

JANUARY

15¢

HORROR STORIES



MEN WITHOUT BLOOD
SPINE-TINGLING MYSTERY NOVELETTE
by **JOHN H. KNOX**

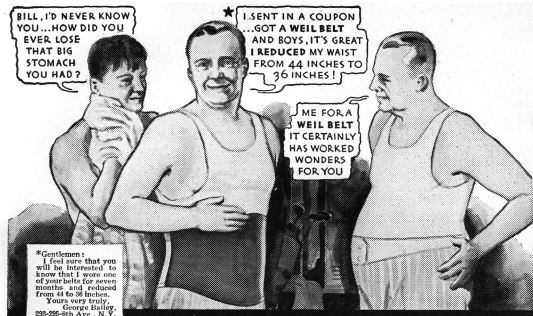
**HER
LOVER-
DEATH!**

*THE WEIRDEST
STORY EVER TOLD!*

by **WYATT
BLASSINGAME**

**ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT
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Yes Sir! We absolutely **GUARANTEE**
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YOU will appear much slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller...three inches of fat gone...or it won't cost you one cent. ■ For 12 years the Weil Belt has been accepted as ideal for reducing by men in all walks of life...from business men and office workers who find that it removes cumbersome fat with every movement...to active outdoor men who like the feeling of protection it gives.

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Now there is an easy way to reduce without exercise, diet or drugs. The Weil Health Belt exerts a message-like action that removes fat with every move you make.

NO DRUGS, NO DIETS, NO EXERCISES

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It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives you an erect, athletic carriage. Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place... that they are no longer fatigued...and that it greatly increases their endurance. You will be more than delighted with the great improvement in your appearance.



DON'T WAIT... FAT IS DANGEROUS!

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■ Remember this...either you take off 3 inches of fat in 10 days or it won't cost one penny! Even the postage you pay to return the package will be refunded!

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any man to
make this
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With My **WEIGHT RESISTANCE** Method

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HORROR STORIES



Volume One

January, 1935

Number One

FULL-LENGTH MYSTERY-HORROR NOVEL

- Music of the Damned** *By Francis James* 10
They were the Army of the Dead. High in the hills Bill Weston saw them marching, their taloned fingers clutching the torn girls who were their victims. And hell-born music dragged him on to their ancient, Satanic orgies.

THREE HORROR NOVELETTES

- Mistress of the Beast** *By Arthur Leo Zagat* 48
Up from the greedy swamp came the evil woman of the fog, to trap Stan Dunn and his companions with their own lust, and drag them back to horror inconceivable.
- Men Without Blood** *By John H. Knox* 70
Even knives could draw from them no blood. Yet it was blood that they sought, blood that they sucked from their victim's headless corpses!
- Her Lover—Death!** *By Wyatt Blassingame* 98
Was Mark indeed a madman in those moments of unconsciousness, a monster who yearned even to tear the throat of his own loved wife?

FOUR SPINE-TINGLING SHORTS

- The Night the Devil Walked** *By Hal Field Leslie* 38
On stormy nights the Devil stalked that lonely region, hunting young bodies for his own fiendish purpose. . . .
- Claimed by the Dead** *By John Tracey* 61
A musty tomb in Egypt held the secret of an age-old tragedy.
- Village of Bones** *By Robert C. Blackmon* 88
Despite the warnings, Jimmy Kent went with his bride to the city of living dead. . . .
- Nightmare House** *By George A. Starbird* 118
That dwelling in the Florida swamps was peopled with freaks from a madman's nightmare.

— AND —

- Strong Medicine** *The Editor* 9
- Chamber of Horrors** *A Department* 127

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Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

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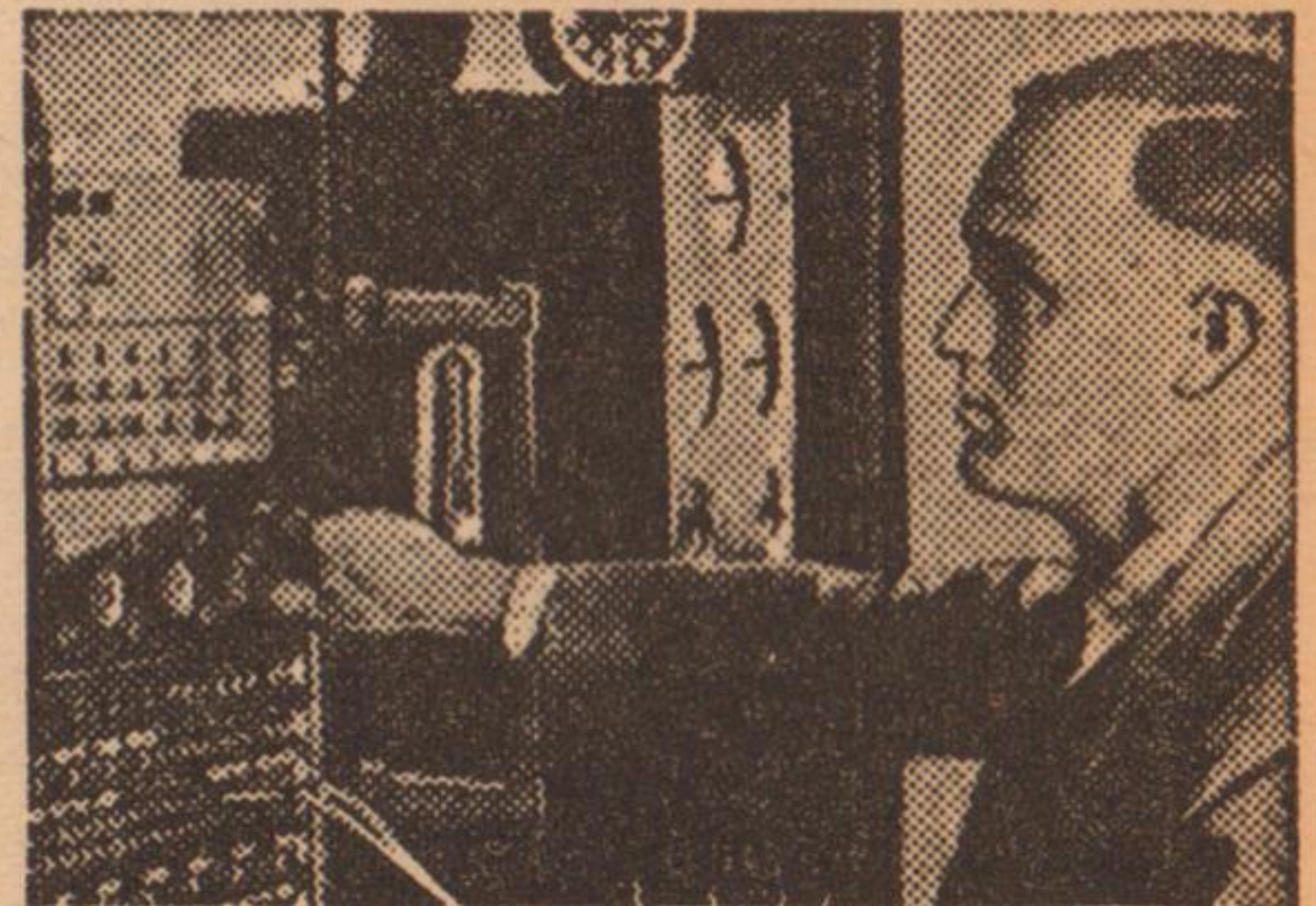
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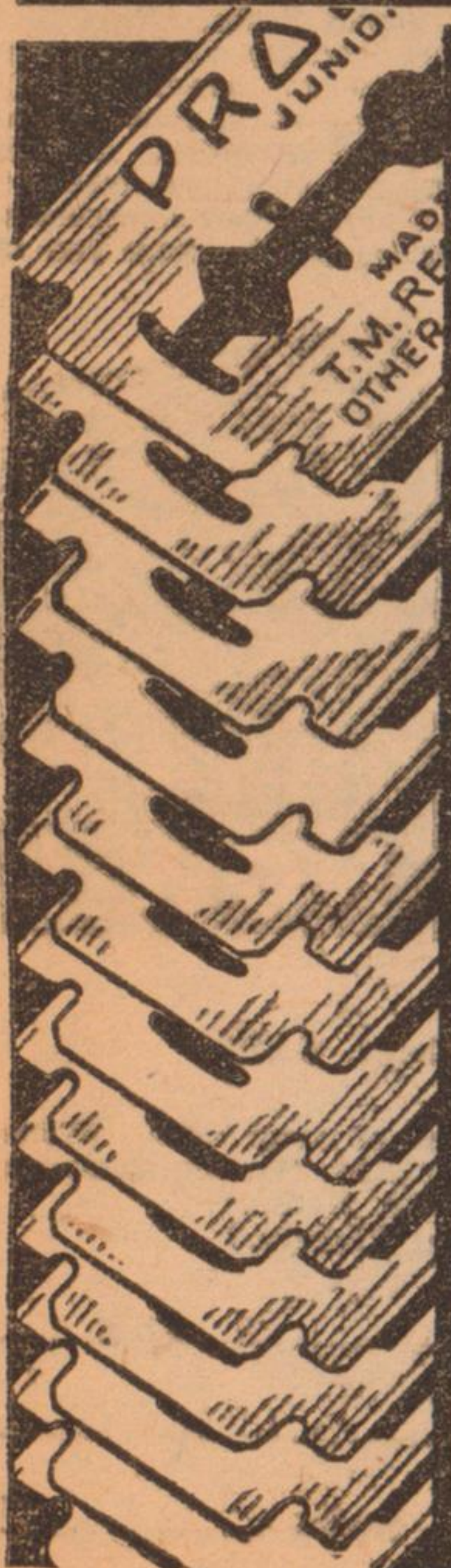
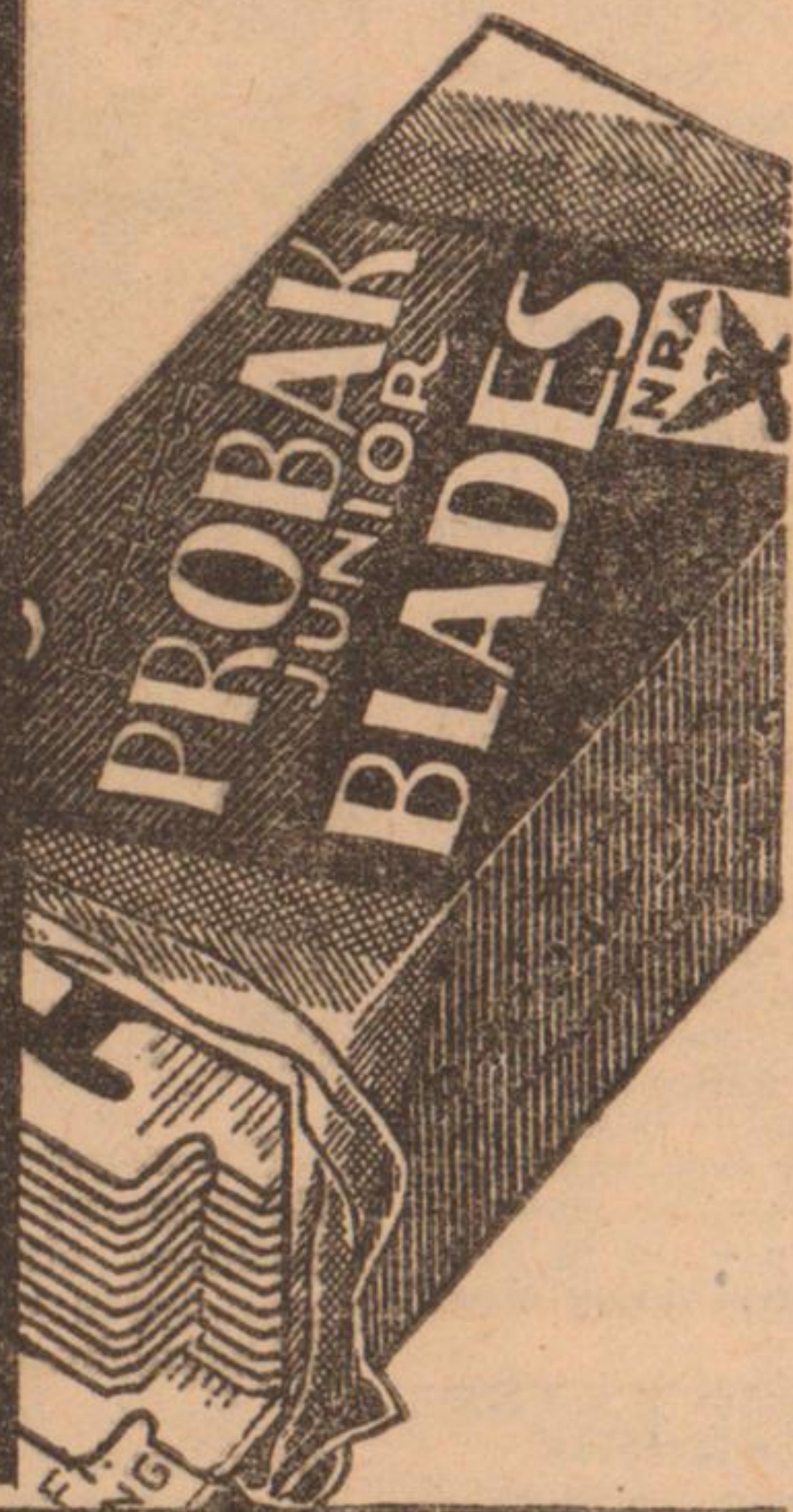
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The night attack on the ranch house by Red and the silent deadly Jeb Grimes—"Red of the Arrowhead," by Gordon Young.

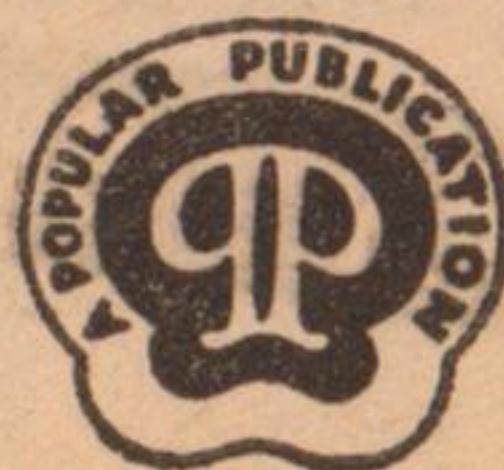
Fight

The prisoner in the North Woods, held by a captor who used the wilderness for jail bars—"Seven Days To Steel," by Robert E. Pinkerton.

Peril

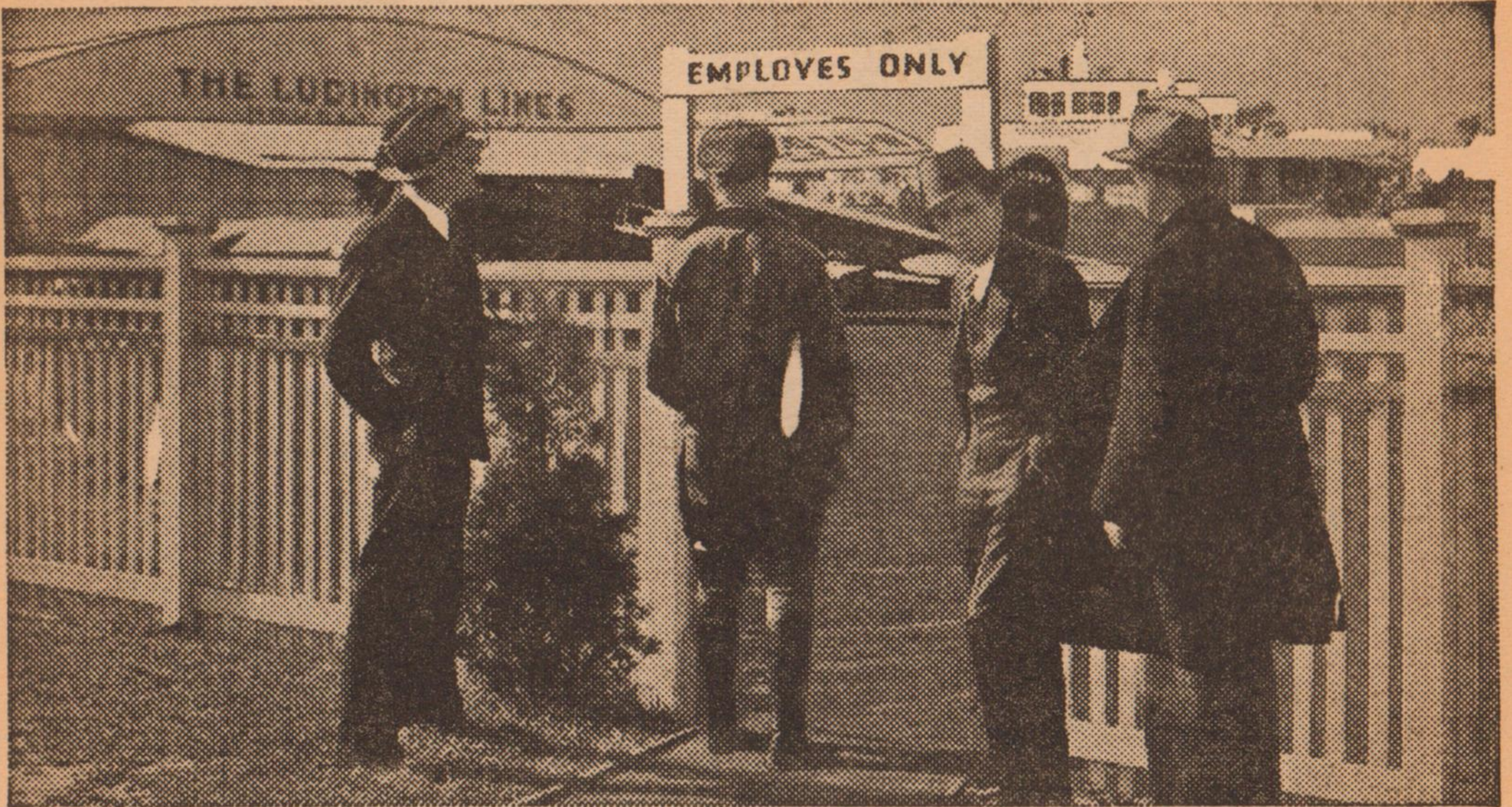
Hanging to a balloon by a weakening hand thirty seconds, (one mile) from earth—"Man To Man," by the air mail pilot, Leland Jamieson.

ALL IN THE JANUARY FIRST ISSUE
(on sale, December fourteenth)



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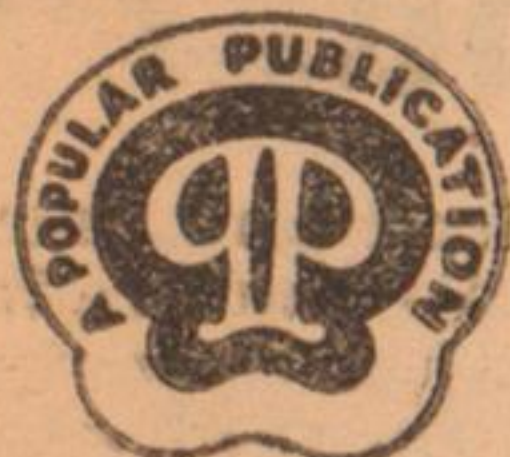
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CORPSES FOR WITCH'S MOUNTAIN

By Franklin H. Martin

HONEYMOON COFFIN

By Ben Judson

THEY DARE NOT DIE!

By Nat Schachner

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SOULS ENSLAVED

By Henry Treat Sperry

DARK CHILD OF DOOM

By Wyatt Blassingame



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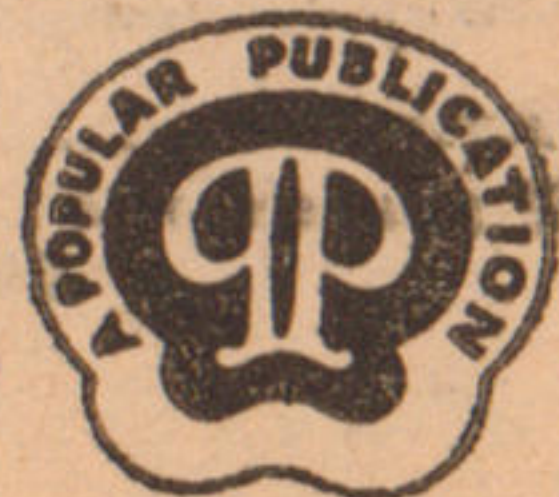
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STRONG MEDICINE

WITH this issue *HORROR STORIES* takes its bow—to chill and thrill the thousands who have long asked for and awaited such a magazine.

You will find it packed with heart-stopping tales from beginning to end, with gruesome stories that will freeze your blood and leave you rigid in your chair. Squeamish ones will flee from these tales as from the plague. Yet we make no apologies for the contents of this magazine, for we know the need it satisfies.

We know the humdrum life it is given most of us to lead in this modern age, and the many things that it lacks to make us all well-rounded and complete. And the greatest of these is fear and the stimulus it gives.

In other ages man lacked not fear; it was with him always. It prowled the night in a thousand hideous shapes and even stalked the distant places in the light of day. No man knew then, when walking a dark and lonely road at night, what foul Satanic revelry he might stumble upon at the crest of yonder desolate hill. The sword he carried would then avail him little; and even the power of his crucifix might be swept away by the wiles of Beelzebub. No man knew when the ravaging barbarians from the North might sweep down upon him to destroy his crops and home and carry his wife or his daughter shrieking away—or when he himself, for a chance word let slip, might be dragged to some dank dungeon to await the cruel agonies of the Inquisition.

Today these things are gone, and for such advance we can be thankful. Yet something else has gone with them that we miss, that it is not good for us to lack. And that is the purging quality of stark fear. For the swift flow of blood, the gasping breath that comes with fear and horror may leave us weak and trembling, yet somehow it leaves us clean. It purges our bodies of a thousand petty aches and troubles and leaves us ready to rise again, unhampered and strong.

Today we feel but petty fears. They are always with us, distasteful and a hindrance to our happiness. Yet they can be swept away by greater fears, never to return.

This, then, is what we hope to do with *HORROR STORIES*. It is strong medicine for our ailments, yet strong medicine is what we need. Nor do we plan to weaken the dose in the future. We give you here a heady taste of horror—and if you like it, as we're sure you will, we'll give you more each month!

THE EDITOR.

MUSIC OF THE

By Francis James

Bill Weston had laughed at the stories of the seven-fingered killers in the Army of the Dead. . . . But once in the hills, with his own eyes he saw them marching—their taloned fingers clutching the torn girls who were their victims. And he heard their hell-born music, dragging him on to join at last in their Satanic orgies. . . .



BILL WESTON lifted his elbow, let the thin yellow stream of *aguardiente* slip down his throat and set down the glass.

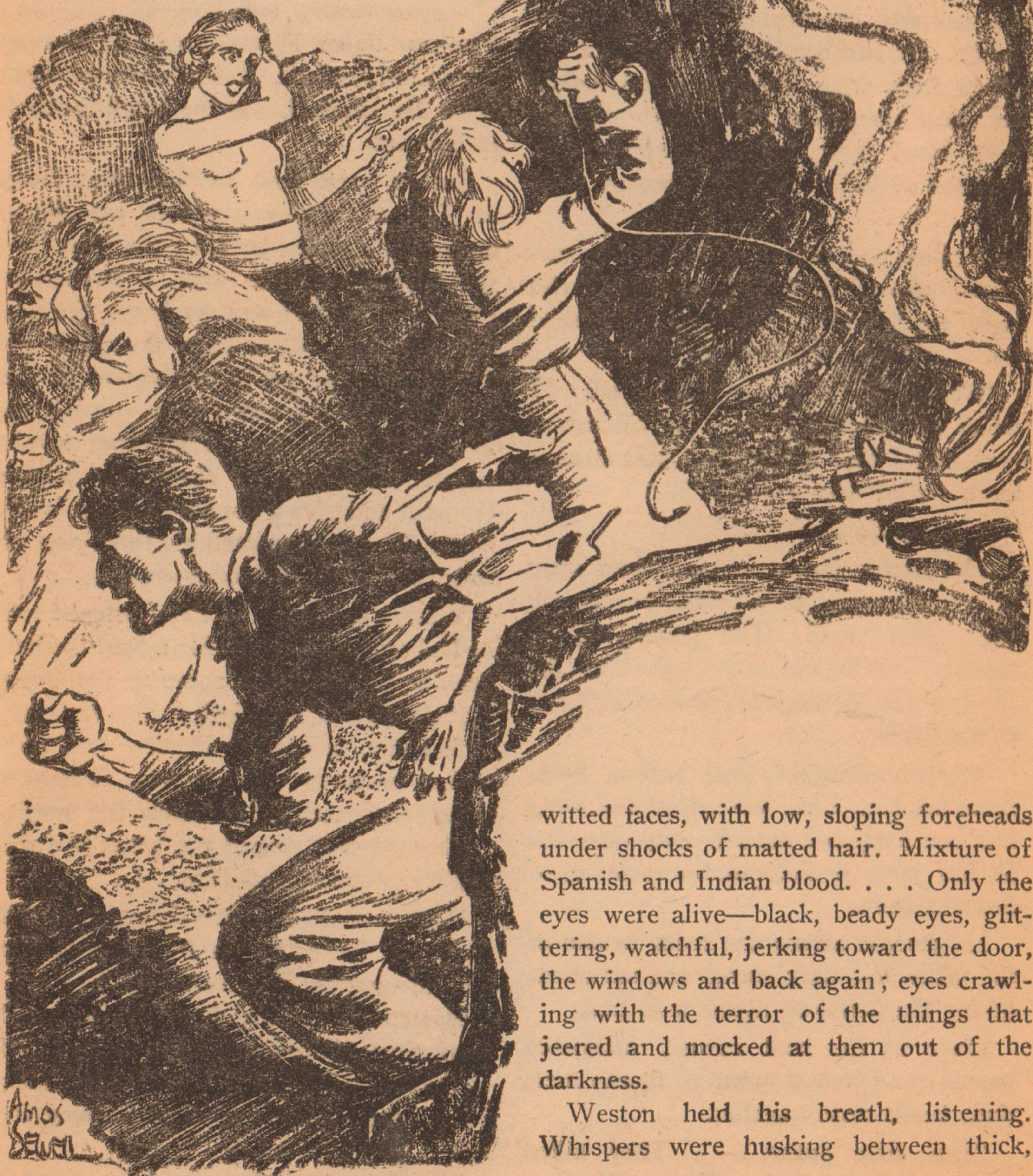
He shivered. The raw liquor scorched his insides like the sear of a hot iron, yet he was cold. He was cold with terror, with a nameless something that gibbered and mocked at him in the air, that swirled around him like a ghostly, intangible aura of evil.

He let his eyes drift around the dirt-floored, low-roofed café of the little vil-

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lage high in the Andes of Peru. The oil lamp swinging from the overhead bracket cast smoky, lurid flares of black and orange over the frozen faces of the men lined up against the bar. Swarthy, dull-



witted faces, with low, sloping foreheads under shocks of matted hair. Mixture of Spanish and Indian blood. . . . Only the eyes were alive—black, beady eyes, glittering, watchful, jerking toward the door, the windows and back again; eyes crawling with the terror of the things that jeered and mocked at them out of the darkness.

Weston held his breath, listening. Whispers were husking between thick,

twitching lips. Over and over again he had caught the word—something that sounded like *Sacsahuaman*. . . . The word spat from the mouths of the natives as though it was poisoned—as though the mere saying of it cursed the speaker. . . .

Plenty of times Weston had heard the word in the week that he had been there at Tampu-Taco. He had heard it slobbering in the shrieks of the women when they had found their husbands' bodies slashed and crucified by the hands of fiends. He had heard fathers snarl it between their teeth when they had looked on their daughters with their virginal flesh laced with swollen purple weals, screams of hellish agony frozen on their lips. . . .

Weston poured out a glass of *aguardiente*, shoved it along to the man who stood next to him at the bar, and dished out another one for himself.

"*Salud, amigo,*" he murmured. "I drink your health. . . . This *Sacsahuaman* that I hear all the time, this strange word—what does it mean?"

"*Sangre de Christo!*"

The native jerked a white-eyed stare of terror around at Weston. He shrank back, glassy-eyed. The goblet slipped through his fingers and crashed on the floor, while his fingers fumbled the sign of the Cross.

Weston shrugged and turned away from the bar. That was the sort of thing that had happened before, every time that he had tried to find out the meaning of *Sacsahuaman*.

He drifted across the room to one of the tables in a dark corner and sat down, taking the bottle of liquor with him.

Over in the next corner, whispered words came from a group of shabby men, their heads close together.

"*Los siete dedos*. . . . They killed Maria, my daughter. They will come

again. . . ." The long grey blade of a knife licked hungrily in a ray of light.

The big brown hand of the speaker's friend reached out, pushing the knife away.

"Paco, *amigo mio*—it is useless. You cannot fight against *el ejercito de los muertos*—against the army of the dead. . . ."

WESTON poured out another glass of *aguardiente*, and gulped it down. The raw liquor lighted a ball of blazing fire in his stomach. Yet he shivered with cold. He laughed, and the laugh mocked in his ears.

Just a week now, he had been there at Tampu-Taco—a reporter case-hardened with a dozen years of the most disillusioning game on earth, a Broadway cynic whose creed was mockery. He had had his lead straight from the chief—go down there and get to the bottom of the yarn and make a laugh of it—play it up as just another case of ignorant native superstition run wild. Make a burlesque out of it and give a hundred million hard-boiled Americans something to snicker at over their breakfast coffee cups. . . .

Weston had come. He had listened and he had seen. . . . And for a week he had been trying to put a name to the thing that clutched at his mind, at his very soul, with slimy, strangling fingers—and now at last he knew what it was. It was a thing too ghastly, too terrible for words. A thought that seared the brain like the blighting touch of hot iron. . . .

With an oath, Weston shoved back his chair and jerked to his feet. He had to get out—get out into the air. . . .

A step toward the door, and he stood motionless. From outside the place had come the sound of racing feet. The door burst open. A woman came pushing inside.

Her face was ashy grey. Her frozen,

rigid eyes bulged to the whites. Hoarse, clucking sounds came through her gasping lips.

Weston knew who she was. She was the mother of one of the native girls who had disappeared a few days before. Desperate, defiant, she had gone out into the hills to search for the girl. . . .

Weston gasped. The woman's dress had been ripped down the front to the waist. Her breasts had been slashed across, gashed into dangling ribbons by the raking of giant claws. Across the middle of her bosom, between the breasts, the claws had left a blood-dripping horizontal trail. They were the marks of finger-nails. But not four of them as would have been the case if a human hand had done the work. There were six marks—the trail of a hand with seven fingers in all. . . .

Midway of the woman's forehead was a thing that Weston had seen before—a diabolical brand-mark, the symbol of incarnate sin, dripping crimson where it had been slashed into the skin with sweeping strokes of a knife. . . .

"Seven—the seven fingers!" a voice behind Weston croaked. "*Los siete dedos!*"

The woman stood wavering for an instant, her fat, brown torso streaming blood. She gasped out a wild, strangled scream. *Los Sacsahuaman! El ejercito de los muertos!*"

Then she pitched face forward to the floor and lay motionless.

Weston gritted an oath. Half a dozen times before, in the six days he had been here, he had seen this sign-mark of hell on bodies horribly dead. The seven-fingered hands of the killers that had never lived—the army of the dead that roamed the darkness, invisible as smoke. . . .

MMOMENTS later, the bottle of *aguardiente* clutched in his hand, Weston was walking swiftly up the street. Gibbering terror, the men in the café had

sidled around the horrible shape on the floor and bolted. Caught by the madness, he had gone with them. Outside they had scattered into the shadows, leaving him in an instant alone.

No one was in sight now as he lurched and stumbled, drunk with liquor and with terror, into the darkness between rows of low-roofed stone and adobe houses. The air was heavy, oppressing and stifling as a lead blanket. Every few seconds, a low, hollow rumbling vibrated through the ground. Flashes like lightning flickered over the roofs of the houses.

Not thunder—the mutterings of the volcano Tiahuanaco, five miles away behind the rim of towering mountain cliffs. The flashes of light were reflected down from the flames that leaped up in its cavernous maw.

Suddenly Weston stopped and stood motionless. The sound of music was coming on the wind. The same burst of wild, diabolical rhythm that he had heard a score of times before when the wind had happened to be right.

Weston sucked down a drink of the *aguardiente*.

It was mad, impossible—and yet it was true. Music that laid hold on hell—the chantings of evil spirits brewing incantations of wickedness—mad screamings of sadists in ecstasy of erotic orgies. . . .

Perhaps they would get him—yet he could not turn back. Ahead, two miles up the mountain, was the camp of Ross, the archeologist, where he was staying. There he would find sanity, men of his own race, men who did not believe these things. There he must go. . . .

The army of the dead—somewhere, they were thronging the darkness. They were not killing the natives alone. Three days ago, an American, a member of Duncan Ross' party, had been found with his heart torn out and the brand of hell trick-

ling blood from his forehead. . . . Two others had disappeared.

Now Weston had come to the end of the village. Up the winding road he was climbing the black flank of a hill.

As he left the last of the houses behind, he came out into a wilderness of badlands. Gaunt naked pinnacles, frozen spurts of fire from the churning cauldron of the earth's bowels, thrust up gigantic fingers out of the tumbled masses of rock. The flames of the volcano shimmered in specter-like lurid contortions over the seared, chasamed faces. It was here, in this same stretch of cursed, fire-blasted land, that the *Sacsahuamans* had caught Marsh and ripped the heart out of his body. . . .

ABRUPTLY Weston shrank back into the shadow of a towering black ledge. A hundred yards in front of him, a procession was crossing the road from side to side. The line of figures were shapes such as might have stalked through the fume-crazed brain of a drug-maniac.

Figures of men, stark naked save for breech-cloths, big and broad-shouldered, their muscles flexing and knotting in the ruddy light of the volcano. Broad, swarthy faces with flat noses and steeply sloping foreheads, narrowing to thin lips and pointed chins. . . . The faces of men whose race had died out a thousand years ago. And out of the upper lip of each man, a triangle-shaped notch of flesh had been cut away in the exact middle, under the nose. Through the hideous mutilation, the three front teeth glimmered weirdly against the brown skin.

And one other thing. Midway of the forehead and on each cheek, a brand-mark of spectral greenish-blue—a symbol of wickedness incarnate that throbbed and vibrated as if alive.

The eyes of the figures were staring and fixed like the eyes of dead men. The skin of their faces was not yellow, as that

of their bodies. It was a horrible, filthy green—the green of dead things, of noisome fungus and rotting slime.

Then the end of the line came into sight. The last two figures carried burdens. White, limp forms—women sprawled in pitiful, lewd abandon of helpless nakedness over the bare backs of their captors. Only scraps of torn clothing partially draped their limbs. The blood-red blaze from the volcano licked like hungry tongues over the creamy white of their legs and arms, over the soft rounded swellings of their breasts.

Like the great Goths who had ravished Rome of its women, the two gigantic yellow forms held them each by a leg pulled over the shoulder. Against the white skin of their ankles, Weston could see the dark outline of the fingers of the gripping hands.

He swore through dry lips. Six fingers and a thumb. Seven fingers in all—*Los siete dedos!*

Seven fingers on the hand that had ripped off the breasts of the woman in the café . . . seven fingers on the hands that had raked the other five bodies found in the past week . . . the story of the seven-fingered killers of the Andes that had come in the news flashes to New York, whereat Weston had laughed. . . .

DUNCAN ROSS jerked around in his chair at the sound of the opening door. The famous archeologist's bright blue eyes were haggard and worn with sleeplessness. Above his huge crimson beard the heavily-built scientist's face was grey and drawn.

He took one look at Weston and jumped up from his chair. He rushed over and gripped the reporter's arm.

"For God's sake, Bill, what is it?" he gasped. "What's happened?"

Weston did not speak for a moment. Wild-eyed, panting for breath, he was

jerking his eyes around the room.

In a half circle, seven persons—four men and three women—sat staring up at him. In the dim light of a candle on the rough board table, their faces were white and tense. All save the women wore automatics belted around them.

Phil Macomber and Dan Welch were both young men of about Weston's own age. Henry Makanna, veteran of Peruvian exploration, a tall, lean man with a yellow, saturnine face and mocking black eyes, sat next to them. Beside him was a middle-aged, fleshy woman, Ross' wife, and two girls—one the archeologist's daughter Mary, and the other her chum, Natalie Summers.

Weston wet his lips. He stumbled forward into the circle of light.

"I saw the *Sacsahuamans* down in the village just now," he burst out hoarsely. "The *Sacsahuamans*—get that? They're dead men. They're yellow from head to foot—yellow as gold. They've got seven fingers—I counted 'em. They killed another woman. . . ."

A silence of stunned, incredulous horror vibrated in the little shack as Weston finished telling what he had seen.

Finally Duncan Ross drew a shuddering breath.

"So you saw them at last, did you?" he muttered. "You saw the *Sacsahuamans*. . . . Now we know what got Evans and Peterson and Marsh. . . . What do you think of this now, Professor?"

The man to whom Ross spoke had but a moment before entered the room, had been sitting silently as the others talked. He was a short, heavily-built individual with a swarthy skin and glittering black eyes. In shape his head was a scientific rarity—it had the peculiar contour of the now vanished Inca race, with low forehead sloping so sharply that it ran upward in a straight line with the nose to the roots of the hair. His nose was broad

and flat above thin lips and pointed chin.

Professor Porcas was an authority on the ancient history of Peru. Ross' purpose in coming to the South American country at this time had been the same that had brought Weston by air express all the way from Times Square—to dig into the facts, if any, behind the weird rumors of the seven-fingered killers. A day or two after he had set up his camp and started his exploring, the professor had walked in, introduced himself and offered to help. He had left his post at the University of Lima, he said, to do exactly the same thing that the Americans were doing. Two heads were better than one. . . .

"Of course we all know of the old legends," he said thoughtfully. "Back there on the top of the mountain behind the rim of cliffs was the city of Huyanboto—the great capital of the Incas. The temples and the palaces of the kings were fabulously rich in gold. When the Spaniards conquered the last remnants of their race, they sent back to Madrid literally tons of solid gold ornaments.

"Naturally, the Incas must have had some amazing vein from which they dug out their pure, wonderfully soft gold. The legends say that this lode was somewhere back there among the hills around the central mountain. There was a special cult of workers who served in the mines. The great god Tlactloclan was supposed to have had seven fingers on each hand. These mine-workers were descended from him as was proved by their also having seven fingers. For this reason they were dedicated from birth to his service.

"No other people than these *Sacsahuamans*, as they were called, were ever allowed to go near the gold veins. They lived alone in a certain village. They were never allowed to leave the village during their lives, nor was any outsider

ever permitted to go to them. Nevertheless, to be sure that they could not talk and thus betray the location of the mine, the workers were mutilated. In childhood their tongues were torn out and a three-cornered piece of flesh cut out of the middle of their lips—"

Professor Porcas broke off and looked around. Mrs. Ross had gasped out a scream. The cry slashed through the dull murmuring of the man's voice like a knife-thrust of terror.

Paper-white, her hand crushed to her heart, the woman had jumped to her feet.

"Did you hear that?" she gasped.

EVERYONE sat tense, listening. Nervously, their eyes met and jerked apart again. No man or woman there wanted another to witness the stark, heart-stopping thing that had suddenly gripped them like a clutching hand out of the shadows.

Outside the cabin there were sounds . . . sounds of loose stones clicking under the scuff of naked feet; the clink of steel; whisperings of ghostly voices out of speechless mouths. . . .

Natalie Summers was wringing her hands. "There's somebody out there!"

Professor Porcas frowned and shrugged. He took another sip of *aguardiente*.

"It is only the dogs, sniffing around for something to eat," he said. "I was telling you about the Incas. They were a strange and terrible race. Their kings and priests were monsters of diabolical cruelty. They celebrated unspeakably terrible human sacrifices. To make up to these tongueless and speechless slaves of the mines for their hard lot, they regaled them from time to time with wild sex orgies. The girls for use in these saturnalias were stolen from neighboring villages. They were taught sensuous dances, and then entertained the workers to the strains of music—music that has been described by

certain of the Spanish priests who had heard it as having been composed by the devil in the pit of hell."

"And didn't the holy fathers," Duncan Ross said gravely, "even go so far as to confess in their terror that after listening to this music for five minutes, they felt strange, damnable longings stirring within themselves?"

Professor Porcas nodded. He shuddered and reached out for the *aguardiente*.

"I, too, have heard that music. And I have felt those things," he said. "It is the music of sin. . . ." Lips tight-pressed, he made the sign of the Cross.

Natalie Summers jumped up from her chair and started pacing the floor.

"I've heard it, too," she cried. "It was like something poisonous, yet so terribly fascinating that you couldn't help listening. It made me want—oh, horrible things. Every night now I hear it. Maybe I dream it, maybe I don't—I can't tell. It's driving me crazy."

The girl's voice was jagged with terror.

"It's the slaves of the mines! They've come back to life. Bill just saw them. They're stealing girls—"

"Natalie! Keep still!" Duncan Ross snapped. "This is bad enough without hysterics. What do you think are the true facts behind this, Professor Porcas? Fantastic as it all seems, we've got to admit that there's real, terrible danger. We have been here a week and already three of our own men—Evans, Peterson and Marsh—have been killed or vanished."

"Who can say?" Professor Porcas' strange black eyes glittered with a wild, uncanny light. Spots of crimson splashed the centers of his swarthy cheeks. "There are many things, my dear Ross, that mathematics and chemistry cannot explain. . . . The natives say that the starting up of the volcano after all these centuries has roused the ghosts of old Tlact-

loclan and his mine-workers from their graves. They have called back their old gods of wickedness and sin that they used to worship and started up their sadistic revels and their human sacrifices again. They resent our presence here, and so—”

“Rot!” Phil Macomber’s blue eyes blazed angrily as he whirled to the professor. “You’re an intelligent man. You ought to know better than to scare these women half to death with your crazy yarns. If anything—”

Mrs. Ross screamed. Macomber’s voice choked in his throat. He stood rigid, his jaw sagging.

From across the shack, at the door that he had locked ten minutes before, had come a tiny tinkling sound—the metallic rattling of the latch as something lifted it from outside.

Once, twice more, the soft clattering noise clicked in the tense silence.

Natalie Summers screamed again. “The *Sacsahuamans* are out there! Don’t let them get in—”

With an oath, Macomber whipped his gun from his holster. He covered the width of the room in three strides, shot the bolt and jerked the door open. There was no one there.

CHAPTER TWO

The River of Sin

MACOMBER jumped back with an oath. Out of the black emptiness of shadows and rocks, something had come whizzing past his head. It shot across the room and thudded against the wall.

Slamming the door shut and throwing the bolt, he whirled around. In a tense, silent knot, the others stood staring at the knife that hung with its point embedded in the plaster wall.

The blade of the knife was bronze, the handle solid gold, carved and fretted in strange, diabolical symbols. Wordlessly,

Professor Porcas pointed at the raised design wrought in bold relief on the haft. It was the same symbol that Weston had seen burning in spectral blue on the foreheads of the yellow men—the lewd, mocking brand of sin. Essence of wickedness incarnate. . . .

Their faces crimson as they realized the significance of the symbol, Mary and Natalie Summers turned away, shuddering. With a muttered curse, Ross wrenched the knife from the wall and flung the thing into a corner. He stood with his big florid face white and twisted under the flaming beard, mopping beads of cold sweat off his forehead.

“It is the *Sacsahuamans*.” Professor Porcas’ face glowed with a light of ecstatic terror. In that fleeting minute, Weston fancied that Porcas himself might have been the reincarnation of one of the cruel Inca kings, gloating in the suffering of tender flesh, in the spurting of hot blood under the sacrificial knife. “They have come back and claimed their own. . . .”

Henry Makanna’s dry, biting voice cut through the million-volt tension of suspense. “If you ask me, you’ve gone crazy, the lot of you. Let’s try to get back on our feet and look at this like intelligent human beings instead of a lot of superstitious savages. You know as well as I do that this supernatural ghost business is all bunk. There’s an explanation for everything.

“The killings down in the village—as well as those of our own men—are the work of some homicidal maniac, of course. In time he will be caught—they always are. As for what Weston here says that he saw—well, he’d been hitting the yellow juice pretty hard, by the looks and the smell of him. Of course a man has the right to pick out the kind of horrors he wants to see. . . . That music is just some love-sick Spaniard with a guitar up in a cabin somewhere. Some

drunken native tried the latch just now and then threw that knife in through the door. They hate foreigners. Of course you couldn't see him, back in the shadows. As for your *ejercito de los muertos*—your army of the dead—erts-nay for them."

