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TERROR TALES

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DODD PUBLICATIONS
NEW YORK

TERROR TALES

FRANCIS JAMES IS BACK!!
WITH A NEW, CHILL-PACKED NOVEL

BRIDE OF THE SERPENT

+

HOUSE OF THE MUMMY MEN

STARK, FASCINATING TERROR NOVELETTE
by **EDITH & EJLER JACOBSON**



Missing Page

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Directions for testing this amazing mineral will be included—Just give make of car on coupon below.

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If worn rings and cylinders are wasting oil and gas, wonders can happen to your motor. Wonders of cutting oil and gas waste—(savings up to 50% reported)—of new power, pep and quiet without the expense of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul can be the secret of big savings to you.

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I have put between seventy-five and one hundred tubes of Ovrhaul in old cars and I have not yet had a complaint.

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Every time I use Ovrhaul in a motor, the compression is greatly increased, the pep and power is helped, the motor is made quieter, and the gas and oil used is considerably reduced.

Yours very truly,

(Signed) J. L. (Jack) Reeves.

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B. L. MELLINGER, Pres. Ovrhaul Co., A-910, Los Angeles, Calif.

TERROR TALES



VOLUME TEN

MARCH-APRIL, 1939

NUMBER THREE

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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

A SPINE-CHILLING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL

Bride of the Serpent.....Francis James 11

What foul and hideous power was it that drew the loveliest women from their beds in that pitiful transient camp—and made them surrender themselves to the unholy mercies of the monster that dwelt in the slime and ooze of the river-bed? Bill Coleman learned the answer; but the price he paid was dearer to him than life itself!

THREE NOVELETTES OF STARK TERROR

Hostesses in Hell.....Russell Gray 34

We thanked God for sparing us, when the storm cast us ashore on that little, uncharted isle; but soon we were praying and begging that death might come quickly, as we watched that half-human, degenerate pack make bloody sport with the girls of our shipwrecked party.

House of the Mummy Men.....Edith and Ejler Jacobson 64

The mad genius that burned like a searing flame in the twisted brain of Dr. Timothy Howard would allow him no rest until his great plan was completed—until the anguished screams of his reluctant young assistants should be moulded in a pageant of pain that would force an unfriendly world to admit his greatness!

Lilith—Deep Lady of Death.....Arthur Leo Zagat 88

It was a ghastly power from the pits of hell itself that sent panic like wildfire through the stolid workers in the big Tunnel, that transformed its murky interior into a shambles of blood and horror—and left a man and a girl alone to face the awful might of Lilith, the Devil's Sister!

TWO SHORT STORIES OF EERIE MYSTERY

Death Lives in My Lips!.....Ray Cummings 54

Doomed I was by my mother's infidelity to live in solitude and continence, and owe to the man who dared my kiss. But I could not help my beauty, nor could I deny the flame of love that burned high within me!

Murder Puppet.....Gabriel Wilson 81

All his life Myron Collins had slaved to create Brutus, the puppet master of evil—and he endowed this thing of wood and sawdust with a dreadful life of its own; a life that was the concentrate of destruction and unholy desire!

—AND—

Interlude of Terror.....The Editor 4

Fran Jones' mad flight from Death.

Black Chapel.....A Department 105

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IF I FAILED...WE WERE ALL DEAD MEN



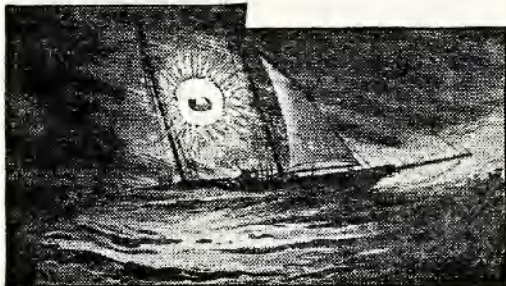
**LASHED TO SHROUDS
OF SINKING,
BURNING SCHOONER,
SAILORS SEE HOPE
OF RESCUE FADE**



1 "The dream of my life, for which I had saved since I first went to sea at twelve, had come true!" writes Capt. Hans Milton of 610 West 111th St., New York City. "I was making my first voyage as master and owner of my own vessel, the two-masted topsail schooner 'Pioneer,' when the hurricane of last September caught us 400 miles off Nantucket.

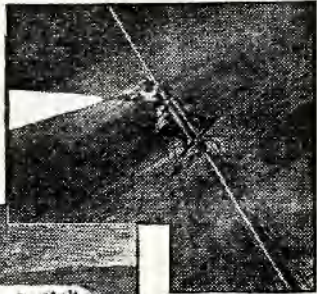
2 "We were pumping to keep afloat when we passed into the windless vortex of the storm where the waves were leaping and jumping crazily and where they crashed in our companion ways and filled the ship beyond hope of saving her.

The five of us and the cat scrambled aloft for our lives. Our deck-load of lumber kept us afloat and without fresh water and with almost no food we lived, lashed to the rigging, for three endless days and nights.



3 "Once a steamer hove in sight—but failing to see our distress signals, went her way. At 3 a.m. on the fourth morning steamer lights showed momentarily over the wild sea. We rigged a huge ball of sails and blankets, soaked it with gasoline, touched it off and hoisted it aloft.

4 "But the steamer did not change her course. She thought we were fishing. The wind blew burning fragments back on the ship setting her afire in various places. I could see the stern light of the steamer going away from us. *If I couldn't stop her, we were all dead men!* I climbed to the fore-top and in desperation pulled my flashlight from my back pocket and in Morse code signalled 'Sinking... SOS... Help!'



5 "Slowly, I saw the ship turn! In her last hour afloat, all of us and the cat were saved from the sinking, burning 'Pioneer' by those fine seamen of the United States Liner 'American Banker' and by the power of two tiny 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries that stood by us in the blackest hour of our lives!

(Signed) *Captain Hans Milton*



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Interlude of Terror

ORDINARILY Fran Jones was a lovely,
radiant creature. Her red-gold hair had a
way of stealing the lights from her spark-
ling black eyes; her smile was warm and frank
like a child's, which was why she was so val-
uable to the Agent. No courtesan of the Eight-
eenth Century possessed as much allure in her
whole being as Fran did in any one sweet curve
of her young body. The Agent noticed that,
too, the day he saw her model the Palm Beach
line at Mademoiselle Fchet's exclusive salon.
It wasn't long after that, that she went to work
for him

Ah, yes, she was lovely—once. But not any
more. Had you seen Fran this night, huddling
in the lee of a ramshackle freight shed to
escape the bitter February blasts, you never
could have recognized her as the girl who had
so delightfully exhibited the creations of Mlle.
Fchet . . . nor as the sweet, wholesome young
lady who conducted "talent contests" in rural
motion picture houses. For now Fran was rid-
den by a relentless, inescapable fear—a terror
that had been haunting her for three weeks.

The Agent was following Fran; the Agent
would follow to the ends of the earth. He would
never stop searching for her until his long, wiry
fingers had closed about her neck. Why couldn't
the police catch him? Why couldn't some one
terminate the swathe of mad, unprecedented
murders perpetuated by this blood-crazy killer?
Fran did not know. All she knew was that he
was never far behind her in her tortuous, almost
headless flight . . . and that soon, inexorably,
he would find her

Something stirred in the coal bin nearby. Her
heart quailed; her tongue clung to the roof of
her mouth. Had the Agent tracked her down
at last? Had he ridden into this tiny, night-
shrouded hamlet on the train that had just slid
slowly by? She turned to flee into the darkness,
God only knew where. Then she heard the
sound again. It was only coal, tumbling from
the top of the pile because of the vibration the
train had made.

But to Fran, it might as well have been
Death itself. Almost, she would have welcomed
it, rather than undergo the further torture of a
mind keyed to terror's highest pitch . . . !

Her eyes became a little more accustomed to
the darkness. Nearby she could make out a
freight loading platform, with something piled
upon it. Cautiously she moved toward it, cover-
ing more distance than she had dared move since
alighting from the filthy day coach fifteen min-
utes ago.

That pile was empty burlap bags. She seized an
armful, crawled with them way under the plat-
form. It was dry there, and near the foundation
of the little station there was no wind. She
made a nest and curled up, drawing the re-
maining bags around her. From under her coat
she took half a loaf of bread she had been
saving for two days, munched on it, sobbing
and trembling.

Then she saw the eyes; lambent, glowing
coals peering out of the pitch-black night. Chill
worse than the winter cold oozed down her spine.
She gasped out: "Here! Here I am, Tony.
Put your fingers on my throat—and press. Press
'til I'm dead

Boys! Girls! Bikes GIVEN for All!

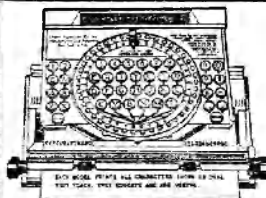


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Typewriter GIVEN

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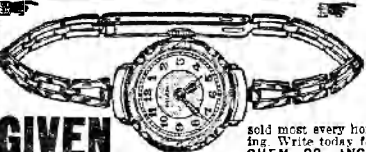
Every letter in the alphabet and the numerals from 1 to 10. Any child can write on it after two hours practice and older people will grasp the idea at once. Full directions, extra supply of best quality copying ink. Clear! Practical! Given for art pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for chaps, burns, etc., which you easily sell to your friends and relatives at 25c a box (with picture free) and remitting as explained in catalog. BE FIRST! Customers waiting. Write quick. Mail coupon now. WILSON CHEMICAL CO., INC., DEPT. PP-91, TYRONE, PA.

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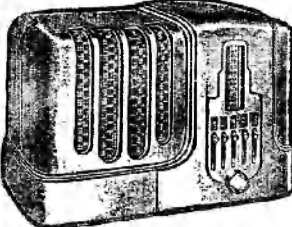
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Then she held her breath, waiting. Nothing happened. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she looked up. There was an animal, silhouetted against the dim grey of a snowdrift beside the tracks. The relief that flooded over her was akin to pain. It was a stray cat. She called it, softly, and it came. It disdained to share the stiff, stale bread, but it nestled close to Fran's breast, purring. And the heat of its little body was the only comfort Fran had known for three weeks.

The cat made her think of her sister's kitten. Ellie always kept kittens in the apartment until . . . that night. Ellie was dead, now. Tony had killed her. Tony had hacked her to bits, left her a gruesome travesty of human flesh. Fran would never forget the awful hideousness of it . . . the heavy odor of blood that permeated the bedroom. Only Fran knew that Tony had meant to murder *her*—instead of Ellie. So she had fled.

There was no one to whom she could turn—not even the police. The fact that she was innocent would have made no difference. "How could a smart girl like you be tangled up with the Agent for months, and not know his racket?" the cops would say. "How could you lure young girls away from their back-woods homes, turn them over to the Agent—without realizing what you were doing? Do you think we're fools?"

Oh, she knew now, all right—too late. She shuddered to think of the girls she had unknowingly sold into white slavery . . . The Agent had capitalized on her very innocence. A few weeks modelling clothes in the city hadn't taught Fran much. She was as "country" as the girls she had duped. Up to a certain point, the Agent had been exceedingly wily in his deception of Fran . . . He had seen her that day in Mlle. Fechet's, where he had gone to buy a thousand-dollar wrap for his current fancy. He had spotted Fran, and he had gained an introduction to her. Anthony Wendell—Theatrical Agent . . . that was the inscription on his chaste card. How could Fran have known that the man was the Agent, king of an international white slave ring? *No one else knew it!*

Later, he made her a "talent scout," at a handsome salary. She conducted screen tests and the beauty contests among small-town aspirants to Broadway and Hollywood. Of those who won, a few actually became actresses. The Agent kept up a front. The majority were pressed into different occupation . . . some as far away as South America. But the Agent conducted his business with such decorum that Fran, one of his chief scouts, suspected nothing.

Everything was all right until Tony Wendell fell in love with Fran. At least, for a while Fran thought it was love. So adroit was he that she failed to see an ulterior motive when he installed her in a gorgeous apartment, with a French maid. So innocent was she, that she immediately brought her kid-sister from home, and got her a job at Mlle. Fechet's. Somehow the Agent concealed his anger—at first.

One night Fran was awakened—horribly. She came "home" to find Tony there, a spell of madness upon him, standing over something

DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

On Sale
February
3rd!

RACE WILLIAMS is back! And what's going to be even better news for all you Race-and-Daly fans who have been wondering what's happened to her lately: **THE FLAME** will be there too in *Hell With the Lid Lifted*, Carroll John Daly's newest complete novel-length action thriller coming next month.

We never expected Marty Marquis, the tough little czar of Manhattan's Main Stem, to fall for an astrology gag, but he does—hook, line and bullet-lead sinker, only to have the constellations spell "M-U-R-D-E-R" when Saturn rises in the west and his big sidekick and right bower, Johnny Berthold, takes seventeen drinks too many and run amok in a Broadway bar in John Lawrence's latest **MARQUIS OF BROADWAY** thriller, *The Stars Said Murder*.

Then William Edward Hayes crashes through with a gripping novelette of the men who roll the behemoths of the highways on the long-haul freight runs. It's called *The Ferraday Phantom*, and introduces a murder-minded ghost who played havoc with the entire trucking industry till a smart company op got wise to the eerie set-up.

Plus shorts by O. B. Myers, Wyatt Blassingame and others. All in the March **DIME DETECTIVE**—Out February 3rd.



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The telephone call was just a joke, said John Smith—because he wanted to go to the movies with Marlon and hold hands. But Marlon said no, so they went out to the little house on St. Ann's. The corpse was there, all right. The corpse—and three live killers! Wyatt Blassingame tells all in his latest full-length novel, *Murder at the Morgue*. . . . Detective Reed talled his quarry a thousand miles to a blood-and-thunder showdown at an *Oasis for Dying Men*, where he learned you can't feed hamburger to a corpse—even if ordered! This is a punch-a-paragraph novelette by Norbert Davis. . . . In Paul Ernst's vivid murder novelette, Steve Bishop risks his life—and his sight to boot—to save a gal with blood on her hands, from a hard-headed cop and a killer with a one-track mind! The title is *Behind the Eyes of Death!*

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TERROR TALES

Fran did not at first recognize. Then nausea swept through her. The thing on the floor was the little French maid, dead, cut to ribbons. Tony's eyes were staring wildly; saliva leaked from his slobbering lips. His dinner clothes were daubed with blood, and in one hand he clutched the butt of a shattered glass vase to which shreds of flesh still adhered. Even as Fran opened her mouth to scream, she fainted.

When she came to, Tony Wendell was holding her tenderly. He was crying like a baby, telling her he loved her, and that he wouldn't hurt her . . . that he was sick . . . He would go to a sanatorium, and by and by he would come back cured. But he couldn't go to jail. He'd die, there; he'd never be cured. And Fran, in a daze, helped him dispose of the body. Her great, pure heart believed . . . sympathized. She thought she loved Tony Wendell. She couldn't know that he had murdered the maid in a fit of maniacal frustration, for having been denied Fran so long.

The next night, just before she was to have accompanied Tony to a hospital, his chauffeur came to her.

"Miss Fran," he said, his eyes showing terror, "you gotta leave."

"Why, Joe, where's Mr. Wendell?" she asked. "He was going—"

Joe said, "The boss is going all right, but not to no hospital. This last spell he had as got him down. He sez he told you too much—he must of."

"Told me too much?" Fran was bewildered. Was Tony sorry he had told her he loved her? She couldn't ask Joe *that*. She didn't have to.

"Miss Fran," said Joe, "Listen to the Wheel—I'm gonna tell you. The Agent is goin' on a murder jag like he does every few years. An' you're gonna be next! Now beat it!"

"Agent? . . . Murder jag?" This was beyond Fran's comprehension.

"You're too good a dame, Miss Fran. Even I could tell that. So I'm givin' you a break . . ."

He told Fran about the Agent . . . and about his periodic murder mania which had been becoming worse and worse. "I'm gonna whip you down to the station and see you outa town," he finished, and before Fran recovered from a state of numb shock, she was halfway across the city. Then she remembered Ellie, and her heart chilled.

She called to Joe to drive her back, which he did; but he didn't dare go too near the apartment building. He was afraid the Agent would be there.

Fran went in alone—and Tony had been there. She found Ellie, slaughtered in the hall, her coat still on. Apparently Tony had entered first, waited by the door. He had struck before he knew his victim wasn't Fran. Fearing detection, he had fled. But something told Fran that he would catch her. So she fled, too.

Through the apartment's management, the police had attached the murder to Tony Wendell. And Tony, skillfully dodging the authorities, was in pursuit of the person he feared would give him away.

INTERLUDE OF TERROR

Fran had fled from one cheap, out-of-the-way rooming house to another, only to learn from the newspapers that Wendell was believed to be headed for that vicinity. And always, he was. Kindly landladies testified to that—mutely, in ghastly circumstances. For one after another, they were found butchered, while in nearly every case were found words of blood, smeared nearby: *You harbored her!*

The newspapers emblazoned the story across the continent: *Mad killer Wendell seeking mystery woman . . .* Until Fran dared not appear at the door of any rooming house or hotel. Her fear-crazed face marked her as the Mystery Woman, everywhere she went. Her money was gone; she dared not communicate with anyone. She stole food from refuse barrels, slept in junkyards, old warehouses. And she knew that Tony, Agent of Murder, would get her . . .

Another freight train rumbled by. Fran stirred, shivering, hugging the stray cat closer. Was that a footstep? Had someone dropped off that train? A pall of terror froze her in rigid wakefulness until the snow by the tracks turned lighter. She had to scurry forth in search of food, before sunrise.

Lamely she worked her way from beneath the platform, wishing that the one person who had helped her, could help her now: Joe, chauffeur for Tony Wendell. She remembered that Tony had called Joe the Wheel sometimes. She thought it was funny, then. Now she knew it was an underworld name. Still, he had saved her life. The Wheel . . .

She stepped around the corner of the coal bin, toward the road to town. Her eye caught the motion of a shadow detaching itself from deeper gloom. She stopped, stockstill—and screamed. Long, steely fingers dug into her throat.

The voice of the Agent said, "You little fool! Didn't you know my organization stretches across the country? That you could escape just so long?" The pressure relaxed.

Fran gasped, "I haven't talked, Tony. Honest to God! You don't have to kill me—"

"Of course you haven't. I'm not worrying about that!" His face was the image of evil . . . insane. "Don't you see? Desire for you started this murder chain. I've got to have you—and kill you. Then I'll be cured. Then I can go on as the Agent, king of the rackets!"

The man was stark, raving mad. Once more his fingers closed around Fran's throat, and now his obscene mouth hovered over hers, panting horribly. One hand slid around her body; then he was dragging her beneath the platform. She fought futilely, visions of Ellie and the little French maid flashing through her tormented mind. Consciousness began to fade, and from a great distance she heard a dull thud. After that, the pressure slackened.

Presently she felt hands chafing her neck, heard a voice saying, "Come, now, Miss Fran, don't tell me I've trailed the crazy son all this way and croaked him for nothing. Don't let the one good thing I ever done in my life come to nothing . . ." She opened her eyes, and saw Joe . . .

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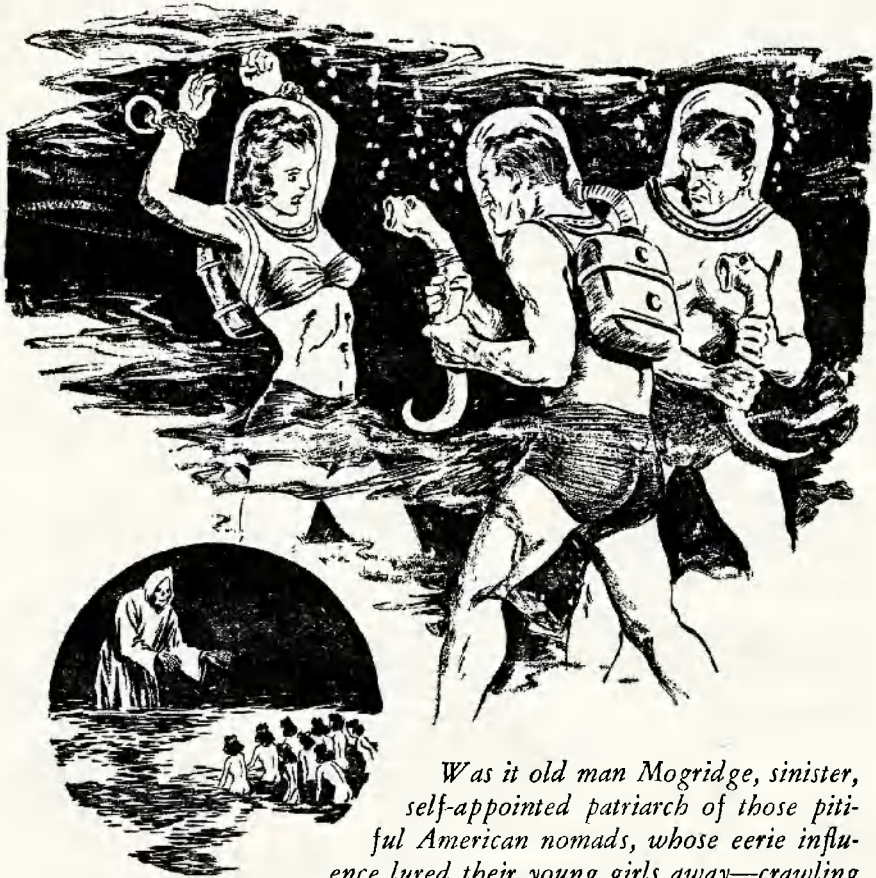
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Was it old man Mogridge, sinister, self-appointed patriarch of those pitiful American nomads, whose eerie influence lured their young girls away—crawling like tortured snakes, to a tryst with a nameless monster of the deep? . . . Bill Coleman found the answer; but before he did, he saw his wife's fair body fed upon by nauseous creatures from the slime of a watery hell!

CHAPTER ONE

Madness Comes to Helen

THE sound that woke Virginia Holmes was the soft scrape of wood against wood, as if a door or a window of the home-made little trailer were being opened stealthily.

At first it didn't occur to her to be

afraid. The thought trailed over her drowsy mind that most likely it was her mother coming to see if she were all right—she had felt a little ill the night before. Or old Susanna Mogridge, stealing on tip-toe to discover if she needed another dose of the old-fashioned herb medicine to reduce her fever.

Her heavy eyelids closed and slumber

poured contentment around her. Her slim body snuggled in sensuous luxury against the warmth of her silk nightgown, the one extravagance of her poverty-stricken life. The caressing of the satiny fabric around her shoulders and young breast brought strange dream-fancies, as though a gallant knight caressing her tenderly.

A few moments passed while she lay in that unique state of half-sleeping, half-waking. And then she roused again, abruptly stirred into startled consciousness—sharply apprehensive.

The scraping sound had come again—sinister, insinuating. Across the narrow confines of the little trailer, wall and door, were half-lighted blurs, save where the window stood outlined as a misty rectangle against the light of the moon. And Virginia gasped!

The sash of the window was crawling upward. Invisible hands seemed to be moving it. The inch-wide crack grew to a half-foot band, the band widened to the full height of the window—and in the middle of the opening a light appeared, like a supernatural blue eye against the background of night. Virginia stared at it, her breath coming rapidly, her bosom starting to rise and fall.

Swiftly the eye grew in size, swelled to incredible brilliance. It was like a spinning star so vivid that she could hardly endure looking at it, yet so weirdly compelling that she could not withdraw her gaze. Virginia lay motionless now, sweat soaking her till her nightrobe clung like a second skin against her body. She pressed her hands to her breast, clutching her bosom till she felt the hurt of piercing fingernails. Her hands slid down over her thighs, while her whole body vibrated with a fierce, evil desire.

OVER by the window the light spun faster, a gyrating ball that dripped blobs of phosphorescent blue. Then sud-

denly it split into two—a *pair* of eyes. Across the sill came pouring a violet shadow, long and rounded, its body thick as a man's coiling downward. Moonlight glinted on scales like triangular sequins, iridescent with river slime.

With a heavy thud it dropped to the floor and disappeared in the shadows. Virginia's sweat-moist hands clutched at the sheets. A thin scream burst in her lungs to be strangled again in her throat. Had she really seen that hideous vision, or had it been only a hallucination of her fevered mind?

A moment passed while she sat frozen there, not moving—not breathing. Then out of darkness came a slithering noise, the rasp of a body dragging across boards. At the side of the bunk something came pushing up into sight—a blue snout, blunt and scaled, with baleful slate-colored eyes. A forked red tongue made play of thread-like fire against the gloom.

Inch by inch the head rose on columnar neck—swaying gently from side to side. Panting, Virginia cringed back from it till head and shoulders were crushed against the headboard, perspiration plastering her hair against her breasts.

The twin orbs gloated lustfully over her nakedness. And then up onto the bed itself came pouring that grisley shape! Palsied with terror, Virginia lay for an instant utterly motionless, while she felt the chill of its scales on her body, felt its noisome weight flowing over her.

Hoarsely she screamed then, teeth bared, eyes bursting out of their sockets. She clawed against the creature with hooked fingers, futilely. Then in sheer horror, she fainted. Exactly what took place during that interval of oblivion, she never knew. . . . But at last she realized that the thing was gone. Her breath came, expelled from her lungs in an eerie cry.

Another instant she lay supine, saliva trickling from parted lips, then slowly

she sat erect. Her motions as oily and furtive as those of the nameless thing that had been there, she swung her legs over the side of the bed—slid to her feet and stole across to the window.

Beyond there, the half hundred trailers and cars of the "Migs" stood blocked out in jet against moonlight, a shantytown village of toy houses, and at the side of her own, the tent in which her father and mother were sleeping. No one seemed awake. Nothing stirred.

From head to foot Virginia was trembling. Cold fingers shaking, she fumbled at the neck of her nightgown. The robe trickled down to lie in a ring at her ankles, revealing her young body, a naiad of pearly loveliness incarnated from moonlight. For an instant, she stood there in the misty light with arms upraised as if in supplication to dark powers, unseen—inescapable. Then without a sound she climbed through the window and dropped on the ground. Tawny hair streaming, she ran soundless and wraith-like where moonlight painted her in silver and shadow.

W/HERE she was going, what she was going to do, she didn't know. But somewhere in the night there must be surcease from the agony in her breast—satisfaction from the strange longings that surged through her. Dazedly she wondered if this was what had happened to Jean Farnum and Sally Roberts, and the half dozen other girls who had disappeared from the camp—if they too had seen that blue light that retreated before her—drawing her, mysteriously calling her.

She turned at length, skirting the flank of the knoll till she came to a winding trail that led down to the river. She halted at the edge of a pool, peering down into the surface where her dim beauty was mirrored. It was close to morning. Low on the horizon the stars were paling

through a gossamer mist. A breeze stirred the cat-tails with thin rustlings.

Virginia took a step toward the water, then paused. Was it the chill of the hour before dawn, setting her shivering like this? Or was it. . . . Now her trembling changed little by little to a sinuous writhing. From shoulders to hips her form vibrated in rhythmic waves, commencement of a *dance du ventre*, like a snake's muscle play.

Suddenly she experienced a longing to lie flat on the ground. She yielded; felt the cold moist earth pressing against her fevered flesh. For an instant she lay stretched at full length, turning from side to side in voluptuous pleasure. Then the twisting motion of her flanks was sending her gliding down the gentle slope toward the water.

Now she was close to the water. Her outstretched fingers touched it. She moaned softly. Inch by inch she urged herself forward, a beautiful white figure against the black earth. The water closed around her. It caressed her shoulders, her back, her entire body. Slowly she swam with her hair like seaweed streaming behind her.

Only the dome of the night with its far-away eyes was there to see Virginia as she swam to her dreadful rendezvous—and the big green frogs honking out of their mud holes. Then in the center of the ripple rings there broke a gruesome shape with glistening coils. Its upflung head peered over the water. It swam forward propelled by giant leisurely gyrations.

Virginia's cry rang once, a filament of wild ecstasy suspended between dawn-touched sky and darkening waste. Then from beneath something closed around her legs. Scaly arms clutched her, one about the hips, the five-taloned claw of the other driven deep into her breast. For an instant they swam twined into one, the pink-white body of the girl, the

cerrulean coils of the monster, so hideously fashioned in the mold of a giant snake. Her hair was a sodden tangle against the chest of the thing, her bosom crushed to its slimy neck.

With a flip of its powerful tail it drove them toward the depths. A circle of ripples widened over the surface. A moccasin flicked its tongue as it slithered through the reeds and slipped into the water—diving swiftly and deep as though it feared to be late at the party to be held by the pair who had preceded him below. . . .

MY wife Helen and I were having breakfast that morning on a board table set up in the open outside our trailer when we learned that another girl was gone—that lovely little Virginia Holmes had been added to the ever-lengthening list in the grisley roster of horrors that for weeks had been terrorizing the trailer shantytown camp of us "Migs."

All around us as we sat there could be seen the ill-clad figures of the hundred or more women and men, our companions, moving dispiritedly about their morning tasks. There was the clatter of cooking utensils, the rasp of querulous voices, and the fretful whimpering of children.

It was a depressing enough scene, God knew—the spectacle of once hard-working and self-respecting people turned into homeless drifters. But I remember, even before I had heard about Virgie, the feeling of uneasiness that had appressed me for days, foreboding of something immeasurably worse hovering over us. More than half a dozen young girls had dropped out of sight, stark naked, by night. What could have happened to them? Where could they have gone? Could the mysterious horror that had claimed them threaten Helen as well?

We were half way through breakfast when feet sounded beside us. It was Ben

Goodrich, our closest friend among the Migs, and his daughter Pearl. They dropped down on the crates, boxes that served us for chairs—and they gave us the news about little Virginia.

"Seems she jest got up out o' bed an' went—like the others."

Goodrich was a tall, broad-shouldered man with deeply tanned face and steady blue eyes—a face deep-graven, emaciated from suffering. Once he had owned his fine farming section in Oklahoma, driven his own car and sent his daughter to college. . . . Husky-voiced, he went on: "They didn't find anything about what could have made her clear out, or where she went—only her nightdress was there on the floor. Silk, it was, too." Goodrich spat; he laughed gratingly. "A silk nightdress—on a shantytown gal!"

His work-calloused hands tightened nervously. He was looking at Pearl. His daughter was a brunette, a tall, voluptuously formed girl with sleeky molded hips and firm breasts. It seemed to me that there was a queer look on her sullenly handsome face. She flushed, turned aside from her father's gaze. Helen, my wife, sat staring at her. There was a strange startled gleam in her eyes, too—an odd excitement.

I didn't say anything. I felt again that apprehension which had impressed itself on me these last days as I had studied my wife. Realized that there was something about her that wasn't quite natural.

My eyes drifted uneasily from the two girls and out over the camp of the "Migs." Wherever you go in the West you will encounter them—the rattletrap cars, home-made trailers, hooded wagons; each vehicle stacked high with household goods, crowded with people. These companies of almost penniless drifters—these American gypsies—are a symptom of the times, casualties in the bloodless yet far-reaching revolution that is sweeping the country. A few years before they had

been workers and home owners. Changing economic conditions had hit them, broken them, uprooted them—sent them rolling like human tumbleweeds, propelled by the winds of Fate.

Farmers from the dust bowl infernos of Kansas and Dakota, share croppers and tenants from Georgia, mill workers out of the green hills of New Hampshire—a hundred and one others in the nomad rabble of the dispossessed, the bankrupt, the beaten, they had taken to the roads in such ramshackle conveyances as they could secure, following the harvests, seeking any work that could be found. Out through the cottonfields, pea-fields, vineyards and orchards of New Mexico, Arizona, Oregon, California and other states, a roving herd without homes or addresses, they find work when they can—and for the rest of the time drift into cities or roadside slums, starving while they wait for the next harvest, jailed for vagrancy, hated and cursed by authorities.

SUCH creatures we were—my lovely wife and I were. Railroaded like plague-carriers from state to state, we and our comrades had finally halted here on the outskirts of the southern town of Bayou View. Just how Ephraim Mogridge, our eccentric leader, had managed it for us, we still only half understood. There was a barren knoll half covered with scrub pine, around whose base the river curved to lose itself amid swamps. The owner of the property had accepted the meagre scrapings gleaned from our purses in payment of rental. And ten hours a day all our able-bodied men were to work at draining a bog where this Jod Farris intended to set out a rice field. In return, he was to furnish us food. . . . And then this had begun—the creeping terror of the vanishing girls.

“If this keeps on,” Goodrich was muttering, “There ain’t none of us that will dare to sleep nights. . . . Coleman, do

you realize that them girls didn’t yell for help when they was taken away, or somebody would have heard ’em? They must have *wanted* to go!”

Goodrich was looking at Rosalie and Pearl as he spoke. Rosalie was an orphaned cousin of Helen’s whom we had brought along with us. She helped with the work. She was flaxen-haired, buxom, over-developed for her fifteen years. She and Pearl stood withdrawn a little way, whispering. I wondered about what, to bring that guilty, unnatural excitement into their eyes.

“Them stories that we hear goin’ around—where do they come from, who starts ’em?” Goodrich was stirring his coffee abstractedly, his eyes tenanted by eerie shadows. “How them girls been seen walkin’ stark naked down by the river. Crawl’n on their hands an’ knees. Layin’ down, squirm’n along on their bellies like they was—snakes. . . .”

I’d heard all those things before. Wild stories to be dismissed as figments of unbalanced minds. But something was here. Seven girls—no, eight—had disappeared. I looked at Helen, at my darling wife, and I felt tendrils of something uncanny and damnable distilling out of the breeze and the morning sunshine. That horror that had snatched those other girls—could reach out for her.

As we sat there talking, I saw that Rosalie had crept around behind a clump of scrub pine to crouch there listening. That was natural enough. But what she was doing wasn’t natural. She had unbuttoned the front of her waist, pulling the folds wide to bare herself. With her pointed fingernails she was gouging her chest and neck as though impelled by some masochistic obsession. Her lips were feverishly parted; eyes rapt in distance with a glassy sheen.

That sight shot a stab of startled horror through me. What could have got

into her? The suggestion of what Goodrich had been talking about? To cover my feeling, I muttered to him:

"Nonsense! You're an intelligent man. You must know that no girl would do that. Those are just some of Mogridge's wild yarns. The girls probably got sick of the monotony here, and ran away. . ."

My voice trailed off into silence. Goodrich wasn't listening. I saw his eyes directed over my shoulder at Helen. I turned to follow his gaze. And at what I saw there, something cold gripped the pit of my stomach.

Over Helen's face had suddenly stolen the strangest look—a flush of eagerness, of guilty excitement. She murmured an excuse and swiftly rose to her feet, turning her back. As she did so—could it be true or did I imagine it?—her two hands rose to cup over her bosom. Fingers tensely curved poised there as though they were about to tear open the cloth. *To bare her body as Rosalie had just done—as, so ran the stories, the vanished girls had tortured themselves as they wandered nude by the river at dead of night. . .?*

CHAPTER TWO

"As No Man Could Love. . ."

I SAT staring after my wife, speechless. Helen—to have done that! Then I heard Goodrich muttering as he rose to his feet:

"I want you should come and take a look at what they found in Holmes' trailer—as long as you think all this is so crazy."

Helen and Pearl had disappeared inside the trailer. I got up and followed him.

We found quite a knot of figures standing around Mark Holmes' unpainted box-on-wheels as we approached. Goodrich's powerful stooped shoulders opened a way through them and then we were climbing

the steps to the doorway. Just inside the threshold a puddle of shimmering silk lay on the boards—Virginia's swank nightgown. The people were all looking at it as though it were cursed.

Goodrich stepped over it and pointed toward the floor. "Get that, Coleman?" he muttered.

