

15¢

SEPTEMBER

HORROR



STORIES

DEATH CALLS FROM THE MADHOUSE

(ILLUSTRATED ON COVER)
BLOOD-CHILLING HORROR NOVEL
by HUGH B. CAVE

SATAN'S LASH

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

NAT SCHACHNER

H.M. APPEL

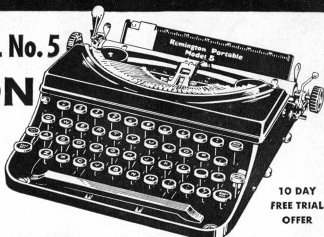
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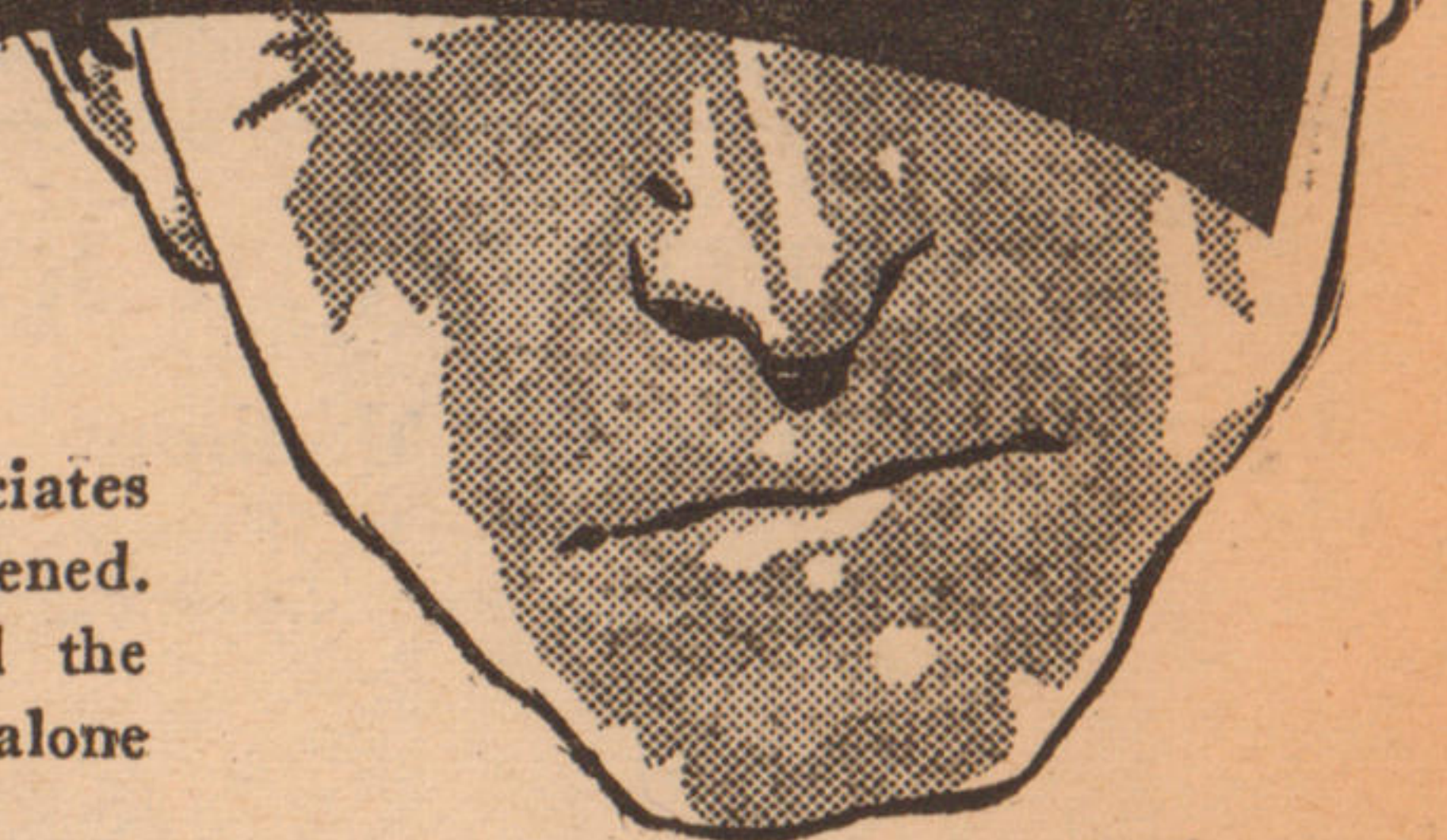
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HORROR STORIES



Volume Two

September, 1935

Number Three

FULL-LENGTH MYSTERY-HORROR NOVEL

- Death Calls from the Madhouse** *By Hugh B. Cave* 6
Only the bleeding Death Woman, weirdest patient of all in that ghastly asylum, could tell to what horrible rendezvous Dr. Randall's lovely sweetheart had been summoned. . . .

THREE HORROR NOVELETTES

- City of the Scarlet Plague** *By Nat Schachner* 46
Hungry and broke the wandering tramp was a ready dupe for the ghastly purpose of the pest-monsters who decoyed him into Dorothy's sinister house. . . .
- The Living Flame** *By Robert Sidney Bowen* 78
Bullets would not stop that berserk horror-beast of crackling flame which would eventually sear Beth Stuyvesant and Garry Colgan with its hideous deathrays.
- Satan's Lash** *By Arthur J. Burks* 110
The crazed self-torturers were preparing a blasphemous rite for their beautiful new victim, who waited, trembling, to share their unspeakable punishment!

STORIES OF HORROR AND MYSTERY

- The Devil's Gift** *By Raymond Whetstone* 34
He made his last wish in fearful, numbing horror. . . .
- Mother of Monsters** *By Roger Howard Norton* 68
They were writhing, frightful monsters—which the world called Estrellita's children!
- The Bath of Blood** *By H. M. Appel* 100
A hideous sacrifice was due the Goddess Cybele—namesake of Earl Young's pretty bride!

— AND —

- Chamber of Horrors** *A Department* 126

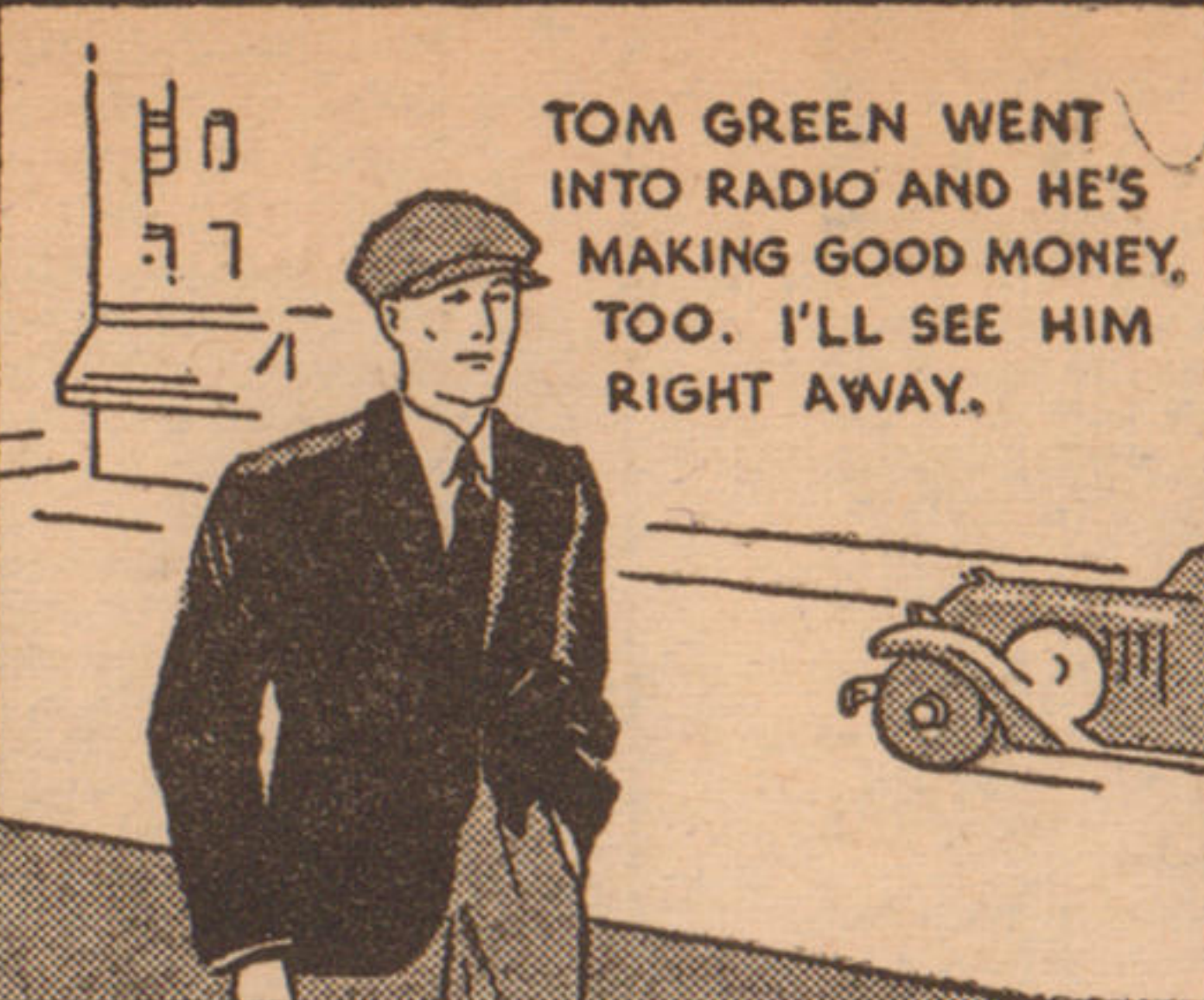
Cover Painting by John Newton Howett
Story Illustrations by Ralph Carlson and Paul Orban

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



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

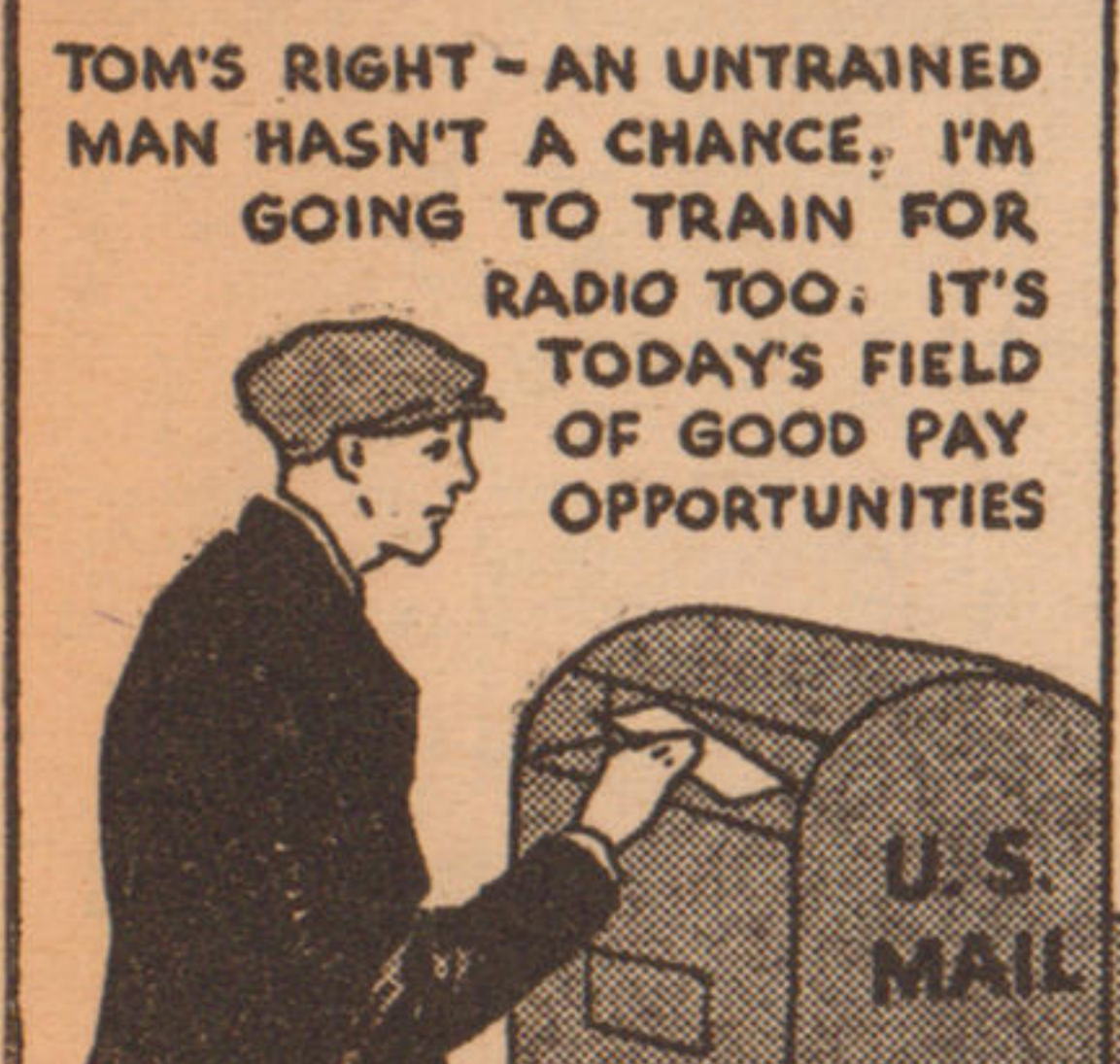
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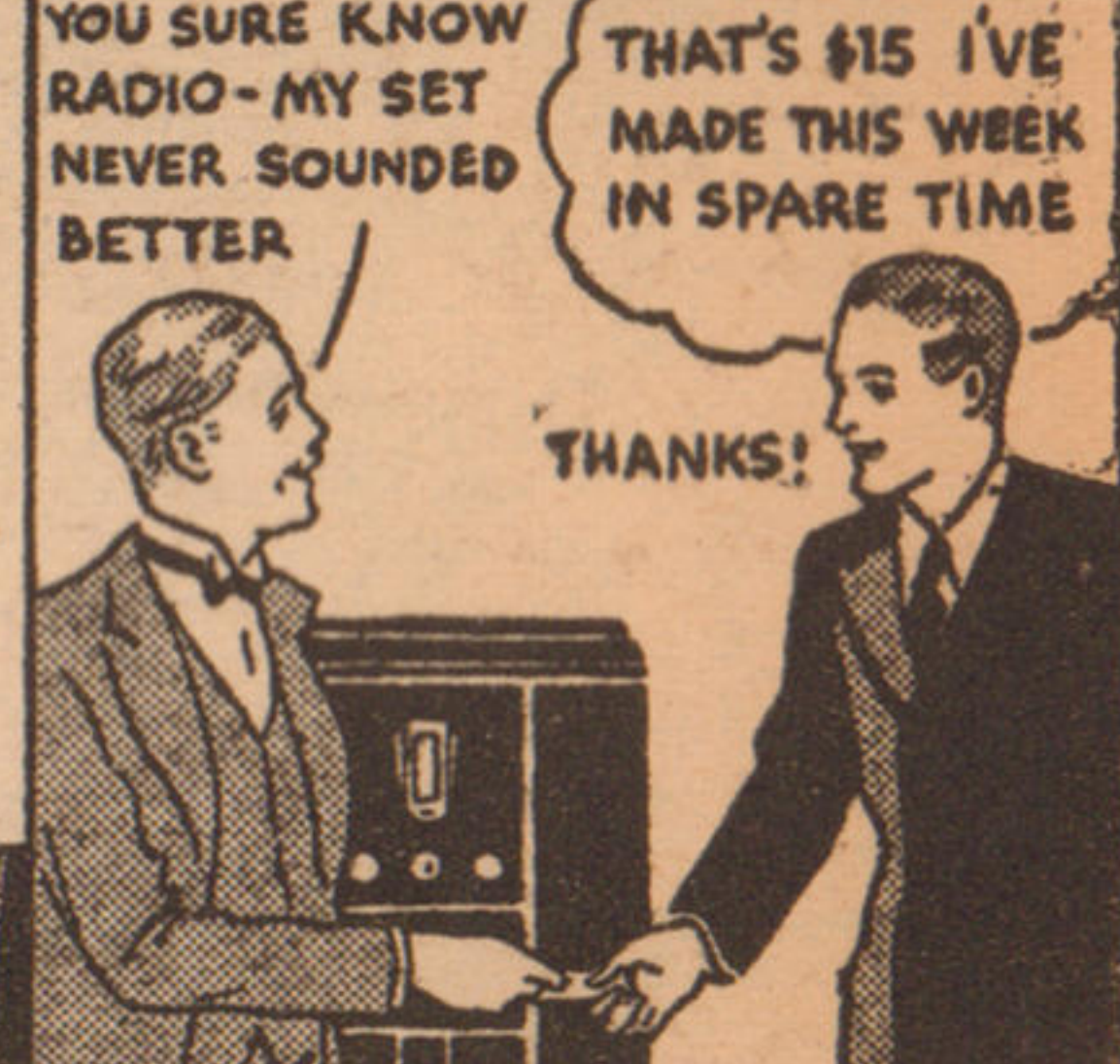
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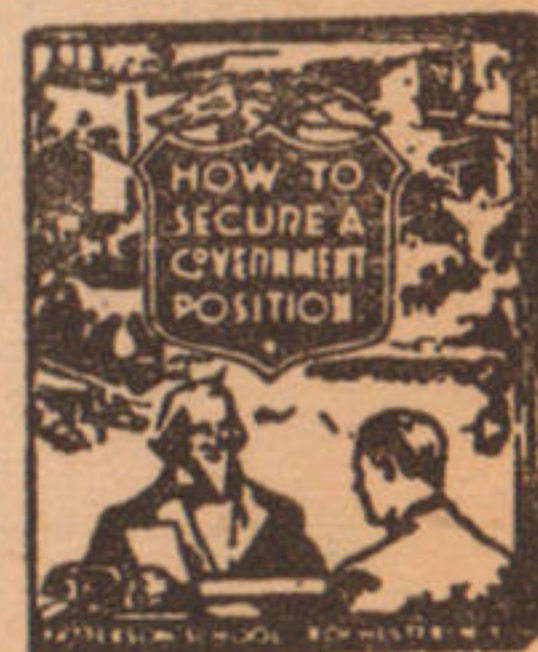
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DEATH CALLS FROM

While a gruesome, faceless monster prowled dark hallways, Mildred Dickson, victim of a weird suicide lust, vanished in the mazes of that ancient madhouse. . . . And only Marie Lovell, the bleeding Death Woman, maddest patient of them all, could tell to what horrible rendezvous Dr. Randall's sweetheart had been summoned.

THE letter was left in my mailbox sometime between three in the afternoon, when I went over to the hospital, and nine in the evening when I returned. It was a typewritten letter, signed with the name Deborah Corey.

I had to look twice at the name before I could place it. At that moment I wasn't able to make myself think. My hands were shaking, and the letter made a whispering sound as it slide from my stiff fingers to the table.

It said this:

Dear Dr. Randall: You will hate me for annoying you, but I have no relatives or friends to turn to. I have wronged the one man who did love me; therefore I cannot

go to him. And I have taken care of all the details, so that what you must do for me will cause you the least amount of trouble.

I have put \$200.00 in the Second National

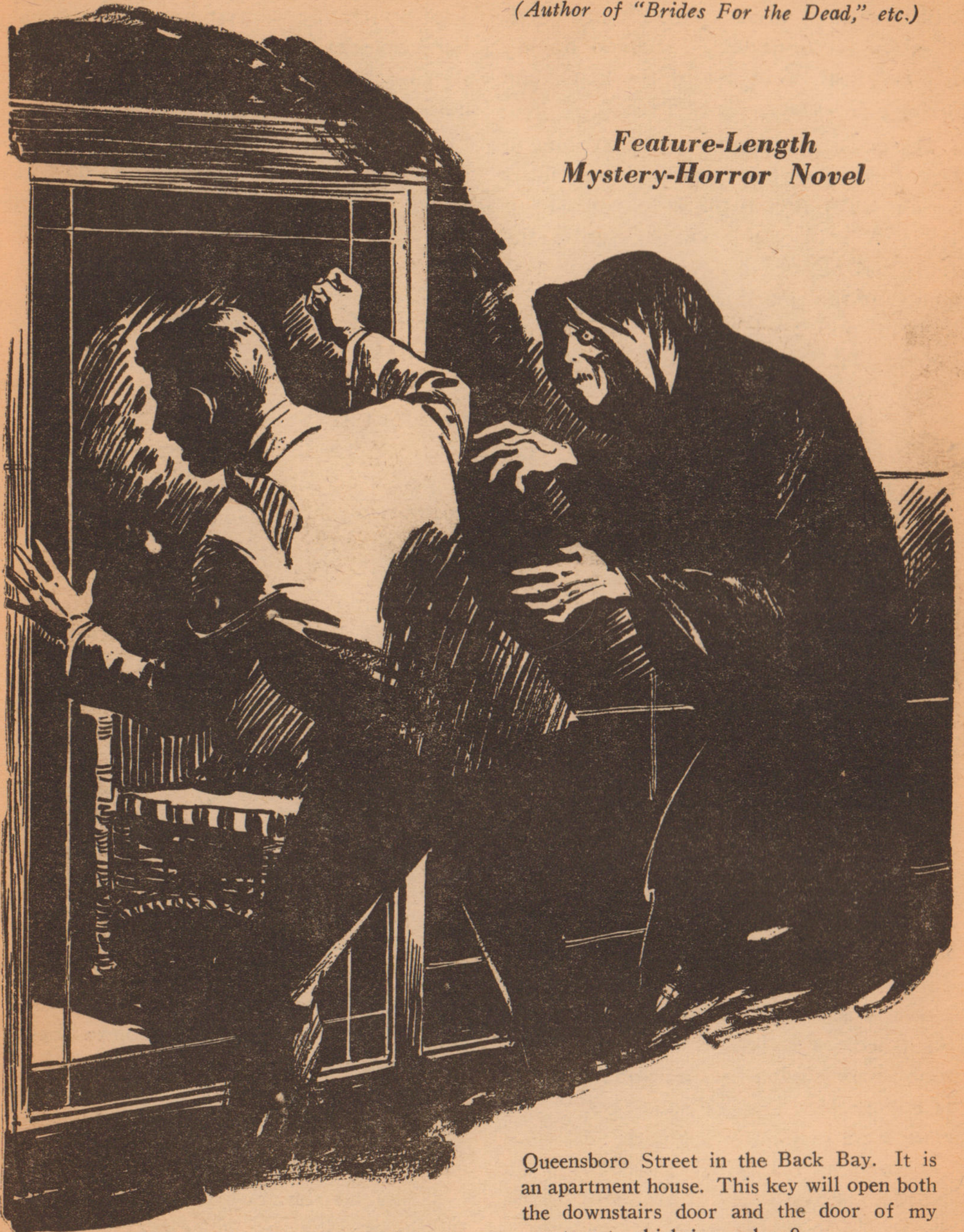


THE MADHOUSE

By HUGH
B. CAVE

(Author of "Brides For the Dead," etc.)

*Feature-Length
Mystery-Horror Novel*



Bank, in a checking account, and a check for that amount, made payable to you, is enclosed herewith. I have made every arrangement with Mr. Alexander Jilson, undertaker, of 117 West Canal Street.

Please take care of me. When you have read this letter, come at once to number 74

Queensboro Street in the Back Bay. It is an apartment house. This key will open both the downstairs door and the door of my apartment, which is number 9.

Trusting that you will help me, I am

Respectfully,

Deborah Corey.

Deborah Corey—the twenty-year-old nurse who had so abruptly resigned her position at the hospital, about two weeks

ago! I stared with wide eyes at the key which lay in the cold palm of my hand. Then, a bit unnerved, I tugged on my hat and coat, went out of the house and drove to 74 Queensboro Street.

It was a vile night. All day long a heavy wet snow had been tumbling out of a slate grey-sky, turning to slush as it fell. A cold wind whined across the Fens and moaned eerily around me as I went up the apartment house steps. I thought dully: It's not a bad-looking house. At least she didn't go to the slums

The key let me in and I went down the hall looking for apartment nine. Had Miss Corey been living here ever since her resignation from the hospital? If so, I thought, she surely would have let Phillips know. She and Phillips had been in love, and for the past two weeks the man had been nearly out of his mind. But the letter had said: "I have wronged the one person who did love me; therefore I cannot go to him." Wronged him? How ?

It took me a long time to get that key into the lock of her apartment after I had opened the hall door. I felt guilty and kept looking around me, expecting someone to discover me there and demand an explanation of my intrusion. When I did get it open I stepped inside quickly.

The place was small but it was nicely furnished. I walked through the living-room, took my hat off and said: "Hello! Is anyone here?" The sound of my own voice went rasping into silence.

I thought numbly: She'll be in the bedroom. And then I thought: Hell, the whole thing's a joke! Somebody at the hospital is taking me for a ride. It *can't* be serious!

It was.

She was lying on the bed, naked, her arms twined around a pillow, one leg humped, the other stiff and straight with

its foot curled in a question mark. Her face was framed in a tangle of hair and her eyes were wide open, staring at me horribly as I stood on the bedroom threshold.

The bed was clotted with puddles of congealed blood. Blood had run down a crease in the crumpled sheet and formed a red lake on the carpet. The bed was a mess, but the rest of the room was perfectly in order.

She had killed herself with a pair of scissors!

Well, I'm a doctor; I'd been a doctor then for three years. The Lakeman Hospital, where I worked, was a resident home for aged psychopathic patients, and in my two years of employment there I'd seen some grisly things. But this was too much. I weaved my way drunkenly to a chair and sat down with a thud and stared. I stared at the blood-stained scissors lying there, half open, beside the girl's nude body. Scissors! God!

MORE than five minutes snailed by before my heart stopped sledging and I had strength enough to get up. Avoiding the pool of red stuff on the carpet, I leaned over the bed and made an examination.

She'd been dead at least four hours. Her body was cold. But those scissors! My God, there are half a hundred ways of committing suicide. Painless ways. This girl had been a nurse. She never would have used anything so agonizing as scissors. Someone else—

Then I saw the letter.

It lay on the bureau, with a ring on top of it. The envelope was pale blue and exuded a faint odor of narcissus when I picked it up. It bore in feminine handwriting the words: "For Dr. Henry Phillips, Personal." Mechanically I thrust it into my pocket, and the ring with it.

An opal ring. Phillips had given it to her, months ago. One big opal in a circle of small ones. Traditional stones of ill fortune.

I went out then, making sure that the door of the apartment clicked shut behind me. I felt guilty as a thief, sneaking out of the house that way without first notifying the police, but I kept thinking: Phillips will know what to do. He loved her.

I drove straight out the Riverway, through Brookline, to the Lakeman Hospital.

It isn't a reassuring sort of place, the Lakeman. Institutions for the insane must of necessity be more or less isolated. One went to the Lakeman by taking the dirt road around Morton's Pond, circling the deadwater swamp and climbing some three-quarters of a mile through Morton's Woods. The hospital buildings stood huddled together at the end of the woods road and looked out over a gloomy, crawling expanse of desolation, with the lights of the city winking in the distance.

I'd been over that winding road scores of times before, on nights darker than this one, but tonight I took with me in my pounding brain, and in the very glare of the car's headlights, a ghastly vision of that naked girl sprawled on the bed. And a pair of bloody scissors

I slurred the machine into the driveway and got out, stood there a moment with my hand on the car door. Lights glowed dimly in some of the windows, and the silence of the place was thick and heavy.

I walked forward slowly and thought of Eric Lecher, who was probably sitting up in bed, glaring now with his hideous lumps of eyes and clawing the air in front of him and screaming luridly to a compassionate God to forgive him for his sins. I thought of the "Death Woman",

Marie Lovell, who would be looking forward in abject fear to the strange and unholy horror which came at weekly intervals to suck the life from her frail, ever-bleeding body.

Staring beyond the great stone wall before me, I thought of tired-eyed nurses and grey-clad attendants pacing silently from ward to ward, looking in upon sleeping patients, silencing those who were garrulous, placating those who endured the awful night-time terrors spawned in shattered minds.

I thought of Dr. Leon Lakeman himself, and of Phillips, and of the male nurse, Estes, whom I'd been forced to smash across the mouth only yesterday for snarling curses upon a woman patient who had childishly disobeyed him.

Then I stopped thinking, walking, breathing, all in the same instant. The thing happened with such ghastly abruptness that I was caught flatfooted. My right hand was in my coat pocket, fumbling for the big key that would open the iron gate before me, when suddenly from the depths of a dark clump of lilac bushes to my left, came a bestial growling sound that bristled the hairs on my neck.

You can't do that to a man and expect him to react instantaneously—not when his mind is wandering far ahead of him. I stood stiff as stone for one fatal second before I whirled around, barely in time to fling up my arms and lurch backward under the attack of the thing which was already upon me.

It swirled forward like some ungainly monster out of a prehistoric past—some huge, flapping shape out of hell, hurtling through a moonless gloom that prevented me from seeing the details of it. I gaped for one ghastly instant into a formless face in which two eyes gleamed like sulphur flames. I saw a two-armed, two-legged body as black as midnight. Then I was flat on my back against the bars

of the iron gate, kicking, heaving, fighting with frenzy. I heard horrible laughter, gurgling in the throat of the ravening thing that fumed over me. My God, I didn't know whether I was fighting man, beast or midnight ghoul! You don't do much thinking when your throat is caught in the grip of strangling hands—hot, sticky hands clawing viciously under the collar of your shirt.

THIS grotesque fiend of darkness meant to kill me, and was *laughing* about it! The sound was a mad outpouring of grisly mirth. My strangled curses, blubbered prayers, had no more effect than did the frantic blows of my fists. I was down, pinned under a shapeless hulk that meant murder.

The snarling face that fumed above me was a face of horror without features, and I couldn't do anything except writhe, scream and claw at the talons that were throttling me.

I was sure that my time had come, but I didn't stop fighting. We writhed and gasped and clawed at each other, that ghoulish monstrosity and I, like wrestlers in a ring. The great wall felt the crashing impact of our bodies and hurled us back. We filled the night-silence with a hellish din that finally aroused some of the hospital's occupants.

I heard a window slam open somewhere above us, and snarling voice yammered down from the aperture. Then suddenly the night was alive with another sound—the screech of a whistle. It wasn't a police whistle, but it had the same effect on my murderous assailant as a police whistle would have had on some drunken brawler in a slum-street of the city.

The fiend jerked away from me, rocked erect and stood rigid. The whistle shrilled again. My assailant twisted his shapeless head and looked up, uttered a plaintive, wailing sound of terror. Whimpering

like a frightened dog, he flung himself forward, hurdled my sprawled body and sped like a black ghost into the night.

I labored to my hands and knees, swayed there and spat blood. The front door of the hospital had opened; I heard someone running toward the gate, heard a hoarse voice spewing unintelligible words. When I tried to get to my feet I was like a man with too much liquor in him. Staggering weakly, I crashed against the fence and leaned there, retching.

It was Stanley Estes, the male nurse whose face I had smashed yesterday, who caught me and kept me from collapsing.

I didn't pass out. I wanted to, God knows, but Estes clung to me and held me erect, and the sound of his hoarse voice dragged me back from the brink of unconsciousness. He had his arms around me and was husking questions at me.

My God!—questions!—at a time like that!

“What is it, Randall?” he sputtered. He was a painfully thin young man and a whole lot huskier than his thinness advertised. “What attacked you?” he gasped. “Are you all right?”

The words came in a kind of stage-whisper croak, as though they'd been rehearsed. But I didn't care then if Estes were Satan himself; he was something to cling to. Those fiendish fingers had twisted my throat into a knot and gouged my face horribly.

With Estes' help I walked drunkenly to the gate, got there as Lakeman himself came stiffly down the steps. He, too, was full of questions. He got one look at me and whipped an arm around me, and steered me inside to the office.

I slumped into a chair and sat groaning while Lakeman worked over me. There was nothing gentle about him. There never had been. He was a short, stumpy man, bearded and brusque, with bony hands

that never wasted a motion. He snapped orders to a nurse, hunched himself over me and jabbed at me. If I hadn't known him well, I'd have thought he was trying to complete the work which that faceless fiend of hell had begun.

Estes stood gaping in the doorway and moved aside presently to admit Henry Phillips, the man I'd come to see. Phillips took a long look at me and said in amazement: "Well, for God's sake!" He looked paler than usual, and he was one of those men cursed with lily-white complexions and watery eyes. He blinked his eyes, paced forward and pushed a hand through his reddish hair. "Was it *you* I heard thrashing around out there?" he said foolishly.

I'd never liked Phillips. There are some men you instinctively dislike at first sight and go right on disliking even after they have proved themselves to be the best of friends. Phillips had gone out of his way to be decent to me, had helped me through many trying ordeals and talked a lot of the squeamishness out of me during my first few weeks at the hospital. But I didn't like the man.

He was his usual decent self even now. "Shall I get Mildred?" he suggested. "She's upstairs, I think, with Marie Lovell."

I shook my head. I hadn't yet looked at myself in a mirror, but I knew damned well that my face wasn't the prettiest thing in the world for a nice girl to look at. It hurt like hell, and Lakeman was making it hurt worse by smearing it with iodine and slapping strips of adhesive over it.

He finished and stepped back, surveying me critically. The way he rubbed his hands and snorted, you'd have thought he had just finished digging a ditch. "Now suppose you tell us what happened," he said grimly.

I gulped a proffered glass of whiskey and told them about the attacker. Be-

fore I'd finished I was swearing vehemently, as usual, and the nurse was blushing.

"You say the creature fled when someone blew a whistle from an upstairs window?" Lakeman scowled blackly. "Who blew the whistle?"

"You're asking me," I snarled.

He swung, glaring, to Estes and Phillips. "Who was upstairs?"

"I was," Phillips admitted.

"And you blew a whistle?"

"I did not."

Lakeman turned his gaze on me and snorted. Muttering to himself, he stumped out of the room, jerked around on the threshold and snapped at Estes to accompany him.

PHILLIPS and I were alone, and I said dully: "I came here tonight to tell you something."

When I'd finished, his watery eyes were big with horror. "Good—God!" he mumbled.

I handed him the letter marked "Henry Phillips, Personal." He stared at it and finally worked up courage enough to open it. His mouth tightened and thinned out as he gazed at the writing. Then he pushed the paper toward me and stood up stiffly.

I read what Deborah Corey had written.

Dearest: This is farewell. When I resigned from the hospital staff, I told you I was leaving because I couldn't stand the horror of that place any longer. That wasn't true. I left because my sin found me out. If I had stayed, you and the others would have known the truth about me.

I love you, dear. I have always loved you. But it was terribly lonesome and nerve-racking on the night watch, and one night, some months ago, I drank too much. I don't remember all that happened, and God knows I don't want to. But I listened to the entreaties of a man who made love to me. Now I am paying for that awful, drunken mistake.

This is the only way out. Forgive me if you can, and think of me as the girl you loved. The woman of that horrible night was someone else, some base creature who must now pay for her mistake.

Farewell, darling. I love you.

Your own Deborah.

CHAPTER TWO

A Face Without Features

I READ that pitiful note of good-bye and stared at Phillips. He had loved Deborah Corey, and I sensed the agony that was seething now in his tormented soul. But there was something more than agony in those bulging eyes. There was a dark, devouring rage that I'd never before seen in that weak face.

His hands opened and closed convulsively and his lips were purple in a snarl of hate. He said viciously: "Some man here in the hospital! Some man forced his advances upon her! Who could it have been, Randall? A patient, or some filthy beast who works here? I'll find out who did it! By God, I'll do that, and then I'll make him pay! He'll pay!"

He went swaying to the door, his twitching hands outthrust before him. Like a man out of his mind, he lurched over the sill and I heard him stumping down the corridor to the staircase. Then I was alone, and the big house was silent again—hushed with a pregnant, pulsating peril.

I decided grimly that the whistle had saved my precious life; someone in this damned house knew all the answers.

I stood there, cursed with nerves, and gaped around and knew that something, somewhere, was hellishly wrong.

Then I stopped thinking. Footsteps were audible in the corridor and a voice—a girl's voice, anxious and querulous—was calling my name. "Dr. Randall! *Peter*—where are you?"

I strode to the door and caught her

in my arms as she came in—my girl—Mildred Dickson. She stiffened in my embrace, stared at me in amazement. "Peter!" Her voice was a whisper that seemed to flow out of her widening eyes. "You—you here!"

I didn't get it. All I got was the undeniable fact that she was frightened. Mildred Dickson was a mighty good-looking girl, a bit too tall for most men, but dark-haired and slender and altogether lovely.

"What's wrong?" I scowled.

She clung to me and she was trembling. "I—I thought Marie was just raving," she whispered. "She said you were here, that something had happened to you. That woman frightens me, Peter! I didn't believe her, but I came to make sure . . ."

Marie Lovell, the "Death Woman," occupied a private room on the top floor rear. She couldn't have looked through a window of her room and seen me fighting with that faceless thing outside. And there wasn't a reason in the world why Lakeman or Phillips or anyone else should have gone up there to tell her of my arrival.

"Marie said I was here?"

"Yes, Peter, she did." I might have been a ghost, the way Mildred was staring at me. "She said she saw you coming here and saw you in danger. She told me to warn you!"

"I want to talk to that woman!" I snarled.

WE went upstairs together and I felt Mildred's hand quivering on my arm. She was as uneasy as I was. There was nothing lovely about this place at night, anyway, with its closed doors behind which were aged men and women who were there because they had to be kept isolated from the rest of society. Paranoiacs, most of them. The fact that

they were silent didn't necessarily mean that they were also sleeping—not always.

I looked at Mildred and she was bewildered by the bandages that half masked my face. I guessed that she was puzzled, too, by the fact that I was here at all.

“What happened to you, Peter?” she asked.

I didn't answer. We had reached the top floor, and in a room somewhere ahead of us a man was screaming in a high-pitched, gurgling voice that choked and crescendoed down the hall. Eric Lecher, the executioner, was praying to his gods. His screaming stopped and I heard Lakeman's voice, low and persuasive, droning words of condolence.

Lakeman, with his uncanny hypnotic power and his understanding of things abnormal, was the only man among us who could worm his way into that pitifully demented brain and sooth it. The rest of us knew better than to go near Lecher when his madness seethed to the surface. And I didn't envy Lakeman his task, for I'd had run-ins with Eric Lecher before.

We went past the door of Lecher's room, without making any more noise than could be helped, and let ourselves into Marie's room, closing and locking the door behind us. Those were Lakeman's orders. At all times this door had to be kept locked. Before that order had gone into effect, Marie Lovell had twice gone moaning and mumbling from ward to ward like something risen out of a grave. Not that she was dangerous. It wasn't that. But the lunatics believed she was Death itself, and they lived in deadly fear of her.

I stared at her now as she lay propped up in bed, as usual, with her long, dark hair cascading over her shoulders and her bloodless face as unmoving as something molded in wax. Only her eyes were alive,

and they studied me intently as I came forward.

It was a small room, with one window. A night-light burned dimly on a small table beside the bed, and a Bible sat there within reach of the woman's waxen hand.

Her eyes watched me. Her pale lips moved and formed my name, but uttered no sound. I looked at Mildred and asked: “Is it almost time again?”

“Not for two days,” she whispered.

More than a score of medical men had tried to solve the mystery of this poor creature, and the best of them had admitted defeat. She was mad, certainly, but she was harmless. Three years ago she'd been found wandering without mind or memory in the slum-streets of the city, and had been sent here for observation. Periodically she died.

I mean that! Every seven or eight days that feeble heart ceased laboring and the frail body stiffened into an icy corpse. Sometimes for as long as twelve hours the woman lay in a state of death. I've sat with her through hours when death held that silent form in a frigid grip, and then crept slowly back into her dead body.

No life, no memory, no realization of the weird mystery that enshrouded her. Just death and life and madness, coming and going with the regularity of the tides. And there was always a loss of blood—since the very beginning, an uncanny, unstopable bleeding from the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, and then from tiny, never closed wounds in the sides of the body. . . .

SHE was mumbling my name as I drew a chair to the bed. Taking one of those waxen hands in mine, I leaned closer and said softly: “Feeling better tonight, Marie?”

Her lips moved—white, thin lips in a bloodless face surrounded by a drooping mass of raven hair. They moved and

whispered my name again, and into those unblinking eyes came fear. Those eyes were always alive, always seemed to be seeing more than human eyes had a right to see.

"Death marches in the night," Marie Lovell sighed. "Death and dark horror walk hand in hand, seeking—seeking—and already they have claimed one victim, one girl who lies alone in a bed of blood. I see more. . . ."

The cold hand trembled in mine and the voice slid back into the woman's throat, mumbling there. I stared wide-eyed at Mildred, saw that she was pale and frightened. I wondered what in God's name this woman could know of a girl who "lies alone in a bed of blood." Can those gleaming eyes see beyond the walls of this room?

A cold, clammy sensation crept into me. Not long ago, Leon Lakeman had said, scowling: "There are things about her that we may never understand. For one thing, she is apparently psychic. . . ."

Psychic? I'd laughed at him then, but I couldn't have dragged a shred of mirth out of my soul now if it meant the difference between life and death. I leaned closer, terribly anxious to catch the almost inaudible drone of Marie Lovell's fading voice.

"What else do you see?" I pleaded. "Tell us! Tell us what else!"

She was like a disinterred corpse that sat there, motionless, gazing at me from behind the veil of death, and speaking prophetically.

"I see danger," she whispered. My God, why couldn't she speak up, so I could hear her? "Danger—for you and the woman you love. I see horror, stalking both of you through dark hours of evil. I see fear and suicide and black peril, and more. . . ."

"What more? What more do you see?"

"Death—hovering over the city. Death—and two clutching hands red with the blood of screaming innocents—and a fiend laughing in lust. And I see—"

That whimpering voice didn't crawl back into her throat this time, but ended abruptly in sudden, inexplicable silence. The woman's eyes turned slowly in their sockets, came to rest with their unblinking gaze focused on the door.

I turned, bewildered. Mildred turned, too. The door was closed and locked. Yet Marie Lovell was staring. . . .!

"Death," she whispered sibilantly. There was power behind her voice now, and the whisper went shrilling through the room, echoing from every shadowed corner. "Death creeping closer—closer! *I see danger now! I see danger to you both!*"

Well, a man can stand just about so much of that sort of thing. I jerked away from the bed and strode to the door, Mildred thrust out a hand to stop me, but she did it too late, for I had twisted the key and jerked the door open.

I lurched backward just in time!

He was standing there beyond the threshold, and at a moment less pregnant with evil he might have appeared ludicrous. The man had a passion for red and the sack-like garment he wore hung from him like a bloody shroud. Standing there in a half-crouch, his long arms curled forward, his bare feet shuffled flat and huge on the floor, and he glared at me balefully.

He had always hated me and he was hating me now as his small, fiery eyes blazed with madness behind a mop of unkempt hair that crawled down a bulging forehead. His teeth gleamed dully and his lips drooled spittle on his hairy chest that was a knotted mound of hard, sinewy flesh.

This was Eric Lecher. For six long years he had lived within the walls of the

Lakeman Hospital—lived here with his ghosts of the past, without parole, without surcease from suffering. Years ago he had been a public executioner in some unremembered part of Europe. Years ago, in the performance of his duty, he had sent men and women to meet their God. And now—Eric Lecher was mad.

I could understand that madness. I could understand the fearsome memories that lurked in this man's demented mind. More than once I had talked to him, argued with him, tried to clear his twisted brain of the frightful horrors that festered there. But some things live forever. . . .

HE glared with an intensity which was shocking, and behind me the girl I loved suppressed a sudden scream of terror. Then the room was deathly still and I stood stiff as stone, returning the stare of those mad eyes—the eyes of a cunning, diabolical monster.

He advanced toward me so slowly that he seemed not to be moving at all. And then, because my two years in Lakeman's hell-house had taught me a few things, I relaxed and forced words out of my throat.

"It's late, Eric," I said casually. "You ought to be in bed." When he stopped and blinked his eyes at me, I said: "Well, what *do* you want? Hungry?"

It didn't work. It might have, if he hadn't seen the terror in my eyes first. Let a homicidal maniac know you're afraid of him, and you write your name on his death list.

Lecher sucked breath into his enormous chest and hurtled straight at me. I stumbled backward, both arms upflung to hold him off. Mildred, within arm's reach of me, had a small gleaming thing to her lips. Frantically, she was blowing a whistle. A single blast from one of those tocsins that all the nurses carried should bring help!

God knows I needed help! Eric Lecher fumed over me like some shaggy jungle beast mad with hunger. I crashed to my knees, spilled over backward under the weight of that snarling shape on top of me. He didn't go for my throat. He tore hair out of my head and wallowed over me, used his knees and elbows in an attempt to mangle me. I'm no weakling, but I hadn't a chance, for the lunatic seemed impervious to pain.

I smashed my fists into his face again and again. I wriggled out from under, flung myself across him, got his head in my hands, and slammed his face into the floor—but he writhed back with redoubled fury.

He got a grip around my bandaged neck and choked flesh that was already torn and raw. That part of my battered body had absorbed all the punishment it could stand, from the fingers of that faceless fiend outside. I gaped up into Eric Lecher's face and gasped out my agony. Then Phillips came blundering over the threshold.

He took in the situation at a glance and stormed forward. Behind him, staring with enormous eyes, came Estes, who hated me. One of them—I think it was Phillips—had to thrust Mildred aside, for she was foolishly trying to drag Lecher off me.

