JANUARY

Weird Tales

25c

CHILDREN OF THE BAT

an eery story of unusual thrill and gripping interest ... by SEABURY QUINN

H. P. Lovecraft
Paul Ernst
Thorp McClusky
Alfred I. Tooke

All Stories Complete

• JANUARY, 1937

WEIRD TALES

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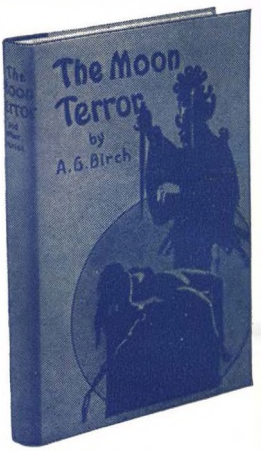
Vol. 29, No. 1

The Phantom of the Ether



The first warning of the stupendous cataclysm that befell the earth in the fourth decade of the Twentieth Century was recorded simultaneously in several parts of America. At twelve minutes past 3 o'clock a. m., during a lull in the night's aerial business, several of the larger stations of the Western hemisphere began picking up strange signals out of the ether. They were faint and ghostly, as if coming from a vast distance. As far as anyone could learn, the signals originated nowhere upon the earth. *It was as if some phantom were whispering through the ether in the language of another planet.*

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"To All Mankind:

"I am the dictator of human destiny. Through control of the earth's internal forces I am master of every existing thing. I can blot out all life—destroy the globe itself. It is my intention to abolish all present governments and make myself emperor of the earth.

"Communicate this to the various governments of the earth:

"As a preliminary to the establishment of my sole rule throughout the world, the following demands must be complied with:

"First: All standing armies shall be disbanded, and every implement of warfare, of whatsoever nature, destroyed.

"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with, all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

"In my next communication I will fix the date for the fulfillment of these demands.

"The alternative is the destruction of the globe.

"KWO"

Thrills! Mystery! Excitement!—"THE MOON TERROR"

Who was this mysterious "KWO," and was his message actually a momentous declaration to the human race, or merely a hoax perpetrated by some person with an over-vivid imagination?

Newspapers and scientific journals began to speculate upon the matter, advancing all manner of theories to account for this strange summons. In Europe, as well as in America, vast throngs of excited people filled the streets in front of the newspaper offices, watching the bulletin boards for further developments. *Was this really the beginning of the dissolution of our planet?*

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Children of the Bat

By SEABURY QUINN

A grim tale of stark horror—a story of the redoubtable little French occultist and crime-fighter, Jules de Grandin, and a weird exploit in the wilds of Yucatan

JULES DE GRANDIN beat his hands together softly in perfunctory applause as the slim young bubble-dancer, birth-nude save for a liberal application of pearl powder, poised on slender, painted toes an instant with the shimmering thirty-inch rubber balloon forming a pellucid barrier between her nakedness and the audience, then ran lightly as a wind-blown thistle-fluff from the semi-lighted dance quadrangle framed by the rows of tables.

"*Parbleu,*" he murmured with a grin, "facilities for studying anatomy have been enlarged since you and I were at *l'école de médecine, n'est-ce-pas,* my friend?"

With the deftness of much practise he maneuvered the cherry at the bottom of his old-fashioned cocktail onto the flange of his muddler and raised it to his lips as a Chinaman might raise rice upon his chopsticks. He ruminated on the candied fruit a moment, washed it down with the cocktail's final draft and turned his eyes again toward the dancing-floor, where an amber spotlight's shaft stabbed through the violet darkness as the orchestra began to play a waltz tune softly.

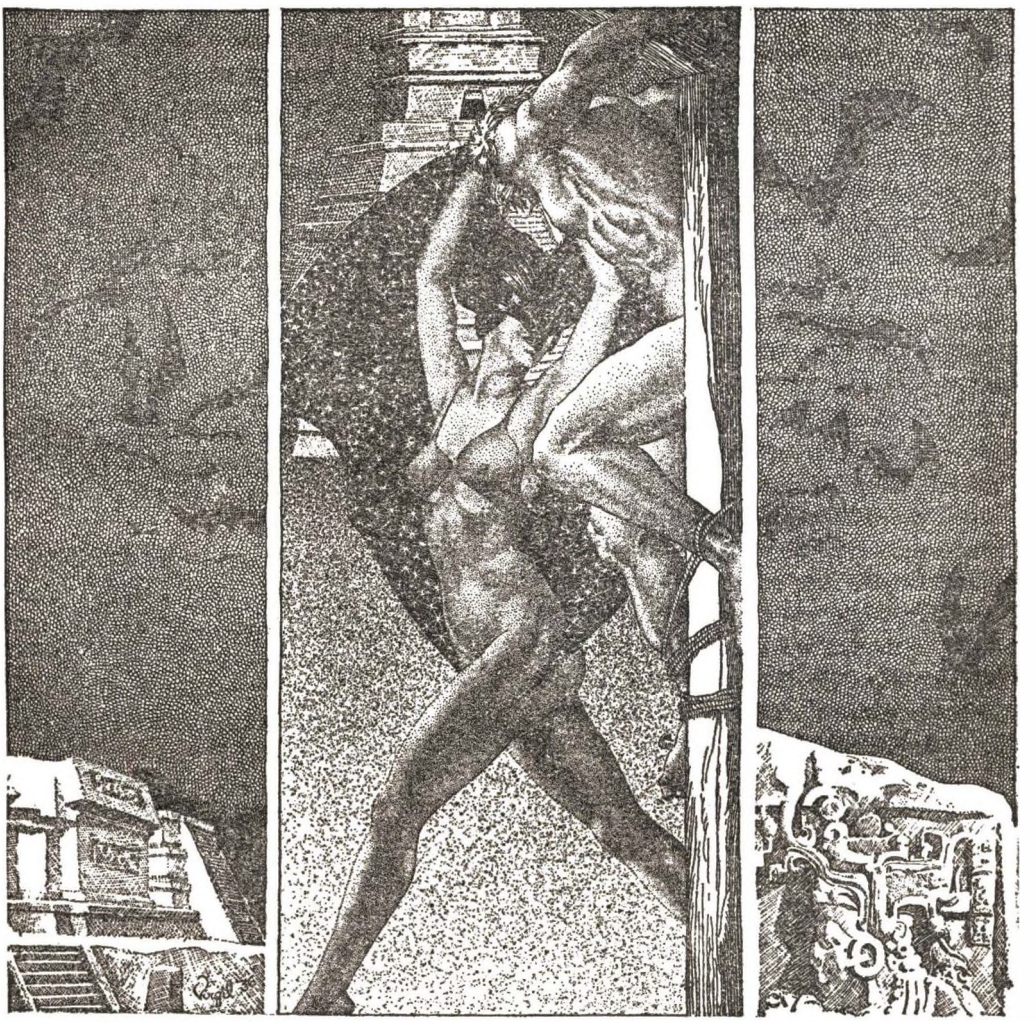
Memories of moonlit straw-rides, of college proms and midwinter cotillions came to me as I recognized the gliding melody of *Sobre las Olas,* but no partners at a college hop or ballroom German of my dancing-days ever matched the couple who flowed out upon the floor. The man was tall and slim, virtually hipless in his molded evening clothes, with a tiny wisp of black mustache and gleaming hair pomaded and stretched back so tightly from his brow that it almost seemed to make his eyeballs pop. The girl was gold and cinnabar and ivory. Her hair, cut in a rippling shoulder-bob, was a mixture of pale gold and red, and the spotlight which played on her made it glimmer like a cataract of coruscating molten metal. Her gown of uncut velvet was brilliant yellow-red, throat-high in front, backless to the waist behind, and slit to the knee at either side to show the gleam of slender, sleekly depilated legs. Mandarin rouge was on her cheeks and lips, the filbert-shaped nails of her hands and feet were lacquered bright vermilion, her spool-heeled sandals were of gilded leather. The oval face, long-lashed blue eyes and provocative red mouth were perfect, yet her vibrant youthfulness was overlaid with a veneer of hardness. The girl had lived and looked at life, not always in its most alluring aspects.

Their dance was neatly executed but purely routine. Turn followed pirouette and lift succeeded turn in an acrobatic version of the waltz, and applause was merely courteous in volume when the couple paused at length and made their salutations to the audience.

The music muted to a slow, soft, sobbing undertone, and a purl of babbling

conversation had began to buzz as the dancers turned to leave the floor. I looked about the darkened cabaret, searching for our waiter. A final drink of dubonnet, the check, then home seemed the best immediate program, for I had an appendectomy at seven the next morning. The servitor had lost himself among the tables, according to the habit of his kind, and I half rose from my chair to get a better vision, when my glance strayed upward to the entrance stairway. Framed against the silken hangings of vermilion, multifolded by reflections of opposing gilt-framed mirrors, stood a woman.

So startling was the silhouette she made that she seemed to be a figure out of allegory, perhaps Lachesis grown weary of her task of measuring the thread of human destiny. Tall she was, and slender, an aureole of old-world glamor hovering round her; black hair shining smoothly back from a forehead of magnolia-white, wide-set black eyes beneath black-penciled brows, lips full and red and richly curved, a little mock-



"He beat his head against the cross and arched his body forward. All the time La Murcielaga stood there statue-still, with her bat wings spread out."

ing, more than a little scornful. Her gown was midnight velvet, its somberness lightened only by a diamond buckle at her belt, and, molding shapely hips, fell swirling down about the brocade sandals on her long and narrow feet. As she threw her velvet evening wrap back from her shoulders it seemed to spread and billow between her outstretched arms, and I had the momentarily unpleasant impression that her graceful shoulders were adorned with sable bat-wings.

"Mon Dieu!" de Grandin's exclamation called my wandering attention to the dance floor; "she is distrait, she is unwell, she swoons, my friend!"

The little danseuse's glance had caught the woman at the stairhead as she rose from her deep curtsy, and the set, professional smile faded from her features as though wiped away. A sudden deathly pallor spread across her face, making the vermilion rouge stand out in shocking contrast, like an undertaker's pigments on the features of a corpse. She paused abruptly, seemed to shiver as though chilled, then sank down to the floor, not in a toppling faint, but with a kind of slow deliberation which reminded me of the collapse of something formed of wax when heat is applied to it. Yet it was not an ordinary fainting fit which bore her down; rather, it seemed to me, she groveled on the polished floor in utter self-abasement, like a dog which, caught in fault, pleads with its master to withhold the whip.

As her dancing-partner raised her in his arms and bore her to the dressing-rooms the orchestra burst out into a fox trot, trumpets and saxophones bellowing the melody, piano, bass viol and drums beating the rhythm, and in a moment the sharp whisper of the dancers' sliding feet mingled with the jungloid music and the cachinnation of high, half-drunken laughter to drown out the memory of the girl's indisposition.

"Doctor," Mike Caldes, proprietor of *La Pantoufle Dorée,* tiptoed to our table, "will you step back to th' dressin'-rooms? Rita's pretty sick an' we'd like to keep th' customers from knowin' it, so——"

"Of course, immediately; at once," de Grandin whispered. "We observed her difficulty, my friend, and were about to offer our assistance when you came."

THE dancer Rita lay upon the couch in her narrow, cell-like dressing-room, and one look at her convinced us that she suffered from a case of paralyzing shock. Her face was absolutely colorless, her skin was utterly devoid of warmth, and tiny nodules of horripilation showed upon her forearms. When she sought to speak, an ululating groan was all that issued from between her writhing lips, for the muscles of her throat were contracted nearly to the choking-point by the *globus hystericus;* in a moment she was trembling in a spasm of uncontrollable successive shudders, while her eyeballs rolled back underneath the lids till the pupils disappeared, leaving but a line of oyster-white framed by her lashes.

"Has she got an epileptic fit, Doc?" Caldes asked. "Th' dirty little double-crosser told me she was strong an' healthy; now she goes an'——"

"Be silent," ordered Jules de Grandin, "it is not epilepsy, but hysteria. She has been badly frightened, this one. Hasten, if you please, *Monsieur,* and bring us brandy and a pan of boiling water and some towels. Be quick; we wait on you, but not with patience."

Quickly he wrung the steaming towels out, enveloped them in dry cloths and placed them on the trembling girl's neck, wrists and feet. This done, he wrapped her in a blanket and proceeded to ad-

minister the brandy by the spoonful till the tremors passed and her eyelids slowly lowered.

A little moan escaped her as her tauted nerves relaxed and the anesthesia of sleep came on. "What is it, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked, bending till his ear lay nearly level with her lips.

"La—La Murciélaga," she responded sleepily. *"La—Mur——"* her whisper trailed to silence and her bosom fluttered with a tired sigh as she sank into unconsciousness.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"I don't know," he responded with a shrug. "Perhaps a line of chorus from some song. They say absurd things at such times, my friend.

"She should be recovered in an hour, at most," he told Caldes as he rose and slipped his dinner jacket on. "Let someone sit with her until she has regained her strength; then see that she goes home. She must not dance again tonight."

"O.K., Doc; much obliged," responded Caldes. "I'll see she's taken care of." But the greedy gleam between his heavy lids served notice that the girl would carry out her schedule on the dance floor if her partner had to bear her in his arms.

I MIGHT have been asleep an hour when the fretful rattle of the bedside telephone awakened me. "Hullo, Doctor Trowbridge, sor," a richly brogued Hibernian voice announced, "this is Detective Sergeant Costello. Will ye an' Doctor de Grandin be afther comin' to th' Pantuflay Dory on th' run, sor? I'll take it kindly if ye will."

"Come where?" I answered sleepily.

"Th' Pantuflay Dory, sor. Mike Caldes' joint. There's all hell to pay here an' no pitch hot."

"What's happened?"

"'Tis a pore young gur-rl's been murthered, sor; kilt dead entirely by a gang o' sacrilegious haythens, an'—can ye come at onct, sor? Ye'll be interested; leastwise, Doctor de Grandin will."

De Grandin joined me as I drove the car from the garage. He had not waited to don short and collar, but had wound a mauve silk scarf around his neck and tied it ascot fashion, then slipped his jacket over his pajamas. As he climbed into the motor he was busy teasing needle-points upon the tips of his small blond mustache.

"Who is it who is done to death?" he asked. "In what manner was the killing done?"

"You know as much as I," I answered as we slid into the street, and, headlights blazing, rushed across town to the *Pantoufle Dorée.*

COSTELLO had not made an overstatement when he told me that the murder was the work of "sacrilegious haythens."

The door communicating from the outer lobby to the club's wide entrance stairs was built of heavy mortised timbers—a relic of the Prohibition days when ax-armed raiders might swoop down upon the place unheralded—and these were overlaid with a smooth coat of bright vermilion lacquer on which were painted golden dragons in the Chinese manner. Bone-white against this brilliant background, crucified with railway spikes, hung the naked body of a girl. From nail-pierced hands and feet small rivulets of bright-red blood writhed down like ruby-colored worms. In haste, perhaps, the slayers had neglected to strip off both her sandals, so that one foot showed gilt cross-straps on each side of the cruel spike which held it to the painted door, while the other was unclothed except for the stigmata of bright blood which ran down from the pierced instep.

In the orange glow of a great Chinese lantern she hung against the red and golden panels in a hush of horror; yet she made a picture of appealing, tragic beauty. Her long, slim limbs, the slender waist, the hips which swelled in gracious curves, were beautiful as anything shaped by a master sculptor. Her breasts, drawn upward by the outstretched arms, were lovely as twin hemispheres of alabaster jeweled with coral. Her head had fallen forward in the utter flaccidness of death, and the fine, bright hair cascaded downward from her brow, veiling the horror of half-closed, glazing eyes and limp lips fallen open.

Upon the Peking-blue of the rich Chinese rug spread on the floor before her the sandal she had lost gleamed emptily upon its side, its buckle broken, its golden heel and instep straps ripped almost clear away from the gilt sole. Somehow, death seemed incongruous here. In this resort of opulent magnificence, this temple dedicated to enjoyment of the vanities of life, death was as out of place as a murder scene injected in a Johann Strauss operetta. An odd place, surely, for a woman to be crucified!

De Grandin stood before the lovely, piteous crucifix, arms akimbo, blond mustache a-twitch. "When did you find her?" he demanded of Costello.

"We didn't, sor," the Irishman replied. "Th' watchman o' th' place ran onto 'er whilst he wuz makin' his rounds a little afther three o'clock. He came a-runnin' like the divil's self wuz afther him, an' bawled his sthory to the desk sergeant down at Number Three; so they sends a harness bull around here to invistigate, an' rings th' homicide squad at headquarters. Gilligan an' I gits detailed to th' job, an' th' first thing I does when I sees how things is, is to ring fer you an' Doctor Trowbridge, sor."

"One comprehends. And where is this *gardien de nuit*—this how do you call him?—watchman?—if you please?"

"Come here, youse!" Costello bawled, and at the hail a heavy-set, bow-legged man of thirty-five or -six came from the checkroom where evidently he had been in durance. Despite the neat gray uniform he wore, the man reminded me of something simian. His shoulders were enormous, his chest so much developed that it seemed to dwarf his abdomen; his legs were strong and heavy, but bowed almost to the point of deformity; his arms hung down quite to his knees, and his forehead was so low it made his hairline seem to rest upon his brows. As he turned his head to keep his gaze averted from the pale corpse on the door, I saw the telltale cauliflower ear which proclaimed his past experience in the prize ring.

"I wuz goin' on me rounds, y'understan'," he said, "just after three o'clock this mornin'—th' three-ten box is by th' checkroom door—an' I had to come through there." He jerked a thumb across his shoulder toward the panels where the dead girl hung, but kept his eyes averted. "Th' door's always kind o' hard to open, y'understan,' but tonight seems like it wuz stuck, or sumpin, an' I has to lean me shoulder to it. Th' office is out here, an' th' first thing that I thinks about is that some yegg is monkeyin' wid th' safe an' one o' his pals is holdin' th' door on me; so I pulls out me rod an' jams me shoulder agin th' door wid all me might an' busts in here. But if they's anybody here, they're awful quiet, thinks I; so I flashes me light aroun', an' then I sees her hangin' there——" He paused in his recital and a tremor shook his heavy frame.

"*Précisément*, you saw her; and then?" de Grandin prompted.

"Then I goes all haywire. I gits so

deadly sick I busts out to th' street an' pukes; then I beats it for th' station house. Th' coppers brung me back, but I don't know nothin' about it. Honest to Gawd, I don't!"

"Did you hear no sounds before you found the body?"

"No, sir. I don't come on till two o'clock when th' kitchen gang signs off, an' dis wuz me first trip roun' tonight. I starts off down by th' kitchen an' storerooms, an' these doors is pretty thick, an' wid th' hangin's an' rugs an' things they has here, you wouldn't be apt to hear nothin' much goin' on in one end o' th' place when you wuz at th' other."

"Très bien," de Grandin answered. "You may wait outside, my friend." To Costello:

"Have you called the others?"

"Yis, sor. There's a squad car wid Mike Caldes on its way here, now."

The Frenchman nodded toward the pendent body on the door. "How long has she been dead, Friend Trowbridge?"

"H'm, not very long," I returned. "There's no sign of *rigor mortis,* and scarcely any perceptible clotting of blood around the wounds. No hypostasis apparent. My guess is that she could not have been dead much more than half an hour when the watchman found her."

He studied the pale body thoughtfully. "Does it not seem to you that there should be more hemorrhage?" he demanded. "Those spikes are blunt and more than half an inch in thickness, and the tissues round the wounds are badly torn, yet I doubt that she has bled as much as fifteen cubic centimeters."

"Why—er——" I temporized, but he was paying no attention.

Like a tom-cat pouncing on a mouse, he dropped upon his knees and snatched at something lying at the margin of the rug, half hidden by the shadow of the dead girl's feet. *"Tiens,* what have we here?" he asked, holding his find up to the light.

"A bat's wing," I replied as I looked at it, "but what in heaven's name could it be doing here?"

"God and the devil know, not I," he answered with a shrug as he wrapped the leathery pinion in a sheet of notepaper and stowed it in an inner pocket of his jacket.

STEPPING softly, almost reverently, he crossed the room and surveyed the body pendent on the door through half-closed eyes, then mounting a chair brushed back the rippling wave of bright, fair hair and put a hand beneath her chin.

"Que diable?" he exclaimed as the back-brushed tresses unveiled the pale, dead face. "What do you make of this, *mon vieux?"* With a well-groomed forefinger he pointed to the tip of her tongue, which, prolapsed in death, lay across her teeth and hung a quarter-inch or so beyond her lower lip. Against the pale pink of the membrane showed a ruby globule, a little gout of blood.

"Probably the poor child gnashed her tongue in torment when they nailed her to the door," I hazarded, but:

"No, I do not think so," he denied. "See, here is the trail of blood"—he pointed to a narrow track of red which marked the center of the tongue—"and besides, her lips have not been injured. She would have bitten them to ribbons in her agony if—*ah?* Observe him, if you please!"

Lowering the girl's head he bent it downward on her chest and brushed the hair up from her neck. About three inches from the skull-base showed a tiny cross-shaped wound, its arms a scant half-inch in length. Apparently it had been made by some sharp, square instrument, and from the faintly bluish cast about

the edges of the puncture I reasoned that the weapon had been forced deep into the tissues.

"Ritual, *pardieu!*" he murmured. "It is obvious. Of course, but——"

"What's obvious?"

"That they hanged her on the door as part of some vile ceremony. She was dead before they touched a hammer to a spike. That drop of blood upon her tongue explains the manner of her death. They drove the lethal instrument clear through her spine, so deeply that it penetrated to her throat. She died instantly and silently; probably painlessly, as well. That accounts for the watchman's having heard no outcry, and also for the small amount of blood she shed when they pierced her hands and feet with nails."

"But why?" I asked. "If they'd already killed her, why should they hang her body up like this?"

"That is a question we must answer, but I fear we shall not answer it tonight," he replied as he stepped down from the chair. "Now, if ——"

A blustering bellow drowned his observation as Mike Caldes, flanked by two policemen, bustled through the vestibule.

"What's this?—what's all this?" he shouted. "Someone's broken in my place? Where's that dam' lazy watchman? I'll fire 'um! Sleepin' on th' job an' lettin'——" Striding forward wrathfully and glowering about him, he was almost face to face with the girl's body before he saw it.

The change that swept across his fat and swarthy countenance would have been comic if it had not been so terrible. Perspiration spouted on his forehead, trickling down until it formed in little pools above his bushy brows. His jowls hung heavily, like the dewlaps of a hound, and his black eyes widened suddenly and shone with an unnatural brightness, as though they were reacting to a drug. His lips began to twist convulsively and his hands twitched in a perfect paroxysm of abysmal terror. For half a minute he stared mutely at the body; then a dreadful, choking cry retched from him.

"*Santissima Maria!*" he sobbed, bending an arm across his eyes to shut the vision out. "Not that—not here—they can't do this in my place! No—no—*no!*"

De Grandin bent a fixed, unwinking stare on him. "Be good enough to tell us more, *Monsieur,*" he ordered. "Who is it that did this thing which could not be accomplished in your place? You were forewarned of this?"

"No!" Caldes gasped. "Not me! I didn't know—I didn't think——"

The Frenchman nodded to Costello. "Take him to the office, *sergent,*" he commanded. "We can talk with more convenience there."

Turning to an officer he bade: "Have them take her down with gentleness, my friend. Do not let them tear her hands and feet unnecessarily when they withdraw the nails.

"AND now, *Monsieur,* we shall be grateful for such information as you have," he said to Caldes as we joined Costello in the office. "You may speak with freedom, but you must be truthful, too, for we are most unpleasant fellows to attempt the monkey business with."

Caldes' hands shook so that he had to make a number of attempts before he managed to set fire to his cigar. Finally, when he had drawn a deep whiff of pungent smoke into his lungs: "Read this," he ordered, drawing a sheet of paper from his pocket and thrusting it into de Grandin's hand.

"*Hace abierto la ventana de su oficina mañana por la noche*—leave your office window open tomorrow night," the missive ordered. It was without signature,

but the silhouette of a flying bat was appended to the legend.

"Ha!" exclaimed de Grandin. *"La Murciélaga*—the she-bat! It was that the poor one babbled in her delirium of fear. What does the message mean?"

Caldes squirmed uncomfortably, looked about the room as though he sought an inspiration from the frankly displayed charms of the photographed young women hanging on the walls, finally:

"I was born in Tupulo," he answered, and we noticed that his usual boastful manner had departed. "They have societies down there, something like th' Black Hand they used to have in Italy, only worse. When they say to do a thing you do it, no matter what it is. Down in Yucatan th' orders of these people always have th' picture of a bat —a female bat, *la Murciélaga*—on them. Everyone, from th' *alcalde* down, knows what happens when you get a note with th' picture of a bat signed to it. I've been up here twenty years, but when I got that letter yesterday I didn't ask no questions—I left th' window open like they said. That's why I scrammed home early tonight an' had th' watchman come on duty late. They didn't ask for money, or tell me to stay an' meet 'em, so——"

"An' I don't suppose ye had th' faintest idea what they wuz up to, eh?" Costello interrupted cynically.

"Dios mio, no!" exclaimed the Mexican. "How should I know they wuz goin' to murder someone, least of all Rita, who's an American gal, an' never did a thing to cross 'em, far's I know?"

"A woman came into the club just as Mademoiselle Rita was finishing her dance; it was then that she was taken ill," mused Jules de Grandin. "Did you recognize her?"

"Who, me? No, sir. I wuz in th' bar when Rita pulled her faintin'-fit. I didn't know about it till they'd took her to her dressin'-room."

"And did you later recognize anyone whom you knew to be connected with these people of the bat?"

A grimace which might have been intended for a smile, but which bore small family resemblance to it, swept over Caldes' face, making the knife-scar on his cheek do a macabre dance. "Outsiders don't know th' members of th' bat society," he responded. "You don't live long if you ever find out who's a member, either. But—say, was this dame you're speakin' of a tall, dark woman—looked like a princess, or sumpin? If she wuz, I know her—she just blew into town, an' lives at——

"Jesusito!" the shrill scream broke his words as he leapt from his chair, his face a writhen mask of pain and fright. Frantically he clawed at his throat, as if he slapped at some stinging insect which had lighted there. But it was no insect which he held between his fingers as he waved a trembling hand at us. It was a bit of brownish wood, no longer and no thicker than a match-stick, pointed at the tip and slightly rounded at the base.

I looked at it in mute inquiry, but de Grandin seemed to recognize it, for with a bound he dashed around the deck and seized the stricken man by the shoulders, easing him to the floor. With his thumb and forefinger he seized a fold of the smooth-shaven skin encasing Caldes' neck and, pinching the tiny wound up, put his lips to it.

"Look out for 'em, Clancy!" Costello roared, dashing to the open window of the office and leaning out to bawl his order down the alley. "Oh, ye would, would ye?"

Snatching the revolver from his shoulder holster he leant across the window-sill and fired two shots in quick succession, and the detonation of his weapon was re-

peated by a third shot from the alley-mouth. Nimble as a cat despite his bulk, he clambered through the window and went racing down the brick-paved passage.

"Send someone for potassium permanganate," de Grandin ordered as he raised his head from Caldes' wounded throat and expelled a mouthful of blood. "Quickly, if you please; we must make haste!"

I HURRIED to the lobby and dispatched an officer post-haste for the permanganate, then rejoined him in the office.

Caldes lay upon the floor, lips quivering, emitting little whimpering noises. Even as I joined de Grandin he drew his legs up with a sharp, convulsive jerk, then straightened them with a sharp kick, and his heels began to beat the floor with a constantly increasing rhythm. He drew his arms across his breast, clenching his fists together, then threw them out to right and left, bowling de Grandin over and upsetting a bronze smoking-stand which stood beside the desk.

"Ar-wa-ar-war-war!" thickly the choked syllables came from his throat as he fought for breath. The man was dying of asphyxia before our eyes.

We turned him on his face and began administering artificial respiration, but before we had more than started the man gasped once or twice, shook with a hideous spasm, then went limp beneath our hands.

"Good heavens, what was it?" I asked as de Grandin rose and began matter-of-factly to brush the dust from his knees.

"Urare poisoning. It was a dart from a *soplete,* or blow-gun, which struck him in the throat. The thing was poisoned with a strychnos extract which acts like cobra venom, causing death within an hour by paralysis of the respiratory muscles. Had it struck him on a limb we could have used a tourniquet to stop the flow of poison to the blood stream. But no! The dart struck into his external jugular, and the venom spread like wildfire through his system. I think that fright increased its action, too, for he had doubtless seen men die in such a way before, and gave himself no hope when he discovered he was wounded. Usually the poison does not act so quickly——"

"I got 'im, sor," announced Costello jubilantly from the doorway. "Bad cess to 'im, he tried to shoot me wid his bean-blower, so I give 'im a dose o' lead poisonin' an' Clancy let 'im have another pill jist for—howly Mither, what's this?"

"This, my friend, is murder," answered Jules de Grandin evenly. "It seems he spoke more truly than he realized when he said that those who recognized the members of this gang are seldom troubled by infirmities of age. Come, let us see the other."

Costello's victim was an undersized dark man, thin to emaciation, swarthy-skinned, smooth-shaven save for a small black mustache, and dressed impeccably in dinner clothes. A quick search failed to show a single clue to his identity. Nothing but a pack of *Violetta* cigarettes, ten dollars in bills and change and a book of paper matches occupied his pockets. The maker's labels had been taken from his clothes, his linen had apparently been worn that evening for the first time; there were no laundry marks upon it. Ten feet or so from where the man had fallen we found a tube of smoothly polished hollow reed some eighteen inches long, and beside it, like a clip of cartridges, a folded sheet of cardboard through which were thrust three four-inch splints of wood like that with which the night-club owner had been wounded. Near the window where it had fallen harmlessly to the pavement

lay the dart he had blown at Costello.

"Be careful how you handle them," de Grandin warned as Officer Clancy picked up the paper clip of darts; "a scratch from them is death!"

"Humph," Costello murmured as he viewed the body of the murderer, "they wuzn't takin' any chances, wuz they, Doctor de Grandin, sor? This felly's as bare o' clues as Billy-be-damned. Th' woman Mike wuz tellin' us about is our best bet. A dame as sthrikin' as ye tell me this one wuz ought not to be so hard to locate. If she just blew into town, like Caldes said, an' if she's been around enough for him to notice her, she's likely livin' at some swank hotel. We'll put th' dragnet out for her immejiately, an' when we find her I'm afther thinkin' she'll have some mighty fancy answerin' to do."

WE WERE enjoying coffee and Chartreuse in the study after dinner the next evening when Nora McGinnis announced: "Sergeant Costello an' a lady's here to see yez, sors. Shall I have 'em wait?"

"Not at all; by no means; show them in," de Grandin bade, and, as the burly Irishman loomed in the doorway, "Welcome, *mon sergent;* is it news of the strange woman that you bring?"

"Well, sor, yis an' no, as th' felly sez," Costello answered with a rather sheepish grin as he beckoned to someone behind him. "This here young lady's got a sthory which may shed some light on last night's monkey-business."

The girl who entered at his gesture seemed absurdly small and fragile in comparison to his great bulk, though in fact she was something over middle height. It was not until she took a seat upon the sofa at de Grandin's invitation that I recognized her as the bubble-dancer at the Caldes cabaret. How a young female who dances naked dresses when she is not working at her trade had never been a subject of my thought, but certainly I was not prepared for any costume such as that our visitor wore. She was almost nun-like in her sheer black dinner dress of marquisette trimmed with tiny ruffles of white organdy, her corsage of gardenias, her small black hat, and her white-kid gloves. She might have been a clergyman's daughter, or a member of the Junior League, judging from appearances.

"I'm Nancy Meigs," she told us as she folded white-gloved hands demurely in her lap and looked at us with wide, grave, troubled eyes. "Rita Smith, the girl they killed last night, and I were pals."

"Smith! *Mon Dieu,* her name was Smith, and she so beautiful!" de Grandin murmured sadly. "This English, what a language!"

"It was *Los Niños de la Murciélaga*—the 'Children of the Bat'—who killed her," Nancy added. "I was sure——"

"Perfectly, *Mademoiselle,* and so are we," de Grandin interrupted, "but who are these sixty-times-accursèd ones, where may they be found, and why, especially, should they kill and crucify a young girl in New Jersey?"

Her gray eyes were clear and soft and steady as they looked at him, but they were frightened, too. "Was—did you find a bat wing by her body?" she responded.

"By blue, I did!" he answered. "Wait, I have it in my room."

He hurried out, returning in a moment with the sheet of paper wrapped around the wing he had retrieved the night before.

She took the folded wing between her thumbs and forefingers, extending it against the light cast by the study lamp. "Can you read it?" she demanded, moving the membranes across the field of light.

Scratched upon the leathery skin was a five-word legend:

Así siempre á los traidores.

"Howly St. Patrick!" swore Costello.

"*Précisément,*" de Grandin nodded.

"What's it mean?" I asked.

" 'Thus always to traitors,' sor," Costello answered. "I picked up enough o' th' lingo whilst I wuz servin' in th' Fillypines to read that much."

De Grandin poured two glasses of Chartreuse and handed them to our visitors; then, as he refilled his own:

"Just what connection did this poor young woman have with these so naughty murderers, *Mademoiselle?*"

"Rita and I were members of the order—once," replied the girl. "It was back in '29, just before the bottom fell out of the show business; we were touring South America with a troupe of entertainers. Fan and bubble dancing hadn't been invented then, but we did a rumba routine that was popular, and went over almost as big as the performing seals. We'd gotten up the coast as far as Tupulo when the crash came. Tupulo's an oil town, you know, and all orders from the wells had been canceled; so the place was like a western mining-camp when the ore ran out. We didn't draw a corporal's guard at shows, and then one night our manager, Samuelson, got into a fight in a gambling-hall and they put him in jail and seized the animals and properties of the show. Rita and I were stranded with only about ten pesos between us. That didn't last us long and presently they threatened to jail us, too, for non-payment of rent. We were desperate."

"One understands," de Grandin nodded. "And then?"

"We got an engagement dancing in one of the saloons. It was pretty dreadful, for the patrons of the place were the off-scum of the oil fields, and we had to do the *danza de las dos tetas*—dancing in unbuttoned blouses and shaking our shoulders till our breasts protruded through the opening, you know—but stranded actresses can't very well afford to quarrel with their bread and butter.

"One night it was especially terrible. The drunken loafers in the place called insults at us and even pelted us with bits of bread and vegetables as we danced; we were both about to collapse when the evening's work was done. Rita cried all the way to our lodgings. 'I can't stand this another night,' she wept. 'I'd sooner go lose myself in the jungle and die than do another shimmy in that deadful place!'

" 'One may go into the jungle, yet not die, *Señorita,*' someone told us from the darkness, and a man stepped out from the shadow of a building, raising his sombrero.

"We thought at first it was one of the barroom loafers who'd followed us, and I drew my hands back to write the Ten Commandments on his cheeks with my nails, but the street lamp showed us he was a stranger and a *caballero.*

" 'I have watched you for some time,' he told us. 'You were made for better things than twinkling your little, perfect feet before such swine as those you entertain. If you will let me, I can help you.'

"We sized him up. He was little, very neat and extremely ugly, but he didn't look particularly dangerous. 'All right,' said Rita, 'what's your proposition?'

" 'One I serve has need of women with discretion—and beauty,' he answered. 'She can offer you a life of luxury, everything which you deserve—fine clothes, fine food, luxurious surroundings. But it will not be a life of ease or safety. There will be much work and more danger.

Also, no one in this service ever makes a second mistake. However'—he shrugged his shoulders as only a Mexican can—'it will be better than the life you're leading now.'

"OUR contract was concluded then and there. We didn't even go back to our lodgings to collect and pack what clothes we had.

"He had a motor waiting at the outskirts of the town, and in this we rode till daylight, stopping at a little *hacienda* at the jungle edge to sleep all day. When darkness came he wakened us, and we rode on muleback through the bush till it was nearly dawn again.

"Our destination was an old abandoned Mayan temple, one of those ruins that dot the jungle all through Yucatan, and it seemed deserted as a graveyard when we rode up to it, but we found the jungle had been cleared away and the debris of fallen stones removed till the place was made quite habitable.

"We rested all next day and were wakened in the evening by the sound of tom-toms. An Indian woman came and led us to a stone tank like a swimming-pool, and when we finished bathing we found she'd taken our soiled clothes and left us gowns of beautifully woven cotton and *huaraches,* or native sandals. When we'd dressed in these she took us to another room, where she gave us stewed meat and beans and cool, tart wine, after which she signaled us to follow her.

"We walked out to the square before the pyramid, which was all ablaze with lighted torches, and I nearly fainted at the sight that met our eyes. All around the square was a solid rank of men and women, all in native costume—a simple, straight gown like a nightdress for the women, a shirt and pair of cotton trousers for the men—and all masked by having huge artificial bats' heads drawn over their faces like hoods. Everywhere we looked they were, as much alike as grains of rice from the same bag, all with their eyes flashing in the torchlight at us through the peep-holes in their masks.

"Four of the bat-men took our arms and turned us toward the steps of the great pyramid. Then we saw *La Murciélaga!*"

"*La Murciélaga?*" echoed Jules de Grandin. "Was it then a bat that these strange people worshipped?"

"No, sir. It was a woman. She was tall and slender and beautifully made, as we could see at a glance; for every inch of her was encased in a skin-tight suit of sheer black webbing, like the finest of silk stockings, and her face was hidden by a bat-mask like the rest, only hers seemed made of shimmering black feathers while theirs were made of coarse black fur. Joining her arms to her body were folds of sheer black silk so that when she raised her hands it spread and stretched like a bat spreading its wings to fly.

"Some kind of trial seemed to be in progress, for two bat-men held another one between them, and the woman in the bat costume seemed questioning the prisoner, though we couldn't hear what she said or he replied from where we stood.

"After a little while she seemed to have arrived at a decision, for she raised her hands, spreading out her bat-wings, and curved her fingers at him as though she were about to claw his face. The poor thing dropped upon his knees and held his hands extended, asking mercy, but *La Murciélaga* never changed her pose, just stood there with her claws stretched out and her eyes gleaming horribly through her mask.

"Before we realized what was happening some men had brought a blood-stained wooden cross and laid it down

upon the pavement. Then they stripped the prisoner's clothing off and nailed him to the cross while the tom-toms beat so loudly that we could not hear his shrieks, and all the masked bat-people screamed *'Así siempre á los traidores!'* over and over again.

" 'That's what comes to those who disobey or fail *La Murciélaga!*' someone whispered in my ear, and I recognized the voice of the man who had brought us out from Tupulo.

"But we don't want to join any such terrible society as this!' I cried. 'We won't ——'

" 'There are other crosses waiting,' he warned me. 'Will you hang beside that traitor or will you take the oath of fealty to the Bat Mother and become her true and faithful servants?'

"The poor wretch on the cross kept shrieking, and though we couldn't hear him for the tom-toms' noise, we could see his mouth gape open and the blood run down his chin where he gnashed his lips and tongue. He beat his head against the cross and arched his body forward till the spikes tore greater wounds in his pierced hands and feet, and all the time *La Murciélaga* stood there statue-still with her bat-wings spread out and her fingers curved like talons.

"Finally, when the crucified man's screams had muted to a low, exhausted moan, they led us up to the 'Bat Mother,' and there in the shadow cast by the cross with its writhing, groaning burden, we knelt down on the stones and swore to do whatever we were bidden, promising to give ourselves up for crucifixion if we ever disobeyed an order or attempted to leave the bat society or divulge its secrets. They made us put our hands out straight before us on the ground, and *La Murciélaga* came and stood on them while we kissed her feet and vowed we were her slaves for ever. Then we were given bat-masks and told to take our places in the ranks which stood about the square before the pyramid."

"And how did you escape that place of torment, *Mademoiselle?*"

"We didn't have to, sir. In the morning we were wakened and taken to the coast, where they put us on a boat and sent us up to Vera Cruz.

"May I have a cigarette?" she asked; and, as de Grandin passed the box to her, then held his lighter while she set it glowing, "Do you remember how the Spanish freighter *Gato* apparently sailed off the earth?"

De Grandin and Costello nodded.

"We did that, Rita and I. They told us to make love to the master and chief engineer, and with the memory of that horrid scene out in the jungle to spur us on, we did just as they told us. We teased the engineer to let us go and see his engines, and Rita took a little box they'd given her aboard, and hid it in the bunkers. What was in it we don't know, but when they threw the coal where it had rested in the furnace the whole side of the ship was ripped away, and everyone on board was lost."

"But this is purest idiocy, *Mademoiselle!*" protested Jules de Grandin. "Why should anyone in wanton cruelty desire to destroy a ship?"

"The *Gato* carried half a million dollars' worth of jewels," the girl replied. "She sank in less than fifteen fathoms, and the hole blown in her side made it easy for the divers to go in and loot her strongroom."

She took a final long draw at her cigarette, then crushed its fire out in the ash-tray. "You remember when MacPherson Briarly, the insurance magnate's son, was held for ransom in Chihuahua?" she asked. "Rita was the lure—posed as an American girl stranded in El Centro

and traded on his chivalry. He went out riding with her one afternoon and—it cost his father fifty thousand dollars to get him back alive."

"BUT why didn't you attempt escape?" I asked. "Surely, if you went as far north as Chihuahua you were out of reach of the jungle headquarters in Yucatan?"

A queer look passed across her face, wiping away her youth and leaving her features old and utterly exhausted-looking. "You don't escape *Los Niños de la Murciélaga,* sir," she answered simply. "They are everywhere. The loafer in the doorway, the policeman in the street, the conductor of the tram-car or the train, is as likely as not a member of the band, and if he fails to prevent your breaking your oath of obedience—there's a cross waiting for him in the jungle. You may be dining in a fashionable hotel, sitting in a box at the opera in Mexico City or walking in the plaza when someone—a beggar, a stylish woman or an elegantly dressed man—will open his hand and display a bat wing. That is the signal, the summons not to be ignored on pain of crucifixion."

"But you finally escaped," I insisted somewhat fatuously.

Again that queer, senescent-seeming look spread on her face. "We ran away," she corrected. "They sent us up to Tia Juana and when we found ourselves so near the American border we decided to make a dash for it. We were well supplied with funds—we always were—so we had no trouble getting up to San Diego, but we knew we'd not be safe in California, or anywhere within a thousand miles of Mexico, for that matter, so we hurried back East.

"The movies had killed vaudeville, and no new musical shows were outfitting that season, but we managed to get jobs in burlesque. Finally I heard about an opening at Mike Caldes' place and sold him the idea of letting me go on as a bubble-dancer. I hadn't been there long when the girl who did the waltz routine left the show to marry, and I got Rita her place. We thought we'd be safe out here in New Jersey," she finished bitterly.

"And this so unpleasant female, this *Murciélaga,* you can tell us what she looks like?" asked de Grandin.

"*You're* asking *me?*" she answered. "You saw her when she came into the club before they took revenge on Rita."

"That lovely woman?" I exclaimed incredulously.

"That lovely woman," she repeated in a flat and toneless voice. "Did you see the way she held her cloak before she took it off? That's her sign. The others carry bat wings for identification. Only *La Murciélaga* is allowed to wear them."

"Well, I'll be damned!" declared Costello.