Across the rough boarding a bill-poster's past-brush had left a broad greasy trail—or so it looked. A nauseating smell rose to permeate the interior of the car—feter as of something dredged from the morass of primeval sin.

Goodrich's stubby finger shafted up toward the bed. The stuff was there, too! Alongside the rounded hollow left by Virginia's body the sheet was stencilled with a pattern of triangular black marks—*where something covered with scales and wet with river ooze had crawled to lie down beside her. . .*

Fingers of horror slid on my scalp. So the dark whisperings of the past weeks had a ghastly reality! And the unspeakable creature that had been here could come to Helen!

Hoarse voices became audible behind me and I turned to look through the door around which the crowd of shanty-towners was visible. I looked into sullen deep-graven faces of men, into gaunt eyes of women and I felt again the weird conviction that the sufferings of these people had done more than break and embitter them—had killed their very souls and replaced them with a lewd and unholy fanaticism. They gazed at Virginia's nightgown, at the prints on the bed and the low murmur that welled around the ring held an undertone that seemed ghastly, exulting.

There came a stir in the background. Between the scattering forms a new figure came striding up to the trailer.

More than six feet in height, with huge shoulders and a snowy beard rolling down to his waist, Ephraim Mogridge pre-

sented a figure that might have been that of a patriarch reincarnated out of ancient days. He had a head massive as though hewn out of granite, with bald dome towering above roden pink eyes.

Mogridge was such a personage as in epochs of social chaos is sometimes churned up from the ruck of suffering and despair to attain an inexplicable influence over his fellow-men—as did the mad Russian, Rasputin. Half saint, half satyr, he had spent most of his life as an itinerant preacher in the backwoods districts of the south and west. He had thrown in his lot with us and little by little had assumed the position of leader—a crazed Moses piloting his tatterdemalion flock through valleys of torment in search of a promised land. A dangerous leader he was, as the cooler-headed among us uneasily realized. We knew his lewd interest in the young women of the camp. We had dark suspicions regarding the things that took place at his secret allegedly religious meetings. So far, we had been able to do nothing. . . .

ALL this passed through my mind in an instant. Then Mogridge's shoulders came pressing in through the doorway and his giant form crowded the interior of the car.

He stared at the nightgown, at the serpentine outline of prints on the bed. He didn't speak. Beneath his white beard his red lips curved in a smile of delight!

I felt my loathing anger rise! and then I was aware that his gaze had ceased its lustful slow roving over the bed to focus on the lovely pale face of my wife. For Helen had followed us here from my home. She stood there, her eyes locked on his, lips parted. Slowly her hands rose, as though in obedience to some hypnotic suggestion, to hover across the front of her dress. She tensed there, while I could almost feel the effort of will that it cost her to keep from tearing open the

cloth and exposing her nude body to the bearded man.

Terror stabbing me, I snatched at her hands—pulled them away to hold them tightly gripped between mine. It was the second time she had done this! "Helen, what are you doing?" I muttered. "What can you be thinking of?"

She shivered, moaned strangely. Soft oval face stricken and bloodless, she pressed to my side. She whispered—with an urgency that I found terrifying:

"Bill! That man! What makes him—oh, don't let him look at me!"

I patted her shoulder, pressed her hands reassuringly. "Wait here. I'll settle him!" I rasped. Fists balling, I spun around toward the door.

But no one was there upon whom to vent my rage. Mogridge had disappeared. And outside, the throng was starting to scatter as Jod Farris' voice could be heard grating that the men were already an hour late on his job. . . .

On impulse I whispered to Goodrich: "Look out for Helen. I've got something to do."

He nodded as I turned away. I believed that I could trust him. What I had seen had been a fleeting vision of the girl Rosalie, slipping away from the camp toward an unfrequented path which led down to the water's edge. Why was she hurrying there?

None of the others seemed to have noticed either her or me as I pushed through the thinning crowd. Quickly I ran down the path. In a moment I was out of sight of the camp. I caught a brief glimpse of Rosalie some distance ahead of me and then a rise of ground shut her away.

I dropped down into a hollow, climbed the slippery clay face of a hill and came out on the crest of the bluff. At my feet a few hundred yards away I could see Rosalie on the bank of a little cove that made up into the land.

I halted to stand motionless, all my faculties at pitch. Was something moving out in the water? A little way off shore an oily disturbance was seething. What sort of creature, deep under the surface, was causing it, I couldn't tell. But some *thing* was there!

Down on the beach, Rosalie was swiftly undressing! Her white body blossomed into sight as she stripped off one scanty garment after another. And now she was running. Utterly nude, she was racing toward the head of the cove where that something that I still couldn't see came swimming—swimming toward her!

I didn't wait any longer to watch. I scrambled down into the bed of a gully that grooved the flank of the bluff and down it I ran as I had never run in my life. For perhaps half a minute the high banks of the ravine shut Rosalie from my sight. Then I vaulted over the last line of boulders and came out on the beach—to stand transfixed, my blood freezing in mortal terror.

Rosalie wasn't there!

NO living thing was in sight. But out **I** in the water a trail of white bubbles fountained up to the surface. And rising with them like smoke came a cry in Rosalie's voice, a shrilling of horrible joy! She had gone in there—and now she had gone to her rendezvous with that monster! For down at my feet the mud was grooved with twin furrows scraped by her breasts as she had crawled to the water—wriggled snake-like on her belly, like nothing human.

I felt that uncanny tingling of fear along my spine, making my hair bristle like that on the back of a dog in terror of something unknown. Then my eyes pulled themselves away from the marks to rest on the thing at my feet. That naked body wasn't Rosalie, as for an instant I had imagined—Rosalie hadn't red hair. She must be Valerie Morse, one of

the girls who had vanished ten days before.

I knew that she must be Valerie. . . . But it wasn't Valerie's face that I saw, only a crimson ruin where teeth sharp and rounded had torn it in ribbons. Val had a beautiful form, entrancing curves browned with sun-tan, adorable body—now pitted all over with scarlet gouges where things had been *feeding* on her. . . . And the climax of weird awfulness . . . along her thighs and down her tapering legs were glittering sequins where scales had started to grow!

Stricken I stood there, my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth. Great God, that such things could be! Those incredible reports that had come to my ears—I had seen the horrors enacted before my eyes! That something that had been in Virginia's room was no figment of nightmare. It was alive, it was real! Rosie had jumped into the water to go to it. And when it had come for her it had brought Valerie back.

And then I heard a murmur behind me. "Bill—she's dead! I saw her! Valerie's dead!"

It was Helen's voice—my lovely wife stood there. Silently she had followed me—she had seen everything. She stood there, lips parted, bosom rising and falling. And on her face was stamped a look so ghastly, so inexplicable, that it seemed to stop my heart.

"Helen!" I murmured. "What is it? What are you thinking of?"

"She's dead," Helen whispered again. "But before she died—while she was dying—she loved. Something loved her as—oh, as no mortal man ever could love!"

I didn't speak—just stared at my wife while maggots of hideous surmise crawled on my brain. Merciful God, what did she mean? What unholy thing could have entered into the soul of my darling to evoke that hungering cry—*loved her as no man could love. . . .*

CHAPTER THREE

The Thing from Hell

THE rest of that day was a blur of ghastliness. Others came and among us we got Valerie's body back to the camp. Some one went to the village for help. The police arrived and their boats could be seen dotting the river as they searched with grappling hooks for Rosalie—for a trace of the monster.

When the blue-coats came from inspecting Val's body, their hard-bitten faces wore greyish hue and the look at the backs of their eyes was more eloquent than their blustering words. All along the authorities had scoffed at the wild stories that came from our camp. They tried to scoff now. . . .

"Some sex madman," the sergent announced. "Them marks on the body—"

"And the scales on her legs—did the maniac make them grow there?" I said.

That fat officer's eyes flickered. He ran a finger around the inside of his collar. "Oh, them!" he muttered. "The broad had some disease. She must have had a disease—"

The uniforms got themselves out of there as fast as they could. They didn't care—nobody cared—what happened to us. And in the air of our camp was something that dried up their throats.

Back in our trailer, Helen muttered that she didn't feel well and fled to lock herself in the little cubby hole at the rear which was our bedroom. She stayed behind that locked door all day, wouldn't even open it when I prepared dinner—and supper—and called to her. I knew why she wouldn't come out.

Remorse of utter helplessness swept me as I sat in the doorway gazing over the camp scene. This poverty was the end to which my career of failure had brought the girl whom I loved more than my life!

A graduate of an agricultural college, I had sunk the whole of a small inheritance from my mother in my Kansas farm, where I planned to make a fortune in the ultra-modern scheme of tray-agriculture.

Then had come the years of drought. My wells all dried, I had watched my tanks of waving green seared to brown and black under day after day of pitiless sun; watched my wife's dear face growing thinner and whiter under lines of despair. Followed the final crushing blow—the black tornados that had scoured the face of the earth naked of all that lived and buried it under shifting sands.

On all sides of us our neighbors were taking to the roads, and we went along with them. A man must try to live. . . .

THE long day dragged past and a short time after dark Goodrich and Pearl came again.

"So Helen is sick," the farmer said darkly. "No wonder, after what she saw. But this isn't supernatural, Bill, no matter what you thought happened this morning." He gripped my arm tensely. "We've all got to know that such things can't exist. We've got to keep our heads!"

It wasn't supernatural! I, an educated man, knew even better than Goodrich that such things couldn't be. But the thing that had clutched Rosalie had been a water monster! And the scales growing on Valerie! And Helen, my own darling wife. . . .

Goodrich turned to beckon toward the open door of the trailer. It seemed that he had brought callers with him.

I was unaffectedly glad to see the first man who came stooping his tall shoulders under the low door frame. Grey, aristocratic, distinguished, Dr. Herman Masters was the sole individual of the neighborhood to have shown any human interest in our misfortunes. He was director of a big private sanatorium that

stood on a wooded hilltop a mile down the river. He had visited the camp a number of times to see how we were getting along. He had gone to bat for us with the town authorities when they had threatened to have us ejected as undesirable characters.

With him Masters had brought—Mogridge! I experienced a start of angry revulsion. The man's unclean presence radiated evil. His pink eyes darted around the walls, probed the corners like orbs of a snake questing its prey. I thought that I knew for whom he was looking—for my wife! . . .

I stood waiting guardedly while our callers took such seats as I had to provide. Darkness had shut down, humid and stifling. My eyes kept straying through the windows down toward the river, silent and noxious in the mystic light. Were these men really going to bring me the answer to all this ghastliness? Would they explain my terrors away—or was that monster lurking somewhere out there, waiting for Helen?

I was thankful now that she was safely locked in her little room! Suddenly then there came the creak of an opening door and my wife stood there, one slim hand pressed to her throat. My heart throbbed as I murmured her name and half rose from my seat. I didn't want her out here with Mogridge! I knew a fresh pang when she wouldn't meet my gaze, when I realized that she still didn't dare face me.

And then to my surprise she came swiftly to sink down at my side. Her fingers closed tensely around mine.

"Bill, darling," she murmured. "Oh, Bill, hold me tight—never let me go!"

I looked at her. As if she needed to beg that of me! As if I would ever leave her alone! What fear beyond my mere masculine power to guess could have wrung from her that almost desperate cry: never let me go?

And then I heard Masters' voice. "I asked Mr. Mogridge to come with me," he was saying. "I wanted him to tell you what he has just told me. I don't know where he got hold of it—from the old settlers, perhaps, the Indian breeds. A quite horrible story, utterly mad, but amazingly suggestive of the things that have been going on. The legend—like all legends—is to be disbelieved unless you find yourself forced to take stock in it." Mogridge smiled with a slightly satirical lisp through his too-red feminine lips. "The doctor asked me to tell you—you can do as you like. . . ."

THIS place—Mogridge said—had once been a sacred spot of the Seminole medicine men, dedicated to dark and gruesome rites. And this particular tale of diabolical weirdness was that in the waters around here lived a monster, a creature half man and half serpent. By night it came up out of the water to visit young girls. Over them, as they slept, it cast an evil charm of unholy desire. If they yielded to its wooing and went down to the river, they became like it—half snake and half human. They grew scales on parts of their bodies; they could live under water. They adopted numerous serpentine characteristics. . . .

Later, those who had mated with it came back to the land at night to lure men with their irresistible fascination. They were creatures who combined the sex-call of sirens with the wiles of the serpent—such temptation as no male could withstand. . . .

Mogridge paused, his eyes riveted on Goodrich's daughter. Pearl's red lips hung loose in a sensuous smile. Her cupped hands clutched her bosom where her breasts tugged at the thin silk of her waist.

"The—the girls lure men down to the water?" she whispered. Her tongue licked her hot lips.

The white-bearded man nodded gravely. "They are said to entice down there their husbands and sweethearts—those nearest and dearest to them. The monster crushes them to death in its coils. It will tolerate no human rivals!" Mogridge started to continue, then hesitated. "Perhaps I have said enough."

It was Helen's exclamation that brought me starting around. She swayed toward Mogridge. Excitement was in her face, the same lust that burned in Pearl's. God, that I should ever have seen that look on the face of my darling—that ghastly longing at thought of sin!

"No, don't stop, Mr. Mogridge—there is something I want to ask you!" she breathed. "Those girls who left their homes . . . how could a serpent charm them? Women, all women, fear snakes—"

I stared at her, wondering, still more inexplicably frightened. Was she trying to reason herself out of some dreadful obsession, trying to find a matter of fact explanation for those horrible feelings? Or was she feeding the lustful fires that she felt burning within her, gloating over lewd details?

"The snake is the immemorial symbol of temptation and fall from purity—yes." Mogridge replied with the pedantic air of a professor instructing a class.

"But temptation, the forbidden thing, has always exercised a perverse attraction upon women—from the apple in the Garden of Eden to the bride of today who takes impish delight in disobeying her husband. The serpent symbolizes the narrow line between goodness and evil, between safety and ruin, along with all women who love to flirt. This monster—if there is such a thing—comes to them in sleep when their inhibitions are relaxed. They are in condition to obey the impulse that every woman cherishes in her secret heart. For women desire love—wild, impetuous maddening love that sweeps them off their feet. And life and death are almost one."

I stared at the man, revolted—inexplicably frightened. Yearning for danger, fascination of toying with sin—dim potent instincts, inheritance of primeval desires only thinly veiled in the soul of every true wife? A suggestion hideous, impossible! Yet there branded on the face of my darling was stark proof of what he had said, horror that I couldn't explain away.

THERE was little more said after that. Masters must have sensed the mistake he had made in bringing Mogridge to see us, for soon after he took him

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away, leaving only Goodrich and Pearl with Helen and me. For a time we four sat there in silence, each thinking our own thoughts. Unnatural quiet had descended over the camp—moonlight painting magic witchery over the river, the strident fiddling of tiny night creatures.

"The moonlight—do you remember how it used to look when we were home?" Helen whispered. Subtly her strangeness had slipped away, leaving her her dear normal self. Her little cold hand nestled inside my big palm, her face a lovely soft shadow, eyes moist, lips trembling. "Out of our bedroom window—the cottonwood trees along the brook, and we could smell the roses down in the garden. Oh, Bill—if we were only at home!"

Home! I pressed her answering fingers, groaned as I drew her closer. If we were only there, alone together, away from—this!

"There isn't anything to it!" I muttered suddenly to Goodrich. "Snake-women and monsters! Charms and spells! We're not living in days of witchcraft. There is some rational explanation—some way to stop this—"

My words died on my lips. I saw Goodrich stiffen—saw his head snap around. On the steps of the trailer had sounded a curious scraping, like heavy body without legs dragging itself across boards.

"Merciful God!" Goodrich gasped.

Slowly the half open door was swinging wide. I saw a pair of paws gripping the sides. Dragon-like fingers covered with scales. A crooked arm—or a leg—I couldn't tell—

Then the whole of the hideous body stood revealed. A carcass round as a boa-constrictor's and thick as a man's, all over dazzling blue—flat head with scaly snout and dots of black nostrils. Tongue that whipped flickering scarlet threads, baleful glassy eyes that flamed with inhuman

lust as they gazed at my wife! That—something—was here!

Helen screamed. She flung herself into my arms, clinging there while her small fisted hands pounded my back and I felt her body surge in the racking tremors that swept it.

A teakettle filled with hot water stood on the stove. I snatched it up and hurled it into the face of the thing. I followed the missile with an iron lid which I clawed off the stove and sent hurtling through the door.

I tore Helen's arms from my neck and jumped for it, my hand clutching a poker. Goodrich's elbow rammed me one side and he tore past me and out through the door—coat flying, arms and legs swinging. There had been a swishing crunch on the boards as the thing whirled and fled. I had a glimpses of it making off over the ground between the tents, hissing, sending stones clattering.

It was out of sight behind the trailers and cars in an instant with Goodrich behind it. I was half way down the steps when Helen's arms flew around me from behind.

"Bill—dear husband—don't go! Don't leave me!" she whispered.

From out beyond I heard Goodrich's shout. "You stay there and look out for the girls. It's no damn snake, it's a man. I'll get him. I'll rip his heart out—"

Excitement needling me, I kept on down the steps. Helen came flying behind me. She threw her arms around me again, twisted me in her clasp so that I couldn't move.

"Bill—if you ever loved me—if I was ever your wife—don't leave me now!" she gasped. "If you go now, you'll never—"

That stopped me cold. "*If you let me go now, you'll never . . .*" Dear God, what did she mean? I didn't ask her, I didn't dare to hear what her answer might be. Without a word I turned and

drew her back into the trailer. I swept her into my arms and held her close. "If you let me go now, you'll never see me again. . . ." Was that what she had been going to say? . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Terror Under the Moon

TIME passed. Goodrich didn't return. Pearl, I suddenly realized, wasn't there either. During the excitement she had slipped away without my noticing her.

Helen was really sick now. Tenderly I undressed her and put her in bed. I drew a chair up beside her and sat holding her hand, watching her anxiously. God, how I loved her! Stark terror had afflicted her at sight of the monster. Yet with it had been mingled the longing that she couldn't withstand, that had wrung that tortured cry from her—if you go you'll never see me again! Would my love be strong enough to hold her against the pull of that hideous power? Or in spite of it would she go to it as Rosalie and Val had gone?

Born on the breeze came strains of voices in ribald song. I knew that Morigridge was holding another of his so-called religious meetings, when he would whip the Migs into frenzy with his fanatical harrangues. Steps rasped outside the trailer and through the shadows there stole his wife Susanna—a stooped, witch-like creature who ministered to such cases of illness as arose in the camp with doses of herbs and Indian brews. She had been in to treat Helen several times. I disliked her—feared her influence over my wife as something malign. Hair flying, lips crazily mumbling, the crone scuffed past and vanished into the dark.

Then suddenly the hush was shattered by clatter of hurrying feet. Goodrich came stumbling up the steps to stand white-faced, breathing hard. Helen had drifted

off into natural sleep. Without waking her I slipped my hand out of hers and went out into the other room.

"I didn't get him!" Goodrich gasped. "He ran too fast. Sometimes down on his belly, sometimes up in the air like a man. I just saw him dive into the water. God, I wasn't going in there after him!"

He broke off to dart his gaze around the trailer. "Where's Pearl?" he exclaimed. He took a frightened step toward me. "Coleman—where is my girl?"

"She went out while we were chasing the thing," I muttered. "Got away without my seeing her—probably through the window. I thought she must have gone home—"

Goodrich stared at me; he licked dry lips. "Home?" he echoed woodenly. "No. I just stopped there. She wasn't—" He gripped my arm, I felt his uncontrollable shaking. "Coleman—for God's sake! She's gone to the river! You've got to help me! We've got to find her, before—"

I cast a fearful glance toward Helen's room. "My wife—I can't leave her—"

"You've got to!" The man's voice came hoarse through agony-twisted lips. "Great God, man, my daughter! My baby girl! She's all I've got in the world. If that devil gets her. . . . It won't come here now, when it's after Pearl—"

Looking back on it now, I can't think what blind recklessness it could have been that induced me to leave the side of my sleeping wife and go with him. Perhaps my judgment was clouded by the spectacle of the man's terror. Perhaps I trusted that the monster, busy elsewhere, wouldn't come here. Perhaps. . . . May God forgive me. . . .

IN THE coolness of approaching dawn a thin mist had distilled up from the marshes. A ballet of phantoms trailed soundless feet over the scrub pines.

Moonlight shafted between their drifting lines, limning silver pools against the ebony of the river.

We didn't know where to go, which way to turn. Without plan or system we searched the gulleys that ran down to the river; splashed through bogs and eerie fens where spurtings of marsh gas stung in our nostrils and moccasins hissed as they plunged into the shallows—straining our eyes, calling Pearl's name. The night's horror mocked us in the wind that rustled the water weeds.

I don't know how long we hunted—and didn't find her. At last Goodrich halted to stand with face quivering, tears streaming. "He's got her, I'll never see her again," he sobbed. "My little girl—down there in the water with him. . . ." He shook my arm. "Coleman—he won't hurt her, will he? Not if she does—what he wants her to. He won't—God, if Valerie had done what he told her! Or maybe she did—"

The man's hysterical crack-up was the most heart-rending thing I had ever seen. But there wasn't anything I could do. And I had to get back to Helen. I had never intended to be away from her half of this time. Anything could have happened—

"Come on, Goodrich—hurry!" I muttered. I started running. And then the fog opened and we met a ghost wandering in the gloom. He was Jod Farris, owner of this very property.

Farris was a misshapen little man, almost a dwarf, with a plough-shaped hump disfiguring his shoulders. He had ratty jet eyes and a dark narrow face sinister in its gravings of furtive cunning.

"Oh, so it's you is it?" he cackled. His hand darted out to fasten its grip on my arm. He leered at me, tobacco juice trickling down from his lip-corners. "I was up to your house just now. Your wife wasn't there. She must have gone out—on a date—"

"What! Helen wasn't there!" The gasp burst from me. I elbowed Farris one side and started running. Merciful God, then my terror was true!

It was four or five minutes later when Goodrich and I lashed into the clearing—to find the whole place astir. Some one had lighted a bon fire. The ruddy glare threw shadowings on pale drawn faces and haggard eyes.

"Two more girls gone!" A man lurched up to me, voice strident with terror. "My darter—we didn't hear her go—jest found her nightgown on the floor. It had been in bed with her first—"

From behind another unpainted house-on-wheels jangled a woman's shriek. "Nancy! My baby, my little girl!" She burst into the firelight, hair plastered over her contorted face, eyes bulged like skinned grapes. She lifted bare wrinkled arms to flourish her fists at the circle of men.

"Why don't you do something, you cowards?" she screamed. "Why don't you go down to the river and get back your girls—"

Her voice died into silence. She stood with jaw sagging—we all stood there staring.

Past the outskirts of the camp where firelight waved lurid banners, two white figures sped running. I saw them in eerie split-second photography—hands clawing their breasts, faces transfigured with a look only half human. And—I couldn't be wrong—from loins to ankles their limbs were matted with glistening scales!

The next instant they had vanished like phantoms. For a moment no one moved, nobody breathed. Then a sound like a great collective moan wailed around the camp. Into it broke Goodrich's anguished cry:

"Coleman, come on! They'll take us to Pearl!"

I turned and ran at his side. Not because I thought that we should find his

girl—but because of the stark horror that whispered to me that one of those naked fleeing forms had been Helen!

WE DASHED through the camp and out onto the darkening hillside beyond. Somewhere soon I lost Goodrich. I made no effort to contact him for at that moment I caught sight of one of those elusive figures again—or so I thought, then. She stood poised on the crest of a bluff some distance above me, staring down at the water.

Could she really be Helen? That perfect form with pearly white shoulders and points of ivory breasts up-tilted against the stars. . . . The golden hair that streamed over her bosom. . . . dear God, was that being of unearthly loveliness my wife? I strained my eyes and still my aching heart couldn't be sure. While I stood staring she turned and started swiftly down the hill toward the river. Had she seen something down there—that was calling her?

I knew that I didn't have time to climb the hill and overtake her from that side. Sprinting, I started cutting a detour around the foot of the bluff, a course that would bring me out between her and the water. I had to get there first—between her and whatever in God's name she was seeking down there. If she was Helen—if I could only be sure! Or if she were not my wife—if I were wasting my time here while elsewhere my darling was. . . .

At my left the oily tongue of the water came into view with starlight dancing like imps' eyes against its slick. Out beyond, where night and morning flowed together in misty blur, something seemed to be moving. I heard faint splashings, saw ripples widening in silver curls.

Then I caught another glimpse of the girl high up above me. The wind brushed her hair and sent it streaming backward, baring her face like a cameo. Less than ever did she seem human then—a spirit

of the night and whispering winds, mad-deningly beautiful, hauntingly unreal. And suddenly then she started to run down the hill speeding toward the head of the little cove toward which the swimming creature was heading.

Around the head of a deep indentation of water I tore, splashing through shallows, dragging my feet out of bog holes. Terror clutched my heart in its icy hand. For I knew now that she was my darling. I had a vision of Valerie. . . . God, if I couldn't get there in time—if I couldn't stop her!

The sucking vacuum of quicksand pulled me ankle-deep and then half to my knees. Sweat poured from me while I floundered breathlessly. And up there on the hillside I could hear the swift light pattering of her feet—growing louder.

THE next instant she ran out of bushes and into plain sight. She ran a few steps and then paused to stand questioning, eager. My wife stood there, so near that I could have gone to her in a few seconds—had I not been anchored in ooze as though in a trap. And out beyond, boring the water with giant rollings, came the monster that I had seen in the door of my trailer—serpentine body and glistening scales, with water cascading down from its ugly shovel-shaped head. It was almost here, and I would never get out of this bog—would have to stand here and watch, while—

Helen started forward again—going to meet him as Valerie and Rosalie had gone! A strangled cry tore from me. "No! Helen, don't you go there! Helen, come here to me!" I gave a superhuman lunge. Thanks to God, it took my legs free.

At sound of my feet she looked around—lovely face bloodless, bewildered. A sobbing moan welled from her lips. She reached for my hand. And then she clung to me whimpering like a frightened child.

"Bill! Oh, dear husband!" she whispered. "I—"

I slid my arm around her. "It's all right, darling, I'm here," I comforted her. "What happened—what made you come here?"

"Yes—what happened?" she echoed dazedly. She drew a hand over her eyes. "I—"

I shook her gently. "Tell me," I prompted. "Why did you do such a thing?"

She shivered, gazed up at me, lips pitifully trembling. "I am trying," she murmured. "Oh, I am trying to tell you. It was a dream—something so awful—so wonderful—"

I half turned her, started to draw her away. "Never mind now, sweetheart," I muttered. "Come. We're going home—"

But she resisted. Perversely she twisted herself in my arms to look back at the river—as though in there something was calling her with a summons more compelling than mine! Her trembling was becoming more violent. Then to my terror I realized that the rhythmic quivering had centered itself in her hips.

"Helen, for God's sake!" I muttered. I tried to pull her away and then stood stricken anew at the sight I saw.

Through the mouth of one of the gulleys that ran down to the river came two figures. The girl was one of those who had disappeared some days before—now altered into a snake-creature with grossly congested breasts and scaly flanks. The youth whom she pulled by the hand at her side was Everett Luscomb. They had been engaged to be married when they got hold of a couple of bucks for the license.

As she drew him along toward the water, the girl fawned on him. She twined her naked body around him till she seemed a lithe serpent winding him into her coils.

It was a strangely horrible sight—one

that afflicted my wife with a terror even sharper than my own revolted amazement. She screamed and dropped in a faint. I whirled to catch her.

From down there where I couldn't see came soft rustlings—the girl's murmuring and then a man's voice exploding in a shriek of agony. Stones clattered under a thrashing form. Something heavy and lumbering pulled its feet from the ooze with a sound like smacking of mucid lips. Then Luscomb's death-rattles could be heard and over them a voice that crooned gleeful blood-joy.

Then a short distance off shore came a quick whirl of water. For an instant I saw again the scaly blue back, obsidian jet eyes that seemed to discharge venom. Should I have thrown myself in there and tried to kill the thing then—risked Luscomb's fate to battle it in its own element? I wouldn't know. . . .

For an instant, appalled by that macabre gruesome vision, I couldn't move, couldn't even open my mouth to cry out for help. And by that time the moment had passed. The thing swirled mockingly and was gone.

Then, with the limp form of my wife hanging over my arm, I was clawing my way back up the face of the bluff. I accepted it now—against all sanity I had to believe in the monster who sent back the girls he had made his to lure their men into his clutches. It had got Rosalie, Pearl—all those others. And Helen, on whose face had been stamped the look of awful *longing* that had been on theirs—who had come here to meet him. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Love Calls Me to Death

DAWN was just hanging its pink and saffron across the sky when I got Helen home. I didn't try to talk with her, she wasn't in any condition. I put her to bed in the back room, went out and locked the door.

That day no one made any pretense of going to work in Jod Farris' field. Women and men gathered tight-lipped in the shade of the trailers. Masters hurried down from the sanatorium, to spend some time with the police and then tell me that he had tried to induce the city authorities to advance us funds with which to go away. They had refused. Down in the town, everyone blamed the Migs themselves for what was taking place—feared that their own wives and daughters would start going next. There was talk of vigilantes, Ku Klux, tarrings and featherings, if we didn't depart.

If we didn't go—there wasn't one of us who wouldn't have fled if there had been any way. But none of us had money even to buy gas for our cars. And our sole source of food was the pittance doled out to us by Jod Farris. We were stranded here to wait for death's coming!

I got up from the steps where I had been sitting to go back into Helen's room. She was sleeping naturally now, one white arm curved around the golden ringlets that flowed over the pillow, satin bosom rising and falling. I bent to kiss her eyes and her hair. How beyond all thought and measure was she precious to me! I had saved her last night. But another one was on the way when that power wielded from an obscene half world would twine its damnable coils into her brain—and she would obey.

Before that night came I had to find the human brain that was directing this awfulness. I had to do something!

I had been thinking about Mogridge. I knew he was a dangerous lecher who preyed upon women—and he had told us that legend. Some time before, curiosity had prompted me to go to one of his meetings, held in a grove a half mile from camp.

People in depths of despair yield fertile soil for seed of false prophets. And as I looked into the lustful hot faces of men

and women sweating in orgiastic dance, I had wondered whether, in their reckless snatching for escape and forgetfulness, these people were capable of yet darker deeds.

I left the trailer to go and find him and demand a show-down. But he wasn't in his shanty; no one knew where he had gone. He had fled from the camp. His repellent-looking wife was missing too.

I put in hours seeking him. With night pressing on, my terror was rising. As a last despairing attempt, I went down to the village to intercede with the authorities. The police wanted to lock me up as the one responsible for the outrages!

Late in the afternoon, a mass meeting was held of all the Migs. Goodrich, grim, haggard, white-lipped, presided.

A babel of panicky discussion took place. "There ain't only one thing to do." A lanky Oklahomian summed up the general feeling. "Get up a posse of vigilantes and guard every house in the camp. Man or devil, we'll ketch him tonight an' tie him against a tree with a fire—"

HELEN and I went to bed early. Through our windows we could see silent forms taking up their watch posts throughout the camp. But that gave me no assurance. I knew they couldn't prevail against this power from hell. Helen cuddled her warm softness close, her arms slid around my neck. "Bill, dear husband, never leave me—never let me go!" she murmured. The fragrance of her hair was like wine in my brain.

Let her go? . . . I wound my arms around her so tightly that our two bodies were one, her heart beats answering mine through the walls of our chests. I told myself that she was safe there, that she couldn't even stir without my feeling it, before I went to sleep. And may God forgive me for that—self-pardon I never can find—when with this ghastliness meshing around my darling, I closed my

eyes for an instant—just one instant.

I slept. . . . And then suddenly I seemed to hear something. In that unique state of half waking I lay an instant. I murmured drowsily: "Helen, what was that—somebody screaming?" Then abruptly I sat up in bed—leaped to the floor and stood there tingling while everything inside me seemed to drop into a bottomless void.

Moonlight streaming in through the window limned a misty rectangle over the bed. But my wife wasn't there. The cozy nest where she had snuggled beside me was empty. In the middle of the rug lay a circle of foam—her white nightgown. And in the air hung that stench of the bogs by the riverside.

I stood there palsied and shaking—licked parched lips while I tried to curse. But no sound came out. I was like a man stricken with death who could not die.

The hours that came then were a blur of ghastliness. Bereft, I roamed the camp and the hillsides, halting those whom I met to push my face into theirs and mutter my question—had they seen my wife?

No one had seen her. . . . But somewhere she was, under the mocking white eye of the moon. Unless already she had gone down to the water, slipped in there, her body that I loved to consecrate with my kisses intertwined with that of the monster as they dove deep—deep.

A sob broke from my lips. In that hour I knew remorse of the damned. If I hadn't slept—if I had been true to my trust. . . . I stumbled on, searching still, back toward the water. But I saw no one save suddenly Mogridge, his white beard a flag against the dark as he stood motionless on the shore. He seemed to be holding communion with invisible things out beyond. He was gone when I stormed up to the spot.

And then suddenly I felt an out-thrust hand halting me—looked around to see the face of his wife Susanna outlined

hatchet-sharp at my side. "You! What are you doing here?" I exclaimed.

The old woman laughed crookedly through snags of blackened teeth. Her eyes glinted with something that wasn't mockery, wasn't hate—that was a horrible mingling of both.

"If you want to find your wife, follow him—follow Mogridge!" she hissed.

"Mogridge!" I echoed. "So it is he—but why are you telling me? Why are you betraying your husband? What kind of a trick—" I snatched at her arm to demand an explanation, but she twitched herself out of my grasp and scuttled away.

I let her go and turned to run toward the spot where I had last seen the man. I didn't catch up with him though, and in a few moments I had lost all sense of direction, to find myself wandering in a maze of black-water creeks. Noxious odors wafted up from the ooze flats.

Suddenly an exclamation broke from my lips. That white form that had glimmered for an instant against the rust-colored scum of the bog and then disappeared—had been Helen! And hurrying her along by an arm had strode, not Mogridge—but Dr. Masters!

A couple of minutes it might have taken me to arrive at the bend around which they had disappeared. I thrashed around the turn—to come to a halt and stand staring, incredulous.

OF HELEN there wasn't a sign. Only Masters was there. He was floundering on all fours on the ground. Blood trickled from gashes in his throat.

He saw me, came crawling toward me. "Thank God—Coleman!" he husked. He turned up his face, ashen and gibbering. His hands clawed at my knees. By my trouser legs and then by my coat he clutched me, striving to draw himself up to his feet. He gagged breathlessly:

"I was down around here, watching for a sight of it—and I found your wife. Alone. I was trying to get her home—

I'd lost my way. Then it came, just a minute ago—something came out of the water. I tried to fight with it. It—Coleman—that thing was stronger than hell—”

Overcome with horror, I backed away. Masters groaned and dropped to the ground—fainted or dead, I didn't know.

Then it was that for the first time I caught sight of the marks of the soft ground at the edge of the water. Only my wife's dear feet could have left those dainty prints! They went meandering off down the shore of the creek toward the darkness beyond.

I started running, following them. My heart was pounding so that I couldn't breathe. Helen was here—alive!

I plunged around the next corner. She wasn't in sight yet. But at this spot she had slipped and fallen down. And where her thigh had rested against the ground, the clay was stencilled with pattern of triangular scales!

Merciful God! Helen was here—but *how* was she here? Changed already into what unspeakable *thing*?

And then from somewhere close by I heard an eerie shrilling like a valkyre wailing her loneliness—Helen's voice calling to me. “Bill! Bill, dear lover, where are you? Bill, come to me—come here and kiss me—” The call quavered unearthly and died away.

For a moment I stood there transfixed while miasma of horror crawled under my skin.

