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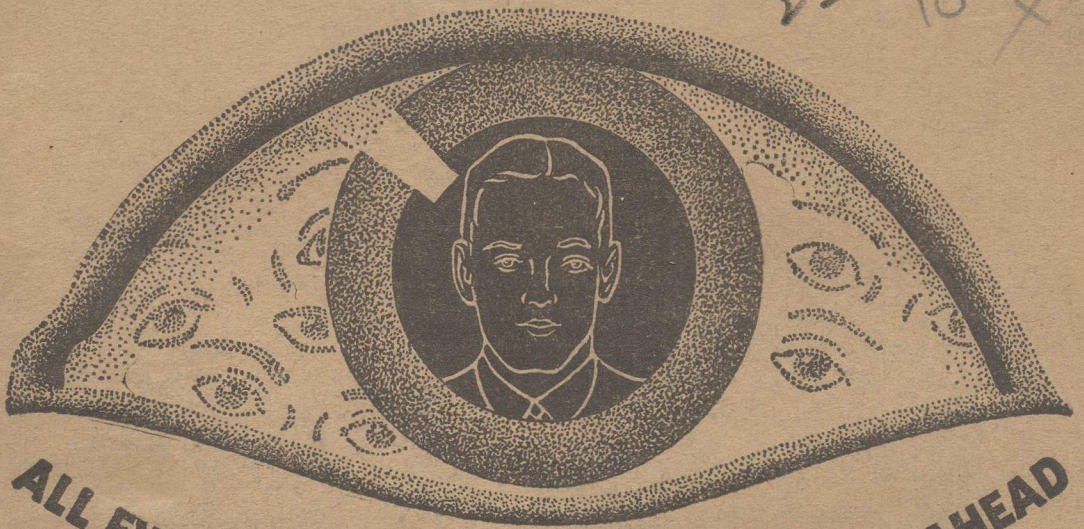
STORIES

AUGUST



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SCORCHERS'  
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*Adventure of Midnight Horror*



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in Chilling Horror*

AUGUST, 1937

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<i>The glorious young body of the girl Terry Grant loved was fated to feel the cold embrace of death, instead of his own warm, protecting one—as her shapely limbs turned slowly into solid stone!</i>		
<b>THE SOUL-SCORCHERS' LAIR (Cover Story)</b> . . . . .	RONALD FLAGG	36
<i>He had a mad desire to scorch his wife's soul, sending the intense heat of a blow-torch through her flesh.</i>		
<b>CORPSE GIRL'S RETURN</b> . . . . .	ERIC LENOX	44
<i>She was alluring, desirable—but the newshawk shuddered. For he knew she had slept the sleep of death with the cadavers in the morgue.</i>		
<b>DEVIL'S BREW</b> . . . . .	BRANTON BLACK	52
<i>Sardonically, Gavin Clark planned murder, and visioned his trembling young wife bestowing her caresses upon a corpse. . . .</i>		
<b>HER ISLE OF HORROR</b> . . . . .	CLIFF HOWE	55
<i>Loretta's dark-eyed invitation made the young investigator face the horrific monsters of her storm-lashed island.</i>		
<b>THE PAIN MASTER'S BRIDE</b> . . . . .	REXTON ARCHER	67
<i>It was stark horror that Edmund Neymores learned when he witnessed the ghastly torment of a helpless girl as she posed for a statue of agony.</i>		
<b>SINISTER SKEIN</b> . . . . .	HORACE STONER	76
<i>Trooper Trant had to untangle a bloody murder skein—depending on the help of a beautiful girl who didn't trust him because he had seen her wearing the briefest of clothing.</i>		
<b>REHEARSAL WITH DOOM</b> . . . . .	TERRENCE FLINT	86
<i>Middle-aged Graham Munster arranged a rehearsal with doom to force his pretty young ward to become his bride.</i>		
<b>LUST FOR BLOOD</b> . . . . .	CLIFFORD GRAY	94
<i>The boat club's secretary floated over corpse currents to a madman's hideaway where the price of life was blood.</i>		
<b>MATE OF THE BEAST</b> . . . . .	LEON DUPONT	102
<i>Len Oakley found that no mortal man could steal a bride of the beast.</i>		
<b>TERROR'S TOMB</b> . . . . .	JOHN GREGORY	107
<i>Private Detective Manton wanted to know why lovely Anne Seymour went willingly into a pit of terror with a parchment-faced fiend.</i>		
<b>STEP-DAUGHTER TO GREED</b> . . . . .	PETER REGINALD	119
<i>Terrified, the girl forced her trembling legs to carry her into the tomb of the dead—to search for an inheritance in hell. . . .</i>		

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From "The Soul-Scorchers' Lair."

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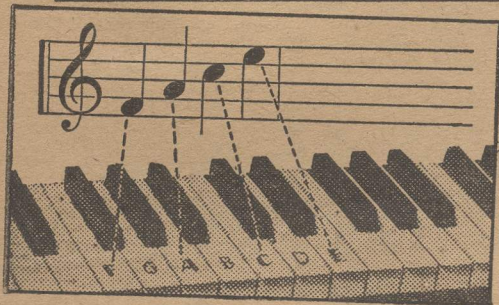
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# A Money-Making Opportunity for Men of Character

## EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

**Costly Work Formerly  
"Sent Out" by Business Men  
Now Done by Themselves  
at a Fraction of the Expense**

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

**Not a "Gadget"—  
Not a "Knick-Knack"—**

but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

**Some of the Savings  
You Can Show**

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$38.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

**Profits Typical of  
the Young, Growing Industry**

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$5.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

**This Business Has  
Nothing to Do With  
House to House Canvassing**

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

## EARNINGS

One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Connecticut man writes he has made \$55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

**No Money Need Be Risked**

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—that is a necessity but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, get in touch with us at once for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, use the coupon below—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. Address

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# Virgins of the

*Gripping Novel of Exotic Adventure*

*By Gates Alexander*

## CHAPTER I

### DEATH SHADOWS

**T**HE hall was dark and still. Fragments of light spattered into it from far off, but only deepened the sinister shadows. No whisper of the before-dawn traffic fifteen stories below, penetrated here. Terry Grant, crouched beside a suit of rusted Asian armor, felt more than saw movement close by. Straining eyes and ears, he snaked out his gun.

He heard nothing. There was not even the sibilance of feet on the thick carpets. Nothing brushed the suits of armor, the cluttered exhibit cases lining the walls. Yet Grant knew the assassin he had awaited throughout the weary night had come. Some sixth sense trickled cold drops of warning down his back.

The invader's progress was as sure and swift as a bat fitting through a cavern. Grant, with cautious breath, automatic in his hand, cat-footed up the hall.

At its remote end a feeble glimmer of street light sifted through a small window, and grayed the darkness. Against it Grant spotted the crouched figure of a man. His outline was vague and enormous. The figure seemed to glide rather than walk, and once more Grant thought of a huge bat. He drew a flashlight from his pocket and crept after that shadowy, somehow horrible shape drifting so silently down the hall, down the hall

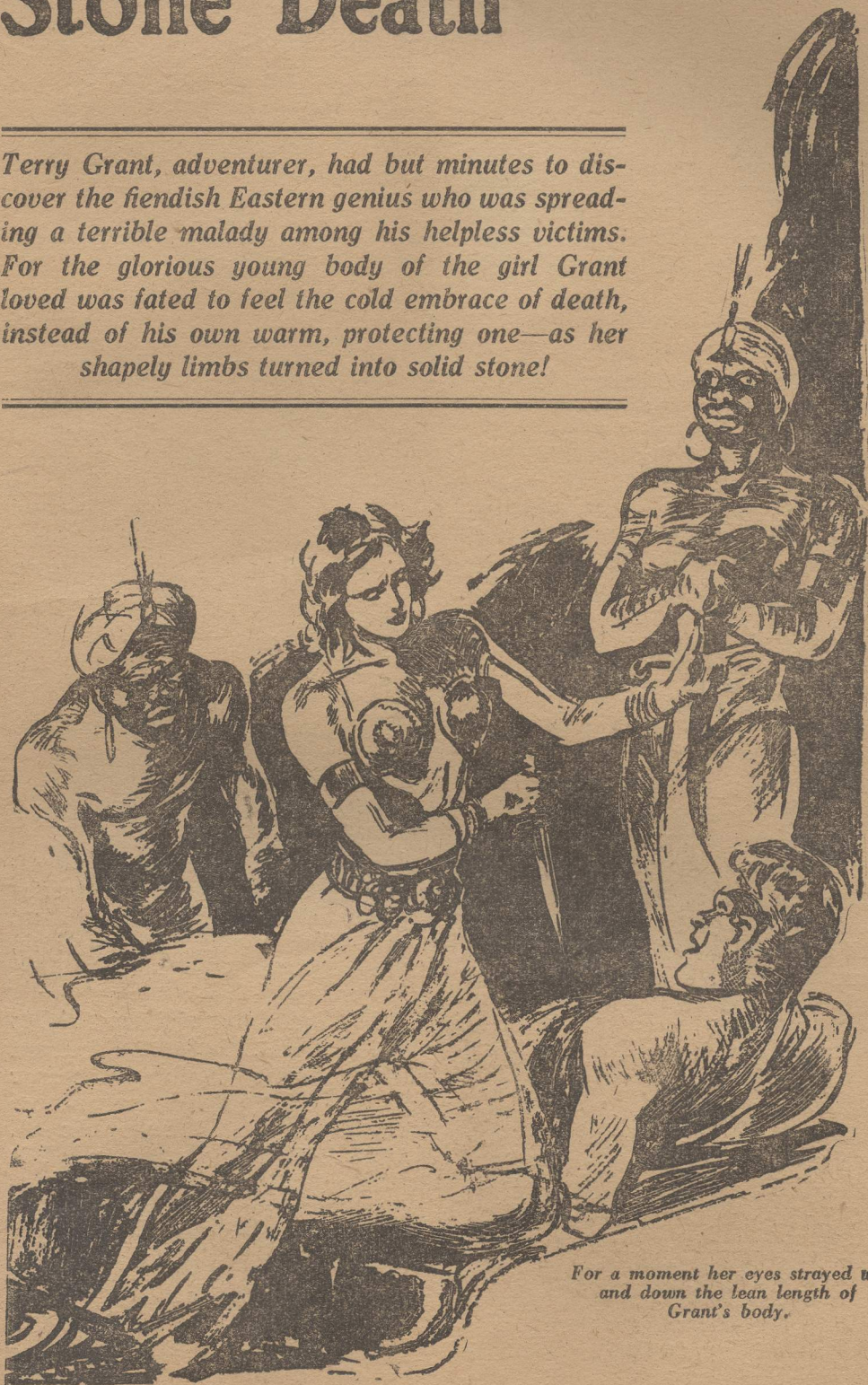


# Stone Death

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*Terry Grant, adventurer, had but minutes to discover the fiendish Eastern genius who was spreading a terrible malady among his helpless victims. For the glorious young body of the girl Grant loved was fated to feel the cold embrace of death, instead of his own warm, protecting one—as her shapely limbs turned into solid stone!*

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*For a moment her eyes strayed up  
and down the lean length of  
Grant's body.*

toward where Colonel Hawks slept, toward where his daughter, Myra, covered behind a locked door.

Terry Grant had taken the job with his tongue in his cheek, reading with amusement the blackmail letter Colonel Hawks had received. Couched in stilted phraseology, it had demanded two hundred thousand dollars on a threat, if he refused to pay, of turning his daughter, rather terribly, into stone.

The letter had gone into gruesome detail:

*First the little toe of that perfect foot will become a trifle stiff; then unmoveable. If you were to touch it, it would be cold and hard as stone, and there would be no feeling in it at all, nor life. It will be dead, a dead member on a living person. Swiftly, but not so swiftly but that your daughter shall know the fear of its spread, the stone death will creep up her feet, up her perfect, symmetrical limbs, pass the jewel-like curves of her hips, and the gripping, icy cold of the stone death will march ahead of it, turning her heart to water. I do not think that you, her father, will enjoy the spectacle of your daughter turning into a statue before your eyes.*

*Or is your money more precious to you than your daughter's life?*

The signature was exquisite, a flourish not readily legible: Achmed ben Hassan.

The threat seemed ridiculous, and in spite of the fat fee offered, Terry Grant had started to turn it down. But beneath those smooth words there had been venom, like vicious snakes masked in the brilliance of tropic flowers.

Then, too, there had been the immediate attraction he had felt for Myra. And she had given him a long, steady, wide-eyed gaze that seemed to promise a delicious reward should he free her of the threatening terror. Clearly the girl was filled with an all-absorbing fear of some dread doom. The expression of her eyes when she had given Grant that long gaze was as plain as though she had used words to say that her instinctive impulse and desire was to give herself to the man who would save her. A private

adventurer, who was youthful, Terry Grant was ready for anything. . . .

Snakes and bats. Certainly there was something equally horrible and venomous about that creeping shadow down the hall. Terry Grant felt a dread of approaching it, a shrinking from cold, writhing coils in the dark.

He forced himself to stride faster now, cutting the distance between himself and the half-seen figure. The fitting shape had merged with the shadow of the right-hand wall, its motion ceased at the door of Myra Hawks.

Every muscle of his tall, athletic body tense, Grant eased closer and closer to the door. He smiled grimly at the idea of its being opened, except from within. Colonel Hawks had loaded upon it a half dozen different bolts and locks, and in its middle an iron rod braced diagonally down to the floor. If every other lock snapped, that one would hold.

Only feet away now from the crouching shadow, Grant could hear muffled metallic fumbling. Suddenly a gray strip of light showed and widened. Grant fought back the gasp of amazement that rose in his throat. The locks had been opened! Good Lord! The man had done the impossible! Cold dread gripped him, but he leaped forward, slashing the darkness with the white gleam of his torch, gun poised.

THE shadow man did not whirl to give battle. He sprang forward into the girl's room, thrust the door violently to close it. Grant was too quick. His foot jammed over the sill, his powerful shoulders heaved. His shout boomed through the house:

"Miss Hawks! On your guard! Colonel Hawks! Help, quickly!"

Strength that matched his own rammed the door against him. His gun was in his hand, but he dared not fire. The girl's bed was directly across from where he battled against the crushing force of this shadow man.

Suddenly Grant rolled his shoulders across the door to the edge. Something struck the middle panel. Blue, glittering steel crunched through the wood where his back had been. The needle point of a dagger glinted. Grant gasped out a strangled cry, eased away from the door. It slammed shut. Instantly he heaved against it again, flung it shuddering inward and dived in close to the floor. Flame lanced from the gun of the invader, but went high.

Myra Hawks, her face a white blur above the bed across the room, found her voice. Shriek after shriek tore through the house. Shouts and pounding came from a distance. Colonel Hawks' bellowing voice, and the answering cries of servants.

Pale slabs of moonlight lay upon the floor, streaming through two iron-screened windows on either side the bed, laying a lattice-work of silver and black. Again Grant was forced to hold his fire, for the shadow stood now directly between him and the girl. He saw a bright glitter of steel. The man turned, flung himself at the girl.

A swirl of bed coverings. The girl's screams soared. She sprang from the bed, cowered against the window. Her nightdress was torn down one side so that a long, gracefully swelling thigh showed, ivory-light, in the lunar shine. With one fluttering hand she clutched at her abbreviated bodice to futilely try to make its top cover the surging uplift of the full-blown breasts beneath. The fingers of her other hand groped frantically to bring together the two torn edges of the nightdress.

Grant hurled himself at the shadow, a human projectile. A glitter of steel streaked toward the paralyzed girl. His hands seized the man's collar. His feet struck and he braced and spun like a hammer thrower, hurling the invader full length upon the floor.

Terry Grant dropped upon him. He felt muscles like steel. The man threw out a hand toward the girl, trying

even while battling for his life to strike at her. For an instant the thing that glittered was framed in cold moonlight, and Grant saw it was a hypodermic needle.

He seized the wrist, and the man's hand bent slowly over so that the point jabbed toward Grant's pinioning fist. With a low curse Grant jerked his hand away. The needle stabbed toward his body.

HE leaped back, snatched out his pistol. The man sprang toward the girl again, needle outthrust. Grant plunged with him. His flashlight smashed on the man's wrist. The needle dropped and the man huddled over it.

The girl's mouth opened in a throat-splitting scream, she plunged sideways, hands outthrust. Light flashed suddenly in the room. Colonel Hawks' voice filled it.

"Myra! Myra dear, you aren't hurt!"

Grant, gun levelled, stood with tense muscles. He shouted suddenly and dived upon the man, hurled him flat upon his back, seized his wrists. The right one dangled limply, broken. The left hand clutched an all-metal hypodermic. The plunger had been thrust all the way down.

The man, prostrate beneath Grant, smiled. The skin was dark, as if browned by tropical suns. His piercing eyes were oddly jubilant.

"Thees time you win, *effendi*," he said in a slurred accent. "But you will not again. There are too many of us too willing to die. It would be wise, Colonel Hawks, if you pay."

Grant wrenched the hypodermic from his grip. The man let it go willingly now, and Grant sprang to his feet, yanking the fellow up, too. Long black robes billowed from his shoulders. He wavered on his feet, flung out his left hand and braced it against the wall.

"If you want me to stand, *effendi*," he said, "you will have to balance me very carefully against the wall."

Terry Grant's mind flashed to that threatening letter, the emptied hypodermic. Good Lord! The emissary of Achmed ben Hassan had inflicted on himself the stone death intended for Myra Hawks.

As he stared awe-struck at the assassin, the man's chest suddenly ceased to pant, and a horrible rigidity spread over his face. The mouth was still open as if in speech, amusement still sparkled in his eyes, and then suddenly they were expressionless, stony.

Grant reached out a slow, fearful hand toward the man's throat. His fingers flinched back from the touch. Achmed ben Hassan's assassin had turned to stone!

## CHAPTER II

### THE STONE DEATH

**F**ROWNING at the figure of stone that so recently had been a living creature, Terry Grant retreated two slow half paces. The assassin stood rigid, propped up against the wall like a disused board. No rigor mortis could act so quickly. Carter inspected the hypodermic.

It was all metal and the needle could be detached and screwed point inward for safe carrying. He slipped it into his pocket and turned.

The girl had drawn a scarlet mandarin cloak close about her slim body. Her narrow white feet were bare in satin mules. Colonel Hawks, bending over Myra, raised his leonine head with its flowing white hair.

"Sir," he said, "I have you to thank for my daughter's life."

The girl's face was pale, but her low voice was firm. "I cannot thank you enough, Mr. Grant."

Grant bowed suavely. You could not have told from the faultless perfection of his brown, tailored suit that he had been battling for his life and the life of this lovely girl.

"You do me too much honor," he murmured. "Miss Hawks, you had

better occupy some other room to-night."

"There is still danger?" she asked quickly.

Grant shrugged his broad shoulders. "No way of telling. This man tried mighty hard to kill you. He didn't mind dying if he could do that."

Colonel Hawks snapped out: "I'll see you safely to the guest room myself, Myra."

The girl shook her head slowly. Her eyes on Grant's were fraught with some meaning he could not determine, as if she warned him.

Grant spoke slowly: "Before you do, colonel, I'd like to ask Miss Hawks a few questions."

The man's maned head shook emphatically. "In the morning, perhaps, not now."

"I'm all right," the girl said mildly.

Hawks' arm went about her shoulders. "Come, my dear, I'm the best judge of that," he said, and led her away.

Grant frowned after the two. The girl's evidence might be very useful in his immediate inquiry, but the police would have to be called and he'd get a chance to learn the girl's message.

He searched the assassin's body, but found nothing and strode swiftly to a telephone and called the police. He hung up and paced back to the hall toward the bedroom, stopped as if turned to stone in his tracks, then broke into a pounding run. Once more the girl's screams made the night horrible!

**T**HE long, dim hall stretched interminably beneath Grant's speeding feet, but finally he reached the room where the screams sounded, hurled himself against the door. He bounced into the room. Against the windows a man crouched.

Grant's automatic spoke. The answer was mocking, hard laughter. The man sprang to the window sill, outlined like a huge bat, and suddenly

was gone. Grant punched on the light. The girl's screams died to a whimpering moan. She tossed from side to side in the bed. Grant pounded to the window, stared down. Fifteen stories below, a dark, still blot stained the pavement. Another of the assassins had killed himself!

Grant whirled to the girl. She still rolled from side to side, but there was this difference: there was no life in the movement of her feet and legs. They were like inanimate logs fastened to her.

Quickly her arms went up to Terry Grant, and in another second she had pulled him down close to her. Her flushed face, wet with tears, was pressed against his cheek. Panting with sheer fright, her breasts surged against his chest. She was trembling in his arms like a child seeking safety and comfort. Grant's pulse quickened at the delectable closeness of her. Slowly he disengaged her arms from around him. . . .

"I feel so cold, so cold!" she wept.

Colonel Hawks plunged into the room.

"For heaven's sake, what's happened?" he cried.

Grant darted past him, raced to the phone, yelling for an ambulance, slammed back into the room. The whimpering had ceased, and Colonel Hawks was a crumpled, beaten figure by the bed, his leonine head bowed above his daughter's body.

The lines of her face had stiffened in a horrid mask of fear. Even her hair seemed rigid as stone. The marble-like gaze of her eyes struck into Grant's heart, accusing him. She and her father had depended on him for protection, and he had failed.

Grant's long face was haggard and thin, his eyes burned. Colonel Hawks stiffened beside the bed, jerked up his head, glowered at Grant.

"Get out!" he said hoarsely.

Grant's eyes jerked to his. Colonel Hawks repeated slowly:

"Get—out—of—here!"

Grant said calmly: "I can't blame you for feeling that way."

The man took a full stride toward Grant, fists clenched. "Will you get out of here? I hire you at enormous fees to protect my daughter and myself, because you have built a fabulous reputation. But you're just a cheap crook like the rest of them. Get out of here!"

Grant's eyes bored into Hawks'; and his whole body was rigid with anger. He had failed, it was true, but he felt sure no human ingenuity could long resist this Achmed ben Hassan, whose servants killed themselves lest they betray their master.

Anger burned in him like white-hot iron. "Okay, Colonel Hawks," he said. "I'll leave, but nothing on earth can keep me from following this case to its end. And I'll catch this Achmed ben Hassan. He has discredited me, and he preys on women, and—" he bowed gravely—"I'm a man of sentiment."

He whirled and strode out of the apartment, slid behind the wheel of his Hispana Suiza. His high forehead wrinkled with thought, he shot the powerful car out toward the open country. He had a problem and long drives helped him think clearly.

His foot was heavy on the accelerator and the drone of his motor was a song of speed. Apartments swept past him, then smaller homes, interspersed by trees.

Terry Grant was giving much of his thought to Myra Hawks. Beautiful, desirable—a thousand times, yes. Any red-blooded man would desire her, madly. But there was something that he had seemed to read deep down in her eyes that made the young adventurer begin to think that he felt more than passion for the gorgeous colonel's daughter. Grant was beginning to feel that he wanted more than to possess only her ripe young, glorious body; that he wanted the girl's real, lasting love. And now she lay in a strange, trancelike state that was induced by some horrible East-



ern drug, perhaps fated to feel the cold embrace of Death's arms instead of his own warm, protecting clasp.

He became aware then that bright twin headlights were on his trail. Grant shot his car more rapidly ahead. The machine hung on. The last of the houses were past now, and he rolled through lonely park lands that invited speed. The Hispana took the challenge, roared like a comet. But those dogging headlights hung on.

Grant, a grim smile on his mouth, loosened his automatic in its holster and eased up on the accelerator.

His quick eyes flung ahead, spotted a low bridge. He sputtered, slewed to a stop just beyond the arch, backed onto smooth grass at the roadside, cut motor and headlights. He sat waiting, tensely, gun in hand.

EVERY sound in the world seemed to cease with the stopping of the Hispana's motor. There was no distant mutter of an engine. The bridge cut off the sound, Grant thought. He had been too far ahead for the assassins to have seen him stop. Nevertheless his tenseness increased as he cranked down the special windshield flat against the cowl to clear the decks for battle.

He sat so for some minutes, and still no following car appeared. Grant twisted about and searched the skyline above the bridge. Nothing moving there. Nothing moving anywhere. Just the still, sinking moon in the sky, and in the distance the rasping double croak of a tree frog.

Grant cursed under his breath, unfolded his long, lithe body from beneath the wheel, and toiled up the rise to the bridge.

The grassy slope was slippery with dew, studded with shrubs, and Grant, struggling up its steep incline, bent almost double. The gun was alertly ready in his fist. The bridge gave him a wide sweep of road dully lighted by the moon.

The highway was a white, unspot-

ted river. Nothing there that might be a car. His eyes pierced the shadows. The car might have been parked in the edge of the woods, with lights out. Achmed ben Hassan's assassins might be creeping upon him even now.

Grant snorted at his fears. That car must have turned off into some side road he had missed. He strode back and half slid down to his car. He jerked open the door, heard the soft pad of furtive feet. He whirled too late.

Strangling silken folds jerked tight over his face, around his throat, and throttled him. A sweetish odor clogged his nostrils. He twisted his gun behind him and fired. A man screamed in pain, then the gun was wrenched from his hand. The silken garrote tightened. The odor choked him. Grant was sinking, sinking, sinking into blackness.

### CHAPTER III

#### SLAVES OF ACHMED

TINKLING lute strings, faint as an ancient memory, was the first sound Terry Grant consciously heard. His senses drifted slowly back, but with rare presence of mind he forced his eyelids to remain closed, trying to orient himself. He continued his deep, regular breathing. Delicate, flowerlike perfume wafted over him.

He realized he lay upon soft cushions, his fingers, moving fractionally, snagged on silk. He heard girls' voices near by.

Queer he felt no headache from that attack on the road, no pain in throat or lungs. He slit his eyes and peered out through the mesh of his lashes. A wall straight ahead of him was twenty feet away and hung with exquisite tapestry. To its right was an arched opening through which sunlight streamed.

The whispers at his side had ceased, and only the archaic tinkling of the lute continued. Grant rolled his

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head over slowly, then blinked in bewilderment.

Lolling on cushions beside the heap of luxurious silk on which he lay, were two girls of dark and exquisite beauty. Their eyes were large and dark in pale fair faces, and jeweled fillets bound their locks.

As Grant gazed in amazement, the two girls rose and swept slow salaams, and he realized with a start that their clothing consisted of jeweled plates about their bosoms and diaphanous skirts which hung low on softly curving hips. They stood with hands folded modestly, with downcast eyes. One spoke in a low, musical voice:

"Master, we are thy slaves."

Grant squeezed his eyes tightly shut, opened them again. The girls were still there. He thrust himself up from the cushions, sitting erect with an effort, and frowned upon the two unbelievable beauties.

"In God's name," he asked softly, "who are you?"

"The handmaidens of Allah," the one who had first spoken replied, and Grant cried out:

"Achmed ben Hassan!"

The girls before him showed by no slightest change of expression that the name meant anything to them, and Grant went on:

"You will tell me next, I suppose, that I am in paradise, or whatever the Mohammedan equivalent of that is."

The girl, startled, peered into his face with wide eyes and said:

"Surely, thou art no unbeliever!"

Grant frowned, swore under his breath, got abruptly to his feet.

The girls bowed, "What is it my lord requires?"

"Let me speak with Allah," Grant said grimly.

The girl salaamed again and said: "This way, my lord," and moved off with a slow, gliding step that was almost music. Grant saw her feet were bare and that the nails were stained with henna. Through the

transparent sheerness of her skirts, Grant saw plump calves, dimples that came and went behind the knees with every step, and the voluptuous widening and fullness of feminine lines above the twinkling dimples.

A few paces along the high-walled corridor, and they were about to pass a partly draped entrance when Grant slowed his pace at the sound of seductive, oriental music and the heavy odor of some Eastern incense that cloyed powerfully with the senses.

Elandi, looking over her shoulder, smiled as she saw Terry Grant slow his steps. Still smiling, she turned, took his hand and led him to the portieres. Then she drew them aside enough for him to look into the richly appointed chamber that was revealed. He involuntarily sucked in his breath. He was gazing at all the sensual beauty and studied passion and depravity of an Eastern debauch.

Their eyes glazed and slightly staring, men and women sprawled lazily upon the richly cushioned floor, where slowly they embraced each other with careful, studied motions. The men had stripped to the waist, retaining only their bright-colored pantaloons of vivid silk. Even as Grant watched, the men clasped the women more tightly to them, increased the tempo of their kisses. Soft bosoms heaved faster and faster under the jewel-studded metal cups that half covered them.

Grant turned to look at Elandi as he felt the pressure of her hand on his increase. Her soft, velvet-dark eyes were clouding with unmistakable passion—the unleashed passion of the East, knowing no bounds when once released. She moved closer to him, invitation mixing with the growing passion in her eyes, and Terry Grant could see that, after all, she was as childlike as a tamed doe, but probably instilled with the evil customs of the East since her earliest teens.

Dull thuddings, which clanked faintly, sounded. Without looking back into the room, Grant guessed

that jeweled breastplates were falling to the thick Turkish rug on the floor. The seductive music increased its tempo, faster, faster. Elandi moved still closer, until one rounded thigh pressed him closely. Terry Grant began to lose sense of time and space; then he set his lean jaws tightly, shook himself slightly and said:

"No, Elandi, I command that you let me speak with Allah—now!"

The girl lowered her soft eyes, an expression of hurt crossing her ivory-skinned face. Then she dropped Grant's hand and moved off along the hall, beckoning him to follow.

Following her with lithe, strong strides, he swiftly studied the building. It appeared to be oriental in every respect. It was plaster and stone. The doorways were low and the rooms draped with gorgeous rugs and silk. Windows were eastern arches, and across them were iron lattices.

They reached finally a huge carved door, and the girl salaamed again and stepped aside. Grant stopped and regarded her.

"Your name?"

"Elandi, master."

"You go no farther than this?"

"It is forbidden, master. We are thy slaves, and none other may look upon us."

Grant frowned and ran his hand up over the twin peaks of his forehead.

"Not even if I order it?"

"If you order it, master, I will go."

Fright trembled in the girl's voice. Grant asked softly:

"Why are you afraid?"

**T**HE girl trembled even more and folded her arms so that her right hand lay upon her left shoulder and her left upon her right. She said, "If you will come I will show you why."

Grant hesitated, then nodded; and she led the way through a side passage that grew increasingly dark. The blackness suddenly seemed to turn green, and gradually a pale-green

light diffused into the air as they entered a small, long chamber.

At the other end was a cabinet. The girl stopped in the doorway, and her trembling was more noticeable than ever.

"If you will look in that cabinet," she said, "you will know why I dare not disobey."

Grant, something in him rebelling at all this mummery, sped across the room, sprang up low stairs to the cabinet, thrust out his hand to the door.

But even so, with his hand outstretched, he paused. Might this not be some trick, some device of Achmed ben Hassan, who sought to get him within his power?

Terry Grant snorted at that foolishness. He was in Achmed's power! He grasped the knob of the doors. At the touch, the portals folded back. Within the cabinet stood a girl.

Golden hair streamed over her shoulders, her body was exquisite, but her face was twisted into gargoyle ugliness by fear. The eyes stared wide, the mouth was open as if to scream. But there was no life in her. She might have been a statue, a stone statue, except for the golden, cascading loveliness of her hair.

Another victim of the creeping death of Achmed ben Hassan, the agonized contortion of her face contrasted grotesquely with the slender beauty of her naked body, half hidden by the down-flowing golden tresses.

Anger swept in a white-hot tide over Grant as he stood there, and he strode across the room. A voice boomed into it, a voice that might have come from anywhere, and nowhere.

The girl prostrated herself on the floor, terror-stricken. Grant stopped tensely, fists clenched, head thrown back defiantly. The great voice boomed out:

"I challenge thee, Grant! Death with the girl in the cabinet, or life with the girl on the floor!"

Grant's eyes ran swiftly over the ceiling, searched the walls. He strode across and tore aside a tapestry—only blank stone behind it. The voice boomed laughter.

"You have until tonight to decide. What you wish you need only ask for—and the girl is thy slave."

Grant crossed to her. "Get up!" he bit out, and the girl, still cowering, rose to her feet.

"Take me to Allah," he said.

She gasped out: "But that was the voice of Allah!"

A grim smile lighted Grant's face. "I want to see him face to face."

The girl's eyes were wide, her head began to shake slowly from side to side, then violently, and she protested:

"No! No! It is not permitted. The sight of Allah means death."

"Just the same," Grant insisted slowly, "I want a look at him. If that's Allah, he talks a whole lot like a human being. Lead on, Elandi."

Elandi moved slowly near to Terry Grant, velvet-dark eyes turned up to him pleadingly. Then her arms were around him. He heard her bare feet whisper softly over the floor, closer to his, and she was straining all the softness of her small body against him until the metal plates that half covered her breasts were digging sharply into his diaphragm.

"It would be better that you take me, as the Master has suggested," she whispered. "I fear for you; I fear for both of us."

For a moment, Terry Grant hesitated; then he patted the girl's bare back comfortingly, and said: "Do as I ask you—lead the way."

The girl started tremblingly down the passage, and the green luminance of the chamber of death faded into blackness. Then there was a distant gleam of sunlight and they were back in the chamber where Grant had first regained consciousness.

"Listen," he said shortly, "this isn't the place you were taking me at first."

The other girl had vanished now, and the lute music had ceased, and Elandi stood in the middle of the room, her arms hanging at her sides, palms forward in a gesture of supplication.

"Allah is everywhere," she said. "If he wishes you to see him you may. If not—" She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug, moved toward him on gliding, dancing feet, her filmy skirt swaying. She put her hands upon his shoulders. The nails were hennaed and her dark hair was scented with musk. Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Do you yearn for death? Why not forget whatever it is that the voice of Allah has warned you against? Why not live here," her whispering voice became a fragrant breath that fanned his mouth, "with me?"

Grant raised her chin with a hand, and his eyes studying hers were weary.

"Nice child," he said.

He led her to the couch, looked down with a strange, hard smile on his face.

"I am going," he said, "for a little walk."

## CHAPTER IV

### TWO MEN DIE

GRANT'S long-legged stride sped him across the room, out the exit he and the girl had first used. Hallways and trick entrances confused him, but eventually he stood at the heavy, carved door behind which the girl had said previously was the voice of Allah.

He seized the knob, and the door swung inward, revealed a long, high room at the far end of which stood an empty, golden throne. A dozen men strolled about. One or two glanced at him curiously, but none spoke.

Grant's long stride was slow and determined. He marched up the center of the room, straight up the low steps and sat upon the throne.

For a moment there was absolute silence, the men frozen into statues of amazement. There was a sudden surge and shrill cries, and they raced down the room, jammed about the foot of the throne steps. They did not seem to dare to advance farther.

Grant leaned forward, putting his elbow on his knee and regarded the men with apparent disinterest, his face calm.

"I'd like to have a little chat with Allah," he said. "What hocus-pocus do you use to call his attention to the fact that I'm here?"

A great voice boomed out suddenly overhead. There was anger in it.

"Down, fool! Down upon your knees, and pray for forgiveness!"

Grant leaned carelessly back in the throne and crossed his knees.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said casually, "but the floor looks mighty hard."

The men before him had dropped down, and their foreheads were bowed until they touched. One straightened and raised his hands above his head, crying:

"Oh Allah, what shall thy servants do to avenge this insult!"

"Horseradishes," Grant grunted and strolled down the throne steps. "Listen, you bozos, this is all a fake. That lad has got a radio up there and he's broadcasting, and that's all this voice of Allah business amounts to."

The great voice trembled with fury now. "Seize him!"

A half dozen men leaped on Grant, and dragged him down, pinioning him flat on his back on the floor. A man with a sour, blackened face drew a long knife and laid its blade against Grant's throat. He gazed at the wall above the throne as if awaiting orders.

The full, resonant glow returned to the voice.

"Grant, you are a brave man, and a foolish one, and over-bold. Still I would use your brain in my business. Will you serve me—or die?"

Grant twisted and stared up at the vacant throne, and short laughter barked from his lips.

"Neither!" he said sharply, and felt the knife prick his throat. His narrowed, dark eyes glared into those of the man who gripped it.

"Listen, fool!" he said. "If you strike without orders you're going to be in a hell of a tough spot."

The man grinned savagely and turned his head heavily and stared up above the throne. Grant's voice rose peltingly.

"You are not served by men, but by skulking dogs. I could conquer any three of them at one time."

He looked around at the angry circle of faces, bent intently over his recumbent form. "Run on and play with your paper dolls," he growled.

The voice was mild and vague. "Youseff."

The man with the knife looked up. "Youseff, kill thyself."

**T**HE man blinked his small black eyes once, took two steps out into the room, faced the throne and thrust the knife to the hilt in his breast.

He stood swaying a moment with his hand on the hilt of the weapon, an exaltation in the small eyes fixed on the empty throne. Then his knees gave and he twisted and fell to his back.

"Mohammet," came the soft voice again, "hurl thyself from that window!"

A man ran across the room and dived over the high railing. Grant's eyes were twin points of anger.

"Are you men or slaves," he flung at his captors, "to kill yourselves at the mere whim of this fake?"

The booming voice of the unseen master, gentle now, was the only answer:

"Is there any living king, Grant, who is served as I am? Can you afford not to ally yourself with one so powerful? I grant you ten minutes to think. If you refuse, they will be your last ten minutes of life."

Terry Grant cried hoarsely: "Then call off your pack of dogs, and let me think!"

The men snarled over him, but the voice called them off. Grant got slowly to his feet and paced the long throne room. Arched windows showed a sunset, but a wall hid the earth. Against the varicolored west a hump-backed monoplane was flying, heading south, and the hum of its motors came distantly.

A blond man with blue, kindly eyes strolled up to Grant and said: "You have five minutes left."

The double, carven doors at the other end of the room burst open, and Elandi ran on little dancing feet into the room.

The men shouted angrily and converged on her, but the booming voice of the unseen filled the room again, halting them. The girl glanced with wide, frightened eyes about the room, saw Grant and ran toward him with outstretched arms, seized his coat with her little hennaed hands and turned beseeching dark eyes up on his face.

"The voice told me to come in here," she said swiftly, "and I am terribly afraid, for women are not allowed in the throne room. It means their death."

Grant patted her on the shoulder. "I'll take care of you, child," he said.

The blond, slight man with the kindly, blue eyes said softly: "You have one minute left."

Grant thought desperately, ran his hand up over his high-peaked forehead into his dull hair. Suddenly powerful hands seized his arms and wrists. The girl uttered a little, smothered cry, and Grant jerked angrily in her direction and saw that she too was held by two men.

They were marched with the slow, solemn pace of a sacrificial parade back to the throne and the deep, booming voice sounded again.

"Well, Grant, my ally or my enemy?"

Grant threw up his head defiantly.

"Just a moment, Grant," came the voice. "You speak not alone for yourself. If you die the girl dies also. It is a little custom of ours. I know she means nothing in particular to you, but she is a woman, and you are an American . . . a man of sentiment, I have heard. Now, Grant, your decision."

Terry Grant turned his head slowly and looked at the girl and found a dagger presented at her breast. Her face was white and her eyes pleaded. Strangely it was her little, henna-tinted feet that moved him. They looked so like a child's. Grant squared his shoulders and glared at the throne.

"You hold all the trumps," he said slowly.

## CHAPTER V

### ACHMED STRIKES

TERRY GRANT straightened aching shoulders, glanced about him. The interior of his Hispana Suiza was wet with dew. The windshield was misted.

Grant dragged a hand heavily across his high forehead, leaned forward against his clenched fist and tried to think. He remembered perfectly a girl with bare feet and hennaed nails and eyes who cried for help; or was it all a fantastic dream? A girl who had pleaded to give him her soft, young body to save them both from death.

Grant felt rapidly through his pockets and came upon a long, thin roll of vellum. He opened it and with frowning eyes read:

*Hear and obey. If you fail, you die.*

*Achmed ben Hassan.*

A bitter, thin smile twisted his lips. Achmed had drugged him, hasheesh probably, and had him transported back to his car. And he demanded obedience. Grant's smiling lips became hard. He kicked the starter and sent the Hispana roaring toward town.

One thing stood clearly out in his mind, the picture of a humpbacked monoplane speeding across a sunset sky. He knew the Stinson had a profile like that. There was a bare chance that through this knowledge he might locate the aerie of Achmed ben Hassan.

Grant sped straight to his home, a high, quiet penthouse he had taken after gangsters had wrecked his previous quarters during his terrific battle against the Blue Terror.

On his way he bought a newspaper, and once in the lofty aloofness of his apartment he read it hurriedly. The date told him he had been in the stronghold of Achmed forty-eight hours. Its pages told him other things, too. The death of Colonel Hawks' daughter—she was actually his ward, the story stated—had revealed a widespread blackmailing plot by Achmed ben Hassan.

Dozens of letters such as the one Hawks had received had been sent out, and many had paid with the threat of horrible death hanging over them. Authorities were working madly to checkmate the assassins.

Terry Grant, tough young survivor of an hundred hair-raising adventures, felt licked for the first time in his life. Myra was dead. What use was there to bother any more to find her fiendish murderer? Vengeance would not bring life back to her glorious young body; open again those beautiful eyes so that the light of her soul might shine forth. But dull, bitter anger began to suffuse Grant. He would avenge Myra Hawks' death if it were the last thing he ever did. . . .

Grant phoned his office and ordered his corps of assistants to place every single-motored Stinson in the country at sunset the day before. He hung up on their excited questions about himself and snapped suddenly out of his chair, whirling with his gun in his hand. No one in sight. Yet he had heard glass tinkle in breaking and a thump on the soft, thick carpet.

