

10¢

DIME

MARCH

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NECKLACES FOR THE DYING

FEATURE-LENGTH
MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL

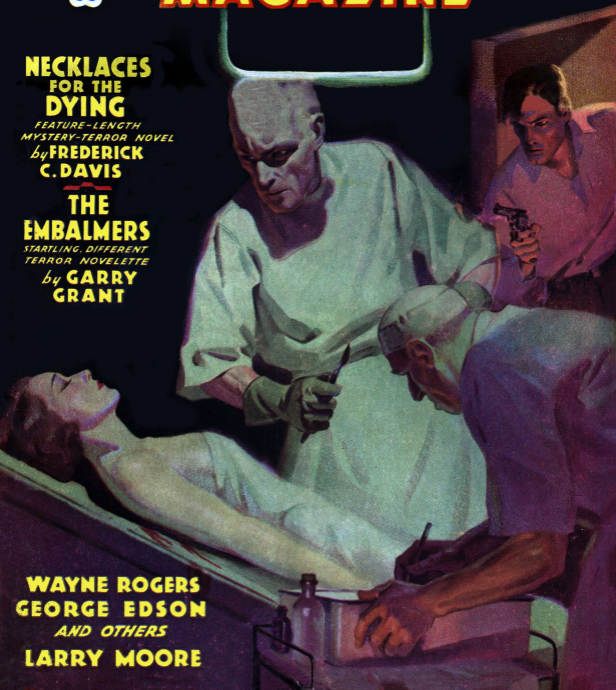
by **FREDERICK
C. DAVIS**

THE EMBALMERS

STARTLING, DIFFERENT
TERROR NOVELETTE

by **GARRY
GRANT**

**WAYNE ROGERS
GEORGE EDSON
AND OTHERS
LARRY MOORE**





"THE FIRST GIRL I EVER LIKED — and these Pimples had to come!"

But it wasn't too late, Ben found, to mend the trouble



I THOUGHT YOU AND THAT NICE NEW BABS GIRL NEXT DOOR WERE GOING TO BE FRIENDS -- WHAT HAPPENED?

DON'T BE FOOLISH, MOM. GUESS I'LL TAKE THIS MAGAZINE UP TO MY ROOM AND READ!



MOM MUST BE BLIND. I WISH BABS WAS -- WISH THESE PIMPLES WERE INVISIBLE! WISH I'D KNOWN BABS BEFORE --



YOUR MOTHER SAID TO COME UP -- WELL FOR THE LUVVA -- ADMIRING YOUR MAP MISS AMERICA ???

OH, SHUT UP! I WAS JUST COUNTING THESE PIMPLES, BLASTEM!!



DOES SEEM TO BE A LOT OF 'EM -- SAY YOU KNOW MY COUSIN RAY -- HE TOOK FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST FOR HIS PIMPLES -- WIPED 'EM RIGHT OFF THE OLD PHIZ

FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST DID THAT? SAY, LEAD ME TO IT!



LATER

GOSH, I'M GLAD I GOT RID OF THOSE PIMPLES!

BABS, GO TO THE SCHOOL DANCE WITH ME NEXT SATURDAY?

WHY, I SORT OF HAD A DATE, BUT -- YES, I'D LOVE TO!

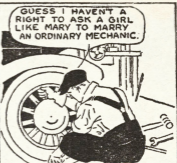
Don't let adolescent pimples make YOU hide away!

Between the ages 13 and 25, important glands develop. This causes disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons in the blood irritate the skin, causing pimples.

In treating adolescent pimples, doctors prescribe Fleischmann's Yeast. This fresh yeast clears the blood of skin irritants that cause pimples. Then the pimples disappear. Eat Fleischmann's Yeast 3 times a day, before meals, until skin clears.



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by clearing skin irritants out of the blood



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My book has shown hundreds of fellows how to make more money and win success. It's FREE to any ambitious fellow over 18 years of age. Investigate. Find out what Radio offers and make tests that teach you to build and make practically every type of receiving set made. James R. Hix, 3525 Chapline Street, Wheeling, W. Va., writes: "During my training, my spare time earnings netted me an average of \$1,000 to \$1,500 yearly."

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6CS9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6CS9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

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CITY..... STATE.....



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National Radio Institute**
The man who has directed the Home-Bind Training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.



10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Volume Ten

March, 1936

Number Four

TWO FULL-LENGTH NOVELS OF EERIE MYSTERY

- Necklaces for the Dying.....By Frederick C. Davis 8
Claire Forester feared the rabid passion that stared at her from out the stone-cutter's lust-filled eyes—feared, too, those fabulously strong hands, which some whispered, shaped ghastly necklaces for the dying. . . .
- Brides for the Beast.....By Wayne Rogers 40
A lust-mad scientist whispered secrets concerning her lover's birth to Minna Talbot—while a mad thing, whose origin was unknown, brought terror to that mountain wilderness. . . .

TWO WEIRDLY REALISTIC MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

- The Embalmers.....By Garry Grant 76
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- Convicts from Hell.....By George Alden Edson 104
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Girls, whose beauty condemned them to horrible death, covered in their homes—where their danger was greatest!

—AND—

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Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

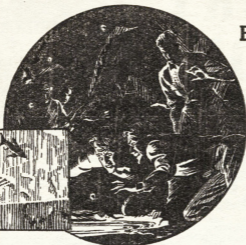
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FATE Led Them to a Living Tomb!

But Edward Eiskamp and Six Companions Cheated Death in Underground Maze

Edward Eiskamp who, with six companions, had this thrilling experience in the Sam's Point caves in the wilds of the Catskills.

"The light continued to burn!"



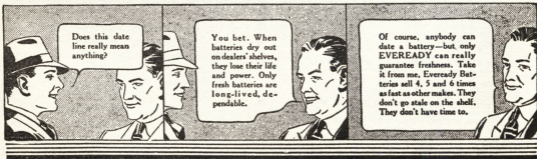
"Splash . . . our tiny rock-bound world went black! I had dropped our flashlight into a pool of icy water at the very bottom of that cavern-maze that burrows for miles in every direction under the Catskills. Without light, here was our living tomb. In weeks or months or years someone would find seven skeletons in this crypt.



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THUMB-NAIL SKETCHES of DIME MYSTERY Authors

No. 1: ARTHUR J. BURKS

ARTHUR J. BURKS, who has contributed his engrossing tales of mystery and terror to this magazine for many years, is marvelously well equipped, through experience and background, to present the eerie and weird aspects of life on this planet in their proper setting. During his travels, which have been extensive, he has encountered individuals and witnessed scenes that he admits in all frankness have him stumped to account for logically. Ranging up and down the West Indies he has seen sights that beggar even his remarkable powers of description—but it was these experiences, in a large measure, that diverted him from a military career into the field of writing.

Although now only thirty-seven, Burks saw eleven years' service with the Marine Corps; enlisting in 1917 and receiving his Honorable Discharge in 1928. He advanced rapidly through the non-commissioned grades from private to aide-de-camp to General Smedley D. Butler. He was stationed in Santo Domingo for two and one-half years doing topographical and intelligence work. He has visited Haiti, Cuba, Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico, Hawaii, Philippines, Formosa, China, Manchuria, Korea and Japan.

His wide knowledge of these places, and his acquaintances throughout the globe, have furnished him with rich resources from which to draw the color and atmosphere for his stories. Who, of those who have read his tales set in the West Indies, in China—or any of the other multitudinous locales he has used—could doubt the authenticity of the background, or the sure authority of the writer? But this is not so much due to the fact that Burks actually visited those places, as to his ability to take authentic raw materials and inject into them that vivid, breathing life without which no amount of actual experience can enable a writer to carry conviction over to his readers.

Burks' background as a writer is as rich and colorful as his experience of life. He has written for a total of one hundred and forty magazines. He has had pub-

(Continued on page 6)

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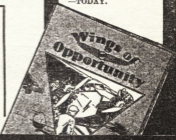


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(Continued from page 4)

lished a number of books among which are the well-known "Here Are My People", "Rivers Into Wilderness", "Land of Checkerboard Families", and many others. He was also co-author of "Yankee Komisar". He has likewise done a considerable amount of screen and radio work.

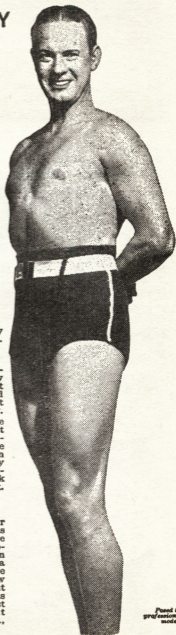
Those who have read books dealing with the West Indies are frequently skeptical about the authenticity of the events described therein. Burks stands as a witness that most of it is true. He has seen voodoo rites, and taken part in ceremonies during the course of which things have happened that he cannot account for. But he is insistent upon the fact of their actual occurrence. A close and skeptical observer, he is the least likely of mortals to be fooled by trickery. One small incident he relates gives a clue to the quality of experience to be met with in those sultry climes whose secrets no white man has ever plumbed. It was while he was in charge of a prison in Santo Domingo. Under him was a native Haitian who held the post because of his influence over the prisoners of his own race. Both Burks and the Haitian had been away, one afternoon, in order to take charge of a shipment of prisoners sent from one of the small islands. When they returned they found that a member of the local gendarmerie had jailed a couple of Haitians—and the Haitians had promptly dug themselves out of prison. Hearing of the incident, Burks' native aide smiled quietly. "Before dawn," he said, "they will return!" The aide did not know the escaped prisoners; he heard of the incident only at the same time that Burks heard of it—and yet he made this strange prediction with apparent confidence. The next morning the prisoners returned, offering no explanation, but obviously almost pathetically happy to be back in the gaol they had fled!

At present Arthur J. Burks is President of the American Fiction Guild, a national organization of writers, painters, and illustrators.

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professional
models

Necklaces For The Dying

By Frederick C. Davis

(Author of "The Smiling Killer," etc.)

It was the rabid passion of a great cat that glared at her out of the stone-cutter's eyes. But more than his evil lust—more, even, than his weird, hypnotic power over her—Claire Forester feared the heavy, fabulously strong hands that shaped cruel necklaces for the dying . . .

SHE was afraid—but she did not know what it was she feared. It was nothing, yet it was a dread that haunted her every waking hour. It was everywhere—in the sunshine and in the

dark, in the quiet, and in her own laughter—yet it was nowhere. Strive as she might, she could find no reason for the terror she felt—but she was afraid.

Claire Forester gazed at her cat. He



A Soul-
Chilling
Novel of
Eerie Peril
and Baffling
Mystery



was sitting at her feet, bushy tail curled, a magnificent grey Persian with luminous yellow eyes. She had acquired him as a tiny, blind kitten and he had been with her ever since—a companion, a confidant, a being she loved. Yet since they had come to this house to live, he seemed changed. The shining, inscrutable eyes of Marco

Polo were directed at her now—a gaze that was somehow ominous.

As she took him into her arms he answered with a friendly purr, though he seemed unwilling and discontented. "Do you feel it, too, Marco?" she asked in a whisper. "Is there something making you uneasy? Would you like to go away?"

The cat's amber eyes looked into hers while he sang. "I think *you* know—"

She told herself it was all nonsense. Here she was, wearing an old sweater and a tweed skirt, snug woolen stockings and oxfords scuffed from long walks through the Connecticut hills—a sensible, sane young woman. She was twenty-two, self-reliant, thoroughly and happily married. Everything about herself, everything around her, was so real. Of course!

There was Jim, the man she loved, stalwart and handsome, puffing away at his old calabash, working with square and pen at his drawing-board. He was computing specifications, skeneing out lines that would some day become the stone and steel of an impressive building. Nothing was worrying him. They didn't have much money, and it wasn't easy to manage, and of course he was concerned about that—but he wasn't worrying about anything else.

And there was Bob Baird, Claire's younger brother, slumped in an easy chair near the fireplace, absorbed in a magazine—a fine chap, hard-headed and genuine. He was a chemist in the laboratory of a proprietary drug manufacturer and therefore a realist—more than that, a born debunker who enjoyed exploding false beliefs. Certainly Bob felt none of this weird fear that had seized Claire.

But she could never free herself of it for more than a few minutes, and inevitably it came back, trickling into her quickening heart like chill water.

"JIM!" she said suddenly—and the anxiety ringing in her voice made the cat cease purring. "Don't you feel something strange about this house? Don't you, Bob? Somehow don't you sense that— that something horrible is about to happen?"

Jim Forester looked up, pen poised, eyes crinkling in a smile. "I'll tell you what's going to happen. In about an hour

I'm going to quit work, have a night-cap, go to bed and sleep the sleep of the innocent. Maybe you're too used to the jangle of the city, sweet—the peace and quiet here are giving you the jitters. You'll get used to it soon."

Bob Baird tossed his magazine aside. "Something else is going to happen right now. I'm going to take a walk. You mustn't let this thing get you, Claire. How about tramping back to the quarry with me?—make you feel better."

Claire said earnestly: "I'm not just being silly. You know I'm not like that. There *is* something here. . . ." Though the dread persisted in her heart, she laughed. "You run along, Bob, and Jim, you keep right on working. If you won't listen to me, I'll find someone else. I've an idea. Maybe Hugo Cliffe can tell me what I'm afraid of."

The cat seemed to sense her decision before she made it—he bounded from her lap landing soundlessly on padded paws. He looked back with his wise, yellow eyes and drifted toward the kitchen. Jim and Bob watched Claire amusedly as she got into her leather jacket and perky felt hat. "See you later, gentlemen," she tossed at them, and went out.

When she reached the tar road, at the end of the dirt path, she paused to look at the house curiously. It was a cheerful old place with craggy, wooded hills piled behind it. A peaceful retreat, miles from Elmsford and more than two hours from New York—Claire and Bob had inherited it from their father and his brother. The spreading suburbanizing influence of the city had not yet reached it, and the main lines of travel had left it untouched. Its brooding tranquillity was a delight, yet somehow the quiet was fraught with the nameless terror which Claire Forester could not elude.

She could not forget that Barnett and Gaylord Baird, her father and uncle, had

died in that house—mysteriously, horribly. . . .

The dark, deserted road led her to the ramshackle dwelling on the adjoining property. Its windows streamed white light. A granite monument sat near its entrance, neatly engraved: *Hugo Cliffe, Craftsman in Stone*. A bright shaft was issuing from the open door of the shed behind the house, and as Claire approached it she heard the ringing tap-tap of a hammer and chisel. Hugo Cliffe was at work.

She had watched him wrestle, single-handed, huge blocks of granite from the quarry on her property, and had marvelled at his strength. He was past sixty now, and all his life he had worked in stone, making doorsteps and gate-posts and monuments, as his father had before him. The hands of the Cliffes had marked the graves of all the neighborhood's dead during decades past. Every time Claire Forester passed Hugo Cliffe's house she heard the clanging of his busy chisel, for he labored with incredible tirelessness, day and night.

As she approached the workshop, a quick black movement on the ground startled her. An animal darted into the light and paused warily, turning gleaming yellow eyes upon her—Marco Polo.

THE cat sped ahead, as though drawn by some desire stronger than her friendship for him, and vanished through the door of the shed. Immediately the rhythmic clicking ceased.

Hugo Cliffe's voice came—a soft, throaty sound. Puzzled, the girl looked into the shed. Its floor was a white packing of stone chips. Its walls were powdered with white stone dust. Monuments sat against the walls, their shining surfaces blank, waiting for Cliffe's chisel to inscribe names upon them—waiting for the coming of death. The stone-worker

was sitting on his bench, his tools put aside, fondling the cat.

He was speaking in a peculiar, purring tone, as though the animal could understand him with human intelligence. The cat was looking intently into Cliffe's eyes, answering him with a high-pitched mewling. To the amazed girl they seemed to be carrying on a conversation—the cat and the man. She started when he looked up suddenly and saw her in the light, for she noted something, then, she had not realized before—that Hugo Cliffe's eyes were like a cat's.

"Good evening! Come in, Mrs. Forester!"

His eyes—amber, with elongated pupils—like a cat's! They had the same inscrutable intensity as Marco Polo's—but the girl scolded herself for being alarmed. She knew the reason for the striking resemblance of Cliffe's eyes to a feline's—twice he had undergone operations for cataract, and each time a particle of iris had been removed by the surgeon's knife. This man, she told herself, was the confidant of the countryside—her friend. She went in with hand cordially extended.

"I'm glad you've come," he said—his voice was still soft, but now it lacked the strange purring quality. "I've taken three blocks of stone from your quarry this past week. I owe you for it. Here's the money. It is satisfactory to you—the arrangement I made with your father before he—died?"

With a smile Claire accepted the three small banknotes which Cliffe fumbled out of his dusty overalls. "Of course it is," she answered. "I want to talk with you because I'm worried—I don't know why. Perhaps you'll laugh at me, like Jim and Bob for being afraid of something I can't put my finger on—but I am afraid. I dread to close my eyes and sleep because. . . ."

She broke off, a strange chill stirring her heart, gazing at the cat. Marco Polo

was rubbing himself against Cliffe's ankles, purring ecstatically, writhing back and forth—consumed with an almost obscene pleasure. Claire sensed again the strange, evil kinship that seemed to exist between the animal and the man, and an irrepressible shudder passed over her. She watched the cat with a terrified fascination, almost unaware of Cliffe's throaty voice:

"You are afraid. You told your husband, 'I felt it the moment I stepped through the door.' He doesn't understand—but I know your deepest feelings, I know every thought that passes through your mind. You were alone with him when you told him that, but I know—because we are one—one being—you and I. . . ."

HER widened eyes rose to the feline eyes of Cliffe. She stood stock-still, chilled, overwhelmed by the intense power of his gaze. The superhuman strength of his muscles was puny compared with the force she felt enwrapping her merely because he was looking at her. In his face she saw desire—lust—a consuming hunger that fixed itself inescapably upon her. She could not take even one recoiling step while his dusty, voracious hands rose.

Suddenly she was fighting. His sinewy arms were squeezing around her, his dusty lips were striving for hers. His fingers dug like talons, his close-pressed body wove with a feline suppleness as a sound of desire came from his throat—a rasping purr. She felt the hopelessness of a mouse trapped by deep-piercing claws as she frantically struggled to escape. Breathlessly she tore back, cringing from the glare of his consuming, amber eyes.

"I thought—you were a friend—but you're a fiend—a fiend!"

She ran. She flung herself from the shop, past the monument marked with Cliffe's name, along the black and deserted

road. She fled from a dogging terror that had suddenly materialized in an evil being who was more of a cat than a man. If he was following her, with swift feline agility, his footfalls were making no sound. She stopped in a paralysis of exhaustion at the entrance of her house, widened eyes searching the gloom. At a sound her breath came back, because it meant Hugo Cliffe was not stalking her.

It was the rhythmic tapping of a hammer, the ringing of a chisel biting into stone. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Chained Death

SHE stood there a long time, striving to still the tumult of her heart. Through the window she could see Jim working absorbed at the drawing-board—his nearness reassured her. She hesitated to tell him what had happened, because already it seemed like a ghastly dream, because she knew Jim would laugh and protest that old Hugo Cliffe was incapable of such an act. Yet the stone-worker's evil intensity had filled Claire with a sense of suffocation she could not fight down.

"He wants me. He means to take me."

The horror of that certainty kept her mind in turmoil as she listened to the metallic tapping. Suddenly the ringing beat paused. For long minutes there was nothing but empty silence. Her fear rising, the girl waited for it to come back. At last it returned, far away, echoing strangely. Its direction had somehow changed—it did not seem to be coming from Hugo Cliffe's workshop. It issued faintly from many points at once, its rhythm destroyed—and then, again, abruptly it ceased.

Claire steadied herself as she opened the entrance. Jim, continuing his work, glanced up to ask: "Well? Feeling any

better?" She smiled bitterly, because her fear had increased a hundredfold, but she fought the impulse to blurt out the story. Neither Jim nor her brother would believe her—she was quite sure of it. She asked, as casually as she could:

"Where's Bob?"

"Taking his walk."

Claire went to Jim quietly. "Do you remember," she asked, "what I said last night, when we were getting ready for bed—when we were talking about this fear I feel?"

Jim answered as his pen scratched: "I felt it the moment I stepped through the door—those were your exact words."

"Yes," Claire repeated tensely: "Yes—my exact words. We were alone when I said that, Jim, weren't we—completely alone?"

"I hope we were," Jim said with a smile. "You were wearing very little, darling."

"But Marco was there."

"Yes, Marco was—"

"He heard it."

Claire's face was white. Jim saw the haunting fear in her eyes, and put down his pen. He gently took her cold hands in his—she tried to keep them from trembling. He asked quietly: "What is it, sweet? You're not ill, your mind is perfectly clear, there's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. What could happen here?"

"I don't know. I don't know, Jim, but something—something—"

It broke suddenly in the hush—a hacking, choking cry. An inarticulate call, bursting out of the night—it brought Claire Forester instantly to her feet. Footfalls were sounding outside, ragged, stumbling. The strangling voice shouted again, this time high-pitched, torn with terror. Abruptly there was a crash at the entrance.

Bob Baird lurched in. He tottered weakly, tearing at his throat with both hands. He turned a face of horror toward his sister—bluish, swollen, his eyes pro-

truding starkly, his tongue slavoring out over puffed lips. He dropped to his knees, still clawing at his throat, forcing out distorted syllables:

"Take it off—take it off!"

CLAIRE hurried to him as he rolled to the floor, fighting desperately for air that would not come, robbed of his last strength. His fingernails had gouged his neck—his skin was ripped and bleeding. Claire seized his wrists, tried to force his arms away, but she could not. Jim crowded beside her as a sob broke through her lips. He fought Bob's hands down. Then they saw it—the chain.

The linked circle was banded deep into Bob's throat. Puffed flesh and gorged blood-vessels almost concealed it. The scant air whistling through the stricken young man's crushed windpipe was not enough to support life. His face was distorted with ghastly suffering—he was dying. All his desperate efforts had not been enough to rid himself of the choking chain—and Jim Forester, frantically seeking an open link, could find no means of removing it.

"The tools!" he urged Claire. "Bring my cutters—anything! God, I can't get it off!"

She ran into the room adjoining the kitchen where Jim kept the tools he used for odd jobs around the house. It was stored with accumulated odds and ends. This afternoon Claire had seen the saw, hammer and pliers lying on the bench in the corner. She groped for them in the dark, too consumed with anxiety to think of turning on the hanging light—but she did not find them. Lips cold with anguish, she grabbed at the bulb, turned the key, reached into the glare. She stood frozen with consternation because the tools were not there.

Horrible choking noises floated to her as she looked around swiftly. She did

not see the cutters. She ran back along the hall, scarcely aware of the sound of the opening door, of a new voice speaking. The man who had come in was Dr. Ellis Hunt, who lived half a mile down the road—she gave him only a quick, unseeing glance as she gripped Jim's shoulder.

"I can't find them, Jim!"

"I left them on the bench—they must be there! Good God—he's choking to death!"

Jim sprang up, rushed back to the store-room. Bob's efforts to breathe had become ghastly spasms. Dr. Hunt bent over him, striving somehow to detach the crushing circle of chain, but he could not even bring it into his fingers because that would tighten it around the choking man's neck. While clattering sounds came from behind her—Jim frantically searching—Claire stood stricken with helplessness, gazing transfixed at her brother's blood-bloated face—watching him die.

"Your car!" she blurted suddenly. "Doctor—there are tools in your car."

She started through the open entrance—but a hand flashed to her arm, gripped hard, stopped her. She stared into Dr. Hunt's ruddy, loose-jowled face, trying to tear away from him. The car was standing directly outside, its headlamps beaming—but his grasp on Claire's arm was secure, his gaze forbidding.

"There are no tools in my car," he declared gruffly. "Do you understand? Call the State Police. I'll keep trying. Hurry!"

He thrust her toward the telephone. She took it up, spoke automatically, looking horrified at her brother. Dr. Hunt was again bent over Bob, endeavoring now, his fingers on a link of chain, to bend its joint apart. It was too strong for him, Claire realized that with growing despair as she rushed her message over the wire. She was replacing the phone when Jim's voice roared:

"Agda! Agda! Where did you put my tools?"

The calm, mellow voice of the housekeeper answered from the kitchen: "I haven't touched them, Mr. Forester."

JIM'S steps sounded quickly. Metallic things clattered a mocking cacophony as he hurled unwanted objects aside, emptied drawers, thrust into cabinets. Claire heard it all, like a din in a weird dream, as she watched Dr. Hunt striving to remove the chain—in vain. Suddenly Jim appeared in the doorway, eyes glinting with desperate urgency.

"They're gone. Somebody took them away. Somebody stole them!"

Dr. Hunt blurted in despair: "I can't get it off!"

Claire saw a screwdriver in Jim's clenched hand. He snatched a bronze paper weight off his drawing-board, fell to his knees at Bob's side. Bob's convulsive attempts to breathe were ceasing. Tremors passed through his body as Dr. Hunt pulled at the linked circle. At a ghastly, crunching sound, Claire shrank back, covering her eyes—the noise made by cartilage breaking in Bob's tortured throat. Then a quick, frantic hammering—the paperweight striking the head of the screwdriver—a rhythmic pounding that drove Claire's mind toward Hugo Cliffe. Hugo Cliffe had chisels—sharp-edged chisels—instruments that could free Bob from the deadly collar far faster than the blunt point of the screwdriver. The hope drove Claire toward the door—a hope stronger than her fear of the man who owned the implements. She was hurrying past Dr. Hunt's car filled only with the thought of saving her brother from suffocation, when she heard Jim's voice ring:

"It's loose!"

She turned back. Through the entrance she watched, wide-eyed, Jim pulling the encarnadined links from the swollen folds

of Bob's neck. Jim threw the chain aside, stooping to press his ear to Bob's still chest. Stung by surging grief, Claire studied Jim's blanched face, his pinched lips, as he rose. He looked at her with silent compassion—but the eloquence of his silence told her that Bob's heart was no longer beating.

Dr. Hunt rolled Claire's brother face down, straddled over him. Spread hands pressed to Bob's ribs, he leaned forward, then back. With an even, regular beat, he forced air in and out of the lungs that death had stilled. Coldly fascinated, still wordless, Claire went into Jim's arms. A sound parted them—the whine of a car speeding along the road.

It swerved sharply from the pavement into the dirt drive. When it bucked to a stop near the entrance, two blue-uniformed men ducked out. They were State Troopers from the barracks in Elmsford, only a few miles away—Claire's call had

brought them at top speed. They hurried into the house carrying a resuscitator. Claire kept watching, her cold hand in Jim's, the efforts of these men to restore a life that had been horribly snuffed out.

The carried Bob into the bedroom on the ground floor. Claire did not follow—she remained in the living-room, listening to the wheeze of the machine as it pumped. Valves clicked and air hissed—it went on and on, mechanically, unendurably.

THE beating sound continued a long time, each click of its valves undermining the girl's hope that it would restore her brother to life. Her mind was a kaleidoscope of terrifying images while she listened. Bob's swollen face as he burst in the door—the eyes of the cat—the grimly set features of Dr. Hunt as he said: "There are no tools in my car." Claire thought that strange. No tools in an automobile? It seemed incredible—

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when a few seconds might have made the difference between Bob's life and death.

She went out toward the car, wondering, her haunting fear urging her to make sure of every possible reality. The four men were working feverishly in the bedroom—she was certain she was not being watched. Carefully, without making a sound, she shifted the seat cushion of Dr. Hunt's coupé. In the glow of the dash she saw the glitter of tools.

Jim's tools! She recognized them at once. His claw hammer, with his initials branded in the handle. His cold chisel. His strong-jawed cutting pliers—she recognized a nick she had herself made in the steel edges. She did not touch them. She gazed at them in stunned wonderment, remembering that Dr. Hunt had said: "There are no tools in my car." But there were tools in his car—Jim's own.

She replaced the cushion. When she turned back to the entrance, she knew what she was going to do. She would say nothing of this to anyone until she had told Jim. She was sure of herself, but she wanted Jim's clear-headed counsel. As she stepped into the living-room, she saw Jim turning away from the bed on which Bob lay.

The pulmotor was not operating now. One of the State Troopers was restoring it to its case. Dr. Hunt was spreading a blanket over Bob. And Jim's pallid face told Claire that her brother was dead beyond recall.

A uniformed man was standing at the table, holding the red length of chain between a thick thumb and a stubby forefinger. Claire knew his name—Lieutenant Korbart. He was squat, bull-necked, taciturn. His black eyes smoldered with hidden thoughts. Instinctively she mistrusted him. As she gazed at him, inspecting the bloody links that had choked

Bob's life away, he became a part of the dread that haunted her.

He lived alone in a cabin, far back in the hills—Claire had seen it, hidden in a hollow, almost a secret retreat. In the State Police car, he came and went over a lonely back road no one else used, and when on duty he patrolled the main highway with a dogged regularity. She had come upon him in odd places, standing silent, watching something—he seemed to be everywhere so that, whenever she wandered into the hills, she went with an expectant dread that she would come upon him, standing silent at some mysterious, self-appointed post.

She watched him intently as he lowered the chain to the table and turned his smoldering gaze upon her.

"That's the way the others went," he said in his peculiar, chesty tone. "First your father, then your uncle. Choked to death—like *him*—with a chain around the neck."

CHAPTER THREE

The Graven Decree

SHE tried to piece it all together as she sat in the living-room with Jim, a closed door shrouding her brother's body in silence. An investigation would be held, Lieut. Korbart had told her. Dr. Hunt had gone, with the two State Troopers. Claire and Jim were alone, silent and stunned.

"First your father, then your uncle."

Claire had been honeymooning with Jim in England when the news of the death of Barnett Baird had reached her. She had not heard the strange details until after her return—how he had been found in the garden, a swollen-faced corpse, strangled with a circle of chain. Only one conclusion was possible—murder. The investigation had brought no suspect to

light, had not even revealed a motive. Yet, months later, Barnett Baird's brother Gaylord had met the same doom.

Gaylord had inherited the house upon the death of Claire's father, and had come here to live—a quiet, scholarly gentleman of the old school, alive with a searching curiosity. Claire and Jim, living then in a small apartment in the Greenwich Village section of New York City had frequently paid him weekend visits. They had arrived one Saturday to find Lieut. Korbart in charge and Gaylord Baird dead—dead with a linked band around his neck. And again the investigation of the police had yielded not the slightest clue.

"Jim—I found your tools in Dr. Hunt's car."

Claire said it abruptly. Jim jerked up, alarmed, yet incredulous. They were silent a moment, striving to grasp the full dread meaning of those few words, until Claire repeated them:

"I found your tools in Dr. Hunt's car."

"You must be mistaken."

"You said yourself somebody took them away—somebody stole them. I believe that. It was done so we would have no means of getting the chain off Bob's neck. The man who did that to him wanted to be sure it would kill him. I saw the tools—under the cushion—in Dr. Hunt's car."

"You might easily be wrong about their being mine, Claire," Jim said slowly. "You were upset, naturally—and tools can look a great deal alike. They couldn't have been mine—the ones you saw. What reason could Dr. Hunt have for—"

"But he said he had no tools. He kept me from going to the car when I mentioned it. The cutters were there. They might have saved Bob's life. But he told me—I remember it distinctly—"There are no tools in my car'."

She was silent another moment under Jim's searching gaze. She stirred un-

easily as she felt a presence in the room—an uncanny warning that someone, or *some thing*, was gazing at her. Alarmed, she looked around. In the shadow in the corner she saw two yellow eyes. The cat was there, watching her—listening.

She blurted: "Don't talk now, Jim. We mustn't say anything while he's here. He'll—tell—Hugo Cliffe!"

"Claire!"

The consternation ringing in Jim's voice startled her. She saw a strange, questioning light in his eyes. His gaze turned to the grey cat sitting in the shadow—almost invisible save for its shining eyes—then he rose. He sat on the arm of her chair, slipping his arm reassuringly around her.

"Claire, darling, you're over-wrought. You're saying things you don't mean. In the morning, when you've had a chance to rest, we'll start from the beginning and—"

"Someone's coming."

A CAR was grinding into the drive. Jim's arm tightened around Claire before he went to the door. "Keep hold of yourself, sweet—this isn't like you at all." Headlamp shafts swept across him as he opened the entrance. Brakes squeaked, and two men trudged to the door. One was a serious-faced young man wearing a dark topcoat over a white interne's uniform. The other was Dr. Hunt.

"Sorry to disturb you—a damned awkward thing," the shaggy-headed physician rumbled. "I've lost a tubule of radium. I was using it on Mrs. Chedwick—cancer patient, you know—and taking it back to the hospital tonight. Found out when I arrived I didn't have it. It's valuable, and needed at the hospital. Do you mind if I look for it here?"

Claire asked uneasily: "What makes you believe you lost it here, doctor?"

Hunt came in, followed by the interne.

The young man was carrying a sealed glass flask, containing two fluttering bright leaves supported by a wire hook attached to a cork. He held it tenderly as Dr. Hunt explained:

"It must have dropped out of this little lead box—the catch is loose." He opened his case and removed a flat container, not more than two inches across, of dull, greyish lustre. Raising its hinged lid to disclosed a pad of cotton marked by an empty depression, he added: "It might have lodged in the coils of my stethoscope and dropped to the floor. It's very small, but worth thousands of dollars. If you don't mind—"

Jim answered quietly: "Not at all."

Claire Forester watched, with fascinated bewilderment, this friendly old man in whose car she had found Jim's missing tools. He had paid them many neighborly calls—his presence at the time Bob was choking to death could easily be explained in that way—yet Claire could not forget the tools. While she watched, she wondered if Dr. Hunt's explanation was a blind to cover some secret purpose that had driven him to return.

The interne drew a shining rod from his pocket, and briskly polished it. He brought the rod near a brass ball affixed to the cork of the flask. The two drooping aluminum leaves suspended on the hook inside immediately flew apart. He held the flask close to the floor and began to move it about, watching it anxiously.

Dr. Hunt rumbled: "Like charges repel. It's an electroscope. If it is brought near radium when charged, the radium emanations cause the leaves to collapse. In that way we can locate the tubule. If it isn't here I'll have to take it along every inch of the way to the hospital. We've already gone all over my car with it—it isn't there."

"But—" Claire almost said it aloud—"the tools are. . . . Jim's stolen tools. . . ."

The interne made a circuit of the room while the leaves of the electroscope remained spread like the wings of a sliver bird in flight. "Thousands of dollars," Dr. Hunt mumbled. "I'll have to make it good if I don't find it—" A hush filled the room as the search continued, with Claire's alert gaze never leaving the ruddy face of the doctor. In the corner, near the old desk her father had used, the interne straightened.

"Not anywhere in here," he said. "Looks like—Hello! It's discharging!"

Slowly the silver leaves drooped until they hung limp. Dr. Hunt strode into the corner jubilantly. Taking the electroscope into his hands, he urged: "Charge it again!" While the interne briskly rubbed the rod, generating static electricity, Jim frowned curiously. "In the desk?" he asked. "That couldn't be. It hasn't been open tonight."

At the touch of the rod to the brass ball, the silver leaves again flew apart. "Rolled under it, perhaps," Dr. Hunt said as he stooped—but, while he moved the flask about near the floor, the strips of aluminum foil registered no discharge. Looking puzzled, the doctor rose. Then, again, the leaves began to droop. He moved the instrument closer to the glass door of the old secretary, and abruptly a complete discharge registered.

"You didn't find the tubule," he asked quickly, "and put it in the desk?"

"Not I," Jim Forester answered. "Did you, Claire?"

"No."

Dr. Hunt mumbled: "Strange. Something inside there, perhaps in that little chest, caused the electroscope to discharge. This is very important to me, you know—the amount of money involved. Do you mind making absolutely sure?"

Claire observed: "That old chest was my father's, doctor. It's locked, and we haven't found the key."

"Then I don't understand," the physician exclaimed. "I don't!"

JIM opened the glass door, removed the little chest. It was heavy, and as he moved it something rattled inside. Age had seasoned its wood, blackened the copper strips which bound it. Claire knew its lid was firmly fastened, but Jim tried it to make sure. Then, once more, the interne charged the electroscope—and once more, immediately it was brought near the chest, the leaves quickly and completely collapsed.

Jim said decisively: "I'll break it open."

He pried a letter-opener into the crack. The old wood groaned. Suddenly the metal catch snapped. Claire came close as Jim raised the lid. The chest contained leather-bound books, closely packed in, which gave off a rich, musty smell—diaries, according to the golden word stamped on their covers—but at one side lay two velvet-black objects, irregular as stones, gleaming with a pitch-like lustre.

Dr. Hunt curiously took up one of the fragments. The interne observed: "Whatever it is, it's radioactive." They made a test, while Claire and Jim watched, putting the charged electroscope on the table, then bringing the black stone near it. Again the discharge of the leaves was prompt and complete. Dr. Hunt, frowning, asked: "Curious—may I take this with me?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks—thanks. But this isn't finding my tubule of radium. I'm sorry it's necessary, but do you mind if—" His blue-veined hand gestured toward the door behind which Bob Baird lay dead.

Jim's nod gave permission. As Hunt and the interne stepped into the hushed room, Claire again became conscious of a steady scrutiny. She turned, her heart speeding, searching for the yellow eyes—and she saw them, gleaming in the dark

corner. The cat was there, his implacable gaze radiant with a subtle, evil wisdom—silent, watching, listening.

He moved, a gliding black shadow, toward the entrance. At the door he mewed. Claire's breath caught as a realization chilled her. "Jim!" she said in a whisper. "Cat's do talk—we both know that. Do you understand what Marco is saying now? He wants to go out. He's saying, 'Please open the door'. Do you hear him, Jim?"

Jim's hand took Claire's. "Darling—"

"I'm not going to let him out. He's been listening—listening to everything we've said. He'll go straight to Hugo Cliffe—and they'll talk together—and Hugo Cliffe will know everything that's happened here. I'm not going to let him go."

While she spoke she gazed intently at the grey cat, and the cat emitted a pleading mew that said: "Please open the door—open the door."

She turned on Jim suddenly. "How else can you explain it? I said it while we were alone upstairs—I felt it the moment I stepped through the door'. No one could possibly have heard it outside our room. We were alone, just you and I, Jim—and Marco. Tonight Hugo Cliffe repeated my very words—I felt it the moment I stepped through the door'."

"That's impossible, Claire."

"But listen to Marco now, Jim! He's talking. Can't you understand him? I can—clearly. And Hugo Cliffe can understand him completely—because he isn't a man. . . . Not a man, but a human cat—more of a cat than a human being!"

Jim was staring at her, with a startled, bewildered light in his eyes she had never seen before. He doubted her—she realized it with a hopeless pang. No one would believe her about Hugo Cliffe. She stood mute with despair. During a moment of hush she heard soft footfalls in the room

were Bob lay dead. She turned when the door quietly opened.

Dr. Hunt came out, holding a small metal tube in his fingers. "Fortunate," he said. "Very fortunate." Placing the tiny object in the leaden case he added: "It was lying in the fringe of a rug. Might never have found it without the electro-scope." He closed his case with a click of finality. "Thanks very much for being so considerate. Good night."

Jim murmured: "Not at all."

Dr. Hunt opened the entrance quickly. Claire was looking at the cat. "Marco!" she called suddenly, sharply. The cat writhed out—a swift flowing, grey movement. "Marco!" Claire thrust the door wide while Hunt and the interne stared. Her heart quickened coldly as she stood outside, unable to see the cat in the darkness, but sensing its movements through a faint, furtive rustle. It was slinking somewhere in the gloom, gliding even then toward the shop of Hugo Cliffe.

Dread held her motionless as Dr. Hunt went to the waiting car. "Good night, Mrs. Forester."