I ran a step forward—and there she was. Stark nude in the moonlight, arms outstretched, beautiful white body trembling. “Helen!” I cried. “Darling, thank God—”

I sprang toward her—and then something hideous took place. With a twist of her hips she evaded my grasp. She ran a step toward the water and paused, looking back. The smile on her face was a wanton's loose-lipped invitation!

God, that lewdness on the face of my darling! And then, despite the surge of my horror, I felt a flame of desire blaze up in me—hunger then transcended all reason. I muttered her name, leaped to seize her—but swift as a moonbeam she slipped out of my reach.

I mumbled crazily and jumped for her again. She trickled out of my fingers and her laughter came back taunting, provoking. I knew what she was doing to me. I had a vision of Everett Luscomb's face.

With a hoarse cry I flung myself after her, hands clutching. She sprang for the water, launched herself in there swimming. I dove in too, a scant stride behind, snatched frantically at her hair which streamed out behind. She dove swiftly, slim legs cutting the darkness, and was gone.

For an instant I peered into the green shadows where she had disappeared. A black light burst in my brain stopping everything there like a run-down clock. Helen gone! Slipped through my clumsy hands to go there to him—

Suddenly, close in front, I saw the water in oily upheaval as though churned from the depths. I yelled hoarsely, whirled toward the shore—and then from underneath felt arms gripping my knees, a heavy weight pinning me and dragging me down. Wildly I kicked—uselessly. With a dizzying speed I was yanked under the surface.

I couldn't see the thing that had grabbed me—but as Masters had said, it was stronger than hell. In frenzy I thrashed and lunged and I might as well have tried to battle the old man of the sea. Pitilessly it drew me deeper into the black caves. My lungs were bursting with the effort to hold in the air. Suddenly it escaped with a whistling rush. Then the pressure of water closed in on me, crushing my chest like jaws of a giant nut-cracker.

Hooks of fire raked my vitals. Black

spots danced in my eyes. I strangled for breath—knew I was dying. And from the shadows down underneath me something laughed.

CHAPTER SIX

The Laughing of Fiends

WHAT jerked me from my dream of death back to consciousness of life more dreadful than any death was a scream that rose to flog the silence with whip-strokes of agony. The soul from which that desperate wailing had been torn was suffering torments not of the world of mortal men!

I opened my eyes, looked around—and for an instant experienced the weird conviction that the monster had worked his necromancy upon me and that I too had become a denizen of the depths. For water was above me, below me, it surrounded me on all sides. The translucent wall was illuminated by green radiance through which nude figures could be seen moving—from which those tortured sobbing had come.

And then I realized that the reason that I was breathing naturally and not drowning was that attached to my head was a diving helmet supplied with air from a small metal tank strapped to my shoulders. And all the figures that I saw gliding around there were similarly equipped.

Suddenly the disturbance of water cleared away and I could see ahead to what seemed a rocky wall. Against it stood the form of a girl, chained there by ankles and wrists. She was utterly nude! Her slim figure strained there, hands clenched at her sides, head thrown back—a gesture of unspeakable agony. I couldn't see her face, but those tresses of raven black hair that lay plastered over her breasts. . . . Pearl Goodrich had black hair!

Pearl screamed again—and then the

hideous cause became evident. Around her crowded male figures, clad only in trunks, with diving outfits over shoulders and heads. In a gloved hand each grasped one of the blood-sucking voracious eels that infested the river. They held the fish close to Pearl's body. The grey heads slashed like rattlesnakes, teeth tearing away segments of living flesh! Rivulets of blood, murky grey under water, streamed from Pearl's body. And as her ghastly hackings came transmitted through the mouthpiece at the front of her helmet.

I cursed through set teeth. I threw myself forward to swim over there—and then for the first time became aware that I was anchored to the bottom by things knotted around my ankles.

NOW the green light shifted to illuminate other forms gliding across the wall. They were the girls who had disappeared from the camp—looking now ever more like mermaids with their scaly flanks, swollen breasts, and streaming hair. A male figure with fat pink arms and rolls of tallow bloating his belly paddled toward one of them. "Come, dearie—come," he called. She swerved toward him and his arms closed around her.

Others were doing the same. They dragged the girls behind clumps of tall seaweed. With claws fitted over the ends of their fingers they held them while their shrieks rang.

I experienced a horror that was physically sickening. Here were things new in the annals of human depravity! And Helen—

The light swerved and then I caught sight of her, filling a niche beside Pearl that had been empty a few moments before. Chained there by legs and arms, prisoner of some foul god of the deeps! Around her was closing another ring of the men with the flesh-eating eels. The slimy heads nuzzled her and she leaped as though bitten by living fire.

In frenzy I beat my arms, thrashed at my ropes. God couldn't let them do that to my darling—

Abruptly my strugglings ceased. For into sight came lazily swimming the blue monster! He balanced himself in the water. And the voice that sounded through the cleverly constructed mouth-diaphragm was that of—Dr. Masters! . . .

"I am sorry that had to happen to you, Coleman—I had really begun to like you," his suave accents addressed me. "But this is business—and I'm a little out of the ordinary about my sex angles, too. You see that I worship pain. And I wanted your wife. I've always wanted her—to love in agony."

I stared at him voiceless in stunned understanding. So it had been Masters all the time, a sadist!

"This thing runs into big money—close to fifty thousand a year," he was going on. "It's worth taking plenty of trouble. No one would imagine the number of men there are—most of them rich men—who want the kind of excitement that is hard to get, and are willing to pay big for the chance to let themselves go. There are places of pain in all the big cities, of course. But all that had become rather trite. I've got something new here in this big tank at my sanatorium."

"SO YOU make your money by exploiting human depravity," I muttered. "And the girls for this hellishness you stole from the Migs, those poor broken people—"

"Before you folks showed up I had been getting them from cities, orphan asylums—it was dangerous and getting more so," he replied. "I fixed it up with Farris to make a deal to keep you here. He supplied all your food, so it was easy for him to get the drug into the coffee of anyone we picked out. A few doses of the aphrodesiac, and then when I went to the girl's room with my whirling mirror it took

only a moment to hypnotize her. I'd give her a shot with a needle and then she would follow me down to the water."

"And tonight, when I saw you with my wife, wounded—" I said.

"I needed an alibi, just in case of possible suspicion. I made those scratches myself—they weren't as serious as they looked. I knew that the Mogridges were around and would see me apparently knocked out. Farris was in the other monstrous suit off shore. We kept two of them hidden in a canoe in the bushes. He took you and your wife away. We always carried one of the tank-helmets with us and slipped it over the girl's head when we got her below. We would put her into the canoe as soon as we got her out of sight of land and then bring her here. Of course the fish scales were stuck onto their legs with cement—"

"And you had Luscomb killed—"

"I thought that he was getting suspicious of me. And the more crazily bizarre I made it all, the more likely they were to blame Mogridge or some of the Indian breeds and forget about me—"

"Mogridge's wife told me that he was behind it—" I broke in.

"Susanna hated him as only a spurned woman can hate because he neglected her to run around after girls. She probably didn't really think he was guilty—she just wanted revenge and hoped there might be enough evidence against him to get him in wrong. . . . But we had our troubles here, too. Some of the girls wouldn't react—went stale on us the way Valerie did. So we had to get rid of them. We lost three or four that way—just money and time wasted."

I stared at Masters' distorted visage through the two windows of glass. "God, what kind of a thing are you?" I muttered.

He didn't answer. Little by little the motion of the water had drifted him closer to me as he talked. I shot out my hands

in a desperate grab for him. I had to kill him! Up there the men were pressing closer around Helen.

God, I had to kill Masters somehow—somehow escape and get to her! But he laughed mockingly and swerved out of my reach. “Don’t get any wild idea that you’re going to play hero, Coleman,” he jeered. “You saw Luscomb—”

THE torturers had turned from Pearl to concentrate upon Helen. The grey shapes darted like whip lashes, snapping more voraciously as their blood-hunger rose.

Helen didn’t scream—it wouldn’t be accurate to describe the sound that came from her as merely a scream. It was an explosion of things bursting, breaking, going haywire inside her. Her body sprang upward and outward against the chains as though the sheer force of her agony would tear them out by the roots.

The sight of that seared my eyes and cramped the breath in my lungs. My arms beat like flails—puny flappings that did nothing to move me from the big stone that weighted me down below.

And then, suddenly, I remembered. My hands groped in the sodden folds of my trousers pocket for the long-bladed woodsman’s knife that Masters had neglected to look for. My numbed fingers shook as I clawed open the blade.

Bending my body into a bow I dove straight down till I could grasp the ropes at my feet. I slashed—and felt the sting of pain as my sweepings pierced the flesh of my legs as well as the cords.

I mouthed a curse of exulting as I felt my ankles kick free. In a long level dive I shot through the water.

The ring of figures around Helen was too absorbed in its hellishness to mark my approach from behind. Like a tiger shark I launched myself to strike at the nearest form. I saw the man’s back spurt a wisp of grey smoke, heard his death-

croak—and then they were on me.

For a moment it was a bedlam of yells and plunging forms. I drove my blade into the hearts of two others, knew grim relish as I saw their bodies droop and go flopping down to the bottom—chilled to a sudden dismay as I felt arms gripping my legs from underneath and dragging me down.

I dove then to strike at them savagely—got one through the back and half-severed the arm of his mate. I twisted around to return to the pack, and gasped at a blow that galvanized me to the heels. Others had picked up stones from the bottom and were beating them on my helmet. If they could break through my glass window, I would drown in a minute!

Stark terror gripped me now as I battled for life. It was a scene that might have been filmed in an ocean-cave of the damned—the darting nude shapes, their grotesquely formed helmets lending them the weirdness of creatures half-human; their blows slowed down by the water till they seemed feather-puffs delivered in eerie slow-motion.

In frenzy I fought them—in a contest that could have but one ending. They were too many for me. Stabbing pains dizzied me, my breath came in thin pantings. With the insensate cruelty of a dog-pack they were beating my life out. A final blow took me on the base of the skull and slowly I sank to the bottom, collapsed there on hands and knees.

In anguish I moaned Helen’s name, dug my fingers into the gravel—trying to crawl to her. My neglect had brought her to this. God couldn’t let me fail now!

But I would never have got up from that spot had I not caught one last glimpse of my wife. Suddenly freed from her chains, she dived off the platform. Behind her shot the blue shadow of Masters, the monster. Swiftly he overtook her. He clutched her in taloned hands and dragged her behind a clump of water

weeds. I saw my darling wound in his scales, heard her shrilling half in agony, half in awful . . . delight!

Some strength that wasn't my own—that must have been sent me from the hell of the living dead—flowed then into my tortured carcass so that I dragged myself up to my feet. My lips met in my teeth till I tasted the saltiness of my own blood.

Wabbling, seesawing, spewing curses, I stumbled around the corner and saw them before me. Saw . . .

For a space of time then I wasn't human. I've only a dim memory of myself shooting in there like a living projectile, driving my knife into Masters's back, slashing and rending—of seeing his body surge in convulsions, hearing his strangled yells as water poured into his suit.

He was dead. . . . And after that, none of the others bothered me. They had no stomach to face my knife after they looked at him.

COMEHOW, I wouldn't know how, I got Helen into my arms, groped over the floor of the tank till I found a flight of steps leading up to the surface. Felt my way in pitch darkness through the now deserted building on the outskirts of the grounds where the secret entrance to the pool was concealed—located a door and came at last out under the stars. Hours later, some of the natives found us wandering along a deserted

road and took us to town and to a hospital.

I was released shortly, but Helen stayed on. The skin grafters performed wonders on her body—if there could only have been another miracle to make whole her mind! After months the doctors told me that it might help if I took her somewhere far inland where she wouldn't ever see running water. . . .

Our story of the night in Masters' torture pool got into the papers and at last to the governor and the legislature. They voted us a thousand dollars for the public service we had done in bringing Masters' clients to the prison sentences that they drew—and to compensate us for our sufferings.

We took a trip and finally went back to our farm. Experts from Washington had found a way to anchor the drifting soil so that it would live again.

That was three years ago. Things are well with us now. If there isn't another drought, I'll be in the money soon.

Things are well, I say. . . . Save for the horror that water has for Helen and me. When she steps dripping, out of the bath tub and comes to wind her arms around my neck and press her rosy nakedness against me—when I feel the lascivious rolling of her hips and see that look in her eyes—I know that she is hearing again the summons of voices inhuman—whose call in her ears will ever be louder than my words of love.

THE END

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Hostesses In Hell

by RUSSELL GRAY

If only the fury of that gale had sent us to the bottom of the sea! But a cruel fate spared us—to cast us on that island of the damned where I was forced to watch my lovely Carla and her friends become the playthings of creatures out of a devil's nightmare! . . .



***A Novelette
of Fantastic
Horror***

CHAPTER ONE

Not Human, Not Beast

LOOKING back, I cannot rid myself of the notion that a malignant power took over our destiny from the moment we stepped into the launch. To begin with, the plan had been only for Carla Mann and I to go on a short cruise. I had promised Carla's father that we would stick close to the shore,

as I had never before been on the ocean. Not that I'm a bad sailor; I'd had plenty of experience on inland waters. But Mr. Mann pointed out a lake isn't an ocean.

No, it isn't. But it wasn't the treacherous and ruthless sea that we had to worry about. What we found, finally, on dry land, was more cruel and horrible than the sea had ever been.

I was starting the motor when Carla's cousin, Melantha, and her two maiden aunts, whom everybody in Seabeach called Miss Desma and Miss Zelda appeared along the beach, and Carla asked them to come along. Less than a minute later the Foster twins, followed by Wanda Rimstad, charged on the dock and demanded to accompany us.



Seabeach was that sort of community. One happy family, and Carla Mann's boy friend, who had come from the city to spend a week with her, had been immediately accepted into that family. I, of course, was the boy friend. So by the time I eased the launch away from the dock, there were eight of us in the boat—seven women and myself and then we started our trip to hell. . . .

The weather was fine. The sea was rather choppy, but that seemed natural on the ocean and I didn't hug the shore as closely as I might have. But the shoreline was always there, less than a mile away.

We were out about an hour when the darkness swooped down on us. It came suddenly in the shape of an immense black-grey cloud. But there was no wind; instead there was a breathless calm. Even the waves flattened out. The shore melted away into a thin line.

"We had better go back." Carla said anxiously.

I nodded and turned the wheel. The nearer we reached shore, however, the further it seemed to be receding. The darkness was increasing. I could see lines of worry deepen on the face of Miss Desma who was sitting near the wheel.

"Everything's under control," I sang out cheerily. "We're nearly back. And suppose it does rain? The worse that some of us will get is a wetting. The rest of you can keep dry in the cabin."

I really believed that. I had been out in flimsier boats in storms.

But never in a storm like that. It swept at us from the ocean with the suddenness of a cavalry charge, and although it was only three in the afternoon, night came with it. With terror clutching at my heart, I realized that I could no longer see the shore.

"A compass!" I yelled above the wind. "There must be a compass in the cabin."

The girls went over every inch of the cabin a dozen times. They found no compass. All I could do was try to keep the launch from foundering until the storm blew over. And that wasn't an easy job. The waves were small mountains. The rain came down in solid sheets. Several times I had to cling desperately to the wheel to keep from being washed over. The women huddled in the tiny cabin.

And then something went wrong with

the motor. It simply died. I was never to find out what had really happened to it.

A few minutes later we had our first and only break. The storm eased off, petered out.

Did I say break? We would have been better off if we had all gone to the bottom of the ocean. The sea would have been kinder. . . .

THE clouds parted and the sun came through. It was, at the moment, the most welcome sight in the world. The rain continued for a short while longer, then melted away. I slumped down in my seat and groped in my pocket for cigarettes. The cigarettes were there all right, but they were a soggy mass. My drenched shirt and ducks were plastered to me and a good part of the ocean was in my sneakers.

The mainland was no longer in sight. With night only a couple of hours off and a useless motor, we would have been in a hell of a mess if not for the nearby island.

It had been the first thing I saw as soon as I could see anything. It lay about five hundred yards to starboard—a mile-long pile of vegetation, occasionally broken by enormous bare boulders. Not a very inviting place, but at least a haven.

The women came out of the cabin. They were a pretty disheveled lot. In spite of the fact that they had huddled in the cabin, each of them had been out in the storm long enough to have become drenched to the skin.

Carla threw her arms about me. With a wan smile she said: "Do you know, Jay, what I was thinking of when I was sure we were done for? That I wanted to kiss you once more before we went down."

So I kissed her then and there. The others grinned. Neither Carla nor I cared. I held her adorable wet body, clad only in shorts and a white polo shirt,

close to me. The soaked knitted shirt was glued to her, and the way the material moulded her high, rounded breasts did all sorts of things to my heart.

Reluctantly I released her, and it was at that time that I noticed how attractive all of the other women were. With the exception of the maiden aunts, they were all attired much like Carla. There was Carla's cousin, Melantha, buxom but not fat as the curves revealed by her clinging outfit testified. Wanda Rimstad, Carla's friend, was the dark-eyed, vivacious type. The Foster twins were always delightful to look at. About twenty years old, I imagine; small and fragile as porcelain dolls and indistinguishable from each other.

Even Carla's maiden aunts were easy on the eyes. Miss Zelda, who was about thirty-five, was the raw-boned, broad-shouldered type of woman, extremely well preserved. Miss Desma was a couple years older, plump, and with the most charming smile I had ever seen.

The evil destiny which had taken charge of us must have chuckled fiendishly at the sight of those seven attractive women.

I said: "Something's wrong with the motor. Maybe I can fix it. I suggest, though, that we get over to that island first and build a fire and dry out before we all catch pneumonia."

All eyes turned to the island, and instantly I sensed that something was wrong. Every one of the women had kept her courage admirably during the storm, but now I saw some of them shudder. The fact that they were wet and it was growing chilly, I thought; but I knew that wasn't it.

"That must be the island they told us to keep away from," Wanda Rimstad said in a faltering tone.

"Huh?" I demanded. "What's wrong with it?"

Carla's hand closed over my arm. "We

don't know. I've never seen it before. As far as we know it, it hasn't even a name. But there has been talk lately among the natives of Seabeach that there's a curse on the island, that there's something strange and horrible there."

Miss Zelda snorted derisively. "Stuff and nonsense! I've heard those stories, too—the usual prattle of superstitious folks who find pleasure in scaring themselves. I'm cold and I'd like nothing better than a warm fire."

"Right!" I agreed heartily. "I think I saw a couple of oars in the cabin."

The girls admitted reluctantly that their fears were silly. I fetched the oars. We had to use them as paddles. I took one side of the launch, the girls worked in shifts on the other side, and slowly we neared the island.

The vegetation came down to within a few feet of the water. And there was a man waiting to receive us!

I suppose we should have been glad to see him. His presence showed that the island was at least inhabited by human beings. But somehow the sight of him reacted on us in the opposite way.

PERHAPS because of the way he looked. I'm quite tall, but he was as tall as I, and twice as broad. His head was massive, topped by an unkempt mane of shaggy reddish hair. He hadn't shaved in at least a week, and, aside from that, his face was something to scare a nervous man.

Yet it wasn't only his appearance. It wasn't even the pistol which was stuck conspicuously in his belt. It was the way he kept glancing over his shoulder every now and then toward the heart of the island and the fear which glinted in his eyes.

If a man his size and armed was afraid of something on that island, we certainly had reason to be uneasy.

As he helped me beach the launch, he said: "I saw your boat and I came to

meet you. I trust that I can be of service."

"You have a home on this island?" I asked.

"Yes. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Dr. Hallam Jarrett."

"An M. D.?" I couldn't keep the astonishment out of my voice.

He laughed. That is, laughter gushed from his throat, but there was no laugh in his face. "You do not think I look like a doctor? More like a circus strong man, perhaps? And my face, it hasn't enough refinement and sensitivity, eh? Too gross?"

Although he had read my thoughts correctly, I started to protest. He didn't bother to listen. By this time the women had all climbed out of the launch and stood huddled together, whispering among themselves. Dr. Jarrett looked at them.

I noticed for the first time how small and pig-like his eyes were. He said not a word but stood staring at the women as if he had never before seen any. I had an impression that his eyes were boring through their scanty, clinging garments—and he looked longest and most intent-ly at Carla.

The women cringed, moved closer together under that scrutiny. Impulsively balling my fists, I stepped toward Dr. Jarrett. Then I stopped. I had gotten a closer look at his face, at his eyes, and what I saw there wasn't lust, but pity.

He was sorry for them, as if he had special knowledge of an appalling and inescapable doom in wait for them.

As briefly as possible, I made introductions. Dr. Jarrett nodded to each in turn and again offered the hospitality of his home.

Miss Ze'da said: "Thank you, Dr. Jarrett, but we would prefer to return to Seabeach before dark if possible. Surely you must have a boat of some kind. We would be glad to pay."

The pity deepened in Dr. Jarrett's eyes. "Unfortunately our launch left a short time ago for supplies. It will not return until tomorrow. There is no other boat on the island."

It was then that we heard the scream for the first time.

Did I say scream? That's not the way to describe it. One associates a scream with terror or rage, and there was nothing of either in that cry. Rather it was an expression of sheer bestial triumph and exultation. Yet at the same time it was as thin and as high-pitched as the scream of an hysterical woman.

As suddenly as it had come the cry faded away. The blood had drained from all of our faces and intuitively the women had moved closer to me. Carla's wet shoulder shivered against my chest.

Dr. Jarrett's hand, I noticed, was closed over the butt of his pistol. His head was turned toward the center of the island.



The telephone call was just a joke, said John Smith—because he wanted to hold hands with Marion. But Marion said no, so they headed the coil . . . went out to the little house on St. Ann's—and they found the corpse, all right; and three live killers! Wyatt Blassingame tells all in his latest full-length novel, *Murder at the Morgue*. . . In the same issue there is a punch-a-paragraph novelette entitled *Oasis for Diving Men*, by Norbert Davis, and another by Paul Ernst: *Behind the Eyes of Death*, in which a young man risks more than his life to save a girl with blood on her hands from a tough copper and a killer with a one-track mind! . . . Arden K. Panchohn, T. T. Flynn, Ward Hawkins, Cyril Pincknet—and others, contribute toward making this a BANNER NUMBER! DON'T MISS IT!

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Slowly his head moved toward us, and I saw beads of sweat on his forehead.

"My God," I cried, "there can't be animals on this island!"

"That wasn't an animal," Dr. Jarrett said quietly.

"A human being? It didn't sound like—"

"No," Dr. Jarrett said. "Not a human being either."

CHAPTER TWO

The Woman Hell Sent

A FOOTPATH led through a jungle-like chaos of undergrowth. In single file, we followed Dr. Hallam Jarrett's huge bulk. I brought up the rear, walking with one hand on Carla's shoulder.

When we had walked for about five minutes, Carla stopped. "Jay, I'm afraid."

"Of Dr. Jarrett? I can handle him if necessary."

"Not only of him," she whispered. "It's something I feel deep inside of me, a sort of persistent warning. And those strange answers Dr. Jarrett gave to your questions about that weird scream."

I tried to dismiss her fears with a laugh. "His idea of humor. Or maybe he's a little cracked."

"But, Jay, he's afraid of something too."

That was true. Because I had no answer, I simply shrugged and said: "We've fallen behind the others. Let's hurry up to them."

The house stood in a large clearing at about the center of the island. When we broke out of the woods, we stopped and gaped. We had expected to find a shack, at the most a cabin. Instead we were looking at a structure more fit to be the manor house of an estate than on this wild island. It was a large Colonial-type house, freshly painted in dazzling white. Its symmetry was marred, however, by a long narrow building with barred windows which jutted from one wing.

"You are surprised at the magnificence in which we live?" Dr. Jarrett chuckled. "Yes, we have all modern conveniences, including electricity and running water." He paused and then added with a cryptic smile: "We cater only to the most exclusive clientele."

"You run a hotel here?" Miss Desma asked in surprise.

"You may call it that," Dr. Jarrett responded, and moved toward the house.

A man was standing on the open porch. In his hand he held a revolver with the longest barrel I had ever seen.

"That damn Cassie!" he called out excitedly. "Did you hear her, Hallam? She's driving them crazy."

He disregarded our party as if we didn't exist. He was even thinner than I and much shorter and he had the face of a ferret. Like Dr. Jarrett, he was unshaven.

"Stop worrying, Joseph." Dr. Jarrett told him. "She'll come back when she's hungry. Meanwhile we have guests. Tell Elsie to put on hot coffee for them."

Joseph looked at us for the first time. Slowly his eyes swept over each of the women, seemingly appraising them as if they were so much merchandise, and he ran a white tongue over his lips. Then he thrust his revolver into his belt and went into the house.

By this time the women were in a pretty bad state of mind. Carla hung on to me as if she would never let go, and one of the twins, Rose or Marie, I couldn't tell which, clung to my other arm.

"What's all the mystery about, Doctor?" I demanded. "Who is this Cassie and whom is she driving crazy and why? What are you afraid of? Why are you and the other man carrying guns?"

Dr. Jarrett expelled a vast sigh. "Cassie is one of our patients. She ran into the woods and won't return. You see, we run a sanitarium"—he hesitated—"for incurables."

That explanation was reasonable—or so it seemed to us at the time. We followed Dr. Jarrett into the house.

A FIRE crackled merrily in the fieldstone fireplace of the cozily furnished living room. The fire drew us the way flies are drawn to honey. We took turns warming and drying ourselves until a woman came in with sandwiches and steaming coffee.

Elsie, Dr. Jarrett called the woman. She was built like a wrestler and had a face like a granite block.

We ate ravenously while Dr. Jarrett sat deep in an armchair with his stubbled chin resting on vast, redhaired fists. The food and the fire served to put us more at our ease.

When we had finished eating, Dr. Jarrett said: "I regret that there are no clothes for the ladies to change into. I suggest that they remove their clothes and dry them in front of the fire."

"Here?" Miss Zelda inquired with raised eyebrows.

"Oh, no. There is a private room. Elsie, show the ladies to the study."

Dutifully the women trooped after Elsie. The desire to get their clothes off and dry them was greater than any uneasiness which they still felt.

I followed, telling them: "I'll go back to the launch and see if I can fix the motor. Chances are that we can still get back to Seabeach by nightfall."

We went along the hallway. Elsie opened a door into a room tastily furnished in red leather. Against one wall was a fireplace. The women made for it and I discreetly withdrew.

Dr. Jarrett was no longer in the living room when I went through it. As I walked across the clearing to the footpath, I heard a groan behind me. I turned. It had come from the narrow structure which jutted out from the house. There was nothing strange about a groan in a sanitarium, but

again I was assailed by the feeling that something was terribly wrong.

I realized now that Dr. Jarrett's brief explanation had left a great deal untold. Why the pistols? Why the iron bars on what was evidently the hospital section? And why were there no nurses in the sanitarium? Aside from the inmates and whomever had gone for supplies, Dr. Jarrett and Joseph and Elsie appeared to be the only permanent residents on the island.

As I hurried along the footpath, the conviction grew that I had to get the women away from the island as soon as possible. But when I reached the launch and looked at the motor, my heart died within me. Somebody had used a sledge hammer or a large rock on the motor. It would never again be any good.

Who had done this? Who wanted to make sure that we would stay here overnight?

As I was climbing out of the launch, I heard a woman's terrified scream. It lasted only a second or two, then choked off abruptly.

I stood frozen, listening—then I was running. I visualized those seven attractive women grouped nude about the fire. Had it been one of them who had screamed? Perhaps Carla? God!

I was stumbling through the footpath when I heard the second cry. Not a scream of terror this time, but a cry of triumph and exultation, as of a beast over its kill.

Good God, what was happening at the house?

It seemed that I had been running for ages, although it couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes. Suddenly a woman materialized on the path in front of me. I had to pull myself up short to keep from crashing into her.

How can I describe her? I can say that she was beautiful and it wouldn't mean anything. It was the kind of beauty that dazzled you like the most brilliant display of fireworks bursting suddenly in the night

sky. It enveloped you and left you dazed and unbelieving. Does that sound absurd? Well, remember that I had heard somebody scream in mortal terror and that I was worried sick for the safety of the girl I loved and was rushing to her—yet at the sight of this woman I forgot all that. I made no attempt to go past her and continue to the house. I simply stood there drinking in her beauty.

THER figure was statuesque and perfectly proportioned. Her eyes were as green as the surrounding shrubbery, eyes which caught the waning sunlight and reflected it like a cat's. Her teeth were white and small and even and curiously pointed. And her dress was utterly ridiculous on that island.

Not because it did not become her, but because it was as out of place on that wild island as an aborigine in loincloth would have been on Fifth Avenue, New York. She wore, you see, a green and silver evening gown and silver opera pumps. And she wore nothing else. That was easy to see, because her gown was made of gossamer stuff through which the sheen of her flesh could be glimpsed. The bodice was cut so low that only the lower curves of her magnificent breasts were covered.

Her voice was husky, vibrant. She asked with the guilelessness of a child: "You love Cassie?" And she stepped toward me.

Cassie! The patient who Dr. Jarrett had said had run away.

She came so close to me that her breasts pressed against my chest. I'm a shade over six-two, but she wasn't more than a couple of inches shorter. Carla had been wiped from my mind. My lips moved toward hers.

Her hands came up to hold me to her—And I saw her fingers. With a cry I hurled myself backward. Her fingers were wet up to the knuckles—red with glistening blood which was still wet.

A cloud passed over her perfect features. "You do not love Cassie?"

I kept staring at her fingers as if hypnotized by them, and suddenly it struck me that she was the one I had heard cry out twice in that spine-chilling manner of a triumphant beast! She was the one Dr. Jarrett had said was not an animal and not human! And this creature had almost caused me to forget Carla!

She saw the rage which suddenly contorted my face. Her pointed teeth bared in an animal snarl—and all at once she was gone. I saw only the green of her gown merge into the green of the undergrowth, and then I was alone on the path. I did not stop to wonder how she could possibly have made her way through that solid mass of vegetation. I was running again, my mind shrieking Carla's name.

The moment I burst into the clearing I saw the body in front of the porch. And on the porch itself, I saw Carla struggling in the arms of Dr. Jarrett.

I flew up to the porch, swung Dr. Jarrett around by a shoulder, and drove a hard right to his jaw. He went back on his heels, righted himself, yelled: "Don't be a fool! I was trying to keep her from running into danger."

He could have pulled his gun and shot me had he wanted to. He didn't, so I thought perhaps he was on the level. Carla cried, "Jay, darling!" and threw herself into my arms.

"There's death out there," Dr. Jarrett was saying. "This girl went crazy with fear, like some of the others. I had to hold her back. That woman there on the ground let panic get her, and now look at her."

I looked. I went down the porch steps and stood over the body. My stomach twisted.

It was—or rather had been—Miss Zelda. She lay on her back, arms outflung, eyes staring with horror. She hadn't any throat. It had been ripped out as

if by steel fingers. By the fingers of an incredibly beautiful woman which were red up to the knuckles with Miss Zelda's blood.

CHAPTER THREE

The Block of Cells

JOSEPH came out of the house. I could see the pallor of his face through his unshaven beard.

"My God, Cassie's let them all out!" he said to Dr. Jarrett. "They're running wild on the island."

Dr. Jarrett nodded. "She stole the key from my desk. Look for her, Joseph. If you can bring her back, the others will come."

Joseph looked like a man who had been asked to volunteer for a task which meant inevitable death. He said: "Why pick on me? You're responsible for this hellish place. It's your lookout to get them back."

Dr. Jarrett dropped his hand languidly on his pistol and took a step or two toward Joseph. From where I stood his bulk completely blotted out Joseph. I don't know if anything was said by either and I couldn't see their faces. But after about half a minute of silence, Joseph growled, "Oh, all right," and he moved toward the woods. His narrow shoulders were hunched and he walked like a man going to his doom.

Carla was sobbing softly against my chest. We were still standing near Miss Zelda's corpse, but we made sure not to let our eyes stray toward it.

"Look here, Dr. Jarrett," I demanded. "What the devil is going on here? One of our party has been brutally murdered and the rest of us are in danger. We have a right to know what it's all about."

Dr. Jarrett turned his massive, ugly face toward us. All the sorrow in the world seemed to lie in his small, blood-shot eyes.

"Yes, you have a right to know," he agreed. "But first I should like to ask the young lady what caused the panic among the women."

Carla said: "We had taken our clothes off and spread them in front of the fireplace to dry. As we were standing about, we heard strange sounds come from the wing of the house. It seemed like human voices uttering sounds which might have been words, although I can't be sure. And some seemed to be animal growls. Aunt Desma tried to reassure us, but her words didn't do much good. Two or three of us started to put on our damp clothes. Then the door opened and I, at least, screamed. We thought it was you, Dr. Jarrett, or your man Joseph. It was a man, all right, but such a man as we had never seen. It was a human monster."

She stopped talking and clung closer to me.

"Yes?" Dr. Jarrett prompted.

Carla lifted her head from my chest. "He was the most horrible creature I had ever seen. He seemed to be all shoulders, wider even than yours, Dr. Jarrett, and hardly anything else. His head seemed hardly bigger than my fist and his legs were the size of a child's, dragging uselessly behind him. He moved by pushing himself along on powerful arms. His eyes were pinpoints, and saliva drooled from the slit that must have been his mouth.

"Do you wonder that we went crazy with panic? One of the Foster twins, Rose, I think, shrieked wildly and, stark naked as she was, plunged past the monster and out through the door. Most of us were simply frozen with sheer horror and couldn't move or utter a word. Aunt Zelda, who had already dressed, was the only one of us who maintained self-control. She ran after Rose to stop her. Strangely enough, the monster made no attempt to go near any of us. He crouched there on the floor looking at us as we

huddled against the wall. We didn't dare move.

"**IT** MUST have been less than a minute, but it seemed like a century, when we heard Aunt Zelda scream. Then we heard that other cry, that terrible cry we'd heard at the launch and the monster's pinhead jerked up, listening. Suddenly he scurried out through the door. Then hysteria overwhelmed us. I paused to put on my clothes. So did some of the other girls, while at least one, Wanda Rimstad, simply ran. What happened to the others I don't know. In our panic we went in all different directions. I found myself in front of the house, and there was Aunt Zelda's body. I think I went mad with fear. I started running. That was when you caught me, Dr. Jarrett. I'm sorry I fought you. I realize now that you were only trying to keep me from running into the woods."

"She fought like a wildcat," Dr. Jarrett told me. "I had the time of my life dragging her as far as the porch. Then you came. It would have been fatal for her to go into the woods. One girl, I'm afraid, is there now."

My eyes moved toward the brooding trees and vegetation. Twilight was descending on the island and a cool breeze knifed through my wet clothes. I found that my teeth were chattering, but it wasn't from coldness.

I said: "Where are the other women? You said only one went into the woods."

"They're safe in the house," Dr. Jarrett stated. "Joseph and Elsie managed to round them up and—ah—calm them. They're safe. But that unfortunate girl in the woods!"

Moving toward the doctor with Carla still in my arms, I grasped his shoulder. "We'll have to go after Rose Foster, you and I together, and you'll have to give me a gun. But before that you'll have to tell me what it's all about."

"Yes," Dr. Jarrett said. "Come with me into the house. We must make sure that the other girls are all right."

We followed him. I'd have to leave Carla with the others. I hated to let her out of my sight, but it was more important that Rose Foster be rescued from whatever horror faced her on the island.

He led us into a windowless corridor which was only dimly lit. It was in the narrow wing. I stopped abruptly and removed my arm from about Carla's waist, ready to hurl myself at Dr. Jarrett.

For the corridor was lined on one side with prison cells!

"What does this mean, Dr. Jarrett?"

