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by **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

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NEXT ISSUE, DATED OCTOBER, OUT SEPTEMBER 3rd!

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BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

The roaring guns that robbed gangster Johnny Diamondo of his sight lifted him into a prosperity that was—for Johnny—out of this world!

By JIMMY NICHOLS

AS FAR as Johnny Diamondo's career was concerned, the best thing that ever happened to him was the tiny .38 caliber bullet that passed through the frontal part of his skull on the night of January 12, 1923, and left him totally blind.

Up to that time, Johnny, a small, slender, friendly looking man with the undistinguished appearance of a grocery clerk or a streetcar conductor, had been what the West Coast underworld in his time referred to as a torpedo—a professional killer. He was attached to the bodyguard of a produce racketeer named Allen D. Sociales, who had made a fortune in lettuce, and a host of enemies.

One night, as Sociales left the Blue Flame night club, located in one of the



Up to that time Johnny had been what the West Coast underworld referred to as a torpedo—a professional killer.

better parts of a little suburb called Hollywood, there was a flurry of shooting, the roar of motors, and by the time police arrived from Los Angeles there was no one around but Johnny, who lay very still on the sidewalk. Probably the last image ever recorded in the seeing portion of his brain was the twisted face of his killer. But of course he could never identify him. Johnny was blind.

The little mobster probably did some tall thinking in that hospital ward. His ability to pull a trigger was, so far as he knew, his only profit-making asset. And he had to find another, quickly.

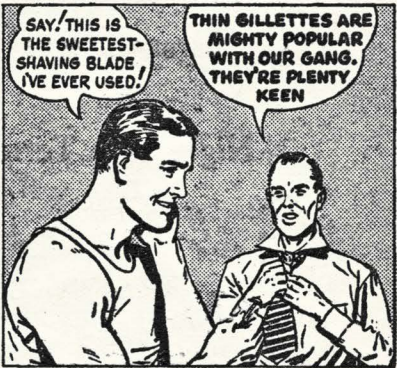
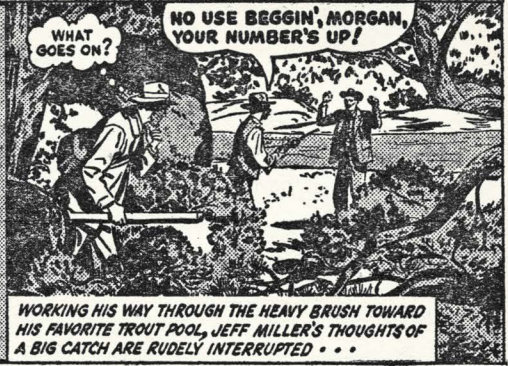
"Cheer up, brother," said a man in the bed next to him. "They'll teach you to mend brooms or something." His voice grew bitter. "Take me, now. Lost my leg in a bus smashup. Insurance won't give me a dime. Every cent I have in the world is right here in my wallet. Just ten bucks. But I'm not worried. Not much."

After a while, Johnny said, much more cheerfully, "Well, I'm not worried, either. Not much. There are lots of things a guy can do, even if he has lost his blinkers." He had, as a matter of fact, discovered a new skill just that moment. His companion's last ten dollars, filched neatly without disturbing the wallet, lay loosely between the ex-gunman's fingers, under the grey hospital blanket.

That was the beginning of one of the most successful pickpocket careers in criminal history. Blindness, Johnny Diamondo discovered, had doubled the acuteness and

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JEFF LOST INTEREST IN FISHING WHEN...



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It was a dream, Morgan had said, only a dream. . . . But, Dear God— what kind of dream was this . . . this great stone figure that stalked the miasmatic night with ponderous tread . . . and pounded his granite fist on Morgan's own door?

MAN OF GRANITE

Strange Novel
of
Night-born Terror

By
ARTHUR LEO
ZAGAT



CHAPTER ONE

"The Wakeful Foe"

IT WASN'T being alone in the house, except for the baby, that made Arlene Morgan uneasy. She'd done a lot of baby-sitting since her sixteenth birthday, last May, and she'd gotten used to the silence of an empty house and the noises within the silence: old wood whispering to itself, scurrings inside ancient walls, ivy





Human or monster, Morgan didn't know. All he knew was that a giant fist had descended on him, clubbing him into oblivion.

rustlings against windows dark with night.

If she was a little jittery going upstairs to make sure the baby was dry and covered, it must have been on account of the queer thing Mrs. Vandahl had said just before she left. "Take good care of my little Lenny," she'd said, pale and great-eyed in the doorway. And then

she'd said slowly, "Intermit no watch."

Arlene wished now that she'd turned on the light down there in the foyer. She hadn't because she didn't need a light just to go upstairs in this house. She'd practically lived here up to when, last year, the Fosters sold their farm to her Dad, and the house, furniture and all, to the Van-

dahls. It was nearly five miles to her own home by the road, the way it meandered, but cutting through the woods it was less than two. Jimmy Foster and she, neither of them having brothers or sisters, had grown up together.

The room she went into, halfway down the dark upstairs hall, used to be Jimmy's. In the dim glow from a tiny light on the dresser it was almost the same as when Arlene used to look at Jimmy's stamps here, rainy afternoons, or his birds' nest collection. The biggest difference was the crib where a bed used to be.

The baby was all cuddled up in the crib, fast asleep and smiling. He had a round and chubby face and two dimples in his fat cheeks, and wisps of blond hair curled like silk on his pink, clean scalp.

She stood there a moment, her dark blue slacks and blue sweater clinging to her sturdy figure. "Sleep well, Lenny," she whispered. She tucked the blankets in around him, touched his warm cheek with a light fingertip and tiptoed out.

At the foot of the stairs the big front door loomed darkly in the seep of light through the portieres curtaining the parlor archway. Arlene remembered how Mrs. Vandahl had shaken it to make sure it was locked after she'd closed it from the outside. She'd told Arlene not to open it for anyone, no matter who. And then she'd said, with a strange, lost smile, "Take good care of my little Lenny, Arlene. Intermit no watch."

In the dark and empty house, it had had a terrifying sound.

ARLENE reminded herself now that she had homework to do. She took her school bag from the marble base of the hat rack on which she'd hung her coat and went through the heavy, fringed portieres into the parlor. It was light in there. The green plush sofa and the deep, comfortable chairs stood in exactly the same places on the Wilton rug Arlene remem-

bered so well, and the same brocaded drapes hid the two wide windows that looked out on the porch. It was warm in the familiar room and Arlene's uneasiness left her.

Going to the carved oak desk, nearly black with age, that stood against the wall opposite the windows, she pushed aside a book that lay open on it, put her bag down, pulled up a chair and got out her algebra book and notebook, and a pencil.

She did her algebra problems and her history assignment. She had a scare when she couldn't find her Greenough's Latin Grammar in the bag, but when she dumped everything out on the desk, she saw that she did have it.

She ought to pack her bag so it would be ready when Mrs. Vandahl came home, she decided. She put in all her books except the Greenough and then picked up her gym bloomers. They'd fallen across the book that had been there, lying open, and the title printed across the tops of the pages caught her eye. *Paradise Lost*.

That's by John Milton, she thought. We're going to have it in English next term. It looked like a school book the way every tenth line was numbered down the margin so teacher could tell you what lines to read. Maybe it used to be Jimmy Foster's. Maybe it was Jimmy who'd underlined in pencil that passage on the right-hand page.

Arlene started to read it and Mrs. Vandahl's strange words leaped out at her ;

... *intermit no watch*
Against a wakeful Foe, while I abroad
Through all the coasts of dark destruction
seek
Deliverance for us all. . . .

No, Jimmy Foster hadn't underlined these words. They'd been marked, the book left open here, as a warning to Arlene.

The silence of the house closed in on Arlene. A rattle of plaster falling inside

a wall abruptly was sinister. The rustle of ivy against drape-swathed windows was a fumbling of furtive fingers.

She was being silly. She was imagining things. Her throat locked on terror then. Imagination?

The thud of a heavy footfall on the porch outside those windows was not imagined. Arlene heard another, a third, a fourth, advancing, slow and ponderous and infinitely menacing, across the porch.

And now the door shook to the blow, as if of a fist of stone, that fell upon it.

JOHN MORGAN shoved his reading glasses up on his seamed forehead, rattled his newspaper irritably. "What the devil's got into you, Mary?" he demanded. "Way you've been staring out of that window the past half-hour, a fellow'd think this was the first time Arlene's been out late, baby-sitting in a neighbor's house."

"It's the first time she's been sitting in that house." Her frail form taut in the curtained embrasure from which one could see a little way up the road towards the Foster house, his wife did not turn. "And I'd hardly call Lorna and Martin Vandahl neighbors."

"Why not? They live in the next house to ours, don't they?"

"That's about all they do, too, John—live there. They've had nothing to do with anyone since they first came here, and they've made it plain they don't want to. Nobody knows anything about them, not even where they came from. They never go anywhere, never get any letters—"

"She did," Morgan grunted. "This very morning. Jed Parker showed it to me when I met him at the gate just as he was about to put our mail in the box."

His wife turned around. "Where was it from?"

"We couldn't tell. There was no return address and the postmark was smudged. There was just her name, typewritten:

Mrs. Lorna Vandahl, RFD 3, Montville."

A knot cracked in the fireplace and shot sparks against the hearth screen. "Must have been that letter took them out," Mary mused. "About an hour after Jed passed I saw them drive past and a little while later she came back without him, just the baby bundled up in the seat beside her. She would have had just enough time to put him on the 10:04 to the city."

"Suppose she had." Morgan lowered the newspaper to his lap. "What of it? And if you don't like them, why let Arlene go there in the first place?"

"I couldn't tell the child no, John, when Mrs. Vandahl called up and said she had to go somewhere for a while and didn't dare take the baby. *Dare*, she said!"

"Oh, for the love of Mike," Morgan growled. "Of course she didn't dare take the infant out of a warm house into the night cold." He pushed up out of his easy chair, strode across to his wife.

"Look," he said. "You're imagining things. There's nothing queer about the Vandahls time won't cure. They're just city people who aren't used to being neighborly. Besides, they're old, and they're set in their ways."

"They are old, John. Especially him, with his hair all white. He seems almost too old to really be the father of an infant like that."

"Maybe they adopted it," Morgan said. "Either way, I don't give a hoot. All I want is for you to quit fretting about Arlene. That woman promised she'd bring her home by ten and it isn't—"

The grandfather clock's deep chime, welling in from the front hall, cut him off. "There it is," she said. "Ten o'clock, and no Arlene."

"Okay." Morgan shrugged. "You won't give me any peace till I go get her, so I might as well go now."

Buttoning his lumber jacket as he strode across the porch and down the

steps to his parked car, Morgan was aware of a sense of urgency he would not for worlds have admitted to his wife.

He slammed the car door, drove out the gate and onto the road. Lit by bright moonlight, the road curved in a wide sweep along the brush-grown fence that marked the limit of Morgan's land and then past the rustling dark loom of the woods. The sharp late November chill was tangy with the fragrance of the pines as the road reversed its curve and the woods retreated. He strained his eyes ahead, but the road was empty all the way to where he now could see the old Foster house silhouetted blackly against the luminous sky, the moon glistening on its panes.

His eyes opened wide with shock then. Those panes were orange red! In the next instant flames exploded from them, swirling together into a single appalling mass that burst into the sky, a pyre from which no one could escape and in which no one could live.

THE SHOCK of that sudden holocaust brought Morgan's heel hard down on the brake pedal. Locked tires screamed on macadam and the car bucked to a halt. As he stared at the blaze he seemed to hear Arlene's cry for help. "Dad!" He heard it again, "Dad!" so clearly that he looked around as if he actually could see her, miles away.

He did see her.

He saw her stumbling out of the woods that edged the narrow field beside which he'd stopped. "Wait!" she called, stumbling toward him. "Wait for me, Dad," and a thin wail threaded her call, an eerie sound in the frightened night.

In a moment he was out of the car and running across the field to her. She was carrying a great bundle in her arms, and Morgan realized vaguely that the wail come from this. He reached her and flung out his arms toward her but she evaded him half laughing, half sobbing. "Watch

out, Dad. You'll make me drop Lenny."

Morgan looked down. "It's a baby," he muttered stupidly. "A baby."

"Of course it's a baby, Dad. It's Lenny Vandahl and he's awful cold." But it was Arlene who was cold, her teeth beginning to chatter, her lips blue. Her school bag hung by its strap from her shoulder but she had no coat on.

In the car, she snuggled under the robe he put about her, closed her eyes and sighed. As the car lurched underway and gathered speed, a hollow moan rose in the far distance, the Montville fire siren, calling out the volunteers.

Arlene stirred. Without opening her eyes she murmured, "Wonder where the fire is."

"Don't you—" Morgan caught that back. She didn't know or she would not have said that. Someone else, seeing the red glow in the sky, had sounded the alarm.

What then had she been fleeing from?

"Arlene," Morgan asked, "why did you run from that house, carrying the baby?"

"The—the Wakeful Foe. It was banging on the door." Remembered terror had her trembling again. "I grabbed my school bag and ran out in the kitchen and up the back stairs to the baby's room and I heard it on the stairs, coming up."

"It?" he broke in. "What? Some animal?"

"No. But not a man either."

"Now, dear, it has to be one or the other."

"It wasn't," she insisted. "I saw it. It was in the hall when I came out carrying Lenny and I saw it plain. It looked like the snow men Jimmy Foster and I used to build, all clumsy shaped, its body and head all round and lumpy. Only," she said, "it wasn't made of snow. It was stone, Dad, it was all chopped out of grey stone."

"Stone? How could it be stone? It was alive, wasn't it?"

"It was alive but it was stone. I felt it. I was so scared I couldn't run, and it thudded towards me and just as it almost reached me I turned and ran. But it was so close it touched the back of my neck and I felt its stone hand scratch me. Look."

Arlene bent her head forward and her father looked down at the back of her neck and saw the scratches, the scrape rather, exactly like stone would make rasping tender skin. His lips parted but no sound came from them as his daughter went on. "I ran. Lenny was awful heavy but I ran down the hall and down the back stairs and out the back door into the woods. It followed me. I heard it behind me in the woods but I ran fast and pretty soon I didn't hear it any more."

The fire siren was a banshee howl in the night. Morgan made himself speak calmly, "You got that scrape from a branch in the woods, dear. You dreamed the thing in the house and you were all mixed up." That was it, of course. "You see, it's the Foster house that's on fire. You smelled smoke in your sleep and dreamed this stone thing and you were so scared it seemed real."

"I didn't dream it, Dad." Her small voice was very certain. "I felt it and I saw it and it was stone. There were even little shiny places where pieces had just been broken off it."

The night was alive with the howling siren, but Morgan was aware only of his daughter's eyes, pleading for belief. A leaden weight formed at the pit of his stomach.

There is a name for the mind that cannot distinguish reality from dreams.

CHAPTER TWO

The Besieged

A BLACK SEDAN rushed past them, and then the Larsens' pickup truck. Turning in at his own gate Morgan saw

the front door open and Mary's shadow appear on the porch as she came out. "Listen, Arlene," he said. "Maybe you did see this thing, but I don't think we'd better tell mother about it. We'll just tell her you grabbed up the baby when the fire broke out and ran out with him just as I came along. Understand?"

"Yes, Daddy," she agreed. "It would frighten mother."

Then he was braking and Mary was beside the car, opening the door. Oddly, she did not seem surprised that Arlene should hand her the baby to hold while she climbed out. Even when he told Mary the story they'd agreed on, her only reaction was to give the infant back to their daughter and say, "Go inside and get warm, dear. I want to talk to your father a minute."

Arlene went off obediently. The fire engine from Montville thundered past. As its roar faded up the road, Mary said, "Cal Hutson phoned just now."

"Huh?" Hutson was the marshal of Montville township. "What did he want?"

"He asked if our Arlene was over at the Vandahls, sitting with their baby. When I told him yes and that you'd gone to get her, he said I should call there and tell you not to wait for them to come home, but to bring the baby here to me. Because, John, about two hours ago they were killed in their auto, just this side of town."

"Good Lord! How did it happen?"

"Cal said their gas tank exploded and burned them to a crisp. The only way he could tell who they were was by the license plate number and the State Bureau was closed, which was why he was so late calling. He said they thought at first the car might have hit one of those low trailer trucks from the quarry but no one remembers one passing through this evening."

Morgan asked, "Why did they think the Vandahls had hit a quarry truck?"

"Because there were some pieces of grey stone in the road that looked as if they'd just been broken off from something." Mary apparently did not hear his gasp because she went on, "I was just about to hang up when I heard the siren start, and then I heard your car coming so I didn't have to phone."

He had to get away before she saw the look in his face. He put the car in gear. "I've got to go help fight the fire," he said hurriedly. "I'll be back soon." He was moving before she could get out a word in answer.

He sent the car roaring out into the road again but as the fences started to slide by he slowed it, trying to think. There couldn't, he thought, be any connection between the bits of stone at the scene of the accident and the stone monster Arlene had dreamed about. Even if there was, even if she hadn't dreamed the thing but had actually seen it, no one would believe that she had.

She's a child, he thought. She'll tell about it to some friend and then it will spread. If he were not her father, might he not himself suspect that she'd set fire to the house and invented the monster to explain it?

Or, at the very least, that it was an hallucination of a weakened brain? Somehow, somewhere, he must find incontrovertible proof that Arlene had told the truth, incredible as it was.

By now he'd come to the curve from which he could see the Foster house, and even from this distance he could see that already it was a mere skeleton of black timbers outlined by the still-burning fire. He recalled Arlene's saying that she'd heard the thing follow her into the woods. That was where he must look for traces of its existence.

Morgan ran his car off the road. Then, taking a flashlight from the glove compartment, he got out and went across the field in which he had found Arlene. The

moonlight was strong enough, here at the woods' edge, so that he did not need the flashlight to locate the path by which she'd run from the Foster house.

He saw where the carpet of dead leaves had been disturbed by her feet.

He plodded into the woods, the leafy carpet rustling. The pines grew more closely, blocking out the moonlight, and he switched on his flashlight to follow the path. It revealed only the single track left by his daughter's saddle shoes as she fled the Golem. . . .

He stopped short, the hairs bristling at the nape of his neck. From where had that word popped into his head, that name for a monster of stone, 'all clumsy shaped, its body and head round and lumpy,' instilled with life?

He remembered. Vividly he remembered a scene out of his forgotten youth: A beamed lecture hall. Rows of chairs rising tier on tier from the dais where Professor Janely droned to his audience of drowsy, half-attentive students.

"Mary Shelley," Janely was saying, "may have gotten the inspiration for her famous tale of Frankenstein's monster from the medieval legend of the Golem." Morgan seemed to recall his words verbatim. "In Frankfort, Germany, somewhere around the turn of the twelfth century a certain student of the Caballa, the Hebrew lore of ancient magic, is said to have hewn out of stone a rough and clumsy figure of a man and by the use of forbidden rites to have given it life.

"The Golem's first act was to crush its creator's skull with a single blow of its granite fist. Freed thus from control, it proceeded to terrorize the Ghetto, night after night, until at long last the Chief Rabbi found in his tomes a charm by which it could be imprisoned. Only imprisoned. The legend asserts that once having been given life, the Golem is immortal. . . ."

Abruptly then, Morgan was back in the

dark woods, his heart pounding. Staring into the shimmering blackness he seemed to see—he could not be sure—just beyond his flashlight's reach a shadowed figure that did not move.

Then it was gone. He must have imagined it. His probing beam found only gnarled boles, winter-naked underbrush. It returned to the path and he was moving again. Then he halted once more.

The bright end of his torch beam had touched shoes, motionless on the dead leaves. It lifted, brought out of the darkness trouser legs scarred with burned holes, a grey topcoat also burned. It found a narrow, gaunt face so blackened with soot that it seemed to be a mask.

One of the firefighters, of course, wandered off from the blaze, but who in the township had hair so startlingly white? Only the man Mary had just told him had died tonight, ten miles from here. The words came slowly off Morgan's tongue. "Who are you?"

"Vandahl," the answer came. "Martin Vandahl. You're John Morgan, aren't you? I'm on my way to your house." Morgan didn't get a chance to answer, though. For, from behind him, a giant fist pounded the base of his skull and clubbed him into oblivion.

STARTLED awake by her daughter's frightened cry from above, Mary Morgan sprang out of the chair in which she'd been dozing and ran upstairs.

Moonlight was strong in the room as Mary entered. Arlene was sitting up in bed, staring dazedly at her. "What's the matter, darling? What's wrong?"

"I can't find Lenny." The girl's sleepy voice was despairing. "I've looked and looked all through the coast of dark destruction and I can't find him."

"He's right across the hall, dear, in the spare room." Mary's tone was steady, comforting. She reached the bedside and put a palm on the girl's forehead. "You've

had a nightmare." The smooth skin was cool to her touch. "I'm not surprised, what with all you've been through, but lie down now and go to sleep."

The girl sank back on the pillow, her throat pulsing where the flannel nightgown left it bare. "It was awful, mother. I was looking and looking for Lenny and there was no light, not even stars, and I couldn't hear anything except the wash of waves on the coast, and I knew the Wakeful Foe was looking for Lenny too. And then all of a sudden I heard the baby crying and I yelled to him not to, and that's when I woke up."

She drew a deep breath. "Maybe I really did hear him crying, mother. He—oh, mother!" Arlene's eyes widened. "Mrs. Vandahl will be terribly worried about him when she comes home and finds the house on fire and doesn't know where he is."

"Your father's there, dear." No use upsetting the child more by telling her Lorna Vandahl would never come home again to her baby. "And I want you to go to sleep or you'll never be able to get up in time for school in the morning. It must be terribly late."

She glanced at the little ivory clock on the night table. "It is. It's nearly half past one." And her husband not home yet. "Now, close your eyes and go to sleep at once."

Arlene moved down under the covers. "I will, mother. I'll go to sleep, but please, please go in and make sure Lenny's all right. Please."

"Of course I will. Good-night, darling."
"Good-night, mother."

The spare room was at the back of the house and there was no moonlight in it. Mary Morgan could make out only vaguely, in the bed along which she'd arranged a fence of chair backs so the baby would not roll out, the tiny mound of blankets and the shape of the curly small head.

But she could hear the infant's quiet

breathing. Everything was all right.

Poor little orphan, she thought. What will become of it now? She thought of Arlene's saying that she wished they could keep it. Maybe they could. She would talk it over with her husband when he came home.

Why wasn't he home yet?

She went to the window, shivering a little in the cold air that came in through the three-inch opening between its lower sash and the sill. Out there the shadow of the house lay black on the kitchen garden and the chicken run, and reached almost to the barn. Past the barn, however, the moon was bright on the home meadow and she could look across it and see up the road to where it curved behind the woods.

The road was as empty as the sky and there no longer was any red glow of fire in the sky. The deep *bong* welling up to her from the grandfather clock in the entrance foyer seemed to strike her breast like a leaden mallet.

You're being silly, she told herself. Nothing's happened to John. The thing to do is go downstairs and put up some coffee so he'll have something hot to drink when he gets home, cold and tired.

But she did not turn from the window. Some movement half seen, perhaps some sound half heard, kept her there, staring out.

She saw nothing. She saw only the narrow roof of the back porch, just below. She saw only the kitchen garden under its blanket of mulch, dimly outlined, and as dim in the shadow of the house the bare ground of the mesh-fenced chicken run. *There!* Near the farther end of the hen-house, against its black wall, a dark blotch.

Maybe it was canvas John had hung from a nail. Maybe it was only a trick of moonlight.

Her eyes widened then. *It was moving!*

Clumsily. Slowly, as if every inch of movement required a separate effort, was a separate pain, it moved out of the

shadow and into the bright moonglow and halted again. Huge, the color of ashes, grotesquely not quite the shape of a man, it stood on columnar legs watching the house.

Scanning the house for a way in.

CHAPTER THREE

The Prisoner

THE GROWLING VIBRATION, sensed rather than heard, that had pulled Morgan back to the verge of consciousness faded. Now there was only awareness of pain and of earth smell and the reek of wood burned and wetted down.

And a stench that had no name but was crawling and horrible.

Pain throbbed in his skull. His lids slit, parted, but darkness pressed against his eyeballs, almost tangible. He could not see but he sensed, as the blind do, the close loom of prisoning walls.

It came to him that he lay sprawled on a flat surface with the harsh feel of carpeting. That was wrong. It should be ground, the leaf-covered ground of the woods. Recollection was back, of the dark woods, of the gaunt apparition that had held his attention while something had sneaked up behind to smash him. Something? The Golem?

"I'm on my way to your house."

They'd been on their way to the house where his wife and daughter slept, the man who'd died tonight and the monster given grisly life centuries ago. "No," Morgan groaned. He thrust down with his hands and somehow was on his feet. He lurched through a dizzy swirl of pain, thudded into a wall. A little further searching brought him to a door frame. His hands felt the door and clawed for its knob.

There was none.

There was nothing his clawing hands could take hold of. The door fitted its

frame so tightly he could not even get fingernails into the seam. He groaned, pounded the door with his fists.

Then he froze.

"No use, Morgan," a voice was saying behind him. "It can't be opened from within." It was a voice he'd heard only once, and that after its owner was dead, but he'd recognize it in Hell. "And the last of the men have left in their cars, so there's no one to hear you call for help."

Morgan seemed to hear in the phantom's tones an echo of his own despair. "We may feel better if we have some light." He twisted to the click of a switch, but the black dark still thumbed his eyes.

He was blind. The Golem's blow had destroyed his sight.

"Silly of me," he heard out there in the impenetrable dark, "to have forgotten that the fire would have fused the wires." He heard movement in the dark, the scrape of wood on wood, a sigh. "Yes, she did say she'd left this here, that time your local power circuits went out during a storm."

It was light that blinded Morgan now. Blessed light. He could see. Nothing else mattered for the moment.

The source of the light was moving. His pupils accommodated and he saw that the light slid long shadows about a space some eight feet by ten, its walls and low ceiling roughly finished planks of aged-darkened wood, closely set. There were the shadows of an oblong table, of chairs solidly built. Directly across from him, against the wall, was a bed—a bunk—whose side rail was a ponderous beam, its legs sawed from logs a foot in diameter. The light steadied and Morgan saw that it came from a dry-cell lamp which a tall, gaunt shape reached up to hang on a high nail in the wall.

Morgan licked dry lips. He said, "You were supposed to have burned to death in your car."

The phantom was very still. Its hand

spread fingers at its side, clenched. "I was not in that car when it burned. The man who died in it beside my wife was the lover for whom she was leaving me."

Martin Vandahl hobbled to a chair, let himself wearily down into it. "They did not get far with all their planning. They sent me to the city by means of a letter that came for me this morning. The first train I could catch after I'd discovered that it was a fake got me back to Montville at eight forty-three. Needless to say, Lorna was not at the station to meet me, but I had no place to go except home.

"Home," he repeated, bitterly. "I set out to walk cross-country, not wanting to talk to anyone, not wanting to meet anyone who knew me. From about a mile away I saw that my house was on fire and by the time I reached it men already were arriving to fight the fire. I joined them, unrecognized in the excitement, and overheard the marshal tell someone about the accident to the car and that you had taken the baby to your home. I decided to go for it and—" He shrugged. "No sense standing, Morgan. Come and sit down."

"Sit down?" Morgan looked around for another door, for a window. "Mary—my wife—will be worried about me. I've got to get out of here."

THERE was no other door. There was no window. "Out?" Vandahl's chuckle was grim. "How do you expect to, my friend? This is the old icehouse, by the pond at the edge of the woods."

"The . . . icehouse." Morgan knew the structure, unused since electricity had made artificial refrigeration possible. Its walls were solid oak three inches through, their only openings narrow ventilation slits under the earth-piled roof. Its door was dogged shut against animal depredation by an heavy iron lever and lug. "We'd need dynamite to get out of here," he said.

"Precisely." Vandahl's hand clenched on the table, knuckles whitening. "That's

why I was so sure it would hold him safe."

"You had a prisoner here." Of course. That was the reason for the furniture. For the bed. Now he knew why the bed was built to support an enormous weight, why the air of this place crawled with a nameless stench. "The Golem."

"The Golem?"

"The stone monster of Frankfort."

Morgan pushed away from the door, his voice a deep rumble in his chest. "Don't try to deny it. My daughter saw it in the house just before the fire broke out. She felt its stone hand and it was only by a miracle that she got away from it."

Vandahl seemed almost to have forgotten he was there. "The Golem," he repeated, in the tone of a man who at long last has found the answer to a question that has burdened him too long. "So that's why Lorna would never let me see her brother."

"Her brother!" It was Morgan's turn to snatch at a word, incredulous. "How can that be? The Golem was given life eight centuries ago. It's not human."

"I've sometimes wondered whether *she* was." The other was aware of him again. "But I do know she is not stone, my friend. Out of the bitter sixteen months of our marriage, I can assure you that she may be fire and ice—she is not by any means stone."

Vandahl's mouth twisted into a smile. "The love that comes to a man at my age, Morgan, is different from that of youth. It is complete, devastating. It is a surrender of thought and will. I met Lorna about two years ago and was lost. It made no difference to me that she evaded my questions as to her background. All I knew was that a faint trace of accent in her perfect English betrayed it as not her native tongue. I did not care that she refused to tell me the source of her evident wealth or why, in spite of it, she had no servants. I even accepted her strange insistence that I always leave her home by

midnight or, if we were out, have her at her door by that hour.

"All I cared about was to win her as my wife and, God help me, I did."

Vandahl dropped his face into his hands and in the tense silence Morgan heard his hoarse breathing.

"She could no longer send me away at midnight, but she could, and did, forbid me to enter a certain room, the door of which was always locked. I knew she kept something alive in there for she would go in there and I'd hear her voice behind the door and a mewling that seemed to answer her. One night she opened the door unexpectedly and before she could slam it shut I glimpsed the swollen and horrible thing that was in the room.

"That was when she told me it was her brother. He'd traveled in the Far East, she said, and had contracted there the dread disease called elephantiasis that bloats its victims' bodies to twice their natural size and transforms their skin to the bluish-grey color of the animal that gives it its name. He was half blind, she said, and all but wholly demented, but she could not endure the thought of committing him to an institution. I need not have anything to do with him, in fact must not. He most likely would attack me. She would care for him herself, as she always had.