When the starter snarled, and the coupé began jouncing along the drive, she turned back and went indoors. Jim was looking curiously into the old chest packed with diaries. He took her arms, forced a reassuring smile.

"Chin up, Claire."

She said in a tight whisper: "Marco is going back—taking a message—to Hugo Cliffe."

JIM'S head wagged. "Look here. You're not yourself, darling. Won't you try to rest? I'll stay down here, in case the police come back tonight, and—"

"I can't rest. I'm going to follow Marco. I've got to make sure, somehow. If I don't, I'll go mad. Come with me, Jim."

He protested gravely: "We can't leave Bob alone."

"I'm going," she insisted, "Even if I have to go alone. Jim, can't you understand? Please come with me!"

His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Listen to me, Claire. You can't let this get you. Tonight you're so upset you don't know what you're thinking or doing. Tomorrow it will all seem different—easier. You're going to bed."

His tone was sternly paternal. He was scolding her like a frightened child. He didn't — couldn't — wouldn't understand. Hopelessness flooded into her mind again, but her determination to learn the truth did not waver. She answered guilefully:

"All right, Jim. I'll try to get some sleep."

She went wearily into the hall. As she climbed the stairs, she heard Jim moving agitatedly about the living-room. She waited at the top of the flight until he quieted. She went down, step by step, making no sound. Through the doorway she saw Jim slouched in a chair, staring into space. He did not notice her. She slowly followed the wall into the dark kitchen. Silently she sidled out the back entrance.

Far across the stone wall the lights of Hugo Cliffe's workshop were gleaming. She stood listening for a faint rustle that might betray the presence of the cat lurking in the dark. She heard a different sound—a rhythmic clinking that chilled her. It was metal striking metal, with slow, even blows, somewhere in the open night. It was not the wind carrying the beat from Hugo Cliffe's shop. It was coming from somewhere near the road.

The sound made Claire's blood icy because it turned her tormented mind to Bob — Bob, dying in horrible pain, a chain choking the life from him. Somehow he had been held helpless while someone clamped the steel collar around his neck. Someone had banded it deep into his throat, hooking an open link, then pound-

ing the joint firmly together. Claire had heard a faint tap-tapping echoing in the night at the very moment the chained doom was trapping Bob. And now she was hearing it again, issuing from the depths of the darkness.

Clink-clink! Clink-clink!

A magnetic horror led her past the front of the house, seeking the source of the sound, while it continued to echo through the gloom. When she neared the road a light appeared, gleaming behind thick bushes flanking the pavement. *Clink-clink—clink-clink*—it was coming out of the glow. Apprehensively, Claire groped to the wall and pulled herself over. She ventured across a grassy field toward the light and the ringing rhythm.

She crouched behind another wall that paralleled the road, peering through the bushes. A car had stopped at the edge of the pavement. The light was beaming from its headlamps. At its side a husky, dark figure was kneeling, shoulders hunched. The shadow man was intently at work, wielding a hammer. He paused at his task and straightened. Claire saw his face, and what he was doing.

It was Lieut. Korbert. He was changing the rear tire of his police car. He was holding a wrench in one hand, hammering it to release a frozen bolt. Unaware of Claire's scrutiny, he went on working. A rasping, nerve-chilling screech sounded as the bolt twisted in its rusty socket. Claire suppressed a broken laugh of relief—yet she could not shake her dread of the man working there in the gloom.

She crept away from the wall. Following a narrow foot-path across the field, she gazed searchingly at the bright light shining from the workshop of Hugo Cliffe.

THE girl approached slowly. The door of the shed hung crookedly on a broken hinge, and through the crack a fan of light spread. She dared step into it, so

that she could look into the shop. She saw Cliffe, squatting on his bench, in front of a tombstone with polished face. His chisel, ringing under the regular blows of his hammer, was etching characters on the shiny surface. And at his feet was the cat.

The grey cat was writhing back and forth against Hugo Cliffe's ankles, purring voluptuously, mewling plaintively, obsessed with a drunken hunger that expressed itself in flowing, silken movements. Cliffe grinned evilly as the cat's lithe body rubbed him. He looked down, spoke in a feline tone, placed his tools aside. He brought the cat into his dusty, strong hands—and the girl heard them talk.

The cat's high-pitched voice quavered, the man answered with crooning, throaty words. The girl listened to an unholy communion between them. "You are a friend—a true friend," Cliffe purred. "Now I know—where it is hidden—because you came to tell me. Go back now—watch and listen—let them have no secrets. No secrets. . . ."

Cliffe carried the cat gently to the partially opened door, placed it on the white, chip-packed floor and turned back to his work. The weaving of the cat's tail, his pleading mewling, said that he did not wish to go. Reluctantly he turned, gliding off into the gloom. From the bright interior of the shop, the clinking of metal on metal, of metal on stone, came again. Claire Forester was turning away with a shudder when she glimpsed the characters etched into the shining surface.

They brought her closer with a hypnotic lure. She almost ceased to breathe as she yielded to a spell of terror that drew her closer, step by step. There were two tombstones standing near Hugo Cliffe's bench—he had been at work on both of them. The inscriptions were incomplete, yet the words were starkly legible—words that

put a paralyzing frigidty into the girl's heart.

On the monument standing nearest the door she saw the name of her husband:

JAMES GREGORY FORESTER

Born January 10, 1907

Died

And on the other—the stone on which Hugo Cliffe's chisel was working while she watched—her own name!

CLAIRE BAIRD FORESTER

Born June 2, 1913

Died

Markers for graves—prepared for the day of death—with only the date of a promised doom waiting to be enscribed by the tools of Hugo Cliffe!

A CHOKING cry of terror broke from Claire Forester's numb lips. Her hand pressed to her mouth to stifle it—but Hugo Cliffe looked up. His feline eyes, gleaming yellow around their elongated pupils, fastened upon her with their horrible, paralyzing power. His tools dropped with a clatter. He started toward the door, hands raising to seize the girl. She tore herself desperately away from the hypnotic stare threatening to engulf her—wrenched away into the darkness—and ran.

Flying along the road, frozen by the dread that Hugo Cliffe was stalking her on swift feline feet, she was unaware of the police car until she was almost upon it. Sight of Lieut. Korbart struck her a new, fearful blow. He was standing in the glow of the headlamps, motionless, silent, his smouldering gaze squarely upon her. She felt, as she fled past him, that her feet were dragging through loose sand. When she flung herself against the entrance of her home she was weak with overwhelming fear.

Jim jerked up from his chair. She threw herself into his arms. She clung to him as the only salvation she knew in a world of inescapable horrors.

Through her sobs she heard his startled questions: "Where have you been? How did you get out? What's happened?" but she could not answer. She steadied herself with an effort, her hands closed tightly on his arms, steadfastly meeting his intent gaze.

"You've got to come with me."

"Where, Claire?"

"Back to Hugo Cliffe's shop. You've got to come. You've got to see it with your own eyes. You'll believe me then."

"What did you see?"

"Tombstones—two of them. One with your name on it, Jim, the other for me. Ready to be put on our graves—everything there—except the date of death." Her voice rose frantically. "It's true, Jim! I saw them!"

Jim said tightly: "Keep hold of yourself, Claire."

He snatched up his hat, jerked open the front door. His hand closed firmly on Claire's arm as they went out. While they followed the dirt driveway, a motor sang along the road. Claire saw the car when they reached the pavement, its tail-light a vanishing red beacon. She knew it was Lieut. Korbart—but she was thinking now only of the two gravestones she had seen—ponderous promises of a waiting death. She kept close at Jim's side as they rapidly approached the shop of Hugo Cliffe.

She paused to whisper: "Do you hear it, Jim?"

The rhythmic tap-tapping of metal on stone—it was beating out of the stoneworker's shed. Beyond the broken door, in the bright glare, he was busily at work. Claire saw him through the crack as she clung to Jim's arm—hunching at his bench, tapping his chisel with his hammer while

stone-dust sifted through the air. There were the two headstones, as she had seen them, but now. . . .

Jim stopped as he pulled the loose door wide. Hugo Cliffe looked up with a smile and said affably: "Why, good evening."

Claire went in with Jim, slowly. Bewildered, appalled, she gazed at the two tombstones. One of them, the nearest, on which she had seen her own name engraved, was—blank! And the other—it bore a name that struck grief into her heart, but it was not the name she had seen:

ROBERT BARNETT BAIRD

Born May 25, 1904

Died October 13, 1935

Hugo Cliffe said gravely: "I hope you will accept it as a token of esteem from an old neighbor. I made the headstones for your father and your uncle, Mrs. Forester. Will he be buried in the cemetery beside them? I thought he would—it is a large plot—large enough for all the family."

Claire shuddered as she asked: "Where are the others? What did you do with the other two stones?"

Cliffe echoed gently: "The others?"

Jim was looking at her searchingly. She turned to him tensely, her gaze imploring him to believe her. "These aren't the two stones I saw. He changed them. He's terribly strong—he could do it without help. He put the first two away, then put these others in their place. Look for them, Jim—please look for them!"

Her husband asked Cliffe stiffly: "You didn't waste any time going about it, did you—carving a stone for Bob?"

"I started it as soon as I heard," Cliffe answered. "I always do. It's the same as the stones I made for his father and his uncle."

"How did you hear?"

"Doctor Hunt dropped in."

"Who is the other stone for?"

"Mrs. Chedwick—Doctor Hunt's cancer patient. She died tonight."

Claire stepped trembling toward the cat-eyed stone-worker. "You did change them. Two tombstones—one with Jim's name, the other with mine—they were standing where these are now. What did you do with them? Where did you put them?"

Cliffe said: "I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Forester."

She turned again imperatively to Jim. "He won't tell the truth. They must be somewhere in this shop. Those—against the wall. Turned face in—do you understand, Jim? Please look—please find them—or I'll go mad!"

JIM walked toward the row of stones sitting against the dusty shop wall. The faces turned toward him were shiny, unmarked. Their rear surfaces were placed within an inch of the dusty boards. Jim gripped the upper edge of one of them, tried to pull it away. The weight of the massive block was too much for him—his muscles were supple and tempered by daily sessions of tennis, but he could not move the block. He went from one to another, trying each, but in every case his attempt to see the rear surface of the slab was baffled by its ponderous mass.

Claire was gazing accusingly at Hugo Cliffe. "Why don't you help him?" she asked huskily. "You're strong. You can move them alone. I've seen you do it in the quarry. Why don't you move them, Hugo Cliffe?"

Cliffe did not stir. He repeated: "I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Forester."

Jim Forester turned away from the row of stones. He frowned at the marker bearing Bob Baird's name, then looked at Claire—and she saw doubt lingering in his eyes. He said quietly: "We'd better go back, Claire." She shook her head in

protest, but he went to the door. As he was pushing it open, he stooped and picked a bit of cardboard from the stony floor—a small carton, crushed. He smiled wryly, slipped it into his pocket, and said firmly:

"Come on, darling."

Utter bewilderment filled Claire. She went to Jim, not because she had abandoned her certainty of what she had seen, but because the evilly powerful eyes of Hugo Cliffe were hungrily upon her. She slipped her arm anxiously through Jim's as they walked toward the road. Moving slowly through the darkness, they heard again the ringing tap-tap of Hugo Cliffe's chisel trimming Bob's name in the gravestone.

They did not speak until they were in the house. As they stood gazing at each other silently, the uncanny sensation of being watched returned to Claire. Looking around apprehensively, she saw the yellow eyes—the eyes of the grey cat, watching her from the shadow in the corner. She turned quickly, picked him up. She opened the door, tossed him into the darkness. He landed silently on his padded paws, turned his amber gaze upon her, mewed a protest.

"Go back!" she told the cat. "Go back and tell him I'm sure of what I saw. Tell him I'm going to make everyone believe it—everyone—because it's true."

The ring of her voice sent the cat slinking off into the gloom. Closing the door, turning, she saw the old chest sitting on the leaf of the secretary. She remembered Hugo Cliffe talking with the cat, and felt suddenly that the chest was important: "Now I know—where it is hidden—because you came to tell me." She went quickly to Jim, searching his tired eyes.

"We've got to go away, Jim. We've got to leave this house and never come back."

"We can't go, Claire—you know that."

"Anywhere—but we can't stay, Jim. We can't! The horrible things that have happened—they'll come again. I know they'll come again because I saw our names on the tombstones Hugo Cliffe was cutting. It drives me out of my mind when I think of it, Jim—finding you as we found Bob tonight—with a headstone waiting, all ready except the date of—"

"Claire!" Jim spoke in a low tone, firmly. "You've been right from the beginning. There's something terrible at work—something that killed your father and your brother and your uncle—something hovering over this house. But we can't go—not only because we haven't any money—but because we can't admit we're licked. We've got to fight it, Claire—stay and fight it."

"Yes," she whispered. "Fight it. . . ."

She turned to the desk, and took up the seasoned chest laden with old diaries. She carried it under her arm as she went up the stairs. The sound of a closing door came down the flight—then there was silence. Claire Forester's husband sat alone in the library, silent and motionless, keeping a vigil over the dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Doom Knocks

BRIGHT sun streamed through crystal-clear air when Claire Forester turned her car off the highway late in the afternoon of the next day. She left it in the driveway and went into the house carrying a heavy package. In the store-room near the kitchen she unwrapped the bundle. She left her purchases on the table in the corner—a pair of strong-jawed cutters, two smaller pairs of pliers, a hammer and a keen-edged cold chisel.

Before she turned away she made sure of the position of each tool so that she

might, if necessary, find them at once in the dark. She stepped into the kitchen. Agda, the housekeeper, was making preparations for the evening meal. She was a plump woman, her grey hair drawn tightly back in a knot, her eyes a mild blue. Claire asked her quietly:

"Where is Mr. Forester, Agda?"

"Sleeping, Mrs. Forester. He asked to be wakened for dinner."

Claire looked at Agda Cliffe intently. This woman was the sister of the stoneworker. She shared Hugo Cliffe's trait of tireless industry. She was busy in the kitchen at dawn: her activity never ceased until late at night. She never stepped outside except to do her chores—never, during all the weeks since Claire and Jim had come to live in the house, had she crossed the stone wall to visit her brother, and never had she so much as called Hugo Cliffe on the telephone. Her world was bounded by her endless toil—yet, Claire told herself with sharp misgivings, she was the sister of Hugo Cliffe, and she always fed the grey cat.

The cat was in the kitchen now, wandering after Agda from sink to cabinet to refrigerator, contentedly purring.

"Agda." Claire said incisively.

"Yes, Mrs. Forester?"

"There are some new tools lying on the table in the store-room. You are not to touch them. No one is to touch them except Mr. Forester or myself, ever. Do you understand that, quite clearly?"

Agda Cliffe turned her steady blue eyes on Claire. "I've never touched Mr. Forester's tools—never. I'll leave them strictly alone."

Claire felt somehow, as she turned away, that the woman was telling the truth, that she would keep her word. She went out of the house, intending to put the car in the garage which sat at the rear, but as she opened its door she paused. The sound inevitably put a chill

in her blood—that regular, ringing metallic tapping. She heard it carrying on the wind, from the craggy hills.

The clear sunlight had helped Claire fight down her fear, though she could not free herself of it entirely. The tap-tapping she heard now began to bring it back—it was a challenge to her composure, a threat against her sanity. Because she was determined to defeat that consuming dread, she left the car and walked toward the source of the sound. It led her along a path, into the rugged hills.

The quarry lay below her—as she paused on the crest of a hill. It was a ragged, cubical cavity in the valley. Simon Cliffe had opened it and Hugo Cliffe, carrying on his father's craft, had deepened it. Its walls were sheer and mottled, dipping deep into a mirror-surfaced pool. The rains of the years had collected in its depths. From it had come the stones which now marked the graves of the village's dead.

Hugo Cliffe was working on a ledge far above the still surface of the pool. He was wielding a sledge, driving wedges into holes he had bored in the deposit. While Claire watched, knowing he was unaware of her presence, he labored without a second's pause—strenuous, back-straining effort that would soon have exhausted another man. The power of his supple muscles suddenly split a line between the row of holes with an explosive crack, and a slab of stone leaned out.

A warm, soft touch at her ankle startled Claire. Her eyes jerked down. At her feet the grey cat was moving—rubbing himself against her, purring hungrily. Claire recoiled at the contact—but she tried to fight the fear put into her heart by the animal. "After all," she told herself, "this is a pet I've kept for years, and loved." She stooped to pick him up—but suddenly, with a frightened mew, the cat darted away.

He was a grey movement trickling

down the crags of the quarry. He vanished with a sleek rapidity—in the direction of Hugo Cliffe.

The girl's eyes returned to the man. He was tearing the block of stone from its socket with superhuman strength. He whipped a rope around it, pressed one hard knot upon another. When he began climbing up, Claire marked the amazing feline liteness of his movements. At ground level, he began to draw the rope through a pulley, hoisting the heavy slab higher and higher, never for an instant ceasing his effort.

While Claire watched fascinated, Hugo Cliffe dragged the stone toward a light truck stationed near the brink of the quarry. He turned it end over end, then with incredible dexterity and power, tilted it into the truck-bed. The stone fell flat with a resounding crash that testified to its immense weight. Cliffe was turning toward the wheel, evincing not the slightest sign of fatigue, when a black movement streaked across the ground toward him.

The cat. . . . It rubbed itself sensually against Cliffe's ankles. He brought it into his dusty hands, and they gazed at each other—the cat and the man. Claire could hear the animal's mewing, the man's crooning purr. Then—as though the feline had told Cliffe exactly where she was standing—the stone-worker turned his powerful eyes upon Claire.

A CHILL struck through her, but she stood her ground as Cliffe came toward her. She did not retreat because it would have been an admission that she was afraid. He paused, stood silent a moment, the lodestone of his eyes acting evilly upon her. He said in a low, smooth tone:

"He stands between us—your husband. Nothing in the world can combat the power that binds us together—not even

his life. It's only a trifle, a small obstacle to be swept aside. You feel it—you can't resist it—this force that makes us one through all eternity."

The girl stood transfixed, so fascinated by the spell of the stone-worker's eyes that his voice seemed a far-away chant.

"It will come to him because it must—death. It will come at it came to the others—the chain around his throat. You must tell no one that it is nearing him. Hour by hour it comes closer, because our love decrees it—an influence stronger than the force whirling the planets through their orbits. We are waiting for it together—his death—you and I. . . ."

Claire blurted: "You're mad—mad!"

She forced herself to turn away, but she did not hasten. She walked deliberately along the path, feeling the pull of Hugo Cliffe's horrible cat's eyes. Without allowing herself even to look back, she approached the house—but the fear had returned to her, the dread had clamped again upon her heart. Her terror became a sharp, stinging chill when she came to an abrupt pause, peering at a figure standing silent in the long shadows cast by the sinking sun.

Lieut. Korbert. He was stationed among the trees on the far side of the stone wall, motionless as a graven image, his smouldering black gaze upon her. Still she would not allow herself to betray her apprehension. She nodded to him with simulated casualness, and went on.

She tried to seem calm and self-possessed while the fear gnawed deeper into her soul. Jim was shaving, getting ready for dinner—she talked with him lightly. When they went down she stole a moment to look into the store-room. The new tools were still in their places, untouched. Agda served dinner with her usual efficiency—and Marco Polo sat, as always, at Claire's side, his amber eyes expectantly upon her.

But the cat's gaze increased her dread. She could not keep her thoughts from her lips, in spite of his presence. She told Jim of her walk to the quarry, of seeing the cat and Hugo Cliffe talking together—how he had looked up to impale her unerringly with his gaze. "Marco told him where I was. He looked straight at me at once."

"A movement you weren't aware of Claire—a sound you didn't hear."

"But there is something between them, something we can't grasp. Marco is drawn to him in some strange way—"

Jim laughed softly. From his pocket he removed the crushed cardboard carton he had picked off the floor of Cliffe's workshop the night previous. He tossed it across the table to Claire with a chuckle: "There's the strange power Hugo Cliffe has over Marco. Cat-nip—that's all."

Claire echoed his laugh, but it was forced. She grew silent for a while, then her thoughts forced her to speak:

"Hugo and my father were boys together—friends. It was a queer sort of companionship—it lasted until Father's death. Yet I always felt there was something lurking in the background. I asked questions when I was in the village today, about Hugo Cliffe. His father committed suicide, under dishonorable circumstances, but I didn't learn anything definite. Behind it all, Jim, I know there's some sort of secret."

JIM did not speak, but in the silence Claire heard a memory of Hugo Cliffe's voice that made her shrink: "*We are waiting for it together—your husband's death—you and I. . .*" A promise of impending doom: "*Hour by hour it comes closer. . .*" Claire remained quiet, striving to retain her poise, until she had drained her coffee cup. Then, quickly, she rose.

She went at once to the telephone. Recollection that this was a party line made her pause. Six instruments, she knew, were connected with the same wire—among them Hugo Cliffe's, Dr. Hunt's, Lieut. Korbert's. With a determined set of her lips she made her call. The rumble that answered was Dr. Hunt's voice.

"Mrs. Forester calling, Doctor. There is something Jim and I must talk over with you immediately. Please come right over."

"Yes, of course," the physician answered. "I'll walk it, if you don't mind—need the exercise. By the way—speaking of the queer black rock we found in your father's old chest—do you mind if I have it analyzed? Very curious. I have it wrapped now, ready to mail to the city."

Claire answered: "It's not necessary, doctor. I know what it is. . . We'll wait for you."

Jim was at her side when she pronged the receiver. He asked: "What are you doing? What's on your mind?" Her chin lifted with renewed determination as she went toward the secretary. She answered: "I can't endure this any longer, Jim. I'm going to get to the bottom of it. I'm going to ask Doctor Hunt about the tools."

Jim frowned. "Do you mean you're going to accuse him of stealing them? Don't you realize that's tantamount to accusing him of murder?"

Claire removed the old chest from the shelf—but she paused, because the grey cat was looking at her. Seated near a chair, his amber eyes fixed upon her in penetrating scrutiny, he was listening. Claire fought an impulse to drive him from the room. She turned squarely to Jim, the chest in her hands.

"There are so many other things besides the tools, Jim. There must be a reason why Father and Uncle Gaylord and Bob all were killed the same way—choked to death by a chain. The same

man must have committed the three murders, in each case for the same motive. I think I know what's behind it all—but that isn't as important as something else. The same thing may happen to you, Jim—and me."

Jim began: "You know—?"

"Hugo Cliffe believes it's going to happen to us—because he has the tombstones ready. I did see them, Jim. Perhaps he doesn't know who the murderer is, but he expects it to come. It *is* coming—hour by hour, it's coming closer." Claire shuddered as she heard herself echo the words of Hugo Cliffe. "There's only one way we can save ourselves. We've got to learn the secret before that ghastly, choking death claims us, Jim!"

He asked her tautly: "Claire, what have you learned?"

She placed the chest on the table, removed one of the diaries, opened it to a scribbled page.

She was silent while Jim read. The eyes of the cat were still upon her. To free her mind of the chill brought by the unflinching, yellow gaze, she followed the words over Jim's shoulder. "The first entry," she whispered, "was written several weeks before Father's death."

It was:

While walking in the hills this afternoon we found a curious mineral near the edge of the quarry. Though I can identify most of the rocks characteristic of this location, it was strange to me—a deep black substance that shines like pitch. I have sent a sample of it to the city for chemical analysis, on the chance that it might be valuable, but more particularly to satisfy my curiosity.

"He wrote 'we,'" Claire pointed out quietly, "but he forgot to mention the name of the person who was with him. The next—"

Extraordinary good fortune! The chemist's report on the black substance I found

near the quarry is that it is pitchblende. It is the most precious ore in the world because it yields radium. Most pitchblende, I find, is mined in Africa, but it is also found in the United States—in Texas, North Carolina, Colorado, and in other parts of Connecticut. The ore may be worked at a profit even when it yields no more than one gram of radium to ten tons of ore. This is because the value of radium is fabulous—about \$1,000,000 per ounce, while gold, by comparison, is worth only \$35 per ounce at the present market price. There are only about 250 grams of radium in the United States at this writing, and in all the world not more than a pound and a quarter has been produced so far.

This afternoon Dr. Hunt dropped in for tea, and we had a long, friendly chat. He left only a few moments ago. Now for a brisk walk before dinner.

JIM turned the page and stared startled at unfilled lines. He blurted in amazement: "It's the last entry he ever made!" He flipped back to the date and jerked out of his chair. "He wrote it the day he died!"

Claire forgot the stare of the cat. She leaned forward tensely, her hands closed into small fists. "Don't you see, Jim? Someone else knew, from the very beginning. Someone killed Father to keep the secret. He wanted it for himself—that precious stuff. He wanted it so much he didn't stop at murder."

Jim reached into the chest, brought into his hand a fragment of the pitchy mineral. The black sheen of its surface seemed to be yielding a hidden truth as Claire rushed on:

"First Father, because he'd found the deposit. Then Uncle Gaylord, because he must have learned of it through Father's diary. Then Bob—because Bob walked back to the quarry that night, and he must have discovered someone digging—stealing the ore. Now, Jim—you and I—because we know! We know, and the knowledge means death—with our tombstones waiting for us now!"

"Yes!" Jim was gazing intently at the last words written by Claire's father before the choking death had claimed him. "Dr. Hunt. . . a long, friendly chat.' You found the tools in Hunt's car. He came in, all of a sudden, while Bob was fighting for life. He came back later, hunting for radium he said he'd lost—but if he's the man, why didn't he—"

"Jim! Listen!"

Claire had heard it—the faint, echoing tap-tapping of metal against metal. It throbbed through the night with the inexorable rhythm of knocking doom. It trickled an icy chill down her back as she hurried to the entrance and flung it wide. It became louder—*click-click, click-click*—but it was not coming from the workshop of Hugo Cliffe. It was not the grating of a chisel against stone. It was a clear, metallic ticking that echoed everywhere in the night.

Suddenly it stopped.

Claire blurted: "I heard it—just like that—before Bob rushed in choking—!"

She turned quickly, leaving the door open, driven by a fearful suspicion. She hurried along the hall, thrust into the store-room. In the dark she groped to the table in the corner and passed her hands across the empty surface. She turned the key of the hanging light and looked transfixed into the glare. The new tools were not where she had left them. The tools were gone!

She hurried out of the store-room, into the kitchen. Agda Cliffe was at the sink, washing the dinner dishes, her hands busy and quick. Claire said abruptly: "Agda, I told you not to touch Mr. Forster's new tools." The woman looked up, her blue eyes inscrutable. She made no answer until Claire said even more sharply:

"You were not to touch the tools."

Then: "I haven't even seen them, Mrs. Forester."

Dismayed, baffled, Claire hurried back to the living-room and Jim. Jim was turning the pages of a diary. She stood tensely silent, listening—and again she became conscious of the stare of the cat. He was sitting in the shadow, watching her. The door was still standing open, but he had remained—gathering secrets that he might carry to Hugo Cliffe. Jim's eyes jerked up when Claire blurted:

"The new tools are missing."

"New—?"

"I bought some today—because I was afraid we might need them as we needed them for Bob. I put them in the store-room. Now they're gone. Somebody's stolen them. Jim! Do you realize what that means? It's coming—again—*now!*"

Even as she spoke a strangling, gasping cry carried in from the night. It turned her frozen toward the door. It brought Jim alertly to her side. It came again—that ghastly choking, gagging sound—and then they saw the man. He was running wildly along the drive, toward the house, staring insanely, clawing at his throat. . . . Dr. Hunt!

He stumbled in as Jim hurried toward him. His eyes were protruding in a horrible glare, his swollen tongue parting his puffed lips. He sagged against the wall as he tore at his neck, his fingers bloody, the skin of his throat ripped by his desperate efforts. He slipped to the floor as Jim fought his hands down. And in the blood-gorged folds of his flesh Claire saw the glitter of the chain.

The doctor's voice was a frantic, slaving mumble: "Take it off! *God, take it off!*"

One tense moment Jim bent over the torture-wracked man, striving to find a means of loosening the deadly links. He jerked up, ran to the rear of the house seeking tools which Claire knew he would not find. As she turned to assist him in the hopeless search, tearing her eyes from

the blood-swollen face of the doctor, quick footfalls froze her.

They were sounding in the driveway. Swiftly they approached. The man who sped into the light was wearing the blue uniform of a State Trooper. He paused beside the dying man, his smouldering gaze directed straight at Claire—Lieut. Korbert.

CHAPTER FIVE

Prey of the Quarry

THE girl stood transfixed as Korbert turned, kneeling over Hunt. She caught the gleam of an implement he snatched from his coat pocket. His thick body covered the movements of his hands as she listened to the ghastly strangling sounds made by the dying man. A burning wonder was flaring in her mind:

How did he know? Where did he come from? What is he doing?

Korbert rose straddled. He lifted Dr. Hunt's limp body in his stocky arms. Trudging heavily, he went to the door of the room where Bob's body had lain, and kicked through. Claire saw him placing the physician on the bed. Immediately he strode back, closing the way. His eyes, like smoking coals, turned upon her as he took up the telephone.

He was completing a call to the State Police barracks in Elmsford when Jim returned breathless to the library. Korbert went back to the door which shielded Dr. Hunt. As he stepped through, Jim glimpsed the physician's lax body sprawled on the bed. He started in, but Korbert blocked the way, thrust him back.

"Stay out there! I'm handling this!"

The door snapped shut. Jim turned away, stricken with dismay and bewilderment. Claire's gaze turned from his drawn face into the shadow in the corner. There in the gloom yellow eyes were shining. While she watched, the grey, sleek

body of the cat weaved toward the entrance. He passed silently into the night as Claire whispered:

"He's going to Hugo Cliffe. He's going to tell Hugo Cliffe everything he's heard."

Jim said tightly: "I'll see for myself."

Claire hurried out the door with him.

Bright light was streaming through the broken door of the shed. No *clink-clink* of metal was issuing from it now—the stone-worker's chisel was idle. The gleam drew the grey cat. He was a dark, flowing movement, almost invisible, as Claire and Jim followed. He glided into the light, through the crack of the door. The girl and her husband heard him speak inside—a plaintive mew.

The workshop was empty. Hugo Cliffe's tools lay on his dusty bench, beside the stone bearing the name of Robert Baird. The cat hopped upon it, crying again. Claire shivered with an understanding of his wail: "*Where are you? I am here. I have news for you. Where are you—where?*"

Jim took slow steps toward the cat. It retreated, bristling with fear, as his hands reached. It leaped—but Jim's movement was swifter. He caught it in midair and held it grimly in spite of its squirming, clawing efforts to escape. He sat on the bench, forcing it against his legs, and pushed his fingers through its shaggy, silken hair.

He said suddenly: "Here's something!"

It was white, small as a medicinal capsule. As Jim's fingers combed it out of the cat's fur a faint snapping sound resulted. A black silk thread was tied to the rolled bit of paper and had circled the cat's neck—Jim had broken it. He allowed the cat to bound away as he peeled the little white roll into a crinkled square of paper. Eyes widened, Claire leaned over his shoulder to read:

They know all about the ore. Tonight is your last chance.

Jim snapped: "Agda wrote that! She's used the cat to carry messages to Hugo Cliffe. She's eavesdropped on us continually. But he must have known anyway—by listening in on the telephone. He's at the quarry now—I'm sure of it."

Claire seized his arm as he hurried from the shop. Her protesting pull did not slow him. She was forced to run to keep up with his long, firm strides along the rutted road that led back into the hills. She realized now that danger must not stop them—they must have the proof of their own eyes. As they hurried toward the quarry they heard no sound but their own quick footfalls, saw no light. The glow of the moon made the quarry a deep, silver-bottomed hole when they paused at its brink.

Then a rhythmic sound. It was not the sharp *click-click* of metal, but heavier, and muffled, as though a pick were driving into the earth. It drew Claire and Jim along the edge of the quarry. They paused, peering down at a glow brighter than the shine of the moon. It was spreading across rough rock from a cavity in the sheer wall. They saw it clearly—a slab swung back, disclosing a hollow from which the light issued. From it came the even beating of tireless blows.

Jim called down: "Come out, Cliffe!"

The dull pounding ceased. A figure appeared in the shine. Amber eyes with elongated pupils looked up. Almost at once Hugo Cliffe seemed to vanish—but quick, feline movements were lifting him up broad stone steps to the level where Claire and Jim stood. He materialized suddenly in the moonlight, facing them, cat eyes gleaming.

He drew one hand from his pocket. They heard the rattle of a short length of chain. He began to take slow, cat-like steps toward them.

SUDDENLY a rushing movement startled Claire. It came without warning from the hump flanking the quarry. She turned to see a terrorized face limned white in the moonlight—the haggard features of Agda Cliffe. The woman was wildly flinging herself forward. She hurled herself, not at Claire, but at the man at Claire's side.

"Jim!"

Jim turned too late from the threat of Hugo Cliffe's stare. The woman's mad thrust propelled him sideward. He tottered on the stony brink, striving desperately to keep his balance—but he could not. A strained cry of horror broke from Claire's lips as he dropped. A hard, crunching sound came out of the deep darkness. She looked down to see Jim lying on the next ledge, sprawled motionless, his forehead marked by a bleeding gash.

A snarl of fury turned Claire as Agda Cliffe rushed at her. Claire threw herself from the yawning cavity, fighting to escape the woman's clawing hands. She backed, striking desperately with small, hard fists. The cool fury of her attack cut through the woman's wild grappling. Agda Cliffe groaned and fell forward. Her head struck stone with a sharp, cracking sound. She rolled face up and lay still—and Claire, conscious of a paralyzing power, looked up to see Hugo Cliffe's feline eyes still upon her.

He had not moved. His gaze had not wavered. He was standing near the edge of the shelf, one hand extended, holding the short length of chain.

He came toward Claire with panther tread. The force of his eyes held her as he brought the chain closer. She knew that once his hands fastened upon her she could not hope to escape his superhuman strength. Once his arms crushed around her she would become a captive of Death. She could feel the cold iron links draw-

ing around her throat, growing tighter, tighter. . . . As the chain crushed deep into her flesh, strangling her, she could hear the metallic tap-tap of the link being closed. . . .

She hurled herself at Cliffe. All the strength of her numb muscles exerted itself in the leap that threw her weight upon him. The jar of her pulsing body against his made the chain jangle. She let herself drop as she felt his fingers snatching at her shoulder. Emptiness opened beneath her. She clutched frantically at the edge of rock, supporting herself while scarcely aware of it, as a succession of crunching thuds sounded below her.

Then silence. Claire hung at the limit of her arms, flat against a sheer stone wall, suspended only by the strength of her fingers. She could not see how deep the drop was below her. She felt the depths claiming her as the muscles of her fingers yielded in spite of all her efforts to hold them in place. The black despair enveloping her was swept away, suddenly, by a crazy joy that came with a whispered call:

"Claire. . . . Claire. . . ."

Jim was all right. He was hurt, but alive. Jim. . . . Claire felt her fingers sliding. She was letting go . . . letting go.

Hard fingers gripped her wrists. She hung limp, feeling powerful muscles lifting her. *Hugo Cliffe*—the name haunted her whirling mind. She was being dragged back to the shelf as though her weight were nothing. *Hugo Cliffe*. . . .

From below came faintly: "Claire. . . . Claire. . . ."

A firm, chesty voice called down: "She's okay, Forester."

Lieut. Korbart. Claire gazed at him incredulously, dizzying relief surging through her mind. He had turned from her. He was looking down over the brink of the quarry. She saw the thing he was

gazing at so intently—a huddled figure lying on the edge of the lowest ledge.

It was a broken thing that had rolled down, step by step. It was moving, slowly, under the instinctive pull of crushed muscles. As Claire watched in horror, it rolled over the edge, broke the surface of the silver water, vanished among glimmering ripples.

"I've been working on this case for months," Lieut. Korbart said matter-of-factly, "but I never suspected it was Hugo Cliffe."

CLAIRE'S arm tightened snugly around Jim's shoulders as they sat by the fireplace, reading the yellowed page of an old diary. It was the first of all the day-to-day records Claire's father had kept. It had yielded the secret of Hugo Cliffe and the choking death.

The entry, written when Barnett Baird was a boy, told its story in an immature scrawl:

Last night the house was robbed again. The thief has been robbing houses all over the neighborhood and has never been seen. This is the second time he has robbed us. He got away with a good sum of money. Father thinks he knows who did it. He found a footprint on the floor under the open window, and he says it's stone dust. Father thinks Simon Cliffe is the thief. . . .

Days later, another entry read:

A horrible thing happened today. I don't like to think about it, because Hugo Cliffe is my chum, and I don't want to lose him as a friend because of what has happened between our fathers.

Today Father accused Simon Cliffe of being the burglar. He had the police with him, and the police searched the workshop. They found some of the money stolen from this house. That proved Simon Cliffe was the burglar. The police were very hard on him. They put handcuffs on him—old slave cuffs connected by about a foot of chain. They took him away. Hugo and I saw them

do it. It hurt Hugo so much he couldn't say anything—he ran away to be alone.

Hugo and I were together when we heard about the horrible thing that happened. While the police were taking Hugo's father to jail, he made a desperate escape. He hid in a field while they hunted for him. When they found him he was dead. He had killed himself, by wrapping the chain of the handcuffs around his neck. They brought him back to the house and Hugo saw him, his face terribly swollen and with the marks of the chain on his throat. Hugo went sort of crazy. He jumped on me and yelled: "Your father's to blame—I'll make you pay for it someday!"

The ring of the telephone drew Claire. The voice of Lieut. Korbort, brisk and cheery, came over the line.

"We've found the stolen tools buried in his shop. I've just got word from the barracks that Agda Cliffe has confessed. There's Dr. Hunt's statement, too—as to how he recognized Cliffe when Cliffe jumped on him coming along the road The doc's feeling lots better today, by the way. Everything taken together proves Hugo Cliffe was guilty all the way through—but I never would have believed it, otherwise. Can you come over with your husband, Mrs. Forester? We need you to identify the tools."

Claire walked with Jim along the highway. Behind them the grey cat trailed. The girl had lost all fear of him, and her heart was completely free of the dread that had haunted her. The menace of the choking death was a horror of the past. The future was made clear and bright by the promise of wealth to be dug from the good earth. At the side of the man she loved, Claire felt a joyous, boundless sense of freedom.

But, when she paused just inside the door of the stoneworker's shop, it flooded back upon her for one brief moment—the horror of the strangling death that might have claimed her and Jim. The police had torn up the floor, searched every corner of the shed. One of the tombstones, moved from the wall, stood opposite the broken door. Its face bore a mocking inscription:

HUGO CLIFFE

Born May 5, 1875

Died

It awaited the grave of the craftsman in stone—but the date of death it lacked must be filled in now by another hand.

THE END

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PROBAK JUNIOR

By Paul Ernst
(Author of "Embrace of the
Fire God," etc.)



DEATH'S WARM FIRESIDE

Malcolm Slade was coming home. Through biting cold and heavy, strangely clinging snowdrifts he was returning, tardily, to the girl he had loved and lost.

OVER the lights of Newton a mile away an evening star glittered like blue ice with a lamp behind it. Blue-black was the early night sky; blue-white the thick drifts of snow that mantled the open countryside. That same

snow crunched under Malcolm Slade's feet like singing particles of glass as he cut across the woodlot at the south end of the Slade farm and walked wearily, unsteadily, toward the house.

God, it was cold! It was blue-cold to

the eye as well as paralyzingly chill to the senses. He shivered and thrust hands he could scarcely feel deeper into his coat pockets. He hunched his shoulders higher so that his coat collar should fit more closely around his neck.

Cold, cold, cold! And the house would be cold too—shut up and unoccupied for a little while, as it had been.

He shrugged philosophically. Well, that was his fault. The house wouldn't be shut, untenanted, if he hadn't lost that quick temper of his. With the passage of a little time he was ready to admit, now, that Claire had been right. He'd been a fool to fling himself angrily out of the house and leave her to go to her folks.