The big man turned slowly. He had his gun in his hand.

"Don't misunderstand," he pleaded with me. "I'm doing this only because I know you'll be safe nowhere else."

A sharp cry tore from Carla's throat. Not because of Dr. Jarrett's gun. She wasn't even looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on the barred door of the first cell.

Wanda Rimstad was in there. She hadn't a stitch of clothing on her and she was futilely trying to cover her nudity with her hands.

"Jay!" she moaned, coming to the door. "What's going to happen to us?"

I whirled toward Dr. Jarrett. He snapped: "By God, I'll shoot if I have to. Don't you realize that I'm doing this for your sake. It's the only place you and the women will be safe until we manage to round up the—ah—escaped inmates. And I'm warning you, as I warned the others, not to make an outcry, because if the creatures know you're in here, they'll come out of the woods and pull you out of the cells, and then—well, it won't be pleasant."

What could I do? If I went for Dr. Jarrett he would shoot me down, and that wouldn't help Carla or any of the other girls. So we continued down the

corridor. This time Dr. Jarrett walked behind us with levelled gun.

EACH cell we passed contained a member of our party. Miss Desma stood at the barred door and told us in a choked voice not to lose heart. Little Marie Foster was sprawled on a cot sobbing hysterically over the unknown fate of her twin sister. Melantha, clad only in shorts, strode up and down her cell like a caged animal.

The next cell was empty. Dr. Jarrett pointed his gun at me. "It will be only for a couple of hours," he assured me. "Perhaps less. Believe me, this is the best way."

I hesitated. Carla was whimpering deep in her throat and holding on to me as if she would never let go.

"Why can't we be in one cell?" I asked.

Dr. Jarrett shook his head. "It will be the way I say. You have five seconds to go into the cell."

Gently I unwound Carla's arms from about me, kissed her on the lips, then stepped into the cell. The door clanged shut.

"Jay!" Carla wailed. There were the sounds of a slight scuffle, then the door of the cell next to mine opened and closed.

Dr. Jarrett, standing somewhere in the corridor, raised his voice so that all of us could hear. "Remember, no outcry. I'm giving you this warning for your own sakes. If your presence here is found out by—the former inmates, I am not responsible for the consequences."

There was the sound of heavy footsteps receding down the corridor, and after that silence.

Silence broken by the toneless weeping of Marie Foster, by Melantha's bare feet padding endlessly on the stone floor of the cell on my left, by Carla moaning with subdued hysteria on my right.

I inspected my cell. It was about twelve

feet by twelve and furnished with a cot, a chair, a dresser and washstand. More comfortable than the average furnished room—yet there was the barred door and the barred window.

These cells were the living quarters of the inmates.

But why barred cells for them? Well, I had already had an inkling of the answer, the full horror of which I could not, at that time, even guess at. Cells for the monster which Carla had described, for the beautiful woman I had met on the path who was a bestial killer—for others!

I strode to the window. Twilight was deepening. A great orange moon rode above the line of trees. The window looked directly out into the clearing which was deserted. There was an ominous stillness out there, a brooding hush as if the whole world were holding its breath before the coming of doom.

Then a scream keened out from beyond the trees. It was such an expression of unbearable terror that every drop of blood felt as if it were drained out of my body. The voice, of course, was unrecognizable, but I had no doubt it was Rose Foster. She was the only one of our party, besides Miss Zelda, who was dead, who was not in one of the cells.

The screams came nearer. Bushes parted and Rose plunged into the clearing.

She was stark naked. Numberless streaks of blood covering her delicate white body testified that she must have been crashing wildly through the underbrush.

At the sight of the house her screams ceased. Hope flitted over her face and she started sprinting wildly toward the porch.

She never reached it.

The woods on three sides of the house suddenly became alive with creatures who could have come only out of a nightmare.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Nightmare Creatures

MY HANDS gripped the iron bars of the window with such intensity that my knuckles turned white. The creatures which were closing in on Rose Foster could not be human, and yet the most monstrous of them had some of the physical characteristics of normal men and women. And that was the most horrible of all. If each of them had been all monster the sight would have been less terrifying than their hideous perversions of mankind.

There were about a dozen of them, some male, some female, some both or neither. There was the creature Carla had described, with the tremendous shoulders and withered torso who dragged himself over the ground with powerful arms. There was something like a snake, wriggling along the ground, yet with the face of a handsome boy. There was a huge hairy male shuffling like a great ape with a single eye and apparently no nose. There was—

But why go on? Even now the vision of that hellish crew makes me retch with nausea.

They converged on Rose Foster, cutting her off from the house. She was screaming again, not loud; the screams were thin as the edge of a razor and utterly hopeless. Then I could no longer hear her, although her mouth remained open to the last. Other sounds drowned out her terror: the hungry, lustful animal growls of the monsters, and the shrieks of the women in the cells on either side of me.

We had forgotten Dr. Jarrett's warning to keep still lest the monsters learn of our presence in the cell block. Each of us was at our window and each of us had gone temporarily mad, and we could express our madness only through our

throats. Fortunately the monsters were too intent upon their immediate victim to pay any attention to us.

I think that I shall never forget that picture of Rose Foster standing within that closing circle of horror, her fragile lovely body trembling like a fawn at bay, her delicate features contorted with insane terror. Then they were on her. The one-eyed creature swept her up and tossed her into the air. Another monster caught her and . . .

Well, have you ever seen malicious children playing with a sawdust doll which they were bent on destroying? They would toss it about to each other, by an arm, by a leg, by the head, until the sawdust ran out and there was nothing left but a limp rag still bearing some of the features of the doll? That was what happened to little Rose Foster.

I shook and pounded at the bars until my hands were sore and bleeding. At last I turned away. The animal howls went on and on and the women in the cells kept shrieking.

And then, above all that din, I heard a woman laugh.

I forced myself to look again through the barred window. The creature named Cassie was standing just inside the clearing, tall and magnificent in her transparent evening gown, and her gorgeous face was twisted with maniacal laughter.

The monsters were still playing with Rose Foster, but now she resembled less a human being than they themselves. An inert bundle covered with broken red skin. Dead at last, I thought numbly, and I was glad. She, at least, was out of it. For us the horror had only begun.

A gun bellowed. A slug-like monster leaped a foot in the air. The gun spoke again and the thing went down.

Cassie stopped laughing. Her head jerked toward the house. The gun continued to roar, four more times, and a creature that looked like a giant crab died.

THERE was a sudden silence. We in the cells had stopped screaming. The growls of the monsters had died away. They stamped and writhed about uneasily, stared dully at the bodies of the two who had been killed, and then with one accord looked toward Cassie.

"Come," she ordered and disappeared among the trees.

The monsters followed. The shots started again, and one more creature died before they all succeeded in leaving the clearing.

For a long time I simply stood holding myself up by clutching the bars and staring out into the clearing. Four bodies lay there, three of the monsters and what was left of Rose Foster.

An hysterical voice called: "Jay! Oh, God, Jay, I'll go mad! They'll come for us next!"

It was Carla. I went to the cell door. The other women in the cells started raving, their voices shrill with hysteria.

I said, loud enough for all of them to hear: "It's all right now, we're safe. It was Dr. Jarrett and his man who shot. Guns can hold the monsters off all night. Tomorrow the launch will come with supplies and we'll get off this cursed place safely."

My words calmed them to some extent. But I was considerably less optimistic than I pretended. I didn't trust Dr. Jarrett; I wasn't satisfied with his explanation for having locked us in the cells. There was nothing for us to do but hope.

I kept up a chatter of optimism to the others. Suddenly I stopped talking as a door nearby opened and closed. The sound came from my right, away from the house. There must be a back door leading directly into the cell block from outside.

Feet moved along the corridor. And then Carla emitted a low cry and a woman laughed.

That laugh! I had heard it a short time

ago in the clearing. I don't think that I will ever forget it. But, even as I heard it, I knew what I must do.

I whispered: "Cassie! You are looking for me. Here I am."

She appeared in front of my cell. Even in that uncertain light her beauty was startling. Its only effect on me now was one of murderous rage which I had difficulty suppressing. But I forced a smile on my lips; I forced ardor into my voice. I spoke to her slowly, patiently, as to a child.

"Cassie, you are so beautiful. I love you, Cassie."

She smiled as gratefully as a child who has been given a new toy. She arched her body, ran her hands sensuously over her almost bared breasts.

"You love Cassie?" she muttered happily.

No sound from the other women in the cells. I knew that all of them must be listening intently, and I was certain that they were aware of what my scheme was.

"Cassie, I want to hold you in my arms," I went on. "I want to kiss you, love you."

"Yes," she said. "That would be nice."

In her hand was a large key. I said: "Come in here, Cassie, so that I can love you."

She frowned. "No. I don't like it in there."

"All right, Cassie, I'll come out to you. We'll go in the woods together and I'll love you."

She nodded. "Yes. Cassie will like that."

"But I can't get out. They locked me in."

"Cassie will get you out." She inserted the key in the lock.

I PUSHED the door open. She came into my arms, her eager smile baring her sharp teeth. My right fist swept up almost from the floor to her chin. It was

a perfect knockout. Her statuesque body crumpled against the corridor wall.

The key, as I had surmised, fitted all the cells. In less than a minute I had all the doors open. Marie Foster lay unconscious in the floor of her cell. Small wonder, for she had seen the horrible way in which her twin sister had died. I lifted her in my arms and with the others crowding at my heels we went to the main section of the house. Night was complete, but bright moonlight flooded in to the house.

I led the girls to the room where they had been drying their clothes when the first of the monsters had appeared. Wanda Rinstad and Melantha Mann, who had fled without their clothes, hurriedly dressed.

Miss Desma said: "What can we do now? We can't possibly leave the island and I doubt if the house will afford much protection."

"The important thing is not to let panic get you again," I replied. "That would be fatal. You girls stay here. Don't put a light on and under no circumstances make a sound. Is there a key in this door? . . . Good. Lock the door after me and don't open it for anybody but me. I'm going through the house to see if I can find a weapon. After that I'll have a talk with Dr. Jarrett."

The first floor of the house was deserted. I found matches on a table, noiselessly went through the rooms, opening every drawer. No weapon of any kind. I made my way up to the second floor. The first door I came to opened into a bedroom. And seated on a chair at a window was the woman Elsie. She hadn't put a light on, but the full moon filled the room with its mellow glow.

She turned her head slightly. "Come in," she said.

On the window sill lay a revolver. Near it was a box of .38 cartridges.

"So you were the one who killed the

monsters, who drove them away," I said.

Her hard, expressionless face belied the intense emotion in her voice. "I was too late to save the poor girl. I had to search for a gun, and by the time I found it she was dead."

The window afforded a complete view of the clearing.

Five dark bodies lay in the moonlight—Miss Zelda and Rose Foster and the three monsters.

"Where did the monsters come from?" I asked. "Why are they on this island?"

"Several years ago Dr. Jarrett lost his doctor's license. I don't know why. He established what he calls this sanitarium—really a prison for human monsters. They are the freakish offsprings of wealthy people who can pay large sums to have the creatures hidden from the world. The ordinary institutions wouldn't suffice. There is always the danger of a leak, of an epidemic or a fire or a nose reporter exposing to the world the parentage of the monsters. So they pay Dr. Jarrett well for hiding them on this island."

"I assumed it was something like that," I said. "And this evening they escaped."

"Yes. Somehow I, or Joseph, failed to lock Cassie's cell properly. She escaped, got back to the house, stole a key and released the other monsters. She can do anything she wants with them. They regard her as a kind of goddess."

"Why is she here?" I asked. "She belongs in a madhouse."

IF POSSIBLE, Elsie's eyes grew even harder than they had been. "She's not like the others—physically. You've heard people say that a woman is as beautiful as sin. Cassie is evil incarnate. She's not mad; it's something far worse. She has no soul. And she is more dangerous than any of the others because she has some intelligence." She paused; then added in a low tone: "Her affection for you is the

first time she showed any emotion aside from sheer bestiality."

"You know about that?"

"Yes," Elsie said. "From this window I could hear everything that was said at the cells. I thought of releasing all of you, but you would be no better off elsewhere on the island. I heard you tricking Cassie into opening the door of your cell. I heard you enter the room directly below this where the girls now are."

No sound came from the room below. They were obeying my admonition to maintain absolute silence. "Why are you here?" I asked.

"I am Joseph's wife," she replied simply.

There was nothing I could say. For a moment I stood silent.

I asked: "Where are Dr. Jarrett and Joseph? What are they up to?"

"I don't know," Elsie replied. "They went into the woods to try to bring Cassie back. The other monsters would be more easily controlled if she were caught. Perhaps they are dead."

They were alive and unharmed as we saw at that moment. Dr. Jarrett and Joseph stepped into the clearing. They walked like men who were afraid of their shadows and their pistols were gripped in their hands. They stopped walking and stared at the bodies in the clearing. Then, whispering to each other, they came toward the house. They paused beneath our window, not ten feet away from the window of the room in which the girls huddled in the darkness. Elsie and I were hardly breathing as we listened.

"I tell you, Doc, that's the only way," Joseph was saying. "Otherwise we haven't got a chance. When they saw me in the woods they were going to tear me apart. My gun wouldn't have been any good against all of them. Lucky for me, this naked girl came running along chased by one of 'em. They forgot about me and they all went after her."

Dr. Jarrett nodded his massive head.

"And they caught her here." He pointed toward the bloody remains of Rose Foster. "That's what they did to her. The shots must have come from Elsie. She killed three of them and the rest were scared off."

"But they won't stay scared off," Joseph whispered in a voice husky with fear. "They know the girls are here. Maybe we can kill them all when they charge the house, but chances are enough will stay alive to get us."

Dr. Jarrett looked a long time toward the narrow wing. "You're right," he said at last. "If we were to kill them, it would mean the end of this lucrative—ah—business. We would certainly not be paid for keeping monsters who are dead. Yes, we have no choice but to keep them satisfied by giving the women to them. We can lure them back to the cells by using some of the women as bait—it's the same technique as a hunter uses a live kid to lure flesh-eating animals into a trap."

It took a while for the meaning of Dr. Jarrett's words to penetrate my brain. His scheme was too diabolical and heartless to have been proposed by a human being. Near me Elsie was breathing heavily. I could not tell how the idea affected her.

The whispering below went on. My horror-numbed brain hardly heard Joseph explain that later they could bury our bodies and that our friends and relatives would believe that we had been lost in the storm.

A moan seemed to rise from the floor. It was followed by a shrill scream in the room below.

Poor girls! They had been forced to listen to Dr. Jarrett and Joseph discussing the horrible fate that was in store for them, and finally they had been able to maintain the agonizing silence no longer. In the room below there was a bedlam of hysteria.

CHAPTER FIVE

Raid of the Monsters

I SNATCHED the revolver out of Elsie's hand and poked my head and right arm through the open window. Dr. Jarrett and Joseph had started running around to the porch steps as soon as they had realized that the girls were in that room. I had a chance for two shots before they disappeared into the house. I was trembling with mingled horror and rage. The shots went wild.

I made for the door of the bedroom. "I'll kill them!" I sobbed. "They're worse than the monsters!"

"Wait!" Elsie yelled. "That's not the way. We're all doomed if we start fighting among ourselves."

I paid no attention to her. At the head of the stairs I stopped, staring down into the broad electric-lit foyer below. Every room on the first floor, including the wing, opened into the foyer. Dr. Jarrett and Joseph were charging in from the large front room. One of the girls had unlocked the door of the room in which I had left them and in their frenzy they were pouring out into the foyer.

At the sight of Dr. Jarrett and Joseph the girls stopped dead, paralyzed with terror. They simply crouched before the open door, whimpering, moaning.

Miss Desma was shrilling crazily: "You can't turn us over to the monsters! You're men, not fiends! Oh, God, please don't!"

Dr. Jarrett's ugly face was set into a twisted mask from which he had excluded all pity. Joseph said between his teeth: "Get back into the room, all of you, or I'll start shooting."

I was halfway down the stairs when I shot at Joseph. He spun in a half turn, cursed harshly and swung his revolver toward me. The bellowing of both our guns filled the house. I kept thumping the hammer back and pulling the trigger several times after the gun was empty.

"Jay! Oh, God, Jay!" I heard Carla's voice. Behind me Elsie was crying: "Stop it, you fools! We all share the same danger!"

I was rather surprised to find that I hadn't been hit. Joseph lay motionless in the foyer. And I saw Dr. Jarrett bringing up his gun slowly. His tiny blood-shot eyes bulged; his upper lip was drawn back over his teeth.

My legs wobbled under me. My own revolver was empty. Dr. Jarrett would kill me and then he would hand the women over to the monsters.

He didn't shoot. I saw his gun swing away from me, saw the terror that leaped into his eyes before I realized what the hellish cries meant which had suddenly become an overtone to the screams of the women. The animal howls grew louder, were all around the house. Feet pounded on the porch and in the corridor of the wing. The monsters were coming from both sides!

"Jay!"

Carla's anguished voice separated itself from the din, became a thing apart. I flew down the stairs moaning her name. If I had had another bullet in my gun, I would have put it into her heart. It would be an easier, a cleaner way to die.

I WAS at the bottom step when the first of the monsters plunged into the foyer. Dr. Jarrett snapped a quick shot at the creature and it stopped abruptly. It had come in on all four limbs. Its browless eyes, the size of saucers, glazed and it swayed. A second monster charged in, knocking the dying creature flat on its face. As I sprang toward Carla, I saw a third one scurrying in from the corridor door. Dr. Jarrett's gun kept barking.

I could think of nothing but to get to Carla. "Jay!" I heard again and her dear face leaped up before me. One hand touched her arm, the other started to slide around her shoulder—then some-

thing like a battering ram knocked me away.

I twisted, lashing out wildly, desperately. My fist sank into flabby flesh. "Carla!" I sobbed and kept fighting. I didn't know what I was fighting, a mist clouded my eyes; but I kept swinging with the frenzy of one who knows that he is doomed. The mingled screams and howls were terrific. Monstrous bodies pressed around me. Every drive of my fists struck flesh. But it was hopeless. There was no end to the on-passing bodies. My arms turned to lead. I felt myself slammed against the wall and my legs gave way.

Tremendous arms picked me up, hurled me down. I had a sensation of falling for a long time—falling, falling. . . .

My first thought when I recovered consciousness was that I was on a boat which was rocking violently. I grinned. I had fallen asleep on the motor launch, I told myself, and now it was storming. The island and Dr. Jarrett and the monsters had all been a bad dream. I would open my eyes and Carla would be nearby.

I opened my eyes. A vacuum formed inside of me. I was in the big living room of Dr. Jarrett's house. And I was looking up into the beautiful face of the she-monster, Cassie.

She was carrying me. She placed me gently down on a couch and then she slid her six-foot length up on the couch beside me. She writhed against me, purring like a contented cat.

I lay motionless. The house was quiet, but far off I heard a rumble of sound, the distant collective voice of the monsters and of those of the girls who were still left alive.

Cassie had no doubt saved my life. After she had recovered consciousness in the corridor she must have slipped into the woods and rounded up the other monsters and led them in the raid on the house. Forgetting the blow I had struck her or holding no enmity against me, she

must have saved me from death and had remained here with me while the other monsters had taken the girls into the woods.

I felt no gratitude toward her. Carla was dead by now or would soon be. I would have preferred not to have recovered. In spite of her superb beauty, the touch of her scantily clad body against mine made my skin crawl. She was the creature who had ripped Miss Zelda's throat out. She was a soulless, merciless beast. And the fact that she evidently loved me filled me only with horror.

I brought my hands up under her. She smiled and moaned with pleasure as my hands inadvertently brushed over her breasts. My fingers caressed her smooth throat—then tightened. . . .

HER green eyes opened wide with surprise. For moments she did not understand, and then she was fighting for her life. I heaved upward and we rolled off the couch, myself on top. She was remarkably strong. She writhed under me, kicking up with her legs, clawing my face to ribbons with sharp fingernails.

Relentlessly I hung on. Warm blood rushed down my torn face, but I felt no pain. Little by little her resistance weakened. Presently she lay still. For a minute or two more my fingers chung about her throat. Then groggily I stood up and looked down at her motionless form.

A pang of regret gripped my heart. She looked all woman as she lay there dead, the acme of feminine beauty. And in her insane, monster fashion she had loved me. . . . Then I recalled the thing that she had been and I could not be sorry that I had rid the world of her.

Dr. Jarrett's big body lay in the open doorway to the foyer. His massive head lay at a queer angle from his shoulders. His neck had been broken. Nearby lay two monsters whom he had shot before

the others had reached him. Between them was the body of Joseph whom I had killed. And at the bottom of the stairway was a mutilated pulp—all that was left of Elsie.

I stood surveying this charnel scene without emotion. I think that by that time I was incapable of emotion. In a kind of detached way, as if I were following out orders, I set about looking for the revolver I had dropped during the fight with the monsters. When I found it, I went up the stairs to the bedroom where I had spoken to Elsie. The box of cartridges was still on the windowsill. I loaded the revolver and poured the rest of the cartridges into my pants pocket.

Through the open window I saw the full moon, now turned white, sailing high in the sky. And then, directly overhead, a motor roared, and from behind the house an airplane swooped.

Breathlessly I watched it disappear. I waited there at the window. It did not return. The drone of the motor had drowned out my shouts, had drowned out the other cries. I knew that the hydroplane was looking for us. When the launch had not returned after the storm, a wide hunt, which must be going on this minute, had been instituted.

I recalled having seen a five gallon can of kerosene in the kitchen pantry while searching for a weapon. I found the can, snatched up a handful of matches, and methodically I set to work. In a few minutes I had started fires in half a dozen parts of the house. I opened every window wide. A strong wind was blowing. In spite of the storm that afternoon, a month of dry weather had made the vegetation into excellent tinder. The fire would sweep the island.

It might serve as a signal for the searching parties, but it was too late for that now. Primarily, the fire would be a deadly instrument of vengeance, for nothing would escape its withering blast.

CHAPTER SIX

The Purging Fire

WHEN I reached the edge of the clearing, I glanced back at the house. The interior seemed ablaze with lights, and as I watched, a tongue of flame shot out of a window and licked the siding.

I didn't bother looking for a path. Plunging into the underbrush, I kept going in the direction from which the cries were coming. Thorns ripped my clothes, slashed my skin.

A girl's insane voice keened out in front of me. Carla's voice? Impossible to tell, but it might be, and hope gushed back.

Suddenly the vegetation ended and I found myself on the shore. A girl was running into the sea, the water already up to her hips—and two monsters were pursuing her. From the squat scaly body of one something like a tentacle snaked out. The girl threw herself face forward in the water and vanished. Then the monster also went under the water.

I was about to snap a shot at the second monster when the first came up with the girl's struggling body in its tentacles. I couldn't shoot now for fear of hitting the girl. I was running and was now knee-deep in water. The second monster saw me, shrieked thinly, and flew at me. Its movement took it out of line with the girl and I squeezed the trigger of the gun. The creature's voice was cut off abruptly and the rod-like body fell forward with a splash.

The other monster wasn't more than five feet away now. The girl's nearly nude, squirming body was held in front of its hideous form. Cursing, I tried to step around for a shot. The monster lifted the girl high over its head and hurled her at me. I hadn't time to step aside. The girl's torso struck me squarely in the chest and I stumbled backward for a couple of steps and went down.

A face contorted with unbearable horror was inches from my own. It was Melantha Mann, Carla's cousin.

"Jay!" she moaned. "Thank heaven you came."

Save for wisps of torn shorts which hung on her only by a miracle, her clothes had been ripped off her.

"Where are the others?" I asked. "Carla?"

"I don't know," she wailed. "Pray God that they are already dead. I tried to drown myself, but they wouldn't let me. They wanted to . . ." She started to shudder violently.

The monster had fled. I inspected my revolver. Fortunately I had fallen on dry land and the gun was unharmed. I was no longer thinking of vengeance. Melantha was still alive, so perhaps it was not yet too late to save Carla and the others. I could still hear what sounded like screaming.

I said: "Walk along the shore until you come to the launch. Get in it and wait."

Melantha jumped to her feet and clutched at my arm. "Don't leave me alone! Please!"

"I'm going after the rest of the monsters. They might get you again."

"I'll go with you," she insisted wildly. "You have a gun. If worst comes to worst, you can kill me."

Without a word I started along the shore. She scampered after me, a crazy whimper trickling from her lips. The wind was reaching gale proportions. Grimly I told myself that nature which had brought us to this hell, was now on the side of vengeance. Above the trees we could see the leaping flames of the burning house. In almost no time the entire island would be ablaze.

THE screams were bursting against our eardrums now. I felt the slowness of our progress would drive me mad. And

then, when finally we burst upon the nightmare scene, I was certain that I had indeed gone mad. For in spite of the horrors I had experienced on that island, I could not convince myself that what my eyes saw could conceivably be real.

We stood on the edge of an enormous flat rock. On the rock itself were the monsters and the girls. Not two hundred feet away the woods were on fire, and the roaring of the oncoming flames and the yellow flickering fire made the scene look truly like a part of hell.

I have described how the monsters had tossed Rose Foster about the way malicious children toss a sawdust doll.

Well, it was something like that now, only worse.

Miss Desma, her clothes ripped from her, one of her legs broken, was trying frantically to crawl away from two monsters who pranced and giggled on either side of her and kept jabbing pointed branches into her delicate flesh. A thing like a giant slug which used all four limbs like hands was tearing Marie Foster apart as I have seen boys do to a fly. She was dead, I saw, and her blood spattered the thing's body. Wanda Rimstad was in the center of a circle of monsters who were pelting her with stones. She crouched, her head buried in her arms, her bruised body quivering, a hollow, endless scream quivering from her throat, yet making no attempt to avoid the missiles. And Carla—

She was at the further end of the rock—in the arms of the huge ape-like creature with a single eye. He was the most nearly human, the most definitely male of them all, and so her fate would be even more horrible than that of the others. He had ripped her clothes from her, and as I watched he crushed her quivering lovely body against his hairy chest.

It wasn't, I think, more than a few seconds before I started moving forward with my revolver belching death. I was

remarkably calm, as if I had lost the ability to feel violent emotion.

The monsters came at me. Some never reached me. Then my gun was empty and I was fighting, squirming, retreating back into the woods. I sank under a bush, reloaded, then emerged again on the rock, shooting. The monsters had enough intelligence to fear my deadly weapon. They fled.

The creature who had Carla was the last to flee, but when he saw me going for him, he turned with a bellow of fear and plunged in the direction of the fire. I could have shot him in the back, but I was afraid that the slug might go through his body and strike Carla. As I raced after him, I could hear Carla shrieking my name.

The fire turned him back toward me. He tried to cut off at an angle, but the fire was closing in on three sides. Through the undergrowth I saw him hesitate at the very edge of the blaze and glance back at me. The heat was terrific. With a bellow of rage he dropped Carla and charged at me. I waited until he was almost on me before I shot. I had to put three slugs into him before he was dead.

When I reached Carla, we clung to each other as if we wanted to fuse our bodies. I lifted her in my arms and carried her back to the rock. The women were huddled together. Marie was dead. Miss Desma had a broken leg and bled from a

score of wounds. Wanda Rimstad had hardly the strength to get to her feet. I placed Carla on her feet, swung Miss Desma over one shoulder, and with Carla and Melantha supporting Wanda on either side we started to make our way toward the water.

That trip was like a bad dream. We sensed rather than saw the monsters who still remained alive lurking all around us, following us. Now and then we heard the grunts and mewlings above the roar of the fire or of a heavy body moving through the underbrush. If they all charged us at once, they would overwhelm me. When we reached the water, we breathed more easily. We went along the narrow beach until at long last we came to the launch. Carla and Melantha helped me push it off the shore and then I paddled it a couple of hundred feet out. After that we just sat, watching the fire.

After an hour or so the fire reached the shore and I had to paddle out further to avoid the heat. Once we heard a howl of agony rise in the heart of the fire which made us turn pale. Another time we saw something, which at that distance looked very much like a man, leap into the water and swim. For a long time it kept on swimming and finally disappeared.

By morning nothing would be left alive on the island. That was for the best. Fire, the great purifier. . . .

THE END



TRADE

BE KIND!



MARK

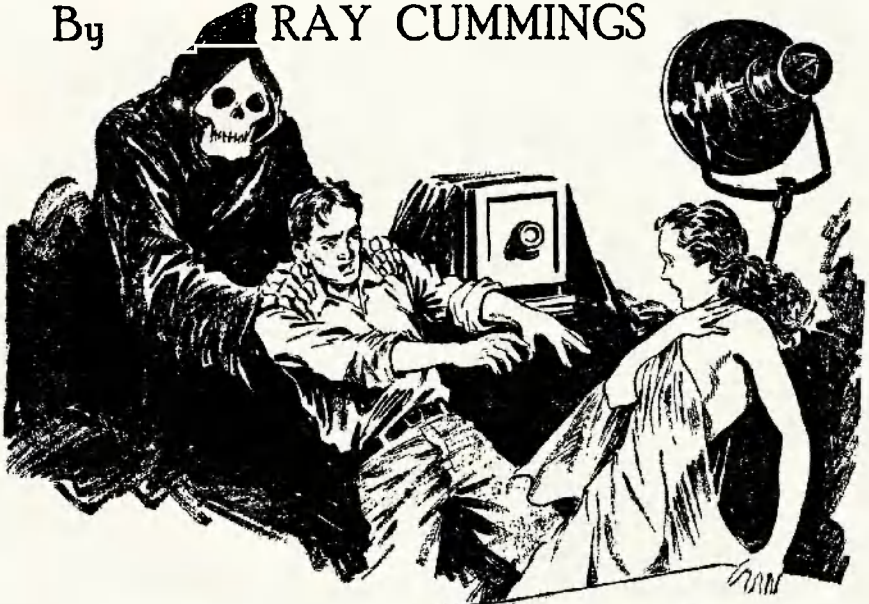
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DEATH LIVES IN MY LIPS!

By RAY CUMMINGS



Like any normal woman, I wanted to love and be loved; to feel the sharp ecstasy of a man's hungry lips pressed against mine. But I was forced to live apart from the joys of the world; for the curse of the Prabars was in my blood—and death for the man who dared to love me lay in the touch of my lips!



I WILL tell my story as it happened, and try to tell it calmly, though even now as I set it down I am shuddering with its hideous memory. My name is Manya Corot. My father, who died when I was three, was of French descent. My mother was an Austrian-American. I realize now that we had never been like other families; some intangible foreboding seemed always to be hanging over us. Though we lived quietly in the small suburban village, we had plenty of money. My father had died rich, I understood;

and mother's fortune was in charge of a Mr. Freeman, at a bank in nearby New York City.

My mother died when I was twelve, but my memory of her is more vivid than of many who have been close to me since. She was tall and dark and slim, with a certain strange exotic beauty which always seemed to me to have a strange, unhuman fascination. At twelve I felt that every man who looked at mother must madly love her. I think perhaps I was not too wrong in that. Many men friends

were often at our house—Robert Freeman, the banker; our family physician, Dr. Frank MacArthur, and many others. Those others now were dead.

At twelve I had developed amazingly to be a youthful replica of mother. I recall her staring at me during her last tragic illness. And she had murmured, "Oh, Manya—you will be so beautiful—like I was. . ."

There was tragedy in her eyes. I think it was then that horror first stabbed at me, for she added, "You, too, are cursed. Your kisses—they'll mean death to the man you kiss. The curse is on us. The curse of the Prahars—and I dared to laugh when he said it would hound me and mine. But it has . . . and now I must answer for what I've done."

My mother died that next day. What she had done, I never knew. But I heard vague whispers of infidelity, disloyalty, innumerable lovers. . . . Her last words burned always in my youthful mind. Subconsciously, I grew afraid to let anyone kiss me. I became nervous; neurotic. I was living with a governess and two maids in the same suburban house. I hated people. I spent my time in the hollow behind the grounds, down by a sullen stream with evil-smelling dead leaves and soggy, marshy banks. And I brooded continually.

Robert Freeman, the banker who had charge of my money, often came to see me. Dr. Frank MacArthur—a big blond handsome man of about forty now—was still my physician. Outwardly, things hadn't changed for me.

Dr. MacArthur was really worried over my health, that year when I was sixteen. "Child, you must tell me what you're brooding about," he urged me once. He gently held my hand, with his keen physician's eyes searching me.

"Nothing at all," I murmured sullenly. "There's nothing the matter with me, Dr. MacArthur."

HOW could I tell him of that stalking, ever-present fear? The fear of becoming a murderess! I might have told him of my mother's words—that a kiss from me was death; told him that always there was the urge of normal sex within me, so that it seemed I was a battleground. But I couldn't tell him.

Dr. MacArthur yielded at last; but he came with weekly visits to check on my health. And always his handsome face was grave; his gentle eyes searching me. I thought on these visits that as he gazed at me, he saw again the haunting, haunted beauty of my dear mother.

I was seventeen when I met Tom Thorp. He was eighteen—an unusually handsome, brown-haired fellow. I knew nothing of his family; he was visiting a friend in the village. Against my brooding fear, built up throughout these years, I felt a sickening weakening of my resolves—all that was normal in my highly passionate nature impelling me to light the fires of passion in him—fires which were ready for the kindling, as I saw, beneath the surface. By every artifice, that late afternoon as we walked through the snowy woods beside a half-frozen stream, I used my darkly slumbrous, exotic beauty—beauty of face and body—to arouse him. And when, in a sudden sweep he had me in his arms, and his kisses burned and throbbed against my eager lips, every instinct within me rose half-fearfully yet eagerly to meet his flaming passion.

We said nothing of love. He tried, but I repulsed him. The fever of the moment was spent, chilled with the deepening, darkening silhouettes about us. And a terrible, terrorizing question was mounting within me. It was dim and distant; but I heard its voice and a mortal fear was stunning me at what it portended. It was possible, it might be positive, that at this instant, with this man's kisses still upon my lips, that *I was his murderess!*

Dear God, my mother had warned me! What justification, if it were true, could I find?

There were shadows crowding us as we went up the narrow path. They seemed to leer at me. Trees were swaying, mocking; the wind whistling softly through the trees was whispering to me that soon this man would die.

And then, the next day, there was a note from his friend saying that Tom was in the hospital with pneumonia. I went down to the stream, torn with anguish and reproach. Yet my common sense asserted itself. There was nothing of a curse in this. Pneumonia was a most prosaic disease; it had nothing to do with this strange mystic horror which engulfed me. Tom was no part of it; my mother had been unfaithful, broken faith with a man named Prahar, and he had cursed her. What had that to do with me?

I went at last to the hospital. Tom was dying; they had him in an oxygen tent. I reached the door, but I could not bring myself to go in. I was afraid he might read in my eyes the thoughts I was thinking.

How I knew when he died, I do not know. Yet before the nurse came out with the grey-haired doctor, I knew. For an instant the door to his room was ajar. Although I was at an angle and could not see her, I heard a woman weeping. It was his mother. I could hear her babbling over him. Then I stiffened, my heart pounding and my head reeling, for her words were shrill and distinct:

"Damn her! Damn that Manya Corot. She killed you—my poor boy. She killed you just as surely as her mother killed Prahar. He cursed her as he stood before her and drove the knife through his heart—cursed her for her infidelity. Cursed her and all her spawn. They're rotten, the Corot women; cursed, and their love leads only to death—death! Oh my poor boy—she's killed you. . . ."

DLURRED and numbed, shuddering with horror, I fled from the hospital. And all that night, in bed at home I lay trembling, dank with cold sweat. Was I a murderess? Cursed by some dead necromancer? I vowed, that night, that never again would I let a man kiss me. There would be no dreams of love and passion—all that my pulsing nature craved must be subdued forever.