Makanna's words died on his lips. His face blanched and his eyes bulged as he sat motionless, listening.

A sound was coming into the cabin. Music. The wild, unholy music that Weston had heard out on the road. Music with mad, fiendish fascination, that rose and fell like the crooning of demons weaving incantations and spells of wickedness around one's soul. . . .

It was louder than when Weston had heard it before. It was coming from close to the cabin!

Professor Porcas leaned forward toward Duncan Ross. His strange black eyes leaped and writhed like flames of blazing oil.

"Can you not feel it in the air, *Señor* Ross?" he whispered. "Can you not feel the aura of evil, the solid weight of sin pressing around you? As though wickedness were a material thing that you could reach out and touch? . . ."

With a strangled scream, Natalie Ross jumped to her feet. Her face was white and twitching. Her eyes, as they stared into space, flamed with a strange, terrible temptation. . . .

Welch yelled and jumped in front of the girl. She was running toward the door. She gripped the bolt and tried to throw it back.

Welch tried to push her back. She fought with him, digging her finger-nails savagely across his cheeks. Her face was contorted with fury. Her eyes glared with a savage light and lines of foam edged her lips.

"Let me out!" she screamed. "I've got to get out!"

MACOMBER and Weston rushed to her. Between the three of them, they dragged the screeching girl away from the door and forced her into a chair. With one of the men holding her down on either side, she sat panting, her eyes blazing like a wild beast's.

Duncan Ross stood mopping cold sweat off his face. Nobody in the cabin spoke. Mrs. Ross was getting cold water to wet a cloth for the girl's head. The music had stopped; but terror vibrated in the silence like a poised lightning bolt.

Suddenly Mary Ross gasped out a scream. She stood pointing across the room.

"Look! Oh, look at that!" she gasped.

A face was looking into the cabin through one of the tiny square windows. The face of a man dead, yet hideously alive. The bulging eyes were fixed and glazed. The lip had been cut away in a triangular notch beneath the nose. Midway of the forehead, a lurid, obscene brand-mark blazed with a blue spectral glow.

Suddenly Makanna gritted an oath. He whipped the gun out of his holster and jerked the trigger. Glass crashed. Over at the window, the face was gone.

Snarling curses, Makanna rushed to the door, jerked it open. He stood for an instant, peering out. Ross and Macomber ran over and looked past his shoulder.

"Phil—for God's sake come here and tell me if I'm dreaming," he gasped.

Welch and Weston covered the three yards to his side in a jump. They took one glance outside and stood frozen.

Figures were stalking through the shadows that lay black and mysterious around the shack. Figures of big yellow men, naked save for breech-cloths of shimmering gold. Men with cleft lips and blue-green brand-marks burning like

splashes of flickering brimstone against their faces. . . .

Makanna slammed the door shut, locked it again, and turned around.

"The *Sacsahuamans* — Great God, they're here," he gasped. "They're all around us—"

The nine men and women in the shack stood looking at one another, silent.

Ross pulled out his handkerchief and mopped the beads of sweat from his face.

"There are five of us with guns," he muttered. "We can stay here till morning and then get out. I don't believe they'll rush the house. . . ."

Professor Porcas laughed sardonically. "You do not know these *Sacsahuamans*, *Señor* Ross," he said.

"We all know that anything that walks on legs can be killed by a bullet," Makanna rapped out. "As long as we stay here, nothing can touch us—"

Makanna bit off his words with a gasp. Behind him, the locked door of the cabin had creaked and buckled inward as a heavy weight came smashing against it from the outside. He had a split-second glimpse of a loathsome green face looking in through a window. As he snatched at his gun, the glass crashed in jangling fragments. Something big and dark came flying in through the hole, hit the candle on the table and swept it to the floor.

Weston had a fleeting glimpse of Makanna's face contorted with horror as darkness flooded down. Guns roared. The cabin was full of crashing echoes and the orange spurting of flames.

He heard the door cave inward with a rending crash. Big, dim-yellow figures were swarming in the room. He heard the men cursing as the rushing shapes leaped on them, wrenching the guns from their hands. Over in a corner, the three women were huddled together. Ross' wife screamed once, a shrill, piercing

shriek of horror. After that, none of them made a sound.

Weston had no gun. As the lights went out, he had seen Mary running to her mother's side.

In the dim light of the moon that seeped in through the windows, he saw a hideous grinning face looming.

The same instant, a stunning blow hit him on the back of the head. He felt himself flying through space. He slammed hard to the floor, rolled over and lay motionless, knocked cold.

WESTON drew a shuddering breath and pushed himself up so that he was sitting on the floor.

Dead silence in the cabin—silence of emptiness and death. The pale green shine of the moon outlined the shattered fragments of tables and chairs, a body lying mute and motionless on the floor. The window was broken. The door hung crazily from one hinge.

Weston struggled up to his feet, went over to the man and turned him onto his back.

It was Makanna. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. Midway of his forehead the lewd symbol of incarnate sin dripped rivulets of blood. . . .

Weston turned away. He went over to the door and stood looking out.

Save for the shrill chirping of the night insects, there was not a sound to be heard. Night rolled around him, night filled with the terror of death. . . .

With the terror of worse than death. . . . The *Sacsahuamans* had been there and gone. Overlooking Weston as he lay hidden by the shadow of the table he had rolled under, they had kidnaped all the others alive.

Weston gritted an oath between his clenching teeth. He drew his belt a notch tighter and stepped out of the cabin. If Mary had gone into the dens of the

yellow men, there was where he was going, too. God willing, he would find her and get her away. . . .

In soundless, rubber-soled shoes, he ran down the trail where he had seen the army of the dead carrying the girls two hours before. A veritable corridor into hell was this path that zigzagged around the feet of crags and pinnacles of the lava badlands, toward the towering barrier of granite cliffs that reared across the end of the valley a couple of miles away.

A rumbling, grinding noise jarred in his ears. The ground commenced to roll and pitch under his feet.

Then he understood. The volcano, after lying dormant for centuries, had recently started into activity again, causing three or four earthquakes a day.

Ten minutes more of running between the jagged lava ridges brought Weston to the open area at the base of the rim wall.

He swung around the corner and halted, staring up at the great rock in front of him.

Up and down the center, a vertical crack fissured the barrier from top to bottom. Down in the village, they said that centuries ago there had been a passage through the wall there.

The earthquake now going on was the most violent that had happened since he had been there. The roar of the boulders grinding down from the overhanging crags was deafening.

Under the terrific wrenching of the earth spasm, the cliff was swaying and jerking on both sides of the crack. Now the two halves of the granite gateway were starting to separate.

The next instant, Weston was racing into the crevice. Half a minute of wild, desperate scrambling, while the hot ground scorched his shoes and the brimstone stench of hell strangled him—then, on either side, he saw the grey walls

swaying and rocking dizzily, starting to pinch together again. He whirled sidewise to make himself narrower. With a desperate lunge he catapulted himself between the rushing slabs of rock.

Head over heels he went flying into the open. Behind him he heard the vindictive grinding roar as the two halves of the cliff crashed shut again.

Gasping for breath, Weston struggled up on to his feet.

Behind him, the mammoth black wall of the rim cliff towered against the stars. A couple of miles ahead, the cone of the volcano etched a jagged saucer into the sky, with the red banners of flame hanging over it like a smear of blood.

FOR a mile or more, the ground rose in a gentle slope. Little by little, as Weston stumbled ahead, a wall steep as the side of a house was looming in front of him, wiping away the stars.

Weston came to the foot of the wall and started to climb, scaling a stairway of steps cut in the living stone, straight up the side of the cliff.

The old Incas had been mountain-top dwellers, he knew. For the sake of safety from their foes, they built their cities on the summits of the steepest peaks that they could find. The way up to these cities was by such stairways as he was climbing now.

Suddenly, Weston froze, a chill tingling down his spine.

Up above, over his head, a face was staring down at him. Lips with a triangular notch slashed out of the middle. . . . Midway of the forehead, the blue, phosphorescent brand-mark. . . .

Beside the face, another one popped into sight. Now three of them, peering down over the edge of the rock like fiends out of the Pit. . . .

Hanging motionless, Weston shot a look back over his shoulder. Behind him,

in the black-oil abyss of gloom, figures came floating upward over the face of the rock. Figures yellow as gold, floating in the air. . . .

Weston sucked an oath through his teeth. Down at the foot of the mountain, the *Sacsahuamans* had let him pass through and then closed in behind him. Up above, green faces of fiends without bodies. . . .

Digging his fingers into the rock, Weston started along. Now the faces had gone. . . .

In a moment, Weston halted and clung, listening. As the wind from the top of the mountain came sucking down, he could hear footsteps—slow, dragging steps of pain and weariness. . . . Then he heard a voice screaming in agony. . . .

Weston gritted his teeth as he started on. The voice was the voice of Mrs. Ross.

The screaming stopped. Step by step, Weston was toiling upward through green silence that swarmed with the filthy, gibbering shapes of fiends. . . .

WESTON put out his hand for a grip on the rock and snatched it away. What he had felt was another hand—a hand whose slim fingers twined around his, tickling his palm, as he touched it.

He pulled himself up a yard further, dug his flashlight out of his rear pocket and thumbed it on.

The hand was there, reaching out, greeting him in terrible, mute irony out of the darkness. A slim, white hand, the fingers glittering with rings.

The beam of the light traveled upward. A bare arm, then a shoulder. . . a head and a face. . . .

Mrs. Ross had been stripped naked. Limp and flaccid, her big, fleshy body lay sprawled in terrible, slack helplessness over the black rocks. Long, ragged shards of flesh like crimson ribbons dangled where her throat had been. . . .

Weston's knees were trembling, his tongue was file-dry against his teeth as he scrambled past the body and went climbing on. Terror dragged his eyes backward over his shoulder. Yellow ghosts with green faces came floating up the face of the stairs at his heels.

Overhead, other faces leered out of the pockets of moonlight as he looked upward. Faces of corpses with the blue brand of sin flaming on their foreheads. Now they were waiting for him. . . .

A yell of agony blurted through Weston's teeth. A streak of fire had blazed over the leg that was stretched out behind him as he pushed himself up the face of the rock.

He yanked up the foot and jerked his head around in the same motion. A yard away, a grinning green face on yellow shoulders was just drawing back out of sight into the darkness.

Weston put his hand down on his leg. From hip to foot, the trousers had been ripped away. The flesh was trickling blood where the raking of a seven-fingered hand had gouged through skin and flesh.

Panting for breath, he raced up the face of the mountain. The yellow men were crowding fast after him now. Their feet made no sounds against the rocks. Over his shoulder, Weston could see their eyes, the fixed, staring eyes of corpses.

Suddenly, Weston stepped up over the edge of the rock and halted. He had reached the top of the mountain.

In the distance, he could see pyramid-shaped roofs of temples and palaces bulking against the stars. Close by were hulks of ruined, flat-topped houses with streets running between them. This was the ruins of Huyanboto, the ancient capital of the Incas. . . .

Weston jumped to one side and bit back an oath. In the dark heap of stone at his side, something had moved. Some-

thing obscene—a dark, formless blot of evil, slipping across the moon. . . .

The next instant, the thing was gone. Somewhere out of the darkness, a cracked, horrible voice chuckled laughter.

Weston shivered and wiped cold sweat off his forehead. The voice had been the voice of a fiend. A voice dripping wickedness and filth; the voice of a thing out of another world. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

City of Fiends

WESTON darted a look back over his shoulder. A hideous green face on yellow shoulders was just pushing up over the edge of the cliff.

His skin scrawling, he whirled and ran.

Just where he was going, he did not know. He was traveling blind into the dead city that somewhere in its foul mazes held Mary Ross. . . .

Weston was laughing crazily as he stumbled along between the black hulks of stone. Down in the village he had sneered superior scorn when the natives had whispered that Tlactloclan and his demon retainers had risen from their graves and peopled the deserted city on the mountain-top again. Now he had seen for himself.

He was in the country of the dead. . . .

Abruptly now, he froze in his tracks. For a moment, he had outrun the yellow things. From somewhere up ahead a scream had rung through the thick silence. Shriek after shriek of frantic, soul-maddened agony in the voice of a girl. . . .

Weston jerked his eyes behind. He croaked out an oath and started running again.

Wall to wall, the grey canyon of the street was crammed with yellow ghosts. Silent as shadows they were rushing upon him. Their seven-taloned hands

dripped spectral fire as they waved them above their heads. Their slashed lips grinned in diabolical, lewd triumph. . . .

Now he was hearing the screams again. The cries were coming nearer. Now he could hear the pattering of bare feet over the stones.

The next instant, a girl swung around a corner and came into sight. She was stark naked. The moonlight showed the dark, crooked rivulets of blood that were trickling down her bosom and legs. Her flaxen hair streamed out behind her as her face strained up toward the sky. She was shrieking steadily, cry after cry, as she came stumbling on—panting, breathless screams of near madness.

Faces were coming down the street after her. Green horrible faces with glazed bulging eyes and lips from which the middle had been slashed away.

Hands were waving out of the darkness. Hands with seven fingers like beasts' talons, talons spectral blue-green in color. Over the girl's head the fingers clutched and writhed like skeleton-claws of demons out of the fiery pit. . . .

With a choking shriek, the girl stumbled and fell. Over her the yellow bodies of the things leaped and swarmed. The sounds that Weston heard made him sick at his stomach. Sounds of talons ripping through flesh. . . .

WESTON mopped cold sweat from his face. The girl had stopped screaming now. The yellow things had swarmed back from her. Abruptly they had disappeared.

Weston crept out of his doorway and went up to her. He recognized her now. She was Pauline, one of the girls from McKey's mine that he had seen kidnaped on the way up from the village.

Where the lashes of rawhide whips had bitten into her bosom and limbs, the flesh hung in crimson ribbons. Between the

soft, ravaged breasts, the brand-mark of incarnate sin pulsed and flamed with blue sulphurous light as if alive.

Weston straightened up. He looked around, snarled an oath and jumped back. Now he could see them—out of the black doorways up and down, the yellow things were leaping. They were rushing down on him, nodding their green faces, flourishing their talons—blue-green, spectral hands pulsing with flame, and dripping blood. . . .

He whirled. Hot, choking gasps of terror whistling between his teeth, he ran as he had never run before. And over his shoulder as he ran, he could see the faces coming after him. . . .

Moment by moment now, the *Sacsahuamans* were flocking thicker. They were swarming the streets on all sides of him. Dodge and sidestep as he would in the jungle of ruined stone, he could not shake them off.

Somewhere ahead in the mazes of empty streets was the palace where Tlactloclan, the monster, laughed wild triumph as he wrung shrieks of agony from tortured bodies. . . . Somewhere in the blind warrens of this cesspool of hell was Mary Ross—lifting her clear blue eyes and her dauntless white chin to the lewd gloating in sadistic eyes. . . .

Winded, Weston was tiring fast. First on one side of the street, then on the other, he was ducking into the black hulks of the ruins, trying to break away from the ring of *Sacsahuamans* that swept him forward. Wherever he turned, yellow figures with green faces and glassy eyes rushed him, driving him back.

Around a corner of the street down which he was fleeing in his stumbling run, Weston saw a red glow spreading out into the darkness. As he came nearer to it, he could make out the shape of a huge rock towering above his head like the front of a skyscraper. A domelike

door, narrowing to a sharp point at the top, opened into the rock. The red light was shining out of the opening.

Ten feet from the doorway, Weston stopped. He looked behind him. The street was solid with the *Sacsahuamans*. Desperately he cast his eyes upward. The face of the rock was sheer as a house wall. Not even a cat could climb it.

The yellow men were coming, their notched faces grinning triumph.

Doggedly, step by step, Weston stumbled on into the cavern. Behind him the yellow men filled the doorway and crowded in.

Now Weston could see the outline of the place—a big, circular chamber with a wall of ragged lava rock curving up to a vaulted roof dozens of feet over his head. In front, over the edge where the sand-covered floor came to an end, red flames were roaring up into a vast, chimney-like opening above.

He looked back again. Soundlessly the yellow things were gliding up through the red shadows of the pit. Mewing, gibbering through their hideous notched lips, they were waving their skeleton talons at him. . . .

Foot by foot they were driving him on toward the brink of the cauldron where the flames of hell billowed and leaped!

WITH a curse of fury, Weston stopped and snatched up a pair of loose rocks from the floor of the cavern. If this was to be his end, he would leave his mark on some of the mocking green faces before he went. . . .

Bellowing strangled yells through his jerking lips, he charged at them, swinging the two rocks like hammers.

The yellow things did not fight back. Like ranks of grain before a wind, they surged backward as he rushed!

In the flickering red light, he could see them circling around the walls on either

side. They were getting behind him. . . .

He whirled and rushed at a knot of yellow shapes. It broke and scattered. As Weston looked the other way, he saw more of them stealing up.

Now the first group were rushing in again. In an instant the two armies of ghosts that he was fighting would have him pinned in between them. . . .

Foaming wild curses, Weston lunged straight at the nearest pack. He hurled his rocks. Whether they landed or not, he could not see.

This time the circle did not give way. Closing ranks, the yellow things rushed.

The picture of the girl from McKey's with her foam-flecked lips and her flesh ripped from her bones burned in Weston's eyes. Curses of utter terror screaming from his lips, he fled toward one of the narrow niches in the rocky wall.

Huddled against the rock like an animal at bay, he looked up at the grinning faces of the demons, graven in caricatures of red and green in the crimson glow—at the hands of men dead a thousand years thrusting out and clutching at him—hands that dripped blue fire from the infernal pit. . . .

He gasped out an oath and jerked his eyes around. The rock behind him was not solid. Now he saw that a narrow niche or crevice opened into it above his head. Face toward the thronging yellow men, he started feeling his way into it backward.

Elbow-wide, the passage zigzagged into the rock. Suddenly, Weston came up against something solid. He felt behind him. A wooden door. . . .

The door was not fastened. He pushed it open and squeezed through. Before shutting it again and going on, he stood an instant, looking back up the passage.

Nothing there. . . The yellow *Sacshuamans* were not coming. . . .

Weston shut the door behind him and swung around. A dim light coming from

somewhere beyond showed the corridor curving away in front of him between the walls. Noiselessly he crept down it.

When but a hundred feet along the passage, Weston stopped. Just ahead of him, he could see that the passage came out into a round chamber—another of the high, vaulted caves blasted out of the mountain rock eons before.

He stepped back into the shadow behind a jutting angle of rock, looked at the scene before him. A slow curse of horror sucked through his lips.

IN THE middle of the sandy floor of the chamber, a fire, on a stone platform like an altar, shed an eddying red glow through the place. At intervals around the walls stood girls, nude, chained to the rock behind by bands of solid gold riveted around their waists. The rosy shine of the flames painted the soft, swelling curves of their breasts and limbs in flickering crimson.

On the sand floor in front of each girl was food and drink. Food that they could look at and thirst for, but never reach. . . .

Back and forth across the floor scuttled figures like huge spiders—old, withered hags, their skin calloused and leathery and wrinkled into folds. Their long, matted hair tossed in wild tangles over their heads and shoulders.

Each of the harpies carried a whip in her hand. A whip with six-foot lash of bullhide, supple and soft as velvet, its tip sharp as a razor.

As they ran from one to another of the girls, the old women would send the long, snaky lashes hissing through the air. Little bleeding notches sprang out where the tips bit like fangs, cutting away patches of skin and flesh.

Now, on the far side of the chamber, a door suddenly opened. A group of figures came running and struggling into the room.

It was four or five more of the old women. They were half dragging, half pushing, two other figures along in their midst. As they came nearer, the light of the altar fire showed Weston the faces of the two captives.

They were Mary Ross and Natalie Summers.

Filthy, clawlike hands were starting to pull the clothes off the girls. Weston saw Mary lash out with her hard little fist, as he roared out a yell and dashed out of the corner. One of the harpies went flying backward and crashed to the floor.

Natalie Summers had jumped into action the same instant as Mary. Athletic, she had grabbed two of the torturers and sent them tumbling head over heels before they realized what was happening.

Weston was sprinting across the floor in flying leaps. The hags heard his feet gritting on the rocks and whirled.

Sin-seamed, horrible faces came leaping to meet him. He grinned savagely as his knuckles crashed home on a yellow-fanged mouth. He saw the spurt of red blood as the harpy's feet left the floor and she went tumbling through the air. Now the others were swarming around. The whips were biting him, cutting his clothes, searing hot flames across his face.

In a moment two more of the women had dragged themselves croaking and yammering out of the battle. There were four of them left. Now they had knives in their hands. . . .

Weston struck out at one snarling face and felt darts of fire sting his shoulder behind. He whirled. A trio of naked figures lunged at his back, knives darting hungry grey tongues.

The others were all over him at once. Foul, grinning things with glaring eyes crushed against him.

He drove out with both fists and sent two more squalling against the rocks.

There were only two of them left now.

Weston made a lunge at one of them, tripped on a rock and went down.

Half stunned by his fall, he whirled over on to his back. As he moved, the two witches leaped at him both at once, knives flashing down.

WESTON shot up both hands. Luck was with him. With each hand he caught one of the down-sweeping wrists, stopping the blows in mid-air.

The weight of the women's bodies brought them both crashing down on him. Over and over the three of them rolled on the floor.

Kicking, screaming, the hags fought like wildcats. Their horrible bodies writhed against his. Their eyes blazed with an insane glare. Their foul talon-like fingers clawed at his throat and eyes. Venom drooled around their champing yellow fangs. Now they were lunging closer. Their teeth snatched at his throat. . . .

With a lunge, Weston whirled so that he was on top. Kneeling, still gripping the women by the throats, he was hammering their heads on the floor. . . .

Dimly, as though from far away, he heard Mary and Natalie gasp out quick, strangled screams. He turned his head.

But too late. Abruptly a big-muscled arm gripped him around the throat. Hands like steel vises clutched him, yanked him to his feet.

The chamber was swarming now with the yellow men. Four of them gripped him by the arms. Others held Mary and Natalie.

In the middle of the floor stood a figure dressed from neck to heels in a robe that flamed with a spectral blue-green light. On his head was a headdress of solid gold in the grotesque design of a serpent coiling around the rising sun.

The face under the golden idol was one such as no living man had worn for a thousand years—broad at the top, taper-

ing to a narrow chin, with forehead sloping back steeply to the roots of the hair.

The long, hooked nose curved down over a big, sensuous mouth. The eyes were fanatical, blazing black. Not a flicker of expression stirred the lips. The big, regally imperious face with its expression of evil hauteur was motionless as though carved from a block of old walnut. Yet a face whose cold, savage cruelty froze Weston's blood.

The figure lifted his hand. Weston saw that he had seven fingers and a sudden light of understanding burst over him.

Tlactloclan—the famed king of the Inca race who had lived a thousand years ago, whose seven-fingered sons worked the mines. . . . The monster of sadistic cruelty whose name the peasants still whispered, white-faced with terror. . .

Tlactloclan turned toward Mary and Natalie. He lifted an arm and muttered half a dozen syllables that clicked like wooden marbles in the tense silence.

Two of the old women that Weston had knocked out but not killed stepped forward. With hideous, clawlike hands, they ripped off the tattered remnants of the girls' clothes.

Weston's fists clenched till the knuckles were white. Never had he looked on anything as exquisitely lovely as Mary Ross' nude body. In this dungeon of lewd shapes, it glowed like a statue of pearly white purity rising out of swirling slime.

Not a muscle of Tlactloclan's face had moved. But a flare of unholy flame blazed in his black-oil eyes. His hand reached out, touching the girl, fingering her limbs and breasts. . . .

A surge of crimson fury boiled in Weston's brain. With a sudden lunge, he wrenched his arms out of the grip of the yellow things. In the same motion, he snatched at the hilt of the big curve-bladed spear that one of them held.

From behind, something cold and hard crashed down on his head. A flood of torturing blue darkness boiled over him as he fell senseless to the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killers of Souls

WESTON opened his eyes. He tried to move, stared blankly an instant and muttered a curse through his dry lips.

He was lying on the floor next to the wall of the cavern. On the opposite side he could see the girls chained to the rocks. Like them, he was shackled to the wall by a gold belt riveted around his waist.

Four other figures were ranged alongside him. Duncan Ross, Macomber, Welch. . . They had been captured alive. . . . Besides them, one other man, at sight of whom Weston stared astonishment. It was Evans, one of the three men of Ross' party who had disappeared four days before. Everyone had taken it for granted that he had been killed in some lonely place in the hills.

Across the room there were two more nude figures chained to the rocks than there had been before—Mary and Natalie Summers. Food and drink stood on the ground in front of them—just out of reach. Little crooked rivulets of dried blood etched crimson zigzags over the smooth whiteness of their bodies. . . .

In the red light of the flames on the altar, Weston could see the girls' faces. The agony of hunger and thirst and flogging had drawn them into stark grey, gasping masks. Breathless moans stirred their lips.

Two of the hags came up. They laughed crookedly as they halted in front of Weston. Their whips unwound, hissed and curled and smoked through the air. Pain like the searing of hot coals burned Weston's body as they bit out little mouthfuls of skin and flesh.

Weary-armed at last, the witches moved along. Straining against his chains, Weston twisted around to Ross, ten feet away at his elbow.

The old explorer had received the same punishment. His flabby, overfat torso was dripping red.

Weston called out to the tortured man. "Will they keep us here until we die?"

Ross' voice as he answered was faint and hoarse with suffering. "What they intend to do with us, I don't know," he said. "But I know about the girls. I overheard some of the women talking. They use a dialect that I understand.

"All those girls, except Natalie and Mary and the one from McKey's, were kidnaped out of various villages. They will be tortured till their spirits are broken and they are ready to give themselves to the yellow men. When that happens they will be taken down and taught the dances. And then when Tlactloclan gives his gang another one of his orgies—"

"And Mary?" Weston said. "Tlactloclan—"

Old Ross ground a curse through his clenching jaws. "Tlactloclan has picked her out for his own particular prize," he said. "When she has suffered with hunger and thirst and pain till she can suffer no more, they will be married—"

Ross broke off abruptly. Fainting, he slumped down motionless in his chains.

A nausea of helpless wrath sickened Weston as he turned away. Mary, her white, pure loveliness to be dragged down to defilement by the horrible cruelty of Tlactloclan. . . . Mary, whom he knew now that he loved, the bride of a monster—a fiend of cruelty incarnated in flesh after a thousand years. . . .

WESTON started at a sound. While he had been gazing across at Mary,

a girl had come into the chamber and stopped before him.

The girl's skin was white as milk; her hair, drawn down tightly around her oval-shaped face, was like burnished copper-bronze. Her eyes were brilliant jade green.

From neck to heels she was clad in a single garment so thin that at first Weston thought it was only a beam of golden sunlight shining around her. Then he realized that it was a robe woven of hair-fine threads of solid gold, so diaphanously sheer that the girl's flesh shone through it like a white blush. So tightly it clung to her that it seemed as though it were her skin, revealing every contour of her voluptuous breasts and arms.

Not a muscle of the girl's face moved as she looked at him. It was the face of a corpse—a face incredibly more beautiful than any living one he had ever seen. The face of a creature too gorgeously beautiful to be real, with the full sensuous lips like a dash of blood across its ivory whiteness.

The girl carried a long black snake-whip in her hand. She swung her arm and sent the lash coiling and hissing through the air.

The razor-sharp fang cracked on Weston's breast, biting out a tiny segment of skin and flesh. Again and again the girl sent the lash whirling to his half-naked body. Blood trickled forth in tiny streams.

The girl's face was motionless as death; but her green eyes were talking to him. Sin, terrible, maddeningly alluring, was calling to him out of the sadistic fires of those green, droop-lidded eyes. . . .

Abruptly the girl turned away. Slowly she started back down the hall toward the door through which she had entered.

Panting curses through his blood-flecked lips, Weston looked down the line of chained men. Other girls had come out into the hall. One of them had halted

in front of each one of the chained male prisoners. While Weston had been getting his flogging, the like was happening to Ross, Macomber, Welch and Evans, the last man at the end of the line. . . .

Hours, Weston had no idea how many, dragged away. From time to time, the hags would come around with their whips and lash the girls. The golden girls came also, and flogged the men.

Two or three times, Weston fainted from weakness and pain. Ross seemed already dead. For a long time he had not moved. Further beyond, Macomber and Welch were writhing and screaming as the whips slowly cut them to pieces. Evans was gone. . . .

Suddenly Weston lifted his head. One of the golden girls was coming into the chamber with a big jar in her arms. She carried a cup—a cup of solid gold.

She came opposite Weston and stopped. She knelt at his side. She poured something out of the jar into the cup and held it to his mouth.

The stuff in the cup smelled like sweet wine. Weston was frantic with thirst. Greedily he sucked down every drop of the pleasant tasting fluid.

The golden girl sat crouched on her knees, watching him. Suddenly she put out her arms. She put her hands on Weston's shoulders. She was drawing him toward her. He could feel her body trembling under the gauzy robe as she pressed him closer.

Weston's brain was reeling. Desperately he fought for mastery over himself. He was being bewitched-hypnotized—charmed by a gorgeously beautiful corpse, whose caress was the blight of horrible death. . . .

The girl lifted her face. Her lips parted. There was mad, terrible invitation in the quivering of her flesh against his.

With a muttered curse, Weston jerked himself out of her hands. He jumped to

his feet and staggered back against the rock.

The girl did not come after him. Savage rage blazed in her jade eyes. Pushing up to her feet, she picked up the whip and started flogging him again.

DOWN the line, Weston saw that the other men had been getting drinks, too. This was the first time that they had been given anything. The girls, though, had received refreshment two or three times since he had come. . . .

Abruptly now, Weston realized that although the girl was still swinging the whip on him, the pain of the flogging was growing less. A feeling like the warm glow of a cocktail was starting to spread over him.

And now something else—something that struck a sudden thrill of terror through him. *He was beginning to like the pain!* Maddening as was the agony of his racking limbs and lacerated torso, a strange, tingling rapture in the suffering of his body was commencing to tingle through him!

The whipping ceased. The golden girl was gone. But across the room, the hags were still going down the line of captive girls with their whips. Most of them still cringed and screamed as the hot lashes seared over their bodies.

But the two on the end of the line leaned forward to meet the blows. Agony too terrible for words racked the girls' faces. Agony—and rapture. Hideous pain—and yet pleasure. Terrible, unholy joy of torture blazed from their eyes.

They were pushing forward against their chains, holding their bodies out—lifting their faces and breasts for the whips to fall on them. . . .

Weston was faint with terror such as he had never dreamed of, even in the face of death. He could feel madness clutching at his very soul.

Here in hell where evil was a solid, incarnate thing, torture and agony were a delight!

Reaching out their arms, the two girls made signs to the hags. They were ready to submit. They wanted to become the slaves of Tlactloclan. They wanted to enter his service in entertaining the workers. . . .

Stepping behind them, the hags unlocked the chains. Taking the girls by the arms, they led them away.

* * *

Weston opened his eyes. More hours had passed. He was lying on the floor of the cave with one of the golden girls bending over him. She was holding one of the golden cups to his lips, forcing the liquid between his teeth. Grabbing the cup, Weston gulped the stuff feverishly to the last drop.

In a moment he felt stronger. An exhilarating warmth spread through his body. He staggered to his feet.

The girl stood opposite him and sent the lash hissing against his chest. A dart of fire shot through him. But he did not mind the pain. *He liked it. He strained against the chains, holding out his body for the blows to punish it.*

Now the music was starting up again. From somewhere close by, the same diabolical, seductive rhythm that he had heard down in the valley. A solid sea of evil seemed to surge in the cavern.

Now it was stealing into his brain. It woke the black hobgoblins and the swart, misshapen things that had been hiding in the dark corners of his soul and sent them prowling abroad, whispering, tempting, suggesting horrible things. . . . A river of swirling, intoxicating sin seethed in his mind, fascinating and charming him, filling him with dark, terrible desires. . . .

He mopped beads of cold sweat off his

face. Not only did he welcome pain now—he longed to become the slave of the golden girl. He was hungry to grovel before her, to toil in the mines, to hold up his flesh to the lashing of the whips—so that afterward he might clasp her in his arms. . . .

Then his eyes fell on Mary Ross. She was feeling the same thing, he could see. The wild light was beginning to burn in her eyes as she stretched her body out toward the whip. . . .

Then Weston clenched his fists till the nails cut into the flesh. With bruised, bloody hands he tore at his chains.

The sight of Mary had done something to him. For an instant it had swept his mind clean of the black things that had swarmed there.

Through a blurred haze of tears, he looked again at Mary. A terrible light of joy burned on her face. She was leaning forward, holding up her bosom to the hissing whip. . . .

Weston beat his fists against the rock. He had had faith in Mary—proudly he had trusted that she would die before she would yield. Now he knew that he was wrong. Torture, death—however agonizing for him and her—he could have endured. But it was not the body alone that Tlactloclan and his yellow crew were murdering in this den where evil was the law—it was the soul as well.

An hour longer in this devilish place, and she would be lost. They would both be lost. With a smile on her face, she would walk to meet Tlactloclan to be his bride. And he, Weston, would look on and be glad. . . .

HE STAGGERED to his feet. On the other side of the room, the hags were coming again, bringing more of the wine. He saw Mary take a cup and lift it to her mouth.

A strangled yell burst from his throat.

"Mary, don't! Don't drink that!"

Mary did not hear. She tipped back her head and drained the cup.

One of the golden girls was coming to Weston. She held out a cup.

Weston took the goblet out of her hands. He laughed and tossed the liquid on the ground.

He got down on his knees. Like a suppliant slave, he groveled before the girl, holding out his arms.

A flare of unholy triumph blazed in the girl's eyes. She stepped behind him and unlocked the chain from the rock. Holding him by one arm, she started leading him away.

As he left the room, Weston looked back over his shoulder. His heart froze. Straining forward against her chains, Mary was holding her body up toward the whip. The horrible light of evil joy flamed still in her eyes.

The golden girl led Weston through a passage in the rocks. She opened a door and pushed him through.

The room on the other side of the door was another big natural cave or chamber formed in the solid rock by the action of time and nature. The walls were covered with sheets of solid gold marvelously scrolled and fretted, rising to a vaulted roof. A dim red light from a fire on a stone altar spread a glow like the dust of powdered blood through the place.

The girl steered Weston across the floor toward a smaller room, like an alcove, that opened out on one side.

He saw then that they were not alone in the room. In little niches around the walls were other couches like the one toward which the girl was drawing him. Men were reclining on the couches—Evans and Peterson, the two men from Ross' camp. And with each of them, one of the golden girls. . .

Weston lay back against the heaped-up pillows on the couch, with the girl bend-

ing low as she sat beside him. The scarlet flame of her lips was like a gash of blood in the dim light. Now he could see what he had been blind to before—the eerie, spectral blue-white brand of sin that pulsed and throbbed on the soft, silken skin between her breasts. . . .

Weston's head had been fairly clear when he had left the torture room. Deliberately he had faked his submission to the girl. It was the one desperate chance that he had to escape—to get free of the chains and save Mary and himself before the sorcery of the sadist den had entirely overcome him. What he would do next, he did not know. The first thing was to get free. Then he would play for the breaks. . . .

On coming into the little room, the girl had given him food and drink. Too late he realized that the wine had been drugged. Now the hideousness of the thing that he had fought against in his chains was creeping over him again. . . .

He lay staring up at the blue-white brand on the girl's breast, while cold terror gripped his soul. Terror of himself, of the black, leering things that were stalking abroad in his heart. Behind them, horror and shame were screaming, pounding his consciousness. But he loved evil—he craved wickedness. He reached up and drew the girl's arms around him—the ivory-white, deliciously rounded arms of sin. . . . He pressed her kisses against his lips—kisses that blighted body and soul with the poison of lingering death. . . .

Then, over the girl's shoulder, Weston caught a flash of movement in the niche where Peterson was.

The girl with him had risen from the couch. Peterson reached out his arms to her. She turned away.

With a stifled cry, Peterson started to his feet. He ran after her. He took a couple of steps, stumbled and fell, his hands clawing at the edge of her robe.

He staggered up to his feet again and swept out his arms. His face was waxy-green. His eyes bulged—the eyes of a dead man, still aflame with terrible longing. . . .

He took one more step. His knees wilted and he fell on his face. He twisted onto his back and lay motionless, staring upward.

Weston gasped in shivering terror. He pushed the golden girl away and staggered to his feet. Death—death in the caresses of the maidens of sin was what waited for him there. . . .

He felt the smooth softness as the white arms of the girl stole around his neck. He felt her figure tremble as it pressed close to him. . . .

WESTON opened his eyes. How long had passed since Peterson had died, he did not know. He had been wandering in a country of horrible dreams, while the girl's hands caressed him.

Now and then, like a fleeting ghost, the picture of Mary's face would flit through his brain. Cold, horrible terror would freeze his soul. He would start up from the couch, beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead.

The next instant, the picture was gone. The girl's hands soothed him as he dropped back, sighing. Little by little, his strength was ebbing away. He saw the black, slimy quicksand of death rising around him, and he was content. . . .

Suddenly, now, he started and lifted himself up on his elbow. The red light on the altar out in the big room was beginning to blaze more brightly. Looking out through the wide, arched doorway, he could see figures gathering there. Rows of yellow men with green, notched faces standing against the walls. . . . And down at the far end, Tlactloclan, the king, sat on a raised throne of massive metal that blazed with dazzling radiance.

Up at the far end of the long chamber,

a girl came in, alone. Slowly she was walking across the floor toward the throne of Tlactloclan.

Tall, regally beautiful, she was dressed in a flowing robe of spun gold that clung to her like a silken sheath. Bare arms outstretched, she held her hands out to Tlactloclan as she moved forward.

She turned her head and Weston saw her face. It was Mary. Now she was walking up to Tlactloclan. . . .

At sight of her something seemed to explode inside him, sweeping his brain clear of the black swirling river of sin. Sweat of terror sprang out on his face. Terror worse than the fear of death—terror of Mary clasped in those hideous arms. Terror that he himself might sit there with the golden girl, looking on, and do nothing to save her.

Tlactloclan was standing over Mary now. A gloating smile blazed in his black oily eyes. He had undone her dress. He was just slipping it down off her shoulders. . . .

A blistering curse gritted through Weston's lips. With a sweep of his arm he shoved back the golden girl and lunged to his feet.

Out through the wide arched doorway off the alcove room he went, tore into the main hall. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw ranks of yellow and green figures standing motionless with astonishment as he raced up the middle of the long room.

At the gritting of his feet on the floor, Tlactloclan jerked his eyes around, startled. Weston's body shot into the air in a tiger-plunge. His outlashing fist crashed flush on the point of the king's jaw.

Weston snarled savage relish as he saw the god's feet fly out from under him and his form stretch its length on the floor. Gripping Mary by the arm, he pushed her behind him and whirled about.

All up and down the big chamber behind him, the *Sacsahuamans* were charg-

ing forward. Against the wall behind Tlactloclan's throne stood one of the curve-bladed spears—like grass sickles lashed to poles—that Weston had seen some of the yellow men carrying. He grabbed it and whirled.

None of the yellow men carried weapons. They had come to an orgy of pleasure, not to a battle.

Weston waited till the first knot of plunging forms was close upon him, then lunged out with the spear.

He aimed not at their necks, but at their stomachs. The wicked sickle-shaped blade raked their bowels, literally ripping them open. Three of them Weston dropped with his savage strokes before the others halted, surged backward in terror.

For an instant now, the floor around Weston and Mary was clear.

"Now's our chance," he gasped.

He whirled, amazement in his face. Instead of coming with him, Mary had pulled away.

Gripping her again, he started swiftly toward the open door opposite them at the end of the hall. Furiously, she held back, slashing her finger-nails across his face.

Weston followed her gaze. He husked an oath of sudden understanding.

Mary was looking over his shoulder at Tlactloclan, just rising from the floor. A light of longing blazed in her eyes.

With a prayer on his lips and horror in his heart, Weston swung his arm around Mary's waist. He lifted the kicking and screaming girl off her feet.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bride of Death

THE chamber behind Weston was buzzing like an angry beehive as he sprinted across the floor toward the door. When he was ten feet from it, two snarling green faces leered out of the opening.

Yelling like a madman, he lashed the

curve-bladed spear at their stomachs. As a flood of crimson belched out of the ripped flesh. He dodged around them and into the opening.

For perhaps a hundred yards, he raced on through the near-darkness of the rock-floored passageway. He turned a corner and stopped. Three more of the yellow things were coming to meet him. In their spectral blue talons they carried curve-bladed spears. . . .

Weston set Mary down and pushed her behind him. Crouched half to the ground, he rushed, swinging his own spear.

One of the things he got in the stomach, the other two in the eyes, before they could turn and run. . . .

He picked Mary up again and started on. Kicking, screaming and scratching, the girl was fighting in a frenzy of rage. Her eyes blazed with a maniacal glare. Her nude white body thrashed and strained in his arms.

Deep into the black bowels of the hills the passage curved away. . . . Now a thin red light shone ahead. It grew stronger as Weston went on. A score of yards further on, he came out in another vaulted chamber.

This one was smaller than the audience room that he had just left. Up through a hole in the middle of the floor the red flames of the volcano lapped and flickered like companies of eddying crimson ghosts.

The blaze glinted on yellow blocks that stood piled against the walls. Weston moved closer and muttered an oath.

Gold—row after row of ingots of solid gold! As far as his eye could penetrate the dim light, pile upon pile of virgin gold!

His breath choked with awe. The treasure room of the Incas—here were the hordes of precious metal that the ancient kings and priests had dug from the mines centuries before—here were the fabled

treasures that the wealth-hungry Spaniards had hunted for in vain. . . .

The run and the battle had left him faint. Mary had stopped fighting now. He set her down on a rock and sank down beside her.

Abruptly Weston caught his breath. Figures were moving behind him. Lewd, yellow ghosts, gliding like specters of sin through the red shadows. First one of them—then three—then a dozen.

Weston jumped to his feet. With both hands he grabbed Mary. He swept her off the floor and swung her over his shoulder.

He was running now. Panting with weariness, he was racing around the curving wall of the gold room, looking for a way out.

He stopped. There was no other way out. He was trapped in a dead alley. . . .

BACK in the far corner of the cave, Weston set Mary down on the floor against the rocky wall. Silent, tense, she crouched, glaring up at him out of eyes venomously murderous as a snake's.

He swung around. The yellow men were close upon him now. Squat, muscular bodies swarming against the lurid glare of the fire, arms waving, hideous notched lips grinning with blood-lust. . . .

A few of them had knives. The others were bare-handed. Weston understood why. They had been ordered to take him alive. Take him alive and give him back to the torture. . . .

He steeled himself for a rush. He stood motionless. Abruptly the pack had drawn back, leaving an opening before the entrance.

Beyond, at the door of the chamber, stood a tall figure in a robe of dazzling blue-white. Tlactloclan. . . .

Now Mary had seen him. She jumped to her feet.

Slowly Tlactloclan came forward. He

raised his arms and muttered dry syllables that clicked like wooden balls in the roar of the flames.

Weston gasped out a cry. His knees melting under him, he groveled backward against the rock.

From somewhere in the distance, the music was coming through the long passages. The unholy, terrible rhythm that called to his soul, whispering lewd suggestions, setting the hunger for wickedness raging in him again.

Clenching his teeth, Weston beat his hands against the rock. Bit by bit he felt himself slipping. He thought he had fought the thing down, mastered it—but he had not. Love of sin surged in him like a mounting flame.

Not a muscle of Tlactloclan's face moved; but a smile of sadistic triumph blazed in his eyes. With one uplifted arm, he beckoned.

For a moment, Weston had forgotten Mary. Now he heard the pattering of her feet on the rocks, behind him. Her white body leaped out of the shadows as she started to run past him, to Tlactloclan.

Once again, as it had done before, the sight of Mary running to Tlactloclan seemed to sweep back the tide of evil that boiled in Weston's brain. With a strangled yell, he whirled out his arms. He caught Mary around the waist and pulled her back. He tripped on a rock and they both went down.

He heard Mary snarl like a cat. One of the yellow men had dropped his knife. The blade glinted under Mary's hand. She snatched it up. As he struggled to get back to his feet, she drove it hard and straight at his heart.

The point glanced against a rib and ripped a long, bleeding gash up his side. As he gasped and fell backward, Mary leaped to her feet. Pushing himself up on his elbow, Weston saw her flying across the floor toward Tlactloclan.

A BLAZE of crimson rage exploded in Weston's brain. Teeth clenched, he staggered to his feet. He stooped and snatched up a rock from the floor of the cave. Stumbling, wavering from side to side, he charged at Tlactloclan.

The king of the Incas had reached out and taken Mary into his arms.

He snarled a curse and dropped his hand to a pocket in the side of his robe. He was too late. Weston whirled up the rock and brought it smashing down on top his head! Tlactloclan dropped like a shot dog and lay motionless.

Weston dropped on his knees at Tlactloclan's side. He thrust his hand into the side pocket in the phosphorescent robe. The thing he pulled out was a big, blue automatic.