"Assuredly, unless you mend your ways," agreed de Grandin with a grin. Then, sobering abruptly:

"Tell me, *ma petite,*" he asked, "have you any idea the unfortunate Mike Caldes knew of your connection with these people of the bat?"

"No, sir," she answered positively. "Mike had never been a member of the order, but he'd lived in Tupulo and knew its power. He'd no more have dared shelter us if he'd suspected we were wanted by *La Murciélaga* than he'd have given us jobs if he'd thought we had the smallpox. As far as any Mexican from Yucatan is concerned, any fugitive from the vengeance of the Bat is hotter than counterfeit money or stolen Government bonds."

"And what of you, my friend?" de Grandin asked Costello. "Have you been

able to locate this strange woman whose advent heralded these murders?"

"No, sor, we haven't," answered the detective. "We spread th' dragnet for 'er, like I told ye at th' joint last night, but we can't find hide nor hair o' her. P'raps she's stayin' in New York—there's lots o' furriners—axin' yer pardon, sor—always hangin' out there, an' we've asked th' police to be on th' lookout fer her, but you know how it is. Pretty much like lookin' fer a needle in a haystack, as th' felly says. So when Nancy—beg pardon, I mane Miss Meigs—come an' told me she might be able for to shed some light on all this monkey-business, I thought I'd better bring her over."

"Precisely," nodded Jules de Grandin. "And in the meantime, while we seek the so elusive Lady of the Bat, how shall we make things safe for Mademoiselle Nancy?"

"H'm, I might lock 'er up as a material witness," Costello offered with a grin, "but——"

"Oh, would you—*please?*" broke in the girl. "I never wanted to be anywhere in all my life as much as I want to be behind jail bars right now!"

"Sold," Costello agreed. "We'll go over to your place an' get your clothes; then you can trot along to jail wid me."

"One moment, *Mademoiselle,* before you go to the bastille," de Grandin interrupted. "It is entirely unlikely that the search for this Bat Woman will produce results. They are clever, these ones. I do not doubt that they have covered up their trail so well that long before the gendarmes realize the search is useless she will have fled the country. Tell me, would you know your way—could you retrace your steps to that so odious temple where the Children of the Bat have made their lair?"

A little frown of concentration wrinkled her smooth forehead. "I think I could," she answered finally.

"And will you lead us there? Remember, it is in the cause of justice, to avenge the ruthless murder of your friend and to save *le bon Dieu* knows how many others from a similar fate."

She looked at him with widened eyes, eyes in which the pupils seemed to swell and spread till they almost hid the irides. Her eyes were blank, but not expressionless. Rather, they seemed to me like openings to hell, as though they mirrored all the nightmares she had seen within their depths.

"I suppose I might as well," she answered with a little shudder. "If I go there they will nail me to a cross. If I stay here they'll do it sooner or later, anyway."

She was like a lovely, lifeless robot as she rose to go with Costello. The certain knowledge of foreshadowed death, cold and ominous as some great snake, had seized her in its paralyzing grip.

CAPTAIN Hilario César Ramirez de Quesada y Revilla, Commandant of Tupulo, courteously replenished our glasses from the straw-sheathed flask of *habañero,* then poured himself a drink out of all proportion to his own diminutive stature. *"Señores, Señorita,"* he bowed to us and Nancy Meigs in turn, "your visit is more welcome than I can express. *Valgame Dios!* For a year I have stormed and sweated here in impotence; now you come with explanations and an offer of assistance. Crime is rampant in this neighborhood, and the police are powerless. A man is murdered, a business house is robbed at night, no one knows who did it; there are no clues, there are no complainants. The very persons who are injured place their fingers on their lips and shrug their shoulders. *'La Murciélaga,'* they say, as

though they said it was inexorable fate. They tell us nothing; we are helpless. Nor is that all. People, women as well as men, disappear; they vanish as though swallowed by an earthquake. 'Where is so and so?' we ask, and *'S-s-sh—La Murciélaga!'* is the only answer. I came here with a full company a year ago. Today I have but two platoons; the others are all dead, deserted or vanished—*La Murciélaga!*

"Por Dios, until you came here with this explanation I had thought she was a legend, like Tezcatlipoca or the Thunder-Bird!"

"Then we may count upon your help, *Monsieur le Capitaine?"* de Grandin asked.

"With all my heart. *Carajo,* I would give this head of mine to lay my eyes upon *La Murciélaga——"*

An orderly tapped at the door, and he looked up with a frown. *"Que cosa?"* he demanded.

"A young *caballero* waits to see the captain," the man explained apologetically. "His *hacienda* was burglarized last night. Much livestock was driven off; the family plate was stolen. He is sure it was *La Murciélaga,* and has come to make complaint."

"Un milagro—a miracle!" the Commandant cried exultantly. "Two in one day, *amigos.* First come you with information of this cursed bat society, then comes a man with courage to denounce them for their thievery.

"Bring him in, *muy pronto!"* he commanded.

The man the orderly showed in was scarcely more than a lad, dark, slender, almost womanish in build, his sole claim to masculinity seeming to be based upon a tiny black mustache and a little tuft of beard immediately below his mouth, so small and black that it reminded me of a beetle perched between his chin and lip. He wore the old-time Mexican costume, short jacket and loose-bottomed trousers of black velveteen, a scarlet cummerbund about his waist, exceedingly high-heeled boots, a bright silk handkerchief about his head. In one hand he bore a felt *sombrero,* the brim of which seemed only the necessary groundwork to support row on row of glittering silver braid.

At sight of us he paused abashed, but when the Commandant presented us, his teeth shone in a glittering smile. "We are well met, *Señores y Señorita,"* he declared; "you are come to seek these Children of the Bat, I am come to ask the *commandante's* aid. Last night they picked my house as clean as ever vultures plucked a carcass, and my craven peons refused to lift a hand to stop them. They said that it was death to offer opposition to *La Murciélaga,* but me, I am brave. I will not be intimidated. No, I have come to the police for aid."

"What makes you think it was *La Murciélaga,* sir?" the Commandant inquired. "These people of the bat are criminals, yes; but there are other robbers, too. Might not it be that——"

"Señor Commandante," broke in the other in a low, half-frightened voice, "would other robbers dare to leave *this* at my house?" Opening his small gloved hand he dropped a folded bat-wing on the desk.

"Bring a file of soldiers quickly," he besought. "We can reach my house by sundown, and begin pursuit tomorrow morning. Señorita Meigs can lead us to the secret stronghold in the jungle, and we can take them by surprize."

PREPARATIONS were completed quickly. Two squads of cavalry with two machine-guns were quickly mustered at the barracks, and with young Señor Epilar to guide us, we set out for the scene of

La Murciélaga's latest depredation. The sun dropped down behind the jungle wall as we arrived at the old *hacienda.*

The soldiers were bivouacked in the *patio,* and escorted by our host, we made our way to a wide, long drawing-room lighted by wax candles in tall wrought-iron standards and sparsely furnished with chairs and tables of massive oak.

"I bid you welcome to my humble home, my friends," said Señor Epilar with charming Spanish courtesy. "If you will indulge me a few moments I will have refreshment——"

"What's that?" the Commandant broke in as a sharp, shrill cry, followed by the detonation of a carbine shot, came from the *patio.*

"Perhaps one of my people plucked up courage to fire at a coyote," answered Epilar. "They showed little enough desire to shoot last night——"

"No, that was an army rifle," the Commandant insisted. "If you will excuse me——"

"And if I do not choose to do so?" calmly asked our host.

"Tres mil diablos—if you do not choose——"

"Precisamente, Señor Commandante," answered Epilar. "I should like to claim my forfeit."

De Grandin's small blue eyes were sparkling in the candlelight. *"Dieu de Dieu de Dieu de Dieu!"* he murmured. "I was certain; I was sure; I could not be mistaken!"

The Commandant regarded Señor Epilar in round-eyed wonder. "Your forfeit?" he demanded. "In the devil's name——"

"Not quite the devil, though something like it," cut in Epilar with a soft laugh. *"La Murciélaga, Commandante mio.* As I came into your office you declared that you would give your head if you could but lay your eyes upon the Bat-Woman. Look, my friend, your wish is granted."

With one hand he tore off the tiny black mustache and goatee which adorned his face; with the other he unwound the gaudy handkerchief which bound his head, and a wealth of raven hair came tumbling down about his face and rippled round his shoulders. Stripped of its masculine adornments I recognized that lovely, cold, impassive face as belonging to the woman who had stood upon the stairs the night that Caldes and the dancer met their deaths.

"Dios!" the Commandant exclaimed, reaching for the pistol at his belt; but:

"I would not try to do it," warned the woman. "Look about you."

At every window of the room masked men were stationed, each with a deadly blow-gun poised and ready at his lips.

"Your soldiers are far happier, I know," the woman announced softly. "All of them, I'm sure, had been to mass this morning. Now they are conversing with the holy saints. "As for you"—she threw us the dry flick of a Mona Lisa smile—"if you will be kind enough to come, I shall take pleasure in entertaining you at my jungle headquarters." For a moment her sardonic gaze fixed on Nancy Meigs; then: "Your fair companion will be glad to furnish some amusement, I am sure," she added softly.

We rode all night. Strapped tightly to the saddles of our mules, hands bound behind us and with *tapojos,* or mule-blinds, drawn across our faces, we plodded through the jungle, claws of acacia and mesquite slapping and scratching against us, the chafing of our rawhide bonds becoming more intolerable each mile.

It was full daylight when they took our hoodwinks off. We had reached an open space several hundred feet in

breadth, tiled with squared stones and facing on the ruins of a topless Mayan pyramid which towered ninety or a hundred feet against the thick-set wall of jungle. On each side of us ranked a file of bat-masked men, each with a blow-gun in his hand. Of *La Murciélaga* we could see nothing.

"*Holá, mes enfants,* we have come through nobly thus far, *n'est-ce-pas?*" de Grandin called as he twisted in his saddle to throw a cheeful grin in our direction. "If—*par Dieu et le Diable!*" he broke off as his small blue eyes went wide with horror and commiseration. Turning, I followed the direction of his glance and felt a sickening sensation at my stomach.

Behind us, bound upon a mule, sat Nancy Meigs. They had stripped her shirt and bandeau off, leaving her stark naked to the belt, and obviously they had failed to tie a *tapojo* across her face, for from brow to waist she was a mass of crisscrossed slashes where the cruelly-clawed thorn branches of the jungle had gashed and sheared her tender skin as she rode bound and helpless through the bush. Little streaks of blood-stain, some fresh, some dry and clotted, marked a pattern on her body and her khaki jodhpurs were bespattered with the dark discolorations. She slumped forward in her saddle, half unconscious, but sufficiently awake to feel the pain of her raw wounds, and we saw her bite her lips as she strove to keep from screaming with the torment which the buzzing jungle flies, her lacerations and the cruelly knotted rawhide bonds inflicted.

"Be all th' saints, 'tis meself as would like nothin' better than to git me hands on that she-devil!" swore Costello as he saw the claw-marks on the girl's white torso. "Bedad, I'd——"

"*Andela*—forward!" came a sharp command beside us, and masked men seized the bridles of our mules and led them toward the pyramid.

Our prison was a large square room lighted by small slits pierced in the solid masonry and furnished with a wooden grating at its doorway. Here we stretched our limbs and strove to rub the circulation back into our hands and feet.

"*Soy un bobo*—what a fool I am!" the Commandant groaned as he rubbed his swollen wrists. "I should have known that no one in the neighborhood would have the courage to come to me with complaints against these Bat-Men. I should have taken warning——"

"Softly, *mon ami,*" de Grandin comforted. "You acted in the only way you could. It was your duty to embrace the chance to wipe this gang of bandits out. Me, I should probably have done the same, if——"

A rattling at the wooden grating interrupted him. "*La Murciélaga* deigns to see you. Come!" a masked man told us.

For a moment I had hopes that we might overpower our guard, but the hope was short-lived; for a file of blow-gun bearers waited in the corridor outside our cell, and with this watchful company we made our way along the passage till we came to a low doorway leading to a large apartment lighted by a score of silver lamps swinging from the painted ceiling.

The ancient walls were lined with frescoes, figures of strange dancing women posed in every posture of abandon, some wearing red, some clad in green, a few in somber black, but most entirely nude, flaunting their nakedness in a riot of contorted limbs and swaying bodies. There was a vigor to the art of the old Mayan painters who had limned these frescoes on the walls. Despite their crudity of execution there was an air of realness in the murals which made it seem that they might suddenly be

waked to life and circle round the room in the frenzy of an orgiastic dance.

At the far end of the room a table of dark wood was laid with cotton napery and a wonderful old silver service which must at one time have graced the banquet hall of some old grandee in the days of Spanish dominance. Four chairs were drawn up to the board facing the end where a couch of carven wood heaped high with silken cushions stood beneath the fitful luminance cast by a hanging silver lamp.

"This must have been the priestess' hall," the Commandant informed us in a whisper. "This temple is supposed to have contained a college of priests and priestesses, something like a convent and monastery."

"*Parbleu*, if that is so, I think those old ones did not mortify the flesh to any great extent," the Frenchman answered with a grin. "But while we wait in this old mausoleum of the ancient ones, where is our charming hostess?"

As though his words had been a cue, a staff of bells chimed musically outside the door, and the guard of bat-men ranged about the walls sank to their knees.

The chime grew higher, shriller, sweeter, and a double file of women dressed in filmy cotton robes, each with a bat-mask on her face, came through the low-arched entrance, paused a moment, then, as though obeying an inaudible command, dropped prostrate to the floor, head to head, hand clasping hand, so that they made a living carpet on the pavement.

Framed in the arching entrance, *La Murciélaga* stood like some lovely life-sized portrait. A robe of finely woven cotton, dyed brilliant red with cochineal and almost sheer as veiling, flowed from a jeweled belt clasped below her bosoms to the insteps of her narrow, high-arched feet. On throat and arms, on her thumbs and little-fingers, flashed great emeralds, any one of which was worth a princely ransom. Long golden pendants throbbing with the flash of blood-bright rubies reached from the tiny lobes of little ears almost to naked, cream-white shoulders. Each move she made was musical, for bands of pure gold were clasped in tiers about her wrists and on her slender ankles, and clashed tunefully together with each step she took. Upon the great and little-toe of each slim foot there gleamed a giant emerald so that as her feet advanced beneath the swirling hem of her red robe it seemed that green-eyed serpents darted forth their heads.

"*Madre de Dios!*" I heard the Commandant exclaim, and his voice seemed choked with sobs. "*Que hermosa*—how beautiful!"

"So is the tiger or the cobra," murmured Jules de Grandin as *La Murciélaga* trod upon the prostrate women as unconcernedly as though they had been figures woven in a carpet.

She greeted us with a bright smile. "Good morning, gentlemen. I hope you did not suffer too much inconvenience from your ride last night?"

None of us made reply, but she seemed in nowise feazed. "Breakfast is prepared," she announced, sinking down upon the heaped-up cushions of the couch and motioning us to the chairs which stood about the table. "I regret I cannot offer you such food as you are used to, but I do my poor best."

Oranges and cherimoya, grapes, sweet limes, guavas and plates of flat, crisp native bread composed the meal, with coffee, chocolate and lemonade for beverages. Finally came long, thick cigars of rich lowland-grown tobacco and a sweet, strong wine which tasted like angelica.

THE woman leant back on her cushioned divan and regarded us through half-closed eyes as she let a little streamlet of gray smoke flow from her lips. "The question, gentlemen, is, 'What are we to do with you?' " she stated in a voice which held that throaty, velvety quality of the southern races. "I cannot very well afford to let you go; I have no wish to keep you here against your will. Would you care to join our ranks? I can find work for you."

"And if we should refuse, *Madame?*" de Grandin asked.

Her shrug lifted the creamy shoulders till they touched the jeweled ear-pendants and set their gems to flashing in the lamplight. "There is always *el crucifijo,*" she replied, turning black-fringed, curious eyes upon him. "It would be interesting to see four bodies hanging up at once. You, my friend, would doubtless scream in charming tenor, *el Commandante* would shriek baritone, I think, while I do not doubt that the old bearded one and the big Irishman would be the bassos of the concert. It should make an interesting quartet. I have more than half a mind to hear it."

A frigid grimace, the mere parody of a smile, congealed upon the Commandant's pale lips. "You make a gruesome jest, *Señora,*" he asserted feebly.

"Cabrón!" she shot the deadly insult at him as a snake might spew its poison. *"La Murciélaga* never jests!" Her face had gone skull-white, with narrowed, venomous eyes, the chin and mouth thrust forward and the lips pressed taut against the teeth.

"Down," she ordered, "down on your faces, all of you! Lick my feet like the dogs you are, and pray for mercy! Down, I say, for as surely as I reign supreme here I'll crucify the one who hesitates!"

De Grandin looked at Costello, and his Gallic blue eyes met prompt answer in the black-fringed eyes of Irish blue of the detective. With one accord they turned to me, and instinctively I nodded.

The little Frenchman rose, heels clicked together, and faced the termagant she-fiend with a glance as cold and polished as a leveled bayonet. *"Madame,"* he announced in a metallic voice, "we are men, we four. To men there are things worse than death."

"Bueno, my little one," she answered; "then I shall hear your quartet after all. I had hoped that you would choose to play the hero." Turning to her guards she ordered sharply: "Take them away."

"No, no; not me, *Señora!"* the Commandant implored, falling on his knees before her. "Do not crucify me, I beseech you!"

Across his shoulder he cried frenziedly: "Save yourselves, *amigos.* Beg mercy. What good is honor to a corpse? I saw a man whom they had crucified—they flung his body in the city square at night. It was terrible. His wounds gaped horribly and the middle fingers had been torn away where his hands had ripped loose from the spikes!"

"You would have mercy, little puppy?" asked the woman softly, regarding him with a slow, mocking smile.

"Yes, yes, *Señora!* Of your pity spare me——"

"Then, since you are a cringing dog, deport yourself becomingly." With the condescension of a queen who graciously extends her hand for salutation, she stretched out a slim, ring-jeweled foot.

It was shocking to behold him stultify his manhood. *"Misericordia muy Señora graciosa*—have mercy, gracious lady!" he whimpered, and I turned away my head with a shudder of repulsion as he put his hand beneath her instep, raised the gemmed foot to his mouth, and, thrusting forth his tongue, began to lick it as a famished dog might lap at food.

"Cordieu," de Grandin murmured as the guards closed round us and began to crowd us from the room, "she may murder us to death, but I damn think she can do no worse to us than she has done to him!"

"Thrue fer ye, Doctor de Grandin, sor," Costello rumbled. "You an' me wuz soldiers an' Doctor Trowbridge is a gintleman. Thank God we ain't more scared o' dyin' than o' dishonorin' ourselves!"

THE square before the pyramid blazed bright with torchlight. On three sides, ranked elbow to elbow, stood the "Children of the Bat" looking through the peep-holes of their masks with frenzied, hot-eyed gloating. Before the temple steps there crouched a line of drummers who beat out a steady, mind-destroying rhythm. We stood, legs hobbled, between our guards, looking toward the temple stairs, and I noticed with a shudder that at intervals of some eight feet four paving-blocks had been removed, and beside each gaping opening was a little pile of earth. The cross-pits had been dug.

"Courage, *mes enfants,*" de Grandin whispered. "If all goes well——"

Costello's lips were moving almost soundlessly. His eyes were fixed in fascinated awe upon the cross-holes in the pavement; the expression on his face showed more of wonder than of fear. "To hang upon a cross," I heard him whisper, "I am not worthy, Lord!"

"Morbleu, she comes, my friends!" the little Frenchman warned.

Tiny tom-toms, scarcely larger than a tea-cup, beat out a low, continuous roar beneath the thumbs and knuckles of the double line of bat-masked women filing from a doorway in the temple. Behind them came an awe-inspiring figure. Skin-tight, a sheath of finely-woven jet-black silk, sheer and gleaming as the finest stocking, cased her supple form from throat to ankles, its close-looped meshes serving rather to accentuate than hide the gracious curves of her long, slim limbs. Moccasins of cloth of gold were on her feet, her head was covered with a hood which bore the pointed snout and tufted ears of a great vampire bat. In the eyeholes we could see the red reflection of the torchlight. Joined to her body from arm-pits to hips were folds of black-silk tissue, and these, in turn, were fastened to her tightly fitting sleeves, so that when she spread her arms it seemed that great black wings stretched from her. Her hands were bare, and we could see the blood-red lacquer gleaming on her nails as she curved her fingers forward like predatory talons.

"La Murciélaga! La Murciélaga!" rose a mighty shout of homage from the crowd of bat-masked men and women. It was not so much a cry of greeting as of stark insanity—of strange disease and maniacal excitement. It spouted up, cleaving the heavy, torchlit air like a terrible geyser of sound.

The drums redoubled their wild rataplan, and the shouting grew more frenzied as *La Murciélaga* mounted a low block of stone and stood outlined in torchlight, great sable wings a-flutter, as though she were in very truth the dread Death Angel come to grace the sacrifice of poor lives with her presence.

"Look, sors, for th' love o' hivin!" bade Costello.

Across the torchlit square there walked, or rather danced, a man. In his hand he held a tether, and I felt a wave of sick revulsion as I recognized the thing he led. It was the Commandant of Tupulo. He was chained and muzzled like a dog, and he went upon all fours, like a brute beast. As his keeper led

him to the altar-stone on which the Bat-Woman was poised, he sank back on his heels, threw back his head and held his hands, drooped at the wrists, before him in simulation of a begging dog. At a kick from his keeper he sank down at the altar's base, drew up his knees and folded arms around them. His depth of degradation reached, he crouched in canine imitation at his mistress' feet.

"Corbleu, I think that we three chose the better part, *n'est-ce-pas,* my friends?" de Grandin asked.

The hot breath rising in my throat choked off my answer. Four men were staggering from the shadows with a cross, a monstrous thing of mortised timbers, and despite myself I felt my knees grow weak as I saw the red stains which disfigured it. "Mine will be there soon," a voice seemed dinning in my ears. "They'll stretch my limbs and drive the great spikes through my hands and feet; they'll hang me there——"

"La Traidora—la Traidora—the Traitress!" came a great shout from the crowd, as three masked women struggled forward with a fourth. All were garbed identically, but we knew before they stripped her mask and gown and sandals off that the captive was poor Nancy Meigs.

There was no pretense of a trial. *"A la muerte—á la muerte!"* screamed the congregation, and the executioners leapt forward to their task.

Birth-nude, they stretched her on the blood-stained cross and I saw a hulking ruffian poise a great nail over her left palm while in his free hand he drew back a heavy hammer.

Costello started it. Hands joined, he dropped upon his knees and in a firm, strong voice began:

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, blessèd art Thou among women. . ."

De Grandin and I followed suit, and in chorus we repeated that petition of the motherless to Heaven's Queen. ". . . *Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of death."*

"Amen," concluded Jules de Grandin, and, in the next breath: *"Sang de Dieu,* my friends, they come! Observe them!"

Their motor roars drowned by the screaming of the crowd, three planes zoomed down above the square, and a sudden squall of bullets spewed its deadly rain upon the close-packed ranks which lined the quadrangle.

I saw the executioner fall forward on his victim's body, a spate of life-blood gushing from his mouth; saw the Commandant leap up, then clutch his breast and topple drunkenly against the altar-stone; saw *La Murciélaga's* outspread wings in tatters as the steel-sheathed slugs ripped through them and cut a bloody kerf across her bosom; then de Grandin and Costello pulled me down, and we lay upon the stones while gusts of bullets spattered round us or ricocheted with high, thin, irritable whines.

The carnage was complete. Close-packed, illuminated by their own torch-flares, and taken wholly by surprize, the bat-men fell before the planes' machine-gun fire like grain before the reaper.

That the three of us escaped annihilation was at least a minor miracle, but when the squadron leader gave the signal for the fire to cease, and, sub-machine guns held alertly, the aviators clambered from their planes, we rose unharmed, though far from steady on our feet.

"Muchas gracias, Señor Capitán," de Grandin greeted as he halted fifteen paces from the flight commander and executed a meticulous salute. "I assure you that you did not come one little minute in advance of urgent need.

"Come, let us see to Mademoiselle Nancy," he urged Costello and me. "Perchance she still survives."

She did. Shielded by the bodies of her executioners and the upright of the cross beside which she had rolled when the gunfire struck the bat-man down, she lay unconscious in a welter of warm blood, and it was not till we had sponged her off that we found her only hurts were those inflicted by the jungle vines the night before.

Carefully they placed the Commandant's shot-riddled body in a plane for transportation back to Tupulo, and a military funeral.

"He died a hero's death, *no?*" the flight commander asked.

"Was he not an officer and gentleman?" de Grandin answered disingenuously.

"BUT no, my friends," he told us as we lay sprawled out in deck chairs on the steamship *Golondrina* as she plowed her way toward New York, "it was no magic, I assure you. That commandant at Tupulo, I mistrusted his good sense. There was a weakness in his face, and lack of judgment, too. 'This one loves himself too much, he is a strutting jackdaw, he has what Friend Costello would call the silly pan,' I say to me while we were talking with him. Besides——

"We knew the countryside was terrified of *La Murciélaga;* the bare mention of her name drove men indoors and women into swoons. That anyone would have the courage to complain of her—to come to the police and ask that they send out an expeditionary force—*pardieu,* it had the the smell of fish upon it!

"Furthermore, I am no fool. Not at all, by no means, and it is seldom that I do forget a face. When I saw this Señor Epilar, there was a reminiscence in his features. He reminded me too much of one whom I had seen the night poor Mademoiselle Rita met her tragic death. Also, there was a savage gleam within his eye when it rested on our Nancy—the sort of gleam a cat may show when he finds that he has run the little helpless mouse to earth.

" 'Jules de Grandin, my friend, are you going into the jungle with this so idiotic Commandant and this young man who looks uncomfortably like the Lady of the Bat?' I ask me.

" 'Jules de Grandin, my esteemed self, I am going,' I reply to me, 'but I shall take precautions, too!'

"Accordingly, while *Monsieur le Capitaine* was fitting out his force and you were packing for the trip, I hied me to a telephone and put a call through to the military airport at Merida. *'Monsieur le Commandant,'* I tell the officer in charge, 'we are going in the jungle. We go to seek that almost legendary lady, *La Murciélaga.* I fear it is a foolish thing we do, for it is more than possible that we shall be ambushed. Therefore I would that you make use of us for bait. Have flyers fly above the jungle, and if we do not return by tomorrow noon, have them investigate anything suspicious which they may see. And, *Monsieur le Commandant,'* I tell him in conclusion, 'it might be well to order them to make investigation with machine-gun fire.'

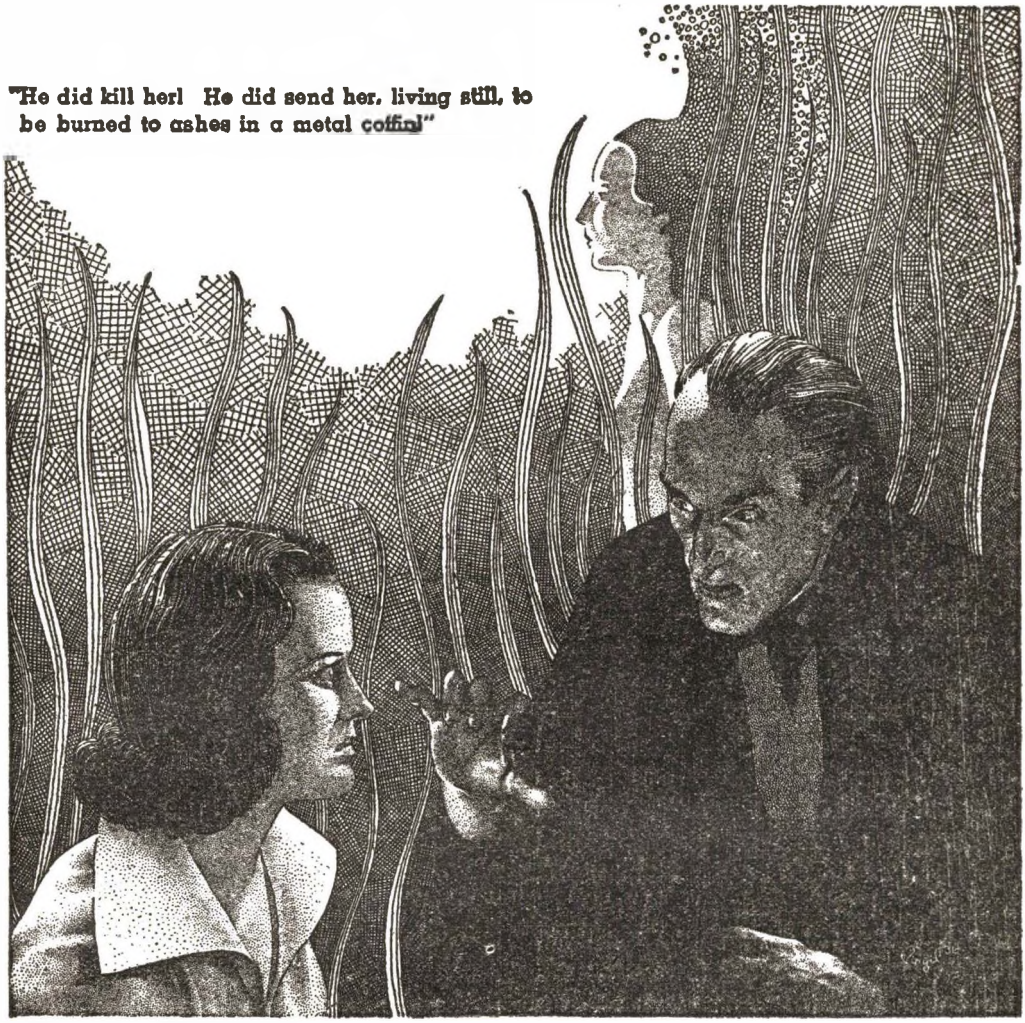
"Eh bien, I think they carried out their orders very well, those ones."

Nancy laid slim fingers on his arm. "We owe our lives to you—all of us—you little darling!" Impulsively, she leant forward and kissed him on the mouth.

Tiny wrinkles crinkled round de Grandin's eyes and in their blue depths flashed an impish gleam.

"Behold, *ma chère,*" he told her solemnly, "I save our lives again.

"Mozo," he hailed a passing deck steward, "bring us four gin slings, *muy pronto!"*



"He did kill her! He did send her, living still, to be burned to ashes in a metal coffin!"

The Dead Moan Low

By PAUL ERNST

What was that faint, eery cry that sounded out as the body of the hypnotist's wife was consigned to the flames? The story of a circus and an avenging Nemesis

ME, I'M out of this. See? I ballyhoo these folks. "Ladies and gentlemen, step right up. Come one, come all. See Princess Hileah dance her native hula-hula. See Professor Brokar hypnotize his bee-yu-tee-ful subject and be hypnotized yourselves. See the python twenty-six and a half feet long, and the eight-foot giant and all the other marvelous sights we have to show. All for

ten cents, ladies and gentlemen. One dime——"

That kind of stuff. You've heard it in front of the sideshow tent next to the big top many times. But that's all there is to my game. I don't take any more part in the freaks' lives than I can help, and even that's too much sometimes.

It was too much that dinnertime at Scranton on the start west of our spring tour. Professor Brokar, whose real name is Welch, came into the counter dump where I was saving a quarter on a real meal, and walked up to me.

Welch is a big guy with a loud voice and something funny about his dark eyes. He's kind of red-faced as a rule. But he wasn't red-faced that evening. His pan was dead-white and he had the shakes like a man who is getting over a ten-day drinking-bout.

I thought I had the dope. Welch has been playing around with a kind of good-looking girl acrobat lately, see? Her old man, who's been an acrobat himself and now is sort of night watchman and general pensioner around the circus, don't like that so much. Welch is a married man. His wife is the bee-yu-tee-ful jane he hypnotizes every day; a girl who is good-looking at that, except for a dull look around the eyes.

When Welch comes up to me looking like he'd seen a ghost, I told myself old Wallace, the lady acrobat's father, had been after him. The old man's got sand. There's been kidding around the lot: Does Welch hypnotize his wife off-stage as well as on so he can get out for an evening with Celia? And does he hypnotize Celia so she can't tell next morning what happened and for how much?

Welch tugs at my arm. "Come on outside a minute, Joe. I got to see you."

"You're seeing me," I said, freeing my arm. I don't like this Welch so good. His wife's an awful nice kid, even if she is a little glazed around the eyes from too much hypnotizing. I think it's lousy the way he goes after Celia Wallace with everybody in the circus knowing about it.

"I got to talk to you alone," he says.

"Is old Wallace after you?" I asked him. "Or is it Bu-Jo, the dog-faced man?"

That's another angle in this Welch-Wallace thing. See? Bu-Jo, whose real name is Jim Blaine and who comes from some place in Connecticut, has been nuts about Dorothy Welch for a long time. Quietly nuts. Naturally he knows no girl is going to go starry-eyed over a guy with a door-mat for a face. He's never said anything to anybody but me—and only about two words to me. But I know how he feels about Dor, and I know he's burned up at the way Welch is running out on her lately.

"Cut the funny stuff," Welch snarls, wiping sweat from his pale face. "This is serious as hell. Come on out."

Well, Professor Brokar is one of the main cards in the show. His hypnotizing act packs 'em in. I don't want to get part of my meal-ticket nervous and upset just before the evening show goes on, so I beat it out of the restaurant with him.

AS SOON as we're alone he wipes sweat from his sick-looking face again, and says: "I want you to help me cremate her."

I burned my hand instead of lighting my cigarette.

"Cremate who? What in blazes are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Dor, my wife. She's dead."

I dropped the cigarette untouched to the sidewalk.

"She wasn't dead two hours ago. She was very much alive."

"She's dead now." Welch bites his

fingernails in his impatience. "She keeled over just after you left the platform in front of the tent. Just fell over, and there you are."

"You're sure?"

"My God! Do you think mistakes can be made on a thing like that? Sure she's dead. Now I want to cremate her. It was always her wish."

"It might be six wishes, and she might be ten times dead. But you can't go off half-cocked like this. You can't go ahead and cremate a person that's only an hour or two dead. There has to be an investigation, a coroner's verdict——"

"I know that. And that's fixed. The doc I got *is* the coroner. He has made sure that the death was natural, and I can go ahead."

"But jumping cats, Welch——" I began, still too stunned by the news to start feeling sorry for Dor, who was a nice kid and whom I liked.

"Don't you understand?" he snapped. "The quicker I can get Dor cremated the less chance everybody has of being tied up in real trouble. There's been plenty of talk, all along the circuit, about how this constant hypnotizing is bad for people. There'll be busybodies to say that it was the strain of that that killed Dor."

"And did it?" I said bluntly.

"Of course not! She died of a heart attack. The Scranton coroner is ready to go on the stand and swear to that. Are you going to help me cremate her, or will you see the entire outfit maybe tied up in knots by some long-drawn investigation as to whether Dorothy died from being hypnotized too deeply and too often?"

I said something about meal-tickets before. If you work for a circus and the circus doesn't go along its regulation program, you don't eat.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be with you."

We did it pretty fast.

A few of Dor's best friends were at the hasty, short funeral services. Among them was Jim Blaine, alias Bu-Jo, with his dark eyes looking kind of like the eyes of a badly shot deer I had once seen on a hunting-trip. You couldn't find any expression on his face because of the mat of hair over it. But his eyes spoke. How he must have loved the girl Welch hadn't thought enough of to stay true to!

We filed past the coffin, and looked in at Dorothy Welch. She was rouged and lipsticked so that the gray pallor of death didn't show too much. She looked really lovely, lying there, and I came closer to wiping at my eyes than emotion had ever carried me before.

As it was, I blew my nose and went with Welch after the hearse to the crematory. They had the fires ready there. And the metal coffin, like a brazier. They put Dor in the metal casket, wood coffin and all.

It was pretty bad. I kept seeing Dor as she had looked in the chapel a few minutes ago, with red lips and rouged cheeks, as if she was only sleeping instead of dead. It was like putting a sleeping person into the flames instead of a dead one, I thought. And the fact that I kept thinking I heard faint screams as the first smell of burning flesh stole around, didn't help any.

"It's the draft," said the man in charge. "It takes a lot of air up the chimney to handle a fire as hot as we have to have here. You get those moans and things from it."

Maybe so. But I didn't like it. I got out of there fast, and Welch stumbled beside me. His face was green now, instead of white.

"Well, that's done," he said. "Let's get back to the show."

I could have socked him. Looking at

the words, you might think Welch was following the old tradition that the show must go on in spite of hell, and that he would hide his broken heart, come what may.

But that wasn't in his tone! His tone said that the whole thing had been a mess which he was glad to get out of so easily, and that now let's forget it.

"You going on tonight?" I gasped.

"Sure," he said. "I'm sorry and all that. But I don't see any reason to take a week's lay-off for it."

"Who'll you use for a subject?"

"I got it arranged already. Celia Wallace will let me use her temporarily."

"Cele! How about her father?"

Welch looked at me angrily. "You've been listening to all the slop the circus gossips have handed around, huh? Well, let me tell you her father will sing a different tune now that I'm no longer a married man."

"Who'll take her place on the bars?" I said, not looking at him.

"Ruth Harrison. The kid has been crazy to get into the act for months. This'll be her chance."

"It's raw, Welch," I said.

"Nuts. Let's get back to the lot," he replies, in almost his normal loud tone.

We get back almost on time, and the show goes on. It may have been oke to the audience that night, but it was a nightmare to me.

The canopy of death hung over us all, almost as plain as the canvas of the sideshow tent. The heart was out of my barking. I kept seeing Bu-Jo's stricken eyes. I kept seeing the look on Celia Wallace's pan as Welch prepared to hypnotize her with those funny optics of his; she's as nuts about him as only a bird-brained lady acrobat could get about a slug like Welch.

Above all, I kept seeing Dor Welch, dull-eyed and slow-moving, in the place Cele was temporarily taking. And I kept hearing the faint screams. Draft up the chimney, huh? I should work in a joint like that crematory!

But the show went on, that night and the rest of the nights.

We got to Cleveland on our way west. And it was there that Welch picked up his tail.

We were eating dinner in a Cleveland hash-house. I was with Welch and Cele. I didn't eat with Welch by choice; he'd come by with Celia, glommed me through the window, and come in to join me.

Cele was a regular part of his act, now. And the talk was that she was going to marry Welch. Maybe she was tired reaching from one bar to another sixty feet up. Maybe being hypnotized is easier than acrobatting. Maybe she really was completely off her nut over Welch instead of mildly infatuated with him. Anyhow, that was the lay.

Celia saw the kid first.

"You've got an audience, honey," she giggled.

"Huh?" said Welch, taking a big bite of steak.

"At the window. Look. The little boy."

I turned with Welch. At the restaurant window a kid was leaning with his nose flattened against the glass, looking at Welch. He was in tattered pants with one leg up and one down.

"He's sure looking at you," I said to Welch.

And the kid was, no mistake. His half-moon eyes, kind of like empty china circles, were riveted to Welch's face.

"He probably saw my act this afternoon," said Welch complacently.

"He's your Cleveland public," I nodded.

Cele giggled. "Not much of a public. The kid's a half-wit."

He certainly didn't look bright. He must have been six years old, from his height, but his face was that of a baby. The only expression on it was a sort of silly grin, and his eyes were as empty of brain-signs as a new-born calf's.

We turned back, then, expecting the kid to move on, of course, when he had tired of flattening his nose against the glass. But he didn't move on. He was there when we left the restaurant half an hour later. And he followed after us when we walked toward the lot.

Always his eyes were fastened on Welch, in a kind of fascinated way.

"Beat it," snarled Welch, after a block or two of it.

He took a step after the kid. The boy retreated, but did not go away. A sort of animal sound came from his slack lips.

"You little dummy!" raged Welch. "Go home."

We started on again. And ten yards behind us came the idiot boy, eyes riveted on Welch, lips drooling and mouthing incoherent sounds.

Welch cursed, but under his breath this time. He turned again, but this time repressed his anger.

"Why are you following us?" he said persuasively.

The idiot kid shook his head, china-blue eyes vacant. He stared at Welch.

"Is it me you're following, or all of us?" said Welch, keeping his temper with an effort.

The kid nodded, with his silly grin, at Welch.

"Me, huh? Well, what do you want?"

"Wan' see you."

I won't try to give you the kid's tone. It was like that of a talking animal. There's no words for it. We could barely understand the syllables.

"All right. Here I am. You're seeing me," snapped Welch.

"Wan' see you make 'er sleep."

Welch looked at Cele and then back at the kid.

"All right. Come to the show tonight."

"Not in show!" The kid began to get so excited that we lost even the labored meaning we had gotten before. "Not . . , show. Sleep like dead . . . this lady . . . like you did other lady."

I looked at Cele, mystified. She shrugged.

"Like other," mouthed the idiot child. "Like . . . before burned her in . . . stone house."

"What the hell is he——" I began.

Then I stopped, and stared at Welch.

His face had gone green again, just the shade it had taken on that day a few weeks ago when Dorothy, his wife, was cremated. There was a telephone pole next to us. Welch leaned against that, trying to hide the fact that he had to lean on anything.

"You little half-wit," he blustered. "Get out of here or I'll——"

He started shakily after the boy. The kid ran back, looked at Welch with vacant eyes, mouthed with his drooling lips, and then ran around the next corner.

Welch came back to us.

"He ought to be in an institution," he said thickly.

"Yes," I said.

"I think I'll get in touch with the juvenile authorities here."

"Good idea," I said.

But I was looking at Welch, and behind a pan I tried to keep straight, thoughts were jumping around like scared rabbits.

"Wan' see you make this lady sleep dead like you did the other lady before you burned her in the stone house."

Make her sleep dead. . . . No, make her sleep *like* dead!

What in the name of the devil was the imbecile youngster mouthing about? And why was Welch as green as a melon and going through the shakes again?

I shrugged. Probably the half-witted kid had seen the show at Scranton or formerly, when Dorothy was Welch's subject, and had traveled on here with his parents on some prosaic errand of theirs, to hang around the circus again at Cleveland as he had a few weeks before.

"Shall we be lamming?" I said.

THE three of us went on. But at the show that night, Welch was rotten. The guy is no fake. He can really hypnotize, and I don't mean perhaps. But he couldn't do anything that night. Cele had to fake, and a couple in the crowd came damn close to spotting the phony stuff.

And that, as I say, was how Welch got his tail. But it didn't stop there. I wish to Heaven it had!

Next night I ate with Welch and Cele again, because Welch was so jittery he needed a nurse. And again we looked out to see an idiot face pressed to the restaurant; and again the half-witted little kid followed us to the lot, drooling, mouthing incoherent words, among which were: "Like dead . . . sleep . . . before burn. . . ."

Welch didn't go on that night. His wife's death at Scranton hadn't kept him out of his act. This idiot child in Cleveland did. Welch stayed in his car compartment, with Celia giggling nervously and sympathetically beside him.

That night we went on west. Ann Arbor. One-night stand. In the morning Welch was almost his usual, loud-talking self again. He kidded Bu-Jo till I thought the dog-faced man, who is a big husky guy, would take him apart. He mushed around Cele till old man Wallace had red spots in his thin cheeks. Wallace liked Welch's attention to his daughter less than ever, but he couldn't do anything about it. Welch hadn't a wife any more, and Cele was over twenty-one and presumably white.