Again I made myself a brooding hermit. I felt that even the servants were watching me—whispering about the curse that was on me; whispering that I was a murderess. I got a new maid—a middle-aged woman named Mary Peters. I grew to like her, and I discharged the others, living alone with Peters.

But I couldn't keep up the isolation. There were times when I told myself that surely the tragedy which followed my passionate outburst was a mere coincidence. How could death be transmitted by a kiss? I was a girl of America of the Twentieth Century—how could I believe in a curse that belonged to the dark ages?

Then I met John Wallace and Alan Carter. Perhaps Robert Freeman, my guardian from the bank in New York, or Dr. MacArthur, arranged that I would meet the two young men. Dr. MacArthur always was frankly working to overcome my neuroticism—always urging me not to remain alone.

Once, impulsively, I had told Dr. MacArthur of my obsession; and as I saw his eyes open with astonishment and heard his ejaculation of relief, it seemed all my terror was lifted and forever gone.

"Why Manya—are you still thinking of what that Thorp woman said in the hospital? I heard of it, of course. But child—that's idiotic. . . ."

I promised him then that I would never think of it again.

"Just be like other girls, Manya," he told me. "No reason why you shouldn't."

No reason. How happy I was, then.

Alan Carter was a handsome young fellow in his early twenties; slim, graceful, with a mop of longish wavy black hair. His father was an art photographer in New York. Alan himself was somewhat of a camera fiend. I grew to like him very much.

But it was big rugged John Wallace—just a hardware salesman, tall and lean and rugged like Lincoln—whom suddenly I realized I loved. It didn't frighten me—that sudden realization. The past, after these months seemed to have receded like memory of an unhappy dream, so that, almost for the first time in my life, I was really happy.

Being swept along—into what? I never thought of it. I could think only of my dreams of John Wallace; his big strong arms around me, his lips murmuring that he loved me. He would tell me it soon—I had seen it in his eyes; seen his growing love for me.

Alan Carter's father died that autumn; and Alan took over his father's studio. And one evening he invited me to his home—which wasn't far from mine—asking if he couldn't take some informal flash-lights of me. I accepted. God knows I had no premonition of what was going to happen. Our friendship, to me, had seemed wholly platonic.

I posed for him in the drapes which he had brought from his studio in New York. The posing thrilled me. I was beautiful—my body voluptuous, fully matured now; and my face had that strange beauty inherited from my mother. Displaying my beauty gave me pleasure, though I was thinking, not of Alan Carter, but of John Wallace whom I loved.

Alan was quiet, with a solemn tenseness as he posed me and made his pictures, impersonally in the fashion his father would have used with a professional model. Then suddenly he seized me, drew me to the couch.

"Manya," he said, "there's something

strange about you." His breath seemed choking him. "You're just a—woman of ice. And I think if I kissed you. . ."

I had no chance to avoid him; his lips smothered my protests.

"Manya darling—"

"Alan—stop!" I gasped.

But he would not listen. "Manya—you glorious woman. . ."

I tried to force myself to halt his advances, yet a wild answering passion which I was unable to stem seemed to be gripping me. Where was my love for John? This was not love, but it was a disloyalty to the man I loved.

A disloyalty. A curse. Yet it was a surging passion which would not be denied. Then the monster suddenly took shape again—the monster of my terror, leering at me. Was it Tom Thorp's dead face, like a hovering shadow over in the corner, reminding me of his body—his body which lay rotting in its grave because we had kissed?

"Alan," I heard myself protesting, "you must listen—"

Was it too late? What difference now, if it were? The ecstasy of the moment, those pent-up emotions struggling to release themselves, were out of hand. But I loved John—and suddenly I called his name:

"John—help me! For God's sake, John—"

AND as though it were a miracle, suddenly I saw John standing in the doorway! Or could it be John, with that teeming hate pouring from his eyes as he took a menacing step toward Alan? Dear God—not murder. I might be a murderess—twice a murderess; but the man I loved must not be a murderer!

How I gathered my wits and flung my torn drapes around me so quickly, I do not know. But in an instant I was at John's side, springing between him and Alan.

"Take me home, John. Please take me home," I cried hysterically.

My need seemed to bring him out of his wrath. "My poor little girl," he said. He saw my coat on a chair; my shoes, stockings and skirt on the hassock. "Here, I'll help you—" He seemed to have forgotten Alan for the instant. And Alan remained on the couch, numbed, his eyes upon me, defiant and bewildered. John hurled him one last look as he edged me toward the door:

Alan just sat watching us. As the door closed behind us, I thought I heard a heart-breaking sob burst from him.

I do not remember the taxi ride home, save that John's dear arm was about me and he murmured words of consolation and love. He had been to my home; my maid had told him where I was, so he had gone to Alan's. I hardly heard his explanation. Alan was paramount in my mind. He had dared to love me! He had dared to caress and kiss me! What price would he pay?

Within my cozy den, the evening's episode seemed almost a nightmare. John was so real, so solicitous. All the tenderness in my nature suddenly asserted itself as he knelt down, put a match to the wood and kindling that was laid in the fireplace. Then he rang for Peters, at my request. I ordered her to bring us coffee and sandwiches. John sat beside me, warming my hands between his. Would he tell me tonight that he loved me? I was trembling inside, afraid of those lurking shadows, yet longing to belong to him. Then suddenly it came. Without preface; forceful and direct. That was John's way.

"Manya," he said abruptly. "I guess you know I love you." His hand went gently to my arm, with his eyes searching my face.

"John. . ." I had no thought of coquetry as I swayed against him—no thought of anything save to tell him that I loved him, and to feel his arms around me.

"You do love me," he murmured.

"Yes!" It burst from me. And then he was holding me, with his dear arms around me, his lips coming toward mine. . .

My telephone rang. John's arms loosened.

"I'll answer it," I said. I got up and went to the little taboret across the room, lifted the receiver.

"Manya—this is Mr. Wallace—Alan's uncle. . ."

My heart leaped. Alan's uncle? His voice was urgent with emotion. He had just returned from New York. Numbly I listened, with the room blurring around me. Alan was dead! His uncle had come in and found him. Dead—of poison, the doctor said. A suicide!

"Manya, what is it?" John asked.

The room swayed and blurred around me. I think I was hysterically, wildly laughing. . . . Alan was dead! He had committed suicide. Another who had kissed me and died!

And here was the man I loved coming toward me. He too would kiss me. . . .

"Get out of here!" I heard myself gasping. "I—I never want to see you again! I hate you!"

"Why, Manya, dear—why, good Lord—"

He tried to seize me, but I shoved him away.

"I lied to you! I don't love you! It was Alan Carter I loved, and now he's dead—"

Peters stood in the doorway. "You'd better go," she said to John.

"Yes, go!" I screamed. "I hate you—get out of here! I never want to see you again!"

Poor dear John. Like a big, baffled animal he stood confused, gazing helplessly from Peters to me as he winced under my lashing tongue.

"Manya—"

"You fool! Don't you know when you're being put out? I don't love you.

I love Alan Carter and he—he's dead!"

Peters shoved at him as I sank into a chair, sobbing. Then he was gone.

Peters and I packed all that night, and soon after dawn we fled from the village.

THE house that Dr. MacArthur found for Peters and me was a little furnished bungalow, set with its back to the brink of a gully, a path of woods around it, and a little side-road winding past. It was a mile from an up-state village.

It was secluded enough; but how could I run away from a thing like this when the horror of it burned into my brain, and all my tortured thoughts, my dreams at night, held nothing but the pathetic, tragic memory of Alan Carter's face, and my conjured vision of how he must have looked, dying in convulsions?

And how shall I describe my despairing conviction that never again would I see John Wallace. I loved him now more than anything in the world. But stronger than that love was the terror of surrender to him. Love and marriage, I would never have them because I was cursed.

The first two days I lived in a nightmare, fearing that I might weaken and send for John; by night I lay drenched in sweat, filled with the ghastly horror that I might cast aside all restraint and claim the love I knew he felt for me. . . . Then the shadows were closing in on me again—grim shadows with leering, lurking menace; accusing shadows of Alan and Tom Thorp who were dead—whose blood I had congealed from the white heat of passion into the festering of the grave.

That third night I stood at my window. There was only blackness outside. Blackness and strange sounds of the lonely night. A premonition of ghastly horror was upon me. Once I thought I would rush to the phone and call John to come and save me. Save me from what? I did not know. There was a chill dankness in the air, but my fevered face welcomed it.

My brain was on fire. My body was on fire; throbbing—longing for John. And that fierce grisly terror persisted, rising up like a great monster, ready to spring and devour me.

Peters came into the room almost soundlessly. She spoke to me, but I hardly heard the words. That voice of Peters—there had always been something vaguely, queerly reminiscent about it. As though in some former incarnation I might have known her—as a friend, or an enemy? And the timbre of her voice stirred me tonight—stirred me so that I trembled.

"What—what is it, Peters?"

"Your supper, Miss Manya." She placed a tray with food and my usual sedative beside my bed. I ignored the food, but took the sedative because I knew that I must sleep or I would die of this torture. Then when she was gone I switched out my light, stripped off my clothes almost in a frenzy and went back to the window, feeling the air strike my nude body with a cold, chilling hand.

I do not know how long I stood there. Finally, in exhaustion, I went to bed and lay uncovered, with my throbbing body nude. Then, at last, I must have drifted to sleep, and I thought I was dreaming. I felt arms about me, protecting and loving. I struggled to get away.

Gradually my senses were returning; I was regaining consciousness. Vaguely I felt the arms tightening about me; and now a voice was murmuring to me.

It was John's voice!

A TERRIBLE lethargy was upon me. I wanted to cry out—to tell him not to kiss me, not to caress me, because if he did it would mean death to him. But I could not arouse myself. And then I heard his words:

"Manya—little Manya—"

The moonlight—I could see now its silver sheen as it struck in through my bedroom window and upon his face. It

made him look ghostlike, sitting there. . . .

"Manya, why did you run away? Dr. MacArthur was so good—he told me where to find you."

"John—you—you—" My hand held him off. I must get him out of here. Then dimly I remembered—

"John," I gasped, "You didn't—didn't kiss me just now, did you?"

"Kiss you?" He leaned toward me. "Why, there's nothing wrong in that, is there?"

His face came down, but I wildly shoved at him.

"John—my God—"

At my wild look, my face, pallid in the moonlight with God knows what look of terror on it, he drew back. And suddenly his hand went up to his face.

"Good Lord—" he muttered. He seemed for the second dazed.

"John—" Horror choked me. Sentinels of death were crowding us.

"I guess—I guess I don't feel very well, Manya," he murmured. He tried to laugh. "How idiotic. What—what were you saying, darling?" He sat on the bed, swaying. "I'm afraid there's something the matter with me, Manya—"

Dear God—the end

I leaped up, with my disheveled hair streaming down on my shoulders and breasts. John had staggered from the bed; he was standing confused.

"I'm—sick," he muttered. Then he seemed to realize he was terrifying me. "Oh, I'm all right—just feel—queer. My head—and I'm trembling."

His outstretched hand was shaking as though palsied. Dear God, he was so pallid, his eyes wide with startled wonderment and a growing terror. Forgetful of my nudity, I leaped from the bed, clung to him.

"John—you don't realize—" I could only laugh wildly—laugh and sob and cling to him. "You're going to die, John. Oh my God, you're going to die and I've

killed you! Murderess—that's Manya Corot—murderess—"

He was gripping me now—staring at me—trying to collect his scattering thoughts. And his face so pale with the sweat pouring out on it.

"Die, Manya?"

He staggered as he tried to clutch me. . . . The end. Oh, why would I stand here like this, with the man I loved dying before me? A doctor—we must phone a doctor. Or phone to a hospital—there was a hospital over at White Cap Mountain, ten miles away.

I must have been babbling it. "Yes—a doctor—a hospital," he gasped. "I guess you're right, Manya."

My telephone was out in the living room. Together, clinging to each other, we started for it. Then a low moan abruptly sounded in the dim and silent bungalow! We rounded a corner of the little hallway, stood frozen. Peters! My maid lay here on the floor! Peters, in her black dress and the stab wound in her breast a crimson horror!

"Peters!" I gasped. "Oh, Peters—"

Her agonized eyes focussed on me. "You—damn you," she faintly murmured. "Murderess! You killed my boy, Tommy—damn you—"

Tom Thorp's mother! The woman of the hospital who had stridently cursed me for the death of her son! If only I had caught a glimpse of her that day in the hospital!

"**D**AMN you, Manya Corot," she was faintly gasping. "I had my vengeance, didn't I? Drugging you—" She seemed to see the staggering John as he swayed, numbed, dazed, with me supporting him. "The man you love—" The dying woman tried to laugh, but it was only a ghastly gurgle of blood in her throat. "He'll die! You can't save him—he'll die from the accursed kiss you've given him—"

She was dying. Who had killed her? Had she committed suicide? The ghastly sight of her blurred before me, as for that instant I clung to John. My head was whirling beyond rational thought. . . . A hospital—a doctor—John was dying—we must get help. . . .

I realized that I was stumbling forward—nude, half maniac woman no doubt—holding the dazed, stricken man I loved—trying to get to the telephone to summon help—

"Manya—where are we? I can't see much."

God, how he was twitching now! Like Alan Carter! . . . He collapsed into a chair. "You know the name—of a doctor—near here?" he mumbled. "Or you better call the police. Tell them to send a doctor—or an ambulance—"

I found the telephone. My teeth were chattering; my whole body bathed in sweat as I lifted the receiver.

"Put that back!" At the sound of the grim voice, I dropped the receiver back on its hook, stared numbly at a shapeless figure that rose up from the shadows beside me. "I'll be the one to call the police, Manya—the police, and a doctor and an ambulance which will be too late."

Dr. Frank MacArthur! The handsome physician stood here leering at me; his hand at his side clutched a knife still dripping crimson! A changed Dr. MacArthur from the man I had known so many years—his hair disheveled—his face contorted with the lust for killing mingled with his triumph. A madman? His glittering, leering eyes burned at me. But there was a shrewdness in them—a glittering, calculated triumph—the triumph of a rational scheming villain with his purpose at last accomplished.

"That's better, Manya. I'll be the one to do the telephoning. Mary Peters is dead—or she will be in a minute." He chuckled. "She did her work well; but I couldn't take a chance that she would

always say the right thing when questioned—"

Like a panting maniac I must have been staring, with the room whirling around me—blurred, numbed so that I hardly heard the damnable villain's gloating, leering words. Then I saw him sweep a contemptuous glance at John—who was collapsed in his chair, twitching horribly now, staring with distended eyes that seemed to see nothing of the grisly scene around him.

"He's dying, Manya." Again that fiendish chuckle. Then his leering triumphant gaze swung back to me, roved my nude, shaking body. "God, you are beautiful, aren't you?" he muttered. "I never quite realized how beautiful. A mad, beautiful murderess. What you'll try to say won't make any difference, my dear. A madwoman. Mad with lust—murderess of Carter. And this fellow Wallace. A poisoner—a Borgia. They'll say you stabbed your poor maid."

With his dripping, crimson knife at his side, he stood appraising my sweat-bathed body so pale in the moonlight. I may have screamed, but I can't remember. I was barely conscious of what I was doing—numbly staring at him, trying to scream with my choking throat so that it only made him laugh.

"Get away from the telephone, Manya. I'll call them. You're going to a sanatorium, my dear. My sanatorium, where I'll have to keep you locked up because you're a murderous maniac. Oh, it will be highly profitable for me—"

DRIPPING poison from her lips. . . . In all the chaos of my roaring brain, the words suddenly were etched as though with lines of fire.

I was aware that at his leering gesture I had staggered to my feet, away from the telephone. Vaguely I saw that John was trying to climb from the chair—

And suddenly raging, as though in truth

my mind were unhinged, I staggered forward and flung myself upon MacArthur. The impact of my body caught him off balance. He stumbled backward, with his arms around me as I fell upon him.

"Why—" he gasped. "Why, Manya—"

"Love me!" I panted. "Hold me close—you've made me a creature of desire—hold me close because I love you—"

In that startled second, with my body close to him, my face against his, the instinct of his passion seized him.

"Why—Manya." In that second he was off his guard.

And then my mouth found his—found his and clung, madly kissing him. . . . Lips that dripped poison—lusting with a mad kiss of death.

Then I was aware that he was struggling with terror. His face jerked away and his man's strength heaved me off so that I staggered to my feet.

"I've killed him, John! Look at him—I've killed him with my kiss!"

The dim moonlit room was a swaying phantasmagoria with John on his feet here beside me, clutching at me. And on the floor, the stricken MacArthur lay in a paroxysm. He had tried to climb to his feet, but had fallen again.

My raging, lustful kiss had been so very different from the gentle caress John had given me. John was still on his feet—but MacArthur was dying in a convulsion. For a moment or two he struggled. Then like an animal gasping its quivering last breath, his twitching muscles stiffened. And then he was gone. . . .

Vaguely I remember John swaying dizzily as he sat at the telephone. Then everything went black as my legs buckled and I fell in a little white heap in the moonlight at his feet. . . .

JOHN was only in the hospital a day or two. But I was there for months. And so was Peters—Mary Thorp, her right name. She made a full confession

before she died, from which most of the details of MacArthur's fiendish plot can be pieced together. The man was irrational, of course. But he was a coldly scheming villain too.

As a young physician he had attended my widowed mother when still I was a child. It is obvious that even then he was scheming to get her fortune. My mother was a tragic weak figure. A strong neurotic strain had come from her Austrian forbears. She feared it—feared perhaps insanity for herself—or for me. As a child I was neurotic, nervous; and that terrified her. Always she had had great confidence in Dr. MacArthur. Dying, she had left her will with provisions that Freeman and his Board of Trustees were to tell me nothing that would frighten me; that at twenty-one, or when for a year I had been happily married to a trustworthy man, the money was to be turned over to me. And meanwhile, for Dr. MacArthur there was a fifteen thousand a year fee as my physician—to guard my physical and mental health. He of course prompted that will—his lavish yearly fee so that if I never married—if I should be declared mentally incompetent, Dr. MacArthur would care for me, trustee of my fortune. . . .

It was a stake indeed worth playing for. And so the scheming villain determined that I should never marry—that in the end I should be committed, mentally incompetent, into his care for life. Tom Thorp's mother was a nurse; MacArthur was a doctor. They met; she became his mistress and, hating me, was easily persuaded to become his willing tool in the diabolic plot against me.

We think, too, that he had a reason for wanting Alan Carter dead. He had contrived that young Carter meet me—for my own good, I had thought! But now it transpires that MacArthur was connected with the photographic business of Alan's father. He had embezzled some

of its funds. Alan, after his father's death, with the alertness of youth, was investigating. MacArthur quite evidently realized the danger—and so poor Alan, through me, met his death. . . . John Wallace had found me in my seclusion. That was not a coincidence. MacArthur had contrived to let him know where perhaps I might be found—and MacArthur had followed him up to me for the climax of his weird and gruesome villainy.

During my months at the hospital, there were many nurses and doctors—and once or twice, the police—who tried to explain to me the medical details of what had been done to me. Shuddering details of strange alkaloidal compounds with weird lethal names . . . Cyanides in compound; cuarite—other deadly drugs. . . .

To me, just grisly words. I only knew that for months my poor body was wracked with the tortures of the damned as the harrassed physicians experimented upon me to find the nature of the drug with which my system was loaded—to give it to me in lessening doses until at last I was free of it.

The reverse of what MacArthur and my maid had done to me all those ghastly months and years. Mary Thorp had also given me aphrodisiacs, the reason for that ghastly torturing desire which always had been upon me. And she had fed me, in tiny but increasing doses, upon the deadly drug so that at last what would instantly kill a dozen men, my system absorbed.

Typhoid Annie. . . . One of the grim young doctors at the hospital mentioned her. . . . There were, he said, many known precedents of my condition. Dispenser of death. . . . The very moisture of my lips—my salivary glands. . . .

I can only shudder as I set it down; I have no heart to detail it. . . . Grim and ghastly horror, so rational. . . . There was even a police precedent—a "poison kiss" murder famous a few years ago—the transference of death in a kiss!

John and I are happily married now. We try not to think of the horrible past. But often—though not for all the world would I mention it—that curse of the necromancer, Prahar, recurs to me. And I wonder if MacArthur himself might have been merely the worldly tool of the malevolent dead mystic—just the instrument to help with the fulfillment of the curse. With MacArthur dead, will the leering venomous spirit of Prahar find some other way?

I am free of all taint of the drug, of course. But sometimes, in the darkness of our bedroom as I lie beside John, it seems that over me there is a leering horrible presence. And when John kisses me—when my own wifely love and passion thrill me into response—often I am shuddering with horror. I wonder if some time when I have fallen asleep, surfeited by the passion of our kisses, I will awaken to find John dying in a ghastly convulsion beside me!

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House of the Mummy Men



Dr. Timothy Howard was not a cruel man. It pained him to have to inflict such agony on these lovely young girls—and all just because the world refused to recognize his genius. But his great plan was nearly complete: it only remained for Marjorie Welles to submit to being transformed into a human treasure chest! . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Model of the Damned

IT WAS a time of great happenings in the current world, but Dr. Timothy Howard, curator of the Municipal Museum of New York City, explorer and anthropologist, was only remotely interested in his own time and generation. At seven o'clock on a brisk Tuesday morn-

ing, having breakfasted early, he worked intently on the last touches of his Cro-Magnon life group. The artificially-lit basement laboratory of Dr. Howard's house in Rockland County was already almost filled by similar life-like groups of ancient and prehistoric peoples.

A west wind rose and died in the hills beyond Dr. Howard's house, and in the house itself, there was a sound of anguish more desolate than the wind.

by EDITH and EJLER JACOBSON

*A Thrillingly Dramatic Novelette
of a Fantastic Diamond and
the Weird Prehistoric
Mummies Who Came
to Fearful Life . . .*



"Hush. Please hush," Dr. Timothy Howard murmured to the dim female form suspended before him. She was strapped to a sort of iron cross, and two bands of pulleys on either side of her, kept belts moving slowly in endless progress; kept a constant, agonizing friction on her exposed skin. Machinery hummed invisibly and a slight, constant wailing came from the woman's whitish lips.

Dr. Howard remembered a time, far back, when he had been able to address people without using that timorous murmur—but he could not remember any details about that time, or when it had ended. He only knew that he had changed since then, and that everything else had changed.

"Don't you understand?" he continued, in a low, almost whining voice. "Only a matter of hours—most important." He had explained before to his specimens that they must co-operate, that they were essential to his well-being and success.

A despairing sigh came from the white lips, as though the woman in the mummy-like wrapping had given up all hope of mercy. The body jerked momentarily against its bonds—and then the endless belts, freed of all living restraint, began to move faster and faster. With nervous but skillful fingers, Dr. Howard released the tension on the belts—and the body sagged heavily on the white-washed floor.

Life had gone from the specimen, not in the insidious lingering fashion it should have gone, but in the old-fashioned way, forever, so that within five days, the woman would be a decaying corpse.

"Damn!" said Dr. Howard. Only a month now, to finish that West Wing exhibit in the museum—and the greatest crisis of his career about to come up. He could not foretell the exact time of the supreme test, but he knew it would be soon. For months, he had been working at fever-pace, preparing himself and now there was a snag at the eleventh hour.

Almost, he felt, the genius which had guided him since his great inner change, was growing fallible. He was not sane, and he knew it—for no man who lives wholly by inspiration can claim a reason of his own. He knew he had been sane when he first discovered the process whereby the constant action of chemically treated belts could make human skin as tough and thick as tanned leather, so that it imprisoned the muscular life within like a strait-jacket, and appeared as lifeless as a relic that had lain underground through the ages.

But he had not been sane since. . . . He had talked in a frightened murmur, and he had had qualms. They were not qualms of conscience—he feared only discovery by a hostile world. It was that world, he considered, which had driven him to this in the first place. The world had been niggardly with him, had side-tracked him into the position of a petty executive in a public show. It had forced him to use his wits until they faltered, whereupon his guiding genius had taken charge of him.

That genius had promised to lead him to fortune and independence, if he should obey its prompting; and he had done so. The means of Dr. Howard's liberation already awaited him in the Municipal Museum, once he had devised a means of using it.

But if there were to be more snags like this one. . .

Dr. Howard was trembling fussily when he slid under the wheel of his conservatively-colored sedan, and nosed it out along the beautiful new highway, toward New York City. The air was like pure wine, but on that Tuesday morning, he was too upset to appreciate it. He felt almost spiteful toward the world, so that he wished he had been a manual laborer, instead of one of the greatest contributors to civilized knowledge to be without honor in his own time and place.

A PARTY of school-children, under the guidance of a teacher, was inspecting the wonders of the Municipal Museum. Curt Whelan, assistant director, listened to their chatter. He was smiling, but he did not know it. Half his mind was busy with the Van Houten diamond. It was a dangerous piece for a museum, he thought, as the children pressed their noses against the triple-glass case in which it was protected. Too bad of old Howard to insist on having it here—and yet, there was no logical place for it except a museum.

“That stone,” he heard the teacher announce crisply, “is worth six million dollars.”

Thirteen of the fourteen youngsters oohed and aahed. The fourteenth, an undersized wiry boy of ten, commented acidly, “Ah, who’d pay six millions dollars for a big piece o’ junk like that!”

Curt Whelan grinned more broadly. The kid had something there—it was the same objection old Van Houten had bucked when he tried to sell the largest diamond in the world without cutting it up. From British South Africa, Van Houten had carried his stone, stopping always in cities where wealth was concentrated, putting his stone on exhibition and hoping for a buyer—but New Yorkers, like Londoners and Parisians, seemed to consider that immortal goods come too high for mere mortal man. And so the stone, uncut and unpolished, lay with a sort of dull malignant lustre in its thief-proof case, an eleven hundred sixty-three carat white elephant.

Within an hour, when the crowd grew thicker, Van Houten’s special guards would come to stand watch. There would be the usual parade of idle women, noisy young hooligans and assorted rubber-necks, staring with greedy stupidity at the diamond. Suddenly Curt felt a strong distaste for the whole business. He was not a shy young man, but during his four

years with the museum, he had grown to love it for its cathedral-like feeling of quiet. He had enjoyed explaining to interested onlookers how Dr. Howard unearthed the Lake Como fossils, but there was nothing sensational in that. Nothing half so sensational as the story of the old Dutch farmer who had stumbled on the largest diamond in the world when a heavy rain washed the topsoil off his turnip patch.

THE undersized, wiry ten-year-old was wandering away from his group. He had already tired of the Van Houten diamond, and was seeking new worlds to conquer. Curt followed him idly. He had a passion for sating the honest curiosity of children. In front of the Afriti life group, the child paused and stared at the poison arrows.

“That’s more like it, isn’t it, youngster?” Curt asked.

The boy looked up and grinned. He said, “Yeah. Say, do you own that diamond?”

Curt said, “No, thank heaven,” and was about to expound certain angles of the Afriti culture which he had found delighted small boys, when a clear feminine voice called his name from the next alcove.

Curt forgot the small boy and the Afritis. He was willing to forget most things when Marjorie Welles called him.

“How’s my Midge?” he asked as he walked up to her.

“Your Midge is fine.” Her smile was quiet, delicate, like everything else about her. “I came to get another look at your wonderful diamond before the crowd pushes me away.”

Curt led her back to the triple-glass showcase. “Van Houten says he’ll break it up if he can’t get a buyer in New York, and I wish he’d make up his mind one way or another. It’s scheduled to remain here almost indefinitely. I can’t

imagine what made Dr. Howard want to turn the museum into a sort of side-show!"

Marjorie's eyes focussed on the unpolished stone. "I hate to see it cut up," she mused. The lazy, unpolished lustre of the stone seemed to exert a powerful fascination over her, as it did over most onlookers. "It's—it's got a soul, Curt. Sometimes I feel as though it were telling me things—all the things it's worth after having lain dormant for centuries. It has a power now, a greater power than anything that size ought to have—and I like it!"

She looked up momentarily, and asked, almost as an afterthought, "So Dr. Howard wanted to have it here?"

Curt was startled into a vague unease, three-quarters jealousy, he realized. Marjorie's tone as she mentioned the gem had been—well, a great deal like the tone she often used with him, and the characteristic had not quite gone from her voice when she mentioned the name of Dr. Timothy Howard. It was almost as though she felt that the brilliant scientist had something in common with her, something deep and eternal in their mutual appreciation of the monstrous jewel whose pale yellow dimness mockingly hid its preciousness.

Roughly he said, "Cut it out, Marjorie—Dr. Howard's an effeminate old fool." He paused suddenly, struck by the thought that had never occurred to him before, that there was something cat-like and purring about his superior. Then he noticed Marjorie's eyebrows rising at his outburst, and added with hasty contrition, "I'm sorry, I—"

A shriek cut him short. A scream that shattered the museum's vaulted quiet. The cry of a small child being tortured to death. . . .

Curt felt the blood going sick in him, as he bolted back toward the Afriti alcove, whence the shriek came.

THE small boy lay on his side in front of the life group, trying to rip something from his swelling belly, something that protruded fourteen inches, quivering as though from a recent impact.

Curt would remember the scene when he was an old man. Burned into his brain were the wooden Afritis; the bowman with his empty bow; the small, tormented figure swelling rapidly into a bloated, discolored caricature of a child; the crowd that collected, as crowds always do.

He was aware of a woman kneeling beside him, with the writhing hideous shape between them, a woman who moaned over and over, "Oh, God, what am I going to tell his mother!" He knew he was talking to the small boy, pleading with him to be brave, and he knew there was no bravery in himself. There was only a sick prescience of dreadful consequence and a desire to smash the Afriti image that had caused this accident.

And then an ambulance doctor came, and pushed them all away. The doctor looked at the small boy briefly, and white-coated stretcher bearers carried off the small form.

The verdict seemed to ring like thunder—yet Curt knew it was ordinary speech. "He's dead."

Dead, thought Curt, of a poisoned arrow that is five hundred years old, fired from a wooden bow held by a wooden bowman.

"Who brought him here?" demanded the doctor. "What's his name? Is there anyone here connected with the museum?"

While guards kept the crowds back, Curt walked to his office with the doctor and the boy's teacher. His legs worked automatically, his mind kept playing the crazy words over and over, like a needle on a cracked record. A wooden bow held by a wooden bowman. The bowman had not moved.

The dead child's teacher sobbed out a name, an address, an age. Then she faint-

ed. A plainclothes inspector, flanked by a few silent police, said to Curt, "Now, sir, what happened?"

Curt told him.

"You expect me to believe that?"

Curt said honestly, "No—I can't quite believe it myself."

"Nonsense. . . . Someone took the arrow and stabbed him with it. Did you happen to notice who was in the alcove with the child?"

"There was no one," said Curt. He felt that the policeman was right—had to be right. Yet, somehow, he *knew* that it was not that. It was something mysterious, inexplicable. He answered more questions, and the inspector shook his head, and asked when Dr. Howard would arrive. Then the office was empty. The hysterical teacher had been taken away, and the police were outside, taking measurements and finger-prints which might in time prove something rational. Curt buried his head in his arms.

"Darling." It was a soft, tender voice, clear and bell-like. Marjorie stood in the doorway, infinite shock on her cool, fair face. He reached out his arms to her, a muscular, competent young man who had become suddenly bewildered as a child. She came to him, and stroked his dark hair. "It's a bad thing," she went on, when she seemed to sense that she had calmed him a little. "Do you suppose the investigation will lead to anything?"

"I hope so," Curt declared. It was going through his head again. A small boy, bright with promise of long good life, dead by a poisoned arrow five hundred years old. A wooden arrow held by a wooden Bowman. "I hope it makes them take out that damned diamond. It's not right. This isn't the place for it! I don't know what the tie-up is, but I know six million dollars of concentrated stone is so much dynamite—and it's just exploded."

"Don't, Curt," she pleaded. "If you

knew what your face looks like. Try to hold on to yourself."

He tried. But it was hard, with those words running through his brain. "How about lunch? I'd like to get away from this."

Marjorie shook her head slowly. "Can't make it. I saw Dr. Howard this morning. He came to look at the stone right after you—when you went into the alcove after the boy. He's talking to the police now, but when he's through, I promised to have lunch with him."

Indignation sparkled in Curt's brain. Howard had been there, in the midst of the melée, and had left him, Curt Whelan, to resolve the problem as best he could, while Howard himself had used the opportunity to date Midge for lunch! It was rotten of Howard—it was rotten of Midge. And how could they have been so cool, with a boy dying in the next room! . . .

CHAPTER TWO

None But the Fair—Shall Die!

DR. TIMOTHY HOWARD stopped on the Manhattan side of the Holland Tunnel, to fill his gas tank. Ninety-eight—dollar-fourteen. . . . It was amazing, the variety of ways in which money could filter from his pockets. He considered that his whole attitude toward the world would be more generous if the world should subsidize him. It wouldn't take much—the grocer would never miss a donation of provisions to one man, nor the enormous oil company, nor would the Federal Government notice an appreciable difference if it ceased to collect taxes from Dr. Timothy Howard. Peevishly, Dr. Howard realized that human beings were too blind to give an inch and gain a mile.

For they would have been much better off, all of them, if they had not forced him to concentrate on irrelevant details. He

didn't like money for its own sake; he thought it a nuisance. And they were forcing him to apply his genius to one great coup, in order that he might forget money forever.

The sedan, re-fueled, threaded again through traffic. Dr. Howard was a good driver, enjoying an occasional game of skill for right of way with a cabbie. It relaxed his mind. He began to see his immediate problems with a certain soothing perspective. The death of the girl this morning left him without a subject for a Nile-dweller for the fiftieth century B. C. . . . But even though circumstances kept him in New York, New York would be cosmopolitan enough to yield him another Namitic type. There was no specific quarter in which to look for her. As any anthropologist knows, the modern Egyptian race differs radically from the ancient. Namite, Semite, Aryan—the classic subdivisions of the white race. Of the three, the Namite was almost extinct, save for an infrequent, startling throw-back which might occur in any strain at all. Wide lips, clear eyes, high cheek-bones. . . . The coloring didn't have to matter, that could be, and must be, changed anyway.

Luck and genius were his allies. He was looking for a woman with wide lips and high cheek-bones, and he might find her this very morning in the museum. It might not be a bad world. For the first time in hours, Dr. Howard appreciated the clear, cold atmosphere. The motor seemed to sing ahead of him.

And then, to cap it all, right inside the museum, he did find her. The most beautiful girl in the world, standing beside the Van Houten diamond. Yesterday she would not have seemed beautiful, for yesterday he would not have needed her. But today—he was so pleased with her, he could have kissed her. He caught her arm, and tipped his hat.

"Good morning, Miss Welles."

The green-eyed girl turned with a start.

When she saw Dr. Howard, her expression changed from anxiety to query. "Dr. Howard, something's happened. I don't know what—"

He knew something had happened. He had heard the sound of disturbance, had seen young Whelan dash from the girl's side. "What seems to be the trouble, child? Young Whelan too busy to see you?"

"Something like that. I wonder. . ."

Dr. Howard gave her no chance to wonder audibly. She was not looking at him, she was looking into the alcove where young Whelan had gone. "Now, now," he interrupted her, his tone gentle and fatherly, "that's not right. Let's you and I teach him a lesson. I'm lunching with Mr. Van Houten today, the owner of this diamond. Join us, and I'll see that young Whelan gets a raise. That ought to solve a lot of things."

Marjorie looked at him then, and he could read the thoughts in her greenish eyes. She thought him an old fool—she was being tolerant, however.

"Very well, Dr. Howard. If you'll excuse me now, I think I'll see what's happened to Curt."

