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SHE WALKS IN MY SLEEP!

by G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

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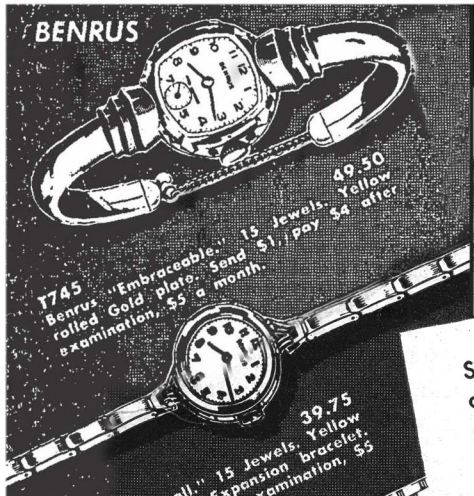
BRANCH · PLUNKETT
AND OTHERS



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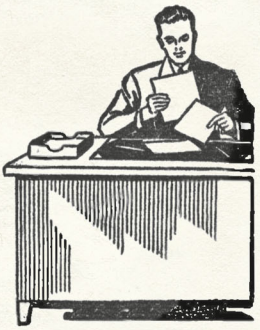

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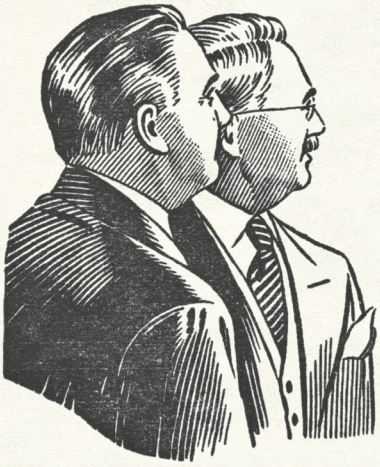

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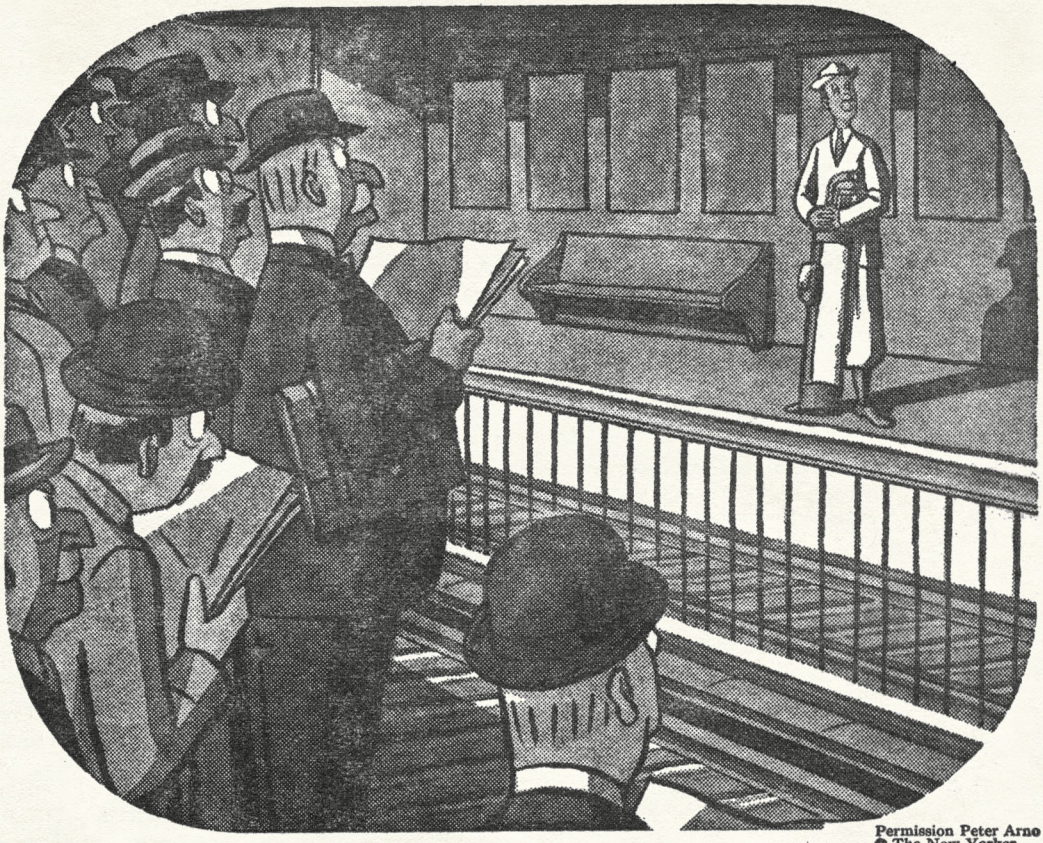

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Often, in the night, Fenton would see the silent, staring ghosts of his dead wives passing before him, hear their eldritch screams echoing down the corridors of his mind. . . . But Carolyn, now—Carolyn must live until the walls that bound her sanity had buckled . . . and loosed her into a world of chill, stark madness. . . .

Fenton was silent. Why hadn't he brought the strychnine with him, he was thinking. . . . Then it would have looked like suicide.

SHE WALKS IN MY SLEEP!

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Compelling Novel of the Man Who Had to Kill!

CHAPTER ONE

Nightmare

SOMETIMES she would scream in her sleep with the terrified voice of a soul being caught in the tentacles of a horrible dream. It was never loud, yet coming out of deep night it was loud enough. Its effect on Fenton was often like a dash of cold rain, and he would wake up gasping. Or, drugged with exhaustion, her thin wail would bring him into the half-world between sleeping and waking where the present is not distinguishable from the past, and he would think, *That's Bessie! Bessie*

screamed once before I stopped all that with a handful of clay. . . . Then, struggling up from the clammy hold of the sweat-dampened sheet, he would stare at the bed next to his and remember that this was Carolyn, her dark hair swirled on the pillow.

Carolyn. Not Bessie. Not Pam. In Fenton's life there had been other screams, and when their echoes wandered the shadowy, crooked streets of his mind they became confused.

Or Carolyn would babble in anguished protest, "No, no, Lisbeth! I didn't hit it too hard. I didn't. It bounced. The tennis ball bounced clear over the hedge, and you ran after it. He was coming along in his yellow shoes and kicked it. I saw his yellow shoes. The hedge grows thin at the bottom, and I saw his yellow shoes. I saw him kick the ball. . . ."

It was always something about a tennis ball. Fenton would listen, intent, as though at the keyhole of some secret and forbidden room, hoping that the door would open. But it never opened. In fifteen months of their marriage it had not opened. . . . There's something queer about her, Fenton would tell himself as he peered through gloom to study the indistinct oval of her face. I wish to hell I knew what it is. A tennis ball. What's so damned terrifying about a tennis ball . . . or yellow shoes . . . or a hedge?

Fenton knew of such a hedge grown tall and rank at the top, thin at the bottom where the sun-starved branches had died. Once, in Columbus, Carolyn had pointed out the house where she had lived before her father's death. Of dull red brick with shuttered windows, it stood back from its neighbors, back from the traffic rumble along the street, somehow withdrawn and sullen. The hedge grew all around the place except for jagged gaps like crannies in a ruined wall, and he had known that something had happened behind there once. Something that had seered her mind and left a scar.

Carolyn had told him before their marriage that she had nightmares. "Aunt Sue thought you ought to know before—" Her thin, rather sallow cheeks had flushed a little. Then, hurrying on, "Sometimes I walk in my sleep. Roger darling—" clinging to his arm—"do you mind terribly?"

He had let his gentle laugh assure her that he didn't mind, his brain too busy to put his answer into words. He was thinking that in the village where they would live, because her only relatives lived there, there was a tall, old house, American Gothic, the Bolton place. It could be bought. It might not be a bad investment. It had a narrow balcony above a concrete drive. . . .

"So we'll have to take precautions." Carolyn had dropped this innocently, but with an alarming clatter, into the machinery of his thoughts. Even then, before their marriage, she had indulged in unconscious sabotage.

PRECAUTIONS. Sometimes in these hot, still summer nights when the air was dead and Carolyn was moaning in her sleep, he was keenly aware of her precautions . . . feeling stifled by them, trapped, somehow. . . . Then he would get out of bed and stamp into the pale night glow from the east window that was permanently locked. The south window, onto the balcony, was open for ventilation, but there was a screen of wood and plywood, its legs fastened to the floor. Awake or asleep, Carolyn couldn't get out onto the balcony. She couldn't walk out there and fall and break her skinny neck. And the bedroom door was locked. She insisted that he lock the door each night, then hide the key where only he could find it.

Her damned precautions. Her unconscious yet effective sabotage. She'd made a will. Without consulting him, she'd gone off to Columbus to see the Cotsworth family lawyer and bequeath the three hundred thousand dollars her father left her to some children's hospital. She'd told Fenton afterwards, blithe about it, smiling as she cut his heart out and he had returned a watery version of her smile.

"If anything were to—to happen to me—" which up until that moment had been a distinct probability—"you wouldn't need my little bit with all you have."

I overdid it, he thought bitterly. I really laid it on with a shovel, buying the Bolton place and the new car, buying into her Uncle Fred's newspaper when it was virtually on the rocks. As though I *wanted* to be editor of a village weekly gossip sheet. SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS MAN MARRIES CAROLYN COTWORTH. For love. For sweet, sweet love. . . . Oh, my God!

So now there was no point in killing her.

Monday night—it was actually in the small dark hours of Tuesday morning—Carolyn dreamed she killed the man in yellow shoes. Fenton knew that was what she was doing the instant her thin wail roused him from his sleep. He looked across the narrow chasm the nightstand defined between their beds, and there she was on knees and one hand, crouched above her pillow.

"You kicked the ball!" she cried accusingly. "I saw you. I saw your yellow shoes beneath the hedge. You kicked it deliberately, and Lizbeth ran after it. They all blame me, but it was you. You. *You!*" Her right hand clenched as though about a knife beat against the pillow, and as Fenton watched her his flesh crept. *His* flesh.

He uttered a short, harsh laugh, sat up, fumbled with the lamp, upsetting it before he got it on. Then he stood beside her bed, caught her shoulders, yanked her about to face him, shook her until she came awake, her dark eyes glazed until she saw him through the thinning shadows of her dream.

"Oh, my darling," she sobbed and collapsed into his arms. "Hold me. Hold me close, Roger."

I'll hold you, he thought. I ought to hold you by your throat for about fifteen minutes. I'm not going to be able to take much of this. It's getting me down, telling on my nerves. You're a clinging vine, a damned parasitic vine with a million creeping tendrils that tangle, trip, and smother. You're perfectly capable of choking out poison ivy.

But he held her in his arms with what passed for tenderness and stroked her fine dark hair. She had that sort of beauty seen in fragile things kept under glass.

"I—I dreamed I killed him," she whispered, not looking at Fenton, "and I couldn't see his face—just his yellow shoes. That's all I can remember. No reason. I simply had to kill him, and I was frightened out of my wits."

He didn't question her. Some day, maybe, it would all bob to the surface. He'd find out some way. Let the victim work out her own destiny. It was Bessie who had suggested the moonlight walks, and one night she had simply disappeared. It was Pam who had wanted to spend their honeymoon in the mountains. . . .

"Roger," Carolyn asked fearfully, "do you—do you think there's something terribly wicked down inside me? I always wake up feeling—well, guilty of some awful crime."

His laugh was gentle. "Look, silly. In the first place, no man wears yellow shoes."

She lifted her head. Her face in the lamplight had an ivory hue, her puzzled frown was etched in sepia. "Yes they do," she contradicted. "Not yellow, but I always think of them as yellow. A lightish tan. Sport shoes with a lot of fancy stitching and punchwork. That Mr. Pryne who dropped in yesterday afternoon, when you were at the paper, had on a pair."

"Pryne?" He stiffened warily. But there were hundreds, thousands of Prynes, no doubt. What would C. D. Pryne be doing in this out-of-the-way spot, in a village of four hundred people . . . ? He said slowly, "I don't know anyone named Pryne."

"Didn't he try to reach you at the office? He said he would. A Mr. C. D. Pryne—I have his card somewhere—and he's opening a little insurance business in the Griffith Block."

"But, why—" Fenton let that slip out, and afterwards his lips closed in a thin tight line.

Carolyn said, "To sell insurance, I suppose."

He took his arms away from her. He stood up woodenly. Then he paced, barefooted, to the east window where he stared out into the night, his hands clasped behind him. Pryne. C. D. Pryne. He didn't sell insurance. He was a claims investigator, a tall, grey-haired man of uncertain age, soft-voiced, with shrewd blue eyes that kept coming back to you as persistent as a fly. Fenton had met Pryne after the death of Fenton's second wife, Pam. Pam who had driven over the edge of a cliff alone while he, Fenton, was miles from the spot. An accident. Double indemnity. Not even Pryne could make anything different out of it, though he had tried. God, how he had tried!

Fenton turned abruptly to Carolyn. She had propped herself up on one elbow, was watching him with those oddly luminous eyes that seemed too large for her thin face.

"Can't you go back to sleep?"

"I feel so terribly guilty, Roger," she said. "You never do get a good night's rest, do you?"

He said peevishly, "I can't if you're going to sit up the rest of the night with the light on and talk about your damn-fool dreams."

Her lips started to tremble, and she quickly put out the light to hide her injured feelings. Fenton sat down slowly in the chair beside the window. A small man, fair, he gave an impression of plumpness without actually being plump. At forty, his round face still retained something of the boy, a day-dreamy expression caught in prominent blue eyes, an unnatural detachment as though occasionally he got outside himself. Occasionally he did, and it was not a good thing, for then he would look back upon himself and view a man of imposing stature, of terrible strength, an accomplished murderer, clever and without fear.

But tonight he could not get outside himself. Tonight he was afraid.

AS EARLY as seven-thirty Tuesday morning, heat shimmered up from the oiled clay street outside the house, and even the thin-stemmed aspen leaves hung languidly and still.

Fenton patted the firm knot of his light tan tie. In the mirror he saw that Carolyn had awakened. She was stretching her slim bare arms above her head. She yawned audibly like a child.

"My dear, sweet husband."

"My dear, sweet wife." There was a note of mockery which she probably didn't catch. . . . And, he thought, *I don't give a good damn if she catches it.* He said, "You don't have to get up. I'll grab a bite at the drugstore."

"My sweet, thoughtful husband. So patient. Come kiss me."

He picked up the coat of his tropical worsted suit and plunged arms into sleeves. As he came toward the bed where she lay, she watched him curiously.

"Is—is something wrong?" Her voice was thin, timid.

He shook his head. "Why? Do I look as though something were wrong?"

She said, frowning slightly, "Oh, I don't know. You look funny."

"What do you mean—funny?"

"Just—well, different. I don't know."

He stooped and gave her cheek a perfunctory little peck, then backed away before her arms could twine about his neck. "I'm in a hurry to get down to the office."

She touched the spot on her cheek his lips had kissed. Her smile was wistful. "Darling—"

"What?" He'd already started toward the door with the key in his hand.

"They're plastering over at Aunt Sue's."

"So what? They're always doing something over there to keep that shack from falling apart."

"In the living room, I think," she said. "The ceiling. It's such a messy job. I wondered if they mightn't like to come over here until the work is done? They could have the downstairs bedroom so Aunt Sue wouldn't have to climb the steps. Her heart isn't good, and she's so heavy. Why not ask them, Roger?"

"All right. I'll see if they'll come." *I will like hell. It's bad enough to have to live with you without dragging your family in under the same roof.*

He left the room, went down into the front hall and out onto the veranda. He picked up the paper—"the city paper" as Uncle Fred always called it, to distinguish it from the village weekly which he published—glanced at the headlines, then tossed it into the swing. He struck a match for a cigarette on one of the porch posts, then walked on down the street.

It was three blocks to the *Village Inquirer,* two and a half to the squat, grey frame house with the sway-backed roof where Carolyn's aunt and uncle lived. The plasterers were already at work mixing a ground coat on the front porch. Fenton followed the mossy brick wall around to the rear porch where he found Aunt Sue hanging a grimy towel on a line that looked as though it might once have laced her corset. A big, slovenly woman, thick ankles overflowing the tops of soiled white oxfords, she looked at Fenton, wall-eyed, her heavy face hanging out of the black net that retained her yellowed white hair in patent curlers. She flattered herself that there was a bond of understanding between them —they had both married Cotsworths—and she clucked in sympathy.

"You haven't shut your eyes, have you?"

He smiled, patient beneath his burden.

"You come right in, Roger, and have some coffee. Fred's just eating."

"Thanks," he said and stepped into the kitchen where Uncle Fred was seated at

the table spooning oatmeal and looking at the front page of the "city paper". He was thin and bald, partially deaf, and sensitive about it. The gnarled fingers that held the spoon were permanently stained with printers' ink.

Aunt Sue hustled Fenton into a chair opposite her husband. "You poor boy, you!" she said. Women were all inclined to mother Fenton. Except Carolyn. Carolyn clung with all her frail rootlets and sought protection from her formless fears.

Uncle Fred said, "No relief in sight, it says here." The heat, he meant.

Fenton said disinterestedly, "Is that so? . . . Just coffee, Aunt Sue."

Aunt Sue poured coffee into Fenton's cup. "You poor boy," she said again. "What was it last night?"

"Lizbeth again." Fenton didn't know what he was talking about. It was simply a name that kept coming up in Carolyn's dream, and he dropped it like a pebble into a deep and quiet pool, then waited curiously to see what sort of a splash it made. Aunt Sue drew her lower lip into her teeth. There was a shocked expression in her moist eyes.

"Her sister," she whispered.

Fenton raised his cup and sipped to hide his interest. Then, "I didn't know Carolyn had a sister."

Uncle Fred forced a cough that his wife chose to ignore. Aunt Sue said, "Lizbeth was the oldest. She was seventeen and Carolyn was ten. She died, and Carolyn was sick for months and months. The shock and all. . . ."

"And we don't talk about it," Uncle Fred inserted dryly. His glance clashed with that of his wife. The silence that moved into the untidy kitchen had a rasping quality. Flies buzzed at the screen trying to reach the drying yellow curds that still clung to the empty milk bottle that propped the window open. A hen cackled in the poultry yard of the place next door. Then Uncle Fred pushed back from the table, the legs of his chair scraping across the pine floor, and stood up.

"Got to shave," he mumbled and went out shuffling.

AUNT SUE put the coffee pot down on its tile. Hands resting heavily upon the table, she sat down in the chair that Uncle Fred had vacated. Her lips were tightly compressed as though she barely contained herself. Her eyes were popping. Fenton thought, *She's my girl. She's going to talk. She's going to open the door for me.* . . . He hid a smug look in his coffee cup.

"You really *should* know," she said, arguing with herself. "You really should. Carolyn is such a sweet girl, and I know how devoted you are to her."

Oh, my God, yes!

"You might be able to do something for Carolyn—those horrible dreams she has!—if you only knew. She never had them until after Lizbeth was killed."

"Killed?" He put the cup down.

The old woman nodded. "She got run over. A truck, I think it was. I wasn't there, thank God. Lizbeth was crazy."

"Good lord!" He was properly awed.

"Not crazy, exactly." Her eyes rolled toward the empty doorway through which Fred Cotsworth had passed. Her voice dropped in pitch. "Simple. She never grew up, and her a big girl of seventeen playing with toys. She could hardly talk a word. 'Car-wee, Car-wee.' That's what she used to call Carolyn. She was always playing with a ball, Lizbeth was. It was awful to watch her, a big girl like that rolling a rubber ball around."

The tennis ball, Fenton thought. The door was slowly opening on creaking, time-rusted hinges. He watched Aunt Sue's rolling eyes.

"Bill Cotsworth did everything. Just everything for Lizbeth. And when it was pretty plain there wasn't any help, he just tried to pretend there wasn't anything wrong with Lizbeth. They're like that, the Cotsworths. Ostriches. Hiding their heads in the sand.

Fenton saw the house of dull, red brick with shuttered windows shrinking back from the street. He saw the tall, rank-grown hedge like a prison wall. He heard the rumbling traffic just beyond. Trucks. A great dripping ready-mixed concrete truck lumbering along.

"Things like this," Aunt Sue went on. "Lizbeth liked to play with a ball. So her father bought her a tennis racket and ball. Bought one for Carolyn, too. Adults play tennis, see? He was pretending there wasn't anything wrong with Lizbeth. He wor-

shipped her, his first-born child. And Lizbeth would stand out in the yard for hours and bounce the ball on the racket, *ping-ping-ping,*—for hours."

He saw her vacant idiot's eyes watching the bounding ball, up and down, up and down. He saw her clumsy, fumbling fingers pouncing delightedly upon it.

"'Car-wee, Car-wee,' she would call to Carolyn, wanting Carolyn to come and play with her. And Carolyn wouldn't want to, naturally. She couldn't pretend. She couldn't fool herself that there was nothing wrong with Lizbeth. And she hated outdoor games. 'Go out and play tennis with your sister,' Bill would say. He'd make her go. He'd insist on Carolyn going out there in the yard with her tennis racket, and when she did, Lizbeth couldn't hit the ball back to her no more'n a puppy could. She'd just drop her racket and run after the ball, giggling crazy-like."

A big lout of a girl chasing a bounding ball, aware of nothing but the ball, squealin with pleasure. . . .

"Poor little Carolyn couldn't get any peace until she wore her sister out. Her father would make her play, and Carolyn would swat and swat the ball until Lizbeth had run herself ragged. It was cruel of Bill Cotsworth." Aunt Sue ducked her large head emphatically. "Oh, I've been there and seen 'em. 'The girls are playing tennis,' Bill Cotsworth would say, just like nothing was wrong with Lizbeth. And there would be little Carolyn with tears streaming from her eyes, sort of white around the mouth and furious, whacking the ball so Lizbeth could chase it."

Carolyn's sleep-drugged voice echoed in his mind, *"No, no, Lizbeth, I didn't hit it too hard. It bounced. The tennis ball bounced clear over the hedge, and you ran after it."* He heard the rumble of a truck beyond the hedge. He saw the yellow shoes. . . .

"That's how it happened," Aunt Sue's low voice went on. "One time when they were playing, Carolyn whacked the ball so hard it went through, or maybe over the hedge, I don't know which. It must have rolled out into the street. . . ."

No, a man kicked the ball. A man in yellow shoes.

". . . and Lizbeth went chasing it. She ran right into the path of a truck. . . ."

Deliberately kicked it as she stooped to clasp the ball in her clumsy idiot's fingers. She didn't see the truck. Only the pretty bounding ball. Then the scream. Like something animal, mortally hurt. . . .

Fenton stirred uneasily in his chair. He was conscious of a painful tightening across his brow. His fingers were clenched, his palms clammy. His eyes slipped away from Aunt Sue's goggling stare, looked toward the open window beside him. A spider had spun a web from a milk bottle to the sill, and in the web the dead dry husk of a beetle hung and quivered with a semblance of life in the upward draft of heated air.

"Bill Cotsworth almost lost Carolyn too." Aunt Sue's voice reached him as though from a long way off. "The shock of seeing Lizbeth killed almost beneath her nose. . . ."

He thought, *That's not it. It wasn't entirely shock. A sense of guilt. That's the thing that gnaws at the back of her mind all the time. She hit the ball in a sudden burst of temper, and her idiot sister was killed while chasing it.*

He drew a sad little smile over his face. "I really appreciate your telling me this, Aunt Sue."

She nodded, her face smug with self-approval. "Maybe you can do something for Carolyn now."

I might even do something to her. That guilt complex—she's right on the brink of mental collapse. I might give her a little shove. If I could convince her aunt and uncle she's not responsible, if there was evidence that could be presented in court to prove her incapable of handling her own affairs. . . .

He looked away, his expression vaguely worried. "Carolyn has been acting a little—well, just a little odd, lately," he said. "Not just the dreams. Not the usual stuff." He shook his head. "Suppose you and Uncle Fred come over and stay with us a few days until after this plastering is finished. Could you?"

Aunt Sue nodded. "How do you mean, queer?"

He said, "I'd rather you'd draw your own conclusions." He stood up, smiling slightly. "You might tell Uncle Fred I won't be at the office this morning. I've got to run into Columbus on business. See you both this evening, then."

FENTON left the Cotsworth house, walked down to Main Street where he smiled and nodded at two old men who were hunkered down on the step of the corner grocery store. He crossed to Colby's Drugstore where the bus always stopped, opened the screen door and went in. Lena Steffens, a prim and elderly maiden lady who taught at the consolidated school, was at the counter talking endlessly to young Colby. She nodded her beflowered straw bonnet at Fenton without slackening the excited flow of talk.

". . . didn't know a thing about it. Not a thing until ten minutes ago when I ran into Mr. Woodburn in front of the post office and he said he had to go help dig the grave. 'Grave?' I gasped, and then he told me. They found him in bed, the poor old thing, all alone, though I always did say he needn't have lived alone if he had tried at all to be compatible with his fellow human beings. . . ."

"Well, I guess he liked to live alone," young Colby said, trying to break it off. He inched toward Fenton. "Something I can do for you?"

"A ticket to Columbus," Fenton said. "When is that bus?"

"About ten minutes."

"Oh, Mr. Fenton, have you heard?" Miss Steffen's sharp, dark eyes fastened on a new victim.

Fenton nodded. "Yes. Oh, yes. Very sad, the poor old fellow." Some old fossil had died in his sleep. He didn't know who, and he didn't give a damn. He didn't want to listen to her chatter. He had to think. He had to get everything straight in his mind. . . .

Miss Steffens glimpsed the ticket that young Colby pushed across the counter. "Now *there's* an item for your paper, Mr. Fenton. Editor of Village Inquirer In Columbus For the Day." She tittered. "It is just for the day, isn't it? Which reminds me, there's a story I simply *must* get in before you go to press this week. About Mr. Pryne, the insurance man. You've met him, I suppose?"

"Yes—" with a start . . . Pryne again. Pryne is here in town for some damned reason. . . . Fenton jerked around to face Miss Steffens. "No, no, I haven't met him. What did you say the name was? Bryan?"

"Pryne," she said. "C. D. Pryne. Perfectly charming." This archly, and her faded cheeks flushed a little. "He's from the city, and he's opened an office across the street above the grocery. I understand he's taken the Wilmouth house for the summer. The Wilmouths are away in Maine. Her people—"

"Yes," Fenton broke in. His fingers trembled slightly as he handed young Colby the price of the bus ticket. Then he hurriedly left by the Main Street door and stood in the shimmering heat to wait for the bus.

An ice truck had parked in front of the drugstore where the street inclined steeply toward the west. A chunk of ice slid off the tail-piece of the truck and landed in the gutter. Fenton stared at it, watched it move slowly along the gutter, following the incline. He grunted. He turned deliberately, gazed up the highway toward Columbus. He lighted a cigarette.

Where the hell was that damned bus?

Inside the drugstore, Miss Steffens' tongue was wagging. "I'm on a rigid diet, no stimulants of any sort, he said, as though I were *that* sort, but of course he meant coffee—I give him the benefit of the doubt. . . ."

Fenton thought, *Oh, for heaven's sake, shut up. I knew a woman like you once, always talking. Bessie. But she stopped. All of a sudden, she stopped. . . .*

His smile was thin. He flicked cigarette ash, turned slowly, as though drawn by some exterior force, to stare at the fallen chunk of ice. It had glided along the gutter to a car parked behind the ice truck. There it had stopped against the left front wheel where it had melted to conform with the curvature of the tire. Like a wedge. Like a chock, though actually the force of inclination was in the opposite direction.

Fenton looked up uneasily at the row of filmy windows above the grocery store. He looked up and down the street. The two old loafers had left the step in front of the grocery. No one, no living thing in sight along the broiling street. Fenton sidled along the front of the building until he was opposite the car parked behind the ice truck. He looked both ways again. Then he moved out, stepped down into the gutter and in front of the car. He took a pull from his cigarette, focused frowning attention on the butt. His left foot moved out slowly,

touched the piece of ice, gave it a nudge that dislodged it from the tire. He kicked it under the car and out of sight, then dropped his cigarette which he ground beneath his heel. He stepped back to the sidewalk, glanced up at the windows above the grocery.

A white cloth, bunched and shapeless, flicked across the glass of the center window. It wiped thoroughly and well until a face emerged, a man's, middle-aged, white-haired.

It was Pryne.

Fenton took a shallow breath. His temples began to pound, and there ws a hot-cold prickling sensation across his scalp.

Pryne was mounting a sign behind the now-clean glass. C. D. Pryne—Insurance, in neat gilt lettering on black. As though he meant it. As though he had moved to the village for only one purpose, to sell insurance.

Fenton's glance flicked across the damp spot the ice had left on the front tire of the parked car. Why the hell had he done that? Why the hell did he have to kick that piece of ice away? If Pryne had seen him do that—but maybe he hadn't. . . . And if Fenton hadn't kicked it, if Pryne had seen it there, wedged beneath the tire, wouldn't that have suggested something to him?

Fenton paced to the corner of the drugstore building, hands in his pockets to hide the nervous clenching of his fingers. . . . Damn Pryne! What was he doing here, anyway? Why did he call on Carolyn? *He's watching me. He knows, and he's watching, trying to pick up some bit of evidence.* . . .

The bus came gasping into town, exhaust gas fouling the humid air. Fenton got aboard, settled himself in a seat, tried to settle the uneasy seething of his brain. . . . Pryne—he had to do something about him. He had to take care of Pryne. He had to. . . .

* * *

Among other things Fenton had to purchase in Columbus were tennis balls. The sporting goods clerk looked the part—muscular in his white tee-shirt, his hair crew-cut, his skin sun-bronzed.

"Tennis balls? Yes, sir. I have the white and the red."

"Red," Fenton said, then frowned slightly. "Yes, I guess the red."

The clerk tactfully confirmed the wisdom of Fenton's choice. "They show up better, especially against a concrete court."

Fenton was still vaguely puzzled. "Yes. Yes they do," he murmured. He thought, *That's only being logical. They would naturally have bought a red ball for Lizbeth. Red would appeal to her childish mind. Red would catch her idiot stare. That's the obvious choice.*

Still, it bothered him a little. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Yellow Shoes

TONIGHT she was afraid of sleep. She hadn't said so, but Fenton knew she was. It was nearly eleven, past the village bedtime, yet Carolyn loitered at the dressing table, busied her fingers with things that didn't matter.

She was listening. The attitude of her slim figure, erect on the stool, her dark head tilted, suggested listening. Her pale face reflected in the mirror, her lips just apart, her large eyes bright and wary, suggested listening.

"Roger—"

"Yes, dear?" Stretched on the bed in pajamas, Fenton looked up from the book he was pretending to read. He noticed the slight convulsive movement of Carolyn's frail shoulders. Her gaze darted, scouted the shadowy corners of the room. . . . He smiled inwardly.

It isn't here, you silly little fool. You don't know where it is, but you're beginning to suspect it's in your mind. Because no one else seems to hear it. You got Uncle Fred in here an hour ago—to fix that sticking drawer, you said, but it was really to see if he heard the sound that's bothering you. He didn't hear anything. Because he's partially deaf—but you never thought of that. Aunt Sue doesn't hear it—not on the ground floor. And I certainly don't!

"Yes, dear?" he said again attentively.

She uttered a strained little laugh. "Funny, darling, but I forgot what it was I wanted to say. It couldn't have been important."

She hadn't forgot, and it was important, he knew. But she couldn't nerve herself

up to ask him if he heard it too. She was scared to death he didn't. And he didn't, see? *It's all in your head, and it's going to drive you batty. . . .*

It was a faint sound, just a *ping—ping-ping* erratically spaced, the sound of a tennis ball bouncing lightly on the taut gut strings of a tennis racket. She must have heard it first at five P.M. when she had come upstairs to get an apron. She was rather a long time about getting the apron, and when finally she did come down, she went to the parlor window and looked out into the yard as though she half expected to see her idiot sister bouncing a ball on a tennis racket.

It came again—*ping-ping—ping.* Carolyn dropped the cap of her cold-cream jar. She twisted around on the dressing table stool, her eyes haunted. "Roger, did—did you hear something? Just now?"

"Nope," he grunted, then looked up, his face concerned. "What's wrong, darling. You look as though you'd seen a ghost."

A ghost. That's what it was, the ghost of a sound that had died when Lizbeth had died.

He said, "You don't look well at all, Carolyn. You're all worn out. You worked too hard, getting dinner for Aunt Sue and Uncle Fred. Why don't you come to bed and get some rest?"

She pushed her lips into a smile. "Yes, I'm tired. That's it. I'm awfully tired." She stood up in her pale blue gown, her fine dark hair flowing away from her peaked face. She moved over to her bed, stretched her arms above her head. Her yawn was counterfeit. She lay down, and Fenton switched off the lamp. The dark closed in, smothering, and in the dark, he knew, she listened tensely.

It was in the attic—not in her mind. It was exactly what it sounded like, a tennis racket striking a ball, very simple, very effective. He'd suspended the racket from a beam in such a position that draft through an attic window would cause it to move in the slightest breeze. He'd tacked a bit of paper across the frame of the racket to offer wind resistance, and there was a ball suspended so that it would touch the gut strings when the wind blew.

He heard her tossing on the bed next to his. He thought, *It's beginning to get you, isn't it? Beginning to nibble on your nerves. Well, stick around. This is only the beginning, see? You'll be screaming before morning—and not in your sleep.*

He heard the bed creak violently, heard her gasp. He said, "For God's sake, Carolyn, can't you get to sleep?"

"No." It was almost a sob. "No, I can't. Perhaps a sleeping pill, Roger, would you mind?"

Not in the least, I won't mind. I've been expecting this. . . .

He turned on the lamp, managed a worried look as he saw the feverish glint of her dark eyes. Wordlessly, he crossed the room, got the key from its hiding place, unlocked the door, and left it open while he went into the bathroom on the other side of the hall. There were sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet. He palmed the tiny box, returned to the door of their room, and shook his head.

"They're all gone," he said, "but I'll run over to Dr. Lacy's and get you some."

As he started toward the closet to get his clothes, she scrambled from the bed and came pattering after him, "No, don't—" She caught his arm. "Don't go, Roger. I can sleep. I'll try awfully hard to sleep."

He turned slowly. Her arms circled his waist. Her eyes pleaded with him. He said, "For heaven's sake, Carolyn—"

"I just don't want to be left alone," she broke in.

He sighed. "Now look here, Carolyn, I'm going to be just a little bit selfish about this. I don't very often put my comfort ahead of yours, but it's got to the point where I've got to have some rest, and I can't get it if you're going to toss and turn all night."

Two big tears formed in the corner of her eyes and rolled down the side of her nose. "Poor Roger! You're so patient, and I'm such a trial, I know, but tonight I—I just can't stand the thought of your leaving me."

He gently disengaged her arms. He patted both of her shoulders. "Stop being such a little goose. You won't be alone. Uncle Fred and Aunt Sue are downstairs, and I'll be back in a jiffy. Now go back to bed."

She went back. At least she sat down on the edge of the bed, and he knew she was listening again. He went ahead with his dressing.

"You—you don't hear anything, do

you?" she ventured. "A sound like tapping?"

"No, I don't hear anything, and neither do you." He came out of the closet tucking his shirt down into the top of his trousers. "Now lie down and relax." He went to the drawer of the bureau where he had hidden the key, got it out, went to the bedroom door and unlocked it. "I'll only be a few minutes," he said and then went quietly into the hall.

DOWNSTAIRS he heard loud snores coming from the room occupied by Aunt Sue and Uncle Fred. He tiptoed to the back of the house, to the door at the top of the basement stairs, went down into the cool, damp dark. The storage room was windowless, and he turned on a light. His trunk was there, supported by wooden runners to keep it from molding on the bottom. He unlocked it, his fingers steady, and lifted the protective flap of the upper tray. From it he removed a pair of light tan—"yellow"—shoes with wing tips and ornate stitching, then a red tennis ball, and finally a .25 caliber automatic pistol.

"I'd hate like hell to find myself in a corner," he thought as he pocketed the pistol. There was no telling what she'd do.

Seated on the top of the trunk, he traded his conservative brown oxfords for the sporty tan ones. Then he was ready to go back to her. . . . *And I hope to hell her heart can take it. I don't want to be the instrument of endowing a three-hundred-thousand-dollar hospital for underprivileged brats.*

He took it easy going up the front stairs to the second floor, probably more cautious than he needed to be. . . . Anyway, she wouldn't hear a sound except that thing in the attic. She'd be pop-eyed, listening to that *ping—ping-ping,* or by now she'd stopped up her ears so she wouldn't hear it.

The light was still on in their room, the door wide open. He didn't go near it, but turned left at the head of the stairs to enter the seldom-used front room which also had a window opening onto the balcony. He went to this window, raised the sash and stepped out.

He was sweating and breathless from that exertion peculiar to moving soundlessly, and for a moment he leaned against the side of the house. Then he straightened, found that the tennis ball was wedged tightly into the damp lining of his pocket. As he peeled it out, his brain whispered, *Don't fumble, for God's sake. . . .*

He inched his way along the balcony until he reached the next window. He stood directly in front of it, invisible from within because of the stationary wood screen that stood eight inches out from the other side. He listened trying to locate Carolyn within the room. It occurred to him that he ought to be able to hear her breathe, this close to her, but he couldn't.

He couldn't hear anything except the sounds of night insects and the faint *ping-ping* of that thing in the attic. And then he heard water running from a bathroom tap across the hall. It was the kind of a break he hadn't dared hope for. Carolyn was in the bathroom.