Phillips and Estes got hold of the man and flung him to the floor, beat him into submission. I didn't help them; I couldn't. A man can suffer just so much agony and then his outraged body refuses to obey orders. I clawed myself erect by gripping the end of the bed, and stood there, retching, staring, with blood dribbling from the reopened wounds in my throat.

Phillips and Estes dragged that writhing man to his feet and they were pulling him to the door when Leon Lakeman appeared. Lakeman's face was smeared

with blood and his eyes were enormous—glaring.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded. “Lecher! What are you up to?”

The former executioner, swaying there in the grip of two strong men, gaped foolishly into Lakeman’s face and made mumbling sounds. Then, grinning, he twisted his head around, blinked his eyes rapidly while he made foolish faces at the rest of us.

“He attacked Randall, sir,” Phillips said.

“Take him back to his room!”

They took him away and Lakeman paced forward and poked his hands at my crimson face. “You know better than to arouse Lecher’s ire,” he said curtly. “It’s a wonder he didn’t kill you!”

I saw dark rage in his eyes and I resented it. Then he shrugged, fingering the raw gash on his own cheek. “My own fault, I guess,” he admitted. “I let him escape from his room in the first place. He caught me napping, came at me when I turned my back to unlock the door. The sound of that whistle brought me to. Lord knows how long I was unconscious.”

I just stared and Mildred was staring, too. Lecher had attacked Lakeman? If so, the attack had been mighty quiet! No sound of it had filtered into this room, despite the fact that Lecher’s quarters were only a short distance down the corridor!

But you can’t call a man a liar to his face until you have proof. Besides, Lakeman was gazing at me too intently, and those eyes of his were, and always had been, weirdly hypnotic. They did things to me.

“Just why did you come here tonight, anyway?” he said tartly.

“To see Phillips.”

“What for?”

If he’d stopped glaring at me I might

have told him. “Something rather personal,” I answered, and walked out of the room.

I found Phillips locking the door of Lecher’s chamber, mid-way down the hall. “What about Deborah Corey, Phillips?” I asked. “One of us must notify the police—see that she’s taken care of. Will you do it?”

He nodded heavily. “I’ll do it. And some day I’ll find the beast who wronged her. Some day—!” He glared at me and strode away.

I went downstairs, my neck hurting like hell, feeling weak and too sick to think things out. The clock in the office said three a. m. and I thought grimly: If I don’t get out of here I’ll soon be as crazy as Lakeman’s patients.

Mildred came into the office while I was trying to patch up my face.

“If you’re going back to the city,” she said, “I’ll go with you. I was supposed to be off duty at midnight.”

We went out together. Lakeman saw us go and stood frowning at us. Perhaps he felt that after what had happened we should have volunteered to remain until things quieted down. But he didn’t call us back.

We went down the steps and through the big gate and along the gravel driveway to my car. The wind had died down; the night was still and heavy, and when I looked back at Lakeman’s domain I had a sudden shuddery feeling that its yellow windows were watching us.

Maybe it wasn’t the windows. Maybe the eyes that watched us were human eyes, or eyes that should have been human. As I jerked open the car door I could have sworn that something dark and shapeless detached itself from the shadows of the great wall.

I stiffened and stood staring, and then cursed my jangled nerves for conjuring up impossible visions.

As we drove away from there neither to us felt talkative. But Mildred said one thing, just before I let her out in front of her own home, that crawled deep down inside me and stayed there. "The Death Woman, Peter . . . I can't forget what she told us about horror and suicide and red hands smeared with blood—and death hovering over the city. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

A Slave to Suicide

IT was three days later, on my day off, when I saw the first of those lurid accounts in the paper. I had left the house about nine in the morning and gone down to Tony's, on the corner, for a late breakfast. Mildred and I had a date to go for a ride into the country that afternoon, to look at a little cottage out near Concord.

I opened the morning paper while I was eating breakfast, and saw the headline on page one.

KIN OF LAKEMAN HOSPITAL INMATE KILLS INSANE WOMAN; INHERITS FORTUNE!

I got half way through the story and had to put the paper down on the table, my hands shaking so violently that some of Tony's customers were gawking at me.

The woman, Miss Wilhemina Brooks, had been a wealthy recluse, living alone in a pretentious home out Chestnut Hill way. The account read, in part: "She and her sister, Miss Ariel Brooks, who for the past four years has been under the care of Dr. Leon Lakeman at his home for aged psychopathic cases, were the last surviving members of the family. Miss Ariel will inherit a sizeable fortune."

The woman had hung herself, had been found naked, dangling at the end of a length of clothes line, in the kitchen of her

home. A farewell note, in pencilled handwriting barely legible, had been found on the kitchen table.

The farewell message, showed that the unfortunate woman destroyed herself after dreaming that her sister had passed away. "I cannot bear the thought of living without her," the note said. "My only happiness in life came in going to the hospital to visit her. Now she has been called to a better world, and I must go to join her."

The matter-of-fact report ended with the statement that the sister, Miss Ariel, was enjoying good health at the Lakeman Hospital.

Death, hovering. . . .

All afternoon I felt it. Sneer all you like—but the presence of a lurking, brooding horror *can be felt. I know!*

Mildred and I went out to look at that cottage. We got there about four o'clock and spent a couple of hours browsing around. "You like it?" I asked, and she said she did. "Well then," I said, "we'll see the agent in town about buying it. In another month I'll be out of Lakeman's hell-house and earning a decent salary at the Samaritan. Then," I said, "we'll look up the price of a diamond for that left hand of yours."

We didn't drive straight back to town because Mildred was supposed to go to Allston, to call on old Jason Camp's sister. Jason was one of Lakeman's oldest patients, a doddering, white-haired codger as harmless and cheerful as a two-year-old. I'd talked with his sister before, at the hospital, and rather liked her. She was a bit queer, perhaps, but a woman who can look back on eighty years of life has a right to be eccentric. She had money, lived alone, and thought more of Jason than of herself.

Mildred and I went to Allston, to call on her. "It won't take long," Mildred said. "The old boy spent hours writing

her a letter, and I'm to deliver it with his compliments, along with some flowers. It's the lady's birthday."

She showed me the letter and I smiled. Half an hour later we were reading another letter, and I thought I'd never in my life know how to smile again.

We'd been let in by a French maid, who asked us to be seated in the library while she went upstairs to notify her mistress of our arrival. She was gone a long while—so long that that damnable feeling of impending tragedy had plenty of time to come to life again within me. When the maid did return, she came like an animated corpse, walking with slow, woodenish steps, her eyes glazed, her face the hue of dirty candlewax.

She didn't say much. She just stood there before us and stared hollowly and whispered in a sibilant croak: "Miss Camp is upstairs. Up—stairs." Then her face went ghastly white, her eyes vanished under closed lids, she took a couple of steps forward, jerkily, and telescoped to the floor in a dead faint.

I went upstairs, leaving Mildred to attend to her. When Mildred came up after me and saw what I was gaping at, she covered her face with her hands and said "Oh!" in a long, shuddering moan.

Death is never easy to look at, no matter how often you've seen it. And this was something more than death. This was horror.

THE room was an ordinary bedroom, medium large, with two windows, a large mahogany four-poster, and the usual array of furniture. The shades were drawn; a pair of lamps on the bureau gave off a pale glow that revealed the woman on the floor.

She wore a nightgown—a silk gown with much fancy embroidery. It must have cost a lot of money, I thought, as I stood there and stared like a man standing

in a crowded public place, knowing he was going to be violently ill, and frantically striving to get a grip on himself.

A lot of money. I kept thinking that. A white silk gown with fancy embroidery and a lot of money. God!—the woman had bled like a stuck pig! The gown was scarlet and the carpet had a huge pool of red wetness in the middle of it. The carpet was white and the blood-pool made it look like a Japanese flag.

You think of funny things, sometimes. . . .

The woman had slashed her throat with a straight razor. She had done it standing up, from the looks of things. Dying, she must have thudded to her knees and spilled over backward. Her legs were still bent and her bare knees, thin and bony, pointed to the ceiling, while the nightgown was tangled under her armpits. The razor was on the floor near the corpse.

I knew she was dead, but I went and made sure. Then I straightened up and tried to look casually around the room. My face felt tight and dry and I didn't want Mildred to see the terror that was crawling in me. A man is supposed to be calm in times like that—a doctor is, anyway. But I didn't feel calm. I was ill.

There was a note on the bureau—just a sheet of plain linen paper, folded once, with rows of small, marching letters in green ink.

I read the letter and horror formed inside of me and crowded up into my throat, while my face seemed to watch me in the bureau mirror, looking like a death's head—leering.

the note read:

To Whom It May Concern: I, Nora Perkins Camp, am an old woman, but neither mad nor mentally unbalanced. In a short while I shall be wandering in that mysterious outer world of shadows which

exists for those who have departed from this life. An old woman, wandering in the Great Beyond. I do not regret it, though admittedly I dread the brief agony of transition.

I shall destroy myself with a razor. That will horrify those who find me, but it is the only way. I have considered gas, but knowing myself as I do, I want something even quicker. And a razor is quick and sharp so that the agony will be over before it has begun.

Suicide! A week ago I had not dreamed of such an end. But a week is an eternity, and strange things have occurred. I am a slave to some dread hypnosis, some power of will mightier than my own. Believe this, or call it the ravings of a mad woman; I shall not care for the opinions of others when this farewell message is read.

A slave to some alien power greater than I. Yes. Whence it came, I know not. It crept upon me with the insidious stealth of a devouring disease. It usurped my mind, entered there and became a feeding parasite. I, Nora Camp, a sane woman and entirely normal, entertained thoughts of suicide. That was the beginning.

Somewhere in the shadows around me, in the very air I breathe, in the beating of my aged heart and in the depth of my soul—if indeed I possess a soul—a malignant and hideous demon of hypnosis lurks unseen. I am enslaved to it. Perhaps others will suffer likewise. What it is, I know not.

For days it has whispered and murmured and shrieked at me to destroy myself. I can no longer fight it. There is no salvation, no surcease from the fearsome craving that drives me. I shall kill myself.

To my brother, Jason Camp, who is under the care of Dr. Leon Lakeman at the latter's hospital, I bestow, with all my affection, my worldly possessions—and beg his forgiveness.

This is farewell. I go to answer the sinister call of the unknown monster who has devoured my soul. I go now. Farewell!

Strange, fearsome farewell! No mad woman had written it; that I knew! No one suffering from a totally diseased mind could have written statements of such deadly calm while afraid of a death to

which, at the same time, she had looked forward with ghastly eagerness.

Here was a sinister, twisted logic, a horrible paradox of terror in ecstasy!

I passed the note to Mildred and watched her while she read it. She raised wide eyes to mine and I knew that she, too, felt the pressure of a growing weight of terror within her. She looked at the woman on the floor, and shuddered. Then we left.

I telephoned the police. I knew that they, too, would read that strange note of farewell and not understand.

"Death," I muttered, "hovering over the city!" This time I spoke the words aloud, and Mildred glanced at me quickly, sharply, as if wondering whether that swelling horror within me had twisted my mind. God! But the affair of Nora Camp was only the beginning. . . .

TWO nights later I was assigned to night duty at the hospital. I've said before that night duty in that abode of madness wasn't the most pleasant task in the world, and certainly it wasn't the best tonic for nerves as ragged as mine.

"We need you," Lakeman informed me curtly. "There is a feeling of unrest here, Randall. I sensed it among the patients days ago and thought it would die a natural death, but it has increased, grown steadily worse. Who is responsible for it, I don't know. I'd blame Marie Lovell, but to my absolute knowledge she hasn't left her room; therefore she couldn't have imbued the others with this hellish spirit of rebellion."

A spirit of rebellion! I, too, had sensed it, had seen it in the faces of Lakeman's patients. They were harder to handle, more difficult to talk to. They were more easily aroused, less easily subdued. I had seen downright fear in the eyes of Stanley Estes, the male nurse whose duty it was to maintain harmony

during the tedious hours between darkness and dawn, and I'd noticed grave concern and anxiety in the womanish nervousness of Henry Phillips.

I had thought: It isn't safe for Mildred to work nights under such conditions. Too many things have happened. Too many things are *going* to happen.

Well—now I'd be with her, to make sure that nothing did happen. So I wasn't sorry when I had been notified of the change.

I was sitting in Lakeman's office that night, about midnight, when he came downstairs from an emergency call to the Death Woman's room. He bustled into the office and plunked himself down at the desk, went right to work on a mass of papers and account-books, without paying me a shred of attention.

I said to him: "With this sudden mania for suicides around the city, several of our patients have inherited small fortunes. That's so, isn't it?"

God knows why I said it. It was on my mind and I blurted it out, that's all. And the effect stunned me!

Lakeman jerked his head up and glared at me. He had slumped down in his chair; the desk loomed large between us, and his head was all I could see. It was like a wax thing of death setting on a gleaming table. It was rigid and ugly and evil.

He just glared at me and his eyes didn't blink for at least twenty seconds, which seemed twenty different eternities. Then his mouth lengthened into a snarl. "What are you inferring?" he grated.

I wasn't inferring anything, and said so; but I sat there then and did plenty of thinking. Several of Lakeman's patients *had* come into money—a lot of money. And during my two years at this place I had learned one thing very definitely. Lakeman had an uncanny hold over his "guests."

I've said before that the man was pos-

sessed of powers that bordered on the hypnotic, for he could make his patients—most of them, at any rate—do precisely what he wanted them to do.

Was it possible that Leon Lakeman needed no one to remind him that several of his pets had inherited large amounts of money? Had he already laid subtle plans for acquiring it? Had he in some unholy way engineered the very suicides by which that money had come into their possession?

Ugly thoughts for a man to brood on during the night hours in a hospital for insane persons! I took them with me when I made my rounds. They grew to a bloated bigness within me and poisoned my soul. I wanted to talk to someone about them, but there was no one I could turn to—no one except Mildred.

I WENT looking for Mildred. It was about one o'clock then, and the big house was silent, gloomy in sleep. I didn't find her.

I encountered Estes prowling around upstairs, and asked him if he had seen her. He shook his head. He hadn't seen her since midnight, when he had talked to her a moment in the lower hall.

I ran into Henry Phillips. "For heaven's sake, Randall," he complained, "haven't I troubles enough of my own?" He had. He was still brooding over the death of Deborah Corey.

My fears increased horribly as I went prowling from ward to ward. Mildred couldn't have gone out, I kept thinking. Lakeman wouldn't allow it. She's here somewhere.

I went upstairs to the nurses' rest-room and asked two of the staff nurses if they'd seen her. I croaked the question out. Perspiration was beginning to ooze from my face, and my eyes must have been big with dread. The nurses gaped at me. But they hadn't seen Mildred.

"She might be with Marie Lovell," one of them suggested.

I went along the upstairs corridor to Marie Lovell's room. Mildred wasn't there. The Death Woman was sitting up in bed, poring over her Bible, and she put the book down and stared at me. I left the door open behind me—which was against the rules—walked to the bed and stood there.

"Where's Mildred?" I demanded.

She seemed bewildered. She mouthed the name Mildred in a kind of lingering whisper, and looked sluggishly around the room. I saw that she was in pain, and I remembered suddenly that Phillips had warned me, earlier in the evening, not to disturb her.

Her hands and feet and side had begun to bleed profusely again. The bedsheets were stained with blood; blood was on the pages of the Bible. But I wasn't a doctor then, I was a terrified young man frantically seeking his sweetheart, his mind full loaded with memories of the unholy sequence of events which had so gradually led up to Mildred's disappearance.

"Mildred—?" The name came in a sudden hiss from the Death Woman's pallid lips. "Go to her. She needs you!"

"Where is she?" I shouted, and my hands clamped down on the woman's shoulders. "Damn you, where *is* she?"

She shook her head. "I see death," she moaned, "hovering over the city. . . ."

That infernal phrase again, just as it had been pounding in my brain for the past several days! I leaned there over the bed and thought of Deborah Corey and Nora Camp and the woman who had hung herself. I thought of others, whose suicides had been reported in the papers. Lurid questions gurgled in my throat and died there. The Death Woman was

mumbling again, speaking words of horror.

"It is here now. It is *here*, seeking Mildred and you—both of you. I see a dark, faceless form with bloody hands and I hear the command to kill. Death and horror and suicide—here among us—seeking new victims." Her voice was suddenly lost in a racking succession of sobs. "She is—in—terrible danger!"

I gaped down at her like a man on a rack, torn two ways by giant chains. If I stayed here and begged and cursed and pleaded with this strange creature, she might tell me where to find the girl I loved. But she was telling me now that Mildred was in peril, and I believed her! If I wasted precious moments here—!

Lurching to the door I went stumbling down the corridor without locking the door behind me, without even bothering to drag it shut. When I blundered past Eric Lecher's room, I heard Lecher wailing to his gods, pleading with them to forgive him for his sins. But I didn't stop there, either.

My hands were shaking and rasping sounds came in my dry throat as I breathed. At the head of the stairs I bellowed Mildred's name while the words of Marie Lovell, the Death Woman, were in my brain, screaming at me to keep going.

I went down to the next floor and saw Phillips coming out of a ward. He stared at me, hurried away. I think he went downstairs to tell Lakeman that I'd gone mad.

Well, maybe I had. When a man has worked two years among men and women who *are* mad, it doesn't take much to twist his own mind along crooked channels. Moreover, I felt horribly alone and helpless. There was no one I could turn to, and I suspected every damned soul in this hell-house of hating me, of being responsible for Mildred's disappearance.

I was in a nightmare labyrinth of dark doubts and mental agonies when I found her.

If there had been no moon that night to slant its pallid glow through a sky filled with scurrying clouds, I might never have seen the girl. She was in the solarium at the end of the second-floor corridor. As I went yammering along the corridor, intending to descend the stairs to the first floor, I saw an alien whiteness beyond the sun-room's glass door.

A MOMENT later I was standing there rigid with bewilderment, while my widening eyes gaped at the creature in the room beyond.

The solarium of Lakeman's Hospital was small. It had walls of unbreakable glass, a glass dome, a single entrance. It was furnished with cots and tables and a few chairs, and was seldom used.

The figure I stared at was sitting alone at a table not more than a dozen feet from me. That damned glass door separated us, and the door was locked, the key gone out of the slot. And I stood stiff, gaping in amazement.

Her back was turned half toward me; her shoulders were bare. She had unbuttoned the upper part of her white uniform and pulled it down, uncovering her breasts. Moonlight slanted through the solarium's glass roof and spilled over her, transforming her into something unreal, something weird and ethereal and ghostly.

She was sitting very still. Only her lips were moving. And she had a knife in her right hand.

It was a surgeon's knife and it gleamed dully there on the table, where the curled fingers of her hand half covered it. She was looking down at it, mumbling to herself. I couldn't hear what she was mumbling. Couldn't hear anything, because of the barrier of glass between us.

But my God, I could *see*, and the thing

I saw filled me with a storm-wind rush of horror! My girl—*my* girl!—sitting there alone in a deserted solarium at night—partly naked, in a kind of hypnotic trance, with a surgeon's knife in her hand!

Death and horror and suicide—here among us! *Suicide!* Merciful God, *no!*

The sound that tore up through the pulsing membranes of my throat was supposed to be Mildred's name, but it was more like the agony-shriek of a butchered animal. I hit that infernal door with my fists and kicked it. I got hold of the knob and tried to tear the lock loose. I made enough noise, in the few short seconds when horror fumed over me, to arouse the whole house.

All Mildred did was turn slowly and stare at me.

She didn't recognize me, I'm positive. Her pale, stiff face came around like something on a turn-table in a store window-display. I looked for one ghastly instant into her eyes; which were dead as the empty orb-holes in a death's head.

"Mildred!" I bellowed.

She heard me, of course. The shatter-proof glass barrier wasn't thick enough to murder my voice. I thought for a moment that the sound of her own name, flung at her in a coherent howl of anguish, would drag her back from the mental quicksands in which she was floundering. But after that brief expression of bewilderment, which was like a single fluttering heart-throb in the breast of a person dying, she turned her attention back to the knife and ignored me.

She picked up the knife and held it at different angles, apparently fascinated by the play of moonlight on the gleaming blade. She touched the steel point to the shadowed vale between her breasts, and I saw a thin thread of red blood leap into the pale satin of her skin.

"Mildred—*don't!*" I screamed. "*Don't*

do it!" I know now how an inmate of the death house feels when he's shrieking and raving against the bars of his cell, watching the guards lead away the wife or sweetheart who has just been to visit him for the last time. That glass door was worse than bars! My hands clawed at it and found no grip, nothing to hang onto. Drowning men go mad with a ghastly, soul-devouring sensation of helplessness when they don't find something to cling to.

I saw blood on those pale breasts and a strange, fearful expression on my sweetheart's face. I thought of what Nora Camp had written in green ink words about some frightful hypnotic power which had driven her to suicide. I shrieked a meaningless jargon of words that had no more effect on my girl than did the flood of soft moonlight that enveloped her.

Then I heard a whisper of stealthy feet in the corridor behind me. I drew breath into my lungs and whirled around on wooden legs.

I whirled too late. The thing was already on top of me. For the second time in my life I was helpless in the path of that faceless fiend of darkness which had already tried once to destroy me.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Death Woman

A MAN can stand just so much. I had screamed myself sick already, and my face was a huge, bloating ache in which my lips worked soundlessly. When that destroying demon fell upon me, I flung up my arms and fought, but it needed a strong man to combat that hell-shape of horror, and I was weak, sick. Somehow I didn't care.

The suicide curse had overtaken the girl I loved, and now this faceless demon

of destruction was about to do to me what he had failed to do the last time.

Even while I fought him there in the gloom of the corridor, my mind was wandering in catacombs far removed from the scene. Perhaps the chloroform was responsible for that. Something in the fiend's black hand was pressed against my face, striving to block the aperture of my open mouth. It was soft, deliciously cool, sickly sweet. . . .

I clawed at that dark face with my hands, beat weakly at it with both fists as I rocked backward against the wall. A crushing arm was around me and a leg was twisted between mine, inflicting agony. But that sweet stench of chloroform was in my throat, penetrating more and more. I didn't mind the pain so much. Not—too much.

I think he flung me to the floor and clamped one of those black hands in my throat, but I'm not sure. I was trying to call Mildred's name. Even that wouldn't come. Then my mind went gypsying off through dark channels of the past and I saw a pair of bloody scissors and a letter written in green ink, and I wondered about them.

There was a face hovering close to my own. I stared up at it, saw it through a tenuous veil of shadows. It was a strange face. I thought dully: The man has no nose or mouth; he has only a pair of eyes that are like red buttons. I reached up to touch the buttons, but my hands slid back again and thudded against the floor.

Red eyes, watching me. . . . Then they swelled to saucer-bigness and crept closer, devouring me in their absorbing power, and my whole world became a spinning mass of redness. But it didn't matter. Nothing matters unless you care; and I had ceased caring. I lost consciousness. . . .

I WAS deathly ill when I came to. That's the curse of an anesthetic. Had I been offered a choice of life or death, I would have chosen the latter; but a monster of torment was screaming inside my head and a horde of leering pain-demons were dragging me back from the void.

I stared at a round, yellow blur of light and wondered about it—pulsing before me like a thing alive. Then my eyes ceased their ghastly laboring, and the thing became a glowing lantern.

The lantern sat on an upturned box, and a gleaming steel blade lay beside it. There was nothing else—just a lantern, a knife and a box in the center of a stone floor that spread away into gloom. The floor was thick with dust and the outflung dimness of the lantern's glow embraced wooden walls rising to a low ceiling.

Near me loomed a low door, but I had neither the strength nor the desire to crawl to it.

I lay there, waiting in torment for the sickness to desert me, unable to think but knowing then that something more than chloroform had been forced upon me—some mind-eating drug. . . .

Then I heard the voice.

It came from somewhere beyond the door, and it was like a thin, sluggish serpent, slithering into the room where I lay. A voice? No, it wasn't that; it was only a ghost-whisper, weirdly alive in itself. Perhaps the acoustics of the prison room had something to do with that. I don't know.

The whisper wormed its way into my presence and went creeping around the room. It called me by name and kept repeating the name. "Peter Randall. Peter—Randall."

I wriggled backward until my shoulders were against the wall. The effort of rising to a sitting posture sent waves of new sickness through me, but I made it, got my back propped against the partition

and sat there with my legs stuck out in front of me, my hands flat against the stone floor. I sat and stared and listened.

"Peter Randall!" the voice kept whispering; and I thought: Maybe there isn't any voice. Maybe it's in my brain.

Then: "What good is life to you, Peter Randall? Why should you cling to it, now that your loved one has come to join us in a pleasanter world of death?"

I narrowed my eyes and stared at the lamp. So it's not in my brain, I thought. I've been drugged, and now my warped mind is being artfully subjected to powers of suggestion.

That was my last rational thought for a long while. The voice worked on me. It slithered into my eyes and nose and mouth and got into my brain. It fed there, became a devouring parasite. In a little while I ceased remembering that I'd been drugged; ceased remembering that the voice was not my own. It *was* my own. It was a living, whispering part of me, emanating from the core of my laboring mind.

"Mildred is dead, Peter Randall!" the voice whispered. "She wanted to die, to be freed from the pain and torment of this unhappy existence. You saw her commit the act. You saw the knife and the blood. . . ."

"The same knife is awaiting the touch of your hand. It lies there beside the lamp, and her blood is upon it—*her* blood, waiting to mingle with *yours*, just as she is waiting for you. . . ."

I stared at the lamp. My tongue came out to lick my lips. I thought: Mildred is waiting. She loves me.

"Death is not painful," the voice whispered. "It is pleasant and gentle. There is nothing to be afraid of, Peter. Come to me, Peter. Come to me—to Mildred. . . ."

Just when that devilish voice ceased whispering and lived only in the fevered

workings of my own brain, I don't know. It served its purpose, anyway, for it turned my drugged mind into the desired death-channels.

I sat there for an eternity, thinking thoughts that no sane man would have entertained for a moment. I sat and stared at the lamp and finally pushed myself erect. Death *will* be pleasant, I thought. It will relieve the pain in this battered body of mine.

Mildred is waiting for me, I thought queerly, to cradle my head in her arms and ease my torment. She would never ask me to come to her if it were not right.

I walked slowly to the upturned box and stood there, oblivious to the shaft of heat that rose from the lamp-globe and seared my face. I looked down at the knife and took it in my hand.

The thin, razor-sharp blade was red and sticky with the blood of the girl who was waiting for me.

I WAS imprisoned in some dark chamber of hell and doomed to stay here, alone and in torment, so long as there was life in my body. Mildred was not far away, and she was waiting. It would be so easy. . . .

I put a shaking hand to the front of my shirt and tore it open. I was strangely calm, with the thought of death but an abstract idea that did not trouble me. I put the point of the knife against my flesh and held it there, and my hand stopped shaking.

Plunging the blade into my chest would be like plunging it into the box here, or into the yellow glare of the lamp. It would be simple. I would enjoy doing it, and the sight of red blood spurting from the wound would be ample payment for any slight pain that I might suffer.

This isn't the end, I thought. It's only the beginning.

Then I saw something.

It was a very little thing, but it bewildered me. It lay in a corner of the room, where the lamplight touched it. It was watching me. The lamplight made a gleaming silver oval on the thing's metal surface, and the oval was like an irridescent baleful eye, staring at me accusingly.

I paced forward and picked the thing up. It was an empty ether tin.

How frequently a man's life hangs by the thinnest thread of chance! How easily a drugged mind can be drawn back to normal by some insignificant object associated with the past!

Holding the can in my hands, I stared at it. The word "ether" grew to huge proportions on the tin can, and took the madness out of me. Ether! Leon Lakeman's hospital, white-clad nurses, insane men and women screaming in the night . . . !

I stared around me. The room was no longer an ante-chamber of hell. I knew it for what it was—an unused storeroom in some remote part of the hospital cellar.

I looked at the empty ether can and at the surgeon's knife gripped in my other hand, while my eyes widened with horror. That blood-stained knife—my naked chest. Merciful God! What had I been going to *do*?

The knife slid between my suddenly splayed fingers and clattered on the floor. Still I stared at it, at the blood on the gleaming blade. I visualized that strange, near-naked figure of Mildred in the solarium. I saw again the blood trickling between pale breasts.

The shriek that climbed up through my rigid body was a choking, gurgling yell that screamed out through dry, cracked lips. "Mildred! Oh, my God, no! You're not dead! *You're—not—dead!*"

I lurched past the upturned box, where that glowing lamp leered at me, got to the door, and put a palsied hand on the rusty latch that angled out from it. It

rasped up and down, the door shuddered to the pressure of my body—but refused to open. It was padlocked on the outside.

That faceless fiend of hell had dragged me here unconscious, locked me in his suicide chamber, and left me to my own devices after insidiously loading my drugged brain with thoughts of death.

I braced myself against the room's far wall, got a running start and hurled myself at the door. I did that twice. On the third time the door let go with a shuddering crash and I spilled down on one knee, hands skidding on the floor. I lay there gasping, while the echoes of the crash faded to silence. Then I got up and staggered through darkness.

How I got out of that gloomy labyrinth I'm not sure. It took me an eternity as I blundered from wall to wall—put my hands out in front of me and became a blind man, groping, until I found a flight of wooden steps up which I pawed my way.

By that time I was mumbling to myself. My hair was a wet mop in my eyes and one of my clutching hands was sticky with blood from a deep gash inflicted by an outjutting nail. I was sick and exhausted and terrified. I kept mouthing the name Mildred.

The door at the top of the stairs groaned open and let me into a corridor where no lights burned. Groping along that, I went through another door into another corridor. Then I knew where I was and night-lights guided me to the second floor of Lakeman's madhouse.

The solarium at the end of the second-floor corridor was empty. The glass door stood ajar.

I stood there on the threshold for an eternity, my brain in confusion, my eyes searching for something that wasn't there. Then I lurched around and went stumbling back toward the stairs.

ESTES, the male nurse who hated me, came out of a ward and put the white beam of a searchlight in my face as I went toward him. He gaped foolishly and spoke my name. I didn't answer. I knew where I wanted to go, and I pushed him out of the way and groped past him—went drunkenly upstairs to the top floor. I had to find Marie Lovell, the Death Woman!

I found her.

She had a white robe pulled over her bedgown and was pacing slowly down the hall toward me. I knew dully that she shouldn't be there; that the door of her room should be locked, and that I was the one who had left it open.

My feet froze under me and I stared at her, then lurched forward and gripped her arms. One look into that bloodless face told me she was ill, horribly ill, and that one of her periodic attacks was racing up from hell to take possession of her. But I was a frenzied madman at that moment, with no thought for anything but my own dark dread.

"You've got to help me!" I croaked. "They've taken Mildred!"

The woman looked at me and nodded and said: "I know."

"You know?" I raved. "You know where she is?"

A low sigh whispered from Marie Lovell's pale lips. She lowered her head and gazed sadly at the floor. My hands were still clamped around her arms, and I felt her slender body begin to tremble.

"This night is the devil's own," she said dully. "I see blood on the moon, and red shadows creeping ever closer. Soon there will be more death and more horror; there will be a horde of people prowling through the night's gloom—people from the rooms around us, screaming and raging when they rush forth to eat the moon's blood. . . ."

"I don't care about the inmates of this

'damned house!" I fumed. "I want Mildred! Where is she?"

"There will be rebellion and blood before the dawn of a new day," the Death Woman moaned. "So it is written, and so do I see it. And I see you and your loved one in the midst of it, suffering. . . ."

"Then she's alive! She's not dead!"

"Dead? We are all dead. We live forever among death's shadows."

"Take me to Mildred!" I begged hoarsely. "Oh, God—please do what I ask! Mildred—!"

Her bloodless face swayed up and down slowly with the mechanical swing of a clock's pendulum. "Yes, I'll take you," she murmured. Stiffly she walked past me and moved down the corridor. "Yes, I'll show you the way. . . ."

I followed her. Some dark intuition within me shrieked out a warning that this strange woman was a handmaiden of Satan himself, but I followed her. Merciful God, what *else* could I do?

She went to the end of the corridor, down the rear stairs and out of the building. She went slowly, one arm bent in front of her, but not once did she hesitate. Yet to my knowledge, this woman had never before wandered through the mazes of Lakeman's hospital. Never before had she crossed the threshold of her own room!

WE WENT out into the night, and the pale glow of a clouded moon transformed my guide into a swaying ghostly shape that seemed to exist only in my fevered imagination. Straight to the gate she led me, and stopped there, waiting silently while I produced the key. Then she paced along the great wall, and around it to the rear of the building, and on into the dark woods that crowded forward to smother us.

She was a corpse walking in death—a weird, silent, white thing pacing ever on-

ward with deliberate steps, never turning to look back, never pausing, never speaking. And I thought: Where in God's name is she taking me? These woods are dense, impenetrable. Surely that faceless fiend did not drag Mildred this way. . . .

We followed a winding footpath and came to a rutted, weed-grown road that lay pale in moonlight. I wanted to croak questions at the woman who walked ahead of me, but I kept silent. Not once had she faltered. Had she been this way before? Did she *know* the secret of Mildred's disappearance?

There was a house along here, I remembered. A dilapidated and weather-worn farmhouse, which at one time had been occupied by a family of Negroes. Soon we came to it.

There was a snake-line of wooden fence sagging white in the moon-glow ahead of us, and the house itself sat like a grey, bleached skeleton in the midst of a clearing where weeds grew in wild abandon. The Death Woman turned and went through a crooked opening where the fence had once possessed a gate. The dark windows of the house stared out at us, with its doorway a crooked oblong of gloom—a twisted slit of mouth in the skeletal head of some long-dead colossus.

I shuddered. I called out shrilly: "Why are you bringing me here? What is there here except death and desolation?" But if the woman heard, she did not answer. Stiffly she paced onward through the deep grass that swished about her.

I blundered behind her and stared uneasily at the gaunt structure ahead. And then I stopped.

I stopped because a shrill, tortured scream of terror came wailing across the clearing from the depths of the house to which the Death Woman was taking me. Once, twice, three times that frightful shriek knifed through the night and stabbed my soul.

I answered it. "Mildred!" I shouted in a voice that went jangling hoarsely from the twisted tubes of my throat—and I lurched forward, running.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rebellion and Blood

I WAS at least twenty paces ahead of the Death Woman when I went crashing over that gloomy threshold. Before me lay darkness and shadowed walls, lurking me on. I went blindly, in a headlong rush, down a corridor that seemed endless, and that lurid shriek of terror wailed up to me from somewhere below, spurring me to greater madness.

I entered a kitchen where a yellow tongue of flame danced on the wick of a globeless lamp. A door hung open before me, and I hurled myself toward it, went lurching down a flight of stairs into a cellar. The screams had ceased. My stumbling feet made an infernal din on the stairs, and the sound of my breathing was a hoarse, gurgling rasp in my throat.

Down there lay darkness, a vast, limitless world of it into which I plunged with reckless abandon. A man doesn't stop to think when the dead have been returned to him and are shrieking for help in some new agony of annihilation!

I heard a sound of movement in the ink-black gloom ahead of me and whirled toward it. Half a score of strides I went in a headlong rush before my right foot came down on something that was not part of the floor.

Then a peal of shrill laughter came out of the gloom ahead. With it came another sound, a grinding, rasping shock of steel on steel, as the jaws of a huge trap closed fiendishly on my leg. Agony tore into my body, and outraged nerves carried a flash of white-hot pain to the core of my shrieking pain. I pitched forward, went down in a screaming heap.

Out of the gloom came a dark, chuckling shape that stood over me, revelling in my torment. Gnarled hands raised a wooden bludgeon and beat me with it. Blow after blow flattened me against the cellar's stone floor as the bludgeon crashed against my back and shoulders, while a sniggering voice intoned horribly: "This time, Randall, you won't have to kill yourself. Someone else'll do the job for you!"

Under the pain of the beating I was dully awake to the fact that the fiend had cast the bludgeon aside and was bending over me, tearing the shirt from my back. My arms were jerked out from under me and my wrists lashed with ropes. The steel jaws of the trap were pried open and it was flung aside. Then a vicious hand twined itself in my mop of hair and dragged me, hauled me across the floor, over a low wooden threshold.

That evil chuckling sound beat over and around me like a vile, fluttering bat out of hell. I was more conscious of that than of the torment within me.

Then I was left alone, left in a sprawled, contorted heap against the base of a wooden partition, while my captor stumped noisily across the floor, away from me, and made a light.

I didn't realize, at first, the significance of the thing I stared at. My head was a nightmare vat of hideous thoughts and my battered body was gnawed by spasms of agony. My eyes focused slowly and I saw a lantern glowing on a shelf across the room—saw a second lantern squatting on the table.

In the glare of those two lanterns loomed a crude wooden contrivance that belonged to an age far removed from the present. I gaped at it and shuddered. It was a stock-like arrangement made of heavy timbers. I thought dully: In Britain and the early New England colonies, those ghastly things were used for the punishment of sinners. Men and women

were forced to remain in them for days. . . .

But this was not Britain, and I was not dwelling in some forgotten era of the past! The stocks before me had been constructed for some sinister purpose by the fiend, who had gone now into some distant part of the cellar.

I heard him returning, stared beyond the lanterns, and stiffened in sudden horror as the creature appeared in the shadows of a half-hidden doorway. Slowly he came forward, his shoulders bent under the weight of a burden that hung limp over them.

He paced sluggishly toward the stocks and dumped his burden to the floor. I stared at a naked body, pale and lifeless in the glow of the lanterns. A woman's body, with a thin red line of congealed blood running between the hummocks of her breasts.

I saw again that strange, near-naked creature in Lakeman's solarium. I croaked the name Mildred. The fiend jerked his head around and glared at me a moment, and returned phlegmatically to his task.

He raised that limp form and locked it in his ghastly arrangement of timbers, so that only a lolling head, two hands and two bare legs were visible to me. Mumbling to himself, the monster retreated, fetched a bucket from the far end of the room and flung water into Mildred's face.

Then he stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. And I lay there in the grip of dark tentacles of horror, staring at him.

I had encountered that unholy hell-shape before. Twice before. Now, as the creature stood there in the ocher glow of the lanterns, I knew him for what he was—a human being garbed in a black, sacklike robe, wearing a black hood that possessed only twin slits for eyes.

MY FACELESS fiend of the night was human, a man garbed in black. My warped mind wandered in crooked paths of shadow and I thought I might be in some dark dungeon—perhaps this man was an executioner.

An *executioner!* *Eric Lecher!* The name wheezed in my throat and hissed audibly through my teeth, as the creature before me flung aside his black raiment. He stood there unmasked, in baggy trousers and crumpled white shirt. And he *was* Eric Lecher—the most feared inmate of Lakeman's house of hell!

From some dark recess beside the stocks, he drew an enormous, gleaming knife with which to pursue his vile profession! I screamed then. A piercing clamor screeched out of my lungs and went wildly around the room, carrying my soul with it; but Lecher paid me no attention. Writhing on the floor, I got my knees under me and tried to sway erect, only to pitch forward again in a groaning heap.

The girl in the stocks was conscious. Her head was up now and her eyes opened wide. She screamed my name and then stared at the knife in Lecher's hands and shrieked terror-words that had no meaning. Lecher was chuckling. Then he spoke.

"I'm going to kill you!" he said, face convulsed with unholy, mad eagerness. He fingered the glittering edge of the knife and took a step forward, reached out and ran a hungry hand over one of those pale protruding legs.

"I'm going to kill you," he repeated, his tongue slobbering against his lips and making noises that curdled my blood. "I've killed a lot of them in my day. Some of them I hanged, and some I used the axe on, and some I beheaded with the knife!" Waves of unholy mirth flowed up from the sea of venom in his mad soul.

"*He* told me to kill you two," he chuc-

kled, leering from Mildred to me. "He said if his other method didn't work, I could do it *my* way. That's a joke on him! He doesn't know all the different ways I know—but he won't be here to tell me what I mustn't do! Not this time he won't!"

Mildred's outburst of terror had died to a low, continuous sobbing sound which beat against my soul after Lecher ceased gloating. I watched him as he went to the table. Methodically he held the blade of the knife over the lamp-chimney and kept testing the steel with his thumb and forefinger. It took him a long time. . . .

When he turned again, I was on my feet, stumbling toward him. He stood there and leered at me. The flat of his hand crashed against my face and hurled me backward. I thudded against the wall and collapsed again, with new agonies grinding through me. I knew then that there was no hope.

No—hope! But from somewhere in the abandoned house came a faint thud of footsteps. Lecher didn't hear. The sound seeped down through the wall and was audible to me because my tortured body lay there where the vibrations could beat through it. Footsteps, marching! And Lecher, the mad executioner, was walking slowly toward the girl I loved!

I thought I could stall for time. I dragged words out of my throat and flung them across the room in an effort to make Lecher stop. "For God's sake, wait a minute!" I cried hoarsely. "Let me say goodbye to her, Lecher! She and I were planning to be married. We love each other!"

I kept on blubbing in a frantic attempt to make him turn toward me, but I doubt now that he even heard the words that wailed around him. His head was thrust forward and his eyes were huge and red in a face unholy with lust. He kept stroking the enormous blade of the

knife. Even Mildred's terror-shrieks, born in the depths of her tortured soul, made no impression on him.

He put a hand out and pawed the girl's face, curled his bony fingers in her hair. His other hand went up slowly, raising the knife. He twisted his leering face around and looked at me. "When I'm finished with her," he said, "you're next."

THEN he heard the footsteps. I whirled toward the door through which Lecher had dragged me into the room, my eyes starting painfully from their sockets.

The doorway was no longer an empty oblong of blackness. In it, framed there like some ethereal visitant from another world, stood Marie Lovell, the Death Woman. And in the dark pit of gloom behind her, heavy feet were marching and other shapes were swaying forward.

The woman stood there and stared straight at Lecher. Her gaze hypnotized him to immobility. Her hands and her bare feet were red with blood, and blood had oozed from that ever-bleeding wound in her side, crimsoning the white garment that drooped about her. She was pale with the pallor of death, and yet she lived.

Undaunted by the gleaming blade in Lecher's upraised fist, she advanced toward him. And through the doorway behind her came a horde of mad-eyed, muttering men and women who trailed after her as curious children once trailed the piper of Hamelin.

"For you, Eric Lecher, this is the end," she said in a kind of singsong chant that went droning around the room. Turning, she beckoned that mob of mad followers to come forward, and pointed to Lecher. "This man is Satan!" she cried shrilly. "His hands are red with the blood of innocents, and some of his victims were loved ones of yours! Destroy him!"

Lecher had that enormous knife, but he also had a black pool of terror seeth-

ing in his soul. He screamed at them to stop, and when they continued their advance he shuddered backward, went lurching across the room.

He might have had a chance, if terror had not muddied his mad brain. Had he stood there with his back to the wall and used that gleaming blade, he could have driven those screaming men and women back. Instead, he flung the knife into the midst of them and used his fists and feet and teeth.

I saw him go down, heard the frightful shrieks that tocsinned from his throat. I heard other sounds, too—but some things are better forgotten. I was staring at something else.

The Death Woman had scooped Lecher's knife off the floor and was advancing toward me. I froze stiff, and a gelid wave of fear rushed through me. I realized that the woman was mad, that she was walking on the very threshold of death; but that knife was in her outthrust hands and her face was horribly empty of expression. And across the room, Mildred was sobbing my name.

I moaned incoherent words and shut my eyes as the knife descended. I expected razor-sharp steel to burn through me. Instead, the ropes slid from my wrists and the hilt of the knife was hot and sticky against the palms of my hands. And the Death Woman was saying: "Go away from here. What happens here is not for you to witness."

She stood staring as I labored to my feet. I lurched past her, pushed my way through screaming shapes of madness and worked feverishly to release Mildred. Had she draped herself around me when I got her loose, I'd have gone down, this time to stay, so weak was I from the punishment I had taken. But she shoved me toward the door, helped me along.

At the far end of the room, Eric Lecher's death-screams had ceased. Some of

the Death Woman's followers were snarling like wolves over their kill. Others turned, seeking new victims.

With murder blazing in their mad eyes and cries of fury shrilling in their throats, they came for us. But my terror had abated. Mildred and I were safe. The door was before us, and it led to freedom!

MILDRED went over the threshold first, dragging me after her. The executioner's knife in one fist, I turned, slammed the barrier shut. When I swung into the gloom of the cellar, the girl I loved was a couple of strides ahead of me.

I took a single stumbling step after her and stopped short. Too late I croaked out a yell of warning.

He was standing there not ten paces ahead of us in the cellar's murk. There was a gleam of light from the gun that swept upward in his outthrust hand, and it belched a staccato clap of thunder. Within arm's reach of me, Mildred staggered back on her heels and cried out in agony. Naked, she made an easy target, with her satin-white skin shining against the gloom. The gun roared again and she crumpled to the floor, moaning.

I was a snarling madman when I lunged toward the shadowy shape that stood there in the dim light. I had Lecher's knife in my hand and I flung it with all my strength, heard it whimper through darkness and slash against the fiend's upflung arm.

The knife clattered to the floor and the gun went with it. With bare hands outstretched and hatred fuming within me, I smashed into this new enemy and hurled him back.

We fought there in the cellar of that hell-house like mad saurians wallowing in the murk of a primeval world. I don't like to remember it—but I was insane

with a desire to kill. This merciless monster had shot down the woman I loved.

I used teeth and fists. I gulped hot, salty blood—and it wasn't my blood. I beat that blubbering face into a soggy pulp until my knuckles were stripped of skin, as I hammered the sharp, bared teeth.

How he got hold of the knife I don't know. He found strength enough, in some buried well of reserve, to hurl me aside and claw across the floor until he found it. Then the blade burned a gash in my upflung arm, raked downward through flesh and muscles and stuck in the thick leather of my belt.

