainer, the beast walked jerkily in such a way that at every step another limb of the Thug was dislocated. He was broken bone by bone. And then still living he was dragged to a block, made to rest his head on it. At another signal from the *Mahout* the elephant placed his front foot on his head and crushed it like an egg-shell.

Thuggee is by no means the only murder cult in India. There are hundreds of them, most motivated by some fanatic religious ideal, some simply devoted to crime for profit. To this latter category belong the Dacoits. Although largely suppressed by British magistrates, acts of Dacoity still break out from time to time in all parts of the country.

Dacoity is a profession. The terrible secrets of its craft are passed on from generation to generation, with new developments of cruelty introduced by each practitioner. The weapons of the Dacoits are varied and subtle. There is the *lathi*, a stout, heavy bamboo staff, its end bound in sheet iron. Skillful use may inflict horrible non-fatal injuries to liver, heart and spleen, fractures of the scalp and bones.

The favorite cutting weapon is the *tukwar*, a curved sword which can slash a man into ribbons with clean-edged cuts. Chopper, axc and hook-pointed bill are used for the sort of orgiastic blood-letting the Dacoits relish. For quick deaths they prefer the spearhead, arrow or dagger, the *kris* or the *aro*, a three-pronged weapon like a strident.

Like the Thugs, the Dacoits favor strangulation. They are adept in the throwing of a weighted rope which coils around the victim's neck, breaking it instantly as the weight winds around and jerks it back. They, too, use the strangling silk and sometimes banuboo sticks, one of which is placed over the Adam's

Apple, the other under, and the two slowly drawn together, choking the victim to death.

The Dacoits are carefully organized societies of criminals, numbering anywhere from fifteen to fifty or more in each chapter, led by some particularly conscienceless monster. Often the leader is a woman, as was the notorious Tumbolin. They roam the length and breadth of India, seemingly immune to capture, frequently boasting of their crimes in public squares and vanishing before the police reach the spot. These crimes usually consist of waylaying a group of travelers, stripping them of valuables and butchering each and every one with their favorite weapons.

What makes the Dacoit the most dangerous fiend on two feet is his frequent addiction to hashish. This powerful drug, otherwise known as *cannabis indica*, or Indian hemp, has the same base as marijuana which has stimulated so many inhuman atrocities in this country.

Half-mad with hashish, armed with a variety of death-dealing weapons, well-organized and as cunning as the vipers they sometimes trained to inflict death, the Dacoits are as formidable a band as ever slew a lonely traveler.

The pages of Indian crime run crimson with their exploits. There was, for example, the above-mentioned Tumbolin who was as beautiful and deadly as a Vampire orchid. History confers upon her the distinction of leading the boldest Dacoity attack ever attempted.

Tumbolin, a sort of "gangster's moll," took over the leadership of some Dacoits when her husband was trapped in Madras and strung up to the nearest tree. Her men adored her, obeyed her commands to the letter. She would lead them to the point of action, then retire from the front line while Himtya, her ferocious, giant lieutenant organized the actual attack.

One day Tumbolin received word of a military treasure situated in the center of

the military cantonments of Sholapore. She and her men were camping at the time some fifteen miles away from the city in the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad, who was then—as he is today—one of the world's wealthiest Oriental potentates.

ACCOMPANIED by Himtya and a picked group of her fiercest ruffians, she approached the military quarter disguised as a wandering minstrel—the Dacoits have always been masters of disguise. They sang songs before the officers' bungalows and audaciously strolled right into the general's garden where a sentry was posted. They could see him showing above a hedge. They could also see that he was guarding the treasure chest, containing the regimental funds.

Meanwhile Himtya, determined to kill two birds with one stone, had wandered off alone and "cased" the home of a rich banker in the same town.

That night they weighed the advantages of both objectives. Tumbolin finally ruled that they would attack the military camp only and planned to strike within forty-eight hours.

The garrison was large, consisting of a native infantry and European horse artillery. The post was important, housing many wealthy and important Colonial officials. A tough assignment, but it only whetted Tumbolin's appetite for slaughter and combat.

The first step was to pitch camp closer to the garrison. This was done, selecting a spot within striking distance of the little cell in which Himtya had observed the sentry lock the treasure chest.

Night fell, and the Sepoy sentry guard was doubled. They were huge Goliaths of men, armed to the teeth. But Himtya knew how to dispose of them. He crouched nearby in the underbrush. Beside him waited two or three crack Dacoit

marksmen. At a signal they raised their wiry, sinewy arms. Each fist gripped a slender bamboo pole, tipped with a steel point. Himtya gave the signal. The spears shot from their hands, slicing the blackness with their deadly hiss. The Sepoy guards barely had time to wheel around. They saw their doom winging toward them. The next instant the spears struck, passing cleanly through their bodies with the ease of knives cutting butter. The guards dropped like poled bulls and the shafts cracked under their weight.

Himtya gave the second signal. A horde of Dacoits emerged from the bush, shadows that were a part of the night. Silently they ringed the treasure cell. Here more sentries were posted. This time the Dacoits used short blades, stabbed again and again, then, wading through the streaming blood, stole into the cell. Here a bitter disappointment awaited them. The treasure had been transferred elsewhere!

Before they could decide what to do one of the stricken sentries, gasping his final breath, made an outcry. Officers came on the run, gripping their rifles. The attack had failed. The Dacoits turned and fled, with bullets whistling over their heads.

Despite this failure, the incident is still considered the boldest exploit of the Dacoits, for the general in command of the garrison later reported that a veritable army of Dacoits had attacked his men. Actually only five of them had taken part in the massacre.

Tumbolin continued her crimes for long years and seemed to bear a charmed life. Ten years after the Sholapore murders she and her faithful Himtya visited the city of Poona. They timed their arrival nicely. The chief of police was getting married and every member of the force was attending the ceremony. Tumbolin and Himtya profited by this situation to break into a number of wealthy house-

holds, butcher the occupants and make off with a small fortune in jewels and gold.

This terrible Amazon, most feared and hated of all Dacoits, with a price on her head, continued to avoid all traps laid for her. When she grew too old for violent activity, she retired to a mountain retreat and died peacefully of old age.

Latterly the more obvious signs of Dacoit activity have been somewhat curtailed by modern crime-prevention methods. This does not mean that the Dacoit no longer exists. On the contrary, he has emerged in a more subtle and far more deadly guise as a professional poisoner.