Fenton removed the bug screen—he had previously loosened the catches—and set it aside. He put his head as far into the room as the plywood screen would permit, and looked to his right. The closet door was still open, as he had left it, and he could see the pile of soiled clothes he had dumped onto the floor. He turned so that his left side was toward the window, raised his left leg, got it over the sill, then sat astride the sill. The wood screen was about eight inches above the floor. No part of him would be visible from within the room except an ankle and one foot shod in a yellow shoe. Carolyn would see the yellow shoe beneath the screen as once she had seen it through the thinning base of the hedge that grew around her childhood home.

He waited, left hand poised, the tennis ball clutched in his fingers. He waited for endless, crawling minutes. There was a stirring within the house, but he could not identify it because of the louder sound of rushing water in the bathroom. Then the water was shut off, the bathroom door opened and slippered feet whispered across the hall to enter the bedroom.

The sounds she made located her in the room, at the dressing table—she had opened a drawer. Then, turning, she approached her bed. He heard the squeak her moist palm made rubbing the varnished wood of the bed post. She would often do that—stand dreamy-eyed for seconds at a time, stroking the gracefully turned post. She might be facing the screen or she might

have her back to it, he couldn't tell. Then he heard her footsteps coming closer until they were just beyond the plywood that separated him from her. She sat down on the edge of the bed to remove her slippers. One slipper dropped, and then he heard her frightened gasp.

She had seen the yellow shoe.

Fenton moved his visible foot, heel and toe, as though about to take a step, and while Carolyn must have watched in terrified fascination, he dropped the tennis ball straight down, and on the second bounce he deliberately kicked it.

Carolyn slipped off the edge of the bed—he heard the jarring sound as she collapsed. Knuckles of a nerveless hand rapped loosely on the bottom edge of the wooden screen, the hand dropped to the floor, palm up where he might have stepped on it.

But the tennis ball—it hadn't gone into the closet. It hadn't buried itself in the pile of soiled clothing as he had intended. It had struck one leg of the screen, had bounded off perversely into the room, possibly in the very center of the room where anyone could pick it up and prove it a thing of substance instead of a hallucination.

I've got to get it, Fenton thought in panic. *I've got to reach that ball before anybody else does. . . .*

He straightened, weight on his right foot, jerked his left leg up and out. He kicked the sill in his haste, and it made a hell of a noise. He started along the balcony, and then remembered the bug screen. . . . *For God's sake, use your head!*

He went back, fumbled the screen into place, turned and stumbled along the balcony to the open window of the front room, got in over the sill, straightened—and froze in his tracks.

He was not alone.

Someone lay sprawled out upon the bed. Fenton heard the husky rattle of an indrawn breath. Uncle Fred—he was in here with Fenton. His snoring must have bothered the old lady, causing her to send him up here. He must have come in while Fenton was on the balcony. . . .

UNCLE FRED yawned, a prolonged ho-hum. Fenton took a long side-step out of the dim grey light from the window and into the shadow. His shoes touched the leg of a chair, and to Fenton the sound it made was louder than a shot in the night. His hand dropped to the gun in his pocket, pulled it, held it against his thigh. . . . *Cornered,* his mind shouted. *Cornered!* He raised the gun.

"Fred."

It was Aunt Sue's voice coming from downstairs. It shouted quietly, a stage whisper.

The old fools. The damned meddling old fools! They've got me in a corner. . . .

"Fred Cotsworth!" It wasn't any kind of a whisper this time.

Uncle Fred sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, his back toward Fenton. The old man mumbled wearily, "Damn all women!" He stood and stumped to the door, opened it. There was light in the hall, and it reached in a yellow wedge to where Fenton stood. He thought, *Now turn around, you damned old fool. That's all you've got to do to die—just turn around.*

"Fred," Aunt Sue called, "you see what's wrong in Carolyn's room. I thought I heard somebody fall a moment ago, and since then there hasn't been a sound. Hurry now, or heart or no heart, I'll climb these stairs. Carolyn might be sick. She didn't look at all well at supper."

Uncle Fred, bowlegged in his nightshirt, put a hand up to the back of his head and scratched. "Aw, now, Sue," he complained, "what's she got a husband for? Roger can take care of her."

"You do as I say. I don't hear anybody moving around up there."

Uncle Fred said, "Damn!" under his breath and turned left into the hall.

Fenton breathed. He put the gun back into his pocket, moved toward the open door of the room, and listened. . . . *He'll see the ball. It's probably right in the middle of the room where he can't miss it. God, what a mess!*

He heard Uncle Fred swear again, and this time the old man's voice had the quality of shock. He called, "Sue, something's wrong with Carrie. No, don't you come up. Roger! Where'n hell is Roger?"

Roger was crouching on the floor of the next room, his fingers all thumbs as he yanked at the laces of the yellow shoes. He got them off. He carried them to the closet, got the door open, shoved them far back into a corner. He stepped back, listened to the

heavy tread of Aunt Sue on the stairs. He moved to the door opening onto the hall, stood beside it, flat against the wall. He glimpsed Aunt Sue as she passed, a shapeless bag of a figure in grey bathrobe, her two grey pigtails sticking out like misplaced horns. He heard her panicky, "What's wrong, Fred? Where's Roger?" Then, "Oh, the *poor* little thing," and her voice suggested the distracted wringing of hands.

"It's just a faint."

"Yes. Get her up on the bed. *Where* is Roger?"

Roger stood against the wall. His knees were shaking. . . . *I've got to do something. I can't just stand here. Think.* Think!

He couldn't think. His brain was frozen. He heard Uncle Fred's voice saying, "I'll go see if I can find Roger. I'll get Dr. Lacy." Then the old man stumped along the hall and down the stairs, and Fenton heard him cranking the antique phone.

It occurred to Fenton that nobody had said anything about the tennis ball. It must be under one of the beds. He had to get it. Right then. He would have to go in there. Pretend he was shocked to death. He went over the story: He had gone to get the sleeping tablets from Dr. Lacy. That would explain his being dressed, except for shoes. . . . Well, if they noticed, he took his shoes off at the door. Didn't want to disturb anybody. . . .

He stepped out into the hall and to the door of the next room.

Carolyn was on the bed, flat on her back, the pillow under her ankles to elevate her legs. Her face held the pinched look of death; her skin was faintly blue. Aunt Sue was bending over her, chafing a limp hand, murmuring, "Open your eyes, honey, for your old aunty." Then she became aware of him. He had to say something.

He said, "My God!" fervently and stumbled toward Carolyn's bed.

Aunt Carolyn looked at him with protruding bloodshot eyes. It was impossible to read any particular meaning into that look. He mumbled, "I went to Dr. Lacy's to get her some sleeping pills. . . ."

"Get some water," Aunt Sue broke in. "She's going to be all right."

HE PICKED up the thick glass from the nightstand, dropped it purposely. It struck the carpet without breaking, and he got down on hands and knees, ostensibly to pick it up, actually to look under the beds. But the ball wasn't under either bed. . . . Uncle Fred must have picked it up, only that wasn't logical. Coming into a room where a woman is lying unconscious, he wouldn't stop and pick up a tennis ball. It was still around there somewhere, and they hadn't noticed.

He went to the bathroom for water. As he was coming out with it, he met Uncle Fred. The old man said, "Lacy doesn't answer. He must be out." And Fenton said hastily, "He's out. I went over there to try and get some sleeping pills. . . ."

The old man didn't care. His and Aunt Sue's concern was all for Carolyn, but later they would start to put the bits together.

Fenton followed Uncle Fred into the room. They went up to Carolyn's bed, stood flanking Aunt Sue. They saw the girl's eyelids flutter, then come open with a start. The silence within the room had a tangible quality. The fright that was mirrored in the dark, staring eyes was a thing contagious. Uncle Fred cleared his throat. Aunt Carolyn said, "There, there, honey. You're all right now."

Carolyn's head rocked over on the pillow. Her haunted eyes stared at the screen that stood in front of the window. She whispered, "He was there, behind the screen. I saw his yellow shoes—never his face, just the shoes. And he kicked the tennis ball deliberately." Her slight shoulders shivered.

Aunt Sue said, "There, there. You've had one of your bad old dreams again, honey."

The frightened dark eyes looked up into the old woman's face. "I was no more asleep than you are right now," she said tonelessly.

Fenton shared in the furtive exchange of glances all around. Only Carolyn was left outside. She moved her hand in a feeble protesting gesture. "Stop it! Stop it, all of you. I know what you're thinking."

Uncle Fred cleared his throat. He didn't produce the tennis ball. He hadn't picked it up. . . . But where in the hell was it? Fenton wondered.

"Honey, we're not thinking anything," Aunt Sue said. "You just relax. Tomorrow you'll laugh at all this."

"I won't laugh. I saw it, I tell you. And

there's that sound—that awful pinging sound." She was listening. Aunt Sue was listening, too. . . . Fenton thought, *Good lord, she'll hear it. The old lady. She's not deaf. She must be hearing it right now.*

"Don't you hear it, Aunt Sue?"

The old woman slowly nodded her head. Her heavy face wore a puzzled expression. "Yes. Yes, I do hear . . . something."

Fenton swallowed. "So do I. Don't you, Uncle Fred?" That was the only thing to do—pretend to humor her and make it obvious.

"Eh?"

Fenton nudged the old man. "Humor her," he whispered, but loud enough for Carolyn to hear.

Uncle Fred cleared his throat. "Well, I guess I do hear something. A funny kind of sound. Old houses have voices. They go creak in the night—" He broke off under Carolyn's reproachful stare.

He'd done it, Fenton thought triumphantly. He'd pulled it off, and put himself in the clear. Now, if he only knew where that damned ball was. . . .

Carolyn asked, "Did you get the pills, Roger?"

"Yes. That is, Dr. Lacy wasn't in, but I remembered we might have some in the lavatory downstairs. . . ." He brought out the box, and her hand reached for it. As a patient in extreme pain grasps for the oblivion of an anesthetic, Carolyn reached eagerly for a sleeping pill.

CHAPTER THREE

Dig the Grave Deep

SHE WAS sleeping quietly by midnight, and somewhat over an hour later the bumbling of voices in the downstairs bedroom was replaced by Uncle Fred's snores. Fenton got up from the chair near the east window, still fully dressed except for shoes. His eyes accustomed to the gloom, he moved unerringly to the bureau, opened a drawer, took out the key to the bedroom, went to the door. When he was out in the hall, he closed and locked the door, then moved quietly to the stairs and down.

In the storage room in the basement, he put on his shoes. Then, opening the trunk again, he took out the kitchen knife which he tucked away into the waistband of his shorts, covering the handle of it with his shirt tail. He left the house through the basement entrance, cut across the back yard and into a narrow alley, choked with weeds. He walked north to Vine Street at an easy swinging gait, then east along the row of sleeping houses until he came to the only one that showed a light. The Wilmouth place. The house C. D. Pryne had rented. Pryne, used to city hours, would not be in bed.

As he went up the front walk, Fenton was conscious of a strange exultant surge of pulse. He climbed the porch steps with no attempt at quiet. Through the window of the living room, he saw Pryne's silvery head above the back of a chair, and he thought with an inward chuckle, I could kill you right now. I could shoot you through the back of the head, and very probably get away with it, Mr. High-and-Mighty Pryne.

He knocked boldly at the screen.

Pryne put aside a book and came to the door. He stood very tall and straight, a slim youthful figure, crowned by a shock of silvery hair. A shadow lay across his face, yet Fenton was conscious of the cold blue eyes.

Fenton's hands dropped to the trouser pocket where his gun was. He said, "I'm coming in," his voice steady but a trifle high in pitch.

"Oh," Pryne said. "It's Mr. Fenton, isn't it?"

"Mr. Fenton, and I know why you're here."

"Come in. The screen isn't latched."

Fenton opened the screen with his left hand. The tall figure backed before him, then turned carelessly and gestured toward the living room. "And have a chair."

It was a small room, cluttered with overstuffed furniture, not at all suggestive of the tall, neat man. But then it wasn't Pryne's idea of a room, Fenton remembered; it was the Wilmouths'. He sat down in the chair Pryne had vacated and looked the insurance man up and down. Pryne wore light tan shoes, yellow shoes, and when Fenton noticed them he felt himself smile.

He said again, "I know why you're here."

"You do?" Pryne's soft dry voice suggested no particular interest. He observed that Fenton kept his hand in his pocket, and then his eyes returned, as they always did,

to Fenton's face, watching him curiously.

"Yes, I know. You're watching me, aren't you?"

"Now I am, yes." Pryne sat down in a straight chair, picked up a charred pipe from the table. Crossing his knees, he struck a kitchen match across the seat of his trousers. "I'm not an investigator any more, Mr. Fenton. Maybe I got tired of all the queer tricks some people try to pull. Maybe I got tired of the queer people who pull them. Maybe I'm just tired, period." He carried the flaming match to the pipe bowl. He had long, strong fingers.

He said, "But I did see you kick that piece of ice from under the front tire of that car this morning."

Fenton said, "That's what I thought." His laugh was a trifle uneasy, and he hated it.

"Let's see," Pryne said reflectively, "that car your second wife drove over the cliff—it had hydraulic coupling of some sort, didn't it? You could chock the front wheel of such a car, leave it in gear with the motor running. If the chock happened to be a cake of ice, the car would start of its own accord after the ice melted." He nodded. "That's how it was done. And you were a mile down the mountainside at the time your wife went over. You were visting the people in the next cabin—an odd thing to do on a honeymoon, I remarked at the time."

Fenton was thinking, *I shouldn't have kicked that piece of ice. It was a damned fool thing to do, and I knew it as soon as I'd done it. But it doesn't matter. It can't hurt me now. . . .*

He said, "You don't know about Bessie, do you?"

Pryne allowed a frown to form on his usually expressionless face. "That was the other wife? The widow who was quite wealthy but with an aversion for banks? She was the one who disappeared."

Fenton laughed. "They never found her. They never will. You wouldn't think a full-grown woman could just—" he shrugged—"just disappear?"

Pryne drew on his pipe. "I don't suppose I thought much about it. Bessie didn't concern me."

She's going to. Your last minutes on earth, you're going to be concerned with Bessie, because you'll be the only man alive who knows what happened to her. And then you won't be alive. . . .

Pryne leaned forward in his chair and eyed Fenton curiously. "Look here, little man, just how many women have you killed?"

Fenton sat up with a start, his mouth open. This was the one thing that terrified him . . . because he couldn't always remember. How did Pryne know that? There were Bessie and Pam. But there were others. They all screamed. . . .

"How many, Fenton?" Pryne's soft, goading voice.

"None of your damned business!" It was a feeble attempt. Aware of the feebleness, he whipped out the gun and brought it to bear on Pryne. He saw a flash of fear in the blue eyes across the room, and then it died like a flame going out. Pryne uttered a sound like laughter.

"Fenton, you're schizophrenic. Jekyll and Hyde, and when Jekyll can't keep track of Hyde, it bothers you, doesn't it? You're afraid Hyde has done something in the past that will eventually lead to you. Maybe some little thing—like kicking that piece of ice this morning."

Fenton moistened his lips with his tongue. . . . *I'm not going to think about that. You're not going to make me think. I've got the whip hand, and I'm doing the talking.*

"Bessie screamed once. I thought she was dead and she screamed just that once down there where she was—" Fenton checked the torrent of words. He passed a hand quickly across his face. His flesh felt cold and damp, his features strange. He stood up, waving the gun. "Come on," he said in a small voice, sobbing. He bolstered it with an oath. "Damn you, come on. Do you think I'm kidding? Get up. I'm going to show you something. I'm going to show you what became of Bessie."

PRYNE took a final drag on his pipe, then put it aside. He stood, seeming less tall in Fenton's eyes and somehow older, less afraid than merely reluctant. Fenton studied him a moment, envious and hating. Then he motioned toward the door.

"Get going," he said hoarsely.

They left the house, went out into the sleeping village street, and along the cracked, uneven sidewalk, Fenton on

Pryne's left and just a little behind, the gun out and ready.

"You know I'd shoot, don't you, if you made a break?"

"Yes," Pryne said. "You'd shoot."

"We turn left up here. It's only a block to the cemetery."

"Yes."

They turned the corner, and there were only two houses on the west side of the street, and then the cemetery sloping upward from a low iron fence.

"Bessie liked to take walks late at night," Fenton said conversationally. "She said it made her feel romantic. She was a big, fleshy woman, easy-going, always giggling. She giggled that night. She said walking through a graveyard gave her the creeps. Her hair was pink and frizzed, neither red nor blonde but in between, and she used a perfume called Oriental Nights."

Pryne said, "That must have gone good with pink hair."

They had reached the gate. They went on into the cemetery, and Fenton placed a detaining hand on the other's arm while he looked around. The headstones were like jagged teeth in the dark mouth of the night. There was a smell of freshly turned earth, of rotting flowers, of dankness. There were sheer grey layers of mist rising from the sod.

Fenton pointed up the slope. "Up there. They're burying some old man tomorrow, I don't know who. I didn't know that other time." He nudged with the gun. "Go on, Pryne. I want to show you how Bessie disappeared."

They started up the hill, skirting headstones. Sometimes Pryne would go down ankle-deep in some sunken grave, or stumble on some forgotten marker, but he kept walking until they came to twin mounds on either side of the empty waiting grave. In the darkness it looked like a narrow rug of black velvet, flat, without depth. But it was deep enough.

Fenton said, "You see?" and when Pryne didn't answer Fenton uttered a short laugh. "Two in one. That's what became of Bessie. I simply deepened the grave a little for her. Very little. I barely covered her body. No evidence at all except my footprints in the bottom of the grave where I tramped the earth solidly about her, and who would question footprints at the bottom of a freshly dug grave? Then they were covered by the grave lining, the coffin, and finally all this earth. . . ."

Fenton moved his right hand in what might have been a gesture, except for the suddenly increasing violence of it as he brought the gun up and then down on Pryne's head. Pryne must have known it was coming some time, but he hadn't expected it so soon. He fell without a sound at the edge of the grave.

It wasn't until after he had dug the grave a little deeper that Fenton used the knife. . . .

FENTON entered his and Carolyn's bedroom and quietly closed the door. He had his shoes in his hand, and he put them down for a moment while he locked the door. Instead of hiding the key as usual as a guard against Carolyn's somnabulism, he merely tossed it somewhere in the dark room. He heard it strike the carpet. Then he picked up his shoes and stepped to Carolyn's bed. She was sleeping soundly under the influence of the drug.

He thought, *I'm going to put you away somewhere soon. Some nice asylum somewhere, and you can scream in your sleep all you want. You won't mind going. Before I'm through with you, you'll be glad to go.*

Then he went to the deep clothes closet, opened the door, stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He turned on the light. Carolyn's clothes were on one side, his on the other, hanging in tidy rows. Both their shoes were arrayed on a clever metal rack fastened to the inside of the door. He picked out a pair of Carolyn's shoes, low-heeled loafers she had never worn, and taking them one at a time, he rubbed the smooth brown leather against the clay that caked his own shoes until Carolyn's were scuffed and streaked with dirt. He further cleaned his shoes on one of Carolyn's skirts, then gave them a coat of polish before putting them on the rack.

He had the knife with which he had finished Pryne wrapped in a piece of paper. He unwrapped it now and wiped some of the drying blood on the same skirt that he had deliberately soiled. Then he turned out the closet light, took the knife out into the dark room and to the dresser where he hid it in a drawer beneath a silken pile of Carolyn's underwear. . . . She'd find it sometime—it didn't matter when.

After that he got undressed and went to bed.

Fenton was up and dressed when Carolyn awoke a little after seven. He was moving about the room with a scowl on his face, going from one article of furniture to another, moving things, opening drawers. He glanced at Carolyn. She had propped herself on an elbow, watching him, her brow troubled as though she had a hangover from the sleeping pill. Her smile trembled.

"Was I a good girl last night?"

He said coolly, "I wouldn't know. I've had so little sleep lately that I took one of your pills and it hit me like a ton of rock."

That reminded her. That got through the barbiturate fog. She winced at the memory of the night before, and her gaze jerked toward the plywood screen that stood in front of the south window. Then her head cocked, listening for the thing in the attic. There was no breeze and consequently no pinging sound.

The ball and tennis racket were still there, Fenton remembered. He'd have to get them down and hide them somewhere, because of Aunt Sue. She had heard the sound last night. She might investigate.

He got down on his knees and looked under the chest of drawers. He stood up and thoughtfully pulled the lobe of his ear. He said, "That's funny."

Carolyn said, "What's funny, darling?"

He looked at her, lips forming a half smile that might have indicated embarrassment. "I can't find the key to the door. We're locked in as usual, but I can't find the key. I put it under my shaving kit in the drawer, but it isn't there."

She stared at him bewilderedly for a moment, then sat up on the edge of the bed, stooped for her slippers and uttered a startled, "Oh!"

She'd found the key. She'd found it where he had tossed it, on the carpet beside her bed. She picked it up, and as he came to take it from her their eyes locked. Hers were wondering and worried. He didn't say anything . . . let her mull that over for a while.

When she finds the shoes she's never had on all scuffed and dirty, and the stains of blood and clay on her skirt; when she learns that they can't find Pryne and remembers that Pryne wore yellow shoes, she'll associate all that with her dream of killing the man in the yellow shoes. That's going to do it. That's the final master stroke.

He went to the door, unlocked it and stepped out into the hall.

Before going down to breakfast, he went into the attic, took down the tennis racket and ball where were suspended from a collar rafter, and hid them in an old packing box.

In the dining room, he found Aunt Sue and Uncle Fred already at the table. Aunt Sue gave him that you-poor-boy look of hers as she asked him how he'd have his egg.

"No egg," he said. "Just coffee, please, Aunt Sue." He held his cup and saucer out, and they rattled in his shaking hand. After that they sat in silence unbroken except by the clatter of Uncle Fred's spoon and bowl and the chomp of Aunt Sue's dentures on dry toast.

Finally, Aunt Sue said, "Roger, what *are* we going to do?"

"I—I don't know." He made it sound

stunned. "I don't know what can be done."

Uncle Fred sucked coffee, put his cup down. "A good doctor," he said. "Not Lacy, but somebody from the city."

"Maybe a few weeks in some quiet place," Aunt Sue suggested, "where she can get good care—"

"A psychiatrist," Uncle Fred said. "She ought to go to a sanitarium."

Fenton gave his head a worried shake. "I hate to do that." *I do like hell, he thought. Get her in a sanitarium, and I've got it made. The court will have to authorize me to handle her affairs.*

"You know," Aunt Sue said, "last night when poor little Carolyn said she thought she heard something, I thought I heard something, too. A sort of pinging, like a ball on a tennis racket. It was downright frightening."

"Well, *I* didn't hear it," said Uncle Fred with conviciton.

"Nor I."

Aunt Sue toyed with her spoon. "It was possibly my imagination. People are like that about sounds in the night. A body says he hears something, and you think you hear it too."

"Well, *I* don't," Uncle Fred said crossly as he pushed back from the table.

ON THE way down to the *Village Inquirer,* both Fenton and Fred Cotsworth were silent, but as Uncle Fred opened the door of the squat brick building that housed the office and press, he asked, "You going to Eli Wilson's funeral this afternoon?"

The old man who had died in his sleep. Pryne's grave partner.

Fenton shook his head. "I didn't know the old man."

"Guess I'll go," Uncle Fred said, his eyes suddenly misty. "Used to fish with Eli in Willow Creek. I'll take off about two o'colck then."

That was all. They went in, Fenton to the scarred desk where he edited the paper, and Uncle Fred to the job press.

At ten o'clock the news broke, at least it cracked a little, and there were faint uneasy stirrings in the village. Rufe Keever, the town marshall, dropped in at the *Inquirer* office, sat on the corner of Fenton's desk and chewed a match. He was a large, paunchy man, middle-aged, with a glint of silver showing in the red of his unruly hair.

He said to Fenton, "This insurance man from the city, C. D. Pryne—they think something's happened."

Fenton laughed easily. "It's that 'they' that always gets me. And just what is supposed to have happened to the latest addition to our community?"

Rufe Keever took the match out of his mouth and frowned at the pulpy end of it. "Lena Steffens went by the Wilmouth place this morning, where Mr. Pryne is staying, and noticed the door was open and the light was on. In broad daylight. She figured mebbe he didn't know his light was on, and went up to the door. She called to him, but he didn't answer, and she went in, and he wasn't there."

Fenton said, "Good lord, Miss Steffens keeps track of everything, doesn't she? I suppose Pryne went down to his office—"

"Nope," Rufe said slowly. "He ain't in his office, and it was locked. He didn't go out of town neither. Car's in the garage."

"He'll turn up."

Rufe slid off the desk and stood up. "Hope so." He yawned, showing gold crowns. He pulled out his dollar watch and consulted it. "Got to get into my blacks this afternoon. Ain't that a sight? Undershirt weather, and I got to put on my black and go to Eli Wilson's funeral."

* * *

Fenton went home at noon, and Aunt Sue met him at the door wearing a lavender apron over black satin. Moist eyes in her heavy face had a frantic look.

She said, "I was going to Eli's funeral, but I won't now. I can't leave Carolyn alone."

Fenton was immediately concerned. "Carolyn? What's wrong? Where is she?"

Aunt Sue gave him a little push toward the stairs. "You'd getter go up. Keeps herself to her room, the poor little thing. Won't take a bite to eat. She's been crying. And when I ask her what the matter is, she just says, 'Nothing, nothing at all,' so you know it's *something.* You see if you can find out, Roger. You go right up to her, and I'll get your dinner. See if you can get her to come down and take a bite."

He was already on his way upstairs. He thought, *My God, suppose I overdid it.*

Suppose she kills herself, and all that money goes to that damned hospital. Suppose—

He knocked at the door, tried the knob and found it locked. "Carolyn! Carolyn, open the door!"

He heard her footsteps and sighed with relief. She'd probably found the shoes. Possibly the knife. . . . She opened the door, stood an instant looking into his face with red-rimmed eyes. Her lips trembled.

"Roger. Oh, my darling. . . ." She threw herself into his arms and started to sob.

"Now," he said. "Now," and stroked her fine dark hair. "Darling girl, whatever is the matter? Stop shaking."

"I—I can't. Roger, I can't stop." She drew him into the room, struggling for self-control. "It's—it's *awful.* I—I've d-done something, Roger. I don't know. . . . I can't remember. . . . I—" She broke off, swallowing. She straightened away from him, and her cold right hand passed down his arm to clutch at his wrist. "C-come here. In the closet. The key, you know—you couldn't find the key this mornin."

She led him to the closet. Her trembling finger pointed to the shoe rack, and he pretended not to see at first.

"Well, what is it? What's so terrifying about shoes?"

"My loafers," she whispered, awed. "I've never worn them. Not consciously, anyway. Look. Look at the dirt and the way they're scuffed. And here—look at this skirt." She held up the skirt from the hanger, and there were the stains of earth and blood.

He fingered the cloth, scratched at the brown stains. "Rust?" he suggested.

"Rust. Or—or blood." She could scarcely form the word.

"Ridiculous!"

"No. It's not ridiculous. The key, remember? Roger—" She caught his hand. The pressure of her fingers hurt. "Roger, I went out somewhere last night. I found the key and got out of the room, out of the house. I went somewhere in my sleep, and I did something. Something *horrible.*"

He stared at her. "That's absolutely the most fantastic thing I ever heard."

"No, it isn't, Roger. It isn't! Somnambulists have been known to attempt suicide. Even—even murder."

He took her in his arms. He let her sob on his shoulder. He whispered comfortingly in her ear. "My poor little wife. You're just completely upset, that's all. Suppose you did somehow get out last night. Suppose you got some dirt on your shoes, some rust on your skirt. That isn't anything. That isn't a crime. There hasn't been any murder. No one has found any bloodstains, and no one is dead except poor old Eli Wilson who died of a heart attack. You've got to stop this, Carolyn. You've *got* to. You're hurting yourself."

Let somebody else tell her about the missing Pryne. He was not going to say another damned thing. He wouldn't have to—until the day he got up in court and told the judge about her.

She stopped crying. She lifted her pale, moist face. "Roger, you're—you're a wonderful husband. Kiss me, dear. Kiss me and hold me tight."

He got her downstairs finally and to the table. She picked at her food, occasionally smiled slightly, and Fenton and Aunt Sue kept up a steady stream of small talk. The weather. The drought. The corn. . . . Always the damned corn, Fenton thought. God, how he'd like to get away from this, to go off somewhere where no one had ever heard of corn.

The meal came to an end, and Fenton said he had to go back to the office. He would take the car because Aunt Sue handed him a long list of articles she wanted brought from the store. "And you pick out the tomatoes, Roger. Don't let Regan's boy do it. He gave me two bad ones last time, and the rest were green as gourds."

"Yes," he said. "Yes," and then escaped from the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Two Mr. Fentons

FIFTEEN minutes before two o'clock, Uncle Fred came into the *Inquirer* office and dropped the afternoon mail on Fenton's desk. The old man had on his stiffly pressed suit of funeral black and a black bowtie that drooped lopsidedly. He stepped back from the desk, turned, stared out through the window at the glaring street.

"Always did hate a funeral," he muttered. His gnarled right hand clutched his Masonic apron rolled in soiled white tissue.

Fenton fingered the mail. "Why go to them, then?"

"Got to. Got to pay my last respects to old Eli. You got to do a lot of things in this world you don't want to." He went out the door and closed the screen softly as though already he was approaching Eli Wilson's coffin.

Fenton started to work his way down through the mail. Halfway down the stack he found a prim white envelope addressed to Roger Fenton, Editor, in a stilted, uniformly slanted hand, school-teacherish, in watery blue ink.

"Old Nosey Steffens," Fenton surmised aloud as he slit the envelope.

Inside was a double sheet of white notepaper, exactly folded. The report of some club meeting or a few lines of eulogistic doggerel dedicated to the late Eli Wilson, he supposed. He spread the paper flat between blunt hands, and as comprehension grew out of words, Fenton's flesh chilled.

There was no salutation, no signature. Only the five neatly written lines:

> There must always be one witness to our sins. I saw what took place in the cemetery that night. Whether or not I speak to the proper authorities will depend entirely on your future actions.

He said softly yet distinctly, "The damned nosey old snooper!" He stood up. His knees were trembling. He paced the length of the small room, stopped, stared out the window, seeing nothing. He had to shut her up, get rid of her. Right away. This afternoon. . . .

He went back to the desk, looked down at Miss Steffens' note again. His heart was beating in his throat, choking him. He seized the paper, crumpled it, then struck a match. He watched it burn to light black ash, dropped it to the floor and scuffed it into powder that sifted into the cracks.

Blackmail. Blackmail couched in stilted, school-teacherish phrases. . . . His future actions! Good Lord, what did she think he was? He'd show her some future actions—by clipping that poisonous tongue of hers.

Poison? Then he remembered. He could lay his hands on poison. There was some within his grasp right now. Down in the basement of the printing office. A little pasteboard box of poison that Fred Cotsworth must have used sometime to rid the place of vermin. Strychnine, the quick and deadly poison.

He went striding back into the deserted press room. He stooped, jerked at the ring handle of the trap door in the dirty floor. He got the door up, took plunging steps down into the basement, groped for the light cord and yanked it. The box, he remembered, was on a crude shelf behind the furnace. Coal dust popped and cracked underfoot as he stepped around the furnace. There was the shelf, the small, round, red box. He picked it up, blew off the dust and read the label that Uncle Fred had penciled: Strychnine—Poison.

He put the box into his pocket, went back up the stairs and closed the trap. He went into the front office, slammed out the front door and got into his car. He meshed gears noisily, spurted from the curb and down the oiled street. He passed the Baptist church where the funeral cars were lined up behind the hearse. . . . She'd be in there, he thought. She'd be in there, sniffling, the damned nosey old maid. That was fine, just fine. Now, if only her house was unlocked. . . .

Miss Steffens' was the small lemon-yellow cottage on the next block, the front porch almost hidden by honeysuckle vines. Fenton parked his car brazenly in front of it, left the car door open, strode up the front walk. There was no one on the street. . . .

His knuckles rapped a furious tattoo on the screen, but there was no answer. She wasn't home. . . . She wouldn't miss a funeral for anything, he thought as he opened the screen and went into the shadowy living room.

He went back into the old maid's tidy kitchen, and already the poison box was in his hand. . . . He'd sweeten her sugar for her. Strychnine is white— No, it's bitter, too. Not the sugar. . . .

He turned distractedly and saw the teapot on the back of the oil stove. That was it. Tea. Tea is bitter. He stepped to the stove, opened the top of the pot and found it full of tea, still warm. . . . Ice tea, he thought. That was what she was making.

He poured the strychnine liberally into the pot of steeping tea. Then he pocketed the box, turned, left the house by the back door and returned to his car.

He thought gloatingly as he entered the *Inquirer* office that the whole thing hadn't

taken five minutes. Old Nosey would come home from the funeral. She'd sit around, awaiting his "future actions," and she'd drink her tea. . . . She'd attend just one more funeral—her own! He'd put a piece about her in the paper. About the dear, good friend who had left them. . . . He laughed aloud as he went back into the press room, into the basement to replace the box where he had found it.

FOUR O'CLOCK came and with it Uncle Fred in his carefully pressed black suit, his hand still clutching the soiled tissue. His withered lips formed a saintly smile as he greeted Fenton at the desk.

"How was it?" Fenton asked.

Uncle Fred sighed. "Brother Frye sure gave a comforting service. Made a man think—the flowers, the organ music, and Brother Wilson lying there."

Brother Wilson and Brother Pryne, Fenton thought. Both planted. . . .

"Anybody hear if they've located Mr. Pryne yet?" Uncle Fred asked.

Startled, Fenton looked at the old man. "No," he said. "How would I hear anything about it with everybody at the funeral?"

"I just wondered. Seems queer, him to vanish like that."

The phone rang—three longs, the *Inquirer's* own. Fenton picked it up and said hello. It was Aunt Sue's voice coming from the receiver.

"I thought you might like to know, Roger, that Carolyn seems to feel a whole lot better."

"Yes." Why in the hell would she feel better? "Well, that's fine."

"I told her she ought to get out of the house for a spell."

"Yes."

"She didn't want to, but she'd promised Miss Steffens she'd come over for tea—"

"What?" He must have shouted it, for Uncle Fred turned in the door of the press room and asked, "What's wrong, Roger?"

Aunt Sue said, "So I got her to pretty herself up and go. It'll do her good if Miss Steffens don't dwell too much on Eli's funeral. . . ."

Fenton dropped the phone from nerveless fingers. . . . *"It'll do her good."* Tea. Tea with Miss Steffens. Oh, it would do everybody good—especially those brats in the hospital! Three hundred thousand dollars' worth!

He dragged himself out of the chair. He said, "Maybe there's still a chance. Maybe she hasn't—"

"Eh?" Uncle Fred said. "Roger, you don't articulate."

"Oh, go to hell!" He slammed the screen. He lurched into the seat of his car, thumbed the starter button.

Strychnine. It's so damned fast. So certain. Got to get her home. Give her an emetic. Emetic and charcoal, that's it. There's charcoal tablets in the medicine chest. But get to her—that's the thing. . . .

His car screamed down the street in second, reeled off one block, two. He started braking, craning his neck for a glimpse of life on the porch of the canary yellow house. That damned honeysuckle. . . . He swerved into the gutter, left the engine running, sprang from the car and raced up onto the porch.

She was there in a hickory rocker, a glass of ice tea half empty in her hand. Miss Steffens was there, on the swing, a glass of water in her hand, and Fenton heard again what he had heard Miss Steffens tell the druggist on the day before: "I'm on a rigid diet, no stimulants of any sort. . . ." Tea was a stimulant. What a damned fool to do to put it in that tea!

"Why, Mr. Fenton!"

He didn't look at the nosey old fool. He saw only Carolyn—her pinched white face and haunted eyes.

"Roger! What's wrong, darling."

He caught hold of her slim bare arm. "Come on," he said hoarsely. "For God's sake, come on." He jerked her to her feet. He caught the slopping ice tea glass and flung it into the yard.

"Why, Mr. Fenton!"

"Roger, what is it?"

He jerked her to the steps and down. "Hurry," he gasped. "Just hurry." He got her to the car and shoved her in. He shoved three hundred thousand elusive dollars into the car, and then he ran around the front to get in under the wheel. The gears snarled.

"It—it's Aunt Sue, isn't it?"

"No." He swung the car for a loop turn. There wasn't room in the narrow street, and the front wheels bounded over the gutter, onto the sidewalk, then down. "No, it's not Aunt Sue. It's you."

Out the tail of his eye, he saw Carolyn's hand go up in front of her eyes. He heard her whisper, "They—they've found someone. Somebody murdered—"

He gave her a backhanded blow across the cheek with his right hand. "Stop that. Don't faint, Carolyn. Don't—"

SHOCKED by his slap, she didn't faint but sat rigidly in the seat until he pulled up in front of the house.

"Get out! Hurry!" He got out, went around to catch her by the arm again. . . . *Strychnine,* his mind hammered. *It's so damned fast. Five to fifteen minutes.* "How much of that tea did you drink?"

"How—how much?" He was dragging her and she was stumbling.

"Never mind. Come on." He got her through the door, through the living and dining rooms, into the kitchen. He didn't see Aunt Sue anywhere. He told Carolyn, "Sit down." He got a glass. He filled it with water. He moved to the spice cabinet, opened it, found the dry mustard and poured half the box into the water.

"Roger, if you'd only tell me—"

"Here, drink this," he told her. He held the glass. She eyed the mustard water distastefully.

"It'll make me sick," she said.

His face close to hers, he shouted, "Damn you, drink it. Do you want to die? That tea was poisoned—" That slipped out. . . . How the hell would he know unless he'd poisoned it? He shouldn't have said that. . . .

"Poisoned?" She stared incredulously.