One of my knees ground into his snarling face, flung him back on his haunches. I fumed over him, wrenched the knife from his grasp, smashed one fist against his teeth and raked the blade across his throat. Behind me, the door of Lecher's torture-chamber had jarred open and a lane of light spilled out across the cellar.

I looked down at the half-severed head that lolled under my bloody hands. Somehow I got to my feet and stood swaying. The dead face that stared up at me was the face of Henry Phillips. And the Death Woman's mad followers were screaming toward me.

There are some things I want to forget, and the last hellish interlude in that horror-house is one of them. When those screaming creatures came at me, I stumbled toward Mildred. She was on her knees, moaning, trying to stand erect.

I stood over her and swung Lecher's murder weapon. Even madmen know the meaning of death, and I taught them to respect it. I sent mutilated bodies stumbling and shrieking back into the arms of those who crowded forward from the rear. I cleared a bloody circle around me while Mildred clawed at my legs for support and got to her feet.

Then, slowly, step by step, we retreated

across the cellar, found the stairs and ascended. I left death behind me in the cellar's gloom and on the stairs. When I finally slammed the door at the head of the stairs and locked that mad horde in the gloom of the cellar, my brain was a warped, twisted thing filled with horror—some of which will never fade.

Other things won't fade, either—the black memory, for instance, of our return trip through the woods to Lakeman's hospital. Henry Phillips had twice sent lead screaming into the naked body of the girl beside me. One bullet had splintered a shoulder; the other had torn through the soft flesh of an armpit. I bandaged the wounds with an undershirt. . . .

WE GOT to the hospital and I phoned the police.

The next half hour I spent bending above a cot in Lakeman's office, where Mildred lay unconscious. When the police came, some went to that house of death where Eric Lecher and Henry Phillips had paid for their sins. Others went prowling through the hospital itself.

Mildred and I rode back to town in the rear seat of a police car, and I held her in my arms, thanked God that the bullets from Phillips' gun had not robbed that warm, bandaged body of life. And I cursed the name of Henry Phillips.

It was Phillips who sent Eric Lecher on those dark missions of murder. I learned that later. It was he who preyed on the man's madness, on his lust for blood, and gave him keys that allowed him to creep in and out of the hospital unseen. It was Phillips who planned and executed the death of Deborah Corey, because he himself had wronged her and feared the consequences of exposure.

Henry Phillips! The man was a scheming, diabolical monster! It was he who forged suicide notes after studying specimens of handwriting in letters sent by

his prospective victims to their loved ones at the hospital. Their deaths meant that some of Lakeman's patients would inherit money, large sums of money which he, Phillips, could cunningly lure away from them.

He had lured money from them before. Apparently those minor successes had caused him to plan things on a wholesale scale.

Perhaps Lakeman was at least partly aware of the man's program. We know now, from an investigation of Phillips' affairs, that Henry Phillips was the real head of the Lakeman Hospital, and that Lakeman was financially enslaved to him. Lakeman might tell us more if he could.

He never will. When those mad creatures, freed by Eric Lecher and aroused by him to the fever-pitch of their madness, went on the blood-trail that night, they began *inside* the hospital and left only death behind them.

I wonder, too, about Marie Lovell. She was dead when the police rounded up those mad creatures and returned them to confinement. Expert surgeons have since examined her dead body and say that she suffered from a form of leukemia, that she was constantly fed drugs which might have produced a recurring, artificial death, and that the continual loss

of blood from her body was caused by the condition of her blood and by a repeated reopening of the wounds.

Perhaps they are right. But I wonder if Phillips, who spent more time with her than did any of the rest of us, did not keep her in that condition for his own vile purposes. She would have been invaluable to him in his diabolical campaign to gain control over Lakeman's wealthy patients.

God knows he was certainly familiar with drugs and knew how to influence the functionings of drugged minds! His fiendish experiments with Mildred and me were hellishly close to being successful. To this day, Mildred remembers nothing of that ghastly episode in the solarium.

But I'm not sure about his power over the Death Woman. I keep wondering how much of her was dead when she went to meet that horde of mad creatures as they marched from the hospital—when she led them to the hell-house where Eric Lecher had set up his execution chamber. She wasn't Phillips' slave then. . . .

I keep wondering about a lot of things. The only thing I'm really sure of is that I'm alive and that I've won myself the love of a good woman. That's enough—for a while.

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The Devil's Gift

By Raymond Whetstone

(Author of "The Hungry Skull," etc.)

The first wish he made in eager hope. The second in frantic, quick despair. The third in numbing horror. . . .



MY WIFE'S hand fell lightly on my shoulder. "You're working too hard, Mark, dear. You ought to get some rest. It—it's late. Won't you come to bed—now?" she said.

I glanced up, and my annoyance at the interruption melted into tenderness as I caught sight of her. God, how beautiful—how sweet—she was! Even after three years of poverty and hardship, she was still as lovely as the day I married her, lovelier even—for those three years had given a new depth to her blue eyes and had moulded her slight, girlish figure into

the softer curves of mature womanhood. I was struck again then—as I always was when I looked at her—with reverent wonder that this glorious creature should actually be mine.

"I can't just yet, Frances," I told her, pressing a kiss on her slim fingers. "I'm too busy whipping this chapter into shape. It will take me at least another hour. Run along, darling, and get your beauty sleep. Even if you don't need it," I added, smiling at her.

Her answering smile seemed troubled. She started to remonstrate, hesitated,

turned away. I watched her go up the staircase, saw her wave goodnight to me as she disappeared from view. Then with a sigh, I forced my attention back to the task before me.

It was hard being poor, I reflected bitterly. Harder yet when the woman I adored was compelled to share that poverty. Frances had never complained about it. Through thick and thin she had stuck to me, sharing my adversity, comforting me when I was ready to give way to despair, enduring misfortunes which would have broken a less noble spirit than hers. Just to be my mate was all she asked of life. "Nothing matters as long as we are together, Mark," she would whisper, clinging to me. "Nothing!"

But I didn't feel that way. Ambition had kindled its flaming torch in my brain. I longed for power, fame, riches. I craved these earthly, material things with a fierce passion which amounted almost to madness. Not for myself alone. Not for Mark Heming. But for the sake of Frances, my dear wife, who was bound to me by man-made legal ties—and spiritual ties sacred to Almighty God!

Scattered over my desk were sheets of manuscript, portions of the novel I was writing. When it was finished, I would be a success. I would shower Frances with gifts, clothes, jewels. We would buy expensive cars, eat costly foods, build the dream home we had planned for so long. I would gratify her slightest wish, give her everything her heart desired, if—

If? What a horrible, soul-searing word that was! How did I know I was going to succeed? Hadn't my first book been a failure? Hadn't I sent it to every editor, every publishing house I could think of, only to have it rejected? And finally, hadn't I destroyed the manuscript on which I had spent so much time and labor, tearing it to shreds in a burst of childish and unreasoning fury? Might not this

second brain-child share the fate of its predecessor?

The thought was an unspeakable torture. Abruptly I pushed back my chair, strode to the window. Outside the rain was coming down in torrents, streaming against the panes of glass, pelting the barren and rock-ribbed ground which stretched for miles about the house. Nothing would grow in that unfertile soil—not even a scrawny bush or tree. It was, I grinned sardonically, like myself—sterile, useless, producing nothing that had ever been of service to anyone.

With hands thrust deep in my pockets, I pondered over my difficulties. Had I just a few hundred dollars of my own I could publish the book myself. Once on the market, I felt sure it would gain public favor. It had the necessary popular appeal to put it in the best-seller class. . . .

Just a few hundred dollars! I kicked at a worn spot in the carpet impatiently. I might as well wish for the moon while I was about it. I would get it as quickly.

"God is cruel and unjust!" I scarcely realized I was speaking aloud. "What has He ever done for me? What does He care whether I live or die? I have prayed to Him and He hears me not! Why should I worship Him? Why should I not pay homage to *Satan*, His arch-enemy, instead?"

MY WILD words rang through the room, recalling me to my senses with a start. Shamed, half-frightened at my blasphemy, I returned to the desk, seized a fresh sheet of paper. Suddenly a mad drive to write had come over me. Silence flowed again through the room, broken only by the swift clatter of the typewriter as it set down in cold print the feverish rush of ideas from my brain.

I ripped out the sheet and inserted another, filled with that irresistible urge to create which comes to an author so rarely

and which he must take advantage of before it passes. Then, at last, I leaned back in my chair, weary but satisfied. I was amazed to see that it was almost three o'clock. But I had done a good night's work. Another week and the novel would be finished. . . .

What was that? It sounded like . . . yes, it *was* a rap . . . a rap at the door. I heard it again, slow, measured, insistent. Who could be knocking at this time of the night? A neighbor? Hardly. The nearest one lived miles away. Who then? And what did he want?

I don't know why I should suddenly have been afraid, but I was. It was an instinctive thing, that fear, reasonless, horrible. It sent icy shudders racing through my body, chilled the blood in my veins, and brought clammy sweat out on my forehead. A million tiny voices were clamoring inside my skull, shrilling a warning. "*Don't let him in!*" they screamed. "*He means evil! Don't let him in!*"

But I went across the room to the door. For what seemed an eternity I stood there, sensing that the frail barrier of wood between us was the last protection I had against this visitor from the night. Then, reluctantly, I threw the door open.

The rain and darkness conspired to blind me at first. But gradually my eyes picked out a black shape on the porch, traveled up to a white, staring face inches above my head. The stranger was waiting silently, patiently—waiting as though hours, years, centuries meant nothing to him!

"Won't you come in?"

I hadn't intended to say that. I was fully determined to send him about his business, for even then, subconsciously, I must have realized who he was. But the invitation slipped out easily, naturally, so well schooled are our tongues in the observance of social amenities. And before

I could retract it, he shouldered past me and entered the room. He made straight for the stove and stood with his back to it, so close that I felt his flesh must be scorching.

Carefully I shut the door and walked to my desk. Clutching it for support, I looked at my nocturnal visitor. I can't describe exactly how he affected me. It wasn't terror in the ordinary sense of the word. It was something infinitely worse than that. Just his presence sent waves of physical nausea through every nerve and bone and muscle—and gripped my brain and soul in the awful throes of mental and spiritual sickness.

AND yet at first glance he wasn't so revolting. Well above six feet in height, his thin, rather graceful figure was clad in somber and funereal black. A cloak hung from his narrow shoulders, hiding his arms and hands in its voluminous folds. Pushed back from his lofty forehead was a broad-rimmed hat, revealing piercing, dark eyes, a hooked nose, sensitive, mobile lips. No, his external appearance, theatrical and bizarre though it might be, would not alone have inspired one with fear. It was not until I burrowed through those trappings of flesh and clothing and glimpsed the naked, malevolent Thing beneath, that I was struck by the full force of devastating horror. Here was a monster who had never known pity or compassion. Here was a fiend whose mouth was shaped for obscenities, whose foul hands would snatch crusts of bread from starving children. Here was evil incarnate—wickedness personified!

"You have come far?" I whispered hoarsely. I had to say something—anything! This silence was driving me insane.

"Quite far." His voice was low, his speech slurred by some strange accent.

"I dislike the rain," he added deliberately.

Fear throttled me again as my eyes wandered over his tall form. He must have been out in the storm for hours, battling the elements, tramping over muddy roads. And still . . . there was not a drop of moisture on his clothing! There was not a trace of mire on his feet!

"Do you live alone?" he asked courteously.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. What was the use to lie to him? He would know and punish me if I did. "I—I have a wife," I gasped.

"Really?" he murmured. "She is young and pretty, no doubt? But"—he surveyed the room disdainfully—"this is hardly an appropriate setting for a charming woman—"

"It's the best I can afford," I cried hotly. "I'm a poor man. I rented this house because it was cheap. . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course," he said hastily. "I did not mean to anger you. You are out of employment, then?"

"I—I write." The words sounded boastful, silly.

"An author?" His eyebrows lifted mockingly. "A prospective genius who will enchant future generations with the music of his prose? Let me be the first to congratulate you!"

This was a little too much. I started for him, my hands knotted into fists. "If you came here to insult me . . . !" I began wrathfully.

"But I didn't," he protested. "I came to help you. I take a great interest in young men—young men with beautiful wives!"

I halted, dazed, stupefied, yet aware that his benevolent remark veiled a sinister threat—as velvet may sheath a poisoned sword. "I—I want no help from you," I muttered thickly.

"You will change your mind when you

learn what I have to offer," he said eagerly. "Anyone would, I think."

With a quick, impatient gesture he threw back the enveloping cloak. Upon the palm of the hand he stretched out to me lay an object which gleamed and glowed like a living coal.

FASCINATED, I drew nearer to examine it. It was a ring. But such a ring! Made of solid gold, it was set with one great, blood-red jewel that glittered, sparkling, flashing with a radiance that blinded me. It was a ruby, I thought to myself excitedly. Rubies were worth more than diamonds. And this one was the largest I had ever seen!

"The intrinsic value of this bauble is very great," he was saying ironically. "But even greater is its significance—" He checked himself abruptly. "By the way, how long have you been married?" he asked.

"For three years," I answered mechanically, my attention centered on the magnificent gem.

"Three years!" He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to me. "Excellent!" He leaned forward, touched me on the shoulder. "What would you say—his voice was soft, persuasive—" what would you say if I gave you this ring?"

I recollected myself then, shrank away from him. "No, no!" I exclaimed. "I—"

"Not to keep." His lips were parted in a meaning smile. "Just to use."

"To use?" I reechoed blankly. "What good would that do me?"

"Listen!" He was very much in earnest now, his nostrils quivering, his eyes shining with the same unholy luster that emanated from the jewel in his fingers. "This is no ordinary ring. It is . . . a *wishing-ring!*"

"Oh, I know what you are thinking," he went on before I could speak. "You think I am talking nonsense. But why

should the idea of a wishing-ring be so utterly fantastic? Does not man have the ability to plan for and even anticipate events which have not yet come to pass? If he can do this, why should he not control them, alter them to suit himself? He can! With sufficient power, magic, call it what you will, he need no longer be the trembling slave of destiny! He may become its master! And that power . . . I give to you!"

Profoundly impressed though I was, I still remained incredulous. "You—you are making sport of me," I stammered. "I cannot believe—"

"I am disappointed in you," he said harshly. "You doubt because you are face to face with something that has never occurred before in your experience—something which only a man with imagination and daring could understand and use. And I thought you such a man! Bah!" He spat out the word in disgust. "You are nothing but a blind, stupid dolt, shutting your eyes to an opportunity which will never come again!"

"But suppose"—I moistened my dry lips—"suppose I accept the ring? What method would I employ in getting my wish?"

"A very simple one." He smiled thinly now "You put the ring on the third finger of your left hand, gaze steadfastly at the stone and ask for what you want—aloud."

"And how many wishes would I get?"

He didn't answer for a long time. When he did, it was in a low, hurried voice. "Three," he said.

Three! A number which corresponded to the years I had been married! He had asked me about that, hadn't he? Why? Immediately I was on my guard, sensing an obscure, hideous reason which terrified me more than I can tell. And my next question showed it.

"Are there any strings to this proposition?" I asked cautiously.

"Strings?" He looked puzzled.

"Would any harm come to me if I made these wishes, I mean?" was my hasty explanation.

"Oh, I understand. No, certainly not." His voice was reassuring, but I didn't like the way he avoided my eyes. "There is, of course, a small debt you must pay on each wish," he continued smoothly. "You never get something for nothing, you know. But what you incur is insignificant in proportion to what you receive. Have I made myself clear?"

I was right! He couldn't be trusted. "You have made yourself very clear," I said, glaring at him. "So clear that I wouldn't touch your cursed ring with a ten-foot pole! God only knows what would happen if I did!"

He merely shrugged his shoulders and moved toward the door. "In case you happen to change your mind, I will return," he said, pausing on the threshold. "Time and distance are less than the snap of a finger to me!"

Fear him though I did, I could not resist this opportunity to make him appear ridiculous. "You must travel fast!" I jeered. "How do you do it? Ride a broom?"

"Beware of what you say, fool!" he hissed. The look in his eyes turned my bones to water. "Laugh not at dangerous mysteries beyond your poor brain to fathom! Remember Hamlet's words: 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy'! Good-night!"

"Wait! "Wait!" I panted. I must make sure—had to make sure!—that what I suspected was true beyond the shadow of a doubt. "Who—who are you?"

"You ought to know!" His smile was like the fleshless grin of a skull. "Did you not offer to pay homage to me . . . tonight?"

And he was gone!

WEAK and sick, I fell into my chair. In God's name, what did it all mean? I asked myself dully. Had my thoughtless blasphemies actually invoked the Prince of Darkness? Had he really been in that room, bartering with me for my immortal soul? No, that was absurd—impossible! I was a twentieth-century American, not a superstitious peasant of the Middle Ages. I didn't believe in the Devil. And even if he *had* appeared to me, I had nothing to fear from him. Hadn't I refused his gift? Hadn't I sent him away . . . ?

My glazed eyes fell on my desk, centered on something there. With a wild shriek, I sprang to my feet, upsetting the chair and sending it crashing to the floor. Lying on a pile of manuscript was . . . the ring! Bright was that circlet of gold. But brighter burned the blood-red gem—bright as the fires of hell!

Who had put it there? Had he? Surely not! He wasn't near the desk at any time. Then how did it get there? But even as these questions swarmed in my brain, I was waging a losing fight with temptation. I wanted to test the miraculous powers of that ring. I wanted to find out if he had told me the truth about it. I wanted to see if it could possibly grant me what I asked for.

Slowly I stretched out my hand toward it, while instinct struggled with curiosity and desire, warned me not to trifle with things of which I knew nothing. I wouldn't ask for much, I told my troubled conscience. I wouldn't be greedy. Surely no harm would come from just a modest wish, when I could demand the treasures of the earth. "What you incur is insignificant in proportion to what you receive," He had said. Very well! I would make my wish so small that there would be hardly any penalty at all attached to it! I would defeat him at his own game!

The ring was on my finger now, its

gorgeous jewel dazzling my eyes. What should I ask for? Fame? The success of my book? No, these things were important. Besides, I wanted to achieve them myself without help from anyone, least of all from him! But I could ask for . . . a little money!

"I wish"—my voice was husky, terrified—"I wish for a thousand dollars! Just a thousand dollars," I repeated more loudly.

And nothing happened! Nothing! Only the clear surface of the ruby clouded over for an instant, as a breath may dim a mirror, and the ring seemed to tighten on my finger as though it were a living thing. But that was all.

More relieved than disappointed, I took off the ring and put it in a drawer of my desk. "It was a—a hoax," I muttered as I blew out the light and started upstairs. "Some wise guy was trying to make a fool of me." But I wasn't so sure. Certainly the ring *had* behaved queerly when I made the wish. And my visitor hadn't seemed the type of individual who would go to such lengths to play a practical joke on a complete stranger. No, the whole business was peculiar—too peculiar for my liking. I didn't want to think about it any longer.

FRANCES was asleep when I entered our bedroom. I undressed in the dark so as not to disturb her. But when I got into bed, she sighed restlessly and crept toward me. She was cold to the touch—so cold that momentary panic stabbed at my heart. Gently I drew her into my arms, holding her close, warming her with the heat from my body, feeling her delicious softness nestling against me. Then I, too, fell asleep . . .

I couldn't work the next day—for Frances was ill. She awoke in the morning, complaining of a splitting headache. Her face was white and drawn, and there

were dark circles under her sweet eyes. I watched her try to sit up, reach dizzily for her kimono, fall back again.

"We must get a doctor," I said, bending over her.

"No, Mark," she protested. "It isn't that serious. Really it isn't. I'll"—she smiled wanly at me—"I'll be all right in a little while. Besides, we can't afford one these days."

"You can't afford to be sick, either," I retorted. "We're *getting* a doctor. And no more objection from you, young lady," I added with a lightness I did not feel.

It seemed to take ages for him to come. Anxiously I hovered around the bed while he fussed over her, stuck a thermometer in her mouth, felt her pulse.

"A slight touch of the grippe, that's all," he told us cheerfully. "Nothing to worry about." He shook some pills into an envelope, scribbled directions on the outside. "She ought to stay in bed for a few days, though," he whispered to me when we were in the hall. "And if she gets any worse, let me know at once."

I sensed, then, a premonition of disaster—a premonition which became a certainty as the day wore to a close and she grew weaker. Frantically I called the doctor again, paced the floor like a madman until he came. This time he told me . . . to remain outside the bedroom!

Hours passed—hours that were centuries. I couldn't be calm. I couldn't be still. I tramped back and forth in the hall, smoking one cigarette after another, listening for the faintest whisper of a sound that might penetrate through the closed door of that room—the room in which the woman I loved lay dying. For she *was* dying! I knew that now. I knew her life was going out like a candle in the wind. But why? How had it happened? What malignant disease had struck her down in less than a single day?

A little before midnight the door

opened. The doctor came out and beckoned to me. I sprang forward, hoping against hope, praying that she might have rallied—praying to the Deity I had scorned and reviled!

"Doctor," I faltered. "Is—is she . . . ?"

One look at his face told me the worst. "I've done everything I could," he said heavily. "It's the most peculiar case I ever had. I—I can't understand—"

Somehow his bewilderment angered me. He should have known what was wrong with her! He should have saved her life!

"Go away!" I shrieked, thrusting him aside. "Leave me alone with my wife!"

I was inside the room, had slammed the door shut on his startled protests. On leaden feet, I neared the bed. She lay surrounded by pillows, rigid, pale, but oh! so lovely! Not even the approach of death could rob her of her beauty.

"Frances," I called softly. "Frances!"

She stirred, and her eyelids fluttered open. I went down on my knees beside her, burying my head in her lap, hard, tearing sobs wracking my body.

"Frances, don't leave me! Don't leave me! Dear heart, I—I cannot let you go!"

"Mark." Her fingers caressed my hair. "You mustn't give way . . . like that. It . . . hurts me so. I wanted . . . to be with you . . . for a . . . little while longer. But God . . . has willed it otherwise . . ."

"God! What does He care for my sufferings? Why has He done this thing to me?"

"Mark! Hush! You don't realize . . . what you're saying. He knows best. Darling, you must . . . pick up the thread of life again . . . after I am gone. You must keep on with your plans . . . as though nothing had happened. In a way . . . my death is going to help you . . ."

"Help me?" I raised my head, saw the angelic smile on her face. Her mind must be wandering. Yes, that was it! Her

mind was wandering. "What do you mean, Frances?" I asked gently.

"I thought something like this . . . might occur. In the midst of life . . . Hold me close, Mark! It's getting so . . . dark . . . and I want to tell you! You see, I couldn't bear to think . . . of your being left alone and penniless . . . if I should die. Even beyond the grave . . . I wanted to protect you . . . until you became a success. And so . . . I took out a life insurance policy . . . a few days ago with you as sole beneficiary. It wasn't . . . a large one . . ."

"For—for how much?" I choked. "In God's name, tell me!" But even before she spoke, I knew with a soul-searing horror what her answer would be.

"For . . . a thousand dollars . . ."

A THOUSAND dollars! Each word was like a blow on my naked heart. So this was the diabolical way in which my wish was coming to pass? This was how I had been tricked and cheated? This was the "small payment" I had to make? How ironical that was! In exchange for a paltry sum of money I had bartered away something infinitely priceless—something worth more than all the gold in the world to me!

"Frances, it can't be that!" I cried in anguish. "It can't! You're—you're joking, dear . . ."

But she was dead! Her head lolled against my shoulder, her eyes rolled up and fixed. And it seemed that as the life went out of her body, I heard a mirthless chuckle outside, rising swiftly to a crescendo of fiendish, jeering laughter. He had come back to gloat over my agony! He was beside himself with glee at my distress!

I went completely insane then. I rushed to the window, tore it open. Leaning far out, I hurled curses into the night, shrieked threats and pleas at the foul

shape hidden there in the darkness, screamed until my mad ravings became husky whispers and my tortured throat would no longer form sounds.

A hand gripped my arm. I turned and looked stupidly at the shocked, frightened face of the doctor.

"No good can come of such an outburst of grief, Mr. Heming," he said reproachfully. "Your wife's death was a terrible thing, but it could not be helped. Pull yourself together. Be resigned to what must happen to all of us. She would want you to do that, I know. I'll give you a hypodermic so that you can get some sleep . . ."

"But, doctor, it isn't her death I mind so much," I sobbed. "It's . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Heming. I understand. It was the sudden way in which it occurred. You weren't prepared for it." The poor fool! How little he *did* understand!

"Come, now," he said. Gently he led me from the room, a broken, shattered wreck of a man, without hope, without even the courage to kill myself and be with her.

THE days that followed were filled with a torture I can never forget. There were times when I sat perfectly motionless, numbed with suffering, oblivious of what was going on around me. There were other times when I would leap to my feet, shouting frenziedly that I had murdered her, begging someone—anyone—to take my life and put an end to my misery. It was an utter impossibility for me to eat or sleep. I gagged at the sight of food. The long, wakeful hours of the night served merely to intensify my hideous torment. Not even the doctor's hypodermics had the slightest effect on me. How deeply I atoned for what I had done! How bitterly I paid for that one moment of weakness!

People were very kind and sympathetic

during the period that Frances lay a corpse. They thought, of course, that her death had deranged my mind. They believed the things I said and did sprang from a brain crazed by sorrow. And so they humored me in every way they could, pretended to agree with everything I told them, pitied me who deserved no pity!

For I *had* murdered her, hadn't I? I had killed her just as surely as if I had picked up a gun and sent a bullet through her heart! And I think she knew it! That beloved face, waxen, rigid, but still as fair as the flowers heaped about it, seemed accusing and reproachful. I sensed her spirit hovering near me, blaming me for killing her! I could not bear to look at her in her casket, knowing it was I who had put her there. I was deprived of even the poor consolation that she would be waiting for me when my own time came to die. No, that cursed wish had lost her to me—through eternity!

Her funeral was a nightmare, endless, yet all too short! As though in a dream, I listened to the minister intone the solemn rites of the burial ceremony, heard well-remembered hymns—hymns which became intolerable to me from that day on. As though in a dream, I moved in that slow procession bearing her to the cemetery. It was only when her coffin was lowered into the grave and the clods began to fall upon it, that something snapped in my brain and I became fully aware of the piercing anguish of reality. Never would I see her again or hold her in my arms! Never!

"Just one more look at her!" I sobbed wildly, springing forward. "Just one . . ."

Strong hands restrained me. Low voices murmured soothing words. I struggled with them for an instant, then turned away obediently. Suddenly my dim eyes focused on the back of a man before me, cleared as they took in the details of his

figure. He was abnormally tall, thin, with narrow shoulders and a graceful carriage. I could not see his face, but I would have known that detestable form anywhere. It was . . .

Hot gusts of fury shook me from head to foot. God knows I had reason enough to hate him! He had made my life a hell on earth, had caused me to send the woman I loved to death. He alone was responsible for my suffering. And the fact that he actually had dared to profane her burial services with his presence added more fuel to the fires of anger consuming me.

"Damn you!" I snarled, leaping upon him and whirling him around. "I've got you at last! Whether you be mortal or fiend, human or inhuman, I'll tear out your heart with my bare hand . . ."

I checked myself abruptly. I was glaring into the bewildered countenance of an utter stranger—a man I had never seen before in my life! Stunned, confused, I mumbled apologies and hurried away. As I went, broken snatches of a conversation reached my ears. Someone—a woman, I think—was explaining my strange conduct to the individual I had assaulted:

" . . . his wife. Insane with grief . . . A shame, too . . . So young . . . He must have loved her very much. . . ."

HOW had I made such a mistake? I could have sworn that it was he! It *was*, though I didn't realize that until much later. He had really been there! He had disguised himself with a new face as easily as an ordinary man might put on a fresh suit of clothes. It was but another manifestation of his infernal power. With this protean ability, he could always save himself from my vengeance. He could mock my best efforts to even the score between us!

Weeks crept by. A month had passed since my wife's death. Though I had tak-

en up the drab routine of life again, the memory of my loss still tortured me. It was less poignant now, since time dulls all sorrow. But there was an aching void in my breast, an emotional hunger nothing could satisfy. Her white face was before me constantly, every line of it etched indelibly into my soul. I talked to it during my waking moments. I stretched out longing arms toward it in my dreams. I seemed to move in a world of ghosts and shadows, a spirit-land peopled by shapes my own imagination had created. My mind was occupied solely with visions of the past. The present was a blank. The future did not matter. Nothing was of the slightest importance anymore—nothing except what had been, what could never be again!

One evening, listless and apathetic, I sat before my desk. It was raining again, gently, persistently, with drops of water falling upon the window panes like huge, incessant tears. On such an evening I had said goodnight to Frances, little dreaming it was for the last time. On such an evening I had been inspired to write, imbued with a creative fervor I would never experience again. Ambition was gone forever, my brain-child still-born. Unless—

My eyes wandered over the desk, saw the typewriter and the sheets of manuscript. Dust blurred the surface of the machine, stained the pages covered by my thoughts. And suddenly I was filled with shame and remorse. Frances had wanted me to make something of myself. She had given her life that I might succeed. How could I sit there, spiritless, dejected, resigned to failure, incapable of appreciating her supreme self-sacrifice? Yes, I must finish the novel at once! Though dead, she would know what I was doing, and be glad! Only in this way could I offer her some slight compensation for all she had done for me!

Eagerly I pulled open a drawer in my

desk, looking for some fresh paper. I found none; my supply was exhausted. But in one corner, glinting brightly in the lamplight, I caught sight of something which stopped my heart beat, changed the warm current of my blood to ice. It was the ring!

THE ring! The cursed thing which had caused all my misfortune! There it lay, brilliant, sinister, the great ruby gleaming up at me like a malevolent, red eye. I had almost forgotten that I had put it there. Beside myself with rage and fear, I snatched it from its hiding place. I would get rid of its baneful influence. I would grind it under my heel, stamp upon it as I would the head of a venomous snake, utterly destroy it before it brought worse harm to me!

But wait! What worse harm *could* it bring? Hadn't I been robbed of my most cherished possession by that first wish? Hadn't Frances been taken from me? What more was there to lose? Certainly nothing I valued. Even my life was futile and useless—without her.

Perhaps a second wish might undo the damage caused by the first. Perhaps good might yet come out of evil. Pondering over these things, I felt hope spring up again within me, lighting the dark recesses of my soul. Yes, I would make another wish. And this time . . . it would be an unselfish one!

I knew what it was. There couldn't be the slightest doubt in my mind about that. Feverishly I slipped the ring on my finger, gazed into the crimson depths of its magnificent stone. Earnestly, beseechingly, the words tumbled from my lips:

"I wish . . . my wife would come back to me!"

Again the ring seemed to tighten on my finger. Again the brilliant surface of the ruby grew dim for an instant. Madly I rushed to the door, flung it open. Racing

out on the porch, I looked everywhere, strained my eyes in an effort to penetrate through the irritating veil of the night. She wasn't there! She hadn't come! The ring had failed me!

For a moment I was sick with disappointment. It was a terrible thing for one's hopes to be aroused, only to have them crushed down again. Then I recollected myself and began to laugh shakily. Of course she hadn't come! She hadn't had time yet. It was over a mile to the cemetery. Hindered as she was by the rain and darkness, it would take her at least a half-hour to cover that distance. I was too impetuous for my own peace of mind. I must restrain myself and await her arrival as patiently as I could.

Slowly I reentered the house, closing the door after me. I must do something to occupy my attention until she came. That half-hour would seem endless if I didn't. I looked about me, was struck by a sudden inspiration. Frances had always been a careful housekeeper. She wouldn't like the way I had taken care of things while she was gone. The place was absolutely filthy, hadn't been swept for weeks. I'd clean up a bit so she wouldn't scold me for being so shiftless. Scold me! I chuckled ecstatically as I seized a broom. Even her scoldings would be music in my ears!

I had nearly finished when I heard footsteps on the porch. She was coming! In another minute my hungry arms would be around her, my eternity of torment forgotten in her kiss. Oh, how happy—how sublimely happy—I was, anticipating the sweet pressure of her lips against mine!

"Frances!" I shouted joyfully, dropping the broom and starting for the door. "Frances!"

HALF-WAY across the floor I stopped, a puzzled frown on my face. Why were her steps so painful and dragging?

Why didn't she hurry, knowing I was waiting for her? Didn't she want to return to me after being in the grave so long? . . .

In the grave so long! God in Heaven! Why hadn't I thought of that? How could I believe that she would return, an alluring, beautiful woman, lovely and desirable as she had been in life? She had been dead a month! For a month she had lain in the cold, wet earth, decaying, putrefying, her body fed upon by crawling maggots! This was the horror creeping blindly across the porch! This was the Thing I had summoned from the tomb! Not Frances, the wife I loved and adored, but a bloated, rotting corpse, animated by the unholy power existing in that ring! Again I had been cursed by the ironical fulfillment of my wish! Again I had been tricked and cheated! And this second wish was inflicting a penalty upon me a thousand times worse, a million times more awful, than the first had brought!

"No! No! I screamed. "No!"

Fleshless hands were pawing, scratching at the door. Stiff with horror, I saw the knob begin to turn. It was trying to get in! It wanted to come to me, smother me with its loathesome caresses!

"Go away!" I shrieked madly. "For the love of Christ, go away!"

Again the knob moved. A husky voice, ghastly, blood-freezing, yet strangely like Frances' own, mumbled dreadful words:

"Let me in, Mark. Let me in. . . ."

"No!" I sobbed. "Go back to your grave! Be at rest! If you love or pity me, go!"

"Mark. . . ."

My eyes fell on the ring on my finger. Screaming, I tore it off, hurled it through the window. I heard the crash and tinkle of breaking glass, heard the hideous Thing outside stop fumbling at the door as though it had paused to listen. Then I

sank to my knees, my tear-stained, beseeching face lifted toward Heaven.

"Merciful Father," I prayed, "do not let this horror come to pass! Take away my cross from me! It is more than I can bear! Have I not suffered enough for my sins? Grant that things may be as they were before! But not my will, oh Father," I added humbly, "but Thine be done!"

SHEETS of flame seemed to roar and crackle through the room, scorching my flesh. I smelled the odor of decay, a foul stench emanating from long-shut tombs. I heard a terrible voice, screeching blasphemies, howling in baffled fury. And then I sensed a divine Presence enfolding me, bringing me comfort and peace, banishing the forces of evil.

A hand fell on my shoulder. . . .

I started erect. The hand was still there! but I was sitting at my desk, not kneeling on the floor. Turning, I gazed in unbelieving wonder—into my wife's accusing eyes!

"Mark," she said reproachfully, "don't you realize what time it is? Why, it's almost daybreak! What in the world have you been doing all this time? . . ."

"Frances!" I babbled hysterically, almost afraid to touch her. "You're not dead, then? You're alive! Alive! Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

She must have thought I was crazy when I fell on my face before her, sobbing like a child, kissing the tip of her

shoe. And so I was. Crazy with joy and relief. . . .

Frances will not believe the things I experienced actually happened. I told her all about them on our second honeymoon—yes, I finished and sold my novel; it's bringing us a comfortable income, now—and she just made fun of me for thinking they *did* occur.

"It was nothing but a horrible nightmare, Mark," she explained, shuddering a little. "You were exhausted from overwork. You went to sleep and dreamed all that—that nonsense. . . ."

A nightmare? A dream? Well, perhaps. But there is a livid, red scar around the third finger of my left hand—a scar that won't go away. There was a shattered pane of glass in the window the next morning, though I didn't look outside for the ring that might have broken it. But if anyone *does* find the ring, he is welcome to the last wish on it—the wish I didn't use. And God pity him if he is foolish enough to accept my offer!

Yes, I wonder if it was a dream. Perhaps I did yield to temptation. Perhaps a higher power took mercy on me and snatched a few weeks from the abyss of time to teach me a lesson I shall never forget. After all, "there are more things in heaven and earth—"

But no! I won't finish that quotation. I hate it now, remembering the circumstances under which I last heard it spoken! I never even want to think of it again! Never. . . .

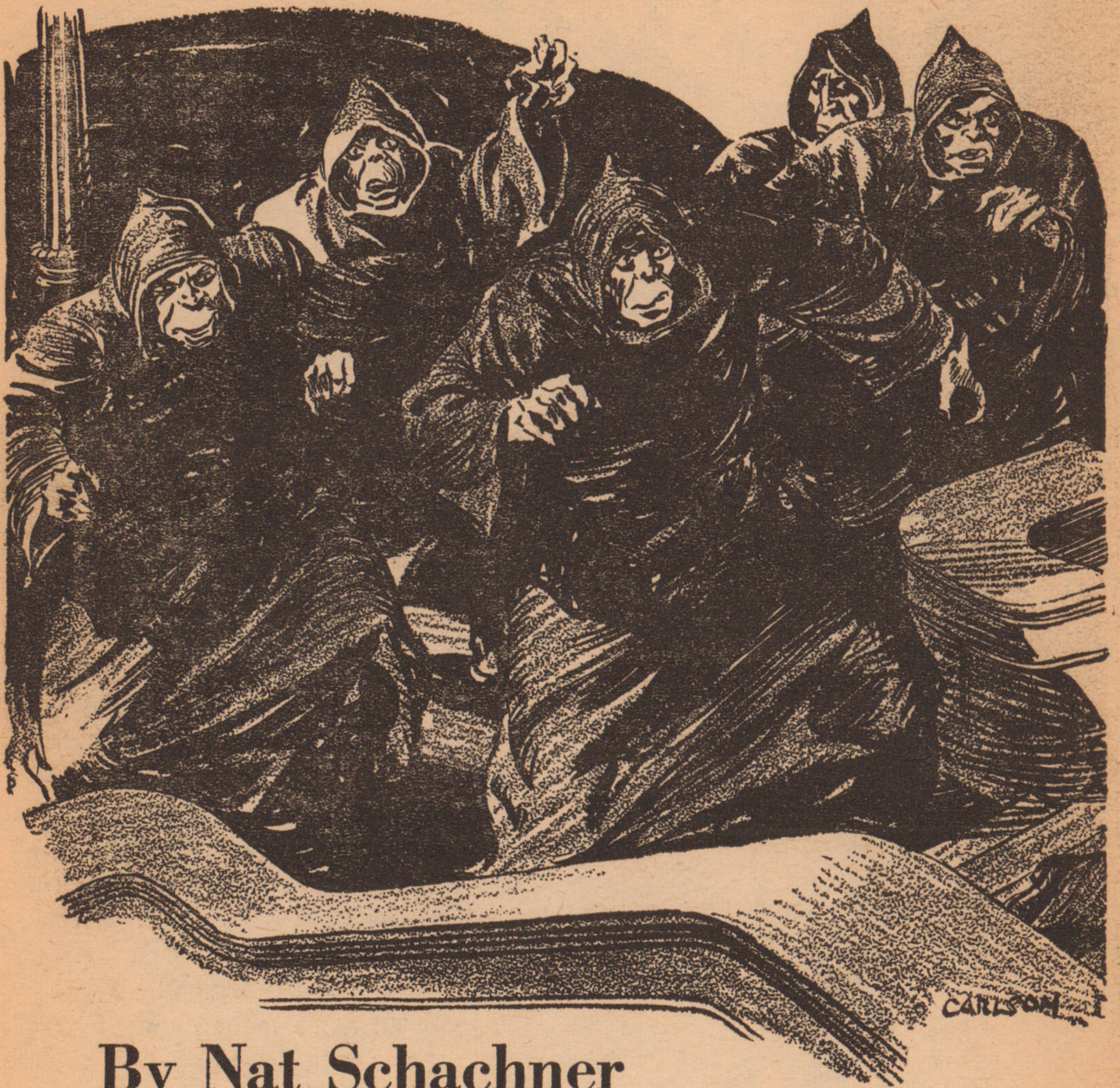
RAYMOND WHETSTONE

Will Thrill You Again With a Weirdly Eerie Tale in the October
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—Out September 5th!—

CITY OF THE



By Nat Schachner

(Author of "Hospital of the Damned," etc.)

Into a dismal city where grey-cowled creatures of plague left scarlet-spotted bodies in the gloom of night, came the tramp. He was a railroad bum, hungry and broken—a ready dupe for the terrible purpose of the pest-monsters who decoyed him into the house of Dorothy Burgess. . . .

I DID NOT know the name of the city through whose deserted streets I slouched hopelessly that grim autumn evening. It was eerie enough in all conscience, what with the dark, sullen tide whose farther shore was hidden in rain-

spattered fog, and the dilapidated, crazily leering warehouses that flanked the waterfront street on whose broken flagstones my weary feet tapped out sounds like thunderclaps.

The fine, sifting drizzle seeped through

SCARLET PLAGUE



A Novelette of Eerie Horror

my threadbare coat, turned up at the throat to hide my collarless condition, as if it were so much tissue paper. I shivered with cold and with hunger. For two days I had been immured in the depths of a freight car, without food or drink, trying to beat my way West where perhaps new life awaited me. Once I had had money and friends and a girl I thought I loved, but now—Well, to be honest, I don't blame the brakemen who thrust me off the mov-

ing train by the light of their lanterns, to the accompaniment of many oaths.

I had no idea where I was, within hundreds of miles. It was night, and what seemed a fair sized city stretched away from the glistening tracks and the turgid, strong-running river. I had stumbled to my feet among the railway cinders where they'd thrown me, and had wandered, shivering, down the nearest street. I think even then a premonition of what hung like

a miasmic cloud over this unknown town must have penetrated my being. For, though the street lamps glimmered in frozen haloes of grey fog-smoke through the slanting rain, no lights sprayed cheerful illumination from the eyeless houses, no human forms paced hurriedly along the streets, no automobiles hissed with wet tires over asphalt.

For the moment it stopped me short; I mean the vast, stealthy silence that blanketed the town. Strange, crazy phrases pieced themselves together in my mind. A city of the dead! A town whose soul had ebbed away in fear. A place of desolation and unspeakable things! I laughed a bit shakily, and the unexpected sound was like ghastly mockery in that deathly stillness. It is because I am weak and feverish that I have these silly thoughts, I said to myself. Every city looks strange and somehow ominous at night; every town inhabited by respectable, hardworking people clothes itself in sleep and blessed quiet during the hours when the earth's pulse is low.

Respectability! I laughed bitterly. I was an outcast—outside the pale. The mist swirled around me, freezing me to the marrow. I could not stand here forever or I would die before morning. . . . Hunching my shoulders forward, I went down the waterfront street, seeking an open door in those musty fronts where I could shelter myself against the rawness and the wet—and I was hungrier than I had ever been before.

But all doors were barred and sullen against intrusion. I stumbled on, still seeking. Then it was for the first time that I knew I was being followed. I had just paced hopelessly past the flare of the fourth street lamp, when the long oval of wet-gleaming flagstone in front of me became obscured with grey shadow. My eyes clung to it even as my feet missed

a beat, and then resumed their slow shuffle forward.

It was a fantastic shadow, blurred at the edges with irradiating globules of rain, grotesque in its foreshortening, hunched over like an evil dwarf with high peaked hat and horrible similitude of groping, clawing hands. It stopped when I did, and flowed on with even pace when I moved again. Then the flare of the street lamp was gone, and the shadow elongated suddenly and merged into the engulfing blackness of the dim-seen pavement.

Yet I knew that the Thing or being had not departed. It was still behind me, following stealthily, inexorably. I laughed suddenly aloud. What had I to be afraid of? To all outward seeming a bum, flotsam of the waterfront, anonymous spawn of the city—what had I to fear from skulking creatures of the night?

NEVERTHELESS my ears strained ever backward. The slow shuffle of my feet was strangely loud, my sharpened senses caught each almost imperceptible hiss of the droplets as they fell, yet not once did I hear the slightest whisper of the Thing behind. I twitched my head suddenly backward. Nothing! Unless perhaps that thicker shadow which seemed to merge with the lowering wall. Nothing! Yet my heart, hitherto a feeble pumping of starved blood, pounded suddenly like a triphammer.

I did not look back again. Instead I hurried gasping toward the next street lamp. Light! I must have light! A faint wind ruffled the tattered garment that I wore, a strange, burning sensation pricked sharply at my spine.

I whirled around with a smothered cry, fists balled in fierce anger. Hunger and cold had sapped my strength somewhat, but I still could give a fair account of myself. If the pursuing prowler thought My hands unclenched, dropped help-

lessly to my side. There was no one there. Only the dark, interminable street, misted with drizzle and grey fog.

I shook my head in bewilderment, and I stared wildly around. Blackness yawned out from the open maw of a warehouse not ten feet from where I stood, yet no power on earth could have compelled me to enter that strangely opened door. Fear clutched my vitals. I spun on my heel and ran as hard as I could toward the haven of the lamp. My feet were strangely light, so was my head. The cold had suddenly disappeared from my bones. Molten fire seemed to flow in my veins. A giddiness pervaded my being.

White radiance flowed around me, dispersing the clutching shadows of the night. I grasped at the dingy green lamp-stanchion as though it were a sentient thing which could protect me from nightmare terrors, and in so doing, my wobbly feet collided with something soft and yielding.

For one dreadful moment I stood there, frozen, rigid against the chill, dripping post, afraid to look down, afraid of what I should see. Yet the knowledge clamored through my veins, seared with blinding horror in my brain. That clammy, sprawled obstruction over which I had stumbled was. . . . With the last expiring effort of my will I forced my weighted eyelids downward.

The man stared back at me with wide-open, sightless eyes. The rain beat senselessly upon his tortured face; a thin, grimy hand tore in the last desperation of death at a blue-mottled throat as if he had literally choked for a saving breath of air. And on his forehead, set in terrible stigmata, were a row of round vermilion spots, red as new-spilled blood, scarlet as the fires of hell.