“PROFESSIONAL poisoning,” reports Major Arthur Griffiths, famous crime authority, “in carrying out highway robbery was spread over every portion of the province of Bengal . . . Murders were constantly committed along the road upon unwary travellers who rashly joined company with strangers deliberately planning to kill and rob them . . . The drug most commonly used by the road poisoners is produced from the *datura* plant, *stramonium*, both the purple flowered and the white flowered, and is prepared from the seeds or the leaves . . . In Bengal it was usually given as an ingredient of sweetmeats or mixed with bread and coffee, sherbet, milk, *tari* or introduced into tobacco. It was relied upon to stupefy; not necessarily to kill, but to produce intoxication or delirium, or profound lethargy resembling coma. Even when life is not seriously endangered, the effects of the poison upon the person are such that they seldom recover their bodily vigor. One was a cripple after a dose taken seven years before; another continued unable to articulate and was like a man stricken with paralysis. Memory is long impaired and often never recovered; idiocy sometimes supervenes. The detection of the crime is thus prevented. If death occurs, it may be at-

tributed to disease, suicide or wild beasts; if the patient survives, he has no clear idea of what happened to him.

“The action of *datura* is generally an indication that it has been administered. It is not only a powerful narcotic, but there are quite unmistakably characteristic symptoms. The patient if not incapable of movement, will perform the most fantastic antics, will exhibit great excitement, ramble in his talk, fly into violent rage when questioned. As it takes effect, the sufferer grows very thirsty and dry in the throat. There are three stages or sets of symptoms observed: First, the headache, dryness of the mucous membrane, difficulty in walking, impairment of vision, with the pupils greatly dilated; second, maniacal delirium, flushed face, eyes glistening, violent perspiration from incessant motion; third, insensibility, coma and possibly collapse with fatal results. . .”

Such a Dacoit crime was committed in a Jain temple near Bhagalpur in Bengal. The High Priest and two acolytes were the victims. The acolytes were found one morning with all the signs of violent intoxication. They were writhing on the ground and frothing like mad dogs. The High Priest was missing. Three days later they found his body mutilated and stuffed down a well.

Investigation revealed that the triple crime was the work of Professional Dacoit poisoners. They had visited the temple ostensibly to make sacrifices to the Gods. They had brought sweetmeats dusted with powdered *datura* seed and handed them to the High Priest for sacred offering on the altar. According to custom, the High Priest ate some of the food, sharing a portion with his attendants.

The killers then waited, pretending to pray. With ghastly appropriateness they prostrated themselves before the Goddess Kali.

They had not long to wait. Shortly the three hapless victims began staggering about helplessly. Immediately the killers—there were seven of them—sprang upon the priest. One throttled him, others held his arms and legs, kneeled on his chest. The murder was accomplished in a horrible way. The most vicious of them, wearing great hobnailed boots, stamped up and down on the High Priest's head, reducing it to a jelly.

The attendants were unconsciousness and the killers were too busy looting the altar to murder them.

It was not for several years that they were caught and sent for life to the Andaman Islands, hellish penal colony.

**I**NHUMAN as they are, Thug and Dacoit seem comparatively harmless when contrasted to the most brutal of all India's evil societies. This is the Beggar's Syndicate, backed and operated by a group of wealthy, unscrupulous men.

Begging is one of India's largest trades. The obscene monstrosities who drag their withered, diseased limbs through the gutters, whining for alms, are familiar sights to the tourist in India. What that tourist does not know is that *these cripples are often deliberately manufactured, made cripples while still in their infancy!*

Formerly parents sometimes made horrors of their offspring in order later to turn them out on the streets to beg.

Today, however, India supports a regular cripple-manufacturing industry. One of the first to learn the inside story of this racket was George Franks. In his book, *Queer India*, he writes:

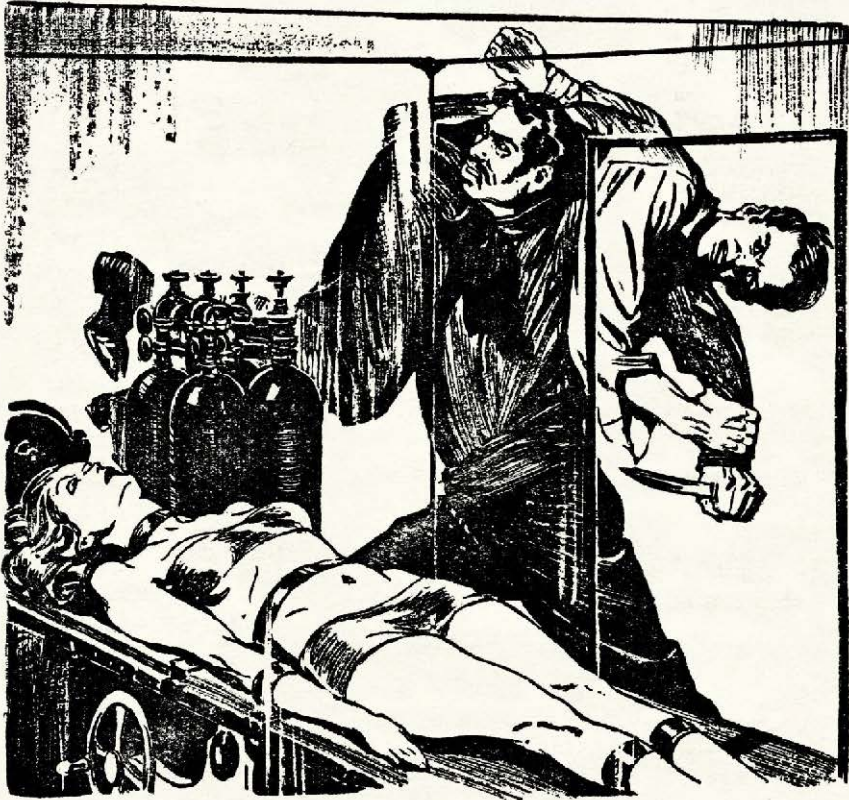
"Although the greatest secrecy is observed in the location of these cripple-factories, it is known that there are at least two, one in the north and one in the south, which keep up a never-failing supply of mutilated and deformed cripples for the leading towns as well as the pil-

grim centers. . . . It may be argued, of course, that India's cripple factories are little different from that factory in Central Europe which produces human freaks for circuses and side-shows. True, the ultimate aim is almost the same, namely financial gain; but how different the methods! The western 'freak' factory ensures a lucrative income for the freak, because bearded ladies, owl-faced men, and over-fat children earn good salaries and live under excellent conditions, whilst even in the preparatory period every care is taken to minimize pain. But the Indian freak factory must be an appalling place. Kidnaped or discarded babies are literally tied into knots in order that they may later be able merely to crawl about the streets and successfully excite public sympathy to the advantage of those to whom they are sold. Only those people who have visited India's pilgrim centers and temples and out-of-the-way shrines can picture the terrible agonies which must have accompanied those years of horror during which young children were tortured to make them into unbelievable shapes. More like animals of another world than human beings, these poor creatures, collect their charity during the day from those who feel their duty done when they religiously give alms. Then, with oncoming night, they drag their hideous forms back to their owners, prepared for beatings and kicks and starvation if their collections are not up to standard."