He said, "I heard that old lady's well was polluted." Miss Steffens *did* have a well, he remembered.

She drank from the glass. She gulped and gagged the mustard water down. And then, almost at once, Carolyn was violently sick. He got her to the sink. He held her head while she vomited. He felt a sympathetic sickness that was instantly quelled by the stimulus of stark fear as he felt Carolyn's slim body stiffen in his arms and saw her face.

The first convulsion of strychnine poisoning. He held her helplessly. He said, "My God—" Then Aunt Sue came lumbering in through the back door. She saw Carolyn, Carolyn's face.

He shouted, "Don't gape. Get Dr. Lacy. It—it's hysteria." He caught up Carolyn's rigid body in his arms, carried her back through the house to the stairs and up to their room. He put her on the bed. "Charcoal," he said aloud. "Get some charcoal."

There was no one there but himself, and he ran across to the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, got the charcoal pills. When he got back to the room, he found that Carolyn had rolled to the floor. She lay on her face, her body twitching. He knelt beside her, broke open the box of charcoal tablets. He turned her over onto her back. There was froth at her lips. He picked up two tablets, crushed them in his fingers, carried the stuff to her mouth. Her lips were rigid. He couldn't cram any of the charcoal past her lips. He picked her up again and got her onto the bed.

Aunt Sue came gasping into the room. "Dr. Lacy'll be here—" She saw Carolyn's face then, the charcoal smeared across the rigid mouth. "Roger! That black stuff—"

"Just charcoal. Get some water. Hurry!" He pinned Carolyn to the bed with his two hands. . . . He didn't know what good water would do. He didn't know what good anything would do. Maybe it would be better to let her go. Why not? Why not just let her die? She'd never been anything but bad luck to him. Let her go, and maybe they'd think Old Nosey did it. Why not? It was her tea ,wasn't it? She didn't drink any of it herself.

Carolyn's eyes opened. They stared up at him in terror from the rigid mask of her face. He thought, *I'm going to get rid of you. Right now. Why shouldn't I get rid of you?*

His hands moved up along her shoulders, towards her throat.

"Here's the water, Roger," came faintly from behind him.

He straightened, wheeled to Aunt Sue. "Water? How the hell would I get water into her?"

Aunt Sue blinked. Her hand trembled, slopping water. "Poor boy! Poor little Carolyn. She must be mad."

They heard the front door slam. They heard Dr. Lacy's voice calling to them. Aunt Sue called back.

"Upstairs, Mark. Hurry!"

Lacy came legging up the steps and into the room. He said, "I really burned up the street—" He broke off, his quiet blue eyes moving from Aunt Sue to Fenton to Caro-

lyn. His lips formed a soundless whistle. He went toward the bed with his bag in hand, kicking over the charcoal, noticing what he had kicked. He ripped off his coat.

He said, "She vomited." It wasn't a question. There was evidence of the fact on Carolyn's blouse.

Fenton said, "Yes." Lacy had seen the charcoal. *He knows that I know what it is. I've got to think . . . think . . . .*

Lacy was opening his bag. "Some water, Mrs. Cotsworth. Oh, you've got some there. Fine. It's a damned good thing she vomited."

Aunt Sue said, "That black stuff on her mouth is charcoal."

"Yes." The doctor's glance darted at Fenton. "Any way she could have got hold of any strychnine?"

Fenton didn't answer. Why hadn't he brought the strychnine with him? If he could have planted it here . . . if he had rigged it right, it might have been construed as suicide if she died. Only, she wasn't going to die. He knew damned well she wasn't. . . .

"Strychnine?" Aunt Sue's gasp. "Why, no. There wouldn't be anything like that around here, would there, Roger?"

"No."

Lacy was saying, "That's what it is. Mr. Fenton, you'll have to give me a hand here. We've got to stop these convulsions. I've got some chloroform in my bag. And, Mrs. Cotsworth—"

"Yes, let me do something," Aunt Sue begged.

"You might go downstairs and phone Rufe Keever," Lacy said. "It's his job, I think. He'll want to know where she got hold of this stuff."

Aunt Sue trudged out of the room. Fenton helped the young doctor. Fenton worked mechanically, doing what he was told, his mind busy but not getting anywhere. . . . Lacy knew that he knew it was strychnine. He shouldn't have given her the emetic. That was what was going to save her. She'd talk. Tell everybody how he saved her. And they'd all wonder how he knew. And Old Nosey was still alive. She knew what had become of Pryne. God, what a mess!

"You'd better take a breather, Mr. Fenton." It was Lacy's voice, coming as though from a distance, but only from the other side of the bed where Carolyn now lay quietly, asleep. "If you don't, I'll have another patient on my hands. You'd make a damned fine nurse, Fenton."

Wouldn't he, though? Wouldn't he make a hell of a wonderful nurse? And he had damned near endowed a hospital for brats, too, hadn't he?

He stumbled out of the room. Take a breather, Lacy had said. . . . He started down the stairs.

". . . and I just *had* to know what the trouble was, Mr. Keever. Mr. Fenton practically *dragged* Carolyn off my front porch, threw her ice tea out into the yard—one of my best glasses, too—so I thought I'd come right over, and if there was any trouble I might be of some assistance. But then to find *you* here. . . ."

YES, FENTON thought dully. She was here. Old Nosey. Rufe Keever and Old Nosey. Old Nosey would talk. She'd tell Keever, just as soon as Keever tells her it's poison. She'd have to, to save herself from suspicion. She'd tell him what happened to Pryne. . . .

He turned wearily on the steps and plodded back up into the hall. He walked down the hall to the bathroom across from his and Carolyn's bedroom. He went in and closed the door. He stood for a second in front of the medicine cabinet, staring at his face in the mirror as though it were the face of a stranger. A small, round face, boyish, with glassy, silly-looking blue eyes. An ineffectual little man who looked as though he were about to cry.

He thought contemptuously, *You sniveling little fool, you. You blundering puny idiot, you got me into this. You're yellow, too, as well as dumb. They'll only have to show you the rubber hose, and you'll fall apart. You'll tell them everything you know about me. Where Pryne is. Where Bessie is. How I killed Pam.*

He smiled a superior sort of smile. "They aren't going to know," he whispered. "You aren't going to tell them." He opened the medicine cabinet, fumbled along a shelf, picked up a new razor blade in its paper package. As he swung the cabinet closed again his image whirled to face him.

He said, "Don't look so damned scared. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to shave." He laughed a little. He tore the paper from the razor blade and the blade

slipped from his shaky fingers, struck the edge of the basin, fell to the floor. He stooped to pick it up, and as he did so he saw beneath the steam radiator under the window.

There was the red tennis ball, under the radiator. It must have rolled clear across their bedroom, the hall, and through the open door of the bath. He picked up the ball with one hand and the razor blade with the other. He sat down dejectedly on the edge of the tub, his brow tight with a puzzled frown, his eyes on the red tennis ball in his left hand.

A truck went by outside the house, and the floor under his feet shook with the weight of it.

A big van, he thought. *No, a big ready-mixed concrete truck. That's what it was. It came barrelling along Washington Street in Columbus. What the hell were you doing in Columbus, anyway? Can't you remember? Anyway, you were walking down Washington Street past a big old house set way back in a yard with a high, rank-grown hedge. Some kids were playing behind the hedge. You thought they were kids. A girl —she looked like she was nearly twenty— came crashing through the hedge. A big lout of a girl, giggling. She bumped into you. She nearly knocked you over, and you saw her face—that vacant look, those idiot's eyes of hers. Crazy. Nuts. A big girl like that chasing a pretty red ball along the sidewalk, grasping with her clumsy idiot's fingers. She didn't see you. She didn't see anything but the pretty red ball.*

You saw the big cement truck rumbling down the street. You knew she didn't, wouldn't see it with those vacant eyes of hers. She couldn't see anything but the ball. You wondered just what would happen if the ball went out into the street, if she would follow it. So you kicked the ball —you were wearing light tan shoes. You kicked the ball out into the street in the path of the truck, and she went giggling after it. You heard her scream just once. You saw her lying there under the wheels of the truck. It was a damned pointless thing to do. No money in it. But you did it, and then walked on. Walked? Hell, you ran! You were scared that somebody might have seen you do what you did. And I suppose you'll want to tell them about that, too, when they show you the rubber hose. You'll want to talk about that and all the other things you've done, the other screams you've heard.

Seated on the bathtub edge, Fenton looked at his right hand that held the razor blade. It was bright and sharp.

He said, "You just think you're going to tell them. They'll never know, and you'll never talk. I'm going to shut you up. For good."

The blade was bright and sharp. He scarcely felt its edge against his throat. . . .

* * *

Old Fred Cotsworth came shuffling out of the door of the *Village Inquirer* at noon on Friday. He had a printed placard in his hand, together with a length of cotton string. He took out a pocket knife, opened it with his teeth and punched small holes in the top of the sign. Then he moistened one end of the string in his mouth and squinted as he tried to thread it through one of the holes.

"Oh, Mr. Cotsworth—"

He looked up. Miss Lena Steffens came mincing toward him from the corner, a sad

little smile trembling on her lips. She laid a hand in sympathy upon the old man's arm.

"I *do* hate to bother you with such a trivial matter at a time like this, Mr. Cotsworth," she said, her voice low, "but I did a perfectly idiotic thing the other day."

"Yeah?" the old man said, not as though he were the least surprised.

"Yes. I had two letters written, and I got the envelopes mixed. One was an item for Mr. Fenton—that is, for the paper, and the other was—" She flushed. "I'm afraid I'm guilty of a federal offense, Mr. Cotsworth."

Fred Cotsworth frowned. "How come?"

"The other letter was anonymous. Oh, I'm thoroughly ashamed. In fact, while I wrote the letter Tuesday morning, I didn't mail it until Wednesday morning. And then, since I put it into the wrong envelope, it wasn't delivered to the right party at all. Poor, dear Mr. Fenton must have got it."

"Eh?" Fred Cotsworth scratched his head. "I don't seem to understand just what you're talking about, Miss Steffens."

She took a nervous breath. "The anonymous letter. You see, Mr. Cotsworth, on Monday night, rather late, I *happened* to pass the cemetery, and *whom* should I see in there but Ruby Boland and some young man." Miss Steffens' eyebrows waved in triumph. "In a cemetery, mind you. Petting." She flushed faintly. "Most unseemly conduct for a young school teacher, but I *did* think it was only right to warn her before I took the matter up before the board."

Fred Cotsworth cleared his throat. "Why come to me about it?" He turned again to the screen, threading the string on the placard through the wire mesh.

"I thought perhaps you might have found this anonymous letter intended for Ruby Boland among Mr. Fenton's effects."

Fred Cotsworth tied a strong knot. "Nope."

Miss Steffens sighed. "How is poor, dear Carolyn bearing up?"

"Pretty well." The old man straightened, squinted against the glare. "She's young yet. She'll mend. Young Dr. Lacy seems to take a lot of interest in her. Lot of personal interest." He cleared his throat again and looked back at the placard on the door. Miss Steffens looked at it, too.

"Why do you suppose he did that?" she asked sadly, and then, before Fred Cotsworth could frame an answer, she gasped and pointed at the sign. "Why, Mr. Cotsworth! Pardon my saying so, but you've got the apostrophe in the wrong place. It should come between the 'N' and the 'S'—not *after* the 'S'. That way, it looks as though there were *two* Mr. Fentons."

The sign read:

CLOSED FOR ROGER FENTONS' FUNERAL

THE END

Mortal Myrtle

WHEN THE wedded bliss of Mrs. Myrtle McClendon of Guntersville, Ala., turned to blisters, she made up her mind to chuck the whole thing—and thereby let loose a chain of events which, for sheer, pointless tragedy, have seldom been equalled. Five men lost their lives and that of a sixth was pretty well ruined.

The first to go was John F., Mrs. McClendon's husband. John was murdered in 1920, and four men—gambling acquaintances—were given life terms for the job. They were Bill Crutcher, Cleo Staten, Jim Murchison and Jim Hudson. Since none of them had had anything to do with Mrs. McClendon, not the slightest suspicion attached to her. She found, possibly, what she had hoped for in remarriage—while Bill Crutcher found death in a prison accident and Hudson and Staten died of illnesses incurred in jail.

The score now stood at four men dead—basis enough for everlasting happiness if you're the sort of woman who cares for that kind of thing. Myrtle, however, found eternity a little too imminent. Someone, she said, was trying to kill her.

The someone turned out to be her own nephew—who claimed she'd bribed him to transport Uncle John to eternity years ago. The four men convicted of the crime were proven completely innocent. The nephew finally paid with his life. And James Murchison was given a few hundred dollars "compensation" for a little more than a decade spent in jail for a crime he hadn't committed, and for which his three friends, equally innocent, had died.

—*By Lauri Wirta*

IF THE BODY FITS—

It would take a heap of cramming, Johnny figured—too much, maybe—to jam his six-foot father into that battered, four-foot coffin. . . .

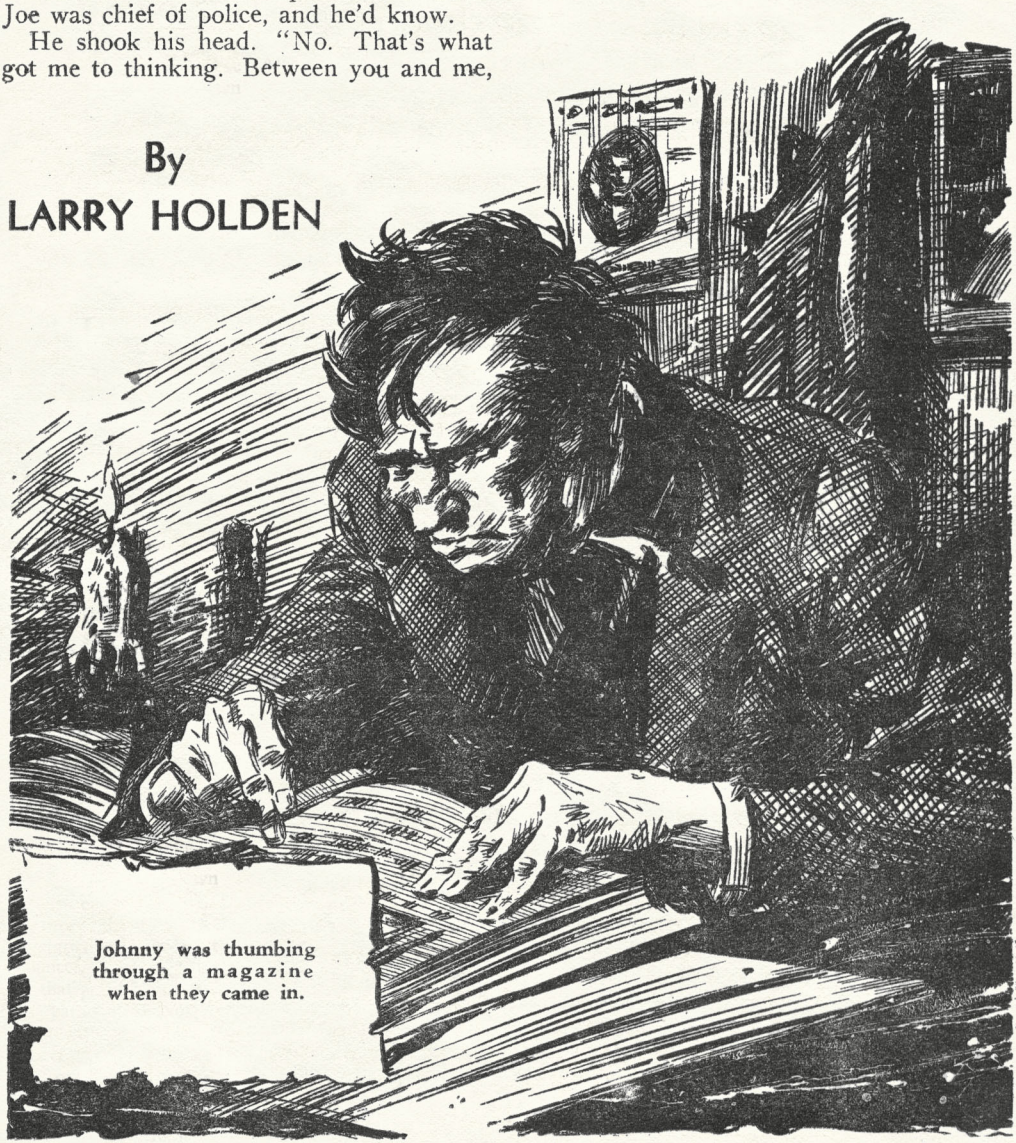
By
LARRY HOLDEN

"FOR THREE days now . . ." Joe was saying thoughtfully. "He ain't showed for three days on that old wagon of his, and it got me to thinking. He's dead."

"And it hasn't been reported?" I asked. Joe was chief of police, and he'd know.

He shook his head. "No. That's what got me to thinking. Between you and me, there's more funny business going on out at that farm than we know about, them two hating one another's gizzards the way they do. Let's get Doc and take a run out."

I stammered, "You—you think he was



Johnny was thumbing through a magazine when they came in.

murdered, Joe? Is that what you think?"

He shrugged. "What's *your* guess?"

* * *

Old Jake Stence was a miser.

He wasn't merely economical, thrifty, parsimonious or even just stingy. He was a fanatical, money-crazed miser.

Let me give you an example of the kind of thing he did. Eighteen years ago, just after young Johnny was born, his wife dropped dead with the baby in her arms. She rolled down the stairs from the second floor, and the baby wasn't expected to live. Jake hitched the horse to his wagon and disappeared for twelve hours. When he came back, he had two battered, paintless coffins in the back of the wagon—a large one for his wife and a little, four-foot one for the baby. How or where he had gotten them was anybody's guess, but from the looks of those old relics, you knew darned well he had gotten them for a song.

But there was a joke in it—if you can imagine a joke in a pair of coffins. The baby didn't die, and Jake was stuck with that second four-foot coffin on his hands. He went out one morning with it in the back of the wagon again, but when he returned that evening his face was as dark as midnight in a wolf's throat—and the coffin was still in the wagon.

From that day on he hated young Johnny. There are charitable folks around who said he hated the baby because he blamed his wife's death on it. Me, I know better. He hated the baby because it didn't die and use that coffin. Jake never forgot a wasted penny, and he never forgave it, either.

The kid got through as much school as he had to, and every extra minute he spent working on old Jake's poultry farm. And not learning the poultry business, as you might think. No. Learning the business of being a miser. Jake drilled it into him from morning till night, sixteen hours a day, until in the end Johnny was just as miserly as old Jake himself.

And don't think for a minute that Jake ever let the kid forget that useless little four-foot coffin. He kept it in the parlor so he could brood over it, so he could beat his breast every time he looked at it—so it would be a continual reproach to the kid for being alive.

You don't have to be a psychiatrist to know that that's no life for a kid. Young Johnny was saving string and making one nail do the work of four when most kids are still playing with dolls, and at the age when he should have been teasing the young girls and offering them sodas in exchange for a furtive kiss later, he was working sixteen and sometimes twenty hours a day, piling penny on top of penny, and nickel on top of nickel, watching them turn into precious dollars. As I said, it was no life for a kid. It was no life for anybody.

They were a familiar sight around town, young Johnny and old Jake, perched side by side on the hard seat of that old wagon. Every day they came through to sell their eggs from door to door because they could squeeze out a few extra pennies that way. And they were as alike as brothers, both six feet tall, as skinny and bony as a piece of scaffolding, dressed in rag-ends and tatters, their hair home-cropped to the skull to save barber bills. The horse was spraddle-legged and tottering, and the wagon moaned as if haunted by all the weary years it had spent past its prime.

In the evening they returned, sagging with fatigue, the wagon empty, old Jake driving and young Johnny sitting beside him, carefully counting a handful of loose change and dropping it piece by piece into a small leather sack under the old man's steely eye.

They lived on the refuse of the garden they kept, eating the chickens that died of old age, or any other way except chopping their heads off. I sometimes wondered if Jake made the kid eat dinner on the lid of the coffin just to remind him what a dirty trick he had played by insisting on staying alive; and sometimes I was darned near to being convinced that if the kid had had his choice, that little four-foot coffin would have been under the turf of the cemetery these eighteen years.

Those were idle thoughts, though, and I had no proof. So I kept my mouth shut.

BUT JOE had a fact that day when he came through my front gate, fanning himself with his hat. Joe was chief of police. He and I hunted duck and deer in season, and whenever he had a job in which he had to depend on a steady hand with a gun, he usually called on me to go along.

"Harry," he said, "have you noticed anything funny about old Stence's wagon these past few days?"

I laughed. "Don't tell me he's gone and got a new one."

"Not much chance of that. But I been watching it for three-four days and he ain't been on it."

"Maybe he's sick."

"Jake's never too sick to ride that wagon, never too sick to let young Johnny make the collections without his being there to keep one eye on the accounting."

We looked at each other.

"For three days now . . ." he said thoughtfully. "He ain't showed for three days on that old wagon of his, and it got me to thinking. He's dead."

A half-hour later the three of us—Joe, the Doc and I—were riding in silence out toward the Stence farm on the Pike. We stopped at the rickety fence, and Joe got out of the car soft and easy, went up the path, not making a sound. There was a feeble, flickering light in the kitchen, and when we peered through the window we saw young Johnny sitting there, listlessly turning over the pages of an old magazine someone had given him. On the table, stuck in its own grease, stood about an inch of candle. It threw an eerie light, fitful and shallow, and it filled young Johnny's gaunt face with darkness. He looked as if the bones of his skull were impatiently thrusting against his skin.

But there was no sign of old Jake. It was too early for bed, and old Jake would certainly not have been in another part of the house when one candle would have done for two.

Joe opened the door without knocking and walked in.

He said casually, "Hello, Johnny."

Johnny looked up. "Hello, Joe." His voice was creaky and rusty, as if he were just as miserly about using it as he was about everything else.

Joe went on, "I notice Jake ain't been to town these past few days, and I dropped in to see if anything was the matter."

Keeping his finger in the magazine to mark his place, young Johnny said emotionlessly, "He drapped daid three-four days ago. Bury him t'morra—if I can spare time from the egg route."

Six feet tall, harsh-boned and scrawny, the image of the old man, you'd never have taken him for eighteen. He looked a hard-used forty. And his words, as calmly as they were spoken, were callous enough to have curdled lead. But what else could you expect, when everything had been squeezed out of him except the bleak desire for money?

"Mind if I take a look at him?" Joe's voice hardened.

Johnny shrugged. "Go right ahead," he said disinterestedly. "He's in there." He tossed his thumb limply toward the parlor.

Joe's face was the color of spoiled veal as he stumbled out.

Joe gave him a sharp glance and he and Doc went into the other room, while I stayed in the kitchen to keep an eye on young Johnny. I had a gun stuck in my waistband, under my coat.

From the tail of my eye, I saw the beam of Joe's flashlight flick around the parlor; then I heard both of them gasp. I sharpened my ears. Johnny hunched over his magazine.

Having difficulty with his tongue, Doc mumbled something about a stroke. Joe stumbled through the doorway with a small hatchet in his hand, his face the color of spoiled veal.

He said hoarsely, "You chopped him off at the knees!"

Johnny didn't even look up from his magazine. "What of it? He was dead, wasn't he?" Then, with sudden, blazing hatred, "That was the only way I could get him in that little coffin. Now he should feel better, damn him! Now that he knows that little coffin didn't go to waste after all!"

Chilling
Death-Doll
Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

The Red-Handed Image

MAYBE it was always in the cards, and nothing Charlie West could have done would have changed it. Maybe it was just that Charlie had always been meant to be a mouse in a trap he could not understand. But of all the guys in the world, it shouldn't have happened to him. Not Charlie.

Charlie, with his brown, half-puzzled eyes and his glasses that got misty some-

By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

A sheet of white agony passed over his face and he screamed and clutched his side. "Something . . . like death," he whispered.

It was his *image that Lyra had fashioned, Charlie West knew . . . his image with tiny, blood-red hands. . . . And it was like all the rapture of love and wine and music when Charlie heard in the night the miniature's deadly command,* "Kill. . . ." *And set out to obey. . . .*

times. His round stomach and his jokes that he always forgot in the middle. His face, sort of like a moon that was losing its hair. A nice face—a little wistful after a few beers, a little lonely after forty-two years. But a guy that it should never have happened to.

It wouldn't have happened had it not been for a lot of things that night. For instance, if Clint Andrews hadn't broken his arm, Charlie would never have made the trip to Marola's Sapphire Club. Clint was Charlie's boss and the head of the Andrews Agency. He booked singers and bands and funny men into the roadhouses around New York and Jersey, and Charlie was his cashier. But that night when Clint broke his arm, Charlie said he'd take the new contracts to Marola at the Sapphire Club in Jersey. Charlie was always willing to work late. He'd have jumped off the Empire State Building with a parasol for Clint. So he went to the Sapphire Club.

Then it began to storm. One of those fast-breaking, hot August downpours. It killed business at the Sapphire that night, and Charlie was sitting there at a table, talking and having a beer with Marola, when he saw the girl. How did the rest happen? Your guess is as good as mine, for the chances are that Charlie hadn't looked at a girl in ten years. But he looked at Lyra and Lyra looked at him. Maybe—just maybe—somebody had told her that Charlie held some strings at a booking agency. Or maybe not. . . . No, the way it worked out, I'm pretty sure she wasn't thinking of that.

But he saw her working her way around the half-filled room, smiling that curious, sad smile, with the lights making satin ripples in her black hair. Her slender face had a look on it that was miles away and remotely contemptuous of the cigarette tray that she carried and the gold-and-black uniform she wore. Charlie asked Marola who she was. Why . . . ? Like I say, I don't know. It was just in the cards, I guess.

"Lyra," Marola said. "Lyra Something. . . . Like a jewel. Oh, yeah. Lyra Topaz. Walked in here five nights ago wanting a job doing anything. Something about her. . . . Needed a kid for the cigarette tray, anyway." Marola watched her carefully as she sort of floated around the tables. "Something about her," he said thoughtfully again. "Those eyes of hers get under your skin. They look like they've lived forever. Like they'd drifted through centuries, watching and watching and never forgetting a thing. They—

"Oh, hell," he sighed and stared at the empty tables. "If business gets any worse, it'll be me who's selling the smokes. Five days it's been sunny as a picture till night; then it starts to storm like a wildcat."

"If you were superstitious, you could blame it on her," Charlie said idly. "Five days ago, then five bum nights. *You* know."

Marola looked at him and slowly took the cigar from his mouth. "I *am* superstitious, Charlie," he said softly. He looked at Lyra Topaz again, a different way. "Funny. I hadn't thought of it. . . ."

"Aw, Marola, I was only kidding," Charlie worried. See, Charlie was a guy who wouldn't have hurt anybody. He was sorry he'd said it, but Marola just kept looking at the girl. A beautiful girl, yes, slender as a child, but not a child, and with those dark eyes as old as eternity.

"I just wonder," Marola was thinking aloud. "If I let her go. . . ."

And then—at that very moment he said it—a party of eleven came in and somebody said, loud enough for him to hear, "The rain is stopping. Moon's coming out."

Marola looked at Charlie and smiled. "That's enough for me. Thanks, Charlie, for the tip."

"Aw, but Marola, maybe the kid needs the buck. I don't want—"

"Not for me. Like I said, there's something about her. Something not quite in-this-world. Some day she'll do somebody no good. Believe me."

It hurt Charlie because he knew it was fault. And when he saw her standing in the lobby with Marola, getting her salary and dressed to leave, it was more than he could stand. He got up and left, and outside he caught her, walking toward the highway.

He told her why he'd stopped her and he told her how sorry he was. She smiled a far-away smile, with that mist of sadness on her face as if nothing mattered at all.

"It is but a little thing," she said gently. There was the soft slur of accent upon her words. "Perhaps it was true, what you told him."

Charlie drove her to Manhattan in Clint Andrews' car that night. Where did she

live . . . ? She told him. The Caravan, a small dusty-looking hotel near Times Square. He paused in the lobby, his plump fingers turning, revolving his hat against his plump stomach.

"Because it *was* my fault," he said, "I've got to do something. I hear of jobs nearly every day. I'll call you."

She looked at him sadly, as if she understood what was going to happen, and was sorry. But there was nothing she could do. "Yes," she said quietly, "you will call me."

He kept thinking of her that night after he got home to his three-room apartment on East Thirty-Sixth. He was thinking of her eyes and winding his watch when it fell. It shattered. He stared down at the pieces. It had been a good watch. His father had given it to him twenty years ago. Charlie didn't say anything as he gathered up the pieces and wrapped them in a handkerchief, but he knew he would never again have a watch that he liked as much.

WITH CLINT at home with the broken arm, there was a lot of work for Charlie. He'd been with Clint over twelve years—ever since Clint had started his agency. They were entirely different. Clint was the suave diplomat. The glamor boy with the magic touch. But a nice guy, understand. He'd never looked at Charlie's books or checked them. He'd probably never taken a check to the bank. He'd said to Charlie a hundred times, "Get yourself married. This is a hell of a way to throw your happiness away, Charlie."

But who would marry Charlie? With his wistful face and his misty glasses and the way he forgot his jokes.

So Charlie was busy, but in the hot afternoon a fly droned over the ceiling and a sort of dreamy trance came around him. Charlie sat at his desk thinking of Lyra's face, so ancient and so lovely, so young and ghostly and sad. Finally his pudgy fingers roamed toward his telephone.

* * *

She was fashioning little statuettes of clay when he went to her room. Her black hair seemed longer that night; it fell around her small shoulders, and her fingers were tiny as a doll's. Her feet were bare and curled under her as she sat on the faded red couch, and to Charlie she was suddenly like a child who was listening to the wind beyond her window, and imagining the tales of elves and goblins of long ago.

The statuettes were strange to Charlie. There were many of them: little figures, no more than six inches high—just shoulders and the heads of creatures that at first seemed like people, then became gnomes and withered-faced children and women with broken wings instead of arms.

"I don't know why I make them," she said faintly. "But they all have names. They almost talk to me when I'm lonely. But—but the ones I love the most always break." She looked at them a long time. "I keep making them, but the ones I love always break."

And then she smiled at him and said, rather sadly, "I knew you would call."

And that was the night when Charlie's parrot died. It was on the floor of the cage when he got home. There had been no reason for it to die that Charlie could understand. It had never been sick, and it was not old. But it was dead. It made Charlie feel as if a happy part of life had ended, and taken a part of him forever away.

It was exactly a week later that Charlie went out to Clint's house on Long Island. He sat there, blinking at his cocktail and swallowing and listening to Clint tell about his arm. Suddenly he coughed, swallowed again, and began to talk frantically.

"The main reason I came, Clint, is to let you know. You see, I—I'm getting married. Getting married," he repeated. "And I want you to be my best man. It's going to be soon and very simple and. . . . Well, that's it."

Clint had stared at him, his grey eyes wide in incredulity. Then he slapped his chair. "At last! Tell me about it. Hey, Lois, come in here! Charlie's going to get married. Bring another drink and we'll hear about. Where'd you find her? Tell me every damned thing!"

Charlie opened his mouth and closed it. It was going to be hard for any one else to understand. It was hard to put it in words, because all the nights, all the words had something of a veil about them that made them insubstantial as a shadowy mist. He tried to tell them of her laughter, soft and far-away; of her loneliness and of his; of the first and only time he had kissed her; of that moment, even yet unbelieved, when his lips had dared to ask, and miraculously, she had granted his request.

He tried to tell them, and his words fumbled. His glasses grew misty. The room seemed hot and airless. And Lois suddenly walked over to his chair and patted his shoulder.

"We're going to love her. Don't you worry, Charlie."

But her eyes, as they met her husband's, had been strange and confused.

Charlie West and Lyra Topaz were married four days later at Clint's house, and Clint gave them a trip to Mexico for a wedding present.

Charlie moved in a trance, a perpetual smile on his face. He held her hand on the plane and tried to make coherent the choking bliss in his heart:

"You know, it's going to be an adventure, everything we say, almost. Because we don't know anything about each other, hardly. I mean, I—well, like where you were born and what you've done or—or a thousand things."

She watched the towers of New York fall away beneath the plane, and that ancient sadness settled like a stain upon her face. "No," she murmured. And then, for no reason at all, she added distantly, "I brought some clay. Perhaps it will be different. Perhaps they won't break now."

It happened the second night in Mexico City.

It was about ten o'clock and Lyra was modelling an image in the clay. Charlie decided to take a walk—just to see where the streets went, and maybe have a beer or two.

Two blocks from the hotel he stopped at the stand where the Mexican was selling the tiny rainbow-colored lizards to the tourists. How lovely their color was, Charlie thought. He would buy one to surprise Lyra. She would like it; she was so like a child.

The little lizard was tied with a ribbon which, in turn, was pinned to Charlie's lapel. It clung to his lapel and scarcely moved. As if it were terrified.

Terrified. . . . Charlie thought of the word as he walked slowly through the darkness. Then he stopped and touched the sleek skin of the tiny reptile. "Yes, you *are* terrified," he whispered. "Why . . . ? Because I can kill you . . . ? Is that it?"

He unpinned the ribbon. He held the tiny creature, so still, in his plump hands. He was thinking of Lyra and the statuettes of clay. Thinking of the images of ancient children and of the women with broken wings. And while he thought, his fingers closed and slowly tightened . . . and tightened. . . .

And tightened until the flesh was pulp in his palm and the blood ran down his fingers. Then he stared, realizing. A terrible sickening horror struck through him.

He had murdered this tiny thing! He—Charlie West—who had always loved animals, always kept a pet! In a moment of sadistic insanity. . . .

He dropped the crushed body and cried out thickly as he turned away. A nameless fear overwhelmed him, as though a vast cloud had formed upon his horizon and was rolling over his sky. He was sickened and mute.

Lyra was still holding the little image when he returned.

"This one is beautiful," she whispered. "It is like you. It is smiling, you see, my Charlie. Happy, as you. I will paint it and make the hands red. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Who Lost His Soul

"WELL, how was it, Charlie?" Clint demanded jovially. "Why didn't you pick up a suntan down there? You look half sick."

"I don't know. Don't know," Charlie said vacantly. His eyes, tired and drawn, roamed around Clint's office. "I don't know," he said again. He wanted to tell Clint. He felt as though he would die of inward poison if he did not release the terrible confession. But he could not. For all his desperate yearning, he could only stand there and feel ill.

"Take the day off and get some sleep," Clint urged. "How about dinner tomorrow night—you and me and Lyra and Lois? You know, we want to know that beautiful bride of yours."

"Yes." Charlie sighed. He turned and left the office.

He stopped before the pet shop on Fifty-sixth Street and watched the cocker puppies playing in the window. One left the play and came to nuzzle the glass, trying to lick Charlie's hand. It was gold and white, this puppy, with eyes that were at once cheerful and sad.

Lyra would love it. It was lonely there, too, in a way, since the parrot had died. And this little puppy needed a home.

Charlie bought it and took it home.

Lyra was sitting at the piano Charlie had bought her, picking a tune that wasn't really a tune. Picking it with one finger, lazily, as if she were dreaming all the while. She looked up and gazed at the gold and white puppy.

"I knew you would," she murmured.

"You knew? Knew I was bringing a dog home?"

"Yes, I think I knew." She held out her hands. "Let me hold him. He looks so frightened suddenly."

"What?" Charlie jerked and let the puppy fall. It ran to Lyra's feet and she comforted it in her lap. Charlie ran his hand across his hot lips. He swallowed. He didn't feel good, he thought suddenly.

He sat down and let his head rest on the back of the couch.

"Play something for me," he said. "I'm tired."

It was something he had never heard, just as he had never heard any of other things she played. The music was languid, making Charlie think of a hot, yellow river, thick as lava, motionless upon a vast, sun-baked plain. Yet the music was restless, too, like a bird hovering uneasily above a branch. There was no pattern to the melody—only a spell, languid as a feverish river, and restless.

Charlie felt his mind sink down upon the river of music and he sighed wearily. How very tired he was these days; how utterly different he felt. Not at all like himself. He wanted only to drift, to sit and think, and sleep.

His drowsy eyes wandered to the mantle and he stared at the tiny statuette that Lyra had molded. It was his plump face, smiling. His fleshy shoulders and his plump hands. Red hands. Yes, she had painted them red. And the eyes. . . . Charlie frowned.

The eyes worried him. They had a strange existence, almost a life of their own in the clay. But they were not his. Their expression was driven and seeking at the same time, haunted and hunting; they were eyes where inward torment struggled with some wild rapture.

They troubled Charlie. They followed him through streets. They floated over his bed in the darkness of night. Surely, surely some day they would speak to him mutely, and he feared what they would say.

Lyra adored the little statuette. It was the most perfect she had ever created, she said. And perhaps, she murmured, it would not break as the others always had.

He must ask her some day why they had broken. He must ask her why she made the statuettes. He must ask her so many things. Why hadn't he . . . ?

He remembered the first day on the plane. It would be an adventure, he had thought. But when the times of silence together had come, his lips had refused to form the question. He felt a barrier, like a forbidden door. His brain would tell him: "Ask not. Do not seek. It is not for you to know. . . ."

When the room was shadowy with twilight, Lyra let the music drift into silence. She rose quietly and Charlie saw her go into the kitchen. He lay back upon the couch, his brain still lulled with the strange music.

He felt the tormented eyes of the statuette upon him. He felt his fingers open and close.

He gazed dreamily at the puppy, sleeping on the rug where Lyra's feet had been. It had been afraid of him. Why . . . ? Because he could kill it . . . ? Was that the reason . . . ?

Because he could kill it?

The music, like the motionless, hot river, seemed to carry him over the rug. The puppy was warm in his hands. It looked at him and whimpered and was very still, its eyes very bright, waiting.