Whirling, Weston slipped the safety catch. Cursing grim relish, he blasted streams of hot steel at the yellow things that had started to crowd, yammering around him.

In a moment, the cave was empty. The *Sacsahuamans* did not relish the kiss of smoking metal. . . . He laughed wildly. They were human after all. . . .

With both hands, now, he tugged at the immobile, wickedly handsome mask that covered the face of the man on the floor. The mask came away. In the dim light, Weston bent and peered at the face underneath.

"Porcas!"

Weston snarled the word between his teeth as he gazed down at the man who was just beginning to groan and stir.

Thinking a moment, he lifted the man's body and pulled off the robe of phosphorescent silk. Then he sat waiting and watching while the sadist recovered from his moment's unconsciousness. As Porcas pushed himself up and stared dizzily around, Weston jammed the snout of the gun in his ribs.

"The game's up, Porcas," he snapped.

"I'm going to kill you. But first we'll spread the cards on the table. . . . I've been pretty thick. I ought to have known—I ought to have realized that you were the only man around here with enough intelligence to have staged a show like this.

"You're a good explorer, all right—you actually found the way to get over the mountain rim and up in here. You wanted to get hold of this Inca gold, and so you combined business with pleasure—what you would call pleasure.

"You organized things on a big scale. You kidnaped the men and the girls in different villages around. You worked on them with your torture till their spirits were broken. That wine was drugged, of course. It was a drug that dulled the will power and stimulated the sex instinct as well. . . . The music, brought in at the right time, added to the general effect. Some of the yellow men you had to work in the mines, the others were your guards and assistants. The hags and the golden girls were women that you caught and trained for the parts. These rooms and chambers are the ones that old Tlactloclan actually used, I suppose. . . ."

Weston pointed at one of the man's hands, stretched out on the rock.

"Five fingers—with the other two made of steel and fastened on with straps," he sneered. "And all the rest of your green-faced devils the same. The blue-green hell light was put on with phosphorescent paint. . . ."

Sweat was streaming down Porcas' face. He scrambled to his knees. Wringing his hands, he was slobbering from his twitching lips in terror.

"For God's sake, have mercy!" he whined. "Do not kill me and I will help you get out of here. I will do anything you say. . . ."

Weston looked around at Mary. All the time he had been talking, he had held

the girl gripped by one arm. She crouched on the rocks, straining away from him. Her eyes blazed with mad fire. Her foam-edged lips drew back from her teeth in an animal snarl.

"I'll trade with you, Porcas," Weston said at last. "Do two things for me, and I'll leave you to the rats to kill. . . . Tell me how to cure her of this thing that you've done to Mary—and tell me how to get out of this place. No—take us out yourself. . . ."

PORCAS nodded eagerly. He felt in his pocket and pulled out a small bottle which he handed to Weston.

"That liquid in there is an antidote for the drug," he said. "A single sip of it will cure her. . . ."

Weston took the phial. "And now how do we get out of this hole?"

"It is most simple," Porcas said. "Follow back the same trail down over the stairs that you climbed up by. Cross the level ground to the foot of the rim wall. You will find a gully up which there is a trail. This path leads up over the top of the cliff.

"At the end of the trail on the other side, where the sheer cliff begins, there is a rope ladder hitched to the rocks. It is what we have used to go in and out with. I kept a man in the gully to pull the ladder up when we had gone out and wait till we came back, when he would let it down again. You can find it without any trouble and climb down it to the foot of the cliff—"

Porcas broke off abruptly. Weston muttered an exclamation and whirled around.

With a sudden, savage lunge, Mary had jerked her arm out of his grip. On hands and knees she made a dive for the knife that lay ten feet away on the stones.

Out of the corner of his eye, Weston saw Porcas leap to his feet as he whirled

from him to the girl. The mad professor swung a vicious blow at Weston's head. It landed glancingly. Weston lost his balance and fell over backward. Porcas sprinted down the passage and out of the chamber.

Weston grabbed Mary's arm and pried the knife from her fingers. Gripping her by the shoulders, he held the screeching girl's head back while he forced a few drops of the liquid from the phial between her teeth.

In a moment she stopped fighting. She stood staring up at him, a dazed expression clouding her face. Trembling from head to foot, she passed her hand over her eyes.

"What—what happened, Bill?" she gasped. "I feel sick—terribly sick. . . ."

"Take it easy, dear," he soothed. "You were drugged. Porcas did it all. I got an antidote from him that brought you out of it. While you were trying to stick the knife into me, he skipped."

The girl glanced down at her uncovered body and her face flushed crimson.

"What are we going to do now?" she gasped. "What about father—and the others?"

"They're somewhere back there in that hell-hole," Weston said grimly. "We're going to get them out. . . ."

"How can we?" Mary shuddered. "The *Sacsahuamans* will kill us. . . ."

Weston bent to kiss her.

"I've got a scheme. . . ."

Stooping, he picked up the robe that he had stripped off Porcas, and pulled it on over his shoulders. He fitted the mask to his face and set the golden emblem of the serpent coiling around the rising sun on his head.

He took Mary's arm.

"Let's go, sweetheart," he said.

LEADING Mary beside him, Weston traveled back down the succession of

passages in the rock that he had raced through in getting up to the gold room.

For the first few rods, they met no one. Then the yellow men began to appear, first singly, then in groups.

At sight of them, Mary shivered and squeezed closer to Weston. On seeing the royal robe and headdress approaching, the *Sacsahuamans* stood awesomely to one side. But seemed to suspect something wrong. Instead of going on about their business after Mary and Weston had passed, they swung around and started to follow them.

In a minute, a dozen or more of the ghastly green faces were trailing behind. Looking back, Weston could see their notched lips writhing in wordless mutterings of suspicion. Their long, curve-bladed spears blood-red in the flames.

Mary's teeth were chattering as she shuddered closer to Weston. "They know you're not Tlactloclan," she whispered.

Weston pressed her arm without speaking. The shadows of death were drawing around them. . . .

In a moment more, the passage widened and came out into the big audience hall. The chamber was buzzing with excitement. Groups of the *Sacsahuamans* were running around, clashing their sickle-bladed spears.

As Weston and Mary appeared in the doorway, every form in the hall froze motionless. Slowly, Weston moved forward. He lifted one arm and waved it in signal of dismissal.

The yellow things did not obey. Instead of scattering, they crowded forward. In a moment, Weston and Mary were jammed in the center of a ring of silent, hideous green faces and waving spears.

"They're waiting for me to say something to them, the way Porcas would," Weston muttered to Mary. "And I don't savvy the lingo—"

Weston could see the girl's breast rising

and falling. She was gritting her teeth to keep from screaming. One of the torture hags had pushed up, cackling laughter and fingering her whip. Mary gasped out a cry and jumped behind Weston.

He kept Mary behind him as he pushed his way through the crowd. He was heading across the hall toward the wide doorway which led into the torture room.

The yellow men were crowding closer, with every step. They shoved their hideous green faces up close to his, peering into his eyes. Weston knew that it was only a matter of seconds now before something would happen to explode the suspense. And then the glittering blades of the spears would come ripping down. . . .

Half a dozen steps more took him to the door of the torture room. Over the heads of the crowd, he could see Welch, Macomber and Ross, and Natalie Summers, still chained to the rocks.

He spat an oath through his teeth. Blood-laced, naked bodies, moaning, writhing with agony. . . .

At Weston's side, Mary screamed. He whirled around.

A grinning giant of a *Sacsahuaman* had suddenly grabbed her arm. His eyes blazing, he was yanking her toward him.

A haze of red fury boiled in Weston's brain. His fist shot out.

The smash caught the yellow thing on the chin. He croaked out a grunt as his feet left the floor. He went spinning head over heels.

Weston grabbed Mary's arm and pulled her close to him. The jig was up now, he knew. And suddenly he realized how the *Sacsahuamans* had known that he was not Tlactloclan. They had looked at his hands. He had five fingers instead of seven. . . .

For an instant there was dead silence in the torture room. Weston stood with his arm around Mary, facing the pack of snarling green faces that ringed them

around. Mary's white, quivering face was turned up to his.

"Bill—you've got the knife. Kill me," she gasped. "Kill me before they touch me again. . . ."

Out from under the robe Weston pulled the knife that he had taken away from Mary back in the gold room. Gripping it, he bent and kissed her. She clasped her arms around his neck and smiled.

"Do it now, Bill—while I am looking at you," she whispered.

WESTON'S heart was like a dead thing inside him as he swung up the knife. Then abruptly he froze.

A figure in shimmering robe, mask and headdress had just come into the torture room through one of the side doors. Somewhere, Porcas had got himself a new set of regalia. . . .

His arm shot up, pointing at Weston and Mary. Half a dozen syllables rattled from his lips.

A wave rippled through the ring of yellow shapes. Behind Weston, a hand shot up and wrenched the knife from his grip. Over his head, a forest of seven-fingered talons, spectral blue-green and dripping blood, clutched like fangs.

The crowd had jammed between him and Mary, forcing them apart. He heard her voice in a scream of terror as he dropped his head and shot forward.

Taking the ring of yellow men in front of him by surprise, Weston crashed into them in a wild football plunge. He snarled grim relish through his grinding teeth as he felt the bodies go stumbling and staggering out of his way.

His hands were snatching, tearing, ripping, as he lunged ahead. Where they touched, yellow things fell back gasping, blood spurting. . . .

The next instant, he was through. Ten feet in front of him, Porcas was just

slipping his hand beneath his robe.

With a blistering yell, Weston shot all the strength of his legs into a murderous flying tackle. He heard a swishing grunt as his head crashed home in the pit of Porcas' stomach.

As the sadist went staggering backward to the floor, Weston yanked the robe from his shoulders. His hand shot beneath and grabbed the fingers that were fumbling for the gun.

Weston braced himself and twisted the hand in a wristlock. Porcas screamed. Weston heard the clang of the gun on the floor and whirled to snatch it up.

With the butt glued in his fingers, he spun around to where Porcas was stumbling to his feet. At two yards distance, he threw up the gun and jerked the trigger.

A round purple spot jumped out between the frozen eyes of Porcas' mask. The man who posed as Tlactloclan staggered a step forward and then slumped, fell forward on his face.

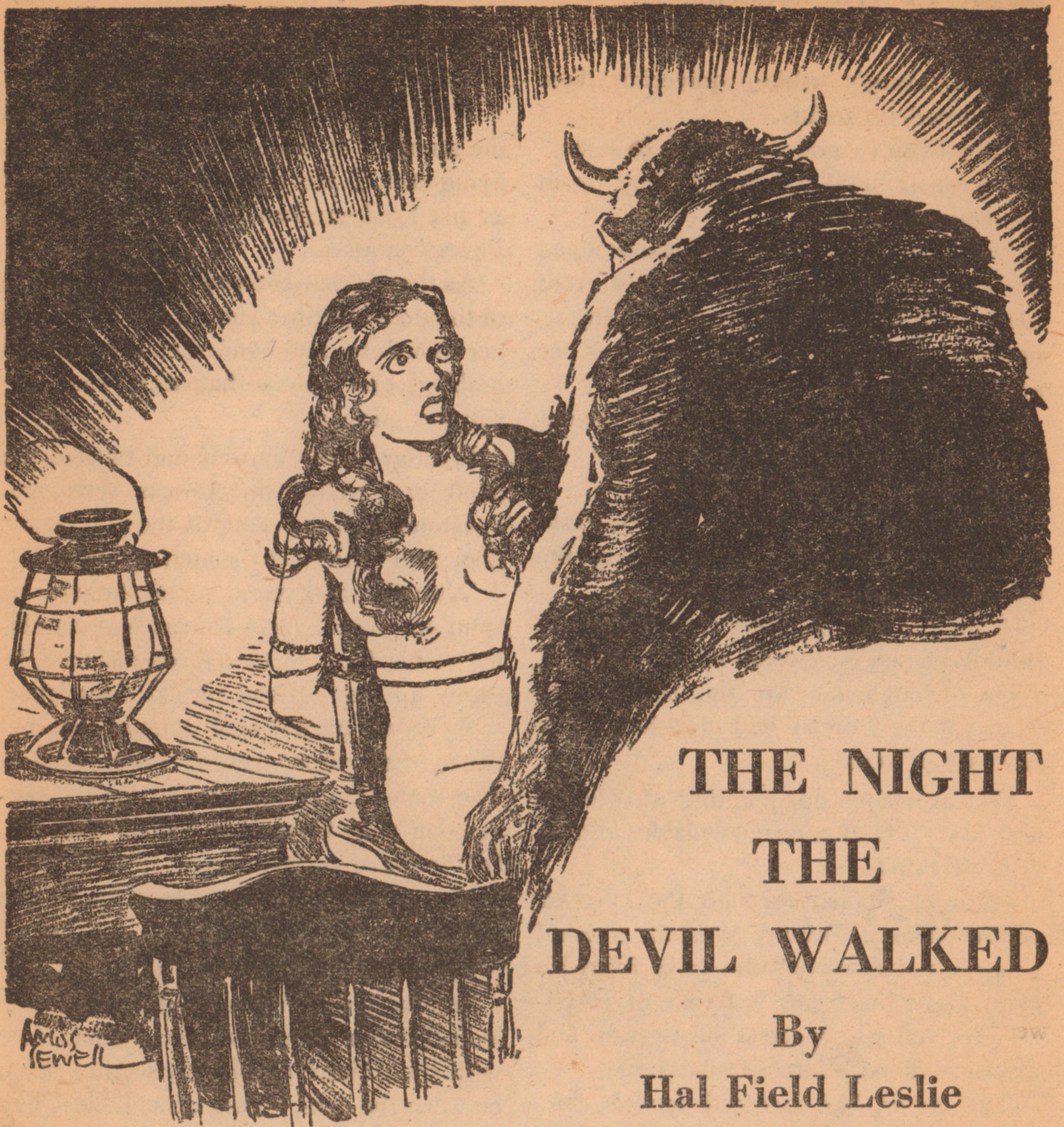
Weston jumped to his side. With one sweep, he ripped away the mask and crown from his head.

As the yellow things nearest Porcas looked down at his swarthy, human face with the rivulet of blood trickling down between the eyes, a gasp of soundless awe seemed to sweep over them. Yammering, they backed away. Standing beside Porcas' motionless form, Weston blasted the circle from end to end with smoking lead. The slow retreat turned to riot. The room was cleared of Tlactloclan's henchmen.

Weston ran over to where Mary lay half fainting on the floor. He stooped and lifted her into his arms.

"It's all over dear," he whispered. "Your father and the others are alive. Porcas has told us how to get home. . . ."

Mary looked up at him and smiled. She lifted her arms and clasped them tightly around him. He kissed her. . . .



THE NIGHT THE DEVIL WALKED

By
Hal Field Leslie

Time after time, through the years, the Devil had stalked that lonely New England region—sacrificing girls and young women in a savage, fiendish rite. Then Jim Hollister saw him face to face—while pretty Ora Carew prayed to be spared from becoming Satan's plaything. . . .

A DEFINITE uneasiness was growing in Jim Hollister as he felt his way along the lonely windings of the pitch-black road.

Never had he encountered a night so utterly dark and soundless as this August night which lay so like a smothering blanket upon the remote New England countryside.

No slightest whisper of breeze was

astir. The air was sultry, breathless, oppressive with the threat of coming storm; it was like a giant hand pressed down upon the gasping earth, squeezing human skulls until they seemed too small to hold the brain. . . .

Suddenly—so suddenly as to halt Jim Hollister dead short in his tracks, and set the small hairs along the back of his neck erect in a crawling prickle—the impene-

trable blackness beyond the road's edge spewed a slobbering dribble of witless laughter.

Hard upon that drooling laughter the darkness took voice—loosely mouthed words, half-mumbled and half-chanted:

"Jest the kind of a night fer the devil to be prowlin'! Jest the kind of a night—"

"Hush yer fool mouth!" a second voice cut in, a little muffled, but harsh and commanding. "Git them idears out of yer head and haul yer carcass inter the house!"

Again that slobbering dribble of laughter, followed by the sound of shambling feet dragging reluctantly across a threshold; the reluctant closing of a door, and a bolt shot home. Silence . . . and then a sudden thin blade of lamplight cutting the outlines of an ill-fitting window-shade.

Thunder growled ominously in the far distance. For a moment, Jim hesitated; then he turned his weary steps toward the lighted window—for here at last was promise of shelter and a bed for the night.

He reached the building's front, located the closed door by sense of touch. His knuckles rapped a sharp tattoo on rough, weathered panels.

The summons evoked an immediate stir of movement within the lonely farmhouse: the sound of heavy boots shambling across a bare board floor; the sound of a bolt withdrawn. The door opened, spilling yellow lamplight outward.

On the threshold stood a squat mountain of gross flesh, clad in a buttonless gingham shirt and soiled overalls. The smoky lamp held high in one hairy paw revealed a gargoyle countenance—enormous ears flanking a bullet-shaped head; a tangle of sandy hair growing low on a sharply retreating forehead; a bulbous nose with wide-flaring nostrils; protruding rabbit-like teeth set in a loose-lipped mouth; pale, round eyes staring owlishly from beneath hairless brows.

The 'creature's entire appearance betrayed a definite lack of normal human intelligence; plainly enough he was a half-wit.

"Who's thar, Lem?" The same harsh voice Jim had heard from the roadway, came now from somewhere within the upper regions of the house. "Who is it?"

"Dunno," responded the half-wit. His pale eyes peered unblinkingly at Jim. "Stranger, I reckon."

Jim's ears caught a muffled oath. It was quickly followed by the heavy clamor of booted feet hurriedly descending some inner stairway, making toward the open door.

THE newcomer ranged himself alongside the half-wit on the threshold; stood there, a gaunt grim figure with a double-barreled shotgun held at ready, eyeing Jim with cold hostility.

"What yer want?" he demanded harshly. "Speak up!"

"I'm looking for a place to stay tonight," responded Jim. "If you've got a spare bed—?"

"Yer can't put up here," the man with the shotgun declared. "We don't take in no strangers."

"But it's going to storm," Jim protested. "The batteries of my flashlight gave out an hour ago, and—"

"Can't help it," the other interrupted stonily. "We don't take in nobody—not this time o' year!"

"Why not?" Jim demanded. "I'm no tramp—I'm a city bank teller, spending my vacation on a hiking trip here in the country. I'll pay you a fair price for the shelter of your roof."

Slimy laughter dribbled from the loose lips of the half-wit. "Ain't no use arger-in' with my brother Dave," he mouthed. "Dave's smart. He knows the kind of a night the devil likes fer prowlin'! Jest this kind of a night—"

"Shet yer mouth, Lem!" the man with the shotgun snarled; then he swung the menacing twin muzzles of the weapon fair on Jim. "And you, stranger—git goin'! *Git, I say!*"

For a moment Jim's steady grey eyes remained locked with the hostile, glinting orbs above the gun barrels.

"You're a hospitable cuss, aren't you!" he flung out contemptuously. And without further word, he turned abruptly and swung away along the dim pathway of yellow lamplight toward the road.

Behind him, the door of the farmhouse slammed shut upon the mumblings of the half-wit. . . .

Doggedly, Jim pursued his way along the pitch-black road. So intense was the darkness, that he could not perceive the substance of his own hand held experimentally close before his eyes. Nor could he remotely guess how far ahead might lie another human habitation.

His thoughts, however, were less upon the prospect of a wet and lonely night in the open than upon the stubborn inhospitality of the man with the double-barreled shotgun—and upon the half-wit's mouthings about the prowling of the devil.

Could there be, Jim grimly asked himself, some grain of truth in that incredible legend upon which his mind had been fixed when halted so abruptly by that slobbering laughter from out the dark?

He had heard the gruesome tale no more than three hours ago—heard it at the edge of nightfall, from the ghoulishly relishful tongue of a crossroads store-keeper:

"Allus on a night like this'n' is goin' to be, the devil he does his prowlin'. Ain't nobody ever seen him, but it's *him* all right! And allus he takes a girl, or a young woman—ketches 'em alone in the house, or mebbe walkin' on the road. Their bodies is allus found miles away from where they was took, with their

throats tore somethin' awful! And allus nearby is them queer tracks of his'n—one naked foot, like a man's, and t'other a split hoof! Tracks that can only be follered a little way's afore they peter out in thin air. . . ."

Incredible, fantastic—yet somehow the thing had managed to lay strong hold upon Jim Hollister's imagination.

So much so, that his usually steady nerves began to react queerly to the utter silence of this huge dark night enfolding him. The chance impact of his boot against an unseen stone was enough to tighten every fiber of his stalwart body. And a dozen times he caught himself pausing to listen, almost with bated breath, for—he knew not what!

HE could not manage to shake away the strangely persistent feeling that this black and breathless night was charged not alone with the threat of storm, but with forces sinister and wholly evil. . . .

Distant thunder growled with increasing frequency. Occasionally, a faint and ghostly glimmer of lightning swept across the sky. Jim tried to quicken his pace; velvet chains of darkness held him back.

At length the road entered a stretch of gloomy woodland. Jim could sense on either hand the crowding presence of unseen trees. In his nostrils was the dank warm smell of forest mold—odor of death and decay. Suffocating silence reigned supreme.

Suddenly that silence was broken by the faintest of sounds—a sound like the whispering of leaves in soft wind. Jim stiffened in his tracks, listened breathlessly. The sound came again, from a point a little way ahead and to the left of the road. Unmistakably it was the rustle of leafy underbrush—yet there was no breeze astir!

For a long moment, Jim stood utterly

motionless, listening. Reason told him that that faint rustling marked the stealthy progress of nothing more menacing than some shy forest creature—a softly treading deer, perhaps. Yet somehow that explanation failed to satisfy him. . . .

He stood listening awhile, but the sound did not come again. Finally he resumed his way. And to quiet jumpy nerves, he fished a cigarette from the breast-pocket of his khaki jacket, jammed it between his lips. He struck a match; but before he drew smoke, he cupped the small flame in his hands and threw its yellow glow about him.

Nothing visible but the dim, ghostly shapes of trees. His glance fell upon the roadway at his feet—and a startled gasp died half-born in his throat. While the match burned unheeded against his fingers, he stared with shocked amazement at that incredible trail in the dust of the road.

It was the trail of a two-legged creature. One foot, the left, was a naked human foot. *The other was a cloven hoof!*

Sting of the burning match jerked his mind free from its whirling chaos of astonishment. Hurriedly he pinched out the flame, and blackness engulfed him like a palpable tide. He stood listening. No sound except the distant muttering of thunder broke the stillness of the woods.

Jim was tingingly certain those bizarre tracks were the marks of the creature he had heard rustling through the underbrush. Was the thing stalking him? He wondered—playing with him cat-and-mouse!

Blood pounding in near panic at his temples, he crept forward along the inky road. Nothing stirred the underbrush on either hand. . . .

Of a sudden his toe encountered some yielding yet substantial obstacle. He tripped, fell sprawling in the dust of the road. Nerves leaping, he scrambled to his

feet; stood there rigid, breathless, not daring any move. Silence like the hush of death lay all about.

What was the thing that had tripped him? A stone? A log across the road? It had felt like neither one. A tingling curiosity at length impelled him to crouch down, send a questing hand through the darkness.

HIS fingers encountered human flesh, the smooth skin of a feminine cheek—and the chill of death was there! With shaking fingers he struck a match. Its yellow glow revealed the body of a young woman, clad in a simple gingham dress. Her dead white countenance was plainly marked with ghastly fear. The large, dark eyes were wide and staring; they seemed to mirror now the utter terror that must have possessed her last living moment.

Just beneath the left ear, at the angle of the jaw, was a small, ragged wound, deep torn to the jugular vein. Strangely, the surrounding area of marble white skin was devoid of any crimson stain. Nor was there a single smear of blood upon the gingham frock, nor sign of any pool upon the ground.

The match burned out. Jim lit another, held it for a closer look at that gruesome wound. And his mind rocketed into unbelieving horror, for the edges of that wound bore marks that unmistakably suggested the ravages of teeth—teeth that were broad and sharp! Teeth that were wholly unlike the fangs of any animal known to him!

Shaken to the very marrow, he lurched to his feet. Caution flung now to the winds, he plunged recklessly onward along the black road, crashing bushes, stumbling blindly, but making headway. . . .

At length his ears caught the soft gurgling of water among unseen stones. Abruptly the road took sharp descent, irresistibly quickening his pace. A mo-

ment later his heels were thudding on loose planks above the invisible stream.

Simultaneously two distinct sounds came from out the forward darkness. One was the muffled snore of an approaching motor car. The other, echoing back from the far end of the bridge, suggested running feet—yet the sound was most peculiar.

Thud-clop. . . . Thud-clop! Briefly and hollowly, the bridge planks gave back that queer rhythm of oddly matched footfalls; then abruptly the soft earth of the road received and blanketed the sound.

At that same instant the uneasy beam of the approaching car's headlamps struck down athwart the far end of the bridge. Here the road bent sharply to the right and upward; and here, briefly limned against a background of illumined bushes, Jim glimpsed the hurrying owner of those mismated feet.

An incredible figure, taking the upward bend at a swift ungainly run! Short, squat, cut to the pattern of a man, it was—yet Jim could have sworn the creature had horns, and a swinging tail!

Hard upon its disappearance around the bend came the sudden grinding squeal of car brakes desperately applied, and a woman's scream of fright—a scream that swiftly was lost in a tremendous rending crash of glass and metal.

Black silence fell like a blow—silence that was tortured by a faint low moaning from the direction of the crash.

Before Jim could move, a lurid flash of lightning lit the woods and the empty bend of road at the bridge end. Through the succeeding blackness writhed a single blood-chilling scream—a woman's scream, keyed to a pitch of utter terror.

With desperate haste Jim lunged on across the bridge. Thunder crashed as he plunged around the upward bend of the road. Again came vivid lightning. By its brief quivering glare, Jim saw a small

roadster half wrapped around the trunk of a roadside pine, saw the white huddle of a woman prone at the road's edge; saw crouched beside her, ugly horned head outthrust and clawing hands tearing at the neck of her dress, that hideous creature with the mismated feet!

Horror drove a wild cry from Jim's panting mouth. Onward he lunged through thunderous darkness.

Before he could reach his objective, there came another flash of lightning. It revealed a road empty except for the white figure of the prostrate woman. The creature with the cloven hoof had vanished.

IN a haste of fearfulness, Jim struck a match. The woman's dress—white-starched uniform of a nurse—was torn half away from her upper body. But there was no mark of violence upon her throat, or upon the smooth white firmness of her rounded breasts. Apparently she had fainted from sheer terror.

Jim struck another match, swiftly inspected the wrecked roadster. No sign of any other occupant. Upon the crumpled seat lay a nurse's blue cape. He picked it up, discovered beneath it a small nickeled flashlight.

Eagerly he seized the flashlight, drove its tiny beam searching all about. There was no sign of the horned terror. The soundlessness of its going argued one of two things to Jim: either it could see perfectly in the dark, or its mismated feet were upon thoroughly familiar ground. . .

He swung to the prostrate woman, allowing the light full play upon her. She was young—no more than twenty-two or twenty-three, and slenderly beautiful, with a riot of pale, gold hair framing her delicately oval face.

He knelt beside her; he felt, beneath the silky firmness of her breast, the strong and steady beat of her heart. He slid his arms beneath her, got to his feet. And

as he did so, a brilliant flash of lightning swept across the sky. Thunder crashed. A tremor shook her lithe, young body. And of a sudden she screamed in terror, and fought to free herself from him.

"It's all right," he told her quietly, over and over. "It's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of. It's gone, I tell you."

At length his quiet words prevailed. She grew calmer, ceased to struggle. But terror still had hold upon her.

"Where is it?" she gasped. "That awful thing I saw in the light of my car—the thing that dragged me from the seat after I crashed?"

"It's gone," Jim repeated. "I think I frightened it away. Are you hurt?"

"No. I was badly shaken, dazed. And then that hideous thing—" She began to shudder.

"Let's not talk about it," Jim said hastily. "Er—you're a nurse, aren't you?"

"Yes. District nurse. Ora Carew. . . . Who are you?"

Jim told her briefly. For a moment she clung to him like a frightened child. Then:

"You can put me down," she said. "I'm all right now."

High above in the inky void, the storm was massing its forces for assault. No rain was falling yet, but the lightning was coming with increasing frequency, and the thunder. The sultry air was crushingly oppressive. . . .

"We've got to find shelter," said Jim hurriedly. "Where is the nearest house?"

"The old Barker place is nearest. There's a woods road, a little way back, leading that way. It's a secluded place."

"Telephone there?" asked Jim quickly, his mind upon the dead woman across whose body he had stumbled.

"I don't think so," Ora told him. "Old man Barker lives there alone—sort of a hermit. He used to be a sailor. Folks say he keeps the queerest pets—"

A blinding flash broke down from the heavens, and with it came a shattering crash of thunder that fairly rocked the ground beneath their feet. Ora gasped, said: "We'd better go!"

RAIN caught them long before they reached the old Barker place. Drenched, breathless, and with the batteries of Ora's tiny flashlight long since exhausted, they gained the storm-lashed dooryard.

Lightning gave Jim a vivid picture of the place: tortured branches of a giant elm twisting and threshing above the grey roof of a grey-weathered house. The house and the bare, unpainted barn were connected by a long low ell; midway in the ell, a sliding door stood partly open.

With unerring certainty, Jim guided Ora toward the promised haven of that partly open door.

The opening was narrow. Jim tried to widen it, found the door tightly stuck in its runway. Ora managed to squeeze through, gain the shelter of the ell. Jim could not follow.

As he stood there in the lashing rain, there came from within the blackness of the ell a sound that was like the sudden rattling of a chain. Hard upon that metallic clamor came one brief choked scream of alarm from Ora's throat. And a sudden slamming thump against the door. And after that the inner darkness was hideous with the coughing bark of some great beast.

Jim threw his weight in a desperate assault upon the door; threw every ounce of his strength in a mighty heave that kindled flecks of dancing fire in his straining eyeballs. An inch the stuck door yielded—and two more—and that was all.

But those three inches were enough. Desperately Jim drove his body through, swung to the right, toward the spot whence came the frenzied coughing of the

beast. A quivering flash of lightning lit the ell's interior—and he paused aghast at what he saw.

Reddened eyes deep set in a flat and hairy skull; white fangs clashing in a massive jaw; a bull-like neck encircled by an iron collar; massive hairy shoulders and long reaching arms with clutching fingers—an enormous bull gorilla!

The noisome beast was lunging at the end of a heavy chain, taut between its iron collar and a heavy post of oak. Straining savagely to conquer the scant six inches between its farthest reach and the prostrate figure that was Ora—Ora lying motionless against the base of the door.

So much Jim saw in one swift flash; then utter darkness took the place, and drums of thunder overrode the maddened barking of the beast. A moment more, and Ora's limp body was safe within Jim's sweeping arms.

As he backed away, holding her close, there came from the houseward end of the ell—seemingly from behind a closed door—a muffled scream of terror, a scream that was strangely like the scream of Ora back there on the road.

QUICKLY that unseen door came open, loosing a small flood of yellow light upon the dark of the ell—light that emanated from a lantern held high in the left hand of a man who was built along the lines of an old-time whaling bark—short, chunky, broad of beam. He was a rugged man with sea-green eyes, and a scrubby beard that was neither white nor grey, but a sort of faded yellow.

His only garment was a red flannel nightshirt that covered him well down below the knees. In his right hand was a heavy cane. In either ear was a massive ring of gold. Perched upon his right shoulder was a big green parrot.

As this man of the sea stood peering uncertainly down the dim length of the

ell, the parrot threw back its hook-beaked head and screamed—perfect mimicry of a woman's scream of terror.

The sound set every nerve in Jim atingle; for a parrot, so he knew, learns well by hearing. . . .

His lantern aided by a flash of lightning, the old salt caught full view of Jim and his burden. Hurriedly he came along the walk of the ell, limping, his stout cane thumping on the boards. His feet were bare; and Jim perceived that the limp was due to a clublike malformation of the left foot, which so shortened the leg that its owner must needs walk upon the twisted toes.

The noisome gorilla still was lunging repeatedly at the chain's length, snapping it taut each time with such fury as to shake the timbers underfoot. Jim wondered how the links could stand such punishment.

With a queer flame burning in his sea-green eyes, the old sailor stepped close, swung his heavy cane broadside against the great brute's ugly head. With a coughing grunt of anger the big gorilla wheeled and leaped; and with amazing nimbleness the old man avoided the savage leap and stepped clear. Again the stout cane swung; and the blow took the big bull smack upon the nose. With a grunt of pain the hairy brute crouched back behind the oaken hitching post; nor did he move again, but watched his master with reddened eyes of hatred.

The old man allowed the lantern light full play upon Jim and Ora. "Say!" he exclaimed. "That's the nurse-woman, ain't it, what goes around lookin' out for sick folks? Ain't hurt, is she?"

"I'm not sure," said Jim grimly. "We came in here for shelter and that damnable gorilla either threw her against the door, or frightened her so that she fell. It sounded as if she struck her head."

"Bring her into the house," said the old man abruptly. "We'll try a nip o' rum onto her."

Warily, lest this be some trap, Jim followed where the old salt led. . . .

The threshold of an inner room was reached and crossed. Here the old man set his lantern down upon a bare board table, jabbed his cane toward a low couch.

"Put her there on the sofy," he directed, "while I git the rum."

He limped away toward the closed door of a corner closet. Back turned, he was fumbling at the knob as Jim bent to place Ora on the couch nearby. . . . And then, at that precise instant when Jim was nearest off balance, the old salt wheeled and leaped.

Too late Jim glimpsed the upswung cane. Its swift and crashing descent caught him glancingly, yet with terrific force, upon the temple. He knew no more. . . .

VERY slowly Jim came back to a dim awareness of existence. Faintly he could hear the beat of rain on outer walls. And by slow degrees he perceived that he was lying all asprawl, with arms and legs outflung and right cheek resting on a bare board floor. A vast weakness was upon him; beyond the weary lifting of an eyelid, he was powerless to move.

His first visual impression was of a flood of yellow light. Then details of the room—the same room where he had been struck down by that stunning blow of the sailor's stick—came clear. And when his gaze swung at last to the table whereon the lantern still was burning, his senses reeled with choking horror.

At one side of the table Ora sat. Her slender body, stripped of its last shred of clothing, was held sharply erect upon a straight backed chair by cunning loops of thin black rope. She scarcely seemed to breathe; the lift and fall of her firm

round breasts was almost imperceptible.

Opposite, its hideous horned head outthrust across the table and the weight of its thickset shoulders supported on bent arms, was that creature with the mismatched feet!

For a moment Jim's rioting mind could not encompass the thing. Then he penetrated the trickery of it—saw beneath that horned skin hood the yellowed beard and the gleaming sea-green eyes of the sailor-man. Old man Barker, clad in a suit of cowskin with the tail intact. Upon his twisted foot was a leather boot; and firmly affixed to the sole was a cloven hoof!

Habiliments of Satan, designed for what grim purpose. . . ?

The parrot was no longer upon its human perch; it now was stalking back and forth upon the table with a sailor's rolling gait. Its beady eyes never wavered from Ora. There seemed to be a curious expectancy about the feathered creature.

Ora sat rigid and white faced. She was in full possession of her senses now, yet terror must have had its numbing grip upon her tongue. Her wide blue eyes were staring with dread fascination upon that hideous outthrust face. And in her fair white throat, a pulse was beating, beating. . . .

The seaman's lecherous countenance was working queerly. His gleaming gaze slid like a slimy serpent across Ora's soft white skin, missing no single secret of her lovely body. But always his sea-green eyes returned to that pulse beat in her throat, and in their slimy depths was utter madness.

"Ten days cast away upon the seas!" he cried hoarsely. "Ten days alone on a bobbin' raft, the captain's gal and me! The biscuits went, and the water. And the sky was like a red hot stove lid clamped down atop us. The air was like it is tonight—it was all a man could do to breathe. . . . Hour after hour, with the

sharks all around and never a knife to my hand, and my tongue hangin' out black with thirst, I watched her layin' there—the captain's gal. Her throat was white, like your'n. . . .

"Oh, I battled agin the temptation until I nigh went crazy! But the air was squeezin' my skull, and my tongue was hangin' black with thirst. . . .

"Next day a big six-master picked up the raft and me. I told 'em the sharks had took the captain's gal!"

A HIDEOUS grimace of soundless laughter parted the bearded lips of the sailorman, revealed four long snags of yellowed teeth gleaming in the lantern-light. Two were in his upper jaw and two were in the lower; and each was broad and sharp and strong.

With a sickening rush of horror, Jim recalled the look of that wound on the throat of the woman dead in the road. He strove mightily to break the sudden cleavage of his dry tongue to the dry roof of his mouth; strove mightily to hurl himself erect. But like a tortured sleeper prisoned in the web of some hellish nightmare, he still was powerless to move.

"That was twenty year ago," went on the old sailorman. "Twenty year—but I ain't never forgot the sweetness o' that first life-givin' drink! Times like these, when the air gits to squeezin' my skull, I git a mighty cravin'—"

Stark terror loosed the bonds of Ora's tongue. She screamed. And mingled with her screaming was the raucous laughter of the big green parrot.

Again that hideous grimace of soundless yammering parted the lips of the sailorman. He came erect, began to hobble on mismated feet around the table's end. And now his gleaming sea-green eyes were for nothing but the leaping pulse in Ora's throat. . . .

rury burst like a bombshell inside Jim's

skull. With a staggering lunge he came to his feet, hurled himself tableward. Before the clawing hands of the sailorman could reach Ora's naked body, bunched knuckles exploded fair between his sea-green eyes.

The blow, with a hundred-sixty pounds of gym-trained sinew behind it, rocked him backward upon his heels. He lurched, staggered, the cloven hoof beating a sharp tattoo as he strove to maintain balance.

Madness of a lust denied was in him. Mouthing foul oaths, he clawed frantically inside his cowskin garb, jerked forth a seaman's dirk. With all his might he flung the murderous weapon.

Jim ducked, and the bright blade whizzed above him, struck the far wall with a ringing thud. Jim launched himself in a vicious flying tackle. His shoulder took the seaman's legs full out from under. Tangled in a desperate clinch, the two rolled and threshed upon the floor.

The agile strength of the old salt was astounding. Flat on his back, he locked a grip around Jim's loins and crushed him down until his spine was near to snapping. Breath wheezing, Jim managed a tight clutch upon those massive golden earrings, savagely hammered that hideous head upon the floor.

Snarling like a beast, the seaman relaxed his hold. Jabbing thumbs dug viciously at Jim's face, sent stabs of pain across his eyeballs. He lunged upward. Quick as the twisting of a fore-castle rat, the old salt drove uplifted knees deep into Jim's belly. A split second later the cloven hoof smashed full in his face. He floundered backward in a burst of stars.

He was up in half a breath, shaking his head, shaking his eyes free of trickling blood. Through red mist, he saw the seaman lunging for the heavy cane that stood against the table. In blind fury, Jim leaped to intercept the move, drove

blow after smashing blow at those madly gleaming, sea-green eyes.

The merciless savagery of Jim's attack was more than flesh could stand. Hideous face battered to a bloody pulp, the snarling seaman broke, swung, made for the room's one doorway at a clopping run.

BUT his desperate bid for escape was of a sudden blocked. Out from the shadows beyond the threshold hurtled the massive hairy bulk of the bull gorilla. A three-foot length of broken chain was clanking from its iron collar, and its little eyes were flaming with red madness.

A bleat of terror bubbled from the seaman's throat—a bleat that rose to a shrill pitch of agony as those clutching hairy hands came down upon him. . . .

Jim's one thought was to get Ora safe away from this house of terror. Frantically searching eyes found the seaman's dirk sticking in the wall. He flung himself upon it, wrenched it free. Knife in hand, he swung to the chair where Ora sat prisoned in those cunning loops of rope, wide-eyed and rigid with terror.

As he slashed at those bonds with desperate blade, his ears were tortured by the sickening snap of bones nearby, and the guttural mouthings of the beast that literally was tearing old man Barker limb from limb. . . .

Before Jim could strike the last loop free, there fell an ominous silence. He jerked his head erect, saw the huge gorilla standing like a triumphant figure of destruction among fragments of a broken crimson doll. Its ugly head was swaying a little from side to side, and its blood-shot eyes were staring straight at Ora. Suddenly the massive shoulders hunched and the ugly head shot forward. With queer rumblings in its hairy chest the beast drove in toward the naked girl.

Jim's move was instinctive, born of

utter desperation. Knife tightly gripped, he flung himself full in the path of the jungle bull.

What followed was to Jim no more than one grim whirl of battling confusion, with mighty arms sweeping him high, slamming him with terrific force to the bare board floor. Somehow he managed to keep his hold on the dirk, managed to lock his fingers inside that iron collar. The slamming gave way to tremendous pressure of crushing arms. Gasping, face jammed hard against a loathsome hairy chest, he doggedly drove the dirk with ripping upward slashes at the creature's belly.

Through a seeming eternity of wracking agony, he sent the keen blade questing for a vital spot. And finally, when it seemed that every bone in his body was turning into useless pulp, the point went home. The crushing grip of hairy arms relaxed. With a peculiar coughing grunt, the huge bull sagged, slumped and lay inert upon the crimsoned floor.

Jim reeled against the table's edge, for a long moment hung there limp and unmoving while breath came back to tortured lungs in rasping gasps.

When at length he was able to move, see clearly, he perceived that Ora's tense rigidity was gone. Color of life was flowing warmly beneath her soft skin.

Quickly he struck away the rope's last loop, flung about her alluring nakedness a blanket from the nearby couch, and lifted her in his arms. She clung to him with a desperate and thankful intensity—as if she never meant to let him go. . . .

Holding her so, he bore her swiftly out and away from that crimsoned room of grisly horrors.

Behind them, as they gained the huge dark freedom of the rain-washed night, the grim old house resounded to the raucous screaming of the madman's parrot. . . .

MISTRESS

By
Arthur Leo Zagat

Were all those mad happenings but a nightmare born of young Stan Dunn's fever-ridden brain? Or did the evil woman of the fog indeed come up from the greedy swamp—to trap him and his companions with their own lust, and drag them back to horror inconceivable?

THE four of us were specters stalking forever through the fog that rolled greyly over the endless swamp, hiding it but not concealing its terror. Now we were four—but we had been five, when dawn had waked us to the discovery that the Mihitchee's sluggish spread was overnight a raging torrent, our flatboats carried off, our only escape through the treacherous reaches of Tallahawn Swamp. Back there, somewhere, Mike Train—freckle-faced, grinning Mike—had slipped off the slimed causeway we followed. He had been the last in file and the first we had known of his misadventure had been his one choked cry. We had heard him splash into the heaving muck, had heard his futile struggles, his screams that at the last had been

AMY SEWELL



OF THE BEAST

squeals blubbing through the muck. And we had stood helpless, utterly unable to aid him. Unable to see him, even, underneath the slimy roil of the fog.

We were four hopeless men slogging eternally through the blinding mist. Grief marched with us, and hunger, and fear.

Jim Bradford, our leader, had sworn that this path led through the swamp to safety. He should have known. All his life he had lived on its edge. But what little light there had been was draining out of the fog till it was dully leaden—and still the swamp was on either side of us, and still

Novelette of Evil Passions



underfoot was the ooze, slippery, yielding, sucking at each step as though loath to release it.

Was the path circling, eternally circling, through the noisome morass? Were we doomed forever to plod through this unreal, woolly mist in which nameless things bulked, baleful, inimical. . . . *There was one now*, a vast loom ahead, pouncing!

Jim Bradford shouted wordless warning. Then there was Doc Warner's thin pipe, "Thank God!"

The path lifted under my feet. Leaves rustled. Bill Curtin, shoving his fat hulk forward, pushed me ahead of him and my head came up out of the mist.

Cypresses towered, dark and forbidding, and long grey tendrils of Spanish Moss swung from live-oaks silhouetted against a drab sky fast darkening to night. My heart pounded as I stared around me wide eyed, and I choked back a sob. We were out of the swamp. We were on high, dry ground. There was no more fog. We were saved. *Saved!*

I wanted to shout in jubilation, but the others were strangely quiet. Bradford peered about, his forehead creased, and I caught a swift glance that passed between him and Doc, carrying a furtive message I could not quite intercept. Even in that moment Warner struck me as ludicrous, his pointed Vandyke bedraggled, dripping, his sharp face flabby, stripped completely of its pompous, little-man's dignity. He *was* ludicrous, till I saw the dread lurking in his little eyes.

"Where are we, Jim?" Bill Curtin asked. Some apprehension made his deep voice tight. His dew-lapped countenance was no longer red; the broad expanse of his leather jerkin was wetted almost black, and tiny drops powdered his bald spot that was like a monk's tonsure fringed by sparse, russet hair. "Where is this?"