Nor do the cripple-makers content themselves with these cruelties. Sometimes two freaks are mated by the hopes of producing an even greater monster!

The buyer of beggars has paid the dread syndicate as much as a thousand dollars for a cripple. And why not? A really repulsive wretch may make three dollars a day and more. An investment in evil which civilization may never stamp out in mysterious India.

# THE DEADLY ARTS OF DOCTOR GIRONDE



A Featured Novelette by  
HENRY TREAT SPERRY

*There Are Some Things With Which No Man May Tamper With  
Impunity—And the Secret of Eternal Youth Is One of These*

## CHAPTER ONE

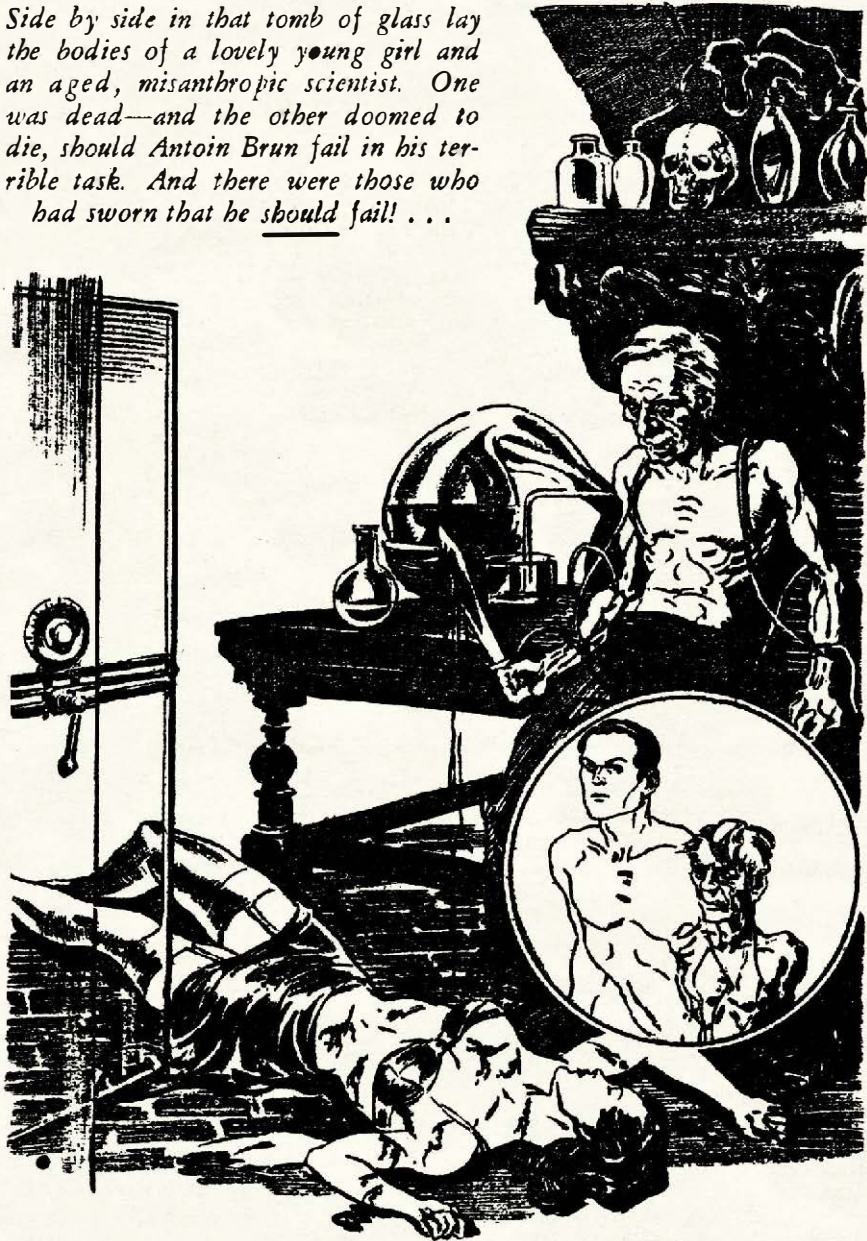
### Sorcerer's Apprentice

**A**NTOIN BRUN looked at his master with bitterness smoldering in his young black eyes. "You are no scientist, monsieur," he said. "You are

nothing, monsieur, but a plain sorcerer!"

Dr. Marcel Gironde's bloodless lips writhed in an ironical grin. "How right you are, *mon petit chou*," he cackled, "you will never know. Or—perhaps you will. At any rate, sorcerer or scientist, old Gironde's name will be on the lips of the

Side by side in that tomb of glass lay the bodies of a lovely young girl and an aged, misanthropic scientist. One was dead—and the other doomed to die, should Antoin Brun fail in his terrible task. And there were those who had sworn that he should fail! . . .



whole world a month hence—and your name, too, if you do as I say. Well, what is your answer? Will you be my assistant in this greatest of experiments—or shall I take a new apprentice and train him, as I have trained you for these many months?

Are you indeed an ingrate—or have you some crumbs of gratitude for the man who lifted you from the gutter?"

Antoin's eyes swept helplessly about the laboratory. *Laboratory!* It looked more like the den of a fourteenth-century al-



chemist. Surely, in all of Paris there was no more anachronistic antiquity than was displayed in this workshop. Dust of the ages was on the shelves and every corner was veiled with cobwebs. Weirdly obsolete bottles and retorts stood on rickety tables, and against one side of the room a forge, constructed at least four hundred years ago, sent out a livid nimbus of light which only increased the gloom.

Yet in the midst of all this ancient clutter, in the exact center of the room, stood a number of startlingly new and modern pieces of equipment. These included a shining porcelain table with bright nickel fittings, a dozen tanks of the type that oxygen is sold in, and a complicated looking piece of brass and steel apparatus whose use Antoin had only lately learned. The whole collection, except for the machine, was housed in a sort of glass case, about seven feet high by ten long and six wide, having a door which fitted snugly into its rubber-padded frame and was provided with a dial combination lock.

On the whole, reflected Antoin, the room very aptly expressed the character of its master. A graduate of Heidelberg and the Sorbonne, old Gironde could have made a name for himself, perhaps, in the fields of physics or biochemistry. Yet for fifty years the whole of his talents and energies had been directed toward a goal long since abandoned as impossible of achievement by the world of science—eternal life!

"There is little for you to do," said the old scientist. "Little enough to repay me for what I have done for you. I, myself, shall apply the needle—give myself the dose which shall accomplish my death. You will be innocent of all blame in this particular, should the police learn of what is happening here. After that you are merely to drain the blood from my body, seal it up in the container I have already provided, and inject the sterile fluid which we have manufactured together. You will

set the pump, there, in motion, connect up the oxygen tanks so that the solution in my veins will be properly aerated—and watch. For thirty days. Then, when Venus and Mars are in conjunction in the house of Mercury, you will drain out the solution, replace my blood and inject adrenalin into my heart. The solution, having circulated in my veins and arteries for a month, feeding the cells of my body, restoring and cleansing them of the accumulated impurities of my three score and fifteen years, will have given me a new lease on life—another three score years in which to enjoy this world of ours. . . ."