The window was full of twilight, and nine floors below, the courtyard was dark now. A radio played in the well of the court. The puppy whimpered again, struggled slightly, then became quite stiff.

Charlie's fingers opened. The blur of gold and white slipped swiftly down into the darkness of the court. A fragment of cry pursued it, then the most gentle of sounds struck in the court. Silence.

Charlie stared at his empty hands.

Softly, so very sadly, Lyra's voice touched his ears. "I knew. I even told it good-bye."

Charlie's scream was a terrible soul-stricken dissonance, like a woman in agony. He flung his arm across his eyes, turned and plunged to the door. Out of the apartment, down the stairs, away into the impersonal gathering night. . . .

IT WAS almost dawn when, without a sound, he crept back to his bed and lay there. The thing in his heart seemed to grow like a tropic vine, sending its tendrils through him, pouring its dankness through him. It was fear, but more than fear. It was fear with the breath of rapture and delight, with the breathlessness of expectation.

Tomorrow, something seemed to say within him. What will happen tomorrow?

Charlie cried out in the silence and writhed on his bed.

The next night they went out with Clint and Lois to dinner. Charlie felt cold and unreal, as if this were not his body that sat in the Glades Restaurant. This was not his tongue that spoke blank words or tasted tasteless food. No, he was far away.

He was gone, and no longer did he exist. This was a shell.

"And I shall make an image of you," he heard Lyra saying. He turned. She was looking at Clint, in her eyes the ancient smouldering melancholy. "Tonight we will go to the apartment, and I will make a little figure of you. Perhaps it will not break."

Lois stirred and a restlessness was in her words. "Clint, I think we— Shouldn't we go home early? Charlie doesn't look at all happy."

"An image of me," Clint echoed. His voice was strange. "Tell me, what will it look like, Lyra?"

"Like you," she said softly. "But it will be all the things you have never been. Perhaps—perhaps it is because it will have no soul."

Clint. . . ." Lois' voice was small and frightened. "Please, I—"

"How strange," Clint said distantly. "I'm just thinking. Wouldn't it be fascinating if we could simply—well, turn everything in us around for a day or an hour. That idea of not having a soul made me think. A man without a soul! Without that scrap of divinity that keeps us from doing—God knows what! Think of it! A man could stand on the sidelines, in a way, and watch his own inner devil guide his life."

"No!" Charlie cried out in anxiety, in confusion.

"Clint, please, I want to go home," Lois begged.

They went to Charlie's and Lyra's apartment and Lyra began to mold the clay. . . .

* * *

The day was hot and Charlie sat at his desk, only half aware of the walls around him. The sounds of Times Square traffic rose through the sticky heat of August like the sullen drone of insects.

He took off his glasses and rubbed the mist from them. He got up and stood at the window. The cars, the people and buildings were only a blur.

Clarity faded in his brain, leaving a grey blur filled with murmurs, like a surf-beat in a fog.

Without a soul . . . without that scrap of God . . . what would a man be? What would he do . . . ? Would he not reveal a hate, a lust, a terrible design upon those very ones he loved most dearly . . . ? Did not man often most despise those whom he

thought he most loved? *Without his soul, what would he do?*

"... the checks, Mr. West. And I haven't been able to reach Mr. Andrews by telephone. No one answers at his house."

Charlie turned and looked vacantly at Clint's secretary. "Checks?" he echoed. Then he remembered. The checks he always took to the bank. The same empty routine. . . .

"Yes," he said. "Of course." He took them and walked toward the door. The secretary stepped back, almost stumbling. Charlie did not notice that he stepped on her foot.

The sun was glassy-bright. The buildings shimmered on heat waves. Charlie walked slowly, never moving from his deliberate path, his eyes set dead ahead and above the shoulders of the people. They were fixed on the floating image of a statuette whose face was his, but whose eyes were haunted with a terrible rapture.

"I BELIEVE you've forgotten to fill out the deposit slip, Mr. West," the teller said.

"The deposit slip . . . ? Oh, no. There will be no deposit slip."

"You want cash? Four thousand in cash?"

"Cash."

The teller counted the bills, recounted them, then extended them slowly and with a faint frown. Charlie thrust them carelessly into his pocket, dropped one, stared at it a moment, then shrugged and left it there upon the floor.

He returned to the glassy brightness of the sunlight and stared into space. How strange his mind worked. It was just as though a record were playing. A record of the voice of memory, reminding him of fragments of the past. Fragments for years forgotten.

The Paradise Bar. . . . The Paradise Bar, remember . . . ? The pretty, empty-faced little singer, Coraline. They'd sat there and Charlie had tried to explain how the Andrews Agency was having to drop her because of the scandal. What a pretty little tramp she'd been. And her fingers—so warm, so intensely warm as they had hunted Charlie's under the table. Strange, how he remembered those fingers. He'd hated them that night. Where had she lived? Some hotel called the Maribelle. Perhaps. . . . Those fingers. . . .

* * *

She didn't remember him at first. He wouldn't have recognized her. The gold of her hair was now hard yellow, the once-pretty face worn and frightened. Beyond her, Charlie could see that the room was tiny and dirty. A milk bottle stood on the dresser beside a box of crackers. Clothes, stockings, underwear clung to the backs of chairs. The scent of sweet, heavy perfume and powder drenched the hot air, and Coraline's faded blue eyes kept trying to remember and her hand held the robe across her chest.

"I'm Charlie West. At the Andrews Agency, remember, honey?" How curious it felt to use that word here!

"Oh. Oh, yes, yeah. Now I know, sure. You—

"Look, you come in," she said quickly. "The place is lousy. I been—been working so hard I never get time to get it straightened." She cleared the clothes from one chair and pushed them under the bed covers. "You sit down. Say, how long's it been since that time? Eight years, almost. Those were the days, huh? You still with that office, Charlie?" Her voice was thin with the desperate striving to be gay, to be young and confident again.

"I'm still there. Same place, same routine. You've been working?"

"Yeah, I've been so busy I—"

"But not too busy to hear about something better. I was with Archie Rhodes' band a while, but—you know. Show and band business." The edge of fear came over her face again.

It was a lie, Charlie knew. She never had anything, and she knows it now. For some reason it made Charlie smile.

"You've got something, maybe?" The words broke over her lips desperately. "I could work something in right now. 'Course, I'd want to know the set-up and I'd want a contract. You know."

"Would you, Coraline?" he asked flatly.

"Sure, you think I'm going to take anything? You think I—" She stopped and the life seemed to slide from her face. Her eyes moved down over her robe, and Charlie saw her throat move. "My God, you can see I'd take anything," she whispered brokenly. "What have you got? Have you

got anything? Please, there must be some—"

"I was just thinking." Charlie's smile became dreamy. "You know, I've thought of your hands a lot. That night in the bar they were hot. I hated them because they frightened me. Let me see your hands, Coraline."

Uncertainty filled her eyes. She opened her palm and looked at it. "I used to keep them better. They used to be smoother."

"Let me touch them."

She looked at him and for a moment Charlie saw something in her eyes that made him think of the gold and white puppy. It was fear, he realized with a rush of breath. His nerves tingled. Coraline approached him slowly and extended her hand.

Charlie touched it. It was not soft, but it was still warm. His fingers closed on hers.

"You're hurting, Charlie," she said in a small voice.

"Yes," he murmured. And then, as he smiled, he pressed the burning tip of his cigarette into her palm. She screamed and jerked her hand away to her lips as she stumbled away from him. He laughed and she stared at him, terrified. Then she began to cry.

It wasn't the pain of the burn that made her cry, Charlie knew. It was this moment where the lost past met the barren today. And he was the link of her torture. He stood here, recalling to her the days when she was young and her face was fresh, when she sang in the soft lights and men watched and yearned for her. And she stood here beside a box of crackers, an empty milk bottle, and the pain in her palm was the pain in her lonely heart.

Charlie laughed then. "I brought some money," he said. He drew the bills from his pocket. Suddenly her eyes grew still. Hunger was naked on her face and she did not breathe. Charlie held a thousand-dollar bill. She stared at it. He moved on to a hundred-dollar bill. Her fingers moved so slightly. He touched a one-dollar bill. Her fingers were still.

"Something nice for you, honey," he said. He let the dollar bill drift to the floor. He smiled and opened the door.

Coraline slowly covered her eyes and began to sob without a sound.

* * *

The shadows were longer now, and the sunlight bathed the spires of midtown skyscrapers. Charlie stood on the sidewalk, a dreamy smile curving his lips and the image of a tiny statuette filling his eyes. And he tasted the delight of Coraline's weeping again.

Like wine! Like the first wild sip of some heavenly wine! That was it, and, ah—to drink again! To drink and drink and drink again, now that he'd tasted the wine!

He turned, and then his steps halted again. Finally they moved across the walk and he stood before the window, looking in. He stood there, looking, while his fingers pressed against the glass, leaving blurs of perspiration, while his breath misted the glass. He stared and the silent tom-toms of an unknown rhythm echoed in his head.

In the window were guns. Many guns. All sizes. Old guns, new guns, pistols. Charlie had never owned a gun. But now. . . .

Dear God, he thought with rapture, *I must have a gun at once!*

CHAPTER THREE

The Doll Said, *Kill!*

THE NARROW-faced clerk hesitated, murmuring something about a permit. Charlie took the money from his pocket. The clerk ran his tongue along his lips and stopped talking. He looked around the shop, then winked.

So Charlie had a gun. A short, blunt, heavy gun, and the metal felt bright and slippery under his damp fingers. He kept his hand in his pocket, stroking the metal, feeling the bore while the dampness of perspiration grew thick between his fingers and the smile deepened on his lips.

He stood in the fading sunlight. Surely there was a certain place where he should go now. Where . . . ? Then the record of memories began to revolve in his head.

Clint. . . . Remember Clint . . . ? Remember his long, handsome face and his easy way of laughter. Remember the eyes of women—all women—as they watched him cross a room. Remember his bronzed muscles. Remember. And then remember his own balding head, his own heavy waistline, his own loneliness and the eyes of women who looked at him but saw him not. Remember. . . .

Charlie's fingers moved gently over his gun.

* * *

Twilight filled the long driveway as Charlie plodded slowly up the hill toward Clint's house on Long Isand. A beautiful house of grey stone and heavy beams. Trees and stillness, far from the road.

Yes, a beautiful house, Charlie kept thinking. Clint lived here. But he, Charlie, lived in the noise and heat and ugliness of the city.

Ah, this was a day of remembering. And such a different day, too. . . .

He turned the knob and entered the high, serene hall with the ivory-white stairway curving upward. He stood there, small and quiet in the silence, with his hand on his gun and a deep ecstasy glowing in his blood.

Presently, a silvery-fragile sound wandered from the back of the house. Slowly, quietly, Charlie walked through the hall, through the oak dining room, and out upon a long, screened terrace. He saw Lois, standing with a drink in her hand, shading her eyes as she looked into the twilight toward the woods.

She seems so young, Charlie thought. Like some slender, sun-browned girl you kissed long ago in college. And her lips would always stay fresh; her eyes would always be wondering and clear. Clint's wife. . . .

Charlie's fingers moved over his gun. "Where is Clint?"

Lois turned with a gasp of surprise. "Oh! You startled me. Clint . . . ? I don't know where he is, Charlie. This morning he . . . simply vanished." She seemed about to speak again, then mutely shook her head and rang the butler's bell. "What do you want to drink, Charlie?"

"You say he vanished?" Charlie repeated fixedly.

"He was up late. In fact, he didn't come to bed at all after we got back from your apartment. He just sat there. And this morning he walked out the back door and went into those woods. I've hunted and phoned everywhere. No one knows where he went."

"Something tells me he will be home soon, now that I'm here."

"But why should—" She looked at him strangely. The butler came and Charlie asked for a whiskey and water. "You look . . . somehow not like yourself, Charlie," Lois said slowly. Is anything wrong?"

"I don't know. What does wrong really mean?"

"I only mean—" She hesitated. "There *is* somthing. What is it?"

"See? Across the lawn. There comes Clint, as I told you."

Lois turned quickly, then became motionless as her husband came closer. "He—he doesn't walk like Clint," she said faintly.

He opened the screen door and stepped upon the terrace. He looked at his wife, then his bright grey eyes moved to Charlie.

"Strange. I knew you would be here. I knew," he said.

"Clint, where have you been all day? And your clothes! What have you been *doing*, Clint?" Lois asked.

"Walking," he said. "My wife is beautiful, isn't she, Charlie? My house is beautiful. I've made a lot of money. You're thinking those things. I see it in your eyes."

"Yes," Charlie said quietly. "But none of it ever made you happy. I see that now. I never knew, but I see it now."

"No," Clint agreed. "I would have traded it all for one day of happiness. And, God, the things I've tried!" He looked idly at his wife. "You have no idea what I've done, do you?"

"Clint, you—

"Both of you! What's happened? You—

"I'm afraid of both of you!"

"I am happy today," Clint said. He opened his hands and looked at them and smiled. Slowly his eyes focused on Charlie's throat and the smile grew still. "You were always happy, Charlie. You've never done anything to regret. You never worried. You never tried to find the other end of the street. Nothing ever tormented you."

"Perhaps," Charlie said. And he realized Clint had always envied him and hated him for his lonely serenity.

"Do you remember last summer, Charlie?" Clint asked softly. He was lighting a cigarette, and the flame made pools of cold grey-blue in his eyes. "I took you to that little cabin I bought in Pennsylvania, remember? You were afraid of that cliff by the waterfall."

"I remember." Charlie felt a stillness in his thoat, and then the tom-toms began their silent rhythm in his brain again. Ah, how well he understood what Clint intended. . . . His fingers stroked his gun. "Yes? You were thinking what?"

"I would like to go there. *We.* Tonight," Clint said softly.

"Clint!" Lois cried uneasily. "I—I feel something terrible—"

"Tonight. We could drive there in four hours, Charlie," Clint pursued with vibrant restlessness. "Tonight. You and I."

The deep wine of ecstasy burned in Charlie. Yes, he too yearned to go. To be there in that lonely wildness with Clint again. "Yes. . . . Yes," he said gently. "Let's go tonight."

"No, Clint! Charlie, no! Please, please, don't go! I can't explain. I only feel . . . know that something—" Lois choked and rushed toward Clint. "Please, please, for me—*don't!* You don't know what you're doing. I feel it! If you—"

"Tonight." Clint's voice was solemn.

"I'm going with you! I won't let—"

"No, you are not going, Lois. Charlie and I want to go alone." He took her arms from his shoulders and walked into the house. In a minute he returned.

In his hand was the tiny statuette that Lyra had moulded of him last night. He held it gently. "I've thought of this all day. I've wanted it. It has such queer eyes. Such very strange queer eyes." He put it into his pocket. "Let's go, Charlie."

They walked across the lawn toward the garage, and Lois' eyes followed them, dark with horror.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Waterfall

THE BROAD highway was behind them now, and the car lights wove their path of brilliance through the tangled woods. The narrow, rock road climbed sharply, broke sharply, twisted and writhed its way deeper into the Pennsylvania mountains.

Now and then, the whole bright green mass blazed in a splash of lightning, and the thunder merged with the drone of the motor. Sudden torrents of wind seemed to erupt in the dusty road, sending spirals of dust foaming toward the windshield.

In the car an impenetrable silence existed beneath the motor's drone. Charlie stared straight ahead. In the reflection beyond the windshield, Clint's image seemed to ride the radiator and his bright grey eyes were like tiny lanterns, riding in the darkness.

Perspiration went slowly along Charlie's throat. Perspiration webbed his fingers, and his fingers smoothed the gun.

"There will be a storm." They were Clint's only words since they had left his house.

"Yes," Charlie said softly. Deeply the tom-toms rumbled in his brain. *My gun and Clint's long bronzed muscles, his fingers wanting my throat.* . . . Yes, he thought, this night had been in the making for an eternity.

The motor labored heavily on a tortuous climb. Lightning splashed the earth again, and there was Clint's cabin. Terribly and beautiful primitive in the storm. One long room, clinging dangerously to a shelf of rock on the mountainside, and beside it plunged the high swift waterfall—plunging down, smashing its liquid ribbon on the bed of beaten stone. Clint stopped the car. The surging roar of the water covered the night. Clint turned and Charlie turned, and they looked at each other.

"We are here," Clint said in a whisper. Slowly his hand rose and one finger touched the soft flesh of Charlie's throat. The finger trembled and Charlie trembled strangely while his hand grew still around the gun that pointed into Clint's stomach.

Would it be now? Would Clint's fingers tighten?

"Your neck is so soft, Charlie," Clint whispered. "I like to touch it." Then his finger withdrew. He opened the door. Charlie's hand relaxed on his gun.

How queer everything felt, he thought distantly. He was glad *that* hadn't been the time. He *wanted* the waiting, the second touch, the tension, the waiting again. He felt starved for the last bottom drop of this wine of deadly rapture.

He followed Clint across the rock-strewn yard and stood in the hot darkness while Clint fumbled with the kerosene lamp. The flame crept into full life. The light, like a palpable haze, pressed the shadows into the corners. The hewn bunks shuddered in the light as it flickered. The broad stone fireplace yawned with blackness. Above

the fireplace twinkled the crossed bayonets Clint had brought from overseas. The old stove and table blinked. A coffee can shone blue and bright. The waterfall screamed its deep, endless agony. And they looked at each other until time seemed to die and decay into nothing, leaving them on their lost island while the ship of the world disappeared beyond the horizon.

"Everybody has always liked you," Clint said slowly, as though his words were part of a long-remembered pattern. "I've heard a hundred people say you were the nicest guy in the world, and they'd give their shirt to you. I've watched them, and they like you. I've watched you, and nothing torments you. I've watched you at your desk, walking in the halls, and I've thought of it a million times: That fat, sweating man has peace. He has the peace I'll never have. I hate him."

Charlie moved his shoulders slightly. "I've listened when people laughed at your jokes. I've watched beautiful women want you, with it glistening in their eyes. Their eyes didn't look at me. I've watched you dance. I've watched you grow rich. I've gone home to nothing but emptiness and known you had gone to Lois and to your beautiful house. I've hated you."

"You were a fool!" Clint's voice rose to a throbbing contempt. "Whatever I got, I wanted more. Wanted it so much that I was never quite happy. It didn't matter what it was: one house, one hundred thousand dollars, one beautiful wife. More! More! Why? Because, underneath, I knew people liked you more. They laughed with me and drank my whiskey, but they hated me because I made more money, because their wives looked at me. People hated me —and they loved you. And I envied you."

"I was lonely! You were brilliant and I was fat and sweating!" Charlie cried harshly. "They patted me like a gentle pup, but they forgot me and no one ever loved me! I was lonely. I hated you!"

"Yes, you hated me," Clint whispered. "But never so much as I have hated you." His fingers opened and closed against his hips. His eyes were glowing as they looked at Charlie's throat. "But you have such a soft throat."

HE TURNED and reached up over the mantle. The bayonet clashed with lamp light as he took it down. He stroked it gently.

"I killed a man in the war with this," he murmured. "Through the throat. It was raining that night. The lightning was playing. The blade went through his throat so easily. There was a sound as if air had sighed. Such a haunting sound, Charlie. Listen . . . it's raining, now, can you hear?"

"Yes." The word was scarcely a whisper. Charlie left the flesh ripple in his throat. His hand moved from his pocket, and Clint's eyes moved to the gun in Charlie's fingers. His face did not change expression.

"I've never had a gun before," Charlie whispered. "I bought it today. Bought it with money I took from you. I've often wondered how it would feel. Would it be the way they tell about in stories? The kicking feeling and the roar? Could you really *see* the bullet enter? What was it really like?"

He saw Clint's tongue move within his cheeks, and their eyes met. How brilliant

were Clint's eyes. How radiant was his face! And Charlie knew: Clint, too, was drinking deeply in the wine of fatal rapture.

"It has taken a long time, hasn't it, Charlie?" he whispered.

"Yes. Some men never get here at all," Charlie whispered.

Clint lifted his muscles and they flowed through his body like an animal's. His shoulders settled forward gently and he came in upon Charlie—slowly, the blade flashing in the light.

Charlie felt his own soft body responding to some mute command. He moved slowly toward Clint. Ah, now at last, the last of the wine was ready!

The door slammed inward. A sheet of rain was hurled on the wind.

"Clint! Charlie! Stop! Oh, God, stop! *Stop! Stop!*" Lois screamed. She threw herself between them clutching Clint's shoulders.

"We've waited so long," Clint said deliberately. His strong fingers pried her away from him and his arm sent her stumbling against the wall. She screamed.

"Lyra! Make them stop! You—"

"Don't you see! Can't you make Charlie—"

"No." Lyra's voice was low, burning like a breath of flame. She stood in the doorway, the wind driving rain through her black hair, the rain pouring over the beauty of her face. And her eyes were the eyes of feasting death. Her lips were parted in ecstasy. She was like some dark goddess, hurled out of space upon the storm, poised for this violent instant upon the threshold where death played its game. And she had come to see.

Lois screamed again and rushed back toward Clint.

"No, don't," Lyra said. "Let them."

"But can't you see what—"

"You! *You!*" Lois choked. "It's you! You want death! It's your food and . . . and . . . you're doing this!"

A smile played at Lyra's lips. "I brought the little statuette, Charlie. It will help you." She came toward him and held out the tiny image with its lusting, haunted eyes and its red hands. "Look at it. Listen. Hear what it tries to say."

"It says. . . . Yes, I can hear. It says to me, 'Be evil. Do evil. Think evil always. Yes. . . .' The eyes shone and Charlie turned back toward Clint. Clint, too, was smiling.

"Strange. Mine told me that last night. I listened to it all night," he whispered.

"Oh, God!" Lois screamed. She threw herself at Clint, fighting to grasp the knife. He stumbled from the impact of her rush and fell against the fireplace. He started to rise. His lips sagged. A sheet of white agony passed over his face and he screamed and clutched his side.

"Something . . . like death!" he strangled. He tore at his pocket. In his shaking fingers appeared the pieces of his statuette—broken in the fall against the fireplace. He stared and his body shook. His fingers opened and the pieces clattered to the floor. He looked up—at Charlie, at the room, at the ceiling. Suddenly he shut his eyes and sobbed. "Where—where . . . ?"

A cry, animal-like in its anguish and heart-break, spilled from Lyra's throat as she stared at the broken pieces. With a wild sound, she darted forward to grasp the pieces. Lois stared at her fixedly, her eyes growing round and bottomless.

Lyra held the shoulder-piece and fitted the broken neck. Suddenly Clint screamed and clutched his throat. "Hurting! Something's hurting so terribly!" he cried.

"But you're going back. In only a moment, only a moment," Lyra whispered.

"No!" The word cut like a knife from Lois' throat. There was the speed of a bird in her rush. Her foot flashed. The broken scraps scattered over the floor. Lyra screamed and fell.

PAIN, like no pain upon earth, split down Charlie's chest. It blinded him. It seemed to fling him through space to clash with speeding meteors and freeze upon the moon, to burn upon the sun. He clawed at the horror in his chest. He opened his eyes.

Shadows and lamplight were in this place, he saw. Lois was here. Clint was here. Remember Clint? He stood there like a man from death. And there was—

Who was she? Oh . . . Lyra. Lyra was kneeling there. And in her hand was an image. . . . The image of him with the red hands. But it was cracked. Cracked across the chest. And his own chest felt cracked. Why did—

The burst of unbearable agony seared

him again. He tore madly at his chest.

"In a moment, in a moment," Lyra was whispering. *She* was breaking his chest! *She!* Each time she moved the image! She was killing him!

Charlie staggered and wailed as he clutched at her. Their eyes met and she cried out and scrambled from him.

He grasped at her again. She tore from him and stumbled out the door, striving desperately to re-fit the broken image.

Lightning flashed and he saw her running across the rocks. He tried to run. She stopped and drew back at the cliff by the waterfall. And there his fingers found her. There she screamed and there the lightning burst and seemed to hang, letting the blue-brightness endure forever.

There was her face, savage in its beauty, evil in its yearning. There were his fingers, soft fingers, on her throat. And then her face was still. Her eyes did not see. His fingers opened and she was gone.

Gone beyond the brink of the cliff and down where the water pounded the beaten rocks. Gone. . . .

How strange it was. How impossibly strange, he thought, as he stumbled at the doorway. For there was Clint, staring at him with hollow incredulity. There was Lois, tears in her eyes, looking at him.

"How—"

"Why are we—" Charlie stammered.

"Why are you here?" Clint asked faintly.

"I don't know. Why are you here?"

"I don't know." Clint felt his lips, his eyes, his side. He stared everywhere around the cabin. "I keep feeling as if I—as if *we* had gone somewhere together. Somewhere where men have never gone. Where men must never go. I feel like a devil had led me to his land."

"Yes. We were there. I feel it," Charlie whispered. "We went there and we came back. I don't know how."

Clint's eyes rose like a puzzled child's to Lois. "Don't you know? Don't you know why we're here?"

She kept looking at him, then at Charlie for what seemed an eternity. Her throat moved.

"We just decided to come. That was all. We just decided. . . ."

"Maybe we were drinking. Maybe we got drunk. It that it, Lois?"

"Maybe a little. Just a little to be foolish. But it's over now."

CHARLIE unlocked the door to his apartment and stood there, rain dripping from his clothes, squooshing from his shoes. The lamp was burning by the piano. It was very late. Lyra was going to be angry. He must try to explain.

He called softly. There was no answer. But of course, she was sleeping. He would look in—just to see her, not to wake her.

But her bed was empty. She was gone. He tried to think where.

He walked in the lonely silence and worried. Tomorrow he would hear, of course. She was angry with him.

But he did not hear. The days went by and he did not hear, and he went to the police. The months went by and his loneliness dulled. He put her clay and little figures in a box, so they would be there if she returned. And when they were put away, he almost forgot to remember her. He liked to drink beer again, and he no longer listened for her footsteps. He laughed. He met a girl named Edith. She smiled with him. And he began to wonder if Lyra had ever existed at all.

Then they told him, the police, that they had not been able to find her. It would go into their files, but it seemed hopeless. A strange thing had happened, though, they said. Three times they'd thought they'd found her. Once in Canada when a man from India told them of such a girl in Delhi. But nothing had come of it; so far away, of course. Then someone from Mexico had known such a girl, it seemed, but nothing had developed.

And only last week they had actually found a girl of her description. The police in San Francisco had found her. They had questioned her. She had been a queer one, too. About half-crazy, acted like. Always whispering about waterfalls, waterfalls, waterfalls. She'd vanished, though. Just like into clear air. Just vanished into nowhere one night. But it probably was somebody else. His wife wasn't a nut on waterfalls, was she?

Charlie shook his head. He scarcely cared, any more, but she'd never even mentioned waterfalls to him. It couldn't have been the one.

THE END

She thought, This isn't a dream. It's real. It's happening to me! And she knew then what she had to do.

COME DIE WITH ME....

"Why are you walking around, child?" the voice whispered softly to Polly. "You're dead. I killed you...."

By WALLACE UMPHREY

HE HAD brought her a glass of warm milk and the sleeping tablets, but tonight she had fooled him. She managed to palm the tablets while she drank the milk.

"Hope you have a good night *tonight,* darling," he said distantly, in that funny harrassed tone he'd been using lately. "You must be tired."

"Tired? Yes, Bob."

Buit I'll never dare sleep again, she thought to herself. She looked up at him, wondering what was in his mind. She had been married to Bob Blake for three months now, and yet she felt she didn't know him at all. He had become a stranger.

Her intent gaze seemed to make him feel self-conscious. He turned abruptly away and picked up her needlepoint from the table beside the bed. "I think mother was wrong, Polly," he said. And then he said, "It's silly to suspect you of trying to kill her. . . ." He put down the needlepoint and his lean brown hand reached out absently for the sharp embroidery scissors.

A voice deep inside her wanted to cry

out, *Don't touch those scissors, Bob! Oh, God, don't let him pick them up!*

He saw the anguish in her eyes. He didn't understand, but he turned away from the table and bent the tall, lean length of him to kiss her on the lips. For a brief moment she clung to him, desperately in need of love and help and security. Then there came the imperious *tap-tap-tap* from downstairs—Mother Blake's cane rapping smartly on the floor. Bob straightened up, his eyes remote again and confused. Polly's feeling of security turned to ashes.

"I wish Sarah hadn't gone away," he muttered. "I've got to wheel mother to bed." He paced across the floor. "Good-night, darling."

She listened to the door closing, his feet receding. A sort of dull terror kept her lying rigidly awake. At the "rest home" where she had been they had recommended needlepoint. Occupational therapy, they had called it. It would keep her hands busy, keep her mind off her troubles.

Vividly, she recalled this morning when she had awakened. She had stretched, yawned and felt more at peace than she had for a long time. She had opened her eyes—and seen the scissors on the table.

The scissors had been covered with blood!

Now she dragged her eyes away from them and stared fixedly at the ceiling. She had wished the scissors and nobody had known. Fear had kept her silent. *Where had the blood come from?* Her terror was real. *Had she killed unknowingly? Was she no longer mistress of her actions? Had her subconscious, somehow, usurped the control of her conscious mind?*

Through the open window, moon-shadows walked across the floor and climbed the satin quilt and peeped into her frightened eyes. She listened, trying to sublimate all perception except that of hearing. There was so much she couldn't understand.

It was hard to tell what night she had first heard the faint sound of footsteps on the floor above her head. Time had become all twisted into a haze of unreality. She thought it must have been two nights ago. Perhaps she had only dreamed about the footsteps. Perhaps it was just mice. Nobody could have been walking on the floor above her head. Up there was only a dusty storage attic. Surely, it was a dream.

Two night ago . . . that was when she had tried to kill Mother Blake. Somehow, Polly had to accept the fact. Bob hadn't quite accepted it yet, and maybe that accounted for his confusion. But Mother Blake *knew*. Polly could see it in the old woman's eyes. Those eyes which had hated her from the first minute.

Now she wondered if it had been before or after she heard the footsteps. All she remembered was that she had awakened to hear Mother Blake's screams ringing in her ears and to find herself lying on the floor of Mother Blake's bedroom—the embroidery scissors, bright and shiny, clutched in her hand.

Bob had rushed down and helped her to her feet and taken the scissors away. She couldn't tell how she got there. Her mind was blank. Bob carried her back to bed—she could remember that. And she could remember that the scissors were still bright and shiny.

That was two days ago. This morning when she awoke there had been blood on them. *Whose blood?*

Now the silence seemed so loud it hurt her ears. She listened to the household going to bed. She heard Bob wheeling his mother out of the living room to her bedroom on the first floor; the sound of old Jim Puckett, Sarah's husband, banging around some place before going to his quarters at the back of the house; the squeak of springs from Bob's bedroom next to hers. Sarah Puckett had gone away to the village to take care of her sick sister. Everyone was accounted for.

No. What about Skipper? The great dane was always restless on moonlit nights.

Then Polly trembled, remembering. The big dog had disappeared.

She didn't know how long she had been lying there, thinking and remembering. Suddenly she heard the stealthy tread of feet. At first she thought, with a feeling of sick dread, that the steps came from overhead. Then she realized that they came from Bob's room.

Her body rigid, she kept on listening. She heard his door softly open and close. His feet whispered past her door and down the stairs. Where was he going so stealthily? She thought she heard the dull squeak of the basement door. And then she heard a

strange sound below her window, out in the garden.

She lay there, hardly daring to breathe. The sound continued. Finally, fighting against her unreasoning fear, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and went to the window in her thin nightdress.

The garden was dappled with silver. Along the border of the garden, the gaunt trees marched in a silent funeral procession. A shadow was down there, digging in the soft earth. Bob! Why was he digging at night? Then her hand flew to her mouth. She could see the indistinct mound of dirt, the oblong hole. She saw Bob pick up something. She saw him bending over the hole. In fascinated horror she saw him filling in the dirt.

It was a grave!

Numbly, she stumbled back to bed. She lay there rigid in the darkness. She heard Bob creep back to his room. . . .

SUNLIGHT painted a bright pattern on the floor when she awoke. For a moment she lay relaxed, her eyes closed. And then the horrible memory of the past three nights filled her mind again.

New sounds were coming from the garden now. She went to the window. Jim Puckett, old and bent, was out there, dressed in a faded blue shirt. He was trimming the hedge. This was reality. Then her eyes were pulled to the spot where Bob had been digging last night.

She dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. Bob and Mother Blake were sitting in the breakfast room. Bob's face was haggard.

Mother Blake sat in her wheelchair. Her breakfast tray had been removed. She had grey hair, but her face was surprisingly free of wrinkles. She was wearing a neat wrapper and slippers on her feet. Polly could see the unscuffed sole of one of them.

"It's late, my dear," said Mother Blake pleasantly. "We decided not to wait for you."

Her voice was low, calm. Polly hated that voice. Polly looked into Mother Blake's eyes, and in their depths she thought she saw a sort of mockery. Polly thought, *Why does she hate me so?*

Bob looked an inch over Polly's blonde head and asked, "Did you sleep well, darling?"

"No." Polly tried to keep her voice level. "I heard somebody digging in the garden last night." She had to *know*.

Bob looked at the floor an inch from her right toe. He said sharply, "Nonsense! You were asleep."

"I saw somebody digging," Polly said. "It was you."

His eyes traveled upward, settled on a spot an inch to the left of her left ear. "Polly, you must have been dreaming."

Polly felt like stamping her foot, like breaking things. She thought, *Why won't he look at me?*

"Why not tell her?" Mother Blake's voice came soft and—deadly. "Why not tell her you dug a grave?"

Bob squeezed his eyelids shut and he didn't look at anything for a moment. He was dressed in a grey business suit and his brown hair was carefully brushed. "No," he said, his eyes still closed. "No, Mother."

"Tell her what you buried," said Mother Blake triumphantly.

"All right." He still avoided looking at Polly. He gulped, and his face was pale. "I—well, I buried—Skipper. We found him dead yesterday. He—well, he just died and we found him and I just buried him. That's all."

Polly felt he was lying. He was keeping something back. Her fingernails dug into her palms.

"What else?" she asked.

"Nothing else," Bob whispered.

Polly saw the sharp, bright gleam in Mother Blake's eyes. A silence was in the room. Then Mother Blake said, "Hasn't Robert enough to do with Sarah—gone?" Polly didn't miss the briefest of brief pauses. "Besides, child, Robert has to go to the village this morning."

"I can get my own breakfast," Polly said, her hands rigid at her side.

"I'll get it," Bob said hurriedly. "Glad to do it. Here, let me—"

He bolted toward the kitchen. Dully, Polly sat down. Mother Blake was humming softly to herself.

Bob put Polly's breakfast in front of her, murmured a hasty good-bye and shot out of the door. Polly heard the car start and drive away. He hadn't wanted to kiss her.

"Where's he going in such a hurry?" Polly asked.

Mother Blake smiled. "We are having a

guest, child. Bob has to meet the train."

Polly poked a spoon at her grapefruit. In the room the silence was deadly. It seemed to take forever to get the spoon to her lips. The telephone bell rang.

"I'll answer it," Polly said, pushing back her chair, glad of the chance to get away.

"You stay here," snapped Mother Blake. "Maybe I can't use my legs, but I can still get around my own house!"

Polly dipped her head. She heard the rubber tires of the wheel chair whispering across the floor. She heard Mother Blake pick up the telephone.

"It was the sheriff," said Mother Blake.

"The sheriff?"

"He found Skipper," Mother Blake said softly from the wheel chair. "I hate a poisoner. There's nothing bad enough for anybody who would poison a dog."

Polly caught her breath. Her stomach twisted into a hard knot. She fled toward the stairway. Reaching her room, she threw her slight body across the bed and wept.

She knew Bob had lied to her. *What was in the grave?*

Finally she wiped her eyes. Somehow she had to find out what was real and what was fantasy. She had to know the truth, no matter what it was. Old Jim Puckett was somewhere out in the garden. She had to talk to him. Quietly, she slipped down the stairs and outside into the warm sunshine.

He was weeding a flower bed when she came up behind him.

Eh?" He turned and put his hand behind his ear, in the manner of the hard of hearing. "What was that?"

"Where did Sarah go, Jim?"

Dirt clung to his gnarled fingers. "Visit her sister," he said shortly.

"Are you sure?"

"'Course she's there."

Polly clenched her hands. "Have you talked to her since she left?"

"No telephone." He shook his head. "Why wouldn't she be all right? You must be . . . *crazy.*"

Polly closed her eyes. She felt that Bob had lied to her about Skipper. Mother Blake had looked as if she had known something secret and terrible. And Jim Puckett hadn't heard from his wife since she had left.

Opening her eyes again, Polly caught a glint of sunlight from a window downstairs. The curtain twitched. Mother Blake was watching her.

Jim Puckett was down on his hands and knees again, weeding the flower bed. Polly gasped. He was weeding near the spot where Bob had dug the grave.

She wanted to cry out, to tell him what she knew now was buried there. But fright held her speechless. For a moment she stood there, too weak to move. Then she fled for the house.

Faintly, then, she heard a startled cry. When she fled through the door, she saw the wheel chair had tipped over and Mother Blake was lying on the floor.

"You did it," Mother Blake said accusingly. "You bunched up the rug there for me to trip over."

"You were spying on me. . . ." Polly began.

"Child, what are you saying?" Mother Blake gasped. "Aren't you going to help me?"

Polly ran to her side, but Mother Blake was a greater weight than she could lift. Polly ran to the door. "Jim! Jim, please help me," she called out.

LATE IN the afternoon Bob got home. Polly saw the car from her bedroom window. There was a shaggy, white-haired man with Bob. Polly was in bed when feet tramped up the stairs. Bob introduced the white-haired man as Dr. Penrose, from the village.