Grant's swift eyes spotted a stone in the middle of the floor with paper tied around it. He darted through French doors to the roof. The sunlight was dazzling. No one in sight, and except for the rumble of distant traffic, there was no sound, no drone of airplane motors. The nearest building was a hundred yards away.

Grant slowly holstered his gun, strode back into the living room, picked up the stone. The paper tied about it was a note.

The note said:

*It would be wise, effendi, if you would ally yourself with the police, then frustrate all their plans where the pursuit of Achmed ben Hassan is concerned. It is for this that your life and brain were spared. Remember, if you serve well and faithfully, there are countless rewards. If you fail, there is the Stone Death.*

*Achmed ben Hassan.*

Grant cursed under his breath, ran his hand swiftly up over the dual peaks of his forehead into his dull hair. His dark eyes were angry, an ugly light in them. The phone rang. Grant still stared down at the ornate chirography.

There was a postscript. It stated that when need arose, some one would make a contact with him for his "report." Grant shredded the note with the previous one and set them afire on an ash tray.

The phone rang again, more insistently, and Grant crossed to it in quick long strides.

"Grant speaking."

"Thank God you've come back," a man's voice poured words into his ear. "We want to hear your version of the Hawks murder, and you must help us, too. Gregory Delaney has been threatened now."

Grant asked quietly: "Who's speaking?"

"Inspector Littleman," the voice snapped back, and Grant remembered a small, lean man with a dark, intent face.

"You want me to go to Delaney's house?"

"At once!" Littleman barked. "You fought these assassins at Hawks' house. You know how they work. Your help in guarding Delaney will be invaluable."

As Grant prepared to leave, he realized that he was banking a lot on his assistants locating the single-motored Stinson he had seen fly close by the strange place in which he had been kept prisoner. He knew from comradeship in all parts of the world with those daring operatives of his that they would work fast and diligently.

A PRIVATE, automatic elevator dropped Grant to the street. He sank back into the leather cushions of his Hispana gratefully and the deep-throated motor dragged him swiftly up Fifth Avenue, across to Columbus and up Riverside Drive to the great stone mansion of Gregory Delaney.

A picketed iron fence surrounded grounds thick with shrubbery. A policeman clanged open the gate and Grant nodded and strode quickly past, keen eyes noting the layout of the grounds. A thousand hiding places in those shrubs, but the black outline of the fence was clear against the opposing buildings.

He spotted Littleman's small, wiry figure in uniform and nodded briefly to the lean-faced inspector of police.

"We have three hours before dark," Grant said rapidly. "Let's have floodlights rigged to cover those fences all around the grounds. Then if we post enough men around, the assassins can't possibly get in—or away."

Littleman nodded and issued orders.

"And that's about all we can do," Grant said. "Checked the servants yet?"

Littleman nodded. Something white struck and bounced in front of them and the two men crouched, snatching ready guns. Nothing to be seen, no one near. Grant's brow was wrinkled

angrily. Littleman picked up the paper tied to a rock, read slowly:

*The penalty of treachery is death.*

*Achmed ben Hassan.*

A warning to him, Grant knew, but Littleman frowned over the message, shrugged it aside. The two redoubled their efforts to fortify the Delaney mansion.

When darkness fell three hours later, Grant was making a round of the sentinels, churning his way through the shrubbery, searching every inch of the mansion's grounds.

Silence lay over the place on the Drive. Clouds rolled overhead and the earth sucked down darkness like a blotter absorbing ink.

Grant nearly stumbled into a shoulder-high clump of spirea, circled it on wary feet. He cursed softly to himself. The backglow of the floodlights, revealing the black bars of the fence, only made his own task more difficult.

He was on edge, his nerves taut. He felt slightly superstitious about Achmed, as if the man were a doom upon him. He was conscious also that police were keeping him closely under eye. He wondered if Colonel Hawks had repeated his charges of criminal neglect or attempted to connect him with the assassins.

His swinging hand struck a barberry bush, and he whistled, jerking it away and sucking it, glaring down at the thorny shrub. Something metallic gleamed within it and he leaped back.

His spring was just in time. Two men exploded from the bush with upraised knives. His years of juggling, of split-second analysis of motion, stood him in good stead now. He plunged to the right. As the knives slashed down, his left fist shot out, hurled one man against the other.

They tangled, plunged to the ground. Grant whipped out his gun and slashed down on the nearest head. Police sentries shouted, three



ploughed headlong along through the shrubbery.

The second man, protected by his now unconscious companion's body, slashed at Grant's legs. The tall adventurer danced out of range, weaved about, seeking an opening. Suddenly he leaped backward. The unconscious body seemed to spring at him from the ground. It caught his ankles and he half stumbled.

Police were just behind him now, shouting loudly. Grant, off-balanced momentarily, saw the second man leap to his feet, saw steel glitter in his hand as it swept back; then Grant fell face down on the ground. Steel whispered above his head. A choking scream shivered up into the black night.

Instantly Grant was on his feet again. The man flashed away over the grounds. Grant, pursuing, darted a glance over his shoulder. A policeman was a swaying figure against the white floodlights, his hands tugging at a knife in his chest.

**G**RANT raced on through the shrubs. The murderer had disappeared, vanished entirely.

Inspector Littleman's short, striding legs brought him panting to Grant's side. They dashed back to the prisoner and the stabbed policeman. The officer was dead.

Littleman ordered the grounds searched, handcuffed the prisoner and, with Grant, herded him up the marble stairways of the mansion to an elaborate drawing-room.

Grant thrust the prisoner into a chair. The man was dark-visaged, hawk-nosed. He glared savagely, handcuffed hands buried in his sleeves.

"Where's your plane?" Grant demanded.

The man bared long yellow teeth in a snarling smile, said nothing.

Grant said softly: "You don't fear death, I know, but many things can

happen to a man before he dies." He spun on his heel, long-legged across the room, borrowed a cop's nightstick. He wrapped it in newspaper, came back and thrust it under the prisoner's nose.

"We have a new sort of nightstick," he said softly. "Shall I—demonstrate it to you?"

Littleman growled: "Here, give me that. I know how to use it." He crouched and snapped it against the dark-faced man's shins. It rang hollowly, like a stick on concrete, and the prisoner gave no sign that he felt the blow at all.

Grant's eyes narrowed. He sprang to the man and seized both his wrists, wrenched the hands out of the sleeves. A metal hypodermic needle clattered to the floor. The prisoner smiled mockingly.

"Not even the scourge of Allah could hurt me now," his words grew blurred. The mocking leer froze on his mouth.

"This is the Stone Death, Littleman," Grant said heavily. "Achmed's men all kill themselves to protect him."

They went through the man's clothing, but found only another of those carefully penned notes and a six-foot strip of leather which widened to about two inches at its middle, and had a loop at one end. Grant held it up.

"That explains how Achmed's notes are delivered. A sling, and a powerful one. It could hurl a rock two hundred yards."

"More damn fool things mixed up with this case," Littleman growled. "Here, let me see that letter."

He opened it, glanced at it swiftly, then peered up with eyes hard as agates. His hand flashed under his coat, jammed a long-nosed revolver into Grant's middle.

"You're one of Achmed ben Hassan's men we'll make talk," he bit out.

## CHAPTER VI

## A MURDER MISTAKE

GRANT submitted to search by two policemen Littleman called, but his eyes were ugly in his thin, long, face. His voice rasped:

"You will explain this, Littleman, or I'll have you kicked off the force!"

Littleman laughed shortly. He seemed to swell with triumph. "I've suspected you for a long time, Grant. You solve cases too easily. You couldn't do it if you weren't in with the crooks you trap. And I've noticed this: men you capture always die."

Grant glared. "You don't even capture any, Littleman."

Littleman's doubled fists drove hard toward Grant, pinioned helplessly by the two policemen. The inspector's face was red with fury.

Grant said wearily: "Stow that!"

Littleman glowered at his captive and said heavily:

"This last note we took from Achmed's assassin goes like this." He drew the paper from his pocket and read somewhat laboriously:

*This is the price, Grant, of those who betray their master.*

*Achmed ben Hassan.*

Grant jerked his head impatiently. "Can't you see it's just a trick?" he demanded. "Achmed is clever as hell. He's just trying to make trouble between you and me so his assassins will have no trouble in getting to Delaney."

Littleman laughed nastily: "I'm afraid it's no use, Grant. I'll just put you where you can't help out—your master. Judson, there's a radio car in the drive. Take Grant to headquarters. See that he gets hold of no one and tell them to keep a guard on him to keep him from killing himself."

Grant grinned thinly: "You needn't worry, Littleman, I'm going to survive just to get back at you for this!"

Judson growled, "Okay," and then

Littleman returned Grant's stare with hostile intensity.

"And look out for this guy, Judson. He's slippery as an eel, and dangerous."

Judson said, "I'll take care of him," and he slipped a handcuff on Grant's left wrist and locked him to his own right arm.

"He won't get away from me, inspector," Judson said. "Come on, you!" and he jerked the handcuff and strode off across the room with Grant at his side.

The lanky detective made no resistance. His eyes were nearly closed and there was tense anger in the stiff abrupt swing of his shoulders. The cop climbed into the car first, still handcuffed to Grant, and the tall detective folded his lanky body into the seat beside him. Grant clicked the door, stared down at his feet and said laconically: "Home, James!"

Judson glared at him out of the corner of his eye and then down at the handcuffs fastening Grant's left hand to his right. He lifted their two hands toward the dashboard to turn on the ignition but didn't do it and let the hands fall back to the seat between them again and looked at them.

Judson muttered under his breath, and Grant said: "I beg pardon? I didn't hear you," and the cop growled, "Oh, go to hell."

Suddenly he began to smile. He pulled Grant's arm over so that the handcuffs were against the steering post, then rapidly unlocked the bracket about his own wrist and fastened it to the steering post of the car.

Grant watched him with amusement at the back of his eyes. The cop leaned back with a sigh of relief, then reached over Grant's arm to turn on the ignition, reached under his arm to shift gears. Grant said dryly: "That was a very clever stunt, Judson. It makes everything so convenient."

The policeman growled and tugged his visored cap down over his fat, ruddy face.

"Chief said not to take any chances with you and I'm not," he said, and spurted the car down the drive, waited while two other policemen opened the gate, then shot on downtown.

Grant began to squirm in his seat as the car shot down the Drive, pushed over to Columbus Avenue and then over to Fifth. "Listen, Judson," he said. "As a favor to me would you mind going down some other street than Fifth? I don't fancy having my friends seeing me handcuffed like this."

Just then the lights went red, and Judson, with a grunt, whirled left, down a dark, deserted side street. Grant swayed to the right, then lurched to the left, jamming the elbow of his handcuffed hand over both of Judson's. His right hand cut off the ignition, balled into a fist, and flashed to Judson's jaw.

Grant had trouble getting strength behind the blow. Judson was only dazed, and Grant was compelled to slam his fist again to the policeman's jaw before he was out.

The car coughed to a halt, Grant's swift fingers found the handcuff key in the policeman's pocket, unlocked himself. He hauled the policeman to his side of the seat, handcuffed him, and gagged him with two handkerchiefs from his pocket.

**W**ITHIN a minute and a half after he had jammed his elbow into the cop's side he was driving the car swiftly toward his own apartment. He switched the radio on and immediately it began to squawk:

"General alarm," it said, and even in the stereotyped tones of the announcer there was excitement. "Pick up man six feet tall, Arabian or Syrian, dark face, scar on nose, last seen near Delaney mansion wearing long black robe from shoulder to ankle. Wanted for the murder of Gregory Delaney."

Grant's eyes narrowed. So the assassins had got through the guard after all, and killed Gregory De-

laney! That made the charge against him accessory in murder. It meant, too, that the inspector would check his arrival at headquarters, and, when he failed to show up, would broadcast an alarm for him, too.

He shot the police car to the curb near his apartment, hurled out the cop, who was mumbling dazedly now, and shoved him into the private elevator, which lofted them to his penthouse.

Once in his home, Grant whistled gaily, mixed a sleeping draught which he forced down Judson's unwilling throat.

Judson spluttered angrily: "You'll pay for this. What are you trying to do, poison me?"

Grant said grimly: "No. Just shutting your mouth for a while."

He shoved the policeman into a chair and stood guard over him until his head began to nod in sleep. Then he swiftly unlocked the handcuffs, took Judson out of his uniform and put him in Grant's own bed, handcuffed him there.

"Sweet dreams!" Grant muttered, and carrying the uniform, strode into his study where he phoned his office to get the report on the check-up of Stinson planes.

His assistants had located a dozen in use at sunset the previous day, but seven had been headed in the wrong direction. Three others were too far west and of the rest, one had been on the way to Washington, and the other over the Big Smoky Mountains of eastern Tennessee.

Grant said: "Have Cary and Daniels go immediately to Newark airport and get the Lockheed ready for me."

He hung up, hurriedly donned the police uniform. The trouser legs were a bit short, and there was too much room around the waist. Grant smiled grimly.

"Too bad Judson can't admire me in his uniform."

He hustled into the bedroom for a last look at the sleeping policeman.

He switched on the light and spotted the white flutter of a piece of paper on the man's chest. Grant sucked breath between his teeth, crossed the room in a stride and a half and crouched over the note.

*The penalty of treachery is death.*

*Achmed ben Hassan.*

He touched the man. He was like stone. Achmed ben Hassan had murdered the policeman, thinking he was Grant!

Grant spun to the window, made a whirlwind search of his apartment and roof and found no one. The murderer had vanished as completely as life had gone from Grant's prisoner on the bed.

Grant's fists clenched. He must, he must find Achmed ben Hassan now, rip the mask from his murdering features! For Judson's death meant an open and shut murder case against Grant.

## CHAPTER VII

### ACHMED AERIE

GRANT stood for a moment staring down at the stiff body of the man who had died in his stead. A hard, tight, fighting smile lifted his mouth, but his eyes were like brown agate.

He dropped the elevator to the street, sent the police car skittering around a corner and down Fifth Avenue. He switched on the radio again.

Squawks and routine orders came from the instrument as he raced past apartment houses, past shops and office buildings, weaving through a clutter of night traffic.

Then, abruptly, there was a new squawk on the radio: "General Alarm. All cars Manhattan and Bronx, Brooklyn to relay. Terry Grant, well-known adventurer, wanted in the murder of Gregory Delaney, escaped while on way to headquarters with Patrolman Judson."

A word-picture of Grant ran into great detail. His smile was bitter now.

Grant shot down into the noisy rush of Holland Tunnel, over the express highway. The police car and his uniform got him past the toll gate, up to the private hangars of the Newark airport, alight with purple flood lamps.

His low-winged, red Lockheed Orion was outside the hangar with motor idling. One of his men stood beside it, arguing with two men in police uniform. Grant shot the police flivver up beside the Orion. The two policemen turned to him with relief. They were state troopers, Jersey men.

One jerked his thumb over his shoulders. "This bozo has a special dispensation supposed to exempt him from police interference."

Grant growled, "Yeah, he'll lose that now," and stalked across to the side of the plane.

If the operative's pudgy face showed any sign of recognition, Grant could not identify it as such. The man glared at him as sullenly as he had at the two New Jersey officers.

"There's supposed to be two of you," Grant growled. "Where's the other one?"

"None of your damned business," the man growled back at him, and Grant turned to the two Jersey policemen.

"Do you mind holding this bozo? I think the other guy's inside the plane."

The Jersey policeman said, "Sure," seized Grant's man by the shoulders and eased him over to one side. The door of the Orion was closed. Grant jerked it open and, bent over, walked forward. His man sat hunched down in the forward compartment so that he was invisible outside.

As Grant entered, the man whirled and jabbed the nose of a heavy automatic toward his face, recognized Grant beneath the visor of the police cap, and sputtered, "Well, for God's sake, man, what are you doing in that outfit?"

Grant said swiftly: "Get out of that, Daniels."

Daniels eased out of the single cockpit and Grant slid in. His hand jerked the throttle and the Orion belted into movement.

Daniels shouted in his ear: "You're heading down wind!"

Grant's mouth was grim. He nodded slowly, leaned forward and adjusted the propeller pitch to maximum climbing power. A long field, and light load. That would help, but he was taking a big chance with the Orion's small wing area.

Sharp cries outside, drowned in the roar of the motor. The airport starter dashed forward, waving his flag excitedly, pointing to a big Curtis Condor racing nose-on toward the Lockheed.

**G**RANT kicked the rudder over, reversed it to check, shot down with the wind. A glimpse of the frightened face of the Condor's pilot, then they were gone.

The Orion's tail seemed nailed to the ground. The edge of the field was closer now; beyond it, high-tension power lines stretched their steel-meshed net. Grant's jaw clamped. His eyes were pinpoints. Not a chance of taking off if he turned now. Hell, he couldn't turn now. Too near the edge of the field, going too fast. Daniels was shouting in his ear. He couldn't understand. It didn't matter.

At long last the tail lifted sluggishly. The motor was grinding, laboring. Grant tested the stick. The Orion hopped like an ungainly bird. He heaved on the stick, sent her nose up almost in a stall, nosed down and then almost muscled the Orion into the air as the markers of the field's edge slid past under the tires.

The steel net of wires loomed ahead. The motor labored. Grant's mouth was a grim, white slit. With every nerve of his body he fought to lift the wind-logged ship. The wires flashed toward them. Grant pulled up the nose and waited for the snagging crash. Fractions of seconds dragged past.

Grant blew out breath between tight teeth, whirled the Orion in a steep bank and rode the lift of the wind upward, upward. Clouds at 5,000 feet. Grant dove into them, nosed south. His face relaxing, he leaned forward and switched the lever to maximum speed pitch for the propeller. They'd have a tough time flagging down the Orion now.

He raised his head, jerked a nod at Daniels. "Take her," he shouted. "Wake me when we pass Greensboro."

Daniels' face was strained. He smiled faintly.

"Pretty work," he yelled back and took the wheel.

Grant slipped off the police uniform, drew on tight-legged riding breeches and a flying suit. From weapon racks he selected a heavy automatic, a pair of glasses, and stretched out on the special seats of his Orion to sleep.

Grant woke shortly after dawn, of his own accord, before they had passed over the North Carolina town, and swept the country below with glasses while the Orion followed the path of the Stinson he had spotted from Achmed's aerie. He searched for a high-walled place in which would be Moorish windows covered with iron grille.

**I**T took twelve hours of flying to find the place, high in the Big Smokies. Tangled virgin forest stretched on all sides of it for miles, but high on the promontory where the big Moorish building sprawled was a dinky landing field.

The Orion could never sit down there, or, having landed, could never take off. Grant doubted that anything but an autogiro could use that field. Grant swiftly strapped on a parachute pack, went forward to Daniels. He shouted:

"I'm going to bail out. Fly across the field. After I jump, hit for Raleigh. Get men to back me up. I've got to get down there so they won't

get away. Whoever you bring better wear parachutes."

Daniels nodded, banked the ship in a slow circle. Grant heaved open the door against wind pressure, stepped off at four thousand feet. He shot down and down and down, and didn't yank the rig ring until he was within 1500 feet of the surface. Even so, a half dozen men spilled out over the field beneath him.

Grant's keen eyes were grim, and he reached up to the shrouds of the parachute, pulled down on one side until air, slipping out from under the bell of the 'chute slid him off to one side of the field into the trees.

Dangerous business, diving into trees that way, but landing on the field meant capture, and the woods would delay those henchmen of Achmed.

His side-slipping had been cleverly done. The men had rushed toward the near end of the field to meet him. By his side-slipping he had sent the 'chute back over the hangar and a hundred yards into the woods. He spotted a small clearing filled with second-growth pine, as close together as quills on a porcupine's back. They broke his landing.

Grant sprawled to the ground, scrambled up unhurt. No time to unbuckle the harness. He snatched out a knife, slashed the shrouds, darted off through the pines. They grew slightly above his head, and the thick, intermingling needles allowed no more than two or three feet visibility.

Once out of the second growth, the forest became park-like, huge, straight pines, whose branches did not begin until fifty feet above the ground. Underfoot a carpet of pine needles, brown and slippery. Difficult woods to hide in.

Grant heard now the crashing of men working through the second growth he had just quitted. He could see the hangars, a dark blotch against the sky. He took out his automatic,

streaked back along the edge of the pines, ran swiftly toward the field again. The soft, needle-carpeted earth gave off no sound.

There were two hangars, and Grant reached the first without having been spotted. He slipped along the side, peered in through the great open doors.

There was no one in the hangar, but there were three, five-passenger cabin autogiros, like huge poised insects with their long rotors. Grant went swiftly to work, dumped a drum of gasoline down to the ground and rolled it slowly across the hangar so the gas covered the ground beneath the 'giros. When most of the gasoline was out of the drum he pushed it slowly toward the doorway, leaving a wet trail. Outside the hangar's door he touched a match to it.

Swift flames streaked across the floor, and, in a few seconds, had wrapped the ships in red and yellow tongues of fire. Grant darted swiftly into the second hangar. No time here for elaborate preparations. He shoved a gasoline drum to the ground beneath the centermost of the three 'giros and wrenched at the gasoline plug.

There were wild shouts in the woods now. Grant dragged down a second drum. The plug stuck. He shot a hole through the drum, dragged it to the door, touched a match to the trail and fled.

He sprinted toward the sprawling building on the hill. It was a veritable castle. The high wall had doorways at regular intervals, and a twisting path ran up the steep slope toward it, thick woods to either side.

Grant plunged into the woods. Those men on the field would have too much fire-fighting to do for a little while to bother him. There was a sullen roar, and Grant whirled in time to see the roof of the hangar lift, the walls fly sideways. Patches of liquid flame spread over the field, flashed into the woods.

THERE were shouts now behind the wall toward which Grant panted through the cover of the woods. Gates flung open and men pounded down toward the field, a full twenty of them.

When no more men had come through the gates for a full minute and a half, Grant crept toward one and through it. Luxurious gardens spread within the wall. Flowering clusters of shrubbery were higher than his head. There was a profuse blossoming of roses and other exotic plants which Grant did not identify.

Abruptly he darted aside, crouched between two huge, spreading bushes of Japanese quince, their thorns prodding him. He had caught a slight movement along the path, and as he crouched a huge Negro came into sight. He was naked to the waist; but his legs were clothed in baggy golden silk, and there were fantastic, brilliant shoes on his feet.

These were not the things Grant noticed. The right hand of the Negro grasped a scimitar with a heavy, curved blade over four feet long. The man's movements were stealthy, and his eyes swung from side to side, searching the shrubbery.

But dusk was filling the garden now, and Grant's clothing was dun-colored. The man, advancing with that long stride, crouched forward with that vicious blade in his hand, passed within five feet of where Grant crouched between the quince bushes.

He went around the corner of the building, and Grant slipped out again and advanced toward the house. Around the third floor ran a shallow balcony, whose arched windows, covered with iron lattice, had been the clew by which Grant had identified the building from the plane.

As he slipped along, searching for some entrance, he heard a soft call and glanced up sharply, gun muzzle pointing with his eyes, to find a girl bending over the railing of the balcony. It was Elandi, his "slave."

Her call was musical, as if she sang. A rope came writhing down from the balcony, and she beckoned with a white hand.

A trap? But why bother? They could easily surround him in the garden. Grant took his gun between his teeth, tested the rope with a tug, and swung upward, hand over hand.

A hoarse shout below him in the garden. He twisted his head. The huge Negro was leaping in great strides across the garden, the scimitar raised.

He quickened his climb, twisted a leg into the rope and grabbed his automatic from between his teeth. The scimitar swished by beneath his feet.

The Negro howled unintelligible things, whirled back the blade again. Grant saw he would throw. His gun spoke, too late. Already the scimitar glittered through the air. But the blade required an expert to throw. It turned in the air. Its hilt struck Grant's hand, knocked the automatic to the earth.

Even while the sword and gun clattered to the ground, the Negro swayed on his feet. He toppled and fell like a redwood tree, mighty even in defeat.

Grant turned back to his climb hauling himself with creaking muscles up the last ten feet. He caught the balcony rail, hauled himself over and—stared into the venomous muzzles of three revolvers.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ALTAR OF ALLAH

BEHIND those three pistols were the grimly determined faces of three assassins. The girl, after her treachery, had disappeared, and below him in the garden were heard the shouts of other men, returning from fighting the fire in the hangars.

Trapped—completely trapped, and at odds that were completely impossible. He had only one trump now.

These men had no way of escape, now that the autogiros were burned, and field and hillside were clear for the landing of the relief that his operative was speeding in his swift Lockheed Orion.

Play for time was his cue—time was his only salvation. He smiled pleasantly into the muzzles of those three revolvers and said:

"Well, it looks as though you had me."

One of the men had a short upper lip and buck teeth, and when he spoke, the upper lip was squeezed back and his teeth showed yellow and vicious as a wolf's. He said grimly:

"Yes. And this time you will not escape!"

He shoved his revolver into his robe, and strode forward, assisting Grant over the balustrade. He leaned over and shouted down to the men below.

"The throne room. Allah summons you all to the throne room."

The three men closed about Grant. The screen of a window slid aside, and they entered a room luxurious in Persian carpets. They strode along dim halls where Grant's hard heels echoed through the sly sibilance of slippers, where jeweled lamps cast a lurid glow. Finally heavy, carved doors swung open.

There were twenty men in a semi-circle about the room, but only a sinister silence greeted him. Behind them he could see a low, white-draped, bierlike couch. His three immediate captors took him deliberately to it. At the couch's head an assassin stood with the huge, heavy scimitar which the Negro had vainly hurled at him.

Two men stepped forward and wordlessly began to strip Grant. He moved his arms unnecessarily, tossed them, offered to do things for the men, to unfasten the buckle of the 'chute harness, anything to play for time. He managed to delay them, but got not one syllable of response.

Finally he stood totally stripped, a leanly muscled, powerful man. A twist of white silk embroidered in gold was bound about his waist. Strong hands gripped his arms suddenly, and almost before he was aware of their intentions, he was spreadeagled upon the white bier.

The man with the huge scimitar strode forward. Grant wrenched his head about, saw that the man was stripped to the waist and that his shoulder muscles bulged with the lift and heft of the blade.

The man stood grimly at the head of the couch, put the tip of the blade on the floor, and leaned on its hilt, his hands almost beneath his chin.

Grant forced his tensing muscles to relax, and calmly began to whistle a little tune. A man's fist struck across his mouth, and a deep voice boomed out:

"Silence and respect in the room of Allah!"

It was again what Elandi had called, "The Voice of Allah."

A man began to intone guttural noises, in a language Grant guessed must be Arabian, and the booming voice of Allah made responses. Finally it spoke in English.

"Terry Grant, you are to die, a sacrifice to wipe out your debt to Allah."

GRANT knew then that the platform on which he lay was an altar. The man with the scimitar moved. Grant's eyes flashed to him, saw him tense, and lift the big blade. Muscles pulled in the man's arms and he threw the blade back over his shoulder and then looked toward the wall above the throne, awaiting a signal.

Muscles swelled and corded in Grant's own arms against the tight grip of his captors. That blade, swishing down, would split him in two, from chest to the top of his head. Grant's face was drawn, his mouth corners strangely lifted in that narrow fighting smile of his.



There was a sudden clamor at the wooden door, and Grant jerked his head about hopefully. The police? Oh, but not yet. They couldn't have come yet. It was not the police. The doors swung inward suddenly wide and through them rushed the small, white figure of Elandi.

She waved above her head a thin, long knife and ran on swift feet across the floor to the throne and knelt.

"Allah, oh Allah, thy servant craves a boon, a chance to wipe out my disobedience. Let me execute the sentence of death upon this dog."

Men stood angrily over the bent figure of the girl but no one touched her, and all stared at the wall above the throne, waiting, waiting for the decision of Allah upon the invasion of this girl.

Grant could not see her where she crouched, as he lay with his head straight back away from the throne. But the man with the scimitar had not moved. He stood still with his arms tensed back, ready to swish down with that murderous blade.

The voice of Allah was slow in answering, but finally its tone boomed out: "It is permitted."

The girl, with a glad little cry, sprang up and ran across to Grant's side. She was a little thing, and her eyes were warm, staring at Grant. There was no hostility in them, only friendliness as for a moment her velvet-soft eyes strayed up and down the long, lean length of young Grant's nearly naked body.

She was dressed as she had been when Grant had first seen her, jeweled plates upon her breast and flowers in her hair. She raised the blade above her head and the voice of Allah broke in again rather hurriedly:

"No, no, not that way. And not the scimitar. Let it be the Stone Death."

The words fell like ice on Grant's heart. He saw movement and a man strode up beside the altar with a small, glittering needle in his right hand. But even as he came near, the

girl's dagger flashed down, a gleam of light, striking not Grant but the man who held his arm.

The man uttered a strangled cry and fell, and Grant sprang from the altar, fighting the man who gripped his other arm, and wrenching free. He felt a small hand upon his arm, and the blood-stained knife of Elandi was thrust into his hand.

He charged the man with the scimitar, wrenched the huge blade from him, grasped it by the handle, and whirled. The blade was superbly balanced, its edge like Swedish razors. Two men fell at its first whistling sweep, a man with a knife dropped to his knees and thrust up under its swing.

Grant chopped down and the man's arm was severed at the shoulder. The scimitar flashed on, a glittering flame in the hands of the naked white giant. There was a shrill scream behind him, and Grant with a whirling sweep of his blade to clear away his assailants, turned to see that Elandi had been seized by the man with the needle.

His hand was on her throat, and her small body was arched backward on the altar, and the needle was going slowly toward her breast.

The scimitar slashed, sliced through needle and hand and the man whirled back, blood spouting from the severed arm upon the girl. The voice of Allah boomed out suddenly:

"Down, down, all of you. So that I may slay this dog."

**T**HIS time there was no doubt about the location of the voice. It came from behind the throne. Grant realized instantly that he would be helpless out of the protecting, close-pressing ranks of his attackers.

The voice of Allah had hardly ceased, the men were just dropping to their knees, when he sprang forward, mounted the throne dais and struck violently against the wall behind it with the heavy hilt of his

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sword. It gave, and Grant drew back and hurled himself against the same spot. A door pivoted beneath his thrust.

Darting into the opening, Grant dived sideways. Gun flame lanced at him from the dark, a lean hand thrust out between dark curtains and Grant swung the scimitar back and hurled it. His years at juggling stood him in good stead. It flew strong and true, and the revolver clattered to the floor.

Grant charged after the flying weapon and sprang upon the man behind the curtains. He was large and powerful and despite his wounded hands, gashed by the scimitar's blade, struggled violently against Grant.

They fought in almost total darkness, the only light filtering through the narrow door that Grant had forced. The heavy curtains swirled about them. A fist caught Grant in the face and hurled him violently back. He writhed aside as the man thumped down with his knees on the spot where Grant had lain. Grant jumped up and sprang on the man's back, linked his arms beneath his, and strained back.

"Give up, you fool," he grated out, "or I'll break your arm."

Sounds that might or might not have been words issued from the man. Grant, his grip on the man's arm rendering him helpless, dragged him toward the narrow door.

If he could show these assassins their conquered master, they might surrender, save the police a terrific struggle when they arrived.

Dragging the captive along, Grant became conscious of a stony chill in the man's arms. They were rigid and hard beneath his grasp, and Grant, with a sudden feeling of nausea at his stomach, dropped him to the ground.

He hit solidly and in the light of the small doorway Grant saw that his position remained entirely unchanged, that his face was twisted hideously with fear.

Grant put his hand slowly to the man's throat, and it was cold, as rigid as stone, and suddenly Grant understood. The blade of the scimitar that had gashed through the hypodermic needle about to kill the girl, had slashed the man's hand immediately afterward! Poetic justice. The master of the Stone Death had died by the Stone Death, and from the virus intended for one of his victims!

Grant whirled and grabbed up his scimitar again, dashed for the door and saw the girl's small back in it. He peered over her shoulder and saw that she grasped an automatic and that she held at bay five or six assassins. Many others lay dead in a welter of blood where the scimitar had slashed, and others lay dead with bullets.

Clamor at the doors again. They swung wide and men in uniform, with levelled guns, dashed in. Grant stepped out into the open past the girl, his arm about her shoulders, and recognized Daniels at the head of the charge.

"Fine work, Danny!" he called.

Then he saw that the men behind Daniels were New York police.

"Danny," he said, "you didn't get all the way back to New York?"

Danny laughed and said: "No, they captured me in Raleigh, and I brought them along here to capture you."

Inspector Littleman strode forward, his keen dark eyes puzzled. He glanced at the shambles on the floor, to the girl with the gun in her hand, and the tall giant with the dark-stained scimitar.

"It looks as if we'd have to add to those murder charges against you," Littleman growled.

**G**RANT took two swift strides forward, and poised the scimitar. He grinned like a boy.

"Want to fight?"

The police officer growled something unintelligible, and demanded:

"What the hell is this business, anyway?"

Grant said quietly, "Did you ever hear of Hassan ben Sabbah?" and Littleman growled, "No."

Grant said rapidly:

"He was called the Old Man of the Mountain. He lived in the tenth century and organized bands of assassins whom he tricked into believing they had gone to heaven for a few days, giving them everything that the Mohammedan expects to find in heaven.

"Then he gave them another dose of hasheesh and sent them back to earth in his service. If they served him they went back to heaven when they died, and heaven to them had been such a delightful place that they did not hesitate to die at his command.

"Apparently this lad, Achmid ben Hassan, the same bloke these boys called Allah, had convinced them by means of a similar trick. You'll notice that all his servants are Syrian. I deduced this from his treatment of me when he kidnaped me and brought me to this castle originally. That was where I was just after Myra Hawks was murdered.

"He was using his assassinations to exact a tribute from the wealthy, just as Hassan ben Sabbah in the old days exacted money from the princes of the world."

"Yeah?" said Littleman. "Well, where is this guy Achmed?"

Grant's smile went from his face. He ducked his head toward the narrow opening behind him. "Achmed's in there, dead."

"Well, haul him out and let's see him."

Grant said, "Haul him out yourself. He died of the Stone Death that he was accustomed to inflict upon other people."

"And what is this Stone Death?" Littleman demanded.

Grant said: "I haven't had any chance to puzzle out the exact nature of the injection he gave, but what he

accomplished was to set up a condition of rigor mortis in the living body, stopping circulation of blood and stiffening the muscles so that the body became like stone.

"Cyanide poisons, especially prussic acid, cause early rigor mortis, often within an hour after death. Sometimes, in case of violent exertion, this occurs even sooner. Achmed undoubtedly used a cyanide in some terrible new form, ferreted out with his deep knowledge of the East and its secret poisons. He induced rigor mortis in the living body, turning people almost literally, to stone.

"This business of death creeping from the feet upward was nothing unusual. In deaths by poison, especially those that effect the heart, the feet and hands always go numb first."

Littleman grunted. "You're so wonderful," and shouldered past Grant. "If you're squeamish about hauling out this Achmed guy, I'll do it."

He stepped in through the narrow entrance and flashed on his light. Grant heard a low curse of amazement and stepped in with him where the white light of his flash bathed the dead face of Achmed ben Hassan. The light showed a leonine white head and a face with the bristling white mustache.

"Dammit," cried Littleman, "it's Colonel Hawks himself!"

Grant smiled grimly and said:

"I'm not surprised. When Hawks hired me, his worry about his so-called daughter seemed vaguely unreal to me, and at his house I learned Myra had insisted on me; and she tried to tell me of some suspicion, but she didn't get very far with it because Hawks wouldn't leave us alone.

"Then when the assassins came they opened the door with six locks on it as easily as I could open my own front door if I had a latch key. These men are human beings, and unless they had assistance—such as Hawks giving them the keys—they could not have opened the door. He must have

feared his ward would give him away and took this means to kill her and avert suspicion from himself.

"Another thing that convinced me was the fact that Hawks was very slow in answering when I shouted for help while battling the assassins in Myra's room. Then, too, his house was full of relics of Asia, a tip-off in itself."

Grant felt a small warm hand on his arm and turned to find the brown soft eyes of Elandi looking up into his.

"Am I forgiven, lord?" she asked Grant.

He threw an arm about her shoulders.

"Forgiven? Yes, child—but I'll never forget."

But Elandi did not know that Terry Grant also meant that he would never forget Myra Hawks, the gorgeous woman who had been held in damnable slavery by the leonine-headed murderer who had posed as her father. Grant made up his mind to take a long trip, soon.



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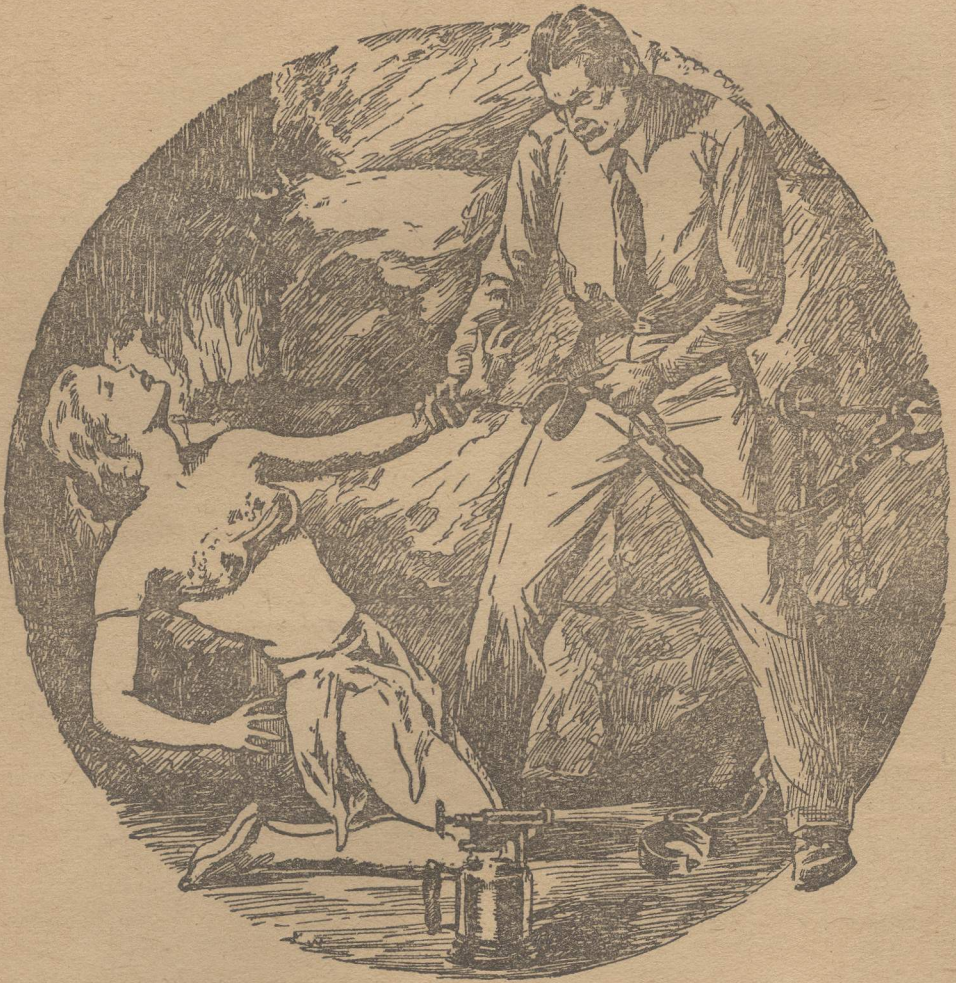


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# The Soul-Scorchers' Lair



*By Ronald Flagg*

He had a mad desire to scorch his wife's soul through her body, using the intense heat of a blowtorch's searing torture flames.

**T**HE big man in whites and sun helmet pushed briskly into the *Cantina La Paloma*. Just inside the flapping doors, he came to an abrupt stop. His bleak, darting eyes raked the boisterous throng of Filipinos, Malays, Chinos, Japs, Moros, and half-castes.

Here was every type of woman that the intermixing of races could produce, all imbued with the age-old wisdom of the female to please the

male. In the foreground a half-caste girl from Burma walked casually by a group of Japanese men, pretending that she didn't know the split in her divided skirt of silver tinsel had slipped overly much so that the upper roundness of one thigh showed boldly. Watchfully she would wait for notice, then smile sly invitation. Other women of different hues plied the booths and corner tables.

The Filipino orchestra died with a twanged discord of their long-stemmed instruments. Shuffling feet scratched to a stop on the sawdust floor. Swarthy seamen in greasy sweaters looked uneasily about. Then they saw that big man in white linen and cork helmet.

With glowering, suspicious eyes they watched that hard-faced *Americano* look searchingly among them. Some of them furtively pulled their caps over their faces—for they did not relish the close scrutiny of the governor general's chief investigator.

Then "Flint" Warren looked over their heads to the balcony at the far end of the lantern-lighted room. It was there he saw the white head he had been searching for. Under that thatch of white hair was the red face of Old Man Nolan. And perched on Nolan's knee was a lithe Filipino girl. Warren said something through his teeth, and started down the room.

A path was quickly made for him. Something like a sigh of relief rippled through that motley throng of mixed races. The instruments once more whined forth their chantlike rhythm. But the swarthy seamen kept suspicious eyes on that big man in white, and hostile hands close to knife hafts.

Flint Warren ducked under a cobweblike fishing net dangling from the rafters, and climbed the rickety steps to the balcony. Old Man Nolan saw him coming. With a hasty shove of his arm, he dislodged the dark-skinned girl.

The Filipino girl tossed her head indignantly, shrilled a string of savage swearing on the floor where he had let

her drop. Then, provocatively, she pulled her brief skirt down over lithe, smoky-brown legs before she got up and moved away.

