

10¢

DIME



# MYSTERY

OCTOBER

# MAGAZINE

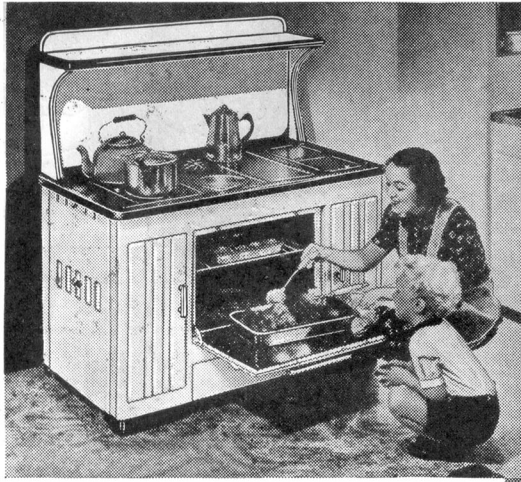
LEON BYRNE  
ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT  
GRENDA ALZEE  
AND OTHERS

DEATH DANCES ON THE TURNPIKE  
*A STARKLY VIVID MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL*  
by FRANCIS JAMES

THE FLOWERING CORPSES  
*BIZARRE NOVELETTE OF EXOTIC MENACE*  
by NAT SCHACHNER



# NEW FROM KALAMAZOO!



**NEW Coal and Wood Ranges—NEW Gas Stoves**  
**NEW Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges**  
**NEW Combination Electric, Coal and Wood Range**  
**NEW Oil Heaters—NEW Coal and Wood Heaters**  
**NEW Furnaces—FREE Furnace Plans**

**ALL ON EASY MONTHLY PAYMENTS**

## NEW FACTORY PRICES!

**FREE** Sensational NEW Stove Catalog! NEW FACTORY PRICES! NEW designs. NEW ideas. NEW features. Nearly 300 illustrations. Handsome NEW color photographs of modern kitchens. As newsy and colorful as a magazine. Just off the press—ready for you. *Mail coupon.*

**Nearly 200 Styles, Sizes and Colors**

You'll see nearly 200 styles, sizes and colors—174 Ranges, in all White, Tan and Ivory, Green and Ivory, Black and White, Gray and White, 14 different Heaters, 22 Furnaces. Stoves approved by Good Housekeeping Institute. Coal and Wood Ranges; Gas Stoves; Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges; Combination Electric, Coal and Wood Ranges; Oil Ranges; Coal and Wood Heaters; Oil Heaters; Water Heaters; Washing Machines; Vacuum Cleaners; Furnaces. FREE furnace plans. *A bookful of bargains—more than you'll find in 20 big stores.*

**Use Your Credit—Terms as Little as 18¢ a Day**

You'll marvel at the easy terms—as little as 18¢ a day for some stoves. Year to pay. 3 years to pay for furnaces.

**24 Hour Shipments—Factory Guarantee**

You'll be astounded at the new rapid Factory-to-You service (24 hour shipments). Order on 30 days trial. Satisfaction or money-back guarantee. You don't risk a cent.

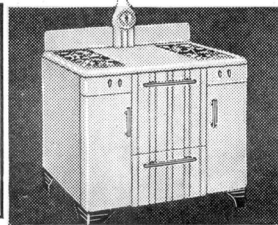
**Oven that "Floats in Flame"**

Mail coupon! See the oven that "Floats in Flame." Read letters from national and state baking champions. See other exclusive Kalamazoo stove features in this marvelous NEW FREE CATALOG. Send for it today.

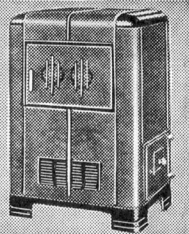
**See this New Combination Electric, Coal and Wood Range**



All our Gas Stoves burn Bottled Gas, Manufactured or Natural Gas



**"A Kalamazoo Direct to You"**



**New Low Priced Coal and Wood Heaters**

Mail Coupon Today for **NEW FREE CATALOG**



**1,300,000 Users—39 Years in Business**  
 Over 1,300,000 Satisfied Users praise Kalamazoo Quality. This is the 39th year of "A Kalamazoo Direct to You." Save at the FACTORY PRICE. Send for this FREE Catalog today. Mail coupon!

**KALAMAZOO STOVE & FURNACE CO., Manufacturers**  
 501 Rochester Avenue, Kalamazoo, Michigan

*Warehouses: Utica, N. Y.; Reading, Penn.; Youngstown, Ohio; Springfield, M. ss.*

- Kalamazoo Stove & Furnace Company  
 501 Rochester Avenue, Kalamazoo, Mich.  
 Dear Sirs: Send FREE FACTORY CATALOG.  
 Check articles in which you are interested:
- Combination Gas, Coal and Wood Ranges
  - Coal and Wood Ranges
  - Combination Electric and Coal-Wood Ranges
  - Oil Heaters
  - Gas Ranges
  - Coal and Wood Heaters
  - Oil Ranges
  - Furnaces

Name.....  
 (Print name plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

# 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 unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

## ALBERT MILLS

5369 Monmouth Ave.,

CINCINNATI, OHIO

## WONDERFUL SUCCESS

Reported by Others

Clare C. Wellman, N. J., tried my plan and cleared \$96.00 in a week. Hans Coor-des, 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  
5369 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)

10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Volume Eighteen

October, 1938

Number Three

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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

TWO NOVELS OF EERIE MYSTERY AND TERROR

- The Master of Accidents**.....Arthur Leo Zagat 6  
*Death that seemed to strike without rhyme or reason had made of Benson's Bald a shambles of horror. Were these grim tragedies all accidents? Those who had seen the faint phosphorescent glow and the dim black shapes in the night, could never tell what they knew—for they had entered the brooding realm of eternity. . . .*
- Death Dances on the Turnpike**.....Francis James 68  
*Lovely Marge Ames was boss of the big trucking company whose success meant life to the people of the Valley. But how could she succeed when those ghastly, bizarre wrecks were fast transforming all her drivers into mangled corpses—or drooling idiots? How could any mortal compete with that hellish power that killed and left no clue? . . .*

TWO FEATURE NOVELETTES OF BIZARRE MENACE

- The Merchant of Damnation**.....John Kobler 38  
*Peter Quest recognized instantly the signs of the dread, white plague of leprosy. Death for himself, he welcomed; but first he had to find the arch-fiend who was sowing the seeds of horror that foreshadowed the annihilation of the entire wealth and aristocracy of New York! . . .*
- The Flowering Corpses**.....Nat Schachner 90  
*What was the secret of his past that the men who knew would rather die so hideously than Street could not even guess—he only knew that while he wore the little chance of living long enough to find out! . . .*

E BAFFLING MYSTERY

- .....Leon Byrne 29  
*... but on the stake which formed  
 ... sin! And then Ann heard the  
 ... r! . . .*
- .....Grendon Alzee 59  
*... or still shudder  
 ... wa was killed  
 ..*

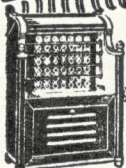
# STEADY GOVT. JOBS WAITING



**PAY UP TO \$2400 YR. TO START**  
 Prepare now . . . this easy, inexpensive way. These books will help you secure a better job. Written by H. F. Ward, Former Dist. Secretary U. S. Civil Service Comm. & famous Civil Service Coach. Each volume contains actual recent Questions & Answers of examinations & covers each subject thoroughly. Follows approved Test and Then Review Method of Learning. Easy to read everyday language. Only a few hours daily makes it possible for applicant to know the necessary points to pass examinations. Begin now to get ready for a Steady Regular Pay Job without layoff. Mail coupon today—No obligation. Money refunded in 5 days, if not satisfied. Use coupon.

**NOBLE & NOBLE, 100 FIFTH AVE., NEW YORK, DEPT. F**  
 Please send me C.O.D. at once the books checked.  
 Copies Questions & Answers Clerical Positions. . . . . \$3  
 Copies Questions & Answers Law Enforcement Positions. . . . . \$3  
 Copies Questions & Answers Railway Postal Clerks, Clerk-Carrier. . . . . \$3  
 I will pay postman—cost plus a few cents postage.  
 Name . . . . .  
 Address . . . . .

# HEAT 1 1/2¢ Per Hour!



**AMAZING INVENTION—New Radiant Heater.** Burns 96% air. Makes its own gas. No piping. No installation. Gives roomful of clean, healthful, penetrating heat, like sunshine, for 1 1/2 cents an hour. Hotter than gas or electricity, at 1/10th the cost. Easy to light and operate. No smoke. No soot or ashes. No odor. Portable—carry it anywhere. Low priced. Guaranteed.

**AGENTS!**  
 Make big money. New easy plan. Write quick for territory and Outfit Offer!

**30-DAYS' TRIAL**  
 Liberal Offer. Try it 30 days at our expense. Write at once for special, introductory, low-price offer and no-risk trial opportunity. No obligation. Send today.  
**THE AKRON LAMP CO.**  
 900 High Street, Akron, Ohio

# Diesel

For several years, Diesel engines have been replacing steam and gasoline engines in power plants, motor trucks and buses, locomotives, ships, tractors, dredges, pumps, etc. And now the first Diesel-powered passenger car is on the market. Our home-study course offers you a real opportunity to prepare for a worth-while position in this new field. Write TODAY for full information. No obligation. American School, Dept. D-749, Drexel at 58th, Chicago



**FOLLOW THIS MAN**  
 Secret Service Operator No. 38 is on the job! Llaming down dangerous Communist spies. Tells finger prints in murdered girl's room.  
**Free** The Confidential Report Operator No. 38 made to his chief. Write for it.  
 Earn a Regular Monthly Salary  
 YOU can become a Finger Print Expert at home, in your spare time, at small cost. Write for confidential full report and details. Literature will be sent only to persons stating their age.  
**INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE**  
 1323 Sunnyside Ave. Chicago, Ill.  
 Dept. 7387

# BOOKKEEPERS!

**BECOME EXPERT ACCOUNTANTS!**  
 Every day bookkeepers just like you are learning accountancy—stepping out of bookkeeping drudgery into executive accounting jobs at \$2,000-\$5,000 a year as Accountants, Auditors, Comptrollers, C. P. A.'s. LaSalle's home training in spare time fits you for such promotions—brings them now instead of years from now. Instruction to suit individual needs—from Elements of Accounting to C. P. A. Coaching. 30 years' success assures results. Thorough but inexpensive. Liberal terms, if you wish. Don't watch others get ahead. Go out and succeed yourself! Write for FREE book "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." Address:  
**LaSalle Extension, Dept. 10334-H, Chicago**  
 The School That Has Over 1,450 C. P. A. Alumni

# What New Evil?

**Y**EARS ago, one of the most brutal, heinous of law-breakers was the ghoul—the grave robber. So eerie, so fantastic was his "calling", so sinister and varied were his methods of operation, that he proved a slippery criminal to apprehend. Only legislation made possible by new trends in thought and progress in scientific endeavor, made headway in stamping him out.

By the same token, it is said that the authorities are preparing to cope with an even more horrible illicit traffic in human merchandise: live merchandise—not dead! Once again science, though actuated entirely by humane motives, will be responsible! . . .

A highly reputable journal recently printed an educational article revealing the miraculous capabilities of a newly perfected apparatus—an apparatus designed to keep alive indefinitely almost every organ of the human body! This device is actually a pump, so constructed as to seal off from bacteria an independent organ, yet at the same time provide the appropriate temperature and diet to maintain life and growth in it. The author intimated that in the not-too-dim future hospitals would support laboratories from which one might purchase a new liver, pancreas, spleen—or other vital organ!

Do not the possibilities of a new, dreadfully nefarious trade become evident. What is to prevent the blood-thirsty and greedy from *stealing* marketable human "accessories" from those unable to protect themselves, and selling this loot to surgeons and medical racketeers? A criminal master-mind conducting a "chasing" ring, robbing and pandering to the thing be more

ever-  
 keep  
 vrn

# HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED--THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY--I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.

IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?

TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY, TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.

BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT

TOM'S RIGHT--AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES

TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST--

SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS-- OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS

OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION

THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN

YOU SURE KNOW RADIO--MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER

THAT'S \$15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME

THANKS!

I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME RADIO JOB NOW--AND A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO

OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

## I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

**Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week**  
 Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year--full time repair jobs pay as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.



J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute Established 1914  
 The man who has directed the home study training of more men for Radio than any other man in America.

**Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning**  
 The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets showing how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that made good spare time money--\$200 to \$500 a year--for hundreds. I send Special Radio Equipment to conduct experiments, build circuits, get practical experience. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT TO HELP FIX SETS QUICKER--SAVE TIME, MAKE MORE MONEY.

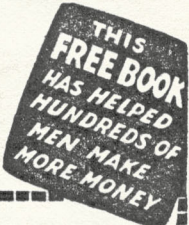
**Find Out What Radio Offers You**  
 Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard--NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8KS9  
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8KS9  
 National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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

NAME.....AGE.....  
 ADDRESS.....  
 CITY.....STATE.....



### HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS



**Broad-cast Operator after Twenty Lessons**

**\$10 to \$25 in Spare Time**



"When I had completed the first twenty lessons I had obtained my license as Radio Broadcast Operator and immediately joined the staff of WMPC, where I am now chief operator." --HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

"I am making from \$10 to \$25 a week in spare time while still holding my regular job as a machinist. I owe my success to N. R. I."--WM. F. RUPP, 208 W. Front St., West Conshohocken, Pa.



**\$3,500 a Year in Own Business**

"After completing the N. R. I. Course I became Radio Editor of the Buffalo Courier. Later I started a Radio Service business of my own, and have averaged over \$3,500 a year." --T. J. TELAAK, 657 Broadway, Buffalo, N. Y.



# DON'T BUY RINGS *or* REBORE IF CAR WASTES OIL *and* GAS



**Miner's Amazing Mineral  
Discovery Saves Up to 95%  
of New Ring and Rebore  
Costs—If Worn Rings and  
Cylinders are Wasting Oil  
and Gas Send Coupon Be-  
low for FREE SAMPLE**

## TAKES PLACE OF NEW RINGS AND REBORE!

Over a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Tested and acclaimed by editors of motor publications.

Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

### **INSTALLED IN 30 MINUTES!**

Ovrhaul works on the mineral plating principle—No special tools needed. No car tie-up. No danger of ruining motor by grinding cylinder walls—works in while you drive—saves you time and money. Gives you months of extra car use. A single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

### **SAMPLE FREE!**

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to \$151.37 for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated and full details of a real money-making opportunity. *Air mail reaches us overnight.*

### *Free* **SAMPLE COUPON**

B. L. Mellinger, Pres., (Paste on Postcard and mail)  
Ovrhaul Co., K-910, Los Angeles, Calif.  
Without cost or obligation, rush me **FREE SAM-  
PLE**. Also show me your big money-making plan.

Name.....  
Address.....  
City..... State.....  
Name and Year of Car.....

## **WHY PAY UP TO \$151.37 For New Rings and Reboring?**

If worn rings and cylinders cause your car to be an oil and gas eater—before you spend a lot of money, try Ovrhaul. Give it an opportunity to do for you what it has done for thousands of others. Here are costs of new rings and rebore on a few 1935 models:

Make	Cost of New Rings and Rebore	Time of Car Tie-up
Chevrolet	\$50.00	2 days
De Soto	\$2.50	2 days
Dodge	\$9.20	2 days
Ford	\$50 to \$55.00	2 days
Buick	80.00	2½ days
Cadillac	151.37	2 days

### **ENDORSED**

By Member of

Society Automotive Engineers  
National Aeronautical Assn.  
Detroit Soc. of Engineering  
Pontiac Engineers Club

Let us send you L. H. Smith's complete report which shows that the compression of a badly worn 6-cylinder motor was increased 32.4% and brought back to within .09 points of its original new car efficiency. Such tests conclusively prove the sensational merits of Ovrhaul.

## **MONEY-MAKING TERRITORIES OPEN**

### **For Salesmen and Distributors Who Act Quick!**

Sales of Ovrhaul have been phenomenal. Hundreds of Salesmen and Distributors in the United States and abroad. Biggest money-maker in years. Advertising in Saturday Evening Post and 150 other national magazines carry the astounding message of Ovrhaul. The market has barely been scratched. To wide-awake men we offer opportunity—an opportunity which may never come your way again. A fast selling, repeating article, fully protected by U.S. and foreign patents. Saves motorists millions of dollars. *Ovrhaul Sells for Less Than Spark Plugs.* Exclusive territories still open—but you must act quick if you want in on this.

### **Phone, Write or Wire TODAY!**

Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you, with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today.  
B. L. Mellinger, Pres., OVRHAUL CO., K-910, Los Angeles, Calif.

**MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY!**

# THE MASTER

*Nora Lane's dad wired her not to come home to Benson's Bald, that bleak plateau high in the mountains. But she went—and she learned that the horrible series of tragedies which befell the little hamlet were NOT accidents, but were fabrications of an eerie, hidden menace that struck like lightning, to leave a clue no living man could trace!*



narrow eyes were turned to the  
st which night lay, black and  
muscle twitched in his

The raw-boned  
end of grey  
ddened

tense



# OF ACCIDENTS

Gripping Mystery Novel by  
ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT



Could all these dreadful tragedies be acts of God—or was there some other . . . some evil influence in control! . . .

in the grass. And then Rachel Wathen was aware of a deep, far-off rumble, barely audible, yet somehow laden with a savage fury.

"Anton," she whispered, the pupils of her faded eyes dilated. "What—"

"It's the bull, woman." Wathen heaved

up out of his chair. "The bull in the north pasture. Something's gone wrong with it." He lumbered toward the door, reaching for the stable lantern that hung from a peg beside the sash. "I've got to see what."

"The bull." Rachel's laugh was forced. "If that's all, there ain't no call for you going way up there to the edge of the woods this time of night just on account he's bellowing. He's maybe scented Fosdick's cows, or something."

Striking a match he'd fished from the pocket of his plaid shirt. Wathen shook his head. "Not with that roar. He's mad, red-eyed mad—Why don't this lantern light?"

Rachel was coming toward him across the white-scrubbed floor, her hand at her scrawny breast. "It's empty. I was going to fill it right after I washed up the dishes. Anton, don't go out there! I'm—afraid."

"Afraid of what? That bull's chained to a rail buried three feet under."

"It's not that." She plucked at his sleeve. "It's—the night. It's something—out there—that *ought not to be*." The bull's roar came again into the room, filling the night with fear, as aeons before the snort of the sabre-toothed tiger might have come into some fire-lit cave. "I've been feeling it since supper. Don't go, Anton."

"I got to. That animal cost me five hundred dollars and I got to see what's wrong with it." Anton's big thewed arm circled his wife's aproned waist and drew her frail frame to him. "I can't let your female fummadiddles keep me here." His mustached lips brushed her withered ones and then he had jerked open the door and was clumping down the back porch steps.

Yellow light streamed from the kitchen door and its windows, and lay across the familiar barnyard. Then Anton passed his looming barn and was tramping across the home field, and the darkness was somehow blacker than ever he had known.

The treeless plateau called Benson's Bald is very near the sky. Now that sky was blanketed with ominous clouds, and the high fields seemed lost out of space and out of time. Even the piping insects were now silent, the wind's whisper gone. There was no sound save the hoarse, enraged bellow of the bovine brute.

**T**HERE was wrath in the rumbling roar, but there was also a note of terror, and this circumstance breathed a prickling

chill along Anton's spine. All his life he'd been dealing with the fiery creatures and none knew better than he that nothing could teach this particular bull the meaning of fear.

Nothing earthly.

Pondering this, he slowed. As the crackle of stubble under his boots lessened, he heard other footsteps that did not slow quite quickly enough, so that their cadence overran the cadence of his and momentarily became distinct. He halted, peering into the dark, a clammy sweat breaking out on his forehead.

From the field ahead the bull's bellow was a hoarse, appalling crescendo overwhelming all other sounds. But Wathen was certain now, by virtue of some sixth sense he could not name, that something was alive within the darkness, something that *ought not to be*!

"Foosh!" Anton expelled angry breath, recalling where he'd heard that phrase. "Female fumadiddles!" Irritated with himself that he'd allowed his wife's superstitious trepidation to disturb him, he lurched into motion once more. What could there be to fear on this land of his, so familiar that by the very feel of the soil against his thick boot-soles he knew exactly where he was? He knew that by angling now a little to the left he would come to the stile in the north pasture's stone fence, where there was a gap in the high, windbreaking hemlock border that ran along it.

Sure enough, in another five strides his toe stubbed the edge of the stile's first step. He mounted it, putting up a hand to protect his face from a branch he knew projected across the opening. He found it, pushed it aside—

And Anton Wathen was suddenly rigid on the narrow top-piece of the stile—his skin an icy sheath for his great hulking body!

Across the pasture, where the forest edge was a blacker black, a curious green

glow wavered eerily. Abruptly there was another, and another. When the third appeared Anton knew that none was a will-o-th'-wisp, for one was near enough for him to make out a flickering five-pointed star with two straight lines drawn diagonally through it, as if to cancel it!

And it was near enough for him to distinguish the outlines of a grey, spectral shape that moved with the eerie green pattern.

"Hey!" Anton yelled. "Who's there and what are you doing in my . . ." The bull's raging roar drowned the rest. Abruptly the thunderous pound of hooves rushed toward him, and with it came that monstrous bellow. The bull was loose—charging him! He'd crash the stile!

Anton turned to flee the lethal attack. A grey shape blocked him, a grey and faceless form on the step of the stile right behind him. Something shoved against his middle. He toppled backward, screaming, thudded to the ground *within the fence* just as the raging beast reached the spot.

Wathen's scream was cut off. There was no other sound in the night but savage snorting, and the sound of hooves trampling a human body.

**T**HE L. & R's branch line from Sarr Junction pierces Hogback Mountain by means of a tunnel. The tracks come out on a curving ridge and run on to the forested slopes of Benson's Bald. They begin climbing again till they reach the timberless flat expanse above. Here, having reached the hamlet of Fardale, they stop.

The population of Fardale numbers some twenty families, and the farmlands of the Bald's summit plateau account for another two-score. It seems odd, then, that a railroad should have been built to it, especially in view of the difficulties of the terrain and the expense thereby entailed.

The key to the explanation lies in a

rambling huge structure rising a quarter-mile from the depot, porticoed and pillared and encrusted with the rococo ornamentation of the late nineties. The Fardalites call the "Gadsden's Folly." They snicker when Asha Sooten, patriarch of the community, retells with gusto the tale of Fasnét Gadsden, who two generations ago visioned these wind-swept heights, overlooking a hundred miles of rolling, forested hills and sylvan lakes, as the "St. Moritz of America."

Gadsden it was who erected the casino and its swimming pool, tennis courts, and tobaggan slides, all now crumbling to ruin. He subsidized the blasting through of Hogback Tunnel and the laying of tracks from Sarr Junction to Fardale. A cold million he sank into the project, and another hundred thousand into advertising. Of this enormous expenditure not a single cent ever returned to him.

Fasnét Gadsden vanished after the debacle, never to be heard of again, but his Folly remained, and the railroad he had built. There was just enough traffic to and from the Bald to warrant the running of one puffing train, down in the afternoon and up at midnight, connecting with the Mid-Continent Limited. This was his legacy to the people of Fardale, this and his portrait that hung, dust-filmed, on the wall of Sooten's store.

"I got a notion," Asha would finish the telling of his yarn, "that some day Fasnét is acoming back." He would comb his white beard with his fingers, project an amber stream unerringly into the ashbox beside his pot-bellied stove, and look up at the picture of the man about whom he spoke. The painted face would gaze back at him, grizzled, walrus-mustached; a peculiar star-shaped blotch marked its left cheek.

"Yup," Asha would ruminate. "Some day he's acoming back," and then he would fall silent.

If some brash youth mentioned that

Gadsden had been past sixty when he disappeared before the turn of the century, and by all human expectation was certainly dead by now, the circle of whiskered countenances would turn toward him, and old eyes would gaze at him in glassy disapproval . . . .

Most of the people on the Bald were hard-working farmers, but some of them, of course, were a mite shiftless, or inconsiderate of their women. Take, for instance, Ezra Mason. He certainly should have brought in a pail of water for Faith's redding up before he hastened off to Sooten's store, the evening after Anton Wathen was gored to death by his bull. But Faith understood that so upsetting an event must be thoroughly discussed, and so she uncomplainingly went out to the well to draw the water herself.

Now Faith knew that when the pail was full she would need to take two hands to it, and so she carried no lantern with her. Though the sky was still overcast and starless she had no need of a lantern in that front yard of theirs whose every inch was familiar as the floor of her bedroom.

She got to the thigh-high curb of the well, set her pail on it, and found the crank of the windlass. Soon she heard the cool water splash, far below, as the bucket struck the water.

But she did not begin at once to bring the bucket up.

That was because, just then, a peculiar green light blossomed in the dark, some distance away. It was like no light she had ever seen. It dimmed and brightened like a flame in the wind, yet it was no flame. It was made up of criss-crossing lines, and as it drifted nearer, silently, Faith saw that some of the lines formed a star, and that the two others were drawn through the star as if to cancel it out.

Then Faith Mason could not have moved a hand to lift a straw, let alone a bucket of water. All the strength drained

out of her limbs, and her throat was dry, and there was a scream in it for which her fear-squeezed lungs would not furnish breath.

There was a greyness behind and about the glowing star. That greyness had the form of a man, but it was too pallid to be mortal, and it moved toward her with too little sound.

Faith Mason, staring at that specter, did not even feel the push against her shoulder blades that threw her over the thigh-high curb of the well and sent her hurtling down into its dark depths. Mercifully she was dead before she struck the water, for when she was found her skull was discovered to be crushed, from banging against the stone well-sides as she fell.

## CHAPTER TWO

### This Doll Is Dead

THE long station platform at Sarr Junction was a tunnel walled on the right by the Mid-Continent Limited's dim car-sides, on the left by a thick blackness of overcast midnight. Nora Lane's suitcase tugged at her arm till it seemed that the shoulder would come out of joint. Her bones ached almost beyond endurance with the fatigue of the long ride in the day coach. She was gritty with cinders, her eyes ached with sleeplessness.

Nora was too tired to keep up with the few other passengers who had debarked with her. Twenty yards ahead of her the narrow stairs to the bridge that connected this platform with the others and the station building were already almost empty. "*Bo-ard. All abo-ard.*" The hollow warning of the conductor echoed. Nora gasped. She must go faster, or she'd miss the Fardale local on Track Five, beyond the departing Limited.

She glanced to the left. The fussy little train wasn't there, two platforms away, where always before it had waited to take

shouldered. His back was to her as she neared, but the girl knew, from the litness of his figure, that he was young. "I'm afraid I'm not in the mood for philosophy." He had no luggage. "What I'm interested in is information. Where can I find the train that's listed to leave for Fardale at twelve-seven?" His tones were the clipped accents of accustomed authority.

The railroad man was stooped, weazened. His eyes were shadowed by his cap's visor. What Nora saw of his face was a bony jaw and sunken cheeks that in the shadowy illumination were grey and dry as bone; he had a toothless grin. It must be the rawness of her nerves, she thought, that made it seem to her a skull, a death's head so long buried that the flesh had rotted from it.

"You can't find the twelve-seven no-where's." His voice was a toneless husk. "Not tonight. An' maybe not ever." A pin in the lapel of his jacket caught light from somewhere and glowed greenly. It was a five-pointed star with two straight lines slanting across it.

"What do you mean?" the other man demanded as the girl came up to them. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"Roof of the Hogback Tunnel caved in this mornin'. Rails buried an' all wires are ripped to hell. You nor nobody else ain't gettin' to Fardale—"

"But I've got to!" Nora cried, grabbing the uniform's sleeve. "I've got to get home tonight." Her fingers dug into the thick fabric, dismay dissipating her usual shyness. "I've got—*Ugh!*" Her hand snatched away from the unnatural hardness within the sleeve it had clutched, hardness too thin to be anything but unfleshed bone.

It seemed to her that there was a rattle, as of castanets, when it dropped.

"Hold everything!" There was a hand on her shoulder, and it was firm and strong. "Hold everything, lady. I've got

reason to get to Fardale in a rush myself. I'll be da—er—darned if I'm going to let the collapse of a two-penny railway keep me from getting there, and if I go, you come too."

Nora looked up into a strongly moulded countenance dusted with freckles. Amused grey eyes and a friendly smile put her at once at her ease. "Is that a promise?"

"Absolutely. We'll be on Benson's Bald by dawn."

"Try it," the rusty voice of the man in uniform croaked. "Try it if you dare." It seemed to fade.

"Listen, grandpop—Holy Moses!" Her fellow passenger broke off. "Now where—" His jaw dropped.

NORA looked away from his face to see what had so amazed him. A cold chill brushed her spine. The old man wasn't there. He was nowhere on the platform. He was nowhere in sight and there was nothing near that could hide him.

"Since I was a kid and saw Houdini in the Opera House I've wanted to get near enough to one of those disappearing acts to see how they're worked," her companion chuckled. "Now one's been pulled right in front of me and I'm still in the dark. Well," he sighed. Obviously he was disquieted and just as obviously he was trying to conceal it for Nora's sake. "If we weren't in a hurry— Say. Is it etiquette for two marooned travelers to introduce themselves or do we keep on calling each other You?"

"I'm Nora Lane," the girl said, a smile twitching the corners of her mouth in spite of her perturbation. "I work in Chicago as a 'phone switchboard supervisor and I'm on my way home for a visit."

"You ought to have blue eyes to go with that name, Nora. Undiscriminating parents hung the appellation, Andrew Montague Carter on me but, praise be, my friends call me Andy. What say we go on the prowl for a means of getting where

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we're going? I take it that's your stuff down there."

"Yes." Carter started toward where she'd left her bag and Nora followed him, thinking: I told where I came from, and why I'm going to Fardale, but all he gave me was his name. I know he doesn't belong around home. What is he going there for, and why is he so anxious to get there?

He reached her suitcase, stooped to pick it up. "Well," he exclaimed. "You've certainly got a macabre taste in toys to bring home to the younguns."

"Toys?" Nora repeated, puzzled, coming up alongside him. "I haven't any—" The sentence was choked by impalpable fingers clutching her throat as she saw what it was he meant.

A narrow box about a foot long sat on the valise. A miniature casket! It was of polished, gleaming ebony, and it was shaped exactly like a coffin. There were even tiny silver handles on it; three on each side.

For a long moment the girl could not get a sound out. Then she contrived to whisper, "It's not mine."

Carter straightened, one hand effortlessly lifting the suitcase that had been so heavy for her, the other bringing up the toy-sized coffin.

"Not yours?" he murmured, little lights glinting beneath the grey surface of his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Nora insisted. "Someone must have dropped it. Maybe it fell off a baggage truck."

He looked at her gravely, questioningly. "We three were the only ones on the platform when you put your valise down. There was no truck moving." He held it out to her.

"But I tell you it isn't mine." The girl's voice rose, thinning, and it had a sharp edge of hysteria. "I never saw it before." Her hand flung out to thrust the thing away.

Her fingers struck the casket's corner,

knocked it from Carter's hold. It hit on one corner and the lid came off.

A doll spilled from the coffin, a doll dressed as a man. It came out of the box loose-jointed and flaccid, and a newspaper page came out after it, unfolding as if it had been put lightly into the funeral box. The sheet flopped over the dead doll, and on it a black band of huge letters said:

DEATH BARS ROAD TO FARDALE  
As Rock Fall Crushes Score  
In Tunnel Disaster

Out of the darkness rose a cackling laugh. It was the shrill and tenuous cackling of a man so old that there was no longer any mirth in him, or of a corpse jeering at the living from within the fetid depths of its sepulcher.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Death by No Accident

THE same midnight in which Nora Lane and Andy Carter stared at a doll and a newspaper sheet that had tumbled from a miniature coffin, found Asha Sooten's general store in Fardale lighted and crowded. The weatherbeaten countenances of the men gathered there were deeply lined by something other than wind, their squinted eyes brooding and sullen.

"All this palaver o' yours ain't changed my mind none," Sooten said wearily. "I say there's a curse laid on the Bald, an' I say if we don't all pack up an' get out there won't be none of us left alive."

"You can't gainsay Asha's right."

Stooped by age and toil as he was, Jed Lane was still the tallest man there, and the gauntest. "Leastways I can't. Death's marked Benson's Bald for its own. That's why I wired my Nora not to come home, and why Hannah's packing our trunk now. We're pulling out in the morning."

"Us too," another grizzled oldster

nodded. "Mom an' me, we're going to live with our Mary in Elmont, like her and her man's begging us to do."

"Listen." Will Cooper, a broad-shouldered farmer of about forty, shoved into the center of the circle. "You old guys in town ain't got nothing to lose, but I'm damned if I'm going to give up my farm and run away with my family just because a half dozen dumb fools get killed, one way or another, by a bunch of accidents."

"Accidents," Sooten broke in. "You keep callin' what's been happening accidents, but—"

"Well, what else are they?" Cooper demanded. He stood straddle-legged, his unshaven face thrust forward, his great hands fisted at his sides, stocky and squat and somehow like a badgered bull. "Didn't we see where Ezra Holden slipped in his barn and stuck the tine of his pitchfork through his eye into his brain? Was it a curse that made Kit Latham's geldings run away and drag him till his skull was bashed out on a rock, or was it the stings of the wasps he run his plough into? Are you trying to tell me some banshee made the Miller twins go too near the edge of Fosdick's Ravine, berrying, and get thrown down into it, when I saw with my own eyes where their heels slipped in the mud? What ghost was it rotted the branch of the apple tree in his orchard so that it gave way under Hen Storm and broke his neck? My granny used to spin yarns about all kinds of witches and goblins and such, but she never told of one strong enough to make a landslide that would stop up a tunnel and bury a train with all the people in it, like happened at Hogback this morning. Them's all accidents, and with the exception of the tunnel cave-in something like every one of them has happened before, right here on the Bald."

"They didn't all happen during the space of three days," the partiarch replied. "When Ant Wathen got gored I didn't

think nothing of it neither, nor when Faith Mason fell down her well. But when things like that keep on happening, one after the other, till there ain't nobody here ain't scared to go home lest he find somebody near and dear to him is been killed, I know there's something more behind it than just a run of back luck. And I'm telling you, Will Cooper, that if I had a grown daughter like your Jennie, I would be home with my shotgun in my hand, keeping watch *she* didn't meet up with no accident!"

"Seems to me you know a whole lot, Asha Sooten," Cooper said slowly, his eyes slitting. "Maybe you even know what *is* behind all these deaths."

"Mebbe I do," the white bearded ancient mumbled. "Mebbe I do."

"Why don't you say it then?" Will flung the challenge at him. "Why don't you say what's at the back of your mind, 'stead of beating around the bush all night like you been doing?"

A MURMUR ran through the group there in the store, a murmur half of approval, half of breath-bated dread. Sooten's blue-veined, fleshless hands took hold of the arms of the broken-backed chair in which he was seated. He came tremblingly erect.

The lamplight threw strange shadows across Asha Sooten's face, laying dark pools in the sunken hollows of his cheeks, making of his eye-sockets black wells within which there was a boding glitter. The whiteness of his beard, of his silken crown of hair, painted his sear skin grey and corpse-like. He was an old man, how old none there knew, but in that moment there was an awful majesty about him, and an aura of unearthly omniscience.

"Shall I tell you?" he asked, and even his voice, dry and rustling, was somehow uncanny. "Do you dare to hear?"

A ripple ran along Will Cooper's ridged jaw. "Go ahead," he growled. "Say it."



"All right," It seemed as if no one was breathing in the little room. "It's Fasnet Gadsden come back."

Muscles twitched in the corners of Cooper's mouth, fashioning it into a sneering grin, but there was no laughter in his eyes. "Of all the idiotic ideas . . ."

Something in Sooten's look stopped him. "We've laughed at him for forty years," the patriarch went on, "at him and his folly, and enjoyed the fruits of his planting. Now he's returned to claim Fardale and the Bald for his own. He was agoing to make it a resort, he swore, for the people who was closed in by the cities, and choked by city dust. But they would have none of it. He's still agoing to make it a resort—for the devils in the hell to which our laughter condemned him. He's barred the way in to all others, and now he's aclearing us out to make room for his hosts from Hades."

Voiced by the man who all their lives had been their sage and their leader, there was none there who did not at least momentarily believe what he said, none in whose veins a chill of eerie fear did not run.

Sooten's arm lifted, his finger pointed to the open door. "I seen him," he whispered. "Last night. Looking in at me. I knew him by the star on his face."

And into that bated silence a burbling sound came, a sound more animal than human. Footfalls were audible from the road, and then ten-year-old Hughie Cooper reeled across the threshold. His eyes were black marks in the bloodless oval of his face, his mouth gaping, his small hands tearing at his nightshirt.