"I was too damnably much in love with her to object. Until the baby was born. I persuaded her then that to have a madman in the house with the child was the height of folly, but she still would not hear of his being put away. I had to agree to the arrangement we had here. After we found this place I fixed up this icehouse with my own hands, but it was Lorna who brought her brother here at night, alone in the car with him, and I never entered it again.

"That one glimpse of him," the recital ended, "was all I had until tonight when he attacked us. Even then, until what you

said just now, I did not realize that my supposed brother-in-law is—not human.”

Vandahl sighed. “Obviously, my dear wife released him—*it*—before she left, in the hope that it would kill me. Instead, with a certain grim humor, it locked me, and you, in here to die of thirst and hunger.” The hands fell heavily to the table. “It is too bad that you should be involved. As for myself, I am content to wait here for death.”

Morgan leaned forward. “We’re not going to die, Vandahl, either of us. When I don’t show up in an hour or so, my wife will have the whole township out searching for us, and the Golem’s tracks will lead them to us.”

“Are you sure, Morgan?” Was he? Did not the legend tell how the stone monster had prowled the Frankfort Ghetto for years and left no spoor by which it could be traced to its lair? “Are you very sure,” Vandahl asked, “that in an hour or so your wife will know whether you’ve come home or not? Or care?”

Morgan’s voice trembled. “What are you driving at?”

Vandahl shrugged. “Hasn’t it occurred to you,” he asked, “that, as I did, the Golem could also have learned where the baby is? Do you think he’ll let a lone woman keep him from it?”

MARY MORGAN did not quite know how she’d gotten down here to the phone on the wall beside the grandfather clock. She was aware only that she’d come quietly so as not to awaken Arlene to new terror, that she must speak quietly now so Arlene would not hear her tell the operator to send help.

She palmed the bells with her left hand, muffling their tinkle as she ground the ringing handle with her right. She took the receiver off the hook and put it to her ear.

The hard rubber was cold against her ear. Cold—and dead.

She knew now what the prowler had been doing at the corner of the henhouse where she’d first glimpsed him. The phone wires ran there before they angled off across the fields, and the insulators to which they were fastened were well within reach of a tall man.

Mary hung the useless receiver back on its hook gently. Her hand still on it, she made herself think, made herself decide what she must do.

She remembered gratefully that the kitchen door was locked. She’d reminded Morgan to do that when he’d come in from his chores. He’d gone the rounds of the downstairs windows, too, locking them before he’d settled down to his paper, but he’d left the front door spring lock unlatched till Arlene should return.

The first thing to do, then, was to see to that.

Moving to it seemed like wading through some invisible fluid that somehow had flooded the foyer, knee high, but she got to the door and opened it and thumbed the latch button in its edge. As she started to close it she heard a faint sound in the night, held it, listening tautly.

Was it the vibration of an approaching motor? Let it be, Mary prayed voicelessly. Please God, let it be John coming home.

If it was, she must warn him the instant he got in the driveway. She moved her hand to the outer doorknob, stepped out on the porch, listened again. Did she hear that car? She wasn’t sure. She leaned far out to look up the road, leaned a little too far. The door clicked shut.

And the road was starkly empty, the car sound gone.

Mary whirled, thrust at the door in panic. No use. It was locked. She was locked out of the house, locked out from Arlene and the baby, locked out into the night where that grey and terrible thing prowled.

She dared not call to her daughter to

let her in. The prowler would hear, would come running, might arrive just as Arlene was opening the door for her.

This way the child was safe, for a while at least. That she should be so was more important than that Mary herself was out in the open, in danger, and with no weapon except her bare hands.

Wait. There was a weapon she might be able to get at. John's scythe, hanging on the wall, just inside the barn door. Perhaps, if she stole very quietly through the shadows, she might reach it without being seen.

Mary went to the end of the porch, climbed over the rail. She slipped along the side wall of the house towards the back, the lawn's dried grass whispering loudly under her feet. She was almost to the corner when she heard wood creak, around in back, as if under a heavy weight, and then a rasp of stone on wood and a sudden, metallic clank.

Something had struck the tin bucket in which she mixed chicken feed. It hung high up on a support of the back porch roof. She knew now what the sound meant. The prowler was climbing to the porch roof, and from there he could reach windows that were not locked. He'd be inside the house before she could possibly get the scythe and get back.

If she were to stop him at all it must be now, unarmed.

Mary went around the corner of the house, fast, and saw the grey and monstrous figure that was poised on the porch rail, groping at the roof edge for a hold. "Down," she gasped. "Get down out of there," and the round head rolled, peered blindly down at her. A stench as of something long dead and rotted was in her nostrils as she got both hands on one of the huge legs and pulled at it.

It was like pulling at a statue's stone leg, but no statue would make the mewling, meaningless sounds she heard above her. She planted her feet against the bot-

tom of the porch, threw herself backward and put her strength into one desperate effort. The foot rasped off the rail then, and the grey body toppled, was hurtling down atop her as she fell.

It seemed to Mary Morgan that she heard a howl of unutterable anguish as the monster fell down on her.

JOHN MORGAN took hold of the top of a chair, so tightly the blood seemed about to burst from his flattened fingertips. "There's got to be some way to get out of here." He looked around the interior of the icehouse, but there was no indication that the walls had been touched since they'd been built by old Jethro Foster seventy years ago. "Good Lord, man," he groaned to Vandahl. "How can you sit there so calmly? My wife and daughter may be in that house, but it's the baby the Golem is after. Your son."

"Not my son, Morgan. Lorna's, but not mine. She thought I believed it was mine but I knew it was not."

That was when Morgan spied the cord dangling from the light fixture in the ceiling. "You installed that light?"

"Of course."

"And you're no electrician." He stepped on a chair seat, then up on the tabletop as he dug his jackknife out of his trouser pocket. "You're not even farmer enough to handle tools properly." He thumb-nailed the screwdriver blade open, reached up to use it on one of the three screws that fastened the socket plate in place. "The way the board here is splintered, I'll bet you used an axe to chop a hole through the roof for the wires."

"Right." Vandahl was out of his own chair, gaping up at him. "But it isn't big enough for an infant to crawl through." "I'll make it big enough."

The first screw was out. Morgan tackled a second, then the third. It dropped and the plate dropped with it to dangle on stiffly coiled black wires. He

changed blades and hacked through the wires, saw that the jaggedly edged hole the plate had covered was only some ten inches across at its widest.

The assembly dropped. The bulb exploded at his feet but Morgan was working on the wider rim with his knife. He cut a V to the plank's edge in a minute or two, whittled through the other rim in less time and, without pause, bent, lifted the chair he'd used as a step and thrust a leg slantingly into the aperture, parallel to the plank's length, as far as the rung would let him.

He hung his whole weight on that chair leg, levering downward.

The old wood creaked, sagged a little, but held. Then Vandahl was up beside him, grasping the chair leg, adding his weight. Wood cracked and the plank angled downward so suddenly that as the leg slid out Vandahl staggered against Morgan and jolted him from the table.

He fell sprawling, rolled, pushed up and was knocked down again by the table itself skidding against him while he was still off balance. "You clumsy ass," he grunted at the legs that vanished through the hole in the ceiling. He shoved the table back

under and clambered up on it again.

The hole's splintered edge cut into his palms, gripped his shoulders. Then he was through and from the roof saw the moonlight bright on the pond's icy surface, heard a thrashing of underbrush in the dark woods that told him Vandahl had a long head start on him.

Morgan leaped down and fought through the thick brush to the path that led toward his car. Sickening fear made him run even faster. How long had he been unconscious? What had happened—what was happening—to Mary? To Arlene?

CHAPTER FOUR

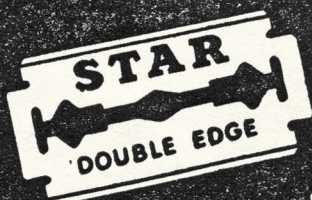
The Dark Killer

ARLENE was sure she must be dreaming again. The Wakeful Foe had howled like something hurt it terribly and now she heard Lenny crying.

She wasn't dreaming. Her eyes were open on the moonlit dimness of her own room but she could still hear the baby crying as if it had been awakened by some noise and was frightened. Arlene threw off the covers and swung her feet to the

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floor. The cold struck through her and she shivered, but she got up and padded across the hall, her bare toes curling from the cold of the floor.

It was dark in the spare room, but she could tell where the baby was by the sound of his crying. "Yes, Lenny," she crooned. "Don't cry. Arlene's here." She bumped into one of the chairs her mother had put along the bed but the baby's crying was stopping. Arlene fumbled at the chair and pulled it out so she could reach him. The scraping on the floor didn't stop when she stopped pulling the chair.

The scraping wasn't here. Arlene turned to where it came from, to the pale oblong of the window at the end of the room.

Then she was back in the lonely terror of her dream. She must be back in her dream because in the frame of the window, black and terrible, was the lumped shape of the Wakeful Foe and the window was scraping open to let it in.

It had heard Lenny crying and so knew where the baby was. Now it was coming in to get him.

* * *

Morgan seemed to have been running forever through the nightmare woods, the leaves rustling under his feet, exhaustion racking his limbs, but now at last the woods were brightening and he stumbled out of them into the stubbled field at whose edge he'd left his car.

It took him a moment before he spied his car, and then he started with shock. The car was moving! It was making a tight U-turn in the road. It straightened out and Morgan saw who was at the wheel. Vandahl! Following the path, Vandahl had come out here and spied the car, and he was turning it in the right direction for a quick getaway when Morgan arrived.

But it didn't stop. It gathered speed, was roaring away—without Morgan.

"Wait!" Morgan shouted. "Wait for me, you fool!" Calling on his last ounce of strength, he sprinted across the field. "Wait!" But there was no use shouting. The sedan was gone.

Morgan reeled out into the road and started to walk toward his home. His heart was pounding. His legs were like rubber. He'd never be able to make it.

Then the car sound that had faded was loudening again. Vandahl must have heard his shout at the last moment, turned and was coming back for him.

* * *

Arlene knew now that she was not dreaming. The Foe had lurched in through the window and stood now just inside it. She could smell it, and she knew that you can't smell anything in a dream.

It was a horrible smell. The Foe was horrible, all big and grey and clumsy shaped as it stood peering into the room as if it were trying to see what was in here but couldn't. Maybe it was blind. Maybe if she kept very still it would think the room was empty and go away.

The baby whimpered.

The Foe's hideous head turned to where the whimper came from, so maybe it didn't hear the other sound Arlene heard, the sound of a car coming along the road. Of Dad's car. She knew the sound of it almost as well as she knew Dad's voice. The foot thudded on the floor, and then the other foot, and it was lumbering toward the bed. Arlene couldn't hear Dad's car any more. Maybe it had reached the house and stopped. The Foe bumped into a chair and its huge arm swung, stiff and straight like a club, and knocked the chair across the floor.

"Dad!" Arlene screamed. "Help!"

The Foe swung to her and her throat locked on the scream. The baby was crying again and she heard a muffled shout, down below, and the sound of breaking

glass. The Foe was mewling at her, like a cat trying to say something. Somehow that unlocked Arlene's throat again and she said, "Don't touch Lenny. Don't hurt the baby. I won't let you."

The Foe turned back to the bed and stooped, its big grey arms reaching down for Lenny, but Arlene bent more quickly. She pulled the baby up, twisted to run—and was tripped by the chair the Foe had thrown down.

"Dad!" she yelled as she fell. "Dad!" And a distant shout answered, "Where are you?" Arlene was all tangled in the chair and the baby was crying and the Foe was moving toward her, but she yelled back, "Here! Upstairs in the spare room!" and as she yelled she knew it wasn't her father who'd shouted.

"Coming," the stranger yelled, nearer, his footfalls on the stairs. The Foe mewled and lurched out of the room and Arlene heard it clumping in the hall. Then she heard a shout and feet running past the door. The noises of a fierce fight exploded out there, shufflings and grunts, and the sound of blows.

Arlene was shaking violently, but she pushed the chair away and sat up, gathering the baby into her arms. "Hush," she crooned. "Hush," as she listened to the noise of fighting get farther away. "Please stop crying."

The baby snuggled against her and his crying grew quieter, and now he was only sobbing. Arlene got up and started to go to the window to climb out, but when she reached the window she knew she couldn't climb out with the baby in her arms, and of course she couldn't leave him.

Then the noise of fighting in the hall stopped.

She turned back to the door, stood listening. She heard someone coming along the hall slowly! As if he were very tired. As if he'd been hurt in the fight but was trying to get to her.

Which one was it?

THE CAR John Morgan had heard skidded to a squealing halt beside him, but it was not his sedan and it had come from behind him. It was a battered old coupe and the man who leaned across from its steering wheel and threw open its door was Marshall Cal Hutson.

"John!" he exclaimed. "What in thunder are you doin' out here, lookin' like you been in a tussle with Satan himself?"

"That's about what I have been." Morgan got hold of the car door and hauled himself in. "Get me home, Cal. Fast." He dropped heavily into the seat. "Hurry, Cal." The car was in motion again, but slowly. "Oh, Lord, can't you go faster than this?"

"Yeah," the peace officer grunted, "but I ain't goin' to. I been pokin' 'round the ruins of the Foster house. I found out something. That fire was set, John. What I want to know is why your daughter didn't phone the alarm before it got a good holt on the old wood."

"She wasn't in the house." No time now to explain the incredible thing she'd seen. "She saw the firebug setting it and ran out, carrying the baby. He knows she saw him and is after her to silence her, and if you don't speed up, Cal, we may be too late to save her."

"Right." The coupe fairly leaped into racketing flight. "What got me suspicious of that fire," Hutson shouted above it, "was what we turned up when the Vandahl car cooled off." They were rounding the curve where the fence began. "In what was left of the gas tank. The remains of some clockwork that looked like it might of been part of a fire bomb."

Now the car surged into the driveway and was stopping next to Morgan's own car. There was a dark shadow before the front house door and Morgan's heart sank.

He hit the ground before the coupe had quite stopped, half stumbled, half fell

up the porch steps and had his arm around the limp figure whose bruised mouth mumbled his name. "John. You . . . I heard your car . . . crawled around here . . . but door locked. Is—is Arlene all right?"

"I don't know. Where is she, Mary?"

"Inside. I heard her scream. . . ."

"And the door's locked, you say? I—"

"Window open there." That was Hutson, behind him, pointing to a gaping parlor window and now starting for it. Morgan lifted his wife in his arms, got to the window seemingly in the same motion. His heels crunched on broken glass as he stepped through, saw Cal already in the doorway to the foyer. He put Mary down in a big chair, said, "Stay there!" and ran after Hutson. Remembering the switch in the foyer wall that turned on the upstairs hall light, he jabbed it as he passed, not stopping.

The marshal was stark against sudden light at the upper stairhead as Morgan started up. He had halted, staring down the hall as though he saw something that appalled him, then pounded away. Morgan reached the top, saw what it was that Cal was running toward far down the hall, but as he turned the newel post to follow he heard a wordless, sobbing cry from within a door Hutson had passed.

"Arlene!" burst from his tortured lungs. He reached for the door, grabbed the frame and swung himself into the spare room.

He stopped short, staring past the shambles of overturned chairs at Arlene, her back to the window, the baby tightly clasped to her breast as she defiantly confronted a tall, disheveled figure.

"I'm not going to hurt you, little girl," Martin Vandahl was saying. "I've no intention of harming you or the baby." And whirled, swinging up a monkey wrench to hurl it at Morgan.

The wrench halted in midair and Vandahl stared. "Morgan." His hand dropped. "God, man, I thought you were—" Sur-

prise was in his bruised and bloody face. "I didn't hear you coming."

"Didn't you?" Morgan asked dully, but Arlene pushed past Vandahl and rushed to him with a cry heartrending in its glad relief. He knelt to receive her, had her sobbing, shuddering small form folded to him, careless of the baby. "All right, darling," he murmured. "It's all right, honey. Everything's all right."

"He was going to hit us," she sobbed. "I don't care what he says—he was going to hit us."

"You heard him say he wasn't, dear," Morgan said, his voice steady. "We ought to believe him." He held his daughter close and her sobs quieted, but the baby was beginning to whimper. "Tell you what you do, Arlene. You take Lenny in your own room and put him on your bed. Then put a bathrobe on and slippers, and take a blanket down to your mother in the parlor."

"All right, Daddy."

She was gone and Vandahl was saying as Morgan rose, "She's a brave little tyke." And then, "Good thing I didn't wait for you. I got here just in the nick of time to save her."

"So I see." Morgan stepped to him, took the wrench from his hand. "This is from my car, I think. Apparently it was a good enough weapon for you to kill the—the Golem with. I thought it was immortal."

VANDAHL pulled the back of his hand across his brow. "We were wrong about that, Morgan. He's not—"

He broke off as Hutson's voice came in from the hall: "What is it, John? What in the name of all that's holy is that creature layin' dead out there?"

Hutson lurched in through the door, stopped short, his eyes bulging. "Hey!" he cried, staring at the white-haired man. "You're Martin Vandahl! Weren't you burned up in your car?"

"Obviously not," Morgan answered for him. "He's Vandahl in person, not a ghost, and that creature out there is his brother-in-law. But this man, Cal, is your fire-bug." He stepped closer, the wrench lifting. "Your arsonist and murderer."

Vandahl laughed. He said to Hutson, "I don't wonder the man's mind has broken with all he's gone through tonight."

"My mind's quite all right," Morgan said. "Now. It must have been near to breaking back there in the icehouse or I'd have known then that you were lying. You never went to the city, my friend. You told your wife you had because you'd planted an incendiary machine in the gas tank of her car, timed to go off when she drove to the station to meet you on the eight forty-two."

"That wasn't the act of a Golem, nor that of a madman who was kept locked up and could have gotten neither the materials to make that bomb nor the opportunity to plant it."

Hutson tried to break in, but Morgan said, "Wait, Cal," and went on, relentlessly. "Some hitch-hiker your wife had picked up, Vandahl, died with her, but the

baby escaped. You found that out when, returning to your home, you saw my daughter in the lighted parlor.

"What you did then was get into the house, probably through a basement window, and set fire to it. And then you released your brother-in-law so that he'd be blamed for both murders, as you'd planned that he'd be blamed for the first if it were discovered not to have been an accident. That was a mistake. He saw the flicker of flames in the cellar, broke into the house to warn his sister and frightened Arlene into running out with the infant."

"Hold it, John," Hutson broke in. "The brother-in-law did come here after them, didn't he?"

"Sure he did. He figured Vandahl would make another attempt at the child and set out to forestall him. He got lost in the woods, found the path just as I blundered on this man, knocked us both out and resumed his painful journey to this house."

"In the meantime Vandahl was stuffing me with the yarn he'd concocted to cover himself, but when I found a way to escape from our prison he contrived to get out

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ahead of me and beat me to my car. He reached here in time to kill his brother-in-law, and if he hadn't heard my shout would have killed the baby. And Arlene. With her silenced, it would have appeared that he'd gotten here just too late to save them.

"That's that," he sighed. "That's the story."

"And a very pretty one," Vandahl grinned. "Except, Morgan, that you've failed to give a motive for going to such great lengths to kill my wife and child."

"Not *your* child, as you told me. Remember? That might almost be motive enough, but you also told me that Lorna was wealthy. With her and the child dead, as well as her brother, you're the sole heir to her fortune." Morgan turned to the marshal. "Satisfied, Cal?"

"Well." Hutson rubbed his jaw. "I dunno. If he can prove he was in the city an' only got back on the eight forty-two he wouldn't of had time to reach the house by the time the fire broke out. It was fifty minutes late tonight."

"He wasn't in the city. That was what I meant when I said I should have known he was lying back in the icehouse. You see, Cal, he told me his wife had a letter sent him that lured him there, but I happen to know the only letter that's come to his house since they've lived here was addressed not to Martin but to Lorna Vandahl. I—"

"Daddy!" Arlene's voice. "The Wakeful Foe's outside. I just looked out the window and saw him going in the woods."

MORGAN went to her, saying, "No dear. You saw some mist or something. He's down there at the end—" He broke off. At the end of the hall, where he'd seen a blue-grey mound on the floor, was only the blank wall that ended it.

Hutson thrust past him, dragging his prisoner. He stopped short, jaw dropping.

"I don't believe it," he groaned. "He couldn't of been just stunned. There was a big hunk busted out of his head."

Morgan gasped and moved down the hall, the others behind him. He stooped, came up with the thing he'd seen, a chunk of blue-grey stone as big as his fist, one surface rounded, smooth, the others jagged. Freshly fractured. He thrust it at Hutson. "Is this," he demanded, "like the pieces you found where the car burned?"

Hutson's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. "Yeah," he got out. "Just like. Why?"

"It doesn't come from any quarry around here. I'd have to check—it's years since I studied geology at college—but unless I'm mistaken, this is a special type of granite found only in Central Europe."

"In Germany," Vandahl made the point clearer. "Near Frankfort. Now will you believe that Lorna was not what she seemed?" But it was at Arlene that Morgan was looking.

"Arlene," he asked. "Why have you been calling the—it—the Wakeful Foe?"

"On account of what Mrs. Vandahl said when she went out, Daddy. She told me to intermit no watch and then I saw it in the book on the desk: '*Intermit no watch against a wakeful Foe.*'"

"*'While I abroad,'*" John Morgan finished the quotation, "*'through all the coasts of dark destruction seek deliverance for us all.'*" He turned to Hutson, a chill prickle traveling his spine. "That's from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Cal. Do you know who speaks those lines in the poem?"

"How would I know, John? Who does?"

"Satan," Morgan told him, "to his fallen angels just after they have been evicted from Heaven. And the Wakeful Foe, Cal—the Wakeful Foe he means is the messenger of the Almighty Himself."

THE END

VOODOO GIRL

LEW GUYON heard the voice in his outer office. It was high, female and elderly. He had seen the legs, and having seen them under the swinging door, he hoped the girl would send them away. She didn't, however, and the legs came in, supporting a brisk old lady.

"Guyon?" she asked. "Lew Guyon?"

"How do you do," Lew murmured, looking beyond her at the girl. The girl, he observed, had excellent legs, plus a South American swish. "Mrs. . . .?" Lew said, getting up.

"Miss," the woman said firmly. "Nettie Crawford. I came to see you about my lawn."

By **DAN GORDON**

"Relax," Lew said. "I'm not the law. I'm only an imitation."



"Maybe you don't believe in voodoo dolls, baby," Lew Guyon said. "But this dummy here says you can't hold on to that gun long enough to shoot me!"

"I'm afraid I can't help you," said Lew, "My business is marine investigation."

"I know, I know. But Doctor Berryman recommended you, and I trust the doctor implicitly."

"Are you one of his patients?" Lou asked carefully.

"I am."

"You carry it well," Lew murmured. "One would never think it to look at you."

"It happens," Miss Nettie said icily, "that I am not an alcoholic. Doctor Berryman was my physician long before he began to specialize in alcoholism. He still is."

"I see," Lew said, not seeing. "And you say you have a lawn?"

"I have. It's the lawn facing the water at my place—Pines by the Sea, I call it. Some one is littering the lawn with bodies."

"Messy," Lew said. "Have you tried the police?"

THE girl with Miss Nettie made a sharp, choking noise, a tiny, unpleasant sound. "Police," she said, "for Voodoo? We have come to a funny man."

"The bodies," Miss Nettie said, "aren't real ones, of course." In answer to Lew's gesture, she plumped herself in a chair and primly arranged her skirts.

"Of course," Lew said, vacantly and encouragingly. "And . . ."

"They're stuffed."

"Stuffed bodies?"

"Dummies, then. Every time I go down on the part of the law overlooking the sea, I stumble over one. Miss Miramar says I shouldn't go to that part of my place. Which is silly, of course. I'll go wherever I please."

"Miss Miramar?" Lew said, nodding toward the girl.

"My companion," Miss Nettie said. "She came to live with me after my sister died."

"Voodoo," the girl said tonelessly. "She died in Cuba."

"You were with her?" Lew asked sharply.

"Sì. It was awful."

"It can be," Lew said. "If you buy it, I guess it can be." To Miss Nettie he said, "Your lawn wouldn't be at Emerald Cove?"

"Why, yes," she answered. "What do you know about Emerald Cove?"

"Only the important thing. I know it's the only place you can land a boat for miles along this coast."

"You know voodoo, too?" Miss Miramar asked, leaning forward.

"Very little," Lew told her. "Except it would be the Latin approach to the kind of problem I think someone has."

"Miss Miramar," said Miss Nettie, "is a Latin. Must you be rude? Does it help?"

"I'm sorry," Lew said. "I get that way from trying to act like a detective."

"Is all right," the girl said. "I think Mr. Guyon just means voodoo is very dangerous."

"Silly," Miss Nettie said.

"Not silly," the girl said with urgency. "Many times I have seen it in the village where I was born. Somebody makes an image, maybe like a doll. Then whatever happens to the doll happens also to the person it represents. The doll, she's taking poison—the person, she sicken and die."

"Isn't that," Miss Nettie said to Lew, "the most appalling nonsense?"

"Unfortunately, no. It really works—for them. May I suggest you take this whole affair to the police?"

"You don't want it?" Miss Nettie said sharply.

Lew shrugged. "It sounds interesting enough. Only, you can get it done for less than I'd charge. You see, I keep a fully equipped salvage tug in operation. I've got to have the tug to work for in-

surance and steamship companies. You'd be paying the upkeep on the tug and the salaries of my crew. For nothing. I can't run a tugboat around your lawn, you know."

"You'd better not," Miss Nettie said grimly. "For the same reason I don't want a lot of big-footed policemen trampling my flower beds."

Thinking of his friend, Lieutenant Carver, Lew grinned and said, "Their feet *are* big, aren't they?"

"That, young man, is the first sensible thing you've said. Now let's stop this foolishness and get down to business. What is your regular fee?"

"One hundred a day," Lew said. "And additional expenses if I have to use the tug."

"Very well."

"Like that," Lew said. "What's money? It would be better," he added, "if I could drift around your place unadvertised. As one of your servants, perhaps. You have some?"

"You could be a gardener," Miss Nettie said thoughtfully. "The two I had left me last week."

"That does it," Lew said briskly. "I'm a gardener."

MOPPING his neck, Lew loosened his grasp on the handles of the ancient lawn-mower and wryly grinned at his choice. The carpeted green swept down to

the beach. Discouragingly healthy grass. Whatever the old girl had paid her gardeners, Lew knew it had not been enough. Even one hundred a day was cheap for a lawn that size.

Miss Miramar came down from the house with an easy, flowing stride. She said, "When you finish mowing the lawn, bring some cut flowers into the house."

Lew looked into the deep, dark eyes, the remarkably full carmine lips. "I'll do it," he said, "but I'd rather take you out for a paddle. You're not afraid of canoes, are you?" He pointed down toward the boathouse where the light craft lay at the wharf. Knowing the approach was rough didn't help him to think of a better line. He wanted to talk to the girl.

"Afraid?" The black eyes regarded him briefly, flickered, looked out over the water. "No, I'm not afraid."

"So," Lew said. "When?"

"Tonight, after dinner. We meet at the boathouse. You do not tell anybody. Miss Nettie would not like." She smiled at him with those South American teeth, and her skirt swirled around her as she walked up the lawn to the house.

That business of the swirling skirt. . . . American girls, Lew thought, never quite had it. Down Cuba way and further south, skirts swayed like that, with that dashing air. It was very nice when it was well done. Miss Miramar did it well. All in all, there were things about this

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job. . . . Gripping the lawn-mower, Lew shoved it along more cheerfully. The grass felt good under his feet.

When his shadow grew long, he put the lawn-mower in the shed and glanced at the house. There were, he supposed, many things he should know. How many servants? How long had they been employed? What had been done with the stuffed figures, the dummies Miss Nettie described. The gardening pose was a definite handicap. It gave him no legitimate excuse for prowling around the house. But if the root of the trouble lay where he thought . . . Abruptly, Lew headed for the boathouse.

Later, in the near-darkness, he checked the canoe. Then, hidden from the house, he stripped and took a dip. By the time Miss Miramar came down, Lew had dried and dressed himself, and smoked one cigarette.

"So we go?" Miss Miramar said.

"If you'll climb into yonder gondola," Lew answered, gripping the smooth bow to steady the craft.

She stepped in lightly, surely, placing her feet, her weight, with the dexterity of a Canadian *voyageur*. She was wearing a pongee blouse and skirt, and now she freed the skirt with a swift motion. With relief and faint disappointment, Lew saw she was wearing shorts.

"Why bother to put it on at all?" Lew asked conversationally.

"For Miss Nettie. Miss Nettie is very modest." She added, a moment later, "You are very observant."

"In some things," Lew said comfortably. "Now you take the way you fold your legs. That pose you're using would break the average girl's pins. You can hold it all day."

She had been sitting on her legs. Now she straightened them so abruptly that the canoe heeled sharply left. Lew leaned far out to the right to bring the craft back to balance.

"Did we come out here," Miss Miramar said, "to talk about my legs?"

"That," Lew told her, "and other things." She was definitely touchy about those pins. Not the pins, but the pose. She wouldn't mind talking about her legs, a girl who swirled her skirt. . . . "Perhaps," Lew said pleasantly, "we'd better not talk for a while."

"Perhaps," agreed Miss Miramar.

Lew dug the paddle deeper and the canoe left an ever-expanding wake on the shining evening water. After the tussle with the lawn-mower, he found the canoe a pleasant, cooperative thing. He sent it skimming out over the inlet, liking the feel of his shoulder muscles bunching beneath his T-shirt. Looking back, he saw the lights come on in Miss Nettie's house and was grateful. He'd need that light to find his way back unless the moon came up.

NOW the girl's features had merged into an indistinct blur in the twilight. Her head was slightly turned. Her thoughts, Lew imagined, would be a long way off. Unconsciously, her legs had resumed their original position. Lew looked at the pose and knew he had it then, and, knowing, he smiled in the dark.

"Souvenir?" he said.