"Evenin', sir." He respectfully got to his feet.

Warren frowned at the girl, then looked hard at Nolan.

The red-faced Nolan pointed to the liquor on the grimy table. "Jus' buy-in' Infanta a drink."

"Sure," said Warren. "Now tell Infanta to beat it."

Nolan blustered a dismissal to the girl. Then he jerked his head toward a secluded corner table. "We can talk over there, sir."

Still frowning over his shoulder at the girl, Warren walked to the table and sat down. He cuffed his helmet back on his head. His eyes bleak again, he coldly studied the red-faced Nolan. In a low voice, he said:

"Maybe you're getting too old for this job—and weak!"

"No, sir," hastily protested the seaman. "Gals come an' go—but Old Man Nolan keeps his hatch battened down."

Flint Warren said nothing. He dropped a cigar on the table, and lighted up another for himself. When it was going, he asked, "Ever heard the name—Aranda Pombal?"

Nolan rolled that name silently on his tongue. He nodded his head a little uncertainly. "Pombal—that the lubber what murdered his wife, an'—"

"And got away with it," finished Warren. "He's up here in the Luzon—not many hours ahead of me. It's pretty well known that before he killed his wife he tortured her fiendishly. There were rumors that leaked out among house boys that he used to strip her naked and torture her. One spying native told others that, not many hours before Pombal killed his wife, he stripped away her clothing, chained her up and used a blowtorch on her—took fiendish glee in gradually searing sensitive parts of her body. Seems he had a fixation that he wanted to scorch her soul right through her body. But

he got away with it—claimed her death was accidental, the devil only knows how. The madman is said to have started a whole cult on his soul-scorching insanity—used to have a lot of half-castes helping him with his torture business.”

Nolan shook his head. “Ain’t seen no one what looks like a murderer. To be tellin’ the truth, sir, I’ve been havin’ troubles of me own. Manuel out there at the lighthouse—”

Warren’s hand clamped down hard on Nolan’s arm. “Not so loud, man! When you have anything to say about Manuel—*whisper it!*” The big Manila agent drew evenly on his cigar. Without taking it from his mouth, he said tersely, “I put Manuel out at that lighthouse for a damn good reason. And I told you to keep a tight mouth about it.”

“That I have, sir,” responded Nolan firmly. “An’ I’ve been skipper of the lighthouse tender for a good many years, an’—”

“All right. All right,” said the flint-faced Warren. “But get this—I’m grappling with a man who never makes a slip. For a leak to spring in my organization—Hell, Nolan, I can’t afford it!” he ended in a hoarse whisper.

**S**UDDENLY Warren looked over to see the sleek Infanta edging back along the balcony railing. Their eyes met. Then Infanta tossed her tawny shoulders, and padded down the steps. The musical tinkle of the spangles on her sleazy, transparent skirt was soon swallowed in the ribald hilarity below.

“That girl’s got something on her mind,” frowned Warren.

“Jus’ wants another drink.” Old Man Nolan attempted an easy smile.

“The hell she does,” muttered Warren. “But tell me—what’s all this trouble with Manuel?”

Nolan leaned closer. “The old trouble, I guess. The natives say the lighthouse is haunted. Maybe Manuel figures the curse is gettin’ at him. Always he’s complainin’ that some-

thin’ or other’s the matter. Yesterday I carried him a month’s supplies. The lubber started complainin’ again—an’ wanted a doc. So today I ships him one.”

“That’s fast service from Manila,” said Warren. “Doc Reynolds must be getting ambitious.”

“But,” put in Nolan, “I didn’t take Doc Reynolds.”

Flint Warren craned his neck as if he hadn’t heard correctly. “You didn’t take Doc Reynolds?” he asked incredulously.

Nolan shook his head. “I carried over a doc from here. Manuel was complainin’—”

“There’s no white doctor at this jumping-off place,” said Warren impatiently. “Who in the name of—”

“He was a perlite Spanish lad,” faltered Nolan. “He was motorin’ north—but didn’t mind the run out to the light. Said that a doc should go where duty calls—”

“Never mind that!” gritted Warren. “What did he look like?”

Nolan gulped the liquor in his glass. “He was a gintl’man, an’ you may lay to that. Always bowin’ an’ smokin’ fancy cig-rettes, he was.”

Warren flung his cigar on the sawdust floor, spiked it with his heel. “Did that Spanish doctor of yours have a small, waxed mustache?”

“Aye, sir, that he did. You know the lubber—?”

A short bark of a laugh came from Tom’s throat. “I know him—sure! He’s Aranda Pombal!”

“The lubber what murdered—”

“That’s him. And the last man in the world to be alone with Manuel! . . . Come on, we’re going to that Cavalier Isle lighthouse . . . Maybe we’ll find Manuel—alive.”

Pushing the squat, stubble-faced seamen right and left, Flint Warren gouged a lane through the chattering crowd of the *cantina*. Out of the tail of his eye he caught sight of the supple-bodied Infanta. The girl’s black eyes held a mocking taunt. Then

Warren was at the heavy swinging doors, with the lumbering Nolan puffing up behind him.

A MOONLESS night is black in any part of the globe—but it is blackest in the murky maw of the South China Sea. And straight out into this great cavern of darkness chugged the creaking lighthouse tender. Dropping off its stern were pin-points of light dotting the countless bays and inlets of Luzon's Asiatic shore.

Warren sat in the bow, fingers restlessly drumming the helmet between his knees.

"How far out is that light?" he asked.

"Better'n six leagues, sir. It'll be after dawn before we heave anchor."

"That," said Warren harshly, "will give Pombal all night to work on Manuel. It's not pleasant to think of—when you know Pombal."

Old Man Nolan spread his hands out. "That Pombal lubber can't pull nothin' rough—when every one knows he's out there."

"He can do anything," said Warren flatly.

Nolan was silent as he lashed the wheel due west, straight for the coast of French Indo-China. This done he took out his ancient pipe. Flint Warren volunteered no conversation, so Nolan suggested:

"Maybe you're steerin' the wrong course, sir. Maybe this Spanish doctor ain't the murderin' divil—"

"Tell me, Nolan, did you walk up to this doctor and say: 'Are you a doctor, mister? And if you are, will you make a trip to Cavalier Isle? Did you say that to him, Nolan?'"

"Well—now—sir. Jus' didn't come 'bout like that. It was Infanta what told me 'bout the doc. She—"

"Sure," cut in Warren, "after she got you drunk enough to shoot off your mouth about Manuel being at the light—she rings in the doctor." Warren's face was flint-hard in the dim glow of the port and starboard lights.

He shook his head grimly. "I've got to hand it to Pombal."

A long silence ensued, finally broken by Nolan's:

"Don't you be worryin' too much 'bout that Pombal, sir. He didn't look none too vicious to me."

Warren stopped his restless finger-drumming to ask, "Know anything about the tortures of the ancient Chinese and Romans?"

"Aye, sir. They had divilish ways of stretchin' an' cuttin' people."

"Right. And Pombal knows 'em all." Warren juttet his rocklike jaw. "Something else—he gets away with 'em." Again Warren went to drumming his helmet. "He got away with murdering his American wife. Did her up in hellish shape. But left nothing to incriminate himself."

Nolan ignited his pipe with a spluttering sea match, illuminating the paint-chipped tub with its chugging engine amidships. He smoked in silence.

Flint Warren went on in his abrupt manner. "I got one of his servants to testify against him. Almost hanged him. But again Pombal was one jump ahead of us. He bribed the native jury. I've been looking for him since." Warren swore harshly. "He's a murder maniac. He can do anything!"

Old Man Nolan suddenly became alert. He scanned the darkness off the bow. Then he tested the rope-lashed wheel. "She hasn't run a point off her course," he muttered.

"What's up?"

"Dunno, sir. By all rights we oughta be seein' a speck of that light."

Warren said, "The way this tub crawls we'll never see the light." Then he added, "Or maybe Pombal is talking to Manuel about the ancient Chinese."

Nolan wagged his head. "This Pombal may be all the divil you claim—but he's not fool 'nuff to murder Manuel. Anyway, sir, what's he got agin' the lad?"



"Nothin'," spat Warren, "except—that Manuel is the servant who testified against him." Warren slapped a cigarette to his lips. "The Manila government offered to protect Manuel—and hid him out at the lighthouse. Hell! Can't this damn tub go faster?"

"She's doin' her best, sir." And Nolan lapsed into silence. Seemed there was nothing more he could say. Then suddenly he sat bolt upright. "There's the light! Burnin' high, too, sir. Manuel's wastin' his wicks. Oughta know better'n that."

Warren sucked on his cigarette, said nothing.

Hours later, the light went out—and stayed out.

Dawn came up behind them, as the laboring craft nosed her bow toward the reef.

CAVALIER ISLE had carried its noble name for many centuries—but its reef was as low and treacherous as nature could sink. Like tiger's teeth, jagged fangs of rock jutted out of the sea. And for every rock above surface, there were three more beneath eager to rip out a ship's vitals.

Old Man Nolan knew this well, as he zigzagged his tender to the miniature wharf built out on the reef.

It was then that Flint Warren got his first look at the lighthouse. About one hundred yards back from the wharf he saw the lightkeep's shack. Above the shack rose the great iron scaffolding which supported the oil tub and glass cupola of the lantern.

While Nolan docked the tender, Warren dog-trotted up to the shack.

The chug of the tender must have awakened some one in the shack, for a freshly-shaven man in whites appeared at the door.

Warren went up to him. "Get out of that door."

A quirk of a smile flicked across Pombal's dark features, showing twin rows of gleaming teeth. He stepped to one side, bowing slightly.

The flint-faced Manila agent shoved

him further out of the way, and went into the shack.

Manuel lay in his bunk dressed in trousers, soiled undershirt, and heavy shoes. To all appearances he was merely resting.

"Manuel!" barked Warren.

There was no answer.

Warren touched the young Filipino. Then he swung on Pombal.

But the Spaniard spoke first. With bowed head, he murmured, "Poor Manuel has passed on to his ancestors."

Flint Warren's jaw jutted aggressively. "You knew that I was some hours behind you—and still you murdered him. You won't get away with this!"

"Manuel died a natural death," politely corrected Pombal.

Warren quickly stripped the body. Expertly he went over every inch of the dark skin.

"No wounds," he muttered to himself. Then he carefully tested for signs of poisoning. Twice he went over the body. He shook his head grimly. Without a word he went over to a chair and sat down.

Pombal started to do likewise.

"On your feet," said Warren.

The Spaniard sneered thinly.

From his chair, Warren asked, "How did Manuel die?"

"He just stopped living," explained Pombal matter-of-factly.

"You have no other diagnosis?"

Pombal lifted his shoulders eloquently. "My limited medical knowledge can find no cause for death—other than a natural one." He pinched his tiny waxed mustache, and blandly suggested, "If my word is doubted, why not take the body to your government doctors?"

Warren nodded slowly. "You've done a perfect job, Pombal—so far. I know the lad hasn't been wounded or poisoned."

"Then," asked Pombal, "how could he have been murdered?"

"Let me ask the questions," cut in the big Manila agent.

Old Man Nolan, who had been standing in the doorway, came in. He looked at the body. "Aye, sir, Manuel was always complainin'. If he ain't been murdered—maybe the curse of this hell-place got him."

Pombal smiled. "I've neglected my studies in superstition. But I must say there is a possibility—"

"Rot!" grunted Warren. "Manuel was educated. Trouble was he got lonely here and imagined things were the matter with him." Then the big investigator looked sourly at Pombal. "Could your limited medical knowledge set the time of death?"

With an obliging smile, Pombal bent over Manuel. From where Warren sat, he could see the Spaniard's profile. And Pombal looked as though he were laughing—laughing at the dead body!

**B**UT when Pombal again turned around, his dark face held a calm, professional expression. "This unfortunate fellow has been dead about three hours."

Warren's face was devoid of expression. "Of course, you were with him—when he peacefully passed on?"

A gleaming flash of teeth. "I'm afraid I don't know. Manuel rested in his bunk. I couldn't tell whether he was dead or sleeping. Naturally, I expected nothing was wrong, and didn't investigate."

"You worked the light?"

"I did my best."

Flint Warren smoked another cigarette, his eyes roving about the shack. In the corner opposite the bunk squatted an iron, pot-bellied stove. In another corner lay the newly-opened boxes of the month's supply of food, water and several huge tins of oil. The walls were decorated with a numerous assortment of rapiers, cutlasses, pikes, battle-axes, daggers and muzzle-loading blunderbusses.

These antiquated weapons took Warren's mind back to the naming of the Cavalier Isle. Long ago, an ill-fated Indianman had lost the route to India. For months it was buffeted around

stormy seas, until finally wrecked on the reef six leagues off the Philippine Islands. Here her cavalier company perished. Native legend gave the reef a curse, and her superstitious sons shunned it. The United States Government gave it a name and a lighthouse to safeguard South China Sea shipping.

Warren's eyes went from the weapons to the corpse. Seemed strange that a weaponless death should take place in so warlike a setting.

Then the big government agent looked bleakly at Pombal. "Your clothes are soiled," he pointed out.

Pombal nodded toward the iron ladder running up the scaffolding to the lantern. "I did my best with the light."

"It was sure tough on your suit. Did you slide down the ladder?"

The Spaniard drew himself up. "I've never taken the trouble to make a study of lighthouse keeping."

Warren said nothing. Getting to his feet, he made two careful rounds of the room. On the second trip he stopped at the newly arrived supplies. He examined them minutely. Then looking up, he spoke to Old Man Nolan:

"There's no wicking here."

"Manuel had 'nuff to last for a coupla days," hastily explained the tender skipper, "so I didn't overload the boat. Fact is, sir, I have it aboard right now." Nolan glanced sharply about the shack, then pointed to a box near the bunk. "There oughta be some in that, sir."

"There is," said Flint Warren. "And Manuel's been careless with government property." The Manila investigator made another round of the shack. Once he turned sharply to find Pombal's mocking eyes on his back.

The Spaniard's twist of a smile tightened in contempt. "I trust this farce will soon end, Lieutenant Warren. I would like to get back to the mainland."

"Maybe to see Infanta?"

"Infanta?" repeated Pombal. He shrugged his slim shoulders. "There have been so many—names elude me."

"And in the morning," Warren went on, "the Luzon would learn that Infanta had died a 'natural death.' Right?"

Pombal sneered openly. "This has gone far enough. I demand that you take me to the mainland. If you persist in your foolish idea—take along the body, too. Have it examined. I wish to leave at once!" He faced Old Man Nolan. "Are you ready?"

The skipper of the lighthouse tender looked to Warren. "Aye, sir, I told you right along that nothin' was amiss. You said yourself that Manuel ain't been shot or poisoned. If I may say, sir—"

Flint Warren shut him up with a wave of his hand. "Pombal is so damn anxious to pull out—I'm going to stick around awhile." Warren tossed away his cigarette. "I'm beginning to like the place!"

**H**E TOOK hold of the iron ladder leading to the light. "I'll get a better view of things from up there." The big investigator quickly ascended the ladder. And every step he took he could feel Pombal's sinister eyes boring into him.

Up and up went Flint Warren, the scaffolding narrowing as he climbed. He paused at the great oil tub which was filled by hand ladling. Far below him he could see the full stretch of the treacherous reef stealing out into the billowing expanse of the South China Sea.

Then Warren studied the construction of the light. Eight flat wicks ran from the tub of oil up through a slitted iron sheet. Each wick was operated by a thumb-screw on top of the metal sheet. Also on the metal sheet was a glass cupola with a window for each wick.

Warren had to climb up on the catwalk circling the lantern to see the thumb-screws, for the glass was piled high with millions of moths. The

wicks, he noted, were screwed up clear of the oil tub, and had burned out for lack of fuel. This explained the sudden glare of light he had seen on the water last night. The wicks had been turned up too high, and not replaced.

Slowly, Warren went down the scaffolding. Not far from the roof of the shack he paused to inspect the ironwork. Minutes later, he started down, slowly—and very thoughtfully.

In the shack he slid into his chair and fired another cigarette.

"Well," demanded Pombal, "are we going?"

"We're going all right," said Warren flatly.

"Good," grinned Pombal.

"You can sit down now," offered Warren. "I don't think you've got the guts to take it standing up."

The Spaniard eased himself into a chair and relaxed comfortably. "Gracias," his teeth flashed genially.

"Manuel's testimony almost stretched your neck, didn't it?" asked Warren.

Pombal nodded. "The poor fellow suffered under a delusion. But justice triumphed."

"Anyway," continued Warren, "suppose we say—just for an argument—that you were guilty of your wife's murder. Then your best way of getting hunk—would be to hang Manuel. Right?"

Pombal pinched his mustache. "Suppose you prove that Manuel was hung. Suppose you prove that he was strangled—that his neck was broken." The Spaniard nodded his head toward Manuel. "His neck was not broken. Even you—can see that."

For several moments Flint Warren studied the walls of the shack. Then he looked up at Pombal, saying:

"You must have made a specialty of Roman history."

The Spaniard eyed him silently.

"Specially the Christian era," went on Warren. "The Romans didn't like 'em. Fed 'em to animals—burned 'em—and—"

Pombal got out of his chair, backed to the wall.

Then Warren smiled for the first time since he had set foot on the reef. And it was not a pleasant sight to see. He pointed up to the lantern and said slowly:

"Why didn't you replace the wicks in the lamp—when the light went out?"

He got no further. With a twisting leap Pombal snatched a rapier from the wall. Thrusting it out before him, he lunged at Old Man Nolan, who stood nearest the door.

Warren's hand, still pointing upward, flicked off his helmet and scaled it at Pombal's face. The visor struck the Spaniard's nose, momentarily blinding him.

And in that moment Warren crossed the room. His knotted fist thudded against Pombal's jaw. Pombal went down, moaning. The rapier clattered to the floor.

"Couldn't chance a bullet," said Warren to Nolan. "I want him to hang in good health." Warren bent over and clicked handcuffs on Pombal's wrists. "By the way, Nolan, I want your tender to run Pombal back to the mainland. Tomorrow I'll send out an-

other lightkeep. You watch the light tonight."

"Aye, sir, that I'll do. But tell me, sir, how was the lad killed? I can't get the course of things."

Warren took up a handful of wicking. "The reason Pombal didn't replace the wicks last night—was because he was using them for another purpose. Look at the rust stains on this wicking—and on Pombal's suit. He used the wicking to hang Manuel from the scaffolding above. And he got himself all mussed up doing it."

"But Manuel's neck—" began Nolan.

"Manuel was hanged the Roman way, Nolan—by the feet! And the heavy shoes he wore prevented any marks of the wicking showing on his feet."

"It was a horrible death. Blood rushed to his brain—and slowly killed him. Then Pombal laid him in the bunk. He knew the Filipino's body would have the appearance of a natural death."

Pombal sat up groggily on the floor. Flint Warren jerked him to his feet. His eyes were bleak when he said: "Manila will treat you to a hanging, Pombal. It's shorter than yours—but the result is the same."



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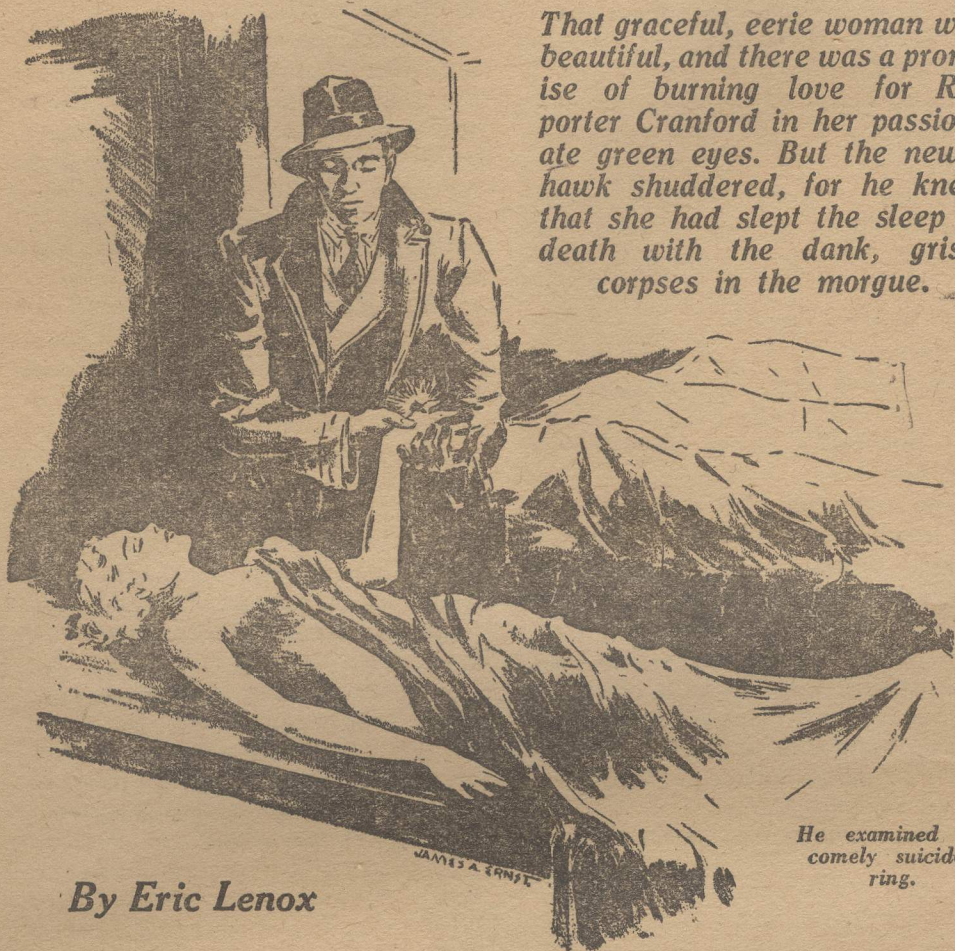
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# Corpse Girl's Return

*That graceful, eerie woman was beautiful, and there was a promise of burning love for Reporter Cranford in her passionate green eyes. But the news-hawk shuddered, for he knew that she had slept the sleep of death with the dank, grisly corpses in the morgue.*



*He examined the comely suicide's ring.*

*By Eric Lenox*

**L**INES of disgust showed in Cranford's face. His hands were thrust deeply into the huge pockets of his topcoat as he strolled crosstown going eastward on Twenty-third.

A thin mist had begun to shoot in from the river, choking the glare of the street lights. Cranford felt the clammy air slapping against his skin, making it feel wet and cold. Effortless he noted that the street grew more deserted as he approached First Avenue.

The old buildings loomed like ghostly hulks in the weaving spirals

of mist. Below he could faintly make out the black ribbon that was the East River; dirty river, murderous river. Like a slippery serpent it wound around the metropolis, sinister and silent, keeping many a secret on its filthy bottom.

As Cranford reached the avenue he turned north. Here the mixture of night and mist was a madman's concoction. To a person of Cranford's sensitivity, it connoted a fitting jest. His lips slid back to a smile, though he felt far from that act. Why should it not be so, he thought? Perhaps his hunch had been right—that is,

that something might break soon.

The thought sent a chilling thrill through him which in itself well repaid the miserable trot down this black section of the city. It seemed to put new life into him and in a moment he was swinging along, his gait a bit firmer, his face a little bit more hopeful.

Presently he entered the squat building that seemed to jut out to the river. He stopped in the dismal hallway long enough to have the silence of the place play on his nerves. He was smart. He knew he could whip himself up to a pitch of anxiety if he did this. His nostrils quivered and he let the pungent smell of chemicals assail him with their meaning of misery.

Before him there was a wooden stairway that rose steeply to the second floor. A dirty yellow light burned at the head of the passageway, throwing a meager bit of illumination on the worn wood. Beyond that loomed immovable shadows.

He moved forward and climbed the creaking stairs. At the left of the landing was a door leading to a small office. On the glazed glass in thick black letters were the words:

#### MORTUARY DEPARTMENT

The reflection of light on the glass told Cranford that inside there would be Detective Sergeant Harris.

Perfunctorily, Cranford knocked and entered the office of the man who had charge of the morgue of the great city.

Harris looked up from his desk.

"What the hell?" he mumbled.

"What the hell is right," smiled Cranford. "When in doubt come down to the morgue, that's what."

Harris swung around in his chair and faced the young man.

"Say, I thought only young cubs covered this place." He eyed Cranford closely. "Seems to me your cub days were over two years ago when you broke the Sherrelli murder case, eh?"

"And I've been looking for something ever since," Cranford muttered. "They made me a roving reporter and for a while I picked up plenty. It was a sweet life, Harris, and you can bet your bottom dollar I thrived on it. But it's six weeks now since I've had something worth while. Nothing but fires, conventions, a few anti-gang meetings that don't jell and a sensational divorce case that wasn't sensational."

Harris interrupted him. "Perhaps this world is reforming, ever stop to think of that, eh?"

"Nuts. I'm going stale, that's the trouble. I'm losing my nose for news. If I don't scare up something worth while in a hurry, two things are apt to happen: either they fire me, or I turn in my police card and go back to being a grocery clerk somewheres."

Harris wondered for a moment why this engaging young reporter who had broken the toughest murder case in the city had come here tonight. To confide his troubles? He had the answer with Cranford's next outbursts.

"How many stiffs you got here, Harris?"

The sergeant glanced at his desk and looked at the top serial number of a sheaf of green slips.

"One hundred and twenty-two."

"All unknowns, eh?" queried Cranford.

"Yep. Unless you got something up your sleeve."

Cranford's eyes brightened. "This is straight, sergeant. I'm not trying to pull a beat. I'm just ankling for a story that will sell papers, that's all. You've got a hundred-odd stiffs down in the morgue, all unknown and ready to make the next boat to Hart's Island for burial in Potter's Field. I want to mooch around downstairs among those stiffs. God knows there's a sob story behind every one of those poor bums and unknowns, but their lips are sealed.

"Most of them have died of age and misuse, but you've got the regular bunch of suicides. Those are the ones I want to see . . . I don't know

why, unless it's my nose for news that's smelling things way before my mind."

Harris' face was grave. "It's pretty hard to get a yarn out of a dead man or woman, son, but if you've got a hunch, go to it. You know where we keep them. The suicides are all on the left row."

Cranford got up and walked toward the door. "Thanks, old man, and here's hoping I get one of your stiffs to write me a six-column screamer."

**C**RANFORD'S movements seemed to make a deafening sound as he walked across the cold concrete floor of the morgue. His skin felt tight and shivery in the dank atmosphere and he wished that he hadn't come on this wild goose chase. The morgue always affected him this way.

The weak yellow electric bulbs pierced the gloomy place like fiend's eyes. They threw ghastly reflections on the still bodies, row on row of them.

To one side, on the left, were the suicides. Six of them during this day who had quit the struggle for existence. Towards these he moved, his heart beating rapidly, and his face bathed in a cold clammy sweat.

On all sides of him lay the dead, their distorted features ogling hideously. Several of the stiffs lay with eyes wide open! staring, staring, and it was these that Cranford felt boring at him wherever he went in that chamber of unholy silence.

Suddenly he stopped in front of suicide row. Out of that grisly line of six, one stood out. For a moment Cranford seemed rooted to the spot as his glance took in the pale, round face of a blonde-haired woman. The beauty that he saw was accentuated by the pitiful surroundings, and Cranford was quick to realize this. Yet, she was comely. And she was young.

He came closer to the cold body and peered deeply at the immovable features. Sharp as his eyes were, there was nothing he could detect in that impassive countenance.

In the prime of womanhood, certainly she must have experienced the joys, sorrows disappointments of life. Her graceful, slender body must have pulsed to nature's age-old drive as its swelling bosom melted into the embrace of some man she loved. Yet the girl's inscrutable face was now a mask that betrayed nothing.

The hand of death had done its work without a flaw.

But his glance noted the thin gold band on the dead woman's left hand. At first glance it seemed like an old-fashioned wedding ring. But Cranford's keen gaze saw that the band tapered and narrowed at the center.

He stooped down and let his fingers touch the cold flesh. A rippling chill coursed up his spine. But he paid no heed. He was working with the coolness and skill of a newshound. In a flash he had seen something which had escaped the more phlegmatic keepers of the dead.

He twisted the girl's hand palm upward. As he had suspected, it was not a wedding band. Turned underneath was the part of the ring which normally would have been on the upper side of the hand.

As he saw its novel design, a short gasp came from his lips. The charm of the ring was a black onyx cameo, but only in half. The cameo showed distinctly one portion of a face, as if it had, at some time, been purposely cut.

Cranford let the stiff hand flop down, palm first. In his eyes burned that crazy light of intense excitement. His lips seemed to quiver emotionally. Quickly he rushed out of the place, his footsteps clattering hard over the dank concrete floor. A thousand things tried to cram through his mind at one time, but he stifled everything except the fact that he knew upon whose hand rested the other half of that black-onyx love cameo. Without being able to prove it conclusively, Cranford knew that Suicide Row held a murdered body!

TONY'S speakeasy wasn't crowded as Cranford sauntered in, whistling softly an innocuous popular tune concerning life and its similarity to a bowl of cherries, inwardly his blood ran swiftly and the pounding of emotion and excitement were hard surges to control.

With a great deal of effort, he gave a satisfactory appearance of the proverbial bored reporter, fed up not only with life but also the bowl of cherries.

It was near twelve when he draped himself over the bar.

Two hours later he was still there, fanning his courage and his hunch with an occasional shot of rye.

Within that time Tony had confided that the rain made business not so good, and that also his wife, at any moment now, would have another *bambino*.

For two nerve-racking hours Cranford listened to that chatter, the jangling of the cash register and the tinkle of ice in frosted glasses.

Then at five minutes past two the outside iron-grilled door opened and clanged shut. A moment later a buzzer squawked twice over the bar. Tony pushed a button and the door leading to the bar opened.

Cranford's head didn't move an inch. His glass came up to his lips. His eyes squinted at the mirror before the bar. There he caught the reflection of the man who had just entered.

The man he had been waiting for!

Even through the reflection of the mirror, Cranford could see the peculiar, pasty-hued skin, accentuated by the white, stiff-bosom dress shirt and the black tuxedo.

Cranford remembered him definitely now. On several occasions he had seen the man drinking alone at the bar, seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts. Once he had heard him mumble through his thin, cruel lips, "It must be amusing to watch some one die!"

The remark, so startling and yet, uttered with such complacency, had

etched itself deeply in Cranford's mind.

With even step the man came to the bar.

"Good eve, Mista Kretchel. The rain, he's no stop yet, eh?"

"Not yet, Tony. Let me have a rye high, will you."

Kretchel looked in the mirror, scrutinized his own features and made a slight motion to adjust his bat tie.

It was peculiar that Cranford's gaze met his at the same focal point in the garish mirror. For a brief moment the two lines of vision hung at the same point like the withering contact of two electric poles.

Kretchel was the first to withdraw his probing glance. Dreamily, Cranford kept gazing as if nothing had happened.

Tony placed the amber fluid before Kretchel. The man grasped the glass with his right hand. Cranford's head turned just as the man started to drink. Under the glare of the speak-easy lights nothing was left to a doubt.

What he had hoped to see, he now saw as he had seen several nights back in this same place, and as he had seen three hours ago in the dank pit of the morgue—the other half of the black onyx cameo.

The very essence of the thing made nonchalance a difficult rôle for Cranford to assume. Impetuosity, in this case, as in others, might not only spell defeat, but might turn back at him in the form of a bitter reprisal. After all, coincidence might be the joker in this deck.

As far as the girl was concerned, there seemed no indication of murder. The slip at the morgue offered this much information: that she was white and about twenty-five years old; that she had been found asphyxiated in a room at Eighty-fifth Street, that sixty cents had been found in her purse. Her clothes were good, but that there were no means or papers of identification. And that she had



taken that room less than six hours before death, giving no name but paying a week's rent in advance.

A thousand reasons might have motivated the girl into taking her life, Cranford admitted. This he did quickly; then shut his mind from further thought in this direction. Reasoning would surely overwhelm him were he to give in to it—

Yet he knew that the cool human being who takes to the art of killing plans invariably to produce such an effect.

Kretchel struck him as such a man.

And with such a person, circumlocution, or the other indirect methods of approach, would be useless. Naught but the height of nerve and the unexpected would challenge the fortitude of that type.

With that in mind, Cranford slid near to Kretchel. His voice was half-drunken as he addressed the alleged murderer.

"That ring," Cranford mumbled. "Couldn't help seein' it. Sort of odd, isn't it?"

A COLD smile cut the pasty face of Kretchel.

He glanced at the ring. "Lots of them around, I guess."

Cranford fiddled with his glass of rye. His voice droned as he continued:

"Now f'r instance where exactly would you say you might find a lot of them?"

Kretchel seemed amused.

"Jewelers, gift shops. All over town. They're very common."

A raised eyebrow and a sort of drunken squint came from Cranford. He hailed Tony and ordered him to fill up both glasses. In a moment the task was done.

Kretchel took his. Cranford lifted his glass also. They were ready to down the stuff when Cranford exclaimed softly:

"Hmm. I wonder if, well, that is, since there's lots of 'em around, would

I find one—well, let's say in the morgue!"

Kretchel didn't bat an eyelash. The hand that held the rye highball was as firm as a rod. Not one trace of emotion flickered across the man's countenance. As Cranford waited for his answer he felt the terrible coldness of the man.

Kretchel kept silent for a full minute.

Finally he clipped, "One might."

His elbow crooked and in one gulp he finished the drink.

Cranford thought then that he sensed the fractional wave of dubiousness in the man's mind, and hurriedly he plunged in with the rest of his facts. Outwardly his manner still remained unperturbed and drunkenly inquisitive.

"F'r instance—aw, let's say on the left hand of a pretty, baby-faced blonde—"

Kretchel's laughter was hard.

"What an imagination you have, or is it the rye?"

Cranford faced Kretchel squarely. The staged sleepiness had suddenly vanished from his features. The half-closed eyes snapped fully open and the glint of chilled steel showed within the blue.

"It's a mixture of three things," Cranford muttered firmly. "Imagination, the rye, and fact!"

Kretchel's answer was immediate.

"That's damned interesting." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a bill. "Here you are, Tony."

Then he turned to Cranford. "Good night, sir. You've been rather interesting. And, by the way, if I were you I wouldn't leave right now. It's raining quite hard out—"

VERY SOON after the iron-grilled door slammed shut, the reporter jumped into the phone booth and called his paper.

While he was waiting for the connection to be made, the face of Kretchel appeared in front of the glass of the booth. A quick twist of

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the folding door; Kretchel's chiselled voice low and controlled; his right hand in his coat pocket menacingly.

"Hang up. I've a cab waiting outside—just so you won't get wet."

Cranford forced a grin to his face. The receiver went back to the hook with a metallic jangle.

"Let's go," he said.

Half an hour later they both were sitting in the living room of Kretchel's isolated suburban bungalow. Calmly and coolly, Kretchel was playing the host. A silver decanter had poured forth drinks for two and Cranford watched curiously from the depths of a leather lounge chair.

Kretchel's hand still rested in his jacket pocket. The silent warning that at any suspicious move he would probably shoot.

"As you know," Kretchel began, "I could have taken you for a ride tonight. I believe that is the expression."

The reporter probed at him deeply. "That's an admission of guilt, isn't it?"

A sneer came over Kretchel's face and for the first time all the ugliness and hate of the man was portrayed in his features.

"I have little patience with dullards. Your acute brain power attracted me, why do you think you are here then? Guilt!" The man sneered again. "Of course I killed her. Killed her cleverly, and the man who even half-suspected a murder has my respect."

Cranford's blood ran cold. Kretchel continued:

"I hold brains at a premium in friend or foe. It took unusual insight to discover whatever you did to lead you on a trail such as this; a man of your type interests me beyond anything else. A man like you I can use to great advantage."

He paused for a moment.

"She had passed her point of usefulness. As a matter of fact she became a deterrent to my plans. For your own edification let me tell you

that I am a chemist. My ways are as mysterious as the action and reaction of chemical agents. During my processes of investigation, I discovered a rare perfume which had a narcotic effect. In its primary stages it was a poison. But through constant, maddening research and experimentation, I had finally succeeded in rendering it to the stage of a usable narcotic. Its effect is the same as morphine, heroin, or hashish. But the beauty of my discovery is its usefulness to women. As a perfume of course. Yet so delicate that the clinging odor finally dominates the user until she cannot live without it.

"I have a gigantic scheme to get this narcotic perfume on the market without government interference.

"You realize that inside of six months I would have every woman in the country eating out of my hand.

"She threatened to expose me, so I did away with her. And in a simple fashion. After she had engaged the room, I called on her and overpowered her with a dose of another powerful chemical of my own discovery which causes instant death similar to asphyxiation. It was a simple matter to turn on the gas in the room to give the sufficient setting and then to raise the alarm. In two minutes crowds had gathered and I lost myself in the masses.

"My only error was in leaving the ring. Yet it may mean my good fortune because it has sent me a person of the highest intelligence."

**C**RANFORD waited long enough to make sure that Kretchel had no more to say. Once or twice he blinked his eyes to make sure he really was awake. And once or twice he thought of the sensational story this would make if—

If he could get away not only from a murderer, but a madman as well.

"Am I to understand then that you are not going to kill me?" the reporter asked.

"I would regret such a move. But if it were necessary, please bear in mind that you too would be just a suicide."

Strange were the numerous emotions that Cranford was experiencing, but somehow he smiled.

"You don't care what you do with other people's lives, eh, professor?"

Kretchel smiled evilly. "Not a bit—my only love is in the drugs I may create which in turn will give me power over humanity."

Again Cranford's newspaper mind buzzed. The utter sensation of the thing would sell a million copies in half a day if he ever could break loose. Visions of this gigantic sweep made him positively dizzy and oblivious to his surroundings.

Kretchel's gaze was intent on him too, so that he also failed to see the hammered silver knob turning ever so slowly in the doorway.

"I am going to use as—" Kretchel was saying as the door swung open. In the same motion it swung shut.

Simultaneously both men came to their feet.

The reporter's eyes gazed unbelievably at the figure with its back against the door. He was going mad, he told himself. This could not be.

But the rapid motion of Kretchel's hand swinging out of its pocket with the revolver brought Cranford into action.

With a pantherish movement he lunged sideways at Kretchel. Both his arms propelled forward toward the gun in order to deflect the shot. The impact brought him across the intervening distance with such force that Kretchel sprawled across the center table.

The girl shrieked a warning.

The sharp burst of a revolver cracked through the room. One shot, filling the room with the acrid odor of gunpowder. Then silence. Kretchel had slumped to the floor, a clean hole drilled through his forehead. His gun had gone off in his upflung hand—killing himself.

Again the reporter felt agonizing chills as he heard the girl's voice.

Cranford came close to her and peered deeply at her face. There was no doubt—it was she! The black onyx ring was still on her hand.

As the reporter stared, the woman's long black, nondescript coat parted open, and the slender, graceful curves of her bare body showed. Besides a pair of shabby shoes, the coat was all she wore.

Her eyelids dropped a trifle over greenish eyes, but other than that she showed no embarrassment as she casually pulled the coat together.

"It—it was all I could find to put on in that awful, dark place," she explained.

**T**HE REPORTER was silent, still staring dumfoundedly.

She broke in on his thoughts quickly. The slight tremor of emotion and fright still in her voice. "I heard it all," she said. "I was standing outside a long time. His drug did not work. Though it gave all the appearances of a suicidal death by gas and seemed to produce a condition similar to *rigor mortis*, it was in reality nothing but a condition of suspended animation."

The girl shuddered. "Then I woke up in that cold, dreadful place—with all the dead bodies!" It was moments before she tremulously went on: "I knew his drug wouldn't work, that's why I never feared him. He tried the drug on white rats. After some hours they came back to life—but I always withheld the fact from him."

Cranford didn't know what to say. He didn't believe this was so. He knew he'd wake up any minute. Here was a dead man at his feet. And here, directly in front of him, was a beautiful blonde he had seen earlier in the evening in the dank chamber of the city's dead, stretched out with one hundred-odd stiffs.

Here she was alive—talking—breathing—animate—and lovely—

She saw bewilderment in his face. "Hadn't we better go?" she asked.

"Good Lord, yes. Tony's is still open. He's got the stuff that'll make me think. You come along."

"Yes, yes, I want to go with you," she said eagerly. Then, hesitantly, she stepped closer to him, and there was no mistaking the message for Cranford in the long, steady gaze of her green eyes.

"I don't want you to leave me," she said softly.

At Tony's they settled their nerves with some brandy before the girl began telling him again what had happened.

Cranford kept staring at her, his face a mask with a twisted slit of a mouth. He had started out to get a story. Now he had one. The greatest scoop in his life! . . . But he couldn't use it! To break this gigantic story would implicate this girl. And would put himself in a devil of a hole. A

man had been killed. But it was his hand that knocked up the gun, exploding the cartridge. Cranford's twisted slit of a mouth was grim. The biggest story of his life—

The reporter felt the girl's hand creep slyly into his, felt her press closely against him in the booth seat they were sharing. Cranford knew she was beautiful, but there was something too creepy about a woman who still bore the odor of the morgue in which she had slept with the dead. Well, he'd help her out, give her a stake. Maybe later, when the atmosphere of horror about her had worn off. . . .

He excused himself from the girl who had come back from the dead, and called his city desk at the paper. His message was brief:

"This is Cranford. Been legging all night . . . . Naw. Nothing stirring. It's been a very quiet evening . . . ."