"Hughie!" Will yelled, ploughing through the stunned crowd to him, grabbing him. "Hughie! What—"

"J-J-Jennie," the boys's writhing lips stuttered. "In—in the casino. I saw—green stars," and then he pitched sideways, the sudden fall tearing him from his father's grip.

"Hughie!" Will cried, going to his knees beside his son. "Hughie!" Taking the frail form in his hands, cradling it. "What's happened to you son?"

"Why don't you ask what's happened to your Jennie, Will Cooper?" Sooten said above him. "Why don't you go look for her in the casino? The boy's all right, except for what he saw there."

Cooper heaved to his feet. "That's right, Asha. It was something the boy saw—"

And then Will Cooper was lunging out of the store door, pounding through the night toward the huge black pile of Gadsden's Folly, and pounding after him came a half-dozen of the youngest and bravest of those who'd been wrangling through the long hours.

**T**HEY trampled past the end of the depot and across the tracks, fought through the tangle of thicket with which the years had choked the entrance to the casino's grounds. Their boots thundered across the rotted boards of a rustic bridge Fasnet Gadsden had thrown across Perley's Creek, now a dried-up and rock-bedded gully. They slithered on the moss-grown flagstones of the driveway that curved up to the wide front porch of Gadsden's Folly.

Will Cooper leaped onto that porch without a stop in his stride, hurled a battering shoulder against the big door of the casino. It flew open and he staggered through into the high-ceilinged, great banquet hall that had been built to accommodate three hundred paying guests. He stopped rigid.

The others clumped about him, all paralyzed with sick horror. Green light spilled on them from above, filling the huge chamber with a spectral luminance. It came from a blazing, five-pointed star fastened to the central rafter, two cancelling diagonals traversing its criss-cross lines. It cascaded down upon a long table

set for a feast, piled with platters of meat and bowls of fruit and goblets of ruby wine.

Was the liquid glinting purple in those crystal cups—wine? Along the nearer side of that amazing board, chairs were ranged, askew and overturned, as though a host of feasters had suddenly fled. But beyond the table were no chairs. There was a platform into which, at spaced intervals, four stanchions were set.

Chained to these stanchions by metal bands about their waists, were four girls. Except for those wide steel belts, they were entirely nude. With a sort of mad frenzy they fought, the implacable chains that held them, and the sepulchral light streamed over their tumescent bodies. That tender flesh was wealed with blisters, seamed with a multitude of shallow gashes from which red droplets oozed.

This awful tableau held the Fardaleites motionless for a nightmare half-second of time, a half-second in which Will Cooper recognized his Jennie by the blood-matted raven black hair on her writhing shoulders. Ted Faggot shrieked at the sight of his sweetheart, Mary Dale, clawing her thighs with mad nails. Mart Jason yowled the name of his young wife, Prue, in a sound that was not a voice, and broke from the group, lurching toward her.

Then from both sides the grey specters struck! A swift and fearful wave, they swooped on the men in Fardale; out of the shadows along the wall where the green light did not reach, down from the baronial staircase that lifted to the shrouded gallery running around that hall, out of the immense fireplaces gracing each end of it. Swathed in grey bandages, faceless and silent, they rolled over their victims in an irresistible swell, swamping them by the very weight of their numbers, consummating the ambush for which they'd been amply warned by the pound of approaching feet.

The grey and featureless demo made

no sound, but for three terrible minutes there was noise enough in that hall, the choking rattle of squeezed throats, the muffled thuds of frenzied, defending fists, a single shrill scream, "God! God help me!" the crunch of smashing bones. For three minutes only, and then there was again silence within the casino, a silence broken only by a sort of whimper from the chained maidens, and the whispering drag of flaccid bodies across a floor. Then there was the thump of a closing door.

**B**ACK in Asha Sooten's general store, the patriarch lifted from a still, small form. "Gone," he whispered, his white-bearded face gaunt, black flame crawling in his sunken eyes. "The lad's dead. Scared to death by what he seen."

"Almighty God!" Jed Lane exclaimed hoarsely. "What was it he seen? What —" He was checked by a muted crash out of the night, thunder from across the tracks.

The old men and the timorous who'd been left behind by Will Cooper and his companions stared at one another, the blood receding to their hearts. It was Asha who answered the question in their eyes.

"That was the bridge across what used to be Perley's Creek. We got to see what's come of it."

It was the bridge, or what had been the bridge. In the wavering light of the lanterns Sooten had taken from his stock, it was a jumble of shattered timbers now, piled among the rocks of the gully that it had crossed. And inextricably mingled with the smashed wood were the shattered corpses of the six men, who not more than ten minutes before, had been vibrant with strength and with courage, rushing out into the blackness.

"Gawd!" Jed Lane was the first of those left alive to find voice. "The old bridge was so rotten it couldn't stand their weight. It's another accident—"

"Accident, is it?" Asha Sooten blurted. "Sure it's an accident. But mebbe now you folks will believe me when I say these here accidents are going to keep on happening till there ain't no human left alive on Benson's Bald."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Into the Abyss*

ON THE station platform at Sarr Junction, the eerie laugh ended almost as soon as it began, and Nora Lane could not swear that it had not been altogether an illusion of her shocked brain. "Death," the headline of the newspaper that had spilled from the miniature coffin sounded aloud in her ears. "Death bars the road!" She realized that the hoarse croak was her own voice. "We can't get to Fardale," she went on as her terror-darkened eyes lifted to Andy Carter's face. "Death won't let us get there."

He met her look and there was that in his grim countenance that made her flinch. "Nicely done, Nora." There was a sneer in his voice. "But it doesn't get over. I don't scare easily."

"Scare?"

"That's the idea, isn't it? That's the reason for your song and dance about this coffin showing up from nowhere with its doll for a corpse? You kept me busy while the platform man vanished through a trap door or something. His make-up was a honey, and your acting is even better, but your sketch has laid an egg."

She got his meaning. Wrath leaped behind her burning eyes. "You—" she gasped, and her palm slapped stingingly across his cheek! He dropped the valise and she snatched it up, started running with it toward the stairs to the overhead bridge. Fingers grabbed her elbow, jerked her to a halt.

"Not so fast, honey," Carter grunted.

Nora drove a sharp heel backward

against his shinbone. Carter twisted her around as the suitcase dropped. Somehow his lips were on hers, smothering her cry. The fierce kiss forced her head back and back, while an arm across the small of her back held her like a steel rod.

Outrage screamed in Nora's veins. Her little fists beat unavailingly against Carter's marble-hard sides. Abruptly his scorching lips had lit a blazing flame within her, and the pain in her breast was sweet agony. Then he broke away from her, and laughed in her face!

"That's payment in full for the slap and the kick," he mocked her. "You vixen."

"Let me go," Nora sobbed in rage. "Let me go, you beast," Tears of vexation, of shame, stung her eyes. "You filthy beast."

"Oh no," he laughed. "You're going to Fardale whether you like it or not, my temperamental darling. And just to make sure—" His free hand came out of his coat pocket with something that glinted.

A bright bracelet on her wrist was matched by another on Carter's, and a six-inch steel chain joined them! "Handcuffs, Nora my love," he chuckled. "I like your company so much I'm making sure I won't be deprived of it. Also, whatever happens to me on the way happens to you, too. Maybe that will change your friends' plans somewhat. . . ."

Nora sobbed. Her anger drained away and nothing was left but the memory of the moment in his arms, when modesty had been seared out of her by a blaze of passion. The clear cold shell which had enclosed her nineteen years in a virginal aloofness was burned away by that blaze.

SHE could not bring her eyes to meet his, lest he read all that in them. "My friends! What are you talking about? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Carter growled. "And I'm not wasting any more time arguing about it."

Nora's brain throbbed with bewildering emotions; fear of the man and his fascination for her that she could not down; the brooding omen of the miniature coffin at his feet, and the sprawled mannikin it had disgorged; her fierce anxiety for her parents, her terrible need to get to them, to learn what was wrong on Benson's Bald. "Where are you taking me?"

"To Fardale." Carter grinned tauntingly. "I promised I would take you there. I always keep my promise."

"Let's go then." She'd go along with him to the little town in the hills. Gladly. Everyone there was her friend from infancy. They'd help her against him, help her to revenge the indignities he was inflicting on her, when they got there. If they got there.

A little awkward maneuvering and their fingers were intertwined on the suitcase's handle, the cuffs of his topcoat and her jacket concealing the steel bracelets, the chain appearing to be attached to the bag. They lifted it and started off.

The barnlike station waiting room was dim and deserted. A ticket agent drowsed behind the wicket and their echoing footfalls made no impression on his slumbers. Carter shouldered open a swinging door and they were in the open.

Slattern houses margined the asphalted expanse of Depot Square, dark and asleep. Three or four street lamps spread a pallid glow that invested the lifeless plaza with a desolate dreariness. A formless shadow moved, far to the left, merged with blackness that dwelt in the maw of a narrow alley.

"Looks like we're going to have to do some walking," Carter muttered, "to find anyone awake in this metropolis. I figured—" A champing rattle, a series of puffing snorts, interrupted him. The sounds came from the opening of a street on the left. They were being made by a decrepit taxicab that limped out into the

square. Its flickering headlamps spied them and it groaned toward them.

"Taxi, mister?"

The cabby might have posed for a bust of the Neanderthal man. His head sloped back from a prognathous jaw, to a sheared scalp that began just above brows beetling over tiny, leering eyes. His bridgeless nose spread over half of his face, and his thick-lipped mouth showed only two yellowed tusks.

"How much will you charge to take us to Fardale?" Andy Carter asked.

"Fardale?" The hackman ruminated. Then, "Twenty-five bucks."

"Fair enough," Carter said. "We'll—" "In advance."

ANDY hesitated for an instant, then then reached into a pocket with his free hand. The hand came out again and he said, "Keep your fingers away from your sides, and crawl out here on the sidewalk." A blued, small automatic snouted at the cabby to enforce the command.

"Gees!" the fellow gurgled.

"I said come out here on the sidewalk," Carter's tone was low, conversational. "Unless you'd rather take lead in your guts. And when you get out, reach for the clouds."

The hackman obeyed, his shoe-button eyes on Carter's gun. "What's the big idea?"

"This." Carter's gun hand flicked out. The automatic's butt thudded against the hackie's temple. The cabby's knees buckled and he settled to the ground with curious slowness.

Andy tugged Nora with him and bent over his victim. "Out," he grunted. "And he'll stay out for a long time." His countenance was lined and grim, but his tones were as calm as though he were discussing the gold standard. "We'll put your bag in the cab and then we'll fix it so he won't be found too soon."

Carter's ruthlessness had deepened the girl's fear of him. But she could not contain her protest. "That was brutal!"

"A little rough, maybe," Andy replied, as they put the valise in the luggage space beside the driver's seat. "But I'm not taking any chances." He was taking her back to the flaccid form spread on the sidewalk, was gesturing to her to help him lift it. "Someone was watching us from the alley. The cab showed up too damned quickly, and this guy didn't bat an eyelash when I told him I wanted to go to Fardale. It's a hundred and twenty miles." He was groping inside his jacket and brought out a well-filled wallet from which he extracted a number of crisp bills which he tucked into the stunned man's pocket.

They were stumbling with their burden toward a dark recess which was the driveway to the baggage room. "Why should he—"

"*You* tell me the answer to that," Carter retorted as the shadows of the passage closed around them. "Or doesn't your leader keep you posted on his plans? This is far enough. We'll drop him here."

The unconscious man was put down, none too gently. "My leader!" Nora exclaimed. "Who on earth—"

"Skip it," Carter interrupted.

**T**HE taxi was exactly where they had left it, and they had heard no footfalls. Nevertheless, Carter opened the back door and peered in. The rear was unoccupied. Andy climbed to the driver's seat and made Nora sit down on her valise. The starter burred under his heel, and the cab jolted into racketing motion.

"You're going the wrong way," the girl exclaimed. "The highway to the mountain is west of this town."

"You don't say," Carter grinned, thin-lipped, and kept right on the way he was headed.

They went past three blocks of dark

cottages. Nora might have screamed for help but she didn't. She told herself this was because that would make certain she wouldn't get to Fardale tonight, but knew it was a lie. They left the town behind and her chance was gone.

Carter switched off the headlights. There was only the faint illumination from the lamps lighting the instrument panels. Beyond the cab the darkness was absolute. They might be traveling through a featureless void were it not for the rustle of wind in treetops. The feel of the wheels under her told Nora they were on a dirt road, and she realized that Andy was making a long circuit around Sarr Junction that would take them into the turnpike to Fardale well beyond it.

The valise was an uncomfortable seat; the jolting and swaying of the ramshackle car jolted her about. Every movement of Carter's hand on the wheel pulled her arm with it. But infinite fatigue welled up into Nora's brain. It was a dark tide that swallowed all her physical discomfort. It flowed over her apprehension for her beloved ones, over the pulsing recollection of the ominous happenings on the station platform, over her fear and her hate for the man next to her, and over the remembrance of her response to his embrace. All this vanished beneath the warm sea of oblivion into which she sank . . . .

After an immeasurable interval, she came out of it to see a hazy vision of Andy's profile intent on the climbing, narrow road, of his brooding eyes in which lurked she knew not what dreadful secrets. The road was smoother now, and the rustle of leaves was only on the left side of the lurching car. Nora knew by this last that they were far along on the trail to Fardale. To the left would be the high, steep loom of Benson's Bald whose side they were climbing.

If she had been more than a quarter awake she would have been appalled at the danger. A skid, a curve seen too late,

and they would plunge off this narrow shelf, down into the pitchy darkness to their right. As it was, she drifted again into an uneasy slumber.

Some nightmare squeezed her heart. Fleeing it, she forced her eyes open. The nightmare came awake with her, in the form of clawed hands materializing from the black rear compartment of the taxi, stealing by each side of Andy Carter's head. They were grey, those hands, and knotted. They were not hands but a skeleton's phalanges!

They flashed to the steering wheel, in that instant, and jerked it! Carter's surging shout brought Nora fully awake. The taxi's hood swerved to the right. Brakes shrieked. Too late! The vehicle shot out over the brink of the abyss, plummeted down into the stygian night, into a sightless chasm.

The world exploded in a thunderous crash of glass and smashing wood and steel!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Pain's Dreadful Lash

**PAIN** drummed a tattoo on Nora Lane's skull, on her lacerated body. A pouched net of white hot, cutting wires plucked her out of merciful unconsciousness to a tortured awakening. Torrid air enveloped her and against her closed eyelids the orange-redness of hellfire wavered. A moan formed in her larynx, parting her lips. Her eyes opened.

Yards away, flames leaped in a lurid surge out of twisted wreckage that still bore a semblance of the cab Andy Carter had purchased with the butt of his automatic, and five hundred dollars. Their glare beat against black tree trunks, gaunt and macabre. Nora lay on her side in a small clearing which the blaze flooded with pulsing crimson and fierce heat.

The taxi was upright, its hood accor-

dioned against one huge bole that sizzled in the blast of its blaze, one wheel crumpled, the others tireless. Glass shards glinted redly all about the rear of the car, but the windshield was still in its frame, clouded with cracks. It was safety glass. It had resisted the crash. If it had not, she would not have survived.

From the step of the driver's seat to where she lay, Nora saw a furrow in the grass, streaked with dark stains that she knew to be blood. Something, bleeding, had been dragged along there. *She* had been dragged along there, and it could only have been Andy Carter who had dragged her.

"Andy," Nora moaned. Where—"

She could manage no more. Her arm, the one on whose wrist he had clicked the manacle that linked her to him, was pulled awkwardly back of her, as she lay on her side. He must be lying there, behind her. Whatever spasm of strength had enabled him to drag her this far, was gone. He was lying there, unconscious—or dead!

Pain's net tightened on Nora, squeezing sight from her eyes, obliterating all sensations save that of agony. But it could not obliterate the grief that went through her at the thought of Andy Carter dead.

Whoever he was, Nora knew in that moment that she loved him.

The pain relaxed. Nora could see again. She could think again. She could think that there was no certainty that Andy was dead, that she had only to roll her body and turn her head to find out.

But this was not easy to do. The slightest movement was agony, tearing her flanks, clawing her breast.

At last she rolled over. Now all she had to do was to look, and she would see Andy. Was he . . .

**H**ER lids pulled apart. Carter wasn't there! Nothing was there but a few feet more of lush sward and the edge of the clearing; trees and underbrush shud-

dering in the red glow of the fire, blackness behind them. Andy Carter was gone, and the steel bracelet was gone from Nora's wrist. He had dragged her this far only because he had to, manacled to her as he was. Having escaped the bursting flames, he had released himself and left her here, not caring.

Cruel and brutal and ruthless! That kiss of his had been a blow, bruising her lips and her soul. All Nora's hate of him flared up in her again, as the fire flared.

The widening glare drove the blackness deeper into the night-shrouded woods. One shadow did not retreat. It moved, but it moved *against* the light!

Now it was the light that retreated away from a monstrous apparition stalking noiselessly out of the gnarled trees.

The thing paused, an avatar of eerie evil looming above the prostrate girl. Every inch of its legs and its arms and its torso was swathed in grey bandages, so that it had the appearance of a mummy, but it was a mummy invested with some grisly sort of life. On its chest thick green lines blazoned a pattern, a five-pointed star across which were drawn two cancelling lines, and this glowed with an uncanny emerald phosphorescence of its own. But it was the figure's visage that was the quintessence of horror.

The grey bindings came up and around the back and top of the mummy's head, but left uncovered the space where a face *ought* to be.

Despite heat from the burning taxi, Nora Lane was numbed with the icy chill of ineffable terror. This thing that towered above her was the spawn of a madman's delirium. But she knew that it was real!

Its menace was concentrated in the thing one striated hand held; a short stick from whose end dangled a coppersmith's twisted wire.

The living personification of evil stood straight and rigid above her, the ghastly blankness it had for a face turned blindly to the flames that fed on what remained of the taxi. It seemed as yet unaware of her.

Perhaps it could only perceive the light and heat of the fire. Desperation lent Nora a frantic courage, a frantic strength and stealth. Thrusting elbows and heels against the ground, arching her lacerated body, she started a slow, soundless slide from under the appalling stature of that which the night had spewed out.

An inch, two inches, she moved and the faceless mummy gave no hint that it was conscious of her action. Six inches more she squirmed . . . a foot. A tiny hope

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blossomed within her that she had a chance to escape. Another few inches, just a few more, and she would spring to her feet, dash for the woods.

Now! Nora gathered herself for the leap upwards, for her flight to the nearest blackness. Now! Heedless of shrieking nerves, of screaming muscles, she came up to her feet. Something writhed around her waist—the mummy's wire lash!

If what she had felt before was pain, this was anguish beyond description. Every cell of her slender body was a separate and unendurable agony. A thousand years of hell were compressed into those seconds of torment. Death would be a boon beyond price, a mercy for which to pray if she could pray. But she was voiceless, sightless, paralyzed in the grip of the torture that had seized her in its teeth. And then it released her.

NORA dropped to hands and knees, mewling, whimpering, mindless for the moment as an infant. From somewhere came the acrid reek of scorched flesh, of smouldering cloth. The pain she had felt seemed now to have concentrated to a throbbing belt about her middle. As her sight cleared she peered down at it.

Her jacket, the blouse she wore beneath it, and wisps of a peach-colored chemise for which she had deprived herself of a week's lunches, hung in tatters from her, their edges glowing. And there, across the white flesh of her quivering abdomen, the circling blister of a burn was rising.

"Get up!"

The voice was a hollow boom in her ears. "Get up!" the command sounded again and twisted Nora's bleared glance around and upward to the mummy. That terrible lash of wire that was not a whip was lifted in threat.

"No-o-o," Nora moaned.

"Beat out the smoulder in your clothes."

She obeyed, crushing the embers with her hands. They stung her fingers and

her palms, but that was nothing compared to what she had already endured, what she would endure again if in the slightest she displeased the wielder of the wire. She crushed the embers and some of the rags that clothed her came away in her hands, and some hung by a thread. A gossamer wisp still hung about her middle and lay against the flat muscles of her quivering thighs. One sheer stocking was yet miraculously whole on a shapely calf. Somehow she had kept both slippers. Aside from these small matters she was nude—and it meant nothing to her.

All that she cared about was that the wire dangling from the short stick in the faceless mummy's hands should not touch her again.

She eyed it sidelong, as a pup eyes the stick with which a cruel master has beaten it, and whimpered as that pup might whimper.

Darkness was stealing back into the clearing as the flames dwindled. A breeze soughed out of the black, foreboding woods. It stroked Nora's seared skin with a desolate chill that sank into her body, into what remained to her of a soul. She dared not move, and the grey-swathed apparition was still, too.

The horror of its eyeless gaze lay blankly on the girl's staring, ravaged face, and the menacing wire dangled from its bandage-swathed hand. The night held its breath, tensed for the next act in the ghastly drama that was unfolding beneath its clouded dome.

"Go," the mummy's booming voice said at last. "That way." Its grisly-grey arm pointed past the taxi's embers into the ultimate blackness beyond it. "Go."

A long shudder ran through Nora Lane's slim and tortured frame, and then she started moving. Somewhere in the pulsing recesses of her delirium-dimmed mind was the grim knowledge that her Calvary had only begun.

And somewhere in the slow beat of her



heart was the forlorn cry, "Andy. Andy Carter. Why did you leave me?"

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Ultimate Agony*

**H**OW ever could Nora have thought of the woods cloaking the steep sides of Benson's Bald as friendly? Their stones bruised her feet, their brambles ripped her skin, and their branches, lashing out of the impenetrable dark, whipped her all but naked body with a savage and wanton flagellation that never ended. Time and again, as she stumbled through the sightless night, Nora knew that she could endure it no longer. She would sink to her knees, only to be brought again to her feet by the touch of the wire on her back; the merest touch of a wire that sent darting through her the agonies of the damned.

She would leap to her feet and stumble on, and always behind her followed the implacable grey specter that had no face, the swathed and grisly thing that hell had spawned.

How long this went on Nora Lane never knew, but at last she was aware that the forest was no longer about her. Lush grass snatched at her ankles now, a million tiny hands striving to trip her. And behind her, the bandaged mummy's progress was no longer silent. Then there was a high shadow above her, black against the black of the night, and her toes stubbed against something like wood. She fell to her knees on the roughness of splintered, wooden steps.

Nora did not quite know when the wire was withdrawn. She was only grimly aware that her pain had somewhat lessened, only vaguely aware that she was being lifted, limp and barely conscious, into a place that was close and musty with dead air.

Motion ceased. She seemed to be lying on something horizontal and hard, and a

greenish glow seemed to be beating against her eyelids. There seemed to be a murmur of intonationless voices all around her.

Suddenly the shock of freezing water brought her back to awareness, the shock of icy water that poured its frigid barbs deep into her, and rocked her reeling brain back to consciousness.

She was on a long table strewn with the debris of a banquet, stained with spilled wine. Lolling grey heads stretched before her in an endless line, heads from whose faceless masks gibbered a low and terrible laughter, and on whose bosoms glowed the green insignia of the cancelled star. It was at her that they laughed, at her bleeding body. Even devils from hell might have had pity on her, but these fiends jiggled with sadistic laughter.

The laughter of the grey specters was terrible, but from behind Nora came a mewling, animal sound that was worse. It sent shivers of revulsion through her, but she had to turn to see from what kind of mad beasts it came.

She saw no beasts. She saw four nude girls chained to stakes by steel girdles about the red-streaked flesh of their middles. Girls? Once they had been laughing-eyed, supple maidens roaming the hillside. Now they were straggle-haired haridans, their mouths gaping with mindless laughter, their blood-dripping hands reaching out to clutch her, to make her one of their company.

From their bodies hung hundreds of feathered darts! Even as Nora glimpsed, them another pointed arrow arced through the air and spanged into the breast of the black-haired one on the end. Another found berth in the thigh of the red-haired one next to her, and both girls rocked with insane laughter, because the darts had not missed them.

"Enough!" a great voice boomed through the raftered space that enclosed this scene. "Enough. We have work to do."

There was a sudden hush, except for the gibberings of the girls chained to the stakes. Through the abrupt silence a single maudlin voice rose, "Accidents? More accidents, master? Bring 'em on."

"None are needed," the voice answered. Nora saw that it came from the head of the table, where a swathed specter, burlier than the rest, had risen to his feet. "Our friends are convinced. They are fleeing from the Sign of the Star and by dawn this hilltop will be ours. But there is one lacking to our triumph, one whom all night we have awaited. You there, where is he?"

NORA stared at him for a long moment before she realized that it was she whom he addressed. Then she shook her head dumbly.

"Answer!"

The girl's throat worked, her torn lips twisted, and at last sound came from them. "I don't know."

"You lie. He left Sarr Junction with you, bringing you here, and he was not in the cab that was wrecked by accident." A ripple of laughter went along the table at the word "accident." "You know what became of him, and you will tell us."

"I don't know."

The questioner shrugged. "We were wearied by our entertainment." His grey hand gestured to the girls whose nudity bristled with the darts for which they had served as targets. "We should be grateful for your obduracy, which will furnish us with a new variety." His voice was abruptly crisp with authority. "Spread-eagle her."

Four of the nearest mummies rose. They grasped her, forced her down flat on the table. In an instant there were thongs about her wrists and her ankles. Her arms were brought up over her head and fastened that way. Her legs were spread, the ropes tautening, holding them. She lay helpless on her back and lascivious

laughter rippled the length of the table.

Nora stared straight upward, holding on to the last shreds of her sanity with the last shreds of her weary will. It was funny, it was very funny. In this same night she had flushed with shame because a man had kissed her, and she had responded. Now she lay here, naked except for a few tattered wisps of fabric, exposed to the gaze of a half-hundred men. Or *were* they men?

They must be! They had to be. If they were not, then indeed the world had gone mad, and there was no hope for her.

She must not think about it. She must look at that strange light hung from the rafter above her, that huge green star with the two lines across it. It burned her staring eyes. Then she looked at the shadows in the corners of the ceiling, the wavering shadows filling the recesses of the balcony that ran around it. The balcony—this must be Gadsden's Casino.

Nora retched with laughter. She had come to Fardale. That was what she had wanted. Andy Carter had kept his promise.

"Where is he?"

The grey leader was bending over her. He was no longer faceless. Vaguely, as through a cloud, she could make out his countenance. It was grizzled, walrus-mustached. On the left cheek was a sprawling birthmark, a livid blotch the shape of a star!

Nora knew that face. She had looked too often at the picture in Asha Sooten's store not to recognize it. *This was Fasnét Gadsden*—dead for a generation and come back, as Asha always had predicted, to Benson's Bald!

Now indeed she knew there was no mercy for her, no hope.

"Where is he?" the hollow voice demanded again. Between the returned dead and Nora was a spidery something, a something that glinted metallically in the spectral light. A lever came up from be-

low the edge of the table and crooked over to hold a long, horizontal bar, and from this bar thrust down at the girl six slim rods.

"I don't know." She didn't. If she knew, she would tell. Andy had betrayed her to this and she hated him.

A whirr started somewhere. Those rods were turning now. They were tipped by little round, serrated bulbs and it was because of these that she could tell they were turning. There was something reminiscent about that wicked whirr, about those whirling, slim rods. Something . . . they were drills, dentist's drills! But these were fastened in a frame so that there were two just above Nora's knees and two above her breasts, and the last two pointed at her eyes.

Faster and faster they turned. till they were blurred by their speed and the whirr of their whirling was a waspish buzz. And now—Oh God!—the grey hand that held the lever was moving and the drills were descending, slowly, so slowly, down upon her!

"WHERE is he?" the implacable voice of the leader of the grey hosts demanded. "Where?"

The burrs were not equal in length. The ones at her knees were the longest. They would enter her flesh first. Then, when they had bored through flesh and bone and the pain of them was unendurable, whirling metal would find her breast. It was her eyes that would go last. By that time she would welcome blindness, death.

Brrrrr . . . "Where is he?"

"I don't know," Nora shrieked. "I tell you I don't know."

The whirring drills descended implacably. That *brrrr* was entering her skull. The sound as piercing, as torturing as the metal would be, in seconds now, in a few terrible seconds. The sound wound the fibres of her brain, fraying it to its fundamental nerve threads, tearing each one of

the myriad till each one was a separate pain, a separate agony. The spinning burrs held Nora's eyes with a terrible fascination. They were winding her reason on their whirling treadles.

They would not touch her. Their slow lowering was a threat, only a threat. At the last moment the grey fiend would believe that she did not know where Andy was, and would relent.

"Where is he?" Brrrrr . . .

"I—don't—know. Please believe me. I don't know where he is."

The drills kept on descending. There was only their whirr in a pent, throbbing silence. The tortured girls were silent and watching. The faceless mummies were silent, waiting for Nora to break, waiting for her to go mad.

She would not. They could torment her, kill her, but she would die sane. Nora forced her staring vision away from the whirling drills, forced it back to the ceiling, to the shadowed gallery under the ceiling.

Something was moving on that balcony, far down at the other end. A form. It came into the glow of the high-hung star, and Nora saw its face. Andy Carter's, pallid, and drawn, and netted with red scratches!

"Where is he?" the implacable inquisitor demanded again. Nora felt the wind of the whirling drills on her knees, felt the steel pluck at her skin. And stared at the ghastly face of Andy Carter as it drifted along that gallery rail. She had only to speak, to betray him . . .

The wicked, whirling burrs bit into the skin of her knees. The fierce pain dragged a wild, high scream from Nora. The long bar lifted a little and the spectral voice said, "Your last chance. Where is he?"

Nora's lips moved. For the space of three heart throbs no sound came from them. Then. "I don't know."

The burrs jerked down again. There was a clap of thunder—or of gun-fire,

from the gallery. A heavy body fell across Nora, and the terrible burring stopped. Orange-red flash came from the gallery again, and streaking flames were answering it from the grey mummies here below. Somewhere there was a smash of shattering wood. A lithe form heaved over the gallery rail, dropped down to the floor below, sprinted toward Nora, two automatics in its hands flashing fire.

The grey mummies were breaking, scattering. But two were swinging to her, guns in their grey-swathed mittens. Red flare flashed over her, and they went down. Andy leaped on the table, straddling her and the guns in his hands jumped like live things as lead streaked from them. Abruptly they were silent.

He had emptied them, and he would have no time to reload. The grey hosts, what was left of them, halted, started to surge back. They were met by a ratatat of angry sound. They were melting away. There were none of them left.

Andy's legs folded under him, and he sprawled across the table. "Nora!" a hoarse voice shouted. "Oh, God, Nora." Dad's face swam over Nora. Black clouds swirled about it, black clouds that swirled up in her brain and finally brought longed-for oblivion.

**T**HE white sheets of her own bed were cool against Nora Lane's tortured flesh. Her mother's frail hands had been very gentle, applying healing unguents to her wounds, binding them. Now Mom had gone out to prepare breakfast and Dad was sitting beside her.

"They was a bunch of what you call 'em, Fascists," Jed Lane was saying. "They had some kind of scheme of building up an army to take over the country. They figgered that in a couple of years we'd get mixed up in a big war and send all our able-bodied men over to the other side, and then they could move right in. They needed a place where they could

train their army, and lay up their munitions. Benson's Bald was just right for them. If they could get rid of us and wreck the railroad, there wouldn't be no reason for anyone's ever coming up here. There ain't even good hunting in the woods, like you know.

"They had us fooled all right, especially with that dumb fool Asha Sooten blabbering about Fasnet Gadsden coming back. I swan I believed him and was all ready to move out."

"Gadsden did come back. I saw him—"

"Not Fasnet Gadsden, Nora. His son. He was their leader, the Master of Accidents."

"But the girls, dad! Why did—?" Nora shuddered, remembering.

Lane's face went bleak. "What kind of riff-raff do you think would fall in with a scheme like that? Their leader had to give in to them when they stole the gals from their homes and let them carry on like they did, or there would have been trouble.

"They had all kinds of disguises stowed in the cellar of the casino, like the masks of one-way glass that made them look like they had no faces. We found one gadget on one of them we couldn't make out what it was for. There was a bunch of batteries hitched around his waist in a kind of pouched belt and a wire ran down from them to a metal plate on his foot. Another wire ran down his arm to a stick he held in his hand from the end of which a wire dangled. Now what that could be used for—"

"I know," Nora's face went white. "I know and I don't want to talk about it."

"Well," Lane shrugged. "If it wasn't for that fellow Carter—"

"Andy! Who is he? What did he come here for, and why did he leave me alone in the woods? And what—"

"Wait, Nora. Mebbe I better let him answer you." Lane rose, and went to the bedroom door. He opened it and went out.

In half a minute it opened again and Andy Carter tiptoed in, his head and left hand bandaged, a sheepish grin on what could be seen of his face.

He stood next to the bed, looking down at her. "Will you forgive me, Nora?" he asked in a low, meek voice. "I thought you were one of them."

"I'm the one to ask forgiveness, Andy," the girl replied. "When they said they were waiting for someone I was sure it was you they meant, and I was sure you were their leader. I couldn't figure out any other reason why you would be so anxious to get to Fardale, and why you acted to me as you did."

"So we're yours," Carter grinned.

"Not till you tell me who you really are. I can't stand any more mysteries. Who are you, Andy Carter?"

"Andrew Montague Carter, young lady. "Lieutenant Carter, of the United States Army, Intelligence Corps." He clicked heels, saluted. "At your service, my lady."

"And you were coming here to—"

"Investigate the reason why a case of machine guns was sent in to Fardale, labelled machinery a week ago. Why it disappeared from the freight car on the way here. I found out," he grinned wryly. "And I found the machine gun cache. Tumbled into it when I was crawling through the woods to get help after that smashup, and got knocked out again, and

lay there for half an hour before I got my wits together. It was one of those guns, handled very ably by your father, that finished off the Legion of the Star."

"You—you were crawling for help—"

"After I dragged you out of the cab. I was pretty badly smashed up myself, Nora, and I couldn't get you much further than I did. When I came to again I was more myself and I went back to that clearing. You were gone."

"I trailed you through the woods, and lost your trail in the open, and somehow stumbled on that old fellow's general store. He told me about a youngster yelping something about green stars in the casino, and I got the picture. But those two hours, from the time I found you had vanished from the clearing till the grey men were killed and everything went blank on me again, were the worst two hours of my life."

"But why, Andy. You thought I was one of the people you were fighting?"

"No. I knew by that time you were too fine and too sweet to be. And I knew —" He hesitated, reddening.

"Yes, Andy. Go on."

"I knew, my dear, that I love you."

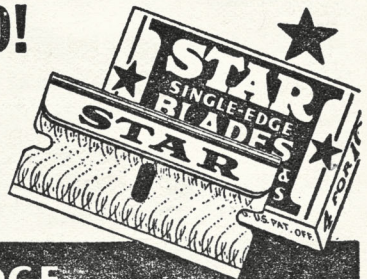
Nora lifted her bandaged arms to him. He knelt, and came into them. Their lips met again, and this time there was no aftermath of regret for the kiss that merged them.

THE END



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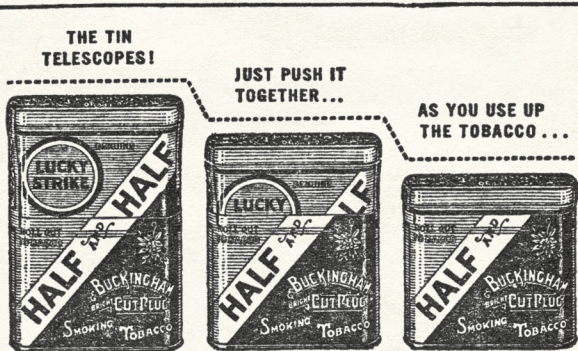
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# Case of the Severed Heads

By Leon Byrne



It was Dippy, monstrous and glowering, the machete in his hand dripping blood!

*One of Ann's pursuers was the village idiot, bearing a machete stained with the fresh blood of three people. The other was a huge, ape-like monster, with murder in his eyes. And they caught her in the cornfield, near the scarecrow upon which was skewered the newly severed head of Ann's lovely cousin! . . .*

ANN GORDON reached for the letter, and the hand that passed it to her was trembling. It was the hand of Al Wheel's nephew, a young man with watery eyes and no chin. He had just taken charge of the general store and post office, for Al Wheel would never again squirt tobacco juice on his own floor—or anywhere else.

A farmer who had come into the store

early that morning had found Al Wheel's head grinning at him from the counter. There wasn't any body under the head; just a pool of blood.

The murderer had struck twice in two days. Early risers the morning before had been shocked by the gruesome sight of Widow Hewitt's head, impaled on a picket of the fence which surrounded her neat white cottage. She had lived there for years, with one woman servant. Wid-

ow Hewitt had been Ann Gordon's great-aunt.