Miss Miramar jerked her head sharply, regained control and said, "Pardon?"

"Don't give me that, baby. I knew I'd recognized that pose. You got it from squatting all day long in a dugout, peddling trinkets around some Cuban harbor."

"You are very smart." Her voice was soft and deadly.

"You too, baby. You've come a long way since then. Like me to guess?"

She shrugged, and seeing the movement of her shoulders, Lew went on: "As a kid you paddled around the harbor. Swimming took care of the exercise. Somehow you got enough to eat, or that figure wouldn't be what it is."

"There was food," Miss Miramar said, "for the quick."

"And you would be quick," Lew said gently. "Even before you knew the score, you must have been a knockout—for the harbor. Some guy, a sailor, any guy, spots you and takes you to Panama."

"Why Panama?"

"The way you swirl a skirt. I don't mean that, exactly. But the way you handle yourself in general. Up here they have charm courses for it. Down there you pass with an A—without the course—or else."

Miss Miramar sounded amused. "I passed," she said.

"And that's the top for most of them," Lew said dreamily. "Panama, and a spotlight, and the floor show come on every hour. You didn't stop there. You learned the lingo and kept going. You're a very remarkable girl."

"Thank you. You're a remarkable gardener."

"Yeah," Lew said. "So I am. That voodoo. You oughtn't to fool with that stuff. Somebody usually gets hurt."

Miss Miramar caught her breath. Then: "I don't know what you say," she said. "I think we better go back."

Lew moved the paddle and the stirred water flashed dimly green. "You know what I say," he told her. "Furthermore, it worries you. Your accent's beginning to show."

Digging the paddle deeper, he swept the bow around, pointing the canoe toward the distant pier.

"Talk," the girl said bitterly. "Let's forget about where I came from and discuss what you think you'll get out of this."

"Out of it?" Lew said. "I get a job out of it." Then, dropping the innocent tone: "You're right, baby. I haven't always been legit, but I finally found out that it pays. So I want you to see my point: Nothing happens to Miss Nettie.

Also, you and your friends stop scattering that voodoo gear around her lawn."

"I don't know what you say."

"You know," Lew said. "And I'm trying to tell you I don't know anything about your racket—don't care about it. Just lay off the lawn and the old dame."

She was quiet; then her voice came softly above the fluid sounds made by canoe and paddle. She had recovered the use of her better English."

"Let's talk about it later," she said. "After all the others have gone to bed, perhaps we can go for a swim?" The voice was warm, inviting.

There were things about her, things that made Lew wonder how much of this he could take without double-crossing his client. "Sorry, baby," he told her, "I can't swim."

"No?" she said.

Hearing the tone, Lew knew it was coming.

It came swiftly. He didn't see her move, but the canoe rolled beneath him, flinging him into the water. He went down into the blackness, fumbling with his shoes. He got them off, surfaced quietly and tied the laces to the seat of the overturned canoe. The T-shirt and slacks were light. He'd leave them on. With his hands resting lightly on the slick canvas surface, he listened for news of the girl.

A hand touched his. The voice said, "Help!" and then two firm arms encircled his neck. The softness of her body was against his back and she was dragging him down.

Lew buried his chin on his chest to ease the pressure on his throat, went down with her, down. It hurt his ears a little, down there, but he made himself relax, go limp. The tick-tock began in his mind, ticking on with mounting urgency, impelled by the need in his lungs. . . . How long could she take it? One minute? Two? Some people could hold it for five. Lew knew he couldn't. He had held it for

three, once. That had been long ago. . . . Within his chest, far down, a spasmodic gulping began, wracking, involuntary. Lew let out a little air, felt fleeting relief.

She let him go.

He felt her move away, counted an agonizing three and kicked his feet. After a tortured, nightmarishly long time, his face lifted clear of the water.

Resting, breathing, he heard the swirling, churning sound of a powerful swimmer's kick. He faced the sound. It vanished and he knew it wouldn't come again unless her feet broke water. Seeing the lights, faint and yellow with the distance, Lew lowered his head, kicked his feet and went into a leisurely crawl.

The water was pleasant enough and Lew had the comfortable feeling that he'd learned quite a lot. Miss Miramar knew what was going on. She would kill. She had tried to drown him to keep him from finding out.

LETTING his body roll, Lew went into a side-stroke. The crawl was getting his legs. Something soft and clinging touched his face, stuck there and trailed aft, entangling his arms. He clutched at it, then chuckled. Miss Miramar had ditched her blouse.

The lights ahead seemed motionless, hung in blackness, distant, yet near. By the time the moon came up, Lew was thoroughly bored with swimming, grateful when the light outlined the skeleton of the pier.

Swimming between the pilings, he waded ashore. His clothing dripped and clung unpleasantly as he ducked along a line of shrubbery, made his way up the sloping lawn and entered the silent house.

Crossing the living room, he encountered no one. His clothes drained rivulets when he paused at the foot of the stairs. Miss Nettie would love that water on her shiny hardwood floors. Feeling more like a guilty small boy than a fearless, fighting

detective, Lew Guyon looked at the puddle again, then hurried up the stairs.

The house, Lew thought, was not at all pretentious, when you thought of Miss Nettie's dough. The one closed door attracted him. Moving silently down the hall, he reached it and plastered his ear against the panel.

Miss Miramar's voice was an indistinct murmur. She was talking to some one. Listening, Lew caught no answering voice. So she was talking on the phone. He caught the word "Midnight" because it was a single word, or perhaps she gave it emphasis. She said something else he didn't catch, and then the talking stopped.

Lew shuffled down the stairs, out on the lawn. Lifting his gaze to Miss Miramar's room, he saw the lights go out, thought he saw a figure move on the wide balcony that connected all the upper rooms on the seaward side of the house.

Again he looked, and decided nothing had moved. Nothing. At midnight there would be something. What and where, he didn't know. He might, of course, corner the dame and twist her arm. He owed her that for the swim. . . .

Stumbling, he almost fell, and peering down at the grass he saw the form. It was lying face down, but he recognized the coat Miss Nettie had worn when she'd visited his office.

The voice beside him said, "It isn't me, young man."

Lew spun, saw Miss Nettie, gulped and said, "No?"

"No. But it could be, for all of you. You call yourself a detective?"

"No, ma'am," Lew said meekly. "You did."

"Hmmmph. Well—investigator, or whatever. I've been following you around these grounds, watching you moon at that girl's window. Furthermore, I saw her come out of the water half naked. Then later, you came along. I'll have you know I'm a broad-minded woman, but there are

some things . . ." She stopped talking suddenly and stared at Guyon.

Lew absently rolled the padded figure that lay on the lawn at their feet. Stuffed with pillows or some soft material, the dummy flopped over obligingly. The moonlight showed that no one had bothered to duplicate Miss Nettie's sharp old face; it also revealed the haft of the knife sticking out of the dummy's throat.

"One of my good coats," Miss Nettie said. "And I'll bet that's one of my knives. This is what happens while you're out there with that girl. It's a wonder to me you came home at all."

"Me too," Lew said. "Miss Miramar had to make a phone call," he added softly.

"Fiddlesticks. There isn't a phone on the place. Noisy, bothersome things. I wouldn't give one house room."

"No . . . phone?" said Lew. No phone. And yet he had heard Miss Miramar talking in her room. To someone else? Another person? Not likely. He would have heard the other voice.

"Excuse me," Lew said to Miss Nettie. Whirling, he ran for the house, bounded up the stairs and entered Miss Miramar's room.

There was no phone. Having searched the room thoroughly, having combed the closet full of rustling, silken things, Lew was forced to agree with Miss Nettie. The girl did not have a phone. Yet the stubborn thought persisted and he moved to the glass door that opened on the balcony, went outside and parted the long-stemmed flowers that grew in the window boxes.

And found the walkie-talkie, the portable radio-telephone there beneath his hand. It fitted the window box perfectly and left plenty of room for the flowers. Thoughtfully, Lew removed it, carried it to the other end of the balcony, suspended it there out of sight by tying the wire to the rail.

MIDNIGHT, the girl had said. And the trouble, if it came, would come from the water. Obviously some mob needed this spot for a landing place from Cuba. Gun-running? Narcotics? Stray politicians? Maybe one, maybe all. That would be for the cops, for the Coast Guard. Lew Guyon was private investigation, in charge of Miss Nettie's lawn.

Having straightened that in his mind, Lew returned to the spot just outside the window. The girl came in after a time, and Lew stepped in to join her.

"Cheers, baby," he said.

"You—"

"Didn't drown," Lew supplied. "Couldn't. Got a date at midnight."

She drew in a breath and held it. Her eyes went beyond him—out to the balcony.

"No," Lew said. "You can't phone them. I smashed it and threw it away."

She took it calm and easy, thinking it over. Then: "On me you have nothing. I get nervous; the canoe she overturn. This is nothing."

Lew picked up a cigarette, carefully raised a lighter. "You're right," he said. "I got nothing. But I'll have plenty at midnight when your friends come in from the sea."

She gave him the smile then, soft and alluring, and Lew knew he had it. "Not now," he said. "Later. Much later. . . ." Then: "And if you have any thoughts about knocking me off, forget it. I've already sent for the cops."

"You have nothing. Nothing at all."

Lew felt they had covered all that. Softly whistling, *I Got Plenty of Nothing*, he crossed to her closet and selected a scarlet gown. "Sharp," he said.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking this with me. Something to remember you by."

He left her there, hissing and spitting, and strolled down to the boathouse. Once inside, he moved quickly. On the cross-

beams above his head he spotted a bundle of life jackets. Pulling them down he set to work yanking the stuffing out.

He didn't know the time. It might be close to midnight, or, his wait might be long. Resignedly, he shouldered his bundle and trudged up a sandy knoll, seeking a spot that would offer cover— and command a view of the beach. Having found one, he dumped his burden, then walked back to Miss Nettie's garage. The sub-machine gun was where he had left it in the car. Lew checked it there in the darkness, then carried it down to the beach.

Except for the growing need for a smoke, he didn't mind the wait.

Like a black bug on the water's moonlit surface, the boat came in from the sea. Lew saw it before he heard it. Though he couldn't be sure in the dimness he thought he could count four men. Straining forward, he tried again. That would be one, that shape in the bow. Maybe two of them on the oars. Another, maybe two, in the sternsheets. . . . Abruptly, Lew gave up his counting, started slightly, froze. It felt like a gun muzzle. It was cool and unwavering—pressed into the back of his neck.

"You are very smart," she whispered.

"Yeah," Lew said. "A genius. You mind moving that thing?"

"Not now. To kill is very messy. But if I must—"

"No hurry," Lew said hastily. "Let's give it a little thought." Experimentally, he moved one hand. The gun muzzle jabbed him sharply. "You think," Lew said, "your friends would want all this noise?"

"Unless you are very foolish, there won't be any noise. Shooting and cursing and fighting— these are the old-fashioned ways."

Lew, measuring the progress of the approaching boat, deliberately relaxed his fist. With a cautious foot extended, he touched the padded form on the sand, the

dummy he had rigged as a gag, using Miss Miramar's dress. "Meaning," he said, "that you're modern? Baby, don't fool yourself. You're a savage, still back in the jungle. What d'ya see here on the sand?"

"The arm," Lew said. "Look at the arm!" Hearing her breath, indrawn, he cautiously turned his head.

She let him. With the gun still there at his throat, he was facing her now, seeing the white blur of her face against the dark slope of the lawn, hearing quite plainly the soft hollow sound of wood against wood as the men came in with the boat.

"The arm," Lew said in a monotone. "It's broken. Limp. Useless. That's you there on the sand. *You*. Take a look at that dress. And the more you try to think otherwise, the more you know it's *you*. . . . You with a broken arm, feeling weaker and weaker, feeling ill, very ill."

"You can't—" the girl said defiantly.

"No?" said Lew in the same soft voice. "But you know I can. You know it's working . . . working. . . . And you can't scream, you can't call out. Your voice is fading away. . . ."

"I—" Miss Miramar began. It came out a whisper. "The arm," she added faintly, "is the arm on that figure. My arm is not hurt at all."

"Oh?" said Lew. "Then move it. Let's see how you do!" Watching, he saw the effort she made, heard the pitiful, muted moan. He swung the muzzle of his gun toward the sea as she fainted and fell on the sand.

THE BOW of the boat touched near a bleached rotten log. Lew cradled the gun comfortably and braced his feet in the sand. "Hold it, chums," he said.

He heard a curse in Spanish. Two men dove for the log. Lew sprayed a light burst over their heads. He waved them

onto their feet with one hand. They stood there, foolish and tense.

"Relax," Lew said. "I'm not the law."

No one spoke for a time. Then one of them said, "We do not understand."

"I want you," Lew said, "to take the girl— and stay away from this cove."

"She's all right?" one man said quickly.

"Fine," said Lew, "but moody. Murder makes 'em moody. The old girl in Cuba, remember? She got to thinking about it."

Silently the men went up to the girl, carried her down to the boat. She moaned once as they settled her near the stern.

"We can go?" a voice said weakly.

"Any time," Lew said, and watched their haste as they shoved the boat off the beach. Turning, he walked behind a dune that shielded him from their sight. He gratefully lighted a cigarette as Miss Nettie came down from the house.

"You were hired," Miss Nettie said, "to put an end to this foolishness. Instead, it's getting worse."

"It won't," Lew said. "It's finished—almost. The almost is in case you want to call the Coast Guard. There'll be a ship somewhere outside the cove."

Miss Nettie's voice was sharp. "I was watching you. You had four of them under your gun. You let them get away."

"Not *let* them—*made* them. You hired me to keep people off of your lawn. Look at that grass! Clean as a smuggler's wake!"

"Not so clean," Miss Nettie said acidly, aiming a kick at the dummy made from Miss Miramar's gown.

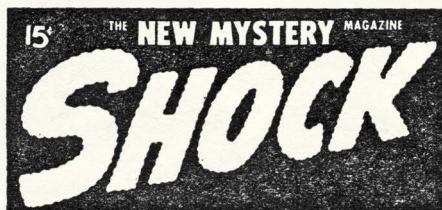
Lew caught her shin-bone with the toe of his shoe, intercepting the kick. "Excuse me," he said. "I'll throw it away." Bending, he picked up the dummy. Miss Nettie cleared her throat and trotted up the hill.

Far back in one corner of the boathouse, Lew found an unused chest. The padded figure would be comfortable there, would be undisturbed for years. It wasn't that he believed it at all—still, voodoo was funny stuff. Before he left the place he paused at the door and raised a saluting hand.

He thought he saw something move—a fluttering wave, like an arm, from the top of the oaken chest. He thought—but then he couldn't be sure.

Shrugging, Lew Guyon grinned in the dark and went to collect his fee.

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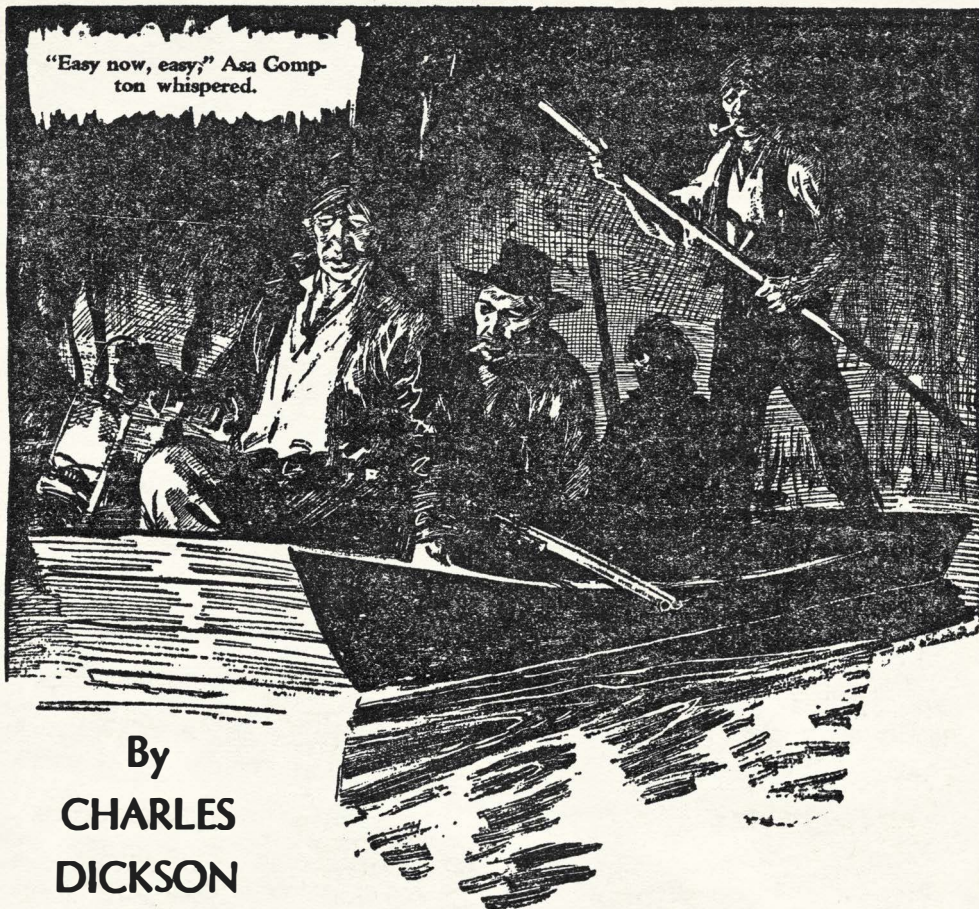
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"Easy now, easy," Asa Compton whispered.



By
CHARLES
DICKSON

"THE TALL, THIN SPIRIT . . ."

"The tall, thin spirit is walkin' again. . . . Promisin' death and grief and pain . . ." Dove Randall had sung. . . . And now Dove was dead, lying in his cabin with pennies in his eyes. . . . So there was only one thing for Jubilee Jackson to do: Take up Dove's banjo, sing Dove's song . . . and wait for the same fate that had overtaken Dove. . . .

JUBILEE JACKSON stood on the porch of Dove Randall's cabin, his soft brown eyes peering dazedly into the fog that swirled in from the black waters of Blind Man's Swamp. In-

distinct faces drifted back and forth through the night, and hushed voices hung in the air, as if caught by the web of the mist.

This was all a dream, Jubilee told him-

self fiercely. Nobody would murder Dove Randall. He'd wake up soon, and it'd be mornin', and he'd hear Dove a-singin' through the pines.

But he knew it wasn't true. Dove Randall, lying inside the cabin with pennies on his eyes, would never sing again.

Asa Compton appeared suddenly in the open doorway, his overalled form tall and gaunt against the yellow lamplight. He craned his long turkey-neck for a moment, than apparently caught sight of Jubilee. Asa crossed the porch, a bony hand clutching the banjo that had made Dove Randall famous throughout the swampland.

“Jubilee,” Asa said. He thrust the banjo forward awkwardly. “We decided Dove would've wanted you to have this. He loved you like a son, and you're the only man in the swamp that could ever play it the way he did.”

Jubilee took the instrument, his thin young face tight with emotion. Instinctively he drew a hand across the strings, then jerked it away. Who was he to touch the strings that had known Dove Randall's fingers? It didn't seem right. Not here . . . not now. . . .

He raised his tormented eyes to Asa's face. “Who did it, Asa?” he cried. “In all his life, Dove Randall never harmed a soul.”

The gaunt swamper's head wagged solemnly. “He was a good man, a kind man,” he agreed.

“All he wanted,” Jubilee said, “was to make his songs and sing 'em. Wherever he went, he took music with him, and it was happy music. Why would anybody kill that kind of a man?”

“Don't repine so, boy.” Asa Compton put a gnarled hand on Jubilee's shoulder. “We'll all miss Dove. Our frolics and our weddin's won't be the same without him to sing and play. But what's done is done. And you've got a job laid out for

you, boy. You've got to take Dove's place.”

“I've got a job cut out for me, all right.” Jubilee squared his shoulders, his slight, wiry body stiffening with determination. “I'm gonna find out who killed him, Asa.”

SOMEBODY grunted scornfully at the opposite end of the porch. “That'll take a heap of doin',” a harsh voice said. Jubilee turned his head as floorboards creaked. Hawk Thorne was approaching through the ghostly glow that the lamp inside the house threw out upon the fog.

Thorne was a squat, burly man in wrinkled denim trousers. Beads of mist clung to his curly red beard.

“It's time somethin' was done about the sheriff in this county,” Thorne said, glowering. “A man's not safe in his own bed any more. Last week that lumber company payroll was stolen at Warrior Creek and the man who was carryin' the money got killed. And now Dove Randall's been murdered.”

He jerked a thumb contemptuously toward the door. “You've both seen Bill Pinson in action. If he's a sheriff, I'm a cottonmouth moccasin. He couldn't find his way out of a room with a dozen doors.”

Asa Compton rubbed his leathery chin and frowned. “Give Pinson a little time, Hawk. He's a nice guy. He's doin' the best he knows how, and he did get one of them payroll bandits.”

“Sure, he got one.” Hawk Thorne snorted. “Somebody else found the robber's body floating in the swamp and brought it to Pinson in the back of a wagon. That took right smart detective work on his part, didn't it?”

He peered at Jubilee from under shaggy brows. “I still say somebody besides Bill Pinson will have to catch the killer. And if you're goin' to try it, I'll be glad to help.”

Jubilee nodded, and realized that unconsciously his fingers were strumming the banjo. The plaintive tune he was playing brought a lump into his throat.

"That's the last song Dove ever wrote," he said, his voice reverent. "I was over here last night, and he was puttin' words to the music. The Ghost of April Island, he called the song, and it was about—"

A shotgun roared in the fog that smothered the yard like a cloud of feathers. Somebody yelled hoarsely, "Grab him! Don't let him get away!"

Feet pounded inside the house, and half a dozen men charged out into the night. Asa Compton and Hawk Thorne leaped off the porch and Jubilee found himself racing along at their heels.

Sheriff Bill Pinson's voice bellowed, "Who fired that shot? What's goin' on?"

An answering shout came through the clammy mist. "Here, Sheriff! Here!"

Jubilee recognized Jonathan Bledsoe's voice. He ran toward the sound. Blobs of radiance that were flashlights and lanterns swam all around him in the fog. They were converging on one spot. Somewhere, far back in the swamp, a bull alligator thundered.

Jubilee found Jonathan Bledsoe in the center of a knot of excited men. Bledsoe's bony face was white in the rays of a lantern somebody was holding high. Words were pouring out of him like angry bees out of a hive.

"I was comin' from the boat landin'—" Bledsoe waved his skinny arms wildly—"when I heard somebody behind me. I turned just in time to dodge a man that was makin' a dive for me with a long knife in his hand. I jerked my gun around, but I guess I pulled the trigger too quick. It scared him, though. He run off that way." He gestured toward the left.

Sheriff Pinson thrust his round, red face forward. "Who was it, Jonathan?"

Who was it? You know everybody in these parts."

Bledsoe shook his shiny bald head. "Didn't see his face. He had a handkerchief tied around it. Couldn't even tell how big he was or what he was wearin'. This gol-blamed fog's too thick."

The sheriff tried to harden his bland, pudgy face into stern lines, but succeeded only in looking like a belligerent cherub.

"Appears like we're up against one o' these crazy men, like you read about in the papers. Let's scatter and search the place. He might be lyin' around here wounded, if Jonathan hit him."

The circle of grim faces nodded and muttered, and sank back into the fog.

Sheriff Pinson shouted after them, "And you better go out in twos. Don't want nobody else gettin' a knife between his ribs."

Jubilee paired up with Hawk Thorne, who had a flashlight and a revolver. After Jubilee had deposited his treasured banjo inside the house, they beat their way through the woods all the way to Warrior Creek, but encountered nothing except one diamondback rattler and dripping leaves that soon had them damp to the skin.

They were the last to return to the cabin. They found a cluster of swamper around the sheriff. Asa Compton was talking, his angular face showing deep concern.

"We didn't find him, Sheriff, so that means he's still loose. And if he's a crazy killer like you say, us family men feel we better get back to our wives and young uns."

The sheriff nodded. His round face was worried, too. "I know what you mean," he said. "I got a family myself. But somebody's got to stay with Dove. After all—"

He stopped as Jubilee shouldered his way forward. "I'll set up with Dove, Sheriff," the boy said quietly.

Pinson frowned. "It'll be dangerous for you to stay by yourself. You got a gun?"

Hawk Thorne spoke up quickly. "I got one, and I'll keep him company."

The swampers dispersed amid the rattle and clank of ancient jalopies. Jubilee found himself alone with the squat Thorne. They went into the cabin.

DOVE RANDALL lay on a bed made of sweet gum, which still gave off a faint fragrance from its hardened aromatic sap. Beneath him was a quilted spread in gay reds and blues and greens. His kindly, weathered face was composed, almost smiling.

He looked like he might wake any minute, Jubilee thought, and the grief inside him was sharper than any knife could have been. He picked the banjo up from a cypress chest and sat in a chair at the bedside, putting his feet on a black bear-skin rug.

Hawk Thorne came and stood beside him, thoughtfully stroking his flaming beard. "Why don't you play a tune?" Hawk said suddenly. "I think maybe Dove would like it."

Jubilee looked up at Thorne in surprise. He knew the bearded man as a scoffing cynic, having no faith in man or God. Apparently there was a softness in him of which no one dreamed.

Jubilee hesitated. He still didn't feel right about putting finger to Dove Randall's banjo, but it came to him now that if Dove's spirit were anywhere in hearing distance, it would crave music, the way Dove always had.

He began to play the *Piney Woods Ballad*, Dove's favorite song. And as the music flowed softly from his fingertips, he could almost hear Dove's high, clear voice:

Come all ye swamp gals an' listen to my noise;

Don' be courted by the piney woods boys;
For iff'n ye marry 'em your portion will be
Cawnbread and bacon—that's all ye'll ever
see. . . .

His hands swept the strings, but his mind wandered out to the empty-eyed, rotting mansion crouched in the jungle on April Island. The house where an unquiet ghost still hovered. . . .

Thirty years before, a stranger, Tain by name, had come from nowhere and bought April Island in the heart of Blind Man's Swamp. He had raised The House and lined its walls with books, and for eighteen years he had not shown his face outside its massive doors. The primitive swampers had come to fear the great, gloomy house, as they did all things they couldn't understand.

And then the April Fool, as the swamp folk called him, had died. And there were many among the superstitious swampers who believed his spirit still wandered through the dust-laden rooms.

Jubilee sighed. The banjo was throbbing with *Fair Ellender*.

He said, "Dove had a warnin' somebody was gonna die. If he'd only known it meant him, maybe he could've done some-thin' about it."

Hawk Thorne, who was still on his feet, looked down sharply. "A warnin'?" he said.

Jubilee nodded. "You've heard the story that every time the ghost is seen on April Island, somebody is gonna die. Well, Dove saw the ghost last night. He was comin' back late from a fishin' trip into the swamp. About dusk, it was. He saw a light on the porch of the old Tain place, and there, big as life, was the ghost!"

Hawk Thorne's pale eyes were skeptical above the flame of his beard. He looked at the boy.

"I don't take much stock in ghosts," he said. "Maybe it was just a man."

"It couldn't have been a man." Jubilee's thin face was serious. "Least Dove didn't

think so. The April Fool was a tall feller, you remember. Tall and saplin'-thin. Well, so was this spirit. He was taller, Dove said, than any mortal man he ever seen."

His fingers had forgotten *Fair Ellender*, and were strumming *The Ghost of April Island*, the strange melody Dove had composed the night before.

"This is the last ballad Dove ever wrote," Jubilee said. "I hope I can remember the words." His young voice rose softly with the music.

The thin, tall spirit is walkin' again,
Promisin' death and grief and pain. . . .

A gun thundered just outside the room's sole window. Glass shattered, and a bullet tugged at Jubilee's shirt sleeve. He felt the searing breath of its passage.

Then both men in the room leaped as one, straight for the kerosene lamp flickering on a table at the foot of the bed. Jubilee struck it first, with a flashing backhand sweep. The lamp crashed to the floor. Darkness flooded the house.

Jubilee heard Thorne bound across the floor, then saw him outlined faintly against the white fog beyond the broken window. Thorne's revolver boomed. Once . . . twice . . . three times. . . . The cabin shuddered with the sound.

Thorne yelled, "I think I got him!" He dived for the door. Jubilee dropped the banjo to the cypress chest and pounded out at Thorne's heels.

Mist still choked the earth. Jubilee reached out and grabbed Thorne's arm. "Better take it easy," he warned. "If he's just wounded, he might be dangerous."

THEY CREPT across the bare yard, without light or sound. The sickishly sweet odor of swamp blossoms rode the faint breeze. From a tree nearby a shuck-will's widow mourned: "Whip-poor-will! Whip-p-ee-er-wi-ill. . . ." Jubilee felt the

flesh at the back of his neck turn cold. That bird made the loneliest sound in the world, he thought.

Thorne stopped. "We're way past the place where I thought he fell," he whispered, disappointment edging his voice. "Let's cut back toward the house."

They spread out a bit and retraced their steps silently. They reached the cabin without finding anything. Thorne cursed. "He must've got away," he growled.

A voice came out of the dark night. "Jubilee! Hawk! Where are you?"

It was Asa Compton who lived only a hundred yards away. "Here," Jubilee called. Compton's gaunt face appeared like a wraith in the fog.

"I heard shots," Asa said.

Jubilee nodded. "The killer was here again. He almost got me this time."

A car rattled into the yard. Another came lurching down the road.

"Everybody must've heard the racket," Hawk Thorne muttered. "Well, let's give the yard one more going-over."

Several other swamp men had padded up. Their lights floated and bobbed like so many will-o'-the-wisps as they scattered to comb the yard and surrounding woods again. Jubilee and Hawk Thorne went back to the area they had just finished examining.

"I *know* I saw him fall," Hawk said stubbornly. "Maybe with a flashlight we can spot something we missed."

They did. Jubilee found it, a spatter of blood on the wet earth.

"Hawk!" His voice rang with excitement. "You *did* wing him." He stopped then, gasping at the other thing he saw.