But Welch wasn't the gay boy that afternoon.

He hauled me inside the side-show tent as I was about to swing into the afternoon spiel. His face had taken on that unripe, honeydew melon tint.

"You got to keep him out of here!" he chattered, running his tongue over his lips as though he hadn't tasted water for a week.

"Keep who out?" I said.

"That kid," he chatters back. "The dummy. The little brat with the empty blue eyes. He's in Ann Arbor."

"You're nuts," I cracked out. "How could he be? Where'd he get train fare? How could a kid that young and that dumb go anywhere anyway?"

"Maybe his folks are trailing the show for some reason, and taking him along. Anyway, you've get to keep him out of the tent. I won't answer for what happens if you don't!"

He was in such a state that I'd have felt sorry for him if I'd thought anything of him—which I didn't.

"All right," I said. "A kid without all his buttons is following you around. So what? Suppose he does?"

"I'm afraid of what he'll say," Welch blurts out. He looks unhappy over it right afterward.

"What will he say?" I asked him.

"Nothing," mumbled Welch, after a minute.

I went on out to the platform again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, step right up. Closer . . . closer yet. That's it. What I have to say is very important and must be heard distinctly. You have the chance, ladies and gentlemen, to see the

greatest assortment of marvels ever gathered together by man. See Princess Hileah dance her native hula-hula. See the giant, the dog-faced man. See Professor Brokar hypnotize the bee-yu-tee-ful——"

"Wan 'see him make lady sleep like dead. Like he did other lady before they burned her in the stone house."

Now where the heck had that voice come from? I got it all right. It was the voice of the idiot kid. But I couldn't see him in the crowd anywhere. I went on mechanically with my spiel.

"——one dime, ladies and gentlemen. Ten cents, the tenth part of a dollar——"

The crowd, some of them at least, began herding forward. I went into the tent. Welch's hands were clenching at each other. He braced them on the back of the chair used in his hypnotizing act. His fingernails rattled on the wood with his trembling.

"I'm going to kill that kid——"

The first of the crowd came in. The acts began.

WELCH fell down in his part again. He kept on falling down in it. Sometimes he couldn't go on at all. Sometimes he could only fake, not too well either, when he did go on. The circus would have fired him except that he was really good, and it isn't as easy to get first-rate, honest-to-God hypnotists as most people think. The boss kept thinking he'd get better.

But he didn't, because from then on that vacant-eyed little kid with one ragged pant-leg up and the other down kept trailing him. Wherever we played, there the idiot child was. Wherever Welch went in any town we stopped at, the kid followed after him, about ten yards behind, eyes empty and brainless, lips drooling.

And every once in a while he would mouth that same thing. "Wan' see you make lady sleep like dead . . . like other lady before they burned her."

I was with Welch one time when he tried to catch the kid, but the little devil was too fast for him. Welch came panting back from a block chase, with his eyes wild.

"I'll kill that little devil! I'll kill him! Just let me catch him!"

"He must have been in Scranton that last afternoon," I said, looking sideways at Welch. Thin as a shadow, he was, by then. And loose flesh hung on his face. "He must have seen that last afternoon show before Dor died. She was in an especially deep trance, I remember. Maybe he sneaked in back and saw you and Dor just *after* the performance, too."

"What are you talking about?" Welch chattered.

"About the half-hour before Dor was pronounced dead," I said slowly. It was a shot in the dark; a little expression of those frightened rabbits of thought running around in my skull. "Before they took her to the . . . stone house . . . and burned her."

"Yeah, she was in a deep trance, all right," he chatters. "Funny business, you know. The longer a subject allows herself to be hypnotized, the deeper the trance can become——"

He stopped and looked away. Then his face convulsed.

"Get away from me—you——" He screamed oaths at the ragged little figure that had come up behind us again. Then he buried his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook as if he was being crucified. I felt cold touch my spine, and backed slowly away from the boy. Anybody'd have thought I was goofy if they could have seen me—a full-grown man backing away with a scared look from a six-year-old kid whose brains were hung in the wrong place.

I couldn't make it out. Stop by stop, clear across the country and back, that kid stuck with us. He never failed to sing out in the afternoon performance: "Make the lady sleep like dead. Like the other before she was burned. . . ." He never failed to be ten yards or so behind Welch every moment we were out of the cars, like his shadow made smaller and given an imbecilic look.

How was he traveling? On the rods of the train? I looked there night after night and never saw a trace of him. On following trains? He couldn't have had the fare. Six-year-old children can't buy fares all over the continent. And how did he eat? And where did he stay when Welch was in the circus car and, for a few blessed moments, without his tail? I gave up. But I wished the little imbecile would drop dead or something, because his effect on Welch was increasingly horrible. The man was going to crack to pieces any day. I could see that.

And then we got almost home, and stopped once more in Scranton because it had been a particularly hot town and we hoped to duplicate the box we'd had there at the start of the season.

SCRANTON! I saw the graveyard as the train pulled in. I spotted the crematory, near at hand, and remembered too vividly that smell of burning flesh and the wails which had been caused by the forced draft up the chimney.

Welch came over to my seat as the train stopped on its siding. He was literally gnawing at his knuckles; far gone on his way to a complete break-down.

"Do you suppose *she* knows we're in again?" he said, nodding toward the crematory.

Good Heavens! Far gone? I hadn't known he was *that* far! But I didn't humor him much even though, remembering the meal-ticket, I should have.

"Sure she knows," I said. "She'll be on hand this afternoon during your act. Better tip Cele about it."

Welch gripped the back of the seat.

"Damn you, Joe! Damn her! Damn everything——"

He stumbled toward the door. And I followed him, biting my fool tongue. He stepped off the car—and the idiot kid straightened up and stood near him, with empty blue eyes, and stared at him. It was really the kid. Welch had gotten so he was seeing the boy whether he was there to be seen or not. But this time he was there. I saw him too—saw the shadow he cast in the morning sunlight.

"Goin' make . . . lady . . . sleep like dead . . . then take her there"—the kid's head moved toward the crematory—"an' burn her like . . . other lady?"

Welch screamed. There isn't any other word for it. He screamed like an animal gone mad. Blood ran down his chin from his bitten lips. He lunged for the kid with mania in his eyes, but the boy ducked under the long circus car and got away.

Welch tottered back into the car, and I went on to the town's core to get a late cup of coffee and kill time. And I kept glancing at the white stone of the crematory and remembering the thin shrieks of the draft up the chimney as Dor's body first began to burn in its metal container.

THE afternoon show opened with a thunderstorm in the distance. I told myself the electricity in the air was what made me so tense and nervous. But I knew I was kidding myself. I'd felt like this just once before; had kind of sensed a pall over things that was just like this one. That was the afternoon that Dor died.

W. T.—2

Crowds began coming up to the tents. Some went right to the big top, more strayed toward the side-show. I got on the platform. Bu-Jo and the Princess Hileah—Mame Diller to you—ranged on my left. The "long and short of it" and several other freaks got on my right, and there was music for an opening come-on.

The crowd thickened. Bu-Jo said into my ear: "Seen Welch in the last few minutes? He acts as if he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him."

"I hope it don't keep him from doing a decent act today for a change," I whispered out of the corner of my mouth. "He's due to get the sack tomorrow if he doesn't take a brace."

Out of the other corner of my mouth I began the spiel. "Ladies and gentlemen. Step up closer, please. Closer. What I have to say is very important——"

I ballyhooed, with sweat running down my collar—because I was all screwed up by the near storm, I kept telling myself. The mob thinned, some going on to the main tent, some hauling out dimes for the side-show. The latter got into the tent, and went the rounds. They gawked at Slim, the eight-foot giant, and Tim, the three-and-a-half-foot midget; at Princess Hileah, and Professor Brokar and his bee-yu-tee-ful subject.

I gawked at Brokar, or, rather, Welch, myself.

If I'd thought I was sweating I had only to look at him and see a guy who was really sweating! It was running down his cheeks and neck in trickles. And his hands were shut so hard I saw purple lines around his knuckles.

He was glaring at Celia Wallace, who sat near him ready to do her stunt in a minute or two. It was frightful, the look in his eyes as he glared at her. I went toward them.

"For God's sake, honey," I heard Cele's hysterical whisper, "Why're you looking at me like that? For God's sake——"

"Shut up," I whispered out of the corner of my mouth. "There 're paying customers around."

Cele nodded at me, white and frightened. Welch didn't move at all. He sat where he was, hands clenched, eyes boring into Cele's face like mad drills.

The crowd began to center around the two. There was good-natured shoving and talk.

"Snap into it," I whispered, as the two looked like they were going to miss the ripe minute to begin.

They got up. Cele giggled nervously, but her white face was not turned toward the crowd. She was looking at Welch, cowering back from him. And Welch was staring at her with his mad drills of eyes.

And then a voice sounded. A drooling, idiotic, empty voice, that mouthed words hardly understandable yet only too horribly coherent.

"Wan' see her sleep like dead. Like the other lady. . . ."

For the first time since Ann Arbor, Welch didn't start at the sound of the voice as though six inches of cold steel had been buried in him. What he did was worse.

Slowly his lips parted, to reveal his grinning jaws. They were almost fleshless, those jaws, so much weight had the man lost. The effect was horrible. It was as if a skull had suddenly grinned. I felt the cold sweat roll faster down my body.

He took a slow step toward Cele, with that awful, slow grin on his face. And now his eyes were not like the eyes of a human being at all.

"Honey . . . don't——" Cele bleated. But even as she spoke, her eyes were

dulling. You can't hypnotize a normal person against his will, but regular hypnotic subjects get so they aren't normal. They get so they slip into the trance almost at a look from the master.

"Honey——"

It was a dreamy, dopy whimper. And then Cele stood swaying, silent, under Welch's thumb as completely as if she hadn't a brain of her own.

"All right, Dorothy," Welch said softly. "I'll hypnotize you as I did before. Like you were dead."

He came still closer. His eyes made several people in the front row shift uneasily. But they thought of course it was all an act. So, for one more instant, did I. Then the meaning of his calling Cele "'Dorothy" cracked home to me.

"You'll sleep, Dorothy," Welch crooned. "How you'll sleep! I can put you into a trance like catalepsy, now, if I want to. Now, after all these trances. . . . And I will. You hear? I will."

The watching crowd were beginning to mill a little. "Hey, what goes on?" I heard a big guy mutter near me. But I didn't have wit enough to stop the show. I was stopped myself, right in my tracks.

"Raise a fuss because I see Cele Wallace once in a while, will you?" Welch went on, still in that dreadful soft voice. "I'll show you, you dull little fool! I'll fix it so you'll never get under my feet again. Sleep, Dorothy. Sleep. Sound enough for the doctor to pronounce you dead."

My God! Oh, my God! my brain was whimpering. He did kill her! He did send her, living still, to be burned to ashes in a metal coffin! *And now he's going through the thing he did last spring here!*

"Suspended animation, the big shots call it," crooned Welch, chuckling horribly. "But we don't care what they call it, do we, darling? Not as long as I can put you in a trance deep enough to fool a coroner. Deep enough to fool them at the crematory. Sleep. Deep enough not to feel the first fire. . . . "

Somewhere a woman screamed. I think the crowd had known for ten seconds, then, that this thing was not a show any more. The woman's scream expressed it. And after it came men's shouts and a horrified confusion that couldn't have been deeper had the tent burst into flames.

"He's mad—*mad*——" I heard a man shriek.

"He's a murderer," I heard a deeper, hoarser voice. And with that I saw a detective, detailed to watch the crowd for dips this time as he had been last, plow through the milling crowd toward the platform.

Welch turned toward the mob. He put his emaciated finger to his blanched lips.

"Ssh," he said, with his jaws still set in that skull-grin and with the light of permanent madness in his eyes. "Ssh. You'll wake her. You'll wake Dorothy. And she must sleep sound. Sleep like death. Till the draft screams and moans up the chimney with the thick, black smoke. . . . "

I SAW the pay-off later. I was walking around the tent, not seeing where I was going, thinking of the thing that had been in the metal coffin when the fires began to burn, when I saw it.

Bu-Jo was giving Tim, the midget, a roll of bills.

I turned without a word, and wandered into the dressing tent where Celia Wallace lay.

Two doctors and a nurse were still trying, without having much luck at it, to get her out of the last trance Welch had put her in before the dick led him away.

"It was a column of fog, yet it lived and had mass and weight."

The Woman in Room 607

By THORP McCLUSKY

A strange, weird story about a woman who clung too closely to life—a tale about the morbid horror that flowed out from under the door of that room in the Hotel Northrup

1. An Appeal for Help

IT WAS a little after eleven in the evening when Police Commissioner Charles B. Ethredge met the woman. . . .

Ethredge, who sometimes rebelled from the too-frequently sedentary nature of his office, had been taking a long nocturnal stroll.

Strolling now, stopping at times to gaze into the brightly lighted shop windows or to study the theater lobby displays, unobtrusively receiving the defer-

ential, friendly salutes of the plainclothesmen he met, watching the clock-like regularity with which the prowl cars patrolled the streets, Ethredge found himself in midtown. He stepped into a doorway to watch the homeward-bound theater-goers pass.

And then he saw the woman coming toward him through the throng, lithely, gracefully, effortlessly, moving through those people like a curl of smoke about a man's fingers.

It was almost as though either they or she did not exist.

"She must be a dancer," Ethredge thought, idly watching.

In the next moment, to his surprize, she stepped into the doorway beside him. Her eyes questioningly searched his face. "Commissioner Ethredge?" she said softly.

"Yes."

Ethredge looked at her more closely, and gasped at what he saw. She was like the women a man sees in dreams. There was an alien, unreal beauty about her: magnificent coal-black eyes looking broodingly upon Ethredge through the half-gloom; a paper-thin, startlingly white skin; masses of raven hair; and the reddest, most wanton mouth Ethredge had ever seen.

She was a splendid, vital animal, Ethredge knew. Even to look upon her set his pulses hammering. And suddenly, incomprehensibly, the quick memory of Mary's blond perfection seemed insipid. Yet Ethredge loved Mary Roberts!

He strove to steel himself against the reeling shock of this woman's magnetism.

"Don't you know me?" she was asking. "I am Marilyn Des Lys. You have seen me dance. In April, at Mayor Hardy's Milk Fund Benefit—you complimented me."

"I recollect you now," Ethredge said, with dazed politeness. "You danced very well."

She smiled, and again the memory of Mary seemed suddenly drab. And then she touched his arm.

"I need your help. You must come with me, must let me talk to you. I am in desperate need. Come; come with me now."

But Ethredge hesitated, even though his whole body seemed incredibly to have taken possession of his mind, seemed clamoring to follow her.

She looked at him, then, closely.

"Are you afraid of me?" she asked suddenly.

Ethredge shook his head.

"No." The word sounded thick and dry.

She laughed briefly, and that laugh sent a delicious, tingling chill shuddering along Ethredge's spine.

"I know of Mary Roberts," she whispered. "I know many, many things. Do not be afraid. . . ."

Through the luring fog that her siren voice had dropped between himself and sanity, Ethredge followed her. . . .

2. *"Another Dope!"*

IT WAS not far, not over two blocks. Her arm linked through his, Marilyn Des Lys stopped Ethredge beneath the gaudy marquee of a third-rate hotel on the edge of the theatrical district. Ethredge knew this hotel—the Northrup. It was a place where drunken brawls were frequent; shady women and broken-down troupers formed, for the most part, its clientele.

For an instant Ethredge drew back, but it seemed as if the woman had cast an enchantment over him. He followed her into the hotel.

As they passed through the dingy lobby toward the single elevator at the rear

Ethredge hazily realized that the desk clerk was looking at him.

"Mister!" The clerk's voice was sharp. "Where you going?"

Softly the woman whispered to Ethredge, "Room 607."

"607," Ethredge heard himself mumble.

The clerk's body stiffened. He had only seemed to notice Ethredge, but now he stared intently toward the woman. Quite distinctly Ethredge saw two small rows of sweat spring out above his brows. And then a fanatic gleam, lurking in the depths of his dark Latin eyes, suddenly flamed.

"O. K.," he said, with a strange exultation. "Go ahead."

Through the delicious haze enveloping him, Ethredge yet knew that something odd was occurring. . . .

They entered the elevator. The boy, yawning, put down the detective magazine he had been reading and clanged the grilled doors. The elevator climbed its black shaft uncertainly, with rickety groans and swayings.

"607," the woman said again, and her limpid black eyes gazed beseechingly into Ethredge's. . . .

The elevator did not stop. With a faint, far-off feeling of resentment at the boy's stupidity, Ethredge watched the floors sinking before his eyes. And then the car stopped with a jerk, and the boy swung open the doors.

"This is the top floor, sir."

"607," Ethredge heard himself snap; then, angrily: "Can't you hear?"

The boy shrugged and closed the doors.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't hear you call out any floor."

The elevator descended. At the sixth floor Ethredge and Marilyn Des Lys, the woman leading, got out. Ethredge felt the boy's eyes burning into his back as the doors closed behind him. But he did not hear the lad's muttered remark as the car rocked downward.

"Another damn dope!" the youth had whispered. "That makes a half-dozen of 'em in the last few days, gettin' off at the sixth."

3. The Horror in the Mirror

ROOM 607 in the Hotel Northrup was at the end of a meagerly lighted, plush-carpeted corridor. Marilyn Des Lys, stalking before Ethredge as sinuously as a feline, stood before the door with regal calm and gestured.

"It's unlocked."

Ethredge, his thoughts wavering between the certainty that this was a dream and the conviction that it was reality, opened the door. Within was darkness.

"The light," Marilyn Des Lys purred. "To the right of the door."

Ethredge's fingers, fumbling, found and pressed the switch. A soft, dim rosiness flooded the chamber.

Ethredge looked about.

This room was larger than the average hotel room, and had probably, during the Northrup's more pretentious days, served as the living-room of a suite. But now it was only a commodious bedroom, furnished, however, with a low divan and two or three chairs in addition to the customary bed and bureau. Obviously it was a room in which Marilyn Des Lys—entertained. A few cheap pictures, a moth-eaten rug, and a multitude of pillows scattered about completed the furnishings.

Two interior doors broke the monotony of wall space. One, closed, and fitted with a full-length mirror, led presumably to the bathroom. The other door was open.

And then Marilyn Des Lys saw that open door. Standing stock-still in the center of the room, she pointed to it.

"Shut that door!" she commanded harshly.

Ethredge, a dim fragment of his mind struggling still to force him back to sanity, closed the door. It was only the door to a closet filled with a bewildering array of feminine things. Yet it struck Ethredge as odd that, hanging in that closet, he had seen the twin to the rust-colored suit she wore, even to the fox collar and the square, distinctively designed buttons.

Did she, then, buy her clothes in duplicate?

"The maid——" she was saying. "She's such a fool. I hate to have my closet doors left open. It makes the room seem so messy."

She linked her arm through Ethredge's and drew him gently toward the divan. They sank down upon it, side by side. She leaned back, half reclining among the pillows, one arm thrown behind her head, her fingers absently toying with her lustrous hair. Her eyes, like those of some alluring odalisque, never left Ethredge's face.

"Smoke?" Ethredge asked unsteadily.

Smiling inscrutably, she slowly shook her head. "I haven't smoked, recently," she said, in a low, urgent whisper. "But perhaps you would like a drink? There are liquors in that cabinet." Her voluptuous arm pointed languorously.

Ethredge rose, and took from the cabinet a decanter and two small goblets.

"I think it is apricot brandy," the whisper came from the divan. "Take as much as you like for yourself, but I cannot drink with you. Perhaps within a few days I shall be able to drink again."

Ethredge turned.

"I will not drink without you," he heard himself say, as he returned to her.

Did a baffled look flicker briefly across her face?

With a shrug, then, she made room for Ethredge beside her on the divan. Relaxing beside her, he could feel the electric nearness of her long, perfect legs; the animal warmth of her splendid body so close to him was like the caress of a hot tropic wind, maddening and deadly.

Her eyes looked upward into his face, velvety and yet bold, promising him anything a man might ask.

"Sit closer to me, Charles Ethredge," she breathed. "I have wanted you—oh, this long time! I have cut your picture from the papers, and, whenever I danced, knowing that you were there, I always danced my best. And when you spoke to me——

"I want you, Charles Ethredge. I will give you love beside which the love of Mary Roberts will seem tasteless. I will give you love such as no man has ever known. I will give you love that will endure beyond death itself. Kiss me."

IN THAT instant a flash of self-disgust, of clean sanity, swept Ethredge like an icy wind. With hideous clarity he saw the cheap room in which he sat, the wanton creature reclining there beside him, and his heart sickened with revulsion. Could it be possible that his mind had even contemplated this insult to Mary? He struggled to rise.

But the woman's arms, like soft white serpents, had twined about his neck. Her breasts were pressed against his thudding heart; her parted lips had fastened hungrily upon his mouth. His arms tightened to push her away, but a languor was rushing through him, delicious mists of unreality were settling upon his senses in pounding, insistent waves. He was no longer conscious of the room, the divan, of the pillows, of himself as Charles Ethredge; he was conscious only of the body of this woman lying within his arms. His arms encircled her yielding form; his mouth returned her kiss.

Again he heard her voice, speaking dreamily, with a strange assurance:

"You have forgotten Mary Roberts now?" the voice was saying, tenderly.

Mary's name! With a hoarse, strangled cry of utter revulsion, Ethredge staggered to his feet. His head was swirling, and his eyes seemed oddly out of focus. In the mirror across the room he saw his own image, its face drawn with self-contempt, its arms outflung.

And then his throat muscles tightened in a scream, a scream that hurtled soundlessly from a mouth paralyzed with horror!

For in that mirror, although he could see his own image clearly, and, behind it, the long low mass of the couch with its profusion of pillows, there showed no reflection of the woman! Instead, there was the reflection of something shadowy and vague and cloudy-looking, like a thick fog, that writhed and billowed upon that couch, coiling and twisting angrily!

Soundlessly screaming, as a man screams in nightmare, Ethredge rushed from that room into the dingy corridor, down to the elevator. His fingers dug tremblingly at the buzzer. And then, when the elevator did not instantly respond, unable longer to endure the midnight silence within that corridor, he plunged through the fire exit door, ran terror-stricken down the stairs. . . .

4. A Room for the Dead

IT WAS early afternoon. Throughout the day Commissioner Charles B. Ethredge had sat at his desk like an automaton, his thoughts turned inward upon himself, his mind preoccupied with the dread that perhaps he was near madness, if not already mad.

The harsh jangle of the telephone roused him from the torpor into which he had fallen. With a sudden, inexplicable tingling of apprehension, he lifted the receiver.

It was Detective-Lieutenant Peters, and the voice of Ethredge's subordinate, over the wire, crackled with excitement.

"There's a lad down here who says he's certain there's a dope ring operating from the sixth floor of the Northrup. He's the night elevator operator over there."

Ethredge heard his own voice snap, with a strange eagerness, "When the narcotics squad's finished with him, report to me at once. . . ."

An hour later Peters entered Ethredge's office.

"It looks like dope, all right," he announced quickly. "You remember those six or seven fellows we've picked up within the past few days, all around midtown, all stark crazy? And thin, like? That elevator lad—Leslie, his name is, Donald Leslie—says he's sure they got the stuff on the sixth floor of the Northrup and then wandered out, hopped to the gills."

"Funny dope!" Ethredge muttered, with a shudder. "I saw those fellows over at the Municipal Hospital, and they didn't look like dope cases to me. Two of them've been there almost a week, and they're both crazy as loons."

"Well," Peters said stubbornly, "Cassidy's taken this Leslie over to see if he can make any identifications. We'll know more when he gets back. But, in the meantime, we've found out that the stuff came from room 607. Leslie's sure."

"607?" Ethredge whispered.

Peters nodded. "Funny about that, too. The room's unoccupied—has been for a week. But the rent's paid ahead and the room contains a woman's belongings—dresses, coats, hats, cosmetics. A Marilyn Des Lys had the room, lived there for several years. A cooch dancer and courtezan, she was. Very beautiful,

too, Leslie says. The night clerk was in love with her."

"Marilyn Des Lys?" Ethredge asked thinly. His hands were trembling. "Why don't you find her, bring her in for questioning?"

Peters looked at his chief, and his face was expressionless.

"Her rent must have been paid ahead by some lover of hers. We can't bring her in for questioning, Commissioner.

"Marilyn Des Lys died in that room, one week ago Sunday night. Her body was cremated at Woodacres eight days ago!"

5. *The Elevator Boy*

THAT evening Ethredge and Mary Roberts dined at the Park Casino. It had been their plan to go from dinner to the Milano Club, where Dino and Stella were dancing. But Mary, early noting the preoccupied expression on her fiancé's face, had tactfully asked, instead, to be taken home. Some other time. . . .

It was with almost a feeling of relief that Ethredge left her at home and turned the long black nose of his sedan toward midtown. It was with a feeling of growing eagerness that he parked near the Northrup and set out, walking.

As Ethredge approached the Northrup he realized that he was involuntarily scanning the faces of the passers-by, as though he sought someone.

Marilyn Des Lys? Marilyn Des Lys was dead! . . .

At the entrance to the hotel he hesitated a moment, then walked inside. He strode through the lobby quickly, noting as he passed the desk that the intent gaze of the night clerk followed him—incredulously, it seemed. And then he was entering the elevator. He braced himself to face the boy's recognition, waited for Leslie to speak.

The doors clanged; the elevator creaked upward.

"You got off at the sixth last night," the boy said. There was contempt in his voice.

"He has recognized me!" Ethredge thought. "I was here, then; *that* was no dream!"

Aloud he said, "Yes. The same floor again tonight, please."

Scornfully the lad said, "You were in a swell daze last night. Didn't seem to know *where* you were going."

Ethredge spoke the words before he was aware. "But—the lady with me—I expected her——"

The boy half turned to look at him. "Say, are you entirely cuckoo? There wasn't no lady with you. You were alone!"

6. *A Pillar of Mist*

THE sixth floor corridor was deserted. But Ethredge, looking up and down its garish, dimly lighted length, knew that the man Cassidy had assigned to the Northrup would probably be on the fire stairs, a strategic position from which he could watch room 607 without danger of detection. Yet it was with a curious feeling of relief that he pushed open the door and actually found the man.

"Grogan!" Ethredge exclaimed.

Grogan grinned. "Good to see me, Commissioner?"

Ethredge laughed uneasily. "This place gets one."

"Yeah," Grogan commented. "It's a creepy dump, all right. There's been nothing funny, though, so far. Only a few stumblebums."

"Nobody in or out of 607?"

Grogan spat disgustedly, shook his head. "I dassent open this door very wide, Commish; you know that. But from the peeks I've got, and I've spotted every-

body, nobody's come down that corridor that looked out of the way at all."

"Well——" Ethredge said. He reached in his pocket for a cigar.

And in that instant Grogan flattened against the door, opened it the merest crack.

"Shh!"

A door had opened at the end of the corridor. And from that door had stumbled a man, weaving as though drunk or blind, and behind the man poured a pillar of thick whitish mist that moved by his side and seemed to urge him forward!

"Fire!" Grogan burst into the corridor.

But Ethredge, with an abrupt chill running the length of his spine like a needle-spray, knew that it was not smoke that eddied opaquely beside that man.

With the rapidity of fog dissipating beneath a morning sun, the pillar of mist thinned into invisibility. It was gone.

"What the——" Grogan muttered dazedly.

But the man had not vanished as had the fog. He had slumped to the floor and lay there inertly, relaxed to almost corpse-like grotesqueness. The door to room 607 stood open. No light shone from within the room.

Together Ethredge and Grogan stooped over the man.

"Holy Moses!" Grogan whispered weakly.

The man was emaciated to the point of hideousness. The skin on his cheeks sagged in two long folds, as though the flesh had wasted away from within; his clothing hung loosely on his body; his collar seemed sizes too large for his dessicated throat. He was breathing in great rattling gasps, and Ethredge quickly forced open his jaws and administered a stimulant while Grogan ran to notify the elevator boy. Just as Grogan returned, the man opened his eyes.

They were gray eyes, handsome eyes. But now they were pools of insane horror.

"What's the matter?" Grogan asked. "Speak; we're friends."

But the man was beyond speech.

Grogan looked appealingly at his chief. Ethredge slowly shook his head.

And then the elevator clanged, and the corridor was suddenly full of the sound of men's voices and the hurried treading of feet. Two plainclothesmen, a patrolman in uniform, a little man carrying a black bag who was evidently a resident physician, and Detective-Lieutenant Peters came down the corridor.

"Commissioner!" Peters exclaimed.

Somberly Ethredge nodded. "I had to come here." His voice was flat and hard.

The little doctor dropped to his knees beside the crazed, emaciated thing lying on the plush carpet. The detectives and police officers grouped about in a tense, narrow circle. Ethredge stood close against the wall, his flesh tingling, crawling.

Almost as by a wordless command he felt himself drawn toward the open door of room 607. The curious desire was in him to enter that room, to learn for himself if it really looked as that nightmarish memory pictured it.

Had he been in that room before?

Stealthily Ethredge moved along the wall. The ebony mouth of room 607 gaped before him. He entered, touched the cool, smooth light-switch.

And then his nerves leaped. In the darkness something had encircled his wrist, something pliant and weak, like a coil of cobwebby rubber, something neither warm nor cold.

"They must not search this room!" It was Marilyn Des Lys' voice.

A SCREAM froze in Ethredge's throat. With an instinctive, involuntary reaction he tore his hand from the thing that clasped it, and turned on the light.

There, billowing in that rose-tinted room, stood a column of thick, colorless mist! It was a little less than Ethredge's own height, and, changing and eddying and coiling uncertainly as though with great difficulty it maintained any shape at all, it was yet molded in the vague shape of a woman. Its hands and arms and ankles were faintly transparent, while the thicker portions, the hips and breasts, were quite opaque. It was a column of fog, yet it lived and had mass and weight.

A voice, Marilyn Des Lys' voice, seemed to speak from that billowing, smoke-like thing.

"You know me for what I am," the voice said simply. "I cannot delude you longer with illusions; your mind rejects them. But," and the voice became insistent, demanding, "your men are outside. They must not take this room from me, for a little while. Send them away and remain with me."

There was a throbbing eagerness in that voice that fascinated Ethredge, once again, despite his horror. And suddenly that eagerness, that longing, turned to menace as the thing added:

"You would not have Mary Roberts mad? You would not have her like that man who lies outside in the corridor? Then do as I say!"

The eddying column of incredible life had heard Peters' voice, urging his men toward that room!

And then, swiftly, in the instant that Peters appeared in the doorway, the thing shrank, dwindled, flowed through the narrow crack beneath the bathroom door like a white slime!

Ethredge, his face ashen, stared at Peters.

"For God's sake, Commissioner," Peters ejaculated, "what's the matter? You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

Ethredge forced a smile to his lips. "I'm all right, Peters," he said shakily. "The sight of that man out there unnerved me. I want to look this room over—by myself."

The Detective-Lieutenant looked narrowly at his superior.

"You've a theory, Commissioner?" he asked meaningly.

Slowly Ethredge nodded. "Yes, a theory," he said heavily. "I want to be left here by myself for a while."

Peters' face was expressionless. "O. K., Commissioner. We'll go along and pump that desk clerk. Come on, boys . . . ."

Though Ethredge did not know, as he went down the corridor Peters signed to Grogan to remain behind. Peters had seen the fear on Ethredge's face, and he had begun to wonder, too, about Marilyn Des Lys. . . .

7. *Marilyn Des Lys*

ETHREDGE stood stock-still in the center of that room, listening to the receding foosteps of Peters' men, watching with a horrible fascination the thin crack beneath the bathroom door. And then he heard the sounds, the faint sounds, like the lapping of ooze across cold tiles. . . .

The thing was flowing into the room, rearing upward once again into the vague shape of a woman! And then it spoke.

"I am becoming more real, Charles Ethredge? See, I am no longer intangible. Watch."

Lazily it approached the bureau, and one of its arm-like, pallid tentacles moved gracefully, lifted, seemingly with effort, a small trinket box, let the object fall with a slight thud. The thing turned toward Ethredge, seemed to smile.

"Sit beside me." With an oddly seductive, gliding motion, it reclined on the couch. And Ethredge, drawn by the fascination he loathed yet could not resist, followed.

It moved close against him, nestled

against his body. And as it cuddled against him with protoplasmic fluidity that strange desire awakened in him once more; for, in repose, it had assumed, more and more, the likeness of a woman —a nude woman.

There was a hammering within Ethredge's skull like the beating of giant sledges. This wraith which had assumed, to a degee, substantiality, was the only thing in all the universe that remained real.

"I love you, Charles Ethredge," it was whispering. "I have loved you always. Kiss me."

"What are you?" Ethredge asked dreamily.

Passionately the thing answered, "I am a *will.* Once I was Marilyn Des Lys. And then, my body died. But I fought against the mists.

"On my death bed I was surrounded by friends who believed as I believed, who fought with me. They gave me of their life essence until the thread that bound me to my dead body had snapped. They had arranged that I should have this room during the—change. Charles Ethredge, within a few days I shall again be a woman, beautiful, wholly alive. Then I shall ask your love. We will go down through the ages together, always eluding the mists; for you, too, shall know my secret."

But again the memory of Mary Roberts, like the whisper of a distant, muted song, came to Ethredge.

"I cannot love you," he whispered. "I love another."

For a moment the woman-thing was silent, and Ethredge could feel its fury beating against him in cold, dread waves. And then, with awful finality, it spoke.

"Would you have Mary Roberts a mindless skeleton? If you would not, then kiss me now."

Ethredge reeled to his feet, stood there swaying, his mind a kaleidoscope of horror. His glazed eyes saw the decanter, and he snatched it up, drank gulpingly. Then, with a hoarse, choking sob, he sank on the couch beside the thing that said it had once been Marilyn Des Lys.

Slowly its arms encircled him, eagerly its mouth sought and found his own. . . .

The minutes passed. At last the thing's face lifted from Ethredge's mouth, while its eyes lingered caressingly on his pallid, strangely sunken cheeks.

"I must not drink from you more, beloved," it murmured. "I must have you sane, when at last I become a woman."

Regretfully it rose from Ethredge's still body, glided to the center of the room, stood regarding itself in the full-length mirror. A slow sigh of satisfaction escaped its lips, for in the mirror it now appeared solid, real. Its coloring had deepened, its hair was raven-black, its lips were full and red. It smiled, then, and glanced speculatively toward the closet door. Its slender, white hand reached out and touched the knob; the long, lithe muscles along its arm tightened. And slowly, with infinite effort, it opened the door.

It stood looking at the array of clothing hanging within, neatly, carefully arranged, ready to be put on. . . .

8. The Night Clerk

DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT PETERS was idly questioning Nick Gallicchio, the Northrup's night clerk, when both men, almost simultaneously, saw the tall, raven-haired woman step from the elevator and walk toward them, slowly and, as it were, feebly.

She came directly to the desk, glanced casually at Peters, spoke to Gallicchio.

"The key, Nicky," she said, in a voice as thrilling as it was soft and low.

The night clerk opened a drawer in his desk and took out an envelope, which he

handed to her. His hands were trembling.

"I will meet you at dawn, Marilyn," he said eagerly.

The woman touched her fingers warmingly to her lips. Then she took the envelope, placed it in her hand-bag. With an alluring smile at the man, she turned, walked slowly and hesitatingly from the Northrup's lobby. . . .

Peters was thinking, "Marilyn . . . Marilyn?"

And then he cursed, leaped toward the elevator!

"Six!" he rasped.

The elevator boy sat on his little stool staring at his row of signal tabs, but he gave no sign that he had heard.

"Hey, you!" Peters exclaimed. "Wake up! Six!"

The boy's whole body was trembling spasmodically, and there was mucus at the corners of his mouth. His face was pasty white.

Peters shook the boy, and the lad's head turned shakingly toward him. The pupils of his eyes were enormous with terror.

"Marilyn Des Lys' ghost!" the boy mumbled. "Marilyn Des Lys' ghost, riding on this elevator!"

Peters snarled an oath, grasped the controls, sent the elevator rocking upward to the sixth floor. . . .

On the fire exit stairs he found Grogan. And Grogan was as that man he had seen earlier in the evening, in the corridor.

Mumbling insane words, Peters ran to the door of Room 607. That door was unlocked.

Within, still, deathly pale, huddled on a maroon couch, lay Police Commissioner Ethredge. With a groan, Peters dropped to his knees beside his chief and began frantically chafing his nerveless hands and wrists. . . .

9. *A Rejected Lover*

THE pale gray light of dawn was streaming through the fly-specked lobby windows of the Northrup when, at last, Nick Gallicchio turned the desk over to the day clerk. Hurriedly Gallicchio left the hotel, took a taxicab to the sepulchral brownstone rooming-house where, a week before, he had engaged a light-housekeeping room.

The landlady, a ponderous, middle-aged woman in a pink satin wrapper, who already, a towel wrapped around her head, was busily sweeping the hall, greeted him with blowsy leer.

"Your *wife* come in this morning, Mr. Gallicchio," she said, with knowing suggestiveness. "I showed her your room, like you said. Very pretty woman, Mr. Gallicchio, I must say. Don't talk too noisy, Mr. Gallicchio, please. There's others in this house still a-sleeping yet."

But Nick Gallicchio had already vanished up the gloom-shrouded stairs. . . .

She was waiting for him, sitting relaxed in the room's single armchair. She wore the brown suit Ethredge had seen hanging in her closet at the Northrup. Her bag lay on the bureau.

"Marilyn!" He came eagerly across the room toward her.

She did not rise from the chair, but sat there looking up into his face with an enigmatic smile on her lips. He stooped to clasp her in his arms.

"Marilyn! Real flesh and blood again!"

Yes, she was real. The chair yielded to the impress of her weight, her hands and arms and throat and breasts were firm and substantial, her coloring was rich and distinct. The shadowy nebulosity had gone.

He stooped over her. But, with a little, impatient shrug, she averted her face, so that his kiss touched her cheek.

"Not now, Nicky," she murmured.

"I'm—not in the mood. Later—perhaps."

Gallicchio let his reluctant hands fall to his sides, for he looked upon her with a peculiar awe. She was Marilyn Des Lys, indeed, and yet that body of hers he sought to hold in his arms was not the body he had so often loved—that body had been burned into gray dust!

Marilyn Des Lys smiled.

"That's better, Nicky," she said indifferently. "I'd prefer that you not kiss me now. I don't feel—myself."

"Was it—bad?" Nicky asked gently.

She shook her head.

"No. There was no pain at all. I was conscious; I could see you all, grouped about my body, sending out your thoughts to me, encouraging me. As the hours passed I could feel the thread that kept me close to my dead body weakening, and I could see your faces dimming. I was afraid, then. And when the thread snapped, Nicky, the grayness clutched at me. But you were all calling me back. I took the life essence from you all, Nicky, and I could see your faces grow drawn and haggard as I gained strength. And then the mists faded, Nicky, and I knew that I had won. I was like a mist, Nicky; you could neither see nor hear me, but I was real. . . .

"Since that night I have been adding to my material being. I took the life essence from drunkards, from the insane, from drugged persons, because they did not resist me. I became a vague mistiness, and I found that I could move bits of paper and other light objects, and that I could impress my thoughts upon others. I communicated with you, Nicky.

"I learned that I could hypnotize men into the belief that I was really a woman. You have always known my will, Nicky, and men have always been attracted to me. From that point on it was easier.

"Every night you unlocked the door to my room; every day you locked it again. . . .

"Last night I was already a thick mist, heavy, almost, as water. I could lift the comb and brush on my dressing-table. And last night I took the life essence from three men, there in the Northrup.

"Yet I was not wholly a woman. And so, just before dawn today, I lured another man by a promise into an alley down the street, and today he is like those others."

She smiled, then, with a slow, seductive satisfaction.

"I weighed myself this morning, Nicky. Do you know what I weigh? One hundred eighteen pounds, Nicky. . . ."

Avid desire was in Gallicchio's black eyes.

"The others will be glad—that you are real," he said hoarsely.

"Yes," she said, as if absent-mindedly. "They will be glad."

Gallicchio dropped to his knees before her. His thick, stubby fingers reached out and clasped her wrists.

"Marilyn!" His arms went about her firm, lithe waist.

She struggled back from him, her face distorted.

"You—pig!" she spat, with venomous intensity. "Take your hands off me!"

She was pushing him away with all the strength in her finely molded arms. Gallicchio loosed his hold upon her waist.

"Marilyn! Marilyn!" There was heartbreak in the words. "Don't you love me any more, Marilyn? You've loved me so long! You're everything to me, Marilyn. Even when I didn't believe, I joined the cult for you, Marilyn!"

She was on her feet, disheveled, her face a gargoylish mask of anger.

"Love you?" she sneered, while her beautiful, carmine lips curled. "I've

never loved you, you—wop! When I let you come to my room, when I smiled at you and was nice to you—did you think it was because I loved you? Fool, you were just the rent!"

Nick Gallicchio stood there, looking, looking at her. His face was like a mask, still as the face of one dead.

Quietly, without a word, he turned and went from that room.

Marilyn Des Lys stood looking at the door he had closed so softly behind him. Then she shrugged and sat down again in the chair. The shadow of a smile was on her lips as she murmured, "Oh, Charles! Charles Ethredge!"

10. Nick Tells All

PETERS sat at his own desk, staring at a bit of stained litmus paper. His flask, filled with Marilyn Des Lys' brandy, stood close at hand.

"Drugged, all right," Peters muttered. "And very pleasantly, too. Just enough to put a slightly toped person in a swell fog. What the devil!"

The door had opened, slowly. Peters leaped to his feet.

"Commissioner! I thought they had you safe in bed!"

Commissioner Ethredge sank into the nearest chair before he spoke.

"They've been pumping me full of blood, beef broth and raw eggs," he said, smiling faintly. "I regained consciousness a little after dawn. Doc Fagan wanted me to stay, but—here I am. I only lost twenty pounds."

"Damnation!" Peters exploded. "Of all the damn fool——"

The harsh jangle of the telephone interrupted him. With an irritated growl, Peters picked up the instrument.

"Peters speaking. What's that? The night clerk from the Northrup? Wants to talk? Looks like a grudge squeal, you say? All right, Cassidy, bring him up!"

He cradled the phone. But Ethredge was on his feet, leaning over the desk.

"If Gallicchio talks, he talks in here—alone!" he said hoarsely. "Only the two of us must be here with him, Peters!"

Peters looked at his chief. A strange expression had settled over his face. Slowly he nodded.

"All right, Commissioner," he said quietly. "I had begun to wonder about Marilyn Des Lys myself. . . ."

Gallicchio, when Cassidy brought him in, was shaking, and his eyes burned with black, vindictive fire.

"Sit down, Nick," Peters said pleasantly.

The man glanced scornfully at the chairs. He was tense as a steel spring.

"I will not sit!" he shouted. "Marilyn Des Lys!"

Hot words poured from him with pent-up, torrential fury.

"This Marilyn Des Lys—you must kill her! She is not a woman—she is a thing that came back from the dead! Already she has taken the minds and the strength of many men, and she knows the secret! There are others with her—they are a cult. I thought them mad, but now I know! But she is the strong one—she is the one with the *will*—she is the only one who has come back. You must kill her, or there will be a horror on this Earth!"