Dr. Howard glanced backward at her as he went to his office. He could not remember having been more delighted with a young woman, ever. She had come like an answer to a prayer, and no amount of disrespect in her attitude toward him could make him like her less. Dr. Howard even thought expansively of Curt Whelan, who had first attracted Marjorie Welles to the Municipal Museum. Good boy, Whelan—the best! He actually would speak to the trustees this afternoon about raising Whelan's salary. The boy had wanted that a long time—had wanted to get married.

But of course, thought Dr. Howard gently, the marriage part will be out of the question. Absolutely out of the question.

FOR two hours, Marjorie Welles watched the birds and the children in the park outside the museum. Sometimes they blurred before her eyes; every time she thought of Curt. Curt's temper was a swift, onerous thing, like an electric storm in midsummer. It flashed always when he thought she was letting him down—and then, like a midsummer storm, it would end in almost violently brilliant sunniness. If he had only listened while she explained—but then, he never did, not until he had ceased being angry, and explanations became unnecessary.

In a way, she was sorry she had promised to lunch with Howard. She was not fond of the man. She thought him a doddering incompetent in everything but science. But if it would help Curt get a raise—they needed that raise! She was making so little herself, with that afternoon job, and it cost so much to live. . . . It was a shame, she thought, that she had to play this hackneyed old game with such a poor actor—a pretty young woman flattering her fiance's boss into giving a young man a raise.

Dr. Howard was visibly distraught when Marjorie entered his office, as she had expected he would be. He must have heard about the boy, and the Afriti bowman.

"I'm not going to discuss frivolities," he informed her gravely. "I only hope, during this luncheon, that I can talk Van Houten into taking away his diamond. And I want you to help me, Miss Welles."

"Me?" She stared at the middle-aged anthropologist, thinking that there was probably some foundation to all the rumors of eccentricity about him. What earthly good could she be?

"Yes, you. I'm not a salesman, Miss Welles—I'm a scientist. And I want to put an idea across; but I can't do it myself. If you could interpret this for me—that there's something evil about that diamond. It's nothing I could express con-

vincingly to a layman. It's a purely scientific hunch, something a man feels when he's dealt as much as I have with old, old things. . . ."

What *was* it? Curt, another anthropologist, had said the same thing. A dead child, and a priceless diamond—to them there was an invisible hyphen between the two. She didn't like to think of Curt's mind being like Howard's. It was said of Howard that he wasn't like other men, that he knew more about the secrets of the ages than a human being ought to know. Of course, that meant nothing. Any professional man's idiosyncrasies are exaggerated by the lay public into sensational proportions.

It occurred to her, however, that Curt had also said something else about Howard and the diamond. She looked sharply at the curator.

"I thought you always wanted the stone here," she charged him.

He wrung his hands, in a feeble attempt at self-expression. "I did. I'm not such a poor businessman as scientists are generally supposed to be. We have two days a week when we charge admittance. That stone's brought a lot of money to the Museum, and I knew it would. But now, I'm afraid we're going to have to pay too high a price, in other ways. . . . If you could only help me explain, Miss Welles! I can't, somehow, do my own explaining!"

That was true enough. Curt had often been amused by the old boy's need for him at trustees' meetings. Curt could address an audience without forgetting what he had started to say. Dr. Howard was notoriously unable to grow graciously friendly with people—as he put it, to explain himself. Partly, that explained the queer stories about him, for people imagine the worst of those they do not understand.

She could not understand Dr. Howard herself—though at the luncheon, later, she did her valiant best.

LITTLE by little, as the three, Van Houten, Dr. Howard and Marjorie, sat on the terrace of the Park Tavern after luncheon, a sense of foreboding began to creep over Marjorie. The Dutchman paid no attention to her—and Howard seemed bent on making it up to her. He leered at her in his gauché way, well-meaning enough, but disturbing. He talked endlessly, after the topic of the diamond failed to elicit response from Van Houten, of his life groups, of the travels and studies he had made to perfect them.

Professional talk by a professional man? Yes, on the face of it—and all the while, Marjorie felt as though he were making love to her in a perverted and mad way, as though all this talk of the Swiss Lake Dwellers and the Maori Aborigines had something distortedly sexual in it. For he talked of his work as Don Juan might have talked of his conquests—and far less wholesomely.

He couldn't love a woman, she thought alarmedly, as the winter sunlight made a lacy pattern on his bony skull, the way a man ought to. He could love a dead image, though, in some sinful, incredible fashion—and that was the way he loved her! It was unmistakable. Marjorie was woman enough to sense his love, human enough to sense the shy vileness of it.

She fixed her eyes on the unresponsive Van Houten, pleadingly. He was coarse and unchivalrous, he had poor table manners, but he was normal. Frantically, her brain worked on one thing over and over—Curt will have to quit that job! There's something really wrong with Howard; he's worse than poisonous, worse than leprous. It didn't matter how Curt raved and ranted this time, if he should choose to rave and rant. She felt as though their lives would be irrevocably tainted unless they cut off all points of contact with the curator of the Municipal Museum. Something about him, less tangible, than an

odor, and infinitely more repulsive.

She was relieved when the talk was over at last, and Dr. Howard offered to take her to the book-store where she worked. She would rather have walked, but she didn't want to make any gesture that would call for explanation. She wanted to be rid of the man as smoothly and swiftly as possible.

She perched beside him in the sedan's front seat, breathing heavily—and then she turned to him with sudden sharp alarm. "Why, you're going the wrong way! This isn't the—" An unexpected stinging sensation in her left wrist interrupted her. She gave a little cry, and lifted her hand. It jerked to a stop against her will in mid-air. She tried to put her right hand over it, but that, too, had ceased to obey her will. The panicky scream that rocked in her throat was paralyzed, unable to become audible. She turned her eyes toward Dr. Howard.

He was staring straight ahead, at traffic, but he turned, and smiled pleasantly at her. The man was insane! He smiled again, with tenderness in his face, and realization broke like a bomb in her outraged brain. She could see the passing streets of New York, hear the hum of multiple life, but she could not move. Her mind was rigid as her body in the cataleptic endurance of two emotions—rage and panic.

CHAPTER THREE

The Diamond of Death

CURT WHELAN realized with a shock that he was thinking of the wooden Bowman as a murderer—and yet, as he studied every angle and lineament of the black face, he knew that no single part had changed. It was the total impression which was utterly different, just as though the Afriti had a soul. . . . Was it the play of light and shade on the coun-

ters of the face? Or was it actual alteration, by the merest of millimeters, so that the facial expression was affected?

Curt had a sense of being closed in on, of the sky's roof falling inexorably, suffocatingly, upon him. . . . He realized that the building was growing uncomfortably warm; the brisk day outside had probably grown milder, making unnecessary the steam-heat in the building. Curt wiped his forehead and walked on. As he passed through the Hall of Mammals and the Hall of Man, he felt an urge to smash every exhibit in the museum. He attributed it to his nerves, and his notoriously ungovernable temper . . . and something else. For the exhibits seemed all like the Afriti image, all subtly changed and vivified, though when he touched them they trembled only insofar as hard, inanimate things tremble under contact.

This was the work into which he had put his life, this was the great educational effort he had admired and abetted. Suddenly, like a man thirsty for light in the midst of a nightmare, he wanted Marjorie. Marjorie was calm and clear-thinking and forgiving. Marjorie was the only one who had the power to quiet his overwrought nerves. She would tell him he was imagining the unimaginable and impossible when he sensed a sinister aura about him.

People wandered about the museum, gaping at all things, and at the diamond in particular, as though nothing had changed. As though Curt Whelan had not seen a child killed by a manufactured image, and had not quarrelled with Marjorie Welles. Surely, something should have been different.

A crowd had collected in the Marsupial Hall. Women's voices cooed questions. A child was crying. Curt shouldered his way through the crowd, his raw nerves making him rough and angry.

A little girl put her hands to her eyes and howled, "I lost my fraulein—and I

want to go home! I want to go home. . . ."

A stout mother commented loudly, "Dreadful careless, them nursemaids."

"Where did you lose her?" Curt asked the child.

"By the ladies' room. I turned around to look at something and when I looked back, she wasn't there."

Curt took the small hot hand in his. "We'll find her," he said.

The washrooms were in a part of the building where, due to pending alterations, only a few exhibits were kept. Save for those few exhibits, and for some scaffolding on the bare plaster, the corridors were empty. Reason told Curt that a girl couldn't get lost there, that if he went down to the entrance desk, he would no doubt find the fraulein as tearful about a lost child as the child was about a lost fraulein. But a frightened memory precluded his turning the child over to another of the attendants, made him head for the almost-empty wing. . . .

Large plaster panes lay at various angles in the corridor, and the faintest of sounds, barely a flutter, seemed to come from behind one of them. Curt stepped behind the panel—and turned rapidly to put his hand across the child's face as she followed him. It was nothing for a child to see. . . .

Nothing for a man, either! The girl lay there, her blood zig-zagging lazily over the fair white skin, matting the yellow halo of hair into a gory wig. There was a dark bruise on her throat where the neck had been broken, apparently by her fall. The blue eyes were staring terror-stricken into eternity. Her clothes were in disarray—and through them, into her bloody entrails, was thrust the hairy arm of Dr. Timothy Howard's brilliant conception of the First Human—the Missing Link!

Curt stared straight ahead for the space of seconds—at the stiff, unmoving hairy figure, which now lay prone over the dead girl, its attitude threateningly hunched. . . .

much the same as it had been when standing upright on its pedestal! But the thing must have moved, before it toppled. . . .

Something went mad in Curt's brain—it seemed to him as though the brute jaw glowered, as though the little eyes of the First Man were red with lust, and he knew he hadn't been dreaming about the look of hatred on the face of the Afriti bowman, Curt had red circles of rage before his eyes as he let go of the child and flew into the hairy figure.

It rolled over with a dull thud against the plaster panel, like the stuffed image it was.

HE WAS conscious of one damning thought as he raced through the silent vault-like halls, with an hysterically babbling child clinging to his hand—these two events were no accident. The fossils were taking their revenge for the ravishment of their secret graves in time's womb. . . .

"Get out of here!" he shouted at the women and boys who clustered about the Van Houten diamond. "Get out before it kills you. . . ."

It was the police who snapped him out of it; who made him stop forcing the people to leave the museum. The police who insisted that all possible witnesses be kept for questioning. But there were no rational answers to any questions, and, in the end, Curt was left alone to wait for Dr. Howard and tell the eminent man that his museum had become a stamping-ground for devils.

He did not wait in Dr. Howard's office. He had urgent business elsewhere in the structure. Marjorie Welles—he wished now he had cut out his tongue before he talked the way he had to her. . . .

It was the madness of his despair that made him knock down priceless relics to see if it would make them show pain. He thrust pins into the tough unwincing skins of the fossils and their reproductions, look-

ing for some sign of life in them. Life which had manifested itself so violently and horribly during the day.

By sheer chance he happened into hearing range of the phone in his own office. It might have been ringing for a long time—the voice of Dr. Timothy Howard told him that it had been.

"Isn't there anyone around to answer bells?" asked the curator of the Municipal Museum.

"No," said Curt. "I'm alone here." He stated briefly what had happened.

There was a long pause, and then a shocked voice exclaimed, "Dear me, how ghastly! I wish you'd leave, Curt; the place should be investigated thoroughly before it's open, and it's no safer for you than for anyone else."

"No," said Curt again. Then, "You wouldn't have seen Marjorie Welles anywhere, would you?"

No, Dr. Howard had not seen Midge since luncheon, but since she had evinced no intention of coming back to the museum, Curt should not worry. Besides, Curt was overwrought, Dr. Howard said. Imagining things. . . . "I'm at a trustees' meeting, downtown. This ought to be brought up—I want them to take that diamond away! And you know how badly I talk to trustees, especially when I have to retract myself. It was I who first wanted the stone there. Please come down and help me, Curt—please!"

"Maybe," Curt promised dazedly. He was going to call Midge—mention of the Van Houten diamond reminded him all the more sharply of her absence and the quarrel which had precipitated it. If he knew where she was; that she was safe and sound and ready to forgive him, there was just an odd chance that he might go to a trustees' meeting instead of straight to her. A very slender chance. . . .

He felt certain that he was jeopardizing his position by thus temperamentally making himself clear to his superior—but

all the response he got from the other end of the line was a somewhat petulant, but wordlessly sympathetic sigh.

“SO YOU see, gentlemen,” concluded Dr. Howard, mopping his bony forehead, “we must remove the diamond. We’ve had nothing but trouble since it first came to the museum. I know that it doesn’t quite make sense—but it is too big a prize with which to tempt the ages . . . contemporary or ancient. . .”

The Board of Trustees of the Municipal Museum was silent. Each elderly gentleman looked at his colleagues for an answer, and it was old Dinhaus, president of the board, who asked finally, “When are we going to do it? Somehow, I don’t like the idea of handling. . .”

“Of course not,” agreed Dr. Howard. “Six million dollars worth of dynamite—and then the trouble with Mr. Van Houten. But if you’ll permit me to advance a suggestion. . .”

Carefully, Dr. Howard outlined the plan which had been in his brain for months, ever since he had prevailed upon the trustees to build that obviously impregnable showcase and extend old Van Houten an invitation to exhibit the diamond. He was relieved to find his colleagues accepting the need of removing the diamond without Curt Whelan’s testimony. As an afterthought, he said, just before the meeting broke up, “I have a young assistant; been with me four years. An excellent chap—I move we vote him an increase in salary to four thousand a year.”

After some discussion, the vote passed. Dr. Howard felt a quiet glow of satisfaction. After all, he owed Curt something—and it wasn’t coming out of his own pocket, but the city’s. There seemed approbation in the blue-and-lavendar evening sky, as he drove away from the meeting toward the hotel room he sometimes engaged when business kept him in New

York overnight. All the nervousness of the morning had vanished—evening had brought accomplishment and peace. Everything had worked out for the best, more swiftly than he could have hoped. Tonight’s denouement would be almost automatic.

He relished the image of a green-eyed blonde girl who was waiting for him in his hotel room as a child relishes the anticipation of ice cream. So lovely, and so useful—surely, luck and genius had followed him all the days of his life!

THE silence of timelessness had descended again for a short space upon jewels and relics, fossils and fetishes, all the curious paraphernalia of mankind’s thousand centuries. Still, Curt Whelan lingered in the museum, though he had combed every corner of it. He had the feeling that if Marjorie were not here, she was somehow safe. He hadn’t been able to locate her, but if she should return to find him—no, he couldn’t leave, not till morning. He stood in the darkness, looking at the fat yellow diamond, hating it.

Armbrose Halleran, the night watchman, had already dozed off to sleep at his station at the front entrance. There was no sign of further disturbance among the life groups, nothing to indicate the presence among them of a dormant and vicious spirit. Curt guessed the accidents, if they were accidents, would hit Timothy Howard hard. The curator might even lose his job because of them. Low and worried beneath the professional confidence, Curt thought his chief had sounded, when he had called after the trustees’ conference.

“You’re still there, Curt? Well, you’ll have company soon. Don’t tell anyone, but Van Houten is coming tonight with his workmen to take the diamond away. It’s being done very quietly, of course, and I don’t think there’ll be trouble. Van Houten himself may be nasty, but once he gets out safely with his stone, I expect

all our lives will be much quieter. And Curt, they've raised your salary—it'll be four thousand this year."

Not a sound in the dark night—or was there? Someone or something seemed to be moving on the second floor. Curt groped through shadowed halls to his own office. Nothing had been disturbed. The other offices? Howard's was just adjoining. . . .

The edge of a towel peeped over the top drawer of Dr. Howard's desk, glimmered whitely and unevenly. Howard, the neatest of men, had never left his desk that way. Curt jerked the drawer open, and cried out at what he saw there. His cry echoed dully through the lofty halls—the thing was impossible!

Fat and yellow and opalescent, unguarded at last, lay the eleven-hundred-sixty-three carat Van Houten diamond. Who had put it there? Who had been able, in the short space of time since Curt had last visited its case, to spirit it out of triple glass?

With the distaste he would have felt in handling a grenade, Curt picked up the heavy jewel and weighed it in his palm. There it lay, like any ordinary stone a man might find in any quarry in the world—but it was worth six million dollars!

Six million dollars worth of uncut, unpolished stone in the curator's desk. But Howard was nowhere on the premises, and the guards had not been Howard's at all, they had been Van Houten's! The natural suspicions which rose in Curt's mind, at finding the stone where he had found it, were untenable, in view of Howard's remoteness from the scene, certainly in view of the man's temperament. But then, what had anyone to gain—

As he approached the upper floor where the diamond should have been, he heard the faint screech of steel grinding on glass. Men with lanterns, in overalls and eye-protectors, were cutting away the case,

under the direction of the grizzled Dutch owner himself.

There was no surprise in Van Houten's old face, no hysterical dismay, as there should have been, with the diamond in Curt's pocket. He looked merely gruff and put out, and the frown-wrinkles in his forehead seemed graven by lantern-light.

And then the silence of centuries was shattered. In the space of a breath, a shadow moved almost imperceptibly forward, and Curt Whelan screamed a sudden warning. The shadow fell swiftly. . . . Van Houten's shriek ended in a gargle as ancient claws met in relentless clasp about his throat.

The heat Curt had noticed earlier had grown stifling, more oppressive. It seemed part of the bizarre happening in the museum. It was as though, Curt was thinking, the ages which had spawned the diamond were guarding it jealously even against a contemporary owner—as though not Van Houten, not any mortal man, might claim it.

Cumbersome no more, their big grotesque bodies limbered in the moist heat, the fossils were attacking. The workmen went berserk, and their shrieks were the shrieks of the doomed. Armed only with his fists and his hatred, Curt joined them. He was blind with frenzy; was barely conscious of the fetid breathing of the enemy, of the claws that sought revenge on his person for the indignities of his wardenship over them. . . .

Then he realized that Timothy Howard was pulling him away. The workmen, those who had survived, had fled. Van Houten ceased to writhe, and the fossils had subsided to a mere twitching. Howard asked in a strident, harsh voice that sounded unfamiliar to Curt, "Where's that damned stone?"

"Here." Curt took the big mass from his pocket.

"Give it to me." Howard seized the

Van Houten diamond from his subordinate's yielding fingers. "I've called the authorities—I suppose they're the people to give it to."

Then the police came, and after Howard turned the stone over to them, he broke down into such hysterical stammering that Curt had to do the telling for him. Later, he followed his chief out into the autumn night. There were still a few questions Howard had not answered to Curt's satisfaction, no matter how they satisfied the police.

CHAPTER FOUR

Curator of Horror

DR. HOWARD felt he owed thanks to someone, but he did not know to whom. For a moment, when the imitation diamond could not be found in his desk, he had felt that the things were out of his hands for good—but he could not have managed better himself! His bony brow glistened with cold sweat that had not yet dried off, but there was a faint smile on his face as he led Curt to the parked sedan.

For Curt Whelan had actually handed over the bogus stone on request—and then, he had not intimated to the police by one breath that such a stone existed. And now the Van Houten diamond itself was in good hands. The police would be some time in discovering the substitution.

He didn't know what had prompted young Whelan to act as he had. Bewilderment, perhaps some remote hope of gain . . . but Dr. Howard had no time to find out. He allowed the young man to seat himself before sliding under the wheel himself. Tight in his fist, he clutched a bludgeon valued at six million dollars. As Curt turned toward him, he lurched forward, smashed the stone with his open palm hard against the side of Curt's head. . . .

Everything was taken care of. Whelan

slumped, groaned. He was out. Dr. Howard did not stop to take the cord from the tonneau until he was on the Hudson's far shore, on a little-traveled road. Then, with a feeling of justifiable triumph, he headed homeward, his captive coming slowly back to consciousness beside him.

They were no more than two miles from the house when Curt said, "You damned crazy fool—let me out of here!"

An odd way, the curator reflected, for young Whelan to talk. He asked, curiously, "What was your idea, Curt? Did you think you could outwit me by not telling the police about the imitation in my office? And, by the way, why didn't you?"

There was anger in the young voice, anger and pain and futility. "You were the last person to see Marjorie Welles, and I wanted to know what happened to her. I think you're stark, staring crazy. . . . I was afraid you might hurt her, might have her somewhere where you could be pretty nasty."

"You shouldn't think that way of me," said Dr. Howard reprovingly. "Why, you're accusing me of spite!"

"Spite!" The young man laughed, bitterly. He threshed against the bonds, lurching dangerously near the gear shift. "You're not spiteful—you're insane. Besides, it doesn't matter whether I told the police or not. They're going to trace everything to you. You can't just walk off with a six million dollar diamond, and have no questions asked. The fossils that caused the disturbance were your work. It's going to be traced to you."

"Now, Curt. . ." Dr. Howard felt the young man deserved an explanation. Besides, the sound of his own voice, dwelling as it did on his own security, was reassuring to him. He explained that he had needed Marjorie, that Marjorie was lovely and useful. "And it's because of her that you're going to remain alive, Curt. It would have been too remarkable if both you and she had disappeared completely.

That was so foolish of you, staying in the museum after I told you not to! Now I don't know what's to become of you eventually."

"You'll burn," the young man insisted. He was being unpleasant, the curator thought, but it was such ineffectual unpleasantness.

He explained how the fossils could never be traced to him. "Because I placed them in the museum years ago—I'm not responsible for any tampering that's taken place since. When they examine the specimens that came alive, they'll find human beings—dead human beings. I attended to that. If the police are clever enough to penetrate the disguise, they will find most of them anonymous—the others are all known criminals. And further search will reveal my original fossils and reproductions cached away in an east side hide-out . . . known to be a gang headquarters. The gang's going to be credited with everything that's happened—especially as even the chemicals that were used for the disguise were bought by members of the gang who perished tonight."

Curt Whelan snorted. "You mean they committed suicide so you could get the diamond? That's ridiculous!"

"NOT quite," demurred the curator.

"You see, they believed they would be only temporarily disguised. It seemed a good idea to my friends in the less respectable parts of the community to take a one-night stand in the museum, disguised as fossils. That was going to be their opportunity to seize the diamond. I imagine they began to suspect, as they grew utterly helpless under my treatment, that they had taken more than they had bargained for—hence the immense efforts on their parts which led to those attacks on the child and the young girl. They were angry, but I rather expected that would happen, too. That fitted in well with my plans, as everything else did. It

led to a series of events which made the removal of the diamond seem a natural step."

The young man seemed to have a one-track mind. Instead of commenting on Dr. Howard's brilliant scheme, he asked, with agony in his voice, "But now you've got the diamond—what good is Marjorie to you? What good would she have been?"

"You'll see," said Dr. Howard. The questions were making him a little impatient. "Your Marjorie is a veritable treasure—or should I say, a travelling-case for treasure."

Ahead loomed a neat, little, white house.

"Welcome!" said Dr. Howard expansively to his young assistant. He dragged him into the house, and down the stairs to the white-washed cellar laboratory.

Curt Whelan began to shout at the stiff half-human unfinished specimens, pleading with them to rise against their satanic creator. . . "Don't be absurd, Curt," said the curator. "They couldn't do a thing even if they wanted to—and I shouldn't be surprised if even they knew that they won't be any loss to the world. I've only been working on them, so that they'd be ready to substitute if my other subjects died prematurely. Fortunately, the need for them will never arise. It's just as well—I might as well admit the business was getting too touch-and-go for me."

He mopped his forehead—he was beginning to get a touch of that migraine that sometimes came to him after crucial moments. "I'm not even faced with the necessity of destroying them," he continued. "The calcium compound I've worked into their tissue, and the other chemicals I planted subcutaneously will take care of that automatically. I'd hate to lose Miss Welles, and if you'll excuse me, I think I'll see how she's getting along. I don't even like to keep her in the same room with these people."

The young man sagged against the white floor, but the curator had no time

to tend to him at present. Even, he suspected, Curt might appreciate some cool water—but Dr. Howard's headache made him impatient with other people's ailments. He still had to take care of Marjorie before he took care of himself.

NUMBLY, as through a local anaesthetic, Marjorie could feel the burning friction of endless belts passing roughly about her tender skin. So much had been done to her—but she had felt nothing.

Somewhere in the world she had lost, dawn was coming. She knew it when Timothy Howard stepped into the small room, and a crack of light came through the doorway. She wanted to tell him something—to utter some curse powerful enough to damn him into eternity. She was unaware of any motion in her throat, but a meaningless sound came out.

"You'll be all right, child," said the anthropologist, rubbing his hands together delightedly. "Do you know where I'm going to take you? To Rotterdam—I've already engaged the services of a diamond-cutter there. Best diamond-cutters in the world, those Hollanders . . . and you'll be of just as much service as he will. We don't want any marks on your pretty body. What would they think of a scientist who brought a mummy aboard with scars on it? So while you're in a condition to do it, we'll have you swallow this. . . ."

From his hip pocket, the man produced an object the size of a man's fist. Crude and yellow and opalescent. . . . Marjorie stared at it as a condemned witch might stretching an inner passage, choking her, lying at last within her like an embryo of the death to come. She was helpless and bound, but another faint wordless protest came from her lips.

"Steady now," Howard cautioned. With small surgical prongs he jacked her mouth open. Numbly, the prong's end pressed into her palate and tongue. . . . She saw the stone magnify as it ap-

proached her face—and then it disappeared. Howard was shoving it back, down the entrance to the oesophagus. She felt no pain, only a terrible breathlessness.

The intent face was blurring before her eyes. She guessed she would not have the good fortune of instant death. Death would come later, after she had endured more, much more of this. . . . She thought of Curt, and of what life might have been theirs. Even this place, she thought, would cease to be hell, if she could see his face.

Suddenly, Dr. Howard was not paying any attention whatever to her. He turned, his nostrils dilating like a frightened beast's . . . and then the walls seemed to come alive with a crackling sound. The air in the small room grew thick and hot.

Fire! Marjorie tried to pull against her bonds, but her muscles were impotent. She looked at Howard, and to her amazement, he was bolting the door. Fear made him drool, turned his eyes reddish. He was afraid of something else, something worse than death by burning! It grew hotter. Marjorie's vision began to blur. Louder and louder grew the crackling sounds in the walls, and then there was another sound, even more thunderous—the sound of stamping feet. Faint at first, then nearer and more savage, rose a chorus of yells, as though the doctor's sins were rising against him.

They were at the door. Marjorie heard the pounding of their fists, the blood-lust in their voices. . . . and then a small red tongue of flame licked the door-hinges, and the mob was upon him.

The shapes that poured into the room were nothing that should have moved, they seemed half-finished pieces out of a museum, come to a sudden, savage life. Relentless, hideous, impervious to fire and heat, they tore into the curator fang and claw. Some of the hairy bodies were already smoldering in flame—but even that did not seem to trouble them.

Curt had come in—a strange Curt with

singed eyebrows and charred hands. She could not be dreaming—she felt him stopping the progress of endless belts about her body, heard him pleading with her not to die. She tried to answer, and blood frothed on her lips—then she closed her eyes. She knew Curt was taking the stone from her throat; the dull sensation through her enervated flesh must be the tearing of membrane. Curt was swearing, begging, weeping like a girl. She remembered at the end that he carried her through the pack of bodies, through the fiery house, into early morning sunlight. She would remember forever the feeling of cool, dewy grass under her, and Curt's hot hand on her forehead.

LITTLE by little, the paralysis seemed to be going from her body. She could not talk, and she could only move her hands a little bit, but she was beginning to feel pain. It was sickening, stabbing pain, but it was better than to feel nothing. And there was Curt's face, leaning over her . . . she tried to touch it, and could not. He caught her fingers in his, held them.

"You're going to be all right?" he asked. There was hysteria in his voice. "We'll get doctors for you—we'll fix you up," he went on. "Oh, Midge, darling. . ."

Far down the road, a bell clamored. Someone was coming to put out the fire, but Marjorie guessed that there would be nothing left of Dr. Howard's hell-house when the flames had done their work. It was just as well, she thought. . . . Curt was gasping for breath, and he flung himself face down on the grass beside her. He must have been hurt, himself. She looked at him anxiously, a query in her eyes.

"I'm all right," he assured her briefly. "It's you . . . I saw what he did to the others, Midge. He was crazy, perverted. He shouldn't have been allowed to live. He told me how he worked it. He got in with a bunch of crooks, and actually per-

suaded them that he could disguise them so that they'd pass for museum specimens. Then, as curator, he could smuggle them in so they'd be on hand at the exact moment when old Van Houten had his diamond in transition from case to case. Howard double-crossed them in one way—he didn't tell them the disguise would be fatal.

"He brought me here, because I'd seen too much—and I couldn't do a thing until the fire started. One of the poor mummies back there—he kept a few replicas on hand, helpless, in case something should happen to one of those already in the museum—had managed to knock a bunsen burner out of the laboratory window, so that it dangled against the wall of the house. This fellow had discovered that the stuff Howard had kneaded into their skins relaxed a little in warmth, and that's why he'd tried to get close to the burner.

"Anyway, that fire started just in time, and its heat set them all loose. One of them, in passing, freed me. They were all out to get Howard."

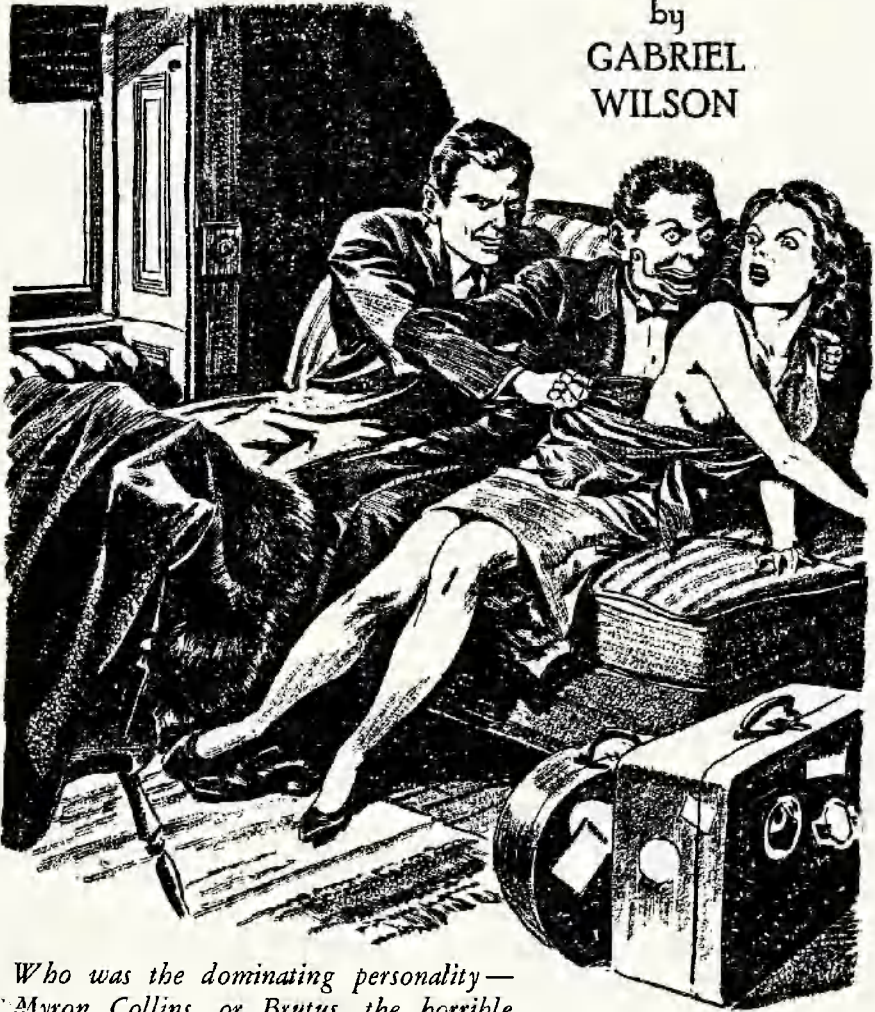
Curt paused, as though he were too tired to go on. . . . Marjorie heard voices, normal voices, and knew that help would come soon. Curt had thrown one arm across her, and she could feel a hard lump pressing against her side—he had something in his shirt-pocket.

The Van Houten diamond—she winced, and he whispered, "We'll get rid of *that*, Midge! But it'll be almost worth our while—there ought to be enough reward for its recovery from Van Houten's heirs to take care of us the rest of our lives."

The rest of their lives—no, she wanted nothing of the diamond to hang over the rest of their lives! But there would be time later to tell Curt that—later, when some of the wounds that were raw torture now, should heal. It was enough now that he was beside her, when she had never expected such blessing again.

MURDER PUPPET

by
GABRIEL
WILSON



*Who was the dominating personality—
Myron Collins, or Brutus, the horrible
man-sized puppet he himself created? Which of the two left the girl
Myron loved, a tragic corpse in a welter of gore?*

THE accident snarled traffic into a tangle of automobiles and glaring headlights. A policeman came running. He pulled the mangled pedestrian to the curb. The crowd milled forward, jabbering questions.

"Is he dead? My God, look at him—
all covered with blood—"

"Get an ambulance! Somebody send
for an ambulance—"

"Too late—he's dead. The policeman
says he's dead. Which car hit him?"

"That young taxi-driver."

The young chauffeur was pallid with terror. "My God, officer, I know you got to arrest me, but it wasn't my fault. I swear it wasn't. Listen, there must be witnesses—somebody must have seen I was innocent. The guy just walked in front of me—like he was drunk—or in a daze."

"I saw him," a man said. "Take my name, officer—I'll testify. Good Lord, he stepped off the curb twitching—stiff-legged—like an automaton or something. Wasn't the driver's fault—"

"Who is he?" somebody else asked.

"Myron Collins," the officer said. "Name's in his purse."

"Myron Collins!" The crowd took it up. "Myron Collins, the famous ventriloquist!"

A tradesman in white apron came running from a corner store. "Myron Collins—that's who he is! I know him. He lives right here."

He gestured to the big brownstone boarding house. And suddenly, from a third floor window an old woman screamed:

"Come up, officer! Look what his puppet's done up here! Blood on its hands! Murder! Murder!"

* * *

Myron Collins, even as a little boy, seemed a born ventriloquist. He was a strange, unnatural child, locking himself in his room for hours. Once his mother came and listened outside. She heard him practicing this ventriloquism, going over and over a scene so foreign in its character that it sent a chill of fear through her.

She called to him to open the door. As the key and door handle turned, she said, "Myron Collins, I never heard such talk. What in the world are you doing?" But the words chilled on her lips as she met the weird look on her small son's face.

"I was playing," he said softly. "Just playing."

For Christmas, he was given a Punch and Judy show. He practiced with the little puppets for weeks. Then, after a supper party given by his parents, he gave a performance for the guests. It was a weird and exciting experience to him: his audience stood gaping with amazement and horror at the cruelty he displayed in this act he had created. He seemed to be striving to make the puppets more real, more appalling—perhaps as an outlet for a latent, dormant nature of his own. Whatever it was, the effect on his audience was one of repugnance and disgust. How could a child conceive a thing so vicious as this play?

Not long afterward he was taken out of school. And he was glad. He had a tutor who made a pretence at giving him lessons, but somehow Myron didn't seem capable of mastering them. He quietly, but determinedly, brushed them to one side.

HIS father had set up a carpenter's workshop for him in the barn. It was several hundred feet behind the house, and every day Myron would make his way there, feverishly. Sometimes in his work, he would drop his head to his arm beside the pretentious puppet he was making, and he would sob at his inability to create it to his satisfaction. Finally he would go back to his work. Sometimes, on the manipulation of one finger alone, he would work for days, a grim, consuming haste upon him. At nightfall, spent and weary, he would go back to the house, furtively escape his mother's questioning gaze, and sink to a chair in his room.