Clearly imprinted in a thin film of mud was the outline of a man at least seven feet tall. He had sprawled head-long, stamping his full length unmistakably into the earth.

Hawk Thorne exclaimed, "He got up and went off toward the creek." A note of awe crept into his voice. "And look at

the size of those tracks he just made."

"There's some more blood, too," Jubilee pointed out. "And more there, farther on. He must've been hit bad."

The line of footprints ended at the creek bank. They could see where the nose of their quarry's boat had been drawn up on the sand.

The news of their find was spreading, and other swampers were gathering around. Jonathan Bledsoe appeared at Jubilee's elbow, his face wreathed in mist.

"Twice that killer's got away," he said. His voice was a shrill cackle. "They say that the third time is always the charm. We'll get him next time, sure."

Jubilee said, "Yeah," absently. In the back of his mind, Dove Randall's voice was singing, "*The thin, tall spirit is walkin' again. . . .*"

"Dove saw a ghost last night," he said, to nobody in particular. "A ghost that was taller than mortal men." He paused, pondering. Then: "Maybe he didn't see no ghost at all. What he saw might've been this seven-foot killer we almost bagged."

Jonathan Bledsoe's bony face turned toward Jubilee. His eyes showed alarm in their cavernous sockets.

"Say! Do you think that's a ghost we been shootin' at?"

Jubilee shook his head emphatically. "Ghosts don't have blood in their veins. The guy Hawk plugged was bleedin' plenty."

A sudden resolve hardened his youthful face. "I'm goin' to April Island. Who'll go with me?"

The faces in the fog stared at him blankly. Somebody said, "Go to April Island . . . at night?"

"I mean right now." Jubilee's tone was sharp. "Listen. If Dove saw a man instead of a ghost last night, it means the killer is probably hidin' out on April Island. And he may be headed back

there now." He looked around at them.

The hesitant voice asked, "Hadn't we better wait till mornin'?"

"Too many things can happen between now and daybreak," Jubilee said, his mouth grim. "The killer might pack up and get away. If he's not hurt too bad, he might even come back and try to kill again. We better get out there now, and make it fast. Who's with me?"

No reply. A night bird darted overhead with a piercing squeak.

Then Hawk Thorne said roughly, "Count me in."

A murmur of indecision ran among the swampers. Asa Compton took a twist of tobacco out of his overalls pocket and cut a huge quid which he thrust into his cheek.

"Hell," he said, "Dove Randall was my best friend. If his murderer's on April Island, I want to be in at the kill."

Jonathan Bledsoe's bald head bobbed. "That's the way I feel," he said. "I wouldn't chase no ghost, but a murderin' mortal's another thing."

Jubilee said, "Good. We'll use Dove's boat. And I guess I better take along his old double-barrel shotgun, too."

FIVE MINUTES later the four men turned the nose of their long, flat-bottomed skiff toward the steaming heart of Blind Man's Swamp. Hawk Thorne stood at the rear, poling.

Luckily, Warrior Creek led straight to April Island, or they would have had difficulty finding their way in the drifting fog. Asa Compton crouched in the bow, calling back occasional directions. Except for him, the men in the boat were silent.

Jubilee sat with his shotgun upright between his knees. He listened to the night noises of the swamp, and a tremor of apprehension wriggled along his spine as he thought of the thick-bodied cotton-mouth moccasins that might drop from a limb at any moment. Snakes as deadly as

the gun in his hands—deadly and silent.

A bullbat swept past with its shivering whine, and Jubilee could hear a bear grunting as it splashed through a watery thicket.

Then something cold and wet slapped him in the face. His heart almost stopped before he realized it was only a branch of dripping leaves.

Hawk Thorne poled tirelessly on. Asa Compton whispered at length, "Easy now, easy, we're almost there." The boat slid silently over black water.

And then they grounded on a hummock of muck. "End of the road," Compton muttered. He stepped out warily and tied the boat to a sapling. The four men picked their way across grass tufts that quaked underfoot. Finally, they reached firm ground.

The moldering mansion that was their goal lay barely twenty-five yards ahead, but the cotton-white fog screened it from view. Vines clutched at them as they worked their way toward the house, and briars raked their faces. They came to a halt beside the rotted porch.

The mansion hulked, dark and forbidding, in the soggy night. All four men jumped involuntarily as a screech owl quavered overhead. Jubilee ran his tongue over dry lips.

"Might as well go in," he said softly. "We can't catch him standin' here."

Asa Compton mumbled, "Yeah," but there was no enthusiasm in his voice. Hawk Thorne started up the steps.

Jonathan Bledsoe whispered, "Wait. We'll have a better chance to catch him if we spread out. Jubilee and me'll take the upstairs. Hawk and Asa can cover the bottom floor. Okay?"

His companions assented, keeping their voices low. The little group crept across the porch.

Jubilee's groping fingers found the latch of the ponderous door. He pushed, and the door swung open, uncoiled hinges

shrieking. Hawk Thorne cursed softly.

Jubilee said, "We got to have light. It's a risk we'll have to take." His thumb pressed the switch of the flashlight in his left hand.

The bright beam of the torch cut into the dark interior, and Hawk Thorne stepped through the doorway, his revolver vigilant. The others pressed close behind him.

The long, musty hall was empty. Jonathan Bledsoe said, "Wonder where the stairs are?" His voice, though purposely kept down, echoed in the heavy silence.

Jubilee spotted the staircase. It led upward from a door on their left. He handed the flashlight to Bledsoe. "You better carry this," he said. "You got a pistol. I'll need both hands on this shotgun if trouble starts."

The two of them headed for the stairway. Behind them, Hawk Thorne's flashlight blazed.

The roof of Jubilee's mouth felt like sandpaper against his tongue as he mounted the stairs at Bledsoe's side. Up there in the shadows a killer might be crouched at this moment, calmly drawing a bead. And if not a killer, there might be something else. . . .

Jubilee had never particularly believed in ghosts. But, then, he didn't *know*. And anything seemed possible now, here in this lonely old house.

A board creaked underfoot, and his hands tightened convulsively on the shotgun. He was glad he was not alone.

The stairs turned, and then the men's eyes came level with the floor of the second-story hall. If the killer waited, they would get it now.

Nothing happened. Bledsoe sprayed the corridor with light. Nothing.

Jubilee drew a deep breath and jerked a thumb at the first door on his right. The flashlight centered on it. The door was already open a crack. Jubilee clutched the shotgun grimly and set his jaw. The

door swung back, nudged by his toe.

The column of light swung across the room—and stopped with a jerk. Jubilee stiffened.

Lying on the floor was a man, the tallest man Jubilee had ever seen. He was bare to the waist, and had apparently been trying to bandage a wound in his side with strips of his shirt when he lost consciousness.

He was breathing laboriously through an open mouth. A flood of triumph poured over Jubilee. “We’ve got him, Jonathan,” he exclaimed, and started forward.

Behind him, Bledsoe suddenly grunted loudly. Jubilee started to swing around. Too late. Something crashed against the side of his head with stunning force, and he felt himself falling just as the light went out.

JUBILEE didn’t black out altogether, but he lost his grip on the shotgun. He struggled to his feet and stood with his back to the wall, half-dazed, staring wildly about. The blackness crushed in upon him like something alien and evil.

No sound . . . but ghosts made no sound. And what else could have stolen up unheard behind two keen-eared swamp men? The tall man was not a spirit, but the real ghost of April Island could be around.

Panic mounted in Jubilee. Was Jonathan Bledsoe dead? The boy’s thundering heart seemed on the point of cracking

his ribs. He considered whispering Bledsoe’s name, but he was afraid to make a sound.

He realized he had to get out of there. He had to get help. He had matches in his pocket, but he didn’t dare light one. If their assailant were of flesh and blood, he might start shooting at the first glimmer of light.

Jubilee slid silently along the wall. His fingers found the open door. Then he was in the hall.

The crash of gunfire in the room behind him came so unexpectedly that Jubilee almost fainted. The panic in him turned to terror, and he leaped blindly down the hall. He had run several yards before he got a grip on himself. He stopped, trembling, and realized that he was completely lost. He had no idea whether he had fled toward or away from the stairs.

Feet slithered on the bare floor to his rear. Jubilee pressed back against the wall and clamped the air inside his lungs. It might be Bledsoe—and again it might not.

The feet scurried on, barely audible. Only a few feet beyond him, they turned, and the sound of them faded downward. They were descending the stairs.

Somebody was running heavily on the ground floor. Hawk Thorne’s voice crackled up the stair well.

“Jonathan!” Hawk exclaimed. “What happened up there? Where’s Jubilee?”

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So the scurrying feet *had* belonged to Bledsoe. Jubilee groped his way to the stairs. Bledsoe's voice floated up to him. Shriill. Excited.

"We found the killer," Bledsoe babbled. "And then something knocked me cold from behind. When I come to, the light was out. I was huntin' around for my gun when all of a sudden somebody started shootin'. I got out of there."

At that instant, Jubilee stepped out into the lower hall. Three faces swung toward him.

"Thank God!" Bledsoe exploded. "You all right?"

Jubilee nodded, his thin face white. A bewildering suspicion was taking form in his mind. . . .

But calm was returning to him. He put his hand to the side of his head, and it came away stained with blood. Would a ghost have attacked like this? Would a ghost pack that much wallop? He doubted it now, with lights and three men around him. A ghost hadn't done that shooting either.

He said, "The killer's up there, bad hurt. Somebody else is up there, too. We'd best be careful."

They went up the stairs silently and without lights. Hawk Thorne and Asa Compton, who still had guns, led the way. When they had all attained the upper corridor, Hawk turned on his flashlight. Jubilee tensed, ready for anything.

Again—nothing happened.

The tall man still lay in the center of the first room on the right. But he wasn't unconscious now. He was dead. At least three slugs had been pumped into his chest at close range.

JUBILEE retrieved his shotgun, and Jonathan Bledsoe reached down for his revolver. A startled exclamation escaped from Bledsoe. "Look here!" he cried, and straightened with a black leather satchel in his hand. He held his find out into the

light. "It says, 'Warrior Creek Lumber Company,' here. Why, this must be the bag that payroll was in. The payroll that was stolen."

Asa Compton's eyes widened. "Then this tall feller is one of the robbers!"

"Right." Bledsoe's bald head bobbed. "And whoever slugged Jubilee and me must be another one. He's probably high-tailin' it out of the swamp right now, takin' the payroll with him."

The suspicion that had been forming in Jubilee's mind now had a definite shape.

He asked quietly, "Why did he kill his pal?"

"That's easy," Bledsoe said. "He was afraid the tall guy might talk too much if he was captured alive."

Jubilee chewed his lower lip. "It don't add up," he said. "There was only two of those payroll bandits. The one whose body was found floatin' in the swamp did the actual robbery, and there was another guy waitin' at the wheel of the car. That would be the tall man, I guess. Where'd the other come from?"

Bledsoe looked at him sharply. "They could've had somebody else in the gang."

"That's what I'm gettin' at," Jubilee pointed out. "I'm beginnin' to see why Dove was killed. This bandit bunch found out he had seen the tall guy and was writin' a ballad about it. They was afraid somebody would hear the song and realize what Dove had actually seen, so they killed him. They didn't want him givin' their hideout away."

He drew a deep breath. "And that brings up the matter of the other member of the gang. It must be a swamper, one of Dove's neighbors most likely. How else would the robbers have found out about the song? Their local pal probably drifted past Dove's cabin last night and heard the song. He killed Dove then, or tipped the tall guy, who came later and did the job.

"There's *got* to be swamper tied up in

this. The two robbers we know about were both strangers. How would they know to use April Island for a hideout, unless some local feller put 'em up to it?"

The three other men were listening with narrowed eyes. "That sounds sensible," Asa Compton said, "as far as it goes. But why did the robbers try to kill you and Jonathan? There don't seem to be any reason for that."

"There's reasons," Jubilee said. "I let it slip at Dove's house tonight that I'd heard his new ballad, too. The swamper member of the gang heard me, and realized I had to be killed. So he got in touch with the tall man, who was probably hangin' around somewhere close by to see if everything was goin' right."

Jonathan Bledsoe scowled. "That still don't explain why the guy tried to knife me."

"He didn't," Jubilee said simply. "You heard me up there on Dove's porch tellin' about the new ballad he had written, and you knew you had to shut me up fast. So you created all that hullabaloo about somebody tryin' to stab you. The whole thing was all a lie."

Bledsoe's tiny eyes blazed in his bony face. "You mean you think I was in cahoots with the bandits?" he stormed, looking around angrily.

The muzzle of Jubilee's shotgun swung up to cover Bledsoe. "I sure do," the boy said. "You gave yourself away a few minutes ago. When we came into the house, you claimed you didn't know where the stairs were. But upstairs, you proved you did. Even in the dark, you hurried straight to 'em, turned, and went down without hesitatin'. You couldn't have done that if you hadn't been in the house before. You never would've known anything about it.

"And there never was anybody up there but me and you and the dead man. You hit me from behind and dropped the light so

you could kill the tall guy. You were afraid he'd squeal on you. So you thought you'd get rid of him."

Bledsoe watched Jubilee's shotgun as if hypnotized by it. Sweat laid a gleaming sheen on the parchment flesh of his face. For a minute he couldn't seem to say anything.

"You're crazy," he whispered, lips drawn tight against his teeth. "You can't prove a thing."

"We can look at your gun and see if it's been fired recently," Jubilee said. "Hand it over. . . ."

Bledsoe made his play then. He tried to jerk his revolver up, but Hawk Thorne was too fast for him. Thorne snatched the gun and raised the barrel to his nose. He nodded thoughtfully. "It's been fired," he said.

"That ties it up then," Jubilee said, "except for one thing. Where's the payroll?" He looked at Jonathan Bledsoe. "You can save yourself a lot of trouble if you tell us. If you don't, somebody'll beat the information out of you."

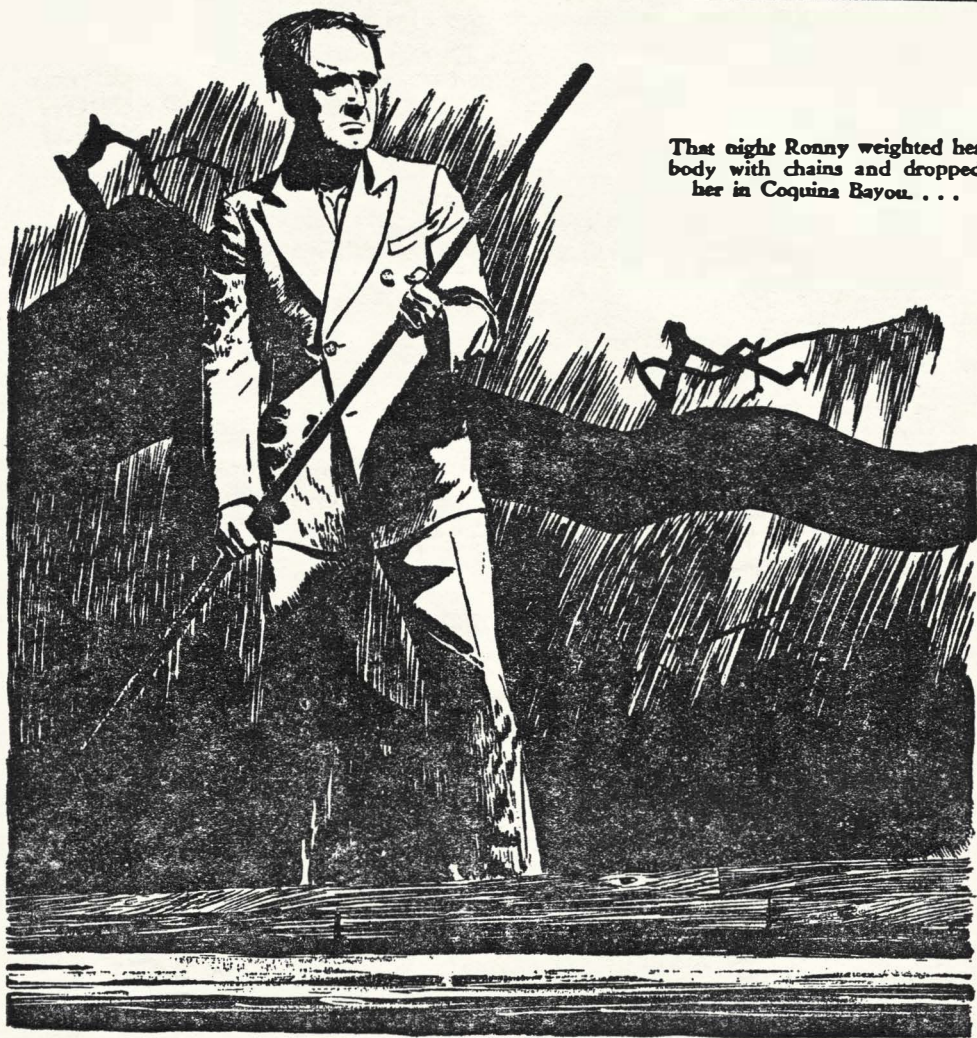
Bledsoe shrugged, his bald head sagging. "I don't know where the money is. Blackie—that's the guy that was found floatin' in the swamp—didn't trust me and Slim. So Blackie got his hands on the money and hid it. Then him and Slim had an argument, and Slim lost his head and killed him. That's why we couldn't change hideouts when Dove saw Slim out here. We had to find the money before we could do anything else."

Asa Compton shifted his feet. "Let the sheriff look for the money," he told Jubilee. "It'll give him somethin' to do. You've got the killers. That's the thing that matters. And you've still got a big job on your hands—tryin' to be the musician that Dove was. You've got a long way to go, boy."

He grinned. "But I think you'll make it. . . ."

By
TALMAGE
POWELL

Strange chants emanated from old Henry's room . . . and an even stranger devil's brew simmered on the stove as he meditated on death. . . . So wasn't it natural that his considerate nephew should help the old man study death at even closer range. . . ?



That night Ronny weighted her body with chains and dropped her in Coquina Bayou. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Lonely Visit

THE OLD HOUSE was north of New Orleans, set back from the road in the shade of willows and tall, unkempt pines, that dripped Spanish

moss. It was a house stripped of pride, a house falling in ruins, surrounded by weeds, the vast acres behind it slowly being swallowed by the encroachment of

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jungle-like vegetation. Those acres had once been blanketed with sugar cane; the house had once been a proud, white colonial structure. But that had been many years ago, and now the house was the sort of place that caused small boys to

approach it with dread and daring and toss stones at it on the way to school.

Ronny hated the house and the people in it. If it hadn't been for that trouble up north with the fast, loose—and deadly—blonde who'd hated her husband and

loved Ronny, she said, Ronny never would have come here. There'd always been a vague memory of the house and of his Uncle Henry. Ronny had visited the house once as a child, and every night beneath its roof he'd had nightmares.

It was even worse now, because the old man was obsessed—crazy—with the idea of death. Ronny could hear the old buzzard moving about in there, in the next room. He wondered what old Henry Kinsley was doing. It had been this way for weeks now, the old man shut up in there in his room, pondering on death, trying to explore death. . . .

Obsessed—that was it. Almost worshipping death! The old man had had a pain in his chest those weeks ago; he'd returned from the doctor with a white, set face and staring eyes. Ronny's heart had raced. Ronny had very much wanted the old man to die. The old man had gone up to his room. Now, sometimes, he woke screaming. So loudly the sounds paled the night creatures outside. So loudly even the insects quit humming, as if they were getting out of this neighborhood fast. Screams so unearthly, so unholy, they even scared the insect life away. "I won't die! I can't die! I don't want to die! I won't. . . I won't. . . I won't!"

Then, echoing in the cavernous hallway of the huge old house, would sound Miss Biddie's knocking on his door. It was timid, knocking as light as a bird's feet hopping over the door. In her thin, colorless, decayed little voice Miss Biddie would say, "You're having a nightmare, sir. Won't you please wake, Mr. Henry?"

He would go right on screaming, and Miss Biddie, uncertain, would creep back to her room. In the dark of his own room, Ronny would listen to the pad of her steps. He didn't know whether the housekeeper were deeply devoted, in love with his uncle, or simply too timid, too afraid of the world, too frightened of breaking from her rut, to leave the house.

Ronny suspected the latter. Her shallow brain couldn't know the kind of the devotion that kept her here for years; if she ever loved, it was without strength. But her timidity—that was without parallel. Yet somehow she fitted here in the house. It sheltered her, the way the dark, deep corners of the attic sheltered the timid, frightened, squeaking little leather-winged bats.

In the stillness of the hot nights, with the mists off the swamps wisping to the house, Ronny waited and wished for his Uncle Henry Kinsley to die. He knew the old man was crazy, or nearly so. No sane man would fight his way through the black water and insects to the head of Ponta Bayou to see old Meg Tyler, the way old Henry had a few days ago. There were strange stories about the old crone who lived in the shack on Ponta Bayou. Stories of her witchcraft, her sistership to Satan. Ronny disbelieved, curling such stories aside with his thin, colorless lips. The bayous were full of such tales. But old Henry had been there. He had returned with the dawn that morning, hollow-eyed from fatigue, but with something strong glowing in his face.

Why hadn't the trip killed the old fool! Ronny had thought. But it had seemed to strengthen him, and now every day the old man stayed in his room, muttering strange incantations, and sometimes from the room came a stench like that of a tomb. . . .

Ronny knew too of the books the old man had gathered in the room. He had seen the titles of the musty tomes when the old man had brought them in. Books garnered from the crannies of dusty stalls deep in the old French Quarter in New Orleans. Books ancient and forgotten. There were, among others, Wyer's *De Prestigiis Daemonum*, 1569; Del Rio's *Disquisitiones Magicae*; Graesse's *Bibliotheca Magicae*, Leipzig, 1843.

Ronny hated the old man for buying the

books—for the books cost money that Ronny was looking forward to having himself.

The only thing that made this old house bearable was the thought of old Henry's money, the hope of leaving here with money to burn . . . If only old Henry would die. . . .

THE DAY had come to life like the opening of an oven door. Over the whole flat countryside not a breath of air stirred. Ronny woke early, sodden with sweat, his eyes feeling as if they were almost swollen shut. For a moment, half awake, the hot tongues of the new day licking over him, he wondered where he was. He stirred, groaned with the lancinating pain in his head. Hell, he'd certainly been drunk last night. Half crazy. Well, anybody would go nuts in this house. In the room next to that old so-and-so who refused to die. He'd been drunk and had tried to make time with a little blonde. But she'd been a smart-aleck, laughed at him—like an experienced woman getting a thrill out of a young country bumpkin, though he was the older, experienced one, and she was the bumpkin.

Ronny stood up, wobbly-kneed. Blood went to his head with a rush, pounding. The heat enveloped him. The day wasn't old; he wished he could sleep a while longer, but he knew he couldn't. Not in this heat.

A chanting, a low, hideous mumuring came through the wall to him. The old fool in there was up already, possibly had been up all night. Why didn't his heart stop? That's what had led to the old man's obsession in the first place, that heart attack. But his heart seemed to be getting stronger with every passing day.

Ronny wiped his slack lips with the back of his hand. The old man should be committed. The thought stiffened him. Of course! What damn fool he was! He was slipping; he should have thought of this weeks ago. He'd see Clark Lawson today. Lawson was the family lawyer, had been for years, and Ronny knew that Lawson hated him with a natural hatred, an unconscious distaste, an intangible, inherent clash of personalities. But Lawson would have to do what was right.

Ronny listened to the old man's chanting in the next room and laughed. He dressed and went downstairs. The stairway was a sweeping, circular thing of beauty. Dead beauty. Like an echo of greatness. Like a memory of a time when life in the walls of this house had been bright and gay. Two of the slender posts holding the railing had been knocked away, and the runner under Ronny's feet was worn in spots to the wood.

Miss Biddie heard him and came to the dining room doorway. The sight of him seemed to fluster her. "Oh, Mr. Ronny! Oh, dear! I didn't expect you up. . . .

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Your breakfast . . . oh, my goodness!" she wailed.

"Don't get so upset, Miss Biddle. I can wait. I'm not all that hungry."

Her steps rushed, peck-pecking, to the kitchen. Ronny sat down at the dining room table. The window yawned on the side yard. Ronny looked out at the weeds, the willows, the pines dripping their needles everywhere. He drummed on the edge of the table, thinking. He had to get the old man committed and get away from here. He had to get away because this house and the old man's obsession was doing something to him. But to get away he had to have money, and the old man was the only place to get it.

And that was the nub of the whole question.

Ronnie went in to breakfast. Miss Biddle served him, her bony little hands like bird claws. Somehow this morning the sight of her hands turned his stomach more than usual.

He concentrated on his food. He lifted the cup of black coffee, bitter with chicory, toward his lips. Before the coffee reached his lips, a scream rang out from upstairs. He spilled the hot liquid over the old, yellowed tablecloth. The house was frozen in silence after that mad, triumphant scream from old Henry's room. Then old Henry laughed up there, and the chanting began again, rising, falling, with a quality that seemed to send the sound to the deepest, most secret corners of the hulking house.

Ronny felt the dark threat of the house about him. His stomach muscles were jumping. He shouldn't have been so eager to bend his elbow last night. The heat was getting him. He needed a change. . . .

Then in his mind he quit beating around the bush.

I'm going to kill the old fool, if that's the only way, Ronny thought. I've got to kill him! His insanity is catching. I've got to kill him before it's too late!

TWELVE MILES south of the Kinsley house was New Orleans. But much closer, only a little over a mile away, the village of LaFarge sprawled in the sun. It was a collection of frame buildings, brick buildings, corrugated tin buildings. It was a creature of dusty streets, hunkered beside a long, yellow bayou that eventually fed into the old daddy of waters. It was an old village, named after the pirate who, with his crew and captive women of sundry races, had founded the village over two centuries ago.

In those two centuries, LaFarge hadn't changed much, neither its custom, manners, nor complexion. The place stank of the bayou, of fish smell, of human habitation. On the sides of the stores were tin signs—tacked there by the traveling men—advertising cigarettes, snuff and brands of candy bars, some of which had ceased to exist as long as twenty-five years before. LaFarge raised a question: When, precisely, is a thing American? If LaFarge was American, then certainly New York, Miami, Los Angeles, even New Orleans to the south were in foreign countries.

Ronny sat down in Clark Lawson's office. The place had the comfortable unhurried air of the country attorney; the furnishings were old, the law books lining the walls cracked and a little tattered; the air in the office was very dry, as if the dust of centuries had collected in the corners and cracks and worked like a dehydrating agent.

Lawson rocked back in his squeaking swivel chair. He was a short, fat man wearing rumpled white linen. A narrow, worn belt bisected his bay window. His string tie was limp. His bald head and bulbous nose had a pale red glow.

"It began," Ronny was saying, "when he had that heart attack several weeks ago. A fear of death was driven into him. Death fascinated him. I can hardly describe the change in him.

"He became . . . sickening. Like a scurrying human weasel. Like a frantic slug under a log trying to squirm out of danger. His whole appearance changed into something shifty and unholy—and frightening."

Clark Lawson looked at his fat hands on the desk and said nothing.

Ronny licked his lips. "He was completely taken with the idea of death. He talked about cataleptics and how they lived while displaying many of the signs of death. He mouthed wild phrases about nervous tissue—why a brain one moment is a living, conscious functioning thing and the next moment as useless and unfeeling as a clod of mud. What was the spark that caused the function, the spark that gave matter the quality of life? Uncle Henry Kinsley was trying to solve the secret of death itself!"

In the heat a bottle fly buzzed. Clark Lawson cleared his throat. "No sign he's crazy, though. Lots of men have pondered the question of death."

"But they didn't try the way he is trying! They didn't go to people like Meg Tyler. They didn't spend hours chanting devilish incantations that turn your blood cold! They didn't prowl the bayous and fields for strange herbs to cook up devils' brews!"

"You haven't seen his room, its filth, the cabalistic drawings he's painted on the walls. You haven't had the stench of the room hit you in the face, and its gloom—he keeps it darkened—seep down inside of you like slimy fingers wrapping around your stomach! I think he's even made a pact with the devil to learn some of the secrets of death!"

"Oh, come now, Ronny. We live in an enlightened age."

"I know. I'm not saying what *I* think—but only what I believe he might do!"

Ronny didn't realize he was on his feet until Clark Lawson said calmly, "Sit down, Ronny." And when Ronny was seated:

"You say your uncle is crazy. Perhaps he is. You want him committed. But I think I understand your real reason, Ronny."

For a moment their gazes met and held. Then Ronny cut his eyes toward the window and said, "You've never liked me, Lawson. I couldn't expect you to judge me fairly."

Lawson leaned on his elbows. "I'm not judging you. I'm just telling you something. You might succeed in having Henry Kinsley committed—but you won't get his money by doing it. I'm his lawyer. I'll see to that. There are certain laws I can use against you, Ronny. He'll be committed for a cure. And you won't be able to touch his money until he's pronounced absolutely incurable."

"You'd fight me all the way, wouldn't you, Lawson? You'd try to see that he was never pronounced incurable."

"I'd do what I could for him. Because he'd be pretty helpless in your hands. Because I like him in a way. Because I've always felt a little sorry for him. You know nothing about his early life, do you? Well, something very unfortunate happened to him, when he was young." Lawson tossed the past aside with a wave of his pudgy, red hand. "To hell with all that. I just like to see my neighbors get a square deal. Henry Kinsley has been my neighbor for a long time.

"So—yes, I would fight you, Ronny. If he reached the point where he really was incurable, I'd want them to say so. But I don't believe he's close to that point, and I don't think you actually believe it yourself. They have some very wonderful methods of treatment in mental hospitals these days. They'd have a good chance perhaps, of restoring his mental balance."

"Yes, wouldn't they?"

Ronny was standing, moving toward the door. "I'm glad to know how we stand, Lawson." At the door he paused. "But he really is crazy. There's no telling

what he might do. If he does something awful, the blame will be partly on your shoulders, Lawson."

Lawson narrowed his eyes. "I'm not worrying about him doing anything. I think I might drop in on him today or tomorrow, Ronny."

"You do that. You go in his room—and see if you can hold your dinner!"