Young Antoin glared bitterly at the new equipment. This was what had become of his dream of learning laboratory technique. Poverty had forced him out of the University of Paris two years before he was to have graduated. Both his parents had died penniless and Antoin had been left in the streets. It had seemed a godsend when the old scientist had picked him up one evening in a shabby café, promised to help him complete his education, accepted him as an apprentice at a small salary. But only lately had Antoin learned the end toward which his mentor's labors were directed. . . .

"Think—" cajoled the cracked voice of the old man—"you will have riches, honors." His pale watery eyes narrowed as he watched the young man shrewdly. "You will be able to marry your little Annette. . . ."

Antoin looked up quickly. "Annette!" he exclaimed. "How did you know about—"

Old Gironde laughed rattlingly. "Oh, I know—I know," he cackled. "Old Marcel has keen eyes, my young friend, and long ears. She is a pretty piece, to be sure. Well—what do you say?"

The mere mention of Annette's name had been enough to set the young man's heart beating wildly. Annette Claire, an

artist's model whom he had met in the same café where Gironde had picked him up. She was beautiful—adorable. Science, ambitions, wealth—they all meant less than nothing when he thought of her. Above all else in this world he desired her. . . .

Suddenly Antoin raised his eyes to old Gironde's. "Very well, monsieur," he said. "I shall do as you wish."

THE preparations, it seemed to Antoin, were endless. That glittering thing of brass and steel, that somehow evil pump which was to take the place of old Gironde's heart in this experiment with life and death, had to be tested over and over. Above all things, it must work smoothly, accurately, ceaselessly. Over and over his master made Antoin repeat his instructions, made him go through the motions of draining the blood from his body, sealing it in the container—a large earthenware jug with a glass and rubber stopper, which, after it had been filled, was to be kept in a hidden refrigerator beneath the forge. Repeatedly he demonstrated how samples of fluid must be taken from the machine every day and tested. Gironde had provided a table which showed how the speed of the pump must be accelerated or retarded according to the impurity content of the fluid.

But that wasn't all. There were less scientifically orthodox things to be done, precautions to be taken. "Don't think, *mon ami*," said old Gironde, "that the professors know it all, these days. Science, with its great reverence for sterilization, has succeeded only in sterilizing itself. The ancients knew many things which we are fools to ignore. All wisdom is not now, and never has been the sole property of *les Académiciens*. . . ."

And so Antoin must consult the stars before he dare undertake anything of importance. "Watch Jupiter," cautioned Gironde. "He is my *bête noir*. ● On the

second day he will be in ascendance in the house of Virgo. Take no samples of the solution on that day. Do not touch the pump. . . ."

Then there was the matter of consulting Frère Simon at L'Eglise de St. Auguste. "As soon as I have taken the needle," said Gironde emphatically. "You must go to him. Walk to the Rue de Medici and turn north until you have come opposite the Luxembourg, cross the park and you will be there. It is a little church just off the Boule' Mich'. Tell Frère Simon that you are from me, and listen attentively to what he has to tell you. Then come back and drain the blood from my tired old veins."

● On this journey Antoin must not take a sieste, must not even walk too fast. And most assuredly he must not telephone! We might as well, thought Antoin disgustedly, be living in the time of Savronarola.

One last evening Antoin had with Annette. They went to a little place he knew of on the other side of Montmartre—*Le Chien Vert*. They drank cheap red wine and tried to pretend that they were happy, celebrating Antoin's departure for L'Hospice Ste. Périne in Nice to serve a month's term as *un stagiaire* or probationer chemist. For he had told her he had received such an appointment, and to cheer her up, spoke of it in the light of quite an accomplishment. "Soon," he whispered, leaning over the table to clasp her slender hands, "we shall be married—after that, Annette. And then—no more separations!"

She smiled, but her violet eyes were troubled. "It is strange, *mon cher*," she murmured, "I can not be happy about this, even though it seems to mean so much to you. There is something—something I'm afraid of. For a week I have felt it hanging over us. Sometimes I suspect that I am being followed in the streets—spied upon. . . ."

He patted her hands. "It is because you are so beautiful. The whole world turns to look at you, my darling. You feel their eyes upon you. . . ."

But by the next day Annette's vague fears had somehow communicated themselves to Antoin. Heretofore he had thought of the imminent experiment with feelings of distaste; now he began to know a weird sort of horror as the time for the first operations approached. Gironde had surrounded the affair with such an aura of superstition and esoteric skulduggery that he began to find it impossible to regard it in the light of an excursion in science. Suddenly the emaciated, senile chemist had become a practitioner of the black arts, and Antoin his apprentice—a neophyte in magic. . . .

In a musty corner of the laboratory was Antoine's cot; piled near it was a month's supply of food and drink—loaves of bread, cheeses, canned meats and vegetables, a case of *vin ordinaire*. A small lavatory opened off the west wall. It was provided with tub and toilet—there was no need, as old Gironde remarked repeatedly, for Antoin to stir out of the place even for an instant.

"The rent, gas, and electricity are paid for well in advance," he said for the dozenth time, "and the concierge has been instructed to tell all callers that we have gone to Brittany. Especially that pestilential niece and nephew of mine." He laughed harshly. "How they would love to know that old Gironde had died—and how they would move heaven and earth to keep me from returning from the grave!" He turned and looked keenly at his young assistant. "You could make a fortune, Antoin," he murmured softly, "if, while I am lying there helpless, you should breathe a hint to one of them. Ah, yes, they would pay you well. And there would be no risk whatever, for you. I shall be dead—really dead—do you understand? Simply call the morgue—"

"Monsieur!" Flushed and angry at the old man's insinuations Antoin glared at him indignantly.

Gironde held up a claw-like hand. "I but jest, of course. I am sure you will carry out your duties with the greatest of exactitude and conscientiousness. Yes. I am sure of that—very, very sure!" There was a curious smug quality to his dry, cackling laugh. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Two Enter Hell

OLD Gironde, his repulsively emaciated body naked under its stiff, sterile sheet, thrust the piston of the hypodermic home, and lay back on the table and closed his eyes.

"Don't wait," he breathed, as Antoin took the instrument from his lax fingers, "go now—to Frère Simon. . . ."

A cold lump had gathered in the pit of Antoin's stomach. He stood there looking down at the parchment-yellow of old Gironde's face. The man looked pitifully small and helpless, now—yet somehow sinister, too. He was like an aged serpent, feeble with years—but still charged with a slow, deadly venom. Antoin shuddered and turned away. . . .