I lurched away from there in frantic haste. The glow of the street lamp had suddenly become evil, inimical, as it laved

the limp, dead body at its base. I started to run again. The strange, silent street seemed suddenly alive with shadows that gibbered and mowed at me. I wanted more than anything in my whole life to get out of this town with its ghastly, scarlet-spotted bodies, and silent, deathly leering warehouses. The fever burned in my veins and the wet flagstones echoed under my pounding feet.

So it was that I did not hear the swift approach of other feet, until the steel-hard hand gripped my shoulder through the thinness of my coat and whirled me around like a top. I cried out in sudden fear and jerked away with a ripping movement. Primeval sounds growled in my ridged throat; without knowing what I did, I bared my snarling teeth as if I were a cornered animal.

"Where the devil are ye running like that?" a gruff voice rasped at me out of the darkness. Then the man moved forward, threateningly, something long and straight uplifting in his hand.

BUT I had seen the glint of metal on the dark blue of his coat, the peaked hat that shadowed his grim, white-staring face, and the sight left me weak and limp with flooding relief. I forgot that, to the stern eyes of the law, I seemed but a homeless wanderer, a slouching bum of the streets; I forgot that my headlong flight from the unmoving thing that lay at the base of the street lamp might give rise to certain uncomfortable suspicions. . . . I knew only that this blessedly solid, flesh-and-blood policeman would protect me from the crawling shadows that had paced me, that had ebbed silently away at the approach of this embodiment of the forces of law and public safety.

I clutched the down-lunging arm with a fierce, hysterical gesture. "Thank God, officer, you came!" I whispered in a high, cracked voice.

He shook my restraining hand off angrily, held his club poised as if to let it descend on my unprotected head.

"None o' that," he grunted. "Come on, give an account o' yourself, or—" He prodded me around toward the light with the ashen stick.

"There've been things following me down the street," I insisted. "Shadows, people, I don't know what. But there's a dead man back there at the post—and that's why I ran."

The policeman whirled on teetering heels. The nightstick fell from his hand to dangle at the full length of its retaining thong. His face in the glimmer of light was a pale, set mask.

"Oh my God!" he groaned. "Another one, an' on my beat!"

I moved forward a bit. "Come, I'll show you," I said.

Perhaps it was the molten lava that seethed through my body that made me brave, assured. As I moved, the far-off lamp sent its feeble glow beating around me.

The cop swung back on me. Fear had set its pallid mark upon him. "Not fer a million bucks!" he mouthed, and stopped short as if he had been shot. His eyes jerked wide on my face, and in the dark glimmer of their depths I saw the unholy dread of a man who has come face to face with death itself. His beefy jaw dropped with a dislocating snap, the muscles of his cheeks sagged into flabby folds, he jerked his arm over his head as he stumbled back as if to ward off a blow. Thick sounds spewed meaninglessly from his trembling lips.

"For Heaven's sake, man, buck up!" I said scathingly. "You're a hell of a policeman." The fever that roared in my veins had burnt away all knowledge of my present plight. Once more I was that Gilbert Lawton to whom uniformed men saluted respectful greeting as he passed,

and at the sight of whose credentials motorcycle cops put their little books away with hasty apologies.

But the officer kept backing away. His eyes were fixed desperately upon my features. Then, with a strangled shriek, he turned and ran down the block, headlong, as if pursued by demons. In a matter of seconds he had rounded a corner, and all sounds ceased. Once more I was alone, and ominous silence shrouded the city, while the heavy fog-mist spattered unheeding against my face, to beat in a frozen nimbus of light upon the motionless huddle up the street.

For a long instant I stared after the plunging back of the fleeing man. What had changed him suddenly into a cowering wretch? What had he seen in my face that sent him stumbling and shivering away from me as if. . . . as if. . . .

The exaltation of fever dropped away from me. I shivered uncontrollably. Ice crystals formed in my blood, froze the marrow of my bones. My body was suddenly too heavy for my legs. My thoughts whirled round and round in a clogging nightmare. What—had it been that—he had seen?

A strange sensation prickled my skin. I looked up quickly. Then I screamed and shrank upon myself. The darkly silent street seemed alive with shadows. They flowed out of obscure holes in the flanking walls, they moved in shrouded greyness and on whispering feet.

Closer, closer, silent as the grave that had spawned them, terrible as the fog that bore them in its womb, the shadows came—on and on, with deliberate, inexorable tread. I knew now why the city was an abode of death; I knew now what had changed the cop into a shivering wretch. The memory of that still figure with the dreadful scarlet stigmata burned like hot irons in my brain. Death flowed in the street, whispered in the grey obscurity

of those enwrapping shrouds. Death that touched, and sent his victim into the gaping jaws of Hell.

SOMEHOW the fear that exploded my skull forced my leaden feet to action. Behind me the long, misty street was bare of shadows, of hooded figures. I turned and ran blindly, gasping, sobbing, feeling the nightmare drag of my limbs, agonized with the knowledge that my stumbling efforts were futile.

A burning cold enveloped my body. My bones dissolved with frozen fire. My lungs heaved with racking pains. The nape of my neck ridged against the expected grip of grave-cold fingers. My steps slowed to a stumbling walk; my wracked body could do no more.

On and on I staggered, slowly, haltingly. Behind me came no sound. Nothing but the scraping shuffle of my own feet. Hope gushed then in a warm flood through my frozen bosom. Had I escaped the strange creatures of the night? Had they abandoned me as too obscure a wretch for their inscrutable purpose?

I looked feverishly back over my shoulder. My head froze into position like that of a twisted doll. Behind me, not ten paces away, moved the shadows. Grey formless blobs, etched out of night and mist and drizzle, holding even step with me, unhurried, terrible in their timeless patience.

Then, for the moment, the ecstasy of ultimate terror lifted me to a certain wild recklessness. I stopped defiantly in my tracks, and shook my feeble fist at them, and mouthed strange oaths. Damn them, whatever they were, creatures of earth or of hell! They were playing with me, inhaling my gasping terror with greedy sibilance, prolonging my agony before the final lunge. Let them come now and get it over with. I was tired of life, of the pain that gnawed with increasing fires at

the pit of my stomach. I would not be made into a hunted animal for their cruel sport. I told them so, with the shrillness of delirium; I told them that and much more. My shoutings echoed up and down the street with ghastly mockeries, and rolled futilely back to my very feet.

For the shadowy Things paid me no seeming heed. They came on with worm-like flow; dim, clawing hands emerged from grey mantles, extended toward me in hideous travesty of priests' benedictions. In seconds more those elongated points would touch me.

I backed away quickly. They followed. Then I saw the glint of something long and sharp. With a moan of utter fear I turned and ran again. Wild, uncontrolled horror lashed me on with scorpion whips, whispered frightful things into my ear. Rather I should push my fevered body to the bursting point of heart and lungs and limbs than permit them to wreak their hideous will on me.

I did not hear them, but I knew they were there, keeping step with me, chuckling with unhuman laughter at my feeble efforts to escape.

Ah! Thank Heavens! The long, interminable block was ending. Directly ahead glowed a corner light, marking a cross street. To the right, it led deeper into the city. To the left—and my thudding heart slammed against my ribs—was the dark, strong-running river. A fantastic plan shaped itself even as I forced myself to renewed speed. A swift turn, a sudden dive into the murky, all-embracing waters. Perhaps there I could escape, perhaps I could strike across the tide for the distant, hidden shore, and rid myself once and for all of the doom that enveloped this night-shadowed city. Pneumonia! Drowning! What did they matter against—?

I turned the corner on unsteady legs and clutched at the wet brick wall with

a little cry. In front, cutting me off from the rain-glistening water, were looming shapes. Grey forms that came toward me with arms extended and long, steely points in their shapeless hands.

I stopped short, doubled on my tracks. The way I had come was barred. I glanced wildly around. Grim shadows disassociated themselves from the gloomy walls on the third side, and pressed toward me. I uttered a hopeless groan. Despair enveloped me in a moveless casket. I was trapped, surrounded, by these muffled shadows. There was no escape. Soon they would be upon me. What—what fate awaited me?

With an oath I lunged forward. Delirium gave me strength. My fists balled. I would. . . . The ranks seemed to widen a bit. Then it was that I noticed for the first time the cross street that led into the heart of the city. It stretched straight and firm, spaced lights making a dim glow in the bellying fog—and it seemed empty and bare. With a mutter of thanksgiving I swerved suddenly in my lunge and catapulted for the haven of seeming safety.

I did not know then! Oh God, I did not know!

Behind me drifted a low, rasping chuckle, like ridged waters in the wake of a speeding launch, but I did not pause to consider its dreadful implications. All my burning energies were engrossed on that lane of emptiness. My body, geared to feverish speed, flung along in an ecstasy of hope. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

In the Grey Horde's Trap

IT WAS a street of private houses, row on solid row, of dark grey stone and built to repel an army, buttressed with massive, oaken doors. Not a light gleamed anywhere; heavy green shutters were

tight clasped against the lonely street. If any one dwelt in their thick-walled depths, if any one heard the clatter of my headlong flight, he made no sign. I was an outcast, a friendless being, abandoned without mercy to the strange creatures who roamed the night.

Then I halted, and groaned aloud the torment of my spirit. It was all over. I had thrust my head into a diabolic trap. From behind the high stoops that fronted each house, new shadows arose and blocked my path.

Shrouded beings in front, shrouded figures behind. Even as I paused, shrinking from expectant contact, they ebbed sideways in a semi-circle. The semi-circle contracted about me with imperceptible tread. The needle points gleamed with hellish luster. Closer, closer!

With a wild shriek I spun and pounded up the stone stoop that loomed invitingly before me. There was no other way for me to go. It was the instinct of terror rather than reason that urged me on. The door was grim and blank; before I could bring help, even if help were there, the creatures would be upon me.

God! Even then I did not know!

I reached the top step, flung my weakened, fire-stabbed body against the heavy oak panels, beat with my feeble fist upon its hard, unyielding wood. "Help! Help!" I shouted to the unseen, unknown inhabitants of that barred and fortress-like house, knowing even as I cried that it was too late!

My blows, my cries, brought no response. The noise muted itself on blank wood, was smothered in the thick fog like a lost voice crying hopelessly in the wilderness. I sagged suddenly, wearily, bracing myself to the silent shapes that should be almost upon me.

My fever-blurred eyes blinked down the stoop in uncomprehending astonishment. For the grey creatures had not

moved. They formed a semi-circle in tight enclosure of the stoop, thereby barring all egress from my eyrie, yet they made no forward step to seize me.

Their hooded, shapeless heads bent forward, their hands were hidden within their shrouds. Like a pack of grey wolves they were, encircled around their prey, knowing that he could not escape—waiting, tongues expectant. . . .for what?

Then I knew what I had done. That arc of silent shadows, terribly expectant, gloating behind their masking hoods, waiting. . . .waiting. . . . Good God! I had been herded like a bleating, panic-blinded sheep, herded to the very spot they had marked for me from the beginning!

With feeble defiance I rose to hurl myself down into that waiting horde, flailing with both fists until I died. That way at least was cleanly; not. . . .

The door pushed cautiously open in back of me. I was weak, I was burning with strange fever, so I fell, cutting the back of my head against the sharp edge of the railing. Even as I dropped, limp and semi-conscious, my blurred vision roamed over the rain-misted street. Somehow it seemed to me that the expectant circle of Things had disappeared, had merged into the darker shadows of the farther walls, as if—and the thought was like a hammer blow on my skull—their mission had been accomplished, as if they had done the dreadful deed they had determined upon.

Voices drifted to me in muted rumbling. A harsh, angry voice strangely strained: "Get away from there, I tell you. It's a trick! Quick, before—"

"But I heard someone calling for help, Father. We can't allow a human being to die on our very doorstep because we are afraid."

Was I dreaming or had I really heard the girl's voice? Once I had believed in

women, with their soft, gentle-seeming ways and helpless, adoring looks; but bitterly had I repented. Was this another of those, a lovely shell enclosing corruption and death? I remembered the demoniac shadows that had forced me hither like hapless flotsam, and a cold sweat drenched my ague-stricken body. Dread, dread of the harsh, strained voice, of the softer, pity-quivering girl, engulfed me. I made agonized effort to arise, and fell back with a dull thud.

"Father, do you hear that?" Once more sounded the lovely voice of a woman with which Hell's demons know so well to clothe themselves. "You must find out. . . .!"

"Very well," the man grumbled, "but if it's one of those—!" The door edge jammed into my shrinking flesh. As in a haze I saw the blue steel of a gun barrel protrude cautiously above me. Smoldering, hostile eyes peered down at me—eyes socketed in a mask so hideous, so like a carved gargoyle that I shrieked and tried desperately to squirm away.

FOR a breathless second the twisted features leered at my thrashing form. Then those twin orbs, aglow with strange fires, widened into—fear, was it? Terror, even? The man made short, explosive ejaculation. The nightmare face disappeared, and the door slammed inward.

A small, shapely foot thrust into the narrowing space. There came to me the sound of a struggle, of the girl's panting voice: "We can not abandon him like that. Suppose he *is* a tramp. . . .!"

A tramp! Scum of the earth! I had forgotten what I seemed. I laughed, and the laugh strangled with bitterness. This girl with the lovely voice, this woman who acknowledged that twisted gargoyle as father, this demon on whose doorstep her brother creatures had thrust me, how dared she. . . .?

The grey shadows ebbed away from the shrouding walls of the opposite side. On noiseless feet they flowed forward, swiftly, in terrible, silent rush for the stoop on which I lay, helpless and writhing, before the door that was still held partly open behind me.

My heart stopped beating. My blood thickened with horror. I saw the whole damnable trick now. I had been bait, human bait. The girl, no matter what her father was, was the prey these grey, mysterious creatures sought after. The trap had been sprung. And now. . . .

Already they were half way across the street, swarming like evil embodiments of the fog. In three seconds. . . .

Somehow the tight constriction that held my throat as in a vise, loosened. My voice sounded dreadful and strange in my own ears as I shrieked: "Close the door, quick! They're coming!"

I tried to roll away, to send my aching body crashing down the stoop, catapulting like a thunderbolt into the silent figures that already were masses of grey against the grey stone steps. There was a quick, sharp, answering cry from within, the sound of sudden, gasping struggle, and a white hand thrust out, gripped my shoulder.

Up the steep stone steps the grey horde came, like water flowing uphill, silent as the grave, shapeless as death itself. I struggled to break that grasp. I was doomed, but the girl. . . . Her grip tightened. My poor body, gaunt from privation and fever, scraped against the sill. My head bumped hollowly, yet I felt no pain. I saw a brown hand, skinny and clawed like a vulture, reach for me. I swear it could have caught my lolling head; there was ample time. Yet, inextricably confused with the thunder in my ears, I thought I heard a swift sibilant whisper, and the hand retracted. The

Things in shrouds froze where they were, drifted down the stairs again.

Then I was wholly within the dark of the entrance hall. The oak door crashed solidly into position; there was the quick slide of heavy iron bolts into place. Was it delusion or had I actually heard, just before the barrier slammed shut, the gloating, satisfied chuckle that rose like a foul miasma from the hooded Things of the night?

I tried to struggle to my feet, but my limbs seemed paralyzed. My skin was a hollow husk, buoyed up by a blazing furnace within. I had no bones, no flesh; all had been dissolved into molten agony. My throat was parched, and my brain a fiery torment.

Just then the darkness flared into light. It hurt my clouded eyes; I blinked upward. The man stood directly over me, gun snouting downward. I blinked again to rid myself of nightmare frenzy, but it did no good. He did not change.

His tall, lean form was the form of a man in vigorous middle age, hard and spare and fit. But his face—dear God, his face! Incredibly old, incredibly twisted, and incredibly evil. It snarled at me with lopsided mouth, it leered at me with cracked, leprous skin crisscrossed with a thousand streaks of red. Deep hollows, filled with scar tissue, gouged his forehead.

I thrust my head weakly to one side to avoid the dreadful vision. And then I saw the girl, pressed tight against the door, listening for sounds from without its thickness. Her face was very lovely and very pale, her red lips were slightly apart as the panting breath expelled from her lungs.

The man's harsh burble of words brought my head around again, startled the girl away from the door. All his body was curved away from me in frozen repulsion; his eyes, twin holes of hell,

burned on my forehead with ghastly, leaping fear.

"Dorothy!" he screamed to the girl, "get away! He has it! *He has it!*"

Had what? A mantle of ice quenched the flames in my body. First the policeman had jittered away from me as though I were a thing accursed, and now this travesty, this monstrosity who had once been a man, cowered and shrieked horrible warnings.

ALMOST mechanically my hand crept up to my forehead, to the place where his loathing gaze was rivetted. It fell away with a thud. I knew now what it was. I lay as one numbed—beyond life, beyond death. I had felt the five round lumps, raised in swelling mounds on my skin. Without a mirror I knew their color—vermilion, red as new-spilled blood, scarlet as the fires of hell. The room rocked and swelled around me. I saw once again the body at the base of the lamp post, hand clutched at throat in frozen agony; once more I remembered the sharp stab of pain in my spine. It was all too clear now.

The girl's voice penetrated my frenzy, dissipated the fiery mist that hazed my reason. It was low and very steady.

"It's too late, Father! I touched him!"

"No! No!" I cried with the desperation of despair. "It is not too late. Throw me out into the street, where I belong. You shan't get the plague from me. Get away from the door."

Where I found the strength I do not know, but I crawled on hands and knees, blind with pain, yet exalted with fear for the girl called Dorothy.

"Let him go," the man croaked.

But the girl did not stir from her position. She barred my path, watching my writhing progress with eyes that were brave and pitiful. Only the alabaster

whiteness of her face showed her inward suffering.

"It is too late," she repeated. "One touch is sufficient to transmit the plague. You know that, Father." Her hand went up to her throat, her dark blue eyes widened. Then she smiled wanly. "We must get a doctor at once for this poor fellow, for—myself!"

The man's fists clenched until the blood ran from his palms. His gargoyle face was even more hideous in its anguish.

"Dorothy," he whispered brokenly. "No doctor can do you any good." His hands opened and fell limply to his side. "If only I had the formula, if only—" He raised his hands suddenly like a grotesque prophet. "Damn Soloway!" he screamed furiously. "God damn him and blast him to hell!"

"S-sh, father," the girl rebuked him quietly. "That won't help us; won't help all those poor people. Please get a doctor. Perhaps—perhaps—"

But the man did not hear. He pounced upon me, swung me up in arms that were incredibly strong, tossed me like a sack of meal upon a couch in the stately, high-ceiled living room. His eyes glared at me with ineradicable hatred for the doom I had brought upon his house.

"Doctors!" he snorted. "What do they know of this?" He swung on his daughter, his distorted face working with strangled emotion. "I'm going back to the lab, Dorothy, and by God, I'll find the proper proportions this time. I must—I must!"

He flung up the curving stairs that led to the second story of the house. "You'll see—" his voice floated down. Then a door banged shut, and there was silence.

Silence, in which I could hear every shuddering drop of blood in my veins. The girl looked at me a moment with pity in her deep shadowed eyes, then she moved swiftly and steadily to the phone that

nested in its cradle on the little stand near the hall.

"I—I'll have a doctor for you soon," she whispered over her shoulder. "Just as soon as I can locate one. We—we are strangers in this town." For the first time this dreadful evening there was a quiver, the hint of a sob in her voice.

Pulsing with pain, wracked with spasms though I was, I watched her slender lithe-ness as she leafed through the telephone directory, seeking at random the name of a doctor. For myself I did not care any more; I was doomed to a hideous death. But to this brave girl, unaccountably the daughter of that hideous distortion who had fled mouthing and raging up the stairs, I had brought, all unknowing, leprous foulness. It was that thought which made me writhe with new agonies and groanings of spirit as her moving finger halted on a name.

She dialled rapidly—and the clicks of the instrument fell into the silence of the room like pebbles in a fathomless pool. Silence again. Then: "Hello," she said, "is this Doctor Hinsdale? Yes . . . ? Will you please come at once to 433 Meadow Street? An emergency case Yes, please hurry!"

She dropped the phone hastily into its cradle, as if to cut off too awkward questions. Her hand gripped the table, as she swayed unsteadily. Her face was alabaster white, and her eyes were frozen prayers. Then she saw me lift myself imploringly on my elbow and a wan smile veiled the nakedness of her fear.

"I—I couldn't help it," I said with difficulty. "Forgive me; I didn't—know I had the plague. The grey shadows—those creatures of hell—pursued me, forced me here. If I had known—" I fell back again in a haze of agony.

The girl tensed like a strung bow. "You were forced here?" she repeated dully. Then horror came into her pallid face,

pried her red lips open in a choking moan. "God help us now!" she whispered. "There is no further hope for us—for anyone."

The anguish in her voice, her bearing, stripped the torture from my skull, made me oblivious to everything but the desperate need of this girl.

"Dorothy!" I cried from my couch, not knowing any other name for her. "Who are *they*? Perhaps I am as good as dead, but in the few moments left me, if I can help—"

She looked swiftly at me with new expression in her eyes, at the sight of which my heart bounded. God forgive me, a fool who was soon to die hideously. Then she dropped her gaze with a hopeless gesture. I misunderstood it.

"Look!" I cried. "I am not a bum, in spite of appearance. I'm Gil Lawton of New York. I—"

CHAPTER THREE

From India It Came

IT WAS not pride; it was not boasting. But I had been fairly prominent in my day, and that last smash-up of mine had given welcome headlines to the avid newspapers. That was why I had slouched off into the shadows, trying desperately to lose myself.

She *had* heard of me. I could see it in the quick flutter of her long lids, the sudden lighting of her fear-shadowed gaze.

"I'm Dorothy Burgess," she said, "and my father—upstairs—is Andrew Burgess. You can't help us," she went on with a shudder, "no one can. My—my father wasn't always like what you see. He was a biologist, a scientist. We were in northern India—Nepal—when the red plague broke out. Its symptoms were five red swellings on the forehead, and its end a—"

She choked off abruptly. Even with the constant pain that blasted through my gaunt frame I smiled bitterly. She need not be so careful of my feelings; I had already *seen* the end result.

"My father refused to flee the country. He was there on a museum expedition, to obtain specimens of certain rare plants that grew only in the mountain fastnesses of Nepal, with his assistant,"—for the moment her lovely face contorted with hate—"Enoch Soloway. My father threw himself feverishly into the work of discovering a cure for this dreadful disease. Day and night he toiled, while the plague devastated the country, made corpse-strewn deserts where once there had been populous villages. At last he found it—a complicated combination of the distilled essences of certain very rare and almost unknown native plants. He tried it out; it worked—miraculously. Recovery was almost instantaneous."

I listened eagerly. Hope flared in me. If that were the case . . . !

Dorothy Burgess went on tonelessly. "He was mad with joy. He distilled and combined for days, made up a substantial supply of the healing drug. Then—" Again there was that look of hatred on her lovely face.

"Then what?" I prompted. But I knew before she spoke, and I felt suddenly like a lost wretch on the desert whose pool of water has proved but a mocking mirage.

"Soloway disappeared one night, and with him went the supply of antidote, our cultures of the deadly plague bacteria, and the notebook containing all of father's researches and data. The next morning poor dad was down with the red plague. His assistant must have deliberately inoculated him while he slept."

The girl's gaze shuddered away from the tell-tale spots on my forehead, brooded with remembered pain into vacancy.

"Father went through hell," she said brokenly. "But somehow Soloway had overlooked a tiny specimen sample. It was not a full dose. It saved father's life, but it left him—as you see."

I forgot my own irrevocable doom at the sight of this girl who had suffered so much, and who now, because of me, was soon to writhe in frightful torture.

"But why," I remonstrated, "didn't your father make more of the antidote?"

She smiled wanly. "Its efficacy depends on certain exact and complicated proportions. A drop of one essence more or less robs it of all curative powers. The first distillation had been pure accident. And Soloway had taken the work sheets. Oh, don't think he didn't try," she cried. "But it was no use. Even now," she gestured hopelessly toward the upper floor, "he's still at it. There is something else, though. . . . Why had Soloway absconded? To gain the glory of the discovery for himself? No! For the plague went on until it burnt out for lack of victims. He never published; never proclaimed the cure.

"Father sensed the dreadful purpose in Soloway's twisted mind. As soon as he was well again, we tried to trace him. A rumor here, a vague report there. For months we hunted, and finally followed him to this mid-western city. Just as we came, the plague broke out. We knew then we were right. But somehow he must have discovered our presence. Things happened; strange attacks from which we escaped only by the mercy of God. So we fled secretly to this house, and barricaded ourselves in. Now," she ended with a catch in her voice, "we've been found again."

THE breath was whistling in my throat, my limbs seemed no longer part of me; my skin crackled and scraped over aching flesh. But I raised myself gasping

and mouthing. The damnable beast! A city lay helpless and dying at his whim. Only the Burgesses stood in the way of complete success. So he had evoked the aid of grey creatures from hell itself; they had used me as the loathsome instrument of their fiendish plan. I had brought the plague within the house, had infected that brave, lovely girl. Her father, Andrew Burgess, was no doubt immune as a result of his previous attack. I tried to speak, but the words strangled in my throat. Thick, incredible sounds spewed forth. I fell back with a thud.

The girl started forward in alarm. Then a bell jangled, and its sound ripped through the room like a thunderclap. I was on the verge of delirium. I saw as in a fiery mist the girl move toward the door, something glinting in her hand. It must have been a gun. I heard muttered conversation, after which the front door swung carefully open, closed quickly. Bolts rattled home.

But there was a man with the girl now—a short, stocky man who carried a black professional bag. I heard his sharp exclamation as the girl, Dorothy, whispered to him.

“My dear young lady,” he protested. “Why didn’t you tell me? If I had known, I would never—”

I laughed out loud. At least I thought I laughed, but it sounded more like the gurgling snort of a bull whose throat has been cut. He was afraid, this doctor, afraid of the plague. I had it, the girl would soon break out, but the healer of men was afraid for his own precious skin.

The man started violently at the weird sound I made, and approached me cautiously. His face was sallow with fear, and his jet black Vandyke and dark, bushy eyebrows jutted in bold contrast to the pallor of his skin. His eyes widened at the sight of the dreadful stigmata on my forehead. It was only with an effort that

he controlled his shuddering movements. Professional decision came back to him.

“It’s pretty hopeless, I’m afraid,” he said crisply. “No one yet has been known to recover. That is—” He stopped, opened his bag. “At least I can ease him for a while—maybe. . . .” His stubby, powerful hand came out with a shining syringe. He bared my arm without touching my skin, and jabbed.

“A heroic remedy,” I heard the doctor saying. “Strychnine! Poor devil, he was on the point of death anyway. It’ll keep him alive a few more hours perhaps. As for you, my dear, you touched him. Within the next three hours you will show signs of the disease. I know of no way to stop it.” He paused, grimaced and shrugged his shoulders. “I too—I’m afraid—! Well,” he went on briskly, “that’s my job. But I’ll have to quarantine all of us in here. I’ll call my nurse, get her over to help.”

He went to the phone, clapped the receiver to his ear, and dialled. A puzzled expression moved shadow-like over his face. He dialled again. A long wait, then he dropped the phone, sucked his breath in sharply.

“The phone is dead,” he remarked evenly.

I was awake now, fully aware of everything going on about me. The pains were gone, and I was strangely light. I felt buoyed up, floating. But that simple remark crashed into my consciousness with sickening force. The phone had been all right when Dorothy phoned Dr. Hinsdale; now it was dead. Some time in between it had been cut. . . .

Outside, lurked the grey, shrouded Things, mocking our agony, chuckling over the rapidly approaching completion of their dreadful task. Inside were a handful of the dying, infected and maimed, cut off from the outer world, waiting help-

lessly for the next move of the plague-carrying hellhounds of the night.

We stared at each other in a kind of horror. I groped unsteadily to my feet. Blood whistled through my heart, pumping with the temporary drive of the stimulant in my veins. Somehow I knew that within the next few minutes. . . .

Upstairs there was a terrific crash, as of tables overturned. Glass shattered. A gun racketed. The voice of Andrew Burgess, high, piercing, unrecognizable with mingled rage and terror. The thud of a falling body. Then silence, sullen, ominous, more frightful than any noise.

DOROTHY screamed and darted for the stairs. But I was ahead of her, taking them three at a time, buoyed to artificial vigor by the drug in my system. I clenched my fists as I raced down the long, dim hall at the head of the stairs. The devilish plot had somehow been completed. It had started with my infection, with the simple, yet infinitely cunning way in which I had been introduced into the house, and now. . . .

I went headlong into the monstrous being who, one with the shadows, was slipping stealthily along the wall. The breath slammed out of my nostrils as I smacked into him. I staggered back, bruised and puffing, still a hollow shell of my former self.

The grim shape straightened, hesitated in the shielding murk. Then I leaped, snarling in my throat like a ravening beast. I was dying, but this—this dim-seen creature would not live to gloat over his victory. Andrew Burgess was dead, I was sure of that, and his daughter—

As I catapulted forward, the marauder swerved. His face caught a glint of the filtering light from the lower floor. The roar of rage died in my throat. Involuntarily I checked my stride. Cold sweat broke out over my lunging body. The

face that leered at me seemed no human countenance. One ear was gone, as if ripped from its roots. The lips were forced back from dead-white gums in a hideous, perpetual grimace. The nose was a swollen polyp, bulbous with raw flesh.

The monster moved its hand. Great God in Heaven! It was the shrivelled claw of a fleshless corpse—and its scaly talons clutched a bar.

I screamed and lashed out weakly. The creature snarled malignantly as my fist sank into its stomach. The bar lifted, crashed down. I ducked, but not enough. It glanced off the side of my skull, and I went down, writhing with pain and renewed agonies.

I heard Dorothy's scream: "Mr. Lawton—Gil!" Then she was kneeling at my side, her dark blue eyes pools of fear.

"Don't come near me," I panted, half mad with the fever that burned again in my blood—and with helpless rage. "Tell Hinsdale he went down that way—before he escapes."

"Who?" demanded the doctor. He came bustling up behind Dorothy.

I lifted myself with infinite effort, held myself with spread hands against the wall. The girl had drawn back, remembering, seeing the scarlet plague writ large on my forehead.

I shuddered. "I don't know," I muttered vaguely. "A monster, a creature out of hell, a thing unspeakable. He hit me and ran down the hall."

The doctor was braver than I had thought. Without a word he scurried down the dim recesses, came back grim and quiet.

"There's a stairway that angles down in the rear. It's pitch black. Perhaps—"

"Father!" Dorothy shrieked suddenly. "What's happened to him?"

She turned and ran back to the door on the right. The doctor was at her heels, his black beard wagging. I followed slow-

ly, staggering, barely able to keep myself upright. There was no answer to the poundings of her slim hands. Hinsdale put his shoulder to the door, went catapulting in. We followed.

THE room was acrid with gun-smoke. I saw that it was fitted up like a laboratory; that a table lay sprawled on its side, and that oily chemicals were flowing sluggishly across the floor.

Dr. Hinsdale ripped out an angry oath and darted toward the table. He was brought to a spraddling halt by Dorothy's scream. She had seen the sprawled, unmoving figure of Andrew Burgess.

Hinsdale jerked around, knelt swiftly at the side of the silent man. His face was pale with some terrible fear. He worked feverishly and silently. Burgess stirred under his ministrations, sat up slowly. Blood streamed from a gash in his scalp. Hinsdale took a deep breath. The color flooded slowly back into his cheeks.

"That was a close call," he remarked. The gargoylish face of the scientist did not seem to take him aback.

Burgess looked vacantly around a moment, as though he did not recognize us or his surroundings. Then he jerked to his feet, panting, glaring madly at the window.

"I saw him," he mouthed. "Out there, outside the window, peering in at me. Like a monstrous toad. I ran for my gun. By the time I got it he had smashed the glass and jumped into the room. I fired and missed. Then something hit me and everything went black."

"Who was it?" Dr. Hinsdale snapped.

Burgess looked fearfully around before he answered.

"Enoch Soloway!"

The name of course meant nothing to the doctor, but Dorothy gave a little gasp and sank weakly into a chair. I stood

rigid, pulses beating like triphammers all over my body. Then I rushed to the window, looked out through the splintered frame.

A broad stone ledge extended out some twelve inches. The adjoining house was dark and shuttered, and an eight-foot well lay between. But a very active and very desperate man could have jumped from the roof, across the intervening gap, and landed precariously on the ledge.

FOR a long moment the smoke-clouded room was a tomb of despair. Burgess had sat down again. The blood trickled unheeded down his cheek; his twisted face was dark with torment. Dorothy was rigid as stone, and her eyes were masks of fear. The doctor stared from one to the other, as if puzzled, then down at the spatter of oils that widened slowly over the floor.

The acrid odor of mingled chemicals and gun-smoke hit my nostrils. The effects of the strychnine were wearing off. My throat was hurting, I had difficulty with my breathing. I knew what that meant. I remembered the dead man who had torn at his throat before he died. I could feel the grim progress of the plague as it enfolded me. Within an hour or two I would be dead.

Strange how the thought affected me. The thing that was *me* would blank out of existence, as though it had never been. That did not bother me nearly as much as the thought of Dorothy. . . . The plague was upon her. How could she escape it? I searched her smooth white forehead a thousandth time for the telltale stigmata. Still no signs. A wild hope thrilled through me. Was it possible—? Then I thought of Enoch Soloway lurking somewhere in the house and the burning fever in my veins was suddenly ice. The plague was inside. Dorothy could not escape; no one could escape.

I might be nearly dead—yes. But before I went I would take Soloway with me, give the girl her last chance for life. I clenched my teeth till the blood ran from pierced lips, and groping blindly away from the wall, staggered toward the door. Dorothy jerked out of her stupor, crying: "Mr. Lawton—Gil—where are you going?"

"After Soloway," I croaked. My throat was hurting like hell, tightening, as though clutching fingers throttled me. I had only a short time left.

Dr. Hinsdale sprang suddenly to the door, blocking my path. "You fool," he ripped out, "you'll die before you reach the bottom step." His eyes roamed around the room from under bushy black brows. He frowned. "I don't quite understand, but this Soloway seems to be dangerous. So I suppose," he shrugged his shoulders and his eyes glinted, "it's up to me."

Then he was gone, slipping like a cat out of the door before he could be stopped. I heard his swift movements as he went down the black pool of those back stairs.

I groped my way over to the window, taking care to keep as far away from Dorothy as possible. "He is a brave man," I said.

My throat was closing up. I could feel dull knives hacking at my larynx. Soon I wouldn't be able to talk. For the thousandth and first time I fastened desperate eyes on the girl. Good God! It wasn't so; it must be delirium, it must be the haze that still clouded the room! Everything whirled around me. I stumbled forward, mouthing sounds that ripped my throat to shreds.

Burgess sprang to his feet in alarm. Dorothy's eyes widened on me. "Great Heavens, Gil! What's the matter?"

With a tremendous effort I forced the words out: "The spots! The spots!"

Burgess leaped for his daughter in one bound. His eyes devoured her forehead,

and hell flamed in them with unhuman fires. He staggered back, clutching his own temples. A great sob racked his frame.

The girl swung fearfully from one to the other. The five round spots, large as dimes, still only faintly red, were unmistakable now. The plague was upon her!

"What—?" she commenced, when she was interrupted by a scuffling noise, followed by a frightful scream. The scream reared itself into the frozen air, and choked off abruptly.

Paralysis gripped us all. That had been Dr. Hinsdale! He had found Enoch Soloway, and must have died—horribly. Even now the misshapen monster was gloating over his victim, was crouching down in the Stygian lair of the cellar, waiting. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell's Scarlet Stigmata

GOOD God! What could we do? Burgess was back in his chair, watching me with sudden childish merriment. His twisted countenance lit up with gruesome glee. Meaningless sounds babbled from his lips, and his hands plucked spasmodically at the hem of his coat. I stared at him in horror. The man had gone mad; his mind was a shattered, ruining wreck.

Dorothy's hand explored her forehead fearfully, dropped with a little thud to her side. Then she slumped over, limp and moveless. I was the only one left, and I was a hollow, plague-rotten husk. I gritted my teeth and went for the door. This time, I swore, I would. . . .

I fell back from the gloomy well of the hall, stumbling in my haste. The cry that rasped my swollen throat was unuttered. My teeth chattered with frozen madness. It was too late.

The shadow creatures were in the house!

They flowed into the room, shapeless

and grey, their hidden feet whispering over the bare floor. They slipped along the walls, forcing me back with the horror of their coming. Two placed themselves at either side of Burgess. He plucked unceasingly at his coat and paid them no attention. Two others guarded the unconscious girl. I felt the window sill pressing against the small of my back. I could go no further. For one wild instant I thought of precipitating myself through the jagged glass, and bring swift surcease of pain to my throbbing body. Then I stiffened as another figure paced into the room. His feet made hollow, thumping sounds, loud as fate in the eerie stillness.

He, too, was enswatched in shapeless shroud and hood of grey, but five dreadful discs made bloody scarlet splotches across the broad expanse of forehead. I stared at him, and felt my reason slipping. Was this in truth the plague itself, walking the earth with attendant train of hell-born creatures, spreading the foul contagion of its breath over a helpless humanity?

Then I threw back my head and laughed wildly, terribly. "I know who you are," I gasped and choked. "You are Enoch Soloway!"

The vermilion-spotted figure turned to me. The others did not move. He seemed to measure me carefully.

"So you know," he said finally, in a deep, muffled snarl. "Then you must also know—"

"That you are about to die!" I screamed, and sprang forward. I had been crafty, pretending limp movelessness, husbanding my failing strength for this last wild leap. Let me but get my hands on the throat underneath that coarse grey stuff and no force on earth could have torn me loose.

But he had been prepared. Two grey-clad Things sprang like lightning to my side, gripped my flailing arms with steel-

hard sinews. They bore me back, struggling and cursing, sent me crashing to the floor. I lay there, a huddled, unmoving mass, gagging with pain and violent retchings.

"I would kill you now," said the masked figure, "but it is not worth while. Within half an hour the plague will have taken you. It is not a pleasant death."

I glared up at him, choking, feeling already the unutterable agonies of the damned, but unable to say a word.

"Enough of such scum," the shrouded being went on contemptuously. "We have more important work on hand. Wake up the girl. She must know what's going on."

A grey shadow leaned over, slapped the limp girl's pallid face. The color flared into her corpse-white cheeks; she lolled her head from side to side. Her eyes opened, widened on the dreadful Things that surrounded her. Her hand flew to her throat; her lips parted with unshed screams.

The masked figure that was Soloway chuckled gruesomely. "The plague has set its stamp on your pretty white forehead, I see. That is well." He swerved on the still babbling man. "Now, Burgess," he sneered, "I have a proposition to make. You always were a fool—boasting about true science and filthy rot like that. You could have made millions out of your antidote, but no, you wouldn't do it. You'd give it free to suffering humanity. Suffering humanity, bah! I was smarter than you. Let humanity suffer, and make them pay through the nose to get better." He laughed horribly in the mufflings of his hood, while I writhed on the floor in helpless torture.

"I chose this city with care," he went on. "It's a rich mill town—plenty of men here who roll in money. I gathered a group who weren't too squeamish; I gave them cultures of the plague germs to scat-

ter broadcast. Hundreds have died, are dying. When I thought the time ripe, I caused the wealthy to be inoculated, the fools with money. Then I sent them messages—that only *I* had the antidote. A half million apiece for their lives. . . . It was cheap. The first one will pay in the morning—the others as soon as they see it works with him.”

He hesitated, then ground out. “I—somehow—smashed the original flask containing the antidote. But I had your notes. I sent emissaries out to get the drugs. I compounded them in the exact proportions, but—” and again he snarled in baffled rage—“a piece had got torn out of the last sheet of your notes. The very last ingredient.”

He took a step forward, towered like an evil demon over the silent, twisted man. “You know what it is. You can’t make the stuff without the figures; I have it all made up but for that one chemical. What is it?”

Burgess had his head down. He did not answer. His hand plucked ceaselessly.

The plague-master chuckled evilly. “So you won’t tell me, eh? Then listen to me. Look at your daughter, the daughter you love. She has the plague; it is stamped on her forehead. In a few hours she dies. You’ve seen how they die; I don’t have to tell you. Give me the name of that last ingredient and I’ll cure her—do you understand me, you fool?”

“Don’t tell him, Father,” Dorothy screamed suddenly. “It’s a trick. He’ll never let us out alive if you do.”

BURGESS slowly lifted his head. His scarred features were more hideous than ever. Then he opened his twisted lips and laughed. Yes, laughed, long and loud and horribly. The sound slashed through my flesh like knives, sent the maggots of terror leaping in my brain.

Burgess was mad, wholly, irrecoverably insane.

“Father!” Dorothy shrieked, and writhed unavailingly in the grip of the grey-clad men who held her.

The hooded master of the plague stared down at him one dreadful instant. Then he ground out a fierce oath and swerved on the girl.

“You know it,” he spat. “You were in your father’s confidence. Tell me, or you die.”

The girl faced him unafraid. The color flamed in her cheeks, matching the red of those awful splotches on her head. “I won’t,” she breathed. “I know I’ll die. I know all of us will. It doesn’t matter. But your horrible racket is gone. It won’t work any more. No one will pay if you can’t cure. I know what is in your filthy mind. You won’t stop with this town if you get the antidote; you’ll do the same thing over and over again.”

The man towered over her, hit her across the face. Red marks, like those of claws, leaped where he had struck. I cried out weakly, but could not move.

The girl did not move under that cruel blow. “I won’t tell,” she said very low.

“I’ll torture your pretty body until you’ll beg for the plague to work faster,” he threatened.

“That won’t make any difference in the least,” she declared. And there was that in her unconquerable eyes that must have convinced him she was telling the truth.

“Very well,” he chuckled suddenly. “You love your father, don’t you?”

Fear leaped into her defiant eyes. “What do you mean?” she quivered.

“Just this,” he grinned confidently. He seemed sure of himself now. “He may have gone crazy, the doddering fool, so he can’t tell me himself, but he’s not insane enough not to feel pain. I’m going to torture him until his shrieks ring in your

ears, until you are writhing with his clamors for mercy."

"You won't—you can't—" she started frantically.

"Oh, won't I?" he sneered. He snapped out something. At once the two grey creatures who stood guard over the slumped madman grasped him by the arms. In a trice they had him securely lashed to the chair with ropes they had taken from under their shrouds. The deranged scientist looked up at them vacantly, twitched and slumped unknowing into his former position. He did not seem aware of his surroundings.

The girl strained against her captors in wild fear. "You beast, what are you going to do to him?"

"You'll see in a moment," he retorted triumphantly. "Unless you tell me what I want to know."

"God!" I raged. "Give me but a moment of my old-time vigor, then I could die gladly, willingly." But I lay where I was, writhing like a broken worm, unable to lift myself from the floor, a horror-stricken, helpless witness of all that went on.

The girl shivered. Her face was pale as death; the red spots of hell leaped out startingly from her marble forehead. A violent struggle racked her slender frame.

"Well?"

"I—I can't," she whispered through dry lips. "Forgive me, father."

The figure who was Soloway howled with baffled rage. "Give it to him, then."

Swift as lightning, a grey demon whipped from under his shroud a huge, curving pair of pincers. At the sight of them Dorothy shrieked quickly: "Stop! I'll—"

But it was too late. The pincers flashed upward and clamped with a cruel snap on the right ear of Andrew Burgess. There was a hideous, crunching, rending sound, and the lobe of ear ripped off in a single

bloody gout. Dark blood gushed in a torrent from the raw wound.

THE insane man jerked under the torment, his twisted mouth opened and a bloodcurdling scream of anguish racketed through the room. The girl struggled violently with her guards, her face a mask of dreadful agony; her shrieks mingled with the toneless, unending cries of her tortured father.

"Stop! Stop! I'll tell. Oh God!"

The vermilion-spotted figure said in satisfied tones: "I thought you would. Quick, what is it, before—" He made a significant gesture with his arm.

The beads of agony stood out on the girl's cheeks. Burgess's toneless cries died down. The terrible vacancy of his madness settled once more on his features.

"It—it's—"

"Don't tell, Dorothy," I cried suddenly. Somehow that last frightful torture had broken through the obstruction in my throat. Waves of shuddering nausea rippled through my frame. With a last grinding effort I had heaved myself erect. I moved forward brokenly, arms outspread.

But I had seen something, and it was that which had given me strength for even this that I was doing.

From the dim recesses of the hall a shapeless, broken thing was crawling. Head down, inching its tortuous way along like a gigantic slug on whose soft body some one had set a crushing heel. But I knew! It could only be Dr. Hinsdale, left for dead in the bowels of the cellar, returning from the grave to avenge his wrongs. In his outsprawled left hand a gun was clutched—the gun of Andrew Burgess—the gun I had looked for in vain.

It was this that had forced me erect with all my dying strength. I must engage the attention of these fiends, keep them away from that slow-creeping death,

pushed on by a will as indomitable as my own. I shouted again: "Don't tell!" and staggered toward the hell creature with the dreadful stigmata.

He whirled at my shout; so did the others. Dorothy shrank into her chair. "Gil!" she shrieked. "They'll kill you, too."

Somehow that anguished cry sent the blood roaring through my bursting flesh, lent me the semblance of my old strength.

I leaped. The plague-master howled horribly. He shrank away from my coming. I must have seemed a frightful enough sight. But before I could reach him, the grey men were upon me, kicking, crashing at me with their fists, beating me back again. I struggled, I fought, I struck out with blows that were mere feather puffs. I was borne back remorselessly, bleeding, stunned, sent crashing to the ground.