CHAPTER TWO

Devil's Brew

RONNY crossed the sidewalk, got in his light coupe. He hated the car. It was cheap, old, sluggish. He drove back toward the Kinsley house, made the turn-off on the short, rutted, dirt road that led to the house. Vegetation was thick and green on either side of the lane, trees throwing their branches together to shut out some of the sun and form a dim tunnel in the heat of the day.

Ronny parked the coupe in the weedy yard and entered the house.

For lunch Miss Biddie had clam chowder and chicken creole. Ronny ate little. He wished she'd quit hovering about the dining room. Like a leather-winged bat, he thought again, looking at her. Timid. But a snake is timid, and the bat has fangs. Miss Biddie, with her pale, translucent skin, her sunken, glowing eyes was as much a part of this house as the shadows in the corners. He pushed his plate back, and went upstairs to his room.

He sat at the window, looking out at the side yard. The old man in the next room was quiet now, almost as if he were contented, almost as if he were a warrior who'd won a hard, unholy battle Ronny shook his head, nibbling his lip. He got up, walked out of the room, downstairs, out to the side yard.

He stood until the sun had warmed the flesh of his face. Insect life hummed. The willows dropped their long hair in the

still, dead air. A mustiness hung everywhere, like the secrets of centuries buried in the swamps and bayous in the distance.

Hands in the pockets of his slacks, Ronny kicked at a clod and began moving about the yard. His gaze darted, and he walked in a widening circle.

At the edge of the yard, near an old stump that was damp with rot, he saw the toadstools, sick grey in color, like tiny eruptions on the earth's face.

Ronny looked back at the house. The windows were dark eyes staring at him. He bent, tore a handful of the toadstools from the loamy earth. He straightened, breathing quickly now, dropping the pieces of fungi in his pocket.

Back in the house he paused in the upper hall and put his ear against Henry Kinsley's door. There was no sound inside. Ronny licked his lips, turned the knob. The odor of the room smote his nostrils, its gloom cloaked him.

There was the sound of running water in the bath. The water turned off, and from beyond the bathroom door a voice demanded, "Who's in there?"

"It's me, Uncle Henry. Just came in to see how you're feeling."

"I'm feeling fine and having a shave."

"Well, don't let me disturb you." Ronny felt blobs of sweat burning his face as he skirted the high, old-fashioned bed with its soiled, rumpled covers. On a table beyond the bed a blackened pot sat on a hot plate; the pot was bubbling, steam dancing over its repulsive contents. Ronny held his hand over the bubbling pot, opened his fingers, and the deadly poisonous white bits of toadstool made little splashes. . . .

RONNY sat in the bare wooden booth and watched the bottles behind the bar. Back and forth they wavered in his vision. He squinted hard, trying to bring things into focus. He knew it was late at night and hot as hell. He could feel his

heart hammering under its load of alcohol and heat. He was in the Tumble Inn, a juke joint on the edge of the village. He looked at the pine bar, measured the cracks in the wide planking of the rough floor. The juke box blasted in his ears. He smiled at no one in particular, pleased that he should know where he was.

He picked up the glass before him, drained it. "Drunk," he muttered. "Drunken than a lord." The drink hit his stomach, bounced, and he had a bad moment.

He looked blearily at the two or three men at the bar. He supposed vaguely they were fishermen. One woman stood at the bar. Two of the men had their arms about her waist. Her laughter was shrill. In his booth, Ronny looked at her in drunken disgust. "Old bag," he muttered. He slouched back in the booth and let his heavy lids close. The booth tilted, wavering, the moment his eyes closed. The booth was trying to climb right up the wall, and Ronnie gripped the edge of the table. He forced his eyes open, and the booth steadied.

Damn filthy joint, he thought. Well, I won't have to drink with old bags and tramps any more. Not after old Henry gets a taste of that toadstool. I'll have a hundred thousand bucks then. That's how much the old bum is worth. Always cracked, salting money away that way, living in that rotten house like a hermit.

Today Clark Lawson said something about unhappiness when old Henry was young . . . may be the reason the old nut's lived like that.

Got to have air . . . Ronny tried to climb to his feet. He got halfway up, his back braced against the back of the booth. The liquor had set up a roaring in his ears. He breathed through loose lips. The laughter of the old bag at the bar and the grating of the juke box ran together, whirlpools of sound in his brain. He slid to a sitting position. The people at the bar came and went like phantasms seen through sliding films of fog. The bottles behind the bar marched and danced, and the room expanded and contracted, and darkness stole over Ronny like a blanket as he passed out.

Hands were shaking him. He tried to fight them off. He wanted to sleep a week. His head buzzed. His mouth tasted like something lined with raw dough. His stomach was a jumping bundle of nerves.

The hands wouldn't go away. They shook him again. A light showed pink against Ronny's closed lids.

He tried to struggle up; his face hit something. He felt it. It was a steering wheel. Then he remembered. He had passed out in the Tumble Inn. The proprietor must have carried him out, dumped him in his coupe which was parked in the lot outside.

Ronny grunted, and the grunt became a



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groan. He opened his eyes, sitting up in the coupe, passing his hand over his face.

The car doors were open, and two or three shadowy figures of men stood close to the coupe.

"Wh—what is it?" Ronny said blankly. In the east, grey light was beginning to show, but the dawn wasn't strong enough for him to see the men clearly.

One of the men had a flashlight. It beamed in Ronny's face, striking painfully against his swollen eyes. Over the light, Clark Lawson's voice said, "How long you been here, Ronny?"

"All night. I passed out in the joint."

"I guess you can prove that?"

"Listen, what the devil is this? I guess the joe who owns the Tumble Inn would swear I was in there drinking. I even ate some of the mess he calls dinner in the joint. I didn't want to go back to the house and listen to that crazy old coot chant, so I got drunk, passed out, and the owner must have put me out here. Why—what is it?"

The men around the coupe shuffled their feet. Clark Lawson said, "We've been looking for you for hours, Ronny. Your Uncle Henry died in the night."

The figure next to Lawson spoke. Ronny recognized the voice as belonging to Sheriff Len Benton. "He died pretty horribly, boy. In convulsions. He had cooked up a pot of something in his room. He must have eaten it. Something in it poisoned him."

Ronny sat like a person numbed. "Well, Lawson, I guess you see what you've done, don't you?"

His words hung in the grey dawn light.

Len Benton demanded, "What do you mean by that?"

"I told Lawson today that the old man was crazy. I told him that the old man was cooking up a devil's porridge in his room. Didn't I, Lawson?" He almost shouted, "Didn't I? The poor old coot spent hours out digging up herbs, roots,

God knows what else. He didn't have sense enough to know that he might be putting something in that pot to poison him!"

FOR ONCE, Clark Lawson was silent.

Ronny said, "I tried to tell Mr. Smart-Pants Lawson the old man should be committed, but Lawson wouldn't hear of it. He was so sure I wanted the old man's money. I won't deny it—what person wouldn't like to have old Henry's money? But the poor old coot would have been better off if I'd had my way! Damn you, Lawson, by sticking your nose in, you killed my uncle sure as you're standing there!" Ronny beat the steering wheel with the sides of his fists and sobbed. They were deep, angry sobs, putting everything else to silence. They weren't hard in coming. The way his nerves were jumping, Ronny felt a certain relief in the sobs.

Lawson cleared his throat awkwardly.

Len Benton said, "We're going to have the mess in that pot analyzed, of course, Ronny. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"What do you mean?"

"If there's any kind of poison in that gruel that old Henry might not have put in there himself. . . ."

"Oh, damn you, damn you!" Ronny choked. He savagely kicked the starter. The motor coughed to life. "Where's my uncle's body?"

"At Beerbohm's Funeral Parlor," Benton said.

Ronny spun the wheel of the coupe and charged out of the parking area so fast he almost ran Clark Lawson down.

He drove into the village and talked with Beerbohm. Beerbohm insisted that the old man would have wanted to be buried in the Kinsley mausoleum in the grove of willows a quarter of a mile north of the house. The big stone crypt, rearing on the earth, was run over with weeds,

and Beerbohn saw Ronny to the door with the assurance that he would send a man out to put the area about the crypt in shape.

Ronny drove home. He expected Miss Biddie to be prostrate with grief, or at least fluttered. She was neither. She was calmer than he had ever seen her. She cooked his breakfast, moving on her little bird feet, and didn't mention Henry Kinsley. I don't like you, Ronny thought, sitting at the table and looking at her. I'm going to give you your wages and walking papers soon as I can.

He didn't know why he should feel that way about her. She was hardly more than a shadow, and a timid one at that. But he wondered if timidity couldn't reach a point where it was a vice . . . and he wondered too, if her timidity didn't sometimes serve as a mask for her thoughts.

He went up to his room. The room next to his was very quiet now. No crazy chanting, no smells out of there. No Henry Kinsley.

Ronny took off his shoes, loosened his belt and lay down across the bed. In a few short minutes, he was asleep.

He woke at noon. He went downstairs, drank a cup of black coffee and drove into the village. He heard the gossip. An autopsy had been performed on Henry Kinsley. There were particles of a substance in his stomach and in the mess he'd cooked up that the doctor had concluded were particles of a deadly variety of toadstool.

For an hour or so, LaFarge teetered on the brink. Could someone have put the toadstool in old Henry's concoction? Then LaFarge began to make up its mind, as Ronny drifted through the village. LaFarge heard from Ronny's own lips how he'd wanted to have the old man put away, how the old man was so crazy he didn't know a poisonous herb from a non-poisonous one. Ronny had no malice in his voice, only a sadness that Clark Lawson had refused to let Ronny put Henry Kins-

ley in a place where the old man would be safe.

By four o'clock, one of Lawson's best friends passed Lawson's office and didn't look in and shout "How's the shyster?"

Ronny, idling across the street, saw Lawson come to the door of his office and look at his friend's silent, stolid retreating back.

Ronny walked across the street to the old frame building that housed Lawson's office.

"Lawson," Ronny said, "something tells me this town is beginning not to like you."

Lawson scratched his pink bald head. Then he looked at the grinning, contemptuous face before him. That was all he did, just look. Then he turned around, walked back in his office and sat down.

The grin faded from Ronny's face. "Damn him!" he muttered through his teeth. He walked to his coupe and drove home.

Two days later Henry Kinsley was interred in the stone crypt amid the willows. After the funeral, Ronny drove to LaFarge, bought himself two fifths of good rye. Back home, he went up to his room, poured himself a long drink.

He was tossing it off when the knock sounded on his door. He knew it was Miss Biddie. He couldn't mistake that scratching knock. Come up to collect her wages, he thought, to give her notice—and that suits me fine!

"Come in!"

Miss Biddie came in.

He poured another drink. He glanced over at her. She was standing in the doorway, smiling, her gaze crawling over his cheeks, around his eye sockets. Her gaze was almost like something tangible on his flesh, like a little pointed icicle trailing over his skin.

"Mr. Ronny, is Mr. Henry's estate in the courts?"

"It will be shortly."

"You're sure you'll get his money, Mr. Ronny?"

"Of course I am! Look here, what business is it of yours?"

She smiled and said, "He always said he'd make a will."

"But he didn't. He wasn't the kind of man to make a will. He was the kind of man to—to let a house like this one fall in wreckage. Just what brought you up here, Miss Biddie?"

The smile stayed on her lips. Her voice came soft as silk, or soft as the squeaking of the little fanged bats in the dark corners of the attic, "I saw you get the toadstools, Mr. Ronny."

CHAPTER THREE

The Crypt

RONNY stared at her. The glass trembled in his hand.

"Can you guess why I've stayed with him all these years, Mr. Ronny?"

"I—I don't know."

"It's not so complicated." She smiled her deadly little smile. He wondered why he'd never seen the real qualities of that smile before. He should have. Any woman who would serve in a house like this one for years . . .

"I was born in back-bayou country, Mr. Ronny. I never had anything and was brought up never to expect anything. I was thrilled at getting this job because you see, this house, even like it is, is so much better than anything else I could have had.

"I never could meet people, Mr. Ronny, or impress myself the way you have to if you want to make a success. If I'd ever left here, it would have been for back-bayou country, for something worse, and I knew it. No one cared. No one even cared for me. I was just a piece of glass that people looked through, never knowing I was there. You live like that a while

and you finally get to hating people."

Her voice was rising now, like a small swamp creature's voice reaching the apex of a scream. "You get to hating people so much that you want to show them, boss them, make them look *at* the glass instead of through it! If you had money you could do that—and a long time ago I began wanting his money. I thought maybe he'd marry me, he was so alone. I think he almost did, once. Then I thought if I served him, took care of him, he'd give me money when he passed on. He promised. He said he'd make a will, that he'd rather see me have the money than anyone he knew. It isn't just his money that you've taken—it's years and years of my life!" She jerked a little gun from her crocheted bag.

Ronny felt a shiver slide up his spine, looking at her. He saw the pounding of a pulse in her throat and her eyes were mad—as mad as old Henry's had been. He took a step backward, away from her.

"You're a thief," she screamed, "and a murderer! You've stolen my money—*mine!* You're going to give me lots of it, do you understand? You'll give it to me, or I'll tell them I saw you pick the toadstools and go up to his room. They'll get the truth out of you then!

"No . . . don't come near me! I'm getting away from here—now. I'm not going to give you the chance to do to me what you did to him. I'm going to New Orleans, and you'd better not come there. You just send the money to the address I'll send you, and never, never come near me, and everything will be all right. Do you understand?"

"What else can I do?" he said.

She gradually relaxed, watching his face narrowly. She had won! For the first time, Ronny thought, she thinks the glass has cut, that somebody is looking *at* the glass instead of through it.

She smiled like a dainty kitten after a vicious game with a helpless mouse. She

licked her lips, backed from the room. "Your coupe is at the front veranda. I'll leave it in the village for you. I'll send you an address to send the money to when I get in New Orleans."

"All right," he said. "I'll split the money with you. But it'll be a while before the courts are all through with the estate."

"I know that. I'll be watching the newspapers, Mr. Ronny."

She slammed the door behind her, and he could hear her steps running down the stairway. He moved out in the hall, looking down the stairs, and saw the front door slam behind her.

With the rye bottle still in his hand, he went down the stairs. Through the narrow, high windows beside the front door, he saw her hurrying around the coupe, dropping the little gun in her bag. She got in the car. The starter ground, but the engine remained lifeless.

A pulse began hammering in Ronny's temple. The coupe was old and, like all old cars, had developed a thousand idiosyncrasies of its own. You had to know the coupe, baby it. But she didn't know the car—and it sounded as if she had flooded the loggy old engine in her feverish anxiety.

Ronny cut back through the hall, moving fast, and came out a side door into the yard. The high, unkempt shrubs concealed him as he worked his way alongside the house toward the front where the coupe was.

He could hear the starter grinding, grinding. Ronny smiled thinly; in her mounting panic she was making matters worse. She should have given the motor an instant's rest, let it take a breath like an old, tired horse.

He moved around the front corner of the house, eeled his way up to the coupe until he could sense the heat pouring off the metal turtleback. He was below the level of the rear-view mirror, and conse-

quently below the level of the rear window; he couldn't see her inside the car, but the starter stopped. The springs creaked, and the door latch snapped. She was getting out of the car.

His face down at the level of the rear fender, Ronny saw one of her shoes step down on the dirt of the driveway. The rye bottle was slick in his fingers. He had his mouth opened wide, barely breathing.

She was standing beside the car, now, looking up at the house. The crocheted bag with the gun in it still hung to her wrist.

She fumbled at the hood of the car. He could almost read her thoughts. Perhaps a loose wire, something a woman could fix—and watch for him, watch for Ronny. . . .

Sure, he thought, watch for Ronny!

He reared up. She sensed the motion and turned. Color swept from her face; she opened her mouth to scream and fumbled at the crocheted bag. He hit her with the rye bottle. He hit her so hard he heard glass and bone breaking and felt liquor spraying all over him. A little of it splashed in his left eye, like a hot poker in the socket.

He caught her as she fell. The one blow had been enough. She was dead.

That night he weighted her body with chains and dropped it in Coquina Bayou.

IT TOOK him until four-thirty in the morning to make his way to the deserted, lonely bayou and back. He knew she would never be found. When he returned, the countryside was a spectral thing, with fog in the trees, like cold ectoplasm in the hollow places. Unaccountably, he was desperately afraid of the hulking, dark house; he drove to the village, parked on a side street, and smoked cigarettes until the sun came up. Then he drove over to the Blue Grill.

When he pushed his coffee cup back on the counter, he told Perk, the fat man who

owned the lunch room. "Drove Miss Biddie to New Orleans last night. Paid her off—gave her a little bonus too. She was mighty fine all through the funeral. Bad time, you know."

Perk swabbed the counter. "Not many like Miss Biddie."

"You're right about that. Said she couldn't live in the old place with the old man gone. Saw her safely to a hotel—then had myself a night." Outside, Ronny's wry grin faded. He could feel his nerves singing, making his arm muscles give little twitches here and there. And in his head was a headache like tiny fingers stabbing into his brain.

I'm in a staté, he thought. I've got to get a grip on myself. The strain of the last days, of last night. I've got to stop it! Got to!

Main Street was coming alive now. La-Farge was an early-rising village, as if by getting up early enough it could make up for the time it spent in the heat of the day loafing.

As Ronny walked across the sidewalk toward the coupe, he heard Clark Lawson call his name.

He turned, waited until Lawson was close to him.

"Glad I ran into you, Ronny." Lawson pushed back his floppy panama and scratched his bald pink pate. "I thought you'd be interested in knowing about the letter I wrote to Millicent."

"What letter, and who in hell is Millicent?"

"The old man never told you? No, I guess he wouldn't have. No one around here even remembers it any more, it happened so long ago. And old Henry never talked about it. It broke his heart when he was young. He went down to New Orleans and got a job. He married a girl there. But she was—well, to put it bluntly a tramp, a complete and utter tramp. He didn't know until after their child was born. He was kind of blind where his

wife was concerned, I suppose, but he finally tumbled to the truth. In his pride and foolish, unforgiving youth, he ran her off. Them, I should say. The girl and her baby. Claimed he didn't even believe the baby daughter was his. But deep down, he knew the child was his. He confided his loneliness to me just a few years ago. All his life he loved that girl and her daughter, that dirty little tramp of his youth, but his pride would never let him mention her. It disillusioned him, maybe even drove him off his nut a little."

Ronny stared at Lawson aghast. The little fingers of heat and hurt writhed in his brain, giving him a sensation of tiny explosions behind his eyes. He spoke through his teeth. "Millicent—the old man's daughter! Old Henry's daughter!"

"Sure, Ronny. Say, now, don't take it like that! I've put private dicks on her trail. Hell, she must be forty or forty-five years old by this time. I guess she deserves to know that somebody rich had died and left her something."

"You'll bring her here! You'll give her his money!"

Lawson's face hardened. "Not his money. *Her* money now." Lawson's voice trailed off as Ronny slammed into the coupe, started the motor and spun the car in a savage U-turn. Dust showered over Lawson from the skidding wheels, and half a dozen people stopped to watch the way Ronny was taking that coupe out of town.

Ronny hardly saw the road before him. He careened off the highway, jouncing over the rutted lane, back to the old house. He entered its gloomy hall, as broke, as helpless as he'd been when first he'd come there.

The little fingers were beating a tattoo in his brain now, trying to pound through his temples.

He reeled upstairs, found a bottle of rye, reeled back down the once-glorious stairway, taking a drink every other step.

About him were only ruin, decay, the ghost of thoughts. . . .

He stalked up and down the vaulted hallway with its peeling paint. The bottle was half empty. His brain was a buzz-saw now, spinning faster, faster. . . .

"I'm not beaten!" he shouted. "Listen, you filthy house, I'm not beaten yet! I've been through too much to take a licking. I'll wait. I'll let him bring Millicent. Then—I'll still get the money. I'll make it look like an accident. I'll kill her! I'll kill her too!"

The words rolled, echoed, in the gaunt, vast house. There was a stirring overhead, as if the bats in the attic had been disturbed. And a faint breath of sound came to Ronny, soft as silk, so soft it might have been a figment of his roiling mind. The whisper bubbled in his brain: "*No, Ronny. You won't kill her! Not my daughter!*"

Ronny saw the man then. Standing in the shadows, as if he were about to flee. In the man's hand was the dull glint of a gun.

"Get back!" Ronny breathed. The bottle slipped from his hand. "You're dead. You can't hurt me! Get back, Uncle Henry! Get back in your grave!"

The man didn't move. "Damn you!" Ronny screamed. "You're not real! I'll prove to myself you're not real!"

He flung himself at the man. A gun began to bucket. Ronny could see the flame winking from the gun in the man's hand. He felt a bullet smash into him, another. He stared, stunned, his heart a thing of ice, not during those first moments feeling the sheeting blood the bullets brought.

The man was real, after all. . . .

Ronny was whimpering, swaying, when he reached the front porch. He could feel the blood searing his flesh now and the bullets burning under his skin. He pitched down the steps to the driveway. Tears streaming down his face, he tried to rise,

tried to run. He fell, crawled on hands and knees, and slowly sank to the earth.

The sky spun in his vision, faded to grey and finally blacked out.

A HAND was holding his head, raising it, and something was being forced in Ronny's lips. He sputtered and the liquid burned his throat. He opened his eyes. A long time must have passed. The sun had travelled clear across the sky while he'd lain unconscious. A wonder he hadn't bled to death.

He looked at the face hovering over him. He couldn't see it distinctly. Like through a film. He licked his cracked, dry lips, and tried to bring his eyes in focus. The face looked like Clark Lawson's. Lawson brought the pocket flash to Ronny's lips again.

Lawson was speaking. ". . . while you can, Ronny. Tell me. What happened. Tell me everything."

"I—"

"You're going out, Ronny. Why don't you get it off your chest?"

"You're bluffing . . . not going out . . ." But he was! He was! He could feel his eyes glazing; the sun was fading. His flesh was growing cold. . . .

He groped for Lawson's hand wildly. He found the hand and clutched it—but he knew he couldn't hang on. This was it. He was dying. He croaked a laugh and began talking. He told it all from beginning to end; then Ronny went limp and Clark Lawson knew he was dead.

* * *

I knew he was dead. Yes, I, for I am Clark Lawson. I have set down this story as Ronny gave it to me. Yet the story goes a bit beyond Ronny.

A tramp was arrested late that same afternoon for drunkenness in the village. The tramp, upon search was found to have a wristwatch in his pocket that had be-

longed to Ronny Kinsley. There was money in the tramp's pocket, too, and Ronny's wallet was found empty near his body.

Legal machinery moved quickly. Under grilling, the tramp claimed that he chanced upon the old house, saw Ronny, thought he was dead. Deciding the place was deserted, the tramp claimed he had taken the watch, money and then run like the devil. In the village with a roll on him, the tramp had given way to a long felt craze for drink and got drunk.

But a jury was sceptical of that story. The prosecutor was never in better form. The defense attorney appointed by the court was getting little out of the case, didn't want to waste time, and didn't believe in the tramp's innocence, anyway. This was a combination of factors hard to beat. The tramp couldn't beat them.

The prosecutor claimed that the tramp had been rifling the house, that Ronny had walked in on him, that the tramp had grabbed a .45 from the old gun-case downstairs when he heard Ronny coming. Ronny's sense of guilt and crazed condition caused him to think the tramp was his dead uncle there in the dim, shadowy hall, the prosecutor claimed, and when Ronny flung himself at the tramp, the tramp, in panic at being found in the house and cornered, had begun firing. The jury agreed with the prosecutor, and the tramp was found guilty of murder in the process of robbery; he was sentenced and duly died in the electric chair.

That the tramp was guilty seemed without doubt. Close checking by the authorities revealed that no one else apparently had been in the neighborhood of the Kinsley place from the time Ronny was shot until I found him dying. His actions in town when I told him of Millicent had seemed so strange to me that I suspected him of murder. I had suspected all along, and I went out there to have a talk with

him. If I hadn't found him gasping his last, it might have been days before he was found.

The gun wasn't found, but of course it was claimed that the tramp had thrown the weapon away. That seemed to be a logical explanation.

Yet it is this point of the gun that bothers me. Just a week ago, during the floods, water undermined the Kinsley mausoleum, causing the crypt to shift and tilt badly. Common decency dictated that something be done, especially as some of the coffins had slid from their shelves. The county sanitation department sent a crew to straighten the crypt, and there in the tomb they found a gun—a .45. Old Henry Kinsley's coffin in sliding from its shelf had struck the stone slab floor of the crypt with enough force to spring it open, and the gun was lying on the floor a few feet from old Henry's coffin.

The sheriff, just to clear the records, had ballistics run on the gun. The markings on it matched those on the slugs taken from Ronny Kinsley's body. But the really bothersome point is this: None of the tramp's fingerprints were on the gun!

Of course, we must maintain that the gun did *not* come from the sprung coffin of old Henry, but that the gun had been on the floor of the crypt since the day of Ronny Kinsley's death. It is fantastic to believe that old Henry, in his trips to Meg Tyler, in his eerie reading, in his devil's brews and chants, stumbled upon something beyond the realm of human understanding. We must be safe in saying that the tramp wiped the gun of prints, and threw it through the iron grillwork of the tomb, thinking it an excellent hiding place, in his hurry to get away from the scene. That is the way it has to be. That is the only logical explanation. In the clear light of day any other explanation is ridiculous

THE END

THE PROBING ROOTS

By COSTA CAROUSSO



I aimed very squarely at the center of the pillow before I pulled the trigger. For a moment I thought I had missed, and I was almost glad.

WHEN she was alive she used to love the poplar tree before the house with a feeling I never understood. She used to say to me, "Chris, darling. Look how eagerly the branches

reach upward. So sure that they can touch the sky. It's like our life together, somehow, isn't it, dearest?"

Or she'd take me by the hand and pull me to the window, saying, "Chris, look

"I couldn't go on living if I had any doubt of your love for me," she'd said. She couldn't go on living . . . my mind had repeated, and added: Baby,

how right you are!



how the leaves are twinkling—first green, then silver. As though they were smiling. It will be so sad when autumn comes. . . .”

I was expected to say something. “Very sad,” I said, as convincingly as I could.

She turned from the window abruptly. It’s strange, but I can still remember how the sky darkened at that moment as a cloud crossed the sun, and how, listening to the relentless sound of the crickets in the sudden silence, I became terrified of what I was going to do.

“Chris,” she asked, “do you really love—”

“Of course I love you,” I said. “Of course, darling.”

A small smile crossed her lips for a moment. “I meant the tree, Chris,” she said. “I couldn’t go on living if I had any doubt of your love for me.” She looked at me for a long time, with the same small smile on her lips.

It was then I knew I had to get it over with tonight. . . .

I HAD first met Ellen almost two years before, when my radiator boiled over near the last, isolated house in the street of a tiny old New England town, and I had walked up her lilac-bordered path to ask for water.

She was wearing faded dungarees and a grey-and-red-checked flannel shirt. Even without make-up she looked good, and I figured, what the hell, maybe the boiling radiator was a lucky break, after all.

“Lots of water in the tap,” she said. “Come, I’ll find you a bucket.” Her grin was as candid as a twelve-year-old boy’s, and right off I knew I’d have to play it slow.

When I came back from the car she was on her knees, digging holes in the ground with a trowel and putting in dixie cups with no bottoms.

“Please fill the bucket,” she said, without turning. “So they can get a good start.”

She thanked me without looking up when I brought the water. I watched her as she scooped up palmfuls, letting it drip through her fingers to the things she had planted. When she had finished she straightened up slowly, still looking at the ground. I could see her eyes now. There was sadness in them and a quiet sort of triumph.

“There!” she said. “In six weeks they’ll be full-fledged petunias.”

My first impulse was to thank her for the water and leave. My second was to stick around and try to find out why a girl like her was hiding her figure with overalls and digging holes instead of divots. I put on my best company manners and got an invitation to lunch.

While we ate she talked. She told me she had been an illustrator of children’s books before the war and when the telegram came telling her that her husband was missing in action in New Guinea, it all went out of her. “I couldn’t be gay and whimsical any more,” she said. “I just couldn’t.”

I nodded understandingly.

“And I couldn’t stay in our apartment and live on memories. My parents had left me enough to live on comfortably, so I drove around until I found this place. I thought,” she added, “that by being close to growing things I might forget how cruel death is.” She lowered her glance, self-conscious for the first time, and reached for a cigarette.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I talk too much. Tell me about you.”

“I guess we’re two of a kind,” I said. “I’m alone too. More or less starving in a garret—only it isn’t a garret, it’s a cold-water room—and writing the great American novel.” I didn’t tell her that I hadn’t done a day’s work since I quit med school when my uncle died and left me a couple of thousand—or that the great American novel was a couple of typewritten pages gathering dust in the closet.

"You shouldn't live in the city!" she cried impulsively. "You should live out here."

I smiled inwardly. "Do you really recommend it?"

Her fingers twisted in her lap and she stared at them as she answered. "That poplar tree out there," she said slowly. "All winter, while the winds lash its branches, the roots grope downward, probing for something to hold on to. But in the spring—" She broke off and smiled hesitantly. "Perhaps when spring comes I'll want to start working again. That's what I need, really."

She wasn't kidding even herself.

That was when I decided I would marry her. Why, I'm not certain. Perhaps I realized that I was drinking and drifting my way to hell, and that I needed what she had to give—warmth and vitality. Or perhaps I remembered her words about having money enough to live on comfortably.

I found her hand. "Maybe this spring, Ellen," I said. "Maybe for both of us. . . ."

She looked at me long and hard, and at last she saw what she was looking for. If you want to see something hard enough, you always see it—whether it's there or not.

SHE WAS a good wife, Ellen. Always gay, charmingly gay, always startlingly passionate. And she loved me with a love that was close to worship.

"You brought me back to life, dearest," she would say. "I was drying up inside, and you made me alive again."

It worked out pretty well for a while. I had my own room, and whenever I wanted to, I could shut myself inside and pretend I was working. When I got a yen for the old crowd I could always say that I had to get into town for a couple of days to do some research at the library. **There were never any questions, any hints**

of jealousy. We had a joint bank account; Ellen had insisted on that. There wasn't much by my standards but there was enough.