"I'm not sure," came the slow, musing

response. "I'm not quite sure. But I think it's what they call Dead Hog Hummock."

Dead Hog Hummock! Why did that name thud on my ears with odd menace? Hadn't Dad told me once. . . .

"Good Lord!" Curtin groaned. "Then we aren't out of the swamp at all!"

"I'm afraid not. If I'm right, this is only a sort of island right at the center of Tallahawn. There's a path on the other side that will take us through to the shore of Lake Ocheebo and civilization, but—" He hesitated.

"But we'd be damn fools to try it in the dark," Bill finished for him. "Best thing we can do is camp here overnight and hope the fog will be gone in the morning."

"Camp here!" Doc twittered. "*Here!*" His slender hands fluttered as though he were pushing something away from him. "We daren't!"

Bill looked at him, disgust struggling with puzzlement on his round, fat-smothered face. "Why not? The ground's dry here, there's plenty of moss for beds, wood for a fire, and the red berries on that bush are edible in a pinch. What's the matter with camping here?"

"Don't you know? Good Lord, this—"

"Doc!" Bradford's interruption was low-voiced, emotionless. But it cut Warner's sentence off, pulled his eyes to the tall man's face with a curious expression that was almost cringing. "We're camping."

A muscle-spasm contorted Doc's face, and again there was that hysterical flutter of his white, surgeon's hands. I sensed some secret between those two, some knowledge Bradford was determined to conceal from Bill and myself. And an inexplicable antagonism.

"We'd better get busy," Doc Warner said, "making ourselves comfortable before the light goes."

EVEN in the few short minutes we had stood there it had grown perceptibly darker. "I'll get some wood," I exclaimed, eagerly. "There's a windrift over there, and the stuff's good and dry." My skin was dry, my head spinning. But I was the kid of the bunch. They were Dad's old gang, bluff, hearty bachelors. He had promised me a duck hunt with them as a reward for winning the intercollegiate high-hurdles. At the last minute he had been unable to go, and like the good sports they were they had insisted on my coming along anyhow. It would be hell if I fell down on them now. "I'll have it together in a jiffy."

That made them all look at me. "Good boy—" Bill started, then, "Hey, you're green around the gills! Are you sick?"

"No. I'm all right." I jerked away to hide the quiver of my upper lip I could not stop, the hot red I felt flooding my cheeks.

The sudden movement seemed to rattle my brain in its case. The dark trees whirled dizzily and the ground surged up to me. I felt a hand clutch my arm, and for a moment everything went black. . . .

It must have been more than a moment, though, for as sight and consciousness returned I was lying on something soft, and across a flickering little fire Jim and Doc squatted, eating something from their cupped hands. A palm was on my forehead, flabby and cool, and almost womanishly gentle. "Awake, Stan?" Curtin asked quietly. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty—good," I lied. My head was weightless, expanded like a balloon, and everything inside of me was cold although the fire's warmth folded gratefully about me. "I—I'm all right." I pushed to sit up, felt the soft rustle of piled moss under my hands. Curtin's light pressure did not relax and I fell back.

"Lie still. You've got a touch of swamp fever, Doc says, but you'll be all right by

morning. Here. Swallow this tablet Doc gave me, and try to sleep."

Shame at my collapse flooded me. But I was too weak to argue. I gulped down the pill Bill thrust between my lips, spat bitterness.

Overhead the sky was a black, starless canopy. Light from our campfire danced orange-red across huge, vaulted tree-trunks, tangled in the long, shaggy grey loops arcing down from their boughs. Shadows moved in the deeper reaches of the dense growth. I started. For *one dark shadow flitted in a direction opposite to that of the others!*

Blood pounded in my temples, the nape of my neck bristled. Suddenly something sinister brooded over the little clearing, and a mysterious threat lurked in the cypresses. I tried to cry a warning, but could manage only a rasp, a meaningless rasp from my squeezed throat.

The murk into which I stared with burning eyes took on shape. Distinctly a figure moved in the gloom behind Warner and Bradford. Then I was glad I hadn't cried out. For, quite suddenly, a girl was standing at the edge of the light!

Doc grunted, scrambled to his feet. She was a slim wisp of a creature, but the sleazy, tattered stuff she wore hinted at the soft roundness of a body not immature. There was weariness in her poise, and a startled wild shyness, as if she were poised, ready to fly at any untoward move. Her head, somehow, was in shadow—I could not make out her face.

"Hello!" Warner tugged at his goatee, smoothing it. Pushed his other hand through his hair. Ludicrously, he was like a pouter pigeon preening, strutting. "Where did you come from, my dear?"

THE girl swayed toward him, sobbed. His arm was around her. Natural enough, for she seemed about to faint, but I didn't like the smirk on the little

man's mouth. Bradford's face, shadow chiseled, was a marble-hard mask as he watched.

"Lake Ocheebo." Her voice was scarcely more than a breath. "Huntin' terrapin aigs." She was close against Doc now and his arm tightened. Vague resentment stirred within me. "Fog come down an' I got lost."

"You're all right now, honey. We'll take care of you. Come, sit by the fire and get warm."

"Oh!" The exclamation was throaty, strangely seductive. "Thankee. But first I got ter git my bag uv aigs." She pulled away from him, glided off.

"Wait!" Before anyone could move Warner had plunged after her. "I'll go with you." There was an odd excitement in his voice—or was it so odd? Brush threshed as he pushed through. "Wait for me!" His cry was already far-off. Woods silence closed down.

"Fool!" The syllable slid from Bradford's tight mouth. Drowsiness was welling up in my skull; the scene blurred as I fought to keep my eyes open. Perhaps that was why I thought his mask broke for an instant to show leering triumph. Afterwards, I wondered. . . "He'll get what he deserves."

"What do you mean? What's all the mystery?" Bill's question impacted dully on my buzzing ears. He heaved, behind me, lumbered across and bulked above Bradford. "What's there about this knoll that you're both afraid of?"

God knows I wanted to hear the answer, but the drug took full possession of me, and everything became jumbled in a meaningless melange of rumbling voices, flickering light and shadow, moving forms. It all merged to the greyness of the daylong mist, and a hand beckoned to me from the void, a white, slender hand with tapering fingers. I fought against weakness to lift myself, to go to her, the

woman of the fog. Her face formed in the haze—pallid, yearning, incredibly beautiful; and her red lips curved with promise of unimaginable delight. Desire ran like molten fire through my veins, my whole frame burned with it. . . .

No, it was fever that burned me, I realized as the fog and the face gave way to the glow of the fire and the high loom of the ancient trees. I was shaking. My clothes were drenched with my own sweat.

"Bill," I muttered. "Bill."

"Bill isn't here." Bradford's hard, unemotional voice came from an immense height. "He's gone to look for Doc."

"How—how long. . ." What was it I feared? In God's name, why did fear's gelid fingers clutch my throat?

"Warner's been gone for an hour. Curtin just left. I didn't want him to go."

"Why?"

"Because there wasn't any use. Doc—" He broke off, his head canted as if he had heard something, something for which he had been waiting.

I heard it too. A thin, high-pitched grunting in the depths of the forest growth. Swish of underbrush as a heavy body pushed through it, rushed toward us. Whatever it was it was coming fast.

It burst out of the arboreal gloom, squealed as it saw us. It was a hog!

It was smaller than average, its head slanting forward to a sharp nose. This pig had never been ringed, that was certain. . . . I felt on the instant that there was something grotesquely familiar about it. Good Lord! I caught sight of an odd excrescence on its under lip, a triangular, dark flap for all the world like a miniature goatee! My skin was a sheath of ice as I realized that the mud-daubed, foul beast weirdly, incredibly resembled Doc Warner! Even the tiny hooves planted in the soft ground as it skidded to a stop were like his slim, effeminate hands. And

the pig's squeal was like his high, thin voice!

Bradford must have recognized the gargoyle-like caricature too, for as he stood statuesque and stared at it, I saw his lips move and soundlessly form a name. "Warner!" He didn't say it, but he thought it. I knew he thought it, and saw the color drain from under his bronze, saw a muscle twitch in his cheeks.

Nightmare horror held me rigid, clawed my larynx with an unuttered scream. The hog's head turned to face me, and I saw its eyes. Terror looked out from those eyes, and frantic appeal, and despair. Despair such as no brute beast could know. Those were human eyes! As God is my witness, they were human, human as my own. And a lost soul looked out from them!

CHAPTER TWO

The Moving Shadow

THE pig grunted, squealed. It was as if Doc were trying to tell me something, to warn me. His head twisted to Bradford and he snarled. I know a hog cannot snarl, but that one did. . . .

The same paralysis that gripped me must have held the tall man. Awkwardly twisted, he did not move, did not make a sound. But the awed, affrighted stillness was shattered by new sounds from the darkness of the woods, the thud of running feet, the crashing of disturbed brush—and by the hog's frightened squeal as he plunged suddenly into motion again, rushed past me and on.

My head rolled to follow the beast. I saw it hurtle down a steep bank into rolling mists, into the billowing fog hiding the swamp just behind me. Instantly it was a dark mass in the haze, had vanished from sight—from sight but not from hearing. Its screams, its shudderingly human screams, ripped the night

with horror—high and thin at first, then blubbing through ooze, then—gurgling to silence. . . .

"Jim! Stan!" a voice cried. "Where's Doc? Where did he go?"

I rolled back to look at Curtin, planted four-square in the clearing. Then he said, "What—what's happened, Jim? You look as if you'd seen a ghost, or the devil."

Bradford swallowed. "Did you—locate Warner?"

"Did I—Hell! Wasn't that him ahead of me, running towards the campfire? I thought—"

"No!" flatly. "No—that wasn't Doc."

"It wasn't? I could have sworn I heard his voice." Bill's glance slid to me, questioningly.

"It wasn't Doc, Bill," I answered. "It was a pig you must have scared up." But my words somehow didn't sound convincing. . . .

"But damn it. . . ." His big-thewed arms went out in a helpless gesture. "I've tramped the whole damn knoll, and there wasn't a smell of him. Nor of the girl. By the Great Horn Spoon, they've got to be somewhere."

Bradford seemed to have recovered somewhat. "Of course they're somewhere. Lying under some bush. Or—by George, I've got it! They've set out on the other path for Lake Ocheebo. She knew where the path came in, and Warner was too damn scared to stay here. He talked her into guiding him, the yellow-livered pup!"

At Bradford's words Curtin's countenance went suddenly livid. Two white spots showed either side his doughy nose, and his small eyes blazed. "You—" he choked. "You—" Stiff-legged, he stumped forward till the round of his belly crowded the other man's leanness. His jaw was thrust forward, bulldog fashion. "Look here, Bradford!" His rumbling growl dropped a note. I sup-

pose he thought I could not hear, but fever had sharpened my senses. "I don't know what you're up to, but I'm telling you now, lay off the boy. Lay off him! I don't give a damn about what you've done to Doc, and I can take care of myself, but the kid's sick and he's Joe Dunn's son. Lay off him."

Bradford looked down at him, his face masklike. "Just what," he said, "do you think I've done to Warner?"

I could see Bill's cheeks quiver. "I don't know. If I did. . . But you hate him; you've hated him for months, since he beat your time with Lola Prentiss. And now he's gone. He's no more on the way to Ocheebo than we are.

"Damn it, Bradford—this is your country. You've hunted Tallahawn Swamp all your life, know every inch of it. But you pretended to be lost, brought us to this cursed hummock—and let Doc go off with that—that *witch*." He shrilled the last word, not loudly, but with a hysterical thinning that stabbed me with eerie terror.

BRADFORD'S grim mouth writhed and its corners lifted so that an aborted smile was painted on his still visage, a smile of cold contempt. His words slid through that smile, somehow, without disturbing it. "I faked being lost, eh? Maybe you're right. But did *you* ever try to stop Warner from chasing a skirt, Curtin? Especially if it's a bit torn to show a white leg, or tight against a small, round breast?"

If ever the lust to kill glared from a man's eyes, it did from Bill's in that moment. I saw his hamlike hands fist till their knuckles whitened, saw what he had of neck swell and cord. But Bradford stared down at him out of slitted lids through which blue steel peered knife-edged, infinitely menacing, and the tall man was encased in a diamond-hard ar-

mor of stillness—more ominous, more threatening than any noisy ranting, any blatant threats could have been.

Orange-red firelight carved a tight sphere of luminance out of the night's velvety blackness to contain that titanic conflict, poignant as it was silent and motionless. But intent as I was on the opposing, taut figures I had an eerie premonition that I was not the only spectator of that clash. Some presence lurked in the rolling fog behind me, or in the sinister, impenetrable gloom of the trees; some dreadful presence watched with me; and some inscrutable decision, far other than the issue between them, was weighed in the balance of their struggle.

And it weighed against Curtin! For abruptly the vitality seemed to drain from Bill's hulking frame. I saw the tenseness go out of it, saw his fist unclench. I saw his glare beaten down by Bradford's awful quiet. He shuddered, turned away, a defeated, flabby fat man.

But he halted with some last flare of defiance, twisting back. "By Heaven, Bradford! If anything happens to Stan I—" He choked as the other's head lifted a little to bring him back into focus, choked as if a fist had been rammed down his throat.

"Leave the boy to me." The measured, slow speech was intoned as though some other than Bradford spoke it. "I'll keep my promise to his father. You said you could take care of yourself. Do so!"

"I will." Curtin said it bravely, but there was little conviction in his tone. And the gesture he made, the little, helpless, quite unconscious outfling of his arm, robbed it of whatever strength it might have had. He turned again, slunk away, squatted wearily at the edge of the fire's nimbus.

I was cold, suddenly cold with dread.

For momentarily, while Bill's back had been turned, a quiver had broken the

stony surface of Bradford's face. Grey shadow had flickered over it, and I knew then that the man of steel also was afraid—with a fear the more terrible because of its repression.

The revealing instant was gone almost before it came. Stillness cloaked him again, and case-hardened strength. He moved toward the fire. . . .

Then, in the darkness, someone moaned! . . . The sound came again, a tiny breaking of the funereal hush that lay on us like a pall. A tiny sound, but it was compact with suffering and with despair. A sound so low that the crackle of the fire must have drowned it to the others. . . .

I tried to call to them, but my fever was in full flood once more and I lacked the strength for even one word. Lacked strength even to make some small movement that might have attracted their attention. When I attempted to throw out an arm the small exertion retched me with nausea, and the firelight hazed so that it was a shimmering circle on the ground.

Not a perfect circle, though. For off there, to the right of the squatting Curtin, its luminance was jogged by shadow. A shadow that had no right to be there, for it was cast *against* the light.

It was growing, was spreading out toward the hunched, head-bowed man! . . .

Now I saw that Bradford was watching it, covertly, from a corner of his eyes, while a tight muscle lumped along the ridge of his square, set jaw. The shadow, the blackness that was not a shadow, was within a foot of Bill, within six inches now. If it touched him. . . .

THE moaning from the woods came louder. Bill stirred, lifted his head. Heaved to his feet just as the shadow reached him—or did it? . . .

"Bradford," he whispered. "Do you

hear that?" The evasive, shadowy object seemed to slide back into the concealment that had projected it.

"Hear what?" I sensed an undertone of queer excitement in the tall man's low response. "What?" And I was sure that a veil dropped over his eyes, to hide—disappointment?

Curtin was peering into the woods, bent forward slightly as if concern urged him to go see who it was that groaned, but fear held him back. "Someone's in there, hurt. Maybe it's—Doc."

Bradford's head shook ever so slightly, in negation, but he said, "Maybe. We ought to—look. . . ."

"Come on." Bill said it with an effort, and I saw his big frame quiver. "Come on."

Strange. Though the oven heat searing my every cell held me voiceless, motionless, I was seeing, thinking more clearly than ever in my life. An eerie clairvoyance seemed to animate me, and I knew, knew beyond doubt, that if Curtin stepped beyond the radius of the firelight he was doomed, utterly doomed. I read in Bradford's face, though not the slightest muscle moved, that he too knew it. Yet the horror of it was that I could utter not the least syllable to warn the man, and that Bradford did not. His lips moved once, as if to say the saving word—then they tightened. They opened again to say, "All right."

And side by side they strode out of the light into darkness, into black menace.

I was alone, my throat torn, clawed by the cry that would not come, my blazing body in the grip of alternate waves of utter cold and fiery heat, cold and heat. Was it fever or ineffable terror, or both, that shook me as a terrier shakes a captured rat?

It was terror! . . .

The weird, unnatural shadow was jogging the light again, was sliding across

the illumined ground of the clearing. It was slithering slowly, inexorably, *toward me!*

And I could not move, could not cry out, could do nothing but lie there helpless and watch its infinitely slow, infinitely terrible, advance. . . .

A cold hand seemed to touch my forehead. From somewhere came the thought that with that touch I was lost, damned to all eternity! And at last I shrieked aloud. . . .!

"Stan!" It was Bill's voice, husky, quivering with emotion. "God, Stan, you haven't. . . .?"

I looked up. Curtin was planted, rigid, at the wood's edge, and tightly in his arms was a limp, dark form. He was looking at me, and the vast expanse of his countenance was frozen, grey.

"Bill," I whispered. How was it I knew what he intended? "No. Not yet." I was weak, weak, but the grip of the fever was broken. "What—who. . . .?"

"The girl Doc went off with. She's—hurt. Must have crawled towards our light, fainted." He moved, came forward to the fire, laid her down within its warmth and knelt to her. Fingers of red fireglow stroked her, outlining the long line of her flank, the swell of her bosom—stroked her white neck and tangled in the glossy black mass of her hair.

Bill was clumsily fumbling with her clothing, evidently loosening it. The grey-ness was fading from his face. A curious light began to shine in his small eyes that was not a reflection of the fire.

"Where's—Bradford?" I asked. He seemed not to hear me. "Where's Bradford?" I repeated, as sharply as I could.

It seemed an immense effort for him to look up, and little tremors of inexplicable fear ran through me as I saw his countenance more clearly. "Don't know," he muttered thickly. "Lost him in th'

woods." His glance refused to meet mine, went back to the girl's flaccid form. His pendulous cheeks were flushed. He licked his thick lips. . . .

THE moss on which I lay rustled. I rolled about. Bradford loomed above me, on the side away from the fire. He was watching Bill, and his mouth was twisted, as if in triumph; but there was no triumph in his eyes. Dark anguish dwelt there and gloom. Here was a soul in torment, I thought, and even as the thought slid across my aching brain he knelt, close to me, and his sinewy hand lay across my shoulder. I could feel it tremble with his inward strife.

The dread that all day, and all the dreadful night, had lain leaden within me redoubled. Fearful forces beyond human experience vibrated about me, elemental forces from the dim reaches of man's ancestral memory. Uncannily, from within the brooding, inky gloom of funereal cypresses and bearded, hoary live-oaks, a baneful shadow seemed to have invested the clearing, so that the very light of the fire was a form of darkness. Dark as the lust that now quivered balefully in Bill Curtin's countenance, pursed his gross mouth, squinted his eyes till they were tiny black beads sunk deep within rolls of fat. Dark as the undulant wave writhing the frame of the girl, as the languid creep of her white arm up over his shoulder and around his neck.

A sob retched his big frame, and suddenly she was clutched within the circle of his arms, clutched tightly to him as his face was hidden by hers. I stared at that embrace, and as I stared I sensed the beat of black wings hovering just above the aura of the darkling fire, and dark, silent laughter shaking the upper, invisible boughs of the woods.

That laughter somehow snapped the nightmare paralysis binding me. Hate-

ful as he was at the moment. I remembered Bill's kindness to me, his watchful solicitude. I jerked up. A cry of alarm, of warning, tore my throat, reached my lips. . . .

The cry was never uttered! Bradford's hand clamped down over my mouth. His arm went around my chest, tightening like a steel band, holding me down, muffling me and clutching me in a rocklike grip.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "You can't help him. It's too late. Quiet, if you want to save yourself."

I struggled. God knows I struggled. I writhed about and beat at him with feeble, aching fists. I was weak, so weak, and at my best I could never have hoped to cope with his gigantic strength. But I fought. . . .

I fought until a sound reached me that told me it was no longer any use to fight. Then I went limp.

My struggles had twisted me around, so that I was looking over Bradford's shoulder into the noisome fog billowing below me and hiding the swamp under its pall. From behind me had come the light trill of a girl's laughter, amused, triumphant, taunting. Then followed that other sound, the sound that stabbed terror through me, and despair. *The bestial, snorting grunt of a hog.*

CHAPTER THREE

"I Want the Boy"

BRADFORD'S grip on me relaxed. His palm slipped from my lips, and I was free to turn. Free—except that fear held me rigid, and a desperate, hopeless hope that I was mistaken, that the incredible, impossible thing had not occurred. As long as I averted my gaze I could not be certain. When I was certain I should go mad.

But I had to turn. I had to see. Though

terror clamored in my blood, and nauseated bitterness up into my throat, I had to be sure! And so, slowly, slowly, I forced my head around against the rigidity of the muscles in my neck, against the black horror roiling within my skull. I fought around to the trilling laughter and the grunting, bestial rumble that weirdly had the very timber of Bill Curtin's belly voice.

I saw the flickering flames, the woman erect, her coverings awry now, flapping wide to reveal her body, the ripple of muscles across her lean abdomen, the fire-tipped globe of one firm, round breast. I saw the swine planted four-square before her, the huge hog whose glittering little eyes, deep sunk in fat rolls, were fastened balefully on her, whose tremendous flanks were a grisly grey shading to russet along its spine, over its creased neck and to the top of its head, where a disk of white showed to give the appearance of a monk's tonsure. I saw the girl, and the hog—and no one else. Bill Curtin was no longer there. . . .

The laugh of the woman was thin blasphemy, going on and on through the lurid fireglow, through the dark, to the evil that beat its black wings somewhere in that dark. The laugh of the woman was the thin steel of a dagger plunging into my quivering brain, twisting, rending, tearing its pulp so that wild laughter heaved in my own breast like a living thing. . . .

A quiver ran through the body of the beast and it surged toward her. It almost reached her, but not quite. Her laugh broke off abruptly. Her arm lifted, its fingers spread. She gestured—toward the swamp.

The hog squealed in agony, twisted. It plunged past her, past me, down into the fog, down into the swamp! The fog and the swamp took him, gurgling. But he did not squeal, did not fight his fate. Bill did not—

Oh, God! How could it be Bill? How could it?

But where was he then, where had he vanished?

A shadow fell across me, and I realized that Bradford was on his feet, was advancing toward the fire. His hands were clenched at his sides, his arms stiff. He walked like one in a dream, and his set face was the hue of death.

The woman turned to meet him. The smile quirking her red mouth was incarnate evil.

"Are you satisfied now?" His question fell flatly on the vibrant night, edged with agony. "Am I free?"

Deep-throated, vibrant, her voice as she answered no longer held the shy breathlessness of the simple native girl. But longing was still in it, yearning that queerly, despite my horror of her, clutched my throat with desire. "Free?" She appeared to ponder. "You promised me four in lieu of yourself. It comes to me that you promised four."

Bradford's neck corded, and his whole frame tensed. "I could not get the fourth to come."

"But there *is* another. Of course there is another. The pretty boy. I like him."

"Yes." I could barely hear him. "Yes, there is another. But. . . ."

"*I want him.*"

Bradford, still moving forward, hid her from me now. And as though cords binding my body, my brain, had snapped, terror exploded in me, flung me to my feet. Almost before I knew I had moved, terror had flung me away from the circle of firelight, into the woods whose murk was not as fearsome by far as the light in her eyes as they dwelt on mine. It was I she wanted!

A scream sounded behind me, a man's scream, hideous. I pounded into an unseen trunk, caromed off, ran on through vines that whipped around my legs and

tripped me, through brambles that tore at me, through slithering, dank shadows that were putrid with the odor of death. I ran on, and knew that something followed me, sliding through the tangle as though it were not there.

Some sixth sense told me of this, some sense inflamed by terror and the incredible things I had witnessed. For that which pursued me made utterly no sound. Not that there was not tumult enough in those lightless woods—the crash of my own frantic flight, the screams of awakened, terrified birds. And the beat of dark wings, ever the beat of dark wings close over my head.

I ran. But it seemed that my stumbling, boneless legs spurned only some treadmill that whirled by underneath and kept me in the same spot, no matter how fast I ran. Grotesque dark shapes that were twisted trees wheeled by, and came again, and wheeled by again. Knives stabbed my lungs; my throat clamped. I wheezed as I fought to breathe. I stumbled, fell; heaved up to run again. And terror ran with me, and terror was just ahead, and terror ineffable followed me, its hot breath on my neck.

A voice, throaty, vibrant, called to me. "Wait, pretty boy. Wait for me." A voice behind, always just behind no matter how fast I ran. "Pretty boy. Wait. . . ."

A LIGHT flickered ahead, a lurid light against which dark boles of ancient trees, twisted, grotesque, were silhouetted as with mute horror. I burst through them, and gasped, whimpered as I realized that the light was that of the fire I had just quitted, that my mad flight had but brought me in a great circle, brought me back again to the clearing where Bill. . . .

Across the clearing, down the bank, grey fog rolled lurid in the light of the fire. Beneath it, the swamp. Oh, God!

Better that than. . . . I lunged across the bank again, toward that red-grey roiling.

As I reached the haze it seethed, lifted a grey tendril, shapeless—clotted. It was a slender lithesome figure standing above the fog, standing on nothingness, surging forward to meet me at the edge of the bank! It was the woman of the fog, her arms outstretched to me, her dark eyes fathomless with desire!

And suddenly, as I felt her warmth close, close to me, fear left me. My veins ran molten fire, and passion blazed in my brain. My own arms, aching with desire that matched hers, clasped the quivering ecstasy of her body, clasped it tightly against mine. So ardent was the flame of her, so ardent the flame that consumed me, that the dross of clothing between us seemed to be burned away, so that my flesh became one flesh with hers.

Yet all the time a hard crystal ball of horror and despair dwelt deep within me—as I knew, even in the transcendent ecstasy of that embrace, that the fate I had seen overtake Warner and Curtin was my own fate. Horror unspeakable, and incredible despair. And rage at him who had betrayed us to save himself.

The ball of horror grew now till almost it quenched the ecstasy. Intolerable itching rasped my skin, as if bristles prickled it from within. Yet still I held her close to me, draining to the uttermost the passion for which I was paying so dearly. Piercing agony ran through me. . . .

In that instant a whirlwind struck me, burst us apart, flung me asprawl. I twisted. The woman of the fog was a white flame, radiant. Bradford stood before her—his fists that had struck me, reft me from her, unclenching, his tall form aquiver. His eyes were on hers, and the hard contours of his visage were breaking, were blurring like wax in the heat, so that the horror that dwelt within him

peered through, and the awful despair.

His throat worked, his lips moved, making no sound. Then his arms came up, not reaching to her but spread wide in a gesture of abnegation, of defeat.

“No,” he husked. “Not the lad. Not the boy. You cannot have him.”

“But that was the bargain you made. Four in your stead. Four! And I have had but three. Was not four the bargain?” Was it her eyes that said it, sliding to the swamp, and then to me, and back to him? Was it her eyes, or her lips? I do not know. Everything was blurring then, and I do not know. “You would not break our bargain, Jim?”

A long quiver went through him. A gasp burst from him, a gasp of sheer terror. But he spoke, squeezing speech through the fingers of awful fear clutching his throat. “You cannot have him.”

A veil seemed to shimmer between me and those two, a grey haze, and darkness was welling up in my brain. But I could still see them, and hear them, hear her. “You said four, Jim, the night the fog reached your house on the edge of the swamp and I came to you. It had been long since my desire had been fed, men long had shunned the swamp and the fog, and I was direly athirst. But you bargained with me, and promised me four in your stead if I would let you go. And I agreed. And now—there is only one way you may break that bargain.”

“Only one way.” Had his voice dropped so low, or were my ears dulled? “I understand. And I choose that way.”

“Jim!” Her cry pierced the haze between us, and it was a cry of triumph, of gloating gladness.

They were shadows now, wavering shadows in a pall of greyness through which I could barely see. But those shadows moved together, melted into one. . . .

And the darkness within my skull welled up, swallowed my brain.

GRUFF voices beat dully to me, stirring me awake. I opened my eyes to daylight and the sun. The gloomy cypresses, and the live-oaks with their grey beards, were gaunt against the blueness of a fresh-washed sky; but somehow they were no longer sinister, no longer threatening. I was lying on a bed of moss and I was weak, so weak that I could not raise my head.

Lord, I thought, what dreams the fever had given me. What awful dreams! But it was gone now, and the dreams with it.

"Bill," I called, feebly. "Bill, I'm thirsty. Is there any water?"

There was no answer, though the burr of voices still continued, from somewhere a little distant. My companions must still be asleep. But my mouth was full of cotton, my lips cracked, and my body, my legs, itched like all possessed. With the petulance of the convalescent, I called again. "Bill! Doc! Mr. Bradford! Mi—"

I caught myself. Mike was drowned in the swamp. Or was that, too, a part of my dream? "Bill!"

Grisly terror crept in on me once more, the terror of my weird delirium. I fought it off. They had risen early, I told myself, were prospecting for food, or for the path to Ocheebo, not disturbing me. It was their voices I had heard.

I sat up, swayed an instant, dizzily. Off there the black, heaving surface of the slough stretched, foetid, ominous. And far out, two figures were bent, working at something. Two figures, slattern, be-daubed. Not Bill or Doc or Bradford. Not any of my friends.

They must be on the other side of the hummock then. But the knoll was small. I should be able to hear them, they me. Good Lord, the fever had dried my skin so that it itched intolerably. I slid a hand inside my shirt to scratch.

Oh, God! Oh, good God! *Stiff, short*

hairs prickled my fingertips, bristles that covered my chest, my belly.

An icy wind took me, and I was shuddering, shivering as with an ague. It couldn't be! Impossible that it could be! Those things that had happened last night, those incredible things, had been dreams, foul spawn of a brain racked by fever, delirium.

A spasm convulsed me, jerked me to my feet, set my arms waving over my head as I screamed, "Bill, Doc! Where are you? Where—" I swayed.

The strangers out in the swamp had seen me. They were yelling, running towards me. I toppled, crashed down. Why were my shoes so strangely loose on my feet, why did it seem as if I had no toes? . . .

Footfalls thudded, and two leathery-skinned faces bent over me. "Godfrey," someone said. "How in tarnation did ye git here?"

I looked up at them. The dull-eyed, moronic faces were handsome to me in that moment, for they were human. "Walked," I gasped. "Walked through the swamp. Slept here, last night."

Incredulity showed in the bleary eyes, and a curious withdrawal. "'Tain't possible," one said. "They ain't no 'un's passed th' night on Dead Hog Hummock an' lived ter tell th' tale."

"Four of us did." My speech was mushy, difficult.

"Four!" Their words slurred. "Where are th' others?"

"Somewhere," I gestured vaguely. "Somewhere on the hummock."

They looked—and shook their heads. Beside them and myself, Dead Hog Hummock was utterly uninhabited! Neither Bill, Doc nor Bradford was ever found, there or elsewhere. It is certain they lie somewhere in the black, heaving deeps of Tallahawn Swamp. But in what shape. . . ?

THE END

CLAIMED BY THE DEAD

By
John Tracey



A musty tomb—the sepulcher of a long-dead Egyptian lady—held the secret of an age-old tragedy. . . . And Peter Hopkins found his wife playing a weird rôle in the theater of the ancient gods of Egypt. . . .

I MARRIED Esther—yes—but she is not my wife. We were married in a church—she was always very religious, though in a sort of other-day manner. And she has always been a good wife, for her religion taught her that the sacrament of matrimony makes a wife out of any woman. Yet still she is not my wife. . . .

AMOS
SEWELL

I suppose she never was, really. . . . She was a strange creature of moods from the first—gay and charming when she played the hostess, but at other times often quiet and inscrutable, seemingly absorbed in her own strange thoughts and dreams. Yet the mystery of her, that suited so well her dark queenly beauty, made me love her the more. Had I known then her secret, perhaps I might have saved her. Now that I know it, it is too late. . . .

Even before I knew, it did not seem strange to me that Esther had never shared my one great enthusiasm—my insatiable interest in Egypt and Egyptian lore. After all, I had lived there when a child. Ever since then it had fascinated me. I had studied at every opportunity the weird history of that strange civilization now lost in the darkness of the centuries. Always, I had wanted to go back, had worked constantly for an appointment there.

Then at last the appointment came. I was to be transferred to the Colonial Office at Cairo! I could hardly contain myself for my elation. I must tell Esther at once.

I stopped only long enough to purchase from a bookshop in Piccadilly all the volumes it possessed of Egyptian lore. I loaded these into a cab and dashed home.

I burst open the door. "Esther! Esther!" I called.

I dashed upstairs. She was in the drawing-room.

"Esther!" I cried. "What do you think? My appointment—"

She seemed to stiffen. "Your appointment to Egypt!"

I did not realize then that her words were edged with fear.

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it splendid?"

She rose suddenly from her chair. Her pale face was a mask of terror! "No! No, Peter! Not—"

She broke off abruptly, seemed to calm herself with an effort. "Of course," she said. "It is splendid. I knew we—I knew you would get the post. . . . I'll start to pack at once."

And without another word she walked out of the room, leaving me staring after her, dumbfounded.

WE ARRIVED at Cairo before the cocks had ceased to crow, in the clear coolness of an Egyptian morning—a morning such as you will find nowhere else on earth. We sped behind a fezzed chauffeur through the Arab quarter to Shepherd's Hotel. As we walked up the broad steps of the terrace, a huge, affable-seeming man elbowed his way up to us.

"Mr. Hopkins," he said rather than asked, "I've been expecting you. I am Franz Boehler. Your father was a great friend of mine in the old days of Egypt . . . so we shall be great friends, too."

I had known Boehler only by reputation, and I was immensely pleased at his cordial greeting. A colossus of body and brain, he was the man who controlled the government of Egypt and owned at least half of it.

We shook hands warmly. I introduced him to Esther. In the midst of acknowledging the introduction he stopped short. "Why . . . why. . . ." Then he smiled, greeted Esther cordially.

"Have you met my wife before?" I asked in surprise.

"No, no," Boehler hastily assured me. "Only a—a resemblance. It startled me a bit. But let us refresh ourselves."

We sat down at one of the tables on the broad terrace. Soon we were sipping a cooling drink, chatting pleasantly. Yet Boehler now seemed preoccupied. His easy manner of moments before was gone.

Finally he said, rather abruptly in view

of what had preceded it, "I have a tomb out in the desert which I think might interest you. I discovered it myself and I'm very proud of it. The workmanship of the interior is exquisite. It is the tomb of an unknown young Egyptian noblewoman of the Rameses era. In the burial chamber there is a very fine low-relief wall-covering. It bears a most remarkable—" He hesitated, glanced queerly at Esther, then seemed to come to some quick determination. "Mr. Hopkins," he said, "would you and your wife care to see the tomb, sometime in the near future?"

I was on the verge of answering in the affirmative; but I had no chance.

"I should like to go," Esther said abruptly.

I started; so did Boehler. For her words had seemed a command rather than a statement. . . .

ENGROSSED in my new duties, it was some days before I was able to give thought again to Boehler's tomb. I suppose it was always in the back of my mind; even so, it seemed rather odd, afterward, that the subject should have come up in my talk with Rachin Mahmoud.

I had met Mahmoud at my office as a result of a confidential government mission which came before me. He was a well-groomed, handsome young Egyptian, swarthier even than most of his people. We lunched together, and I found him a pleasant conversationalist. The talk turned to Egyptian antiques.

"I understand," said Mahmoud after a bit, "that Franz Boehler is taking you to see the tomb he discovered."

I started a trifle. How did he know? "Yes, indeed," I assured him then. "He's driving my wife and me out tomorrow."

"I'm extremely anxious to see it myself," Mahmoud said. "Do you think you could arrange for me to join you?"

"Certainly. I'm sure Boehler wouldn't object. Meet us on the terrace of Shepherd's tomorrow at eleven. I'll have arranged it for you. . . ."

At precisely eleven o'clock next day, Rachin Mahmoud mounted the steps of the hotel terrace to where we sat. He bowed low to my introductions, his hand on his heart in the Egyptian fashion.

Boehler, on the other hand, was not his usual affable self. He started visibly as he looked at Mahmoud. "Amazing!" he said, without seeming to realize he had spoken.

But it was Esther who alarmed me most. She acknowledged the introduction with a strange half-smile.

"I knew you would come," she said to Mahmoud.

Mahmoud, despite his suave mask of politeness, showed a trace of surprise. Boehler stepped quickly into the breach with some good-humored comment. I had no opportunity to question Esther's strange conduct.

We hurried to Boehler's waiting car, as if trying to put behind us the tenseness of the preceding moment. As the car whizzed through the cluttered streets of Cairo, scattering the yelling, selling Arabs to right and left, Esther remained perfectly silent, staring straight ahead as if lost in another world. She did not look again at Mahmoud. The Egyptian's eyes, however, seemed to be focused intently upon her. And in them there burned a peculiar light—a half-puzzled light, as if he knew an answer, yet could not quite name it.

As we passed the Pyramids and speeded out through the desert, Boehler, on the other hand, seemed to expand with affability and good humor. Apparently he took no notice of the fact that I, of all his company, was the only one making any attempt to talk with him. Yet, tense as I was, I soon came to feel that even his

affability was but a mask for something else—that beneath it he, too, was strained and nervous, as if in expectation of some momentous happening about to occur.

We drove for an hour along the desert camel trail. Then the ground became more rolling. At last we wound up a long, somewhat rocky hill.

We were approaching the tomb. Now Boehler was obviously excited. His keen eyes snapped in anticipation.

"I always feel intensely moved," he said, "when approaching my little tomb."

His enthusiasm was contagious; we all in some measure felt it. Esther, for the first time that day, showed signs of interest. Her eyes sparkled; her nose quivered as if having caught a familiar scent.

My excitement was of a different order. I was frightened. I felt, without knowing why, as if a climax were approaching; as if some dreadful event was about to bring to an end the strangeness of these past few weeks.

The tomb was hardly visible above-ground, as the car came to a stop before it. An iron cage, built by Boehler against robbers, enclosed a short flight of steps that led down to a doorway hewn from solid rock. A huge rock slab, which once had sealed the doorway, now stood just at one side.

Boehler and his chauffeur busied themselves with arranging an extension light, by means of a light bulb with a long cord, attached to the car. Then, with the bulb in his hand, the big man unlocked the door to the iron cage.

"Mind the steps down," he said. "They're not any too regular." His voice sounded strange in the hush which had fallen over us. He helped Esther down the stairway to the door.

I sniffed the air. A musty, cloying odor of things long dead came up to me from the tomb—an odor as of an ancient drug.

What happened then seems confused to me now. I did not realize until afterward that Esther, strangely, had pushed on ahead of Boehler, with Mahmoud following close behind. Then, just as we had gotten well inside the passage, darkness descended upon us! Boehler, in his haste to follow after the two, had somehow caught the light-cord and pulled it loose from the socket.

The darkness seemed absolute, menacing. We stopped short. "I say, Henry, fix the light—quickly!" Boehler called to his chauffeur. His voice held a note that was almost fear.

In a moment there was light around us once again. It shone on finely-worked, beautifully-colored pictures depicting scenes of the time of Rameses Second. All along the walls on either side these paintings marched, forward toward the unknown end.

But throughout the length of the passageway, there was no sign of Esther or Mahmoud! The tomb had swallowed them!

A TERROR I could not name seemed to be driving me onward as Boehler and I raced down the echoing passageway. On either side, the light made flickering, living things of those weird wall-decorations. I did not pause to look at them, and yet I saw them. And in a flash I seemed to fathom the depths of the old Egyptian soul, and find an answer there to all things. Those marching figures led ever onward, an irrevocable road of destiny—and their destiny was doom!

I do not suppose the length of the passageway was fifty yards; yet it seemed an eternity before we drew up, panting, at the doorway to the burial chamber. Here too, a huge slab of stone had been set aside to open the way. Boehler's light flashed inside—and I gasped aloud.

For the muted rays of light shone on

a niche in the far wall of the chamber. In that niche, stiffly poised and in the scant costume of an ancient noblewoman, I saw the form that bore the features of my wife! And in a niche beside her, in like costume, was Rachin Mahmoud! The features of both were stiff, immobile as stone. . . .

Then my pent-up breath escaped in a long sigh, half-relieved. For what I had seen was actually two low-relief carvings on the wall of the chamber—but carvings, centuries old, that bore the exact features of Esther and Mahmoud!

As I looked on, astounded, a strange sound came to my ears and an eerie chill swept over me. The sound was a chant in an unknown, ancient-seeming tongue—a weird, unnatural song that sent shivers along my spine.

I turned to the sound. Boehler's light had shifted. What I saw now in the dimness left me stock still, staring.

In single file, at the far end of the chamber, three figures walked. They walked toward a doorway that opened in the wall, and the two in front went stiffly and with unseeing eyes, as if in a trance—Esther and Mahmoud!

But the one who directed them, who ordered them forward with chant and pointing finger, was the most fearsome of all. He was an old man, incredibly wrinkled and aged. It seemed that he might be countless centuries old—and the robes that flapped about him were no denial of that seeming. Black as night and of a strange material, their blackness was interspersed with stars and moons and weird signs of the zodiac.

His costume was, in fact, that of a priest of Thoth, the hawk-faced God of the Dead, of the time of Rameses' reign!

Already now Esther, with Mahmoud close behind her, had passed through the doorway that led into blackness. With my heart beating madly in fear for her,

I came out from the spell that held me and started forward. But I stopped short.

The thing that stopped me was no spoken word—it was but a look that the old priest gave me. Only briefly, out of darkness, did his eyes flash toward me as I moved; but in that moment I saw mirrored there an ancient hatred and a malevolence so fearful that it chilled the very marrow of my bones!

While I stood, unmoving, he reached the doorway. Already the others had passed through. Now he turned again and spoke. I am sure he spoke in the language I did not know, yet I understood him.

“What belongs to the dead must come back to the dead,” he said in deep, monotonous rhythm. “Toth of the tomb has claimed his own.”

There was a grating sound. Before my eyes a heavy door clanged shut. Where I had seen Mahmoud and the priest and Esther, was now only a hewn wall with no opening!

I think I went a little mad then. I rushed to the wall; I clawed at the rough stone where the door had been until blood streamed down my hands from the torn nails.

“Good God in Heaven!” I heard Boehler say. Then he was beside me, pawing the wall as frantically as I, though with more of a calm purposefulness. But where the door had been was only smooth stone, that seemed not to have been disturbed for centuries. . . .

We stopped at last, exhausted. We looked into each other's eyes, searching for a faint shred of hope. I suppose Boehler must have seen the madness in mine, for he tried to calm me with well-chosen words.

“This won't do it, old fellow,” he said. “But there's a way. If I can—”

His words stopped abruptly at a sound.

It came from behind us, toward the entrance. We whirled.

The great stone that had stood beside the door was moving into the aperture as if hands had shoved it. We were being sealed into the tomb!

It was not quite shut. We rushed forward together. Perhaps there was yet time. . . .

And just as we reached that narrow aperture, Boehler shoved me roughly aside! Taken completely by surprise, I sprawled on the stone floor as he slid through. As I scrambled to my feet, the last crack vanished. The stone slid tightly into place.

With that, the light went out. I was alone in the darkness of the tomb. Alone—and buried alive!

I KNOW that then, for a little time, I was thoroughly insane. I pounded the stone walls with my bare fists; I screamed and shouted gibberish. And at last, exhausted, I sank to the floor. . . .

Slowly, then, I forced myself by sheer power of will back to sanity. This mad effort, I told myself, would simply drive me to an earlier death than was otherwise in store for me. I was buried alive—but if I calmed myself, reserved my energy, there might yet be hope.

But would there be? . . . For I thought I saw now the answer to it all. The confidential government mission that I was to undertake next week. . . . I had not thought it would harmfully affect Boehler's interests, but now I could see that perhaps it would. And so he had wanted to be rid of me. . . .

Yes, it all fitted in now. . . . His meeting us upon our arrival . . . his mention of the tomb . . . my introduction to Mahmoud, who must be one of his tools . . . and last of all, his shoving me aside at the doorway, to be buried in the tomb. . . . His affability had been but a mask,

this weird priest and the rest but a stage set.

In that case, then, there must have been some way arranged for Mahmoud to escape. There must be an exit through that door I could not find. Esther, at least, would not be buried alive as I was.

But what would they do to her, then, since they must leave me here. . . ? Good God! What awful fate was in store for her? Would they kill her mercifully? Or Mahmoud: . . . I thought again of his dark eyes and now I saw there only lurking evil. I shuddered, groaned aloud.

And in the extremity of my agony, I realized that the answers did not fit. Some of these things might be true, but they did not explain all. They did not explain Esther's strangeness in these past few days, her remark at the meeting with Mahmoud. There were many things to which there was no answer.