No trace of the bodies belonging to the heads had been found. . . .

Leaving the store, Ann Gordon paused on the narrow porch outside. Usually at this time the younger men of the village, finished with their day's work, would sit on the porch railing and swap stories and smirk at the girls who came by. But there was nobody on the porch now. Nobody was in sight on the little main street of the village. Ann Gordon had a feeling that all the townspeople were huddled in their homes, cowering in fear of the killer who left only grisly heads as evidence of his crimes.

Two heads in two days! Would there be another one tomorrow? Or, perhaps, even sooner than tomorrow?

Ann hurried along the sidewalk, turned into the dirt road which led to Charlie's farm. Night was coming fast and her destination was about half a mile from the village. Anxiously she glanced up at the sky. Dark rainclouds were hovering in the west. There was a strange quiet, even the birds and insects had become silent. The whole country-side seemed to be waiting in hushed suspense for something dreadful.

Suddenly Ann Gordon stopped, her hands shooting up to her throat, her breath coming in short gasps. The man who looked like an ape had come around the bend of the road, heading for her.

He was huge, that man, with arms which dangled almost to his knees, and he lumbered toward her with the shuffling gait of a great ape. When he came nearer she saw that there was something apish about his face, too, with its broad flat nose and tiny close-set eyes. She had never seen him before, but she felt that he must be a murdering maniac. No one who looked like that could be sane.

Terror held her in a vise. To save her life she couldn't move. The tiny eyes

seemed to hypnotise her. The massive slash which was a mouth opened and said, "Hiya, toots."

She ran then, as if she had been shot from the mouth of a cannon.

"HEY!" a voice yelled behind her. She knew she hadn't a chance if she stayed on the road. On the right was a cornfield—the beginning of her cousin Charlie's farm. The stalks were at least six feet high; the rows between stalks were like a labyrinth where she had a better chance to hide or shake off pursuit. She plunged into the field.

"Hey!" the voice said again.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the ape-like man racing after her. Seconds later she was running between two rows of corn, her lungs nearly bursting.

At last she broke out of the cornfield into a cabbage patch. About a thousand feet away was the red roof of the farm house. Could she make it in time?

As she ran she realized what a fool she had been for having gone to the village for Roger's letter. Charlie had warned her not to. He had told her that he was too busy to go himself, and she couldn't drive a car. For three days she hadn't heard from the man to whom she was engaged, so she had set out for the post office in spite of the horror which hovered over the community. And now, running and clutching Roger's letter in her hand, she wondered if she would ever read it.

In the middle of the cabbage patch stood a scarecrow. As she neared it, she had a fleeting impression that it moved. Involuntarily she screamed. Then she clamped her lips shut, knowing that the scream would tell her pursuer where she was.

A moment later Ann was screaming again, hysterically.

The scarecrow had a face. A human face! The heart-shaped face of Kate Gordon, Charlie's wife! But from the neck



down there was still the familiar scare crow—ragged clothes filled with straw, held up by a pole and cross-arm. Only now—Kate's head was the crowning horror.

Ann's legs turned to jelly. She swayed, fighting the faintness which was closing in on her; then she suddenly straightened up with a jerk. Her mouth was open, but she was no longer screaming. Her voice was paralyzed in her throat.

A figure stepped out of the cornfield. Instead of the ape-like man it was small, twisted, with a flat head lower than its shoulders. Under beetling eyebrows blood-shot eyes stared at her. She had seen this man hanging around the general store several days ago. It was Dippy, the village idiot. He had seemed harmless then, the butt of the smaller boys' pranks. He wasn't harmless now!

His hands gripped a machete almost as big as himself. Dull red splotches were on its blade.

Ann crossed her arms over her breast and took a single step backward. "No!" she whispered. "Oh, my God!"

The idiot moved toward her, the tip of the machete trailing on the ground. When he reached her, he would swing it and it would slice her head clean off her body. . . .

The idiot's eyes stayed on her, intently, lingering on the slender lines of her body.

"**DIPPY,**" a voice behind her said. Ann Gordon half-turned so that she could keep her eyes on the idiot and at the same time see the newcomer. It was the ape-like man who had been chasing her. He looked without emotion at the head of Kate Gordon on top of the scarecrow, then at Ann, then at the idiot.

"Dippy," he said again. "How'd you like to sell that big knife?"

The idiot gripped the machete tighter. "Mine," he said.

"I'll pay you for it, Dippy." He dug a

hairy hand into a pocket and brought out a coin. "Look, Dippy, a dime. Gimme the big knife and it's all yours."

It was utterly horrible, one monstrous creature offering to pay the other for the pleasure of decapitating her, Ann Gordon. Offering ten cents! She was caught between two homicidal madmen.

"Mine," the idiot said.

He shook his head as if it were on a hinge, his eyes filled with childish grief that anybody would want to take that beautiful and bloody knife away from him.

"I'll give you a fishing pole, too," the ape-like man said. "How about it, Dippy?"

She was directly between the two of them, but both were looking past her at each other. She tensed. This was her last chance. She turned suddenly and dashed for the cornfield. She saw Dippy move backward and disappear into the corn, the other way, and then she heard pursuing feet behind her and a voice shout, "Wait, you dope!"

Then she was amid the corn stalks and there was nothing but a world of corn and a patch of darkening sky above. She couldn't see the farm house from here; she couldn't see anything but corn. And wandering between the rows of corn in this field looking for her were two maniacs who wanted to kill her!

She paused, panting, listening. Suddenly the sound of a heavy body furiously breaking through the stalks sounded at her side. Wildly she started running again. The corn was so big and the rows were so close together that she couldn't see five feet in front of her. An enormous form loomed up at her side; a hand shot out for her shoulder. She squirmed, shrieking, flinging herself away from the shape.

Then she was sprawling face down on the ground, a powerful hand gripping her ankle. She lay still, waiting for death.

"You dope!" a voice said. "Beats me what damn fools gals'll be. What's the idea being out alone? Want your head chopped off?"

She turned her head without moving the rest of her body.

"Who are you?" she asked timorously.

"Me?" He grinned, making his face several shades uglier than it had been. It wasn't a pleasant sight. "I'm Billy Uhl. My God, toots, ain't you got more sense than go running through fields with something loose that's chopping folk's heads off?"

"Oh," Ann said. "You weren't chasing me?"

"Sure not. I was trying to warn you about going into the fields. Craziest thing I ever seen."

She didn't know whether or not to believe him. He looked forbidding enough, like the kind of fiend who would decapitate people and place their heads in conspicuous places. She said weakly: "I became frightened."

Billy Uhl grinned again. "My ugly mug scare you?" he said. "Don't know's I blame you, toots."

"No, I—" she began. Then she stopped. "That idiot—Dippy. He's in the corn here. He might come on us suddenly with that machete."

"It's all right, I'll hear him. I got good ears."

"He—he just killed Kate."

"Mebbe," Billy Uhl said. "Shame, ain't it? Kate's the third one."

**T**HERE was a silence. The darkness was increasing and terror returned to Ann. Perhaps this Billy Uhl was the killer after all.

He said: "You're Charlie Gordon's cousin, ain't you? Live in Rochester and come out here three days ago to spend a week with Charlie and Kate."

She looked at him. "How did you know?"

"Small place and news gets around. That's two of your close kin killed—your aunt Widow Hewitt and Kate. Damn shame. Say, Kate and Charlie ain't been hitting it off so good, have they?"

"No," Ann said. "The farm hasn't been paying and the worry has been making them constantly quarrel and— What business is that of yours? You're not trying to say that Charlie killed Kate?"

"Not saying a thing."

Ann stood up. "That idiot killed Kate and my great-aunt and Al Wheel. You saw the bloody machete in his hands. He was going to kill me."

"Mebbe," Billy Uhl said. "What do you say we take you home, toots?"

He lumbered up to his feet. She followed him through the corn, keeping as close to him as possible. In the dim light he looked even more like a great ape than before. She still wasn't sure that he and Dippy weren't the killers, but at least there was a chance that Billy Uhl wasn't. Somewhere in the corn Dippy was lurking with that deadly, blood-stained machete. An any moment he might leap out on them.

When they got out of the cornfield, Ann saw the lights of the farmhouse ahead. She began to breathe more easily.

"I'm sorry I ran away from you," she said. "I guess you saved my life."

Billy Uhl said nothing. His jaw hung slack. She looked up at him and felt sorry for him. A poor harmless freak, she thought.

Charlie Gordon and Jep Long and Charlie's farm hand, Hal, were in the house. Charlie was a broad-shouldered, handsome man of about thirty-five. Jep Long, thin, loose-jointed, was the village constable. He sat on the horsehair couch with a rifle across his knee.

"Hello, Miss Gordon," Jep Long greeted as she and Billy Uhl entered. "How you, Billy? We were worried about you, Miss Gordon. Nobody ought to go out alone these days."

Charlie said anxiously: "Didn't Kate go with you, Ann? When Hal and I came back from the fields she wasn't in. I got worried and called up the store. They said you'd been there but not Kate, so I called up Jep. We're going to look for her. God, if anything has happened to her!"

"She's all right," Jep Long said. "I told you she's likely visiting a neighbor. She's sure to be—"

Ann exploded into tears and ran to her cousin. With her head against Charlie's chest, she sobbed out the story.

"No," Charlie kept mumbling as he listened. "Not Kate!" His face was as hard as if it had been chiselled from stone. He removed Ann's arms from about him and took down the shotgun which hung over the fireplace. "So it's Dippy did it," he said in a strange, tight voice. He made for the door.

Billy Uhl stuck out a hand as Charlie passed him and grabbed his shoulder. "You ain't the law," Billy Uhl said. "And we ain't sure it's Dippy. Lets do it regular. We'll get a posse to bring Dippy in. Jep, you're the law. Tell him not to be a damn fool."

"Sure," Jep Long said. "Let the law bring him in."

**W**ITH a sudden jerk Charlie broke Billy Uhl's grip and plunged through the door. Billy Uhl slammed after him. Then Jep Long rose and went out without hurrying. He walked as if he preferred to remain in the house.

Hal, the hired hand, coughed. "Reckon I ought to go out there with them, but I don't like leaving you alone."

Ann sank down into a chair. A wall clock was ticking with monotonous regularity and it seemed to her that her heart was beating just as loud.

She said: "Perhaps this Billy Uhl is the killer. He frightens me."

Hal laughed dryly. "Reckon looking at him is pretty bad till you get used to him.

He's got a heart of gold and wouldn't hurt a fly. But the laziest man I know. The folks in the county wanted to elect him sheriff, but he turned it down."

"Sheriff?" she said, astonished.

"Sure. He don't look like he's got anything above his eyes, but whenever the police of the county are up a tree they ask him for help. He's got a knack for figuring things out and they don't come braver. And he knows everything around here. He lives in a rundown shack and does odd jobs when he needs money, but mostly he sits in the sun and everybody comes around and talks to him. He turned down the sheriff's job because he says it's too much like work. Funny guy, Billy Uhl."

Through the window Ann could see that outside the darkness was complete. The sky was black, starless, and the air was heavy with humidity. She found that she was sweating, but it wasn't only because of the humidity. The sweat turned cold as it trickled down her skin.

Hal stood up and started to drift toward her. He looked at her with a strange kind of concentration. "You're the prettiest gal I ever seen," he whispered hoarsely.

She stood up too. Suddenly she was panting. Everything was so still save for the ticking of the clock and the pounding of her heart. She slid behind the chair so that it would be between herself and Hal. Why was he looking at her like that? His eyes seemed to be fixed on her slender white throat. Was he thinking of how easy a knife could bite through it?

Then she saw the short-handled axe. There were several around the farm, but what would an axe be doing on the table in this room? Had it been used recently—not for chopping wood? One stroke of its sharp blade would sever a head from its body.

Hal had stopped. He had followed the direction of her gaze, was also looking at

the axe. The blade shone under the electric bulb—as if it had just been wiped clean. Fascinated, he stared at it. Then, as if he were afraid of it he reached for the handle.

“No!” Ann shrieked. “What are you going to do with that axe?”

He turned to look at her again, his tongue running over his lips. “This axe,” he whispered, “how easy it could bite through a neck.”

With a mad scream, she ran for the door. Better the darkness outside than to be cooped up here with a man who might be the killer. She pushed open the door, slammed it behind her. Then she screamed again.

Light coming from the window revealed Dippy gaping at her stupidly, the bloody machete still clasped in his two hands.

She was hardly conscious of pumping her legs, of the shrieks tearing from her throat. In a little while, she knew, she would be mad with terror. She looked up and saw the dim outline of the barn in front of her. Then a shape leaped up in front of her and an anxious voice said: “That you, toots? You all right?”

She fell into massive arms, panted against a barrel chest. She wasn't afraid of Billy Uhl now. He and Charlie were the only people she could trust, the only ones who could save her sanity, her life.

The door of the farm house was open and Hal stood there with the light at his back. “Miss Gordon,” Hal called. “Come back to the house.”

“What happened?” Billy Uhl asked, hilding her in his arms. The darkness blotted out his ugliness and the strength of his arms was comforting.

“I saw Dippy,” she gasped out. “He still had that bloody machete. I screamed and ran.”

“You screamed half a minute before that,” Billy Uhl said. “And why'd you leave the house?”

“I was afraid of Hal. There was an axe on the table and he was going to pick it up. And he kept looking at me.”

“Sure,” Billy Uhl said. “Don't blame a man for looking at you. Don't see many gals like you around here. Why shouldn't there be an axe on the table? Lots of axes around a farm. You're a dope. You're scaring yourself crazy.”

She broke away from him. “Who do you think you are, calling me names?”

“All right, toots.”

“And don't call me toots.”

“Sure, baby.” He closed a hand about her arm. “Come back to the house. Ain't safe in this dark. Guess I was a sap for going away from you. But those two out there in the dark, Charlie and Jep, it's bad business. Can't see five feet without a flash.”

But somebody else had a flashlight. Its beam leaped into life a hundred feet away, cutting through the night in a swinging arc. It swept past them, stopped, and came back.

**B**ILLY UHL'S shoulder knocked Ann to the ground. Then she felt his great weight falling on her legs. An instant later a gun roared. The flash moved, found them again. Billy Uhl threw himself over the ground, pulling Ann along with him. The gun roared again. Ann felt herself snatched up and then Billy Uhl was running with her in his arms. A third time the gun spoke. This time she imagined she felt the hot breath of the bullet streak past her.

Then they were inside the barn. It was black as pitch in there, but Billy Uhl seemed to have eyes which could see in the dark. He went straight to the ladder, and handling her as easily as a baby, he climbed up to the hayloft. Ann found that she was whimpering hysterically; she must have started whimpering the moment Billy Uhl had knocked her down.

He placed her gently down on the hay. "You all right, toots?" he whispered.

"Only my legs," she gasped between sobs. "You fell on them. They're numb."

"Close," he said between his teeth. "Damn it, if I'd had a gun . . ."

He dropped down suddenly beside Ann, his great body tense against hers. Somebody had entered the barn. Through the opening she could see a flashlight sweeping the interior of the barn. If Billy Uhl hadn't brought her up here, the killer could have picked them off down there with his gun. But wouldn't he think of coming up to the hayloft?

Billy Uhl's mouth was against her ear, whispering. "Take it easy, toots. He's got more sense than to come up here. I'd get him while he was climbing the ladder."

The beam traveled up the ladder. Ann burrowed deeper into the hay. The flash snapped off suddenly and they heard the killer leaving. The barn door closed behind him. Under them a horse kicked his stall.

"How will we get out?" Ann said. "What will we do now?"

"Can't say."

There was a strained silence. Then Ann's voice quavered in the darkness: "Billy, there's somebody up here with us."

"Huh?"

"A body. I just touched it. Perhaps somebody dead."

Billy Uhl crawled past her, pushing her gently out of the way. She moved away, shivering violently. Then a scream choked in her throat. Her hand had come down on something cold and solid and sticky.

"God!" Billy Uhl said. He struck a match. The flare illuminated a dim circle about them, revealing three corpses. Each was headless.

Ann fainted.

When she came to, Billy Uhl was rubbing her wrists. She tried to sit up.

"Lay there," he said. "Hell, you been through a lot tonight."

"Those bodies," she said, "are they—"

"Yeah. Weren't killed here because there's not much blood on the hay. Al Wheel was shot and Widow Hewitt stabbed and there's no mark on Kate Gordon. The killer brought them up here after he chopped their heads off."

Ann said: "Here? Charlie's barn? You asked me before if Charlie and Kate quarrelled. Oh, God! Did Charlie get Dippy to kill them, and then—just before he shot at us—"

"Not Dippy," Billy Uhl grumbled. "He's just an idiot; he wouldn't kill anybody. And if he did, he wouldn't have—what? Method. Yeah, that's it—method. Dippy would just kill. And as for Charlie—well—"

The barn door opened again. This time no light flashed. They heard somebody moving below. Billy Uhl, who was looking down, let out a yell. He moved toward the ladder.

The beam of the flashlight jumped up the ladder, and Billy Uhl fell back.

"He's burning the barn!" Billy Uhl said. "If we go down, he'll pick us off."

Ann sat up, clinging to Billy Uhl. A pile of hay in the corner of the barn was already blazing. She could make out the form of the killer going through the door. He left the door open. He would be standing just outside the door where he could see the ladder.

Billy Uhl was cursing aloud. "If I had a gun! I should of taken a chance jumping down on him. Now it's too late."

**T**HE horses started to scream. It was amazing how quickly the fire spread. He must have used kerosene on the dry hay. In two or three minutes the whole barn would be ablaze.

"I'll get you out, toots," Billy Uhl yelled above the cackling of the flames. "Leave it to Billy."

He went to the back wall of the hay-loft. Ann went with him, hanging onto his arm. "Out of my way, toots," he said roughly. He pulled back one of his tremendous arms and struck the wall with his first. The board quivered, but didn't break.

The fire below illuminated the entire loft. Ann looked back at the three headless bodies and turned away, quickly. It was strange how calm she had become at this moment of utmost danger, as if all the fear in her had been exhausted.

Billy Uhl crashed against the wall with his shoulder. Two of the boards cracked. He used his shoulder once more, then attacked the boards with his fists. The two boards parted. He tore them away with his hands. Ann went into a paroxysm of coughing. She was breathing smoke. The straw in the loft was burning now. Below, the horses were screaming terribly.

"You can get through," Billy Uhl coughed. "Maybe me, too. Here you go."

He pushed her through the opening, holding onto her hands, and lowered her as far as he could reach. As she hung there, she heard his voice above her: "Run like hell for the cornfield as soon as you drop." Then he let go.

The ground came up to meet her. Her legs folded up under the impact. As she lay stunned on the ground, feeling as if every bone in her body were shattered, a voice yelled above the roar of the fire: "Run!"

She got to her feet, surprised that she could stand, and headed for the cornfield. It seemed a vast distance away. Halfway there she dropped. She was in darkness, out of the circle of light made by the blazing barn.

The entire back of the barn was a sheet of roaring flame. He's dead, she thought numbly. He couldn't squeeze his huge bulk through the opening.

Dippy appeared from around the side

of the barn, goggling at the inferno, dragging the bloody machete behind him. And then a ball of fire came hurtling out of the heart of the flame. Billy Uhl! Flame shot up from his body. He landed on his feet, swayed to retain his balance; then threw himself down, rolling on the ground, beating at his burning clothes with his hands. Dippy stared at him in fascination.

Ann tried to scream a warning to Billy Uhl. Helpless as he was on the ground, Dippy could slice his head off with a single blow. But sound would not push past her throat.

**S**LOWLY Billy Uhl rose. Dippy took a step backward, hugging the machete to his chest. "Mine," Dippy said. "It's mine." Billy Uhl gave him a single glance, then staggered around the farther side of the barn.

Then Ann saw the body lying just at the outer rim of light. It lay in a huddled heap, its back toward her. Who was it—Hal or Jep Long or Charlie? The fourth corpse, this one still with its head attached to its body. She would be the fifth if she stayed out here in the open. Billy Uhl had told her to hide in the cornfield. He knew her danger. He knew everything.

She started to get to her feet, then turned suddenly rigid. The sound of feet behind her! Oh, God, the killer!

With an effort she twisted around on the ground, and found herself staring up at Jep Long. His rifle was held lightly on the crook of his arm, his finger on the trigger. A sad smile twisted the corners of his mouth.

Then behind him she saw a dark form running. Jep Long heard the patter of feet. He whirled, bringing up the rifle.

"Stay where you are, Billy," Jep Long said.

Billy Uhl stopped a few feet from the constable. His face was black from fire

and smoke; his clothes were in rags. He looked past Jep Long at Ann.

"You dope," Billy Uhl said. "I told you to hide in the cornfield. I knew he'd keep going around the barn to see that we didn't get away live."

"You mean me?" Jep Long asked. "What are you talking about?"

"You're the killer," Billy Uhl said.

Jep Long was still smiling—a hard, deadly smile. "You're crazy." His eyes shifted for an instant toward Dippy who was still gazing raptly at the fire. "Dippy done it."

"That's what you want us to think," Billy Uhl said. "Dippy ain't a killer. You gave him that big knife, so's when you killed all your kin, you'd kill him too and say he was the one. I knew it had to be you or Charlie. Then, when you shot at me and Miss Gordon, you gave yourself away. Charlie had a shotgun. A rifle shot at us. The first two killings didn't make sense. Then when I saw Kate Gordon's head, it did. You're after Widow Hewitt's money. You knew she was thinking of making a will. Me and the widow, we were good friends. She talked to me last week; said it was time she made a will, she told me she had five living kin, none very close to her. You and Al Wheel weren't kin to Charlie or Ann Gordon, but you were to Widow Hewitt on the other side of the family. You knew she had a mite of money and

you wanted all of it. If you killed off all the other heirs before she made a will, you'd get it all."

Jep Long brought the rifle up a little higher. "Who'll believe you?"

"That's Charlie Gordon lying there," Billy Uhl said. He stood like an ape, his long arms dangling down his side. "He's dead. When they dig the bullet out of him, they'll find it matches your gun."

"Yeah?" Jep Long said. "That barn will burn for a while yet. The fire will have three more bodies—yours and Charlie's and the girl's. Then I'll shoot Dippy and blame him, just like you said. Hal went to get help to put out the fire. Who'll know? You're gonna die, Billy."

It was amazing with what rapidity Billy Uhl could propel his tremendous body forward. He skimmed over the ground, coming in under Jep Long's rifle. He hit the constable's knees the instant the rifle exploded. The bullet whistled over his head.

Then Billy Uhl had his arms around Jep Long. It was over in a few seconds. Jep Long screamed once and was silent.

Ann felt Billy Uhl's hands on her, helping her to her feet. "It's all right now, toots." She saw the broken body of Jep Long on the ground. Dizzily she swayed against Billy Uhl, burying her face against his massive chest which smelled of smoke and charred flesh. She was no longer repelled by his ugliness.



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*Peter Quest gloried in danger, for his one desire was to die before the living tomb of blindness overtook him. But even he quailed before the thought of seeking the unknown monster who had the power to visit such frightfulness upon mankind. .*

By JOHN  
KOBLER



Wealthy Men Disappeared—And  
They Returned Only To Spread  
The Foul And Loathsome Disease!



# Damnation

A Featured  
Novelette

## CHAPTER ONE

### Holocaust

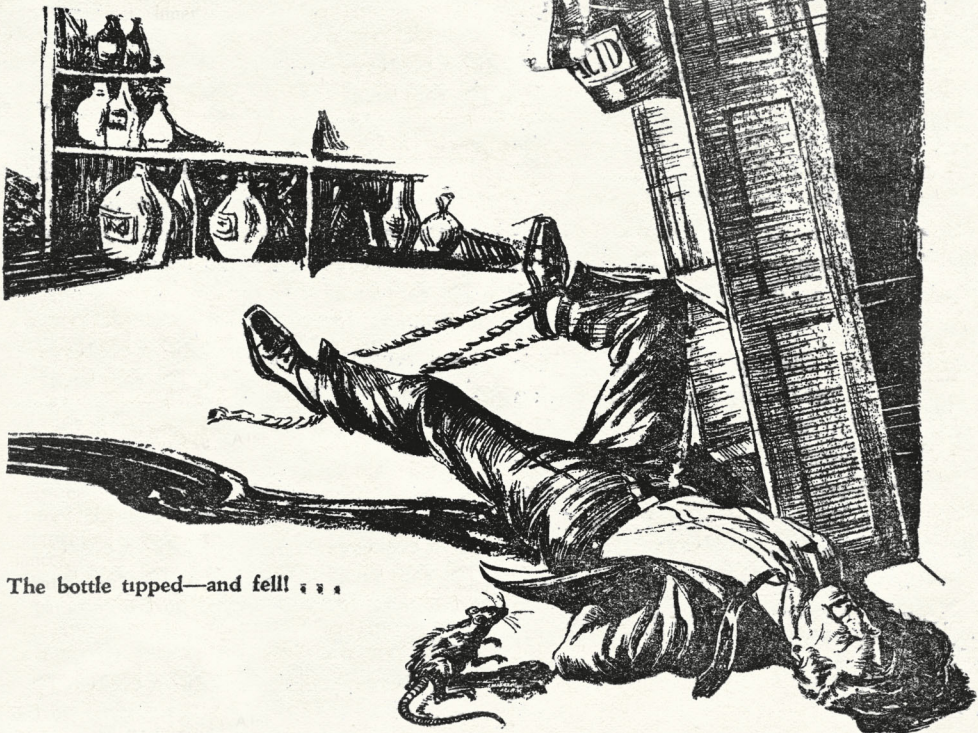
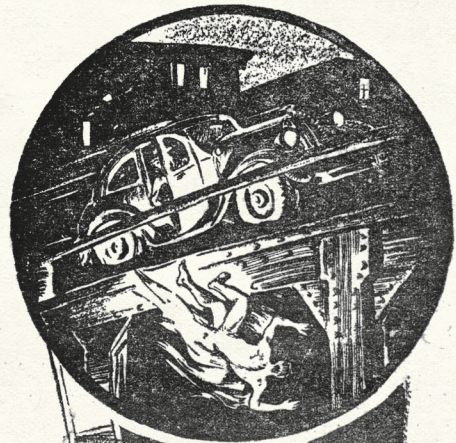
**T**HE DAWN was black as a bat's wing, black with the bottomless blackness of a dismal, late-summer downpour.

Patrolman Skelley, Shield 21356, tightened the collar of his rubber coat, and shook the rain from his dripping helmet. He couldn't recall ever having been so wet before.

His lonely night-to-dawn rounds took him to the top of Vanderbilt Avenue. Here a wide, grey, glistening ramp rises, curves around the Grand Central Building, girding it like some monstrous python constricting a mastodon. Cars threaded cautiously along its humped back.

Patrolman Skelley surveyed the ramp idly, gripping his nightstick behind him

and drumming its knob against the small of his back. It was early morning. The hands of the huge Grand Central clock pointed to quarter to four. At this hour



The bottle tipped—and fell! . . .

the upsurging stream of traffic thinned. Cars crawled by in infrequent groups of two and three. And then for a moment the ramp was empty.

Patrolman Skelley didn't know why, but this simple fact troubled him. The bleakness, the glistening emptiness of the ramp, lifeless and grim, seemingly suspended in mid-air, stirred his imagination.

The emptiness came strangely alive. A low, jet-black, closed sedan emerged from a side street, snaked smoothly up the ramp. It held the center, alone, supreme. But something else froze Patrolman Skelley to a swift halt. It was the blackness of the machine, its severe, unrelieved blackness. Headlights blind. Black shades masking its windows. License muffled by black cloth. A solid mass of black metal.

Patrolman Skelley scowled, lifted his whistle to his chapped lips and blew. "Drivin' widout headlights, eh?" he muttered and quickened his pace.

If the driver of the car heard the whistle, he gave no sign. The car's wheels slackened nor increased its speed but climbed steadily toward Grand Central. Patrolman Skelley yelled and started up the slippery ramp.

As the car reached the crest, it slowed. Abruptly a vague, white figure shot, was catapulted rather, from the black interior of the car. It swayed crazily in the middle of the ramp, while the car resumed speed, swept around the corner of the building.

Patrolman Skelley, mistrusting his senses, saw that the figure was a man, an old man and stark naked. There was something horribly animal to the halfling, half-crawling agony of his movements. He tottered a step forward. It was not the unbalance of a drunkard, but rather of a man drugged, hypnotized.

"Hey!" Patrolman Skelley shouted at him.

For answer the man opened his throat wide and from it issued a scream, a ghast-

ly rending scream of pain that the wind lifted and smashed against Patrolman Skelley's ear-drums.

The officer could never be certain whether the scream came first or the other thing, the sight that he knew he could never tear from his memory. One instant there was a naked man. The next, a spiraling sweep of flame. As it burst from his hair and flesh, the man jumped high off the ground as though a charge of dynamite had exploded under him. For a swift moment the swirling flames brought his features into lurid relief. Eyes, like glowing coals, bulging from their sockets. Skin pulled taut over tortured lips and nose and mouth.

The next moment the flames obscured everything. There, in the center of the ramp, with other cars approaching from below, was this twisting, dancing horror of flame and flesh, orchestrated by the man's screams.

He was on the ground now, or what was left of him. The flames seemed to radiate from his contorted limbs, spread over the ground. The screams that had never faltered or lost any of their intensity faded, sank to a gurgling whimper. Silence.

The whole thing had taken two or three seconds. By the time Patrolman Skelley, sweating with horror and incredulity, reached the spot there was nothing but a smouldering mass of flesh and bones.

The nauseating, foetid stink of burned flesh stung Patrolman Skelley's nostrils. And something else.

Gasoline!

THE frosted-glass office door bore a single word—QUESTS. That was all. It might have meant anything, a trade name, a plan, an ideal.

Only the lean, dark-browed man who sat behind that door knew its real meaning. Peter Quest faced the window high over Fifth Avenue. It was grey in the

setting sun. His index fingers were pressed hard against his eyeballs. When he eased the pressure it was as he feared. The city appeared to him through a mist. Presently he was in total darkness.

For Peter Quest, celibate, hermit, creature of despair and reckless courage, was doomed. Not to death. That he would have welcomed. Glaucoma was the technical name the doctor had given to his ailment. Encroaching blindness. Short spells of it at first that could be relieved only by the drops in the flat bottle he carried over his heart. Then one day would come the final, irretrievable blackness that nothing could pierce.

No, Peter Quest did not fear dying. He feared living, helpless and blind. And for this reason he plunged hungrily again and again into terrible danger, hoping that death would come to him gloriously, triumphantly, in action.

The darkness was upon him now. He fumbled for the bottle in his vest pocket, leaned back and let fall two drops from the bottle-stopper into his eyes. Soon his vision cleared. He returned to the objects on his desk.

There were two metal boxes. One was filled to overflowing with newspaper clippings.

**Mystery Man Quest's Testimony Breaks  
Karp Case . . .**

**Peter Quest Traps Killer . . .**

**Blackmail Ring Smashed . . .**

**Another Quest Victory . . .**

Yet across the face of each clipping Peter Quest had scrawled a single word—"failure." To him these were failures, for he was still alive.

The other file, the empty one; perhaps some day some one would understand, would place in it a single clip, Peter Quest's last case.

But this strange, fate-ridden man had no thought for his files at the moment. He was frowningly studying the front

page of today's newspaper. It told him: "Death came in horrible form at four o'clock this morning to an unidentified man who was burned to death on the Grand Central Station ramp. . . . Police revealed that the victim was about sixty-five, five feet eleven, bald, with the index finger of the left hand missing and a small appendectomy scar. . . ."

Peter Quest read that description for the third time. Then he dove into the pile of communications which burdened his desk. They had come, most of them, from sadly misguided persons with problems ranging from the loss of a pet dog to securing divorce evidence, and Peter Quest had scornfully ignored them. Such matters were not close enough to the heart of danger and Peter Quest lived for danger only.

But among them was one appeal—he cursed himself for having scorned it. The newspaper story told him how wrong he had been, how horribly wrong. He could see the girl now, Mona Rand, as she had looked that day when she visited his office, following her letter. A breath-takingly lovely girl, with her great, searching eyes and her skin soft as magnolia petals. There was breeding and courage in her bearing.

He had seen that she was badly shaken, yet forcing herself to appear composed.

"Mr. Quest," she had said, "only you can help us, Phil and me. Phil's my brother. It's my father, David Rand. He—he's gone."

Peter Quest knew the name, of course. David Rand had been one of the most successful brokers in the history of Wall Street until illness had forced him into retirement. He was a widower. Mona and Phil Rand stood to share two million dollars between them.

Peter Quest had listened to Mona Rand politely, but without great interest. David Rand had vanished. What of it? Scores of old men vanished every year and turned up after they'd had a little fling. There

was a Missing Persons Bureau. It wasn't Peter Quest's meat.

But the girl's moist, splendid eyes held him in spite of himself. "My father left the house three days ago. Just for a walk, he said. He seemed terribly nervous and upset at the time. And he hasn't returned, Mr. Quest. We haven't had a word from him. I'm terrified, absolutely terrified."

At the time he'd gotten a vague impression that Mona Rand wasn't divulging all she knew.

"Have you informed the police?"

"No, certainly not. That's why I've come to you. We want to avoid publicity. I can pay you well, Mr. Quest."

But money didn't interest Peter Quest. He had all he needed for the life that remained to him.

Regretfully he had dismissed the girl, after advising her to seek official aid. Now he wished he hadn't. For the description of the human torch in the newspaper before him left no doubt in his mind. It was David Rand!

The girl had described her father minutely and the description tallied. A surge of pity shook Peter Quest. He hoped she had not yet seen the papers.

Peter Quest rose from his swivel-chair. He was tall and spare and built for swift, flowing movements. He dipped into his pocket again for the precious drops. There was work to be done.

**A** SWINGING, overhead lamp sprayed greenish light over the cold slabs with their burdens of corpses showing eerily through white sheets. Tabs were looped around protruding toes. Peter Quest didn't flinch. Death was familiar to him. He looked on the Old Man With The Scythe almost with affection, as a friend.

He eyed the white-coated attendant questioningly. The attendant silently jerked his thumb at a table. Peter Quest went to it. He stripped off his chamois gloves, pinched a corner of the sheet and

peeled it aside. Like an electric bulb which burns most fiercely in the instant before final extinction, so Peter Quest's eyes possessed an abnormal acuity of vision. They gazed now unblinkingly at the blistered, scorched travesty of a human body under the sheet.

The blackened features formed a grotesque, contorted horror, the limbs, flayed to the bone by flame, caricatured human arms and legs. But in spots the fire had not quite completed its destruction. There were streaks of comparatively untouched flesh and on these Peter Quest riveted his attention.

One such streak ran diagonally from jaw to navel. Peter Quest, who had once been a medical student, reached out his fingers probingly. He was about to touch the dead flesh with his bare fingers when he detected something that made him start back as though he had touched a live wire—a whitish, festering blemish below the heart. Normally unmoved by the spectacle of death even in its most harrowing guise, this thing he saw made his eyes go wide, his breathing stop short. He stared long and hard at the blemish.

Minutes later Peter Quest replaced the sheet. He walked out of the morgue. As he passed through the leather-padded doors, a young doctor, assistant to the medical examiner, approached him, adjusting rubber gloves.

"Hello, Mr. Quest."

"Afternoon, John. I've been looking at that poor devil who was burned to death."

"Yes?"

"Yes. And if I were you I'd handle him with caution. *That man was a leper.*"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Murder by Disease

**T**HE Rand Apartments, built and owned mortgage-free by David Rand, covered a city block between Park and

Madison in the eighties. The Rands occupied a ground-floor duplex with a private entrance separate from the main building. It was a graceful, granite affair, standing in a plot of flowered lawn and ringed by a wrought-iron fence. Yet an aura of tension, of uneasiness seemed to over the arched door as Peter Quest mounted the three steps and pressed the bell.

The door swung back with startling suddenness. Peter Quest became aware of a lithe, smooth-complexioned youth whose raven-black hair trailed wildly across his brow. He stood with one hand resting limply on the doorknob. His eyes were focussing unsteadily. The family resemblance was unmistakable. This must be Phil Rand, thought Peter Quest.

"What do you want?" the boy asked with hostility. His speech was thick. He had obviously been drinking and Peter Quest remembered what he had heard of Phil Rand's reputation. Dissolute. Pleasure-loving. The spoiled son of an indulgent, wealthy father.

Peter Quest's eyes narrowed. He made no answer, but thrust a card into the boy's hand. It bore the one word—QUESTS.