Bob still avoided looking at her. Almost curiously, she examined her husband's face. It was a tanned, handsome face—but was there weakness there? She hardly knew him. Maybe she should have followed the dictates of her intellect and waited, instead of marrying him such a short time after they had met. She knew at the time that something was happening to her.

"Run along, Bob," Dr. Penrose said. "I'll talk to your wife now."

Bob departed. Her eyes closed, Polly listened to him going down the stairs. He was glad to get away.

Dr. Penrose dragged up a chair. "From what I've been told, your condition was due to excitement and overwork. You went to pieces on your honeymoon. You spent several weeks in an institution, and then you were released—"

"My trouble hadn't become serious,"

Polly said. "They told me I needed lots of rest and freedom from worry. They said they could halt trouble like mine—but they were never sure they could cure it. After I was released, Bob told me about his mother. How she had suffered a stroke and was paralyzed from the waist down and that we'd have to come here to live."

"I'm only a country doctor," Doctor Penrose said gently. "I've tried to keep up with modern trends, but it's a hard thing to do. I'm not very sure of myself in mental cases and maybe that's a good thing." He chuckled softly. "I'll be glad to listen to anything you want to tell me."

Polly clenched her hands. "They want to send me away again."

"Relax," he told her.

She looked at him. His gentleness inspired her confidence. There was a short silence during which she could hear his measured breathing. Suddenly she asked, "When did Mother Blake have her stroke?"

"When she heard about your marriage," Dr. Penrose said. "But don't jump to conclusions. Her paralysis is real enough." He paused a second. "They call it hysterical paralysis." He paused.

"Bob's father died some time ago. Bob and his mother were very close. She lost him to the Army for a while, but she got him back. When she learned she had lost her son completely to another woman, her only thought was to find a way to get him back."

That was why Bob had wanted a secret marriage, Polly thought. He was afraid of what might happen.

The doctor's voice sharpened. "Now don't think for a minute that she planned it that way. She didn't. It was all in her subconscious mind. Physically, there's nothing wrong with her legs. It's her mind. But she has really lost the use of her legs."

"She hates me."

"Possibly. You are her enemy, and she'll use every weapon at her command to defeat you." Dr. Penrose coughed. "She's really paralyzed. Some day she may walk again. Or perhaps she'll never regain the use of her limbs. That's something nobody knows."

Polly said, "Bob was kind and understanding before. Now he's deserted me."

The doctor shook his head. "He's confused. He has been dominated by his mother for a long time. All this is something he doesn't understand."

"They want you to say I'm dangerous," Polly cried. "They want to have me put away, . . ."

Dr. Penrose smiled. "Tell me all the things that have been bothering you."

She told him. She felt like a child confessing. She told him everything that had happened since coming to this house, hiding nothing, making no attempt to separate dreams from reality. That was for the doctor to do.

"I don't know," he said. "Who am I to say what is real and what isn't? There's something, though. Some of these things can be proved, one way or the other. I can't explain your attack upon Mrs. Blake. Maybe you walked in your sleep. Maybe you were really going to kill her. If so, you *are* dangerous. We can check on the grave tomorrow. If you killed Sarah Puckett—you'll *have* to be put away. If it's mice in the attic, we can set traps and find out."

"What are you going to do?" Polly whispered.

"I'll have to decide," Dr. Penrose said humbly. "I have the authority to have you committed to an institution." He walked slowly to the door, then turned. "I've got to make up my mind before somebody else is attacked. I'll stay here tonight. Set out some traps, maybe."

At ten o'clock Bob came up with her warm milk and sleeping tablets. He carried a drink for himself in the other hand. This time Polly swallowed the sleeping tablets. Bob sat down to sip his drink, staring moodily at the floor. He spoke only in monosyllables. Dr. Penrose looked in, then went on down the hall to the guest room.

"Look at me, Bob," Polly said. "Remember about the little cottage we talked about, just the two of us, forever and ever? What happened to that dream?"

"You know," he said. "It was Mother—"

"Bob, what's happening to us?" Polly asked.

His hand clenched. "Darling, you aren't well. I—" He broke off and shambled toward the door. "Good-night, Polly."

Polly thought, *He's changed. He didn't kiss me. He walks like an old man.* Vaguely she heard the household going to bed. . . .

SHE DIDN'T know how long she had been asleep. She came awake all at once. Had it been the footsteps above her head that had awakened her? She lay there, staring upward, listening.

It was dark and she felt so terribly alone. Everybody was against her. Seconds trickled past. Then there came a faint creak. Fear paralyzed her vocal chords. *The footsteps were here in this room!*

Terror was stabbing at her now. She couldn't move. Slowly, her pillow was pulled from beneath her head. She felt the softness of it pushed down over her face. Her breath was crammed back into her throat and trapped there. She couldn't cry out now, she couldn't even breathe.

A hand felt along her bed table—*the embroidery scissors!* Somebody was going to kill her. The hand brushed the scissors off the table to the floor. A little of the pressure went away from the pillow, as her assailant reached down to pick them up.

Polly felt her pulse race. Frenzied strength flowed into her muscles. Twisting and turning, she arched her slender body. More of the pressure went away from the pillow covering her mouth and nose. With a sudden awareness she knew that the scissors were upraised over the bed. She reached out and grasped the pocket of a man's coat. The pocket ripped out. With her last bit of strength she threw herself to the side.

The sharp scissors swished past her throat and buried themselves in the mattress.

She lay quietly, unable to fight longer. The pressure of the pillow went away entirely. And then she realized that her assailant must think her dead. Lying there, unable to move, she heard the door open and close. All was quiet again.

Her breathing was still labored, but gradually her pulse slowed. Time had no meaning whatever. Then from overhead came the footsteps.

She sat up. Her assailant was in the attic now. She almost cried out, and then her hand went to her mouth. Perhaps it was all a nightmare. Perhaps she was just imagining things. She put out her hand and felt the scissors; *they* were real enough. And then she didn't dare call out. Her assailant might return.

Slipping out of bed, she pulled on her robe and pushed her feet into slippers. She went to the door, then returned and picked up the scissors. She might need them. Opening her door, she slipped down the dark hallway to Bob's room.

The door was locked. She rapped lightly without response. Fear touched her again, worse than ever. Where was he? She moved on down the hall toward the guest room. But just outside the door she stumbled and almost fell over something. Her hand told her it was the pajama-clad figure

of Dr. Penrose. He was breathing hoarsely through his mouth.

She thought, *This isn't a dream. It's real. It's happening to me!*

Then she knew what she had to do. And she had to do this herself; she had to *know*. There was nobody to help her now. She slipped along the hall and pulled open the attic door.

A musty odor struck her. The air smelled old and dead. She crept slowly up the steep, dusty stair, her hand flat on the wall for direction and support. Her pulse hammered. Finally she felt the attic floor under her feet. Her lip was caught between her teeth to keep from crying out. And gripped in her hand were the scissors.

Suddenly there was a click and she was caught in the beam of a flashlight. She blinked and pressed back against the wall, blinded for a moment. There was no sound. When she opened her eyes she could still see nothing.

But she said, "Mother Blake."

"Why are you walking around, child." The voice came softly petulant. "You're dead. I killed you."

"You can't walk," Polly whispered.

"Only for this," said Mother Blake. "Robert is mine. You'll never have him."

Polly pressed flat against the wall. "What—what are you going to do?"

"I have a gun, child. It was my husband's. All his things are stored here." The voice was still petulant. "Drop those scissors, child."

Polly thought, *She'll kill us all!* She screamed wildly.

Mother Blake took a step toward her. Polly could see the dim outline of the gun in the cone of light. There was a yell from Bob's room downstairs, the sound of his body crashing into the locked door. The scissors raised, Polly lunged.

With ease, Mother Blake side-stepped. But something snapped at her heels—one of the traps Dr. Penrose had set. The small sound momentarily unnerved her. She took another step to the side.

She hadn't known how close she was to the attic stairway. She screamed once, shrilly, as she stumbled down the first step. She didn't scream again as her body thumped all the way down to the hall.

Polly swayed and went to her knees. Bob's footsteps came toward her, paused briefly at the bottom of the stairs, then came on. She felt herself lifted in his strong arms.

* * *

"Her neck was broken," Dr. Penrose said later. He felt gingerly of his scalp. "She couldn't have walked out of her room if the house were afire. But her subconscious desire was to wholly possess her son, and you stood in the way. So she walked.

Bob's face was grey with inner suffering. He shook his head slowly.

"So that's how it was," he said, looking at Polly. "She crept into your room for the scissors with which to stab Skipper, and—"

"So it *was* Skipper you buried," Polly said.

"Of course." Bob looked startled. "What—"

Polly didn't tell him. Mother Blake had lied about the phone call of the sheriff. Mother Blake had only been tormenting her.

"Two nights ago she must have somehow managed to carry you downstairs," Bob went on. "You were drugged. She made it look as if you had tried to kill her. That's the way it *has* to be."

Dr. Penrose nodded.

"She needed shoes when she went outside to kill Skipper," Polly said. "Maybe she killed him so he wouldn't bark at her, and maybe she killed him in order to make me think I'd done it. It doesn't matter now. Tonight she needed clothing, in case she was seen. She drugged Bob and locked him in his room."

"I heard something," Dr. Penrose said. "When I looked out to investigate, she struck me. That's all I know."

Bob asked, "Why did she try to kill Polly tonight?"

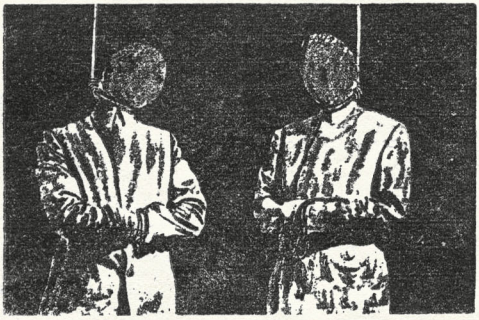
The doctor shrugged. "Maybe she was afraid I wouldn't commit Polly. So she tried killing her, hoping it would look like suicide in a fit of despondency."

Polly looked at Bob. His eyes were clear now. There was no more doubt, no more confusion.

"We haven't had much time alone together," he said. "Do you still want that cottage?"

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson

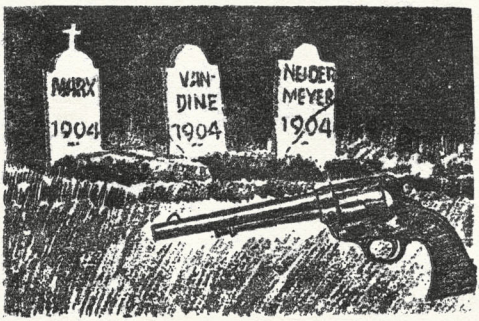


Nobody has ever quite been able to explain the case of Herman Billik, Chicago fortune teller, who lived parasitically on the earnings of Martin Vzral, a businessman who believed in Billik's supernatural powers — until he poisoned Vzral and six members of the latter's family. Billik—guilty beyond doubt—was convicted of murder. For some inexplicable reason, Chicago was seized with a frenzy for his liberation. Priests and congregations prayed, five hysterical mass meetings were held in his behalf—and even his hardened fellow prisoners went soft on him and sent flowers to Father O'Callahan, leader of the free Billik movement!

Billik got life imprisonment—and a gubernatorial pardon in 1917!

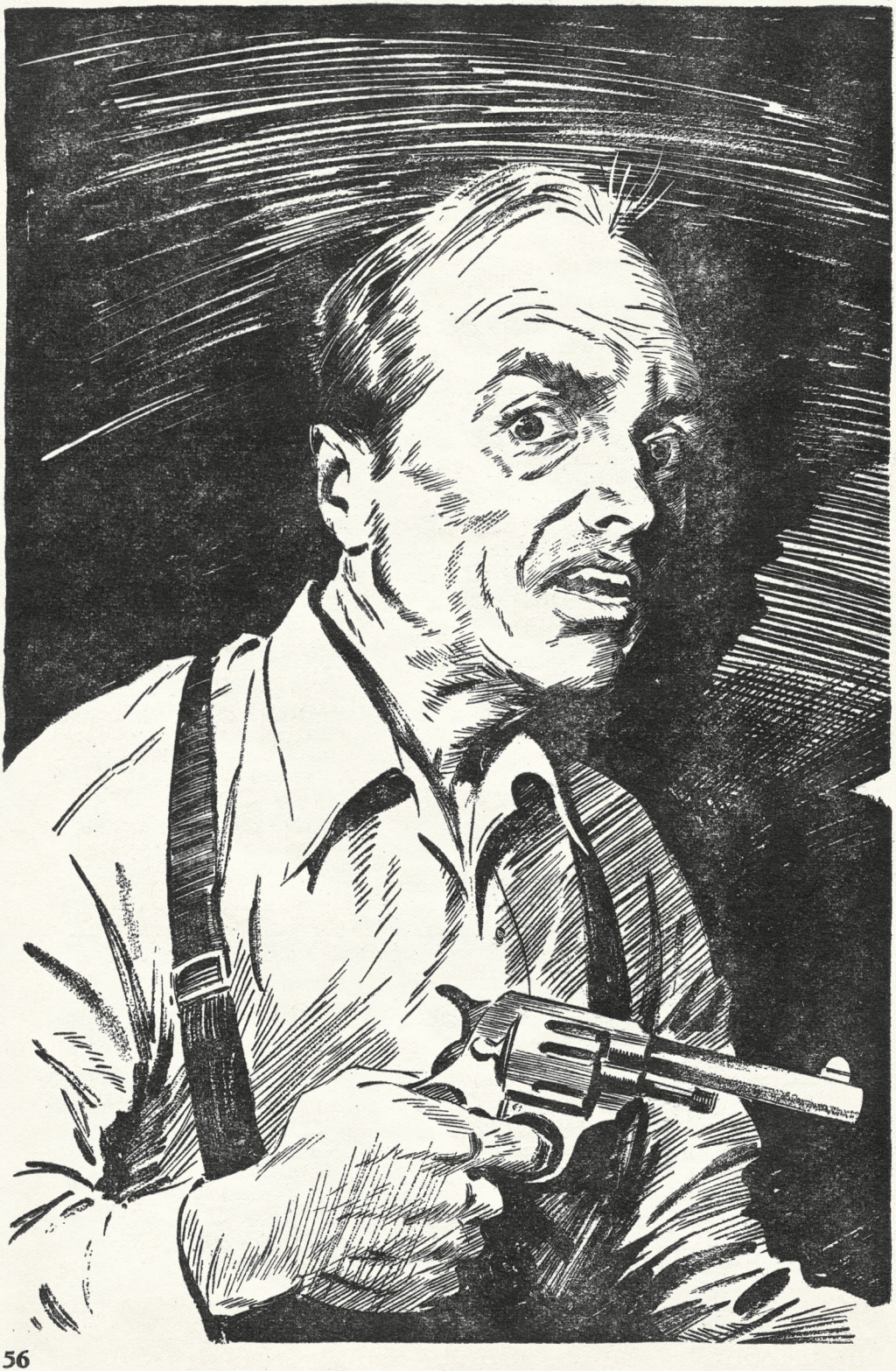
None other than the devil himself, if you're superstitious, could have engineered what is probably the most dramatic hanging in history. Two convicted Louisiana murderers, Jean Adam and Anthony Delisle, had secured last rites from a voodoo queen prior to their execution. When the trap was sprung there was thunder and lightning —and both men were found, injured but very much alive, crawling around under the gallows! The noose had slipped over their heads! The crowd outside the prison went into a superstitious panic and several people were killed in the ensuing stampede.

The devil's strategy didn't work, though. Both killers were nursed back to health and rehanged. This time the proceedings were uneventful—except for the hangees.



Eight men dead—two of them cops—and eight robberies for practically no profit was the score run up by Chicago's notorious kid Car Barn Bandits. The gang consisted of four youths, Gus Marx, Harvey Van Dine, Peter Neidermeyer and Emil Roeski. Their leader, Van Dine, once drew a picture of three headstones, marking the graves of the first three, dating them in March, 1904, the year after the gang's heaviest activity. He was partly right. The trio were convicted and sentenced to death in March, 1904—but weren't hanged until April. Roeski drew life imprisonment.

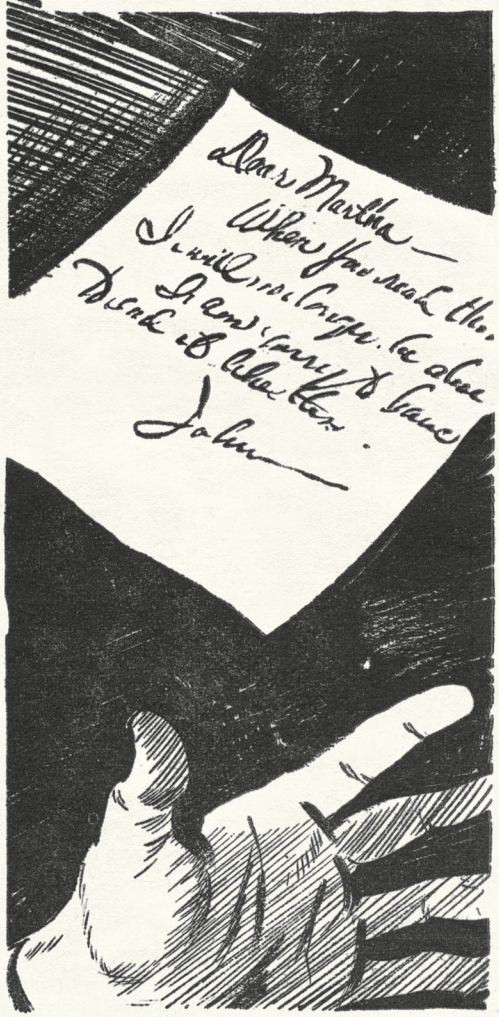
Henry Christophe I, the ex-slave who became the black king of the Haiti he "liberated," once came upon a hundred of his subjects wrestling with a heavy piece of artillery he'd ordered mounted. The mob was unable to move the gun —whereupon Henry ordered every third man shot. The remaining toilers still were unable to budge the cannon. Henry ordered every second man shot —and the survivors promptly hoisted the weapon into position!



LITTLE MAN, YOU'LL HAVE A BLOODY DAY

By RUSSELL BRANCH

Thrilling Mystery Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Appointment With Death

IT WAS eight o'clock, and John Quigley had an appointment with Death.

Eight o'clock. The moment he had been planning for, existing for, during a whole month past . . . and now he seemed rooted to his chair by a hundred fears and the pounding of his own heart.

The second-hand on his wrist watch moved relentlessly around in its tiny circle. The schedule . . . he had to meet the schedule! It had all been calculated on paper, down to the last minute. The paper had been carefully burned, but it was still etched on his mind, every word and figure of it. And the time was now. Now or never.

Martha didn't even look up as he reached for his hat. He paused, feeling suddenly angry and cheated that it was going to be this easy.

"I'm going for a walk," he announced almost challengingly.

She reached for another chocolate from the candy box next to the sofa. "I thought it was raining."

"So it's raining," he said. "What's a little rain?"

Martha shrugged indifferently and turned back to her magazine. "Maybe you can remember to mail that letter of mine you've

He was such a little man, John Quigley was, to have so much blood on his hands. . . . To have so much blood that when the fat man came after him, calling, "Quigley . . . Quigley!" . . . bulking large, like the figure of Fate itself . . . Then a little more blood didn't matter anymore. . . .

been carrying around all day with you."

Automatically he reached inside his coat pocket and touched the envelope to make sure it was there. He was a little man, little not so much in size as in personality. The shabby suit, the stringy hair combed carefully over his bald spot, the apologetic stoop of his shoulders—all made him seem small and ineffectual.

Yes, ineffectual was the word for John Quigley, but behind his thick spectacles now there was bitter hatred and grim purpose as he took his last look at the drab apartment and the flabby, dowdy woman he had lived with for twenty years.

As he closed the door behind him, he wondered what her face would be like when she found the note on the bedroom dresser. But even that thought gave him little satisfaction. She would read it with the same contemptuous indifference; then she would be irritated that he had caused her this last inconvenience. But wait until she found he had cashed in his life insurance policy!

He chuckled vengefully as he came out into the street. The drizzle had stopped, but there was still the murky dampness that never seemed to leave the air in this neighborhod. As he turned left up River Street he shivered a bit and hurried his footsteps past the loft buildings and the ship-fitters' shops that loomed dark along the waterfront.

Two blocks up, the light of a bar glowed forlornly through a dirty, rain-splattered window. Quigley paused for a moment outside. Big Joe was on duty, aimlessly wiping the dark-stained bar, and the only other customer was a drunk staring morosely into his glass at the far end.

So far so good.

JOE LOOKED up in surprise when he came in. He gave the bar an extra swipe and said formally, "Evenin', Mr. Quigley. Didn't expect to see you on a night like this."

The "Mister" had always hurt John Quigley. Joe called all his other regular customers by their first name. Even Sloto, who owned the Produce Mart and was supposed to be worth a million . . . so it was something other than a mark of deference. It merely meant he didn't belong, wasn't quite accepted.

Tonight, after all these years, he found the courage to speak up. "My friends call me John," he told the bartender.

Joe suddenly paused in his wiping.

"Okay. . . ." he said, surprise in his voice. "What'll it be? The usual?"

Quigley shook his head. "No. Whiskey. A double-shot of your best."

Then he added, as the bartender looked at him, "This is an occasion, Joe. Pour one for yourself, too."

The bartender made the drinks and raised his glass. "Here's to a short life and a merry one . . . John."

More than alcohol glowed inside Quigley as he downed his slug. Too bad it was the last time. . . . Too bad he had never offered Joe a drink before, even if he would have had to account to Martha for it. Anger rose in him again as he thought of the way she had doled out his pocket money so reluctantly . . . she and her boxes of candy, her cheap magazines.

Joe had set his glass down and was looking at him curiously. "What're we drinkin' to, John? Marriage, divorce . . . boy or girl?"

Quigley shrugged ruefully. "Nothing like that, Joe. Nothing like that at all."

He was thinking of how Martha had never wanted a kid. Not until he was making twice as much, she had always said accusingly. Now he tried to think of something more to say, but the right words wouldn't come. He made wet circles on the bar with his glass, while Joe waited curiously.

The drunk at the other end stirred, and the bartender went down to fill his glass again. When he came back, Quigley had figured out his approach.

"Joe," he said carefully, "What the hell's it all about, anyway?"

"I don't getcha. What's what all about?"

Quigley made a broad gesture with his glass. "Life. People. You know, what does it all add up to?"

Joe shifted uncomfortably. Then his eyes lit happily on Quigley's empty glass. "Here, have another."

Quigley waited until the glasses were filled again, and then persisted in his question.

"Where does it get you, Joe? You work all your life, trying to do right . . . and where do you end up?"

Joe shook his head. "You got it bad, Mr.

Quigley. It must be this lousy weather."

"John," the little man reminded him gently. Then he went on.

"I'll tell you where it gets you. The same place it gets anybody. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief . . . they all end up six feet under."

Joe considered. He usually discouraged such philosophical discussions because they often led to fights and gave the place an unhappy atmosphere.

"Well, I dunno," he said cautiously. "My philos'phy is make the best of it while you can. Here today, gone tomorrow. So why worry about the day after that?"

"Exactly," answered Quigley. Then he added craftily, "The point is though, some people have fun. The ones with money. You and me, we just work and get pushed around and never get anywhere."

"That's right," agreed the bartender placatingly. "It's like the races, you can't win. Whatcha think of the fifth today? I lost ten bucks on that damn Twinkletoes."

But Quigley wasn't going to have the subject changed on him. It was all part of his plan, and every bit fitted. First the note, then this. . . .

"Joe," he said, studying the wet rings he had made on the bar, "what would you do if a doctor told you you only had a year, maybe two years more to live?"

The bartender looked at him sharply, but Quigley met his eyes with a bland stare. "How about it, Joe? Suppose that happened to *you?"*

"I'd have myself one hell of a time," said Joe shortly.

Quigley nodded and shoved his glass forward again. He was already feeling the whiskey, but he was going to need it for what came next.

As he reached for his drink, the telephone jangled suddenly and his hand paused in mid-air. Joe ambled slowly down the length of the bar, out through the break in the end. Quigley twisted on his stool to watch him as he went to the phone on the wall.

"Yeah?" said Joe, and then he was raising his eyebrows significantly at Quigley. "Oh, yes, Mrs. Quigley?"

The little man at the bar fought down his impulse to flee, shook his head desperately at the bartender. Joe turned and lied into the mouthpiece with the ease of long practice. "No, Mrs. Quigley, he ain't here. . . . No, not tonight. I'm sorry."

Quigley was thinking rapidly as the bartender came back. The telephone was in the bedroom. That meant she had found the note already . . . sooner than he had expected.

"Your old lady," Joe explained unnecessarily. "She sounded awful mad about somethin'."

The drunk at the other end got up abruptly and lurched out.

Quigley gulped his drink down and looked at his watch. Then he pointed toward the bottle. "One more, Joe."

The big bartender hesitated.

"The last one, Joe. We'll have the last one together."

Joe poured it reluctantly. "This is on the house, then."

Quigley raised his glass. "You're a good man, Joe. Bes' damn bartender I ever knew."

He tossed it down, put a bill on the bar, climbed off the stool. His feet seemed clumsy, but his head was clear as a bell. He knew just what he was doing, and it all seemed simple now.

"Good-bye, Joe," he said sentimentally. "Good-bye and thanks."

Joe took his hand automatically, but he was studying him closely. "You all right, John?"

"Sure I'm all right. What d'ya mean, am I all right?"

Joe said hesitantly. "Well . . .what you told me about the doctor and all that. . . ."

"Hell, I was just supposin'. Just supposin', Joe."

He laughed, but his voice had a false note in it. The right note, he prided himself, seeing the worried frown on the bartender's face.

At the door he suddenly stopped and raised his hand. An inspiration had just come to him, something buried deep in his memory from high school days.

"Morituri te salutamus," he said dramatically. "You know what that means, Joe?"

Joe shook his head with the weary patience of all bartenders.

"It's Latin," said Quigley. " 'We who are about to die, salute you.' " And with that he pushed quickly through the door.

Behind him, Joe watched him go. After a moment he muttered "What the hell!" and took off his apron. Then he began

switching off the lights hurriedly. Quigley had turned up River Street, instead of in the direction where he lived. . . .

IT HAD started drizzling again. The little man hurried along, instinctively huddling close to the dark buildings for protection from the rain. Suddenly, he laughed out loud to himself, seeing the irony of it. Here he was trying to keep dry—and in five minutes he would be in the river. Then it would be all over for John Quigley.

At the next block he turned right and crossed the street toward the approach to the Second Avenue Bridge. A couple of cars splashed by him, and then he heard a shout behind. He looked around.

Half a block down the street a big figure was hurrying after him. It was Joe, the bartender. He hadn't counted on this; he must have overplayed his hand.

Joe shouted again, but Quigley hurried on into the shadows of the drawbridge. There was an overhead light in the middle of the span, and when he came within its range he stopped and looked back again.

Joe had already reached the end of the bridge and was running now. He had to hurry. Part of the plan had been to take off his coat and leave it behind, but that didn't matter now. An eye-witness would be even better.

Quigley climbed over the rail and walked gingerly out on a wet girder. Then, when he reached the end, he looked down at the water for the first time. The current swirled in a black torrent below.

It was only twenty feet down. He had checked that carefully and he had also practiced off the high board at the "Y" on the nights when Martha thought he was working. In fact, Martha didn't even know he had learned to swim . . . but these angry, swollen whirlpools were something he had not counted on.

Now his courage failed him. A little man, huddled fearfully on a narrow beam above the river, the chill air had robbed him of even the confidence his drinks had given him.

"Quigley, you damn fool. . . . Don't! Come back here, you fool!"

It was Joe yelling at him, as if from some great distance. But Joe was right there at the rail, and his escape was cut off. He looked down at the river again, but fear held him powerless. He stood there, shivering, his knees trembling, with all his plans, all his dreams, vanishing in dismal defeat.

Joe had stopped shouting and was climbing carefully over the rail, edging out on the beam, stalking him. Joe had a grip on his arm now. Joe was big and strong, and his other hand was gripping the rail behind him. In that moment of failure Quigley felt a quick hatred for himself, a bitter scorn for the coward he was and had always been. This was to have been the start of a new life . . . but now he was being drawn relentlessly back into the old one by a bartender's strong arm.

As Joe pulled him to the rail he swung out hysterically, frantically, kicking at his rescuer. For a moment they struggled, and then Joe lost his grip. Quigley felt him go, felt the sickening feeling of falling himself.

Only sheer instinct made him hang on, dangling by one arm; only blind terror gave him the strength to pull himself up . . . up until he had the other hand on the rail, and then up still more, until his flailing feet had found a hold and he had tumbled back to safety.

For a moment he lay there, panting, his legs rubber, his heart pounding weakly. Then for the first time it occurred to him that he had just sent a man to his death in that swirling water below.

He, John Quigley, was a murderer! He looked up and down the bridge, shaking his head like a trapped animal, but he had lost his spectacles in the struggle and couldn't see well.

All he had to do, he told himself, was to remember his plan. John Quigley was the man who had murdered Joe the bartender. So he would become someone else. The man he had planned to become. His schedule would still work. It had to work, even more now. He was sorry about Joe—as John Quigley. But as Mark Stanton he would have no time for regrets.

He started toward the far end of the bridge, glancing furtively over his shoulder as he ran.

CHAPTER TWO

Man With the Suitcase

TWENTY minutes later, a man carrying a suitcase walked quickly out of the deserted park grounds which lay on the city

side of the river below the Second Avenue bridge. He hurried toward the boulevard corner and then paused for a moment in the shelter of an awning over the drugstore there. The rain was coming down strong now, and he would be conspicuous if he walked.

As he straightened, pulling his shoulders back, he looked suddenly taller. A grey homburg was perched at a jaunty angle on his head, a finely tailored gabardine top coat protected him from the rain. His name was Mark Stanton, man of leisure, and in his pocket was a ticket on the Special for New Orleans. A compartment ticket, a key and a trim little automatic pistol.

True, in the expensive saddle-leather suitcase were the shabby clothes that had belonged to John Quigley, but those would be destroyed at the first opportunity that presented itself.

He caught sight of a taxi approaching and smiled to himself. The new contact lenses were fine, even better than his old glasses. A bit uncomfortable, perhaps, but he'd get used to them. He stepped to the curb and raised his hand with an imperious gesture. The cab went past, then stopped and backed up for him. Mark Stanton smiled again to himself.

But the smile froze as he opened the cab door and started to get in. In the dark corner of the seat was another man, a big man who looked like Joe. His voice was loud and hearty, too.

"Going to the station, friend?"

Stanton nodded uncertainly, and for the moment he looked like John Quigley again, despite the clothes.

"Well, hop in! That's where I'm going, too."

The big man chuckled as Stanton sunk down on the seat next to him. "Yes, sir," he said. "Saw you standing there with that suitcase, and I says to myself, 'Fred, old boy, there's a man bound for the same place you are.' So I made the driver stop, and sure enough. Hell of a detective I'd make, eh?"

"Thanks," said Stanton. "Thanks a lot for stopping. It's a bad night to be walking."

He tried to make his voice sound as he had pictured it, but it wasn't quite right. This bothered him; it was another thing that hadn't been on the schedule, but he had to stop worrying. Mark Stanton wasn't a man to fret over trifles.

"Yes, sir," the other man was agreeing amiably. "It's a hell of a night, all right. And I say it's gonna be a lot worse before morning. You know how I know that?"

"I suppose you're right."

His new friend chuckled heartily. "I'll tell you how I know. I just came across the bridge and the old river's really running tonight. Means they're having rain up north, lots of rain, and that means we'll get it before morning. See?"

"You're right," said Stanton, and he shivered in his corner of the seat. He was seeing the river again, seeing a dark figure disappearing below a black, seething current. The man he had killed. . . . No, not he, Mark Stanton, but another person named John Quigley who was also dead now.

His stout acquaintance had given up and was looking out the window at the rain-swept boulevard. But not for long. As the cab turned right on Carson Street he tried again.

"Where you going, friend? Headin' south?"

"Yes, south," said Stanton and then regretted it. He had to be alert, watch things like that.

"New Orleans?" suggested the stranger. "Swell place, New Orleans. Wish I was going there myself."

Stanton protested quickly . . . too quickly. "No, not New Orleans. Not that far."

"Oh?"

Stanton desperately searched his memory. But not a single city came to his mind, nothing except the name of a place he had never even heard of before he saw it on the timetable.

"Marton," he said.

The big man in the corner seemed to expand even more with friendliness. "Well, say now! Pick a man up off the street, and he's going to Marton, too! Good old Marton. Haven't been there for two years, but I'll bet it's still the same old one-horse town."

He paused and then added jovially, "Well, since we seem to be making the same trip—my name's Fred Pendergast. Travel for Thompson Products, St. Louis. You know old Bill Hatterly down at Marton? Runs the biggest general store there."

"No," said Stanton shortly. "I've never been there before."

"You'll have to meet Bill," the big salesman assured him. "Man, you haven't lived 'til you've met old Bill Hatterly! I'll introduce you to him."

The man chuckled reminiscently while Stanton squirmed. If there was one thing he wanted to do, it was get rid of this fat talkative fool. He would lose him at the station. . . .

THEY WERE already turning into the approach ramp, into the bright lights that seemed to be reaching into the cab to spotlight his guilt. But there was no turning back now. A Red Cap had already opened the door and was taking out the two suitcases. The big man shifted his bulk forward, waiting for him to get out first.

He remembered to hold himself erect as he stepped into the bright entrance. Pendergast had eased himself out with a grunt, and was pulling out his wallet. Stanton reached for his, and then panic struck him again.

He had forgotten that, too! There was a nice new sealskin wallet with two hundred dollars in it—but the wallet was in his suitcase. And the Red Cap was already loading the bags on his hand cart.

Pendergast saw Stanton's dismay as he waited for his change. "What's the matter, friend? Lose something?"

"I'm afraid I—"

"My wallet must be in my bag. In my other suit. I'll get it. . . ."

But the big man had grabbed his arm. "Hell, it's on me. Forget it."

Stanton tried to pull free, but Pendergast held on. "Forget it, pal, forget it. You can pay me on the train if you wanna be stubborn about it."

His hand was still on Stanton's arm as they stepped into the entrance, and Stanton again fought down an urge to shake him off and flee into the night. It felt like a ghost hand—the hand of Joe that had clutched this same arm earlier that night.

The porter was waiting to see their tickets, and again Stanton hesitated with fear pounding in his head. His ticket was for New Orleans, a compartment reservation, and the big man was sure to notice.

But the problem was solved even while he thought about it. Pendergast had dismissed the porter with a tip and instructions to put them both on the same claim check. "We're traveling together," he explained casually, putting the baggage check in his own pocket.

Then he took Stanton's arm again with a friendly gesture and led him into the terminal. He looked up at the big clock, and then at Stanton coyly. "What d'you know—we got more'n half an hour to kill yet. Time for a couple of drinks, eh?"

"I—I've got an errand," said Stanton.

"Plenty of time, plenty of time," boomed the big man and started off toward the barroom on the far side of the terminal. Stanton felt drawn along as if pulled by an invisible current.

He had to get rid of this impossible stranger! Already he was five minutes past his schedule. But he couldn't start running, with people watching. Besides that, his bag had already disappeared somewhere in the bowels of the busy terminal, and he had to have that bag.

So, for the second time that night he found himself perched on a bar stool. Automatically he ordered whiskey, his mind going back to that other bar. . . .

Pendergast was holding up his glass. "A short life and a merry one, I always say."

Stanton stiffened, gulped. The salesman looked at him curiously. "Say, pal, you look like you needed that drink. Bottoms up, and have another."

Stanton raised his glass blindly. His bag. . . . No, he'd go through with his original plan, and then he wouldn't need his bag. He'd take another train, a bus . . . go somewhere else. Anywhere to be rid of this persistent fool.

He got up suddenly and murmured. "Be right back."

The fat man waved his hand. "Sure thing."

Stanton walked quickly down the bar and out the door on the far end. He fought to keep from running, from looking back.

Across the floor of the terminal, out the side door on the uptown side. Once out on the street, he hurried still faster, looking neither left nor right as he plowed through the downpour to his goal.

The Merchant's Building was only a five-minute walk from the station. That had been another part of his schedule. He had tried it out on his lunch hour last week, and

it had taken him exactly four minutes and forty-five seconds. He felt a surge of confidence again. This was more like it. This was the way he had planned. . . .

He had been lucky about the night watchman. The old one had known him well, but he had quit last week and the new one was still timid on the job, not knowing the big shots from the unimportant tenants yet. So Stanton could bluff it out.

He'd simply walk into the lobby as if he owned it, sign the night register with a flourish, get on the elevator. But as he pushed through the door he felt a sudden let-down again, a sense of something wrong.

For the lobby was empty. A light shone on the night register, but the guard was not on duty behind his desk. However, the elevator was standing open, and he hurried into it. He pushed the button for the third floor, but nothing happened. He tried it again, then looked down. A small red light was glowing at the bottom of the panel, showing the car to be out of order—but to Stanton it looked as big and dangerous as the night light over a police station.

He scurried quickly across the deserted lobby, up the staircase to the rear. His steps echoed emptily on the polished marble steps, and at the second floor he paused cautiously before going on around the landing and up the next flight.

The corridor on the third floor was dim and deserted, too. As he went softly down it, Stanton reached in his pocket and found the key he had had made. That had been ridiculously simple, too. He had taken it one day from the desk drawer where the boss' secretary kept it, had a duplicate made, and then returned it before Miss Billings had even got back from lunch.