It was a long way from Montmartre to the Luxembourg Gardens, and mindful of his master's orders, the young man did not hurry—although some unsponsored instinct kept urging him to hasten. On the Rue de Médiçi at last, he turned off into the park, cut across behind the palace and came out on the Boule' Mich'—but he saw no small church. There were many old houses, two or three new apartment buildings—but no church of any description.

Fearful that delay would upset his schedule, Antoin accosted the first gendarme he saw and hurriedly asked directions.

"But, Monsieur!" exclaimed the fellow. "There is no Eglise de St. Auguste in the Luxembourg. There is no Eglise de St. Auguste in the whole of Paris!"

"What!" Antoin could scarcely credit his hearing. "You must be mistaken—" "Monseieur," the gendarme spoke with confidential earnestness, "for ten years I was a guide in the employ of Le Bureau des Tourists. I know every church, every chapel, every shrine in the city. There is Notre Dame de Paris, St. Germain-des-Prés, St. Pierre-de-Montmartre, St. Sulpice, St. Eustache, St.—"

"Very well," interrupted Antoin, fearful that the recitation would go on until every church in Paris had been named. "I must be mistaken—"

A telephone call to the Séminaire de St. Sulpice confirmed the gendarme's information. Antoin knew that he had been sent on a fool's errand.

But why? What possible reason could old Gironde have for doing this? Ignoring the old man's orders, now, Antoin took a cab back to the Montmartre, his heart filled with a vague foreboding.

Arrived at the Rue Ramey, Antoin paid off his cab and descended the stone steps to the gloomy half-basement which was his and Marcel Gironde's home. A moment he paused before the scarred, worm-eaten door, wondering whence had come the cold fear that was clutching his heart. Then he pushed the door open and went inside.

For many seconds he stood frozen to immobility, straining his eyes against the dimness of the scene before him: aware, even before objects had taken on recognizable definition, that the very air was charged with portents of evil. Something had been changed—

Suddenly he knew what it was: There was not only one body in the glass cubicle in the center of the room—there were two!

Breath-takingly beautiful, in its white

nudity, the body of Annette Claire lay on a table next to that which supported the shrunken form of old Marcel Gironde. And Antoin had no need to test the pulse of the girl he loved better than life, itself, to know that it no longer beat. . . .

THE note lay folded on the table beside Annette's exquisite body. With hands that trembled in horror Antoin unfolded it and read the words old Gironde's perfidious hand had scrawled there:

I am sorry, my young friend, thus to have deceived you—but in time you will forgive me. It is a matter of life and death, you comprehend, and one should be very careful in such matters. Therefore, I have used your little Annette as an insurance that you will follow out my instructions to the letter. She is in a cataleptic state which no one in this world is capable of bringing her out of save only myself. Thus she shall remain, suspended between life and death, until I have awakened and done what is necessary to revive her.

I confess to playing two tricks upon you: I did not actually take the dose which induced my present condition while you were here. That was a harmless saline solution. As soon as you had gone on your fruitless errand—which was the second deception I practiced upon you—I went about procuring the person of your loved one. It was not difficult, you comprehend, in a city where the very life of an enemy may be purchased for a few francs. But as soon as I had cast the spell upon your fiancée, I introduced the drug into my veins which, for a time, has put an end to my life.

It remains for you to follow out the instructions in which I have so carefully schooled you. Do this, and have no fear—your Annette will be restored to your arms in thirty short days.

Marcel Gironde.

For a time the calm cruelty of this letter drove everything but a hot, consuming rage from Antoin's mind. The young man bent over the parchment-skinned

form of the old scientist, his strong hands working convulsively as though he longed to throttle that scrawny neck.

But at last a kind of sanity returned to him, and he began to think. He re-read the letter, and noted the words: "cataleptic state." Was Annette really in a trance? Had old Gironde actually induced in her body a state of catalepsy? If it were true, there were remedies, antidotes. . . .

He went to a dusty shelf at one side of the room. With trembling fingers he washed and sterilized a beaker, uncorked bottles, began compounding a mixture—a solution of sulphur and oil. Finished, he filled the barrel of a hypodermic and went to the side of the girl who lay so white and still on the table next to old Gironde.

But he found his courage unequal to the task of injecting the preparation into his sweetheart's body. Twenty cubic centimeters of this solution should create an artificial fever in that body, which in time, would counteract the effects of the catalepsy and eventually restore consciousness. But would old Gironde, knowing Antoin's prowess as a chemist, leave as simple a problem as that? It was dangerously unlikely. In this, as in all the old scientist's works, there was some trickery.

Standing with bitterly clenched jaws, Antoin silently acknowledged himself defeated by his master. He dared not depart an iota from the instructions the old man had left him. . . .

**W**ITHIN an hour the two bodies lay in the sealed and locked glass vault, in an atmosphere of nitrous ether and carbon monoxide. On a table at one side of the room stood the earthen jug, filled with five quarts of blood—old Gironde's. And in the septaugenarian's veins there now flowed gently the chemical solution which had taken its place, the smoothly working pump which propelled it through

his vascular system providing the only sound to disturb the tomblike stillness of the room—a faint, soft clicking. . . .

Shortly before dawn, on the second night of his vigil, Antoin was awakened from his uneasy slumbers by something which, at first, he could not identify. He sat up on his cot in the darkness, straining his eyes and ears—but he could see nothing in the dense, pre-dawn gloom, and his ears reported only deep silence.

But that was it! There was utterly no sound in the room—and that meant that Gironde's mechanical heart had ceased to beat!

With a startled exclamation, Antoin threw back the bedclothes, and reaching over to the small table beside his bed, turned on his dim reading lamp.

As the light went on he thought he detected a shadowy form disappear quickly from sight behind the table on which the machine rested; but he could not be sure, his eyes being temporarily dazzled. He leaped from the bed and ran to the gleaming little machine, noted with a chill of horror that one of the brass piston rods had been bent out of line so that it would not follow its guide into the cylinder.

There was no time for mechanical finesse. Antoin sprang to a bench, caught up a small hammer, and gave the bent rod several smart taps. Then he replaced the belt from the electric motor on its pulleys—it had flipped off as the piston rod jammed—and turned the switch back on. The motor and pump began operating immediately.

Only then, with beads of cold sweat standing out on his forehead, did Antoin look about for the intruder who had attempted to wreck the machine. He searched the room high and low, tried all the doors and windows—they were all securely locked—and looked every place where a human being could possibly hide. But he found no one—no evidence, except the condition in which he had found the

pump—that anyone had been there.