But he could see how still and black and drear the house looked across the white-drifted fields. And that hurt. The house had been so homely and comfortable looking just a short while ago, before he had quarrelled with Claire. Now it looked. . . .

"Never think it had been lived in," Malcolm Slade muttered laboriously. He felt that if he didn't talk aloud, do something like that, he would sink into the drifts and float off in the sleep that precedes freezing.

"Never think it had been lived in. But just a little while ago. . . ."

IT had been in the late fall that he'd left, scarcely six weeks before this period, the height of winter. The last of the leaves had been eddying in cheery piles before their porch. The big fireplace had been singing its message of warmth and benevolence for those fortunate enough to live in the old farm home.

Slade got to the meadow fence, with the black, bleak farm house only a hundred yards away. He climbed the fence, fell heavily on the other side in the snow. He had to fight his cold-drugged senses to make himself rise. And he groaned as

he thought of what the house would be within. An empty house in winter always seems even more bitterly cold than the temperature outside.

Well, he'd light fires, get the thing going again. Then, he thought hazily, he'd get in touch with Claire and they'd pick up where they had left off. It was a nice little farm; they had proved that a good living could be taken from it. And it was perfect for the boy they were going to have. . . .

"Fool!" he mumbled, biting his lips to keep his eyes from closing. "We have everything right in our hands, Claire and I. And I tossed it away. . . . But she'll come around. She won't let a few weeks break our whole lives. I'll tell her it was all my fault. . . ."

He went past the barn, staggering a little. And now he was so cold that his eyes were playing him tricks. He thought he saw the outlines of the old barn waver; thought he could see the stars through it in places.

"This is getting serious," he told himself, throwing his weary shoulders back and taking his hands from his pockets to beat them together. "God, I wish I was coming into a warm house instead of a freezing one. . . ."

And into a home instead of a bleak shell that looked, in the eerie moonlight, like a great, empty tomb, his mind went on with his thought.

He went to his knees in a drift near the front door of the dark house, got up again.

"Claire." he called, tongue thick, voice hoarse.

Then he got a grip on his wavering senses. This wouldn't do! Calling to Claire like that! As if, at his call, she would open the door and he would see her as he had seen her so many times in her life here: in a trim house dress, face flushed with heat from the coal range but

beautiful nevertheless, arms opened to him. . . .

"But she'll be back again soon," Slade muttered. "I'll get the house warm, and things straightened again . . . place can go to pieces in a few weeks . . . she'll come back. . . ."

He climbed the porch. There were only three steps, but they were a hard struggle. He took them a step at a time, and leaned against a porch post and panted for a full minute after he had accomplished them.

Leaning there, he saw lights across the road, a few hundred yards away.

"New house," he muttered in surprise. "Well! Old Gleason got it built, did he? Put it up in a hurry when he did get started. Nice for Claire and me to have closer neighbors."

Mechanically, senselessly, he tried the door. It was locked, of course. Claire wouldn't leave it unlocked when she left, after his abrupt and angry departure. And the other doors would be tightly fastened, too.

He walked along the porch to a window. It was one of the living room windows. He tried it with almost frozen fingers. It did not budge. Nailed shut, probably.

For a moment maudlin self pity seized him. Coming through the freezing night like this, alone and cold, to a house that was nailed and locked against him, and that would be freezing within anyhow. . . .

"Hell," he muttered. "It's your own fault it's like this. Now get in there and go to work."

There seemed no way short of violence for him to get in. He took off his felt hat, wadded it around his right hand, and smashed it through the window. Then he picked out the sharp pieces that clung to the sash, and slithered through.

INSIDE the living room he stood blanketed in total darkness.

Cold inside? Yes. But in this house

that had known no heat for a time the cold ate into his very heart. It sent ice needles through his flesh; attacked him like a living, bitter thing.

He searched through his pockets for matches, found them at last. Two dropped from his stiff fingers, but the third he managed to hold. He stared around in the dim light it cast.

He could see practically nothing, and he wondered for an instant if his eyeballs had frozen. He had heard of such things. But that was preposterous; the kind of thing that happened only in Arctic cold, not the zero weather of Ohio. The match threw a poor light, that was all.

Nevertheless, he shrank from the shadows its yellow flame produced; shadows that seemed to creep slowly toward him from all four sides of the room, hemming him in, poisoning as though to leap.

He shuddered again, and now not entirely because of the cold. Then he started, and dropped the match stub. Had that been a step upstairs?

He listened in the darkness, and heard it again: a distinct creak as if a person's weight had been pressed against a board in the big bedroom.

For an instant a wild hope seized him. That was Claire! He was here! She. . . .

"Fool! Here in this icy place with no light on and no fire going? It's a board creaking with the cold, that's all."

He walked toward the stairs off the little hall between living room and dining room. He didn't bother to light another match. He knew the way perfectly. He went slowly only because there might be some piece of furniture out of its accustomed place, between him and the hall.

The place was alive with memories of Claire. He kept seeing her in this hall doorway, calling him to dinner. He kept visioning the living room, warm and cheery, as she had furnished and arranged

it. He kept seeing Claire and himself sitting before the leaping flames in the fireplace, talking of the boy that was to come. . . .

His steps resounded in the bleak house like giant drum-beats. He tried to walk on tiptoe, appalled by the noise. But he was too shaky with cold, and weariness from the distance he had walked, to make it. So he shuffled over the bare floor of the little hall and noisily climbed the stairs.

The second floor was, if anything, colder than the first. He realized that at last the bitter chill was really getting him. But even as he realized that, he found himself sinking to the top step.

He sat there, leaning against the newel post, chin on his chest.

"Got to get up," he said thickly, aloud.

But he made no move. It was so pleasant to sit, to give in for just a moment to his lassitude. He'd get up in a minute and get some fire going. With the living room stove red hot and the fireplace going, the first floor would warm up in a hurry. Have to get some wood in.

A sound from downstairs penetrated his stupor. And as he really heard it, he straightened quickly. This was not a fancied sound, nor one made by cold-contracting boards! It was real, and startling!

It was the sound of flames, the crackling of fire!

"My God, the matches I lit—" Slade thought.

He started drunkenly down the stairs. The little hall was already bright with the rosy glow of naked fire. He stumbled into the living room. . . .

There are moments too big, too marvelous, to be borne. And this one, as Slade stood in the living room doorway, was one of them.

Mouth open, eyes wide, he stared at the transformed room.

The fire that had sent its light into the

hall was from the big fireplace; a great pile of wood was roaring there, with logs atop to send out even heat when the kindling had burned. The stove in the center of the room was already black-hot, and laving him with warmth. The bright lamps on the table near the front door were lit; and on the stove a pot was steaming that Slade knew contained hot rum.

And beside the stove stood Claire.

Her blue eyes were alight as she stared at him, though they were suspiciously moist. Her red young lips were half parted. Her heart was in her face, and staring at it, Slade knew he was already forgiven.

"Surprise—" Claire called, tears spilling from her eyes.

But Slade's knees were folding under him. He slid to the threshold and lay with his head inside the living room and his feet in the little hall.

SLADE'S head was in Claire's lap when he again became aware of things. She was holding him to her, calling him all the endearing terms they'd thought up during their five years of married life.

"Darling," she whispered, when his eyes opened. He saw fear in her own eyes, saw it fade into gladness when he looked at her.

"Mal! I was afraid. . . . You looked almost as if you were dead!"

"Kind of a shock," whispered Slade, staring at Claire's face as though he could not get his fill of it. "I didn't dream you were here too. It looked like no one was here. All cold and dark, like it was."

Claire's eyes, expressive as open books, lighted again.

"I wasn't here when you broke in, Mal. I was at Mr. Gleason's. I've been staying there, watching, waiting for you to come back. I saw a light in here—"

"I struck some matches to see my way around."

"I saw the light, dear, and came over. I came in as quietly as I could, and lit the fires. I wanted to surprise you."

Slade sat up. He didn't want to take his head from its comfortable position, but he was afraid Claire would think him ill or feeble from the cold if he lay where he was any longer.

"It was a surprise, all right!" he told her. "The most gorgeous one. . . . But it kind of knocked me out. So far from what I expected, and everything. . . ."

They looked at each other for a long while. Then their two bodies, that had been so close so many times, swayed toward each other. They kissed, eyes closed, all quarrels melting in the wordless agreement.

"So you were waiting for me," marvelled Slade.

"I was waiting for you," nodded Claire. "It seemed a very long time, Mal."

"Well, now I'm home and we'll carry on. I'll get to work tomorrow and clear things up. . . . Claire, what did we quarrel about?"

She shook her head, smiling.

"I can't even remember. But it doesn't matter anyway. We won't quarrel again. You've come home, and so have I. Without the two of us, the place is just a house, cold and bleak and deserted. With us, it is a home again."

The flames in the fireplace leaped and roared. The stove behind them hummed with heat. Slade felt a little drowsy.

Claire handed him a glass of the hot rum that had steamed on the stove. He sipped at it. Floundering through snow drifts toward a house as cold and empty as his own heart had been since he left? Yes, he had been doing that, and only a little while ago. But it seemed years ago, now, in the light of his present warmth and comfort.

He was so warm, so comfortable! He

let himself drift into a sort of dreamlike state, with Claire warm in his arms.

"You're kind of wonderful," he whispered to her.

And it was then that their bodies drew closer still, and he knew again the poignant sweetness of the woman he had married, and had been stupid enough to leave awhile ago.

Outside, a frigid wind began to moan over the blue-cold world. But the only effect it had in the warm room was to make the raw flame in the fireplace leap higher, and the warm stove hum more loudly.

"You've missed me?" he whispered at last, greedy for the look on her face to be translated into words.

"So much," she whispered back, running her young, smooth hands lightly down his stubbled cheek. "But now you're here. And I know you'll never leave again."

CURIOSLY, now, a little chill stole down his spine. Her words were natural; the kind of thing she would tend to say. But there was something about her tone that struck him as a little odd. It had such extreme conviction in it. She *knew* he would never leave her again! She had said it as though he were now chained to her by some circumstance stronger than earthly will.

But the uneasy feeling faded soon. Why shouldn't she have conviction in her tone? She was right, wasn't she? He never would be separated from her again. Not while he was in his right mind!

So warm and comfortable before the fireplace. . . . So contented with Claire again by his side, in his arms. . . .

Malcolm Slade felt himself slide again into a sort of dreamlike trance.

"Kiss me," whispered Claire.

Dreamily, he kissed her.

"So glad I'm home," he said finally,

eyes sagging closed as though weights pulled down the lids. "So glad. . ."

He dimly saw Claire smile. There was everything in her smile a man dreams of getting from a woman.

"You're sleepy, darling, aren't you? I don't blame you. The cold outside, the bitter, bitter cold inside before I got the fires going, your long walk, now this warmth. . . ." Her voice was a lullaby, closing his eyes more securely still.

"Sleep, Mal. Sleep. And know you'll never be away from me again. Sleep. . . ."

The fire was sending dim red even through his closed eyelids, carrying him off to unconsciousness with the feeling that all was right in a world that had not been too kind to him of late.

"Sleep. . . ."

Crackling fire, Claire, everything slipped into a slumber as comforting as it was profound.

THE rather creditable Newton fire engine panted in the snow-packed lane beside the farm house. Its hose was out, and the volunteer firemen, half a dozen of them, were helmeted and in rubber slickers ready to attack the roaring blaze that soared through the roof twice as high as the house it was consuming.

But there was no way for them to attack it. There was no water in the well

behind the house, and the nearby creek was frozen solid.

"Have to let 'er burn," said one of the men. "No loss, anyway."

A sedan slid up through the snow and stopped behind the fire engine. A man got out; the Newtown doctor, Allen Lutz.

"Bill, you phoned there was a man here who needed me," he said.

The man he addressed shook his head a little.

"No work for you now, Doc. The guy died a few minutes after I phoned from Gleason's, without ever coming to."

The men parted. Lutz bent over a stark figure on a heap of coats in the snow. He felt the figure's chest.

"Dead, all right. Who is he?"

One of the others shrugged.

"Just some old tramp. None of us has ever seen him before. We found him lying in the burning house."

"In there?" said Doctor Lutz, staring incredulously at the almost demolished building. "In the roofless old ruin?"

"Yeah. I can't figure out why. I shouldn't think even an old drunk like this bum would try for shelter there. The house has been falling to pieces since I was a kid—ever since Mrs. Malcolm Slade died after her husband deserted her thirty years ago."

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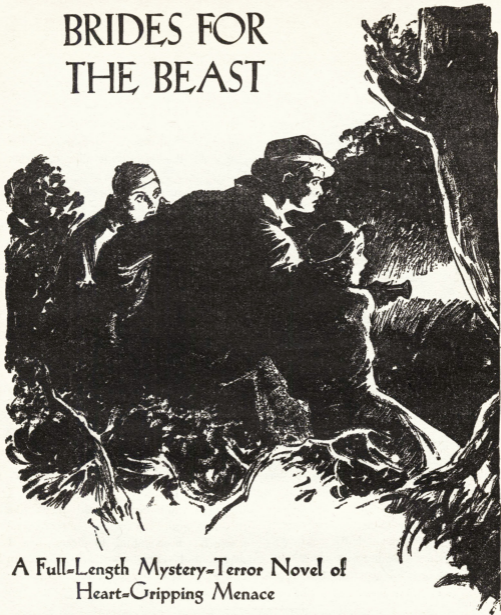
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A Full-Length Mystery-Terror Novel of Heart-Gripping Menace

BACK and forth, back and forth, from end to end of its large outdoor cage the great gorilla paced. Its reddish eyes glared murderously as it whirled and spat out at the laughing crowd packed tight against the guard rail. Then it backed away—only to fling itself forward again and tug at the bars with all of its great strength.

The crowd thought it was great fun to bait the enraged creature, but Hartley Kincaid frowned in disapproval and

Minna Talbot clung to his arm nervously. She didn't like it; that display of savage ferocity frightened her.

"Come on, dear; let's go somewhere else," she urged as the monstrous animal howled its rage and shook the bars until they rattled. "If that thing should ever get loose—"

The words died on her lips, lost in a stifled gasp as she stared, terrified, up at the cage. One rattling bar was loose! It had snapped out of the framework that

By WAYNE ROGERS

(Author of "Substitute Corpses")

Roving the mountain wilderness was a mad thing that brought unspeakable terror to the hill people and a torturing doubt to the heart of Minna Talbot . . . For a lust-mad scientist whispered secrets concerning her lover's birth—secrets involving a grisly experiment with a great ape . . .



held it at the bottom, and the gorilla, quick to sense the opportunity, seized it in both sinewy paws. The great shoulders hunched, swelling muscles ridged out on the long arms—and the bar bent upward, twisted almost double!

The whole thing had happened in a few short seconds, and before the gaping spectators realized their danger the maddened creature was squeezing through the opening, free to get at them. With wild shrieks they bolted, stampeded in blind panic, knocking one another down in their desperate flight.

Minna clutched Kincaid's arm, but a wild-eyed man dived between them and another knocked her off balance. Then she was down, and the crowd was streaming past her, sweeping Hartley with them. Another moment and the pavement in front of the cage was deserted, except for Minna, trying to get to her feet—and the great ape that was lurching toward her!

She heard women screaming, heard men shouting to her to run, saw a uniformed zoo attendant gaping at her helplessly—but she could not move a muscle. She seemed turned to stone—stone that shook in terror as death loomed above her.

And then Hartley was there beside her, cool and collected, speaking calmly, almost persuasively—to the gorilla!

"No—no," he was saying quietly. "No—no."

The lumbering ape hesitated, crouched on its haunches, and looked puzzledly into those eyes that were fixed so steadily upon it. Gradually the snarl began to fade from its face.

"Good—good," Hartley said in the same quiet tone, and then made queer, animal noises deep in his throat.

Slowly and easily he walked toward the gorilla, speaking to it all the while. Then his open hand touched its shoulder, patted it; and the red eyes looked up into his with what almost seemed to be understanding! He reached down and touched

the open paw, patted it, lifted it—and started leading the ape back to the cage, where a quick-witted attendant was spreading out an inviting array of food.

For long minutes the tense, hair-trigger drama had held the watching crowd spell-bound. Then, as the gorilla squeezed its way back into the cage, the breathless silence was broken by a roar of applause, and Hartley was bending over her, helping her to stand on weak, trembling legs.

The danger was past, and Minna could feel the crushing terror lifting like a great weight from her shoulders—but in its place came a weird reaction that sent a shiver through her. What she had just witnessed was unnatural—uncanny. It wasn't human for a man to exert such an influence over a savage beast. Something deep down within her shuddered away from it, and she recoiled unconsciously when his hands touched her.

Then the strange reaction was gone, forgotten, and she was in his arms. But the next day it came back to her and she shivered unreasonably as she read a statement by one of the zoo attendants in the morning paper.

"If I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't believe it," he was quoted as saying. "Mr. Kincaid has more influence with apes than any man I've ever known. He handled that gorilla as if he knew it—almost as if—well, as if he was one of its own kind and could think the way it did."

THAT near tragedy was now three months past, but it all came back to Minna with crystal clearness as she read and reread Hartley's letter. He was at his father's remote estate in the wildest part of the Adirondack foothills, but he was to have come back to town to spend the four-day holiday week-end with her at the seashore. His friend, Don Porter, and Don's fiancée, Alice Marvin, were to have completed the party—but now Hartley wasn't going to be back.

"Dad feels that he is on the verge of a great discovery, and you know I am an integral part of his experiments," he wrote, "so I really can't run out on him for almost a week right now. Instead, I want you three to drive up here and pick me up. Then we'll go to my lodge and spend a couple of days there."

Minna frowned. It wasn't that she did not like Hartley's mountain lodge; it was an adorable place, and she was almost as fond of it as he was. But the prospect of going to Professor Kincaid's home, even if only to pick up Hartley, was not inviting. It filled her with vague uneasiness.

Professor Kincaid was a strange, reticent man, and she was never comfortable in his presence. He was an anthropologist who was devoting himself to an exhaustive series of researches into simian life and development. So immersed was he in his subject that he had become eccentric; he seemed hardly human—scarcely more than an automaton.

He gave Minna the creeps—and the thought of Hartley forming part of his experiments, being studied and probed by this queer, impersonal old man, did not add to her peace of mind. She had only a vague idea of what those experiments were like, but what she conjured up in her mind gave her no desire to visit the place where they were conducted.

There was another reason why Minna dreaded going to Professor Kincaid's establishment—August Gebhardt, his assistant. Gebhardt was a German, a blond, bullet-headed Prussian, and he made no effort to conceal his desire for her, even though he knew she was engaged to Kincaid's son.

Minna had never liked him, and she liked him even less for the past few months. He had little liking for Hartley, she knew; but there was certainly no excuse for the unthinkable things he had hinted at.

Ever since that accident in the zoo he had been unbearable. Minna's little nose wrinkled with distaste and her eyes became frosty as she remembered how he had read the account in the paper and then looked up at her significantly.

"A most remarkable occurrence," he murmured. "It hardly seems human. I would not believe that a *man* could wield such an influence over a beast."

There were other things, too; not the words so much as the inflection, the crafty cocking of his head, the knowing nod—as if he knew a great deal that had better remain unspoken.

Gebhardt had made several attempts to declare his affection, but so far Minna had managed to avoid a direct avowal. But how much longer she would be able to do that was a question; it was much better to avoid the man and the chance of an unpleasant scene.

So, between the professor and his assistant, there was little to tempt her to the Kincaid place—not to mention the reputation of the establishment itself. There were queer stories whispered about that gloomy backwoods retreat; wild tales about the professor and his experiments.

Once, a few years ago, he had even broken into the columns of the metropolitan newspapers when the mangled body of a young girl was found near his place. His angry backwoods neighbors claimed that she had been slain by one of the apes the professor kept penned up in his laboratory, but he convinced the authorities that his animals could not possibly have escaped to commit the deed. Hartley had been with him at the time, and Minna noticed that he was strangely worried and unnerved when he came back to the city.

Not a very pleasant place to visit, but Minna shrugged; if it was all right with the others, she would not object. And it was all right with them.

"I sort of expected this," Don laughed when informed of the change in plans. "I

didn't think we'd be able to drag that Tarzan of yours down to the seashore. He's never happy unless he's up in the woods. Regular forest-dweller, that guy."

Oddly, that jesting remark struck Minna as strangely significant. Hartley did have little use for the seashore, for water sports of any sort. His mountain lodge was his idea of heaven, his ideal playground the woods.

Minna caught herself up short and gave herself a figurative shaking. What sort of ridiculous thinking was this? It was those preposterous insinuations August Gebhardt had insidiously planted in her mind. Do what she would, she could not get rid of them or throw off the feeling of uneasiness, of apprehension, they cast over her.

IT stayed with her as Don's car sped through the bright morning sunshine, and increased when early twilight brought the Adirondacks closing in around them. Today those tree-covered hillsides were depressing. They lowered above her ominously, closed in threateningly. It would be a relief when they reached Kincaid's and picked up Hartley. Minna wanted him beside her; wanted the reassuring touch of his hand, the sound of his voice—

"The only objection I have to this place is the ungodly trip you have to make to get here," Don interrupted her thoughts as he brought the car to a halt. "Seems I never can negotiate it without losing the way. God only knows where we are now. Looks as if this road's going to become a deer-run in a few minutes."

"There's a light ahead there to the right," Alice pointed out. "Maybe they can put us back on the right road."

The light came from what proved to be a general store in the center of a straggling village that appeared to consist of no more than a dozen scattered houses. As the car

braked to a stop in front of the building men came surging out on the wooden porch. A surprising number for a place of that size, Minna noticed at once. She counted twenty—and some of them carried shotguns.

"Wonder if you can tell me how to reach Professor Kincaid's place?" Don asked them all in general.

But only silence answered him—cold silence that was made unmistakably hostile by the surly gleam of their eyes.

"We seem to have lost our way—" Don began again, and then his voice faded away before that almost palpable hostility. There was something terribly wrong here; something—

"Ye want to go to the professor's, eh?" a bewhiskered old-timer finally said, while his neighbors eyed him uncertainly. "Friends of his, be ye?"

Don's admission brought from the crowd of hillmen a low growl that swelled into an angry rumble, but the old fellow paid no attention to it.

"Wall, ye just stick to this here road," he went on, "until ye come to the first turnin'. Take the right hand fork. Pretty bad road fer a spell, but it'll git ye where ye wanta go."

Don thanked him and threw the car into gear. For a moment Minna was sure that the men were going to step out in front of the machine and stop them with those shotguns. Then they were under way—but, as she looked back, she saw that the hillmen still stood watching them as the light of the store dimmed in the distance.

The road grew steadily rougher and bumpier, until the girls had to cling to the sides of the car to keep from being tossed around. The right hand fork proved to be even worse—almost impassable in spots.

"Don't believe anything on wheels ever went through here," Don groaned as he

clung to the wheel and ground forward in low gear. "What the—"

He jammed his foot on the brake as a lanky, dark-bearded figure suddenly loomed up in the beam of the headlights. The fellow's hand was raised in a command to stop, and his face was grim as he strode over to the side of the car.

"Don't know where ye think ye're goin'," he announced, "but I want ye to help me."

A shriek of agony ripped through the silence, and the old fellow's gnarled hand tightened on the side of the car.

"That's my darter, Nancy," he said huskily. "She's gonna have a baby—havin' a turrible time with it—an' the doctor from town ain't showed up yet. Less'n he gets here mighty quick it's gonna be too late—so I want ye to turn around an' drive back an' fetch him, mister."

It wasn't a request; it was a grim command. But Don wilted at the prospect of going back over that impossible road.

"I can't make any time," he argued. "You can walk faster than I can drive this car—"

But the lanky hillman had unlatched the door and was starting to crowd in under the wheel—when another burst of agony shrilled and quavered through the night. The sheer torment in that scream sent a cold chill down Minna's spine. She knew well enough what it meant.

"There's no use going for the doctor now," she said as she hopped out of the car. "There won't be time. I'm a nurse, and I'll see what I can do if you will take me to her."

Minna scarcely needed a guide; the girl's blood-chilling cries blazed a trail straight to the crude shack where she lay writhing in agony. As they came in the girl half raised on her bed and gazed at them with feverish eyes.

"It wasn't a monkey critter," she gasped. "It wasn't a monkey critter, I

tell ye—it was human!" And then another spasm of agony rocked her and twisted her words into distorted moans.

The poor thing was delirious, Minna thought; that was the only explanation for her raving about this "monkey critter". Again and again the insistence that something or someone was not a monkey, but human. Gradually Minna began to understand that the girl was talking about the father of her nearly born child—and the chilling tentacles of grisly horror began to wrap themselves around her.

Fortunately the doctor, a rugged little country practitioner, arrived before the child was born. He took charge, and Minna noticed that his eyes became bleak as he listened to that delirious raving. She tried hard to catch more of the girl's words and make sense of them, but the disjointed raving told her nothing more—until the newborn infant lay in the doctor's hands.

And then stark horror gripped her, enveloped her utterly!

Fascinated, she stared at the dead monstrosity, while her mind reeled away from what she saw. It was a huge child. Its arms and legs were long and gangling. There was a thin covering of dark hair all over its body; and its face—

Those flat, widespread features were unmistakably simian!

Minna heard a low curse escape from the doctor's lips as he swung around and tried to hide the thing from the girl on the bed. But he was too late. She had already seen—and now her brown eyes were two great, brimming pools of incredulous horror.

A low, choking moan bubbled up from her throat, gasped from her open mouth. Then came words, slow and deliberate, in a voice that was insistent yet pathetically pleading—as if she were arguing with herself, striving desperately to convince herself of something that must be so.

"But it *was* a human critter! O God, it was!" her low words throbbed through

the still room as her eyes closed wearily and she slumped to the bed to join in death the grotesque thing to which she had given birth.

CHAPTER TWO

Prey of the Beast

FOR long moments the silence held as they stood beside the bed and looked down at the dead girl. Minna forgot that she was part of it. Rather, it was as if she were a spectator, looking into a room where something unthinkable horrible has just occurred.

It wasn't the girl's death. Death alone would have been clean and final, a blessed relief. This was something else; something incredible and unholy; something that clung noisomely to the room even after the girl's spirit had fled. Its taint held them mute in the presence of horror they could not put into words.

Then the bearded parent shuffled over to the table on which the infant's body lay. Horror and disgust were mirrored in his working features, to give place to bitter rage.

"Human—hell!" he snarled. "It's a monkey—an' one of Kincaid's critters is its father!"

That broke the spell, and only then did Minna realize that other eyes had been regarding them. Eyes in the windows and at the door. Now the owners of those eyes shuffled in and gathered around the table, to stare down at the monstrosity in awe that quickly kindled into savage rage.

She recognized several faces among them. They were the same men she had seen back in the straggling little town. Now they were all armed with guns or clubs, and the hard stares they directed at the three strangers were filled with menace.

"Thank God my Betsy died afore she give birth to a *thing* like that!" one of them exclaimed, and Minna saw that it

was the old fellow who had directed them. "My pore gal was only dead—ripped to pieces—with her dead fingers still grip-pin' the black hairs she pulled out of the critter's dirty hide. But the lot of ye let the perfessor lie his way out of it—let him keep those murderin' apes here in the hills—an' this is what ye get fer it!"

His face twitched and his old eyes blazed as he swung around on the others.

"An' this ain't all!" he raved. "Wait till we find your gal, Jeff Muzzey. A gal in this country don't disappear for two days an' come back safe. The ape's got her—an' when ye find her ye'll wish to God ye never did!"

Jeff Muzzey, a red-haired giant, quailed under that withering prediction, and the color drained out of his ruddy face.

"Ef anything's happened to my daughter—" his tense voice came in a deep rumble, then stopped.

His blazing eyes turned to Minna, and decision flashed in them. Before she could move he leaped across the room and grabbed her by the wrist.

"We've stood enough o' Kincaid's murderin' critters," he said grimly. "I'm holdin' this gal until we find my Dorrie—an' if—if anything's happened to Dorrie—God help this one!"

That was the spark that set off the explosion, that opened the floodgates for pent-up passions. Don Porter sprang forward and tried to push the fellow away from Minna, but in the next moment he was down, helplessly battling half a dozen men who struggled to get at him. Minna felt rough hands grab at her and hold her, felt hard fingers pinch into her arms as she stared aghast at what had suddenly become a bloodthirsty mob, slaving for the blood of people they had never even seen until an hour ago.

Rough hands seized Alice and held her helpless. Angry fists flailed out at Don, and the bewhiskered old-timer whose tirade had started this frenzy shouted en-

couragement and heaped fuel on the blaze. Only one man in the room kept his head.

Above the din the doctor's voice rang out authoritatively.

"Let those people alone, you fools!" he commanded. "What did they do to you? If you feel so much like fighting, go up and tackle the professor's apes—not a couple of girls. Thought you were supposed to be out looking for Dorrie Muzzey! Well, you're not gonna find her in here—and while you're wasting time God only knows what's happening to her."

The lash of his voice snapped at them, penetrated their rage-befogged brains, and slowly common sense began to reassert itself. The hillmen fell back, abashed, but even as they released her, Minna saw that their glances were bitter.

"You came along here at a very unfortunate time," the doctor said as Don got to his feet. "After what's been going on in these hills these men can hardly be blamed for flying off the handle, but old Stevens shouldn't have sent you up this road. He did that out of pure cussedness. It will get you up to Kincaid's all right—in fact you're within half a mile of the place now—but the road's in very bad shape. Hasn't been used for years."

"And if we go back and around the other way?" Don groaned.

"Ten or twelve miles," the doctor admitted. "Guess you might as well go on this way, as long as you've come this far. Wait a minute. I'll get you a guide. Hey, Tully," he called to a young husky who was just going out of the cabin. "Suppose you ride up to the Kincaid place with these people. You can take them up and at the same time keep your eyes open for any sign of Dorrie along this back road."

SO when they drove on Tully Walters rode on the running board of the coupe beside Don, clinging to the side of the car as it pitched in and out of ruts, his eyes

never leaving the lighted road in front of them.

"Dorrie's my gal," he confided as they bumped along. "She ain't been home—ain't been seen—since yesterday morning. That ain't like Dorrie. If she was a-goin' anywhere she'd 'a' told me about it."

Minna listened to his anxious voice and studied the silhouette of his worried face etched against the background of the dark road. Her heart went out to him, and she shuddered at the memory of the dead girl back in the cabin they had just left. What a ghastly tragedy—to go through the excruciating agony of motherhood to bring such an abomination into the world!

Somewhere in this black wilderness was the creature that was responsible for that tragedy. Could it be that it was really a beast—an ape? A horrible monster that caught and violated young girls and left their mangled bodies as gruesome evidence of its bloodthirsty lust?

Minna remembered the red, hate-flaring eyes of that monster in the zoo; remembered the way it came lunging toward her—and suddenly the darkness that hemmed her in was filled with staring eyes, with hairy arms that were ready to reach out and grab her! She fought to control her panic, but instinctively she shied away from the open car window and pressed closer to Alice, until she could feel her friend's trembling arm, her ice-cold fingers. Fear huddled there in the car with them.

But the dying girl had insisted that the father of her child wasn't a beast—that it was human. What had she meant by that? Didn't she know for sure? Was it some sort of weird half-beast that was neither man nor ape? Some impossible creature that was able to change its form and pass as both man and beast?

That was inconceivable! But Minna shivered at the thought and wished with all her heart that she had not come on this trip. Intuition had warned her not to

come to this place. Perhaps this unnatural monster was the spawn of one of the professor's unholy experiments. Perhaps—

Suddenly Tully Walters' hand shot out and gripped Don's arm.

"Stop the car!" he whispered tensely. "Look! Over there at the side of the road. Did ye see that—"

The motor died as Don flicked the switch and stepped on the brake. The car stopped, settled with a faint metallic sigh—and the stillness settled down around them; stillness so absolute that Minna could hear the pounding of her heart and the panicky sough of Alice's quickly drawn breath.

The world became a circle of light in the midst of surrounding blackness—a ring of glaring radiance into which she stared until her burning eyes seemed to be standing out of her head. And then she saw it!

Full in the glare of the headlights was a snarling black face, a bullet head hunched between great shoulders, a huge hairy body. For a fraction of a second the ape crouched at the edge of the brush and glowered at them. Then it heaved itself forward—and a heavy rock smashed into the windshield, driving murderous splinters of glass all about the helpless occupants.

Minna ducked behind the protection of the dashboard as another rock crashed against the hood of the car. She saw Tully Walters spring from the running board. Then Don snapped off the lights and the narrow road was plunged into darkness.

Out of that darkness came the sounds of the fearsome creature's flight and of Walters' threshing pursuit, growing fainter in the distance. Behind the wrecked windshield the girls clutched each other and cowered in terror, until Don pulled a flashlight from a side pocket and climbed out of the car.

"I'm going after him," he announced quietly. "I can't let him face that thing alone. You'll be all right here—"

But Minna was already out of the car, dragging Alice with her.

"Don't be silly, Don," she said firmly. "We're going with you. That's much better than waiting here in the darkness."

Don did not argue. With his flashlight he searched the side of the road until he found the place where the ape had crouched, and then a faint path leading back into the brush. Slowly he led the way along this hardly discernible trail. The noise up ahead of them had dwindled and then stopped altogether. Again the wilderness was quiet, the heavy stillness broken only by the sounds of the night insects and the noise of their own progress.

It was better when there was a noise up ahead. At least then they knew where the creature was. Now it might be anywhere around them in the darkness, ready to pounce on them as they passed. Minna cringed and could fairly feel the huge black paws fastening on her hunched shoulders—

A yell burst through the stillness and her blood turned to ice. It was Tully Walters, right up ahead there somewhere, and his shout of surprise was strangling in his throat, turning to a howl of pain and terror!

Don started to run, but they did not have far to go. A few steps farther ahead and they could see the flickering light of a low fire. Don's warning hand pressed them back as they reached the edge of a little clearing—but he could not shut off the sight of the frightful thing that was going on out there in the firelight, nor close their ears to the bloody gurgle that was Tully Walters' death-cry.

The huge ape's bloody paws were tearing at the man's throat, mangling it horribly, while the warm blood spurted out and drenched its shaggy coat. Then, with a bestial snarl, it dropped the limp body

and stood glaring around the clearing.

Could it see in the darkness—see right through the thin brush behind which they were crouching? Minna felt as if the creature's eyes were looking right into her own; as if—

It was coming straight toward them! Bloody paws swinging at its sides, ugly head lowered, it lunged awkwardly across the clearing, until it was only yards away from their hiding place. Then, suddenly, it cocked its head and listened.

In her terror Minna had not heard the first call. Now she caught it as it was repeated—a distant halloo. Without another glance in their direction the ape whirled and loped off into the brush.

Not until the last faint sound of its flight was lost in the distance would Don let them step out into the blood-spattered clearing. It took but a glance at the gaping hole that had been Tully Walters' throat to tell them that here was nothing they could do for him.

But the sight that caught Minna's attention and brought an icy tingle of horror to her spine was on the other side of the clearing!

Beneath a crudely constructed bower lay the naked body of a young girl, chained by one ankle to a tree. She had been beaten, tortured, mutilated, until her flesh was a crimson horror—and yet she still lived!

Minna sprang forward and cradled the battered head in her arms as she saw the closed eyelids flicker. Blood frothed up on the girl's lips as she tried to speak; then the words came, thick and hardly intelligible—while the tortures of hell flamed in her glazing eyes.

"It was—it was the perfes—"

That was as far as she got. The welling blood gurgled in her throat and her head fell back limply. Dorrie Muzzey would never be able to tell who had committed these abominations on her tender body, but she had planted horrible suspicion in the

minds of the three who bent over her.

What had she meant to say? The professor? The professor's ape? The professor's assistant? Or—no, God Almighty, no; she couldn't have meant to say "the professor's son"!

Minna did not dare to meet the eyes of the others as she rose to her feet. She could not bear it if she should read in them the terrifying suspicion that had reared its nasty head like a venomous snake in her own mind. Instead she turned to the crudely built shelter.

It was nothing more than four poles with crosspieces lashed over their tops and freshly cut boughs spread over these. Evidently it had served as a shelter for the murderous beast—a couch from which it could watch the suffering of its helpless victim. In the bed of leaves heaped beneath it were crusts of bread, a gnawed bone—yes, and the stubs of cigarettes!

An ape that smoked cigarettes!

Minna looked closer — and her heart sank sickeningly. For a moment the world swayed giddily and she was sure she was going to faint. Then, from some inner spring of courage, came the strength to step forward and place her foot on the gleaming bit of metal that had caught her eye.

When she was sure the others would not notice, she stooped quickly and snatched up the silver-plated, monogrammed lighter she had given Hartley Kincaid as a present the past Christmas!

CHAPTER THREE

Festering Suspicion

THE rest of that terrible ride to the Kincaid home was a torture nightmare to Minna. The faces of that dead girl in the shack and the awful thing she had brought into the world, of Dorrie Muzzey and Tully Walters, would not be pushed out of her mind—and the lighter

in her handbag seemed to be burning its way right through the leather, straight into her suffering heart!

The fact that the lighter was there did not connect Hartley in any way with these fearful atrocities, she told herself again and again. But apes do not smoke cigarettes. A man had been there, reveling in that murder nest, and that man had had Hartley's lighter!

When the enraged hillfolk found those bodies there would be no restraining them. They would swarm up here and tear the Kincaid house down brick by brick, she told herself, and as she looked up at the gloomy brick and stone pile she knew that she would not blame them. She had never liked the place, and now it loomed up in the darkness ahead of her like the dwelling place of all evil.

More than twenty years ago Professor Kincaid had come to this out-of-the-way place so that he would be alone, so that he would be undisturbed in his work. He had been there ever since—and God only knew what sort of monsters the place had spawned in that time.

Minna shuddered as the car drew up beneath the porte-cochère, and her distaste was in no way alleviated when the door swung open and August Gebhardt strode out, smiling, to meet them. At the sound of the motor Professor Kincaid came from the brick building behind the main structure that was his laboratory, and Mandy Goss, his housekeeper, came from her kitchen, followed by her moronic looking grandson.

The Kincaid household was assembled—with the significant exception of Hartley!

Where was he? Something in the back of Minna's brain shouted the question accusingly, but as she glanced at the faces of the other she could find no answer in them.

Gebhardt was bowing and smiling oilily

while he murmured stupid compliments. Professor Kincaid was making the welcoming ceremony as brief as possible; plainly he wanted to get it over with and return to his endless work. Mandy Goss, a husky old woman with a sharp, vitriolic face and glittering, mean-looking eyes, made no attempt to conceal her lack of enthusiasm; visitors meant more work, her biting glance said plainly enough. And Corby, her hulking young grandson, stared at them stupidly, as if he had never seen such surprising creatures before.

"Where—where is Hartley?" Minna dreaded to frame the question that was foremost in her mind, but somehow the words formed on her dry lips. "Isn't he here?"

"He was until an hour or so ago," Gebhardt supplied quickly. "Then he went out. I believe he said he was going to meet you."

His words seemed to sap her strength, to leave her weak and trembling. Hartley wasn't there. He hadn't been there for an hour or more. Then where was he when that ape creature murdered Tully Walters? Where was he? Where was he?

That question kept throbbing maddeningly through her brain until, fifteen minutes later, Hartley's car drove up beside the house.

"Hello," he greeted them with a grin. "How did you get here? I began to get worried about you, so I drove out to see whether you had had trouble on the road—but no sign of you anywhere. Don't see how I could have missed you."

Relief surged through Minna. Of course, that was the answer: he had driven down the main road looking for them while they were plowing along that terrible back road! That was where he was!