The plague-master advanced. "So you wouldn't die in peace, eh?" he ground out. "We'll give you a taste of the pincers, too."

Steel flashed before my aching eyes. The girl's voice rose in strained horror. "I'll tell you; only leave him alone!"

"The bargain applies only to your father," he snarled. "Not to this damned butter-in."

Closer, closer, came the rending pincers, as the crawling, broken figure lifted itself over the threshold. I saw it raise the gun in a hand that shivered with ague. My gaze froze to it. "God, steady his hand!" I prayed. The pincers clamped on my ear, started to pull. A fiery agony beat in my skull. The figure that was Soloway hunched over me, drinking in with whistling breath the sight of my twitching torture.

The gun sagged to the floor, as if it were too heavy a burden, wobbled upward again. I felt cartilage giving. I shrieked.

Then all pain was forgotten. The gun

hand had stiffened; the round bore snouted directly at the bending back of the figure with the scarlet stigmata. All my soul leaped into my eyes, willing him on, willing that finger to squeezing pressure.

The man Soloway must have seen the direction of my stare. He whirled around on cat feet. The gun was dead-centered on him now. He howled with fear and jerked forward. As he did, the gun spouted flame; the thunder of its explosion smashed through the room. The masked man gave a great convulsive leap, came down with a dreadful thud to the floor.

I must have fainted then. But the last thing I saw, or thought I saw, was the man from the dead rear a hideous head.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Missing Ingredient

WHEN I woke it was to the sobbing murmur of my name. Dorothy, her face wet with tears, the vermilion signs of the plague startlingly distinct on her forehead, was chafing my gelid hands. I felt a queer rushing ecstasy. "I love you, Dorothy," I said brokenly. We were both soon to die; why then should I mask my feelings?

She flushed and nodded her head. She must have felt the way I did. For a moment we clung desperately to each other. Then I said: "What happened?"

She shivered. "I don't exactly know. But those dreadful Things ran as if they had seen a ghost. Father," her voice quivered, "is dead. Poor man, he is better off. As soon as I saw I couldn't do anything for him, I ran to you."

I lifted myself weakly. "We shall both be with him soon, Dorothy," I said.

Then I saw the huddled grey shroud with its row of bright red discs. I laughed harshly. "Soloway went first, but we won't meet him, I'm sure of that."

I tottered over to that sinister figure,

twitched at the hood. It came off in my grasp. I staggered back with a great cry.

Dorothy ran toward me. "Gil, what's the matter?"

I could only point voicelessly. Staring up at us, dirty brown even in death, black beard torn awry, bushy eyebrows loose from their moorings, was the distorted, hate-snarling features of Dr. Hinsdale!

Dorothy gasped. "Hinsdale! That's not his name. I recognize him now. That's Sailendra Mir! The native doctor who used to do odd jobs for father!"

"Then who," I demanded in bewilderment, "is the other—the man who killed him?"

I had only minutes to live, yet I felt I could not die properly unless I knew. I forced myself over to the other creature, the man who still lay, face downward, the gun fallen from his nerveless fingers.

I turned him over, and received an even greater shock. It was the hideous, deformed monster who had smashed me down in the hall, who had tried to kill Andrew Burgess. My head was swimming with disease and utter confoundment. I could never unravel this.

But Dorothy moaned: "Oh! oh! *This* is Enoch Soloway. My God, what happened to his face, to his hand?"

The misshapen thing that had once been a man stirred. Like a corpse whispering back to life. He opened his eyes, stared with the shadow of approaching death at the girl. "Forgive me, Dorothy," he said slowly and painfully. "I am dying. It is better so. I deserve it. But I swear," he moaned, trying to raise himself, "I never intended—what happened. I—was jealous of your father; I wanted the—glory. I ran away with the antidote, and—everything. I wanted to publish, and claim I had found it. But Sailendra Mir must have seen me. He followed me, waited till I got to America."

He slumped down again upon the floor,

but continued: "Then his men made me prisoner. Only last night, I heard him boast of what he was doing. I managed to slip my chains; I crawled into the room. Before they could stop me I had smashed the bottle of antidote and grabbed for your father's notes. It was all on a table before them when they were holding a conference."

The dying man took a deep breath, went on: "But he was too quick. He snatched the papers back; only a little piece stuck in my fingers. I chewed it, swallowed. It held the name of the last ingredient. He was crazy with rage; he tortured me with hideous tortures, but I wouldn't tell him. Then he flung me back in my cell. Outside I heard them talk. Somehow they had found out you had come to this town. They were going to compel you to tell them." He stopped; his head sagged.

"Go on," I urged breathlessly.

"I broke my chains again when they were gone. I must have been crazy with pain, for I staggered here, instead of going to the police. I found them prowling outside. Somehow I managed to get to the roof of the neighboring house and jumped. But Burgess saw me. There was no time for explanations. He had a gun. I hit him, took the gun, ran into the hall and into you. I got away and raced down to the cellar. Then I heard steps. Suddenly a flash blinded me, and before I could shoot, I went down. It was Mir. I recognized him in spite of his disguise, as I fell."

I nodded. The whole business was getting plainer. That scream we heard had been Mir's way of throwing us off the track. He had thought Soloway dead, had raced back to let his henchmen in the front door, and had donned his gruesome robe.

"But—but how," Dorothy asked, help-

lessly, "did he come as the doctor? How did he know whom I called? I took a name at random."

"Simple," I said. "The whole thing was planned. I, a nameless tramp, was the decoy. He had your wire tapped, answered your call, heard you mention the name. Then he cut the wires to make sure you couldn't call again."

SOLOWAY fell back. The blue of death was spreading over his features. Soon, I thought with sudden anguish, we would follow. I didn't want to die now, not after I knew that Dorothy loved me.

"Fool!" I shouted suddenly to myself. I clawed down to the stricken man. "What was the name of the missing ingredient?" I cried. My heart was thumping with a wild hope. Then it sank. The stricken man did not seem to hear. He lay motionless, dead.

I shook him, I cried, I raged. Life had beckoned and then vanished. It was incredible, horrible.

Then suddenly I recollected. The pseudo-doctor's bag! I raced for it; I stormed through its contents. There was the colorless flask, filled with a clear liquid. The antidote—minus the one precious ingredient. I held it up, almost let it drop in despair. Dorothy cried out sharply. "Gil, for God's sake, don't! The last thing mentioned on father's notes was potassium sulphate. I remember that. We have—have it here!"

She was running toward the glass shelf, toward a stoppered bottle. Then she stopped, turned tragic face to me. "But the exact amount," she whispered. "That—I don't know."

There was no time to experiment. Life was slipping fast. I could not stand the fire in my throat much longer. My hopeless eyes fell on the syringe. Strychnine!

The stuff that had pumped life momentarily into me.

It was the last chance. I grabbed it, wobbled unsteadily back to the dead-seeming man. No spark of life was on his monstrous countenance. Dully, without hope, I squirted the contents into his arm.

Nothing! It was all over. I rose wearily. God! If only—

Dorothy's sharp cry jerked me around. "Gil—his eyelids! I saw them flicker!"

I was on my knees again, shaking him frantically. His lips moved soundlessly; his eyes opened.

I cried: "How much potassium sulphate? How much?"

He stared upward with the look of one already dead; then his lips moved. I bent down, caught the faintest of whispers: "One per cent." A shudder rippled over his body. His eyes were open, but he did not see. This time he was irrecoverably dead.

But now it did not matter. It is not necessary to tell how we measured the precious dose with shaking hands, how carefully we added it to the liquid, how, with shuddering prayers, we drank.

It is enough that we are alive today, happy in our new home in this midwestern city from which our antidote cleared away the last vestiges of the plague that had spread horror for one long, nightmarish week. It is enough that once more I face the world, boldly, confidently, with a substantial sum of money in the bank, subscribed by a grateful people, whose lives we saved with the completed formula.

And we, that is, my wife and I, have made it a fixed, unalterable rule never to discuss the soul-grinding terrors of that night at Meadow Street. But often, at night, I cannot stop myself from reliving each dreadful moment. But then I hear my wife's calm breathing, and a blessed peace steals into my soul, and I sleep.

MOTHER OF MONSTERS



By Roger Howard
Norton

*The sons of her dreams were big and stalwart, handsome and fine—
not like those writhing monsters which the world called her children.*

THE night was black as the mouth of the Pit, the bags as heavy as sin, and Dorothy Crayton felt like dropping them—crying wildly, hysterically, like a little child. She was tired, hungry, frightened. How much farther was it. She laughed bitterly to keep herself

from sobbing. She wasn't even sure she was on the right road.

The trees were a darker arch against the darkness of a starless sky. The road was a grey shadow, leading nowhere, and silence spread over the country like a curse. She put down her bags to rest a

moment, and there wasn't a sound to be heard but the panting of her breath and the beating of her heart. If she could only find someone and ask the way, make sure. . . .

What was that? She knew that something was moving, something was behind her. She whirled around and there, moving silently up the road towards her, was a black robed figure!

For a moment, panic gripped her with the icy clutch of fear. Her eyes dilated and she pressed her hands to her mouth to keep from screaming—wildly, hysterically. Then the figure stopped, hesitated.

It was a tall, thin man dressed in a dark coat. His collar was turned up and a black slouch hat was pulled down over his eyes. Some slight measure of composure returned to her. The man might look menacing, but his actions reassured her. He seemed unwilling to come closer. Her throat was dry, her voice thick, but she called to him.

"Can—can you tell me how to get to Carl Waters' house?" she asked. The black figure came reluctantly nearer.

"Carl Waters'?" he repeated, questioningly. She could not see his face in the darkness, but she felt his eyes probing her.

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Waters was going to meet me at the station. I missed the train I was supposed to take, and caught a later one. There was no one at the station, so I walked. I think he lives on Seven Mile Lane." She fumbled in her purse and took out a book of matches and a letter. The dark stranger was standing quite close to her now.

"Seven Mile Lane?" repeated the man. "This is—"

Dorothy had struck a match to verify the address on the envelope. The little flame burned brightly, there was an exclamation from the man standing before her and with a sharp blow he knocked the match from her hand, but not before she

saw his face! A face contorted with rage, eyeballs glaring and teeth flashing white, *and the face was dark blue!*

For a moment Dorothy stared straight at him in the darkness, stunned. Then with a wild scream she turned and ran down the road into the night. She ran on and on, blindly, madly, until her legs started to waver—until there was no strength left in her body. Then there was a flash of light, a sudden noise and, as she started to fall, strong hands gripped and held her.

"There, there, little lady," said a pleasant voice. "What's the trouble? Where are you running to? Lucky I have good brakes or I would have hit you sure."

DOROTHY looked up into the smiling eyes of a young, good-looking state trooper. The reaction from her fear was so great that for a moment she buried her face in his tunic and he held her tight, as if she had been a frightened child, then she got hold of herself and, blushing a little, stepped away.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "A man down the road—he frightened me! I dropped my bags and ran." She smiled at him, her eyes still wide, her golden hair a bit disheveled.

"A man frightened you?" His strong face darkened. "Come on, let's find him."

The trooper helped her into the patrol car, and started down the road in the direction from which she had come. She looked at his profile as it showed in the faint light of the dashboard, and she felt warm, safe—and a little excited.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Peter Brant," he answered. "Company B, State Police. What's yours, and what are you doing up here in the wilds?" His teeth flashed in a smile.

"My name's Dorothy Crayton," she answered. "I just came up from New York. I'm trying to find my uncle's house, Carl Waters. I'm going to live with him."

"Carl Waters?" Brant's voice was amazed. "You're going to live with him?"

Dorothy was slightly annoyed at the note of astonishment in his voice. "Yes," she said. "Any objections?"

Brant flushed. "Gee, no! I'm sorry, Miss Crayton. I was just surprised. Why didn't he meet you at the station?"

Dorothy hesitated a moment. "Well," she confided, "I lost my job. I didn't have any place to turn to, then I remembered this uncle of mine that I'd never seen. So I wrote to him and he told me I could come and live with him if I wanted to. He told me what train to take, and said he'd meet it." She hung her head a little. "I . . . I didn't even have the money for the train fare. By the time I had managed to borrow it, I had missed the train—had to take a later one. There was no one at the station, so I had to walk. Then . . . I met that man!"

Peter Brant threw on the brakes and the car stopped.

There, outlined by the headlights, were Dorothy's bags lying in the center of the road. He got out and put them in the back of the car.

"Well," he assured her, "you won't be frightened by any more men tonight. I'll drive you to your uncle's myself." There was a faint click and an imperative, metallic voice spoke from under the dashboard.

"Calling Car 16!" it said. "Calling Car 16! Report at once to headquarters! Report at once to headquarters! Important! Hurry!" Brant swore angrily and then looked at Dorothy.

"That's me," he said. "Car 16. Damn that radio!" He looked helplessly into her lovely face. "I—gee, I'm sorry, but I've got to go. I won't be able to drive you to your uncle's after all." Then his face lit up. "I'll tell you what," he suggested. "It's not far, about a mile. You walk there and I'll take your bags with me in the car and bring them to you later.

Then I can check your arriving safely." He looked at her anxiously. "You don't mind?" he asked. "I've got to answer that call."

Dorothy laughed. She felt that the country wasn't going to be as lonesome as she had feared.

"Not at all," she replied. "It'll be very sweet of you to take the bags for me and, if I don't have to carry them, the walk will be easy." She got out of the car and closed the door. "Can you tell me how to get to my uncle's?" she asked.

"Straight up this road," replied Brant. "About a half mile. Then take the first road right. It's the first house on the left, about another half mile from the fork." He put the car into gear and then looked at her, his face grave. "And be careful," he said. "Your uncle's a queer duck!"

The car roared away and she watched the tail light grow dimmer and disappear. Then silence crept back and enveloped her. . . . The silence . . . and fear.

IT was at least an hour later that she stopped for the tenth time and looked around her. Still no house! She had taken the first road right and walked, it seemed, not half a mile but two or three. Had she missed it? The country seemed wilder, more desolate than before. Then, far away, she saw a light. The house at last! She started walking again and soon was at the gate.

It was a large, rambling building. Metal bars guarded the windows and the light coming through the two on the ground floor seemed like the faintly glowing eye sockets of a skull. The building was brooding, ominous, watchful. She started to walk up the gravel walk to the front door and in the silence the rattle of the small stones grating under her feet was like thunder. She was nearly up the driveway when the lights in the house went out!

She stopped and waited. The fear that had dogged her footsteps all evening like a pursuing ghoul now grasped her. Trooper Brant had said that her uncle was queer. Well, he certainly lived in a queer house. It was evil, menacing! Why had the lights gone out when her footsteps sounded on the gravel? It was still not too late. Should she go back? She thought of the long walk to the station along the dark, deserted roads and shuddered. No, she could not go back. She had no choice. Stiffening herself, she walked up to the heavy door and let the knocker fall with a loud clatter.

There was silence for a moment, then a scuffling noise behind the door. A deep voice, now oddly quavering, spoke.

"Who . . . who's there? Who is it?"

"It's Dorothy, Uncle Carl," she answered. "Dorothy Crayton. I took a later train and walked from the station."

"Dorothy?" repeated the voice questioningly. There was a rattle of chains and bolts. The door opened quickly, a hand reached out and seized her, pulled her inside and the door closed with a bang. It was pitch dark in the house. Dorothy could hear her uncle breathing heavily. There was a rattle of bolts and chains again as he locked the door, then the scratch of a match and a candle sputtered and burned, dispelling the darkness.

A huge, black bearded man stood before her. His dark eyes fixed themselves first on her face, then travelled slowly down over her body to her feet and back up again.

"You are . . . who?" he asked. Dorothy stared back at him, half angry, frightened at the odd reception.

"Your niece, Dorothy Crayton," she repeated. She fumbled in her bag and pulled out his letter. "Here, don't you remember? I wrote to you and you sent me this letter telling me that I could come

and stay with you. I missed the train and came by a later one."

His eyes burned into hers as he took the letter, examined the envelope, then read its contents. He gave the letter back to her and his eyes swept her from head to foot again. Then he threw back his head and laughed, a loud booming laugh. "So you're Dorothy," he said. "Well, well. Have you a kiss for your old uncle?" and without waiting for a reply, he threw one arm around her and pulled her to him.

Amazed, she did not resist, but turned up a cheek for him to kiss. Strong fingers seized her chin and turned her head around. Hot lips were pressed to hers as he kissed her, not on the cheek but on the mouth—and not like an uncle!

There was horror in her eyes as she put her hands on his chest and pushed him away. Horror . . . and fear!

His laugh boomed out again. "Don't you like your uncle?" he asked. "Your old uncle who has given you a home? Your old uncle who has been so lonesome?"

Dorothy stared at him coldly. "Yes, I like you," she said shortly.

His eyes narrowed but he said nothing. He turned and walked to the right into another room, dimly seen in the darkness. Again a match scratched and he lit a lamp. "Come in here," he said.

She walked into the large, barren room. It was dirty, dusty. The wallpaper hung from the walls in discolored, curling strips like fungus in a rotting forest. The furniture was broken, worn. He blew out the candle and set it down on a rickety table next to the lamp.

"How did you find your way here?" he asked. "It's a long walk from the station."

"Why, I just walked," answered Dorothy. "And then I met two men and I asked them."

"Two men?" His eyes became wide,

frightened. "What . . . what kind of men?"

"One was a state trooper and the other—" Then she remembered and she shuddered.

"The other? The other?" He stepped forward and grasped her by the arm. "What was he like?"

"The other . . . was all . . . blue!" Her voice quavered. Her uncle staggered back and there was wild terror in his eyes.

"Blue? My God, no! Then they are, they are—" He grasped her arm again fiercely, savagely. "You're sure? You're not trying to frighten me?" He shook her with vicious force. She shrank back frightened, and from somewhere in the depths of that queer, remarkable house a peal of mocking, mad laughter arose that cut through the silence like a sword!

THEY stood motionless for a second, he grasping her arm and the fear deepening in his eyes until they were bottomless pools of terror, she feeling his fear plucking at an answering chord in her—and all the while that mad laughter was ringing louder and louder. Then, abruptly, he dropped her arm and hurried from the room.

Dorothy stood there, rubbing her arm where he had clutched it. Brant had said he was queer, did he mean—mad? The locked and barred house, the kiss. She felt her skin crawl in revulsion at the memory. What was he so afraid of? And that mad laugh!

At that moment the laughter stopped on a note of infernal merriment as if a hand had been clapped over the mouth that gave out the sounds. Dorothy looked towards the door. Should she leave? Go back to New York—away from this place where—?

She had started to move towards the door mechanically, following her hardly formed thoughts, when Waters appeared

out of the darkness, blocking her way. He was carrying a bottle and two glasses and he seemed more composed.

"Bella, the cook, gets nightmares," he explained, his eyes avoiding hers. "How about a drink?" He put the glasses down on the table, and filled them.

"No thank you," said Dorothy. "I'm dreadfully tired. Would you mind if I went right to bed?" Waters picked up one glass and downed it with a swift motion.

"No," he said. "Go ahead." He picked up the other glass and mutely offered it to her. She shook her head and he tossed that down with a gulp, too. His eyes were burning again, travelling up and down her body with hot eagerness.

"Most of the rooms aren't fixed up," he told her. "Would you mind sleeping in my room with me? I'll sleep on the couch."

The face of this relative that she was seeing for the first time in her life was beginning to fill Dorothy with loathing.

"No, thank you," she refused. "I wouldn't think of inconveniencing you. It doesn't matter if I have to sleep in a room that isn't fixed up. I'll manage."

Waters' eyes were suspicious but he nodded. "All right," he said. "Come on." He picked up the lamp from the table, and led the way up the creaking stairs.

WHEN Dorothy woke it was hours later, how many she did not know. It was still dark. The room was quiet but there had been a noise, a noise that had wakened her. She listened, huddled in the bedclothes. Then she heard it again, a noise outside the window, the noise of the gravel on the driveway. Was it her Uncle Waters?

She slipped silently out of bed and stole over to the window. She peered out through the cracked and dirty panes and there, on the driveway below her, was a

coach and two horses. A man dressed all in black was sitting in the box and holding the reins. The horses had plumes on their heads and the coach was oddly shaped. It reminded her of something. It reminded her of a hearse!

Even as the terror of that recognition wrenched her nerves, the man holding the reins looked up and *it was the man with the blue face!*

She muffled her scream with her hands and backed away from the window. She was trembling violently. A hearse waiting outside a dead house! A hearse waiting, perhaps, for her! She threw herself on the bed and sobbed in a hysteria of fear. Then, through her sobs, she heard a sound outside her door, the sound of a footstep. She lay quiet, not moving, not breathing, listening. She heard a click and the knob started to turn. She writhed backward away from the edge of the bed.

Her back was pressed against the wall now. She could move no farther, but her feet made futile pushing movements, as she tried to move herself still farther back, away from the door, away from this room—from this house of terror. Then the door opened and there stood her uncle, Carl Waters!

She did not know what she had expected to see, but even this known figure was terrifying. He crouched in the doorway, and she could tell by his slow swaying that he was drunk. Hands outstretched, he moved towards her. She lay quiet, frozen, paralyzed with fear. Then his hands were on her, clutching, fumbling. With a scream she tore herself loose from the hypnosis of fear. She clawed, bit, tore at his hands in an effort to get free. He was mumbling under his breath.

"You must, Dorothy, you must. I want you, need you. She is old, mad. You are young, beautiful. Money! I need

money! They may come at any moment. It is not very painful and I know how now. Only once, and then—"

He seemed to become suddenly conscious of the fact that she was resisting him and with a snarl he exerted his full strength and crushed her into immobility. She could not move. His hot red mouth was coming closed and closer to her. She was panting, moaning, her eyes staring wildly about her. They fell on the bed and a groan of such abject terror came from her lips that even Waters in the heat of his vile, blind passion heard it. Then both stiffened in their struggle at sight of what they saw through the window.

There, outside the window, standing on thin air twelve feet from the ground, was a dwarf not three feet tall!

His pale, flat face was a mask of grinning hate and his narrowed eyes were glaring into the room. Carl Waters saw him, and with a scream he leaped off the bed and huddled back into a corner, cowering. A big man, over six feet tall, in terrified fear of a dwarf he could crush with a blow!

She must get away, away from this house of horror and madness—get away before her mind slipped from her control and she started laughing wildly, uncontrollably. She was at the door now and, with a swift motion, she opened it, darted out into the hall. She could hear Waters screaming agonizingly behind her.

"No, Dorothy, no! For God's sake, don't leave me! Don't open the door!"

She was flying down the stairs now, unheeding, unthinking. She reached the front door and was fumbling with the bars, the chains. She could hear heavy, running footsteps on the stairs. Waters was coming down after her to catch her, to stop her!

Frantically Dorothy unhooked the last chain and threw open the door and there,

outside, was nightmare—madness incarnate!

Three figures stood in a row before her—three figures from Hell. The first was tall. He had a long, conical head and no neck or shoulders. His head ran down to his waist where short, thin arms projected. The second was short and round, almost a ball. His body followed the curve of his head in a circle and from the bottom of this circle dangled short, useless legs. Dangled, because his body was supported by arms that were fully four feet long and whose hands had no fingers, only a flat pad like a beast's. The third figure was the most horrible of all. A long, ribbon-like, swaying body with a cleft at the bottom like a seal's tail that took the place of legs. It had short, flipper-like arms and a triangular head. Its eyes were set next to each other, not half an inch apart, and under those pale, unwinking eyes projected a snout.

They were three figures vomited up from the nethermost pits of hell, yet Dorothy knew them to be human!

They stared at her and then past her. She heard a movement at her feet, and looking down, felt her flesh crawl—but still she could not move!

Another Thing writhed there. It was armless, legless, a twisting torso with a man's head. And even as she looked the Thing spoke.

"There he is!" it said. "Get him!"

She heard a scream that was the sound of a soul in torment and whirled around. There, behind her, was Carl Waters. He was rigid, frozen, his back against the closed door that led to the rear of the house. His eyes were starting out of his head and there was foam on his lips. He held that position for a moment—a human statue of panic and terror. Then he tried to move clumsily, to run.

There was a hiss and a thud. A long

knife flashed through the air and pinned one of his hands to the door. Another, another, another, six in all! The blades pierced hands and legs and dug into the wooden door on each side of his head so that he was held as immovably as a frog on a dissecting board. Then the monsters moved forward into the room, ignoring Dorothy as if she did not exist—the three monsters, the writhing Thing and also a man who looked like an Indian, who had thrown the knives.

Behind them came others, the blue faced man, the dwarf Dorothy had seen looking in the window and a human giant who was fully eight feet tall. The dwarf was riding on the giant's shoulders and despite the confusion that horror and terror wrought in her, Dorothy realized that that was how the dwarf had appeared in the window. He had been held up at the full stretch of the giant's arms.

They stood in a gloating half circle, that group of human monsters, and stared at the man before them. The Indian with the knives thrust in his belt spoke first.

"I go find her," he intoned, and slipped up the stairs and disappeared.

TIME meant nothing to Dorothy now; nothing meant anything to her. One can become immune even to horrors, and she had been so steeped in horrors that night that nothing could touch her. She was suspended in a void. She did not know how long it was before the Indian came back leading a woman, a woman not old but aged.

She was bent, twisted. Her hair was white and long, unkempt. Her eyes were vacant, staring. Then she saw the three monstrosities who had first stood outside the door, and her eyes lit up.

"My boys!" she said softly. "My three, strong, handsome sons!" She held out her arms to them, and the three embraced her.

"Mamma!" mewed the Seal Man in a voice like a mechanical doll. "Mamma!"

The Indian held something in his hand. It was made of steel chains and cables, and it looked vaguely like a corset.

"She was chain' up in the attic," he said. "And I find . . . dees!" He held up the metal contrivance.

The creatures of nature's mad joke stared at it, and then fastened their attention again upon their prisoner pinned helplessly to the door. The old woman, her face soft and maternal, looked from the three to Carl Waters.

"Children," she said, "doesn't Daddy look well? I take good care of him," and she nodded her mad, white head affectionately.

The three looked at Waters fixedly. Blood was dripping from his hands, his thighs. But terror had so filled his shrinking body that his constricted throat could not utter a sound; he could not cry out.

The Indian spoke again: "Thees he used." He waved the metal girdle. "He is not man, he is devil from hell!"

The writhing Thing on the floor exploded into fiendish laughter. "Devil from hell?" he moaned. "Devil from hell have bat wings. Make *him* devil from hell. Give *him* bat wings!" They looked at one another, all of those creatures and nodded their heads.

"Bat wings!" they whispered, croaked, hissed. "Bat wings!"

"Bat man not have hair, have beard," spoke the Indian. "Must come off." He ran inside and came back with the kerosene lamp. "Like dees must come off!" He poured the kerosene on Waters' head and beard and, striking a match, touched it to the dripping hairs.

There was a puff of yellowish flame, and in a second Waters' head was blazing like a torch, his face surrounded by a nimbus of fire. He started screaming wildly,

frantically, as the flames licked his face, his head. Then, in a moment, it was over. Where his beard, his shock of black hair had been, there was only stubble and blackened, cracked skin. The creatures grinned and nodded to one another.

"Now," said the Indian. "We make . . . the Bat Man!" He drew three knives from his belt and handed one to each of the three horrors who had called the old mad woman their mother. They each took one and advanced on Carl Waters, one on each side and one in front. They slashed with the knives, and cut and tore the clothes from his body so that he was naked to the waist. Then they raised the gleaming knives again and went deftly to work!

The keen blades slit the white skin along the tops of his arms and down the center of his chest to his belly. Blood leaped out in a thin red line that followed the sharp edges. Waters' screams were piercing, agonized, and under the shriek of them the three could be heard mumbling, muttering in a queer jargon of their own. Now the monsters started to lift the skin they had cut—to rip and peel it back from the quivering, bleeding flesh! They were flaying Waters alive!

His screams had become hoarse, strangled moans and then, as if a cord had been cut, Dorothy lost contact with the world of sight and sound. Like a dropped doll she fell forward on her face and the vision of Waters' torment was swallowed in whirling darkness.

STRONG arms were holding her when she came to herself. Timidly, fearfully, she opened her eyes and saw the strained face of Trooper Peter Brant bending above her. Her eyes went past his shoulder to the face of another man who was standing behind him. An old man with a kindly, ascetic face which was now pale and drawn. It was a face that

reminded her of her mother's. Was it . . . ? Yes, it must be! *He* was her uncle, Carl Waters!

Then who . . . ? She turned in Trooper Brant's arms and looked behind her . . . and then shriek on shriek of agonized horror and loathing—the pent up, choked emotion of that whole soul searing night—ripped from her throat!

The man she had thought was her uncle was still pinned to the door. Man . . . ? He was now the Bat Man! The flayed skin of his arms and back had been peeled down and the skin of his chest and stomach had been lifted to the side so that they met in raw, ragged sheets. The whole had been gathered, cut and folded so that it hung like the veritable wings of a bat from his hands to his hips! He was winged, now, and the bloody, transparent wings were made of his own skin!

His ears had been trimmed to points and his hands and feet cut to resemble claws. There he hung, the human Bat Man, his face contorted and dead as the animal he now resembled, when it has been nailed to a barn door!

Dorothy had stopped screaming and was only moaning faintly when Trooper Brant carried her from that house of terror to his car outside. There was no sign of the monstrosities who had done this horrible thing.

"Quiet, honey," Brant was saying. "You're all right now."

"Dorothy, dear," the elderly man sobbed in a choked voice. "I can't tell you . . . my fault . . . if I'd waited for the next train . . ."

"It doesn't matter uncle," said Dorothy. "Only what . . . what happened?"

"You must have missed your uncle's house when you walked up here," said Brant. "He thought you weren't coming and he had put out the lights and gone

to sleep. When I brought your bags there I woke him and he said you hadn't arrived. We were both worried. I told you I thought he was queer. That was because he had phoned in to headquarters several times to say that he had seen mysterious, inhuman figures going past his house at night. Now, of course, we know that he *had* actually seen them!

"We got in my car and came up the road looking for you. Just before we got to this house there was a shrill whistle, and a moment later a queer looking coach with two horses came dashing out of the driveway and disappeared down the road. I didn't know what sort of a coach it was then, but later I realized that it was the kind they use in circus parades, except that it had been painted black so as to make it hard to see at night.

"The house here was lit up so we went in to ask if you had been seen. We found you—and that!" He turned his head away and swallowed as if to still a retching stomach. "He was still alive when we came in and he told us enough to make clear what had happened.

"His name was Legros and he had been owner of a circus. He had been in love with the star of the circus, an equestrienne named Estrellita. One day she told him she was going to have a child, his child. He was furious. It would mean the loss of her figure. She would be unable to ride in the ring during the most important time of the carnival season. He had a steel corset made and strapped her in it so that her growing size would not be apparent. He made her wear that hellish contrivance until the very last minute, until the child was born! And, when the child did come, it was a monster! That steel girdle had deformed it until it did not look human!

"The rest is obvious. Her mind went when she saw the Thing she had borne,

but Legros kept her with him. He had a new use for her now. He sold the first child as a freak to another circus and got an enormous sum for it, and then he started to breed, to make more freaks. He begot three in all, this fiend, this demon who would make monsters of his own children and sell them for money!

"Then his own circus folk found out what he was doing, and they decreed that he should die! He found out about it, and fled in time to save his life—temporarily!

"It must have been twenty or twenty-five years ago that all this happened, but with the intense loyalty of freaks, his executioners have been seeking him all that time to punish him, and to release the woman he had driven mad. They evi-

dently located him some weeks ago, and tonight their vengeance was accomplished!" Trooper Brant stopped, and there was horror and wonder mingled in his voice.

"And to think that it was my fault that you had to undergo a night like this!" said Carl Waters. "To think that he might have kept you there and used you to—" He choked, unable to say more.

Dorothy shook her head. "No, uncle, never!" she said. "There would always have been a way out!" and she shuddered. Trooper Brant put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it understandingly, and then, oddly enough, Dorothy found herself thinking of children, of children who were tall and straight—and who had blue eyes like Trooper Brant!

THREE SOUL-CHILLING NOVELETTES!

**Tales of Horror and Gruesome Mystery That Make
a Banquet of Fear!**

By:

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

JOHN H. KNOX

ARTHUR J. BURKS

All in the Big Thrill-Packed October Issue

of

HORROR STORIES



—Out September 5th

THE LIVING FLAME

By Robert Sidney Bowen

An animal of horror, a beast whose body was only a crackling mass of blue flame, ran berserk through the Stuyvesant house. Bullets would not stop it and solid walls did not impede its progress. Would it eventually catch up with lovely Beth and Garry Colgan—would it run them down with its hideous, searing death?

THE harsh jangle of the phone dragged Garry Colgan back to semi-consciousness from a swell dream about Bourbon and blondes. Thoughts of the latter were still trickling through his head when he propped himself up on one elbow and gaped stupidly at the darkness of the room. The radium dial of a clock on the table showed fifteen minutes past two.

With a grunt he dropped back on the pillow, and pulled the blankets up around his neck.

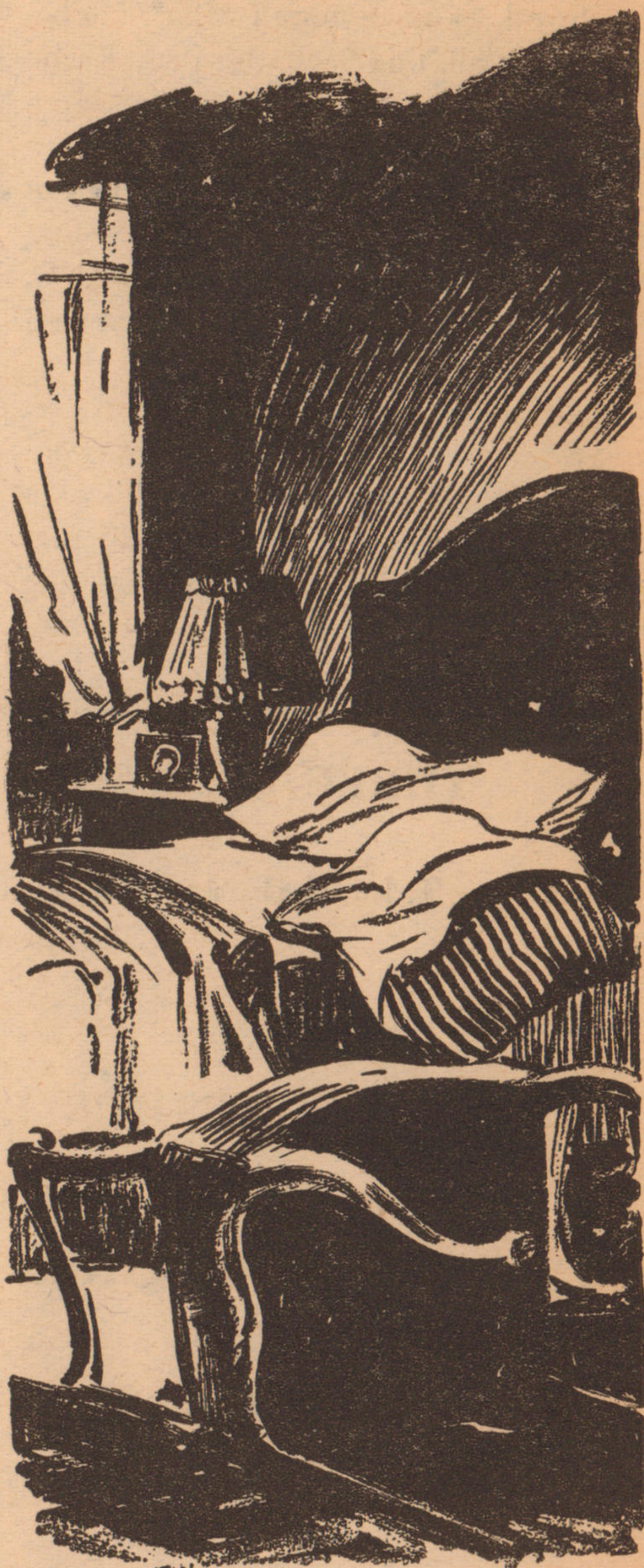
"Nertz to you, Standish!" he muttered thickly. "You may be the best city-desk editor in town, but you're only a pain to me! Go buzz some other sucker."

The phone rang a third time, and a fourth. Finally, Colgan cursed, flung back the covers and stumbled across the room. He reached the telephone and yanked the receiver off the hook.

"Well? What the hell do you want?"

The excited voice at the other end of the wire created the effect of an arctic shower. His sleep drugged senses cleared in a flash.

"Garry? Garry, this is Beth, Beth Stuyvesant. Can you come out here right



away? Something terrible has happened, and I . . . !"

A click and the line went dead.

Colgan jiggled the hook frantically, and yelled into the transmitter. "Hello? Hello Beth! What's the matter? What's . . ."



*A
Novelette
of
Weird
Midnight
Menace*

The nasal twang of the operator answered him. "Were you cut off? What number were you calling, please?"

"I wasn't calling!" he snarled. "I was being called. I . . ."

"There is no party on the wire now, sir.

If you will hang up they'll probably . . ."

"Hang up, hell!" roared Garry. "The call was from T. J. Stuyvesant's residence . . . Newtown seven, four, two, six. Get it through quick!"

"Just a moment, please. Hold the wire."

It was more than a moment. It was

several. Then the voice came again. "Sorry, but there is no answer at that number. The line seems to be out of order. Do you wish to report the matter to . . . ?"

Colgan drowned out the rest with a curse and slammed the receiver back on the hook. With a continued movement of his hand he snapped on the wall switch. Then he dived for his clothes.

One minute and seven second later he barged out of his apartment and tore down the three flights to the street. At the curb, parking lights glowing feebly, was his roadster. It was battered and of ancient vintage, but it still retained one good quality. It could smoke pavement with the best of them.

And smoke pavement it did as he shot away from the curb and raced wide open down the deserted street. Five red lights later, he swerved sharp right, took the local railroad tracks in two bounces and skidded left onto the main state highway that lead past the Stuyvesant place seven miles out in the country.

AS he tore along the cement his memory raced backward; back to a night just two weeks ago. It had been a perfect night, a full moon and the fresh warm smell of spring in the air. But most important had been the presence of Beth Stuyvesant, there beside him on the bench. With lowered eyes she had listened while he stumbled and stuttered through the age old story. And when he had at last gulped to a husky finish, she had raised those eyes and looked at him. It was then he had seen his hopes go up in small pieces.

The words of mixed gratitude and consolation she spoke simply added to the dull ache about his heart. The one blunt fact remained. He had spoken his piece, and had been gently given the air. Like millions of others throughout the ages he had refused defeat at first, and argued

his case vehemently. But when he ran out of breath he got the same answer. And then, still like those millions of others, he had pledged himself to a life of eternal waiting, left her and gone home to get blind drunk.

But the final knockout connected with his jaw four days later when he read in his own newspaper of the engagement of Beth Stuyvesant to one Courteny Billings. That was both the knockout and the drag-out—and his love for *the* girl went into reverse. Of all the little tramps! Courteny Billings, eh? That sleek-hair fashion plate with a pot full of dough. Just like a dame! They were all the same. Love in a cottage with a seventy-five buck a week newshawk? Not a chance! Dames like her didn't know how to spell the word, Love. Yeah, he was a lucky guy, all right. She'd have probably run him ragged sooner or later. Okay, she could marry that sap . . . the rat had had the inside track all the time. Assisting old man Stuyvesant in some trick experiments, was he? Like hell he was . . . him with his forty 'leven degrees after his name. He was rowing his own boat, that's what he was doing. And Beth, the little fool, had fallen for it. . . .

And now? Now . . . the sound of *the* girl's voice had crushed bitter thoughts and sworn resolutions into oblivion. Beth Stuyvesant needed him. She had called him. And the speedometer needle was quivering between eighty-four and eighty-five.

Careening around a sharp bend in the road he missed a parked car by inches as he tugged the wheels about straight and whammed along the last two mile stretch. Behind him came the muffled echo of shouting, but he kept right on going until he finally skidded to a full stop before the narrow shrub-lined path that led up to the Stuyvesant house. Not a light was showing in any window. In the glow of the

stars and a dying quarter moon it looked like some grotesque minaretted phantom crouched among great blotches of trees half way up a knoll.

But Garry didn't pause to admire or speculate. He raced up the flagstone path toward the front steps. But thirty yards from those steps something caught at his left ankle, jerked his whole leg back, and spun him around twice. Momentum sent him flat—and the flagstones knocked every drop of air out of his lungs.

He was gagging and gasping when he tried to struggle to his knees. Then a great weight crashed into the small of his back, smashed him prone again. Stinging fingers clawed at his neck, dug into his eyes. Spinning stars and globs of colored light started a mad dance in his brain. Spears of white fire sliced through his chest, and his eardrums clanged like the bells of hell. Instinctively self preservation, and nothing else, forced his arms and legs to function. He was hardly conscious of his fists flaying thin air, or of his feet kicking more thin air. He couldn't see, for everything was a great conglomeration of colored shadows. And he couldn't hear because the inside of his head was exploding section by section.

DESPERATELY he fought against a great wave of total unconsciousness that was trying to sweep over him. A thousand wasp stings were shooting through his body, and in a dulled abstract manner his whirling brain pictured himself impaled on a spiked fence. Every move he made brought increased stinging torture. He tried to cry out but the words choked and died in his throat. Then, suddenly, his body slid downward as countless barbs clawed at his clothes and the flesh of his hands and face. Seconds later he realized that he was sprawled out on the flagstone path. Struggling to his hands and knees he shook

his head, like a boxer down for the count of nine, and stared hard at the shadowy gloom. And then more truth came to him. His phantom assailant had hurled him into the heavy thorn-hedge that lined the path.

At that moment he heard the muffled scream of a woman. It came from the house; from the second floor, and, he was positive, from the lips of Beth Stuyvesant!

Lunging to his feet he raced blindly up the path, took the long flight of stone steps three at a time, and grabbed the handle of the front door. It swung inward at his touch. He hesitated for a second, then leaped into action as he heard dulled thumping on the floor above. Dodging furniture in the dark hallway, he found the stairs and stumbled up them. At the top he turned left and ran down a long hallway to the door at the end. A woman was pounding against the other side of the door and sobbing hysterically.

He tried the knob and found it locked.

"Beth! This is Garry . . . Open the door!"

The stifled gasp of relief on the other side sent the blood racing through his veins.

"Oh, thank God . . . Garry! I can't . . . the door's locked. Oh, get me out Garry, get me out. Break it down. Break . . .!"

"Stand back, Beth!" he yelled. "Stand back from the door!"

Bunching his muscles he slammed his shoulder against the wood panelling. It resisted the first three attempts, cracked on the fourth, and crashed splintering inward on the fifth. Garry fell with it. Scrambling to his feet he went over to Beth Stuyvesant. In the faint light of a guttering candle on the bureau, she looked like a ghost. Her hair was a tumbled mass about her shoulders—her face delicately chiseled alabaster, out of which

her wide eyes stared fixedly at him. Like a statue she stood rigid, just staring at him. It was as though her entire body were in the grip of some hypnotic spell.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her gently.

"Steady, Beth, steady! Are you all right? What's happened?"

The sound of his voice seemed to snap her back to normalcy. With a little frightened cry she clung to him, trembling. Then, like the releasing of flood gates, words spilled from her lips.

"Father . . . ! Father! I heard him screaming. Oh, it was horrible. My door was locked . . . someone had locked me in. Then the lights went out. I called you . . . but something went wrong with the phone. Oh Garry . . . we must find Father. We must find him. Oh, something must have happened to him. . . ."

"Sure, sure Beth," he cut her off. "Where was he? Where'd you hear him screaming from?"

"I wasn't sure," she answered, "but it sounded like he was in his study . . . it's on the third floor. Oh we must find him, Garry. I know something's . . ."

THE words trailed off as he scooped up the candle and helped her over the splintered door. Forgetting the pain that movement caused, he walked hurriedly down the hall and up the stairs to the third floor. Her breath was coming in little gasps as she clung to his arm and went along by his side.

At the top of the stairs he suddenly stopped dead. An acrid odor had come to his nostrils, an odor—and the thought sent a clammy chill down his spine—that smelled like burning flesh. He'd smelled it too many times during his newspaper career, not to recognize it now. With considerable difficulty he kept his voice steady.

"You . . . you wait here, Beth. I'll go take a look."

She shook her head. "No, no, I've . . . I've got to go, too!"

Colgan walked down the hall to the door of T. J. Stuyvesant's study. The acrid odor had become so strong that it was almost gagging. He swallowed hard, pushed the door, and held the candle out. With a low moan Beth Stuyvesant released her hold on his arm and crumpled to the floor.

He was hardly aware that she'd fainted. In fact, he wasn't aware of anything except the horrible sight that held his eyes like a magnet, and seemed to paralyze every living part of his body.

On the thick carpet that lined the floor of the study was sprawled the figure of a wire haired man of middle years. He was lying face upward. Face upward? There was no face—nothing but a furrowed mass of scorched flesh that glistened horribly in the flickering candle light. The body was fully dressed, and, save for the face, seemed otherwise untouched. But the hands, doubled into fists, stiff in death. . . .

COLGAN could only stand and stare down at the awful sight. Then the candle slipped from his trembling fingers, and the room became plunged in darkness.

"And what the hell's all this about, Colgan?"

Garry whirled, and blinked into the blinding beam of a flashlight.

"It's me, your old pal, Sullivan," said a voice behind the beam. "You were doing over eighty, guy. And you damn near ruined a brand new radio patrol car . . . and a couple of good cops along with it. So . . . Say . . . ! Oh my God!"

