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DIME



JANUARY

# MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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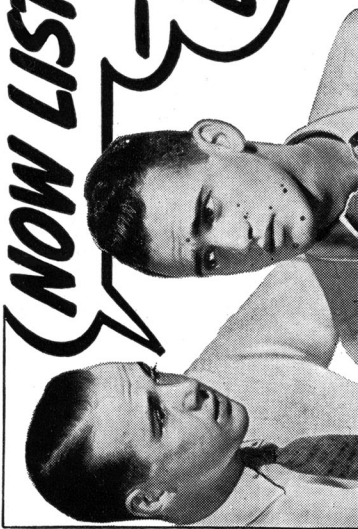
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MASTER

FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

by DAVE BARNES



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LARRY'S A WIZ WITH THAT SAX—

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—DARNED GLAD I SOLD HIM ON THOSE YEAST CAKES

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# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Thirteen

January, 1937

Number Two

## TWO FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELS OF MYSTERY AND TERROR

- Festival of the Bloodless Dead**.....By Frederick C. Davis 6  
*The bloodless dead were found each night in Lacey Street—the little avenue where joy had ushered in horror. And Robert Rodman knew that his own sweetheart had been marked as one whose blood must quench the ghastly thirst that walked abroad!*
- Hell's Dancing Master**.....By Dave Barnes 40  
*Marie Delabart's beauty was a thing not of this earth. Yet Ray Graham fought hopelessly for her against forces no man has ever conquered!*

## TWO REALISTIC, SPINE-CHILLING NOVELETTES

- Shrine of the Devil-Dolls**.....By Frances Bragg Middleton 72  
*The eerie melody which floated nightly over the black water held the entire town in a grip of grim horror—for when its lamenting chords announced that the Dolls of Dagon sat upon their golden thrones, it also presaged the ghastly death of another young girl. . . .*
- Prince of the Black Fire**.....By Francis James 90  
*The harsh, weird voice of the hornbill croaked the coming of the black fire to the helpless body of the girl whom I adored. It was the dreadful harbinger of the invisible, torturing flame a human monster summoned from the depths of hell to be the instrument of his deathless hatred!*

## THREE NERVE-JOLTING SHORT TERROR TALES

- Me—Murderer!**.....By William Hines 32  
*Am I a murderer—or have I destroyed a power not even Death could subdue?*
- The Little Gods of Doom**.....By Wayne Rogers 61  
*Too late we learned the dreadful, hell-born power of the little household gods my wife and I had brought into our home. . . .*
- Death's Dreadful Lover**.....By Ray Cummings 111  
*When my husband and I were worse than dead it was the genius of love which helped us fight desperately against one whose powers were not of this earth. . . .*

—AND—

- Beautiful and Deadly**.....The Editor 4  
**The River Styx**.....A Department 118

Cover Painting by Tom Lovell  
 Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell and others

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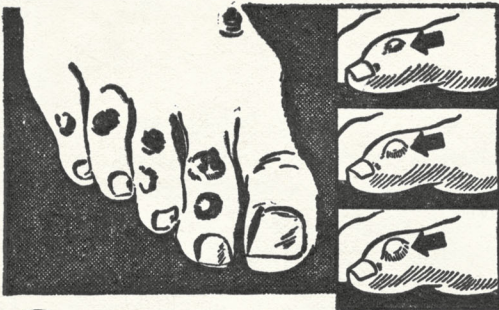
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## Beautiful and Deadly

**W**HEN our grand-mother was a school-girl, a roughly spherical, bright-red object frequently furnished a spot of vivid color in the otherwise rather drab propriety of her parents' Victorian "parlor." It usually rested upon a small *faience* dish inscribed with the slightly anachronistic legend: "Souvenir of the United States Capital, Philadelphia, Pa." It was always kept on the mantle well out of grandmother's reach, and to her it was a beautiful and fascinating object, partly because of its color—but mostly because of its sinister reputation. It was supposed to be deadly poison. It was a tomato.

The tomatoes—love-apples, they were called, in that era—got too ripe after awhile, lost their ornamental redness, and were discarded to be replaced by fresh ones. As decorations they were as highly regarded as stuffed orioles under bell-jars, or ormolu clocks. Their subtle fascination was hardly equalled by the plaster skull tobacco jar in our grand-mother's father's "den." But one day a progressive and courageous truck gardener took his life in his hands and ate one of the sinister love-apples in full view of a number of horrified witnesses. The daring fellow neither fell dead on the instant, collapsed into convulsions, nor turned that particular shade of deep blue which was supposed to result from such unparalleled temerity. In fact, he merely smiled, licked his lips, and ventured the opinion that with a little salt the things wouldn't make bad eatin'.

Not long after that, love-apples disappeared from the mantles of the nation and took their place in the kitchen. They had not become less valuable as ornaments—though they were as red and pretty as ever. They had merely ceased to be interesting because they were no longer considered dangerous. Their fatal allure had passed down the gullet of a temerarious farmer. They had lost the fascination which all men attach to sinister things, to fatal and mysterious and eerily threatening things. In a word they had become common-place.

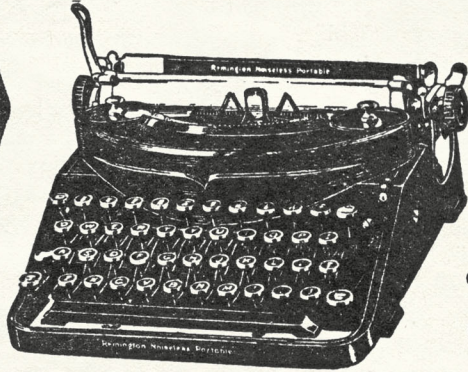
But there are plenty of mysteriously deadly, weirdly menacing qualities left in this world of ours—things far less tangible than the love-apples of the last century. And many of them will remain enigmatic, directly terrifying to the end of time. They are not and they never will be commonplace—and they continue to furnish the themes of many of the stories appearing in **DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE.**



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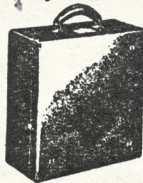


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# FESTIVAL OF THE BLOODLESS DEAD

*In brilliant, colored lights and garish trappings terror came to Lacey Street. Yet when the dreadful festival was over, Robert Rodman knew the horror was there to stay; for the bloodless dead were found each night—and his own sweetheart had been marked as one who must quench with her blood the ghastly thirst that walked abroad!*



By  
Frederick  
C.  
Davis

*(Author of "Goddess of Evil Revelry," etc.)*





A Heart - Chilling Novel  
of Eerie Mystery  
and Black Terror

**O**LD Lacey Street was a reveling riot of carnival spirit that night. Colored lights were festooned and bright banners were unfurled; concertinas were wheezing nostalgic melodies for the songs and laughter of the gay crowds, and the floral floats were parading to jubilant cheers. Joyously festive, the old street was, early that evening, without a hint then of the soul-withering terror soon to strike.

Lacey Street is such a racial potpourri as can be found nowhere else in New York or, for that matter, in all the world. The few blocks surrounding Lacey Street are an agglomeration where every nationality and every faith is crammed into a fantastic melange. It is a small polyglot country in itself, which is no country at all—but all countries in one. It is Cosmopolis in miniature. It is Babel and Mecca and Bedlam. There is shrieking strife and bland concord in that fascinating fusion of folk—but until that night there never was stark terror.

Struggle your way along milling Lacey



Street by day, as a stranger, and you will see nothing but squalor in the wash-draped fire-escapes crawling up the sooty walls that shut in sunless, fetid warrens. But live among these people, as I have done in the little apartment above my pharmacy, which is cramped between a bakery and a spaghetti seller's; share their miserably happy lives—and you will learn to lament over their woe and to rejoice in their gusto.

Enchantment turned the sordidness into a fairyland tonight. It was an hour of feasting and bacchanalia, the evening of Shrove Tuesday. While the famous Mardi Gras was in garish progress in far-away New Orleans, this world-within-a-city was celebrating its own Mardi Gras, poorer by far, but certainly as boisterous. Flowered floats that had been constructed in jealous secrecy were now passing in vivid procession under the rainbow lights while the throngs howled: "*Bravo! . . . Macte virtute! . . . Optime! . . . Hurra!*" It was all a vociferous, merry uproar until . . .

It happened directly in front of my shop.

A woman's voice shrieked above the hubbub. "*Pietro! Pietro!*"

A little girl cried out in fright. "Papa! Papa, Papa!"

I glimpsed the child through the mob as she tore away from her fearful mother. It was little Maria Giglio. She flung herself into the littered street toward a beribboned truck that was just passing. The hullabaloo was abruptly stifled as the crowd surging on the curb saw the thing that terrified her. She screamed "Papa, Papa!" with her thin arms upthrown toward a man who was bent double over a bank of paper decorations.

Pietro Giglio's swarthy face was twisted into an expression of unbearable agony. His hands groping weakly for support ripped off crepe blossoms. The false roses

beneath him were streaked with crimson by the blood trickling from his knotted fingers and streaming from his gaping mouth. It must have come upon him suddenly, for the other costumed men on the float seemed unaware of his horrible paroxysm until little Maria ran alongside clutching at his dangling arm, stumbling, wailing, "Papa! Papa!"

Worse tragedy followed swiftly. Maria's small hands slipped from her father's wet, scarlet sleeve. She fell headlong, tumbling over, too frenzied to know that one of the massive truck wheels was rolling upon her. Suddenly she was pinned beneath it, being crushed. Only then the other men in the truck seemed to realize something ghastly was happening. The ponderous vehicle slammed to a stop, causing Pietro Giglio's bent body to swing loosely, but then it was too late—too late for the little girl smashed beneath the wheel.

SILENCE blanketed down as I shouldered to the curb. The hush was sudden, ominous, oppressive. At the same moment everyone near became numbly motionless. Even Maria's mother, who had rushed frantically after her, had stopped short. Mrs. Giglio was standing transfixed with abject horror, staring at her little girl's dark head lying in puddled red. I was only vaguely aware of this as I sprang to the rear wheel.

"Back it up!" I shouted. "Back the truck!"

But it did not move. The dark-skinned driver, instead of acting quickly to release Maria, was tumbling crazily from the cab. All around, feet were shuffling. Faster, then even faster—men crowding away, women fleeing, children clinging to hands and skirts. Terror glinted in every widened eye. Pallor was bleaching every drawn face. The crowd pressed away like a startled herd, staring not at the pitifully injured little girl, or at the slumped figure



of her father, but at something higher in the bloom-bedecked truck.

A man had pulled himself quickly atop a mound of artificial roses. In his colorful costume he was chunky, bald, quaint—but his eyes were gleaming insanely. He was gripping the staff of some strange symbol that had been cut from heavy cardboard and painted. He was waving it, breathlessly muttering a sort of incoherent incantation. It was a huge human heart, all black.

"Move the truck!" I shouted at him.

He did not hear. He kept swishing that weird standard. I moved that truck myself. Rolling it backward, I saw with amazement that the throngs were crushing into every doorway, emptying the street. Unreasoning fear was driving them into a heedless stampede. Thinking then only of little Maria, I jumped from the seat to find Helen already at that bloody wheel, lifting the wretchedly injured girl into her arms.

Helen Elliot had been watching the festival parade from a window of The Good Samaritan Hospital, which stands opposite my pharmacy. A nurse of rare skill and deep sympathy, she worked tirelessly to minister to all the ailing patients who begged for her attention. She always looked like an angel, with her golden hair shining under her spotless white cap. Her uniform became blotted with red as she ran, cuddling Maria gently, into the hospital.

Carl Brunner, an interne, who had rushed out with Helen, was lifting Pietro Giglio's limp body down. I hastened to help him with that, but by the time the stretcher was brought out, Brunner's stubbled head was wagging. "He's dead," he said.

They carried Pietro Giglio into the emergency room, and I stood there in the street beside the juggernaut, looking around stunned.

Only the distracted Mrs. Giglio had remained near Maria. Even she was not there now—she had stumbled into the hospital after Helen, her lean hands fluttering, bewailing her tragedy to God. The bald, chunky man, who had waved the strange banner, had scuttled down and run off with it. He had vanished. And all the others were gone—the whole throng. A moment ago the street had been jubilantly seething, but now it was fearfully empty and silent. The hush seemed to echo the dismayed shouts I had heard.

"*Jettatore! Fascinato!*" The Evil Eye!

There were only eyes now—terrified eyes—staring out of dark windows.

Why? I asked myself. Why had these thousands fled? Was it sight of that ugly black heart, swinging overhead in the spectrum glow, that had lashed them with dread, whipped them into their cowering retreat? And if it was, what did the black heart mean—what was the evil, over-aweing power it wielded?

These questions were answerless then, but they haunted me as I hastened into the hospital. Its every corridor and every room was familiar. Co-operating with the physicians and the nurses, by filling prescriptions and supplying their needs from my shop—which I hoped to build up into a city-wide chain of pharmacies—I had grown to be almost one of the staff. I assisted in many emergencies, most gladly in cases which were Helen's. Knowing she must have taken poor little Maria into the nearest operating room, I went there at once.

**T**HE TERROR that had swept the streets was an invader even here. The usual serenity was gone; apprehension was like a smothering fog. Patients were praying in their beds. Bewildered, I heard Helen's voice calling: "Rosa! Nurse Lorenza! Please come, Rosa!" I widened the swinging doors of the operating room



to see Maria's broken, emaciated little body already on the table, a gauze-masked surgeon working with intent swiftness. Helen was assisting deftly. She looked up quickly to ask me:

"Please tell Rosa Lorenza we need her desperately. She must be asleep in her room. Hurry, Rob!"

Mrs. Giglio was across the hall, pacing about, sobbing out her anguish. Her thin face was beaded with tears, her bony hands entwined. A few of her broken words were translatable. "The cost—the cost! It was not too high! What does it matter now? The money—so little—but losing my dear ones! Pietro! Maria, Maria! It would not have happened—never—if we had had but one Black Heart—but one Black Heart!"

Then she saw me and went rigid, her wet lips crushed together. I did not have time then to question her, and I felt that she would have told me nothing. Hurrying to the floor where the nurses' quarters were located, I found Rosa Lorenza's door closed. A knock brought no response. Urgently I pushed in. On the sill I stopped frozen—icy and staring, my revolted eyes fixed upon the figure on the bed.

It was Rosa Lorenza, one of the most capable nurses in the Good Samaritan, a girl of somber beauty—but this thing on the bed was not the lovely Rosa Lorenza we knew so well. The ripe blush of her cheeks was gone. The redness of her lips was now faded to colorless waxiness. Her firmly curved figure had become gaunt. The outlines of her body were visible through the gossamer of her night-gown—shrunken, shrivelled as a mummy!

The ghastly sight held me cold and strengthless a moment. I went in slowly, closing the door. Why did I close it? Somehow I felt a malignancy in the air, and wanted to shut it out—the same uncanny virulence that had caused panic to flood the street. I was horribly sure that

it—whatever fiendish thing it was—had done this.

Small marks marred Rosa Lorenza's olive skin. They were tiny incisions, each a little gaping mouth, the raw lips parted to disclose flesh that hideously lacked the color of life. Both her calves bore them, both her flanks; one shoulder was similarly lacerated, and the side of her neck. Her haggardly sunken face revealed no trace of suffering, but somehow, gruesomely, she had died. Something frightful had rapidly transformed this plump, healthy girl into a wizened corpse.

Too shocked to think, I turned back to the door. It opened before I touched the knob. Helen had come up from the operating room. She was pale, dismayed. Her position would not allow me to close the door again. She said huskily: "We don't need Rosa now. Poor little Maria. She was so badly hurt. I knew it was hopeless, but we had to try. Oh, Rob, it's so awful—"

Then her moist eyes caught the thing on the bed. The tears drained out of them. She stood breathless, staring aghast. I tried to keep her back, but she forced herself past me. She saw at once that Rosa Lorenza was beyond all aid. The shocking change in Rosa's appearance staggered her. At last I was able to draw her away. Her stricken eyes questioned me as I closed the door on the dead girl, but there was no explanation I could give.

"Dr. Morningside had better know about it immediately," was all I could say.

**D**R. GEORGE MORNINGSIDE — tall, well-dressed, humane yet decisive in his manner—was in his office on the street floor. He was gravely peeling off the rubber gloves he had worn in the operating room. His eyes sharpened alertly at Helen's pallid face, at my dazed frown. Conscious that what I was saying



must sound incredible, I told him about Rosa Lorenza. He made no answer, but a fierce fire kindled in his gaze, and at once he strode out to see for himself.

Carl Brunner, the interne, having just come from the emergency room, met Dr. Morningside in the corridor. "It isn't easy to understand how it could have happened as it did, Doctor, but Pietro Giglio seems to have died from loss of blood. There's a small wound on his right forearm, bandaged up, but that wouldn't account for his death. Apparently there was a severe internal hemorrhage. Knowing his tubercular condition as we do, though—"

Dr. Morningside strode on urgently, so grimly wordless that Brunner was rendered silent with uneasy surprise. Something strange glinted in Brunner's eyes, too—some vague realization that unearthly, predatory forces were at work in the night. The paleness of his face was fear. He turned abruptly, strode away. Swinging doors effaced him. Helen and I were left alone there, where we could hear the patients mumbling prayers in their rooms—alone, grievously wondering.

What had happened? Pietro Giglio, to judge from what Brunner had said, had died suddenly of natural causes. Shameful accident had taken his little daughter's life. But the street crowds had been paralyzed with dread, then goaded with terror. Why had the insignia of the black heart been flourished over the dead? Was it this dark symbol which had inspired such harrowing fear? It seemed so, yet Mrs. Giglio, in her despair, had moaned out her belief that these deaths would not have occurred if they had had "but one Black Heart."

All this was ominously baffling, yet it was certain that the heterogeneous thousands who lived in our crucible of humanity were being preyed upon by some haunting hydra.

Helen and I sat gazing at each other in silent perturbation until Dr. Morningside came running down the stairs. The surgeon, his fine face drawn with tension, strode imperatively into his office.

"Notify the police, Nurse Elliot. Lose no time about it," he directed. "Whatever ghastly thing happened to Nurse Lorenza, I'm very much mistaken if it's not murder." His eyes fixed on me. "A few days ago Luigi Roco was in here getting his scalp stitched up after a street fight. I had to give him ether. When he was coming out of it he said damned queer things. He didn't know he was talking, of course, but Nurse Lorenza and Nurse Elliot and I all heard him. I'm going to find out what he meant. Right now!"

Dr. Morningside strode swiftly to the entrance. Helen was bewildered. She hurried after him, but his pace was so rapid he was down the steps before she could stop him. His glance lanced back as he repeated, more emphatically, "The police, Miss Elliot!"

As his long strides carrying him along the deserted street, Helen turned, and her troubled eyes seeking mine. It was at that moment that a hand reached into the light—a hand that stretched out of shadow to grip her wrist.

It appeared with a darting movement—a pudgy claw that fastened hard, its long nails glittering. A stifled cry broke from Helen's lips as she recoiled. Immediately I strode toward her. The man who had seized her was a dim shape in the shadows, but he was speaking in a husky tone. "Be careful what you say! I warn you, be careful!" She was vainly trying to free herself when I grasped that wrist and tore the talons off, peering into the darkness from which the hand had struck.

It was Dante Zavada. He was alone in the street that terror had stalked. He was a fattish, hunched gnome, with a repulsive feline mouth that now was stretched as



though to hiss, exposing his fangs. They could not be called teeth—fangs they were, gleaming and white, especially the long, sharply pointed incisors. He was as revolting as some obscene beast. Incensed because he had startled Helen when she was already overwrought, I held to his tattered sleeve.

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

He snatched himself away, crouching to scurry off. Just at that moment a nearby door opened and a woman cautiously appeared. She was the first to venture into the dreadful street. She took one faltering step, but no more—because she glimpsed Dante Zavada. She retreated, terrified, a shrill exclamation bursting from her:

*"Empusa! Empusa!"*

Helen's hand caught mine coldly. We stood staring at the spectral shadows which had blotted Zavada up. The translation of the woman's cry was echoing in our numb minds—a word that brought ghostly horror out of the mists of the dark medieval ages:

"Vampire! Vampire!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Bloodless Death

THE detectives paused in their questioning, staring strangely. This was, obviously, something unlike anything they had ever before encountered. Big, burly, hardboiled fellows, they could not clearly understand what Helen and I were trying to explain. One of them leaned forward to her after a moment.

"Tell me again," he urged, "what you and Nurse Lorenza and Dr. Morningside heard Luigi Roco say when Roco was coming out of the ether."

"He said first, 'For the Black Heart, two hundred. It it worth two hundred—your life!'" Helen repeated. "Then he

seemed to break into an argument with someone he imagined was there. He said, 'My share is not too much, signore. It is I who shield you. I go from you to him, and because of me no one knows it is you behind it all. For that a high price is right. Yes, for that you must pay me well, and for saying nothing too, for I know how it is that the blood goes out.'"

The detective asked: "And none of you knew at the time what that meant? You don't know now?"

"I didn't, and I still don't," Helen answered. "It seemed to set Rosa Lorenza to thinking. I had the feeling she was going to ask Luigi Roco about it. She had dates with Roco sometimes—she knew him rather well, and wouldn't hesitate to question him."

"Perhaps she learned—" the detective observed—"too much."

Another confused silence followed. Helen and I had told these men of every detail, but they seemed to feel, as well as we, that behind it lay something which no words so far uttered gave any key to. The full truth was obscured by some indefinable fog of evil. Trying anew, the detective leaned forward again, holding something toward Helen.

"What's that mean?"

It was a ragged bit of white paper with a round crimson stain on its center—a blot that looked like dried blood.

Helen answered: "I don't know."

"We found it," the detective told us, "near Rosa Lorenza's bed."

Then they dismissed us. We left the room as bewildered as when we had entered, but with our misgivings far stronger. At once I took Helen's arms firmly.

"Darling, I'm afraid—for you," I said. "Whatever it was that Roco was raving about under the ether, it's dangerous knowledge. Rosa Lorenza must have faced him with it, and now—" My voice faded anxiously while she gazed at me



breathless. "You don't understand what it means, but that makes no difference. Whoever, or whatever did that to Rosa may believe you do understand. I want you to watch yourself, Helen—very carefully."

"I will, Rob," she promised.

Both of us were thinking then of two facts which the investigation had brought to light—two facts that were somehow even more fearful than the weird unknown.

The assistant medical examiner had found that every drop of Rosa Lorenza's blood had been drained away through those tiny incisions—drained or sucked. This was one thing. The other was the fact that the fire-escape in the gloomy court behind the hospital made it likely that some person—or some thing—had stolen into her room while she lay asleep and had fled from her corpse unseen . . . .

**H**ELEN, distressed as she was, was obliged to resume her duties. She was more of an angel than ever that night, administering to the dread-filled ill while she herself was sick at heart. I left her, intending to go to my shop, but I paused when I found a bent figure hobbling into Dr. Morningside's office.

This was a lean man of marked pallor, short of breath, so unsteady with weakness he immediately dropped into a chair. Vittorio Margaria's expensive clothing was far finer than his health. The diamonds with which he emblazoned himself were not enough to buy him a quick recovery from the pernicious anaemia with which he suffered. He was almost royalty among the poor masses of the Lacey Street section, was accustomed to slavish adulation from them, but he came humbly and frequently to Dr. Morningside to wheedle a new prescription.

He greeted me in his native tongue. "The doctor is here?" he asked. "I feel so

weak! My breath comes so hard. This little walk, and I am exhausted. The bone marrow the doctor gave me to take—no good. The liver I eat day after day—no good. There is something more, something else, to make me strong and well—yes? If the doctor will be so kind—"

My eyes had sharpened. Vittorio Margaria's supremacy in this neighborhood, where he had lived all his life, made him a fountainhead of personal news and gossip. The chain of provision stores he owned were a clearing house for an amazing variety of intimate information. He went nowhere far from Lacey Street, but everything that was said and done, he knew. Grasping at this opportunity, I said quietly:

"Dr. Morningside is not here just now. He went out to try to learn something that you may be able to tell me.

"My friend, you know, of course, what happened in the street a little while ago. You know everyone ran to hide in their homes, filled with fear. What is it they're afraid of? What did they run away from? What does the Black Heart mean?"

"The—Black—Heart!"

Margaria mouthed it as though the very sound of the words was a curse. He stared, stiffening, his breath coming even faster. He struggled up from his chair, every movement anxious. "I do not know!" he blurted huskily. "I do not know!" He started out, and I insistently took his arm, but he tore free with a frenzied jerk. He tottered with haste while I doggedly followed him to the outer steps.

"You do know!" I challenged him. "It isn't possible that this is something you haven't learned. Tell me, Margaria! What is the Black Heart?"

"I do not know—do not know!"

He muttered it awesomely, his haste increasing. He almost ran through the



iridescent shadows thrown by the festooned bulbs.

Now a few persons were venturing into the street. They moved warily, as though apprehensive that something might strike them down in their tracks. The panic had abated somewhat, but it had snuffed out the gay spirit of the little Mardi Gras. There would be, I knew, no more festivity tonight, but only heartache.

I went into my shop. Its windows were the brightest in Lacey Street; it was thoroughly clean, neat, well equipped. My assistant, too, was disturbed, but I could not answer his questions.

SOON, while I was checking up on my supplies, a woman came in. She was large and masculine, with a peculiar dogged look in her grey eyes—a stranger to this section. She was sitting at the soda fountain, sipping coffee, when one of the headquarters detectives strode across from the hospital. I sensed at once that the woman was also connected with the police, and this I later learned to be true. Her name was Pauline Rorke. She had entered first in order to listen to Lieut. Quayle question me.

"Look here, Mr. Rodman," the detective said quietly, "you don't really believe there's any so-called black magic behind all this, do you?"

I knew at the beginning I could not dislodge his mundane skepticism, but I answered: "These people, Lieutenant, are not living in modern New York City. They dwell in a part of the old world they've brought with them, with all its ancient traditional beliefs. What I think has no bearing on the matter, but what they feel is important, because it's intensely real to them. As for witchcraft, there are thousands who still adhere to *la vecchia religione*—the old faith."

Lieut. Quayle merely looked at me.

But this was a subject that had exerted

an increasing fascination upon me since Helen had induced me to open my first shop in Lacey Street. I went on: The modern world is full of sorcery. Among the Pennsylvania Dutch, hex doctors are mortally feared. Murders have been committed to break their spell. You've read of other cases in the newspapers yourself, surely, Lieutenant. There was a young woman recently who paid all her savings, sixteen hundred dollars, for a certain powder which a witch in Brooklyn promised her would win her the love of a young man. It was supposed to be the dust of the bones and the dried blood of a murderer who had killed himself. She was thoroughly modern and well educated. Whether or not a superstition is actually false doesn't mean anything. The belief in it makes it powerfully real."

Quayle stared on without change of expression.

"You ask me if something supernatural is doing some evil work here. If it can happen anywhere on the face of the globe, Lieutenant, this street is the place. Here, in a world old with fears and evil portents . . . What—what's that?"

A prolonged groaning sound was surging in from the street. It was the harrowing voice of awesome despair. Quickly striding to the door, with Quayle at my side, I saw a few men and women standing rooted. The sick wail was chanting out of their dry throats. Their stricken eyes were staring at a vague moving form which, in a moment, became appallingly clear. They were hauntedly watching a man who was lurching along the opposite sidewalk toward the hospital—staggering, stumbling, gasping as though the insufferable clutch of death was upon his throat.

He reeled into a sprawled heap when he reached the steps of the Good Samaritan. I was first out the door, with Quayle bounding alongside. Snatching at the huddled figure, we saw clothing sodden



with blood. The sidewalk was spotted with a crimson trail. The ghastly strangulations of the fallen man were quick, indescribably desperate. He had tottered with his last strength to the hospital door, there to collapse in dreadful agony . . . It was Dr. George Morningside!

**Y**ET this creature of horror was scarcely the brisk, strong physician who had left this door so purposefully such a short time ago. His cheeks and eyes were appallingly sunken. His hands were now emaciated, one a waxen claw, the other a bony club of a fist. And on his neck, gaping obscenely like a small slaving mouth, was an incision exposing faded flesh.

"It's the same—the same as Nurse Lorenza!"

There was no time then to think or wonder, no time even to fear the thirsty horror that had preyed upon the physician. Dr. Morningside was on the verge of death. It was incredible that he had been able to fling himself this far along the street. He was in fearful need of aid. Quayle and I must have shouted, for two nurses came running toward us—Helen was one. With feverish haste we carried the shriveled, exhausted Morningside into the operating room.

Another staff physician, Dr. Hastings, fortunately was at hand. Competent to the emergency, he issued crackling orders. Preparations for a blood transfusion were

soon made. Very quickly a girl was hurried into the room and made to lie upon a second table placed alongside that on which the scarcely living mummy lay. A few minutes later both her vein and Dr. Morningside's were pierced by large steel needles, and her rich blood was pulsing through valve-controlled rubber tubes into the uncannily emaciated body of the doctor.

Watching shocked, I could not help thinking how strangely fortunate it was that Angela Haloff's blood was overabundant in a place where others' blood was being so horribly, uncannily sapped. Angela Haloff was the donor on the second table. She was undergoing treatment at the Good Samaritan for a rare disease, erythremia, which is a too profuse production of red corpuscles. It was necessary to draw off some of her excessive life fluid daily—as much as a pint each time. Serious as her affliction was, she was a blessing when she could be used for an emergency transfusion.

She lay with eyes closed, dark face serene, experiencing relief while her blood throbbed into Dr. Morningside's veins. Dr. Hastings plied the glass valve back and forth, back and forth, filling the chamber, plunging it empty. The victim—the victim of God knew what evil voracity—was stripped now, his nakedness revealing other ghastly incisions on his calves and shoulder. These wounds had been taped.



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There were, besides, lacerations on his wrists and ankles as though he had been bound—tied helpless while some thirsty thing drank his blood away. There in that tense room I watched science battle for a life that had been fed upon by some devouring, unearthly demon.

Lieut. Quayle, now pale and shaken, turned grimly to order another detective: "Find Dante Zavada! Find that man, or fiend, or whatever he is, and drag him in here! Don't stop until you get him, because—"

Because, Quayle's unspoken thought was, no one else must die like this—no one else must suffer the blood to be drunk from their living heart.

The wild shine in the lieutenant's eyes revealed that now, hard-headed as he was, he half believed.

Dante Zavada! What was known about this demi-man who was even now being hunted as a monster? Little—mysteriously little. He lived without visible support, except for the few errands he was hired to run for a few miserable pennies—but lived where? I did not know. I knew only that he was a repulsive little dwarf from whose approach others sidled apprehensively, in whose wake a dread word was whispered: "*Empusa!*"

A voice, husky and almost inaudible, was whispering in the operating room. Dr. Morningside's waxen lips were working painfully. I watched Quayle and Helen bend close, trying to catch the broken whisper. In a moment they straightened. Quayle was scowling. Helen moved to me quietly, her face almost as white as the stricken, alabaster mask of the man on the table. She took my arm tightly, her whole body trembling.

"He warned me! He said, 'Don't try to learn. Let it alone—let it alone—or you will become—like me!'"

I stood gazing wretchedly in Helen's fear-filled eyes. Of the three who had

heard Luigi Roco's unconscious revelation, vague as it was, she alone remained. "Become like me"—it was echoing with ghastly insistence in my mind. Helen to suffer this horror! The fear was numbing my brain—fear that Helen—*my Helen* . . .

Lieut. Quayle was turning away from the operating table. He had something in his fingers—a little dark, glittering thing that Dr. Morningside had held clenched all the while. He raised it in the light, dangling it on the end of a slender, broken chain. It was the hue of deepest midnight, shaped—shaped like a heart. . .

### *The Black Heart!*

The hush had deepened. I was aware, abruptly, that Dr. Hastings was wagging his shaggy head in solemn finality; that the action of the transfusion pump had ceased.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Cups of Crimson

THE passage of a day did little to restore the cheerful hustle of Lacey Street. Merry chatter gave way to guarded whispers. The push-cart peddlers left off their vociferous bickering, refused or accepted offers with preoccupied shrugs. No one lingered in the street; everyone hurried indoors. The festival was abandoned. It had become something which every soul wished to forget and could not—a carnival of corpses.

At every opportunity I hurried across the street to seek Helen in the hospital. "Are you all right?" I asked. "Nothing has happened to make you uneasy? If it does you'll let me know instantly?"

"Of course, Rob," she said, but her smile was forced. "Don't worry."

But my anxiety was like a heightening fever, while Helen tried to lose herself in her busy duties and I kept occupied behind the counter.



The police search for Dante Zavada was continuing. He could not be found. The filthy hole where he lived was located, but it was empty. Low-voiced rumors crept through the neighborhood to tell of his having sought shelter in a grave. To timorous hundreds this was an unquestionable explanation of his disappearance. I could not believe, as all my neighbors did, that this creature was one who nourished himself on the blood of others; yet, somewhere deep in a primitive crevice of my brain there lurked credence and fear.

Fear for Helen. Fear that she might feel the sharpness of the fangs, the thirsty lips pressed to her bleeding flesh . . .

The man whom she had heard raving out a depraved secret, the man whom Dr. Morningside had sought last night, was also being searched for by the police. In these few blocks, where hundreds of thousands were packed into their hives, there were countless hidden crannies. Luigi Roco, a flashy, effusive young hanger-on, had vanished into one of them. This was extremely suspicious to the police, but not to the heterogeneity of Lacey Street. My neighbors spoke fearfully of Dante Zavada and spat out, "*Empusa!*"

I worked over my books late that night, frequently glancing across the street for a reassuring glimpse of Helen. I was disturbed to find so many unpaid accounts. Trivial amounts had been charged by my customers for weeks back, in increasing numbers. My assistant told me they had professed greater poverty than usual. Other merchants, he had learned, were also suffering. Vittorio Margaria had professed himself hard hit. Money was never plentiful, but we could not explain this. I felt uneasily that the little cash these poor people had was somehow being diverted into some underground channel. I was puzzling over this when I was interrupted by Ferdinand Jaffe.

Jaffe was a shy young fellow, a barber

who plied his scissors in the shop of Cesare Giotto. He was wearing his white coat and his fixed smile when he leaned across my desk to nudge my arm. His dark eyes crinkling, he asked ingratiatingly:

"Please, if you will be so good, Signore Rodman, a few leeches. We need them because we have no more now. Thank you very much, my friend, for a few leeches."

I sat there, suddenly icy cold, staring at him. My mind flashed with realization. I thought of dead bodies with all the blood sucked from them—and leeches.

"I'm sorry," I said finally. "My supply is exhausted. I will have no more for a day or two."

He kept smiling, and turned to leave. I reached out a restraining hand. I asked quietly: "You seem as happy as usual, Ferdinand. Aren't you afraid? All the others are so worried, but you're not uneasy?"

His smile remained. "Afraid?" he asked. "I? No, signore. I have nothing to fear. I am sure I am safe. I have my—" There he broke off, and his smile flickered. But it came back. "I am not afraid," he substituted for what he had been about to divulge. His lips were still curved when he strode out.

I ROSE quietly and went back to the compounding table. I took up a small metal box and raised the lid. It was half full of dark, chemically treated ooze in which clumps of glistening brown things were resting. Some were stretched out, some were slowly slithering, others were loops clinging to the side wall of the container, held so by their two suckers. They were leeches.

It is not generally known that leech-farming was once a great and profitable business. In the nineteenth century, when phlebotomy, or blood-letting, was at its zenith, millions of leeches were raised and



used every year. It may be amazing to learn that this is still a flourishing business. I obtained my leeches from an Italian in the Bronx who imports 50,000 leeches a year, selling them to drug stores like mine in Italian and Polish sections. Centuries ago people bought them to treat themselves, feeding the leeches their own blood. Today many still do so.

Here, then, is ancient belief and advanced science meeting. Blood is sometimes let in some cases of heart disease, cerebral hemorrhage and convulsive attacks by the wisest surgeons—yet, why this benefits the patient is not fully clear. If leeches are used for this, from one to twelve are applied at once and allowed to remain until they have so engorged themselves that they fall off. The flow of the tiny incisions must then be stopped, for leeches exude a salivary chemical called *hirudin* which prevents the coagulation of the blood. Each leech will bloat itself with about three ounces of blood in fifteen minutes. I thought of this as I stood there gazing at the slimy little things which I had declined to sell.

Suddenly I clicked the box shut. Leaving my assistant in charge, I strode along desolated Lacey Street toward the shop of Cesare Giotto, the barber. I saw before I reached it that it had just closed. Immediately I turned to the tenement where he lived on the ground floor across the street. His rusty touring car was sitting at the entrance. I strode in and raised my knuckles to knock—but I paused.

There were several suspiciously clean spots on the floor. They were large as a loaf of rye bread; someone had scrubbed the boards. Traces of something had been removed. Looking at them, I heard odd sounds in Cesare Giotto's rooms. Someone was puffing, grunting as though struggling with an awkward, strenuous task. When sound of the puffing seemed suddenly to approach the door, I turned

away on a sudden impulse. Slipping out of sight behind the stairway, I watched.

The door opened cautiously. Cesare Giotto's glistening head appeared. His features shone as smooth as his hairless pate. Suddenly I realized what I had not taken time to grasp during the emergency in the street the previous evening—that it was this man, Cesare Giotto, who had climbed to the highest part of the beflowered truck that had crushed out Maria Giglio's life—this man who had waved the symbol of the Black Heart while thousands fled in abject terror.

**G**ALVANIZED, I heard Giotto slip furtively from the room. He went to the street door with little bouncing steps, peered out, then tip-toed back. He reached up, unscrewed the bare bulb in the hall. Darkness settled. He re-entered his room and extinguished the light there. When he emerged again, his breath choking and rushing with effort, he was merely a blurred shadow, but I could make out dimly that he was carrying something heavy.

He cautiously scanned the street again, then stumbled to his car. With frantic haste he heaved his weighty burden into the rear of it. Even more rapidly he scurried to the wheel. His eyes flashing with apprehension, he went off with a neck-breaking lurch. He was driving frantically along the sombrely deserted street by the time I reached the entrance. In another moment he would be blocks away, lost in the dark canyons.

I ran back to my coupe, which was sitting near my store. Moving as fast as possible, I started up. The roar of the engine brought pallid faces to grimy windows along the way. I sped out of Lacey Street, glimpsing the red tail-beacon of Giotto's car fleeing southward. Abruptly it swerved east. Nearing the river, I lost it at another quick turn, but in a moment



I found it sitting lightless in front of a warehouse, with the front door gaping and no one at the wheel.

I slipped out. Abruptly Cesare Giotto's pudgy figure materialized from the bleak shadows of a pile of broken crates awaiting disposal. He jerked to a breathless stop when he saw me. A glance into the rear of his car told that his cargo, whatever it had been, was no longer there. My advance seemed to fill him with terror. I demanded:

"What the devil are you up to, Giotto?"

"Nothing, signore!"

I took a firm stance. "Look here," I said. "You've just hidden something. What was it? Why are you so afraid? What do the clean spots mean in the hallway in front of your door? You washed something away there last night, didn't you? It was blood, wasn't it, Giotto?"

"No, no, signore!"

"It was blood," I insisted. "It was Dr. Morningside's blood. Sooner or later you will have to tell the truth, Giotto. You know me—I'll be far more sympathetic than the police. If you don't tell me here and now, I'll turn you over."

He blurted: "I did not know then whose blood it was!" He shot a terrified glance around. He was an explosive charge of fear. Somehow, there in the glow of my headlamps, he looked evil. His glittering eyes were dread-spangled curtains of concealment. He went on beseechingly: "Signore Rodman! Signore, I am your friend. I will not lie to you. You will comprehend, signore."

"Nurse Lorenza and Dr. Morningside were also my friends," I told him. "Nurse Elliot is much dearer to me than a friend. I'll stop at nothing to keep her safe. I'm going to learn what this horrible thing is for her sake. I want the truth, Giotto!"

"Yes, yes, signore!" He swallowed in agony. "Last night, signore—I am in my shop. Everyone, everyone else is also

inside, afraid of—afraid. Soon someone comes to the door and knocks. He calls 'Cesare Giotto! Cesare Giotto!' He sees me in there. He says, "Where is Luigi Roco? I come close, and it is Dr. Morningside. I tell him, 'Luigi Roco, signore, is across the street, in my home, with much wine.'"

"Morningside went there?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, signore! He goes across the street and into my home. He stays there. In the window there is no light. I wait in my shop. I wait a long time, signore. Very quickly, the signore doctor runs out. He runs like he is crazy. I do not know. Then I go from my shop to my home. On the floor, in the hall, there is blood. Inside, more blood—much blood. What happens, signore, I do not know, I swear by all the saints!"

"That's not all, Giotto!" I insisted. "What's the rest? Why did you wave that damned black heart over Pietro Giglio last night?" Suddenly I caught his arm, tugged his tie aside, tore his shirt open. I plucked at a thin chain dangling around his neck, at a glittering amulet hanging from it. It was exactly the same as the fearsome talisman which had been taken from the dead hand of Dr. Morningside—a shining, night-black heart.

**M**Y FIST closed on it as I snapped: "What does this mean?"

He flung himself away from me wildly. It was not an attack—it was a mad, scrambling dive for his car, but it jarred me back. I tottered over a broken crate in the gutter and sprawled. By the time I could draw myself up, Giotto was behind the steering-wheel, madly racing the motor. The car jerked away, blurring into the darkness. Turning toward my coupe, I was aware that the chain of Giotto's weird amulet had been broken by his rush. The ebon heart remained in my hot palm.

Reaching for the wheel, I paused. My



spill over the broken crate had shifted it. The beams of my car disclosed something lying huddled, now only partly concealed. It was, I knew, Giotto's burden that he had hidden there. I strode to the box, tilted it aside. New horror trickled down my spine like icy water.