But as he took her in his arms and kissed her he seemed like a stranger—a stranger whom she feared! Instead of

responding eagerly to his caresses she wanted to draw away, to shrink from him—even though she scolded herself for her disloyalty.

"It's this old house," she told herself. "It makes us all suspect each other. Once we're away from here—"

But Professor Kincaid dashed her hopes for a speedy departure the moment he saw his son.

"So you're back, Hartley," he said quickly. "Then let's get back to work. I know—you want to be with your guests, but if you want to get away by tomorrow noon we'll have to put in several hours of work tonight. Mandy has prepared a bit of supper for them, and after that they will probably want to retire. So they won't miss you at all, and there will be plenty of time to see them in the morning."

Reluctantly Hartley went with him and left Minna to Gebhardt, which, it was very apparent, delighted the professor's assistant. As soon as the light supper was finished he maneuvered her into the library. Minna knew what was coming and tried to avoid it—but this time Gebhardt was not to be put off.

"Wait, Minna—please," he begged as she tried to excuse herself and go up to her room. "There is something I must tell you. I can not wait any longer. Don't you see? Don't you understand? I love you! I want you to marry me! To go away with me—"

His arms were around her, drawing her to him, bringing her face up to his lips; but Minna fought loose and broke away from him.

"You have no right to talk to me like that!" she panted. "You know I am engaged to Hartley! I love him, and I'm going to marry him—and you can only make things unpleasant for all of us by going on this way."

She was at the door and was about to open it and rush upstairs, but the ex-

pression on his livid face stopped her. Rage twisted his features, contorted them into a sneering snarl that was demonic.

"So you fling my proposal back in my face," he grated between clenched teeth. "I am not good enough for you, I suppose. Not such an Adonis as young Kincaid. Well, let me warn you! Watch your step before you marry him or he may drag you down into hell with him!"

Minna knew that she ought not to listen, that she ought to ignore his jealous raving, but something seemed to keep her rooted there at the door, incapable of opening it. Against her will she looked into his blazing eyes and could almost feel their hypnotic attraction.

"What—what do you—mean?" she asked, in a voice that seemed to come from the back of her brain rather than from her lips.

"What do you know about Hartley?" Gebhardt flung at her. "How about his mother? Does he ever speak of her? Does he *know* anything about her? How do you know that the professor is his father? They resemble each other in no way. And do they act like father and son? How is it, do you suppose, that Hartley is so at home with the apes? How is it that he can handle gorillas as no other man has ever been able to do? How is it that he is so inordinately fond of the woods and so uncomfortable indoors?"

With the stunning force and regularity of a triphammer he hurled his questions at her, piling innuendo on innuendo, until Minna reeled away from the merciless barrage, aghast at the staggering implication of the things he was saying. But Gebhardt was not finished.

"I have tried to spare you this by hinting when I should have spoken frankly," he snapped at her. "Now I shall answer some of those questions for you. I have been with Professor Kincaid for more than five years, working with him intimately, and during that time I have dis-

covered no evidence that would indicate that he ever had a wife. His interest in Hartley is not that of a father in a son—it is that of a scientist in a rare specimen! Mrs. Goss has known the family a good many years, but her loyalty to the professor stops her from telling all that she knows. But suppose that what she insinuates is true—that Hartley is the son of an ape!"

Like a lash laying open the skin that unthinkable suggestion slapped into Minna's face—and like the quick blood rushing up to the wound came the ready promptings of her own mind.

That day at the zoo—the attendant's statement to the reporters—Hartley's passion for the woods—the so-necessary part he played in the professor's experiments. One by one they flashed before her, and with them the half-formed suspicions which Gebhardt's insinuations had prompted within her.

Hartley the son of an ape! Hartley—No, it couldn't be! That was madness—the vicious invention of a brain that was embittered and warped by jealousy. Gebhardt was lying—lying!

"I won't listen to any more such lies!" she blazed at him, while her bosom rose and fell with such stress that she could hardly speak. "Get out of here! Get out—before I tell the professor what you have dared to say!"

Gebhardt's sneer had become cold and fixed.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?" he stabbed at her as he walked toward the door. "Especially when it is what you have known yourself but have not had the courage to admit."

As he stepped into the hallway he paused and listened. There was the rumble of voices outside. Then heavy feet clumped up the steps and across the veranda; fists banged on the door.

Minna heard those noises and a new fear coursed through her. That must be

the hillmen; they had found those mangled bodies in the clearing and now they had come for an accounting. They had come for revenge, to kill the beast that had murdered their kin.

Like an icy blast the memory of Hartley's lighter flashed through her. That killing monster was not a real ape. It smoked cigarettes and it carried a lighter—Hartley's lighter. Suppose that Hartley was the son of an ape!

Minna grasped the side of the door for support. Her face, she could see in a mirror, was ashen, and cold perspiration was bathing her body in a wet, clammy blanket. Weak-kneed, she staggered out into the hall. She had to see for herself—had to hear—

"I'm a deputy sheriff," she heard a heavy voice rumble. "I ain't got no warrant to search this place but if you know what's good for ye, you better not try to stop us."

"Come right in, gentlemen," Gebhardt invited. "I shall be more than glad to help you in any way I can."

Would he tell the deputy his suspicions about Hartley? That enraged mob would be only too quick to jump at conclusions; they would drag Hartley out to the nearest tree! Fear clutched at Minna's throat, threatened to choke her, while her head throbbed like a drum. She strained her ears. But Gebhardt said nothing that would arouse their suspicions. It seemed that they wanted to see the professor's apes, and as Gebhardt started to lead them to the laboratory she joined them.

The laboratory was a one-story brick building with heavily barred windows and a stoutly bolted door. At one side of the single large room Professor Kincaid and Hartley sat working at a large desk, and in a caged off section at the rear two big gorillas stared out at the visitors inquisitively.

"Our guests told me of their distressing experiences," the professor said, as

soon as the deputy had announced their mission. "Had we a telephone I would have notified you, but it seems you have discovered the bodies without my assistance. A most horrible tragedy, gentlemen, but I can not see how you can suspect that I am in any way responsible for it. These animals have not been out of this building since I brought them here."

"Where were they earlier tonight?" one of the possemen demanded.

"Right here in this room," Kincaid answered readily. "My son and I have been working with them all evening. They were never out of our sight. And even if we had not been here to watch them, you can see that there is no possibility that they could break out of their cage and force their way out of this building. I have no idea what this murderous monster may be, but I can guarantee that it is not one of my gorillas."

"I know a monkey when I see one," the deputy insisted stubbornly, "and that thing Bess Robley give birth to was a monkey. If one of these critters ain't its father—who was?"

Minna had scrutinized the caged gorillas keenly. There was no blood splashed on their bodies and their paws were clean. No, it couldn't have been these animals, she realized. Then the deputy's question caught her attention, and she looked up—to find August Gebhardt's eyes fixed on her significantly.

What was the man insinuating? *That Hartley had been that foul monster back in the clearing? That Hartley was the father of Bess Robley's monstrosity?*

Sickeningly, the dying girl's delirious raving came back to her:

"It wasn't a monkey critter! It was human!"

What had she meant? Could it be that a human being—or something that appeared to be a human being—had been the father of that ape-like infant? Could it be that

there was appalling truth behind August Gebhardt's nasty suggestions—that—dear God, that Hartley was really—?

The lights in the room grew dimmer, seemed to contract into themselves—and then Hartley's arm was around her shoulders, supporting her as he led her to the door.

"Brace up," he said softly. "You've had a trying day and your nerves are about gone. Bed is the place for you."

Alice was already asleep when Minna slipped quietly into bed beside her. She was tired herself, exhausted and physically ill from worry, but her jumpy nerves would not let her sleep. The room was filled with hideous apes and grinning monsters, and whenever she dozed off they seemed to gather around her, to hang over her, to press down upon her—

It was Alice's terrified scream that snapped her out of it and brought her back to full wakefulness!

The room was dark, but a late moon had risen and painted a dim patch of light in the window frame. Against that light she could see that something huge and black *was* bending over her! When she tried to move a muscular, hairy arm pressed down upon her—and she looked up into the snarling face of a gorilla!

Minna's throat muscles were paralyzed. She could not utter a sound—and then, amazingly, her own scream rang in her ears. Rang for a second, and then was choked off as a hard black paw closed over her mouth and stifled her.

Frantically she struggled for breath, but there was no breaking that grip—no chance to gulp even a single blessed draft of air into her tortured lungs. Her heart pounded madly; the cords in her neck strained and tightened into taut thongs, and the swelling veins at her temples threatened to burst through the skin—and then a wave of billowing darkness swept up around her and engulfed her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bloody Trail

WHEN Mina groped her way back to consciousness she was still there in her bed. The room was dark, the window an unobstructed panel of dim radiance, just as it had been when she dozed off to sleep. There was no crouching ape, no snarling face bending over her. Perhaps, after all, that horror had all been another nightmare conjured up by her harried brain.

Her hand stretched out slowly to touch Alice—and flew back as if her exploring fingers had come in contact with red-hot metal!

The bed was empty!

Minna pushed herself upright and peered into the darkness. Now she could see more clearly around the room. It was empty. No trace of Alice, except her clothes neatly arranged on a chair. She was gone—and Minna knew that that horrible ape had been: no fantastic creature of her over-wrought imagination!

Shakily Minna climbed out of bed and slipped into her negligee and slippers. Perhaps Alice had gone downstairs—but there were her slippers beneath the bed, her negligee lying on the chair with her clothes. She was gone, and perhaps even now the monster might be returning to drag Minna off with him.

Trembling, she tiptoed to the door and looked out into the hall. It was dark and empty. Fear spurred her on as she ran through the darkness to Hartley's room and knocked on his door. No answer. Again she knocked, louder. Surely he must hear that, but there was only silence behind the panel.

Noiselessly she opened the door and looked inside. The room was empty, the bed undisturbed.

Don Porter's room was next to that.

"Just a minute," he answered sleepily

when she pounded on his door. "Heck of a time to wake a feller, but I'll be right out."

But the moment he saw her frightened face in the light of the lamp he had lit he knew that this was no jesting matter.

"Alice—she's gone!" Minna sobbed an answer to his quick demand to know what had happened. "That awful ape carried her off!"

Don took charge efficiently after that. As soon as he had heard her story he began a search of the other rooms on the sleeping floor. Professor Kincaid's was empty, the bed undisturbed, but August Gebhardt was asleep. He got dressed immediately and joined them.

There was no sign of Alice or anyone else in the main building, but there was a light burning in the laboratory. When the searchers got there they found the professor writing at his desk, surrounded by mounds of books.

"Alice gone!" he cried as soon as they had told him what had happened. "But how? What could have taken her—and how could it have gotten in and out of the house? I don't have to tell you that Obo and Dora were here in their cage all night, just as you see them now. But what sort of frightful creature can this be?"

The gorillas were asleep in their cage, and Minna had no doubt that they had been there all night, just as he claimed—and yet there was something furtive about the professor's manner. When she caught his eyes she was sure that she detected guilty knowledge in them. Perhaps not guilt so much as fear. That was it—fear. He was terribly afraid of something that he would not even mention.

But what? If he knew that his steps were innocent what had he to fear? Minna tried to be obtuse, tried to ignore the answer that was clamoring for recognition but it would not be denied.

Kincaid was terrified because he thought that Hartley, his son, might be the guilty

killer! There, she had admitted it to herself. And with the admission came damning questions. Where was Hartley now. How was it that his bed was undisturbed? Why wasn't he anywhere in the house or here in the laboratory? Where could he be at this time of night—if he was innocent?

Before she could put one of those questions into words the answer came through the laboratory door in the person of Hartley himself. But the sight of him sent icy fingers of horror clutching at Minna's heart. His clothing was dirty and torn, there were scratches on his face, and one hand was covered with blood!

"Hello! What's up?" he grinned, as he dabbed at his bleeding palm with a blood-soaked handkerchief.

"Where—were—you?" Toneless and dead the words forced themselves from Minna's lips.

"Looks as if I'd been in a war, don't I?" he laughed. "Well, don't be so alarmed; it's nothing serious. I climbed up to the summit of the hill in back of the house—the view from up there is great in the moonlight—and I took a spill on the way down. Almost broke my neck, but all I actually got out of it was a few scratches."

Minna watched his face and hope sickened and died within her. His story didn't ring true. She couldn't believe him, though she wanted to pin her faith to his every word more than she had ever wanted anything in her life!

They searched the house for Alice after that, but Minna knew with hopeless certainty that it was a useless formality. Alice would not be found in the building. No, she would not be found until the monster was finished with her and ready to discard her poor, mangled body.

At the rear of the building they routed Mandy Goss out of her bed to join the hunt, despite her acrid comments about letting a person get some sleep when there

was a lot of extra work heaped on her. Corby got into his clothes, too, and trailed around after them like a big, lumbering dog—or like a dumb calf, as Gebhardt called him as he callously cuffed the pop-eyed yokel out of his way.

The search was futile, as Minna knew it would be, and there was nothing left but to give it up for the night. Sleep seemed impossible for her any more that night, but when it did come it claimed her completely. When she opened her eyes it was broad daylight.

Alice's clothes, arranged with pathetic neatness on the chair at the bedside, stabbed at her heart the moment she saw them, and the full horror of the night before flashed back to her. With it came a reminder of the questions she had determined to put to Hartley.

The other doors on the upper hallway were open as she stepped out of her room; evidently the others were already awake and had gone downstairs. But there was a sound in Hartley's room, and she started toward the open door.

It wasn't Hartley, but Mandy straightening up the room. Minna turned away disappointedly—and then stopped and looked back. Mandy was standing before a closet door, rattling it and tugging at the knob, while her ugly face was screwed up into a scowl.

"—have mighty important secrets to keep from a body all of a sudden," Minna heard her mutter as she gave the door a final yank and then whirled away from it disdainfully.

Secrets in Hartley's closet? According to that it was not customary for him to leave it locked. Then why—now?

Hardly knowing why she did so, Minna slipped back into her own room and waited there until Mandy was finished with her work and went down the hall to the next room. Then, when the way was clear, she walked quietly to Hartley's door and stepped inside.

The closet door was still locked, but perhaps the key had dropped out onto the floor. It hadn't—but in the pocket of Hartley's bathrobe she found it.

The metal seemed to burn her fingers as she lifted it out, and she called herself a despicable sneak—but she must know why that closet door was locked.

"It's the least I can do for Alice," she told herself as she turned the key in the lock.

What she expected to find behind that locked door she had no idea—but what she saw there sent her staggering back across the room, her mouth agape and her eyes wide with horror!

Wadded up in the corner of the closet was a dark mass which she recognized instantly. A monkey skin, complete with an ugly, snarling head! A monkey skin that was still matted with gummy blood—Alice's blood!

"O God! O God!" she whispered over and over as she stared at that awful hide and as her numb mind tried to grasp what its being there meant.

Hartley the masquerader who had used that skin to commit unthinkable crimes! Hartley—part ape, part man—slipping back periodically into the animal kingdom and using this horrible disguise to satisfy his bestial appetites.

Somehow she locked that door and put the key back in his pocket. In a daze, not knowing where to turn, she went downstairs to breakfast. The very thought of food was abhorrent to her, but Gebhardt was at the table and quickly recognized her condition.

"What you need is a strong cup of coffee," he prescribed. "That will help you get yourself in hand." And then, when she had drained the cup Mandy brought for her, he leaned forward and asked, "Now—is there anything I can do for you? Anything you want to tell me—or ask me?"

There were many things—not that she

wanted to ask, but that she *had* to ask him.

"Yes," she said dully. "Tell me—is it possible that there could be such a creature—as you insinuated Hartley might be?"

"Entirely possible." His voice was gentle and sympathetic. "If you will come with me I'll prove it to you."

Unresisting, she let him lead her into the library, seat her in an easy chair. Then he took down two thick volumes from the crowded shelves. Scientific volumes from which he read passages aloud to her. Those volumes spoke of hellish things—of savage women who had mated with apes—of the hybrid offspring that had resulted. Some of those misfit creatures had lived for years, and one of the volumes stated that it was possible that others that had been lost in the jungle, turned completely beast.

"So you see it is entirely possible," Gebhardt finished his reading. "There is no reason, either, why a strong, superior type of human female mated with an ape should not produce an offspring in which the ape characteristics of the father would be entirely lost—outwardly, anyway. But, of course, there is no telling when such a creature would revert to type and become, for a period of time, all ape. And there is no guarantee that a woman marrying such a creature would not give birth to full-fledged apes—throwbacks to the paternal grandparent."

Minna's face was white, blank, but her tortured mind was writhing in agony. That was what the dying girl in the shack had meant! The father of her child had not been a monkey to her eyes. He had looked like a human being, but the result of their union was the terrible monstrosity Minna had seen born!

And the father of that child was—

From a drawer of his desk Gebhardt had drawn a faded diary which he held out before her.

"Do you recognize this handwriting?" he asked. "It is Professor Kincaid's. The items, you will notice, begin in 1910, the year Hartley was born."

And then he began to read—an account that seared into Minna's brain as if the letters of each word were printed there with vitriol. That account recorded the birth of a male child whose mother was a white woman—her mate a gorilla! For three years that shocking chronicle followed the infant's development, day by day—until Minna raised her trembling hands as if to shut the thing from her mind.

"I do not know definitely that this is a record of Hartley's birth and infancy," Gebhardt concluded, "but certainly you should know more about him before you marry him. If I were you—"

That was where Hartley interrupted him as he entered the study. His face was grave and worried as he turned to Minna.

"What could have happened to Alice is a complete mystery," he told her. "We have searched the grounds and the entire neighborhood and there isn't the slightest trace of her anywhere. It seems queer to give up the search—but there isn't anything more we can do. Nothing but wait until we see what happens. Dad is anxious to complete the experiment he's working on, so I suppose I might as well get it over with."

"I want to talk to you a few minutes before you go, Hartley," Minna summoned up courage to say, and she was thankful that Gebhardt tactfully left the room. "It seems odd, here in your home, that there is no picture or reminder of your mother. You have never told me anything about her, Hartley!"

He frowned and she saw that he was uncomfortable.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I know very little about her. My mother is a subject on which Dad has never been willing to speak. So far as I have been

able to gather, she was a very beautiful woman and she died when I was very young. Dad was heartbroken and became pretty much a recluse. He moved out here in the wilderness to lose himself in his work and forget the pain in his heart.

"I believe there was a woman who took care of me for a while, but that evidently didn't work out, for my earliest recollections are of being raised in a private school. I must have been three or four then. After my early schooling was over I came here to live with father—and the apes. I've been with them so much since then that I know them a lot better than I've ever known any woman but you."

At the age of three was when that dairy of the ape-child ended! Minna shivered inwardly and tried not to let him see the horror that gripped her until the palms of her hands were wet with perspiration. She picked up a cigarette from the desk and held it to her lips expectantly, but Hartley seemed not to notice.

"The lady wants a light," she laughed. "Where's your lighter?"

Again he was uncomfortable. She noticed that he stalled and stammered embarrassedly.

"I seem to have mislaid it," he confessed at last. "Had it a day or so ago, but it isn't here now. I'm pretty sure I know where I left it."

Minna wanted to give it to him, to tell him that she knew well enough where he had left it; wanted to tell him that she knew all about that bloody disguise locked away upstairs in his closet—but she couldn't. She had to get out of that room, out of the house, out into the air where it was clean and fresh.

Unconsciously her footsteps led to the rear of the building, past the laboratory and on up the hill behind it. Not until she was halfway up the slope did she admit to herself why she was there. She was

going up to the top, to the spot where Hartley claimed he had been when Alice disappeared last night.

She wanted to see for herself if there was any sign of his having fallen. If he really had been up there on the summit—if there was a scar on the earth where he slipped and fell—then there might still be an explanation for the damning circumstances that were closing in tighter and tighter around him.

The slim hope beckoned to her, lured her on until she was panting from her eager exertions. The summit was just ahead there—an open space beneath a lordly pine—a few yards more.

And then her legs became leaden weights that clung to the ground as if molded there, while her bulging eyes stared up at that pine—at the bare stretch of ground beneath it. There was something white there—something ghastly white, and smeared with brownish red, that sprawled in the sunshine at the foot of the tree.

She knew what that white thing was.

It took an age to climb those last few yards, and with every relentless step the sight that met her eyes became more terrifying. Alice, stretched out there on the ground, stark and cold, her naked body stained and smeared with her own blood! Her face had been mercilessly beaten until it was hardly recognizable; her throat ripped to shreds by savage claws!

And there, beside her, lay the tattered remnants of the lacy nightgown the beast had torn from her body in his feverish lust!

Tears would not come as Minna stood looking down at that appalling sight. It seemed they were dried up within her—lost in the crumbling wreckage of her hopes, her plans, her whole world, as it came tumbling down in chaos around her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Foul Clutches

AS MINNA staggered blindly down that hill she wanted more than anything else to get away, as far away as possible, from that awful place and all it contained. The place was evil, wicked, damned by the unholy experiments Professor Kincaid had performed there in the profaned name of science. It terrified her, made her feel as if she were in a trap that was slowly but surely closing in around her.

Perhaps she would be the next victim to feel those savage paws tearing at her, to die abominably in the clutch of those hairy arms—and to lie, naked and mutilated in the light of the rising sun!

Panic routed her caution, sent her down the hill in headlong, mad flight, until she was no longer able to stop herself. Straight ahead of her was the laboratory, Kincaid's infernal workshop. She tried to steer away from it but couldn't. Careening and half falling, she rushed toward it, just as a figure stepped away from the side of the building and directly in her path.

It was August Gebhardt. He set himself and caught her, pulled her to her feet as she would have pitched to the ground.

"I found Alice!" she gasped when she regained her breath. "Up there on the hill—dead! Oh, God—it was horrible! Let me get away from here—please!"

"Another," Gebhardt clipped grimly, and his lips compressed into a hard, white line. "Now maybe you will believe me. I have been looking for you—to show you something that will open your eyes."

"No! No!" Minna protested as she tried to tear away from him, but his fingers were tightly closed around her wrist.

"It will take only a few minutes," he insisted, "and then you can go—knowing what it is you are running away from. Quiet now!"

Firmly he led her to the side of the laboratory building, to where a clump of bushes grew close to one of the windows. From the shelter of the bushes they could see into the room, and the window had been propped up a few inches so that they could hear.

Minna stopped trying to break away when she caught a glimpse of what was going on inside. Hartley was sitting in an easy chair in the middle of the big room, and the gorillas, Obo and Dora, out of their cage, were hovering around him, patting him, peering into his face and moving their lips as if they were trying to talk to him.

"Fine—excellent!" came from the other side of the laboratory, where Professor Kincaid was sitting at his desk, watching intently and jotting down notes on the paper before him. "Try that again, Hartley."

Hartley laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"A, B, C, tumble-down," he sang to them very slowly and deliberately; "cat's in the cupboard and can't see me. Now then. A—B—C—"

The gorillas watched every movement of his lips, and now their mouths were open and sounds were coming from them. Not the actual letters and words that he had spoken, but sounds at least resembling them. It was eery, listening to those huge apes on the verge of speech—and the garbled version of the simple nursery rhyme sent cold chills down Minna's spine.

"Good girl, Dora," Hartley congratulated one of the beasts, and then made queer animal sounds that brought what was unmistakably a gratified smile to the creature's ugly face.

Dora slipped her long arm around him and petted him while she leaned over his chair and tried to repeat the jingle for him.

"Excellent!" Kincaid exulted again. "There never has been anyone with such

influence over gorillas. You are able to bring them closer to the borderline between animal and human than has ever been accomplished!"

"Yes," Hartley grinned, "and when I spend a couple hours with them like this I feel as if I am pretty close to the borderline myself. You'll make a confounded ape of me—have me loping around on all fours—if you don't finish up this experiment mighty soon."

Minna could stand no more. Hysterical screams were crowding up into her throat, ready to burst forth at any moment. Suddenly she twisted her wrist free from Gebhardt's grip and darted out of the bushes, ran frantically toward the residence. She must find Don Porter; he would take her away before her straining nerves snapped entirely.

Don was in front of the house, pacing the ground nervously and watching the surrounding hills as if he expected to see Alice appear on the edge of the woods at any moment. He looked up with startled concern when he caught sight of Minna's wild eyes and terrified face. Then she was in his arms, sobbing out her story.

"I found Alice!" she gasped. "We can't do anything more for her, Don. She's dead. And we'll all be with her if we don't get away from this place. Please, Don, let me get in the car now and drive away—as far away as we can get. Please, Don!"

Porter was puzzled, but he saw the unmistakable signs of hysteria.

"All right, we'll go," he soothed her; "but how about Hartley?"

He was even more amazed by the mingled dread and agony that flamed in her wide eyes.

"He's—he's part of it, Don," she whispered. "I can't tell you any more now. Please get me away."

Doubtfully he led the way around the side of the house to the garage. The moment he swung back the rolling door he knew that something was wrong. The

air was heavy with gasoline fumes. One glance beneath his car told him the answer: nail holes had been punched into the bottom of the gasoline tank and every drop of fuel had run out onto the floor. Hartley's car, the only other in the garage, was in the same condition, drained and useless.

Minna saw those pools on the floor and understood what they meant before he could say a word. She should have known it would not be so easy to escape; the trap was too carefully prepared, and it was closing in on her relentlessly!

Fearfully she glanced out of the garage, toward the house, half expecting to see a huge, hairy monster bearing down on her. Instead she looked straight into the cold, malignant eyes of Mandy Goss, fixed on them with hostile intensity, and the effect was as chilling as if the beast itself had been watching them.

"Well, that means we don't leave—unless we walk," Don said grimly as he started away from the useless car, "and before we start doing that I'm going up that hill for Alice's body!"

Minna dreaded another sight of that pitiful corpse, but she did not dare to remain at the house alone. Hartley, Gebhardt, and professor or the prowling monster—any of them might find her there; and one terrified her as much as another. Going back up the hill she would at least have Don to protect her.

As they climbed she tried, haltingly, to explain the horrible fear that hung over her—to explain what Gebhardt had insinuated, and what she had seen with her own eyes. But she could see that Don looked at her queerly, sympathetically; that he considered her half out of her mind from fright.

She could not blame him for that. It did sound insane—a perfectly normal man becoming a monkey! But with her own lips she had heard Hartley say that often he felt close to the borderline that sepa-

rates mankind from the animal kingdom. That was when he was conscious of what he was doing. But what about those times when he actually slipped over the line and became a beast? Then he would not know what he was doing—would be no more responsible for his horrible deeds than the ape that had been his father!

They were halfway to the top of the hill when Minna froze in her tracks and turned a blanched face to Don. There it was again—Hartley's voice, farther down the slope, calling her name!

For a moment it paralyzed her, rang in her ears like the knell of doom. Then she grabbed Don's arm and urged him up the brushy trail with greater speed.

"Please don't answer, Don!" she begged, as she cast frightened glances behind her.

"Minna!" There it was again. Nearer now. He was coming after her, catching up with her.

Minna scrambled through the brush as long as she dared; until his voice seemed almost at their heels. Then she dragged Don down beside her into the shelter of a thick clump of bushes.

She could hear his footsteps now, hear him snapping twigs, scuffing stones out of his way. Nearer and nearer. Were his senses more acute than theirs, she wondered? Would animal instinct lead him straight to their hiding place?

Her heart pounded so loudly that she was sure he would hear it. Desperately she poised for a mad fight if he broke in upon them. Nearer—nearer. Now he must be only a few yards away! And then she knew that he had passed; his voice came back to her from above them, and the noise of his progress became fainter.

Not until it had died out altogether would she let Don start up again. Cautiously, watching on all sides of them, they climbed steadily without catching sight of him—and then they came to the

bare stretch from which they could get a clear view of the hilltop.

There, at the foot of the pine, Alice's nude body lay as Minna had left it, but now a man was bending over it.

"That's Gebhardt," Don identified him immediately. "What's he doing—"

Before he could finish his question his eyes popped wide and he stared open-mouthed up the slope. From the lowest limb of the pine a huge black body swung down and then dropped—to land on all fours on Gebhardt's back!

The German went down, flat on the ground, the wind knocked out of him, and the black furry was all over him, pounding and tearing at him with clawing paws. Before he could stagger to his feet the great arms closed around him and held him helpless, dragged him to his feet, seized him by the throat and shook him like a limp doll.

The thing took only seconds. Before Minna had stifled her first gasp of surprise Gebhardt screamed horribly—and the blood spurted from his torn throat while the huge ape snarled and voiced its triumph in weird animal noises.

Even after his head fell back limply, the ape tore and ripped at him, shredding his throat, mangling his face, beating and pounding at him with savage fury. That exhibition of bestial rage was appalling—nauseating. Minna felt weak and sick.

And then she saw that Don was racing up the hill, crazily intent on trying to save the professor's assistant!

With a shout he launched himself at the gorilla—but the huge monster dropped the crimson horror that had been Gebhardt and lunged straight at his new opponent. The black fist swung up from the ground and smashed into Don's face with sickening force. Somehow he managed to stand up under that blow, but he was tottering—staggering backward—his arms dropping helplessly at his sides. And the monster was lunging at him again!

Minna screamed shrilly, wildly, and for a fraction of a second the ape hesitated, peered down the slope to where she crouched. Then one hairy arm swung around in a black arc and caught Don a backhand blow on the side of the head that lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing into a clump of scrub oak.

Even before his body hit the ground the ape was loping down the slope, straight at Minna!

With a terrified shriek she whirled on legs that threatened to collapse beneath her at any moment. It was no use; she knew that she could never outrun the creature. It was coming toward her with great, ground-covering strides. And then—great God in heaven—it called her name!

Not distinctly, not clearly—but plainly enough so that she could not mistake it. Minna! The way those gorillas down in the laboratory might have pronounced it after Hartley!

Was this thing one of the professor's gorillas? But they could not have recognized her; would not have known her name, even if they could have spoken it! Then—then it must be Hartley—slipped across the line and become a savage beast—but still able to recognize her and call to her with the half-human utterance of the gorilla that he had become!

Minna's brain reeled under that fearful realization, and the delicate balance that separates rationality from insanity was upset, tumbled helter-skelter. She was no longer sane as she ran down that hill with strength that had never been hers before. There was room for only one thought in her mind; she must run—run—run.

Behind her she could hear the ape pounding along after her, and new energy enabled her to put on a fresh burst of speed. Had she been sane she would have fallen a dozen times in that mad flight;

she would have turned an ankle, would have crashed into a tree, would have slipped and cracked her head open on a stone. But now her subconsciousness protected her like a guardian angel. She must run—run—run. Somehow she must keep ahead of that frightful creature crashing along in her rear!

Now she was on the path leading directly to the buildings below. Ahead of her was the laboratory—and bedlam was raging in there. From the open door came a hoarse scream—a groan of agony. But she hardly heard—and there was no time to turn away; the creature was almost upon her.

Without a glance at the laboratory she ran past, reached the main building, dashed inside and flung the door shut behind her. The key had hardly turned in the lock before a heavy body thudded against the panels with such force that the door trembled.

Run—run—run! Minna sped up the stairs—just as a downstairs window crashed. Now where to? Her room—it was the only haven she knew. She could hear the creature starting up the stairs as she slammed the door behind her and locked it.

But that door would never hold against the ape's tremendous strength! There was only one hiding place in the room—the closet. And there wasn't a second to lose; the monster was pounding at the door. Minna pulled the key out of the closet door lock, slipped inside and locked it after her. Perhaps if she was very quiet—if she could muffle the sobbing gasps of her panting breath—

The outer door fell in with a crash—and the monster was at the closet, tugging at the door. A chair splintered against it, smashed a hole through one of the light panels. A hairy black paw came through the aperture, grabbed the frame of the door and pulled. The wood creaked, splin-

tered—and the door tumbled out in wreckage.

In the doorway loomed the hideous ape, blood splashed over its torso, dripping from its crimsoned arms. Minna tried not to look at it, tried to cover her face with her hands as she cowered back against the wall; but the monster grabbed her wrist and dragged her out into the room, held her tight against its bloodstained breast.

Close up against the creature she could see, now, that it was not actually an ape but a man masquerading in a gorilla's skin. The eyes that glared at her out of the snarling mask of a face were blue eyes—blue eyes like Hartley's!

Desperately Minna thrust her hands against the ugly mask and tried to push it away from her, beat at it with her fists, tore at it.

"Let me go! Let me go!!" she shrieked as she tried to wriggle out of the hairy arms that encircled her.

One arm released her; she was almost free—and then the black fist crashed down on her head like a club. A great ball of fire seemed to burst in her brain, and in its dazzling glare the world slipped out from under her.

CHAPTER SIX

Hate Feeds

THAT light was still blazing above her when her brain began to function again. It hurt her eyes, made them blink as she looked up into it—and then she discovered that she was staring up into a lighted lamp that hung from the roof of a cave. She was lying on the floor, a hard stone floor, and her aching wrists and ankles were tied so securely that she could not even move them.

There seemed to be some crude, home-made furniture in the place—benches and a table. Then she saw that she was not alone. Sitting tied to a bench on the other

side of the cave was Professor Kincaid, looking ghastly pale and obviously in great mental anguish, and the blood-spattered ape was standing beside him.

Minna groaned with the combined pain of her throbbing head and her burning wrists and ankles. The murderous creature caught the sound and wheeled to face her—and her eyes stared past him unbelievably. Then her heart leaped with wild relief and delirious exultation.

The fiend beneath that gorilla-skin disguise was not Hartley—for Hartley was sitting there on the bench beside his father, tied up and helpless! There was a smear of blood on his forehead and his eyes were haggard as they met her gaze, but that did not matter. He was not the atrocious killer! He was not a bloodthirsty beast—a half-ape in human form!

But there was an ape there in the cave; not this disguised fiend but a real simian. She heard it snarl in rage, heard it pacing up and down fretfully, and then, as her eyes became more accustomed to the semi-darkness of the place, she saw that one end of the cave was barred off into a cage. Behind those bars a real gorilla, a monster even larger than the professor's apes, was swaying back and forth while its red eyes fairly glowed with fury.

"Just take it easy, pet," Mandy Goss's harsh, cracked voice rooned to the beast. "Your time's a-comin' right soon now."

With a throaty chuckle she turned from the cage and came, grinning, into the light. Her shrewish face was diabolical in its gloating hatred as she strode from one to the other of her captives and glared down at them. Then she stopped in front of the professor and spat full in his face, while her evil features were suffused with unholy triumph.

"What—what is the meaning of this, Mandy?" Kincaid gasped, as he stared up into her frenzied face.

"So you don't know me, eh?" the hag grinned malevolently. "After all these

years I'm still jest Mandy Goss to you. You're a right smart man when it comes to monkey critters, Professor, but you don't know much about humans. You were so busy fussin' around with your beasts that you didn't have time to recognize the mother of Nonnie Blake. Yes, Nonnie Blake, the gal you hired to take care of that brat of yours when you came out to these parts! The gal you killed with your dirty experiments!" Her rage was mounting until now she was leaning over the professor and howling into his set face. "The gal you mated with a monkey and then threw out of your house when she was goin' to have a baby!"

Silence, heavy and pregnant with ghastly tragedy, hung over the cave after she had flung her horrible charge. Minna stared at the professor, while little trickles of horror wriggled through her. Could it be possible that he had done such a foul, inhuman thing? Was that the guilty knowledge she had thought she detected in his eyes?

His lips were working, she saw, but it was long moments before he managed to speak.

"Mandy," his low voice came at last, "if I had only known that was what you thought— The thing is preposterous. No beast was ever near Nonnie. I never allowed her in the laboratory—but I did come upon her in an illicit affair with a wandering gypsy. When I discovered that she was pregnant I told her she would have to go. If she told you anything else, she lied to protect herself."

"All right enough to call a deal gal a liar!" Mandy brushed aside his explanation scornfully. "She can't answer for herself. But I can—and her son can! For years I've been slavin' for you, hatin' the ground you walked on, hopin' that every mouthful of vittles I cooked for you would choke you—but I've been waitin' an' plannin' all the while. And now, my dear pro-

fessor, my time—my time an' Nonnie's time—has come at last!"

The infuriated woman's voice had risen until it was a harsh shriek, punctuated with the stamping of her feet and the waving of her gnarled hands. She had nursed her bitter hatred so long that her mind was deranged, and now that she was about to taste her revenge she could hardly contain herself.

"Now you'll pay!" she howled gleefully. "Pay the way I paid! My only regret is that you haven't a daughter of your own who can be treated the way my Nonnie was. But we'll make out the best we can. This gal who was goin' to be your daughter-in-law will do as well, I expect—an' after Tana's finished with her, he'll take care of you and your son."

"Tana!" The professor squinted his weak eyes toward the cage and then nodded his head. "So that's what became of Tana; you had him here. I've been worried about him ever since he escaped from the laboratory years ago."

"Ever since I turned him loose an' led him here, you mean," Mandy gloated. "Gettin' Tana was jest the first step in my plan to settle the account with you. Digin' up Tana's mate, after she died on you, an' skinnin' her was the second."

"Every time I heard of one of those grisly killings I was sure it was Tana's doing," the professor went on as if he had not heard her, "but I did not dare to mention my suspicion for fear the enraged natives would kill off my other animals and drive me out of the hills. I lived in constant dread of what the creature might do."

"You'll see what he does soon enough," Mandy chuckled as she started back toward the cage. "Corby, get that gal ready for Tana."

So the fiend in that bloody gorilla-skin disguise was Corby, the old woman's vacuous-faced grandson! That was what poor Bess Robely had meant in her delir-

ious raving; the father of her child wore an ape's skin but was a human being! And the infant had been no monkey but one of Nature's horrible blunders, a Mongolian idiot!

Minna tried frantically to wriggle away from the repulsive fiend, but he reached over and picked her up as if she had been a doll. Then he dragged her to the center of the cave and slashed the ropes around her wrists and ankles with a bloodstained knife. Before she could move her numb hands he grabbed her right wrist and snapped a handcuff around it. From the cuff a short length of heavy chain led to an iron ring that was bolted into the rock floor.

Hopelessly Minna tried to struggle with him, to fight him off, but he knocked her off her feet with one slap of his black fist, and then held her down while he tore the clothing from her body—while his lusting eyes gloated over her nakedness until Mandy ordered him out of the way.

Minna cowered on the floor and watched the cage with fascinated eyes. The gorilla was working himself into a feverish rage, tearing up and down the barred enclosure, but never taking his eyes off her. Sniveling animal noises came from his throat and his red eyes flamed with desire. Once he got out of that cage—

Horror had numbed her brain, had frozen her body so that her flesh felt like ice. There was nothing she could do—nothing anyone could do. Hartley and the professor were shouting threats, pleas, were calling wildly for help; but Mandy only laughed and jeered at them.

"Go on and holler," she taunted. "Even if anybody heard you they would not come near the place. I've worked on them—built up their fear and hate—so that they wouldn't move a finger to drag you back from the edge of hell!"

There was nothing anyone could do, but Hartley yelled all the louder, as if to scare the gorilla by the volume of noise.

But that would not work. Mandy had unlocked the door, and the creature rushed toward it. Minna wanted to close her eyes, to hide from the sight of him rushing toward her. Already she could feel herself in his arms—could feel his black paws tearing at her soft flesh! But her eyes would not close. She had to watch—had to stare unblinkingly as the monster lunged out of the cage!

"There she is, Tana!" Mandy Goss laughed. "Go an' take your bride—jest the way you had Nonnie!"

Deliberately the gorilla loped forward on all fours. Then he was right above her, crouching on his haunches, looking down at her with flaming eyes. One black paw reached out and touched her naked side tentatively.

Minna wanted to scream, to shriek—but not a sound would come from her parched throat. She wanted to shrink away, to tear her hand out of the manacle that held her—but not a muscle would move. She lay there like an ivory statue while the black fingers ran exploringly over her flinching body.