When he was seventeen, his mother died. He always remembered, with a vague wonder, the strange shuddering glance she gave him as she passed away, still holding to her heart his almost fem-

ine hand. She must have known things she never mentioned; seen, perhaps, a tragic vision of the future.

His father died a year later. They had come to the workshop and told him his father was sinking. But he was working on the last detail of a life-size puppet, and he delayed. At last it was done, and in an exultant rush, he came to his father's bedside, a triumphant gleam in his pale eye.

"Father, I've finished him. He—he seems almost alive—"

His father gave him one brief, hurt look. Then he sighed heavily and was dead.

Myron glanced from his dead father to the barn behind the house where the puppet lay—the puppet that almost lived—and he could not have told at that instant, whether his achievement, or his father's departure stirred him with more emotion.

Three days later his father was buried and Myron sat in the workshop back in the old barn. The puppet was on a discarded sofa, beside him. It was a man-puppet, life-size; with evil carved into the lines of its wooden face.

Myron said, "Now there's no one to stop us, and we must decide how to begin. You're to be the most famous puppet in the world. Your name is Brutus and I must train you as carefully as a parent would train a child."

He was surprised to hear himself make the puppet say, "We'll start with one understanding: I am the one who gives the orders from now on."

The grim mouth opened and shut. The words, coming from Myron yet seeming to issue from Brutus, clicked out with an almost metallic ring to them. Myron was becoming so expert, that he worked the controls of the puppet with comparative ease. It would not be long now before it would be second nature to him and require no conscious thought.

He realized, and it made him shudder with a sudden thrill, that from the first he must have seen this malignant Brutus as an evil being. Those words of Brutus' were the keynote of their relationship as it would be henceforth. Brutus would play the part of the strong, cruel dominating character; Myron would continue to be the quiet, self-effacing person he had been always.

Vaguely he wondered if those words were crystalizing a submerged craving within himself.

THREE years later—Brutus and Lamb, as they were now called—were a national success. A fad. People engaged Myron to entertain their after-dinner guests with his puppet, and the menace and satire hurled at them by Brutus fascinated even as it terrorized them with its uncanny, demoniacal realism.

On such a night as this Myron met the girl he was doomed to love. After his performance, he was about to accept his hostess' invitation to have a glass of punch.

"I should like to wash my hands first, if I may," he had said.

In the half-light of a turn in the upper hallway he saw a young girl leaving one of the guest rooms. He had not met this girl, though he had seen her earlier in the evening, and was disappointed not to see her when he glanced about during his performance.

"Where were you?" he said softly. "We missed you."

She, probably thinking he was another guest, answered his smile.

"Oh, I came upstairs," she said. "That man down there with that horrible dummy—it was so revolting—"

Myron quickly took in the situation. "Yes, wasn't it? And the man—"

Already he was realizing this young girl's beauty and charm were giving him

sensations he had never before experienced. Her radiant face with its halo of golden, clinging curls, her body, lithe and rounded. . . .

"I haven't seen him. But he must be despicable. No civilized person could create such a ghastly travesty. Don't you think I'm right?"

Her liquid, expressive eyes made his heart pound absurdly. "Of course you are. I'm glad you had the sense to stay up. But now it's over, won't you meet me on the terrace, say in five minutes? You remember me," he found himself lying glibly, "I'm Myron Wainwright—"

"I forget names, but I should like to know you better—"

"Your name is—"

"Wanda Carter. You're not good at remembering either."

"There are so many new faces tonight," he said quietly.

"Of course. In five minutes, then."

"I'll be there."

But how? He must be careful. Wanda must not know who he was. That would be fatal. Myron knew beyond a doubt, that he had fallen in love. Strange that he should have gone for so many years, and had no interest in women. He made his way furtively to the terrace. She was standing there, pallid in the gleaming moonlight, with the marble of the terrace a weird setting for her vibrant youth. . . .

HE saw much of her in the months following, always keeping his true identity from her, yet always promising himself that he would disclose the deception and trust to her growing love for him, to understand.

Meanwhile he worked untiringly on Brutus, changing the features, the mechanisms, as he found their defects. He had made the lines of its mouth more cruel, the eyes more human; they sent a harrowing chill of exaltation through him, when they were done. There was a

giant strength in the look of Brutus now, and in its speech a stark cruelty which inspired Myron with a shuddering awe.

Moreover, Brutus had become so closely hinged with his every thought and action, that at times Myron could almost believe that it was Brutus who was engineering their words and actions, rather than he. This thought persisted and it gave Myron a nauseous wave of horror, when he realized its consequences if he did not curb it.

Then came the day when Wanda wrote that she was coming to New York. Would he meet her at the train? Suddenly he was forced to face himself; and the picture he saw frightened him. He had not realized where he was heading. He had not realized that his grip was gone; that uncertainty of himself, of his other self, Brutus, made him a gruesome, dual personality unfit to be responsible for the girl he loved. But he fought away the thought.

He said softly, "When I'm married, all this will be over. She'll help me. I'll get rid of Brutus; that's the way out. I've been with him too much. My head aches so I can't think. But when I'm married. . . ."

Brutus was beside him as usual, his sole companion in the apartment. There were words coming from Brutus now, metallic words clicking out sharply, unexpectedly:

"You fool! You can't marry. You're insane. It isn't something new. Your mother knew it. You'd have been locked up long ago if you hadn't been rich. You can't marry. She'd soon realize—and she'd have you put away. Remember—she doesn't know you. But I do. And I'll tell her the first chance I get."

A wave of insufferable helplessness came over Myron. He must have said the words for Brutus. He *knew* he had. But they were words that had come from him without his conscious knowledge—

words that must have come against his will. How would such a grisly matter end?

It was an intolerable situation, with Wanda coming. How could he explain such a condition to her? Would she understand?

He knew she would not. He must do something; avoid the issue in some way. Perhaps if he were to hide Brutus—that was it! Lock him here in this closet. When he was out and away from Brutus, these things did not happen. Yet a nagging fear still followed him as he left for the station, after locking the puppet away. A fear he could not answer.

His moody brooding had made him late. Wanda stood there, looking about. She seemed younger, more lovable than he had ever seen her before. It sent a strange pang through him.

"Wanda, I'm sorry to be late."

"Oh, there you are! It doesn't matter." She smiled. "I'm so relieved you've come."

"You look so lovely, Wanda," he said softly. He picked up her small suitcase. "Come. I'll take you to my place first," he said.

He saw a puzzled wonderment upon her lovely face, but she said nothing. Why did she look at him so strangely? And what a child she was, really, with those large questioning eyes. A sudden premonition made Myron want to say, "We won't go to my place, after all. I'll take you to a hotel—" But the words would not come.

SOON they were in a taxi, heading for the darkly oppressive rooms which were Myron's home. An increasing unrest was upon him. Almost he wished that Wanda had not come. Suppose she were to see Brutus? Immediately she would recognize it as the revolting dummy she had avoided that night. But she wouldn't see Brutus; he had locked the

closet door. His fear was nonsense; he told himself, with the reaction from the thrill of her soft young lips upon his, and the tiny trusting hand now resting within his own.

They arrived at his address and walked up the three rickety flights of stairs. The halls were noisome with a conglomeration of smells. He felt her hand clinging to his arm. Once she stopped, almost as though she, too, had become suddenly aware of some grim menace lurking here.

He glanced down at her. "We're almost there," he said softly, and they continued on up.

He unlocked his door and they went into the dim, shadowy interior. There was a strange ominous silence. It struck at them. Myron could feel a dank chill of apprehension go down his spine. He stood for an instant, fighting the impulse to snatch Wanda's arm and drag her from the frightening room.

"Myron," she murmured. "I—I seem to be afraid. I feel as though we weren't—weren't alone, as though we were being watched. What is it? Why do I feel this way?"

From the closet, before he could form his words of reassurance, before he could control it, the metallic rasp of Brutus' voice came to them:

"You feel that way," it said, "because the man you love is crazy—insane. He hasn't told you about himself. Let me out, and I will."

Myron stood by, helpless at this thing he was doing. This was no usual ventriloquism and he knew it. There was a rasp of murderous hate—a hate so vehement that it caught him unawares, unable to believe that he was the instrument of so fierce an outburst. It was as though some nomadic spirit were brooding within this room. Was he being used as its tool? Those words had not emanated from his conscious brain. He had

been used, merely, to say them. Almost as if he, instead of Brutus, were the puppet!

Wanda's agitated cry steadied him. "My God, what is that—who is that? Myron, don't stand there looking like that! Do something, say something!"

"Don't be afraid," he said softly. "It's nothing to be afraid of. Sit down and I'll show you. Then you'll understand, and I hope you'll forgive me—" They were quiet words, but his heart was racing.

"Put on the light, Myron. I'm afraid. I tell you, I'm terribly afraid."

He lighted the lamp. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes," she said. "But don't go away. Don't leave me. Oh, I'm so ashamed of myself, but I don't seem to be able to help it."

A nervous tremor was upon him. Why was he doing this thing? It pounded at him. What mysterious agency was this, forcing him on—to what? What was this terrifying crisis which lay ahead, like some great abyss yawning beyond its brink, with him stumbling toward it, unable to save himself?

He wanted to cry out, "Wanda—save us—save us—" But the futility of his desire, his inability to execute it, numbed and confused him.

He heard himself saying softly: "Just a moment Wanda. . ." He was unlocking and opening the closet door. "You'll recognize it—but don't be angry."

IN quick staccato repetition, the question hammered at him now: why was he doing this? Why, in Heaven's name, was he doing this to Wanda! Was it voluntary, or was he being impelled by a force stronger than himself? Was he torturing this girl whom he loved, torturing her and getting a sadistic triumph from his power to frighten her? What horror was this, stalking them both!

Wanda was sitting on the edge of the sofa, her soft blue eyes hazy with tears, her red lips trembling. As he opened the door, showing the malignant, evil-looking Brutus, she let out a scream of frenzied revulsion.

"It's Brutus," Myron said softly. "I made him. I'm Myron Collins."

He seated the puppet in a large arm chair. Wanda glanced at it, shuddering. "My God, Myron—don't bring it here. What made you make it? How could you—how could you! I thought it was alive for an instant. Put it back!" She was sobbing now and cringing.

"Don't be afraid," he said softly. "You'll get used to it." He put it on the couch between them.

She put her hand to her lips to stifle the scream of terror. "I can't believe you're Myron Collins. I can't believe it. I must be dreaming. . . . Take it away! Don't let it touch me—it's touching me!"

Its cloying, sodden hand was upon her arm in a rude caress. It was not a human caress, yet its palm was resilient. Then its hand closed upon her arm. Myron was watching quietly, leaning forward on the sofa so that he could see Wanda.

"You'll get used to Brutus," he said softly.

Yet there was a tumult within him, as though there were two of him, each at war with the other. There rose in him a fierce struggle to warn the girl he loved, warn her of this mad storm that was going on within him and over which he had lost all control. But the other, his evil self, seemed now to be the stronger force.

"Take it way. Make it stop!" She was tearing at Brutus' arm, beating its chest in her panic.

A strange light feeling was coming over Myron, as though he were floating, perhaps. The tumult has ceased. He felt as though he had left his body—been dispossessed perhaps—thrown out of the

temple in which he had lived. He was hanging in midair, gazing dazedly at this demoniacal debauchery.

"Take it away! You're making it do this! Stop it—Oh, Myron!"

It was forcing her backwards now. Its monster face, with set animal greed showing in the pallid lamp light, was bending over her. One hand began methodically clawing at her soft dress, her hair, in harsh rhythmic strokes. It came closer; it seemed to open and shut its mouth with a click, yet the lips smacked together in a sound most horrible.

MYRON'S hands shook as he gripped the puppet's arm controls, urging it with its caresses. Within him, stronger than the pity he felt, the strange horrible thrill grew more demanding.

She was fighting desperately now. But Brutus had her pinned back on the sofa. Her dress was rent down the front. Soft silk things were in ribbons and blood gushed from the claw-like marks on her firm, white breasts. There was blood streaming from her arm where the flesh was torn away, and her face—stark terror was written in her eyes.

Yet now Myron had no impulse to make this grisly horror be done. Vaguely he wondered what had come over him.

Wanda was struggling and twitching now in agony. The pallid light showed her in mortal pain. Her arm had been broken and hung dangling. Her neck was twisted, her eyes goggled and her lips moved spasmodically.

Myron said, "She is dying." Or had he uttered it? He could hear no sound.

Then, incredible horror, he thought he saw Brutus getting to his feet. From this strange detached place from which he was watching, he saw the dummy stagger to the door.

Why couldn't he think? Why didn't he do something. What in God's name was this numbness upon him! Had he

gone mad! Had he been mad always!

Brutus couldn't open a door. Yet he was opening it now, his eyes seeming to gloat as he turned to face Myron, who was sitting stiffly, with eyes staring, moving with a rhythmic jerk to cover the exposed bleeding breast of the pallid, dying Wanda.

The door closed after Brutus. . . .

Myron thought, "I'm dreaming. This is a dream. I wasn't clever enough to make Brutus walk as well as that. And doors were always too difficult for him—" But a dawning, sweeping terror came at him. There was a mirror across the room. In the pallid light, with the room now a gruesome silent tomb, in which Wanda lay dead, Myron saw himself.

Saw himself? Could that be he—so horrible?

Then what was left of the consciousness of Myron Collins, still housed there in that strange form, suddenly departed—stricken into a heap of wood and sawdust.

* * *

In the dim gaslit hall of the lodging house, by the bottom of the stairs, the terrified old landlady stood peering. What was all that commotion upstairs?

Then she saw Myron Collins come down—his big spare figure walking with strange steps that jerked mechanically as he fumbled at the front door and went out.

The jerking figure crossed the pavement, walking like an automaton. The body of Myron Collins—the suddenly dominant, unleashed thing that was Brutus, not knowing how to use this human mechanism, not knowing the meaning of rushing automobiles that could kill. . . .

Is that what it was?

Brakes screamed. The jerking, weirdly stalking figure went down—mangled.

Myron Collins, or Brutus the puppet? Who shall ever know?

Lilith—Deep

Something more hellish than a "blow" drove those hard-bitting "sandhogs" from the Big Bore in frenzied terror. . . . Something Chief Engineer Jerry Carter, whose first love was that great tunnel project, couldn't crush—without the help of a fragile girl who braved the awful pressure under the river . . . and the whip in the hands of Satan's Sister!



CHAPTER ONE

Lilith, Lady of Death

THE gauge in the wall of the air-lock showed the "50 lbs" that matched the pressure inside the tunnel. Dan Ryan, night super of the Big Bore, started for the inner gate. His hand

lifted to the wheel that would unlock it, but the wheel whirled before he could touch it. The door burst open, and Ryan was swept back by a rush of white-faced, gibbering sandhogs.

A giant Negro, eyes rolling with a frenzy of terror, kned a whimpering

Lady of Death

by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT



Hell's Chief Engineer never designed a torture chamber to equal the pit of doom one man made of New York's newest tunnel—in this high-pitched terror novelette by Mr. Zagat!

Hunky out of his way. An Irish pipe-layer crashed a path for himself with mad fists. A Magyar riveter made a battering-ram of his oilskin-clothed shoulder, and Ryan was banged up against the lock's

opposite wall, his wind knocked out.

The gate from the Tube was pulled shut by frantic hands. A hiss signalled that someone had started the slow half-hour of decompression necessary before

anyone could leave for the normal pressure of the outer world without being tortured by the dreaded "bends." The great steel box was hideous with a clamor of wordless shouts, frightened whimperings and shrill invocations to the Deity.

"Pipe down," Ryan howled, getting his breath. "Pipe down you mugs," and reinforced the order with blistering oaths. "What is it? What's sent you yellow-bellies skyhootin' in here like scutterin' rats?"

They goggled at him as if he spoke an alien tongue. "Is it a break?" Ryan demanded, and knew at once that it could not be any sudden inrush of river silt that had sent into the lock this tidal wave of frightened men. He'd worked with them too long, knew their breed too well, to really think that any of the usual forms which danger takes in the under-river workings could so grey their lips and dilate their pupils, and set the small muscles twitching in their mud-masked faces.

If the Tube's iron walls were buckling, if some "blow" in the Bore's metal armor had reduced pressure and let river mud and water come in upon them, they would be in there battling it with a fine coordination of brawn and muscle and brain. They were tunnel-men, hard-headed, hard-bodied, hard-living and hard-dying. Never, as long as there was any hope of staving off disaster would they run. If all hope were gone, they would try to escape, but it was incredible that, even then, they should flee in this manner, their faces glistening with the cold sweat of fear.

They gaped at Ryan, soundless gasps in their throats, and Ryan's own skin crawled with the contagion of the nameless terror he read in their eyes.

"You, Jon," he growled, his horny fingers hooking into the collar of Jon Wencslaw's leather coat, wet and mud-slimed. "What's gone wrong? Speak up, damn you!" Ryan shook the burly Pole with a viciousness born of wrath at his

own reasonless panic, shook some modicum of sense back into the crew foreman's pallid visage, shook a gurgle of speech out of him.

"Ees in dere, da Devil's Virgin," came the amazing words. "She ees take Dinny Mara, an da rest of us run before she take us all."

An icy pucker tightened the skin across the back of Dan Ryan's shoulders. The tale of the Devil's Virgin is whispered wherever human moles burrow through towering mountains, or under city streets, or beneath the turgid flood of mighty rivers. More beautiful than a hundred poets can tell, she is, and more evil than Satan, her brother, by the same measure that a bad woman is worse than the worst of men. Seeing her face, no man can resist her. Nor can any man live, having seen her, and the manner in which he dies is such as would make the Grand Inquisitor himself ill with pity. So dreadful a being is the Devil's Virgin that He who permits Lucifer to roam the earth has forbidden her its surface, and that is why she is known only to the men who delve into the Plutonian realms.

RECALLING this legend, a shudder ran through Dan Ryan's great frame, and his lips blanched. Then those same lips were snarling. "You're crazy, Jon Wencslaw. You're blithering mad."

"He ain't crazy, Mistah Ryan," Black Jeff interposed. "She is in dah." Jeff could tie a crowbar into a knot with his bare hands, and there was none born of woman whom Jeff Adams feared. "She sho is." But now his face was a sickly green, his eyes big as saucers, and his teeth chattered audibly. "We seen her come right froo de Headin' Shield, an' we run. But Dinny, he look back at her, an' he turned aroun' an' went to her. He wuz de on'y one dat seen her full—"

"What you saw was the grey spray of a blow, you blithering idiots," Dan Ryan

broke in. "And Dinny was the only one with guts enough to try to plug the leak before the whole river fills the tunnel. You left him to fight it alone—Lift that pressure, you white-livered rats. Lift it back to fifty so's we can get back in and help him."

The gauge was already down to forty-four, and it must go back up to fifty, or when the lock gate was opened, the consequent lessening of the push of air against the weight of the river might be just enough to let the shield blow in, and the silt of the river bottom after it, and the river itself, and months of labor would be obliterated. Months of labor and the life of a black-haired, ox-shouldered Irish boy with a never fading grin and the fighting heart of Brian Boru.

"Lift the pressure," Dan Ryan bawled again.

A beetle-browed Slovak reached for the switch handle to obey him, but the Slovak's hand was batted away.

"No," a voice from the back of the lock shouted. "We're not opening the gate. We're not letting *her* get at us."

"Lift the pressure," Ryan bellowed, and then he was charging through the press of fear-crazed sandhogs, shoe and knee and iron fists crunching on bodies, battering them out of his way.

He reached the switch, sliced it over. He jerked its handle-lever out of its socket and was laying about him with the flashing, murderous hammer of brass. It cleared a space about him and held that space clear while the gauge-needle that had been dropping, quivered and started to climb again. To forty-six it climbed, and to forty-seven, while the great bulk of Dan Ryan guarded the switch, his massive head thrust forward on that bull's neck of his, his black eyes slitted and furious. To forty-eight and forty-nine the needle climbed, and to fifty, and then Ryan was moving to the inner gate of the lock, flinging it open.

Dan Ryan lurched out of the lock into the tunnel, roaring, "Come on you yellow scuts." He didn't wait to see if they followed him, but heaved into a run.

A clanging crash reverberated behind him. Ryan looked back over his shoulder and gave voice to an oath that would have seared his tongue were it not made of asbestos, for that clang had been the sound of the lock-gate closing, and he was alone in the great Tube. He flung the switch handle at the great metal plate with a snarling, "Here, you gutless pups!" and ran on toward the head of the Bore.

The Big Tube through which he ran was weird as some minor hell, a huge, iron-walled pipe alive with grotesque shadows and with the throbbing pulse of the air-pumps that held the river out of it.

The pressure of fifty pounds to the square inch squeezed the water out of the air, so that the Tunnel was filled with a thick, steamy fog, stifling the light of the naked electric bulbs hanging overhead. The water dripped from the wet-black, arched ceiling, and dribbled down the curved iron walls. The water lay in glistening pools between the rails on which stood trains of little dumpcars loaded with mud and silt from the Shield that was the cutting head of the Tube which nosed day and night, night and day, out under the river, four feet each twenty-four hours.

Ryan's great chest labored with the breathing of the thick air, and despite the damp chill, sweat bathed his brow and his back and chest as he ran. The thump of his running boots echoed hollow and resonant in the tunnel, and the pulse of the pumps throbbed against his ears, and about him tiny leaks in the airlines hissed like a million snakes, yet a strange, weird hush seemed to possess the Tunnel.

It was not only that the clangor of steel on steel was missing, and the deafening chatter of the riveting guns, the scrape of shovels and the rumbling of the dump car trains and all the other noises that had

resounded here, for so many months. There seemed to be another silence here, underlying the silence of sounds missing, a curious, taut hush as if the Tunnel itself bated breath with dread of something that had come into it, something alien and evil.

Icy fingers closed on Dan Ryan's heart as he ran on, the shadows about him sluggish, his legs sluggish as though ploughing through some invisible, miasmatic fluid. He seemed to have run endless miles, but it seemed still endless miles to the Head of the Tube where Dinny Mara was fighting alone to plug some blow in the Shield.

THEN Dan Ryan went past a pile of cement bags and saw the Shield, the great circular steel wall divided into compartments where the men who covered in the lock, far back, should be working. The Shield was netted by a maze of rubber tubes and lead pipes, but it was whole, no sign of a break in it, or of a blow.

In the muck and mire of the Tunnel's floor beneath the Shield, Ryan saw the tools the men had dropped in their panic, and there he saw Dinny Mara.

It must be Dinny Mara, but there was nothing about the torn and awful thing that slopped in a pool of rusted, stinking water like a caught fish, that could prove it to have been Dinny. Faceless it was, its flesh shredded, its limbs crushed so that they seemed never to have been centred by bones. That which enabled it to lift and splash down and lift again, grotesquely, was not life at all, but some awful animation of a dead thing that even Death rejected.

Ryan froze for a horrible moment, staring at it, and most horrible of all that moment was a word that croaked from the gory, featureless mask. A name. "*Lilith.*"

There was neither agony in the sound of the name, nor a curse, but a strange, inexplicable yearning. And then that from

which it came dropped down with a rusty splash, and was still.

Dan Ryan went to his knee beside the horror that once had been Dinny Mara, and he saw that Dinny was dead. Ryan's hand lifted to cross himself, his grey lips forming to the first word of a prayer for a soul that had passed. But Ryan's hand never made the sign of the cross, nor did a syllable of prayer pass his numbed lips.

His eyes, lifting to the Father, had found a green shimmer all about him, as if the Tunnel were filled, abruptly, with the green brine of the sea. Through it the cast-iron wall of the Bore and the steel loom of the Shield wavered blurrily.

Ryan's breath caught in his throat, for fear that, if he inhaled, it would be water he would draw into his lungs, and almost he felt the cold caress of the water against his skin.

And then there was a silvery glint in the green, and the languid undulation of a great fish's scaly tail. It trailed great streamers of seaweed black as night, and through the weaving black masses gleamed the whiteness of the fish's belly—No!

Not of a fish's belly! That pallid gleam in the wavering, watery light had the shape of a human abdomen, and half-hidden by a streaming mantle of black hair, Dan Ryan saw the pearly sheen of a woman's breasts, full-rounded and virginal. The swan-curve of a woman's neck formed out of the green light, and above it was a woman's face.

Framed in a cascade of raven locks, a mouth damask-red and sensuous smiled at Dan Ryan, a smile secret and enticing. From under a high, white forehead lustrous, dark eyes promised him such delights as words never have been devised to describe.

Arms of whitest alabaster lifted, throwing back the ebon curtain of hair and unveiling all the wonder of her. The arms stretched out to Dan Ryan, calling him to their embrace.

Dan Ryan rose, heart hammering his chest, blood in his veins hot with desire, all the world blotted from his mind, only passion alive within him. He started to the woman, her voluptuous smile welcoming him. Something caught his ankle, tangling it. He glanced down—saw that it was a boneless leg that had caught him, *the crushed leg of Dinny Mara!*

An oath ripped from Ryan's white lips. Then he leaped for the woman-fish, his hands clenched into fists, the fists flailing at her.

A white flash of light met him, blinding. Dan Ryan screamed, the sound of it high and shrill and agonized. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Virgin's Lash

THE embrasure of the window was deep enough for Diane Forbes and Jerry Carter to stand within it and be cut off by the curtains behind them from the chatter of the crowded room. Carter's arm was around the slim, warm body of his sweetheart, and the fragrance of her tawny locks was in his nostrils and his heart beat strong with his love for her.

"It's good to be alone with you," Diane murmured, the tiny oval of her face a glimmer in the dimness.

The smile on Carter's big-boned face was a little bitter. "So you say. But you insist on dragging me to a brawl like this, where we've got to sneak off to be alone, the first night in a week that I've been able to get away from the Tunnel. You make me dress up like a monkey in a circus." His stalwart shoulders wriggled uneasily within the black stricture of his tuxedo. "And choke myself with a starched collar, to show me off to a bunch of nincompoops who never did an honest day's work in their lives."

"You're a big boob, Jerry." On her petal-like lips the epithet was an endearment. "Darling, it's these nincompoops

who are responsible for the tunnels and bridges you design, and—"

"The devil it is," Carter growled. "Maybe they finance them, but it's the huskies who build them, the bohunks like Jon Wencslaw, and the two-fisted, devil-be-damned micks like Dan Ryan and Dinny Mara. Look!" He drew her closer to the window, so that she could look out into the night, out and down from this sixteenth story aerie to where the river was a wide, black ribbon moiréed with gold, far below. "See, down there where that spangle of lights is clustered, that's where the Tunnel is being built, not in this perfumed penthouse with its powdered beldames and its paunched, pouch-eyed captains of high finance. I wouldn't give the little finger of one of my sandhogs for the whole mess of tycoons and vapid, glass-eyed playboys you chase around with."

Against his sturdy young bulk, Diane was a fairy sprite in silver and gauze, a nymph spun from the stuff of dreams; the downy bloom of a peach on her soft cheek and her hazel eyes aglow with pride in the brawn and brains of her man. "Oh, there's something to be said for them, Jerry. Most of them have fought hard for what they have—"

"How have they fought? With stocks and bonds and ticker tape, cheating and swindling one another, the best liar and biggest thief the winner. And when they've won, they go soft. There's a man down there, where those red sparks show on a black bulk, over near the other shore just north of where the line of the Tunnel runs. Elkan Pond. He invented a dozen of the devices out of which your tycoons made their fortunes. He's an old man now, past eighty, but is he prancing around in a white shirt, and black tails? No. He's down on the bed of the river every day, in a new sort of diving machine he's devised, doing the thing that every small boy dreams of, hunting for buried treasure. A bullion-carrying frigate

was sunk somewhere out there, during the Revolution, and he's searching for it. He won't find it, of course, but look at the fun he's having—"

"Fun!" Diane interrupted. "I think he's pitiful. I know about him. He never married, never had a woman to love, a child to cherish. He's had nothing, all his life, except his inventions and his—" A discreet cough, just outside the curtains, cut her off. And then they were apart, turning to a grey-faced man in the livery of a butler.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Carter," the latter said. "But there is a telephone message for you, relayed from Miss Forbes' home. It seems that there is some trouble at the Tunnel, sir, and your presence is required."

"The devil!" Carter exclaimed. "I wonder what—" He wheeled back to the window, peered out. "It's not a blow, I don't see any bubbles coming up. But Dan Ryan wouldn't call me if it wasn't serious. Sorry, chicken, I'll have to go."

"I'm going with you," Diane exclaimed, and then she was running to keep pace with Jerry's long-legged strides, running through a swirl of tail-coated men and their jewel-bedizened, pillow-bosomed mates.

A TAXI roared into the flood-lighted yard at the Shafthead of the Tunnel, braked to a screeching stop. Its door slammed open and Jerry Carter leaped from it, his black tie askew, his blond hair ruffled. "Wait here," he snapped at Diane, flung a bill at the hackman and pounded through a row of ambulances toward a cluster of blue-uniformed policemen who stood somehow dazedly around the door to the building where the elevator platform of the airlock entrance to the Big Bore came to the surface.

One of the cops grabbed him. "Where d'you think you're goin', guy?" the officer grunted.

"In there!" Carter growled. "I've got to—"

"The hell you are. There's trouble enough without any sightseers—"

"Sightseer, hell," Carter barked. "I'm the chief engineer, here. What's gone wrong, man?"

"I dunno—"

Carter broke the fellow's grip, lunged away from him and into the Shaft House. There were more cops here, and a number of white-suited hospital internes. The latter were bending over a row of men who writhed on the floor, blood streaming from their mouths and noses and eye-sockets, their muscles jerking spasmodically.

"The bends!" Jerry exclaimed. "What on earth—" He saw a pump-tender, grabbed him. "Fogarty," he yelled. "What's coming off here?"

Bill Fogarty stared at him with horror-stricken eyes. "God knows, Chief. The whole damn night shift got caught in the lock when the pressure went off. Less than a minute's decompression they had, instead of a half-hour, and—"

"The pressure went? How did that happen?"

"Main-line valve to the lock went out, and I can't see how. I—"

"The Tunnel!" Was the Bore filled with water? "How—"

"Tunnel pressure is all right." Fogarty jabbed a shaking finger at the largest of a bank of gauges on a near wall. "Steady at fifty."

"Then what the devil were the boys doing in the lock? They weren't due out till—"

Carter cut off as brutal fingers dug into his shoulder. He twisted to a gorilla-jawed man with the gold-braided cap of a police captain. "You're Carter, in charge here, ain't you?" the latter demanded.

"I'm the chief engineer in charge of construction. Yes."

"Then you're under arrest. For crim-

inal negligence. But it will be manslaughter if any of these lugs die. They—” Jerry jerked from his hold, dropped to a twitching, gore-masked giant at his feet.

“Chief,” had croaked from the bloody mouth. “Chief.” It would have taken more than a grip on his shoulder to hold Carter from him.

“Yes, Jeff,” he murmured. “What?”

“Dan Ryan’s still in de Bore,” the tortured Negro moaned. “An’—an’ somethin’ terrible’s happened to him. We—he hollered we was yaller, an’ some on us fought ‘twill we got de gate open to go after him. We heard him scream an’—whoof—dey wasn’t no mo’ pressure an’ de gate slam’ shut on us, an’—” A gush of blood from his writhing mouth drowned the rest.

The captain dragged Carter to his feet by his arm. “You’re under arrest,” he repeated. “For criminal—”

“Negligence,” Jerry grunted. “You said that before.” And then he was yelling to an interne. “Doc. You got to get these boys into the medical lock and send the pressure up to fifty again, force the nitrogen back into their blood. There’s one out in the yard—”

“Yeah, buddy,” the young medico interrupted. “We know. We got a half-dozen of them in there now, and that’s all it will hold.” Over his shoulder Jerry saw the elevator platform come up through the floor. Cops on it had a half-dozen more sandhogs flung over their shoulders.

“This is the last,” one of the cops yelled.

“And the rest of the boys will have to take their chance,” the interne finished. “If their hearts are strong enough we may pull them through—”

“May isn’t good enough,” Carter snarled, and twisted to the captain. “Listen,” he grated. “We’ve got to get the big lock working again so we can put the men back in. I’m going down—”

“The hell you are,” the officer grunted. “Our emergency crew will work on the lock, but you’re going to a nice, quiet cell, mister.”

“All right,” Carter responded, his tone ominously low and even. “All right. But there’s something else to be attended to. There’s a man still in the tunnel. You’ve got to send some one in there to get him out.”

“We’ll do that when we get the lock fixed. I’m not going to send any of my men in there to—” Carter’s fist crashed the rest of the sentence back between the officer’s teeth. Then Jerry had jerked free, was leaping past the elevator shaft-head. A square, black hole gaped in the floor here. As Carter jumped for this, feet first, he heard a cop yell, “The man’s a maniac—grab him! He’s crazy!”

His legs, his hands, caught the side-pieces of the vertical ladder that went down into the darkness, two hundred and fifty feet to the level of the Big Bore, an emergency exit against failure of the elevator.

THE HAD no intention of letting Dan Ryan, who had screamed in agony, wait till fumbling police mechanics had found the flaw in the lock pump-line and adjusted it.

Down the ladder Jerry Carter slid, friction burning his hands, fraying the black broadcloth of his dress trousers. Down he went into a stygian darkness, into damp, dripping chill, while above him shouts broke out and faded. And then he dropped into light again, the light of the space into which the lock opened.

The impact jarred Carter away from the ladder, flung him down into trampled, noisome muck. The last trace of dapperness was gone when he staggered to his feet again, his tuxedo, his once-white shirt-bosom dripping mud, his starched collar a muddy, limp rag about his neck.

The outer gate of the airlock gaped

open. Carter leaped through it, slammed the portal shut. With hasty but sure fingers he pulled down the iron dogs that would hold it shut against anything short of an oxy-acetylene torch. The meddling cops would play hell reaching the lock.

He wanted only enough time to get into the Tunnel and find Dan Ryan. The fault in the air line couldn't be located and repaired before he'd be back, and so he wasn't harming the sandhogs any. When he brought Dan out he'd let the cops take him away. Meantime they couldn't get at him.

There *was* a way by which the cops could by-pass the big lock, a smaller, emergency lock, with a battery-operated pump of its own. Carter grinned humorlessly, thinking how little apt any tunnelman would be to tell them of this, and went across to the other gate.

The switch-handle was gone. That didn't matter. It wouldn't be any use anyway. But Carter's heart sank as he sighted the gauge beside it, the needle against the pin at zero. He'd had no time to think of that, no time to realize that with the pumps inoperative he could not get out into the Tunnel.

The air-pressure in here was normal, sixteen pounds to the square inch, and that in the Tunnel fifty. The difference, thirty-four pounds, lay against every square inch of the inner gate, holding it shut. The gate measured six feet by three. Its area was more than two and a half thousand square inches, and so to open it Carter must move a weight of over forty tons!

His hands threw out sidewise, in a gesture of despair.

He spun around to go back, to open the outer gate and take the chance that the police would listen to him, that they would let him go through the emergency lock and bring Dan Ryan out. A small chance it was, when they thought he was insane, but it was the only—

He stumbled over something, went down to his knees. It was an electric drill, dropped here by some sandhog who'd clung to it till the out-gush of air had caught him. Carter snatched it up, jumped erect. He reached overhead to the single bulb that illuminated the interior of the lock.

The glass burned his fingers, but he gritted his teeth and twisted it. Darkness, velvet and impenetrable, closed in. Carter finished unscrewing the bulb, replaced it with the plug attached to the long feed-wire of the drill. Then he groped back to the inner gate, set the drill's bit against the steel, and thumbed the trigger-switch that set the drill whining.