He had reached the broad doorway that said "Latham Jewelry—Wholesale". The "wholesale" part was a snare; and however much he hated Latham he had to admit the man was smart. For the customers flocked up here, lured by a carefully advertised reputation that at Latham's "you can get it wholesale."

And Leo Latham had made a fortune, while his clerks worked for a pittance. The man fitting the key in the door now was thinking about the last time he had applied for a raise, pushed into it by the nagging of his wife.

Latham had been pleasant and smooth about it, but John Quigley had walked out with only an empty promise to "think it over." That had been nearly two months ago; and today—only today—had Latham called him back into his office to sneer at him from behind the big desk as he told him no. A hard man was Latham, hard and smooth as glass, and proud of his ability to handle men. Only this time, Stanton told himself, silently pushing the door open, this time the laugh was on Latham.

He eased the door shut behind him and started past the showcases. Only a little light from the dimly lit hallway reached through the glass panels, but Stanton knew every inch of the way.

Then, at the inner doorway, he stopped dead, his heart in his throat. There was a light glowing through the frosted partition of Latham's inner office, and behind it the figure of a man was bent over the desk. Stanton recognized the massive outline of that hated head: The boss was working late tonight!

QUIGLEY'S fear changed to the blind rage of frustration. He'd be damned if he'd let Latham scare him out this time! He'd carry it out right under Latham's nose. He had counted on the weekend to give him two days before it was discovered, but what difference could all that possibly make now?

The police would still be baffled. Sure, John Quigley had known the safe combination. But John Quigley was a trusted employee, a mouse who wouldn't steal a dollar . . . and John Quigley was dead.

Stanton moved stealthily toward the big vault door in the wall. There was over twelve thousand dollars in there: the big gross of the pre-holiday season. He had counted on that, and it was all his for the twist of a dial. Money, power, the means of living as he had always dreamed. Maybe it would only be for a few months, as the doctor had said, but it would be worth it. . . .

The man in the grey homburg and the expensive topcoat reached for the dial with his gloved hand. Latham's presence was even helping him, for the light from his office was sufficient to see the dial. He turned it once, started back. . .

A sudden clamor from the outer room straightened him up. Somebody was pound-

ing impatiently on the hallway door, pounding and shouting!

Stanton ducked behind his own desk as Leo Latham burst out the door of his private office and hurried on through to investigate the disturbance.

Hugging the shadow of the desk, cramped and shaken, Stanton recognized the accent of the night watchman, and the answering rumble of Latham's deep voice. He couldn't make out the words, but it was obvious something was going on. There was a note of excitement, of urgency . . . and he was trapped here.

Even while he hesitated, he heard Latham's footsteps returning. He cringed as they approached closer and closer, and then Latham went on by, almost brushing him with his leg. He was working the dial of the safe, turning it quickly, excitedly.

To Stanton it meant one thing. They had trailed him here; they had learned somehow of his plans. The watchman had seen him enter after all . . . someone had seen him at the bridge . . . the alarm was already out for John Quigley. . . . His hand slipped in his pocket, and as he rose the gun was ready.

Leo Latham whirled in shocked alarm. He half raised his hands, glancing uncertainly at the vault door as his attacker gestured with the gun.

"The money," said Stanton in a voice he tried to make gruff. "I want that money."

Amazement dawned in the jeweler's stocky face, and he dropped his arms with an incredulous laugh. "Quigley. . . John Quigley!"

His amusement grew as he studied the man standing before him, with a gun that had fallen helplessly to his side.

"John Quigley!" he repeated to himself. "Old Faithful. I didn't recognize you in that get-up."

Stanton found his voice, raised his gun again. "I'm serious, Latham. You've stalled me off for the last time, so make up your mind what it'll be."

It didn't sound convincing, even to his own ears. And Latham's reaction, a scornful laugh, flicked his pride like a whiplash, exposing his cowardice. Hysterically he hurled himself forward.

The jeweler fell back before the unexpected onslaught, stumbled over a chair, and Stanton was on him before he could regain his balance. The gun rose and smashed down, again and again, until the frantic rage was gone, leaving him weak and shaking, his heart pumping.

Latham was a silent hulk on the floor, and Stanton was going down . . . down . . . down into the fate that was relentless and smothering, like the river. Then the thought of the schedule he had planned came like a straw of hope. He could still get the money from the safe . . . and then he would be free.

Automatically he put the gun back in his pocket, reached for the dial again. The wail of a siren in the distance reached his ears. He looked around wildly, his only thought now to flee. . . . Already another siren was picking up the shriek of the first, drawing steadily closer like the pursuing hand of destiny.

He stumbled into the corridor, seeking an exit. The steps he had come up yawned invitingly, but instinct told him that in that direction lay danger. The watchman would be waiting for him there . . . and the police would be coming in the front door any minute now.

At the far end of the hall, a red bulb glowed dimly. The fire escape . . . those back stairs that led out into the rear alley! It was pitch-dark in the stairway, filled with shadows and terror. His heels echoed as he ran down them pell-mell. Then a door loomed up ahead, and he was out in the damp cool air again.

But there were still the shadows and the unrelenting sound of sirens in the night. Mark Stanton ran on down the alley to the next block, forced himself to a walk as a pedestrian looked at him curiously.

He hurried on blindly. It seemed to him he had been walking for hours, but still the shriek of those sirens sounded in his ears. Finally the painful throbbing of his heart forced him to pause and take thought while he regained his breath.

A figure drifted out from the shadows of a dark store entrance, approached him, touched his arm.

Stanton whirled. The stranger drew back in alarm, mumbled something, but Stanton was already running away from him. At the next corner he halted again. He realized now that it had been only a panhandler asking for a dime. He would have to get hold of his nerves . . . think. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

End of the Road

HE KNEW now he had failed. He hadn't got the money from the safe. The money that was going to make a new man of him, the twelve thousand dollars that would make his life worth living for the few months he had left. . . .

And now life seemed suddenly most important to Stanton: just the bare fact of life. He could still escape. His train ticket was in his pocket. . . .

He looked at his watch. Much as he dreaded it, a taxi was the only way he could make it now. Luck was with him for once. He found one sitting at the next corner, the driver asleep. He rapped on the window, climbed in back.

"The station, in a hurry," he said. "I've got thirteen minutes to catch a train."

The driver looked at his watch and shrugged. "The Special, eh? Hell, we got lots of time."

The car started out, and Stanton sat back, far back in the seat away from the lights that flashed by. Then he stiffened. The driver had turned down Grand. This way would take him back just as he had come . . . past the Grand Street side of the Merchant's Building!

He held his voice level. "Say, driver, isn't it quicker to take the boulevard all the way out to Carson?"

The cabby wrestled his wheel to get out of the wet car tracks, then snapped over his shoulder: "You wanna make the Special, don't you? Relax, mister, I'll get you there."

Stanton said apologetically, "It's worth five dollars to me to catch that train."

The cabby grunted and pushed his throttle another five dollars' worth.

But another thought had come to torment his passenger. He didn't have a cent. He had dismissed his missing wallet when he set out for the money in the safe, but all he owned was still in his bag, and the bag was undoubtedly on the train by now. Frantically, he cast about for some solution, and thought of his watch. He'd shove it in the driver's hand when he got out. It was a Latham watch, it could be traced by the number to John Quigley . . . but he'd have to risk that.

The taxi slowed with a sudden skid. Up ahead, through the streaked windshield, was the Merchant's Building, and there seemed to be a traffic jam at the corner. A policeman in a white rain outfit was holding back the line of cars; another one was walking back toward them!

Stanton didn't hesitate this time. He opened the door on the outside lane, ducked across the street before the driver knew he was gone. There was an outraged yell behind him, but he kept his feet moving.

He could still make it. He had to make it. Five minutes it was from the office to the station. He ran down an alley, cut across Grand, down another block, through an alley. Faster and faster he ran, oblivious to the people who stared at him.

A Red Cap looked up in surprise as he reached the entrance, but he kept going. Inside the station he was safe. People only smiled sympathetically as they saw a well-dressed gentleman running desperately for his train.

A sign over a gate showed him the proper track, but the guard was already closing it. He stopped when he saw Stanton, but held out his hand to halt him. Stanton pushed him aside and went on through.

The train was just beginning to move. Up ahead the conductor was swinging aboard; on the last car nearest him a porter was just closing the platform over the steps. Stanton yelled and the man raised it again, giving him a hand as he jumped aboard.

For a minute he was too breathless to move. His overtaxed heart was pounding pain through his chest. But he had made it, he had made it!

The porter was shaking his head. "Mistuh, you sho' made it by the skin of yo' teeth!"

Still gasping for wind, Stanton managed to smile, and showed the man his ticket. The next step was to get in his compartment, lock the dor. Then he would be safe.

The porter showed gold teeth and pointed ahead. "Yes suh, two cars for'ard!"

Stanton moved down the aisle, feeling the train gather speed under his feet. He was glad he didn't have to meet the eyes of the passengers in the seats; he kept his eyes straight forward.

But at the rear entrance to the next car, he stopped suddenly. From the other end of the coach, a stout man was coming down

the aisle, struggling along with two suitcases, and scanning the face of each passenger as he passed. It was his friend from the taxi cab—the salesman, Pendergast. Stanton had forgotten all about him. An unreasoning compulsion to hide possessed him.

He wheeled and went back onto the platform. But there was no retreat here. In desperation he moved back into the last car . . . and the porter who had helped him aboard was blocking that aisle. A door with the sign "Men" was at his side, and he ducked into it.

FOR SECONDS he held his breath, mentally counting each step as the stout man worked his way down the aisle, across the platform between the two cars, into this one. He opened the door a crack. Pendergast was halfway down the car, his back to him, talking to the porter.

Stanton slipped out, sick anticipation gnawing in his stomach. But they didn't see him, and he hurried through the next two cars. At the other end was Compartment C; and as he locked the door behind him he felt he had used up his last ounce of strength.

He slumped down, closed his eyes—and then realized what a fool he had been. The man had only wanted to return his suitcase. And he needed that suitcase, because it contained every cent he had now.

He would have to get up, find the salesman, explain that a last-minute long distance call had made him nearly miss the train. And thank him . . . yes, he'd thank him politely for looking after his suitcase, and bid him good-night, and that would be the last of that.

But still he hesitated, dreading to open the door and face the world again. . . .

A sudden knock on the door sat him bolt upright. Another knock, and then the doorknob turned as the man outside tried it.

"Hello . . . hello in there!"

Stanton recognized that booming voice and knew the decision had been made for him. He rose to his feet, opened the door.

It was his fat friend, all right. Still beaming but a bit redder of face. He pushed in past Quigley, set the two bags on the floor, and straightened up with a grunt of relief.

"Bro-ther! Am I glad to see you. What happened?"

"I—I was making a phone call. A long distance phone call. Very important . . . last minute."

"I'll say you nearly missed it! That colored boy back there's still shaking his head. He told me where you were."

"I—I was going to look you up," said Stanton uneasily. "Just catching my breath first. Thanks for taking care of my bag for me."

He was still standing by the open door, hopefully, but the big man plumped himself down on the seat as if he intended to stay there.

"Friend, you sure travel in style."

Stanton closed the door reluctantly. "Oh . . . you mean the compartment?"

The fat man nodded comfortbly. "Use 'em myself, when I can work it in on the swindle sheet. But they wouldn't stand for it this trip, not just to Marton."

The train lurched, and Stanton sat down hastily on the opposite seat.

"What *you* need is another drink," said the salesman jovially, and produced a pint bottle from his inside coat pocket.

Stanton shook his head; even the thought of it made him ill.

The fat man held the bottle out insistently. "Go ahead, pal. It's good stuff. Bonded."

"No, no thanks. Really. I need some sleep, more than anything."

His friend shrugged, oblivious to the hint. "Well, I always say an eagle can't fly on one wing. . . . Here's to ya'."

The bottle tilted long and loudly, as Stanton stared. Then it went back into the coat pocket, the fat belly slumped even more permanently, and a pair of slightly bleary eyes studied him affably.

"Quigley . . ." he murmured. "John Quigley."

Stanton stared at him speechlessly, too weak, too defeated, to protest or think.

The big man chuckled at the obvious effect he had made on his little pal. "Told ya I should've been a detective, yes, sir. Freddie Sherlock Pendergast, that's what they should call me."

He paused for a burp and then grinned complacently. "Know how I knew? Give up?"

Stanton shook his head helplessly.

"Apologize for openin' your bag, yes, sir. But when you didn't show up, I thought I

oughta—you know, find out your name and address an' stuff, case I had to ship it back to you. So I looked in it, an' I say to myself: Freddie, ol boy, here's a man forgets to mail letters same's you do. Wife's name is Mrs. John Quigley, so he must be Mr. John Quigley—and that's his address."

He beamed triumphantly, while Stanton remembered with a flash of painful memory the letter Martha had given him to mail a million years ago. The letter he had forgotten, in his old suit.

He tried to think of a way out, but he was too tired, too weary to think, and the salesman was looking at him belligerently now, misunderstanding the expression on his face and his silence.

"Your wallet's in there, pal—still in there, a hund'd per cent intact. Anybody else woulda walked off with it, and serve you right. But not Freddie Pendergast. They don't come any honester, no, sir."

He looked at Stanton again and kicked the suitcase. "Here, you don't believe me, take a look. Nobody calls ol' Pendergast a liar, not an' get away with it."

Stanton forced a placating smile because he realized now that the man was quite drunk. "Sure . . . sure, you did right. And thanks a lot."

The other man subsided as quickly as he had been aroused. "Okay, friend, okay. Les' forget it. Les' just have another snort an' forget it." He pulled out the bottle again, helped himself when Stanton shook his head.

Then he leaned his head back on the seat. "Quigley, eh? 'S funny name." His eyes closed. "Once knew a guy name of Quimby. But Quigley—tha's a new one on me."

The train rattled on. Outside, the night rushed by in a black tunnel of rain. The fat man's head had drooped now, swaying with the motion of the car. He was almost asleep.

STANTON sat there staring at him with frozen fascination, trying to pull his thoughts together. He had to get away from this friendly, talkative fool. He knew his real name now, and he'd remember it. He'd remember it when he read that John Quigley was wanted for murder, for two murders perhaps.

He'd remember it too, if he woke up and found Quigley and his bag gone, at one of the first stops. If he stayed on the train, the man was expecting him to get off at the same stop with him—and he'd think it peculiar if he didn't. Not only that, but the conductor would be coming through soon—and he'd have to show his ticket for New Orleans.

No, the thing to do was to leave his bag behind and hide somewhere, until he had a chance to get off unobserved. That way, the salesman would never know what had happened to him; wouldn't even know that he had gotten off the train.

But first, his money and the letter. He wouldn't leave those behind this time. He got up quietly. Pendergast's leg was sprawled against the bag, but he was snoring soundly.

Stanton eased the suitcase away, trembling as the man stirred. But the snoring resumed again, and he swiftly unsnapped the catches. He found the wallet, the letter, stuffed them in an inside pocket and closed the bag again.

The corridor was empty, but where could he hide? He opened the door wider, ventured a few steps out. Just at the end, where the aisle turned, was a door without a number. Footsteps sounded behind him cutting off his retreat, and he pushed it open.

It was dark inside—a closet with some clothes hanging on a hook, a broom, some shelves. There wasn't much room, but he managed to squeeze his thin body in and shut the door just as someone went by outside.

So, hardly daring to breathe in the stuffy blackness, Mark Stanton rode through the miles, crammed in a porter's closet while another man dozed comfortably in the compartment he had paid for.

His legs went to sleep, his body became stiff with cramps, but still he dared not venture out again. He finally dozed off, or perhaps he passed out. . . . It seemed hours later that he felt the monotonous rumble of the train slowing down.

Close by, came a muffled clang as the floorplate over the steps was swung up, and Stanton knew he could endure it no longer. He stumbled blindly out into the passageway, carried by stiff legs which moved by something other than his own will.

In the closet he had removed the new contact lenses to relieve the one physical

pain he could do anything about; and now his world was out of focus.

But he could make out the porter hurrying past him; he could feel the train still slowing down, and when he stepped into the vestibule he could see through the open doorway where the few lights of a strange town beckoned.

He waited until the train was barely crawling before he jumped. Then he ran swiftly across the far end of the station platform, down a freight ramp. Behind him the train had paused and was already beginning to move again, but he didn't look back.

He had come out on the main street of the town. His smarting, watery eyes couldn't see too much, but the place had the fragrant atmosphere of the country after a rain, the midnight hush of a small village at sleep.

He took a deep breath, like a man out of prison. In the distance the train was rattling away with a last mournful whistle, carrying with it all that was left of John Quigley . . . and a fat, over-friendly salesman who would never know he had a murderer's secret in his hands.

Mark Stanton, free at last, straightened his stiff back and walkd confidently toward the one lighted window he could make out among the small cluster of store buildings.

A man stumbling drunkenly along the sidewalk turned and stared at him, and Stanton stopped.

"Can you tell me where a hotel is?"

The man moved his head tipsily and then unaccountably laughed. "They ain't but one, mister. An' you're standin' right in front it."

He was still staring and muttering to himself as Stanton turned toward the light just ahead. He went through the door and found himself in a narrow lobby with straight-backed chairs. At the desk, a sallow-faced youth looked up from the comic magazine he was reading by the harsh light of a fly-specked light bulb.

"A room—with bath," said Mark Stanton.

The clerk smirked as he shoved the register forward. "They all got baths, mister. Right at the end of the hall."

Stanton shrugged, signed the register with an undecipherable scrawl. When he looked up he saw the look in the clerk's eyes, beady eyes that were going impudently over the crushed grey hat, the gabardine topcoat now crumpled and smudged.

"That'll be two bucks, mister."

Stanton reached for his wallet with a shaky smile. "I just got off the train, and somebody stole my luggage . . . while I was asleep."

The clerk examined the ten-spot suspiciously, said "I just work here, mister," and tossed change and key on the counter.

"Twenty-one. Top of the stairs to the right."

Stanton fled up the creaking steps, found his room in the hall, switched on the light. It was dingy, it was musty, it wasn't what he had hoped for—but it was a haven at last. He locked the door, pulled down the torn blind, tossed his hat and coat on the chair and then threw himself on the lumpy bed.

For a while he dozed, but the glare of the bulb overhead bothered him and he finally got up. Just as he reached for the switch, the telephone on the wall at his shoulder sounded shrilly. He drew back, staring at it in fear. It jangled again, and he finally reached out a trembling hand.

It was the clerk's voice, charged with excitement. "Say, mister, your name Quimby, or somp'in like that?"

Stanton's denial sounded like a scream to his own ears. "No . . . no! It's Stanton."

The kid went on. "Yeah, I knew it was a phony, a name like that. This guy just checked in from the train, see—a big fat guy with two suitcases. . . ."

"Yes, yes?"

"Well, I remembered what you said about somebody swipin' yours, and I looked at 'em close. Don't seem likely a man would be needin' two big bags just to stop here. And then he gives me this phonus balonus, see, about one of 'em belonging to a joe named Quimby and ast was anybody stayin' here by that name. A thin man in a tan gabardine coat, he said."

Stanton was silent, his mind whirling.

"I didn't tell him nothin'," the kid was assuring him. "You want I should call the cop?"

"No . . . no, I'll see for myself in the morning. You forget it. Thanks."

"Well, okay." The kid sounded disappointed. "Just thought I'd ask. He's in

room twenty-four, right across from you."

Stanton got the receiver back on the hook. His eye caught the tattered telephone book dangling by a string underneath. On the cover, above an advertisement for a feed company, was the ornate heading: *Marton & Marton County.*

The fateful words burned in his mind. He had fled from the train at the same stop as the salesman. And Pendergast knew he was here. He had told him himself he was getting off at Marton!

FOR A long time Mark Stanton stood there motionless. The events of the night passed before his mind like a hideous, fumbling nightmare. . . .

A door slammed out in the corridor and someone stumbled across the hallway. Stanton started to reach for the light switch, but it was too late. Already a fat, tipsy salesman who liked to fancy himself a sleuth was pounding on his door.

"Hey, Quimby, you in there? Quimby, ol' pal. Open up!"

Stanton was silent, hoping he'd go away, but the door shook on its hinges again. "Quimby! Hey, it's me . . . Freddie."

His sigh was one of final despair. If he didn't open the door, there'd be a real disturbance. The kid downstairs might even call the police. If he did let him in. . . .

Then he remembered the gun . . . the gun in his coat pocket. He'd let that loud fool in, yes. And he'd wipe that name off his fat lips forever. Mark Stanton would do that. Mark Stanton had money. Mark Stanton could say it was self-defense, and the kid would testify the other man had robbed him. . . .

He stumbled across the dingy carpet, fished for the gun in his coat. The metal was cold in his wet palm.

As he straightened up he thought he saw somebody else in front of him. A man staring at him with haggard, insane eyes. A little man, in shabby clothing, with a gun in his hand.

The whirlpool was closing around him again, sucking him down into the depths of fear. . . .

And the man was John Quigley

* * *

His end was not without glory, of a sort.

There was a fat, friendly salesman named Fred Pendergast, who told his friend Bill Hatterly all about it the next afternoon:

"A character, Bill, a real little character. Always leavin' his bag behind."

There was the jeweler, Latham, too. "You never know," he remarked to the head salesman. "You never know. Would you believe it, that little squirt came in here with a gun and beat hell out of me because I'd turned him down on a raise. Right in the middle of that fire next door, too. Didn't know he had it in him. . . ."

And there was a bartender named Joe, who liked to tell about this little guy, see, who got a load on one night and jumped off the bridge:

"The night of the flood, see, and I went off myself, trying to pull him back. Used to be a lifeguard, myself, an' I still don't know how *I* made it. But this little guy—his name was Quigley—he turned up fifty miles south of here. . . . Drowned? Hell, no, he didn't drown. Died of heart failure in a hotel down there. Read it in the paper."

Even today, down in Marton, there's a suspicious hotel clerk who never accepted the official verdict. He still suspects a certain fat traveling man of murder; he still wonders why a man, just before he died, should fire a shot into a mirror.

THE END

DARK INQUEST

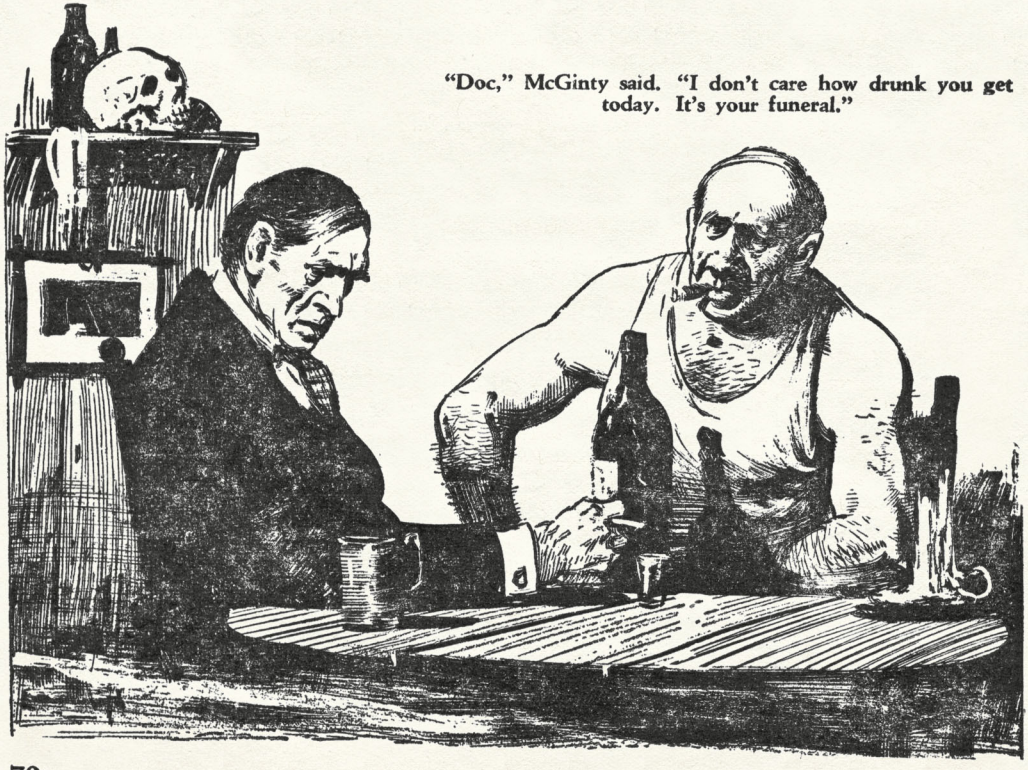
By CYRIL PLUNKETT

ONCE HE'D had a girl, and way back in those days—the early days—he'd promised her the world. He'd lived with hopes and plans: He was going to climb mountains. He was going to swim seas. The world would know him and his work, and she would be proud. He was going to be a great surgeon. At that time—about 1920—he could take a drink only when he came in late, or when the flu was raging, or after he'd sat up all night waiting for a baby. Then, he could hum and grin when he looked in a mirror. He could put the cork back in the bottle.

Sometimes, later, he would sigh and shake his head and wonder what had happened.

He lived now on Main Street. Not at the north end, where homes were fine and big and white. Not at the south end, cubicles on thirty feet of frontage. He lived above Sully's drugstore, downtown, on the corner—just across from McGinty's bar. He had three rooms and a washstand. Three chairs and a roll-top desk and a bed and the washstand. A tin sign on the fourth riser from the bottom of the narrow stairway read: Doctor George P. Lacey.

Look at him: Dr. George P. Lacey, coroner by the grace of his friends. . . . His dreams—shattered . . . His god—whiskey . . . His jury—twelve bottles . . . And his salvation—the long, silent sleep of the dead. . . .



"Doc," McGinty said. "I don't care how drunk you get today. It's your funeral."

Sixty? Oh, no, not by far. How far he'd forgotten—as he forgot to press his pants or change his shirt or shave. A little powder, he'd discovered, would take care of the whiskers. And who looked at his shirt? Mac didn't. Mac—McGinty of the Main Street Bar and Grill—was Lacey's prize patient. There had been no other way, for several years, that McGinty could recover for the whiskey Lacey drank. Occasionally, to be sure, someone wandered up the Lacey stairway, and a dollar would change hands, but even that was becoming rare.

He was coroner of Robb's County.

"Now look, Doc," McGinty said one morning a while back, "you gotta have dough, don't you? I can't set 'em up on the house forever. Look, Doc, it pays a thousand bucks a year, don't it, and nobody else wants—I mean all the other docs are too damned busy."

Lacey sat that morning looking at an empty glass morosely.

"So what the hell," said McGinty. "I talked to a few of the boys, and we went to the polls yesterday and wrote your name in. *George P. Lacey, Coroner.* A thousand bucks a year—and what you gotta do, Doc? Car gets smashed, you look over the bodies. Accident, ain't it? Nobody *wants* to smash their car up these days. Or say a kid goes swimming in the lake and drowns. All you gotta do is sign the death certificate. What's wrong with that racket?"

Lacey's hands were clenching and unclenching. He drew in a deep breath, let it all out slowly. "Nothing, Mac, I guess," he said.

"Well," Mac grumbled, "I had to do something. The pills you give me don't pay for my whiskey, not the way you drink. So I had to do something, before you drink yourself to death."

"Mac?"

McGinty took the deep breath this time, squinted. Then he grunted, "Shot, huh?"

"A double, Mac? Mac, I—I need it badly this morning."

AT TWO o'clock on a humid Saturday night in August, Doctor Lacey's phone rang. Lacey's body shuddered. Then one eye opened, blinked, shut again quickly. Hipperty-hopping through the room was the ugly glare of McGinty's red and green neon sign. The phone continued to jangle, and finally Lacey groaned, managed to roll half over in bed and fumble for the handset.

"Whassamatter?"

"Lacey? Brent—sheriff's office. Get your clothes on. I'll pick you up in five minutes."

Whassamatter? Whassamatter?" Brent's words had come too fast for Lacey and he couldn't grasp them.

"So you're drunk, eh?" Brent's voice paused. He swore. "You'd better sober up in the next five minutes, Lacey. This time it's murder!"

Somehow Lacey got the phone back on its stand. He became aware then of his hand—numb, shaking as with palsy. He became aware of his heart, the leap it gave and its sudden pain. The word revolved in his bleary mind now, blinked on and off with McGinty's sign—murder. Panting, he tried to get up. Nothing happened. The effort spent ballooned in his head until his temples began aching, throbbing. He rolled both legs at last off the bed, and his feet dropped like lead, but he couldn't feel the floor beneath them.

Easy, Lacey. Don't get scared. There's got to be a floor there. And you've got time, Brent said. Five whole minutes to fight off the fumes, to get sober. That's lots of time, five minutes. Just get a grip on yourself now, Lacey. All you need is—help. There's a bottle around here somewhere. . . .

He worked his way up on one elbow, rested again, his breath rasping. What had happened to the floor? In sudden panic he lunged for the stand, pawed it. The phone fell off and then nothing was left. No bottle?

You emptied the battle long ago, Lacey. Saturday night, isn't it? Well, you always empty the bottle. Every night for that matter—except Sunday. On Sunday there's a law and you can't buy it. Sundays you just sweat. Sundays you don't go to church—you just live up here in hell and wait for Monday morning. . . .

There was a car outside, below, a sharp squeal of brakes. That would be Brent. Sobbing, Lacey rocked to his feet and swayed there perilously a moment before staggering to the wall. He clung to the wall, his chest a bellows, fighting to turn. He caught one glimpse of his wet face in the washstand mirror. Doctor Lacey? Coroner? Wet face, red face, green—he

moaned and pushed himself one step from the wall.

There was no floor to stop him, nothing, no pain. McGinty's sign hipperty-hopped through the room. *Liquor—Beer—Wine.*

* * *

The sun found him. The sun peeped in, then withdrew. But it stole back and sat a while on the sill. It was very hot. The lake, beyond, was very blue. People all along the beach were in the blue lake, swimming. Main Street's asphalt reflected shimmering heat waves into the air. It was August.

There were flies in Lacey's bedroom, and they liked the sun. They hummed. They liked Lacey and they circled over him. Presently he began to mumble, curse the sun, the flies and his head. It was very large today, his head. There was a small gash on his forehead, and the blood had dried there.

He got up finally, staggered to the washstand. The water gurgled, jeeringly, it seemed to him. It was afternoon. Sunday afternoon. And no bottle. My God, no bottle. Then he remembered something he'd kept in his desk. Alcohol, pure grain, two ounces. Saving that for his patients? What patients? He uncorked the bottle, let it chatter against a grimy glass, added a little water and drank it.

He shivered. Now he felt better! He found a rusty blade and shaved with bar soap from the washstand. He brushed his coat, put his hat on, drained the last two drops from the bottle and went down the stairs.

The heat stopped him. Slapped him in the face, left him momentarily dizzy. But Sheriff Brent had phoned him last night, he remembered. He remembered all too often and too well. There was a body he must view now. There had been a murder.

Brent was at the morgue. Brent, it seemed, had stopped by to pick up the deceased's effects. Just a few things, a torn silk dress, underthings, a pair of white shoes and a purse. Brent was shoving the shoes into a bag as Lacey came in. He just looked at Lacey.

"Did you get another—" Lacey wet his lips—"another doctor last night, Sheriff?"

"We got a doctor," Brent said.

"I—" Lacey looked everywhere Brent wasn't— "I'm here to examine the body."

"Suit yourself," Brent said. "There she is on the slab."

Slender body, covered by a sheet. Blonde hair, smooth white arm and shoulder. . . . Lacey had raised the sheet, but now he dropped it, swayed. No face. A woman with nothing for a face but the broken bone structure, bruised and battered tissue. It was too much on a breakfast of two ounces. Lacey tried it again, but contrived to keep the head covered as he examined the body.

"Bruises on the wrists."

"Why not?" Brent had paused at the doorway. "There was every indication at the scene of a struggle."

"Bruises on the ankles. . . ."

"Apparently he kicked her." *After all,* Brent's manner seemed to say, *this is a formality I can't very well ignore. This lush is the coroner.*

"We went over all of this last night, Lacey. Dr. Madden and I. I called Madden because you were under the weather—remember? Well, Madden is prepared to testify. Murder, fractured skull, blunt instrument—we have the instrument, incidentally."

"You mean no—no autopsy?"

"With that face? Are you kidding, Lacey?"

"But—"

"Look, Doc. *We* haven't been under the weather. We've been *working.* We've got the murderer, a young chap named Horgan. Girl's name was Renning, a Mrs. Alec Renning. Identification was found in her purse. We got hold of Renning promptly and he and his secretary drove in last night and clinched the identification. Finally, here's her clothes, dress ripped down the front. It's one of those cases. It's nasty."

"Horgan?" Lacey reached around for a stool, sat down on it abruptly. "Sheriff—I—I'm still a little weak."

"The way it happened," Brent went on casually, "the Rennings took a beach house some days back, place up on the North Shore." He put the bag down and fished in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. "They had plenty of money, I guess. He's in business, in Chicago, and yesterday his secretary, a Miss Wilson, flew down for the weekend. So he was busy last night with dictation and so on, and his wife—her name was Corrine—got a yen for a binge and came into town on the prowl, alone. One of

these gilt-edged tramps, the way I get it. She rolled into Mac's place and started drinking. Mac remembered her."

"Horgan?" Lacey said again now, queerly.

"Yeah, a guy named Joe Horgan. Just married yesterday morning, by the way. Some kid from downstate who came to the lake with his new bride for the honeymoon. That makes it nice, huh? Cozy. According to his wife, he drove into town about eleven last night for some sandwiches and beer—that's *her* story. There was beer in the car, as a matter of fact, with McGinty's name on the sack. That led us back to Mac—and he remembered Horgan, too. He said Horgan and the dame got to chinning at the bar and then went out a few minutes later together."

Lacey began rubbing his eyes with both hands, then his head. His whole body was shaking.

"About an hour later," Brent said as he lit his cigarette and flipped the match aside, "Reed, one of our patrols, spotted a car in Oakland cemetery. Reed stopped, threw a spotlight on it. He saw a woman lying on the ground, her face a bloody pulp, with Horgan kneeling beside her. Horgan looked straight at the light, then jumped up and started to run. When he wouldn't stop, Reed threw a couple of slugs at him. So we got her on the slab, and him at Mercy, unconscious. His prints were all over the bloody weapon, a lug wrench."

"The—the other girl, Brent? Mrs. Horgan?"

"The kid?" Brent reached down for his satchel. "She's out at Mercy with her husband, waiting."

SHE was in a small room on the second floor at Mercy. The room reserved for . . . waiting. Draperies limp with heat, settee and two stiff-backed chairs. Her hands were clenched—nice hands, Lacey saw, as he paused in the hall beyond the open doorway. She was looking straight down at her hands, until a nurse came by to say, "Please, Mrs. Horgan. Please let me bring you something to eat."

Brown hair and brown eyes. Eyes so very hurt, so very wide now. A low voice, husky in its fear. "Has there—has there been any change, nurse?"

"I'm sorry."

"He—he'll not die?"

Not die? Strapped in the square chair, electrodes on his legs and wrists—not die? The nurse bit her lip, then answered, "We think he's improved, Mrs. Horgan."

"Thank God."

"We're really more worried about *you*, Mrs. Horgan."

"About me?" Tears welled in her eyes, fled down her cheeks. "We waited three years to be married. I mean, we were engaged when I was seventeen and then we waited because Joe was wounded in the war, and for a while he couldn't walk. . . ."

"Hush now, Mrs. Horgan! I'll bring you a tray—"

"Nurse, don't go. Please! I'm so desperately alone and afraid—"

Lacey turned abruptly, fled straight down the hall and down the stairs. Fled straight up the street to McGinty's bar.

The bar was closed, McGinty had been mopping. McGinty's pants hung below his belly, and his shirt was off, and the black hair on his massive chest was beaded, sweaty. McGinty shook his head at Lacey at the door, then scowled and stood aside, and Lacey stumbled, coming from the bright sun outside to this dimness.

"You're still drunk from last night," said McGinty.

"Mac, I've got to think and I—I can't!"

"Well, I can't help it if you've got a thirst instead of brains."

"You don't understand, Mac. . . ." Lacey slumped before a table, put his head down on his arms. His shoulders shook and he was crying. "You don't understand, Mac!"

McGinty looked at him, then walked around the bar. There were glasses, bottles, on the bar, still to be washed and polished.

"Here, Doc." McGinty returned to the table. "Maybe I don't care how drunk you get today, at that."

"Th—thanks, Mac."

"It's your funeral."

"Thanks, Mac."

McGinty pulled another chair up to the table. "Maybe I do understand, Doc, this time. I went over to the morgue last night with Brent to look at the body. And then Brent took me out to Mercy to see Horgan, to identify *him*. That's when they brought the girl in. So I saw her. It seemed like I'd seen her once before. I asked her what her name was before it was Horgan."

Lacey choked. His glass fell over, rolled half across the table. His mouth fell open. He wiped it slowly with one hand then, and the hand was shaking.

"Time and time again," Mac said, "when you were soused, you'd pull snapshots from your wallet. 'Mac,' you'd say, 'this girl was my wife. Mary was her name.' Well, the way I got it she had backbone if you didn't. The way I got it she saw what was going to happen and just took the kid and left. That's a long time back, and now she's dead. The girl never knew her daddy, thinks *he's* dead. What I mean, Doc, before she married Horgan, this girl's name was Lacey."

A fly had found Lacey and began to buzz around his head. It lighted at last on his glistening forehead. "You—you didn't tell Sheriff Brent?"

"I didn't tell anyone. It's none of my business."

"Mac, Horgan didn't kill that woman!"

"That's none of my business either."