The man's body had a ghastly gauntness. The neck was scrawny, the cheeks sunken, the eyes deep and ugly in their sockets. The flesh above his collar was colorlessly parted by a small cut, precisely like those that had marked the bodies of Nurse Lorenza and Dr. Morningside. Other incisions, I felt sure, were concealed by the blood-crusting clothing. In spite of its mummified appearance, I recognized this, gauze-plastered scalp and all, as the corpse of Luigi Roco.

The panic-stricken Cesare Giotto had already escaped the bleak thoroughfare. Once behind the wheel of my car, I sped to Lacey Street. Both Giotto's shop and his room were dark. His battered car was nowhere in sight. He had sought shelter somewhere else, I thought, but perhaps he would soon steal back to his home. I ran my coupe down to my store, left it there, walked back quietly and concealed myself in a dark doorway. Across the deserted, black and blighted street the barber shop of Cesare Giotto stood.

The signs in its windows were dimly legible. Translated they read, *Cupping Expertly Done Here, Skilled Blood-Letting a Specialty*. Looking at them coldly, I thought how damning Giotto's pseudo-surgery was in the light of what had happened.

Cupping, I reflected, is a practise which the encyclopedia declares obsolete, but here it flourished, as in thousands of foreign communities. Little cups, or *cucurbitula*, of clear glass—or, sometimes, instead, horns hollowed out—were heated over a spirit lamp and quickly applied to the patient's skin. A vacuum formed as

they cooled. The cups clung tightly, sucking up the flesh. Flow of blood to the surface was stimulated. The treatment was given for every sort of ache and pain, and taken as casually and as frequently as we might swallow aspirin.

Sometimes as many as seventy-five or a hundred cups were used at once, all sucking at the torso. When horns were applied, it gave the patient a grotesquely monstrous appearance. Used dry like this—*cucurbitula secca*—they merely resulted in red-blotched swellings. But sometimes little incisions were made, like that found on the arm of Pietro Giglio, and blood was drawn—*cucurbitula cruenta*. Thousands of times, countless times, blood had been let, both by cups and leeches, in the shop of Cesare Giotto.

THESE thoughts stirred me with revulsion as I hid in the doorway, expecting Giotto to return. Prickling with impatience, I stepped out and turned to the entrance of the barber's room. It was still dark, but I knocked. The sudden violence of the rap shocked another sound from the room—a stifled gasp. I realized then that Cesare Giotto had been there all the time, after having left his car on another street—was in there now, sheltering himself in the dark.

"Giotto," I said quietly through the panel, "I have learned about Luigi Roco. Both Roco and Dr. Morningside died in your home. All the while the police have been hunting for Roco, you have been keeping him under cover—him or his body. I am going now, Giotto, to tell the police you killed them."

The barber's hoarse whisper emerged. "No, no, signore! I have told you the truth about last night! The truth, but not all of it! I will tell you the rest now. I pray you, listen to me! I did not do it!"

"Open the door!"

"No, signore, no! Listen! Last night



I come here to find the blood in the hall. This I have told you. I enter and find more blood. There are pieces of rope on the floor, with blood on them, but I do not know. In a chair, signore, there is Luigi Roco. He is tied up. He is dead. I do not know! But the police—if they find him like this they will think Cesare Giotto has murdered. I swear by all the saints, signore, that is why I carried him away tonight!"

"Your supply of leeches," I said in a low tone, "is exhausted, Giotto."

"Signore, signore! You are a smart man. I am your friend. I tell you that a few leeches—the few small leeches I have—could not do this. Only a few little leeches, signore, could not drink up all the blood of a man. How many are the cuts on the body, signore? You may count them on the fingers of one hand. So few small leeches could not do this, signore!"

It was true. Giotto's frenzied logic was inescapable. The hirudinea employed for blood-letting were of such limited capacity that a ghastly number of them would be needed, applied all over a human body, in order to suck away its blood as completely as the blood of the terror victims had been drawn. I estimated two hundred. But it was not for me to stand as Giotto's judge and jury now. My burning concern was somehow to destroy the obscene preyer who might next open Helen's veins. I rasped through the door:

"You will tell the police that, Giotto! They will weigh what you say. Open the door—give yourself up."

"No, no, signore! No, no!"

An ominous silence followed. My rap brought no answer. I began shouldering the door. No one came to watch or to protest while I battered that panel; every soul who heard was cowering behind fastened locks. The dry wood splintered under my strengthened attempts. A section cracked out. The bolt was easily

reached. The turn of a switch disclosed—no Cesare Giotto.

An open window in the rear room revealed that he had stolen out into the court. By now he had wormed himself into some stenchy hole God knew where.

Determining to notify the police at once, I gazed around the room. Floor and rug and chairs were spotted where a rag had rubbed away red stains. The standard that had been waved in the night was standing in one corner. I felt something of the dread that had stabbed into thousands as I gazed at it—the huge Black Heart picturing the small amulet clenched in my hot fist. Dread gripped me, because Giotto was lurking in the night—dread for Helen.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Hell's Thirst

**H**ELEN! Anxiety for her hurried me to the Good Samaritan. The very lateness of the hour, the fearful hush of the street, the time that had passed since I had last made sure of her safety—these were a nightmare. I bounded into the hospital, finding it silent and dim. Helen should be on duty, but she was not at the corridor desk. Another nurse was there, her face looking hideously pinched and green in the glow of the shaded lamp.

"Where is Helen?" I asked quickly. "Is she all right?"

The answer filled me with chilled consternation. "Nurse Elliot went out some time ago. She said it was important and asked me to relieve her. It has something to do with Mrs. Giglio, I think, but—"

I ran out, waiting to hear no more, my heart trip-hammering. The thought that Helen had gone alone into a night of predatory horrors was like a momentary madness. Speeding along the street, I searched every shadow. A great breath of relief flooded from my lungs when, suddenly, I glimpsed her familiar, slender fig-



ure. She was just rounding the corner, hurrying toward me. Breathless, I caught her arm.

"Good God, Helen! You—you're all right, aren't you? You mustn't do this again!"

She was unharmed—except for the corrosive fright that would not leave her, that was deepening lines in her lovely face. She was quick of breath, though reassured to be with me. She took my arm eagerly, holding one small hand clenched.

"I had to, Rob," she whispered. "Mrs. Giglio came in some time ago. She was half out of her mind with grief and worry. She begged me for money. She wouldn't tell me what she wanted it for. My asking her terrified her somehow. I was determined to learn the truth so I told her I would help her if she would explain the meaning of the Black Heart. She shook her head and burst into tears and ran out."

I was suddenly wary. I sensed some hidden, furtive movement in the street. It had rustled somewhere near, but I could see nothing. Eyes alert, I kept searching while Helen, unnoticing, went on.

"A little later I was so anxious for her I had to go see her. I went to her rooms. I kept insisting. She wouldn't say a word, but just kept looking at me in terror. I felt she was afraid for her life. At last she gave me a bit of paper. I handed her some money and left her. Here it is Rob. The same—the same—"

She had opened her hand, was smoothing out the rumpled, irregular piece. It was wetly spotted, as though tears of despair had fallen on it. But in its center was a glaring blot of brownish crimson—dried blood. It was exactly like the thing the police had found beside Rosa Lorenza's bloodless body.

"That's a warning," I said. "One of them was apparently put into Rosa's room before—it happened. It's why Mrs. Gi-

glio is beside herself—it's a threat. She's afraid she'll be seized upon by the demon that drinks blood. The money she wants—that must have something to do with it. And the Black Heart. We—Helen! Get back!"

I DREW her suddenly into the gloom of a doorway. She was startled, trembling. Her gaze followed mine down the street. Now I saw the thing that had moved invisibly before. It was creeping through the darkness with hunted stealth. It dodged past the lighted windows of the hospital to the emergency entrance, but not so rapidly that we did not recognize that gnarled, hunched figure.

It was Dante Zavada. He had prowled from his hiding place—perhaps from his vampire's grave? He was huddling now at the hospital door.

Helen whisperingly choked out: "He may—may be looking for me!"

But Dante Zavada knocked. He huddled in the gloom, his eyes flickering uncannily, but he did not see us. Presently his rap brought an answer. The door opened slightly. Zavada leaned close and his feline lips whispered words we could not hear. The door closed again. While Zavada waited he smoothed and patted his filthy clothing, preening himself with catlike self-absorption. He ceased abruptly when the door again went ajar. A hand reached out, proffering him what looked like a dark whiskey flask.

Immediately Dante Zavada tucked the bottle inside his ragged coat and began scuttling away. I had seen enough. I strode from the doorway, keeping one hand tight on Helen's. Zavada heard my heel-beats and started to dart away, but I overtook him. Grasping his arm, I jerked him around. I began, "What the devil are you up to?" but my question was broken by a sharp, splintering crash.

The bottle had dropped from Zavada's



coat. It cracked to bits on the pavement. Dark, viscid stuff spattered. A cry of horror broke stifled from Helen's lips. Staring down, I saw the thick red color that meant blood. Beyond all doubt, it *was* human blood. A groan of dismay strangled from Zavada's throat, and he wrenched himself as though to grovel in it. My grip on his arm holding him, I thrust him back to the emergency entrance, and through the door.

Helen stood close at my side in that bright, glittering, white-walled room. Carl Brunner, the interne, was there. He was thrusting several banknotes in his pocket, having apparently just counted them. He went pale at sight of the cowering Zavada. I asked him bluntly: "Did you give Zavada that bottle of blood?"

Brunner shrugged. "What of it? It's Angela Haloff's blood. There's more of it than we have any use for. Most of it is thrown out. Zavada pays for it. Why not?"

Helen had told me that the blood it was necessary to draw from Angela Haloff's body every day was kept stored in the refrigerator, with a little citric acid added to prevent coagulation. It might be used experimentally, but no check was kept on the quantity. I was appalled by Brunner's sullen confession that he had been bootlegging it. I demanded:

"What does he want it for? How much have you sold him—how long has this been going on? Good God, Brunner, how could you do it at all?"

He shrugged again. "I asked no questions. He's been coming here every night for a long time now, but sometimes there wasn't any—last night, for instance. I'm not responsible to you, Rodman. This is none of your business."

I snapped back, "You know this man is wanted by the police. You're content to let him remain at large, prowling about doing God knows what evil things, for

the sake of the few dollars he might pay you. No more of that, Brunner. Telephone the police right now. Tell them we have him. Tell them, too, they can find Luigi Roco's bloodless body on Front Street where Cesare Giotto put it a few minutes ago."

He started, turned pale, and reached toward the telephone. At that instant Dante Zavada burst into a wild scramble to free himself. He twisted from my hand and sprang to a white-enamelled table. On it was a steaming sterilizer brimming with boiling water, full of razor-sharp surgical implements. He caught it up violently, snapping off the rubber gas pipe. Helen recoiled with a cry of terror as he poised it to hurl.

"Drop that!"

Madly Zavada heaved it. It struck across the room, glittering and solashing. Scalding water spun from it while those incredible sharp instruments flew out. Helen flung herself down, terrified, covering her head with her arms. Brunner dove toward the inner door with a hoarse shout. I lunged across the room toward Zavada, but already he was swiftly scuttling toward the street. Before I could stop him he was out the entrance, scampering evilly through the shadows somewhere.

**S**TEAM billowed up from the pools on the floor. Light gleamed off the scattered instruments. Helen came to my side, breathless with anxiety. I commanded Brunner again, "Call the police!" Striding to the entrance, peering along the accursed street, I could see nothing of Dante Zavada. While Helen clung to my hand I said grimly:

"I'm going to hunt for him—find him. He got away from me, so it's up to me to bring him back. Helen, you—you won't be safe alone. I don't trust anyone—not anyone now. I'll feel easier about you if



you'll stay with the police when they come and—"

"With you, Rob," she said huskily. "I want to stay with you. I feel, somehow, you're in danger too. It will be better if we're together. Please don't argue, darling. I couldn't stand it—being away from you now."

I was glad to be able to feel her hand in mine. It was cold and trembling, but firm and real, and at least for the moment, safe. We went along Lacey Street together, quietly, searching for Dante Zavada. Of course, he had had a chance to hide himself somewhere—perhaps to return to the grave that was his unearthly haven. But I had a strong feeling that if we searched long enough, we would find him. This was night—the hour when vampires prowled. He had been deprived of the bottled blood. Perhaps he was seeking someone else's. Together, hands entwined, Helen and I searched.

It seemed an eternity later that I glimpsed a shadow on a window-blind, a shadow that jolted my nerves.

The window was three flights up. It alone was lighted in that grimy tenement wall. A black silhouette was blotted over it. The hunched shoulders, the pointed chin of the otherwise full face were, beyond all doubt, Dante Zavada's. He was up there in that room, making obscene grovelling motions, stooping. His evil lips were working together.

Silently, dreading the move even as I made it, I crossed the street with Helen. The tenement entrance was black. The odorous hallways were dim with the dusty glow of old yellow bulbs. We climbed three flights slowly, making no sound. A line of sill light drew us to the door which hid Dante Zavada. There I paused, leaning down to peer through the keyhole. I saw—ghastly horror.

A woman was sprawled on the miserable bed. Her cotton nightgown had been

peeled up around her arm-pits. The gaunt, waxen face was that of the big woman who had come into my shop—Pauline Rorke, from the precinct station. Her exposed body no longer looked strong and full. It was pallid and shrivelled. In five places her drained flesh bore gaping incisions. Over her body Dante Zavada was bending.

Perhaps it was an unconscious gasp that warned the thing of our presence. Dante Zavada whirled to the door, straightening. He leaped at it, arms lifting so that his loose coat became the webbing of black wings. He dashed, snarling, into the dark hallway with fierce violence. He flung himself, long nails glittering, sharp fangs gleaming, upon Helen.

A scream rose from her throat as she fell back. I grappled madly at the evil thing that was Dante Zavada. The struggle that followed was swift and desperate, a nightmare of obscene terrors. Suddenly Zavada was wrenching himself free, crying out animal-like rage, fluttering to the stairs. I could not throw myself after him—not with Helen lying stunned on the floor, her eyes wide with speechless fright, her neck flowing with blood from a fresh cut.

With anguished swiftness I pressed my handkerchief to the wound. She struggled up, clinging to me. The hallway was full of the muttering and moaning of tenants whom the struggle had aroused, but Zavada was gone. Helen and I stumbled down the stairs, seeking the cool air of the street. Our only thought to find salvation from abysmal fears, we ran to the Good Samaritan. It was a dream flight, endless and agonized, but at last we reached the door of Helen's room. We pushed in—and stopped.

I saw it first. I snatched it up, hoping she had not seen it, but she had. The fear in her eyes became a consuming flame. She knew what I had found slipped



under the edge of her door during her absence—a ragged slip of paper bearing a blot of dried red. The warning that Helen was marked as a victim by the thirsty thing that drained the heart of all its blood!

I sat there in the room, with a dim light burning, while Helen lay sleepless. I listened for every furtive sound, glancing from the latched window to the bolted door. In stifling heat and even more stifling apprehension I guarded her against the coming of the voracious thing. All night, clenching a keen surgical knife in my fist, I stood watch.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Lurking Fiends

**D**AYLIGHT brought no alleviation of the dread burning like acid in our hearts. It was necessary for Helen to resume her duties. I remained near her a while, wan and haggard, until the activity of the hospital surrounded her with some degree of safety. Feeling exhausted, but no less fearful in the sunlight than in the darkest of the night, I went to my shop.

It was evening again when Helen hurried across to me. She strove not to reveal how anguished she was, but I knew. She said quietly: "Mrs. Giglio is back, asking for more money. She's even more desperate than before. I told her I must go to my room to get it, but I wanted to tell you first. She wants only a few dollars and says it's the last she needs. What shall I do, Rob?"

I took three dollar bills from the cash register. "Give her these," I answered. "I'll try to find out what use she has for the money."

Helen hastily crossed into the hospital. I watched the stone entrance. Presently Mrs. Giglio appeared. She moved with quick, anxious eagerness. As she hurried

off along the dark street, Helen came down the steps. I went quietly to Helen's side. I urged her to remain in the hospital, but she would not listen. Feeling that we were about to learn something of importance, we followed Louisa Giglio without her being aware of it.

She half ran to a tenement at the end of Lacey Street. Here it was even darker, even more ominously quiet. She panted as she entered an obscured doorway. Pausing near it, we could hear her climbing. Venturing into the lower hall, we heard her knock. Her footfalls resumed, fading. Alertly, with Helen close, I climbed. On the second landing we came to a door that was painted a dead black. A low hum of voices disclosed that Mrs. Giglio had entered there.

I listened, then stooped to the keyhole. The room was dark except for a deep blue glow that seemed to hover in the close air like something alive. It cast uncanny shadows over the face of a man who was wearing a black robe and a black cowl. Mrs. Giglio was kneeling, facing him. With feverish haste she was counting out money. Banknote after banknote, coin after coin, mounted in a pile while the cowled being watched. The woman's muttering reached the figure of three hundred. This sum, to her a fortune, she had desperately begged, to bring here to this unearthly atelier, to pay to the black monk.

A dark hand passed over the heap of money, gathering it, vanishing with it. The woman whimpered imploringly. The cowled being murmured deep-throated incantations. His shadow hand at last reappeared, lifting into the blue glow a little glittering thing that dangled on the end of a chain. A Black Heart! The woman snatched at it, sobbing out pathetic joy. She sprang up, clutching the amulet to her breast. "Now I am safe, I am safe!"



I left the door quickly, hurrying to the next stairway with Helen. Mrs. Giglio, still mouthing pious relief, fluttered across the hall and descended. Silence came into the hallway. I whispered to Helen:

"She came here to pay three hundred dollars for a Black Heart. She believes her husband and her little girl would not have died if they had had a Black Heart sooner. She was frantic to get one to save her own miserable life. It's a protective talisman. She is certain that without it the blood-thirsty thing would get her, but now she is safe."

The Black Heart, then, I realized, was not an object of terror. It was the bloodless death which terrified, the Black Heart which staved off the demon. It was why Ferdinand Jeffe was not afraid—he possessed one. Perhaps it was why Cesare Giotto had waved the big black heart over Pietro Giglio's body—either an attempt to save him, or a deliberate spreading of fear. Giotto's act might prove him to be the evil brains behind this amulet-seller to whom thousands paid their last miserable pennies while legitimate merchants suffered. It was traffic in superstition and dread, merciless and murderous—yet the basis of it was a ghastly thirster for blood *who existed*.

About to guide Helen down the stairs, I paused. A sound came from the black door. It was opening. A figure emerged. It was not enveloped in robe and cowl but it was, I realized, the same man, the seller of fetishes. He was extraordinarily tall and vulpine. His face had an unearthly cast. Ugo Kera was one, I knew, whom the neighborhood held in awe as a wielder of supernatural powers. He silently closed the black room, went stalking down the stairs.

**F**LOURISHER of strange forces though he might be, Ugo Kera could not have foretold the accident that imme-

diately occurred. This strange being of the ancient world found himself abruptly caught in the machinations of the new. Going quietly down the flight after him, Helen and I heard a sudden screeching of breaks, then a sickening, crunching noise, and a hoarse shout of agony. Running into the street, we found Ugo Kera lying unconscious, sprawled in the gutter, near the taxi which, wheeling swiftly around the black corner, had struck him down.

Immediately Helen was the nurse. While she bent over Ugo Kera, with startled people milling around, I sought the nearest telephone. My call brought an ambulance from the Good Samaritan in a few minutes. I aided Carl Brunner in shifting the limp body to a stretcher. While Brunner eyed us sullenly, Helen and I rode in the ambulance back to the hospital. The fox-like man was immediately carried into the emergency room, and within a few minutes Dr. Hastings was working on him, making a careful examination.

It was not extremely serious, I soon learned, though a splintered bone would necessitate an operation. The operation was not imperative; it would wait until Kera had revived somewhat and was better able to undergo it. He was taken to a room, where he automatically became Helen's patient. While she attended him, I told Lieut. Quayle what had transpired. Again, as before, he merely looked at me, saying nothing. I waited until Helen was free. She came to me with a grimly eager light in her eyes.

Drawing me into an empty room, so that no one would overhear, she said quietly: "I've an idea, Rob. Luigi Roco told part of the secret when he was coming out of the ether. Ugo Kera must know the man behind this traffic in charms. After the operation, while he's still only half conscious, I'm going to ask



him questions. Perhaps he'll answer them without knowing it—tell us who the real criminal is. It's worth trying, Rob."

Alarm struck at my heart. "Good Lord, Helen! Rosa Lorenza learned too much, and so did Dr. Morningside—and you've already received a warning. It—it's like signing your own death-warrant. You don't dare—"

"But it will go on—these horrible deaths—unless we learn the whole secret," Helen insisted valiantly. "I'll have Lieut. Quayle with me. If we learn who the guilty man is, that will end it, once and for all. Then there will be no danger for anyone, Rob. I've got to do it!"

"I will be with you," I promised, "when you do it."

Then a sound startled me. I jerked around to the door. Snapping it open, I stared into the hallway. It was empty—but a second before I had felt deadly sure, someone had been there. He, or she, or the thing, had been listening. Helen had been overheard. The emptiness was mockery—weighted with impending doom. . . .

**H**OURS later, after an agonized period spent in my shop, I returned to the hospital to learn that the operation on Ugo Kera had not yet been performed, that he would not undergo it until morning. Helen was not at her desk. I went to her room, opening it quickly to find it empty. Perhaps she was with a patient and would be back in a few moments, I thought. I paced about, waiting, numbed with fatigue and anxiety, while minutes trailed into an aching void.

There was a glass on the dresser, partly full, beside a bottle. A note under it said that one of Helen's patients had gratefully sent the wine as a gift. I filled the glass, drained the home-made stuff down in the hope it would quiet my nerves. It helped. I moved about again, restlessly.

Presently I found the few lines which Helen had written and left for me on the table. They read:

Mrs. Di Macchi's little girl has burned herself severely, and I've gone to do what I can. It's only a few doors away, at 110 Lacey, so I'll be quite safe. Don't worry, darling.  
Helen.

Helen was constantly being summoned in such cases by patients who would allow no one else to touch them. She had saved both Mrs. Di Macchi and her newest baby from death in childbed. But the mere fact that Helen had left the hospital worried me. I went out anxiously, but accepting her reassurance. Intending to go to her if she was not back in a few minutes, I crossed to my shop. Just as I reached it, I saw Vittorio Margaria shuffling in.

He eyed me with a tinge of fear as I refilled his old sedative prescription. He was still wary of me, I knew, because I had questioned him, but I was determined not to give up trying to learn something from this man who knew everything said and done in the neighborhood. As I was handing him his box of tablets over the counter, I slipped a penny from my pocket and covertly let it fall to the floor. I asked quickly:

"What was that? Did you drop something, Signore Margaria?" Then, before he could answer, I stooped past the corner of the counter. When I straightened I extended my palm to him. On it lay the glittering Black Heart which belonged to Cesare Giotto. At sight of it his face went white. He jerked open the front of his shirt, feverishly reaching inside. Immediately a dizzying relief shone in his eyes.

"No—no, I did not drop it!" he exclaimed. "Good night, Signore Rodman—good night!"



I gripped his arm. Grimly I tugged him behind the partition. In his breathless weakness he fell into the chair at the compounding table. He trembled as I leaned over him grimly. I said, "Signore, I now know the meaning of the Black Heart. You and I have many unpaid accounts on our books because our customers are scraping their pennies together to buy these amulets. Without these charms they are full of a fear of horrible death. We must learn who the man is who is making a business of ghastly dread. You, Signore—you must know him."

"But I do not! I do not!"

"Cesare Giotto," I went on, "was once your son-in-law, signore. Your daughter, whom he married, died rather strangely—wasted away. Your son-in-law was as broken-hearted as you, signore. This, I know, has given you a bond of sympathy with him. But you must not let that sway you now. Cesare Giotto is a letter of blood. He profits every time he opens a vein. Perhaps, signore, he profits doubly—by being the man who sells protection against the bloodless death. You, signore—you know if this is true."

Margaria sprang up. "Cesare?" he muttered. "It is impossible! Cesare Giotto could not do this! I cannot allow you to think it of him! I will defend him with my last breath! Not Cesare—never, signore! Someone, no doubt, profits from the sale of the amulets, but mere money does not matter now. We pay—pay gladly—because otherwise we should fall before the evil eye—because the night is full of *empusa*, signore—*empusa!*"

"Then—Dante Zavada?"

"*Empusa!*"

VITTORIO MARGARIA pushed himself away from me. He staggered out of the shop, breathless, obsessed with fear. I watched him go, feeling an odd

numbness pervading my body. At first it was scarcely noticeable, but it grew rapidly—a strange tingling that was not a tingling, but, instead, no feeling at all. While I wondered how much Margaria dared not tell, it strengthened in me—until, simply making a turn, I found myself swaying, about to fall.

"What—what's the matter with me?" I asked myself. "What's happening to me?"

I was vaguely aware that my assistant had come to me. He evidently noticed nothing amiss. He handed me an envelope, saying, "It's for you, boss. A kid just brought it in." I nodded dizzily, ripped it open. For a full moment I stood there staring at the ragged bit of paper with the blood-blot in the center. It seemed miles away from my eyes, but it was there—the threat, the promise that I was marked for the dry-veined doom.

I could not stifle the choking dread that closed my throat, but I thrust the warning angrily into my pocket. Automatically I turned to mark the entry of Margaria's prescription in my record book. My bleared eyes moved to another notation on the same page—one under the name of Mrs. Di Macchi. What I saw struck me like a blow. This woman's address was not the same as that Helen had put into her note to me. It was not on Lacey Street at all! Helen had gone—had gone into God knows what fiendish trap!

Suddenly I was throwing myself from the shop, stumbling across the street, I lurched into the hospital, breathlessly staggered up to Helen's room. I almost fell into it, shouting Helen's name. She was not there. Another nurse, seeming like a distorted image as far away as the moon, appeared in the hall to make grotesque sounds that somehow brought me the message that Helen had not yet returned. I knew she was caught—caught!



The thirsty thing was drinking—drinking her blood. . . .

**I** TOTTERED down the stairs blindly. Reaching the street, I stood swaying with the realization that to go on was impossible. Some virulent force had invaded my system, was rapidly robbing me of consciousness. I scarcely knew where I was. I could not think, could not feel, could scarcely move. Poison was pounding through every organ. I knew it was the wine I had drunk—the wine in Helen's room. She, too, had taken some of it. She was caught—and I felt myself falling—plunging into oblivion.

Somehow I managed to heave myself across the street. My assistant stared as I tottered in. He could not understand the thick sounds I mouthed out. In crazed desperation I propelled myself behind the counter. I did not know what ghastly virus was destroying me, but my only thought was somehow to find an antidote. With my hands huge as boxing-gloves at the end of fantastically long arms, I gulped down some magnesia, then some ground mustard that I sloshed into tepid water. I fell into the lavatory, wracked by violent retching.

There was no relief. I dragged myself up, and with those thick, sausagelike fingers of mine, I somehow fitted a needle into a hypodermic syringe. I filled the barrel full of strychnine, plunged the needle deep into my flesh, drove the solution out. Still the lethargy held me.

But I forced myself on. My huge, swollen lips could not form words intelligible to my assistant. I felt that I was a dying man as I pushed myself back to the entrance. The address that Helen had written in the note was drumming through my balloonlike head. Thank God she had thought to tell me that! I stumbled along the street to the door numbered 110.

I tackled one door after another, craz-

ily at random, madly hammering, shouting Helen's name. I mounted black miles to the top floor. With utter blackness enveloping me, I heaved against a door that yielded.

I fell through into murky gloom—and as I sprawled, strengthless, an inert mass that no effort of my will could move, I saw Helen's face.

At first only her face. It was a pale oval, immeasurably distant. Her eyes were wide with insupportable terror. She was not gazing toward me, but downward. She seemed not to be aware of my presence. I stared at her, trying with a supreme effort of the will to bring her closer, so that I might tell her I was there. But she was far away as the stars, lost in cosmic emptiness, floating in the wind between the spheres.

**I** WAS a being pinioned by my own weight. My arms and legs and head were immovable masses. My eyes turned like enormous globes in their sockets. This was a room as vast as all eternity, profoundly black and timeless. But there was something in it—something besides Helen's nebulous face. After a century I was able to discern, while I lay motionless, another body sprawled as still as mine. Thousands of miles separated me from it, but I recognized the feline features of Dante Zavada.

Clothing had been ripped from his gnarled body. Its hideous misshapeness was made more horrible by the lacerations on his twisted limbs, on his fat abdomen and on his neck. They were openings that gaped bloodless. Through the vacuum of my mind came the vague thought that a thirsty thing had preyed upon this thirster. This demon had fallen victim to another, greater, stronger, even more evil, even more avid. My stillness was as complete as that abominable gnome's, but his was the final repose of death.



Then an enormous being loomed before me. It came out of the murky space like a tremendous, hovering cloud. While I lay inert, great hands ripped at my clothing. My left thigh was laid bare. Something descended upon it—something cold and slimy *and alive*. It clung to my leg, and I knew it was drinking.

Able only to submit, careless of what this foul living thing might be doing to me, I again sought Helen in the murky limitlessness. She seemed nearer now. She was clearer in my burning eyes. The lines of her body were a white etching against the blackness. She was still staring down, transfixed with horror. It was not only leaden dread that was holding her—her ankles and her wrists were bound. She was gazing abjectly at brown, slimy things clinging to her flesh—things that already were fat with her blood.

Adhering to her naked flesh, affixed by their suckers, they were giant abominations. Their size was not an aberration of my stricken sight. They were like the little things which slept in the ooze of the leech box in my shop, but they were monstrous by comparison. Eighteen inches long, each of them was—the hugest known on the face of the earth—and there were four. They were engorging themselves with Helen's blood, growing fatter, ever fatter as I stared.

They were the drinkers—these great, living brown thirsts. Their sharp, sawlike teeth had incised the wounds found in the bloodless corpses, as they had cut the flesh of Helen. Live blood had drained into their hungry gullets, as Helen's was flowing now. . . .

Now the black shadow was hovering above Helen. It was a shapeless presence, watching her die. I saw its one great hand reach to a leech which was a hemisphere, bloated and shining. A gentle blow dislodged the animal. It plumped to the floor, and the wound in Helen's bare leg

flowed. Now the shadow being was holding a glass beneath the wound. Crimson was trickling into the goblet. The scarlet level mounted slowly. Then the glass was lifted—lifted to a black mouth in a black head. The goblet was drained by blood-hungry lips—then returned for more.

That unbearable sight fired in me a determination to move—somehow to move. Perhaps it was the antidotes which were at last overcoming the drug and taking hold. I was able to shift my hands, then my legs. With a shudder I fastened my fingers on the brown fatness clinging to my thigh. I tore it off, and a trickling wound remained. With my stinging eyes fastened upon that shadow being, I pulled myself up. It was again lifting the glass again drinking the scarlet nectar of Helen's veins.

Madness threw me upon that unspeakably evil presence. My attack threw the goblet upward, so that scarlet splashed into the hideous face. It crashed down under my weight, diminishing in its awful proportions like a melting ghost. In wild fury I pounded my fists into a twisting visage made red as a demon's. Again, again—until the dark fiend lay still.

And all the while I frantically worked over Helen, removing the loathesome leeches, loosening her bonds, bringing her into my arms, staggering with her toward the Good Samaritan—and all that time, the red-smearred face of Vittorio Margaria haunted me!

**H**ELEN lay quietly in her bed, her hand curled warmly into mine. A pink flush had returned to her cheeks and a ripe redness to her lips. Her eyes had a luster that meant strength and relief from poisonous dread. We both knew that the danger point had passed, and that she would rapidly improve.

"Of course, of course," Dr. Hastings



lad murmured. "The transfusion was what she needed. . . ."

She was ready now to hear the story.

"Lieut. Quayle got into that room very soon after I carried you out," I told her. "Margaria was still unconscious. But I learned only a few moments ago that he has confessed. A strange man, Margaria, and strangely vicious. Plagued by his own anaemia, he was obsessed by the thought of blood. To die by blood and live by blood, to traffic in blood—it was in the core of his being. Aided by Ugo Kera, who was regarded by the folk of Lacey Street as a sorcerer, he was able to appease his terrible anaemia-bred thirst, and at the same time collect tremendous revenue by his reign of terror. Of course he was the man who traded in the amulets, to make himself fabulously rich through the Black Hearts by fattening himself on the pennies of the poor.

"He wished others to be suspected, of course. He felt enmity to Cesare Giotto because his daughter had died as Giotto's wife. He wanted to torture Giotto with suspicions, yet he wanted to preserve Giotto as a suspect. The same was true of Dante Zavada, until Zavada became too dangerous. The worst Zavada ever did was to act as Margaria's messenger, bringing bottled blood from the hospital to him. Poor fellow, Zavada must have been trying desperately to learn why he was so hated—to learn who was re-

sponsible for turning him into an object of loathing. He had been hard on the heels of the culprit when we discovered him bending over the body of the woman in the third-floor bedroom on Lacey Street. So, trying in his own way to discover the truth, he learned too much—and died.

"Devilishly clever, Margaria was. The sedative he bought from me—he didn't use it himself. He saved it, using it to help trap his victims. Rosa Lorenza must have drunk some of it unwittingly—perhaps she was sent wine, as you were, by Margaria, under another name. Then, while she slept. . . .

"When the drug could not be utilized, Margaria made use of ropes. His weakness was a pose—he was strong. He will trade no more in human blood. His Black Hearts are no longer needed for protection. I think the people already know."

Old Lacey Street was not now a place of dread and terror. Its old bustle was returning. The sidewalks were thronging. The peddlers were bickering as was their habit, and the shops were busy. Chattering was constant, and shrieking altercations broke out, and laughter rang. The old gusto was coming back—yet, beneath this miserable cheer, there were still fears lurking, ancient beliefs which were still alive, still real—ancient traditions to which the children of the melting pot had always, and will always, cling.

THE END

*At Best it's a gamble*

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**PROBAK JUNIOR**



# Me-Murderer!

by William Hines

*Am I a murderer—or have I rid the earth of a menace so horribly powerful that not even death could destroy it?*

**I** SHALL never know if I am a murderer. Even in my sleep, the question haunts me: *What was that thing in the coffin?*

Now there is no way to know, and the unanswerable question hangs in my mind, driving me mad. . .

I said "Sure!" when the chief asked me if I'd take the Portland run. It was queer that I'd answer him that way, when it was what I'd been fearing for weeks. I'd rather have driven a truck without brakes. Yet I was taking it out! I should have said, "There's death on that highway tonight, Chief, and you know it. Get someone else to haul those coffins to Portland!"

But just across the street I could see the Pedersen Freight Lines. For years they'd been the only auto freight line in town. Then Bill Ranning, Red Gurney, Tom Matson and I started the Tri-State Freight Line. We all owned stock, but Bill was boss. Tri-State had made quite a nick in Pedersen's business, although he still hauled plenty of freight. I knew that Bill didn't have any other drivers left. If I turned him down, Pedersen would get the business.

So when Bill asked me to take that load to Portland, I said, "Sure!"

**I**T was late afternoon when I jumped in to the driver's seat of Truck Number Three, with the smell of a fresh paint job still on it, and kicked down the starter. The engine sounded sweet. I eased out





the clutch pedal, and rolled out of the terminal. A sense of death, so tangible it seemed embodied, rode with me, yet I managed to grin at Bill Ranning, watching me from the office doorway.

"That highway's awful, Jerry," I heard Bill yell. "Don't try to make it if it's too tough!"

I was too far away for him to hear me, so I just waved my hand and shot into high.

Sure the highway was bad. It was almost impassable. But that wasn't what Bill Ranning meant. He didn't say anything about what he was really thinking. Neither had the rest of us. But we knew, and wondered, and were afraid.

The streets were covered with slush, and I knew that out on the highway I'd find ice and snow. It was snowing a little. I started my windshield wiper, and swung out of my way a few blocks so that I could say goodbye to my girl.

If I had known what was to happen, I'd never have stopped my truck in front of her house, not even though I knew I'd never see her again!

Lois saw me coming, and ran out of the house to meet me before I could stop the truck.

"Jerry!" She hopped onto the running board, swung the door open, jumped in beside me. "You're not . . . you're not going . . . to Portland!"

I nodded my head.

"Please, Jerry! For my sake, don't!" She took one of my hands in hers. Both of her little hands were not big enough to cover one of mine.

"I've got to, honey. I can't let Bill Ranning down."

"But that's silly!" Her hands crept up to my shoulders, and her blue eyes met mine, pleading. "I can't let you die, Jerry! I can't stand it if they bring you home like Red Gurney and Tom Matson—dead! Don't do it, Jerry! Please!"

"I'm a careful driver, Lois. Red and Tom just had bad luck . . ."

"It wasn't bad luck, and you know it! It was Mrs. Nelson! It was that woman who . . ."

She started to cry. I put my arm around her, tried to kiss her tears away.

But my mind was not on her, but on Mrs. Nelson. I could not forget the day she had come into the office.

A little boy had run under Red Gurney's truck on the Portland run, the day before. Two tires ran over him before Red could stop. The boy was dead before the rear wheel hit him.

Red, Tom Matson and I were in Bill Ranning's office when the kid's poor mother came in. She was grey haired. Her eyes were red from crying, and she twisted a handkerchief in her fingers. We knew it was the dead boy's mother before she spoke.

"What are you going to do about my boy?" she said. There was a look on her face I'll never forget.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Nelson, more than I can say," the chief began. He pulled a chair out for her. She didn't seem to see it, so he rumbled in his throat, and went on. "As you know, all the witnesses are willing to testify that our driver was not at fault . . ."

He looked at her as if he expected her to say something, but she just stood there, staring, twisting that handkerchief.

"However, we are willing to give you any reasonable sum to recompense you for your boy's death, to save ourselves the expense of going to court . . ."

"Money!" She was staring straight at the chief with those red, swollen eyes. "Money! What is this talk of money? It is my boy I want! Give me back my boy!"

"But, Mrs. Nelson!" Bill spread his hands wide.

"Give me back my boy, I tell you!" she cried. "Give him back to me, or you,



all of you—" she pointed at the chief, at Red, at Tom, and at me—"will suffer as Bobbie suffered, and as I suffer now!"

She began to scream words in an almost incoherent jumble, demanding that we give the boy back to her. It made me feel all gone at the pit of my stomach. It was pitiful and it was horrible. But she went on screaming, that mad, wild look in her eyes, until we called the police. I couldn't forget the look of purposeful, avenging fate on her face as they led her out.

Mad with grief, she cut her own throat the next day.

I thought of Mrs. Nelson with my lips on Lois' face, with the soft pulsing of her heart against my side. She wiped her eyes, looked up at me.

"Listen to me, Jerry. At the terminal, you pretended that there wasn't anything to what Mrs. Nelson had said. And you went on pretending after Red Gurney smashed into a tree, and died, and after they brought Tom Matson's body home, crushed and horrible. Both of them were killed at 10:30, just this side of Washougal, and no one knows why they had those accidents. Jerry, if you drive that truck tonight, you'll die at 10:30, just this side of Washougal, and no one will know why. It isn't superstition! It's—it's happened! Don't go, if you love me!"

"It's my job, Lois. I've got to do it." I pressed her slim hand, kissed her again.

"Then let me go with you, Jerry! Please!"

"No, darling. Please don't worry. I'll be all right, I promise. You'll have to go, now dear. I'm late already."

She pressed her tear-moistened face against mine in a farewell kiss, and climbed out of the cab, still crying.

I pulled away without looking back. I was afraid to, afraid that the sight of that girl whom I loved so much would be too

much for me, and that I'd quit my job for her sake. And if I quit my job, how could I marry her? I had to go through with it, had to beat whatever horror had taken the lives of my friends.

Stretched like a white ribbon before my windshield was the snow covered road which led to the Evergreen highway. That highway, I knew, was a sheet of ice covered with powdered snow. But worse than slippery roads lurked somewhere ahead. It had killed Red Gurney. It had killed Tom Matson. *Would it kill me, too?*

I looked at my wrist watch. 8:30. *What would meet me at 10:30, just this side of Washougal?*

I ground the gear lever into low, and the engine roared as it got down to the labor of pulling its load—coffins, consigned to an undertaker in Portland—up the steep Satus pass. Snow drifted against the trees at the sides of the highway. The skin along my backbone shivered, and not only from the cold. The whirling snow, to my eyes straining into the darkness, took the shapes of ghostly wraiths, lurking behind the trees, floating across the road, threatening, rising and disappearing, until fear was not a word, but an embodied thing with my skull for a home.

I remembered what Tom Maston had looked like when they brought his body in. The face a bloody, unrecognizable pulp, teeth bared of lips, clenched on the stub of a cigar.

I remembered speaking to him the last night he pulled out. "Jerry," he said, "I think this is the last time I'll take the Portland run." He was chewing the unlighted butt of a cigar, and lines of worry etched his forehead.

I stopped moving cases of paint, and looked up at him. "Why "

"I'm starting driving a beer truck tomorrow. Less pay, but . . ." He shrugged



his big shoulders. "This run gives me the creeps."

"Imagination," I suggested.

"Imagination?" He smiled one-sidedly. "Well, I guess you'll have the run next. See what *you* think."

He climbed into the truck and pulled out on the highway. I remembered that he waved back to me, which he'd never done before. Perhaps he knew, as well as I did now, that an unnameable *something*, horrible and inescapable, waited out here on the highway.

Was it the ghost-like forms of this wind-borne snow, I wondered, which had made Tom so nervous that he'd lost control of the truck? I stared out of the windshield from smarting eyes, gripped the steering gear harder.