"Not so fast, Nick," Peters interrupted quietly. "You'll have to cut the gibberish. Whom do you want us to kill, Nick, and why don't you kill her yourself? It's difficult for the police to go around killing people haphazardly, you know."

He was talking to calm the man, and yet—there was an intentness in him. . . .

The Italian stopped his nervous pacing and stared madly at the detective.

"I kill her?" he babbled incredulously. "I—who loved her? I could not kill her

with my own hands, policeman. Today, even today, the thought was in my mind, and I could not so much as lift a finger against her. But you——"

Ethredge, for the first time, spoke.

"I understand more about this than you know, Gallicchio," he said slowly. "Tell us—all that you know about Marilyn Des Lys. We will not laugh at you, Gallicchio, I promise you. And then—we will decide—what to do."

11. The Cult of the Dead Who Live

"WE MUST kill her, Commissioner!" Ethredge and Peters sat, alone, in Peters' small office. Gallicchio, heart-sick, babbling incoherently to himself, had gone, stumbling blindly, from the room. Pitying him, Peters had let him go. . . .

Slowly, then, Ethredge nodded.

"Yes, Peters," he agreed heavily. "She is too frightful a thing to let live. But if there were any other way——"

Peters turned his hands over, palms upward, and looked at them thoughtfully. Slowly his fingers flexed until his hands were upturned fists, blue-knuckled, unrelenting.

"There is no other way, Commissioner." Peters' mouth was grim. "I have watched this case from the start, and I knew, days ago, that those men who staggered from the Northrup Hotel to collapse in the streets, emaciated of body and ravaged of mind, were no dope addicts. Even then I knew that there were only two solutions—either those men had been exposed to some infection utterly unknown to medical science, or alien, occult forces were at work.

"Any germ theory I might form proved untenable. Those men ran no temperatures; their corpuscular count was normal; it was as though from every cell in their bodies had been drawn some rare life-principle which cannot be isolated or studied under the microscope, yet whose absence left them drained and depleted as empty bags.

"I knew, of course, that Marilyn Des Lys had died in that room, so recently. And I knew, too, that she had been at the head of a small, exceedingly earnest spiritualist cult, a strange, fanatic cult which claimed to be able to do more than lend the ectoplasm of its sitters to those spirits determined enough to struggle back from the shadows to the vicinity of sympathetic mediums; this cult believed that the dead could, with the proper assistance from the living, come back and resume life!

"Ectoplasm—the word fascinated me. I knew that in ectoplasm lay the key to the mystery. Ectoplasm—that mysterious substance which mediums claim exudes, during séances, from their bodies and from the bodies of their sitters; ectoplasm—that strange vital stuff with which it is said spirits ring bells, sway draperies, touch faces, write notes, *appear in their own likeness!*"

Ethredge was staring, haggardly, at his subordinate.

"Perhaps, if we destroy Marilyn Des Lys, we will be making a supreme mistake!"

Somberly, Peters shook his head.

"Marilyn Des Lys is not a Messiah, Commissioner. She is but a will which abhorred death, a will so strong that, with sympathetic assistance, it has conquered death! And yet, God did not intend that the dead return! Had that been His will, the dead would have returned long ago.

"It is not God's will that the dead take life from the living! It is not God's will that a dozen strong men sink into the shadows of madness that one wanton may return.

"What would happen if Marilyn Des

Lys were left to live? This would happen: her cult would grow by leaps and bounds. When next a member lay close to death, a hundred hell-inspired devotees would group about his bed, to snatch his spirit back from eternity. They would feed him, like a spawning vampire, with the life essence of their fellowmen!"

And then Ethredge lifted his hand and let it fall heavily at his side.

"I see, now, that we must destroy her," he admitted. "But, Peters, do you know that we may face a murder charge?"

Peters stared inflexibly at his chief.

"I had thought of that," he admitted quietly. "If it must be, it must be. But—it is incredible that a thing of ectoplasm, a thing born of thought and the life essence of many men, can in death retain human shape. It is my belief that the thing will—change."

Ethredge stood up.

"Whatever happens, it is destiny," he said slowly. "Are you ready, Peters? What weapons shall we take?"

Peters picked up a slender, steel-bladed, bronze-hilted paper-knife that lay on his desk. It had been a gift; it had never been used, but it was sharp.

"I think that this will be sufficient," he murmured.

12. A Dread Combat

KNOCK, knock, knock.

Peters' fists beat a questioning tattoo on the door Gallicchio had named, then paused. Half-way down the stairs, panting with righteous indignation, the fat landlady hovered.

There was a long silence from within the room. Then the soft sound of footsteps.

"Who is it? Nicky?"

Ethredge shivered. That voice—that alluringly rich contralto!

Quietly the door opened, a few inches. Peters' square-toed boot was in the crack with the rapidity of a striking serpent. His shoulder lunged against the door. The door burst open, the two men plunged into the room.

"Charles Ethredge!"

The woman's exclamation was an incredulous gasp. Yet, even in that instant of surprize, of fear-ridden shock, her arms half lifted toward him, her full-curved lips parted, trembling with passion. For the woman was Marilyn Des Lys!

Peters had stopped short. Marilyn Des Lys' beauty dominated the room like the beauty of some exotic flower, radiated a strange, unhuman splendor, enfolded and bathed the men in sensuous delight.

"God, Commissioner!" Peters babbled. "She's lovely!"

Slowly, like a puppet drawn by invisible strings, Ethredge was moving toward her, his eyes mad with horror, glazed with hypnotized desire.

"Marilyn! Marilyn!" The unuttered name hung in the air, pleaded and rang in the silence.

She stepped back, warily. Her lambent eyes were fixed on Ethredge's face, as though she knew that by controlling the Commissioner she also controlled Peters; yet she was also sending out waves of thought—seductive, sensual thought—in a desperate attempt to bend the detective to her will. She stepped back as the men advanced—Ethredge dazed beneath her spell, Peters striving to gain the cold courage to destroy this lovely thing.

Tantalizing thoughts danced in Peters' brain. He pictured her lying in his arms, her lips reaching upward toward his kiss, whispering words of love and passion. . . .

Suddenly, with a hoarse, inhuman cry, Ethredge seized her in his arms!

And in that instant Peters' hand slid

swiftly within his coat. That animalesque lunge of Ethredge's, so untrue to the man's real character, had shattered Marilyn Des Lys' spell like a hammer crashing against a soap-bubble. The little paper-knife flashed thinly.

A scream, vibrant with terror, burst from Marilyn Des Lys' throat. She shrank backward, half turning, struggling to free herself from Ethredge's encircling arms. And then Peters struck.

The narrow blade sheared through her woolen dress, sank hilt-deep in her shrinking breast. A ring of crimson blood jutted through the thick cloth.

She shuddered, and her fingers clutched the weapon's delicate hilt. Slowly, Ethredge supporting her, she sank to the floor. A brief, spasmodic trembling, and she lay still. The blood no longer spread across her breasts; its flow had ceased.

"She is dead!" Ethredge's words were stark and low. "You have killed her, Peters!"

But Peters did not hear. He was watching that still form on the floor at his feet.

The thing had not changed; it was to all appearances the body of a murdered woman!

PETERS wiped his hands tremblingly across his forehead.

"Dear Lord!" he whispered. "We've got a—corpse on our hands!"

There was a brisk knocking at the door!

"Who's screaming in there?" It was the landlady's voice.

"Go about your business, landlady!" Peters growled. "This doesn't concern you—keep away from that door!"

Cold beads of perspiration standing on his forehead, he turned back to Ethredge and the body of Marilyn Des Lys. . . .

A startled, horrified gasp burst from his taut lips. For Ethredge was kneeling over that beautiful, still body, his eyes curiously glazed, curiously fixed. It was as though he listened to the soundless voice of the dead!

And somehow Peters *knew,* knew that the malignant spirit of Marilyn Des Lys, still hovering close in that room, bound by some fast-weakening ectoplasmic thread to that dead body, was reaching out hungrily to Ethredge, dipping deep into his life-stuff, absorbing from his willing body the ectoplasm that would form the nucleus for a new body!

For Ethredge's face was turning gray, and his cheeks were sinking, falling in before Peters' eyes! Slowly he sank closer to the corpse until he sprawled supinely across it.

Cursing, Peters leaped to his feet, a wild, weird hope flaming through his brain.

"Landlady!" His voice was a hoarse, choked croaking. "Stop eavesdropping and get to the telephone; call Lincoln 6-1747! Get Mary Roberts—Mary Roberts—get her here at once, and to hell with traffic laws! Understand? Mary Roberts—Lincoln 6-1747."

He dropped to his knees, clenched his fists into Ethredge's shoulders, dragged his chief from that thing on the floor.

The mad, listening glare on Ethredge's face was fading.

"Dear God!" Peters thought. "He's dying!"

Leaden minutes passed. Ethredge's face was steadily thinning, becoming more hollow, more gaunt. His clothes lay about him loosely, he was breathing in quick, rattling gasps.

And then there was the quick rush of frantic footsteps up the stairs, along the hall. Peters leaped to the door, opened it just wide enough to admit Mary, slammed it quickly in the landlady's face.

"Charles! Oh, Charles boy!"

Mary reeled against Peters, stark horror in her eyes. That thing on the floor,

with the knife in its breast! But then, with a little whimpering cry, she ran to Ethredge, knelt beside him, pillowed his head in her arms. Her lips moved tremblingly.

"Oh Charles! Charles dearest!"

Peters stooped above them both.

"Call him, Mary!" he whispered. "Call him back—from close to death! The spirit of that—thing on the floor is sucking the life from him!"

Mary did not, could not, understand. But her lips were touching Ethredge's forehead, his eyes, his mouth.

"Charles! Charles!" she pleaded brokenly. "It's—it's your Mary! Speak to me, beloved; speak to me!"

Peters watched. And, although the expression on Ethredge's face did not change, in some way beyond human explanation Peters knew that he had heard, as if from far, far away, Mary's voice.

"Charles, Charles! It's Mary, your Mary! Come back to me, beloved!"

Ethredge's glazed eyes were upon Mary's face. And, with infinite slowness, a trace of sanity began to waver through the madness in them. His lips quivered.

"Charles! Charles!"

Fleetingly as the passing of a breath across a window-pane, his lips formed the name, "Mary!"

"By Heaven!" Peters gritted exultantly, "she's beating the thing! She's making him resist—it can't feed upon him!"

The minutes passed. And then, suddenly, that strange sixth sense that had awakened in Peters that day told him that the invisible, lecherous spirit was withdrawing, baffled. The thread that bound it to that dead body on the floor was dissolving.

Had it absorbed sufficient ectoplasm from Ethredge to begin a new life, or had the mists claimed it?

Then, like the snapping off of an ultra-violet light, the malign presence was gone, leaving behind it a curious tingling of frustration and despair.

And, oddly, Peters knew that this time the thing had not cheated Fate, that this time it had been swallowed in the silences and the mists of eternity. . . .

As though a sudden weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Peters exhaled a long pent-up breath, got shakingly to his feet. And then a scream tightened in his throat!

He saw the pool, the pool of colorless, gelatinous stuff, inches deep, faintly shimmering, extending across the floor in a great still blob from which exuded an odor as elusive as that of unpicked mushrooms—and as delicately sweetish. . . .

That pool of still, gelatinous stuff, in the midst of which lay a woman's garments!

13. Nick Joins the Dead

HOURS later they stepped into the clean sunlight—Peters and Mary supporting Ethredge, pale and weak, between them. Ethredge's sedan still stood at the curb; Peters helped Mary and her fiancé into the rear seat, slid behind the wheel. With a strange chill prickling his body he placed the newspaper-wrapped bundle containing a woman's clothing and hand-bag on the seat beside him. He wondered, somberly, if he would ever forget those moments he had spent cleaning up that still, gelatinous mess. . . .

Ethredge's head lay against Mary's shoulder; her whole soul hovered over him, mothering him, protecting him.

Peters, adjusting himself comfortably behind the wheel of Ethredge's car, felt something smooth and bulky pressing against his left hip. It was the flask of Marilyn Des Lys' drugged brandy. And Peters, with the feel of that dead ooze

still cloying his finger-tips, knew that tonight he would drink and drink and drink until that flask was empty. . . .

Ethredge's black sedan moved slowly into the city's crosstown traffic. . . .

Not until tomorrow would they three know that at that very moment a man lay alone on Marilyn Des Lys' maroon couch in the Hotel Northrup, his muscles rigid, his face ghastly, his lips blue from strychnin—Nick Gallicchio, the poor broken-hearted devil who had loved the dead. . . .

City in the Sea

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

Under the feet of each dancing wave
There is a city the waters lave,
A silent city of greenish gloom,
Where pallid sailors, like wraiths of doom,
Go rolling down each coral street
With sea-washed eyes, with dragging feet,
That make no sound, as they wander on,
Where there is neither dusk nor dawn,
Where there is only the ghastly glow
Of starless night that the fishes know.

Their veins now deaf to the call of sin,
They make their way to the Mermaid Inn,
Where pale mermaidens with seaweed hair
Serve them their grog and return each stare
With eyes unseeing, with lips as cold
As winds that wail down the snowy wold;
Though sailors evermore shout and sing,
When they are having their giddy fling,
No song is sung and no word is said
By these wan sailors who all are dead.

Like shadows lost in a river fog,
They sit for hours and sip their grog,
The tomb-like stillness unmarred, unbroken
By shuffling feet or a word outspoken,
Until the doors on the inn swing wide
To let strange sailormen crowd inside,
And on the instant their tongues find life
To cut the silence as with a knife,
"One more ship garnered to Davy Jones!
And these are her crew! God rest their bones!"

The Thing on the Door-Step

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A powerful tale by one of the supreme masters of weird fiction—a tale in which the horror creeps and grows, to spring at last upon the reader in all its hideous totality

IT IS true that I have sent six bullets through the head of my best friend, and yet I hope to show by this statement that I am not his murderer. At first I shall be called a madman—madder than the man I shot in his cell at the Arkham Sanitarium. Later some of my readers will weigh each statement, correlate it with the known facts, and ask themselves how I could have believed otherwise than as I did after facing the evidence of that horror—that thing on the door-step.

Until then I also saw nothing but madness in the wild tales I have acted on. Even now I ask myself whether I was misled—or whether I am not mad after all. I do not know—but others have strange things to tell of Edward and Asenath Derby, and even the stolid police are at their wits' ends to account for that last terrible visit. They have tried weakly to concoct a theory of a ghastly jest or warning by discharged servants; yet they know in their hearts that the truth is something infinitely more terrible and incredible.

So I say that I have not murdered Edward Derby. Rather have I avenged him, and in so doing purged the earth of a horror whose survival might have loosed untold terrors on all mankind. There are black zones of shadow close to our daily paths, and now and then some evil soul breaks a passage through. When that happens, the man who knows must strike before reckoning the consequences.

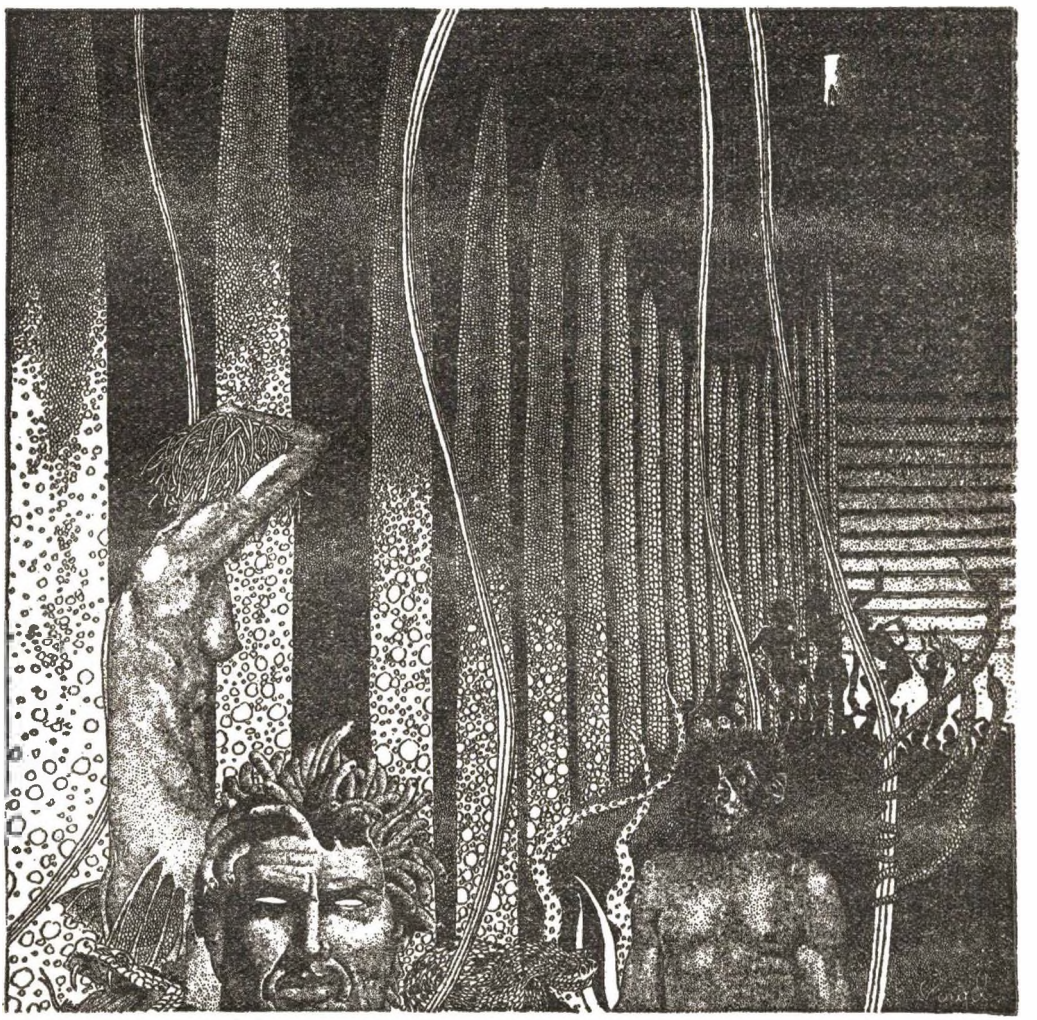
I have known Edward Pickman Derby all his life. Eight years my junior, he was so precocious that we had much in common from the time he was eight and I sixteen. He was the most phenomenal child scholar I have ever known, and at seven was writing verse of a somber, fantastic, almost morbid cast which astonished the tutors surrounding him. Perhaps his private education and coddled seclusion had something to do with his premature flowering. An only child, he had organic weaknesses which startled his doting parents and caused them to keep him closely chained to their side. He was never allowed out without his nurse, and seldom had a chance to play unconstrainedly with other children. All this doubtless fostered a strange secretive inner life in the boy, with imagination as his one avenue of freedom.

At any rate, his juvenile learning was prodigious and bizarre; and his facile writings such as to captivate me despite my greater age. About that time I had leanings toward art of a somewhat grotesque cast, and I found in this younger child a rare kindred spirit. What lay behind our joint love of shadows and marvels was, no doubt, the ancient, moldering, and subtly fearsome town in

which we lived—witch-cursed, legend-haunted Arkham, whose huddled, sagging gambrel roofs and crumbling Georgian balustrades brood out the centuries beside the darkly muttering Miskatonic.

As time went by I turned to architecture and gave up my design of illustrating a book of Edward's demoniac poems, yet our comradeship suffered no lessening. Young Derby's odd genius developed remarkably, and in his eighteenth year his collected nightmare-lyrics made a real sensation when issued under the title *Azathoth and Other Horrors*. He was a close correspondent of the notorious Baudelairean poet Justin Geoffrey, who wrote *The People of the Monolith* and died screaming in a madhouse in 1926 after a visit to a sinister, ill-regarded village in Hungary.

In self-reliance and practical affairs, however, Derby was greatly retarded because of his coddled existence. His health had improved, but his habits of childish dependence were fostered by



"The pit of the shoggothai Down the six thousand steps . . . the abomination of abominations."

over-careful parents, so that he never traveled alone, made independent decisions, or assumed responsibilities. It was early seen that he would not be equal to a struggle in the business or professional arena, but the family fortune was so ample that this formed no tragedy. As he grew to years of manhood he retained a deceptive aspect of boyishness. Blond and blue-eyed, he had the fresh complexion of a child, and his attempts to raise a mustache were discernible only with difficulty. His voice was soft and light, and his unexercised life gave him a juvenile chubbiness rather than the paunchiness of premature middle age. He was of good height, and his handsome face would have made him a notable gallant had not his shyness held him to seclusion and bookishness.

Derby's parents took him abroad every summer, and he was quick to seize on the surface aspects of European thought and expression. His Poe-like talents turned more and more toward the decadent, and other artistic sensitivenesses and yearnings were half aroused in him.

We had great discussions in those days. I had been through Harvard, had studied in a Boston architect's office, had married, and had finally returned to Arkham to practise my profession—settling in the family homestead in Saltonstall Street, since my father had moved to Florida for his health. Edward used to call almost every evening, till I came to regard him as one of the household. He had a characteristic way of ringing the door-bell or sounding the knocker that grew to be a veritable code signal, so that after dinner I always listened for the familiar three brisk strokes followed by two more after a pause. Less frequently I would visit at his house and note with envy the obscure volumes in his constantly growing library.

DERBY went through Miskatonic University in Arkham, since his parents would not let him board away from them. He entered at sixteen and completed his course in three years, majoring in English and French literature and receiving high marks in everything but mathematics and the sciences. He mingled very little with the other students, though looking enviously at the "daring" or "Bohemian" set—whose superficially "smart" language and meaninglessly ironic pose he aped, and whose dubious conduct he wished he dared adopt.

What he did do was to become an almost fanatical devotee of subterranean magical lore, for which Miskatonic's library was and is famous. Always a dweller on the surface of fantasy and strangeness, he now delved deep into the actual runes and riddles left by a fabulous past for the guidance or puzzlement of posterity. He read things like the frightful *Book of Eibon,* the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt, and the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, though he did not tell his parents he had seen them. Edward was twenty when my son and only child was born, and seemed pleased when I named the newcomer Edward Derby Upton, after him.

By the time he was twenty-five Edward Derby was a prodigiously learned man and a fairly well-known poet and *fantaisiste,* though his lack of contacts and responsibilities had slowed down his literary growth by making his products derivative and over-bookish. I was perhaps his closest friend—finding him an inexhaustible mine of vital theoretical topics, while he relied on me for advice in whatever matters he did not wish to refer to his parents. He remained single —more through shyness, inertia and parental protectiveness than through inclination—and moved in society only to

the slightest and most perfunctory extent. When the war came both health and ingrained timidity kept him at home. I went to Plattsburg for a commission, but never got overseas.

So the years wore on. Edward's mother died when he was thirty-four, and for months he was incapacitated by some odd psychological malady. His father took him to Europe, however, and he managed to pull out of his trouble without visible effects. Afterward he seemed to feel a sort of grotesque exhilaration, as if of partial escape from some unseen bondage. He began to mingle in the more "advanced" college set despite his middle age, and was present at some extremely wild doings—on one occasion paying heavy blackmail (which he borrowed of me) to keep his presence at a certain affair from his father's notice. Some of the whispered rumors about the wild Miskatonic set were extremely singular. There was even talk of black magic and of happenings utterly beyond credibility.

2

EDWARD was thirty-eight when he met Asenath Waite. She was, I judge, about twenty-three at the time; and was taking a special course in mediæval metaphysics at Miskatonic. The daughter of a friend of mine had met her before—in the Hall School at Kingsport—and had been inclined to shun her because of her odd reputation. She was dark, smallish, and very good-looking except for over-protuberant eyes; but something in her expression alienated extremely sensitive people. It was, however, largely her origin and conversation which caused average folk to avoid her. She was one of the Innsmouth Waites, and dark legends have clustered for generations about crumbling, half-deserted Innsmouth and its people. There are tales of horrible bargains about the year 1850, and of a strange element "not quite human" in the ancient families of the run-down fishing-port—tales such as only old-time Yankees can devise and repeat with proper awesomeness.

Asenath's case was aggravated by the fact that she was Ephraim Waite's daughter—the child of his old age by an unknown wife who always went veiled. Ephraim lived in a half-decayed mansion in Washington Street, Innsmouth, and those who had seen the place (Arkham folk avoid going to Innsmouth whenever they can) declared that the attic windows were always boarded, and that strange sounds sometimes floated from within as evening drew on. The old man was known to have been a prodigious magical student in his day, and legend averred that he could raise or quell storms at sea according to his whim. I had seen him once or twice in my youth as he came to Arkham to consult forbidden tomes at the college library, and had hated his wolfish, saturnine face with its tangle of iron-gray beard. He had died insane—under rather queer circumstances—just before his daughter (by his will made a nominal ward of the principal) entered the Hall School, but she had been his morbidly avid pupil and looked fiendishly like him at times.

The friend whose daughter had gone to school with Asenath Waite repeated many curious things when the news of Edward's acquaintance with her began to spread about. Asenath, it seemed, had posed as a kind of magician at school; and had really seemed able to accomplish some highly baffling marvels. She professed to be able to raise thunderstorms, though her seeming success was generally laid to some uncanny knack at prediction. All animals markedly disliked her, and she could make any dog howl by certain

motions of her right hand. There were times when she displayed snatches of knowledge and language very singular—and very shocking—for a young girl; when she would frighten her schoolmates with leers and winks of an inexplicable kind, and would seem to extract an obscene and zestful irony from her present situation.

Most unusual, though, were the well-attested cases of her influence over other persons. She was, beyond question, a genuine hypnotist. By gazing peculiarly at a fellow-student she would often give the latter a distinct feeling of *exchanged personality*—as if the subject were placed momentarily in the magician's body and able to stare half across the room at her real body, whose eyes blazed and protruded with an alien expression. Asenath often made wild claims about the nature of consciousness and about its independence of the physical frame—or at least from the life-processes of the physical frame. Her crowning rage, however, was that she was not a man; since she believed a male brain had certain unique and far-reaching cosmic powers. Given a man's brain, she declared, she could not only equal but surpass her father in mastery of unknown forces.

Edward met Asenath at a gathering of "intelligentsia" held in one of the students' rooms, and could talk of nothing else when he came to see me the next day. He had found her full of the interests and erudition which engrossed him most, and was in addition wildly taken with her appearance. I had never seen the young woman, and recalled casual references only faintly, but I knew who she was. It seemed rather regrettable that Derby should become so upheaved about her; but I said nothing to discourage him, since infatuation thrives on opposition. He was not, he said, mentioning her to his father.

In the next few weeks I heard of very little but Asenath from young Derby. Others now remarked Edward's autumnal gallantry, though they agreed that he did not look even nearly his actual age, or seem at all inappropriate as an escort for his bizarre divinity. He was only a trifle paunchy despite his indolence and self-indulgence, and his face was absolutely without lines. Asenath, on the other hand, had the premature crow's-feet which come from the exercise of an intense will.

About this time Edward brought the girl to call on me, and I at once saw that his interest was by no means one-sided. She eyed him continually with an almost predatory air, and I perceived that their intimacy was beyond untangling. Soon afterward I had a visit from old Mr. Derby, whom I had always admired and respected. He had heard the tales of his son's new friendship and had wormed the whole truth out of "the boy". Edward meant to marry Asenath, and had even been looking at houses in the suburbs. Knowing my usually great influence with his son, the father wondered if I could help to break the ill-advised affair off; but I regretfully expressed my doubts. This time it was not a question of Edward's weak will but of the woman's strong will. The perennial child had transferred his dependence from the parental image to a new and stronger image, and nothing could be done about it.

The wedding was performed a month later by a justice of the peace according to the bride's request. Mr. Derby, at my advice, offered no opposition, and he, my wife, my son and I attended the brief ceremony—the other guests being wild young people from the college. Asenath had bought the old Crowninshield place in the country at the end of High Street, and they proposed to settle there after

a short trip to Innsmouth, whence three servants and some books and household goods were to be brought. It was probably not so much consideration for Edward and his father as a personal wish to be near the college, its library, and its crowd of "sophisticates", that made Asenath settle in Arkham instead of returning permanently home.

When Edward called on me after the honeymoon I thought he looked slightly changed. Asenath had made him get rid of the undeveloped mustache, but there was more than that. He looked soberer and more thoughtful, his habitual pout of childish rebelliousness being exchanged for a look almost of genuine sadness. I was puzzled to decide whether I liked or disliked the change. Certainly he seemed for the moment more normally adult than ever before. Perhaps the marriage was a good thing—might not the *change* of dependence form a start toward actual *neutralization,* leading ultimately to responsible independence? He came alone, for Asenath was very busy. She had brought a vast store of books and apparatus from Innsmouth (Derby shuddered as he spoke the name), and was finishing the restoration of the Crowninshield house and grounds.

Her home in—that town—was a rather disgusting place, but certain objects in it had taught him some surprizing things. He was progressing fast in esoteric lore now that he had Asenath's guidance. Some of the experiments she proposed were very daring and radical—he did not feel at liberty to describe them—but he had confidence in her powers and intentions. The three servants were very queer—an incredibly aged couple who had been with old Ephraim and referred occasionally to him and to Asenath's dead mother in a cryptic way, and a swarthy young wench who had marked anomalies of feature and seemed to exude a perpetual odor of fish.

3

FOR the next two years I saw less and less of Derby. A fortnight would sometimes slip by without the familiar three-and-two strokes at the front door; and when he did call—or when, as happened with increasing infrequency, I called on him—he was very little disposed to converse on vital topics. He had become secretive about those occult studies which he used to describe and discuss so minutely, and preferred not to talk of his wife. She had aged tremendously since her marriage, till now—oddly enough—she seemed the elder of the two. Her face held the most concentratedly determined expression I had ever seen, and her whole aspect seemed to gain a vague, unplaceable repulsiveness. My wife and son noticed it as much as I, and we all ceased gradually to call on her—for which, Edward admitted in one of his boyishly tactless moments, she was unmitigatedly grateful. Occasionally the Derbys would go on long trips—ostensibly to Europe, though Edward sometimes hinted at obscurer destinations.

It was after the first year that people began talking about the change in Edward Derby. It was very casual talk, for the change was purely psychological; but it brought up some interesting points. Now and then, it seemed, Edward was observed to wear an expression and to do things wholly incompatible with his usual flabby nature. For example—although in the old days he could not drive a car, he was now seen occasionally to dash into or out of the old Crowninshield driveway with Asenath's powerful Packard, handling it like a master, and meeting traffic entanglements with a skill and determination utterly alien to his accustomed na-

ture. In such cases he seemed always to be just back from some trip or just starting on one—what sort of trip, no one could guess, although he mostly favored the Innsmouth road.

Oddly, the metamorphosis did not seem altogether pleasing. People said he looked too much like his wife, or like old Ephraim Waite himself, in these moments—or perhaps these moments seemed unnatural because they were so rare. Sometimes, hours after starting out in this way, he would return listlessly sprawled on the rear seat of the car while an obviously hired chauffeur or mechanic drove. Also, his preponderant aspect on the streets or during his decreasing round of social contacts (including, I may say, his calls on me) was the old-time indecisive one—its irresponsible childishness even more marked than in the past. While Asenath's face aged, Edward's—aside from those exceptional occasions—actually relaxed into a kind of exaggerated immaturity, save when a trace of the new sadness or understanding would flash across it. It was really very puzzling. Meanwhile the Derbys almost dropped out of the gay college circle—not through their own disgust, we heard, but because something about their present studies shocked even the most callous of the other decadents.

It was in the third year of the marriage that Edward began to hint openly to me of a certain fear and dissatisfaction. He would let fall remarks about things "going too far", and would talk darkly about the need of "gaining his identity". At first I ignored such references, but in time I began to question him guardedly, remembering what my friend's daughter had said about Asenath's hypnotic influence over the other girls at school—the cases where students had thought they were in her body looking across the room at themselves. This questioning seemed to make him at once alarmed and grateful, and once he mumbled something about having a serious talk with me later.

About this time old Mr. Derby died, for which I was afterward very thankful. Edward was badly upset, though by no means disorganized. He had seen astonishingly little of his parent since his marriage, for Asenath had concentrated in herself all his vital sense of family linkage. Some called him callous in his loss—especially since those jaunty and confident moods with the car began to increase. He now wished to move back into the old family mansion, but Asenath insisted on staying in the Crowninshield house, to which she had become well adjusted.

Not long afterward my wife heard a curious thing from a friend—one of the few who had not dropped the Derbys. She had been out to the end of High Street to call on the couple, and had seen a car shoot briskly out of the drive with Edward's oddly confident and almost sneering face above the wheel. Ringing the bell, she had been told by the repulsive wench that Asenath was also out; but had chanced to look up at the house in leaving. There, at one of Edward's library windows, she had glimpsed a hastily withdrawn face—a face whose expression of pain, defeat, and wistful hopelessness was poignant beyond description. It was—incredibly enough in view of its usual domineering cast—Asenath's; yet the caller had vowed that in that instant the sad, muddled eyes of poor Edward were gazing out from it.

EDWARD'S calls now grew a trifle more frequent, and his hints occasionally became concrete. What he said was not to be believed, even in centuried and legend-haunted Arkham; but he threw out his dark lore with a sincerity and

convincingness which made one fear for his sanity. He talked about terrible meetings in lonely places, of cyclopean ruins in the heart of the Maine woods beneath which vast staircases led down to abysses of nighted secrets, of complex angles that led through invisible walls to other regions of space and time, and of hideous exchanges of personality that permitted explorations in remote and forbidden places, on other worlds, and in different space-time continua.

He would now and then back up certain crazy hints by exhibiting objects which utterly nonplussed me—elusively colored and bafflingly textured objects like nothing ever heard of on earth, whose insane curves and surfaces answered no conceivable purpose and followed no conceivable geometry. These things, he said, came "from outside"; and his wife knew how to get them. Sometimes—but always in frightened and ambiguous whispers—he would suggest things about old Ephraim Waite, whom he had seen occasionally at the college library in the old days. These adumbrations were never specific, but seemed to revolve around some especially horrible doubt as to whether the old wizard were really dead—in a spiritual as well as corporeal sense.

At times Derby would halt abruptly in his revelations, and I wondered whether Asenath could possibly have divined his speech at a distance and cut him off through some unknown sort of telepathic mesmerism—some power of the kind she had displayed at school. Certainly, she suspected that he told me things, for as the weeks passed she tried to stop his visits with words and glances of a most inexplicable potency. Only with difficulty could he get to see me, for although he would pretend to be going somewhere else, some invisible force would generally clog his motions or make him forget his destination for the time being. His visits usually came when Asenath was away—"away in her own body," as he once oddly put it. She always found out later—the servants watched his goings and comings—but evidently she thought it inexpedient to do anything drastic.

4

DERBY had been married more than three years on that August day when I got that telegram from Maine. I had not seen him for two months, but had heard he was away "on business". Asenath was supposed to be with him, though watchful gossip declared there was someone upstairs in the house behind the doubly curtained windows. They had watched the purchases made by the servants. And now the town marshal of Chesuncook had wired of the draggled madman who stumbled out of the woods with delirious ravings and screamed to me for protection. It was Edward—and he had been just able to recall his own name and address.

Chesuncook is close to the wildest, deepest, and least explored forest belt in Maine, and it took a whole day of feverish jolting through fantastic and forbidding scenery to get there in a car. I found Derby in a cell at the town farm, vacillating between frenzy and apathy. He knew me at once, and began pouring out a meaningless, half-incoherent torrent of words in my direction.

"Dan—for God's sake! The pit of the shoggoths! Down the six thousand steps . . . the abomination of abominations . . . I never would let her take me, and then I found myself there—Iä! Shub-Niggurath!—The shape rose up from the altar, and there were five hundred that howled—the Hooded Thing bleated 'Kamog! Kamog!'—that was old

Ephraim's secret name in the coven—I was there, where she promised she wouldn't take me—A minute before I was locked in the library, and then I was there where she had gone with my body —in the place of utter blasphemy, the unholy pit where the black realm begins and the watcher guards the gate—I saw a shoggoth—it changed shape—I can't stand it—I'll kill her if she ever sends me there again—I'll kill that entity—her, him, it—I'll kill it! I'll kill it with my own hands!"

It took me an hour to quiet him, but he subsided at last. The next day I got him decent clothes in the village, and set out with him for Arkham. His fury of hysteria was spent, and he was inclined to be silent, though be began muttering darkly to himself when the car passed through Augusta—as if the sight of a city aroused unpleasant memories. It was clear that he did not wish to go home; and considering the fantastic delusions he seemed to have about his wife—delusions undoubtedly springing from some actual hypnotic ordeal to which he had been subjected—I thought it would be better if he did not. I would, I resolved, put him up myself for a time, no matter what unpleasantness it would make with Asenath. Later I would help him get a divorce, for most assuredly there were mental factors which made this marriage suicidal for him. When we struck open country again Derby's muttering faded away, and I let him nod and drowse on the seat beside me as I drove.

During our sunset dash through Portland the muttering commenced again, more distinctly than before, and as I listened I caught a stream of utterly insane drivel about Asenath. The extent to which she had preyed on Edward's nerves was plain, for he had woven a whole set of hallucinations around her. His present predicament, he mumbled furtively, was only one of a long series. She was getting hold of him, and he knew that some day she would never let go. Even now she probably let him go only when she had to, because she couldn't hold on long at a time. She constantly took his body and went to nameless places for nameless rites, leaving him in her body and locking him upstairs—but sometimes she couldn't hold on, and he would find himself suddenly in his own body again in some far-off, horrible and perhaps unknown place. Sometimes she'd get hold of him again and sometimes she couldn't. Often he was left stranded somewhere as I had found him; time and again he had to find his way home from frightful distances, getting somebody to drive the car after he found it.

The worst thing was that she was holding on to him longer and longer at a time. She wanted to be a man—to be fully human—that was why she got hold of him. She had sensed the mixture of fine-wrought brain and weak will in him. Some day she would crowd him out and disappear with his body—disappear to become a great magician like her father and leave him marooned in that female shell that wasn't even quite human. Yes, he knew about the Innsmouth blood now. There had been traffic with things from the sea—it was horrible. . . . And old Ephraim—he had known the secret, and when he grew old did a hideous thing to keep alive—he wanted to live for ever—Asenath would succeed—one successful demonstration had taken place already.

As Derby muttered on I turned to look at him closely, verifying the impression of change which an earlier scrutiny had given me. Paradoxically, he seemed in better shape than usual—harder, more normally developed, and without the trace of sickly flabbiness caused by his indolent habits. It was as if he had been

really active and properly exercised for the first time in his coddled life, and I judged that Asenath's force must have pushed him into unwonted channels of motion and alertness. But just now his mind was in a pitiable state; for he was mumbling wild extravagances about his wife, about black magic, about old Ephraim, and about some revelation which would convince even me. He repeated names which I recognized from bygone browsings in forbidden volumes, and at times made me shudder with a certain thread of mythological consistency — of convincing coherence — which ran through his maundering. Again and again he would pause, as if to gather courage for some final and terrible disclosure.

"Dan, Dan, don't you remember him —the wild eyes and the unkempt beard that never turned white? He glared at me once, and I never forgot it. Now *she* glares that way. *And I know why!* He found it in the *Necronomicon*—the formula. I don't dare tell you the page yet, but when I do you can read and understand. Then you will know what has engulfed me. On, on, on, on—body to body to body—he means never to die. The life-glow—he knows how to break the link . . . it can flicker on a while even when the body is dead. I'll give you hints and maybe you'll guess. Listen, Dan—do you know why my wife always takes such pains with that silly backhand writing? Have you ever seen a manuscript of old Ephraim's? Do you want to know why I shivered when I saw some hasty notes Asenath had jotted down?

"Asenath—*is there such a person?* Why did they half think there was poison in old Ephraim's stomach? Why do the Gilmans whisper about the way he shrieked—like a frightened child—when he went mad and Asenath locked him up in the padded attic room where—the other—had been? *Was it old Ephraim's soul that was locked in? Who locked in whom?* Why had he been looking for months for someone with a fine mind and a weak will? Why did he curse that his daughter wasn't a son? Tell me, Daniel Upton—*what devilish exchange was perpetrated in the house of horror where that blasphemous monster had his trusting, weak-willed, half-human child at his mercy?* Didn't he make it permanent—as she'll do in the end with me? Tell me why that thing that calls itself Asenath writes differently off guard, *so that you can't tell its script from*——"

THEN the thing happened. Derby's voice was rising to a thin treble scream as he raved, when suddenly it was shut off with an almost mechanical click. I thought of those other occasions at my home when his confidences had abruptly ceased—when I had half fancied that some obscure telepathic wave of Asenath's mental force was intervening to keep him silent. This, though, was something altogether different—and, I felt, infinitely more horrible. The face beside me was twisted almost unrecognizably for a moment, while through the whole body there passed a shivering motion—as if all the bones, organs, muscles, nerves, and glands were readjusting themselves to a radically different posture, set of stresses, and general personality.

Just where the supreme horror lay, I could not for my life tell; yet there swept over me such a swamping wave of sickness and repulsion—such a freezing, petrifying sense of utter alienage and abnormality—that my grasp of the wheel grew feeble and uncertain. The figure beside me seemed less like a lifelong friend than like some monstrous

intrusion from outer space—some damnable, utterly accursed focus of unknown and malign cosmic forces.

I had faltered only a moment, but before another moment was over my companion had seized the wheel and forced me to change places with him. The dusk was now very thick, and the lights of Portland far behind; so I could not see much of his face. The blaze of his eyes, though, was phenomenal; and I knew that he must now be in that queerly energized state—so unlike his usual self—which so many people had noticed. It seemed odd and incredible that listless Edward Derby—he who could never assert himself, and who had never learned to drive—should be ordering me about and taking the wheel of my own car; yet that was precisely what had happened. He did not speak for some time, and in my inexplicable horror I was glad he did not.

In the lights of Biddeford and Saco I saw his firmly set mouth, and shivered at the blaze of his eyes. The people were right—he did look damnably like his wife and like old Ephraim when in these moods. I did not wonder that the moods were disliked—there was certainly something unnatural in them, and I felt the sinister element all the more because of the wild ravings I had been hearing. This man, for all my lifelong knowledge of Edward Pickman Derby, was a stranger—an intrusion of some sort from the black abyss.

He did not speak until we were on a dark stretch of road, and when he did his voice seemed utterly unfamiliar. It was deeper, firmer, and more decisive than I had ever known it to be; while its accent and pronunciation were altogether changed—though vaguely, remotely, and rather disturbingly recalling something I could not quite place. There was, I thought, a trace of very profound and very genuine irony in the timbre—not the flashy, meaninglessly jaunty pseudo-irony of the callow "sophisticate", which Derby had habitually affected, but something grim, basic, pervasive, and potentially evil. I marveled at the self-possession so soon following the spell of panic-struck muttering.

"I hope you'll forget my attack back there, Upton," he was saying. "You know what my nerves are, and I guess you can excuse such things. I'm enormously grateful, of course, for this lift home.

"And you must forget, too, any crazy things I may have been saying about my wife—and about things in general. That's what comes from overstudy in a field like mine. My philosophy is full of bizarre concepts, and when the mind gets worn out it cooks up all sorts of imaginary concrete applications. I shall take a rest from now on—you probably won't see me for some time, and you needn't blame Asenath for it.