*Sardonically, deliberately, Gavin Clark visioned his trembling young wife bestowing her caresses upon a corpse, as he prepared to give her lover a . . . .*

# Devil's Brew

*By Branton Black*

**G**AVIN CLARK accepted with cold, unruffled deadliness the fact that another man had entered his wife's life. His invalid body did not burn with outraged anger at thought of Madeline—slender, misty-eyed, trembling passionately in the arms of Randolph Shortly, as she had used to do in his. Clark even thought with queer detachment of the satin-smooth mole that beauty-spotted her white bosom where the swelling of the left breast began—*d e t a c h m e n t* caused by a craven, martyred resolve to do murder.

Fortunately, G a v i n Clark considered the whole affair calmly, else the thinning walls of his aorta might have been broken, and its rushing, red cargo of life would have been given up. Since the doctor had told him that he might live nearly a year longer, if he avoided excitement, he had taken everything calmly—even the unfaithfulness of his wife.

Perhaps he had got used to the idea of death. Perhaps that is why he had contemplated murder with greater passiveness than a society woman contemplates another tea.

Since that evening when Clark had unintentionally overheard a conversation between Randolph Shortly and Madeline Clark, he had plotted coldly and impassionately. It was to be simple—this murder, for only simple murders succeed. In the one week that Randolph Shortly had been staying

at the Clarks' he had shown himself to be a hog for drink. That fact alone simplified matters. Then at the inquest, it would be called suicide. Clark would see to that.

Gavin Clark took a piece of paper from his pocket and for the eleventh time compared the writing on it with the writing on a letter that Shortly had sent from the mountains. Clark chuckled. He could have made fortunes at forgery, he thought. He had wisely written it on a sheet torn from Shortly's note book. It ran:

*Dear Madeline:*

*What I saw in your eyes last night makes it impossible for me to go on living. Without you, I can't live; yet with you I could*

*never face the sun. There is one honorable way out. I have taken it.*

Clark chuckled again. He hadn't attempted a signature. It would have been tricky and entirely unnecessary.

He pocketed the note and drew a small vial from his pocket. The white and red label read:

**TRIOXIDE OF ARSENIC—DEADLY  
POISON!**

Rat poison it was and to be used on a rat.

Rat! Clark thought that was putting it rather mild. Had he not been Shortly's best friend, "rat" would have done nicely. But he *had* been Shortly's best friend. It was he, Gavin Clark, who had staked Shortly when Shortly had been broken in health and



finance. It was Clark who had sent Shortly to the mountains to regain his health. And Shortly *had* regained his strength. He was now disgustingly healthy—for through the green eyes of a chronic invalid, health is disgusting. This man—this Randolph Shortly, had returned from his mountains to steal another man's wife; and at that, a man who had one foot—nay, more than that, in the grave.

Tonight would be the time. Madeline had to preside at some sort of a club meeting. Shortly would be far gone in drink. Clark would prepare a friendly night-cap that would be a cup of true darkness, and all would be over.

Why hadn't Madeline and Shortly had the decency to wait until he was dead? But no; he was glad he had learned the truth, for now Shortly would pay!

Even at that moment, Clark could make out the voices of Madeline and Randolph coming in low blurred tones from the sun-room. Perhaps they were arranging the details of their flight. He wanted to hear what they were saying; yet he feared that some sentence would arouse passions that would hasten that rupture which spelled death. No; he must live—live to attend Shortly's funeral.

Thus, determined to put eavesdropping beyond temptation, Gavin Clark took up his hat and wandered out into the garden.

Let them talk! He knew the truth. Soon Madeline would no longer be able to rest her small, curly-haired head on Shortly's shoulder—unless she could bring herself to love a corpse. Clark smiled grimly, half-insanely. A fitting retribution—Madeline giving her caresses to a corpse!

**U**NFORTUNATELY, Gavin Clark didn't know the truth. Had he listened to that conversation between his wife and Randolph Shortly, the arsenic would have found its way down the kitchen drain; for at the moment that Clark left the garden

door, Randolph Shortly was waging the one decisive battle of his pampered life.

"Don't you see, Madeline," Shortly was saying, "I *can't* do this thing to Gavin! Can't you realize what a real friend is? Can you imagine the man you love being weak enough to take advantage of that friendship? Everything that I have I owe to Gavin Clark. Yet, you would have me betray him in order that we might go away together."

He paused, watching the lovely shoulders of this woman; watching every movement of those shoulders, shaking with sobs; trying to watch them as he would have watched the shoulders of a marble statue shaken by a quake.

His victory over himself was complete. He understood her now. She had been a child of love and had become a woman of love. The wound that he had created would soon be healed. He decided to leave on the morning train. He would never see her face again—except in dreams.

Night came quickly for Madeline and Randolph, but slowly for Gavin Clark. Madeline had given up all thoughts of going to her club, but she could not endure her husband's roof for that night. She would go to her sister's for the week-end.

How this decision pleased Gavin Clark! How it relieved Randolph Shortly!

Two hours of cribbage with drinks. Two hours of drinks without cribbage. Four hours all told and Randolph Shortly gazed over the rim of his glass at two Gavin Clarks.

Gavin was a good pal, but there wasn't any use of there being two of him. Now if there had been two Madelines . . . Shortly's thoughts were becoming tangled.

With a hilarity that was genuine, though not drunken, Clark extended one of two tall glasses towards Shortly.

"Come on, Ran," he urged; "you're not going back on me? Have this last

glass with me, won't you? Just what you need to pull you up the stairs."

"S' help me!" Shortly gurgled.

The mud-sloven swine! thought Clark.

"S' help me! Never went back on a pal yet. Not goin' to now."

Clark's right hand held two glasses—glasses that were Siamese twins. Two swell glasses in one hand. That was funny, Randolph thought.

"Where 'n hell zit?"

"Right here," said Clark, drinking from his own glass.

"Shur?" Shortly seized at the twin glasses with both hands. The liquid slopped as he raised it to his lips.

Clark stood watching the man's Adam's apple slide up and down as he gulped.

"Good stuff!" exclaimed Shortly as he crumpled into his chair, his head and shoulders flopping on the table.

It sounded like the carcass of a dead cat being thrown over the alley fence, thought Clark.

Gavin had no idea that arsenic worked so fast. Perhaps Shortly was only asleep. Anyway, he wouldn't wake up in a long time.

Clark took the empty arsenic vial from his pocket and placed it on the table. Then he took one of Shortly's clammy hands and pressed it against the bottle.

So much for fingerprints! Now for the note!

He placed the scrap of paper on the table near Shortly's glass. Then he tiptoed up the stairs.

He was glad the house was new. He hated creaking floors.

Slowly, carefully, Gavin Clark began to wonder how long it would be before Madeline would again come to him and lie eagerly in his embrace; give herself freely to him as she used to do. Well, if it took her too long to forget Randolph, she'd die, too—that was all.

Chuckling softly, he made his way to his own room, undressed, and got into bed. He went to sleep almost instantly—for murderers *do* sleep.

HOW long Clark slept he did not know. It was still dark when he awoke. But why had he awakened? What was the rushing sound that seemed to come from his pillow, or even from his own ears?

His heart!

The thought boomed on his brain.

But why did it murmur so loudly in his ears? What was that noise—that noise in the hall?

Clark listened intently—as intently as he could with that terrifying *lub rushsh—lub rushsh* sound in his ears.

There was something walking—walking up and down the hall outside his door. Something that walked as Shortly had walked. It was the same stride that had taken Shortly up the highest peaks of the mountains.

And Shortly was lying dead below, Clark kept repeating. There were four lethal doses of arsenic in his belly!

Gavin stared dry-mouthed at the darkness.

*Lub rushsh*, went his heart.

He must get up! He must see who walked with Shortly's walk, up and down the hall! Quickly out of bed! Quickly press the light switch! Quickly open the door!

Dry-mouthed, Gavin stared into the dimly lighted hallway.

Hell! It was Shortly! Shortly's ghost?

*Lub rushsh—lub rushsh—rushsh—*

Not a cry escaped Gavin Clark's lips as he fell at Shortly's feet.

Shortly glared half-drunkenly at the clay thing on the floor.

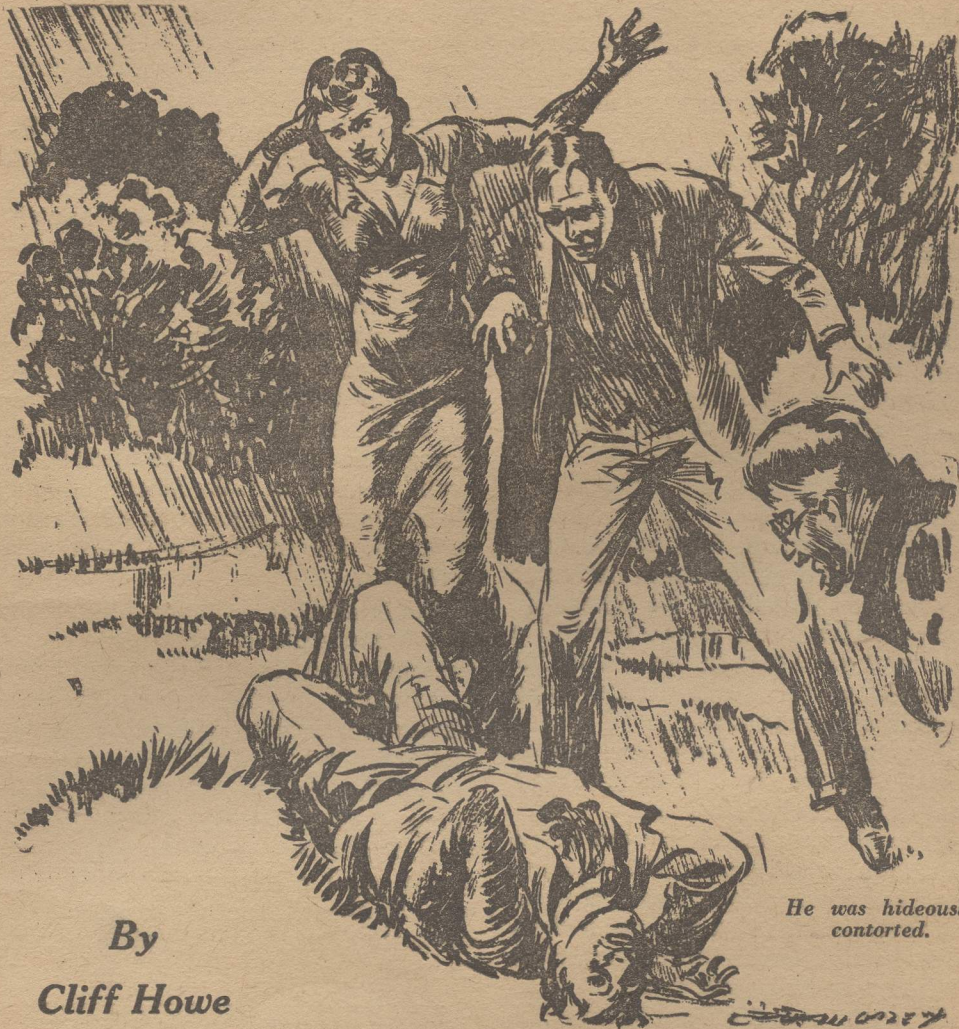
"So you'd poison me, huh? Make out I'd killed myself, huh?"

Clark didn't hear. He would never hear.

"Poison me, would you!" Shortly's voice shook. "Dam' lucky for me I've been taking big doses of arsenic regularly up on those mountains to strengthen my wind and ease my nerves. You get used to that stuff after a while. Gavin, you must be crazy!" He kicked gently at the body.

"Takes all the arsenic in hell to poison an arsenic-eater!"

# Her Isle of Horror



*He was hideously contorted.*

By

Cliff Howe

|| *Hoke Martin was baffled by the soft looks that dark-eyed Loretta gave him—when her fiance had only just died. But Martin could not forsake her to escape the horrific monsters of her storm-lashed island.* ||

**A**NGRY winds whipped the waves as Hoke Martin's open motor boat sped toward the island. He was taking a chance, he knew, in trying to make it tonight, but the call had been an urgent one.

"I wouldn't risk it in this storm, mister," the old man at the beach re-

sort had told him. "You're liable to get swamped."

But Hoke Martin was in a hurry and was chancing it alone. He couldn't miss the island, the boatman had said, if he kept the boat straight ahead.

Thunder boomed out, and lightning streaked the sky. Now the detective



could make out a blur ahead of him that must be land. Grimly he wiped rain from his face.

A few minutes more and a flash revealed a landing stage to his north in a little cove. Changing the course of the boat, Hoke Martin soon drew up to it.

This was the semi-tropical region of the South Carolina Sea Islands. Blasted palmettoes strained gauntly in the wind like tortured things. Salt spray cascaded over the sand dunes.

When he had shut off the ignition and made fast to the landing, he clambered onto the sea-blackened framework and made his way to shore. No lights were visible. A path led up through the palmettoes.

Three steps, and he brought up short.

What he saw, not fifty yards ahead of him, caused chill fingers of terror to creep up and down his spine. He could feel his heart pounding; feel a sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach, as though he were going down in a fast elevator.

The form of a giant ape loomed there in the ghostly half-light, atop a sand dune, waving its arms.

Hoke Martin rubbed rain out of his eyes and looked again. He was not given to hallucinations. Years of criminal investigation had made him skeptical of most things, but there was no mistaking what he saw now.

He could feel his face burning. A slow trickle of sweat oozed down his forehead among the globules of rain water. He told himself that it could not be so—a gorilla running loose here, but there the thing stood.

A flash of lightning brought the figure out more clearly. It seemed to be beckoning, with ponderous motions of its hairy arms. Then it was pointing down at something in the sand.

A moment more, and it wheeled and ran into a strip of tawny marsh. For an instant there it disappeared in the sea-grass, then its head and shoulders became visible again. It reached higher ground, plunged out of sight on a

hill heavily wooded with red cedar and pine.

Hoke Martin had his gun in his hand now. He advanced toward the spot where the gorilla had stood. All the while his brain was working furiously.

This section was wild enough. Alligators, wildcats, ten-foot rattlesnakes and bear were native to it. But certainly not gorillas. Some man was responsible for the gorilla being there—perhaps the client upon whom he was going to call—Dr. Richard Curtis, the famous plastic surgeon.

As he reached the spot, he saw the tracks first. Rain beat down, tearing the sand, but the tracks were still firm enough. At sight of the footprints, no doubt was left in Hoke Martin's mind. He had hunted big game in Africa and he knew. The prints were those of a gorilla.

The intermittent flares of lightning ceased momentarily. He drew out a flashlight and scanned the ground for any further clue. The noise of the gale clamored over him with ear-splitting violence.

And then he saw the most amazing thing of all. There was writing in the sand. Big letters carefully traced, evidently with a heavy stick. The rain was washing them; they were fast disappearing, but they were plain enough to read.

### LEAVE THIS ISLAND IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE!

Shaking his head in horrified bewilderment, Martin glanced about. He was alone in the storm. No man could have written that, because no man had been in sight when he reached the beach. The letters would have been washed away if they had been written before.

And the ape had pointed! Had clearly tried to draw his attention to the writing.

Flashes lit the sky again; thunder crackled and rolled like powerful drums across the heavens. Those eerie

letters were now obliterated. The lanky detective pocketed his flash with a shrug and started grimly up the path.

SOMEWHERE ahead of him was the residence of Dr. Richard Curtis. Perhaps Curtis could offer some explanation.

As he leaned into the wind, making his way between gnarled cedar, gum and pine trees, Hoke Martin thought of the genius upon whom he was going to call. A mysterious personality, Curtis was yet one of the most eminent scientists in the field of surgical anaplasty.

Born in a circus family, he had grown up in the atmosphere of the big top. He had become a physician. And then, with the war, he had specialized in plastic surgery.

Newspapers had printed almost unbelievable stories of the miracles he had wrought with men's faces—faces that had been blown half off in the trenches and which he had restored.

After the war Curtis had continued his specialization. Surgeons all over the world consulted him. But he had grown more retiring, more of a scientist for the sake of science only, until finally he had retired to this remote island on the Carolina coast.

Many queer rumors reached the outside world. There was much speculation as to Curtis' activities. Certain it was that he had a laboratory here, but as to the exact nature of his experiments no one could say.

At a turn in the path, Hoke Martin saw the rambling structure which was the surgeon's home. It perched on the summit of the island. Through the driving rain it appeared starkly sinister. Several windows were lighted like evil eyes.

A few minutes more and he was pounding on the front door.

It opened to reveal a cadaverous figure in threadbare broadcloth. There was something about the man's face that told Hoke Martin he was a servant.

The eyes were cunning, narrow-slitted, and the cheeks were drawn and wrinkled with a peculiar hardness. Yet the man had that unmistakable air of servility about him. He was waiting for Martin to speak.

"I was called here from New York," the investigator explained after he had given his name and occupation. And, when the man made no move to admit him, "I was told that it was a matter of utmost importance."

The door moved and Martin stepped into a hallway. He removed his hat and raincoat. The man took them.

"Are you the butler?"

The man nodded. His attitude was puzzling; he seemed to be waiting for Martin to speak again.

"Please tell Dr. Curtis that I am here," the detective said impatiently, and ran fingers through his red hair. He was in none too good a humor, what with his hurried trip and the spectacle on the beach.

Bowing, the butler turned and went down the hall; left Martin standing by the entrance. Martin saw him open a door near the end of the hall and go into a room.

He waited. Would Curtis have any adequate explanation of the grotesque beast which had confronted him as he landed? Martin was doubtful.

In a moment the butler reappeared and conducted him into a high-ceilinged study. It was just such a room as Martin had pictured as a setting for Dr. Richard Curtis. Surgical charts and bookshelves lined the walls. Instruments lay about on tables.

The man who rose from behind a flat desk was of medium height and stocky. His clothes did not fit him well, yet he was distinguished. His eyes were the most impressive feature of his whole appearance. They burned with an intensity of intellect.

"Mr. Martin?"

"Yes."

"I understand that you are a private detective. Your presence here is a distinct surprise. To exactly what do I owe this visit?"

Advancing, Martin wore a worried frown. The situation was growing complicated. First, an ape waving at him on the beach and apparently writing a message in the sand. Then, this man, for whom he had rushed south by airplane, denying that he even knew him.

"Are you Dr. Richard Curtis?" the detective asked.

"Yes." There was no cordiality in the reply. Its tone was that of a challenge.

"This morning in New York my secretary received a telephone call from Beaufort requesting that I come here as quickly as possible. Your name was used. Am I to understand you did not authorize the call?"

Curtis' forehead wrinkled into a V. "Someone called you and used my name?"

"Exactly. I made the trip at considerable trouble and expense. In fact, I risked this storm to reach the island. The man from whom I rented the boat would not bring me. Is there nothing here which might call for the services of an investigator?"

Curtis waved a hand toward a chair. They sat down.

"No-o," the surgeon said thoughtfully. "I can think of no reason why you might have been called, nor anyone who might have called you. The whole thing—"

He broke off and turned in his chair, following Martin's gaze. The detective had sensed the presence of someone else near-by and was looking at a girl who stood in the doorway. She was very pretty, about eighteen.

"Loretta," Curtis gasped, "what are you doing here—looking like this?"

The girl, slim-curved, swayed sinusously on feet that were muddied and wet, as she hesitated to answer Curtis. Nervously, she took off a light coat that had been little protection from the driving rain outside, for the dress underneath was drenched skin-tight against the agitated rise and fall of

the firm globes of her girlishly uplifted breasts.

Martin raised his eyes to her oval face and read in her velvet-brown eyes the brief, half-curious, half-entreating glance she shot at him as Curtis, angered at her failure to reply, demanded:

"Loretta! Tell me the meaning of this. And what do you mean by breaking in on me like this?"

Slowly, her fingers trembling, she tried to smooth her wet, clinging dress free of some of her more alluring curves as she finally answered:

"I can't find Frank. He seems to have disappeared without saying a word to me. I thought I saw him outside, moving about strangely in the storm, so I went to find him."

The doctor frowned, snapped: "That still doesn't acquaint me with why you intruded upon my privacy so rudely."

"The storm frightened me and I came in and saw you two," she explained. "I did not mean to eavesdrop, but I could not help hearing part of your conversation." Her hand fluttered to her throat, nervously. She was under some kind of stress.

Her father jerked his head, motioning her to come in. Martin was on his feet.

"Then you heard what this private detective said," Curtis told her. "Do you know who might have called him?"

"Yes," she answered instantly, and moved forward. "I did."

Curtis rose. "You—you called him? When you went to Beaufort this morning?"

She nodded.

"I had to do something. You would not listen to me. I'm sorry, father. But something terrible is going on here. I've been here only two days, yet I can feel it. Something—horrible. And then last night Frank heard that voice."

A soft sob breaking her voice, the girl turned and left the room abruptly.

HOKE MARTIN was peering sharply at the surgeon. Curtis turned slowly and cleared his throat. He was more the unruffled scientist than ever.

"My daughter has been off at school, Mr. Martin," he said slowly. His bushy eyebrows were bent. "This is the first time she has visited my island retreat. In fact, it has been several years since I have seen her. She's been abroad, at Grenoble, you know, and—"

He paused, fingering his throat.

While the doctor hesitated, his daughter returned to the study—this time knocking discreetly on the door before entering. Martin did not fail to notice that she had changed to dry clothing in a remarkably quick time. Even now, her fresh garments failed to entirely hide the graceful, girlish contours of her slim, small figure. Hoke Martin began to hope that her fiancé had really disappeared.

"Go on," he addressed Dr. Curtis, after flashing the girl a brief smile.

"Well, she's engaged to be married. She brought her fiancé with her to visit me. His name is Frank Holmes. I quite approve of him, except for one thing. He has hallucinations. This morning he told a wild tale of someone at his window last night, and a voice that warned him to leave the island."

"To leave the island—if he valued his life?" Martin put in, thinking of the sinister message in the sand.

"I believe that was the phrase Mr. Holmes used," Curtis replied. "How did you know?" And, when the detective did not reply, "Of course it is absurd. There is no one on the island except my daughter, my butler, who sometimes assists me in my experiments, Mr. Holmes and myself."

"No other servants?"

"None. Until my daughter and her fiancé arrived, there was no need for any. Snaggle, who is really a sort of man-of-all-work, cooked and looked after the house." The surgeon talked calmly and logically.

Martin came nearer the desk. "If there are no other humans on the island, are there any beasts that might be mistaken for humans?"

It was a thrust in the dark. Martin watched for reaction anxiously, but all he saw was puzzlement.

"Beasts?" The surgeon fingered his throat again. "Why do you ask that?" And, before Martin could answer, "Yes, I have several gorillas here which I use in my experiments."

Looking sharply at the girl, Martin said, "There was a gorilla running loose on the beach where I landed. I saw him quite distinctly."

"What?" Curtis barked, rising.

"This gorilla waved his arms at me as a human might," Martin went on. "He pointed to the sand. When I reached the spot where he had been, there was writing in the sand. The writing said for me to leave the island if I valued my life."

Horror crept into the girl's face. She fell back, staring at him.

"Are you sure of this, Mr. Martin?" Curtis asked, alarmed.

The detective smiled. "Positive, I do not see things that do not exist. If I did, I wouldn't last long as an investigator."

"Then one of my apes must have escaped from his cage," the surgeon said. "Probably that was what you saw. But as to the writing in the sand—"

Loretta's trim young shoulders shuddered convulsively. She glanced half expectantly toward the nearest window, a growing dread showing in her large brown eyes.

"I beg your pardon, sir."

It was Snaggle, the butler, standing in the doorway. He seemed more cadaverous than ever. His threadbare black broadcloth emphasized the deathly hue of his skin.

"Well, what is it?" Curtis snapped.

"It's Mr. Holmes, sir. He—"

The girl gave a low, choked cry. "What's happened to him?" she demanded breathlessly.

"He's been murdered," Snaggle announced.

Curtis strode forward. Martin watched the doctor and the servant with shrewd appraisal. His freckles stood out, as they always did when he was thinking fast.

"Murdered?" the surgeon echoed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir," Snaggle stated. "His body is lying at the north side of the house."

WITH one accord, they rushed to the front door. The rain had stopped, but the skies still were lit by flashes; thunder reverberated.

Martin was the first to reach the body. It lay in a crumpled heap beside the north wing. It was twisted unnaturally, one leg at right angles to the other. When the detective turned his flashlight on it, he saw that it was horribly mutilated.

Streaks of crimson were across the face and the chest, as if giant claws had torn the skin. The arms and legs seemed to be broken in a dozen places.

Switching off his flashlight as Loretta Curtis came running up, Martin turned to the surgeon.

"I believe you guessed correctly, doctor," he said. "One of your gorillas is running wild about the island."

Curtis pivoted.

"Get inside the house at once, Loretta. Lock yourself in. I'm going to inspect the cages." He started away. Martin followed. The surgeon stopped. "Maybe you'd better go with her. The ape might have got into the house."

The girl, catching sight of the gruesome object on the ground, screamed. The sound split the night like a ghastly knife.

Martin turned to the butler.

"You were the last one out. Did you leave the front door open?"

"I believe I did, sir," Snaggle said, hoarsely. "You see, in the rush—"

"All right," Martin told the doctor. "Do you need a gun?"

"No," Curtis said. "I can handle him." And he disappeared in the dark-

ness, walking fast. Martin watched him go, then took the girl's arm. She was swaying, the back of her right hand pressed to her forehead.

"You seem to have had more foresight than your father, Miss Curtis," he murmured.

But the girl did not reply. Her legs grew unsteady beneath her, and she would have fallen had not Hoke Martin caught her up in his arms. His breath caught as he felt both the softness and firmness of her body tremble and quiver against his. But he realized that her emotion was for a dead man.

Back in the house, they went to the study and waited. The girl slumped in a chair, her head in her hands. She was moaning very softly. Snaggle stood by, his face unrevealing of any emotion.

In ten minutes Curtis returned. He came through the doorway scowling. He looked more worried than at any time since Hoke Martin had met him.

"It's true," he said, clasping his hands before him. "One of my largest gorillas somehow broke the lock of his cage and is at large on the island now."

He went to his daughter and put an arm in a comforting manner over her pretty shoulders. She gave no sign that she welcomed his caress. Martin glanced at them with eyes that were lazy-lidded with speculation. Again the girl looked directly at him, with that same soft and appealing look in her beautiful eyes. And again Martin wondered about that fiancé.

"Of course there can be no way for this beast to reach the mainland," Curtis went on. "On the other hand, I'm afraid there is no way for us to capture him tonight. In these several square miles of junglelike growth, we would probably never find him at night, in the storm, and if we did, it would be very difficult to capture him."

"You think it best to wait until morning before beginning the search?" Martin asked.

The surgeon nodded. "I'm afraid that's the only thing to do." He turned

to Snaggle. "Lock all windows and doors. We must—"

Martin coughed behind his hand. "Excuse me. I think I'd better bring in the—body."

"Yes," Curtis agreed. "Put it in the front room on the right as you enter. Do you want Snaggle to help you?"

"No," the detective said. "I can manage it alone very well."

He went out into the hall. Snaggle followed him and locked the front door behind him. The thunder and lightning had ceased. There was an ominous after-the-storm quiet, almost tomblike. Giant oaks, with trailing banners of Spanish moss, were spectral sentinels all about him.

The body had not been disturbed. Catching it by the arms, Hoke Martin hefted it across his shoulders, back to his back, so as to avoid bloodstains. He called to Snaggle as he neared the front door.

Admitting him, the butler's face was an impassive mask. Martin went into the room Curtis had mentioned and dumped the body unceremoniously on the floor. Frank Holmes had been a very handsome young man. Martin spent several minutes examining the wounds and going through the pockets, but found nothing of interest.

When he preceded Snaggle back into the study, Curtis paused in pacing the floor.

"It's past midnight," the surgeon said. "There is nothing else we can do until daylight. I suggest we retire to our rooms and try to get some rest."

MARTIN was installed in a south wing bedroom, on the ground floor. He sat smoking, turning the problem over in his mind for nearly an hour, until he was reasonably certain that the others were safely abed, if not asleep, in their locked rooms.

Then he switched out his light and crossed to the window. Moonlight filtered through scurrying clouds. He raised the window softly, climbed through it and dropped to the ground. His hall door was locked, so there was

no way for the ape to get beyond that room even if it happened to get in.

For nearly an hour Hoke Martin prowled the grounds, his gun in one hand and his flashlight in the other. He used the flash only occasionally. The moonlight was getting brighter. It shed a ghostly and strangely macabre aura over the place.

As he was about to return to his room, the lanky detective came across an abandoned well. It had an old-fashioned windlass with buckets on chains. He peered into its depths, without knowing exactly why he did so.

A faint glimmer of light, apparently about half way down the shaft, caught his eye.

Martin strained his gaze toward it. One moment he could not be sure it was there; the next he saw it plainly. Straightening, he looked about him. The scene was dismal, silent as the grave.

His jaw hardening, Martin examined the chain and the buckets. Maybe the glow he saw below was only some phosphorescent substance. On the other hand, it might be something that would help him solve the mystery of the gorilla who wrote in the sand.

The chain and buckets seemed strong enough. He arranged them, got on one of the buckets and began to let himself down into the well. The chain was old, with moist rust that rubbed off on his hands.

When his eyes were two body-lengths above the glow, he saw that his hunch had been a good one. His pulses quickened. The glimmer came from the opening of a tunnel.

He stepped off into it and crouched. The tunnel was not more than four feet high. On hands and knees, he crawled forward.

A slight turn, and he saw a bright light ahead of him. It was some kind of underground chamber, and a large one. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears, feel the hammer of his heart.

At the end of the tunnel he crawled into the room and stood erect. A kerosene lamp flickered. Two large cages with iron bars faced him. The door of one of the cages was open, as was another door which seemingly led out of the dank room toward the house.

But it was the thing in the locked cage that held Hoke Martin's eyes riveted once they rested upon it.

It had all the features of a man—the forehead, the nose, the mouth, the chin, and the contour of its body. Beyond that the human semblance ceased. Its hair was a matted, filthy mess. Its face was streaked with dirt on the cheeks and nose, above the stubble of beard. Saliva drooled from its lips.

Hoke Martin approached. In his long career as an investigator he had seen many queer things, but never a creature like this, a creature so horrible that it sent prickly sensations over his scalp.

It looked like a man, yet something told the detective that it wasn't human. The eyes were those of an animal. He decided to see if it could talk. He had seen, once tonight, an ape that could write. Maybe this thing could talk.

"Hello! Who are you?"

The thing gave no indication of comprehension. It stood there behind the bars, gripping them much as an ape might. It wore only a loin cloth. Its expression showed only curiosity.

**A**N inkling of the horrible truth came into Hoke Martin's racing thoughts. This thing was not a human gone insane. It was—

And then the voice came. Not from the thing in the cage. Not from any spot in the chamber that Martin could see clearly. It seemed to come out of a shadowy, cavernous corner of the ceiling overhead.

"You are the man who arrived tonight, the man I warned with writing in the sand."

Martin tensed, whirled. He could see nothing from which that voice

might come. The words were queerly mumbled, as if the speaker had not used his tongue in a long time, yet they were distinct enough.

"Yes," the detective said, and waited.

After a moment the voice resumed. "I warned you. No good could come of your visiting this island. You may yet lose your life. Leave at once. Get off the island while you still have a chance." And the voice stopped, mechanically.

Martin waited, every nerve on fire.

"You are not going to leave?" the voice came again.

"No!" the detective whipped out. "I'm going to break this case if I have to stay here the rest of my life. Who in hell are you, anyhow?"

There was a sound as if the owner of the voice were clearing his throat. Then, "You know not with what appropriateness you use the term 'in hell.' I am a man in hell here on earth. Shall I tell you the story?"

"Go on!" Martin blurted.

"Very well. I am a creature of the eminent"—the voice became brittle, mocking — "Dr. Richard Curtis, world's foremost plastic surgeon, the man who can work miracles grafting skin, changing faces.

"During the war, you will remember, he made over many faces that had been shot off. After the war he became so devoted to his science that he lost all human compassion. As a youth he had been reared among circus freaks, so he conceived the most ghastly project in the history of surgery.

"If it were possible to change part or all of a man's face by skin grafting, he reasoned, why couldn't he change a whole body? He decided to create by his own hands the two most horrible freaks of all time—simply to satisfy his own scientific curiosity to see if it could be done.

"He has been six years in the process. Six years on this island of horror. First he acquired a gorilla, as near to

the human form as he could find. Then he ran an ad in the papers for an unattached young man who would travel with his employer.

"I answered that damn' ad! He brought me here, used powerful drugs on me. And the same with the gorilla. Bit by bit, over these six years, he transferred my skin to the ape, and the ape's skin to me. It is not necessary for me to go into the horror of it. Your imagination will doubtless serve to tell you that, even though most of the time I was drugged.

"He even went so far as to break bones—particularly our jaw bones—and alter their structures. That Thing in the cage there is an ape. He looks like a man. He has the soft white skin and the face of a man. But he has no soul. He is a gorilla.

"I am a man, but you would never guess it to see me. I have the head, the hairy body of an ape. Any person, looking at me, would not guess that I was something else. But I have the soul of a man, the brain of a man."

The voice stopped, suddenly.

Martin felt as if he were in the midst of some garish nightmare. He shook his head to clear it.

"Who killed Frank Holmes, the fiancé of Loretta Curtis?" he asked. "Did you?"

"Holmes!" the voice came, startled this time. "Did you say Holmes?"

"Yes," Martin snapped.

"Good God! Earlier tonight I released that ape in human form—released it believing that it would seek out and kill its torturer, the surgeon. It returned with blood on its hands and I believed Curtis dead. You say—it killed the young man?"

"Yes."

For the space of a minute the voice did not resume. Then it came through thickly. "I am sorry—as sorry as a creature like me can be for anything not himself. But that is over. Come! Do you believe what I told you?"

Martin hesitated. "Well—"

"If I show you myself, and show

you proofs in Curtis' own handwriting, will you believe me?"

"Naturally."

"Good. I come down." And the owner of the voice dropped to the floor of the cavern in the wall where he had been concealed.

His face was as much like a gorilla's as any Martin had ever seen. His body was covered with coarse hair—the hide of the real ape. But Martin caught the gleam of intelligence in his eyes.

The ape-man moved forward, toward the door which opened in the direction of the house.

"Follow me."

MARTIN holstered his gun and followed him through the doorway, up a short length of tunnel in which he did not have to stoop, and into a laboratory. The laboratory was clean and elaborate, with the latest equipment. It had the acrid tang of chemicals.

The ape-man went to a filing cabinet. He opened a drawer and produced a sheaf of papers.

"There is the proof," he said, "in the handwriting of Dr. Richard Curtis. Complete records of every stage of the experiment. Every change, every day, over the whole six years."

The detective took the papers and scanned them. The ape-man was telling the truth. Skeptical as he was, no doubt was left in Martin's mind. Pocketing the papers, he looked up, and—

"Raise your hands quickly, both of you!"

Dr. Richard Curtis stood in a doorway. An ugly, snub-nosed automatic nestled in his right hand. His eyes were two jets of flame that took in the tableau understandingly and with a malignant cunning.

His finger tightened on the trigger. The gun was aimed at Martin. White stood out on the knuckles of the surgeon's gun hand.

Suddenly the ape-man plunged forward, his gorilla arms outstretched.



The automatic roared, belched lead and flame. The bullet took the apeman in the chest, but on he came. His plunge was as relentless and as fully controlled after the shot as before it; he seemed possessed of the fury of the beast in whose guise he masqueraded.

With a swoop, he knocked the gun from Curtis' hand. The surgeon leaped aside. Momentarily the ape-man was off balance, and in that moment Curtis threw himself back through the doorway from which he had emerged.

Hoke Martin was after him like an expertly released arrow. The ape-man recovered balance and followed.

Curtis swerved through an aperture and onto open ground. He was running with incredible speed for his stocky build. Abruptly he gained the cover of a clump of bushes, tore his way around and over a tangle of jasmine and honeysuckle vines.

His pursuers lunged after him, through the thick growth.

The chase continued for nearly half a mile. Sometimes Martin and the apeman gained, sometimes they lost, but always they could hear or see their quarry.

"He's heading for the sea cliff!" the ape-man shouted.

In a twinkling, the pursuers halted at the edge of a precipice and looked about them. Dr. Richard Curtis was nowhere in sight. They looked over the precipice.

Bursting white waves piled up on the rocks two hundred feet below. Their spewing crests, lashed by the recent storm, beat with cutting intensity at the base of the cliff.

And there, on the most jagged rock of the group—a rock that was a projecting splinter—was the impaled and lifeless form of the surgeon.

"Damn!" said Martin fervently. "What a way to end a career as the world's greatest plastic surgeon!"

At a slight sound behind him, the detective whirled. What he saw caused his right hand to jerk toward the gun in his armpit holster, caused him to crouch for action.

The gorilla in the skin of a man was there, walking steadily forward. Somehow it had escaped. The beast's arms, despite their grafted white skin, were long and powerful. They clutched forward.

In that instant the ape-man, by now gory with his own blood, catapulted himself between Martin and the monster who was attacking. The two creatures crashed together, fell to the ground and rolled over in a battle to the death.

The detective tried to get in position for a shot—a shot that would end the life of the beast who looked like a man. But the fight was so swift, the figures were so lightning-like in their twists, that he could not get in his bullet where he wanted it.

He had decided to throw himself bodily into the conflict when it happened.

On the brink of the precipice, the two struggling figures toppled, hung for a split second, and then fell over. Down they crashed — together, entwined.

They bounced off sharp, jutting edges of rock in their descent and at last hit with a sickening thud on the salt-sprayed boulders in the sea.

Hoke Martin peered over. He felt nauseated. He imagined he had heard the crunching of the bones as those ill-treated bodies had found their doom together.

Even as he looked, a big wave came roaring in and covered those two bodies and the nearby form of Dr. Richard Curtis. Water churned furiously over them. When the wave receded, none of the bodies was to be seen.

**T**REMBLING, the detective stood erect. He still had the evidence in his pocket—the laboratory records in Curtis' own hand. But the creatures were gone with their creator.

Determinedly he got a grip on himself and started back toward the house. Snaggle, the butler, and the girl, Loretta Curtis, were doubtless

ES

still there. He wondered what he could tell them.

A slight wind was rising again. It whispered through the gum, tupelo, cypress and pine trees.

At a turn in the path, Martin froze in his tracks. A gun, not fifty feet ahead of him, blazed. The detective's revolver flashed out and its explosion mingled with the echoes of the first shot.

The butler was there, in the open, firing with the same deliberate calm he had displayed throughout the night.

Martin dodged behind a moss-covered boulder. Within its shelter, he took careful aim. A bullet chunked a piece of rock off not five inches from his face and zoomed on past him. The lanky detective did not waver. He tugged trigger.

With the recoil, he knew that the shooting was over.

The butler jerked once, took two faltering steps forward, swayed backward, almost off balance, and then forward. His legs gave way beneath him with a slow, sagging motion. He crumpled like a length of chain.

Martin rose from behind the rock and strode forward.

Gasping, a crimson hole in his chest, Snaggle glared up at him. "You—you got me, damn you!" the butler rasped. "But the doctor will pay you for it! He—I told him not to let her bring that man here. I told him! But he would do it!"

He paused, fighting for breath. "No place for a girl and her beau. So I warned him, talked to him in the night—outside his window. No good. Too late!" Then he twitched and lay still.

The detective didn't have to feel the pulse or the heart. He had killed men before—not from choice, but from necessity. Shooting a man to death was not a pleasure.

He had known when he pulled the trigger that the butler's life was gone. And now, as he looked at the body, he

saw the darkening smudge over the heart, the glassy, turned-up eyes that denoted only death.

Stooping, he picked up the lifeless form and hung it over his shoulder like a sack of meal. It was strangely light. The man had been very thin. He had been thin in body and thin in mind—thin in everything except his devotion to his master.

WITH slow and measured gait, Hoke Martin walked back to the house. He left the front door open, for there was no one else on the island now but the girl and himself. Wearily he put the body in the same room with that of Frank Holmes.

Trudging up the stairs, he drew on his imagination to spare Loretta Curtis the horror of her father's death.

She came to the bedroom door quickly when he knocked. Evidently she had not been asleep. As the portal opened, he looked for a moment into her wide, frightened eyes. Many times he had borne news of death, but this time seemed the most difficult of all.

"My father—" she began.

Martin said nothing.

"He's—" She swallowed hard. "Tell me!"

"Yes," the detective whispered.

"Your father is—dead."

"How did it happen?"

"The same man who killed your fiancé," Martin told her. "Snaggle. He also killed your father. He went—insane. Fought with your father on the cliff. Knocked him over. The body was washed away."

She put her hands to her eyes. Her shoulders shook. Then after a sob; "What became of the—murderer?"

"I shot him to death," Martin said. "He attacked me. There was nothing else to do."

With a swift, impulsive movement, Hoke Martin put an arm tenderly around Loretta's shoulders. And he was glad when she didn't move away from the embrace that he wished he had the right to tighten until she was

closely, securely within his arms. Mutely she looked up at him with tear-stained eyes.

"I wish I could do something to make you less unhappy," he finally said. "I don't want to— Well, to be honest, I hate to leave you. I hope I may see you again soon?"

Surprisingly enough to Hoke Martin, Loretta Curtis replied with unmistakable eagerness: "Oh, yes, you must. I want you to!"

"Well, I realize that your fiancé—" He broke off embarrassedly.