"Quests, eh?" Phil Rand repeated dully. "You're the fellow Sis went to. Well, forget it. She didn't know what she was doing, see? She doesn't want to see you."

He started to shut the door. Peter Quest's foot held it open. "I don't like your manner, son," he said warningly. "If you know what's good for you, you'll tell Miss Rand I'm here."

Surprisingly, the boy made no further resistance. He opened the door wide and Peter Quest stepped into a dark, low hallway. Young Rand jerked his head at an open door. Peter Quest went through, came into a simple, but richly furnished drawing-room. French windows opened on a rear garden.

The boy was gone. In his absence Peter Quest sensed, rather than actually heard, a watchfulness, an alertness about him.

For a moment he could have sworn he heard whisperings close at hand. The next moment the feeling left him and Mona Rand stood before him, composed, icily controlled.

The instant he saw her, Peter Quest knew she had not yet learned of her father's death.

"Miss Rand," he said with the directness which sometimes suited his purposes, "I've changed my mind. I'll help you if I can. You needn't concern yourself about the matter of payment."

The long shadows of late afternoon were stealing across the room. Peter Quest could not see her clearly, but he sensed a quiver of alarm in her. She came closer to him, a wan, not entirely convincing smile on her full, red lips.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Quest, but the fact is there's no need now. I'm afraid I was rather foolish."

"I don't understand you."

He was totally unprepared for the answer. "My father is back and quite well."

Peter Quest turned briskly aside to conceal his confusion. This charming, sweet-faced girl had just lied, deliberately, coldly.

"Indeed? In that case—" He made a movement to leave, then stopped as though struck by an afterthought. "Perhaps I might be allowed to see your father and pay my respects. I've always been an admirer of Mr. Rand."

Mona Rand played out her lie coolly. "Ah, I'm so sorry. Dad is leaving on a long trip tomorrow and he's resting up. He can't see anyone—I'm afraid."

"I see." He wheeled on her savagely. "Why are you lying, Miss Rand?"

She flushed. "How dare you!"

Am I being a fool? Peter Quest wondered. It's no affair of mine. Let the police figure it out. But the next moment he was telling himself that the girl needed help in spite of herself.

He spoke gently. "I must ask you to

prepare yourself for a shock, Miss Rand. Your father isn't in this house. He can't be."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, but—he's dead."

"Dead! You're mad!"

"I wish I were. I've just come from the morgue. There can't be any doubt. From your description—"

She had gone white as a sheet. She swayed, then collapsed into a chair, moaning softly, "Dad . . . Dad."

MINUTES crawled by before she could master her grief. Either it was genuine, that grief, Peter Quest told himself, or the theater had overlooked a consummate actress.

She looked up at him. "Well, Mr. Quest?"

"Your father was murdered, rather horribly murdered I'm afraid. It's all in the papers, though the police haven't identified him yet."

"I must see—I must tell Phil."

"Not just yet. I want to talk to you first. I believe you're in very great danger, Miss Rand. I want to help you, if you'll let me. I want the truth. Why did you lie? What do you know about your father's disappearance?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "Nothing beyond what I've already told you. That's all I can say."

"You're being very foolish. The police won't accept that answer."

"I can't help it. Believe me, I can't."

"Then perhaps you'll tell me this—was your father ill in any way?"

She stiffened violently, looked at him, then looked away. She knew! Peter Quest was positive.

But she answered. "No. His health had never been good, of course. But as for illness—"

The appalling thought crossed Peter Quest's mind that the nature of David Rand's ghastly disease had been known

to his daughter and son. Leprosy is slow to take its toll. He might have lived for years—a tragically unbearable burden. And he was rich. Could Phil and Mona Rand—? He forced the thought from him. He couldn't believe it, not of this girl. Yet why was she lying?

He repeated, "Think carefully. He complained of no illness whatever?"

"Not unless you count a touch of poison ivy."

"Poison ivy? Is that all?"

"Yes. It was rather curious. There's been a regular epidemic of it in this neighborhood lately. I can't imagine how it's spread here in the city."

"And was your father being treated medically in any way?"

Again her eyes betrayed an evasiveness, something she was trying to hide. "No. Except for his poison ivy. And he didn't need a doctor for that. There's a little druggist on the corner who's got the most wonderful lotion. Makes it disappear in a few hours."

The dusk was deepening rapidly. They stood almost in darkness. Peter Quest could smell the heady perfume she wore, could hear her quick, anguished breathing.

"I'll make some light," she whispered.

She crossed the room. Peter Quest turned, took a step after her. His broad back was to the partially open French windows. The average person wouldn't have heard, the hushed susurrus of sound in the clipped grass outside, the ghost of a sound rather, but Peter Quest's exquisitely trained senses telegraphed him a swift warning of danger. Moving instinctively, scarcely knowing why he acted as he did, he lurched sideways, beyond the range of those windows. His action synchronized with a sharp, deadly sound. The crack of gun-shot, an orange stab of flame that sliced through the murkiness of the room. The girl gasped.

"What—what—"

"Down!" Peter Quest commanded.

She understood and obeyed, dropping to her knees.

The shot was not repeated. The window curtains fluttered harmlessly and there was no one outside.

Peter Quest rushed to the windows, had one leg over the sill—and cursed in impotent fury. As often happened, the excitement had brought the veil of darkness rushing down over his vision!

He stood there helpless, blind, fumbling for the drops.

The girl saw, went to him incredulously. "What is it?"

"Quick—in my vest pocket—drops."

She followed his directions. Her warm, trembling hand dipped into his coat. He felt it there and it was strangely comforting.

**S**HE brought out the bottle. Peter Quest tipped his head back and she let the stuff drip into his unseeing eyes. Her movements were tender, womanly and in that moment a warmth, a subtle understanding passed between them.

"It's nothing. I get these attacks now and then . . . Wait here."

With his vision clearing, he dashed out into the garden. Nothing stirred, yet the darkness seemed alive with leashed menace. He proceeded cautiously, hugging the granite wall, sliding toward the corner of the building. He rounded it and in the darkness struck hard against a man's chest.

Peter Quest's arms, tough as steel fibres, closed around the man's throat.

A high, quavering voice protested, "Lemme go! What do you think you're doing?"

"You answer that one. What were you doing, sneaking around here in the dark?"

"I live here, you fool. This is the entrance to the basement flat."

Inside the living-room Mona Rand had flicked the light-switch. It splashed over the man's features and Peter Quest saw

a bald, rabbitly little fellow with immense, tortoise-shell spectacles. His face was smooth and hairless as an egg except for an absurd sprouting of chin-whiskers.

The girl came running toward them.

"Do you know this man, Miss Rand?" Peter Quest asked.

"Of course. Why, Mr. Grew, what's the matter?" She turned to Peter Quest. "Mr. Grew's quite harmless, I assure you. He's the renting agent for the building."

Grew freed himself from Peter Quest's iron grip. "I could have you arrested for this."

"My error," Peter Quest observed dryly.

The little man glared at him furiously, bowed briskly to Mona and ducked into the building through a side entrance Peter Quest had not noticed before.

When they re-entered the house the living-room was not empty. Phil Rand, a half-empty whiskey glass in his too-soft, white hands, was fingering the bullet hole in the wall.

"What's going on here?" he demanded thickly.

Mona ran to him, putting her arms around him protectively. "Oh, Phil, I can't understand it. It's a nightmare. Some one just shot at Mr. Quest through the window. And Dad—Dad's death, Phil, murdered!"

"Murdered?" The boy stared blankly ahead. The message slowly penetrated his drink-fogged brain. If he felt sorrow, he showed none.

Peter Quest appraised the handsome young couple. Were they putting on an act for his benefit? Did Phil Rand know who had fired that shot? Did he know perhaps, had he known all along that his father was dead? It was hard to believe, but easier than to suspect the girl.

"Miss Rand," he said, "for some reason you choose to lie to me, to withhold what you know. You must realize now

that you and your brother are in grave danger. I want to help you, but I must have your entire confidence. Think it over. You know where you can reach me."

He left them there, staring at each other uneasily. He retained for a long time the memory of them, the boy hostile, defiant, the girl, frightened and helpless and needing him. And both guarding their secret.

When, half an hour later, Peter Quest entered his office, he became instantly aware that he was not alone. A foreboding tingling agitated his nerves. In the darkness he sensed a certain displacement in space, a something watching and waiting over by the desk. He dove instinctively for the protection of a bookcase, flipping up the light-switch in the same fluid motion.

A man was sitting stiffly in his swivel-chair. He was an old man, shriveled, impeccably dressed and his face seemed vaguely familiar. His eyes were wide and glassy, his mouth agape, uncontrolled. He stared at Peter Quest with a chilling fixity.

"Who are you?"

**P**PETER QUEST'S voice sounded strange to his ears. That gaze, that steady, unwavering gaze, disconcerted him. The man didn't answer. He didn't budge. And then Peter Quest heard a slow, steady drip-drip. It came from under the desk.

He shifted his gaze to the man's feet. They were encased in pearl-gray spats, but now the spats were soaked in blood. A spreading, sticky pool of it flowed from the man.

Peter Quest knew then that the man had not heard him, that he would never hear anything again. He ran around to the other side of the desk and in doing so jostled the swivel chair. The man sailed forward ludicrously, thudding his

forehead against the desk, sideslipped and crashed to the carpet. His back struck a chair-leg and he came to rest rigidly under the desk. An ivory-handled paper-cutter, Peter Quest's own paper-cutter, jutted from his heart. Some one had taken the man to Peter Quest's office and butchered him there!

A sheet of paper protruding from the dead man's breast-pocket drew Peter Quest's eye. Donning gloves, he picked it up gingerly. Words typewritten on his own typewriter brought a tremulous gasp to his lips.

*My Dear Quest—Allow me to introduce Colonel John Varick. I leave him with you as a little gift, a reminder, in case you are collecting lepers these days.*

*Yes, poor Colonel Varick is quite rotten with leprosy. It would be unwise to touch him. You might become a leper yourself. And that, incidentally, is what you may expect to become, if you meddle further in what does not concern you.*

*It was clever of you to determine the identity of my first subject, David Rand, and the nature of his illness. As one clever man to another, I salute you. I make no attempt this time to conceal Subject No. 2's identity. I do not wish to give you unnecessary work to do.*

The note bore no signature.

Peter Quest's cheek-muscles flexed with fury and outrage. He had fought monstrous evils before, but now, he knew, he was dealing with a criminal of not only superhuman cunning but titanic egotism and vanity, a killer who would and could dare anything.

Peter Quest's mental reflexes were clicking smoothly. The killer had somehow followed his movements, knew what he had discovered, acted with lightning swiftness. But who could have been in a position to do that? Not Mona Rand or her brother. He'd just left them. Yet who else—?

The killer had not lied. A whitish, pustular outbreak below the dead man's



jaw revealed the presence of the deadly, foul virus that can reduce a healthy body to an unclean mass of diseased flesh.

Peter Quest resisted the impulse to call the police at once. He must assemble his thoughts first, see clearly if he could.

Obligingly the killer had divulged the "subject's" name. Colonel John Varick. Of course. He thumbed deftly through his files of newspaper clippings, found it under the dateline of a week before.

VARICK VANISHES. "Colonel John Varick, wealthy oil promoter, was reported missing today twenty-four hours after he left his Park Avenue penthouse.

"Mr. Varick is known to have been in poor health for some time and it was feared by his housekeeper, Miss Myra Hopkins . . ."

Peter Quest went rigid. He dropped the clipping under the impact of the thought that had struck him suddenly. It had been lurking at the base of his brain. Now it sprang forward. Was it coincidence or design that both David Rand and John Varick had been old men, that both had been wealthy men, in poor health and both—it was this that seized Peter Quest's imagination—lived within two blocks of each other? From the note, it was no coincidence that both missing men turned up with symptoms of leprosy in an advanced stage, but an indication of a deep, subtly laid scheme so appalling that Peter Quest shuddered to contemplate it!

Nor was this all. Such a frightfulness occurring twice might conceivably be coincidence. But three times—no. For it came to Peter Quest that within recent weeks still another disappearance had been reported. Carter Bayliss, real estate man. He remembered filing it away as he did all unsolved mysteries. And was not Carter Bayliss rich? Wasn't he an elderly man and in poor health? Didn't he—no, it wasn't possible! Peter Quest hurriedly consulted his files again. He found it. *Carter Bayliss lived off Fifth*

*Avenue a stone's throw from the Rand Apartments!*

And Carter Bayliss was still missing. Would he, too, be found horribly dead, his dead flesh loathsome with the ravages of the white plague? Peter Quest's mind recoiled, tried to reject the ghastly possibility, but the conclusion was irresistible. Some obscene fiend was preying upon wealthy old men and when he had finished with them they turned up dead—lepers. But why and to what purpose? What single factor connected the disappearances of three wealthy men?

More vital, could Carter Bayliss be saved, or was it already too late?

Peter Quest made a telephone call. He spoke urgently to his old friend, Captain of Detectives Quincy. Then he located Colonel Varick's address in the directory and hurriedly left the office.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Trial by Terror

MYRA HOPKINS was an aged, withered spinster. Worry had etched deep, grey lines in her leathery skin. Peter Quest refrained from shocking her into complete uselessness by revealing the terrible fate of her employer.

Instead he lied discreetly, "Miss Hopkins, I've been sent here by the police to help find Colonel Varick. Will you help me?"

Miss Hopkins threw up her hands flutteringly. "Mercy me, yes. I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you. Now, I understand the Colonel was not well. What physician was treating him?"

"Well," replied Miss Hopkins thoughtfully, "I shouldn't say he was exactly sick. Not actively. Though he was planning to take a rest-cure at some sanatorium he'd heard of. Halcyon Rest. It's run by a Dr. Freemont."

Dr. Freemont, yes, Peter Quest knew that name. The man was a prominent physician. His sanatorium was said to be the very last word in streamlined medical care.

"But, so far as you know, he never got there?"

The spinster's face wrinkled up like an old prune. "Heaven help us, no, he never did. He just disappeared one evening and I haven't seen hide nor hair of him since."

"Where was he headed for?"

"Why, just down to the corner drug store. Mr. Carolus's pharmacy. He'd gotten a little touch of poison ivy and—why, Mr. Quest whatever's the matter? Have I said anything wrong?"

Peter Quest's color had suddenly turned slate-grey. He had been in the act of lighting a cigarette. His hand froze in mid-air, remained motionless until the match burned down and he dropped it.

"Miss Hopkins," he said slowly, tensely, "say that again."

"What? About the poison ivy?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was kind of funny. I remember a few days ago some letters came. He fished them out of the mail box himself and a few minutes later there it was, a rash all over the palm of his hands."

"And next he heard about this remarkable lotion sold by Carolus?"

"That's right. How in the world did you know that?"

"I'm not sure. Would those same letters be around?"

"We can see."

She led him into the Colonel's study, drew him over to the carved, mahogany desk.

"There were two letters, I remember, and one was a circular. Yes, there it is."

She made a gesture toward it. Peter Quest stopped her. "Don't touch it."

It bore the letterhead of some third-rate nightclub. It was an advertisement,

inviting the addressee to spend an evening at the Cafe Napoleon. Peter Quest was prepared to stake his reputation on two things—that there was no Cafe Napoleon, that there would be no way of tracing the sender. Microscopic examination, he was also sure, would reveal the presence of tiny poison ivy smears.

He enveloped the circular in a larger sheet of paper and stuffed it into his pocket.

THE Carolus Pharmacy on the corner of 80th and Madison was definitely a superior type of establishment, catering only to the affluent and the fastidious. No cut-rate drugs were sold here, no cheap substitutes. Shelves neatly packed with scientifically labeled products lined the burnished walls. In the window pharmacist's symbols of red and green bowls threw off sparklets of gaudy light.

Behind the counter which was free of the usual impedimenta of bargain tooth-pastes and shampoo soaps a stocky, red-haired man, dapper in a white coat, peered at Peter Quest from behind glasses so thick that they completely hid his eyes. The opaqueness of the lenses gave him a mildly malevolent appearance.

"May I help you, sir?" he asked with suave courtesy.

"I understand," Peter Quest answered casually, "that you put up an excellent lotion or ointment of some sort for poison ivy."

Mr. Carolus rubbed his chin reflectively. It annoyed Peter Quest that the man's thick-lensed spectacles hid his eyes, for Peter Quest had learned to analyze a man's character by the expression in his eyes.

"Why, yes," the druggist was saying. "I do. There's been quite a demand for it in the neighborhood lately."

Peter Quest experienced a curious little stab of anticipation. "I should like some."

"Certainly. One moment, please." He stepped backward through a curtained doorway which led, Peter Quest imagined, into the stockroom.

It was then he noticed for the first time the other man lolling against the far counter—the furious gentleman of the egg-shaped face. He was scanning Peter Quest acidly.

"How do you do, Mr. Grew?" Peter Quest called out. "I trust you've forgiven me for my unfortunate error."

"Oh—it's you." He considered a moment. His face crinkled into a foolish grin. "Well, well, we all make errors. The incident is closed." He stepped closer. "Odd, isn't it, all this poison ivy about? I've got a touch of it myself."

Peter Quest started violently. "You!" Good God, he thought, was it to be followed up by the other thing, like the others. Yet he dared say nothing now.

"You know," Mr. Grew went on apparently not noticing Peter Quest's distress, "I have a theory. Mr. Rand—God rest his soul—kept a roof-garden on top of the Rand Apartments, and I've been wondering if some poison ivy might have been grown there by mistake."

"I hardly think so," said Peter Quest, looking at Mr. Grew as though he were already a dead man.

"Got it bad yourself?" Let's see," Grew said.

At once Peter Quest knew he had committed a tactical blunder. He locked his hands behind his back.

"Matter of fact," he put in rapidly, "the lotion isn't for me. It's for a friend."

Mr. Carolus had returned so silently that Peter Quest wondered how long he had been standing there. He was wagging his head sadly from side to side. "I'm so sorry, sir, but I seem to be out of it. If you could stop by a little later in the evening?"

So Mr. Carolus was out of it!

"I'll do that," he said. He nodded

curtly to the two men and strode out of the pharmacy.

Walking at a leisurely pace at first, he lengthened his stride the moment he was out of sight. There was a fierce burning in him, an urgency driving him on. What he had suspected from the beginning was a compelling certainty now. Mona Rand held between her slim, lovely hands the one clue that might lead him to the murdering monster of the leprosy germs. She must talk. Somehow he must find a way to make her talk.

With the dusk came blackness and the chillness of early fall. Peter Quest lashed his coat collar up around his cheeks and bent forward, plowing his head through the stiff wind. Street-lamps cast baleful pools of yellowish light that made the intervening stretches of darkness all the colder. He came to the street where reared the Rand Apartments.

As he swung around the corner, heading toward the graceful structure, he saw something that made him gasp. A car was slowly drawing away from the building. It was black, closed, a sedan—the *sedan from which David Rand's blazing body had been thrown!*

**I**T GLIDED smoothly to the corner, halted for the red light. Momentarily fear paralyzed Peter Quest, fear for the girl he had come to cherish and pity. What was that sinister car doing in the neighborhood? What secret was locked within its black depths? Peter Quest meant to know. He must know.

His worst fear was realized when Phil Rand came charging from the building, screaming after the car, "Mona! Mona!"

She was inside! Helpless, at the mercy of the bestial giver of disease! The force of that knowledge stung Peter Quest to swift action. The red light had changed to green. The car was nosing around the corner, heading down the avenue.

Peter Quest dashed for the taxi stand-

ing fifty feet ahead, yelled at the driver, "A hundred dollars if you catch that car, stop it somehow. I don't care how."

The taxi was rolling before Peter Quest had slid into the back seat. The driver leered back at him slyly. "I could ram it from behind—just a little."

"Do so! And for God's sake don't let it get away."

When they turned into the avenue Peter Quest saw that the black car had a head start of two blocks. His hands gripped the walls of the taxi, slipped over them as they sweated in agony. They'd never catch up now. Their only chance was if the driver of the black car didn't know he was being followed.

But Peter Quest had underrated his driver. Skillfully weaving in and out of dense traffic, he gained foot by foot, yard by yard until barely half a block intervened. Then the light winked red again. The black car braked to a halt and the taxi slid up hard behind it.

Now, the driver of the black car must have seen them, for suddenly he ignored the lights, swung out and plunged into the side-street. Peter Quest heard a muffled scream. Mona! If anything happened to her—

The taxi-man negotiated the corner at the same time. He slammed the accelerator to the floorboard, lurched far out and cut back close to the sedan.

Unexpectedly, it halted. The taxi struck. Peter Quest was flung forward to the floor. He shielded his face against the spray of smashed glass. Then chaos arose around him. Crowds screaming, a policeman bellowing orders. . . .

Peter Quest slid out of the taxi. The fender of the taxi was locked with the trunk-rack of the sedan. And within the latter, there was deathly silence. Peter Quest jerked open the door, fearful of what he might find.

Mona Rand lay crumpled up on the floor. Otherwise, the car was empty. Its

occupants, whoever they were, had dissolved apparently into thin air.

Frantically Peter Quest swept the girl into his arms. Thank God, she was breathing. Her body bore no wound. Soon her eyes fluttered open. "Peter Quest," she breathed. And smiled. "I'm glad."

He thrust a card bearing his name and address into the traffic cop's hand, gave the taxi driver a bill. "This girl's been badly shaken up. Let me take her home. You know where you can find me."

"Certainly, Mr. Quest, go right ahead."

They commandeered another taxi. Once inside Mona seemed to recover. She settled back, sighed contentedly.

"You're safe now," he told her.

"I know. Thank you, Peter Quest."

"Tell me what happened. Quickly. There's no time to lose."

"I hardly know, really. All I remember was Phil saying there was a man to see me in the hall. I went down and Phil was lying on the floor, knocked out. I never got a chance to see the man. Something black and heavy, a bag of some sort went over my head, and I felt myself being carried outside. Then I guess I fainted."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Too Late to Talk

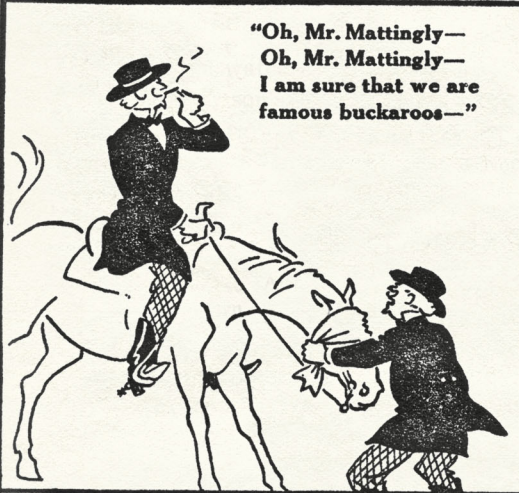
**H**E PRESSED her hands urgently. "Listen to me, Mona." Her Christian name slipped out quite naturally, "Will you believe me now when I say that you're in terrible danger every moment?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Then you've got to trust me. Tell me what you know about your father. You did know, didn't you, about—"

She covered her face with her hands. "That he'd gotten that awful thing, yes. Leprosy!" She whispered the terrible word. The rest came from her in spasmodic sobs. "It happened so queerly.

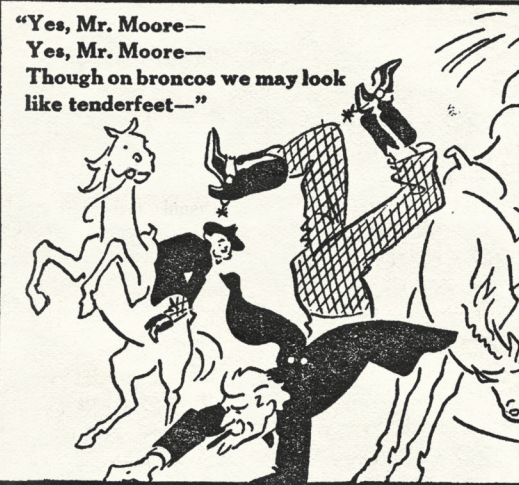
# Mr. Mattingly & Mr. Moore corral a great brand



"Oh, Mr. Mattingly—  
Oh, Mr. Mattingly—  
I am sure that we are  
famous buckaroos—"



"For thru gulch and thru arroyo  
Echo praises like: *Oh, boy, oh!*  
*M & M's the brand of whiskey  
that I choose!*"



"Yes, Mr. Moore—  
Yes, Mr. Moore—  
Though on broncos we may look  
like tenderfeet—"



"We're old-timers and we're skilled  
At making whiskey slow-distilled.  
That's why M & M's so tasty, at a  
price that can't be beat!"

Mattingly & Moore is ALL whiskey—every drop is distilled the slow, old-fashioned way.

What's more—it's a blend of straight whiskies—and we think you'll say *that's* the kind of wis-

key any man can tie to—for keeps!

Ask for M & M at your favorite bar—or get a bottle at your nearest package store—today.

You'll say it's grand whiskey—and you'll like its real low price!

## Mattingly & Moore

**Long on Quality — Short on Price!**

*A blend of straight whiskies—100% straight whiskies—90 proof.  
Frankfort Distilleries, Incorporated, Louisville and Baltimore.*



Dad just—just discovered he had it. He told us about it, said a doctor was going to treat him secretly; otherwise they'd send him away to some leper colony."

"That's it, that's why I've got to know the name of that doctor."

"But I don't know. I swear I don't. He made Dad promise never to tell, because, of course, he was breaking the law by keeping Dad's condition secret."

Peter Quest was bitterly disappointed, yet it was all beginning to fit. "The name of the place where your father was being treated, do you know that?"

"No. All I know is that it was some kind of a sanitorium in the country."

"And I suppose this doctor wanted to be paid well for his discretion?"

"Dad did tell me that. It was something enormous."

"I see. How long had Mr. Rand been there, before—"

"Several weeks. . . . Oh, don't you see, that's why I lied to you. That's why I pretended he'd disappeared and come back. When I first went to you, Dad had just disappeared. It was only later he got in touch with me, told me what had happened. Then I didn't want you to investigate. I didn't want any one to know . . . the horror of it . . . the shame. . . ."

He stroked her hand fondly. "I understand, my dear. Now, listen to me. I'm taking you home. I don't want you to stir from the house under any circumstances. Answer the door to no one. Be careful to whom you speak over the telephone. Wait till you hear from me. You and your brother must be on guard every instant. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"One more thing. The moment you get home disinfect yourself thoroughly. Take a bath with a good, strong solution of disinfectant. Iodine preferably."

She paled at that. Peter Quest wished he had not been obliged to take this precaution. But, for all he knew, she had

been riding with Death in that black car.

THE voice on the telephone was soothing, almost crooning, but it filled Peter Quest with a chilling forewarning.

"Mr. Quest?"

"Speaking. Who is it?"

"That doesn't matter. Listen carefully, please. Go to the corner of Fifty-sixth Street and Fifth Avenue. You will witness something of vital importance."

"Who the Devil—?"

"Listen, please. Look across the street at the Standish Building. Tenth floor. Fifth window from the right."

"Who are you?"

"I advise you to listen, Mr. Quest. I will say this only once. Look for a message in his breast pocket."

"His—? Damn it all, who—?"

But the wire had died. Peter Quest jiggled the arm-piece furiously.

"Number, plee-uz?"

He cradled the receiver, glanced hastily at his watch.

Sick with apprehension, Peter Quest reached the designated spot within ten minutes. He might have been walking into a trap, playing straight into the killer's hands. But he had to take that chance.

At first he noticed nothing unusual. The customary mid-afternoon crowd streamed unconcernedly past him, scurrying about their business. He backed into the comparative privacy of a store entrance, craned his neck up at the high, towering Standish Building. His eyes played over the ultra-modern facade, came to rest on the fifth window from the right. It displayed a huge TO LET sign.

His forehead creased in puzzlement. Why had the mysterious, disquieting voice instructed him to watch an unoccupied office window. Was the whole thing a hoax, a trick, perhaps? Had he been unwise to obey so blindly?

So intense were his speculations that,

although his eyes were trained on the window, they blurred, lost sight of the spot for a moment. A piercing scream at his elbow jolted him out of his reverie. His head strained further back. Every one was screaming and shouting around him, gesticulating wildly at the window.

He understood now. A man was struggling on the ledge. *He was being forced out of the window!* An indistinct, shadowy figure loomed behind him. The man uttered a pitiful, whinnying cry, slipped, fell, clinging to the ledge by his hands. The watching crowd had frozen into silent, paralyzed immobility. There was nothing any one could do.

Then the shadowy figure reached out with a long rod or bludgeon of some sort, brought it crunching down on the man's knuckles. With a howl of agony the man relaxed his death-grip, fell.

A roar exploded from the crowd. A woman fainted. Others turned away. But Peter Quest forced himself to follow the terrible, downward flight of that man. Down, down, somersaulting in mid-air, clawing at nothingness, a shrill, mewling sob on his lips. . . .

He struck the sidewalk with a soft, splashing thud. Peter Quest saw an immense, crimson upsurge, blood splattering up. And the man, or what was left of him, smeared in streaking rivulets over the street. Up above, the window was empty again.

No one ventured to approach. Only Peter Quest found the strength to go up to that obscene, jelly-like smear of human flesh and bone and blood. The sweetish, sickening smell of fresh blood hung heavy in the air.

Presently two policemen joined Peter Quest.

"I'm a physician," Peter Quest lied.

By that time he had mastered his revulsion sufficiently to reach into the man's incarnadined clothes, and he found the envelope he had been warned would be

there. He transferred it hurriedly to his pockets.

"It's murder," he told the first of the sweating cops. "Better have an ambulance take him to the morgue. I'll follow."

But he didn't follow. He couldn't. Not after reading that note.

**My Dear Quest—You were warned. Unfortunately you refused to heed my warning. You may become dangerous.**

**Again, let me congratulate you on your cleverness. It would be folly for me to deceive you. Doubtless, you would soon discover that the gentleman on the pavement is Mr. Carter Bayliss. Yes, Mr. Bayliss has just recovered from a touch of poison ivy. He is also quite leprous. These facts are of no importance.**

**You will do absolutely nothing further for the simple reason that Miss Rand is at the moment my guest. I am aware of your regard for that young lady. What happens to her depends entirely upon how quickly you follow my instructions.**

**You will leave the city at once on a long vacation. Say, three or four months. If you have not done so within twenty-four hours, you will be a dead man.**

Peter Quest laughed. He laughed mirthlessly, bitterly. Death, was that the worst the killer could threaten him with? Him, Peter Quest, who sought death in action before the other thing, eternal darkness, should overtake him?

**P**HIL RAND stared at him stupidly. Peter Quest saw he was befuddled with drink. He gripped his shoulders, shook him.

"Where is she? Where's your sister? You young fool, I warned you both!"

"Gone. Sis's gone."

"Gone? Where? How?" He had had the faint hope that the killer was bluffing. That hope died now.

"Poison ivy . . ." The words sent icy stabs of agony through Peter Quest's body. "Went to the drug store. Mist' Carolus. . . ."

Poison ivy! God help her now! Rand and Varick and Bayliss, they, too, had had it. And they had died lepers. And it was happening now to Mona. Let him only get his hands on the monster who was behind this horror.

"If anything's happened to her," he told Phil Rand between clenched teeth, "I'll make you sweat for it!"

He didn't wait for a taxi. He ran breathlessly the length of the block, turned into Madison, raced two blocks down until he came to the pharmacy. The hard weight of his Luger thudded against his heart. He felt it reassuringly.

Inside the store all was calm, serene. Mr. Carolus held his customary post behind the counter. Seeing Peter Quest, he rubbed his hands together unctuously, bowed. Peter Quest felt a mad desire to rip the glasses from the man's head, see what lay behind them.

"Ah," Mr. Carolus greeted him, "you've come for the lotion."

"Never mind that now. Has Miss Mona Rand been in here?"

"Miss Rand? Miss Rand? Dear me, I'm not sure—"

"I'll look myself."

He vaulted the counter, made for the curtained doorway. Mr. Carolus squealed, pawed at him ineffectually.

"Here, what would she be doing in my stockroom? You can't break in here like this!"

But Peter Quest had already done so. He came into a high-ceilinged room, illuminated by an overhead light.

Mr. Carolus came in after him, wringing his hands. "You see?"

Peter Quest saw. He saw something he had not noticed before. Set tight in the floor of the stockroom was the square outline of a trapdoor.

"What's that?" he demanded.

Mr. Carolus's demeanor had undergone a strange alteration. He appeared neither timid nor distressed. Peter Quest turned

in time to see the druggist's hand stealing beneath his white coat. His own hand was out in an instant, gripping the Luger.

"I wouldn't, if I were you, Mr. Carolus. Reach!"

The druggist obeyed.

"This is most unwise, Mr. Quest."

"You know my name."

"I know many things."

"Good. You're going to tell me some of them now. Though I don't think you can tell me much about this affair I don't know. Talk, Mr. Carolus. Talk quickly and talk straight and God help you if—"

The suddenness of it made him wince. With the swift, irresistible downrush of a steel curtain falling, he was in total darkness. *His eyes had failed him.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The White Horror

**H**IS first, his only impulse, was to conceal his plight from the druggist. He tried to keep his head trained on him.

With his free hand he groped toward the bottle in his inside pocket.

The druggist had fallen ominously silent. Peter Quest grew aware that the man was no longer in the same position. He was shifting, cautiously, soundlessly.

"Carolus!"

He must goad the druggist into revealing his presence.

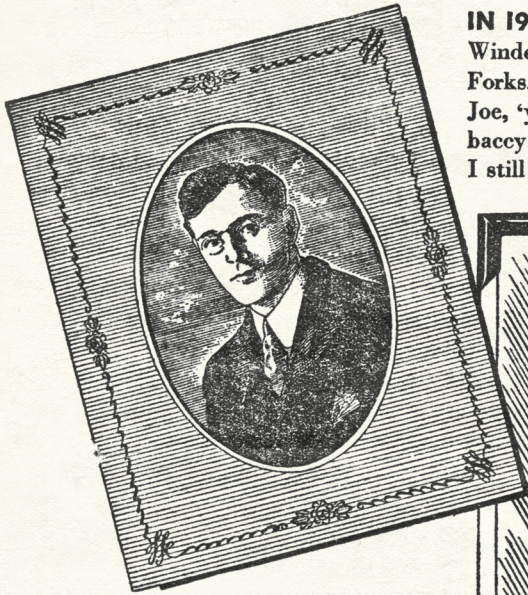
Silence. Then a faint shuffling directly behind him. He wheeled savagely, jerked the trigger of his Luger. He thought the explosion came from his gun, but oddly it seemed to synchronize with an explosion inside his brain. All his senses flared up in a flashing, radiant, white blast of light.

Then he knew nothing at all. . . .

When he recovered consciousness his first realization was that some one had introduced the sight-restoring drops into his eyes. He could see quite clearly. But



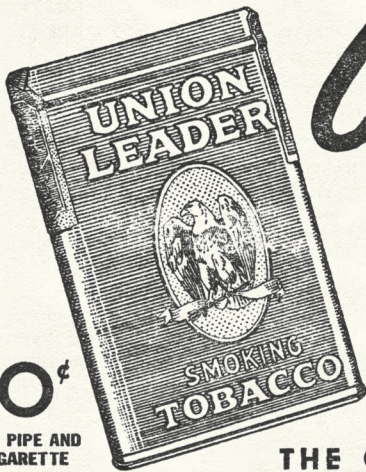
# A kind friend Then..and now



**IN 1910**—"I first smoked Union Leader when Joe Winders, who ran the general store over at the Forks, gave me some to try. 'Long as you live,' says Joe, 'you'll never meet up with a sweeter pipe tobacco.' And after 28 years of smokin' Union Leader, I still think Joe was right."



**TODAY . . .**"Here I am 28 years later, still smoking Union Leader. When a tobacco is friendly and gentle and satisfying as long as that . . . it comes pretty close to makin' good."—Harry C. Bratt, Box 58, Hoosick, New York.



## Union Leader

**ALWAYS . . .** For a third of a century UNION LEADER has been famed for its richness of flavor and freedom from bite! Choice, hill-grown Kentucky Burley gives Union Leader that appealing taste. Long aging in oaken casks adds smoothness and mellowness. A *special* process removes all harshness! Let a dime introduce you to a big tin of Union Leader, America's friendliest tobacco.

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**THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE**

**10¢**  
FOR PIPE AND  
CIGARETTE

for the moment pain centered his attention upon himself. It was localized around a spot behind his right ear. He had been struck with crushing force.

Struggling against the waves of nausea which swept over him with each throb of pain, he shifted his head, studied his surroundings. He lay helpless, flat on his back, hands and feet lashed together with coarse hemp that burned into his flesh. Low, arched walls, weirdly high-lighted by wall-bracket lamps suggested a cellar, a sub-storeroom of some sort. Here, too, walls were masked by rows of pharmaceutical jars and bottles, each inscribed with the appropriate chemical formula. Directly ahead of him, on the topmost shelf, rested a jar of sulphuric acid.