Once, when I was leaving for the city to keep a date with Penny Chalmers who did a number at the Zazerac Club, I got the feeling that Ellen knew the truth and that if I admitted it outright she would have answered: "As long as you're happy, darling. You've brought so much happiness to me."

That was when I looked at myself coldly, as you look at a stranger, and I was looking at the unpleasant picture of a heel.

That was when I began getting fed up.

Ellen had begun drawing, and her sketches were really excellent. Gay and whimsical, she had said, and those weren't just her words. Her publishers thought so, too, with checks in three figures. I was keeping up the pretense of writing, but I wasn't doing a damn thing else. And I knew that it wasn't in me.

Living with Ellen showed me that she was my superior in a thousand ways, made me more and more aware of my own worthlessness. I developed a painful sense of inferiority, and it kept nagging and nagging like a bad tooth.

I couldn't bear listening to her tell me how wonderful I was, and finally I almost reached the point of screaming the truth out at her—telling her just what sort of dope I had played her for.

But I didn't. Maybe I didn't dare put the thoughts I had about myself into the finality of words. I began hating her, instead, with the counter-part of all the murderous self-hatred that she had unknowingly awakened in me.

The mockery of it was that she noticed nothing. Her eyes, her face, glowed with happiness. She was transformed by it; she became startlingly beautiful. Looking at her own complete fulfillment stirred the **hell-fires of envy and frustration in me,**

brought the bitter taste of ashes to my mouth.

I wasn't able to get any fun out of Penny any more. I wasn't getting anything out of Ellen, and twenty times a week she told me that everything she had, I had given her. That was when I should have packed up my bags and gone, but I figured I had something coming to me for the year and a half I had wasted. I could have taken the bank-book with me, but one moment I was afraid Ellen would put the police after me, and the next, when I realized that she was incapable of dragging her love through the courts, I was terrified that no matter where I went or what I did, I would feel her contempt for me as long as she lived.

As long as she lived. . . .

I told myself that it would be kinder the other way. She would go out still happy, still loving me. And no one would know she had gone. . . .

Perhaps that was the real reason. Or because I wanted that money bad, and I didn't want to take the risk of going to jail. Perhaps it was because I felt that I would get rid of that gnawing sense of inferiority only when I had destroyed her. . . .

* * *

" . . . I couldn't go on living if I had any doubt of your love for me." She looked at me for a long time, with a small smile on her lips.

It was then I knew that I had to get it over with tonight. I listened to her footsteps going down the hall to her room and after her door closed I stared at the tree branches for a long time. After a while the way they moved—touching, crossing and recrossing, brushing against the house—the very monotony of it, brought a scream almost to my lips.

That was when I knew I had to stop thinking and act.

I went to my room and checked the .32 with the silencer that was hidden behind my books, and I lay down and smoked one cigarette after the other. When the hall clock struck ten, I tiptoed to her room.

I opened the door gently, stepped in and aimed very carefully at the center of her pillow before I squeezed the trigger.

No blood stained the pillow, and for a moment I thought that I had fired a dud, or that I had missed. I was almost glad. The first thing I saw when I bent over her was the small bluish hole in her temple. The second was the note on the bedstand, under the empty phial of sleeping tablets.

"I really meant it," she had written, "when I said that I couldn't live a moment doubting your love for me. Almost—almost I do not doubt it now. I'm so sorry, Chris. I so wanted to give you even a fraction of the richness you gave me. I think perhaps even that very little might have been enough. This is such a clumsy way of saying things, but I want to spare you any unpleasantness with the police."

As I read that last word, my glance went to the tiny bluish hole. It was still there, and nothing would take it away.

There was an awesome silence in the room. I turned away, and the silence followed me. I cried out, and my cry seemed to come from a vast distance. Urgency gripped me and I almost ran as I hurried down to the kitchen.

When I carried her down to the cellar, her body was no longer warm.

Even with my two years of medical school, it was a night without end. Finally everything dimmed into a red mist. I remember at last closing the four-inch trap in the cast-iron pipe that led to the sewer and bending down, listening to the dull roar as water from every faucet in the house swept past and washed away my crime. I remember laughing because it was so final, so utterly final. And then the laughter stopped abruptly and the roar-

ing grew louder and ever louder. . . .

IT WAS full daylight when I stood beside the window. Beyond the tortured, wind-lashed branches of the poplar tree, the sky was grey with rain. The fresh green of summer had faded from the boughs; leaves tore away and fled. I heard the echo of her voice saying, "It will be so sad when autumn comes. . . ."

Mechanically, because some reasoning part of my mind dictated that I should, I walked dully around the house opening



Her presence was still in the house, palpable as her perfume, and I could still hear her voice telling me how she loved me.

faucets, and then I went down to the cellar. The water flowed through the trap steadily; there was no trace of blood on the floor.

One part of my mind triumphed in the thoroughness of its cunning; the other listened with horror at the water's steady, irrevocable flow. Finally I whirled and turned the faucets off.

My first impulse was to bathe and shave and wait for darkness, and then slip away. But when night came, I didn't go. I didn't leave the next morning nor the next week. Each night I swore I would leave in the morning, and at the end of each day I put it off until the following. Ellen's

presence was still in the house, palpable as her tender perfume. I looked at the empty vases, and I remembered her slender fingers upon them as she moved them on the breakfast table to catch the morning sun. I touched the tarnished silverware, and I remembered how it had gleamed when she was here. I looked at a book I had bought her, and I heard her voice telling me how she loved me. Once I had been almost a god in her presence. Away from it, I would be nothing—less than nothing—and unbearably alone.

The earth froze and the snows came; it seemed that the winter would last forever. I no longer thought of leaving now. Part of me—the best part, perhaps—had died in this house; the rest could not survive away from it. I told myself, without really believing it, that perhaps when springtime came. . . .

The grey was swept from the skies by the roaring winds of March, and fat, white clouds drifted against a background of incredible blue. The snow melted in the pale yellow sunlight, and here and there green blades pushed through the steaming black earth. Deep roots stirred in the earth; buds burgeoned on the branches of the poplar tree. . . .

When I first saw the dark stain of water on the cellar floor, I thought it was melting snow that had escaped through the walls. But then I noticed the small puddle around the trap, and I turned on the faucets of the washtub.

There was a gurgling in the trap and the puddle widened. The thing was clogged, and it was a job for the plumber.

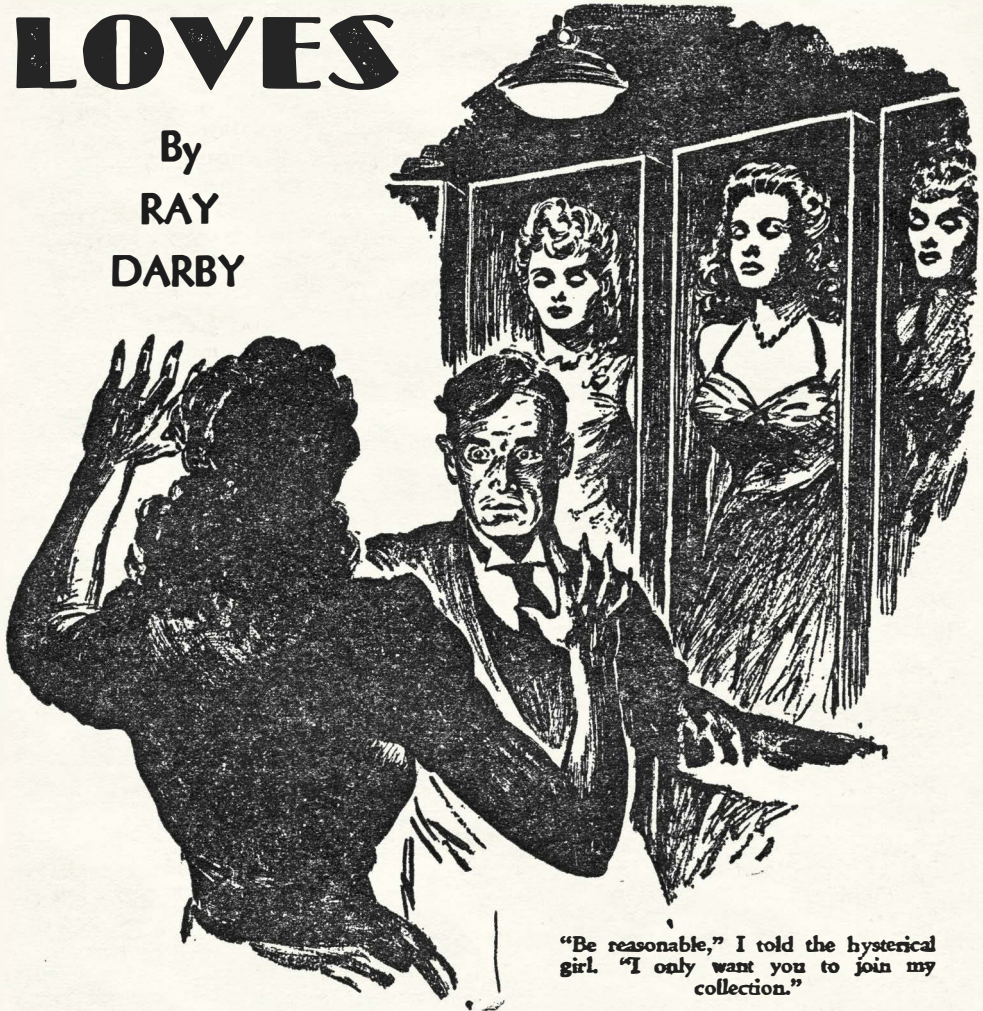
I had no fear that my crime could be discovered; the passage of months had reassured me of that. On the contrary, one part of my mind—the cunning part that had gloated at its cleverness—welcomed the chance to prove its mastery.

I wanted to bring someone into the house, close to my secret, and mock at his

(Continued on page 96)

ALL MY DEAD LOVES

By
RAY
DARBY



"Be reasonable," I told the hysterical girl. "I only want you to join my collection."

Every man has his little hobby. But Moseby's was quite unusual: He collected things. Girls, that is. Very dead ones.

GENTLEMEN! Please!
You don't have to hold my arms. I'm not a desperate man. Nor am I a criminal, as you two seem to think. I'm not going to try to escape. I'm not going to lie to you. I mean to tell you the whole truth. Then, I hope, you'll realize what a terrible mistake you've made in arresting me, and you'll let me go back to

my undertaking parlor, and to what I consider to be nobody's business but mine. That's better. Thank you.

And now, so that you'll understand, I'll go back to the beginning. I wonder if either of you know what it means to have a consuming love for beautiful things? I was raised in poverty, surrounded by squalor and filth. Yet as a child, I was

extremely sensitive. I hated the miserable existence I was forced to live in a dingy, airless room, with no view except for the shabby walls and the littered alleys.

That was why I began collecting things. I tried to bring a little beauty into my wretched life.

I would pick up a faded flower on the street, a brightly colored bit of glass that seemed to contain the rays of the sun I so seldom saw. My greatest treasure was a broken toy that made a tinkling sound when you turned a small handle. I kept these precious things in an old cardboard box under my bed, and whenever I was alone I would take them out, one by one, and hold them in my hands and look at them.

Those things, gentlemen, were my secret world. I personally created that world, and built and added to it as I grew older.

No one would have discovered my secret if it hadn't been for two things. First, the suspicion surrounding the death of Miss Madge Turner, and second, the fact that Miss Dora Humphries ate lunch at The Ladle yesterday at noon. Insignificant things, perhaps, when you consider them in their normal relationship to my life, but under the circumstances they conspired to place me in the position I find myself now.

You know the Turner case well, both of you. You know that the police got the notion Miss Turner might have died from the effects of poison, rather than from natural causes. You, Mr. Ogilvy, were in charge of the party that set out to exhume her body for an autopsy. You were both there when her coffin was opened. You were both, I imagine, rather surprised to see that the coffin contained only a straw dummy, instead of the body of Miss Turner. Naturally, this seemed to confirm your suspicions.

You immediately thought of me, since the funeral had been conducted at my

undertaking parlor. So you came to see me.

YOU MAY recall that I was quite at ease during that first visit. I had nothing whatever to do with Miss Turner's death, therefore I was not in the least disconcerted when McBride said flatly, "We want to talk to you, Moseby."

"Sit down, gentlemen," I said.

Then Ogilvy said, "We understand you arranged the funeral of the Turner girl. Madge Turner."

"Yes," I said, "and what a lovely funeral! You should have seen the flowers. There was one basket of red roses that—"

McBride interrupted me. "Never mind the flowers, Moseby. We're looking for a murderer!"

If you expected me to lose my composure, I'm afraid you were disappointed. I remained quite calm. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean," I said.

McBride said, "How sure?"

Ogilvy was not quite so blunt. "Lay off, McBride," he said. "This man is only the undertaker." Then he glanced approvingly around my very well-appointed premises. "Nice place you've got here, Moseby. If you don't mind the stiff's."

I said coolly, "My clients, Mr. Ogilvy, are my friends."

"Sure. Now about this Turner funeral. Was there anything different from the regular procedure, Moseby? Anything odd?"

"No," I said. "I was on hand myself through the entire ceremony. There was nothing out of the way."

"You closed the coffin yourself?"

"Yes."

"And Miss Turner was in it?"

I said sharply, "I'm not in the habit of interring empty coffins, Mr. Ogilvy."

"Never mind the cracks!" McBride snapped at me. "Just answer the ques-

tions, Moseby. Answer the questions.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing,” I replied. “I’m afraid I don’t understand why you gentlemen feel that you should investigate the death of a girl as young and lovely as Miss Madge Turner. Surely you don’t think—”

“We think a lot of things,” Ogilvy said. “What we’re trying to do now is prove them.” He paused and scratched his head. “You know what it looks like to me, McBride? It looks like somebody beat us to that coffin, knowing that we’d get there eventually. No body, no evidence.”

McBride growled, “I’ll bet this Moseby knows more about it than he lets on.”

“I don’t think Moseby knows anything,” Ogilvy said. “He only did his job.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ogilvy,” I said stiffly. “And now, if you’ll be good enough to let me get on with my work. . .”

“We’re leaving,” Ogilvy said. “Just a word of warning, Moseby. We’re convinced that Madge Turner was poisoned, and whoever did it will go to any length to hide his guilt. The fact that he would even open her coffin proves that. I’d keep my eyes open, if I were you.”

YOU LEFT after that. Mr. Ogilvy, I’m sure, was quite satisfied as to my innocence. But Mr. McBride evidently didn’t share the feeling. He was doubtful, though I still don’t know why. I’m a quiet man. I’m not the type to be involved in anything underhand. My one strong characteristic is my love for beautiful things, that deep, abiding love that has remained with me since my poverty-stricken childhood.

As soon as you two had gone, I went downstairs. I have a special room down there, a room with a carefully hidden door. No one but I know of the existence of that room, because it is there that I keep my collection.

I only visit my collection two or three

times a week these days. Business has been good, and I don’t have the time. I don’t like to be rushed when I’m there. But that day I felt I *had* to go down there. You two had created a doubt in my mind, the disturbing possibility that one of my best items was . . . spoiled.

I drew aside the curtain that hides the door and unlocked it. She was there. So were the others, all in their cases. They were perfect, all of them. So beautiful. Miss Turner, as you know, was dark and olive-skinned, and I had arranged the cases so that she stood next to a girl with fair, fair hair and white skin. I have an eye for contrast, you see. They were all there, embalmed with my own process so that they looked just as lovely, just as lifelike, as when they breathed the fresh air.

I looked at Miss Turner long and carefully, and was convinced. Gentlemen, you are wrong. She could not possibly have died from poisoning. That wonderful creature could have had nothing in her past but the good things of life.

Then, suddenly, my thoughts were disturbed by the buzzer that told me someone had entered my office. I quickly went out, closed and locked the door, and went upstairs again.

It was your man. The one called Graves. He was standing there twirling his hat, and he greeted me with, “You’re Moseby, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m Moseby. Can I do something for you?”

“Maybe you can, maybe you can’t. I’m Graves, from the City Building Inspector’s office.” He laughed. “Graves!” he said. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Very amusing,” I said wryly. He wasn’t fooling me. I’ve had building inspectors around before, and I knew he wasn’t what he claimed to be.

“I’m here to look your place over,” he said. “Regular inspection, Moseby.”

“The regular inspection was two

months ago," I said, watching his face.

He looked a little flustered. "This is a different one," he said. "Mind if I have a look around? Just routine, that's all."

I was secretly amused, but I didn't show it. He was so obviously a detective.

I was sure that Graves would never discover the room where I keep my collection, but I couldn't take a chance. My collection meant everything to me, you understand. The thought of burying those lovely girls deep in the ground where they would never again be seen and where their loveliness would be wasted was more than I could bear. So I picked up a heavy bookend from my desk and followed Graves as he went about the place.

He didn't find my room, as you know. If he had, I suppose I would have had to kill him. A justifiable action, of course. You *do* understand, don't you?

I saw Graves again afterwards, several times. He wasn't very clever. Not nearly as clever as I am. I saw him, and I knew that he was keeping an eye on me, but I wasn't worried. Why should I worry? I wasn't guilty of anything wrong, was I?

It was shortly after that when I met Miss Humphries. She was seated on a stool at the lunch counter just down the street from my establishment, and the moment I walked in, I was overpowered by her beauty. She was ravishingly lovely. Her face was like an angel's, and her figure like that of a goddess. I simply couldn't resist striking up a conversation.

To get acquainted, I said, "It's no wonder that women are able to keep slim these days."

Miss Humphries just looked at me and nodded.

"A lettuce sandwich and a coke," I exclaimed. "I suppose that's how you keep your dainty figure."

"Who, me?" said Miss Humphries. "No, all I c'n afford is fi'teen cents for lunch. It's a good thing, or I'd be as fat as a pig."

She laughed. Her voice was so incongruous coming from that sweet mouth. It was shrill and uncouth. For a moment I couldn't think of a thing to say. I began to wish I hadn't spoken to her, so that I could have kept the illusion of her utter charm.

She said, "You eat in here regular?"

"No," I said. "Only sometimes."

"What a joint! Everything tastes like it come out of the same big pot."

I nodded, dumbly.

"You work around here somewheres?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. "I own a business just down the street."

"You do?" She turned around on her stool and looked straight at me, and again I was amazed at the beauty of her features. "Say," she said, "how about giving a girl a job?"

I didn't want to give her a job. All I wanted to do was to close that raucous mouth. I wanted to shut off that voice. I felt as though I had found a perfect rose, only to discover a worm crawling in the heart of it.

THAT, gentlemen, was when the idea first occurred to me. I'd never thought of taking a live one and adding it to my collection. The thought rather intrigued me. Certainly she was worthy of a place among the others. Her form and face were beyond compare. Without that voice, without the inner character that made her so repulsive, she would be a wonderful specimen. And after all, what did she have to look forward to but a life of the same sort of squalor that I had lived as a child?

We talked on. She worked in a laundry, I learned. She hated her employer, who was always trying to get fresh. The more we talked, the more convinced I became that I had to do it. Surely this girl would be far happier in the quiet, pleasant surroundings of my special room, in the

midst of such beauty as one could never hope to see gathered in one place again.

I told her to come and see me the following day, giving myself overnight to think it over.

She came just before noon. I let her in and seated her in the visitor's chair in my office.

"Some joint," she remarked. "You didn't tell me you ran an undertaking parlor."

"I didn't think it was necessary," I said.

"Whaddayou want me to do?" she asked. "Answer the telephone, or something? You wouldn't get me to touch a corpse for all the dough in the world!"

"I take care of that part of it myself," I said. "No, I've got a different sort of a proposition to offer you, Miss Humphries."

"Good. What's it all about?"

"You're a very beautiful girl," I said. "I suppose you know that."

"Oh, sure." All at once her face grew sharp with suspicion. "Say, what is this? Are you gonna be another Hendricks?"

"Oh, no," I said hastily. "This is purely business. You see, I have a theory about beauty. I believe that real loveliness should never be lost or destroyed. A scene changes, a flower fades, a lovely woman grows old and wrinkled and ugly. . . ."

"Get on with it," Miss Humphries interrupted.

"Very well," I said. "I will. I just wanted you to agree with me before I went further. You do agree, don't you?"

"I guess so," she said impatiently. "Where do I fit in?"

"Come," I said. "I'll show you."

We went down the stairs to the lower floor.

"You must be very quiet," I said. "This is something special."

"Lead on, chum," said Miss Humphries.

"This way."

I stopped before the door to my special room. "I hope you're going to appreciate what I'm about to offer you," I said. "It may be a little difficult to understand at first, but you'll get used to the idea."

"I'm waiting," she said. "And for gosh sakes, quit rubbing your hands like that. It makes me nervous."

I kept my temper with difficulty. I drew back the curtain and opened the door.

"Its dark in here!" she cried.

"I'm turning on the light. Now then . . ."

My fingers found the button of the light switch, and at the same instant Miss Humphries screamed. She kept right on screaming, no matter what I said.

"Lemme out of here!" she yelled. "Those are corpses! Lemme out! Lemme out!"

"Please," I said soothingly. "Please don't scream like that. You don't understand. These are special ones. This is my collection."

"No!" she wailed. "No, no! Open that door! I can't stand dead bodies! Let me out!"

I pushed her back against the wall and locked the door. There was nothing else for me to do. The woman was obviously on the verge of hysterics.

"Be reasonable," I protested. "You must listen to me! I only want you to join my collection!"

She screamed all the harder. If she had let me talk, I could have made everything clear. I could have told her it would be painless. I could have explained how much happier she'd be down here with Miss Turner and all my other beautiful girls. I could have shown her that she as a misfit of nature, an ugly soul in a beautiful body. All I wanted to do was to remove the ugliness and preserve the beauty.

But she wouldn't listen. I took her by the throat. I had to be careful, doing it

(Continued on page 97)

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

By JULES ARCHER



In a few minutes, Joe thought, the red circle would be a red wall, impenetrable, closing in with flaming fingers on them all.

On the altar of gratitude Joe Keith set two burnt offerings—two crisped, fire-seared bodies!

“D RY as a damn bone, ain’t it?” sighed Dave Fell, through the window of his ’32 Ford. He was the Keiths’ nearest neighbor, living nine miles further along the winding dirt

road. “Seems to me, Clem, might be smart to change yer mind about a well.”

Joe Keith stood silently at the fence beside his foster-father, watching muscles tighten in the older man’s cheeks. “I ain’t

payin' nobody to drag water out of the ground for me," Clem Keith scowled, "when it comes down free from the sky."

"Ain't comin' down, though. Looks like it don't aim to, either. How you fixed for water in that rain tank of yourn? Want me to haul some over to you?"

"We ain't no worse off'n the wheat," Clem said. "If the wheat can stand it, we can. If it can't, might as well die of thirst as hunger. Dry or wet, I don't pay nobody fer water."

Dave Fell shrugged. "If that's the way you want to figure it, okay." He started his motor and drove off in a cloud of dust.

The two men at the fence turned and walked slowly back toward the house. Joe Keith wet his lips apprehensively. He had been about to ask Clem again, when Dave Fell had driven by. Clem would be in a bad mood now, the way he was whenever Dave Fell needled him about the water. But it had to be now. Joe had made up his mind. It had to be now.

He cleared his throat and said in a low voice, "Clem, you just got to give me my chance. You got the money—I know you have. I'd pay you back, every cent, just as soon—"

"Shut up," his foster-father said grimly. "I don't want to hear no more about that fool scheme of yourn."

"You got to understand," Joe said doggedly. "I don't want to be no wheat farmer. I ain't cut out for it. I don't like it."

"Martha and me brung you up like our own son. We give you a good home, and schoolin', didn't we? Now that you're old enough to help out, all you want to do is run off and start a likker place. Well, go on—run off. But not with *my* money, you don't."

JOE knew then he would have to do it. Wasn't as if Clem didn't have the money. He had it, all right. Owned all the land and property clear, too, with a pot

of cash in the bank. Joe didn't know how much, but it was enough to pay out plenty for the heavy insurance Clem carried. If anything happened to Clem and Martha, those insurance policies could buy the best bar and grill in Oak City.

Joe had thought about it a lot. He felt scared, because his mind was made up. He'd known all along, deep inside, that there would be no other way. Clem had it coming, for spiting him out of the chance to become his own man. For trying to squeeze work out of him now, to make up for the money Martha had forced Clem to spend in bringing up the tight-lipped boy.

As for Martha—well, it just couldn't be helped.

Joe felt cold all over because he knew he was going to do it, but he didn't yet know how. He didn't want a way that would mess things, or leave him open to be caught. He'd seen it done in the movies, and heard it on radio mysteries, but they always showed you how the guy got caught.

That was the big thing—not to get caught. It stood to reason, Joe reflected, that a lot of guys got away with it. The guys nobody heard about. The really smart ones.

There was Clem's hunting gun. But Joe didn't want to do anything like that. He'd get caught, sure as anything. Anyhow, he'd just about die if Clem or Martha woke up while he was trying to do it. Had to be some way he wouldn't have to see them, wouldn't even have to be there, when it happened. Then he wouldn't get last-minute scared. And nobody could point a finger at him.

Clem's rasping voice cut into his thoughts. "Climb up and see how much water we got in the tank. Gettin' too low. Have to shut it all off except fer cookin', no matter what your ma says."

Joe climbed the rust-flaked iron ladder that Clem had fixed to the side of the big

rain tank which stood at the rear of the house. Clem had built the tank himself out of a bunch of corrugated iron sections which he'd picked up second-hand and soldered together. Standing on the top rung, Joe held up the heavy lid with one arm and leaned over to peer inside.

"Looks about a third full," he called down sullenly.

Clem grunted and entered the house through the kitchen door.

Joe let the lid down carefully and started to back down the ladder. As he did, his foot suddenly paused on one rung. Transfixed, as though in a dream, his dark brown eyes stared at the giant tank in awed speculation. The thought took shape slowly, inevitably, each detail whirling through his mind and snapping into place.

That was it, he reflected in growing amazement. So simple, so easy and certain. A ring of fire, hemming in the farm, late at night. Everything inside it would be burned to a crisp. But not him. He would be here, inside the water tank. Fire couldn't burn water. He could laugh at it here, wet and safe, and he wouldn't have to see how it happened to Clem and Martha, or do anything to them himself.

They couldn't even suspect him, the insurance people or nobody. He'd been trapped inside the fire, too, hadn't he? He'd have been roasted, too, if he hadn't thought about climbing inside the water tank. How did the fire start? How should he know? First he knew was when he woke up and saw the flames. He got

panicky, yelled a warning at Clem and Martha's door, raced out of the house. Fire was so close, with no way of getting through, he'd jumped into the rain tank as the best thing he could think of.

HE LAY awake in the dark room, worry creasing his forehead. He wished his heart would stop bumping like a frog trying to get out of his pajama pocket. He was doubly scared now because it didn't seem like he could change his mind anymore, even if he wanted to. It was as though he had already done it.

He kept worrying the scheme around in his mind, trying to find something wrong with it, some good reason to put it off until he could figure out something even better. It was just too easy, somehow, to be so good. But he knew he was going to do it. There was just no other way to get that bar and grill.

The house was still. Everything was waiting for him to go out and do what he must to become his own man, free and independent for the rest of his life. With a little shiver, Joe threw back the blankets. As he leaped out of bed, recoiling mattress springs made a loud, wiry noise that iced his heart. He slipped into his clothes swiftly.

A sudden realization made him pause. He could hear the sneering question. "Panicky, eh? But you weren't so panicky, young fellow, that you didn't take the time to get dressed." With feverish haste he stripped the clothes from his body

WHEN DEAD MEN WALK . . .

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and got back into his pajamas. He threw a jacket over his shoulders and slipped his bare feet into his shoes. Then he transferred a book of safety matches from his pants to his coat.

Passing the closed door of his foster-parents' bedroom, he heard Clem's heavy snore and the lighter sound of Martha. At the foot of the stairs he hesitated for a moment, wondering about locking the front and kitchen doors from the outside. But if Clem woke up in time, he could easily get out through the windows. And afterwards, the insurance investigators might go poking in the ashes and find the locks and ask questions. . . .

Joe moved through the front door noiselessly, closing but not locking the door behind him. Turning to the right, he rapidly paced off about one hundred yards, passing through a fringe of forest where it began to arc around the farm.

With trembling hands he built a small fire, heating a thick branch until one end burst into flame. Using this as a firebrand, he hurried through the forest, touching it to dry branches and bushes as he passed. A brightening glow sprang up at his back.

It took him only a few minutes to reach the edge of the forest. Now he moved into the parched wheat fields. Continuing in a rough circle, he touched his firebrand to the stalks. Joe gasped with excitement as he raced along in a curve toward his starting point. The heat was already so intense at the edge of the forest that he could not approach. He left a gap of about ten feet in the circle—a gap which would quickly be closed for him by the fire itself.

Now the dark night was stabbed with a ring of fire, at its heart the sleeping farmhouse. In a few minutes the red circle would be a red wall, impenetrable, closing in with flaming fingers of inescapable death. It was already even too late for him, if he changed his mind about the

water tank, and wanted to get outside the ring of fire. But why should he?

His face hot and feverish, Joe ran along the inside of the flaming circle. The crackling and roar of flames was higher now, and he could hear the thud of burning branches. He reached the rain tank with a grateful sob, seized the iron ladder and climbed to the top. Raising the heavy lid, he slid over the side and hung down by one hand. Then he let go and fell into the wet darkness below.

It was done now.

DAVE FELL, in his '32 Ford, was the first to reach the fire. But he could only sit there helplessly, staring in awe at the great conflagration. It was an hour before the volunteer firemen of the two nearest towns showed up, to do what pathetic little they could before, forty minutes later, the big engines from Oak City roared along the dirt road. Even they had to be reinforced by all the companies from Stagford and Chester, before the forest fire could be brought under control.

When the flames had swept through the Keith property, Dave Fell got out of his Ford and picked his way carefully over the charred ruins. It was after dawn now, and he was dead tired. But he had his duty to perform as a neighbor. He stared with horror at the blackened, tangled mass where Clem Keith's house had stood.