Cold fingers of weird terror fluttered at Antoin's throat. The strain of living in this room for only as short a time as forty-eight hours was already beginning to take its toll of his nerves. With a kind of horror his eyes suddenly fell on the astrological calendar which old Gironde had hung above the workbench—and he remembered the old man's admonition: "Watch Jupiter. . . . He is my *bête noir*. On the second day he will be in ascendance in the house of Virgo. . . ."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *Lady of the Night*

**BY THE** end of the second week one who had known Antoin Brun, before the beginning of his vigil, would not have recognized him. His enforced confinement within four walls had bleached his skin to a deadly whiteness. His sleep had been irregular and brief, and as a consequence his eyes were darkly circled. For several days he had subsisted on nothing but coffee and a few pieces of bread, being utterly unable to eat anything more substantial. His hands, as he made the daily tests of the fluid flowing through old Gironde's veins, shook so that he could hardly hold the test tube. . . .

There was no surcease from the torture of his thoughts in sleep, for his dreams were plagued with fevered visions in which Annette came to life during the night in her glass case and called to him vainly through its thick walls to come to her. In other dreams it was Gironde who revived, and under the cloak of the laboratory's murky darkness, violated the naked, helpless body of the girl who lay beside him.

Then, one night during the latter part of the fourth week, one of the dreams turned into horrible, brain-shattering reality. . . .

Again, it seemed to him, Annette had

come back to life. He saw her rise from her table in the darkness, pass bewildered, trembling hands across her dazed eyes. Then she slid from the table, staggered to the wall of the cubicle and called to him.

Vainly he tried to burst the bonds of sleep to go to her aid; he strove to reply to her, to say that he was coming. And then, somehow, without his having moved from his cot, she had escaped from the cubicle, had stumbled across the room to his side. In the darkness his arms enfolded her cold, smooth body and he felt the chill of death strike through the thin material of his pyjamas, conveying to him the dreadful message that though his Annette moved and spoke, she was still in the thralldom of death—and that the force which activated her was not of this earth.

Then, with a jerk which threw every muscle of his body into steel-like rigidity he awoke—and found that it was no dream. Annette was lying beside him on the bed, clutching him convulsively with her cold, round arms, babbling strange, formless sounds into his ear.

With a roughness born of terror, Antoin partially disengaged himself from the girl's frantic embrace and switched on the light beside his bed. Instinctively, in spite of the fact Annette screamed piercingly and clapped her hands over her eyes as the light went on, Antoin's frantic gaze went to the table beside Gironde's in the glass cubicle.

It was empty—and the door of the chamber was still securely closed. . . .

He had just time to see that—and then the violence of the girl's movements caused his arm to jerk, and the lamp fell from the table, crashed into darkness as it struck the floor. . . .

**T**HE girl clutched Antoin more tightly. "I am cold—so cold," she whispered. "It is like death. . . . Warm me, Antoin, for the love of God. . . ."

His mind a maelstrom of horror the young man drew the bedclothes over the naked form of the girl beside him, pressed her body close to his. For though he knew that something unearthly, unimaginably horrible had happened, it was enough that Annette, whether alive or in some unthinkable state of half-death, had returned to him for help and comfort.

After awhile, as they lay there in silence, Antoin became aware of something which caused his heart to give a leap of sudden hope: the girl's body was becoming warm, lifelike! No revenant corpse, endowed with some infernal, unclean life would react like this!

He reached up and passed his fingers over the girl's velvet-textured cheek—it was warm, imbued with the elastic feel of normal blooming life. She stirred luxuriously in his embrace, pressed her lithe body more closely against his.

"Warm me, my darling," she murmured, "for soon I must go back to that cold, dark place where poor, tortured souls call endlessly to their loved ones on earth and only I, for a time, am able to escape. . . ."

Galvanized by a resurgent tide of frigid terror, Antoin started up in his bed, but the girl clung to him insistently. And now, through the uncanny fear which possessed him, the morbid horror which enshrouded his soul at his sweetheart's weird words, he felt his senses sinking into a slough of terrible passion. Suddenly he ceased to care whether this girl properly belonged in this world—or in the depths of hell, itself. She was young, beautifully formed—and desirous. . . .

Just before dawn a sleep that was like death plunged Antoin's senses into oblivion, and when he awoke again the little clock on his bed table showed noon. His eyes, still stupefied with sleep, flew immediately to the table beside Gironde's—and a spasm of supernatural terror raced over his nerves as he saw Annette's body

resting there, as though it had never stirred!

Throwing back the covers and leaping out of bed he ran to the cubicle, stared unbelievably at that white, terribly composed body. Then he frantically inspected the lock, the dial whose combination only he and old Gironde could possibly know. It was exactly the same as when he had last inspected it—and the door was still securely locked!

**M**ECHANICALLY, that day, Antoin went through with his duties, his baffled brain refusing to cope any longer with the ghastly riddle of what had happened the night before. From a valve in the pump he took the customary sample of the fluid which was circulating in old Gironde's body, submitted it to the tests which were required. The rest of the day he spent gazing as though hypnotized at Annette's body, his mind a welter of hopelessly confused thought-phantoms.

At length, as darkness flowed into the little room, he lay back upon his cot—and as though he had been dealt a powerful blow on the skull he sank immediately into unconsciousness. . . .

When he awoke it was dark as pitch. He rose to a sitting position on the cot—and felt his nerves go suddenly taut while cold worms of terror burrowed into his heart. From nearby had come the soft, almost inaudible sound of a naked foot slithering over the bare floor, then the muted hiss of quiet breathing. A whisper came out of the darkness: "*Antoin—Antoin. . . .*"

The young man felt a febrile scream rising in his throat. He wanted to strike out—to force this half-living apparition back to the glass tomb whence it had come. Then cold but soft, slenderly rounded arms stole about his neck, a lithe body pressed against him—and the desires of hell seized upon him, banishing all thought save for its gratification. . . .

And again, as on the night before, a death-like sleep claimed him as dawn was breaking—and once more he awoke to find Annette lying upon her table and the lock of the door undisturbed. . . .

And then, on the fifth night, he heard the words which he knew spelled the final and absolute condemnation of their souls.

As they lay in a lax embrace, Antoin's body sunk in the apathy of satiation, the girl whispered to him, telling him the thing he must do to reclaim her body from the clutches of the half-death which held her bondage.

"For it was no drug that Gironde gave me, nor any sort of hypnotic spell he cast over my senses," murmured the girl. "He is in league with the devil, my Antoin, and he has made a bargain with the Prince of Hell according to the terms of which the spirit of my youth has passed into old Gironde's blood, and when that blood is again restored to Gironde's veins he shall become as a young man—and I will return to life as an ancient, bent crone, unfit for love, repulsive to look upon. . . . So you must give me his blood, Antoin, that I may take it back with me to that cold, dark place where I dwell when I am away from you. And I shall return it to you when that which is necessary has been done—and you may replace it in old Gironde's veins, so that he will live again—but with the years that are rightfully his, and not in a youth which he has fiendishly stolen. . . . Promise me, Antoin. . . ."