This was the preliminary torture of Purgatory, but it would be very short, she told herself with a strange, detached calmness; then would come fiery hell itself—and after that the sweet relief of death. It would all be over in a few minutes; just a few minutes of excruciating, quivering agony, and then—

Was she mad, entirely? Was her delirious brain conjuring up phantoms to add to her torment, peopling the cave with gorillas? There, in the entrance, was another one—and behind it still another!

But they were not creatures of her imagination! Hartley saw them, too! For a moment he stopped tugging and tearing at the ropes that bound him to the bench, and gaped at the cave entrance. Then new hope dawned in his sweat-streaked face. He recognized them!

"Dora! Obo!" he called out to them.

"Come, Dora! Come, Obo! Come here!"

The gorillas seemed uncertain; hesitated, not knowing just what to do—and Hartley "talked" to them in the way they had come to understand. A weird medley of sounds—clicks, whines, grunts and huffs—came from his lips. And the apes understood!

With an angry roar they loped into the cave. Tana was quick to sense their challenge. He turned from Minna's alluring white body and leaped to meet them.

In the next moment three hairy bodies were locked in a tumbling ball of savage fury. Long arms flailed and pounded, prehensile feet ripped and tore, and gleaming teeth bit and slashed. The cave was filled with the fury of their struggle, and Minna expected that at any moment they would roll on top of her and grind the life out of her beneath their straining bodies.

But theirs was not the only primeval passion unleashed in that cave. When Mandy Goss saw her long-cherished revenge slipping from her grasp she became a shrieking fury. With bony fingers curled into talons she threw herself at the professor and raked his defenseless face.

Minna stared in horror, but at that moment Hartley tore his wrists free and drove his fist into the hag's face. Before she could return to the attack he had untied his feet and sprang up from the bench. With one arm he knocked Mandy out of the way—sent her sprawling, dazed into the middle of the cave—and then he closed with Corby, the fake gorilla, who came rushing at him.

Back and forth the length of the cave they battered and pounded at each other, but Corby's strength was prodigious. Minna watched fearfully, saw unmistakably that Hartley was weakening. Then Corby got his long, hair-covered arms around his opponent's waist and lifted him bodily off the floor.

For a moment they traded blows, Corby using only one arm while the other pressed

tighter and tighter around Hartley, squeezing the breath out of him. Then they pitched to the floor and Hartley was underneath. Desperately he tried to keep up the fight, but he was weakening—weakening—

Out of the corner of her eye Minna saw Mandy Goss get to her knees. She was creeping—making her way toward where Corby had dropped the knife with which he had cut Minna's bonds. Once the old woman got her hands on that knife she would plunge it into Hartley's breast!

But before she could reach it she had to pass within Minna's reach!

Every nerve taut, the girl waited until exactly the right second. Then she threw herself the full length of the chain—and her arms tightened around Mandy's legs, dragged her back into the center of the cave and closed in a death grip around the hag's arms. Mandy raved and cursed, but those white arms held her helpless with the strength of utter desperation.

Minna hardly dared to take her eyes from her captive, but when she did flash a glance at Hartley sickening fear enveloped her. His arms were futilely trying to ward off Corby's clutching fingers—but the ape talons were already wet with blood, and they darted back again and again to his torn throat!

"Dora!" Hartley gasped through puffed, battered lips. "Come, Dora!"

And the almost human gorilla heard his cry, heard and left it to her mate to finish the half-dead Tana. Noiselessly she glided across the cave and loomed up over the struggling men. One black paw reached down and grabbed Corby's shoulder, to yank him backward; the other closed around his throat, and Corby died the way he had killed his helpless victims, a yell of terror strangling in the blood-clogged

throat that was being torn from his body!

The moment Hartley was free he sprang to Mandy Goss and took her out of Minna's arms. He was just finishing tying her with the ropes that had been around his own arms and legs when Don Porter crawled into the cave entrance.

"Good work," he congratulated and managed a painful grin. "Just about in time, too; that posse is down at the house again. They're coming this way now and they mean business this time."

"Don!" Minna cried. "Where did you come from? I thought that monster—Corby—killed you when he murdered Gebhardt."

"That's what he thought, too," Don nodded. "He left me lying up there in the bushes while he chased you. But I'm a pretty tough bird to kill. I couldn't make much speed in the condition I was in, but I managed to crawl down the hill. When I heard Hartley and the professor yelling for help I figured they were in a pretty bad way for reenforcements. I wasn't worth a damn myself, but I knew Hartley has a pretty good drag with those gorillas, so I crawled into the laboratory and turned them loose. They followed the sound of his voice—and you know the rest of it."

"Good man," Hartley clipped. "We won't forget it, Don." Then he turned to where Minna huddled, blushing, still chained to the floor. "And now, before those hill-billies come swarming in here to start Mandy on her way to the electric chair, we've got to get some clothes on you, darling."

But even before he attended to that he gathered her in his eager arms and covered her trembling lips with a fervid kiss—a kiss which she returned joyously and thankfully, without even a trace of a terrifying reservation.

THE END

BEDFELLOW FROM HELL

By Larry Moore

In the dead of night Leona awakened in that old dark house—to find that her bed had been invaded by a being whose grisly passions were not of this earth!

AS Leona looked up into the yellow-flecked, agate eyes of Talbot Rhone, she seemed to feel the clutch of icy fingers on her heart. "You won't marry me, then," he said in an odd, tight tone. "You insist upon going to live in that weird old house?"

"I've always told you that I couldn't marry you, Talbot, and I most certainly am going to live in the comfortable home I have inherited," she asserted firmly, purpose unshaken though the chill was spreading from her heart throughout her body. "As a physician you have assured me that I am in a state of exhaustion, that I should have complete physical and mental relaxation—in the country. What better place could there be than this fine old house of Great-Aunt Judith's, in Greyport?"

"Leona!" He bent his head, holding her eyes by his intense gaze. "As a physician I tell you that is the last place you should go—to a house so old it is saturated with dead, mouldering things. Its very timbers creak and groan from the stress of past griefs that fill the ancient rooms to bursting. Youth should have new things, sunshine, color—not decay, the shadows and miasma that arise from graves. Give up this idea—let me take you away!"



His hand was on her arm, the fingers hot, yet their touch sent a freezing current through her veins.

"No." She tried to free herself. "I shall not change my mind. And I'll love that old home—mellowed by time, where people have joyed as well as sorrowed."

"Dead—people!" he whispered.

Then his clasp tightened, bit into the soft flesh of her arm. The yellow flecks in his eyes spread to a blaze that leaped at her.

"It's Tom Farrell who's come between us!" he burst out hotly. "And I say that you'll never marry him. . . . *Something* will prevent!"

"I shall marry Tom as soon as he comes back from this engineering project," she said steadily. Leona had meant to keep this fact to herself, sensing Talbot Rhone's unreasoning and unjustifiable jealousy. But his words stung her to speech.

He searched her face for a moment. Then his expression changed and he released her.

"I'm sorry—forgive me," he implored. "My love for you—sets me crazy—at thought of another man. . . . But, more than all I want to protect you. It worried me to think of you going to live in that house of—" He broke off, with a slight shudder. "We'll forget all I said, and when I come to Greypport—you know I often run down to see the old folks—I'll look you up and see that you're all right. After all, we're sort of cousins, since one of mine married one of yours. And I used to play in your Aunt Judith's house—maybe it isn't as bad as I remember it. But the thought of it certainly did give me goose-flesh on a hot summer day." His laugh was almost convincing.

LEONA as glad to leave him, and walked briskly. Though her dislike had been growing through the two years

he had been importuning her to marry him, never till that day had his manner stirred fear. She tried to banish this, reminding herself that Talbot exerted himself to do much that was good, giving considerable time to charity patients and to work in the county hospital. . . .

A week later she was in Greypport taking formal possession of her new home. She had immediate evidence of Talbot Rhone's concern for her, when the attorney in charge of the property said:

"I wrote you the former housekeeper was getting too old for the place, and I was having difficulty getting anyone suitable. Wouldn't have one yet, either, if Dr. Rhone hadn't happened down to see his folks a few days ago. He learned of it and recommended a capable woman—patient of his—who was glad to get the position. The Doc says you aren't well—need to be favored quite a bit."

"I only need rest," Ruth said, aware that a little wave of gratitude went out to Talbot.

It was a sunless day with wisps of fog trailing sadly through the air, and she had rather dreaded the possibility of arriving at a lonely house. The presence of another woman would be cheering.

She was more glad of this assurance when they neared the edge of the village and came into view of the old Purdy House among its terraces and somber, crowding evergreens. Smoke came from the two chimneys to droop in sable plumes to the ground. The box hedge gave off a faint, not pleasant odor into the clammy air. The place was permeated with gloom.

Involuntarily Leona shivered, her glance going from sodden terraces and funereal trees to the mist-saturated and time-stained brick walls of the dwelling.

"Decay—old things—dead things," she thought with another shiver. "Oh, I do wish Talbot hadn't said that!"

Bravely she threw off the mood, enter-

ing the dwelling to greet the housekeeper with friendly warmth. This was returned by the stout woman who at once displayed signs of wishing to "mother" the girl. But despite Mrs. Graham's cheerfulness, the warmth of generous fires, the interior of the house repeated the effect of the outside. The walls were covered with paper of not one, but several, generations past. The hangings while clean, were drab with the faded colors of half a century. And the graveyard smell of the damp hedge appeared to have seeped through the small-paned windows.

That day brought no sun. As the hours passed, the fog wisps thickened, drew together to form trailing streamers that at times hung motionless, at others swirled weirdly about.

"It does look like a winding sheet," Mrs. Graham commented. "Makes you think of the poor soul that's just gone from here!"

"Oh, don't!" Leona exclaimed.

"Do excuse me, Miss Wade," the older woman begged contritely. "I forgot Dr. Rhone said you wasn't to be disturbed nor made nervous about anything. And you mustn't get to—imagining things—it's dangerous when a body's near a nervous breakdown." These words seemed to hang heavily in the air, as Mrs. Graham turned away.

Leona moved restlessly through the many rooms, all bleak in appearance, family portraits on the walls of each. And the female Purdy ancestors all seemed to have affected one style of hairdressing, parted in the center and brought low over the ears. The effect of so many similar ones suggested a collection of family ghosts hanging on the walls. The girl tried not to look at them.

Learning that the housekeeper's room was on the lower floor of the east wing, Leona chose one above, to be near the only other occupant of the house. Miss

Judith Purdy had occupied a room off the main hall, at right angles to the one taken by Leona.

THE coming of night and closing in of the fog to an unbroken, clammy curtain, shut out the world. This isolation added to the gloom of the house and the girl found herself continually forcing her thoughts from the words Talbot Rhone had used to describe the place. Shortly after ten o'clock she went upstairs.

The blazing fire on her hearth and her own things scattered about had a pleasant effect, and for a few moments her mood lightened. Then she raised a shade preparatory to opening a window for the night. She halted, outstretched hand on the sash, eyes staring through the glass and across the open space to a window in the main building, from which shone a bluish-white light.

A woman sat there—a woman with black hair parted in the middle and brought down over her ears. And she wore a dress like one Leona had seen in Great-Aunt Judith's closet, that day. This figure was knitting and rocking steadily back and forth.

The fog drifted between, but that bluish light filtered through uncannily.

A scream rose to Leona's lips, "Oh! Mrs. Graham! Come—come!"

There was the sound of running feet, an encouraging call, and a moment later the housekeeper came panting up the stairs.

"Look—look!" the girl gasped, pointing at the window.

The woman came close to her side, gazing at that other window. She shook her head, giving the girl a puzzled look. "What is it?"

"Oh, God—can't you see her?" Leona gasped.

"Dearie—there isn't anything to see, but fog, and the dark wall of the house."

The girl stared through wild, dilated eyes. "It's Aunt Judith!" she cried chokingly.

Mrs. Graham shook her head anxiously. "See here, my dear," she murmured, putting an arm about the shaking figure. "I'm going to draw that curtain to shut out that awful fog—it makes you imagine things—"

"Imagine—things!" Leona exclaimed tensely.

The other woman continued as if she didn't notice the interruption. "And I'm going to get you some hot milk, which you must drink and I'll sit with you till you go to sleep."

She tucked the girl into the bed, turned on all the lights and hurried to the kitchen. She was back in a surprisingly short space of time. Leona drank the steaming liquid without question. Afterwards she directed firmly:

"Raise that shade—just a second—I must see!"

But there was no blue light shining from the other window—only fog swirls harboring in the corner between the wing and the main building.

Holding tight to Mrs. Graham's plump hand, Leona fell asleep. And it was broad day when she awakened.

COMPELLED to decide that she actually had imagined the figure in her Great-Aunt Judith's window, Leona forced her thoughts from re-creating that picture in memory. And the morning brought word that Tom Farrell would be in Greypoint within the next three days.

"Everything'll be all right then!" she assured Mrs. Graham with a radiant smile on her red lips.

By night the girl found courage to go alone to her room. "I mustn't let this nonsense got hold of me," she assured herself valiantly, succeeding in allaying fear for the moment.

But terror, far exceeding that of the former night, seized Leona when she looked from her window. There was the same woman's figure, this time with head lifted to stare straight across the space at her. The features were livid, the eyes burning with unearthly fire.

With a wild cry, Leona ran from her room and through the hall to the head of the staircase. There she came to an abrupt halt, crouching against the balustrade, the screams silenced in her throat. At the foot of the stairs stood another woman with dark hair parted smoothly in the center, winglike folds over each ear. But this one was thinner than Aunt Judith. The same bluish-white light revealed her clearly. She tilted her head to look up and Leona saw with horror-drenched senses that the face was the bony, fleshless one of a skeleton.

Above a body dressed in commonplace clothing, the effect was far more dreadful than to glimpse an entire skeleton form.

"O-o-oh! O-o-oh!" Leona moaned.

Her quivering limbs would not carry her weight. She sank lower, flesh crawling with icy terror. Was that terrible thing with the skeleton face advancing up the stairs? And what of that other—the one in Aunt Judith's room—such a short distance away—was that gliding noiselessly upon her from the rear?

As if in answer to the question, she heard a slight rustling. Her scalp prickled at the roots of her hair. Icy perspiration drenched her forehead. Her heart labored heavily.

Another rustling. Something bent above her, shutting off the air, exuding that odor of the grave that assailed her from the box hedge when she arrived. Cold, stiff fingers clamped on her arm. An icy hand touched her cheek, went downward to her throat, to linger.

Oh God—was this terrible thing going

to choke the life from her body? Was she, right then, to become one of the Dead, in that house?

She lapsed into insensibility. . . .

"My dear—what is it? There, there, poor lamb!" came vaguely to her ears.

Gentle arms held her, warm arms that drew her protectively against a warm breast. The damp hair was smoothed back from her brow. Opening her eyes, Leona gazed up into Mrs. Graham's face, the pallor of which betrayed her concern.

"She was there at the window—again," Leona gasped. "And there was another—a horrible thing—" She could utter no more and it was many minutes before she could fully explain, the housekeeper holding her closely while she gasped and shuddered.

"My dear, you must get hold of yourself," said the housekeeper firmly. "Your friends are anxious about you—but we will fight this thing, together. It would be dreadful if you should get to—imagining these things, till they had to take you away!" The last words were barely whispered, suggesting a horrible thing that clutched Leona's heart to squeeze it with renewed terror.

"You don't mean—that—" she could not go on, could not put the grisly fear into words.

"No, indeed!" the housekeeper insisted stoutly. "We won't let anyone do a thing like that. You're a brave girl—you'll conquer your nerves. You are not going to see another thing. I shall stay with you at night, after this."

"I'm not really losing my mind," Leona thought, trying to subdue that devastating panic. "This is just because I'm worn out. I must dream—it can't be anything else!"

HOPE that Tom would come that day, was in vain. But with mid-afternoon, Talbot Rhone appeared. Leona had be-

lieved Greypont would be a refuge from his attentions, had no idea he revisited his old home so often.

"This is just a call," he remarked. "I'm catching the next train back to the city. Just wanted to be sure you're making it all right."

"I certainly am," she said, wishing he wouldn't look at her like that, with the yellow spots in his eyes fusing into that dreadful flame.

"You're not looking well. Do you sleep?" he asked gravely.

"Most of the night," she evaded. Not for worlds would she confess her experiences to him, though she felt that he was willing her to say more. She feared him, feared what peeped starkly from his eyes. With sudden alarming clarity of vision, she saw that he would welcome any barrier that set her away from Tom. "He wouldn't care if I went crazy. Maybe that's why he talked as he did about this house—hoping to frighten me. But I won't let go of myself—I won't imagine those horrible things, again!"

Rhone left in a few minutes, his manner one of friendly solicitude. But the look in his eyes remained with Leona.

If the housekeeper slept in the room adjoining hers, Leona insisted that would be sufficient protection against the fright that held her with a cold grip at thought of the two previous nights. The older woman insisted upon tucking her into bed. Then she raised the shade.

"Now—take a look across there, and you'll see that there's no one in the poor lady's room."

Clasping her hands tight, Leona looked, across the space to that other window—it was blank.

"Oh!" she sighed with a great relief of taut nerves. "I didn't see it—I didn't!"

The proffered glass of hot milk was taken and Leona lay down with a feeling of real relaxation. "I've been so fright-

ened," she murmured, "not of ghosts—but of my own mind. I've been afraid—I might be taken away—where I couldn't see Tom again!"

Night stillness fell over the big house. Mrs. Graham had retired to her room, and Leona slept. She had no memory of being aroused by anything. Consciousness merely drifted slowly back to her. At first she dimly believed that the housekeeper had lain down beside her. There was someone in the bed. But—strangely there was no sound of breathing. And the girl was aware of a chill, as if something very, very cold were near.

She came wide awake.

Somebody was lying close beside her. A someone that was rigid. Against the warmth of her own limbs pressed something hard and chill like marble—only more terrible. Her outflung hand came in contact with an icy, dreadful face.

"Oh God!" she shrieked in a frenzy of horror, cringing from the dead thing at her side.

Light! She must see!

Flinging herself over the edge of the bed, she caught the suspended light cord. The room was flooded with brilliance. And on the pillow beside the one on which Leona's head had rested, lay a woman's head. The hair was parted smoothly in the middle and brought down over the ears. The features were waxen and rigid in death. Under the bedclothes, the body was clearly outlined.

With a cry torn in extremity of terror, from her throat, Leona ran from the room. She did not even hear the housekeeper's voice as she fled. That icy, lifeless flesh still seemed pressed against her. The smell of death was in her nostrils. Had hell itself opened, disgorging all the evil spirits from its fetid maw, her frenzy of fear would have been no greater.

Steps followed her. She knew what they meant—this dead woman was com-

ing after her, just as that dead one had come from Aunt Judith's room the previous night, to touch her. She could not bear that again. She glanced back. In the bedroom door stood the body which had lain in the bed, sightless eyes turned towards Leona.

"I can't help it—I can't help it!" she screamed frantically. "It is there! I do see it! Oh—God—help me!"

TERROR swept her over the borderland of consciousness into an oblivion that endured for many hours. The new day was born of the sun, before her eyes opened. Then her senses seemed drugged, as she remembered feeling after the administration of a hypodermic. But the horror of memory pierced her, re-creating the frenzy of the night. It seemed to Leona that she could not endure Mrs. Graham's assurance that she had slept quietly.

"I couldn't have!" she protested through pallid, quivering lips.

She turned to stare at the pillow beside her. Again her nostrils seemed to be assailed by that odor of the grave. It lingered about the bed clothing, stifled her. A shaking hand pointed at the spot where death had lain.

"A dead body was there!" she cried. "It followed me to the hall. It had hair like the pictures on the walls—oh!"

"My dear, you mustn't let yourself think these things," the housekeeper implored, taking the icy hands in her warm clasp.

"I didn't imagine that!" Leona denied. "I felt the body, its awful chill went through me. I am *not* losing my mind. I tell you, this is a house of dead things!"

The older woman shook her head as if helpless to meet the situation. "Perhaps, if we sent for Dr. Carpenter—he lives in the village—he could help you."

"No doctor could help me," Leona

shuddered. She would not risk a medical man's thinking she conjured these horrors from within her own mind. "I'm going away from here—after Tom comes."

Later in the afternoon she came to a sudden decision. "I'm going for a walk," she told the housekeeper, turning to the door as the words fell from her lips.

Leona walked to the telegraph office where she sent a message to Tom Farrell in care of his company's New York office.

It read:

Am in dreadful trouble. Come direct to the house, no matter what hour you arrive in Greypoint.

Leona Wade.

The return to the house did not seem quite so bad, when this word had sped on its way to Tom. It was almost like speaking to him—seemed to bring him nearer. And he would be with her very soon.

She was greeted with the announcement that during her absence all the pictures of female ancestors had been removed from the walls and stored in the attic.

"I should have thought of it sooner," the housekeeper said. "They just stared at you all the time. No wonder—" her speech broke off.

Leona shivered. Was Mrs. Graham beginning to think that she was going mad? Was she being kind merely to humor her till Tom came—who would be someone to assume authority?

The last months had been a protracted strain, culminating in the loss of her mother and her own physical breakdown. But Leona had been thoroughly convalescent when she received the heritage of the old Purdy house. And she was certain that whatever her weakness had been, her mind was untouched.

Relief at the absence of the pictures somewhat lessened as evening drew on.

Leona began to be conscious of the similarity in the various male portraits. Like the women there was a resemblance in the arrangement of the hair. Brushed straight back, pompadour fashion, in each likeness it was worn more than usually long. She found herself trying not to look at them, yet the picture of Great-Aunt Judith's father seemed to draw her eyes.

"I shall not sleep upstairs," Leona announced as the hour for retiring came. "I—couldn't lie in that bed."

"Very well," came the quick suggestion, "how about the room I first had—in this wing? There's a big bed in it."

"That will do," the girl assented. "Tom will surely come tomorrow—and he will take me away. He'll believe me—whatever I tell him. . . . He will know that there are—dead people here!"

"I'd drink this hot milk," Mrs. Graham advised. "It helps to make you sleep."

"Sleep!" Leona shuddered. "I'm afraid to—sleep, after last night." But she drank the steaming liquid, for she was cold, with the chill that crept over her at sundown in that house.

"We'll leave the light," the housekeeper said, "and I shall stay right with you."

FOR the first time it occurred vaguely to the girl that it was odd for this strange woman to take so deep an interest in her, to be willing to stay in so lonely a dwelling under the conditions prevailing. Even if she herself held no belief in spirits or the supernatural, it could not be pleasant to endure the existing situation. Other questions knocked dully at the doors of Leona's mind—but her senses were growing heavy—and she welcomed the state which deprived her of thought and feeling. Her eyelids fell, shutting out the brilliantly lighted room.

The interlude of peace was broken into

by the odor that tortured her nostrils. It awakened her. It brought back the horrors of those other nights. In that minute she knew that she should have run from the old house—she should not have been restrained by fear that she would be called insane because she fled from a haunted place. These things were clear to her mind in the flash of time before her eyelids lifted. Then she saw. . . . what stood beside the bed.

Her heart was riven by the awfulness of that awakening, the devastating horror of the thing that looked down upon her. . . .

Thick hair was combed back in a pompadour from the bony forehead. Lipless jaws grinned; black, eyeless sockets stared at her. Yet—far back within them, seemed to be flame formed of yellow flecks, flame that scorched her flesh. Mouldering garments hung on the bony frame, garments like those in the picture of Great-Aunt Judith's father.

Leona did not scream. Paralysis held her throat. Only the horrible crawling and shrinking of her flesh told her that she was alive.

The thing that must once have been a man, bent forward. Arms in the mouldered sleeves went out to her. The ice of their touch froze to the very marrow of her bones. She was lifted from the bed, borne to the door.

Leona could not close her eyes. She could not move. Thought was beyond achievement. She could only stare with tortured eyes that would not close.

Into the hall they went. It was flooded with light. Advancing with a rigid, awful step was the dead woman who had sat in Great-Aunt Judith's room. On the stairs was the clothed figure with the skeleton face. The foul odor of decay weighted the air.

The other two moved at the side of the thing that carried Leona. And they went

into the parlor. In its center they halted, under the blazing chandelier. All the pictures of the female ancestors were suspended from the walls. And their eyes were glowing, horribly, from the canvas.

Suddenly the rigid arms tightened about Leona. The head bent towards her face, bony jaws approaching her lips. She felt their pressure.

Vibrant with agony, wild with the insanity of fear, rang the scream that burst from Leona's livid lips. Again and again that shriek of unearthly terror shattered the night silence. And again and again that gruesome, skeleton mouth came down to hers.

HIDEOUS laughter came from the figure with pallid flesh.

Then there was a crash like the crack of doom. Cold air rushed through the house. Steps pounded through the hall. As they reached the parlor threshold, the lights went out.

"Leona!" a voice shouted.

"Go away!" she shrieked frenziedly. "Away from the House of Dead people! They've got me—don't let them get you!"

But the steps did not halt. They came on through the darkness. Leona was released with a suddenness that let her fall to the floor. She lay with face pressed against the polished boards, listening to the mad battle that raged about her.

They were fighting—the dead people who lived in the old house. They were fighting Tom—Tom who had come to rescue her.

Leona moaned in wordless agony. Then she felt that death had come to her. She, too, was cold and rigid. Feeling ceased and she lay motionless.

Nor could she believe that she still lived, that Tom's arms were about her. Trembling, her forehead clammy, heart beating sluggishly in her breast, she lay in his embrace, scarcely seeing his face bent above her.

"Leona—you must listen—believe me. There are no dead people here—except the body Talbot Rhone must've brought. And this skeleton dressed in woman's clothing. You're alive—and so am I! *Alive*, I say!"

When he finally compelled her to look about the room now revealed by the light he had turned on, she saw Talbot Rhone lying unconscious from a blow Tom had delivered. He was clothed in tattered, mouldy garments, a contrivance like a bony mask over his face.

She looked no further. Never again would she gaze on those horrors that had so nearly cost her reason.

Her message had brought Tom in time. Outside the house he had heard her scream, bursting down the door to get to her. And the plot was easily solved, in the light of calm reasoning. Talbot Rhone had been ably seconded by his ally, Mrs. Graham. A woman's dead body from the morgue, a skeleton, an opiate in Leona's milk to keep her asleep while they laid preparations, a hypodermic once—to hold her in oblivion. It had been cruelly easy to plot against the girl. So easily might she have been driven to actual insanity. So nearly did the plot work out.

"Dead people are worse than ghosts!" she whispered, clinging to Tom as she left the old Purdy house forever.

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THE EMBALMERS



Marmon stood vigil at the side of the girl whom they had pronounced dead. It was his Bernice they were trying to wrest from him—to consign to the horrible fate of living burial. Was he a mad man, as they claimed? Or was he indeed battling sinister forces that reach beyond the very portals of death for their pitiful prey?

DURING ten hours of fast driving a heightening dread had haunted Marmon—a ghost of fear flying in the wake of the roadster's spinning wheels. Unendurable anxiety tortured him as he weaved up a graveled drive. He slammed the car to a stop and sprang out;

he thrust through the entrance of the rambling house with a name bursting from his lips—the name of the girl he loved. “Bernice! Bernice!”

She appeared suddenly in the library arch, a slender, fragile girl of ethereal, luminous beauty. Suddenly she was in

By Garry Grant



A Compellingly Realistic Novelette of Eerie Terror

his arms. Marmon held her close, stunned with relief.

"You're all right, Bernice. Oh, God, it's good to know you're all right." He studied her worried eyes—blue as the space between the singing spheres of the universe—arms crushing her. "I started back as soon as I got your letter. I pictured a million horrible things happening to you. What is it, Bernice? What are you afraid of?"

She whispered: "I don't know. I'm terribly afraid of—of something, but. . . . There's more—much more—than I wrote in my letter. Doug and I have been almost driven out of our minds since—"

The girl's breath caught. Marmon turned sharply. The door had opened. A young man was standing on the sill—Douglas Hartley, Bernice's younger brother. He was white-faced, staring, breath-

ing rapidly as though from a hard run. Inarticulate he stood there transfixed, horror pictured on his clean-cut face—and Marmon was struck sharply by a recollection of the traditional curse that hovered over those who lived beneath this roof.

A Hartley heritage—fear of the most ghastly fate that can befall human life. Bernice's father had narrowly escaped it only to succumb later as though by the relentless machinations of an evil destiny. It had claimed Bernice's three older brothers one after another, with the inexorable certainty of doom. The girl and Douglas Hartley shared it now—a common terror they could not shake. It was the dread of being buried alive.

Something in Douglas Hartley's drawn face, as he stood on the sill, made it seem an imminent, blood-chilling danger. The dread was in Bernice's mind too—it was in Marmon's own, put there by the letter she had written him, which had brought him racing back to this accursed house.

There was silence until Douglas Hartley said huskily: "I came back to get my gun. I saw lights in the cemetery. Someone's there—digging. Someone's opening one of the graves."

He jerked past Marmon and the girl, ran up the stairs. Marmon felt Bernice tremble in his arms. He said quietly: "Doug and I will look into this. He's wrought up—perhaps he only imagined the lights. Stay here, darling. We'll be right back."

The girl's brother bounded down with an automatic target pistol gripped in one hand. He went past Marmon breathlessly, breaking into a sprint as he reached the entrance. Marmon's fingers pressed reassuringly on Bernice's shoulders before he left her. When he hurried past the house, following the path that led deep into the wood, Doug Hartley was running ahead.

THREE of the victims of the Hartley doom lay interred in the little plot at the rear of the vast estate. It could not be seen from the house. The path wound through baffling shadows that cloaked Doug Hartley with invisibility as Marmon followed it. Suddenly Marmon was conscious of quick, light footfalls behind him.

Bernice was following him. She caught his arm breathlessly. "I can't stay back. You don't understand, Grant. This—*this* is what has been driving Doug and me to the point of madness. Listen—listen. Do you hear it?"

A sound was eddying on the stream of the night wind. It was a quick, irregular rhythm—the noise made by a shovel blade driving into solid earth. "Someone's digging in the cemetery," Doug Hartley had said. "Someone's opening one of the graves."

Suddenly there was the sound of a shot—a jarring concussion that shattered the stillness.

"Doug!" The girl screamed her brother's name. "*Doug!*"

She broke away from Marmon. Terror hurried her to the crest of a hill; she was flying down the far side when Marmon saw the light. It was shining deep in the shallow valley, glowing upon a marble monument. Black, raw earth was heaped in front of the stone. A dark cavity marked the site of a desecrated grave.

Another cry broke from the girl's lips: "Mother's!" Then: "Look! That isn't Doug! It's someone hiding—hiding!"

Bernice stopped short, frozen with horror, staring into the gloom beyond the open grave. Marmon, hurrying past her, saw for one brief instant the figure of a man leaping from the shadow of another monument—a man whose face was masked by darkness. The fugitive fired once—a coppersy flash of flame—as he darted into obscurity. Marmon stopped, chilled, beside the mound of fresh earth.

Douglas Hartley was lying in the excavation, his chest torn by a bullet—his face covered by spilled dirt that his own fall had avalanched upon him from the edge of the grave. Loam heaped over his eyes and mouth and nose was a mocking portent of the choking death that haunted the soul of every Hartley.

"Doug!"

Marmon dropped into the grave, seized the fallen man's shoulders and raised him. The dirt dropped away from a lax, white face. Doug Hartley's head lolled with the ghastly looseness of death. Marmon straightened grimly, hands reddened by blood that had poured from a bullet-burst heart, gazing appalled at a man who had died in his mother's opened grave—died under a murderer's gun.

"Bernice!"

Uncanny silence lay over the little valley. There was no answer from the girl. Marmon snatched up a flashlight that lay on the mound. He hurried across the cemetery, chilled by apprehension for the girl, cutting the beam into every shadow.

"Bernice! It's Grant. Where are you?"

Silence—no answering voice. The only sound was Marmon's quick steps. Headstones stood like frozen ghosts inscrutably keeping their secret as he wound through them.

"Bernice! Bernice!"

A wailing sob came out of the darkness. Marmon was startled by a rustle of branches. The flashlight beam revealed Bernice Hartley running—running madly, blindly, from unendurable horrors. Marmon sped after her. He was the man she loved, yet the sound of his swift steps increased her frantic haste.

He bounded to cut her off, gripped her arm. She shrank from him, lips trembling, eyes widened with terror. "Bernice! Don't you know me? It's Grant." Abruptly, desperately, she flung herself into his arms.

"Grant! Take me away! Take me away!"

"Listen, Bernice. It's all right now. He's gone." She was sobbing, her hot breath beating on his cheek. "Did you see the face of the man with the gun? Bernice!"

"Yes."

"Who was he? Answer me!"

"It was—"

Suddenly she was utterly limp in Marmon's arms. Her hands dropped. Her head lolled. A deep sigh came from her lungs as her every muscle went loose. Marmon pressed her close, anxiously looking into her face—a face white as death.

"Bernice!"

He lowered her to the ground. "She's fainted, that's all," he told himself frantically—but he was mocked by a ghastly dread. He pressed his ear to her breast—a breast unmoved by the slightest breath. For a long moment he remained frozen, stunned by the horrible truth.

No whisper of life came from her heart.

CHAPTER TWO

To Claim the Dead

HOURS had passed since Marmon had returned to the house carrying the limp body of Bernice in his arms. He had immediately called Dr. Fawcett, the family physician, and he had telephoned the police. He scarcely remembered submitting to the questioning of the detectives who had come from headquarters. All the while he had been thinking of the letter Bernice had sent him. Now an unquarable conviction filled him, reflecting in his eyes as he gazed at the three others in the library—a conviction that he had not lost Bernice.

Dr. Fawcett was standing at the fireplace, shaggy head bowed. Stanley Brain-

ard, thin and small-eyed, the step-father of Bernice and Doug Hartley, had a reticent, even furtive, manner. He enjoyed a small income from the Hartley estate, was rather an ineffectual fixture of the place—and because of his taciturnity, something of an enigma.

Miss Caroline Brainard, his sister, a sentimental spinster, had, following Letitia Hartley Brainard's death, some four months ago, come to the house to live.

The room was hushed until Marmon said: "You're wrong to mourn her. She is not dead."

Dr. Fawcett came to him quietly. "My boy, you must realize her heart was not strong. She was hysterical just before it happened. Cardiac failure, my boy—but please don't insist—"

"She is not dead."

Dr. Fawcett winced. Stanley Brainard turned a protesting gaze upon Marmon. Caroline Brainard took alarm at his sharp tone. Marmon's shoulders squared as he went on:

"She's asleep—sleeping a sleep so profound you can't distinguish it from death—but she'll soon waken. Doctor, you're a man of science. It's not only possible, it's happened many times before—once in this very family."

"My boy, my tests show—"

Marmon interrupted: "Call it what you like—cataleptic sleep, suspended animation, the death trance—it is not death. It's happened to Bernice exactly as it happened years ago to her father."

"That must have been different, my boy," the doctor said.

"How can you know?" Marmon challenged. "You weren't the Hartleys' doctor then."

Marmon recalled an episode that was unforgettably fantastic yet as real as death itself. Craven Hartley, a high-strung man who worked under terrific nervous pressure, had been found slumped at his

desk, and the physician who was then attending the family, Dr. Roberts, had announced that he was dead.

Marmon vividly remembered the hearse drawing to the door, and Simon Calder, the undertaker, retiring to the room where Craven Hartley lay. A moment later Calder had burst out of the room, face sheety-white, palsied with consternation. They had crowded in to see Craven Hartley gazing at them, smiling, rising from the bier.

"What is the matter?" the "dead" man had asked.

Months later, victim of a grimly ironical fate, Craven Hartley had been killed in a mine cave-in in Pennsylvania—*buried alive*—but only the grace of God had saved him that night from the poison that would have seeped through his veins from Simon Calder's embalming receptacle.

Marmon said quietly: "Dr. Roberts explained it quite fully. Cataleptic trance has been known since the beginning of history. It follows a long illness, or an over-wrought condition—a supreme effort of nature to rest exhausted nerves. That night Craven Hartley was enjoying a profound, refreshing sleep, with all vital processes relaxed to such low ebb he *seemed* to be dead. It is the same now with Bernice. She is not dead—only sleeping."

The physician began: "My boy, you're too stunned to realize—"

Marmon removed a letter from his inner pocket—the letter Bernice had sent him, which had stirred such a persistent dread in his heart—a fear now a thousand times magnified. He handed it silently to Dr. Fawcett.

Grant, darling,

I'm frightfully worried, so worried I can't sleep, can't rest, can't think of anything but one ghastly thing. I'm afraid, terribly afraid, that the horrible thing that

happened to Father will happen to me—soon.

The day after you left, Doug and I went for a drive. We met a gypsy caravan. A toothless old hag looked at my palm, then stared at me in the most uncanny way. She said:

"Your family is cursed with the fate of being buried alive."

I couldn't speak—because you know how horribly true it is. I had never seen this gypsy witch before. She knew nothing about me, except what her supernatural vision told her. She trembled as she held my hand, and went on:

"You will die as your father and your brothers died. It will happen soon. Destiny wills it."

Then she ran from me. Her prophecy has been haunting me night and day. She only spoke the dread that has been in my own mind for years but now it has become a frightful obsession. Darling, you must understand, and must make me a promise.

Whatever happens to me, don't let them bury me until you are certain I am dead.

Bernice.

MARMON said quietly: "Craven Hartley died the horrible death of being buried alive. Bernice's oldest brother, Julian, superintending the excavations for the Lincoln Bridge, was caught in a landslide, and when they dug him out he was dead. Kendall, wandering through the West the next year, was thrown from his horse, into a bed of quicksand, and he was never seen again. Everett, foreign correspondent of the *Times*, was caught in an earthquake in Tokio and trapped in a collapsing building. Buried alive, all of them! Now Bernice—Bernice is sleeping, but you won't believe it's only that—you want to treat her like a corpse."

Dr. Fawcett and Stanley Brainard and his sister were staring.

"God in Heaven, it's what Bernice has been dreading day and night for years! Added to that, the horror of the thing that happened to her father—a fear of being believed dead while she still lives,

the dread of being thought a corpse and made one!"

Marmon straightened. "I've made Bernice a promise. I'm going to keep it. I'll let no one touch her until I am sure the spark of life is gone. But she's not dead now. I know she's not dead."

His exhausted nerves sent a surge of dizziness through his brain. He climbed the stairs, passed the room where Bernice was lying so silently, went into his own. His mind hummed over and over, "She's not dead—not dead—" and yet God knew he was not sure.

He heard the sound of a motor outside the house. Quiet voices spoke downstairs, but he did not stir. Soft footfalls in the hallway aroused him. Suddenly Marmon jerked out of his chair, heart pounding with frenzied alarm. Bernice's door was standing open.

He rushed into her room and stopped in a paralysis of horror, staring at the two men who were bending over the bed. Bernice was lying on it, her eyes closed, her face placid, her lips waxen. Marmon had left her fully dressed, but these two men had begun to remove her clothing. They had thin, preying hands, and cadaverous faces—like evil angels of Death who had come to claim their bounty.

Marmon thrust them back, straddled between them and the girl on the bed. "Don't touch her!"

Simon Calder, the undertaker who had prepared the bodies of four Hartleys for burial in the family cemetery, blinked his amber eyes. He said in a husky whisper: "I was called by Doctor Fawcett. I've come to take her away to my—"

"She's not dead!" Marmon snapped. "Do you understand that? She's sleeping, that's all. If you embalm her now you'll murder her with your damnable poisons. You saw one Hartley rise from the dead, Calder. I promise you you'll see another."

Arthur Dotey, Simon Calder's rabbit-

toothed assistant, moved toward the door. "I'll speak to the family, sir."