"This trip was a bit queer, but it's really very simple. There are certain Indian relics in the north woods—standing stones, and all that—which mean a good deal in folklore, and Asenath and I are following that stuff up. It was a hard search, so I seem to have gone off my head. I must send somebody for the car when I get home. A month's relaxation will put me on my feet."

I do not recall just what my own part of the conversation was, for the baffling alienage of my seatmate filled all my consciousness. With every moment my feeling of elusive cosmic horror increased, till at length I was in a virtual delirium of longing for the end of the drive. Derby did not offer to relinquish the wheel, and I was glad of the speed with which Portsmouth and Newburyport flashed by.

At the junction where the main high-

way runs inland and avoids Innsmouth, I was half afraid my driver would take the bleak shore road that goes through that damnable place. He did not, however, but darted rapidly past Rowley and Ipswich toward our destination. We reached Arkham before midnight, and found the lights still on at the old Crowninshield house. Derby left the car with a hasty repetition of his thanks, and I drove home alone with a curious feeling of relief. It had been a terrible drive—all the more terrible because I could not quite tell why—and I did not regret Derby's forecast of a long absence from my company.

5

THE next two months were full of rumors. People spoke of seeing Derby more and more in his new energized state, and Asenath was scarcely ever in to her callers. I had only one visit from Edward, when he called briefly in Asenath's car—duly reclaimed from wherever he had left it in Maine—to get some books he had lent me. He was in his new state, and paused only long enough for some evasively polite remarks. It was plain that he had nothing to discuss with me when in this condition—and I noticed that he did not even trouble to give the old three-and-two signal when ringing the door-bell. As on that evening in the car, I felt a faint, infinitely deep horror which I could not explain; so that his swift departure was a prodigious relief.

In mid-September Derby was away for a week, and some of the decadent college set talked knowingly of the matter—hinting at a meeting with a notorious cult-leader, lately expelled from England, who had established headquarters in New York. For my part I could not get that strange ride from Maine out of my head. The transformation I had witnessed had affected me profoundly, and I caught myself again and again trying to account for the thing—and for the extreme horror it had inspired in me.

But the oddest rumors were those about the sobbing in the old Crowninshield house. The voice seemed to be a woman's, and some of the younger people thought it sounded like Asenath's. It was heard only at rare intervals, and would sometimes be choked off as if by force. There was talk of an investigation, but this was dispelled one day when Asenath appeared in the streets and chatted in a sprightly way with a large number of acquaintances—apologizing for her recent absence and speaking incidentally about the nervous breakdown and hysteria of a guest from Boston. The guest was never seen, but Asenath's appearance left nothing to be said. And then someone complicated matters by whispering that the sobs had once or twice been in a man's voice.

One evening in mid-October I heard the familiar three-and-two ring at the front door. Answering it myself, I found Edward on the steps, and saw in a moment that his personality was the old one which I had not encountered since the day of his ravings on that terrible ride from Chesuncook. His face was twitching with a mixture of odd emotions in which fear and triumph seemed to share dominion, and he looked furtively over his shoulder as I closed the door behind him.

Following me clumsily to the study, he asked for some whisky to steady his nerves. I forbore to question him, but waited till he felt like beginning whatever he wanted to say. At length he ventured some information in a choking voice.

"Asenath has gone, Dan. We had a long talk last night while the servants

were out, and I made her promise to stop preying on me. Of course I had certain —certain occult defenses I never told you about. She had to give in, but got frightfully angry. Just packed up and started for New York—walked right out to catch the 8:20 in to Boston. I suppose people will talk, but I can't help that. You needn't mention that there was any trouble—just say she's gone on a long research trip.

"She's probably going to stay with one of her horrible groups of devotees. I hope she'll go west and get a divorce—anyhow, I've made her promise to keep away and let me alone. It was horrible, Dan—she was stealing my body—crowding me out—making a prisoner of me. I lay low and pretended to let her do it, but I had to be on the watch. I could plan if I was careful, for she can't read my mind literally, or in detail. All she could read of my planning was a sort of general mood of rebellion—and she always thought I was helpless. Never thought I could get the best of her . . . but I had a spell or two that worked."

Derby looked over his shoulder and took some more whisky.

"I paid off those damned servants this morning when they got back. They were ugly about it, and asked questions, but they went. They're her kind—Innsmouth people—and were hand and glove with her. I hope they'll let me alone—I didn't like the way they laughed when they walked away. I must get as many of Dad's old servants again as I can. I'll move back home now.

"I suppose you think I'm crazy, Dan—but Arkham history ought to hint at things that back up what I've told you—and what I'm going to tell you. You've seen one of the changes, too—in your car after I told you about Asenath that day coming home from Maine. That was when she got me—drove me out of my body. The last thing I remember was when I was all worked up trying to tell you *what that she-devil is.* Then she got me, and in a flash I was back at the house —in the library where those damned servants had me locked up—and in that cursed fiend's body . . . that isn't even human. . . . You know it was she you must have ridden home with—that preying wolf in my body—you ought to have known the difference!"

I SHUDDERED as Derby paused. Surely, I *had* known the difference—yet could I accept an explanation as insane as this? But my distracted caller was growing even wilder.

"I had to save myself—I had to, Dan! She'd have got me for good at Hallowmass—they hold a Sabbat up there beyond Chesuncook, and the sacrifice would have clinched things. She'd have got me for good—she'd have been I, and I'd have been she—for ever—too late—My body'd have been hers for good—She'd have been a man, and fully human, just as she wanted to be—I suppose she'd have put me out of the way—killed her own ex-body with me in it, damn her, *just as she did before*—just as she, he, or it did before——"

Edward's face was now atrociously distorted, and he bent it uncomfortably close to mine as his voice fell to a whisper.

"You must know what I hinted in the car—*that she isn't Asenath at all, but really old Ephraim himself.* I suspected it a year and a half ago, and I know it now. Her handwriting shows it when she goes off guard—sometimes she jots down a note in writing that's just like her father's manuscripts, stroke for stroke —and sometimes she says things that nobody but an old man like Ephraim could say. He changed forms with her when he felt death coming—she was the only one he could find with the right kind of brain and a weak enough will—

he got her body permanently, just as she almost got mine, and then poisoned the old body he'd put her into. Haven't you seen old Ephraim's soul glaring out of that she-devil's eyes dozens of times—and out of mine when she has control of my body?"

The whisperer was panting, and paused for breath. I said nothing, and when he resumed, his voice was nearer normal. This, I reflected, was a case for the asylum, but I would not be the one to send him there. Perhaps time and freedom from Asenath would do its work. I could see that he would never wish to dabble in morbid occultism again.

"I'll tell you more later—I must have a long rest now. I'll tell you something of the forbidden horrors she led me into—something of the age-old horrors that even now are festering in out-of-the-way corners with a few monstrous priests to keep them alive. Some people know things about the universe that nobody ought to know, and can do things that nobody ought to be able to do. I've been in it up to my neck, but that's the end. Today I'd burn that damned *Necronomicon* and all the rest if I were librarian at Miskatonic.

"But she can't get me now. I must get out of that accursed house as soon as I can, and settle down at home. You'll help me, I know, if I need help. Those devilish servants, you know—and if people should get too inquisitive about Asenath. You see, I can't give them her address. . . . Then there are certain groups of searchers—certain cults, you know—that might misunderstand our breaking up . . . some of them have damnably curious ideas and methods. I know you'll stand by me if anything happens—even if I have to tell you a lot that will shock you. . . ."

I HAD Edward stay and sleep in one of the guest-chambers that night, and in the morning he seemed calmer. We discussed certain possible arrangements for his moving back into the Derby mansion, and I hoped he would lose no time in making the change.

He did not call the next evening, but I saw him frequently during the ensuing weeks. We talked as little as possible about strange and unpleasant things, but discussed the renovation of the old Derby house, and the travels which Edward promised to take with my son and me the following summer.

Of Asenath we said almost nothing, for I saw that the subject was a peculiarly disturbing one. Gossip, of course, was rife; but that was no novelty in connection with the strange menage at the old Crowninshield house. One thing I did not like was what Derby's banker let fall in an over-expansive mood at the Miskatonic Club—about the checks Edward was sending regularly to a Moses and Abigail Sargent and a Eunice Babson in Innsmouth. That looked as if those evil-faced servants were extorting some kind of tribute from him—yet he had not mentioned the matter to me.

I wished that the summer—and my son's Harvard vacation—would come, so that we could get Edward to Europe. He was not, I soon saw, mending as rapidly as I had hoped he would; for there was something a bit hysterical in his occasional exhilaration, while his moods of fright and depression were altogether too frequent. The old Derby house was ready by December, yet Edward constantly put off moving. Though he hated and seemed to fear the Crowninshield place, he was at the same time queerly enslaved by it. He could not seem to begin dismantling things, and invented every kind of excuse to postpone action. When I pointed this out to him he appeared unaccountably

frightened. His father's old butler—who was there with other re-acquired servants—told me one day that Edward's occasional prowlings about the house, and especially down cellar, looked odd and unwholesome to him. I wondered if Asenath had been writing disturbing letters, but the butler said there was no mail which could have come from her.

It was about Christmas that Derby broke down one evening while calling on me. I was steering the conversation toward next summer's travels when he suddenly shrieked and leaped up from his chair with a look of shocking, uncontrollable fright—a cosmic panic and loathing such as only the nether gulfs of nightmare could bring to any sane mind.

"My brain! My brain! God, Dan—it's tugging—from beyond—knocking—clawing—that she-devil—even now—Ephraim—Kamog! Kamog!—The pit of the shoggoths—Iä! Shub-Niggurath! The Goat with a Thousand Young! . . .

"The flame—the flame—beyond body, beyond life—in the earth—oh, God! . . ."

I pulled him back to his chair and poured some wine down his throat as his frenzy sank to a dull apathy. He did not resist, but kept his lips moving as if talking to himself. Presently I realized that he was trying to talk to me, and bent my ear to his mouth to catch the feeble words.

"——again, again — she's trying — I might have known—nothing can stop that force; not distance, nor magic, nor death—it comes and comes, mostly in the night—I can't leave—it's horrible—oh, God, Dan, *if you only knew as I do just how horrible it is! . . .*"

When he had slumped down into a stupor I propped him with pillows and let normal sleep overtake him. I did not call a doctor, for I knew what would be said of his sanity, and wished to give nature a chance if I possibly could. He waked at midnight, and I put him to bed upstairs, but he was gone by morning. He had let himself quietly out of the house—and his butler, when called on the wire, said he was at home pacing restlessly about the library.

6

EDWARD went to pieces rapidly after that. He did not call again, but I went daily to see him. He would always be sitting in his library, staring at nothing and having an air of abnormal *listening*. Sometimes he talked rationally, but always on trivial topics. Any mention of his trouble, of future plans, or of Asenath would send him into a frenzy. His butler said he had frightful seizures at night, during which he might eventually do himself harm.

I had a long talk with his doctor, banker, and lawyer, and finally took the physician with two specialist colleagues to visit him. The spasms that resulted from the first questions were violent and pitiable—and that evening a closed car took his poor struggling body to the Arkham Sanitarium. I was made his guardian and called on him twice weekly—almost weeping to hear his wild shrieks, awesome whispers, and dreadful, droning repetitions of such phrases as "I had to do it—I had to do it—it'll get me—it'll get me—down there—down there in the dark—Mother! Mother! Dan! Save me—save me——"

How much hope of recovery there was, no one could say, but I tried my best to be optimistic. Edward must have a home if he emerged, so I transferred his servants to the Derby mansion, which would surely be his sane choice. What to do about the Crowninshield place with its complex arrangements and collections of utterly inexplicable objects I could not

decide, so left it momentarily untouched —telling the Derby household to go over and dust the chief rooms once a week, and ordering the furnace man to have a fire on those days.

The final nightmare came before Candlemas—heralded, in cruel irony, by a false gleam of hope. One morning late in January the sanitarium telephoned to report that Edward's reason had suddenly come back. His continuous memory, they said, was badly impaired; but sanity itself was certain. Of course he must remain some time for observation, but there could be little doubt of the outcome. All going well, he would surely be free in a week.

I hastened over in a flood of delight, but stood bewildered when a nurse took me to Edward's room. The patient rose to greet me, extending his hand with a polite smile; but I saw in an instant that he bore the strangely energized personality which had seemed so foreign to his own nature—the competent personality I had found so vaguely horrible, and which Edward himself had once vowed was the intruding soul of his wife. There was the same blazing vision—so like Asenath's and old Ephraim's—and the same firm mouth! and when he spoke I could sense the same grim, pervasive irony in his voice—the deep irony so redolent of potential evil. This was the person who had driven my car through the night five months before—the person I had not seen since that brief call when he had forgotten the old-time door-bell signal and stirred such nebulous fears in me—and now he filled me with the same dim feeling of blasphemous alienage and ineffable cosmic hideousness.

He spoke affably of arrangements for release—and there was nothing for me to do but assent, despite some remarkable gaps in his recent memories. Yet I felt that something was terribly, inexplicably wrong and abnormal. There were horrors in this thing that I could not reach. This was a sane person—but was it indeed the Edward Derby I had known? If not, who or what was it—and where was Edward? Ought it to be free or confined—or ought it to be extirpated from the face of the earth? There was a hint of the abysmally sardonic in everything the creature said—the Asenath-like eyes lent a special and baffling mockery to certain words about the early liberty earned by an *especially close confinement!* I must have behaved very awkwardly, and was glad to beat a retreat.

All that day and the next I racked my brain over the problem. What had happened? What sort of mind looked out through those alien eyes in Edward's face? I could think of nothing but this dimly terrible enigma, and gave up all efforts to perform my usual work. The second morning the hospital called up to say that the recovered patient was unchanged, and by evening I was close to a nervous collapse—a state I admit, though others will vow it colored my subsequent vision. I have nothing to say on this point except that no madness of mine could account for *all* the evidence.

7

It was in the night—after that second evening—that stark, utter horror burst over me and weighted my spirit with a black, clutching panic from which it can never shake free. It began with a telephone call just before midnight. I was the only one up, and sleepily took down the receiver in the library. No one seemed to be on the wire, and I was about to hang up and go to bed when my ear caught a very faint suspicion of sound at the other end. Was someone trying under great difficulties to talk? As I listened I

thought I heard a sort of half-liquid bubbling noise—"*glub . . . glub . . . glub*" —which had an odd suggestion of inarticulate, unintelligible word and syllable divisions. I called, "Who is it?" But the only answer was "*glub-glub . . . glub-glub.*" I could only assume that the noise was mechanical; but fancying that it might be a case of a broken instrument able to receive but not to send, I added, "I can't hear you. Better hang up and try Information." Immediately I heard the receiver go on the hook at the other end.

This, I say, was just before midnight. When that call was traced afterward it was found to come from the old Crowninshield house, though it was fully half a week from the housemaid's day to be there. I shall only hint what was found at that house—the upheaval in a remote cellar storeroom, the tracks, the dirt, the hastily rifled wardrobe, the baffling marks on the telephone, the clumsily used stationery, and the detestable stench lingering over everything. The police, poor fools, have their smug little theories, and are still searching for those sinister discharged servants—who have dropped out of sight amidst the present furor. They speak of a ghoulish revenge for things that were done, and say I was included because I was Edward's best friend and adviser.

Idiots! do they fancy those brutish clowns could have forged that handwriting? Do they fancy they could have brought what later came? Are they blind to the changes in that body that was Edward's? As for me, *I now believe all that Edward Derby ever told me.* There are horrors beyond life's edge that we do not suspect, and once in a while man's evil prying calls them just within our range. Ephraim — Asenath — that devil called them in, and they engulfed Edward as they are engulfing me.

Can I be sure that I am safe? Those powers survive the life of the physical form. The next day—in the afternoon, when I pulled out of my prostration and was able to walk and talk coherently—I went to the madhouse and shot him dead for Edward's and the world's sake, but can I be sure till he is cremated? They are keeping the body for some silly autopsies by different doctors—but I say he must be cremated. *He must be cremated—he who was not Edward Derby when I shot him.* I shall go mad if he is not, for I may be the next. But my will is not weak—and I shall not let it be undermined by the terrors I know are seething around it. One life—Ephraim, Asenath, and Edward—who now? I *will not* be driven out of my body . . . I *will not* change souls with that bullet-ridden lich in the madhouse!

But let me try to tell coherently of that final horror. I will not speak of what the police persistently ignored—the tales of that dwarfed, grotesque, malodorous thing met by at least three wayfarers in High Street just before two o'clock, and the nature of the single footprints in certain places. I will say only that just about two the door-bell and knocker waked me —door-bell and knocker both, plied alternately and uncertainly in a kind of weak desperation, *and each trying to keep to Edward's old signal of three-and-two strokes.*

Roused from sound sleep, my mind leaped into a turmoil. Derby at the door —and remembering the old code! That new personality had not remembered it . . . was Edward suddenly back in his rightful state? Why was he here in such evident stress and haste? Had he been released ahead of time, or had he escaped? Perhaps, I thought as I flung on a robe and bounded downstairs, his return to his own self had brought raving and violence, revoking his discharge and driv-

ing him to a desperate dash for freedom. Whatever had happened, he was good old Edward again, and I would help him!

WHEN I opened the door into the elm-arched blackness a gust of insufferably fetid wind almost flung me prostrate. I choked in nausea, and for a second scarcely saw the dwarfed, humped figure on the steps. The summons had been Edward's, but who was this foul, stunted parody? Where had Edward had time to go? His ring had sounded only a second before the door opened.

The caller had on one of Edward's overcoats—its bottom almost touching the ground, and its sleeves rolled back yet still covering the hands. On the head was a slouch hat pulled low, while a black silk muffler concealed the face. As I stepped unsteadily forward, the figure made a semi-liquid sound like that I had heard over the telephone—"*glub . . . glub*"—and thrust at me a large, closely written paper impaled on the end of a long pencil. Still reeling from the morbid and unaccountable fetor, I seized the paper and tried to read it in the light from the doorway.

Beyond question, it was in Edward's script. But why had he written when he was close enough to ring—and why was the script so awkward, coarse and shaky? I could make out nothing in the dim half-light, so edged back into the hall, the dwarf figure clumping mechanically after but pausing on the inner door's threshold. The odor of this singular messenger was really appalling, and I hoped (not in vain, thank God!) that my wife would not wake and confront it.

Then, as I read the paper, I felt my knees give under me and my vision go black. I was lying on the floor when I came to, that accursed sheet still clutched in my fear-rigid hand. This is what it said:

"Dan—go to the sanitarium and kill it. Exterminate it. It isn't Edward Derby any more. She got me—it's Asenath—*and she has been dead three months and a half*. I lied when I said she had gone away. I killed her. I had to. It was sudden, but we were alone and I was in my right body. I saw a candlestick and smashed her head in. She would have got me for good at Hallowmass.

"I buried her in the farther cellar storeroom under some old boxes and cleaned up all the traces. The servants suspected next morning, but they have such secrets that they dare not tell the police. I sent them off, but God knows what they—and others of the cult—will do.

"I thought for a while I was all right, and then I felt the tugging at my brain. I knew what it was—I ought to have remembered. A soul like hers—or Ephraim's—is half detached, and keeps right on after death as long as the body lasts. She was getting me—making me change bodies with her—*seizing my body and putting me in that corpse of hers buried in the cellar.*

"I knew what was coming—that's why I snapped and had to go to the asylum. Then it came—I found myself choked in the dark—in Asenath's rotting carcass down there in the cellar under the boxes where I put it. And I knew she must be in my body at the sanitarium—permanently, for it was after Hallowmass, and the sacrifice would work even without her being there—sane, and ready for release as a menace to the world. I was desperate, *and in spite of everything I clawed my way out.*

"I'm too far gone to talk—I couldn't manage to telephone—but I can still write. I'll get fixed up somehow and bring this last word and warning. *Kill that fiend* if you value the peace and comfort of the world. *See that it is cremated.* If you don't, it will live on and on, body to body for ever, and I can't tell you what it will do. Keep clear of black magic, Dan—it's the devil's business. Good-bye—you've been a great friend. Tell the police whatever they'll believe—and I'm damnably sorry to drag all this on you. I'll be at peace before long—this thing won't hold together much more. Hope you can read this. *And kill that thing—kill it.*

"Yours—Ed."

It was only afterward that I read the last half of this paper, for I had fainted at the end of the third paragraph. I fainted again when I saw and smelled what cluttered up the threshold where the warm air had struck it. The messenger would not move or have consciousness any more.

The butler, tougher-fibered than I, did not faint at what met him in the hall in the morning. Instead, he telephoned the police. When they came I had been

taken upstairs to bed, but the—other mass—lay where it had collapsed in the night. The men put handkerchiefs to their noses.

What they finally found inside Edward's oddly-assorted clothes was mostly liquescent horror. There were bones, too—and a crushed-in skull. Some dental work positively identified the skull as Asenath's.

Fate Weaves a Web

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

Destiny made a tangled snarl out of this man's life when it wove a net from which there was no escape

I LAID the newspaper on Rodney Sanders' desk and pointed to the headline:

FLOODS HIT STATE. $1,000,000 DAMAGE

"Early this year," I said, "you spent several thousand dollars lobbying for certain fat, juicy road-building contracts that would have netted you between half a million and a whole million dollars. When they were practically in the bag for you, you suddenly decided you didn't want them. Why?"

Sanders laughed. He pointed at the newspaper. "Worst floods in seventy years. Every dollar put into those contracts has been lost. The cuts filled in and the fills washed out. Every contractor involved is tottering on the verge of bankruptcy at this moment."

"How did you know things were going to pan out this way?"

Sanders replied "Alleppo!"

"Do you drink it, apply it externally, or eat it with a pinch of salt?" I asked.

"You expect to be nominated for District Attorney next election, don't you?" he countered.

I nodded.

"Fortune-telling in this state carries both fine and jail sentence, doesn't it?"

"Correct!"

"Two reasons why you never heard of Alleppo. He's a fortune-teller. But you don't believe in fortune-tellers, do you?"

"Never have, since that time at college when our gang visited a couple. Everything they said about me turned out wrong. They were fakers."

"Alleppo is the real McCoy. Do you know Bill Wendell?"

"I'm his lawyer."

"Well, six months ago, Bill told his family doctor that he was in for an attack of some obscure disease. The only things Bill knew about it were the name of it and that it killed you in a week if it got half a start. His doctor could find no symptoms, but, on Bill's insistence, sent him to a specialist, who found slight but unmistakable symptoms. They caught Bill's case in time. He lost the affected kidney instead of his life."

"If he knew so little about the disease, how did he know he was in for it?" I asked.

Sanders said: "Alleppo!"

"He must be good!" I conceded. "With the race meet starting next week, I'd like to meet him. How much does he charge for the names of a few winners?"

"He charges one thousand dollars a question."

I whistled.

"And limits you to three serious or useful questions. Stock-market tips and race winners are out. He has scruples against telling people how to get money without earning it. He says that if he abused his power it would be taken from him."

"Joking aside, though," I said, "I'd like to ask him a serious question if you could put me in touch with him."

Sanders eyed me thoughtfully. "What question?" he asked.

From anyone else, that might have seemed impertinent, but he and I were bosom pals through school, college, and the Big Scrap. I hung out my shingle as a lawyer the same week he inherited a big building and contracting business from his father. We golfed, fished, hunted, attended the races, and spent our

"In dodging about like this, he realised that he was taking certain chances."

holidays together until the year we met Carmen Osborne at a lodge in the mountains. We both fell madly in love with her. I was the one she married. It was a supreme test of our friendship. I think Sanders felt bad about it for a while, but some time later he married Betty Grebb, a girl he had known for some years. To me, she seemed as stolid and unattractive as the name she bore, but she worshipped Rod, and he seemed satisfied. We all played bridge together two or three times a week, and Rod and I still attended the races together. I think we were both glad that neither of our wives cared much about the Sport of Kings.

I answered his question, and said, "I'd like to ask about accepting that nomination for District Attorney."

"I'll see what I can do," Rodney said. "I'll pass the word along that you want an appointment and that I think you are all right. If he agrees, you'll get a telephone call within three days. Otherwise there's nothing doing."

IT WAS on the third day that the telephone call came. I was just ready to leave the house to meet Sanders to attend the opening race meet, but a mellow voice with a clipped, foreign accent told me to go at once to room 384 in the Hotel Metropole, and to mention the matter to no one. "I am Alleppo's humble assistant," my caller finished, and then hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, still attired for the race track, I was being greeted by the possessor of the mellow voice. "The Great Alleppo," he said, "does neither see nor be seen." He pointed to a large screen that shut off half of the room. "Already in his hypnotic trance he is."

"This will all be strictly confidential, I presume?" I asked.

"In his trance, the Great Alleppo knows not who you are, nor is it necessary. Afterward, remember your questions he does not, nor the answers that to you he gives. As for my humble self, that you paid the fee I shall remember, but all other things not."

I took the hint and produced the money. "Three thousand," I said, "for three questions."

"Then to me you must give, for a few moments only, some personal possession —your field-glasses, perhaps?"

I unslung them from over my shoulder and handed them over.

"Thank you. And your first question, it is what?"

"I have been wondering of late whether or not my wife is faithful to me," I said.

He stepped behind the screen. "The owner of these glasses, O master," he intoned, "would know his wife she is to him faithful or not?"

A voice with a cultured Oxford accent said, "The wife of the owner of these glasses is faithful to him, and always has been. She is, at the present moment, attending the matinee of a light opera with a lady friend."

The assistant reappeared. "You heard?"

I nodded. "My second question is: Am I, at any time, likely to develop any disease, and if so, what steps should I take?"

Again the assistant vanished behind the screen. "The owner of these field-glasses, O master," he intoned, "would know concerning disease."

"The owner of these," I heard the Great Alleppo reply, "has inherited through both maternal and paternal channels, a tendency to cancer." There was a distinct pause. "But he will not, during his lifetime, contract that, or any other disease."

"It's worth a thousand to know that," I told myself.

"You have a third question?" the assistant asked.

"If I am nominated for the office of District Attorney at the next election," I said, "is it best to accept or to reject the honor?"

The third time he disappeared. "The owner of these glasses, O master," he intoned, "would be advised whether to accept or reject the nomination for District Attorney."

For long moments the Great Alleppo was silent, then the words came slowly and deliberately. "The owner of these will not be nominated for such an office."

"That is all, O master!" the assistant said.

"Wait! You may tell the owner of these why he will not be nominated. Fate weaves a web. He will be murdered within a week."

IMAGINE my feelings if you can. The announcement stunned me for a long moment; then I shot question after frantic question at the assistant. "By whom shall I be murdered? Can I not prevent it? Why am I to be murdered? What shall I do? Where will I be when——"

The assistant raised a protesting hand. "Very much I regret! The Great Alleppo three questions has answered for you. No more he can do. Sleep for many hours he must."

"But can't I come back when he has slept?" I protested. "Tomorrow? The next day? I will pay any fee he demands."

The assistant shook his head. "The Great Alleppo could not, even should he wish. Absolute rest and quiet for a week he must have. His nervous and mental energy, which now is utterly exhausted, he must rebuild. But he who is forewarned, the web of fate may escape sometimes."

"But if he will just answer one more question—now——"

"Impossible it is! Your great scientists and inventors, they study for the months or the years one tiny atom of knowledge to wrest from the great stores that in the future lie. In the few seconds, the Great Alleppo many atoms of knowledge wrests from the future, because his nervous and mental energy to a penetrating focus he can concentrate. But afterward he must rest in proportion. I am sorry. To you I return these field-glasses."

Presently I found myself outside. Subconsciously I realized that my mind, still confused by this terrible prophecy, would not be equal to driving my car in the intricate maze of city traffic. I left it where it stood, and walked

Murdered! Within a week! Why? When? How? By whom?

Possible answers whirled around my brain in a fantastic tangle. I tried in vain to convince myself that the whole thing might be a fake. The Great Alleppo had not been a fake with Rodney Sanders and Bill Wendell.

"But he might be wrong in my individual case," I told myself. "At college those others were wrong about me!"

"There is an easy test," came the answer. "Go home and find out whether your wife did go to a light opera with a lady friend. She told you she intended to stay at home."

I turned my steps homeward. Carmen was alighting from a taxi as I reached the house. Rodney's wife, Betty, was with her.

"Betty took me to see *The Pirates of Penzance* for a surprize, John," Carmen greeted me delightedly. "I wish you could have seen it. It's just the nonsensical, whimsical type of thing you go crazy over!"

Perhaps it was because they were both so busy living over the high spots of the

play that I was able to get a grip on my emotions before they noticed anything wrong.

". . . attending the matinee of a light opera with a lady friend."

The words of the Great Alleppo echoed in my brain. My last hope that he might have been wrong had vanished.

IT WAS not until the day following my soul-shattering visit to the great Alleppo that my mental chaos began to resolve itself once more into a semblance of order.

I had a decided objection to being murdered within the week. Alleppo's assistant had said something about a forewarned person having a possible chance to change the course of destiny. I resolved to try.

First I obtained a permit to carry a revolver on my person at all times, then bought a shoulder holster complete with a small but deadly-looking weapon designed to fit snugly under my coat.

I made a new will, and had it witnessed.

I dictated to Miss Hoskins, my private secretary, a series of memoranda covering the firm's policy on every matter of current importance, explaining that I might shortly take a vacation but was not certain when it would start.

"It all depends upon others," I told her, "and I may have to pop off and leave you at a moment's notice—and then again, I may not go at all. It is impossible to tell what will happen, or when, but these memos will enable Mr. Wenderbell to carry on in my place at a moment's notice, if necessary."

I remember that I used just that phrasing. Fate was certainly weaving a web!

I went over my records to see if I could pick out anyone who might have sufficient grudge against me to murder me. I found three names, and listed them on a sheet of paper:

Mike Gatinka: convicted through my efforts and sentenced to ten years for selling dope to school children. Had made threats to "get" me. Paroled a month previously.

Mexican Tony, convicted of manslaughter through my efforts. Had made no threats, but was of savagely vindictive nature, especially when under influence of marihuana. Released six months previously. Reported to have returned to Mexico.

George Smith, dope peddler, escaped from road gang two months previously. Whereabouts unknown. Had made threats.

I planned my course of action should one of them suddenly appear in the doorway. My hand would dart inside my coat, flash out again instantly, and I would have the drop on the intruder, whereupon I would bark in the traditional manner: "Stick 'em up!"

In a foolish moment I decided to see how quickly I could do it. I snatched out the gun. "Stick 'em up!" I barked—and at that moment the door shot open.

"Hey—I—don't shoot, boss!" a scared voice said as a pair of hands shot into the air sending a score of letters fluttering about the room.

Matters could have been worse. It was only the office boy.

"Gee, but you scared me!" he said as he brought his hands down. "I didn't know you packed a rod in a shoulder holster. You sure was quick on the draw. I bet you could've got the drop on Dillinger any time!"

"Young man!" I said sternly. "That was intended as a lesson to you. You have been told to knock on that door before you enter."

"I—I forgot this time, sir!"

"Don't forget again," I cautioned. "Next time I might do more than just practise on you!"

Fate had woven another strand in the web!

I changed all my habits as far as was possible. I left the house at different times and reached the office by different routes each morning. Sometimes I took taxis instead of using my own car when business called me out of the office. I had my lunch sent in. I went home at different times. For the first time in years I passed up the first week of the race meet and Sanders occupied our joint box without me; and Fate wove another strand for her web.

I avoided my club and either stayed at home in the evenings or went to small movie houses in the suburbs, though I let Carmen think I was at my club in order not to alarm her.

SIX DAYS of the fatal week came and went. I felt that if I could negotiate the seventh successfully all danger would be over. I redoubled my precautions. Reaching the office safely, I gave instructions that I was "out of town" to all callers, regardless of who they might be. I even refused to answer telephone calls.

"I want to think out my course of action on an important case I may have to deal with shortly," I told Miss Hoskins.

Fate certainly was weaving her web with fiendish ingenuity.

I left earlier than usual and went home by taxi. To Carmen's inquiry I replied that it was lodge night—as she knew—and my regalia needed going over. As Grand High Vizier of the local lodge, my presence was practically imperative and I had not missed a meeting since my election to the chief office three years before.

"What are you doing this evening?" I asked.

She held up a slip of pasteboard. "Ticket for *Annabel's Aunt*. Our usual crowd bought up a box. I suppose it won't be any use waiting up for you?"

"I hardly think so," I said. "Special business tonight. It will run us rather late."

"Business!" She laughed musically. "And whose turn is it to pay for the midnight dinner at Tony's afterward?"

"Not mine," I relied, "so my appetite won't suffer!"

Someone has said that "a wise general does not announce his plans in advance", and I felt that if I was to outwit that arch-enemy, Fate, I must be wiser than wise. I kept my plans strictly to myself.

I left the house in full regalia which was concealed by a light coat, but I had not the slightest intention of being present at that lodge meeting. I directed the taxi man to a certain corner drug store. Before alighting, I handed him a generous fee and told him to wait five minutes and then drive away. I walked through the drug store and took a taxi on the other street, directing the driver to the Union Station. Arriving there, I hurried to a telephone booth.

In dodging about like this, I realized that I was taking certain chances, but I reasoned that if my death had been plotted, the murderer would expect to stage the event where I was certain to be on that particular night, namely, on my way to, or returning home from the lodge—or perhaps at the lodge or the usual midnight dinner at Tony's afterward. Here, of course, some man might suddenly go berserk for no apparent reason, as people sometimes do, and choose me for a victim; or gangland might stage a scene of carnage in which I might stop a wild bullet. Such things cannot entirely be guarded against. At any rate I felt safer than if I had attended the lodge.

Through the glass window of the

telephone booth I watched and made reasonably sure that nobody had trailed me. I dialed lodge headquarters. I told them I was out in the country with a bad blowout and the nearest garage was twenty miles away and I could not possibly reach the city in time to officiate at the lodge ceremonies.

A third taxi took me to within half a block of the rear of my house. I walked the rest of the way, my hand on the weapon in my shoulder holster, and reached the side door of my house unmolested. A moment later I had let myself in. Carmen, I reasoned, would by now have left to join her theater party. Cook would be in the kitchen reading some "confessions" magazine. The other servant would be out. However, I took no chances. I slipped my shoes off, and cautiously ascended the stairs in my stockinged feet.

A single light burned in the hall upstairs. I tiptoed to the door of the room Carmen calls my "den", but which really is a sort of depository to which unwanted *lares* and *penates* gravitated. I use it occasionally for a little extra studying when big cases are pending.

The door was half open. I slipped in and settled myself in the depths of the most disreputable but most comfortable overstuffed chair in the house.

It was an ideal point of vantage. I could hear everything that went on in the house, front and back, upstairs and down; yet my presence would be unnoticed unless someone entered the little room and came right up to peer between the enveloping arms of that all-embracing chair, and I would hear and see him first.

I reached for a cigarette, but put it back again. That would be giving Fate too good an opportunity. Cook could catch a whiff of smoke, softly notify the police over the kitchen telephone and . . .

"No smoking!" I told myself. "And no noise till after midnight."

I MUST have dozed, for though I had heard nobody come in, I suddenly became aware of voices ascending the wide front stairs: ". . . so I said I had a headache and would go home after the first act. I can tell John all about that, and he'll never suspect. He's a trusting old dear. I suppose he's having a thrilling time doing the honors at that stuffy old lodge meeting now!"

That was Carmen's voice, of course, but what did it matter whether or not I suspected she had left the theater because of a headache, I wondered. That was Betty who had come with her, no doubt.

"I've given cook fifty cents for the movies," she continued, "so we won't see any more of her for a couple of hours."

I failed to get the drift of that remark until the other voice spoke. It was not Betty's. It was not feminine, but masculine, and it said: "You're a wonderful little schemer. By the way, I brought these back this time. They're John's. He has mine. They're both alike, you know, so we didn't notice when we got them switched."

It was Rodney Sanders' voice. His first words had thrown my brain into a turmoil of suspicion. The rest registered only subconsciously. He had brought something that was mine, and I had his. If they were alike, what did it matter if we got them switched? Our fountain pens again, or a deck of cards, no doubt, but nothing that could be of any possible consequence beside the startling, soul-devastating fact that he was strolling calmly into Carmen's bedroom while Carmen had got rid of the cook for an hour or two; and I was a "trusting old dear"!

Time is a clumsy measure for life. In the next startlingly brief moment I lived a year. In the tick of a clock I re-lived ten years, and many, many things took on a new significance. Then, for me, time resumed its measured marching as I got slowly, noiselessly to my feet. The deadly little weapon I had carried as a protection against Fate now pointed avengingly before me.

The murmured words that floated to me as I strode along the carpeted hallway set my brain on fire afresh. I reached the door of our bedroom. I shot it wide open. I said "Good evening!" in a voice which, despite the mad rage in my brain, did not waver. It was the only thing I could think of to say. It must have sounded ridiculous, and rigged out as I was in the full regalia of the Grand High Vizier, I must have seemed a second Bluebeard to Carmen.

Sanders was crushing her to him, imprinting fierce kisses on her lips when I shot the door open and spoke. She screamed. Startled, he turned his head. The blood drained from his face, while bewilderment flooded his eyes, giving way suddenly to recognition.

"My God, it—it's John!" he said. "It's all a mistake, John! I just called to return your——"

"It was not a mistake," I interrupted. "Neither will it be a mistake to rid the world of such a poisonous, crawling snake as you!"

I pulled the trigger. Carmen screamed again, and fainted. Sanders slumped to the floor, his hand clutching at the hole in his shirt front.

I have heard of people doing queer things in their last moments. Sanders finished what he had started to say, the pink foam spraying from his lips with every gasping word:

"I called to return those, John!" He pointed to something behind me. "Remember we bought 'em s-s-same time. Had initials engraved. Only diff-difference. Got 'em switched. I had yours. Y-you had mine. Everything s-s-straight n——" A choking gurgle defeated the last word Rodney Sanders would ever try to utter.

WHEN the police arrived they found me staring at the significant thing to which Sanders had pointed as he died. When they asked me what had happened, I answered, gesturing with the gun that I still held: "He had my field-glasses. I had his. We got them switched somehow!"

"But that's not why you shot him, is it?" a policeman demanded. "Did you come home unexpectedly and find him with your wife?"

"Yes," I said. "You see, he was the one who was to be murdered, not I. The field-glasses got switched, and——"

"Snap out of it!" Someone eased the weapon from my fingers and placed it beside the field-glasses. I recognized Detective-Inspector Carnady. "It's my duty to warn you that whatever you say may be used as evidence, John," he said. Then lowering his voice: "Better not say anything until you get a grip on yourself. It'll come out all right. You know the defense . . . unwritten law . . . violated sanctity of your home . . . came in unexpectedly and found him . . . unpremeditated. No jury would ever convict."

I think I managed a smile as I shook my head. "I haven't a chance in a million!" I told him. "Fate wove a web!"

Need I go into detail about the trial? If you read the papers, you know how short and conclusive it was.

The "unwritten law" plea advanced by my counsel did not have the ghost of a

chance, for the prosecuting attorney proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the murder had been deliberate and premeditated.

I swore that it was not premeditated, but he proved that a week previous to the murder I had secured a license to carry a gun on me at all times, and that I had immediately purchased a gun and shoulder holster and worn it. My office boy gave evidence to prove that I was "quick on the draw" and therefore must have practised a good deal. I had made a new will six days before the murder. For the first time in many years I had failed to attend the race meet with Sanders, indicating, presumably, that something had gone wrong between us. I had told several mutual acquaintances that special business to which I had to attend personally was the reason—yet my firm had no such special business. My private secretary testified that five days before the murder I had dictated special memoranda detailing the policy to be followed on all matters of importance so that the staff could carry on in my absence. It was proved that for the entire day preceding the murder I had shut myself in my office, refusing to see anyone, and saying that I wished to plan out my course of action on an important case I might have to deal with shortly. It was proved that the said case must have been personal, since it was not a business case. Carmen testified that I had led her to believe that I would attend the lodge meeting, while the lodge registrar stated that I telephoned that I was delayed out in the country. Thanks to my lodge regalia, only partly concealed by my light coat, three taxi-drivers testified as to my movements in detail on the fatal night.

But why go on? I took those steps to outwit Fate in the belief that it was I who was to be murdered, but each one turned into a damning point of evidence to prove that the murder I committed was deliberate and premeditated. Each step I took was a strand Fate wove in the web that was to enmesh me.

The jury took only fifteen minutes to reach their verdict of "Guilty of murder in the first degree", and they made no recommendation for mercy.

But I have no more time for writing. I see the warden and the chaplain coming.

As a lawyer, I have often wondered what were the last thoughts of the men I have sent to the electric chair. Mine will be about my visit to the Great Alleppo, and of the assistant who took the field-glasses I wore, and who prefaced each question with: "The owner of these glasses, O master, would know——" For as you have seen, the owner of those glasses was not I, but Rodney Sanders. It was his wife who was faithful and who was at a matinee with a lady friend. It was he who was to be murdered within the week.

In a few moments, on this fatal Friday the 13th, you will see the lights flicker and dim when the hand of Justice throws a switch and diverts several thousand volts of that deadly current through the thing that will cease to be me. And I shall have thought my final thought. It will be this:

"Fate wove a web! There was no escape!"

"Before my very eyes the creature had slashed his own throat."

The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep

By G. GARNET

A powerful tale of the degeneration of the Kobolder family through centuries of inbreeding—the story of a grisly horror

Mr. Abiathar Hall,
Purchasing Director,
Americana Antiques, Inc.,
New York, N. Y.
Dear Mr. Hall:

I herewith tender my resignation, effective immediately.

Maybe what I have seen tonight is all in my mind. Maybe it never really happened and the events that I believe to have occurred are but morbid hallucinations. If so, then I am the victim of the maddest cacodemonia a man's mind has ever been blasted with and all the more

reason why I should resign this job and stop poking my nose into strange and unholy places. I'm through!

In all fairness to you, I suppose, I should give an account of what has occurred to bring me to this decision. I find it difficult to do so. I am no occultist. I have always scoffed at tales of spirits, ghosts, devils, or other spiritual manifestations. But tonight my faith in the fundamental reasonableness of God and Nature is shaken. Perhaps, as I've suggested already, I'm mad. After reading my account I suppose *you* will be sure of it!

How you ever suspected the existence of Kobold's Keep, even as only a legend, is a matter of wonder to me. It is marked on no map that I have ever seen. And I was practically on top of the place before I found anybody who'd ever heard of it.

I had dismissed the existence of Kobold's Keep as being, in fact, a legend, until one morning, while driving north along a narrow dirt road that wound among the mountains, I came to the village of Merlin.

While the attendant ministered to my gas tank at the hamlet's solitary filling-station I sat back and took stock of my surroundings. The mountain peaks that serrated the skyline ahead seemed to be even loftier, craggier, more forbidding than the ones I had come over already. I wondered whether my brakes and bearings would hold out until I got to the next town. The sour-faced, close-mouthed hill-billy who was pumping gasoline into my tank didn't impress me much as a possible repair man. And neither did the old fellow, whom I took to be his assistant, who was sitting at the base of the gas pump, knees drawn up under his chin, eyes shut tight, apparently fast asleep.