Antoin promised—and sank into the death-like sleep which seemed always waiting for him like a yawning black pit after he had embraced his beloved. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Death's Disciple

ANTOIN awoke to the realization that the day appointed for old Gironde's resuscitation had arrived. He arose shak-

ily from his cot and staggered to the cubicle. For a long time he stared within the glass enclosure, first at the deliciously rounded body of his Annette—and then at the weazened, yellowed countenance of Marcel Gironde. And out of the chaos of his thoughts came, at last, the clear, cold conviction that he must break his promise to his sweetheart. He must, instead, complete his pact with old Gironde and restore him to life if it was within his power to do so. Then, if the old man did not revive Annette—bring her back to the youth and beauty which had been hers—Antoin would kill him with his own hands.

In a kind of frenzy, then, Antoin began preparations to awaken Gironde from his long sleep. Nearly an hour must pass before the final operation of draining out the solution and supplanting it with Gironde's blood could be undertaken, but there was much to do in the meantime. He took a final sample of the fluid from the pump, analyzed it carefully. He nodded grimly as he found an enormous impurity content in the haematoporphin which the fluid contained. Perhaps old Gironde had made a contract with the devil—but the scientist had left no scientific stone unturned to rid his body of the true essence of old age: the accumulated deposits and impurities left in the body cells throughout the course of the years. Absorbing this matter like a liquid sponge, the haematoporphin had left those cells clean as those of an infant.

Accelerating the action of the pump, Antoin now closed the petcocks which controlled the flow of nitrous ether and carbon monoxide into the glass case, opened other petcocks which introduced a stream of oxygen. Then he turned to the hidden electric refrigerator beneath the old forge, removed the false front at the base of the ancient furnace and withdrew the earthen jug which contained Gironde's blood mixed with a fifth part of

*(Continued on page 105)*



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This gruesome double-murder was a terrifying shock to the good people of Cleveland, but not the surprise it might have been under other circumstances, for it was merely another page to a pattern of horror that was already five years old: two more victims for the Mad Butcher of Cleveland—America's Number One Horror!

The known list of murders attributed to this ogre is now twelve—and how many more the actual total is may never be discovered until, and if, he is ever caught. For with uncanny cleverness, he has eluded every police trap set for him; has nullified every effort to discover his identity. Were it not for the fact that all bodies found had been dismembered and decapitated with the same skilled and sure technique, one could hardly believe that the Mad Butcher could be still at large. Of course, this crime may have been committed some time ago, and the monster whose perpetration it was may have come to a natural death, or perhaps he has met death at the hands of his last dying victim. But we do not know.

The Mad Butcher may this instant be preparing for his next heinous atrocity—in some locale far removed from the scene of his original crimes. He may be hiding in a great city; he may be hiding his time in the quiet of some peaceful, rural district. Wherever he is, he is more than likely to strike again; and at this instant, his victim is alive, happy, carefree. Who is the Mad Butcher? And who is his next victim? ARE YOU?

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## The Deadly Arts of Doctor Gironde

(Continued from page 103)

four percent saline solution to keep it from coagulating.

His lips compressed into a thin, white line, Antoin banished all thoughts of the girl from his mind, and turned to the final operation of resuscitation.

Retarding the action of the pump, he slowly drained the fluid out of it—and Gironde's body—into a large glass jar. Then, while the pump still moved, he poured the blood solution into an intake valve. Pulsing quietly, like the substitute heart it was, the machine gently forced the crimson liquid back into the old scientist's arteries.

When two-thirds of the fluid had been poured into the pump, Antoin lowered the jug and closed the valve. This was sufficient for the needs of the body. Its bulk increased by the saline solution, the blood would quickly be enriched and augmented by the functioning of Gironde's vascular system as soon as the action of his heart had been restored.

Antoin now stopped the pump, and taking a small surgeon's kit, unlocked the glass door of the cubicle and went inside.

Throwing back the sheet from Gironde's withered old body, Antoin carefully disconnected the pump's intake tube from the scientist's femoral artery high upon the groin. Quickly he sutured the wound, bound it securely with sterile gauze. Then he turned to the other tube, which had been inserted into the median cephalic vein at the crook of Gironde's left elbow. This, too, he disconnected, stitched up the wound and bandaged it.

Drawing a deep breath, Antoin took an adrenalin-charged hypodermic from the

(Continued on page 106)

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## TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 105)

sterilizing case at the head of the table and plunged it into the old man's heart, pressed down the piston. . . .

At that moment a woman's scream rang out from the head of the stairs leading down into the laboratory.

ANTOIN turned to see a man and a girl running down the steps. Quickly he leaped out of the cubicle and closed the door. As he did so the man reached the foot of the steps—and Antoin found himself looking into the black mouth of an automatic pistol held in the fellow's hand.

"Damn you," the intruder snarled at his companion, "this is what has come of your elaborate plan." He was a slender, dapper individual with a short black mustache and small evilly glittering eyes. The girl, a cheaply pretty blonde, came and stood at the man's side, her eyes fixed wonderingly on Antoin's.

"But I would have sworn he fell for it," she murmured. "He promised—" The man's glance went beyond Antoin to rest on Gironde's body behind him in the cubicle. "That was a shot of adrenalin you just now pumped into his heart, wasn't it?" he snarled.

Antoin did not answer for a moment. He regarded the man steadily, then turned his eyes on the girl. "Who are you?" he asked quietly, at length.

The girl giggled suddenly. "Really," she said, "I thought we were rather—intimately—acquainted. Did you never suspect during all those five nights that I was not really your Annette?" She turned laughingly to her companion. "You see what an actress I am, Pierre," she simpered. "And you thought I would not be able to get away with it!"

"What difference does it make?" growled the man. "He was able to fix the machine after I broke it—and you weren't able to get the blood away from him. So now we'll have to go through

## The Deadly Arts of Doctor Gironde

with my original plan, kill them both, and make it appear that this fellow double-crossed the old man."

The girl sighed. "It seems a pity," she murmured. "Such a lover! You've no idea, Pierre . . . What about the girl?"

"She goes out, too. Shut up and let me think for a minute."

As the man the girl had called Pierre stood there, still holding the pistol on him, but with a speculative expression in his eyes which showed that his thoughts had strayed from the weapon, Antoin tensed his muscles. He had identified this pair, now, and knew the purpose of their visit—knew, moreover, the reason for the appearance on five successive nights of a girl, in this room, who professed to be Annette:

This must be Pierre and Phyrne Gironde, the dissolute niece and nephew of whom the old man had often spoken with bitterness and disgust. The two of them, apprised by some mysterious means of Gironde's experiment, had plotted to persuade Antoin to surrender the old man's blood to them. Undoubtedly they had planned to introduce a poison into it, and then return it so that Antoin, himself, should be the direct agent of bringing about Gironde's death. As the only living heirs of the old scientist they would receive a handsome fortune.