A big hand swept Garry to one side, and the flashlight beam sliced down to the hideous sight on the study carpet.

And then, as though at a given signal, the lights flickered into life. Unable to shake himself loose from the trance which gripped him, Garry stood gawking foolishly at the hulking figure bending over Stuyvesant's body. The reporter recognized him at once. The man was Detective Sergeant Sullivan.

"Y-y-you, Sully?" he gasped. "What the . . . ?"

The detective straightened up, shot him a piercing glance.

"Just what *I'm* wondering," he boomed out. "This man's dead. Murder, is my guess. Now what . . . ?"

"Give me a hand, Sully," Garry cut in, bending over the girl. "She fainted . . . Beth Stuyvesant . . . that's her father. No, let's take her in the next room."

Together they carried the limp girl into an adjoining room and placed her on a couch. Sullivan started to shoot out questions, but Garry ignored him until he'd dashed into the bathroom, soaked a towel in cold water, and was bathing the girl's face.

"Okay, Sully," he then said. "Here's all I know about it."

In a few short sentences he told of the phone call, and of his arrival at the house. Sullivan listened in frowning silence; grunted when Garry finished.

"Looks like he'd run his face into a meat chopper," he commented gruffly. "Never seen anything like it before. Know anything about him . . . what he does . . . ? Some kind of a scientist, ain't he?"

"Yes," Garry nodded. "He was doing cosmic ray research work. Just what, I don't know, but— She's coming out. Be a good guy now, Sully, and go easy. It gave her a jolt."

THEY bent over the girl as her eyelids fluttered open. She stared at them glassily for a moment. Then as

memory returned, she trembled violently, and clutched Garry's hand.

"Garry! Th-that was Father! He's dead . . . He was murdered . . . !"

"Steady Beth," Colgan soothed. "You've got to be brave."

She nodded, forced a tight little smile to her lips, and glanced questioningly in Sullivan's direction. The reporter made the introductions, and explained the detective's presence.

"Do you mind if he asks you some questions, Beth?"

"Just begin at the beginning, Miss," said Sullivan, without waiting for her answer. "Notice anything unusual about your father? Has he been worried? Any idea—who might have done this? You know, enemies?"

She stared fixedly at the opposite wall, drew a deep breath.

"He has been receiving threatening letters for the last two weeks," she said. "And yesterday when I happened to answer the phone, a strange man's voice said, 'Tell your father that he will die on the Fourteenth.'"

"Why, that's the day after tomorrow!" Garry exclaimed.

Sullivan glared at him.

"Who sent the letters, Miss? And what did they demand—money?"

"They were unsigned," she said. "At least that's what my father told me. I didn't see them. He only admitted receiving them, when I questioned him about the phone call. He insisted that they were just foolish threats from some crank he didn't know. They didn't demand anything. Just threatened his life."

"But you think he knew who sent them, don't you, Miss?"

She glanced at him wide-eyed, then slowly nodded.

"Yes, I do. I . . . I had a feeling that he was keeping something back. He acted very strangely . . . unusually nervous.

Of course, he was tired. He'd been working day and night completing some laboratory experiments, but . . . oh, I don't know, I just felt it. And tonight at the dinner table I felt sure of it. Something he said convinced me."

The girl paused, as though she were trying to remember.

"What did he say?" Sullivan encouraged.

"Oh, it was just a remark. Trenton Carver . . . the lawyer, who handles all of my father's affairs . . . was dining with us. Well, we were talking about the police methods of checking up on a criminal's past, and father said, 'No man's past is ever completely buried. Sometimes, even the dead can rise up to confront you.' It wasn't exactly what he said that impressed me. Rather, it was the way he said it; the look on his face . . . as if he actually expected something like that to happen."

"Did your father tell Mr. Carver about the threats?" questioned Sullivan.

"I don't know. At least the subject wasn't mentioned at the table."

Sullivan frowned at the rug on the floor.

"Hum-m-m," he mused aloud presently. "Well what about after dinner? Any other guests? Did Mr. Carver go home? And, oh yeah, what about the servants here, Miss?"

"There is only Williams, the caretaker," she said in answer to the last question. "The others were all dismissed this morning. You see, father and I were to sail for Europe tomorrow. We always leave Williams in charge when we go away. He's been with us for years. But, anyway, there were no other guests. And after dinner I went up to my room to finish packing. I believe Father and Mr. Carver went up to the study to go over some business papers. The . . . the next thing that happened, was my father screaming.

That was shortly after midnight. Then the lights went out, and—"

Her voice broke, and she crushed a handkerchief to her trembling lips. There was a moment or two of awkward silence. Then she spoke again.

"I tried to open the door, but it was locked. Then I phoned Mr. Courteny Billings, but there was no answer. So I tried Garry—Mr. Colgan. We were cut off."

"Who is . . . ?"

A sharp look from Garry stopped Sullivan's question. The reporter extended the fourth finger of his left hand, and nodded toward the girl. Sullivan arched his eyebrows in understanding, opened his lips to speak, then suddenly snapped them shut and went rigid as there came the unmistakable thump-thump of footsteps on the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

Groaning Walls

THE footsteps seemed to pause at the top landing. There came a whining voice. "Oh, Mr. Stuyvesant, sir? You'd better look at that control gadget. It's not . . ."

The words broke off as a big grey-haired man in dirty shirt and overalls appeared in the doorway. He blinked at them a moment, then fastened his gaze on the girl and shouldered into the room, fists bunched.

"What's the matter, Miss Beth? You look sick, or something. Have . . . ?"

"My father is dead, Williams," she said with an effort. "This is Mr. Colgan, a friend, and Sergeant Sullivan of the police."

The man's jaw sagged, and his eyes opened like saucers.

"Dead?" he gulped. "Why . . . !"

"Murdered!" Sullivan shot at him quickly. A couple of hours ago. And where have you been all this time?"

As though the full meaning of it all had suddenly penetrated the man's brain, Williams' eyes took on a stupid, glazed look, and he seemed to shrink up visibly.

"I—I don't know nothing about it, sir," he got out in quavering tones. "Me . . . I lives in a house on the other side of the estate. She'll tell you. Usually I takes care of the place generally. But, today, seeing as how the other servants had left, it was up to me to do all the jobs. And . . ."

"I know, I know," Sullivan cut in curtly. "You had to do everything. So what? Where've you been the last three or four hours?"

"Ain't I trying to tell you?" the other whined. "When I got the supper things taken care of—'bout ten, I guess—I asks Mr. Stuyvesant if it's all right for me to go home. I ain't been feeling none too good lately, and . . ."

"About ten, eh?" Sullivan interrupted. "You saw Mr. Stuyvesant at that time?"

Williams' face twitched with irritation. "Ain't I just said so?" he snapped. "Sure I seen him! He and Mr. Carver were in the study pawing a mess of papers, and things. Mr. Stuyvesant tells me he won't be needing nothing more, and for me to go to bed and take care of myself. Well, I does that, but along about sometime after midnight I gets up to take some medicine and I sees that the house is dark. That ain't right . . . and I figures that its probably that goldarned new fangled control gadget of Mr. Stuyvesant's . . . Oh, excuse me Miss, but the darn thing never did seem to work good. But, as I was saying, I figure its that control gadget that's . . ."

"What do you mean control gadget?" asked Sullivan.

"A gadget for switching over to more power for the lights," Williams answered. "We don't use no city current in this house. Mr. Stuyvesant built some kind of

a contraption that gets better electricity from the stars, or something. Never did understand the hang of it, myself."

As the man stopped to shake his head slowly from side to side, Beth Stuyvesant reached out and touched Sullivan's arm.

"Perhaps I can explain, Sergeant. Father has been studying cosmic rays for years. It was his hope to harness their tremendous energy for practical use here on the earth, at minimum cost to all. He never discussed it with me much, but I do know that he perfected an apparatus that can draw a certain amount of that energy through the earth's magnetic field and convert it into electrical power. Everything in this house is operated from that power. That's what Williams means by the control gadget. It is a control dial in the power room. When the converted energy becomes low you adjust the control dial to permit an increased amount of cosmic energy to be converted into operating power through the medium of my father's invention. I believe it's known as—stepping it up."

"Sure, sure," nodded Williams. "You have to turn the gadget, and step up the current, when the lights get dim, or the blasted things will go out. Its like recharging a battery, so your father once told me, Miss Beth. That's what I figured had happened, so I comes over to see Mr. Stuyvesant and fix the goldarn thing. Well, he ain't in the power room and the cussed needle is at zero. I does what I can, but it don't act right, and so I comes looking for him. And here I am, and you're snapping questions at a body!"

The old man emphasized his words with a short bob of his head. "And that's what I've been doing, young fellow!" he added a moment later. "Like as not the fellow that done it is miles away by this time, what with you wasting all this time with foolish questions!"

Sullivan glared at him and said nothing.

Then suddenly they all stiffened and looked at each other. Garry found his tongue first.

"Did you hear that, Sully?" he gasped. "It sounded like a groan . . . like somebody groaning!"

The detective nodded.

"Yeah, I heard it right enough. I . . . listen . . .!"

FROM a point that seemed to be behind the middle of the left wall of the room came the low muffled groan of a human voice. A second later something fell with a thud. By that time Sullivan was out of the room and starting down the hall.

"Come on, you two!" his voice boomed back. "It's from this room . . . the door's locked . . . lend me a shoulder."

After three rushes the wooden framework jerked loose from its hinges and the door slammed inward. Sullivan's flashlight beam sliced the darkness inside and stopped dead on a huddled form. At that moment Garry's groping fingers found the wall switch and flooded the room with light. Beth Stuyvesant, standing on the threshold cried out with fright.

"It's Trenton Carver . . . oh, he's hurt!"

As Williams stood gawking, Sullivan and Garry lifted the limp figure and placed it in a chair. Presently the lawyer's eyelids fluttered open, and jet black orbs regarded them dully.

"What happened, Mr. Carver?" Sullivan asked.

The lawyer raised his eyes, frowned. "Why, why you're from the police!" he exclaimed. "I've seen you in court. But . . . what . . .?"

"Mr. Stuyvesant's been murdered, sir," said Sullivan. "We heard you groaning, and busted down the door."

The news brought Carver straight up out of the chair.

"Murdered?" he cried. "Stuyvesant murdered! Good God, Sergeant . . .! Why . . . why I was talking to him . . . and then suddenly everything went black. But how . . . who? Oh Beth, you poor child. I'm so sorry, so sorry."

Pushing past Garry, Carver took the girl in his arms. She leaned against him, sobbing softly. The reporter stood watching them as the back of his neck went hot. Then almost immediately he felt ashamed of the jealousy that had surged up in him. Trenton Carver was twice Beth's age, and he'd known the girl since she was a baby.

He turned away for fear that they might see the look on his face. Then suddenly, he went rigid and stood staring down at the splintered door. The tongue of the lock had been pulled clear of its holding groove, proving that the door was fastened. But the thing that caught and held Garry's eye was the key. It was still in place in the lock, and *on the inside of the door.*

Stunned for a moment he was not able to comprehend the significance, but as it ramméd home in his brain he turned back and stared fixedly at Carver. The lawyer was murmuring sympathetic words to Beth Stuyvesant, and looking far from the expected state of a man who has just recovered from a two or three hour period of unconsciousness. In fact—and the impression rushed upon Garry—Trenton Carver seemed to be no longer suffering any after effects. Not even the hair of the "splitting head" was ruffled; no bump, or trickle of blood, or anything.

Sullivan seemed to be thinking the same thought.

"Any idea what hit you, sir?" he asked. "Remember seeing anyone?"

The lawyer led the girl over to a chair before he spoke.

"No, I don't know what hit me, Sergeant," he said. "Nor did I see anyone. Everything just went black . . . and I woke up here. But, listen, we'd better phone the police. Excuse me, Sergeant . . . I mean that we'd better get more men up here. If there's a killer loose in this house, we've got to catch him. By the way, where is the . . . where is Mr. Stuyvesant?"

"In the study sir," said Sullivan walking toward the door. "I'll show you, if you wish, sir."

As the pair started to walk out the lights flickered, died down, came up a bit and died down again. Williams mumbled a curse.

"There they go again, goldarn it! I . . ."

"Listen, Williams," Sullivan cut in. "Can't you do something to keep them going? Or are there any candles in the place?"

The caretaker shrugged stupidly. "I can try," he said. "Maybe, but I ain't promising. There's plenty of candles in the store room. Want me to get 'em?"

"Hell yes!" Sullivan barked at him, giving him a shove. "But fix these blasted lights, if you possibly can. All right, Mr. Carver."

WITHOUT even so much as a look at Garry, Sullivan escorted Trenton Carver out of the room and down the hall toward the study. But that didn't bother the reporter. The comforting of Beth Stuyvesant was the main issue for the moment. He turned toward her, a cheery smile on his lips, but the smile froze as he saw the expression on her face. She had turned paler, and a look of fearful horror filled her wide eyes.

"Why Beth! Steady, dear. Nothing's going—"

She checked the rest by clutching his

arm impulsively. "Garry . . . Garry, I'm afraid . . . terribly afraid!"

The blood leaped through his veins as he put his arms about her. But, she pulled away with a shake of her head.

"No, no you don't understand, Garry. I mean . . . oh, I don't know how to say it, but—but Father wasn't murdered by anyone."

He stared at her. "What—what do you mean, Beth?"

She stepped close to him, placed both hands on his shoulders. Her voice trembled with pleading earnestness.

"You must believe me, Garry. You must! I didn't tell your detective friend, because . . . well, because it sounds so foolish, so utterly foolish. But Garry, I'm sure that no human being killed my father. It . . . it was something else . . . something that no living person has ever seen before, except my father."

Icy chills rippled up and down Garry's spine. He shrugged them off, and took the girl's hands in his.

"You're upset, dear," he soothed. "Sit down . . . take it. . . ."

Before he could finish, Sullivan and Carver appeared in the doorway.

"Going downstairs to phone, Miss," said the detective. "I'll be right back. I'd like to talk to you some more. You two wait here, eh?"

"The line's probably dead, Sully," Garry reminded him.

Sullivan grunted. "We'll see," he said. "Your room phone is an extension, isn't it, Miss?" She nodded and he said, "Well, we'll try the main connection. Be right back. No, don't bother, Mr. Carver will show me where it is."

CHAPTER THREE

The Locked Room

WHEN they were alone again, Beth Stuyvesant raised a hand to silence

Garry's lips. "No, I'm all right," she said breathlessly. "Please don't interrupt. I must tell some one, or I shall go mad."

She paused for a moment to choose her words, then began again, slowly. "It was about a month ago. Father had been working in his laboratory very late. As a matter of fact it was almost dawn . . . I had been asleep for hours, but I suddenly woke up and heard him pacing up and down his room, which is next to mine. He was moaning and mumbling to himself . . . and sobbing. I rushed in. . . ."

The girl shuddered, and covered her face with her two hands.

"I'll never forget the look on his face," she said after awhile. "It was terrible . . . pale as paper, and his eyes burning like coals of fire. I was frightened at first. I thought he'd gone insane. He simply stood there looking at me with those terrible eyes. Then suddenly he dropped into a chair and sobbed as though his heart were broken. It was a long time before I could get him to talk. And even then, I could not understand half of what he was saying. He said that he'd discovered something terrible—that he'd gone beyond the borders of science . . . into another world. And he was afraid—deathly afraid of this thing that he'd discovered. But, he wouldn't tell me what it was. He said that the world must never know . . . that it was too dangerous . . . that if it got out of control, civilization might be wiped out."

She paused, and gestured helplessly. "And that's the way he talked. Just raved and raved like a madman. He said that I must leave the house; go away someplace. That he was afraid for me to stay under this roof any longer. That he was afraid for all of us . . . for himself, for me, and the servants. I quieted him somewhat by agreeing to go away. I said that we'd both go away on a nice long trip; that he was tired and overworked. He

admitted that. In fact, he said that he was through with everything; that he would never conduct another experiment. He planned to give it all up. Well, eventually, I got him to go to sleep. He . . . he was like a frightened little boy. I didn't leave his bedside until morning. He was still sleeping then."

"But why didn't you go away?" Garry blurted out the question as she stopped.

"Because he said he had too much work to do. That he couldn't go just yet."

"What? Why, you just said. . . ."

"I know," she interrupted tearfully. "But when he woke up the next day, he was his own dear self again. He acted as though nothing had happened, and when I tried to question him he just apologized for what he said was an attack of nerves. As a matter of fact, he questioned me closely as to what he'd said the night before. And when I told him he hadn't said anything I understood, he seemed very much relieved. It all ended with his promising to take me abroad soon, and my promising not to ever tell a soul about the night before; not . . . not even Courtney. But—but now . . . Oh, he's dead, and I had to tell some one."

Pent up tears broke their bounds again. Garry held her tight and waited for the spasm to run its course.

"I'm sorry, Garry," she managed after awhile. "But . . . I couldn't help it."

"You're the bravest girl in the world, Beth," he said loyally, and meant it. "But tell me, did your father ever mention it again—what he'd discovered, I mean?"

She shook her head. "No. But he acted, oh so queerly. He seemed to be expecting something to happen. His eyes were never still. No matter what room we might be in, he'd always keep glancing toward the door and the windows. And there was fear in his eyes. I could see it, as plain as day. Courtney saw it too, and questioned father. But father simply

laughed and said we were imagining things. But once, I believe it was about two weeks ago, I heard father scolding Courteny. He was very angry at Courteny . . . it seemed to be about some room next to father's laboratory. Courteny had tried to go in, found it locked, and went to father for the key. I always understood it was a storeroom for father's equipment. But father refused to give Courteny the key. He told him that he was never to go into that room . . . never, under any circumstances. When I told Courteny later, what I had heard, he said that he didn't know what had gotten into father. He'd been in the room lots of times; knew that it was a storeroom. But, for some reason, that father would not explain, the room was to remain locked up, and that Courteny, or anybody else, was never to try and go in. He threatened to discharge Courteny if he even so much as caught him looking at the door. Oh, Garry, what do you suppose it all means? I'm afraid . . . Oh, I know I shouldn't be like this . . . but . . ."

The rest was lost in a stifled moan. Colgan absently patted her shoulder and stared dully at the wall. There was a queer feeling at the pit of his stomach, and an eerie ringing in his ears. He swallowed hard.

"I don't know, Beth," said. "But the thing for us to do, is tell Sullivan. Your father's dead . . . and your promise doesn't matter now. Yes, we've got to tell Sullivan about that storeroom. There may be something in it that. . . ."

SUDDENLY half screamed words, punctured by the crashing sound of two pistol shots, rang through the house.

"Colgan! . . . Colgan . . . for God's sake . . . quick!"

For a split second the reporter couldn't move. His whole body seemed to turn into a lump of lead. The gasping intake

of the girl clutching him, broke the spell. He dragged her through the door and out into the hall. From downstairs came sounds of a furious scuffle. He jerked to a skidding halt.

"I've got to go help Sully!" he panted. "Get into that room, Beth. No, get in . . .! Here's the key, here in the lock. Stay here, and don't let anybody in. I'll be right back!"

He virtually threw her into the room, pulled the door shut. As he heard the key turn in the lock he spun around and raced for the stairs. Snarls and curses drifted up at him, as he tore down the steps four at a time. When he had reached the second floor landing a wild cry of mortal pain echoed up from the front hall. His feet hardly touched the steps as he plunged madly down the last flight, and a mad cry of alarm burst from his lips. On the floor near the front door Sullivan was twisting and thrashing about in the grip of what seemed to be an animal in the shape of blue flame. Clutching the stair-railing, Colgan gaped in terror. The tangy stench of burning flesh blasted his nostrils.

And then, suddenly, as he stumbled down the few remaining steps, the blue flame actually leaped for the open door, slipped through and was gone. Garry hurtled forward through the door and out onto the front porch. For a fleeting second he got a glimpse of the thing . . . It had a head, a body and legs—like a wolf or a tiger completely enveloped in blue flame. Just a glimpse as it went streaking down the hillside, and then, like the snapping of a light button, it was gone.

Garry leaned weakly against the porch railing and put a hand to his eyes. It came away wet with the sweat oozing out on his brow. His heart was pounding with trip-hammer intensity, and his throat and mouth were suddenly bone dry. With an effort he roused his legs into action;

walked back to the hall and bent down beside Sullivan.

The detective was gasping for breath in horrible gurgles. His neck and chest were drenched with blood gushing from a hideously scorched wound. The man's service gun was still gripped in his right hand.

Colgan stuffed his handkerchief in the wound, and pillowed the detective's head in the crook of his arm.

"Sully! It's me—Colgan. What happened?"

Heavy eyelids opened to reveal blood-shot eyes. They were glazed and fringed with terror. The man's left arm twitched violently; came up off the floor a bare two inches, and a quivering forefinger pointed across the hall. Sullivan's lips moved and rattling sounds came out of his throat, then choked words.

"Wall . . . the wall . . . it was . . . it was . . ."

A horrible gurgle blended the rest into unintelligible sound. Garry bent his ear closer.

"It was, what, Sully?" he shouted. "It was *what?*"

The detective made a desperate effort to speak. But though his lips moved, no sound came from between them. And then with a convulsing gasp his chin sagged down on his bloody chest, and his whole body went limp and still.

FOR a long moment Garry didn't move. He sat crouched, like a man of stone, gazing wide-eyed at the opposite wall. But there was nothing to see but plain wall. Slowly he released his hold on Sullivan, got up and walked over to the wall. Touching it with both hands only confirmed the fact that it was solid. The empty feeling hit him in the pit of the stomach again. For reasons he could not explain to himself at the moment he leaped over to the front door and slammed it shut and

leaned back against it fighting for breath that would not seem to come. A sickening sense of utter bewilderment and eerie helplessness surged up to him and seemed to virtually crush him back against the door.

And then, like the steel jaws of a vise, panic gripped him. He'd left Beth upstairs. He must get her out of the house. There was something running amuck—some hellish thing that looked like an animal of blue flame. It had killed Sullivan—ripped his neck and chest to ribbons, and seared the flesh. He had to get Beth Stuyvesant out of here, and get her out at once!

The command boomed through his spinning brain. Hardly conscious of what he was really doing he scooped up the revolver from the dead detective's hand, and raced up the stairs to the third floor. The sight of the closed door of the room in which he'd left the girl, served to reassure him and steady his nerves a bit. In a frenzied, abstract way he had half expected to find it battered in, and the room empty. Catching his breath he rapped his knuckles against the panelling.

"It's Garry, Beth," he called, fighting to curb the excitement in his voice. "Open the door, I'm going to take you away from here!"

The heavy silence that followed his words was like a knife blade cutting through his heart. He pounded the door.

"Beth! Open the door . . . it's me, Garry . . . *Open the door!*"

His own voice rang through the hall, and died off into silence. Sane reason snapped in his brain. He hurled himself at the door, tugged and twisted frantically on the knob, and pounded the gun barrel against the heavy wood. A stifled groan on the other side redoubled his efforts, and got him nowhere. The door resisted him stubbornly.

Reeling back a step or two he glanced

wildly about, searching for a make-shift battering ram. Then suddenly he realized that something even better was right in his hand—Sullivan's gun. He pointed it at the lock, pulled the trigger twice. The crashing sound deafened him, but through curling muzzle smoke he saw the lock jump and twist all out of shape. Shoulders bunched, he charged against the wood. The furious impact tore the crumpled lock loose, and the door sagged inward.

For seconds everything spun around in crazy circles. Then he saw Beth Stuyvesant. She was slumped down beside an open window. The left shoulder of her dress was torn, revealing a long red scratch on the marble-white skin. Her right arm was flung up over the window sill. With a cry wrung straight from his heart Garry leaped over to her and gathered her up in his arms.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Blue Flame Phantom

HIS action was like a signal for her to come back to the conscious world. Her eyes opened, stared terrified for a moment, then changed to a look of recognition. With a choking sob she clung to him, every bit of her trembling like a leaf.

"Are you all right, Beth?" he managed to blurt out.

The nodding motion of her head, crushed against his chest, answered for her lips. Presently, her sobbing, muffled voice came up to him.

"Take me away, Garry, take me away. Oh, it was horrible . . . horrible!"

"You bet I'll take you away!" he said firmly. "That's what I came up here for. But what happened . . . what did you see Beth? Who opened the window?"

The last question brought her head up sharply. Through tear-stained eyes of fright she stared at the open window.

"Why, it was shut!" she gasped. "I locked it to make sure. That thing . . . it couldn't have opened it . . . why. . . ."

He turned her face toward him.

"What thing, Beth?" he asked. "What do you mean? Did you see something?"

She nodded vacantly. He shook her gently, then roughly.

"Beth . . . Beth, snap out of it! *What did you see?*"

Her lips moved and the words that fell from them were slow, heavy.

"Just after you left . . . I was sitting there, in that chair . . . Something grabbed the shoulder of my dress . . . It . . . it was like some kind of an animal—only it wasn't an animal . . . It was blue flame shaped like an animal . . . It . . . it sizzled, Garry . . . It sizzled like—like hot grease! I . . . I tried to scream . . . and then . . . I guess I fainted.

Garry stared at her long and hard as his brain raced back to Sullivan's death. Good God, he couldn't have stayed with the detective more than five minutes after that "thing" streaked out the front door. Yet . . . yet Beth had seen the same thing—seen it in this very room on the third floor.

He eased her down into a chair and forced himself to go over and put his head out the window. The darkness of night blinded him for a second. Then the retina of his eyes focussed and he found himself looking out at the side yard. Beneath him was a sheer drop of thirty feet, straight to the shadowy ground. He pulled his head in and walked over to the girl. He took her by the arm and helped her to her feet.

"I'm taking you out of here, now, Beth," he said. "This place isn't safe . . . for any of us. There's . . . well, I don't know. But you're getting out of here!"

Keeping hold of her arm he led her over to the door and out into the hall. But they had gone but a dozen steps toward

the stairs when suddenly they became plunged in inky darkness. Instinctively he pulled her back against the wall, shielding her with his body. His free hand flew to his jacket pocket and yanked out Sullivan's gun. And then, every nerve went taut as a bow string, and goose pimples of stark fear oozed out all over him. For there, coming toward them from the stairs, was a wavering mass of hissing blue flame in the shape of a four footed beast. It was coming slowly and softly; hardly seeming to move, yet coming closer and closer. There was no outline to the moving horror; just a blurred mass of blue light perched on four legs of blue flame.

HIS brain screamed commands to his numbed fingers, but somehow he couldn't seem to raise the gun; to point it and pull the trigger. Then he realized why. The girl was gripping his gun arm, tugging frantically. In the darkness he heard her hoarse, fear-ridden whisper.

"Garry . . . look . . . the other end of the hall!"

He tore his eyes from the blue horror near the stairs and looked toward the other end of the hall. A second blue flame was approaching from that end. It was exact in size and appearance—an animal-shaped mass of wavering blue light, suspended from the floor by four legs of blue fire.

With a wild cry Garry wrenched his arm loose from the girl's frenzied grasp, jerked up the gun, and froze on the trigger. Fire spurted from the muzzle and sound thundered through the hall. There came the tinkling of broken glass, and then without warning the approaching blue spectre faded into the darkness and disappeared. To Garry's whirling brain it seemed as though the thing had dissolved into the wall. For a long second he stood rigid, peering down the dark hall

and seeing nothing but the all-enveloping darkness. Close beside him came the choking gasps of the girl.

And then the shouting of Carver's voice downstairs broke the spell. Beth? Beth, are you all right, child? Stay where you are! I've got candles here. I'm coming right up!"

Feet pounded on the stairs. A fused glow cut through darkness, and became a candle flame as it rounded the corner at the top of the stairs.

"Good God, what's happened?" exclaimed Carver's voice as he held the candle higher. "I heard pistol shots . . .! Good heavens, Colgan, where'd you get that gun? Speak up . . . are you both deaf?"

But neither the girl nor Garry paid any attention. Wide-eyed they looked up and down the hall. It was completely bare, save for a mirror at the far end that was smashed to pieces—scattered on the floor.

From a long way off Garry heard his own voice.

"The reflection! My God, I shot at it's reflection!"

"What?" snapped Carver. "What the devil are you talking about? What reflection?"

Garry stared at him stupidly for a moment, then told him in jerky sentences. The lawyer's hand holding the candle trembled, then became steady as he got it under control.

"You saw it?" he gasped. "Actually saw a blue flame shaped like an animal? Why . . . why good heavens man—you must be imagining things! What could it have possibly been?"

Garry got comfort from the steadiness of his own voice as he answered. "I don't know, Mr. Carver," he said. "I only know that I saw it—that we saw it. There's something loose in this house. Something that . . . that isn't human. It . . . it killed Sullivan, and it tried to kill us!"

"Sullivan?" cried Carver sharply. "Why, I left him at the phone, while I went to hunt up some candles. You . . . you mean, he's dead?"

"Yes, dead," Garry repeated. "Didn't you see him? He's in the lower hall."

The lawyer stepped close to him, eyes hard. "What the devil are you talking about, Colgan?" he cracked harshly. "Sullivan isn't in the hall. I've just come from there. There isn't anyone in the hall."

Garry gulped, and stared at him, jaw sagging.

"But you're crazy, man!" he blazed. "Sullivan died in my arms. I tell you he's dead . . . dead, do you hear?"

Carver simply stared at him, narrow-eyed. Beth Stuyvesant gave a little choking cry and moved closer to the lawyer. For one horrible instant Garry thought he was losing his mind. He tried to talk, but his tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. He didn't even move when Carver reached down and took Sullivan's gun from his limp fingers. Then the sound of Carver's voice seeped into his brain.

". . . and if Sullivan hasn't notified police headquarters, it's time someone did. Come along. Beth, and don't worry. You, Colgan, walk in front of us. Down stairs."

LIKE a man in a dream Garry put one foot in front of the other, then the other foot in front of it, and went mechanically down the stairs to the front hall on the ground floor. There was no body of Sullivan on the floor. But there was a dark red stain on the rug. The sight of it jerked him back to partial normalcy. He grabbed Carver's arm and pointed.

"Look there! That's blood . . . Sullivan's blood. I tell you he died right there . . . right on that spot!"

The lawyer put the candle close, peered hard, then slowly straightened. He ran a

tongue across his lower lip, and scowled at Garry.

"That's blood, all right," he nodded slow. "But why didn't I hear him? You say he yelled? . . . well I was right down stairs in the basement!"

Before Garry could reply Williams shuffled up. His hands and pockets of his overalls were bulging with candles. Two of them in his hands were lighted.

"Guess the goldarned thing is out for good," he mumbled. "Can't seem to do noth. . . ." He stopped short as his eyes fell on the blood stains. Unconsciously he went back a step.

"Mother of Mercy!" he choked out. "That there's blood stains, ain't it? What's happened?"

"That's what I want to know," said Carver meaningly, as he took one of the candles and lighted it from his own. "You were downstairs too, weren't you? Did you hear anything?"

"Who, me?" the caretaker gaped at him. "Sure I was down stairs . . . in that cussed power room. But I didn't hear nothing. It ain't likely I would. . . . This floor, here's, thicker than a brick wall. That's why Mr. Stuyvesant put in that system of signal bells for us that works below stairs. No, I didn't hear nothing.

The old man gulped to a stop and stood trembling.

"And I ain't gonna wait to hear nothing either!" he added hastily, a split second later. "I don't like the looks of things that going on around this place, and I ain't going to get myself mixed up in no more murders. No sir, Mr. Carver . . . I got myself to think of. And if you're wise, you'll be leaving with me, Miss Beth."

As the caretaker started to shuffle toward the front door, Garry stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Williams," he said. "Do you know where Mr. Stuyvesant keeps the keys to his storeroom?"

The care-taker stopped short and stared at him in dumb perplexity.

"And what in the world would you be talking about?" he asked. "Storeroom? There ain't no keys to the storeroom. I just come from there. It's where I got these candles. Keys, you ask? Why that door ain't been locked in years. Longer than that, I'd be guessing."

"You mean that storeroom next to the cellar laboratory has never been locked?" Garry demanded.

The caretaker raised his eyebrows. "Oh, that place?" he piped. "I thought you meant the storeroom. Well, I don't know nothing about that. If it's locked, then maybe the keys are about here some place. Or maybe that young Mr. Billings has them. I couldn't tell you, I don't know. And now, if you'll be letting go of my arm, I'll be getting out of this lunatic place. I'm a sick man as it is."

But as Williams turned to the door again it suddenly opened and a thin, blond-haired youth rushed in. A tux that he wore was badly torn. There were blood stains on his shirt front, and blood and dirt were smeared on his hands. He stopped short as he saw them, and stood staring at them wild-eyed.

Garry's heart looped over, and a red haze filmed his eyes. Recognition had been instantaneous. The newcomer was Courteny Billings.

CHAPTER FIVE

Horror On the Stairs

FOR several seconds they all held the tableau. Then with a frightened wail, Williams backed away, one hand flung up as a sort of guard in front of him. He only stopped when he backed into the wall. The candle dropped from his fingers and snuffed out unheeded on the rug.

Then with a sharp cry Billings went over to Beth Stuyvesant.

"Beth! Beth, dearest, what have they been doing to you?"

Before the girl could answer Carver's hand snaked out and pulled Billings away.

"First, let's hear what they've been doing to *you*, Billings!" he said sharply.

The young scientist gulped for words. "I was attacked . . . attacked as I came up the walk!" he declared. "I had called up here to . . . to say goodnight to Beth. But the line was dead. I couldn't get any answer, on either phone. That . . . that was strange, so I drove right out here—Mr. Stuyvesant hasn't quite been very well, you know—As I came up the walk, something leaped at me. I . . ."

"What leaped at you?" cut in Garry.

Billings started to answer, then saw who had asked the question. He gave Garry a withering look, turned back to Carver.

"It struck so quickly I didn't have a chance to see what it was. The next thing I realized, I was covered with dirt and blood. Everything was a blurr. Then I heard voices in here, and came in. But . . . but where is Mr. Stuyvesant?"

"Mr. Stuyvesant is dead," replied Carver quietly. "He was murdered."

Garry's eyes glued to the other's face, saw the lids narrow, and the skin over the jaw bone grow taut. Apart from those two things Billings received the news as quietly as it had been given. Then, he suddenly backed away from the group, toward the door. His handsome features seemed to turn a yellowish green, and his eyes to grow small and starry.

"Mr. Stuyvesant dead . . . *dead?*" he mumbled thickly. "Then get out of here, all of you. Quick! You'll all be killed!"

"Hey, wait!"

Garry's shout was drowned out as Billings disappeared and slammed the door. The young scientist's shoes made clicking sound as he raced down the flagstone path. Garry turned from the door with

disgust on his face. His eyes met Beth's, and he quickly looked the other way. She was leaning against the wall, one hand raised in a pleading gesture. With a quivering little sob she crumpled to the floor.

The reporter went over to her quickly, knelt down beside her and froze rigid. From out of the darkness beyond the front door came a trembling cry of mortal terror—just one cry, and then silence. For a second Garry forgot about the girl. He slowly straightened up and looked first at Carver, and then at Williams. Their faces reflected the look he knew must be on his own. The one candle Carver held in his hand was bobbing up and down, the flame gutting in the tallow. With an impulsive motion the reporter reached out and closed his fingers about the man's wrist.

"Steady, Carver!" he husked.

The lawyer gawked at him and gulped. "Of course, of course!" he mumbled. "Er . . . thanks."

A low moan tore itself from Williams' lips. "We must get out, we must get out!" But Garry stopped him half way to the door.

"Don't be a fool!" he barked. "It's safer in here where there is light."

AS Garry spoke the words he tried desperately to believe their logic, himself. But it left him with an empty quivering feeling. There was no place that was safe. A phantom killer was roaming the inside of the house, and out there in the darkness, beyond the front door something else was waiting and watching . . . something that had wrung that cry of mortal terror from Billings' lips. Or had that cry come from Billings? He thought so, but he wasn't sure. As a matter of fact, he wasn't sure of anything.

He shot a quick side-glance at Carver, at Williams, at the wall Sullivan had pointed to, and at the front door. Sweat started trickling down the back of his

knees. There was a queer burning in his lungs, and a dull throbbing in his head. For a fleeting instant he was consumed with a berserk desire to bolt out the front door himself. This murdering madness wasn't any of his business anyway. He'd stumbled into it, and he was a fool not to get clear of it as soon as he could. Billings had had the right idea . . . save your own neck. Damn right, he'd. . . .

But as his eyes fell on the helpless figure of Beth Stuyvesant, self-shame swept through him. Hell, what a yellow rat *he* was turning out to be!

"Listen, Carver," he said, striving to keep his voice steady. "There's only one thing we can do. Stick right here, all of us, until it's dawn. That'll be in another couple of hours, and we've got plenty of candles. Let me see that gun."

The lawyer hesitated, then shrugged and handed it over.

"That won't help," he said shakily. "It's empty."

One quick look confirmed the words. Garry groaned, and icy fingers curled about his heart. He had wasted precious bullets on a mirror!

"Then the next best thing," he said with savage conviction, "is to make all the light we can. Williams, let's have some of those candles."

The caretaker shuffled over. Then suddenly he stopped dead. The unlighted candles spilled from his fingers. His face went sheet white, and he clutched madly at Carver for support. Carver yelped and dropped his lighted candle, as the piercing cry spilled from the caretaker's lips.

"Mother of Jesus . . . the stairs . . . the stairs!"

Garry whirled and went rigid. It was there on the stairs . . . the thing . . . the wavering mass of blue flame shaped like an animal. It was about half way up the flight, motionless, and pointed toward them. The reporter only realized that he

was pulling the trigger of Sullivan's gun when he heard the firing pin clicking against the empty shell chamber. With a wild cry he hurled it from him, straight at that mass of blue light on the stairs. He heard it thump against the wood, bounce off the flame—clatter down onto bare floor. But the thing didn't move.

Panic gripped him. The black hallway was ringing with screams and shouts. In a dulled sort of way, he was conscious that his own voice was adding to the bedlam of sound. Then he stumbled over something soft and yielding . . . Beth Stuyvesant's body. Hardly realizing that he was doing it, he bent down and gathered the girl into his arms. Then he stumbled blindly for the front door.

The groping fingers of one hand found the knob, and twisted. The door opened and he lunged through, crashed up against a solid wall! The impact and the weight of his burden sent him to the floor.

In the darkness he'd missed the front door. He was in the hall closet. His pawing fingers touched coats on hangers, an umbrella, and last the inside knob of the door. The instinct of self-preservation acted on the spur of the moment. He jerked the door shut.

Holding the limp girl braced against him he sank down against the back wall, and held his breath and listened. But only ringing silence beat against his straining eardrums. On the other side of the door, in the hall, all was deathly quiet. There was not a sound, not. . . .

Yes, there was too! There was . . . there was . . . Something was sliding over the floor. The blood in his veins became ice. His heart stood still. The faint, soft sound beyond the door was coming closer and closer.

The girl stirred in his arms. She moaned faintly, and her body quivered. Then it went limp and still again. He tightened his arm about her, held her clos-

er. Sweat oozed out on his forehead, ran down into his smarting eyes. But he didn't even feel it. He didn't feel anything. His whole body was like one great ear tuned to that soft, snaking sound beyond the door. It came closer and closer . . . then stopped directly in front of the closet.

One second . . . two seconds . . . three seconds of hellish torture. And then the click of the latch going back came to him like the crash of a gun. It snapped sane reason in his brain. With a wild shout he lunged upward. But his foot slipped and he spilled backward.

A blast of air swept over him, then a white beam of light pierced his eyes. He flung up one hand before his face. Something brushed it aside. Then his head split open and the whole world blew up in a roar of sound, and a great blaze of spinning colored lights.

CHAPTER SIX

The Blue Death

ETERNITIES of death-like silence, were followed by a pulsating sound in Colgan's fogged brain. It grew louder and louder, until finally he realized it was a human voice talking in a high pitched tone. He knew that his eyes were open, but he could only see blurred objects dancing and whirling around in front of him. Gradually they ceased whirling, and took on definite shapes and outlines. Even then, his brain refused, for the moment, to believe what his eyes saw.

He was flat on his back on a marble slab, in T. J. Stuyvesant's laboratory. A few feet to his left was another slab, and on it the white faced form of Beth Stuyvesant. Her eyes were closed, but the movement of her breasts beneath her torn gown told him that she was breathing and alive. Beyond her was a sight that froze his blood anew. Bound fast to the rear

wall of the room were the naked corpses of Sullivan and Stuyvesant. A long metal bench had been pushed in front of them, and upon the bench was a mass of wires and electrical equipment. One instrument Colgan recognized definitely. It was a spark gap, and a wavy blue spark was sputtering and hissing from one electron to the other. Beside the bench, a pencil shaped instrument in his hand, stood old Williams, the caretaker!

His eyes were pin-points of fire. Sweat glistened on his wrinkled face. And with his other hand he gesticulated toward Trenton Carver, who was bound hand and foot in a chair.

Then Colgan heard the spoken words that poured from the old man's lips.

" . . . and you would have turned me over to the police, wouldn't you? Ya-a-ah, after I'd done your dirty work for you! Well . . . "

"For God's sake," Carver's tortured cry cut in on him, "shut that thing off! You'll kill us all!"

"Why not? Why not? Isn't that what you wanted? Didn't you say you wanted his patents? Didn't you want him out of the way?"

The lawyer struggled frantically at the ropes that held him tight.

"No, no! You know I didn't say that. I did not tell you to *kill* him. I gave you that stuff to put on the dog to scare him—make him give up his experiments, and sell his patents to me. But, you fool, he was going to do that anyway. I told you he was—I told you that we did not have to do anything. I—!"

Carver's voice was drowned out by the shrill blood-curdling laugh that spilled off Williams' lips. The old man dropped the pencil shaped instrument on the table and waved both scrawny arms wildly.

"You told me? You told me? What do I care what *you* told me. I saw him bring that dog back to life. Well, I'm

going to do even more. I'm going to bring a dead man back to life. Yes, me, the greatest scientist in the whole world. I've worked with him—and now I'm going to do more than he ever hoped to do. I'm going to bring the dead back to life!"

The old man cut himself off short, took two stealthy steps toward Carver, and crouched like an animal ready to spring. His voice lowered to little more than a rasping whisper.

"You wanted those patents. You wanted to get rich. But you were afraid to kill—only willing for me to kill, for me to run all the risks. Phosphorous paint you gave me to smear on that dog, and scare him? Bah! You knew that it would drive the dog mad—drive him to kill. But you wanted *me* to do it. And then—then you'd steal everything. Yes, with those patents you'd get money, *power!* And me—I'd be put behind bars. For me, all hope of ever becoming a great scientist would be gone. Yes, the world would laugh at me. Old Williams thinks *he's* a scientist, ha, ha, ha!"

The ungodly note that had crept into the caretaker's voice held Colgan spellbound, though his whole body screamed for action. Carver and Williams! Carver, the brains that had plotted and planned to rob a trusted friend of his life's work; Old Williams, the tool who had gone insane with desires of his own, and had turned on his master. For years he'd lived in a world of scientific exploration, and finally it had twisted and warped his brain. Perhaps Carver had goaded the old man on.

The lawyer's screaming voice shut down on Garry's spinning thoughts. "You're wrong, Williams! I swear that you are wrong. I would have given you what I promised. For God's sake—it's not too late now. Let me out of here. I'll give you money to get away. I'll give you more money than you've ever had. You

can go away—go to Europe. You can travel, Williams, all over the world—see all kinds of wonderful things. For God's sake, man, untie me. I swear I'll never say a word to—!"

Once again the old man's shrill, nerve rasping laugh drowned out his words.

"Oh no, Trenton Carver, oh no! You once wanted me to help you. And then, when you found out my help was no longer needed, you were going to cast me aside—take everything for yourself. Oh no! You started it—you wrote those letters—you told me what to do with that dog. But I was clever, too. I wasn't going to be cheated. Now, you're going to watch what old Williams can do. Phosphorous paint? Ha-ha-ha! You thought old Williams was a fool, eh? Well, he is the greatest scientist of them all. He will kill, and bring back to life. And the world will be his!"

PERHAPS it was because the old man stopped talking, or perhaps it was because he turned and reached out clawing hands toward Beth Stuyvesant's limp figure. At any rate, Garry Colgan knew that his body was in motion. Like a shot from a cannon he went off the slab table and hurled himself at the caretaker. Williams saw him coming. His lips went back in a snarl. He spun and snatched up the pencil shaped instrument from the table. The shiny point came curving down through the air, straight at Garry's eyes. For one hellish split second he saw certain death. Then his muscles obeyed his screaming brain. He flung himself to the side, half pivoted and slashed out blindly with his fists. A mad thrill surged through him as he felt his fist smash against flesh and bone.

He staggered back to brace himself for a new charge. Through a red film he saw the caretaker stumble backward and go spread-eagled over the instrument-covered

table. A scream of terror rang out, and instantly a crackling sheet of blue flame leaped ceilingward. It changed to yellow and orange—and brown acrid smoke belched out in all directions.

Choking, gagging, cursing Garry stumbled toward Beth Stuyvesant. The whole room was echoing with the crackle of flames and piercing screams of mortal pain and berserk fear. He could hardly see through the spewing smoke. Somehow, though, he managed to scoop her up in his arms. He started toward a door, became lost in a swirling sea of fire and smoke, and went crashing into a wall. He fumbled for the door, found it, shoved it open. A world of cold dawn air blasted against him. He staggered up a flight of stairs, down a short hall, and out of a door into a side yard.

There, a bedlam of shouting voices greeted him. Blurred figures crowded around. Many hands relieved him of the girl's weight. In a crazy, abstract way he knew that he tore himself away from hands that clung to him; fighting to go back into the house. He heard his own voice from a thousand miles off.