Her soft brown eyes were half lidded as she said: "I liked the way you looked and talked from the first moment I saw you. About—about Mr. Holmes—Well, father didn't tell you the truth about Frank. Father had been badgering me, in one letter after another, to marry him, reminding me of the expense of my extensive education abroad. Father had lost most of his money, and because Frank Holmes was rich, he planned that I marry him so there would be enough money to

continue all the ghastly experiments on this awful island."

Hoke Martin took her closer into his arms. But he only kissed her softly, briefly on the almost childish mouth that he wanted to crush against his until they both felt the full urge for love. For although Dr. Curtis had been a dangerous, criminal meddler in science, he had also just died—and Hoke Martin felt that he must respect the dead of the girl he had grown to love in so short a time.

Gently he led her to the bed and let her fall upon it. He pulled covers over her and left, closing the door. The girl had never known of those two creatures of terror that her father had created. There was no need to tell her now.

In his room, the detective got the laboratory records out of a pocket and looked at them. He wondered if he would ever find it necessary to tell the truth, to use those records to clear up the case. For Loretta's sake, he hoped he never would.



# The Pain Master's Bride

*Edmund Neymores felt chill horror at sight of Fulton Xavier's sensational statue of a man in pain. But Neymores did not know real horror until he saw the ghastly torment of a helpless girl as she posed for a newer masterpiece.*



*By Rexton Archer*

**S**TANDING alone in front of the statue, Edmund Neymores could scarcely tear his eyes from the thing. "The most masterly presentation of hideous grotesqueness I have ever seen. Beyond the conception of the normal brain," he muttered.

It was ten minutes past closing time at the Art Institute. Most of the evening, Neymores had spent watching the people as they crowded around

*Gloatingly, his eyes traveled over the graceful contours.*

Xavier's sensational statue. It is not often that a totally new artist achieves a masterpiece. But Neymores had noticed that not a single person in the crowd could suppress a shudder upon

looking at the thing of bronze. One old beggar woman had actually fainted. Mentally, Edmund Neymores resolved to hit that statue hard in his general interest column in tomorrow's paper.

The statue was the naked figure of a man lying on his back, knees drawn up close to his belly, arms twisted, and fingers knotted together. Every muscle was craftily molded. The bronze face was a contortion of agony. The twisted lips, the gaping mouth seemed to indicate that the figure was choking on a shriek that was beyond utterance.

"It—it's not a statue," Neymores muttered with a grimace. "It's a tormented soul captured in metal!" His eyes dipped to the placard at the base of the thing:

### MAN IN PAIN

by

FULTON XAVIER

There was something about the hands—Neymores forced himself to touch them. An altogether inexplicable sensation of repugnance passed over him. Yes, there were only nine twisted fingers—not an oversight on the artist's part, for there was a sort of a stump where the digit had been. Xavier had followed his model in perfect detail. That was what made Neymores shudder. It wasn't the statue itself. Where, in the name of heaven, had Xaxier got his model?

He turned abruptly and clicked across the polished floor. Yes, he'd hit "Man in Pain" hard in tomorrow's paper. Time that art, too, made some effort to get back to normalcy!

At the bottom of the steps leading to the boulevard, Neymores met Jasper Felps, a man who occupied the apartment adjacent to his. Neymores detained him. "Have you seen the exhibit yet?" he asked. Jasper Felps snarled: "Hell, yes! what a nightmare! And that thing made by Xavier. I'll never get it out of my mind! But knowing who made it, I'm not surprised."

Jasper Felps had no reason to love Fulton Xavier, Neymores knew. There was something about a fraudulent business deal in which Xavier and Felps had both had a hand. Then came the law. The wealthy Mr. Xavier was above reproach. Felps took the brunt of the burden—prison and ruin. The disgrace of it all had killed Felps' father. But Xavier had waxed fat, hoarded the profit, and maintained the respect of the world. Now, at fifty, Jasper Felps was a hard working electrician. At forty-eight, Xavier had retired to dabble in art and music, to give money lavishly to charities, to inherit the immortality that a public benefactor sometimes unjustly deserves.

"I've my car here, Felps," Neymores offered.

"Thanks, but I'm not going home now." And Jasper Felps hurried off in the opposite direction.

"Funny kite," Neymores muttered. He lighted a cigar and walked slowly down the street to where his car was parked. He snapped open the door of his car, put his foot on the running board, and suddenly jerked back. He stood there staring at some black, misshapen object that huddled on the cushions of the front seat. From the gloom within the sedan, a thin, white hand darted out. Fingers, sharp and pointed as claws, clutched at his coat sleeve. A gray, shriveled face, beaded with tiny black eyes, peered up at him from between strands of dirty, disheveled hair.

"Good Mr. Neymores," came a thin, crackling voice. "Munchy always called ye good Mr. Neymores, and I know you'll help me and my Munchy, won't ye, Mr. Neymores?"

Neymores fumbled along the door post, found the dome light switch, and pressed it on. As he had judged from the voice, the person who had appropriated the front seat of his car was an old woman. She was wearing a ragged dress of filthy silk stuff, and, in spite of the warm night, a plaid shawl was tied over her head. He rec-

ognized her immediately as the woman who had fainted in the Art Institute that evening. Aside from that, he could not remember ever seeing her before. As for "her Munchy" he hadn't the slightest idea to whom she had referred.

It was mere curiosity that prevented him from sending the woman about her business. The city abounded with creatures of this kind—some who deserved charity, and others who counterfeited both their ailments and their poverty. Neymores did not reply at once. He closed the door of the sedan, walked around, and got in under the wheel. Then he asked, "Just what is the matter? Who is Munchy?"

"Why you know Munchy!" the old woman shrilled. "He's my son. You buy all your pencils from him."

Neymores remembered now. Munchy must be the ageless blind man who stood at the corner of Eighth and Wentworth Streets. And that was very strange! During the past week, Neymores could not remember seeing Munchy at his accustomed post. "Is Munchy sick?" he inquired.

"No-no," the woman whimpered. "He's gone. For ten days he has not come back."

Neymores' mind fired with sudden inspiration. "Tell me," he said earnestly, "why you fainted in the institute when you saw Xavier's statue?"

"I do not know what you mean," whimpered the woman. "But I know that the metal man all curled up on his back looked like my Munchy!"

Neymores pressed a five dollar bill into the crone's hand. That would keep her from starving. "Now, you'll have to go," he told her. "I'll see what I can do to find your son." He had suddenly remembered that the blind man had one missing finger on his left hand!

That settled it! Beyond a doubt, Munchy had served as the model for Xavier's "Man in Pain." But by what hellish torment had this perverted artist twisted the placid features of the blind man into a resemblance of

the hideous metal thing that had caused a sensation at the exhibit? What had become of Munchy since the completion of the statue?

Neymores hurried the old woman from his car. Then, he drove to the nearest telephone booth, called the Missing Persons Bureau, and described the blind pencil vender.

**S**HERINGHAM COURT belies its grand name. It is something of a Soho mixed with the tinselled finery of a Montmartre together with a filth and squalor all its own. Here, artists and scribblers have made their dwellings and have counterfeited the Bohemian life. Among all this tawdriness, Sheringham Court boasts one building where money created something that was genuinely picturesque — Fulton Xavier's new studio. Faced with clean stucco, the upper stories jut out three feet beyond the lower. Glazed tile insets, attractive green shutters, and blossoming window boxes all contributed their bit towards brightening up what would ordinarily have been called a drab city street.

As the steady thrum of Neymores' car stopped in front of the Xavier studio, soft melodious music floated to his ears. He listened for a moment. An organ was playing "In a Monastery Garden." Neymores knew that it was Fulton Xavier himself who played. Why? Because the full-bodied bass notes were entirely lacking. For all Xavier's money could not manipulate those wooden organ pedals. Xavier could not walk. A railroad accident had robbed him of his legs.

Knocking at the studio door brought a servant. "I am sorry," said the man, "but Mr. Xavier is not here."

"I am sorry," retorted Neymores, "but I know that he is here." He elbowed his way into the hall. "Please inform him that I am from the *Evening Record*. I would like to interview him in regard to his sensational statue, 'Man in Pain.'"

"I will see, sir," said the servant. He turned stiffly and left the room.

Neymores listened carefully. The organ continued to play a few more bars, then stopped abruptly. Neymores smiled. Fulton Xavier had one weakness—vanity.

The servant re-entered the hall to inform Neymores that Mr. Xavier would see him in the conservatory.

Passing through a small library, Neymores was ushered into the presence of Xavier himself.

Fulton Xavier was seated in a high-backed chair. A woolen robe covered his lap and dropped to the floor concealing the stumps of his amputated legs. His domelike head was hairless and his beetling black brows divided equally his pink forehead and white face. His features were hard, his lips colorless. His smile was an artificial thing devoid of all pleasantness.

"You have, then, seen 'Man in Pain?'" he inquired immediately.

"I have," replied Neymores. "It is hideous. If you conceived it, I am tempted to say that yours is not a strictly normal brain!"

Color flamed across Xavier's parchment face. "You—you dare—" he sputtered.

"I would dare much to discover what has become of a certain blind pencil vender who has been missing for the past ten days."

"Why, damn you! What has that to do with me? Why do you come here with your blind beggars? I know no one who sells pencils! Impertinence to the greatest genius of all times!" The man's wrath shook the massive chair in which he sat.

"I have had the impertinence to inform the police of the disappearance of that blind beggar. I have proof that Munchy—that is his name—was the model for 'Man in Pain.' Suppose, Mr. Xavier, that they should find Munchy—dead. Your bronze statue can be identified beyond a doubt as the image of that blind man—distorted though his features are by pain and torment. Murder, Mr. Xavier, is an unpleasant word!" Neymores crossed the room to the wealthy art patron's chair. His

hand descended heavily on the man's shoulder. "An unpleasant word, but one I shall be forced to use over the telephone in five minutes unless you give me information concerning the man who modeled for your statue!"

The shoulder beneath Neymores' hand shook with silent sobs. "I know nothing of your beggar. Why do you torment me? Money, I know! Here—" he fumbled in his inner coat pocket and tugged out his check book. "How much do you want?"

"Perhaps," said Neymores in an icy tone, "I am the first man you have ever met whom you cannot buy. But I am only the first. You have not met the gentlemen of the homicide squad, I take it."

With an angry motion of his hand, Xavier threw aside the woolen robe, seized two small, rosewood crutches that leaned against the arms of his chair, and squirmed to the floor. Balancing himself on his stumps, he looked up at Neymores. Tears filled his eyes. "Look at me," he implored. "Just look at me—dwarfed in the very prime of life, perfectly helpless. Yet you would take the one thing that is dearest to my heart away from me."

"Answer my question and I will leave this house at once. Where is Munchy?"

"Damn your Munchy!" Xavier seized the tail of Neymores' coat and shook it angrily. Then anger passed. His face once more became the color of parchment. The dark eyes darted furtively about the room. Again, he tugged at Neymores' coat. "If I tell you a secret that only two human beings know, will you promise to leave me alone and keep silent?"

Neymores hesitated. "If you do not confess a crime, I can promise."

"Come then," said Xavier; and using his crutches with remarkable skill, he hopped across the room towards the door at the rear. He opened the door and hopped into a small, brilliantly lighted chamber that was obviously his work shop. Unformed and partly formed lumps of clay were heaped

upon low work tables. Clay smeared smocks and modeling tools littered the room. Xavier stumped over to one of the tables, picked up a small clay figure, and held it above his head. It might have represented a man, but so ill-formed, so utterly lacking in proportion that Neymores could not be certain.

"This," said Xavier, "is my masterpiece!"

Neymores stared at the thing. Xavier was completely insane. A child could have fashioned a more perfect image in mud; and whatever could be said against "Man in Pain," it was certainly perfectly proportioned and complete in every detail.

"Fool, don't you see!" Xavier shouted. "This is the finest thing I have ever done. You are learning the in-most secret of a genius!" He paused, moistening his colorless lip. "My one ambition was to be a great sculptor. I dreamed of art unborn—yes, dreamed until I believed myself to be an artist. Some day I would see my name upon the most sensational statue ever exhibited in America. All this, I saw in my dreams. Now, do you understand why I could not have seen the man who modeled for 'Man in Pain?'" A chuckle rasped his throat. "It is the greatest hoax of the age. Today, Xavier is on the lips of every art critic. Yet, here in my hand, I hold my masterpiece!" With an oath, he hurled the clay thing to the floor where it shattered to bits.

"You mean," said Neymores softly, almost compassionately, "that you were not the artist who fashioned 'Man in Pain?'"

Slowly, Xavier nodded his head. "That is my secret."

**U**NDERSTANDING crept over Neymores. Xavier, who had bought what the world would sell, had been thwarted in his greatest ambition. He had been denied the artistic skill for which he longed. Yet, even greater than his longing for artistic expression, was his hunger for fame

as an artist. Insane? Of course—the insanity of strange vanities, grandiose illusion!

"Then, if you did not make the statue, who did?"

Earnestly, Xavier replied, "I have no more idea than you. He is a man with a long, yellow beard. Sometimes I fancy he is the reincarnate Leonardo Da Vinci. He came to me, told me that he was a great sculptor to whom fortune had been unkind. I made him this proposition: If he would create works of art in my name, I would pay him a large sum of money. His studio is directly below this one. He has a secret entrance, and no one knows that he is the real sculptor of my statues!"

"Then I—"

A half-muffled scream broke through Neymores' sentence. It sounded as if it came from the floor at his feet. "What was that?" he snapped.

Xavier stood stiffly on his stumps, every sense alert. "It—it sounded like a woman."

Neymores sprang to Xavier, seized him by the shoulders, and shook him until his teeth rattled. "Have you ordered any more of your damned statues?" he snarled.

Xavier's eyes bulged. He nodded, unable to speak.

The entire horror of what that scream portended slashed across Neymores' brain. This fiendish artisan who created Xavier's nightmares in bronze must torture his victims in some hellish manner in order that the metal faces of his finished products might reflect a pain beyond human conception. "We've got to get down there," he shouted in a frenzy. "He may be killing her, or—or something worse!"

Something behind Neymores creaked like a rusty hinge. A rasping shriek from Xavier. Neymores pivoted. Behind him, a door in the floor had opened. Standing on the edge of the yawning pit was a strange, foreboding figure—a man whose face was covered from eyes to chin with a mass of curling yellow hair. A white robe dropped



from his shoulders to his feet—and it was spattered with crimson! In his right hand, he held a thick, black automatic. Not a sound passed his lips. He merely beckoned with one crooked finger of his left hand—beckoned towards the pit.

There was no mistaking his meaning. Neymores had seen the lust to kill in a man's eyes before. There was but one thing to do. He advanced towards the sinister, bearded figure. Evidently, Xavier, too, understood the meaning of the man's gesture. Neymores could hear him stumping along behind. Silently, the robed figure pointed to the opening. Looking down, Neymores saw a narrow flight of steel steps. Below was total darkness.

"I—I can't go down steps. You know that!" Xavier whimpered.

Still the crooked finger pointed. Xavier inched nearer the opening. Suddenly, the robed man's left hand shot out, gripped Xavier by the shoulder, twisted him around, and shoved him into the opening. The legless man was thrown down the steps. His hoarse cries of pain and terror blasted up from the darkness.

Lips within the yellow beard spoke.

"Intruder," the voice cut, "you know how to use steps."

Mechanically, Neymores obeyed. His feet found each step in turn as he worked his way down into the blackness. Below the stairs, he could hear Xavier groaning. When at last he found firm flooring beneath him, he heard the trap above him close. Brilliant electric lights illuminated the room. Neymores involuntarily gasped at the strange spectacle that spread before him.

A glass vat fully twelve feet in length occupied the center of the room. He judged it to be cubical. It was filled within a foot of the brim with a brilliant blue fluid. Next to the great vat was an enameled basin eight feet long and half as wide. Lying stark naked in this basin was a man. His throat was slashed from ear to ear,

and a crimson pool of his own blood bathed his body.

Bound and gagged in a straight chair was what first appeared to Neymores to be a negress. She was wearing a short, black tunic. Upon a second glance, he saw that the woman's features were obviously Caucasian. Face, body, and garment had been coated with some black substance. She was apparently unharmed and fully conscious, though her eyes were staring wildly at the ghastly scene.

NEYMORES jerked his eyes away. The shock of it all had numbed his wits. That was the one thing to be avoided at all costs! He forced himself to look calmly at the robed man. Evidently, while Neymores had been engrossed in the horrific revelations of the room, the bearded man had lowered a large metal cage over the recumbent form of Xavier. The latter, he noticed, had been stunned by his fall but was gradually coming around. Goldenbeard stood beside the cage, his automatic still in his hand. Pushing his foot between the bars of the cage, he goaded Xavier into consciousness. The cripple groaned and twisted to a sitting position.

"I am fulfilling your orders, Xavier," said the bearded one. "The subject of your second great work was to be 'Judgment.' It was to be composed of two life-size figures—a man and a woman. The man was to have the impassive face of a judge; the woman was to have the tortured features of the condemned. You will see how well I have chosen the models. The man in the basin was a worthless vagrant. He agreed to model for ten dollars. In order to preserve his placid features, I was forced to take his life before the 'art work' began.

"Bound in the chair, you see the female subject. In spite of the liberal coating of graphite I have applied to her fair skin, you may be able to recognize her."

Xavier's eyes strained in an effort to see the woman in the chair. Sud-

denly, his lower jaw sagged open. "My God!" he breathed. "My daughter!"

"Your daughter," the bearded man mocked. "Hers shall be the immortality of bronze. This unfortunate intruder—" he indicated Neymores—"I shall be forced to kill because he knows our methods—or can guess them.

"Then, I shall leave this building for all time. You will be left alone in this room—I will remove your cage from above—and there will be a little hint to the police. Though the police have not yet learned the truth about 'Man in Pain,' when they raid the Xavier studio, they will find the great Xavier, the great sculptor, surrounded by his victims in various stages of the process. Tonight, you sacrifice human beings on the altar of art! And no amount of denying, after your boasted art abilities, will ever convince the police that you are not the sole murderer of these unfortunates!

"But at the same time you are going to witness more than all this, my friends," the madman went on. "Miss Xavier's father is going to see his own daughter wed to Death himself as though to a mortal man. For besides the exquisite torment she will endure, my apparatus will make her experience every sensation of which the human body is capable—yes, besides agony, there will be exhilaration ecstasy, joy and almost unendurable delight combined with agony so stark and pure as to be sheer beauty itself."

The bearded one turned fiendishly to face Neymores directly. "You do not yet know the full beauty of this girl," he almost chuckled, gesturing at the short tunic she wore. "But it will do you no good to watch—no good at all."

As full realization of the bearded fiend's purpose flashed upon Neymores' mind, a shout burst from his throat. "You're crazy! You can't pull a stunt like this!"

"I correct you," said the bearded one. "I have pulled a stunt like this. Do you remember the blind pencil vender? He became immortalized as

'Man in Pain.' Do you wonder how I succeeded in capturing his tortured emotions in metal? I did it right here. In his blissful ignorance, Xavier supplied my every need—but did so in his own name. Do you wonder at my methods? Then, I am about to show them to you upon the person of Xavier's lovely daughter.

"But first, to manacle your hands—" Goldenbeard picked up a chain from the floor, stepped briskly behind Neymores, and ordered, "Hands behind you!"

With the fiend's gun jabbing into his back, there was nothing to do but obey. In another moment, the chain was tightened about his wrists and fastened with a padlock. Then strong cord was tied about his ankles.

Swiftly the satanic maker of statues hurried close to the girl. For a moment he hovered over her, then tore the tunic from her. Softly, gloatingly his eyes traveled over the graceful, swelling contours of her bosom and thighs.

"Yes, yes," he sniggered sardonically, "this will be one of the very best masterpieces of art that I shall leave behind."

Neymores stared, fascinated, at the starkness of the girl's disattire—which would have been made hideous by the darksome coating of the graphite, had it not been for the beauty nature had modeled throughout her figure. He could not help noting, even in a moment of such horror, that the curves of her breasts and thighs were so feminine as to be almost voluptuous.

The killer hurried to the wall, untied a strand of hemp rope, and pulled on it. Looking up at the ceiling, Neymores saw a metal hoist to which rope and grappling hooks were attached. The crane moved until it was directly above the chair in which the girl was bound. At the killer's manipulation, the grapples lowered, to the back of the chair.

He then crossed to the girl, fastened the hooks, saying as he did so, "Miss Xavier's body is coated with graphite

which makes her an electrical conductor. To establish the connection, I fasten a metal band around her head—so. One of our wire leads goes to the metal head band. In the glass vat, we have a solution of blue vitriol and the second electrode in the form of a heavy copper plate. Current passing from one electrode to the other through the copper sulphate will deposit a film of copper upon the graphite-covered body of Miss Xavier. Now, the current we shall use will be small so that Miss Xavier can suffer exquisite pain without it killing her. In that way, we can capture every tortured expression, every convulsed muscle in the metal itself!"

Goldenbeard pulled on his ropes, and the chair containing the girl was hoisted into the air and wheeled above the tank containing the blue vitriol. Very slowly, the killer lowered the helpless girl towards the surface.

In his cage, Xavier clenched the bars, shouted, threatened, and hopped up and down until his face became purple. Neymores was too horrified at what he saw to do more than stare. The girl was lowered until one slender foot was immersed in the blue fluid. Then the killer crossed to an electrical switch and turned on the current. Muscles in the girl's foot tightened and twitched. Her blackened face instantly became seamed with lines of agony.

Then for a moment the girl's body relaxed, only to commence a gradually increasing tremble that moved the flesh of stomach, torso and thighs as though by the manipulation of unseen hands. Suddenly she stiffened and arched her back violently. A second later the girl's body relaxed abruptly. But soon she writhed agonizedly with every limb, and tormented gasps and weak cries came through the gag that was tight-bound across half the convulsed features of her face.

"Xavier!" Neymores whispered. "Xavier, if you can raise your cage up on edge a little. Try it. Try anything that will attract his attention."

Panic fled from the cripple's face. With a desperate effort, he wrenched at the base of the cage. It raised a few inches and dropped again into place.

FROM across the room, the bearded man saw what Xavier was trying to do. Yet Neymores knew that he dared not kill the cripple. If he did, there would be no logical place to rest the blame for the fiendish crimes. With a snarl, he leaped across the room. "Stop that!" he shouted. Xavier's arms snaked through the bars, fastened upon the fiend's smock, and clung there. The killer laughed at Xavier's determined efforts.

While they struggled, Neymores dropped to the floor, doubled himself up, and worked his long arms down towards his ankles. Inches more—just inches. He had done the trick any number of times when he was a kid. He tried again and got his manacled wrists to the back of his heels. He contracted his muscles as much as possible. The chain slipped over his heels, over his toes, and came up in front of him. Another moment, and his fingers had ripped the cord from his ankles.

Then he was on his feet running up behind the killer. Xavier was giving the man so much trouble that it was not until Neymores was ready to spring that the bearded one had a chance to spring away. Neymores whirled his chained wrists above his head and brought them flailing down. The steel chain caught the man in the head. It was probably mere accident that his automatic roared. Even as Neymores and the killer fell together, the reporter saw a red-eyed wound appear in the forehead of Fulton Xavier. The full weight of Neymores' body landed upon the killer's back. The man's gun skated across the floor.

Completely winded by the fall, it was a second before the killer could continue his resistance. As he squirmed over on his back in an effort to throw off Neymores, the reporter's manacled wrists beat down again. This

time the steel links struck the man full in the face. Blood drooled from the corners of his mouth, drenching his beard with crimson. He lay perfectly still.

Neymores got to his feet. A glance showed him that the padlock connecting the loops of the chain about his wrists could be easily broken. His first thought, however, was for the girl. He ran across the room and yanked open the switch that controlled the electric current running through the vat of vitriol. Returning to the glass vat, he saw that her graphite-covered foot was already tinged with copper plate. Still, she was fully conscious.

And, evidently attracted by the sound of a shot, the whole place was filled with blue-coated police by the time Neymores had lowered the girl to the floor.

"Holy smoke!" gasped a fat sergeant as he clattered down the steps. "Will you look at the shambles! Why, it's the bright boy from the *Record*. How'd you get messed up in this, Neymores?"

"A long story," replied the reporter, "beginning with a missing pencil vender named Munchy."

"Yeah, I know. We were all posted to keep an eye open for him. Where is he?"

"Munchy is in the Art Institute—"

"Well, that's a fine place for a beggar," the sergeant interrupted.

"He was buried alive," continued Neymores, "in a sarcophagus that slowly crept upon him—a sarcophagus of copper to which a bronze finish was added for artistic effect."

The sergeant's eyes popped. "Say, that sounds crazy! Who's that old Father Time there on the floor with the whiskers on? Who's that gal? Who's the guy with the slashed throat?"

"The man in the basin was another subject to be electroplated. The girl is

Miss Xavier. She's been covered with graphite preparatory to being electroplated alive! 'Man in Pain' you will find to be Munchy, the pencil vender. He was also electroplated alive. That is how the 'artist' managed to get that hideous expression on his 'statue's' face. But, quit asking questions and get that poor girl to the hospital. They'll have to get that black stuff off of her.

"As to the killer, I believe he is a man who hated Xavier because of a business deal that ruined him and killed his father. He's crazy as a bed-bug, but was clever enough to play on Xavier's vanity. He knew that sooner or later someone was bound to discover that Xavier's statues were simply the cadavers of murdered people plated with metal. Nobody but the killer and Xavier knew that Xavier wasn't the real creator of the statues. With Xavier's name plastered all over the statues, there wouldn't be a jury in the country that would believe Xavier was not the murderer. It was the bearded man's idea of vengeance—the disgrace of trial, the frantic and futile efforts to escape the chair, and eventually the death of the condemned but innocent man." Neymores crossed to where the bearded man lay. Seizing the yellow hair, he jerked it away. The pale face of Jasper Felps glared up at him.

For a long time Neymores struggled with a mental picture of the ordeal the beautiful girl had endured. Even when he learned that she had recovered in the hospital, he did not know whether it would be right to try and see her. But he finally went to receive the girl's thanks for saving her life.

"Why not?" he reasoned. "Perhaps they had thus been destined to meet. And with true, spiritual love between them, the beauty she possessed could no longer be sullied in his mind by a ghastly memory of her hellish experience.

# Sinister Skein

By Horace Stoner

**T**ROOPER TRANT kicked his motorcycle brakes. Locked wheels threw up a spray of cinders. Barely three feet from the isolated grade crossing, he steadied the throbbing machine. His headlight shot a probing finger into the black night. Its beam glinted up the twin tracks—to the form of a man. That man was stretched across the rails.

Out of the night, dangerously close, came the shriek of a locomotive whistle. Again and again it shrilled.... The Flyer!

That man on the tracks had his head turned, looking in the direction where the hurtling train would round the curve. He moved, seeming to settle himself more comfortably on his steel death bed. Trooper Trant yelled. But the man paid him no heed.

Another blast from the metal-mouthed monster. It charged around the curve, glaring headlight silver-washing the ground on the far side of the track.

Trant dropped his motorcycle and sped up the track. He yelled hoarsely into the grinding thunder of giant wheels. Then he grabbed the man and braced his feet against the wooden ties. The snorting engine seemed to crash down on his head as he heaved backwards.

A shock of wind hurled him flat on his back with the man on top of him. The Flyer thundered by, roared away into the distance. The engineer had been on the far side

of the cab, and had seen nothing. Trooper Trant rolled the man off of him.

"You would-be suicides give me a pain!" he growled.

The man was breathing heavily. But his arms and legs never moved. Trant peered closer, then swore. The man's arms were strapped with a leather belt, and his legs bound with a silk necktie.

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*Trant became involved in a strange murder skein—depending on the help of a beautiful girl whose confidence he had to win because he had seen her wear but the briefest of clothing.*

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Trant pulled him over into the beam of the motorcycle headlight. He propped him up while he took a knife from the pocket of his gray and black tunic. With swift strokes he freed him.

The man was white-haired, had a kindly, fatherly looking face. He was about fifty-

five. His clothes were dark and baggy. The collar of his white Oxford shirt was open, his necktie missing. And he wore no shoes.

Trant's lips pressed together hard. He shook his head.

"Who'd want to kill an old codger like him?" Trant got down beside the unconscious man and rubbed his wrists briskly.

Moments later the man nodded groggily. His head weaved from side to side. He licked dry lips. Sound rumbled in his throat.

Trant said, "You'll be all right, friend. Take it easy."

The old man mumbled again. Then incoherent words came. "Hidden—House.... We'll—" his voice trailed off into a mumble again.

"Hidden House?" repeated Trant. "What about Hidden House?"

The man's eyes blinked in the glare of the headlight. Trant shielded those eyes with his wide-brimmed campaign hat. Then the man dazedly took in Trant's natty tunic with crisscrossing Sam Browne belt and gun-lanyard. His eyes lingered on the big .45 Colt in its open holster.

"Cop?" he asked weakly.

"State trooper," said Trant. "You're safe now—"

A cinder rolled down the track bed behind him. Trant whirled—got half-way around. Then something like a ton of bricks thudded down on his bare head. He folded up into a void blacker than the night around him.

**T**ROOPER TRANT opened his eyes. And it seemed that he had just closed them and opened them. For everything was the same as when he closed them. His motorcycle was still there, headlight glaring. The old man was still propped up against the stone. The only difference Trant realized was that his head felt like a dull chunk of lead.

Then Trant looked closer. His throat tightened. His eyes narrowed to the ground beside the old man. That ground was wet—as if coated with a dark enamel. And that dark enamel was smeared on the front of the old man's white shirt.

Trant flung himself to the man's side. Words—oaths—boiled to Trant's lips—but those lips were so tightly clamped that no sound escaped them.

The white-haired fellow was as dead as ever a man could be. A knife had ruthlessly slashed his stomach, then had been contemptuously wiped on the tails of his white shirt.

Trant swayed on his feet, his spurs crunching the track cinders. He had seen a lot of Death's handiwork, but none so vicious—so horrible—as this.

The trooper, grim of face, searched through the murdered man's clothes. Not even a cigarette had been left for identification. And the brand tag had been ripped from the inside of

his coat. Trant studied the tragic scene for long minutes.

"The killer wasn't sure—and came back." Trant looked at the dead man. "He's sure—now!"

Picking up his purple-corded campaign hat, Trant gingerly put it on his aching head. A gust of late fall wind nearly whipped it off. With a grimace, he set it more firmly. Then he walked over and righted his motorcycle, straddled the wide, sheep wool-covered seat.

"The poor devil said something about Hidden House." Trant wheeled his machine back in the direction from which he had come. "We'll see what that ritzy city girl has to say about this." The trooper thought a moment. "Funny. Thought she closed up for the winter and went to New York. Soon find out."

Headlight lancing the night, Trant hurled his motorcycle along the wild, desolate road. And the road became wilder, more desolate, as he skidded sharply to the left and flashed on over a wheel-rutted lane. So rugged and isolated was this country that it seemed almost impossible that a New York debutante would choose it for a summer home. But far overhead, wires snaked through the tree tops—wires that supplied heat, light, refrigeration and telephone.

Then right where the trees seemed thickest, Trooper Trant sped into an arenalike clearing. And in the center of this clearing was a large two-story hunting lodge with an eight-car garage behind it. A gay spot in mid-summer. But now, in late fall, it was a desolate, wind-swept blot against the night.

The big living-room was lighted, but the rest of the lodge was in inky blackness. Then above the throb of Trant's Harley-Davidson came an ear-piercing shriek:

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

**T**RANT jerked to a stop, kicked out the motorcycle rest and leaped up on the wide veranda. He

tried the door. It was locked. Then he pressed his face to the curtained glass door—and saw a very strange sight indeed.

A dark-skinned, wiry man ran across the room, jumped into the air and wildly swung an iron poker. Trant pressed closer to the glass to look beyond the man, but he saw nothing—nothing that the man could have swung at. The dark-skinned man turned his face up to the rafters and wagged the poker viciously. Trant followed the man's gaze and saw a big green and red parrot awkwardly waddling across the rafter.

Trant thumped on the door. The dark-skinned man twisted about, his face contorted angrily. He tossed the poker into the dead ashes of the fireplace. With a shrug he straightened his clothes and walked over to the door. He called out, "Who's there?"

"State police," said Trant. "Open up."

The man's shadow on the glass grew rigid. After a moment's hesitation, he opened the door. His dark face was expressionless. "Well?"

"Trooper Trant," announced the policeman, stepping in past the man. "Sorry to bother you, but I'd like to ask some questions."

The wiry man's eyes followed Trant's uninvited entrance into the room. His dark lips peeled back over gleaming teeth. "Do come in." His smile crept higher on one side of his face. "And those questions—"

"About a murder," said Trant. "First, who're you?"

The smile left the man's dark face. "I'm Packley—Anton Packley. I'm a guest here."

Trant crossed the room and picked up a continental phone. He lifted his head back and glanced at the rafters. The parrot was perched up there suspiciously eyeing him. Trant tapped the phone signal bar. He looked at the dark-skinned Packley. "Dead?"

"Stupid of me," Packley hastened to say. "I could have told you. Yes,

the service was discontinued yesterday."

Trant said something under his breath. Then to Packley, "Seen anything of a white-haired old fellow around here?"

"Yes, I've seen a lot of one white-haired man." Slowly, an expression of alarm spread over Packley's face. "You—you—don't—"

"How was he dressed?" cut in Trant.

"Why, a brown suit—white shirt—Say, you don't—"

"That's the old fellow I mean," said Trant. "He was knifed—murdered."

Anton Packley swayed unsteadily on his feet. His arms stiffened at his sides, like a man bracing himself against a great shock. "It can't be!" he muttered hoarsely. "It can't be. That man—is my father!"

ANTON PACKLEY slumped into a chair and stared with unseeing eyes at the brightly colored Navaho rugs. His fingers clenched and unclenched. "Where is—he?" finally asked Packley.

"At the tracks. But you'd better stay here until I can get the medical examiner." Trant laid his hand on Packley's shoulder. "Nothing you can do, anyway."

Packley sat up. "What have you done?" he demanded.

The trooper told him briefly what had happened.

"It's awful!" muttered Packley. "Our hostess will be shocked—when she gets back."

"Let her rot!" shrieked the big parrot from his perch on the rafter. "Let her rot!"

Packley sprang to his feet, looking for something to grab hold of. "Damn that bird! I'll—"

The parrot lost its balance and slipped down the side of the rafter. Almost falling, he hooked his powerful bill into the wood and wildly beat his wings for balance. Slowly, he climbed up to safety.

"Let her rot!"

Packley grabbed a heavy iron book-end. Trant took it away from him roughly. Then asked:

"Whose parrot?"

"That damn—" Packley bit his lip and scowled up at the long green and red tail feathers. "It belongs to—our hostess."

Trant put the heavy book-end back on the table. "Then let it alone. I think I'm gonna like that bird." He whistled. The parrot stopped its waddling. Trant asked, "Who's gonna rot?"

The parrot squawked something, then continued along the rafter.

Trant looked thoughtfully after it. "I know I'm gonna like that bird."

"They're no damn good," grunted the dark-skinned Packley.

Trant slowly shook his head in contradiction, but said nothing.

From somewhere above them came a dull knocking sound. There was a moment's pause, then it was repeated. Trant looked at the parrot. But the bird was twisting his head to survey the ceiling. Anton Packley was looking up, too. He was the first to speak. And his voice was hoarse, his words thick.

"Maybe—the murderer—"

Trant sprinted up the rough-hewn staircase, flinging over his shoulder, "You stay here." He got to the second floor, fumbled for a light switch. He found it and the hall glowed with shaded amber lights.

The knocking sound seemed to come from directly over the center of the living-room. Trant turned left and flung open a door. Into a woman's bedroom he dashed. The air was heavy, as if the room had not been occupied for days. He looked under the bed and in the closet, which held only a row of bare hangers.

Trant spun into the hall again and into the next room. Another woman's room. Didn't look like the hostess had allowed for many male guests. The beds in this room yielded nothing. The clothes closet did.

On the floor, securely bound and gagged, squirmed a young girl. Trant dropped to one knee, taking the pocket-knife from his tunic. The girl's hair was black, stylishly bobbed. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black. And they smouldered like black fire. Trant cut the gag away, then patted her face with his handkerchief. It was a pretty face, distractingly pretty even with the red marks of the gag marring its softness.

She quickly pushed her skirt down over ridiculously brief panties that didn't quite reach the upper, high swelling of her legs. Embarrassedly she lowered her eyes with an expression that plainly told that she realized he had seen her bare thighs while freeing her.

"Who are you?" gasped the girl. "What—"

"Who're you?" countered Trant, cutting free her slender and shapely ankles. He picked her up bodily and sat her on the edge of the bed. "Who're you?" he repeated, briskly rubbing the circulation back into her wrists and ankles.

The girl flexed her cramped muscles. "You're a state trooper, aren't you?"

Trant faced her squarely, impatiently. "Right. Trooper Trant, New York State Police. Now—who are you?"

"Thanks for freeing me," said the girl. "I'm Natica Nason. I live here."

"Thanks," nodded Trant. "Who tossed you in the closet?"

Natica's eyes flashed angrily at the thought. Words rushed from her lips:

"Packley did it!"

Trant moved toward the door. "So friend Packley did it, eh?"

"Do you know him?" asked Natica, jerking up her head in surprise.

"Sure," Trant turned. "He's downstairs."

The girl came to her feet. "Then he's still here?"

From downstairs rose a shrill squawking. Something heavy hit the



floor under Trant's foot. The squawking stopped.

"I'll say he's here," snapped Trant reaching the door. "And I don't want anything to happen to that parrot!"

Natica reached the door the same moment Trant did. She entwined her fingers in his Sam Browne belt. "Don't let him get away! Arrest him—"

She was so eager in what she was saying that, at first, she didn't realize she had pressed herself close to him. Quickly she took her hands away from his belt and looked at him through half-veiled eyelids, remembering again how high her skirt had been when she was tied up.

"Sure!" barked Trant. His voice got hard. "Let's go!"

The girl darted through the door and along the hallway. "Don't let him get away!" she called out again.

**T**RANT caught up with her at the head of the stairs. His hand shot out and grabbed her arm, jerking her to a standstill.

Downstairs, the dark-skinned man was backing to the door. Under his left arm, held in a viselike grip, was the struggling parrot. His left hand clutched the back of the bird's neck, safe from the gnashing beak. And in the man's right hand was a black automatic. The man's dark face split in a gleaming smile as he swiftly swung the automatic to cover the head of the stairs.

Trant neatly tripped the girl, shoving her away from him. Whipping out his big Colt, he dropped to one knee.

The automatic cracked. Bullets jerked the air over his head. The dark-skinned man ducked out the door. Trant sent two slugs crashing through the glass panel.

From out of the night came a wild screech:

"Honest—honest—I haven't got it!"

Trant flung down the stairs keeping his balance by a miracle alone.

Three rapid shots cracked outside.

Three shots ending in dull, metallic thuds. Trant half guessed their meaning. He skidded around the open door and bending double dashed out on the veranda. No bullets greeted his reckless rush. He leaped off the illuminated veranda and landed in the dark shadows, crouching, listening.

No human sound came out of the night's black maw. Only the rustle of dead leaves, wind-lashed across the clearing. Trant threw an anxious glance at his motorcycle. And the meaning of those three shots was no longer a guess. They had been turned into the engine of the motorcycle, wrecking it completely.

Trant swore roundly — then stopped! From the back of the lodge came the whirring noise of an automobile starter. Trant dug his toes into the ground. Reaching the side of the lodge, he heard a grinding mesh of gears. He ran faster. He was just in time to see the rear wheels of the sedan disappear around the corner.

The careening sedan was three-quarters the way across the clearing when he caught sight of it again. Trant's Colt kicked with thunderous explosions. The right rear tire of the sedan blasted wide open. The car lurched madly, looked like it was going over. It bounced crazily but held the ground. Trant was feverishly loading when it hurtled out of sight.

He snapped the Colt back into its holster and dog-trotted to the lodge.

Natica Nason met him at the door, a pearl-stocked revolver gripped firmly in her hand. She lowered the little gun.

"He got away?"

"Yeah," Trant scowled at her. "Yeah."

He took her by the arm, crossed the huge room and pressed her into a chair. Standing before her, he hooked thumbs in his Sam Browne.

"Well, let's have it."

**N**ATICA'S black eyes regarded Trant from under long-lashed lids. She shrugged. Then reaching

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into the pocket of her tweed jacket, held out the little pearl-stocked revolver.

The trooper wagged his head impatiently. "I want the lowdown on all this. What's it all about?"

Natica slipped the gun back into her pocket, said, "Oh." She crossed her legs. "May I have a cigarette?"

He gave her one, lighted it.

The girl smoked a moment. Then she waved her hand to include the room. "As you see, I'm preparing to leave for the city—"

"I know," said Trant. "The phone's cut off. What about Packley?"

"I was getting ready to leave," went on Natica, unruffled at his abruptness, "when an old man ran into the house. He had a big parrot with him. A minute later that dark man, Packley, followed him in."

"Packley said he was your guest," said Trant.

"I never saw him before tonight."

"Then how did you know his name?"

Natica's eyes flashed. "Don't cross-examine me! I knew his name was Packley—because that was what the old man called him." Natica leaned forward in her chair. "They fought. Packley hit the old man on the head and knocked him out."

"Did Packley take off the old man's shoes?" butted in Trant.

Natica's lips opened, "Yes," and closed quickly. Then she added. "I think so."

Trant's spurs clinked as he shifted his position to look about the big room. Without a word he went over to the fireplace and poked around the dead ashes with his toe. Suddenly he stooped and pulled out what was left of a pair of shoes. Trant whistled softly.