**A**HEAD, a swirl of snow bigger than the rest, with almost human form, started to float across the road. And then my brakes squealed like live things as my right foot hit the floor boards. It was more than a ghost made by the drifting snow and my imagination! God! It was . . . I whispered a prayer as I cramped the wheel, too late! I felt the sickening crunch of the impact, felt the wheels go over something soft. The truck lurched,

almost went over as I swung to the side of the road, jolted to a stop.

I had seen the figure of a woman, grey-haired, floating, rather than walking, move across the road, stop squarely in the path of my truck, point her finger at me. Just as Mrs. Nelson had pointed at me when she said. "*You, all of you, will suffer as Bobbie suffered!*"

I climbed out of the cab stiffly, the skin along my thighs quivering. Mrs. Nelson was dead, dead by her own hand! It was impossible that she had stood there in the middle of the road, pointing at me, warning me again!

I thumbed my flashlight, pointed its rays along the road, dreading what I would find. I had felt the truck hit her. It was impossible that she could have escaped. I expected any moment to see her body, the snow around it bright red with her ebbing blood.

But what I saw was worse than that which I had dreaded!

For the snowy wastes or road revealed no body! There was nothing there! No broken body, no sign of life, nothing but the drifting snow and whispering, biting wind. I started to search the sides of the road, on the slim chance that she had crawled, or been thrown, a little distance away.

Edward Lawton, powerless to move, was forced to watch his lovely sweetheart, nude, bow in supplication to a lecherous creature whose power could split asunder the world itself, in



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From out of the darkness, a voice called my name! "Jerry! Jerry Cargan!" The tones were clear, soft and sweet. But I doubted by senses. It sounded like Lois. But it couldn't be! Was this a new trick, or a hallucination?

It came again. Cautiously, I started back toward the truck, from which the sound had seemed to come. My flash swept along the back of the truck. Crated coffins, six wide and four high. I saw movement near the top of the load, and arced my flash up.

"It's me, Bill." My flashlight shone on Lois' face! "I couldn't let you go alone! I crawled into the back of the truck as you pulled away from the house . . ."

I pulled myself up to the truck bed, lifted her down, and even in the fear whose dark hand compassed my mind I knew that her body was soft and warm against mine.

Something nameless had struck at me a few moments ago, and I knew that it would strike again. And now Lois was with me! I couldn't turn her out alone on that cold, barren highway to freeze. All I could do was take her with me, and pray. It wasn't in me to scold her for coming. She'd done it because she loved me. I set my teeth, vowed to myself that if human being could keep this horror from striking at her, I'd do it.

We stood at the rear of the truck, looking for a long moment into each other's eyes. "Jerry!" Lois stammered between teeth she tried to keep from chattering. "There's something . . . something in that coffin at the top! I heard something in it, something that groaned!"

I climbed to the top of the load, put my ear to the coffin she pointed out. I shook it roughly. "There's nothing there, Lois. You heard a loose board in the truck bed."

"It was—it was more than that!" she whispered.

"Nonsense!" I snapped as I climbed

down. My nerves were worn to the breaking point. "Come on. I've got to get this load to Portland."

Lois was beside me, her hand on my knee, as we rode downhill toward the icy-highway along the Columbia. My knuckles showed white as I gripped the wheel, expecting every moment to see the ghost woman again, wondering if Lois *had* heard something in that coffin. God! If anything had happened to Lois!

I felt her hand tightened on my knee as the snow rose and fell, drifted across the road, and knew that she, too, felt the invisible net of horror which was closing around us.

And then, coming at me diagonally across the road, I saw a boy! He was a little fellow, a ghostly boy, all white, with white hair streaming back from his forehead as he ran straight into the path of my truck!

I spun the wheel to the left, away from him. The brakes were shrieking as the truck slewed around, too late. I felt the sickening crunch of the impact. The truck went up on two wheels, and my head smacked the roof as we bounced to the edge of the road, inches from the precipice along the river!

LOIS' hands were over her face, and when she lifted them her face was white as the banks of snow.

I climbed out of the truck. Lois came with me. "We won't find anything," I whispered. "It was like that before. An old lady, grey haired. . . ."

I thought of Red Gurney, and of Tom Matson. I knew now how they had been killed. But I did not know *what* had killed them, and my vitals felt cut by a thousand knives as we plodded through the snow, Lois' hand in mine. No body was there. There was only the snow, piling up against my heavy boots, and the low moan of the wind.



But I heard a moan which was more than the sound of the wind! It came from behind us, from the truck!

"That's it!" Lois' hand tightened on mine, and fear choked her voice. "From that coffin!"

We ran back to the truck. I let my flash play over those tiers of crated coffins. Once more we heard the groan, only half-human, at once supplicating and threatening.

My heart beat in my throat as I pulled myself up into the truck, stood silent for a moment, listening for what I dreaded to hear. It came again, unearthly and terrifying, louder than before. The sound came from a coffin at the top of a tier. I placed my ear against that coffin.

From within I heard a soft rustling, the sound of something that moved, that scratched softly against the coffin walls!

I pulled at the crating, heard the nails squeak as they started to come out. My body was bathed with sweat in spite of the cold. The rustling within the coffin stopped. What manner of Thing was it which lay within that coffin? Trembling, my hands fell to my sides.

I was afraid. I lifted my hands to the crating on the coffin again, but I could not bring myself to pull those rough boards off. My hands refused to do my bidding! I was afraid, deathly afraid of what was in that coffin, most afraid of discovering what it was!

"Don't open it, Jerry! Please don't open it!" I heard Lois whisper.

My teeth bit into my lip. I *had* to do something about that coffin! I couldn't go on along that highway on which death lurked at each corner, knowing that a coffin in which an unknown Thing existed rode in my load!

I looked down off the highway into the darkness. Down there, I knew, flowed the Columbia, choked with ice, deep and sluggish.

I pulled the coffin from the load, let it slip to the truck bed, lowered it to the road.

"Get in the truck, dear," I whispered to Lois. It seemed better to whisper. "I'll be there in a moment."

I dragged the coffin to the edge of the road. It was heavy. I could feel movement, hear something rip the lining within it! My heart beat faster as I tipped it on edge, sent it over the side of the cliff. After a moment I heard the splash as it hit the water.

And then a scream of pure terror hit my eardrums. Lois! The truck was moving, gathering speed as it rolled down the road! I heard the roar of the starting engine. Lois was in that truck!

**I** RAN after it, stumbling in the soft snow. The truck went faster, careening from side to side as if driven by a mad man. My breath rasped in my throat. I could not run faster, and the truck was farther and farther away. Its tail light was a pin-point of red in the dark as I fell in the snow, sobbing.

That truck had carried Lois! Lois, the girl I loved more than anything else in the world! She would never have driven away by herself. Had the mysterious thing which haunted this highway, which had sent the old woman and the little boy in front of my truck, taken Lois? I sat up, looked at my watch. 10 o'clock. Would the thing which had killed Tom and Red at 10:30 take Lois, too? Would I find her smashed body in the wreckage of the truck?

Whatever happened, I was helpless. If only I had put Lois out of the truck when I found her, left her there on the road! She'd have had a chance against the cold and snow, but against this *thing* which now carried her along the highway in a truck which swayed like a drunken man . . . I bit my lip until I tasted blood. I



knew the truth. There was no chance.

Then headlights flared behind me, and lit a flicker of hope in the despair which engulfed me. I stood in the middle of the highway, waving my arms wildly. The driver had either to stop or run over me. I didn't care if he did hit me. If Lois were gone . . . if the Thing in the truck had carried her over the cliff . . . I wanted to die, too.

The car slid to a stop inches from me. I ran to its side. It was Bill Ranning!

"Let me drive, Bill!" I snapped. "Life and death! I'll tell you about it on the way!"

I slid under the wheel, spurred the car away.

We were doing sixty before the car had gone two hundred feet. The indicator swung up to seventy, paused, swung on up to eighty and eighty-five as we plunged down the road, skidding around corners as my eyes searched the darkness ahead for that red point of light which would say that the truck was still on the highway, and that Lois, perhaps, still lived.

"What—what happened?" gasped Bill. "I got worried about you, decided to follow."

Before I could answer, my eyes caught the glint of the tail light ahead! I jammed the accelerator against the floor. It was all I could do to hold the car on the road. But I was gaining on that truck, the truck with a human cargo!

The truck had stopped at a wide place in the road. I took a snap-glance at my wrist watch. *The hand was just this side of 10:30!*

As I whirled toward the truck, it backed up so that its nose pointed toward the side of the cliff. I saw something climb out, dart into the woods.

My spotlight swept the cab's interior. A limp body was in there, breast against the steering wheel. Lois!

As I saw her, the truck began to move.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, it began to roll toward the side of the cliff. Slowly, irrevocably, its wheels turned, spokes glinting in the lights of my speeding car, carrying the girl I loved to the precipice. It would crash against the great rocks for forty feet before it hit the river!

**T**EETH set, I prayed for time enough. Three hundred feet from the moving truck I jammed on the footbrake, set the emergency. Shrieking metal mingled with Bill's wild shouts as we twisted a crazy course toward the truck.

Somehow I guided the car into the narrow space between the truck and the edge of the cliff. The nose of the truck banged the side of the coupe. The coupe swung up, came down on its side, throwing me against Bill. The impetus of the truck pushed up a few feet farther. But we stopped, stopped before the truck had pushed us the few inches which would have toppled us over the cliff!

"All right, Jerry?" Bill whispered shakily.

"All right!"

I groped in the darkness for the door handle, found it, pulled myself up and out.

I ran stumblingly, blindly, to the truck. My heart pounded against my ribs as I shouted her name: "Lois! Lois!"

I found her in the cab of the truck, arms lashed to the steering gear. She lifted her head as I tore at the bonds with a jack knife.

"Lois! Darling! What was it?"

"Pedersen!" she gasped.

So it was Pedersen, owner of the Pedersen Freight Lines, who had stolen my truck, tried to kill my girl! He was the man I had seen run into the woods!

I plunged toward the spot where I had seen him disappear, on the dead run. A shot cracked out, from behind me! The bullet whanged as it ricocheted from a



rock ahead. I stopped, whirled around.

Bill Ranning stood beside the truck, one arm circling Lois, the other was stiff, holding an automatic pointed at me!

"Come back here!" he snarled. "You know too much! But your luck can't beat *this!*" He gestured with the gun. Anger tore my heart as I saw his left hand slip suggestively along Lois' slim waist and thigh.

She seemed half-conscious, compliant in his grip. But suddenly she twisted with all the quick strength of her wiry body, and sank her teeth into the wrist of his gun hand. He screamed in pain.

Then I was on him, fists flailing. I drove the gun from his fingers, sent my fists crashing into his face, drove them like pistons into his paunch until he was nothing more than bruised, groaning flesh beneath me.

I dragged him to the truck, pulled him into it, fitting his body into the space where the mysterious coffin had been, and tied him there.

Lois was still shaky from fright, but otherwise unharmed. Her head was against my shoulder as we rode on into Portland. We didn't understand just how, but we knew that the mysterious killer which had haunted the highway to bring death to my friends and threaten us, was gone forever.

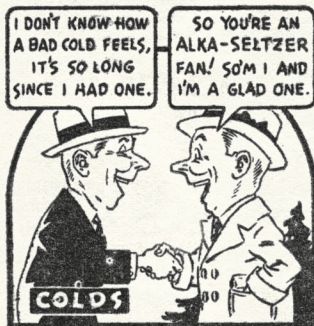
We turned Bill Ranning over to the police. Pedersen was captured, and the two of them convicted of murder. Going back over the highway, we found the pulleys and wire which had been used to pull the cleverly built dummies across the highway. Ranning claimed he had not tried to kill us, but confessed that he had secretly bought stock in the Pedersen Freight Lines, and had tried to make the stock of our freight line so worthless that we'd have been willing to give it to him. Then he and Pedersen would have had complete control of all auto freight.

But both Ranning and Pedersen swore that they knew nothing about the coffin I had thrown in the river, nor what was in it!

And the memory of that coffin haunts me. For now I can never know what it contained, nor whether I destroyed that thing, human or inhuman.

A few days after Pedersen's capture I read two news stories. One told of the finding of a coffin frozen in the ice of a bay along the river. It had been opened, apparently from the inside, and the lining was stained with blood. The other told of the discovery of an apparent grave robbery in which a fresh grave had been opened, the coffin and the body it contained removed.

It was the grave of Mrs. Nelson!  
*What was that Thing in the coffin?*



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A Realistic  
Feature-Length  
Novel of Weird, Midnight Menace

# HELL'S DANCING MASTER

By Dave Barnes

**T**HE YELLOW light rolled up like a slow-creeping fog from the dull black sleekness of the floor. There was a chant—a dull and monotonous

chant of sing-song voices. It rose and fell in a jumble of senseless words that had no beginning, no meaning, no end. It carried a madly sinister undertone that was like





*Her name was Marie Delabart, and her beauty was a thing not of this earth. And though Ray Graham knew that one of her name had died the death of a sorcerer, yet he fought valiantly and hopelessly for her against forces no man has ever conquered nor can ever comprehend!*

the touch of a clammy hand in pitch darkness.

There was the crash of a cymbal which split the air into hard particles that clawed at the ear drums. The sound rose to a screaming crescendo, blended down again into a whine that mingled with the mumbling voices that went on and on.

The shadows were rolling back a little farther, as though a great hand were slowly releasing its grip on the darkness—and then there were figures visible. Only a few at a time at first, grotesquely distorted by the yellow light. But as the light grew brighter, instead of growing clearer and more distinct, they grew only the more distorted and malignant-seeming.

The yellow light rolled over on itself with a queerly snake-like revolving motion and gathered in slow-writhing coils in back of the hunched, sitting figures. It focused on an oblong object that seemed to be a stone, blackened and scarred and weathered by the foulness and slime of centuries. There was a little spurt of flame and two fat black candles on either end of the stone sprang into sudden simultaneous light. Their flames flickered and guttered and bowed like mad dancers.

**T**HE CHANT of the sitting figures grew louder, and their grins stretched and writhed in the waxen blankness of their faces. A figure rose slowly from behind the stone. It was shapeless like the others, bound round and round in the shiny folds of slickly glittering black cloth. As it stood up-right, towering to an inhuman, gaunt length, it raised one hand to the fold of cloth that covered its face. The hand had claw-like fingers six inches long, and it was covered with yellow, short hair that bristled beast-like, clear to its fingernails.

The yellow claws of its hand pulled slowly and reluctantly at the cloth over its face. The cloth moved a little, jerked suddenly aside, fell softly rustling over the wide shoulders. The figure had a beast



face—the face of a goat, grinning, with yellow tusks bared.

Slowly the beast head turned, and then a long arm moved in the muffled folds of the cloth, extended straight and stiff like a bar of iron. The long yellow-furred finger pointed into the darkness.

Light left the tip of the finger in a thin little pencil of white that cut through the yellow over-shadow in a round bright cone. The white circle of it crept across the blackness of a wall, touched the rounded slimness of a girl's body.

Ray Graham, sitting at his table in a corner, shivered in spite of himself. He knew it was merely a show—but always at this point it ceased being a show and became something else. Something a little too poignantly horrible to be mere play acting. . . .

The girl screamed once—a full-throated cry of stricken terror that had all the hopeless fear of a lost soul in its brittle, ringing echoes. She was flattened against the wall with arms spread wide, and her face was a white and twisted mask. She wore black, too, in thin shiny strips that wrapped softly around the smooth curves of her body, and contrasted sharply with the creamy whiteness of her flesh.

The beast-man laughed—a thickly rolling, triumphant snarl of sound that was echoed and re-echoed with jeering malice by the twelve squatting figures rocking back and forth in obscene glee.

The light moved over the girl, caressing the softness of her body like a lustful, disembodied hand. The beast-man raised his other arm and beckoned invitingly. The grin on his face was sly and gloating.

The girl twisted and squirmed against the wall. The beast-man made no attempt to approach closer. He merely stood there, grinning with evil knowledge, with his stick-like arms extended in repulsive welcome. The girl fought and writhed against the invisible chains that inexorably fore-

shortened, bringing her nearer. She came closer to the beast-man, one jerky reluctant step at a time. Her spasmodic movements began to take on a definite and compelling rhythm.

The girl's contortions gradually merged into a strange pantomimic dance, blood-stirring in its irregular beat and whirling beauty, frightening in its terrible sense of horror and loathing. Faster it went, and faster, until at last the girl could no longer resist the unearthly power of the beast-man. She reached him. She screamed again, tried to turn. But it was too late. The stick-like arms caught her, whirled her. The voices of the squatting figures rose to a shrill yapping howl.

Ray Graham fought the tenseness of his body, the tautness of his nerves. This was nonsense—nonsense! And yet . . . .

There was a rumbling smash of sound that slapped down over all the noise like a stifling palm. The yellow light winked and was red, then dissolved into a spinning flutter of colors, and over everything there was the thin, acrid smell of brimstone. A voice with the slow rumble of thunder in it said:

“Who dares to summon Satan?”

**T**HERE was a rending crash that snuffed out the reedy music, the muted clapping, like a giant wind. Thin squealing cries of terror bubbled up as the squatting figures crawled and squirmed beneath the lash of the thundering voice. There was another crash and a blinding spit of white light, and the beast-man crumpled and fell against the black stone behind him. The girl dropped in a limp white heap.

The thundering voice chuckled slowly and lingeringly, and then all was darkness.

All was silence, too, for long dragging seconds, and then came a spattering burst of applause that grew louder and more



emphatic. Lights on the side walls jumped up brightly. The slick black dance floor was empty now. There was no sign of the squatting figures, the beast-man, the girl. The hand-clapping swelled to a roar.

The tuxedoed master of ceremonies was bowing and smiling in front of the raised orchestra platform, gesturing for silence.

"Thank you, folks. Thank you. That ends our floor show for this evening, but we want everybody to stay around and have a good time. Dancing until three, and Happy Hemingway and his Harlem Hotfeet will give you all the music you can take. Happy starts it off with 'Memphis Man'. Will you swing?"

The orchestra jumped into the tune with a smooth wail of reeds. There was the blurred undertone of conversation as the patrons talked over the show, the jingle of china and glassware as hurried waiters ran to get in delayed orders, the smooth shuffle of feet on the dance floor.

Ray Graham took a crumpled cigarette from the package on the table in front of him, lit it. "How'd you like it?" he asked. The spell had passed with the finale of the act. He could be amused, now, by memory of the emotions which had gripped him only seconds ago.

Benjamin Marks made a gulping noise in his fat throat and closed his still gaping mouth. He fumbled a silk handkerchief out of the pocket of his coat, mopped at his forehead. His smooth white hands were shaking a little, and his bulging blue eyes held a dazed expression.

"How'd you like it?" Graham repeated.

Marks drew a deep breath. "Like it!" he said in a strangled voice. "Like it! Good God! It was horrible! It—it's blasphemy!"

Graham smiled. He was a young man, tall and slim, deeply tanned. His hair was a lightish brown, bleached a little from the sun. He had a thin, strongly-featured face, grey eyes that were shrewdly intelli-

gent with little asterisks of humor at their corners.

"Not as bad as that," he said. "But it does make a pretty impressive act."

"Impressive!" Marks said, shivering. "Impressive, you say! Why, it's more than that. It's real. It's awful!"

Graham waved at the crowded dance floor. "People seem to like it. That's why they come here."

"Was that really Marie Delabart in the act?" Marks asked. "I wouldn't have recognized her."

Graham nodded. "It was Marie. She's pretty heavily made up, and then the light distorts her features."

"You take it pretty calmly for a man who's supposed to be in love with her. You *are* in love with her, aren't you? How can you let her take part in a thing like this?"

"It's nothing to get hysterical about," Graham said shortly. "It's simply an illusion. There's nothing awful about it after you've seen it a couple of hundred times, as I have. Besides, I designed a lot of the lighting tricks they use, and I know all the actors personally. More than that, I haven't any right to ask Marie to stop doing it. We're not married yet, and she was doing this before I met her."

MARKS shook his head slowly. "I tell you I don't like it. I wish I'd known about it sooner. Of course, I haven't any actual control over Marie. But I am the guardian of her property, and I think I have some influence over her. I knew, of course, that she was in some sort of an act in this place, but I had no idea that it would be anything like this. Why—why the thing is gruesome! It's insane! She's a highly strung girl—delicate. She shouldn't be doing things like this. It might have some permanent effect on her."

"Marie isn't very strong," Graham ad-



mitted. "And to tell you the truth, I don't like the idea of this act much better than you do. She's promised me that she'll stop as soon as we're married."

"What exactly is the act supposed to represent?" Marks asked.

"It's a re-enactment of the celebration of the Black Mass or Witches' Sabbath. The idea is that it's the means by which worshipers of Satan attempt to summon him. The meaning of the climax of the act is that they succeeded in summoning him this particular time, and he destroyed them all for their impudence in daring to do it."

"Monstrous!" Marks exclaimed. "The whole idea is madness personified! I'm going to speak to Marie about it. I won't have her acting in it!"

Graham smiled wryly. "That won't do any good. The act has been very successful, and she feels she owes some loyalty to Johanson—he's the man who acts the part of the leader of the ceremony—and to the other actors in it."

Marks sat back in his chair with a jerk. "Just the same," he said, "that act is too close an imitation of the real thing! Who's to say where the line is drawn between imitation and reality?"

"What the devil do you mean by that?" said Graham sharply. "That's pure nonsense."

"Are you sure it is? Who's to say what goes on in the players' minds? I tell you it's too close to the real thing! It's too dangerous, and I'm going to stop it. I'll cut off Marie's allowance if she doesn't quit!"

"Be sensible," Graham said shortly. "It's only two months until we're to be married, and Marie won't stop before that. If you try to make her and give her the arguments you've just been giving me, you'll just get her more worked up about it. Besides, you can't cut off her allowance. You weren't vested with any

discretion in the matter. All you can do is to invest the money her parents left in trust for her and pay her the proceeds in monthly installments."

Marks nodded slowly. "Yes, I know. You're right, of course. It's none of my business. But the thought of that frail creature going through that horrible business every night . . ."

"Hiyuh, Graham."

Graham looked up over his shoulder at the man who stood beside his chair. "Oh. Hello there, Fulton. Sit down."

FULTON was a square, thick-set man with a barrel chest and long, heavy arms. His face was full, heavy-jawed, spotted with tiny clusters of red tracery that were broken veins. He *always* wore coats that seemed too small for him, and his heavy shoulders bulged the seams to the bursting point. His eyes were dull brown, shot with red streaks. He had an unlighted cigar in his mouth, and the tobacco grated a little as his strong yellow teeth gripped it, shifted it to a new position between his thick lips.

"This is Mr. Marks—Mr. Fulton," Graham introduced them. "Fulton is Marie's theatrical agent, Marks."

Fulton's big square hand squeezed down on Mark's smooth white one. "Glad to know you."

"Marks is Marie's attorney," Graham said to Fulton. "He handles the money her folks left her. He doesn't think much of the act."

"No?" said Fulton. "And why not?"

"I don't like it," Marks said shaking his head. "It—it shouldn't be allowed. It brings out thoughts people shouldn't think."

Fulton snorted. "You're crazy, mister! People eat this act up. They come back time and time again to see it. They like it." He leaned over the table toward Graham. "Here's something good. I



closed a swell deal tonight. I booked the act for six weeks at the Trianon at double the money we're getting here! We start in just two months,"

Graham shook his head slowly. "No." he said quietly.

"Huh? What do you mean—no?"

"Marie and I are going to be married in two months."

"Well, what difference will that—" Fulton stopped short, his dull eyes squeezing down to slits. "You mean you're draggin' her out of the act?"

"Yes."

Fulton breathed noisily. "You realize what you're doing? You realize that I took this act on when it was nothing but a crack-pot idea in Johanson's head? You realize that I pounded the streets in this town for months trying to sell that idea to guys who didn't even want to listen? And now, when I'm just getting the chance to see some return for all the work I put into it, you want to kill the whole business!"

"No, I don't," Graham denied evenly. "You can get another girl, train her, and go on with it."

Fulton's big hands clenched on the table, rumpling the smooth white cloth. "You know damned well I can't! You know I can't get a girl that can act scared like Marie can. That's what puts the act over. She lives that part! Her scream, now. Why, I've heard that seven hundred times if I've heard it once, and it still makes me jump out of my skin. It's got real terror in it! And the way she moves—the way she looks—"

"That's just it," Graham interrupted. "I'm not sure I like the way she looks. The act puts a great strain on her mentally and physically. It—it may have been changing her. You and I wouldn't see it; we catch the act every night ourselves. We're almost a part of it. But a stranger seeing it for the first time . . .

Marks has given me something to think about. There's no use arguing about it, anyway. She can finish out this engagement, but she's promised me not to play in the act after we're married, and I'm going to hold her to it."

Fulton sat very still for a long moment, then slowly got to his feet, bumping against the table clumsily. Knotty jaw muscles made white ridges along his cheek bones. "All right, Graham," he said thickly.

"Sorry, Fulton," Graham offered sympathetically.

Fulton looked at him. "You may be sorrier," he said. He turned on his heel, bumped his way heedlessly through the dancers crowded on the small dance floor.

Marks cleared his throat uneasily. "I'd—be a little careful with him. He looked pretty nasty about it. He might do something to hurt you—or Marie."

"Nonsense," Graham said calmly. "I gave him quite a jolt, then, and he lost his temper. He'll be all over it again in a few minutes . . . Now if you'll excuse me, I'll get Marie. I'll bring her back to the table before we leave."

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Witch Strain

GRAHAM threaded his way through the close-packed tables, opened a small black door beside the orchestra dais. When he closed it behind him, he was in the semi-gloom of a small hall that ran back crookedly into the wing of the building reserved for the dressing rooms of the entertainers.

Graham moved slowly along the passage. It seemed to him that somehow the hall was smaller, more twisted, than it had ever appeared before. There were more unexpected niches of blackness, and the shadows gathered in the corners had a thick, palpable weight that pressed



down on him. He shrugged impatiently at the thought. He was a practical man, not given to imaginative or nervous fears. He knew he had been brooding too much over Marie and the act. But one thing Marks had said was sticking like a burr in his mind. It had struck a responsive chord.

There are some things that shouldn't be meddled with . . . Things that aren't for normal humans to touch . . . Things that twist the mind . . .

Graham heard the scream, then, rolling down the passageway in a spate of tortured sound. Instinctively, without thinking at all, he knew it was Marie Delabart. The scream had that same note of utter, abandoned terror that made the night club act so effective. It had a note of realness, of desperate horror, that choked Graham's breath off short.

He ran down the hall to the first corner, whirled around it. The door of her dressing room was close ahead of him in the gloom. It was closed now. Graham reached it in two strides, fumbled for the knob. He found it, slammed his shoulder hard against the panels.

The door swung back, thundering against the wall. The dressing room was small with barren unpainted walls. The lights on either side of the big dressing table mirror made a bright, unreal glare that hurt the eyes.

"Marie!" Graham called hoarsely, and his own voice was strange to him. "Marie! What is it? What's the matter?"

She looked very small and child-like crouched on the chair before the mirror. She wore a dressing gown now that draped around her in thick, soft folds. Both her hands were clasped tight over her face, fingers pressing against her eyes, as if she were forcing them to stay closed, forcing them not to see. She stayed there, rigid and unmoving.

Graham caught her slim shoulders. "Marie! What is it?"

Suddenly she began to shiver in his grasp, and she lowered her hands slowly from her eyes. Ordinarily they were a clear lake-blue, but now fear and shock had so expanded the pupils that they looked a dull black. Her delicately small, elfin-featured face was stark white, lacking all color and animation. Her full lips moved stiffly, trying to form words.

"Window—" she managed, forcing out the word with visible effort. "Window—"

Graham spun to look at the room's one window, small and high up on the wall on the right side. It was a black dust-streaked hole, reflecting the room and his own face in jagged, slanting distortion.

"What about it?" he demanded tensely. "Did you see someone there?"

Her head moved in a trembling nod. The brilliant light caught and reflected red-brown glints in her smooth hair. "Y-yes." She swallowed with difficulty. "There—there was a face . . . I saw it looking at me. *Reflected in the mirror.*" The last words came out with a rush.

GRAHAM went to the window. He shaded his eyes with his hands, peering through the grimy pane. He could see nothing but blackness. There was an alley running along this side of the building, and after a moment he could make out the bricks of the opposite wall. There was nothing else, no movement, no stirring in the darkness.

"No one out there now," he said, turning back to her. "Are you *sure* you saw a face?"

She nodded again. She sobbed, a dry rasping gasp, and bit her under-lip with small white teeth.

"What kind of a face?"

She shivered at the memory. "It was horrible—horrible! Green and shining, and the eyes were red, glaring at me. It



had—hair on it like a beast and—and it had tusks for teeth . . . It was a face to— to make a person sick with horror . . .”

Graham stared at her uneasily. It seemed that his misgivings had been only too well justified. The act was proving too much of a strain on her. Hallucinations sometimes did forecast a nervous collapse. He turned suddenly at a sound in the doorway. Two chorus girls were peering in fearfully. Behind them in the corridor there were half-a-dozen other actors and actresses of the elaborate show.

One of the girls ventured timidly, “Is it Marie again? We heard a scream.”

Graham said, “Yes. She thought she saw—” He stopped short as he suddenly grasped the import of the chorus girl's remark, its implication. “What did you mean—Marie *again*? Has this ever happened before?”

The chorus girl looked flustered. She gazed at Graham, at the unmoving Marie, back to Graham again. “Why yes, it has. Several times. Marie has been seeing shadows and faces and hearing noises—queer things like that.”

Graham turned on his fiancée. “Is this true, Marie? Why didn't you tell me?”

Marie drew in a long unsteady breath. She smiled with wan courage. “I thought it was nerves, Ray. Overwork, maybe. Until tonight. But I didn't—imagine that face . . . It was there at the window, looking in . . .”

Graham swung back to the crowd of curious entertainers. “Did any of you see anything tonight—hear anything before Marie screamed or afterwards?”

The entertainers were silent suddenly, glancing at each other uneasily.

“Well?” Graham queried.

The little chorus girl spoke in a defiant rush of words. “That's just it! We never see anything! We never hear any of these strange noises! It's just Marie! She's the only one who hears things and sees

things—things that ordinary people don't know about . . . And things that we don't *want* to know about, either!” Her voice ended on a high note of hysteria, and she whirled and pushed her way through the crowd and disappeared down the crooked hall-way.

The tall, lank figure of a man appeared in back of the crowd around the doorway, seeming to materialize quietly out of the dimness of the shadows. It was Johanson, the man who played the part of the devil-priest in Marie's act. Even without his goat's head mask there was something strange and faintly repulsive about his appearance. He had a gaunt, dark-burned face and black eyes that glittered with a hypnotically feverish light. He pushed through the crowd—a black and sombre contrast to the painted faces and fluffily tinsel-dance costumes of the chorus girls.

“I heard what she said, Mr. Graham.” His voice was deep and smooth, soothing. “I'm sorry you had to hear it put that bluntly. I've been meaning to speak to you about it. There's been a—rumor going the rounds back-stage that Marie is being be-witched. Her part in the act . . .”

Despite Graham's effort to control himself, tiny icy fingers of terror went tapping up his spine. “That's—that's crazy! Why, that's an insane idea! Who's responsible for that rumor?”

The chorus girls in the doorway shifted uneasily. None met his eyes.

Johanson moved his gaunt shoulders. “It is one of those things it is impossible to trace.”

“Impossible or not,” Graham said thinly. “I can try. And if I find out . . .” He jerked his shoulders. “But that can wait for the moment. Right now I'm going to have a look at that alley. Will you be all right here, dear?”

Marie nodded. Her eyes, her face



were calmer now, saner. "Of course, Ray. This is all nonsense. Probably I just—imagined the whole thing." She smiled at him.

**H**E TURNED and walked hastily along the hall to the tiny door that led to the alley. It was dark outside, musty and stinking and cluttered with refuse. Staring hard into the darkness, Graham was fumbling in his pocket when Johanson's deep voice said softly from behind him:

"I have some matches here."

Graham spun around tightly. "What—"

"I thought I would help you search," Johanson said. He was a stick-like black shadow in the gloom. "I thought perhaps you would need help—although human help is not always of any aid . . ." He struck a match, and the yellow flame suddenly revealed the dark, bony mask of his face and reflected in little moving flecks from his deep eyes. "Marie's window is down this way." He stopped under the orange square of light that marked the window and turned around. The match flame guttered in his clasped hands, and he held it tightly against his chest, like some weird votive offering.

"Here . . ."

The match flame flickered once and went out, and the waiting shadows seemed to move in around them silently.

"Strike another," Graham said hoarsely. "That window—is seven feet up, and there's no ledge to hang on to. If anyone looked in, they must have used a ladder, something to stand on . . ."

"If anyone human looked in," Johanson said.

Another match flared in his fingers, and he lowered it slowly and carefully toward the ground. The light spread over the ground reluctantly, like a slow pouring liquid.

"There!" said Graham. "There's a

mark—" He swallowed hard on the words that were unsaid, and the whole alley filled with cold, congealing horror that was like a physical thing lurking there in the darkness, waiting.

The mark in the dirt was the distinct imprint of a cloven hoof.

**G**RAHAM'S breath was thick in his throat. "An animal—wandering in here in the dark . . ."

"No animal," said Johanson. "No human."

Graham glared at him in the jumping flicker of the match flame. "What are you trying to say? Do you mean to tell me that you thing the face that looked in at Marie belonged to—"

"It is best not to speak that name," Johanson said.

Graham batted the match out of his hand, seized one of the stick-like arms, whirled Johanson hard against the wall. "You mumbling superstitious fool! You're the one that's responsible for those rumors about Marie! You—"

"The rumors are the truth," Johanson said evenly. "And I did not start them. I have even tried to fight them. But some things cannot be fought by human power."

Graham dropped his arm as suddenly as he had seized it and stepped back. "Nuts!" he said contemptuously. "You're mad, Johanson. You're stark, staring mad. All this mumbo-jumbo you go through in the act has gone to your head. Witches and the evil eye and the Black Mass! Why, that's medieval! This is the twentieth century!"

"Some things never die," said Johanson gravely.

Graham found a match in his own pocket and struck it on the wall, kneeling in the dirt of the alley paving. He held the light close above the spot where he had seen the imprint of the cloven hoof.



The print was no longer there, and Graham felt a cold numbing fear that stretched his nerves like rigid wires.

"You!" he snarled. "You wiped it out!"

"I didn't move," Johanson said.

Graham stared down at the ground where the mark had been until the match sputtered and went out in his hand. There was silence in the grave-like darkness of the little alley, then, until Johanson said softly:

"If I were you, Mr. Graham, I would consider very carefully what you have seen and heard tonight. If Marie Delabart is be-witched, it might not be she who is in danger—but you."

"Lies!" Graham said violently. "Damn'd nonsense! I won't stand for that sort of thing, and I won't have you talking like that around Marie! Do you hear that, Johanson?"

"I hear you," said Johanson. "But there are some things one can't ignore—even when one is stubborn and in love . . . Did you notice the face of Marie Delabart when she was hysterical?"

"Certainly I did. What about it?"

"Did she cry?" Johanson asked softly.

"No," Graham said.

"That didn't seem strange to you? That she should be shocked into hysteria—and still not cry?"

"What are you driving at?" Graham demanded bluntly. "What devilish thing are you trying to insinuate now?"

"Devilish?" Johanson repeated gently. "Perhaps you're closer to being right than you think. Marie Delabart did not cry because she could not cry. *Witches cannot weep!*"

Graham was shocked speechless for a second. "Why—why, you—"

"Good-night," Johanson said in his deep, smooth voice. "Good-night, Mr. Graham. I don't think there is any use

in prolonging your search of this alley. And, as I said before, if I were you, I would consider very carefully what you have seen and heard this night."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "Some Things Never Die!"

WHEN Graham came back into the hall, the little group of performers was still gathered around Marie Delabart's door. Graham noticed that none of them had gone inside the room. They watched him with uneasily furtive eyes as he came closer.

"I think Marie will be all right now," he said, holding his voice level with an effort. "Thank you."

He went inside the dressing room and closed the door in their faces. He turned around slowly to face Marie. She was still sitting before the dressing table.

"Did you—find anything?" she asked.

Graham shook his head, watching her. "No nothing."

She smiled uncertainly. "But—but I *did* see something, Ray. That—face was there . . ."

Graham didn't answer.

Marie said, "Ray. What—what's the matter? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I'm worried about you," Graham said gravely. He pulled up a chair and sat down facing her. He took both of her hands in his. They were icy cold. "Marie, just where did you get the idea for this act?"

"It wasn't my idea, Ray. It was Johanson's. I met him over a year ago when our acts were both billed at the same theatre. He was doing a mesmerism skit then, and I was doing interpretive dances. Johanson is a student of witch-craft. When I met him he already had the idea for the act. He was looking for a girl to



take the part I do now. He came to me and proposed that I should take it."

"Why," Graham asked.

"That question isn't very flattering, Ray," she said lightly. "Johanson liked the way I danced, and he thought I was capable of taking the part."

"Wasn't there another reason?"

"Why, I suppose so. We were friends, and he thought his act was due to be very successful—as it has been. He wanted to help me out a little."

"Those were the only reasons?"

"Well," she said reluctantly. "There was my name."

"What about your name?" Graham asked quietly.

"I told you Johanson is a student of witch-craft and black magic. He thought Delabart was a corruption of de la Barthe."

"What if it was?"

Marie lowered her head a little. "Angel de la Barthe was one of the most famous witches in history. She was tried for witch-craft at Toulouse in 1275, and she admitted consorting with the devil. She admitted bearing a monster son with a wolf's head and a devil's tail that was fed on the flesh of new-born babes . . ."

"Good God!" Graham exclaimed in sudden instinctive repulsion.

"Ray," she said in a whisper. "Ray—Johanson was right about my name. Delabart is a corruption of de la Barthe. My family's name *was* de la Barthe—and they came from France about a hundred and fifty years ago. They changed their name to Delabart when they got to America."

There was a thick little silence for a second, and then Graham got slowly to his feet.

"It's late now," he said quietly. "You'd better get dressed, dear, and let me take you home. I'll be waiting just outside the door."

"Ray," she said. "Ray, do you think—do you think I could be—"

"Marie," he said slowly and distinctly. "I don't want you to talk about those things or think about them any more. Please get dressed now. I'll be waiting outside."

THE CROWD in the night club had thinned out considerably when Graham and Marie Delabart came out through the little black door beside the orchestra dais. Marks was still sitting at the table where Graham had left him, and he rose clumsily to his feet when he saw them approaching.

"Good evening, my dear! You took so long . . . I was worried about both of you. The waiter told me there was some sort of a disturbance back-stage. He said some girl in the show had thought she had seen someone peering in her window—"

Marie made some inaudible remark. Her full lips were white, stiff. Behind her back Graham made a quieting gesture at Marks and shook his head violently.

Marks stared blankly from one to the other. "You mean—you mean it was Marie . . ."

"Let's not talk about it," Graham said flatly.

"But—but if—"

"We would rather not talk about it," Graham said slowly and distinctly.

"Oh!" said Marks. "Oh, I see. Well—well, won't you sit down and join me?"

Graham shook his head. "I'm sorry. Marie is very tired, and I think she ought to get some sleep. You'll excuse us?"

"But I wanted to talk to Marie about the act—"

"Some other time," Graham said firmly.

Marks blinked at him, blankly puzzled. "Why—why surely. I'm—sorry you have to leave . . ."

"Good-night," Graham said.



Marie Delabart lived alone in a small cottage on the outskirts of one of the city's suburbs. Before, Graham had always thought that its loneliness and seclusion added to its rustic charm, but now the dark and empty roads over which he had to drive to reach the place filled him with uneasy qualms.

The cottage was a dark, box-like shadow, its outlines softened and blurred a little by the shrubbery that grew tall and close around it. It was cold when Graham and Marie entered. Somewhere a window had been left open, and tenuous streamers of fog clung damply to the corners and dissolved only reluctantly under the light and warmth of the wood-fire Graham quickly built in the fire-place in the front room.

"I don't like your being—here alone," Graham said. "Couldn't I get someone to stay with you?"

Marie Delabart was sitting on the divan in front of the fire-place, watching the bright orange flicker of the flames. The fire made quick-shifting patterns across her face, made her eyes seem larger and darker.

"No, Ray," she answered absently. "Thank you, but I'd rather be alone. I would, really."

Graham watched her uneasily. "You'll go to bed and get some sleep?"

She smiled up at him. "Of course, dear. Don't worry about me any more. I've forgotten all about—everything."

"You're sure you'll not be afraid?"

"Of course I won't! Why should I be? I've lived here alone over a year now, Ray. I've never been afraid. You'd better go now, dear. You've got a long drive, and you've got to work tomorrow. I've kept you too late as it is. Oh—I forgot—I have a bottle of wine in the kitchen that was given to me by—a friend. Would you like a drink of that before you go?"

"No," Graham said absently. "No thanks. But I hate—"

She got up from the divan and came close to him. Her face was strangely and ethereally beautiful in the wan glow of the fire. Graham caught her and held her close against him, pressing his lips against the soft, smooth coolness of hers.

For a second, then, all the happenings of the night seemed like some childish nonsense in a fairy story. Only for a second, though, and then the horror came back again like a black, invisible thing that was encircling them, formless, threatening with unimaginable, monstrous force.

Marie's voice was soft in his ear. "Good-night, Ray. I love you."

"Good-night," Graham said. He walked across the room to the front door. He turned there and words seemed to stick clumsily in his throat. "I—please don't think about—those things . . . I want to help you—"

"I know, dear." Her hand touched his arm softly. "You've been awfully good. I won't think about them any more. I promise."