What was that feeling that was coming over me, that made the flesh crawl along my spine? That there was—yes, that was it—that there was something, someone else in the dark chamber. It was looking at me with ancient, long-dead eyes and I could not see it. . . .

Yes, it was all true. It was as I had seen it. Esther had been taken back into the depths of the tomb by an ancient priest, was even now being buried, for all eternity. . . .

I leapt up, screaming. I rushed toward the vanished door, to batter my strength out in seeking it.

Ten feet away I stopped short. For I saw now what it was that had been looking at me, what it was that had seen me when all about me was only darkness.

There were two of them; they stood, one on either side of the spot whence Esther had vanished. They were black men, black as the night about them, yet I could see them plainly. They were

naked save for loin-cloths and queer, bird-like headdresses. Each held a spear at his side.

They were two slaves of ancient Egypt, and they had come back from the long-dead past to guard the entrance to Esther's burial vault!

And I had advanced too close to them. I backed away now, but too late. Already they were coming forward, spears upraised. Now their arms swooped downward, to drive the sharp weapons into my body. I felt the burn of steel in my shoulder.

I fainted then. . . .

I CAME back to consciousness to find light once more about me. The stone at the outer entrance had been rolled back. Franz Boehler knelt above me, dashing cold water into my face.

The black slaves were gone. Later, when I looked, I found no mark of spears upon me. . . . Now an old man knelt before the space where they had been. He, like that first one, seemed to be a priest; he too was incredibly old and wrinkled; yet I knew somehow that he was of the present.

As he knelt he was speaking—in that ancient tongue I had heard before this day. I thought it to be an invocation—to Thoth, perhaps, who kept the dead, to Thoth, the Hawk-faced One.

The old man finished speaking. Now he fumbled at the wall. And again a door swung open there!

Boehler raised me to my feet. "We'd best hurry," he said. "If she ever comes out of the trance and finds—"

Already he was racing down the black passage ahead; but this time a flashlight in his hand cast welcome beams along the way. Close behind him ran the old man and myself.

"Damnably sorry about knocking you down," Boehler was getting out as we

ran. "But I knew we'd never both make the door before it tumbled in. If you had gone, it might have been too late before you found out what to do. This old priest is my friend—and I knew if anybody could find the spring to open that door that I'd never known was there, he was the man. I thought—"

He broke off abruptly. We had entered another, deeper chamber—one built, perhaps, to hide the greatest treasures from those who robbed the tombs in ancient times. He flashed the light about.

In a golden niche, hewn out of the rock and beautifully decorated in colored paintings and hieroglyphics, a mummy-case was resting. In the case lay Esther! Her dark hair had fallen back, revealing her broad, white brow—weirdly white now. Her eyes were closed, her arms crossed on her breast. She had assumed the posture of an Egyptian in death!

Before her, prostrated in sorrowing reverence, forehead touching the ground, was Rachin Mahmoud. But of the ancient priest of Thoth who had led them here, there was no sign. . . .

I started forward, my heart in my mouth; but Boehler stopped me. "A trance. . . ." he whispered. "Dangerous to startle them. . . ."

And while I waited, the old man walked slowly up to the golden niche. Before the two, he spoke a long time in the strange chanting tongue. He finished with a sharp word that seemed a command.

At the word, Mahmoud rose up, looked dazedly about him. Then Esther, too, arose from her resting-place. She looked around with frightened eyes, saw my anxious face. The fright changed to relief and a great happiness welled up within me.

"Peter!" she said in her old voice. "Where am I? I—I must have been sleeping—a long time. . . ."

I took her in my arms.

Boehler mopped his brow. "Thank God," he said fervently. "And let's get out of here. This beastly place. . . . I—you know I think something they left in here centuries ago must have drugged the air. I've seen the damndest things here more than once—things that couldn't possibly be here. . . ."

We hurried out of the tomb. I was carrying Esther, and when we went up the steps she tried to turn and look back. Some fearful premonition seized me; I forced her head quickly away. Mahmoud, dazedly bringing up the rear, turned and stared for a long time at the dark passageway. Then, shaking his head, he came forward and climbed into the car, his eyes burning with a strange dim light.

I was still trying to answer a thousand questions as we drove away. But there was little time for that. Beneath my hand Esther's brow was burning hot; her eyes were wild. She was not yet out of danger.

We drove swiftly home, stopping only to leave Mahmoud at his house. I got Esther into bed and called a doctor. Then, and then only, did Boehler and I find time for talk.

"I'm damnably sorry, old fellow," he said worriedly. "Terribly sorry. I never should have taken Esther out there—especially after Mahmoud joined us. But the resemblance—it maddened me. I didn't realize there'd be any harm—I had to see Esther there, at the tomb. Then I'd know. . . . I—I'm sure she'll make out all right now. . . ."

I had never seen him so genuinely troubled. I could not be angry with him. "I don't think you could have helped it," I said. "She must have known this was going to happen before we left England. Centuries before. . . ." I broke off. "What sort of rot am I talking?" I asked. And then I added: "You said you'd know then.

I wonder—now—how much we do know. . . ."

Boehler's first words seemed irrelevant. "I found this tomb," he said, "just about thirty years ago. There was a mummy then in the outer chamber, whose face was like—like the one on the wall. I had the tomb locked and guarded—no one could possibly have entered. But a few months later the mummy and the case containing it vanished. We've just seen the case—but there was no mummy there. . . ." He paused; his usually smiling lips were thinned. "Reincarnation," he muttered. "I don't believe that sort of thing. . . ."

"Esther," I said, and I seemed to speak dully, "Esther was twenty-nine years old today. . . ."

We both lapsed into silence. . . .

FOR two days Esther burned with a fearful fever that I thought would sap all the strength from her frail body. She tossed about; she raved in that ancient language which I did not understand. The doctors, frankly at their wits' end, shook their heads and called the malady Egyptian fever, because they knew no other name.

By the afternoon of the third day they were ready to admit they could not save her. The fever was fast approaching its climax. It would burn her to death.

Thoth, the Hawk-faced One, I thought with a shudder of horror, *will have her, after all. He will have her in his dark tomb in cloth wrappings. . . .* I suppose the strain of those past three days had left me not quite sane.

Boehler, who had been constantly at my side, watching over Esther, now nodded his head. "There is one hope," he said. "Just one. . . ." And he turned on his heels and went out.

A little later he came back. With him was the old priest who had opened the

door of the burial chamber for us, seeming now even older than before.

The fever was now almost at its height. Esther was raving madly—raving in that ancient tongue. And while Boehler and I stood helplessly by, the old priest knelt beside her bed. From the folds of his gown he took a small vessel and from it dropped oil on Esther's forehead. Then he lighted an incense lamp. He anointed her nostrils, her eyelids, her mouth, the palms of her hands and feet.

He gazed at her intently for a moment. From his voluminous gown he now brought a roll of withered papyrus, a pen and ink. Then he spoke to Esther in the same tongue she was speaking, and she answered him. And the things she said he wrote down on the withered parchment.

He must have written for half an hour. When he was done Esther seemed to have quieted a bit, though the fever still burned and still she talked on. The old man rose, shaking his head sadly.

"What was done before must be done again," he said as if to himself. "The prince looked back. It cannot be otherwise. . . ."

Without another word, he rolled up the papyrus and placed it back in the folds of his gown, then walked out of the room.

An hour later the climax was past. The fever was all but gone, and Esther breathed normally, sleeping deeply and quietly.

She awakened in a little while, and her first inquiry was for Rachin Mahmoud. In my worry I had forgotten that he too might be ill. I sent a servant to his home at once to ask after his health.

The servant came back to report that Rachin Mahmoud was dead. He had not been ill, Mahmoud's servant declared. That afternoon an old man had called to see him. Afterwards he had slept; and he had not awakened.

At the moment he died, Esther had begun to recover. . . .

NOT long after, I managed to effect a transfer to India. I thought it best, and anyhow, I did not love Egypt any more.

The change seems to have been good for Esther. You would think she had never lived through those weird days. She is gay and social. She dances, swims, plays golf and tennis with the young officers who are our friends. She is the life of our little British colony, and we are both very happy.

Yet sometimes I come upon her suddenly, alone. She will be sitting rigid, staring with her long dark eyes into nothingness, and for a moment she will not know that I am near.

I shudder then. For I know that Thoth is calling her—that now she is not my wife. . . .

In the Next Issue—

Stories by—

Hugh B. Cave—Arthur J. Burks—H. M. Appel—Paul Ernst

And a Host of Other Masters of Horror Fiction!

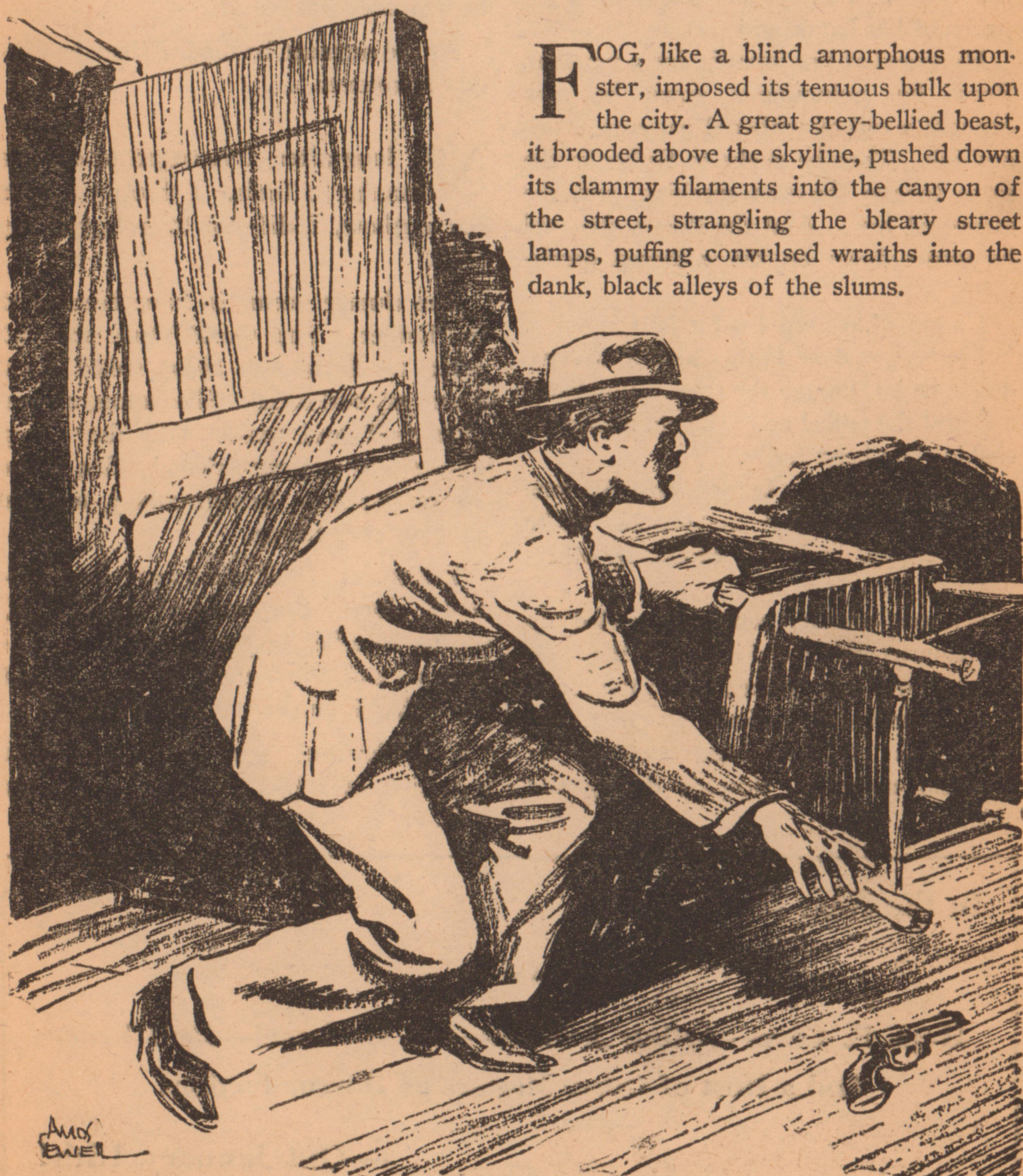
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MEN WITHOUT BLOOD

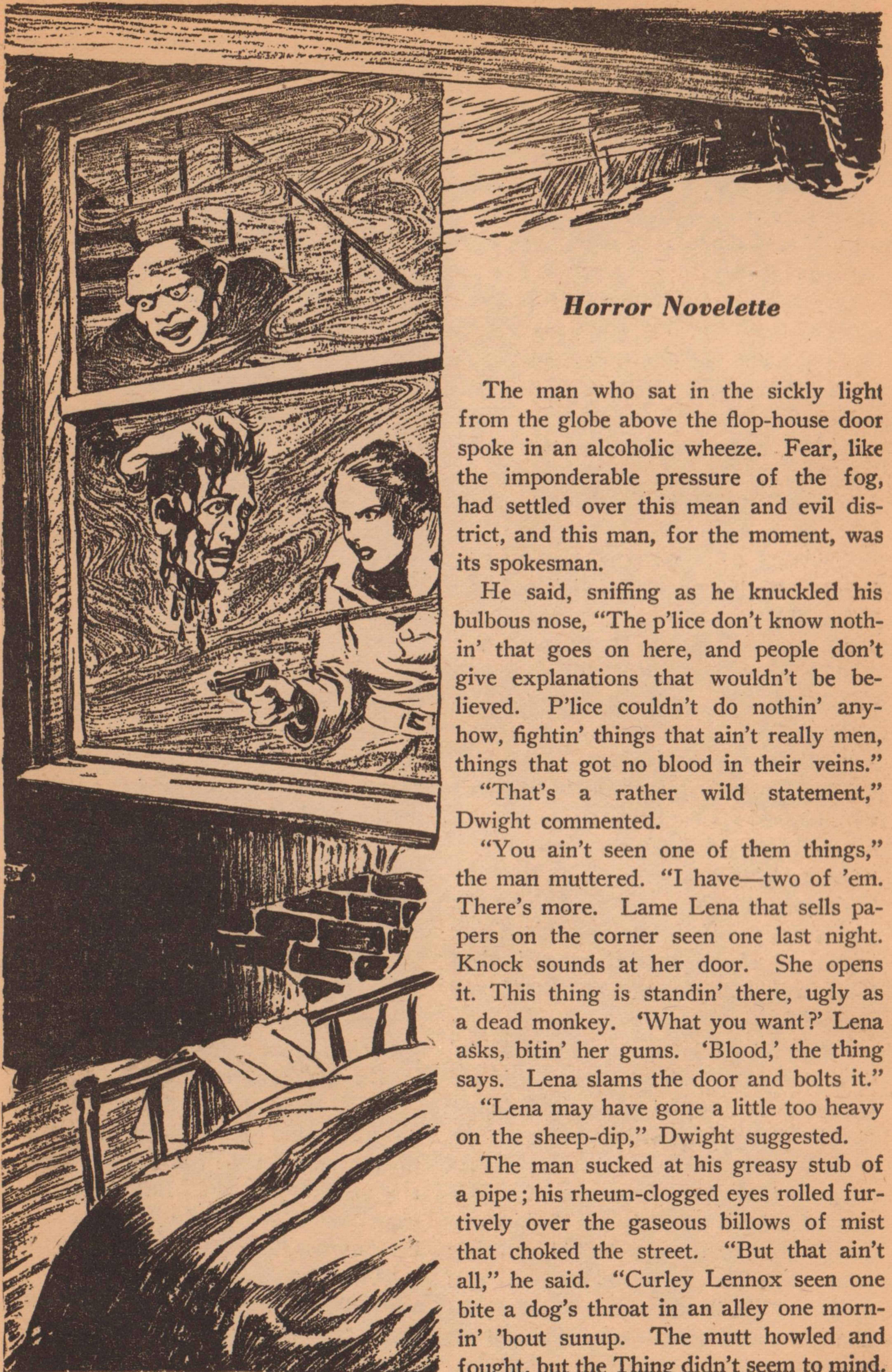
By
John H. Knox

Through the fog-choked greyness these horrors prowled. Their faces were pale as the fog itself and even knives could draw from them no blood. Yet it was blood that they sought, blood that they sucked from their victim's headless corpses! . . .

FOG, like a blind amorphous monster, imposed its tenuous bulk upon the city. A great grey-bellied beast, it brooded above the skyline, pushed down its clammy filaments into the canyon of the street, strangling the bleary street lamps, puffing convulsed wraiths into the dank, black alleys of the slums.



AMOS
EWEL



Horror Novelette

The man who sat in the sickly light from the globe above the flop-house door spoke in an alcoholic wheeze. Fear, like the imponderable pressure of the fog, had settled over this mean and evil district, and this man, for the moment, was its spokesman.

He said, sniffing as he knuckled his bulbous nose, "The p'lice don't know nothin' that goes on here, and people don't give explanations that wouldn't be believed. P'lice couldn't do nothin' anyhow, fightin' things that ain't really men, things that got no blood in their veins."

"That's a rather wild statement," Dwight commented.

"You ain't seen one of them things," the man muttered. "I have—two of 'em. There's more. Lame Lena that sells papers on the corner seen one last night. Knock sounds at her door. She opens it. This thing is standin' there, ugly as a dead monkey. 'What you want?' Lena asks, bitin' her gums. 'Blood,' the thing says. Lena slams the door and bolts it."

"Lena may have gone a little too heavy on the sheep-dip," Dwight suggested.

The man sucked at his greasy stub of a pipe; his rheum-clogged eyes rolled furtively over the gaseous billows of mist that choked the street. "But that ain't all," he said. "Curley Lennox seen one bite a dog's throat in an alley one mornin' 'bout sunup. The mutt howled and fought, but the Thing didn't seem to mind.

It run off though, when Curley come up. The dog was dead."

"That's news," Dwight said, "when a man bites a dog."

The jest went unapplauded. In spite of himself it gave Dwight a queer feeling. You couldn't laugh about these matters, apparently.

"Another one bust into an opium dive," the man went on. "I won't say where. But the Chink had a corpse to get rid of later. The rest of 'em run off and left this feller—after they seen the Thing wouldn't bleed no matter how much they cut him."

"Good God!" Dwight exclaimed. "You mean, seriously. . . ?"

"Didn't I tell you?" the man growled irately. "Didn't I say there ain't no blood in 'em?"

"A figure of speech, I supposed. . . ."

"Figger of speech, hell! Listen, I seen that fight in Hongkong Charlie's place myself."

"Let's hear about that."

The man rocked forward in his chair which leaned against the fog-sweaty building, and knocked the dottle from his pipe. "Three nights ago, it was," he rumbled. "I'd dropped in fer a spread of chowmein and a little snifter. I sees this Thing with the dead-pan sittin' there an' it gives me the creeps to look at him. But I goes on eatin'.

"Next thing I know there's a howl, an' this Thing has grabbed a Chink kid an' started to run out with him. Up jumps Emilio the Spick, who's sittin' by the door, and out comes Emilio's knife. As slick a knife-fighter as ever cut a Gringo's guts, that Mex. But does it do him any good? The Thing drops the kid, and they fight. The Thing's got no weapon, so it fights with its hands clawed. Emilio cuts him to ribbons, so to speak. Face, arms, throat slashed.

"Then of a sudden Emilio jumps back,

goes white, crosses himself and begins to gibber in Mexican. That was when he seen the Thing wouldn't bleed. I seen it, to. There was a gash you could see the raw edges of—like a piece of bled beef."

"And no blood?"

"No blood. And mister, that Thing went out, and nobody follered it, neither. . . ." His words trailed off. Light footsteps sounded on the clammy pavement.

DWIGHT turned in the direction of the man's bleary glance. The slender figure of a girl was materializing from the mist. She walked with lowered head and face half hidden by the collar of her smartly tailored coat, but Dwight caught a brief glimpse of black, mysterious eyes, that sent a curious glow tingling in his veins, and he noticed how the wan light from the smoky globe lay softly on the perfect texture of her skin. No harpy of the pavements, that girl!

He was wondering what could bring her into this evil district, when, to his surprise, the girl with a sort of furtive duck turned in at the flop-house doorway and mounted the stairs. He saw her trim ankles vanish in the sickly light, heard the click of her heels in the hallway above and turned back bewildered.

The man grinned. His puffy, stubble-rough jowls spread in fat folds over the frayed collar of his coat. "Surprises you, eh—to see a doll like that in here?"

"Rather," Dwight said. "Who is she?"

The sagging shoulders shrugged. "You're askin' me. Took me by surprise, too, when she come in this evening and paid fer a room. But should I ask questions? She paid; I reckon she knows her business."

"Yes," Dwight said abstractedly. "Still, with all due respect for your establishment. . . . But look here, what's your opinion about these monsters?"

The man screwed his flabby face into

a grimace and spat. "Ugh! I don't know. Only they ain't human."

"Why do you say that?"

"Somethin'—a look about 'em. Faces with a greenish gleam on the skin, like you might see on a Chinese vase, eyes so cold and empty it makes you shiver, like when you look over a high cliff. . . ." He paused, his brow creased intently. "I tell you they look like them figures of dead murderers from Paley's Waxworks come to life!"

Dwight looked sharply at him, but did not pursue his inquiries in that direction. "I'd give something to see one of your monsters," he said.

The man looked at him narrowly; sudden suspicion gleamed in his rheumy eyes. "You ain't a reporter?"

"No," Dwight said, "I'm a capitalist."

The man laughed. Dwight, too, smiled. Queerly, it happened to be the truth. He didn't add that conducting a private detective agency was his way of escaping the boredom of an idle existence.

"You'd really like to see one of them buzzards?"

"Five dollars' worth," Dwight said.

Greed gleamed rawly in the man's face. "All right," he agreed. "But just a peek. I don't want no disturbance—from him."

"You've got one—in here?"

The man nodded, dragged his shapeless bulk upright. "Came in this afternoon. Face all muffled. But I seen the eyes—the skin. I reckon he's sleepin' now, if they sleep. You can take a peek at him."

Dwight slapped a bill into the grimy palm and followed the scrape of the ragged shoes up the stairway. A dim, fly-specked bulb lighted the upper hall. It was bare of carpet and oily grime stained the floor and cracked plaster walls. The smell was the immemorial reek of such a place. Dwight stared about warily. It might be a trap; you never knew in a dive like this.

The slithering shoes paused. The landlord gripped his arm, shoved his head so close that the smell of sour alcohol was sickening. "He's in Twenty-two," he hissed. "We'll go easy, mister."

He slunk softly to the door and Dwight crept behind him. The transom was dark; there was no sound from within. The man's warty hand was on the knob; he gave the door a little push.

"H'mm!" This time aloud. He shoved the door wide. "Empty!"

"What's this," Dwight growled, "a game?"

The squat man's face was puckered with real surprise.

"So help me. . . ." he began. "He ain't come down the stairs."

"Since he's not human," Dwight muttered sourly, "I suppose—"

"Don't laugh!" the man said grimly. "He's here—somewhere."

Then it dawned on Dwight what was in the man's mind.

"Damn!" he swore. "That girl! Where's her room?"

"Twenty-six," the man sputtered, and started forward.

Dwight followed, taking long strides on tiptoe. But they didn't reach the door. It was Dwight who grabbed the other's arm and drew him suddenly back. He had stopped at the closed door of Twenty-five. Feeling the iron grip on his arm, the landlord sputtered, rolled his eyes.

"Jeez! What is it?"

Dwight's features had clouded; the grip of his lean fingers tightened on the pudgy arm. "Look!" he said between gritted teeth.

"What . . . where?" The man raised his frightened eyes, stared.

The transom hung ajar, forming a dark and hazy mirror, and in the moist, distorted depths something was swimming, something like a human body which

seemed to move gently with a curious volition not its own.

THE man looked helplessly at Dwight; his jaw dropped, but instead of speech a flood of saliva ran out of his mouth and drooled from his pendulous underlip. Dwight's face was a corded brown mask; the brows dipped severely over eyes gone black and hard as lumps of basalt. A revolver had appeared in one hand; with the other he was pushing the door slowly open. Then he stopped. He felt the shaking body of the landlord, now pressed against him, stiffen with a jerk. The hair on Dwight's neck bristled as he stared.

Between him and the open window, past which the grey and ghostly fog was boiling, the body of a man was hanging in mid-air. Headless and half naked, it dangled by its feet from a rusty iron chandelier, swaying with the gentle momentum of a dying pendulum. Directly beneath the bloody stub of a neck was a white wash-basin, and with each grotesque motion of the swinging corpse, fresh drops of the viscous, ruddy fluid were shaken down into the half-filled bowl.

There was no one else in the room.

Dwight turned. His companion, who had been gaping in speechless vertigo, now began to blubber his innocence in a terrified whimper.

"Shut up!" Dwight ordered hoarsely, and pushed past into the hall. Three long strides brought him to the door of Twenty-six. He twisted the knob. Locked. He rattled it, yelled, "Open it up!"

The hurried scrape of feet and a low muttering reached his ears. He backed away to the opposite wall, braced his thick shoulders and lunged. With a crack the flimsy lock gave, and Dwight's body hurtled like a projectile into the room.

His shins struck a chair. He sprawled, cursing his luck, snatching for the revolver which had been jarred from his hand.

Then he froze, his hand poised in mid-reach, staring. In the embrasure of the open window three heads were visible. One of them was the head of the dark-eyed girl who now held in one tense hand a black automatic. Beside, and slightly behind her, wreathed like a goblin in the swirling fog, was something which might have been a man, something which wore human garments, but whose gaping mouth was literally split from jaw to jaw, so that a purplish tongue lolled between tiers of yellow teeth dropped wide apart. And in this creature's hand was the third head—a gory, nauseous thing, with bugging eyes and coarse red hair now twisted between the fiend's wax-yellow fingers.

For a moment, a curious sort of horror, detached and impersonal, swallowed up all physical fear in Dwight's mind. Then his hand moved toward the revolver a few inches away. But almost touching it, he jerked stiff again.

"Do you think I won't shoot?" the girl asked.

Dwight thought she would. He saw the barely perceptible tightening of her finger on the trigger, and froze into immobility.

"Back to the door!" the girl ordered. "Then face about!"

Dwight obeyed. The gun crashed behind him; the light globe shattered and fell in fragments as darkness swallowed the room.

Dwight ducked, ran to the window. It opened on a fire-escape landing, and below he could make out dimly two figures descending the iron ladder into the alley. He whirled about, retrieved his revolver and climbed out. But already a car with wet top glistening through the fog was slinking out into the street.

He climbed back into the room, swung out into the hall and almost collided with the craven landlord who was creeping toward the door.

"God!" the latter swore hoarsely. "God! Wot'll I do?"

"Call the police, you fool!" Dwight growled and shoved him aside.

A moment later he was in the mist-dreary street, legging it with swift strides toward his office, a definite plan in his mind.

SELF-SCHOOLED in a dangerous calling, Stanley Dwight had two antidotes for nerves—action and more action. He also had a system of mental discipline which served him well in circumstances like the present. And as he strode, like a tall determined phantom, through the frothing billows of fog, he brushed from his mind the morbid, disconcerting horror which clung like a foul miasma about the night's events, and attacked the problem in a cold and analytical fashion. So by the time he had climbed the stairs, navigated the hall and swung open the door of his office he had already made up his mind as to his next move. Then he picked up the note on the desk marked "Urgent," and frowned. It was from his office boy and sole assistant, and it read:

Old Prof. Collins has kept the phone jangling all afternoon. Is he high behind? He says are you going to let them cut his throat or aren't you? If he's not already croaked, you better call him.

Jimmy.

Dwight tossed the note back and swore. "Croak him!" he fumed. "What that old egotist needs is a blind bridle to keep him from breaking his neck every time a paper blows across his path!"

He turned away toward an inner door with the firm intention of going on with his other plans. "But no," he said re-

flectively, and stopped. "No, he may scare himself to death. But I won't waste much time on him!"

He went out, closed the door, clumped back into the street and hailed a taxi. The car ploughed through the sodden murk of the streets and came to a halt before a cottage on the fringes of the university campus. Dwight told the driver to wait.

Professor Collins, wearing a dressing-gown and carrying a revolver in one slightly tremulous hand, answered the door. He was a small, dumpy man, with scraggly hair fringing a pate as white and ponderous as a roc's egg. His pink face was clean shaven and its cherubic cast belied the erratic temper and the intellect for which the eccentric scientist was noted. Dwight saw at once that the professor was at present as swollen as a toad with indignation and uneasiness. He followed the professor into his bachelor study, prepared for the outburst.

There the dumpy scientist squared off and faced him. And the outburst came.

"Well!" he exploded. "My well-being, I suppose, is a matter of small moment to the world. Still, since I have employed you to protect—"

"So they've written again?" Dwight inquired laconically. "Let's see the note."

He watched the professor as he fumbled among his papers. Pompous and egotistical! Ignorant people often took him for an ass. Better informed people, of course, knew that the man who had startled the scientific world with his discoveries in the fields of biology and organic chemistry, could scarcely be that. Dwight had been in one of his classes and was accustomed to the professor's tantrums.

"It's signed this time," Professor Collins said indignantly as he thrust the sheet toward Dwight.

Dwight took it, glanced at it abstractedly, then stiffened abruptly with interest

and alarm. It wasn't the substance of the note that excited him. The order to leave his laboratory unlocked was natural enough in view of the fact that valuable supplies had already been stolen. It was the signature that caught Dwight's eye. The note read:

Last warning. Vacate your house for the night and leave your laboratory unlocked. What we need we will get. Disregard this order and a fate worse than death will be yours.

The Six Without Blood.

DWIGHT looked up sharply. It had been his intention to minimize the seriousness of the thing. His real opinion had been that mischievous students had taken advantage of the professor's nervousness since the recent robbery to play a joke on him. Now matters had assumed a different aspect. Was it possible—this grotesquely horrible conjecture which had dawned, nebulous and half-formed, in his mind?

"Look here," he said bluntly, "you haven't come entirely clean with me in this business. What were the chemicals which were stolen?"

The professor paled, moistened dry lips nervously. "Why do you ask that?" His manner now was considerably subdued.

"Maybe you know," Dwight countered.

The professor fidgeted; then, as with an effort, he brought his eyes level with the detective's. "I see I'll have to tell you," he said. "I had two reasons for holding that back. First, the habit of a lifetime of guarding my incomplete experiments from a prying world. And second—" Here he paused, and a grim look hardened his mobile features—"and second, the possible consequences to society of a discovery of the properties of that compound."

Dwight leaned forward, the muscles of

his face tensing. "Be plainer," he said curtly. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean," said Collins, "that if the properties of those drugs were discovered by evil minds, the very fabric of civilization would be unsafe!"

Dwight sprang to his feet scowling. "Then your damned secrecy," he growled, "may cost a ghastly price! I don't know what your stuff was, but I begin to suspect a connection between it and an unspeakable horror. Did it have something to do with blood?"

Professor Collins paled; his mouth popped open in astonishment. "It does indeed," he stammered, "but how could you have known?"

"I don't," Dwight said, "but I imagine there are others who do. Tell me quickly what effect the stuff has."

Professor Collins nodded, swallowed with difficulty, got up. "Great God!" he breathed, "What have I done? I knew that there were graves that should never be opened!" His words trailed off in a sort of sob. Then he straightened, clenched his hands, blinked at Dwight. "But perhaps it isn't too late! You shall know all, the whole incredible secret. I have it all written down—a paper I was preparing. I'll bring it." He trotted toward a half-open door which gave on his laboratory.

The door closed behind him. Dwight took a deep breath. His head was throbbing. Thank God he had come here after all! Now he would know. Certainly Providence must have brought him here, brought him to the only man perhaps with the power to devise an antidote for the horror he had unwittingly unleashed.

What did it all mean? *Blood . . . graves opened. . .* Dwight could only guess, and his brain whirled with the chaotic vision of monsters reanimated, monsters with some frightful hell-brew in their veins, monsters more hideous and

appalling than beasts, soulless, pitiless, conscienceless! He saw them in a multiplying horde boil up from the dank dens and alleys, swarm through the fetid gutters, gibbering insanely, shrieking like the damned, driven perhaps by a loathsome thirst for what their bodies lacked, howling for blood, blood, blood. . . .

The vision swirled and vanished; reality thundered back as a sound from the laboratory sent an electric current rippling through Dwight's veins. A crash, a muttered oath, and then the scream—a shrill ululation of fear and agony which rose until the walls seemed to shiver before its impact—then died in a convulsed, blubbering sob snapped sharply off!

CHAPTER TWO

Where Corpses Walked

DWIGHT hurled his body toward the door. He tried the knob, beat on it with his fists. It was locked—an automatic spring lock on the inside, he supposed. Damn the man's absent-mindedness!

"Professor! Professor!"

There was no reply. More than fear, Dwight realized now, had been in that wail. He threw his weight against the door, battered it until the bones of his shoulders ached. But it would not yield.

He crouched, applied his eye to the keyhole. His knee-joints went watery at what he saw. Horror like a slimy thing crawled into his throat and choked him.

In the small area of visibility which the keyhole afforded, two figures could be seen. One was the headless body of Professor Collins, sprawled hideously in a welter of blood upon the floor! The other was the grisly Thing lifting its lean, cadaverous body over the sill of the window. In one harpy-like claw, it carried a flagon of some dark liquid, in the other a sheaf of papers.

For an instant the Thing turned its head. Dwight would never forget that brief glimpse of its face. For it was the face of a revenant, a ghoul, a *thing without blood!*

The stunned paralysis which held Dwight lasted for only a moment. He sprang to a side door, gun in hand, and dived out into the black and vaporous night. Groping his way through the sodden murk, he reached the open laboratory window. But the specter had vanished, swallowed up by the humid, incorporeal fog which seemed its proper element. Except for the ghastly, decapitated body, the laboratory was empty.

Then, in the alley behind the place, an automobile motor roared its hoarse vibrations through the smoking mist. Dwight stumbled toward the front of the house, saw that his taxi was still there.

"Get started!" he yelled. "Follow the car that leaves the alley!"

The driver nodded. As the car shot forth, he swung swiftly in pursuit.

But it was hopeless. The fog, that clammy monster who fights for crime, spread the shadow of his tenuous wings about the ghostly fugitives. Somewhere, soon, they made a quick turn and were lost in the greyness.

Dwight saw then that it was useless to attempt to pick them up again. He had seen the car but dimly. He settled back and gave the driver his downtown address. No use in going back to the place. Professor Collins was beyond all help now, and the papers had been stolen. He would phone a report of the murder to the police and then follow the faint and bloody trail alone.

He got out at his office and hurried in. And the first thing he did was to take a stiff drink of whiskey, a very stiff one. . . .

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Stanley Dwight, unrecognizable in his shabby topcoat and

flop-brimmed hat, and with his face considerably the worse for a little deftly applied make-up, shuffled his sagging shoes along a fog-muggy street of pawnshops, penny arcades and cheap clothing stores. Ahead of him, in the middle of the block, a spot of light stood out under the grey nimbus of the fog. Colored globes, which winked like evil eyes, formed an arc over the foyer of an old theater and lit up the cracking sign: *Paley's Wax Museum*, past which the fog in pink and green wraiths was drifting.

A thinning crowd of grey, nondescript figures stood hunched and half interested before the painted box where a gold-toothed spieler with a scenic necktie was talking hoarsely and gesturing with a cane toward the sample exhibits.

"There he is, ladies and gentlemen," said the spieler, pointing toward the waxen image of a burly young giant who stood on a pine plank gallows surrounded by a wide assortment of lethal weapons. "There he is—a man who loved his feller man! Yes sir, why he loved his feller man so much that he ate him!"

Even the unresponsive crowd stirred a little at this ghastly pronouncement. A murmur like a challenge rose from the seedy ranks.

"You don't believe it? It's a matter of police records. And the man boasted of it himself. He ate his pal when the two of 'em was starvin', hemmed up by the law in a Florida swamp. Bysshe Guttman was his name—the only authenticated modern American cannibal! He saved a million bucks from his crimes, hid it away. But the law finally got him. He was drowned a month ago while trying to escape from Alcatraz Island. His body was never recovered from the swift current. So the fishes ate the great lover of humanity!"

He cleared his throat, spat discreetly within his box and turned to another fig-

ure. This was of a small man, incredibly hairy, with a thick black beard muffling his features, and smoked glasses over his eyes. He wore an Inverness cape and there was something monstrous and evil about the soft, almost dainty hands which were outstretched as if for inspection.

"See them hands, ladies and gentlemen?" the spieler barked. "The hands of a sorcerer! Dr. Magwood was this soft-speakin' little feller's name—a skilled surgeon, a madman, a pleasure-killer. In the dark of night he done his bloody deeds for pleasure, cuttin' his victims in pieces an' arrangin' them in neat piles. Foxy as a devil, he claimed he could do magic, even raise the dead. He was supposed to have been killed by a mob, but it ain't certain. Now, ladies and gentlemen, inside you will see. . . ."

Dwight heard no more. He shuffled to the curtained entrance, asked to see the manager and was directed to a narrow flight of steps that led him up to a cubby-hole office. The man behind the battered desk lifted a thin, crafty face to regard his visitor.

"You're the manager?"

"Yes."

"I want to collect that ten dollars you offer to anyone who'll spend the night in your Gallery of Ghosts."

The manager studied him shrewdly, rolled a smoking cigar between thin fingers. "We've had a little trouble with that stunt," he said. "Several men got so scared they ran out in the middle of the night."

"I don't care. I need the ten bucks. I'm broke, out of a job. It's good publicity. . . ."

"Sure, it's good publicity." A pause. "Got a family?"

"No. What difference does that make?"

"We got to know these things. How's your health—nerves good?"

"Nothing wrong with me. Just not eatin' enough."

"Well, I suppose—if you want to try. . . ."

"Thanks," Dwight said. "When do I start?"

"It's about closin' time now," the manager said. "I'll have 'em put a cot in there for you."

FIFTEEN minutes later Stanley Dwight sat alone on a narrow balcony which overlooked a huge and dimly lighted room. Around and below him, like a vast congregation of the unhallowed dead which the very grave had rejected, the pallid effigies of evil were grouped. Dwight was watching the door which had just closed. The man who had brought him here might still be spying, so for a time he sat perfectly still on his cot.

Three colored ceiling lights threw out a faint and greenish luminescence, of a brightness about the equivalent of moonlight. Under this weird unearthly glow, the silent and ghostly place took on the look and atmosphere of a morgue—but a morgue in which no veil or covering softened the icy contours of death's horror, a morgue in which the unhallowed dead had risen with stiff, corroded limbs to mock in a motionless pantomime whatever black and bestial deed had won them this posthumus infamy.

Reaching into his pocket, Dwight took out a folded piece of paper which he had been carrying about for several days. It was one of those anonymous tips, some worthless, some valuable, which drift to the office of every detective. It had come to him unsigned through the mail. It read:

Have a look in on Paleys Waxworks. The police are too dumb. Men go in there and dont come out. Somebody dressed like them runs out yellin to fool people. Tramps and drifters are all theyll take, so nobody wont know the difference. A strate tip.

Dwight pondered the queer message. Until tonight he had given it little thought. Now, with only a blank void like the fog confronting him, it seemed a clue worth following. It was little enough, but it was something. The flop-house keeper's mention of the resemblance between the monsters and the wax-effigies had brought the note back into his mind. Then too, this place was located in the very heart of the district which the execrable creatures seemed to have chosen for their hunting ground.

Added to this were the words of Professor Collins which, together with his ghastly end, had engendered that appalling hypothesis in Dwight's mind—and now he seemed to see a possible connection between the scattered pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. He meant to wait now, see if anything happened. If not, he would make a thorough search of the place. He wanted particularly to examine some of the effigies, to see if, as rumor had it, there were real corpses among them.

Dwight put the note away, stood up and looked about him. "The Six Without Blood!" Here at least were men without blood. Their frozen attitudes, their gruesome postures, their staring lifeless eyes, seemed to mock his thoughts, jeer at him horribly. The figure nearest to him, that of a sallow young man who had murdered his father-in-law by thrusting his head into a gas stove, was seated beside the replica of his fiendishness, staring at it with an expression almost of pride.

Feeling that by now he should be safe from the manager's eyes, Dwight stepped to the figure. He stripped the baggy clothes from the stiff frame, wrapped his own topcoat about it and threw it on its side upon the cot. He laid his hat over the thing's eyes. At a little distance it might have been his own body, peacefully asleep.

He then took up his position in the chair by the stove. He adjusted his limbs

in the very attitude of the effigy, and sat very still with his revolver on the edge of the chair beside him.

Silence and forced inaction are the immemorial allies of fear. Dwight, who prided himself on the steadiness of his own nerves, thought of how an ordinary man might feel in this place alone. He thought of it with a certain amusement but also with a certain vague flutter of uneasiness. The imagination is a powerful and terrible instrument. For instance, with very little encouragement from excited nerves, Dwight could imagine that he had seen a figure—the figure of a murderess in a group below—move slightly as if tired of the posture. Well, that was patently absurd. He expected something to happen, but no such fantastic business as that. He laughed it aside and waited.

The place was deathly still. A jittery man might positively lose his mind staring too long at the horrible, frozen immobility of these grisly figures. With the thin green light over it, it was like some gastly tableau frozen in ice. It was like something a man might see if he came upon some village where a sudden catastrophe had left the whole population frozen in their tracks, standing hideously in their familiar attitudes with a frightful, timeless patience, as if for ages unnumbered they had stood thus, and for other ages would so stand. He imagined how such a man might wander for days among staring dead faces, until his mind cracked and he shrieked for them to move or speak.

A totally unexpected throb of cold shot through Dwight's veins. At first he thought that it was the idea itself which had excited it—then he realized that in reality it had been an impression that the wax figure slightly behind him had moved. But he did not turn. If anyone were watching now it would be fatal to betray the fact that he had substituted

the wax figure for his own upon the bed. As for that wax likeness of a dead murderer, well. . . .

HIS thoughts scattered like leaves before a puff of cold wind. He did not move or start, but now his eyes narrowed in earnest. It was the slight figure of the hirsute Dr. Magwood which had been brought inside at closing time and which now stood here on the balcony just under the dangling noose of the portable gallows. It had seemed to him that this figure had bent slightly as if to peer at the thing that lay upon his cot.

Now, without making a movement, Dwight studied the figure's face. Something like a gleam of life showed in the eyes behind the smoked spectacles. He hadn't noticed it before. The figure was perfectly still now. Why did it give such a curious impression of life and intelligence? It was looking at the cot, looking with a sort of rapt gloating, like an obscene fat spider leering at a captured fly.

Dwight stiffened, stiffened into a cold rigidity that rivaled the frightful statues themselves. For from somewhere in the room below, the rusty mechanism of a clock began to purr and chime. The sound was somehow ghastly in that tomblike chamber.

Then, on the stroke of twelve, the short figure of the evil Dr. Magwood bent forward with a movement slow and mechanical! While Dwight watched with a strange breathlessness and a slow, clammy crawling of his skin, the bearded ogre reached up, caught the noose of the gallows rope and began to draw it slowly down!

Dwight fought to keep his muscles steady. An hallucination had been his first thought. Now, as a flash of reason told him that the thing was really taking place, the horror of that creeping, ghostly pantomime held him with a dreadful fas-

ination. For the feet of the bearded doctor made no sound, yet they were moving nearer and nearer to the cot. And the fiend's grisly lips, which showed like bloodless slabs of flesh between the beard, were parted in a smile of insane gloating!

Dwight held himself ready to spring up, gun in hand. He now understood what sort of hellishness had been going on in here! And at the thought of the unsuspecting men who had awakened at midnight to find this creeping demon with his noose bending above them, his blood ran cold. For the squat figure in the cape was now bending above the cot, was reaching out his pudgy, obscene hands with a sort of hideous gentleness to place the noose over his victim's head.

Now! Now was the moment! And while the hair bristled on his scalp, Dwight slid one hand across his lap to seize the revolver at his side.

Then abruptly cold horror like strangling fingers of ice closed on his throat. For where the pistol had been, the fingers of his groping hand encountered something as repulsive as the touch of rotting flesh. At the same moment he lunged away. Lunged but could not move—for fingers like the jaws of a vise were on his shoulders, dragging him back!

He struggled to his feet, still unable to turn and face the nameless horror which had fastened itself upon his back, for the strength of the thing which held him was like that of a boa constrictor. A cold and hairy arm had encircled his throat in a deadly strangle-hold which held the air in his bursting lungs and seemed to be forcing his eyes from their sockets with the torturous pressure.

Still he fought with his waning strength, for the horrid little monster of a doctor was moving toward him now, a low chuckle quivering in his throat.

A choked cry of fear and defiance rattled from Dwight's lungs and he made a

desperate lunge at the fiend. Something stung his arm, something like the jab of a hypodermic. His senses began to swim. Giddily he reeled, felt himself released to stagger forward blindly.