"Mac, you saw her. Those kids were in love."

Mac blinked and said, "She's in love with him. He's unconscious, so we don't know a damn thing about him. Look, Doc. For almost twenty years you didn't care. You knew where the kid was, I guess. I guess you knew, some way, that she was going to marry Horgan. But you didn't care if she *should* marry Horgan. That's what's wrong, Doc, where you failed. You don't know Joe Horgan. You just want things different. But we still got facts to face: the Renning dame left here last night with Horgan. She was still with him, dead, an hour later.

"Look, Mac—" Lacey shaking all over, reached for the bottle. "Look, Mac, maybe —maybe if I have an inquest . . . ?"

The fly dry-washed sticky feet, then walked down Lacey's cheek unnoticed by Lacey. McGinty watched it. McGinty raised one stubby finger to his own cheek, scratched. "Doc, I guess you're on your way to a dandy. Now you want an inquest. Okay, there's your jury, right there on the bar. Twelve bottles."

"I could do it! Mac—Mac, listen. They got married. Mac, you've seen her—"

"Sure," McGinty nodded. "You said that before. She's young and she's sweet. A guy would be nuts to leave her. Your jury's impressed, Doc. You're doing fine."

LACEY drained the bottle, suddenly stood up, staggered off a few feet, pounded on the bar. "Gentlemen," he said, "this inquest is open! You've been sh-summoned to inquire into murder, into the death of—of— Mac, I don't know her name!"

"Your jury won't care, Doc."

"They don't care?"

"It's all right, Doc."

"Yes, shir, it's all right. And the first—first witness will be Mac McGinty!"

"Okay." Mac lit a cigarette, frowned, put the match down in a tray. "Here I am, Doc. Fire away."

"Thish woman come in alone?"

"That's the way I recall it."

"She sat at the bar?"

"That's right. Alone. Half, maybe three-quarters of an hour."

"Uh—what was she drinking?"

"Straight shots, whiskey and water. I don't know how many."

Lacey pondered, swaying. He shook his head, rubbed one hand across his bleary eyes. "Told Brent we should have an autopsy."

"Hell, we know how she died, Doc. Her skull was bashed in with a wrench. Doc Madden said that. Horgan beat her head and face in with a wrench."

"Should have an autopsy," Lacey answered doggedly. "It's my girl who will suffer. Should do it all up right." He swung around abruptly, hung with both hands on the bar and savagely surveyed the empty glasses. "You, there!" he thundered. "You there, at the end. You Doc Madden? Oh, you are, huh? And too busy to be coroner, too busy to make an autopsy. Well, shir, *I've* got time. Wouldn't be coroner if—never mind though. Did you shay—say you smelled whiskey on the body? Oh, you did, huh? Well, how in blazes are you going to prove she drank the whiskey, without an autopsy?"

"Wait a minute, Doc." McGinty interrupted mildly. "We've got the proof. *I* saw her drink the whiskey."

"Thash a lie!" roared Lacey. He fixed McGinty with a cockeyed stare. "You shaw a woman in a green dress drink shome whiskey. Ain't the shame thing at all!"

"The hell it ain't! It was the same woman. I identified the body," Mac said.

"You identified shome—some hair! You identified a dress! All you shaw—saw in the morgue was a woman half-covered with a sheet. She didn't have a face. Ain't the shame—same thing at all! No, shir," argued Lacey. "Ain't the shame thing at all. Call Mr. Renning now. Alec Renning—take the stand! Now, shir—" he pointed at a scummy beer glass—"you took a vacation, beach house up North Shore. You had your shec—secretary come down with shome work, busy with your shec—secretary all last evening. Then your wife went into town alone. You didn't shay—say *how* though, did you? In a car? No, she didn't have a car when she left the bar. She went out and got in Joe Horgan's car. You want us to believe she walked in from the North Shore, *walked*—in those high-heeled shoes?"

"Doc," Mac broke in gruffly, "are you nuts? You can't make up facts to suit yourself. She didn't wear high heels. She was wearing flat-heeled sandals."

"Thash a lie! I shaw the shoes, shaw 'em today at the morgue."

"But damn it," McGinty flared, "I saw 'em on her feet last night. Flat heels, sandals—I could see her toes."

"Couldn't see her toes. You're crazy."

"Oh, yeah? She had gold paint on the nails—"

"McGinty, thash a lie! I shaw 'em today. Toenails painted red today!" Lacey's face was red. He began to wave both hands and almost fell, grabbed again at the bar with one hand. He pointed a shaking finger at the empty glass once more. "Shecretary—that is who it was! *She* was in here, drank the whiskey. Dead woman didn't drink whiskey and an autopsy will prove it. Secretary was posing as your wife in here, and all the while you had your real wife out in your car, parked somewhere, waiting. Bruises on her wrists and ankles—now I shee it! She was tied! You and your shecretary killed her!"

McGinty's chair fell over as he rose. McGinty swore and ran for the phone.

* * *

"Brent? McGinty, over at the bar. Doc Lacey's here, holding an inquest. I'm not kidding. It's the damnedest thing you ever saw. What color was the polish on the toenails on that woman? Hell, no, I tell you I'm not kidding. Last night at the morgue the sheet was on her feet, and I didn't see 'em. Red? My God, Brent, then Renning must be the guy! Look, Brent, that's one thing they missed. Renning rigged his secretary's looks and posed her as his wife. But apparently the only thing she couldn't wear was Mrs. Renning's shoes—"

"Gentlemen of the jury," Lacey was crying. *"Would a young man in love leave his bride of a few hours to chase after a—a tramp? Would a woman change the polish on her toes—to die?"*

"That's Lacey, Sheriff. You hear him?" McGinty had to yell into the phone now. "But never mind Doc Lacey. Get Renning and his girl friend. I can see it. She was in here last night by design, to pick up a fall guy. She could have hooked young Horgan merely by asking if he'd drive her home. Then, somewhere outside, Renning could have been waiting, could have sapped him. Brent, it fits! They'd scram to the cemetery—gravel lanes, no tracks—beat Mrs. Renning's face in, so I wouldn't see it wasn't the same girl, leave the dress and the body. Horgan, recovering consciousness, couldn't have explained the body—he'd think, too, it was the same woman. Even if the patrol hadn't seen the car, Brent, the frame would have stuck. I'd have remembered the two had been here and I'd have had fingered Horgan—"

McGinty stopped; his head turned. There had been a thud behind him. Then McGinty caught his breath. Lacey lay on the floor now, pale—too pale—panting.

"Doc . . . ?"

No answer. McGinty dropped the phone, ran to Lacey's side. He felt for Lacey's pulse, failed to find it.

"The poor guy," McGinty whispered. Then he cried out, "Doc, you hear me? The jury's back with the verdict. Doc, you hear me? A good verdict—"

Lacey's lips jerked, seemed to smile then. He was staring straight up at the ceiling, as though he could see bright multicolored lights there, brighter than mere neon, brighter even than McGinty's sign.

McGinty shook his head and sighed. There was only darkness for Doc Lacey, creeping in to claim him. . . .

AWAKE AND SWING!

By LAURI WIRTA

"MIDNIGHT and spooks," the kid muttered. He shivered. He looked up at Jim Carroll helplessly. He said, "So help me, I went to the movies. It was a spook picture. It made me feel funny. . . . I came home and went to sleep. And the next thing I knew is when you told me to drop the razor."

Carroll nodded. He could see how it was. He wondered when somebody was going to think up a new one. "Everything went blank, so help me. Next thing I knew, there was blood all over!" Oh, for the life of a cop, Detective Jim Carroll thought. Oh, hell, for the life of a cop!

He said, "Stay put, kid," not unkindly, for he was old in homicide. Why get your blood pressure up, he thought? There wasn't much kindness the kid could expect from here on in. From now on things would be tough for Michael Filosa. Short and not too sweet. A little trip, not very far; a brief pause, then another trip. This time with a little green door at the end of it. And behind the little green door the end of everything for Michael Filosa, sailor, age 26.

Detective Jim Carroll turned, picked up the broken, bloodstained razor.

"I musta done it in my sleep," the kid said.

"Sure," Carroll told him. Who was he—the judge and jury? If that was the story the kid was going to stick to, let him stick to it. "Sure, kid," Detective Jim Carroll said consolingly. Maybe it really helped these birds to imagine they didn't know what they were about when they did their blood-letting, only he hadn't been asleep when Jim Carroll had found him, standing over the terrified old woman in bed, the bloody razor gripped in his bloody hand.

"He *looked* asleep," the girl said defensively, and Carroll turned. The girl, Catherine de Hall, Michael's half-sister, was tall for sixteen, intelligent, loyal—with a mind of her own, Carroll decided. There was loyalty in the look she gave her half-brother—and there was blood on her, too, oozing from a cut along the neck. "I saw him," the girl said. "He cut me, too—but he didn't look like himself. He didn't—he looked like he was asleep."

She herself looked ready to burst into tears, or worse. Carroll could understand that, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it except—

"Sure," he said, almost mechanically.

He took down the girl's story. It was her screams that had awakened the neighbors, who'd called the police. She'd come awake with Michael drawing his bloody razor across her neck, and looking, she insisted, asleep. When he left her, she screamed. In the meantime, Michael had wandered into his mother's room, and had been engaged in further butchery when Jim Carroll had answered the emergency alarm.

"Drop that razor!" he'd told the kid, and the kid had dropped it.

The old lady, Mrs. Anna de Hall, corroborated the sleepwalking angle. Hurt and hysterical as she was, she'd noticed that her son seemed "asleep." *Now I've seen everything, heard everything,* Detective Jim Carroll thought, as he snapped his notebook shut—but he hadn't.

He'd seen the corpse in the next room, sure—the one time Michael's razor had really cut home. On the bed in that room lay Salvatore de Hall, Michael's kid half-brother, his throat thoroughly severed. He'd seen the cuts on the two women, heard and checked their stories—and he'd seen Michael with the broken bloody razor in his hand, intent upon his carving.

"I musta done it while I was asleep," Michael had told him—and the two women had corroborated him.

A LITTLE less than a year later Michael Filosa was brought to trial. His dream defense didn't work out too badly. Doctors certified him sane and responsible, and then climbed a tree without stepping on any limbs that might crack under their cogitations, by testifying that Michael might have been at least half asleep during that

The hands of his watch crept slowly past midnight as Detective Jim Carroll stood there amidst the graven memorials to the dead . . . and waited for a ghost to solve Carlton Avenue's bloody mystery. . . .

night of horror in the modest house on Carlton Street, Brooklyn. The jury took them at their word and brought in a verdict of guilty of manslaughter in the second degree. But when the time came for County Judge F. C. Taylor to pronounce sentence, Detective Jim Carroll received his jolt.

"I am going to postpone sentencing you —indefinitely," Judge Taylor told the prisoner. "I am convinced that you are shielding someone. And I am going to order the district attorney to find the murderer of Salvatore de Hall. . . ."

* * *

Carroll had worked hard on the case and made a conscientious report. There had been a couple of things that had puzzled him: One, the break in the razor had been new, yet no one in the house had been able to account for its having broken at all. There had been no struggle. Two, he had established that Michael had come home from his "spooky" movie at midnight, and the murder had been committed no later than fifteen minutes after twelve. That had been pretty fast work for a homicidal dream, Carroll figured.

First he visited the grave where little Salvatore was buried, in Calvary Cemetery. He had a little difficulty finding the spot, for the grave bore no headstone, and the pitiful mound had sunk almost to ground level. Something about it caught Carroll's attention, however, and he bent down to investigate. The spot showed the marks of pathetic care—as if a blind person had striven to keep the grave fresh. There was a small bouquet of fresh flowers tied with a handkerchief. . . .

A little startled, and thinking hard, he spoke to the caretaker of the cemetery. Next, he drove to the Children's Society, which held custody of Catherine de Hall. After talking to the girl, he went to the de Hall home, spoke to the mother and the neighbors. He unearthed a picture of feminine jealousy and possessiveness with hideous overtones—and another picture of self-sacrifice and selflessness.

Then Carroll drove over to the jail that still held Michael Filosa, awaiting his sentence after all these months. His mission was one of the strangest that ever took a homicide cop into the cell of a convicted killer. His opening remarks might be paraphrased something as follows: *You might as well come clean, buddy, and admit you're innocent. . . .*

But he needed more than that. And that night as he again waited at the cemetery, he had the unearthly feeling that often plagues those who seek to follow a murderer's logic—that the answer had been there all along from the start, if he had but had the eyes to see it.

What was it Michael Filosa had said that night in his house of horror on Carlton Avenue, Brooklyn? *"Midnight and spooks . . . made me feel funny. . . ."* A killer's logic had run a full cycle, back to its starting point. Only now it was Detective Jim Carroll, waiting in the shrubbery by little Salvatore's gravesite, who felt strange.

The hands of his watch crept slowly toward midnight. Jim Carroll tensed. *"Midnight and spooks. . . ."* The hands inched past—and here came a spook.

At twelve minutes past midnight, the exact moment when little Salvatore had died, a grotesque figure detached itself from the shadows of the graveyard. It shambled toward the grave and kneeled.

"Sally," it whispered, "I have you all to myself—for all eternity!" It uttered a prayer to a corpse, claiming possession—as only phantoms can possess the dead. It claimed forgiveness.

Detective Jim Carroll sweated it out until the gruesome litany was over. Then he stepped out.

He said quietly and formally, as they had taught him way back in police school, "It's all over now, Mrs. de Hall—I arrest you for the murder of your son. . . ."

And he made it stick.

ONCE IN A

Even as the guards began moving along the catwalk from cell to cell, Larry saw the shadow pass through his own door. . . .

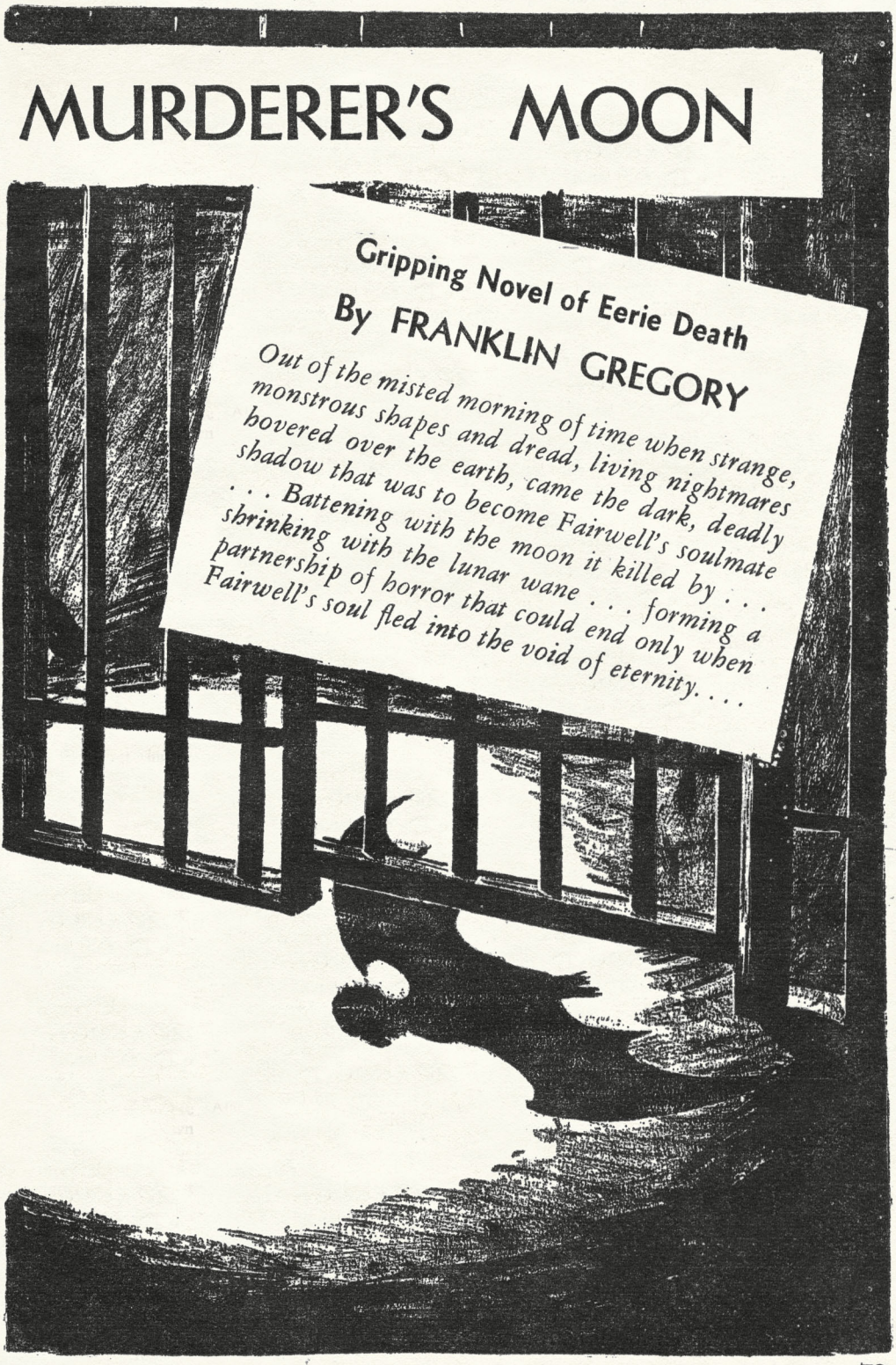
CHAPTER ONE

Shadows From the Dead Past

AT FIRST, all he saw was this shadow on the wall—a shadow no larger than a moth. But gradually it grew.

He had been drinking, of course—tonight it was in this little saloon in the Ironbound—and he had seen the shadow before. It shuddered, like a wing. But more than

MURDERER'S MOON



Gripping Novel of Eerie Death

By FRANKLIN GREGORY

Out of the misted morning of time when strange, monstrous shapes and dread, living nightmares hovered over the earth, came the dark, deadly shadow that was to become Fairwell's soulmate . . . Battening with the moon it killed by . . . shrinking with the lunar wane . . . forming a partnership of horror that could end only when Fairwell's soul fled into the void of eternity. . . .

that, there was the suggestion of a horrible face in the middle of the shadow. He picked up his half-empty glass and threw it at the wall.

The glass smashed, and the shadow went away.

"All right now, mister, that's enough of that!"

The broad-mouthed Irish bartender, who had been standing at the other end of the bar was suddenly in front of him.

"Say, mister, I think you've had enough."

"Guess I have. Sorry. Thanks."

But as he turned, just before going out the door, he saw the shadow on the wall again. And the strange thing was that there wasn't any object in front of any light to cast the shadow. It was simply there.

The bartender was staring at it, too.

THAT WAS at 9:50 o'clock on the night of August 1. You may remember how hot is was that night and there was a full moon. It was still hot at 9 o'clock the next morning when they steered him before the line-up at the Newark Detective Bureau.

His hangover should have been terriffic. Curiously, it wasn't—yet. Curiously, he remembered almost everything that had happened the night before: the shadow, growing larger and larger; the bartender ordering him out of the joint; his being picked up by the cops a few minutes later just this side of the brewery on Raymond Boulevard.

But what he couldn't understand as he stood there, tipsy, blinking in the bright lights beyond which the sixty-odd detectives were seated, was what the lieutenant meant when he spoke into the microphone at the pulpit:

"All right, men. Take a good gander. This is the yellow rat that killed Marty O'Toole last night—as nice a guy as ever drew a mug a suds."

The lieutenant must be talking about the man next to him in the line-up, he thought, that dark-skinned, slick-haired guy.

But then the lieutenant said, "Tossed a glass of whiskey at Marty, and as luck would have it a chip of glass clipped Marty in the nape of the neck. No bigger'n a needle, men, but it done for Marty. And it done for this chicken-livered punk, too."

He tried to voice protesting words. "That wasn't the way it was!" Hysterical words that he had screamed from his cell through the night. "I threw the glass at a shadow, I tell you. The shadow was creeping. It had a face." But now, somehow, the words didn't come.

The lieutenant's voice grew cold and academic.

"Name, Lawrence Fairwell. Age, 31. Address—too drunk to tell us. Occupation—petroleum geologist."

Fairwell blinked into the bank of lights. They were talking about him all right.

"No previous record. Papers show he served with Army Engineers. Height, five feet eleven. Weight, a hundred and eighty. Hair, thick, blond, curly. Eyes, dark blue. Slight scar on left cheek. Left arm scarred. Needle pricks. Hype, of course. Uh—"

The lieutenant stopped short, adjusted his spectacles and frowned at a paper on the pulpit in front of him.

"That's funny. Doc Sadders who examined him found no sign of dope addiction. Uh—"

A thin smile curled Larry's lips, interpreted by the detectives no doubt as bravado, then faded.

"Of course there was no sign of addiction," he thought. "They didn't know about those nights of the shadow. . . ."

AS THEY led him later from Police Headquarters across No Name Alley to the waiting car, he heard newsboys screaming the headlines:

COPS NAB JINX TRIP SURVIVOR,
CLAIM HE MURDERED BARTENDER

Arrest Launches Investigation
Of 3 Deaths in Darkest Africa

At first, the headlines made no sense to him at all. But there was time, plenty of it, to remember while he was waiting in the Newark Street Jail.

At first, he was able only to remember the events immediately preceding his entrance to the saloon: the sudden decision to flee New York, the short ride on the Hudson Tube train from Fulton Street to Newark's Penn Station, the aimless wandering through the industrial Ironbound section and, finally, the smashing of the glass.

But why had he left New York? Certainly, not because he'd lost his job. Drunk or sober, he was still the best damn oil smeller in the business, and he'd have gotten another job fast enough once he'd pulled himself together. It wasn't that.

Then was it because he wanted to find Tommy Webster? He'd wanted to see him; he remembered that well enough. He'd thought Tommy could help him . . . Tommy, who lived somewhere in the Oranges. No—it couldn't have been that, either. For he wouldn't have taken the Hudson Tube. He'd have taken the ferry to Hoboken.

What was it? Now he remembered: he'd been making friends again—and endangering those friends.

What was it the lieutenant had said caused O'Toole's death? A tiny hole in the nape of the neck? He laughed grimly. He'd bet they hadn't found the chip of glass. He'd even make it his defense, if worse came to worst. They didn't even need to *tell* him they hadn't found it. He *knew*. For hadn't it been that way with the others? What others?

Gradually, as the effects of those long weeks of alchoholic indulgence drained away, the other events of the past began to settle themselves in time and space. It was like the ball in a pin-ball machine, settling itself slowly into a pocket; and then another ball settled, and then another—until they were all there and they formed a pattern. And the pattern led back to that time, not four months before, when their plane was forced down by engine trouble in Northern Abyssinia.

They were after oil. He and Ted Ryan—they'd come out of Colorado Mines together and served together in the war—were in charge of the expedition.

They were forced down in the Province of Waag, not far from the Takazze River, one of the sources of the Nile. It was wild, rugged back country in the shadow of that three-mile-high peak, Ras Dascian. There was nothing to do but wait for help; the mechanic needed a part that would have to be flown in from Cairo. They radioed for it.

Some of the men went hunting; others stayed with the plane and played cards. Larry and Ted visited a native village of thatched huts nearby, and were greeted by the head man—a monstrous old man who somewhere had picked up a smattering of English. He gave them cheese and native cake and a concoction of fermented goat's milk. Then, in the manner of a proud chamber of commerce guide, he showed them the local points of interest.

Ras Dascian, he told them, was the "House of Paradise," where that fabulous ancient king of Christian Ethiopia, Prester John, lived. Along the Takazze, he added, they would find good fishing. But of one region they must beware. This was the country upstream some miles where the hills rolled down from Ras Dascian to the very edge of the river. There was a fearful cave there, known as the "Cavern of the Damned."

"Cavern of the Damned?" asked Larry, restraining a smile.

The old man nodded gravely. Haltingly he explained that this cave was the mouth to hell; that obscene spirits dwelt there, walled up in the old times by a strange hero who had rescued the land from a disastrous plague.

He was quite vague, for, after all, it was only an obscure legend handed down in the village from generation to generation. But some of the spirits were known to be vulturous bird-like creatures who fed on souls. And as for proof, what more was needed than the fact that none of these hill folk dared approach it?

"It is tabu," the head man advised. So, naturally enough, once they were out of his sight, that was where they directed their steps.

"Feel like a damned archaeologist," Ted said as they made their way across the plain. But Larry was thoughtful. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind hung an elusive story associated with the old man's words.

"Remember what happened to the guys who busted into King Tut's tomb?" he asked.

"Yeah, they'da died anyway," jeered Ted.

They had no trouble locating the cave—in a high bluff above the river bank. And when they had climbed to the mouth they found, perhaps half a dozen paces inside, that the interior was cut off by a block of stone.

It was a small block of stone—greenish-black in color, smooth, and showing evidence that at some time in the long past it

had been hewn from a much larger block.

"Basalt—amygdaloidal," was Larry's quick analysis. "Ethiopian marble. Blanford says it's not later than the Oolite. Whoever put it there had to cart it quite a ways. I haven't noticed the Ashangi formation hereabouts."

They'd probably have left the stone, had it not been for Ted's amazing discovery.

"Hey, look—glyphs!"

Sure enough, finely inscribed over the smooth marble as if with diamond point, almost too small for observation, Larry saw the queer characters of some ancient language.

He was unaccountably uneasy, had a sudden desire to leave. He was even about to say, "Aw, let's scram." Only, for some reason, he didn't say it. And when Ted suggested, "Let's try to move it," he found himself at Ted's side, throwing the weight of his body against the rock.

"Won't budge. Listen! Hear that?"

It seemed to Larry, though he could not be sure, that from behind the stone he heard the faint fluttering of wings, a fainter chattering.

"Bats?"

"How'd they get in there?"

"Maybe cracks above? Let's give another heave."

Yes, that's what Larry found himself saying: "Let's give another heave." Good God in Heaven, why? Actually, he felt most uncomfortable. Actually, he'd rather be out in the sunlight of the plain instead of here in this shadowy, sepulchral opening. But he seemed drawn to this place, compelled to stay. Why? Had he expected to find a tomb filled with gold and jewels?

They pushed, and suddenly the green-black stone gave. Not much. But still, they felt it move as if it were crazily tilted on a secret pivot; and they saw, just to Larry's right, a slender crack appear between the slab and the limestone wall of the cave.

But that wasn't all. They felt the abrupt absence of something that had been there with them. They looked at each other, puzzled.

"What . . .?"

"It's . . . hell, you can't hear it any more?"

That was it: the chattering, the faint fluttering of wings had ceased. And it was then, as their eyes turned back toward the crack, that the strange thing happened.

They talked about it later as they plodded through the waist-high grass of the plain, down the valley toward the disabled transport.

"Bat?"

"It wasn't any bat," said Ted. "Too small."

Lizard?"

"They're fast—but not that fast."

"No," mused Larry, "it really wasn't a lizard, either, though it clung to the wall like one. Did you see it when it came out of the crack? Seemed to stop there and fill it, and then scoot right out."

"More like a shadow," Ted said. "But that couldn't be. The whole cave entrance was in shadow. You can't throw shadow on shadow. And when it reached the sunlight, did you see what happened? Vanished—just like that! The damnedest thing."

WELL—that's how it was. And somehow, after that, they hadn't felt like trying to move the stone any farther. Help came two days later and they flew on down to Addis Adaba. And that was where Ted died one morning, screaming with pain as he ran crazily through the sun-washed streets, clutching at the back of his neck.

How, why had he died? Well, there was the incision in the flesh, of course. And after all, asked the native police with a shrug, was a stabbing so uncommon?

A pretty rough deal, any way you looked at it. But over and above his sense of deep personal loss, Larry—young, strong, and with an intelligent faith in his own destiny—knew the birth of worry. He must have imagined, he kept telling himself, that just before Ted walked out of the cool shade of the hotel he had seen the tiny shadow again, fluttering moth-like across Ted's face.

Yes, of course, it must have been imagination based on an association of ideas; in this case, something that two long-time and understanding friends had seen together in a cave. A mutual experience. And what could be more natural than that both should "see" it again when they were together? He was pretty sure that Ted had seen it. For he had put his hand to his face, there in the dim lobby of the hotel, with the gesture of a man brushing away a fly. Then, alone, he had walked out to his death.

A week of inexplicable restlessness was followed by the crew's moving south to make permanent base in the rainy forests of Kenya. And there, a fortnight apart, Joe Stuart and Pete Strong died in agony, each with the little hole in his neck.

From his walnut-paneled office in New York, John Greene Edwards, the oil king, called off the expedition and ordered the men back home.

"Hoodoo Hounds Prospectors in Deepest Africa," screamed the newspapers.

"Snake bite," the company doctor told ship news reporters when they docked. For after all, he explained, there were deadly mamba and puff-adder snakes thereabouts. Privately, the doctor had his doubts; he had observed none of the usual symptoms of reptile poisoning.

Larry also kept his thoughts to himself. How could he tell of the slow dawning of horror in that lonely little camp in the jungle? Each time, just before Stuart and Strong had died, he had seen the shadow close to them—and each time a little larger. There were nights, too, as he lay on his cot in the hot, dark tent that he had felt it. Feel a shadow? How could you feel a shadow? But he had, and he could tell how it felt, creeping along his leg and thigh and up his side until finally it came to rest against his arm, like the light brushing of a feather against his bare flesh. That is how it felt. But how could you tell a cynical, hard-boiled New York ship's reporter about that? Or how could he relate that sometimes the shadow merged with his own, and that then his was protrusive and unnatural. Always he feared that someone would notice it.

At first, out there in Kenya, he had thought he might be suffering hallucinations, the result of an equatorial fever. But back in New York there was no fever and —he had seen the shadow, large as a woman's fan, just before Charlie Layton died.

That was shortly after midnight, July 18. And how the newspapers had overlooked it, Larry couldn't say. Perhaps they were pressed for space that night; perhaps it was because Layton worked for another outfit and even the police at the time didn't know Larrry was his friend. All that the papers carried was a one-paragraph item under a one-line head: "Pedestrian Stabbed."

But it was then that Larry began to regard himself as untouchable, a hell of a thing for a gregarious man. And it was why, in the end, he had left New York. Even a heel couldn't do that to his friends.

Thinking about it during those first fitfully miserable nights in his cell, he strove for possibilities. He had discarded the theory of fever, but now he reconsidered it. Couldn't it have been fever in Kenya—and alcohol in New York? He had been drinking for such a long time; he had been drinking as if under a compulsion. Wasn't there just the hopeful chance, he asked during lapses into rationality, that he was suffering delirium tremens?

Why had he been drinking? To forget? To forget what? Ted Ryan's death? Shadows? But that would be a grim joke: to seek in alcohol the escape from fever-born shadows—only to rediscover them in drink. Or—was he mad?

Whatever his thoughts, the shadow was nonetheless with him these nights. Sometimes it lay with him in his cot; sometimes it clung to the cracked wall of the cell in the shape of a loathsome old woman. Or at other times, as he stood peering through the bars on the cell door, it was a wing flitting past the other cell doors on the opposite tier. Hunting? He must be very careful not to make friends in this place.

A guard appeared at his cell door, thrust a heavy key into the lock.

"You're wanted down in the visitor's room, Fairwell. It's your mouthpiece."

"Mouthpiece?" Larry looked at the guard. "I didn't hire any mouthpiece."

"The court appointed him."

Larry shook his head violently.

"I won't see him. That's final, understand? And listen—I've this right, haven't I? If any friends come, I won't see them, either."

CHAPTER TWO

The Moon Brings Death!

TRY THOUGH he might, it was impossible not to form some associations during the exercise periods in the jail yard. And that's how Larry got his clue—from the casual remark of Big Dick Polti, the safe cracker, as they played quoits one day.

"Damned harpy, that's what she was,"

Big Dick grumbled in telling how his moll had gone copper-hearted and turned him into the police.

Larry stared at Polti.

"Harpy?"

"Say—a guy with a education like you must know what a harpy is." Polti tossed a ringer.

"Yes—oh, yes, I know what a harpy is."

"Damn greedy snatcher, that's what she was. Took me for all I had. They got a book in their damn jail library; that's where I read about 'em. Say, mister, what's achin' you? You're white as a ghost! Ain't sick, are you?"

"No—no, I'm not sick."

But after that Larry didn't feel much like playing quoits any more. Suddenly many memories hitherto elusive were coursing back. He knew now why the old man's story down there along the Takazze River of Northern Abyssinia had seemed so tantalizingy familiar.

That day, before they locked him in his cell, he found the book—a dog-eared item among the heterogenous collection peculiar to jails. And that night he lay on his cot re-reading, for the first time in many years, Bulfinch's "Mythology."

It was all there, just as he had remembered it: how Astolpho, paladin of Charlemagne, rode his amazing Hippogriff far up the headwaters of the Nile where he found King Senapus of Abyssinia plagued by a horde of ravenous birds.

> While the guests were seated at table . . . the horrid scream of the Harpies was heard in the air, and soon they approached, hovering over the tables, seizing the food. . . .
>
> In vain the guests struck at them with knives and any weapons which they had, and Astolpho drew his sword and gave them repeated blows, which seemed to have no more effect upon them than if their bodies had been made of air.
>
> At last Astolpho thought of his horn. The Harpies, terrified at the sound, flew away as fast as their wings could carry them. They stretched their flight towards the great mountain, at the foot of which there is a cavern, which is thought to be the mouth of the infernal abodes. Hither those horrid birds flew, as if to their home.
>
> Having seen them all disappear in the recess, Astolpho . . . rolled huge stones into the mouth of the cave . . . so that he effectually barred their passage out, and we have no evidence of their ever having been seen since in the outer air.

The realization that came with this knowledge was a more profound shock than when, in New York, he had come to know himself as untouchable. Before, he had been drunk; but now he was sober. Before, while mystified by this thing that hounded him, he still had hope that it was no more than a malign fancy. But now, here clearly charted, was proof drawn from ancient lore that he was in the malevolent, hungry grasp of the supernatural.

A tale? Then how account for the known tabu among those villages of the Province of Waag concerning that cavern? How account for the old man's warnings? How account for the chattering and fluttering of wings within the cave, and their sudden hushing once they had moved the basalt block? And more than anything else, how account for the flashing shadow that escaped through that crack—and the shadow that had been with him ever since?

Nor could one shrug off the deaths of five men.

Well, Big Dick Polti the safe robber was right: Harpies, from the Greek word for "Snatchers." Larry remembered a line from Homer: "The harpiai have carried off Odysseus." Stemming from classical times, they were early thought to be wind spirits who issued from the netherworld to prey on men. Indeed, Larry recalled, Hesiod had mentioned a harpy named Aello of "Stormwind." And Virgil spoke of another, "Celaeno," which because it meant "Dark" bore out the relationship with Hades.

Still, there was evidence, too, that they were ghosts. Had not Larry himself, straying through the British Museum, come upon those mystical reliefs Sir Charles Fellows had stolen from the famous Harpy Tomb at Xanthus in Lycia?

Always they were female. And if, in Homeric times, they were considered beautiful, still later in the Argonautic saga they were described as taloned birds with the faces of obscene and hideous women.

This much he remembered from his classical reading of college days. And he knew, too, that they had carried over into early Christian times. Wasn't this proved by the tale of Astolpho? Wasn't it proved by his own visit to the cavern where Astolpho had imprisoned them?

Avenging wind spirits from hell, or the

restless ghosts of humans who had lost their souls, this much appeared certain: they were soulless beings, and they hungered for souls.

For a long time after the lights were turned down that night, Larry lay on his cot thinking. Was there any means of escape from such a curse? Or, having fed this winged creature with his own spirit night after night, was he beyond hope?

Lord! If he could only talk to Tommy Webster. For Tomy knew about such things. He remembered him clearly from their college days: a lean, studious, pale-faced lad with enormous glasses. Something of a mystic, who had shifted his interests from geology to anthropology. Larry wondered if he were in the country now. But then—it wouldn't do to ask to see him. It wouldn't do at all. Too dangerous.

PERHAPS only in a prison can sheer terror have such terrifying effects. And terror clutched at Larry's heart when, his eyes still open hours later, he saw the shadow creep out through the bars of his door to the areaway between the tiers where one light still shone dimly. He saw the shadow flit from his own cell row to the cell row opposite. And there he saw it hesitate against a barred door, then quickly vanish.

Instantly, there was a scream—such an hysterical, agonized scream as Larry had not heard since that night just after he had left the Ironbound saloon. Just as abruptly, the screaming stopped.

Lights flashed on. Larry heard running steps on the concrete floor below.

"What is it? Where the hell did that come from?"

The steps slowed; the guards were ascending the iron stairs.

"Up here, I think."

And even as the guards reached the stairhead and began moving along the catwalk from cell to cell, flashing their lights upon each bunk as they passed, Larry saw the shadow pass through his own door and approach his cot.

Now, from all the cells, rose a mad yelling of trapped and frightened men. They shouted curses. They banged on their cell doors with pans. They cried out to be released. And over the din, Larry heard an iron door swing open and a guard exclaim:

"Good God! It's Big Dick—murdered!"

* * *

Larry saw the headlines when they led him into the warden's office late that afternoon:

BARKEEP'S KILLER STABS
SAFE CRACKER IN PRISON

He kept his eyes on it for almost a minute. So? They'd already convicted him, had they? Of O'Toole's death, and now Polti's? Under other circumstances, it might have been amusing. He read the lead:

> Larry Fairwell, 31, already suspected in the slaying of three companions in Africa and now awaiting indictment for homicide in Newark Street Jail in another case, today was questioned concerning . . . .

So that's how it was?

> Some mystery was attached to the manner in which Polti was killed. He was found locked in his cell, and a careful search revealed no weapon.

Some mystery! I'll say there was.