"Good-night," Graham said thickly. "Good-night." He walked down the steps, down the narrow walk toward his car.

Her voice sounded small and thin in the fog. "I'll see you tomorrow, dear." The front door of the house made a quiet thump of closing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Night Shape

GRAHAM had not quite reached the car. He stopped short and turned around slowly. The fog was rolling in thickly now, sliding around the house, squeezing it like a great clammy hand. In the white mistiness the cottage was like a squat animal, crouching there clumsily malignant, staring down the walk at



Graham with orange squares of eyes that were windows.

Graham stepped quietly off the walk. The grass oozed a little under his feet, damp and coldly slippery. He walked back toward the house, one slow steady step after another, angling out a little to clear the shrubbery. The fog rolled up around him, touched his face gently with moist, prying fingers.

He stopped at the corner of the house, looking back along its side. There was one lighted window half-way along the wall, its light diffused and distorted by a gaunt, blackly grotesque shrub that grew close against it. There was no stir, no sign of any living thing moving anywhere in the fog.

Turning on his heel, Graham started back across the front lawn to look at the other side of the house. He had gone three steps when he remembered that there were no shrubs planted close to the bungalow on that side. That thought choked his breath off in a strangling gasp. He stood perfectly still for a second, fighting down the panic that gibbered and screamed in his brain. Then he turned very quietly and walked back to the corner, peered around it.

The shrub was still there, swaying a little bit in the breeze. Only there was no breeze. The night had a queer, deathly silence, as though all motion and movement had ceased.

Graham slid softly around the corner and walked towards the shrub. His legs were numb and stick-like under him, and his body was stiffly rigid, tense. His lips felt stiff and dry, twisted away from his teeth in a strained grimace.

It was not a shrub there against the house. It was a body—a monstrous vaguely defined body that spread out on all sides like an enormous black bat. The head by comparison was a tiny, bulbous thing with weirdly distorted features,

crowned by a conical black hat. Its face was close against the window pane, and the puffy waxen mouth writhed and twisted and grimaced.

There was no feeling in Graham's body at all, and his mind was like a strange thing far away, isolated in its icy horror. The mist was cold and slimy on his face. He kept walking straight ahead.

He was just three paces away from it when the creature at the window turned and looked at him. Deep-sunken little red eyes gleamed brightly, and the puffy mouth writhed and twisted. Graham couldn't stand the thought of touching it with his hands. He made a thick, choking noise in his throat and hurled himself forward, head bent, arms against his side.

He smashed head-on into the wall of the house. He seemed to be floating in the air for a second with a strange listlessness, and then his face hit the cold wetness of the grass. The shock dulled his senses, made all perception as vague and misty as the fog. Then he struggled dizzily up-right, slipping on the grass.

The black figure was twenty feet away from him, standing quite still, watching him with an air of mocking compassion. There was no measure of time, now. There was no way for Graham to tell how long he stood there flattened against the house. It could not have been very long, because then Marie Delabart's voice came, faintly muffled, calling him.

"Ray! Where are you?"

**T**HE BLACK figure tilted its tiny head as though it were listening to the sound of her voice and was pleased. Graham uttered an agonized cry of rage and hurled himself at the figure. It faded back away from him, wavering and dark in the fog. Graham tripped over a hedge, fell heavily to his hand and knees. White mistiness folded softly around the black figure, hid it away.



Graham got up again with a lunge, ran for the spot where he had seen it last. There was nothing there, and the fog was soft and cold and silent all around him.

A door opened, and Marie's voice came more plainly: "Ray! Ray!"

Graham swallowed at the stiffness in his throat. "Yes," he said. "I'm out here, dear." He walked back toward the house.

The light in the kitchen behind her outlined the slim rounded beauty of her body. "I didn't hear your car start, Ray. And then I heard something bump against the house . . ."

A dog howled somewhere, and the sound was indescribably thin and lonely and forlorn.

"It was a—dog," Graham said thickly. "I saw it nosing around the side of the house, and I threw a board at it."

She stared at him. "Why, Ray! What did you do that for? You like dogs . . ."

Graham moved his shoulders. "This was a savage-looking brute. I thought he might bark or scare you prowling around. I . . . Well, good-night, again."

She moved down the steps, and her lips were soft against his taut, cold ones. "Please be careful, dear."

"Yes," Graham said automatically.

He waited until she closed the door, and then he went around to the front of the house. The leather seats of his car were slippery and cold from the touch of the mist. The head-lights cut feeble yellow funnels along the curb. He started the engine, ground away noisily in low. He shifted into second with a clash of gears, let the engine race then gradually die down. The car coasted ahead for a little ways, bumped gently into the curb.

Graham fumbled around on the floor boards under the front seat, located a wooden jack-handle. He turned off the lights and got out of the car. Back of him the cottage was a vague black blot looming out of the fog. He stood still be-

side the car for long moments, listening, staring around him. After awhile, he walked softly back to the cottage, carefully circled around it, the smooth weight of the jack-handle squeezed tight in the fingers of his right hand.

He heard nothing, saw nothing. He came back to the car at length, sat down on the running board facing toward the cottage. He folded his coat collar up around his neck, pulled the brim of his hat down low over his eyes. He waited there while the fog crawled slowly around him and the cold numbed his whole body. The minutes dragged by like the slow measured tread of giant feet tramping.

Graham had no watch, no way to measure the time. At irregular intervals he got up and walked around Marie's house. His tired muscles were beginning to jump and twitch with nervous fatigue, and his eyes smarted, burning dryly, when at last the rising sun made a fuzzy red blur on the horizon, fighting its way through the trailing streamers of the fog. He pulled himself wearily inside his car, then, and drove away.

**D**AY-LIGHT was just changing to the grey smoothness of dusk when Graham came back once more to the little cottage. He had worked all day after his sleepless night, and he had reached the point now where the whole world seemed vaguely strange and unfamiliar and objects seemed distorted out of all proportion. His body felt lumpily heavy, and each movement was a distinct and separate muscular effort.

Going up on the small porch, he noticed that there were no lights inside the cottage. He rapped on the door. There was no reply from inside, no sound of any movement.

"Marie!" he called.

Her voice came faintly. "Come in, Ray."



The door swung back under the push of his hand. The living room was like a dim cave, cold and gloomy. The blackened remains of the fire Graham had built the night before were in the fire-place. Some of the little flaky bits of ash had blown out across the rug. Graham stared at them with a sort of dull surprise. Marie was a meticulously neat housekeeper. She was not in sight now.

"Hello," he said. "Where are you, dear?"

"In the bedroom. Come here."

Graham walked across to the bedroom door. There was a broom lying flat on the floor in front of the doorway. There was nothing in any way strange about it. It was an ordinary house-hold broom. But for some reason the sight of it gave Graham a chilling sense of repugnance. He kicked it away from the doorway. He was still staring down at it, when Marie said!

"Ray! What—what did you do that for?" She was standing in the doorway, fully dressed. Even in the dim light her face looked drawn and tired, infinitely weary.

"I don't know," Graham said. "Why?"

"I put it there in front of the door."

Graham stared at her. "You did? What for?"

Her eyes were widely dark, luminous. "I was afraid. There is an old legend . . . A witch cannot enter a room guarded by a broom laid across the doorway."

Graham's mind was dulled with exhaustion, and it took him several seconds to grasp the meaning of what she had said. "Witch?" he repeated incredulously.

She shivered a little. "I know—I promised you I wouldn't think about those things any more. But—but I had a nightmare last night that frightened me horribly. Ray, I—I dreamt that I was—being summoned to take part in a real celebration of the Black Mass. When I

woke up—I was terrified. I remembered that legend about the brooms. I got up and put this one across the doorway. I thought it—might protect me . . ."

"Good God," Graham said slowly. He shook his head violently, trying to get rid of the terror that was like a slow paralysis creeping over his mind. He made his voice calm, matter-of-fact. "Listen, dear, I'm not going to have you dancing in that act tonight, feeling the way you do. I'm not going to leave you alone here at night again."

She made no protest. "All right, Ray. But—you'll have to call them at the club and tell them I'm not coming."

He nodded. "I will. I'll call from that service station on Handley Boulevard. They have a telephone there, and they're open at night. You wait here for me."

Graham went out to his car. He couldn't shake the slow, congealing horror from his mind, and then suddenly he knew why he was afraid. Marie had said a witch couldn't enter a room when there was a broom across the doorway. If that was so, then for the very same reason a witch couldn't leave the room . . .

Graham thought of the unswept rug with the ashes from the fireplace blowing across it. They hadn't been swept up because Marie hadn't been out of her bedroom. She hadn't answered his knock at the front door. She hadn't come out of the bedroom until he had kicked the broom aside . . .

Graham was in a hurry at the service station. He made no attempt at an explanation over the telephone. He simply told the person who answered at the club that Marie wasn't going to be there that night, and hung up.

By the time he got back to the cottage the dusk had changed slowly into thick darkness that was heavy with the threat of another fog. He had parked his car in front before he noticed that there were



still no lights visible in any of the windows. He kicked the door of the car open, ran up the front walk.

"Marie!" he called anxiously.

There was no answer. The little cotage seemed to draw the curtains of darkness around itself with aloof and sinister silence. The front door was unlatched, swinging back and forth in gentle, mocking invitation. Graham went inside the front room.

"Marie!" he called, and fear tightened his voice, roughened it. The shadows in the room were thick and soft with the sleek gleam of polished furniture peering dimly through.

"Marie!" Graham said. "Where are—"

There had been no sound, not even any preceptible movement. Graham simply turned his head and saw it there, standing right beside him. It was the same black night-creature he had seen before. The little red eyes gleamed, and the bulbous tiny head bobbed and nodded. The puffy lips writhed and twisted soundlessly.

Graham had time for only one blinding shock of crawling unbelieving horror. Then there was a quick sweeping rustle in the air and thunder exploded in his skull in a deafening blast that wiped out all sensation.

**G**RAHAM heard the voice talking first, faintly, very distantly. Then finally he could feel the hands on his shoulders, shaking him. The voice kept repeating his name.

"Graham! Graham! Graham!"

He took two or three sobbing breaths, and then consciousness returned to him with a rush. He sat up, grimacing at the agony that lanced through his head. He stared vacantly at the man who knelt beside him, supporting him with one arm. It was Fulton.

"What—" Graham said thickly.

"That's what I want to know," Fulton

said. "What in the devil happened to you? You've got a lump on your head the size of a baseball."

Graham touched the welt over his temple gingerly. "Where'd you come from?" he asked, watching Fulton narrowly.

"Where'd I come from?" Fulton repeated blankly. "Why, from the club, of course. I was there when somebody called up and said Marie wasn't com'in' tonight. So I came out here to see what was the trouble with her."

"I called," Graham said absently. "I—" He sat up straight with a jerk. "Where is she?"

"That's what I'm tryin' to find out," Fulton answered. "Listen, fella, get a grip on yourself. I come in here, and you're lyin' on the floor with your head damned near caved in and Marie isn't anywhere around."

"Did you look through the house?" Graham demanded.

"Sure. In every damned room."

Graham staggered to his feet. "She's gone! They've taken her! That thing—"

"What? Who's taken her? Where—"

Graham fought down the sickening panic that surged up inside him. "There's no time for that now! I tell you, she's been taken away! We've got to get help! Get the police—search—" He ran unsteadily for the door.

Fulton pounded heavily after him. "We'll take my car! You can't drive."

It was an old-fashioned sedan—high, lumberingly bulky. Fulton had parked it in front of Graham's roadster.

"Hurry!" Graham said.

Fulton slid clumsily in under the steering wheel. He groped for the starter with his foot, and the ancient engine groaned into protesting life, stuttering and coughing. Gears rasped under Fulton's heavy hand, and the sedan jerked away from the curb.



"Now, what happened?" Fulton demanded. "I want to know—"

"I went to telephone," Graham interrupted. "When I came back the house was dark. I went in. There was something—"

Graham looked up at the rear-sight mirror. There was a reflection in it. Deep-set little red eyes were looking straight into his, and a triumphant smile writhed and twisted on puffy waxen lips. The thing was riding in the back seat of the car.

"Well," said Fulton. "Go on. What—"

Graham yelled hoarsely and tried to turn in the seat. He struck at the wavering puffy face, and in that same second the car spun around in a long, screaming skid that stopped with a sudden jarring impact as the tires hit the curb. The top-heavy body swayed over at an angle, hesitated there for a long sickening second.

Graham knew they were going to turn over. He fought to hold himself up-right, sensed Fulton's thick arms straining frantically at the steering wheel. Then the car smashed down on its side, and blackness swept up warmly and engulfed Graham again.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Where Demons Dance

CONSCIOUSNESS returned in flashes, each successive lucid interval lasting a bit longer than the preceding one. He was being carried along slowly, and each step was unbearable agony that pressed on his eye-balls like hot irons. The support slid from under him suddenly, and he felt himself falling. He could do nothing to save himself. His muscles refused to obey his brain. He slammed down on something incredibly hard, and consciousness slid slowly away from him again.

A long time later he became aware of a

sound. It was an irregular crunch and thump that went on without sense or reason. Graham knew he was lying face down on the coldness of a cement floor. He tried to get up, and he felt thin rope cut deeply into his wrists.

He felt no pain at all, but the knowledge of what the ropes meant was like the shock of icy water in his face. His brain was suddenly clear, and he turned his face against the hard dampness of the cement.

The room was square, windowless, with white blank walls. A cellar. The crunch and thump of sound came from the far corner. A smoky lantern burned fitfully there, washing black shadows in quick, snaky reflections around the ankles and legs of two men. The figures were dim, fantastically distorted by the folds of black, shiny cloth that enveloped their upper bodies.

Each of the men held a spade in his hands. They were digging in the floor of the cellar. They had cut through the cement with picks that lay beside them. Black dirt rose in an indistinct, ever-growing pile around their feet.

Silently Graham rolled back and forth, fighting the bonds around his wrists. He rolled against something soggily inert behind him and turned his head slowly to look at it. He was staring into Fulton's face. The thick lips were slack now, and the eyes stared glassily at him, unblinking. The man was obviously dead.

Graham felt no horror at that discovery, only a vague surprise that he himself was alive. And at the same time he realized the purpose of the digging being done by the two men. A grave—deep enough and wide enough for two . . . .

Suddenly the black night-creature was in the cellar. Its tiny head bobbed and nodded. It made no sound at all. The two diggers stopped their labors, stared at it incuriously. It approached with a slow, gliding motion that was nothing like a



human walk, hovered close over the half-completed grave.

The two diggers made no motion, and the night creature was still now, too. Graham stared at the trio in dazed wonder, not understanding.

One of the diggers shifted the grip of his hands on the shovel handle a little, and then suddenly swung the sharp blade around in a vicious swishing arc. The flat of the shovel smacked on the side of the creature's bobbing head. The tiny head flipped over sideways with the force of the blow. It flattened, and the waxen features ran together in a bubbling, seething mess.

**T**HE creature didn't fall. It glided sideways, and one arm made a quick, flicking motion. The digger screamed in sudden unbelievable horror and pain. His shovel rattled on the cement. Both his yellowish hands clutched the black cloth across his chest, and the cloth grew darkly sodden under his grip. His breath made a choking bubble in his throat. He took one staggering step, and then his knees bent loosely under him, and he fell straight forward across the pile of dirt and slid down limply into the half-completed grave.

The night creature slid forward, toward the other digger. Its arm flicked forward in the same quick motion. This time Graham saw a knife leave the claw-like hand, make a thin glittering streak in the air. The second digger jerked his shovel up in front of his face, and the knife made a steely clang hitting it, dropped to the floor.

The digger lunged forward with his shovel, holding it like a bayoneted rifle. The night creature dodged back agilely, swooped over and picked up the other shovel.

The two of them fought before Graham's straining eyes with the horribly fluid slowness of figures in a night-mare,

dodging, striking, lunging. There was no sound except the quick gasps of in-drawn breath, the sliding shuffle of feet on the floor, the ring of metal on metal as the shovel blades met and parried each other in mid-air.

The digger was the night creature's master in this sort of a weird duel. The blade of his shovel slipped past the creature's guard once, and then again, cutting deep into the black-flowing robes, making an ugly little scraping sound as it sliced through flesh and hit bone.

The creature slipped suddenly and fell sprawling. Its tiny smashed head bounced on the floor limply. The digger made a thickly guttural sound of triumph. His blood-stained shovel blade rose high in the air. The claw-like fingers of the night creature scabbled frantically across the floor, clutched the hilt of the knife it had thrown.

The shovel blade struck with a dull thud, rose again. The night creature moved with a spasmodic jerk. Graham saw the knife flip neatly over in the air, bury its thin blade to the hilt in the digger's straining throat muscles. He stood there rigid and unmoving for a long second and then slammed down on top of his shovel in a limply, unmoving heap.

The night creature's breath rasped and gurgled noisily. It began to move in weakly tortured writhings. The claw-like hands came up, fumbled at the thick folds of cloth under the tiny smashed head. The cloth loosened reluctantly, pulled aside. A gaunt, pain-wracked face stared at Graham.

"Johanson!" Graham exclaimed incredulously.

**T**HE deep-sunken eyes, glazed with suffering, blinked once in silent acknowledgment. Johanson's hand reached out, and his fingernails grated on the cement as he began to pull himself slowly across the floor. His crippled body left a broad,



sickly red trail behind it, and frothy red bubbles formed and burst on his thin-pressed lips. He had to stop and rest three times, each interval longer than the other, before he could reach Graham. He began to fumble weakly with the knots in the thin rope around Graham's arms.

"Yes. Make apology now. Too late." Johanson paused and somewhere found strength to tell his fantastic story. "I—was in love with Marie. Tried—frighten her with witch-craft. Make her—believe she was bewitched. I was—face at window. I put mark of cloven hoof in dirt—wiped it out again as you said. Knew lots of other tricks—from my mesmerism act. Gave her wine with hasish in it. Illusions—dreams—strange hallucinations. All meant to frighten her—and you."

"Why?" Graham demanded.

Johanson's bloody lips stretched into a ghastly grin. "Wanted her. Only way I could get her away from you. Make her look on me—as barrier against black forces guiding her destiny. Her protector. Sorry—now. Meant no real harm to her—or you."

"Good God!" Graham said. "But this to-night . . ."

Johanson's head moved weakly. "Not—me. When I got—to house Marie was gone. You came. Had to strike you down. Didn't know—what had happened to Marie. Thought you—and Fulton were going to her, so hid in his car. When heard—you talking—then I understood. Wanted to help you search but you saw me. Fulton wrecked car. I was hurt in smash—dazed. Got out of car—started to get help. Then saw—other men taking you and Fulton away. Followed them."

Graham struggled up-right. "But Marie! Marie! Where is she?"

Johanson gestured weakly over his head. "Up there—think. Going hurt her. You stop."

"Untie me!" Graham said tensely. "Get these damned cords loose . . ."

Johanson's bloody fingers tugged clumsily. "Hands—won't work . . . Sorry . . ." His gaunt body stiffened, and he rolled rigidly over on his back and lay there unmoving.

Graham braced his back against the wall, worked himself up to a standing position. Johanson's efforts had loosened the knots in the thin rope a little bit. Graham tore them loose with a sudden wrench that cracked the muscles in his shoulders. Without pausing a second, he picked up one of the discarded shovels and made for the door.

HE WAS beyond caution now, beyond caring in the slightest what happened to him. He could think only of Marie. He pounded along a narrow, crooked corridor that stretched briefly before him, ended in a short flight of steep cement steps. Graham mounted the steps, heaved his shoulders against the weight of a trap door. He rose slowly above the floor level to gaze upon a scene of unimaginable horror.

He was looking at something that was almost an exact replica of Marie's night club act.

But this scene was indescribably different from the act. The yellow light was not merely an electrician's trick. It was somehow horribly noxious. The stone and candles were not innocent stage props. They were symbols of abomination. The Devil Priest was not an actor trying to entertain an audience. He was a living evil force so terrible that the aura of menace that flowed from him struck Graham with the strength of a physical blow.

This was not an act. No. This was a *Witches' Sabbath* in very truth.

The ceremony was well under way. Faster and faster went the intonation of meaningless iargon, faster and faster



rocked the chattering black-clad celebrants. And the yellow light grew stronger, stronger. Graham could see its source now—flames glinting brassily slick on the surface of liquid in a great flat urn.

There was a scream, and the sound was like the clutch of hands jerking Graham's head around. Marie Delabart stood flattened against the wall, held there by the pull from the ceiling of a linked chain around her slender wrists. Her nude, rounded body swayed like a match flame under the avid lechery of the light. She had been smeared from head to foot with the same slick grease that had covered the faces of the grave diggers below. She was to be the initiate in this hell's ceremony—the Bride of Satan!

Her slim body twitched and jerked against the pull of the chain, her convulsive movements in rhythm with the chant. Horror had so dulled her senses that she stood there, only semi-conscious.

The Devil Priest was descending from the altar stone now. His yellow tusks were bared in a grin, and lurid maggots of light seemed to crawl in his eyes. He glided softly toward Marie, and his yellow-furred hands swept out toward her gleaming body.

She screamed again, and something exploded inside Graham's brain, striking away the invisible mesmeric shackles that had held him motionless. In one lunge he came up out of the trap door.

"Stop!" His voice was a rasping below of sound, inhuman, and he had no consciousness of uttering the word.

The shadows lapped weirdly around him like the waves of a black soft sea, and the blade of the shovel in his hands made a bright, ruddy glitter swinging back and up over his head. He stepped squarely into the circle of celebrants, and the shovel swept down in a vicious, terrible arc.

**E**VERYTHING dissolved into a screaming maelstrom of clawing hands and twisted, writhing bodies that squirmed around Graham like one great live mass. He felt no blows. He was incapable of feeling anything. The shovel seemed light as a tooth-pick in his hands, and it rose and fell like a steel flail, mangling flesh, crunching into bone.

The great flat urn tipped over with a heavy thud, and the oily liquid it contained slid across the floor with the bright flame following it like a fiery snake, digging into the floor with the sinister crackle of dried, burning wood.

Graham was suddenly staring straight into the beast-face of the Devil Priest. He was ten feet away, facing Graham across the river of fire, a short automatic pistol in one furred hand. The steel of its short barrel glinted coldly blue as he raised it slowly and leveled it at Graham. It jerked a little in his hand as he pulled the trigger, and the report was a light, cracking pop.

Graham laughed insanely. He jerked the shovel up, hurled it like a javelin, blade forward. There was a light crunch as the sharp edge of it bit into the throat of the Devil Priest just below the snarling muzzle of the goat's head. His thick arms jerked up in one spasmodic movement. He fell backwards on the floor, and the flames licked up gleefully around him.

Graham staggered forward. The flames were climbing up the walls, and the room was a seething inferno. The heat seared his eyes, blinding him. Somehow he found Marie. He could remember faintly the bright links of the chain cutting into his hands as he jerked it loose from the floor, and then holding her soft body close against him, staggering back through the flames. It was years, aeons of blind struggling before the cool wash of night air hit him in the face, and he fell on the ground, still holding Marie.



NOISE was mixed in Graham's brain in a vast black sea of sound. There was the sharp crackle of flames, the snake-like hiss of steam, the monotonous thump-pound of a laboring engine.

He could see nothing but blackness, and he raised his hands to touch soft cloth over his eyes.

"Here!" a voice said suddenly. "He's coming around! Keep his hand away from his eyes, sister!"

Soft, cool palms closed over Graham's fingers. "Marie!" he said in a choked murmur. "Are you—you—"

Her lips touched his cheek gently. "I'm all right, dear. Everything is all right now."

"My eyes," Graham said hoarsely. "I can't see—"

"You could if that bandage was off," the voice said. "Only you better leave it on. You gave yourself some rough treatment. Keep him quiet, sister, while I go hunt for my ambulance and see if I can't get it through this damned crowd."

"What—what happened?" Graham asked.

Marie's voice was a whisper. "The roof fell in just as you carried me out the door, dear. The building—it's an old warehouse—is gone completely. They're trying to keep the fire from spreading."

"Did anyone else—get out?"

"Three or four men. The police caught them. One they shot. They were criminals—dope peddlers—the police said. It was Johanson doing it all, wasn't it, Ray? I—thought sometimes during the last few weeks that it was he making me think the things I did."

"You were being systematically doped," Graham said "That's why you had those hallucinations."

"But Johanson . . ."

Graham thought of Johanson, dead, crushed and mangled and burned under the ruin of the warehouse.

"No, dear," Graham said. "Johanson was entirely innocent. He saved your life and mine to-night at the cost of his own. He loved you—a brave and splendid love that didn't count any sacrifice too great."

She sobbed once—a dry little gasp of sound. "Johanson! Oh, I'm sorry! And I thought he . . . But then, who—who—"

"Marks," Graham said.

"Marks!" she repeated incredulously.

"Yes. When he tried to shoot me in there, when I threw my shovel at him—I saw his face as he fell. Those creatures in there taking part in that ceremony—some of his clients. He specialized in criminal law. He kidnaped you to-night with their help. He evidently left some of them on guard at your house—waiting for me to come back. They brought me here—and Fulton."

"But why . . ."

"The money and property your parents left. He was handling it, and he wanted to keep on. The trust was supposed to end when you were twenty-three or when you got married. Marks planned to have you declared insane before you reached twenty-three—unfit to care for your property. Then he could keep on handling it himself—get himself appointed your guardian. For that same reason, he didn't want you to marry me. This whole business to-night was planned with that in mind. To get rid of me and drive you out of your senses."

"He pretended to practice witchcraft . . ."

"Yes," said Graham. "And he paid the price for it. You know the old penalty for trying to communicate with the devil, for evoking evil spirits."

"Burning . . ." she whispered, shivering a little.

"Yes," said Graham, holding her close against him.

THE END



# THE LITTLE GODS OF DOOM

By Wayne Rogers

(Author of "Killer Blood for Sale," etc.)

**B**LACK night, so dark that the bedroom windows were merely slightly lighter panels of opaqueness. Black and still, the hushed silence hardly disturbed by the soft wind sighing through the bare-limbed trees beside the house. Black and still and lulling—half a dozen times my staring eyes had closed and my



*Even though you knew your wife were the victim of diabolical, unearthly powers, what would you do if you found her lovely, sleeping body in the embrace of another man?*



senses had almost slipped into the soothing grip of sleep, only to jerk fully awake again as my tired brain rallied for another interminable tussle with the maddening problem that was making life hell for me.

I *must* stay awake. Other nights, in my sleep, I had vaguely sensed that Ruth was no longer at my side; that she was out of bed, prowling around the dark house. And that night she had acted so queerly—the baffling, terrifying, almost tangible thing for which I groped had been so close to the surface, so nearly within my grasp, that I sensed I would know more of it before morning.

Tensely I lay there, eyes closed, every nerve taut—and then there was a movement at my side. Not a natural movement such as one makes tossing in sleep; instantly I recognized the difference. This was furtive, cautious. Ever so quietly at first, then more definitely, Ruth was raising herself in the bed. First on one hand, then she drew herself half-erect—and I knew that she was bending over me, looking down at me.

My heart was beating like a trip-hammer; it seemed to pound like a drum in my ears. Surely she would hear it thumping in my breast. But, somehow, I managed to keep my eyes closed, managed to keep my breathing soft and regular, while the tingling blood rioted through my veins.

Satisfied, Ruth drew back. Softly, stealthily, she was slipping out of bed, gliding soundlessly across the room; then she was out in the hallway, and I could hear the soft pad of her bare feet on the stairs. Instantly I was after her, softly tiptoeing my way to the door and down the stairs, across the short lower hallway to the living room doorway—but there I stood transfixed, drawn back into the deep shadow of the archway while my bulging eyes stared at the pagan rite that was being performed there on my hearth!

IN FRONT of the open fireplace Ruth stood, the subdued blaze of the night log still sufficiently bright to silhouette her lithe figure clearly through the sheer stuff of her nightgown. For long moments she gazed down into the flame, and I could hear the deep sough of her breathing—and then her hands, which had been raised before her, resting on the stone mantelpiece, dropped slowly to her sides. Sinuously her shoulders wriggled, and one of the nightgown straps slid down over her arm. Then the other. And the filmy thing fluttered down and settled in an encircling white heap around her feet.

Stark naked she stood there in the firelight, and my heart pounded faster as the spell of her glorious body laid its hold on me—until it was choked off by shivery chill that shuddered through me and banished all else as a vague, appalling terror that I only half understood welled up within me!

From where I stood her white body was silhouetted against the black shadows that blanketed the room beyond the feeble reach of the dying flames. Like a savage maiden she stood there, reveling in the fire-glow, while her eyes sparkled and her naked bosom rose and fell with deep, sobbing breaths.

At that moment I could hardly recognize her. She had the perfect physical outlines of the wife I had married a little more than three months before, but that was all. The girl inside that alluringly modeled body was a stranger—a savage who had come out of the unknown to usurp Ruth's place. A savage whose rabid intensity, glowing out of those deep brown eyes, gripped me like a magnet and sent strange tingles of fear vibrating through me.

Slowly her arms lifted above her head—and every movement was lithe and sinuous, every motion a poem of luscious invitation that made my fingers itch with



desire for her even as I shrank from that evil something that I could not comprehend but sensed instinctively. It was as if Ruth had tossed aside the restraints of civilization; as if she had let herself back into the dawn of history, to step forth, naked and seductive, a primitive woman unashamedly seeking her mate . . . .

Seeking her mate . . . . She was slipping away from me, slowly but surely. For days I had felt it as I sensed the change in her. Now, as I stared at her glowing body, at her heaving breasts, I knew it—and again the terror that had been with me constantly prodded me mercilessly. She, the girl who meant more to me than life itself, was slipping away from me—but I must stop her somehow!

Impetuously I stepped out into the room, and she heard me. Slowly, as if under a spell, she turned and looked at me, stared at me for a long moment before she started toward me—and then, suddenly, she was in my arms. Her lips sought mine hungrily, savagely, sought and clung to them in an embrace that seemed to drain the strength from me as I struggled to calm her.

This wasn't Ruth I held in my arms; it was a human animal, a trembling, vibrating creature who clutched me with arms of steel, who kissed me with lips that crushed and bruised until I could taste my own blood in my mouth. A creature who fairly enveloped me, threatened to bear me down—and then suddenly went limp in my arms as if all the consuming passion had fled from her.

"Ruth!" I whispered close against her ear. "Ruth, darling—what is it? What in God's name is the matter, dear?"

Her forehead was beaded with perspiration as she lay back in my arms; her eyes stared up at me piteously, frightenedly—and now the daze had gone out of them. They were the eyes of the Ruth I knew so well—but as I gazed hungrily

into them I caught a glimpse of shadowy terror lurking uncertainly in their depths. The tears were very close, and for a moment I thought that she was going to break down, that she would confide in me as she had not done for weeks.

And then, again, that cold, veiling film masked them, and the frightened lines faded from her face.

"What is it, Ruth?" I pleaded. "Tell me what's the matter, and we'll fight it out together."

But that brief moment of near-confession was past; that flashing interval when I was able to peer into her soul and see the terror lurking there. When she straightened in my arms and pushed me away she was again the cool, disinterested enigma I had come to know so well.

"There is nothing the matter, Paul," she said quietly, as she picked up her nightgown and slipped it unconcernedly over her head. "I couldn't sleep, but now I am tired. I'm going back to bed."

AND then she was gone—but in her wake she left a chill that seemed to congeal the blood in my veins, just as it had been freezing my happiness and making a torturing mockery of the marriage I had planned and looked forward to for so long.

For a month after our marriage Ruth had been all that my fondest dreams had ever pictured her. We had been supremely happy—giddy with bliss. For a month—and then she had begun to change, slowly and almost imperceptibly at first. Her warmth had dimmed, faded. Her spirit had dulled, become listless. And gradually I had sensed that I was losing her—that my bride of three months had almost slipped away from me entirely.

That realization was torturing, maddening. I wanted to do something about it—to stop it. But what? If only there



were something tangible I could fight. But there was nothing. Nothing but the slowly cooling ashes of the romance that was my whole life . . . .

Dully I stared into the fitfully leaping flames, stared out across the shadow-haunted room—and two weird black monsters that danced and writhed on the wall seemed to leer and mock at me. Inhuman devils, with long, fat bellies, with small heads and grotesque, distorted features. Shadow demons seven or eight feet tall as they danced on the wall.

And then I turned back to the fireplace and looked at those fantastic creatures more closely. They were really less than two feet high—two metal figures whose roly-poly bodies served as the uprights of our andirons. Amida Nyorai, his round moon-face wreathed in a fatuous smile that seemed to ripple down his double chin, his thick neck and to his fat-swathed stomach. And, facing him, Yomato Hokusai, his heavy-jowled face twisted into a mask of venomous hatred that was skillfully carried out in every line of his swart, powerful body.

Two Japanese images, ingeniously worked in a variety of metals that at times made them seem almost human—especially when the flames played just right on their pudgy countenances, on the deep-set eyes that gleamed out from between thick, heavy lids. At times they looked almost human—or inhuman, as the yellow flames endowed them with freakish life and sent their cavorting shadows scurrying fearsomely up the walls.

As I stared at the little men the chill that ate into my very marrow made me shudder, and I recalled the first time those inanimate figures had assumed personalities—recalled the uncomfortable spell they had cast over what had been a jolly company . . . .

We were just married then, Ruth and I. For years we had patiently waited for the

day when my growing business would be sufficiently prosperous to make our wedding possible. For months we had had a little home picked out in the rolling hills of western Connecticut. At last our dreams had been realized, our honeymoon was over, and we were back in the little cottage, hosts for a housewarming.

There were more than a dozen guests—Jim and Sally Langham, Clem and Gladys Fajans; Melville Ford, who had a place down the road from us and had located the cottage for us; Tip Hayden and Clara Noff; Gene Sprague, my partner, and his girl friend; Lew and Irma Ason—all old friends we had known for years. It was getting on toward evening, and the late September day was bleak and overcast. The log fire felt good, and we were all gathered near it when Eijiro Tomita walked into the room.

"Tommy" was a college friend of mine, a student of advanced psychology. We had seen quite a bit of each other since college days, and he was one of the first Ruth and I thought of inviting.

His round face was wreathed in smiles, and his black-haired head bobbed in greeting from one to the other as he recognized friends and acknowledged introductions—and then, suddenly, the smile began to fade from his face. Into his dark little eyes came a look of surprise and he got down on his knees in front of the fireplace, fingered those unusual andirons experimentally and examined them carefully.

"I see you have bought the Kaneko andirons," he said when he arose and turned back to us, and now there was no smile on his face.

"We didn't buy them, Tommy," Ruth laughed. "They're another of the wedding presents—and one of the nicest, I think—don't you?"

"A wedding present?" Tomita's voice



was surprised, questioning as if he had not heard aright.

"Yes, Mel Ford gave them to us," Ruth smiled to where Ford was sitting in an easy chair. "I think they're the most fascinating little jiggers—"

But now Tomita's face was bland and inscrutable, but in his eyes I detected a glint of—was it fear, or suspicion? Melville Ford must have caught that look, too, for he leaned forward in his chair.

"Looks to me as if Mr. Tomita doesn't approve of my choice of Japanese artistry," he laughed.

"It is not your choice of art," Tommy's precise English clipped out in his flat, emotionless voice. "It is these particular andirons. They are well known, and there is a story that goes with them—but, of course, you could not have known that. It is not a pleasant story, so it would be better that I do not narrate it—"

But by then every eye was fixed on him, and a dozen voices urged him to tell the story regardless.

"THESE figures," he began with a shrug of resignation, "represent Amida Nyorai, the god of good achievement, of success and happiness; and Yomato Hokusai, the god of frustration, of evil disappointment. They are continually at war with each other to determine our destinies. In Japan this conflict is represented by a symbolical dance. The fortunes of the two gods vary as the dance progresses, but in the end when it seems that Hokusai will triumph Nyorai finishes victoriously.

"The figures on these andirons represent the dancers in the middle of their portrayal. These andirons were wrought by Osami Kaneko, a very clever worker in metals. He presented them as a wedding gift to Kentaro Nogano and his wife, Susuki. Kaneko had been an un-

successful suitor for Susuki's hand and had lost her to Kentaro Nogano.

"Kentaro and Susuki began married life very happily, but very soon disagreements arose between them. Unhappiness came in the door, and then unfaithfulness. Finally Susuki deserted her husband and went one night to the house of Osami Kaneko. Her husband followed her there in the morning, but when he arrived it was already too late. Osami Kaneko was dead in his bed—and his face and body were cut and trampled horribly, as if sharp little feet had danced upon him.

"Kentaro Nogano took Susuki back, but he threw out the andirons that were the gift of the treacherous Kaneko. They passed into the hands of a metallurgist who became interested in them because of the complexity of the metals employed. He tested them carefully and found that they were composed of a fendish alloy—metals which, under heat, worked upon each other and sent forth a subtle gas that is poisonous to the human brain. It was this gas that worked upon Susuki and alienated her from her husband. Osami Kaneko had planned very evilly—but he forgot that Amida Nyorai, the god of success and happiness, must always finish the dance in triumph."

There was not a sound in the room when Tomita finished his low-voiced recital, not a sound but the snapping of burning embers behind the dancing gods which now held the attention of every eye in the room. As I glanced surreptitiously at the others I saw that there was doubt and uneasiness in their gaze—and, in some of those eyes, more than that.

Most of our guests knew that Melville Ford had been considered engaged to Ruth before I met her and won her away from him. And it was Ford who had given us the andirons.

But I knew something that most of them did not suspect: I knew that Mel-



ville Ford made a hobby of Japanese art; that he was considered an expert on the subject and was fully acquainted with the history of the many pieces in his collection. Ford would hardly have purchased the Kaneko andirons without having ferreted out their history—if, indeed, he had not bought them because he knew of that history!

"That's a good story," his dry chuckle broke the silence, "but, unfortunately, it will not hold water. Any metallurgist will tell you that it is impossible to generate such a gas from fused metals unless they are subjected to intense heat, heat that would melt them."

"I like the little fellows just the same, Mel," Ruth sprang to his assistance. "And, anyway, Tommy says that Amida Nyorai always comes out on top, so we have nothing to worry about, Paul."

But even her attempt at lightness did not entirely dispel the spell of uneasiness, of vague discomfort, that had settled over the party—and more than once I caught a glimpse of narrowed eyes turned dubiously toward where the conflicting gods danced in the firelight.

**I** FORGOT about Tomita's story after that night, forgot about it for weeks. It was only lately that it had come back into my mind—to chill me with a vague fear that was almost supernatural.

A strange, inexplicable transformation was coming over Ruth, that I knew, and I was at my wit's end seeking the cause. Those dancing images? That was preposterous! Common sense told me that Ford was right and that Tommy's tale was nothing but a legend. Fused metals could not be endowed with any such mysterious powers—and yet there is that about Oriental legends that takes hold of our imaginations and makes us wonder . . . .

Was it possible that Melville Ford still hoped to win Ruth away from me? Pos-

sible that he was convinced of the diabolical powers of those andirons and for that reason had presented them to us? Given them to us so that the poison they exuded would work on Ruth just as it had affected the downfall of the little Japanese bride?

Ford lived nearby. When I was at work in New York there was no way that I could know whether he was at home—whether he was alone—

Those torturing thoughts gave me no peace. They plagued me incessantly, drove me to the verge of madness as I watched my wife drifting away from me and stood by, powerless to hold her, powerless to fight the thing that was taking her.

It was not those andirons, of course, but when I made an attempt to put them aside for others Ruth would not hear of it—and the look she gave me made me cringe in discomfort. It was not those andirons—yet they became a fetish with me. The grotesque faces of the dancers seemed to be laughing at me, jeering at my helplessness. I longed to take them out in my car and throw them in some field far away—and yet something within me whispered that to do that would be to lose Ruth forever.

My jaws were clenched tightly, the veins on my forehead throbbed and stood out like cords, and my damp hands clenched and unclenched as I sat there before the waning fire and fought my hopeless battle. Hopeless, utterly hopeless because I had no idea what it was I was fighting . . . .

I breathed deeply, filled my cramped lungs with air—and suddenly I was aware of a new strength, a new life that flowed through me. The tips of my fingers and toes tingled, and the blood flowed faster in my veins—and in the back of my mind vague yearnings began to awaken. Animal yearnings that called to me unmistakably.

There was something about these and-



irons! I had felt it myself! Had I inhaled a whiff of the subtle poison they exuded and felt its effects coursing through my system? And Ruth was in the house with them all day, breathing in this hellish emanation with which they polluted the air and twisted innocent minds!

On my hands and knees I bent over them and sniffed, but there was no alien odor; nothing but the ordinary smell of metal and wood ashes. Their poison was too well concealed to be detected that way, but now I was sure that it was there. That fixed my resolution. The following night I would have it out with Ruth—and before I was finished those andirons would be discarded; thrown in the bottom of the nearest lake, if I had my way.

I would bring home another pair to substitute for them, I told myself the next morning when I left for town.

But once I reached the office work piled up on me and it was afternoon before I had time to think of them again—and then it was the voice of Gene Sprague on the telephone that brought me back to them with a guilty start.

"I'm afraid I'll be stuck up here tonight, Paul," Gene was calling from Boston. "Old Henry Abbott practically insists that I have dinner with him and his superintendent. It means a sure contract for us if I do—so I'll have to let you bat for me with the Wilkinson crowd. Their board of directors is meeting at eight-thirty. You know the spiel I was going to give them. You hand it to them and they'll sign on the dotted line. Good luck, old man."

The Wilkinson board of directors. Of course. Sprague had been working on them for weeks. If they would agree to let us handle their advertising account it would mean thousands of dollars a year for us—but if I kept the appointment that night it would mean that Ruth would be

all alone. Would mean that she would sit in front of the fire—in front of those devilish andirons . . . .