Now, thwarted in their more subtle plan, they were determined, nevertheless, to kill their uncle—and along with him, Antoin, himself, and Annette. . . .

Suddenly, noting that the muzzle of Pierre Gironde's pistol had lowered a fraction of an inch, so that it was no longer pointing at his heart, Antoin sprang at the man, striking his gun-hand just as the weapon exploded. . . .

**B**UT the bullet crashed harmlessly to the floor, and the next instant Antoin's fist had crashed into the intruder's jaw. The man collapsed to the floor with

(Continued on page 108)

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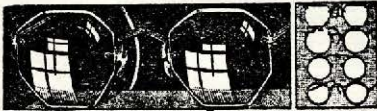
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## TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 107)

a finality which testified that he would need no more attention for some time to come.

Then, with a leap which carried him half across the room, Antoin caught the arm of the blonde girl just as she was screamingly rushing for the stairs. She fought like a tigress, but in a few seconds he had thoroughly subdued her, and trussed her up with stout cords. Leaving her squirming on the floor beside her insensible brother and filling the air with foul maledictions, he raced up the stairs in search of the concierge.

The latter, a grim-visaged Alsatian, appeared at the top of the staircase before Antoin was half-way up—and to the young man's consternation he saw that the fellow held in his hand an automatic pistol.

In a moment the shock of encountering this new and formidable obstacle was gone, and Antoin realized that the concierge had been in the plot all the time—had to be, else the girl and her brother could never have obtained access to the laboratory. By spying on him the concierge had learned the combination of the cubicle's lock, had probably aided the girl in removing Annette's body while she masqueraded in her identity—and then replaced Antoin's fiancée so that he would find her there the next morning, apparently having passed in and out of the cubicle in some supernatural manner...

With a growl of rage, and utterly ignoring the concierge's weapon, Antoin flung himself at the fellow's ankles, felt a searing pain in his shoulder as the gun exploded and hot lead cut through the cloth of his shirt. Then the two of them were tumbling down the stairs.

Landing with a crash at the bottom of the steps, Antoin felt the body of his antagonist go limp beneath him, realized that he had been knocked senseless by the fall—and then looked up to behold a

## The Deadly Arts of Doctor Gironde

scene of such horror that he was unable for an endless moment to move a muscle.

While he had been fighting the concierge, old Gironde had come back to life—but a life which was not that of a human being. His eyes frightful with the blazing lights of stark insanity, Gironde, smeared from head to foot with blood, stood over the mangled bodies of the girl and man who had been his niece and nephew, waving a dripping scalpel and babbling wild, inchoate phrases.


Apparently oblivious of Antoin's presence, the old man now turned his terrible eyes toward the cubicle—then leaped with incredible swiftness through its door, swung upward the bloody knife directly above the white, unguarded breast of Annette who still lay unconscious upon her table.

An instant longer paralysis held Antoin's muscles locked as in a vice—then he sprang toward the cubicle with every atom of power at his command. But in that instant the knife had ample time to flash down to bury itself in Annette's heart, had not Antoin's movement diverted the old man's attention.

Then there was the shrill sound of a whistle outside—and the next moment a squad of gendarmes came clattering down the stairs into the laboratory. . . .

IT WAS a good hour before the police had left with their prisoners—the now insensible and dying Gironde and the forcibly revived concierge—and the hastily summoned ambulance had carted off the grisly remains of the old scientist's niece and nephew. By dint of savage eloquence—and the helplessness of the police in the face of a scientific riddle for which even the internes who had accompanied the ambulance had no answer—Antoin had obtained permission to remain alone with the body of Annette until he had either succeeded or definitely

(Continued on page 110)



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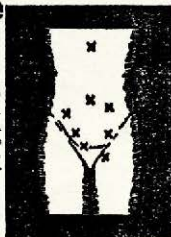
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## TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 109)

failed to revive her. He had explained to the internes that her revival, if it were possible of accomplishment, depended entirely on his special knowledge of her condition, and impressed upon them the warning that if they attempted to interfere in any way they would be responsible for her death and be held answerable for it.

But gazing down at the still, cold form of his sweetheart, Antoin was plunged in despair. The stethoscope detected not the slightest evidence of a heartbeat, there was not the least observable sign that his beloved lived—save that her body persisted in its state of perfect preservation which it had maintained for the past thirty days.

Then his eyes, searching feverishly about the room for some inspiration in his dilemma, lit upon the table where, for such a long time, the body of old Gironde had reposed. And with an eerie sense of surprise, he saw that something had been scrawled upon its surface, about the place where the old man's shoulders had rested. He bent over the table and read the faint pencil script, almost obliterated, as it was, by long contact with Gironde's flesh:

Men Cher Antoin:

I know that you will find it hard to forgive what you will consider my villainy in taking your sweetheart as a hostage, as it were, into the valley of death. Yet my great concern for the conclusion of this experiment is not so much for my own benefit as for that of science—and any means that serve the ends of science are justified.

I have led you to believe that I was sure this experiment would be a success—but as a matter of fact I am almost sure that it will not be. I know that a certain degeneration in the brain is not to be avoided—although, in the desperate hope that there is some virtue in occult science I have tried to forestall this one obstacle which my skill is unable to surmount by attempting to evoke super-mundane assistance. However, I do not anticipate success. I am all too

## The Deadly Arts of Doctor Gironde

certain that, even if you follow my instructions to the letter, I shall return to life only as a mad man. Nevertheless, this experiment will prove of immense aid to science. I charge you with the task of writing a paper for the Académie, describing in detail all the steps we have taken, and augmenting the notes I have left by a description of the final outcome of the experiment. I ask, also, that my body be turned over to the scientists of that body for dissection as soon as the fact of my death is fully established.

As a partial recompense for taking your Annette from you for a time, I have named you as my sole heir in the will now in the hands of my attorneys. My villainous niece and nephew I have cut off without a centime. May this fortune bring you and your fiancée happiness.

As for the girl—do not fear for her. I induced in her body a form of surgical shock by the injection of a small amount of histamine. She will be kept unconscious, with every appearance of death, as long as she lies with me in the cubicle under the influence of the nitrous ether and carbon monoxide. But within two to four hours after this gas has been cut off and oxygen introduced into the atmosphere about her, she will begin to breathe once more, and shortly afterward she will be entirely normal—save for a slight weakness which may be overcome within a few days. Do not try to revive her prematurely with drugs or artificial stimulants of any kind.

Marcel Gironde

As Antoin finished reading this strange letter, he turned once more to look at his sweetheart's body—and now, for the first time in thirty long days, there was joy in his eyes.

Kneeling beside the table he gently caressed the girl's cheek—a cheek which, within the past five minutes had begun to assume the warm tincture of life—and prepared to wait. . . .

THE END

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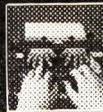
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