"Let go, you fools! Let go! Carver—Trenton Carver's in there! Got to get him out, and learn the—!"

Hands pulled him back. Voices shouted. And in the next instant a rumbling roar shook the ground, and the whole rear section of the Stuyvesant house crumpled inward, and livid tongues of flame spewed out.

"Get back, everyone!" someone roared.

As Garry automatically stepped back, a figure brushed past him, and a familiar voice rang in his ears. It was the voice of Courteny Billings.

"Beth, dearest, are you all right? It's Courteny! I've sent for the police. It's all right now. Only a mad dog! It tried to attack me again, when I went for help. We found it dead, near the woods. He

must have been burned by some kind of phosphorous paint, or something. His singed hair still glistened. Come, darling, we—”

Colgan turned blindly away, disgust welling up in him. Yeah, everything was swell, *now!* Mad dog painted with phosphorous? The hell with it—let 'em think so. But, there was more than phosphorous paint on that dog. Williams knew, so did Carver. But, they were dead—and the real truth would never be known.

It was better that way, too. When mankind probed beyond earthly limits—

BREAKING into a run, Garry tore around the house and down the flagstone path to his car. A bitter laugh was on his lips as he kicked the starter.

“Garry! Oh, Garry!”

The voice checked his foot, jerked his

head around. Beth Stuyvesant was running toward him. She reached the side of the car and put out both hands in a pleading gesture.

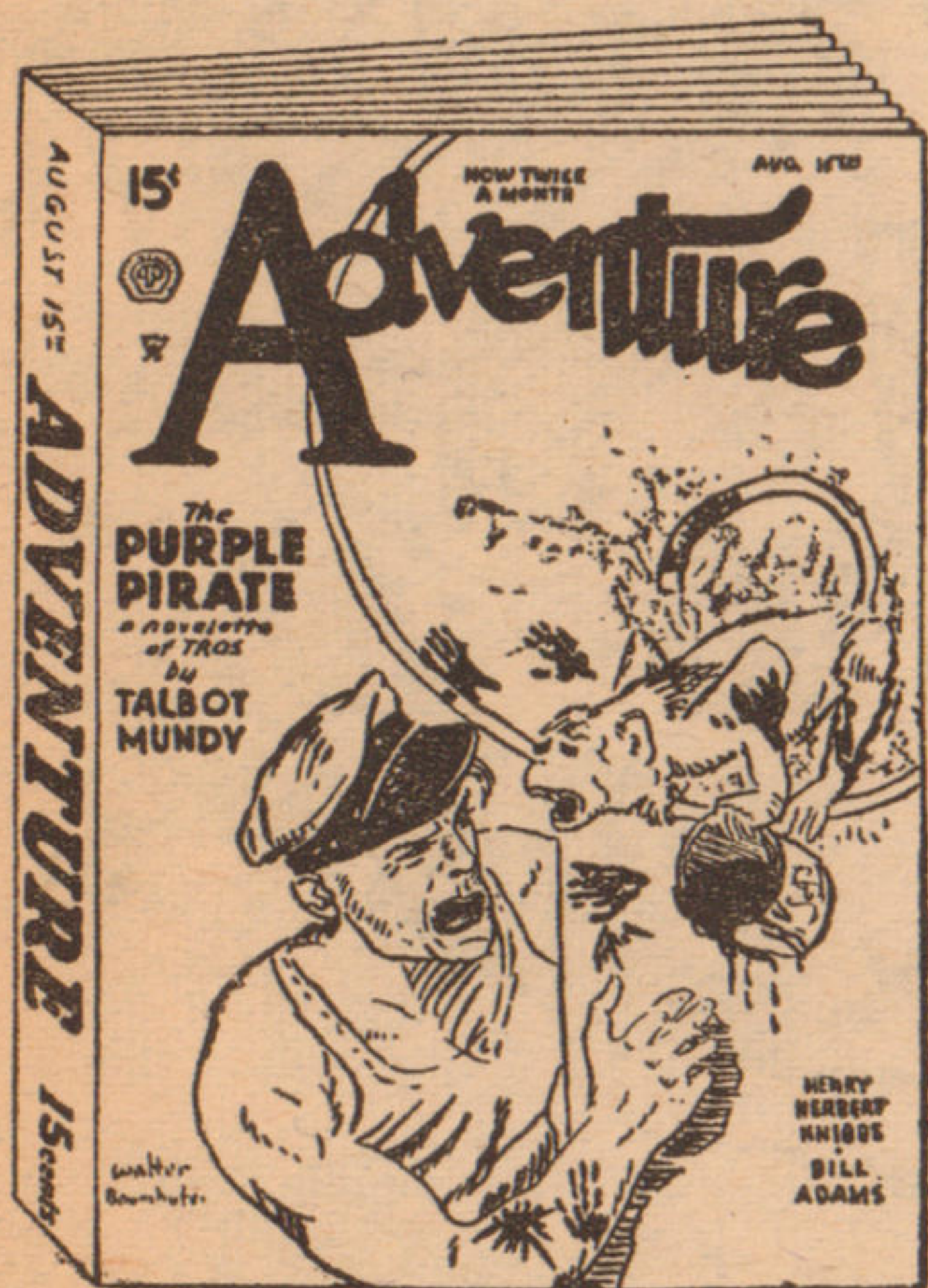
“Garry! Garry, dear, please take me to my aunt's! I can't stay here! Oh please take me away!”

He stared at her, blurted out the words. “What about Billings?”

“I was wrong, Garry,” she said in a low voice, sliding in beside him. “I—I couldn't marry a coward, Garry.”

His heart looped over with joy, as he booted the starter again. What a break! *The* story, and *the* girl! No, the story was out. No one would believe what he'd write—he wouldn't himself. The true story was in that burning house, lost forever. Oh, well—wasn't Beth worth more than the best scoop that ever hit the front page? Damn right, she was!

THE END



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THE BATH OF BLOOD

By H. M. Appel

(Author of "Nightmare Lake," etc.)

It was time for the hideous sacrifice to Cybele, the Goddess of Fertility—and, as the wailing horns of the wild Korbands came ever nearer, Earl Young wished to High Heaven he had not taken his bride with him along that dark trail; for the pain worshipers knew that her name was Cybele, too!



EARL YOUNG'S lean-jawed face looked haggard and worn. "I believe," he said soberly, "that Hal Coleman is dead. He wasn't yellow. Never the sort to run away."

Cybele, his attractive bride of a month before, felt her dark-skinned cheeks grow pale. A fork dropped from her trembling

fingers. Leaning across the dinner table in Wendell Shorey's mountain cabin, she exclaimed:

"You don't mean . . . murdered?"

The grim lines about Young's mouth tightened. Nervously, he kicked back his chair and got up—a tall, sun-tanned figure in engineer's boots and breeches. With

the harassed air of one who speaks against his will, he addressed their host.

"There's something queer, something evil, brewing among these gloomy hills. Surely, you must have felt it! Festus Meers could tell us what happened to Hal. His evasive answers to my questions, his vague warnings, point to guilt."

"Oh, come now! That's a serious accusation!" Shorey also rose, a gaunt, hollow-cheeked savant with silvery hair and large, veined beak of a nose. "Meers is rather a homespun product, rough and arrogant, but not a killer."

"I don't say that he killed Hal. I say he knows who did! He warned me that I'd risk my life by venturing out upon the Common. There's too much hocus-pocus about his secret dealings with those herdsmen who squatted on my company's property. What do they call themselves?"

"The Korbands? Really, there's no mystery about them—nor about Meers. I've devoted nearly ten years to a study of their origin, in connection with my history of these mountain folk. They are direct descendants, outrageously intermarried, of early English fanatics who settled here in the Southern Appalachians when driven from the homeland. Their sect name is a corruption of 'Corybant,' meaning a dancing priest of Attis and dating from a time when their forefathers indulged in long-forgotten rites to that mythical god and his mother, Cybele."

"Why!" Young's wife smiled, surprise dulling her fears. "That is my name!"

"Cybele?" Shorey stared. "What a weird coincidence. She was the Goddess of Fertility. A very ancient deity revered in Western Asia long before the Emperor Claudius incorporated Phrygian worship in the established religion of Rome. Even to this day, the illiterate Korbands dance over these hills by torchlight to the scream of trumpets on March

festival nights when they seek her influence upon the fecundity of their cattle."

Like a confirmation of his words, from afar across the vast, brush-choked plateau known as "the Common," came the brazen blast of a horn. Cybele Young started to her feet, gazing wide-eyed into the oppressive darkness. Her husband, with vague dread twitching at his lips, said jerkily:

"The Corybants—didn't they hold orgiastic ceremonies? Wasn't part of their unholy program known as the 'Night of Blood'? My mythology is a bit rusty."

"Quite right." Wendell Shorey nodded, something like a shadow of alarm crossing his own face. "Of course, that was centuries ago, and these poor creatures whom your Consolidated Coal Company seeks to evict from its property cannot even read old legends. Their dances and processions are innocent enough . . ." He paused abruptly, listening to an odd new rhythm now being sounded by the distant horns. "Young! I don't like that. Does Festus Meers, by any chance, know your wife's name?"

"No. We were never here before today. Still—he might have heard me call her Cybele. Why?"

"No matter," Shorey said, absently. "Each of their trumpet calls has a different meaning. Tell me! Just what did young Coleman write to you about difficulties he encountered?"

Young, with an arm around Cybele's waist, followed their host into a long, low living room. "I sent Hal to check over possible sites for strip-mining operations on the flat expanse of the Common," he said. "Also, to make recommendations for a line of spur tracks before I brought a surveying crew out on the job. First, he reported suspicion and antagonism on the part of these squatters. Next, he had trouble with Festus Meers, who acts as their agent in the sale of surplus cattle to buyers in the lowlands."

"That," Shorey cut in, thoughtfully, "is Meers' only means of livelihood. He earns generous commission upon sales of the beasts."

"And," Young snapped, "he's afraid his income will be cut off if we move those folks to other hill property as we are prepared to do. The company wants to give them a square deal. Anyway, Hal wrote that you had taken him in, after Meers refused to lodge him following some argument with the Archigallus." He grimaced, impatiently. "What the devil is an Archigallus? Hal didn't say."

"A sort of high priest, or chieftain of the clan. I've never seen him, but rumor has it that he goes cowled and masked—that no one may look upon his face."

"Sounds spooky, but I've a hunch it may be Meers, himself." Young spread his hands helplessly. "Then, there was no further word from the boy. So I came—"

Wendell Shorey paced the floor, biting his pale lips, running long, bony fingers through his silvery hair.

"It is folly to suspect a man like Meers—a phlegmatic type utterly lacking in imagination—and yet, what you suggest disturbs me. Perhaps I have underestimated the fellow." He dropped into a chair, sat looking through a window into black shadows crowding close about the cabin. When the hoarse note of a horn echoed from some rocky crag quite near at hand, he started up, exclaiming:

"I thought it queer! The lad packing his belongings and departing at night without a word. Still, I can't understand why he would have taken his clothes if he did not leave of his own free will."

"He may have started and been waylaid." Young lit a cigaret, puffed a moment, threw it aside. "Coleman was excited about finding a 'sink' out there in the middle of the Common. A sort of natural amphitheater where coal might lie very close to the surface. Wrote that some

one took a shot at him while he was inspecting the spot. Perhaps he decided that reinforcements were needed—and was killed before he could go after them."

Again the near trumpet note vibrated on the whispering breeze. Cybele Young grasped her husband's arm in a convulsive fit of trembling.

"Earl! What if they mean to kill us, too? Oh, I wish we hadn't come alone. You should have brought some men!"

"I had hoped to reason with these people, to persuade them, without making a show of force." Young's jaw hardened, his black brows were knitted in a frown. "But if it's trouble they want, they shall have it. I'm going to have a talk with Festus Meers right now."

"You must be careful!" Wendell Shorey spoke anxiously. "I'll go with you. I have some influence with the man. Perhaps Mrs. Young had better remain here."

"Alone?" Cybele shuddered. "Never! I'm coming along."

Together, they went into the night.

OUT on the black expanse of the Common a chorus of horns blared wildly. Here and there distant torchlights flared like monstrous fireflies blinking. Between strident outbursts of the trumpets, silence hung like a pall over the gloomy flat. Then, footsteps of the hurrying trio beat a muted tattoo upon the rocky trail which led to the home of Festus Meers.

"We'd better not use a flash, or the man might dodge us," suggested Shorey, who was leading the way.

"What is this tale," Young demanded, "about the 'Bull-eaters' who live hereabouts? Are they the same as the Korbands, or another clan?"

"I've heard them called that," Wendell Shorey panted, setting a vigorous pace. "As their herds increase, only the cows are sold through Meers, but the Korbands

raise the most magnificent white bulls you ever saw. Perhaps they do eat them”

The way led between thickets of redbud and dogwood which crowded close to the path. The warm night air was rich with the heady scent of growing things. Beyond the eastern range rumbling thunder threatened a storm, and faint flickerings of lightning made white-blossoming trees shimmer with ethereal radiance.

“They frighten me, Earl!” Cybele whimpered, clinging to his arm. “Like specters those bushes stand—like ghosts about to leap upon us.”

“Please, dear!” he remonstrated. “The damned horns rasp one’s nerves enough. Keep hold of yourself!”

Shorey halted, snapped hoarsely:

“Wait! *What was that?*”

“Where?” Young’s voice dropped to a wary whisper. “What did you see?”

“Something” The old man’s grey-clad arm was faintly visible as he pointed to the right. “I thought it moved. . . .”

Young muttered: “I wish to heaven I’d brought a gun.”

“You didn’t?” Shorey’s tone trembled slightly. “I thought—”

“*Great God!*” The exclamation grated across Young’s dry lips. “Run, Cybele!” He shoved her forward. “They’re all around us! White-robed devils!”

Dim-seen forms, on every hand, moved like wraiths through underbrush which scarcely rustled. Cybele stumbled and went down. Young bent to lift her as Shorey raced ahead. Out of the old man’s throat rose a weird, moaning cry. It was echoed by a score of tongues. The nightmarish creatures closed in.

Standing astride his terrified wife, Young lashed out with pistoning fists. His blows thudded upon muscular bodies. Men cursed and pummeled him, bore him to the ground. A rib-cracking kick drove the breath from his body, the impact of

a heel or club upon his skull sent him whirling into oblivion.

Young could not say, when he regained his senses, whether he had lain unconscious for minutes or an hour. But Cybele was gone! No voice answered his frenzied call. With a pocket-flash he searched surrounding rocks and thickets. Shorey, too, had disappeared. Had he escaped or been carried away? In frantic haste, Young headed for the cabin of Festus Meers.

Rounding a bend in the trail he saw a lighted window gleaming. Heedlessly rushing to the door he flung it wide and faced a squat, stocky figure seated in a hickory chair. The man did not rise. Sullenly, he demanded:

“Now what? Why do you come busting in here at night, all crazy-eyed?”

“*Where is my wife?*” Young stepped forward, fists clenched. “You know! Don’t lie to me. Where have they taken her?”

Slowly, Festus Meers got to his feet, broad shoulders slightly hunched, his weather-beaten face drawn tense.

“Do you mean to tell me she went out somewhere at night—with them damned horns ablowing?”

“Meers! Don’t stall! Talk—before I choke the truth out of you! We were coming to see you—the pair of us and Wendell Shorey—when those white devils sprang upon us and knocked me silly. Now she’s gone!”

“*God!*” The man’s ejaculation was a husky croak. He cocked up his head, listening to far-away trumpet calls. “I warned you to keep off the Common, to stay indoors after dark. You’ve brought this on yourself.”

“Brought what? Why did they attack us? What do they man to do with Cybele?”

“With who?” Festus Meers gaped, his hard jaw hanging loose. “What do you know about Cybele?”

"She's my wife, you fool!" Young stepped forward, teeth grating with impatience. "They carried her off, I tell you. Your damned Korbands! And I want her back—now!"

"*Cybele!*" Meers shook his head as though to clear his brain of hideous visions. "If they know that! On the 24th of March—the Night of Blood."

Desperately, Young cried: "You know where she is. You've got to help me find her!"

"I can find her. I'll go and see the Archigallus. But whether I can do anything with them in the heat of their blood rites—"

"Hurry! We've got to act quickly!" Young turned to the door. "Come on!"

"Not so fast!" He wheeled to look into the muzzle of a heavy revolver. "Move a step and I'll drop you. I'll break one of your legs with a bullet. You've got to keep out of this mess."

Recklessly, Young sprang. Meers hesitated, sidestepped, reversing the weapon in his hand. A blow of the butt sent Young to his knees, groaning. Meers heaved his half-conscious body into the chair, lashed his arms and ankles with a rope out of which he had been fashioning a lariat.

"I'm not going to have your blood on my head, too. They'd go nuts as soon as they saw you. As for your wife, God knows what will happen to her, but I'll do what I can."

THE hickory chair was solidly built. Festus Meers was skilled in the use of ropes. The knots which he had tied about Earl Young's wrists and ankles did not loosen. Young twisted and strained in groaning agony of mind and body, blood oozing from his hemp-torn flesh.

Cybele! He must break free. A terrified girl at the mercy of that white-robed pack! Now, Festus Meers had gone to

make doubly sure that she did not escape. "Goddess of Fertility," Shorey had named the deity. To what odious ordeal might his bride be subjected by these fanatical breeders of cattle? Dreadful visions of loathesome rites flashed through his reeling brain.

When the chair fell backward and crashed upon the floor his mind cleared a little. There must be a way! He managed to roll upon his side. Arching his body outward, away from the seat, he twisted and squirmed until one upraised and contorted elbow hooked over a post of the chair-back. In that position he could exert leverage. Panting, sweating, he brought his whole strength to play.

Slowly, creakingly, the spindles loosened and the seat tore loose. Soon he had broken the chair in two parts. With flailing legs he beat the bottom rungs against the cabin stove. They separated. By dint of straining, then, he got upon his knees and found he could reach the ankle-knots with his fingers. Feverishly, he worked at them, felt them begin to unravel.

Beyond the window a pale shadow moved and was gone. But Young's eye had caught the flash of motion. *Meers?* Returning to make sure of his prisoner? Or had the man ever gone? In frantic haste Young tore at the knots. A moment later he staggered to his feet. Now he must rid himself of the chair-back. *What was that laughter?* He stared toward the window. His bloodshot eyes whipped about the room. God! If he could but free his hands . . .

An open claspknife lay upon the table. He leaped toward it, turned, groped for the blade. But the dangling wooden thing blocked his effort. *Yes, it was laughter!* Malicious and mocking. They were outside—the white-robed fiends—peering in through the glass. The door opened slowly. He whirled, lunged forward, butted a tall figure back into the night.

Then they were upon him, ghostly white arms reaching, clutching. Brutally, their fists hammered his head and face. Stunned, he felt the bite of a noose around his neck, knew when they untied his wrists. Gasping for air as the throttling rope tightened, he was dragged toward the shadowy Common.

One of the spectral figures touched fire to a torch and its flickering light illuminated savage faces in which bloodlust seemed to flame. Running, leaping, shouting a wild, mad chant they raced toward a distant area which glowed with the light of many flares. Young hung onto the rope with both hands to keep it from garroting him. When he stumbled and fell, he was dragged until he found his feet again. The cries of his captors ceased when, somewhere ahead, the night erupted a weird screaming of horns and flutes.

"Hurry!" one yelled. "It is the signal for sacrifice. Holla!" he shouted. "We bring another to face the bulls!"

They scrambled down a steep declivity into that "sink" which Hal Coleman had reported—a level, rock-floored basin free of brush, at one side of which the torches were clustered. The white-robed fanatics dragged Young into a corral walled with flat limestone shards. At a muttered word from the leader of the group one powerful fellow snubbed the rope about an up-thrust rock and held him caught like a lassoed cow. The others joined a tense and silent throng before the door of a small temple built into the hillside.

Earl Young felt an icy stricture at his heart when he recognized three figures visible there upon a slightly elevated ledge in the light of the torches. One was tall and spare, white-robed and hooded, its face masked by an opaque veil. The Archigallus! The other was Festus Meers, clad in corduroys, booted. The man's eyes were fixed upon the lovely form of Cybele

Young. Stripped to nakedness save for twining garlands of white blooms, she stood with slender arms lashed to a cross of stone near the temple door. Her face blanched to the pallor of snowy blossoms with which her dark head was crowned, she stared down at the leering Korbands in abject terror.

Young tried to shout her name but his voice was a husky wheeze in his tortured throat. Around the center of the natural arena, inside a circular wall of rocks, a group of Korbands came leading three huge, white bulls. Utter silence blanketed the spot until the animals had completed the circuit and halted before the temple. Then, Festus Meers spoke into the masked priest's ear. The Archigallus raised his hands, chanting a sonorous invocation in a language which Earl Young judged to be corrupted Latin. One long arm pointed across the heads of the fanatics. A sepulchral voice boomed:

"The middle one. I have chosen!"

The great white bull indicated by his outthrust finger was led toward a squat rock mound which reared its flattened top above the circular wall at the farther end of the arena. Four men herded the animal to the crest, prodding its white flanks with short spears. Others dragged from the temple a struggling man.

Groans and broken cries issued from the captive's lips. Flowing garments in which his body was clothed swished and billowed as he strove to escape. Before the Archigallus he was forced to his knees. Again the eerie voice was raised in a sentence of doom:

"Upon the horns you shall be carried to the arms of Mother Cybele. For the glory of Attis you shall be reborn in the bath of blood."

Was Wendell Shorey about to die? Young heard his wife's shocked, despairing scream as it echoed across the night.

He stared, when a glimpse of the victim's face confirmed her cry:

"It is Hal Coleman!"

STILL fighting hopelessly the lad was led through a small opening in the base of the rock mound. A door dropped into place with a thud, leaving Coleman and one Korband inside. White figures on top, guarding the big bull, straightened alertly with spears upraised. The Archigallus shouted:

"Slay!"

Steel flashed and harsh barbs sank home. Wound followed wound until the work of the butchers was done. The great white animal sank to its knees, rolled upon its side, and expired.

In the walled arena the remaining two beasts pawed and bellowed, enraged by the scent of fresh blood. Korbands crowded close along the fence, waiting in tense expectation, eyes staring, lips silent.

Through an opening in the base of the mound, into the pen where maddened creatures were confined, a tall man came. Robed in gleaming scarlet strangely streaked with white, his dripping hands scratched at his eyes as though they were blinded. Some force had propelled him forward in a stumbling rush. Earl Young glimpsed another crimson-clad figure safely ensconced within the aperture which was too narrow for bulls to enter. He realized, then, that it was Hal Coleman who staggered about the stone-floored space—who had been thrust forth to his doom in garments stained to the color of gore, following the horrible blood bath which had fallen in a drenching rain through openings overhead.

The two white bulls, crazed by smell of death and flash of maddening red, lowered their heads and charged. The thudding impact of the leader's skull against Coleman's chest made Earl Young shudder. The boy went down! A scream

of agony quavered upon his lips as he died. The cloven feet spurned him, danced upon him, slashed him to pulp. Then, one gigantic animal tossed the body in air. It fell impaled upon the horns. Followed by its snorting fellow the furious creature galloped about the ring, bellowing like a blood-smeared demon.

Shrill rose the delirious shouts of the Korbands. High over all blared the horns and flutes. Men and women fell into a wild, whirling dance, hair flying, heads wagging, shrieking in rapt frenzy which their rites had bred.

Young's guard had relaxed his grip upon the throttling rope. Muscles twitching with the will to dance, eyes glued to the capering crowd, he never knew that Young had freed himself until the noose slipped over his head. Desperately, pitilessly, Young choked out his life. Dragging the inert body into shadow below the wall he stripped the corpse of its loose white gown and donned the garment. Joining the hysterical throng, jumping and gesturing with as much abandon as the most excited fanatic, he wormed his way toward the platform where Cybele Young hung lashed to the cross.

Festus Meers and the Archigallus were engaged in some argument. Quarreling over the lovely plunder? Debating the nature of her fate? The nails of Young's tight-clenched fingers cut his palms. Like an automaton he continued the motions of an awkward dance. *How to save her!* Hopeless the thought of leaping up there in the full glare of torchlights, of removing her bonds and bearing her dear body to a place of safety. He began circling through the crowd, edging toward the fringe, bent upon reaching a point behind the temple.

But Festus Meers and the high-priest had come to some decision. They strode toward Cybele, untied the ropes which held her. The girl reeled forward, her

faltering knees like jelly, and would have fallen had not Meers caught her in his arms. Urged and pushed by the Archigallus he carried his moaning burden into the temple.

Cold sweat beaded Young's brow and blood pounded in his brain. Out of that dark cloister they had dragged young Coleman to death upon the horns. Were they preparing Cybele for a similar sacrifice?

Panting with haste, no longer troubling to pose as a dancing Korbant, Young forced his way through the howling mob and crept up a steep rock shoulder in which the low, one-story temple was half-embedded. A sigh of relief whistled across his dry lips upon noting an aperture in the wall above.

SPRINGING into the air he hooked his fingers over a ledge, drew himself upward, climbed into the window and stared. In the bare chamber below a single torch flared. His bride lay in a corner where she had fallen, eyes wide with fright. Bending over her was the white and ghoulish form of the Archigallus. Festus Meers, a heavy revolver grasped in one outthrust fist, was snarling:

"You can choose now between a bullet, or—!"

Young launched himself downward, feet first, loosing a strangled cry of rage. As Meers looked up, boot-heels clipped him upon the jaw. The gun crashed deafeningly and was knocked across the floor. Young felt the man's body go limp under the impact of his weight.

He sprang erect and whirled to meet the Archigallus. Cybele's warning cry came too late. Korbants, plunging in to investigate the pistol-shot, dragged him down, piled upon him. Then, the white robe confused them. He closely resembled his assailants. Soon, the small chamber resounded with savage cries as blows were

dealt indiscriminately. In the mad melee, slowly, he was forced through the door. Outside, other devotees of the cult joined the battle. The surge of the crowd carried combatants toward the sacrificial mound. Young slipped, went down. Trampling feet bruised and scratched his flesh. But he rolled clear and found himself at the entrance of the blood pit. Darting on through, skidding and sliding upon the sticky floor, he crouched against the wall. Somewhere, the Archigallus was shouting for silence.

"Have you caught him?" the high-priest demanded.

Shrill voices answered yes and no. He was here and he is gone. He wore the robe. He was dressed as one of us . . .

"Then he is hiding near! But he cannot escape. Let him watch—and may he enjoy the spectacle. Bring the bulls! The rites must proceed, for this is the Night of Blood."

Herdsmen leaped into the arena, armed with spears and clubs. By force of numbers they drove the still enraged animals to a position before the temple. The Archigallus indicated the smaller of the pair. It was goaded to the crest of the mound above the blood pit. The Archigallus shouted:

"Raise your eyes and pray. Look upon the reincarnation of Cybele!" Dragging Young's bride from the temple doorway he lifted her nearly nude body in his long, gaunt arms. Thrusting her light weight aloft, he chanted:

"O, Mother of Attis, Goddess of Fertility, repay our worship with your blessings. Into the blood bath, thence to rest upon the horns, I carry this fair one of your name and sex."

Striding down three crudely fashioned steps, still bearing Cybele's writhing form high in air, the Archigallus approached the pit in which Young lay hidden. To

white-robed men standing beside the bull upon the roof, he cried:

"The last rites will take a little time. Hold back your spears until I have done. Let the blood flow when you hear my command to slay."

THE only light within the reeking cavern was that which shone between heavy oaken bars, after the door had been dropped into place. Earl Young saw the cowed and masked high-priest stretch Cybele upon the floor. Her shuddering outcry evidenced the depths of terror into which she had fallen.

As the creature's loathsome hands stroked her twitching limbs, held her pinned in a helpless agony of revulsion, Young leaped upon the man's back. Again and again he drove his fist to the jaw, heard bone crunch before the fury of his attack. Raising the groaning ghoul erect, with mad purpose he shouted to the men overhead, uttering the one word:

"Slay!"

Blinded by the hot and sickening shower he held the Archigallus beneath its crimson flow. Then, grasping the reeling fiend by neck and breech, he rushed him into the arena where the largest bull awaited its prey.

Young stood poised until the bellowing monster lowered its head, began its terrible charge. When he thrust the Archigallus forward the mask and cowl fell away. A croaking gasp of astonishment rose to his lips and he cried:

"Wendell Shorey!"

Stunned by the treachery of one whom he had trusted, Young hung rooted to the spot. He saw Shorey tossed upon the red horns of doom. The infuriated animal gored its victim through. Its rush carried it to the narrow door in the base of the mound. Wheeling, with bloodshot eyes gleaming like red coals, the white bull

snorted viciously and dropped its head to charge again.

His way of escape blocked, Young's harassed glance darted toward the walls. Korbands, recognizing him now, were yelling hysterically. Every eye was riveted upon the bull as it pawed and roared. Behind the animal's back a white and staring face appeared, framed in the dark opening.

"No, no, Cybele!" The warning gushed from Young's throat as she started. "Great God! Don't come out!"

Past the bull she sped. It plunged in pursuit. Young caught her in his arms. She moaned: "We'll die together!" He began to run, but there was no hope. Although he dodged the bull's first rush successfully, flailing fists thrust him away from the wall. Again the ferocious animal lowered clotted horns and bellowed. Once more its churning feet launched a ton of fury toward Young and his dear burden.

A man's hoarse voice was raised above the cries of the crowd. "One side! Let me through!" A blood-smeared face appeared at the wall, eyes gleaming at Young from behind the muzzle of a pistol. Young sprang forward, grasped the barrel, wrenched the weapon away. With Cybele caught close under one arm he evaded the bull by a narrow margin, whirled and shoved his gun against its ear.

A shot crashed. Flame spurted. The creature's knees buckled. Across its kicking bulk leaped Festus Meers who screamed:

"Into the pit! We can hold them off there!"

Through the narrow door in the mound they raced. Young said jerkily: "I ought to put you out or kill you, myself!"

Meers groaned: "You fool! All evening I've been trying to save you." Snatching the revolver from Young's hand he stepped to the barred door, shot one of

the fanatics. "If you hadn't jumped me there in the temple, I'd have forced the Archigallus to free her or killed him!"

"And I thought—" Young sprang toward the arena opening. His hammering fists smashed the face of a man who entered. "Did you see—when the bull got him? It was Wendell Shorey!"

"I had long suspected him," Meers muttered. "And I've feared what might happen at this spring festival, after I found bones of men who had disappeared. He taught these Korbands the old rites of human sacrifice."

Outside the blood pit, angry herdsmen had gathered the sacrificial spears and now they hurled them downward through the overhead grating. Sharp blades clanged and bounced upon the rocks. Festus Meers uttered a gurgling sigh and sank to the blood-drenched floor. Cybele dropped to her knees beside him, sobbing with pity. Young drew both into the shelter of the wall. Meers groaned:

"I'm done for. Take the gun. Maybe you can hold 'em off till they come."

"Until who comes?"

Young snapped a shot at the grilled gate which stealthy hands were raising. Somewhere in the outer darkness, like an echo, a rifle cracked and a Korband screamed. Then came the rattle of a rapid-fire fusilade, a hideous clamor of wounded and retreating men. Harsh voices yelled:

"Let 'em have it! Shoot 'em down! See the dead bodies of their victims lying in that bull ring!"

Festus Meers said weakly: "They made it! They got here in time." He raised a shaking hand and touched Cybele Young's white face. "I 'phoned for help from Shorey's cottage when I went to look for you and found him gone. I'm glad. . . ." A last breath rattled in his throat and he was dead.

The firing dwindled. Young wrapped a coat about his trembling wife. With a prayer in his heart for the eternal peace of that man whom he had wrongfully suspected, he went forth to greet the rescue party that Meers had called.

THE END

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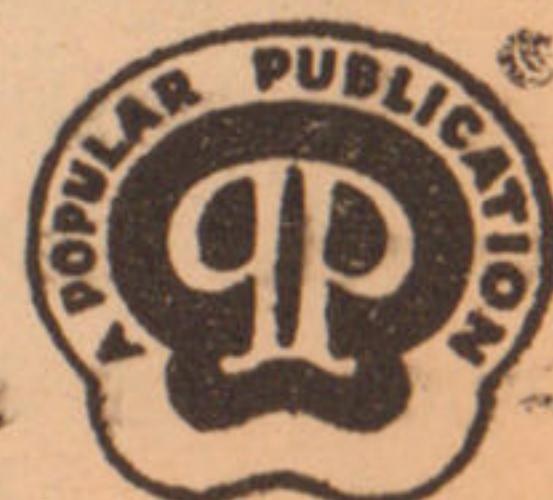
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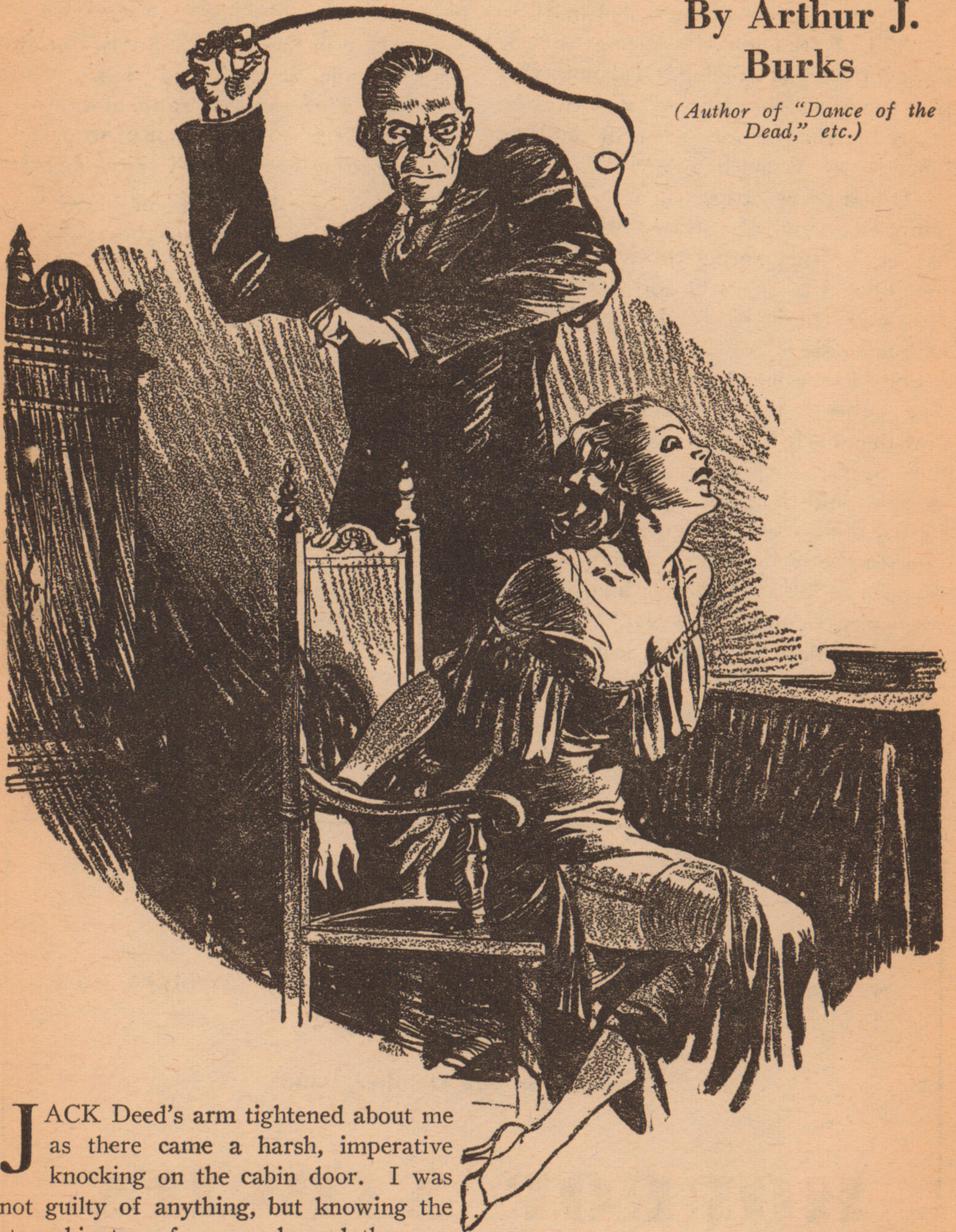
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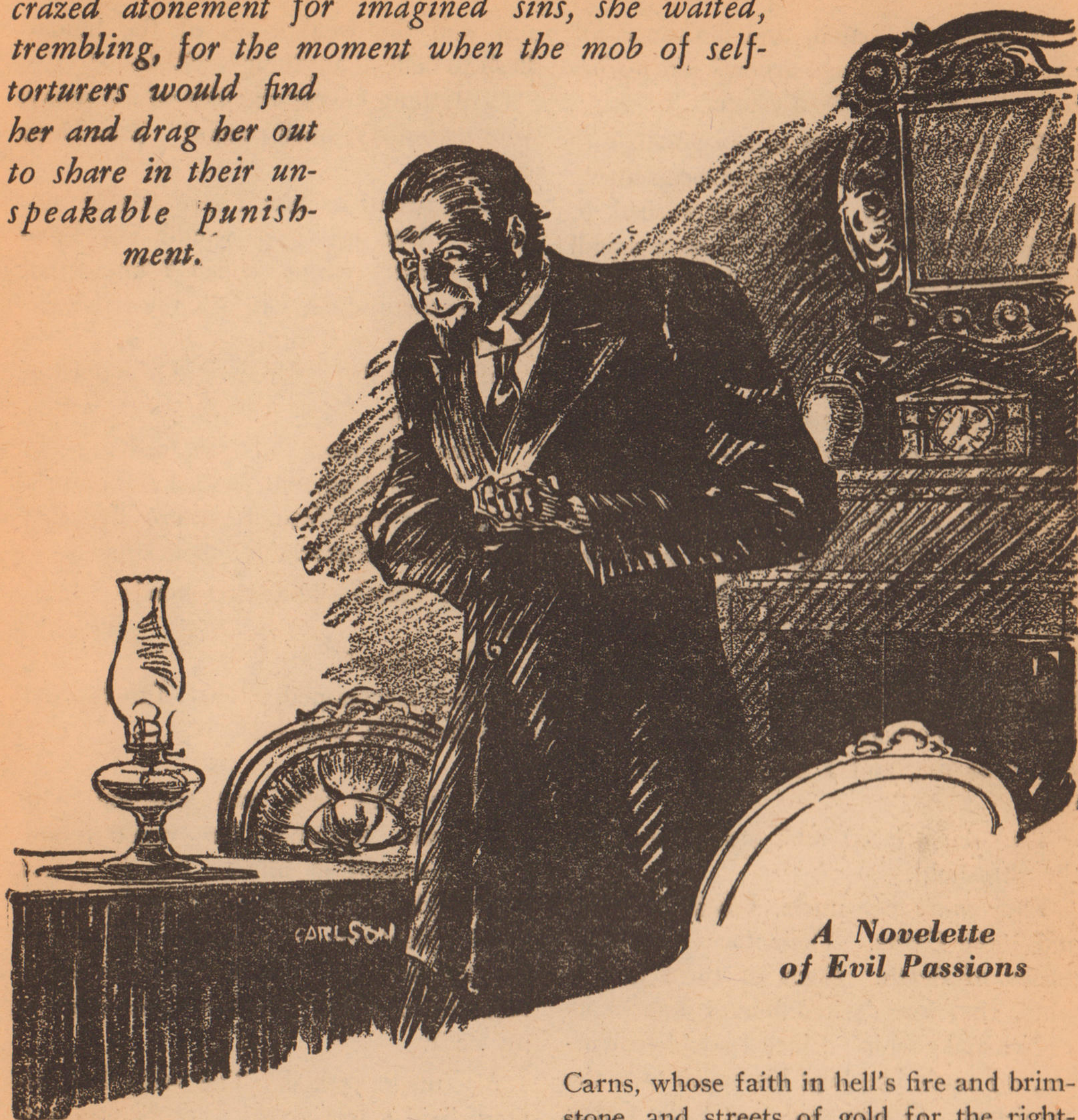
(Author of "Dance of the
Dead," etc.)



JACK Deed's arm tightened about me as there came a harsh, imperative knocking on the cabin door. I was not guilty of anything, but knowing the stern bigotry of my uncle and the man whom he wished me to marry, I feared the worst. Last night I had stolen from my room for a row in the moonlight on Silver Lake with the man I loved from

the bottom of my very soul. It was to have been goodbye, too, for my uncle's anger had worn me down to the point

Drawn into an evil, blasphemous rite of religion-crazed atonement for imagined sins, she waited, trembling, for the moment when the mob of self-torturers would find her and drag her out to share in their unspeakable punishment.



*A Novelette
of Evil Passions*

where I would have done anything to escape the fury of his red-rimmed eyes.

To him all women were potential vessels of evil, and I, his niece Marie, the frailest vessel among women.

Jack Deed was poor, and in my uncle's eyes a nobody.

Luke Carns, twice my age, and as bigoted as my uncle, owned land for miles in all directions from us. He had been twice married and both his wives had died. He had no children, and there were whispers that it was a blessing that this was true. Children of Luke Carns would have been imps of Satan. But to Luke

Carns, whose faith in hell's fire and brimstone, and streets of gold for the righteous, was absolute, the barrenness of his two wives had been their punishment for sins of which he knew nothing, but suspected much.

I remembered his wives as a child—gaunt, unlovely, worn and beaten women. I think they were glad to die—and I had been fiercely glad for them, never thinking that I might be called upon to take their place. But Luke Carns wanted a son to inherit his vast property, so that it might not go to charity, and benefit someone he might righteously hate.

He selected me.

Uncle was so like him that he thought

it an excellent match, and a chance for the vast land holdings around him to become a part of his own estate.

So I had slipped out to say goodbye to Jack Deed. Silver Lake had been lovely in the moonlight. We had rushed to High Island in its center when a squall had broken over us that had smashed our rowboat against the craggy rocks of High Island.

Marooned on that tiny spot of land, we had been forced to spend the night in the island's only habitation—a deserted cabin.

And now, the knocking at the door could mean but one thing: my guardian had found us, had perhaps had someone spying on us, and had come in the early morning, before Luke Carns could know of what had happened, to fetch me.

Jack's face was white as a sheet. He stared at me, and I bade him open the door.

Two dour faced men stood there, on the threshold.

They were my uncle, Obed Crisman, and Luke Carns. Their faces were like masks of death. Each of them held a whip, that long-lashed horror known as a blacksnake whip. Since I could remember, my uncle had kept his coiled over the wood-box. Gossip said that Luke Carns had left the mark of his whip many times on the bare shoulders of the two wives who had died.

My uncle's mouth opened. He spat two words:

“Scarlet woman!”

Jack hurled himself forward, his mouth opening in protest.

“Mr. Crisman, it isn't true! There was nothing . . .”

“You spent the night here on High Island?”

“Yes, but—”

“Your future husband—if he will still accept you, after last night—and I know

too well the weaknesses of the human flesh to believe anything—will be—”

“Anything except the filth which scums your own dirty, small minds!” Jack Deed cut in.

How proud of him I was at that moment! But my eyes would not leave those ghastly whips, which I knew that both men could use with such horrible expertness.

My uncle did not move. He looked at Luke Carns.

“Since you were to be her husband,” he said, “it is fitting that you set the punishment. Let it be fittingly severe, that they may make atonement for their sins.”

Luke Carns spoke two words in answer:

“The whips!”

“No!” I screamed. “No! For the love of a merciful God, no!”

MY uncle's face was suffused with wrath. Righteous fury raged in him. I flung myself at him as his right arm came back with the whip that was so much like a monstrous ebon snake. He shifted slightly as I ran toward him, my arms lifted in entreaty. The whip curled about my neck.

My uncle jerked. The whip had already laid a terrific welt across my back and shoulders. When my uncle jerked I was spun thrice about on my high heels, screaming, my brain dizzy. Then I hit the floor on my left side, banging my head against the rough boards. Ghastly weakness possessed me. As my uncle jerked the whip free I knew that some of my white skin, which Jack so dearly loved to touch with the palms of his hands, adhered to the awful lash.

I tried to rise. I could not. My uncle kept an eye on me, ready to send me spinning again if I managed to rise. I thought I saw unholy glee in his eyes. He enjoyed what he had done, what he

was now doing. He would use the whip on me again and again! I had always known him for a hard man, but I had never before suspected that he was entirely mad, nor that Luke Carns was mad with him. Maybe this was the strange, horrible bond between them.

While I lay, half stunned on the floor, Luke Carns crossed the cabin with two mighty leaps. Jack Deed was now between the two of them. Jack was flinging himself at my uncle, his fist raised to fell the monster, when Luke Carns went into action.

The tip of his lash curled savagely around the forehead of Jack Deed. I tried to cry out and could not. Carns yanked on the whip, spinning Jack around, and I saw the result of Carns' blow. Jack's forehead had been gashed to the bone. Crimson blood ran down over his brows, across his cheeks, dripping into his eyes. It dribbled across his lips, on either side of his nose, then fell to the front of his sport shirt.

Jack's mouth twisted into a red grin. That grin was as horrible as the smirks of Uncle and Carns, terrible as the lashes of their grisly whips.

Jack's back was now toward my uncle, whose whip curled out like a rattler striking from its coil. It curled around the chest of my beloved. So savagely skilled was the stroke that Jack's shirt was cut as though shears had been used. The lower part of it fell about his trousers, exposing his bare chest—across which was a bleeding weal as red and ghastly as that which Carns had laid across his forehead.