That was utter nonsense. I cursed myself for a fool as I grabbed the telephone and put in a call for my home. The palms of my hands were cold and clammy as Ruth's voice came to me over the wire, as I made my apologies and told her that I would not be home until well after midnight. I was on edge, but I could not let my jangled nerves throw me altogether off-balance; could not let this absurd mania that had taken hold of me make a complete fool of me.

And yet, as I sat in a restaurant nibbling at a few bites of tasteless food, I knew that that was just what I was going to do.

Ruth sitting in front of those andirons, breathing in their subtle, insidious poison . . . . Ruth alone and with nobody to watch over her . . . . As I sat there I could see her again standing in the firelight, gloriously nude but thrilling to wild desires that had taken complete possession of her—that terrified her even as she obeyed them. Ruth, standing like that before the fire . . . .

Fearful premonition clutched at me, dire foreboding whispered impossibly awful thoughts into my ear—and in that moment I knew that the Wilkinson board of directors did not matter. Nothing mattered—nothing but Ruth—and that I get home to her at the earliest possible moment!

It was an hour before I could catch the next train, and that would make it nine o'clock before I reached home. Sixty long minutes that stretched ahead of me like sixty eternities. Part of that time I spent in a Madison Avenue shop where I bought a pair of andirons. That seemed to lift some of the depressing weight from my shoulders, but long before the train pulled into my station my nerves were



again like taut bow-strings, twanging hysterically at the slightest jarring thought.

Quickly I crawled into my car and drove the mile and a half to our place, but the moment I sighted it in the distance cold chills started crawling down my spine. The house was dark! Was I too late? Had Ruth already gone—gone away from me for all time?

My heart was in my mouth as I braked the car to a stop out in the road and started up the driveway on foot. Why, I don't know. Perhaps I had some confused idea of running back to it and racing to bring help if she were really gone.

As I came nearer to the house I saw that there was a dim light in the living room—the flickering light of the fireplace. But otherwise everything was dark and quiet, the front and one side of the building palely outlined by the radiance of the early moon. Dark and still—and then the squeak of a door brought me up short as if a cup of icy water had been dashed into my face.

The side door was opening. Someone was coming out. It was Ruth. Bareheaded and with only a light wrap thrown over her shoulder despite the penetrating chill of the November night. Without a glance around her, she closed the door and turned toward the hill that rose a short distance behind the house.

At a safe distance I followed her, keeping her always within sight while I longed to shout to her, to run up and clasp her in my arms. Yet something within me held me back, warned me that it would be better to follow and come to grips with this thing that was taking her away from me. Suspicion, jealousy, frantic fear—I don't know what it was that chained me; I only know that I followed mutely, in an agony of apprehension.

It took but a few minutes to reveal her destination. Already she had crossed from our land to that of Melville Ford, and

now she was following a path that led up into the woods—that led to a rustic hunting lodge Ford had built half a mile up the mountain. It was his custom to sleep up there during the hunting season, I knew. That meant that he would be there now—that Ruth was going to him.

Yes, it meant that those devilish and-irons had accomplished their hellish purpose. Insidiously they had worked upon Ruth, undermining her loyalty and her love for me, stealing her away from me—just as Melville Ford had planned when he presented them to us and sardonically watched us set them up in the center of our home!

Rage at the man's diabolical perfidy swept through me and I yearned to face him—to get my punishing fingers around his throat. The lodge was only a short distance ahead now—just a few minutes before I would confront him and turn my clenching fists loose upon him . . . . .

I must have grown careless then. Perhaps in my eagerness to come to grips with the man who had broken up my home, I did not watch where I was going. Something in the path caught at my foot, imprisoned it for a moment—and before I could tug it loose there was a new noise in the dried brush at my side. I whirled, but before I was half-way around something crashed down sickeningly on my head.

Waves of blinding pain, of surging nausea, washed over me—and then were merged into the blackness that encompassed me on every side.

**H**OW long I lay there I had no way of knowing, but when my aching eyes batted open again my body was stiff from the cold and my fingers seemed half-frozen. Around me was utter quiet, and now the young moon was almost gone from the sky. But I needed no moon to guide me to Melville Ford's layout. Stiffly



I scrambled to my feet as memory flashed back into my mind; feverishly I groped my way along the trail until the long, low building loomed in the semi-darkness ahead of me.

Dark and silent. Not a light. But Ruth was in there—I knew that all too well. Without hesitation I strode up onto the porch and found the door, opened it and stepped into the large main room. Darkness and silence, but a lighted match showed me an oil lamp on the center table, and in a few moments I had it lighted.

Still there was no sign of Ruth; no sign of anybody. The place seemed deserted, and yet there was about it that indefinable feeling of habitation—that peculiar emanation that telegraphs to our sixth sense the presence of other human beings. Ruth was there—she must be there; that trail led no farther than this lodge, and had she retraced her steps she would have had to step over my unconscious body. But the kitchen and store-room were empty. That left only the bedrooms opening on the balcony that ran the length of the main room.

My skin crawled as I went up the flight of steps and grasped the knob of the first of those doors, as I pushed it inward—and then stood like a statue; like a man who is suddenly turned into cold, insensate marble, as my horrified eyes seemed to turn into great, round, burning sores in the middle of my face! Unbelievably I stared into that room—and everything that was fine and decent and worth cherishing seemed to wither and die in my agonized heart!

Stretched out on the bed in that room was the pajama-clad figure of Melville Ford, his eyes closed in sleep—and beside him lay Ruth! Ruth, nude as she had stood in the firelight only the night before, with her bare arms twined around him, clutching him to her! Ruth, asleep—ex-

hausted by the fierce passion that had burned itself out!

FOR what seemed endless eons of time I stood there in the doorway staring unblinkingly; stood there and suffered indescribably. Then, somehow, the lamp was standing on the bureau, and I knew that I was walking toward the bed—that I was stalking toward it with the stealth of a jungle cat; that my fingers were closing and unclosing like restless claws; that my lips were drawn back and the air was cool on my clenched teeth as it sobbed down my throat.

Stalking toward the bed, poised ready on the balls of my feet—until a cold, sharp voice knifed through the room and brought me up short.

“That’s far enough,” it snapped. “Stand just where you are or I’ll put a bullet through your belly.”

That voice—my dumbfounded brain reeled. It couldn’t be—but it *was*—it *was* Gene Sprague’s! And there he was, in the doorway of a closet on the other side of the room—Gene Sprague, my partner, holding a deadly looking automatic that was trained on my stomach!

“Just where you are,” he repeated. “That’s just where I want them to find you in the morning.”

His eyes were wild and gleaming with excitement; his face white and tense, set in strained lines that made it demoniacal. He was mad!

“You don’t know what you’re saying, Gene,” I tried to soothe him when I recovered control of my tongue. “You’ve been working too hard lately; it’s upset you so that you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Yes, I’ve been working—working like a slave,” he gritted, “and now I’m going to start to harvest. I’ve built up the agency so that I can turn it into a gold mine—a gold mine for one, not for two. That’s



why you're going to stay right here on the floor, with a bullet through your heart. That's why I've gone to the trouble of setting this stage so carefully."

"Then it was you," I groped dazedly. "You who were behind all this devilishness—and not the andirons."

Sprague's voice cackled into a contemptuous laugh.

"No, not the andirons," he grinned twistedly, "but your friend Tomita helped me a lot by that yarn. I knew you and I had to come to the parting of the ways pretty soon, and I didn't know how I was going to manage it—until Tomita gave me the idea all ready to be carried out. If you had taken the trouble to examine those little god-jiggers lately you might have discovered that I drilled a little well in the back of each of them. I did that one day when I knew Ruth was going to town—drilled the wells and filled them with a wax preparation a friend of mine brought back from the South American jungles. Deadly poison that stuff is—and when it melts and evaporates into the air it is just as devilish in its effect on the human brain.

"I've kept those wells stocked up—replenished them whenever I knew that the house would be empty. This afternoon I put in a double load—filled them right up to the top. By the time I telephoned to her tonight Ruth was so completely doped that she came like a child—"

"Then she didn't—then nothing—happened to her?" I gasped.

"No, nothing has happened; she has been quite safe," Sprague chuckled softly, and his grin was satanic. "I had Ford put to sleep before she arrived, and then I gave her a shot of the same sedative. They will both be asleep for several hours yet—and when they wake up you will be sprawled out there on the floor, and this little pistol will be gripped tightly in

Ford's hand. A clear case of murder when you burst in on their little party.

"That's all the talk, Hadley. I haven't any more time for you. After you're gone—" his gaze flitted toward Ruth's naked body and his tongue licked out over his lips as lustful desire gleamed in his eyes—"I want to have a little time for your wife—"

His arm was stiffening, his knuckle whitening as his finger tightened on the trigger. His eyes narrowed, squinted devilishly—and the last flicker of hope winked out in my despairing brain. I was utterly helpless, doomed. At any moment hot slugs of lead would rip into my heart and I would drop to the floor beside the bed where Ruth lay, a defenseless victim ready for this mad beast to slake his lascivious thirst.

At any moment . . . . .

**I** TENSED, flexed my muscles as inconspicuously as possible. When that gun roared there might be a chance. If the bullet did not tear through my heart, did not find a vital spot, I might be able to reach him . . . . .

And at that moment my ears, tensed for the roaring explosion that was to be my death knell, pricked up in amazement as a new sound disturbed the hushed quiet of the night. A tapping—a *rat-tat-tat* that was like a tap-step—like the dancing of little feet!

Even at that moment, when I teetered on the brink of eternity, I could feel the hair at the back of my neck standing on end as I listened to that eerie clatter!

Sprague heard it, too. His set face blanched, and he glanced fearfully toward a nearby window. And at that moment I sprang.

The automatic roared deafeningly, and something seared through my side like a red-hot poker. But before he had a chance to pull the trigger again I was grappling



with him, one hand twisting his gun-wrist until the weapon dropped from his nerveless fingers and thudded to the floor.

With a howl of snarling rage he butted his head forward, right into my face. I saw stars as his skull crashed against my forehead and almost broke my nose. Blindly I grabbed for him, but he had managed to tear himself free and get out of my reach. Dimly I could see him racing across the room toward the window, scrambling up onto the sill.

One glance he cast at me, and then, with a yell of fear, he threw himself outward. That terrified yell died as he landed on the ground below—or perhaps it died because I toppled over on the floor and fought vainly against the blackness that was again overwhelming me . . . .

When I came back to my senses it was daylight, and Ruth, clad in one of Mel Ford's dressing gowns, was bending over me. Tears were running down her cheeks as she watched over me and cautioned me not to move lest I reopen my wound and start it bleeding again. But I had no desire to move. All that I wanted was to lie there and watch her looking at me that way, while my exulting heart sent up a paean of thanks.

"Sprague?" I asked when Mel Ford came in and grinned down at me. "Did he get away?"

The grin faded from Ford's face.

"He didn't get any farther than the ground down below that window," he shook his head puzzledly, "and that's

what gets me. There doesn't seem to be anything the matter with him—no wounds or broken bones—but when I found him he was stretched out there and trampled into a bloody pulp. His face was a sight, and even his chest was all cut up—just as if sharp little feet had tramped all over him."

"Had *danced* on him," I suggested softly, but Mel shook his head.

"I know what you're thinking," he admitted, "but it couldn't have been that. Must have been that little deer I kept penned up out in back of the lodge. It's gone from its cage—broke loose, it looks like—and must have run full tilt into Mr. Sprague, and then trampled him to death in its terror."

But no little deer will trample on a man's face and chest until they are a bloody horror. I know that—and Mel Ford knows it, too. That explanation may satisfy him, but it doesn't go down with me—any more than the "logical" one we found to account for the reddish brown stains on the little feet of our andiron images. Those were caused by the gum Sprague packed into the wells he had drilled into their backs, we agreed; he put in too much and it had bubbled out and run down to coagulate around the little metal feet.

Maybe so—but I like to remember that Amida Nyorai, grinning impishly as he helps to support the logs in our fireplace, always finishes his dance in triumph!

**DIME  
MYSTERY  
MAGAZINE**

Edith Horne came home to find brooding horror where there had been peace and happiness; hatred and black menace where there had been love and security—but even her father's ghastly fate did not forewarn her of the nature of the grisly trap she had walked into. Edith Horne's story is told in—

**DEATH BREAKS QUARANTINE**  
By Arthur Leo Zagat

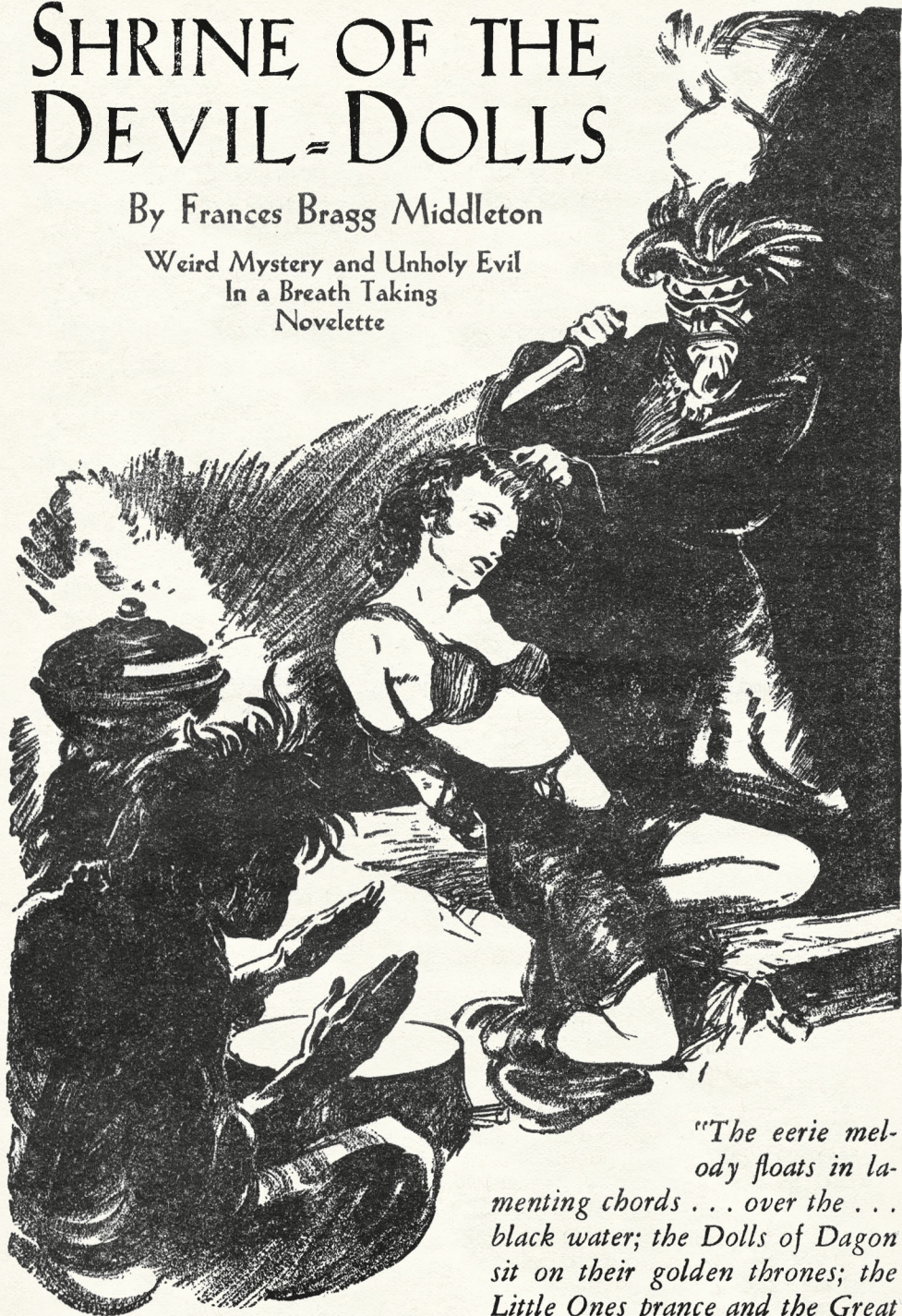
*In the February Issue! Out Jan. 8th!*



# SHRINE OF THE DEVIL-DOLLS

By Frances Bragg Middleton

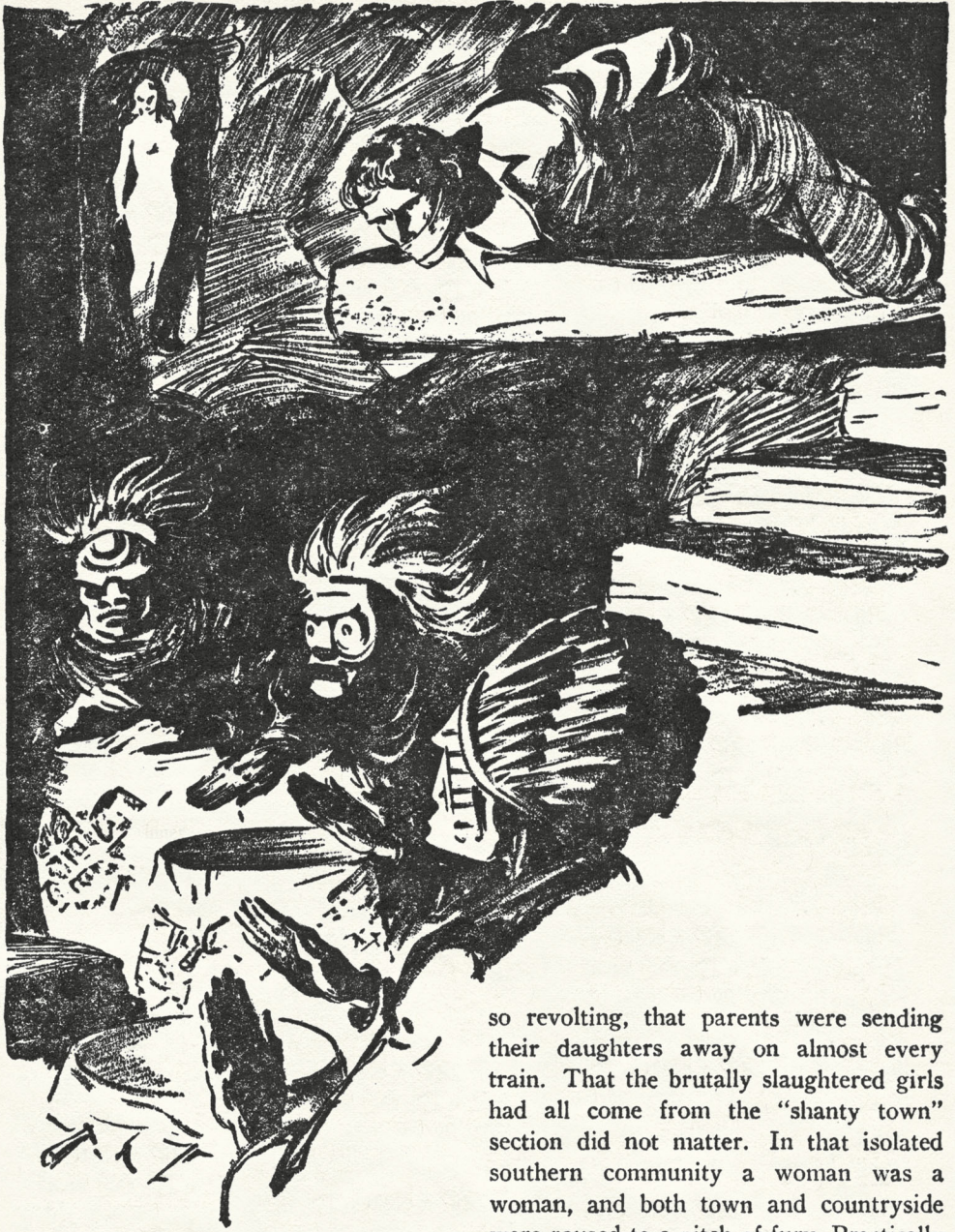
Weird Mystery and Unholy Evil  
In a Breath Taking  
Novelette



*"The eerie melody floats in lamenting chords . . . over the . . . black water; the Dolls of Dagon sit on their golden thrones; the Little Ones prance and the Great One kneels—and they that sacri-*

*fice to Dagon shall prevail!" Those words held the entire town in a grip of grim horror, because each time they were broadcast, the fleshless body of a young girl was found. . . .*





**J**ED HAMMOND drove his car recklessly down the flat dirt road. He was in a hurry for he had promised the sheriff to help guard the railroad station while the afternoon train came through. The grim force that held the whole county in the grip of icy terror, might strike again at any moment. . . .

Five girls had met a fate so hideous,

so revolting, that parents were sending their daughters away on almost every train. That the brutally slaughtered girls had all come from the "shanty town" section did not matter. In that isolated southern community a woman was a woman, and both town and countryside were roused to a pitch of fury. Practically all the younger men, like Jed himself, belonged to Sheriff Brown's hastily mustered posse.

And because he belonged, or because of certain private investigations which he and his brother Tim were carrying on, Jed now carried in his pocket a grim threat against his life.

It was midsummer. The narrow road



wound through a live oak wood, dim and shadowy. Great thickets of blackberry briars grew close on either side, masking the bends in the road to the point of invisibility. And Jed was driving fast. The log across the road seemed fairly to leap at him as he swung around the turn. Only the quickest, almost automatic action saved him from a disastrous crash. As it was, the front wheels thudded against the log as he jerked the car to a halt.

"You're covered, white man!" a strange voice warned from behind the thicket. "If you draw, you die. And we have no wish to kill you. Come with us peaceably, and you will live—for a while."

Ice cold fingers seemed to play a devil's fugue up and down Jed's spine. During the past ten days he had seen more horrid things. Now, the thought of what must have happened to those poor girls before they died gave him stubborn courage.

"You won't take me alive!" Jed spoke hoarsely, while the queer, incomprehensible message he had received went shivering through his mind. He held himself rigid, but his right hand had dropped to his gun when it left the wheel, and he was quick on the draw. "You won't kill me by inches—as you must have killed those girls."

"You are surrounded, white man." The voice was puzzling, neither male nor female, a reedy, unhuman sound. "We need you, and we mean to take you. Look!"

Slowly heads and faces appeared above the blackberry briar. But Jed did not fire. For these apparitions were masks, wavering in the air seven or eight feet above the ground, hideous travesties of human visages—masks that might have come from the Congo, or from devil-devil houses of Samoa or Tahiti, unholy things that sickened the soul and chilled the blood to ice.

And the words of the warning note in

Jed's pocket thudded like a dead march through Jed's mind:

*"The eerie melody floats in lamenting chords out over the peaceful black water; the dolls of Dagon sit on their golden thrones; the Little Ones prance and the Great One kneels; and they that sacrifice to Dagon shall prevail!"*

*"Death awaits the spy and the meddler. This is the first warning—and the last!"*

They were going to kill him, Jed reasoned. Better a clean death by gunfire than—

His gun fist swept up swiftly. He poured ten shots into the thicket in as many seconds. A wild cacophony of yells answered him, and then a high, falsetto voice:

"Grab him before he can reload!"

And a mob of nightmare figures rushed out into the road.

But almost on the instant a fusillade of shots resounded from the wood. A deep voice bellowed. Horses' hoofs thudded from somewhere behind the trees. And the hideous, grotesque mummers melted into the shadows of the thicket.

A dozen young men galloped into view, the "mounted" branch of the posse which patrolled the woods, where a car, of course, was useless. Jed made curt explanations. They found one dead man, robed and masked, apparently, to represent a devil doctor. He was a white man, but a stranger. By a curious freak of coincidence Jed's bullet had pierced his chest directly through a tattooed representation of the ancient Phoenician and Philistine fish-god Dagon, but far coarser and more brutish a version of it than Jed had ever seen.

But that one body was all they found. The rest of the mob had vanished.

JED left his rescuers to continue the search. He rolled the log from across the road and drove like mad to meet the



sheriff at the railroad station as we had planned.

He found the lean, stoop shouldered officer waiting near the station, on the cinder path that stretched beside the gleaming rails. The train was almost due. Small knots of armed men stood about, none of whom were talking. Most of them were watching the cars parked along the dusty, unpaved street. In each car were scowling men and at least one white faced, terrified girl. And each of these men held a shotgun; rifle, or some small arm, in full view. Fear hung over the place in an almost visible cloud. When the instigators of that terror were located, Jed reflected grimly, all hell would break loose. It would not be a lynching. It would be a massacre. . . .

One of the girls leaned forward in her seat and beckoned to Jed as he strode by to join Sheriff Brown.

"Is there anything new, Jed?" she whimpered. "Do *you* think I ought to go?"

Jed halted, frowning. He looked at the tight lipped men of her kin who were guarding her.

"I think every girl ought to be shipped out of this place as fast as the trains can carry them," he said shortly. "And I'm glad you're going on this train, Virgie. Cars aren't safe any more. I was stopped by a log across the road on my way here. If the woods patrol hadn't come up I'd have been dead by now."

"Oh!" The girl gasped. One nervous hand went to her throat. The fright in her eyes should have told him something, but his mind was too firmly set on other things. "They—they—have no business with you, Jed!"

He shrugged. "Why not? I'm doing my best to hunt them down. And they'll be after me good and proper now. I just shot one of them, I'm glad to say."

"Shot one?" The sheriff's voice was

sharp behind him. "That'll make you a marked man, Jed! Who was he?"

"None of us knew him. An outsider. And he'll never tell us anything. He's dead. . . . Yes, I'm glad you're getting out of here, Virgie, and, believe me, I'm glad that Mavis is away at school!"

He turned away with the sheriff as he spoke. He did not see the sudden flush of rage, the greenish glint of jealousy that lighted for an instant the girl's cheeks and eyes. He was completely blind to her infatuation for him, her grim determination to supplant Mavis Earle in his affections. . . .

The very thought of her had dropped out of his mind by the time he had turned his back. He took the warning note out of his pocket and thrust it into the sheriff's hands.

"That's the self same message that Tim's been picking up for the last ten days," he muttered between his teeth, "and we found that first mangled body just ten days ago!"

Sheriff Brown scanned anxiously the smudged damp bit of paper with its incomprehensible jumble of words. Then he looked up helplessly into Jed's smouldering gray eyes.

"You think it's a joke, maybe?" he asked feebly. "One of those radio amateurs tryin' to be funny? Tryin' to kid us?"

Jed shook his head decisively.

"It's no joke," he answered soberly. "It's meant for Tim and me. As I said, he's been picking up that call every day lately, and he and I've been investigating, as you know. If it wasn't for the danger to Tim—he's only a kid—I'd be glad we got this warning. Don't you see—it ties up the sender of those mysterious messages with the murderers of those poor dead girls? And as I've told you before," his voice sank to a mere thread of sound, "Tim can locate the sender!"



"You're sure?" from the sheriff, with a start of eagerness.

"It's practically done now. I don't know a thing about radio, and I care less. But Tim knows his stuff. If he's not killed inside of twenty-four hours, he'll be ready to lead us to the murderers."

"But this threat was sent to you—not to Tim?"

"It must have been meant for us both. And the fact that the man I killed had the figure of Dagon tattooed on him is all the proof I want. I *know* that the crazy message came from the murderers, Sheriff!"

Sheriff Brown sighed. "It all sounds wild to me, Jed, but we can't pass up anything that might be a clue. It's the worst thing ever hit this state. Another corpse found yesterday—an' elections comin' on. . . . It's mighty tough on me, Jed—"

"I'm dam' glad Mavis is off at school," Jed said again.

His eyes swung back to the girls in the waiting cars just as the train's shrill whistle sounded down the line. The men were getting out, now, and herding the frightened girls toward the track. Jed and the sheriff fell in behind them. Nobody spoke.

The train thundered to a stop and Jed cried out in sudden horror. A girl with a gay and smiling face had appeared at the top of the pullman steps. Jed tried to cry out to her to go back, but his voice was no more than a hoarse gurgle in his throat. The girl descended the steps, darted toward him with a little cry of surprise and pleasure. He tried even then to get her back on the train but she only stood still, bewildered and half angered by the strangeness of her reception. Before he could make her understand the train got under way again. Jed never saw the flash of gloating vindictive triumph that lit up Virgie's face. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Summons to Death

"MY GOD, Mavis, why did you come?" Jed groaned. "Don't you know *anything*? This accursed place—"

"Get her into your car an' run her out home, Jed," the sheriff growled. "There ain't another train till mornin', an' as for your drivin' her back to the city through the dark. . . . No, I surely wouldn't advise that."

"But what's it all about?" Mavis Earle demanded, looking at them in astonishment. She was a pretty girl, slight and vivacious. "Why were Edith and Marie and Annabelle and Virgie leaving town like that, looking so scared? And why all the *guns*?"

Jed and the sheriff exchanged exasperated glances. The latter made a weary gesture with one hand.

"Get along with you, boy," he growled, and turned his back.

Jed helped Mavis into his car, slid under the wheel. The car started with a jerk.

"What's all the dark mystery about?" the girl demanded. "I thought you'd be glad to see me—"

For answer he drew a copy of the evening paper from his pocket and thrust it into her hands. He did not look at her. His eyes remained glued grimly to the road.

The headlines were brutal enough. So were the pictures. And between them they filled the front page. The fifth case of the kind in as many weeks. A girl murdered—hideously, horribly. Mavis didn't read the details. She glanced at the sheet, folded it and handed it back to Jed.

"What has that to do with me?"

"Do you suppose," he asked her fiercely, "that I want *you* to be the next? Why in the name of the *devil* did you come back here?"



"Henry sent for me. He said Uncle John was—"

"Your Uncle John is a hypochondriac. He took to his bed when he lost his job five years ago, and he's stayed there ever since. He isn't the only one who lost his goat to the depression. But that's all that's the matter with him. He just couldn't take it—"

Mavis stiffened visibly. She turned a cool and wilting eye on Jed's profile.

"Let me out, please." She spoke frigidly. "Uncle John happens to be related to me, but that's no reason why he should ever be kin to you, you know."

"Listen, Mavis." Jed never took his eyes from the road. His voice was hard. "There's something diabolical, horrible in this town. These murders are—fiendish. I wrote you not to come, begged you not to. And yet you came, just because your kin want you to come—and they're your heirs, you know."

"Stop this car!" She cried furiously. "I won't listen any more—"

Jed reached out a hand and forced her down in her seat. Still he did not look at her.

"Mavis, you've *got* to listen!" he said urgently. "I'm taking you to your own house. I'm putting you inside your own door. And I'm hanging around till you go back to school. You promised to marry me, you know, right after graduation. And I'm holding you to your word because I love you—and I know you love me."

"I'm scared, Mavis. I get cold chills and nightmares every time I think of anything happening to you—" He turned and faced her squarely. His jaw set hard. "And nothing you say or do is going to deter me—or make me mad. I'm *going* to look after you!"

She did not speak. Her blue eyes were still mutinous, the line of her mouth rebellious, but it was plain that some part

of Jed's fear for her, some part of the horror in his soul, had awakened uneasiness in her.

"I didn't see anything about this at school," she said slowly. They had left the town now, were moving swiftly along the narrow, tree-bordered, country road. "And they must have intercepted your letter. You know what a *proper* place it is. . . . But this paper says the indentifications weren't—positive—"

"There wasn't enough left to identify," Jed interrupted grimly, "but five girls from shanty town are missing!" He went into low gear suddenly and sounded a raucous blast on the horn. They were rounding a sharp turn in the road where the way was narrow and thickly set with trees; a bit slippery, too, from water backed up from the neighboring swamp. Jed hoped grimly he would not encounter another log across the road. "This is a blamed bad business, Mavis!"

And it was then that he first noticed the anguished howling of the dog.

IT WAS a weird and mournful wailing, coming from somewhere among the trees on the right. A dirge-like, eerie keening, like the cry of a banshee! It made the hair bristle on the back of Jed's neck.

He stopped the car, climbed out from under the wheel. His face was white and resolute. But Mavis reached over and clutched his arm.

"You're not leaving me here, Jed," she cried, the beginnings of hysteria in her shaken voice. "You can't do it. I won't let you. Here you've got me all worked up over those murders, and then you—And that dog may be mad—"

"A mad dog is the very least of what I'm thinking of," Jed answered. "But I'm going to find out what *is* the trouble. I've got a gun handy," he added coolly. Again the written words of the grisly warning, the hideously disguised forms of his



attackers danced before his wide eyes.

Mavis landed in the slippery ooze of the road beside him. Her hands dug deep into his arm.

"I'm going, too," she gasped. "I wouldn't wait in that car—after all you've been saying—"

"Come on then. Don't blame me if you see something you'll never be able to forget. But I can't pass this up. I can't. We've got to track down those fiends—"

He stopped with a gulp. He had happened to look upward, and Mavis followed his glance. High above the road, black against the clear blue of the late afternoon sky, a lone buzzard wheeled and circled. . . .

It was dusky and still in the woods. The great boles of the live oaks loomed grey and grim as ghosts, their dangling festoons of moss as still as death in the windless air. The fallen leaves sank treacherously under their feet into the spongy, sodden earth. No birds sang. From some spot invisible to them the frenzied, horror-maddened dog howled and howled.

They caught sight of him presently and crept toward him on cautious, reluctant feet. A half bred bloodhound it was, his mournful, wrinkled visage uplifted as he gave his awful summons to the air.

"You stay here, Mavis," Jed whispered shakily. For he had seen something; a waiting cluster of loathsome scavengers in the upper limbs of the tree nearest the dog.

But Mavis would not loose her hold on his arm. Her face was drained of color. Her trembling legs scarcely had strength to hold her up.

"It's the Carpenter dog," she chattered fearfully. "The pup Mollie wouldn't let them drown. Oh, if anything has happened to—Mollie—"

But when they reached the thing on the ground they couldn't tell. There was

nothing there but bones—bones smeared with clotted blood, with grisly shreds of flesh—just a heap of bones. Yet they were arranged in a rough semblance of human pattern, as if by the hands of some creature possessed of a fair knowledge of human anatomy—and of grim, macabre humor.

Mavis turned her back. She was very sick.

Jed carried her to the waiting car. The hound had not seemed to see them at all. Not for a moment had he ceased his vigil, nothing had disturbed the even rhythm of his mournful howls.

"Your 'phone is as near as any," Jed muttered as he started the car. "And I've got to get you home." He was quiet a long minute, thinking. Then—"That couldn't be Mollie Carpenter. Her folks sent her away several days ago."

Mavis said nothing. Then the car thundered over the wooden bridge that spanned the bayou. Woodsbridge Plantation was just before her. The dreary, huge old house loomed eerily white through the trees.

A colored girl opened the door. Her complete surprise at the sight of Mavis caught even Jed's bemused attention. A quick suspicion sprang to life in his mind.

"Didn't you know Miss Mavis was coming?" he demanded.

Lina shook her woolly head vigorously.

"No, *suh*, Mist' Jed. Ain't nobody lookin' fuh Miss Mavis. No, *suh*. Her room done shet up tight, jest like she lef' hit. Dey ain't nobody—"

"So," Jed muttered harshly under his breath. "If I hadn't been at the station—what then?"

Mavis lifted her white, strained face.

"I don't understand," she wailed. "Henry wrote me—"

"Eh, what—Henry?" A man's figure materialized from the shadows of the hall. "What's this, Mavis? Where have you



dropped from? A darned poor time to descend on the family mansion, if you ask me!"

"You sent for her!" Jed flung the accusation at him bluntly. "And I want to know why!"

"Not guilty, your honor!" Dr. Henry Earle was beside them now, a tall, thin man, stoop-shouldered and pale. He had black hair and black eyes, and slender, nervous hands. "I did *not* send for Mavis, Jed." His voice was high and fluttering. "And if I have anything to do with it, she'll get out of here on the next train."

"But—but—it was your handwriting, Henry," Mavis faltered.

"Forged then," crisply. "Better stay with us, tonight, Jed. If somebody wants Mavis here—well, there's no use mincing matters—it wouldn't be for any good!"

**J**ED eyed this cousin of Mavis with suspicion and distaste. He had never liked Henry Earle, even in childhood, and of late years the young doctor had acquired a reputation for queer experiments and strange, sometimes miraculous-seeming cures. And he kept a foreign laboratory assistant of whom queer things were whispered. And now Mavis was saying that Henry had called her home—and Henry was denying the charge. Between the two, Jed did not hesitate. He accepted Mavis's word without reservation. But something else had to be attended to first.

"There's been another murder," he muttered. "I've got to 'phone the sheriff."

When he turned from the telephone Mavis had gone to her room. He went to find Henry again. The doctor was in the big, lamplighted front parlor. His long, narrow face looked very grim in the yellow light.

"Who's killed now?" he demanded.

Jed shook his head in bewilderment. Without sparing the details he described

what he and Mavis had seen; and the attack upon himself in the afternoon.

"A grisly mess." Henry Earle nodded thoughtfully. "I saw the other five. They had me in at the inquest. But that couldn't have been Mollie Carpenter. She isn't home, thank God. Maybe you haven't paid much attention to neighborhood gossip, and of course it isn't announced yet, but Mollie and I are planning to marry in the fall."

"Mighty glad for you," Jed murmured awkwardly. "Mollie's the best ever. I—I admit I was worried when I saw her dog—even though I knew she was away. That dog seemed so—so—grief stricken—"

"Oh, that dog would have howled over anybody, I imagine, under such gruesome circumstances. Queer animals, dogs. Psychic, and all that, you know. Able to see things we can't. I've always been mightily interested in—things of that sort. But you never would listen—"

"A man would be willing to listen to anything just now," Jed countered. His suspicion of Henry Earle had not lessened. Why not let him talk, and, possibly, betray himself or at least let slip some clue that might be followed? "If you've got any theory, I wish you'd spill it."

"I haven't any theory, exactly." Henry dug a package of cigarettes out of his pocket and they lighted up. "There's just one thing—You know this whole South Texas country is greasy with oil. Right here in this particular locality, somehow, things have never come to a head—yet. But I've been noticing lately, while I've been driving around making my calls, one bunch after another of strange men snooping about. And I know I've seen those same strangers in the bank. Probably the man you shot was one of them. I've been wondering a bit about old man Hayes, our tight-fisted bank president. Reckon he wants to scare everybody out of here,



buy up our property for a song and then clean up on oil leases?"

"Looks pretty thin to me," Jed snorted. "Anybody tried to buy this place yet?"

"Lord, no. Nobody wants this dump. Next door to the swamp the way it is, run down, hardly paying its taxes. No, we've been trying to sell it ever since grandfather died, but it still belongs to Mavis and Uncle John and me. I suppose when I marry I'll have to bring Mollie here. I don't want to, though. I always did hate the dam' place. . . . Give anything if I could sell my share of it."

Jed jerked about at the sound of a foot-fall. A woman was standing in the doorway. It was Miss Emmons, the housekeeper, a dowdy, over-plump, short-statured woman. She was very commonplace except for the pitted scars—the result of some past beauty treatment gone wrong—that disfigured her face and neck and hands.

"You're wanted at the telephone, Mr. Hammond," she said in a deeply resonant, carefully modulated voice.

Jed went hurriedly to the telephone under the back stairs. The sheriff's voice greeted him.

"The posse's to meet in the courthouse square at eight o'clock," he announced curtly. "Be sure to be on time an' come heeled. We gotta do somethin' about this business. Can you keep your tongue between your teeth, by any chance?"

"I think so," Jed told him.

"Well—see that you do!"—tersely. "That was Mollie Carpenter that you found, Jed, what there was left of her. We've been doin' a lotta phonin', an' we found out it was Henry Earle's telegram that brought her home. Try to pump him, Jed, but don't let on what you know."

The 'phone clicked. Jed hung up the receiver in a daze of horror. He had known Mollie Carpenter ever since he could remember, a grand girl and Mavis'

best friend. So Henry Earle had lured her home just as he had lured Mavis. That meant that the same fate that had met Mollie was waiting for Mavis too. And Mavis was right here in the same house with Henry Earle. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Silent House of Terror*

SHE was standing in the parlor door when he went back. She hadn't gone in to see her Uncle John yet, she told him, and wanted him to go with her. He went, only too anxious to keep her in sight. But the thought of her relatives fairly nauseated him. Was old John Earle in the plot with his nephew to murder Mavis? The old man owned nothing, Jed remembered, except a third interest in the plantation. Henry supported himself by his profession. Mavis had inherited a good income from her mother. Together they kept up the place and bore the small burden of their uncle's support.

But if Mavis were put out of the way each of the men would come in for a worthwhile amount of money. Jed had literally a bitter taste in his mouth as he followed Mavis into John Earle's room.

John Earle was propped up in bed. He looked very feeble, very venerable, in his dark silk dressing gown. Miss Emmons stood beside the bed, lifting his supper tray in her scarred hands. Jed looked away from her quickly, with an inward shiver of disgust at her awful disfigurement. Yet he pitied her, too. Poor thing, to make so desperate a try for beauty, and to be made so revoltingly hideous for her pains!

And then his eyes fell to the papers spread over the old man's knees. Local maps and blue prints they were, oil company prospectuses, papers covered with figures. He looked up quickly, caught the



light of almost fanatic fire in John Earle's eyes.

"Riches," the old man murmured with unctious. "Riches at last. They're going to strike oil, and we can sell this place for a million dollars, and then—Palm Beach or the Mediterranean—the best doctors and trained nurses—mineral baths—the happiness that cures—"

"Who says so?" Jed asked him, breaking heartlessly in on the old man's dream. "Who's talking about oil?"

"My good friend Simon Hayes, at the bank,"—with dignity. "He's going to let me in on the ground floor, because of old friendship, and that includes my kin, of course. We'll all be rich—*rich*—soon! But it isn't to be talked about yet, of course. It's all in the family, you know," he added, with a benign smile.