> Young Fairwell, a petroleum engineer, was also locked in his own cell . . . .
>
> Guards found Polti half sitting up in his cot, one hand clutching at the back of his neck. Medical Examiner Nathaniel Milton said he found a small incision in the nape about the size of a shingle nail. It was a similar wound which killed O'Toole . . . .

Larry was thinking: "But Polti wasn't any friend of mine. I met him only a couple of times. And O'Toole—why, there weren't ten words between us. I don't understand.

Warden Roger Hall, a big, meticulous man of about Larry's own size, picked up the paper, meticulously folded it and put it away.

"Well, now, Fairwell, what'd you have against Polti? Playing quoits with him yesterday weren't you? What'd he do, cheat?

Warden Hall was bluff, he was pompous, he was proud of his intuition. It took a mighty smart prisoner, he often said, to pull the wool over *his* eyes.

Larry said nothing.

The warden said, "Of course, we know how you killed him. Just like you did O'Toole."

"With a chip of glass, Warden?" Larry asked innocently.

The warden concealed his annoyance.

But he wondered: Did Larry know there wasn't any chip of glass? Did he realize that that was the reason the prosecutor hadn't taken his case before the Grand Jury yet?

The warden said casually, "Of course, we know what you did, too. You threw a dart from your cell to his. A dart with a thread attached. Then you drew it back."

Larry was surprised at the man's stupidity.

"Did you ever play darts, Warden?"

The warden frowned. He was thinking: At night, through bars, around a corner, then drew the dart back without snagging, without the thread breaking. He stroked his chin. But how in the devil had Fairwell done it?

And Larry didn't say. After four hours of close questioning—by Warden Hall, by detectives, by the prosecutor—he said not another word. He had no fear of these men—of any man. He was far beyond that. Nor did he any longer fancy himself the victim of tropical fever or delirium tremens. If, in the line-up that first day, he had wanted to blubber hysterical nonsense about a creeping shadow, he now held his peace. He knew what he knew; and he knew that only one man perhaps—Tommy Webster—could help him. It was something he must wrestle with himself.

Yet, if the interview was unsatisfactory from Warden Hall's view, it shed a little light on Fairwell's dilemma for himself.

"What've you been doing up there in your cell, Fairwell? Making shadow pictures?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Warden Hall grinned.

"The other inmates in your tier tell me the last couple of days they saw a shadow near your cell. Like a bird, they said."

Larry tried to smile it off. But he couldn't. It was his first intimation that the shadow could be seen by others than those about to die.

"Well," said the warden at length, "we can't have you mixing with other men. God knows what you might do." And with a heartiness for which he had no heart, he slaped Larry on the shoulder. "But when you decide to talk, Fairwell, just let me know."

So they put him in solitary, which was the worst thing they could do. For the "hole" does things to a man's thinking.

YOU HAVE to look at it Larry's way, for there's no other way to look at it.

The codes of men don't hold in matters beyond men's comprehension. Certainly, under any conceivable human code, the cold-blooded decision Larry finally made would have doomed him. But when he reached that decision, was he altogether human himself?

Oh, yes, he realized in the beginning that it was necessary to segregate a man with a communicable disease for the welfare of others. Yet here he was, a vigorous young fellow with a hitherto sunny disposition who liked friends, fresh air, sunshine, active sports. And now he was hidden away by himself—for what? Not for anything *he* had done. *He* hadn't killed those three men in Africa; *he* hadn't killed Charlie Layton or Martin O'Toole or Big Dick Polti. Then why should *he* suffer?

The loneliness gnawed at his mind.

Then, too, there was the matter of his soul. Had the thing gotten it finally? Certainly, for him to reach the final decision he did, there must have been at least a deterioration of the soul; a shrinkage of the soul stuff within him—perhaps its complete destruction.

As men will, he became in those long, lonely nights resigned to the thing—like a man who has made a bad marriage and seeks to make the best of it. And habit so grew that he even found a strange comfort in its companionship.

Until he came to think: "If she's got my soul, she's part of me—and I'm part of her. Why should I fight her?"

In this light, it was only natural for him to begin studying this new she-side of himself, this parasitic alter ego. He asked: What was she? Where had she come from? What was her purpose? Why had she not killed him?

He laid these questions out in the same order that, in college, he had laid out specimens of rock. Then, from what evidence he had, he tried to find answers.

He thought always of this new self in the feminine. And this was because, since he had first noticed its vague outline in the Ironbound saloon, the female face between the two broad wings had insensibly grown more distinct. And though the face was no less hideous than when he had first seen it, all of the features were now there: Pro-

jecting ears, straggly hair, moronic forehead, flat nose, bulbous mouth, receding chin, eyes. . . .

Eyes? Larry stared again as she clung to the wall.

Why, there were no eyes! Not even in the sense of the lowest order of animal life. There were not even the sockets for eyes. The low forehead merely merged with the cheeks and nose. She was blind by nature!

That's how he learned why she hadn't killed him. Unable to see her way about in this world of light, she held to him as a blind man does to his dog for guidance. From him, as the center of her existence, she directed her proscribed movements—never venturing, on those sanguinary excursions, beyond reach of her vibrant perception of him.

Here, certainly, must be the answer to those two virtual strangers, O'Toole and Polti. They were simply (and sweat spilled from his pores at the revelation) *the only available human beings, within vibratory radius of his own guiding self, at the time of her need!*

That he had been with friends during the earlier stages of this horror was only natural. And since, realizing that in some mysterious way he was harming those friends he had fled them, he was now solely with strangers who must bear the brunt of her savagery. It was as simple as that.

The shock of this discovery led him to renew the study of her face. What he saw only confirmed his theory. Blind things are not without their expression; but this blind thing had none. There was no suggestion by any movement of the mouth or nose, by any line of the features, of any intelligence whatever. It was a vacuous, mindless face that would have made even the imbecilic seem like genius.

Thus Larry was led to his second discovery: that this sightless creature was also without conscious purpose. There was no discriminating design in her career of slaughter—only a compelling, inexorable necessity. But what force it was from out of the dateless primordial past that compelled her, who could say?

HARDENED as he might well have been by the terrifying proximity of this thing, the thought of what lay behind her actions brought new terrors to Larry's mind, filled it with nameless fears.

What was she? Where had she come from? How was she born? Was she a remnant from the antediluvian past, a monstrous survival of the world's infancy? Or did she antedate creation itself? Only God or Satan could tell.

And why she had attached herself to him instead of Ryan, Larry might never know. He could only hazard that, at the time of her release, he was the nearer.

Again, a line from his own reasoning returned to haunt him: *". . . at the time of her need!"*

God in Heaven, how could one know the time! How predict when that fateful force would compel her to strike again? Apalling as was the idea that her need was periodic, here at last was something substantial to work upon. Larry studied the history of these murders.

Aided by memory, by association, by a pocket almanac the guards had permitted him to keep, he was able to chart the deaths. They found the chart later, drawn with soap on the cell wall. This is how it read:

Ryan.....Addis Ababa....about 7:30 A.M., April 21.
Stuart.....Kenya.....about 8 A.M., May 5.
Strong.....Kenya.....about 5 P.M., May 20.
Layton.....N.Y.C.....12:15 A.M., July 18.
O'Toole....Newark..... 9:50 P.M., Aug. 1.
Polti.....Jail..... 5:12 A.M., Aug. 16.

Roughly, the first three deaths were two weeks apart; so, too, were the last three. Larry wondered: Was it a fortnightly hunger? But how could that be? There seemed to be no real regularity when, for example, there were fourteen days between the deaths of Ryan and Stuart and fifteen and one-half days between Stuart's and Strong's.

And take the space between the Layton and O'Toole deaths. Just fourteen days, twenty-one hours and thirty-five minutes. And from O'Toole to Polti, fifteen days, four hours and fifty-seven minutes.

Could it be, Larry wondered, that one soul was more or less nourishing than another?

It was a paragraph, finally, from the

almanac that gave him his clue. It read:

"Tides do not always rise to the same height. At new and full moon the range is increased while at the moon's quadrature the range is decreased."

Larry's heart skipped a beat. Why, of course! The moon ruled the tides; why could its changes not rule the hellish appetite of this primitive creature? Then, suddenly, he was remembering that night in the Ironbound saloon when, through the window just before the advent of the shadow, he had seen a glorious full moon riding high above the smoke stacks of the factories.

His hand shook as he turned the pages of the almanac to the tables of the moon's phases. First, August 1. O'Toole. Under August, he read: "Full Moon—first day, 8:50 P.M."

That, for a moment, puzzled him. There was an hour difference between the full moon and O'Toole's murder. But wait! The almanac was in Eastern Standard Time. The saloon clock was on Daylight Time.

Excitedly, he checked the Layton death. July 18, 12:15 A.M., Daylight Time. Actually, July 17, 11:15 P.M., Standard, the exact time of a new moon.

He was on the track now. Polti had died under a full moon at 4:12 A.M., Standard, August 16—an hour later by Daylight Time.

The East African deaths were more difficult to compute. There was an eight-hour time difference there. Ryan was killed somewhere between 7 and 8 in the morning of April 21 at Addis Ababa. And at 11:19 P.M., April 20, EST, the moon was new. Add eight hours to 11:19 P.M. and you got 7:19 A.M., the next day.

Well, that clinched it, didn't it? She struck with the new moon, she struck with the full!

Still, Larry had the feeling that something was radically wrong. Now he saw what it was: how account for the long lapse between Strong's death May 20 out there in Kenya and Layton's in New York in mid-July? Almost two months divided those death—not two weeks.

Suddenly he stared in horror at the chart:

Good Lord! *Others must have died, too!* Others, of whom he didn't know. Where? In Cairo, while they waited for their ship to France? On shipboard in the Mediterranean? In Paris, during their layover? And who were these innocent victims? Larry might never know.

Well, this was Friday, August 29, Hesitantly, apprehensively, he turned the page. He had the awsome conviction—experienced so seldom by man—that he was about to peer into the future.

The type was black and cold and casual. All that it said was:

"Sunday, August 31—full moon, 11:34 A.M."

Yet Larry was sweating as he added an hour to the time.

CHAPTER THREE

Harpies From Hades

IT WAS, after all, a very simple thing to engineer. Hadn't the warden said, "But when you decide to talk, Fairwell, just let me know."

Yet, at the last minute, his plan nearly failed. For Guard Steigman, who twice a day—at 11 and 5—brought him his slops, was wary of this dangerous prisoner who was kept to himself down in this stinking bowel of the jail. It was lonely and damp down there, and Steigman was not a brave man.

Sunday, promptly at 11, Fairwell heard the clomp of the man's boots on the concrete of the basement floor. Then, suddenly, the man was before the iron door, poking the usual boiled cabbage and boiled potatoes and stale bread through the little aperture. Larry snatched at it and threw the mess onto the cell floor.

"Whatcha do that for? Wanta starve?"

"I'm ready to talk, Steigman."

Steigman laughed harshly.

"Oh yeah? You'll talk in hell, that's what."

"Listen! You know as well as I do, Hall gave orders when I was ready to talk I'm to see him."

"So what? Or didn't you know it was Sunday. He mightn't be around."

"You find him."

"He might be in church."

"That's a laugh."

"Yeah?" Steigman was peering through the aperture. "Say! What's that?"

"What?"

"Like a shadow . . . on the wall . . . moving."

"Don't be an ass, Steigman. What time is it? Eleven, little after? You tell Hall this: that I'm sick of his hole and I'm ready to talk. I'll be ready in one hour, and if he takes any longer I'm liable to change my mind."

"Okay, I'll tell him. Mind, no funny business."

And Steigman went away, clomping over the bare floor. Larry turned to the wall and stared at it fixedly. Almost, this blind, senseless leech had betrayed him.

* * *

He'd counted, of course, on Warden Hall's vanity. He didn't count wrong. There'd be no others at the interview, only the warden and himself. The warden would want lone credit for the confession. It would be a feather in his cap. Later, he'd bring in the stenographer, witnesses.

It was 12:20 when they sat down, facing each other across the table; Hall, eyeing him coldly; Larry, licking his lips.

He started slowly, telling about Ryan. He laid it on thick.

"It was a stiletto job," Larry said.

"To hell with that," interrupted the warden. "I want to hear about Polti."

"I'll tell it my way."

Impasse. The two glared at each other. The warden shrugged. The clock on the wall struck 12:30. Larry continued.

At 12:32, the warden growled:

"Fairwell, you're lying. . . ."

It was then Larry saw it—at first, small like a moth; then growing larger. . . . Larry glanced at the clock. At 12:33 Warden Hall saw it. He sprang up and stared.

"What's that?" he demanded.

The hand of the clock moved, and it was all over.

* * *

Sunday night, headlines:

MAD KILLER SLAYS WARDEN, ESCAPES NEWARK ST. JAIL

Guard Describes Hoax

Police Spread 8-State Net; All Roads, Bridges Blocked

Monday morning, more headlines:

Examiner's Autopsy Reveals Warden Met Bloodless Death

Monday afternoon:

Fairwell Case Takes Fantastic Turn; Detectives Admit They Lacked Proof Fugitive Murdered O'Toole or Polti

Fellow Prisoners Claim Shadow Haunted Fairwell; "Bosh!" Says Prosecutor

Tuesday morning:

Fairwell Death Calendar Found In Cell Pictures Him as Slave Of Periodic Impulse to Murder

* * *

"You've got a hell of a nerve coming here."

"But, Tommy, don't you see? I'm up against it, and you're the only one who can help me. *I* didn't kill them."

THOMAS CADMAN WEBSTER, M.A., Ph.D., D.Sc., Litt.D., noted anthropologist, famed for his essays on primitive religions, paused in his agitated pacing to stare at his late caller. His distraught glance strayed to the telephone. His eyes dropped to the headlines of the papers strewn over the library table.

He said, "You're trying to tell me you didn't kill Warden Hall? And yet you are wearing his clothes, you have his money, his keys?"

"Tommy, listen! I did kill *him*. That's my trouble. I'm going haywire. The others . . . I had nothing to do with them. But the warden . . . I'm guilty of that. At least, I arranged it." He paused. "And yet, Tommy, if it hadn't been the warden, it would have been somebody else whom I'd nothing to do with."

Webster wheeled.

"What do you mean by that? That you have an ungovernable impulse as the newspapers insist, as the calendar in your cell implied?"

"No, not that, either. If you'd only listen."

With resignation, Webster sat down.

"Did you know I called at the jail—in fact, several of us—and they wouldn't let us see you?"

"I gave orders, Tommy. You see, that was when I thought it was jealous and only after my friends."

"It?"

"Listen—"

At first, Webster had difficulty following the outlines of Larry's story. Perhaps Larry was incoherent; perhaps the thing itself was so inconceivable. Then, little by little, to his growing amazement, Webster found himself listening with care.

"Yes," he interposed at one point, "yes, I recall the Astolpho legend very well . . ."

And again: "Oh, so you've seen the Xanthus reliefs, too? Yes, coming from a tomb, it *would* seem to tie them in as ghosts somehow."

Still, when Larry had finished at last, Webster, the man of science, could only say: "You're mad, of course. This periodicity of compulsion, with its connection with the phases of the moon . . . and what else is lunacy but insanity broken by intervals of reason? You're evidently now in one of the rational periods. You see that, don't you?"

Larry's fists clenched the arms of his chair. Webster watched the hands warily.

"And it's not as if moon madness were really a myth," Webster continued. "Every so often, there's such a case . . . that Cleveland torso killer, for example, who strikes with the full moon."

He knew it was dangerous to try to reason. Yet he couldn't help himself. Reason, rationalism, scientific research were his forte. Still. . . .

"Tommy," Larry's voice was pleading, "why do you think I came here? To hurt you? No, of course not. Because you're the one person I know who can help me. Look at it this way. Never . . . in any of these cases . . . have they found a weapon." He paused. "And how—how in the name of heaven—could I have gotten to Polti?"

It was that, perhaps, more than anything, that began to move Webster. His eyes reverted to the headline: ". . . admit they lacked proof fugitive murdered O'Toole or Polti."

And even a man of science doesn't spend years studying savage rites without touching the hem of mystery, without confronting at some time or other the inexplicable. He murmured: "There are the Tuareg harpies of Timbuktu, of course . . . sorcerers."

He found himself recalling De Grivy's report, based on Johannes de Cuba's "Hortus sanitatis":

> "They were birds with human faces which nevertheless were no way human. Harpies ate continually without being able to glut themselves, and would devour any kind of flesh, but especially that of men. They were found in great numbers on the shores of the Black Sea . . . ."

And then Webster found himself thinking: And what's science, really, but the objective scrutiny of all the evidence? He got up and went to the book shelves that reached across two walls of the study, and took down a volume by Montague Summers. He read, not realizing that he read aloud:

> "In essaying some explanation of the phenomena, I approach these problems entirely from the theological and philosophical point of view, where alone the solution can lie. Far be it from me to seem in any way to depreciate or underreckon the valuable work which has been done by the anthropologists in collecting parallels from many countries and tracing significant rites and practices among primitive and distant folks, *but they cannot read the riddle,* and only too often have their guesses been far away from the truth. It could not be otherwise if they disregard the science of God for the science of man. Anthropology is the humblest handmaid of theology."

He looked at Larry.

"But a shadow? If it were something substantial . . . I might be able to conceive of it. But a shadow." He paused. "Wait—"

Once more he went to the shelves and this time he took down a volume of that greatest of all anthropologists, Sir James G. Frazer's "Perils of the Soul."

> "Clearly in these cases the shadow, if not equivalent to the soul, is at least regarded as a living part of the man or the animal, so that injury done to the shadow is felt by the person or animal as if it were done to his body . . . .
>
> "Conversely, if the shadow is a vital part of a man or an animal, it may under certain circumstances be as hazardous to be touched by it as it would be to come into contact with the person or animal. Thus in the Northwest Province of India people believe that if

the shadow of the goat-sucker bird falls on an ox or a cow . . . the beast will soon die. The remedy is for someone to kill the bird . . . ."

WEBSTER closed the book thoughtfully.

"There's a poser. 'Kill the bird.' But what do you do when there isn't any bird, when there's only a disembodied shadow?"

Larry breathed relief.

"Ah—you're believing."

Webster flung himself into a chair. He snapped, "No, I'm not believing. Let's put it this way: I've an open mind. And I'm surprised I have. It's difficult to get used to the idea of the insubstantial . . . unless you're a mystic. And I'm not."

Larry reached into the warden's coat, extracted one of the warden's cigarettes, lit it with the warden's lighter. Narrowly, Webster watched him and, noting the alien initials on the lighter, bit his lips at this near, visible proof of the violent death of Roger Hall.

"Perhaps," ventured Larry, "in creation, shadow came before substance."

Webster drew himself together with an effort.

"Chicken or the egg?"

"Something like that."

Webster drew a deep breath.

"Well—what do you want me to do, hide you?"

"That, and help me get rid of the damn thing if you can."

Webster's eyes bored a hole in the carpet. He considered: It would be an excellent opportunity, afforded to few of his calling, to test certain theories. He was a little ashamed of his thought.

He said, "I'm no witch doctor. Probably what you need's a psychiatrist. I'll do what I'm able. You realize, of course, I'll be playing with fire. Accessory after the fact and probably what I ought to do is turn you back." He paused. "My housekeeper left last week and I'm not hiring another immediately. That's to the good. But my sister, Helen, will be back in a few days. She's been in Europe, but she's probably read about you. We'll have to pass you off as someone else."

* * *

What doubts—and they were many—that Dr. Thomas Webster entertained during a restless night dissolved at breakfast the next morning when Larry Fairwell triumphantly dropped the morning paper before him. Black headlines, eight columns across the front page, exclaimed:

LINK AFRICAN JINX WITH NEWARK DEATHS!

And below that, in 12-point boldface type three columns wide:

Addis Ababa, Sept. 2 (INS).—Reports emanating from distant Waag Province today said that a number of natives had been killed recently by strange, vulture-like birds. While little credence is given to the rumors by the European colony here, it has been learned that Emperor Haile Sealssie has ordered an investigation.

Legend has long associated that mountainous district with the harpies of mythology.

Some speculation has arisen since it was in that area last spring that an American airborne oil-prospecting expedition was forced down. Later, Theodore Ryan, expedition member, was mysteriously killed here. Two other members died in Kenya and a fourth, Lawrence Fairwell, is now a fugitive from murder charges in Newark, N. J.

For a long time, while his coffee grew cold, Dr. Webster stared at the story. Slowly he turned to Fairwell.

"Good God! You and Ryan must have released a horde of 'em."

"But what's more to the point," Larry said, and he nodded to a side story. Webster read:

Lunar Changes Govern
Shadowman's Crimes;
Next Death—Sept. 14

Study of the weird, soap-written 'murder calendar' left on his solitary confinement cell by the fugitive Lawrence Fairwell has convinced at least one Newark detective that Fairwell's killings are prompted by a neurotic compulsion which in turn is associated with the changing phases of the moon.

Capt. Maurice Kaplan pointed out last night that on the basis of the periodic slayings of the past, the next murder can be expected at 3:28 P.M., EDT, Sunday, September 14. At that hour a new moon will occur.

Kaplan, while at first inclined to discredit prisoners' claims they saw a ghostly shadow near Fairwell's cell just before Big Dick Polti was killed, is now studying a report from Guard Clarence Steigman that he, too,

saw a moving shadow near Fairwell the day of his escape. Kaplan warned citizens that on September 14 . . . .

Webster drew a hand across his brow.

"Lordy! If that isn't characteristic of newspaper irresponsibility! Why, they'll have three million people in North Jersey scared of their own shadows."

Suddenly he looked searchingly at his guest.

"But—but what will *you* be doing that day, Larry?"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Choice

THERE could have been a hundred reasons for Larry to fall head over heels in love with Helen Webster. Actually, there were only two. One was Helen herself, a gay, pretty, buoyant creature who might have stepped right out of a cosmetics ad. And the other was the contrast she offered to the melancholia of Larry's recent past. It had been a long time since he had enjoyed the company of a lovely young woman.

She had arrived at LaGuardia Field, N. Y., from a summer at the Sorbonne on Thursday. And it wasn't twenty-four hours before Larry was helping her putter around the broad gardens of the Webster West Orange home. Webster, returning from his classes at the college where he taught to find them chatting in the grape arbor, bit his lip. The worst of it was, he reflected, he would have to leave them by themselves so much.

He'd passed his dangerous guest off as "Larry Lane." Larry had insisted on keeping his Christian name. "You have to have some personal integrity," he said.

So Webster had said, "Mr. Lane is helping me with some research, Sis." Which, in a way, was sufficiently accurate.

If she had heard of the mounting public fever occasioned by the search for Lawrence Fairwell, she did not mention it. Certainly, had she seen the pictures of the fugitive, she would not have recognized him. For the bleak-eyed, hollow-cheeked inebriate who had been photographed immediately after his arrest a month ago was a far cry from the well-dressed, athletic young man of today.

Evenings the two men spent in Dr. Webster's study. Once, Webster said, "They were all—ah, bitten in the nape of the neck?"

"All I know of."

"All you know of?" Sharply. "Oh, yes. I'd forgotten the lapse between the time you left Kenya and reached New York." He pulled at his pipe. "It's a pretty common belief," he continued, "that the soul is a bird ready to fly from the body. But how to release it, that's the catch. Here." And he drew from a stack of papers a printed, yellowed pamphlet entitled "Father Boas' Seventh Report on the Northwestern Tribes of Canada."

It told, Larry found, how the Bella Coola Indians believed the soul was a bird imprisoned in an egg and how the egg was lodged in the nape of the human neck.

"You've sucked birds' eggs?"

Larry smiled. "As a boy, yes."

"Then perhaps," ventured Webster, "that's what this—thing is doing."

"What a ghastly thought!" Instinctively Larry fingered the back of his collar.

There was that. And there was another night when, with a hard, wind-driven rain lashing in from the Atlantic, they read the murky pages of "The Book of the Formation" and discussed the dark doctrines of its cabalist authors. They were seeking, as always, a way out.

"It it were simply a matter of exorcism," Webster speculated.

"But it isn't a demon," protested Larry. "It's got no intelligence. I've lived with it so much that I feel it goes back beyond the beginning itself." He picked up a Bible and read: "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. . . . And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. . . ."

He tapped the page of Genesis.

"D'ya see what I mean? That it's some senseless remnant that escaped from the void. And how to get rid of it, there's the problem. If we could get to the hidden meanings of the words of the cabalists, if we could undo creation. . . ."

"What!"

"A little bit, only a little bit, and find some means to drive the thing back, and

then close the door. . . . Then we'd have it."

Webster was staring at him, appalled.

"Do you know what you're saying?"

AND NOW again time was running short. In the cities of North Jersey—in Newark, Elizabeth, Paterson, Passaic, Jersey City, Hoboken, Perth Amboy—the newspapers were filled with stories of the hunt.

"Not since Orson Welles' Martian invasion of this state," wrote one imaginative reporter, "have police and city room switchboards been alight with so many calls from so many frantic citizens.

"Fairwell is reported everywhere: skulking through the Lackawanna freight yards along the Hackensack River; walking the streets of Montclair; hiding in a shack along the Raritan; holed up in the tall grass of the Newark Meadows; or taking the ferry from Bayonne to Staten Island. . . ."

The enterprising *Jersey Journal,* in sidewalk interviews, polled its readers on their plans for spending the fatal Sabbath. And the *New Brunswick Home News* led off with:

"This Sunday you—or you—or you—perhaps a member of your family—perhaps a friend—will fall victim to the Shadow-man unless police, so far eminently unsuccessful, seize him first."

And, libel of libels, one paper went so far as to accuse state troopers of dilatory tactics.

"Can it be," asked the editorial, "that, knowing the man's uncanny ability to murder even while behind bars, the police themselves are disinclined to associate with him?"

* * *

In a pleasant, tree-shaded home in West Orange the nerves of two men were fraying. Dr. Webster, watching from his study window while Larry and Helen played tennis, gasped—and then cursed silently. It was already the Friday before.

That night Webster declared, "I'd been getting used to your over-size shadow—but this afternoon, good God! The damned thing's thin as a reed. Makes you look grotesque."

"It's getting hungry," Larry said. "You see, what happens is that most of the time it associates with my shadow. That makes mine look larger. But toward the end of a period, it's leaner. And that makes mine about normal."

"But doesn't it detach itself, too?"

"From mine? Yes—usually just before, when it goes scouting around. It's small then—about the size of a moth. But in this stage, divorced from mine, it grows a bit until just before the kill it's about the size of a hawk or eagle. I thought I told you that. That's when Steigman saw it."

Webster shuddered.

Larry said, "You don't think Helen noticed it?"

The doctor exploded. "And that's another thing! Stay away from Helen."

"Stay away? But—"

"You heard me, Fairwell. I'll not have it."

Larry gazed beyond his host. Then he faced him. "You might as well know. Helen and I are in love."

"You're—what?"

Larry nodded.

Webster took a threatening step forward. He exclaimed savagely, "But you can't be! Think, man! Think what you're doing! Besides, Helen's only known you for a week, even if you are handsome as hell."

"Didn't you ever hear of love at first sight? Well, it's true."

Webster smiled grimly. "I can always turn you over to the police."

Larry smiled back. It was not a nice smile.

"A lot of good that'll do. They admit they can't pin anything on me."

"No? How about Hall?"

"Strictly circumstantial. Whoever heard of a man stabbed in the neck and not bleeding? And you needn't kid me. I've seen what you've had in mind, shielding me here. It's your damned yen for research. And what if you did turn me in? Where'd your reputation be? You've said yourself, you're an accessory after the fact. And what if I did go to trial? Can't you see the comedy, when the time came, with that thing creeping about among the lawyers and jurors. . . . A mistrial, sure as heaven. And then another—"

"You devil!"

For a long moment, they faced each other. Then, more calmly, Larry said, "No, Tommy. I'm just bedeviled." Then, per-

suasively, "Let's follow our plan. It's really what I've had in mind since I escaped."

The suggestion brought Webster to his senses. Yes, of course; follow the plan, he thought. There'd be no trouble after that. Follow the plan. He smiled secretly.

* * *

Sunday. . . .

The two men, driving west on U.S. 22, listened in silence to the radio:

". . . fear in their hearts, North Jerseyites are flocking today into the churches in record numbers. They seek the safety of their pastors, their families, their friends. The stranger is an outcast, regarded with suspect eye. And in many a tavern, brawls are breaking out between men who have never so much as seen each other before.

"The theaters, the ball parks are empty. And on the sun-lit streets—at Newark's Four Corners, at Jersey City's Journal Square—pedestrians glance warily at the shadows they themselves cast.

"Hysteria mounts by the hour. For over the region hangs a cloud—the cloud of tall, blond, handsome Lawrence Fairwell, age 31, who kills, no man knows how, at each new moon and at each full. In just two hours and ten minutes, when a new moon will be born at 3:28 o'clock, Fairwell is expected to strike again. . . ."

WEBSTER reached out and snapped off the radio. He was making every effort to control himself.

Fairwell said, "I hope you know where you're going."

Webster retorted, "You wanted seclusion, didn't you? Well—you'll get it,"

He was trying to watch the road, but with little success. For he was aware now of a small, black thing no larger than a humming bird flitting across the dashboard. Once it seemed to alight upon his knee and with an involuntary movement, almost hysterical, he struck out at it with his open palm. The car swerved.

At Somerville, Webster swung south on State 31. At Harlingen he turned west again over a narrow, winding country road until, topping a rise, they saw before them the green and wooded wilderness of Sourland Mountain.

Webster asked, "Do you have any idea how far from you it will go—its radius?"

"None. But it can't be great."

"You still feel it won't venture beyond its perception of you?"

"No more than a kite on a string. To me, it's a mindless automaton, obeying laws established before creation. What are the laws? *I* don't know. But perhaps they're vibratory. Perhaps the thing sends out waves like a proximity fuse to steer it home."

"And if it can't find its prey within your aura . . . ?"

"I think it will shrink up and die, don't you?"

Webster did not answer. He had probed so much farther into the arcana of the primitive than Larry . . . and he had thoughts that he kept tightly to himself.

Nervously, as he drove, he was aware of the thing's growth; until now it was darkening half the windshield.

Far past the last farm house, he turned into a steep and rocky lane, walled in by solid forest. As the car ground upwards, Webster said, "Came here hunting once. There's not a soul in miles." He stopped the car in a clearing. "Well—"

Larry opened the door and stepped out. He glanced at his wrist watch—it was exactly 2:05.

"When'll you be back?"

"Tomorrow. Next day. When I feel it's safe."

"It ought to be safe tonight."

"I'm the one who'll determine that," Webster said. And he let in the clutch and began backing and turning. Sudden suspicion dawned on Larry. There was that in Webster's tone, in the man's manner to kindle a frightful conviction. The car paused an instant, the wheels straightened, the gears shifted, and the car began rolling forward down the hill. Larry raced to it, leaped on the running board beside Webster.

"Tell me!" he cried. He tried to reach in and switch off the ignition. Webster struck out at him.

"Damn you, Larry! Let go!"

"Oh—it's very easy for you! Tell me! Tell me!"

Again Webster struck out viciously with his free hand. Larry fell back, sprawling in the gravel. The car hurtled down the lane and out of sight.

BUT Larry knew. With every passing second, conviction grew. He'd been outmaneuvered. And now the thing circled about the clearing, probing, darting, hunting in an ever-widening circle. Large as an eagle's wings, its obscene head distinct in profile, it fanned backwards and forwards, sometimes returning to Larry like a trained falcon, then increasing its arc. And Larry knew that, with no other prey about, it would still blindly insist on gratifying its unholy hunger.

Hell rode with him the next ninety minutes. There were the eons during which he frantically stumbled down the rocky lane; there was the reaching, at long last, of the county road; there was his crazy running along the road as if he were pursued by the legions of hell. Heedless of direction, he was aware of the hateful thing, cavorting ahead of him, sweeping to one side or the other, then returning to him, like a dog to its master.

So far had he lost all sense of moral values that he ran with a coward's fear, with a bestial dread that left room for no other emotion than the elemental thought of survival.

There was a wooden bridge over a crystal stream. And there, exhausted and sweating, he paused to lean against the rail. But even before he caught his breath, he saw the thing soar back to him from a clump of trees and merge with his own shadow. And then—

He felt it creeping up his spine, slowly, tentatively, light as the touch of a feather, until it came to rest at the nape of his neck. In sheer panic, he sprang forward and ran on.

There was the brow of a small hill, a ravine beyond, a car parked off the road, a party of picnickers in a green glade screened by white and slender birch. And there, in a gully, Larry collapsed.

His first sensation was of overwhelming relief, of cool grass against his hot cheek, of exquisite lessening of his heart's pounding, of the miracle of deliverance itself as he felt the pressure ease at his neck, then saw the long, broad wings beating away from him.

Raising himself on his elbows, he peered over the gully's rim to see the thing cours-

ing across the ravine. And then he saw something else. From the party of picnickers a tiny, laughing girl ran out and pirouetted toward him.

More through an involuntary impulse telegraphed from a long-forgotten manhood than from any present ethical understanding, Larry gasped in horror. But he did not act. His last fragment of will died as he watched the child stumble and fall.

* * *

Dr. Webster, from his bedroom, heard the tread of tired feet on the verandah steps. But before he could throw on his robe, descend the stairs and switch on the lights, Larry had let himself in.

There was revulsion and fear in Webster's glare.

"So you couldn't take it," he said slowly.

Larry did not reply. But in his glazed eyes was accusation.

From above came Helen's call: "Who is it, Tom?"

Webster mastered his voice.

"Just Larry, Sis. Returned earlier than he planned."

"How's Washington, honey?" she called. Larry did not reply. "He's gone into the study," Webster lied.

"Oh—then I'll go back to bed."

Webster heard her door close. He glanced at the clock—one in the morning. He returned his gaze to Larry. "Well—speak up, you sniveling coward!"

Larry said nothing.

Webster tried to charge his voice with contempt: "A man who'd kill a kid to save himself!"

Larry only stood there and looked at Webster—looked through him, as if he knew the contempt was a fraud and that only the fear was real.

Uneasily, Webster dropped his eyes to the floor. And there it was, the shadow, bloated now all out of proportion—bloated and corrupting his own shadow by the merest touch. Trembling, he leaped back. Lord God, take it away!

And still Larry only stood there mute.

"Damn it, say something!" It was almost a plea. "How'd you get back? By bus? Didn't they see you? Where . . . ?"

He saw it was useless, at last. And see-

ing that, he saw something else: that Larry was incapable of speech. But was he incapable of comprehension?

"We'll go to the study," Webster said.

Larry did not move.

Unheeding of their union of shadows, Webster violently propelled the stricken man out of the room, seated him in the study, and, himself sitting at his table, regarded him with dismay. As for Larry, it was as if in compensation for his tremendous exertions of the day a cataleptic idiocy had seized him. His members were rigid, his features stone; only in his eyes was there any expression—and the eyes were damned.

Near-hysteria possessed Webster. Ahead of him he saw only ruin: of his name, his professional reputation, for his sister. From mixed motives, he had hidden this man—and now it was too late. If he surrendered him now, how—with a child dead—could he explain his own actions?

And yet, how could he keep him? With Helen in the house? She would call a doctor and the doctor, the police.

He was trapped. . . .

THE INSPIRATION, when it came, left him pale. Reaching for the volume, he found the page.

"The remedy is for some one to kill the bird. . . ."

But what, in this instance, was the bird? The thing itself had no substance. You could not destroy the immaterial. But then, that all along had been the problem: to slay the harpy and release Larry. And under the pressure of time, they had reached no conclusion.

Now, as his glance fell on that distorted shadow cast by Larry, Webster viewed the problem from a different perspective. What else was that huge double shadow there on the floor but a marriage between the two? Was that odious harridan not part and parcel of the man?

From the garage Webster pulled out an old tarp used on many an expedition and dragged it across the lawn and through the French windows into the study. Scrutinizing it for tell-tale labels, he considered what he would tell Helen. That Larry had returned to Washington? Yes, that should suffice—for the present. And he could not see beyond the present need. Other problems could be solved as they came up.

Quietly, he went upstairs and opened his sister's door to assure himself that she slept. Returning through the hall, he was startled by a movement to his right. Had the thing detached itself? Was it moving about again? Was he too late?

With relief, he saw that it was only his reflection in the long mirror. Yet he scarcely recognized the face that looked back at him from the glass.

Larry made no resistance as the doctor half-pushed, half-carried him from the chair. But as he sat rigidly upright in the center of the tarpaulin, Larry's eyes held the fires of hell. Only by avoiding their gaze did Webster hold to his resolution.

It was a quick, clean stroke just at the nape of the neck. And as death released the dementia, the mind-shackled muscles relaxed and Larry Fairwell's body slumped forward.

Webster stepped back, then stared. His clenched fist lifted to his mouth and he bit his knuckles to the bone. From the dead man's shadow a segment divided itself. The thing was crawling toward Webster, slowly merging with his shadow. . . .

THE END

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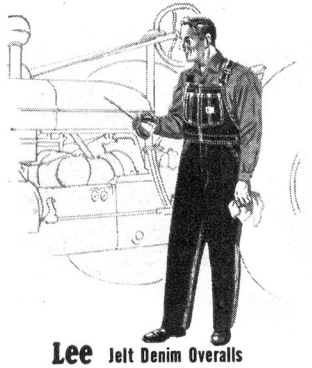

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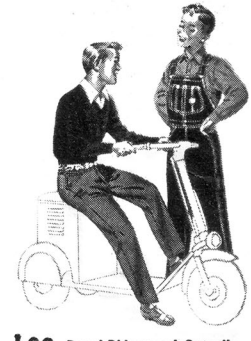

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