I tried to rise again. Uncle's whip curled, and its tip struck me between the eyes. It was almost as though I had been hit with a bullet. It knocked me flat. But there was satanic skill in my uncle's torture, for, though he rendered me helpless, he did not knock me unconscious—

and I could see thereafter what they did to Jack Deed.

Jack hurled himself at Uncle Obed again. Standing six feet in his stocking feet, Jack was a magnificent figure of a man. His brown hair was awry on his splendidly formed head. His fists were tightly locked, so that his knuckles were white. I knew that if he could lay hands on uncle and Luke Carns he would slay them. I didn't care. They deserved to be slain. I think—I was *sure!*—that both dour-faced men knew what was in Jack's heart, and were instantly, without communication between themselves, intent on punishing him as a murderer. How often had I heard my uncle say:

"He that seeth a woman and lusteth after her, committeth adultery in his heart."

By that he meant that a man was guilty of doing whatever he desired to do. In his eyes, then, and those of Luke Carns, Jack Deed was already a murderer. And the law was on their side, for uncle was my guardian, and Luke Carns the betrayed prospective husband—and Jack Deed was trying to reach both of them with his fists.

But his efforts were fruitless, for when he reached for my uncle, the whip of Luke Carns grabbed at him. It grabbed with torturous, uncanny skill—curled about the legs, about the loins, of my beloved. His face was a mask of pain, but he was too proud to cry out. He had seen what they had done to me, proof of what they were capable of doing, and had gone berserk. Even though his face was twisted with pain, I doubt if he felt the sting and bite of the whips.

But I? *I* felt them—felt them to the tips of my toes. Every blow of the lash curled around my heart.

"Don't," I kept saying. "don't! You will kill him!"

"Would he not kill us if he were able?" asked my uncle.

From the lips of Luke Carns came the most horrible travesty of laughter I had ever heard. It made my flesh crawl. It made me forget the lashes which had struck me. Must I, the rest of my life, listen to that horrible cacophonous laughter? Oh, dear God, let me die first with my beloved.

THEY had closed the door, and I started crawling toward Jack Deed, down on his knees now, spitting blood, wagging his tortured head from side to side. I wanted to take that gory head in my arms, cover that crimson, beaten body with my own, take the blows meant for the man I loved.

My uncle knew it, and Luke Carns knew it. He laughed again.

At his laughter I looked up at him, crawling as I was on hands and knees, almost on my stomach because my whole body trembled with the horror and the pain I had experienced—and seen.

“See how she goes to her betrayer! She still does not repent of her sin!” So cried my uncle.

“Women,” said Luke Carns, “need to be broken, like horses!”

“Two were broken, and are dead,” I managed to say.

“They were followers of Satan,” said Luke Carns, “and he took them!”

I fell on my face, unable to get closer to my beloved. As in a ghastly nightmare I heard the rhythmic, savage, endless, striking of the two whips against quivering flesh. Then I heard a thud which told me that Jack Deed had sprawled out under the torture—but had not once cried out. Then I knew no more.

CHAPTER TWO

The House of Whispers

I SAT in a low chair in the stark, harsh home of Luke Carns. It had been made

plain to me that I might even be forced to go to him without marriage, were it not for the fact that Luke Carns would never have taken a woman so, and wanted, besides, everything to be legal for the sake of my uncle's ambition in the matter of the combined estates.

Luke Carns had said that he would still take me, under certain conditions. Uncle Obed had agreed to those conditions. But first there was the horrible inquisition.

I sat there, trembling, the greatest horror of all a weight upon my soul, a picture on my brain that not even death could erase. The two of them had taken me from the cabin on High Island. They had pulled me away from Jack Deed. I had screamed and wept and clung to his poor battered body, and his blood was on me, mingling with my own, when they had finally pulled me free.

Uncle Obed had been breaking and piling the meager furniture of the cabin in the center of the one room.

From the unwieldy rowboat in which they had come to us on High Island, the two men had looked back at the cabin where, in spite of the certainty of being found out—since, if the two had not come, we would have been compelled to signal the mainland for help to get off—I had been for some hours deliriously happy with the strong arms of Jack Deed around me. Smoke and flames now rose from the cabin on High Island.

It was still dark, and the chance that anyone would see Uncle Obed and Luke Carns, rowing away from the island, was very slight.

I watched through blurred eyes that must have been big with horror, for Jack to stumble from the blazing inferno. But when we had beached the rowboat I had seen nothing come forth from the flames. Jack Deed was surely dead, murdered by Uncle Obed and Luke Carns.

Now they were adding fresh horrors to their deed of blood.

I was bound to the chair. My wrists and ankles were bleeding from the bonds they had used to tie me. Uncle Obed slapped me across the face. Back of him Luke Carns croaked like a raven.

"Confess," he said. "Only by confession can your immortal soul be saved."

"I have nothing to confess, except that I loved Jack Deed, and that I despise you from the bottom of my heart. I shall always despise you. You are the vilest—"

Uncle Obed slapped me again. This time he split my lips, and I tasted my own blood on my tongue. He twisted my head with the blow, so that the room of this ghastly inquisition spun and whirled, and I was sick and dizzy.

"Listen," said my uncle, "and tell us what happened on High Island. Did—"

He leaned toward me, saying things just loud enough for me to hear, and for Luke Carns. Carns' hawk-like face was a mask of curiosity. He gloated over a prospective confession. He wished to hear all the details, however guilty they might be. If there had been anything between Jack and me I would have told them, gladly, freely, proudly. I was only sorry that there had not been, for now Jack was dead.

"No!" I shouted. "No! No!"

My Uncle grabbed my shoulders and shook me savagely. His teeth were bared in a snarl.

"Listen, Marie," he grated, "The truth now, all of it!"

"Yes," echoed Carns, "the truth, a confession. Confess, my love, and it will be easier for you, and you shall be forgiven, as in the olden times sinners were forgiven."

I stared at the hypocrite.

"No," I said. "You shall not blacken his name."

Uncle Obed nodded at Carns.

"She is yours," he said. "You are the judge of her punishment, that she may confess."

CARNS stepped back. I screamed as he brought the whip into play again. Almost lovingly he coiled it in his left hand, while his right hand fondled the handle of it. His eyes were on me. They devoured my every curve.

I knew that men found me desirable because a mirror does not lie. My hair is golden, my eyes blue. I weigh a hundred and twelve, and not even the sleazy garments my uncle permitted me to have could hide the fact that I was delightfully formed. Why should I not say so, when it was true?

I stared at Luke Carns, stiffened my will and my spine for what was to come.

The lash curled out. It plucked at the front of my dress as though it had been the fingers of a fiend. The dress came away with the lash. I looked down at the ravages the whip had caused. My breast had been bared. The face of Luke Carns was a picture of desire. He licked his lips as a famished dog licks his chops.

"Confess!" he said, his voice a hoarse croak.

"There is nothing," I managed to whisper. I still faced both of them proudly, because I had done no wrong. Jack Deed had not broken. I would not break, either. "I did no wrong."

Calculatingly, surely, carefully, his eyes never leaving my flesh that his whip had laid bare, Luke Carns drew the ugly, black lash over his left hand again.

In his mind I knew that he was possessing me, taking me for his own, his chattel, his plaything. I could find no words with which to scorn him. I called him names, and he laughed that crazy, weird laughter. I knew then that the

very measure of my hatred for him added to his desire for me.

I knew it because his lash, while it stripped me, did not mar my flesh. He was looking ahead to the time when he would not wish me to be scarred more than the lash of my uncle had scarred me.

Again the lash curled.

It plucked at my waist again, and again it was like a hellish hand plucking. My flesh quivered with utter aversion, as I pulled and twisted against my bonds. My uncle, to make it easier for Carns, went to stand behind me, to steady me, so that Carns should not miss.

"Confess!" said Carns. "Confess, or I shall strip you with the whip. . . ."

Did he dare go so far? How could my poor father, weak though he had been, have left me in charge of such a monster as Uncle Obed? I knew the brute must have hidden his true self from father.

Mother had died at my birth, and I was now eighteen. For five years Uncle Obed had been grooming me to be the bride of Luke Carns—ever since the day Carns' second wife had folded her tired arms and died, and Luke Carns had spat in the dust with contempt for her weakness in that she had escaped him by dying. Now my shame was almost greater than I could bear.

I looked at Uncle Obed, seeking the slightest sign of sympathy, the slightest hope that he would intervene. But there was none. His face was cold and rigidly set.

"Confess! Confess!" stormed Luke Carns. His whip moved faster now, as though he could scarcely wait. "Confess, or—"

The whip went back once more. I was a quivering bundle of tortured nerves and outraged girlhood. I could stand no more. If Luke Carns struck with the ultimate skill I should die of shame. I wanted to

die, but not until—I told myself fiercely—something had been done to avenge the murder of Jack Deed, burned like a roasting pig in the cabin on High Island, where I was sure both of these brutes believed I had often met my sweetheart.

Would to God I had! I would have been filled with joy to remember it. But I had not—and yet

I stared at the face of Luke Carns as the whip went back. It would never strike me again, because I knew now the full extent of his fiendish potentialities.

"All right, I'll confess," I said. "Listen, and know what it means to love a *man*. Harken, you hypocrites, and understand what it means really to have all the love of a woman!"

They had used horrible words with me, but I could not find it in my heart to use such words with them, not when they referred to Jack Deed and myself, and to a relationship for which both of us would have given our immortal souls, yet which had not been ours.

I used words of beauty, because to me it would have been beautiful. I used words that were winged with glory, because to me the picture I was painting in my new inspiration, was a picture of loveliness. And the lash did not fall again.

BOTH men now faced me. I couldn't understand the expressions on their faces when I finally opened my eyes.

"So now," I said, "you know. And it was not the first time we were together on High Island, when the moon was bright and lovely, and the wind whispered across the water. Nothing you did to him, nothing you can possibly do to me, can rob us of that."

If only my words had been true!

"Do you still want this woman?" my uncle finally asked.

I stared at Luke Carns, and knew his answer before he gave it, knew I had made

a ghastly mistake; that instead of killing his desire for me with my pseudo-confession, I had added oil to its flames.

"Yes," said Carns in a low, terrible, *hungry* voice, "for she is the woman of my choice. But she must be purified, must make atonement, must understand the vastness of her sin, by knowing to the depths the consequences of that sin, so that she may not so sin again."

"Your meaning?" said Uncle Obed.

"Back in my lower valley, in the deep Berkshires," said Luke Carns, "is the sanatorium of Doctor Stator. There is no other building in many miles. To that place go men and women who have sinned, who have sinned madly so that they have been made mad of their sins. If this woman, for as many days as may be necessary, until she shall realize to the full what she has done, were to go there, with you and me, Obed"

I almost swooned. House of Horror! House of Black Whispers! House of Hell! All of these names had been used to designate that asylum. I was numbed with the awfulness of Luke Carns' conditions. Uncle Obed listened, his eyes wide. Surely, mad as he was, he could not listen to this, could not allow it to happen! My father would come back from the grave to prevent, I was sure. But I *wasn't* sure! If it were possible for father to come back, he must long since have come, bringing with him the thunderbolts of God's wrath to crash them about the heads of Luke Carns and Uncle Obed.

No, he would not come. I was alone, helpless, and Jack Deed was gone forever. Not even Jack could come back.

I WAS still numb when I was thrown into the back seat of Uncle Obed's rattle-trap car, a wheezy old auto that should long since have been relegated to the junk-heap but for the miserliness of Uncle Obed. Why he had purchased the

car in the beginning I could never understand.

The top was in shreds. The ribs of it, in the dark of that night, when we traveled through the dark woods toward the House of Whispers, were like the ribs of some bulbous human skeleton. In the front seat, driving, never looking back, Uncle Obed was like a scarecrow.

Luke Carns sat beside me, his eyes furtively watching my Uncle's back, making sure that he did not turn his head. I was bound with cord that dug cruelly into my arms and legs. I had not changed clothing. Still dressed as the whip of Luke Carns had left me, his hot, scabrous, gnarled hands caressed my flesh. I bit my lips through to keep from crying out with repulsion, lest the two of them think of something even more ghastly to do to me.

Luke Carns licked his lips with a smacking sound. I was driven to such desperation that I could have carved him asunder with a knife. I tried to think of all the ghastly things that might be done to him, and how I would enjoy doing all of them.

And ever the aged, asthmatic flivver bounced and rattled through the dark, its one dim headlight filling the black woods with shapes out of nightmares, on the road ahead.

Finally, there was just one light. I could see that it glowed dimly from a shadowed rock porch, behind which was a house all mantled in the shrouds of night and the woods—a monstrous pile against the faint, soft light of the moon.

I remembered one story about this awful place, and what the one who had told the story had called it. . . . The House of Whispers!

The one light on its porch, like the eye of a monstrous, fiendish Cyclops, seemed to jump at me as we approached.

God, it couldn't be true! God in Heaven, it couldn't be true!

And yet, there was the light, the pile of the mighty house behind it, and our tires crunching on the rock driveway as we swung in against the porch.

When we stopped, the motor coughing like a dying animal, Luke Carns, with a regretful sigh, left me to open the door, stepped on the porch and rang a jangling bell—which rattled all through the place as through a dungeon—and stood waiting for the keeper of that gate to the purgatory of the living.

CHAPTER THREE

Dr. Stator's "Patients"

DOCTOR Stator looked like a frog with a man's legs. Nothing else could so fitly describe him. His bulging eyes were set wide apart, and there was no bridge to his nose, which was batrachian. Under the light on the porch the color of his hands, as he rubbed them gleefully together, made them seem to be webbed. His hair was as black as midnight, as were his eyes. His chest was enormous, the pelvic girdle like the fore-legs of a bulldog, bowed and grotesque.

"We have a patient for you, Stator," said Carns.

My uncle did not speak. I know I was afraid with a fear that was soul-numbing, as the wind from the woods whistled, sighed and whispered about the black pile of the sanatorium. Fireflies darted through the gloom. Now somewhat closer, I could see the windowpanes of the front of the building, like the eyes of a blind monster. Through them I perceived grim iron bars.

I hadn't said a word. I couldn't talk. Besides, no word of mine would have been heeded. I meant to conserve my strength for whatever hideous ordeal I was about to undergo.

"Yes, Mr. Carns," said Stator, rubbing his hands faster.

His froggy eyes peered at me in the back seat. They widened when he saw the condition of my garments. I wondered, then, how many other "patients" Carns had brought to Doctor Stator's institution, where it was plain that no commitment papers were needed and no questions were asked.

I saw desire in Stator's eyes, too, though it came to me that because of my terror I might have seen something that was not there.

"We shall be very careful of the lady," said Stator, and his voice was somehow like the croaking of a frog. "She is inclined to violence I see."

For a moment neither Uncle Obed or Luke Carns answered.

Then Carns said: "There will be no need of rough methods, *though she is not to be coddled!*"

He emphasized the last words in a way that made me shiver anew.

Doctor Stator laughed, and it was as though he had merely increased the tempo of his croaking. He reached out, grasped me by the shoulder, and his hand slid along my arm as he did so. It pinched me tentatively, and I knew that the horror I would experience here would outweigh that which I had known with my Uncle and Luke Carns.

I screamed suddenly, started to run. Luke Carns had me in his arms before I had taken three staggering steps, and his arms were so mighty that they almost crushed me.

My scream had a strange result, for when Carns grabbed me he twisted me so that I faced one of those windows, and, like ghosts moving out of the shadows, faces came to peer through the windowpanes. And what faces! They were white as chalk, save for the lips, which were red as new blood. The eyes were

big and deep-sunken, and stared at me as had the eyes of Carns and Doctor Stator.

Their eyes devoured me, and the tongues of those eerie people beyond the windows licked their lips with horrible anticipation. I stared, numb and speechless with horror. For my eyes went down from the white faces, to the dim, misty forms upon which they were set—and I knew that the creatures beyond the windowpanes, men and women, were battered and beaten hulks, at least as to their torsoes—scarred and covered with bright red welts that I could see even from where I stood!

Men with hairy chests. . . .

Women. . . .

I screamed again. The faces turned toward one another, and the lips parted in pleased grins, while hands clapped with delight.

CARNS took me to Stator. He pushed me against the doctor. The big hands of the man grasped me again, this time as in a vise. I was all but carried into the black, gloomy place. I heard the heavy steps of Uncle Obed and Luke Carns, following me across the porch. A door clanged shut behind me with a sound of harsh finality.

"Just what is wrong with her?" Doctor Stator asked Uncle Obed, whom he seemed to know. "I can find out, of course, after an examination, but—"

My uncle pulled Stator toward him, whispered. The doctor's face flushed, and I could only guess what my uncle had said. But the hand of Stator tightened again as he bade Carns and Uncle Obed to enter a door marked office.

He led me on to another door, all studded with bolts, which he opened with a key on a big ring, handling it with one hand while he held me with the other.

Then I was in a room, or many rooms, all opening into one another, filled with

vague echoes—the echoes of our own footfalls, the echoes even of our breathing.

"You will be very comfortable here, my dear," whispered Doctor Stator. "And you will be even more comfortable if you are nice"

He put his face close to mine, leered at me. I decided on a desperate chance.

"Doctor Stator," I said, "they have told you lies. I merely do not wish to marry Carns. I loved another man, whom the two of them murdered, burning him in the cabin in which they found us. We were guilty of nothing wrong, but they would not believe. . . ."

Even as I spoke I wondered how often he had listened to just such entreaties on the part of his "patients." He smiled, and I knew he did not believe me.

"Of course," he said cynically, "none of my patients ever has anything wrong with him—or her; especially *her*. They are always wronged. But if you can convince me. . . ."

I shuddered. What did he mean by "convince?" I was afraid to ask for an explanation. His eyes told me too much of horror already, his grasp too much of terror.

"Don't you have lights in here?" I asked next.

"Sin," said the doctor, "is always hidden in the dark!"

In God's Name, what did he mean?

His words filled me with greater terror, when already I did not see how my soul could harbor any more. Surely I had already imagined all the horror that could be visited on me, had nerved myself to fight to the end to thwart or withstand it. But his words! I shuddered. The doctor, feeling my trembling, chuckled.

"I will come to you again, later," he whispered. "Ah, Mortha, there you are!"

Mortha seemed to be a keeper. He was

twice as big as Stator. His arms were the arms of an ape. He was beetle-browed, and his chin was stained with tobacco, while his cheeks were pouched with it, like those of a monstrous monkey.

"Yes, Doctor," said Mortha.

"Take the little one to room 37, Mortha, and understand one thing: she is not to be molested!"

"Yes, Doctor." The two words seemed to be his entire vocabulary. He swung out his huge right arm, which encompassed me, lifted me from my feet. He carried me with ease, and I heard the rhythmic working of his jaws on his chewing tobacco. He didn't even seem to realize that he carried me. I kicked and squirmed, and he paid me no heed.

I essayed a scream, and he slapped me cruelly in the mouth, without checking his stride or altering my position in his right arm. But my scream, as had my screams outside, had a strange effect.

It filled the shadowy, crypt-like place, with awesome, eerie whispers, and I felt the eyes of the unseen whisperers upon me.

Mortha put me in a room, which was really a cell, and the door clanged shut, with Mortha inside. He looked at me, his jaws working. His right hand shot out again, grasped my dress. When his hand was withdrawn my clothing went with it, save only for my shoes and stockings.

Mortha stared at me for a moment, while I cowered as one turned to stone, trying to cover myself with hands and forearms. Then he spat on the floor, went out the door, shut and locked it.

"There'll be company soon," he said, just before he left.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Beasts Decree It!"

SOMETHING was happening to the weird lights of the place, and I knew

instantly that Stator and Mortha were the prompters in preparing some ghastly drama. I knew something of the horror of this place, and why it was called the House of Whispers, but it would be impossible to even imagine the foul depths to which humanity might sink unless one witnessed—were thrust into the very maw—of the terrors about to befall me.

I knew what manner of men and women came here, were "patients" here. I knew that many of them came from personal choice, and were not merely brought as Carns and Uncle Obed had brought me. They had come because here, and only here, could they make "atonement." They had a perverted craze for it, such as had my Uncle and Luke Carns.

The lights. . . .

They sank very low. The whispers grew louder, more insistent, as though the sinking of the lights had been the signal, which undoubtedly it had.

There were rustling sounds, such as people make when they move, and stretch, and bend, and sigh on awakening. Then the lights came on stronger than before, and I made a gruesome discovery. The walls of my cell were not of any solid substance, hiding inmates from one another, but of some semi-transparent stuff that, in the strength of the increased light, made it imperative that they *did* see each other.

I looked into the cell to my right, where shadows danced between myself and the light beyond, and I cowered down in the darkest corner of my cell. For in that other cell were two horrid people, a man and a woman.

I watched them through the glass, or isinglass, heard their agonized whispers, and saw the menacing gestures of their hands. I saw her claw at the man, whose ears were pointed, like those of a faun. I saw and heard him belabor her with

gloved hands, and the gloves looked like the claws of a great cat!

Great God, the inmates of this place were compelled to punish one another for whatever they had done to cause their confinement in this ghastly place!

In the other cell were two women, fighting in silence, with teeth and with fingernails.

I cowered down lower, staring at the door of my cell, beyond which were the shapes of other cells, and the shadows of other figures moving—moving like numbed automatons along the whispering aisles, like the one by which I had entered the House of Whispers.

They whispered, close together. I heard the aching sounds they made, and there was hell in their faces as each, by punishing his neighbor, sought to work out his own atonement!

I moaned a little in terror, and from the funereal halls sounds came back that were the voices of other women, and of men—echoing and re-echoing through that place which was hell incarnate.

I saw two women, clawing a man. I saw a man join the trio, and all three turn upon him, rending, striking, beating. . . .

It came to me then that what the fourth man suffered, what *all* the inmates suffered from one another, would be my portion, that I must take the blows of all of them, up to, but not including, the blow that would destroy me.

I moaned, but tried to stifle my moans, lest they hear me. Maybe, if I cowered very low, and made myself small, and dared not so much as breathe, they might not remember that I was here.

But no! How could they forget? I was something new to all these people who had become numbed to one another, and to pain. I, fresh, unharmed, still had vast capacity for suffering.

They would come for me, and that soon.

I THOUGHT I heard, away to my left, beyond the reach of my vision, Doctor Stator and Mortha, talking together, chuckling horribly, watching the macabre torture-dances of the insane damned.

My heart hammered. Fear? None could imagine the fear which was mine.

“Oh, God,” I prayed. “Let this horrible nightmare pass from me! I have done nothing to deserve it. If I have, let it happen to me, then, in Thine own good time, and not as men like beasts decree it!”

But could God see into this Hellish place? If He could, why did he not strike Uncle Obed dead with the thunderbolts of his wrath? Luke Carns, Mortha, and Doctor Stator? Night after night, with Uncle Obed and Luke Carns as visitors, for all I knew, the white shapes in this place of horror held their carnival of mutual torture.

I kept on staring at the ghostly march through the funereal aisles. The coming together and the parting of men and women who were like white shadows. The whispering, the bestial sounds, were like the whimpering of dogs that have been kicked or beaten. . . .

“Merciful Heaven!” I screamed aloud.

For a moment after my cry had gone winging through the place, the whispering stopped. The movement of the white figures ceased. The march stopped. Then Luke Carns laughed his mad travesty of human laughter, and it made me think of the barking of a mad coyote. Doctor Stator laughed, too. I heard Mortha expectorate vigorously, his only way, I thought, of showing his excitement.

Suddenly all the inmates together burst into laughter. In that laughter I could hear ungodly things: the whimpering of

fallen women who weep for what they have lost, the evil words of men who are afraid of what they have done, and use vile words to hide their fear.

In the midst of their laughter, the lights went out. It was no accident, that extinguishing of the lights. Already, from what I had seen, I could understand why the lights had gone out. For imagination, especially of the mad, was wilder in the dark than in the light. Now with the eyes of the mind, keener and wilder than the eyes which saw material things, these poor men and women could see one another. I too, could see, and the horror was greater still, for the sounds were still there, whispering in the awful building.

I could hear the sounds and see, in my very soul, the actions, the behavior, which went with the sounds—and every sound was like the lash of my uncle or of Luke Carns, laid, not across my naked flesh, but across my heart, across my very soul.

I heard the march continue, as the women made a pretense of fleeing, and the men pursued.

“Oh, Jack, Jack!” I whispered. “You would rise out of the ashes of the cabin on High Island, and come to me, if you could but guess the terror which consumes me.”

I would have slain myself. I thought of it, and sought for a weapon, and knew then that there had been a reason—other than the one I had thought—why Mortha had taken my clothing. For a strip of it would have given me release from the horror. With the string of my dress I might have strangled myself. Then I thought of the laces of my shoes. . . .

I KNELT swiftly, seeking the laces. I would still find a way out. But no, the laces were too short. The two of them together might suffice, but my hands trembled so violently that I could not knot them, to make them long enough.

“God give me strength to bring my own release,” I prayed, and could not keep from shuddering as my nightmare imagination pictured what would happen even to my body, dead, when the white horrors—infesting this place like slugs under a stone—found that I had cheated them. Were even the newly dead exempt?

Now, I had it! My stockings. They were long. Either one of them would suffice me. I sat down. My hands fumbled for the tops of my stockings. So eager for haste was I that I could not, for many moments, decide which stocking I should use. It seemed dreadfully, terribly important. For fear had made me stupid.

Finally I decided on the left, kicked my shoes away from me, and drew off the left stocking. It slipped from my hand. Sobbing I fumbled for it. I could not understand how it had escaped me.

A minute passed while I felt for it—and I could not find it. It was as though the darkness of the House of Whispers had swallowed it up, to defeat my purpose. I began to fumble with my right stocking. Then I heard the chuckle.

Eyes in the dark? Ears in the dark to hear my sobs? I did not know—not at first. But when the second stocking also was lost the moment I rolled it off my leg, I knew that something was dreadfully amiss. Then, I heard that chuckling—*there in the cell with me!*

Through either wall of the cell, from either of the two cells adjoining, by some entrance I had not even suspected, one, perhaps both, of the men whose shadows I had seen, had entered the cell, were with me now, chuckling in high glee at my feeble efforts to escape the inescapable.

The outer door clicked, as though the lock had been opened by invisible hands. I heard it go creaking open, heard the whispers commence again, heard the words:

"Come! Come! A fitting welcome for the bride!"

Who was to come? *Who* was the bride? I heard myriad rustlings approach. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

The Whispering Horde Attacks

THE ghostly marchers were coming—coming for me! I would be the butt of their jests, the target of their mockery. I would be the play which they would watch, in which each of them, at one time or another, would be one of the actors.

I rose to my feet. I would fling myself through the door, out into those whispering hallways. I would run, and keep on running, would somehow win my way past Stator, Mortha, Carns and Uncle Obed. I was strong with the urge to escape. My mouth was open. I was panting. The white ghosts would pursue, reaching for me with their awful hands. I would, if I could not escape, hurl myself head foremost against one of the walls.

But even as I rose I knew that I could never carry out my plan. For hands grasped my right arm. Hands grasped my left arm. A soft voice whispered into my right ear, another in my left.

I screamed again and yet again.

I fought. I struggled. I saw white faces, a perfect phalanx of them, approaching the door of my cell. Once, in the window, I had seen the denizens of this purgatory bearing marks of claw and fang—and now the lights were slowly coming on again.

I was suddenly strong with the strength of desperation. I jerked free of my captors, gained the hall beyond my door. I looked back over my shoulder at the two whom I had escaped, who now pursued me with their too-red lips split apart in grins of high excitement.

I shrieked, turned my head, began to run, and raced into the first aisle. From the door leading to the office, where I knew that Stator and Mortha and Carns and Uncle Obed stood, came the sound of Luke Carns' laughter. It only made me run the faster. "Women should be broken, like horses," Carns had said. . . .

The cells were little rooms inside the main room, which towered so high above them. If I could leap to the top of one I might be able to fight off the grisly rabble.

I found myself in a *cul-de-sac*, with the rabble at my heels, laughing like crimson ghouls. Dashing to one of the cells, I tried to pull myself up when I caught my hands over the cell's roof. But my arms were too weak. Now hands were grasping me, pulling me back. . . .

Women's voices, soft, whispery—and their words entreated me to submit to their vile rituals. One said:

"It is not unbearable, my dear. You should not be afraid to suffer for having loved, else there would be no love in the world. One should not avoid the consequences of one's deeds. One should be made ready for the Hereafter. And here, in this place, are men and women whose atonement is to help you to make ready! Men and women whose love has burned and punished, making them mad, so that now, in their madness, they help us all to make ready—hardening our bodies, and thus our souls, against the greater, eternal punishment to come Beyond the Curtain!"

The House of Whispers, conceived in the mad brains of men like Uncle Obed and Luke Carns, and their satellites, Stator and Mortha, was—because mad ones could be persuaded to their whims—a hell on earth!

I FOUGHT erect. They did not try too hard to stop me, for my fighting

was part of the ritual. I was the mouse, they the many cats to play with me, so that when I was spent and panting I should be ready for "purgatory". I broke from them. It was not difficult, because they wished me to break free, and run, and scream, the greater to delight those who listened, and those who pursued.

I ran back the way I had come, for I had made a swift decision. Luke Carns was a man of horror, yet he might be able to save me, if only for himself. There would be marriage, a travesty of marriage, yet a marriage none the less—and my conscience would treat with nothing less.

I would beg to be taken away from this hell-hole. I would promise to serve Luke Carns to the end of my days, to put out of my mind even my sweetest memories of Jack Deed.

I raced toward the four men. But when I got close enough to recognize the four I came to a halt, and my pursuers halted behind me as though suddenly turned to white statues. They had seen what I had seen. They halted in amazement to observe, thinking, perhaps, that this was all part of the ghastly ritual, a new variation invented by Stator and Mortha for their delectation.

For behind the four tormentors, holding my father's whip in his right hand, while his left cradled the horrible lash, was a man. And what a man! The marks of the lash were all over his body, which was naked to the waist. His hair was burned off, his face a black horror.

The man was Jack Deed! Jack, *my* Jack, had come back from the dead! Somehow he had escaped the burning pyre on High Island. Somehow he had followed me, found out where I had been brought. He had got my uncle's whip from the car. Behind him, coiled like a snake on the floor of this house of Hell, was Luke Carns' whip, which Jack must

have also brought to use as a reserve weapon.

Loud over the whispering and the whimpering rose his clarion cry:

"Stand back all of you! Stand and see the monsters brought to judgment! These monsters who have turned you into beasts. Watch them treated as they have treated you!"

The four men turned. Quick as a flash the blacksnake licked out, reaching first for Luke Carns. It struck him squarely across the eyes. He screamed and covered his bleeding face with his hands. From those who had pursued me came a growing cry of delight! Luke Carns screamed like an animal. He started toward Jack Deed, groping because he could not see, and Jack sent his lash curling again.

It struck Luke Carns on the temple, a savage, bullet-swift blow, that sent him crashing down upon the floor.

Swift as light then, Jack struck at Stator and Mortha. His lash hit their eyes laid open their faces to the very bone. They screamed, called on the inmates of their house of whispers to help them.

"Take and slay this man who would rob you of all your delights!" commanded Stator. In answer Jack Deed shouted:

"*They* are the betrayers! Take and destroy *them!*"

Jack drew back the whip to send it curling into the face of Uncle Obed, and I saw the sweat start from Jack's blackened cheeks.

"I cannot, Oh, God, I cannot," Jack moaned. "He is your blood relative, Marie, beloved!"

"But *I* can!" I screamed, hurling myself forward, past the groveling three, to stand at the side of Jack Deed. I caught up the extra whip, which fate must have caused Jack to bring, whirled and shot it forth. Fate, vengeance, must have guid-

ed my hands, made keen and accurate my eyes. For the lash curled to its objective like a serpent striking.

Uncle Obed cried out: "For shame, daughter of my brother! It is your own uncle, your blood-relative, whom you would destroy!"

"And it is you, Uncle Obed, who would give me to a fiend, who would shame and destroy me!"

And I struck again.

The denizens of the evil house were closing in, licking their lips, eyes avid. Blood streamed from the faces of the four groping men, who now did not know their way out.

Jack Deed shouted again to the mad marchers: "*They* are the betrayers!"

And then the horde of half-naked white mad ones attacked. Jack Deed rushed to me. He gathered my trembling body into his arms, and held me closely while I sobbed. But I could not take my eyes from the scene. It would go with me forever. My conscience did not trouble me, for never on this earth could Luke Carns and Uncle Obed—and their satellites, Mortha and Stator—be sufficiently punished. How many of these poor ones had come here as I had, innocent and pure, to be tortured in their ghastly ritual. There was no way of knowing.

But they closed in on the four. . . .

HANDS clawed and raked. There were screams of laughter from the women, for women can be so much more cruel than men, so much more loving than men. I wondered what hideous thoughts went through their poor minds as they cornered the four cowering men like so many rats, and went to work on them with nails, and with teeth.

"Take me away, Jack," I whispered. "Take me away, and keep me close to you forever where I'll always be safe!"

We went to the door. It opened easily, and Jack Deed closed it behind us—barred it—shutting out those evil, hideous sounds.

"The mad ones will scatter, half-clothed through the woods, and many will die, if we leave the doors open," he explained. "Here is the office. There might be clothing."

It did not seem to matter that I wore no clothing. Jack and I had been through too much for nudity to have any meaning—save that of a horrible remembrance. But we found two overcoats with which to cover ourselves.

Quitting the place, we stepped onto the graveled driveway. The gibbous moon still rode high and in its pale light Jack started to carry me toward the ancient flivver.

"No, Jack, no!" I said. "Not that! I couldn't stand it, again. I would be reminded. . . ."

I was impractical, unthinking—but the terrors I had endured robbed me of much reason. Jack nodded, gathered me into his arms, started for the black aisle through the woods.

"Nor the road, either, Jack," I whispered. "Just take me with you, into the woods, where the dark will hide me, where I can go with my face against you. . . ."

He lifted me to his powerful shoulders, bore me away from the House of Sibillant Whispers. Once, like Lot's wife, I dared to look back. The single light still burned on the porch, and beyond it was the black horror of Stator's purgatory.

White shadows moved back and forth before the window panes—shadows with hands and arms that seemed, endlessly, to be pulling and tearing at something which mercifully, I could not see. Then I buried my fevered face in Jack's neck as the night erased the House of Whispers.



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Already, O candidate for further trials in the shadowy domain of the Dark One, your very soul has shrivelled within you at sight of the malevolent, gruesome things that have inexorably closed in upon you as you read these stories. Now, take heed! Go no farther in your seeking after waiting horrors unless your mind is strong. Know that, in our own times, ancient evil may be creeping upon every man and woman, even as Montague Summers of England recently reported, declaring:

“The Black Mass is said in London and Brighton under conditions of all but absolute secrecy. The tabernacles of London churches, moreover, have been robbed of Hosts in circumstances which admit of no other explanation.”

The Black Mass! Still persisting in our twentieth century!

Among the countless records in the grey archives of the Chamber of Horrors, are included the true details of Madame

Montespan's blasphemous Black Mass of horror—that hideous ceremony which is reported to be practised today in hidden places throughout the world. So let us review the Montespan beauty's frightful rite, performed by the Black Church.

On a black velvet pall lies Madame Montespan's perfectly formed, naked white body—a lovely figure of contrasting pallor that shimmers in the light from six black candles. Her beautiful shape writhes in slow agony, not as a penitent seeking salvation, but as a crazed soul suffering the tortures of jealous torment. For Louis XIV has been seeking another woman.

Dark robed priests of sinister evil hover near. One holds aloft the dimpled body of a three-month-old-babe. Another dents the rounded breasts of the king's jealous mistress with a jewelled chalice and paten, then rests a desecration of the Host for a moment over her pounding heart. The monotonous intoning of unholy words commences as the officiating

high priest makes the dented places in the French woman's soft body an altar for his own worship—presses his hot lips upon the quivering, golden flesh. . . .

Then, later, when he has finished certain unmentionable rituals, the court beauty raises herself upon the black pall, and stills her heaving bosom enough to speak an agonized invocation—

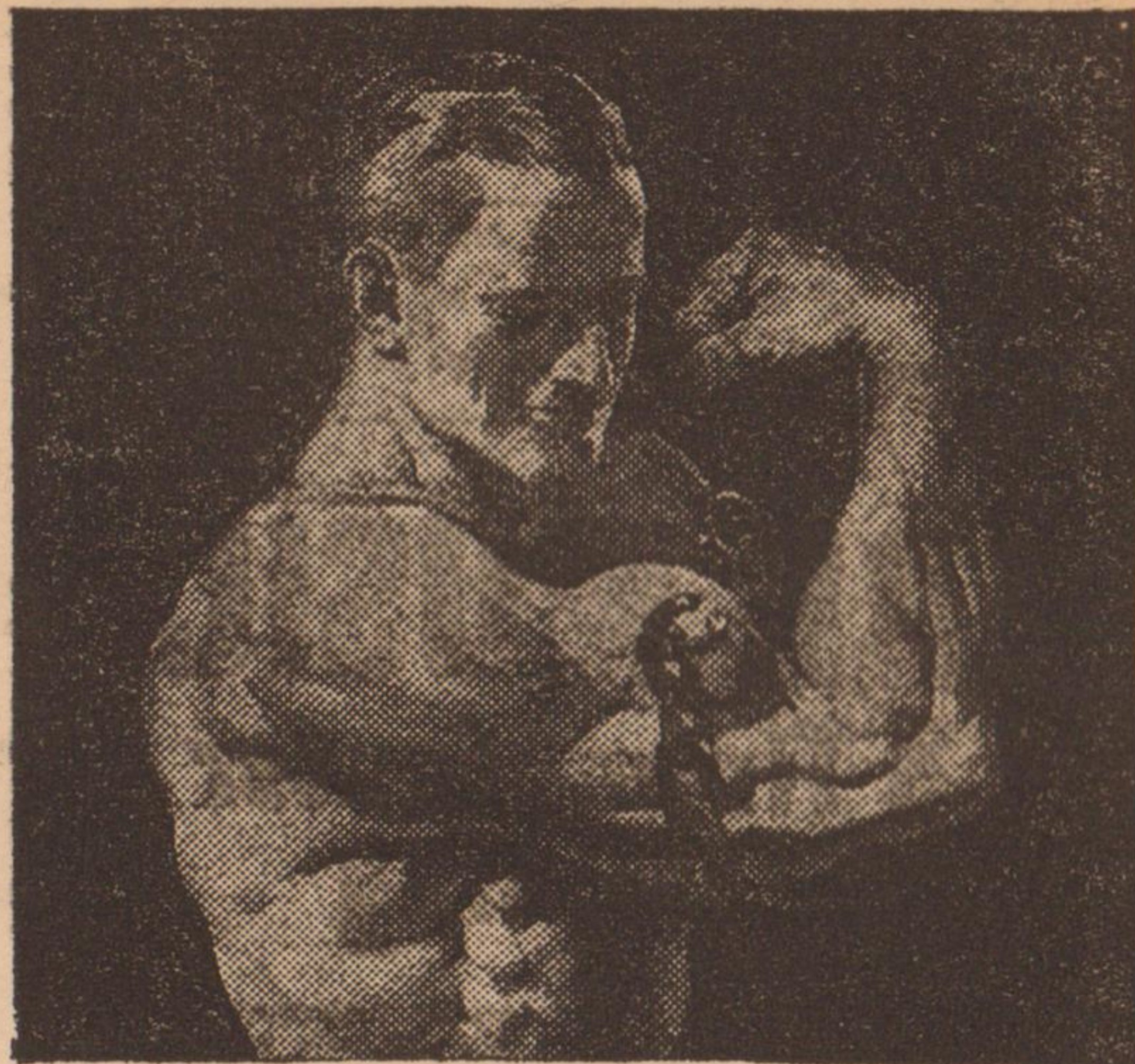
“Ashtoreth Asmodeus I invoke you to accept as sacrifice this child that I offer you for the things I beg: that friendship and love of the king and the dauphin may be assured me and that the king deny me nothing that I ask. . . .”

A knife flashes, a small cry squeals forth from the mouth of the babe; its red blood quickly fills the gleaming chalice, and a slinking priest hurries the little body away to a crematory-oven. Then the pale skin of Louis' mistress is sprinkled scarlet with the blood from the chalice. . . .

This is a part of the Black Mass, which is hinted to be practised even today! Those who are induced to join its priesthood of horror, through promises of great wealth and secret powers, must indeed be some day damned forever. So beware such a dreadful pitfall, should you ever find yourself wavering upon its brink!

Often you have read pulse-quickenning tales of such matters of Satan in *Horror Stories*—and many eerie kinds of hideous mysteries having power so strong as to send the cruel fingers of fear clutching at your very heartstrings. If the claim of some investigators that the Black Mass still exists today makes an added chill pass along your spine, prepare with extra courage and fortitude for the next degree of your initiation in the October issue of *Horror Stories*. For there we will print stories written by a group of authors whose genius is unsurpassed for telling the weird, the ghastly, the frightful, in tales of macabre grimness gathered from the darkest recesses of all time!

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28x5.25-18		2.90 1.15	40x8	15.95 4.95	
29x5.25-19		2.95 1.15			
30x5.25-20		2.95 1.15			
81x5.25-21		3.25 1.15			
28x5.50-18		3.35 1.15			
29x5.50-19		3.35 1.15			
30x5.50-20		3.40 1.15			
31x5.50-19		3.40 1.15			
32x5.50-20		3.45 1.25			
38x5.50-21		3.65 1.25			
32x5.50-20		3.75 1.35			

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6.00-20	\$3.75 \$1.65	
6.50-20	4.45 1.95	
7.00-20	5.95 2.95	
7.50-20	6.95 3.75	
8.25-20	8.95 4.95	
9.00-20	10.95 5.65	
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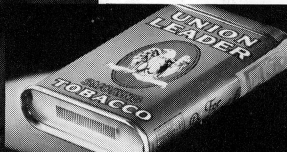
“The smartest **dime**
I EVER SPENT!”



I'VE smoked long enough to feel that I know something about smoking tobacco. But it wasn't until I tried my first tin of Union Leader that I discovered a dime will buy all the pipe pleasure that any expensive tobacco mixture can give.

Fine tobacco is fine tobacco no matter what the price tag reads, and the mellow, *old* Kentucky Burley in Union Leader is *tops* with me. So, why pay more, says I. And I save lots of nickels. (Great in cigarettes, too!)

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GEORGE BRENT, starring in Warner Bros.' picture, "The Goose and the Gander,"
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This is a Sworn Perfect diamond. You're sure it's perfect because it conforms with the Federal Trade Commission's ruling that a diamond described as perfect must be without spots, flaws, or carbon. My diamond expert and I select these diamonds and he swears that they are perfect in the form of an affidavit sworn to by a Notary Public. You get this affidavit with purchase. The feature shown here is a good sized sworn perfect diamond with 7 other diamonds in an attractive 14k white gold model. Only \$4.99 a month. Examine at my expense—ask for No. 87.



\$29.95



\$29.95

78—A dainty ring at a low price. New style natural gold mounting in 14 k; brilliant high quality diamond. You'll like it.
\$2.99 a month

251—Our craftsmen designed this 28 diamond wedding ring of 18k white gold so that it will look like an all diamond ring when worn. It's the narrow band design, but not too narrow. **\$2.53 a month**



\$29.95



\$16.95

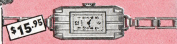
592—A very popular number in New York during the Xmas holidays. A beautiful Dinner Ring arranged with 9 high quality diamonds in 14k white gold. A real bargain—examine it and convince yourself. **\$2.96 a month**

1287—I know men like heavy rings. I had this ring made up sturdy and strong in 10k yellow gold. Your initials cut out in gold and mounted on black onyx, with diamonds as illustration. **\$1.59 a month**



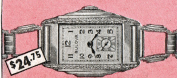
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1521—I recommend the Bulova because I wear one myself. This fine baguette watch is Bulova's Miss America model. At last year's low price. **\$2.58 a month**



\$15.95

1825—I have tested this watch myself and found it to be dependable. It's a dainty baguette with 7 jewels priced exceptionally low. **\$1.40 a month**



\$24.75

2301—A snappy, good-looking watch that will give lasting satisfaction—a Bulova. Beautifully engraved case; 7 jewel movement; new link band. Give it a trial. **\$2.58 a month**



\$14.50

2126—I had this watch reproduced from a \$75.00 model. Numerals on case in enameled background; 7 jewel movement; new style link chain band. Let me send it for your approval. **\$1.35 a month**



\$29.50

1875—I bought 508 of these 3 diamond baguette watches to get a low price. That's why I can offer it to you at this big reduction. I'll guarantee the 7 jewel movement to give lasting satisfaction. Get yours while the limited quantity lasts. **\$1.96 a month**

Over 54 years ago, my father started this business and won thousands of friends by fair treatment and good, honest dollar for dollar value. He originated the 16-month payment plan which makes buying so easy. Now I'm "following in his footsteps" and if you'll give me your loose change I'll give you the diamond or watch that you want on my liberal pin-money terms—as little as 25¢ a week, payable monthly. Here are some of the bargains I'd like you to examine. It's simple—here's how you do it.

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Simply put a dollar bill in an envelope with your name, address, number of article wanted and tell me your age (must be over 28), occupation, employer and other facts about yourself. All this information will be held strictly confidential; no direct inquiries made.

WHAT I'LL DO—
I'll open a 16-month charge account for you and send your selection for approval and 16-day free trial. If it isn't all I say about it and more—send it back and your dollar will be refunded immediately. I satisfied, you pay balance in 16 small monthly payments—simply your loose change.



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