Blackness passed for a moment over Stanley Dwight's mind, blackness which he felt, in that awful moment of awakening consciousness, had been something sweet and merciful. For now his hands were bound to his sides, the noose was about his neck, and he was being dragged up, up from the floor. He saw the green lights spinning; he saw the bearded face of the doctor, floating hazily like the head of a demon. Then the dark flowed back, gratefully swallowing mind and senses.

CHAPTER THREE

Hostage of the Dead

DWIGHT opened his eyes. For a long time, it seemed, he had lain there in a semi-conscious stupor. Now his nerves jerked thoroughly alive. Instinct warned him of the nearness of some living presence.

He blinked into the eerie twilight of the tunnel-like passage in which he lay, realized that he was lying upon a clammy floor of stone, his hands and arms still bound. He flung his body over. Pain shot through him at the first movement of his wrenched and swollen neck. But in the shock which now smote his cringing nerves, the pain was forgotten.

A silent figure was bending above him. It was a woman. Pink tights ruffled at the waist—the outmoded chorus-girl costume of the murderess he had seen move in the waxworks! Next his eye fell on the point of light that gleamed dully on the blade of the knife she held, striking the weird attitude of some sacrificial priestess.

Then he saw the face, and a queer sob of mingled incredulity and despair forced itself between his gritted teeth. For it was

the face of the girl with the dark eyes and hair whom he had seen in the flophouse! The black eyes bored into his now with a strange fanatical gleam that gave to her face a mingled beauty and horror. The knife seemed on the point of descending. . . . Dwight's jaw set; he steeled himself for the blow.

And then the frozen look on the girl's face changed. Human feeling betrayed itself, a sort of startled anxiety. "Oh!" she sobbed. Then in a suppressed whisper, "I almost killed you—I thought you were one of *them!*"

"The first break I've had," Dwight grunted. "Cut these ropes quick! Who are you?"

"My name doesn't matter," she said. With quick fingers she slit the ropes and released him. "I came here to kill. You're going to help me."

Dwight got to his feet. "I'm going to get out!" he said.

"But you can't!" the girl whispered. "We're prisoners. The trap-door that leads into the waxworks is guarded, and it's the only exit. They caught me hiding in there, just as they did you. But they didn't search me; I had the knife hidden under my sash. I pretended to be unconscious and they left me in this passage. Now I'm going on. I'm going to kill *him* anyhow!"

"*Him?* Who do you mean?"

"Dr. Magwood."

"Then," Dwight stammered, "it is Magwood—here, alive?"

She nodded.

"And what's that got to do with you?"

"You remember," she said, "that man with me there in the rooming-house—the poor creature with the mutilated face? He's Fred, my brother. He *was* Fred, I mean. Now he's a maniac with a broken mind, one of this fiendish doctor's victims."

"Tell me about him—Magwood,"

Dwight said. "What's he doing?"

"Bringing dead murderers back to life!" she sobbed. "He's stolen the formula for some sort of synthetic blood to revive them. But he has to have fresh human blood for his work. He traps his victims in the waxworks, just as Fred was trapped. He drains the blood from these victims, then revives them with his chemicals and they become monsters.

"Those he can't revive are embalmed and put in this museum. Fred and two others managed to escape. But they couldn't become men again. The stuff in their veins made them thirst for blood. You saw—there—there in that room. It was dreadful. I had searched for Fred, found him there. But he had killed a man, was trying to drink—God! I can't say it.

"You see, that's why I couldn't go to the police. I managed to get him away, take him home, lock him up. He swore he would get the two other victims and come here, kill them all. But—" she sobbed fiercely, "that's what I'm going to do!"

"Rot!" Dwight snapped. "With a knife? We'll go back, fight our way out, then come back with the police—"

DWIGHT broke off to follow the girl's tense gaze. She was staring toward a ruffled ribbon of light which showed beneath a curtain at the end of the passage. Sounds came from beyond that curtain—a murmur of voices, a rhythmic creak, creak, like the noise of a rusty pendulum. A medley of strange chemical smells drifted to their nostrils, and a persistent reek like the sickening, bloody smell of a slaughterhouse.

A voice rose above the murmur: "A little more blood, Brutus, a little more blood."

Dwight seized the girl's arm. "Come!" he whispered.

She pulled away. "No!" she said. "I'm

going in!" And she ran stumbling toward the curtain, the knife in her hand.

With an oath, Dwight raced after her. But he was too late. She flung the curtain aside and went staggering into the room. Dwight followed—and as the thick velvet curtains rippled past his body, talon-like hands clawed at him from either side, gripping his arms and shoulders. He fought, but his body was dragged back, held as in a straitjacket.

Further struggle was useless. The two powerful creatures, with the bloodless, dead faces and cold, empty eyes, pressed their loathsome bodies against him, pinioned his arms securely. Another of the beasts was holding the sobbing girl.

The blood throbbed hotly in Dwight's temples. His throat seemed dry, scaly. He stared helplessly about the strange long room—something between a laboratory and an abattoir. Long tables held test-tubes and retorts and all the gleaming apparatus of the chemist. There were shelves of chemicals and curious looking machines.

In one corner a weird contrivance caught Dwight's wildly gazing eyes. It was something like a child's seesaw, mounted on a frame of gleaming steel. Strapped to it was the naked body of a man, and at each end one of the grisly, grey man-monsters was keeping the contraption in motion, bending and straightening his gaunt, repulsive body with the stiff and rigid movements of an automaton. This accounted for the creaking sound which Dwight had heard in the passage.

His captors had made no move; they seemed to be awaiting orders. Here and there about the walls of the room, numbers of the repellent creatures were squatting on their haunches like apes, their lean, hairy arms dangling, their bloodless faces stamped with a listless and dismal despair. And worse—hunger, stark hunger was in their insane eyes

as they watched him through the red, uncanny mist of light which fell from globes in the ceiling. Dwight shuddered.

"Prepare the girl!" The words came from somewhere behind, in a lisping voice that was somehow vile and unnatural.

Dwight jerked his head about. Beyond a nearby laboratory table, the shaggy head of Dr. Magwood was visible, thrusting up from the hunched shoulders, caped in black like the body of some loathsome bat. He was moving about briskly with tubes and phials.

The fiend who held the girl moved away with her. Dwight held himself in check, trying to formulate some plan. With a morbid fascination he watched the frightful doctor's hands, thought of the man's unspeakable practices. Those were the hands that cut human beings to pieces—for pleasure! God! It would be better if he and the girl were dead and in decent graves!

Magwood was holding a test-tube in each hand. He poured liquid from one to the other. *Pfff!* A small explosion shattered the tube and sent billows of acrid smoke into the air. The doctor sprang back, neither injured nor alarmed, and began wiping his hands on a towel. Now he looked at Dwight, fingering him with his eyes as a butcher might a calf brought in for slaughtering.

"Strip him and bind him," Magwood lisped, "and take him to the meat room."

The meat room! Dwight fought again, straining and snarling like a trapped animal. But other monsters sprang to the assistance of those who held him. Their rasplike hands tied him and lifted him and carried him, still struggling, to that place of unspeakable dread.

THEY went through a narrow doorway, and Dwight was flung without ceremony upon the floor. He heard the

door close; he lifted his eyes, and an almost intolerable impulse to retch and vomit seized him. The reek of the place was frightful, and what he saw was indescribably worse. For from the walls of this small abattoir, there hung by meat hooks, like so much beef in a market, four hideous bodies, headless, naked, with small glass bowls beneath each gory neck to catch the dripping blood!

There was a small, round hole in the door at about eye level, a peep-hole apparently, where the captors could stare in at their victims. Dwight staggered to his feet, inched his way to the door and stared out.

He gasped, grinding his teeth together and digging the nails of his fingers into his palms. For two of the nauseous revenants were carrying the body of the girl toward the seesaw contraption. Limp and inert, her slender body lay in their clutches like a wilted flower, her dark hair trailing back from the pallid face.

Horror and a sickened fascination glued Dwight's eyes to the scene. He saw the ghouls halt the motion of the seesaw, narrowed his eyes to stare at the great muscular body that lay upon it. Panic swept over him as he recognized in the square, brutal features the face of the murderer, Bysshe Guttman, the man who had been drowned a month before in the swift currents off Alcatraz!

Disgust, loathing, and a vertigo of incredulous terror gripped him then, held him in its frozen talons as he watched the inert body of the girl being placed upon the machine, saw her strapped there at the side of the dead cannibal, while a strange contrivance of tubes with a dial and siphon was fastened to her numb wrists. He went berserk then, writhing at his bonds, beating his helpless body against the door which would not yield.

Gradually he sobered, took a desperate grip on his throbbing nerves and tried to

think. The opening of a door behind him caused him to swing his body clumsily about. A man had come into the room and stood confronting him, and for a wild instant Dwight thought that his reason had cracked. For the man who stood in the doorway was Professor Collins!

After a moment the professor spoke. "It seems," he said calmly, "that we are in the same boat."

Dwight found his voice. "Good God! What—? I thought—"

"It might have occurred to you," said the professor, "that I would be more valuable to them alive than dead. That headless wax figure on the floor in a pool of blood was a thing easily contrived. It served to establish my death and they stole it out of there later."

"Good God!" Dwight burst out. "They'll use you in this business too, then?"

"Perhaps. . ." Collins seemed resigned now, all trace of his erratic temper vanished. "And you too—if you'll permit a rather grisly jest."

"What do they intend to do with us—the girl and me?"

"The girl is being used now," Professor Collins said, "in the process of resurrecting Guttman."

"Then Guttman is. . . ?"

"Technically alive now. Magwood tells me that he had planned the thing before Guttman's escape. Guttman expected to be drowned, but Magwood had promised to revive him, and he thought it worth the chance. For almost thirty days the man's heart has been beating. There are moments, he says, when a flicker of consciousness is evident. In the end, I have no doubt, he will live."

"With your chemicals in his veins—like these others?"

COLLINS shook his head; there was the hint of a smile on his lips now.

"I'm afraid I exaggerated a bit in my excitement," he said. "Frankly, there is no magical chemical, as you believe—only a system. I have used it with considerable success on animals and it consists in the use of artificial respiration, artificial heating of the body, injections of defibrinated blood, physiological salts and *epinephrine*, or adrenalin. Even my see-saw plan, which you see them using, has been experimented with before. It forces the blood to circulate by constantly shifting the center of gravity."

"But these monsters," Dwight protested. "What is it that flows in their veins—surely not blood? They won't bleed."

"Not after Magwood has dosed them with a newly developed hemostatic, the work of a Canadian doctor who perfected it to the extent that it will instantly stop bleeding from even a major blood vessel.

"These creatures you see are not re-animated corpses. They did not die. When they were weakened by pain and fear and loss of blood, which Magwood extracted for his use, they were dosed with the hemostatic and told that they were no longer human. Magwood's hypnotic suggestion and the fact that they would not bleed has convinced them that they are nothing but walking cadavers. It also awakened an insane craving for blood. He feeds them small doses and keeps them in a state of docile slavery."

"And these?" Dwight jerked his head toward the hanging bodies.

"They were too unruly, Magwood informs me. He finds other uses for them.

Dwight's face twisted into a sickened scowl; a crawling nausea turned and twisted in the pit of his stomach. The tense silence of the place was punctuated by the creaking of the machine on which the body of the girl was strapped like a human sacrifice, while the blood in her veins was being sapped by the loathsome

thing beside her. In the end she would be another of these repulsive ghouls!

Some emotion deeper than fear stirred in Dwight then, something primeval, inherent in his blood. His black eyes blazed with a new fire as he lifted them now to Professor Collins' face.

"Look here," he said, "you're not in the same fix as we are. He won't kill you; he needs you. But with your help, I'll destroy this monster, even if it costs my life, which it probably will. It'll likely cost yours too. But you won't stand back on that account, will you, Professor?"

Collins did not answer at once. As Dwight stared at him, he felt the blood draining from his own cheeks, felt a more appalling horror than any which had gripped him. For Collins had looked away, was staring abstractedly at the wall.

"Speak, man!" Dwight half screamed. "Are you a fiend too, or just a coward?"

Collins' glance swung back; the eyes were cold, emotionless. "You cannot understand, perhaps," he said, "but neither life nor death nor any human value means anything to me—nothing but science. Science is my life, my god!"

"You're a coward!" Dwight snarled. "You're yellow to the quivering marrow of your bones!"

He stopped, biting off his words sharply. A queer alarming light had sprung into the professor's eyes. It was the lurid glimmer of monomania, the flame that hides in darkness, unseen by normal eyes except when betrayed by a moment's passion!

"My God!" The words forced themselves in a half groan from Dwight's throat. "My God! I see it now. There is no Maywood; there is only Collins!"

No flicker of emotion showed in the professor's face, but strange yellow lights were crawling in his eyeballs. "Have it your way," he said quietly. "What of it? Society has dogged me with

its taboos, refused me living men for my experiments. But science will not be thwarted. I wondered how long the wig and whiskers and cape would fool you. It doesn't matter. In a few hours you will be hanging on the wall here like any other dog." A look of deep-rooted cruelty betrayed itself in the immobile features as he added, "But first I'll let you see the girl, let you see what we do to her!"

THAT was the last straw. Dwight's nerves cracked. Reason was swamped; only the blind and driving impetus of outraged instincts remained as he threw his shackled body toward the fiend.

Heels against the wall, he thrust out his lowered head like a battering ram, drove with all his power. It caught the professor in the belly, jarred him back against the opposite wall. Dwight toppled to the floor, writhing and kicking like a tied cat.

Rage, suddenly unleashed, burned like an angry fire in the professor's face. A knife leaped into his hand and he sprang like an insane, gibbering monkey upon the helpless body of his victim. Dwight kicked, butted with his head, rolled over and over, threshing his bound body from right to left, while the little monster clung to him like a catamount. He seemed determined to cut Dwight's throat without injuring the rest of the body. And it was this intent which gave Dwight his few minutes' respite from death.

But Dwight was weakening. At last, with burning lungs racked by the unequal struggle, he found himself flat on his back, saw the blade of the knife inexorably descending toward his jugular vein.

The knife stopped in mid-air. From the main room had come the staccato sound of gunfire! Pandemonium seemed to break loose then. There were cries and curses, the crash of objects thrown and broken, the slap of running feet!

Collins sprang to his feet, dropped the knife, dived through the door.

Flinging his body about, Dwight seized the knife with savage eagerness. While out there the sounds of battle heightened, he struggled with his bonds. He managed at last to free his wrists and ankles. Then he peered out the door. His mouth widened in amazement.

Already the place was a shambles of corpses and milling bodies. The grey-faced monsters were fighting in a pack, like wolves. Urging them on was Collins, with an automatic in each hand, firing at the three men in the curtained entrance.

Those three, automatics in their hands, were spraying the room with a murderous fire! Shoulder to shoulder they stood, shouting cries and jeers at the cornered ghouls, and their faces were like the faces of their foes. They were, Dwight realized now, the three who had sworn to come back and wipe out this place of torment. One of them he recognized, by his split mouth and hanging lower jaw, as the brother of the dark-haired girl. They had arrived just in time.

But the relief which had flared in Dwight's breast was smothered a moment later by mounting despair. He had turned toward the now motionless seesaw. Bullets were whistling through the air, splattering the plastered wall behind it. The half-alive murderer and the living girl were equally exposed to that annihilating gunfire—and it was evident, as men tumbled from the grey and howling ranks of the ghouls, that the crazed gunmen had failed to see or recognize the girl, and would not stop until all life was wiped out of the place.

Dwight measured the distance between him and the girl. He might reach and free her—but they could never escape. They would never survive that fire.

Then inspiration dawned upon his brain with a wild surge of joy. It was a single picture, flashed from his memory—the

doctor, the two chemicals which when mixed had caused the small explosion!

Dwight dropped to his hands and knees. He darted out the door and scuttled like a rabbit for the shelter of the nearby laboratory table. One of the ghouls loomed up before him, with upraised knife. He tackled the hideous shape by the legs. It fell heavily to the floor and he raced on. Bullets sang past him; a slug tore a bite from his heel, but he did not stop.

A moment later the two bottles were in his trembling hands. He placed one of them against the wall, then darted back a few yards and hurled the other at it.

A dull concussion thundered in the air. A sheet of fire leaped out like a spreading stain across the room. Abruptly the atmosphere was choked by a thick and soggy smoke, acrid and stifling, that rolled and boiled its blinding vapor over the scene of carnage.

The cries redoubled. For a moment bullets ceased to fly.

Knife in hand, Dwight plunged through the smoke, fought his way through the struggling, blinded ghouls to the girl. He found her struggling weakly into consciousness, slashed the bonds that held her, threw her across his shoulder. Then, following the wall, he groped toward the entrance. Now the maniacs had come to grips in the blinding fog of smoke with knife and tooth and claw. Heaving bodies were all about him; a knife slashed his shoulder. But he fought his way to the entrance, plunged down the now deserted passage. He climbed painfully through the trap-door that opened in the floor of the waxworks. There he laid the girl aside and heaped a pile of heavy furniture over the basement's only exit, locking the battling fiends in their smoky hell.

Then he called the police.

AN HOUR later Dwight, with the weak but otherwise uninjured girl,

sat cozily in the back seat of a police car which was whisking them to their respective homes.

Still a little dazed, the girl had listened to his explanation in silence. Now she asked: "But why did he do it? Why would a respected scientist stoop to such a thing?"

"As he boasted," Dwight said, "science was his god. Anything, even the use of humans in his experiments, was justified in his mind. Society, of course, would not permit it, and that irked him. He wanted to raise the dead, to be a sort of god himself.

"Then the idea of getting Guttman to escape and take a chance on a revival after he was drowned must have occurred to him. He had a special reason for that. Guttman was reputed to have a million dollars hidden, and with that money Collins could have financed his dangerous experiments to the end of his days. And that was what he desired most in life.

"The reason he brought me into it is obvious. He wanted a reliable report of his death to be circulated. That would leave him to work unhindered in his secret slaughter-house, and it would also leave his reputation unstained."

"It's horrible, horrible," the girl muttered. "I—I'm glad, now, that my poor brother was killed. It—it's better for him. But I can't forget the horror of it all."

"You can try," Dwight said. "And if you'll let me, I'll try to help you. I think I can. There are so many things I want to talk to you about. You might begin by telling me your name."

Smiling wanly, she told him. They nestled a little closer together on the seat. Outside the window of the car the fog swirled and billowed, but it was no longer sinister. It seemed soft and somehow comforting, like a pleasant veil that shut out all fearful memories, and walled them in an intimate world of their own.

VILLAGE OF BONES

By

Robert C. Blackmon

Jimmy Kent had been warned not to take his beautiful young bride to Sharon—to the ghost town his grandfather had founded, the city of the living dead. . . .

IF I WAS you, stranger, I wouldn't go to Sharon—'specially—” The lanky filling-station operator swung his hollow-cheeked head toward the dark-haired girl sitting in Jimmy Kent's coupé under the shelter. “Specially with the lady along. You'd better ride right past—and keep on going.”

“Why?” Jimmy Kent's stocky body, set firmly on wide-planted booted feet and clad in worn khaki breeches, gray shirt and battered hat, seemed to shout that James Warren Kent would go any damned place he pleased. “Sharon folks got the plague, or something?”

“There ain't no folks there—that is, living folks.” The operator's deep-sunk eyes glittered strangely in the white glow of the single gasoline lantern hanging under the rickety shelter. “Every living soul moved away years ago when the Sharon Mine petered out. They say that Amos Sawyer, the man who sunk all his money in the mine, put a curse on the place. He said if anybody came to Sharon, the dead would rise from their graves on Boot Hill and chase them out of town.” His voice dropped to a harsh whisper that grated on Jimmy's nerves. “I've talked



to men who've *heard* the dead screaming and *seen* them walking in Sharon!"

"Yeah?" Jimmy's square jaw, stubbly with a day's growth of reddish brown beard, jutted forward a fraction, and his blue eyes narrowed, causing little crow-foot wrinkles to form in the tanned skin of his face. "Amos Sawyer was my grandfather. He died two years ago while I was on an engineering job in South America. He left me the Sharon Mine. I got married when I got back to the States." He jerked his head toward the girl in the coupé. "The firm I worked for went blooey, and we decided to look over the Sharon Mine as a sort of vacation and honeymoon combined. We've got grub and stuff for two weeks packed in the back of the coupé, and we're staying there at least that long. If any dead people come walking around us we'll give 'em a pick and shovel and put 'em to work."

The operator accepted a crisp bill, shuffled toward the station, his long arms dangling from narrow, bony shoulders. Nearing the door of the little building, he stopped, turned. "Say, there's an old guy in the station that's trying to beat a ride. He lives a couple of miles on the other side of where you turn off for Sharon. He can show you the place. How about it?"

"Okay. Trot him out." Jimmy climbed into the coupé, grinned reassuringly at the slim, dark-eyed girl beside him, patted her hand, and his broad face went grave as he felt her trembling.

"Do—do you think we ought to go on, Jimmy?" She drew closer to him, her husky voice troubled. "It sounds so—so terrible!"

"Aw, it's nothing, Cora, baby." He squeezed her slim fingers. "We'll have—"

The operator came out of the building, followed by a short, wizened man who walked with a queerly sidling gait.

Bright, beady eyes peered over a thin

hooked nose and a scraggly beard that masked sharp features. His thin, knobby wrists stuck out inches from the ragged edge of his coat sleeves. A strange air of uncleanness seemed to radiate from the man. Jimmy's jaws hardened.

"Pack-Rat'll show you the way, stranger." The operator gave Jimmy his change. Pack-Rat climbed on the right-hand running-board of the coupé, dirty, clawlike hands gripping the door edge. Cora Kent slid closer to Jimmy, and the latter got a whiff of foul, cheap whiskey that came from the shabby Pack-Rat. "If you two have any trouble, or run out of anything," the operator went on, "just come back up here. Jake Pond'll take care of you. Won't I, Pack-Rat?"

JIMMY KENT hunched over the wheel of his speeding coupé, the cool night wind stirring the reddish mop of his hair, whipping the cigarette smoke from his wide, hard lips. The headlights bathed the sandy highway ahead, boring a white pathway through the velvety darkness of the desert night. Sand, flung up by the spinning wheels, swished dryly against the fenders, a ghostly whisper above the roar of the motor.

Cora Kent sat pressed against her husband, quiet except when slight tremors shook her slim body. It made Jimmy feel queerly nervous. Pack-Rat stood crouched on the runningboard, clutching the door edge; and occasionally, out of the tail of his eye, Jimmy could see Pack-Rat's beady eyes furtively toward him, then whip straight ahead. The bleary stare gave Jimmy the creeps. He cleared his throat.

"What," he growled, "is all this stuff about dead people yelling and walking in Sharon?"

"It's fac', Mister!" Pack-Rat's hoarse voice was but a croak. "Some of 'em been dead so long they ain't nothin' but bones—"

jest skeletons—but they come right outta Boot Hill an' walk all over Sharon! I—I seen 'em! They yell an' scream." He gulped noisily. "You better not go there, Mister!"

"Yeah?" Jimmy's wide lips tightened into a grim smile.

"Honest, Mister." Pack-Rat jammed his head in the open window, his beady eyes burning. Cora drew closer to Jimmy. "They're walkin' skeletons! You'll see 'em an' hear 'em! They yell an' scream at night!"

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Jimmy could feel his wife's whole body quivering with uneasiness.

"Road turns to the right, then it's four miles to Sharon," Pack-Rat directed. "An'—an' if you don't mind, Mister, I'd like to ride as far as Sharon with you. I—I'm scared to be out here alone."

Jimmy laughed, turned at the road indicated, and droned through sand for several minutes. Presently, the roadster rolled on harder ground, and Jimmy grunted.

A squatty, weathered building showed up a little ahead to the right, its warped board sides painted a silver gray by the headlights. The shack's black windows and gaping door gave the place a look of utter desolation. Beyond were the ghostly hulks of other buildings.

"This is Sharon." Pack-Rat's bony fingers gripped the dooredge until the knuckles showed white. "You—you'd better go on to the jail. It's got cement floors and walls. All the other places are about to fall in."

Jimmy stopped the coupé in front of the squat, gray-walled building. Pack-Rat dropped off the running-board. Jimmy pushed open the left-hand door, stepped to the ground, then every muscle in his husky body went rigid.

A moaning wail cut through the cool darkness. It started as a low, throaty

cry, then rose to a shrill, nerve-tingling scream that caused every nerve in Jimmy's body to jangle like plucked strings. The cry choked short, dropping to a choking gurgle, then stopped. It seemed to be coming from the jail.

Cora Kent scrambled from the coupé, clung to Jimmy, her slim body jerking with terror, her breath coming in sobbing gulps. Jimmy stood stiffly, trying to quiet her, stared across the coupé's turtle-back, rapid breath beating in his flared nostrils. Pack-Rat wasn't on the other side of the coupé. He was gone!

Jimmy stood motionless for a moment, the skin of his face feeling cold, drawn tight, a fine mist of sweat beaded on his broad forehead. The breath stopped in his throat as the chilling cry again came from the gray-walled jail. The clank of metal on metal sounded from the gaping blackness of the jail door, the rasp of footsteps on a concrete floor. Then Jimmy sucked in breath through set teeth.

Picked out in ghastly relief by the coupé lights, a tall, emaciated apparition of a man stood in the blackness of the jail door. Stringy hair hung down over a bony forehead. Wide, wildly staring eyes glared with an unseeing stare from a face which had stark madness written in its every sunken line. Strange, animal-like cries issued from lips that writhed back from yellow, fanglike teeth.

The ghastly apparition stood in the doorway but a moment, then screaming at the top of its harsh, cracked voice, it broke into a stumbling run and disappeared in the darkness.

ABRUPTLY, the night seemed colder, blacker, and Jimmy felt the chill of sweat on his body, felt his wife's slim figure jerking with terror. Pack-Rat's hoarse words flashed through his mind like fire: "Some of 'em been dead so long

they ain't nothin' but bones—jest skeletons. They scream—”

He growled deep in his throat, pushed the girl toward the open coupé door. “Buck up, Cora, honey,” he rapped, his tanned face hard, grim. “There’s something queer here. What—I don’t know; but, by golly, I’m going to find out!”

Three hard-heeled strides and he jerked open the lid to the coupé’s turtle-back, dug around in the well-filled space and found a single-barreled, twelve-gauge shotgun and a box of shells. Ripping the pasteboard box open, he stuffed a handful of shells into his pockets, broke the gun and jammed a shell into the chamber, pulled the hammer back.

“Here!” Jimmy caught Cora’s quivering shoulder, shook her gently. “You get in the coupé and lock yourself in. I’m going to blast everything that moves out here. You’ll be safe in there with the doors locked. Get in!” He reached over, took the keys from the ignition switch, locked the left-hand door, then went around to the driver’s side of the car. Cora sat in the center of the seat, stiff with terror. He pulled the left-hand door open, flipped up the door handle to lock the door, ran up the glass, and handed the keys to his wife.

“Now,” he said grimly, “you stay in there until I come back. I’m going to the jail.” Before she could protest, he slammed the door and strode toward the gray-building, holding his gun in his right fist, a flashlight in his left.

The flashlight showed a long, narrow room just inside the door. The concrete floor of the place was gritty, and little drifts of sand had piled in the corners. The musty odor of long neglect filled the place, and mingled with it was another, ghastly smell—the faint stench of dry death. Jimmy’s flared nostrils twitched.

“Pack-Rat!” he called softly.

The gray walls flung his voice back, and

it echoed hollowly in the empty jail. Straight ahead, he could see the dark rectangle of another doorway. He shot the light toward it, picked up the rusty streaks of iron bars lining a narrow corridor, a cell block. Dark shadows of forgotten criminals seemed to lurk in the barred space, and he felt a queer tightening of his muscles.

“Pack-Rat!” he called again, and again his voice was lost in the empty building. He stepped forward, and the crunch of sand under his feet made the hair prickle upon the back of his neck. It sounded like the crunching of dry bones.

Jimmy’s broad shoulders stiffened, and his teeth met as he fought the queer feeling of dread creeping over him. It was almost as if he sensed that something horrible was about to happen. He grunted derisively, took another step forward. Then abruptly, Cora screamed outside, her cry shrill with terror.

Jimmy leaped through the doorway, pounded for the coupé.

“Jimmy! Look!” Cora had the car-window lowered. Jimmy’s eyes followed her pointing finger.

Some distance down the sandy street and almost directly in the coupé’s headlights was something that sent the blood pounding in Jimmy’s temples—made his hands grip flashlight and shotgun tighter. It was a skeleton, standing erect and walking slowly across the street. The headlights glinted on weathered bone, made blacker the eyeless sockets of the skull. The thing swayed queerly as it walked, a macaber—swagger that swung its fleshless shoulders, showed the gruesomely empty cage of ribs. It seemed to be grinning, its gumless teeth gleaming yellowly in the light.

Jamming the flashlight into his pocket, Jimmy whipped the shotgun up shoulder high, swung the muzzle toward the ghastly thing and squeezed the trigger. The blast-

ing roar ripped the quiet darkness to shreds, booming hollowly in the empty street, then the silence seemed more intense, to take on a quality that made it heavy, oppressing. Jimmy gulped, stared with widened eyes.

THE skeleton didn't even pause in its macaber walk. It strolled on toward the black, creeping shadows at the side of the street. A moment—then a mad, nerve-jangling laugh sounded in the darkness, a numbing, chilling sound that turned Jimmy's blood to ice in his veins. Mechanically, he reloaded the shotgun, raised it again; but the walking skeleton had reached the shadows and was gone.

"Jimmy! Please! Let's leave this place! It's—" Cora was getting out of the coupé. Jimmy strode to the sobbing girl, put a hard arm about her jerking shoulders.

"Don't let it get you, Cora," he rumbled. "We're having something pulled over on us." His voice sounded strangely empty to his ears. "Skeletons don't walk. They can't. You get back in the car, lock yourself in. I'm looking around a bit. If—"

A queer, gurgling cry came from the darkness. It rose to a shrill, terror-stricken note, then chopped short, came again, mad, chilling. It was the cry of a human faced by some ghastly horror, and with it came a sound that caused Jimmy's temples to throb with racing pulse—the dry, rapid rattle of bones upon bones!

Cora's fingers bit into his arm. Her sobbing breath beat upon his cheek as she clung to him. The girl was almost frantic with terror. Jimmy shook her gently.

"Get in the car." He urged gently, firmly. She started screaming; a flat, jarring sound that made his scalp twitch. "Stop yelling," he growled. "Stop it!"

She subsided, quivering as throaty, shuddering sobs jerked her slim body. He

got her into the car, closed the door and locked it. "Run up the window and sit tight until I come back. I'm going to see what's up."

Leaving the coupé, he strode stiff-legged toward the spot from which the gurgling scream had come, whipping the livid ray of the flashlight ahead.

Scabby building-fronts leaned crazily over what had once been a board sidewalk. Now the planks underfoot were crumbling to join the sand that blanketed them. Gaping windows exhaled the musty odor of decay into his set face as he stalked past. Sagging doors squealed as they swung to errant gusts of breeze. The sand, drawn out into gossamer strands by the same stirring air, whispered against dry, sun-warped boards.

Jimmy stalked on, every muscle in his husky body quivering, his eyeballs aching with the strain of trying to peer beyond the reach of the slowly dimming flashlight ray. He switched the light off to save the remaining power in the batteries, then clicked it back on as he heard the dry scutter of movement in the darkness ahead.

As the shaft of light stabbed through the night, he froze motionless, breath sticking in his suddenly constricted throat. His mouth went dry, salty, and his entrails went cold. The slithering whisper of the wind-borne sand seemed to rise to a chilling, macaber shriek that gibbered of things not meant for human ears. The cold crawl of sweat started at his throbbing temples, crept down over his drawn cheeks and hard jaws.

Impaled in the yellowing blob of light, less than twenty feet ahead, was the twitching body of a man, and lying on top of him fleshless, bony hands gripping his throat, was a skeleton!

Even as Jimmy stared with frozen eyes, the ghastly pair jerked spasmodical-

ly, then were still, the queer stillness of death.

Jimmy sucked in breath, felt the cold chill of air strike his set teeth. Raising the shotgun up to ready, he stalked forward, keeping his light upon the strange pair.

They didn't move as he neared.

The man sprawled upon his back, his hands gripped about the brown arm-bones of the skeleton. His eyes were bulged from his head, glassy, staring, and filled with indescribable horror. His bearded mouth sagged open, exposing broken teeth, the black maw of a throat. It was Pack-Rat.

The skeleton lay lax upon his body, bony hands fixed about Pack-Rat's skinny throat, the finger bones buried in the flesh. The fleshless, domed skull was face-down on Pack-Rat's chest, as though the skeleton was gnawing with dead yellow teeth at his breast.

Jimmy gulped as a surging wave of nausea swept over him, then spun on his heel, black horror shrieking in his brain as the high shrill cry of a woman cut through the night, screaming his name. Cora!

SAND spurted from under his feet as he sprinted toward the coupé, sobbing curses bursting from his lips. Cora! She screamed again, the pleading cry knifing through the mad pound of blood in his ears. Then her scream was blotted out, choked short. . . .

Stumbling over the uneven humps of crumbling boards under his feet, Jimmy pounded toward the coupé, breath searing his throat as he strained every muscle. The lights of the coupé, still on, blacked out everything behind them.

He reached the coupé. The right-hand door was wide open. He jabbed the flashlight into the car, pressed the switch. The seat was empty. His wife was gone!

Jimmy stood tensely, ears straining to catch every sound. Wind-borne sand started a macaber whispering at his feet, gibbering of the ghastly things that could have happened, and his whole body went cold, rigid.

The madman who'd run screaming from the jail! He'd come back and— The walking skeleton! Pack-Rat had been throttled by dead, fleshless hands! Mad thoughts seethed in Jimmy's brain.

Seconds dragged silently into minutes, and there was nothing but the black, close-hovering desert night, the maddening whisper of sand, and his own freezing thoughts. A wind-blown door somewhere squealed protestingly, and Jimmy whipped about, shotgun hip-high.

The mad, blood-chilling laugh that had followed his firing at the walking skeleton sounded in the crawling darkness. Then he heard Cora scream again.

The cry came from his right, behind the gray-walled jail. It lasted but a split moment, then was choked off.

Jimmy broke into a scrambling run, booted feet skidding in the loose sand as he darted toward the jail door. Reaching it, he pounded across the concrete floor, seeking a back door. Into the corridor flanked by the cell bars he ran, whipping his dimming light about. The yellow rays stabbed through the iron grills, bathing the cells with weak, sickly light, and horror struck with chilling fingers at his vitals as he saw what was behind the bars.

All but one of the cells contained jumbled piles of fleshless bones upon which rotting shreds of clothing still clung. A furtive movement near one of the rotted corpses jerked his eyes about. It was a beady-eyed, bloated rat crouched upon the filth-covered floor of the cell. The whole place reeked of death.

Unconsciously, Jimmy noted that one cell was empty, the iron door open wide,

then the corridor ended in a blank wall.

Feet skidding on the sand-carpeted concrete, he whirled and pounded back to the main room, found another door, tore it open, and raced into a narrow hallway that opened upon the street behind the jail.

He left the building, felt sand under his feet again, and stopped motionless, listening.

A moment passed, then he heard the crunch of sand in the darkness to his left. He pounded toward it, breath whistling through his set teeth, his shotgun up and ready. His flashlight was now dimmed to a pale, useless glow. He flung it away, raced on, guiding his course by the crunch of sand ahead.

He lost the crunch of running feet, stopped, listening, forcing his pumping lungs to take breath slowly. He was sure now that the madman had returned, dragged Cora from the car. The pounding blood in his temples shut out all other sounds for a moment, then he heard the clatter of feet on stone. Sucking in breath, he raced toward the sound.

A moment and the ground became rocky, slanting upward at a steep angle. It was covered with sharp, broken rock that turned and skidded under his feet. Small stones, dislodged by the person ahead, rattled down the slope, banging against his shins. He scrambled upward, pawing the rock with his free hand as the stones slid from under his feet. His right fist gripped the shotgun.

The feet above clattered faster, then stopped. . . .

JIMMY climbed faster, lungs pumping sobbing breath through gritted teeth. He knew now that he was on the sloping sides of a mine dump. Abruptly, he reached the lip of the slope, trod fairly level yet still rocky ground. He heard the pound of feet in the darkness ahead,

sprinted toward the sound. The clatter ahead changed abruptly to a hollow booming. Jimmy raced after it.

Running full-tilt through the darkness, he abruptly crashed into a rock wall. Rough stone scraped skin from his face, banged his forehead, bruised his nose. The shotgun flew from his hand, clattered off somewhere in the darkness. The force of the blow nearly drove the breath from his body. He staggered back, hands pawing. He touched rock, moved two feet to the right, and touched nothing. He could hear the hollow boom of running feet straight ahead. A tight grin twisted his split lips, and he grunted under his breath. He was at the mouth of a tunnel, undoubtedly an entrance to the Sharon Mine. The madman ahead was running down the tunnel, and Cora was—

He heard her terrified scream coming from the moist darkness of the tunnel, heard a snarling curse. Dropping to his knees, he pawed frantically for the lost shotgun, hard fingers brushing crushed rock, nothing else. A moment, and he jerked erect. He'd lost a minute already. The gun would have to stay lost. The madman was carrying Cora deeper and deeper into the mine. . . .

Pawing until he found the tunnel, he pushed forward, one hand brushing the wall as he ran. A few moments and he could hear the pound of feet ahead, the harsh rasp of labored breathing. He quickened his pace.

Around a turn in the tunnel, he saw the faint glimmer of yellow light. A few feet farther and the light spread to a roughly rectangular glow. Silhouetted against it, he could see the racing figure of a tall, gaunt man. Over his right shoulder, the man carried the limp form of a woman, and Jimmy knew that it was Cora. He pounded forward, hot rage boiling in his veins.

The man ahead ran faster, sprinting

for the light. Suddenly, he darted to one side, and was gone.

Jimmy tore after him, labored breath searing his throat, leg-muscles jerking under the strain as he pushed them to the limit.

Abruptly, he whipped around a corner, light blazing in his eyes, then the ground fell away from beneath his feet, and he plunged forward to the rocky floor. His forehead struck rock, knocking him half unconscious. Dimly, he saw Cora huddled upon the floor of a square-shaped tunnel cut in the rock. His mind registered the glinting points of yellow light in the rough rock of the tunnel end, then a crushing weight fell upon him. Something banged into the back of his head, exploding a thousand lights within his skull, then came blackness.

JIMMY KENT'S eyes snapped open as consciousness returned with a flooding rush of pain. His head felt as if his skull had been split. His back ached. Ropes bit into his wrists, rasping the skin from the flesh. His ankles were also tied. He turned his head, looked about.

Cora was lying upon the floor of the tunnel some distance from him, also tied hand and foot. The small space was illuminated by four miners' candles stuck upon the top of an empty dynamite-case. By the flickering glow, he could see that his wife was conscious, her dark eyes upon him. Her softly oval face was pale, and she was stiff with fear. He twisted his head farther. He and Cora were the only persons in the place.

"How—how'd he get you, Cora?" His tongue felt swollen, furry.

"Somebody came up to the car." The girl shuddered. "I thought it was you coming back. I opened the door, and a man dragged me out, put his hand over my mouth. I screamed—and—and—he choked me." Her slim body shook with

sobs. "I—I'm so frightened, Jimmy! We'll never get—"

"Buck up, Cora, baby." Jimmy grinned mirthlessly. "We've got to figure a way to get out of here."

"And that," a low, harsh voice croaked behind him, "can't be done! You're both staying!"

Jimmy rolled over, stared at the black bore of the tunnel. Standing just inside was a tall, lanky man. In the flickering light, his hunched shoulders gave him the appearance of a strange human vulture gloating over them. His deep-sunk eyes glittered in the glow of the four candles, gleaming with a mad light. It was the filling-station operator, Jake Pond.

Jimmy's eyes swept the lanky figure from head to foot, then he saw why he'd fallen when he'd reached the end of the tunnel. The floor dropped almost eighteen inches in a step-like break. He hadn't seen the drop. Jake, he knew now, had jumped him before he could recover from the fall. The purpose of Jake's interest in the dead city of Sharon was now clear to Jimmy. He tugged at the ropes about his wrists as hot rage flooded his body. The ropes only bit deeper into his flesh.

"Hate to leave the gal here," Jake Pond's voice was a dry chuckle, "but there ain't no help for it. She—"

"You murdering skunk!" Jimmy rumbled as things clicked into place in his mind. "You got me to take Pack-Rat in my car by saying he was trying to beat a ride. He wasn't. He was to steer us into the Sharon Jail, and on some pretext get either me, or both of us, to go in one of the cells. He'd have locked the cell door and left us to starve, like those other poor devils in there. The screams people heard were the agonized cries of those men whom you and Pack-Rat locked up and left to die of thirst and hunger. You low down—"

"What of it?" Jake Pond leered, his

deep-sunk eyes flaming with a mad hate. "You can't never prove it. Pack-Rat found the Sharon Mine had gold in it. You can see it in the tunnel face." He waved a bony hand. "We've took out near two hundred pounds of the stuff, but we got to leave the rest—"

"We?" roared Jimmy. "You killed Pack-Rat! Choked him with a wire, tied a skeleton to the wire, and thought that would run me out of Sharon! That walking skeleton was sliding on a wire!"

"Yeah. I done that." Jake squirmed, glared balefully at Jimmy. "Pack-Rat was to get you both in the cell, like you say. He went in the jail to hide one of the fellows what wasn't dead yet, and the man got away. He was to lock you up, then come back to the filling-station. We got a back road and it ain't but eight miles that way, and thirty the way you went. I got to Sharon a half-hour before you did. The skeleton and the crazy man didn't scare you off, so I thought of getting Pack-Rat. Getting him that way helped scare you."

HE LOOKED up at the gleaming tunnel-face, and greed glittered in his eyes, gave way to a mad, cunning light. "And I don't have to split with him, neither. I hate to leave the rest of the gold, but—" His pale lips writhed back from stained teeth, "I got to. I'm settin' a blast that'll drop fifty feet of the tunnel roof, plugging you back in here. I'm leaving you the candles. I'm putting a half-hour fuse on the blast, so's I'll have time to get back to the filling-station before it goes off. I can cash in, leave the country, and live royal."

"You can't get away with it, Pond!" choked Jimmy, cold sweat bathing his body. "We'll be missed. The Police'll hunt and—"

"Let 'em hunt. They can't prove nothing. In a week's time, the wind'll drift

sand over the back road. I'm going now to get rid of Pack-Rat." And before Jimmy could say anything, Jake Pond had ducked back into the dark tunnel. His clumping footsteps clattered fainter and fainter on the rocky floor.

"You—you think he'll do it? Blow us up?" Cora's dark eyes were big with horror.

"Not," Jimmy told her grimly, "if I can help it!"

He stretched his husky body flat on the floor, squirmed, rolled toward the wall. Reaching it, he wriggled until he'd gotten his shoulders against the rough stone. Then, drawing his stocky legs up, he set about the nerve-wracking task of getting to his feet. After falling a half-dozen times, he finally made it, cord-like blood vessels standing out on his throat as he tottered erect, balanced. Cora watched him, eyes bright with hope.

Moving carefully, Jimmy hopped to the dynamite box upon which the candles were burning. The box was all of eight feet away. Cora was on the other side of the box. He reached the box, turned his back to it, then gritting his teeth, he thrust his bound wrists out over the flame of one of the candles. He grunted as the flame licked his wrist, scorching his flesh, burned the hair from his skin. The sharp odor of burning cloth, hemp, hair and flesh filled the narrow tunnel-head. Jimmy pulled on the ropes, felt them give a trifle. He jammed them back into the candle flame, felt the heat sear his wrists. Another jerk, and his wrists were free. He tore the ropes free, dropped to his feet and jerked the ropes from his ankles. He started toward his wife, then stopped, listening.

Heavy footsteps clattered in the dark tunnel. Jake Pond was coming back!

Hurriedly, Jimmy flopped back to the floor, wound the loose rope about his ankles, thrust his hands behind his back.

Jake Pond clumped into the tunnel end. The lanky filling-station man had Pack-Rat's body draped over his bony shoulder. He dropped the lifeless figure to the floor, stood leering down at Jimmy and Cora.

"Well," he croaked hoarsely, "I've set the blast. The fuse's burning. You got about twenty-nine minutes. I'm leaving, and I'm leaving Pack-Rat and the four candles with you." He backed into the tunnel. "So long!" He turned to leave.

Jimmy left the rocky floor like an uncoiling spring. Pond sensed rather than heard the movement, whirled, bony-face contorted with rage and fear. His long arms clawed for Jimmy. The latter's flying body crashed into the gaunt man, and the two fell to the tunnel floor.