The old man caught my interest. He was, to say the least, an unusual type. His long, lank, dirty gray hair fell to his shoulders in two braids, like an Indian's. His face, weather-beaten and hairless, was broad and lean, the cheekbones as prominent as a cat's, his nose thin and hooked. I was about to question the station attendant whether the old fellow wasn't a member of some Indian reservation hereabouts that I hadn't heard of, when I noticed his hair more closely. At first glance it had seemed to be a dirty gray, but I saw now that it was actually red—a faded, nondescript, pinkish red, but red, nevertheless. I'd never heard of a red-headed Indian.

The ancient, red-headed anomaly yawned. I observed a curious, crescent-shaped swelling in the center of his forehead. Its bottom border was fringed with little hairs, like misplaced eyelashes.

As if sensing my fixed stare, the old man's head lifted. I looked for his eyes to open. They seemed oddly sunken.

It was an unusually hot day. Yet, as I looked, I grew cold—cold and rigid, and a little sick; for the old man had opened his one, solitary, sky-blue eye. It was in the center of his forehead.

My horror must have been written on my face, for the old man's mouth slit in a frightful, toothless grin. I turned away hastily. . . .

Of course, I'd heard of similar cases of persons born with cyclopean eye formations as recorded in medical history. But being faced with such an individual unexpectedly, even in broad daylight, is enough to give anyone a start.

I JERKED my eyes away and tried to get a grip on myself—all the while being aware of that great, bulging, sky-blue orb fixed on me in dreadful contemplation.

"Have you ever," I asked the surly-faced attendant (as I had asked at every town, village, and hamlet in the state through which I'd passed), "have you

ever heard of a place hereabouts called Kobold's Keep?"

The attendant, who was screwing my radiator cap back on, looked up suddenly. He stared at me a moment; then, averting his gaze, finished what he was doing.

"Naw," he growled, and knocked a tomato can into the ditch with a rifled stream of tobacco juice. "Never heered of it."

A nasal, cackling laugh clattered on the still air.

"Don't ye believe him, mister! He's lyin', Jim is! He's heered of the place all right!"

Torn between repulsion and a horrible fascination, I slowly turned and gazed on the dreadful face of the ancient mountain cyclops who sat by the gasoline pump. His bulging eye rolled, glistening in the bright sunlight. His toothless mouth writhed with crazy mirth.

"Don't pay him no mind," the attendant muttered sullenly. "He's crazy."

The old man slapped his thigh with a renewed spasm of hissing laughter.

"If that don't beat all! 'Don't pay him no mind,' he says! I'm outen my head, I am! What you want to lie to the feller for, Jim? Tell him!" He paused, subsiding reflectively, "But you can't go thataway, mister. You gotta leave your autymobile behind. It'll take more'n gasoline to git *that* thing over Black Knicht Pass!"

Black Knicht . . . Black Knicht . . . I stared at the old fellow curiously. Shockingly repulsive as he still was, most of the horror I'd experienced upon first laying eyes on him was fast evaporating. He was simply a freak. . . . But what had he just said?

"Black Knicht Pass," he repeated, pronouncing the "Knicht" with the old Teutonic "ch" guttural—a sound that was dropped from modern English many centuries ago. "It's the on'y way ye kin git over the ridge into the Devil's Millhop."

"Black *Knight*, you mean, don't you?" I said curiously.

The bulging blue eye blinked.

"Knicht," the old man repeated, "Black Knicht. . . . It'll take ye over into the Millhop, and there—there ye'll find the thrivin' town of Kobold's Keep!" His eldritch laughter whistled and sucked between his toothless gums.

"Iffen you listen to that loon," the attendant spat, "you're fixin' to git yourself in a peck o' trouble. You want to stay outen Kobold's Keep, brother!"

Then there *was* such a place!

"Yeah," he growled sourly. "It's there, all right. And so is hell!"

At the moment I was puzzled and irritated because of the fellow's manifest reluctance to have me go to Kobold's Keep. After all, what business was it of his? I tried to discover some reason for his attitude.

"Don't be askin' no questions and you won't be gittin' no lies," he responded discourteously. "You can't git to Kobold's Keep onless you walk or git a mule. And when you git there the main thing you'll be wantin' to do is to git out. So just drive on your way, brother, and forgit that you ever heered about the damned place!"

"But I've got to get there," I insisted. "I have business there."

One bushy black eyebrow lifted. "Business?" the mountaineer drawled incredulously. "Business in Kobold's Keep?"

"And why shouldn't he be havin' business there?" the old man cackled. "Kobold's Keep is a right smart town. Better'n this hole! Ye needn't be a-knockin', Jim, ye scut! Kobold's Keep is one o' the finest towns in these whole mountings!"

I began to lose patience. "I have business there! Damned important business!

'And if I can't get there by car, then I'd just as soon leave it here and rent a horse or a mule for the trip."

"Must be gosh-awful important," the attendant muttered.

"See here," I cried, "what the devil's the matter with the place? Why are you so damned anxious to have me stay away?"

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, and spat.

"Believe it or not, mister, I'm tryin' to keep you out for your own good."

"Oh, nonsense! What is there to be afraid of?"

"Wal," he drawled, "for one thing—the people."

"The people? What's the matter with the people?"

"Yah!" the old cyclops screeched. "Ain't nothin' the matter with 'em! Don't you listen to that damn' fool, mister! The citizens o' Kobold's Keep are right fine, upstandin' citizens!" And the glistening blue eye in his forehead blinked emphatically.

The attendant swept the freak with a lowering glance. He turned to me and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"*He* comes from Kobold's Keep. *He's* one of 'em. And he don't look so bad as the most of 'em. But that ain't the wust part."

He pulled a dirty rag out of his pocket and began to wipe the inside of my windshield.

"No?" I prompted.

"Naw," he drawled out of the corner of his mouth. "It ain't. The place is hexed. There's been a curse on it since the days when Injuns owned these mountings—afore the days o' my great-gran'pappy's great-gran'pappy, hunnerts and hunnerts o' year ago. That curse has been on it. And still is. I ain't askin' you to believe nothin', mister. I'm just tellin' you that no stranger who ever got into Kobold's Keep ever lived more'n a day after leavin' it!"

"Whut's that he's sayin'?" the old man drooled. "Is that lowdown dawg tellin' more lies about the Keep? Don't ye believe a word he says, mister! He's plumb loony, he is! Why, I'll guide ye to the Millhop myself, I will! And cheap, too!"

"You're hired!" I agreed promptly, and turned to the attendant. "Could I rent parking-space over in that shed for a couple of days?"

He shrugged. "You can. And, I reckon, you'll be wantin' a mule, too." He seemed to give up all efforts to dissuade me from visiting Kobold's Keep.

"*Two* mules," I corrected. "One for my guide."

He laughed shortly and with a grim significance that, at the moment, entirely escaped me.

"That'll be all right," the cyclops croaked hastily. "I won't be needin' no critter. I'd ruther lead ye afoot."

"And see that he allus keeps a good ten paces away f'om the mule," the attendant growled, "or the critter 'll shy and throw ye as sure as God made little ducks!"

HE SAUNTERED around to the back of his shack behind the station and presently returned leading as ancient and wobegone-looking a beast as I've ever seen, alive or dead. He led the blind, spavined creature to within thirty feet of the old freak when the hobbling bag of bones suddenly snorted, as if he'd scented a mountain lion, reared up in terror, planted his front legs down with a crash, and refused to budge.

"Do ye git whut I mean?" the attendant leered.

Frankly, I didn't. But I could hardly afford to waste any more time trying to get around the patent stupidities of my filling-station mountaineer. I got down

to business. How much did he want for the use of the mule for a couple of days? I was willing to pay a reasonable rental.

"*Rent* this mule?" he grinned sardonically. "I ain't rentin', mister. I'm sellin'. I ain't so sure you're comin' back."

I flared with anger. Hadn't he my car as security?

He shrugged. "I'm sellin'. One hunnert dollars. Take it or leave it."

It was an outrageous price to pay for that moribund animal, but it was too early to be looking around and I was too much in a hurry, anyway. I took it.

He drove my car into the shed, then got out and threw a mildewed old saddle on the mule.

"Must be moughty important business you've got in Kobold's Keep," he muttered as he tightened the cinch strap.

"You've been there, I suppose?" I ventured casually.

He looked up—shook his head slowly.

"Naw, mister. Once, when I was a young sprout, I clumb to the top of the Pass and looked down into the Millhop. I could see the shacks of the place way off below. Yeah. I could even see some of the critters who live there. But I never went down to take a closer look. I got better sense."

"That doesn't sound reasonable!" I protested. "What's there to be scared of? What kind of people live there?"

He glanced at the cyclops. The great eye in the center of the freak's forehead winked weirdly, the toothless black gums showing in a lipless grin.

"Same kind as he is, I reckon. On'y this'n seems like the best-lookin' critter that ever came outen the Devil's Millhop. That's why he's still here now, I reckon. The others what tried it got kilt or chased back. There was no puttin' up with the sight of them!"

Black Knicht Pass . . . the Devil's Millhop . . . Kobold's Keep . . . it all sounded like a Barnum's paradise. I guess I must have grinned, for the mountaineer scowled and I could get no further word out of him.

THE cyclops hopped to his feet with surprizing agility as I mounted my decrepit steed, and plunged down a steep embankment into a ravine that ran at right angles to the road. I hesitated, met the jaundiced sneer of the station attendant, then kicked the ribs of my blind mule so that he half slid, half dived down the road bank. The cyclops, turning, winked, then plunged into the woods, leading a good thirty feet or more.

Through silent, needle-cushioned pine forest, across dark and rocky mountain flanks, over verdant, flower-studded meadows the strange old fellow guided me. For all his apparent senility he was possessed of an astonishing vigor. His thin old legs skipped along with the spring and easy grace of youth. And when the country began to grow rougher, the grassy carpet sparser, and the rocks blacker and more cruelly sharp, he negotiated the difficult terrain with the supple, careless ease of a mountain goat, while my feeble old mule gasped and heaved and forced me to dismount and struggle along beside her over the crenellated rocks.

Our progress, however, was steady, and I found times during the smoother stretches in which to ponder certain strange peculiarities that I had noticed in the natives of this part of the state—and, more particularly, the peculiarities that I had observed in the eldritch fantasm who was my guide.

That he was a hybrid of some sort I had no doubt. Probably he was a Melungeon—one of those dark people who are descendants of early English settlers who took Indian wives. Still, I had never before met one who displayed such a

combination of physical degeneracy with wiry stamina. As I contemplated his skipping figure, his pale pink braids waving in the air, his ragged overalls constantly on the verge of slipping off, I couldn't help but fancy that he wasn't exactly human—that he was, really, a cloven-footed goblin, an emanation of evil possessed of the immortality and deathless strength of Satan.

I smiled to myself. That was giving my fancy entirely too much leeway. For the world to me was a reasonable place—and belief in devils, evil spirits and such I took as a matter of course to be the products of sick minds and the spawn of ignorance.

The cyclops had called the mountain we would have to cross the "Black Knicht"—pronouncing it with the long unused Anglo-Saxon "ch" sound. Black Knicht! Why, the word "knight" hadn't been pronounced that way since the Fourteenth Century—a hundred years before America was officially discovered!

I knew that the mountaineers inhabiting these peaks are, perhaps, the purest bred stock in all America—fair, blue-eyed folk, descended from the earliest English settlers, being born, marrying among themselves, and dying within the radius of a few miles, generation after generation. I have met many who have never yet seen a railroad train, although I suspect aircraft passing overhead have become a familiar sight by now. I have found many a treasure of furniture and brassware among their mean huts—articles inherited from father to son down through the centuries.

Yet—Black Knicht! It worried me. Fourteenth Century stuff in Twentieth Century America! I concluded that the way he pronounced it must have been only a personal peculiarity.

Our ascent had become many degrees steeper. Then, quite abruptly, as we came to a looming wall of rock barring our way, the cyclops vanished. I soon discovered that he had disappeared into a narrow cleft in the raw stone—a cleft that rapidly widened into wide, though unevenly graded, road. Overhead the sky gleamed like a crooked blue ribbon and thinned the shadows within the pass so that the figure of my guiding imp was a visible, though dim, silhouette. A cold, dank wind whispered about my ears and explored my summer clothes with chill fingers. I crouched close to my mule's neck for warmth.

Suddenly the path at the bottom of the crevasse grew straighter, smoother. Far ahead I could see the walls of the cleft fall away into sky, crystal-clear, a bright background framing the black silhouette of the cyclops, standing motionless, watching me like a monstrous, one-eyed ghoul. . . .

Thoughtlessly, I let my mule have its head, and it wasn't until she suddenly snorted, reared, and flung me to the hard rock that I realized I'd let her approach the cyclops too closely. I still was seeing stars while the clattering gallop of my panic-stricken animal drummed in my ears, sounding more faintly with every hoofbeat.

I PICKED myself up and plodded painfully up to where the cyclops stood, his bulging eyes sparkling giddily, his toothless jaws writhing in silent laughter.

We had reached the top of Black Knicht Pass. I peered down and saw spread before me the panorama of the Devil's Millhop.

It resembles nothing so much as a huge black bowl with vertical sides, and almost perfectly circular. Perhaps it's as much as four miles in diameter. I could see absolutely not a single break in the great barrier of black cliffs that surround it. Then the ugly devil who was with me pointed

to a precipitous path dropping away from the lip of the pass down the face of the cliff by a series of narrow, natural steps. I believe now that it's the only route by which a human being may enter or leave that frightful chasm.

The terrain of the Devil's Millhop, while showing patches of green here and there, seemed to be the same color as the rocks—basalt black. And though I scanned every section of the place, the only habitations I could discern were some curious hutches of black stones, almost invisible against the soot-like ground, grouped near the center of the bowl. A narrow waterfall splashed from the distant cliffs like a sliver of pale silver, and fed a brook coursing through the center of the Millhop. The brook, after speeding down a sink about a quarter of a mile in diameter that indented the bottom of the bowl, seemed to disappear into the ground.

"See yander?" the cyclops pointed, grinning. "In the sink, where the brook disappears . . . see, that fine black mansion?"

I strained my eyes. Sure enough. It was quite pretentious, built in the style of —a castle? Anyway, I thought I could discern turrets. There seemed to be some kind of bulky affair hanging over the spot where the brook vanished—something that seemed suspended on an axis jutting from the building.

"Oh, that!" the cyclops cackled. "That's the mill! Gran'pappy Kobolder called it the Keep. He had him a fancy house across the water that he called the Keep. So when he come here, he and his three sons they built this mill to grind the corn they larned to grow. And the ole man—he called it the Keep!" The eye winked.

"When did this happen?" Those curious stone dwellings offered food for speculation.

"Oh, long, long, long time ago, I reckon." The cyclops sat on his haunches and grinned spasmodically. "The ole folks down yander"—he jerked a thumb over his shoulder — "they sometimes mumble lies of whut *their* great, great-gran'pappy done tole 'em. Maybe some of it ain't lies, though."

The eye winked confidentially.

"Maybe it ain't a lie that Gran'pappy Kobolder was a boss man—a Knicht, they called 'em in those days. . . . Yeah—a Knicht. Funny, ain't it? He was a sinful man, murderin' and thievin'—yeah. . . . They chased him plumb outen the land over there 'cross the water . . . and he come here with a slew of people who, I reckon, had been share-croppin' on his land. I reckon it was somethin' like that. . . . They come here and settle down. . . . But all that's a moughty long time ago, I reckon. Nobody knows how long. There's an old book made o' sheep-hide, seems-like, down yander in the Keep. Gran'pap wrote it hisself. He was full o' book-larnin', they say. A boss Knicht had to be, I reckon. But I don't figure it's in English. . . . Queer-lookin' printin'. Some furrin' language they spoke in them days, I guess. . . ."

The bulging blue eye regarded me contemplatively. I must have showed my excitement.

"Whut's on your mind?" he snarled, his black gums showing.

"Who owns that property?" I asked, trying to repress my eagerness. "Who is living there now?"

The old degenerate burst into a hilarious cackle.

" 'Who owns it?' he says! 'Who's livin' there now!' Hee, hee!"

I snapped, "What's so funny?"

"I'll tell you who owns it, mister! The feller that built it owns it! And the feller who built it is the feller who's still livin' in it right this very minute! It's old

Robin Kobolder — the great-great-great-great-gran'pappy of us all down yander!"

I DIDN'T press the point. The fellow, of course, was quite mad.

The glistening eye studied me avidly.

"How come you're so all-fired sot on comin' here?" he inquired. "What you so het up about Gran'pappy Kobold and his ole mill?"

I explained as patiently as I could that I might buy it if the price was right. Now that I was completely recovered and rested I was on pins and needles to be moving down before night overtook us.

The huge blue eye rolled with high humor.

"Let's get going," I broke into his cackling.

He scampered down the side of the precipice as nimbly as any lemur. Evidently he knew every step, ridge and cranny by heart. I followed slowly, laboriously, clinging to the wall with trepidation, averting my eyes from the sheer drop below me, yet considering at the same time that it would require careful preparation and much delicate work with block and tackle to remove any possible purchase I might make in this strange crater.

When I got to the bottom I paused, sniffing disgustedly, for the smell of the ground was utterly fetid. I scuffed the soil with my boot, picked up a handful. It was loose, granular and flinty, reeking with an unpleasant chemical cacosmia. No wonder vast stretches of this bottom land were dark and barren. No possible thing might grow in it. Perhaps in some ancient day this had been the mouth of a monster volcano that had spewed up poisonous substances which, even today, carried the breath of death. . . .

A silence covered the valley like a choking blanket of dark swan's-down. An invisible cap seemed to seal the hole in the ground hermetically against the murmurs of life outside—the whisper of summer breezes, the song of birds, the rustle of trees. But as we strode toward the cluster of stone hutches on the farther side of the bowl I began to distinguish the sound of the waterfall—echoing and re-echoing like water splashing inside a bass drum. It accentuated the silence by its very solitude.

When I had viewed them from a distance I could have sworn I'd seen men moving about among the black stone hutches, but, as we approached, they appeared to be strangely deserted. The houses, thrown crudely together, were shockingly primitive and foul. They squatted in aimless clusters like a colony of filthy black bugs. The rock, I surmised, was their sole source of building material. As far as I could see, not a tree existed anywhere in this monstrous bowl. In fact, the only green things I saw growing were the infrequent garden patches that grew in hummocks of what was, quite evidently, imported soil.

The cyclops halted before one of the larger hutches.

"Funnel!" he screeched. "Open up, ye blabbermouth scound'el! It's me, Glim!"

There was no reply. Perhaps it was my nerves—but I could not escape the feeling that I was being watched; that eyes—many pairs of eyes—were peering at me covertly; eyes glinting from between stone chinks—peering from around corners. . . . I could catch fleeting glimpses of bodies from out of the corner of my eye now and then, but whenever I turned quickly there was—nothing.

Enraged, the cyclops was kicking the tall slate slab that served as a door. And presently, slowly, inch by inch, the slab began to move outward. The cyclops stepped back, his huge blue eye blazing with wrath. A creature stuck its head out and peered at us.

I cannot adequately describe it. I can only say that Horror stared from that misshapen, rat-eared head. It was the head and face of a being scarcely three feet tall, capped with a matted bush of filthy black furze that straggled into the squinting, Mongoloid eyes. The creature had no nose. From where the nose was supposed to be the face shot out horizontally in a ghastly anostosis of the bone, both jaws opening forward and outward, the green-yellow fangs protruding beyond the lips like the mouth of a misshapen banshee.

"Git outen the door!" the cyclops screeched, and advancing a pace, grabbed the creature by the hair and jerked it out.

The tiny gargoyle had virtually no body at all. Its huge, chinless head sloped down to a scrawny infant's torso, a pair of crooked match-stick legs, and two tiny clubbed feet. Its bent toes and tiny fingers were webbed.

"That's Funnel," the cyclops said, nodding to the creature.

Glancing at the monstrous mouth, I understood the name. He stood there in the muted light, eyeing me, motionless. I stared a moment as the cyclops entered the foul-smelling hutch. Each slanting eye of the creature contained two beady pupils.

Within the rocky hutch a perpetual twilight reigned. The light filtered through the cracks and crannies between the slabs of the rock. In the center of the room was a table made of a single slab of slate supported by a block of hewn granite. Smaller blocks served as chairs. On the table were a broken clay crock and several clay mugs.

I FOLLOWED the cyclops' example and sat down at the table. He poured a dark, heavy-odored liquor into two of the mugs and handed me one. I watched him drain his, then sniffed at mine. A rather sweetish, though flat, scent.

The bulging blue eye winked confidentially.

"Not bad, eh?" He smacked his lips and filled his mug again. "We make it outen honey. It goes down even better'n White Mule."

I tasted it—and was rather shaken by its strength. A hazy memory floated around the inner depths of my mind . . . the memory of tales of ancient Cornish feasting-halls, where warriors rolled under the benches, drunk with a fermented liquor made of honey, water, and spices. . . . They called it mead. . . .

Idiocy writhed in the freak's gibbering mouth.

"Ole Gran'pappy Kobolder—we call him Kobold for short—wal, he was the one who fust mixed the fust mashpot full of this stuff. He mixed it up in Cornwall, and up in the fur North Country—and then he brought the idear with him here. He was a smart bugger, he was!"

My skin prickled.

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

But he didn't hear, apparently. And, presently, I remarked on the shyness of the populace around here.

The cyclops agreed. "They ain't used to visitors," he explained. "Shucks, the last time anybody come hereabouts was—wal, come to think of it, it was exactly a year ago to this very day. It were an old priest, I remember. Yeah. He crawled down Black Knicht and began prayin' for his salvation when he seen some of the ugly scound'els around here! I reckon he figured he'd come to an outcrop of Satan's kingdom!"

And the cyclops laughed with huge, nasal mirth, his rolling eye crinkling at the corners.

"I showed him around. Yeah. I took the holy scound'el down to the Keep itself! I showed him the furniture, the things that's been lyin' around untouched for hunnerts and hunnerts of years. Yeah.

. . . But when I showed him Gran'pappy's ole book, blamed if the rascal didn't claim that it was a fake!"

"A fake!"

"Yeah. The blamed ole fool claimed that Gran'pappy never wrote it. Said it was a Bible printed by some feller named Caxton!"

You can understand how I thrilled to my very soul. A Bible by Caxton! William Caxton, date—1477! I realized that I was on the verge of a priceless discovery.

THERE was a stealthy scuffling of footfalls just outside the walls of the hutch—I'd been aware of them for several minutes now. I could almost feel the eyes peering at me through the chinks and envision the shapeless monstrosities crowding about the hutch to spy on me—to listen. My horror and disgust were giving way now to a misty sort of pity. Poor, hopeless, Godforsaken wretches! They were so desperately frightened of, yet hungry for, contact with the outside world. But, I sighed to myself, better that they stay here, unknown and unmolested. The milk of human kindness ran thin throughout the world. . . . Once I thought I heard a sound in the rear of the room—the dark threshold of what was probably a sleeping-chamber.

"Gran'pappy didn't cotton to that priest none," the cyclops was mouthing again. "When mornin' come, damn iffen we didn't find that priest lyin' in the door of the main room in the mill. His head was chopped clean off."

"Gran'pappy?" I repeated stupidly.

"Shore. Gran'pappy Kobold. He didn't like that old priest. He chopped his haid off!" He grinned more hideously than ever, and edged a little closer toward me. "Though, jes' between you and me, stranger, maybe the old priest stumbled against the door-jamb under which Gran'pappy's ax-head is hangin', and the shakin' made it fall so that it hit the priest in the neck and killed him. . . . Still"—he shrugged—"ye can't tell about sperrits. They say that them what see's Gran'pappy's sperrit walkin' dies on the spot. Or, anyways, within twenty-four hours. It ain't never failed yit, mister!"

I pressed him for details about Grandfather Kobolder.

He grinned nauseatingly, winked, and leaned forward.

"He was the Knicht. The big boss man. But he was gittin' old—old and the cold was creepin' into his bones. He began cotchin' young uns when their mammies weren't lookin'—and then cuttin' off their haids and drinkin' their blood. It kept him young, it did. Mebbe, if they'd let him alone, he could live for ever thataway. . . ." The lipless mouth receded from the black, gangrenous gums. "But no—they druv him off. He and his three sons and his three daughters had to skedaddle for their lives! They come here . . . they settled down. . . ."

The cyclops filled his mug and drained it at a gulp, his eye shining bright.

"Yeah," he rasped, "but soon the cold come again. . . . The ole man needed blood. He tried to git his youngest son—but the scound'el took the knife away f'om him, stabbed him daid, cut off his haid, sculped him, and hung it at the belt! The murderin' whelp!"

I stared, transfixed at the glaring rage suddenly contorting that evil face. It subsided slowly.

"You," I ventured timidly, "you are all his descendants?"

"Yeah. His chillen ma'ied 'mongst themselves, and *their* chillen ma'ied 'mongst themselves, I reckon. Later on mebbe there was an Injun gal or two to mix with. But not often. It's been mostly—jest us!"

My gorge rose. These amorphous crea-

tures, a self-sustaining breed of compounded incests, had miraculously existed century after century through deepening shadows of insanity, through successive generations of horror and deformity, alone, shunned by the world, isolated from civilization, fit only for death!

A sudden weird mewing in the next room snatched up my shocked attention. I stared at the opening of the chamber. My eyes slowly lowered to the Thing that appeared on the floor.

Rolling, squirming, writhing its way out of the opening was a naked, armless, legless, eyeless, earless Thing. It paused on the threshold, as if it sensed our presence, mewed once, like a frightened kitten, then continued its weirdly painful progress until it reached the door. The cyclops got up, opened the door, and it rolled out.

I rose, nauseated. Through the wide-open doorway I could see that the shadows had lengthened considerably; that, in fact, time had passed so swiftly that it was nearly twilight. The idea of spending the night here, which I'd originally entertained, now left me trembling.

"Let's get on down to the Keep!" I cried. "Let's get on down. I want to see these things, buy them if I can, and leave!"

The cyclops licked the edge of his mouth with a thick, coal-black tongue. I shoved some bills into his hand and we both sallied forth into the deepening dusk, walking briskly to the brook and following it down into the sink.

"Buy them!" the cyclops kept hissing to himself with thoughtful glee. "Buy them—and leave!" He seemed to mouth the words as if they tasted good.

As we approached the old mill I was struck with the similarity of its design with that of several old castles of Norman vintage that I had seen in England. The silent mill-wheel hung motionless on its broken, rust-eaten axis, the swift waters of the stream breaking about it futilely. As we came more closely toward the old mill house I was struck by the strength of the chemical vapors that swirled into my nostrils. I stopped, half suffocated.

The cyclops clutched my arm, grinning.

"Come on," he snarled, "come on."

We stumbled to the bottom of that dank, mephitic pit, waded across the brook, and stepped across the threshold into the open doorway of Kobold's Keep.

Its interior was a revelation. Though laden and crusted with filth, everything was, perhaps, as the owner had left it unknown centuries ago. The spacious chambers were timbered with Gothic arches and ornamented with gargoyles of wood. The furniture was of an undetermined period. Certainly it antedated any of the so-called "period" furniture that we recognize today—and antedated it, I'll swear, by centuries. As I scuffed through the strange and ancient old house a feeling that was nearly awe encompassed me. If the story of old Robin Kobolder's voyage to the New World could be authenticated a new chapter would be added to American history!

At first I was suspicious of the extraordinary state of preservation of the woodwork and, especially, of certain stiff damask draperies I saw still hanging there. I am now convinced, however, that these objects are entirely authentic. And the most reasonable conjecture I can offer as to their preservation is that the strong chemical exhalations rising from the ground have served as an effective bactericide, halting the process of decomposition through the centuries.

Presently I found myself in a large, nearly empty room, whose paneless windows gaped upon the teetering millwheel and the yawning pit into which the brook

vanished. It had been, apparently, an armorer's workshop. A few blades of ancient design and all rust yet hung precariously on the walls. Glancing about, I perceived the huge bronze blade of a battle-ax hanging, edge downward like a guillotine, over the lintel of the door I had just entered. A black stain crusted the greater part of its surface.

A splintering crash!

I spun around, my heart beating wildly. The cyclops stood there, grinning at me, winking that ghastly eye of his. But when I saw what he had done my fright gave way to swift anger. He'd smashed one of those priceless chairs to fragments!

"You damned fool!" I yelled. "What did you do that for?" And, like a hen gathering in a lost chick, I fell on my knees and gathered together the pieces of the chair tenderly.

The cyclops shrugged. "We'll be needin' a fire, I reckon. We gotta have firewood!"

An authentic Fifteenth Century chair —firewood!

I warned him to keep his hands off the furniture while I prowled about.

The book lay on a huge work table near the center of the room. It was a Bible, all right—a Caxton Bible! My eyes devoured its priceless pages, my fingers infinitely tender, infinitely reverent. God! To find such a treasure in this dismal, miasmic hole, alone, uncared for!

Suddenly I was aware of the crackle of flames. I glanced up—leaped to my feet with an oath.

The deformed wretch had built a fire on the ancient hearth with the broken pieces of the chair!

I aimed a blow at his blinking eye, but he ducked and skipped away nimbly, hissing like a frightened adder. But the flames had completely engulfed the fragments. It was too late to save them. . . . The dancing flames painted eery chiaroscuros of scarlet light and stygian shadows on the walls.

I was suddenly aware how late it had grown. So engrossed had I been in the book that night had already slipped over the Devil's Millhop like a swift-flowing black melena, catching me unawares.

To be forced to spend the night in this mephitic hermitage was no pleasant prospect. But the book provided consolation. I sat cross-legged on the floor near the fire, and read it slowly, critically, picking my way, as you may well imagine, with sheerest delight through its ornate typography.

The cyclops sat on his haunches beside me, his glistening eye pondering the flames hungrily.

How long I sat there wading through the pages of Caxton's Bible I cannot say. Suddenly I was aware of a strange sound—a squeaking and a thrashing, as of badly greased machinery stirring to activity. Simultaneously there came a slow, crunching, grinding sound that shook the house in every rafter. It seemed to come from directly beneath me.

I leaped to my feet, scuttled to the window and peered out.

The ancient mill-wheel was turning! Slowly, at first, it began to pick up speed even as I stared and soon was spinning industriously, the blinding moonlight catching the spray dancing from its paddles like spume of liquid silver.

Puzzled and, I must admit, scared by this inexplicable event, I turned to the cyclops—and found him on his feet, facing me, a long, curving blade of oriental design clenched in one fist.

"Where did you get that?" I rasped, startled.

"Funny thing," he grinned horridly, "but it was a-lyin' right there where I was a-settin'."

The firelight scintillated on the bright steel. "It doesn't look so very old," I commented, more to myself than anyone else.

The black gums bared. "I reckon it ain't so old. Only a mite over four hundred years, I reckon. This is the knife that old Kobold's whelp used to sculp his old dad—and to cut off his haid! Feel that edge."

He extended the blade to me. I drew back.

The cyclops cackled mockingly, "Gran'-pap Kobold, he warn't feared of man nor devil!" The eye winked confidentially. "He'd as soon slit your throat as look at ye. That's the kind of man *he* was! Iron-fisted! He couldn't be puttin' up with the law. 'Cause he was the law hisself! That's why he come across the water. Not that he wanted to much, I reckon!" His laugh rattled through the room like loose bones. "But y' can't do much when the Devil sends a storm that blows ye across!"

"The cyclops laughed hissingly and spat into the fire. His gaze swung back to my face with a sudden intensity.

"But, like I tole ye, he was a-needin' new blood . . . new blood. . . . The cold was a-creepin' into his bones." His taloned fingers curved and slowly clenched.

As I stared into that writhing face glistening with sweat, it seemed to take on a glow, an uncanny, greenish aura. The slack chin seemed to strengthen, to grow heavier, and in those grotesque, shriveled features burned a mad, brutal virility!

"But they caught him one night!" The cyclops' voice clattered with a harsh note of fury. A chill malaise crept over me as I stared into that terrible visage. "They caught him!" the cyclops snarled. "They caught him and drove him out! And we run, my boys and my three daughters—we run! And then——"

The great burning eye closed slowly. And as I stared in sick horror it seemed that it was not really an eye at all. No—no eye at all, but a swollen scar—a scar from whose ends stretched two finer, dead-white lines that completely encircled the base of his scalp—the mark of the scalper's knife!

"The young scound'el stabbed me!" the horror roared in a strange, deep voice—a voice that I heard as if through a vast stretch of space and time. "He stabbed me!" he screamed madly.

I stared into the sunken blank walls of flesh covering the eyesockets. And, even as I stared, they lifted and I was gazing into a pair of mad, burning, red-rimmed eyes.

The knife flashed, and before my very eyes the creature had slashed his own throat, sawing the knife back and forth until the head dropped off, hit the floor, and rolled across the boards. I stared at it as if in a dream. I remember vividly an instant of crowning horror when the head, as it came to rest on the floor, looking at me, closed one eye in a ribald wink.

How I got out of that accursed house, across the moonlit crater, up the face of the cliff, and back to civilization is a confused nightmare of terror and madness. I can recall only flashes of my mad flight—the gibing creaking of the spinning millwheel, the dull crash of some heavy object as I fled from the room—an object that brushed my coat-tails as I passed under the door-lintel—the goblin laughter of the brook, the searing pain of my hands and knees as I tore them on the cruel cliff rocks, the eery moonlight sifting through a forest . . . gasping, stum-

bling, falling, plunging forward—ever forward . . . and, by some unfathomed miracle, the vision of a road sign which read in the bright moonlight: "You are Now Entering the City of Merlin. Go slow."

I woke up the filling-station keeper. He didn't seem very surprized to see me. His jaundiced grin swept me once; then, not waiting to hear my gasping explanations, he led me to a room—the room I am writing this letter in. . . .

It's no use trying to sleep. Sleep takes me back there. . . . The eye of the cyclops . . . the bleeding head . . . the ribald wink. . . .

If all these things are but the figments of a diseased mentality then I suppose I should be put away. . . . Maybe they didn't happen. . . . Maybe I'm crazy. . . .

I see dawn breaking over the hills. As soon as it gets a bit lighter I'm going to post this letter via the first bus.

Then I'm going to get in my car and drive like mad out of this accursed country!

Faithfully yours,
ROBERT DARNLEY.

* * * * *

THE following newspaper clipping was included by Mr. Abiathar Hall with the manuscript of Mr. Darnley's letter:

May 5, 1936—The body of a man believed to be Robert Darnley, a professional art collector, was found in the wreckage of his automobile about three miles north of Merlin, Tenn. The car, which had sheared off a number of telegraph poles, had evidently been traveling at a high rate of speed. Glass from the shattered windshield had completely decapitated the body.

Omega

By HOWELL CALHOUN

I gaze upon a barren, ghostly world,
Devoid of ought but grayish, crumbling earth,
Alone, through space, in stygian void fast hurled
By some weird force. And yet, upon her girth
The pyramids of Egypt once were spread.
Whence went they? Night, the monstrous spider, now,
Web-filled, spins softly her eternal thread.

To think that once some deep-knit, throbbing brow
Conceived of floating space-ships, manned by kings,
With cargoes of sweet spices and rich gems,
Which winged toward Mars and Saturn's whirling rings;
Of foreign moons, and telescopes with stems
Abysmal. Man's dreams, buried in this run
Of tabid clay; what has Jehovah done?

The Eater of Souls

By HENRY KUTTNER

A five-minute tale of a strange entity on a distant world

THEY tell it in Bel Yarnak, in a language not of Earth, that a malignant and terrible being once dwelt in that incredible abyss named the Gray Gulf of Yarnak. Not on earth, nor on any planet that spins about any star in the skies we know, is Bel Yarnak; but beyond Betelgeuse, beyond the Giant Stars, on a green and joyous world still in its lusty youth are the towers and silver minarets of this city. Nor are the dwellers in Bel Yarnak anthropoid nor in any way man-like; yet there are fires during the long warm nights in curious hearths, and wherever in this universe there are fires there will be tales told about them, and breathless listeners to bring contentment to the heart of the teller of tales. The Sindara rules benignantly over Bel Yarnak; yet in the old days fear and doom lay like a shroud over the land, and in the Gray Gulf of Yarnak a brooding horror dwelt loathsomely. And a strange enchantment chilled the skies and hid the triple moons behind a darkened pall.

For a being had come to glut its evil hunger in the land, and those who dwelt in Bel Yarnak called it the Eater of Souls. In nowise could this being be described, for none had seen it save under circumstances which precluded the possibility of return. Yet in the gulf it brooded, and when its hunger stirred it would send forth a soundless summons, so that in tavern and temple, by fireside and in the blackness of the night some would rise slowly, with a passionless look of death upon their features, and would depart from Bel Yarnak toward the Gray Gulf. Nor would they ever return. It was said that the thing in the gulf was half a demon and half a god, and that the souls of those whom it slew served it eternally, fulfilling strange missions in the icy wastes between the stars. This being had come from the dark sun, the hydromancers said, where it had been conceived by an unholy alliance between those timeless Ancients who filter strangely between the universes and a Black Shining One of unknown origin. The necromancers said other things, but they hated the hydromancers, who were powerful then, and their rune-casting was generally discredited. Yet the Sindara listened to both schools of mages, and pondered upon his throne of chalcedony, and presently determined to set forth voluntarily to the Great Gulf of Yarnak, which was reputed to be bottomless.

The necromancers gave the Sindara curious implements made of the bones of the dead, and the hydromancers gave him intricately twisted transparent tubes of crystal, which would be useful in battling the Eater of Souls. Thereafter the necromancers and the hydromancers squatted on their haunches in the city gate and howled dismally as the Sindara rode westward on his gorlak, that fleet but repugnantly shaped reptile. After a time the Sindara discarded both the weapons of the hydromancers and the necromancers, for he was a worshipper of Vorvadoss, as had been each Sindara in his time. None might worship Vorvadoss save the Sindara of Bel Yarnak, for such is the god's command; and presently the Sindara dis-

mounted from his gorlak and prayed fervently to Vorvadoss. For a time there was no response.

Then the sands were troubled, and a whirling and dancing of mist-motes blinded the Sindara. Out of the maelstrom the god spoke thinly, and his voice was like the tinkling of countless tiny crystal goblets.

"Thou goest to doom," Vorvadoss said ominously. "But thy son sleeps in Bel Yarnak, and I shall have a worshipper when thou art vanished. Go therefore fearlessly, since god cannot conquer god, but only man who created him."

SPEAKING thus cryptically Vorvadoss withdrew, and the Sindara, after pondering, continued his journey. In time he came to that incredible abyss from which men say the nearer moon was born, and at its edge he fell prone and lay sick and shuddering, peering down into mist-shrouded emptiness. For a cold wind blew up from the gulf, and it seemed to have no bottom. Looming far in the distance he could just discern the further brink.

Clambering up the rough stones came he whom the Sindara had set out to find; he came swiftly, making use of his multiple appendages to lift himself. He was white and hairy and appallingly hideous, but his misshapen head came only to the Sindara's waist, although in girth his spidery limbs rendered a shocking illusion of hugeness. In his wake came the souls he had taken for his own; they were a plaintive whispering and stirring in the air, swooping and moaning and sighing for lost Nirvana. The Sindara drew his blade and struck at his enemy.

Of that battle sagas are still sung, for it raged along the brink for a timeless interval of eternity. In the end the Sindara was hacked and bleeding and spent, and his opponent was untouched and chuckling loathsomely. Then the demon prepared for his meal.

Into the Sindara's mind came a whisper, the thin calling of Vorvadoss. He said: "There are many kinds of flesh in the universes, and other compounds which are not flesh. Thus doth the Eater of Souls feed." And he told the Sindara of the incredible manner of that feeding, of the fusing of two beings, of the absorption of the lesser, and of the emergence therefrom of an augmented half-god, while the uncaged soul flew moaning in the train of those who served the being. Into the Sindara's mind came knowledge and with it a grim resolve. He flung wide his arms and welcomed the ghastly embrace, for Vorvadoss had also spoken of the manner in which the doom might be lifted.

The thing sprang to meet him, and an intolerable agony ground frightfully within the Sindara's bone and flesh; the citadel of his being rocked, and his soul cowered shrieking in its chamber. There on the edge of the Gray Gulf of Yarnak a monstrous fusion took place, a metamorphosis and a commingling that was blasphemous and horrible beyond all imagining. As a thing disappears in quicksand, so the being and the Sindara melted into each other's body.

Yet even in that blinding agony a sharper pain came to the Sindara as he saw across the plain the beauty of this land over which he had ruled. He thought he had never seen anything so beautiful as this green and joyous land of his, and a pain was in his heart, a sense of empty loss and an aching void which could not ever be filled. And he looked away to the black evil eyes of the Eater of Souls that were but inches away from his own, and he looked beyond the being to where cold emptiness lay gray and horrible. There were tears in his eyes and a gnawing ache in his heart for the sil-

ver minarets and towers of Bel Yarnak, that had lain naked and beautiful beneath the glowing light of the triple moons, for he should never see that place any more.

He turned his head again, and for the last time, blinded with his tears and with his doom upon him. As he leaped forward he heard a frightful despairing shriek, and then half-god and man were spinning dizzily downward, seeing the precipice rushing up past them. For Vorvadoss had said that thus, and only thus, could the spell be lifted.

And the cliff wall curved inward as it swept down, so presently it receded into the dim gray haze, and the Sindara fell in empty mist and into final unstirring darkness.

The Disinterment

By DUANE W. RIMEL

A powerful story, about a man who had been resurrected from a hideous death in the grave, only to be yoked to an even greater horror in life

I AWOKE abruptly from a horrible dream and stared wildly about. Then, seeing the high, arched ceiling and the narrow stained windows of my friend's room, a flood of uneasy revelation coursed over me; and I knew that all of Andrew's hopes had been realized. I lay supine in a large bed, the posts of which reared upward in dizzy perspective; while on vast shelves about the chamber were the familiar books and antiques I was accustomed to seeing in that secluded corner of the crumbling and ancient mansion which had formed our joint home for many years. On a table by the wall stood a huge candelabrum of early workmanship and design, and the usual light window-curtains had been replaced by hangings of somber black, which took on a faint, ghostly luster in the dying light.

I recalled forcibly the events preceding my confinement and seclusion in this veritable medieval fortress. They were not pleasant, and I shuddered anew when I remembered the couch that had held me before my tenancy of the present one —the couch that everyone supposed would be my last. Memory burned afresh regarding those hideous circumstances which had compelled me to choose between a true death and a hypothetical one—with a later re-animation by therapeutic methods known only to my comrade, Marshall Andrews. The whole thing had begun when I returned from the Orient a year before and discovered, to my utter horror, that I had contracted leprosy while abroad. I had known that I was taking grave chances in caring for my stricken brother in the Philippines, but no hint of my own affliction appeared until I returned to my native land. Andrews himself had made the discovery, and kept it from me as long as possible; but our close acquaintance soon disclosed the awful truth.

At once I was quartered in our ancient

abode atop the crags overlooking crumbling Hampdon, from whose musty halls and quaint, arched doorways I was never permitted to go forth. It was a terrible existence, with the yellow shadow hanging constantly over me; yet my friend never faltered in his faith, taking care not to contract the dread scourge, but meanwhile making life as pleasant and comfortable as possible. His widespread though somewhat sinister fame as a surgeon prevented any authority from discovering my plight and shipping me away.