Only one thing was standing—Clem Keith's rain tank. A strange hope seized him. Maybe, by some miracle, Clem, Martha and Joe had managed to— He approached the tank with awe and a prayer in his heart.

The iron ladder was too hot to touch. He put on his heavy gloves and scrambled up the rungs nimbly. As he pushed aside the heavy lid, a thick cloud of scalding steam arose. And then he could see the parboiled body floating below.

The water was still bubbling.

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



Missouri Farmer Marion Jackson used a fine-honed hate as a weapon with which to commit not one, but four perfect crimes. He hated his wife and the son she bore him. No suspicion attached to him when his wife died and he remarried. But when his second wife vanished and his third wife's decaying body was found in his fields, authorities decided to investigate.

He was found to have murdered all three women though the son he had trained for that very purpose, and whose mind the series of crimes had all but destroyed. At first convicted with his son, Jackson's subsequent acquittal made him the perfect criminal—and his almost instant death from heart failure meted him perfect justice!



Constable Bill Headdon eyed the shambles in the small cottage in the Smokies with a mountain man's calm. The cabin contained the murdered bodies of the constable's sister-in-law and her girl friend and the latter's baby. In one corner sat the constable's grieving brother and the latter's small son, who could not talk, but had been present at the murder.

But he had no need to talk, the constable knew as he doggedly worked on the case, though getting nowhere. Justice finally came into her own, though, when the constable himself was arrested for the murders. The principal evidence against him was the survival of his nephew—his only blood kin at the murder scene. He died in the chair, unconfessing, but also unprotesting.

← Half of Shelburne Falls, Mass., doubted that Jack O'Neill was guilty of the murder of Hattie McCloud, found dead on a murky night when, they said, the Devil himself must have visited the Falls. The other half of the town doubted that he was innocent. The hangman's noose itself expressed hesitation—and kept poor Jack dangling for nineteen minutes between this life and the other—as if the other would we e debating whether to receive him.

It was one of the longest hangings on record. Strong men fainted—including the officiating sheriff—before Jack died. A few months later a dying Spanish War veteran in Cuba confessed to the crime, vindicating the inexplicably reluctant noose.



← Canky Paul Vanier had a reputation for being hard but honest. So when he died, foully murdered, the town of Cohoes, N. Y., had little hesitation about posting a reward of \$600 for the finding of his body. Somewhere, somehow, they felt, Paul would make it good. He had already driven a typically hard bargain with his killers, Louis King and Howard Green, whose effort to rob him had come to nothing but grief, since both had been caught shortly after their futile crime.

Sure enough—though both Green and King had sworn the dead man had had no money on him—when they dragged Paul out of the river, he had the money right there. The full \$600—and an extra \$50 for everybody's trouble.



The LOST HOURS OF MURDER



Out of Sammy Kirk's life—like a leaf torn from a calendar—one day had disappeared. . . . One day during which he had breathed, talked, slept, eaten and, for all he knew—killed!

"Yesterday was my birthday," the kid said. "I was nine and—what're you doing there, mister?"



**Startling Mystery
Novel**

**By
FRANCIS K. ALLAN**

CHAPTER ONE

In Memory of Murder

IT WAS just after dark of this May evening when the Miami-to-New York plane came sinking down toward the lights of LaGuardia Field. The wheels touched the earth. The speed diminished and the plane crawled noisily back toward the terminal. Sammy Kirk

closed his briefcase and stood up. The florid-faced man with the pale mustache buttoned his vest. "Nice ride," he said in a flat voice. Sammy agreed. He claimed his suitcase inside, then hurried toward the cab line.

It was after eight when he turned on the light in his two-room walkup on East Thirty-ninth Street. The odor of stale cigarette smoke hung in the room. The Sunday paper was crumpled on the floor, just as he had left it ten days before. Coffee dregs were dried in a cup on the mantel. He raised the window and took a deep breath. It felt good to be home again. The Florida thing had been a mess. Ten days wasted, just as he had told Dave they would be wasted.

Which started him thinking again of Dave Fowler, the first half of Fowler and Kirk, Publicity. This trip was just another instance. Next week there'd be something else, or another scene and argument. But each time it was a little more bitter, a little closer to something violent. Sammy wondered if Dave was going crazy.

He pushed his fingers restlessly through his reddish hair and walked back to the refrigerator. He uncapped a quart of beer and carried it back to the front room. For a while he stood at the window, drinking and frowning as he thought. He had powerful shoulders and strong fingers and deep brown eyes. There was something about his face and build that made you think of a prizefighter. A very smart fighter who had made his pile and gotten out. His nose was slightly crooked; he grinned instead of laughing, usually. He listened with his chin sticking out.

And he kept thinking about himself and Dave Fowler. There was something almost fatalistic about their association, he reflected, as if they were puppets performing some grotesque routine at the hand of some unseen master. Within this last year, even the last ten months, it had

happened: the silent distrust of each other, the cynical and acid retorts, finally the unspoken hate. And where had it started, or why?

Sammy shook his head heavily. Not that he had ever thought of Dave as a genius or a wonderful guy to know. No. But Dave, with his gaunt appearance, his rimless glasses and his deacon-like manner, was a guy to make one dollar turn to two. Smart and cool. Not a man who would work himself up to hating someone for no reason. Not a man—

Sammy shut off his thoughts with a sigh and took the beer over to the radio. He turned it on and lit a cigarette. He tuned about until he got the Wednesday night fight from the Broadway Arena. Charlie Bonner was fighting Pete Colson. It was the third round. Sammy loosened his tie and collar and leaned back. He was very tired, he realized. He wanted to sleep and forget about the waterhaul in Miami, about Dave and the inevitable explosion. Tomorrow he had the appointment with Carradine at the Billboard Club. Maybe he'd talk to Carradine about breaking up the partnership.

He closed his eyes. He was half asleep when Colson knocked out Bonner. He felt too tired to reach out and cut off the radio.

THE SUN was shining, spreading a bright rectangle across the dusty rug. Sammy opened his eyes and the announcer was urging him to eat Biddlies, and eat them immediately. Then came the station identification and the time: ten-thirty.

Sammy pushed himself out of the chair. His back ached. His neck ached. He damned himself for going to sleep in the chair. He went in to shave and shower. He felt as if he had a fever—not much, but as if he were taking a cold. The sounds that drifted up from the street seemed faint and brittle. His own motions seemed dreamy and pointless. He drank

two cups of black coffee at the corner drugstore and felt better. It was eleven-forty when he walked up the steps of the squat old brownstone on East Forty-third that had been converted to business suites. He opened the inner door at the left. Joan stopped typing.

"Some get rich, some get to Florida, and I get to ride the subway," she said drily. "Hello." She had a saucy nose, curly black hair, and a Siamese cat at home.

"Hello," Sammy said. He nodded toward a closed door. "Is Dave in?"

"Not since day before yesterday. You boys are getting hard to find. Carradine has been calling you. He sounded frosty, the last time."

"Call him." Sammy glanced at the mail, then pushed it aside. His eyes hurt. Joan handed him the telephone.

"Where have you been?" Carradine demanded testily. "I waited two hours for you at the Billboard, and Payson's been screaming at me to bring him the signed contract on the Paradise Park deal."

"I thought you said lunch, not breakfast. I'm on my way to the Billboard Club now."

"Oh, *are* you?" Carradine said in his wry courtroom voice. "Perhaps you should have started earlier. You are exactly one day late."

"I said Thursday when I called you long-distance, didn't I?" Sammy asked. "Well?"

There was a silence, then Carradine mocked; "Well. So?"

Sammy turned around and stared at the calendar on Joan's desk. It was open to Friday. He frowned at her and pointed. She was frowning at him oddly; then she moved her hands in an I-don't-get-it response.

"Is this Friday or is this Thursday?" Sammy demanded loudly.

"Friday," she said. Carradine said the

same thing then, over the telephone.

"But it couldn't be!" Sammy began. "Yesterday was Wednesday. I know. I was listening to the fight from the Arena. Colson knocked out Bonner. I know damned well that—"

"Oh, yes," Carradine interrupted. "Colson knocked out Bonner on Wednesday. *Wednesday*, the day before yesterday." There was a flat pause. "When you get caught up on your days, try to get over here and sign this contract." He hung up. Slowly Sammy put down the telephone.

He looked at Joan and she looked at him. He started to say something, then changed his mind. Mutely he walked into his office, closed the door and sat down at his desk to stare at the wall.

He remembered it all, he kept telling himself. He'd bought the Miami newspaper just before boarding the plane—the *Wednesday* paper. He'd gotten home, opened a quart of beer and listened to the *Wednesday* fight broadcast. He'd gone to sleep, woke up, and here he was. Friday.

Thursday was missing. Lost. All gone.

He tried again. He remembered how his neck and back had ached; he remembered how sleepy he'd been at the end of the fight. Maybe he *had* slept through all of Thursday. Then an odd recollection crossed his mind: his beard *had* been longer than usual this morning. Hadn't it?

The telephone rang at Joan's desk, then at his. "For you," she said. "Mitzi is calling." There was a touch of acid in her tone.

"Mitzi? But I don't know—" Sammy started. The low voice came in.

"Lo, again, Sammy. Feeling better or worse this morning?"

"Uh," he said. "Call it worse."

Her laughter rippled gently. "You should. Brother, you tied one on. The reason I called, besides saying hello, was to tell you where you left your hat."

There was a moment of pause. "You could come around to get it about martini time," she suggested.

"Uh," he said again. "Yes. I . . . sure. What's that address again?"

"The Darcy House, Suite 4-D. Golly, you must have been foggy. Are you and Dave speaking to each other yet?"

"I haven't seen—" Sammy's words stalled. The back of his neck began to turn cool. He moistened his lips. "Did Dave and I have some trouble?"

He could feel her staring at the receiver. "Oh, maybe you boys just like to wrestle when you're drinking, only I think Dave got awful sore. From the sound of it, you must have busted his nose, Sammy."

Sammy's mouth opened. Nothing came out. Mitzi was laughing lightly and saying she'd see him when she saw him, make it soon. She hung up. Slowly Sammy put down the phone. He was starting to perspire.

"Joan," he called in a strained voice. "Get Dave on the phone for me." A minute passed, then his telephone rang.

"He's not at home," Joan said. "Do you want to talk to Mrs. Fowler?"

Sammy did. "Ann, where is Dave?" he asked.

"I haven't the remotest idea." Her voice was cool. "I haven't seen him since Wednesday night, and I'm not sure I want to."

"Oh," Sammy said. "Like that, huh?"

"Exactly like that," she agreed and hung up. Slowly Sammy rose and walked out to the reception room.

"I've got to see somebody. I'll be back later," he said.

"Until then, you will not be available at the Darcy House," Joan said wryly. She looked at him without pleasure as he closed the door.

THE DARCY HOUSE was a sedate, almost shabby apartment-hotel in Murray Hill. Sammy lifted the knocker

at Suite 4-D and let it fall. He looked around the green corridor, trying to find some detail, some focus of memory. He shook his head hopelessly. The door opened. In the shadowed doorway stood a tall girl with bright black hair and blue-black eyes. Sammy had never seen her in his life, that he recalled.

"Sammy! You must want that martini in a hurry. Come in."

He walked past her slowly and into a long room. The curtains were closed at the windows. No lights were on, and everything was cloaked with the grey indistinction of a wintry twilight. Then he saw the artist's stand and brushes by the fireplace. So Mitzi must be an artist, he decided. He peered at the half-finished canvas. She was painting one corner of the room where the piano stood, painting it with the ghostly half-reality of the shadows. It was a queer painting. A depressing scene.

"If it makes you gloomy, I'll open the curtains," she said. "I rather like it this way. I'm morbid, Sammy." Then she laughed. "Your hat's over there. Sit down and I'll shake something. You ought to feel like the devil—both of you."

She kept talking idly as she went away. Sammy heard ice clattering into glasses. He peered at the old Oriental rug on the floor, at the worn but comfortable couch and at the many paintings that were hung and stacked about. Most were of gloomy scenes, glimpses of night, of storms, of a barren street corner, a derelict. And all were very good, in their hauntingly morbid way. Suddenly Sammy had a feeling that this interlude—him here, waiting for this martini from someone named Mitzi—was no more real than the shadow scenes of the unfinished painting.

Mitzi came back. "Here's to another day," and she handed him the cocktail. The features of her face were half obscured in the gloom, but he knew she

was beautiful. Her skin was very white, her hair brilliant black. The smock she was wearing was stained with paints. Her figure was slender, and there was something tantalizing in her movements.

As Sammy lifted his glass, a telephone cried out in the shadows. It seemed like a raw voice from another world. Mitzi crossed the room and answered, then muffled her voice.

"It's someone named Joan. She sounds worried. Do you want to talk?"

"I'd better." He took the phone from her warm fingers. "Yes?"

"I'm at the cigar store," she said swiftly, softly. "There are two detectives at the office and they're checking the books. They want to find you and Dave. They won't explain, but it's something about the Hudson Theaters account and a lot of money. I don't know what to do."

Sammy tried to think fast. Then a thought reached him: Until he had found the lost Thursday, he shouldn't talk to detectives.

"Go back to the office. Stick around and listen. Learn all you can. Ask questions. I'll call you later. Okay?"

"Oh, sure. Just perfect." Her voice was shaky. Sammy hung up and remembered his martini. He needed it. Mitzi turned from her unfinished painting and smiled. "Need another one?"

"Not just now. I want to hear about yesterday. What happened?"

SHE GRINNED. "The day after the fog, huh? Well, Dave came by about eleven o'clock in the morning. He had something on his mind that kept him walking around and muttering. Finally he said you were back from Miami, and he had to talk something over with you. Just kidding, I asked why didn't he phone you to come over. He had a drink and thought about it, then he did. I had to take a lay-out over to the Bentwell agency and didn't get back until after three. You and Dave

were tight and mad as sick chickens. There was a lot of snarling about eighty thousand dollars and an investigation; then all of a sudden you hit Dave—a lulu. I decided the party was over and threw both of you out. That was five or six o'clock, and that's the story. I haven't heard from Dave since."

"We were talking about eighty thousand dollars, and I hit him?" Sammy echoed. He sat down. "I—give me that other martini. You don't know what happened after we left here?" Mitzi shook her head. Sammy stared at her as she took his empty glass. He caught her wrist as she turned toward the kitchen.

"Skip the liquor for a while, Mitzi. This is interesting. It has angles, one of which is you. How do you happen to know Dave so well?"

"How well do you mean?" she countered. She tilted her head. "I used to draw little pictures for him. Then he held my hand—I practically had to teach him how. Then he began telling me that his wife didn't understand him. I'd heard that one before. I straightened his tie and sent him back to school, and after that I was strictly his wailing wall. Does that sound nice?"

"Unless," Sammy said drily, "you're a liar."

She laughed—a beautiful laugh. "But certainly I am! What a silly thing to wonder about, Sammy." She slipped from his grasp and went back to the kitchen, still laughing. Sammy felt very angry and very foolish.

When she came back, he put the cocktail aside and looked at her intently. "The thing I don't swallow—that I *can't* swallow—is this lost day idea. I don't believe it."

"Lost day?" She frowned. "You mean, like the movie where the man—"

"I mean me," he snapped. "I don't think it happened."

"Are you batsy?" she asked. "Ask

Dave. Look at his nose. Or look at your shirt where he bled on it. Not that one, the one you were wearing. Say, are you serious about all this? Don't you—" She stopped and slowly her brows went up. "Where is Dave today?" she asked strangely.

"I don't know. His wife doesn't. I— Why?" he asked abruptly.

"Do you always forget what you do when you're drunk?" she wondered softly. Her eyes had grown very bright as they watched him. "Do you?"

"What are you driving at? What do you mean?" he demanded.

"When you left here, you were swearing you wanted to kill him. Remember? What happened after that?"

"I don't know," Sammy said after a long silence. "I don't believe I want that martini."

A wave of stark doubt had assailed him. He was remembering the times when his fury had made him yearn to seize Dave's throat, to choke off the stream of life. Now, in this moment in this room of shadows, before this unknown girl, his mind became a mass of self-suspicion where anything was possible, true or false, where there was no longer a clean line between the real and the fantastic. And the key was the day that was lost.

Then, by massive effort, he dragged his brain into focus. If these things happened yesterday, he thought doggedly, and if it is real, *there must be traces . . . things I can find, see, look at, follow. There must be a trail, and I must find it. . . .*

Slowly he turned toward the door.

"Oh, Sammy, I was just kidding. Don't get huffy," Mitzi said. "I don't think you killed Dave. I don't think anything. I was just—Hey, don't you hear what—Well, so-long and lots of fun. Get your hat there."

"Oh," Sammy said vacantly. He turned and picked up the hat. It was his. And the first solid scrap was in line, he thought.

His hat . . . the first broken twig on the trail. . . . He closed the door.

CHAPTER TWO

The Grave

THE SUNLIGHT was shining in the street. It was three-thirty, but time had lost most of its meaning. The sun hurt his eyes. He got into a cab and gave the address of his apartment. As soon as he did so, he realized it was a mistake. The police were looking for him. He must remember that.

Two blocks from his place, he got out on a red light. He approached his apartment on the opposite side of the street and looked at it for several minutes. At last he hurried across the street and entered silently. Cautiously he climbed the stairs and peered into the hall. It was empty. He crept into his apartment and locked the door behind him. The coffee cup was still on the mantle; the old newspaper was on the floor. He went into the bedroom. There, crumpled on the bed, was the suit he had worn back from Miami, the suit he had slept in and taken off this morning.

First he picked up the shirt. On the front was a dark stain. It looked like blood, and he remembered Mitzi's words: "Look at your shirt where he bled on it. . . ."

Another twig on the trail, his brain said coldly.

Next there was the money. He'd cashed a check for a hundred dollars in Miami, just before leaving. He couldn't remember spending more than five. Now there was less than forty dollars in the pocket.

Then he found the receipt, dated the day before, and given to Sam Kirk by the Ace-King Auto Rent Service, West Forty-second Street. It acknowledged payment in cash of fourteen dollars for car rent.

"Twig," Sammy whispered softly. He

laid the receipt gently on the dresser.

Next there was his handkerchief, stained as his shirt was stained. And finally a set of keys on a chain that also held an imitation gold four-leaf clover. They were the keys to the fishing cottage on the South Shore of Long Island that Sammy had bought the year before—a three-room semi-shack, two miles outside the village of Westhaveren.

He stared at them for over a minute, then went into the kitchenette and opened the drawer where the keys usually stayed. Of course they were not there; they were in his hand, but still he stared at them. Then, as he moved his fingers through his reddish hair, he saw it for the first time—the pool of darkness on the linoleum floor.

It was dried now. The light seemed to pluck ruby gleams from it and sparkle them toward Sammy's eyes. It was just the color of dried blood.

At that moment a heavy knocking came at the front door. Sammy stopped breathing. He listened and a bead of perspiration slid along his cheek and down his chin. This was what they meant, he realized. This was what they were talking about when they said 'blind fear.' For he was terribly afraid, and he did not know exactly why.

The knocking alternated with silence for over three minutes. Then a man's voice said something and footsteps faded down the stairs. Sammy breathed again. He thrust the receipt into his pocket with the keys, turned back from the doorway and went to the sink. He ran water on the dishrag and, with a knife, cleaned the blood pool off the floor. He tiptoed to the edge of the front window and peered down to the street. A fruit vendor was polishing oranges. A cab driver was parked, watching a pretty girl. That was all.

Sammy started out into the hall, then remembered the bloodstained shirt. It was hard to think of those things. Funny, the

way you had to see everything from a different angle. You even had to *act* guilty. It didn't make sense, but nothing else did either.

He balled the shirt inside a sheet of newspaper and tiptoed down the stairs. At the corner he pushed the bundle down inside the trash basket and turned toward Forty-second Street.

He found the Ace-King Auto Rent Service west of Ninth Avenue. It was a slice-in-the-wall office that looked as if it booked horses on the side. To the right was a vacant lot where half a dozen sedans were parked. Inside were three men: one was talking laconically on the phone, one was picking his teeth and the third was looking at a magazine full of pretty-girl pictures. The second one took the match out of his teeth and nodded.

"What're you needing, pal?"

Sammy spread out the receipt. "This says I rented a car," he began.

"Yeah. And it says you paid the dough. So what's the gripe? I'm the guy you talked to, and nothing was wrong last night."

"I'm not griping—I'm asking," Sammy snapped. "When did I rent this car? When did I bring it back?"

"About nine. Brought it back about one, little after, this morning."

"Did I say where I was going?"

"Long Island somewhere. Don't know as you said the place."

Sammy pushed back his hat and looked at the man steadily. "Can you *swear* I'm the man who rented that car?"

"Listen, I wouldn't swear my mother wasn't—" He stopped and his damp eyes grew narrow. "You get into trouble with it last night, pal?" he asked cautiously. "You hit something, somebody?"

"No, I'm just asking. Can you swear I'm the man?"

The man blinked and wet his lips. "I don't swear nothing. Darkish in here at night. It's not my business to look. It

looked like you. Not the same clothes as you're wearing now. Your shirt was messed up last night. Listen, what's the matter? You want something or not?"

Sammy started to reply, then stopped. "Yes," he said finally. "I want that same car again—now."

Slowly the man shook his head. "I dunno. Gets worse every day."

IT WAS a worn Packard sedan. It coughed, bucked, then lunged away. Sammy fought it across town and over the Queensboro Bridge. He took a south-bound parkway until he reached the highway that led to Westhaveren.

Beyond the village he turned onto the rough road that bent down toward the sparsely settled shore. This was not a desirable summer section. It was ragged and on clear days the factories of Brooklyn were visible. But it had been cheap last summer, when Sammy had been broke.

He turned off the road into a weedy trail that ended in the sand beside the weathered white cottage. Cases of beer bottles from last summer were stacked under the porch. A window was broken. He climbed the steps and unlocked the front door. There was little furniture here: two single iron beds, stripped of covering, a kerosene cookstove, two camp chairs, a card table, fishing tackle, soiled dungarees, some dusty five-and-ten dishes and a jar of olives. Sammy laughed without humor.

He walked through the bedroom to the shed-like work-and-store room at the back. Here was the ten-foot boat, set on blocks. The outboard motor lay on the floor amid patches of grease and oil. Other parts and tools were heaped in the corner, and the back door of the cottage was ajar. Sammy noticed this first and then, as he crossed the room, he saw the dark drops on the threshold, drops that were the color of dried blood.

He opened the door fully. It looked out

across weeds and sand toward the lapping water, and he followed the overgrown trail as a man might follow the dim beckoning of a Lorelei of dreams. And there, in the weeds and the sand, he came to the mound of newly turned earth.

Even the shape and size of it frightened him. Minutes passed while he stood there, his fingers rigid and his throat dry. Finally, with agonizing deliberation, he knelt down and dug into the earth with his bare hands. Six inches down he touched cloth; beneath the cloth he touched flesh that was alive no more. His fingers moved faster. Sand sprayed out furiously from his clawing fingers. Inches and inches were disclosed: the leg, from the knee to the belt.

Wildly Sammy threshed at the earth while perspiration poured off his face and his chest labored with his hard breathing. And there was Dave Fowler's face. The long, cold, deacon-like face, strangely naked without those rimless glasses, with sand-grains in the sparse hair and filling the hollows of the lifeless eyes. The once-classic and lean nose was puffy. It seemed to lean to one side, as if it had been broken. Broken. . . . Sammy remembered Mitzi's words. He was motionless for moments, perhaps minutes, before he plunged into the earth again.

At last he found the wound—a small knife wound between the shoulder-blades.

Suddenly he was empty of strength. He knelt there, staring at the body, at the sand and weeds. He realized vaguely that the sun was disappearing. A cool, damp wind came through the weeds and Sammy yearned for nothing more than to lie down and go to sleep and never have to think again.

A voice was calling. He started up sharply. It was a boy on a pony, waving to him as he rode nearer. A very young boy, just a child.

Sammy gathered the sand back frantically.

"See my pony? Daddy bought it for my birthday!" the child shouted. "Yesterday was my birthday and I was nine. I bet— What're you doing?"

"Go on, go on!" Sammy almost screamed. The sand wouldn't move. It seemed to slip through his fingers, refusing to hide the face of the corpse. "Go on, I tell you! Don't get any closer to—"

"Gee, mister! What's the matter with that man? Is he— *He's dead!*" the child shouted. "Wait a minute and lemme look, mister! Let me—"

Sammy spun around as the child jumped down and ran toward him. He caught the boy's shoulders. "Get back on that horse, damn you! Get away from here, can't you?"

"But why can't I— Oh, you're hurting me!" he cried.

Sammy jerked his fingers away. His face was burning. His chest seemed aflame, yet he could not move. He watched the boy peer down at Dave Fowler's face. Then he turned to Sammy. His eyes were bright with mystery and excitement.

"Say, what happened to him, mister? Did somebody kill him?"

Sammy felt his fingers start to move. He felt his heart scream out to him; then he heard the words rip from his throat in agony and despair:

"Get away! Go home, go home, damn you! Go home before it's too late!"

The agony seemed to pierce the boy's understanding. For an instant he was frozen, then he ducked his head and ran wildly, blindly up the hill, leaving the pony. And the pony came lazily over to sniff at the fresh earth and blow fresh sand into the face of the corpse. Sammy snapped. He might have screamed; perhaps he cursed. He didn't know. He ran, as the child had run, blindly and wildly back toward the old sedan. He hurled himself in and stamped at the starter. Not until he had reached the crowded parkway did he begin to breathe evenly. He

mopped his wet face and tried to think, to plan.

But what was there to plan? What? What?

HIS BREATHING rose again and he fought with himself for control. He felt himself sinking into a routine of mechanical motions. It was getting dark, so he turned on the lights. Other cars turned, so he turned. He noticed a man lighting a cigarette; he lit one. He had gotten the car on West Forty-second Street; he returned to West Forty-second Street. His brain had ceased to have the power of thinking.

"Same mileage as last night," the yellowed-toothed man reported. "Fourteen bucks. Gotta get money for it these days."

Sammy paid slowly because he had to count the bills several times; he couldn't add.

"Thanks. Any time you need a car again—" the man started to say. Then a vague frown passed through his eyes and he blinked. "That's funny. I could of sworn."

Sammy kept moving toward the door. The tone of the words finally sank in. He stopped and turned around dully. "Huh? Sworn what?"

"Them fingernails. Let me see 'em again."

Sammy responded slowly. The man stared at his fingernails and scratched his head. "I guess I'm going crazy. Forget it."

"What is it, damn you?"

"Hey, you don't need to get muscled up. It's just—just that last night I noticed somebody's hand where a couple of the fingernails were all purple-black, like when a guy mashes them bad. Somehow I kind of remembered it as the same guy with the splotches on his shirt, and I figured he'd been in a fight, see? That's all, pal."

Sammy kept running his tongue across

his lips as he stared at the uneasy man. "You keep figuring the shirt and the purple fingernails go together," he echoed slowly. "Which hand, do you remember?"

"I—seems like the left. Yeah, on the left hand."

"Left hand." Sammy turned and went out into the night. He paused. A mist of rain was beginning to fall. He didn't know where to go. He wasn't sure what to do, but he didn't feel the same. Those purple-black fingernails were the difference: one thin fragile thread that struggled to balance the mass of nightmare.

Fingernails. . . . Then Sammy laughed. A low restless laugh. Funny. . . . They always said there was one little thing like that. . . .

The sign of a bar glowed down the block. He walked toward it slowly, his shoulders forward, his gait like the prowling pursuit of a fighter, hit and hurt, yet coming back.

He drank one whiskey. It felt hot and strong in his stomach. He got change for a quarter and went into the telephone booth.

Joan answered. "Can you talk?" Sammy asked.

"Wait," she said. After a moment music came through the wire. Then she returned. "Elsie and Fred are here, but they're in the kitchen. I'll talk fast. It started when somebody audited the books of the Hudson Theater chain and discovered that eighty thousand dollars wasn't where it should be. That was Wednesday. Next, the assistant cashier over there didn't come back from lunch. That started them hunting him. His name is Jeffrey Hurst; he's been in to see Dave Fowler a few times."

"I've met him. Thin guy with a twitch in his cheek. Go on."

"They called the detectives and they went out to find out why Hurst was taking so long to eat. They haven't found

him yet, but he left his apartment in a hurry. Such a hurry that the detectives found two uncashed checks for a thousand each, made out to Fowler and Kirk. That brought them down to look at our books, and also you and Dave. They didn't like something they found. They left the office fast, on their way to a check-cashing outfit over on Third Avenue, but that little man wasn't there either. His name, from the sound, is Obberhotter—something like that. That's the picture now. Eighty thousand gone. You gone, Dave gone, Obberhotter gone, Hurst gone, and a lot of people mad as hell. What am I supposed to do? Keep looking innocent and dumb?"

"If you get an offer of a good job, you better take it," he said. "I'll keep calling you. And in case you wonder, honey, I didn't get the eighty grand."

He returned to the bar, ordered another whiskey and stood there thinking. The starting point, he reasoned, was the end of the fight broadcast when he went to sleep and lost Thursday. He was sitting there, drinking beer, feeling tired but perfectly normal when— *I was sitting there drinking the beer*, he repeated silently. *The beer. . . .*

He turned a coin over and over in his fingers, then abruptly moved to the phone booth and hunted a number. He dialed. "I want to speak with someone in authority on the Fowler and Kirk case," he said. After thirty seconds a voice droned, "Milford speaking."

"Listen carefully. If you will go to Sam Kirk's apartment, you will find a half-finished quart of beer in the front room. There are two more quarts in the ice box. Please have the contents of those bottles tested. I think you will find something."

"Who is this?" Milford asked.

Sammy hung up. He decided it was time to leave this bar, in case Milford traced the call. He walked west to Broadway in the rain. He kept thinking.

It was quite possible, he admitted, that the man at the car-rent place could have been deceived by someone who resembled him; it had been night, and he probably paid little attention to faces. But even he had noticed the fingers. But Mitzi—that was something else. No one could make that mistake, after a man had been around all day drinking and talking in an apartment. She certainly would have seen the masquerade.