THE bit bored into the steel, and its whine bored into Jerry Carter's brain, and its breast plate vibrated against his chest, while the thick blackness thumbed his eyes. Then there was a sharp hiss above the whine of the drill, hiss of air forcing in past the bit, and he pulled the bit out of the hole he had made.

The hiss rose to a scream as air under fifty pounds pressure squeezed into the lock through that small hole. The blackness became something tangible now, something weighty and alive. It squeezed Jerry Carter's chest. It bound his brow with an iron band and set his ears ringing. He gasped with the pressure that was heightening three and four times as fast as it should for his safety, and his heart hammered at his ribs as though it would crash through them.

Gasping, shaken by the pounding of his heart, the iron band squeezing his skull, Carter planted his legs firmly on the floor of the lock and his shoulder against the gate, and exerted every last bit of his strength in a shove that would open the gate at the earliest split-second the equalizing pressure within and without would permit. He was thankful that the amount of air taken from the Tunnel, required to

fill the lock to fifty pounds, would not endanger the Shield.

After awhile the steel wall started to move, and then, as air gusted in through the slit between its edge and its jamb, it flew open, and Carter was plunging through it, running headlong toward the Shield at the edge of the Big Bore, while the door clanged shut again behind him.

"Dan," he yelled. "Dan Ryan!" Only the echoes of his own shout answered him. "Dan!" he yelled. . . .

Something was moving there in the fog ahead of him. Something white—a swirl of the fog caught in the dim light of the infrequent overhead bulbs? No. Whiter it was than the fog, and edged with black, and there was about it an aura of menace. Jerry Carter slowed, came to a stop as it formed more completely out of the haze.

It was a woman who stood there in the tunnel, awaiting him. A woman cloaked in lustrous black tresses that cascaded to her knees, but otherwise not clothed at all. Her tiny feet were pink and perfect on the wet-black floor of the tunnel, the skin of her white legs were satin. The in-curve of her hips was velvet to the eye, and a torch to set fire to the blood of a man. The curve of her breasts was a song of ultimate passion. Her face was shadowed by the shadow of her hair, but Jerry Carter knew that there were moist, red lips in that shadow, lips half-parted and the tip of a pink tongue. . . .

The white, slim fingers of the woman held the handle of a whip, and the lash of the whip hung sinuous along the pale whiteness of her thighs. Her thighs blushed with the pulse of the blood beneath their transparent, blue-veined skin, and the blood of Jerry Carter answered that pulse, and the fire that was in his blood burned all thought and all honor from his brain; all thought of Dan Ryan, and of the sweet Diane who was his betrothed.

The hand of the woman rose and beck-

oned Jerry Carter, the lash of her whip hanging sinuous from it. Somewhere within him, deep within him, a warning whisper said to him, "Beware! This is the Devil's Virgin, this is Lilith," but he did not hear the whisper. His legs water-weak with desire, he went to her, and as he neared her the lash she held rose above her head.

He was near her now, near enough to reach for her, and his hand came up to grasp her. The whiplash whistled, slashing down. It slashed Jerry Carter's hand, grooving his fingers with red.

The woman laughed; her laugh the silvery trill of running water in a dark cave; and the whistling lash slashed across Jerry's face, cutting deep into his cheek. The woman laughed, and the Big Bore took up her laughs, echoing and reechoing them till it seemed that a thousand imps laughed in the dim fog of the iron-lined Tunnel under the river. Her whip slashed across Jerry Carter's mouth and across his brow. His face was bathed with his blood and he saw her through a red haze, her white curves glinting through a cascade of raven hair.

CHAPTER THREE

The Metal Monster

FROM the taxi where Jerry Carter had left her, Diane Forbes heard sudden shouts inside the timbered building into which her lover had vanished. And then a gruff roar came clear and distinct, "Stop him! Stop that Carter if you've got to put a bullet into him. He's a homicidal maniac bent on wrecking the tunnel!"

"No!" the word choked in Diane's throat, and then she was out of the taxi, was running across the flood-lighted yard, was being swept into the Shaft House by a surge of the police who'd been standing around its door. Inside, a burly officer with bleeding lips was bellowing commands into a boiling confusion, and blood-

spattered men writhed on a muck-scummed floor, and white-clad internes moved imperturbably through the tumult. But Jerry Carter was nowhere to be seen.

Diane was thrown out of the rush of cops like a bit of flotsam thrust out of an eddy. She stood there, hand to breast, eyes wide. In that clamor no one seemed to notice the white-faced girl in her misty gown from whose chiffon and silver perfect shoulders rose, as though Venus once more was being born out of whispering, moon-touched sea-foam.

The police were pouring down into a square, black hole in the floor, and others were crowding on to the platform of a cageless elevator that creaked and carried them down out of sight. A man in a wet rubber coat and a wide-brimmed rubber hat was passing her and Diane recognized him as Bill Fogarty, to whom Jerry once had proudly introduced her.

She snatched at Fogarty's sleeve. "Why do they want to shoot Jerry? Why do they think he's a madman?" she gasped.

"He slugged a cop." The man grinned, turning to her. "An' faith, no Irishman coulda done it better—But he's not crazy, except with the frenzy to save a man in the Tunnel. . . . And what brought you here, Miss Forbes?"

"Where is Jerry?" the girl demanded, ignoring the question. "Where—"

Fogarty shrugged. "He went down below, like a streak, an' they're goin' down after him. They—" He checked as a hollow, faraway shout came out of the elevator shaft.

The shaft funneled words clear and distinct to the surface. "He's not in the lock. He's gone through into the tunnel, an he's fixed this damn door so's we can't go in after him."

And then, just as distinct, the gruff voice of the police captain Jerry had slugged; "Send the Emergency Squad down to burn the door in."

"You can't do that, cap," another voice

protested. "If the door from the lock into the tunnel is open, it will vent the pressure and let in the river."

"Then you guys wait right here, in case he tries a rush out, while we get the lock fixed. He's a menace to humanity—so shoot to kill if he fights."

Fogarty's grin was tight-lipped and snarling. "They'll do just that," he grunted. "Hardshell Gannon and his bunch of uniformed plug-uglies. The toughest bunch of cops on the force, they are. They got that way fighting the waterfront gorillas, and they don't know when a man's crazy with coke—or just tough. But the Chief's safe enough as long as he stays in the Tunnel. Hardboiled as they are, they ain't hard enough to tackle the heavy air in the Bore." He started across to the switch-pumps under the bank of gauges. "I'll just see that it stays at fifty—" The sentence wheezed into a gasp, and the pump-man was gaping at the big central gauge, his lips graying.

"What is it?" Diane exclaimed.

His arm jerked up, pointed to the gauge. "It's hit the Big Bore itself now. Look!"

Diane looked and saw that the needle on that gauge was moving, already it was at forty-eight, was dropping to forty-seven, slowly, inexorably. It touched the forty-seven mark—

Fogarty leaped to the switches for which he started, was checking them with shaking fingers, as if to assure himself by touch that they were really closed, was listening to the *throb, throb* of the great pumps. "Nothing wrong here," he groaned. "But the air's goin' out of the Tunnel."

Carter had told Diane enough of the mechanics of high-pressure work for her to know what that meant. She reached the pump-man, twitched at his sleeve. "The river will break into the Tunnel and Jerry will be killed. You've got to stop it."

Fogarty turned to her, his nostrils flaring, his eyes dead. "I can't stop it. Nobody can stop it soon enough to save the Chief."

"Then we've got to warn Jerry."

"How? The 'phone's are down there in the compartment where those cops are. They'll hear us calling him, an' they'll be ready—"

"That's right. But look, Fogarty. Didn't Jerry once show me an emergency lock separate from the other? If someone goes in through that, and tells Jerry about the police—"

"Yeah. But I've got to stay here an' keep these pumps goin', best as I can, an' with the rest of the crew laid out, there's nobody else—"

"Of course there is." Diane glanced up at the gauge. The needle was down to forty-six. "There's me."

"You!" the tunnel-man gasped. "You wouldn't dare go where them tough cops are afraid to risk their skins. Your life wouldn't be worth a wax-candle in hell—"

"It would be worth less than that to me if anything happens to Jerry. Quick. Tell me how to work the emergency lock."

The pump-man's eyes were wide with admiration. "By gorry," he exclaimed. "I believe you mean it." And then he was snatching a set of oilskins from a peg. "Here! These belong to one of the water boys on the day shift. Get into them while I tell you. . ."

And then in hurried, crisp syllables he was giving her directions. . . .

TWO hundred and fifty feet down in the bowels of the Earth, brute-jawed cops watched the airlock gate with drawn guns while others scurried about with all manner of tools, lashed by the blistering tongue of Hardshell Gannon to hasten in locating the trouble with the air-line pipes. They were too busy, those cops, to pay any attention to the boyish form in oilskins too big for it that stole out of the

shadows where the ladder from the surface ended, and slid unobtrusively along a dripping wall, and merged with the shadows behind the great air pipes that writhed down from above, throbbing with the throb of the pumps Bill Fogarty tended.

Diane stared into the dimness behind the great, throbbing pipes, and she saw the rivet-studded small door in a concrete wall for which she searched. Her slender fingers came out of a flapping slicker sleeve and twisted the clamp that held that door shut.

For an instant Diane stared into the lightless, grease-pungent hole thus revealed, and a sob pulsed in her throat. Then she went into the hole, and pulled the door shut behind her, and groped for the dogs Fogarty had said would be on its inner surface. The dogs slipped into their catches, locking her into the blackness that was narrow and silent as a grave.

Diane's hand trailed along cold metal, came to a tumbler switch and threw it. There was the whir of a starting motor, and a throb, somewhere in the dark and a hiss of incoming air that pulsed in rhythm with the throbbing.

She had only to wait, now, till a click ahead would tell her that the air in this gravelike box had reached the density of the air in the Tunnel and the way to Jerry was open for her. Only to wait, doing nothing, but that waiting in the dark would be long and terrible.

A THOUSAND fiends laughed at Jerry Carter, and all about him was the hiss of the woman's lash. Through the haze of the blood that streamed from the cuts the lash made, he could see only her white, and voluptuous body, only her laughing lips, moist and red and desirous.

Carter snatched at the whip, growling. If he could grasp it, if he could tear it from her, he could get his hands on her,

and drag her to him. The lash was a knife slicing his fingers, cutting his fingers, cutting his clothes into rags, picking the rags away. Already his coat was gone, and his shirt hung in ribbons, and the whip-tip was flicking his skin.

Jerry stumbled into the whirr of the whip, trying to reach the white lusciousness of her who wielded it. He was aware of no pain but only of the heat of the fire within him that her nearness kindled, and always the gap between them remained the same as she retreated, always almost within his reach, and always just beyond it.

And always the woman laughed, and the long Tunnel took up her laugh and turned it into the laughing of a myriad tiny imps. Half naked now, Jerry Carter heard that laughter, and it was like the gurgle of water, and the hiss of the whip was like air hissing into the Tunnel.

Coldness, a spray of cold water, struck his face and washed the blood from his eyes. *The spray jetted from a seam in the Tunnel's iron wall!* A blow!

Carter grabbed with both hands for the whirring lash, and it cut his hands, but he held it. He jerked it free and he sprang. But the woman shrieked and whirled away, and was gone; into the fog of the Bore or into the nothingness from which she had come, he could not tell.

He could not tell, and he did not care. He whirled back to that white jet that hissed into the Tunnel, and he saw that in the split-second since his first glimpse of it, it had widened. The whole unimaginable weight of the river above was behind that thin spout of water. The whole force of the river was plucking at the jointure of iron plates where the water came through, was tearing it asunder.

It must be stopped! Before the seam opened and a plate was ripped loose, and an unstoppable breach was made in the Tunnel's defense against the river.

Carter glanced around. He saw one of

the piles of sandbags that were placed all along the Bore for just this eventuality. He leaped to this and had one of the bags in his arms, and was staggering back to the blow. He heaved the bag against the place where the water spurted in. There was a gurgle, and silence . . . and then the bag was moving back like a thing alive and the water whose force moved it, was spurting in again.

But Carter had another bag in his arms by then. He fell with it beside the first one. His feet caught and braced themselves against the edge of a rail, and his shoulder braced against the two bags. His lacerated body, the rags of its finery fluttering from it, arced with the taunting of all its muscles. Little by little the bags moved back to the Tunnel wall and closed the breach in it.

Jerry Carter had made a bulwark against the invading river out of his body, out of its bones and its muscles. But the monstrous force of the river pressed against the bags his body held in place, and Carter knew that his muscles, that no human muscles, could for long hold those bags where they must be held if the Tunnel were to be saved.

HE MUST build a buttress of sandbags. The sandbags were within his sight, but beyond his reach. He couldn't get them from here, and he dared not leave here to get them, or by the time he got back with them they would be of no use at all.

"Blow!" Jerry shouted. "*Blo-o-ow!*" The long shout that has boomed from the mouth of many a tunnelman who has held bags against a break like this, and called to his fellows for help. "*Bl-o-o-ow!*" Jerry Carter boomed. And then he recalled that he was alone in the Bore, that there was none to hear his cry, none to come to his aid. His cry became a hoarse inhalation of breath into bursting lungs, a whimper of protest at the unendurable

agony in his muscles. His eyes bulged from their straining sockets, and a dimness came into them.

In that dimness a vague form moved, babbling inanely. Something was thrust under Carter's straining arms. It was a sandbag! Another sandbag came out of the shuddering darkness and, with the first two, the four bags reached as far as the rail against which Carter's feet were braced. He kneeed them down, making them more compact, and the strain was gone from his body.

He rolled, and staggered erect, and turned to the strange, liquid babbling he heard. He saw a form sprawled at the base of the sandpile, saw arms reaching up to claw another bag from its top. It was a man, but something was grotesquely not man-form about him—

He had no legs! The two crushed and bloody things that trailed behind that great, hairy torso could never have been legs.

The bag tumbled down, and the man twisted to bunt it along with his shoulder, while he shoved his own gargoyle-like body along with his arms. Carter saw a face wealed with red, empty-eyed, the mouth gaping open to show the quivering stump of a tongue from which that weird babbling came.

"Ryan!" Carter croaked. "Danny Ryan."

The monstrous hulk whose Hallow'en mask of a face so weirdly resembled Dan Ryan's, did not look up but hitched along, shoving that sandbag ahead of him. Dying, maimed and mindless, Carter's howl of "*Blo-o-o-w*," had touched within him the deathless loyalty to the job that is of the very bone and sinew and soul of the tunnelmen; had called him from some unimaginable limbo where he had been left for dead.

Carter grabbed the bag and heaved it on top of the others, and staggered back to meet the babbling Ryan as the latter

shoved another along with his shoulder. This took its place on the rapidly growing buttress, and then another.

As he worked, Carter became aware of a curious lightness. "It's as if the pressure was lessening," he muttered, and then was shaken with the realization that this was exactly what was occurring. Somewhere there was a leak of air, for the throbbing of the airlines was more rapid than he'd ever heard it, a fever pulse of pumping over-exerting itself to make up for that bleeding of pressure.

That was the reason for this blow! There had been a flaw in the seam-welding here, and so here the river had started through first. This one was stopped, but if the pressure got much lower a thousand perfect seams would blow in, and no human power could save the Tunnel!

The leak of air must be somewhere ahead. Could he find it before it got so bad the pumps could not keep up with it? If he found it, could he stop it?

Against the menace to the Tunnel, poor Ryan faded into insignificance. Jerry whirled and started running toward the Shield, his eyes scanning the dripping, iron walls of the Bore as he ran.

He was weaker than he thought. He stumbled and fell, and shoved himself erect—and froze, peering into the steamy fog.

Something clanged, ahead there, as though a ponderous mass of metal were moving toward him. A huge darkening formed in the luminous dimness, and then a grotesque and incredible monster loomed over Jerry Carter. Twice the height of a man it was, and twice the width, and it seemed to be all of metal; a globular head with a single, goggling eye; a cylindrical torso; ball-and-socket jointed legs; gargantuan arms whose hands were cruel, hooked pincer-jaws.

Before Carter could turn to flee, before even he was quite certain this was real, one of those arms flailed out and its

pincer hand had closed on his arm, and it was flinging him into the air.

His head struck the roof of the Tunnel, and black oblivion crashed into Jerry Carter's skull.

CHAPTER FOUR

Torture in the Deep

THE hissing darkness closed on Diane Forbes as the Iron Maiden had closed on the Inquisition's victims in the Middle Ages. Slowly it closed on Diane, with increasing, even pressure, almost gentle at first, almost caressing, and then greater and greater till her heaving breast had no room to breathe, and her limbs were numbed and motionless, and the very walls of her arteries seemed about to cave in on the pulsing blood within them.

With the growing pressure grew the fear within her, the terrible fear of the unknown. The fear dragged her hand to the switch that, pressed down, would reverse the pumps and withdraw the pressure, and let her out of this awful place. And then the thought of Jerry stayed her hand and it fell away.

"Jerry," she moaned. "Jerry dear."

Abruptly there was the click ahead for which she waited. What must she do now? She couldn't remember. Panic struck at her for an instant. "Jerry," she whimpered, and recalled Fogarty's directions and was wrenching at the metallic coldness of a wheel in front of her, and the door was opening, and light dazzled her, and she tumbled out into the steamy, yellow dimness of the Tunnel.

And then she was running through the muck and mire of the Big Bore.

The Tunnel flung back her high, clear voice, mocking her with "Jerry" and "Jerry," repeated a thousand times, but Jerry did not answer.

Diane Forbes came to a place where sandbags were ranged in a row across the Tunnel. She scrambled over the bags, and

on the other side she saw a sprawled and bloody form. Her legs gave way and she fell, the rough jute of the bags stripping the filmy hose from her legs, shredding the gossamer chiffon and silver of her gown. The yellow mud splashed about her, and she was shoving herself up so she could see the face of the man who lay across the sandbags.

The face of horror she saw caught Diane's throat and wrenched a scream from it, but it was the face of no one she'd ever known.

"Jerry?" she cried at the face. "Where's Jerry Carter?"

The eyes in the face rolled and the mouth in the face opened, and a senseless babble came out of the tongueless mouth. And then there was a touch on Diane's shoulder.

"Come," a low, kindly voice said. "Come with me and I'll take you to Jerry Carter."

Diane looked up, and she saw that it was a woman who spoke, a woman whose white face was framed in hair black as the night. "You will?" Diane said, and for the moment it did not seem curious to her that a woman should be here in the Tube, for she thought only of the woman's promise to take her to Jerry. "Oh, thank you," she said, and stood up.

The man at her feet babbled more excitedly. Diane looked down at him to see that somehow he'd flung out his great-muscled arms, and that his horny hands were crawling up the black-haired woman's legs—innocent of covering! The man with the face of horror babbled, and his babble made no words, but Diane heard entreaty in it, and yearning, and the cooing of a desire that she was too innocent to understand.

And then Diane saw that the woman was altogether naked!

"Come," the woman murmured, smiling at Diane and ignoring the man whose hands were clawing at her. "Come with

me to your Jerry." But Diane looked into the black eyes beneath their slumberous, shadowed lids, and read something there that made her blood run cold.

"No," Diane managed to squeeze through her icy lips. "No. I'll not go with you."

The woman's smile was abruptly a grimace. "Oh, yes, you will," she hissed. "Yes, you will, my dear." Her hands came out from within her nubian cloak of hair, the white fingers of one were clawed talons flailing for Diane, and the other clutched a reptilian, hissing whip. . . .

JERRY CARTER came back to consciousness out of a black welter of pain, and his eyes opened on a wavering dazzling glow unlike the light in the tunnel. There was a salt tang on his tongue, and a briny prickle in his nostrils, and so complete was the illusion that he was in some underwater world that his breath caught in his throat and he dared not breath till his clamoring lungs broke the seal on his larynx.

But it was air he breathed.

His vision cleared somewhat, and he saw that he lay on the floor of a circular chamber in whose walls were windows of greenish glass through which he thought he saw the movement of black water. A sound of movement rolled his head toward it.

He thrust his hands down on the floor where he lay, thrusting himself up to a sitting posture. Terror ran through him, and a fire that was not terror, as he gaped at the woman with black hair and luscious lips, and virginal breasts.

The woman who'd whipped him—and had roused in him such a blaze of desire which had burned out of him all normal reason.

Or was it she? Her langorous face, her shadowed eyes promising such delights as man would give his soul for, were

not quite the same as that of the one with the whip. She knelt near him, smiling—

She was not kneeling! Her wide and enticing hips did not melt into the quivering, damask, skinned thighs, the legs of blushing mother-of-pearl that had tantalized Jerry even as the lash had bit his flesh. It was not legs, or thighs at all, that coiled beneath her perfect body. It was the silver-scaled tail of a fish!

Now Jerry Carter knew that he'd gone mad. The cops must have been right! He was lying somewhere in the Tunnel mad and dying. Of course. It was no more sane that he'd been taken out of the Bore into this glass-walled, sea-lighted chamber, than that a black-haired mermaid should sit there, smiling at him.

"I am real," a low sweet voice came to his ears. "See." Her arms lifted, so that her black hair concealed none of her from Carter's avid gaze. "Am I not lovely?"

"Lovely," Carter croaked, and he did not longer care whether he was mad or sane, dreaming or awake. He threw himself across the floor, to grasp her. . . .

And was stopped by an invisible barrier! His hands flailed against it. It was glass, so crystal clear as to be unseen. A silvery laugh tinkled in his ear.

"Not yet," the mermaid's voice said. "Not yet, my sweet. You shall taste of my charms if you will, but not yet." She was just beyond the crystal barrier, and she was laughing at him. "There is something the master must know before he permits our arms to entwine."

"The master?" Jerry gasped, quivering with desire denied. "What master?"

"The Master of the Waters," the maid replied. "The Old Man of the Sea."

Nothing seemed too strange to believe. "And what does your Old Man want to know?"

"Only where lies the main valve that will empty your silly Tunnel of its air. If you'll promise to tell him that. . ."

The amazing demand fractured the spell that had taken hold of Carter. "What!" More than desire, more than love, more than honor itself, was the Tunnel. Just as his call of "*Blo-o-o-w*" had penetrated the torture-maddened soul of Dan Ryan, so did that threat of destruction to it quench the heat that blazed in the veins of Ryan's chief. "You and your master can go to hell—"

Carter's defiance choked off, because there was no one to defy. The space beyond the crystal screen had gone black!

"You will tell me what I want to know," sere, intonationless accents rasped in Jerry Carter's ear. "You will tell me, and in moments."

"Try and make me."

"Torture will not wring it from you, eh?" The voice chuckled. "Will it, Jerry Carter?"

"Not as long as that's my name."

"I believe you. Not any torture I could inflict on you. But, look, Jerry Carter. Look who has replaced the mermaid whose charms you rejected."

DIVIDED by a vertical line its full height half of the crystal screen was transparent once more. Beyond this—Carter came up to his feet, quivering. Diane was on the floor beyond the screen!

She was staggering back against the curved wall of the chamber, unable to cringe further. Her tawny hair was clogged with mud, her face was mud-splattered, and out of it her hazel eyes stared at him, dark with agony.

"Diane!" Jerry shouted. "Diane!" And his fists battered at the gleaming barrier that cut him off from her.

"Jerry," her answer husked. "What have they been doing to you? You're all over blood, and your face—oh Jerry! Your face! . . ."

"A touching reunion," the voice of their unseen captor chuckled. "Really a

shame to add a third to it. Look, Jerry Carter."

The other half of the screen cleared. Ice sheathed Carter's body, and a sick revulsion shook him.

A pool of water spread on the glistening floor, only feet from Diane, and that pool was fed by streamlets from the mottled green and brown shell of a giant crab. Almost as large as a man's the seamed body of the crustacean was, and its great, toothed claws each spanned three feet. Tiny, black eyes glistened fiercely from under the pointed hood of the carapace, eyes that were fastened on Diane's form.

Feelers as long as a grown man waved slowly above the noisome creature, and then the horny body heaved and was moving sidewise, with a terrible leisureliness, toward the gleaming form of the girl Carter loved.

The whispering voice said. "Have you ever seen a crab eat, Jerry Carter? Remember how it holds its prey down with one claw, and with the other tears small bits from the living flesh? Tiny bits, Carter, so that its victim does not die for a very long time."

Carter's fists, his feet, battered at the crystal shield and it did not yield.

"No use in that," the voice chuckled. "That glass is strong enough to withstand a hundred pounds pressure of air, Carter, and so you cannot break it. And, that reminds me, the space where you are is now under fifty pound pressure, while that on the other side is normal, so that even if you did break through, the bends would twist your muscles and bring the blood bursting from your veins, and all you would have accomplished would be to give my pet two delicious tid-bits to feed on instead of one. The lady has been decompressed. She's more attractive that way."

Bruised, his knuckles bleeding, Carter ceased his efforts. He leaned against the

(Continued on page 106)

BLACK CHAPEL

WE HAD dinner recently with a rather well-known aviator and explorer who had faced and overcome almost certain death countless times, and we asked him if he could recall his most terrifying experience.

"A few years ago," he said "I chanced to spend the night in a rather shabby hotel on the West Coast. The place had rather an unsavory reputation and was supposed in the past to have been the rendezvous of thieves and murderers. It was, however, the only hotel in the vicinity—and I had slept in worse places before. In any event, some time after midnight, I suddenly found myself sitting bolt upright in bed, covered with cold sweat and trembling as though with ague. I could have sworn that only an instant before, clammy, unhuman hands had been at my throat and that I had screamed loudly enough to wake the entire village.

"Yet the moonlight pouring in through the window disclosed not a single thing that had not been in the room when I went to bed, and, though my hearing seemed so acute that not even a shadow could move unheard. I could not detect the slightest sound, inside or out, save my own rasping breathing.

"There was nothing to be afraid of, I assured myself. It was only a nightmare . . . and even while these comforting thoughts ran through my head, I could feel—somehow, I *knew*—that I was not alone. I was convinced, inexplicably, there was a presence in the room with me that wanted to kill me; that *would* kill me if I went to sleep again.

"Some months later—and this is what removed the last doubts from my mind that I had suffered entirely from an hallucination—I encountered a friend who had also passed a night in that same hotel. I related my experience to him, and he confessed that he had undergone almost exactly the same sensations. And that, moreover, in the morning his mirror had revealed faint splotches of red about his throat—marks that had the shape of a human hand!

"Neither of us could offer any explanation for what had happened. It hardly seems possible that the two of us could coincidentally have had the same frightful dream at the same location; but it seems equally unlikely that we had undergone a true psychic disturbance—that our subconscious, more sensitive to the presence of unknown danger than the ordinary, perhaps, had revealed to us a supernatural presence. Whatever the reason, I can only say the terror I felt that night was more real and more vivid than anything I have experienced before or since. It may not be sensible, but there is nothing I would not face rather than the prospect of spending another night in that hotel . . ."

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 104)

hard, cold surface of the screen and stared through it at the huge crab as it neared Diane.

"There is one way you can save your sweetheart, and only one way."

Jerry hardly heard that. Diane's scream had reached him, a scream shrill with the terror of a small woods creature who sees a panther leaping down upon it. The crab's terrible claws were reaching for her—a foot from her they halted, groped oddly.

"She is safe enough for a moment, Carter," the dreadful voice husked. "There is another crystal wall between them. But I can lift that wall and let the crab through. See?"

There was a sliding noise. The crustacean's great claws moved upward a little, and then dropped to the floor, and groped along it, and passed the barrier! Only their tips, however. Where the claws swelled they seemed to be caught.

"I can lift it, Carter, till the claws get through to her, and then the rest of my pet, to feed on her. See? It is lifting now." The sliding noise continued, and very slowly the groping claws were squeezing nearer and nearer to Diane, as the gap they fought to get through widened. . . . Diane's golden skin rippled with muscles in a spasm of horror, and the throb of her heart was plain in the pulse of her breast, and her mouth was agape with a scream that was a rasp. "I will stop it, Carter, the moment you tell me how to reach the main valve of the pipes that keep up the Tunnel's pressure, and not an instant before."

"No!" Diane's cry came to Carter's ears. "No, Jerry."

Jerry wheeled around. "All right. I'll tell you!" The sliding noise cut off. "It is stopped," the voice said. "Now tell me."

"I'll have to draw you a diagram." Carter fumbled among the rags that flut-

LILITH—DEEP LADY OF DEATH

tered from his whip-torn torso. "It's too complicated to—" His hands fell away. "But I've got nothing to draw it with."

"Very well." The voice chuckled with triumph. "I'll bring you writing materials." The sound of surfaces sliding on one another rasped in Carter's ear again and he whirled back to Diane, but the crab's awful claws were still caught as they had been, and he whirled back to see an aperture in the opposite wall of his cell, and to see, coming through it, the gargantuan metal monster that had captured him in the Tunnel.

IT CLUMPED toward him, and Carter circled it, his eyes watching its pincer hands warily. One of those hands clutched a paper and pencil, and the familiar things seemed utterly incongruous in this place of horror.

"You need not fear me," the voice said. "I shall not harm you as long as you comply with my demands. Here." The jointed arm lifted with the paper.

Carter's thigh muscles exploded to hurl him in a flying tackle at the Machine Man! The battering ram of his shoulder struck just right to send the monster off-balance. It toppled backward, its metal arms flailing, and crashed through the crystal wall into the compartment where the great crab was.

The thunderous crash deafened Carter, and glass showered about him, and there was a great whoof of air past him. But somehow he'd flung himself away from the prostrate Machine Man, and had leaped on the back of the crab, and his monstrous mount was heaving around.

Pain seared Jerry Carter, rending pain within his muscles, tearing pain within his veins as the bubbles of nitrogen came out of his blood-plasma, released by the suddenly diminished pressure. Blood burst from his nostrils, and his head seemed to balloon, and he knew that in another in-

(Continued on page 108)

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 107)

stant the dread bends would have him helpless.

And the crab's great claws were reaching backward for him, gaping!

In the instant while he still had full control of his muscles, Carter snatched up a shard of the thick glass that was sliding off the shell he rode. Its knife-like edges cut his hand almost to the bone, but he lifted it and drove it down, straight into the crab's eye cavity, deep down into whatever brain a crab has. And then the spasm of the bends took him, and he was sliding down off that mottled carapace. But the crab was motionless in death.

Carter struck the floor with a thud that he did not feel because of the torture that tore his every cell and sinew, but somehow he managed to throw out an arm and send a clinking stream of glass fragments sliding toward Diane, somehow managed to croak, "Cut yourself loose with these. . . ."

He was writhing on the floor, spraying blood, his magnificent frame netted with twitching muscles. The spasm rolled him against something hard and round, an arm of the metal monster, and it was moving!

The Machine Man, apparently stunned by his fall, was regaining consciousness! The realization pierced the shell of agony that encased Carter's brain. The battle wasn't won yet.

Biting his tongue with the anguish the effort cost him, he lifted and fell over on the metal sphere that was the grotesque being's head. He got his hands on its goggling eyes, twisted. The eye was a glass plate twisting in his hands, unscrewing. It came loose. Carter flung it aside and his hands went in through the gaping space where it had been and his fingers closed on a scrawny neck inside.

His fingers tightened, all the agony that tore him concentrated in their fierce clutch. As through a mist, darkly, he saw

LILITH—DEEP LADY OF DEATH

the face of the man whose throat was crumpling in the iron grip of his fingers. The face was seamed with wrinkles, and grey as Time, and it was a face he'd often seen pictured in the literature of his profession. It was Elkan Pond, inventor and scientist, whose gullet his fingers clamped!

A scream pierced Jerry's ear, and the hissing lash of a whip stung his back, and he twisted to see above him the face of the naked woman framed by her black hair, to see that terrible lash of hers lift and flail down. And beyond her he saw Diane, and Diane's hand had a splinter of glass in it. The glass splinter sliced down into the woman's back, and then the woman's warm flesh smothered Jerry, and a gush of her blood mingled with his own.

"Jerry," he heard Diane's voice, from far away. "Oh, Jerry!"

"Find—pumps," Jerry Carter managed to gasp. "Lift pressure—in here," and slid down into merciful oblivion.

JERRY CARTER, weak as a newborn kitten, lay on the deck of a huge barge. The dark waters of the river rippled against the sides of the barge, and the growl of the city's night was in the air, but it was Diane's voice he listened to.

"They're coming for us, Jerry dear," she told him. "I waved a red lantern till they answered, and now they're coming in a boat to get us."

"The Tunnel?" Carter gasped.

"Safe. While the pressure was healing you, Pond told me where he'd tapped the Tunnel Shield to pump air out, and I shut off the connection. Pond didn't dare cut a hole through the steel wall because the bubbles coming up in the river would have shown where the break was. He had to pump the air out through this barge, and his pumps couldn't work enough faster than the pumps that kept

(Continued on page 110)



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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 109)

the pressure up in the Bore. That's why he had to try to find out the location of the main valve."

"He told you that?"

"Yes, Jerry, before he died. He told me why he did it, too. All his money was invested in this installation and the diving devices he'd invented, the great metal suit he was in. . . ."

"I'd seen the patent papers for that," Jerry cut in. "That's how I knew there was a man inside. I remembered calculating that the thing was topheavy, which was how I got the idea of tackling it high and crashing the crystal wall with it. But go on."

"He wasn't money-mad, Jerry, but she was—the woman with the black hair whom in his dotage he'd come to love. She had drained the senile bachelor of his whole fortune. The only way he could keep her was to promise her more, and he figured he could keep the promise because he'd at last located the sunken frigate with its load of bullion.

"But that frigate lay right in the path of the Tube, and the Tube was moving toward it faster than he could get set to take it from above. He had to stop the Tube somehow, for six months at least, and he got the idea of doing it by flooding the Tunnel.

"He knew of the legend of the Devil's Virgin, and he got the woman to pose as that apparition, to scare out the sandhogs. He figured that by chasing them into the airlock and then venting the pressure from it to give them the bends, he'd empty the Tunnel for a whole night, and that would be time enough for him to pump enough air from it to flood it.

"He let down a big pipe to the Shield—maintaining fifty pounds pressure in this chamber, and all the way down the pipe—and sent the woman in. His scheme almost worked. He would have vented the Tube through that pipe, but he had no

LILITH—DEEP LADY OF DEATH

escape valves strong enough to carry that much air through his lock-chamber without blowing up the barge. All the sand-hogs but Dinny Mara ran out, and he killed Dinny with the claws of his metal diving suit; but then Dan Ryan came in, and fought with him, and that delayed matters."

"Then I came in after Ryan—"

"Yes. But he had gone ashore by then, and learned you were in the Bore. So he signalled from shore for the woman to get rid of you, and you fought her and stopped the first leak in the Tube. Meantime, he discovered that the lock was being repaired. There was no longer time for his original scheme to work. He came back here in his speedboat and got into his metal diving suit, and went after you to try and get the location of the main valve out of you."

"The mermaid?"

"Pond had met the woman originally in a sideshow where she posed as a mermaid. He was always interested in curiosities of the sea, has a sort of underwater zoo here, one of the denizens of which was that awful crab. His paramour still had the costume. Pond knew no torture would get what he wanted out of you, but he thought she could vamp you. That didn't work, and then he decided to use me—"

"How did he get hold of you, Diane? How on earth—"

"I—I was in the Tunnel, Jerry," she murmured, her eyes downcast. "I—the police were waiting to shoot you for a maniac, and the pressure was going down in the Bore, and so I came in through the emergency lock to warn you—"

"You did that!" Carter shoved up to a sitting posture. "Diane. You love me enough to do that?"

"I love you more than enough for that, my dearest." Her arms lifted and stretched out to take him within them.

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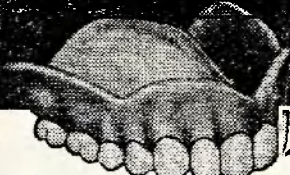
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