Jed went out with Mavis, more bewildered than ever. Was Hayes really involved in some oil scheme, or were Henry and John Earle in league to make Jed think he was?

Supper was a dreary meal. Jed and Mavis were too much worried to talk, and colored Lina, who waited on the table, added to their depression by her visible terror. But Henry Earle was in a conversational mood, and Jed, remembering the sheriff's injunction, encouraged him in it.

Mostly he talked of his laboratory assistant, Manio, a college bred one-time native of the South American jungles. They had been performing some important experiments, he declared, some things that would make the world sit up and listen when they were ready to talk. Those South Americans had some queer knowledge, were able to do queer things. If he could ever get Manio really to open up and tell what he knew—

Jed begged Mavis to go back to town with him after supper, and Henry, much to Jed's surprise, joined in his plea. But

the girl was adamant. She was jittery with terror, but felt that she was as safe at home as she could be anywhere else in that community.

"Well," the doctor said with a shrug, "it's a goshawful lonesome place out here, and I can't stay with you. Got a maternity case I've got to get back to. I wish we could ship you out tonight, though."

"Mine's an upstairs room, and there are bolts on the door and 'he windows," Mavis said, "and I'll make Lina stay with me. She's a good girl, Lina."

Jed and Henry left, each in his own car. Jed maneuvered it so that he followed Henry into town. . . .

It was a grim-faced group of men who met that night in the sheriff's office. A group who ached to do something violent. Henry Earle's name came up frequently. The sheriff was hard put to it to hold them down.

"Give him rope," the lawman insisted. "If he's guilty he'll show it in time. An' ain't we guardin' the roads? He can't get away—"

"Who but a doctor would *want* to cut up a woman like that?" shouted an angry planter. "It turned my stomach just to look at it, but doctors *like* to carve up people. It's the way they learn—"

But the sheriff prevailed. The men went out, still grumbling, to their endless patrolling of the roads. Not till after they had left did Jed tell the sheriff of Henry's summoning letter to Mavis.

"Got her an' Mollie both here, huh?" the sheriff grunted. "It does look bad. He wouldn't serve on the posse, neither. An' you can't force a doctor on, you know, account of his practice. An' you say you want a guard for Mavis?"

"I've got to have one," Jed declared positively. "She'll leave tomorrow, but tonight— Send somebody right out, will you, Sheriff? I'm going out there later, but my kid brother and I are still work-



ing on that clue I told you about, so I want to run out home—”

“All right. I’ll send Tad Robins out to Woodsbridge. He’s my chief deputy, an’ a crack shot. He’d likely enjoy a job of knight-errantin’.”

JED burned the road out to his own place, where he and his brother Tim lived alone with the servants. A wide spreading cotton plantation it was, well kept up, with a towering radio aerial beside the house. Jed hurried up to Tim’s radio room, a big disorderly place, crammed with apparatus.

Tim Hammond was younger than Jed, a wiry youth, and full of energy. He was sending when Jed entered, but he cut it short, jerking the ear ’phones from his head as he rose.

“That same message came again, just a little while ago,” he said jubilantly. His voice changed as Jed stepped into the circle of lamplight. “What’s up?”

“They got Mollie Carpenter,” Jed told him quietly. “And Mavis came home from school—today.”

“Good lord,” whispered the boy. “Mollie! The first one of our girls—You still got that warning, Jed?”

Jed laid the dirty slip of paper on the table.

“It’s plain you’re getting warm, Tim. They know you’re after them—as I told you this morning when we found this under the door.”

He hesitated a moment, then decided to say nothing of the attack on himself.

“I *am* getting warm. In fact I’m burning up. They know I’m getting that call, or they wouldn’t have sent us a copy of it. They must know, too, that I’ve been sleuthing with my radio compass every night. I reckon I’ve tried it out twenty times from every point of the compass. And there isn’t any doubt about it any

more—that call’s coming from the swamp!”

“But it couldn’t! Nobody could live out there. Not enough water to float a boat except during high water, and it’s too miry and treacherous to wade through—”

Tim shook his head stubbornly.

“No. You’re wrong. I’ve been inquiring among the old folks. It seems there used to be a secret trail—folks called it ‘The Blacks’ Causeway’ because runaway slaves used to use it. They had a hideout somewhere in the swamp. That much is certain. Maybe the niggers around here still know where it is. You know white men never go out there except when the water’s deep enough for boats—”

“Maybe,” Jed grunted. “What are you going to do tonight? I’ve got to get back to Woodsbridge. I don’t trust anybody out there to look after Mavis.”

“I’m going back to the swamp to see what I can see. I tell you, there’s some connection—”

He picked up the slip of paper again, looked at it closely.

“‘Dagon’s dolls’—what the devil . . . . Dagon was a water god, though, like a merman, half man and half fish—‘black, peaceful waters’—maybe the swamp. ‘The Little Ones prance, and the Great One kneels’—and that word ‘sacrifice’—Yes, I’m going out there again, Jed. It’s our best bet.”

Jed leaned low over the wheel as his car fairly leaped along the road toward Woodsbridge. He fully expected another attack, for he had no doubt now that both he and Tim were marked for slaughter by the same beasts who had killed and mangled Mollie Carpenter and all the other victims. He kept his gun handy, but what he really feared was another trap for his car, one that would finish him neatly without danger to his attackers. Yet he pushed his engine to the utmost. He had to get back to Mavis.



Few lights showed in town as he drove swiftly through. Most of the citizens, he reflected grimly, were cowering behind barred doors and shuttered windows. Only the brick bank building was brightly lighted. The banker stood fully revealed in the entrance. The three men with him were strangers to Jed, and his mouth set hard as he remembered Henry Earle's veiled accusations and John Earle's dreams of wealth. It was certainly unusual, to say the least, for the bank to be open so late.

With every turn of the wheels Jed's uneasiness mounted. He began to curse himself for ever having left Mavis at all. The few country houses he passed were black as ink. The sky was overcast by many scudding clouds. Moonlight broke through at long intervals, making the night actually more eerie than if there had been no moon. The woods where he had found what was left of Mollie Carpenter were broodingly silent now, and hideously suggestive of hidden horrors.

The boards echoed hollowly as he spun across the bridge. The white plantation house loomed vaguely through the murky light of the half hidden moon. Jed swore silently at the sight of it. Why were there no lights burning—anywhere?

He stopped the car at the door. The stilling of the engine had brought a silence that struck his eardrums like a blow. Terror for Mavis tore at him. He plunged up the steps and began to pound frantically on the closed door.

No one answered. There was no sound at all, not even a whippoorwill's cry, or the croak of a frog from the marsh. Silence. Complete and ghastly silence that fairly reeked of death. Where was Tad Robins, whom the sheriff had sent out here?

Jed ran back to the car like a crazy man, got a heavy wrench, began to pound on the shutter of one of the long French windows that flanked the door. The old

wood splintered. He smashed the glass behind it and surged through.

Inside was inky blackness. He did not wait to find a lamp, but groped his way to the stairs and ran up. At the top of the steps he tripped over something bulky, saved himself from a headlong fall only by catching at the newel post. With terror in his soul he struck a match and looked at the thing he had stumbled over. As he had known it would be, it was a dead body. But it was not Mavis. It was old John Earle.

His throat was slit from ear to ear.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Dagon's Crimson Shrine*

JED gave him but one horrified glance. There was no room in his mind then for pity or regret or any feeling at all except a consuming fear for the girl he loved. He shouted her name, over and over, but she did not answer. Was she, too, lying somewhere in a pool of blood?

He did not know which of the dozen rooms up here belonged to Mavis. And his supply of matches was scanty. He lunged at the nearest door in the darkness, and, finding it locked, broke it down. He found a lamp there and lighted it. A glance told him it was Henry Earle's room.

A coat of the doctor's was thrown across a chair. Medical books filled a large case between the east windows. But what brought Jed up with a gasp of horror was an amateur radio broadcasting set beside the doctor's bed. Henry Earle had never mentioned such an interest to him. When had he taken it up—and why?

Jed moved closer. Beside the receiver on the table lay a prescription pad on which was inscribed that familiar jumble of words:

"The eerie melody floats in lamenting chords out over the peaceful black water ;



the Dolls of Dagon sit on their golden thrones; the Little Ones prance and the Great One kneels; and they that sacrifice to Dagon shall prevail."

Beside the cryptic message was a neat pile of maps and oil prospectuses similar to those that had belonged to John Earle—might indeed be the same ones.

Jed stood still a while with hot eyes glaring at that meaningless message, those damaging documents. All his previous suspicions of Henry Earle assailed him in full force. John Earle was dead. Had Henry killed him, and Mavis, and, possibly, Tad Robins? Jed snatched up the lamp and blundered with it into room after room. All were empty. Mavis's room, when he found it, showed no sign of violence. The bed was undisturbed. Her clothes, her bags, were neatly stowed in the closet. She must have left the room of her own will. Yet she had promised him to remain in it—

Frantically Jed ran up to the attic and searched it thoroughly. He went down to the first floor and searched more—also in vain. There was no cellar. And even the negro cabins were empty. All but one. He found the body of old black Mandy, the cook, in that. She still clutched tightly in one stiffening hand her "cunjur bag," and her throat, like John Earle's, was slashed completely across.

There was no sign of anybody else. Mavis was gone. So was Lina, the colored housemaid, and the rest of the servants, and Miss Emmons, the housekeeper, and Tad Robins, and—Henry Earle.

Jed went back to his car at last. He headed for the camp. Tim was out there somewhere, and Tim was convinced that the message was sent from the swamp, and was tied up in some way with those grisly murders. Maybe he could find Tim out there—and maybe, together, they could find Mavis. At any rate the swamp was the only place he could think of

where those devils' hiding place could be.

He stopped his car at the edge of the oozy marshland. The moon was completely obscured then, and the shallow water showed but the faintest gleam in the dimness. He had cut out his lights. For a moment he sat there motionless, appalled and horror struck by his feeling of complete helplessness, of absolute despair. Which way could he turn? The swamp covered many acres. No man dared try to wade through it. He would die, most certainly. And the water was too low now to float a boat.

"The Blacks' Causeway," Tim had said. Yes, Jed remembered hearing something of it back in his childhood. But surely no black now living knew the secret trail that led to it. And the colored folk couldn't be responsible for these crimes anyway. They killed in the heat of turbulent passions sometimes, of course, but what black was ever known to strip the meat from the bones of his victims? It took a white man, or an Indian, Jed reflected grimly, to do that.

But—Henry Earle was a surgeon—accustomed to carving human flesh . . .

Somewhere in front of him, across the face of the faintly gleaming water, Jed saw a shadow move. His head jerked up, his blood ran cold, as he looked. *Something in the shape of a man was walking on the water.*

The figure was too far away, too dimly revealed by the pale light, for Jed to recognize it. But he was certain it was a man. And whatever another man could do, he could do. He slipped out from under the wheel and, taking advantage of the shelter afforded by reeds and grasses that grew along the edge of the marsh, he made his way to a point in line with the direction in which the figure was moving.

But it was not to be as simple as that. At his first step the ooze sucked his leg down to the knee. It required every ounce



of his strength to lift it out. That narrow escape taught him caution. He found a stick and with it probed the ooze for several yards along the margin. And at last it touched solid rock, a stepping stone. And there were others. . . .

THE figure he had first sighted disappeared. The moon remained obscured. Jed fought for footing on the slimy stones, his feet sloshing through the chill, foul water, his mind in a turmoil of anguish.

After what seemed an eternity of effort he caught sight of a tiny gleam of light ahead of him, and the figure of a man. There was something beyond him that he must explore. Perhaps Tim was somewhere near him. Perhaps even Mavis. . . .

He went on. And at last he saw that the light seemed to come through a crevice in a low mound before him.

Wearily, hopelessly, Jed dragged himself toward it and again caught the glint of light. He staggered on toward the chink through which the gleam was coming, and almost shouted aloud as his tired mind took in the astounding discovery he had made.

The light was filtering out around the edges of a loosely closed door in the side of the mound, a door that would, when shut, conceal an aperture large enough to admit the body of a man. There was a quantity of caulking material about, which meant, Jed reasoned, that it could be sealed in emergencies against the seepage of water.

Cautiously Jed dragged the door open and looked through into what was certainly a cavern, though from where he was he could see nothing but the roof and a sort of shelf just inside the door. Carefully he dragged himself in upon this shelf and pulled the door to behind him.

Lying on the ledge with only his head leaning over its rim, he could see almost the whole of the cavern. A precarious stair-

way made of notches cut in the side of the cave wall led down to the floor, which was many feet below him. A queer blue light filled the place, a light which seemed to eddy and foam through the cavern as water swirls about a rock. It hurt Jed's eyes and made it difficult to see plainly, as all objects seen through it were strangely distorted and foreshortened. Shadows became weird tongues of darkness that flickered and changed shape constantly, darted here and there like wraiths. But Jed could see a tall tripod which supported a basin filled with bluish flame.

From a vent in this basin a band of intensely blinding rays played upon a niche in the cavern wall, and it was plain that the seething blue lights and shadows were the backwash from these rays. And, moving about in this strange, eerie light, were certain figures wearing robes and headdresses similar to those worn by his attackers of the afternoon.

And as he waited, uncertain what to do, he became aware of a thudding sound which seemed to come from very far underground—the muted, toneless throbbing of a drum. And in that selfsame moment the blue lights flashed out. The cavern was plunged into a murky dimness relieved only by a few torches whose yellow flames leaped and ebbed and leaped again. Jed saw one of the robed figures go into the niche which had withstood the flood of bluish light and come out with something in one high-held hand.

"Behold! Another of Dagon's Dolls!" the figure cried, in a high, wild, *woman's* voice. "The Dolls of Dagon sit on their golden thrones! Light up their shrine!"

Three figures came slowly out of the darkness carrying black nine-branched candelabra set with candles of the color of the new-shed blood. These they set on a high table against the wall. As the clear candlelight fell upon this table it revealed five tiny dolls seated in tiny gilded chairs,



And now the robed figure who had spoken came forward and set another gilt chair on the table and placed upon it a doll similar to the others, the doll that had just come from the bath of deep blue light. And as Jed saw this sixth doll he drew in a deep, rasping breath of icy horror. The dolls were perfect female figures little more than a foot high. They were quite nude, *and the sixth doll wore the face of Mollie Carpenter!*

An icy sweat broke out over Jed's paralyzed body. A monstrous thought had taken possession of his mind. Hadn't Henry Earle talked a lot about the experiments he and his South American assistant, Manio, were making? And wasn't it a known fact that certain South American tribes knew how to remove the bones from a human body and shrink it? . . .

**H**ENRY Earle, a physician who had taken the oath of Hypocrates, a man sworn to relieve the suffering of his kind—debasement his talents to such ghouliness as this! And Mollie Carpenter a victim! Henry had said he was to marry her . . . And Henry had even traded on Mollie's love for him, her trust in him, to lure her to her doom!

Jed's sick soul asked him, where was Mavis—now?

In his absorption he had forgotten that the way by which he had come was still open, that there was an unlocked door behind him . . .

His first intimation of danger came when a wad of cotton soaked with chloroform was clamped over his nose and mouth by remorseless, incredibly powerful hands. He made a violent effort to resist, but it lasted only a moment. His body relaxed, his eyes shut, but not before he had caught a fleeting glimpse of Henry Earle's face, scowling into his own . . .

When he recovered consciousness the drums were still bellowing. The sop of

cotton was removed from his face, but he was gagged securely and his hands and feet were bound. He could still see what was going on below.

Lina, the colored maid at Woodsbridge, was crouching on hands and knees in the middle of the cavern floor. She was motionless, her eyes set and glassy as if hypnotized. Around her and around, in a changeless circle, scampered a herd of little black goats, kids apparently only a few months old, keeping time to the inhuman rhythm of the awful drums, the squealing of maddened fifes.

Ranged in a row against the farther wall, near the tall table where "the Dolls of Dagon sat on their golden thrones," stood the human figures Jed had seen before. They still wore their disguising robes adorned with cabalistic figures, their high, feathered headdresses. The one who had taken the pitiful shrunken remains of Mollie Carpenter from the niche of the blue fire, and who had spoken in that high feminine voice, stood in the center of the line. She was chanting what seemed to be some sort of invocation, but Jed could not understand the words. And he noticed for the first time, in a far corner of the cave, a towering statue of Dagon, god of the Philistines and of their kinsfolk the Phoenicians; a god half man and half fish, identical no doubt, in some far distant age, with Neptune, Poseidon, Triton, Proteus. But this statue of the ancient water god had hands that dripped with blood . . .

Was it Mavis's, Jed wondered, in anguish? And which of those gowned and bonneted fiends was Henry Earle?

And still the throb of drums, the cacophony of fifes and violins kept up the illusion of the jungle. Still the baby goats circled on their flying, clicking hoofs around the doomed mulatto girl till she was dazed and dumb and paralyzed.

And then a robed fiend with a cowed



white rooster held under one wide-sleeved arm, led in a full grown black goat.

The goat seemed to be well trained. It knelt in front of Lina and stared unwinking into her staring eyes.

The chanting woman, doubtless the high priestess of the cult, stepped forward to join the votary who held the rooster. Together they cut its throat, sprinkled the bloody drops on goat and girl. The drum beat, the chanting, the eerie music rose to a high, screaming, unbearable crescendo. Through Jed's throbbing head galloped the words of that radio message:

"The eerie melody floats in lamenting chords out over the peaceful black water; the Dolls of Dagon sit on their golden thrones; the Little Ones prance and the Great One kneels; and they that sacrifice to Dagon shall prevail."

As he watched, the priestess leaned over, swiftly and neatly slit the mulatto's throat. The body slumped, lay still in a horrid, widening pool of blood. The goat began to bleat in a mournful tone what Jed could have sworn was the old plantation melody: "Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fo' ter 'a'ay me home . . ." It was horribly, unendurably human . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Revolt in the Temple

THE robed figures lifted the lax body of the dead girl and bore it to a table. For some time they were busy with it. Jed knew what they were doing. Hadn't he seen that pile of bones which had once been Mollie Carpenter? Yet he was not prepared for the horror that finally affronted his eyes—the limber, boneless husk of Lina's body. In anguish he bit and chewed on his bloody gag, strained and tore at his bonds. Mavis! Mavis! Where was Mavis? Would her turn come next?

The ghouls placed the boneless body in

the niche whence had come the "Doll of Dagon" which wore Mollie's face. A portion of the blood was used to wash the idol Dagon's hands. The blue rays were turned upon the body. The blue lights and shadows began to foam and froth through the cavern once more. The oo-oo-oom-m, oo-oo-oom-m of the drums began.

The priestess uttered a cackling laugh.

"There will be another doll for Dagon soon. Bring forth the other one!"

The robed figures led in another girl.

It was Mavis.

Jed tried to cry out. He wrenched at his bonds. He writhed and squirmed on the ledge where he lay. His struggles were useless. Finally, exhausted, he lay there panting, his tormented eyes turned on Mavis as she stood there below him, fettered, her white satin pajamas torn by rough handling, and stained by the foul water of the swamp. The eerie light frothed over the straight tense beauty of her. Jed knew such agony then as he had never dreamed that man could bear—and live.

Slowly the she-fiend, the priestess of Dagon, came forward to confront the captive girl. With an impatient movement she cast from her her feathered bonnet, her ceremonial robe. She stood there, hideous to look at, her pitted scars revealed all too plainly by the scantiness of the short slip she wore—Miss Emmons, the housekeeper these past ten years, at Woodsbridge!

"Do you know what I am going to do with you?" she screamed, in a voice high and raucous with triumph.

Mavis looked at her. She held herself superbly, although, Jed was certain, she knew she was going to die.

"Why, you are going to do to me what you did to Lina, and to—Mollie"—Mavis said slowly, in the toneless voice of one who has witnessed so much horror, withstood such stress of terror that no sensation remains. "You will kill me, and fling my bones by the wayside somewhere, to



be a horror in the morning sun. And you will shrink my flesh into one of your—blasphemous—Dragon's Dolls—”

“Oh, no, not quite that—for you,” the Emmons woman shrieked, with a cackling laugh. “Not for you. I didn't call you back for that! It was good enough for Mollie Carpenter and those women of the slums I lured in here to experiment upon. But I have other uses for that exquisite face, that perfect body, of yours! What is the purpose, do you suppose, of all these experiments of mine?” she screamed. “You can see how hideous I am. But you can have no realization of the slow torturing crucifixion I have borne these forty years.

“Ugliness! Scorn! Contempt! And when I paid good money to a charlatan who promised me beauty, what did I get? Scars! These hideous, black-cored, red-rimmed pockmarks that make men shiver when they look at me! I am hideous—I who have loved beauty all my life—I who have worshipped beauty as the old Greeks worshipped it—I to whom beauty is an end in itself, an end for which any labor, any sacrifice is endurable. Beauty! Loveliness! Perfection! And now it shall be mine! For you, Mavis Earle, shall walk the earth despised by others and loathed by yourself—in my hideous body, and I shall live in yours!

“You took the man I wanted, didn't you, with your fair hair and your peach-blown face and your—what does he call them?—‘your eyes that are the blue of a tropic sea’—Ah, but he'll say that to me—to *me!*—tomorrow!

“And we'll have your money, Mavis, and your share of Woodsbridge. For they've located oil there, Mavis, and we'll be rich. And what will you have? Now that the tables are turned? You'll be Miss Emmons, old and despised and poor, without even a job! A great surgeon has helped me, Mavis, a man looked down upon and unappreciated here. He'll get his share of

wealth, of course, and all the others who have helped me will get theirs. But that's enough of that. I only wanted you to understand! I have had one disappointment, though. I wanted Jed Hammond taken captive so that I—in your body—could rescue him. That would have been the very cream of the jest. But never mind. He'll never know the meaning of the radio call I used to bring my helpers together, and perhaps it's just as well. He might have suspected . . . Get to work now.” She turned to the robed fiends behind her. “I've wasted time enough.”

SO, Jed realized in his sick soul, Henry Earle hadn't told the hellcat that he, Jed, was there—helpless. Which meant of a certainty that Henry meant to kill him. Perhaps Henry meant eventually to take Mavis's body and Mavis's fortune after the grisly play was over. Oil! So it was true then. Old John Earle had been right, and had his throat cut!

Jed had stopped fighting his bonds. They were so tight that by this time his limbs were numbed. He was totally exhausted, his mind a whirling mist of dizziness. His useless struggles, his agony over Mavis, his hopelessness, had made him a little mad. He was glad now that he was going to die. For surely Mavis would kill herself. How could she live—after tonight? And if they died—so near together—then surely they would find each other, somewhere, where they'd be free . . .

The fit of dizziness passed. Jed looked below again. They had forced Mavis to her hands and knees. And the Emmons woman was facing her in the same posture, garbed now in black goatskin, goat's horns set on her forehead, goat's hoofs on hands and feet. And, their tiny feet clicking on the stone floor, the baby goats were prancing into the light again.

And just then, quietly, without haste, two of the robed figures stepped out of line



to take part in the ritual—Jed supposed. But he was mistaken. For the pair turned to face their companions and opened fire.

The men attacked were taken completely by surprise. Two dropped, a third clutched his middle with both hands, screaming incoherently. The little goats, terrified, stampeded into them. Men and goats vanished into the shadows beyond the frothing light. But only for a moment. Then the men were back again—armed. Gunfire answered gunfire. The place became a shambles. Suddenly Jed saw that Mavis was up and running toward the notched footholds that led up to the ledge. Miss Emmons saw her, jerked off her impeding goat's hoofs and pursued. But one of the two rebels turned and fired. Miss Emmons came crashing down to the cavern floor, lay still.

Then Mavis was tugging at Jed's gag, his bonds; chafing his wrists and ankles, frantically trying to get his blood into circulation again, his numbed muscles into action. After what seemed an age they scrambled down to the cavern floor. A distorted pile of dead and dying lay there in a bloody heap. They were unmasked now, their robes torn and bloody. Some of the men were strangers, but Jed recognized Manio, Henry Earle's assistant, and, to his horrified amazement, Sheriff Brown, and Tad Robins, his chief deputy, and those members of the posse who had been loudest in their denunciations of Henry Earle. One man was standing, Tim Hammond, with a bleeding, dangling arm. And one man lay crumpled up on a bundle of goatskins—Henry Earle.

"It's rotten to shoot down unarmed men," Tim mumbled tonelessly, his young eyes dazed and sick, "but it was the only way. Two of us against so many . . . Henry's finished," he added simply.

Jed gazed somberly at the dying man.

"I thought you were guilty as hell," he told him. "Why did you tie me up?"

"Because I wanted to keep you out of it—for Mavis's sake," Henry answered calmly. "I'll talk as long as I can . . . they shot me in the middle and I've got mighty little time to explain . . . I'd suspected Manio a little but I wasn't sure. And he was infernally clever. And I heard about Mollie when I went to town after supper. I didn't want to live . . . after that. That's not play-acting histrionics . . . It's sober fact. And I'd been tracing those queer calls the same as Tim had. We met out here tonight, Tim and I, and made our plans—and then, you butted in. There wasn't time to explain we were afraid you'd spill the beans by attacking us. We didn't dare take the time to identify ourselves. So I tied you up. . . ."

"I feel like hell," Jed told him awkwardly, "because I distrusted you—"

"That's all right. Anybody . . . would. I'm going fast and glad . . . of it . . . Manio and the sheriff, and the prospectors from outside—" with a slight jerk of his lowered head at the pile of bodies, "and that Emmons hellcat, hatched it up. They wanted to scare everybody out of the county and grab the land . . . and with Uncle John and me butchered as they planned—" his voice was weakening—"and with Emmons in Mavis's skin . . . they'd have had all Woodsbridge among them and it's now worth an awful lot . . . No, I don't understand all this grisly business here. But Manio did. They . . . can do those things . . . In Hayti . . . and South America and places . . ."

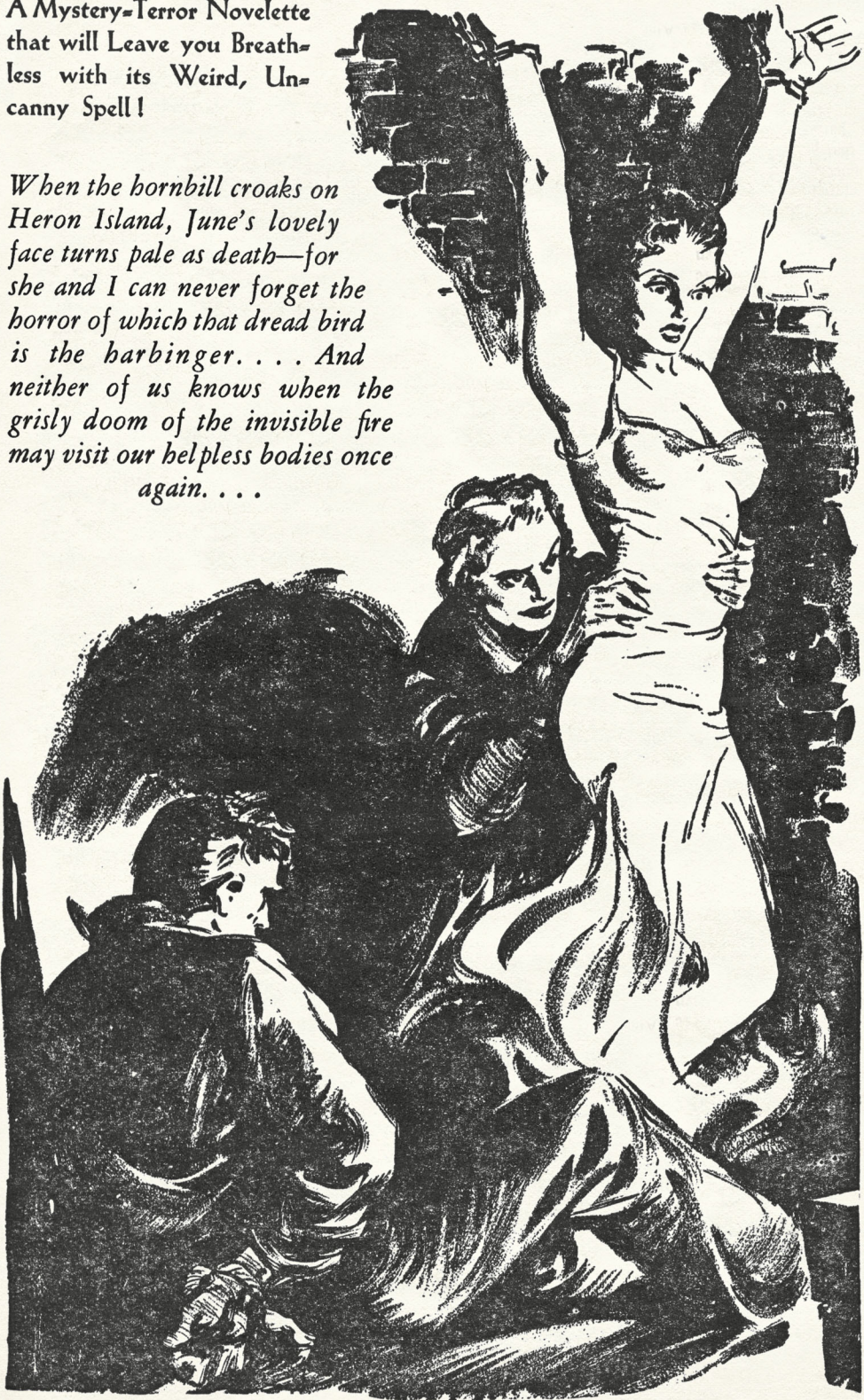
His head drooped lower. Slowly his body sank down upon the pile of goatskins, lay still.

"Let's go," Mavis whispered, a sob in her voice. "We've got to find—some other doctor—for Tim's arm."



A Mystery-Terror Novelette  
that will Leave you Breath-  
less with its Weird, Un-  
canny Spell!

*When the hornbill croaks on  
Heron Island, June's lovely  
face turns pale as death—for  
she and I can never forget the  
horror of which that dread bird  
is the harbinger. . . . And  
neither of us knows when the  
grisly doom of the invisible fire  
may visit our helpless bodies once  
again. . . .*





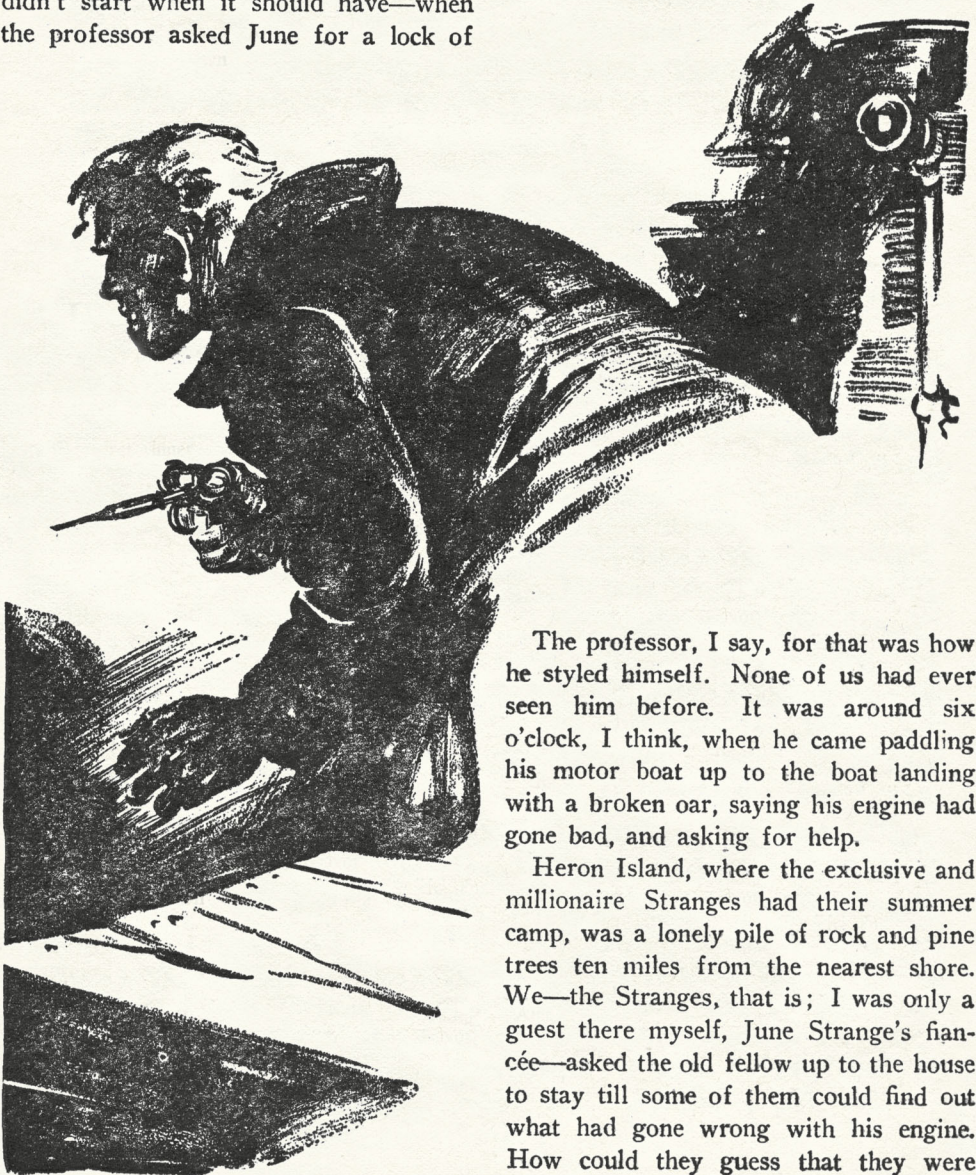
# PRINCE OF THE BLACK FIRE

By Francis James

(Author of "My Twin from Hell," etc.)

I'M NOT sure just when it was I began to feel the fear that we had all been enmeshed in a net of horrors, down there at the Stranges'. I know it didn't start when it should have—when the professor asked June for a lock of

her hair. I knew what he wanted it for, but I laughed with the rest of them. We all thought it was only a lark. A lark—God!



The professor, I say, for that was how he styled himself. None of us had ever seen him before. It was around six o'clock, I think, when he came paddling his motor boat up to the boat landing with a broken oar, saying his engine had gone bad, and asking for help.

Heron Island, where the exclusive and millionaire Stranges had their summer camp, was a lonely pile of rock and pine trees ten miles from the nearest shore. We—the Stranges, that is; I was only a guest there myself, June Strange's fiancée—asked the old fellow up to the house to stay till some of them could find out what had gone wrong with his engine. How could they guess that they were



inviting Death to their house party. . .

Right afterward, we went in to dinner. The stranger was a queer-looking old fellow, with a big, gaunt-boned frame on which his clothes hung as loosely as the rags on a scare-crow. He kept eyeing June—eyeing her in a way that started a slow, hot tide up the back of my neck.

But I wasn't afraid of him, not even later, when we were all sitting around, and he asked me to hold out my hand so that he could take off a paring of my fingernail with his scissors. I'd been on that island of Dobru that he had talked about, too; and I knew what he wanted that nail-paring for. He was getting some of my body-essence. It sounded fantastic, here in civilized America—his asking me for a piece of my body. . . .

During dinner, the professor—Oslow, he said his name was—had begun talking about his travels in the far East, and the subject of witchcraft came up. He had told some tall-sounding stories of the power of the native sorcerers to bring sickness and death on their enemies.

His stories had been received courteously enough, but of course, no one took them very seriously. I'd seen all that stuff done right there on the grounds, and I knew it was hokum. The witch-doctors couldn't do anything really—they got their results through secret murders and poisonings. . . . And then some one, Paul Strange, I think, had challenged the professor to prove what he claimed—to cast a spell or work a charm, or whatever he called it, on some one there.

Oslow had stared at him an instant and then said that he would—if they wouldn't hold him responsible for anything that happened.

Everyone was laughing as we got up and went into the big living room. All the Stranges were there, except half-crazy old Madam Gertrude, head of the

family. She had dined alone in her suite on the top floor, where she lived virtually in seclusion away from the kinfolk whom she hated as though they were poison.

**O**SLOW told us to sit in a circle. Then he asked for some ginger root from the kitchen. When it came, he put it into his mouth and started to chew it like tobacco.

I saw that, and for just an instant I felt a cold finger against my spine. I knew he was bluffing, nothing could happen here, but I'd been in New Guinea—as I say, I'd been right there on Dobru—and that ginger-chewing brought back the picture of some things I didn't want to remember. . . .

Oslow excused himself and went up to his room where his suitcase had been taken. When he came back he had thrown some strings of beads and others of feathers on over his clothes. He had painted his face scarlet and ringed his eyes with white circles. His chin and cheek bones were bright yellow.

I felt a flicker of excitement warm in me then. I estimated this old fellow as a plain faker, who hoped to impress us with some harmless hokum. But those vulture's feathers, and that paint told me that he was a *barau*, a master sorcerer, and that he meant business. At least, he was going to the trouble of making his performance authentic.

He started going around, collecting a little bit of something from every one there—fingernail parings, locks of their hair, butt ends of cigarettes they had smoked, handkerchiefs which they had used.

In front of me he stopped and wanted the trimming from my fingernail. I knew what the *baraus* did—what they claimed that they did—with things like that. Sickness and torture and death apparently the result of their spells—actually pro-



duced by secret druggings and poisonings. What did this fellow think he could do to us? Was he planning to go through with his mumbo-jumbo—and then injure us somehow? But that was ridiculous. I grinned in his face and gave him the nail paring.

And then he came to June and wanted a lock of her hair. I started to put out my hand to stop him—then I laughed and pulled it away again. Of course it was nonsense, but somehow the thought of his touching her had made my pulses skip a beat.

That finished Oslow's collecting. He'd completed the round of the circle, and he had all his little bits of stuff lying scrambled together on a piece of white paper.

He rolled up the paper into a crude cigarette. He put one end in his mouth, lighted the other, and drew smoke through it as the paper charred. When he was done, it had burned into a cinder, and it wasn't hard to fancy that its crumpled-up form resembled a miniature human body twisted and contorted after having been burned to a crisp. One after another, he pointed at us and pushed the thing into our faces.

"In this I have the essence of your bodies," he crooned. "I have burned them. So likewise I will make your bodies to burn, little by little and hour by hour till you are dead."

"Nonsense!" a voice scoffed.

Nonsense—of course! I don't know why I kept thinking of those black and fire-caked bodies of the Dobru men in the huts where they had died screaming. For I knew that those savages had really been killed with snake-poison. . .

**O** SLOW had started his incantation. He held a conch shell in one hand in front of his mouth, he crooned and he spat juice of the ginger he was chew-

ing into it as he talked. He stopped in front of Paul Strange and he chanted:

"Hornbill curser of  
Paul Strange on Heron Island:  
He burns, he burns. . . .  
He burns standing,  
He burns flying,  
He burns sitting down;  
He burns the face,  
He burns the lips,  
He sears the flesh;  
From the legs,  
From the feet,  
From the arms,  
From the belly—"

Paul stared at the man. He started to laugh. That gibberish was enough to make anyone laugh. The *barau* stamped his feet in rhythm with his crooning, he flourished the paper cinder into Paul's face.

He shifted his stance to bring him facing the next one in the circle. He went on with his chanting:

"Hornbill slayer of  
Martin Strange on Heron Island:  
He burns, he burns. . . .  
He burns standing, flying;  
He burns the throat,  
He burns the heart,  
He burns the hip,  
He burns the tongue;  
He burns crying,  
He burns crooning—"

Martin stared at him. His face was pale.

"Damn you, take that thing out of my face!" he yelled suddenly.

The professor spat into his shell and wheeled to the next one—Violet Strange.

"Hornbill slayer of  
Violet Strange on Heron Island:  
He burns, he burns. . . .  
She crouches bent over,



She crouches with hands on her  
breasts,  
She crouches with hands on her  
legs;  
Her skin—my skin;  
My shadow—her shadow.  
Woman nebogula—  
My vision deceives me—”

Violet covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

“Stop him! Take him away!” she moaned.

Oslow was working on around the line.

“I conceal away—  
They struggle back falteringly;  
They crouch with their heads in  
their arms;  
Their flesh is burned from their  
bones. . . .  
Wailing, shrieking,  
It flies hither;  
It flies thither—  
Your spirit, my spirit. . . .

At last the seance was over. Oslow tossed the paper fetish into the fireplace and put down his conch shell.

**A** DEEP sigh seemed to run around the room. People were stirring, laughing shakily.

“Well, thanks for the show,” a voice said. “But you’ve lost your bet, professor—no one has broken out with galloping chillblains—”

The speaker broke off and jerked his head around. Paul Strange, oldest of the brothers, had lurched to his feet. He stood staring down at his hand and his face was whiter than ice.

“Great God, look at that!” he exclaimed.

He held up the hand. Two fingers had turned black—black as charred meat.

“Snap out of it, Paul.” It was Sibyl Jocelyn, one of the week-end guests. “You just forgot to wash off the grease after you were trying to fix up his engine.”

Paul shook his head. He ran his tongue over his lips.

“No—I washed my hands. They were clean when I came in here. And it burns—my God, how it burns!”

There was dead silence for an instant then. Suddenly some one yelled:

“Where’s the professor?”

We looked, and he wasn’t there. He had slipped out of the room during the excitement.

We ran up stairs, we hunted the house over and then the grounds outside—and he had vanished like a leaf in a gale.

Back into the house we flocked, and we stood staring at one another.

“What is this, for God’s sake, what’s happening?” Martin Strange said shakily. “That faker didn’t come here by any accident. He came here on purpose to do this—”

Paul stood staring down at his hand. The others had drawn back from him in a ring of white, fear-frozen faces. His own relatives, shrinking away from him as though he were something unclean.