As his vision grew accustomed to the darkness, he made out the dim, limp form of Mona Rand. Shackled like himself, she sprawled, half-sitting, half-reclining against the far wall. Her breasts stirred feebly under her faint breathing. Peter Quest breathed a silent prayer of thanks. At least she was still alive.

Before he could further consider their position, a square of light gaped in the ceiling, revealing a trap door and a flight of steep cement steps. Down these steps came two men. The first he recognized as Carolus, the druggist. His manner toward the second was deferring, subservient. And then as the second stepped directly into the path of light, Peter Quest got a full view of his features.

*It was Grew, the rabbit little renting agent!* But there was nothing rabbit about him now. He strode over to Peter Quest's prostrate form, looked down at it complacently.

"Too bad, my dear Quest," he observed, "You were warned."

"God—you—you butchering swine!"

Carolus took a menacing step forward. Grew restrained him.

"No, no, Carolus, let him talk. . . . You're surprised, eh, Mr. Quest? I do

not appear to be the kind of man who could manoeuvre the most brilliant, the most daring scheme ever conceived!" He seemed to swell and grow to monstrous proportions as he spoke.

"No," rejoined Peter Quest coolly, "I suspected you almost from the first."

"Indeed? Then let us hear the results of your investigations."

"**Y**ES, I'll let you hear. Grew, you and Carolus have been deliberately spreading the plague of leprosy throughout this neighborhood. You've been doing it by first distributing fake circulars impregnated with poison ivy smears. Then Carolus spread the word that he had a marvelous cure for poison ivy rash. So he did. But that cure, that lotion—I'm sure of it now—contains the leprosy bacillus.

"That's where you came in, Grew. You approached the wretches who got the disease, told them you knew of a doctor who would treat them and say nothing, fail to report it to the city health board as the law requires. I think I know who that doctor is, Grew. Freemont, the head of Halcyon Rest, the man to whom Colonel Varick went!

"They paid a fortune for that treatment and when they'd paid all you and Carolus and Freemont could get out of them, you murdered them. Am I right, Mr. Grew?"

"In every detail, Mr. Quest. A pity you will not be able to reveal your interesting findings to the world. We have more useful plans for you. For you and Miss Rand, I should say."

"By God," said Peter Quest, straining against his bonds, "you wouldn't dare!"

"Funny man," commented Grew dryly.

He signaled to Carolus. The druggist came forward, carrying a small iron cage. Peter Quest saw that the cage imprisoned a fat, viciously fanged rat, stirring restlessly and gnawing at the bars.

"You see," Grew explained, "the one

drawback to our little business scheme has been that leprosy is a slow disease to 'take,' as it were. I believe we've changed all that. My friend Carolus here has developed a culture of such virulence that subjects, treated with it, contract the disease within a few hours. You and Miss Rand will have the honor of being our guinea pigs." He pointed to the cage. "This is Oscar. Oscar is our laboratory pet. He is at the moment fairly overflowing with leprosy germs. We are going to leave Oscar here to keep you company. He is hungry now. He will grow much hungrier and then—" He stopped eloquently. Peter Quest was no coward, but he shuddered now with the fiendishness of it. "You can appreciate the point. We will then be able to infect household pets, dogs and cats, with the disease. Much safer for us."

Mona Rand, who had revived, heard this last, screamed. "Oh, Peter, don't let them—don't let them."

"We're not licked yet," he called to her in a tight, choked voice. His eyes blazed at Grew and Carolus, "Make a good job of it, you two. If I ever lay hands on you—"

"That," said Grew with finality, "is not apt to occur. Come, Carolus."

The druggist deposited the cage, sprung open a little door. The rat darted, scurried across the room.

The two men mounted the stairs.

Peter Quest yelled after them, "You can't do it, Grew. It's—it's—"

"Pleasant dreams, Mr. Quest."

The trap-door slammed shut. They were alone. Alone in semi-darkness.

The rat was moving around. It scuttled softly over the girl, sniffed uncertainly at her bonds. She strained away, turning tortured eyes on Peter Quest. His mouth twisted in pain and fear for her. He tugged harder at the ropes that held him.

The rat had momentarily changed its

mind. It retreated, padded over to Peter Quest. It came within inches of his face and he could smell the foulness of it. It squatted back on its haunches, ogling him at a safe distance.

He averted his head and, doing so, his eyes chanced to fall on that top shelf, the one burdened with a jar of sulphuric acid. His muscles tensed. For the first time, he saw a glimmer of hope. It would be dangerous, possibly fatal, but if it worked—

"Mona," he whispered, "Keep your nerve up. I think we may have a chance."

"What is it?"

"Don't talk now. Watch me and be prepared to act quickly."

He began the painful process of wriggling on his belly across the stone floor to within striking distance of the shelf. His position was further complicated by the rat's watchfulness, the chance that it might attack at any moment. Already it was stirring, coming closer.

**P**PETER QUEST quickened his struggles. He was near enough to roll against the shelf. Gritting his teeth, he applied pressure. The shelf responded, quivering a little on its base. The jar tipped dangerously. If it fell, shattered before he could cushion its fall with his body, he would be horribly burned, die a death a thousand times more ghastly than even Grew could conceive. But it was the chance he had to take.

He pressed harder with his shoulder against the shelf. The jar began rocking rhythmically, five feet above his head. Each time it tipped over a little further. Mona saw, understood what he was trying to do.

"Peter, don't. You'll kill yourself."

But he kept thudding against the shelf, rocking it more and more with each attack. And then the rat moved forward. Its teeth were bared.

Peter Quest clamped his jaw, uttered a silent prayer. He lurched with all his

strength against the shelf. The jar toppled, came streaking down. For one timeless instant he saw it falling, gave his body a fierce twist and caught the full force of the jar on his chest. The impact winded him for a second and the jar almost broke on the floor. But he recovered, steadied it.

At the same instant the rat was upon him. He spun around, met its attack feet first. His heels smashed into the animal's maw. It squealed and scampered aside.

Peter Quest arched his head forward, seized the cork of the jar between his teeth. Snapping his head back, he drew out the cork. The acrid stench of the acid made his eyes water. The mouth of the bottle fumed.

But he was ready. When the rat attacked again, he tipped the bottle deftly forward. The deadly liquid spilled over, deluged the rat. It keeled over, screaming in almost human agony.

Their lives, his and Mona's, hung on the swiftness of his actions. He steeled himself now for a physical ordeal. Deliberately he rolled over into the little pool of acid. Searing agony tortured the flesh of his arms. But it had the desired result. The stuff was eating through the ropes. With a superhuman effort, he stood it for a minute . . . two minutes . . . and the ropes snapped.

The trap-door overhead yawned open again. Grew came first, and close behind him Carolus, gripping a revolver.

Peter Quest had no time for the nice-

ties of combat. He lifted the jar overhead, let it fly from his burning hands.

It struck Grew flush on the jaw, shattering and spraying him with the acid. He uttered a shriek, covered his face in his hands, then fell, writhing and cursing and the liquid soaked through his clothes, enveloped him in flaming death.

Taken utterly by surprise, Carolus had faltered, gun in hand. Peter Quest sprang. His hands closed over the druggist's wrist, twisted it backward. For a moment the two men grappled on the cellar stairs. Peter Quest's superior strength told. Never relaxing his death-grip on the man's wrists, he forced the gun around, stabbing it against his heart.

The cellar echoed and re-echoed with the deafening explosion. . . .

MONA was home. Home and safe. She looked up at Peter Quest, her eyes swimming with gratitude—and something more.

"Peter, my dear, I—I—"

But he knew what she was going to say and stopped her by covering her mouth with his hand. She was lovely and infinitely desirable, but not for him.

"I must go," he said. "There's the matter of a certain Dr. Freemont and the Halcyon Rest. . . ."

"And after? You'll come back, won't you, Peter Quest?"

"Who knows? Perhaps. Some day."

Minutes later he left her. She watched him vanish slowly into the dusk.

THE END



# The Brothers From Hell

By  
Grendon Alzee

*Tom is blind, Dick is a deaf-mute, and Harry is a hopeless cripple. When I saw them down in Hell's Corner, I wondered what purpose they have in living...*

*Okdan Karo*

*wrun*



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The Corner awakes only after dark, and midnight is its high noon. At four a. m. they scuttle back into their crannies. At about four-twenty on this particular morning, Karolya's dive was empty except for a bum sprawled over a table, stubbled cheek flat in a pool of stale beer.

Okdan finished counting his night's take and yawned. Coming around the end of the bar, he hobbled across his floor of rancid sawdust, intent on evicting

was not to be disturbed

halted Okdan.  
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and tightly stretched over flesh the color of putty; a mask without beard or eyelash or brow. It was his grin. That grin was not a smile, but two livid scars which lengthened the grim gash that was his mouth.

And too, there was the still, *expectant* way the man stood there. "Lak he see sometinks in here gonna jump on me," Karolya said, his red-rimmed left eye ogling a far corner, while the right canted up to the ceiling. "Sometinks nobody got a right to see."

So definite was his impression that the newcomer watched some horror behind him, that Okdan looked apprehensively over his lower shoulder. The worst thing as his own *erfed* and crooked horror behind the and demand-

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seldom see silver dollars, and the fact the man offered them heightened Karolya's feeling of his eeriness. But it was money, and the cellar had been vacant a month. Okdan took the coins and, to make sure they were genuine, rang each one separately on the bar. That made noise enough to wake the drunk. He suddenly vented a gurgling scream and came lunging past the dive-keeper.

Okdan was of the opinion that the bum was merely frightened out of what little wits he had by the ghastly apparition in the doorway, and was making a break for the open. But the mute evidently thought differently, for his hands flashed out of the cape. They clamped on the screaming man's throat and lifted his hundred and sixty pounds of whiskey-filled hulk a foot off the floor; held it there at arm's length!

Those pallid fingers, so long that their tips lapped over an inch at the back of the throttled neck, must have done something to their victim's spine. The bum hung from them, left leg convulsively drawn up, dirt-crust hands twitching. He was making no struggle to fight that strangling clutch.

On the mute's glistening countenance there was no expression but that meaningless grin.

Okdan Karolya didn't give a hoot in hell whether the choking man lived or died, but if he died in there it would mean trouble, one way or another, and Karolya didn't like trouble unless he was paid for it. So the automatic came out of his apron and its muzzle prodded the mute's side while Okdan made signs for him to let go.

He might as well have made signs to the lewdly amended chromo of a nude on the wall for all the effect they had.

The bum's face was so purple the stubble on it didn't show any more, and his eyeballs seemed about to drop out of their sockets. Karolya would cheerfully

have squeezed his trigger, but that would simply make more trouble without profit.

It was at that instant that Mary came through the door in the partition behind the bar and stopped there, her hand going to her breast, her pupils dilating.

That must have been a picture to challenge Doré: The dim, foul room with its low, fly-specked ceiling, its floor of sawdust stained with tobacco juice, liquor and mud; its rows of round, leprous tables, five gleaming silver dollars strewn over one of them. The spectral apparition and the paralyzed drunk hanging from his clutch. Okdan, twisted, dwarfed, swarthy; his thick lips twitching; his mismatched eyes staring everywhere but at that at which he looked.

And for a highlight, there was Mary behind the bar, in a blue satin kimono hastily thrown over a gossamer nightgown that hardly veiled the glimmering sheen of her slender body. Raven hair cascading over perfect shoulders to set off the transparent glow of her lovely face.

It may be even more revolting to know that Mary, who is beautiful as a drug-taker's dream of an angel, was the hunchback's wife!

**T**HE scene held like that, utterly without motion, for the space of two heartbeats. When the third pulse throbbed in the curve of Mary Karolya's throat, the drunk thudded to the sawdust, a crumpled heap. The mute went backward out of the dive, and Okdan bent to see if he had a corpse on his hands.

The man was alive. Karolya forced a fiery draught between his teeth. The bum scrambled, sputtering, to his feet and lurched out. It is doubtful whether he had any recollection at all of what had occurred, but the white, ridged weals around his neck must have taken days to disappear.

The hunchback made sure the door was

double-locked before he let Mary explain that she had been awakened, in their living quarters above the saloon, by a premonition of peril. It was so strong that it pulled her, almost without conscious volition, out of her bed and into the bar-room.

Neither could explain why her coming had saved the life of the drunk, but neither doubted that it had.

All this Okdan Karolya told me late the next day, when I went to him to ask about the three newcomers. We let the evil of Hell's Corner flourish pretty much as it pleases, except that we try to hold the killings within reasonable limits. In order to keep things in check, we keep as close a watch on the denizens of the place. This would be more difficult than it is, were it not for a few people like Karolya, who exchange for certain favors from the police the information we require.

Something more than duty, though, inspired the curiosity that took me to Okdan's that day. I had just seen the three moving into the cellar he had rented them.

I had been following up an inquiry from the Bureau of Missing Persons, about someone whose last known address was Pig Lane. Learning nothing, as I expected, I emerged from a stinking hallway and came face to face with an unforgettable procession.

The Lane is about fifteen feet wide. The wooden walls of the houses that line it lean drunkenly toward each other, and they seem tied together by ropes from which hang grey banners of tattered washing. As a result of these facts, a sort of perpetual twilight lives in the cobbled, garbage-strewn gutter below.

Through this grey dusk rattled a huge pushcart. Harnessed to the front of it by an intricate arrangement of cording was the deaf-mute I have described the way Okdan Karolya saw him the night before. Another caped individual shoved

the cart by its handles. He was as tall and gaunt as the first, displayed the same grotesque grin on his glistening, lashless mask. Lashless? He had no need of eye-lashes, for where eyes should be there were only empty sockets, blackened holes that might have been seared into his putty-colored countenance by a soddering iron.

The wagon itself was piled with bundles, some wrapped in heavy paper, some composed of bulging, knotted sheets. Atop these, jolting and swaying with the jolting and swaying of the two-wheeled vehicle, squatted the third of the trio.

He gripped the legs of an up-ended table with chalk-white hands, to keep from being thrown off, and so his cape was held open. His torso was barrel-chested, powerful, but below the waist there were legs too small to have served a seven-year old child, legs corkscrewed so that the toe of the left foot pointed in the opposite direction from that of the right, and neither in the way they should have pointed.

The man in front could not hear or speak, but he could lead the way. The man in back could not see, but his strength kept the cart rolling. The man in the cart could see and hear and speak, but he was excess baggage, no less a burden for the others than the bundles and furniture upon which he squatted.

**T**HE sight stopped me, held me goggle-eyed till they went past. It was their grins, those damned grins that were carved into their faces, that was the worst of them. Their grins, and the awful black pits in the blind one's head.

Before I could think what to do about them, or whether I should do anything at all, the leader swerved to the maw of a cellar entrance next door. The cripple called a direction. The sightless one acknowledged it, and maneuvered the cart in line with the entrance. The pushcart bumped down into the cellar.



The first thing for which I asked Karolya, when I got to his place, was the special bottle he keeps under the counter for me. After I'd taken a hearty swig from that, I inquired about his three new tenants.

"T'ree," he exclaimed. "T'ree? I see only vun." And then he gave me the story of the night before. His maimed syllables fell over themselves, spilling from his protruding lips as if all day he had been avid to talk about the thing, and had dared not. "Mary do not sleep," he ended. "Alla night she valk, valk, valk de floor."

"I don't blame her," I commented, wondering for the fiftieth time at the strange, gloating sort of triumph that came into that ape's visage of his at the mention of his wife, wondering for the hundredth time where she had come from and how he had prevailed on her to come to him.

She had appeared there one day, about a year before and remained. She never went out. She never spoke to anyone. And he never explained her. "I'll probably have nightmares myself after what I've seen of them."

He reminded me that I hadn't told him what I'd seen. "Three brothers from Hell," I answered, and taking another drink to burn away the recollection, I told him.

This talking about them and, I imagine, the whiskey, made me aware that there was no good reason for my agitation. "They're queer looking ducks," I wound up. "But I don't suppose they like their looks any better than I do. After all, there's something admirable about their sticking together and taking care of one another," I chuckled. "Tom, Dick and Harry. I got those names in that interchange at the cellar entrance, but I'd be willing to bet they weren't baptised with them. Tom is the blind one, Dick the deaf mute, and Harry the one who can't walk."

The first of the evening's customers came in just then and I moved out. Part of our tacit agreement, Okdan's and mine, was that I should not hang around there. It was bad for his kind of trade to have detectives too much in evidence.

I changed tours a couple of nights later, so after working the four to twelve, I started right in on the twelve to eight. Things were pretty quiet for the Corner. There were the usual number of street brawls for the patrolmen to break up and the usual two or three knifings, but nothing that called for any work from me or the other two precinct detectives. A financial stringency kept me out of the backroom poker game, and I couldn't sleep for the yowling of the drunks in the cells downstairs. Along about four-thirty the desk lieutenant decided it might be a good idea if someone took a walk around the district and put it to bed.

Pat Garrity doesn't take kindly to the idea of college men on the force. He picked on me for that promenade, and I had a pretty good hunch he wouldn't be over-perturbed if it ended for me with a few inches of steel in my back. I may be wrong, of course, but otherwise, why would he send me out alone, when even the uniformed men work night tours in Hell's Corner in pairs?

**I**T was muggy out, with a low ceiling of cloud and no breeze, so the stench was particularly bad. After a half hour of it I needed a drink badly, to settle my stomach. I made for Karolya's to get one, hoping that his dive would still be open.

It wasn't. At least it showed no light when I got to it. But I rattled the door anyway, with the thought that he might hear me. Right then a glow of light wavered across the dirty glass and lay against it.

That's queer, I thought. It's not one of his ceiling bulbs, it's a flashlight. I put

my face close to the pane, trying to peer in. The light got brighter, and then a hand inside rubbed a clear spot in the grime. It was slim and white. A woman's hand.

I could see through now. I saw Mary Karolya. She had nothing on but a nightgown, but there was a flashlight in her hand. Her lips were white and her eyes staring. She was terrified.

"Open up," I yelled. "Open the door."

The torch was quivering, but she managed to keep its light on my face. I saw her lips form the words, "Who are you?" I turned the lapel of my jacket to uncover my badge and moved so that she could see it through the clear spot. Then I yelled, "Open up," once more.

Her voice came very faintly to me. "Break the glass."

I couldn't understand that, but I had to get in and there was nothing else to do. I used the butt of my gun to smash the glass out of the door. As the first fragments crashed in, something silvery whizzed down and up again so fast that I couldn't see what it was. But there was a fresh gash in the floor, as though someone had chopped it with a knife.

"Watch out," the woman said. "Keep away from the sides of the door as you come in." I didn't need her warning. I'd already seen that the door was a death trap for anyone who tried to open it, without knowing exactly how, when it was set.

I went through without getting caught. "What's up?" I demanded. "Where's Okdan?"

"Come," she whispered, already turning. I wanted to pick her up and carry her, so that her bare little feet wouldn't have to walk through the muck on that floor, but of course I didn't suggest it. I followed her behind the bar and through the door at the back of it.

She clicked off the flash. There was dim light from somewhere and her

misty form was wraithlike in its glow.

She led me up a flight of stairs. The light was stronger up there and I saw that we were passing through a living room as clean and well furnished as any I've ever been in. Then we went through another door into the room from which the light came. I knew it was a bedroom, though I wasn't aware of any of its furnishings. I saw only that at which the woman, abruptly motionless, pointed. Okdan Karolya. A gargoylelike heap on the rug.

**H**E was dead. No question of that. No man could be alive with his head twisted around like that, so that his unshaven chin nuzzled the hump on his back. With his head wrung like a chicken's.

"Who did that?" I gasped.

"I don't know," Mary Karolya whispered.

"But you were here, in the room."

"Yes. I think it must have been the sound of his falling that woke me up. I saw"—her pointing finger jerked to an open window—"the shadow of a head. And hands—fingers—writhing—dropping from the sill."

"Hands," I repeated inanely. If I remembered rightly, that window was ten feet above the pavement, and there was no foothold on the brick wall. I started for the opening.

She grabbed my arm. "Don't go near it!" she cried.

"Why not?"

"Look." She shoved a chair toward it. It reached a foot from the wall and something flashed down across the sash. It chunked into the chair-top, bit a two-inch gash in the wood and was held by it. It was a blade of curved steel eighteen inches long. A machete. Its long wooden handle slanted down from a boxlike contrivance above the top of the sash. I felt sick, realizing what my skull would have

been like if I had stepped on the floor board where the chair foot rested.

"Every window in the house is fixed like that," Mary Karolya whispered, "and the two outer doors. To keep burglars out—and me in." The last was a mere shadow of sound.

I wheeled, ran out through the living room, down the stairs, out into the bar-room. I had heard the faint thud of running footfalls outside, had guessed they belonged to a cop who'd heard the glass smashing. "Stop there," I yelled. "Don't touch that door!" Hank Clancy goggled at me through the jagged opening, club and gun out. Jim Forbes came up beside him.

I explained. Then I sent Forbes to phone the station house. "Tell Garrity we'll need the Emergency Squad as well as Homicide," I said. "They've got to fix things so some blundering ass doesn't get killed. Clancy, you stay here. This is the only way anyone can get out." I ran back, ran upstairs. Mary Karolya was still in the bedroom, statuesque, staring down at that grotesque horror on the floor.

"Get some clothes on," I commanded her from the door. "Touch as little in that room as you can help. Then come downstairs."

I went downstairs again, and out. Forbes was back and I gestured him to come with me. We went down Pig Lane, three doors and turned into the cellar there. I had my gat and my flashlight in my hands when I pushed open the unlocked door in the board partition that blocked off the room Okdan Karolya had rented for five silver dollars.

Snores greeted me. I thumbed my torch, tilting it so that its beam would hit the ceiling and I would see the room by reflected light. That place was clean as a whistle, those three must have worked like beavers to make it so. The only furniture was a table and two chairs

I recalled seeing on the pushcart. Three beds were made up on the floor, and they were all occupied.

The form in the end pallet stirred, and sat up. It was Harry, the cripple. His eyes blinked open and stared at me without surprise. "What do you want here?"

"Which one of you three just came in?"

"And who are you to ask that?"

"Police, mister." I showed my badge. "Now answer me."

"Certainly." The other two were stirring now, awakened by our talk, but it was Harry who replied. "It's none of your business, police or not."

"No? Maybe we'll make it our business. In the meantime, you're staying here. Forbes!" I turned to the cop. "You stand at this door and see that they stay put. Keep your gun out and don't let any of them get within three feet of you." I was thinking of hands. Of the hands Mary had seen vanishing through the window. Of the hands Okdan had seen lift a hundred and sixty pounds and hold them at arms' length.

**W**HEN I got back to the corner the big Emergency Squad wagon was there, surrounded by a shoving crowd.

Inside the house the boys were busy rendering Karolya's death traps harmless. They confirmed Mary's statement. No one could have gotten into the place or out of it with a whole skull. Her eyes were on me while I asked about that.

The Homicide Squad trampled in followed by the medical examiner. I told them as much as I knew, and went out again, to the areaway behind the house on which the window of the death room looked. I confirmed my recollection of its height above the ground. Ten feet. Only a fly could have climbed that wall. A ladder? Possibly. The concrete paving was too dry to show marks. But Okdan lay a full four feet from the window. No one

could have reached him from a ladder at the sill. No one could have gotten, alive, into the room, to reach him. Perhaps he had been undressing nearer the window, and had been thrown to where he lay.

He hadn't. The experts of the squad established that. The rug on that floor was a high-piled, silky Persian. Its nap held footmarks for a long time. They traced Karolya's movements with precision, from the moment he had entered to retire. They showed that he'd never been within three feet of the window.

They showed also that no one had been in the room that night beside the murdered man, his wife, and myself.

There were no unaccounted-for fingerprints on the sill or the sash. There were no signs on the outside of the sill of a ladder having leaned against it, and its wood was too decayed not to have taken such signs. There was absolutely nothing to show that the Karolyas had not been alone there when Okdan had died.

The medical examiner found a bruise on the side of the cadaver's chin, another on his shoulder, in exactly the right spots for the leverage required to wring its neck. The doctor stated unequivocally that Mary could not possibly have a tenth the strength to do it.

Captain Ryan of Homicide ordered her arrested anyway. We had to arrest someone, and we couldn't touch the men I had set Forbes to guard. There wasn't a scrap of evidence to connect them with the crime.

When I went to call Jim Forbes out of the cellar, the three were asleep again. On the pillows their heads didn't look like human heads at all. They looked like the heads of some statues I've seen at the Museum of Natural History.

After Mary Karolya had been grilled for eighteen hours, the district attorney ordered her release. He said no jury ever assembled would convict her with the facts he could present.

I went around that night to talk to her. She wasn't in the house on Pig Lane. The cop we'd left on guard said she'd returned there, had gone out again in half an hour, carrying a single battered suitcase. It wasn't hard to find the driver of the taxi she had taken. He'd brought her to the railroad station. I located the booth where she'd bought her ticket. It was to Chicago, and she'd paid for it with silver dollars. With twenty-three silver dollars, brand-new and shining!

I had no right to wire Chicago to have her trailed. There was no charge against her.

I WENT back to Pig Lane. The house wasn't empty any longer. Men from Homicide were there, and the boys from Emergency. Captain Ryan had hit upon the bright idea that there must be a secret entrance to the house. He'd ordered the place ripped to pieces to find it.

They did exactly that, thoroughly. They didn't find any passages. But they did find Karolya's cache, a steel vault concealed between the floor of his living room and the ceiling of the one beneath, its opening ingeniously contrived.

It was jammed full with wealth. A lot of this was in bonds listed as stolen, bills whose numbers identified them as being some of the ransom paid out for the Kelton kid, and more stuff like that. But there were a good many thousands in cash that could have been spent anywhere, by anyone, without trouble. It had been there for the taking and Mary'd not touched a penny of it.

They found something else of interest. A crumpled letter that somehow had slipped into a crack in the dresser in the bedroom. It had a faint smell of perfume about it. It read this way:

Dear Sis:

I know you must have been nuts with worrying, not hearing from me for six months, but there wasn't no way I could reach you without the cops tracing back to

me, and I knew you'd rather worry about me than know I was nabbed and booked for the hot seat. Once they caught me it would be that, and no out.

I'm pretty near nuts myself, dodging around the country. Pretty near nuts and dead broke. Couple days ago I was ready to chuck in my cards and take what was coming to me, that's how bad it was. And then I got a break. I got wind of a guy that makes a business of getting blokes like me out of their jams, and I managed to get to him.

Guess who it is. Remember that hunchback kid used to live across the tracks? Okdan Karolya? We were pretty lousy to him in them days, but he's all right. He's going to take care of me, even if I ain't got nothing to pay him with. He's going to ship me out to South America, to a place where there ain't no extradition. That is, he will if you'll go along with him on a proposition he wants to make you.

You won't fall down on me now, kid, will you? I know I ain't been much of a brother to you, but you've always been swell to me, and this is the last time I'll ever have to ask you to do something for me. The last time either way, because if you don't come here with the guy that brings this to you, it's the cops for me, and the last long mile.

The letter wasn't signed, and it had been handled too much for the prints of the writer to be left. Some of it was hard to read because the ink was splotted by something wet that had sprinkled it. But there was a date. Two days after that date, Mary had appeared in Pig Lane.

The mystery of Okdan Karolya's death was never solved. Officially. But I have a notion how it came about.

The hunch came to me at, of all places, the circus. Some clowns gave it to me. The big arena was a hurly-burly of activity, but when these fellows came on I didn't watch anything else. Not because they were funny, or because they were such skilled acrobats, though they were both. I watched them fascinated.

And then they leaped on one another's shoulders, till they made a single column four men high!

The bright colorings of that human column seemed to change for me into the rusted black of threadbare capes. The

glare of the circus dimmed to the shadowy murk of Hell's Corner just before dawn. I saw an open window high up in a blank brick wall and the top of the column leaning over into the gap. As I saw it in my mind, the top of the column was a man whose legs were so twisted he had to be held by his brother beneath him, but whose hands were so strong they could wring a man's neck.

"I see that act's going over big with you," Jack Sorley said to me. Jack has been a circus man so long there's a legend he taught P. T. Barnum the business. "Those boys are pretty good, but they got the stunt from the Three Grimsons. *There* was a troupe for you! They wowed all of America and half of Europe in their time, and they'd be doing it yet if they wasn't always going over the top for the underdog. They did that once too often, and it finished them."

"What happened?" I asked.

"They was doing a carnival turn down South during one winter layoff and they found out the guy running it was gyping his freaks. They threatened to turn him over to the law and gave him till after the night show to come across. They never played that show. A tiger somehow got loose in the tent while they were rehearsing in it, alone, and when the shooting was over they were mince-meat, just barely alive. Funny thing. They skipped out of the hospital the day before they were supposed to be released, and nobody's ever heard of them since."

Tom is blind, Dick is a deaf mute, and Harry's legs are so grotesquely twisted that he cannot walk. But Dick has eyes to see a wrong, and Tom has ears to hear the tale of it, and Harry has hands that can right it. I do not know whether they are brothers or not, but I know very well it is not from hell that they come, though they dwell in a cellar in Hell's Corner.

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The thing of horror had  
come again. . . .

# DEATH DANCES on the TURNPIKE

A Feature Novel By  
Francis James

Ghastly, Incredible Terror Seized the People of the Valley as their Very  
Existence Was Menaced by the Thing That Struck at Midnight

*What supernatural power was wrecking our trucks on the open highway and leaving our drivers either torn and mangled corpses—or mindless, drooling idiots? What work of the devil had etched that grotesque image on the fair flesh of lovely Margaret Ames? I knew that Margaret was doomed, and I with her, but the people of the Valley depended on us—could we save them before we died? . . .*



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Living Dead

**T**HE THINGS that were happening to the drivers of the Tri-Mountain trucks were insane, incredible—horrors that no normal mind could believe.

In the darkness of deserted roads, in gorges where night winds wailed like voices of fiends, in solitudes between forest-clad hills—something waited for us, and unseen voracious hand snatching us into hell, one by one.

But that ghastliness hadn't really come close to me till the night Bill Cullom, my

helper, and I took the ditch at sixty-five to let that thing pass—and heard coming from the blackness where it had gone those awful acreams. . . .

Bill and I looked into one another's eyes that night as we climbed into the cab of the Monarch ten-wheeler. Bill lit a smoke and muttered:

"Well, here we are again. Three hundred miles over hell's primrose race-track."

I didn't say anything. His levity hadn't fooled me. Bill was as scared as I was. These days, everyone was afraid. . . .

The interstate trucks, those monsters that come out at night with green and red lights atwinkle to take possession of the roads like behemoths emerging from dens—dreadful catastrophies will always overtake them, of course, from time to time. But the horror that had singled out the Tri-Mountain drivers for its victims was something unparalleled in the annals of ghastliness.

Our trucks had been forced from roads at places where no ordinary mishaps should have occurred. Drivers had been found dead among ruins where the great vehicles had been broken, twisted and mangled as a huge hand might crush a match box. Yet they had been killed by wounds that no rending steel nor flying glass could have inflicted. They had been torn to pieces by something with claws.

And others, not killed outright, had just disappeared—to come back later to a life more hideous than any grave.

Half an hour took us out of town onto the country road. The big truck drove along with the deep drone of its motor and the whine of high-pressure tires against cement. Pleasure cars flitted past like scared rabbits, while the Monarch towered above them, owning the thoroughfare.

Suddenly I saw Bill stiffen, cigarette dangling from limp fingers. Lips parted, eyes queerly dark, he sat listening.

"Slim—did you hear that?" he muttered. "That noise—"

I'd heard it. It was as though a banshee were wailing her loneliness to the winds, the weird echoes reverberating from the mountain flanks.

The sounds died away, and left me with galvanic tinglings chasing over my spine. Were those the noises that our pals had heard before they had died with expressions of inhuman terror frozen on their mad faces?

**F**INALLY I heard Bill's voice again over the hum of the engine: "Marge said she was going out again tonight, didn't she?"

I nodded. "She's with Hank and Phil Downs in Number Six."

Bill grunted a curse and I saw his big body stir sharply.

"What the hell has got into her to do a crazy thing like that! God, when I think of the chances she takes—"

Chances, yes . . . Game little Margaret Ames took her full share and more of the dangers that haunted the boys who worked for her. How a slip of a girl ever came to be owner of a he-man business like Tri-Mountain is a story that I'll explain later. Suffice for the moment that she was our boss and we loved it.

Loved *her*, rather—for I din't think there was a two-fisted fighting son-of-a-gun in the garage who wouldn't have done the Sir Walter Raleigh for her with his life. And six of them had . . . But I was luckier than the rest of the boys. For she loved me back. We were engaged to be married—if and when. . . .

These days we had little time to think of our own future. For we were fighting with our backs to the wall to save her business—to save a lot more than just money and her franchise. In a desperate effort to find out what sort of hideousness was killing her drivers, she had been going out almost every night on some



run or other. Tonight she should be somewhere not so very far ahead of us on this same road.

That was the thought that had kept me speeding up, driving the Monarch faster and still faster. Margaret ahead there in that loneliness where invisible doom haunted the dark, where *something* waited with death!

Margaret without me! I had visions of those six dead men and I knew that I had to catch up with her, had to get behind Number Six and trail it so that I could know she was safe and that cold hand would stop twisting my stomach.

And then, suddenly, Bill grunted and touched my arm. We rounded a curve and before us we saw the great black bulk of a truck swaying along, whiffing around angles, scudding down straightaways like a greyhound. "That's Number Six," Bill said.

I drew a long breath and fumbled in my shirt pocket for a cigarette. Thank God she was safe!

A moment passed—and then Bill's head whipped around at me. "There it is again! Slim, what in hell—"

The sound we had heard before was repeated, a shrill wailing that swelled and ebbed, rose to a piercing scream and faded to a throbbing moan. And then I realized that the sound was growing louder. Whatever was making it was coming up behind us—coming up fast.

And suddenly then I knew what it was—the thrilling siren of an approaching car. Close behind now, it blared insistent clangor, demanding the road.

"Must be the cops," I muttered. "Wonder what's up?"

Bill shoved open the sliding window and leaned out for a look behind. I saw his face pale, eyes oddly narrowed as he pulled his head in again.

"It's another truck, a strange one," he muttered. "Big as a freight car. He's climbing our back—"

Nerves queerly jerking, I looked at my speed dial. I was doing fifty myself. Who could be wanting to drive a truck of that size faster than that? Yet still that raucous challenge kept up, yelling to me to get out of the way.

I didn't know yet what I was afraid of, but I was growing more terrified moment by moment. I tramped on the throttle. I didn't want him to get by, to cut in between me and Margaret!

For a couple of minutes we hung there the way we were. Notch by notch my speed was creeping up—sixty, sixty-five. The Monarch reeled like a drunken man as she took the curves. Desperately I clung to the road's middle, ignoring those siren blasts, rocketing hell-bound through the dark. How long could I keep this up? How long before I'd miss a turn and meet death in a ditch under thirty thousand pounds of steel?

**H**OW he finally managed to get by me is still a thing that I can't explain—it didn't seem possible. But at a spot where a side road coming in made a wider corner, he cut out and did it.

I saw something that seemed huge as a city block shooting past. Lurching, swaying, careening—yet, somehow, still holding the road.

For an instant I knew a crazy thought that it was something inhuman, that no mortal hands could be guiding it. For all over, it shone with such a supernatural phosphorescence as might cling to a coffin exhumed from moldering earth.

The rear came into view. I saw the thing there and I felt as though ice water had been driven against my naked body out of a pressure hose.

The end of the truck was open. Against the dark background of its interior, a figure was outlined by our headlights.

I stared at a form so misshapen and grotesque that it seemed but the product

of an evil nightmare. A plough-shaped head bristling with red hair was set neckless between hunched, twisted shoulders. Crooked, slathering lips revealed bared fangs. Hooked talons raked the empty air.

One split second it was there and then the truck slowed around a turn and was out of sight.

I didn't need Bill's yell and his fingers biting my arm to send my foot tramping on the accelerator again. What the ghoul-ish thing that had passed us could be, I didn't know. I only thought of the faces of those dead men and terror flowed instead of blood through my body.

Margaret was up ahead where that thing was going!

I sent the Monarch roaring around curves with tires screaming. The road was a river of spectral grey flowing to meet us and vanishing under our wheels. Hills loomed for the Monarch to gulp down with her purring growl. We hung suspended on crowns of giddy descents and then swooped into depths as though sucked by a vacuum. Fighting the wheel that kicked and bucked like a live thing, I dragged the truck out of ditches by sheer will power and kept going.