So . . . Sammy came to the hard core: Either the auto man was mistaken, or Mitzi had lied about everything that was supposed to have happened yesterday. And if Mitzi had lied, her motive must be rooted in the murder of Dave Fowler. Just so, Sammy told himself.

He nodded. He walked slowly through the rain toward Mitzi's.

CHAPTER THREE

The Man With the Black Hair

THE LOBBY was drowsy and quiet. He walked casually around its outskirts, glanced back, then climbed the emergency stairway. The corridor of the fourth floor was empty. He knocked at Mitzi's door. He knocked again. Two minutes passed. He knocked a final time. No answer.

He tried to visualize the pattern of the apartment. The kitchen was off to the left. He moved to the end of the corridor and silently raised the window. The platform of the fire escape ran the length of the outside wall. He crept out, closed the window, and crawled down to the dark rectangle of kitchen window. He raised it and listened. No sound. He let himself in and felt around in the darkness, finding the cool metal of a stove, then a door. Still no sound save his own muted breathing. He reached the room that, he reasoned, must be the large studio. He struck a match and the gaunt shapes of chair and

tables loomed before him, and to his left was the artist's stand.

He struck another match, then tiptoed back toward the kitchen.

A bedroom opened off the short hall, and between the bedroom and kitchen was a bath. He kept striking matches while he opened the drawers of the dresser; there was nothing there that meant anything. He moved toward a little desk. Just then he heard the rattle of keys at the front door, then heard it closing.

"Damn the rain." It was Mitzi's voice. Sammy stopped breathing. In his mind he recalled this bedroom, and cautiously felt his way toward the closet and burrowed behind the hanging dresses. But Mitzi seemed alone, and her footsteps stayed in the studio. Ten minutes passed. Sammy became convinced she was alone. He started out, stopped as he heard a knock. The front door opened and closed. A man's voice spoke.

"I've been calling you for two hours."

"I wanted to go somewhere. I ate at Milo's."

"Have you heard the radio? They found Fowler's body. A kid that lived around out there, and damned if Kirk wasn't squatting right there building castles in the sand."

Mitzi laughed gently. "Aren't I smart, Joe? Just like I said he would: figure it out, go out there, and get in worse." She giggled.

"You're very smart, darling," Joe agreed softly. "You can pick a frosty looking guy a mile away and drive him nuts in six months. Make him do things he wouldn't do for nothing. And you like the work too."

"That's cause I'm morbid," she said with a laugh. "My God, he was a fool. Kirk's going to be another. Guys are crazy, Joe."

"All guys, honey?"

"All guys but you. You know what I mean."

"Sometimes I think about it. You can drive *any* man crazy. Now you love me, maybe some day, no. Sometimes I think about it, darling."

"Don't you be silly. Listen, you haven't even kissed me yet."

"Oh," he said softly. "That's not nice. You come to old Joe Castle, sweetheart, and we'll fix it so you won't ever need a kiss again."

She laughed—a soft snuggling laugh. Sammy stood there. One drop of perspiration went down his neck. There was nothing but silence for a long, long time; then Joe's soft voice said. "Pretty little sweetheart. It would have been me, some day."

His footsteps came back toward Sammy and, from the crack of the closet door, Sammy saw him pass through the hall. He was solidly built, with brown curly hair, a hard, wary face and strong arms. Water ran in the kitchen. A glass tinkled. The footsteps returned to the studio room. There was a sound of a drawer opening and closing, then with quiet finality, the front door was shut. The apartment was silent.

The silence grew and spread itself thin. Sammy wet his lips and continued to perspire. Mitzi. . . . Why didn't Mitzi make some—

He ceased thinking. Slowly he tiptoed across the room and to the doorway into the studio. There he found Mitzi. She lay upon the couch, her brilliant black hair tumbled about her head, one arm hanging down to touch the rug, her lips parted in an agony whose pain was over now. Life itself, for Mitzi, was over now. She had been strangled to death. As Sammy stood there, awed by her loveliness and sickened by the frozen agony on her lips, he remembered the last words she had heard:

"Come to old Joe Castle, sweetheart, and we'll fix it so you won't ever need a kiss again. . . ."

Old Joe had fixed it just that way, Sammy thought.

AT LAST he moved. He opened her purse. There was nothing of interest there. He search around the telephone. There was no address book, no list of numbers. He opened the Manhattan directory. As simply as that he found where Jos. W. Castle lived. On West Fifty-second Street.

He turned out the light and peered out into the hall. Silently he left the apartment. The rain was heavy when he reached the street. He entered a glassy-bright sandwich shop and ate. Then he stopped at the corner and bought the latest tabloids and carried them into a dreary bar. He settled himself in a shadowy booth, ordered a bottle of beer and cigarettes and began to read.

The story of the child and the pony had gotten in. There were pictures of the crude grave in the sand. It was clear as crystal, said the papers. Kirk and Fowler had been masterminding the steal from the Hudson Theater chain through fall-boy Hurst. Came trouble and once again the old adage about 'honor among thieves' had taken a licking. Kirk had murdered Fowler. Obviously. A child would know it blind. There were pictures of Sammy too.

He pushed the papers aside. As he lit a cigarette, he watched the match trembling in his fingers. He tried to steady it but it was no soap. He kept thinking acidly of all the things he knew and all the proof he didn't have. The police would believe him like a turkey full of gin.

He sighed and had a last beer. Tomorrow was tomorrow, anyway. . . .

Joe Castle's address on West Fifty-second Street was a small hotel called the Bluemont. It was a flashy place of chrome and blue and mirrors. After looking at it, Sammy went back to the corner cigar store and called it. The girl said Mr.

Castle wasn't in. His suite number? 714.

As he left the store, Sammy noticed the lettering on the window of a dingy shop: Theatrical Costumes, Cosmetics, Wigs. A yellowed light was burning inside and a hunched man was moving about. Slowly he crossed the street, peered in, then opened the door. The little hunched man pattered toward him. He wore very thick glasses. Sammy decided it would be all right.

Forty minutes later, as he walked casually across the lobby of the Bluemont, Sammy was wearing straight black hair and a neat black mustache. He wore a rakish black felt hat and carried a jaunty cane. A pair of rimless glasses were perched on his nose, and a black ribbon flowed from them to his lapel.

"Nasty weather, I say. Would you have a bit of a suite available?"

They had a suite: 511. Sammy went up, took another look at himself, applied a touch more rouge to his cheeks, then returned to the lobby. Just off the lobby was the bar—a noisy place, dimly lit, with water-bubbles floating over neon lights and ten-dollar murals on the walls. He sat down at the end of the bar where he could watch the lobby.

"Scotch, with just a smitch of water," he said.

A chubby man with owlish eyes peered at him. "I betcha you're an actor, Percy," he said fuzzily. "Huh?"

"Actor? Oh, ho. Charming, but no. I—" Sammy stopped. At that moment a muscular man came through the doorway and paused a moment, rocking on the balls of his feet. He approached the bar with a cat-like grace.

"Greetings, Mr. Castle," the bartender said. "The usual?"

"Always, Nick." Castle pulled out a roll of bills. Sammy's eyes sealed themselves on the fingernails: purple-black.

"Well, if you're not an actor, what are you?" the chubby man demanded.

"Uh, really, the truth, old boy. . . ." Sammy was thinking hard and fast. "Truth is, I'm a bit of a performer, a bit of a delver. The Great Dark Chamber is my sphere. The brain, you know. I'm a student of telepathy."

"Huh? Oh, mind reading. Listen, I don't believe that junk. Like me. Take me right now. You can't tell me what *I'm* thinking."

Sammy smiled and put his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "Concentrate, old chap. Seriously, now. Let me see. . . . You. . . . Hard, old boy. Keep thinking. . . . I. . . . Oh, I say, I—" He dropped his glass. It shattered loudly. The bartender jerked around. The chubby man jumped back.

"Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry," Sammy stammered. "It was—I can't— For a moment there I could have sworn I was contacting the brain waves of a murderer. It was so violent. As though he were right beside me, and as though the crime were still fresh. The passion of the waves. . . . I'm sorry, I simply cannot continue. Another Scotch, please."

FOR ONE INSTANT in the mirror beyond the bar, Sammy saw Joe Castle's profile. Castle was staring at him rigidly. His hard and wary face was totally devoid of emotion. Abruptly, then, he downed his drink and strode out of the bar.

For a few minutes Sammy sipped his drink and frowned. Finally he went up to his suite and went to bed. In the darkness he watched the glowing tip of his cigarette. It trembled. He wondered how long he had. Not long, probably. The New York police were not fools. He put out the cigarette and turned over. Hours passed before he went to sleep. Then it seemed scarcely a moment before he waked to the restless existence of fear.

It was grey early morning and the rain was still falling. A wave of despondency

passed over him and he shook himself doggedly. Slowly he dressed and went downstairs. It was not quite eight o'clock. He bought a morning paper at the cigar counter and carried it to a secluded part of the lobby.

It was after ten before the elevator opened and Joe Castle walked briskly toward the cigar counter. Sammy got up slowly. Castle bought cigars, put one between his teeth and bit off the end, and said something to the girl at the cash register. Sammy sidled up and asked for a pack of cigarettes. He did not look at Castle, but he felt him turning slightly and glancing at him.

"Nasty bit of rain," Sammy said to the girl as he took out his change. His hand halted, mid-motion, then he emptied the coins across the floor. He gasped.

"I say, I— Sorry, I—" he stammered. Then he stared straight at Joe Castle, his mouth open. "Something. . . . I felt as if I were in contact with a—" He fumbled to a stop and bent over clumsily to gather his coins. He watched Castle's shoes. Thirty seconds passed. The shoes turned and made a path toward the door. A slow, deliberate path.

Sammy rose and smiled apologetically at the girl. "Rather made a fool of myself, I'm afraid. The gentleman seemed annoyed with me."

"Oh, Mr. Castle's all right. That's just his way sometimes."

"Indeed? What does he do?"

"He has a little night club. Place called the Black Hat."

"Interesting." Sammy bowed and walked out. He ate, then went into a newsreel theater for two hours. It was after one o'clock when he phoned Joan. "Anything new to tell a friend?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, we have no information about Mr. Kirk," she said. "If you care to call back later, we may know something then."

"Thanks, darling. I'm sorry for you." He hung up, then hunted the address of the Black Hat. It was on West Fifty-fourth, not far from the Bluemont Hotel. He walked up Broadway to Fifty-fourth.

The Black Hat looked drab and pale in the grey rain. There was a blue door with a black hat and cane painted on it, and a blue canopy extending across the walk. That was all there was to see from the outside, and it seemed closed. He went into the drugstore that was diagonally across the street and drank coffee while he watched the blue door. Just after two o'clock Joe Castle came out and turned toward Broadway. Sammy followed. Castle went into Davilla's Restaurant on Broadway.

It was a big restaurant, but the lunch crowd had thinned out. Many of the waitresses and waiters were eating at the back tables. Bus-boys were changing tablecloths and refilling sugar bowls. Castle was sitting alone at a wall table, facing out across the sea of tables. Sammy sat down eight tables away, facing Castle. He ordered a drink and studied the menu.

The drink came. "This filet, old man," Sammy started. "Is it—" He stopped, gasped and half rose to his feet, rasping the chair-legs across the floor noisily and overturning the drink. The waiter dropped his pencil. And across the tables Sammy's eyes met and locked with Castle's. Castle stiffened. His lips parted. His eyes went from brown to black in an instant. Slowly Sammy sagged back to his chair and mopped his face.

"Sorry, I . . . don't understand. Another drink, please. The filet will do, thank you."

PRESENTLY he sent another glance at Castle. Castle was staring at him fixedly and his face was curiously grey. Sammy ate slowly. He noticed that Castle had not touched his food. Sammy's breath began to flow more swiftly. He felt per-

spiration in the palms of his hands. Then his nerves sang. Castle was getting up. Napkin in hand he was crossing the room slowly toward Sammy's tables. He stopped.

"We're running into each other a lot, aren't we?" His voice was very gentle.

"Yes. Quite extraordinary, isn't it? I— I must ask you to excuse my clumsiness. I have been feeling quite off-key since last night."

"I noticed. Down in the bar at the Bluemont. Mind if I sit down? Castle's my name."

"Charmed." Sammy held out his hand. "Huntington. George Huntington."

Castle frowned. "Funny thing, but I keep thinking I've seen you around somewhere. Before last night, I mean."

"It is possible. If you've visited about, perhaps you've seen my little routine in the night clubs. Telepathy, you know."

"Uh-uh." Castle worked a cigar from corner to corner of his mouth, then took a deep bite on it. "Only I can't make it fit, just where the place was." Sammy could see his brain working behind the dark eyes. "Tell me a little about your pitch. I've got a little club over near here. Might be—"

"Oh, it's mainly a set of devices, of course. I can't read the average mind any more than you can. I depend on advance information about customers. Once in a very great while I do encounter a touch of true elepathy, though. Used to do it as a boy. That's what got me interested."

"Then sometimes you *can* tell what a man is thinking?"

"Once in a great while. But at those times, it is astonishingly clear. Almost as if my brain were hidden within his, or his in mine."

Castle chewed the cigar from left to right in short hops. "And you've been having one of those true spells lately?" he asked slowly.

Sammy hesitated, then frowned and put

his fingers to his forehead. "I'd rather not discuss it, sir. It is an alarming sensation, this time—unlike anything I've felt before. I am frightened by what it suggests and . . . I prefer to forget it."

Castle's face was immobile. Then he took the cigar out and laid it down. He leaned forward and there was a glint of gold in his brown eyes. "But if I told you I'd like to hear it?" he murmured. "In fact, that I'd pay to hear it—what's the answer?"

"I don't believe you realize what my brain is telling me," Sammy said. "It is a terrible image."

Castle smiled momentarily. He took out his wallet and unfolded it just enough for Sammy to see the padding of bills. "I'd still like to know. I can pay for the things I like."

"But you don't want to hear what I'm thinking!" Sammy cried. "And I—damn you, I'm *afraid* to tell you what I'm thinking!"

The lips stiffened. The eyes seemed to freeze, then melt. "You don't need to be afraid of me, English. Not old Joe Castle."

For a moment, Sammy felt that he was back in the closet of Mitzi's suite, hearing again the gentle sing-song from these same lips as they called Mitzi to her last kiss.

He squirmed and ran his finger around his collar. He swallowed heavily. "I—I'm a poor man, of course," he said falteringly and uneasily. His eyes shifted back to the wallet. He could feel an inner smile fill Castle. "A poor man, but an honest man, understand."

"Sure, don't you worry." Castle moved a hundred-dollar bill.

Sammy began to pant. "No, I . . . not yet. I've got to think. I'm afraid. Afraid of what I'm thinking. Afraid of everything. I . . . let me think and then I'll tell you. This evening I'll tell you. I'm afraid."

"Afraid, English?" Castle echoed. "Or looking for a better offer?"

"Offer? Offer?" Sammy said blankly.

"Yeah. Another—" Then Castle's lips smoothed out. "Okay, you're all right. When you make up your mind, come around to the Black Hat on Fifty-fourth. Just say who you are and ask for me. Okay?" There was a glint of measuring steel in his eyes. Sammy nodded.

"Yes. I understand. You see, I don't always understand you Americans and I *am* an honest man. A poor man, but . . . uh . . ."

"Yeah. Okay." Castle smiled and got up. "I'll see you." He went back to his table. Sammy dragged down a hungry breath. He felt as if he'd been lifting concrete all day. He paid his bill and left. At the corner he paused long enough to see that Joe Castle was following him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Appointment at Eight

HE WALKED slowly through Times Square and down into the subway. As soon as he reached the lower level, he ducked into a waiting train. At the first stop he got out and hurried upstairs. A girl was getting out of a cab. He slipped in and rode to Washington Square, then walked up Fifth to Thirteenth, turned west and settled himself in an alleyway. Five minutes passed. He peered out. Joe Castle was not in sight. He crossed the street to a place called the Sapphire Grill.

First he called Joan. "Me, again. What's the news?"

"Mr. Kirk is not in. I don't know where to locate him," she said. Sammy moistened his lips.

"Have they checked your apartment?"

"No, sir. Is there any message?"

"Have you met this guy named Milford?"

"Very nice, and thank you, sir, but I don't have any real information at the present."

"He may be calling you. If he wants to go to your apartment alone, take him along. If it looks honest—the alone part—stand in the window and light a cigarette three times. Eight o'clock tonight. Okay?"

"Yes, sir. I have the message in case there are any calls."

Sammy took another walk, then called Milford at police headquarters.

"How were the bottles of beer at Kirk's place?"

"Who is this?" Milford said stubbornly.

"How much promotion goes with the Kirk case? In fact, put another murder with it. Is that enough to listen hard, *and privately*, about?"

Almost half a minute passed. "Is this Kirk?" Milford asked softly.

"The word might get to him, if it's not. Will you meet him—you only, and with the agreement that you'll give him twenty-four hours after the meeting? In return, you get the promise of honesty and full credit for the case."

This time it took a full minute. "I can't make a promise like that." Then a pause. "Not on duty."

"When are you off?"

"Six o'clock," came the slow reply.

"Think about it. Don't kid me. I'll ride, if you ride with me. Call Kirk's office after six and talk to his secretary. And don't start shoving her. She's just the gal that answers the telephone."

"I've seen her," Milford said quietly. "I don't push her."

Sammy tried another newsreel theater and sat there thinking in the darkness.

AT SEVEN-TEN Sammy was standing in the doorway of the closed shoe-repair shop across the street from Joan's apartment on Fourteenth Street in Green-

wich Village. Cabs went by, their tires mushing on the wet paving. At twenty until eight he heard the crisp sound of high heels clicking on the sidewalk, accompanied by the heavier sound of men's shoes. The slender figure of Joan turned up the steps of the apartment building. The man followed. The door closed. Presently the light went on in the front room on the third floor.

Sammy kept looking up and down the street. A man went by, huddled inside his raincoat and walking a poodle. A cab stopped, discharged its passenger and went away. The street slept on. The figure of Joan appeared at the window, silhouetted by the light behind her. She struck one match and carried it toward her lips. She struck another, then a third.

Sammy took a long breath and walked across the street.

Joan opened the door. Her black curls were damp with rain, and her eyes were sleepless. Instinctively she reached out and touched his arm. He looked at her, this girl who had taken his dictation, who had told his social lies and bought his cigarettes for two years. He looked at her and a feeling of shame and longing went through him.

"Hello." That was all he said. Then he looked at Milford, and Milford was looking at him. Milford was an average-sized man, bulky of shoulder, worn and plain of face, with big ears and blue eyes. His suit was rusty and an unlighted cigarette dangled from his lips.

"Thanks for accepting the invitation," Sammy said. "I won't waste time. I'll tell you my story and you can say yes or no." Then Sammy told him the whole thing—from the time he had left the Miami-to-New York plane until this moment. Milford kept smoking the cold cigarette.

"And so?" he said carefully.

"I have no proof," Sammy said. "But I think I can send Castle back to Mitzi's

apartment. Tonight. Her body hasn't been discovered?"

"I haven't heard of it. I don't think so."

"I think I can send Castle back there, and I think he'll look nervous if a couple of detectives step out of the inside hall. Maybe even nervous enough to remember his gun. From that point, with fingerprints that must be around, from fingernail stories from auto renters, you should get a different story." Sammy paused and looked at Milford. "Is it yes or not?"

"As a detective, no." At last he lit the cigarette. "But I went off duty at six o'clock." He smiled slightly. "When do you think Castle might show?"

"I'll go from here to the Black Hat. It depends on what's there."

Milford nodded. "I'm a crazy fool, you know. If you throw me a kink on this, I'm back at a desk at Coney Island."

"That's if I throw a kink," Sammy said. He turned toward the door. Joan walked with him.

"Sammy," she said slowly. "Listen, please, Sammy . . ."

"For God's sake," Milford said. "Why don't you kiss that woman?"

That was when Sammy knew it was all right.

A HOT PIANO was beating at the Black Hat when Sammy walked in. A clay-faced headwaiter came toward him. "I'm George Huntington," he said. That broke the ice.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Castle mentioned you. This way, please." The headwaiter led the way along a narrow hall to a flight of stairs that climbed toward a closed door. The hot piano retreated. The headwaiter opened the door. Across the pine-paneled office sat Joe Castle, tilted back in his chair with his arms locked behind his head.

"Hello," he said. "Come in. Sit down." The door closed firmly behind Sammy and the music was completely gone. "Sit

down," Joe said again. Suddenly Sammy sensed that something was wrong with his plan. There was a new air, a steely complacency about Castle that had not been there before. Or was it his imagination?

"Have you made up your mind?" Castle asked abruptly, leaning forward.

"I'm poor, you understand," Sammy whined. "But I've always been honest. I don't want to do anything wrong. I just . . . am afraid."

Castle put out his billfold. "That's my answer. Tell me what you've got in your mind."

Sammy swallowed. "You have—have murdered a girl. You strangled her to death. You did it last night. Last night in her apartment."

"Go on. You don't need to choke."

"You got money from her. Money she had gotten from another man who had stolen it, and then—then last night you told her to come to you and you'd kiss her so she'd never need to be kissed again. That's when you murdered her."

"You've got it pretty clear in your mind, haven't you, English?"

"It's just like a picture. You see it in your brain, and my brain absorbs it from yours. I can see it even better than you, however, because I can absorb the details that you consciously do not remember. There are details that your subconscious recalls, but your memory does not."

"I don't get that. Tell me about these details," Castle said slowly.

"As you bent over, strangling her, an envelope dropped from your pocket. It is on the floor beside her couch right now. It has your name on it. Your subconscious noted it, but your conscious was too involved in the murder to realize."

"Oh. So there is an envelope there?" Castle's fingers moved into his pockets. He drew out some papers and unfolded them slowly. "Would it have been an envelope like this?" He held out his hand.

Sammy walked across the room. When

he was four feet away, he saw what Castle was holding. It was a newspaper photo of him, Sammy Kirk.

"Something like that, Sammy?" Castle murmured.

Sammy didn't move. He felt his muscles crawling into poise and he watched Castle's hands for any moment. Castle just smiled.

"I kept thinking and thinking where I had seen your face. I got to reading the papers again and looking at your picture. Then I said to myself: Look, isn't that my little friend, English? Funny, it didn't come to me sooner."

"Very funny," Sammy said coldly. "And you've had time to decide what to do about it?"

"Oh, yes. You shouldn't need but one guess."

"I don't think it will be clear profit, Castle. I've talked to the police. They know what I know. It's going to be hard to explain."

"Explanations don't bother me too much. Proof is something else, and I don't think there is any. In fact," and he grinned; "there isn't any Mitzi any more. Not in that apartment. She took a last ride about three this morning, when nobody was around to see a package go out the side door." He cocked his head. "Who has been reading whose mind, Sammy?"

Sammy felt a slow-boiling tide of fury climbing through his throat. He felt his muscles reach their last notch and break. With a howl of rage, he leaped. Castle had seen it coming. He kicked away his chair and slid to the left. His right fist creased Sammy's jaw, and his left hand snaked into a desk drawer. Sammy lunged wildly and sent him staggering backward with a right into the mouth. He started to follow.

He froze. Castle was bent against the wall, blood dripping from his lips, his eyes burning brightly, and the gun cocked in his hand. This was it. Sammy saw it

THE LOST HOURS OF MURDER

on the man's face, and then, for one instant, he saw the raw wild irony of this affair. He laughed harshly.

"Look at it, Castle!" he cried. "You were clear on all the other murders, and I don't have a scrap of proof against you, but you've got to kill me. You've got to, and this is the one that will get you! That's funny! Laugh, damn you!"

HE SAW the realization of it jarring over Castle's features. The result was a torrent of rage. It seemed to drive Castle insane. Sammy had one instant of warning before the gun blasted. He tried to duck. The gun made a pattern of flame before him and pain slipped through his shoulder. He went in with a bull-rush and the gun roared again. He smashed Castle against the wall and felt his chest crumple. He swung blindly and there was the faint feeling of swinging a pillow.

Then came the shot and Sammy waited for the pain. With dazed eyes he watched Castle put his hands against his belly and cough. The gun fell from his fingers and blood came out of his mouth. Then, as if to make the entire nightmare complete, Castle sat down foolishly right in front of Sammy, bent over as if trying to cough again, and there he died.

Sammy tried to turn around. Joan was kneeling beside him, saying something. Milford was bending over Castle's body with a gun. Then he turned and looked at Sammy, at his shoulder. He grinned.

"You'll make it. Listen, you know what? Somebody moved that gal's body. When it wasn't there, I figured somebody was telling me some terrible lies. If it wasn't for that, I'd be standing down there waiting for Castle to walk in. I guess that's funny, huh?"

Sammy looked at Castle, the fingers relaxed against the belly and the lips open in death. "Yeah. Very funny," he said.

THE END

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COSTA CAROUSSO

(Continued from page 65)

blindness; exult in the knowledge that I alone possessed.

I found a plumber in the phone book and put through my call.

Long after he had arrived and uncoiled the long, spring-steel worm and thrust it into the trap, I realized abruptly, as though I were first one person and then another, that I did not want—didn't dare risk—this gesture to my vanity. If he found something, the police would come and take me away, put me behind bars, and I'd be alone, without the living memory of Ellen.

I was just thinking of how I would tell him that I didn't want the job done, to go away, when I heard the thin sound that steel makes scraping over concrete. I grabbed the .32 from the drawer and ran downstairs.

He was bent almost double, and, hand over hand, he was hauling in the steel ribbon that writhed and coiled like a snake behind him.

He bent and removed something from the hook at the end of the ribbon. "By God, if it don't look like a human hand," he muttered. Then he heard me and turned, and horror was on his face.

I stared at the slender, bloodless, shriveled fingers he was holding. I pressed the gun against my head. . . .

* * *

Thunder reverberated through the cellar.

The plumber stared at the body on the floor. The fragment of poplar root slipped from his nerveless grasp, fell soddenly. After a long time he turned away, still uncomprehending, and walked towards the stairs. "Roots work into the sewer pipes of most folks in town, this time of year," he mused. "But damned if that's a reason to blow your brains out!"

ALL MY DEAD LOVES

(Continued from page 70)

that way. I didn't want to mar her skin. She struggled. She screamed until the breath went out of her body. It was terrible, but it could have been so simple.

And just as she slumped in my arms, I heard someone pounding at the door.

"The fools!" I gasped. "The stupid fools! Why can't they leave me alone?"

I kept quiet, hoping whoever it was would go away. Then something crashed against the door, and crashed again and again.

I knew then it was no use. Your man Graves is very strong. He had to be, to break down my door.

SO NOW, gentlemen . . . now that I've explained to you exactly how it happened, I'm sure you'll realize what a terrible mistake you've made. You have no right to arrest me. I've done nothing wrong. Miss Humphries would have been far better off if you'd left me alone. What does life hold for her now that she has recovered? Nothing but dingy rooming houses and noisy lunch counters, and no one to fully appreciate her beauty because it is still attached to her unfortunate character. You know, too, that you were wrong about Miss Madge Turner. You were wrong all the time, as the autopsy proved. As for the others, don't you agree that they're better off, too, in my collection? The straw dummies I put in their coffins are sufficient concession to convention, surely.

No, you would never have discovered my secret if it hadn't been for the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Miss Madge Turner. If it hadn't been for that, you would never have had me watched. And now that you know everything is all right, won't you please go away and leave me alone . . . with my collection?

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JIMMY NICHOLS

(Continued from page 6)

sensitivity of his touch and hearing. The rest was simple. He sat on a sunny corner outside a drugstore on Sunset Boulevard, selling pencils from a tray. When men and women stopped to make a sympathetic purchase, or to drop a few coins without buying anything at all, his ears traced the soft slither of leather on wool or the sharp click of a dangling handbag and he would gently relieve the owner of its contents.

Johnny saved his money. He knew that this soft touch would not last forever, but he felt that a jail sentence for pilfering as a first offense could not possibly be very heavy. And at the end of the sentence, there was easy street.

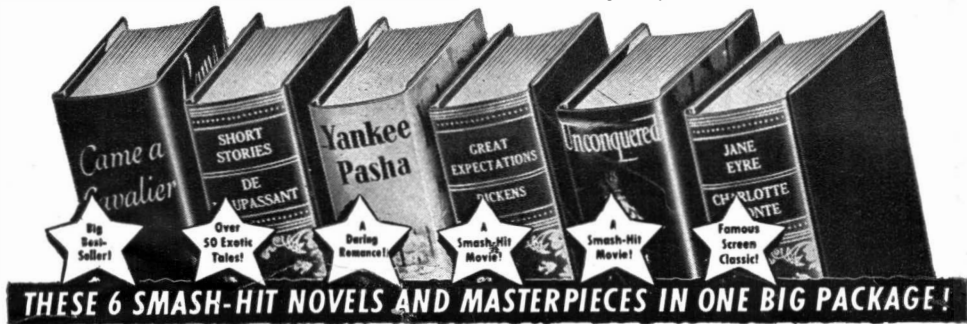
Before the close of the year, detectives in that precinct were conscious of the fact that they were up against something new in light-fingered thievery. They drew their circles closer and closer to Johnny's sunny corner of operations. They questioned the druggist who so kindly let Johnny sit outside. They watched the newsboy. They even called in a policeman from the other side of town to keep an eye on the corner cop. But the dollar bills continued to disappear and it did not occur to them to suspect the blind pencil vendor.

Of course, his luck broke. He lifted a fat moneybelt with velvet fingers, even undoing the buckle around the man's waist and stripping the belt through the trouser slots. But with the prize still stuffed in his pocket, he stepped off the curb into the green light traffic of the roaring boulevard. In the hospital, this time with a broken leg, he confessed to that single theft—but no one could ever convict him of the others. Nor did he ever serve a single day in jail for his crimes. The judge refused to sentence him, remarking that the court pitied the poor blind man.

"Society is at fault for making this blind man steal for his food," his honor remarked. But he did not know about the cache that Johnny held under another name in a San Francisco bank. With it, he bought a large estate just outside of Alexandria, in Egypt, where the blind dip lived quite comfortably. He died in 1942, as Allied armies were stabbing across the desert toward his palatial front door.

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