Marmon stared at the open black case on the chair—at ghastly things inside it used to make the preliminary preparations for embalming. He thrust Dotey into the hall, gripped Simon Calder's lapel.

"Get out of here, both of you! Get out of this house! I won't let you touch her!"

They recoiled from the fierceness of his eyes. Calder caught up the case of horrors and retreated down the stairs with Dotey. Marmon did not move while confused voices sounded in the library—until the entrance closed. Through the window, he saw a shining black hearse rolling away.

He turned quietly to the bed. The girl lay horribly still, her bronze hair splashed on the pillow, her cheeks white, her lips faded. There was no breath from her exquisitely carved nostrils, not the slightest sign of life in her heart.

"Bernice," he whispered. "Bernice, darling—sleep—rest."

He turned out the lights and left her lying in the darkness. He closed the door quietly. Grimly he turned the key and kept it in his cold, clenched hand.

MARMON went into Doug Hartley's room. Remembering that Bernice's brother had owned two pistols, he sought the other. He took it from a drawer. Grimly he tucked it in his belt and buttoned his coat.

He was turning away when Caroline Brainard came to the sill. "Lieutenant Carmody is here from police headquarters, Grant. He wants to see you."

Marmon tried Bernice's door, to make sure it was fast, before he went down. Carmody was a towering, broad-shouldered Irishman with sympathetic eyes. They sat facing each other near the fireplace, while Stanley Brainard and his sister stood by. The detective said quietly:

"I've read your statement, Mr. Marmon. This is very trying for you, I know, but we must have more information. The bullet passed completely through young Hartley, and we haven't found it. There are no clear footprints. Whoever did this thing—"

"Bernice saw the murderer," Marmon pointed out. "She will be able to identify him beyond all doubt."

Carmody started. "But—she's dead."

"She's not dead. She's only sleeping. She will waken soon."

The detective blinked. "All this is damned strange, you know," he resumed. "Have you any idea why someone began to open Mrs. Brainard's grave?"

"I believe Bernice knows," Marmon said. "Perhaps it won't be long. When she wakens she'll tell you with her own lips."

"But—she's dead."

Marmon jerked up. "She's only sleeping. How many times must I tell you? Can't you hear—can't you understand? She's not dead—only asleep."

Carmody muttered: "Yes—yes, of course. Mr. Marmon, it is most unfortunate to our case. We haven't a single clue pointing to the murderer. You declare you are unable to identify him. Only Miss Hartley saw his face, and now she's—" He broke off in confusion.

"I understand," Marmon answered, "Bernice's identification is the only possible means of pinning the guilt on the murderer. She must point him out or he will never be caught. I intend to do everything possible to help bring the guilty man to justice—that's an added reason for safeguarding her while she's sleeping, Lieutenant. But it's only a question of time. She'll waken soon."

Carmody muttered a good-night, bewildered dismay in his eyes. When he was gone, Marmon faced Stanley and Caroline Brainard.

"No living person other than Bernice can point out the man guilty of murdering Doug. Did you hear that clearly? No living person but Bernice. I'm going to watch her, day and night, until she revives and speaks his name. . . . You think I'm mad, don't you? They all think I'm mad. That doesn't matter."

Marmon left the library, his mind reeling with nervous exhaustion. He stopped at the door of Bernice's room and again made sure it was fastened. The key was in his pocket. He turned to Doug's study because it was directly across the hall and from it he could watch Bernice's door.

He went in slowly, wryly eyeing the bed. There was no dead body lying on it. They had taken Doug to the dank, odorous morgue—as they wanted to take a living, sleeping girl to murder her, officially and stupidly, on a cold, slimy slab.

A hush had settled in the house. Marmon sank wearily into the desk chair. He turned aching eyes on the littered blotter. A sealed legal-size envelope was lying under the light. Startled, Marmon saw his name scrawled across it in Doug's flowing script. He snatched it up, ripped it, drew out a closely typed page.

Dear Grant,

I am writing this in case something happens to me. I am filled with a dread that my mind may fail or—

A spidery chill crawled along Marmon's nerves. An indefinable noise had crossed the hall. From Bernice's room. It came again—a rustle of movement behind the locked door. A sound that made Marmon hope, desperately, crazily, that the girl he loved had risen from the living death.

Carefully he toe-tipped to the door—carefully because he remembered a warning of old Dr. Roberts, dead now these several years, that a shock at the recovery stage might mean eternal death for Bernice. His heart hammered wildly as he

slipped the key into the lock. His breath stopped as he turned it. He opened the door a crack, without sound—and stood paralyzed with icy horror.

A shadow was bending over the girl on the bed—the silhouette of a hunched man with one arm upraised, his hand gripping a long-bladed knife. A glow on the opposite wall outlined him sharply—a phantom being poised to plunge the gleaming weapon into Bernice's heart!

THE point of the blade glinted downward as Marmon broke the icy rigidity that held him. He jerked the automatic out of his belt as he shouldered in. The thump of the flying door quickly turned the man at the bed. He was a faceless shadow, crouching to spring. With savage swiftness he leaped on Marmon, the knife slashing. An instant before the black body collided with his, Marmon fired.

The horror of the sight had slowed his finger. The impact of the fighting man sent the bullet into the wall. He struck out desperately, warding off the arm that was driving the blade downward. Twisting away, he warned himself that he must not shoot again because he might hit Bernice—Bernice, who was not dead but only deeply sleeping—but the man with the knife came after him with jungle ferocity.

Marmon gripped the wrist that held the weapon, and felt the fabric of a glove. He was leaning down, striving to wrench the blade away, when a fist exploded against the side of his head. He tumbled to the floor, the world spinning around him, aware of frantically swift movements in the gloom. He glimpsed a shadow on the sill of the window—a black image that instantly vanished.

Marmon pulled himself up while excited voices echoed downstairs. A crash sounded before the open window, then running footfalls. Automatic ready, Marmon thrust his head out. A trellis rose

against the wall beside the window—the means by which the assailant had entered. The darkness below was tempered by the shine of the entrance lantern, but it was a dim, baffling glow that revealed nothing of the escaping man. Marmon turned back, slapping the window down, and stopped, gazing in consternation at the girl on the bed.

He snapped on the lights to see that she had not moved. The crack of the automatic had not disturbed her. Her eyes were still closed, her face still placid, her lips waxen. The sheet had been pulled back to bare her breast for the plunge of the knife—a breast unstirred by any perceptible breath.

He forced himself past her, out the door. He turned the key in the lock before he bounded down the stairs. Caroline Brainard was in the lower hall, staring in bewilderment. The entrance was open. Marmon, hurrying out, caught a dark movement near a group of blue spruces, and sprang toward it. The man who twisted, gasping, out of his grasp was Stanley Brainard.

"What're you doing out here?" Marmon demanded.

"I heard a noise. What in God's name happened? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm not the only one who thinks Bernice is alive. Someone else believes it—the man who just tried to kill her."

Brainard stared inarticulately into Marmon's fierce eyes. Marmon ran along the garden path, circled back to the entrance. There was no sign of the fugitive in the darkness. He had vanished as swiftly, as completely, as the murderer of Douglas Hartley had disappeared from the sheltering shadow of the tombstone.

Marmon thrust past the ashy-faced Brainard, climbed the stairs, paused at the room of the girl he loved. He unlocked the door quietly, stepped in. The change-

lessness of the girl on the bed struck cold dread into his heart. He bent over her, called her name softly, but her waxen lips gave no response. In despair he turned away, his eyes aching—and he saw the knife.

It was lying in the center of the room, where Marmon had fallen—a curved blade, needle-pointed, razor-sharp. Marmon's blood pounded hotly as he covered his hand with his handkerchief, took its carved ebony handle into his fingers. Quickly he left the room, locking the door behind him.

At the end of the hall he thrust into the room occupied by Stanley Brainard. It was cluttered with relics from the four corners of the earth—spears, swords, shields. Directly over Brainard's desk a copper scabbard was hanging. It was the sheath into which this curved murder blade fitted.

Marmon's jaw-muscles bulged as he went down the stairs. He strode directly to Brainard at the fireplace. He said tightly:

"This is yours. It came from your room. I got it away from the man who tried to kill Bernice."

Brainard blurted: "Kill her? She's already dead. You must be mad!"

Marmon went on grimly. "There must be a reason why you insist Bernice is dead. She and Doug had a quarter million each, left them in trust, by their mother. There is no doubt of Doug's death. His share goes to Bernice if Bernice is living. She's the last of the Hartleys and if she dies, the estate goes to you, Brainard, by the terms of the will."

Brainard choked: "In God's name, you can't think me capable—"

"You love luxury. You've stayed in this house since Letitia's death, reveling in its comforts. You like to satiate yourself with rich amusements on the sly. But she didn't leave you much—only a modest

income. Not enough—is that it, Brainard?"

"You can't say that!"

"You began to think, 'Perhaps Bernice is still alive.' That one vital fact would keep half a million out of your hands. You thought, 'Everyone else believes she's dead and they think Marmon is mad—I'll make sure.' Perhaps a little bribe paid to Simon Calder would keep everyone from learning about the knife-wound. One hard thrust, into Bernice's heart, and you'd be *sure* of the half million, Brainard!"

Brainard snapped: "You don't know what you're saying!"

Marmon said grimly: "There is one thing we must not forget. Bernice saw the man who killed Doug. That's why he came back to make sure she would never live to identify him—but she will. She'll speak his name. She'll rise to name the murderer."

CHAPTER THREE

Drug of Doom

A SOFT knock echoed in the room where Bernice Hartley lay uncannily still, where Grant Marmon sat a grim sentry at the portals of doom.

A day of torture had passed—and now the beginning of another night of torment. Marmon had not opened the bolted door. He had not eaten, had not slept. All the while the girl had lain motionless, shrouded with silence—silence disturbed now by the rap on the door.

"It's Caroline," a quiet voice said. "You can't keep this up, Grant. If you insist on staying there to watch her, perhaps you'd like coffee. I've brought some. Please open the door."

Marmon pulled himself up. He braced the door with his foot as he opened it. He put trembling hands on a silver tray

bearing a pot of coffee and a cup. "It won't be long—I'm sure it won't." At once he shot the bolt.

"Grant, won't you come out?" Caroline asked through the panels. "Won't you lie down and rest?"

"Rest!" Marmon snapped. "The moment I close my eyes they'll come for her like vultures. I can't let myself sleep."

He poured the cup full of steaming coffee and gulped it down. It seemed weak and strangely acrid, but Marmon took a second cup and a third. He gazed tenderly at the girl on the bed who lay so still. He had begun to dread to turn his eyes upon her. "The one infallible test of death," he had read it somewhere—the words haunted Marmon. "The putrefaction of the body. . . ." Marmon tore his eyes away. . . .

The coffee was having no stimulating effect on him. Instead, he found it harder to fight off sleep. . . . The letter Douglas Hartley had written. Marmon drew it from his pocket. He had read and reread it, feeling that somewhere between its lines the answer to the murder riddle lay—an enigma which only Bernice could answer. His aching eyes jerked from word to word as he strove again to solve its riddle.

. . . I am filled with a dread that my mind may fail, or that the doom of the accursed Hartleys may claim me.

You remember Dad's wedding gift to Mother, the diamond necklace which Dad had made according to his own design. Mother loved it so much she stipulated in her will that it was to be buried with her. We all saw it at her throat when the lid of the casket was bolted down. We know the necklace went with her into her grave.

Marmon shook his head to clear his senses. Fatigue was spinning a blinding web before his stinging eyes. He forced himself to read on:

The next day after Bernice became so

upset by the gypsy's prophecy—she and I went to dinner at Mrs. Marston's. Mrs. Marston's house guest was Mrs. Livermore, from Chicago. Bernice and I kept staring at the diamond necklace Mrs. Livermore was wearing. It was Mother's—we kept telling ourselves it was impossible—but we knew it was Mother's.

We asked Mrs. Livermore polite questions. She had bought the necklace from a reputable jeweler. When she allowed me to examine it more closely, I looked at the clasp. Mother had had hers engraved—"C to L." I was almost delicious with relief when I saw the clasp of Mrs. Livermore's necklace was not enscribed at all. But then she explained:

"I had the clasp replaced when I bought it. The original was initialed—"C to L," I think."

Understand, Grant, the necklace itself is not the vital thing to us. It was Mother's but now it is, somehow, rightly Mrs. Livermore's. To Bernice and me it was an indication of something else, the symbol of a fear striking at the very roots of our minds. We kept asking ourselves, "What has happened, what has happened?" Somehow we must learn the answer or else we'll go mad.

The page was blurring before Marmon's eyes. He fought the numbness that was enveloping him and stared at the swimming words.

You remember, Grant, how profoundly Mother was disturbed by Dad's "death"—how she dreaded the same horror happening to her. She made us promise that, when the time came, and she seemed to have died, we would not permit her body to be embalmed. We granted her wish, and waited until at last we were sure, and we were sure when we buried her. Yet—is she lying there in her grave now? Or was she still alive when her casket was lowered into the grave—and did someone know it—and was she, somehow, disinterred—and is she alive now, somewhere in this world, hidden from us by a secret cloud that rose with her at her resurrection?

The necklace—we always come back to the necklace. What does it mean? How can it exist in the land of the living while Mother remains in the realm of the dead? That

is the thought torturing us. Is Mother dead and in her grave, or is her coffin empty?

Marmon's head was whirling. He opened the window, drew deep breaths. The fresh air cleared his senses a little.

Bernice and I have desperately tried to think it out logically—but there is no logic. There is only the horrible conviction that our dead is not dead, that the grave is vacant. Yes, we tried. First we questioned Simon Calder.

"You saw the necklace at her throat when I closed the casket," Calder said, "and you remained with her until the grave was filled."

We even dared confront Stanley Brainard. "Was the necklace we buried with Mother the real one?" we asked him. "Had artificial stones been substituted without Mother's knowing the difference?" It was tantamount to accusing him of theft and, of course, he denied it. Yet I wonder—

Marmon blurted: "God! I can't let myself break now. They're waiting—waiting for it. If I let myself go, they'll take Bernice away. They'll kill her—kill her with their stupidity—if I don't keep hold of myself."

Wonder—horrible uncertainty—it is consuming our minds. We can't endure it any longer. The only way we may be sure is to open Mother's grave, yet God knows we can't do that. Whether her casket is empty or whether she is lying in it—God help us—will we ever learn?

Doug.

MARMON groped to the door, gazing in despair at the girl lying so still, so white on the bed. Bernice's mother had lain like that, day after day, while her tortured children waited for the certainty of her death—certainty that now, months later, a dead son was questioning. Perhaps Bernice would never rise. Perhaps hers was the sleep of eternity. Perhaps . . .

Marmon tried to make no sound as he

turned the key in the lock and went along the hallway. Quietly he entered the room that had been Letitia Brainard's. It was musty as if filled with the breath of a tomb. Scarcely able to find his way to the desk, Marmon fumbled an old scrap book from a drawer and turned to a photograph of a diamond necklace.

A ragged line of type on the yellowed clipping announced that this halftone pictured Craven Hartley's wedding present to his wife. The highlights grew blindingly bright in Marmon's eyes, moved and danced before him, bewitched things swirling like storm-torn constellations—stars waltzing through cosmic space black as all eternity. Profound darkness poured into Marmon's mind. . . .

Far, far away he heard footfalls and voices—sounds from another world—as he strove to rise, but he could not move. An interminable period passed—ages and eons—before he felt volition returning to him. When he forced himself up unsteadily the footsteps and voices were gone—the house was hushed.

He started toward Bernice's door—then, a sob breaking from his lips, he flung himself forward. Her room door was standing open! He stumbled in, staring at the bed where she had lain—a bed now empty. He shouted "Bernice!" as he swayed to the window and stared down to see fresh tire tracks in the driveway. "Bernice!" as he twisted back in terror.

He stopped short, staring at the silver coffee pot standing on the tray. A cold suspicion helped clear his mind. A trickle of the dark brew remained in it—and a half-melted tablet. He propelled himself out of the room as quick footfalls came up the stairs.

He gripped Caroline Brainard's shoulders. "Where is she? Where have they taken her? You drugged me—you put something in my coffee so you could steal her away—"

The woman sobbed: "Please, Grant. You were on the point of collapse. It was just a few sleeping tablets. We were sure about Bernice—it was too horrible—you were driving yourself mad—"

"You fool, you fool!" Marmon shook the woman. "Where is she? *Where have they taken her?*"

"It's too late, Grant!" she screeched. "Simon Calder took her away. Do you hear? It's too late!"

Marmon sped down the stairs, jerked out the entrance, ran reelingly to the garage. He fell into his roadster, twisted blindly at the ignition, kicked at the starter. With the engine roaring he whirled down the drive, hurled the car into the boulevard. In insane haste he started toward the mortuary of Simon Clader.

"It's too late!"

Pavement flowed under the headlights in a blurring stream. It was a delirium, long and maddening, while Marmon flew interminably through empty space. Yet, the cold rushing wind cleared his brain and when he drew near the amber lighted house he acted with consummate caution.

The mortuary was a somber dwelling of the dead shrouded by the funereal glow of its chapel windows. Marmon stole toward a shining black hearse which sat backed to broad doors at the rear. The hearse was open and empty. Marmon crept to a door set in a whitewashed wall. He brought the automatic into his hand as he stepped into a cement corridor that was cold and reeking with the scent of death.

Behind another door movements sounded, lowered voices spoke. With the utmost care Marmon turned the knob and opened a crack. He looked into the embalming chamber.

Two men were at work near an enamel table—Simon Calder and Arthur Dotey. They were adjusting a tank full of preservative fluid, uncoiling rubber hose. A

sharp surgical implement was in Calder's hand as he bent forward—a blade used to open the veins of corpses for the admission of the embalming poison. He half turned away and Marmon saw the nude girl on the slab—Bernice.

"Don't touch her!"

THE men jerked up, twisting around. The knife, dropping from Calder's hand, rang on the cement floor. Dotey retreated, his face whiter than that of the girl. Marmon's gun covered them as he made sure, swiftly, that the keen edge of the knife had not yet marred Bernice's smooth skin. He straightened grimly when Calder said acidly:

"If you don't go, you'll suffer for it."

Marmon felt along the wall, twisted a knob, opened a closet. It was cluttered with the ghastly appurtenances of the embalming chamber. He stepped to the side of the table where the girl lay, his gun waving. "Get in there, both of you," he ordered. "I swear to God I'll shoot you if you don't."

The two men retreated into the closet. Dotey was quaking with fear. Simon Calder's narrowed eyes gleamed venomously. Marmon blotted away their faces with the door, dragged a chair close, braced it under the knob. Then he turned to the girl who lay naked on the table, still and cold.

Marmon brought a robe from the hearse and whipped it over her. He lifted her in his arms, a waxen, limp burden. He carried her out of the chamber, through the darkness, to his car. As he placed her tenderly beside him, he realized that Calder and Dotey were even then striving to break out of the closet, that a few seconds might bring the police.

The hot motor caught at once. Marmon cut sharply from the curb, seeking dark streets, traveling swiftly as he dared, the

name of Bernice on his lips—unspoken because she could not answer.

"But she isn't dead . . . she isn't dead."

When Marmon turned down a rough dirt road, an eternity later, a lake rippled in the beams of his headlamps. He braked at a log cottage by the water's edge. The air was cold and the camps, Marmon knew, were deserted by their summer tenants. He had often swum here with Bernice, and canoed in the moonlight.

He broke the lock. He took her into his arms and carried her into the deep gloom inside. He placed her on a bed, wrapped the robe snugly around her, looked long at her white, still face.

"Rest, Bernice—rest, darling."

He left her in the silent darkness, his heart as cold as hers, and drove away alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ghoul's Gamble

THE private cemetery of the Hartleys lay hushed among the pines, its sighing serenity disturbed only by the mournful calling of owls. The grave of Letitia Hartley Brainard yawned in the darkness, untouched since the body of her murdered son had been lifted from its shallow depths.

He had wound his way along unfrequented back roads, had descended into the valley of the dead while avoiding the house. Cautious that men from headquarters might be standing guard, he listened to every furtive night-sound. Sure at last he was alone, he went with slow, quiet steps to the half-opened grave.

The shovel used by Douglas Hartley had been taken away by the police, but Marmon had brought another, small and collapsible, from the kit of his car. He lowered himself into the grave. He drove the blade into the earth and worked with-

out a light, listening tautly, his nerves burning with anxiety.

Bit by bit Marmon deepened the cavity. His every sense snapped to alertness when the steel struck something hard with a hollow muffled sound. He felt a damp board—the lid of the coffin of Bernice's mother.

Each scrape of the shovel over the wood seemed to rasp along Marmon's spine. He brought a heavy screwdriver from his pocket and worked at the fastenings of the cover—an exhausting, awkward ordeal. He struggled up, pried the lid loose, heaved it out of the hollow. The casket of Letitia Hartley Brainard lay exposed.

Marmon plied a wrench at the bolts of the headpiece, panting with the effort. Sharp, creaking sounds, the protest of rusty metal aroused an echoing stir among the trees. One by one Marmon loosened the studs, twisted them free. He fingered at the hinged section, bracing with all his strength, lifting it.

He paused, nauseated by the fetidity that swirled around him. Thought of facing the thing that lay beneath him now—or the emptiness that would mock him with a greater mystery—was an almost unbearable pain. He forced himself little by little toward the inevitable moment. The light gleamed.

One short moment, then it was out. Marmon kept his position, stunned with the certainty that he could never forget the thing he had seen. It was not a face, nothing that could ever have been human—but it was there. The light had revealed, in repellent horror, all that was left of a woman who had met the infallible proof of death. And in the bright shine, during that incredible moment, the stones of a necklace had twinkled.

Marmon reached into the casket. His soul revolted while he strove to find the necklace. He groped in darkness, fingertips stretching a fraction of an inch at a

time—and at the first touch of precious metal, he tore back. He had it—had it in his numb, trembling hand—the necklace!

With mad haste he thrust it into his pocket, pushed the lid down. Rapidly, but with almost tender care, he twisted the bolts tight. He lowered the wooden cover, replaced it, swung the shovel. Quickly he refilled the grave to its former level—and as he was climbing out, he heard footfalls along the path.

Marmon heaved up breathless, clutching the automatic. The footfalls stopped abruptly. A gruff voice called: "Who's that?" A blinding beam of light shot through the trees. It shafted upon Marmon as he whirled into a stumbling run. With the flash beam wavering behind him, he plunged among the trees while a man gave hard chase.

A hand gripped Marmon's arm. Lieutenant Carmody studied Marmon's haggard face, his sharp eyes glittering.

"What have you been doing, Marmon?"

Marmon snapped: "Let go of me!"

Carmody answered: "I stopped in the house to pick you up. The chief wants to talk to you. There are no witnesses to bear out your statement, you know—it doesn't sound straight to us. We want to find out if *you* had a reason—sane or insane—for killing Douglas Hartley."

"He was the brother of the girl I love."

"We're wondering," Carmody said, "whether that isn't what killed her—the shock of seeing her fiancé murder her brother."

THE drive of Marmon's fist into Carmody's face was an explosive protest he could not control. The detective blurred back in the darkness. The light dropped from Carmody's hand as Marmon savagely struck again. Marmon fell on him, snatched the gun Carmody was

fumbling to get, hurled it far among the trees. Then, madly, he ran into the maze of shadows.

Marmon drove with mad shrewdness and speed. He kept to the back roads. With the radio playing, he waited for some hint of an alarm that the police had ordered a hunt for him, but none came. He pulled to a stop, at last, in front of an apartment building.

He left the elevator at the seventh floor, went to a door, knocked insistently. This was the apartment of a man whom Marmon knew—the jeweler from whom he had purchased Bernice's engagement ring, who had years earlier, fashioned the Hartley necklace. A sleepy voice asked through the panels:

"Who is it?"

"Grant Marmon. Open the door."

He stepped past a white-headed man whose beard was ruffled by sleep. Marmon, looking around, said "Wait!" He strode into the bathroom, held the necklace in a stream of water, until it was quite clean.

"Look at that," he directed.

The old man took it into blue-veined fingers. He shook his hoary head, ambled to a desk, fixed a lens in his eye.

"Paste," he said.

Marmon thrust the necklace into his pocket, strode out. He went to his car warily. He turned into the highway leading to the Hartley estate.

The sedative still numbed his mind, but he forced himself to think. When he reached a side road near the Hartley home, he left the roadster lightless, climbed a stone wall, crossed a field toward lighted windows. He entered the garden stealthily, looked into the library.

Carmody was there, one cheek marked by a cut, talking earnestly to Stanley Brainard. Marmon strained to catch each word.

"He can't be far away. He couldn't

have taken the girl a very long distance and he wouldn't leave her. I'm going to let him think he's getting away with it while I build up a case. In any event, removing a dead body is a serious offense."

Dead body! The mocking words turned Marmon's thoughts again to the girl lying alone and still.

"Suppose he hated Douglas Hartley without letting on—hated Hartley enough to kill, for some reason we haven't found out yet—but he loved the girl. Marmon didn't intend her to see him commit the murder, but she did. The shock of it killed her. That's why he can't admit even to himself he's responsible for the death of the girl he loved."

Stanley Brainard insisted: "It's not rational—the way he insists my step-daughter is still alive. Perhaps a desperate need for money—a crazy attempt to transfer the whole Hartley fortune to Bernice, so he could marry into it. He denies she's dead because if he admits the fact, he knows his murder was in vain—he's lost it all."

Carmody answered: "I'm playing it slow and careful. That's the way to handle an insane person—let him hang himself. Well—good night."

Marmon sidled out of the glow of the entrance lantern as the door opened. Carmody trudged out. A car ground down the drive. Marmon drifted around the house, opened the way quietly, went along the hall with slow tread. He was in the living-room before Brainard was aware of it.

BRAINARD started, grew white as a sheet. "Grant! The police are looking for you. You've gone too far—you've betrayed yourself."

Marmon asked tightly: "How much did you get for the necklace, Brainard?"

Brainard mumbled: "What?"

Marmon heard Caroline Brainard come into the room behind him. His eyes leveled at Brainard's cold and intense, as he stood with fists clenched. He went on tightly:

"The necklace—Letitia Hartley's—cost two hundred thousand. The paste duplicate was much less, wasn't it?—and she never knew the difference. We all thought it was real when it was buried with her—except you. I have it here— would you like to see it?"

"Good God, Grant!" Brainard exclaimed. "You're accusing me—"

The necklace glimmered in Marmon's palm. "Sold to one fence, then to another, then to a jeweler, and finally to a woman named Livermore—a deadly circle, Brainard, and it trapped you. You understood why Bernice and Doug were so disturbed lately. You remembered the questions they'd asked you about the necklace. You wanted to remove the casket from the grave. You were afraid of going to prison, Brainard—so afraid you committed murder to escape it."

"You *are* mad!"

Marmon took a slow step forward. "Madmen are dangerous, Brainard. They stop at nothing—yes, I'm like that now. I'm going to beat the truth out of you."

"Grant!" Caroline Brainard protested with breathless anxiety. "If you strike him, I'll call the police."

He looked around. The woman had already lifted the telephone receiver. Her face was ashen, her eyes terrorized. Marmon knew she would keep her promise. It was not fear of arrest that brought him to a pause, but thought of Bernice. Once jailed, he would be powerless to stop them.

"You're right, Caroline," Marmon said quietly. "After all, it's not necessary. Bernice saw the man who murdered Doug. She has only to speak his name when she awakens."

He strode out the entrance. As he trudged across the garden he felt a dewy chill along his spine. A cold instinctive warning that he was being watched persisted even when he suddenly left the path, leaped the wall, and cut across the field to the car.

He sped toward the lake, winding through the back roads, at once haunted by the sensation that he was being followed and driven by a consuming anxiety to reach Bernice, but when he swung near the water he felt sure he had shaken the unseen trailer.

She was lying in the darkness, still as he had left her, silent as the night that shrouded her. He knelt at her side. He fought down a mounting grief, a despair that threatened to overwhelm him, as her name rose yearningly to his lips.

"Bernice. . . Bernice. . ."

A sound? For a long moment he dared not raise his head. Had he heard a whispered word? Had those cold lips spoken? Perhaps it was only his fevered imagination tricking him, the madness of his mind mocking him, that wraith of sound still hovering in the air.

"Water. . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

Black House of Death

FADING embers lay on the hearth. Yellow lights filled the living-room of the Hartley house with a soft glow. Quiet, even footfalls disturbed the stillness of the early morning hours—Stanley Brainard walking back and forth, in front of the fireplace. His sister sat watching him, her eyes compassionate, her lips working with unspoken words until at last she said:

"You wouldn't keep the truth from me, Stanley."

Brainard paused. Tires were gritting

in the driveway. He opened the entrance as the car stopped. Dr. Fawcett shivered with the chill of the coming dawn.

"You're mad," he said. "The house is full of irrational people. Calling me out of bed at this hour of the night."

"I've got to be sure," Brainard pleaded. "I want to know definitely, once and for all, whether Bernice Hartley is really dead. If it's possible Marmon's right, if it's possible she's still alive—"

Fawcett grunted. "Do you want details? I made the auscultation test. I held a mirror at the girl's nostrils, and no dew gathered. I placed a downy feather on her upper lip, and it did not stir. I placed a saucer of water on her chest, and there wasn't a ripple. Those are respiratory proofs, Mr. Brainard."

"Yes?"

The physician's scowl deepened. "The conjunctiva of her eye had become insensitive. There was a loss of body heat. The cadaver exhibited primary flaccidity giving way to *rigor mortis*. The post-mortem lividities were in evidence. Putrefactive changes are sure to follow."

"Is there any reason, doctor—" Brainard asked it carefully—"any reason why you would wish to believe Bernice dead though she were really in a state of cataleptic trance?"

Again the physician officiously cleared his throat. "I am a man of science," he answered. "I am stating facts. I did not come here, Mr. Brainard, to be insulted."

A quiet step turned them. Their eyes widened at the young man who appeared on the sill. His cheeks were darkened with a beard, his eyes haggard with exhaustion. His shoulders were sagging and he was trembling as if with the chill of the dawn. It was Marmon.

"I've brought her back," he said.

Caroline Brainard rose tensely from her chair. She came slowly to Marmon, then

tried to pass him. He stopped her with an out-stretched arm.

"Where is she, Grant?"

"Upstairs. In her room. Please don't go up now."

The woman faltered: "We didn't hear you come in."

"The side door," he explained. "I didn't want anyone to see. Stay here, won't you—all of you?"

Brainard and Fawcett watched him silently as he went to the telephone. He opened the telephone book, thumbed down a column. They saw him guide his finger with difficulty as he spun the dial.

"Is that the Simon Calder Mortuary?" He squared his shoulders. "Is that Mr. Simon Calder speaking?" He took a slow, laborious breath. "This is Grant Marmon. I am at the Hartley house, Mr. Calder. You had best—come at once."

Brainard was studying Marmon's face while his own was eaten deep with black lines. Dr. Fawcett went to Marmon with an elaborately gentle gesture.

"Let me give you something to ease your nerves, my boy. You've got to rest or—"

"I'm all right." Marmon brought himself erect. "There's nothing to do but wait for Simon Calder."

Marmon eyed them intently. They lowered themselves uneasily into chairs, listening for the first sound of a car in the drive. The dimming coals in the fireplace made faint crinkling noises. The mantel clock ticked softly. Surprisingly soon the hum of an engine approached the house.

It was Lieut. Carmody. He came in warily as Marmon stood back. "I had a report you were here," he said quietly. "Now then, come along."

"In just a little while, lieutenant. We are waiting. Simon Calder is due here."

THE light in Marmon's eyes was so strange the detective made no move

to stop him. He walked back to the living-room. Carmody entered it, rubbing his numb hands, still eying Marmon alertly.

Brainard said quietly:

"He's brought her back."

"We're waiting," Marmon repeated, "for Simon Calder. Lieutenant, are you going to press charges against me? For assaulting an officer, I mean?"

"I can overlook that," Carmody answered wryly. "I want a confession."

Marmon made a groping gesture. "It's a little difficult, lieutenant. I'm not quite sure of everything that happened. It seems like a nightmare, most of it. It will be hard to separate the real from the unreal."

Carmody nodded. "Take your time, Marmon."

Now the sound of another car was penetrating the hush of the dawn. Marmon turned quietly to the entrance. Holding the door wide, he watched the hearse approach. Bright, shining black, it backed to the house. Dotey climbed down from the wheel and opened the rear doors. Simon Calder came toward Marmon carrying his black case.

The undertaker's narrowed eyes gleamed hostility as Marmon followed him along the hall. He paused to ask, "Where is she?" Marmon gestured and answered: "Go into the living-room first, Mr. Calder." The undertaker lowered his case, went through the door uncertainly. Marmon faced them all.

"I have already asked Lieutenant Carmody a question I must ask you, too, Mr. Calder," he said. "Are you going to charge me with felonious assault?"

Calder answered: "I would be fully justified. I consider it an outrage. I'll promise you nothing."

The bitter twist returned to Marmon's lips. To Carmody he said: "You are seeking a murderer, lieutenant, and you believe I am guilty. I have also been hunting him, and I suspected Stanley Brain-

ard. Only one person ever knew the truth, other than the murderer himself—Bernice Hartley. You wish a confession, lieutenant, and perhaps you'll have it. We may be sure of one fact. The murderer is here in this room, now."

Marmon's gaze turned to Stanley Brainard during a moment's tight hush. "I'll give you all the facts, Lieutenant Carmody—clean-cut and conclusive, all of them. Or perhaps Mr. Calder will give them to you instead."

The undertaker snapped: "What the devil are you talking about?"

"The necklace," Marmon answered quietly. "A week passed between Letitia Brainard's death and her burial—all the time needed for the making of the duplicate. You used the newspaper photograph as a pattern. You handled the exchange very deftly, because none of us suspected the necklace placed in the casket was paste."

The twinkling string dangled from Marmon's extended hand.

"And you knew Bernice and Douglas Hartley had discovered it. You were warned by the questions they asked you. You watched them for fear the truth would be revealed. That's why you hid night after night in the cemetery, near the grave containing a corpse you'd robbed. It meant ruin and prison for you, Calder—that's why you stopped Douglas Hartley with a bullet."

Calder was standing rigid, his eyes stony. "Let him finish. He's mad. You can see it in his eyes. He's accusing me to shield himself."

Marmon pressed on grimly. "How often have you done that, Calder—robbed the bodies entrusted to you? Many persons want to take their treasures to the grave with them. The cemeteries of the world hide untold fortunes in jewels buried with their owners. You've stolen from the dead again and again, haven't you,

Calder? You were afraid it would all come out with the opening of Letitia Brainard's casket."

Calder repeated contemptuously: "He's mad."

Marmon's fist clenched on the false stones. "You tried to kill Bernice too because she saw you fire the shot! Your bullet missed, and you had to rush from the cemetery because I was coming—but you were playing in luck, weren't you, Calder? You came back to knife a girl who a doctor swore was dead, because you didn't dare wait. A wound only you would have seen, and you would have said nothing! You filthy devil—"

The undertaker sneered. "You haven't the slightest proof of what you say. You admit yourself the girl is the only eyewitness and she's—"

He broke off in a gasp. His widened eyes gazed past Marmon, through the door. Dr. Fawcett stood transfixed. Lieutenant Carmody muttered a broken prayer. Stanley Brainard recoiled. His sister swayed as if about to faint. A rustle sounded as a girl paused in the doorway.

Her face had lost the pallor of death. Her lips were ripe red again, her cheeks rich with color. Her eyes were bright, her manner composed. She was fully, smartly clothed, glowing with refreshed vitality. She smiled as she came to Marmon's side.

"Bernice," he asked quietly, "whom did you see kill your brother?"

"Simon Calder."

THE undertaker broke away from his position so violently, so suddenly, a chair toppled to its side. He twisted toward the door, dragging a revolver from his hip pocket. Consternation held Carmody motionless until the weapon was leveled. Calder waved it, covering every person facing him, backing to the door.

"What are you going to do, Calder?" he asked quietly. "Do you think you can

get away now? It's too late—much too late."

Calder was turning the black muzzle at Bernice. His wizened body was trembling, drawing taut. An insane fury smoldered in his eyes as he began to squeeze the trigger. The hammer of the revolver rose . . . rose . . .

The gun cracked at the instant Marmon leaped. Calder lurched, arms upthrown. The bullet furrowed into the ceiling and flakes of plaster rained. Bernice Hartley clung breathless to Marmon's arm. Calder, whirled into the hall, was pointing the revolver again. Marmon stood in front of the girl, protecting her, as Carmody turned to the French windows.

The detective slipped out into the grey light as Calder sped to the entrance. The undertaker drew up with a gasp, glimpsing Carmody at the side of the hearse. Carmody's one hand was on the steering wheel, defying Calder to touch it; his other was leveling his police positive. Calder pointed his revolver full at the detective's chest, flattening against the black side of the hearse.

"Don't stop me," he warned.

Backing, Calder suddenly spun—to face Marmon. Marmon was coming out the entrance. He took slow steps toward Calder, smiling tensely, his advance challenging the gun. Calder retreated before the inexorable sureness of Marmon's deliberate march. The undertaker whirled, eyes flashing with terror, and sprang to the step of the hearse. He lunged in, pulling the black doors shut.

A muffled shot boomed inside the carrier of the dead.

Marmon turned away. Bernice was in his arms. He held her close, hungry for the warm softness of lips that once had been cold, looking into clear, bright eyes that once had been closed as if forever. Her vitality brought ease to his soul.

"You see," he said, "she was only sleeping."



LOCKED IN WITH DEATH

Terror held a great city in its paralyzing grip while girls, whose very youth and beauty condemned them to horrible death, cowered alone behind locked doors—where their danger was greatest!

By Dale Clark

(Author of "My Friend the Corpse," etc.)

HORROR hung like a black pall over Chicago that January of 1936. A horror that centered over Rogers Park, the northerly and fairly affluent district where the outrages centered.

The curtainless squad cars patrolling the pavements! The lines of people in the stores clamoring for locks—the newest, strongest, guaranteed to be pick-proof locks! The grim-faced husbands who

crouched behind those locks night after night clutching their ready, freshly greased, loaded revolvers!

And the uselessness of locks and guns. . . .

Sleepless and infuriated men rode the El in the mornings, each glaring at his neighbor with hot suspicion. The wan, terrified faces of girls who fled on tapping heels through the wintry dusk to barricade themselves in their kitchenette apartments—where they should have been safe, and where actually the danger was greatest!

The stark, screaming, inky headlines on the papers. The descent of swarms of newspaper hustlers upon some silent street in the dead of night, and the fierce brawling of their voices thundering up to the lighted windows:

"Fiend in de block! Hey, uxtry, read-allaboutit! Fiend in dis block!"

The cordons of police closing in—under the personal supervision of Detective Lieutenant Clubb, in charge of the Special Detail—but finding nothing. Absolutely nothing. Except, of course, the latest victim. . . .

THE night club singer, lying nude on the floor of her apartment—horribly bruised and mutilated, her blood besplattering the walls of the room, her throat torn as if by the claws or fangs of some enormously powerful animal. Her doors and windows were locked. . . . The actress, her *sac de nuit* ripped to shreds, and her body shredded by those fangs or claws. Her windows were fastened and the doors locked with new locks. . . . The dancer—she had her door locked and barred, and the windows nailed down!

It was the dancer who lived to gasp out a few words. "Circle of fire. . . . phantom. . . ." What could that mean?

There were others. False alarms, to be sure. In no part of the city could a purse

be snatched, or a woman frightened by a shadow, but the cry of "Fiend!" was raised. Discount also the stories told by hysterical or publicity seeking women who claimed to have beaten off the monster's attack. The real cases followed closely to a grim pattern.