Jimmy dug upward with short jabs, finding flesh-cushioned bone and teeth. Pond tried to rise for a smashing kick to Jimmy's head. Jimmy wound stocky arms about him and dragged him down again. Pond drooled saliva down into Jimmy's face, clawed at his throat, sharp fingers digging into the flesh.

JIMMY smashed at his face with flying fists, felt his knuckles strike teeth, felt the skin split, the warm spurt of blood on his hands. Pond bellowed with pain, jabbed bony thumbs at Jimmy's eyes. Jimmy caught one thumb and wrenched it. Pond clawed at his face with the other hand, banged hard knuckles against Jimmy's eye. Then the lanky filling-station man yelped with pain as Jimmy snapped his thumb bone. Pond jerked erect. Jimmy thrust his stocky body into an upward arc, twisted, and Pond toppled. Jimmy was on top of him in a flash, banging at his face, smashing lips, loosening teeth. One thought burned in his brain—to batter this murdering thing into a bloody pulp. Pond went limp under his smashing blows.

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" Cora's shrill cry cut through the red mist crawling before his eyes. "The fuse is burning! We have only a few minutes!"

Jimmy staggered to his feet, wiped blood from his eyes. A few minutes! God! It had been hours.

Gulping in breaths, he stumbled across the tunnel-end, caught his wife up in his arms. She went limp as his hands touched her.

Holding her slim figure close, he stumbled along the dark tunnel, moving as fast as he dared over the rocky floor. A little over half-way, he saw the red eye of the sputtering fuse. Putting his wife down, he reached for the thing, found that the fire was beyond reach of his fingers. He spun, grabbed Cora up, and ran, cold horror clutching at his heart.

He saw the gray tunnel mouth ahead, reached it, and stumbled thirty feet. A dull, coughing roar sounded behind him, and a blast of air knocked him to his knees. The ground beneath him trembled. He staggered back to his feet as rock ground upon rock back in the tunnel. He carried Cora another twenty feet, then put her down.

The sullen roar of the falling rock sounded like distant thunder for a few moments, then everything was silent. Jimmy shuddered as he thought of Pond. . . .

"Did it—did it—?" Cora stirred.

"Yes. It went off—with us outside." Jimmy's lips twisted in a tight smile. "Pond's back there—with Pack-Rat and the four candles. It'll take over two weeks to get a gang of men here and clear the tunnel. By that time—"

"Let's not think about that." Cora's slim body shivered. She drew closer, slid a warm arm about his neck. Her soft breath touched his cheek. "Let's think about—"

"Us?" he suggested gently.

HER LOVER-- DEATH!

By

Wyatt Blassingame

Mark awoke in darkness, with blood upon his hands—to find beside him the mangled body of his friend, Mark's own knife thrust into his throat! Yet he knew naught of what had happened. . . . Was he indeed a madman in these moments of unconsciousness, a blood-lusting fiend who sought even to tear the white throat of his own loved wife?

I WAS on my feet, staggering backward, when I regained consciousness. My left arm was held before my face as though to ward off the weird and terrifying horror that shook through me. Even before my eyes began to focus and I realized that it was night and I was standing alone in a picked-over cotton patch, I had some premonition of the gruesome thing which had happened. But it wasn't until later that I saw the blood. . . .

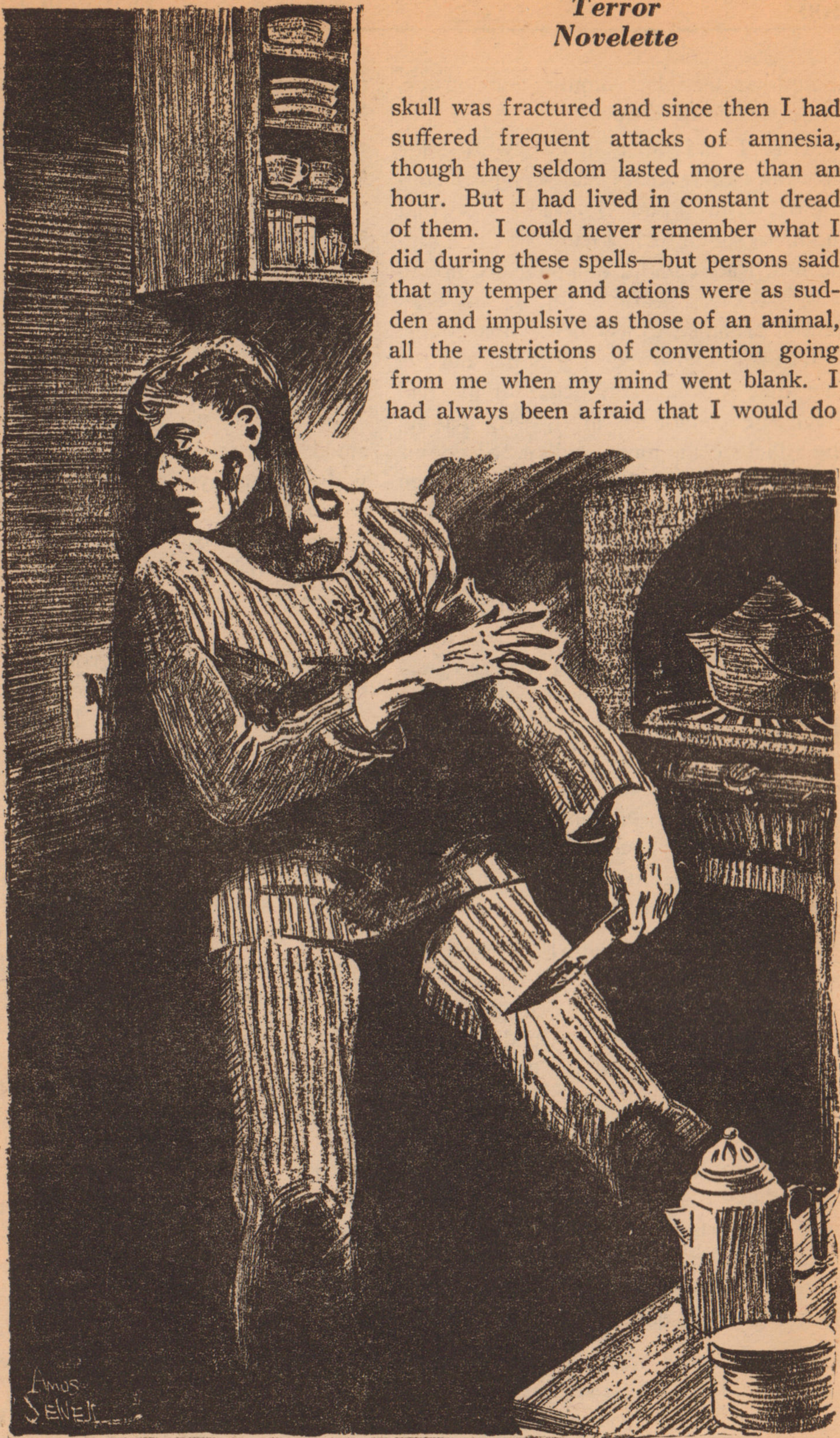
I felt like a sleep-walker who had awakened suddenly. Where I was, how I got there, what time it was, I didn't know. Yet I knew that something terrible and inhuman had just happened.

It wasn't anything new for me to regain consciousness suddenly, this way, and be unable to remember what had happened during the last hour or two. It was two years before that a rope had broken while I was mountain climbing and dropped me forty feet. Only a miracle kept me from being killed, but my



*Terror
Novelette*

skull was fractured and since then I had suffered frequent attacks of amnesia, though they seldom lasted more than an hour. But I had lived in constant dread of them. I could never remember what I did during these spells—but persons said that my temper and actions were as sudden and impulsive as those of an animal, all the restrictions of convention going from me when my mind went blank. I had always been afraid that I would do



something terrible, commit some crime, while in this condition.

After I had fallen in love with Anne Meadows these fears had weighted constantly on my mind. I loved her so that the mere sound of her name was like music heard at twilight, stopping my breath with its sheer beauty. But I had been afraid, ashamed to ask her to marry me. It was she who forced the issue, and the fact that she had confidence in me had given me confidence in myself, making the attacks come more seldom. Since our wedding three months ago, there had been only one attack and it lasted but a few minutes.

I stood flatfooted now, breathing heavily as though I had been running. Close around me empty cotton stalks lifted themselves like the twisted shadows of a nightmare. The field rolled gently off to the right, where a quarter moon was low in the sky. The November air felt chill and damp. A hundred yards to my left a dusty stripe showed palely in the moonlight. A gravel road. My eyes moved along it slowly until they saw the automobile headlights, a mile or more away.

I started walking slowly toward the road, shuddering a little from the cold and from the horror that gripped me. Then a thought struck me. I stopped abruptly, mouth open, lungs hard and motionless.

"Good God!" I said. "Maybe it's been . . ."

My voice trailed off. Months, years might have passed since that last afternoon I remembered. I had been sitting in my office at the mill. It had been late afternoon, almost time to go home. I'd been wearing a dark grey suit.

"It must have been just a few hours ago," I said aloud. "It couldn't have been more than . . ." Fear, cold and clammy, was creeping into the horror that surged through my blood now. If months had

passed, if 'd left my home in Tallassee, left Anne. . . .

The automobile was still a quarter of a mile away, but the light of the moon was sufficient. My mouth open, eyes set and staring, I raised my right hand and arm to look at my suit.

Air tore from my lungs like hot knife-blades. I went reeling backward. The muscles of my throat were swelling, choking me. I stumbled and almost fell.

In the seconds that followed, while I stood as motionless as a statue gazing with bulging eyes at my hand, the whole world seemed to stop and hang silent. The air was crisp, but there was no wind. The cotton stalks stood like gaunt skeletons with the bolls hanging empty as skulls. Their moon-cast shadows lay in twisted stillness on the ground. And yet, through all this stillness there was a great surging beat of horror. From the first moment of consciousness I had felt the shadow of horror. Now . . .

Like the far-off scream of an animal I heard the whine of tires on gravel. The car was less than two hundred yards away. I flung myself to my knees, hiding among the cotton stalks, cold with fear. And my right hand was still held chest high and my eyes were still gazing at it.

I had on the dark grey suit, all right. But *my right hand was a nasty mess of oozy blood—and bits of flesh were caught beneath my finger-nails!*

THE car whirred past and vanished down the road, but I didn't move. What was that blood doing on my hand, the flesh beneath my nails? It was still wet, couldn't have been there for more than a few minutes. What horror had filled those dark hours since I was sitting in my office?

After a minute I looked at my left hand. It too was blood-coated, and from the nail of the index finger hung a long

shred of flesh. A muscle was twitching at the right corner of my mouth. The movement felt stiff. A new fear caught at my chest and I tried to fight the thought from my mind, not even admit that I had thought it. *But I kept wondering if my mouth, too, was blood-smeared.*

Slowly I got to my feet. Whatever had happened, it had taken place not long ago. If I searched, perhaps . . .

I can't transmit the emotion that was in me during those minutes while I walked in a slow circle about the point where I had regained consciousness. My eyes kept jumping from shadow to shadow, and with each one my brain conjured up some new horror. I was afraid, terribly afraid of the thing I might find. I wanted to shut my eyes and slink away from this place. I wanted to throw these weird and gruesome minutes out of my mind, believe they had never been, that it was some dream and it would fade into nothingness.

But I kept walking, kept searching. I knew that if I didn't find what had happened, the uncertainty would prey on my mind. I would go mad! I *had* to learn what had happened—and I was afraid to learn.

When I saw the dark, shapeless mass in the ditch by the roadside I stood very still. Coldness moved like a slow, fat worm along my legs and up my spine, and where it moved sweat broke out in icy beads. The blood had congealed on my hands and I could feel it crack as the muscles stiffened and grew larger. I went toward the dark mass in the ditch not yet knowing what it was.

It was a long pile of broken cotton stalks, but there was something ghastly about its lean, angular shape. Slowly, awkwardly I bent, caught a handful of the cotton stalks and threw them aside. I did not move at all when I saw the torn, bloody face beneath, the throat from

which the small pocket-knife protruded. I did not speak, because motion and speech were beyond me. I stood there like some stone gargoyle above the pit of hell.

I didn't need to uncover the rest of the man's body. Though one eye had been torn from its socket and hung on a red muscle along his cheek, I knew him. It was John O'Hara, the foreman of my mill.

Perhaps I wasn't human in that minute. So much emotion was packed into my body that I could feel none of it. My hand was steady when I pulled the knife from his throat. I seemed to have known from the first that it would be my knife.

It was the sound of a car coming along the road that brought me back to my senses. For one moment I stood uncertain, wavering. I had killed a man, one whom I had known for years, had trusted and liked. There was nothing for me to do but report to the police. I'd stop this car, get them to carry me into Tallassee . . .

Before God that's what I meant to do! But the human body is a strange thing. I was not conscious in that moment of thinking of the electric chair, or of losing Anne, my wife of three months, and her soft lips and arms forever. I meant to report to the police, tell them I had killed O'Hara.

Yet suddenly I found myself back in the cotton patch, flat on my belly between the furrows, quivering like a rabbit as I watched the car pass along the road! Dust whirled up behind it, almost blotting out the red tail-light. As the dust swirled and settled I could feel my mouth jerking stiffly, and again I wondered if there were blood on my face.

I got to my feet again but I made no step toward the road. I should tell the police. I knew that. Since childhood I had been taught to respect law and order, to despise men who tried to live outside

the rules civilization had found necessary. But now the full consequences of such an action stood like a gigantic and horrific spectacle before me.

Even if I were not sent to the chair it would mean disgrace, ruin. I would no longer be fit to run the mill which my father had left me. And the ownership of that mill meant a great deal to me. My father had built and developed it. We had never become wealthy, but we had always been comfortable, and our labor had always been contented. During the years of depression, during the labor struggles of recovery, there had never been one complaint in this mill. I took a great pride in the satisfaction of my workers as my father had done before me. And I think they loved me as they had loved him. At least they did then; but later . . .

I was thinking of the mill and of what a confession would mean to my work there, when suddenly my thoughts changed. There was one thing more dear to me than the mill.

What would it mean to Anne if she knew I had killed a man? Would she still love me? Could she love a murderer?

But if I didn't tell her . . . ? If I stayed on at home and another attack came, what was to keep me from killing . . .

"Oh God!" I said aloud, and buried my sweat-damp face in my bloody hands.

YOU will say that the terrors which followed are partially my own fault, that if I had reported to the police things might have worked out differently. Perhaps. And yet at that time I couldn't bring myself to confess. I kept saying that I hadn't meant to kill O'Hara; it hadn't been a conscious act. I kept trying to convince myself that I would never do such a thing again. I didn't want to suffer for what I had been unable to help.

And so I decided not to report. But fear clung to me like a black shadow. I was a murderer, a fugitive.

I walked through the cotton field until I found a small brook, realized where I was. My watch said 8:10. By the time I had carefully washed my hands and face it was 8:15. Cutting across fields, avoiding lights, I reached my home in Tallassee at 8:32.

There were lights showing in several of the downstairs windows as I went up the concrete walk bordered by flag lillies. I could feel something tight and hard in my chest. Every muscle in my body was corded and I had to keep my lips hard shut to stop their trembling. I had never lied to Anne before. But I couldn't tell her! I couldn't! Her love meant more to me than any one thing on God's earth. I couldn't let her know.

The front door had scarcely shut behind me when I heard her heels clicking on the hardwood floor of the library. Then she was in the hall coming toward me. I stopped and watched her and my very breath hurt as it came through my nostrils.

She was not a tall girl, yet the perfect, slender grace of her body, the liquid ease with which she moved, gave her the appearance of height. She was wearing a black dress that molded the soft curves of her figure, left visible the beginning of her high breasts, the dark hollow below her throat. Her hair was almost white, but there were living, golden lights in it that came and went the way a blush could show under the creamy softness of her cheeks. Her eyes were wide and strangely black.

"I'm glad you're finally here," she said. "Dinner's—" She stopped, two steps away from me, her dark eyes seeming to grow wider. "What—what . . . ? Why are you looking at me that way?"

I realized then that I was staring at her

and that my teeth were set in my lower lip. This was the girl with whom I lived, and if some night when we were alone the spell came on me . . . I had killed once. Perhaps . . .

"Why are you looking that way?" she asked again.

I took one long step and caught her in my arms. "It's because you are so lovely you frighten me," I said. I tried to laugh, but the dark shadow of fear clung to me like a cloak, keeping between me and the woman in my arms.

Anne kissed me and pulled away. "Because you say such nice things I'll forgive you for being late," she said. "But keep anything else until after dinner. It's already getting cold. I—I was afraid that you had . . ." She smiled at me and took my hand.

I opened my mouth then to tell her what had happened, to say that I was going to the police because I was afraid of what I might do if I stayed here with her. But the words stuck in my throat.

Anne said, "Pete's here for dinner. When you were so late I called him, asked if you were there. If you hadn't come he was going to look . . ." Her voice trailed off again. She never liked to mention my attacks of amnesia because I was ashamed of them.

I said, "Good," and the joy that I felt must have shown in my voice, for Anne glanced up at me. I was afraid to be alone with Anne and yet I knew that I couldn't leave her. I kept telling myself that the thing which had happened in the dark, invisible hours when my mind had been blank didn't mean that I was a killer. I could never injure Anne, conscious or unconscious. Love of her was part of every fiber of my body. And yet I was afraid. I had liked John O'Hara, played with him when we were kids. There was no reason why I should have wanted to kill him. Yet. . . .

So now I was afraid to be alone with Anne and I knew of no person I would rather have on hand than Pete Boswell with his wide smile and deep-throated laughter.

I said, "Pete was at the office this afternoon, but we didn't quite finish working out the plans for the new loan." He had been my lawyer and friend since we finished college together six years before.

Anne pouted, "Business at dinner!"

I laughed and said, "All right." We went into the library.

PETE BOSWELL was standing in front of the large grate where a wood fire was crackling. He was a big man, about my size, with black hair, black eyes and a big mouth that was always curled in a grin. He smiled now and said, "Anne thought you'd deserted her. She was about to send me out into the cold night looking for you."

We went into the dining-room. Dinner wasn't a pleasant meal, though we all three tried desperately to make small talk. Twice I caught myself staring at Anne while cold sweat broke on my forehead. I couldn't stop thinking that another spell might come on me and I might . . . Silently I cursed myself.

It's strange that I didn't worry much about being caught for that first murder. I seemed to know, to foresee the monstrous fury ahead and to know that O'Hara's death was only an allegretto prelude to the full, thundering symphony of terror.

Pete stayed for some time after dinner. About eleven we had a last highball together and he left. "See you tomorrow," I said at the front door and closed it behind him. My fingers were shaking so that the key rattled in the lock.

When I turned, Anne was in the hall watching me. Her lips were slightly open and there was worry in her dark eyes.

She said, "Mark, darling, what's the trouble? There's been something wrong all night."

I wanted to tell her then, tell her to leave me and never come back, to have me locked in an asylum, that I was a madman likely to murder her at any moment. But the words wouldn't come. I couldn't face the change that would take place in her face. The hell I was in was bad enough, but I couldn't live without Anne.

Even so I tried to tell her part of what had happened. "I—I had another attack. That's why I was late for dinner."

She came toward me quickly, slid her hands across my chest and locked them behind my neck. "You quit worrying, dear, and come on to bed. In the morning you'll feel better."

My lips were dry and when I tried to wet them with my tongue it did no good. I must have known the horror that was coming to this house after the lights were out and dark stillness had smoothed life into sleep.

I must have sounded a little crazy when I spoke, my jerky words. "Listen, darling, wouldn't you like to go visit your mother for awhile? I'm going to be awfully busy these next few days, and my nerves . . . You know how I get irritable and make you unhappy and—"

The troubled look showed plainly in her eyes now. "Tell me, Mark. What's happened?"

But I couldn't tell her. I repeated my argument about business and that she would be happier away from me for a week or two.

She said, "All right, we'll talk about that tomorrow."

"No! Tonight! I want you to go tonight."

There was a spark of anger in her face for a moment and her lips parted quickly. Then the anger was gone and she put a

hand against my forehead. "You've got fever, I believe. I'm going to call Dr. Lawrence."

I had trouble stopping her, and I didn't dare say anything else about her leaving home that night. And yet I was so afraid that the very bones of my body seemed cold and crumbling. After the lights were out I lay in my bed staring up into the darkness, hands clenching the covers.

I could tell when Anne went to sleep by the sound of her breathing. It was soft and regular and deep. Lying there thinking about the beauty of her, feeling love for her like the very blood in my body, I was afraid as few men have ever been afraid. But surely I could not hurt her, even unconsciously. I had liked John O'Hara, but perhaps we had quarreled. A man can lose his temper with another man. But I *couldn't* hurt Anne.

Then I felt it!

That queer little *tick, tick* sound like small threads breaking within my brain—the one warning that I had of a coming attack!

I flung back the covers, hurled myself silently from the bed. God! I had to get away from here before the blank spell came. Oh Christ keep me from becoming a beast this time!

I felt the coldness of the doorknob, heard the click of the latch. I took one step into the dark hall.

After that I don't remember.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood on Her Throat

SOUND beat in high, flat, terrified waves about my ears, jarring through my brain. My eyes were wide open, staring into darkness. My right hand was chest high, gripping something tightly.

The high, flat sound struck at my ears again.

It was Anne screaming!

I whirled and took three short running steps. My body seemed to move slowly, sluggishly as a thick syrup in which fear was a million crawling maggots. What had I done to Anne? Where was I? Why was she screaming?

My legs smashed into something and I went headlong, struck wood with a crash. The thing I had held in my right hand went spinning away, making a harsh noise. I shouted, "Anne! Anne!"

My arms thrashed, touched something. I recognized it as a chair, realized I was still inside the house. A quick look showed me two windows through which dim light fell across a wide table. The kitchen. Anne screamed my name and I came to my feet, leaped for the door.

My bare foot struck something that skidded along the floor. The sound brought full consciousness to my mind. The fingers that I reached toward the light switch were stiff and trembling.

I blinked against the light, which seemed white and blurry at first. Down the hall Anne was calling my name, but I could not answer. My eyes moved along the squared linoleum of the floor, stopped.

"Oh God!" The words were scarcely a whisper behind cold lips.

About two feet from the place where my toe had struck it was a large kitchen knife. The blade was a dark smear of blood.

I seemed unable to move my eyes toward my hands, and unable to stop their upward movement. It was like some great, inexorable glacier, sliding, very slowly. . . .

I did not cry out when I saw my hands. I must have already known that they were bloody.

"Mark! Mark! Where are you?" Anne's voice was louder now. She must be in the hall. Was this *her* blood on my hands?

I shouted, "Here I am. Be with you in

a minute." I bent, scooped the knife from the floor, leaped toward the sink. It was the work of a moment to wash the blood from my hands and the knife. Dropping it on the table I whirled and crossed the room just as Anne reached the door. She had turned on the hall light, and in its glare her face showed startlingly clear.

I stood motionless for a moment, staring at her, thanking God that she was alive, sick throughout my body at the injury she had suffered.

She was wearing white satin pajamas cut low at the throat. There was a long streak across the left side of her neck and blood had spilled down to stain the white pajamas. One red drop stood like a great ruby at the top of her left breast.

"Oh darling," she whispered, and threw herself in my arms.

I stood there, holding her, breathing heavily, afraid to speak for a long minute. Then I led her into the kitchen, washed the cut on her throat. It was not much more than a scratch and I wanted to cry with relief. I said, "It's all right. You're all ri—" I stopped, my mouth still open. *I had tried to kill her once. The next time . . .*

Anne's voice was a broken flood of words when she began to talk. "I woke up and saw him—right over my bed, leaning over me. He had on something dark and silky—like your pajamas. At first I thought it was you. It was too dark to see his face. Then he cut at me with the knife. I screamed and he ran. Maybe I fainted."

Before God I tried to tell her then, send her away from me forever. I stood there gulping, trying to speak the words, but they wouldn't come. I know it was cowardly. I know it was selfish. But when I thought of living all my life without her, it was more than I could stand. I hadn't killed Anne, and certainly I'd been able. Perhaps I was getting back to nor-

mal again and would come through without causing any more trouble.

I heard myself saying, "I woke when you screamed and saw the man run out of the room. I chased him down the hall, but lost him."

I insisted on calling Dr. Lawrence, though Anne's cut was very slight. Then I called the sheriff and told him Anne's story. He was silent a long time. "You didn't get to see this man plainly?" There was a queer note to the sheriff's voice.

I said, "It was dark and I got just a glimpse."

"Was it a white man?"

"I—I think so. Yes, I'm certain." I couldn't have them lynching some poor Negro because of my madness.

"How do you know if it was dark?" the sheriff snapped.

"Why—er—he passed close. I got a glimpse of him against the window."

The sheriff didn't answer that and I stood holding the telephone, feeling my lungs like creaky bellows within my chest. "About how big was he?" the sheriff asked at last.

"About my size." My lips twisted in a bitter grin when I said that.

DR. LAWRENCE came in soon afterward. He was a new doctor in Tallassee, having come from Montgomery, Anne's old home. He'd been in love with Anne before she met me, and at first I thought he'd resented our marriage. But I'd known him before I'd known Anne and our rather mild friendship had continued. He was wearing a dark topcoat over hastily donned clothes when I opened the door for him, and explained what had happened. He rubbed lean fingers along the thin line of his mustache, wrinkled one corner of his thin mouth.

"Well, let's see her," he said.

After he had finished dressing Anne's wound I followed him to the front door.

I knew I couldn't tell him everything that had happened; yet I had to talk to somebody and I wanted a doctor's advice. Lawrence turned for the usual cursory handshake and I said, "There's, er—" It was difficult for me to find words—"one other thing I want to ask you about."

Lawrence ran his slim fingers along his mustache in that quick, impatient gesture of his. He looked more nervous than sleepy, though it was nearly four o'clock. His eyes were strangely blue and glittering under his light, brownish hair. "What is it?"

I tried to wet my lips, but my tongue seemed dry. I couldn't be too definite. If he found out that I had murdered a man, tried to kill my wife, it would be his duty to turn me over to the police. And if he were still in love with Anne, he would be glad to get rid of me.

I said slowly, "You know these attacks I have, when I forget who I am, everything."

He nodded impatiently, pulling his topcoat closer around him. "Yes."

"Well, er, if I do something during one of those spells is it likely I'll—er—do it again?" I stood stiffly, waiting for his answer, knowing deep inside me what it would be. And already I had tried once to kill Anne!

The slim fingers moved along the mustache again. "Perhaps. I can't say without knowing more about it. If there is some desire firmly embedded in your subconscious mind, then you might try for it during each attack. On the other hand, if it were just some passing fancy, it might never occur again. What did you have in mind?"

I tried to laugh, but the sound wasn't natural. Lawrence's eyes narrowed slightly, making little lines about the corners.

"It's not important," I said. "The last couple of times I've found myself at the

office, playing around with the books. Once it was late at night."

Lawrence said, "Ummm," but the suspicion stayed in his eyes. "Having any trouble with the business?"

I couldn't tell whether or not he believed the lie I had told him. "Business looks better than ever," I said. "I'm having to borrow fifty thousand for improvements at the mill, but Pete Boswell is taking care of that and it's going through without any trouble."

"Perhaps that has you a little worried. If you have another attack soon, let me know." He looked at me out of those bright blue and narrow eyes for a moment, turned and went out the door.

I didn't sleep any more that night. I didn't dare to. And all the next day I walked back and forth across my office. I was beginning to worry about O'Hara's murder now, though his body hadn't been found. Nick Porentis, the lean, dark, angular-faced assistant foreman reported that O'Hara hadn't come to work. I said he was probably sick and I would send someone to check up.

Almost everyone in Tallassee worked at my mill. I kept thinking the boy I had sent to O'Hara's home would come back and say that O'Hara had been murdered, and I had killed him. I wondered how these people would look at me, their employer, a madman who killed without knowing why. But when the boy came back he said that O'Hara's wife didn't know where he was, hadn't seen him since yesterday.

It was midafternoon when the body was found. How the news struck through the mill so rapidly I don't know, but I knew without being told that they had all heard of the horrible manner in which he had died. It showed in every face, in the widening of the eyes, the slight quivering of the lips, in constrained nervousness.

And to me it seemed that every person

knew I had killed O'Hara. They seemed to stare at me, to shrink away from me in fear. I told myself that it was only imagination, that no one could know. It was nothing but my overwrought nerves that made me believe they looked at me strangely. If they *knew* that I had killed him, why—

"Good God!" I heard myself say the words aloud. These people would probably lynch me, burn me for a witch. And what made me sick inside was the knowledge that I was little better than a demon. I was a murderer who killed through no will of his own but as a mad dog might kill, unable to stop himself, without even knowing that he committed the deed.

I was walking back and forth when I heard the office door open and spun to face it. My secretary was standing with one hand on the sill—and there was no doubt of it now! She *was* staring at me! She just stood there, left hand against the sill, mouth half open.

THE words burst from my lips, "All right, damn it! What is it?"

"Oh, er—" Color came into her face with a rush. "Mr. Boswell to see you."

"Well, send him in." I turned and flung myself in the chair, elbows on the desk, head buried in my hands. My brain told me that it was because of the way I was looking—I could feel the sweat standing on my forehead—that the girl had stared at me. She couldn't know anything. Couldn't!

Shoes clicked in the outer office and Pete Boswell came through the door, black hair shining, big mouth already curled in a grin and half open to say something. And then he stopped and stood looking at me. The smile left his face slowly. "What's the trouble, Mark? You're white as the proverbial lily."

"We—we've had trouble here. It's sort of shaken me up."

Pete leaned his wide shoulders toward me. "What's happened?"

I dug a cigarette from my pocket before answering. When I raised the match, my hand was shaking so that the flame jittered and nearly went out.

"John O'Hara was murdered," I said slowly. "They just found his body. Some madman, they think. Ripped to pieces."

Sympathy showed in Pete's eyes and he shook his black head. Then abruptly he slid into the chair across the desk, leaned toward me. "Is there anything more than that? The way you looked—as if something had happened to you."

I said, "O'Hara was a friend of mine." I knew that couldn't explain the way my hand was shaking, the ghastly bloodlessness of my face. But it was all I could say. Pete's black eyes narrowed as he looked at me, but he didn't say anything else about the matter.

I insisted that he take dinner with Anne and me again that night. I was afraid to face her alone. She too would see that something had happened. If she urged me, the whole horrible story would come tumbling from my lips. And I didn't want her to know. I kept telling myself that I would never harm her again. I hadn't killed her last night, though certainly I'd been able. Perhaps that meant I was recovering. Anyway I loved her too much ever to harm her.

I kept telling myself these things, but they didn't relieve the gnawing, hungry fear that was eating at my heart. Last night I had almost killed her. A little more pressure on the knife would have ripped her throat. Perhaps tonight . . .

I tried to be as cheerful as possible when Pete and I walked up the drive to my home that evening. I tried to force the thing from my mind, but it came back time and again, as the rising tide beats higher and higher with each rolling wave.

The cold sweat kept breaking out on my forehead and I kept dabbing at it with a handkerchief.

Anne sensed that something was wrong, something more than the explanation I gave her about O'Hara's death. Time and again during the meal her eyes turned toward me, and there was a new expression coming into them, a haunted, fearful look. Perhaps it was only my imagination still playing tricks on too taught nerves. Perhaps—but there was a question in her face and her fingers were cool against mine as we walked hand in hand from the dinner table.

Not once did I get far from Pete Boswell's side. I knew that if I were alone with Anne she would begin to question me—and I was afraid. But about ten o'clock, Pete put his highball glass on the table, stood up and said he'd better be getting on home.

Panic seized me then. I would be alone in the house with Anne again! If she forced me to tell her the truth— She couldn't love a murderer!

But there was another and greater wave of fear rolling through me. Alone with Anne, if another attack came, what . . .

I tried to persuade Pete to stay and have another drink, but Anne didn't insist. I could see, could *feel*, her eyes watching me, curious, puzzled, hurt—and fearful.

Pete had on his hat and topcoat now. Anne was standing just inside the library door. She spoke politely to Pete but I could feel her eyes on me, never swerving. In another minute . . . I knew that my fingers were twitching and my lips were working dryly.

"Listen," I said quickly, "I think I need a breath of air. I'm going to walk part way home with Pete." Without waiting for an answer I got my hat and coat and followed him out the door.

THE moon was very low in the west, making long streaks of silver and shadow across the lawn. The stars looked small and cold, and a fitful autumn wind was rustling dead leaves with a sound like the dull clicking of bones. It wasn't cold, but the air was crisp, the way it can be in Alabama in November.

Pete lived only two blocks away and we walked half the distance without talking. We were crossing the intersection when abruptly he turned to face me. "There's something wrong with you, Mark," he said, his eyes hard on mine. "I don't know what it is, but there's something bad wrong. Need any help?"

Again that cold wave of fear, that feeling of being utterly alone in a dark and rolling sea of terror washed over me. I was afraid to tell even Pete; he would think I was crazy—would *know* I was crazy. He'd tell Anne and I would lose her. If I didn't tell her, there was a chance of pulling through. . . .

Yet I never really believed I could pull through. I never had any real hope. I always felt it deep inside me, the horror that was to come. And yet I couldn't confess. It was as if I were swimming in a vast ocean of darkness, an ocean to which there was no shore and from which there could be no escape, swimming and knowing that I could stay afloat only a little while longer and then must drown under those dark waves of terror.

"You're acting like a crazy man," Pete Boswell said slowly.

I think I grinned then, a crooked, bitter smile. Even looking at me now they could tell I had gone mad! Well, why didn't they lock me up! That would save Anne. . . .

"Just a little worried these last few days about that loan. Nothing serious."

I knew Pete didn't believe me. I could see it in his eyes. He said, "You don't

have to worry about the loan. It came through today. You knew that."

"Oh, that's right," I said hastily. "I'd forgotten."

Pete stood looking at me and there was no smile on his broad good-natured mouth. "If there's anything I can do to help, you can count on me. You know that."

I said, "Thanks," and held out my hand. He gripped it hard, then I turned away.

But I didn't go back to my house. The thought of going in and facing Anne, of being alone with her, terrified me. I kept remembering the way I had regained consciousness the night before, the feeling of Anne's blood on my hands, the sticky blade of the knife. And I remembered the long scratch across Anne's throat. Another quarter of an inch with that blade and . . . I all but hurled my fear-ridden body through the night, feet pounding, head lowered, paying no attention to my direction.

Thinking of Anne and how close I had come to killing her I began to think about John O'Hara. I remembered the angle at which the knife stuck from his throat and the way his face had been slashed, the feel of flesh under my finger-nails and of blood about my mouth. . . . Suppose I killed Anne that way. Suppose I awoke suddenly with her mangled body beside me, to find my hands nasty with her blood!

"Oh God!" I said aloud, and flung back my head in an agony of despair.

And in that moment, fully conscious, I stopped all motion. Horror was an ice-cold strait-jacket about my heart and body. For one long, dragging second my eyes stared ahead.

I had been walking blindly, without noticing where I was going. And now I had raised my head to find that I was on the Tuskegee road not more than fifty

yards from the place where I had found O'Hara's torn body!

"The murderer always returns to the scene of the crime," I whispered.

IT WAS dark, with the moon only a pale yellow shadow on the right, and I must have recognized the place more by instinct than by sight, because the instant I raised my head I knew where I was. Probably I had known subconsciously all the while where I was going, and had gone on because I was unable to keep away.

My eyes moved in a slow stare from the cotton field to the ditch where O'Hara's body had lain covered with cotton stalks, along the pale stream of the gravel road to the very point where the body had been.

Air ripped from my lungs and my chest seemed to cave in. I reeled backward before the giant fist of terror which struck me. My eyes bulged in their sockets.

At the very spot where I had hidden O'Hara's body another form showed dark against the darkness of the night! It was a tall, lean man standing stiffly erect on widespread legs. *It was John O'Hara!*

I scarcely remember going forward, but I must have staggered as I moved. I heard dimly a far-off, whimpering, sobbing noise and knew instinctively that it came from my own throat. I don't know exactly why I went forward instead of turning and racing away, but I had some vague idea of explaining to O'Hara that I had not killed him purposely, that it was not really I who had killed him, but a mindless, soulless being that was my body.

"Don't—don't come any closer! I'm going to shoot!" The words were shaking with fear. I knew that before I had heard more than the first phrase. Then I noticed that they held the slight accent of

a foreigner who has been in this country many years. It wasn't O'Hara's voice.

Some remnant of intelligence began to come to my shaken brain. I wanted to laugh at myself for having been fool enough to believe, even for a moment, that O'Hara could have returned to life. The emotional strain was driving me mad, had my mind and nerves shaky, ready to believe anything.

I said, "I'm Mark Waverly. Who are you?" and kept going forward.

Some of the tenseness seeped from the figure ahead. The man took three steps toward me and I saw the dark, angular face of Nick Porentis, my assistant foreman. And I saw too the gun that he was slipping back into a coat pocket.

"Why are you out here this time of the night, Mr. Waverly?"

The man asked the question civilly enough. It was only in my own mind that it had any terrific meaning, but I felt my muscles jerk and the blood must have dropped away from my face. Then I checked myself and it was anger at my own emotions that made me snap, "I might ask you that question. You get O'Hara's job now that he's dead. What are you doing here?"

Even in the darkness I saw Porentis' face flush, but I hardly noticed, hardly heard his words—for I was listening now with every fiber of my body to a sound within my own skull, a sound like the cracking of small strings.

Another attack was coming!

"I came here because I couldn't sleep for thinking about John, Mr. Waverly. You know we was friends, and I got to thinking that maybe whoever killed him. . . ."

I hardly heard the words. I knew that the two men had been the closest of friends. It was one of those strange things that can happen in a mill town, the brotherhood between the Irishman and

the Greek. But I wasn't wondering any more why Porentis had come here. I was listening to that cracking sound within my own head. Wild ideas whirled kaleidoscopically through my mind. Another minute or two and my mind would go blank, my body become an automaton without brain or soul. What would happen then? Would I tell Porentis what I had done last night? Would I try to kill him? Anne, what . . . ?

Before the Greek's gaping eyes I began to back away. My mouth was half open, working silently. My fingers were stiff in front of me. I mustn't be here when my mind went. I must . . .

The little strings in my brain kept breaking, louder. I saw myself half turn from the Greek, saw the black, rolling cotton field, the yellow smear in the sky that was the last of the moonlight, the dusty stream of the road. I took one quick step.

After that—darkness.

I WAS sitting very still, staring straight ahead at the blank wall of a lighted room. It seemed that I had been listening to something, but I couldn't remember what. My muscles were rigidly stiff, yet trembling, and there was something deep in my chest that hurt. And then, almost suddenly, I knew that I was afraid. Something terrible had happened, something weird and bestial that I could remember no more than one remembers the sounds he heard before awaking.

And I was afraid of something else also, something more than the thing which had already happened. There was a thing even worse, threatening, towering above me, ready to crash down and smash the life from me. I sat very still except for the trembling of my muscles, afraid to move lest I shake this unseen thing, bring it down with a crash about me. Even my eyes remained fixed. There was a blank

wooden floor, a small flat table near the wall, and to the far right I could see the edge of a window. Very slowly I realized that iron bars squared the window.

"I'm in jail!" The words were a hoarse, crackling whisper.

Behind me someone said, "I think he's all right now, Sheriff."

The words brought a full rush of consciousness to me. I came out of the chair, tried to spin and almost fell. A hand caught me, balanced me as I slid back into the chair. My hands and feet, I knew now, were tied.

There was the clack of shoes and Dr. Lawrence and Sheriff Higgins came around to lean against the small table in front of me. Lawrence's blue eyes were glittering and his lean fingers kept moving nervously along the line of his mustache. The sheriff, a squat, square-faced, bald-headed man looked at me out of squinted eyes.

"All right," he said. "Why did you kill them?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. His words came to me like the far-off ringing of a bell that moved closer with a wild rush until it was clamoring against my very ears, thundering, breaking my eardrums. I could feel my eyes widening, feel the muscles of my jaws beginning to ache as my mouth opened. My breath was thick as dry cotton and I couldn't pull it through my nostrils.

"All right!" the sheriff's voice snapped again. "What'd you kill 'em for?"

"Kill—" I got the one word out and had to stop for a breath that was hard to draw. There weren't any conscious thoughts in my mind yet. Only a gnawing, hungry fear. "Kill who?"

When I spoke one thought came into my mind, struck it like a bursting, horrific light. I had killed more than one person! O'Hara and . . . ? Was it Anne? I didn't feel the aching of my

jaw muscles now. My head was thrust forward, stiff, my eyes on the square, sal-low face of the sheriff.

"You know damn well who you killed. Don't come pulling that stuff on me."

"Sheriff—sheriff, please, tell me" I was trying to scream the words, shriek against the torture of this uncertainty, but the sound was only a hoarse whisper. "Whom have I killed?"

The sheriff took one quick, short step forward. "So you admit you killed 'em!"

I tried to bring my hands up to paw at my face where sweat was breaking out in large beads, but they were cuffed behind me. The sweat began to slide across my forehead and into my brows.

The sheriff turned to where Lawrence stood silently. "You heard him, Doctor. He admits he killed 'em."

"Killed whom?" This time the words *were* a scream.

Lawrence said softly, "O'Hara and the Greek Porentis have been killed, Mark. I made a call out on the Tuskegee road and was coming back when I saw you trying to hide Porentis' body in the same place O'Hara's had been hidden. He had been killed in the same way: beaten over the head with a stick, horribly cut with a pocket knife, and . . ." He hesitated, lips working silently. A quivery, fearful light began to show in his eyes. His right hand came up in that quick little gesture across his mustache.

The fear that showed in Lawrence's face sent a new wave of horror rolling over me. When he had named Porentis I had almost shouted with joy. Anne was still alive. I hadn't killed her! But now, watching his face which had suddenly gone grey in the electric glare, the feeling of relief went from me. What had I done so horrible that a doctor was afraid to mention it?

Lawrence's hand dropped to his side. He wet his lips with his tongue. The

sheriff had gone back a half step and I could feel the fear in his face also, though I didn't take my eyes from Lawrence.

"His throat," the doctor said slowly, "was torn open and most of the flesh had been *scratched* from his face. There was blood all over your mouth and under your fingernails."

My body went limp, sick in the chair. My head spilled over on my chest. I wanted to die then, to be done with a life in which there was only a haunting, agonizing fear of the things I would do, and a furious, ghastly loathing for myself. They would convict me of murder. I would go to the electric chair at Kilby. There would be the whir of the current, my body crashing forward against the straps, the stench of my flesh burning that I would never smell. Then there would be peace. No more terror, no more sickness and shame gnawing at my heart. I would be glad, glad to die.

"You admit you killed 'em?" the sheriff said suddenly.

I didn't raise my head to look at him. I didn't want to ever look into the eyes of another human being. I said, "No. I remember nothing. I don't know if I killed them or not."

ANNE came to see me at the prison the next day and brought Pete Boswell with her. I didn't want to see anybody, particularly Anne. I kept my eyes turned away, afraid to look into her face and see the horror and revulsion that would be there.

I heard the click of the iron door opening, the tap of her heels on the concrete. I was standing looking out the window, yet seeing nothing beyond the bars around which my fingers whitened. The tap of the heels came toward me, stopping in the middle of the cell. "Mark."

I couldn't believe I had heard the word clearly, for there was no hatred, no loath-

ing in her voice. My hands clenched at the bars until the rust bit into my skin. Inside my chest a knife-blade was turning slowly.

"Mark."

There was no doubting the sound now. Yet the thought that she still loved me hurt like a white flame. For I was not fit to be loved. I was not a human being. My hands were shaking the bars now as if they would tear them from their sockets.

"Mark, please."

My hands tore loose and I turned. There was a little rush of tapping heels. Then I was on my knees, my arms around Anne's legs, my head pressed against her. I was sobbing like a baby.

After she had gone I sat on the cot, my head buried in my hands. With my arms around her, I had forgotten for a moment. Now the thought came back to me in all its force. I could never, never have Anne again. Even if by some chance I was released, I could not go back to my home. Already I had almost killed her. I couldn't, couldn't take that chance again.

My family was an old one in Tallassee and influential. Pete Boswell was a good lawyer and in the South the law has a way of moulding itself to the requirements of the old families. My trial came quickly. I was on my way to the courtroom for the first time when I realized what other persons in the town thought of me.

Like most mill towns Tallassee has a large foreign population, most of whom are poorly educated. Their mingling of superstitions had added to the horror of the stories told about me. I knew, the moment I stepped out of the jail and started toward the courthouse a half block away, that the love and regard which my employees had held for me, and which I had cherished as part of my inheritance

from my father, had been replaced by fear and hatred.

There was a crowd gathered, but it didn't press close about the sidewalk as most crowds do. Instead it hung back, leaving a wide space through which the two guards and I passed easily.