It was after nearly a year of this seclusion—late in August—that Andrews decided on a trip to the West Indies—to study "native" medical methods, he said. I was left in care of venerable Simes, the household factotum. So far no outward signs of the disease had developed, and I enjoyed a tolerable though almost completely private existence during my colleague's absence. It was during this time that I read many of the tomes Andrews had acquired in the course of his twenty years as a surgeon, and learned why his reputation, though locally of the highest, was just a bit shady. For the volumes included any number of fanciful subjects hardly related to modern medical knowledge: treatises and unauthoritative articles on monstrous experiments in surgery; accounts of the bizarre effects of glandular transplantation and rejuvenation in animals and men alike; brochures on attempted brain transference, and a host of other fanatical speculations not countenanced by orthodox physicians. It appeared, too, that Andrews was an authority on obscure medicaments; some of the few books I waded through revealing that he had spent much time in chemistry and in the search for new drugs which might be used as aids in surgery. Looking back at those studies now, I find them hellishly suggestive when associated with his later experiments.

Andrews was gone longer than I expected, returning early in November, almost four months later; and when he did arrive, I was quite anxious to see him, since my condition was at last on the brink of becoming noticeable. I had reached a point where I must seek absolute privacy to keep from being discovered. But my anxiety was slight as compared with his exuberance over a certain new plan he had hatched while in the Indies—a plan to be carried out with the aid of a curious drug he had learned of from a native "doctor" in Haiti. When he explained that his idea concerned me, I became somewhat alarmed; though in my position there could be little to make my plight worse. I had, indeed, considered more than once the oblivion that would come with a revolver or a plunge from the roof to the jagged rocks below.

ON THE day after his arrival, in the seclusion of the dimly-lit study, he outlined the whole grisly scheme. He had found in Haiti a drug, the formula for which he would develop later, which induced a state of profound sleep in anyone taking it; a trance so deep that death was closely counterfeited—with all muscular reflexes, even the respiration and heartbeat, completely stilled for the time being. Andrews had, he said, seen it demonstrated on natives many times. Some of them remained somnolent for days at a time, wholly immobile and as much like death as death itself. This suspended animation, he explained further, would even pass the closest examination of any medical man. He himself, according to all known laws, would have to report as dead a man under the influence of such a drug. He stated, too, that the subject's body assumed the precise appearance of a corpse—even a

slight *rigor mortis* developing in prolonged cases.

For some time his purpose did not seem wholly clear, but when the full import of his words became apparent I felt weak and nauseated. Yet in another way I was relieved; for the thing meant at least a partial escape from my curse, an escape from the banishment and shame of an ordinary death of the dread leprosy. Briefly, his plan was to administer a strong dose of the drug to me and call the local authorities, who would immediately pronounce me dead, and see that I was buried within a very short while. He felt assured that with their careless examination they would fail to notice my leprosy symptoms, which in truth had hardly appeared. Only a trifle over fifteen months had passed since I had caught the disease, whereas the corruption takes seven years to run its entire course.

Later, he said, would come resurrection. After my interment in the family graveyard—beside my centuried dwelling and barely a quarter-mile from his own ancient pile—the appropriate steps would be taken. Finally, when my estate was settled and my decease widely known, he would secretly open the tomb and bring me to his own abode again, still alive and none the worse for my adventure. It seemed a ghastly and daring plan, but to me it offered the only hope for even a partial freedom; so I accepted his proposition, but not without a myriad of misgivings. What if the effect of the drug should wear off while I was in my tomb? What if the coroner should discover the awful ruse, and fail to inter me? These were some of the hideous doubts which assailed me before the experiment. Though death would have been a release from my curse, I feared it even worse than the yellow scourge; feared it even when I could see its black wings constantly hovering over me.

FORTUNATELY I was spared the horror of viewing my own funeral and burial rites. They must, however, have gone just as Andrews had planned, even to the subsequent disinterment; for after the initial dose of the poison from Haiti I lapsed into a semi-paralytic state and from that to a profound, night-black sleep. The drug had been administered in my room, and Andrews had told me before giving it that he would recommend to the coroner a verdict of heart failure due to nerve strain. Of course, there was no embalming—Andrews saw to that—and the whole procedure, leading up to my secret transportation from the graveyard to his crumbling manor, covered a period of three days. Having been buried late in the afternoon of the third day, my body was secured by Andrews that very night. He had replaced the fresh sod just as it had been when the workmen left. Old Simes, sworn to secrecy, had helped Andrews in his ghoulish task.

Later I had lain for over a week in my old familiar bed. Owing to some unexpected effect of the drug, my whole body was completely paralyzed, so that I could move my head only slightly. All my senses, however, were fully alert, and by another week's time I was able to take nourishment in good quantities. Andrews explained that my body would gradually regain its former sensibilities; though owing to the presence of the leprosy it might take considerable time. He seemed greatly interested in analyzing my daily symptoms, and always asked if there was any feeling present in my body.

Many days passed before I was able to control any part of my anatomy, and much longer before the paralysis crept from my enfeebled limbs so that I could

feel the ordinary bodily reactions. Lying and staring at my numb hulk was like having it injected with a perpetual anesthetic. There was a total alienation I could not understand, considering that my head and neck were quite alive and in good health.

Andrews explained that he had revived my upper half first and could not account for the complete bodily paralysis; though my condition seemed to trouble him little considering the damnably intent interest he centered upon my reactions and stimuli from the very beginning. Many times during lulls in our conversation I would catch a strange gleam in his eyes as he viewed me on the couch—a glint of victorious exultation which, queerly enough, he never voiced aloud; though he seemed to be quite glad that I had run the gauntlet of death and had come through alive. Still, there was that horror I was to meet in less than six years, which added to my desolation and melancholy during the tedious days in which I awaited the return of normal bodily functions. But I would be up and about, he assured me, before very long, enjoying an existence few men had ever experienced. The words did not, however, impress me with their true and ghastly meaning until many days later.

During that awful siege in bed Andrews and I became somewhat estranged. He no longer treated me so much like a friend as like an implement in his skilled and greedy fingers. I found him possessed of unexpected traits—little examples of baseness and cruelty, apparent even to the hardened Simes, which disturbed me in a most unusual manner. Often he would display extraordinary cruelty to live specimens in his laboratory, for he was constantly carrying on various hidden projects in glandular and muscular transplantation on guinea-pigs and rabbits. He had also been employing his newly discovered sleeping-potion in curious experiments with suspended animation. But of these things he told me very little; though old Simes often let slip chance comments which shed some light on the proceedings. I was not certain how much the old servant knew, but he had surely learned considerable, being a constant companion to both Andrews and myself.

With the passage of time, a slow but consistent feeling began creeping into my disabled body; and at the reviving symptoms Andrews took a fanatical interest in my case. He still seemed more coldly analytical than sympathetic toward me, taking my pulse and heart-beat with more than usual zeal. Occasionally, in his fevered examinations, I saw his hands tremble slightly—an uncommon sight with so skilled a surgeon—but he seemed oblivious of my scrutiny. I was never allowed even a momentary glimpse of my full body, but with the feeble return of the sense of touch, I was aware of a bulk and heaviness which at first seemed awkward and unfamiliar.

GRADUALLY I regained the use of my hands and arms; and with the passing of the paralysis came a new and terrible sensation of physical estrangement. My limbs had difficulty in following the commands of my mind, and every movement was jerky and uncertain. So clumsy were my hands, that I had to become accustomed to them all over again. This must, I thought, be due to my disease and the advance of the contagion in my system. Being unaware of how the early symptoms affected the victim (my brother's being a more advanced case), I had no means of judging; and since Andrews shunned the subject, I deemed it better to remain silent.

One day I asked Andrews—I no longer considered him a friend—if I

might try rising and sitting up in bed. At first he objected strenuously, but later, after cautioning me to keep the blankets well up around my chin so that I would not be chilled, he permitted it. This seemed strange, in view of the comfortable temperature. Now that late autumn was slowly turning into winter, the room was always well heated. A growing chilliness at night, and occasional glimpses of a leaden sky through the window, had told me of the changing season; for no calendar was ever in sight upon the dingy walls. With the gentle help of Simes I was eased to a sitting position, Andrews coldly watching from the door to the laboratory. At my success a slow smile spread across his leering features, and he turned to disappear from the darkened doorway. His mood did nothing to improve my condition. Old Simes, usually so regular and consistent, was now often late in his duties, sometimes leaving me alone for hours at a time.

The terrible sense of alienation was heightened by my new position. It seemed that the legs and arms inside my gown were hardly able to follow the summoning of my mind, and it became mentally exhausting to continue movement for any length of time. My fingers, wofully clumsy, were wholly unfamiliar to my inner sense of touch, and I wondered vaguely if I were to be accursed the rest of my days with an awkwardness induced by my dread malady.

It was on the evening following my half-recovery that the dreams began. I was tormented not only at night but during the day as well. I would awaken, screaming horribly, from some frightful nightmare I dared not think about outside the realm of sleep. These dreams consisted mainly of ghoulish things; graveyards at night, stalking corpses, and lost souls amid a chaos of blinding light and shadow. The terrible *reality* of the visions disturbed me most of all: it seemed that some *inside* influence was inducing the grisly vistas of moonlit tombstones and endless catacombs of the restless dead. I could not place their source; and at the end of a week I was quite frantic with abominable thoughts which seemed to obtrude themselves upon my unwelcome consciousness.

By that time a slow plan was forming whereby I might escape the living hell into which I had been propelled. Andrews cared less and less about me, seeming intent only on my progress and growth and recovery of normal muscular reactions. I was becoming every day more convinced of the nefarious doings going on in that laboratory across the threshold—the animal cries were shocking, and rasped hideously on my overwrought nerves. And I was gradually beginning to think that Andrews had not saved me from deportation solely for my own benefit, but for some accursed reason of his own. Simes' attention was slowly becoming slighter and slighter, and I was convinced that the aged servitor had a hand in the deviltry somewhere. Andrews no longer eyed me as a friend, but as an object of experimentation; nor did I like the way he fingered his scalpel when he stood in the narrow doorway and stared at me with crafty alertness. I had never before seen such a transformation come over any man. His ordinarily handsome features were now lined and whisker-grown, and his eyes gleamed as if some imp of Satan were staring from them. His cold, calculating gaze made me shudder horribly, and gave me a fresh determination to free myself from his bondage as soon as possible.

I had lost track of time during my dream-orgy, and had no way of knowing how fast the days were passing. The curtains were often drawn in the daytime,

the room being lit by waxen cylinders in the large candelabrum. It was a nightmare of living horror and unreality; though through it all I was gradually becoming stronger. I always gave careful responses to Andrews' inquiries concerning my returning physical control, concealing the fact that a new life was vibrating through me with every passing day—an altogether strange sort of strength, but one which I was counting on to serve me in the coming crisis.

FINALLY, one chilly evening when the candles had been extinguished, and a pale shaft of moonlight fell through the dark curtains upon my bed, I determined to rise and carry out my plan of action. There had been no movement from either of my captors for several hours, and I was confident that both were asleep in adjoining bedchambers. Shifting my cumbersome weight carefully, I rose to a sitting position and crawled cautiously out of bed, down upon the floor. A vertigo gripped me momentarily, and a wave of weakness flooded my entire being. But finally strength returned, and by clutching at a bed-post I was able to stand upon my feet for the first time in many months. Gradually a new strength coursed through me, and I donned the dark robe which I had seen hanging on a near-by chair. It was quite long, but served as a cloak over my night-dress. Again came that feeling of awful unfamiliarity which I had experienced in bed; that sense of alienation, and of difficulty in making my limbs perform as they should. But there was need for haste before my feeble strength might give out. As a last precaution in dressing, I slipped some old shoes over my feet; but though I could have sworn they were my own, they seemed abnormally loose, so that I decided they must belong to the aged Simes.

Seeing no other heavy objects in the room, I seized from the table the huge candelabrum, upon which the moon shone with a pallid glow, and proceeded very quietly toward the laboratory door.

My first steps came jerkily and with much difficulty, and in the semi-darkness I was unable to make my way very rapidly. When I reached the threshold, a glance within revealed my former friend seated in a large overstuffed chair; while beside him was a smoking-stand upon which were assorted bottles and a glass. He reclined half-way in the moonlight through the large window, and his greasy features were creased in a drunken smirk. An opened book lay in his lap—one of the hideous tomes from his private library.

For a long moment I gloated over the prospect before me, and then, stepping forward suddenly, I brought the heavy weapon down upon his unprotected head. The dull crunch was followed by a spurt of blood, and the fiend crumpled to the floor, his head laid half open. I felt no contrition at taking the man's life in such a manner. In the hideous, half-visible specimens of his surgical wizardry scattered about the room in various stages of completion and preservation, I felt there was enough evidence to blast his soul without my aid. Andrews had gone too far in his practises to continue living, and as one of his monstrous specimens—of that I was now hideously certain—it was my duty to exterminate him.

Simes, I realized, would be no such easy matter; indeed, only unusual good fortune had caused me to find Andrews unconscious. When I finally reeled up to the servant's bedchamber door, faint from exhaustion, I knew it would take all my remaining strength to complete the ordeal.

The old man's room was in utmost darkness, being on the north side of the

structure, but he must have seen me silhouetted in the doorway as I came in. He screamed hoarsely, and I aimed the candelabrum at him from the threshold. It struck something soft, making a sloughing sound in the darkness; but the screaming continued. From that time on events became hazy and jumbled together, but I remember grappling with the man and choking the life from him little by little. He gibbered a host of awful things before I could lay hands on him—cried and begged for mercy from my clutching fingers. I hardly realized my own strength in that mad moment which left Andrews' associate in a condition like his own.

RETREATING from the darkened chamber, I stumbled for the stairway door, sagged through it, and somehow reached the landing below. No lamps were burning, and my only light was a filtering of moonbeams coming from the narrow windows in the hall. But I made my jerky way over the cold, damp slabs of stone, reeling from the terrible weakness of my exertion, and reached the front door after ages of fumbling and crawling about in the darkness.

Vague memories and haunting shadows came to taunt me in that ancient hallway; shadows once friendly and understandable, but now grown alien and unrecognizable, so that I stumbled down the worn steps in a frenzy of something more than fear. For a moment I stood in the shadow of the giant stone manor, viewing the moonlit trail down which I must go to reach the home of my forefathers, only a quarter of a mile distant. But the way seemed long, and for a while I despaired of ever traversing the whole of it.

At last I grasped a piece of dead wood as a cane and set out down the winding road. Ahead, seemingly only a few rods away in the moonlight, stood the venerable mansion where my ancestors had lived and died. Its turrets rose spectrally in the shimmering radiance, and the black shadow cast on the beetling hillside appeared to shift and waver, as if belonging to a castle of unreal substance. There stood the monument of half a century; a haven for all my family old and young, which I had deserted many years ago to live with the fanatical Andrews. It stood empty on that fateful night, and I hope that it may always remain so.

In some manner I reached the aged place; though I do not remember the last half of the journey at all. It was enough to be near the family cemetery, among whose moss-covered and crumbling stones I would seek the oblivion I had desired. As I approached the moonlit spot the old familiarity—so absent during my abnormal existence—returned to plague me in a wholly unexpected way. I drew close to my own tombstone, and the feeling of homecoming grew stronger; with it came a fresh flood of that awful sense of alienation and disembodiment which I knew so well. I was satisfied that the end was drawing near; nor did I stop to analyze emotions till a little later, when the full horror of my position burst upon me.

Intuitively I knew my own tombstone; for the grass had scarcely begun to grow between the pieces of sod. With feverish haste I began clawing at the mound, and scraping the wet earth from the hole left by the removal of the grass and roots. How long I worked in the nitrous soil before my fingers struck the coffin-lid, I can never say; but sweat was pouring from me and my nails were but useless, bleeding hooks.

At last I threw out the last bit of loose earth, and with trembling fingers tugged on the heavy lid. It gave a trifle; and I was prepared to lift it completely open

when a fetid and nauseous odor assailed my nostrils. I started erect, horrified. Had some idiot placed my tombstone on the wrong grave, causing me to unearth another body? For surely there could be no mistaking that awful stench. Gradually a hideous uncertainty came over me and I scrambled from the hole. One look at the newly made headpiece was enough. This was indeed my own grave . . . but what fool had buried within it another corpse?

All at once a bit of the unspeakable truth propelled itself upon my brain. The odor, in spite of its putrescence, seemed somehow familiar—horribly *familiar*. . . . Yet I could not credit my senses with such an idea. Reeling and cursing, I fell into the black cavity once more, and by the aid of a hastily lit match, lifted the long lid completely open. Then the light went out, as if extinguished by a malignant hand, and I clawed my way out of that accursed pit, screaming in a frenzy of fear and loathing.

WHEN I regained consciousness I was lying before the door of my own ancient manor, where I must have crawled after that hideous rendezvous in the family cemetery. I realized that dawn was close at hand, and rose feebly, opening the aged portal before me and entering the place which had known no footsteps for over a decade. A fever was ravaging my weakened body, so that I was hardly able to stand, but I made my way slowly through the musty, dimly-lit chambers and staggered into my own study—the study I had deserted so many years before.

When the sun has risen, I shall go to the ancient well beneath the old willow tree by the cemetery and cast my deformed *self* into it. No other man shall ever view this blasphemy which has survived life longer than it should have. I do not know what people will say when they see my disordered grave, but this will not trouble me if I can find oblivion from that which I beheld amidst the crumbling, moss-crusted stones of the hideous place.

I know now why Andrews was so secretive in his actions; so damnably gloating in his attitude toward me after my artificial death. He had meant me for a specimen all the time—a specimen of his greatest feat of surgery, his masterpiece of unclean witchery . . . an example of perverted artistry for him alone to see. Where Andrews obtained that *other* with which I lay accursed in his moldering mansion I shall probably never know; but I am afraid that it was brought from Haiti along with his fiendish medicine. At least these long hairy arms and horrible short legs are alien to me . . . alien to all natural and sane laws of mankind. The thought that I shall be tortured with that *other* during the rest of my brief existence is another hell.

Now I can but wish for that which once was mine; that which every man blessed of God ought to have at death; that which I saw in that awful moment in the ancient burial ground when I raised the lid on the coffin—my own shrunken, decayed, and headless body.

The House on Fifth Avenue

By DURBIN LEE HORNER

Who were these grisly guests, who sat around the table in that strange house like ghastly specters?

HEAVEN knows it was a simple enough beginning. Helen and I were strolling up Fifth Avenue. It was terribly hot, and now that I recall, I was puzzled as to why we were remaining in town. It occurred to me that we had accepted an invitation to spend the week-end on Commodore Fowler's yacht, and here we were foolishly spending the hot evening in town. I wondered who had sent our regrets to the Commodore, and what our excuse was for not going. As a matter of fact, the more I thought about it the more confused I became. I could have sworn that we had actually started out for the Fowlers' Long Island estate; but here we were, suddenly, in the center of a sweltering city. I couldn't make it out.

As I say, we were making our way up Fifth Avenue. We had just crossed Forty-Second street, and were traveling uptown, on the west side of the street. Here, of course, the tall office buildings stand wall to wall without a break, and there is no private residence for blocks.

I was therefore completely thunderstruck when Helen stopped and informed me that we had reached our destination. In the first place, I had no idea that we had a destination; and in the second place, my senses were paralyzed at the realization that we had stopped before an old-fashioned Avenue residence of red brick and brown stone with high front steps and large lace-curtained windows.

I brushed my forehead. Perhaps the heat had played a trick on me. If so, I must have been walking by Helen's side in a state of trance for some time, for a quick glance around me showed that I was in a neighborhood totally strange to me.

Helen had suddenly acquired an uneasy restlessness. She impatiently tugged at my arm, and pointed upward to the heavy double doors which gave entrance to the unfamiliar house. I obeyed her gesture and followed her up the steps. Climbing, I received still another shock of surprize when I noticed that two panes of a front window were broken, and that others were covered with thick accumulations of dust.

Arriving at the top of the steps, I received another jolt of surprize. Helen did not ring, but walked right in. The doors had noiselessly opened as we approached them, and together Helen and I entered. I looked in vain for a servant who should receive us.

Then it was made plain to me that Helen had conducted me to some home where she was accepted as a member of the family; for she walked on without hesitation, straight ahead through a wide hall, and this despite the fact that the windowless hall, unlit, was so dark that

I must have stumbled over chairs and tables if I had not followed closely in Helen's steps. My passing glances to right and left showed me only indistinctly the faces that looked down out of the frames of old portraits on the walls.

At this point in the proceedings, however, I began to get a glimmer of light, and my feelings of oppression and anxiety began to give way to a sense of fun and adventure.

I HAD met and loved Helen during a hectic summer in Newport, which I was spending in the company of a group of wealthy idlers. I was an outsider in this company myself, being a laboring writer with questionable success, submitting to the patronage I cynically guessed gave my friends diversion, if not outright amusement. So it had been with real fear that I yielded to the fascination I had felt from the moment I first met Helen. I supposed that she was one of the sort in whose company I had found her. To my delight, she showed herself to be as much an alien in this social sphere as I myself, though not, like me, a penniless intruder. She was, in short, a child of that little tradition-bound circle of well-bred New Yorkers, fussy in their exclusiveness, which counts breeding a greater asset than wealth.

Helen was as powerfully drawn to me as I was to her. And her first avowal of love was followed by fears that her marriage to a penniless writer, with no family background, would be opposed by her people.

"But let me manage it, dear," she had told me. "I'll bring them around, somehow, even though it takes a little handling. Only I won't present you to them until the stage is all set."

So, entering the musty old mansion, I now came to the conclusion that Helen planned to present me to some of the most hide-bound and cloistered of the relatives she had often amusingly described to me. I ascribed her mysterious manner to some little plan she had concocted to make the incident a surprize, and I decided to be on my best behavior.

In this lightened frame of mind, I followed mute Helen up a broad staircase to the second floor, not failing to make mental note in passing, that these people, though they might boast Colonial forebears, could not boast of their housekeeping, which was shocking. There was a cushion of dust on every object I touched.

As soon as we put foot on the second landing, I was aware of sounds of revelry coming from a room which I correctly judged to be the dining-room of the house. The heavy oaken doors of this chamber were slightly ajar, and through the aperture was cast a strong beam of light that fell full upon an object that startled me for an instant. It was a headless human figure!

I tried to cry out and draw Helen away from the gruesome sight, but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and I seemed powerless to raise my arms to restrain her. Helen, on the other hand, seemed not to notice anything untoward. My heart was pounding like a trip-hammer, and perspiration bathed my face. All my old feelings of fear and oppression returned to me; and even when I saw, at closer range, that the figure was nothing but a suit of old armor, I did not breathe any easier.

As we approached the doors, I heard laughter and the clinking of glasses. In another moment, I found myself in the large and brilliantly lighted festive room. If the rest of the mansion was dark, there certainly was no lack of illumination here. I was fairly dazzled by the numerous lights, thrown by candles arranged in clusters, not only in the regiment of hold-

ers on the tables and sideboards, but in the cut-glass sconces and the enormous crystal chandelier overhead. It struck me as odd that our hosts should have elected this outmoded arrangement for lighting. But then, everything about this dusty old mansion was odd.

To my astonishment, not one of the persons gathered around the table seemed to take the slightest notice of our entrance, although we were very late. We seated ourselves at places which apparently had been set for us, although how Helen knew all this was beyond me. I was decidedly ill at ease. Almost immediately we were served with soup.

I hastily sipped a few spoonfuls and noted it was insipid stuff—had indeed no flavor at all. I leaned to whisper to Helen, but she touched her finger to her lips and I understood that I was not to speak.

I put down my spoon and began to study my fellow diners. At once I saw that we had been bidden to a costume dress affair, and again wished to ask Helen why she had not mentioned this beforehand so that we might have come dressed accordingly. However, she seemed unperturbed, so I dismissed the matter. I began to study my companions in more detail.

Opposite me was a veritable caricature of a bedizened old Eighteenth Century beldame, clad in white silk cut alarmingly low in the neck. She also wore camellias in her hair, which I recalled was a fashion of long ago.

She suddenly emitted a high cackle and leaned across the board to scream:

"How's that old skinny shanks, your grandfather? I know him well. I come from Philadelphia, too."

This was a strange leading question from my soon-to-be-in-laws; and I was so astounded that I could not form an answer. Furthermore, I could only have told the crack-brained old lady that my grandfather had died before I was born.

My glance traveled down the table and found no face that was familiar until it stopped at a handsome, sad-faced young man who reminded me strongly of someone I knew, or had known well. I cudgeled my brain for a clue to his identity and in so doing brought my eyes back to my plate, and then stole a quick glance into Helen's eyes. I let my fork drop in amazement.

"My brother," she said, and swiftly averted her face.

I couldn't figure it out. In discussing her family, Helen had never mentioned a living brother.

My round of inspection ended with our hostess. She was a handsome woman, with a gorgeous figure. Very regal, with dark skin and velvety black eyes, she resembled a Spanish queen. An elderly man of great distinction, obviously a foreigner, sat at her left and engaged her in conversation.

Beyond her beauty, however, there was another quality about our hostess that held me. She seemed to have an understanding, and grave and tolerant wisdom, that was lacking in the rest of the company. They, although courteous enough to each other, seemed curiously distrait, and were all noticeably engaged with their own thoughts. They all seemed to be under some kind of uneasy spell; and, moreover, no one seemed to be quite aware of what exactly constituted the menace that hung over them.

Only our hostess seemed to be the custodian of the secret which was vaguely sensed by the others.

I was about to intrude upon the conversation between the hostess and the foreigner, when a fresh unconventional incident distracted me.

A footman was at my elbow, offering me a telegram on a little tray.

"Are you Mr. Paul Brennan?" he asked.

"My name is Brennan, but not Paul," I answered, and was about to turn away, when a thought stayed me. I knew no one by the name of Paul Brennan, now that my father was dead. But someone who had known our family slightly, and had forgotten that I had been christened "Saul," might have so addressed this telegram, meant for me.

I took it from the tray and opened it. My head reeled as I read:

> Dear Paul: Your son, Saul, and Helen Gibson, his fiancée, died this morning.
> FRANK GIBSON.

MY FIRST reaction was pure rage. I turned to Helen and showed her the message.

"I don't know what kind of a practical joke this is, but this carries it too far. Some idiot thinks it's funny to telegraph me in your father's name that you are dead."

To my horror, my words, which had carried around the table, brought forth a burst of cackling laughter which traveled around the table and reverberated in the corners of the rooms. And what mirth it was! Horrible paroxysms of empty, shrill howls and jeers! I pray Heaven I may never hear it again.

I waited until it subsided and then asked as calmly as my rage would permit me:

"May I ask what this means?"

Dead silence was my answer. I felt every eye upon me. Strangely enough, I felt that they were all pitying me. My hair rose. In anguish, I turned to Helen, sought to touch her. But she averted her face and shrank from my hands.

Still that terrible silence. Then, suddenly, the old lady with the camellias in her hair broke it with an affected giggle.

"And why, young man, do you think that your Helen isn't dead?" she demanded.

I stared at her. "Are you out of your senses, madam? Why should I think she is dead?"

The old beldame cackled on a scale that was supposed to be musical and retorted:

"Well, ask her yourself whether or not she's dead."

The room was reeling around me. The obscenity of the whole situation bore down on me with deadly weight. My mouth was dry.

"Why, of course, she's dead," put in a gentleman with a red nose. "What would she be doing here if she weren't?"

"Of course—of course. We're all dead," twittered the other guests in chorus.

"This is more than madness!" I exclaimed. "You all seem to have such a rare sense of humor. Perhaps you'd like to go a bit further—and tell me that I myself am dead!"

The jeering laughter that greeted this remark was even more derisive than before. It began with a titter and spread until the whole table was in an uproar. The old beldame threw herself back in her chair and chortled until the tears came.

My reason seemed to snap, and I groped frantically for Helen's hand. This time she surrendered it. Her fingers, normally so pliant and responsive, were stiff and icy in my grasp.

She turned sorrowful eyes to mine and leaned to whisper:

"Don't, Saul—don't suffer too much. I've known it for the last hour. You and I died when we——"

The rest of her speech was lost in a sudden burst of that repulsive hilarity of

the other guests. All about me was bedlam. I looked around for some means of escape, but the noisy cacklers hemmed me in. In desperation, I turned to my hostess.

"Why are we here?" I pleaded. "What does all this mean? Is it true what they say?"

She nodded sympathetically, and as she spoke, the hilarity of the others died down.

"We are here because we all happen to have some social link, remote or near, with the former occupants of this house —this former house, I should say; for this is the ghost of the home of the ghosts of a couple who died years ago."

I stammered: "Then the house—too —is not real?"

The foreigner seated beyond my hostess bent forward and began a grave harangue.

"Call this house real, or call it immaterial. Those phrases mean nothing to us," he expounded. "It frequently happens, of course, that a building is erected on ground previously occupied by some other structure. You must understand that the material parts of a dwelling may be removed at any time, but its astral shell will remain. Thus the ghosts of many houses may remain on a site occupied by a new and substantial structure. They are none the less real for being unseen by living eyes."

This might have gone on and on, but was interrupted by a noisy outburst from the gentleman with the pink nose, whose convivial spirits seemed to have struck a snag. I saw the irritated gentleman, who freely punctured his actions with oaths, pour himself a half a goblet of sherry. He called for brandy, with which he filled the goblet to the brim. Muttering angrily, he seized a caster of red pepper, unscrewed the lid, and dumped the whole contents into the mixture he had made. He stirred up the mess, closed his eyes, and drank it in one gulp.

I EXPECTED to see him spit and gag. Instead, he paused with eyes tightly closed for a moment and then opened them wide. I have never seen such disappointment. I thought he was about to cry.

"It has no taste, no pep," he mourned. "I'd give my right eye for one good shot of whisky."

My hostess leaned toward me.

"That is the way with pleasures in the afterworld," she said. "They do not exist. Sometimes one of us rebels. It is pathetic—and useless. The trouble is that our old habits survive, but the wisdom of death deprives us of the imagination to enjoy them."

"But you"—I interrupted her—"you do not seem to rebel as do the others——"

She shook her head gravely and explained simply:

"I am more fortunate than most. You see, I was unhappy during my lifetime in the flesh. Here I find contentment." At the dreadful implication of these words, I leaped from my seat.

"But I" — I shouted — "I cannot accept—I will not accept unhappiness. There is one bliss that nothing can take from me!"

I cried my beloved's name. "Helen, come here!"

She walked slowly toward me, almost unwillingly, it seemed to me. I was so wild with grief, terror and desperation, I did not notice the sadness of Helen's eyes—sadness which should have warned me against what I was about to do.

"Kiss me, Helen," I commanded. "Kiss me and defy this madness. We will never accept!"

I opened my arms.

Behind me someone screamed derisively.

"Come here! The lovers are going to kiss!"

They swarmed about us, pressed in on us, leering and cackling. They held their sides in hysterical laughter. I closed my ears to their insane giggling, and drew Helen to me in frantic desperation. Her head was lowered, and she did not wish to respond to my caress. But I was not to be denied. I forced her head back. As my lips neared hers a look of infinite sadness came over her and she closed her eyes.

And then we kissed. A sensation of utter horror shot through me. Instead of feeling her soft, full lips on mine, I felt as if bone were pressed against bone. Our teeth met and scraped together harshly. It was as if our lips were not there.

I felt my senses slipping from me. I had the confused impression that the timbers and rafters were buckling, and roaring in on us. The table rocked; the jeering laughter roared in my ears. The lights in the holders flickered, grew dim, and all was darkness and cold. . . .

I WAS revived from our immersion in the waters of Long Island Sound some minutes before Helen opened her eyes. I learned what had happened. Helen had fallen overboard during our excursion with our yachting friends, and at a moment when the yacht was steaming swiftly on its course. Fortunately, I had seen her fall and had dived to her rescue. But the reversing of the yacht's course and the arrival of aid had taken some time and I, who am not an expert swimmer, went down with my unconscious burden. Now we were back on the yacht's deck, literally returned from the home of the dead. How literally? I wondered. Was the whole of the ghastly experience in the mansion of ghosts which I still remembered in such vivid detail a fantasy spun by my subconscious brain while I struggled in the water?

I had some moments for consecutive thought. Thank God I did. I was in complete command of my faculties when Helen opened her eyes. The first thing they met were mine. I read in them a message of horror—recent horror—and I knew what it was. Instantly I was on my guard for the question I knew would come.

Her whole soul was in the words: "Tell me—did you feel that kiss?"

I hope and am convinced that I betrayed no sign.

"What kiss?" I blankly returned. "Did you dream something, dear?"

The Eighth Green Man*

By G. G. PENDARVES

"DANGEROUS road, huh!" Nicholas Birkett slowed down and frowned at the battered old sign-post. "I'll take a chance, anyhow!"

"I should try another road," I said abruptly.

"But this one leads right down to the valley, and will save at least ten miles round."

"It's a dangerous road—very dangerous," I answered, with the conviction growing fast within me that the sign-post gave only a faint inkling of the deadly peril it guarded.

Birkett stared at me, his big brown hands resting on the steering-wheel. "What d'ye know about the road, anyhow?" he asked, his round blue eyes blank with amazement. "You've never been this way in your life before!"

I hesitated. My name is famous in more than one continent as that of an explorer, and I had recently achieved an expedition across the Sahara Desert which had added immensely to my fame. In fact, it was my lecture on this expedition, given in New York, that had brought about my friendship with Nicholas Birkett. He had introduced himself and carried me off to stay with him at his country estate in Connecticut, in a whirlwind of enthusiastic interest and admiration.

How could I make my companion understand the shuddering fear that gripped me? I—Raoul Suliman d'Abre—to whom the face of Death was as familiar as my own.

But it was not Death that confronted us on that road marked "Dangerous" . . . something far less kind and merciful!

Not for nothing am I the son of a French soldier and an Arab woman. Not for nothing was I born in Algeria and grew up amidst the mysteries and magic of Africa. Not for nothing have I learnt in pain and terror that the walls of this visible world are frail and thin—too frail, too thin, alas! For there are times—there are places when the barrier is broken . . . when monstrous unspeakable Evil enters and dwells familiarly amongst us.

"Well!" My companion grew impatient, and began to move the car's nose toward the road on our left.

"I'm sorry," I answered. "The truth

*From WEIRD TALES for March, 1928.

is . . . it's a bit difficult to explain . . . but I have my reasons—very strong reasons—for not wishing to go down this particular road. I *know*—don't ask me how—that it's horribly dangerous. It would be a madness—a sin to take that way!"

"But look here, old chap, you can't mean that you . . . that . . . that you're only imagining things about it?" His face was quite laughable in its astonishment.

I was frightfully embarrassed. How explain to such a rank materialist as Nicholas Birkett that instinct alone warned me against that road? How make a man so insensitive and practical believe in any danger he could not see or handle? He believed in neither God nor Devil! He had only a passionate belief in himself, his wealth, his business acumen, and above all, the physical perfection that went to make his life easy and pleasant.

"There are so many things you do not understand," I said slowly. "I am too old a campaigner to be ashamed of acknowledging that there are some dangers I think it foolhardy to face. This road is one of them!"

"But what in thunder do *you* know of the damned road?" Birkett's big fresh-colored face turned a brick-red in his angry impatience. Then he cooled down suddenly and put a heavy hand on my knee. "You're ill, old chap! Touch of malaria, I suppose! Excuse my being so damned hasty."

I shook my head. "You won't or can't understand me. The truth is that I feel the strongest aversion from that path, and I beg you not to take it."

Birkett looked me in the eye and began to argue. He settled down to it solidly. I had nothing to back my arguments except my intuition, and such a flimsy nothing as this he demolished with his big hearty laugh, and a heavy elephantine humor that reduced me to a helpless silence.

Opposition always narrowed Birkett down to one idea, that of proving himself right; and at last I said, "This is more dangerous for you than for me. I am prepared . . . I know how to guard myself from attack, but you——"

"That settles it," he interrupted, gripping the wheel and shooting forward with a jerk. "I can look after myself." His cheerful bellow echoed hollowly as the car dived into the leafy roadway under a branching archway of trees.

2

BIRKETT became more and more boisterous in his mirth as we sped along, for the road continued smooth and virtually straight, descending in a gentle slope to the Naugatuck valley.

"Dangerous road!" he said, with a prolonged chuckle; "I'll bet a china orange to a monkey that sign means a good long drink. Look out for an innocent little roadhouse tucked away down here. Dangerous road! I suppose that's the latest way of advertising the stuff."

It was useless to remonstrate, but I noticed many things I didn't like along that broad leafy lane.

No living creature moved there—no bird sang—no stir of wings broke the silence of the listening trees—not even a fly moved across our path.

Behind us we had left a world of life, of movement and color. Here all was green and silent. The dark columns of the tree-trunks shut us in like the massive bars of a prison.

Shadows moved softly across the pale, dusty road ahead; shadows that clustered in strange groups about us; shadows not cast by cloud or sun or moving object in our path, for these shadows had no relation to things natural or human.

I knew them! I knew them, and shuddered to recognize their hateful presence.

"You're a queer fellow, d'Abre," my companion rallied me. "You'd waltz out on a camel to meet a horde of yelling, bloodthirsty ruffians in the desert, and thoroughly enjoy the game. Yet here in a civilized country, you see danger in a peaceful hillside! You certainly are a wonder!"

"Inshallah!" I murmured under my breath. "It is more wonderful that man can be so blind!"

"Are you muttering curses?" Birkett showed white teeth in a flashing grin at my discomfiture. "I suppose it's the Arab half of you that invents these ghosts and devils. Life in the desert must need a few imaginary excitements. But in this country it needs something more than imagination to produce a really lively sort of devil. Something with a good kick to it."

Suddenly, ahead of us, the trees began to thin out, and we caught a glimpse of a low white building to our left. Birkett was triumphant.

"What did I tell you?" he cried. "Here I am leading you straight to a perfectly good drink, and you sit there babbling of death and disaster!"

He stopped the car before a short flight of mossy steps; from the top of them we stood and looked at the house, glimmering palely in the dusky shade of many tall trees.

A flagged path led from where we stood to the house—a straight white path about fifty yards in length. On each side of it the tall, rank grass, dotted with trees and shrubs, stretched back to the verge of the encroaching forest. And within this spacious, park-like enclosure the distant house looked dwarfed and mean—a sort of fungus sprouting at the foot of the stately trees.

Birkett, undeterred by the menacing gloom of the whole place, cupped his hands about his mouth and gave a joyful shout, which echoed and died into heavy silence once more.

"Not expecting visitors," he grinned. "This is a midnight joint, I'll wager. Come on."

At that moment we saw a sign at our elbow—a freshly painted sign—the lettering in a vivid luminous green on a black ground. It read:

"THE SEVEN GREEN MEN."

3

"SEVEN Green Men, hey! Don't see 'em," said Birkett, moving up the pathway. I followed, looking round intently, every nerve in me sending to my brain its warning thrill of naked, overwhelming terror crouching on every hand, ready to spring, ready to destroy us body and soul.

Then, suddenly I saw them! . . . and my heart gave a great leap in my body. They faced us as we approached the house, their grim silhouettes sharp and distinct against the white roadhouse behind.

The Seven Green Men!

"Gee!" said Birkett. "Will you look at those trees? Seven Green Men! What d'you think about that?"

In two stiff rows before the house they stood, each one cut and trimmed to the height of a tall man. Their foliage was dense and unlike that of any tree or shrub I had seen in all my wanderings. A few feet away, their overlapping leaves gave all the illusion of metal, and seven tall warriors seemed to stand in rank before us, their armor green with age and disuse.

Each figure faced the west, presenting its left side to us; each bared head was that of a man shaved to the scalp; each profile was cut with marvelous cunning, and each was distinct and characteristic;

the one thing in common was the eyelid, which in every profile appeared closed in sleep.

And when I say *sleep,* I mean just that.

They could awaken, those Seven Green Men! . . . they could awaken to life and action; their roots were not planted in the kindly earth, but thrust down deep into hell itself.

"The Seven Green Men! Well, what d'you think of that for an idea?" And my companion planted his feet firmly apart, clasped his hands behind his broad back, and gazed in puzzled admiration at the trees. "Some gardener here, d'Abre! I'd like to have a word with him. Wonder if he'd come and do a bit of work like that for me? A few of these green fellows would look fine in my own place. Beats me how the faces are cut so differently; must need trimming every day! Yes, I'll say that's some gardener!"

I put my hand on his arm.

"Don't you—can't you see they're not just trees? Come away while there's time, Birkett." And I tried to draw him back from those cursed green men, who, even in sleep, seemed to be watching my resistance to them with sardonic interest. "This place is horrible . . . foul, I tell you!"

"I came for a drink, and if these green fellows can't produce it, I'll pull their noses for them!" His laugh rang and echoed in that silent place. As it died, the door of the inn was opened quickly and a man stood on its threshold.

For a long moment the three of us stood looking at each other, and my blood turned to ice as I saw the great massive figure of the innkeeper. Most smooth and urbane he was, that smiling devil! . . . most punctilious and deferential in manner as he summed us both up, gaged our characters, our powers of resistance, our usefulness to him in the vast scheme of his infernal design.

He came down the flagged path toward us, passing through the stiff, silent rank of the seven green men—four on one side of the path, three on the other.

"Good morning, sirs, good morning! How can I serve you?" His high, whispering voice was a shock; it seemed indecent issuing from that gigantic frame, and I saw from Birkett's quick frown that it grated on him too.

"If you've got a drink wet enough to quench my thirst, I'd be mighty glad," answered my friend, rather gruffly. "And about lunch . . . we might try what your green men can do for us!"

Our host gave a long snickering laugh, and glanced back at the seven trees as though inviting them to share the joke.

He bowed repeatedly. "No doubt of that, sir! No doubt of that! If you'll come this way, we'll give you some of the best—the *very* best." His whisper broke on a high squeak. "Lunch will be served in ten minutes."

I put a desperate hand on Birkett's arm as he began to follow in the wake of the innkeeper.

"Not past *them,* not past *them!*" I urged in a low voice. "Look at them now!"

As we approached, the trees seemed to quiver and ripple as though some inner force stirred within their leafy forms, and from each lifted eyelid a sudden flickering glance gleamed and vanished.

Beneath my hand I felt Birkett's involuntary start, but he shook me off impatiently. "Go back, if you like, d'Abre! You'll get me imagining as crazy things as you do, soon." And he stalked on to the house.

4

"ENTER, enter, sirs! My house is honored!"

Unaccountably, as we passed the threshold my horror gave place to a fierce determination to fight—to resist this monstrous swollen spider greedy to catch his human flies.

Power against power — knowledge against knowledge—I would fight while strength and wisdom remained in me.

I waved away the proffered drink.

"No, nothing to drink," I said, watching his smooth pale face pucker at this first check in the game.

"Surely, sir, you will drink! You will not refuse to pledge the luck of my house! You are a great man—a great leader of men; that is written in your eyes! It is a privilege to serve so distinguished a guest."

His obsequious whispers sickened me, and I gathered my resources inwardly to meet the assault he was making on my will.