"Looks like the parrot or maybe a tiger chewed them up. Hmmm. What's this?" He picked at a little brown spot on the ripped leather. "This looks like cement. Good stuff, too. See the way it sticks?" When the girl looked, Trant held her eyes

steadily. "And what were you doing while all this was going on, Miss Nason?"

"I tried to call the police, but the service had been stopped. Then Packley tied me, took me upstairs and put me in the closet."

Trent nodded. "Guess that's where the parrot heard, 'Let her rot!' That bird could help me a lot." Trant fingered his gun-lanyard thoughtfully. "What happened to the old man?"

"I don't know. But while I was upstairs in the closet I heard an automobile leave and come back twice."

Trant's fingers slid along the lanyard to the black butt of his Colt. "Yep. That's when Packley took the old man to the tracks, then went back and knifed him."

"Knifed him?" echoed Natica. "You mean—"

"Murdered," said Trant flatly. And while the girl stared hard at the floor, Trant quietly crossed to a small packing case which he had not noticed before. It was partly concealed behind a big chair. Trant leaned his head to one side to examine the label. It read in part:

*From*—BERNICE HARGRAVES  
Hidden House

*To*—BERNICE HARGRAVES  
Park Avenue

Trant shot a glance at the girl. She was still staring at the floor. Trant pulled on his campaign hat and gauntlets. Walking to the door he said:

"I'm going after Packley. I'll have to take your car from the garage."

Natica swept her eyes from the floor to the trooper. "I'm sorry—but my chauffeur has the car. He is going to call for me later."

Trant scratched his neck. "Then I'll have to patch up my motorcycle. It's out front here."

When Trant stepped off the veranda, he didn't go near the crippled motorcycle. Instead, he swiftly ran to the back of the lodge and crouched in the shadows. He had not long to

wait. For the back door slowly opened and closed. In the dim light, Trant made out the graceful figure of Natica Nason. She stood at the door listening, then suddenly ran straight out across the clearing.

Trant knew she was taking the short-cut to the little village of Edgerock. He smiled grimly. Letting her get a good start, he followed, keeping to the shadows.

THE fall wind made Trant's task quite simple. The noise of wind-tossed dead leaves effectively covered the sound of his running feet. Natica set a brisk pace, so brisk and steady that Trant marveled at her stamina.

The girl topped a small hill and disappeared from sight. When Trant reached the hill, he saw Natica entering the rambling village from the south end. He waited until she disappeared around a building, then he went down the hill at a dead run.

He came out between two buildings onto the main street. Twenty yards ahead he saw the girl stop before the village hotel to look at a dark sedan parked at the curb. Then she went in.

Trant followed quickly. One glance at the sedan showed him that the right rear tire was blown. Into the hotel he went. The sleepy clerk got wide awake at sight of Trant's gray and black uniform. He told Trant that the girl went up to 202. Trant went swiftly and silently up the carpeted staircase.

He reached the second landing and went quietly to 202. Voices came out. He recognized Natica's:

"I'll keep this rod for you, Packley. And no funny stuff—Leave that parrot alone!"

Then came the dark-skinned man's voice:

"I'm gonna make him talk!" There was a pause. "Say, who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Me?" the girl's voice was sugary. "I'm an investigator of the Reliance

Insurance. My boss insured the Blue Ball—"

Packley's voice was a snarl of triumph. "Then you've got it! Say, do you think that cap pistol is going to stand between me and—"

The girl laughed contemptuously. "Do you think I'd be here—if I had it? Use your head."

"But it was at Hidden House to-night!" growled Packley.

"Certainly," agreed the girl. "The old man stole it from the DuMont's in Albany. I followed him here, learned he was going to meet you at Hidden House. I got there first!"

"The old fool had it!" insisted Packley.

"Sure! But you took it—and murdered him." The girl's voice sharpened. "Now hand it over, Packley. This means my job—so—I'm not fooling."

Trooper Trant listened carefully at the door. He loosened his Colt in its holster. Packley spoke, whiningly:

"I haven't got it."

Then a far sharper voice than Packley's called out:

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

"Damn that bird!" Suddenly Packley became crafty. "Listen to me, girl," he said. "The Blue Ball is worth close to fifty grand. How about working together? Wait! Think of that. Why, it's more than you'd earn in ten years! Here's my scheme—"

"You're wasting breath," cut in the girl.

"Wait! The old fool always had this damn parrot with him. It repeats everything he says. We'll take it back to the house and talk about the Blue Ball—"

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

"See!" yelled Packley. "The parrot will lead us right to it. The old man always muttered to himself when he did something. You can bet he muttered plenty when he hid the thing. You just heard the parrot. And do you remember how the old fool yelled that he didn't have it?"

"Yes—I remember," the girl's words were thick at the thought of it. "But—" she pointed out, "—you're forgetting that trooper. He's nobody's fool."

Trant grinned to himself on the other side of the door. But his grin vanished when Packley laughed.

"Leave the hick cop to me . . . I won't miss this time."

"No soap," said the girl flatly. "You double-crossed the old man . . . You're a dirty killer!"

"Now — now," soothed Packley. "But I wouldn't cross a sweetheart like you. Fact is, I think we'd get along fine. Why, I'd do anything for you—"

"That's great," snapped Natica. "You can start by writing a confession to killing that poor old man!"

There was a long silence. Trant tensed. His hand gripped the doorknob. Finally Packley spoke, and his voice carried the note of a broken man.

"All right. You win."

And through the door came the scratching of a pen on paper. Trant twisted the doorknob and stepped quietly into the room. He had the door closed again before he was noticed.

"As you were," he ordered coldly. "Natica, you just let that gun drop to the floor."

The girl saw that Trant's big Colt was still in his holster. But she remembered how fast it had come out when he shot from the head of the stairs in the lodge. Without a word, she let her weapon fall to the floor.

"That's fine," nodded Trant. "Now, Packley, you finish that confession. Oughta be interesting to read how a man confesses to killing his *father*. Your father, eh?" Trant looked from one to the other. "You've both lied yourselves blue in the face all night."

TRANT narrowly watched Packley as he said. "You searched the old man for the Blue Ball, but couldn't find it. Then you decided to get rid

of him in a way that would cover your whole scheme. You put him on the railroad tracks to make his death look like an accident. Then you went back to the lodge to search some more. You did a good job on his shoes. While searching the lodge you must have gotten the idea that the old man swallowed the Blue Ball."

Trant paused a moment, his face hard as granite. "You went back to the tracks, slugged me—and made sure with your knife *that he hadn't swallowed the Blue Ball!*"

Natica gasped. The room seemed to swim about her. She reached out and steadied herself by gripping the back of a chair. She looked at Packley and nearly fainted.

"That knife-work," said Trant, "told me that some one was searching for something valuable. You made your first mistake—in not killing me."

During Trant's accusing deductions, Packley had been studiously writing. And when Trant finished, Packley looked up. He pointed a dark-skinned finger at the confession, saying:

"It's all there—every word of it. See for yourself."

Trant glanced at the paper. "Sign it. Then stand up and raise your hands."

"I know when I'm licked," mumbled Packley. He lifted the fountain pen to sign the paper. And when the point of the pen was in line with Trant's eyes, Packley thumbed the refilling button on the end of it with a vicious punch.

Black ink sprayed into Trant's face—blotted out his sight! He stumbled backwards, frantically brushing his sleeve across his face.

Packley chuckled, kicking back his chair.

A scream of warning tore from the girl's throat.

"He has a knife! Look out—he has a knife!"

TROOPER TRANT'S left arm stopped rubbing his burning eyes. It swept out and caught hold of the girl. In a swift shifting of his feet, he put Natica behind him. Then his right hand flashed down and up in a blurring movement. His blue-black .45 Colt came into his hand. And then Trant's dryly humorous voice cracked across the room:

"You've blindfolded me, Packley—so I can't call my shots!"

Trant fired point-blank straight in front of him. Into the thunderous echo of that shot, he placed another a fraction to the left. Then he rapidly triggered another, to the right. The little room rocked with the terrific reverberations. To the left, farther out, he threw another bolt of gun-lead. With the last roar came a screech of pain!

A heavy body crashed to the floor.

Natica cried, "You got him! In the shoulder! . . . It had to be that last shot—he was going to throw the knife!"

"Take the knife," Trant told her.

She threw it across the room. "Nothing to worry about him any more. He's fainted." The girl then ran into the bathroom and came out with towels and a glass of warm water. She made Trant sit down while she bathed his eyes.

Minutes later, he blinked his eyes open, free of the ink. He sat there a moment and looked at the girl. "You could have gone back to the lodge and searched for the Blue Ball—while I floundered about."

Natica shook her head. "Not me, trooper. We'll work together. I'm willing to take lessons from you in this game any time."

"Okay," grinned Trant. "Now I'll show you where the Blue Ball has been all night." He walked over to the parrot. The big bird eyed him suspiciously, started waddling, getting ready for a take-off toward the ceiling. Trant pulled on his gauntlets.

Suddenly he dived and snared the bird's feet and neck.

"Natica, tie its feet with this lanyard. Take it off my neck."

The girl, a little frightened at the gnashing beak, finally secured the the parrot's feet with the tough leather lanyard.

Trant stood on one end of it, stretching the bird out and rendering its clutching talons harmless. Then Trant poked his gun-barrel into the parrot's face. Like a dart of light, it fastened its powerful bill around it. And just as quickly, Trant gouged his gloved fingers back of where the jaws met. Slowly, he forced the bill open. Then he trapped the flapping wings under his steel-muscled arm. The bill slack, the gun dropped to the floor.

Trant's gloved forefinger probed the inside of the bird's upper bill. He snagged against something. Trant added pressure, taking care not to injure the muscled membrane joining the beak to the head.

Finally, something gave. Trant moved his finger. The parrot caught a brown object on its tongue, held it there a moment, then spat it out to the floor.

Trant released the bird, but tied it to a table leg. It was in no pleasant mood.

Then picking up the brown object, Trant broke away the outer crust with his fingers. He smiled at Natica.

"You remember that brown cement we found on the old fellow's shoe? Well, that gave me the idea that perhaps the Blue Ball was cemented on the inside of the parrot's bill. It was the only place to hide it. And this bird had a large bill. There is a space between where the upper bill slides in and meets the lower bill, and where the membrane starts. The Blue Ball was safe there from the lower bill. And the parrot's tongue couldn't dislodge it. That old fellow must have trained the bird a lot to get him accustomed to it."

Trant finished picking the cement off the Blue Ball. A flashing, brilliant diamond glittered in the palm of his hand.

Natica's black eyes lingered on the diamond, then she looked up at Trant. "Well, you've done it. You've accomplished in two hours what I've been trying to do for two weeks." She smiled. "How did you know I wasn't the owner of Hidden House? Gee!" Natica laughed a little. "I sure tumbled for that trick of yours to get me over here."

"The label on the packing case told me you weren't the lodge's owner. The rest came easy." Trant bent over the wounded Packley, murmured, "He'll be okay. Call a doctor, will you?"

The angry parrot sank its beak into the yielding wood of the table

leg. For a moment it took it off to screech:

"Honest—I haven't got it!"

Trant laughed outright, glanced at Natica. "That's the first word of truth I've heard all night."

Natica came closer to Trant, holding her shoulders well back because she knew that gave more of an uplifted roundness to the front of her figure, and said, with a sly provocativeness: "Well, this has been quite a case. Don't you think we ought to celebrate?"

Trant grinned, taking in the graceful femininity of her figure as he answered: "Celebrate—yeah, but don't you think we could get together on something that'll call for a real celebration?"

Smiling, she said softly: "Yes, I think we could. Let's go."

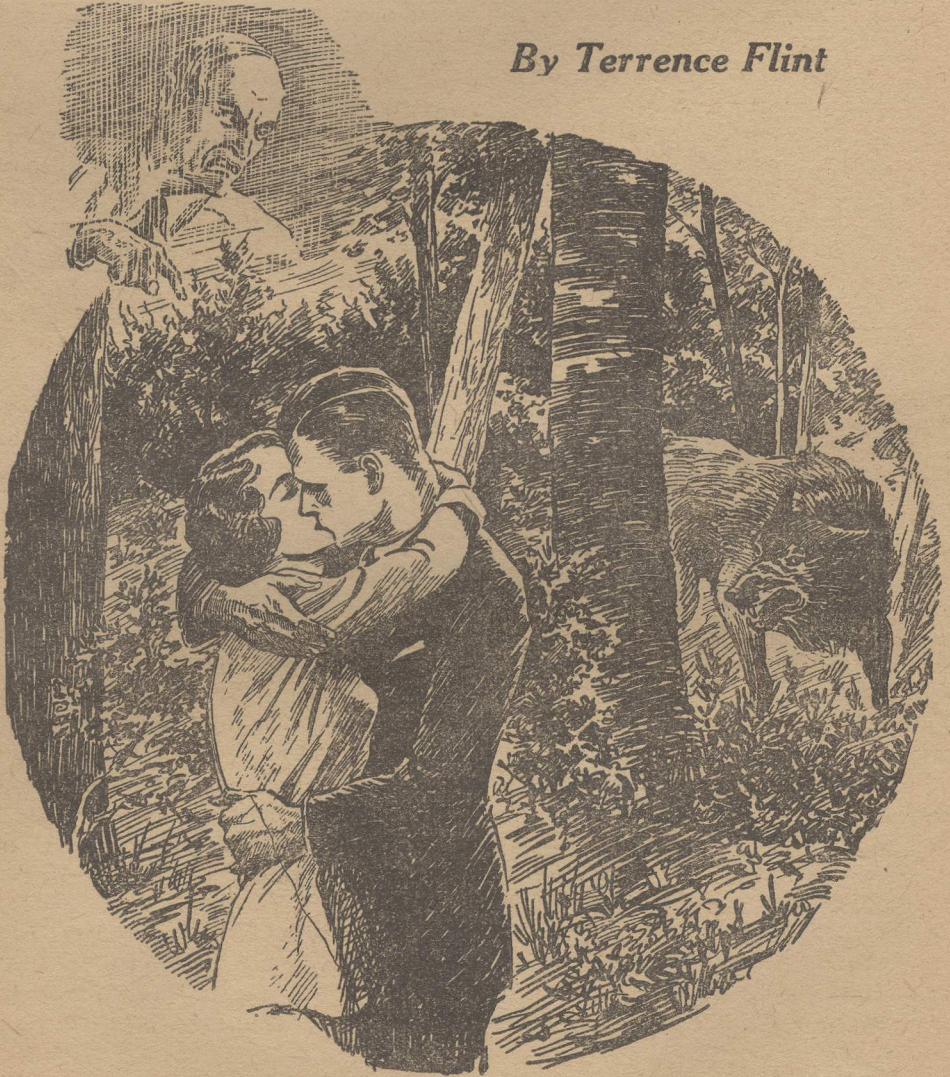


*Natica Nason*

*Middle-aged Graham Munster had patiently watched his beautiful ward grow old enough for him to force her to be his bride. And to keep her from the arms of another and younger man, Munster had to do a*

# Rehearsal With Doom

*By Terrence Flint*



**T**HERE was an odd similarity between Graham Munster, retired broker, and his wolf-dog, Karl. Both had yellow eyes that showed red where the underlids turned out. Both had deep clefts at

the sides of their jaws, and both had inborn savagery.

The difference was that the man concealed his true nature behind smiles and a civilized veneer, while the dog was its own, instinctive self.

Fear was the only controlling force it had learned to recognize, and the man, knowing this, used the brutal sway of fear to gain complete mastery over the dog.

Graham Munster stood looking down at Karl now, his eyes narrowed and speculative. The animal was squatted on its haunches, its tongue hanging out, its tushes showing as it watched its master. Then it whined and thrust its damp nose through the wire enclosure encircling its kennel and made necessary by its ferocity.

The dog seemed to be trying to say something, and Munster guessed what it was. He knew that his own actions of late had puzzled the animal. He smiled, and his yellow eyes gleamed in a half cunning, half cruel look.

"You've never wanted anything the way I want her, Karl," he muttered. "She's lovely—and she's mine, just as you are mine. I've raised her, trained her—and *he's* not going to have her!"

A terrible harshness came into Munster's voice as he pronounced the last sentence. His expression was avid as he glanced back toward the house on the crest behind him—the house where Alma MacKnight, his ward, came to stay every summer.

He paused, dwelling upon the envisioned femininity of a slim school-girl budding into early womanhood. That was when he had first evolved the passion that held everything for him in his savage life of primitive emotion. Now his blood raced hot at thought of the slender, girlish figure that was always in his mind. At the same time anger flamed fiercely because another and younger man threatened to take her away.

He seemed to see her face in each window; seemed to see her on the front steps, on the porch, on the lawn; in sports dresses, jersey suits, and filmy afternoon frocks, as he had seen her a thousand times. He saw her slimness, her maturing womanhood that was like the slow, sweet

unfolding of a flower. He remembered the first time he had seen early womanhood in the swelling of her bosom beneath a bathing suit—and he trembled with savage passion.

Then, in his mind's eye, he saw that other hateful figure that had intruded itself upon him, upsetting his plans, making him conscious of his age—Malcolm Paine.

He saw the eager face of Malcolm Paine bending over Alma's shoulder. He saw the quick smiles, the soft brightness that sprang into her eyes.

He remembered that day when Malcolm and Alma had come in, hand and hand, to announce their engagement and to receive his blessing. And he pictured Malcolm's week-end visits ever since, the visits that had become such a habit that the young man regarded Munster's house almost as a home.

And, at the thought of these things, the terrible force of Graham Munster's suppressed emotions seemed to rise in his throat and choke him, like the clutch of vicelike fingers.

They did not know, those young people, how he felt. He was too crafty for that, too suppressed.

If he had told Alma that he wanted her himself she would merely think he was joking. "Certainly, uncle"—she always called him that—"I'll marry both of you. A girl needs two husbands these days to keep her in clothes."

She would have made some such facetious remark, then perched provocatively on the the arm of his chair and patted his cheek. Or even have kissed him, not knowing that the touch of her fresh young lips made a scorching flame spring up inside him.

He was trembling as he looked at the dog.

"You'll help me, Karl," he said. "You don't know it, you ugly beast; but I'll make you. You'd do it now if I said the word."

Then Munster thought again of the touch of Alma's fresh, soft young



lips, pressing in adolescent unawareness. The very memory sent a thrill through the stocky frame of the middle-aged, mentally-warped man. Yes, he must keep her for himself. No young fool was going to take her away. He would teach her to give herself to him, teach her to press that warm, sweet mouth of hers against his with the burning pulse and feeling of fully awakened love.

HE turned toward the tool shed standing near the kennel. He unlocked it, stepped in, reached up on a shelf and took down a long pole with two prongs at its end. He hooked the prongs into a square of cloth cut from a man's shirt. Then, keeping on the leeward side, he went back toward the dog's enclosure.

Karl got up this time and growled, standing stiff-legged. He seemed to know what was about to take place.

Without a word the man thrust the pole through the fence. The dog backed away, but the pole followed him, and the prongs jabbed him once. Karl snarled then. His fangs gleamed as he whirled.

With terrible ferocity he snapped at the pole. The piece of cloth came away in his mouth, and he worried it, chewed it, till the pole caught it up again.

He hardly looked at the man outside the enclosure—the man who was the real cause of his torment. He vented his rage on the pole and the square of cloth on it. His brute mind grasped only the nearer problem, the pain of those prongs and the man-scent on that piece of cloth. He did not know that Munster, his master, had secretly cut it from one of Malcolm Paine's old shirts.

For a week now the sinister training had gone on. Each day, whenever Alma was in the village as she was now, Karl got two or three jabs with the pronged pole and had the scent of young Paine waved under his nose.

He sank his fangs into the cloth, and a growing desire was being built up in him to bury those same fangs in the man whose scent he had learned to hate. When the training period was over, Munster walked back to the tool shed exulting.

"He'll tear Paine's throat out," he muttered. "He'll finish him the way he did those two prize Airedales down in the village before they made me lock him up."

He remembered that brief, bitter dog fight down in the street two years before. He remembered the screams of the woman who owned the Airedales, and the sight of their two gasping brown bodies.

It had given Munster a strange thrill to see his dog slay those others. When they had asked him to shoot Karl as a public menace he had refused point-blank. He had paid for the Airedales and had built Karl a wire runway.

And now he planned to put the dog's ferocity to use in a terrible way.

"They'll never know," he thought. "I'll say it was an accident, that Karl got out. I'll shoot him afterwards."

The scheme seemed certain of success. For weeks he had revolved it in his mind. Then he had acted upon it with the thoroughness that characterized his nature; the thoroughness that had enabled him to retire from business at fifty-five with a snug fortune.

Munster walked back toward the house, a stocky figure of a man, dressed in loose-fitting tweeds. He was still muttering to himself, a habit he had developed since the strong emotions of his lost youth had come to life again and been violently repressed.

Alma was spending the night in the village, to stay with a sick friend. She was always doing things like that, helping some one. People liked her as much as they disliked and feared her strangely aloof guardian. He had heard Alma defend him, then laughingly turn to him. "They just don't

understand you, uncle—the way I do.”

Munster smiled. What would Alma say if she knew the thoughts that were going through his mind? She would shun him, never speak to him again, never come to stay with him.

But she did not know, and the thing would soon be settled now. The death of Malcolm Paine would shock her, cast a shadow over her young life. But she would get over it in time. And with Malcolm out of the way she would turn to him at first for sympathy, then for deeper and more intimate things.

He was being ever so cautious about it, ever so adroit. But, with a little luck, the removal of his rival might even take place tomorrow night, the time that Malcolm Paine was scheduled to arrive.

Then, as he was entering the house, Munster saw the letter lying on the hall table! The mail had come while he was away. Madge, their deaf servant, who was like a faithful automaton, had brought it. The letter was for Alma with Malcolm Paine's well-known handwriting in the corner.

The gleam of almost insane hatred returned to Munster's eyes. He snatched up the oblong of paper, and held it in tense fingers as though he were going to tear it to pieces. Then his grip relaxed. The expression of hate was replaced by craft.

What was Malcolm writing to Alma about when he was going to see her the very next day? Was he perhaps postponing his week-end visit for once, or was it just a silly, sentimental repetition of his love?

Graham Munster's palms grew sweaty, and a little pulse throbbed maddeningly in his temples as he thought of the slim, lithe, straight-bodied girl whom he had watched blossom from adolescence into the first stages of asserting womanhood. He had watched and waited, patiently biding his time until he could take her as his mate. Savagely he cursed Malcolm. . . .

MUNSTER went into the bathroom with the letter in his hand. He closed the door and turned the hot water on. He held the letter close to the rising steam, carefully softening the glue. Then he opened it with shaking fingers.

It wasn't the first time he had spied on their correspondence. He kept watch over it jealously, getting a perverted thrill from their private endearments, and fanning his hatred of Paine at the same time. He read the lines eagerly now.

*Dearest One:* I have splendid news. This is going to be the longest week-end we've had together—two whole days! Think of that!

Old Man Thomas is letting me off tomorrow, instead of Saturday, and I'll see you shortly after you get this letter, a whole day sooner than you expected.

I've got a surprise for you, too—something you would never guess. But, if you like it, one of your own dear kisses will be payment enough.

Hastily and lovingly, your MAL.

Munster's hands trembled more than ever. Young Paine was coming tonight! Why, that meant he would be here in an hour, on the evening train.

And Alma was away! She hadn't expected him; she had gone. There'd be no chance of her meeting him on the path through the woods that he always took. He would come up it alone with his battered, tan suitcase and his coat over his arm, his face eager for a sight of her.

But instead, he'd meet a leaping gray shape, a furry avalanche of destruction that would snuff out his life there in the woods.

It would all be over, and even the dog out of the way before Alma returned. Graham Munster couldn't have wished it better. Fate had played into his hands.

He could hear Madge clattering over her dishes in the kitchen, opening and shutting the oven door. He paced the room, his face an expressionless mask, but his emotions seething.

He ate his dinner abstractedly, hardly knowing or caring what he put into his mouth. He went over again and again in his mind what he would say to Alma, just how he would act, and how he would censor his every word and gesture. There must not be the faintest trace of suspicion in her mind. There would not be. He would see to it.

Then, just as dusk was falling, he heard the train. A thin mist was drifting over the woods now, floating past the windows. He could hear the faint whistle of the engine as it slowed down for the stop at the village.

He knew just how long it would take young Paine to get off, to pass through the village, then strike out on the path through the woods and up the hill.

Without visible hurry, but timing himself precisely, Munster went into the kitchen and had Madge give him a plate of bones. There was nothing unusual in this. He did it almost every night after dinner. He saw the servant with her yellowed, unintelligent face, turn back to her dishes stolidly, suspecting nothing.

Then, with the plate in his hand, he left the house and went toward Karl's kennel.

But, instead of giving the bones to Karl, Munster carried them to the tool shed and put them on the shelf. He took down the pole again, gave the dog one sharp prod, and let him sniff the scent on the cloth.

Then he went around and unlatched the door of the enclosure. The dog had often tried to do this himself and once had nearly succeeded. Every one would think that his getting out was an accident.

Munster glanced back at the house. A clump of shrubbery screened the bottom of it. The kitchen had no windows on the side facing the kennel. He knew he was safe. He spoke softly to Karl then.

"The door's open, Karl. He's coming up the path through the woods. Go get him!"

Instantly the wolf-dog was alert. Stiff-legged he came toward the door. He whined once, nosed it open and stood looking at his master. Munster knew he was safe from the dog, too. Karl wouldn't attack him. He was a one-man animal, and Munster had mastered him completely.

"Go and get him!" he commanded.

With his nose pointing toward the woods, the dog set off at a fast lope. It was the lope of a killer wolf. The animal's hackles were on end now and his black jowls were quivering.

Munster walked back toward the house and saw the dog enter the path through the trees, saw him move along it with terrible certainty.

WITH a paper in his hand, Munster tried to sit down and read. But he couldn't quite do that. He was only human after all, though his brain seemed like the calculating one of a devil. He lit a cigar and walked the floor, listening to the clock on the mantel tick off the minutes.

Five had gone now. Karl must have reached the edge of the woods. He might leave the path and go in among the underbrush to creep up on Malcolm Paine's flank, or he might go straight ahead and attack Paine with a rush from the front.

Eight minutes! The dog might even now have sighted his quarry. He might be crouching to the ground, edging forward, fangs bared, body tensed for the spring.

A light sweat dampened Munster's forehead. His hands trembled. He seemed drawn to the window, though, with the mist and the darkness, he knew he could see nothing. Then suddenly he jerked around.

The telephone in the hall was ringing. It sounded twice and Madge didn't answer. She hardly ever heard it any more. He would have to get rid of her, Munster mused irritably, and get a new one who could hear—after he and Alma were married.

He strode into the hall, took the receiver down mechanically.

"Hello! Who is it? Who's calling?"

His tongue and lips moved, but his thoughts were out there in the woods, dwelling on the scene his mind conjured up.

"I want to speak to Alma a minute."

The voice came to him over the wire. It was a woman's voice. Munster recognized it with a start. Mrs. Hartzon, in the village. He spoke tensely.

"Alma — why isn't she there? I thought she'd gone to spend the night with you."

"She did; but I felt so much better, I told her I didn't need her. She left a few minutes ago. I thought perhaps she'd gotten back and I just wanted to tell her that she forgot her handbag. It's here. You'll tell her, won't you?"

"Yes," murmured Munster. He hardly knew his own voice. He hung up the receiver in a daze, and stood by the telephone for a few seconds like a man paralyzed.

Then gradually, as if the mist outside were miraculously lifting, letting him see in actuality the thing that his mind was building up, he glimpsed the whole scene.

Alma had left Mrs. Hartzon's a few minutes ago, possibly fifteen. She had entered the woods as Karl was coming in from the other side. She was probably with young Paine, had met him as he came up the street from the station.

Laughing and talking, they would not see Karl, or think of him. They would probably stop in the woods to embrace. Her young form would be against his, her lips touching his, her arms encircling him. Their two scents would be almost indistinguishable to the dog's nose. He would attack, and she would stay, trying to defend Malcolm. Then the dog would turn on her, too.

The awfulness of the picture made the blood drain from Munster's face. It seemed as though some all-powerful higher justice had arranged this

miscarriage of his plans, making his own scheme rebound upon him like a terrible boomerang.

Crazed remorse and frustration seized Munster as he thought of the tender young body of Alma being torn and marred by the sharp fangs of Karl. The slim girl-woman that was Alma—she was his life, what he had waited so patiently for. The thought of losing all for which he had dreamed made him tremble.

He did not want to hurt Alma, his ward, the girl he desired so fiercely. With an inarticulate cry in his throat he sprang forward. There might still be time to save the girl.

He stumbled across the room, hands outstretched, groping almost like a blind man. He was shaking with dread and it seemed suddenly that the coldness of the mist had crept into the house and surrounded him.

His stick! He must get that and go out. He flung the door of the hall closet open, seized his stick and an overcoat and a flashlight from the shelf. Then, like a drunken man, he staggered to the door.

The chill mist beat against his face. His skin was clammy with the sweat of apprehension, and he was shivering. Around the house he ran, across the lawn, till he found the path into the woods.

"Karl! Karl!" he cried. "Come here, Karl!"

His voice was almost a shriek. His ears were straining for the growling and worrying of the dog. The animal would be about his awful work in the woods.

**T**HE blacker shadows of the trees seemed to reach for Munster as he approached them. He could feel the increasing coldness as he entered the forest. His feet pounded like drums. His blood roared in his ears. He shouted again:

"Karl! Karl!"

Then his finger pressed the button of the flashlight, sent the bright beam along the path. And his eyes

followed, hardly daring to look for the thing they sought.

He saw the dog then. Two greenish sparks showed ahead in the darkness. A low, ominous growl reached his ears. "Karl! Karl! Come here!"

It was an order now, the voice of command that never failed to bring the dog skulking and cringing up to him. But Karl growled again; the growl of a wolf who knows no master. Munster stopped and turned his flashlight full on the animal. He could see Karl's slinking, gray shape; see the great head close to the ground and the bristling hackles. But Munster still spoke confidently.

"Come here, Karl—come where I can get a look at you."

It was at the dog's jaws that the man was staring, fearful of what he might see; for the woods were strangely quiet. Only the drip of the leaves—the *drip, drip, drip*—and the dog's growl, and his own shaking voice.

Then Karl came closer. But he was still growling—not acting right. It occurred to Munster then that the dog had tasted human blood, that he was unruly. But he had not lost faith in his mastery over the animal.

He raised his stick and shouted again, fiercely, peremptorily.

"Come here, Karl—or I'll brain you."

The dog came then, came like a leaping gray shadow, teeth bared, eyes gleaming.

Munster gave a hoarse bellow of rage and fear.

"You fool! What's the matter? Don't you know me, Karl? It's Graham — your master. Down — get down!"

He leaped aside as the dog made its first rush. But Karl wheeled like lightning and came back snapping wickedly. The animal seemed to have gone mad.

Munster's flashlight struck a bush and fell. He was in darkness now, but he could still see the light of those two wolfish eyes. He screamed then,

and swung blindly with his heavy stick. But something struck him on the chest and he fell.

He felt himself going down under the weight of heavy paws. He shrieked again. The green eyes were coming closer. They were like moons now, moons of devilish fire.

The snarling of the dog drowned the wild beating of his own heart that ached inside his chest, that seemed to be bursting.

Hot breath fanned his face. Munster tried to scream again, but the pressure in his chest paralyzed speech. Then, just before a wave of blackness smote him down, he knew that this was the end. He could feel that hot breath coming closer, those terrible teeth reaching for him, and he went limp.

There came only the drip, drip, drip of the wet leaves and the worrying of the wolf dog as it tore and ripped at cloth.

After a while even that ceased. The animal slunk away. And there was nothing but the slow dripping of the leaves left.

IT wasn't till a half hour later that another sound filled the air, the metallic grinding of a motor car coming uphill in second gear. Two headlights showed on the road that wound serpent-like around the hill toward Graham Munster's house. The car finally stopped before the steps. There were two people in it. One reached forward and sounded the horn; then both were still for a moment, listening.

"I wonder why he doesn't come out?" It was a girl's voice—the voice of Alma MacKnight.

"He doesn't know who it is," said the man beside her, young Malcolm Paine. "He didn't expect either of us — and certainly not this way."

The girl sprang out lightly, her face flushed and eager.

"Uncle! Uncle!" she called as she ran up the steps. "See what Malcolm has—he's bought a car for us both."

She was bursting with excitement. Malcolm had met her on the village street and already taken her for a ride. They would make a trip in the car together on their honeymoon.

But the house was empty, silent. They went into the kitchen where Madge was still working, tidying up.

"I thought he was in the library," she said, reading the question on their lips. "He came back after he fed Karl. I didn't see him go out."

Karl! A look of fear crossed the girl's face.

"You don't suppose he's had trouble with him?" she said, turning toward young Paine. They went out together and found that the dog was gone.

Malcolm ran to his room then, his face grim. He got the shotgun that he used for clay pigeons and slipped two shells into the breech of it. With Alma holding the lantern and walking at his side, he went out again.

He had brought the gun mainly for the girl's protection. Karl seemed to him like a killer. They circled the house and walked toward the woods.

It was there, at the edge of them, that Malcolm Paine saw the gray, skulking shape—a shape that turned and bounded toward them snarling fiercely. He saw the green eyes, the bared fangs; and there was no question in his mind as to what he had to do. It might be Karl's life or Alma's. So, shaking a little, he raised the gun and fired.

The gray shape dropped, twitched a few times and lay still. Malcolm's voice shook, too, as he spoke.

"Don't look," he said huskily. "I know your uncle was fond of him—but it had to be, Alma. He's been getting dangerous. I'm afraid about your uncle now."

They went down the woods path with the lantern, the girl clutching his arm. Then young Paine drew in his breath and Alma began to tremble.

Graham Munster was lying there beside the path—dead.

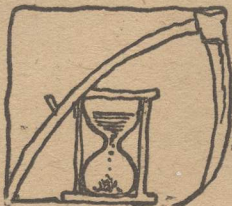
Young Paine stooped, trembling, too, afraid of what he would see. He glimpsed the rigid face, the staring eyes, the torn clothing. And, in growing horror, he looked for the marks of the dog's teeth. But there were none.

Wonderingly he turned to the girl.

"Karl didn't bite him, Alma. He almost tore the clothes off your uncle's back, but he didn't bite him. It was fright that killed your uncle, stopped his heart. He thought the dog was going to bite him.

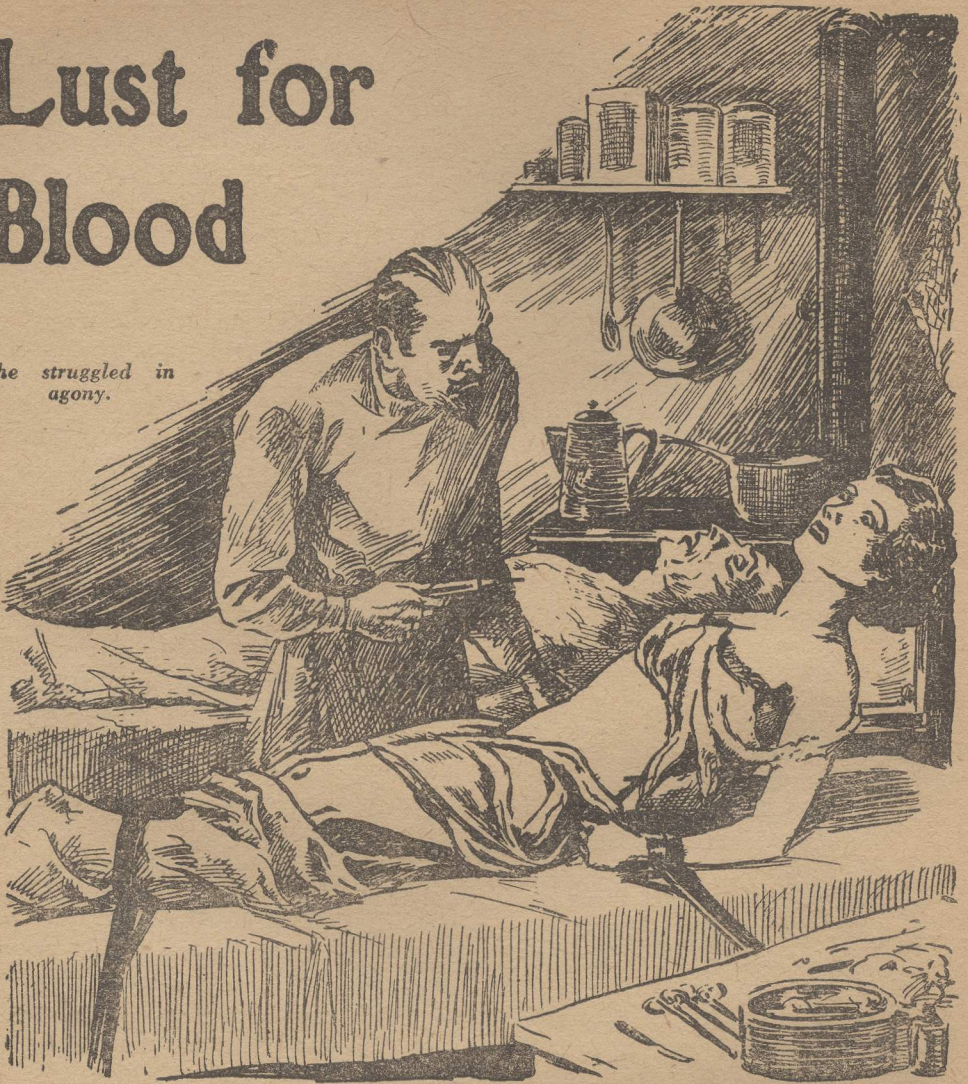
"Yes," said Alma huskily. "And look—he was wearing your overcoat, Malcolm—the old one you kept in the hall closet. He must have grabbed it by mistake when he went out to find Karl. Maybe that was why Karl attacked him and scared him so."

Malcolm did not answer. And the white, still lips of Graham Munster, set in death, kept their terrible, ironic secret.



# Lust for Blood

She struggled in agony.



*By Clifford Gray*

*The young secretary of the Long Island Boat Club became the mariner of weird waters when he floated over corpse currents to find a missing girl in a madman's hideaway where the price of life was blood.*

**M**ALLORY, young secretary of the smart Long Island Boat Club, would never have thought to look for Mary Fallon, the nurse, on that bleak Connecticut shore if the bodies of the men with the slashed wrists had not been washed up on the beach of the swanky Long Island Boat Club.

It was fortunate that Mary Fallon's family were wealthy enough to institute a thorough search for her when she disappeared after answering a call for duty at an address which later proved fictitious.

When her apoplectic banker father gave Mallory the check for the advance fee he said explosively, "If

she's kidnaped, I'll pay any ransom they ask—but wait till I get that girl home! She's not too old for a good old-fashioned spanking. Imagine a young woman with everything she could want in life going out to do nursing and support herself!"

The banker was already employing an army of private detectives, but he wanted Mallory to work on the case, too. The banker was a member of the Long Island Boat Club, where he had met Mallory and learned that the young secretary had solved several crimes when he was a reporter.

On the way back to the office, Mallory tried to get his mind on something tangible—some clue to work from in starting the search. It was after five, and the staff was gone for the day. He had to use his key to get in. The phone was ringing.

Ralph Dorrance, the manager of the Long Island Boat Club, was on the other end. He sounded desperate. "Thank God I caught you!" he exclaimed. "Look here, Mallory, I want you to drop everything and shoot right out here. Never mind," as Mallory started to protest. "I don't care what you have on hand."

"I've got a stiff here," Dorrance rushed on. "The night watchman just went on, and he found him on the beach. His wrists are slashed."

"Sounds like suicide. Why get excited?"

"Excited! This is an exclusive club. The members can't be annoyed with the publicity. I've got to stop it!"

Mallory laughed, puzzled. "How you going to stop it? Hasn't a guy a right to bop himself off any more?"

Dorrance swore. "Dammit, you don't understand. This is the *second* one that's been washed up *in a week!*"

Mallory just uttered a short "Oh!" into the transmitter. Then he said, "I'll take a cab—be out there in a half-hour, Mr. Dorrance."

**D**ORRANCE was waiting for him at the entrance to the pier. He was a well-tailored, middle-aged man

with an appearance that was ordinarily sleek but was now disheveled. He dragged Mallory down to the office at the foot of the pier, talking excitedly.

"I've got to get some action on this. Some very distinguished people belong here, and the first thing you know they'll quit coming. Then they won't renew their membership."

"The cops here yet?" Mallory asked.

"I—er—haven't notified the police yet. Yes—I know it's wrong and all that, but I thought it would be better if you had a look first. You've had some crime experience as a police reporter."

The night watchman, a stocky Italian, was holding lone vigil over the corpse on the floor in the office. The manager introduced him. "This is Vic Arcuro. He found the body."

Mallory stooped and pulled off the tarpaulin with which it was covered. The dead man was about thirty, fair-haired, of medium build. He wore trousers and a shirt which were drenched. No underwear. Mallory saw that the radial artery had been slashed in each wrist. The man had bled to death.

"What do you think of it?" Dorrance demanded anxiously. "The one last week was just the same—dressed the same, too. He had no underwear, either."

There was a short rope around the man's waist, ending in a wide noose. Mallory asked the watchman, "Was there anything tied in that noose when you found him?"

Arcuro nodded vigorously. "A beeg rock—so beeg." He spread his hands to indicate the size of the rock. "I took heem out—no can carry heem up here."