I tried to shout to Bill but the roar of the heavy truck swallowed all other sound. Then we swung around a corner into a long straightaway, and my foot jumped from throttle to brake. The phantom truck wasn't in sight. But over in a meadow lay a twisted black bulk, just a pile of scrap iron with one wheel slowly spinning. Ruddy tongues of flame lent an eerie aspect to the scene.

Bill and I were out of the truck and racing through long wet grass almost before the ten-wheeler had stopped. My heart had ceased beating. Everything inside me was emptied into a void as I snapped my flashlight on those skeleton bones of iron that skewered the stairs.

Out of the darkness a figure came

tumbling. A man whose flesh was hanging in ribbons and whose teeth were grinning in a face that was raked and torn to the bone pitched out to land at my feet.

Hands gripping my ankles, my knees and then my coat, he clawed his crimson ruin up to confront me. I knew then that he was Hank. Knew that by instinct; for his face wasn't Hank's. It wasn't—human.

He was spewing frothy bubblings out of a mouth that was just a round gory hole. He waved an arm back toward the truck.

Phil was stark dead in the cab. But that wasn't the most terrible part. No edges of iron or glass could have done those unspeakable things to his body, his face—to his eyes.

I stood there transfixed and shaking, while my soul turned into a sick, rotting thing. Hank and Phil dead. And Margaret. . .

Bill let out a yell and we both raced to the wreck, piling over it, delving into its tangles, tearing at framework and plating till our fingers ran red with blood. The fire spread fast, roaring in mockery, singeing our hair, blistering our faces—till at last we had to give up and stagger back panting.

My eyes were red holes burned in the smoke-blackened mask of my face. Margaret, my darling! What could have become of her? Was she burning to death in the wreckage? Or had she been taken away to be kept till the time was ripe for those fiends to return her like the dreadful pair who hung around the garage, creatures whose bodies still lived, but their souls were dead?

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Devil's Photograph

**B**ILL had spun around to stand gazing into the darkness beyond the glow of the fire. His arm lifted up, pointing.

Margaret was over there, stumbling aimlessly, moaning, wringing her hands.

And then, before we could move to go to her, something happened that turned us to stone.

Shadows lay like coiled brown dragons over the ground. And from them there came a shapeless, black something. It didn't run like a man, but with incredible swiftness it seemed to flow over the terrain.

I heard Margaret's frightened cry, saw her little fists lash out desperately, helplessly. And the next instant it had swept her into its grip.

That was the most horrible thing I had ever seen. The yell that burst from my throat was purely animal, nothing civilized, nothing—human. Fists clenched, I raced to the girl's side.

Whatever the creature was, he didn't fight back at me, didn't wait for my attack. I saw a brief, hideous struggle, heard Margaret shriek again as its hands tore at the front of her dress. And then it was gone, melting into the impenetrable dark without trace or sound.

The next instant I had swept Margaret into my arms. I held her close while I gasped out:

"Marge, sweetheart! What happened? What was it?"

Blank-eyed, she stared at me without answering. She was in a condition of shock, out on her feet.

Her clothes hung in tatters. Her bared breasts, ivory shoulders and arms glimmered in the sheen of the moonlight. And then as I stared at her I became aware of a thing so bizarre and so awful that my heart seemed to freeze.

Against the rosy softness of the flesh between her breasts a figure of blazing crimson seemed to be dancing, demoniacal in its repulsive lewdness.

It was a miniature portrait of the thing that I had seen cavorting at the end of the phantom truck—the creature that just

now had grabbed her and tried to take her away!

Bill and I looked at each other. For myself I couldn't speak, my throat was twisted into a knot. Bill cursed through clenched teeth.

We got her back to the truck and I held her in my arms while Bill burned up the road to the nearest doctor's. He left us there and took over the truck to finish the run alone—the game had to go on.

The doctor dressed her wounds and administered a sedative, after which her dreadful shiverings began to calm down. At a garage I hired a small car and started back with her over the fifty miles to our town.

After awhile I asked her as gently and quietly as I could what had happened.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know!" she cried wildly. "It all happened so fast. A big truck came up behind and honked for the road. Hank pulled over. As it went by there seemed to be an explosion. Hank lost control. And then I don't remember anything till you were holding me in your arms."

She couldn't go on, couldn't talk rationally. She clung to me, arms around my neck and I felt her slim figure throb as those hysterical rackings swept her again.

"Slim, darling, take me home! Don't ever let go of me!" was all she could sob.

**I**T TOOK just an hour and a half to make the return trip to our headquarters at Thompsonville. On my way back to the house, I stopped in at the garage—I wanted to tell the boys myself what had happened.

But I should have remembered the other horrors that would be there. I saw them as I drove into the big shed. Two figures who lolled against the wall, stoop-shouldered, slack-eyed, spittle drooling from nerveless lips. They were idiots, but two months before they had been our

best pair of drivers. They had gone out one night on a run. Their truck had been wrecked. They hadn't been killed, they had just disappeared.

They had been gone for a month. And when they had been found wandering aimlessly in the streets they were such things as we saw them now, minds swept away, dreadful scars matting their bodies.

Harmless, they hadn't been sent away but allowed to live with their folks. They haunted the garage, shuffling around in their loose-jointed gait, eyes vacant as windows of tenantless houses,

Margaret gasped as she saw them. They had found hell in the open road, where she, too, had just felt its blasting touch.

**M**MARGARET lived with her aunt in a big house on a side street. I boarded there, too.

We both heaved a sigh of relief as we closed the door behind us and stood in the darkened front hall. There was silence and safety—and intoxicating intimacy in the moment of solitude that sent her stealing into my arms.

Safety, we told ourselves. Yet that thing on her bosom radiated an aura of something uncanny and damnable that left our brains shaken with horror.

"Oh, Slim, I'm so afraid!" It wasn't often that Marge let herself go so far as to confess the terrors that haunted her these dreadful days. But now she broke down, clung to me shivering.

"Something inside me keeps crying out that I can't go on, that I've got to give it all up. But you know why I can't, why I've got to keep at it and succeed. Don't let me be weak, darling, don't let me stop!"

Heavy-hearted, I kissed her. I knew indeed what an almost impossible task she had set herself. How her slim white hands stood between so many people and ruin—between them and death.

"I'll always be with you," I whispered.

She stood on tiptoe to kiss me and then drew me beside her as she started up the stairs toward Sue's room. Sue was her baby sister, an adorable youngster of six. Their parents were dead and their staunch old Aunt Ella was their only mainstay in life.

I stood smiling as Marge stooped to brush her lips over the flood of brown ringlets that lay strewn over the pillow. She loved the little one devotedly—we both loved her. And then she started up to wheel to me, cheeks suddenly paling.

"Slim, did you hear something—a noise in the house?" she cried.

I had heard it, too; a queer sharp rustling. Where it had come from I couldn't tell. It was just a disembodied ghost of sound indefinite and vague as the sighing of tree branches in the wind. And queerly sinister. . . .

I slid my arm around her and drew her away.

"Just your nerves," I murmured comfortingly. "Go to bed. I'll stay around a while and make sure that everything is okay."

**T**HE TRAIN of events that had rushed Marge into ownership of the Tri-Mountain outfit was a strange coil of jealousies and hatreds and human needs.

It went back to the once-thriving upstate community of Beachers Falls. During the past dozen years, changing conditions had little by little spread a blight of dry rot among the people there. Farms ceased to be profitable, the two-or three small manufacturing establishments that had furnished a certain amount of employment shut down. Nearly all the homesteads were heavily mortgaged. There had been several foreclosures. Those who still clung to their properties waited hopelessly for inevitable ruin.

There seemed no way out—till adventurer Rufus Hartley had come along.

A glib talker, he had sold the distracted people on his scheme to rehabilitate the valley. The idea was to pool all remaining resources and set up a cooperative community producing dairy products and garden stuff. He would establish a line of trucks to rush the produce fresh to markets in nearby cities.

The farmers had made one last desperate effort by pledging whatever property they had left to raise the necessary capital. With the trucks in operation, at last Hartley had widened his field of operation to include commercial common-carrier service in addition to servicing the valley.

The farming venture hadn't worked out. The old-fashioned natives didn't seem to have the capacity for quantity production.

But by a strange quirk of fate, the other part of the business, the trucking, had proved a big success. And now the Tri-Mountain had expanded into quite a network of lines. The profits from its operation were almost the sole income of the farmer-stockholders, their only hope of keeping up with the mortgages they had put on their homes to get capital.

So matters had gone for a year or more. Then had begun the attacks that were now close to ruining the company. Drivers had been killed, others kidnapped to be sent home worse than dead—gibbering madmen.

And along with that, terror started to strike in the valley itself. One by one, people there began to disappear. Where they went, what became of them, no one could guess. They just vanished as though a voracious hand reaching from an unseen half world were yanking them out of the realm of the living into the unknown.

Margaret was a valley girl, college-educated through the sacrifices of her brother Bob, a driver on one of the

trucks. Two days after he had been driven off the road and had become one of the missing, she had presented herself at Hartley's office, tight-lipped, and asked for a job—any kind of a job.

I had always known that she was a girl of ability. But I'd never dreamed of her really brilliant executive calibre till I saw how little by little she was mastering every detail of the Three-M affairs. Erratic and undependable, Hartley was more and more away from the office. But Marge was there on the job, morning, noon and night.

She was a small, compact little piece of live-wire energy. She had softly glistening brown hair, a pair of eyes blue and straight-shooting as diamonds, a rounded oval face and lips like scarlet flames.

She had a man's quick grasp of detail and efficiency of execution. But all that hadn't kept her from being responsive and tender and loving, too.

I had been her friend and Bob's for a long time. I was a medical student, driving for the Three-M during the summer vacation to bolster finances. And after that horrible day when Bob had come back from the dead—and worse than dead—I had taken her into my arms and told her that we two would fight it through together.

LITTLE by little, Marge had come to be more the Tri-M than Hartley himself. And when he was found murdered one night, there was only one person who held all the threads of the business in her capable grasp—and that one was Margaret.

Hartley's family—his arrogant globe-trotting daughter, his silly fool of a middle-aged wife, his wastrel son—expected the business to fall into their laps, with the profits somehow continuing to keep them in luxury. But the shippers and the Beachers Falls people thought differently. There was only one person in whom they

had confidence. They all insisted that Marge take over the business. The near-bankrupt farmers put on a few more plasters and raised the funds for her to buy out the Hartleys.

And so here she was, a slip of a girl with a man's troubles on her hands. Times without number in the past harrowing weeks I had begged her to give it all up and get out—before this awfulness reached out to strike her down, too. And always her reply had been:

"I can't do it, Slim, don't you understand why I can't? It isn't myself. It is all those people back home, my friends—they are all depending on me. They put on those mortgages because they trusted me to come through. If I let the Tri-Mountain go broke, you know what will happen to them, don't you? . . ."

I was pacing the unlighted rooms, trying to think. What, or whom, was behind this awful business. The Hartleys all hated us. Junior was a treacherous dog, capable of anything. . . .

And then suddenly a sound brought me up rigid, sweat soaking the palms of my hands. There it was again, that sound of stealthy motion somewhere inside the house. I moved silently to the door of the living room to peer out into the hall.

A haze of misty radiance streamed through a fanlight over the street door, outlining an eerie figure. A man who had once been a stalwart six feet of young power. Now he stood there slouched over and shambling, jerking with nervous seizures, arms flopping uncontrollably. His face was the dreadful blankness of one whose brain has been sucked away, leaving only a vacant husk.

He was Margaret's brother Bob. Harmless, he had lived with us after his return from the dead, surrounded by such loving care as she and her aunt could lavish on him.

Harmless we had all deemed him. . . . But as I looked at him now I saw that his

hand clutched a knife. And in those slack eyes there glared a light of maniacal purpose.

For a long moment I stared at him, my body robbed of all motion. In the pale moonlight that knife-clutching madman was a blood-curdling sight!

He hung vacillating an instant. Then he wheeled around. He turned toward the stairs and went skulking up them toward the upper hall—where Margaret's room was.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Sign of the Beast

SOMETHING cold and damnable chilled me as I slipped out into the hall and started after him. I hurried, and when I got up there I saw his scuffing figure half-way down the hall. His hand still clutched the knife. And now I saw to my horror that its tip bore ghastly brown stains.

He glided to Margaret's door. He turned the knob, trying to open it. His slack lips bubbled a horrible gibberish.

The next instant I had let out a curse and rushed at him. He whipped around quick as a snake. His mad eyes glared over his shoulder and then he lashed out savagely.

As I jumped away, he whirled and went dashing up the stairs. I heard him go to his room, slam the door and shoot the bolt.

I stood there spellbound—and the next instant I heard a wail, Sue's voice in a terrified scream.

It took maybe five seconds for me to rush down and into her room. I snapped on the wall switch. No one was to be seen save the little girl, sitting up in bed and crying frantically.

Sue's convulsive tearings had ripped away a gag that had been hastily bound over her mouth. Through the V at the neck of her nightgown could be seen her

bare skin. And at the base of her little throat an ugly knife wound was dribbling blood.

I recoiled at sight of something weirdly horrible. The wound had definite form. In hasty slashings someone had sketched there a crude replica of the figure that had been branded on Margaret's bosom!

Marge, too had heard the child's screams and came running down the hall. For a long unbelieving instant she stared. Face ashen, eyes dilated, she whirled to clutch at my hands.

"Dear God, that mark on my baby, too! Who could have done it?"

I muttered: "I don't know. Someone must have got in." I didn't tell her the truth of what I had seen. I couldn't tell her about Bob.

Aunt Ella heard voices and came into the room. She and Marge dressed the little one's wound and then Marge took her to her own bed for the rest of the night.

They all went back to bed finally. But I settled down to stay on watch.

**M**ORNING came at last and Margaret called to me as I passed her door. She admitted me, closed the door and stood leaning against it. She had on a blue kimono with Japanese filigree over the front. Her glorious copper-bronze hair, still tousled, made a golden aureole around her face.

I swept her into my arms and kissed her moist yielding lips, her little white chin till it grew pink. And even in this moment of tension I knew a swift leaping of pulses at the feel of her warm thinly clad body under my hands.

She answered my ardency. She clung to me till it seemed as though our two bodies fused and ran into one. Panting a little she freed herself and sank on the foot of the bed to brush the hair out of her eyes and ask tensely:

"Did you find out anything, Slim? Have you any idea who could have—"

I shook my head. I still couldn't bring myself to tell her the dreadful truth. I muttered:

"How about you? That thing on you—"

She parted the folds of her kimono to uncover her bosom. The mark was still there. In the last hours it seemed to have grown brighter and more grotesque.

"It won't come off!" she whispered. "I've washed it with everything. Oh, Slim, what does it mean? Why did they put it on me? Oh, what's going to happen?"

I didn't say anything, couldn't trust myself to speak. I groaned through tight lips and left her to dress.

After a sleepless night, her Aunt Ella didn't come down to breakfast. It was just Marge and I and Sue at the little table. Marge sat across from me, pouring my coffee, buttering my toast, smiling and color rising as she saw my eyes fixed on her and knew what I was thinking. It was a bit of stolen intimacy that at any other time would have thrilled me with happiness. As though she and I were married and in our own home. Sitting over there in her trim little business suit, she was my dream-bride, she answered every need of my soul. Every fiber of my being leaped with desire for her.

But she couldn't eat. She sat gazing pale and anxious-eyed, at Sue.

"I can't leave her again. not for a moment!" she cried at last. Her fingers clutched in her napkin, white-knuckled. "When I think of last night—if he hadn't heard you coming. . . . Oh, Slim, what shall I do?" ;

That was when I told her as gently as I could about Bob.

"He has become violent. You can't keep him here any more," I finished. "You will have to send him away."

She gave me a long silent look, of grief too tragic for tears.

"Oh, Bob—poor darling Bob!" she drew a long shuddering breath.

To save her as much as possible, it was I who phoned the authorities. When they came I went with them up to Bob's room.

And then another surprise jolted us. He wasn't there. He had slipped out and escaped during the night.

Marge's face seemed to grow even whiter when I put my arm around her and told her. She knew then, we both knew, that there could be no safety for her, for Sue, till he was caught.

**WE SENSED** the breath of fear colder and starker than it had ever been, when we got down to the garage. The story of the phantom juggernaut had got around. That inhuman thing would be lurking somewhere tonight—and someone would die.

I spent most of the morning in the office with Margaret while we tried to figure out ways and means to keep going—how much longer we could last. There were four or five of the drivers on whom we could count, but we knew that the others were getting ready to quit. And who could blame them? I sat watching Marge as she sat at her desk.

I had to take care of her! Somehow I had to see her through this hell safely.

In the early afternoon we had a visit from Junior Hartley.

Rufus Hartley's son had his father's oily suavity, his bold prominent blue eyes and milk-white skin. His big mouth was treacherously soft. His over-fleshed figure was clad in the most expensive of superfine tailoring.

He strolled arrogantly into the office and stood for an instant without speaking. His eyes grew wet and a slow grin widened his sensuous lips at sight of the expanse of silk stocking revealed under Margaret's short skirt, the curves of her breasts sculptured beneath the thin silk of her blouse.

He had come, it appeared, to renew the offer he had made a dozen times—to buy

the Tri-Mountain as was and in spite of trouble—for what amounted to chicken feed. Margaret told him to get out and never come back. We both suspected him of being behind all our difficulties.

He went, sneering and ugly. His parting shot from the doorway was:

"You have accused me of trying to wreck you. But I'll remind you that the Tri-Mountain trucks started getting knocked off six months before you stole them away from us, while my father was still owner. Which lets me out. And here's something else. The time is going to come when you are going to be begging for my help—when you'll crawl on your pretty little white knees to promise me anything if I'll only save your skin for you."

If we had only known how horribly true that was to be!

**THE DAY** dragged past. I should have gone out on a run, but Marge sent another man in my place. It seemed as though she couldn't bear to have me away from her side for an instant.

As the afternoon wore away, suspense tightened around the garage like singing wires. The men were about due to start out on their night runs. We were sending two together in every truck and giving them pistols to protect themselves.

I did leave Marge though for a short time to take her small coupé and run out a few miles to the headquarters of the State police.

I told the sergeant in charge about last night.

The officer's face had a queer tight whiteness as I stopped talking. He fingered a dry cigarette and muttered:

"Twenty-four hours ago I'd have said you were haywire. But now—come with me."

He led me by narrow passages out into a back room. On a table a long humped shape lay motionless under a sheet.



The nude body that lay there was that of a young woman. She had a lovely form. Beautiful shoulders, slim tapering arms and legs. But her face—it was as though the fires of hell had blasted her to turn it into a picture of loathsomeness. Cheeks sunken and withered, graven by jagged black lines. Lips snarled back from yellow fangs. Frozen arms crooked at the elbows so that hooked fingers seemed to claw at my eyes. . . .

But the crowning touch of horror was the thing that she wore on her bosom, midway between her breasts. It was another miniature of the thing on the truck, the same mark that Margaret bore!

For a moment there was stark silence there in the dingy little room with the bloated yellow and green thing on the table and the buzzing flies—and the smell! And then I heard the sergeant's voice coming again as he pulled up the sheet:

"We were able to identify her, in spite of everything. She was one of those girls that disappeared from Beachers Falls three months ago. One of our cruiser cars saw your phantom last night. It went past doing seventy. She was thrown out of it."

I licked my lips, drier than ashes. So that was the end of the circle for the Beachers Falls people. Margaret was a valley girl, too. . . .

The policeman was saying:

"We're doing all we can. We'll keep on doing it. But if you love that girl of yours, get her out of here. Take her a million miles away and don't ever let her come back. Unless you want to see her like that—"

I HAD another talk with Marge on my return. I didn't tell her what I had seen—I couldn't add to her troubles by describing that awfulness. I only told her that I had learned—something. She wasn't safe here for a minute. Again I begged her to sell out to Junior and go away. "

A little white figure in the depths of the big desk chair, she shook her head. Her eyes travelled from the papers littered in front of her through the half open door where the shapes of trucks could be seen crowding the garage, piles of merchandise heaped in the shipping room. She said slowly:

"It may be all that, Slim—but I can't quit. I know the risk I am running—but those eight boys who died took bigger chances. Took them for me. . . ." There was something gallant and thoroughbred in her white little smile. "Those shipments out there have got to go through, the men at Beachers Falls have got to have their money to live. There must be some way—there has got to be some way."

Her bosom fluttered, her voice broke in a little appealing sob.

"And you've got to help me, Slim! Don't let me be a coward and quit! Make me keep going—and don't leave me! Don't ever leave me!"

I gave it up then. We spent a while discussing business—where we could get trucks to replace those that had been wrecked, where we could find drivers to run them, now with eight of our hands gone. I knew even then a sickening chill of defeat. There was a swell chance of signing any new hands with the Tri-Mountain!

What we had been bracing ourselves for came a half hour later. A long distance call reported that our eight-wheeler Bismark had been found in a ditch and both men gone.

My stomach was tied in a knot as I put down the phone. I knew for what hideous purpose those pals of mine had been taken away. And that Bismark was the run on which I myself would have gone if Marge hadn't relieved me.

The phone was jangling with calls from irate shippers. Their loads were protected by insurance, but all the same there was a limit to what they would stand. They

were cancelling in droves. I took a look at the bunch of silent men standing around in the barn and I knew that they were about finished up, too.

A few minutes later all but three or four of them came in a body and quit. And that seemed about the end.

Marge and I stood looking at each other for a long silent moment after the door had closed behind them. She didn't break down as any ordinary woman would have done. Her chin lifted with that quick little motion with which she always seemed to challenge set-backs and troubles. She drew a long breath and said:

"I'm going out again tonight. It's the only hope. They—whoever it is—will know it and they'll try to get me. Perhaps I can find out who—"

I nodded. I didn't try to dissuade her. I knew she would go anyway. I only said grimly:

"We'll both go. We'll take it together." For if what I expected happened to her. I didn't want my own death far away.

For just an instant then she broke down. She bit her lips and whispered through sobs:

"Aunt Ella will take care of Sue—if we don't come back."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Village of Fear

**I**T WAS a night when hell let loose its furies in earnest. The gale drove rain in cataracts against the windows. Down-swooping blasts whipped tree branches like tortured arms. Hurricanes trumpeted in the hills.

I drove at moderate speed with all lights going. We were setting a trap—with ourselves as the living bait!

An hour or two dragged past with only the ribbon of road licking out to meet us like a great luminous tongue. The truck with its droning engine and whistling tires seemed the only thing human, alive.

Suddenly Marge clutched my arm. "Slim—there it is!" she cried.

We were slipping down the bed of a deep gulch between sheer rock walls. A curve made it possible to look back over the road which we had just travelled.

And there on a hilltop we saw it—a long shining outline that scudded along the crest of a ridge like a projectile of eerie blue light. Soundless, it flew with terrific speed.

Now that it was here, now that I saw death coming at last, I knew faintness of a purely animal fear. The wheel was sweat-slimed under my hands.

But death didn't catch up with us then—not that kind of death. For the next moment we roared around a curve and saw before us the twinkling lights of a village. I had a blurred picture of a crowd of women and men milling across the highway from side to side.

Clamping on brakes, I brought the truck to a halt. I shoved open a window and stuck out my head.

"What's the matter—what's happener?" I called down.

I had said that before I realized in what place we had stopped. Now I perceived that it was the village of Greenbush, a tough little backwater community of which I had heard plenty.

In a terrible accident some time before, one of our wagons had hit two young fellows, killed one and crippled the other for life. And after that one and all they had vowed vengeance. It was a bad spot in which to be halted.

A harpy-faced hag shoved her way through the crowd. She flourished grimy talons in front of my face. "It was my Tom that ye killed, damn ye! Damn all ye murderers!"

My alarm growing, I tried to pacify her. "That was a terrible thing," I said. "But it was an accident. And we paid you full damages—"

None of them paid any attention to

what I was saying. They were too stupidly brutalized to use reason. They crowded still closer, a ring of knotted faces, pale hate-filled eyes and tossing fists.

"Curse them! To hell with the rich murderers!" voices rang.

I realized our danger then. I threw in the clutch and tried to start up the truck. We had to get out of here! But they were wedged so tightly in front that I couldn't move without running them down.

I muttered to Margaret:

"There's going to be trouble. Lock your door over there—"

But as she moved to obey, it was already too late. I saw the door snap open. A tangle of arms and clutching hands snatched at her.

**I** LUNGED across, groping for a big wrench on the floor as I shouted: "I'll brain the first man that gets into this cab—"

My fingers dragged vainly over the boards and the next instant I felt my own door wrenched ajar. I felt the clutch of merciless hands. Scrambling and kicking and yelling, I was dragged backward out to the ground.

Margaret screamed from the other side. I saw her small figure struggling in the middle of a seething knot of angry villagers.

Striving desperately to keep my head, I twisted around to face my captors.

"Listen, let's get this straight," I panted. "The girl wasn't responsible for the accident. What good will it do you to hurt her?"

A chorus of yells and cat-calls jeered me down. And as I looked at that circle of sullen faces I realized how unconvincing my terrified words must have sounded. Yet in my desperation I tried to shout over the bedlam:

"Men, don't be fools and get the police after you. There's a car right behind us. Listen, we'll pay you more money—"

Another guffaw of derision drowned me out. And then my voice froze in my jaws as my eyes lifted to fall on a new figure that came rolling and elbowing into sight.

His gigantic frame loomed head and shoulders above the others. I saw a sin-bitten face scarred by the tracings of every evil passion, thin voracious lips wrenched in a snarl. He was Jed Slavin, man-breaking boss of this rural hell-spot. His son was the one who had been crippled under our truck. I had heard spine-chilling tales of his hatred, how he had sworn to get even with us.

His great fist stabbed out to point at Margaret.

"It was her truck that hit my boy an' made him an idiot!" The giant was biting off his words and spitting them through his teeth. His insane eyes seemed to leap from gaunt hollows. With sweeps of his arms he brushed aside the jostling forms, opening a passage through which they dragged Marge tip to him.

Then his black paw, huge as a grappling hook, snatched out to clutch her. He hooked a finger into the neck of her blouse. A jerk ripped it to the waist.

A growl of beast hunger rolled over the pack; but I couldn't take a step toward her. The crowd held me jammed in its midst.

And the next moment I fell motionless to stare transfixed at two figures that had appeared on the fringe of the crowd.

Junior Hartley stood there! And with him was Bob. Junior was bending over the idiot, talking slowly and urgently as though trying to impress some simple idea on his befuddled intellect. I saw a glance pass between him and Slavin. The next instant the pair disappeared.

Then the crowd opened and through it came rolling—no human being, it seemed, but the creation of some deranged mind. I saw shoulders humped like a plough, gorilla arms dangling menacingly at its

sides. And that triangular head with slathering jaws—was the same Cyclopean imp that had cavorted at the end of the phantom truck!

Comprehension burst over me. Slavin's idiot son—he had been the fanged killer! He lurched up to face Margaret. His squeal of sadist frenzy shrilled. I saw his black hands dart out to clutch at her.

I haven't a very clear idea of what happened next. Fists driving like piston rods I flung myself at that wall of figures. I jabbed my thumbs into their eyes. I kicked them and butted them. I used my fingernails on their faces and my teeth on their throats. A man swung a lighted lantern over my head. I snatched it out of his hand and used that, too, on their faces till it was gone.

Half a dozen of them had staggered back screaming, cursing. But double that number had jumped in to replace them. They pounded me with their heavy fists. I knew jolting gidiness as clubs battered my skull. Through blood-shot eyes I glared into rat-faces animated by only one brutish emotion, lust for my death.

A squirrel-skulled yokel tripped me and I was down. His heavy boot drove into my stomach. His laughter rose over my cries of agony. And then they were all swarming over me, slugging, smashing and kicking.

**I** MUST have passed out for an instant because the next thing I knew, pistol shots were popping and stentorian voices bellowed authority.

Groggily I pushed myself up on hands and knees to blink at the sleek blue shape of a police car. Figures came spilling over the sides to go pounding after the mob of scattering forms.

Then an officer was kneeling beside me, supporting my shoulders and holding a flask to my lips. Over beyond, another was wrapping a blanket around Margaret.

When I finally recovered my senses I

found that our rescuer was old Philander Thomas.

Philander was a lawyer and banker of Margaret's home town. The rural capitalist had been her friend from childhood, and staunchest backer throughout her troubles. Well on toward sixty, he had a rugged, still-powerful figure with a mass of tousled iron grey hair over burning black eyes and a face as gaunt and deeply engraved as a stone idol's.

Driving by chance behind us, he had happened on the riot in its early stages. Realizing that alone he could do nothing, he had hurriedly driven back to the nearest telephone to call police barracks for help.

The murder pack had stampeded like jackals. Leaving a squad to hunt down the miscreants, the rest of the police were getting ready to take Margaret home in their car. They told me to get into my truck and leave while I was still in one piece.

I said that I would—and then didn't. Instead, I climbed into the open rear end of the Standard. Hidden behind tarpaulin curtains, I waited.

Slavin didn't show up again. But presently a taller and slighter figure loomed briefly against rain-lashed mist as it crossed the road and vanished amid shadows. Junior Hartley. I slid out of the truck and went after him.

Through clenched teeth I told myself that I would catch up with him and choke the truth of these horrors out of him with my naked hands.

Where the man led me, over fences and ploughed fields, I couldn't tell. I followed him blindly through thickets and up rock-studded hillsides where the storm whooped with wails of the damned.

After a while we were toiling up the bed of a ravine with dripping black cliffs looming on either side. And there I lost sight of him. I stumbled on a short distance at random and then suddenly I made

out the shape of a building against dim-lighted heavens. Through one of the windows gleamed a sickly yellow ray.

I cat-footed up there and peered through a chink. Turning, I groped along the rough wall of the shack till I came to a door. It was locked, but my shoulder drove the thin panel inward and I lunged over the threshold.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Lovely Idiot

**T**HERE might have been a dozen women in that dismal room with the food-littered table and the filth on the floor. Young females, as I knew by glimpses of their bodies through torn grimy dresses. But their faces—such masks of loathsome age as I had seen on that woman thrown from the phantom truck. Tangled locks streaming awry, seamed sunken cheeks, eyes that glared fearfully into mine. They had bunched in a ragged half-circle on the other side of the kitchen, lips writhing, mouths growing pinched and vulpine with hatred.

And then a sound from the other side of the room brought my gaze whipping around.

Over there a line of cages had been erected, closed off by stout wooden bars. The figures shut up in those boxes were humans—once they had been drivers of the Tri-Mountain trucks. Now they were bestial creatures that grovelled on hands and knees, jamming unshaven faces against the bars.

I muttered a curse and started toward them. Those were men that I knew, they were my friends!

From the corner where the women clustered came croaking threats and insane mumblings. Feet sounded on creaking boards.

I turned to see a forest of bare scrawny arms and hooked talons. Whirling, gib-

bering, clawing, they tore at me with long fingernails. Blood flowed from deep gouges in my face.

For an instant I tried to fight back at them. It was like battling a swarm of harpies. They leaped in the air and came down shrieking, hands flying.

I whirled and got out of there. By what blind crazy ways I couldn't remember, I made my way back to the village. The truck was still standing there. I piled on board, gunned the engine and started for home. In the hot summer night my body gushed sweat of icy-cold horror.

Four of them, it seemed now, were hooked up together here in an unholy partnership. Mad for revenge, Slavin had made his own son his killer on his phantom truck. Junior wanted to frighten Margaret till she would sell out to him. He had got hold of Bob and was using him as his robot of frightfulness—had implanted in his dim brain the fixed idea that he must destroy Margaret and Sue.

As for the women in the shack I had just left—they were the girls who had been stolen from Beachers Falls. They hated all men! In those cages our kidnapped drivers had been driven insane by their savage tortures.

At the first town I came to, I found a phone and told the police what I had found. When a posse had raided that shack and had picked up Junior and Slavin, Margaret's troubles ought to be over.

That was what I told myself then in my folly. . . .

But when I got home, an hour later, and answered the phone, it was to hear the sergeant's voice saying that they had mopped up the town and hadn't caught either of the pair.

And when, the next day, they went in search of the shack in the woods, hours of combing the mountain wilderness didn't unearth it. It had been hidden so cleverly that they never found it.

For a day or two there was feverish activity by the police, trying to root out the fugitives. But Marge and I weren't thinking much about that, for a strangely horrible thing had started happening to Sue.

**T**HE wound on her neck was healing—but something seemed wrong with her body. Her little arms and legs began to behave queerly. She couldn't control them. They moved in spasmodic jerkings like those of the idiots around the garage!

A new specter of terror chilling us, we called a doctor. He couldn't explain it, didn't know what to do. Some kind of a nervous shock, he said vaguely. She would get over it.

Margaret turned to me, lips quivering, face utterly bloodless. We both felt the power of a damnable menace pressing around us. As though when her brother Bob had stabbed Sue, he had cast a spell over her that was making her like him!

"Oh, if she doesn't get well!" Margaret sobbed. "And anyway, Bob will come back. I know he will come again. He didn't finish the first time—"

I slid my arm around her. If I could only take her terrors away from her! If I could only suffer them all for her!

"Get the baby away somewhere," I said. "Send her and your aunt up to the country."

"He could get her just as well there," she moaned. "And with her so terribly sick and needing me—oh, I can't let her be away!"

Sue was dreadful enough. But when I looked at Marge, I saw something that chilled my soul like a touch of death's hand.

For now she too was beginning to show the same symptoms. Her expression was changing subtly—changing terribly. Her wonderful eyes, like bits of blue sky, became clouded. Her speech was taking on a strange thickness. One of her feet start-

ed dragging ever so little as she walked.

When I saw that, I thought that I had all that my sanity could endure. But God—or the devil—had something still more harrowing in store for me.

For the past weeks, Marge and I had been inseparable as two halves of the same soul. But now she began to shun me, to grow cold. She turned her lips away from my kisses. Wildly she cried:

"No, Slim, no! You mustn't kiss me! I—Oh, don't ask me why!" Her lips cold and white, she sobbed hoarsely: "Slim, go away. Go ten thousand miles from here and don't ever try to see me again. Forget that you ever saw me—"

I staggered back from her as though she had struck me in the face. Go away and forget her! In God's name, why? What was this that was happening?

All compunctions swept away then in the rush of my terror, I started shadowing her. And what I saw—

Hidden at night in shadows of trees I saw her get into a black coupé that stopped swiftly at the curb and then darted away before I could find another car in which to follow. But I had had a glimpse of the driver's face, lighted momentarily in the glow from the instrument board. It was Junior Hartley! Hartley for whom the police were searching everywhere! Whose lewd gaze had played over her like the tongue of a snake!

A crazy thought blasted me. Had the damnable spell of that mark on her bosom made her this way, strange to herself? Was she growing lewd as those female animals I had seen in the shack? Had Junior made Slavin's son put that brand on her knowing that it would bring her into his arms?

**A**NOTHER day passed, just a numb succession of horror-packed hours. Sue was growing dreadfully worse. She stumbled on twitching legs. Her baby chatterings came incoherent and mumbled.

Marge sat looking at her, speechless, distraught with terror. Her hands were busy now, fluttering and pressing against her breasts—as though some unholy compulsion kept drawing them to caress the flesh where that red imp gibbered and danced.

And then at midnight I had a call from the police.

In an abandoned house outside Greenbush village they had found Slavin with his throat cut from ear to ear. They had had a brief glimpse of Junior and another man, a stranger, lurking around. They had escaped before they could catch them.

For a short time then I fed myself another pipe-dream of hope. With Slavin's death one thing was over—the phantom truck wouldn't ride again.

Then, as though in sardonic mocking, the thing suddenly reappeared on the roads. Three of our drivers reported seeing it. One of them was chased and escaped only by driving into the yard of a farm house.

I believed then that Junior must be the thing's driver—till an amazing thing happened. Of his own free will he walked into a police station and gave himself up!

Terror had driven him in there, fear of something more horrible than the law's punishment for murder. He wouldn't talk. Hours of questioning didn't crack him. Through twitching green lips he only begged them to lock him up in a cell—in the strongest cell that they had!

That was a mystery that brought the visage of doom blacker, still more macabre. We had a dim vision of powers bigger than Junior, more voracious than Slavin, striking from—somewhere.

That menace was the one which was clutching at Margaret! Menace that didn't have to get her out on the road now—for right here at home the shadows were closing around her fast. Her feet dragged like those of the idiots at the garage. A dreadful looseness made her mouth leering and slack as a wanton's.

From her home town came a group of her friends to offer their sympathies. Philander Thomas, her adviser and backer, was their spokesman.