When I refused not only to drink, but even to taste a mouthful of the unique lunch provided, a sudden vicious anger flickered in his pale, cold eyes.

"I regret that my poor fare does not please you, sir," he said, his voice like the sound of dry leaves blown before a storm.

"It is better for me that I do not eat," I answered curtly, my eyes meeting his as our wills clashed.

For a long, terrible minute the world dropped from under me: existence narrowed down to those malicious eyes which held mine. I held on with all the desperation of a drowning man tossing in a dark sea of icy waters—torn, buffeted, despairing, at the mercy of incalculable power.

With hideous, intolerable effort I met

the attack, and by the mercy of Allah I won at last; for the creature turned from me and smoothly covered his defeat by attending very solicitously to Birkett's needs.

I relaxed, sick and trembling with the price of victory.

I had fought many strange battles in my life: for in the East, the Unknown is a force to be recognized, not laughed at and despised as in the West. Yet of all my encounters, this one was the deadliest, this evil, smiling Thing the strongest I had known in any land or place.

Must Birkett's strength go to feed this insatiable foe who battened on the race of men?

I shuddered as I watched him sitting there, eating, drinking, laughing with his host; his whole mind bent on the pleasure of the moment, his will relaxed, his brain asleep; while the creature at his side served him with hateful, smiling ease, watching with cool, complacent eyes as his victim let down his barriers one by one.

In his annoyance with my behavior, Birkett prolonged the meal as long as possible, ignoring me as I sat smoking and watching our host as intently as he watched us.

Anxiously I wondered what the next move in this horrible cat-and-mouse game would be; but it was not until Birkett rose from the table at last that the enemy showed his hand.

"It's a pity you can't be here on Friday night, sir! You'd be just the one to appreciate it. One of our gala nights—in fact the best night in the year at the *Seven Green Men.* You'd have a meal worth remembering that night. But I'm afraid they wouldn't let you in on it."

"Why not?" demanded Birkett, instantly aggressive.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you see it's a very special night indeed. There's a very select society in this neighborhood; I don't suppose you've so much as heard of it: *The Sons of Enoch.*"

"Never heard of 'em." Birkett's tone implied that had they been worth knowing, he *would* have heard of them. "Who are they? Those seven green chaps you keep in the grounds—eh?"

A cold light flashed in the innkeeper's eyes; and my own heart stood still, for the flippant remark had been nearer the truth than Birkett guessed.

"It's a society that was founded centuries ago, sir. Started in Germany in a little place on the Rhine, run by some old monks. There are members in every country in the world now. This one in America is the last one to be formed, but it's going strong, sir, very strong!"

"Then why the devil haven't I been told of it before?"

"Why should you know of all the hole-and-corner clubs that exist?" I interposed. The innkeeper was probing Birkett's weakest part. How well—oh, how truly the smiling, smooth-spoken devil had summed up my poor blundering friend!

"It'll be a society run for the Great Unwashed!" I continued. "You'd be a laughing-stock of the neighborhood if it got out that you were mixed up with scum of that sort."

"There is much that your great travels have not taught you, sir," answered the innkeeper, his sibilant speech savage as a snake's hiss. "The members of this club are those who stand so high, that as I said, I fear they would not consent to admit you even once to their company."

"Damn it all!" Birkett interrupted irritably. "I'd like to know any fellows out here who refuse to meet *me.* And who are you, curse you, to judge who can be members or not?"

Our host bowed, and I caught the mocking smile on his thin lips, as the fish rose so readily to his bait.

I poured ridicule on the proposition and did all I could to turn Birkett aside, but to no avail. Opposition, as always, goaded him to incredible heights of obstinacy; and now, half drunk and wholly in the hands of that subtle devil who measured him so accurately, the poor fellow fairly galloped into the trap set for him.

It ended with a promise on our host's part to do all in his power to persuade the *Sons of Enoch* to receive Birkett and perhaps make him a member of their ancient society.

"Friday night then, sir! About 11 o'clock the meeting will start, and there's a midnight supper to follow. Of course I'll do my best for you, but I doubt if you'll be allowed to join."

"Don't worry," was Birkett's valedictory remark. "I'll become one of the *Sons of Enoch* on Friday, or I'll hound your rotten society out of existence. You'll see, my jolly old innkeeper, you'll see!"

And as we left the grounds, passing once more the Seven Green Men, their leaves rustled with a dry crackle that was the counterpart of the innkeeper's hateful, whispering voice.

5

OUR drive homeward was at first distinctly unpleasant. Birkett chose to take my behavior as a personal insult, and, being at a quarrelsome stage of his intoxication, he kept up a muttered commentary: ". . . insulting a decent old bird like that . . . best lunch I ever had . . . damned if I won't . . . Sons of Enoch . . . what's going to stop me . . . be a Son of Enoch . . . damned interfering fellow, d'Abre! . . ."

He insisted on driving himself, and

took such a roundabout way that it was two hours later when we saw New Haven in the distance. Birkett was sober by this time and rather ashamed of his treatment of a guest. He insisted on pulling up at another little roadhouse, *The Brown Owl,* run by a New England farmer he wanted me to meet.

"You'll like the old chap, d'Abre!" he assured me, eager to make amends for his lapse. "He's a great old man, and can put up a decent meal. Come on, you must be starving."

I was thankful to make the acquaintance of both old Paxton and his fried chicken . . . and Birkett's restored geniality made me hopeful that after all he might not prove obdurate about repeating his visit to the *Seven Green Men.*

Old Paxton sat with us later on his porch, and gradually the talk veered round to our late excursion. The old farmer's face changed to a mask of horror.

"The *Seven Green Men! Seven,* did you say? My God! . . . oh, my God!"

My pulse leaped at the loathing and fear in his voice; and Birkett brought his tilted chair down on the floor with a crash. Staring hard at Paxton, he said aggressively, "That's what I said! *Seven!* It's a perfectly good number; lots of people think it's lucky."

But the farmer was blind and deaf to everything—his mind gripped by some paralyzing thought.

"Seven of them now . . . *seven!* And no one believed what I told 'em! Poor soul, whoever it is! Seven now . . . Seven Green Men in that accursed garden!"

He was so overcome that he just sat there, saying the same thing over and over again.

Suddenly, however, he got to his feet and hobbled stiffly across the veranda, beckoning us to follow. He led us down the steps to his peach orchard behind the house, and pointed to a figure shambling about among the trees.

"See him . . . see him!" Paxton's voice was hoarse and shaken. "That's my only son, all that's left of him."

The awkward figure drew nearer, approaching us at a loping run, and Birkett and I instinctively drew back. It was an imbecile, a slobbering, revolting wreck of humanity with squinting eyes and loose mouth, and a big, heavy frame on which the massive head rolled sickeningly.

He fell at Paxton's feet, and the old man's shaking hand patted the rough head pressed against his knees.

"My only son, sirs!"

We were horribly abashed and afraid to look at old Paxton's working features.

"He was the *Sixth* Green Man . . . and may the Lord have mercy on his soul!"

The poor afflicted creature shambled off, and we went back to the house in silence. Awkwardly avoiding the farmer's eye, Birkett paid the reckoning and started for his car, when Paxton laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"I see you don't believe me, sir! No one will believe! If they had done so, that house would be burnt to the ground, and those trees . . . those trees—those green devils with it! It's *they* steal the soul out of a man, and leave him like my son!"

"Yes," I answered. "I understand what you mean."

Paxton peered with tear-dimmed eyes into my face.

"You understand! Then I tell you they're still at their fiend's game! My son was the *Sixth* . . . the *Sixth* of those Green Men! Now there are *Seven!* They're still at it!"

6

"How about staying on here and having another swim when the moon rises?" I said, apparently absorbed in making my old briar pipe draw properly,

but in reality waiting with overwhelming anxiety for Birkett's reply.

It was Friday evening, and no word had passed between us during the week of the Seven Green Men, or Birkett's decision about tonight.

He was sitting there on the rocks at my side, his big body stretched out in the sun in lazy enjoyment, his half-closed eyes fixed on the blue outline of Long Island on the opposite horizon.

"Well, how about it?" I repeated, after a long silence.

He rolled over and regarded me mockingly.

"Anxious nurse skilfully tries to divert her charge from his naughty little plan! No use, d'Abre; I've made up my mind about tonight, and *nothing's* going to stop me."

I bit savagely on my pipe-stem, and frowned at an offending gull which wheeled to and fro over the lapping water at our feet.

As easily could a six-months-old baby digest and assimilate raw meat as could Birkett's intellect grasp anything save the obvious; nevertheless I was impelled to make another attempt to break down the ramparts of his self-sufficient obstinacy.

But I failed, of course. The world of thought and imagination and intuition was unknown and therefore non-existent to him. The idea of any form of life, not classified and labeled, not belonging to the animal or vegetable kingdom, was simply a joke to him.

And old Paxton's outbursts he dismissed as lightly as the rest of my arguments.

"My dear chap, everyone knows the poor old fellow's half mad himself with trouble. The boy was a wild harum-scarum creature always in mischief and difficulties. No doubt he *did* go to a midnight supper at the *Seven Green Men.* But

what's that got to do with it? You might as well say if you got sunstroke, for instance, that old Paxton's fried chicken caused it!"

7

"You don't mean to say that you're coming too?" asked Birkett, when, about 10:30 that night, I followed him out of doors to his waiting car.

"But of course!" I answered lightly. "You don't put me down as a coward as well as a believer in fairy-tales, do you?"

"You're a sport anyhow, d'Abre!" he said warmly. "And I'm very glad you're coming to see for yourself what one of our midnight joints is like. It'll be a new experience for you."

"And for you," I said under my breath, as he started the engine and passed out from his dim-perfumed garden to the dusty white highroad beyond.

A full moon sailed serenely among silvery banks of cloud above us; and in the quiet night river and valley, rocky hillside and dense forest had the sharp, strange outlines of a woodcut.

All too soon we reached the warning sign, "Dangerous Road," and passed from a silvery sleeping earth to the stagnant gloom of that tunnel-like highway.

But hateful as it was, I could have wished that road would never end, rather than bring us, as inevitably it did, to that ominous green-and-black sign of our destination.

The sound of a deep rhythmic chant greeted us as we went up the steps, and we saw that the roadhouse was lit from end to end, not with the mellow, welcoming radiance of lamp or candle, but with strange quivering fires of blue and green, which flickered to and fro in mad haste past every window of the inn.

"Some illumination!" remarked Birkett. "Looks like the real thing to me! Do you hear the *Sons of Enoch* practising their nursery rimes? Coming, boys!" he roared cheerfully. "I'll join in the chorus!"

As for myself, I could only stare at the moonlit garden in horror, for my worst fears were realized, and I knew just how much I had dreaded this moment when I saw that the seven tall trees —those sinister devil-trees—were gone!

Then I turned, to see the huge bulk of the innkeeper close behind us, his head thrown back in silent laughter, his eyes smoldering fires above the ugly, cavernous mouth.

Birkett turned too, at my exclamation, and drew his heavy eyebrows together in a frown.

"What the devil do you mean by creeping up on us like that?" he demanded angrily.

Still laughing, the innkeeper came forward and put his hand familiarly on my friend's arm. "By the Black Goat of Zarem," he muttered, "you are come in a good hour. The *Sons of Enoch* wait to receive you—I myself have seen to it—and tonight you shall both learn the high mysteries of their ancient order!"

"Look here, my fine fellow," said Birkett, "what the deuce do you mean by crowing so loud? I've got to *meet* these nigger minstrels of yours before I decide to join them."

From the house came a great rolling burst of song, a tremendous chant with an earth-shaking rhythm that was like the shock of battle. The ground rocked beneath us; gathering clouds shut out the face of the watchful moon; a sudden fury of wind shook the massed trees about the house and grounds until they moaned and hissed like lost souls, tossing their crests in impotent agony.

In the lull which followed, Birkett's voice came to me, low and strangely subdued: "You're right, d'Abre! This place

is unhealthful. Let's quit." And he moved back toward the steps.

But the creature at our side laughed again and raised his hand. Instantly the grounds were full of shifting lights, moving about us—hemming us in, revealing dim outlines of swollen, monstrous bodies, and bloated features which thrust forward sickeningly to gloat and peer at Birkett and me.

The former's shuddering disgust brought them closer and closer upon us, and I whispered hastily, "Face them! Face them! Stamp on them if you can, they only advance as you retreat!"

Our host's pale, smiling face darkened as he saw our resolution, and a wave of his hand reduced the garden to empty darkness once more.

"So!" he hissed. "I regret that my efforts to amuse you are not appreciated. If I had thought you a coward"—turning to Birkett—"I would not have suggested that you come tonight. The *Sons of Enoch* have no room for a coward in their midst!"

"Coward!" Birkett's voice rose to a bellow at the insult, and in reaction from his horror. "Why, you grinning white-faced ape! Say that again and I'll smash you until you're uglier than your filthy friends here! No more of your conjuring tricks! Get on to the house and show me these precious Sons of yours!"

I put my hand on his arm, but the blind anger to which the innkeeper had purposely roused him made him incapable of thought or reason, and he shook me off angrily.

Poor Birkett! Ignorant, undisciplined, and entirely at the mercy of his appetites and emotions—what chance had he in his fatuous immaturity against our enemy? I followed him despairingly. His last chance of escape was gone if he entered that house of his own free will.

"The trees are gone!" I said in a loud voice, pulling Birkett back, and pointing. "Ask him where the trees are gone!"

But as I spoke, the outlines of the *Seven Green Men* rose quivering in the dimness of the garden. Unsubstantial, unreal, mere shadows cast by the magic of the Master who walked by our side, they stood there again in their stiff, silent ranks!

"What the deuce are you talking about?" growled Birkett. "Come on! I'll see this thing through now, if I'm hanged for it."

I caught the quick malice of the innkeeper's glance, and shivered. Birkett was a lump of dough for this fiend's molding, and my blood ran cold at the thought of the ordeal to come.

8

OVER the threshold of the house! . . . and with one step we passed the last barrier between ourselves and the unseen.

No familiar walls stood around us, no roof above us. We were in the vast outer darkness which knows neither time nor space.

I drew an Arab knife from its sheath —a blade sharpened on the sacred stone of the Kaaba, and more potent here than all the weapons in an arsenal.

Birkett took my wrists in his big grasp and pointed vehemently with his other hand. In any other place I could have smiled at his bewilderment; now, I could only wish with intense bitterness that his intellect equaled his obstinacy. Even now he discredited his higher instincts; even here he was trying to measure the vast spaces of eternity with his little foot-rule of earthbound dimensions.

Our host stood before us—smiling, urbane as ever; and, at his side, the *Seven Green Men* towered, bareheaded and armor-clad, confronting us in ominous silence, their eyes devouring hells of sick desire!

"My brothers!" At the whispered word, Birkett stiffened at my side and his grip on my arm tightened.

"My brothers, the *Sons of Enoch,* wait to receive you to their fellowship. You shall be initiated as they have been. You shall share their secrets, their sufferings, their toil. You have come here of your own free will . . . now you shall know no will but mine! Your existence shall be my existence! Your being my being! Your strength, my strength! What is the Word?"

The *Seven Green Men* turned toward him.

"The Word is thy Will, Master of Life and Death!"

"Receive, then, the baptism of the initiate!" came the whispered command.

Birkett made a stiff step forward, but I restrained him with frantic hands.

"No! No!" I cried hoarsely. "Resist . . . resist him."

He smiled vacantly at me, then turned his glazed eyes in the direction of the whispering voice again.

"No faith defends you . . . no knowledge guides you . . . no wisdom inspires you. *Son of Enoch,* receive your baptism!"

I drew my dagger and flung myself in front of Birkett as he brushed hastily past me and advanced toward the smiling Master. But the *Seven Green Men* ringed us in, stretching out stiff arms in a wide circle, machine-like, obedient to the hissing commands of their superior.

I leapt forward, and with a cutting slash of my knife got free and strode up to the devil who smiled, and smiled, and smiled!

"Power is mine!" I said, steadying my voice with hideous effort. "I know you . . . I name you . . . Gaffarel!"

9

IN THE gray chill of dawn I stood once more before the house of the *Seven Green Men.*

The dark woods waited silent and watchful, and the house itself was shuttered, and barred, and silent too.

I looked around wildly as thought and memory returned. Birkett . . . Birkett, where was he?

Then I saw the trees! The devil-trees, stiff, grotesque, and menacing in their armor, silhouetted against the white, blank face of the roadhouse behind.

The *Seven Green Men!*

Seven . . . no . . . there were *eight* men now! I counted them! My voice broke with a cry as I counted and recounted those frightful trees.

Eight!

As I stood there sobbing the words . . . eight . . . eight . . . eight! over and over, with terror mounting in my brain, the narrow door of the inn opened slowly, and a figure shambled out and down the path toward me.

A big, heavy figure that mouthed and gibbered at me as it came, pouring out a stream of meaningless words until it reached my feet, where it collapsed in the long dewy grass.

It was Birkett—Nicholas Birkett! I recognized the horrible travesty of my friend at last, and crept away from him into the forest, for I was very sick.

The sign was freshly painted as we passed it coming out, much later, for it was long before I could bring myself to touch Birkett, and take him out to the waiting car.

The sign was freshly painted as we passed . . . and the livid green words ran:

"THE EIGHT GREEN MEN."

LETTERS about Robert E. Howard's untimely death continue to come in to the editor's desk. They are letters of appreciation of his genius, and of sympathy and condolence. Mr. Howard was undoubtedly a superb writer, with a spirited, vigorous style and an inexhaustible imagination. His poems were works of sheer genius. We believe that his greatest stories will outlast most of what passes today as literature in the slick-paper magazines. By his death WEIRD TALES has suffered an irreparable loss.

The necrology of WEIRD TALES authors is altogether too long. Beginning with the tragic death of Alanson Skinner *(The Tsantsa of Professor Von Rothapfel,* etc.), who was killed in an automobile accident several years ago, WEIRD TALES has lost by death Henry S. Whitehead *(Jumbee,* etc.), S. B. H. Hurst *(The Splendid Lie,* etc.), Edward Lucas White *(Lukundoo),* Robert E. Howard *(The Shadow Kingdom,* etc.), Arthur B. Reeve *(The Death Cry);* those two fine English authors, G. Appleby Terrill *(The Supreme Witch,* etc.) and Arlton Eadie *(The Eye of Truth,* etc.); the Mexican poetess Alice I'Anson, and the young Illinois poet Robert Nelson. New authors are coming into their maturity and stepping into the places of those who have gone, but we hope it will be a long, long time before any more of our writers will be added to the necrology of this magazine.

Science-Fantasy Correspondent

The "fan magazines" are an interesting phenomenon. These are magazines printed by amateurs and devoted to discussions of the type of stories featured in their favorite magazines. *Fantasy Magazine* has just published its Fourth Anniversary Issue, devoted to weird-scientific stories and weird fiction. Another magazine of this type was *Fantasy Fan,* which lately discontinued publication. A strong bid for supremacy in this field will be offered by a new amateur publication, to be called *Science-Fantasy Correspondent,* according to a letter from its editor, Willis Conover, Jr., of 27 High Street, Cambridge, Maryland. We notice that the first issue features an autobiography of Virgil Finlay, whose illustrations in WEIRD TALES and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Wright's Shakespeare Library edition) have been so much admired. The new magazine will also offer, among other things, Lovecraft's scholarly treatise, *Supernatural Horror* and *Literature,* beginning where *Fantasy Fan* left off when that publication ceased; and a story by Robert Bloch entitled *A Visit With H. P. Lovecraft,* which Mr. Conover describes as a "hilarious yarn."

From the Philippines

Teofilo D. Agcaoili, of Manila, writes: "WEIRD TALES is a magazine I can unashamedly carry around with Whit Burnett's *Story* and Miss Monroe's *Poetry,* it being the best of its kind. I am sick of the other terror and mystery magazines one sees overcrowding the news stands: their contents are without significance—utterly formless and lacking substance. Their contributors seem to be ignorant of anthropology, science and metaphysics; much more, the greater bulk of them are not meant for writing. They should think less of pulps and more of art. I like August W. Derleth's stories. Paul Ernst is too prolific, but in spite of that I like him too."

A Plea for Conan

Bernard E. Schiffmann, of Laurelton, New York, writes: "It was with deep sorrow indeed, that the tragic death of Robert

E. Howard affected me. It was not merely that a fine author had passed on, but that I myself had lost something personally. I'm sure that I but voice the sentiments of thousands of your readers. For years his stories had entertained me, and had gotten to mean something to me. I felt I knew his characters myself. I have a suggestion to offer. I really don't know what you will think of it, but here it is. Is there, and I think there is, some way to continue Conan? I know that it is being done with other characters whose authors have passed away, and I'm sure Mr. Howard would be happy if he could know that it was being done. In my humble opinion no finer tribute could be paid an author, and as no one could ever take the place in your magazine of Conan, nothing could ever please your readers more. I have thrilled and adventured with Conan since his first appearance. Please try to have him remain. Let us not lose both of them, and in that manner, in some small way we may perhaps lessen the blow the death of Robert E. Howard has dealt all of us." [Several other readers have expressed the wish that Conan's adventures be continued by other hands, for Mr. Howard's barbarian hero is very popular. But Mr. Howard's style was so compelling and so individual, bearing the marks, not of mere talent, but of actual genius, that we fear any attempt of other and different authors to recapture the mood and style of Mr. Howard's fascinating stories about Conan must fail to accomplish their purpose.—THE EDITOR.]

More Serial Novels

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The November issue of WEIRD TALES was a real top-notcher, and I thoroughly enjoyed it from cover to cover. Many thanks for reprinting the Lovecraft masterpiece, *Pickman's Model*, one of the most perfect tales of this kind ever written. Like the insidious inspirations of a lotus dream, the horror creeps and grows and gnaws away until it finally bursts in full bloom upon the reader's consciousness. I derived just as much enjoyment from this second reading of the story as I did from the first, eleven years ago! . . . *The Dark Demon* by Robert Bloch was excellent, a worthy successor to *The Shambler from the Stars*. It's a pity Bloch wastes so much time in writing mediocre stories when he is

capable of doing such as these. Probably the most unusual tale in the issue was Thorp McClusky's *The Crawling Horror.* What an improvement between that one and his *Loot of the Vampire!* To compare the two stories is like comparing the sublime with the ridiculous. Other fine yarns included *Black Hound of Death, Mice, Witch-House* and *Midas,* although I much prefer Bassett Morgan's stories of the tropics, and hope he will eventually give us another about Ti-Fong. Keep up the good work and I warrant you'll hear very little fault-finding from the readers. It seems to me that you are making a big mistake in eliminating serial novels. By doing this you automatically eliminate many superb tales. . . . Personally, I favor carrying two serials at a time, but at any rate give us at least one. It gives the reader something to look forward to from month to month. Why not put this proposition up to your readers and let them decide? I hope you print this part of my letter, as I am certain you will hear from several agreeing with me on this point."

McClusky a Find

Richard H. Jamison, of St. Louis, writes: "The November WEIRD TALES was excellent except for *The Blue Room,* which was not weird, and too obvious. Quinn and Howard turned out their usual excellent yarns. The loss of Howard is as great a blow to weird fiction as Stan Weinbaum's death was to science-fiction. . . . Why not put out a book or two, or three, containing all of the Howard stories that were published in WEIRD TALES? . . . You've got a find in Thorp McClusky. His *The Crawling Horror* ranks first in this issue, with one exception. *Pickman's Model,* of course, is the exception. What a genius this man Lovecraft is! I was very fortunate in securing a number of back copies of WEIRD TALES. Among them was the June 1930 issue containing that Lovecraftian masterpiece *The Rats in the Walls.* Words cannot describe the sheer atmosphere of horror this story creates as it builds toward that magnificent conclusion: 'The rats they can never hear; the rats, the rats in the walls!' "

Midas

Most of our readers were highly pleased with Bassett Morgan's story, *Midas,* but here's one who doesn't like it at all, at all. Warren H. Schryer, of Philadelphia, writes: "Although I have been a constant reader of WEIRD TALES for about two years now, this is my first letter, and, unfortunately, it is one of complaint. Why did you ever put such a story as *Midas* in WT? It is just the kind of trash one would expect to find in any of the dime thrillers now on sale. As for Midas poisoning himself with strychnin and then crawling into the wine cask—bah! Now that I have that off my chest I would like to compliment you on the usually fine standard of WT, truly 'a magazine of the bizarre and unusual'! The covers are superb, but please stick to Brundage, as St. John's figures are too angular. I agree with the idea submitted by Charles H. Bert for small type in the reprint department, as that would mean longer stories. While on the subject of stories, I think *Witch-House* was the most interesting story in the November issue."

A Finlay Cover

Robert Oberon, of Denmark, Maine, writes: "Let me add my plea for an edition of the works of Robert E. Howard, only make it his complete works—all his poems, short stories, novels, in fact everything that he has written that is of a weird nature. I am sure it would be a 'best seller' among us readers. I was certainly glad to see our old friend Jules de Grandin back again, and in one of his best stories to date. *Witch-House* was the best story in the November issue, with *Black Hound of Death* and *Pickman's Model* tying for second place. Where in the world is Clark Ashton Smith keeping himself these days? We haven't had one of his masterpieces for months. Virgil Finlay and Hugh Rankin are your best inside illustrators. DeLay promises to join this group if he keeps up his recent good work. I still say that you should give Finlay a chance on one of the covers. His creations are really weird. I don't mean by this that I dislike Brundage; far from it, for she is the best cover artist you have ever had, but why not give Finlay a try and see what he can do with colors?" [Virgil Finlay has painted the cover for next month's issue.—THE EDITOR.]

A Mason Jar

Leslie Mason, of Brooklyn, sends us this jingle:

"Your issue of November's date
I read, and these lines did result:

The mag is good, if more ornate
Than was the one for August ult.
Direct simplicity, you see,
Makes for a stronger, weirder tale;
Your authors seek verbosity
But that style is (beg pardon!) stale.
Yet sometimes in your mag we find
A tale to which we doff our hats;
An instance that I have in mind
Is Kuttner's yarn, *The Graveyard Rats.*
Enough of this, however (for
Poetic style I can't keep up);
I'll close with this: For evermore
Shall WEIRD TALES take the Mason cup!"

More Ghouls!

Lorne W. Power, of Windsor, Ontario, writes: "Trusting that I am not too new a reader of WT to have my opinions printed in the Eyrie (I started with this year's June issue), I would like to comment on the November number. *Midas,* by Bassett Morgan, takes the honors for the best story in the issue. Bloch's story was good, but he has done better, *The Grinning Ghoul* for instance. As for the rest, the shorts were the best. Why not have more stories of ghouls? Almost every other story in your magazine is a vampire yarn, which is all very fine, but the ghoul (my favorite fiction character) is very scarce. I wish you'd reprint *The Call of Cthulhu* by H. P. Lovecraft, which I once read in an anthology."

A Swell Cover by Brundage

John V. Baltadonis, of Philadelphia, writes: "Congratulations on the November issue! In the first place, there was a swell cover by Brundage; secondly, a Jules de Grandin and a Robert Ervin Howard story in the issue. There's a swell line-up this issue, as, besides the two mentioned above, there are also Paul Ernst, Robert Bloch, and Thorp McClusky. How long will this 'no serial' policy last? Personally, I favor it and hope it will be permanent. . . . The best story in the issue was Seabury Quinn's tale, *Witch-House.* Robert E. Howard's story, *Black Hound of Death,* closely followed. I'm glad to see that Quinn will have another story about Jules de Grandin soon. I also am glad to note that Howard will appear in the December issue. Need I say that Finlay's illustrations are superb?"

In Appreciation of Howard

Clifford Ball, of Astoria, New York,

writes: "I have been a constant reader of your magazine since 1925, when some author's conception of weirdness was a gigantic ape dragging a half-naked female about a jungle, and I have watched it progress steadily upward to the zenith. I do not write criticisms; the main purpose of this letter is that I feel moved to offer my condolences upon the death of Mr. Howard. A hundred international Tarzans could never erase the memory of Conan the Cimmerian. Neither Northwest Smith nor Jirel of Jory—and in Moore you have an excellent author—can quite supplant his glory. When I read that *Red Nails* would be the last of Conan's exploits I felt as though some sort of income, or expected resource, had been suddenly severed."

Fine Poetry

Mary Frances Easton, of Bellevue, Pennsylvania, writes: "Although I can't claim to be an old reader of your magazine, I am a very constant one. The chief reason I buy it is for the fine poems it contains. And I know I'm not the only one that does so. I especially like the weird poetry and think that your magazine is its finest exponent. The only trouble is, you don't print enough of them. I am sure that many of your readers tell you the same thing. Here's a suggestion I'd like to offer: why not have weird poetry reprints, like your weird story reprints, and select your material from some of the best, such as Edgar Allan Poe, especially his *Ulalume?* I'm sure that would prove a big favorite with your readers, as it's one of the finest weird poems ever written."

More Jules de Grandin Yarns

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "I was quite satisfied with the stories in the November WEIRD TALES. *Witch-House* by Seabury Quinn, one of your most clamored-for writers, is a magnificent piece of literature. Jules de Grandin never becomes dull or uninteresting, no matter how many stories he appears in. I am anxiously awaiting the appearance of another story by Mr. Quinn, and the sooner it is printed the better I'll like it. Robert E. Howard's *Black Hound of Death* was not quite as interesting as those stories of Conan the Cimmerian. *The Dark Demon,* Robert Bloch's latest story, was really *weird.* That is a typical example of the type of story you should devote more to. The other stories which constituted the issue were also fine stories, especially *Pickman's Model.* That was another *real* weird tale."

No Serial in November

Samuel Gordon, of Washington, D. C., writes: "Well, I'm back again, primarily because the November issue was without a serial. All of which meant that I finally got a good two-bits worth and didn't have to suffer through a jumbled synopsis or try to rack my memory as to what happened in last month's number. . . . *The Crawling Horror,* by Thorp McClusky, is an interesting tale because it tries to give an explanation of vampires. . . . *Midas,* by Bassett Morgan, is not 'a tale through which blows an icy breath of horror', but a literary gem nevertheless."

Trudy

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes, in part: "Yuh, yuh, yuh, yuh—I chuckle as I hug myself in fiendish glee—hee hee hee hee. So—Joseph Allan Ryan, of Cambridge, Maryland, doesn't like my writing sensibly. Okay, Joey boy, you asked for it—you're gonna get cute words. Yessir. Y'know—I had often wondered what the readers thot of my kookoo komments. Reckon as haow they like 'em. It's a laff to think that I write cute words. Doodness! You'd never b'lieve it to look at me. And thanx, Mr. Ryan, for dubbing me Trudy—people are too unkind and call me Gertie—and oh, how that grates on my ears, ugh! . . . How's about having another beautiful tale by the brothers Binder, with an illustration by brother Jack? Those boys really appeal to me with their yarns. Their last story of the sapphire still lingers in my memory as one of the loveliest I have ever read. . . . The whole issue was durn good—the selection of authors helped muchly—Quinn, Howard, McClusky, Bloch and Lovecraft—with a good verse turned out by Richard Searight."

He Wants All Conan Stories

J. F. Vandegrift, U. S. S. Taylor, No. 94, Care Postmaster, Norfolk, Virginia, writes: "I have never written to any magazine before, but I have been reading out-of-the-way stories ever since I was nine years old. My reason for writing now is to find out if any of your readers has a complete selection of

Robert E. Howard's Conan stories they wish to sell. . . . As an old-time reader of WEIRD TALES it goes without saying I think it's a grand magazine. I would not be such a constant reader if it hadn't proved itself years ago. Please print this."

WT Is Tops

Kristine Karkau, of Buffalo, writes: "My dear man! Now what's up the old editorial sleeve? Has y'all done had a change of heart? Don't tell me you've up and cut off the lovely ladies from the covers for good? Or are you just giving the other side of the 'nudes question' a chance? J. Allen St. John sure knows how to draw some dead-lookin' folksies, that's a fac'. (P. S. Who's the lumpy lady in the foreground?) Anyways, he's *good,* for real! Give us now another story by C. L. Moore and let St. John draw the illustration for it. F'instance. What do you suppose he'd draw up one of them thar Shambleau critters to look like? Ugh! Do one—Mr. St. John—you're O. K. Let the horrors multiply and may the nightmares gallop where they list. I don't believe there has ever been a better issue of WEIRD TALES than the October. Every story is the last word in excellence. *The Tree of Life* was the best, in my opinion, with all the rest of the stories running neck and neck for place. I couldn't say any one of them was better than the rest. I am really sincere when I say that no other magazine can ever hope to equal or even approach the all-around excellence of WT. Only one thing is lacking — an author's page. With that, it would be perfect. By the way, what happened to that idea? I s'pose it's gone where the woodbine twineth, as most good ideas do. Just think how much the millions that have read and liked Mr. Howard's stories would have appreciated a picture and biography of him! . . . Keep up the good work. Your magazine is tops."

Dorothy Quick's Stories

A. R. Brown, of East Hampton, New York, writes: "I've been waiting for a long time to see another story by Dorothy Quick in your pages. I thought *The Horror in the Studio* that she wrote the best weird story I ever read, and *The Lost Door* is even better. Don't wait so long before you have another by her. *The Lost Door* gets my vote,

and next I like *Doom of the House of Duryea,* by Peirce."

Concise Comments

John R. Small writes from a CCC camp in Maryland: "In my humble opinion the two best stories of the year so far have been *The Crystal Curse* by Eando Binder and *Doom of the House of Duryea* by Earl Peirce, Jr."

Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes: "Just time for a card of protest against the policy of all stories complete. Stories such as *Golden Blood* cannot be published under this policy. As Ziegfeld glorified the American girl, WEIRD TALES seems to be trying to glorify the nude—American or otherwise."

Pettersen Marzoni, of Birmingham, Alabama, writes: "I want to extend my sympathy to WEIRD TALES over the loss of Robert E. Howard. His Conan was not only one of the most vivid figures in fiction, his philosophy of regarding every obstacle as only something to be overcome was grand philosophy for any man during these last and trying six years. May you find his like, though that seems a futile wish."

Justus Schifferes, of Minneapolis, writes: "I want to put in a vote of 'excellent' for the story *In the Dark* by Ronal Kayser, which appears in the August-September issue of WEIRD TALES. To me, at any rate, the story strikes just the right chord of realism and horror."

Henry Kuttner, of Beverly Hills, California, writes: "Very pleasing issue, November, containing only one story I didn't like. Did you notice, in the Eyrie, a reference to the 'Virgin Finlay'? What has the maligned Mr. Finlay to say about that?"

Edmond Hamilton writes from New Castle, Pennsylvania: "Congratulations on Bassett Morgan's swell story, *Midas.* It is one of the best stories you've had for a long time, I thought."

Henry Allen Vaux, of New York City, writes: "Should you continue to avail yourself of such material as Dorothy Quick writes for your magazine you will, I am quite sure, find a lively interest in new readers. Here, in my humble estimation, is a woman who handles her subjects with intelligence, ease and a technic that is within the compass of anyone who enjoys this lighter fiction."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, which story do you like best in this issue? Write a letter to the Eyrie, or fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page and send it to WEIRD TALES. Your favorite story in the November issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was Seabury Quinn's intriguing novelette, *Witch-House.* This was closely pressed for first honors by Robert E. Howard's *Black Hound of Death.*

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE JANUARY WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1)----------	Why? ----------
(2)----------	----------

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in WEIRD TALES if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

W. T.—8

COMING NEXT MONTH

WHEN Guy Sellers awoke, everything was as black as pitch about him. He had no idea where he was. In a panic he put out his hands in all directions, but he could feel no walls. He rose to his feet and started to run in the blackness, as though by so doing he could shake it off. The floor rose and fell as though it were moving. Twice he almost fell, and once, unable to save himself, he crashed to the floor over some protruding object and struck his head a stunning blow. At that moment there come an unearthly shriek and something cold and dank brushed against his hand. It seemed as large as a cat, although of this he was not sure, for in the blackness only its shining eyes were visible.

With a cry he sprang to his feet and stood trembling, afraid to move. The floor rose and fell rhythmically. Without doubt he was on a ship, a ship infested with rats and other vermin. For what reason he was imprisoned in that gruesome hold he did not know.

He was interrupted in his musings by a ray of light which appeared above his head. The next moment a hatch had been removed, and far above he could see the blue of the sky. By the position of the sun he knew that it was nearly midday. He had evidently been unconscious for many hours.

And now there appeared the most peculiar-looking individual he had ever beheld. He dropped down into the hold as though he were a gorilla, not deigning to use the ladder. His face was repulsively ugly. His eyes, wide apart, were separated by a nose so broad and flat it was simian. His protruding chin resembled a cup, a great wart underneath taking the place of a handle. His mouth was enormous, as though it had been slit from ear to ear in infancy, just as was done in Old Paris to make permanent grinning jesters for the kings. But the eyes were the most repulsive feature in the face. They were as small as those of a hog, and rheumy rings of inflammation encircled them. For a moment this monstrosity of a man stood and surveyed him as though he were some new species of insect. . . .

You will not want to miss this amazing story. The shanghaiing of Guy Sellers was but the prelude to a series of weird adventures so astounding, so unbelievable, that they would read like figments of a dream except that the author's superbly realistic style makes them seem true. This startling novelette will be printed complete in the February issue of WEIRD TALES:

The Poppy Pearl

By Frank Owen

—Also—

THE GLOBE OF MEMORIES

By SEABURY QUINN

A story of stealthily creeping terror which rises by gradations to a climax of sheer horror—a story you will not easily forget.

DIG ME NO GRAVE

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A shuddery tale of dark horror and evil things, and the uncanny funeral rites of the corpse of old John Grimlan.

AT THE TIME APPOINTED

By LORETTA BURROUGH

The father hated his son with a vindictive hatred, all because of a childhood accident—and his hatred culminated in a ghastly jest, there in the silent tomb.

THE VAUNSBURG PLAGUE

By JULIUS LONG

Overnight it struck, that dread ray which turned vigorous young men and women into doddering, senile creatures in a few seconds—and lured a great European Dictator to the U. S. to use the ray for his own purposes.

I, THE VAMPIRE

By HENRY KUTTNER

Dark horror settled down like a fog on Hollywood, the world's film capital, as an evil thing from beyond the ocean preyed on the celebrated stars of filmdom—an odd and curious story of vampirism.

February WEIRD TALES - - - Out January 1

I HAVE A NEW FAMILY OF 10 PUPPIES
3 OF THEM ARE MARKED EXACTLY ALIKE—

CAN YOU FIND THE TRIPLETS

IN THE PICTURE BELOW?

Answer Quick! Get an Opportunity to ...

WIN $2,500.00

or Buick Sedan and $1,250.00 Cash!

Just think—$2,500.00 cash all for your very own. You, **YES, YOU,** may be the very person to receive this magnificent fortune. You may take your very own choice of either the shiny, new, latest model Buick 8 Sedan and $1,250.00 promptness prize—**or** $2,500.00 all cash, if winner. Imagine what you could do with all that money, if you won First Grand Prize. We are going to pay out over $5,000.00 in big, cash prizes and thousands of dollars in extra awards. Besides the $2,500.00 cash prize, there are **103 other Grand Prizes.** Second Grand Prize, a latest model De Luxe Chevrolet Master 6 Sedan or $800.00 cash; Third Grand Prize choice of beautiful latest model De Luxe Ford V-8 Fordor Sedan or $600.00 cash. There's plenty of cash for folks who want to go after really big cash prizes. Fill in the coupon, mail quick and you will receive opportunity to win $2,500.00 cash!

Right now, look at the picture below and see if you can find THE TRIPLETS, the three lovable tender puppies that look alike, and send your answer today to get the opportunity to win a marvelous, magnificent fortune. With all this money you could do the things you have always wanted to do. You could pay bills, build a new home, buy new furniture, rugs, a refrigerator, radio, new fashionable clothing or educate yourself or ones whom you love. Yes, $2,500.00 is a lot of cash. You could **DO THE THINGS YOU WANT TO DO!**

Send No Money—Mail Answer Quick!

Can you help Princess Letty find her TRIPLETS? Princess Letty is the devoted mother of the ten bewildered puppies pictured below. Look at them, see how alike all of them look **but three of them, THE TRIPLETS, are marked EXACTLY alike!** That's where the fun begins. **Look for the identifying marks around the heads, eyes, ears, noses and mouths.** It isn't quite as easy as it appears—but KEEP LOOKING and you may find them. Mark the numbers of the Triplets in the coupon below and mail it to us today!

Don't send a penny with your answer. You risk no money, and it costs only a postage stamp to send your answer, according to our plan, getting the opportunity to win $2,500.00 all cash if prompt. You need now only find the cute little Triplets if you can and mail the coupon. Send your answer quick. Thousands of dollars in special cash rewards. Be prompt, and if declared first prize winner, you will be awarded the Buick 8 Sedan and $1,250.00 or $2,500.00 all cash if preferred. You take your choice if winner—you be the judge!

PRIZE MONEY WILL BE PAID!!

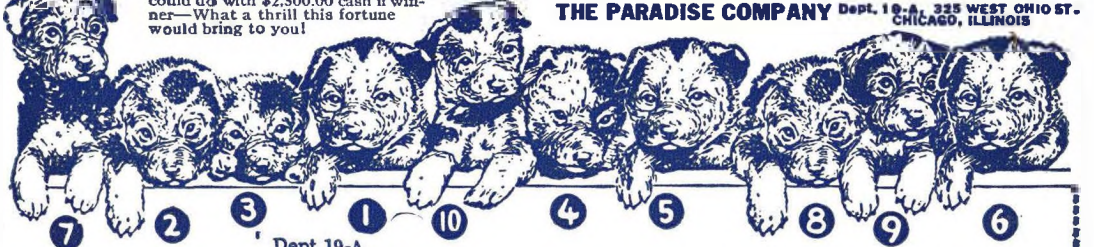
This year marks the first of our enormous cash prize offers. We want people everywhere to have the opportunity to share in this great distribution of cash. What could be more symbolic, appropriate and fitting than the Inaugural Celebration we have planned. Upon sacred oath, the President of our Corporation pledges himself to pay each and every prize and duplicate prizes in case of ties. As a gentleman and business man, he vows that prizes must be paid! We guarantee to pay out prizes to winners. Get your share! See if you can FIND THE TRIPLETS, mail the coupon and get this wonderful opportunity. Then go after the first Grand Prize. Oh, boy, imagine what you could do with $2,500.00 cash if winner—What a thrill this fortune would bring to you!

Just Mail Coupon

The Paradise Company is a reliable concern, doing business with honest, upright people in every part of the United States, and if you are declared First Prize Winner, you take absolutely no risk, according to the plan which your answer brings, then you get the new 1937 Buick 8 Sedan and if prompt $1,250.00 cash besides, or $2,500.00 all cash if preferred. Remember, there are thousands of dollars in prizes—Yours for the winning!

Send in the coupon right away, but send no money with your answer. You want the opportunity to win $2,500.00 cash? Don't put off until tomorrow. Find the Triplets NOW and mail your answer today.

THE PARADISE COMPANY Dept. 19-A, 325 WEST OHIO ST. CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



$1,250.00 CASH
Send answer quick and we will tell you how the winner gets $1,250.00 cash
FOR PROMPTNESS

Dept. 19-A,
THE TRIPLETS
ARE NUMBERS:

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....