The terror of it! A wild scream ringing out in some apartment building; a sound of furniture smashing, frightful cries and snarls as the brief struggle proceeded; the onrush of neighbors breaking down the door—then, no sign or trace of the fiend! How could that be? The man or animal, or whatever it was, must have been covered with the victim's blood. How did it pass through the police net?

And the circumstances—so similar, so baffling! Always the victims were young and beautiful women, and with the mysterious allure which is called "sex appeal." Generally, the attacker swooped upon them late at night. Yet there were the two brides whose husbands worked in the Loop—they were slain by broad daylight. Generally, too, the fiend found his prey alone—though once two girls, and again a man and his wife, were destroyed.

Always the firmly locked doors and windows! And, invariably, a radio turned on full blast flooded some wild, gay dance tune over the disordered, bloodied room and the horribly mangled, clawed body. . . .

But the doors and windows?

In the name of Heaven, what manner of thing was this that melted into thin air or passed through solid walls?

Fear swelled a frenzied exodus. By every train and bus, beautiful and delectable women fled the accursed city. Husbands sent away their brides, and fathers the daughters that no man could protect against the mysterious and invisible assailant. . . . The world had seen nothing like it since whole medieval populations panicked into flight from the Black Death.

Then, the night of the 29th! And, moving through the swirling, chaotic hell vapors, the figure of Charles Forture—in that building on the very shore of Lake Michigan, with the ice floes grating at its foundations and the freezing spray dimming the windows. . . .

But let *him* tell it.

(Here begins Charles Forture's story.)

BY PROFESSION I am a chemist; by education a graduate of the University of Minnesota. I played football at school, and since have kept in pretty good condition through boxing and handball. I've been steadily employed, dating from 1930, by the firm of Beckley & Beckley.

Not that I expect anyone to be interested in *me*. The point is that I'm physically and mentally at least normal, a little on the scientific and skeptical side, and not a physical coward. My main fault is that I'm too easy going, good natured, and in a way unimaginative.

For instance, last January I wasn't much impressed by the great fiend scare. Mostly newspaper talk, as it seemed to me. That is, until. . . .

But here, I mustn't get ahead of myself. Not being a professional author, or anything like that, I'll just have to tell the thing the way it happened. Consequently I won't start out by chilling your blood in the first paragraph—the way those writing chaps do. As a matter of fact, my blood wasn't the least bit chilled about Enid Walsh.

I met her in rather an odd way that January evening—or rather she met me, for it was she who came and tapped on my door. I yelled, "Come in!" thinking one of the fellows had dropped by. And she came in.

She wore a trim little scarlet, swaggerish suit that hugged tight to her absolutely gorgeous body; her eyes and lips were

vivid, without being awfully made up; and she had a fluff of dark curly hair combed over to one side—but it isn't any good trying to describe Enid. Just imagine your particular brand of dream girl walking in at *your* door and you'll sense what I felt. This isn't mush. Any fellow that's never had a dream girl notion in his head—well, I know what kind of flower he is.

I felt all this before she opened her lips; and when I heard her voice, that clinched it.

"I'm afraid you don't know me, Mr. Forture," she said. "I'm Miss Walsh. Next door."

I must have looked foolish, just staring at her. Probably I grinned like an idiot. Because, wouldn't it have been hell if she'd said, "Mrs.?"

"I don't quite know how to say this," she went on. "It's embarrassing to ask favors of strangers—"

"Oh, I'm a small town boy," I told her. "Always glad to oblige the folks next door. I'll lend you the sugar bowl, cup of flour, gin, anything. I'm handy at running errands, too."

She laughed.

"It's my radio," she said. "There seems to be a click in it. A loud click. One of my girl friends is staying with me tonight—she doesn't want to be alone, on account of the fiend," and I could tell the scare had got to her, too. "I just wondered, would you mind terribly about lending us your radio. Just for tonight. Mine's a rented set, and I'll have the man fix it tomorrow."

I felt like a Polar bear; one of the Rogers Park gang that takes a dip in the lake once a week through the winter.

"Gosh," I had to say, "mine's on the blink, too. Been that way for a week. It's one of those special 18-tubers, and I haven't wanted anyone but an expert to go over it—"

"Then I'll have to ask somewhere else,"

she said. "My friend and I have to practice a dance routine for the Artists and Models Benefit." And closed the door.

I heard her heels clicking down the hall. So she was an artists' model. Then I knew where I'd gotten the dream girl idea—her face on magazine covers. Sure! I listened, and fairly soon another fellow brought her his radio. He carried it into her apartment and hooked it up. I heard him say, "Down the hatch!" and knew she'd offered him a drink.

Damn.

AFTER a while I went and tapped at her door. There was a pause, then she called, "Who's there?"

Well, girls weren't opening their doors—not that month. I told her, and she came. She had thrown on a negligée, and underneath I could just make out the dance routine costume. Panties and a brassiere.

"Please," I said, "would you mind asking your radio man to look in at my set?"

"Glad to," she said. And, naturally, didn't invite me in or offer me a drink.

About 5:45 the next evening, a man stopped at my apartment and offered me his card. It said, "HUGO THYLE, radios rented, repaired, satisfaction guaranteed," and so forth. He was an oldish man, and a big one, and with the most extraordinarily powerful hands I'd ever seen.

You won't believe this, but he didn't use a tool of any kind on my set. When it came to taking out a screw—and they were well-set screws—he simply put his black, thick, sharpened fingernail into the slotted head, and turned. I saw him snip a wire clean through between the thumb and forefinger nails.

"It's a pretty good radio," I said. "Don't you think?" Not that I wanted or needed his opinion.

"That?" His eyes, which were light

green and shifty, showered contempt on the set. "That's a mere child's device."

Which got in my hair.

"You don't see many better ones," I said.

"Oh, commercially." He grunted. "But commercial radio's in its infancy."

I thought I knew what he was getting at. "I expect we will have practical television one of these days. They'll be bringing prize-fights and football games right into our homes, I expect."

"Television?" It sounded like a snort. "That's another child's toy. Radio'll go a long ways beyond that."

I don't know why my spine tingled. It must have been his manner—his perfect cocksuredness.

"Well," I said, "what's your guess?"

He chuckled softly, and for the first time looked straight at me. "Well, what would you say to sitting down in front of your radio and—instead of having the prize-fight brought to you—you yourself be taken to the prize-fight?"

I was too stunned to say anything. "In other words," his words hammered at me "what would you say to ectoplasmic transmission?"

"Say that in English," I said.

"The ectoplasm is the material manifestation of the life-spirit principle," he came back.

"You mean, shoot souls out on radio waves!" I got a laugh out of that. "Oh, nuts!"

Thyle gave me a dirty look. The queer thing is, I don't believe he was sore because I laughed at him. He seemed to be sore at himself—as if he'd said too much, and wished now he hadn't said anything. . . .

THE rest I'll write carefully. My object is to put down exactly what happened. When I'm not sure about any part of it, I'll say so. For example, I can't give the

time to the minute, but it was close to midnight. . . .

Then hell broke loose. I heard a yell from Enid Walsh's apartment. Well, it wasn't a yell, either. More of a muffled sob. I should say that it started out to be a yell and was smothered or throttled into hardly any sound at all. I wouldn't have heard it, except for the thinness of the wall between our rooms. . . .

My chest thickened inside when I heard that. The breath made a dragging noise and feeling in my throat. I couldn't be sure that I *had* heard it; and at the same time, I *knew*. . . .

Then, a sound of feet running—or trying to run, churning up and down in the same spot almost, as if dragging some enormously heavy weight.

I came up out of the chair like a shot, and got to the door, and had to fumble with the knob before I stumbled out into the hall. At the same instant, Enid's door jerked open, and I saw her.

She had on a different negligée, a misty and billowy white silk thing with some kind of a fuzzy collar to it. One sleeve had been torn out from the shoulder, and showed the white curvedness of her arm down to the elbow. The negligée was torn across the front, too. Her hands clasped the tattered silk and covered her breasts.

"What happened?" I said. "What—?"

She couldn't possibly answer for a moment or two. Her face was talc-white, drained white. The eyes made two wide circles, and to me they were bottomless pools on which horror floated. Honest to God, her eyes looked *deathly*.

Enid swallowed, or tried to.

"It's in here," she managed to say. "The fiend—"

I went past her into the apartment. No credit to me, understand. At that time, I figured the fiend to be one of those dirty night prowlers. Maybe with some tricky wire device for unfastening windows, as

the police said. . . . I happened to be the lucky one in the million decent chaps in Chicago aching to sink their fists into the brute.

So I went in, with the left and the right cocked for action, and then had to pull up short . . . because there wasn't anybody or anything to hit.

Nothing.

And at the same time, I had a feeling there was *something*. I could hear it breathing . . . a horrible, wet, sucking sound. Or was that the pound and seethe of blood in my own skull? Because I couldn't locate the source of it. . . .

Understand, the windows were down and fastened down from the inside. I made sure of that. Two rooms opened off the apartment's hallway; a kitchenette-dinette, and a living room with in-a-dor, and the bathroom beyond that.

I waded into the closet where Enid's gowns hung, and explored through the misty, perfumed things. I poked behind the in-a-dor, and looked under the sofa; even into the gas range oven. . . . And there wasn't anything. And at the same time there was that feeling of a secret, lurking, damnable presence!

"It's no use," Enid said. She had closed the door and stood leaning against it. "You won't find it . . . it just *isn't*—"

I stared at her. "But you said it was in here!"

"I know." Her voice went dull, resigned. Hopeless. "Only, the thing isn't human. Not even real . . . if you can see what I mean."

I COULDN'T. So I fumbled in my pocket—I had on my smoking jacket, by the way—and found a cigarette. She didn't take one. Still that pale face and too-wide eyes! "You'd better tell me what happened, exactly," I said.

"I'm alone tonight," Enid explained. "The noise of the lake outside bothered

my friend—made her imagine things, she said. She's staying with another friend tonight."

She glanced at the sofa—didn't point, for her hands covered her breasts, as I've said. "I sat there. Listening to the radio. Perhaps I dozed off a little—"

"That's it!" I said. "You had a nightmare. Of course." I even thought to myself that maybe she had torn her own negligée, before she snapped out of the nightmare.

"It wasn't a dream," she shook her head. "It—oh, the horrid, slimy *thing!* It got hold of me and dragged me down—tore at me. . . . And then somehow I twisted away from it, off the sofa onto the floor. I staggered away, I don't know how—"

"What did it look like?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"You mean, the light was off?" I said puzzled. "But the radio was on—?"

"That's on the power circuit," she said. "But the bridge lamp was burning. I just didn't see it clearly—something strange and white, or cloudy . . . if there was anything to see! Oh, I don't know!"

It sounded more and more like a nightmare to me. Still—"Shall I call the police?" I asked.

She bit her lip, shaking her head. "The police can't do anything. They never do. Only I'd get my name and picture in the papers and people would stare at me, strangers come up and ask questions—I'd hate that!"

I knew. Maybe they'd even call her one of those cheap publicity seekers. . . .

"Look here, Miss Welch!" I said. "You can have my apartment—there's a bedroom, and I'll sleep in the chair; or I'll bunk in your dinette."

"No-o."

Well, it wouldn't have been exactly proper. Besides, why should she trust me?

So I said, "Anyway, I sleep lightly. If

you have any more trouble, just call."

I lied. I didn't sleep at all. Back in my own apartment, I took off my shoes and lay back in the chair. This chair faced the door; and, furthermore, I opened the door a very little and propped it with a wad of paper. The idea being not to waste any time fumbling with the knob again.

Also I balanced a book on the back of my hand—just in case I should doze off. . . .

Pretty silly, considering that the girl had merely dreamed the thing? Yes, but I remembered that feeling of a *something* being in there. Remembered it? I felt it now, gibing at me. . . .

THEN . . . It was a full hour later.

I could hear Enid walking about. There wasn't going to be any sleep for either of us, apparently. And I heard the radio playing in her living-room. . . . By and by, it seemed to me that there was something queer about that radio music. As if something more than music lived in it. A menace. A queer, pulsing, evil menace!

Crazily, I wanted to pound on her wall and tell her to shut off that radio; that it wasn't right—somehow.

"I'm having a nightmare, too," I decided.

All the same, I got up and went to my own set. A little time passed while the tubes warmed, and then I hurried dialing down through the night-owl stations until I got in on her wave-length.

I listened. "Treasure Island," it was. But hadn't it a different, cleaner, sound as it came from my radio? I felt sure of it.

Then. . . There wasn't any yell this time. Not even the whisper of a sob. Only the sound of something wet rustling, if wetness can rustle, a dreadful soft squishy sound as you'd imagine the feelers of an octopus slithering over a sea stone would make. . . .

And this sound seemed to be an intensification of what I'd been hearing in her radio!

I went through the door—down the hall like a shot. I knew that this time she wouldn't get to *her* door. I slammed down the corridor, close to the opposite wall, and whirled—smashed my shoulder against her door.

They don't put solid oak doors in these apartment buildings. There was hardly any sense of shock as I crashed through the flimsy panel.

"Enid!" I choked.

She lay in the middle of the living room floor, in a pool of light shed by the bridge lamp. Face down, with her hands out in front of her clutching the rug—as if she'd been trying to drag herself away from something. . . . All that remained of her negligée was the fluff of fur around the neck.

Three bloody channels raked down over her nude, satiny back. From just between the shoulder blades to the swelling roundness of her hips. As if she'd been torn by an enormous, metal claw!

Thank God, she lived! Great breaths lifted her shoulders.

I stared across the room. And there wasn't anything. . . .

Nothing. . . .

Except the radio purling out a louder, different dance melody. . . .

But this couldn't be a nightmare, I knew. Those scratches—wounds, really—couldn't have been self-inflicted! There *had* to be something.

And the dinette—dark! Didn't something move in there? Lord, I couldn't be sure. If I didn't see it, I sensed the *thing*—its secret, lurking, damnable presence!

Switch buttons ranged on a brass plate along the apartment hall's wall. I poked one. . . .

And killed the bridge lamp. Blackness blotted out everything—except the radio

music flooding out around the yellow blink of the illuminated dial.

Then I saw it!

A FOUL and vile *shape* was in that room—and it seemed to *flow out of the radio*.

The thing took form, almost human—and yet not human, either. . . . a faint and dusky blot outlined by white, vivid, phosphorescent tentacles or filaments which waved and crawled in the air like innumerable glowing worms!

Hands! It had hands. Big, sinister, shining hands with nails which gleamed as fangs in the dark. . . .

There was blood on the hands. I saw that, too. Shining red drops that wept from the extended, groping fingers!

I stood still and gaped at it—instead of smashing out through the broken door. And that standing still was a hell of a lot braver thing than all the charging and fist shaking I'd done that night. . . .

Maybe I'd have run, after all. But suddenly I couldn't. Because the thing rushed me.

Since I'm telling the truth, I can't go into detail about the rest. I don't know what happened, exactly. It was all horror and madness—a blind hot seething maelstrom of rage and fear inside me—and that other cold, slimy maelstrom outside of me. . . .

The *deadness* of it. Like hammering your fists into corpse flesh, flaccid and rotten and gelid. It lived, though. It oozed and slithered all over me, sucked me into its noxious folds.

There was a face in it. Deep in the loathsome jelly substance, the features wavered like a countenance seen through muddy water. Green eyes blazed. A pale slit of mouth laughed, without making any sound. He didn't make a sound, even when my fists rammed deep into the flaccid flesh.

He? Yes—Hugo Thyle.

Or else, some unthinkably horrible replica of him made in some mucid stuff. . . . What had he said? Ectoplasm?

We flopped and thrashed on the floor. His hands raked me. They were noxious, poisoned—I got weak and lightheaded. My fists felt like pillows. My arms went limp.

He—or his ectoplasmic self—had me pinned to the rug. His weight flowed over me, concentrated its weight on my chest and numbed biceps.

And the hands at my throat.

I should have died, then. There was no way I could go on living—not strangled, lungs bursting, head a ball of fire. But I didn't die, though it—for it wasn't human, I knew that now—may have thought I had.

I lurched up and went for the *shape* again.

It got away from me. There wasn't anything I could get my hands on because it seemed to be thinning and dissolving there in front of the radio—disappearing into it!

I smashed at it.

Fire fountained. And I heard a scream—or the ghost of a scream—that cried out in a more horrible torment than this earth knows . . . the scream of a thing that dies frightfully . . . the wail of life being pulled fiber from fiber!

Then the apartment lights flashed up. It seemed that half the occupants of the building were crowding into the room. I glared at them stupidly. I, with my hand thrust halfway through the ruined, smoking radio that had exploded when I hit it. . . .

And no sign of the thing anywhere!

SOME one had called the police. They came bursting into the place with a big plainclothesman leading—Detective Lieutenant Clubb, as I afterward learned.

They came damn near dragging me off to jail as the fiend. . . .

But Enid had gotten into the bathroom and put on another wrap; and she opened a window in there, and told them a story about a ragged tramp breaking into the apartment. You see, she couldn't have saved me any other way. Figure it out for yourself. Here were a bunch of cops that had caught a man—bloody faced, with torn clothing—in a room where a girl had been assaulted. They were being ragged to death by the newspapers, those cops. Do you suppose they'd have believed any story about a fiend that vanished into a portable radio?

I didn't say anything about Hugo Thyle. I'd been near enough to jail. I wasn't courting the lunatic asylum.

Clubb quizzed us, hard. What did the man look like? "We can't identify him," we agreed. Finally, he noted the time of the assault—12:51—and left.

I lay awake that night, figuring on ways to cope with Hugo Thyle. I never did settle with him. In the morning paper was a big front page story about the affair in Enid's apartment and back on page 7, this small item:

RADIO EXPERT ELECTROCUTED

Hugo Thyle, 54, proprietor of a radio repair shop at 8540 Cottage Grove, was found electrocuted in his place of business early today. Mr. Thyle had been working over an experimental broadcasting device, of a type so far unidentified, and was killed by a short circuit in the wiring. The time of the accident was indicated by his watch, which stopped at a few seconds after 12:50 A.M. this morning.

Thyle's body was badly injured by flying pieces of metal when the device exploded. The entire upper portion of the trunk was found to be covered with contusions. Physicians said, however, that the electric current caused the death.

Mr. Thyle was formerly employed by the Zonocast Radio Corporation.

The same day, I carefully examined the interior of Enid's radio. Every tube in the instrument was hopelessly wrecked. I have submitted the ruined tubes to experts, who tell me that they have never seen anything of the type before.

Mrs. Forture—yes, Enid—and I have quietly gone around “looking at apartments”—that is, the apartments where the fiend struck. The queer thing is, in the dozen cases we've been able to follow up,

the radios had been rented from Thyle; and he had removed the sets after the tragedy!

It is hard to believe in the transmission of soul plasm over the radio waves. . . .

Now Enid comes and begs me not to write any more about that old horror.

“We will forget it,” she says.

And that is the right and sensible thing to do.

Here ends Charles Forture's story.

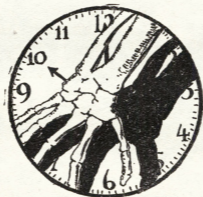
DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

April Number

An Eerily Fascinating Novel of Mystery and Terror

GIRL FOR THE TORTURE GOD

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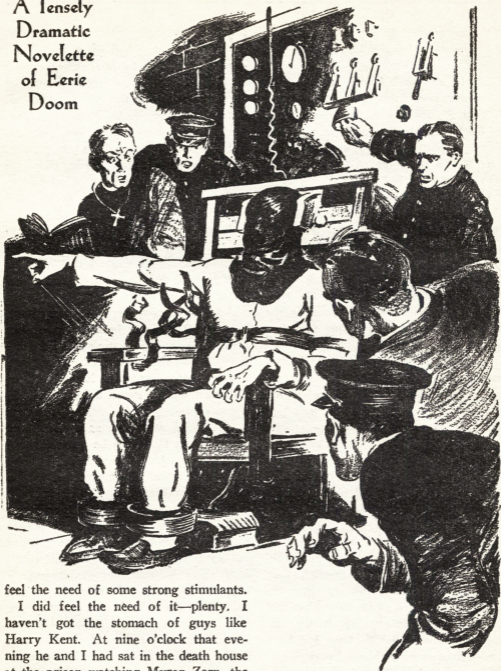
Thousands of volts of electricity swept through his quivering body—and still he sat and hurled vows of vengeance at those whom he deemed his persecutors . . . Nan Raymond and her fiancé trembled but would not believe—until they cowered in the shadow of the black doom he brought back from hell!

THE city room relaxed after the morning edition had been put to bed. A couple of the boys yawned with much noise and gesticulation. Morey, the city editor, stopped chewing the stub of a dead cigar and puffed actual smoke from a live one. I lit a cigarette myself. Then glancing at Nan Raymond,

who is the only girl working as a straight reporter on the *Daily Examiner* and the only girl in the world so far as I'm concerned, I forced a grin and pushed to my feet.

"Honey," I said when I'd walked across to the desk at which she sat, "let's go make some large whoopee for a bit. I

A Tensely
Dramatic
Novelette
of Eerie
Doom



feel the need of some strong stimulants.

I did feel the need of it—plenty. I haven't got the stomach of guys like Harry Kent. At nine o'clock that evening he and I had sat in the death house at the prison watching Myron Zorn, the most fiendish criminal and murderer in the history of the city, burn in the electric chair. Now, just a couple of hours later, Harry was cracking jokes with another reporter while I still felt sick as hell.

And I knew Nan didn't feel any too

chipper. I'd loved her long enough to spot her feelings almost at a glance. She had helped get the evidence which had sent Zorn to the chair and, despite the fact that he had deserved death for all the atrocious crimes he had committed, she was upset.

But she answered: "I'd rather go home, Bob. Somehow I couldn't do anything else tonight."

"Okay, darling," I told her. "I'll go along with you. Let's start. . . ."

"Say, I guess you began to wonder if the old buzzard really wasn't going to fulfill his prophecy," Morey, who had sauntered across the room to us, laughed as Nan reached for her hat.

I didn't laugh. To me, with the ghastly vision seared into my memory, what had happened would never be funny. Zorn, a misshapen hulk of flesh with a huge apish head, had scorned assistance to walk the last mile. Entering the death chamber at the end, he had sneered. But suddenly, as he had taken his place in the chair, an expression of insane fury had contorted his face.

"Cut out that damned drivel!" he had snarled at the chaplain who had been reading from his Bible. Then he had swung venomous eyes over the stand in which reporters sat with the state witnesses, fixing them on Harry and me, and said: "Get this—for yourselves and the others on your snooping paper who helped send me here! They can't kill me! And I'll see you all die in hellish agony before I'm satisfied!"

Had I known what I was destined to know, the full horror, those words would have affected me. Not knowing, they hadn't. I had merely thought them the words of a maniac. But those that had followed, or more particularly the circumstances under which they had been uttered, had made my blood freeze.

For the executioner had advanced, attached the two electrodes to the head and leg of the convict who had already been strapped to the chair by guards, stepped back to his instrument board to await the signal of the warden, finally thrown the switch—and *Myron Zorn had repeated his threats!*

OF COURSE the electricity had eventually quieted him. But for a moment, with that awful hum accompanying his voice and the nauseous stench of burned flesh filling the chamber, he had actually resisted death. More incredible, supposedly impossible, he had even remained conscious enough to talk. . . .

So, remembering the horrible picture, I didn't laugh at Morey's crude attempt to be humorous. I just said: "Yes, I did begin to wonder. . . ."

"Maybe he'll return from the grave to get us," Harry Kent suggested, approaching and leaning on Nan's desk. "Wonder how he intended to kill us? Rather an interesting speculation, eh?"

A brilliant newspaperman, Harry Kent, possessed the clever brain to have been great. But he was erratic as he was brilliant, sometimes convivial, sometimes moody, always sardonic. Now, however, I thought I could detect a forced note in his mockery.

"He didn't strike me as a sweet soul who'd forget the agony he promised us," Kent continued. "Perhaps he'd—"

"I—I wonder if he meant me, too," a new voice said nervously.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Gramp Hodge had edged up behind me. The "Gramp" was a nickname based not so much on age, for Hodge wasn't fifty, as on manner; he was a crotchety bird who appeared with both raincoat and rubbers if one white cloud hung in the sky. Strangely, though, he was the best rewrite man in the office. I gathered that he had grown jittery because he had written several of the stories about Zorn.

"I didn't really help send him to the electric chair." The apologetic whine in his voice made me wonder if he thought Zorn could hear him. "I—I only wrote what you boys told me over the telephone."

"Sure as hell he'll go for you first,"

Morey, the city editor, told him. Then with a raucous hoot: "But I'll lay a hundred to one that even a ghost would get lost in the dust you'd make."

"You can laugh!" Hodge shrilled in quick anger. Almost immediately, however, fear swept back through the gleam of rage which had snapped into his watery eyes. He glanced at Harry, at Nan, finally fixed his gaze on me. His voice quivered with awe as he said: "I've written hundreds of stories about executions. No man ever before talked after the executioner had thrown the switch. No ordinary human being *could* talk. . . . How—how do you explain what happened tonight?"

"Maybe Zorn wasn't human," murmured Harry Kent.

I had chanced to lower my gaze to Nan. I stiffened. For deep in her blue eyes lurked something which wasn't just squeamishness caused by the thought that she had helped send a man to the chair—but fear.

I reached for her arm, said: "Let's go, honey."

She picked up her handbag, rose. Morey and Kent rode down in the elevator with us.

"Old Gramp sure is a pip," Morey muttered, chuckling. "Say, he'll be petrified by the time he gets home."

"And I," Kent announced with his sardonic smirk, "will be petrified long before I get home. G'night, children, I'll see you anon."

He weaved down the street as Morey gave a disgusted snort and ducked into the subway. . . .

NAN and I decided to walk to her apartment. For a while she chattered lightly about events of no importance. I waited. And before long, as I'd expected, she swung to what was on her mind.

"I—I don't see how he could have kept repeating his threats of vengeance while—while the electricity . . ." She shuddered.

"I suppose some short in the wires might've lowered the voltage of the current," I told her. "Or perhaps he did have a physical peculiarity which made it less effective at first. Maybe he knew about this peculiarity and was screwy enough to believe he wouldn't die. . . . But what difference? He did."

"I know," Nan murmured. "Yet I've had the wierdest feeling ever since the execution, Bob. A feeling that—well, just that he isn't—dead."

"But of course he is," I argued. And I remembered the hideous sight of Myron Zorn's misshapen body leaping against the straps, straining, finally going limp when the current was cut. I swallowed hard. Yet my voice was hoarse when I added: "I saw him die. Afterwards the prison doctor examined him and pronounced him dead. They put his corpse in a coffin. That was taken away in a hearse for burial by his brother."

"Oh, Bob!" Nan exclaimed with a contrite glance. "I didn't mean to make you remember! Let's talk about something else!"

We didn't, though, because I kept arguing until I had smothered her feeling with logic. She was herself again, a girl packing more vivaciousness than any girl I know, when we reached her apartment. I stayed a few minutes, put in a word about our glowing plans for the future when I could, then kissed her and left.

I started the hike toward my apartment in the lower end of town. The short cut which I always took when I walked led me through a dark residential district. Having temporarily forgotten the horror of the execution in thoughts of the girl I loved, I hummed happily—until I heard the scream.

It was a woman's scream, high and shrill, a shriek of mortal terror. I jolted to an abrupt halt. Almost immediately a second scream followed the first. This one held both terror and pain.

Shaking off the startled numbness which had gripped me, I dashed toward the corner. The second outcry faded to a choked groan of agony. I reached the corner and wheeled into the side street. A woman, face bloody and clothes torn, lay sprawled on the pavement. Beyond her, running swiftly away from the spot, I glimpsed a hunched figure. I raced in pursuit.

He led me across lawns, through mazes of trees and shrubbery, around houses, trying to lose me in the darkness. I managed to hold the same distance between us. But I couldn't gain.

Though he kept twisting his head, peering back at me, I couldn't seem to penetrate the gloom to see his face. . . . Then I did. He had skirted a street lamp, slowed before plunging into an alley between two apartment buildings, cast a quick glance over one shoulder.

Face—God! I felt my whole body go cold even while I ran. It was a ghastly mask of shriveled red skin!

Yet the hideousness of the face wasn't what made me gasp. Something else, something vague but present, caused the shocked sound to tear from my throat.

For the first time I saw that the creature's head was hairless! And then I realized that his features bore a resemblance to those of Myron Zorn!

THE possible significance of this resemblance drove horror—horror and, yes, stark fear—to the very depths of my soul. Yet I didn't stop. I forced myself to keep rushing toward him. And when he twisted his head, plunged into the alley, reason asserted itself in my brain.

Myron Zorn was dead! . . . That this

creature's head had been hairless, like the shaven head of a convict prepared for the chair, and his skin shriveled, like skin which has been terribly burned, didn't prove anything. Nor did the resemblance. And perhaps I had even imagined it. Myron Zorn was dead! . . .

I had reached the mouth of the alley. Thick blackness shut down on me with the next step. For a short distance I groped my way, then halted and stiffened. A clammy chill oozed over me.

From far ahead a mocking laugh had floated back to my ears. . . .

After a moment I turned to grope my way out of the alley again. Reason had killed my fear; that wasn't why I quit the chase. I just realized the uselessness of it. The creature had given me the slip—and a woman, needing aid if she wasn't dead, lay back there on the side street.

She wasn't dead. A few people who had heard her screams, including a cop, had gathered. Two of them were starting to carry her into the nearest house. I trailed along with the others.

She recovered consciousness in the house. She wasn't badly hurt, just scratched and terrified. Her story, which she told in a shaky voice, was that a degenerate had jumped at her from the bushes as she was walking home. She tried to describe him.

The policeman and the others obviously thought her description exaggerated until, without referring to my momentary impression that the creature had resembled Myron Zorn, I told my story.

"Must've been burned in a fire," the cop grunted. "The burns probably drove him nuts."

The others agreed. . . .

A few minutes later, after the cop had telephoned the description to police headquarters, I borrowed the phone. The woman, it seemed, was the wife of a local politician. Names make news. The yarn

was worth more than a stick on the third page.

I gave the facts to the rewrite on the night trick at the office. Finishing, I made sure he had everything and started to hang up. But the rewrite caught me. In an excited tone he told me he, too, had some news.

And he did—news which caused cold sweat to ooze from my pores.

Ared Zorn, Myron Zorn's brother, had claimed the corpse after the execution and carried it away in a hearse for burial. There had been a driver and himself. Just a short while ago he had appeared at a farmhouse on the lonely road from the prison to the city, bruised and disheveled, and frantically called the police. He had told them, when they arrived, that the hearse had gone over a bank. He had been knocked unconscious. Later, recovering, he had seen that the coffin was on the ground near him instead of in the hearse—open and empty!

CHAPTER TWO

The Man With the Burned Head

I GOT to the office very early the next morning. From Morey I learned that the night city editor had sent leg men to check on the accident. They had reported that the police hadn't found any clues as to what had become of the corpse.

"The driver of the hearse was in such tough shape that he couldn't explain what had caused the accident," Morey told me. "Neither can Zorn. . . . The old man wants us to play up the stuff Myron Zorn jabbered about how he wouldn't die." An expression of disgust swept over Morey's face. "To give the yarn a little of the spooky stuff. Make a hell of a lot out of the fact that Zorn didn't fry like a prime cut. . . . Nuts!"

The old man, as we called the recent

owner of the *Daily Examiner*, loved sensationalism.

"Well, I suppose he's the boss," Morey sighed. "But sometimes he gives me a pain in the kohunkus. . . . You amble out to Ared Zorn's and see if he's more coherent about things after a snooze, Bob. Then go to the Clarke Memorial Hospital and quiz the guy who drove the hearse. His name is Dennis."

"Okay," I said.

Suddenly Morey laughed, exclaimed: "Say, I've got it—Hodge! How he's going to quake when he hears about the corpse disappearing! He'll get the old man's spooky stuff into the yarn without trying. . . . Here he comes!"

I looked toward the door. And there was Hodge, umbrella on his arm, shuffling into the office. His haggard face and his bloodshot eyes told of a sleepless night—and I couldn't help a little feeling of pity for the poor cuss.

He must have taken three steps inside the door before Harry Kent started to give him the new development. I didn't listen long, however, for I saw that Nan had arrived while I'd been talking with Morey. She looked pale, frightened. I went over to her desk.

"Hello, honey," I said with a grin which was supposed to make things look less ominous to her.

But it didn't work. Staring at me with anxious eyes, she quavered: "I met Walter Keller in the hall. He told me all about what's happened. . . . Oh, Bob! The—the feeling I had last night was stronger this morning even before I heard. And now . . . !"

"You mustn't let your nerves get you, darling," I said in an insistent voice. "Somebody stole the corpse. It *was* a corpse. You know that. And corpses don't come to life."

"I—I know," Nan mumbled. "I just can't help—"

"What do you think happened to the body, Lake?" a voice asked.

I glanced over one shoulder to see Walter Keller sidle up to us. He was the old man's nephew, a thin chap with sallow cheeks and receding chin, who had begun as a cub reporter to learn the racket because he figured he'd inherit the paper at the old man's death.

"I think it was stolen," I grunted curtly. I was sore because he'd been the one to tell Nan that Zorn's corpse had vanished from its coffin—unreasonably, of course, since someone else would have told her if he hadn't. But, like the other boys, I guess I even resented Keller's existence; he was too much of a parasite.

"Who would have stolen it?" he countered. A superior expression crept over his face. "Electricity is a strange force. I happen to know more about it than the rest of you in this office. I've studied it . . . and the related psychic forces. Now I have a theory that Myron Zorn actually has—"

"Bunk!" I snapped. "Neither of us are interested!"

With a sullen frown Keller slouched away. . . .

"Listen, kid," I continued to Nan, "don't let dopes like him feed you any screwy theories. That feeling of yours comes from being upset because you dug up some of the evidence used to send Zorn to the chair. But you don't need to be upset. He was a rat who deserved to die. Just remember the helpless women he tortured to death."

Nan shuddered.

"I've got to go have a chat with Ared Zorn," I told her. "Keep a stiff upper lip, honey. . . . See you soon."

LEAVING the office, I jumped into a cab. Ared Zorn, a bachelor who had once been a professor at the university and had retired to do private research

work, lived on the outskirts of the city. I gave the driver the address and lit myself a cigarette.

The question Walter Keller had asked had been sticking in my crop ever since I'd had the news from the rewrite over the phone last night: Who would have stolen that corpse? I couldn't think of anybody. Yet obviously the corpse had been stolen; nothing else could have happened.

For a few minutes after hearing the news, however, I hadn't been so sure nothing else had happened. The fact that the hideous hairless creature had seemed to resemble Myron Zorn had been less easy to forget with Zorn's body actually gone from its coffin. In the end, though, I had managed to make my reason stifle the wild ideas in my head. . . .

Within ten minutes we reached Ared Zorn's house. It was a gloomy old place, set far back from the street, surrounded by trees and unkempt shrubbery. I told the cabby to wait, went up the walk, knocked.

An old crone with a wrinkled parchment face opened the door. She gave me a hostilely questioning stare.

"I'm Robert Lake of the *Daily Examiner*," I said with a cheery smile. "I'd like to see Mr. Zorn."

She said: "Humph."

But she told me to wait, closed the door and eventually reappeared. As if doing anything for me caused her acute agony, she motioned me into a musty hall and led me to a mustier room at the end.

Ared Zorn sat in a stiff chair behind a desk littered with books and papers. Unlike his monstrous brother, he was rather a fine looking man. He had a thin ascetic face, studious grey eyes, grey hair.

"Good morning," I said in the tone I reserve for people from whom I want to get something to print. "I hope that

you're recovering after your unfortunate accident."

He nodded but offered no comment.

"We thought you might possibly remember more about the accident this morning," I continued. "I mean about the cause."

He shook his head, muttered: "No. I wasn't watching the road as we went down that hill. Suddenly we skidded—" he gave a little shudder—"and then there was a terrible crash. I felt myself being hurled from the seat. . . . That's all I remember."

"You regained consciousness to find your brother's coffin on the ground near you—open and empty," I said. I made my voice casual. "Do you have any idea what might have happened to the body?"

"Do I—have any—idea?" He repeated my words in a hoarse whisper. Then quickly, nervously: "No—no, I don't."

I waited a moment before I asked: "Do you recollect that your brother had any physical peculiarity which might have made him partially impervious to electrical shocks?"

Ared Zorn stared at me, a puzzled expression on his face, but back in his grey eyes I thought I could detect a furtive look. He ran his tongue over dry lips.

"No, I don't recollect any such peculiarity," he said, shifting in his chair.

I waited another moment before, still very casually, I murmured: "You've gone deeply into electricity with your psychological researches, haven't you?"

"Only a—little," Ared Zorn mumbled.

"Do you think such a peculiarity possible?"

"I—I couldn't say." He raised one shaky hand, swathed in bandages, and pressed the fingers along his forehead. "I'm afraid you must excuse me now. I—I feel too faint to talk."

"Of course," I told him solicitously. "Thank you for seeing me at all."

I went to the door and, as I stepped into

the hall, cast one quick glance over my shoulder. His eyes were fixed on me. . . .

USHERED out by the sullen housekeeper, I returned to my waiting cab and ordered the driver to take me to the Clarke Memorial Hospital. During the trip I thought about the brief interview with Ared Zorn.

Obviously he had hedged on the questions concerning electricity; they had seemed to put him on his guard against admitting something. I wondered what. And I wondered why he had been so nervous when I had asked him if he had any idea what had become of the corpse of his brother. I suspected he did have an idea. . . .

Arriving at the hospital, I went into the reception room and asked about the man who had driven the hearse. He was too badly injured to talk any more, the nurse told me, so I rode back to the office.

I looked for Nan, couldn't find her—and then Morey shouted to me.

"Get over to the Cramer mansion," he ordered, cradling the receiver of one of the battery of phones on his desk. "The caretaker just called the police. His wife was murdered last night. He claims he was bound and couldn't get free until morning. . . . God, this ought to please the old man!"

The Cramer mansion was one of those brownstone atrocities built in the nineties. I argued my way past the cop on guard at the door, pushed into the hall and followed the sound of voices into a big room to the right.

Inspector Murphy grunted at sight of me. He and two other plainclothes men were grouped around a quivering old guy with an ashen face and anguished eyes.

Then I felt the inside of me go hollow.

The woman lay on the floor near one corner. She had been strangled to death. Her face, framed by disheveled grey hair,

was bloated and blue. Her glazed eyes bulged from their sockets.

"I—I tell you I didn't do it!" the old guy shrilled the protestation in an hysterical voice. "You must believe me! I didn't! One of them did it! . . . They jumped on me when I came into the room. They bound me and gagged me. There's the rope, the gag." He pointed to some rope and a wad of cloth on the floor. "They opened the safe and took everything—all the jewels. Then she—my wife—came downstairs looking for me and . . . Oh God!"

For a moment the poor old devil shook with sobs. But finally he managed to continue:

"One of them strangled her before she could utter a single cry! Strangled her to death . . . right here in front of me!"

"And do you still insist they looked like corpses?" Inspector Murphy grunted in a sarcastic voice.

"Two of them *were* corpses! I could smell the stench of the grave on them! And their faces . . . God, they were horrible! . . . The third—the fiend who murdered my wife—was a monster with a hairless head and a ghastly face that looked as if it had been burned!"

Jerking taut, I pushed toward the caretaker.

"A face that looked as if it had been burned!" I echoed. "What time did this happen?"

"About three o'clock, sir," he quavered. "I heard some noises and came to investigate. The Cramers had all gone away on a trip and left part of the family jewelry in the safe. The servants were on vacations. . . . Just about three o'clock. But I couldn't get loose to call the police until this morning."