"If there is anything I can do—if any of us can do anything—" He pressed my hand. "I know what you are suffering, my boy. I had loved ones once and I lost them—they were driven mad, too." A sudden outleaping of savageness clutched his ascetic features.

I didn't bother much to try to figure out what his meaning could be. My heart colder than death, I took Marge to doctors. They examined her and gathered owl-eyed behind their spectacles to mutter in wonderment over an unheard of medical phenomenon. They muttered:

"Effect of some extreme nervous shock. Send her to a hospital. Perhaps expert treatment—matter of months—"

I cursed them crazily and took her home. I knew it was the end. Hour by hour she was becoming an idiot under my eyes. Soon she would be another one of those blasted wrecks that squatted twitching and vacant-eyed on the running boards of the trucks.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Death Rides the Highway*

AND then came the morning when horror reached its apex—the morning when I found that Marge was gone.

When it had happened, who had taken her, I couldn't guess. She had just vanished out of the house like those drivers whom an invisible hand had yanked from life into the world of the missing.

I went to the police station and they spread a dragnet over two hundred miles of road. I besieged their office till my white face and burning eyes must have haunted them.

They didn't find her . . . I was at the point of frenzy—I'd even thought of self-

slaughter—when coming in late one night I heard the phone ringing. It was Philander Thomas' voice, husky, trembling with excitement. He gasped out that he had found the shack in the woods and she was there. Not being able to get me, he had called the police. By this time they must have her. If I wanted to start out and meet them. . . .

I dropped the phone without waiting for him to finish. I started back to the garage and I ran as no man ever ran before in this world. Margaret found! Margaret safe!

The little coupé was laid up for repairs. The only vehicle in the garage was the great Selwyn truck.

I found that I wasn't alone when I climbed into the cab. Jim Peters, the last of our drivers, came tumbling in beside me. Grim-lipped and white he muttered: "I loved Marge, too, Slim, before she picked you. I'm in on this."

The events of the next hour can be passed over briefly. It was a forty mile run out to the outskirts of Greenbush and the hour the trip took was long as a lifetime. As we neared the place we kept our eyes open for the sight of a blue police car coming to meet us. I couldn't wait—I couldn't breathe—till I got Marge into my arms.

We did find that police car—found a tangled heap of steel and mangled uniformed bodies there in a ditch. And Margaret standing witless and moaning staring down at it. It had happened just a moment before.

She was half naked. They had been flogging her. And what else—God, don't ask me to tell of those horrors! She was utterly mad now, she stared at me with wild animal eyes that didn't know me.

I took one moment to crush her into my arms. I wrapped my coat around her and took her back to the truck. I set her down on the seat between Jim and me, and stamped on the accelerator.

I was still on my knees thanking God that I'd got her back, but somehow I was more terrified than I'd ever been. The phantom had done that—got that police car filled with armed men. It was out abroad somewhere now. I was sweating with panic to get that forty miles over with, to get Marge off the road and inside four walls and shut away from this something that I felt reaching dank hands at me out of the very air.

I DON'T know at just what moment I became conscious of a presence there in the cab with us. I couldn't see anything, couldn't hear a sign of its nearness. It was some sixth sense instinct of danger that told me that it—that something—was a fourth passenger.

The hair on my neck started to rise like that on the spine of a frightened dog. I half turned to look over my shoulder. And then out of the dark at my side came an awful yell, Jim's voice. I felt the surge of Margaret's body against me as his wild lunging jostled her.

From the empty body of the old fashioned truck, open behind us, had come swarming over into the seat a figure that seemed nothing but a great half human crab. It was Slavin's idiot son! He leaped on Jim, biting, ripping, tearing.

I knew that I ought to stop the truck and go to Jim's help, but I couldn't stop! For without my having given her the gas, the truck's speed started to jump!

I grabbed my foot off the lever but it didn't make any difference. A malign power seemed to have taken control to hurl us at madder and madder pace. The night was a roaring of trees, hills and fences. We hung on the crest of a giddy descent and then went lurching down as though we were diving the chute of a roller coaster.

What happened next in the cab of the Selwyn was too hideous to describe. Jim's yells rose to squeals of animal madness.



I knew that the idiot was killing him. Margaret was right next to them—she felt him doing it! She whirled to fling her arms around my neck. She clawed at my shoulders. In her frenzy her teeth ripped at my face and my ear till I felt hot spurting of blood.

Stop the truck—great God, I had to stop it! I reached down to yank out the ignition key. I couldn't, for the thing had been broken off in the lock.

Still faster yet. I felt a wave of terror freezing me from heels to heart as we went rocketing through the night—propelled by a spectral hand toward that black curve that came speeding toward us. Could I get around it, or was that where death would greet me under tons of jangling steel?

And in that instant when my brain seemed exploding in chaos was when I heard a sound that struck fresh terror to my heart—the scream of the phantom! It was coming up from behind, wailing insanely as it demanded the road.

I heard Jim's last bubbling shriek. I felt Margaret's body jerk backward as something gripped her and dragged her over there—to kill her too!

But I couldn't think of even that now. I was riding a monster of screaming steel that had gone berserk under my hands. I had to get it around that curve! I gritted my teeth and threw all my strength against the wheel. There was a sickening lurch. I felt the wheels go off the road.

While we hung poised there on the knife-edge of hell there dashed past us a great luminous shape, swaying, yawing, speeding like nothing human—holding the road, God or the devil only knew how.

Then came a sharp crashing of a hard object hitting the windshield. A suffocating stench strangled me, blinded me. The truck swerved like a blinded horse.

For a second we catapulted through space. A thunderbolt hit me and everything went black.

IT MIGHT have been a minute or a hundred years before I opened my eyes. There was a space of dizzy bewilderment. Then I realized that I was lying on my back with a tangle of steel skeleton spiderwebbing the stars over my head.

I moved head, legs and arms. I was bruised and bleeding, but miraculously no bones were broken. I stretched out my hand and it fell on something wet and warm. What I had touched was Jim's face—what was left of his face.

Pain shot through me as I pushed myself up to a sitting position.

"Margaret!"

For a moment she didn't reply. There wasn't a sound save the chirping of small night creatures and the wind crooning through long grasses. And then from somewhere I heard her voice.

A low cluster of rocks loomed against the stars. And at its base four figures were visible—Margaret and three male forms. Two of them were Slavin's son and another monster just like him, his twin of hideousness. The third was a tall, vague form whose face I couldn't see.

They held Margaret between them. What they were doing to her I couldn't exactly tell—something namelessly hideous! Their hands clutched curved implements like hooked garden tools. There were soft ripping sounds and her shrieks echoed through the night.

A yell burst from me and I flung myself over there. One of them dropped Marge and spun around. I had a glimpse of wildly tossing hair, glaring eyes and lips dribbling spittle. And then the five prongs of his hook glinted against the sky.

I ducked under the slash and drove my fists to his jaw. I felt stabbing pain of a smashed knuckle.

The hooks caught in my coat collar, ripping my clothes down to my belt. Before I could jump away, one of his arms swept around me. He held me clutched

to him while with the hook he raked my back again and again. I felt searing agony as the flesh was torn and gashed.

Over there Margaret was screaming horribly, but I couldn't do anything, couldn't go to her. For now he was trying to get the hook around to the front to gouge at my face—the way Hank and Phil had been clawed!

I fought like a madman. I attacked him him with my teeth and my fingernails, with my fists and my feet. I drove my knees to his vitals.

And it wasn't enough. His bestial laughter rang. He backed me against the rocks and held me there while he slashed at my eyes.

**S**TARK terror clutched me then. Where I found the strength in that last ghastly moment to come up from the ground with both thumbs driving into his eyes, I'll never know. I felt my fingers jab home in the sockets and he let out an agonized howl. He jumped to his feet and lurched backward, pawing his face.

I left him there and surged to my feet. One hand gripped a rock that I had snatched from the ground.

I didn't stop to shout at the other one who held Margaret. I swung up the stone and brought it down with all my newfound power on the back of his head. His knees folded under him and he caved down on his face.

At sight of that, the third figure, whose face I hadn't seen, let out a yell, whirled and started to run. In two strides I overtook him. I dropped him cold with a smash under the ear.

I took one second to roll him over before I jumped to sweep Marge into my arms. The face of the man who lay senseless there was that of Philander Thomas!

It wasn't till some days afterward when Margaret and I had recovered enough to have visitors at the hospital and Thomas and Junior had cracked and talked, that

the whole of the dark and tangled truth came to light.

The thing that had turned Thomas into a mad beast had started years before when he was a young man, just married and living at Beachers Falls.

Through evidence given by a number of the inhabitants, he had been found guilty of a crime that he had never committed and been sent to prison. He left behind his lovely young wife, soon to become a mother. In her delicate condition, she had become crazed with anguish at her husband's misfortune. And when his son was born, he, too, was an idiot.

In the hour when Thomas had returned from prison to discover the ghastliness of his tragedy, he had sworn a vow of revenge on the entire community. He had settled down there, leading a quiet life, pretending that he had forgotten and forgiven. He set up a banking business offering loans. When the debtors had reached the point where they could no longer pay, he would foreclose.

**A**ND for another reason than that he was going to find profit in ruining them. A syndicate had secretly acquired a franchise to build a dam across the river at a point some miles farther down for the development of hydro-electric power, necessitating the flooding of the entire valley. With the properties in prosperous condition, the expense of acquiring them would be great. But if the farmers could be deprived of their homes at foreclosure—they had promised Thomas a big bonus for delivering the titles to them at a low figure.

When the Tri-Mountain outfit had started bringing prosperity back to the valley, his warped brain had thought up the phantom truck. It was really a light car with a steel framework and canvas sides. Our trucks had been driven off the road by a gas bomb shot through the windshields as the phantom went past.

Slavin and all others at Greenbush had hated us and were glad to help. Slavin's crippled son and his—Thomas'—had been the killers. To make his sadist vengeance more ghastly, he had kidnapped the Beachers Falls girls whom I had found in the shack. He had driven them old and mad with the same drug that had been given to our drivers. His son had jabbed Margaret with a needleful of the stuff at the same time that he had branded the mark on her with acid.

Thomas had kidnapped Margaret to work his sadist cruelty on her. The police were pressing him close and he wanted an alibi. He had phoned them and guided them to the shack where he had her. On their return, the phantom had wrecked their car.

His son had been concealed in the back of our truck. What had given the Selwyn its uncontrollable speed was the fact that during the fight a blow of Jim's foot had hit the gas lever and jammed it down. Another had broken off the ignition key.

As for Junior Hartley, Thomas had got hold of a lot of his worthless checks and blackmailed him into helping him on pain of going to prison. Desperate, Junior had been working on Margaret on his own behalf, trying to get her to sell. He had an

offer from a rival concern for the Tri-Mountain. The money from that deal would enable him to take up his checks with Thomas, and then expose him.

Thomas had become suspicious of him, also of Slavin, who he feared was about to crack to the police. Slavin he killed, but Junior escaped by giving himself up.

As for Margaret's affair with Junior—she was seeing him in a desperate effort to induce him to tell what had happened to Sue and how to cure her. To save Sue's life and reason, she was prepared to do anything.

I guess that is all. The doctors managed to find an antidote for the drugs that she and Sue—and Bob—had absorbed. She recovered at last from her awful experiences.

We are married now. The Tri-Mountain is flourishing. The Beachers Falls farmers have new cars. Marge has retired and Bob is the manager. Life holds no shadows—save that when we are driving by night on some lonely road and we hear the whoop of a police siren and she shivers and tucks her little cold hand into mine—I know that she is seeing again the mad rocketing of a ghostly blue shape and feeling the torture of steel claws ripping her bosom.

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Nick saw a man standing beside the girl. His face was hidden in the hideous mask of a Mongol Lama. . . .

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Brain that Forgot

THE man whose name had been entered on the hospital records as Nicholas Street now examined himself attentively in the mirror. He beheld a well-set, personable stranger in the early thirties, as near as he could judge, with lean, sinewy face whose weather-beaten brow not even a long hospitalization had caused to fade. A newly healed scar just

beneath the upsweep of strong black hair, glowed pale red across his forehead. Oddly enough, it did not disfigure him. Alert, keen eyes stared back at him.



"You still don't know who you are, Mr.—er—Street?" asked Jim Hard. Jim was a city detective, first grade.

The man called Nicholas Street shook his head. A quizzical grimace drooped his lips. "Never met myself before, Hard," he retorted. "Sorry!" He shrugged into his expensive tweed topcoat, set his imported grey soft hat rakishly on his head so as to hide the scar.

Doctor Bellman shook hands with him. "We've done all we could for you, Mr. Street. It's a clear case of amnesia. That smack on the head completely dissociated the past from you. It was a vicious blow. You can thank your tough constitution, and some particularly good nursing here at the City Hospital, that you're still alive. To all intents and purposes, you're a new man now. You may go through life without ever knowing who you are, or it may come to you suddenly; perhaps even bit by bit. There's no way of telling. Let's hope some relative or friend recognizes you somewhere."

Nicholas Street puckered his forehead. "Somehow," he answered slowly, "I don't think that will happen. Don't ask me why. I couldn't tell you."

Doctor Bellman looked away. There was pity in his eyes. "Going to keep that name the incoming clerk handed you?"

The man shrugged. "Why not? It's as good as any other. It's the name of the street on which I was picked up unconscious, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" Jim Hard said hurriedly. "Let's get going. 'By, Doc!"

THEY stepped out of the hospital into the early spring sunshine of the city. Nick took a deep breath, gazed at the busy town with wide, interested eyes.

The hospital was close to the waterfront and the river flowed broadly beyond. Ships swung lazily at the wharves and the salt tang brought odors of spices and ginger and green coffee to his nostrils. A

cosmopolitan crowd surged through the narrow thoroughfares—swarthy Italian sailors, Lascars, shuffling Chinese with flapping trousers and hands discreetly hidden in wide blue denim sleeves.

"Recognize any of this?" Hard asked alertly.

"Not a thing!" Nick said in a flat monotone. "Never saw this town before that I know of." There was pain in his eyes; a tremendous effort at concentration.

Jim Hard took off his derby, wiped his broad red face. The sun was warm. "Damn funny!" he growled. "We've sent your picture all over the country; England, too. Didn't get a peep anywhere. Yet your clothes are expensive as hell, you had five grand in your pocket, and that ring on your finger—"

Nick Street stared down at the ring as if he saw it for the first time. It was a curious affair. A clear, semi-translucent jade, light green in color, carved into a writhing dragon. The workmanship was exquisite, the artistry that of a master. Nick could almost see the lashing of the tail, the fire snorting from the nostrils.

"We had a jeweler look at it," the detective frowned. "He practically kissed it. Said it was a museum piece; only one of its kind in the world. Something about Ming Dynasty stuff. He claimed a millionaire couldn't afford to buy it. Yet nary a word could we get to identify you. Hell! It looks like you just dropped from the sky."

Nick tore his eyes away from the ring. Something in its depths had called to him, plucking faintly at the tattered threads of memory. But it was infinitely remote, far off.

"Where are you taking me now?" he inquired.

"Back to Nicholas Street," Hard grunted. "Gonna try and reconstruct the crime. Maybe that'll give us a lead."

They plunged into the Oriental quarter. The streets were crooked, tortuous. The

sun flung impotent rays over the crowding houses whose depths it could never penetrate. Exotic merchandise filled the store windows, pictographs flaunted their faded gold on the swinging signs. Saffron shadows flitted along the walls, slant eyes turning furtively to the two white men who had ventured into their domain.

Nick saw everything without seeming to look anywhere but straight ahead. A window sign told him—*Ho Sing, Humble Merchant of Dragon's Blood, Musk and Ancient Bones*. He read it easily, not knowing that it was in Chinese. Long ago, he must have been able to translate the language . . . .

He saw a slanting shadow flow from a dim hallway, a scarred yellow face twist into ludicrous astonishment, cruel slitted eyes widen with fear. His own eyes drooped under calm lids to follow that frightened gaze. They fell on the jade ring, the tiny dragon pricked out in a mote of reflected sun.

When he lifted his eyes, the Chinese was gone, melted back into the cavernous hallway, where it would be impossible to follow. Nick frowned. There had been fear, yes, but also deadly hate in those sloe-black eyes.

He said nothing to Jim Hard. The detective had not seen the skulker.

THEY swung around a sudden angle. "Here we are," said Hard, and stopped. "Nicholas Street," he said sourly, "meet Nicholas Street, your namesake. They found you right over there, just outside that hallway, swimming in your own blood. Does this place mean anything to you?"

Nick looked blank. "Not a thing," he repeated wearily. It was a sickish feeling—this one of having no memory beyond a month of pain in a hospital bed. "Are you certain I was deliberately attacked?" he asked. "Perhaps I fell and smashed my head against the stone."

"Not a chance," the detective asserted grimly. "Only a blackjack, and a powerful arm swinging it, could have smacked you down like that. The fellow must have been hiding in that hallway. He cracked down on you as you were passing. He was sure you were dead."

"But why?" Nick puzzled. "It couldn't have been a stickup; you say the police found all that money on me."

"And also the ring," Hard added. "Sounds more like a case of private revenge, or a hired hatchetman. We've grilled every Chink in the house. They all swear they heard nothing; saw nothing."

"Who picked me up?"

"A bum going into the mission across the street for sinkers and coffee."

Nick lifted his gaze. The mission was a squat, scabrous building between two tenements. Large flakes were peeling from its grey-stone front. Electric bulbs pricked out a legend over the doorway—

*Come ye in, brothers, and find  
shelter and refreshment. Serv-  
ices mighty, 7 to 8 P. M.*

Underneath were Chinese characters on a faded scrollwork.

"Confucius was a great man, but only the Christian God is all-powerful," Nick read aloud unwittingly.

"Hey!" Jim Hard almost yelled. "You read Chinese?"

Something clicked in Nick's brain, clicked off again. A struggling instinct warned him, a close-mouthedness inherited out of the blank past. "Who, me?" he laughed in denial. "Not a chance. That just popped into my head."

The detective surveyed him suspiciously. "It's damn funny, then. Me, I can't read their heathen writing; but they tell me that's what those laundry marks up there say. You're a queer bird, Street. Doc Bellman told me every time he'd make some medical crack about your case to another sawbones, you'd chime in with

some of the same lingo. He swears only a graduate surgeon could of spilled that talk."

Nick pressed his temples, trying to recollect. "No," he said finally, "I don't think I was a doctor. Now, about this chap who found me—"

He broke off. A man was shuffling up the street—a white man. His head was bent, pinched shoulders sagging in a threadbare coat. A ten-day stubble blackened his hollow face. The street swarmed with Chinese, slippers flapping, filling the air with singsong intonations. Aside from Nick and Jim Hard, the bum was the only white man in that crooked maze.

Nick gripped the detective's arm, spoke swiftly. "Who is that man? Do you know him?"

Hard raised his eyes. "Sure!" he answered. "That's the bum who picked you up. He hangs around the mission regularly; they give him handouts. We grilled him plenty already. Want to talk to him?"

Nick's grip tightened. He was surprised to find himself so tense. His scalp crawled without his knowing why. "Watch!" he whispered.

The man shambled ahead, without looking up. He hesitated at the mission steps, then turned away. But, even as he turned, he staggered. His head jerked back, his battered hat fell from his head. A look of unutterable astonishment distorted his stubbled face. Then he commenced to run, arms pistoning, legs pounding. A thin scream tore from his wide-open mouth, choked off into clotted gurglings.

"Hey! What the hell!" yelled Hard.

The man's body seemed suddenly to swell. Green, slimy fronds pushed swiftly through his clothing, spread with lightning speed over his jerking form, covering him from head to foot in a shroud of heaving, swarming, growing tentacles. Then his face puffed up. Even as they watched in horror, the green fronds burst through the skin in pustules of quivering

life, ran rapidly over his features in an obliterating mat. His legs sagged; he fell headlong; the cries ceased. He kicked once, convulsively—then lay still. He was no longer a recognizable man but just a bloated, tangled mass of slimy vegetation!

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Green Death

AT the first tortured shriek, Jim Hard and Nick had raced for the man. But by the time they reached his side the shambling bum was beyond human aid. The detective's eyes popped out of his head. "Good God . . . Good God!" he repeated over and over. A minute before, the street had been crowded; now it was bare of all save themselves. Even the murky tenements seemed blank of life.

Nick clenched his fists, fighting back the prickling horror that tightened his scalp. His brain clicked madly, vague memories plucking at his mind but vanishing even as he strained to capture them.

Jim Hard was bending forward to turn over the loathsome mass. But Nick caught his hand, thrust him aside.

"Hey!" the detective cried out angrily.

"Don't touch him," Nick snapped. "It's death to touch him. Those spores . . ." He stopped, passed a bewildered hand over his forehead. "For the moment I seemed . . ." His voice faltered. "But it's gone now."

The detective glowered, broad face transformed from its sickly pallor to a beetling red. "You seem to know a damn lot, Street," he growled. "But I ain't touching him. Let the docs do that. Watch him while I go phone for the wagon."

"There is no need to do that, officer," someone said. The voice was low, precise, yet authoritative.

The mission doors had opened, and a



group of three men and a girl were coming down the steps. The leader was powerfully built, with heavy, rough-hewn face. Thick, dark glasses hid the expression of his eyes. Though his body was that of vigorous middle age, his hair was white as snow, and fell to the collar of his sober black cloth.

"I've already telephoned, Officer Hard," he explained. "I saw what happened to this poor creature from the mission window." His muscled hand extended in a benediction, lips moving silently as if in prayer.

"Thanks, Mr. Porter," mumbled the detective, swallowing with difficulty. "He was one of your drifters."

The second man pushed down the stairs. Sweat glistened on his pink bald head. His little eyes, deep in folds of fat, fairly crawled with terror. His pudgy fingers plucked nervously at the enormous gold chain across his vest and his stiff collar seemed about to choke him.

"For Pete's sake, Hard, what sort of a cop are you?" he babbled. "Don't stand there like a mummy! Do something! Take that awful thing away. Pick him up—"

"It's death to touch him now," Nick interposed. Something inside of him was talking—something so vague as to be almost instinct. How could he have had experience with this greenish horror? "A little later, perhaps, when the growth has stopped—"

"Oh, yeah!" The fat man whirled on him. "Who are you? What do you know about all this?"

"No more'n I do, Mr. Bruff," the detective said hastily. "He's the guy who was hit on the head last month just across the street. You know, the case of amnesia. The clerk in the hospital tagged him Nicholas Street, after this place."

**N**ICK felt their four curious glances survey him. For the moment, the growth-covered body of the tramp was

forgotten. Then Tom Bruff blew his nose noisily. "That makes two nasty crimes in my district," he growled. "You fellows in the department better get wise to yourselves, or you'll be pounding beats. My people here're peaceful and law-abiding. I don't want 'em scared away—eh, Joshua Porter?"

The man in black said quietly, "They are my children too, including this poor victim at our feet."

"Well, you save their souls, Porter," Bruff grimaced, "and I'll take care of their votes." He pounded down the remaining steps, skirting the loathsome corpse gingerly. "Solve this, Hard, if you want to keep your job. Can't have this sort of thing going on. G'by!" And obviously he was glad to be gone.

The detective glowered after him resentfully. "Easy for a fat political boss like Tom Bruff to say '*solve it!*' But how in hell do I even know it *is* a crime? Maybe this guy had some kinda disease!"

The third man, who had remained in the background, came toward him discreetly. Although tall and worried looking, his voice was calm. "I'm Anthony Allison, officer," he said, "and this is my daughter Lucy. We happened to be passing through Chinatown, and thought we'd take a look into Mr. Porter's mission. You see, I've just returned from China, and these things interest me. I've seen dreadful deaths in my day, but never such a strange business as this one." He shook his spare, finely shaped head. "Yet, once out in the Gobi, I did hear a tale about a—"

"About what?" Hard snapped him up quickly.

Allison swallowed, fear creeping into his eyes. "Nothing!" he muttered. "You wouldn't be interested in old wives' tales, officer." He clutched at the girl's arm, and Nick noted the odd trembling of his hand. "We'd better be going," he said. "It is too much for my daughter. You'll

find me at my home, Six-forty-two West Seventy-eighth, if you need me, officer. Come, Lucy!"

The girl had said nothing all this while. Nick, watching her narrowly, saw that she was beautiful—slender and dressed in a smart tailored suit that set off to perfection her supple form. Dark brown locks peeped from under a pert little hat. Her nose tilted just the tiniest bit, lips curving adorably. But just now they were quivering, and her dark eyes were lustrous with terror. They shuddered away from the green-encrusted body, meeting Nick's level gaze in a strange, silent appeal. "Yes, Dad," she whispered, "we had better go."

But Allison's eyes had suddenly focused on Nick's hand. The man started, grew terribly pale. Involuntarily, Nick looked down. He had almost forgotten about the ring. The dragon stood out startlingly clear; glowing with a pale green light.

Allison gulped, swayed—seemed about to become ill. Then he pulled himself together, mumbled an indistinguishable farewell, and almost shouldered the girl down the street.

Nick watched them go, puzzled. This was the second man to stare at his ring, and show horror. But the first, the Chinese, had betrayed scorching hate in his expression, as well. What meaning was centered in this ring? Who had he, Nicholas Street, been in his previous life? Why had an unknown bum been cut down by the hideous fungus plague?

Quickly, he shoved the betraying hand into his pocket. It was lucky that Jim Hard had not seen Allison's sudden fear. As for Joshua Porter, the missionary, had the ring affected him? It was difficult to say. Dark glasses had concealed Porter's eyes. A cold wind stirred the scar on Nick's forehead. He felt himself enmeshed, helpless. Something sinister was tightening around him. If only he knew

his identity, what he had been in that previous incarnation before the black curtain had fallen upon his past!

The street was now crackling with sound. Scared Orientals began to peep stealthily from windows and doorways, sidling closer with fascinated, morbid smirks. An ambulance clanged; a radio patrol dashed up. Things began to happen. Brawny policemen jumped out, gasping incredulously. A young interne sauntered up jauntily, bag in hand. But his professional air abruptly deserted him as he glimpsed the grisly corpse. The bag dropped from his hand, and he was just a very pale young boy.

Nick Street decided it was time for him to go. Very quietly, he eased down the street, while the crowd tightened around the ambulance and the green-molded body, and Jim Hard's voice rose in brisk explanation. Somehow, Nick knew that it was no longer dangerous to touch the dead man; and also that neither the interne nor the whole medical profession would be able to diagnose the strange fate that had pounced on the unknown tramp.

These things were flashes of intuition. They popped into his mind; popped out again. He could not hold them. Nor did he understand the quick liteness, the sure competence of his own movements. He slipped soundlessly around the corner. The hubbub, the mutter of voices was gone. But someone was *stalking* him. He had caught the glimpse of a scarred shadowy yellow face, the dim form creeping from doorway to doorway. He recognized that face at once. It had snarled with mingled fear and hate at the sight of Nick Street's ring.

Nick laughed quietly, ducked into a hall, doubled out through the yard, grinned at scared little yellow children, vaulted a fence, and came out on the next street. The shadow was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Riddle of the Ring

THE man called Nicholas Street stirred uneasily in his sleep. Then suddenly he was awake, every nerve tingling with strange excitement.

It was almost dawn, and the cold, dim light of the city had begun to send its pallid reflection into the hotel room. Nowhere was there any sound or even flicker of movement. The city was asleep. Yet Nick sensed that unseen danger had somehow crept into this room with him, that his life hung by a hair. A scene flashed into his mind—there fluttered a half-remembered scene of a certain night on open sand, stars hanging like lanterns in the sky . . . a brown, thin hand reaching for him. Then the scene clicked off. . .

Doubling and redoubling on his tracks the day before, he had been certain that the shadower had been thrown off his trail. This hotel was in a quiet section of the city. . . . But now the menace had caught up with him!

He lay quietly, no muscle moving. His eyes seemed closed, his breathing calm and deliberate. No one could know that his heart was pounding, that every nerve shrieked to him to fly. Through locked eyelashes he tried to localize the abstract nearness of that danger. But only the dawn wind whispered through the open window, stirring the curtains. The fire-escape was a ghostly pattern beyond.

His sharpened senses now caught the faint slither of movement. Yet still he did not move. The intruder, whoever he was, was certainly armed; would kill before Nick could fling himself from the bed.

Into the thin silver of dawn, a hand slid. Lean, scrawny, dirty yellow, a long, curving knife glimmered dully in its tight-closed fist. Swiftly, soundlessly—it plunged downward!

In that split-second, Nick acted. With

a single flowing motion, he flung himself to one side, scooped up the pillow, thrust it into the path of the down-rushing knife.

There was a startled grunt, then choking, gurgling sounds, the thrashing of a yellow body trying vainly to break the grip of Nick's steel-hard fingers. A cloud of feathers drifted upward from the ripped pillow; the weapon slid softly to the carpeted floor. . . .

SLOWLY but surely Nick pressed the assassin down upon the bed, knee gouging into his chest, hands taut over windpipe. In the dawn's first wan rays, Nick stared down into the yellow, distorted face that was fast turning a dirty white under his remorseless pressure. A jagged scar ran irregularly from its cheek to temple. And now he recognized his prisoner. It was the same Oriental who, at first sight of Nick's ring, had ducked into the hallway, and then had so persistently dogged his footsteps from the mission.

"Son of a misbegotten ancestor," Nick said sternly, "you have followed me, tried to kill me. You have seen and recognized the Dragon Ring that I wear. Therefore, you know my past; you know the significance of the ring. Tell me these things. Explain to me who I am, or I shall send you to join the devils in unhallowed soil."

Nick scarcely realized that he had slipped into the sing-song dialect of the Cantonese. . . .

The assassin's eyes bulged from his head at the awful pressure of Nick's hands on his throat. Nick released his hold slightly. But the Oriental only shook his head. His tongue was thick with gasping, fear and terror, sweeping over his features.

"I dare not speak," he panted, at last. "The Master would slay me with the slow death of a thousand cuts. For this which you ask is a secret no living man may utter."

Grimly, Nick tightened his grasp. "Then die under the torture of the pressing thumbs," he said cynically. "Speak, if you wish to live."

The Oriental writhed and twisted under the cruel suffocation. His tortured face grew blue, his tongue lolling inanely from the gasping mouth. Then, finally, his hand fluttered.

Nick lifted his thumbs slightly. "You will talk now?"

The man groaned. "Yes!" he gagged. "Yes, I will talk! Though I go to join my ancestors because I have broken the Great Oath! You are—"

The high cheekbones dripped with sweat, the face a sallow mask of terror. "You are . . ." he started again.

The man called Nicholas Street bent eagerly to catch the stammering words. Now at last to know his own identity and comprehend that fate which hung over him!

Then the thing happened . . . . There was a dry whisper of air. The body of the assassin jerked convulsively, grew queerly rigid beneath Nick's forcing knees. The faint words trailed off into a bubbling groan. The lips worked, but no sound came. They started to swell, a green haze clouding them, spreading eerily!

Nick flung himself off the bed, with a curse. Like a great cat, he sprang into the farther shadows, out of the line of the window. He picked up a chair, charged for the opening with it in front of him as a shield.

No one was outside. Recklessly, he vaulted to the fire-escape. Three stories up he could see a shadow that flitted over the roof-top. It might be a man—or only the lifting dawn. Then it was gone . . . .

**S**LOWLY, thoughtfully, Nick eased himself back into the room. He knew exactly what he would find. Nevertheless it was with a shudder that he studied the

grisly object which lay there on his bed.

The assassin was no longer recognizable. His body had puffed up into a bloated mass, and green, slimy fronds, covering him from head to foot, had converted him into a shapeless, horrible mat of slithering vegetation.

A dull despair seized Nick—mingled with helpless terror. What could be the awesome secret of his past existence that it should cause death in a most hideous form to follow his trail, make men prefer to die rather than raise the veil?

Warily, Nick examined the body. Out of the blank past something made him recognize the fronds as fungoid in nature—a parasite that attacked living flesh, fattened with abnormal speed upon the blood which was its food. How was that frightful growth planted in living bodies; from where did it come? What, if any, defense could there be against it? Strain as he might he, found no answer. The line of communication with his former self was hopelessly severed.

He dressed quickly. Seven now, the sun peeped over the jagged skyline with long red lances. The city stirred, began its normal life. And Nick left that scene of dreadful death. He opened the door, stepped briskly out, locked it, walked with the quick step of a man about to take up his morning duties.

He took the elevator down to the lobby, turned in his key to the clerk with a nod of greeting, made his way out into the street. Within an hour the chambermaid would discover the unrecognizable mass and run screaming through the halls. There would be police, ambulances, reporters, newspaper extras. Jim Hard would come also, without doubt, his broad red face sweating, cursing a man named Nicholas Street. An alarm would go out for him, but by that time he hoped to have touched bottom in this mesh of bizarre intrigue and stalking terror. He allowed himself no illusions. These awe-

some events were but the beginning others, as yet unknown, undoubtedly marked him for a dreadful death.

He did not wish aid from the police. He had been a lone wolf, in his former incarnation—this much he felt in every fiber of his body—and he must act that way now. He smiled thinly . . . Doctor Bellman had thought him a surgeon; Jim Hard had hinted he might have been a detective or secret agent; he knew Chinese. What *else* had he known?

He started toward the curb, to hail a taxi. The Oriental quarter seemed to draw him irresistibly. Here was the fountainhead, the source. He wanted to talk to Joshua Porter, the mission founder. Perhaps some of his Chinese converts might be able to give him a lead. There was Tom Bruff, the political boss of the district—he would bear inspection. More than all, Anthony Allison! The thought of Allison brought another picture to Nick's mind—a far more pleasing one. That lovely girl . . . .

A cab drew to the curb. The driver reached back, opened the door. Preoccupied, Nick climbed in. The door slammed—the taxi roared away.

Nick stiffened, jerked to one side. There was someone else in the cab, huddled against the farther end, crouching in the shadows. The taxi took a corner on two wheels. Nick uncoiled, pounced upon the dim figure, grabbed it savagely.

Its body was slight and yielding to his grip. A faint odor of perfume assaulted his nostrils.

Good God . . . !

"You don't have to be so rough, Mr. Nicholas Street," said his captive clearly. "I just want to talk to you."

He fell back, bewildered, staring. Then the cab lurched and they fell together again. It was a pleasant sensation. The morning sun etched her features into view.

"Lucy Allison!" he breathed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Girl Who Knew Death

SHE explained quickly: "I need your help. My father is in terrible danger. He won't tell me what it is; he won't answer my questions. But he's afraid to leave his house, afraid even to move! He sits there in his room, with everything locked, holding that gun. He won't let me in. He told me to go away—to leave him to his fate!"

Nick frowned. "But why tell this to me? Why not go to the police?"

Her face was a pale calla lily as she leaned toward him. "Maybe I should have done that," she shuddered. "But I didn't think they could really help. Last night, after we reached home, Dad got a queer phone call. I saw him turn white, tremble. He smiled at me like one who is already dead—hopelessly, helplessly. 'They just got poor Dick Fenton,' he whispered. 'I'll be next.' Then he shut himself up in his room."

"Who is Dick Fenton?" Nick asked.

"I don't know," the girl admitted, "except that Dad met him once or twice in Asia. I think he was a mining engineer."

"How can I help?" Nick growled. "I am a man who doesn't even know his own identity."

The girl implored him with her eyes. "It's just blind intuition. But somehow I think you're the only man in the world who can save my father. I watched you back at the mission. Something about you scared Dad. It was odd. It wasn't fear of *you*, but of something relating to you. I asked him about it on the way home, but he only looked sick and shut up tight. That wasn't like him at all. Something has been preying on his mind all week. Almost ever since he came back from China. He is an explorer, you know."

Nick started violently. "How did you know where to get me?" he asked.

She said in surprise, "Don't you recognize the driver? I left home bright and early, determined to see Mr. Hard, the detective, and to get your address from him. This cab was waiting outside. I hailed it, told him to go to police headquarters. The driver grinned, said he was a police operative, detailed by Hard to guard my father. I told him what I wanted. Then he said he'd take me to you."

Nick whirled like a cat. He had asked the question too late. They had been tricked—both of them!

The driver was sitting hunched in his seat, cap pulled over his eyes. The glass window was tight shut.

"Stop the cab!" Nick yelled through the glass. He pounded heavily upon the frame.

**T**HE driver turned, merely grinned, put on speed. The cab lurched from side to side over rough cobblestones. Now, they were racing along the deserted waterfront.

They turned a corner sharply, whipped into a narrow alley, and braked to a grinding stop just as Nick grabbed for the door handle.