He muttered an oath. He pushed his way through them and stormed out of the room.

June looked up at me. She was shivering. She slipped her hand into mine, and the fingers were chill as ice.

“Dick! What—what is it?” she whispered. “What’s the matter with Paul?”

I put my arm around her and pulled her away. We went upstairs to her sitting room where no one would be likely to interrupt us. We sat down on a window seat. June lit a cigarette and tried to laugh.

“What was it, anyway—that blackness on Paul’s hands?” she said again. “Of course it couldn’t be the—the—anything that man did . . . And where did he go to?”

I said something. I don’t know what. I was trying to think, trying to be calm



and sensible, and my brain was jammed. Witchcraft—of course that was the bunk, there couldn't be anything in it. And yet *something* had happened to Paul! Blackness on his hand that wasn't engine grease, a sensation of burning. . . .

June had been under that spell, or whatever it was, too—the *barau* had burned a lock of her hair in his cigarette. If Paul's hand had turned black, hers could, too. . . .

I lunged to my feet and started to pace the floor. Great God, what was I doing? Was I beginning to take this nonsense seriously? But Oslo had got June's hair-lock—he could cause her hand to turn black—if he could do it to Paul's. . . .

I cursed myself for an idiot. Of course it couldn't be that—it was something else, something that had a sane explanation. But what? *Something* was going on here, something sinister, and dark, and unimaginably evil.

June lifted her head, she turned toward the open window and sniffed. I'd got that odor before. It was the smell of something burning, of charring flesh. Only once before in my life had I smelled that stench—when the wind had brought the fumes of Hindoo funeral ghats to my nose. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Death's Invisible Flames

**I** SAT there with June, I don't know how long—maybe an hour. I was trying to think, trying to make sense out of what had happened. There was no sense—it was sheer madness. I cursed under my breath, and I was cold with the terror of things too strange and damnable for words.

Suddenly we heard the sound of voices out in the hall. I got up, opened the door and saw a knot of figures clustered

around the door of Paul Strange's room. I shoved my way through them.

Paul was lying there on the bed, stripped to his undershirt. And the rest of the picture wasn't a pretty one.

The arm on which two fingers had turned black an hour before was jet as coal all the way to the shoulder. It was swollen and puffed with the fever that raged in it. Paul writhed and moaned in sheer torture, beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks.

No one was talking. There was a stark silence, a tenseness as though cold hands were clasped over our mouths.

Behind me, a woman screamed. It was fat little Helen West.

"What is it—Oh, what's happening here?" she sobbed. "I'm afraid—"

"God!" It was Martin Strange, gripping my arm. "That business downstairs couldn't have done this—it's damned lunacy to think of it. But something has set that man on fire. He's burning alive!"

"Doesn't matter what it is, we've got to get him ashore to a doctor," Harold Strange cried. "Snap into it."

"Let's get everyone out of here. And make it fast," I said. I was thinking of June. If I should see her start to turn black, if I should see that fire start to creep up the soft white arm that I loved. . . .

The Stranges kept three speed boats, enough to ferry us all off the island in one trip. But the boats weren't in sight when we got down to the wharf—not one of them. Only the mooring ropes, slanting down steeply from the places where they were tied, told the story. The boats had been caved in, sunk at their moorings.

Some one cursed. A girl started to cry. We were marooned on this pile of rock ten miles from anywhere—marooned here for what. . . .?

Violet Strange whimpered; she buried



her head on her brother Harold's shoulder and began to sob.

Behind her, another female voice suddenly rose in a scream. Laura West had dropped down on the wharf and started to tear off her shoes and stockings. She held up her foot. It was black—inky jet to the ankle.

I swung around to June.

"Darling," I whispered. "June, for God's sake—"

She smiled wanly and shook her head.

"No—I'm all right," she whispered.

"I want to get out of here—I've got to get out of here!" Helen Strange shrieked.

"Shut up!" her cousin Bill snapped at her. "You're all going bats over this. Of course that faker couldn't have done anything to us. It's something else—just a coincidence—"

Finally we gave it up and went back to the house. Paul was moaning and cursing in his room. Martin and I went in. His fingers stuck out from under the bandages they had put on the arm. I touched them. They were stiff and hard as iron—hooked claws of a hand already dead, burned crisp in a fire. . . . What fire. . . .?

I WENT back to my room and paced the floor. What in God's name was this all about? Sorcery? Still I told myself that such an idea was nonsense. There was a cause, a reason for everything. I told myself that, I clung to my sanity with both hands, so to speak—and those pictures of Dobru kept coming back. Dobru, where the *baraus* had done the same things that Oslow had done—had chanted the same incantations. Dobru—where I'd seen the man they had cursed slowly burned by invisible fire. But I knew that those savages hadn't died from any curse—they had been subtly poisoned. . . .

Down the hall I could hear Laura in hysterics in her room. Paul and Laura—

and June! June, with the threat of that blackness hovering over her. June, my darling, with that slow roasting turning the hands I loved to kiss into swart, claw-hooked dead things. Maybe already—maybe she was alone in her room now, with that horror. . . .

I couldn't sleep. I went out and roamed over the house. The lights were out—there was just a thin haze of moonglow seeping in through the windows. It was dead silent, tense and aching hush of poised horror.

And in that strained stillness I heard something that started the gooseflesh forming on my back—stealthy rustling of feet. *Swish, creak, swish*—some one was moving around, up and down, roaming the corridors. I slid back into a corner and listened to those noises coming and going, now louder, now fainter. Now louder yet—and down at the dim end of a long passage, a dark and slender form. A tall, thin-shouldered figure—a woman, under the dark robe that billowed around her.

She slid along furtive and sly as a ghost. She was heading toward June's room. I crept out of my corner and started after her. Something gleamed in the dark—the blade of a knife. She bared it and she hovered there in front of June's door.

I lunged a step forward and she must have heard me, for she whirled around and melted away. When I got there where she had been there was only the hazy darkness and silence.

I stood there peering around, and my brain swam in bewilderment. What was the idea of this—this second sort of terror loose in this place—as if the fire-death wasn't enough? Who was this woman prowling around like a witch in the dead of night? I thought of the old woman upstairs and I shivered. That half-crazy beldame stalking about the



house of the relatives whom she hated, with the blade of her knife a-thirst for their blood. . . .

Softly I tried June's door. It was locked. So if the knife-woman came back, she couldn't get in . . .

I went back to my room. I flung myself down on the bed and I tried to think; tried to reason it out—and my brain bogged down in the wilderness of contradictions.

At last I must have dozed off to sleep. I know that the last thing I remembered was that odor of burning meat, that stench of a cremating ghat, growing stronger. Reek of charring flesh, here in this house. . . .

**I**T WAS a scream that awakened me, the horror-charged shriek of a woman's voice. I came up off the bed on to my feet in one jump. It was June—June calling my name. . . .

Across the blackness of my room I charged, my hands outstretched in the dark, clawing for the knob of the door. I thought that I'd never find it—it seemed a lifetime before I finally felt the cold round thing under my fingers.

I twisted it and yanked the door wide. Out in the hall, the lights were blazing again, and there was another knot of forms around the door of Paul's room. June was there. She saw me and she ran and threw herself into my arms. She was barefoot, in her pajamas; and I remember that I looked at her feet and hands before I went on into Paul's room.

Paul lay there in his bed. I knew that it was he only because it couldn't have been anyone else. But there wasn't anything about his face that could have identified him. For it had been burned to a crisp. It was just a blackened skull with the charred remnants of skin stretched tight and flaking off over the cheek-bones and chin.

His body, too. . . . Charred to a black cinder and naked as when he was born—twisted and tangled in convulsions like the paper fetish that Oslow had waved in his face.

I whirled around and went out of the room and shut the door behind me. In another minute I'd have been sick in there.

We all went down to the living room and stood there in our pajamas and dressing gowns. We didn't speak; we were numb with the coldness of terror beyond words to describe . . .

I really don't know what went on the rest of that night. None of us went back to bed—we just sat there. Old Mata, the cook, showed up after a while with black coffee and sandwiches. We swallowed some of the coffee, but we couldn't eat.

After a while I left June there, went out and climbed three flights of stairs and knocked on the door of old Mrs. Strange's suite.

It was three o'clock in the morning. I knew I was the only one in the house who could get in there, now or any other time of the day or night. As I've said, the old dowager, titular head of the great family, lived almost invisible to the others; seldom or never appeared at table; carried on her life utterly apart from the crowd of relatives whom she hated.

I knew the story. . . . One of those grim family feuds where will is set against will, and jealousy and hate make blood-relations more cruel and vindictive toward one another than they would ever be toward strangers.

Old General Strange, the woman's husband, and founder of the family fortune, had left a will dividing the stock and control of the great automobile business among all the living members of the clan. The old lady bitterly resented this, as she thought that she should have had complete control. She had drawn apart



from the others and all but refused to meet them. Year after year she had cherished her grievances. And year by year she had grown more eccentric, more crochety and unreasonably. Year after year that strange wildness in her eyes had sharpened and glittered more noticeably. I had no doubt that she was going mad, though her grip on business details remained keen and unerring as ever.

I had done considerable law business for her—it was this way that I had met June, and of all those below stairs, I was the only one whom she was always glad to see.

Her personal maid, another wizened crone as queer looking as herself, opened the door about a quarter of an inch and peered at me over a steel chain. She saw who it was, and unfastened the door.

Three hours after midnight, old Gertrude Strange was still up and dressed. She sat straight as an arrow in her chair pulled up to a window where the sea breeze came in. She smiled, said hello, and motioned me to sit down.

"Paul is dead. He burned to death in his bed," I said without preamble. "Laura West's arms have turned black and fire is spreading over them. Some one has smashed the boats and we can't get away. Does that interest you?"

She squared her shoulders and tossed her white hair and looked out of the window without answering for a moment.

"There was fire on the moon last night," she said at last. "The hornbill croaked in the pine tree. I told Kathon—" the ancient maid—"that this was going to happen. The sins of my children and grandchildren are on fire within them."

That hit me between the eyes. The hornbill was the bird invoked to bring on the fire disease, the one that Oslow had called in his incantations!

I tried to draw her out, but I couldn't

get another word. I sat looking at her, measuring her with my eye. She was big as a man and strong, too. She could have been the one out in the hall with the knife. . . .

I left in a minute more, and the back of my neck was cold.

I WENT back downstairs. June stole up to me and said that she was going to bed. I walked up to her room with her. Outside her door, I said:

"June, darling—look at your feet—"

She kicked off her slippers and let me see for myself. Not yet, thank God—not yet. . . .

I muttered a prayer as I kissed her goodnight and saw her go in. Not yet. . . . But what difference would time make? If not now, perhaps in an hour. . . .

Outside in the hall, I stood thinking—trying to think, for my brain was sluggish with bewilderment of two terrors. Oslow had come here—he must have been hired by some one to come—to put the curse of the fire-death on us. . . . To do whatever hellish thing it was that he had done. The old woman upstairs could have hired him—she hated everyone in the house; she was half crazy; she had been dabbling in witchcraft. But that wasn't enough. She had had to go out with her knife, too—go out and prowl through the night, gloating at the doors of those whom she wanted to see dead. . . .

Not for one instant the rest of those hours till dawn did I go back to my room. Up and down the house I roamed, watched, and I listened. Not for more than a minute at a time did I go out of sight of June's door. I hid in the shadows at the corner of the hall, my eyes glued to the spot of light on the floor which that killer would have to cross to get to her, and every creak and murmur of the timbers and hoot of the wind brought me up with my heart hammering in my throat. . . .



The night watches crept past and daylight came, and nothing more happened. I went to my room for a little rest. I dropped off to sleep and it was noon when I wakened. Harold had just come down with the blackness and gone to bed. And Sibyl Jocelyn, too. . . .

The rest of the day dragged away. It must have been a dozen times during those hours that I got June on one side and asked her. And every time she would force her wan little smile and shake her head.

"Not yet," she'd whisper.

I'd draw a long breath and grip my hands. God help me, I didn't know whether or not she was telling the truth . . .

It was just four o'clock in the afternoon, I remember when I was downstairs and heard her calling me. Her voice was hoarse, horror-choked.

"Dick—Dick, where are you?" she wailed.

I went upstairs four steps at a time. Martin and Violet and old Mata the cook were there in the hall with her. She pulled me over to the door of Sibyl Jocelyn's room. I took a step over the threshold and halted. I stood there staring, and I could feel my blood freezing—freezing. . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Secret of Gertrude Strange

SIBYL lay there in bed, her arm, black over the shoulder, stretched out on the covers. And the rest of it was no prettier.

The girl was dead. There was a gaping hole in the front of her nightgown, and a red river of blood was still trickling down, soddening the sheer silken thing.

Even before my eyes fell on the frantically scrawled note that had been brushed off onto the floor, I understood. She couldn't wait for the fire to kill her,

she had killed herself. Done it with scissors. *Scissors!*

I turned away from the sight. I put my arm around June and drew her out into the hall.

Back to her own room I took her. I shut the door, I put my two hands on her shoulders and I could feel how she trembled. I drew her close to me.

"June," I whispered. "June, darling—"

She clung to me sobbing. We were young and in love, we had the whole world to live for—we didn't want to die. We were too young to die. . . . But we knew that death's hand was reaching out, and our turn would come. Our turn to make our choice between what had happened to Paul—and the way out that Sibyl had taken.

I crushed her in my arms. I couldn't let things happen to her. Great God, I had to do *something*. But what could I do? How could any mortal grapple with these unseen things?

In a few minutes I left her. I made her promise to stay in her room with the door locked. I went out and walked over the island, I strode up and down over rocks and through straggling pine woods and the bright sunshine and the crisp fall breeze seemed to mock at me.

Oslo—strangely he'd disappeared. And the boat that he'd come in was one that had been sunk. Which meant that he was still on the island. . . .

I went to work and I ransacked the place from top to bottom and end to end.

I had resolved that if I could get my hands on that devil, I'd torture him till he did a *lola*, a counter-charm, to undo the first one. . . . That shows how distracted I was—to have taken a thought like that seriously. . . .

I didn't really expect to find him—but I did. I poked my head into a cave in the piled-up boulders around the head of the north cove, and I saw his yellow dog-



face snarling out of the shadows. I didn't stop to see if he had a knife, I dove into the hole head foremost, I gripped him by the front of the shirt and dragged him into the open.

He started to scramble up to his feet, and I smashed him cold with a right to the chin. I tied his ankles and wrists with a pair of belts—mine and his—while he lay there unconscious.

And then I made my own preparations. I'd been on Dobru, I knew the lingo of their mumbo-jumbo. When he opened his eyes, he saw a driftwood fire blazing on the rocks. I was warming myself over it—a sorcerer has to be *hot* before he can cast a charm. That was why Oslow had chewed ginger. I didn't have any ginger, but the heat of the fire would do the same thing for me.

I was a white man and a college graduate, but I *believed* that! I was muttering to myself as I worked. . . .

I WAITED till I saw he was conscious and watching me like a snake, and then I opened my pocket knife and stooped over him. He cringed away, he screamed like an animal. He spat into my eyes, he grovelled and writhed over the rocks, trying to get out of my reach.

I smashed him in the mouth. I saw the blood spurt and felt his teeth cave in under my knuckles as I grabbed his hair and hacked off a lock of it.

I wrapped the lock up in a little bundle of sea weed. I put the bundle of weed on the fire. As it burned, I bent over him and I chanted:

"Eagle that sits on the pine tree  
of Heron Island:  
He burns, he burns. . . .  
He burns out your heart,  
He burns out your eyes,  
He burns out your belly;  
You scream for mercy;  
You gasp, you cry our horribly;

You cannot speak, you cannot  
breathe;  
Your brain is blazing;  
Your body is flaming from within—  
You turn to a cinder. . . ."

What was behind all that, I'll never know. Why I did it, why I *believed* in what I was doing—I'll never know that, either. For a few minutes, I was stark mad. I wasn't a civilized white man, I was a jungle *barau*, my soul was poison with hate and I summoned the black powers of the sorcerers from hell.

Round and round him I paced and I spat the words of the fire-curse into his eyes.

I went over to the fire, picked up some of the blazing sticks by the cold ends and piled them up on his stomach till I had another little fire going there. I piled the sticks in such a way that they wouldn't burn him badly until the cold ends became ignited.

"I'll spin you a white man's *puri* that won't need any feathers," I spat through my teeth. "I'll pile that blaze up on your guts and I'll roast them out of you unless you do two things—tell me who hired you to come here, and do a *lola* to take off the fire-curse that you planted."

He didn't answer. He writhed and threshed, and the hatred of hell raged in his eyes.

"Who is behind this? How did you do it? Will you do a *lola*—?"

I yelled—and then I stopped. For Oslow was dead. He had given one last convulsive surge and then dropped back limp, his jaw sagging.

I pushed back on my knees and I stared at him, and I was cold with the terror of such things as words can't express. I'd killed him—I *myself* had killed a man with a *puri*! For the fire couldn't have done it. It had been arranged in such a way that it couldn't have done more than



blister him a little—I'd been careful about that.

Great God in heaven! All along, deep in my heart, and in spite of appearances, I hadn't really believed in his magic. I'd told myself that it was something else—there was some sensible explanation for what was happening to us. But now I, myself, a rank amateur, had done it. I'd killed Oslow with a New Guinea curse.

I stumbled up to my feet and I stood there with my head spinning in circles. If I had done, it he could have done it. That spell—it could really be witchcraft that was killing them. . . .

I staggered around and went stumbling off into the rocks—and I battled with the horrors of on-coming madness. . . .

**B**Y AND by I went back to the house. The rest of them were all upstairs around Laura West's door. She lay in her bed with the blackness down half over her bosom. Blackness over-splashed with the tide of crimson that poured from the ragged hole under her breast. She had done it with scissors, too. . . .

No one was talking. People were pushing back from the door, staring at one another out of faces like sculptured chalk. Suddenly the creaking of footsteps behind us sounded loud as a gun shot.

It was old Mata padding up the stairs.

"Anna and Mary—" the other maids—"are yust run oot of de house. Dey say dey go and hide in de hut in de voods," she announced.

"How about you, Mata?" I asked her. "Aren't you afraid?"

Mata shrugged her big shoulders. Tall as a man, raw-boned and powerful, she didn't look as though she had a nerve in her body.

"I not fright. I stay," she said, and went back downstairs.

There wasn't anything I could do, the rest of them were shutting the door and

locking it. I took a turn down the hall. From a rear window I saw that old Madam Strange was out behind the house on one of her infrequent walks with Kathon, her servant. That meant that her apartment was empty.

I raced up the two flights of stairs, two at a time. Her door was locked, but the lock was an ancient contraption that I had no trouble in picking.

I spent maybe five minutes in there, and in a corner behind some books on her shelves I found a couple of volumes on sorcery with passages underscored—passages that contained the words of the incantations that Oslow had used. And wrapped in a paper beside the books, a cigarette of wilted green leaves in which were pieces of nail parings, locks of hair, cigarette stubs—all kinds of miscellany, each item of which must have been in contact with a person's body at one time or another.

So that was it. . . . The old lady had started reading about witchcraft, gone nuts on it, and then got the professor to come and cast the spell on the people she hated.

I put the things back where I had found them and went out of there, and my body was clammy under waves of gooseflesh.

The evening dragged past. Helen Strange came down with the blackness and went to bed. The air in the house was cold and death-laden as the breath of a tomb. Mata plugged away at her housework. It was too much for one. She called in Nils, the gardner, to help. Nils was another Norwegian, a little, stooped grey man. He wasn't stolid as Mata, I could see that he had imagination and he was frightened stiff. But he kept his mouth shut and carried on.

I haunted June's room. Her door was locked and I thought that she was asleep—but I didn't know. . . .



a shower. I sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off my shoes and socks. Then I froze and sat staring. My foot had turned blacker than coal.

I laughed crazily. My turn had come. The foot was on fire, it throbbed and burned, the nerves jumped as though little devils were jabbing hot tridents into it.

After a while, I dressed and went over to sit with June. I didn't tell her about my foot; but she looked in my eyes and she knew. I sat down on the bed and took her hand. She gripped it in her agony, and we sat there and waited. I remember I was wondering which sin would be greater—to let her lie there and burn up by inches, or bring back those scissors that I'd taken away. . . .

**S**UDDENLY June gripped my hand tighter.

"What was that?" she breathed.

There had been a lull in the sound of Harold's drunken ravings from down the hall, and then suddenly out of that death-charged hush a yell had rung. Once, twice—and then it croaked away in choked slobberings.

I rushed across to the door. In the hall, the lights were out, but a thin glow of radiance shone in from a window at the far end of the corridor. And across that luminous haze, a black shadow flitted briefly and then vanished. The same one that I'd seen before—slender, with dark, trailing garments flowing behind it—that I'd thought was the old lady.

I pushed open the door of Harold's room and slid my hand over the wall inside of the door for the light switch. The white blaze spot-lighted him there in his bed. His purple, drink-bloated face grinned at me above the crimson slash of his half-severed gullet. Not done with scissors this time—with a knife.

But there was no knife in sight, no sign of one anywhere in the room. . . .

I swung around back into the hall, and terror chilled my spine. Harold hadn't killed himself, he had been murdered. And so—those others, the two girls, who we thought had committed suicide—they had been slain, too. But why had they been killed with knives, when Paul had been burned to death. . . .

Ten seconds longer I stood staring at that ghastly thing on the bed, trying to think. I wheeled out of there and started racing up the back stairs to the old woman's suite. Now was my chance. . . .

I hammered on the door, and after a long time old Kathon unlocked it. I brushed her to one side and stormed across the living room and into the old lady's chamber. I snapped on the light and stood staring.

Gertrude Strange lay asleep in her bed. Really asleep—for when she roused up at last and glared at me, her face under the curling kids in her hair was the blowzed and wondering vacancy of an old woman jerked out of her dreams.

I mumbled something, went out and back down stairs again. I roamed the house, I tried to club my spinning brain and make it think.

I'd suspected the old woman, and I'd been wrong. Somebody else. . . In heaven's name, who? For in all this likeable and square-shooting family there wasn't one I could suspect.

Moreover, the knifing of Harold threw fresh confusion over everything. It began to look as though the fire-death was a bluff, that the victims were merely frightened with it and that the fiend who was doing this had really depended on his—or her—knife. Put the blackness on them and then killed them so as to make it look like suicide. . . .

But if they were, how about that hell's fire that was creeping up my leg and June's, how about Paul, who had been burned to death in his bed?



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But if they were, how about that hell's fire that was creeping up my leg and June's, how about Paul, who had been burned to death in his bed?



I didn't know, I cursed under the shadow of terror.

I wandered down the hall and into my own room, I'd feel better for a drink from my pocket flask. There was a square of white paper on top of the dresser. I picked it up and puckered my eyes at the words on it. I read it again, my fingers relaxed and the thing made thin whispering sounds as it fluttered between them to the floor.

The message had been patched together with words clipped from a newspaper. It said:

You saw Paul Strange die. June will die the same way, only slower, more horribly. If you want to save her life, there is a way. Kill the old woman. Kill Gertrude Strange and you will both be spared. The fire-death will be taken away.

I STOOD there and stared into space. My lips moved without sound. One thing I understood—why I had been

picked for this job. Up in her apartment, the old lady lived too barricaded behind lock and chains that the killers couldn't get at her. But I had an in to her whenever I wanted. I was the only one in the house who could go there—go in there as a friend *and then kill her!*

I stumbled out of my room and went over to June.

"Dick, Dick, darling, I want to die," she whispered. "I can't stand it any more—"

I groaned a curse and turned away. June, suffering like that, praying to die, and I could save her. I could save her by going up there to that old woman, already with one foot in the grave, and—

I didn't know whether I was devil or saint when I put that temptation behind me. My soul was torn with the terror of hell. Suppose I disobeyed that note and June killed herself or died of the fire, what price my clear conscience then. . . .

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Statement of ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of March 3, 1933, of Dime Mystery Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1936. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Dime Mystery Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Harry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1936. Edwin F. X. Silk, Notary Public, Bronx Co., No. 244, Reg. No. 76-S-37. Cert. filed in N. Y. Co. No. 183, Reg. No. 7-S-113. Cert. filed in Kings Co. No. 28, Reg. No. 7113. Cert. filed in Queens Co. No. 1400, Reg. No. 5851. (My commission expires March 30, 1937.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.



And another thing yet. Suppose she didn't kill herself—Sibyl and Laura and Harold hadn't either, they had been murdered, slain with knives. If I didn't do as the note said, June would be next . . .

For yet another night I watched over her. Not for an instant did I go out of sight of her door. And in the morning, I asked Martin, as he came down the hall, to send Nils to me.

In a few moments the gnome-like little Norwegian appeared. I told him what I'd discovered—that the knifings weren't suicides, there was a killer at work in the house.

"I want you to help me watch Miss June," I said. "Stay here outside her door if I have to go away, and don't let anyone—*anyone*—else into her room."

"I stay. I take care of her," Nils said.

I made sure that he had had breakfast and I left him there while Martin and I went back to work on the boat. All that day I was near-frantic under the shadow of doom. June—I'd left Nils to watch over her, but still I couldn't be sure. The killer could get past him. And daytime was no protection. Sibyl and Laura had been killed in the daytime. And Nils—*suppose he himself was the killer*. He might be, for all I knew. . . .

**WE** worked till dark on the boat. One more day would finish it. One more day—one more eternity . . .

After supper, Nils and I organized a patrol all over the house. We took turns searching it, hiding in corners, listening, while the other one stayed by June—and we drew blanks. Nothing was stirring. Finally I told Nils to go to bed and I went in to sit with her.

The fire was worse on her. At times she raved, she seemed out of her head. Maybe she was dying now, maybe she wouldn't last until morning . . . Perhaps these were our last hours of life—we'd have them together . . .

The full moon was up and I swung her bed around so that she could lie and look out at the white-maned horses riding the crests of the breakers. The house was full of snappings and creakings. A dozen times I started up in my chair with my heart kicking me in the throat. It would be only a blind slamming and I'd sink back again.

And then suddenly June started half up.

"What's that?" she breathed.

There was a calm spot in the wind and I heard it too. Some one was walking outside in the hall. Feet crept along in hushed scuffings, clothes scraped on the wall.

A ray of moonlight shone on the door and I could see the knob starting to turn. It twisted and the door commenced to swing open.

Back from June's side I slid. I gripped the chair in both hands and drew it after me as I oozed into a pocket of shadow.

Wider and wider the door opened. And right at that instant, a cloud must have crossed the moon, for what little light there had been faded away and the room was pitch dark.

I couldn't see a thing now, but I could hear. Some one was there in the room. A figure darker than the inky blackness was gliding in over the threshold.

My ears told me that, but where it was, still over there by the door, or closer, I couldn't tell. Shadows, drifting blots—were they figures moving toward June, or only my brain limning phantoms? Had they got over there to the bed, were they stooping over her now, and I didn't know?

Soundlessly I slid a step away from the corner to where I could feel the edge of the bed at my knee. I put one hand down and touched the sheet.

For an instant there was nothing. And then I still didn't see, didn't hear. But I felt a hand pulling at the other end of



that sheet. Starting to tug at it gently, twitching it inch by inch down toward the foot, pulling it off of June.

I didn't try to hold on to it, I let it go. I felt it sliding under my fingers, and shivers rolled on my spine. Some one was down there in the black gloom at the other end of the bed, some one who lived in the house, some one I knew, with a knife to plunge into June . . . .

And then something cracked in my skull. I couldn't wait to get my hands on that killer and find out who it was. I let out a yell, I whirled up the chair and I drove headlong with it, the legs jabbing straight out in front of me.

I felt those sharp ends of wood crunch into something soft, I heard a gasp of astonishment and pain. That voice—it was familiar, I'd heard it before, but whose it was I didn't know. But one thing I was sure of. *It was a woman's voice.* There was a muttered curse and then the scuff of running feet at the door.

I swung around back toward the bed. I opened my mouth to speak to June and the words froze there. For there was some one else in the room. I heard a whisper behind me, I started to spin around and I felt a weight leap on me from behind, felt iron hands knitting around my throat.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Cave of the Fire-Death

I CAME back out of the valley of death and the breaths I drew poured liquid fire over my lungs. I pushed myself up to sitting and I slumped there in a daze, feeling the welts and bleeding skin on my throat.

At last I whispered June's name. She didn't answer. On my hands and knees I crept across to the bed. I ran my hand over the sheets. Nothing. She wasn't there.

I shoved my aching and bleeding car-

pass up on to its feet. With hands to my chest and spitting foam, I lurched across to the door and out into the hall.

Footsteps were coming, out of sight down the hall. Then the lights went on. Two figures, Nils and Mata, their faces white, eyes bulging. Nils carried an oaken bludgeon in his hand.

"Mister Dick, what—" he started to say. I lunged toward him and I gripped him by the slack of the shirt front.

"Where have you been—where were you five minutes ago?" I yelled. I was thinking of that pair who'd attacked me. Two of them, a man and a woman—and the man had been built like Nils.

The little Norwegian's face went startled and pained.

"We—I was in bed," he said quietly. "I heard noises, I got up and came—"

"I was in bed, too," Mata said.

Nils read the unbelief on my face. Without a word, he stooped and rolled up his pants leg. That limb was blacker than coal as far up as I could see—black and swollen horribly. And now I saw the grippings of pain on the man's face, saw how he limped.

"I am yust de same," Mata said. "Look, Mister Dick—"

She lifted her skirts. I nodded and she dropped them back again. God! Merciful God!

"Miss June is gone," I muttered. "They've got her—"

"We will look. We will all go and look," Mata said.

I left them hunting in there and rushed out of the house. I raced up and down through the rocks, I called her name wildly. The cool wind blew on my tortured face and its crooning among the rocks were like voices, like June's voice screaming my name. I knew she was somewhere, she couldn't have gone off the island. In God's name, where? Where in all this



wilderness of darkness and rocks should I look for her . . .

At last I went back to the house. High and low through the great mansion I searched for her.

Out of that house I ran, fled from the devils of terror that thronged in it. Only one place I could think of to go—the little two-roomed cottage where Nils lived alone. He would be there and we would die together . . .

Dully I groped my way through the place toward the bathroom. My throat was killing me, I had to have water to drink. I switched on the light and swung open the door of the closet over the wash bowl, looking for a glass. I started to reach out my hand and the motion froze.

The thing that had stopped me half way was the label on a bottle that stood on one of the shelves. The label said:

#### NITRATE OF SILVER

For I don't know how long I stood staring at the colorless liquid in that bottle and I felt my blood freezing, drop by drop. I'd studied chemistry, I knew what effect that liquid has on the skin, how it will turn it black in a few moments, with no harmful effects whatever from the stain which wears off in a week or so. Silver nitrate, with which any one could turn his whole body black if he wanted to, and be none the worse . . .

So carried away was I with what I was thinking that I didn't hear the soft foot-fall behind me. I heard a swishing of air and then a blaze of scarlet sparks in my head as something crashed down on it and everything went black.

**I** CAME back gagging and coughing, some one had heaved a pail of water into my face. I was tied hand and foot, propped up against the wall in a corner.

My vision cleared and I saw that I was down in the cellar under Nils' cottage. Nils and Mata both standing watch-

ing me, the woman's yellow face blotched with lived-hued splashes of fury.

Over across, against the wall, another form, Gertrude Strange. They had crucified her—pegged her up to the boards with nails through her palms. Blood ran down her withered old arms, slowly she writhed with the torture.

Nils' wolf-jaws cracked in a grin, he stepped to one side. And then I saw June over there, too. She was hanging from hooks by chains which encircled her wrists. She saw my eyes open, saw me looking at her and she tried to smile.

"So it was you, was it?" I croaked at Nils. "You fooled us all, you dog—"

Crookedly the Norwegian laughed. He stepped toward me and slapped me across the face with the back of his hard hand.

"Yell. Shout and scream all you want to, Mister Dick Downing," he mocked. "Nobody iss going to hear you. Dey are all out in de rocks, hiding away from de fire-death—"

"Fire-death, hell!" I raged. "It was a bluff. You used that silver nitrate to make them turn black and think—"

"You are a fool," the man spat scornfully. "Think of that foot of yours, how it burns and throbs, how it iss swollen. Could your harmless little chemical have made it like that?"

Nils threw down his club and laughed again.

"Listen—I will tell you a story before you die. Ten years ago, I had a son—Mata and I had a son, she iss my wife. He was a fine, intelligent young man, a genius. He went to college and afterward he worked for this company, for de Strange automobile factory. He invented a new process for steel, a marvelously strong and light steel for autos and aeroplanes.

"Like a fool he showed it to Paul Strange. It was at night, in one of the laboratories at de works. They were alone



Paul killed him. He threw him into a blast furnace—alive he threw my son in there to be devoured by dat white hot melted steel. No trace of his body wass ever found, so a murder couldn't be proved . . .

"Paul took de paper on which de formula was written. Later, he sold it to his father, the General, claiming that he had got hold of it honestly, that the young man had sold it to him. The general bought it and he knew that his son lied, he knew that his son had murdered my son to get hold of the secret. With that invention he founded his fortune of millions. The Stranges all knew where their money had come from. They all knew that Paul was a murderer, that it could never be proved. That old woman, that white-haired old devil that I've got nailed to de wall, she knew it too—"

"No, Nils, no! I never knew it, I never heard it till this instant!" the old madam burst in. "And I know that no one else in the family ever knew either. My husband and I talked over the strange disappearance of the talented young engineer and we wondered—"

Nils whirled at her. His jaws worked, foam spattered his lips.

"Lies, nothing but lies!" he raged. "Lies that you can sing to yourself as you burn in hell—"

He slewed himself around, facing me again.

"And now you, Downing, why I have got you here, you murderer. Oslow, my life-long friend, my boyhood chum—you make a fire upon his heart. De blaze didn't kill him, sure not. He had a disease, a weakness, and he die as you torture him—"

Here was one thing that made sense. Oslow had died of heart trouble, brought on by the excitement. I'd marvelled that that small amount of punishment could have wiped him out in such a hurry.

"I COME to dis place to work so dat I can have my revenge," Nils was going on. "For a long time I do not know how I am going to do it—how I can make it so horrible as the death of my son in de furnace. Then one day when Mata iss cleaning de old woman's room, she finds books that she has been studying. The old woman has gone crazy, she iss dabbling in witchcraft.

"Mata tells me, and I remember my old friend Jens Oslow, who has travelled in strange countries and has told me of things he has seen there. I write to him and tell him my story, I send him money. He comes to your fine house and plays at his little circus and you think that his charming has given you de blackness—you, a white man who has studied in colleges believes that sorcery has power!" Nils gritted his mockery into my face. "You did not read about St. Anthony's fire in your books, did you, mister Dick?"

"St. Anthony's fire?" I repeated blankly. "What's that?"

"Many years ago, when poor people ate bread from rye flour improperly cured, there was much St. Anthony's fire," Nils answered. "Dees was from de drug ergot, whose spores are naturally found in de rye. In hands of a doctor, ergot has valuable uses. But taken in excess, it brings on de St. Anthony's fire. Starting first with the limbs, the whole body turns black. It dies by inches in worst agony, like iss burned oop from inward flames—de most horrible disease ever suffered by man. We don't see it ever now because de rye flour is better cured.

"Well—dees in what you have got, all of you Stranges—St. Anthony's fire. Mata gave you the ergot in your food. We watched you burning to death as our son had burned, it wass a good revenge, and we laughed. We use de silver nitrate on ourselves for fool you, make you think we don' do it."



"Paul—he didn't die from the fire, though," I said. "It never would work as fast as that—"

"Paul I killed with a knife and then I burned his body on a fire out in de rocks," Nils chuckled. "I carry him back and put him into his bed all pretty, so dat you others can see what iss going to happen to you."

Nils laughed again, his eyes leaped.

"We start dat way, but we don't finish it. De St. Anthony's fire takes maybe a week to burn, some one might come to de island. So after we get them started, Mata finish them with her knife—all but you three and a couple others that run away. I smash your boat, and now we got plenty time. We don't got to hurry for you, you three die slow in torture of hell. You don't eat nothing, all right, we put de ergot into your blood with a needle. We sit here and watch while you burn to death, an inch at a time like Olaf my son."

Nils went away and returned with a hypodermic needle. He jabbed it into the old woman's arm as she hung there with the nails piercing her palms. He came to me. I thrashed and kicked, lunged with all my strength in my bonds, but his corded hands held me while his wife drove in the point. And then they turned toward June.

In madness I fought my ropes till I felt hotness of blood where the cords had cut into my flesh. I foamed prayers and curses comingled and I didn't know which was which. Nils gripped her shoulder and held her while Mata pushed the point up to the hilt in her white flesh.

Hours passed, I wouldn't know how long, I lost reckoning of time. The fire grew worse in us, they dosed us again and again. Now I looked at June and now I turned my eyes away. She tried to talk to me, tried to tell me she loved me, but her shrieks of agony cut her short, brought her up panting as the twinges of fire caught her excruciatingly.

Mata, Nils' wife, wasn't there, she had gone out a few minutes before. I'd seen Nils watching June, a new, hot gleam in his eyes. And suddenly now he shot a look at me, he laughed and went over to her.

He stood in front of her and he reached out for her clothes. Piece by piece, he started pulling them off her. Her dress, her sheer underthings he ripped down from the shoulders, he laughed crazily as he flung the ribboned fragments over his shoulder.

His hands reached out for her, they felt her and fondled her, they slid over her soft nakedness while his eyes blazed and spittle drooled from his lips.

He reached up and undid the chains that held her. Numbly she tottered forward into his arms.

She was trembling and cramped, faint with pain. But she fought back at him, she hammered and pounded him, she jabbed her sharp little fists into his face, she raked her fingernails over it till it gushed crimson.

Nils snarled rage. With the flat of his hand he batted her. She went slewing side-wise against the wall. He raced after her, he gripped her and dragged her up to her feet.

He smashed her again, with his open hands he batted her right and left. She sank to her knees, moaning. Through bleeding lips she whispered my name. "Dick—Oh, Dick, help me—"

The sound of that tortured wailing blew a fuse in my brain. There on the floor I raged, I strained my trussed arms against the ropes till I gasped with the pain. I yelled at Nils, I cursed him with the blasphemies of the damned.

**B**UT it didn't do any good. I was tied up too tightly, I couldn't loosen the ropes.

Through my sweat-dimmed eyes, I could see him pick June up in his arms.



He was carrying her across the floor. I knew what he was going to do. Before she died from the ergot poisoning, he was going to satisfy his desire. I'd have to watch and I could do nothing.

Nothing?

Trussed wrists and ankles as I was, I staggered up to my feet. I couldn't walk; in bird-like hoppings I hobbled across the floor. Nils didn't know I was coming—he couldn't see nor think of anything save June, naked and struggling in his arms.

A yard from him I crouched and exploded that last flickering remnant of strength in my legs in one savage leap. A grotesquely horrible sight I must have been, blood-streaked and torn, my hands tied behind me, my lips gripped in my teeth to keep myself from screaming my fury as I kicked my feet out from under me in that madman's lunge.

Nils didn't know till I hit him, and that frenzied leap took him amidstships and slewed him off balance. He snarled, he started to whirl around, and June struggled out of his arms. He tripped over her and pitched headlong on to the floor.

I couldn't walk, I couldn't even crawl, but I hurled myself on him. I jumped with my knees and I squirmed and twisted myself a couple of feet up over his body. He twisted over on to his back, face up.

I dug my shoulder into his belly to keep him down, I followed them with my knees again. I flung myself flat on him and I dove for his throat. Not with my hands or fists, I couldn't get them around from behind my back—with my mouth.

I won't linger on the details of this, they weren't pretty. Nils thrashed and grovelled beneath me, he hammered and pounded at my face. I felt the jar of his blows on my skull, the agony as his thumbs jabbed into my eyes. I was a human bulldog and I didn't let go. I gripped my teeth deeper into his flesh, I

shifted my clutch and worked deeper while I tasted his gushing blood.

After a while his struggles relaxed. I waited a minute longer till I was sure, then I opened my jaws and rolled off him.

I hitched myself around, looking for June. She had sunk down in a faint for a moment, but she was up again now. She came creeping over the floor on all fours, a knife in her teeth. Her strength was about gone, but she managed to slit the ropes that pinioned my hands behind me and then I took care of the legs.

The rest of it doesn't take long to tell. Mata came back and by that time we were ready for her. I hid behind the door and smashed her down with a club as she came through. We tied her up as she lay cold on the floor.

I got the nails out of Gertrude Strange's hands and took her down. It was daylight then and we heard voices yelling outside the house. It was a coast guard cutter, they had seen the distress signal on the pine tree. One thing Nils had forgotten—to pull down that flag . . .

They rushed us all up to a hospital—including Martin and Bill, Violet and whoever else had been hiding out in the rocks. Marvelous to tell, the old lady actually got well—she lived a full ten years more, in fact. All the Stranges had the vitality of the devil.

As for June and I, it was a long story, weeks and weeks there under treatment. But modern science finally got that ergot out of us, and we were as good as new. Better than new—for we got married and the old lady made me the manager of her affairs at a salary that still makes my head spin.

But June and I got our cottage, all the same, and our garden, with climbing roses over the gate. And we have a bedroom up under the attic roof where we lie and try to keep awake and listen when it rains. . . .



# DEATH'S DREADFUL LOVER

By Ray Cummings

(Author of "Music of Madness," etc.)

*We were horribly helpless—worse than dead—my beloved husband and I. Yet the genius of love enabled us to make a last desperate stand against one whose powers were greater than any normal man's. . . .*

“LOOKS sort of bad, Carla,” my husband said. “A nasty squall—”

“Or a hurricane,” I commented. “How far do you figure we are from Guadalfa? We’ll never do over ten knots in a sea like this.”