I looked at the faces of the people once, then I lowered my head, shivering. There was not hatred in their faces so much as fear. They huddled close together, men and women alike, trying to draw within themselves. Their eyes were large, and even the dark, swarthy faces of the Levantines were pale with fright. In that one brief glimpse I saw a man cross himself as I passed. A woman was silently muttering a prayer, clinging to the arm of the man beside her. Once a child screamed, but I didn't look up.

"It'll soon be over," I thought. "I'll go to the chair. And I'm glad. I'm glad!"

The courtroom was packed, but not once during that long day or the one that followed did the judge rap for silence. The crowd was as silent as the moon-cast shadows of tombstones. Except for the voices of the attorneys and the witnesses the room might have been a mausoleum, where men who had died of fear watched the trial of a ghost.

When I was asked to enter a plea, I raised my head—and saw Anne's face. A beam of sunlight fell on it—and to me she was more beautiful and desirable than than all the angels of heaven, all my fears of hell. I couldn't give her up, couldn't!

I opened my mouth to say "Guilty." So help me God, that was what I wanted to say! But the words which came were, "Not guilty."

Not that it could make any difference in the outcome. I knew that. I sunk into a stupor, waiting corpse-faced for the time when I'd be taken to the chair. A specialist who had first treated me after my fall was called to the stand. From

what seemed a great distance I heard phrases. He seemed to believe that in my particular form of amnesia, murder was impossible—that all my movements then were clumsy and it would be impossible for me to overcome a healthy man. Almost, when I heard that, I cried out. He hadn't seen me with blood and flesh under my fingernails. He didn't know that my workers trusted me, wouldn't believe I would attack them.

Dr. Lawrence was called. He admitted I was clumsy when under an attack, that I had seemed very awkward when trying to hide the body of Porentis.

After that the testimony went on and on, but I paid no attention. The jury weren't fools, I thought. They'd see my guilt, sentence me, rightfully, to death.

But the state had been unable to show motive. The specialist had given good testimony, using many big words. The men on the jury had known me since childhood and some of them had known my father. They had believed, finally, that I had simply found the body of the Greek, lost my memory, and awkwardly scratched his battered face in my effort to hide the body from my tortured sight. The fools!

They acquitted me.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Death Trap

I WALKED from the courtroom awkwardly, hardly aware of what had happened. I could feel Pete's hand on one arm and Anne's on the other, but I was hardly conscious of who they were. It was not until we were in the sunshine and getting into my car that I realized what was taking place.

My emotions broke then. Since the moment I had regained consciousness in the sheriff's office they had been dulled,

almost deadened. I had known that I could not escape from the jail and I had looked forward to dying with what was almost relief. And now the whole horrible matter was about to start over again.

I turned toward Anne fiercely, gripping her shoulders. I didn't know that I was shaking her, but the white-gold hair swirled about her cheeks. "No! No! I'm not going home. Take me to an asylum, back to jail! Anywhere, but not home!"

Anne had her arms around me, holding me still. Pete had crawled into the front seat and already the car was moving. Anne whispered as if she were talking to a child, but there was a throb of pain in her voice too. "Mark, be quiet. You'll be all right at home. We'll—"

I pulled away from her and tried to fight my nerves to stillness. I spoke slowly. "No, I can't go home. I tried once to—to kill you. I might try again. I—I'm not human when—"

Anne reached out for my hands which were digging into the edge of the seat. She said, "Please don't worry. I won't believe you ever hurt anyone. But for your own peace of mind we'll make sure that you—you don't have any more trouble. We'll lock the doors and . . ."

I didn't say anything then, but I felt like no living man has ever felt before. I was to be a prisoner in my own home, a madman locked into my room! Day after day this woman whom I loved above everything in God's earth was to watch me in my shame and bestial insanity. She would take care of me, pretend to love me. And always she would know that I was a madman, waiting for a chance to kill her, to mangle her body, rip her flesh with my fingers and teeth. And I wanted her to love me. Love . . .

It was during the last part of the ride while I sat there limp and sick that the idea came to me. I don't think I moved except that my jaw set a little more firm-

ly. I must have known then that I would have another attack that night. Not once had the amnesia troubled me during the time spent in jail, but I seemed to feel even now, hours ahead of time, that another attack would come. *And there was more than mere feeling in that suspicion.*

NATURALLY Pete stayed for dinner, and though both he and Anne tried to make the meal pleasant, they failed utterly. There were long, tense pauses. The room seemed to rest on an invisible cord which was being pulled tighter and tighter. Even the air was growing tense, uncomfortable. But I had already made my plans. I couldn't, *couldn't* live in this house were Anne constantly thought of me as a beast to be chained. Death was preferable.

After dinner I stood up, turned to Pete, said, "I'm going to bed now. I wish you'd come lock my door, take the key."

There wasn't any smile on his big, square face then. He looked embarrassed, but said, "All right."

From inside my room I heard the lock click, the key scrape as Pete removed it. "I'll see you in the morning," he said through the door.

I said, "Okay," and turned to work out the plan I had made.

There was a .38 revolver in my dresser drawer, and from around a package of shirts I took some string. I took a picture from the wall, pulled the tacks out of the frame, and from the bath I got some adhesive. Then I cut off the lights, sat down to wait.

A half hour later Anne called good night from the hall. I answered and heard the door of her room close. I was getting nervous now. Suppose there wasn't time to work out the thing I had planned. Suppose an attack came on me while I sat here waiting, with the gun in my hand. I knew that the key to the closet would

open the hall door. It would be easy for me to reach Anne—and if I went mad, with a gun in my hand . . .

Twice I got up and tiptoed to the window, looked at my watch. I must wait long enough for Anne to be asleep, but not too long. It was eleven-ten now.

And then a new thought came to me. Perhaps I was already mad! Perhaps what I was planning was to murder Anne. Suppose she . . . I dug the fingers of my right hand into my left arm. They hurt. Surely I must be conscious of what I was doing. Yet . . .

At eleven-twenty I unlocked the hall door, using the closet key. There was no light in the corridor, but I didn't need any to find Anne's door. After that it was more difficult to work in the dark. But within ten minutes I was back inside my room, locking the door. And in the darkness of the hall I knew that my .38 revolver was fastened, a string from its trigger to Anne's door, its muzzle pointed so that anyone entering would get the bullet between his shoulder blades.

But if I went there, unconscious of what I was doing, and it killed me, how would Anne explain what had happened? Would she understand that I wanted to die before I could harm her? . . .

Then those thoughts went out of my mind the way light can vanish suddenly from a room. There was a thing swelling louder and louder within my head. It was a small, imaginary sound like the cracking of a spider web, yet it seemed to thunder at my eardrums.

It was coming!

Another minute, another half minute and all conscious thought would go from my brain. Soulless. And suppose this mad plan of mine didn't work. . . . If I killed Anne . . . God! I had to keep myself from that!

I made a lunging step in the darkness of the room, pulled the key from the door

and started toward the window. The key was cold in my hand. I could feel it like a low, chill sound through the breaking of the web within my head—the web that held my brain. The window was two steps away, a grey square against the darkness of the room. I had to reach it, had to!

And then the darkness of the room swept into my skull.

THUNDER was shaking through the darkness. It was beating around my head, bringing thought back to my mind. But all I could see was the darkness, and all I could feel was the wall behind my back and the round, wooden thing I held in my hand. And all I could think was of that vast, empty horror through which I had come and could not remember.

How long had I been unconscious? Where was I? What had I done? All I could remember was that last step toward the window, the key held in my hand.

But I was not in my room now. Somehow I had gotten out. And this thing in my right hand . . . I shifted my fingers, then stopped while terror beat its black wings through the darkness.

The thing in my hand was a knife! And the edge of it was bloody!

There was something in the darkness. It struck me like a live thing, lashing my cold muscles, whipping my body, drawing that long half second into an aeon of agony before I recognized the sound.

Anne was screaming!

The knife made a clattering sound when it hit the floor. My back against the wall I began to edge away from the fallen blade. My body was jerking, pulpy with fear. I had killed Anne! Anne! The words kept ringing in my head.

My shoulder touched something on the wall and the feel set my brain to working slightly. It was the light switch and I cut it on. I was in the kitchen.

In the hall outside Anne was crying. Not screaming now, but weeping hysterically. My muscles seemed to creak as I reached for the door and pulled it open. If I had shot her, if she were dying . . .

It was dark in the hall, pitch dark. And through the darkness came the sound of Anne's sobbing. I was afraid to speak but somehow I said, "Anne?"

The sobbing stopped suddenly and in the darkness there was no sound at all, no movement. The blackness was like the furry body of an animal.

A sudden whispering of bare feet. "Mark! Mark!"

Lights blazed up. Anne was crouched close against the wall, her hand still on the light switch. Her face was as white as the satin pajamas that clung to her body. Even her lips were pale and her eyes were like dark pools of shadow. Her blonde hair was a white cloud about her face. Across from her the door of her room stood open. Just behind her was the pistol I had fastened.

She came toward me slowly. "Mark, you . . . Who's that in my room? I thought— Who shot . . . ?"

She didn't see the blood on my hands as I put her gently to one side. I said, "Wait a moment."

At the door of Anne's room I stopped, reached inside and cut on the light. My voice was clipped when I said, "Well, it worked. There he is."

"Who?" Anne asked. I heard the whisper of her bare feet behind me.

I pointed to where Peter Boswell lay sprawled on the floor. A short pocket-knife was still gripped in his right hand. Between the shoulders of his blue coat was a small hole around which a dark stain was growing. His head was twisted to one side and I could see that his dark eyebrows were powdered to be as blond as mine. An old brown hat of mine was pulled low over his forehead.

Anne said, "It's Pete!"

I said, "You're right. It's Pete."

She turned toward me, her eyes still wide and amazingly dark against her pale face. "But what. . . ? Why? We've got to call a doctor."

I knelt, rolled Pete over and put a hand against his breast. When I stood up I said, "Call the sheriff and a hearse. The doctor would be wasting his time."

"But—whats happened?" she asked.

I TRIED to explain, though some of the points were not fully cleared up until later, after we had seen Dr. Lawrence and the loan company. But my general idea had been right. Pete had been putting some kind of dope into my drinks which stimulated the heart and brain, brought on an attack about an hour and a half later. The dope also robbed me of any volition of my own, even subconscious, so that I simply stood still or did as I was told. Pete had killed the men, left me holding the blood-smearred knife. Tonight he had smeared the blood of a cat on me first so that he could run away quickly after frightening Anne.

He was able to judge pretty well when I would recover. He had only scratched Anne for the simple reason that he didn't want to harm her. He was in love with her, hoped that she would come to believe me insane and later fall in love with him. But what he was really after was my mill and that fifty thousand dollar loan. He had already spent part of the borrowed money, but knew that it would be easy to shift the blame on me with everyone thinking me insane. As the executor of

my estate he could doctor the accounts, show that I owed him a great deal of money, and take the mill in payment.

I hadn't begun to suspect him until coming home from the trial. Then I recalled that he had been with me a short while before each attack. During the days spent in jail I had been perfectly normal. And the fact that I had managed to kill two strong men without so much as being bruised was strange.

It was Anne's use of the word "we" which had set me thinking. Evidently Pete had been with her a great deal while I was in jail, pulling the "old family friend" stuff. So I had fixed the pistol to shoot whoever went in Anne's door. I hadn't been certain then if I were really doing these things or not, but if I were guilty I wanted to die before I killed her.

Anne looked at me steadily when I finished telling her all I had guessed of these things, then turned and looked at the door. "You overlooked something."

"What?"

"If I'd decided to come out before he came in, that shot would have killed me."

I said, "Darling. You know I wouldn't soil those pretty white pajamas. The door swings open on the inside left and there's a dresser on the right. You have to stand to one side when you open the door and the bullet would have struck the door, not someone on the inside."

She made a soft, wriggling movement. "So it was the pajamas you were afraid of hurting."

I said, "Of course."

And then I kissed her, very hard.

THE END

Next Month—

Another Eerie, Blood-chilling Novelette

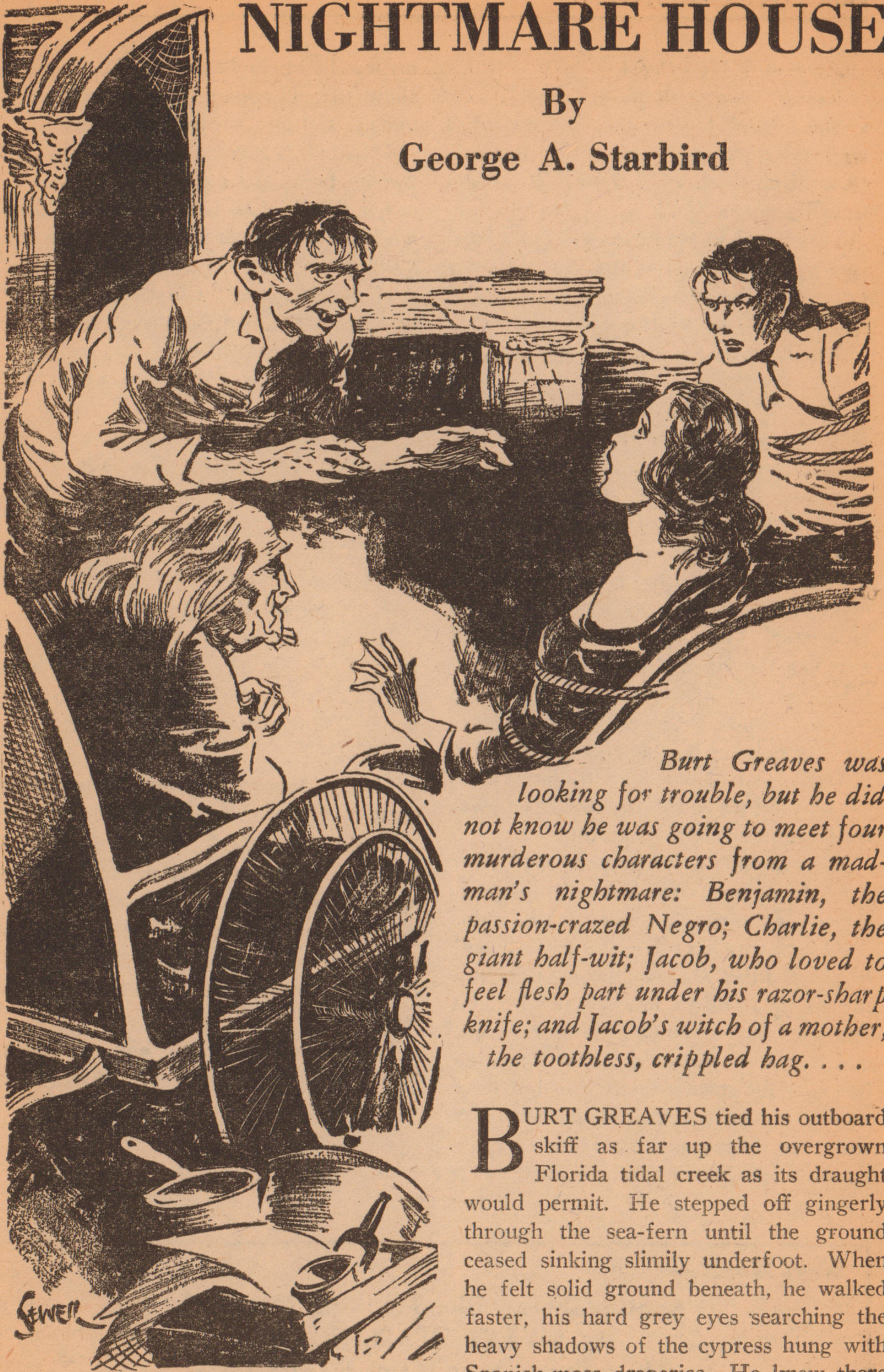
By WYATT BLASSINGAME

The February Issue Is Out January 15th!

NIGHTMARE HOUSE

By

George A. Starbird



Burt Greaves was looking for trouble, but he did not know he was going to meet four murderous characters from a mad-man's nightmare: Benjamin, the passion-crazed Negro; Charlie, the giant half-wit; Jacob, who loved to feel flesh part under his razor-sharp knife; and Jacob's witch of a mother, the toothless, crippled hag. . . .

BURT GREAVES tied his outboard skiff as far up the overgrown Florida tidal creek as its draught would permit. He stepped off gingerly through the sea-fern until the ground ceased sinking slimily underfoot. When he felt solid ground beneath, he walked faster, his hard grey eyes searching the heavy shadows of the cypress hung with Spanish-moss draperies. He knew there

was danger here, in this desolate stretch of Florida back-country—grim peril and lurking death. The earth was boggy and hostile; the lush foliage hid poisonous plants, reptiles—and in addition to those elements, men would be ahead—bitter, desperate men, who would offer him the greatest hazard of all! Yes, he knew danger was there—but it was a danger he must force himself to face!

Burt Greaves was long and loosely hung together in a manner that belied his strength. His head was bare; his hair black, curly, and hard, like dry shavings. A hard, ominous bulge in the back pocket of his gray flannels was hardly disguised by the low-hanging leather jacket he wore.

A half-mile's hard going through cypress, sedge, scrub palmetto and high weeds brought him to a jasmine-covered, sagging fence. Swinging over this, he could see through the first hazy grayness of dusk a house standing in a small clearing.

It was a two-storied structure with columns and a broad piazza. In the waning light, the paint appeared peeled and weather-rotted. Pampas grass and high sedge had over-run the yard and the ancient driveway. The porte-cochère was sagging in a dozen places. Uncurtained windows stared like haunted, vacant eyes at Burt Greaves as he strode slowly towards the structure across the weedy, hummocked yard.

The time-wracked place seemed to be what Greaves was looking for, for a curious light came into his grey eyes, the lips of his hard-chinned mouth tightened.

When Greaves got as far as the ancient veranda, he stopped and stared up at the house. Its vacancy seemed to mock him; and his teeth gritted a little at this.

The piazza's steps were rotted and awry; its floor had been broken through and patched with uneven planks laid across the skeleton-like joists. A foul odor

emanated from the place—an odor of long untended garbage. His nose crinkled in disgust.

But as he examined the structure, Greaves squared his jaw. He had a job to do. And whatever might come of it, there should be no waiting now. He stepped up on to the rotting veranda and strode, with short, quick steps, towards the heavy door that sagged half-open, revealing a bit of musty, inky hallway within.

He grasped the door and heaved on it. A dried and eerie creaking seemed to fill the house, even cause the ancient boards beneath him to quiver.

"Hain't no one lives here atall, nowadays," said a voice behind him.

Greaves' lengthy shape wheeled. For a second he almost popped his hand back to the gun he carried in his hip pocket.

There was a man standing in the middle of the yard. A short, compact figure with a black, stubbled face; a wide-brimmed, flopping hat. He was dressed in a pair of filthy, tattered coveralls and a pair of high laced boots.

But what was more remarkable, he held in his hand a long, curved butcher knife sharpened until it was a mere half-inch in width. It was something one might use to kill a hog.

Greaves stared at the man, silently. He was used to "po' white trash" ways, but this man was more unpleasant than the usual run.

Greaves said: "You live here for one, mister. Maybe you're all I need. Ran outta gas in my outboard heading back for Glades. Thought I might find some hereabouts. Got any?"

The man shook his head, and dark lights of anger suddenly shone in his blue eyes. His bearded mouth screwed up tight.

"Hain't no one living here nowadays. Ain't got no gas either." He turned his

head a little, called in a louder voice: "Benjamin!"

THERE was a scuttle of feet around the house's sagging corner, and a mountainous buck Negro appeared.

He was dressed in a pair of tattered dungarees and no shirt. His massive muscles rippled like movements of great snakes beneath coal-black, oily skin.

"Yes, suh?"

The stubbled beard moved in little jerks. "I jest told this man, Benjamin, no one lives hereabouts no more. We ain't got any gasoline either, have we?"

"No, suh. We—"

The short man cut in. "Better move along, feller. This here place is vacant jest now. 'Sides I don't want yuh around."

The butcher knife made a movement, came up sharply to point at Greaves.

Greaves said: "'S funny. I thought I saw a light in there a moment ago. Went out. Sure you haven't any gas?"

He stepped down off the rotting porch and stood, long legs a little apart, on the firmer ground of the yard.

"Yuh ken walk back tuh Glades," the little man snapped. "Ain't more'n twenty miles. Gwan—git!"

The butcher knife rose to a sharper angle; the short man took a step forward.

At that second, a wild shrieking cry burst from the house. It was a cry of mortal terror that mingled instantly with the stamp of feet, the hard thunder of feet on loose boards behind the building.

Both the big Negro and the short man wheeled as though they had been struck. The bearded man cursed, tersely, violently.

A man came running past the corner of the house, a stumpy man whose torso was bare and streaked with blood. One arm pawed the air, as he tried to save his balance; his mouth ripped out short cries that sent a chill up Greaves' spine.

The man stumbled, fell on his side, kicking. Greaves saw that his other arm was gone, and in its place was a ghastly, bloody bandage that covered the aimlessly waving stump.

Another white man, in pursuit, now appeared around the house corner. He was a huge man with great, ham-like hands stretched out toward the struggling, moaning thing in the weeds.

He did not see Greaves nor hear the shout from the little, bearded man. He plunged forward, his meaty hands hardening into fists. When he reached the struggling figure, he bent and hit the contorted face twice, with a heaving blow.

The legs in the weeds kicked once and were quiet. The air that a second before had been rent with those terrible sobs suddenly held an ominous silence.

Greaves' lips were thin, white lines; his lithe body a stooping blob in the half-dusk.

The mountainous white man rose and stared now in motionless surprise at the three men before the house. His face too was covered with a sort of ugly, light stubble that did not conceal the heavily hanging lower-lip, the drooping mouth and dulled eyes.

"You crazy—!" the short man gritted.

The huge half-wit hung his head as he rose. He blurted, haltingly: "I kain't let him git away, ken I? Runned, he did, till I got him. Yer maw said yuh-all wanted him, didn't yuh?"

"You crazy—!" the short man repeated.

He whipped his body around towards Greaves. "Git outta here!" he shouted.

Greaves face was white; his mouth a hard, ugly gash. He said: "Mebbe I better," and turned a little to walk away.

He hadn't taken three steps when he wheeled about in time to swing up his revolver and clout the bull-like head of the oncoming Negro with all his might.

THE revolver thudded to the mark, seemed to bounce off the kinky wool as the big Negro's rush stopped in mid-flight. His tree-trunk legs hinged in under him. But in falling, momentum knocked him against Greaves' own legs, throwing the lean man to his hands and knees.

Greaves jerked himself from under the inert weight of the Negro as a wrestler would and rose, the revolver ready.

The short man had been standing, thin-bladed butcher knife upraised, ready to dash at Greaves. He saw the pistol. His blue eyes suddenly looked as though he were about to be sick. Whipping his stumpy body about, he ran for the half-wit.

"Stop!" Greaves' voice rasped.

But by that time the small man had thrown his body behind the protecting hulk of the half-wit. Greaves could see he was tugging at a revolver of his own, hidden inside the breast of his coveralls.

"I'll git you!" he was chattering hysterically. "You don't dare shoot me here, even if you could. I'll blow yer—"

Greaves stood, revolver outstretched, his finger contracting slowly on the trigger. On the ground before him the massive buck Negro lay, unconscious, sightless eyes staring at the darkening sky.

Greaves realized then that if he pulled the trigger, the hulking, whining half-wit would be slaughtered like a pig in a chute. Also that when the little man yanked loose the gun he was tugging at, he could pepper Greaves at will.

Greaves' hard young jaw tightened. His taut muscles contracted, then shot him headlong towards the rotting veranda. He hammered across the steps, ripped the sagging door open with a mighty heave.

Outside he could hear the short man bellowing furiously. "Benjamin! Git Benjamin and come along with him!"

Greaves' teeth ground together and he stepped forward—into pitch black night,

feeling for the grimy walls of the narrow gallery.

AS HE did, a door burst open at its far end. A figure in a dress appeared briefly in the dim light and was blotted out immediately by the closing door. Greaves heard feet running towards him, stumbling feet. He braced himself.

A body, coming on headlong in the dark, collided with his. Small fists suddenly beat up at Greaves' face; tearing little nails scratched at his arms and neck.

The breath, the fragrance of a woman was close to him, almost overpowering as he grappled for her hands, clamping them down at her sides.

The woman screamed twice, high yet flat, setting Greaves' teeth on edge. He cursed, and muffled the third scream to soft, frantic burbles by clamping a big palm square across her lips.

"Shut up," he warned. "If I have to hit you, I will."

When the door at the opposite end of the hallway had opened, Greaves had seen the shining knob of a nearby door.

Dragging the girl by main force he stalked forward through the inky blackness, feeling for that knob. When its metallic surface came up into his wandering touch, Greaves jammed the door open.

As he did, a shaft of light burst full upon a moulded heart-shaped face beside him in which a pair of blue eyes stared at him in mounting horror. The girl's hair, long and tawny blonde, streamed back from her face and over her shoulders. . . .

They were in a low-roofed, compartment-like little room whose main source of light was one grimy window, high up in the wall. A heap of smelly trash graced the middle of the rotting, bare floor.

Greaves wheeled to the girl, his eyes glittering. She had leaned back, supporting herself against the closed door, her hands rising to her temples. Her eyes

were heavy-lidded with unshed tears; creases of anguish channeled her face.

She said: "My God, Burt! *You!*"

Greaves' face itself was lined with pain. His hard lips opened. "Yes, Dorothy, honey. I've come. Is—is Father here? Still—still alive?"

His words were breathed out, hushed with expectancy, as though he hated to ask the question for fear of the answer.

The girl nodded, eyes still staring. "I think so. He's—he's in the basement. I talked to him about an hour ago. They let me. How did you get here?"

Burt Greaves' shoulders straightened as if from under an overpowering load. He said in sharp syllables: "Thank God for that! I came in the outboard, lied to them that I'd run out of gas when I found this place. I knew—knew damn well I'd find something along here some time. I've been out this way every day for two weeks, hunting. The Glades police said I was crazy. After those messages started coming, I searched all night for two nights."

THE girl's voice was low, agonized. "We were on the boat, your father's yacht, *Paranella*, anchored off-shore nearly a mile from here. We didn't know they were on board until they came into the main salon where Mr. Greaves was dictating to me. He often works late at night on board. There was the short man—he's Jacob—the Negro and the half-wit. They killed the captain and tied his man in his bunk. Then they rowed your father, the steward and myself ashore with them. I asked them what they could want with me, his secretary. They wouldn't tell me. *Now I know!*"

The last came out in tones that cut Burt Greaves to the quick. He took the slim arm beside him in a grip that was at once caressing and assuring. But his voice was hushed, painful as he went on.

"They found the *Paranella*, Dorothy, floating like a derelict fifty miles south of here. The man on board had been unconscious for three days. He couldn't remember, after we brought him to, where it had happened. Mother and I got the first note before we found the boat. The first note had a finger with it—*Dad's amputated finger!* It said that if we didn't deliver \$500,000 by the next day, his arm would come in the mail. When we left part of the money where the note ordered, no one took it. The next day another package came!"

Greaves' voice was suddenly tinged with steel. "That package asked us to put the money elsewhere and to stop the police. But how could we? The police found the boat—I couldn't stand it any longer. I left Mother, decided to work alone. *That second package held his clenched, bloody hand!*"

For a full half-minute, Burt Greaves was silent, staring at Dorothy Varden, his father's secretary, hoping she would deny what he had just said might be true. But her lips were tight, contorted with pain even as his were.

She said: "I didn't know that, Burt. I—I couldn't see in the basement." She paused, then: "Oh, Burt, honey—!"

Her long-fingered, graceful hands whipped up to cover her moving face.

Greaves said, bitterly: "I saw Willard, the steward, a moment ago. They'd been working on him too!"

Through her hands, the agonized voice of Dorothy Varden spoke. "I know—I know! It's that old woman—that terrible, hideous—"

But even as she said that her words were bitten off at her lips. Through the house about them rang a high-voiced shout, muffled by heavy walls.

Greaves jerked erect. He heard the cry: "I'm here, Burt! I'm alive still.

Don't let them fool you—keep your courage, boy!"

"Dad!" he shouted.

His hands grappled at the door-knob of the small room. The revolver he had returned to his hip pocket was whipped out, ready.

"Don't!" the girl cried.

But Burt Greaves didn't hear her. That was his father's voice—his father who had been kidnapped and—if Burt believed those hideous packages—mutilated by veritable human fiends.

Greaves jerked open the low door, plunged into the inky hallway. He ran down it, bumping against the hard walls. Around him darkness pressed—a murky, evil thing.

He ran the thirty feet of hallway, shouting to his father that he was coming. But suddenly, in the midst of his flight, his foot struck something solid on the floor. A second later, his other foot was tripped up by the tight-stretched piece of manila rope across the hall. Then, as he fell, Burt knew he had been drawn into a fatal trap.

A door he had not been able to see beside him whipped open. An arm, big and long as a railroad sleeper, flashed in the crack of the door.

In that position, Greaves could not protect himself. The chair leg gripped in the mighty Negro's hand hit him square, with bone-crushing force.

Darkness and pain surrounded Greaves like a tidal wave, crushing him under tons of quivering thunder that beat in and around his head, seeming to lift him in powerful surging hands out from the narrow gallery. As in a dream, then, he began to fall, blotted out by grey fogs. . . .

BURT GREAVES could feel his limbs struggling against ropes tied securely about his ankles and wrists. And he real-

ized, too, that he was lying on the floor on his back.

Greaves shook his head, sat up sharply in spite of his bonds, and found himself staring into a face so hideous that he shuddered unconsciously. Across the room from him sat a hunched shape in a wheel-chair. The wrinkled slit of her mouth was spread apart over the rotten stumps of teeth. Her eyes glittered like foetid swamp pools from the middle of a shriveled, sunken-eyed death's-head.

The woman was now looking at Greaves with interest. Cackling high, a falsetto voice snapped: "That's him. Yes, it's him, all right. That's the son, Jacob!"

Jacob, the short, bearded man, stood beside the hag in the wheel-chair. He muttered, "I thought so, too, when I saw him, maw."

For a short moment, the muscles along Greaves' hard jaw stood out. He was now in a gloomy, musty big room that had evidently once been the living-room of the mansion. Cobwebs and filth littered the corners. The foetid odor of garbage was stronger in here, but he hardly noticed it. For across the big room from him, hands clasped in terror to the seat of her chair, sat his father's secretary, Dorothy Varden!

The big Negro, Benjamin, stood sullenly in a corner, glaring at him. The half-wit slouched, long arms dangling, in another corner, staring at the girl.

The old woman nodded at Greaves. "Now *you've* come, eh? That's good, ain't it, Jacob? They wouldn't pay the money we asked when we sent that bloody hand to town. No, sir! But they got money, Jacob. This Greaves is a banker in New York, like I told you. They'll come through. Now that we got the boy, Jacob—we ken send *some of him* into Glades too!"

The slit that rimmed the line of rotten teeth-stumps snapped closed; the

filthy, murky pools of her eyes glared with undisguised venom at Burt Greaves. He saw then that the buck Negro had moved his eyes to the old woman. In them, Greaves read hatred—silent hatred mixed with fear. . . .

Something kinked up in Greaves' throat when he saw that. A glimmer of hope sprang into his brain. The old hag turned to the hulking half-wit, said: "Charlie, whar's thet little rat—th' other man? Git him quick—" She turned to Greaves, "Yuh ain't believin' me, air yuh! You'll see—! We lost all our money to damn Yankee swindlers up North. Now we're gonna git it back from thar!"

Greaves' lips tightened into a white line when the half-wit appeared lugging the doubled-up form of his father's steward by the belt.

Dorothy began to scream, wildly, in a high-pitched, aimless key. Greaves knew she had seen something like this before.

They brought the steward forward, threw him face downward on the floor.

His torso was still naked, striped with blood. That terrible stump that had been his arm was bleeding again. But he didn't seem to move—until his head rolled over loggily. The man was still alive!

Jacob, the short man, stepped away from his mother's side. With a congealing of the horror within him, Greaves saw the man draw out that diabolic long knife and stoop. . . .

Seconds later, while Greaves tried to hold back the nausea that swept over him, gripping his vitals in a steely hold, Jacob rose holding in his hand the other amputated arm of the figure on the floor!

Charlie, the half-wit, was doing something about the gushing, reddened stump that even now sprayed the floor about them with sticky gore.

The hideous, mutilated thing on the floor did not even groan. Greaves prayed

that the man would die before he regained consciousness.

That—was *that* what had been happening to his father? If he did get free, would he find some ghastly thing like that in the basement? Greaves shuddered.

Seconds later he became aware that Dorothy was screaming louder, less flatted. The hag's voice was saying, "Yes, sir. That'll bring money out of *his* family too. We'll be rich, Jacob. Rich!"

Greaves saw Jacob take the amputated limb, lay it on the chair behind him and start forward.

"Wait a minute!" the old woman's voice was wailing. "I want to have my fun too, Jacob. Wait—!"

The bearded man paused. His eyes, that had been staring at Greaves with sultry, smoky gaze, shifted. He said: "All right. Charlie, you undo his arms."

The half-wit came over to Greaves, heaved him erect to his feet. With fumbling hands, he unshackled first Greaves' feet, then his wrists. But before Greaves could move, a powerful pair of arms wrapped around his in a clumsy form of half-Nelson. He stood there helpless.

"I tell you, Jacob," the chattering death's-head cackled, "we'll only do his hands first, Jacob. That's enough for th' time bein'."

A GLOWING coal in Greaves' bosom seemed to grow, to flame, then freeze to an icy weight within. Dorothy had not stopped screaming. He wondered how long her breath would last.

The Negro, Benjamin, was standing in a corner, watching. Now he stepped out. He said: "You hain't told me yet—whut I'm gonna git outta this. I done my share and took thet white man's gun on th' haid. Tell me!"

The old woman leaned forward in her chair. "Tell you, you black rat! I told you once. You do yore share and you'll

git the gal. Yuh ken have her tomorrow—but not before!”

The Negro seemed to stutter until the stumbling voice of the half-wit abruptly grated from behind Greaves' ear.

“No! Not him! I tell yuh, he don't git her. You promised her to me, if I'd go through with this. *It's me!*”

The ancient hag shifted her eyes rapidly between them. Greaves noted now that Dorothy's screams stopped short when they spoke of her. It was like a sedative. A second before she had been screaming wildly, unreasoningly. Now she was silent, a statue of terror. Greaves felt his throat go dry.

The half-wit said: “It's me,” once more.

The foetid eyes glittered back and forth between the Negro and the half-wit.

The old woman said: “Mebbe I'll let yuh-all fight over her. That's it, eh, Jacob? Let 'em fight to see who it'll be!” She went off into a mumbling chatter of high laughter, choked suddenly and lapsed into sibilant wheezing.

Greaves felt the huge half-wit stirring behind him, the bear-like arms quivering with rage. Greaves looked at Dorothy. She was staring at him with wide-open, terrified eyes.

The big Negro, Benjamin, had moved away from the wall. Inch by inch he was drawing closer to her, eyes wary for the old woman and her son.

Greaves raised his voice. He spoke to Charlie, the half-wit, but for the benefit of the others. . . .

He said: “They're stringing you, Charlie. You're not going to get her. You can tell by what *she* said.” He nodded towards the hag. “The girl's pretty and young and Jacob's going to keep her for himself. He'll take her while you two are fighting. If you want her, why don't you take her now?”

He saw Dorothy's eyes shift to his own, expand, and show a light he had never

before witnessed in a human being's:

“How—how d'you mean?” the slack, stupid mouth at Greaves' ear muttered.

“I mean—if you don't take her now and beat it, they'll kill you and keep your share of the money. If they don't get you, the Negro will. He wants her. You better act—run with her—now!”

Indecision moved the arms holding Greaves. He prayed for his voice to be steady, to speak convincing words.

“She's young—” he said, softly.

The girl's mouth stopped working. “Don't—don't say that again! You *can't* say that, Burt!”

But bitterly Greaves' voice went on. “You see, Charlie, they're afraid of what I'm saying because they're afraid of the truth. She's yours—if you take her and run now. I want to get away, too. You let me go and I'll stop them—”

The bearded man, Jacob, moved with quick little jerks. A revolver appeared in his hand.

“Shut up, you crazy fool! Stop talking that way—”

Even the Negro seemed frightened now. “Don' say that, white man. He don't know whut he's a-doin' when he's started.”

Greaves said: “You see, Charlie? She has blonde hair—just like yours. She'll be full of curves and—soft, Charlie. You better take her now. After the Negro gets through—”

With a hoarse rumble of rage, the half-wit moved. He shoved Greaves away from him and lunged sideways. Dorothy screamed again. The bearded man yelled, “You crazy—!” and pulled the trigger of the gun.

The room was shattered with the roar of the revolver, the hoarse bellow of pain and rage from the half-wit.

BUT in that second, Greaves, too, had moved. He had thrown himself for-

ward towards the bearded man with the pistol. He went like a football tackler, low and close to the floor. The gun exploded before he hit the bearded man. Both of them crashed to the floor, the smaller man below.

Greaves' fists whipped—one, two—across the bearded man's chin. Then when he jerked himself erect, the revolver was in his hand.

He backed off into a corner, holding the revolver, before the smoke cleared.

Greaves saw the giant half-wit stooping in the middle of the room, his hand over the bullet wound in his shoulder. The big Negro was pressed against the wall, eyes white-rimmed in terror.

Greaves said: "Stick where you are—all of you!"

Jacob, the bearded man, stirred, felt of his chin. Slowly his eyes opened and he struggled to his feet. He looked around, saw the gun in Greaves' fist.

He turned to Charlie. "You lumbering half-wit—You see what you've—"

He didn't finish the sentence. His arm, dangling against the side-seam of his trousers, whipped up and threw.

A twinkling, white, cold flame of light, the thin-bladed butcher knife snapped through the space between the bearded man and the half-wit. Greaves saw it leave the man's hand and appear suddenly, buried to its black hilt square in the chest of the weak-minded giant!

He stood there, stupidly looking at the weapon jutting from him, for a short second. Then with a wild, choking cry, he tore it from his breast and reeled across the room, the knife held high and dripping with gore, in his hand. . . .

Greaves contracted his finger on the trigger, but he didn't shoot. He saw the Negro lunging after the half-wit, trying to stop that upraised arm. He saw Jacob's small body collide with the half-

wit; he saw the dripping, murderous blade sink into the bearded man's throat. The men collapsed, the half-wit on top.

Greaves jumped. He leaped around those bodies, grappled for the girl's arm. He pulled her towards a doorway opening into the room which showed a set of steps leading downward. He thundered down, after clapping the door shut.

Once in the basement, he made short, jabbing moves at the door of a wooden, grimy cage in the cellar.

SECONDS later, the girl, Burt Greaves, and his father stood at the edge of the clearing.

The elder Greaves was saying: "Yes, they were afraid to hurt me, afraid I'd die. So they sent in his mutilated body bit by bit, and told you it was mine. They came down and told me they were doing the same to you upstairs. That's why I yelled. You say that old hag and the Negro are left. Maybe—"

Burt Greaves clicked his teeth and stopped his father. "No, we won't go back. Let them fight it out themselves. The Negro had big welts on his back where he'd been beaten—I'll lay money, by that old hag's orders. She had a gun all the time, but evidently was too wobbly to aim it. The Negro hates her."

A shout came from the darkened house in the clearing. A cry that was preceded by the muffled explosion of a revolver, a cry that a wounded animal might make.

And answering that, there came the burbling, hysterical wail of a woman. . . .

"He did it," Greaves said. "Come, we'll let the police finish up the rest of it. I'm sorry, Dorothy, I talked the way I did. You understand now—don't you?"

As the three of them passed off into the forest of cypress towards the creek and the outboard, the girl took his hand in hers to prove that she did.



CHAMBER OF HORRORS

AH, MY FRIENDS, a pleasant gathering it has been. . . . We have watched, shuddering, while the gods of an ancient race directed foul orgies in their name. We have felt the dank air of the tomb enclose us. We have even walked beside the Devil himself, on a dark and storm-swept road, and found him hardly to our liking. What a cozy spot indeed this little room has become, damp as it is with the dampness of the tomb, warmed by the fires of hell itself and ringing with the shrieks of those in torment. . . .

And how have you fared, my brothers? You are weak and trembling, you say? . . . Ah yes, but you say that you also feel cleansed, ready to take up again the cares of the day with new hope and new spirit? . . . Well, we warned you that would happen.

But what of that charming young lady slumped so soundlessly on the bench to the rear? . . . She has fainted, eh? . . . And you suggest that a taste of the thumbscrew and the rack might revive her? . . . But no—we have a better thing than that. . . .

Do you notice that door in the far corner, all but hidden from the fire-glow, and how it is opening so soundlessly? Do you notice the dark young man who enters now, so slowly and so quietly? You might well think his entrance sinister, for he it was who entertained our gathering with that matchless masterpiece of horror, *Her Lover—Death!*

In another age Sire Blassingame might have had trouble with the stake. Such tales as he tells, people would have said, can come only from the Devil's tongue; and the man who writes these surely has sold his soul to gain them. Now, we know that such fearsome pacts are not necessary, that such tales spring all but unbidden from the fertile brain of a master of eerie fiction; yet that detracts no whit from their strange and terrifying quality.

Sire Blassingame brings with him now another tale for next month's gathering—a tale so blood-chilling that it cannot fail to revive the charming young lady. There will be a host of other stories as well, each equally terrifying.

So, my friends, we shall meet here again. . . . And we leave you now to pleasant dreams.

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My Tea and Coffee Routes pay best because I supply people with the things they need daily to live—Tea, Coffee, Extracts, Spices, and other Kitchen Necessities. You handle all the money, make delivery of goods, and keep a big share of the cash you take in for yourself. I'll furnish you with hundreds of fine premiums and other amazing specials to offer your customers with Tea, Coffee, and other fine Food Products. Hundreds of people are now waiting to be served in many localities.

START EARNING AT ONCE
My amazing new Tea and Coffee Route Plans provide for your having immediate cash earnings. If you are honest and reliable and willing to take good care of one of these Routes you are eligible for this work. You start right in your own locality, near where you live. There is nothing hard or difficult—and no red tape or delay. You don't have to take a long course of training. Your earnings start at once.

NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED
I am not nearly as much interested in your experience as I am in your willingness to follow a few plain, simple instructions. I will tell you all the inside workings of my nationwide "home owned" Tea and Coffee Route Plan. I'll explain just how you make a quick start to earn big money immediately. There is no stock to carry—no expensive fixtures to buy—no store rent to pay.

SPECIAL OPENINGS FOR WOMEN
I have some unusually good openings for women. Neighborhood Tea and Coffee Routes

pay up to \$0.50 a day full time and as high as \$5.00 a day for spare time. The work is light and pleasant. Mrs. Carrie McCallum, Neb., reported that she has never let her earnings run below \$50.00 a week. Mrs. Jewell Hackett, here in Ohio, made \$33.00 in seven hours. These exceptional earnings prove the amazing possibilities of my offer to women.

NO LIMIT TO MY OFFER

If you are honest, conscientious and willing to listen to reason, I won't put any limit on your earnings. You will have a steady business day in and day out. No danger of lay-offs—no chance of getting fired. That's the kind of proposition I am offering you.

SEND NO MONEY-- JUST NAME

I want people right away to handle Routes and look after the business in their localities. Don't send money—just your name—so I can lay all the facts before you and then you can decide if the earning possibilities are satisfactory. Send name on coupon or penny postcard. Costs nothing. Do it today.

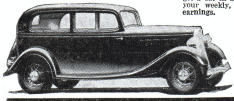
FORD SEDANS GIVEN

I furnish my producing Route Operators with brand new, 8 cylinder Ford Tudor Sedans as an extra reward or bonus. This is not a prize contest or a raffle. You get a car in addition to your weekly, big cash earnings.

VACANCIES BEING FILLED RAPIDLY

My Tea and Coffee Routes are not an experiment. Others are you? If you have been working part time or for poverty wages, here is your opportunity to get cash immediately to pay your bills and live well. Here's what some have already done:

Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., made as much as \$21.60 in a single day and \$103.32 in a single week. Hans Coordes, Neb., made \$27.95 in a day and \$96.40 in a week. Albert Becker, Mich., made \$40.00 in a day and as high as \$100.00 in a week. Ray Chapman, Mo., made \$73.50 in a week. Mrs. C. R. Luoma, W. Va., averaged \$40.00 a week for a year. Chester Clay, N. Mex., made \$10.00 in only two hours. These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Hundreds of other Route Operators have sent me similar glowing and enthusiastic reports. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name today—Now!



TEA and COFFEE ROUTE COUPON

ALBERT MILLS, Route Manager
7403 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio
Tell me about your Tea and Coffee Route Plan and how I can get started making up to \$60.00 a week at once.

Name.....

Address.....

(Please Print or Write Plainly)