But even as he did so, a sickish-sweet gas spurted from the corners of the compartment, flooded his eyes, his nostrils, his mouth. He swayed, his hand fell limply to his side; everything swam in a dizzy haze. As though from a far distance, he heard Lucy's faint shriek. In a blur he saw what happened. The car door jerked open. Yellow hands clawed at the girl's slender form, dragging her out into the open. Dazedly, he watched wavering shadows move swiftly to a parked black limousine in which all shades were tightly drawn. The figures hurried into it, there was the bang of a door, the roar of a motor—and the car vanished into the alley.

Then a face seemed to grow on him—closer, closer, grinning, ugly with snarl-

ing self-satisfaction. "We got ya this time," mouthed the face. "This time there'll be no coming back from the dead for you, you——"

A cord appeared suddenly in the man's hairy hands, a slim, immensely strong cord with two weighted knobs at the ends. It pushed toward Nick's neck, twisted to encircle it . . . .

Nick's eyes were half-closed, vacant, his limp body sprawled on the seat. He was dizzy from all the spraying gas. But the opening of the doors had let some cleansing air swirl in. He took deep draughts, yet seemed not to breathe.

Already, he felt the tightening of the cord. His brain clicked suddenly. A sharp memory came to him—of a Dacoit who once had noosed him with a strangling cord—*like this!* Then the memory was gone, and pain took its place . . . and the pain was banishing the last of the clouding fumes . . . .

His knees came up sharply, both feet lashing out. They caught the strangler full in the stomach. He crashed back against the front seat with a howl of agony. His hand dropped the cord, moved convulsively toward his hip pocket—

Nick was upon him like a cat. His crashing fist caught the thug on the side of the jaw. With a whoosh of escaping breath, the man collapsed into the cramped space.

Nick crouched over him, his own gun pressed against his side. "Talk fast—You know the answers!"

The strangler rolled his head in feeble terror. "Shoot, damn you!" he moaned. "You won't get nothing out of me!"

Nick clubbed the gun, tapped him sharply across the back of the neck. A spasm of paralyzing agony quivered through the man. There was a certain nerve . . . "There's more of that coming," Nick threatened. "Talk up!"

The prone man read death in Nick's eyes. And he cheated it in his own way.

Another spasm wrenched his body. He had fallen with his left hand behind his back. The hand twitched. Too late Nick caught the movement, grabbed frantically at the arm. The thug opened his mouth, moaned, and fell back with a little plop. Before he touched the floor he was dead. But a snarl of triumph was fixed upon his brutish features . . . .

**N**ICK straightened with a curse. Once more cheated of that knowledge he so desperately must have! This time a man had committed suicide rather than talk. A tiny sliver of needle had fallen from the lifeless fingers.

Nick pocketed the gun wrested from the dead man, and quietly left the car. The alleyway was still deserted. The black limousine was gone—and with it, Lucy Allison!

Swiftly, he walked away. Even as he emerged into the sunshine and noise of a swarming ghetto, he heard the whistle of a patrolman. He grinned tightly. The taxi and its silent occupant had been found!

A newsboy rushed down the street breathless, a stack of fresh-printed papers under his arm. "Wuxtry! Wuxtry!" he yelped. "All about the slime-murders! Police searching for Street! Wuxtry!"

Nick pulled his hat lower over his face. That would be for the hotel affair, of course. It was an additional reason for not calling on Hard. He must go it alone, ducking the police as well as the unknown menace.

He knew exactly what he must do. Get to Anthony Allison before he died. With a flash of blinding clarity he knew that the explorer, Lucy's father, would be the next victim. Through Allison, he might save the girl, might get the truth that had slipped out of his hands twice already. But would he be in time?

A yellow taxi cruised slowly down the street, looking for a pick-up. Nick hailed it, muffling his face. "Six-four-two West

Seventy-eighth!" he snapped. "And a five spot extra if you make it in ten minutes flat."

But even as the door closed he saw the startled look in the driver's eyes, and realized that he was recognized. A police alarm was out for him! He drew his gun, held it straight. "That tip still holds if you play ball," he said quietly.

The cabman turned hastily in his seat. "Okay, buddy," he gulped. "You're the boss!" Fear paralyzed his pinched face.

It meant crashing through red lights, through police whistles, a couple of scraped fenders, but they raced down Seventy-eighth Street within the allotted time. Nick sprang out before an old-fashioned brownstone front, tossed a ten-dollar bill to the trembling driver.

He took the high stoop, with its crumbling stone steps, three at a time. The door was open—ominously so. Within was musty darkness. All shades were drawn, and only silence met him. Nick's teeth clicked tight. Again he was too late!

He whipped through the door, throwing himself to one side as he did so. The gun snouted in his hand.

But nothing met him; neither the crash of a bullet, the lunge of a knife, nor the tiny whisper of air he had heard in the hotel room. Only silence . . . more sickening than any sound could have been . . . .

Quietly, he cat-footed from room to room, his eyes probing the darkness. Nothing, downstairs—only stately furniture of a mid-Victorian style and exotic treasures on the walls, trophies of years of exploration. He went upstairs. A light burned dimly in the nearer room. A bedroom.

There he found what he had expected. Anthony Allison sprawled on the floor, his gaunt features wide with an awful fear. Strangely enough the fungoid death had not touched his face. But his body was a bulbous riot of bright, green ten-

tacles, a carpet of sinister vegetation . . .

Nick kneeled feverishly. He'd chance contamination. Perhaps, in the man's wallet . . . Then he straightened, rose slowly.

"Get up!" a cold voice had spoken. Its accents were rasping, icy. "Drop your gun! Stay where you are!"

NICK cursed himself for not having taken elementary precautions. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the closet from which the figure had stepped.

"All right!" he said dully. "You have me. What do you want?"

But the figure only chuckled. Suddenly, the room was filled with padding feet. Nick's arms were pinioned, his legs expertly tripped. He fell to the floor. Ropes wound round and round. Then they quit him—silent, slant-eyed Orientals, their faces inscrutable masks.

The man who had spoken now stepped into the area of illumination. He held a gun.

Nick stared up at him, expelled explosive breath. "So it was you all the time," he said slowly.

The fat man surveyed him with hating eyes. It was Tom Bruff, politician, boss of the Sixth Ward. He ignored Nick's remark. The veins swelled on the back of his neck. "I waited long enough to get you. All right, Nicholas Street, or whoever the hell you are. How did you do that to Tony Allison? What's your racket?"

Nick grinned scornfully up at the enraged politician. "What's *your* racket?" he countered. "Turn me over to Jim Hard—if you want me to believe your pretense."

Bruff moved forward, sent the ball of his fist crashing against Nick's jaw. "Jim Hard *hell!*" he snarled. "I'll handle this my own way. Tony Allison was my friend." The Orientals stood in a row, watching with blank countenances.

Nick spat blood from his cut mouth.

His grin tightened. "I came here to save Allison from *you*," he said calmly, "and to find his daughter, Lucy."

The man stepped back. A strange expression crept into his eyes. "Lucy?" he echoed hoarsely. "By God! If anything happened to that kid, I'll rip your heart out. Speak fast, man."

Nick's lips curled. Bruff was putting on a good act. Yet he spoke. "Lucy was snatched from me in Ridge Street, by gunmen," he said. "They tried to strangle me, but I got away. I thought they were your henchmen. If you're *really* Allison's friend, let me go. Every second counts."

The politician hit him again; hard. "Quit stalling!" he snarled, "You're in this up to your eyes already. Tell me the truth, or—"

Nick shook his head to clear the trickling blood away. A sudden fear devastated him. Suppose Bruff were not lying? Then he had miscalculated; and even now the girl . . .

"You damn fool!" he said desperately, "I've *told* you the truth. Lucy's in terrible danger, and you're driving the nails into her coffin. That is—if you're actually her friend."

Bruff stepped back, indecision in his eyes. His fat lips trembled, his fleshy jowls shaking like jelly. "By God!" he swore, "I didn't know. You're a smooth one, Street. Maybe you're trying to wriggle out from under like a snake. But I'll take the chance—for Lucy! I'll comb every damn opium joint in the district. I know them all. If they've done anything to her—"

Nick strained at his bonds. "Let me go along," he urged. "I think I know the answers. I'll find her."

Bruff grinned wolfishly. "Nothing doing," he said flatly. "You stay put, until I get all the truth. Wo Ling, watch this guy! If he tries to escape, knife him. Savvy?"

A tall Chinaman with a cast in one eye



smiled from ear to ear. "Me savvy!" he grunted. He took a long, wicked-looking knife from his belt, ran a blunt thumb tenderly over its edge.

Already Bruff was out of the room, followed by the rest of his henchmen. Silence descended again.

COLD sweat poured down Nick's chest. The Oriental had cocked his ears to listen to the diminishing rumble of a car. Now, with a cruel grin, he crept quietly toward the prone man. The knife glittered evilly in his hand.

"Tom Bruff big fool!" he chuckled. "He think me convert from mission, all the same listen to him. He wrong. Me good Dragon man, listen to Number One Top. He say you die."

He licked thick lips in anticipation. The knife poised.

"Wait a minute," Nick said. He had to think quickly. "You say you're a Dragon man?"

The tall hatchetman smiled proudly. "Sure! Me just join!"

"Then look at this, you fool!" Nick spat. He squirmed around in his bonds, displayed the ring on his finger. "There is the Dragon," he said hurriedly. "The symbol of your Tong. You know it, don't you?"

The Oriental hesitated, bent forward with doubtful eyes to survey the jade representation. He scowled in puzzlement. "That Dragon all right," he declared, "but me take orders Number One Top. He say you die."

As the man bent over, hesitating, Nick relaxed his hands. The tight ropes loosened. Where he had learned that trick of swelling his wrists on being bound, he could not tell. Now, with a swift wriggle he withdrew one hand, caught the knife arm that dangled close to him, in a grip of steel—twisted hard. There was a gruesome, snapping sound.

The Dragon man staggered back, with a

shriek of agony. His hand flapped like a broken wing. The knife fell near Nick . . . In seconds, he was free, the cords slashed, the point of the knife pricking the Oriental's throat.

"Where is the girl—Miss Allison?" Nick demanded.

The Chinese gulped. The knife pressed. "Me don't know," he howled.

"Who is your Number One Top, then?"

"Me don't know that, too. Me just joined. He allee time got face covered."

There was the ring of truth in his desperate accents. Nick groaned. Every second wasted was eternity. "One last chance," he rapped. "Where do you meet?"

The hatchetman's eyes rolled. "Me get killed," he said wildly.

"You get killed right now," Nick retorted. Blood trickled under the sharp point.

"Me tell," howled the man. "Below mission, below Mist' Porter's place, deep cellar. We meet there; think good fun on Clistian man. Go way by door belong next house."

"When's the next meeting?"

"Time high sun today. Number One Top promise white girl grow like weeds in garden then."

Nick flung the cowering Oriental into a corner, scooped up his gun, fled from the house of death. High sun meant noon, twelve o'clock. A single glance at his wrist watch had shown the time! Five minutes to twelve—an impossible task! Even if he flew, he could not reach the underground lair in time. Lucy Allison was doomed to die by the frightful fungus death!

He almost fell into the arms of Jim Hard, as he catapulted off the stoop.

The burly detective staggered, shouted "Hey, you! What the hell . . ." Then he let loose a snort. "Nicholas Street! You're the guy I'm after. Pulling fast ones with

that fake amnesia—" He grabbed, lost his balance, as Nick swung neatly for the point of his jaw.

Nick caught him as he fell, jerked him over to his left arm, pointed the gun with his right at the police driver of the department coupé standing by the curb.

"Okay, pal," he said carefully. "When Jim wakes up, I'll tell him the news, and you too. No time now."

Hard was a heavy man, but Nick got him to the parked car, thrust him in, jumped in, motioned to the speechless policeman with his gun. "Drive like hell for the Nicholas Street Mission!" he ordered. "Miss Allison is on the spot. The payoff is *there*."

It was a hair-raising ride, mostly on two wheels, the siren going like mad, traffic cops clearing all cars blocks in front of them, not knowing that a gun was being pressed against their comrade's side.

Jim Hard stirred uneasily, blinked, said, "What the hell, Street! You can't get away with this!"

"Shut up!" Nick told him savagely. His eyes burned on the telltale clock on the dashboard. "You're a lousier detective than I thought. At twelve Lucy Allison was to die. It's a minute after now. All we can do is catch the murderer before he gets away."

Hard rubbed the point of his chin, tenderly. His bright, inquisitive eyes searched Nick's set face. "All right," he decided suddenly.

Pedestrians scattered like squalling chickens before their hurtling speed. Crooked streets yielded wildly. It was already five past, when they pulled up with screaming tires before the rickety old tenement next to the mission.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Flower of a Fury

**T**HE mission doors were open. Sanctimonious-looking Chinese, converts, shuffled up the steps. It was the hour of

meditation, of silent prayer. A band tightened around Nick's heart. Within that grey exterior Joshua Porter labored in the name of Christianity; beneath, in a subterranean cellar, a fiend held high revels.

Passers-by, converts, turned to stare as the three grim men, guns drawn, catapulted from the department car and raced into the musty hallway. Nick led the way. In the rear, he found a door which led, by steep, tortuous steps, into the filthy cellar.

Jim Hard's flash sprayed around, illuminated cobwebs, rubbish, broken bottles.

"Ain't nothing," he growled.

But Nick did not hesitate. Like a man who had been there before, he leaped unerringly to the farther end where the whitewash seemed curiously cleaner than elsewhere. His fingers ran over the surface like a pianist's, suddenly stopped short, dug in. The wall moved smoothly out on a pivot.

The detective grunted amazement. The rookie policeman said: "Good Lord!"

But Nick was already through the opening, hurtling down the low tunnel in a desperate race with time.

So headlong was his pace that he had crashed into the crouching man before he knew he was there. The guard yelled; something whistled in the gloom. Nick ducked under the slicing blade, lashed out with all his strength. The man crumpled silently, and Nick dashed on. Behind, he heard the heavy crunch of regulation shoes, trampling down the prone man.

The dank dimness blackened suddenly. The tunnel had ended, and a heavy door barred the way. Hard was panting "Wait!" but Nick leaped low.

The door sagged, fell inward with a terrific crash. The three men catapulted through.

Green, ghastly light blazed upon them.

(Continued on page 106)



**E**VEN when the homicide squad trailed little Leona Rivers to Detective Marks's office, Marks was convinced she wasn't the hideous murderer they sought. There was something about her. . . . So he foiled the cops with a most daring—and intimate—deception. After he spirited Leona to safety, he set out to prove her innocence. He knew that somehow the mysterious killer was connected with the life of Leona. He knew that another spectacular, bizarre death was on the calendar.

He went to the Ninety-Six Club to hear Rose Sharon sing her torch songs. Rose was Leona's lovely room-mate. Perhaps the "torch" angle attracted his subconscious. . . . It reminded him of the flaming death!

At first Rose was singing easily and smoothly, in the voice that thrilled thousands. Then a quaver in her tantalizing tones plucked at Marks's nerves. He stiffened. He had been right; she *was* frightened!

She finished her number, and her lips twisted into the semblance of a professional smile. Marks knew it was a grimace of pain! She opened her mouth to sing an encore, but her voice broke. She attempted an apologetic curtsy, staggered toward the exit. Suddenly the master of ceremonies was on his feet, reaching a helping hand. Marks saw him go rigid, his face blank with amazement.

Rose Sharon screamed. Her hands clutched at her breast in agony, as if the scream had seared her throat. A thread of black smoke spiraled from her lips, and then, from her mouth issued—a *tongue of living flame!*

Marks strangled a shout, and fiery words stood out in his brain—the words the homicide chief had used, and Leona, too, about those other ghastly deaths: "*Burned up from inside!*"

The bringer of flaming death had struck again! . . .

Norvell W. Page wrote *Bringer of Flaming Death*, one of the two feature-length novels which appear in the November Issue of *Dime Mystery*. In it, Mr. Page tells you about the menace which is so terrifying to Leona, and so baffling to the police as well as to that illegal lawman, Conway Marks—who is not Conway Marks at all!

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## Dime Mystery Magazine

(Continued from page 104)

Many heads turned in startled fear. A moment they were dazzled, then the scene took shape and form. They were in a great underground chamber, lavishly made into the form of a Chinese temple. A huge green dragon snorted clouds of incense in a sculptured niche. Joss sticks made the place heavy with fumes. Joss and the unmistakable smell of opium!

About twenty men were leaning eagerly forward, nostrils wide, inhaling the deadly fumes, and upon the altar in front of the dragon. They were chiefly Orientals, but here and there a white face, cruel, tense, stood out.

A girl was tied to the altar, her eyes staring, imploring.

"Lucy!" Nick shouted, and knew he was too late . . .

Alongside the girl stood a man, his face hidden in a Mongol Lama's ceremonial mask. His fingers poised a hypodermic; the steel tip hovered over Lucy's bare arm.

Nick shot from the hip. The man howled, fell writhing to the floor. Instantly there was bedlam. The smoke-crazed inmates flung themselves upon the intruders. Guns roared, knives hurtled—were answered by the heavy smack of police .45's.

The battle lasted only a minute. The dragon worshippers fled screaming from the deadly hail, melted into secret passages. Through the haze of acrid smoke the chamber seemed a shambles. A half dozen men lay motionless, others groaned with wounds; the rookie policeman sat down abruptly, nursing his shoulder.

But Nick was already at the girl's side, cutting her bonds, whispering: "Thank God we got here in time!"

Jim Hard strode to the twitching man in the mask, ripped off the ceremonial covering. Then he gasped. The saintly features of Joshua Porter, missionary to

(Continued on page 107)

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## The Flowering Corpses

(Continued from page 106)

the heathen, stared up at him! The pallor of death was already upon his face.

The detective clutched at the disguising glasses. They clattered to the ground. One eye was an empty hole, a red-rimmed socket; but the other blazed with hate and triumph.

"Too late!" Porter shrieked. "Too late! Already she's infected with the fungoid plague. The hypodermic injection is a mere catalyst, to hasten the action. In several hours she will die, even as the others. There is no antidote."

JIM HARD slugged the dying missionary viciously across the mouth. "You filthy rat, I know you now. That blind eye gives you away. You're the guy for whom the Chinese Government has offered half a million yen reward. The One-Eyed Scourge, they called you. Robber of temples, leader of bandits, torturer extraordinary!"

The One-Eyed Scourge grinned. "They looked everywhere but on Nicholas Street, where the sanctified Joshua Porter conducted his mission."

But Nick was not listening. A single look at Lucy's frightened face convinced him that Porter had told the truth. He whirled, caught the false missionary by the throat. "Damn you, Porter," he rasped. "Tell me the antidote, or—"

The man choked. "There is none," he said feebly. "I got the fungus spores from a lama in the Tien Shan Mountains of Turkestan. He assured me nothing could stop them from sprouting."

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 107)

Nick's hands fell away. He seemed like a man in a dream.

"The Tien Shan Mountains," he whispered. "The Heavenly Mountains; the Going-to-the-Sun Mountains."

A silence fell on the shambles. The burly detective stared at him. "What the devil!" he ejaculated.

Nick's eyes glazed, his movements those of a somnambulist. Stiffly he picked up the fallen hypodermic, squirted out the clear liquid within.

"I want," he said tonelessly, "the juice of the poppy—the matrix liquor of opium . . ."

Porter shrank from his fixed glare. He shivered, and the blood welled in a red splotch through his shirt. "You . . . you . . ." he moaned like a trapped animal. "There is none!"

But Hard strode heavily to the altar, kicked it crashing. Beneath the flimsy structure were boxes and tins, neatly piled. "I thought so," he grinned satisfaction. "The old plant. Porter ran in dope, sold it to his supposed converts, to all Chinatown, at tremendous profits!"

He picked up one of the tins, knocked in the top with his gun butt.

"Here's your opium matrix, Street," he said. "Though what good can it do?"

Nick did not answer. He did not seem to hear. With fixed, precise motions, he filled the hypo with the sticky liquid, moved to Lucy's side.

She looked up at him bravely. "If you think it will help, Nick . . ." she whispered.

The bright point jabbed deep, the syringe slowly emptying. The silence grew insupportable. Porter broke it with coughing curses. There was a newborn terror in his eyes.

"Of all the world, he had to come!" he said.

The detective towered over him. His eyes were pinpoints. "You know this man called Street. Who is he? Speak up!"

(Continued on page 109)

## The Flowering Corpses

(Continued from page 108)

Impotent hate veiled the fear of the one-eyed man. "He stole my ring, damn him!" he coughed. "He came all the way to China to do it. The Dragon Ring, the symbol of authority. While I had it, I was safe in China, could laugh at the authorities. When he took it, I had to flee."

He groaned, closed his eyes. The pallor on his face deepened. "Spill the rest of it," Hard urged. "Who is Street?"

The single eye opened, glared derisively. "That," declared Porter with deliberate emphasis, "is a secret no one knows now but myself. It dies with me. "He—" his thumb jerked toward Nick—"will never know."

Nick said in the same strange voice, "She will be all right now."

Then his eyes cleared. He stared around in puzzlement. "I . . . don't remember . . . anything."

"And you never will," crowed Porter.

Lucy went up to Nick, put her hand on his. "You are a brave man, whoever you are," she said softly.

"And a swell detective," Hard added grudgingly. Then he cleared his throat. "Okay, Porter!" he snapped. "You're all washed up. There's a bullet in your lungs. Why did you kill the bum and Allison?"

Red foam moistened the man's lips. "They knew too much," he said with difficulty. "The bum stumbled on my layout, found me with my glasses off. Allison and Dick Fenton had been captured by my band for ransom in the Gobi. Allison acted suspiciously at the mission; I was afraid he had spoken to Fenton, too. I sent a man to kill Street in his hotel room, but I followed him to make certain. When he started to talk, I shot him with a blow-gun dart. It contained the catalyst.

"All my underlings had a little of the spores in their veins; but not enough to kill without the hastening fluid. That's why they obeyed me blindly."

(Continued on page 110)

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30x5.00-19	3.40	1.40	0.34	6.00-20	\$3.75	\$1.65	7.50-20	\$6.95	\$3.75
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32x5.00-20	3.45	1.50	0.34	8.25-20	5.35	2.95	9.00-20	10.95	5.65
32x5.00-21	3.65	1.55	0.34	9.00-20	6.75	3.45	9.75-20	13.95	6.45
32x5.50-20	3.75	1.75	0.34	<b>ALL OTHER SIZES</b>					
6.00-16	3.75	1.45	0.34	<b>DEALERS WANTED</b>					

**SEND ONLY \$1.00 DEPOSIT** on each tire ordered. (\$3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. **ALL TUBES BRAND NEW - GUARANTEED - PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.**  
2328-30 S. Michigan Av., Dept. 1270-A, Chicago, Ill.

**MIDWEST FACTORY-TO-YOU**  
**RADIOS SAVE YOU UP TO 50%**

AS LOW AS **\$30.00 TRADE-IN ALLOWANCE!** **17-TUBE SPECIAL \$39.95 COMPLETE**

Big beautiful console --- 10,000-mile range --- Dial A-Matic Tuning. Money Back Guarantee. Paste coupon on to postcard---or write for FREE 1959 catalog!

**MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION, Cincinnati O.**

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**HOLDS FALSE TEETH FIRM**

A single application on plates—even lowers—brings all-day comfort. One application lasts up to 48 hours. A new adhesive in cream paste form. *Nothing else like it!* More economical than powders. Recommended by dentists. Made by the makers of Stera-Kleen. Money back if not delighted.

**FOR FREE SAMPLE** write The Phillips & Benjamin Co., Dept. 8-7, Waterbury, Conn.

**Easy Profits** **AND YOUR OWN CLOTHES WITHOUT COST**

**MADE-TO-MEASURE SUITS \$19.95 AND UP**

Just show friends, neighbors our High Quality All Wool UNION Made Tailored-To-Order Suits and Overcoats as low as \$19.95. Easy to take orders. Our sensational values make men "sit up and take notice." Make big cash profits full or spare time. Get a suit or overcoat without cost to wear or sell every time you sell 6 suits. Get as many as you can earn. If you need extra money or good full time income here is your chance. Complete outfit actual samples sent FREE.

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2240 Wabansia Ave., Chicago, Ill.

# Classified Advertising

## Advertisers

This space is available for legitimate advertisers who are looking for profits at low cost. Write for rates to: Advertising Dept., Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York.

## Agents Wanted

**BIG MONEY** taking orders; Shirts, Ties, Hosiery, Underwear, Raincoats, Pants, Dresses. Sales Equipment **FREE!** Experience unnecessary. Write NIMROD, 4922-AS Lincoln Avenue, Chicago.

## Aviation

**AVIATION APPRENTICES. GOOD PAY—BIG FUTURE.** Write immediately, enclosing stamp. Mechanix Universal Aviation Service, Strathmoor Station, Dept. U-2, Detroit, Michigan.

## Educational & Instruction

**FOREST JOBS AVAILABLE \$125-175 MONTH.** Cabin, hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify immediately. Write Rayson Service, C-62, Denver, Colo.

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**MEN—WOMEN. GET A GOVERNMENT JOB. \$105-\$175 month.** Prepare immediately. **LIST POSITIONS—FREE.** Franklin Institute, Dept. A37, Rochester, N. Y.

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**POSITION OPEN FOR MARRIED WOMAN** to wear free sample dresses. Earn to \$23 weekly. No canvassing, no investment. Write fully giving age, dress size. Fashion Frocks, Dept. CK-1026, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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**FREE! Magic Catalog 500 Tricks.** Amaze, Mystify friends. Write today! Lyle Douglas, Station A-2, Dallas, Texas.

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**SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC.** Free examination. Send poems to McNeil, Bachelor of Music, 4153-A South Van Ness, Los Angeles, Calif.

**POEM WRITERS, SONGWRITERS—Send for free Rhyming Dictionary, Songwriters' Guide.** Submit best poems, melodies today for bonafide, superior offer. **MMM STUDIOS, Dept. 32E, Portland, Oregon.**

## Salesmen

**EARN FREE SUITS AND CASH PROFITS.** Earn Cash Profits **PRIZES** and **FREE SUIT** for selling **FIVE** tailored-to-measure suits. No limit on Free Suits you may earn. No experience necessary. **FREE SAMPLE OUTFIT.** Prices from \$18.00. Money back guarantee. **FRANK KNIGHT TAILORING CO., 330 S. Franklin, Dept. AG-10, Chicago, Illinois.**

## U. S. Stamps Wanted

Cash for unused U. S. Stamps at 90% face value. Plymouth, Dept. 1, 152 West 42nd, New York.

*(Continued from page 109)*

**T**HERE was a sudden commotion outside, the rush of pounding feet. Tom Bruff crashed into the room, the sweat glistening on his fat face. Behind him poured his slant-eyed followers, guns in hand, and two strange Chinese, venerable, the wisdom in their aged eyes overlaid with secret fear.

The politician's excited glance darted to the girl. "Lucy!" he shouted joyfully. "Thank God . . ." Then he saw Nick. Astonishment painted his jowls. A gun leaped into his pudgy fingers. "How the hell did you get here?"

Jim Hard jerked forward, caught the gun. "None of that, Mr. Bruff," he growled. "Nick Street is the guy who saved Miss Allison, if you want to know." He stared sharply at the two old Chinese. "What are you doing with Wu Fong and Hip Ling?" he demanded. "They're the leaders of the tongs. Are they mixed up in Porter's racket?"

"I managed to shake the truth out of them," Bruff panted. "They were scared to death—still are. Porter's been holding the tongs up for protection money. Big Stuff! Every time they refused to kick in, one of their big shots died with the fungus sprouting out all over him. They even had to furnish him with gunmen. All Chinatown was under his thumb."

The big detective's face was stony as he turned to the prone figure of the one-eyed man. "I might have known," he said softly, "that dope was too small a racket for a guy like you. Making the tongs pay protection, eh? That's a new one, all right."

Porter coughed up blood. The pallor was deepening on his twisted countenance. But a faint glimmer of triumph glowed across it. "I . . . was . . . the only . . . one . . . who ever . . . put it across," he whispered.

"You're practically dead," Hard told

*(Continued on page 111)*



**Missing Page**

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# Lend Me Your Body for 7 Days...

and I'll Give You **PROOF**  
I Can Make **YOU**  
a **NEW MAN!**

No Other Physical Instructor in the World  
Has Ever **DARED** Make Such an Offer!

**A**LL I want is a chance to give you **PROOF**—  
in just 7 days, and right in your own home  
—that I can give **YOU** the mighty muscles  
and boundless energy you want!  
Right in the first week under my  
guidance you will see and feel the  
improvement! Then as my weekly  
instructions arrive in your home  
you continue to re-build, renew  
and "overhaul" your body. By  
the end of three months you are  
the owner of a powerful body that  
you will be proud to display.

People will notice the ruddy  
glow of health in your face, the  
sparkle in your clear eyes, your  
broad shoulders, and they will  
seek your company. You will be  
the fellow who walks off with the  
prettiest girl and best job while  
others wonder how you did it!

### GET MY FREE BOOK

Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you, absolutely free, a copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

### ARE YOU UNDERWEIGHT?

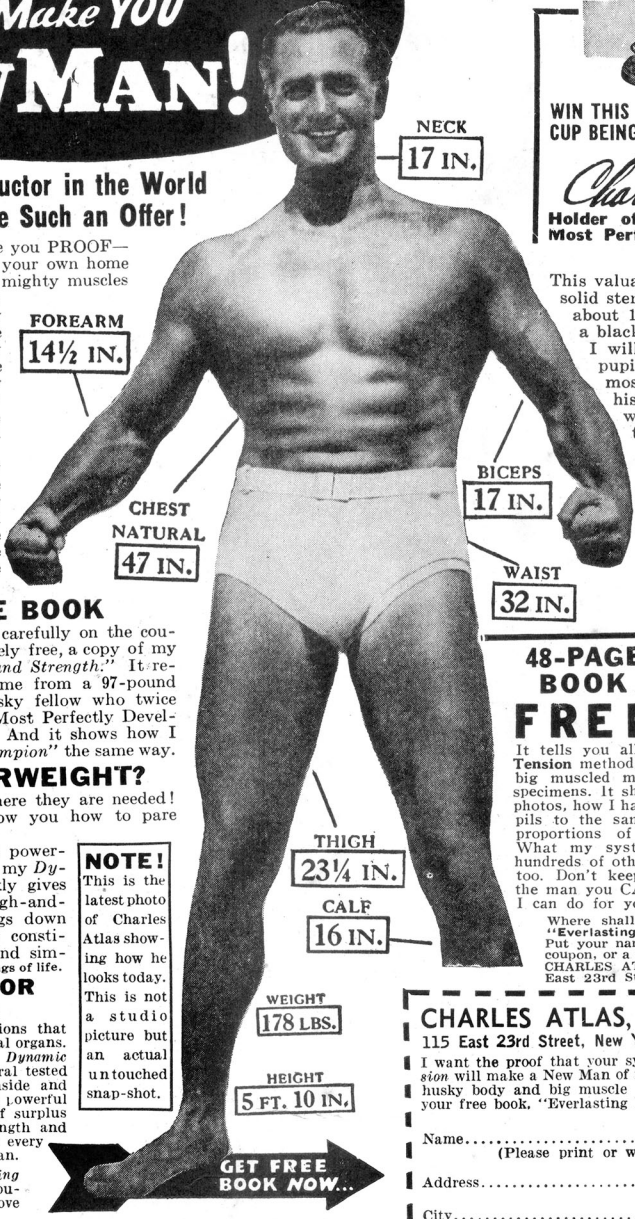
I'll add pounds of muscles where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

And with the big muscles and powerful, evenly-developed body that my *Dynamic Tension* method so quickly gives you, I'll also give you through-and-through health—health that digs down into your system and banishes constipation, pimples, skin blotches and similar conditions that rob you of the good things of life.

### I'VE GOT NO USE FOR CONTRACTIONS

I haven't any need for contractions that may strain your heart and other vital organs. I don't dose you or doctor you. *Dynamic Tension* is all I need. It's my natural tested method for developing real men inside and out. It distributes added pounds of powerful muscles over your body, gets rid of surplus fat, and gives you the vitality, strength and pep, that win you the admiration of every woman and the respect of any man.

Get my free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength!" Mail my coupon today. Gamble a stamp to prove I can make **YOU** a new man!



WIN THIS STERLING SILVER CUP BEING GIVEN AWAY BY

*Charles Atlas*  
Holder of Title "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

This valuable cup, made of solid sterling silver stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base. I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

Get my free book by mailing coupon below.

48-PAGE  
BOOK  
FREE



It tells you all about my *Dynamic Tension* method, and how it has made big muscled men out of run-down specimens. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique. What my system **did** for me and hundreds of others it can **do** for you too. Don't keep on being only half the man you **CAN** be! Find out what I can do for you.

Where shall I send you a copy of "Everlasting Health and Strength"? Put your name and address on the coupon, or a postcard. Mail it today, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 8310, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 8310**  
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic Tension* will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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(Please print or write plainly)  
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**GET FREE BOOK NOW...**

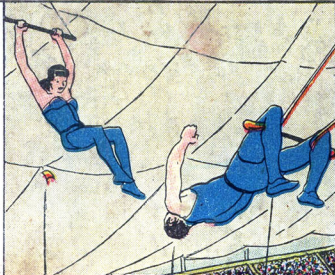
# THRILLS *from the* CIRCUS

FEATURING  
**ANTOINETTE CONCELLO**  
 TRAPEZE SENSATION  
 AND  
**TERRELL JACOBS**  
 LION KING



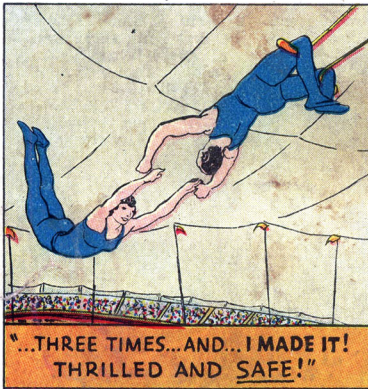
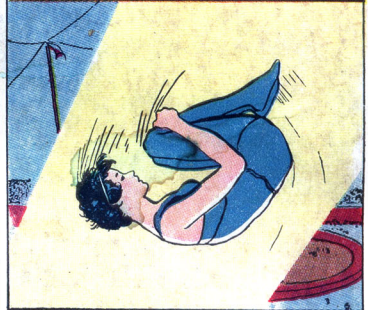
MISS CONCELLO, HOW ARE CHANCES FOR A STORY ON YOUR BIGGEST THRILL AS AN AERIALIST?

TONY, TELL HIM ABOUT YOUR FIRST TRIPLE SOMERSAULT IN THE AIR.



"NO WOMAN, TO MY KNOWLEDGE, HAD EVER EXECUTED A TRIPLE MID-AIR SOMERSAULT. I HAD TO DEPEND ALMOST ENTIRELY ON AUTOMATIC TIMING..."

"... BUT AS I WHIRLED OFF INTO SPACE... ONCE... TWICE... FOR A SPLIT-SECOND I PRACTICALLY LOST CONSCIOUSNESS..."



"...THREE TIMES... AND... I MADE IT! THRILLED AND SAFE!"

Copyright, 1938, R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company



TERRELL, TELL HIM ABOUT THE TIME SPARKY, OVER THERE, ALMOST FINISHED YOU



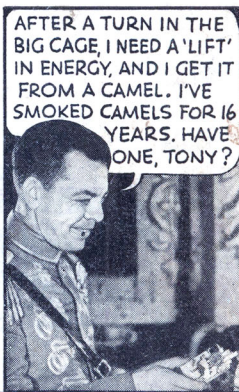
"I HAD ALMOST COMPLETED MY ACT WITH 25 LIONS, WHEN SPARKY AND ANOTHER MALE WENT FOR EACH OTHER..."



"TRYING TO BREAK IT UP, I WAS KNOCKED DOWN AND SPARKY TURNED ON ME. THINGS LOOKED PRETTY BAD..."



"BUT I GOT THE UPPER HAND. BEFORE I LEFT THE CAGE, EVERY LION WAS BACK IN PLACE."



AFTER A TURN IN THE BIG CAGE, I NEED A 'LIFT' IN ENERGY, AND I GET IT FROM A CAMEL. I'VE SMOKED CAMELS FOR 16 YEARS. HAVE ONE, TONY?

YOU BET, TERRELL, THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CAMELS AND OTHER KINDS - IN MILDNESS - IN SO MANY WAYS!

One Smoker tells another...  
**"CAMELS AGREE WITH ME"**

PEOPLE DO APPRECIATE THE COSTLIER TOBACCOS IN CAMELS THEY ARE THE LARGEST-SELLING CIGARETTE IN AMERICA  
 CAMELS ARE A MATCHLESS BLEND OF FINER, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS--TURKISH & DOMESTIC (SIGNED) R.J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO CO., WINSTON-SALEM, N.C.