The weather was alarming, to say the least. Out to the Northwest in the gathering dusk of sundown, black sullen clouds were banked solid. The horizon line of the Carribbean out there was lumpy. The wind was rising in gusts. Our little *Annalea*—forty foot cabin cruiser—already was plunging and rolling, her bluff bow hitting the slanting seas, sending the salt spray in sheets over us as we sat in the cockpit.

My name is Carla Thomas. I was just twenty that September when on our honeymoon, John and I took the little *Annalea* for a West Indian cruise. An adventurous couple, I recall we were fond of calling ourselves. John was a railroad man—expert telegrapher at the age of twenty-two. I was stenographer in the same office. He taught me telegraphy. The romance of it—trains of Pullmans with thousands of sleeping passengers hurtling through the night, and only your sensitive fingers to protect them from disaster and death—perhaps the thought of that made us adventurous.

But the feeling certainly is gone now. Adventure? We want no more of it,



since that night of storm-swept horror we spent on Tortuga Key!

“Guadalfa couldn’t be more than two or three hours away,” John was saying. “If the wind doesn’t get too nasty—”

“That is Tortuga Key, northwest,” Pierre Largan said abruptly. “Maybe we best land there, Mr. Thomas, ’till the storm, she pass.”

The giant black—our passenger from San Gregory, which we had left at sunrise—sat huddled under an oilskin cape



in the stern. His thick arm, glistening mahogany with the spray on it, came out with a gesture as he added,

"See her there? Tortuga, she have a little cove where we be safe."

The lonely key was only a dot on our chart. It showed now Northwest over the starboard bow, a tiny blob on the lumpy horizon with the sodden storm-clouds massed close over it.

"You've been there?" I said.

He shook his head. "Once I passed close and saw the little cove. This storm, she may be very bad. We can anchor for the night—"

It seemed the wisest thing to do; and John swung the *Annalea*, heading into the seas, with the gusty wind steadily rising and the blackness of the stormy night presently enveloping us.

**A**N hour. The wind was howling now. The seas were white blobs in the blackness with the *Annalea* plunging as we headed into them. Enveloped in oilskins, the three of us sat huddled in the cockpit, pelted now with a driving rain mingled with spume as the *Annalea* staggered forward. Pierre Largan had not spoken. Under the cape he huddled, shapeless, with only his huge bullet head of close-clipped black hair protruding, hatless, drenched.

All day he had seemed a moody, inscrutable sort of fellow. We had only known him since yesterday, when John purchasing supplies at the San Gregory waterfront, had been approached by this giant black who wanted to know if we would take him to Guadalfa. He was a young fellow; twenty-five perhaps. He said he was a native of Santo Domingo. Brown, stalwart; well over six feet. His smile of flashing white teeth was likable; his heavy Negroid features were handsome in the fashion of his race. He had no luggage; he was clad only in trousers and shirt, shoes and stockings; but he

offered us money, which of course John refused.

So we took him. And all day he had sat brooding, so that though I said nothing to John about it, there had come upon me a little fear—and a vague revulsion for this inscrutable black, so that inwardly I winced whenever his gaze met mine . . .

"The cove is on this side, Pierre?" John's voice roused me out of my gloomy thoughts. Tortuga Key loomed ahead of us now in the murk of the storm—a little thousand foot island with a terraced undulating central hill heavily palm-dotted. We were in the lea now; the sea was calmer, but the rain still drove in torrents over us.

"Two or three small coves," Largan said. "The shorefront, this side she is rocky. I show you."

Then we saw a narrow cove entrance; and as we were heading into it, suddenly it seemed that on the island's little hill there was a tiny spot of light winking.

"A house?" I exclaimed. "You didn't tell us Tortuga was inhabited Pierre."

We had assumed it was not—practically all the dots on the chart of this region were nothing but empty strips of palm-dotted sand.

We were in the blackness of the cove now, with the wind howling in a roar over our heads.

"One house," Largan said. "One man—the French Doctor Paul Croix. You will like him—he is very nice. He will take care of us for the night."

"Oh, you know him then?" John demanded.

In the glow of our little cockpit light Largan's black bullet head shook a vehement negative. He was staring, not at John, but off into the stormy blackness.

"No—no," he said. "But I have heard of him in Guadalfa. Everyone say he is very nice—we land here, Mr. Thomas."

A small dock was at hand. John swung



us alongside it. With the hawser he leaped out; and I was after him to help him tie us up. Why not? Looking back on it now we can easily see why we should have headed out into the storm rather than land at that dock! But hindsight is meaningless.

Then the thing abruptly struck at us. The rope was twitched from John's hands! The little *Annalea* was swiftly backing!

John whirled. "What the devil—"

**I**N the darkness we could barely distinguish the giant figure of Largan standing erect on the deck of the *Annalea*. For a second or two there was only a few feet of water between the dock and the *Annalea's* bow, and I saw John tense to spring. Then Largan flung something at us; a monkey wrench, I think it was.

John roared with anger. My husband is a muscular six foot fellow; but I knew he was certainly no match for that black giant, so that I flung my arms around him, holding him. And with blank astonishment we stood while all in a moment the *Annalea* made a swift circular turn, headed out through the cove entrance and vanished into the howling blackness of the storm.

"Well, I'll be damned—" And then John laughed sardonically. "Our hitchhiker repays us by stealing the automobile! I suppose he thinks he can sell it in Guadalfa before we can get there to stop him."

If only so simple an explanation had been the truth! . . .

"Might as well go up and see this Frenchman," John said at last. "Can't very well stand here all night."

We were already pretty well drenched, despite the oilskins. We had no weapon, no food, no flashlight; we were standing on the black open dock, pelted with rain, and with the wind, even down here in the

sheltered cove, swirling in gusts around us.

"There ought to be a path," John added. "If I ever get my hands on that Largan in Guadalfa—"

We found the little ascending path, with sodden palm fronds swaying over it. . . On the upland the wind all but plucked us from our footing; but soon we saw the lights of the lone house like a welcoming yellow radiance in the blur of the storm-swept palms. . .

It was a big low tropical bungalow, with giant palms arching over its tin roof, bending and swaying now to the press of the wind. The path led us to the steps of a wide low verandah, with coconut posts and a coconut rail. Yellow light showed through the curtained windows, and the silk curtain of a doorpane.

John knocked. We stood, sorry spectacles no doubt, in our drenched garments. My dark hair was soaked, half tumbling to my shoulders. I am small, slim and dark. John says I am a beautiful woman. Certainly at that moment as we presented ourselves appealing to the hospitality of this lonely occupant of the little key, I felt like a drowned rat. . .

The door abruptly opened. And whatever self-consciousness I might have had was swept away by the sight of this man who now stood before us. Small as I am—he was shorter; a squat, massive dwarf with a huge head of iron-grey hair; and a face of amazing ugliness. . .

"Dr Paul Croix?" John murmured.

"Yes," the man said. "Who else could it be? Who are you?"

For a second or two I think that John and I must have stood blankly gaping. The dwarf at first sight was a monstrosity. Under five feet tall, with wide heavy shoulders, a barrel chest, thick legs and arms that dangled almost to his knees. He stood swaying, gorilla-like, so that his dark trousers, immaculate white fluted



shirt, collar and black bow tie seemed wholly incongruous, like an ape in the circus, garbed in the raiment of a man. The face also—at first glance it seemed unhuman; thick nose upturned like a snout so that one was only conscious of its cavernous nostrils; eyes wide apart, dark under bushy black brows, with a sloping forehead and that mass of iron-grey hair above. . . . A very gargoyle of face, fascinating with its ugliness . . .

For myself, being a woman, a queer revulsion swept me, mingled with a grewsome sort of fascination so that I stared into the man's eyes and all my queer mixture of emotion was translated into a wild desire to laugh. One may laugh from sheer horror. . . .

Then I heard John murmuring,

"Oh—I beg your pardon—some explanation from us, of course—we—we were afraid to take our little boat on to Guadalfa. This storm—"

Abruptly the gargoyle face broke into a smile. I cannot say why, but the spell of startled emotions which was upon me suddenly seemed gone. The smile of Dr. Paul Croix, despite his face made it a travesty, somehow seemed to humanize him.

"Come in," he was saying. "But of course—most assuredly you need shelter. So bad a storm—"

**H**IS grotesque bow had a very singular dignity as he stood aside to admit us. His gaze had flicked from my face to John; it had lingered only briefly on me, but in that second it seemed that he must have remarked my startled emotions. Had he sensed my wild desire to laugh, of which abruptly now I was thoroughly ashamed? Was he a hermit here because of his monstrous ugliness? The thought leaped at me, so that the smile with which he had met us seemed both horrible, and pathetic.

"You are welcome," he said. "I have few visitors here."

It was a big rustic living room, with a log fire brightly blazing, before which he insisted immediately upon seating us so that our garments would dry. With his swaying, ponderous steps, for all the world like a trained gorilla, he moved around us, taking our oilskins, flinging my sweater upon a chair-back, doing everything he could to make us comfortable. And then, despite our protestations, shambling off through an interior doorway to get us something to eat and drink.

John took one look at me. "Good Lord, Carla—"

But the dwarf seemed within hearing; then in a moment he was back.

"I dined early," he said. "I am alone here—I do all my own work. Once I had a serving maid, but she is away just now. You will excuse—"

I think I need no more than summarize the two evening hours which followed. I recall that very queerly the shock of Dr. Croix's monstrous appearance was dropping from me. His smile—it seemed very human. His voice was cultured, refined; a man, we soon found, of clever wit, with things interesting to say so that presently I found myself actually liking him, no longer seeing his gargoyle exterior . . .

When we had eaten the informal meal which he brought us, I let down my long black hair, turning my back to the fire to dry it. John gave me a startled glance. Queer. Not queer that John was surprised. Quite the reverse; queer that with no self-consciousness I should have let down my hair and opened my waist at the throat the better to dry it. . . .

Dr. Croix, for all his interesting commentaries on the islands of the Lesser Antilles, had little to say about himself.

"I was—I am, a research physician," he told us. "I do a little work here—more for my own amusement—" He let



his voice trail away, with his singularly, weirdly fascinating smile upon my face.

He had already persuaded us that we must stay the night. We had told him how the *Annalea* was stolen from us. Even if we now had the *Annalea*, we could not have left here, for the storm was steadily getting worse. The wind was roaring now, certainly with more than full gale force, and the rain was still a tropical downpour.

"I have a powerboat on the other side of the key," Dr. Croix said. "Of course I shall be glad to run you to Guadalfa in the morning if the sea goes down. I go there twice a week."

Then John said, quite inadvertently, "That confounded black giant Largan—"

Was I mistaken, or did the mention of the name strike some emotion to Dr. Croix? My husband is a big good-natured, easy-going fellow. Not a bit analytical. Not his style, to be alert for mysteries, to conjecture hidden motives—to look for trouble where probably none exists. But a woman is different. More imaginative. Keener perhaps, with intuition that goes beyond any masculine logic.

And I saw—or seemed to see—on the gargoyle face of Dr. Croix, a sudden sweep of emotion. I saw—or thought I saw—that the name Largan was familiar to him; that it struck at him with a very definite surge—of what? Hatred? Fear? Horror?

Certainly it was something of the kind. And though he made no comment and in a moment we were talking of other things, I do believe that the nameless lurking emotion never for all the rest of the evening was gone from the depths of his eyes. A contagion seemed to it. I began to feel a restless stirring of horror within me—as though something of nameless menace were here on this lonely storm-swept little key—something menac-

ing, not John and me, but Dr. Croix... What was it?

"You will be comfortable here I am sure, Mrs. Thomas."

HE stood with his massive squat body swaying beside me, his head hardly above my shoulder as he showed John and me the bedroom we were to occupy. It was a small room of wicker furniture; an oil lamp on a table; a big luxurious-looking double bed; a single window, closed now, with the rain beating against its glass pane, the water running down in glistening rivulets. The noise of the storm was louder here than in the living room; the tin roof, close overhead, rattled with the staccato tattoo of the rain. A shutter of the window was thumping at intervals.

"Sure enough," John said. "This is fine."

For just a moment Dr. Croix lingered, peering up at my face. "In the morning I will call you—but not too early. The wind already is dying. We will get to Guadalfa by noon."

He bowed with his grotesque gesture of dignity; his thick fingers with a dark growth of hair on them were toying absently with his flowing black tie. Then he turned and was gone, closing the door after him.

"Well—" John murmured. "Weird-looking little fellow, Carla. I guess that's why he's here."

But somehow I was in no mood to discuss it. Strangely, as I prepared for bed I felt as though there were more than John and me here. As though the gargoyle monstrous presence of Dr. Croix still lingered so that my cheeks were burning with a sudden self-consciousness as I disrobed.

Vague thoughts... something of horror again seemed enveloping me. A sort of expectancy, with so singular a fascination



to it that my fingers trembled as I pulled off my stockings...

"This confounded door has no lock," John was saying. "Oh, well—" He laughed as he turned away from it; but with a shock I realized that John himself was perturbed and unwilling to let me know it, for fear of frightening me.

The room was fairly warm; the bed coverings looked substantial. I took off my outer garments, braided my hair; climbed into the bed.

The shutter banged. "That damned thing will drive us nuts," John exclaimed. I could not miss now the tenseness that was on him. He raised the sash; drew in the shutter and locked it.

"Now we can have some air," he said. "The rain won't beat in with the shutter closed."

He left the window sash up; and presently he blew out the light and came to bed. And I lay beside him with the darkness enveloping us as we listened to the pound of the rain and the moan and whine of the wind as it slapped the sodden palm fronds against the house. And now, with the window open, the roar and pound of the surf on the island strand was audible...

I drifted at last to sleep, with the vision of the massive gargoyle face of Dr. Croix seeming poised in the darkness over me, his gaze making my cheeks burn...

I dreamed that something bit me. I felt it on my neck—so real a tiny stab of pain that it jolted me to consciousness. For an instant I lay puzzled. The pain was gone; I was blurred, in doubt whether I was asleep or awake.

Then I felt John stir beside me. As though asleep, he was mumbling a curse. It snapped me to full wakefulness, with a rush of horror that started the sweat all over my body. Was something wrong with John?

"John—John dear—"

On one elbow I bent over him, my

braids dangling over his face and neck; and suddenly his fumbling hands were fighting with my hair braids, trying to brush them away.

"John—"

"Oh—" He sat up, blinking, staring at me in the vague moonlight that now filtered into the room. "Oh—you, Carla—" He laughed, but it was forced—a laugh with horror straining it. "I dreamed—some damned thing. No! It's gone—"

I was aware that the room, the whole house, was heavy with unnatural silence. The rain had ceased; the wind was only an eerie whine; moonlight was filtering through our shutter. A silence so heavy that I could hear John's labored breathing, and my own—a sodden silence, with the drip of the palm fronds upon the roof.

"I dreamed—" I murmured. "Something bit me—it woke—"

What was this thing of horror now upon us both? John's hands were cold as they gripped my bare arms, and we both sat up in the bed, tense, staring.

"You dreamed that?" he said. There was a hush to his voice. "Something bit you? That's what I dreamed—No! I felt it!"

His hand fumbled his neck. Then he leaped out of bed. "No air in here, Carla, I'm stifling." He flung open the shutter. And then he laughed, his old good-natured self striving to master what his masculine logic was telling him was idiocy.

Fitful moonlight streamed in, with a breath of dank warm air from the sodden tropical night. John gulped at it.

"That's what's the matter with us," he muttered. "No fresh air—gets you dreaming—"

He was gazing out the window; and then I saw him stiffen; heard him suck in his breath with a gasp that made me leap from the bed and stand beside him.

"John—what is it?"



HE gestured. The rolling upland of the little palm-dotted island was patched with moonlight—moving areas of light and shade from the broken cloud-masses swiftly crossing the face of the moon.

“Carla—good Lord—”

We were staring at a figure out there, down a declivity by a banana patch in a little hollow—a giant figure, bending, shoveling dirt into a hole...Giant black figure, naked to the waist...The moonlight gleamed on the glistening mahogany skin...Giant black man with a bullet head...

“Pierre Largan!” I must have murmured it, for John muttered:

“By God, it is! He’s burying something—”

The dank breath of the night was cold on the moist flesh of my limbs; the moonlight whitened them pallid, as though I were already dead, yet standing here staring. Pierre Largan! He had not taken our boat to Guadalfa! Had only taken it to circle the island, and land doubtless in another cove. But why? So we would not know he was here? So Dr. Croix would not know he was here? And now he was burying something, out there in the moonlight? Was that a grave which he had dug? A grave into which now he was tumbling dirt upon something he had interred?

What had he buried?

I saw John staring at me, his grewsome thoughts undoubtedly running with my own.

“Carla! We must—tell Dr. Croix!”

Our bedroom door was closed; but it did not lock, and I rushed after John as he flung it open. The living room was pallid with moonlight, and a flickering red sheen stained it as though with blood from the dying embers of the fire.

John called, “Dr. Croix—”

The door which we knew was his bedroom stood ajar. John flung it open. We stared. The bed was rumpled, but Dr. Croix was gone. I think I must have laughed wildly. Of course he was gone! I had seen terror in his eyes at the mention of Largan! Too late now to find him—unless we were to go out there and dig up that thing the giant black murderer had buried!

There was a moment when we stood transfixed in the blood light of Dr. Croix’s living room, staring at each other aghast. And I saw that terror was engulfing John—terror, not for himself, but for me. A lurking murderer here upon the little island....

“Got to find a weapon,” he muttered. “You—you stay here, Carla. We’ll lock these doors and windows—”

He turned for the kitchen as though he might seize a knife with which to defend me; but within a step he whirled; and the

*(Continued on page 119)*



# DETECTIVE TALES

Ivy Lane was desperate when he sent his courageous little aide, the rotund, ebullient “Senator” Greer into deadly jeopardy. But he couldn’t excuse himself on that score when news came that the Senator had lost his greatest gamble—and was as good as dead!

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**N**URSE FARRELL shuddered. "Oh, Jim," she whispered, "I'm so afraid. I know I shouldn't be—I'm a nurse, and supposed to be indifferent to this sort of thing. But it always frightened me when it was alive—and now that it is dead I—I'm even more afraid of it. . . ."

"Don't be silly, Nora," snapped the young intern, Jim Crosby. "I tell you, it's the only place you'll be safe. Dr. Levant is strong as an ox and we may not be able to capture him for hours. Ever since his mind broke this morning he has been yowling for you—and until we find where he has hidden, you are in constant danger. He'll never think of looking for you in ward five, and he doesn't know Knute Balder is dead. We won't have time to move the body until we capture Levant—but you'll be perfectly safe. . . ."

Gently, as he talked, he pushed the girl through the grilled door of ward five, slammed shut the door with a casual glance at the covered, huddled body on its single bed, switched off the light by means of the button in the hallway, and walked rapidly away.

Nurse Nora Farrel moaned softly as the lights went out. She knew Crosby was right in turning them out—darkness was her surest protection—but it was horrible to be left in stygian blackness with the corpse of what had been a dangerous, beast-like lunatic. She shuddered again as a vision of the being who went by the name of Knute Balder flashed into her brain. Beast-like hardly described Knute Balder. Before the madness had stricken him, Dr. Levant had often described him as a primitive—a being less man than animal, but less animal than some sort of new, insufficiently developed species having no real place in this earth. The short, squat body, the neckless head which seemed to grow out of the center of the thing's thick chest, the short but incredibly heavy and powerful arms—and above all, the hideous, unhuman face of Knute Balder set him apart from all human beings and all normally developed animals. And to

Nurse Farrel he was no less dreadful dead than he had been alive.

But Balder *was* dead—his terrible, distorted body was harmless. It would never move of its own volition again. . . .

Never . . . ?

Nurse Farrel heard a sound. It was a soft, slithering sound as might be made by bed-clothes being thrown back. It was followed by a slight scraping noise—as of heavy feet coming in contact with a cement floor. Then the scraping sounds grew louder, began coming relentlessly nearer her through the quivering, stifling darkness.

But Nurse Farrel could make no sound, herself. Terror locked her jaws, smothered her lungs, choked her swelling throat. Her eyes stared sightlessly into the dark, her body quivering with helpless horror—but she couldn't scream until she felt two heavy, murderously strong hands tearing torturingly at her soft flesh. . . .

Summoned by that scream, intern Jim Crosby fought madly in the dark with a being he thought must be an immortal monster—and it was not until his fellow internes rushed to his side, helped him subdue his adversary, and turned up the lights that he found he had been struggling with Dr. Levant. And Nurse Farrel, gazing up, bewildered and shaken from the floor where the mad physician had thrown her, shuddered with relief when she realized the crazed doctor had taken the place of dead Knute Balder in the bed of the corpse!

DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE hopes each month to bring to its readers something of the weird, unearthly terror that Nurse Farrel knew in the darkened chambers of that asylum.



## Death's Dreadful Lover

(Continued from page 117)

back of his hand went up to brush his forehead.

"John—" Was that my own pallid voice?

"Carla—why—good God—"

He seemed to stagger. And suddenly I realized that I had taken a tottering step.

"John—help me—"

"Carla—Good God—"

What was this? We stood again clinging to each other. I felt his dank hands against my flesh...

What was this? The room was warm. My limbs were dank, pallid. My voice—John's voice—so far away—so pallid—wraiths of voices... Were we already dead? Wraiths of humans standing here, clutching at each other with only horror remaining of all our human emotions?

"John—help me—"

"Carla—Good God—"

**L**EADEN limbs. We tottered with a very frenzied effort of movement. Ice was in my veins. No, not ice, but blood congealing... The end...

But my senses clung. Still I could hear and see—but the touch of John's hands upon me was fading...

We reached the hearth. Against my bare flesh, still I could feel a little touch of the red embers' warming breath...

"Carla—I—I'm going—I—can't—move—"

He almost fell, so that it was I, not falling, but struggling to hold him up. Both of us stricken... fading, with numbing muscles... breath shortening, growing fainter...

Together we sank to the hearth... John's head was on my breast—I tried to hold it with leaden fingers. Between the braids of my dangling hair, his eyes, agonized with horror, stared up at me. His lips moved, but no sound came... Then it seemed that his lips were trying to move, but could not...

(Continued on page 120)



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## Dime Mystery Magazine

(Continued from page 119)

"John! John dear—"

My faint voice? No! My numbed lips were motionless; no breath came from my inert lungs that could have given me voice. I was only thinking it—"John—"

Just agonized, helpless thoughts... Weird, this death—no pain—only a swift congealing into immobility...

In the bloodlight of the hearth we lay motionless, helpless to move; almost, it seemed, unbreathing. Death? But now I knew I was not dead—and with the thought, there came to my brain a little clearer ability to think... That stab in the neck which had awakened me! That was when this damnable poison had entered our veins! John had dreamed he was stabbed! No dream, for either of us—a reality!

Catalepsy! Paralysis so complete, that now our breaths might barely have clouded a mirror. Living death... And I knew now that I was not cold. The dankness of my limbs had been the sweat of my terror. A living death, in which one still might be warm. Stiff with death? I knew my body was not stiff—merely inert, beyond my power to move even the tiniest muscle.

Yet that was not quite true. I stared down with motionless eyeballs into John's face as it rested upturned upon the pallid whiteness of my breast. His features were a waxen mask of death, stained with blood from the ember light. Dead—yet alive. I gazed into his motionless, dilated eyes. And suddenly I saw his eyelids blink. A little spark of remaining movement! I tried it. And I realized I had never yielded that last tiny mobility. I was blinking...

Then as John and I crossed glances—little beams of horror from widened motionless pupils—it seemed that the same thought was striking at us both... Blink... Blink—a pause—another flicker



## Death's Dreadful Lover

of movement from this last tiny muscle that would answer to our will... Blink... a pause... dot... dot-dash... dash-dot... "C-A-R-L-A—"

I COULD not miss it. . . Trains of Pullmans hurtling through the night, with John's sensitive fingers guiding mine upon the telegraph key! And when we were engaged, we had even tried it, working the Code with our eyelids, amusing ourselves that we could communicate in lovers' secret fashion, even with others watching us . . .

"C-A-R-L-A—"

"J-O-H-N—"

Grisly waxen mask that was my dear husband's face! Ghastly, staring motionless eyes, with nothing but a transfixed horror streaming from them; no least movement to tell me that he was alive—save that his eyelids blinked. . .

And I read:

"A—D—R—U—G—W—E—A—R—E—"

I heard abruptly a treading step; and into my motionless vision a figure swam, stained with red from the firelight. For an instant it was blurred, too far away, so that the frozen lenses of my eyes could not adjust the image. . . Then closer. . . Monstrous figure bending over us. . .

Largan? . . . No, it was not he, for here was a horrible, grimacing gargoyle face, leering at me. Dr. Croix! Not murdered by the lurking black giant—not buried out there in the pallid moonlight under the banana trees! . . .

And here at my ears was Dr. Croix's voice, with all the human timbre now seeming gone from it so that it was no more than the growl of a lusting animal.

"So you still cling together? That is very pretty."

Then his monstrous thick dark hairy arms were raising John's inert body. The vision of them swam away beyond my sight, and I was left alone, staring with

(Continued on page 122)

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(Continued from page 121)

eyes that could not move, into the blood-light of the dying fire.

Silence. A blank emptiness of this living death as I lay with straining senses listening to the silence which seemed to engulf all the world with the rushing torrent of my horror.

Then again I heard the monstrous dwarf's thumping tread; the vision of his thick, barrel-chested body, naked to the waist now, swam again into my sight. And his arms went around me, with my limbs and hair braids dangling almost to the ground as he carried me...

"How warm you are, little Carla... The dead must remain warm—"

The terror blurred me. The frenzy of trying to scream—my whole being damned up with horror that I could translate into nothing of movement or sound—it swept me into a numbed abyss so that I was conscious only of being carried through darkness—a doorway—down a flight of stairs...

Then dimly it seemed that I was being propped upon a couch. Light was here. A soft, flickering, yellow-red candlelight. It brightened the scene, so that with eyes that could not move, still I could see that this was a cave-like cellar room; a rug on its dirt floor; candles on a table; a big low couch of black velour coverings and black pillows upon which my pallid body lay gleaming...

Macabre scene. The monstrous dwarf was moving about. Madman now—but only mad with lust. His panting breath sucked in and out; his triumphant chuckle was a growl more animal than human.

Then I saw the body of my husband lying here near my couch. The candlelight struck on the waxen death mask of his face.

And his eyes were blinking...

"C-A-R-L-A—"

"J-O-H-N—"



## Death's Dreadful Lover

Both of us still alive; warm with this living death . . .

"C-A-R-L-A — D-O — N-O-T — S-H-O-W — L-I-F-E — I — C-A-N — M-O-V-E — A — L-I-T-T-L-E—"

**I**T struck at me with so poignant a rush of hope that for an instant my terror was submerged. John could move a little! He was recovering! The drug must be wearing off! But we must not show it!

Move? With every effort of frenzy I had been striving to move. Leaden limbs . . . my whole pallid body lying here as though detached from what still was ME . . . But now I could swing my eyes! Furtively I tried it. My gaze followed the shambling figure of Dr. Croix as he crossed the room to another couch. A drape-white couch . . . And he said:

"A rival for you, Lola. Look what came to me by chance tonight. Can't you see her over there?"

The dwarf stood staring at the couch of white velvet. And I stared. A young woman lay propped there among the white velvet pillows. Another stricken victim of this monstrous fiend. The candlelight gleamed on the dark mahogany of her skin. A woman perhaps no older than I—slim and beautiful in the fashion of her race. The dancing firelight gave highlights to her skin so that it shone like burnished gold . . .

"A rival for you, Lola. White—and even more beautiful. See her over there? Like you, she cannot laugh at the ugliness of Dr. Croix. She can only lie limp and warm—"

Lola! The maid whom he had mentioned early in the evening. Victim of his monstrous obsession—inferiority of his ugliness, driving him here to his lonely key with his mad desire to possess a woman who could not show revulsion for him—who could only lie in living

(Continued on page 124)

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(Continued from page 123)

death—limp and warm with living beauty.

It was a swift rush of my horrified thoughts . . . Then he was padding back, kneeling now over John so that a very maelstrom of terror engulfed me that now John was to be killed. . . But the lusting fiend was only gloating at each of his victims . . .

"You Thomas—you deserve to watch for a while. You with your strong young body—so superior to the ugly little dwarf! You thought so, didn't you? But you overlooked the power of the mind. With my mind I worked and slaved to perfect this cataleptic drug. It acts perfectly, does it not? A little every few hours will keep these beautiful women always dead—but warm. For days—weeks perhaps—"

He straightened, still gazing down at John. "For a little while, you may watch. Then—a larger injection of my drug will waft you off—so that you will be stiff and cold with real death—"

Then he came shambling at me. And the ghostly bonds held me, so that though I felt like a wind-blown feather in the gale of my horror, still I could only lie inert, pallid yet warm as though welcoming his embrace. . .

But what was this? Across the candle-glowing room, as I could see it over the dwarf's thick shoulder, I was aware now of a narrow, cave-like tunnel entrance, with vague moonlight shining at its distant end. And a figure loomed there. Giant black man, with a bullet head. . .

Pierre Largan! He came padding into the room, with a huge rock poised in his hand. He may have made a noise, or the damnable dwarf as he pawed at me must have possessed some sixth sense warning him of danger, for abruptly he cast me off, shambled from the couch as the rock which Largan flung hurtled past him.

The giant black came plunging, vengeful and desperate but with more valor



## Death's Dreadful Lover

than cunning so that the shrewd little dwarf with amazing agility avoided the crashing rock, leaped under Largan's outstretched arms and gripped the black by the waist.

**T**HEY fell together; rolled. The candlelight gleamed upon the dwarf's hand as it struck against Largan's sweating black chest. A little poisoned stab, which made the black grunt with the pain. I saw the tiny implement go hurtling across the room as Croix flung it away.

Then Largan staggered gigantic to his feet, with the monstrous little dwarf clinging to his waist, his arms locked around the black body, his legs entwined, with feet off the floor. Grisly combat of death. The huge black man staggered, with his grotesque adversary clinging around his middle. And squealing now with demonic triumph:

"You're done for, Largan! Another minute—There's your Lola! How queer—when you saw me bury her two weeks ago, after that weird disease had killed her—"

Damnable circumstances, which afterward we learned. Lola, working here for Dr. Croix, had been stricken seemingly with a strange disease. And Largan, who was to have married her, came only to find her dead—to help Croix bury her. Then he had gone away. Suspicious—he had wanted to come back—had seized the opportunity, meeting us in San Gregory...and the storm had played into his hands...He had not been burying anything...He had dug into Lola's grave—found her body gone—and locating this cave now, was striving with all the brute strength of his giant black body, to save the woman he loved...

Futile brute strength. In his veins the damnable poison was swiftly doing its work. Ghastly struggle; that squealing, demonic dwarf; the staggering, stricken

(Continued on page 126)

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28x4.40-20	2.00	.85		32x4	2.65	.85	30x5	3.30	1.35
28x4.75-21	2.15	.95		32x4	2.90	.85	32x5	3.40	1.45
28x4.75-20	2.20	.95		32x4 1/2	3.00	1.10	32x5 1/2	3.55	1.55
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05		<b>HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES</b>					
	2.55	1.05		(High Pressure)					
28x5.25-19	2.60	1.15		32x5 1/2	3.70	1.45	34x7	5.95	2.35
28x5.25-18	2.60	1.15		30x5 1/2	3.75	1.45	32x7	5.95	2.35
30x5.25-21	2.90	1.15		34x5 1/2	3.95	1.50	36x8	6.65	2.65
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15		34x6	4.25	1.75	36x8 1/2	6.65	2.65
30x5.50-19	2.95	1.15		36x6	5.00	1.85	40x8	12.45	4.15
	2.95	1.15		<b>TRUCK BALLOON TIRES</b>					
30x5.50-18	3.10	1.15		36x6 1/2	5.25	1.95	40x9	12.45	4.15
31x5.50-19	3.10	1.15		36x7	5.50	2.05	40x9 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-20	3.10	1.15		36x7 1/2	5.75	2.15	40x10	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-21	3.25	1.25		36x8	6.00	2.25	40x10 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-20	3.25	1.25		36x8 1/2	6.25	2.35	40x11	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-19	3.25	1.25		36x9	6.50	2.45	40x11 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-18	3.25	1.25		36x9 1/2	6.75	2.55	40x12	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-17	3.10	1.15		36x10	7.00	2.65	40x12 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-16	3.10	1.15		36x10 1/2	7.25	2.75	40x13	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-15	3.10	1.15		36x11	7.50	2.85	40x13 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-14	3.10	1.15		36x11 1/2	7.75	2.95	40x14	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-13	3.10	1.15		36x12	8.00	3.05	40x14 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-12	3.10	1.15		36x12 1/2	8.25	3.15	40x15	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-11	3.10	1.15		36x13	8.50	3.25	40x15 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-10	3.10	1.15		36x13 1/2	8.75	3.35	40x16	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-9	3.10	1.15		36x14	9.00	3.45	40x16 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-8	3.10	1.15		36x14 1/2	9.25	3.55	40x17	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-7	3.10	1.15		36x15	9.50	3.65	40x17 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-6	3.10	1.15		36x15 1/2	9.75	3.75	40x18	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-5	3.10	1.15		36x16	10.00	3.85	40x18 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-4	3.10	1.15		36x16 1/2	10.25	3.95	40x19	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-3	3.10	1.15		36x17	10.50	4.05	40x19 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-2	3.10	1.15		36x17 1/2	10.75	4.15	40x20	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-1	3.10	1.15		36x18	11.00	4.25	40x20 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x18 1/2	11.25	4.35	40x21	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x19	11.50	4.45	40x21 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x19 1/2	11.75	4.55	40x22	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x20	12.00	4.65	40x22 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x20 1/2	12.25	4.75	40x23	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x21	12.50	4.85	40x23 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x21 1/2	12.75	4.95	40x24	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x22	13.00	5.05	40x24 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x22 1/2	13.25	5.15	40x25	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x23	13.50	5.25	40x25 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x23 1/2	13.75	5.35	40x26	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x24	14.00	5.45	40x26 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x24 1/2	14.25	5.55	40x27	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x25	14.50	5.65	40x27 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x25 1/2	14.75	5.75	40x28	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x26	15.00	5.85	40x28 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x26 1/2	15.25	5.95	40x29	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x27	15.50	6.05	40x29 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x27 1/2	15.75	6.15	40x30	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x28	16.00	6.25	40x30 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x28 1/2	16.25	6.35	40x31	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x29	16.50	6.45	40x31 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x29 1/2	16.75	6.55	40x32	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x30	17.00	6.65	40x32 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x30 1/2	17.25	6.75	40x33	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x31	17.50	6.85	40x33 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x31 1/2	17.75	6.95	40x34	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x32	18.00	7.05	40x34 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x32 1/2	18.25	7.15	40x35	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x33	18.50	7.25	40x35 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x33 1/2	18.75	7.35	40x36	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x34	19.00	7.45	40x36 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x34 1/2	19.25	7.55	40x37	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x35	19.50	7.65	40x37 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x35 1/2	19.75	7.75	40x38	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x36	20.00	7.85	40x38 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x36 1/2	20.25	7.95	40x39	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x37	20.50	8.05	40x39 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x37 1/2	20.75	8.15	40x40	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x38	21.00	8.25	40x40 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x38 1/2	21.25	8.35	40x41	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x39	21.50	8.45	40x41 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x39 1/2	21.75	8.55	40x42	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x40	22.00	8.65	40x42 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x40 1/2	22.25	8.75	40x43	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x41	22.50	8.85	40x43 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x41 1/2	22.75	8.95	40x44	12.45	4.15
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32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x42 1/2	23.25	9.15	40x45	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x43	23.50	9.25	40x45 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x43 1/2	23.75	9.35	40x46	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x44	24.00	9.45	40x46 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x44 1/2	24.25	9.55	40x47	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x45	24.50	9.65	40x47 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x45 1/2	24.75	9.75	40x48	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x46	25.00	9.85	40x48 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x46 1/2	25.25	9.95	40x49	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x47	25.50	10.05	40x49 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x47 1/2	25.75	10.15	40x50	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x48	26.00	10.25	40x50 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x48 1/2	26.25	10.35	40x51	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x49	26.50	10.45	40x51 1/2	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x49 1/2	26.75	10.55	40x52	12.45	4.15
32x5.50-0	3.10	1.15		36x50	27.				



(Continued from page 125)

black giant... Then suddenly Largan fell, limp and leaden, with his panting breath fading away...

And Croix panted:

"You see, little Carla! My drug acts quickly in the larger dose. Perhaps you need a little more. Do you? I would not want your beautiful waxen face to wrinkle with a sneer at my ugliness—"

The triumphant dwarf had picked himself up from Largan's inert form and again was shambling toward me. And now I felt that I could move. My breast seemed heaving with my breath.

"My arms around you, Carla—my dead one, so warm—"

I felt that I could scream now, but with every effort of will I recalled John's warning... I must not show life...

But beyond the monstrous body of the sprawling dwarf I could see that John was moving... creeping... that huge rock which Largan had flung—John was gripping it now—raising it—

Then upon the monstrous head of the fiend, the rock crashed.

"John—"

My voice—released at last!

"Carla—dear—"

From the horrible sprawled body of the dead dwarf, my dear husband snatched me; tottered with me in his arms, his own failing strength bolstered by his frenzy. Tottered with me from the ghastly shambles of the candlelit scene, out into the pallid moonlight.

And together we sat revivifying...

"I think Largan and Lola will live," John murmured presently. "In the morning we'll take them to Guadalfa—"

We huddled together, waiting for our strength, gazing at the pallid moonlight on the stormy ocean—wondering if in all our lives we could ever forget the horror of Torgua Key.

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But now a new method enables people who have scalp itch, dandruff, falling hair and bald parts to remove the old, outer scalp skin and have a fresh, new scalp skin, and many are growing hair who never thought it possible. This new method explained in a treatise called "HOW HAIR GROWS" is being mailed FREE to all who wish it. Simply write to Dermolav Lab. Desk 400-K, No. 1700 Broadway, New York, N. Y. It will be mailed in plain wrapper absolutely free.



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Cards 4 new ways to read em. X-ray-Ceathru know 1st, 2nd and 3rd without taking card off top. Dice Misers Passers. Systems. Quit losing. Races, Stock Market. Send \$1 for new book "BEAT THE CHEAT." Invisible card ink. Slot Machine, Punchboard exposes. Send \$1 to Johnson Exposures, Box 2488-F, Kansas City, Mo.

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Secret Service Operator No. 88 is on the job! Running down dangerous Counterfeit King. Tell-tale finger prints in murdered girl's room.

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Start \$105-\$175 month; Men—women, age 18-50, common education. Yearly vacation with pay. Want to qualify for next entrance test? Complete details free. Write, **INSTRUCTION SERVICE, 182, St. Louis, Mo.**



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Viscose Method heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for TRIAL. Describe trouble and get FREE BOOK. Dr. M. G. Clason Viscose Co., 140 N Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

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Treatment mailed on FREE TRIAL. If satisfied, send \$1; if not, it's Free. Write for treatment today.

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DETECTIVE TRAINING, TEST PROBLEM METHOD. LOW COST. **JOSEPH KAVANAGH, PP-17, HOBOKEN, N. J.**

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# MAN AND WIFE WANTED!



To run local  
**COFFEE AGENCY**

Splendid Chance  
To Make Up To **\$60<sup>00</sup>** in a Week

**NEW FORDS  
GIVEN AS A BONUS**

If you are married and willing to cooperate with your life partner in operating a Coffee Agency right in your own locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—FREE.

It is now possible for married couples to make up to \$60 in a single week if you can work harmoniously together. Wife handles the orders, keeps records, etc., while the husband delivers and collects. Steady, permanent business of one to two hundred customers can quickly be established if you follow the simple, proven plans that I send.

## START EARNING AT ONCE

I'll send you everything you need—your complete outfit containing full-size packages of products, also printed forms, blanks, advertising literature, samples, etc., together with simple instructions for both the husband and wife, so you can start your earnings right away. Make as high as \$45.00 your very first week.

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Baking Powder, Flour, Cocoa, Canned Goods, and other foods every day. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

## I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

## FORD CARS GIVEN

Over and above the cash earnings you make I will give you a brand-new Ford Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. I offer a Ford Car—as an extra reward—to everyone who starts in this business.

## YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

You can start a Coffee Agency and make money the first week. You don't have to risk a cent of your own money. I absolutely guarantee this. No experience is needed. You use your home as headquarters. You can build your business on our capital. Full details of money making plans are free. Send your name today for the free book giving all inside facts, then you can decide. Don't waste a minute as you might lose this opportunity through the unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

## WONDERFUL SUCCESS

Reported by Others

+

Clare C. Wellman, N. J., tried my plan and cleared \$96.00 in a week. Hans Coordes, Nebr., made \$27.95 in a day; \$96.40 in a week. Norman Geisler, Mich., reported \$33.00 profit for one day and as high as \$129.00 in a single week. Ruby Hannen, a woman in West Virginia, stated that she made \$17.00 in one day and \$73.00 in a week. Wilbur Whitcomb, Ohio, reported \$30.00 profit in a day and \$146.00 in one week. I have scores of reports of exceptional earnings like these as evidence of the amazing possibilities of this money-making offer.

## FREE Offer COUPON

**ALBERT MILLS, President**  
3714 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Send your free book telling how to start a local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or single persons) can make up to \$60.00 in a week. We will read it and then let you know if we want to accept this opportunity.

Name.....

Address.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

**ALBERT MILLS,**  
3714 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio





And I wish you  
many of them ...

*They Satisfy*