"I think he's telling the truth, Murphy," I said to the inspector. "This monster with the burned face must be the degenerate who assaulted that woman about

twelve o'clock last night. I chased him and saw him. The description fits perfectly."

"Say, it does!" Murphy exclaimed. "I'd forgotten about him. Maybe you're right and the story is the truth." Suddenly he frowned. "But the two who looked like corpses. What the hell are they?"

"I don't know," I muttered unsteadily.

I tightened my lips. The monster who had so fiendishly strangled this poor old woman must be the hideous creature I had chased—the creature who had resembled Myron Zorn. Between midnight and three o'clock he had acquired two accomplices who looked like living corpses. . . .

Good God, what hellish horror stalked the city?

DURING the whole trip back to the office I drove my reason at the nameless dread within me. Again I told myself that the creature's uncanny resemblance to Myron Zorn meant nothing. Great Heaven, it couldn't! And, of course, the other two the caretaker had claimed were corpses weren't corpses. That was equally impossible.

But what the devil was the gag . . . and why?

Reaching the office, I found Morey having himself a private laugh over something. He called to me. I glanced at Nan's desk, saw she wasn't there, and went over to the city desk.

"This is rich," Morey told me. "Gramp Hodge and dear nephew Walter have been working on the old man. First Gramp feeds him on how Myron Zorn must've been superhuman to have talked after they poured the juice into him. Then Keller feeds him a few crazy theories on how electricity controls life and death. Between 'em they've got the old man believing that Zorn either didn't really die

or has returned from the dead. . . . And is he scared!"

Morey had another laugh, then wiped his eyes and asked me what I'd got. I told him—still withholding the fact that I'd thought the degenerate resembled Myron Zorn.

But such a fantastic story was on the books, it seemed, without any help from me.

"The old man, on the strength of his nephew's fantastic electrical theories, already figures Zorn has cheated the grave and is committing every crime in the city," Morey said. Then he frowned. "Say, this one could give a guy the creeps if he let his imagination play with it. A fiendish killer with a hairless head and a burned face . . . and two henchmen the caretaker swears were walking corpses. That could give a guy the creeps, couldn't it?"

"It could," I murmured.

And suddenly, for just a moment, an uncertain gleam penetrated the hardness of Morey's eyes. Then he snorted as if disgusted at himself.

"Did you get anything from Ared Zorn or the driver of the hearse?" he demanded.

I told about my interview with Ared Zorn.

"Well, you better see the old man before you write your yarns," Morey said after I'd finished. "He wants to have finger in every angle of this case. You'll probably find him mumbling prayers in his beard."

"Anybody in his office now?" I asked.

"I don't know. I never know since he had that second door cut through into the back hall. Hodge went out to get a prescription for his nerves. Keller finally started off on his morning assignment." And half under his breath Morey grumbled: "Swell fun to have the owner's nephew for a cub. . . ."

I went across the door of the old man's

private office and knocked. There wasn't any answer. I knocked again, louder, because the old man is deaf. Still no answer—and I pushed the door open.

The ghastly sight which met my gaze made every muscle in my body snap as stiff as a steel rod. The blood in my veins congealed. Horror rocked my senses.

For the old man, his face purple and eyes glassy, sat slumped low against the back of his desk chair—strangled to death!

CHAPTER THREE

Discovery in the Cemetery

DURING the rest of that day, that night and the next day, the horror I had felt increased a hundredfold and spread throughout the city. For crime after crime, usually a robbery with someone murdered and yet someone else left alive to tell the tale, was committed. And always the someone else left alive told a gruesome tale of a monster with a hairless head, burned face, and two accomplices who looked like living corpses.

The murder of the owner of the *Daily Examiner*, coupled with the fact that Myron Zorn's body had disappeared from its coffin when the hearse had been wrecked, convinced people the monster was Zorn. The inability of the police to find clues pointing to any other murderer was even further proof. Either still alive or returned from the dead, Zorn had risen from his coffin and begun to carry out the threats he had uttered in the death chamber.

Tonight, the second night after the old man's murder, stark terror gripped the city. Since dark the streets had been nearly deserted. Those few forced to be abroad, their eyes wide with fear, clung to patches of light.

Of course we whom Zorn had treat-

ened, they muttered to each other, were doomed. That was certain. But that wasn't all. No one else was safe. . . .

At about eleven o'clock, as usual, we put the paper to bed. Newspapers can't just die with their owners. Besides, the *Daily Examiner* already had a new owner—the old man's nephew, Walter Keller.

His expectations had proved to be sound; he had been the old man's sole beneficiary. Now, his sallow face flushed with excitement, he stood beside Morey at the city desk.

"This first article of mine will send the circulation soaring," he gloated. "I've advanced the theory that some of the mysterious forces of electricity are really psychic forces. Therefore a man killed by electricity doesn't die as other men die. His mind still possesses extraordinary psychic powers—powers which indubitably allow him to raise his physical corpse from the grave."

Morey glowered.

"And I've advanced the theory that Myron Zorn has returned from the grave. He died—yes—but not as other men die. . . . Scientists in this country will send my article all over the world to contemporary scientists!" The flush in Keller's cheeks grew brighter. "Now I'm having my chance to make all my theories on the relation of electricity to the psychic world heard!"

"You sound glad your uncle was killed," Morey muttered.

"No—no, I'm very sorry!" Keller protested quickly. "But this phenomenon *has* given me an opportunity to . . ."

I didn't listen any longer. Though not even able to muster a smile for her, I dragged myself wearily over to Nan's desk. She sat there, her pretty face pale and drawn, still intent on that conceited fool's ranting.

"Please don't be bothered by the bunk he spouts," I begged. "He's crazy."

"I—I wonder," Nan husked. Then she lifted fearful eyes. "The prison doctor swears Myron Zorn was dead when he examined him. Yet who can this man with the burned face be except Myron Zorn? Who else would commit such brutal murders? Who else would have killed Mr. Keller?"

"I don't know," I answered frankly. "But I do know the fiend can't be Zorn. I saw Zorn die. The prison doctor swears he did die. That means he's still dead."

"Yet three people he's tortured and left alive have recognized him," Nan quavered. "And those two corpses . . . ? They've both been recognized as Zorn's two henchmen who were electrocuted last month. And why would they have tortured the man who sent them to the electric chair if they hadn't been the ones who wanted revenge?"

Earlier in the evening a man who had been instrumental in sending Myron Zorn's two henchmen to the chair had been assaulted. But instead of being killed, he had been horribly tortured and left alive to suffer. He had claimed that he had recognized the faces of his torturers. The police, however, had held that terror inspired by newspaper stories had made him imagine he recognized them. . . .

"I don't know," I muttered again.

God, if only I did know! Ever since the old man had been murdered, with the exception of two hours sleep which sheer exhaustion had demanded, I had sought for some way to smash the horror gripping the city—sought in vain. If only I could get a lead!

"I wonder whose turn's next," a sardonic voice said.

Harry Kent had appeared from somewhere. He draped one leg over the corner of Nan's desk.

"Let's see," he continued, "there're five of us left in the top flight of workers on this rag who helped push Zorn so rudely

into the hot squat: Nan, you, me, Morey and Hodge. I wonder which will—”

“Stow it, Kent!” I snapped.

“But I—”

“God!” a young reporter burst into the city room. “I—something—something terrible—” He choked.

“Come on, come on, what’s the matter?” Morey bellowed.

“In the vacant lot back of the building—I just found—Gramp Hodge!” The young reporter swallowed. “He’s been—strangled to death!”

“And now,” Kent murmured softly, “there are only four of us. . . .”

NAN uttered a little whimper, swayed to her feet, clutched my arm. A hard groan rattled from my own throat. Hideous thoughts streamed through my brain. This tragedy, the horror of it added to the horror of the last two days, rocked the reason to which I had clung so desperately.

First the old man—and now Hodge! Good God, the fiend *was* carrying out the threat Myron Zorn had made in the death chamber! But that didn’t really prove anything. . . . I tried to pin myself to logic. The fiend couldn’t be Zorn—couldn’t!

Yet the dreadful uncertainty in my mind wouldn’t be stifled. He looked like Zorn. Other people beside myself had noticed the resemblance. And a person who should know had sworn that the two accomplices were Zorn’s two henchmen who had been electrocuted last month.

“And now there are only four of us!”

Harry Kent’s words kept pounding through the back of my head. Only four of us: Kent, Morey, myself—and Nan! And Nan might be next! My whole body trembled.

Morey, Kent, Keller and most of the others who had been in the office crowded

toward the door. Morbid curiosity had conquered the revulsion they knew the sight of poor Hodge would cause.

Realizing there was no use in trying to catch this fiend by chasing wildly around the city, I stayed with Nan.

“Bob . . . !” Her voice was hoarse. “He’s the second! The—the murderer is Myron Zorn . . . returned from the grave for his revenge!”

“You mustn’t believe that,” I whispered. I swung one arm around her and drew her close to me. “It’s impossible—utterly impossible.”

If only I could believe beyond any doubt what I was attempting to make her believe . . . !

She clung to me, her eyes wide and terrified, her face even paler.

I had to do something! I had to get this monster before he could kill Nan! Kill the girl I loved—God! At the thought my heart congealed into a cold weight of fear in my breast. But what could I do? I didn’t know what I was hunting—a man or a thing. . . .

Morey had returned to the city room. He muttered: “I’d better call the police. Though I don’t suppose they’ll be able to do any more this time than—”

“Morey,” I interrupted, leaving Nan and meeting him at his desk, “I’ve got to be gone a little while. Will you guard Nan until I come back again?”

“Why — sure,” Morey answered. “Where’re you—”

“I can’t tell you,” I said. “It may not mean anything at all. . . . Will you keep her in your sight every minute?”

“Sure, Bob, sure,” he promised.

I crossed to Nan and told her to stick to Morey. She, too, wanted to know where I was going. I repeated what I had answered Morey.

“But something may happen to you!” Sudden panic swept into her voice. She

grabbed my elbow. "The fiend may—"

"Don't worry, honey," I said gruffly. Then I pulled away from her and hurried down to the door.

THERE wasn't even a cab in front of the office; I had to go two blocks before I found one parked in the bright light of a street lamp. The driver's face was pinched with fear.

"Brooklawn Cemetery," I ordered.

He stiffened in his seat.

"Come on—let's get going," I said.

Reluctantly he kicked his starter, meshed the gears, wheeled out from the curb. I lit a cigarette and dragged in a couple of nervous puffs of smoke.

I had to *know* who was executing Myron Zorn's threats. It couldn't be Zorn. Logic told me it couldn't . . . but I had to be convinced beyond the power of mere logic.

I had to have actual proof!

In about fifteen minutes we reached the nearest corner of the cemetery. I had the driver take me along to the main gate and the caretaker's lodge.

"Wait for me," I commanded as I stepped to the ground.

I left him while he was still whining a frightened protest, walked up to the door of the lodge, knocked. After a few moments a wizened old man inched the door open.

"I'm a detective from headquarters," I lied. I didn't want to waste time on argument about what I wished him to do for me. "I've got orders to inspect the Jorret family tomb. . . . Here's a ten to pay you for the trouble of coming to unlock it."

Terror had snapped into the old man's rheumy eyes at the mention of the name Jorret. But avarice crawled through the terror when he caught sight of money. A gnarled hand seized the bill.

"Come this way." He gestured for me

to enter. "I'll get the key and a light."

Turning, he hunched out of the room. Presently he returned with a lantern, motioned for me to follow, led me through to a door giving directly into the cemetery from the rear of the house. We started along a walk between lines of ghostly white headstones.

Arthur Jorret, one of Myron Zorn's two henchmen who had been electrocuted last month, had come from a good family. He had been a kid of twenty when he had fallen under the insidious influence of Zorn. Last month, when he had been executed at the age of only twenty-five for the vicious murder of a young girl, his family had won a bitter fight with the authorities of this cemetery over their right to put his body in the old family vault. . . .

"Here's the tomb ye want," the caretaker croaked. Then fearfully: "Ye—ye don't think ye're going to find anything wrong? Ye don't think them stories in the newspapers is true?"

"I don't know," I muttered grimly. "Has anybody visited this tomb within the past three days?"

"Not—not to my knowledge," the caretaker answered.

"Does anyone else have a key?"

He shook his head.

I drew in a slow breath, said: "Okay. Let's have a look."

He fumbled in his coat pocket, produced a bunch of keys on a ring, held them close to the lantern. Separating one with a shaky hand, he pushed it into the lock. He raised the lantern as he turned it. I could see the muscles in his wizened face twitch.

My own face was set; the skin felt tight. The inside of me had gone hollow. A clammy chill of dread because of what we might find crawled up my spine.

Presently, withdrawing the key, the caretaker pulled at the huge iron door. It creaked open. Dank air, filled with a nauseous odor, swirled out of the tomb.

"I—I ain't going in there," the caretaker rasped. "Ye can have the lantern."

"Where's Arthur Jorret's coffin?" I asked.

"The—the bottom one on the right."

Taking the lantern, I stepped into the tomb and turned to the right. The bottom coffin. My eyes flicked down the tier. That one there. . . .

I froze. Breath oozed between my lips with a hissing sound. My left hand, which held the lantern, trembled and made the light flicker.

For the cover of that bottom coffin had been removed—and it was empty!

CHAPTER FOUR

Death in False-Face

I HARDLY remember stumbling from that tomb. The ghastly significance of the empty coffin had driven the capability of clear thought from my brain. As if I had dreamed the actions, I dimly recollect locking the door of the tomb for the terrified caretaker and hurrying with him down to his lodge. I recollect that he begged me to take him to the city and that I assented.

During the ride my mind whirled with horror. I had come to the cemetery to prove that, because Arthur Jorret's body was in its coffin, one of the supposedly resurrected corpses was a fake. That would mean that the other supposed corpse and the creature who resembled Myron Zorn were also fakes.

But now . . . !

"Faster—faster!" I shouted to the driver of the cab.

I sat tense on the edge of the seat. The thing I had believed impossible might be true! Keller's theories, which I had considered so ridiculous, might be correct! . . . How was I going to protect Nan? How could I guard her from a creature

with power to bring not only himself but others back to life?

Despair clutched my heart.

Yet I must! I clenched my fists. Somehow I must—and would!

Now we had reached the center of the city. There was little traffic; we careened down the main street and jolted to a stop in front of the office.

I jumped out to the sidewalk, the old caretaker of the cemetery following me, then I heard brakes scream and a hoarse voice shout my name. I wheeled to see a burly form lurch from a second cab.

Morey! And he was alone!

"Where's Nan?" I shouted at him.

"I took her to—" he choked.

Suddenly I noticed that his shirt front was drenched with blood. He started to sag; I sprang toward him and caught him. I saw that his eyes, which were usually so hard and cynical, were glassy with horror.

"God, Morey . . . tell me what's happened to her," I said huskily.

"I—I thought she wasn't safe in the office after the others left," he muttered unsteadily. "I knew she wouldn't be safe either at her home or mine. The killer was after both of us. So I took her to a friend's house. The—the friend wasn't there. We went around to try to find a window unlocked and—and—" His voice cracked. Then: "It is Zorn! I saw him! He glided out of the darkness and stabbed me! He must've taken Nan! I came to . . . and she was gone!"

Those last words almost destroyed the final vestige of sanity in my mind. The fiend had Nan! I had left her—and he had struck! An agonized groan tore from my throat.

But he hadn't killed her! I seized at that tiny hope. He would have done it on the spot. No, he must have taken her somewhere. He must have wanted to use her to satisfy his . . . Desperately I stifled

the hideous thought of his reason for letting her live. Thinking about that would drive me completely insane. And I must keep my head!

Where would he have taken her? Who might know? I could think of just one possible person—Ared Zorn. I rushed back to my cab and shouted Ared Zorn's address to the driver.

After a ride which seemed interminable we reached the gloomy house on the outskirts of the city. Again I ordered my driver to wait for me. I ran up the path.

All the windows in the front were black. I rang the bell. No answer. I tried the door. To my surprise I found it unlocked. I flung it open.

The hall inside was dark. But dim light filtered through the doorway from the room in which I had interviewed Ared Zorn a couple of days ago.

"Zorn!" I shouted, hurrying toward it.

The sound of my voice echoed through the house and faded into silence. There was no response. I reached the doorway—and stopped short.

Ared Zorn sat in the stiff chair behind his littered desk. He stared at me with sightless eyes. He was dead. His blue face told the story. Like the others, he had been strangled.

I uttered a low moan of despair. The only one who might have told me where to find the girl I loved—dead. Dear God, how could I ever find her now?

If the creature really were Myron Zorn, if he had the power to return from the grave, how could I ever have hoped to save Nan? If a ghastly hoax were being perpetrated . . . I stiffened. In this moment of deepest despair my brain began to work. Yes, it was possible that the whole business had been a fiendish hoax! Cold sweat oozed from my pores.

All other angles could have been faked. And Myron Zorn's ability to live after the executioner had thrown the switch

. . . A person who knew a little about electricity could have managed even that.

God, why hadn't I thought of this long ago!

Twisting about, I rushed out of the house and down to my cab. I shouted an address to the driver. . . .

THE address was a dilapidated warehouse down near the waterfront. But on the roof of the unused building, I knew from several visits there in the past, was a bizarre penthouse. It was reached by stairs from a door part way up the alley at one side of the building.

I told the driver to stop at the nearest corner. I didn't want to advertise my arrival. Leaping out before the cab had even come to a complete stop, I ran down the street and ducked into the alley.

Just how I was going to get inside the building I didn't know. The door, of course, would be locked. But perhaps I could find a window. . . .

Then, before I had taken more than a dozen steps up the alley, it happened.

I didn't hear any sound. I just saw the hideous white face appear out of the darkness to my right. I tried to wheel and swing a fist. Something crashed down on my head. I felt my legs buckle.

For a few moments I managed to cling to consciousness. Vaguely, though my flaccid muscles refused to obey commands to resist, I realized that a second figure with a white face had appeared and that the two of them were lifting me. They carried me into the building. But instead of taking me up toward the penthouse they carried me down some stairs into a dank cellar.

Then I passed out. . . .

I opened my eyes to a scene which made horror grip my whole being. I was lying on the floor of a dimly lighted little chamber filled with the nauseous odor of rotted flesh. Near me stood two

creatures whose faces were partially decomposed.

God, they *must* be living corpses! And one of them—I felt my sanity slip again—did have the recognizable features of Arthur Jorret!

Yet that wasn't the full extent of the horror. I heard a voice husk my name. Twisting my head, I uttered a stricken cry.

For in another part of the chamber, a dull black suit hanging from his hunched form, stood the hairless monster whose shriveled red face resembled the face of Myron Zorn! And on the floor by his feet, half her clothes stripped from her body, lay Nan!

"Bob. . ." Anguish showed through the terror in her eyes. "Oh God . . . now he's got you!"

The sight of her lying there, half naked, with that hellish monster standing over her, made insane fury surge up within me. Frenziedly I tried to leap to my feet. Only then did I realize my wrists and ankles were bound. I strained at the bonds.

"I decided not to kill you—yet," the monster said in a rasping voice. He chuckled. "Of course I shall kill you. The threats must be carried out. But first I wanted to give you the pleasure of watching a little drama, since you so unfortunately happened to be in this vicinity . . . You've noticed that I also spared the dear lady. She's too beautiful to die before I have the joy of—"

"You damned fiend!" I raged.

The monster chuckled again, mockingly, nodded to his two gruesome henchmen and rasped: "I don't need you here. Do the job we planned without me."

Silently they shuffled out of the chamber.

"Now," the monster croaked, bending toward Nan, "the little drama can begin. . ."

I WENT through the lowest hell of torture during the moments that followed. Nan, moaning in horror, tried to cringe away from the monster's foul hands. But she, too, was bound; she couldn't escape them. His chuckles lowering to obscenely lascivious sounds, he ripped at the rest of her clothes.

I kept tugging frantically at my bonds. The rope around my wrists slashed through the skin and let warm blood trickle down over my hands. But I was numb to pain.

God, I had to get free! That monstrous fiend couldn't have Nan! I had to save her!

The rope around my wrists seemed to have loosened a little. If only I had more time. But in a few instants it would be too late. . . .

Suddenly a desperate idea flashed into my mind. I was near a jutting corner of stone wall. Perhaps I could use that for a crude knife. . . . I hitched myself back toward it.

The creature was so absorbed with Nan that he didn't notice. Reaching the corner, I lifted my arms and sawed at the rope.

My wrists jerked free!

Hope welled up within me. I tore at the bonds around my ankles. . . .

"You would, eh?"

The monster snarled those words just as I got the bonds loose. He whipped a knife from under his black coat and lunged at me. I had clawed to my knees. I came to my feet with both fists swinging. One missed; the other smashed into the hideous face.

But in the split second before it landed I saw, at this close range, that the face was only a clever mask! My suspicion had been correct!

The fiend rocked back a step. Then, swiftly, he caught his balance and sprang at me again. I ducked. Too late. The

blade of his knife dug into my shoulder—and I felt life flow out of me.

I heard Nan scream.

"Oh, darling," I sobbed as I sagged to the floor. "My darling. . ."

I didn't lose consciousness. But I lay there, limp and helpless, while the fiend pulled off the skull cap which had made his head look hairless and the broken mask which had covered his face. The features that had been concealed were those of Harry Kent.

They were twisted into a characteristically sardonic sneer. But his eyes, which had always seemed devoid of any real emotion, weren't the eyes of the Harry Kent we all had known; they burned with sadistic cruelty.

"You've signed her death warrant," he said. "I'd had an idea of pretending to save her in the end if she suited me. With the money I'll have in another couple of days I could've taken her on one hell of a spree. I've always had a yen for her."

"Harry . . . you're the monster!" Nan husked in an incredulous voice.

"Good God, Kent, are you mad?" I exclaimed. "You can't get away with this!"

"Can't?" He shrugged. "I have."

"But why are you doing it?" I asked. I tried to stall for time by inducing him to talk. I knew he was egotistical enough to want to brag. And perhaps, in a minute of rest, I could regain a little strength.

"Why? First, for money." An avicious gleam mingled with the cruelty in his eyes. "I want a lot of money. That's why I went in with Zorn as a secret partner a year ago. With my tips we had chances to make a lot. But then he died. I couldn't save him. But I made him think I was going to save him at the end. That's why he was so brave in the death chamber and so free with his threats."

KENT laughed. "He thought I'd fix the chair so he couldn't burn. He figured they'd have to let him go free as a man legally dead. I did fix the chair. When I got access to the death chamber on the pretext of writing an article I put some colorless lacquer impregnated with asbestos on the electrodes. Sure, I fixed the chair—so he'd burn slow and leave the stage set for my act."

He paused to give me a moment to comprehend his diabolical brilliance. I kept drawing in deep breaths of air to clear my head.

"It's a pretty good act, isn't it?" He fondled the hilt of his knife. "My two helpers arranged the wreck of the hearse by putting a log in the road. They took Zorn's corpse from the coffin and hid it. We even stole the corpses of Zorn's two known henchmen from cemeteries to make everything convince the most skeptical snooper. Then the masks—those were real masterpieces. Dim light and receptive minds made them plenty convincing. A touch of genius for my helpers were the clothes from the corpses we stole. They gave the authentic smell."

I flexed my muscles.

"Finally, all that was needed was to have ourselves identified. It was quite simple. I began by assaulting a few people on the streets. Then I started to execute Zorn's threats. That was a pleasure in the old man's case. In fact, I found I got quite a kick out of murder—though I will hate to kill Nan." He sighed. "But now it must be done. That is . . . soon."

My fists clenched.

"My helpers tortured the man who sent Zorn's two real henchmen to the chair in order to identify themselves. I tried the same thing on Ared Zorn tonight to make my identity stronger. But he was too shrewd and had to die. When we committed a robbery we usually committed a murder—to create the horror. What

we wanted, and got, was a city so terrified that we could have access to any building and yet be in no danger. We—"

I couldn't stand any more of that fiendish story. Drawing in a quick breath, I pulled myself to my knees and threw myself at Kent's legs.

I took him by surprise. He toppled to the floor as he whipped the knife down at me. I managed to catch his wrist, wrench it, grab the knife with my other hand.

Then I stabbed him in the heart. . . .

I hardly remember what happened after that; I had almost shot my bolt. But somehow I did manage to free Nan. Together with her holding me up most of the way, we stumbled out of the place before Kent's two "corpses" returned. We found my cab still waiting. As soon as I got inside, I passed out cold.

* * *

I came to in the hospital. Nan, a tender smile on her face, was sitting beside the bed. I signaled for a kiss.

"You're going to be all right, dear," she whispered to me afterwards. There was a catch in her voice.

"Of course I am, silly," I said. "I've got a claim on the most beautiful girl in the world and I'm sticking around to collect. . . Did the cops capture Kent's two men?"

She told me they had. Later, when she

figured I had recovered enough to talk, she asked: "How did you ever find me? How did you come to suspect Harry Kent?"

"I should've suspected him long before I did," I grunted. "First, I began to believe in the hoax. When Morey, whom Kent failed to kill in his hurry to get you, told me you were gone, I went to Ared Zorn's. He'd acted so nervous that I figured he must know something. But I guess his nervousness was just fear that his brother really had returned to life. Then, when I found Ared Zorn dead, I came to my senses. The most convincing thing about the hoax was Myron Zorn's living after the switch had been thrown. Suddenly I remembered that Kent had been in the death chamber alone and that he knew enough about electricity to fix the chair. It occurred to me such a hoax would be a typical product of his clever but warped mind. So I came to his penthouse—or rather, his cellar."

I caught my breath after all that talking.

"Free speech is not one of my beliefs," I said with a grin. "How about paying for the one I just made?"

She lowered her head to pay.

"And, honey," I whispered in a minute, "let's forget the whole horror. Let's catch up on happiness."

She nodded.

THE END

GEORGE ALDEN EDSON

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Out March 10th!



THE manuscript, which is written in faded ink on pages torn out of a ship's log, was found by a geologist named John Norman. Engaged in a mapping tour which extended from Juneau east to the western slope of the Canadian Rockies, he records that he discovered it near the center of the great basin which lies in latitude 59, long. 128 west, sealed in a glass jar. No other information is furnished by Mr. Norman save the small item of geological information which concludes this story. We present it verbatim, and leave to the reader the task of explaining it according to his prejudices and convictions:

I am making this record—so begins the MS.—more for the purpose of giving myself something to do for an hour or so, rather than in the hope that it serve any useful purpose to us who are condemned to a living death in eternity, or to those who may conceivably discover it after I have thrown it overboard. What has happened is so strange, so weirdly horrible, that I can find no words to describe it in terms that a possible reader might understand. Nevertheless, I shall try, in a three-dimensional form of expression, to describe what can only be a sort of fourth-dimensional experience, and hope that some day science and metaphysics will have advanced to the point where human beings may be able to understand what has happened to us.

The *Queen Charlotte*, bound north from Tacoma, was a fantastically alarming spectacle—especially to one conversant with the superstitions and mores of the sea—when I went down to board her on that cloudy, cold afternoon in late February. For one thing, she had a decided list to port. For another, the rats were pouring out of her like disturbed flies from a rotting carcass. These things added to the mood of profound melancholy that had plagued me all day—and gave very definite evidence that the voyage ahead of me was a thing to be dreaded. For there is hardly a man who follows the sea but believes in the unfailing omens of disaster that a merciful Providence affords to sailormen.

Nevertheless, since I had signed the articles as second mate, I was honor-bound to make the voyage; so in spite of my certain knowledge of impending doom, I boarded the vessel.

I found the ship in almost a state of mutiny. The captain and first officer, Mr. Williamson, held the crew aboard at pistol's end. I had no sooner boarded than the order was given to cast off, and only after we had hoisted sail and were many miles at sea did the captain relax his vigilance and abandon the poop. He called me into his cabin, for I was a new man to him and to the *Queen Charlotte*.

He gazed at me speculatively for a few moments as I stood before him, his cold grey eyes seeming to plunge into the hidden recesses of my mind; and I could feel the icy inhumanity of the man as it had struck me at our first meeting. Indeed, I regretted the necessities that had forced me to take this voyage with a strange master of no very savoury reputation, and on a hulk which was generally regarded as a hell ship.

"I trust, Mr. Sanders," were his first words, "that you take no stock in the childish nonsense that is being babbled for'ard?"

It was a question and a challenge at the same time. I met it according to the dictates of my conscience. "As a matter of fact, Captain Doone," I replied, "I cannot truthfully say that

I do not believe in the significance of rats leaving a ship about to embark on a voyage. . . . However, my presence here should be proof to you that I shall do my duty and carry out the orders of my superior officers to the end."

Again he subjected me to that cold, unemotional scrutiny that was like the malevolent glare of ice-blink in the north latitudes. After a time he grunted—a sound in which infinite contempt was mingled with frigid anger.

"It seems," he said, "that I have shipped a gang of milk-sops and idiots. . . . That will be all, Mr. Sanders. Your watch below, I believe . . ."

That night in my first watch the men seemed quiet, if sullen and despondent. I went forward past the break of the poop, leaned on the rail, and gazed out to sea with a feeling in my heart that no words can describe. It was not so much the feeling—nay, the conviction—that I and all this ship's crew were going to our death; it was something infinitely more terrible—more devastatingly unbearable than that. I felt that we were literally sailing into another world. I was like one who has turned his face from the earth, leaving all dear, familiar, and comfortable sights, sounds, and experiences behind him. My *hopes* were burned—I was facing a cold, alien world from which there would be no returning. And yet, many and many a time I had made this self-same voyage on good ships and bad. From Tacoma to Seward and back. From San Francisco, from Seattle and Vancouver, to Nome and Bristol Bay and the Aleutians—many, many times. I was more at home on these seaways than on any land—and yet. . . .

Nothing was *right* about this voyage. The atmosphere of the ship was strange and alien. It was as though, somewhere, somehow we had turned a corner and did not know how to get back. . . .

Turned a corner! How often in the months that followed I would think of that phrase! How thin a partition separates human beings from the unknown land that has somehow trapped us and our vessel. There would be some point in writing this if I could send back a warning—specific directions—of how to avoid the fate that has befallen us. But I cannot. I can only tell what happened.

The next day we made a disturbing discovery. Apparently every atom of food aboard was spoiled. The flour was mildewed and mouldy. The meat was rotten and maggot-infested. Even the jerked meat was all but inedible, and such canned goods as we had aboard showed bulging tops and bursting seams from the gaseous pressure of the corruption within. This discovery nearly precipitated another riot, and strident demands came from the forecabin that we return

immediately to reprovision. The captain refused, and quieted the men with the promise that we would restore the larder at the first port of call. That would be Vancouver which we could be sure of reaching before the month was out.

But on the day following it was found that the water-butts had started seams, and practically every drop of fresh water aboard had been lost, trickling down through the course of the night into the bilge.

Then, indeed, we had our hands full. The men had secured a few firearms, somewhere, and headed by a huge Swede by the name of Larsen, they charged the poop. The first officer and Captain Doone each killed a man. I fired over their heads, thus incurring a black look from the master, but I could not bring myself to shoot the poor devils. At length quiet was restored, the leaders of the mutiny clapped into the lazarette, and we sailed on.

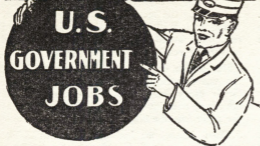
No need to recount the minor trials of the remainder of that horrible voyage. Suffice it to say that it soon appeared that we had, indeed, sailed into an alien world. Our instruments still recorded with seeming accuracy. The sextant, the chronometer, and the compass *appeared* to register our position as faithfully as of yore—but we were nonetheless lost as surely as though every instrument had been thrown overboard.

The time came when we should have been nearing Vancouver—but we made no landfall. Our instruments told us that we must be directly opposite Juan de Fuca Strait—but we saw no sign that this was so. We turned and sailed directly east—according to our instruments—and we never saw land. We sailed for weeks. We sailed until we should have been half-way across the American continent—near the 100th meridian, our instruments said—and still nothing met our perishing gaze but trackless, endless, illimitable miles of ocean. And then, again, we turned north.

It is strange that we lived for those weeks and months. We had no water or food. We were starving and dying of thirst—but we did not die! We suffered the tortures of the eternally lost and damned in the deepest pit of hell—but death would not come to end our agonies. We were a wasted, shrivelled company of walking skeletons; our skin blackened, our hair sere and dank, our eyes staring metal globes ringed by fevered, fiery flash. Each man gazed upon his neighbor with livid horror writhing in his brain, plain to see in his ghastly, cadaverous face. But we could not die. . . .

And on and on, forever on we sailed.

One day the captain threw the sextant and the chronometer into the sea. With an ax, then, he shattered the binnacle and destroyed the compass. "Liar!" he screamed in a voice that was



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like the shrieking of a loon. "Liar--liar--liar!" And swung the ax crashing down. And then he lay stricken upon the poop and made no move for many days. . . .

It was I who first saw the ship.

Strangely, I could make no move, for a time. It was like a horrible nightmare. I would not--could not believe that my eyes were not playing me false. I was frozen by the fear that it was but an illusion of my fevered brain--and then, when I would scream the gladsome news to my mates, my voice failed me. Only a choking, dry husk came from my throat that hardly sounded in my own dulled ears. I remembered, then, that other seaman the poet wrote about--that Ancient Mariner whose ship had likewise transgressed the law of the sea and sailed into an ocean of nothingness. I remembered the line: ". . . I bit my wrist, I sucked the blood and cried 'A sail! A sail!'"

As he had done, I bit my wrist and the turgid blood oozed out enough to moisten my palate and the chords of my throat. I shouted, "Sail--ho!" and sank upon the deck.

But none answered that call. All lay about the deck where they had been lying these many weeks and not a man showed by the slightest movement that he had heard.

For a long time I lay there, watching that ship come on, and the weakness and pain of my body would not permit me to signal her nor even to give her a hail as she drew close enough for them to hear me. But it was plain that she had sighted us, that she was coming on to investigate this strange derelict that rolled in the trough of the sea and yet forged onward at good speed with sails flapping listlessly on the masts. And soon I could see the men about the forecandle deck, others in the rigging, and all occupied with the business of sailing their vessel as all normal ships are sailed. . . . And yet, I thought, it is strange that all goes so quietly aboard that ship. For never had I seen men behave that way when a passing vessel is sighted. It is a rare enough occurrence to draw the attention of the entire crew on ships maintaining even the most rigorous discipline--but not a head was turned toward us save that of the helmsman.

The ship came on. And now, desperation drove me to my feet and I found the strength to lift a shout of terror. For the vessel was closing down upon us under full sail. If she kept her course another minute she would ram us and send both ships to the bottom of the sea. But my shrieks were in vain.

The bowsprit of the oncoming vessel loomed amidships and I grabbed the rail and set my body for the shock--but there was no shock!

The ship sailed on--cleaving through our middle as though ours was a vessel of cob-webs; and not a tremor, not a sound signalled to my straining, anguished senses that we had been

rammed. The body of the vessel shot through ours—and was gone. And with it went my consciousness, and I fell upon the deck like a storm-felled mast. . . .

I know not how long I lay senseless upon the deck of the accursed ship, but when I awakened it was to find our vessel gliding into what seemed a great inland bay. A shoreless expanse of mirror-calm water shown beyond the rocky abutments of the entrance, and somehow I knew that an end to our suffering was in sight.

As the ship swept through that narrow passage I looked in growing wonder and awe upon the rocky walls that rose on either side. Like opalescent glass, they were—but like no glass I had ever seen before. They shimmered with the colors of the rainbow, and seemed glossed over with a flowing, swirling sheen of light that was never still and never twice the same. It made me dizzy and sick to watch—for all that it was the most beautiful sight I have ever looked upon—but the strangeness of it all drove fresh anguish of fear into my heart, and I dreaded the unguessable things their weird appearance portended.

And yet, those beautiful walls were, indeed, the herald of the end of our physical suffering. We had no sooner left them behind and passed into the quiet, shoreless sea beyond than every man rose from the deck and gathered at the rail. I felt the hunger and drought leave my body, to be replaced by a feeling of lightness and health, and I knew that what had happened to me had happened to all the crew. It was strange, though, that this physical change occasioned me no joy—nor brought an expression of happiness to the faces of my companions. They stood there at the rail, where I joined them, and stood gazing back at the rocky escarpment of the coast we were rapidly leaving behind—but they spoke no word and I felt no urge to speak to them.

Time . . . what is time? I thought we might have stood there for hours as the ship plowed onward through that quiet sea—but perhaps it was weeks. We never moved nor felt any need for movement. The captain came down from his poop and joined us, but he spoke no word to us and we did not address him. We stood and waited—and at long length the ship came to rest. . . .

As I finish this account of the strange last voyage of the *Queen Charlotte* I feel a vague restlessness stealing over my senses. Is it the beginning of the thing that has driven all the crew but myself into the quiet, turgid waters of this eerie sea? Is it the thing that drove them shrieking to throw themselves over the rail in search of succor from the madness that writhed in their brains?

There is no sun nor moon nor stars above this sinister water, so I cannot say how long ago it was that the first man went over. It was little

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Cox, the cabin boy. For a time he ran shrieking about the ship, crying in a strange high voice without words—and at last cast himself into the water. We watched him listlessly, no man making a move to rescue him—for we knew that we were all beyond rescue. He lay there quietly, buoyed up, somehow, so that most of his small body was above the surface of the water. He stared up at us with a strange, questioning look on his drawn, young face—and we gazed back at him, blankly, stupidly. Then, slowly he turned over and began swimming away. Slowly, he went, at first, with smooth, rhythmic strokes—then faster, and still faster, until it seemed he was swimming with a speed far beyond the powers of any mortal. We watched him until, at last, he disappeared—a diminishing speck on the measureless breast of that still, oily ocean. . . .

One by one they went like that—all in the same direction. All with an accelerating speed that no man ever swam with before.

What shore awaits them? Is there, beyond that sinister, far horizon release from terror and pain? Is there forgiveness for the transgressions of this ship, release from the doom brought down upon all our heads by its master? For I know, now, that a curse has been upon us from the start.

Captain Doone was the last man to go over the side. Before he sprang into the sea his voice was given back to him and he seemed to pray.

"Forgive me!" he shrieked and lifted his face to the empty sky. "Forgive me for not answering your call. You men who died on the ship I passed while you signalled for aid—forgive me!"

Then he rose and flung himself from the rail. It is true, then, the tale that was told about the wharfs in Tacoma. Captain Doone, on his last trip down from Alaska, had disregarded a distress signal. . . .

But I must end this. My blood boils in my veins. I seem obsessed with fiends who twist my brain in its skull, who pluck at my nerves and claw at my throat so that I long to shriek aloud. I must make an end. . . . I must go to whatever shore my shipmates have found—for there lies my destiny. . . . I know it. . . .

Thus ends the only available account of the last voyage of the *Queen Charlotte*, reported lost at sea many decades ago. And the account is accompanied by a statement, from the man who found the MS., which may or may not possess significance:

"The basin in which this MS. was found," notes Mr. Norman, "was once the site of a great inland sea which, geo-

logical records show, extended, from what is now the western coast of Canada, east to approximately the location of Great Slave Lake. This sea disappeared at the time the northern Canadian Rockies were formed—many hundreds of thousands of years ago.”

Men, there are, who claim to have come back from the dead. Others have stories to tell which have the ring of truth—and yet are as strange as the one we have presented here. All over the world, and in all ages, records of experiences that seem to surpass what is known of normal, human life have sprung up to set men wondering and speculating. We are not able to judge what is true and what is not—unless we adopt some rigid standard of comparison that admits nothing not capable of physical proof. But, at least, we may thrill to the unusual, the weird, and the inexplicable. Readers of DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE have become connoisseurs of such stories.

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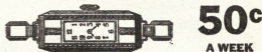
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