Dorrance said, "You think it could possibly be suicide? You think it could be a coincidence, the two of them doing it the same way within a week? Maybe it was a suicide pact!" The last suggestion was offered hopefully.



Mallory gazed down at the body. "Would they slash their wrists—and drown themselves? One of those methods is generally conceded to be plenty."

Mallory knelt beside the body. There were half a dozen punctures in the left forearm. He said, "Either this guy took dope, or else—"

"Or else what?" the boat club manager demanded.

**Y**OUNG Mallory stood up and shrugged, "Or else, who knows!" He turned to Arcuro. "If these bodies were both washed up on this beach, there must be a current in the Sound around here. Do you know about it?"

"Sure," Arcuro replied. He explained that the Connecticut shore was directly across the Sound from the beach, and that there was a powerful undercurrent that brought up many things from the opposite side.

Mallory muttered a thoughtful "Hm-m." Then he said, "Let's take a look outside." He led the way, Dorrance following. At the door, he called Arcuro who was covering the body again. "You come too, Vic. Leave him there."

They walked out to the end of the pier. An edge of the sun illuminated the sky across the Sound with a blood-red vermilion. It was the sunset hour, when men's spirits are lowest, and when dying people give up the ghost.

The detective said, "Show me where that current starts, Vic."

The Italian's skin was grayish under his swarthy skin. He crossed himself. Then he pointed a shaky, dirty forefinger at the shore across the Sound. "You see da dock over t'ere? Da current, he come from da dock, an' swing across," he described a wide parabola with his hand, "an' drift right up to t'is beach. It's ver' strong current."

Dorrance said, "That's right. The Sound is full of these cross-currents."

Mallory asked him, "Who does that dock belong to?"

"The family that lives in that white house on the hill just behind it. Lennon is the name. I don't know much about them except what I've heard now and then. The old man is past seventy. His oldest son is a doctor, comes out often. Then there are two more sons living there all the time. One of them is—queer. They say the whole family is queer, for that matter—the old man, too. He's a paranoiac or something." Dorrance wet his lips and jerked a thumb back at the office. "I wouldn't put it past them—murder, I mean."

"So," Mallory mused, "if somebody dropped that body from the dock over there, not knowing about the current, the body would be carried across and washed up on this beach. And whoever did it would think the body was safely out of the neighborhood!"

Dorrance exclaimed, "Huh, if that's so, they must be fiends! What'll we do?"

"You'd better notify the police," Mallory told him. "You can't squirm out of that. In the meantime, lend me a motor boat and I'll go across and investigate. The cops haven't got jurisdiction over there."

**T**HE rim of the sun had disappeared under the edge of the horizon by the time Mallory nosed the little outboard motor boat alongside the old dock on the Connecticut side and stepped up on to the decayed planking. The house on the hill looked white and ghastly in the dusk. Ugly shadows were thickening among the trees which lined the path he had to take.

He pressed his left arm against his body to get the reassuring feel of the shoulder holster, and started to walk. His feet crunched on the gravel. Suddenly he stopped short. A weird form had slid into the path from among the trees. It was a figure of a youngish man, perhaps twenty-seven or eight, of medium height. His body was round and squat, with a fat paunch that protruded from under a flat

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chest. A face that was broad and vacuous sat on a short, massive neck. He was in his shirt sleeves, though the air was crisp.

Mallory looked into the eyes of the man with the weirdly disproportioned body, and he felt little crinkles along his spine. The eyes gleamed with a wild, maniac cunning, from beneath a thatch of disordered black hair. They inspected the detective shrewdly, as if appraising him for some unspeakable purpose.

"Hello," said Mallory, lamely.

"Hello yourself," said the other.

"What's your name?"

"Bruce Mallory."

"Where do you come from?"

Mallory jerked his left thumb over his shoulder. "I came in a boat."

The other's eyes gleamed avidly as they caught the glint of the young man's gold wristwatch. "Gimme that ticker!" he demanded eagerly.

Mallory was taut. If this wasn't a perfect type of homicidal maniac, then there was no such thing. "I need the watch right now. Maybe I'll give it to you later. What's *your* name?"

The other sulked. "I'm Morry Lennon. I live up there." He indicated the house on the hill. "Give me that ticker now, will you? My damn' brothers never give me anything."

"Take me up to the house," said Mallory. "I want to talk to your brothers. If you do that, I may give you the watch before I leave."

Morry Lennon bobbed his head quickly. The muscles of his face arranged themselves into an expression of cunning greed. "You want to come up to the house? I'll take you!"

HE turned and led the way up the path. Mallory followed, feeling much like the fly that has yielded to the spider's blandishments. He spoke at Lennon's back. "You don't like your brothers, do you?"

Lennon spat out a spiteful, "No!" He looked over his shoulder. "They're both crazy—Andrew and Benson.

Benson's the crazier of the two. He beats me up. Andrew's a doctor. He don't live here. But when he comes out, he treats me pretty bad, too." He snarled. "Some day I'll kill 'em both!"

Mallory clucked sympathetically. "Your father lives here too, doesn't he? How's he?"

Lennon cackled. "Dad's crazy, too. He thinks everybody wants to poison him so we'll get his money—that is, he used to. He don't think that way any more."

"How come?"

"Well, Dad made a will last month. While he lives we get an income every year—Andrew and Benson and me. But if he dies, all the money goes to charity. So it's up to Andrew to keep him alive. That's why I can't kill Andrew yet."

They were only a few yards from the front porch of the house, now. From within came the thin wail of a terrified woman, followed by a man's angry oath.

Mallory stopped. "What was that?" he demanded.

Lennon chuckled. "It's that girl. She's crazy, too. She won't let them—"

He was interrupted by the sudden opening of the front door. A girl with red, bobbed hair burst out. She was dressed only in a filmy nightgown that was torn along one shoulder. Mallory saw the look of abject terror in her face as she pattered under the dome light of the porch, and raced down the steps.

For a moment the young secretary stood motionless, watching, determining what course of action to take. The girl ran faster and faster, plump knees and white-gleaming legs churning up and down through a rent that split the front of her nightdress.

After her pounded a big brute of a man, face contorted with anger. He was in his shirtsleeves, and held a queer sort of syringe with a needle at the end.

The girl raced down the path toward Mallory and his guide, not seeing them. Morry Lennon put out a foot to trip her.

MALLORY got into action. He had recognized the girl as none other than Mary Fallon.

Mallory swung a hard fist to the side of Morry's head, and the maniac staggered across the lawn, out of the girl's path. The detective put out his arm and stopped her headlong flight. She collapsed in his arms.

"All right, Miss Fallon," he reassured her. "I'm a friend."

"Thank God!" she gasped. "Don't let them—" Then she fainted.

The big man was off the steps now, rushing at them. Morry was picking himself up ten feet away and sputtering filthy curses. Mallory supported Mary Fallon with one arm, and got his gun out with the other hand. He pointed it at the big man and growled:

"Hold it!"

The big fellow pulled up short. His face purpled as his close-set eyes focused on the barrel of the gun. "Who the hell are you?" he barked.

"You'll do all the answering of questions now," Mallory said softly.

Just then a window in the upper floor of the house was shoved open. Mallory saw a gaunt face with a mustache and a Vandyke beard. He caught a glimpse of the silencer on the end of the rifle barrel that was thrust out of the window. He started to raise his gun. There was a wicked little "phut," and a slug tore into the fleshy part of his right arm. The rifleman had evidently wanted to avoid hitting the girl whom he was supporting on his left side. The impact bore him backwards. He dropped the girl and staggered. He couldn't lift the gun.

Benson was on him in a flash, battering at him with two brutal fists. He went down under the rain of blows.

Morry ran over and started to kick him. "Gimme his ticker, Benson," he shouted. "I want his ticker!"

Benson gave him a back-handed blow that sent him reeling.

Mallory felt his senses dimming. The numbness in his arm was spreading. A wave of nausea engulfed him. Vaguely he felt himself lifted in powerful hands. He heard some one come running out of the house and glimpsed the gaunt, bearded face of the one who had shot him. He heard the man who carried him say, "Take the girl, Andrew. The little devil almost got away from me."

Across the lawn, up the steps, into a dimly lit hallway, he was carried roughly. He got dizzy. There were dancing spots in his eyes. He lost consciousness.

He opened his eyes in a brightly lighted room. He moved his arm. It was neatly and efficiently bandaged. But his wrists were handcuffed—with his own cuffs.

He looked around and his eyes opened wide with horror. The room was a good-sized kitchen. But it was no longer used for that purpose. It had been converted—into an operating room.

Morry Lennon crouched in a corner, playing with the key of his handcuffs. Benson was stolidly watching his brother Andrew, who wore a surgical robe and was arranging a series of syringes on the washtub beside the sink.

IN the center of the room were two surgical tables. Mary Fallon was strapped to one. She had apparently put up a struggle, for there was a welt on the side of her face.

On the other table lay a skeleton of an old man, with the pallor of death upon him. His breath came fast and short, and with great difficulty. His head was tilted sideways, and he was watching Mallory out of deep-sunk eyes.

Mallory jerked to a sitting position. He had been laid on the floor along

the wall. The others turned to him as his handcuffs clinked.

Doctor Andrew Lennon smiled. His lips were bright red under the moustache. "You're just in time to witness the transfusion," he said. "It'll give you an idea of what's in store for you."

Morry cackled, "He's awake. Gimme his ticker!"

Benson turned at him with a snarl, and he cringed.

Mallory struggled to his feet. "What's this all about?" he demanded.

Andrew dipped a wad of cotton in a bottle marked "Mercurochrome," and swabbed the girl's arm with it. "Just a blood transfusion, my friend," he said softly.

Mallory looked at the old man on the second table. "For him?"

"Yes. This is my father. If you know anything about medicine you can tell from his appearance that he is afflicted with pernicious anæmia. He will need half a dozen transfusions. Miss Fallon, here, is number three."

Mallory was puzzled. "Did you have to kidnap her for the transfusion? And did you have to kill those other two men? Couldn't you have gotten blood donors in the usual way?"

Andrew laughed. "You don't understand, my friend. This is not the ordinary case of anæmia. It is the last stages. Ordinarily a transfusion of five or six hundred cubic centimeters of blood is sufficient for a temporary cure. In my father's case it requires a continued flow of not less than ten thousand cubic centimeters. And that, my friend," the doctor leaned forward to stress his words, "is all the blood there is in the human body!"

Mallory paled. "You—you're going to drain her body dry of blood!"

"Exactly. And we'll use you next week. By that time you will have recovered from your injury."

Morry chuckled. "All to keep Pop alive so we'll get our income!"

Benson growled, "Shut up!"

The old man's eyes gleamed with sardonic amusement. He tried to talk, but he was too weak.

In horrified fascination, the young boat-club secretary stared at the girl. Helpless though she was, Mary Fallon writhed her milk-white legs and arms against the straps that bound her to the table. Mallory could see every muscle of her girlish body tense and strain, for only a wisp of her night-dress remained, looped over one shoulder, after the struggle she had put up. An angry-red welt streaked across one breast, and ugly abrasions marred the smooth perfection of a thigh upon which she must have fallen.

MALLORY saw the hopeless expression on Mary Fallon's face, and something snapped in his head. He raised his manacled hands above his head and rushed at Andrew. But Benson seized him about the middle in a crushing bear hug and held him helpless. Fiery pains shot through his right arm, and he dropped it weakly, slumping in Benson's grip.

Andrew said coldly, "Take him out, Benson. Cuff him to the steam pipe in the next room and leave Morry to watch him. I don't want him raising a fuss when I start to work."

"He's fainted," said Benson.

Mallory kept his eyes closed and shammed. He was dragged out of the room with Benson's hands under his armpits. Morry followed.

In the next room, Benson took the key from Morry and unlocked the cuffs. Mallory had counted on that moment. He straightened up in a lunge, but Benson was too quick for him. His wrists were gripped cruelly in the big man's paws. He was helpless, weak from his wound. His arms were forced around the steam pipe, and the cuffs were snapped on again.

Benson said, "Playin' possum, huh!"

Mallory struggled to his feet and glared. He said nothing. In the short struggle, Benson had dropped the key. Morry picked it up. He begged:

"Gimme his ticker, Benson. He ain't gonna need it any more."

"You just watch him," Benson grumbled. "If you watch him good, I'll let you take it later."

"Attaboy," Morry crowed. He patted his brother's sleeve. Benson shook him off impatiently and strode out.

They were left alone. Morry produced a hollow needle from his trousers pocket. "I stole it off one of them syringes that Andrew uses for drawin' the blood out o' them," he confided. He regarded Mallory out of mad, narrow-slitted eyes. Then he laughed in childish glee and came closer, pointing the needle at Mallory's face. "Let's play a game. I'll try to jab you in the eye, an' you see if you can duck. I like to jab people!"

Mallory said desperately, "Listen, Morry. Benson isn't going to let you have my watch. He's going to keep it for himself!"

Morry stopped to think that out, holding the needle in the air. After a moment he said, "The dirty skunk. It'd be just like him. I bet you're right!"

"I'll tell you what," Mallory went on, talking swiftly. "Let's fool him. You take the watch now."

Morry's eyes gleamed crazily. "Swell!" He dropped the needle and extended his hand. "Gimme!"

"I can't take it off. I'm handcuffed."

Morry cackled and waved the key in his face. "It's a trick. You want to make me let you go. But I won't!"

Mallory extended his wrist. "Here, take it off yourself."

"Fair enough." Morry's fingers flew to the strap buckle. He bent over it eagerly.

**M**ALLORY gathered his energy, and with every ounce of remaining strength he brought his fists

up in a smashing blow to the maniac's chin. He heard Morry's teeth click together as his head was snapped back. Morry would have fallen backward, but the detective clutched his shirt front and held him till the key fell from nerveless fingers. Then he let him drop, to sprawl limply on the floor.

Mallory ran his hands down the pipe and knelt to recover the key. In a moment he was free. Disregarding Morry's unconscious form, he gripped the steel handcuffs as the only weapon available, and lurched out of the room. His arm bothered him. The exertion had started it bleeding.

In the hallway he saw the light through the open kitchen door. As he approached cautiously, he heard Andrew Lennon's voice addressing the girl. He talked softly, gloatingly, not as a physician, but as some abnormal being enjoying the agony of a victim.

"Now, Miss Fallon, you will see how we make the incision in the artery. Soon your blood will be spurting into these syringes, to be transferred to my father's veins. It will be practically painless. After the first few syringefuls you will grow a little faint, then you'll become numb. Before we have finished, your heart will have stopped beating . . . You can watch yourself die."

The boat-club secretary stood tensed for a moment, his muscles gathering tight for action, as he watched the scene before him; watched the girl's agony. Mallory had seen Mary a few times at the club dances. Somehow or other he had not managed to meet her; felt that her wealth put her beyond his reach. But she had made an unknowing conquest of his heart from the first.

The girl seemed to have given way to utter resignation. Her legs and arms now lay flat and motionless. Only the soft mounds of her breasts and the round contours of her small stomach surged laboriously with the exertion she had expended.

Mallory saw red. He forgot everything but that hateful voice of evil; forgot that Benson was in the room, too. He swung into the kitchen with the handcuffs raised high in his left hand.

Benson was saying, "We'll slash your wrists like the others, and put you in the Sound so it'll look like suicide—" He turned a startled gaze to the door as Mallory came at him. Mallory brought the steel cuffs down on his forehead before he could raise a hand to protect himself. The secretary experienced a strange satisfaction as he felt Benson's skull cave in under the blow.

Mallory seemed to be infused with renewed energy. He pivoted sharply toward Andrew who was on the other side of the old man's table from him. The table moved on casters.

Andrew recovered from his first moment of stupefaction. He held a syringe with a sharp-pointed hollow needle at the end. With this in his hand he started to come around the table, his red lips parted over white teeth.

Mallory put his two hands to the old man's table and heaved mightily. The table skidded into Andrew. It caught him in the stomach and doubled him over. Mallory leaned forward and brought the handcuffs down on the doctor's head. There was a nasty crunch, and Andrew sprawled over the old man, who had been trying to raise himself on his elbows.

The old man's eyes were terrible to see. His breath began to come in quick gasps. He put a hand to his throat and wheezed, then dropped back to the table. The excitement had been too much for his heart.

Mallory stood still for a moment, chest heaving. He saw Mary Fallon looking at him with eyes that mirrored the horror of her ordeal.

He dropped the bloody handcuffs. Mechanically he walked over and started to undo the straps that held her helpless.

She closed her eyes tight, and opened them again. "Take me home," she moaned in a small voice.

"I'll take you home all right," Mallory said grimly, "but you won't thank me. Because there's one whale of a spanking waiting for you!"

Now that she was safe, a hint of a smile crept into Mary Fallon's eyes as she said: "Not—not if you stay with me for a while when we get home. I—I liked you the first time I saw you at one of the club dances."

Mallory had finished unstrapping the girl, and had cloaked her in the curtain torn from a window, when he replied: "I didn't think a simple secretary would have a chance for your friendship. But I certainly noticed you—very much."

Mary Fallon smiled boldly into Mallory's face, and whispered: "Yes, I noticed you did. But surely you didn't expect me to do then what I'm going to do now—after all this that's happened." She made a gesture to indicate the horror scene of but a few minutes ago. "After all, a girl wants to be sure of a man before she throws herself at him."

Mary Fallon came close to Mallory, lifting her arms, tilting her chin to raise her mouth to his. The curtain fell away from her shoulders and whispered to the floor. But she only smiled—and put her arms around the secretary's neck. In a second Mallory was holding her soft, eager form closely to him; was kissing the full-shaped, willing young mouth that sought his arduously.

It was fully half a minute before their lips parted and Mallory said: "No, I guess you won't get that spanking—now. Let's go."

# Mate of the Beast

By Leon Dupont

**L**ONG, quavering cries of timber wolves keened through the great forest as Len Oakley hurried along a narrow path, staggering slightly. With a stone jug in his left hand, and a Winchester in the crook of his right arm, he was this night going to make Mary Timmons his own, without further delay, wolves or no wolves.

The long-drawn, primitive notes carried an eerie, knowing message that made the man's spine stiffen under his coarse flannel shirt. Those accursed beasts—they had been hemming him in closer and closer since Ruud, that fool of a step-brother, had gone. Of late they

had trailed him for a part of the five miles he walked, early every morning, to the mill where he worked. And they were costing him a fortune in ammunition.

"Damn you, Ruud," he mumbled, "it's you what's a-doin' this. They're signallin' each other again. A-comin' fer me. And it's you as is a-sendin' 'em, damn yer devil's soul!"

Nearer and nearer the mournful cries broke forth; and he knew that the gray, savage creatures were moving through the trees on their side of him, keeping to cover with careful cunning. But he kept on, legging it along the moonlit trail that led to the log house where Mary Timmons lived. Cursing, he lifted the stone jug to his whisker-stubbed face and gulped a long draught of fiery liquid.

The liquor was making Len Oak-

ley's brain reel; also his steps, somewhat. Yet the long strides of a born woodsman carried swiftly over the ground. Every so often his mind's eye showed him Ruud's face lurking in a shadow here, in a shadow there—and with that same calmly vengeful look with which it had been stamped when he had last seen him.

"You think as how yer c'n keep me from havin' Mary," Len mumbled thickly, "but yer can't stop me, Ruud Oakley, any more than yer could before!"

Ruud Oakley . . . Legend said his life had been a strange one since early childhood. His father and step-mother, burdened with many children,

had had little time for any one of them. As a little tot of six, Ruud was wont to wander off and spend many solitary hours alone among the tall trees of the forest. The day he had brought home a little, fat-stomached wolf pup, which he had freed from a trap, the strangeness had begun.

As soon as the wound in the animal's left foreleg had healed, no amount of begging from Ruud's mother, nor beatings from his father, would keep him and the baby wolf from wandering afar from sunup to sundown. About the time that old man Oakley vowed he would put a bullet through the limping little animal, it disappeared. But Ruud would continue to go out into the woods, and sometimes he would not return with the coming of night.

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*That majestic wolf of the mountains was always close by when Len Oakley tried to make Mary Timmons his wife. And Oakley found that no mortal man could steal a bride of the beast.*

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Old man Oakley had gone to search for the six-year-old Ruud, when the boy had been absent for almost two days. With luck, and perhaps partly through the consummate skill of an expert hunter, he had come upon an amazing spectacle.

In a mossy bank, over which the bole of a large tree had fallen, was the entrance to a wolf's lair. Before the dark hole burrowed under the tree trunk, lay a female wolf. Ruud was feeding from her dug, along with several of her cubs.

The elder Oakley shrank back among some concealing shrubbery, rifle aimed, watching breathlessly, hoping the air currents would not change and carry his scent to the nostrils of the she-wolf. He dared not shoot, for the boy partly shielded that big gray form. And then, too, a female wolf would become a raging fury if her young were threatened.

In fact, as he watched, she growled ever so slightly at young Ruud. She half rose and sniffed suspiciously at the boy, but apparently satisfied with the wolf smell that permeated his sketchy and ragged clothing, she settled back again.

Presently the man in the shrubbery sighed with relief as the mother wolf, shaking the pups free of her dug, disappeared down the hole. One by one her family followed; the last was Ruud's limping pet. The boy started off through the woods. His father soon caught him and took him home.

When Ruud grew to manhood he had occasionally been seen, in the distance, speeding through the woods, surrounded by his savage companions—the wolves. And many a hunter, out for the government bounty that wolves' ears would bring, believed Ruud warned the gray beasts of their danger.

The step-brothers, Len and Ruud, had often fought bitterly over Mary Timmons, who loved only Ruud. One week ago, he had disappeared. It was believed he had forsaken mankind; even Mary, for a wilderness life,

although many said he had taught her to know his gray friends as well as he did.

“DAMN his soul!” cursed Len Oakley as he swung along the narrow, winding trail. “The devil's his master, I say. He cared more for beasts than men. Said they're more honest. An' he took Mary out with 'im, too, an' got her to a-gettin' like himself.”

Closer and closer the gray beasts of the forest were hemming the path that led to the Timmons' log house. Len Oakley, now almost running, could hear their nearness. A snapping twig, a short, snuffing grunt, panting breathings; and, farther back, ominous, shortened howls.

He took another long swig from the jug. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot as he muttered:

“Damn you, Ruud! Since yer can't come out an' fight like a flesh-and-blood man, yer got to use yer devil's tricks of sendin' them beasts fer me—eh? Well, I'll have the girl fer myself, wolves er no wolves. You—”

Then he saw the great wolf with the silver-white markings on its chest—biggest of them all—the leader who had been bringing the pack against him for the past week. Perched high on a rocky boulder that jutted out from the roots of a tall fir tree above the path, it half crouched, eyeing him intently.

Down dropped the stone jug and up came the heavy Winchester. It flamed four times before the leader of the pack leaped away into the shadows, seemingly scornful of the deadly rifle. Len Oakley shuddered involuntarily, and eerie, fantastic thoughts worked slowly through his brain; then, shouting words of blasphemous rage, he grabbed the stone jug, drained the last of its contents down his throat and hurled it at the shadows where he had seen the leader vanish. Still swearing, he increased his pace. He had not many shells remaining.



Len Oakley was out of breath after he had circled a dank-smelling quagmire in Owl Hollow and, about a hundred yards farther on, reached the Timmons' log house. He banged on the door with the butt of his Winchester. A gray, scraggle-haired old woman opened the bark-covered portal.

"Glad yer come, Len Oakley," she greeted. "Walk in an' set down. Powerful lonesome, what with the wolves an' Mary actin' so strange since Ruud took himself off."

Oakley grunted, asked: "Strange—how yer mean?" He walked over to the young girl who sat in a rocking-chair by the fireplace. He looked at her with burning eyes. She was bare-legged, dressed in a checkered gingham dress. It bagged in some places; in others it stretched tightly, showing the firm roundings of her body. Silent, she rocked back and forth, staring steadily at a window.

For a few moments Len Oakley stared moodily at the girl. Deliberately his eyes roved from the plump, unstockinged calves to the small, pear-shaped breasts that were half revealed by the carelessly unbuttoned top of her gingham dress. He took a step toward her, reaching out a hand to jerk her up out of the chair, to crush her in his arms, force her to his will then and there. But the old woman started chattering again, and he checked his movement.

"Strange it is; and yer don't know what I've been a-puttin' up with," said the old woman, her voice rising. "That girl never did do nothin' to earn her keep, what with goin' off with that hell-damned step-brother of yourn. Goin' out with the wolves—like no decent human bein'—like a witch. That's it—like a witch!"

"What's the matter with you, Mary?" Oakley rumbled.

The girl said nothing. Monotonously she rocked back and forth, staring toward the window.

"I got to watch her every minute since Ruud took himself off," the old

woman whined. "Twice she tried to kill herself with a kitchen knife. She ain't et nothin' these last three days. An' them wolves! They come around so thick a soul ain't safe no time. Pa'll be back from the village, soon, a-bringin' traps fer the critters. Shells is too expensive."

Oakley put his rifle in a corner, then said to the old woman: "Get me somthin' to drink, Annie Timmons—somethin' strong. I ain't a-goin' to wait no longer. I'm takin' Mary to the village an' git us married by Judge Wilkins. He c'n fix it tonight."

"I'm glad—mighty glad, Len, if you'd take her off my hands. Look at her—a-layin' around like that. All she does—all day and all night. It's a queer girl she is. Took this spell—and the wolves started a-howlin' an' comin' around so's a body ain't safe. But that Ruud's a bad one. He'll be out fer your blood when he sees you two wedded."

Len Oakley took a long swallow from a crock that old Annie passed to him. He wiped his mouth with the back of a gnarled hand and turned at the sound of Mary's voice. It was soft, low and monotonous.

"Ruud'll never see us. I know, I know. He ain't never comin' back here."

Oakley's eyes narrowed. "Not a-comin' back?" he said. "Maybe he might be comin' back—after he's through fer awhile with them wolves. But if he does, he ain't a-goin' to have nothin' to do about us."

The three were silent for a moment, and they heard the distant sound of wolves growing nearer and nearer.

"I wish Pa'd hurry back with them traps," Annie grumbled.

**T**HE young girl slowly turned in her chair, her dark eyes lackluster and staring. "Traps? . . . Who said anythin' about traps?"

Annie Timmons eyed her daughter fearfully and took a pull at the mouth of the crock. "Course I said

traps," she shrilled. "What you think I said?" Angered, her voice rose still higher. "Traps! Traps to kill them damn beasts with!"

Mary leaped wildly from the rocking-chair, her apathy gone.

"Set still, Mary!" roared Oakley, lunging for the girl.

But she twisted away from his reach and ran out of the house, screaming:

"No, no! No traps! I'll warn them. I will! I'll warn *him!*"

A deep-throated snarl, followed by a ululant howl, suddenly came from near-by. Oakley was halfway out the door, after the running girl, when he caught sight of Annie poking his rifle through a window. He whirled back and knocked the barrel aside as she fired.

"The big wolf—the one that's always brung the others!" the old woman was screeching. "Shoot him, shoot him—an' then the others'll stay away!"

With another hamlike blow of his fist, Len floored her, unconscious. Seizing his rifle, he ran out.

Ahead of him sped the girl, her plump brown calves flashing up and down. As Oakley ran he saw a slowly crimsoning stain spread down the left side of her dress. He drew nearer and could see that Annie's bullet had hit her in the left shoulder.

That fool of an old Annie Timmons. When he had knocked aside the gun she was aiming at the wolf, the bullet had hit the girl. But the blood coming from her shoulder couldn't mean a bad wound. For she raced nimbly over the ground, without the slightest falter. The damned accident wouldn't spoil his bridal night.

On and on raced the girl, straight toward the quagmire.

"Stop, you fool!" he shouted. "Stop! Git away from that quag!"

Mary stopped abruptly and turned to face him. He slowed down to a walk, came on cautiously. The girl's heels were on the edge of the bank.

"Now, Mary, come like a good girl.

Git away from there. Don't git yourself so worked up. It's your Len—a-comin' to take yer away—to git married. Be a good girl, Mary."

She took several steps forward, away from the bank, and stood motionless. A slow smile came to her lips. Oakley eagerly ran the remaining distance between them. Her arms lifted up halfway. He pulled her to him.

"Now yer actin' right," he said as her arms went around his neck.

For a moment the two, in close embrace, did not move. Then Mary's arms jerked down. She yanked hard at the rifle Oakley held in one hand at her back. There was a slopping plop as the Winchester fell into the quagmire and sank from sight.

"Why, you—you hell-cat!" he roared, lunging at her.

But when the man neared her, Mary retreated to the edge of the bank. He was afraid it would crumble under her feet, so he held back.

Before he could speak again, the girl with the bleeding wound in her left shoulder said one word: "Murderer!" Then, after a pause: "You killed him. You murdered Ruud an' threw him in the quag."

"What? You—you couldn't say I killed him. He's just off in the woods somewheres. You—"

The girl's cold, eerie-toned voice cut him short. "You did murder him," she almost whispered. "You wonder how I found out, don't yer?" Then, more slowly: "Well—I—*know.*" She turned her head and stared with a strange fixity at the forest.

As if her motion had been a signal, the weird sound of a wolf's howl wailed out in the night. Oakley shivered slightly and tightened his muscles for a leap at the girl. But the sudden change in her face stopped him.

**H**ER features were contorted in a mask of blazing hatred, lips parted, teeth showing in a way that was wolfish.

"Murderer!" she repeated wildly.

Abruptly the girl wheeled to face the quagmire. Her face again calm, a smile on her lips, as though walking in a deep sleep, she quickly stepped off the bank and began forcing her way out.

Oakley rushed forward, a hand outthrust to clutch her. The bank began to cave in under his feet. Terror showed on his face and he jerked backward to safety. In another second the girl was beyond reach from the bank.

Barely audibly she murmured: "Ruud—Ruud—"

Shaking with anger, Oakley shook his fist at her and grated: "Go ahead, you fool! You'll find Ruud down in there—al right. Let 'im have yer—in hell! Damn yer both! Sure, I done 'im in—but nobody seen me do it. Nobody knows but you—an' now yer goin' too!"

The girl sank shoulder-deep in the bog, her lips still smiling, as Oakley turned away from the quagmire and glanced furtively about. What he saw made him stagger back in sudden fright. His eyes dilated, his jaw fell.

Before him, and to each side, but a scant two yards off, that gray, silent pack ringed him round—and at his back was the quagmire, silent save for the slopping sound of the girl's sinking body. Quiet, watching, those great timber beasts sat there on their haunches, their eyes gleaming greenly in the moonlight. Their lips were grinning, drawn back from vicious, shining fangs. The hackles on their broad necks stood up stiffly.

Near the center of the horseshoe circle that they formed, was the huge one with the silver-white markings on its chest. The leader's teeth were not bared, but he growled slightly, deep in his throat, and the pack closed in on Len Oakley. He shouted and bellowed to Annie Timmons, but there was no reply.

The man's fight on the edge of the quagmire was desperate and short. He battled furiously with heavy boot

and hunting knife. But relentlessly that leaping pack drove him back with slashing fangs, never once allowing their circling formation to be broken. The edge of the bank gave way under his feet, letting him down into the sucking ooze. He tried to claw his way up the bank, out of the mire. He screamed as the flesh of his hands was torn, the bones of his fingers crushed between snapping jaws.

Still madly shouting for help, Oakley attempted to thrash his way out into the bog where a tuft of weeds showed above the surface, hoping that there he might find solid ground. But he sank faster and faster. He saw the wolf pack trot leisurely off into the surrounding woods.

Louder and louder his shrieks knifed through the night, sending terrified implorations to the old woman he had knocked unconscious. Now he was facing the opposite bank. There sat the great leader of the pack gazing at him with a weird and calm intentness, but a few yards away.

As the slime of the bog began to envelope Len Oakley's whisker-stubbed face, the gliding form of another wolf appeared at the border of the opposite bank. Its gray figure seemed to form from the gray of the very muck near the solid ground so near and yet so far away. As though rising out of the bog which no living creature could conquer, this wolf came.

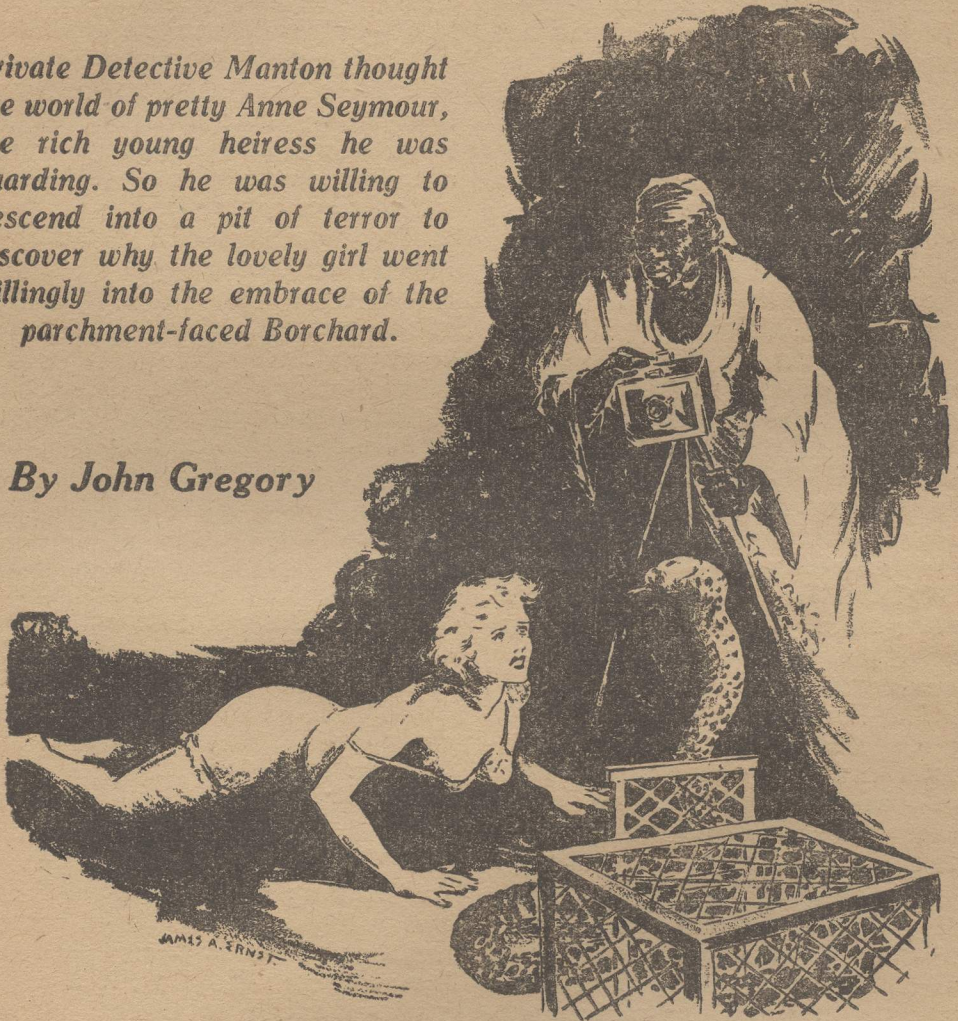
Len Oakley's hysterical shrieks rose to crescendoes of frightful sound. Dimly his fading senses told him that it was a she-wolf. As though through a misting fog, he saw her go up to the leader and nuzzle him. And he saw the leader bend his majestic head and lick the *blood welling from a wound in the she-wolf's left shoulder.*

Just before the quagmire reached Len Oakley's eyes and cut off his sight, he saw the pair wheel about, glance gravely over their shoulders at him and lope off together into the forest.

# Terror's Tomb

*Private Detective Manton thought the world of pretty Anne Seymour, the rich young heiress he was guarding. So he was willing to descend into a pit of terror to discover why the lovely girl went willingly into the embrace of the parchment-faced Borchard.*

*By John Gregory*



*She was crawling straight toward the serpent . . . .*

**I** WAS sitting in a box with Anne Seymour, viewing a revival performance of "Emperor Jones" when I became aware that the man, Borchard, was in the house.

It was a sweet job, and I had begun to appreciate it after three days of acting as bodyguard for Miss Seymour. When her old man had hired me, he said: "Mr. Manton, expense is no object. You understand that Anne is our only daughter. Whatever this

thing is that threatens her, it will be your duty to guard her against it, to find out the nature of the danger. We ourselves have been unable to get any information from her. All we know is that she's deathly afraid of something, that it is rendering her melancholy, is reducing her to a mere shadow of herself."

Yes, it sure was a sweet job, in a way. Believe me, aside from the strained, pale look of her face, Anne

Seymour was enough to make any guy's pulse pick a good many extra beats. She was one of those slim little blondes that aren't too slim when you look in certain places. And she had a pair of unusually dark blue eyes that looked as though they could promise a fella a lot. But when I took on the job of detective nurse for her, those eyes of hers too often showed a strange, spooky sort of expression.

Well, if you can't soak millionaires, whom are you going to soak? So, for the past three days I had been going to parties and shows, riding in taxis—in short, living on the fat of the land, with all expenses paid, and a hundred bucks a day salary.

That was all to the good, except that it was a little monotonous. It's not bad racing around all over town with the most beautiful girl in the city, if she'd only loosen up and talk a little. But in all the three days Anne Seymour hadn't said more than about fifteen words to me. Always there was that queer sort of haunted, frightened look in her eyes. Whenever I took her arm to lead her to a table in a restaurant, or to guide her down the aisle of a theatre, she felt cold and clammy to my touch. I guess it was beginning to get on my nerves.

And on top of this we had to be seeing this goofy show that takes place in the African jungle or some place, with this guy running away through the forest, chased by natives who want to stick pins and needles or something into him and make him miserable in general. And all through it there's this queer, insistent beating of the tom-toms, like water dropping on your forehead, drip, drip, drip.

Anne Seymour was sitting straight and still next to me, her proud, beautiful profile seeming to be cut out of marble.

And then I got the funny feeling that there was somebody in the house staring at us. I looked around quickly and, as if drawn by a magnet, my eyes found the eyes of a man who was sitting in the fourth row of the orches-

tra. He was lean, and his face was like parchment. If it weren't for his eyes, you'd think he was a mummy in evening dress. Those eyes were deep and black—and bad. Somehow or other I got the idea that this guy might be the devil himself, all dressed up. He hadn't been looking at me; he had been staring all the while at Anne Seymour in a curiously appraising sort of way.

I swung my eyes away from him as if I hadn't noticed him particularly, looked toward the stage, and nudged Anne Seymour, whispered to her out of the corner of my mouth, "Don't turn now. But see if you know that man in the fourth row."

"I've already seen him," she said huskily. She hadn't turned either, was still sitting straight, erect, and was whispering with hardly any motion of her lips. "I told dad it was no use getting me a bodyguard. You'll only be killed. I can't escape that man."

"Listen, Miss Seymour," I said earnestly, "my name is Don Manton. I'm no baby, and I'm no youngster at this game. You tell me what it's all about, and I'll fix that guy's wagon for him. What's he got on you?"

Suddenly a shudder seemed to rack her body. "I suppose I ought to tell you all about it. It's not fair to you not to. Will you promise not to tell dad or mother?"

"Okay," I said. I'd have promised her anything right then, if it meant getting the truth out of her.

She went on tensely. "His name is Borchard. He's been at several places where I have been in the past week or two—theatres, night clubs, parties. Nobody knows his business, but he's extremely wealthy. And—he always looks at me like that. I seem to feel the blood freezing within me when his eyes are on me."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"No. One thing more. Monday night—that's four nights ago—I woke up from a sound sleep. It must have been three or four o'clock in the morning. I had felt a sudden pain in my arm—like a pin prick. I opened my eyes, and

there was his face, leaning over me. And—oh—it was the most horrible thing in the world. He seemed to be exuding evil. I started to scream, but my muscles were frozen. And then I suddenly became weak, and lost consciousness. I woke up in the morning, weak and dazed. I might have thought it was all a dream, except for a little red spot on my left arm. He must have done something to me—given me some sort of injection.”

The way Anne said that last gave me the creeps. It made my blood boil to think of that dead-looking Borchard guy messing with sweet-bodied little Anne, even though she was about old enough to be grown up.

“Why have you kept all this a secret?” I asked her, raising my voice a little so as to be heard above the terrified shrieks of the man on the stage who was being haunted by the ghosts of his past crimes.

Miss Seymour said, “I don’t know. I suppose I was afraid of being laughed at. And since that night I’ve had all sorts of queer feelings. Perhaps a dozen times I’ve had a sudden desire to leave everything and run out into the night. It seemed that this Borchard was calling to me, calling to me, always calling to me.”

Her face was white, drawn, tense. “He—he’s calling me—now.” Her little hand was clenched in her lap as if she were resisting some powerful, magnetic urge.

And just then the curtain dropped on the stage. Intermission had come. I looked down to the orchestra. The man, Borchard, was not staring at her now. He was getting up from his seat.

I turned back to Anne Seymour. She seemed to be more at ease. She managed a faint smile. “I’m—better now.”

I got up, and excused myself. “I’m going to see what’s to be done about this. You stay right here, Miss Seymour, and don’t move. Wait till I come back.”

She nodded meekly. Somehow, she

seemed to feel better for having unburdened herself to me.

“Be careful, Mr. Manton,” she said.

“Don’t worry about me,” I grinned. “I’ve taken care of myself for a long time now. You just take it easy, and leave everything to me.”

Then Anne put her hand softly on the inside of my forearm and again gave me that faint bit of a smile she seemed to have trouble to manage. Often when she happened to touch me or smile a bit at me, I’d begin to wish I wasn’t just a shamus who couldn’t stand much of a chance with a girl who came from people like hers.

I have to laugh now, when I think of my swell-headedness. Leave everything to me! I thought I was good. I wouldn’t have thought so, if I had known what kind of a bird this Borchard was.

**D**OWNSTAIRS in the lobby, I looked around for him. He wasn’t there. I started for the smoking room, thinking maybe he had gone down there, when suddenly somebody tapped me on the shoulder, and a cool voice with a hint of a nasty laugh in it asked, “Were you seeking me, sir?”

I swung around and looked into the long, gaunt face of the man named Borchard. He was very tall—as tall as I am, and that’s saying a good deal, because I’m five feet, eleven myself. And he certainly was one to give you the creeps. If you looked at him, you couldn’t help feeling sort of scared. His skin seemed to be stretched on his head as if it had been taken off at some time and shrunk, and then put back on. It was of a pale, white, sickening color—like the color of death. But the man had poise, power. You could see it in his eyes, in his whole bearing.

His face twisted into a mean sort of smile that I didn’t like at all. I had a feeling suddenly that this guy had lived for ages and ages; that he would go on living forever, as long as evil lived in the world.

He said to me, “I knew, of course, that you would come looking for me.

I wanted to meet you. I have a proposition for you."

I sort of gulped, and put on a bold front. "Go ahead, mister, but talk quick. I got plenty to tell you."

"There is no need to talk quick. There is no need for hurry, my friend. We have ages and ages before us." Borchard put his hand on my arm, and I winced, surprised. Because his grip was like steel. "But I forget," he went on, "that to you, time is fleeting. I will not keep you long. In brief, my proposition is this—you are receiving one hundred dollars per day plus expenses to act as bodyguard to Miss Seymour. You are a private detective, and you are interested in making money. Say you are employed for ten days. That will be a thousand dollars plus expenses. All right, I will give you a cash sum of five thousand dollars. You will notify Miss Seymour's father that you can no longer continue on the job."

I started to laugh, but stopped quickly, when I saw those eyes of his boring into me. He had talked with the assurance of one whose word is law. Now he went on in the same vein. "When you return to your hotel, you will find the money in an envelope in the top bureau drawer of your dresser. Take it, and live in peace, my friend. Otherwise, you will learn what—terror is!"

Well, I'm no saint, and five grand is five grand—especially when turning it down means bucking up against a guy like this Borchard. But I'm a pretty stubborn sort of egg, and in spite of what people say about me, I have principles of my own. Also, I remembered the beautiful curve of Anne Seymour's throat.

So I said, "Nix. Your proposition is rejected. Now listen to what I have to say."

Borchard had been holding on to my arm all this time, Now he let go, and bowed, smiling ironically.

"I know what you have to say, Mr. Manton. You wish to tell me that you are a very honest, capable and efficient

private detective; that if I do not leave Miss Seymour alone, you will break my neck, or do me other serious physical injury. I understand all that, and I wish you a very good night."

With that, he bowed again, and turned away, walked out into the lobby of the theatre.

For a minute you could have knocked me over with a feather. He had taken the words out of my mouth, stolen my thunder. What was I going to do—sock him in the jaw right there in the crowded theatre? That wouldn't have helped any. I would only have gotten myself into a jam, and left him free to work on the girl. I began to figure that I would be earning my hundred bucks a day in the near future.

The bell rang for the end of the intermission, and I started across toward the box. I looked up in that direction, and stopped short with a cold sensation in the pit of my stomach.

Anne Seymour wasn't up in the box. She should be visible from here, but she wasn't. The box was empty.

I guess it was instinct that made me swing out through the doors into the lobby. And there I saw it.

If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it. There was a swell looking, maroon-colored limousine drawn up at the curb, chauffeured by a huge negro in a uniform that matched the color of the car.

The man, Borchard, was stepping into the car just as I caught sight of it. Another negro, who had been holding the door open, slammed it shut and swept around into the front seat beside the driver. The limousine got into motion.

But the thing that made me jump after it headlong, pushing a couple of bewildered theatre patrons out of my way without any consideration, was the glimpse I had caught of the white, proudly tilted face of Anne Seymour—sitting quietly inside that car as if she belonged there!

Then Anne Seymour turned her face upward to Borchard's damned

yellow pan. He caressed the white smoothness of her curving throat with one hand while he pulled her closer to him with the other. And Anne made no resistance whatsoever!

The car was already moving when I got out to the curb. I sprinted, came up alongside it. The windows were closed. I put my hand on the handle of the door, twisted it, but it didn't open. It was locked.

I yelled, "Miss Seymour! Miss Seymour!" But she didn't even seem to hear me.

Borchard was sitting next to the window, and I started to pound at it with my fist. The glass was shatter-proof. Borchard didn't even turn to look at me. He merely leaned over and whispered a few words to Anne Seymour. She finally turned her head, gazed at me impersonally, as if she had never seen me before, and then looked away again and stared straight ahead.

Suddenly the car gathered speed, leaped away, and the handle was torn out of my grip. I stood there in the middle of the gutter, panting, and I must have looked like one awful sap.

I STARTED to curse out loud, and then I realized that that wouldn't do any good.

There was a cab across the street, and the driver was sitting there and looking at me as if I were pulling some sort of freak advertising stunt.

I sprinted across, swung inside the cab, and yelled, "Follow that limousine, guy. Twenty bucks if you don't lose it!"

I needn't have promised him the twenty dollars. The limousine made no effort at all to lose us, though Borchard must have known that I was after him. On the contrary, they seemed to slow up accommodatingly so as not to get too far away from us.

A left turn, then five blocks west through the night toward the express highway; here the speed of the limousine increased so I figured we were making fifty or sixty miles an hour.

The express highway ended, merged into Riverside Drive. The pace slackened, there were halts for red lights, and I was burning up, trying to figure what to do. I could have cut them off and had a showdown. But I remembered the way Anne Seymour had sat there in the car, not making any effort to get away, as if she wanted to be there. Borchard would probably have me arrested for disorderly conduct if I tried to start anything. The only thing was to keep on their tail, and see where they went.

At the northern extremity of the Drive, the limousine swung around in a wide curve and entered Van Cortlandt Park. Through the park we followed them slowly, then up through Yonkers and into a quiet, dark section of Westchester along dimly lit roads where there were very few houses.

And then suddenly the limousine spurred ahead, and we lost them. My driver slowed up alongside the mouth of a road that led away at right angles from the one that we were on. He turned around and said to me, "They must have swung in here, boss. They ain't up ahead."

"Go ahead then," I told him. "Keep after them!"

The driver shook his head. "Not a chance, boss. This thing looks phony to me. I got my own troubles, and I don't want no part of other people's. This here neighborhood is dead and God-forsaken; there could be a dozen murders happen up here, and nobody would know about them."

"Where are we?" I asked him.

He pointed to the side road. "That there path leads up to an old cemetery that ain't been used in thirty years. The people up around here keep away from it at night. And this is as far as I go, mister."

I shrugged, got out and handed him his twenty dollars. There was no use arguing about it.

"All right," I said to him. "As long as you're afraid to go any further, you can wait here. I might be going back."



He didn't say whether he'd wait or not. I left him there and worked my way along that path, guided at first by the headlights of the cab. Then there was a sharp curve, and I lost the benefit of the lights. I went along slowly, carefully, feeling my way. Ahead, there was impenetrable darkness.

Back at the road I caught the sound of a taxicab's motor racing, heard the clash of gears. The driver wasn't waiting, and I didn't blame him much.

I was in evening clothes, and I had no gun. Miss Seymour had been rushing me around like mad for the last couple of days, from parties to theatres and back again to parties, so that I'd been a little dizzy—and in changing to the tux that evening, I'd clean forgotten to take the little twenty-two that I usually lugged around with evening clothes.

I swung around another curve and saw a white wall ahead. It was a cemetery wall all right, and the gate was open. Inside, there was no sound, no hint of motion or life.

There was no other place that the limousine could have gone, so I worked my way in among the white stones which rose stark and bleak all around me. You will probably laugh at me when I tell you that I had worked up a nice little sweat by this time, and that it wasn't because of any physical exertion. I was just a little bit scared. And if you think I'm a sissy or anything, you are hereby invited to go up to that cemetery *without* having met a guy like Borchard in advance, and wander around in there for a half hour. I'll give you the address any time you ask it.

It didn't make me any too comfortable, either, to think of Anne and Borchard in some lair of his hidden about this damn' place. It gave me the fan-tods to think of him using what surely must have been unholy hypnotic powers to cause her to go with him for the Devil only knew how many evil purposes . . . .

Well, I guess I wandered around through that spooky place for about fifteen minutes before I found the limousine. It was standing in front of a faded, granite mausoleum, with the lights out. It must have been a couple of hundred years old; probably one of those crypts where they put whole generations of some family that was probably extinct by this time. The name, which had been carved in the stone above the doorway, was indistinguishable in the dark.

But one thing I saw that didn't make me feel much better. It was the wrought-iron handle on the door. It had been fashioned into the likeness of the head of a snake!

I suppose ordinarily I wouldn't have noticed it, but all my senses were keyed up now, extremely acute.

Everything was quiet now, except for the rustling of leaves falling in the pathway from the overhanging trees. They stirred and seemed to whisper, to cackle hoarsely.

I took a peek in the limousine, saw that it was empty. Then I swung around to the door of the mausoleum, grabbed hold of that disgusting-looking snake head, and swung the door open.

**T**HE interior of the vault was in absolute darkness. And I knew that I was in the right place. Because, though there was no hint of life, neither was there any hint of death. You know what I mean—that musty smell, which is peculiar to vaults of the dead, was lacking here. This place had been opened recently. Fresh air had entered here earlier in the night.

I left the door, stepped inside cautiously, and groped around.

I felt a wall at my right, started to follow it like a blind man, touching it with my right hand while I kept my left hand extended in front of me in case I should meet somebody or something in the dark.

And suddenly I stopped still. I had the chilling knowledge that there was some one else in the vault with me. It

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was nothing I saw, nothing I heard; just that strange feeling that you get sometimes.

And almost at the same minute my outstretched hand touched a living being, I saw two eyes staring at me—right in front of me. I slammed out at those eyes with my right fist, and felt the crunch of bone under my knuckles, heard a gasp, and a grunt of rage.

Fingers reached out and gripped my shoulder, a fetid breath brushed my cheek. I slammed out again, this time a little lower, hoping to find a chin. And I guess I did, because the grip on my shoulder was suddenly relaxed.

But it was my unlucky night. Because from the left a flashlight suddenly clicked on, glared in my face. I started to swing toward the light, but something crashed against the side of my head.

That was an awful sock, and for a minute I staggered, weaving dizzily on my feet. And that was the minute that licked me. Because two massive arms gripped me from behind, twisted my hands in back of me, and held me helpless like a baby.

I'm no weakling, and I've been able to put up a pretty good fight in the past, even when I was groggy. But I made no headway at all against whoever it was that had this grip on me.

My head started to swim from that blow. I could feel the left side of my face wet where the blood trickled down from the split in my scalp. It had been a harder sock than I thought it was. I kept my senses all right, but I was kind of woozy. I guess for a few minutes the only thing that kept me on my feet was this guy that was holding on to me.

As if in a daze, I was aware of figures passing in the darkness, of whispered orders and shuffling feet.

I was suddenly lifted up in the air by the man who held me, carried a few steps and then lowered.

The guy let go of me, and I dropped—but not just a foot or two to the floor. I had been dropped through

some sort of trap door, and I traveled about a dozen feet before I landed with a jar that sent the breath whistling out of my body.

Above me I could see the opening through which I had come. And even as I watched, it disappeared; a slab of stone had been shifted into place up there.

I rested on my back, breathing hard, trying to regain my wind. It was absolutely black here, but I had an idea that something was moving around—there was a kind of gliding, scraping sound not far away.

I got to one elbow, tried to stare through the darkness. And I caught a whiff of something—a noxious sort of stench. This was something I could recognize; it was snake stench. Some place around here there was a snake.

Once more I caught that slithering, scraping sound.

I put out my hand and touched some sort of wire mesh screen. There was a swift, vicious, hissing noise, and something struck that screen close to my hand.

I jerked my fingers away, took out a book of matches, and shakily lit one. I raised it up high, and I can tell you that that light was doing a waltz. My hand was certainly not steady. By the flare of the match, I saw what I was up against. Right beside me was a sort of wire mesh cage, about five feet square and as many feet high. Inside that cage were two tiny pin points of eyes that squinted redly at me. Those eyes belonged to a squirming, wriggling reptile that was about twice as long as I. And somebody must have figured that it wasn't horrid-looking enough, because they had painted its entire length in red with some ghastly design that seemed to move and have life as the snake wriggled.

The match flickered and went out. I lit another one, raised it high and took a look all around. This wasn't just some sort of pit under the mausoleum. I was on the gallery of a vast, cleverly constructed chamber. If I had been unwise enough to take four steps

forward, I would have fallen from the ledge to the floor of the chamber below; and that would have been a drop of about thirty feet.

This place must have been cut into the ground away back when the mausoleum was built—and that had not been done haphazardly, for the walls, floor and ceiling were of brick, solidly constructed. I began to wish that I was in some peaceful business like the Chaco War.

I started to inch away from the cage next to me, feeling in the darkness for some way to get off the gallery. My head was throbbing now, and I started to have burning pains flashing across my eyes. My hair was matted at the spot where I had been hit, and it was cloyed with blood. I put my head down on the brick floor of the gallery, which felt nice and cool, and I lay there quietly for a few minutes to let the cold stone draw the fever out of the wound.

In back of me, the scraping at the wire mesh of the cage seemed to grow louder. I guess the snake was kind of sore at me for not coming inside and providing him with a meal.

**A**ND then, all of a sudden, things began to happen. There was a glare of light from the floor of the chamber below, and I caught the sound of measured footsteps.

I crawled to the edge of the ledge, raised my head and stared over at the singular procession that was marching in through a door at the far end of the chamber below.

Two negresses, immensely fat, dressed in long, red flowing robes, came in first. Each of them carried a tall taper whose flame flickered, casting weird shadows on the wall.

Behind them came a man who was dressed all in black, with a peaked cowl over his head, and a flowing robe that hid his feet. Out of the cowl peered a gaunt face. It was Borchard's face all right, but there was something different about him. He looked like a high priest—reminded me some-

how of strange, outlandish, African rites.

The two negresses crossed to a sort of dais in the middle of the floor, and set their tapers in two tall sconces on either side of the raised platform.

Then they turned around and faced toward my ledge, standing immovable.

Borchard marched solemnly across the room until he stood directly below the ledge. Then he raised his face toward the cage in which the serpent lay, and began to recite a kind of invocation in a voice that gradually grew louder and louder until he was talking so fast that the words seemed to trip over each other. He was using some sort of strange, outlandish language that I didn't recognize.

By the light of the flaring tapers, I could see the snake in his cage, and he must have been used to this sort of ceremony, for he rested his head against the wire mesh and seemed to be listening.

Suddenly Borchard's voice dropped to a whisper, and then became silent. As if it had been a signal, one of the two negresses produced a flute from under her robe, put it to her lips and started to play the weirdest, creepiest kind of tune I'd ever heard. The time was so swift that my ear could scarcely follow it. The snake responded to that music by wriggling its gruesome, sinuous length faster and faster. The hideous red marks with which it was painted made me dizzy to watch them.

Borchard reached over and pulled a chain down below there, and the cage began to move slowly. I noted for the first time that there was a kind of pulley fitted to the top of the cage, and that the pulley rode on a cable extending from the ledge down to the platform near which the negresses stood. Slowly the cage descended via the cable, until it came to rest upon the dais on the floor below.

The negress continued to play that damned flute of hers even faster, and Borchard strode across the room and unlocked a small door in the cage. The

serpent was writhing frenziedly now, in tune with the music, but made no attempt to slip out of its prison.

Borchard turned and faced the doorway through which he had entered the room, and stood in an attitude of expectancy. I looked in that direction, too, and started to feel a cold sweat all over me, forgot all about the pain in my head.

Anne Seymour had come into the room.

But let me tell you *how*. She was *crawling*.

She wriggled across the room slowly, sinuously, as if she were some sort of reptilian being, keeping time to the wild strains of the flute.

Well, that was bad enough in itself. But somehow even greater was the shock of Anne Seymour's nakedness. Against the dirty, dark ground over which she squirmed, the stark whiteness of her smooth, young body was startling. Crawling, writhing, tipping herself from side to side . . . the budding roundness of the graceful young body, which was just coming into early womanhood, seemed a hideous blasphemy—with what Anne Seymour was doing . . .

Her face was changed, somehow distorted. Of course, she was under the influence of some sort of drug. And she was crawling straight toward that lividly painted serpent in the cage.

And then I found out what this dizzy business was all about. Because I happened to turn my head, and there, right near me on the ledge, were these two tall negroes—still in the livery which they had worn while driving the limousine. I had been lying so quiet, with my head on the stone, that I guess they thought I was still unconscious. The face of one of them, I noticed with satisfaction, was kind of marked up. I guess that was the one that I had slammed into in the dark up in the vault.

This one was setting up a camera on a tripod, focusing it on the scene below. The other was watching him

and holding a large flash-bulb overhead.

Now I got the whole picture. And was it a laugh? It was not!

I turned around, grabbed a quick look down below. Anne Seymour had crossed the floor, had reached the top step of the dais. She was resting on her elbows, so that her head was on a level with that of the serpent. Slowly, those long, powerful coils oozed out of the cage. The snake reared its ugly little head high, arched itself over her. The flute was still playing.

And it was at that minute that the flash-bulb went off.

The two negroes had taken the picture of Anne Seymour and the snake.

A lot of things happened at once. Anne Seymour screamed—screamed loud and sharp and clear. It was a scream of mortal fear and agony; and though it didn't sound so nice, it indicated at least that she had come back to her senses. Then I made a flying leap at that camera from my position on the ledge, sent it smashing over the side to crash into pieces on the floor below. The plate of that picture would never be developed. And the third thing that happened was that the flute stopped its infernal music. Why the negress stopped playing, I'll never be able to figure out for sure, but I think she'd seen me lunging for the camera up there on the ledge; or else Anne's scream had made her quit.

Then all of a sudden those two negroes were on me like a ton of bricks. I wasn't dizzy any more now. I was just mad—good and mad. And I used a couple of stunts on them that I would have hesitated to use under ordinary circumstances. In any boxing or wrestling ring in the country they would have been declared fouls, and the guy who pulled them would have been forever barred and black-listed.

Well, I confess I used them. And though I got a bad cut under my left eye, and a long knife gash in my side from one of those two boys, I had them on the floor, dead to the world inside

of what must have been about sixty seconds. One of them was altogether out, having cracked his head against the stone ledge when he fell, and the other one was just doubled over, holding onto his middle and moaning with agony.

I didn't wait to offer them any consolation, but turned and raced along to the end of the ledge. I had noticed a flight of stone steps that led down to the chamber below.

I GOT down there in time to see Borchard standing at the foot of the dais with a vicious, hateful look on his face, and pushing Anne Seymour toward the cage. She was trying to get away from there, trying frantically; striving to get away from the coiled neck of the serpent which was arched above her. And Borchard wouldn't let her.

Borchard was standing as far away from the damned snake as he could, and he was holding Anne Seymour at arm's length, gripping her shoulder with those powerful fingers of his. He was afraid of that snake, I could see, for the reptile was no longer under the spell of the flute's music. Borchard hadn't intended letting the thing go so far, of course, but now that the snake was really after some supper, he figured the girl would make a better tidbit than himself.

He must surely have heard the camera smash, must have heard the sounds of the scrap I had up there on the ledge with the two negroes; but he had his hands full trying to sell the snake on the idea that the girl would make a tastier dish than himself.

Well, anyway, it's funny how one million thoughts and pictures will fill your mind in the space of about thirty seconds; because I think that's all it took for the whole tableau there by the dais to register with me.

And then I was across that floor in nothing flat, sprinting the way I had done many years past when I hung up a record for the hundred-yard dash

in the Marine Corps—only I did it faster this time.

I had to stop short, or else I would have slammed into Borchard, and he would have slammed into Anne, pushing her right up against the serpent.

So I slid the last five or six feet, reached across his shoulder, shoving him sideways, and yanked Anne out from under that serpent.

Anne went sprawling on the floor, and Borchard came for me, his thin, parchment-like lips pulled back from his snarling teeth, and his hands raised like two claws. We tangled, and his hands went for my throat. I could see that snake's pin-point eyes watching us as Borchard dragged me to the floor, slammed himself down on top of me, driving the breath out of my body, and clamped those powerful fingers of his around my throat. His breath was in my face, and it smelled foul, fetid, like the stench of death.

I squirmed around, trying to break that grip, but it was no use. His hands were powerful.

I began to gasp for air. My head was getting dizzy again. I slammed out with my fist, kicked him in the shins, but he held on.

His face was close to mine, and he snarled, "Damn you—damn you! You have robbed me of a fortune!"

I couldn't talk any more, and I felt myself getting kind of weak. I wanted to yell out to Anne Seymour to get the devil out of there, but I couldn't make any sounds come out of my throat. Things began to get spotty in front of my eyes. I figured I was about through.

And then, without warning, Borchard's grip on my throat relaxed. He shrieked—again and again—while I drew great gulps of air into my lungs. I rolled away weakly, groped to my feet. And I stood there, staring stupidly, uncomprehendingly, at the struggling, threshing body of Borchard, about which was wound coil upon coil of the sinuous body of the great snake. The serpent had picked him for its supper. And I wasn't going to do any-

thing about it except to hope that it choked on him.

A hand clutched at my sleeve, and I looked down to see Anne Seymour. She was sane now, scared out of her drugged trance.

"Take me away!" she gasped. She took one look at Borchard, just as some of his bones started to crunch. She closed her eyes and swayed, would have fallen if I hadn't caught her.

But when I did hold Anne in my arms, and she felt the touch of my clothing against her bare body, she started back. Terror had made her forget that she was still in her birthday suit, and I could see a blush of crimson spread down her face and throat, over the uplifted, pear-shaped breasts.

I didn't waste any time stripping off my dinner jacket, wishing all the time—for her sake—that it had been cold enough for me to wear an overcoat that night. I was a bit worried that the jacket to my tux would not be quite long enough. But I'm pretty tall, and Anne's pretty small; so the dinner jacket was just long enough to put her a little more at ease.

I picked her up, started for the staircase leading up to the ledge. Borchard kept on screaming behind us, but his screams were getting weaker and weaker.

**WE** weren't out of the woods yet, by any means. I found out that the two fat negresses could do something else besides play the flute. The last glimpse I'd gotten of them was when Borchard had me down; I had seen them standing, each at her corner of the dais, rooted to their places with fear of the serpent, afraid to come any closer than they were.

Now, as I made for the staircase, I suddenly heard the wildest, most frenzied sort of shrieking that yours truly has ever had the privilege—if you want to call it that—of listening to. I took one quick, startled look behind, and, sure enough, it was my flute-

playing pal and her girl friend.

They were coming after us.

Their hair was streaming out behind them as they ran; they were drooling at the mouth and shrieking at the same time; and their eyes were wide, mad, rimmed with red. They had long nails, and their hands, flourishing knives, were sort of reaching out after me as if they wanted to rip me apart and take me home for souvenirs. They looked like the pictures I had seen of those mythological dames who are known as "The Furies."

Well, believe me, I put on a burst of speed. If I had been clocked then, I bet I would have broken not only the record for the Marine Corps, but the world record. The only thing that saved us from those two dames with the long nails and knives was the fact that they were fat, and waddled.

I beat them to the stone staircase, swung Anne Seymour over my shoulder, and raced up.

On the ledge I stumbled over one of the unconscious blacks, almost fell, but recovered my balance by a miracle. The stone slab was in place in the opening above.

I set Anne on her feet, let her lean against the wall, and climbed the few steps of the short wooden ladder that led up to it. I pushed hard with my shoulder, the slab gave, and I had it opened in a moment.

Those two fat negresses were waddling up the stairs, still screaming, but no sound came from Borchard. And I didn't look over there to see how he was getting along.

I reached down, gave Anne a hand, and fairly dragged her up the ladder into the vault.

The two negresses were paddling across along the ledge now, and I literally slammed the slab down in their faces. We were up in the darkness of the mausoleum now. I turned, found Anne Seymour's hand, and raced with her out into the night.

We didn't stop till we got out onto the highway.

Behind us we were able to see the two shadowy figures of the negroes, still coming after us.

I had no desire to tangle with them, and I looked up and down desperately for some sort of vehicle.

And there it came.

My taxi driver!

And out of the cab leaped a couple of State policemen.

The driver got out, explained sheepishly, "This business looked phony, mister, so I went back and got a couple of cops."

"Boy," I exclaimed, "you're Santa Claus!"

I said to the two cops, "We'll have company here in a minute—two negroes. Grab 'em."

I couldn't be of any assistance to them, because Anne Seymour was leaning heavily against me, and I had to hold her up.

I fairly carried her into the taxicab, sat down alongside her. We watched while the two State policemen subdued the negroes.

After some of the excitement died down, the taxi driver must have remembered how much—or rather, how little—Anne was wearing, and like a good fellow he got his slicker out for her from under his front seat. When she had the slicker covering the curving whiteness of those beautiful legs of hers, she spoke:

"What—what did Borchard want with me?" Anne Seymour asked. She was still trembling. "I—hardly seem to remember what happened."

"It was just a blackmail racket," I explained to her. "He had a couple of guys there ready to take a picture of you as a snake worshipper, and then he would hold your old man up for plenty of jack—make him buy the pic-

ture back. It's an old racket: I've been up against these cults before; but I never saw it worked in just this way."

"But—but what was I doing there, with that snake?" She shuddered as she asked.

"Just forget about it, kid; just forget about it," I told her. "It's all over now."

I wasn't going to tell her what she had looked like to me as I saw her from up there on the ledge. Better to let it stay in the limbo of her subconscious.

The only thing I regretted was that my hundred dollar a day job was over. I consoled myself with the thought that maybe old man Seymour would come across with a bonus.

And he did. And it was a fat one.

But I didn't tell the old man about a little secret that I'm going to let you in on now—provided you promise to keep it to yourself. This is it: Borchard might have been a pretty screwy kind of blackmail artist; but he was as good as his word, and I guess he had been pretty sure of himself.

Because when I got back to my hotel, I took a chance and looked in the top drawer of my dresser. And sure enough, there was a neat little package. When I opened it, I found that it contained fifty brand new one hundred dollar bills—just as he had promised!

But I still wished I was a little better than just a shamus, so I could hope to have a chance with Anne. Well, I'm still hoping; and I may make something bigger of myself yet, what with the five grand and what I've been saving the last few years. Anyhow, sometime soon, I think I'll go around to her house and see if maybe she'd go to a movie with a fella once in a while.



# Step-Daughter to Greed

By

*Peter Reginald*

*They caught sight  
of that hideous,  
deathly face.*



*There was fear and terror  
written on the childlike  
face of the beautiful girl.  
But she forced her slim,  
trembling legs to carry  
her down into the tomb of  
the dead—to search for  
an inheritance in hell.*

**T**HE girl sitting beside Detective Monty Wills leaned forward and spoke to the driver of the yellow taxi. Brakes shrilled as the cab came to a sudden halt. With nervous, black-gloved fingers she paid the fare.

Monty shuddered when he saw where they had stopped. The dark, sinister-looking wall of Greenmount Cemetery showed on the other side



of the street. Pines, moaning in the night wind, rose above it like ominous, brooding shadows of the dead.

He got out ahead of the girl and took her slim arm. But she freed herself as the taxi rolled away. Her face was pale and set and her eyes had that strange look of fear that he had noticed when he first saw her, back in the office of the Gilder Detective Agency.

Monty Wills sensed, from the moment she had met him, that the girl instinctively liked him. And he had fallen for her pretty hard himself. But business was business.

She turned and started across the street and he kept close at her side. Then suddenly she stopped and her small, lithe body stiffened. He saw that she was listening, bending her head sidewise. And at the same instant he, too, heard the noise that had attracted her. It was the throaty rumble of a powerful auto motor.

The next moment the girl stifled a terrified cry. A car with dimmed headlights had swung careeningly around the corner. It was long and low and was traveling at terrific speed.

Monty clutched the girl's arm and pulled her out of the way just in time; for the car, a black limousine, seemed bent on running them both down. Its whining balloon tires flashed across the asphalt where their feet had been a second before. Monty drew in his breath with a hiss.

It might have been the darkness of the night and the close proximity of the graveyard—but the car had given him a strange impression. Its low-slung black body seemed almost like a coffin on wheels—a coffin answering some inexorable call to return to the City of the Dead now that midnight had struck. Then the girl's tense fingers closed over his arm.

Wills felt her small figure sway close against him in the darkness, felt the softness of her thigh stiffen and tremble.

"Look!" she whispered hoarsely.

Monty stared wide-eyed. A face had appeared in the car's rear window. It was visible for an instant as the slanting rays of a distant arc light fell on it. It was a horrible face, pudgy and inhuman.

The two staring eyes seemed to Monty as fixed as the wide-open ones of a corpse. He couldn't tell whether it was the face of a man or a woman; but it fitted in with his ghastly impression of that coffinlike vehicle. It was as though he were staring through the window of a casket at the features of the dead.

A chill passed along his back. He looked after the car with morbid fascination. He saw the horrible face fading from sight amid the night shadows. He saw the car come to a stop by one of the cemetery gates down the avenue. An indistinct form moved from the car to the gate. Then came the eerie squeak of metal on metal, after which the black car rolled forward again and was lost from sight.

"They've gone in," breathed the girl. "We must hurry."

He hadn't any idea what she meant. Who had gone in? And what did she plan to do? Gilder had told him not to ask her questions. She had given references and had paid her fee in advance. He was to take orders from her and give her protection if she needed it.

She had given her name to the head of the private detective agency as Miss L. Stoner.

Monty glanced sidewise at her cameo-clear features, trying to fathom the mystery that lay behind them. In some way he knew that inhuman face they had seen staring at them from the car window was connected with her mission. In some way it lay behind the fear that made dark shadows in her eyes.

And he himself felt shaken by the sight of that car and at the gruesome place to which she had brought him.

With quick, furtive steps she crossed the street now and he fol-

lowed her, his wonder growing. Was she going to enter the graveyard?

In spite of the tense mystery of the situation, Monty Wills could not help but wonder at the braveness of such a very small girl as, in the dim light, he observed the tantalizing roundness of femininity in waist and thigh as she moved with quick, small paces.

She turned and walked parallel with the cemetery wall for two hundred feet, keeping close to it and almost hugging the rough stones as though some inner terror made her cling to anything that might give protection. Once she took his arm, and he felt a sudden warm thrill. But she dropped it immediately afterwards and resumed the barrier of mystery and aloofness that she had held to from the first. Then she paused and he saw her eyes move upward.

"We'll cross here," she said. "You'll have to help me. Hurry!"

He understood then that she planned to go over the wall.

It wasn't more than eight feet high. She was light, and as he lifted her he tingled a little at the shapeliness of her small, firm body. She drew herself up with his aid, and in a moment she had dropped out of sight. But he heard her calling huskily.

"Follow me!"

**H**E jumped, caught the top of the wall, and pulled himself up. Then he dropped down beside her. It was so dark among the evergreens that the night seemed to press in upon them as though it had a substance of its own. But when they had picked their way twenty feet ahead between rough-barked trunks, they emerged into ghostly moonlight.

To guide her over the uncertain footing, Wills grasped her small arm. She seemed to thankfully gather courage from his touch, for she quickly walked closer to him. Encouraged, the private detective shifted his arm to encircle her waist, fearing that she would resent the embrace. But she lifted her miniature, cameolike face

for a moment to give him a short, thankful look. Then her face tightened with resolution, and Wills knew that he'd have to wait until the business at hand was finished before he could know better this childlike woman-girl for whom he had an instinctive desire to love.

They picked their way forward, and all around them now gravestones rose from the earth, looking like white and gray wraiths, still and ghastly in the watery moonlight. A sense of foreboding that he could not repress filled Monty Wills.

They found a little gravel path winding between the graves, and the girl's slender, high-heeled shoes crunched along it.

Monty wanted to speak to her and ask her what ghoulish mission she had brought him on in this night-shrouded cemetery; but he had given his word to Gilder that he would not ask questions. She was a client and he was a detective whose professional services had been hired. And it was almost as though she had forgotten his presence. She seemed to have withdrawn into her own dark thoughts.

The path began to rise, and Monty saw that they were approaching the higher portion of the cemetery. Big family plots were marked off ahead of them, and here and there the somber white fronts of mausoleums rose, misty in the moonlight.

The girl walked faster. She looked so pale now, so impassive and marble-white that Monty shuddered over the thought that she, too, seemed a little corpse-like. But when she moved ahead of him where the path narrowed and he saw the lithe, free-swinging grace of her hips, this impression faded. She was a living, breathing, desirable bit of femininity, and only the strange mystery that surrounded her made her seem aloof.

She suddenly touched his arm and spoke in a low voice.

"Wait here for me—but if you see any one coming let me know. I'll be at the head of the path."

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She turned then and moved off. He had the illusion that she had suddenly vanished away into thin air, her black clothes blended with the darkness so perfectly and reflected no ray of moonlight.

He stood still, hands thrust in pockets, gazing up the narrow path. Once he saw a white gravestone blotted out as the girl passed in front of it.

Then, four minutes later, he heard a faint, ghostly noise—the sound of metal hinges opening complainingly. It came from the big mausoleum at the head of the path. The sound was repeated and was followed by a dim glow of light somewhere inside. The girl had entered that lonely, night-darkened crypt.

Monty Wills was tense, anxious, wondering how this little chit of a girl could have the courage to resolutely continue her mysterious objective, whatever it was. He visualized the brave set of her small chin, the determined swing of the almost child-like lines of her body, which her brief dress only partly shielded; and he felt that he should not leave her alone, although she had ordered it.

Minutes passed as Monty waited. A far-off clock boomed once, making a whispering echo that seemed to pass overhead like a fleeing wraith. The moaning of the wind in the pines along the wall came intermittently.

Then suddenly he was aware of another noise. It was the faint crunching of stealthy feet on gravel. He turned and a warning prickle passed along his scalp.

The noise stopped, but for a moment he saw something dark pass across the granite face of a monument at the foot of the hill.

He remembered the girl's parting instructions. Turning quickly he walked up the slope in the direction she had gone. He picked his way along the grass at the edge of the path until the mausoleum rose before him stark and white as the bleached bone of some giant. He went close to the door and looked in.

THE girl had one of the crypts open. There was a piece of metal in her hand, and he saw to his horror that she was at work on the end of a big coffin.

He called her name huskily, and she gave a start, then turned a white scared face toward him.

"What is it?" The words fell from bloodless lips.

He pushed the door wider and entered, filled with a sense of depression as the chill dampness of the chamber penetrated his clothes.

"Some one's coming up the hill. I heard steps on the path."

"Oh!" The girl's exclamation was a gasp of fear. She laid her metal tool on the top of the coffin and picked up the flashlight. Then she started toward the door. But she stopped suddenly close beside him and he could feel the trembling of her small body.

"Look!" Her voice was choked with terror.

He turned and almost cried out himself.

The flashlight in the girl's hand was still on. For an instant he caught sight of that pudgy, hideous death-mask of a face again, framed in the half-open doorway—the same face that had stared at them from the rear window of the coffinlike car. For a moment the eyes moved and he saw that it was human after all, and not the face of a corpse. But living, it seemed somehow a more terrible menace.

It disappeared from sight as he looked; but two other indistinct faces took its place, and he saw gleaming, threatening eyes.

He snatched the flashlight from the girl's hand and snapped it out. They were in total darkness now in the old mausoleum. But at least they could not be seen themselves, and the moonlight outside made the doorway an oblong patch of light.

The private dick gathered the small girl close to him, felt her shuddering against him. Her small hands were clutching at his clothing, pulling her-

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self closer to him in her fear. In the darkness they stood, waiting for what was to come. And even though Wills sensed that their lives were in danger, he could not help but enjoy the delicious thrill of the girl's warm, trusting closeness.

Again something showed. It was a horrible, brutal-looking head this time. The head of a man plainly silhouetted against the outside glow.

Monty whipped from his pocket the automatic which he had a permit to carry.

"Who's there? What do you want?" he called.

But nothing answered him except the eerie echoes of his own voice in this chamber of death. The girl had drawn close to him now as though for protection.

"They've come," she whispered. "It's Myra and those others."

He did not understand what she meant. But the next moment the door of the mausoleum began opening wider as though spirit hands were upon it.

Monty jumped forward to stop it. Then it seemed that the night leaped in upon him bodily. He had an indistinct impression of flying, tackling forms and of a shrill, harpylike voice urging them on.

His finger instinctively pressed the trigger of the automatic and the shot echoed and reverberated in the confined space. But he sensed that he hadn't hit anything. There had not even been time to direct the muzzle of the gun.

It was knocked from his hand the next moment and he found himself striking out with bare fists. Somewhere back in his brain primitive anger flared like a crimson banner.

His attackers seemed as strong and brutal as gorillas. They came at him in the darkness, indistinct and awful like destructive monsters. But he lashed out with strong-knuckled fists and had the fighting thrill of feeling them strike against yielding flesh.

AND all the while in his ears sounded that rasping harridan voice. Who was it? What mystery lay behind this sudden attack and the girl's strange actions? His mind was as puzzled as his fists that struck out blindly in the darkness. But he kept on fighting furiously and felt his knuckles make contact again. There was a thud against the wall and the sound of a man swearing in pain.

Monty flashed on the light that he had taken from the girl.

A gorillalike man was now cowering against the wall of the mausoleum, one hand pressed to his convulsed belly. Another was writhing on the stone floor of the vault, felled by the blow Monty had given him. Close to the door was that bulbous, contorted face he had seen before.

It was, he saw now, the face of a middle-aged woman—a woman whose features had been made hideous by the etched lines of hate and greed. The mouth was pendulous and fish-like; the eyes bloodshot and cruel; the skin blotchy with dissipation.

Then Monty sensed rather than saw movement against the wall behind him. He turned just in time. A second more and it would have been too late. For the man whose midriff he had struck recovered sufficiently to thrust a hand beneath his dirty clothes. The hand came out with stubby fingers holding a long, gleaming blade, and an arm shot forward with a deft, purposeful motion.

Monty leaped aside as that glittering blade came through the air like a streak of livid lightning. He felt the death whistle of it as it passed close to his neck.

Then he heard a gurgling, fearful shriek behind him. He saw the knife-thrower's jaw drop.

The knife meant for him had found its mark in the breast of the hideous woman. She was swaying on her feet; her eyes bulging, her fishlike mouth working from side to side; and as he watched, she pitched forward on her

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face and lay still with the knife driven up to its very hilt. She had been slain accidentally by one of her own brutal allies.

Monty took advantage of these few tense seconds to reclaim his automatic from the floor. He swung its muzzle toward the man who had thrown the knife.

"You see what you've done," he said harshly. "Make another move and I'll fire."

The man stayed still now, cowed by the threat in Monty Wills' voice and by the sight of that unwavering gun. Monty flung a question at the girl. He felt he had a right to now.

"What's it all about?" he said.

The girl was staring at the dead woman with fascinated eyes. Then words came to her pale lips.

"It's terrible, but she deserved it. She would have stood by and seen us both murdered if there had been no other way. She was like that always—full of greed and brutality. Those men and she came after the jewels."

"Jewels?"

"Yes—the one thing that father was able to save for me. I've a right to them. He wanted me to have them."

"Where are they?"

From the corner of his eye he saw her go over to the big casket and start work on it again. In a few moments she had the hollow handle off. Then she drew from it a small tissue-paper package. She came to him, opened it, and he saw a glittering heap of unset jewels. But still he did not understand.

Seeing this, she took a crumpled letter from her handbag and held it out.

He gave her the flashlight and, holding the gun in one hand, read the letter.

*My Dearest Daughter:*

Myra, as you know, has taken everything away from me—even things that I wanted you to have. And now, when I am helpless and dying she has had me adjudged insane. I can't even make a will.

But she doesn't know where the family jewels are. She doesn't know that I pulled

them out of their settings and hid them in the coffin I bought ahead of time. I let her think I was insane in the purchase of that.

They are in the handle, dear—the one marked with lines. After I am dead and put away in the family vault I want you to come and get them. But look out for Myra. She may grow suspicious and spy on you, and when her greed is aroused she is like a devil.

Your loving father.

Monty pointed to the woman on the floor.

"Who is she?"

"My step-mother," the girl said. "Do you understand now?"

"Yes," he said huskily. He took the flashlight from her slim hand. "Go outside," he said. "I'm going to lock all of them in the vault and send the police here. It's the only way. But don't worry, Miss Stoner. You've a legal right to the jewels now that your step-mother is dead."

They backed out, and Monty swung the big door of the mausoleum shut and locked it. It had become a prison house for two human vultures and a woman who deserved to die.

The girl leaned against him for a moment, and Monty Wills did what was for him a strange thing. He slipped his arm around her slender waist there in the moonlight and kissed her once gently on the lips. He admired her pluck in putting this thing through in spite of her terror—and anyway he felt he had a kiss coming to him after the mad fight he'd staged. The sudden pressure of her fingers on his arm showed that she felt the same way.

Suddenly she pressed tightly against Mills, clasped her small arms around his waist and gave way to sobbing emotion.

"Oh, I've been through so much, and—and you won't mind if I show that I care a—a lot for you? You—you won't think wrong of me—because we've only just met?"

Monty Wills had two answers: kiss her soft, childlike lips long and tenderly; tell her that he was sure he wanted her with him always.

Wills chose the first answer.

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